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Policy and Practice Brief 8:

Teacher Training and Endorsement Requirements to Teach English Learners in Virginia



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In Virginia's public schools, there are over 160,000 English learners (ELs) and former ELs¹, who speak over 240 languages.² Teacher preparation programs in Virginia for all grade levels³ (including special education) and preK-12 endorsements⁴ require preservice educators in mainstream classrooms to be trained in EL teaching methods, but how preparation programs meet this requirement varies.

Requirements and regulations for teaching licensure and training vary across states. For example, in California, all teacher preparation programs require EL training for teaching licensure and all teachers with one or more ELs in their classroom are required to have an EL teaching certificate or endorsement.⁵ In Minnesota, school districts with one or more ELs are required to provide professional development to all faculty and staff who work with ELs, and in Massachusetts, teachers and administrators seeking recertification are required to complete training in second language acquisition.⁶ Virginia's requirements for teacher licensure are set by the Virginia Department of Education's (VDOE) Department of Teacher Education and Licensure. Initial license requirements vary by teaching position, but all include the completion of a state-approved teacher preparation program, as well as a variety of certifications.⁷

Teacher Preparation Programs

There are 36 colleges and universities with approved teacher preparation programs in Virginia,⁸ each of which is unique in regard to program offerings and requirements. All accredited teacher preparation programs are approved through the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. At the middle and high school levels, individuals generally select a subject area of endorsement (i.e., secondary English, Visual Arts) for licensure, whereas elementary teachers receive endorsement for grades PK-6. Regardless of endorsement area, all teachers will likely work with an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse student

¹ <https://p1pe.doe.virginia.gov/apex/f?p=180:1:18204843068704>

² <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/esl/index.shtml>

³ [8 Va. Admin. Code 20-543-110](#); [8 Va. Admin. Code 20-543-120](#); [8 Va. Admin. Code 20-543-130](#)

⁴ [8 Va. Admin. Code 20-543-140](#)

⁵ <https://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/ela>

⁶ <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/124D.61>;

<https://malegislature.gov/laws/generallaws/parti/titlexii/chapter71/section38q>

⁷ <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching/licensure/>

⁸ https://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching/educator_preparation/college_programs/colleges.shtml

population, and thus, English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement or training is an important consideration.

Teacher preparation programs in Virginia have not always required⁹ training in ESL instruction, curriculum, or assessment. While current programs are required to provide instructional practices that are “sensitive to culturally and linguistically diverse learners,”¹⁰ this does not include designing curriculum, assessment, or instructional practices specifically designed to address EL needs. As a result, many veteran and early-career teachers do not have this training. Arguably, such teachers could benefit from professional development or receiving an ESL endorsement in order to ensure appropriate background knowledge on EL instruction.

ESL and Dual Language Endorsement

There are specific requirements for those who wish to teach ESL in Virginia public schools in grades PreK-12. This endorsement is offered with initial teaching licensure at some of the colleges and universities in Virginia, with programs that offer language acquisition courses and focus on best practices for teaching ELs. Until July 2017, 18 credits of ESL-intensive coursework were required for the endorsement, however now teachers who already hold a teaching license in Virginia can add an ESL endorsement by passing a Praxis test, English to Speakers of Other Languages, with a score of 149. Nationally, pass scores range from 140 to 163, with most states requiring a score of 155.¹¹ This means that teachers are not required to take specific coursework or participate in a practicum experience to further develop their understanding and knowledge of pedagogy to best serve this unique group of learners. While the Praxis exam does reflect a core base of ESL pedagogical knowledge and may lead to an overall increase in the ESL teaching endorsements in the state, the exam has limitations including lack of assessment regarding lesson design, lesson delivery, and instruction.

In regard to dual-language endorsement, in 2018, House Bill 1156 passed in Virginia, which states that the Board of Education must provide teacher licensure in dual language instruction for grades PreK through sixth.¹² This created a new endorsement area for individuals wishing to teach in a dual language classroom setting. This endorsement requires certain coursework, including second language acquisition and bilingual education methods, and is generally aimed at teachers seeking to teach in a dual language classroom. While providing opportunities for ESL and dual language endorsement is important for districts with a large population of English learners, school districts should also consider professional development as a pathway to ensure veteran teachers develop effective curriculum, instruction and assessment for the ELs in their classroom.

Professional Development

School divisions often offer professional development (PD) opportunities for educators, especially if there is a growing or substantial population of ELs. The PD offered to educators varies by school division. Division level administrators supply PD on the topic(s) and in the

⁹ <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincodefull/title8/agency20/chapter543/partVII/article3/>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ <https://www.ets.org/praxis/institutions/scores/passing/>

¹² <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincodefull/title8/agency20/chapter543/partVII/article3/>

capacity they find most pertinent for their particular school division. A school division with a high EL student population or a dual language immersion program is more likely to provide PD to its educators on ELs, best practices in teaching ELs, language acquisition, and dual language programming than a division with a small population of these students and no such program.

One training commonly offered to educators is the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), which is an instructional framework aimed at improving academic language proficiency for ELs.¹³ The framework is built upon the following eight components designed to improve academic and language outcomes for ELs: lesson preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice and application, lesson delivery, and review and assessment. While SIOP offers benefits to teachers and students, research suggest that for the program to be successful, it must be implemented with adequate coaching¹⁴ and time for reflection. Coaching is a form of PD in which an expert, or knowledgeable peer, observes and helps an educator to learn, practice, and reflect upon a new teaching strategy. However, this process requires a commitment of time, personnel, and resources.

There is a growing need to ensure Virginia teachers have a grounding in effective practice for EL education. Requirements for ESL endorsement have loosened, and there is a new endorsement for dual language which is an alternate direction to meeting Virginia's linguistically diverse students; however, these endorsements and lack of required coursework do not address the needs of veteran teachers and ELs in the Commonwealth. As a result, school divisions should consider providing PD opportunities and training on various facets of EL education, such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, strategies, and cultural competency.

Recommendations

- School divisions should offer PD opportunities on the EL population, instruction, curriculum, and assessment for all staff and faculty.
- School divisions should also offer training on working with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations.
- Teacher preparation programs should provide comprehensive training in ESL instruction, curriculum, and assessment.
- Teachers with one or more ELs in their classroom should be required to have an EL teaching certificate or endorsement.
- Teachers and administrators seeking recertification should be required to complete training in second language acquisition.

¹³ From "Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model," by J. Echevarria, M. Vogt & D. Short, 2008.

¹⁴ From "Using the SIOP Model To Promote The Acquisition Of Language And Science Concepts With English Learners," by J. Echevarria, C. Richards-Tutor, R. Changes & D. Francis, *Bilingual Research Journal*, 2011.