Analysis of English Language Achievement among Wisconsin English Language Learners

Findings

Initial English proficiency is the most significant factor in determining how successful a student is within an English language learner (ELL) program. Students with strong initial English skills score higher on later ACCESS exams (see Figure 1), are likely to reach English proficiency before graduation, and spend less time in ELL programs before testing out.

Figure 1. Initial Proficiency Effects on ACCESS Scores

Starting age also predicts ELL progress, but the results are more mixed. Students starting later in ELL programs before eighth grade are associated with a modest but statistically significant increase in test scores. Among subtests of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, these trends hold, although not uniformly across the subtests (see Figure 2). The older a student is when beginning an ELL program, the less likely s/he will reach proficiency before high school graduation.

Figure 2. Starting Age Effects on ACCESS Subtest Scores

Language groups are associated with variation on ELL outcomes. The two largest language groups in Wisconsin, Hmong and Spanish, correlate with lower performance compared to students speaking other languages. Hmong-speaking students spend five additional months and Spanish-speaking students 2.5 months longer in ELL programs, on average, compared to students from other language groups.

Poverty and Disability: Students in these groups are associated with a lower later test score, a lower probability of reaching proficiency, and are expected to have a longer duration in an ELL program.