

FORUM

The Changing Face of America's Schools

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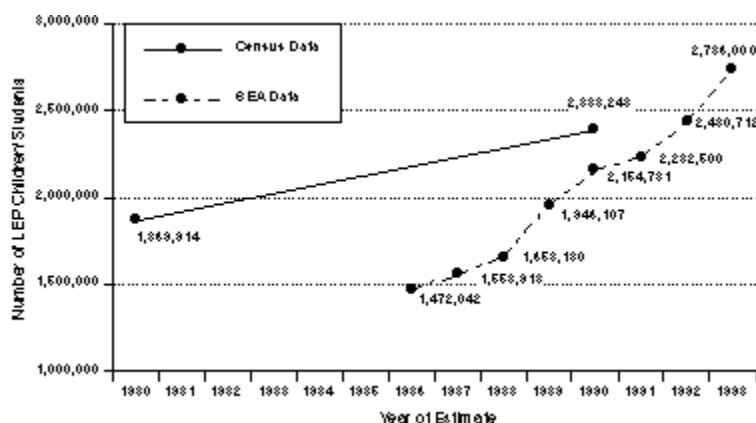
Despite the divergent methods used and the varied estimates they yield, research on the size of the limited English proficient (LEP) student population in the United States clearly indicates that this group is growing at a significantly faster rate than the overall student population. According to a recent U.S. Department of Education-sponsored study conducted by the Special Issues Analysis Center (SIAC), many factors influence the data sets, from how the term "LEP" is defined to whether data were collected from state or local education agency (SEA or LEA) surveys (Hopstock and Bucaro, 1993).

According to the SIAC report, two approaches have been used to estimate the size of the LEP population and examine trends in enrollment: Census counts from 1980 and 1990 and school-based studies. In Census-based studies, the data collection is "generally comprehensive and consistent in definition" (p. 3). However, the reliability of Census counts in estimating the total LEP population is lessened by the use of a subjective scale in determining an individual's proficiency in English and by data collection that may have omitted significant portions of the population. While school-based approaches generally rely upon some type of criteria for determining LEP status, they may provide an inexact picture of the total LEP student population since the definition of "LEP" varies from state to state—a student considered LEP in one state is not necessarily counted as LEP in another state (Hopstock and Bucaro, 1993). Furthermore, data gathered through the Survey of states' limited English proficient persons (reported annually to OBEMLA by the SEAs) is limited by the fact that only states receiving Title VII funds are required to report such data.

Regardless of how data are collected, estimates indicate that the LEP student population has been growing at a significantly faster rate than the overall student population (see figures 1 and 2). Furthermore, there is little evidence to indicate that the rate of growth of the LEP student population will diminish in the near future (Hopstock and Bucaro, 1993).

Figure 1

Trends in the Size of the LEP Student Population in the United States



Source: Hopstock and Bucaro, 1993.

Figure 2

Comparative Growth Rates of LEP and Total Student Populations in the United States: 1985-93

School Year	LEP Student Enrollment*	Percent Growth	Total Student Enrollment**	Percent Growth
1992-93	2,736,000	12.6	48,110,000	1.02
1991-92	2,430,712	8.9	47,246,000	1.02
1990-91	2,232,500	3.6	46,449,000	1.01
1989-90	2,154,781	10.7	45,898,000	1.01
1988-89	1,946,107	17.5	45,430,000	-.01
1987-88	1,656,180	6.7	45,487,000	1.01
1986-87	1,553,918	5.6	45,205,000	.01
1985-86	1,472,042	--	44,979,000	--

* Source: A. Henderson et al., 1994.

** Source: C.S. Fromboluti, 1994.

Comparison of LEP and Overall Student Population Data

Figure 2 compares the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) count of the overall student population from the 1985-86 to 1992-93 school years with SEA survey data on the LEP student population for the same time period.

From the 1991-92 to 1992-93 school year, for example, the LEP student population increased at a rate of 12.6 percent, from 2,430,712 to 2,736,000. During this same period, the overall student population only increased at the rate of 1.02 percent, growing from 47,246,000 to 48,110,000. Interestingly, from 1985 to

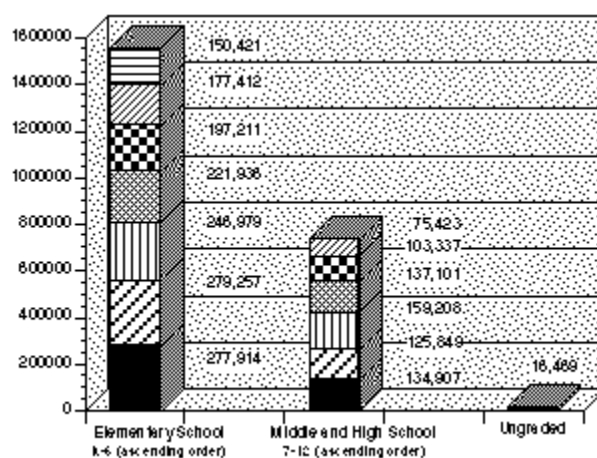
1993, the LEP student population increased at an average 9.2 percent per year; by contrast, the overall student population increased by approximately one percent annually. In fact, during the entire eight-year period, the overall student population only grew by 8.2 percent-less than the average annual LEP rate of growth.

These disproportionate rates of growth are evidenced through an examination of the LEP student population in relation to the overall student population. During the 1985-86 school year, LEP students accounted for only 3.3 percent of the total student population; by the 1992-93 school year, this number had grown to 5.7 percent.

Grade Level Characteristics of the LEP Student Population

Fleischman and Hopstock (1993), in a study conducted for the U.S. Department of Education, concluded that most LEP students are young, with more than two-thirds being enrolled in grades K-6. Eighteen percent are enrolled in grades 7-9 and 14 percent in grades 10-12 (see figure 3).

Figure 3
LEP Student Distribution by Grade Level



Source: Fleischman and Hopstock, 1993.

LEP Population by Language Group

Fleischman and Hopstock (1993) mailed surveys to 745 school districts nationwide during the 1991-92 school year. Figure 4 shows the 20 most common language groups among LEP students as projected from 733 respondents to this survey. The study revealed the Spanish-speaking group to be the largest, representing almost 73 percent of the total LEP student population. Four percent speak Vietnamese, followed by Hmong, Cantonese, Cambodian, and Korean (two percent each). One of 29 different Native American languages is spoken by 2.5 percent of LEP students.

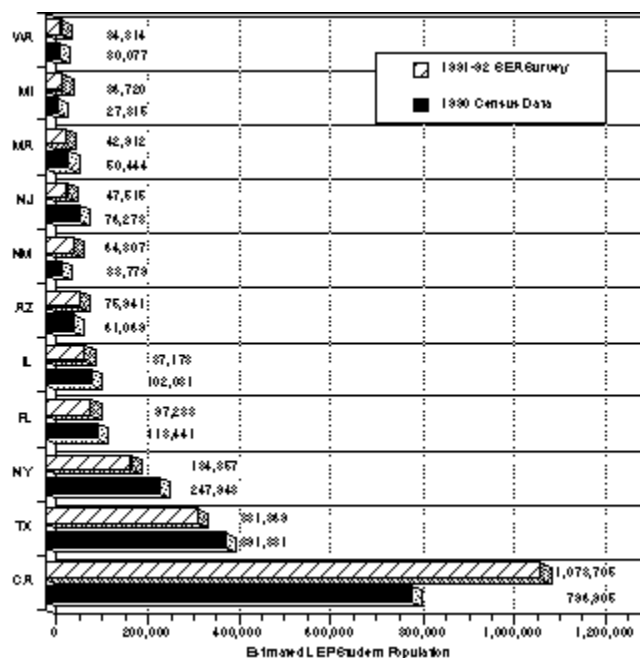
Figure 4
LEP Student Population Distribution by Language Group

Language Group	No. of LEP Students	Percentage of LEP Students
Spanish	1,682,560	72.9%
Vietnamese	90,922	3.9
Hmong	42,305	1.8
Cantonese	38,693	1.7
Cambodian	37,742	1.6
Korean	36,568	1.6
Laotian	29,838	1.3
Navajo	28,913	1.3
Tagalog	24,516	1.1
Russian	21,903	0.9
Creole (French)	21,850	0.9
Arabic	30,318	0.9
Portuguese	15,298	0.7
Japanese	13,913	0.6
Armenian	11,916	0.5
Chinese (unspec.)	11,540	0.5
Mandarin	11,020	0.5
Farsi	8,563	0.4
Hindi	7,905	0.3
Polish	6,747	0.3

Comparison of LEP Student Populations by State and District

Figure 5 compares SEA survey and Census data for the 11 states with the largest LEP student populations. With only a few exceptions, the two data sets are consistent with regard to their ranking of state population sizes, though their actual state-by-state population estimates do vary significantly. Figure 6 ranks the 20 LEAs with the highest number of students identified as LEP in the 1993-94 school year. Although high LEP enrollments are found in several large urban districts across the country, 12 of the top 20 districts are in California. It is important to note that LEAs use different methods for identifying LEP students. While these data are representative of the LEP populations, they are not definitive.

Figure 5
Eleven States with Largest LEP Student Populations



Source: Hopstock and Bucaro, 1993.

Figure 6
School Districts with Highest Reported LEP Student Enrollments (1993-94)

School District	LEP Enrollment	Total Enrollment	Percent LEP
Los Angeles, CA*	291,527	639,129	45.6%
New York, NY**	154,526	1,015,756	15.2
Chicago, IL*	57,964	409,499	14.2
Dade Cty., FL*	54,735	422,658	13.0
Houston, TX*	50,839	200,839	25.3
Santa Ana, CA*	33,540	48,407	69.3
San Diego, CA*	33,397	127,258	26.2
Dallas, TX*	31,522	142,810	22.1
Long Beach, CA*	26,042	76,783	33.9
Fresno, CA*	24,022	76,349	31.5
Garden Grove, CA*	17,856	41,664	42.9
San Francisco, CA*	17,673	61,631	28.7
El Paso, TX*	17,609	64,145	27.5
Montebello, CA*	14,988	32,321	46.4
Glendale, CA*	14,930	28,742	51.9

Broward Cty., FL*	14,622	236,885	6.2
Boston, MA**	14,518	59,613	24.4
Oakland, CA*	14,044	51,748	27.1
Pomona, CA*	13,381	29,880	44.8
Sacramento, CA*	12,290	49,997	24.6

* Data obtained from State Education Agency

** Data obtained from Local Education Agency

References

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