

Research Evidence Against Dismantling the U.S. Education Department: How to Protect and Improve Programs for English Learners

Title III Evidence Review: The Impact of Federal Support for English Learners

Has Title III shown evidence of success in
achieving the program's goals?

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Introduction

As the Trump Administration pursues an agenda that prioritizes a reduced federal role in education policy, questions arise as to whether the federal government has been successful in achieving its goals with respect to improving educational outcomes and expanding opportunities. These questions are best answered through a review of the existing research evidence so that citizens, advocates, and policymakers can evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of particular programs based on high-quality studies. However, the evidence base for federal programs is mixed and difficult for non-researcher audiences to assess and make use of without a systematic synthesis that centers the information needs of non-researcher audiences. Varied approaches, observation periods, questions, and data sources lead to different and sometimes competing takeaways. Stakeholders relying on existing studies and syntheses alone are likely to find the evidence base impossible to use to understand the implications of recent and planned federal actions to reduce the scope and nature of federally funded education programs.

This research synthesis addresses this need for clarity, focusing on the evidence base for Title III – English Language Acquisition. Drawing on a foundation established by a

2017 National Academies report, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning: Promising Futures*, the research team reviewed evidence published from 2015 through 2025, using a rapid review framework for assessing whether there is evidence that Title III has shown success in achieving the program’s goals (see Appendix).

Summary of Findings

Overall, our review suggests that Title III may be struggling to meet its goals due to implementation challenges and inadequate funding that has not kept pace with the growing English learner (EL) population, but not because of a lack of evidence for what works to support ELs and recent immigrants. This conclusion is based on 500 articles screened for relevance and against inclusion criteria, yielding 23 systematic reviews of empirical studies and 51 original, published empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025. Empirical studies across many disciplines and methodological orientations have yielded a robust literature on programs, practices, and instructional strategies that effectively improve English language proficiency and academic achievement. However, it is not clear that Title III funds are being used to support these practices. While an important piece of the puzzle is missing – a cancelled contract for an evaluation of the implementation of Title III might have provided more answers¹ – it is clear that schools need more prepared teachers to enact evidence-based approaches. While all states use at least some Title III funds to better prepare their workforce to support ELs, districts consistently report significant unmet need for prepared EL teachers. Finally, researchers and advocates have consistently argued that Title III funding for English Learners and recent immigrants is inadequate. While estimates of what would be adequate levels of funding vary, our review did not find any research suggesting that there is currently enough or too much money allocated to support the growing population of ELs.

¹ A \$4 million, six-year contract with AIR for a [National Evaluation of Title III Implementation](#) was cancelled in the summer of 2025. Though not reflected on the IES website, the cancellation was confirmed with AIR researchers.

Primer on Title III & Program Goals

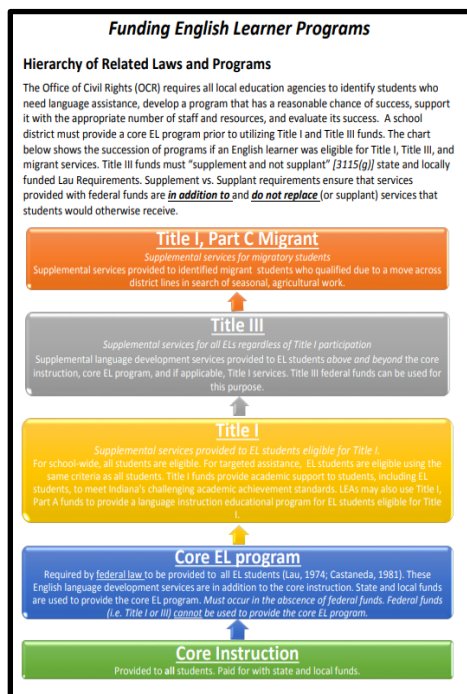
The intent of Title III can be understood as follows: **To ensure that English learners (ELs) and recently arrived immigrant students attain English proficiency and achieve academic content mastery at the same levels expected of all students, by providing supplemental language instruction and support services.**²

Title III funds, regulated by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as amended by ESSA, are administered through a **state-to-local formula grant system** to states and districts based on the number of English Learners (80%) and newly arrived immigrant students (20%). This system channels almost all Title III dollars to districts through states. **Districts deploy their shares for classroom-level language programs, intensive professional development, family engagement, and immigrant supports.** States receive a purposeful slice (up to 5%) to raise the floor on program quality statewide. State Education Agencies (SEAs) use their share to set uniform entrance/exit rules, train educators, monitor fidelity, and curate resources. **Nearly all identified ELs participate in Title III funded programs** (U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2020).

Title III funds must supplement, not replace, state- and locally funded core programs, which are mandated by law (Lau vs. Nichols, 1974). Title III covers just under 8% of overall costs (Sugarman, 2021) and is intended for evidence-based activities that accelerate progress for English Learners and immigrant students. For example, Local Educational Agencies (LEA) must use Title III funds to implement three core activities: language instruction educational programs, professional development, and parent, family and community engagement. The succession chart below from the Indiana Department of Education shows the prioritization of funding sources for service (McCormick, 2019). As Figure 1 demonstrates, school districts must provide core instruction and core EL programs before accessing ESSA entitlement programs like Title I and Title III services, supplementing services that students otherwise receive through state and locally funded programs.

² “Title III” has meant rather different things at different points in the 60-year life of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (see Boyle et al. 2024 for a discussion of its evolution). The definition here is summarized from the 2015 reauthorization of the ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Figure 1. Hierarchy of Related Laws and Programs



Source: Indiana Department of Education, [English Learner Guidebook](#) (McCormick, 2019, pg26)

Synthesis of Evidence: Methodology

This rapid evidence review focuses on the question of whether Title III is achieving its goal of accelerating progress for ELs. It is methodologically difficult to assess the causal impact of Title III due to the flexibility offered by the program and the requirements that federal funds are to be used to supplement legally required state and local funded programs. **No studies were identified in the rapid review that address this question in a straightforward way by linking federal resources directly to student outcomes (see Appendix).** Given the lack of available causal evidence to support or challenge the claim that federal programs under Title III have shown success in achieving program goals, this rapid review focused on the following questions, which together help to address the overall question at hand:

1. Are there evidence-based programs and practices that improve English proficiency and academic learning among ELs?
2. Are Title III funds used by LEAs on evidence-based programs and practices?
3. Are funding levels adequate for achieving Title III goals?

To address these questions, the research team followed this procedure: We reviewed the original legislative intent behind Title III in order to define “relevance” to guide the literature search and study selection (see below). The research team used Google Scholar and discussions with the broader project team to identify key conceptual and empirical works, including pivotal studies and systematic literature reviews. We identified a total of 13 candidate studies, which were then analyzed to generate a key word search for the rapid review of studies published between 2015 and 2025. The first 500 results of the search were then screened based on specific inclusion criteria—published in English, focused on K-12 U.S. public education, and for additional criteria related to source, format, and publication date. Studies were then screened for relevance based on the following definition:

A research study will be considered relevant for inclusion if it explicitly and empirically examines Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), or related federal policies governing English learners (ELs), with a focus on the policy’s impact on language acquisition, academic achievement, or educational equity for English learners.

Relevant studies must focus on one or more of the following:

- *Empirical analyses of English learners’ progress in English language proficiency, as measured by standardized assessments or state-defined criteria;*
- *Studies evaluating EL’s performance on academic content standards, graduation rates, or other key educational outcomes aligned with Title III objectives; and/or*
- *The role of Title III in shaping educator practices, family engagement, or school/district capacity to serve English learners effectively.*

Studies must explicitly reference Title III, or analyze programs, outcomes, or strategies clearly attributable to Title III mandates or funding.

An initial screen for relevance resulted in 28 reviews of research and 221 original empirical studies (textbooks, policy guidance, advocacy documents, policy critiques, and demographic profiles of ELs in different settings were excluded). Of these, 175 were dissertations and were further excluded from this review. **The final count of studies included in the rapid review: 23 research reviews or briefs and 51 original, published empirical studies.** Selected studies were coded and analyzed using a framework that captures essential details aligned with the research questions above. See Appendix for details on the methodology employed in this rapid review.

Synthesis of Evidence: Findings

This review aimed to assess the evidence base for effective practices, their use, and adequacy of funding. Across much of what was reviewed, a consistent theme emerged: **English Learner education in the United States requires significant improvement, and there are opportunities to reform current policy and practices to better align with research.** This theme is succinctly captured in a position paper by Umansky and Avelar (2022), who draw on existing literature to generate four insights from the field: Current policy and practice in EL education reflects (1) an overwhelming English language orientation, to the detriment of language diversity and core content instruction; (2) the provision of largely homogenous and often inappropriate educational supports and services; (3) a near-universal experience of stigmatization through the EL label and its resulting effects; and (4) a widespread and systemic pattern of unequal opportunity to learn. In the next sections, our review identifies opportunities for improving evidence-supported EL instruction to help educators overcome these policy and practice limitations.

Q1: Are there evidence-based programs and practices that improve English proficiency and academic learning among ELs?

Yes. While schools face many challenges in simultaneously delivering tailored language support and high-quality academic content to individual students, especially in districts with linguistically diverse student populations (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016), our rapid review unequivocally shows that **there are many evidence-based approaches to improving English proficiency and academic learning.**

As discussed above, Title III funds may not be used for a district's core activities to meet its civil rights obligations, including, for example, core English proficiency instruction, developing or administering English language proficiency tests, identifying ELs, or meeting basic requirements for translation and interpretation for parents. Instead, they are generally used for support staff and activities such as teacher training, supplementary instructional materials, summer and afterschool programs, and program evaluations and improvement.

Nonetheless, we focus first on the current state of evidence assessing core English as a second language (ESOL) instruction, which essentially asks whether English-only or English-dominant approaches are more, equally, or less effective than dual language or bilingual approaches. While these programs are mostly funded by local and state dollars,

Title III funds can be used to accelerate progress through teacher training, supplementary materials, and support staff associated with the programs, making the assessment of evidence for their effectiveness relevant for this rapid review. Following the review of the evidence base for core ESOL approaches, we turn to a review of the evidence for specific instructional strategies across early, middle, and high school grade levels.

Core approaches for promoting English proficiency: Language Instruction Educational Programs (LIEPs)

In U.S. public schools, Language Instruction Educational Programs (LIEPs) range from English-only to bilingual approaches, which highlights a fundamental policy choice: whether programs should emphasize swift integration into English or promote long-term bilingualism and biliteracy as educational assets (Sugarman, 2018). At one end, **Structured English Immersion (SEI)** and **English as a Second Language (ESL)** prioritize rapid English acquisition through English-only instruction with varying levels of support. **Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE)** begins with instruction in students' home languages but gradually shifts toward English dominance. More balanced models, such as **Developmental Bilingual Education** and **Dual Language/Two-Way Immersion**, sustain and value both English and the home language, aiming for bilingualism and biliteracy. At the far end, **Heritage Language Programs** focus on maintaining and developing proficiency and cultural competency in a student's heritage language alongside English, a strategy popular in communities facing the loss of a native language.

Supporters of English-only approaches in public education argue that immersion accelerates English acquisition, enabling students to integrate quickly into mainstream classrooms and perform better on standardized assessments (see Gándara, 2012; Lu, 1998; Valentino & Reardon, 2015). These programs are often viewed as more cost-effective and scalable than bilingual models, since they do not require staffing or materials in multiple languages (see Steele et al., 2018). Advocates also frame strong English skills as essential for economic mobility and civic participation (Schwarz & Soifer, 2012), while some emphasize that a common language fosters national cohesion and shared identity (Rich & Vance, 2024).

While English-only viewpoints have been articulated in policy documents, the research literature doesn't support their claims. In the past decade, **there has been mounting rigorous evidence that recommends bilingual approaches over English-only programs.** While studies show that it can take longer to achieve English proficiency with bilingual approaches, more students achieve higher levels of English proficiency and score higher on academic assessments, especially in ELA (Bibler, 2021; Steele et al., 2018; Watzinger-

Tharp et al., 2018; Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Valentino & Reardon, 2015), though the specific features of dual language approaches matter and need to be carefully examined before adoption for specific populations (WestEd, 2024). The available rigorous evidence skews toward Spanish-English programs, and more evidence is needed to understand program effects on outcomes other than reclassification and ELA achievement (e.g., math and science achievement and graduation) and across different student populations, home languages, and program models (WWC, 2022).

Some researchers go so far as to characterize English-only legislation as discriminatory and marginalizing. In their 2017 analysis of the field, Nelson and Davis-Wiley draw on theories of second language acquisition and descriptive empirical research on bilingual education and literacy and language development to offer a research-based critique of English-only policies. The authors argue that bilingual approaches should be prioritized because the development of students' first language is critical for second language acquisition and cognitive development. Furthermore, bilingual education not only supports students' academic development but also validates their cultural and linguistic identities, helping them reconcile their heritage with their American identity.

Simply being classified as an English Learner (EL) can confer negative effects due to both programmatic effects and status effects, particularly in English-immersion settings and for students who are relatively more proficient in English but not yet reclassified (Umansky, 2016). Since bilingual programs can keep students classified as ELs for a longer period than English-only approaches, it is a reasonable question whether we should prioritize programs that help ELs exit soonest. However, in a study based in California using a regression discontinuity design with instrumental variables to estimate the causal impact of EL classification on students' academic trajectories, Umansky (2016) found that the negative effects of EL classification on students with relatively advanced English proficiency are actually concentrated in English immersion classrooms. In contrast, EL classification has neutral or even positive effects in transitional bilingual and maintenance bilingual programs, suggesting that these **bilingual environments may buffer students from the negative impacts of EL status.**

Despite the evidence that English Learners in bilingual education programs demonstrate higher rates of English proficiency (though it may take a bit longer to achieve) and higher academic achievement than their peers in English-only programs, **bilingual programs are not implemented widely, in part because they can be difficult to staff and politically complicated to sustain** (Johnson et al., 2018; Sugarman, 2018). While several states such as California, Arizona, and Massachusetts have recently repealed English-only laws in

favor of bilingual and dual-language education, across the United States less than 20% of multilingual English Learner students are educated through bilingual and dual language approaches (Williams and Zabala, 2024).

Ethnographic evidence suggests that regardless of approach, LIEPs can be difficult to implement as designed. In an ethnographic study of the educational experiences of Bangla-speaking and Spanish-speaking English Learners (ELs) in a public middle school, Garver (2020) sought to understand how conditions for learning vary within segregated bilingual instructional models. Using a one-year ethnographic approach, the study involved classroom observations, staff interviews, and analysis of school policies to compare the outcomes of two Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) programs. Despite being officially identical, the programs differed significantly in design, staffing consistency, and social integration opportunities. The study found that Bangla-speaking ELs benefitted from more cohesive program structures, consistent teaching staff, and stronger teacher-student relationships, which contributed to better academic outcomes. In contrast, Spanish-speaking ELs faced challenges such as bridge classes that combined multiple grade levels, inconsistent staffing, and limited access to grade-level curricula, resulting in inferior learning conditions. **These findings highlight the importance of program design, teacher consistency, and equitable access to resources in ensuring bilingual instructional models are effective and do not perpetuate inequalities among EL populations.**

Another ethnographic study provides evidence that English-only approaches are also difficult to implement as designed. In Johnson and colleagues' (2018) ethnographic study of Sheltered English Instruction in four school districts in the state of Washington, they found that ELs were frequently placed in mainstream classrooms without adequate support. The researchers attributed poor EL performance to a lack of training and skills in strategies for making academic content comprehensible for English Learners through academic language instruction, visuals, manipulatives, and other techniques to contextualize language input.

While there continue to be debates – both ideological and empirical – about which programs are most feasible for ELs, which contexts they should be used in, and how to ensure these programs are implemented as designed, **the literature is clear that any program that focuses on the specific learning needs of English Learners is better than nothing** (Irby et al., 2010). There is growing evidence that **program quality and instructional practices may be equally if not more important than the language of instruction** (Slavin et al., 2011). Our review now turns to summarize what we know about effective instructional strategies.

Instructional strategies across grade levels

Although Title III requires states to prove that their strategies are evidence-based and demonstrably effective, the considerable flexibility in Title III allows large variation in the approaches states and districts can take in supporting English Learners to achieve English proficiency and academic mastery in schools. In this section, we assess the extent to which the literature offers states and districts evidence to inform programmatic decisions for supporting English Learners.

The purpose of this section is not to be comprehensive, but to establish the case that the field has produced a robust and growing literature on what works for ELs across grade spans and in different contexts. A comprehensive review is out of scope for this project, but the results unearthed in the rapid review unequivocally confirms that states and districts can draw on high quality evidence to inform program and practice decisions aligned with Title III requirements.

There is a robust literature providing evidence-based best practices in instructional strategies to improve time-to-proficiency/reclassification and academic learning *in early grades*, with emerging evidence covering *middle and high school grade levels* as well.

The most recent comprehensive synthesis of this evidence comes from a 2017 National Academies report: *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning: Promising Futures*, specifically *Chapter 8: Promising and Effective Practices for English Learners in Grades Pre-K to 12* (Takanishi & Le Menestrel, 2017). The chapter focuses on promising and effective practices for educating English learners across three grade spans: Pre-K to grade 5, grades 6-8 (middle school), and grades 9-12 (high school). It highlights instructional strategies tailored to the developmental, linguistic, and academic needs of ELs, emphasizing their socioemotional well-being and cultural assets (Table 1).

Table 1. Instructional Strategies for English Learners by Grade Level

Grade Level	Supports/Strategies
Pre-K to Grade 5	Explicit literacy instruction (including phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension), academic language development, ³ visual and verbal supports, peer-assisted learning, leveraging home language and cultural assets, screening and monitoring, small-group support
Grades 6-8 (Middle School)	Access to grade-level content to develop academic language and critical thinking, comprehension and writing support, visual aids, home language and cultural knowledge, collaborative learning, addressing socioemotional needs
Grades 9-12 (High School)	Academic English development focusing on oral and written language, structured reading and writing, cognitive strategies, extended discussions, motivation and engagement, peer-assisted learning, small-group instruction for struggling ELs

The authors identified several gaps in the evidence-base and directions for future research, which highlights the need for comprehensive and targeted research to address the diverse needs of ELs and improve their educational outcomes. In Table 2, we summarize these gaps and identify related studies from the rapid review to show how this literature continues to advance. Again, this is not a comprehensive review but demonstrative of the active nature of this field of study.

³ For a primer on academic language development among ELs, see [Academic Language and ELLs: What Teachers Need to Know](#).

Table 2. Gaps and Emerging Research in Instructional Strategies for English Learners

Research Gap	Description
Developmental Factors and Instructional Practices	<p>Limited research on how developmental factors such as age and cognitive and social changes influence EL's learning and interact with instructional strategies.</p>
Middle & High School Instruction	<p>Lack of studies on addressing unique developmental needs of middle school ELs, including literacy engagement and impact of organizational structures like departmentalized instruction; limited evidence on effective instructional practices for high school ELs, including preparation for postsecondary education and careers, and effectiveness of intervention/remedial classes.</p> <p>New research: In a small-scale randomized study to address gaps in what we know about effective instruction in middle grades, Vaughn et al (2017), tested a special discourse-based teaching program in eighth-grade social studies classes with both ELs and non-ELs. In this study, 18 teachers taught the same material, but in some classes (the treatment group), they used extra strategies like teaching important vocabulary, focusing on understanding key ideas, and team-based learning. Results showed that students in these special classes (845 students) did better on tests about what they learned in social studies and on reading related to the subject than students in regular classes (784 students). However, there was no difference in general reading skills. Both ELs and non-ELs improved similarly, with the biggest gains in learning social studies content and understanding related reading. However, as the percentage of ELs in a class increased, performance on the content knowledge acquisition measure decreased for all students but more dramatically for ELs than for non-ELs. The authors suggest that for discourse-based interventions, more support is needed in classrooms with more ELs to maintain program benefits.</p>

Research Gap	Description
Long-Term English Learners (LTELs)	Insufficient research on effective practices for reengaging LTELs and addressing their linguistic, academic, and socioemotional needs.
Academic Language Development & Integration of Language and Content Instruction	<p>Need for studies on integrating academic language development into content instruction and higher-level linguistic competence.</p> <p>New research: While the rapid review did not yield specific studies about how academic language development can be integrated into content instruction, de Araujo and Smith (2021) published a study reviewing popular algebra curricula materials to examine how integration is currently being treated in instructional materials. Many programs include special notes and tasks for teachers to help English language learners. After looking at four popular curriculum programs, the authors found they often treat English learners homogeneously in both their language and math proficiency, as if they all need extra help with both math and vocabulary. The materials offer limited ways to learn both math and language, which could reinforce teachers' negative views by assuming math deficits in all English Learners.</p> <p>Another study (Wolf et al., 2022) conducted a textual analysis to examine the types of language demands manifested in Grade 5 English language proficiency (ELP) standards and content standards, such as in English language arts and mathematics, finding a large overlap in terms of language functions with a heavy emphasis on integrated language skills and interaction skills. The authors also documented perceptions of both general education and ESL teachers about the language demands in the standards and the challenges in implementing the standards with EL students. In focus groups with teachers, many noticed that standards often require several skills at once, but they differed on which skills they thought were most important. When researchers showed teachers more details about language demands, teachers were able to spot the different language skills needed for each standard, suggesting it</p>

Research Gap	Description
	could be helpful to have training and tools that make it easier for teachers and curriculum planners to identify all the language demands in academic standards.
Small-Group and Peer-Assisted Learning	Further research needed to optimize small-group and peer-assisted learning strategies for ELs.
Extended Discussions and Critical Thinking	Need for studies on integrating extended discussions and critical thinking opportunities into instruction for ELs, particularly in secondary schools.
Socioemotional Factors	<p>Limited understanding of how socioemotional factors like motivation, engagement, identity formation, and teacher attitudes impact EL’s academic performance.</p> <p>New research: Using longitudinal data from a large, urban California district, Soland & Sandilos (2021) followed a cohort of students from 5th through 8th grade and linked annual reading and math scores with a brief survey measure of academic self-efficacy (students’ confidence they can succeed academically), using growth-curve modeling to examine how these change over time and differ for English learners. They found that (1) lower initial self-efficacy helped explain part of the English learner achievement gap in academic growth, (2) self-efficacy declined across middle school for all students, and (3) ELs did not close the self-efficacy gap even as reading achievement grew. These findings suggest that academic supports may be stronger when paired with practices that build students’ confidence during a period when confidence tends to drop—while noting the study is observational and more experimental evidence is needed to confirm that boosting self-efficacy can significantly drive EL achievement gains.</p>
Scaling Up Effective Practices	Need for studies on scaling up and sustaining effective classroom practices for ELs across schools and districts.

Research Gap	Description
Culturally Relevant Practices	Limited research on incorporating EL’s cultural and linguistic assets into instruction to enhance engagement and achievement.

The rapid evidence review also touched on other areas of inquiry – for example, research on use of Title III for supporting ELs through extended learning time (e.g., summer and after school programs) (Johnson, 2020); organizational practices in schools that promote equity for ELs (Thompson, 2017; Garver 2022; Mavrogordato & White, 2020); evidence-based interventions within RTI frameworks (Petit & Kuo 2020); supporting ELs in rural communities (Burke, 2015; Ruecker 2016; Williams & Ditch, 2019); and best practices for assessing and supporting ELs with disabilities (de Valenzuela et al., 2022; Kangas, 2020; Karavonen & Clark, 2019; Kim et al., 2023; Lei et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2015; Rivera-Mills et al., 2022; Watson & Donahue, 2025), further indicating the active nature of scholarship generating high quality research that can be used to support decision-making and systems change.

Q2: Are Title III funds used by LEAs on evidence-based programs and practices?

Unclear. The Institute of Education Statistics (IES) funded an [implementation study](#) of Title III funds in 2019, however the contract was cut by President Trump’s administration before findings were released. A previous study conducted by American Institutes for Research in 2012 drew on data collected through interviews with Title III officials from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, a nationally representative survey of Title III district administrators, and case studies of 12 Title III districts to provide a picture of how states, districts, and schools were implementing Title III provisions as of the 2009-10 school year (Tanenbaum et al., 2012). **The report concludes that even though Title III is mainly a supplemental program, it helped increase awareness and encouraged schools to focus more on the needs of ELs.** In the 10 years after its enactment through NCLB, Title III led to changes in standards, testing, accountability, and data systems for ELs. The authors call for refining the policy to build capacity, improve teacher quality, and increase the use of proven teaching methods to better serve the growing EL student population.

Due to the lack of published results from the more recent implementation study, it is unclear if these issues have improved or been addressed since, in particular with the reauthorization and new guidance in ESSA in 2015. The unpublished study fielded surveys in spring 2023 focused on the following research questions:

- Do policies appear to support ESSA's objective of promoting consistency within states in how EL students are identified and exited from services?
- What has the shift from a separate Title III accountability system for EL performance to integration of EL performance into the general accountability system under ESSA meant in terms of identifying schools with low-performing ELs for support and differentiation of supports for ELs?
- Do district policies and practices reflect an emphasis on using research evidence to select and support language instruction, as ESSA encourages?
- Do districts appear to be responding to new Title III requirements for parent, family, and community engagement and outreach?
- To what extent are teacher preparation and professional learning efforts directed towards building capacity to meet the diverse needs of ELs as ESSA requires?

Without the results of this study, it is difficult to address the question of how states and districts use Title III funds. Nonetheless, the following sections address some aspects of this question. **Results from the rapid review suggest that there is considerable unmet need for educators who are trained and prepared to meet the needs of the diverse population of ELs across the country. We lack sufficient research to address the question of whether Title III funds are being used to fund evidence-based practices in language instruction, though studies in specific contexts point to implementation challenges that suggest practices may not reflect recommendations from the research base.**

Personnel and educator preparation

According to the 2017 NAS report reviewed in the previous section, Title III funded positions for 346,715 certified/licensed teachers working in Title III across the US in 2013-14, with an additional 82,380 additional certified/licensed teachers needed in the years to follow (Takanishi & Le Menestrel, 2017, pg. 498). Recent estimates suggest that the unmet need for certified ESL teachers has continued to grow. In the Fall 2022 RAND panel survey of school district leaders, **a third of district leaders indicated a moderate or severe shortage of ESL teachers in fall 2022** (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2023).

The rapid review returned several studies documenting the lack of educator preparation for supporting ELs. In a recent brief published by Annenberg in their EdResearch for Action

series, Mavrogordato et al (2024) used data and some of this research to conclude that **most principals and teachers are not well trained to help EL students**. Using NCES data, they show that even though about two-thirds of teachers have at least one EL student in their class, less than half have taken a course about teaching EL students, and only 10% are certified to teach English as a second language. They also argue that many teacher training programs give little or no guidance on how to support EL students, leaving new teachers unsure how to design lessons, track progress, co-teach, or find the right digital tools for ELs. Finally, they argue that school leaders also often lack the training needed to support EL students and make good decisions for schools where many different languages are spoken.

It is important to note that Title III funds interact with state policy contexts to shape educational experiences of ELs. **States play a primary role in setting policy for teacher credentialing, and studies show a need to strengthen credentialing for bilingual and ESL educators**. Leider, Columbo, and Nerlino (2021) documented wide variation in the types of preparation required by states for teachers of ELs, leading to varying degrees of content and pedagogical knowledge. The authors argue that most teachers are insufficiently prepared to work with ELs because of weak requirements in most states that do not necessitate teachers completing an approved program for bilingual education credentialing (required in only eight states), and instead rely on less rigorous means, such as merely passing a test.

Grantee activities

Without a comprehensive study of the implementation of Title III since ESSA (as described above), the best source for data on how states use funds comes from biennial reports to Congress. According to the [2025 biennial report to Congress](#), which covers school years 2020-2022 (pg. 3): “For both school years, **providing professional development to EL instructors and other personnel** was ranked as the first most common type of activity across all SEAs (72.5 percent) and as one of the five most common types of activity by 100 percent of SEAs. Other subgrantee activities that commonly ranked first among SEAs were supporting the **development and implementation of language instruction educational programs** (LIEPs) (37.3 percent of SEAs in SY 2020–21 and 43.1 percent in SY 2021–22) and **offering parent and community engagement activities** (37.3 percent in both years). The activity that showed the largest year-over-year increase was ‘**[p]roviding tutorials and career and technical education**.’ Just over a quarter of SEAs (27.5 percent) reported this as one of their top five activities in SY 2020–21, compared to 33.3 percent of SEAs doing so in SY 2021–22, an increase of just under 6 percentage points.”

More research is needed to better understand how funds are used beyond these broad categories, especially whether funds are used to support evidence-based strategies for achieving program goals. While funding from the 2019-2024 national study of implementation have not been published due to cancelled contracts, the rapid review of research yielded several more targeted studies of implementation challenges in translating Title III resources into achieving program goals in specific contexts and the complex interplay between policy frameworks and the realities of everyday schooling.

Across multiple case studies investigating English learners' experiences in schools, several interconnected themes emerge around the opportunities and barriers to advancing educational outcomes for ELs. At the leadership level, school boards (Sampson, 2019) and administrators (Mavrogordato and White, 2020) act as mediators in the policymaking and implementation processes, directly affecting outcomes for English learners. Studies show that these leaders often engage reactively with policies, navigating tensions around race, equity, and deficit perspectives, and that their attitudes and understanding of policy significantly impact their decision-making. Effective leaders can leverage their grasp of policies and build external supports, such as resource networks and guidance from state agencies, to expand equity for multilingual learners.

However, research suggests that subgroup entitlement policies, including Title III and IDEA, can create barriers to achieving program goals in how they influence daily resource distribution in schools, particularly in resource constrained contexts. In an ethnographic case study of a public middle school, Garver (2022) shows how these policies can both open and restrict opportunities by creating distinct learning tracks, fragmenting organizational coordination, increasing compliance pressures, and re-allocating resources intended for specific groups to general education students.

Q3: Are funding levels adequate for achieving Title III goals?

No. Programs designed to support EL students—such as those involving language assessment, the recruitment of qualified staff, and the delivery of excellent instruction—often demand significant resources. As a final component of assessing whether Title III has shown evidence of achieving its program goals, we review studies of funding adequacy to assess the extent to which Title III provides adequate levels of funding to achieve its goals.

How are supports for ELs funded?

State funding streams make up the majority of funding allocated for EL students; federal funding covers about 8% of overall costs of programs for English Learners and recent

immigrants (Sugarman, 2021). In addition to **Title III**, other federal sources of funding include: **Title I, Part A**, which focuses on students in poverty, including ELs, by providing resources for remedial instruction and parent engagement; **Title II, Part A**, which supports professional development for educators, including EL-specific training; and the **Migrant Education Program** under Title I, Part C, which assists ELs affected by frequent moves due to agricultural work. Finally, **Refugee School Impact Grants**, managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, fund academic and integration support for refugee youth.

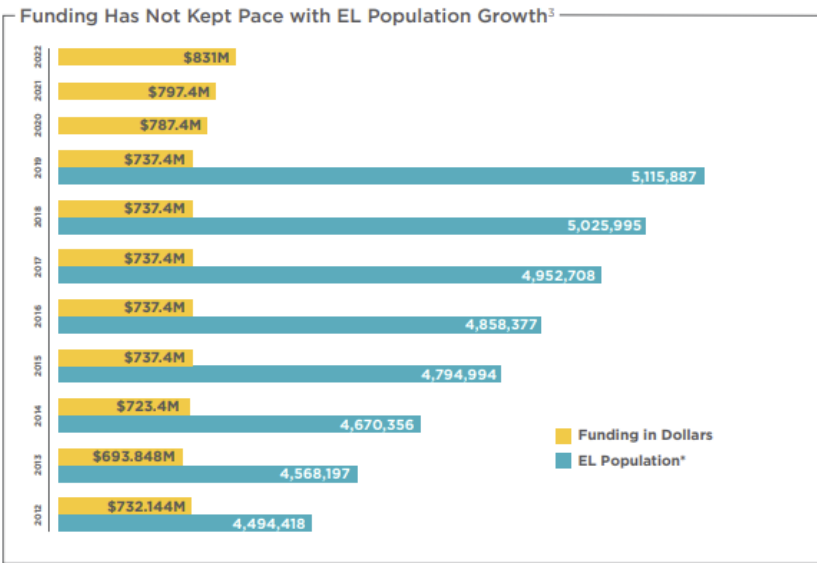
Are federal sources of funding adequate?

Based on the rapid review, researchers and advocates have consistently argued that Title III funding for English Learners and recent immigrants is inadequate. In the last decade, several researchers and advocates have attempted to assess the adequacy of Title III funding levels (Dammu and O’Keefe, 2022; Dammu and O’Keefe, 2024; Millard, 2015; Sugarman, 2021; Unidos US, 2022; Williams, 2020), and, while estimates of what would be adequate levels of funding vary, no one has suggested that there is currently too much money being set aside to support ELs. Funding inadequacy to achieve program goals is clear.

Prior to the ESSA reauthorization of ESEA, Title III officials and district administrators reported in a 2012 survey that Title III funds are helpful but insufficient for the kinds of EL services that would allow them to meet the challenges they face (Tanenbaum et al., 2012). Since the survey was fielded, **funding has remained relatively flat even as the national EL population has rapidly grown** (Sugarman, 2021; Unidos 2022). A 2022 budget brief by Unidos US, the nation’s largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization, reported that the EL population in the United States grew 35% between the 2000-01 school year (3.8 million) and the 2018-19 school year (5.1 million). While Title III funding for ELs increased 25% between FY2002 and FY2022 from \$664 million to \$831 million, adjusting for inflation shows that the “spending power” of Title III funding actually decreased by 24% since 2002.⁴

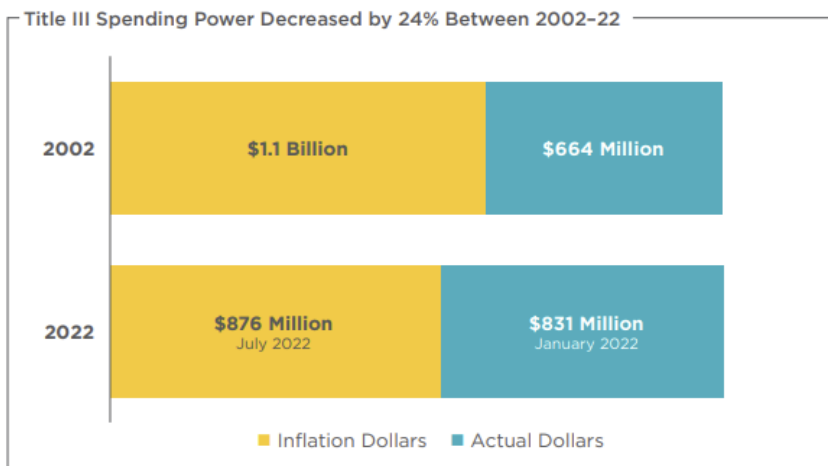
⁴ Several other issues have been raised about funding adequacy, captured succinctly in a [2023 brief](#) by Leslie Villegas of New America called, “English Learner Funding Equity and Adequacy in K-12 Education.”

Figure 2. Title III Funding and English Learner Population



Source: UnidosUS, [Investing in English Learners: Federal Recommendations 2022](#).

Figure 3. Title III’s Declining Spending Power



Source: UnidosUS, [Investing in English Learners: Federal Recommendations 2022](#).

Advocates' calls for increased funding range from \$1 to \$2 billion to achieve adequacy:

- Appropriations should include the \$1 billion for Title III as proposed by the U.S. House of Representative's Budget in FY23, with the goal of securing \$2 billion in FY24 to fully meet the needs of ELs (Unidos US, 2022);
- In order to maintain the per-pupil EL funding standard set by the federal government in the early 2000s, Title III would need to grow to at least \$1.21 billion, accounting for the growing EL population as well as inflation (Williams, 2020).

Conclusion

Our review of the evidence suggests opportunities and challenges in the administration and implementation of Title III funds to support English learners.

First, it is clear that improving instruction and academic proficiency for English learners, the primary goal of Title III, is possible based on a review of the empirical research on the programs, practices, and instructional strategies designed for English learners. Multidisciplinary and multimethod research has consistently shown that there are many approaches that can be leveraged to improve English proficiency and academic achievement. There are, however, clearly areas of research that are underdeveloped and require additional attention. Continued support for this research is required to advance the field.

Second, whether federal Title III funds are being used to support these evidence-based practices is less clear. Large-scale evaluations of state and school district activities are necessary to understand whether these entities are implementing Title III programs in ways that are consistent with federal policy and are designed to achieve the program's goals. The cancellation of the most recent evaluation study contracted by IES leaves many questions unanswered about how states and school districts are responding to new accountability and policy goals articulated in 2015's ESEA reauthorization. It is clear, however, that even with Title III support for educator preparation programs, many states are struggling to effectively prepare teachers for the demands of educating a growing population of English learners.

Finally, in stark contrast to proposals to eliminate federal funding for English learners, the research consensus is that funding for Title III is inadequate to achieve the program's goals. Advocates have estimated that Title III funds need to double in order to reach adequate levels to support the unmet needs of the growing EL population.

The key takeaway from this evidence review is that the federal government plays an integral role in supporting English learners. While we were unable to draw a direct causal relationship from Title III funding to improved student outcomes, we were able to identify a clear opportunity to use Title III funds to deliver evidence-based instructional practices. Additional evaluation is necessary to determine whether states are following through on this objective, and additional funding is required to ensure states have the resources to implement effective programs and practices.

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Appendix: Rapid Review Methodology

Rapid Review Steps

1. **Review and document original intent of each program/policy:** Review original congressional intent and legislative documents for each program, examining their foundational goals, noting specifics around educational equity and student support.
2. **Definition of relevance:** The proposed definition of “relevance” is used to generate search terms and to inform the selection studies to include in each review. See Table A1 for identification of key concepts and related key words employed in the search process.
3. **Identification of candidate studies:** A systematic search for relevant studies is conducted in two stages. First, the team uses Google Scholar to gather conceptual and empirical research – both peer-reviewed and grey literature – aligned to our research question. Second, the research team identifies “pivotal” studies and existing standalone literature reviews, meta-analyses, and research syntheses in our search thus far.
4. **Inclusion criteria and procedure:** Candidate studies are screened based on an agreed upon inclusion criteria to identify a final sample of articles and reports to read and summarize. Our inclusion criteria are as follows: (a) articles written in English; (b) focused on K-12 public education in the United States; (c) published in peer-reviewed journal journals, professional associations or organizations, or government reports; (d) available in full-text format; and (e) published between 2000 and 2025.
5. **Content analysis of literature:** After completing the search and screening process each study is individually coded and analyzed. A coding framework is used to accommodate a diverse set of studies while extracting key information to allow us to compare across studies and key learnings from the literature, including: research questions, study context, theoretical orientation, key concepts, data and measures, methods, findings, and policy implications. Analytic memos describe and synthesize relevant data from the extant research.

Rapid Review Inclusion Criteria and Definition of Relevance for Title III

Inclusion criteria and procedure: We screened the candidate studies based on agreed-upon inclusion criteria to identify a final sample of articles and reports to read and summarize. Our inclusion criteria are as follows: (a) articles written in English; (b) focused on K-12 public education in the United States; (c) published in peer-reviewed journals, professional associations’ or organizations’ reports, or government reports; (d) available in

full-text format; and (e) published between 2015 and 2025. We use a truncated period for this review because of significant policy changes and evidentiary requirements enacted through the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015.

Definition of relevance: Evidence for inclusion was assessed based on following definition of relevance: A research study will be considered *relevant* for inclusion if it explicitly and empirically examines Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), or related federal policies governing English learners (ELs), with a focus on the policy’s impact on language acquisition, academic achievement, or educational equity for English learners.

Relevant studies must focus on one or more of the following:

- empirical analyses of English learners’ progress in English language proficiency, as measured by standardized assessments or state-defined criteria;
- studies evaluating ELs’ performance on academic content standards, graduation rates, or other key educational outcomes aligned with Title III objectives;
- and/or the role of Title III in shaping educator practices, family engagement, or school/district capacity to serve English learners effectively.

Studies must explicitly reference Title III, or analyze programs, outcomes, or strategies clearly attributable to Title III mandates or funding.

Search #1: Keyword search (based on review of candidate studies): Impact on student outcomes; Language acquisition and student achievement

(“Title III” OR “Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)” OR “Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)”) AND (“English Learners” OR “English Language Learners” OR Immigrants OR “Immigrant students” OR “immigrant children and youth” OR “immigrant-origin students”) AND (Impact OR Effectiveness OR Effect OR Intervention OR “Program evaluation” OR “Policy impact” OR “Evaluation of Outcomes”) AND ((“English language proficiency” OR “English language acquisition” OR “English proficiency levels” OR “Language proficiency” OR “Language acquisition”) OR (“Standardized tests” OR “Academic achievement” OR “State standardized assessments” OR “Achievement gains”))

Results: 5,170

Screen first 500 results, sorted by relevance.

We were unable to identify any studies that met the inclusion criteria and definition of relevance of the impact of Title III funds. We expanded our inclusion criteria to identify

studies that reference Title III and focus on the impact of practices that are typically supported with Title II funding.

Search #2: Revised key word search – Impact of practices typically funded by Title III funds

(“Title III” OR “Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)” OR “Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)”) AND (“English Learners” OR “English Language Learners” OR Immigrants OR “Immigrant students” OR “immigrant children and youth” OR “immigrant-origin students”) AND (Impact OR Effectiveness OR Effect OR Intervention OR “Program evaluation” OR “Policy impact” OR “Evaluation of Outcomes”) AND (“professional development” OR (“English language proficiency” OR “English language acquisition” OR “English proficiency levels” OR “Language proficiency” OR “Language acquisition”) OR (“Standardized tests” OR “Academic achievement” OR “State standardized assessments” OR “Achievement gains”))

Results: 5,050

Screen first 505 results, sorted by relevance.

An initial screen for relevance resulted in 28 reviews of research and 221 original empirical studies (excluded results were things like textbooks, policy guidance, advocacy documents, policy critiques, and demographic profiles of ELs in different settings). Of these, 175 were dissertations and were excluded from this review. **The final count of studies included in the rapid review: 23 systematic reviews of empirical work and 51 original, published empirical studies.** Selected studies were coded and analyzed using a framework that captures essential details aligned with the research questions above.

Table A1. Key Concepts and Related Key Words

Concept 1	Concept 2	Concept 3	Concept 4	Concept 5	Concept 6	Concept 7
Policy	Population	Method/ Aims	Language acquisition	Student achievement	Educational equity	Program/ Practices
“Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)” “Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)” “Title III Immigrant Children and Youth funding” “Bilingual education” “Second language programs”	“English Learners” “English Language Learners” Immigrants “Immigrant students” “Immigrant children and youth” “Immigrant-origin students” “Minority group students”	Impact Effectiveness Effect Intervention “Program evaluation” Outcomes “Policy impact”	“English language proficiency” “English language acquisition” “English proficiency levels” “Language proficiency” “Language fluency” “Language acquisition”	“Curriculum based assessment” “Academic failure” “Standardized tests” Scores “Academic achievement” “State standardized assessments” “Achievement gains” Algebra	“Opportunity to learn” “Equal education” “Educational equity” “Equal opportunity” “Equality of opportunity” “Equity” “Access to opportunity” Enrollment “Enrollment trends”	“Language instruction educational programs” LIEP “Professional development” “Parent and community engagement activities” “Family engagement” “Community engagement”

Concept 1	Concept 2	Concept 3	Concept 4	Concept 5	Concept 6	Concept 7
Policy	Population	Method/ Aims	Language acquisition	Student achievement	Educational equity	Program/ Practices
<p>“Second language learning”</p> <p>“Immersion programs”</p> <p>“English only movement”</p> <p>“Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA)”</p> <p>“Educational legislation”</p> <p>“Federal legislation”</p> <p>“Accountability”</p> <p>“Educational equity (finance)”</p>	<p>“Hispanic American Students”</p>		<p>“Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State”</p> <p>ACCESS Enrollment</p> <p>“Enrollment trends”</p>	<p>“Mathematics tests”</p> <p>“Mathematics achievement”</p> <p>“Reading tests”</p> <p>“Reading achievement”</p> <p>“Writing achievement”</p> <p>“Science achievement”</p> <p>Geometry</p> <p>“Language arts”</p>		<p>“tutorials and career and technical education”</p>

Concept 1 Policy	Concept 2 Population	Concept 3 Method/ Aims	Concept 4 Language acquisition	Concept 5 Student achievement	Concept 6 Educational equity	Concept 7 Program/ Practices
“Educational Finance” “Compliance (Legal)”						