Effects of English Learner Reclassification Policies on Academic Trajectories

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Abstract

In California 38% of students have at some point been English Learners (ELs) during their time in public schools. For ELs one of the most monumental decisions that schools make is when to reclassify them as Fluent English Proficient. Upon reclassification, former ELs cease to receive language support services, but also now have more opportunities to take the same courses as native English speakers. This paper uses student-level data secured through special arrangements with two school districts to ask "Are ELs being reclassified at the right time?" It uses data from the two largest school districts in California, the Los Angeles and San Diego Unified School Districts, which together account for 14% of ELs statewide and 4% of ELs nationwide.

We use a Regression Discontinuity design (RD) to examine outcomes for students just above and just below the cutpoints for EL reclassification. The outcomes include math and reading scores one and two years after the reclassification decision, and whether students graduate on time. This allows us to identify any causal relationships between duration of English language support and student outcomes. Additionally, because the two districts have used four different reclassification policies, we can compare the different reclassification standards to determine which comes closest to reclassifying a student at the appropriate time. The study also examines potential mediating and moderating effects.

Using over a decade of individual student level data, we find that in most cases the two districts were reclassifying students at an appropriate time. However, we find several exceptions, mostly in Los Angeles, in which those meeting the reclassification criteria subsequently performed worse academically compared to their peers just below the cutpoint who were not reclassified.

The results hold implications for many states, which under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) are now being required to devise a single set of statewide criteria for EL reclassification that all schools must use. California and other states are thus currently working to understand how new assessments measure EL students' English proficiency and academic English and how to use those assessments to standardize their reclassification procedures. Early indications in California suggest the state's new criteria will be more stringent than those used during the periods and within two districts we study.

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