

Position Statement on Adolescent English Language Learners in Adult ESL Programs in the United States

As the population of English language learners continues to grow dramatically in the United States, so does the population of English language learners in U.S. public schools. In recent years the population of adolescent English language learners has grown steadily not only in secondary schools, but in many adult education programs as well. The increased use of high-stakes testing in high schools, such as exit exams, now required by many states, has led to increased pressure regarding academic achievement for all secondary students. As a result, many adolescent English language learners, especially those who have limited or no formal education, are choosing, are encouraged, or are forced to turn to adult education programs to improve their English language proficiency and complete their education.

Adolescent English language learners are a broad and diverse group with many different needs. They may be newly arrived immigrants, or first- or second-generation children of immigrants (sometimes referred to as generation 1.5.) Some may have a solid educational background, while others may have had interrupted or even no formal schooling. Of those with interrupted or no formal schooling, many lack literacy skills in their native language, making it more difficult to develop academic proficiency in English. Compounding the challenges for these students in particular are cultural and social adjustments they often face as they meet the demands of U.S. high schools.

Federal law mandates that students cannot be discriminated against on the basis of national origin and that districts must take the necessary steps to provide an appropriate education for English language learners. Adult education programs are not typically designed to meet the specific academic needs of adolescents, and therefore it is inappropriate for schools to direct adolescent English language learners toward such programs to complete their education. TESOL strongly opposes efforts to encourage the early withdrawal of adolescent English language learners from high school in order to boost the academic ratings and test scores at the high school level.

To address the needs of the growing adolescent English language learner population, many communities have established a variety of secondary education programs. These programs, such as transitional ESOL high schools, newcomer programs, or English language summer programs, focus on providing intensive English instruction in order to accelerate English language development and aid students in earning their high school diplomas. Some programs also offer unique features such as flexible schedules in order to meet the needs of older students. Families must be provided with several options and must be allowed to decide what best meets their needs.

TESOL supports the development and implementation of such programs geared toward meeting the specialized needs of adolescent English language learners in helping them to

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achieve the same high academic expectations and goals of their native-English-speaking peers. These programs must lead to full standard diplomas that allow them to further their postsecondary education and access job opportunities that require a high school diploma. As this population of learners continues to grow, resources should be committed for these programs as well as for providing professional development for educators trained to meet these learners' unique needs. However, when these resources do not exist or have not yet been sufficiently developed, TESOL supports the rights of English language learners to remain in attendance in their appointed high school until such time as law requires them to leave.

Finally, school districts should establish transitional programs to assist students in identifying and developing their long-term goals. Such transitional programs would seek out a variety of vocational, apprentice, and precollegiate support for students according to their specific needs. TESOL strongly advocates for collaboration and articulation between secondary schools and local post-secondary institutions (such as adult education programs or community colleges) so that these learners can complete their educations and achieve academic success.

*Approved by the Board of Directors
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