

**The Disappearance of High School English Language Learners from Texas High Schools**  
*Editorial Summary*

**Overview**

As the United States and U.S. schools absorb growing numbers of immigrants, especially from Latin America, it is important to analyze how English language learners (ELLs)—who must learn English simultaneously while mastering subjects such as math and science—fare in Texas public schools. This paper examines the frequency with which ELLs disappear from the public school system before graduating.

The authors prefer to use the term *ELL* rather than *limited English proficient* (LEP) because it characterizes students as facing a challenge rather than being deficient. (However, some data cited in the paper use the classification LEP.) They examine disappearance—defined as the number of students who are captured in TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) records in their ninth grade year but not in the following year—rather than the notoriously difficult-to-compute dropout rate. Although students who disappear have not necessarily dropped out—they may have moved to a different jurisdiction, for instance, or enrolled in private school—the authors argue that disappearance is the least ambiguous and subject to manipulation among available measures of students' progress toward graduation.

The authors review the literature about ELL students, then present two sets of data. One, employing longitudinal data (which tracks the progress of individual students over time) from an unnamed large, urban Texas school district, finds that more than half of ELLs disappear between their 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade years.

The second section describes the disappearance of ELLs statewide and analyzes which characteristics—of both students and schools—appear to either curb or exacerbate disappearance rates. Interestingly, school characteristics appear to have a marked impact. For instance, ELLs who attend predominantly White, suburban schools (where resources and academic expectations are often greater) are significantly less likely to disappear than those in urban schools where the student body is primarily made up of students of color.

**Background**

The number of ELLs in Texas public schools grew by 158% from the 1980–1981 school year to 1996–1997, far outstripping the 30% growth of the whole student population. Although ELLs are by no means a uniform group—they differ markedly, for instance, in immigration age and amount and quality of schooling received in home countries—it is useful to study how their experience

in the Texas public school system differs from that of children who speak English fluently. This analysis has many implications for public policy, particularly in an era when a student cannot obtain a high school degree without passing a series of tests administered only in English—tests an ELL may fail regardless of how well subject matter is grasped.

A number of researchers have shown ELLs are more likely to drop out of school than English proficient (EP) students. This paper examines that phenomenon in greater detail and suggests how findings might inform both future studies and public policy.

### **The Case of a Large, Urban Texas District**

The authors obtained individual student data covering the years from 1995 to 2002 for students enrolled in a large, urban Texas district. In 1995, the oldest student cohort captured by the data was enrolled in the ninth grade; the youngest was in the third. By 2002, three cohorts of students had progressed through high school.

Unique identifying numbers allowed the authors to know with certainty whether students progressed on schedule from grade to grade, if and when they disappeared from the district's rolls, whether they took and passed any or all of the mandated statewide achievement tests (at that time, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS), and whether they qualified for graduation and actually graduated from the district. Using this data, the authors compared the experiences of ELL students (or LEP, as designated by the educational system) and fluent English speakers.

The district used math and reading TAAS scores to claim that, from 1995 to 2002, both EP and LEP students made sharp gains and the achievement gap between the two groups narrowed significantly. District figures reported more than 75% of LEP as well as EP students passed the TAAS math and reading tests administered in English in 2002.

Using the longitudinal cohort data, the authors discovered a different picture. Focusing on the cohort of 13,000 students who enrolled in the eighth grade in 1996 and progressed to the ninth grade in 1997, the authors found that only 36% of EP students and 18% of LEP students subsequently took and passed all the TAAS exit tests required for graduation. One reason for these surprisingly low numbers is that 45% of LEP students and 41% of EP students did not take the exit exams—in part, because a significant number of them disappeared from the district's rolls during their high school years. Some may have moved to other districts or private schools, but further analysis discounts any suggestion that mobility was the predominant factor.

The district reported a less than 5% dropout rate for both LEP and EP students during the period in question. However, analysis of the cohorts that entered the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in the 1996–1997, 1997–1998, and 1998–1999 school years, whose students would have been expected to graduate in 2000, 2001, and 2002, does not support these assertions. Instead, the data show that in each cohort, at least 50% of LEP students and 40% of EP students disappeared between their 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade years. They continued to disappear throughout their high school years, albeit at much lower rates—generally, well below 10% per year, and, by the final year, in the range of 1% or 2%.

Even if some of those who disappeared enrolled in private schools or public schools outside the district, the magnitude of the disappearance between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades can scarcely be chalked up primarily to student mobility, especially since the rate slowed so dramatically at the higher grade levels. It appears that an alarming number of students simply did not progress on schedule to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Numerous studies suggest many such students never graduate from high school. That conclusion squares with this study's finding that, of the cohort entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade in 1997, only 32.7% graduated within 5 years, including just 20.0% of LEP students. Again, even allowing that some students complete their education elsewhere, it is clear, in the authors' words, that the district is "hemorrhaging students between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, and the majority of students not advancing with their cohort—they were being left behind, withdrawing, or disappearing (dropping out)."

### **A Statewide Perspective**

Rounding out the study, the authors analyze the experience of all Texas students identified as ninth graders by records of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in 2004. (The TAKS test is the current assessment tool used, replacing the TAAS test.) By comparing 2004 and 2005 records, the authors determined 12.1% of EP students and 25.4% of ELLs disappeared from Texas public schools in the interval. (ELLs, identified by enrollment in English as a Second Language classes, were 8% of the total cohort.)

Statistical analyses of the demographic characteristics of ELLs and the schools they attended pinpoint several factors significantly correlated with ELL student disappearance:

- Surprisingly, low socioeconomic status appears to make an ELL less likely, rather than more likely, to disappear.
- Female students are less likely to disappear.

- Students in affluent districts were less likely to disappear.
- Students in urban districts were more likely to disappear, while students in predominantly White, suburban districts were far less likely to disappear.
- Students retained in the ninth grade were more than twice as likely to disappear as those not retained.
- Students who took both the reading and math TAKS in ninth grade (regardless of whether they passed) were less likely to disappear than those who did not take it.
- Students in the Houston region were considerably more likely to disappear than those in the Dallas and Fort Worth areas.

### Conclusions

Several recommendations flow from the findings:

- Researchers should devote more attention to tracking student cohorts over time.
- The state should collect more information about ELLs, including information about educational experiences prior to entering the United States.
- More resources must go to educating ELLs through efforts such as well-designed bilingual programs.
- Relying on a single test administered in English to measure academic achievement is poor public policy. Other valid measures, including tests administered in Spanish, students' grades, and class rank, are available and should be incorporated into the accountability system.
- Proficiency in Spanish is a valuable intellectual attainment that should be recognized and rewarded.
- The accountability system should take into account educational inputs such as monetary outlays, facilities, and teacher quality, in addition to outputs such as student TAKS scores.

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By

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper's objective is to analyze how English language learners (ELLs) fare in Texas public schools. Specifically, it examines the frequency with which ELLs disappear from the system before graduating. The authors argue that among available measures of students' progress toward graduation, disappearance is the least ambiguous and subject to manipulation, as opposed to difficult-to-compute dropout rates. Their results show more than half of ELLs disappeared between their 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade years. They also describe the disappearance of ELLs statewide and analyze which characteristics of students and schools appear to either curb or exacerbate disappearance rates. School characteristics appear to have a marked impact. The authors make public policy recommendations based on their findings.*

**Keywords**

English language learners, dropouts, student disappearance rates, limited English proficient, Texas public schools

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### Introduction

Our purpose is to explore the status of high school English language learners (ELLs) in the state of Texas with respect to our key variable of interest: disappearance. By “disappearance,” we mean students who do not have an answer document for the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) submitted on their behalf from one year to the next. Because they do not appear in the state’s accountability dataset, they have, in effect, disappeared. We draw our framework from Lee and Burkam (2003), who maintain that researchers should rely on dropout risk factors related to social background (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, family structure, inner-city residence), academic background (e.g., test scores and grade retention), and academically related behaviors (e.g., engagement, school truancy, grades, and relationships between students and school staff). While state data prevent us from examining family structure and academically related behaviors, they do permit a focused analysis of social and academic backgrounds of ELL students in relationship to the probability of disappearance from school.

Besides case study data from a large urban district in Texas and a logistic regression analysis of English language learners statewide—officially called “limited English proficient” (LEP) youth by Texas law—we review recent literature that situates LEP youth as immigrants with a unique set of circumstances that circumscribe their mobility and life chances. While McDonnell and Hill (1993) argued that the conflation of immigrant status and limited English proficiency (LEP) inhibits the development of more nuanced state and federal policies to address the diversity of needs, it is a misstep to suggest that problems these youth face are reducible to language-related factors, particularly in a historical moment when there is a heightened awareness and concern about immigration reform.

Before addressing our data, methodology, and findings from analyses of state data, we review current sociodemographic shifts involving immigrants in general and Latina/os, in particular.<sup>1</sup> In this review, we will refer to English language learners as “ELLs” rather than “LEP” because of the deficit overtones of the latter term. However, we use the term “LEP” whenever we refer to actual data where this term or indicator is relevant.<sup>2</sup> Current explanations for the

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<sup>1</sup> The term, “Latina/o” is used as an umbrella term when no distinction between immigrants and nonimmigrants or between Mexicans and other national origin groups is necessary.

<sup>2</sup> All LEP students are English language learners, but not all ELLs are officially designated as “LEP.” That is, many ELLs are not in bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) programs, either because they never received instruction in such a program or because they tested out of the programs. At the high school level, where bilingual education is not offered, “LEP” status therefore means children have been identified as being in an ESL program.

egregiously high disappearance (or dropout) rates of ELLs are also considered. The next major section addresses ELLs in the Brazos City School District (a pseudonym) in Texas. We conclude with policy recommendations we hope will help stem the tide of ELL disappearance from high school.

### **Sociodemographic Context**

Because many ELLs are part of an unprecedented demographic shift in our state and nation (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwanto, 2005; Murdock, 2005), it is important to document the changes taking place. Recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2006) showed the number of immigrants living in U.S. households—many from Mexico—rose 16% over the past 5 years. While these immigrants are settling in many new areas across the nation, Texas is one of six states that have traditionally attracted them.

Children of immigrants account for nearly one in five U.S. school-age children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Ruiz de Velasco and Fix (2000) reported that 40% of foreign-born youths attending school nationwide were officially designated as LEP. Moreover, Spanish is the primary language of two thirds to three fourths of children from non-English-speaking homes. Because diversity of immigrant student “types” exists, one-size-fits-all policies are inappropriate. While many of these youth have received uneven or irregular instruction in their own countries, others are long-term ELLs who have attended U.S. schools for many years (Olsen, 2006). Recent arrivals from Mexico and Latin America also vary significantly in levels of schooling attained in their previous countries of residence (Olsen, 2006; Ruiz de Velasco, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999).

In Texas, LEP student enrollment has risen dramatically in recent years. Over a 16-year time frame (between the 1980–1981 and 1996–1997 academic years), LEP enrollment grew 158%, while overall enrollment only grew 30% (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 1998b). The trend has continued in recent years, with a 14% growth in LEP enrollment between the 1997–1998 and 2003–2004 academic years—3 times the overall enrollment growth rate. By the 2003–2004 school year, more than 15% of students enrolled in Texas public schools were identified as LEP (TEA, 2004). In 2000, Texas ranked second only to California in the number of LEP youth enrolled in public schools—nearly 600,000 LEP students (TEA, 2000).

The increase in LEP enrollment reflects broader changes in Texas public school demographics during this time period. Between the 1993–1994 and 2003–2004 school years, the state’s school-age population increased by almost 20%, from 3.6 million to nearly 4.3 million (TEA, 2004). While the proportion of African American students remained a little above 14%, the proportion of



non-Hispanic white students declined from 47% to 39%, and the proportion of Hispanic students grew from 36% to 44%. The proportion of low-income students increased from 45% to 53% during this period (TEA, 2004). Such trends point to increasing demands for resources for bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) teachers and classrooms, support for economically disadvantaged at-risk youth, and more gifted and talented program opportunities, as well as career and technology education.

The U.S. General Accounting Office (1994) found that LEP students are nearly twice as likely to live in poverty, tend to be more geographically mobile than their school-age peers, and often have significant health and emotional needs. The study also found that parental involvement in schools was often inhibited due to language issues. Furthermore, low academic achievement, poor performance on standardized exams, and a high dropout rate persist in this population (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Rumberger, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999, 2004).

These national trends on immigrants show up in aggregate Texas data. In a report by the U.S. Census Bureau (2004), Texas ranked 50<sup>th</sup> in the percentage of high school graduates ages 25 years and older. Thus, dropping out is not only a Latina/o issue, but a Texas problem in general. Accordingly, the next section considers why so many ELL youth underachieve and drop out of school.

### **ELL Achievement and Dropping Out**

ELLs are affected by the same school-related factors many Texas children endure, including inadequate public investment in education; high teacher–pupil ratios in public schools; low teacher salaries relative to other states (National Education Association [NEA], 2005); and high percentages of teachers who do not possess degrees in their subject areas (Fuller, 2005b; Fuller & Brewer, 2005a). For ELLs, this translates into ill-equipped learning environments, a dearth of quality instructional materials, critical shortages of teachers specifically trained to serve them, and as a result, ineffective instruction (Valenzuela 1999, 2004).

These conditions are compounded by low teacher expectations; a lack of cultural sensitivity; and a high-stakes accountability system that frequently places too much emphasis on testing, resulting in narrowed curricula and the abandonment of programs that have proven successful, such as late-exit bilingual education programs (Crawford, 2004; Hampton, 2004; McNeil, 2000a, 2000b; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Sloan, in press; Valenzuela, 1999, 2004). To students' detriment, the entire enterprise of schooling is based on an assimilation framework, which fails to respect the richness of culture, language, and community-based identity. The enterprise opts instead to subtract these

identifications as part of a failed recipe inscribed in public policy for the ever-elusive goal of high school completion (see Valenzuela, 1999, for elaboration on the assimilation argument).

While some ELLs possess a literacy level higher than that of their U.S.-born counterparts (especially if they have attained middle-school level education in Mexico or Latin America), others are underschooled, and grade-level skill proficiencies cannot be assumed (Valenzuela, 1999; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996). Assessment tools such as the TAKS test further lack validity and reliability. This is primarily because, in the case of the TAKS, the high-school level test is offered only in English and is, therefore, language dependent, making it impossible to separate language errors from academic ones (Hakuta, 2001; Hakuta & Beatty, 2000). These problems with the TAKS test illustrate well how the Texas accountability system has failed to adequately take the needs of ELLs into account and hold schools directly accountable for their achievement (see Valenzuela, 2004, for in-depth discussion of the shortcomings of the Texas accountability system for both ELLs and Latina/os in general).

To succeed in school, ELLs must perform the dual task of mastering academic knowledge and skills while simultaneously acquiring a second language (Baker, 1993). Although state and federal education policies urge youth to acquire English quickly, ample evidence suggests both teaching and learning English are different from teaching and learning other subjects, such as math and science. That is, while children may learn English grammar rules similarly to how they might learn math principles, they acquire oral and written language skills through exposure to language models—frequently other children—and through a process of trial and error (Gee, 1990). Most estimates of length for acquiring native language fluency are between 5 and 7 years (Cummins 1981; Thomas and Collier, 1996); for secondary youth, this is an even more difficult task than for children in earlier grades. Effective bilingual programs enable students to accomplish the task of mastering academic knowledge and skills while acquiring a second language (Baker, 1993). Critical shortages in staffing, poor program design, weak school and district commitment and leadership, and the absence of bilingual education at the secondary level thwart this goal (Thomas and Collier, 1996).

Tienda and Mitchell (2006) found that immigrant youth ages 16 to 19 are significantly more likely to drop out of high school than those born in the United States. Note that many of these youth were already behind in school before arriving in the United States. Once in the United States, they are more likely than either their Anglo or African American counterparts to attend segregated, large urban schools with high dropout rates and high proportions of youth

from poor families (Fry, 2005; Orfield, 2004). It is therefore not surprising that nationally, 40% of Latina/o students attend high schools with a 60% completion rate among entering freshmen (Carnevale, 1999).

Although only 8% of school-age youth in the United States are immigrants, they account for a full quarter of dropouts (Fry, 2005b). Moreover, those who have arrived in the United States later (from ages 12 to 17) are at greater risk of dropping out than youth who enter the U.S. public school system at younger ages. A number of factors help explain these differences between recent and early arrivals. Combined with a possibly higher quality of public education in the United States relative to other countries, compulsory schooling laws that keep youth in school through age 15 appear to make a difference. Also, because English language acquisition is easier for younger children in a context where both English fluency and bilingualism are positively related to school outcomes, early arrivals are frequently better positioned in this regard (Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006).

Additionally, whether immigrant youth experience continuous or interrupted schooling before migration has significant implications for whether students will become high school dropouts (Valenzuela, 1999). While 9.9% of immigrant youth with continuous schooling experiences eventually drop out of high school, almost 71% of those with interrupted schooling experiences prior to immigration drop out (Fry, 2005b).

Ruiz de Velasco & Fix (2001) found that immigrant children from Mexico were less likely than their U.S.-born counterparts to initially enroll in school past the eighth grade. If they did enroll, they were more likely to be retained in a grade and fail to graduate. It is worth noting that many immigrant youth from Latin America were dropouts in their own countries, failing to ever enroll in the public school system and opting to enter the labor market instead (Fry, 2005b). Similarly, a National Center for Education Statistics (1997) report found that 69.3% of immigrant youth between the ages of 16 and 24 have never enrolled in U.S. schools. This study also found that while Latina/os account for 56% of all foreign-born youth ages 16 through 24, they constitute nearly 90% of the immigrant dropout population.

### **Large, Urban Texas District Case Study**

We will now consider LEP student success in the Brazos City School District (a pseudonym) during the “first generation” of Texas-style accountability (from 1995 to 2002). The forthcoming analyses utilize a longitudinal dataset obtained from a large, urban Texas district. The data include more than 100,000 students and their demographic characteristics and achievement outcomes matched

with teacher and school characteristics from 1995 to 2002. Unique student identifiers allow cross-sectional analyses as well as the ability to follow students throughout their tenure in the Brazos City School District. The dataset includes grades 3 through 8 from 1995 to 2002. For high school progression, only three cohort waves are available because the data included grade 12 only from 1999 to 2002. These unique data allow us to examine longitudinal student progress of individual students by race, class, and language proficiency in the midst of high-stakes testing and TEA accountability.

### *High School Exit TAAS Testing Trends*

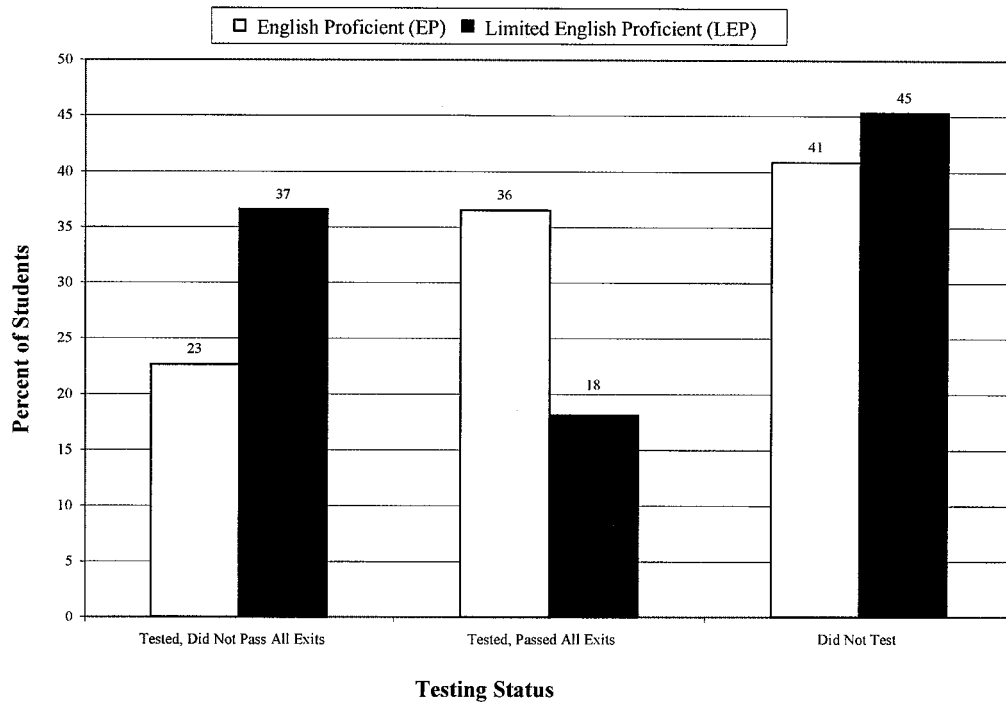
We will first consider high school LEP student achievement. For Texas students who entered high school in the 2000–2001 school year or before, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was utilized as an exit level test in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Haney (2000) related that the TAAS was a test of extremely high stakes for high school students, educators, and schools in Texas. Students were required by state law to pass all sections (Reading, Math, and Writing) of the Exit TAAS tests to receive a high school diploma, regardless of their grades in high school courses (TEA, n.d.). Students typically had as many as seven opportunities to take the TAAS Exit exams and had unlimited additional testing opportunities as out-of-school examinees. Note that this analysis does not consider students who passed the Exit exam during summer administrations or as out-of-school examinees.

In 2002, near the end of the TAAS testing cycle (before the TAKS was used), Texas high school sophomores were passing the Exit exam in record numbers, with 85% of students reportedly passing all portions of the test.<sup>3</sup> Sophomores in the Brazos City School District were scoring below the state average, but the district had apparently made large gains. Local media outlets even trumpeted burgeoning Exit TAAS achievement gains.

To examine which students were taking and passing the spring Exit TAAS during their high school career, we utilized a ninth grade cohort. The cohort contained more than 13,000 students in the eighth grade in Brazos City School District for the 1996–1997 school year and in the ninth grade the following year. Our method excluded retained eighth graders and previously retained ninth graders from the cohort. The analysis focuses on whether students took (perhaps one or more times) and passed the spring Exit TAAS sections during any academic year throughout their high school careers in the Brazos City School District. Figure 1 shows the cumulative testing and passing rates for the 1997 ninth grade cohort by English language proficiency.

<sup>3</sup> Local Newspaper; not identified, as local district is not identified and a pseudonym is used.

**Figure 1. Ninth grade (1996–1997) cohort testing on the spring Exit TAAS by English proficiency status.**



Approximately 36% of English proficient (EP) students passed all TAAS Exit tests during their high school careers, while only 18% of LEP students passed all Exit tests. Approximately the same percentage of LEP students tested on the Exit and did not pass all sections (37%) as EP students who passed all sections of the Exit (36%). Almost one fourth of EP students tested on one or more Exit exams but did not pass all of them. The proportion of LEP students not testing on the Exit exams (45%) was slightly higher than the proportion of EP students not testing on the Exit exams (41%) in the Brazos City School District.

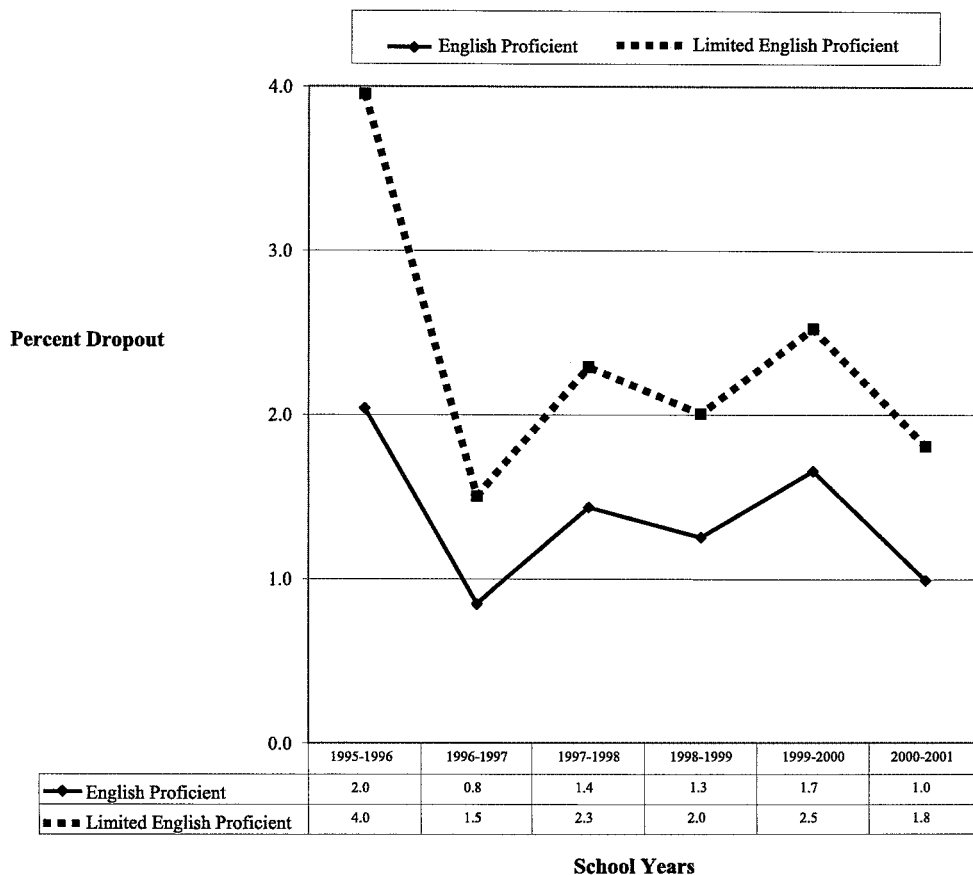
There are a couple of possible explanations why students did not take the spring Exit TAAS during their high school careers. As we will examine later in the paper, the Brazos City School District apparently experienced large numbers of high school students not progressing through school on time or otherwise leaving school. Mobility is another issue to consider as the reason why students did not take the test in the Brazos City School District (see discussion on mobility in the analysis of graduation rates). Nevertheless, what is clear from the analysis is that only 18% of LEP students in the original ninth grade cohort

took and passed all sections of the spring Exit TAAS in Brazos City.

***Dropout Rates***

We will now turn to an analysis of LEP student enrollment trends in Brazos City School District. Haney (2000) cited TEA reports of decreasing rates of students dropping out of school before high school graduation as more evidence contributing to the perception of dramatic educational gains in Texas during the 1990s. The Brazos City School District was no exception—reported dropout rates steadily declined. Figure 2 shows overall dropout rates from 1995 to 2001 by English proficiency status.

**Figure 2. School-reported dropout by English proficiency status (grades 7 through 12).**



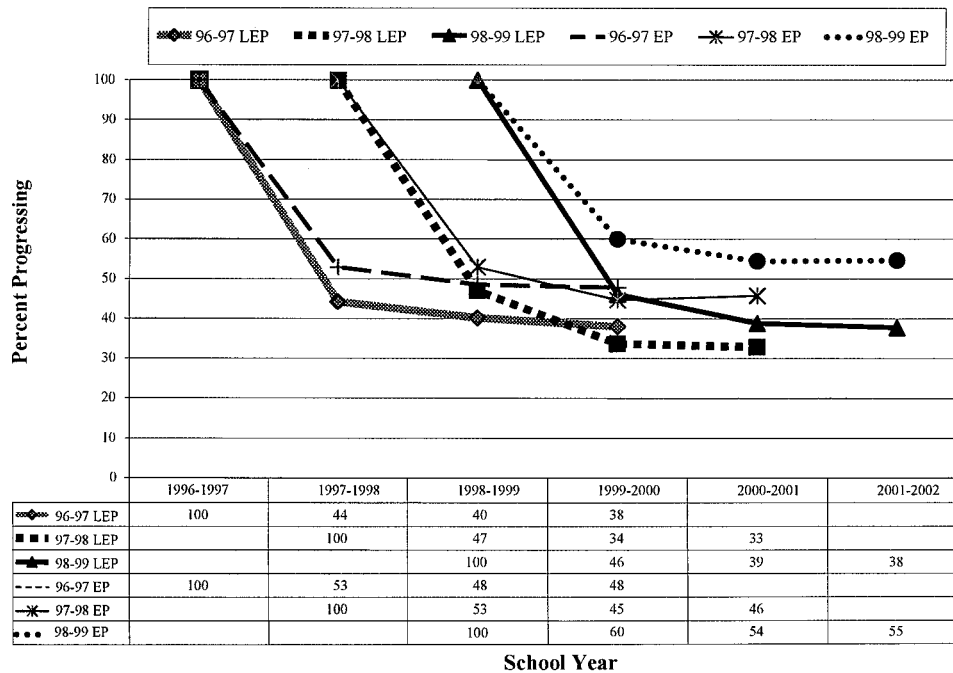
In 1995–1996, the dropout rate for LEP students in grades 7 through 12 (4%) was double the rate for EP students in grades 7 through 12 (2%). Although both LEP and EP students showed decreases in school-reported dropout rates from 1995 to 2002, LEP students continued to exhibit a higher dropout rate than EP students for the same period. However, the gap between LEP and EP student dropout rates narrowed. Thus, the dropout rates reported by the Brazos City

School District appeared to show fewer students were dropping out of school. Considering the school-reported dropout rates from 1995 to 2001, it might be suggested that for most of the period, traditional high schools in Brazos City School District decreased their students' dropout rates, regardless of English proficiency.

### High School Grade Progression

TEA audits of dropout data in Texas districts have often revealed that schools have severely underreported dropout data. To better understand student progress through school, we examine here how cohorts progressed through high school in the Brazos City School District. The data allow the study to follow three cohorts, in which all students were entering the ninth grade, over a 4-year period. Figure 3 plots the proportion of students that progressed on time by English proficiency.

**Figure 3. High school cohort progression percentage by English proficiency status (entering ninth grade from 1996–1997 through 1998–1999).**



The data allow us to examine the three high school cohorts by English proficiency status. In each cohort, LEP students showed the greatest loss between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades—less than half of LEP students in each freshman class progressed on time. In comparison, more than half of EP students in each of the cohorts progressed to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade on time. The proportion of LEP students

not progressing from 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grade varied from 4% to 13%, while the EP cohorts showed 5% to 8%. By the 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade transition, both EP and LEP cohorts showed fairly level progression trends, with a grade-to-grade loss of less than 2%. Notably, by the 4<sup>th</sup> year, about a third of the initial LEP students were seniors (12<sup>th</sup> grade), while approximately half of the initial EP students were seniors.

The cohort method described above provides a stark picture of the state of high school education for LEP students in the Brazos City School District, with only approximately one third of LEP students progressing to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade on time. Thus, it is apparent that Brazos City School District's high school students were not progressing through school in a traditional 4-year fashion. However, the cohort analysis did not take into account students who took 5 or more years to progress to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In similar fashion to Carnoy, Loeb, and Smith (2001) and Haney (2000), it accounted only for students who progressed to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the traditional 4 years. It may be possible that students remained in school and progressed to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in 5 years or that students progressed to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in a shorter period. To understand student trajectories through school, we will now examine how a ninth grade cohort progressed through school over a 7-year period by English proficiency (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Seven-Year Progression of 1996–1997 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Cohort Through High School by English Proficiency*

Grade	Proficiency	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
8	EP	97%						
	LEP	98%						
9	EP		100%	30%	6%	4%	1%	
	LEP		100%	31%	5%	3%	1%	
10	EP			53%	14%	4%	1%	
	LEP			47%	13%	3%	1%	
11	EP				45%	7%	2%	
	LEP				34%	8%	3%	1%
12	EP			4%	6%	46%	5%	1%
	LEP			3%	6%	33%	6%	1%

*Note.* Starting with 1997–1998, yearly columns by English proficiency will not add up to 100% due to student disappearance/dropout. Columns with less than 1% are excluded.

Comparing trends for the 1996–1997 ninth grade cohort makes it apparent there were notable differences in the progression through high school by English proficiency. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of high school, 31% of LEP students were retained in the ninth grade. About 3% of LEP students and 4% of EP students skipped directly to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. (Conversations with teachers in Brazos City suggested that some schools have skipped students directly to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in response to high-stakes testing in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Further research is necessary to understand



skipping as a way to “game the system.” By the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, about a fifth of LEP students were no longer in the Brazos City School District and had dropped out, withdrawn, or disappeared. As a result, only 47% of LEP students arrived in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year. By comparison, 30% of EP students were retained in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, while 53% advanced to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. By the cohort’s 3<sup>rd</sup> year in high school, similar proportions (roughly 20%) had not advanced to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade; however, a larger proportion of LEP students (42%) were no longer in the district by the 3<sup>rd</sup> year. In 1999–2000, about 13% more EP students progressed to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade by the 4<sup>th</sup> year. Notably, few EP or LEP students remained in high school more than 4 years.

### *High School Graduation*

TEA (2003) reported the state had an overall graduation rate of 81.1% for 2001–2002. The Brazos City School District reported publicly that the district graduation rate had soared more than 20% over 5 years. However, from the cohort analyses, it is apparent that a large number of students were being retained or otherwise not advancing with their peers through school. If students are not progressing through school, then cohort graduation rates should be correspondingly low. This analysis examines the students in the 1997 ninth grade high school cohort, as it included a 4<sup>th</sup>- and 5<sup>th</sup>-year student graduation status identifier. There is a wide disparity between the graduation rates reported by the schools and district and the proportion of students identified by the district as graduates in the dataset. Therefore, for comparison purposes, we have calculated an additional graduation variable to consider students who were eligible for graduation based on attaining senior grade status and passing all sections of the spring Exit TAAS. Table 2 details proportions of the ninth grade cohort (first-time 1997–1998 ninth graders and nonretained 1996–1997 eighth graders) coded as graduating and as graduation eligible by student demographic characteristics.

Of the students in the data’s 1997 ninth grade cohort, 30% appeared to be graduation eligible within 5 years. Using the district-provided graduation status code, 33% students were coded as having graduated by 2002 (5-year span). The cohort graduation status and eligibility variables show comparable cohort graduation rates. Considering the dataset’s graduation status variable, only a fifth of LEP students graduated. This disparity is even greater when considering the graduation eligibility variable. Of concern, only 14% of LEP students in the 1997 ninth grade cohort were eligible to graduate from Brazos City School District by the 5<sup>th</sup> year. The proportion of LEP student graduation in the cohort is the lowest of all the disaggregated groups except for students who failed either

section of the eighth grade TAAS. It must be noted that the cohort graduation categories overlap. For example, an LEP student may be included in the Latino and/or eighth grade TAAS failure group.

**Table 2**  
*Graduation Rate of 1997–2001 Ninth Grade Cohort*

Student Characteristics	Graduation Eligible Within 5 Years	Coded Graduated Within 5 Years
Overall	30.1%	32.7%
White	44.9%	43.3%
Latino	26.1%	24.8%
African American	29.3%	39.4%
Asian American	53.1%	49.4%
Econ. Disadvantaged	26.3%	28.3%
LEP	14.1%	20.0%
Not Passing 8th Reading TAAS	7.3%	19.3%
Not Passing 8th Math TAAS	9.7%	22.3%

A primary concern is the low graduation coding and eligibility for LEP students. The cohort progression analysis showed the district hemorrhaging students between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, and the majority of students not advancing with their cohort—they were being left behind, withdrawing, or disappearing (dropping out). It is also apparent that these trends were more acute for LEP students.

Considering the lack of student progress for large numbers of students, the numbers cannot mathematically add up to stellar graduation rates for LEP students in the Brazos City School District. Even if a compounded rate of 3% mobility for a 4-year total of 12% is added to the overall graduation rates (based on mobility between middle school and high school from the 1996–1997 ninth grade cohort analysis), graduation status and eligibility still would not reach 50%. Additionally, it could be argued that LEP students may be more likely to be mobile than others and move to Mexico or Vietnam during high school. Even if the compounding 4-year mobility rate is doubled to 24% for LEP students, both graduation status and eligibility would still be less than 45%.

### **Summary of Evidence from the Brazos City School District**

District-level analyses of LEP student achievement and progress compared with those of their EP peers are rarely encountered in the literature. By examining the high school Exit TAAS, it is apparent that LEP students are lagging behind their peers in the Brazos City School District. It is also apparent from the student progression analysis that publicly reported dropout and graduation rates for