

**Portland Public Schools' Programs for English Learners:
A History of Persistent Problems
July 2009**

Executive Summary

In January 2009, the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) notified Portland Public Schools of the results of a review of the district's programs for English language learners, conducted in January of this year. The Department reported five negative findings summarized here in abbreviated form:

1. Not every English language learner (ELL) identified as limited English proficient is provided specifically designed instruction for the acquisition of English across the district schools.
2. Academic development and on-grade level core subject instruction, using instructional methodologies ... are not consistently provided across the district schools....
3. Not every English language learner participates in the schools' on-grade level core curriculum... ELLs are denied access to on-grade level classes based on language proficiency rather than knowledge of core content.
4. The data reported to the ODE regarding the district's ELD (English language development) programs do not reflect the practices that are in place in the district's schools.
5. Information in languages and formats that national origin parents require is not readily available at all the district schools.

Subsequently, the Portland Schools Alliance examined the history of external reviews of the district's programs for English learners conducted by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the Oregon Department of Education over a 15-year period, from 1994 to 2009. The Alliance studied reports issued by the Office for Civil Rights in 1994 and 1999; an investigation commissioned by the district in 2000 as to the reasons for the district's continued non-compliance with civil rights requirements; a review by the Oregon Department of Education in 2005; and the above-referenced review in January 2009. The Alliance also reviewed the commitments and agreements entered into by the district in response to OCR. The Alliance found that the findings listed above mirrored what earlier reviews had already repeatedly discovered and has concluded that Portland Public Schools has not followed through

on its stated commitments in response to those reviews to ensure an equitable education for its English language learners.

The patterns of findings in the external reviews cited above, and the experience of its own members, lead the Portland Schools Alliance to call upon the district to use its systems of internal evaluation to answer the following questions:

- Why the district has not met targets for reclassifying ELL students as proficient in English.
- How many ELL students are not placed in classes that allow them meaningful access to the curriculum.
- Where responsibility actually lies for ensuring that meaningful access is in fact accorded to ELL students.
- The extent to which teachers have actually been trained to implement the educational programs the district has selected for its ELL students.
- Whether academic programs for ELL students, including those intended to nurture their native languages, such as two-way immersion programs, are adequately supported in terms of curriculum development and instructional materials using state and federal funds intended to support ELL programs as well as basic district funds.
- The extent to which programs for ELL students are implemented with fidelity.
- Whether immersion programs intended to promote proficiency in non-English languages and cultural understanding for English-speaking students are adequately supported in terms of curriculum development and instructional materials.
- To what extent minority and ELL students have been given modified diplomas, suggesting that they did not truly benefit from the educational experience a diploma should represent.
- Who is responsible for ensuring that schools communicate with ELLs' parents in ways they can understand, and how future effective communication can be accomplished.
- Who will responsible for remedying the problems identified by ODE, and what kinds of accountability mechanisms will be put in place not only to ensure the problems are resolved, but that they will not recur again.