English Language Learners in the Southeastern United States

Considerations for Practice, Policy, and Advocacy

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English Learners in the Volunteer State

Policies, Practices, and Proposed Priorities

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In this chapter, we introduce the landscape of English learner (EL) education in *The Volunteer State*. We discuss the makeup of Tennessee's EL population, outline policies, frameworks, and protocols for English language services prescribed by the state, while considering policies and practices that have guided the education of PK–12 ELs in Tennessee's schools. We focus on the current policies and practices for elementary and secondary education, as well as teacher preparation, to highlight beneficial aspects of those policies and problematize policies and practices that may be harmful to students and detrimental to the English language teaching profession.

EL GROWTH TRAJECTORY IN TENNESSEE

The population of ELs in the United States has steadily increased for decades. In 2010, there were approximately 4.5 million ELs in U.S. public schools. By 2020, that number had grown to over 5 million, representing over 10% of the public school student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Tennessee has exhibited a similar growth trajectory. According to the Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury, between the 1997–1998 and 2007–2008 school years, the number of EL students in Tennessee increased by over 200%, from 8,465 to 26,449 (OREA, 2012, p. 1). Since then, EL student enrollment has continued to increase in the state, growing 45% from 2011 through the 2017–2018 academic year (Quttaineh, 2023). By the conclusion of the 2021–2022 academic year, "Tennessee's population of English learners (ELs) exceeded 74,000" (Tennessee Department of Education, 2023, p. iii). Although the state has experienced more than two decades of continued

growth in terms of the overall EL population, the percentage of public school students who are ELs in Tennessee in 2020 stood at 5.4%, which was lower than the national average of 10.3% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Thus, Tennessee, like many states in the American South, may be classified as a "new destination" state (McFarland et al., 2019); that is, a state with a limited recent history of international migration, which is often underprepared to adequately support the needs associated with the changing demographics (Held et al., 2018).

ELs tend to aggregate primarily in the major urban areas in Tennessee (see figure 8.1): Memphis/Shelby County (west); Nashville/Davidson County and Murfreesboro/Rutherford County (middle); Knoxville/Knox County and Chattanooga/Hamilton County (east). However, smaller and rural counties are also seeing increasing populations of ELs, such as one relatively small East Tennessee county (Hamblen), with a 19% EL population in its school district according to the 2021–2022 Tennessee State Report Card (Tennessee Department of Education, 2022).

Table 8.1 details the increase in EL populations from 2016–2017 to 2021–2022 in the five districts with the most ELs in the state.

The increasing population of ELs in Tennessee results from several factors, including new immigration, refugee resettlement, and the children of immigrants. Tennessee has seen a steady increase in immigration in recent years. According to the Migration Policy Institute (n.d.), in 2021, the largest percentage, 47.2% (174,965), of immigrants in Tennessee came from Latin America, followed by 27.8% (102,983) from Asia and 11.9% (44,109) from Africa. Many immigrants arrived in the state with limited or no English proficiency.

In addition, Tennessee ranks 27th in the United States in terms of refugee resettlement per capita, and 16th regarding the percentage of immigrants who are refugees (Immigration Research Initiative, 2023). In 2018, Tennessee resettled over 3,000 refugees, many of whom were children. For the 2019 fiscal year, 692 refugees were resettled in Tennessee. The majority, 410, were settled in Davidson County. Knox County received 101 individuals, Hamilton County received 82, and Shelby County received 43 refugees. For the period January 2023 to March 2023, new refugee arrivals totaled 180. School-age minors ($n = 80$) were 44% of this population (Tennessee Office of Refugees, 2023). Finally, children of immigrants are a growing share of the U.S. student population, which is also reflected in Tennessee's EL population. In Tennessee, roughly 83% of children of immigrants were born in the United States, while nationally, that number is a little higher, at 86% (Migration Policy Institute, 2018). Among these families, many speak a language other than English at home, and many of these have been classified as ELs.

Figure 8.1 Tennessee Map Highlighting Counties with Concentrations of ELs. *Source:* GIS Geography (2023). Tennessee county map [Image]. Retrieved from https://gisgeography.com/tennessee-county-map/. (Highlights added.)

Table 8.1 Number of ELs and EL Share of Students in Tennessee School Districts with More Than 1,000 ELs, SY 2022–2023

School Districts/Counties	Number of ELs		EL Share of Students in District (%)	
	2016–2017[1]	2021–2022[2]	2016–2017[1]	2021–2022[2]
Metro Nashville Public Schools/Davidson County	16,165	20,920	18.9	27
Memphis-Shelby County	9,782	13,289	8.9	13
Knox County	3,094	4,710	5.1	8
Hamilton County	2,804	4,861	6.3	11
Rutherford County	2,775	6,327	6.3	13
Hamblen County	1,364	1,873	13.1	19

Source: Migration Policy Institute (2017) and Tennessee State Report Card (2022).

The increasing population of ELs in the United States presents several challenges for the country's education system. One challenge is ensuring all ELs have access to high-quality English language instruction (Rodriguez et al., 2022; Ziegenfuss et al., 2014). However, the increasing population of ELs is also an opportunity: ELs bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences that can enrich the learning environment for all students. When schools, states, and districts build from the rich linguistic and cultural experiences of their students, families, and communities, education can be enriching for all.

TENNESSEE STATE POLICIES, FRAMEWORKS, PROTOCOLS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE SERVICES

Given this landscape of immigration and the rapidly increasing EL population in Tennessee, it has become increasingly critical to reconsider the state's policies, frameworks, and protocols for English language services. This section provides an overview of two key policy documents that outline EL schooling in the state: Chapter 0520-01-19 and Tennessee's English as a Second Language Manual.

Tennessee's Chapter 0520-01-19: English as a Second Language Programs

To comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA), states, local education agencies (LEAs), and schools are required to provide specialized programs for students with limited English proficiency (LEP). On April 15, 2005, the Tennessee State Board of Education (SBE) adopted English as a Second Language Program Policy 3.207. The policy occurred during immense growth in Tennessee's immigrant population, when the EL population increased by over 200% in 10 years (from 1997–1998 to 2007–2008; OREA, 2012). This policy was designed to set minimum standards for Tennessee school districts in providing services to non-English language background (NELB) students who were also ELs. In October 2017, the SBE approved changes to the English as a Second Language Program Policy 3.207 and renamed it ESL Rule Chapter 0520-01-19 (2023). Under the Tennessee Education Improvement Act, the Rule became effective on July 6, 2021.

More recently, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) has implemented ESL Rule Chapter 0520-01-19 (2023), often referred to as the "ESL Policy," and the English as a Second Language Manual (2023). Like its predecessor, ESL Rule Chapter 0520-01-19 established standards and

procedures for school districts to identify, assess, and provide English language instruction to ELs. However, it was amended in March 2023, with its updates coming into effect on June 8, 2023. The updates include provisions for antidiscriminatory practices, identification and screening of ELs, parental notification and rights, staffing ratios, service delivery, and exit processes. The Tennessee SBE requires school districts to follow the standards and procedures in the current iteration of the Rule. Districts are monitored annually through a results-based monitoring process. Tennessee's school accountability model[1]—a system grading schools on an A-to-F scale—is based on multiple indicators that make districts and schools successful. These indicators encompass student growth and achievement data, EL performance, chronic absenteeism, graduation rates, and college and career readiness (TDOE, n.d., *District and state accountability*).

Tennessee's English as a Second Language Manual

The Tennessee English as a Second Language Manual (TDOE, 2023c) guides districts and schools on how to best follow ESL Rule Chapter 0520-01-19 to support ELs. The TDOE developed the manual in collaboration with a variety of stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, parents, and ELs themselves. It is based on four principles that are interwoven throughout the manual and the Supporting All English Learners Across Tennessee Framework (2018):

> All ELs can learn and succeed,
>
> ELs bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences to the classroom,
>
> ELs need high-quality English language instruction to access the full range of academic content and standards, and
>
> ELs need support from all stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, parents, and the community.

The manual consists of practical information such as welcoming new students and parents, LEAs' responsibilities when parents waive direct ESL services, placing ELs at all grade levels, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requirements to include those specific to Tennessee, and background characteristics to consider for accommodations.

The policy and the manual are guiding documents that inform ESL instruction in Tennessee. As such, they are also used in ESL teacher preparation programs to prepare candidates for K–12 EL instruction. The recent updates to the ESL Policy and Manual reflect an increasing focus on standardizing procedures for identifying students for English language services, communicating with parents and stakeholders, and policies governing ESL services.

This may reflect the growing population of EL students both urban and rural school districts continue to experience.

ESL Programs and Practices in the Volunteer State

In preparing this chapter, we found that uncovering policies guiding EL instruction in Tennessee was straightforward. However, we can only report on program practices if we offer a caveat regarding any research-based overview of what occurs in EL classrooms in Tennessee. One contributing factor is that researchers studying specific student populations in Tennessee often face significant obstacles in accessing school districts for data collection and observation. These challenges include the following: (1) lack of centralized protocols where there is often no central authority providing uniform guidelines or procedures for researchers to navigate; (2) gatekeepers within school districts who act as intermediaries between researchers and students—individuals who may impose additional requirements or delays, based on personal perspectives or concerns rather than explicit, objective criteria; and (3) limited resources or personnel in smaller districts who lack the capacity to dedicate time and attention to research requests. This often leads to delays in responses, difficulty scheduling access, and impressions that researchers are unwelcome. More importantly, access difficulties hinder essential research efforts that could benefit students, educators, and communities across the state.

As such, there is limited empirical research to be cited. Miley and Farmer (2017) and Mancilla-Martinez et al. (2023) are two such studies and are discussed later in the chapter. In addition, a handful of unpublished dissertations focus on ELs in K–12 settings in Tennessee. Sekar (2009) explored predictors of academic success for secondary ELs, Hughes (2019) examined teacher efficacy of instructing ELs, and Parker and Perry (2023) conducted a case study on a newcomer in Middle Tennessee. It is with this backdrop that we offer the following realizations.

The history of English language programming in Tennessee has mirrored broader national trends in pro-English, anti-immigrant policies in the United States. In Tennessee, instructional policies framing the education of bilingual students are visibly aligned with the emphasis on English language-only development and accountability. This monolingual and assimilationist stance is visible in program options and the individualized learning plans (ILPs) that Tennessee requires for ELs.

Program Options

Currently, approved "ESL Program" service delivery models have changed little from those offered in previous decades, and Tennessee does not

accommodate summative assessment in languages other than English (TDOE, 2018). Approved program models listed in Tennessee State Board of Education Rule 0520-01-19 include Sheltered English, Structured English Immersion, Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE), Content-based Instruction, Heritage Language, Virtual ESL classes, Pull-out instruction, and other models "approved by the Department" (TDOE, 2021, p. 5). These options (see table 8.2) are provided to districts to implement as they see fit, with guidance to "engage ESL teachers and general educators teaching ELs to identify appropriate program models to support the range of learners in the district" (TDOE, 2018, p. 12). This range of service options clearly and heavily emphasizes English language acquisition. For educators and teacher education programs deeply committed to advancing policies and practices anchored in equity and social justice, understanding the range of services available to students designated as ELs is paramount, as they may be called upon to consult with their districts regarding service delivery program models.

Given the wide variability across the state regarding EL population sizes, implementation of these models looks somewhat different. For a high-density, urban district like Metro Nashville, service options include a range of models such as within-school programs for students with interrupted formal education, sheltered classrooms for specific subjects like math and English, and content-based instruction through co-teaching (Metro Nashville Public Schools, 2022). In districts with smaller numbers, it is difficult to ascertain from publicly available information which program models or procedures are being implemented. However, one rural district with 0.3% EL students reports a "pull-out" model for "language support" (T. McAbee, personal communication, August 1, 2023).

Individualized Learning Plans

In 2017, Miley and Farmer found that achievement levels in both English language arts and math state assessments for ELs, who achieved the exit criteria on WIDA ACCESS,[2] were lower than the achievement levels of non-ELs. They suggested that, although ELs receive ESL services, the students are only sometimes given effective support to develop academic language skills for content knowledge. Miley and Farmer recommended ongoing monitoring of exited ELs.

The officials with the state had similar observations. Their solution was to increase collaboration through ILPs for active and exited ELs. Thus, in addition to the traditional service delivery models, Tennessee mandated the use of ILPs to facilitate appropriate instruction for all EL students (SBE, 2020). These plans provide complete records for EL students' "academic needs,

Table 8.2 Tennessee Service Delivery Program Model Placement Examples

Student Example	Service Delivery Model	Pros	Cons
		Service Delivery Program Model Examples	
First-grade EL, expected to exit direct ESL services at the end of the school year	Push-in	Allows teaching team to see how s/he will perform in the academic classroom; Can determine if this model is appropriate for language growth with the child's learning style	May determine that language is adequate, but social and personal learning support is needed
Recently Arrived English Learner (RAEL), 16 years old, who is a refugee from Syria and has been on the move for the past three years, out of school since age 11	Pull-Out	Will be able to develop English skills with a selected group of students; Allows individualization of needs, including social/personal needs	May be relegated to work on a software language program if other students have better language skills
Long-term English learner (eighth year in the ESL program)	Sheltered English Instruction	Could connect academics to ESL to help make up academic gaps in concepts and vocabulary; Would be learning the grammatical structures for classroom work in authentic language	Approach to grammar and language learning might be too deductive and unclear
EL with disabilities, sixth grade, identified in first grade for ESL and in third grade for special education services	Content-based Instruction	Provides consistency to academics while increasing English proficiency	If content is too difficult and not properly scaffolded, access to language instruction will not be evidenced
Newly arrived fifth grader with high beginning English skills	Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English	Provides support for academics and ESL; Must be a schoolwide or grade-level-wide program for ELs	Requires Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) or SDAIE trained team of teachers
12-year-old recently arrived from Guatemala with a non-English home language and/or no written English skills	Structured English Immersion	Develops basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS); Allows for adjustment to U.S. schooling expectations; Individualization of non-academic needs, including counseling and other social supports.	More than academic support may be needed; Requires trained teachers understanding the needs of newcomers which is not limited to academics; Requires schoolwide buy-in from ESL teachers and general education teachers.

Source: TDOE (2018), *Supporting all English learners*, p. 13.
Note: Determining the appropriate program model can be challenging; the table provides examples of students and the potential service delivery model to support their needs. Districts should think critically about ELs' needs when determining which service delivery models to utilize.

language needs, and goals" (p. 1). As per the Tennessee Department of Education (2020), all active, waived, and transitional year 1 and 2 exited students are required to have an ILP. ELs' ILPs must be reviewed, updated, and revised annually, and ILPs are monitored every quarter to track progress toward domain-specific goals. To this end, we suspect Miley and Farmer would support this policy, particularly with respect to the monitoring of exited ELs.

As of 2023, Tennessee adopted a new platform for ILPs, TNPULSE, designed as a statewide, standardized means of tracking and sharing EL student progress (TDOE, 2023a). According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2023a), the uniformity of TNPULSE across districts is designed to increase the consistency of teachers' access to crucial information when students transfer schools within the state and enhance communication and collaboration among teachers.

The ILPs are designed to improve teachers' "data-driven decisions" and assist them in tracking growth trajectories of students designated as ELs (TDOE, 2020, p. 1). Beyond demographic information, each ILP contains recent WIDA ACCESS or Screener scores for reading, writing, listening, speaking, and overall composite, recommended instructional scaffolds and assessment accommodations for each student, and a record of the timing and type of ESL services provided to the students. Individual goals are created based on current proficiency levels, and students in grades 4 through 12 also have career-readiness goals requiring family or caregiver input (SBE, 2023).

As with any tool designed to collect and track information on a student, there are necessarily opportunities and challenges. For instance, when used as a communication tool between classroom teachers and EL teachers, this approach's potential strengths include improving communication and collaboration across groups of teachers responsible for a given student and the direct involvement of parents and the student in goal-setting activities. Potential challenges arise, however, as such tools become punitive if adequate time is not given to teachers to use and update these documents, or if the language used on the documents is deficit-oriented. As with any communication about EL students, the focus should be on what students *can do* and how to provide appropriate scaffolds or supports while maintaining high expectations for all learners. Finally, adequate professional development or training, as well as time to connect through planning learning communities or at other moments of the school day, can improve collaboration and even the efficacy of the plan itself.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE EDUCATION FOR ELS IN TENNESSEE

Tennessee classrooms are becoming increasingly vibrant with the diverse voices of ELs, and their educational journey presents a complex tapestry of

challenges and opportunities. From fostering effective collaboration between specialists and general education teachers to navigating English-only mandates, the path to successful EL education demands multifaceted solutions. Engaging families as crucial partners, addressing the disproportionate representation of ELs in Special Education Programs, and tailoring ILPs to refugee-background students are just some threads in this woven landscape.

Effective Collaboration and Instruction

As described in the previous section, local education authorities (LEAs) across Tennessee have flexibility in the service models they adopt for their ESL programs. In this way, Tennessee's flexibility in program implementation allows for districts to adopt instructional models aligned with guidance from educational authorities, provided the resources to implement such a model are available within a given district. In addition to the program models offered by the state documents, content-based instruction through co-teaching has emerged as an instructional approach in Tennessee. For example, Metro Nashville and Knox County Schools, two of the larger districts within the state, have adopted this as an approved approach in their handbooks (Knox County Schools, 2023; Metro Nashville Public Schools, 2022).

One force that may contribute to the utilization of co-teaching models includes guidance from education consortia like WIDA, which Tennessee adopted as its English Language Development standards in 2013 (TDOE, n.d., *English as a Second Language*). Collaboration among stakeholders is one of WIDA's Big Ideas, shifting from language development being the sole responsibility of the EL teacher to all teachers being responsible for the integration of content and language (Nordmeyer & Honigsfeld, 2020). In other words, WIDA recommends that content area teachers and English language teachers join forces to address EL needs. Another force that contributes to an emphasis on such models is the ever-increasing focus on standardized testing within the U.S. school systems, which emphasizes "scaffolding language and vocabulary instruction to increase ELLs' access to the content curriculum" (McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010, p. 104). This emphasis can lead to diminished opportunities for EL teachers to focus on language development and result in EL teachers being relegated to the role of "supporter" (Arkoudis, 2006; Creese, 2002; Pappamihiel, 2012).

Despite its potential, the success of co-teaching is contingent upon having an adequate number of qualified teachers, which becomes a hurdle in the context of ongoing specialist language teacher shortages (O'Brien, 2023). Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive teacher training and preparation (de Jong & Harper, 2005) can exacerbate difficulties faced by teachers, particularly in implementing collaborative models like co-teaching effectively.

The shift to emphasizing collaboration and shared responsibility between EL teachers and general education teachers for academic English language development demands a level of expertise and cultural competency that many educators outside TESOL-related fields may not have received in their preservice training (de Jong & Harper, 2005; Education Commission of the States, 2024; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2019; Kibler & Castellón Palacios, 2022). Emerging research suggests that areas of consideration when implementing co-teaching include shared planning, opportunities for both teachers to contribute ideas, and a common curricular framework can contribute to the success of this model (Fu et al., 2007; Martin Beltrán & Peercy, 2012; Slater & Mohan, 2010). Specific research in Tennessee is needed to understand the types of co-teaching models being implemented and their effects on teachers and students.

English-Only Mandates

English has been designated the "official" language in Tennessee since 1984 (§4-1-404). This law affects the availability of bilingual resources, such as state-mandated standardized assessments, which instead can only be administered in English. Just as they are nationally, literacy and language instruction policies in Tennessee are shaped by diverse and sometimes conflicting beliefs about the nature and objectives of learning. For instance, recent focus on learning to read has emphasized attention on phonics, required students receiving regular education services to achieve a score of *proficient* on a state-mandated standardized test, and restricted the instructional programming available in districts around the state (Tennessee Literacy Success Act, 2022; Tennessee Learning Loss Remediation and Student Acceleration Act, 2021). While provisions for ELs receiving language services exist, English-only laws impact the quality and type of instruction EL students receive. Thus, beyond navigating the spectrum from support to accountability, English language educators must also grapple with policy perspectives that perceive languages other than English as "problems" rather than as assets or inherent rights (Ruiz, 1984).

Although Tennessee state law mandates that "instruction in public schools and colleges of Tennessee shall be conducted in English unless the nature of the course would require otherwise" (TCA §4-1-404), a limited number of dual-language education programs can be found in Tennessee within optional programs and the public charter system.[3] Unlike publicly funded dual-language programs, which primarily serve monolingual English-speaking students, several optional and charter programs state a specific mission to serve students from Latine backgrounds. For example, the program at Aventura Charter School in Nashville seeks to serve families from Spanish- and

English-language backgrounds (Kim, 2021). Our inability to find a comprehensive list of bilingual or dual-language programs in Tennessee indicates the lack of such programs.

Family Engagement

As an English-only state, Tennessee also highlights barriers to communicating with students' families and caregivers. This is evident in rural and urban districts, where achieving equitable access to interpretation and translation services remains a struggle, despite state policy mandating communication be provided in a language that can be understood (Coady, 2019; SBE, 2023). Larger districts allocate their funding strategically to maintain a more favorable ratio of interpreters to students. In contrast, others opt to contract on-demand language services such as ACUTRANS to fulfill school interpretation needs (Metro Nashville Public Schools, 2023).

Working families of ELs often encounter challenges in actively engaging with school stakeholders. The demands of employment, irregular work hours, and, in some cases, limited proficiency in English create substantial barriers for families seeking to be actively involved in their child's education because they obstruct parents' ability to attend meetings, conferences, or school events (Coady, 2019; Findel, 2022; Shim, 2013). The language barrier is particularly challenging because it exacerbates difficulties faced by families, limiting their capacity to communicate effectively with teachers, administrators, and other school stakeholders. This linguistic divide impacts family members' ability to advocate for their children and hinders their understanding of crucial information related to academic progress, school policies, and available resources (He & Thompson, 2022; McCardell, 2021). Recognizing these challenges, some schools and districts have implemented strategies to bridge the gap and facilitate meaningful engagement for working families of ELs. This may involve offering flexible meeting schedules outside of traditional school hours, providing translation and interpretation services, and leveraging technology to increase bidirectional communication using apps and messaging platforms (McCardell, 2021; Protacio et al., 2021; Sawyer, 2022). The "Tech Goes Home" initiative in Metro Nashville is one example of increasing family engagement with schools by providing training, laptops, and Wi-Fi access upon program completion (Tennessee Alliance for Equity in Education, 2022).

The Disproportionality of ELs in Special Education

The issue of disproportionality of representation for ELs in special education has been documented across the United States (Artiles et al., 2005; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2017; Sanatullova-Allison

& Robison-Young, 2016). While much of this research has focused on the overrepresentation of EL students in special education, identification trends across states vary. As an example, Mancilla-Martinez et al. (2023) found that in Tennessee, documented underrepresentation of EL students in special education extends to both students designated as English learners ("current" English learners) and those designated as English-proficient across both high-incidence and low-incidence categories of disability. They used Tennessee state-level data collected between 2009 and 2019 for students in 3rd through 8th grades to examine the adjusted and unadjusted odds ratios for ELs to be identified for Special Education across all categories. The analytic sample across all academic years included 812,783 students, averaging 285,900 yearly. The researchers found that across the focal timespan, both English-proficient bilingual students and designated EL students were less likely to be identified for Special Education than students identified as native English speakers. In other words, all bilingual/multilingual students were less likely to be recommended for and ultimately receive special education services than monolingual English-speaking students. Mancilla-Martinez et al. (2023) surmise that several factors may play a role, including the "new destination" status of the state, the fact that assessments, even those used for identification of special education, are overwhelmingly in English (Escamilla et al., 2017), and social, cultural, and historical trends. This underrepresentation is significant because all students must receive appropriate instructional services aligned to their educational needs. When gaps between needs and services erupt, these disparities can negatively affect students' academic success (NASEM, 2017).

Tennessee's attempts to address the disproportional underrepresentation of ELs have included implementing the Response to Intervention (RTI) model and universal dyslexia screening. Instituted across Tennessee in July 2014, the RTI model is a central piece of Tennessee's efforts to improve EL instruction by following a tiered support system (TDOE, 2023b). By integrating RTI strategies and personalized learning initiatives, schools can actively work toward eliminating disparities, ensuring that all students, regardless of cultural and linguistic background, receive the support and services essential to access grade-level content and curricula. The Tennessee Literacy Success Act of 2021 was intended to add additional support by requiring LEAs to administer universal reading screening for kindergarten through grade 3 students and provide high-quality Tier 1 foundational skills[4] instruction. It is suggested that the dyslexia screening (in particular) can help discern whether reading difficulties are rooted in the language acquisition process or specific learning disabilities, thereby guiding educators in tailoring interventions that align with the unique needs of ELs (TDOE, 2021). However, we acknowledge that

several variables, including the administrator's knowledge and skill level, could render screeners such as these inaccurate and ineffective.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Refugee-Background Students

As previously noted, refugee numbers in Tennessee make up a substantial part of the total number of immigrants to the state. As such, promising practices for working with this population are essential for school districts in Tennessee with growing refugee populations.

According to a series of studies (including Daniel, 2018; 2019; Daniel & Zybina, 2019), working with resettled refugees in the state, culturally responsive pedagogy and "funds of strategies" were demonstrably effective approaches to supporting refugee-background students' learning and development. For example, Daniel and Zybina (2019) observed and interviewed resettled refugee youth about their experiences in schools. They found that these students are able to productively draw on their knowledge of multiple languages to make meaning at home; however, in schools, these same students rarely had opportunities to do so. Additionally, students' learning was best supported when engaged in collaborative activities and when teachers took the time to get to know them as people. The studies noted that schools missed opportunities to align instruction with those practices that the students indicated are helpful for their learning, thereby failing to uphold the same high standards for these students as they do for all learners (Daniel & Zybina, 2019). Daniel (2019) argues that culturally responsive pedagogies allow students to draw upon their out-of-school literacy and translanguaging practices to strategically navigate educational experiences.

de Jong and Harper (2005) supported Gay's (2002) assertion that teachers need to use "the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 106). They highlight classroom participation structures and the role of students' prior learning experiences as two foci that are particularly important for ELs who have been schooled in their home country.

A CONCLUDING CALL TO ACTION

Scholarship highlights relationship-building as critical to creating meaningful opportunities for learning when working toward long-term change. This view emphasizes how "daily practices [can] change norms" (O'Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010, p. 566). In Tennessee, teachers' engagement in advocacy, manifested in daily practices aimed at enhancing educational opportunities and outcomes for ELs, represents a consistent method of fostering a more

inclusive and effective learning environment for this student cohort. For example, after learning about students' particular experiences and needs, EL teachers work to develop partnerships that connect students and families with appropriate community resources, legal counsel, or other resources necessary to facilitate educational equity (DaSilva Iddings & Warraich, 2022; Warren & Ward, 2022). This advocacy extends beyond the classroom, as teachers actively participate in efforts at the district and state levels. By collaborating with stakeholders and decision-makers, teachers contribute to shaping policies that address the systemic challenges faced by ELs, thereby advocating for long-lasting change. Therefore, we propose a call to action consisting of two advocacy-based priorities where researchers, activists, and policymakers can further support Tennessee's teachers to ensure that their ELs are provided an equitable education.

Advocate for Dual-Language Programs and Policies that View Native Language Use as a Resource and as a Right

As mentioned earlier, Tennessee is essentially an English-only state. As such, most ELs may miss out on the educational, economic, and sociocultural benefits of bilingual education that can be accomplished through dual-language programs. Dual-language programs have been shown to enhance cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and academic achievement in all students, not just those acquiring English. Bilingual brains seem to be wired differently, offering advantages in executive function and attention control (Christian, 2016; Farhan, 2019; Kroll et al., 2012). Contrary to what many may believe, dual-language programs do not hinder English acquisition but rather accelerate it in the long run. Students gain a deeper understanding of language structures by comparing two languages, leading to more vital English skills (Christian, 2016; Kroll et al., 2012).

Furthermore, supporting native languages fosters cultural identity and heritage preservation. Communities can maintain their traditions and values through language, strengthening social cohesion and intergenerational understanding (Bayram, 2021; Leonard et al., 2020; Montreal, 2023; Paradis, 2023). Finally, dual-language programs promote understanding and appreciation of different cultures, leading to a greater sense of belonging (de Jong et al., 2023; Montrul, 2023), tolerance, and respect for diversity. This can help combat prejudice and build stronger communities. When individuals feel their languages are valued and respected, they are more likely to participate in civic life and contribute to society. Recognizing native language rights empowers communities and fosters a more inclusive society.

Initiate Critical Conversation Regarding the Difficulty of Accessing Tennessee School Districts for Necessary Research

While we believe Tennessee's school district leaders recognize the benefits of allowing researchers responsible and reasonable access, it has become increasingly difficult for research projects to gain approval and support. We encourage essential conversations between district leaders and researchers that would minimize the challenges that disproportionately impact research on vulnerable or marginalized student populations, whose voices and experiences are often underrepresented in educational research.

Difficulties in accessing relevant data and populations can hinder efforts to understand their unique needs and develop effective interventions and support systems. Moving forward, it is crucial for school districts to:

- *Develop a centralized system for research access with clear guidelines and standardized procedures.* This would streamline the process for researchers and ensure consistency across districts.
- *Promote transparency and open communication regarding research requests.* Districts should clearly explain their decision-making process and provide timely feedback to researchers.
- *Allocate resources, including personnel and training, to facilitate research within districts.* This would demonstrate a commitment to evidence-based decision-making and support for educational research.

By addressing these challenges, we can ensure that researchers have equitable access to Tennessee school districts and can contribute to better educational outcomes for all students, especially those from underserved communities like ELs.

NOTES

1. For more information regarding the 2023 Tennessee plan for giving schools letter grades, please see Aldrich's (2023) report on its implementation at https://www.chalkbeat.org/tennessee/2023/11/2/23944324/a-f-school-letter-grades-delayed-with-new-formula-lizzette-reynolds/.

2. WIDA ACCESS is a collection of summative English language proficiency assessments. Specific information regarding the WIDA consortium may be found at https://wida.wisc.edu.

3. To date, we have only been able to find three examples in Nashville and Chattanooga.

4. Tier 1 vocabulary consists of everyday words with clear, unambiguous meanings such as "cat," "book," and "pencil." This level of language is usually acquired

organically at home, in social situations, and through conversations with peers and teachers at school without needing to be formally taught (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013).

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