

# The State of Teacher Preparedness to Teach Emergent Bilingual Learners: Perspectives of 45 English Language Education Directors

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## **After five years of Rethinking Equity and Teaching English Language Learners (RETELL),**

how well prepared are Massachusetts educators and school districts to teach emergent bilingual learners? To get an answer to this question, we administered a survey to 45 English Language Education (ELE) directors at the November 2017 meeting of the Massachusetts English Learner Leadership Council (MELLC).

### **RETELL PD**

Since 2014, teacher candidates applying for initial licensure have been required to complete a Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) endorsement course approved by MA DESE, and since 2016 all core content teachers and the administrators who supervise them have been required to complete the relevant RETELL course. The RETELL PD (Professional Development) program for in-service teachers consists of an initial 45-hour course that engages participants in research-informed sheltered English instruction (SEI) strategies for teaching emergent bilingual learners. Topics include oral language development, vocabulary, reading, and writing. RETELL PD is also required for administrators, consisting of a 15-hour overview of the strategies that teachers of emergent

bilingual learners should be implementing in their classrooms.

The structure of the RETELL course conforms, in many ways, to the criteria that scholars believe is likely to result in changes in teaching practice: It is ongoing—45 hours across 15 weeks (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009), context-embedded—as teachers develop, implement and reflect on lessons (Panuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi & Gallagher, 2007), and often provided to cohorts of teachers from the same district, resulting in collective participation (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001).

### OUR SURVEY

To understand the state of teacher preparedness five years after the implementation of RETELL PD and one academic year after the 2016 mandate, we developed a survey to measure ELE directors' perception of the preparedness of their teachers to meet the needs of emergent bilingual learners, including students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), students with English proficiency levels at WIDA Level 2 ("Emerging") or higher, and students with disabilities.

**A high number of participants indicated the RETELL training was regarded merely as a “box to be checked.”**

Our survey began with questions about demographics (total number of students, number of emergent bilingual learners, number of SLIFE, and number of newcomers), which were recoded as scale variables (<10%=1, 11-20%=2, and so on). The remainder of the survey contained 19 Likert-scale statements regarding RETELL completion rates and teacher preparedness in the directors' districts. Prompts to gauge participants' perceptions of the quality of the RETELL course and opportunities for ongoing professional development were included at the end.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Only 38 directors responded to a question about the total number of students in their district, suggesting that the question may not have been clear. Given the small student population numbers (less than 200) given for some districts, it also appears that some directors included only the schools that were under their immediate direction. Of those who responded, 34.2% reported total student populations under 1000, 15.8% reported 1001-3000 students, 23.7% reported

3001-5,000 students, and 18.4% reported 5,001-7,000 students. Only 7.9% of directors reported more than 7,000 students in their district.

All 45 ELE directors responded to the demographic questions about emergent bilingual learners, students identified as newcomers, and students identified as SLIFE. Seventy-one percent of the districts had fewer than 10% emergent bilingual learners, while 26.7% had between 11-30%. These figures are consistent with MA DESE data about the overall incidence of emergent bilingual learners in Massachusetts schools (10.2%, MA DESE, 2018). One participant reported having 51-60% emergent bilingual learners, which may have been school-level data or perhaps an error.

All ELE directors reported SLIFE in their districts. The vast majority of directors (97.8%) stated that the total SLIFE population in their districts accounted for fewer than 10% of the total population of emergent bilingual learners. Only one ELE director reported that SLIFE students comprised 11-20% of this population.

The percentage of newcomer emergent bilingual learners was more variable, with 57.8% of ELE directors reporting that newcomers represented less than 10% of the total emergent bilingual learner population. Newcomers represented 11-20% of emergent bilingual learners in 15.6% of districts, 21-30% in 20% of districts, 31-40% in 4.4% of districts, and 41-50% in only one district.

## **RETELL TRAINING**

We asked the ELE directors about the approximate percentage of teachers and administrators who had completed RETELL training in their districts and converted their responses to points on a Likert scale as follows: <20%=1, 21-40%=2, 41-60%=3, 61-80%=4, 81-100%=5. The results show a high level of completion among teachers (Mean=3.87) and an even higher level of completion among administrators (Mean=4.53). This bodes well for emergent bilingual learners, as the principal plays a key role in fostering academic success (Stufft & Brogadir, 2011). We believe that the lower number of teachers who were reported to have completed RETELL may reflect the fact that non-core content-area teachers are not subject to this mandate.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF RETELL IMPACT**

Because we know that initiatives that are valued and are consistent with school goals are more likely to “stick” (Sackney, Walker, & Hajnal, 1998), we next explored ELE directors’ perceptions of the value and impact of RETELL PD.

Directors responded to two prompts, choosing their responses along a four-point Likert-scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree and 4=strongly agree). A high number of participants indicated that RETELL training was regarded merely as a “box to be checked” in their district (Mean=3.02). It is not surprising, then, that directors generally disagreed with the previous statement: “The RETELL initiative has made a significant difference in instructional practices within my district” (Mean=2.33).

We also asked ELE directors to rate the overall quality of the RETELL training for teachers and administrators, from 1 to 4 (1=poor, 2=fair, 3=good, 4=excellent). Both the teacher and the administrator training were rated as fair to good (Mean=2.68 for teacher RETELL; Mean=2.74 for administrator RETELL).

### PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER PREPAREDNESS

In the next section of the survey, ELE directors were asked to rate their agreement with 12 statements (Table 1) focusing on teachers' preparedness to teach various subgroups of emergent bilingual learners. The items in this section were scored from 1= strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree.

When asked whether teachers had improved their instructional strategies to teach emergent bilingual learners, responses were mixed (Mean=2.51), but stronger than those for the next

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item, which asked about teachers' preparedness to teach all proficiency levels of emergent bilingual learners (Mean=1.98). We suspect that while teachers were generally perceived as prepared to teach WIDA proficiency levels 2-5, they were likely less prepared to teach newcomers, therefore lowering the rating for overall preparedness. Unfortunately, we neglected to include a survey item focusing specifically on teacher preparedness to teach newcomers. Since the demographic questions revealed that 26.6% of the districts had significant numbers of newcomers (more than 21% of all emergent bilingual learners), this would have been an important point to investigate.

Among the subgroups we asked about, the lowest ratings were for preparedness to teach SLIFE students (Mean=1.51 for elementary; Mean=1.49 for middle school; Mean=1.34 for secondary). Across the board, elementary teachers were rated as best prepared to teach all subgroups, followed by middle-grade teachers and, finally, secondary teachers. However, secondary teachers received a higher rating (Mean=2.15) for their preparedness to teach emergent bilinguals in advanced academic classes.

Table 1. Teacher Preparedness.

Survey Item	Responses	Mean	Std. Error
Regular education teachers who have completed RETELL training have improved their instructional strategies to teach ELLs.	45	2.51	0.133
Regular education teachers who have completed RETELL training are prepared to teach ELLs at different proficiency levels.	43	1.98	0.118
Elementary grade teachers are prepared to teach ELLs with overall WIDA proficiency levels greater than 2.	45	2.76	0.101
Elementary teachers are prepared to teach SLIFE.	43	1.51	0.102
Elementary teachers are prepared to teach ELLs with disabilities.	45	2.07	0.116
Middle grade teachers are prepared to teach ELLs with overall WIDA proficiency levels greater than 2.	42	2.36	0.127
Middle grade teachers are prepared to teach SLIFE.	43	1.49	0.139
Middle grade teachers are prepared to teach ELLs with disabilities.	43	1.98	0.113
Secondary teachers are prepared to teach ELLs with overall WIDA proficiency levels greater than 2.	42	1.93	0.125
Secondary teachers are prepared to teach SLIFE.	41	1.34	0.119
Secondary teachers are prepared to teach ELLs with disabilities.	41	1.78	0.113
Secondary teachers are prepared to teach ELLs in academically advanced courses.	40	2.15	0.132

## CONCLUSION

The results of this survey indicate that while the RETELL PD course represents an initial step in preparing administrators and content-area teachers to educate emergent bilingual learners, it has not yet made a sustainable and lasting difference. To achieve this result, the course must be perceived as integral to the mission of the district, rather than a box to be checked. In our view, the RETELL course represents a minimal level of preparation but is not sufficient, by itself, to create equitable educational opportunities for emergent bilingual learners. Given the apparently inadequate preparedness of teachers who have completed the full RETELL course, the current relicensure requirement that teachers complete an additional 15 hours of PD over a five-year period is not likely to be sufficient to prepare them to educate the diverse populations of emergent bilingual learners in our schools—students with varying levels of English proficiency, students with special needs, and students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). 

## LIMITATIONS

Readers should be aware that the participants in this survey were a select group (MELLC members) and do not necessarily represent the views of all ELE directors across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Future research should include surveys of teachers themselves, along with classroom observations of instructional practice.

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