



Professional Development at Scale: The Causal Effect of Obtaining an SEI Endorsement Under Massachusetts's RETELL Initiative

Jesse Bruhn, Nathan Jones, Yasuko Kanno, Marcus A. Winters

POLICY ISSUE

English learners (ELs) are among the most rapidly growing and lowest-performing student groups in American public schools. Lack of access to teachers who have been trained to serve their specific needs is one potential explanation for ELs' unequal educational outcomes relative to English-proficient students. Unless they are enrolled in bilingual education programs, most ELs receive instruction within a general education classroom shared with non-ELs and headed by a core academic teacher. Yet, nationwide only 24% of elementary teacher education programs offer EL-specific training and only 29.5% of teachers who instruct at least one EL have completed EL-specific professional development (PD) programs. Massachusetts is one of 24 states that currently requires or recommends EL-specific PD for general education teachers in an effort to ensure that ELs receive instruction from a properly-trained teacher.

Massachusetts public schools provide an especially salient policy setting in which to estimate the effects of EL-specific PD requirements. In 2002, the Massachusetts voters approved a ballot initiative known as "Question 2," which effectively eliminated transitional bilingual education programs in the state. The majority of ELs who had been in those bilingual education programs were then moved to regular, English-medium classrooms with teachers untrained in EL instructional strategies. Consequently, in July 2011, the U.S. Department of Justice sent a letter informing the state that it was in violation of the Equal Educational Opportunities Act for its failure to require adequate training for Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) teachers. Massachusetts policymakers responded by developing and implementing the Rethinking Equity in the Teaching of English Language Learners (RETELL) initiative, which required that all core academic pre-service and in-service teachers and teachers who were instructing ELs obtain an endorsement in SEI, a common instructional strategy for teaching ELs in English-only classroom settings. In addition to the teacher training requirement, RETELL resulted in several other changes, including additional training for administrators, new English language development standards and corresponding English language proficiency tests, and, beginning in 2015, additional coaching and learning opportunities. Our study focuses specifically on the impact of RETELL's teacher PD initiative.

RETELL provides a unique example of a rigorous and time-intensive PD delivered at a nearly unprecedented scale. Over a 5-year period, more than 35,000

KEY FINDINGS

A teacher obtaining an SEI endorsement under RETELL had no significant effect on the average math or English language arts MCAS scores of the ELs they instruct.

A teacher obtaining an SEI endorsement under RETELL led to:

- Increased **effectiveness of teachers** hired by the district within the previous 3 years in both ELA and math
- Improvements on the **ELA test** for ELs with very low proficiency in English
- Modest but statistically significant positive spillover effects on the average **performance of students with disabilities and the larger group of non-EL students** that the teacher instructs on the ELA test

in-service public school teachers throughout Massachusetts completed a training equivalent in scope to a college-level semester-long course. Teachers who had no or very limited previous training were required to take a full 45-hour endorsement course. Those who had previously completed two or more voluntary trainings provided by the state were eligible to take a 15-hour short-bridge course or a 24-hour long-bridge course.

STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

We combine records on SEI course completion with administrative data for all Massachusetts public school students and their teachers for school years 2010-2011 through 2017-2018 in order to estimate the causal effect of a teacher acquiring an SEI endorsement under the RETELL initiative on the performance of both the EL and non-EL students that teacher instructs.

We find that a teacher obtaining an SEI endorsement under RETELL had no significant effect on the average math or English language arts Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) scores of the ELs they instruct. The analysis

did not detect a significant difference in the effect of a teacher completing the full, long-bridge, or short-bridge training on their student's test scores. However, the training did lead to:

- Increased effectiveness of teachers hired by the district within the previous 3 years (a proxy for teacher experience) in both ELA and math.
- Improvements on the ELA test for ELs with very low proficiency in English.
- Modest but statistically significant positive spillover effects on the average performance of students with disabilities and the larger group of non-EL students that the teacher instructs on the ELA test.

When interpreting our results, it is important to keep in mind that we measure the causal effect of completing the SEI endorsement training, which is not necessarily the same as the effect of utilizing the strategies that are taught in the training. We did not observe the extent to which teachers changed their instructional practices after receiving the training. It is also feasible that the expansive nature of the training across the state—with multiple state-approved vendors providing the PD—affects the quality and consistency of the

training.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our findings have somewhat mixed implications for the use of large-scale PD generally and specifically for training teachers to instruct ELs in English-only classroom settings. On the one hand, it is disappointing that training in SEI instructional strategies did not lead to immediate improvements in a teacher's impact on ELs' MCAS test scores, on average. On the other hand, our finding of a potential for positive impacts for recently hired teachers suggests that the SEI endorsement requirement could yield benefits in the longer term as new teachers continue to enter the state's schools having completed the training during pre-service education. Further, the existence of spillovers for other students and the range of effects for teachers completing the training on the outcomes of both ELs and non-ELs suggests that the training did elicit improvements in teacher effectiveness, which is promising for the potential use of widespread PD.

FULL REPORT

For the complete working paper, visit wheelockpolicycenter.org.

OUR MISSION

The Wheelock Educational Policy Center (WEPC) conducts and disseminates rigorous, policy-relevant education research in partnership with local, state, and federal policymakers and stakeholders to improve educational opportunities and holistic outcomes for underserved students.

www.wheelockpolicycenter.org
wheelockpolicy@bu.edu



Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development
Wheelock Educational Policy Center

