

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
September 28, 2021, 7 am CT

CONTACT:
Lisa Sall
lsall@uchicago.edu
630-408-1633

**Pre-k and bilingual education are associated with long-term academic success
for English Learners in Chicago Public Schools, study finds**
*New research from the University of Chicago identifies factors that improve the academic success
of this growing population of students*

New research, from the [University of Chicago Consortium on School Research](http://consortium.uchicago.edu), identifies factors that are connected with better academic outcomes for English Learners (ELs) in Chicago Public Schools (CPS): 1) attending CPS pre-k, especially full-day pre-k; 2) enrolling in pre-k earlier—before age four; 3) receiving bilingual education services; and 4) attending a school with a higher rating on the CPS School Quality Rating Policy. According to the new report, [English Learners in Chicago Public Schools: An Exploration of the Influence of Pre-K and Early Grade Years](#), these factors were associated with better academic outcomes, including stronger attendance, English language development, grades, and test scores.

Supporting the academic success of ELs is a matter of urgency given the growing number of ELs in Chicago and across the state of Illinois. Approximately one out of every three CPS pre-k students is an active English Learner (EL)—a student who has not yet reached English proficiency on a state test.

The study's findings have important insights for parents of ELs who are making decisions about when and where to enroll their children in CPS and for policymakers and educators who are making decisions about allocating resources. "Our research findings are clear that full-day pre-k and bilingual education services help to set up ELs for long-term academic success," said Marisa de la Torre, principal investigator and managing director at the UChicago Consortium. Between 2016 and 2018, only one in five ELs enrolled in a CPS pre-k attended a full-day classroom (19 percent), compared to the district average of 34 percent.

"The Consortium's research about English Learners demonstrates that bilingual education as early as pre-k positively impacts students' long-term academic achievement," said Rebecca Vonderlack-Navarro, PhD, director of education policy and research, Latino Policy Forum. "These findings are a call to train and retain a workforce of bilingual educators who are qualified for early childhood education."

The study also shows that ELs who would benefit from additional support can be identified by educators as early as pre-k based on lower scores on their English proficiency screener tests. Starting school with low levels of English proficiency was related to lower academic performance, however, this was not related to students' attendance.

ELs with identified disabilities were more likely to miss school and more likely to opt out of bilingual services, limiting their access to services and their academic progress. "Our findings suggest that school leaders should try to understand and find solutions for lower attendance patterns among ELs with disabilities," said Alyssa Blanchard, research analyst at the UChicago Consortium. "Schools may also want to help families understand that their children are entitled to both bilingual and special education services."

[Previous research](#) from the UChicago Consortium found that 80 percent of CPS students who began kindergarten as ELs became proficient in English by fifth grade and performed academically as well as or better than peers who began school as native-English speakers. However, the one in five ELs who did not demonstrate English proficiency by the end of eighth grade had lower educational outcomes in terms of grades, attendance, and test scores.

Research Questions and Key Findings

1. What are the factors associated with stronger outcomes for ELs in pre-k and the early grades?
 - Attending a **full-day pre-k classroom** was associated with stronger ELs pre-k attendance and their kindergarten readiness in terms of English language development and early literacy.
 - **Enrolling earlier** in CPS pre-k (prior to age four vs. enrolling at age four) supported ELs' kindergarten readiness in terms of English language development and early reading skills.
 - The differences in outcomes were still detectable—even as far as third grade—between students who attended a school-based CPS pre-k and those who did not. Compared to their peers, third-grade ELs who had enrolled in a CPS pre-k had better attendance, reading and math grades, and test scores, and were more likely to demonstrate English proficiency.
 - ELs who **received language supports** through their schools' Bilingual Education Services had higher attendance and academic outcomes in the long run than students who refused bilingual services in kindergarten.
 - **Attending higher-rated schools**, based on CPS' School Quality Rating Policy, was associated with positive outcomes for ELs in terms of standardized test scores in math, reading, and English proficiency.
2. To what extent can schools identify ELs who would benefit from additional support?
 - **Starting school with low levels of English proficiency** was related to lower academic performance, measured by standardized test scores and grades; however, screener data were, in general, not related to attendance.
 - ELs with **identified disabilities** made progress, but at a slower pace, toward acquiring English skills and most students with identified disabilities had lower attendance.

Cite as: de la Torre, M., Freire, S., & Blanchard, A. (2021). *English Learners in Chicago Public Schools: An exploration of the influence of pre-k and early grade years*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

About the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research

With the goal of supporting stronger and more equitable educational outcomes for students, the [UChicago Consortium](#) conducts research of high technical quality that informs and assesses policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, families, and communities as we support the search for solutions to the challenges of school improvement. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and practice but does not advocate for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school improvement by identifying what matters most for student success, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.