Abstract Title Page

Title: Student and school characteristics associated with academic performance and English language proficiency among English learner students in grades 3–8 in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District

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Abstract Body

Context:

The Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) has seen the number of English learner students in grades K–12 increase in recent years, even as overall enrollment has decreased (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In addition, the English learner student population has grown more diverse in race/ethnicity, country of origin, and native language. This has been driven in part by an influx of resettled refugees speaking a variety of languages. The increasingly diverse English learner student population requires more support from the district to meet broader needs for language, cultural, and educational assistance.

The Cleveland Partnership for English Learner Success is a researcher–practitioner partnership between Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest and CMSD's Multilingual Multicultural Education Office and the district's research office. The partnership has prioritized examining the characteristics of English learner students and the schools they attend to identify which of those characteristics are associated with student achievement. The partnership undertook this research to help improve district and school supports for English learner students.

Research Questions and Approach:

This study answers three research questions about English learner students in grades 3–8 in CMSD:

1. What are the characteristics of English learner students and the schools they attended between 2011/12 and 2016/17?
2. What are the patterns of performance on statewide math, English language arts, and English language proficiency assessments among English learner students between 2011/12 and 2016/17?
3. Which student and school characteristics are associated with math performance, English language arts performance, and English language proficiency level in 2016/17, after other student and school characteristics are accounted for?

Student and school characteristics were examined separately for each year to identify patterns of stability and change. To explore associations with academic performance and English language proficiency, data for the most recent year—2016/17—was used to provide information most relevant to the current English learner student population and education setting.

Highlighted Findings:

The number of English learner students speaking languages other than Spanish increased (see Appendix Exhibit 1). From 2011/12 to 2016/17 the percentage of students whose native language was Spanish decreased from 82 percent to 71 percent. During the same period the percentage whose native language was Arabic increased from 4 percent to 9 percent, and the percentage speaking an African language doubled from 5 percent to 10 percent.

English learner students in grades 3–8 performed below the district average on the state assessment in English language arts in all years and on the state assessment in math in 2011/12, 2012/13, and 2013/14. But their math performance was closer to the district average than their

English language arts performance. There was little change in the proportion of students in grades 3–8 scoring at each level on the two state English language proficiency assessments used during the study years.

The percentage of English learner students in grades 3–8 attending the district's newcomer academy doubled from 11 percent in 2011/12 to 23 percent in 2016/17. During the same period the percentage attending one of the district's seven bilingual schools decreased from 70 percent to 54 percent. The percentage attending a nonmultilingual school remained stable.

English learner students in grades 3–8 increasingly attended schools that scored above the district average in each of the four domains of the Conditions for Learning Survey that assesses school climate: academic rigor, safe and respectful climate, peer social-emotional learning, and supportive learning environment (see Appendix Exhibit 2). This increase occurred at the same time that more students enrolled in the newcomer academy, which in every study year had school climate scores at least one standard deviation above the district average on most school climate domains. As the proportion of English learner students attending the newcomer academy increased, the average English learner student experienced a more positive school climate.

All four domains of school climate were positively associated with English language speaking proficiency level (see Appendix Exhibit 3). Further, English learner students who attended schools with higher ratings of academic rigor and supportive learning environment had higher English language arts performance. Students who attended schools with higher safe and respectful climate ratings had higher listening proficiency levels. There were no other clear associations between the school climate measures and the other outcomes.

Conclusions:
The study findings suggest the need for additional examination into the role of school climate in student learning. For example, it could be useful for the district to examine whether a positive school climate contributes to English learner students' ability to improve their speaking skills. Schools also may wish to consider whether there are approaches to building a positive school climate that are particularly well suited for supporting English learner students. Further research could focus on working with the district to evaluate school climate interventions that appear to be useful for improving English learner student performance.

Relatedly, it would be useful to understand the extent to which the newcomer academy's particularly high ratings for school climate reflect strong practices for building a positive school climate that could be replicated in other schools. The district also may wish to understand whether newcomer academy student supports help explain school climate perceptions and student performance. The district also might benefit from studying English learner school climate ratings over time, as students leave the newcomer academy and acclimate to their new contexts.

These findings contribute to the body of research suggesting that school climate is a promising area of focus for districts and schools. While research on school climate as it pertains specifically to English learner students is limited (O'Conner, De Feyter, Carr, Luo, & Romm, 2017), the findings of this study are similar to those of previous studies based on general student

populations that have found school climate perceptions in other locations to be associated with student learning and performance (Hopson, Schiller, & Lawson, 2014). Future research could use a more rigorous approach to understand whether districts and schools can improve school climate as a pathway to improving performance for English learner students and all students.

References

Hopson, L. M., Schiller, K., & Lawson, H. (2014). Exploring linkages between school climate, behavioral norms, social supports, and academic success. *Social Work Research, 38*(4), 197–209. doi:10.1093/swr/svu017.

O'Conner, R., De Feyter, J., Carr, A., Luo, J. L., & Romm, H. (2017). *A review of the literature on social and emotional learning for students ages 3–8: Characteristics of effective social and emotional learning programs (part 1 of 4)* (REL 2017–245). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED572721

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Appendix

Exhibit 1. The percentage of English learner students in grades 3–8 who spoke Spanish decreased between 2011/12 and 2016/17, while the percentages who spoke Arabic and African languages increased
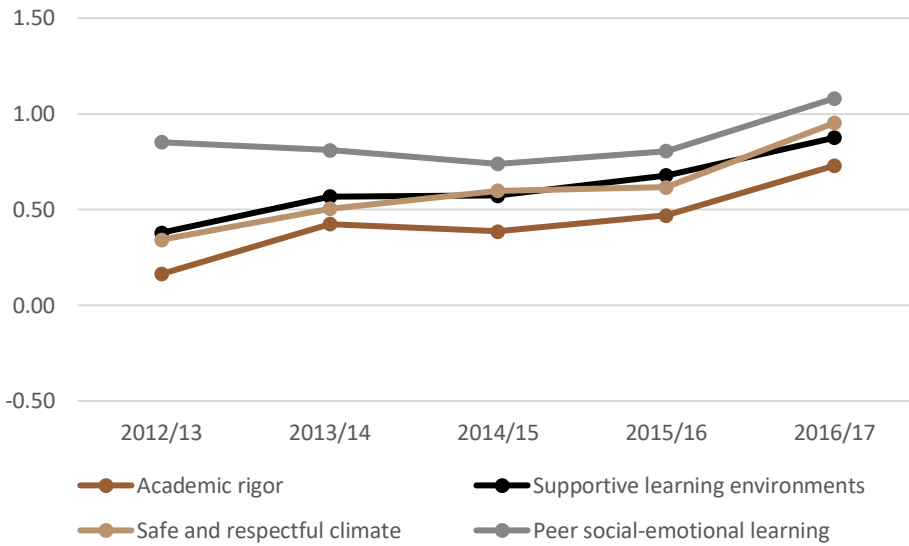
Percent of English learner students
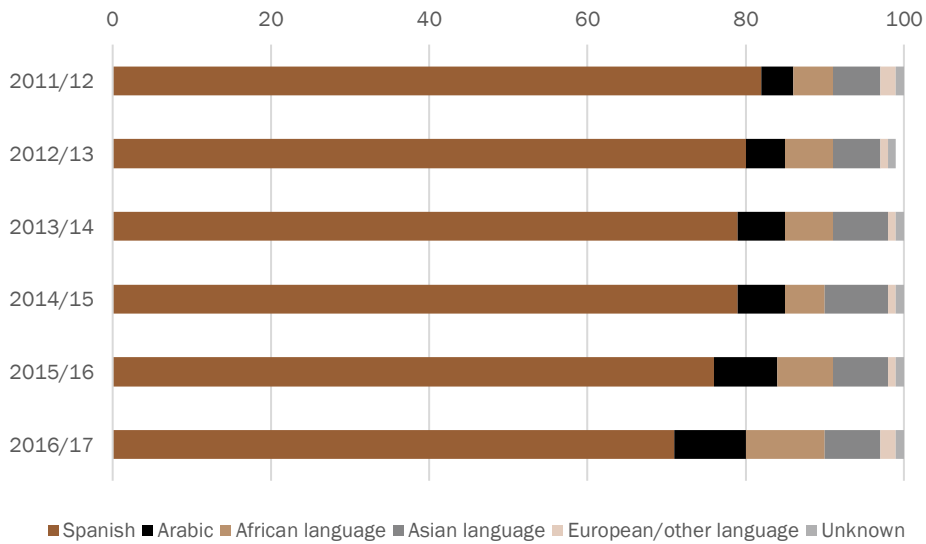
Note: See box 2 for the languages included in each category.

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Exhibit 2. *English learner students in grades 3–8 attended schools that scored above the district average on all four domains of school climate from 2012/13 to 2016/17*

Standard deviations from district average

Note: The figure is based on school-level scores weighted by the number of English learner students per school to depict the average English learner student experience. Each point represents the average school climate score in standard deviations from the district average among English learner students in a domain and year. The study team standardized scores for each domain relative to the distribution of scores for all schools in the district.

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Conditions for Learning Survey.

Exhibit 3. Conditions for Learning Survey measures related to English learner math and English language arts performance and English language proficiency levels, 2016/17

Domain	Ohio State Test		Ohio English Language Proficiency Assessment				
	Math	English language arts	Overall	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Academic rigor	ns	+	ns	ns	+	ns	ns
Safe and respectful climate	ns	ns	ns	+	+	ns	ns
Peer social-emotional learning	ns	ns	ns	ns	+	ns	ns
Supportive learning environment	ns	+	ns	ns	+	ns	ns

ns is not significant at the *p* = .05 level.

+ denotes a statistically significant positive relationship.

Source: Authors' analyses based on the regressions that account for student and school characteristics.