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# Most Oregon schools slow to get English learners proficient

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By **Betsy Hammond, The Oregonian**  
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Doug Beghtel/The Oregonian

Cornelius Elementary emphasizes strong reading skills to help non-native speakers become proficient in English.

After five or more years learning English as their second language in Oregon schools, 75 percent of those students still are not proficient in English according to a report out today.

**Portland Public Schools** has failed its English language learners for so long that the state this fall **cut off federal funding** for students with limited English proficiency, a loss of more than \$600,000 a year to the state's largest district.

The Oregon Department of Education says it's crucial that schools help students gain proficiency in English, and the U.S. Department of Education says five years should be

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enough time for a typical student to master the language.

But most districts aren't coming close to that target.

Half the state's English language learners are concentrated in just seven school districts, including Portland and Beaverton. And in four of those -- **Hillsboro**, **Reynolds**, **Salem-Keizer** and **Woodburn** -- fewer than one-quarter of the students are fluent after five or more years, according to today's accountability report.

In Salem, which has more English learners than any other district -- 5,700 -- only 16 percent mastered English after five or more years in English as a second language classes, the state reported.

State monitors are upset with Portland's performance because the state notified the district in 2005 that it was violating federal education law. The district fixed the problems to the satisfaction of state monitors in 2006, but when the state checked again in 2009, the district had slipped back into some of its old ways.

Among the problems found in early 2009 and still not fixed to the state's satisfaction: Some Portland schools don't give English learners enough language support to learn the core subject matter for their grade level, and not every student is being taught English language development using research-backed techniques.

Assistant State Superintendent Colleen Mileham notified Portland in late September that the state would withhold federal funds, a step it rarely takes, to communicate how important it is to consistently serve English language learners well.

Portland may be the first large school district in the country to have its federal funds for English proficiency withheld. Mary Ann Zehr, an assistant editor at the national education newspaper Education Week, says, "In a decade of reporting on English language learners for EdWeek, I've never heard of a state department of education withholding Title III funds from a district."

Oregon schools generally do a good job helping students progress through the early stages of speaking, reading and writing English, the state report says.

The problem occurs when schools try to move students to advanced and proficient levels so that they can exit the English as second language program. Helping students master complex verb tenses, idioms and advanced academic language is challenging, says Kim Miller, statewide coordinator of English as a second language programs.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind law, the state expects schools to get half their English language learners proficient within five years. Only 16 of the state's 200 school districts managed to do that, and only two of them -- **Redmond** and **Eugene** -- served a large number of English language learners.

**Martha Hinman**, Redmond's director of student services, said teachers there make sure they spend enough time and concentrate on the right skills to get students up to speed in academic English. For non-native English speakers, mastering academic language in math, science, health and literature, as required, is "really tough," Hinman says.

The state education department is supposed to require big changes in school districts that chronically fall short. If a district fails to succeed with its English learners for four straight years, federal law gives the state two options. It can require a district to change its "curriculum, program and methods of instruction" or it can withhold funding and require that educators responsible for the poor results be replaced.

Oregon mainly opts to require curriculum and teaching changes, says Jake Weigler, communication director for the agency. Portland is the only district ever to have its English proficiency funds withheld, he said.

- **Betsy Hammond**

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**kezialyn**

December 10, 2009 at 9:05PM

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Say what you like. I choose to comment about topics on which I have a thorough background and understanding. Judging from the comments on this article, is not true of most of the the others who have chosen to post, including yours.

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**kezialyn**

December 10, 2009 at 9:01PM

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What do you mean by that, Bigfir? I'm a native speaker of English, no idea what you're talking about.

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**thewayitottabe**

December 10, 2009 at 12:20AM

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I'll bet that if multilingual information was eliminated, they would all learn English. My family did back in the 1920s.

It would also help if the people in school learning English were using English in the home.

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**dundeeseage**

December 10, 2009 at 3:27AM

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Waiting for the road signs to be converted to Spanglish & metric. Ever since the local Thriftway converted all the aisle signs, and replaced the checkers, my oil-camp grade Spanish has improved considerably.

I don't know how well any of these programs are going, but I expect if we put more effort into it, English can still be taught as a foreign language credit in most high schools.

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**yankeeshogun** December 10, 2009 at 12:48AM [Follow](#)

Agree with thewayittotabe. When I was a kid they threw a hispanic kid in with us. He had no trouble at all because we treated him as one of us. Maybe the difference now is that immigrants are not considered one of us so there is not enough interaction to learn. I think the kids should receive extra help AFTER school so they have max time to be immersed in English during regular hours. They should be seated next to native English speakers as much as possible. Also when I was in eight grade I was drafted into a special program to tutor kids who were behind (not because they were from overseas but due to other factors). It was good for me because I learned about coaching younger kids, and it was good for them because they got support in reading and math. This sort of approach should be considered as well in order to leverage the ESL staff's efforts.

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Immersed? So a beginner, new to the country, speaks no English at all, comes to the USA as a middle or high school student, should be thrown into classes like English Lit, political science, Biology, etc? How much do you think the average student (or, you for that matter) would get from this sort of immersion?

How much do you know about the theories of language acquisition? Perhaps you'd like to do a bit of research? Try this site.

<http://www.sdkrashen.com/index.php?cat=0>

I taught English in Japan and spoke no Japanese whatsoever. In addition, despite my fine education, I was essentially illiterate since as you know the Japanese language does not use our alphabet. There were no signs in English for me. After working 10 hours a day, the last thing I wanted to do was learn to read all over again PLUS learn the spoken language. Though I did try--I took a Japanese language class while there and at the end of three months could say 'hello, good bye, how are you' and could not read a lick.

It certainly changed my perception of learning a language and the difficulties that accompany it, especially as an adult.

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I travel and work in many foreign countries. I know of no other country that considers it a RESPONSIBILITY to teach their language to foreigners; it's up to you. What's WRONG with you people? A handful of people complain, you take down the school Christmas tree; illegal aliens flood your schools with kids and you REQUIRE bi-lingual education. You used to be a great country but for the last 40 or 50 years, you've been on a long, downhill slide. Take back your country while you still can.

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Not exactly sure what you're talking about. I got my master's degree in Australia and part of my degree required a practicum in a high school ESL program. This was a publicly funded school, not private.

I have also travelled/taught/lived in various countries and got the impression that second/additional language classes are pretty commonplace. Which countries are you referring to?

[Reply](#) [Post new](#) Inappropriate? [Alert us.](#)**chris** December 10, 2009 at 1:14AM [Follow](#)

I agree! Take a walk thru any Walmart and see how many hispanic families are speaking english. Blame it on the families not the schools.

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**kezialyn** December 10, 2009 at 12:32PM

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Blame what on the families? Speaking their native language? Do you speak Spanish when you visit Cancun for vacation? How do you imagine you would behave if put in a similar situation?

Do you think American expats often learn the language when living overseas?

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**kjironman1** December 10, 2009 at 3:19AM

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Press 1 for english... press 2 for spanish... why learn english?

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**drbonsky** December 10, 2009 at 4:09AM

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This country is a laughingstock to everyone who comes here. There are laws that benefit THEM over natives, since most of them are non-White. What do you think liberals have been doing the past 5 decades. They expect you to learn THEIR language.

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**kezialyn** December 10, 2009 at 12:43PM

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Who is this 'THEM' you are referring to? You don't really need to answer that it's pretty clear. Wow, is this the 1950's? From reading the comments on this article, I would think so.

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**froggy13** December 10, 2009 at 4:10AM

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There seems to be more emphasis on teaching students Spanish, not English. Homework is printed in Spanish and English. The Spanish is always first, even at school events. Why do we do this for Spanish but we don't do this for other languages? This only hurts the children. I have hispanic employees who have worked for me for 10 years and their English hasn't improved. I have Vietnamese employees who have only been in America for 2 years and they speak English much better.

A lot of hispanic employees don't read/speak English well and they do not understand their rights. They do not understand that their employers do not have all of the rights. They live in fear of losing their jobs, when there is no reason to fear. Not legally anyway. This sets them up for the bad employers to take advantage of them.

English is important to learn. Learning the native language does not take away cultural heritage. Replacing the cultural heritage (American, which is a mix of many heritages) of one group with a migrant heritage (Hispanic) is not the answer. Incorporate it into the mix. Don't eliminate all the other groups. Remember that these people came here for a better life, they chose this country for a reason. Don't turn it into the same thing they left behind.

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**dundeeseage** December 10, 2009 at 5:36AM

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It has been observed that many cannot read or write their native language - let along learn English - all of which may have something to do with this. We've attracted some some really Nobel grade stuff here. Tesla, Sikorsky, Albert E. or Carnegie, etc., they are not.

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