



# Factors that challenge English learners and increase their dropout rates: recommendations from the field

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## ABSTRACT

This descriptive study surveyed the perceptions of teachers, counselors, and administrators on issues pertaining to school services and academic and instructional challenges of English Learners (ELs) in NYC public high schools. This study attempted to identify factors that increase the dropout rate of high school English learners. In addition, this study sought to identify school services, if any, provided to ELs that improve academic and learning success. A list of recommendations is provided for all stakeholders.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

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## Introduction

Understanding the reasons why English Learners (ELs) dropout of school is important in order to develop support systems that foster retention and academic success of ELs. This work adds to the available literature on research and initiatives undertaken to improve the educational opportunities for at-risk ELs by identifying specific academic factors, instructional practices, and school services that challenge ELs and lead some of them to drop out of school. The first part of this paper provides a summary of the graduation status of ELs. The second part provides a review of the literature on school dropout of ELs. The third part presents data and recommendations from a small group of New York City high school personnel (school principals, counselors and teachers) on the challenges secondary ELs have in meeting school requirements to advance through the grade levels and obtain a high school diploma. The literature has indicated a series of explanations for the underperformance of ELs focusing mainly on social and structural barriers, such as the fear of school failure, academic tracking, lack of teacher understanding of student needs, stereotyping, and limited access to social, political, and economic power and resources (Cole 2008; Darling-Hammond 2010; Doll, Eslami, and Walters 2013). Practitioners and researchers have investigated issues surrounding school dropout rates with the goal of developing effective approaches toward addressing the disparities in academic engagement and success.

In the New York State Education Department, the Office of Bilingual Education and World Languages has played a key role in supporting educational policies to improve the quality of educational outcomes for ELs. Fordham University, New York University, and the New York State Education Department have worked together to develop the following two main goals and a series of implementation activities to reduce the number of ELs at risk of dropping out: **Goal #1:** Support high school principals and EL Teams to develop/review criteria that pre-identifies potential EL high school dropouts while reviewing NYC and State data and assessment that include EL subgroups; (2) **Goal #2:** Increase the capacity of high school constituents (administrators, counselors, English as a New Language (ENL) teachers, content area teachers and parents) working with at risk ELs by offering

*regional professional development.* The NYC Regional Bilingual Education Resource Networks (RBE-RNs) are involved in the presentation and discussion of issues surrounding school dropout rates for ELs and addressing the issue of increasing student engagement as an important approach to prevent ELs from dropping out of school. NYS-RBERN staff and school practitioners have looked at national data systems with the purpose of determining whether the high numbers of EL dropouts is a national issue and not one only in New York State. This research study was supported by NYS/ NYC Regional Bilingual Education Resource Networks.

## Graduation rates of English learners

Graduation rates for states with a high number of ELs in 2014–2016 demonstrates increased dropout rates among ELs, which is becoming a serious national concern for educators. As indicated in [Table 1](#), there is a significant group of high school ELs who are not succeeding in achieving a high school diploma. For example, in Arizona, data indicated that in 2016, about 68% of high school ELs did not graduate. New York, Louisiana, Nevada, Maryland, and Virginia presented a similar picture. Notably, New York State has one of the lowest EL graduation rates in the country. And even California and Texas have around 30% of ELs who have difficulties attaining high school graduation standards. Perhaps many ELs dropped out once they realized that a high school diploma was an impossible dream.

## Graduation rates for English learners in New York State

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) graduation data rates for the 2014 cohort (those students who first entered 9th grade in New York's public schools in 2014) indicate that the overall graduation rate increased slightly to 80.4%, including black and Hispanic students, for students with disabilities. The data for the 2014 cohort graduation rate for English learners (ELs) showed some graduation rate improvement, as shown in [Table 2](#). New York State Education Department data divides EL graduates into three groups: (A) current ELLs, (b) ever ELLs, and (c) never ELLs. 'Current ELs' (students who were identified as ELs during the school year of their last enrollment) improved their graduation rate by 2.4% points over the previous year. 'Ever ELs' (students identified as English language learners in any school year preceding the school year of their last enrollment) improved by 1.1% points the year before (New York State Education Department, Media Release Memorandum, January 30, 2019). With a graduation rate of 85.5%, Ever ELs continue to show strong progress, surpassing the overall statewide graduation rate by more than five percentage points. However, current ELs still lag far behind the statewide rate, with only 29% of the 2014 cohort graduating on time. Current ELs benefit from extra time in school, with graduation rates

**Table 1.** National graduation rates of english learners.

	2014	2016	Change
Arizona		32.0%	
Arkansas		86.0%	
California	61.0%	72.0%	11%
Florida	55.8%	62.0%	4.2%
Iowa		81.0%	
Louisiana		43.0%	
Maryland		48.0%	
Nevada		42.6%	
New York		37.8%	
Texas		73.7%	
West Virginia		93.0%	
Virginia		45.4%	
U.S. Total	62.6%	66.9%	4.3%

Education Week (December 7, 2017).

**Table 2.** 2013–2014 cohort graduation rates for english learners in New York state.

	Cohort June graduation rates for english language learners		
	2013	2014	% Point Change
Ever ELs	84.4	85.5	1.1
Current ELs	26.6	29.0	2.4

Source: New York State Education Department, Media Release Memorandum, January 30, 2019.

increasing 5.1% points from June to August to 34.1%. NYSED informed the public that the 2014 cohort graduation rate improved for black and Hispanic students, for students with disabilities, and for both current and 'Ever' English learners (ELs). Of the Big 5 City School Districts, Rochester and New York City improved their graduation rates this year; Buffalo remained essentially flat, while Syracuse and Yonkers experienced declines. The State's charter schools experienced a decline in their graduation rate as compared to the previous year. The gap in graduation rates between black and Hispanic students and their white peers narrowed again this year (New York State Education Department, Media Release Memorandum, January 30, 2019).

The New York State Department of Education's Media Release Memorandum of January 30, 2019 also indicates that as in previous years, the data show that persistence pays off for students who do not graduate in four years. Table 3 indicates that for the 2012 statewide cohort, the four-year graduation rate was 79.7%; students continuing to a fifth year improved the rate to 84.5%; and a sixth year improved the rate even further, to 85.8%. With the addition of a fifth year, the 2013 statewide cohort graduation rate increased significantly, improving to 84.9%, up 4.7% points from the four-year graduation rate of 80.2%. Current ELs demonstrated significant increases in graduation rates given additional time and continued services. For the 2012 cohort, the four-year Current EL graduation rate was 26.9%; the five-year rate rose to 36.8%; and the six-year rate reached 40.5%. That is an increase of 13.6% points and represents approximately 1,000 more students earning a diploma. For the 2013 cohort, the four-year Current EL graduation rate was 26.6% and the five-year rate rose significantly, to 37.2%.

Tracking the dropout rate of ELs in New York State lead the Education Department to develop programs, strategies and to provide services to ELs, as well as school educators to prevent the negative outcome. According to the New York State Education Department (2018), the 2013 Cohort Dropout Rate Data percentage of students who dropped out of school remained relatively flat, declining from 6.5% for the 2012 cohort to 6.2% for the 2013 cohort. Despite this small overall improvement, the percentage of current ELs statewide who dropped out increased by 1.7% points, from 28% for the 2012 cohort to 29.7% for the 2013 cohort (NYSED: New York City Graduation Rates Class of 2017, 2013 Cohort).

## Literature review: researchers' voices

A growing body of research demonstrates that dropping out of secondary school is more prevalent among minority students, notably black and Hispanic males, and students whose home language is not English. There has been ongoing research on nationally representative dropout rates that

**Table 3.** Cohort 4, 5, & 6 – year graduation rates.

	Cohort 4, 5 & 6-year graduation rates			% Point Change
	4-Year	5-Year	6-Year	
2013 Statewide	80.2	84.9		+4.7
2013 Current ELs	26.6	37.2		+10.6
2012 Statewide	79.7	84.5	85.8	+6.1
2012 Current ELs	26.9	36.8	40.5	+13.6

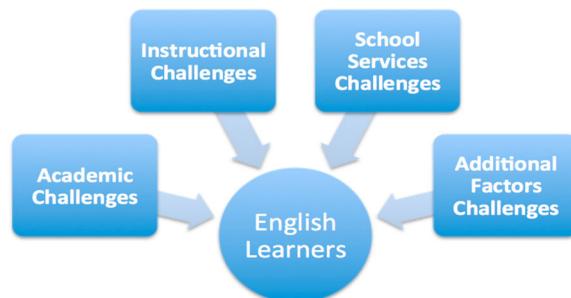
Source: New York State Education Department, Media Release Memorandum, January 30, 2019.

highlights changing trends and causes (Doll, Eslami, and Walters 2013; Deussen, Hanson, and Bisht 2017; Blaise 2018). The school dropout risk is high among ELs not only because they are learning English, but also because they are also significantly more likely than the general population to be disadvantaged, poor, and born to immigrant parents, each a status group at heightened risk of dropping out. Linguistic, academic, and school characteristics have an impact on students' academic success, as well as background and socioeconomic factors of students. The cost of students dropping out has an impact not only on student and family life, but also on the community and society. Students who drop out of school have not acquired the skills needed to succeed in a global economy. Consequently, dropouts who become employed are often not be able to retain jobs that would allow them to move out of low socio-economic conditions due to low wages and poor benefits. Dropouts are vulnerable to involvement in crimes that result in incarceration. This hurts the community at large because incarceration impedes dropouts from voting, paying taxes and contributing to society. Additionally, dropouts often have to depend on government programs like food stamps to supplement low incomes. Also, dropouts are prone to suffer from health-related illnesses related to poverty and obesity (Doll, Eslami, and Walters 2013; Kent et al. 2017).

Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) present startling statistics that indicate 'The dropout epidemic in the United States disproportionately affects young people who are low-income, minority, urban, single-parent children attending large, public high schools in inner cities' (1). Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison wrote the report from the perspective of high school dropouts, painting a picture of who drops out and why, as well as what schools could have done to keep these students on track. Collectively, the student voices propose ways in which districts can ameliorate the dropout situation. They urge educational leaders to consider different programs or approaches for different students, instead of the 'one size fits all' approach. School districts should create options for students, connecting the classroom curriculum to real life experiences, including work. In addition, school districts should consider creating alternative schools that offer specialized programs to students at-risk of dropping out.

Callahan's (2013) research, as well as the *Schools and Staffing Survey* (National Center for Education Statistics) and the *Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELs)*, emphasize that understanding the EL dropout problem is a complex task; in some ways, consequences, causes, and solutions are similar to the general dropout rate, but they are unique when ELs' educational, social and linguistic experiences are considered. There are a series of factors that contribute to ELs who are at risk of dropping out of school. Among those factors are academic and instructional challenges, as well as the services provided by their individual schools. Those three key areas greatly affect the high school journey of ELs. In addition, background, family and socioeconomic factors play an important role in students' academic achievement, success, and high school graduation.

As illustrated in Figure 1, ELs confront many academic challenges, especially those related to their level of academic English language proficiency and literacy, understanding of the content of the various subject areas, as well as the urgency of schools to push them to take and pass state and



**Figure 1.** Factors that contribute to ELs who are at risk of dropping out of school.

local tests. Academic areas affecting EL high school graduation include the following: (a) students' levels of academic English language and literacy; (b) ability to learn content knowledge and language at the same time; (c) keeping up with the specialized vocabulary and complex academic concepts; (d) passing State high school tests required for graduation; and (e) passing individual content area tests and course requirements.

Cole (2008) believes that poor and minority students drop out of school because they cannot make the grade. When students finally learn English, they have lost so much ground academically that it becomes difficult for them to catch up, many of them become discouraged and drop out of school. Hamilton-Boone (2011) presents research studies that provided common reasons for dropping out of high school. Studies included Rumberger and Lim (2008), Rumbaut (1995), Belfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007), Fry and Hakimzaden (2005). For example, Rumbaut found grade point averages (GPAs) to be a significant predictor of dropping out. She found that students with limited English proficiency had lower GPAs and were more likely to drop out of school. However, those students who were former Limited English Proficient (LEP), but had since been reclassified as Fluent in English Proficient (FEP), had higher GPAs and were less likely to leave school prematurely. Other common reasons for dropping out include: (a) a belief that high school is a different and a more difficult experience than middle school; (2) a history of transferring schools or changing school systems; (3) a feeling of not 'belonging' to the high school; (4) a tendency to avoid talking with key school personnel; (5) loss of interest in school; and (6) being overwhelmed with too many problems to successfully complete their education.

Keiffer and Parker (2017) analyzed high school graduation outcomes of two cohorts of ELs who entered NYC schools in Grades 5 and 6. The analysis included graduation rates and the categories of diplomas earned by these groups. In addition, Keiffer and Parker (2017) compared performance of study participants designated as short-term and long-term ELs. Graduation rates for ELs were lower than graduation rates for English proficient students (77% four-year graduation rate for non-ELs compared with 52% among ELs). The study also explored outcomes for the Long-Term EL subgroup as compared to their short-term counterparts by investigating five student background characteristics: grade of entry (Grade 5 or 6), race/ethnicity, home language, eligibility for federal school lunch, and average income for the census tract in which the students' home was located. The percentage of students earning a local diploma was higher for long-term ELs than among short-term ELs, who earned more Regents diplomas. This substantiates the idea that many ELs who come into the system at a later age may do better because of greater literacy in their home language coupled with higher motivation (Blaise 2018; Sugarman 2019)

As documented in the literature above, there is a persistent problem facing long-term ELs. When they reach high school, after years of failure, it may be too late to succeed academically due to unaddressed academic problems for students in this subgroup beginning early in their educational careers, usually in later elementary school years. Elementary and middle schools most often have failed to acknowledge the needs of these students. Consequently, high schools need to develop plans to tackle the issues associated with long-term EL disaffection by developing robust academic language programs designed specifically for students whose fossilized language skills lead to failure in the classroom, and the resultant lack of resolve to finish school. Keiffer and Parker (2017) support previous research on the problems facing long-term ELs. Usually, long-term ELs exhibit fossilized language in both their home languages and in English. Although promotional policies are lenient for these students as they move from grade to grade, scores on the English language tests show that most of these students' grades fall into the lowest quartiles. When students experience recurring failure, they are likely to become disaffected. These students may benefit from more robust, interesting and targeted programs that focus on their personal strengths and interests. This issue demands that administrators, counselors, and teachers (ESL, bilingual, content) realize the importance of developing deeper understandings about the spectrum of needs of all ELs. Keiffer and Parker (2017) provided a view of ELs who arrived at school at or around middle school, followed their trajectory through the completion of high school and compared them with the achievement of long-term

ELs, focusing on the achievement differences between long- and short-term ELs. They discussed how frequently students enrolled at a later age often have better outcomes due to literacy in their home languages. Motivation is high among these students and transference of skills supports their language learning.

Doll, Eslami, and Walthers (2013) conducted a comparison of seven studies of students who dropped out and examined the students' reasons or factors for dropping out of school. The authors examined the information by dividing the antecedent factors for dropping out into three factors: push, pull and falling out factors. Push factors are a result of events that lead to negative school consequences (attendance, discipline, poor grades, breaking regulations, not feeling safe at school). Pull factors include out-of-school enticements like jobs and family, pregnancy, marriage. Falling out factors refer to disengagement among students not caused by push or pull factors.

Rumberger and Lim (2008) disaggregated dropout data into Black, Hispanic and White males and females. The Rumberger and Lim study concluded that the most prevalent causes for dropping out were 'associated with pull factors,' such as employment and pregnancy, both of which ranked highest among Hispanic students. Also, Hispanic students reported the highest influence of pull factors, with females reporting higher rates, mostly from pregnancy and marriage, and males, higher rates from work and home responsibilities, which suggests that ELs, many of whom are Hispanics, often dropped out due to pull factors. Hispanics also stated that they did not feel safe at school. Factors identified by Rumberger and Lim (2008) may be applicable to ELs from a variety of ethnic groups. Further, the factors suggest the strong influence of jobs, family, and perhaps language issues that make school completion insurmountable for some Hispanic students, as noted in other studies (Fry and Hakimzaden 2005; Rumberger and Lim 2008).

Since 2006 there has been a call for a national conversation and response to the dropout epidemic. *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts* report (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006) called for immediate attention and action in order to address the dropout epidemic. The perspectives shared by 467 ethnically diverse high school dropouts selected from geographically and demographically diverse locations should mobilize efforts to educate the public at large regarding this critical problem facing our public schools. The report urged educators, policymakers, and leaders from various sectors to make this a national priority. The report urged that all efforts should be undertaken, including congressional hearings and public forums in schools and communities, to formulate concrete steps that community leaders in education and policymakers could take to ensure more students graduate. Within this report, the authors presented charts and graphs and offered policy recommendations for school systems and state leaders. The comments from dropouts provide a perspective that is often missing from the discussion. This report still provides insights for leaders who wish to improve graduation rates by retaining students who are at risk of dropping out. The report is also a model for institutional researchers seeking to collect data from communities about the experiences of high school dropouts.

Although Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) acknowledged efforts to reform high schools, they believe that due to the chronic underreporting of the dropout problem, valid and reliable research on this topic continues to be sparse. They called for improved methods of data collection. One such step relates to absenteeism and maintaining a reliable list of students who fail to attend school, and developing the mechanisms needed for maintaining daily communications with parents/guardians in their home language to ensure that these students get the support they need to stay in school. Public awareness is essential because the increased dropout rate and the negative issues presented have consequences for all: dropouts, schools, neighborhoods and communities, job markets and the economy. In 2006, the authors concluded that these students had shared their stories and that it was time for us to respond. They also called for additional studies to test some of the intragroup differences surfaced during this study.

A contributing factor to the high dropout rate for English Learners is poor academic performance in school. According to the U.S. Senate HELP Committee (2002), one-third of Latino students performed below grade level, which increased their chances of dropping out of school from 50% to

98%. With the goal to increase academic success of ELs, this report included specific recommendations to help ELs overcome the challenges they encountered.

Obasohan and Kortering (1999) collected data from secondary school teachers, school administrators, and ELs on their attitudes, preparation, and practices in seeking to ascertain the reasons that students have dropped out of high school over the past half century. The authors stated that administrators and teachers felt that absenteeism/tardiness were severe problems, whereas students perceived them as minor in relation to other more serious school problems. This suggests that the lens of students and school personnel (both administrators and teachers) accounts for differences in perceptions of the same problems. An important outcome of comparing the responses of the administrators was that they felt that students dropped out for entirely different reasons than students had reported. Administrators reported that pull factors ranked highest for early dropouts, whereas fall-out factors ranked highest for late dropouts. Teachers offered their viewpoints as follows: Teachers expressed helplessness about student verbal abuse towards teachers and a similar response regarding student physical abuse of teachers, which is congruent with their firsthand experiences. Students who have dropped out offered their viewpoints as follows: These students reported high rates of dropout causes that were a result of breaking school regulations (fighting, vandalism, drug and alcohol abuse, and skipping classes). Students had fewer concerns about issues that may have had less severe penalties or social appeal (verbal and physical abuse of teachers and weapons usage, absenteeism). Each respondent group reported views of school problems that reflected personal experiences. A deeper discussion among administrators, teachers and students must take place system-wide to attain the goal of making real changes that will positively affect outcomes for at-risk students. Administrators expressed great concern regarding absenteeism and tardiness, which is most related to their job duty in monitoring schools and collecting data regarding absenteeism and lateness. An analysis of these responses leads to the conclusion that each respondent type reported views of school problems that were personal, and in their own political and/or peer-related interests.

Instructional challenges of high school ELs is another key factor affecting successful educational attainment of ELs. Dondero and Muller (2012) 'found evidence of a growing Latino-White achievement gap that they hypothesize may be due to the limited linguistic support services available in the majority of new destination districts.' Dondero and Muller (2012) found that ELs are more likely to drop out than fluent English-speaking language minority students and students with English as their native language. Dropouts have been less positive about interactions with teachers and their peers. Perhaps the current climate of such high expectations has led more dropouts to the point of exasperation and, in turn, the decision to quit school. The key differences between males and females point to an area where we must differentiate dropout interventions for each gender to achieve the greatest impact. Hispanic students and other ELs, with the additional issues of language, social/cultural alienation and economic factors, have more pull factors as precursors to dropping out. The studies highlight the need for an examination of attitudes of all stakeholders. This includes administrators, teachers, students, parents, and support personnel. The dispositions and perceptions of educational personnel toward ELs further impacts graduation rates from high schools.

These factors, which determine dropout rate, are starting points for considering how the educational experiences of ELs can be transformed to create more effective learning opportunities and experiences. Addressing 'poor academic preparation' is crucial to eradicating a root cause of the EL dropout problem. All teachers must be responsible for the achievement of ELs, not just the ESL teacher. This, in turn, requires adequate teacher preparation for all teachers who provide instruction to meet the linguistic and content area needs of ELs. In addition, schools must capitalize on the use of the primary language and flexible programming to facilitate ELs' access to content while learning and improving their English. How much time is allocated to instruction and how the instructional time is used are critical factors in student success. Studies have found that even attendance in a full-day kindergarten may have an impact on reducing the possibility of dropping out in later years.

Callahan's (2013) research argues that many schools do not allocate sufficient time for ELs to develop content knowledge in the core subjects; instead, the ESL class consumes an unjustifiably large portion of the program. Academic decisions about programming must also consider the fact that many ELs come with different levels of academic competency in their native language and literacy in the core subjects. Some ELs come with a high command of their native language and experience in formal schooling, while others lack formal and consistent schooling or even come from a culture with no written language. Even recent arrivals, who come well prepared from their country and succeed in US classrooms, are sometimes unable to pass state exams. When they drop out, their talents and skills are not only a loss for them, but to society as well. Comprehensive school-wide reform, which systematically improves ELs' access to rigorous academic content and enhances instruction through effective certified teachers, is critical in some school districts.

Cole (2008) regards tracking as the most harmful institutional practice, which thrusts socioeconomically disadvantaged students into low academic tracks, sending them *en route* to a second-rate education. As a result, the author reckons that those students, already stigmatized and traumatized, fall further and farther behind their peers, lose self-esteem and motivation, and eventually quit school altogether. Despite poor and minority pupils' continuous failures, there is a lack of accountability for promoting underperforming students. Cole also underscores that some schools circumvent bilingual education programs by inappropriately placing ELs in monolingual classes. Even when bilingual programs are available, there exists unequal access to resources because the schools that house these programs receive less funding than their mainstream counterparts, hampering EL learning (Cole 2008).

Teachers must become proficient instructors in numerous learning configurations (e.g. small cooperative groups, direct instruction, and one-on-one teacher support) in order to meet students' needs and learning styles (e.g. tactile, auditory, visual, and kinesthetic). Another scaffolding technique is reality-based learning, which debunks the perception that many students suffer from 'cultural deprivation' and bring no educationally worthwhile experiences to school. Real-life activities intrinsically motivate and engage students seeking to achieve high levels of performance. Levels of mastery should be assessed using multiple artifacts and methods, including work samples, projects, observations of hands-on experiences, oral interviews, and criterion-referenced tests. Formative assessment activities can provide significant insights into students' knowledge and, ultimately, inform instruction. Effective organization of a classroom environment enables students to pursue a variety of activities (e.g. experiential, problem-based, and active learning), which are conducive to various types of learning in accordance with a twenty-first century pedagogical paradigm. School-parent relationships remain part of effective and responsible school change. Academic achievement is not distinct from the child's social and cultural background. In schools, it is important to affirm that parents can assume decision-making roles in parent-teacher organizations and on advisory councils at all levels of government. Also, parents can actively monitor schools and work for school improvement. Cole suggests that the causes of high student dropout rates are a result of poor educational services ranging from misplacement to inadequate administrative support, and ineffective guidance from counselors. Most importantly, students quit school because of the absence of quality instruction on the part of teachers who are reluctant to embrace research-based pedagogical practices.

Another factor to take into consideration are the school services provided for ELs. Are these services effectively implemented to address the needs of ELs? Research suggests that while recent immigrants benefit from ESL course work, continually offering the same type of programs for language support to long-term ELs is not appropriate. Instead, researchers propose that schools analyze the root causes of the EL achievement gap in order to determine the negative effects of providing low-level coursework in the core subjects over multiple years. Course work that is age- and grade-appropriate in academic classes is important for students' success in high school.

In addition to factors related to schooling, there are many other factors that affect the academic success of ELs (Hamilton-Boone 2011; Deussen, Hanson, and Bisht 2017). For example, home

problems such as the lack of legal documentation regarding the parents' immigration status and fear of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents bring a lot of stress, especially in these times. These problems may force parents to work long hours and not be home to help their children with homework. Often, older children take on additional responsibilities, such as caring for their younger siblings while the parents work late hours. Parents may force their child to be absent because of medical issues or keep them out of school because of lack of documentation of the required immunizations. These factors may discourage students from thinking that they are capable of obtaining a high school diploma. On the other hand, researchers' 'immigrant optimism hypothesis' suggests that immigrant parents' optimism and high expectations for their US-raised children may diffuse any number of negative environmental or contextual influences. Other major factors affecting dropout rates included not liking school, poor grades, work, marriage, inability to get along with teachers or other school personnel, the need to help support their families, pregnancy, and expulsion.

Table 4 summarizes a series of facts or behaviors that were repeatedly mentioned in the literature as factors or challenges encountered by a significant number of ELs, which may elevate frustration and, in turn, increase the likelihood of dropping out of high school. The list in Table 4 is not exhaustive of factors affecting dropout rates and is a work in progress; other factors/challenges need to be added as they become evident in research and observed by school practitioners.

Authorities in the field have made several recommendations to tackle the high dropout rate of ELs. Furger (2008) outlines research-based strategies aimed at dropout prevention and suggests that school officials and school administrators, teachers, and counselors can ameliorate the EL dropout situation by implementing some or all of the following solutions: (1) Communication with Parents Through Home Visits; (2) Cultivating Relationships; (3) Paying Attention to Warning Signs; (4) Making Learning Relevant; (5) Raising the Academic Bar; (6) Rethinking Schedules; (7) Developing a Community Plan; (8) Investing in Preschool; and (9) Adopting a Student-Centered Funding Model. Furger compiled and summarized decades of research, which included successful implementations of strategies. Those reforms, especially suited for ELs, build a net of support early and provide academic interventions to support ELs in danger of not passing the exit exams in English and at risk of not graduating. Implementing advisories with concerned teachers or adults whom ELs can trust is

**Table 4.** Factors contributing to ELs dropping out of high school.

Academic	Instructional	School services	Other factors
Not able to pass State high school tests required for graduation	Lack of connection of classroom content to real life situations or experiences	Lack of resources to offer tutorial or small instruction to students who need to catch up	Students' part time or full-time jobs
Failing individual content area class tests and requirements	'One size fits all' instruction or program approaches	Lack of one-to-one teacher support	Absenteeism/tardiness to school
Students' level of academic native language and literacy	Lack of a successful classroom environment	A feeling of not belonging in the school	Lack of parents' opportunities to help with homework and other school activities
Difficulty in catching up on content knowledge and language at the same time	Classrooms not providing a variety of activities (e.g. experiential, active learning, problem solving)	Inability to deal with a variety of content courses as well as language development	Home issues, such as parents' legal documentation of immigration status
Lack of English language proficiency	Lack of interactions with teachers and peers	Lack of communication with students' parents/guardians in their home language	Breaking school regulations
Keeping up with the technical vocabulary and complex academic concepts	Provision of low-level coursework in the core subjects	Lack of student support to stay in school	Lack of parent's support (due to working situations, illness, illiteracy, etc.)
Lack of formal consistent schooling			
Not seeking academic advice and support from school personnel			

also a strategy that can make the difference between staying in school and dropping out. In addition, conducting outreach to families through home visits to connect them to the 'new' world of high school and keeping them engaged in their children's progress and attendance is essential.

Hamilton-Boone (2011) makes several recommendations on helping students complete their high school education. For example, establishing a close support system for all potential at-risk students, including ELs, to prevent them from leaving school before earning a high school diploma. Another recommendation is to promote tolerance, if not a genuine celebration, of students' differences. Provide early interventions for possible misbehaviors. Ensure that parents understand their rights, ask questions, visit their child's school and encourage them to be bold enough to advocate on behalf of their children. Schools should establish a parent center and school personnel should operate in the best interest of all children, not just ones in honors programs or college bound. Importantly, schools should offer professional development opportunities for all educators at their respective schools. Professional development needs to intensify cultural diversity training and must emphasize specific needs of certain student populations, such as ELs. Students must feel welcome and should experience a culture of respect. It is essential to hold staff accountable for creating a positive learning atmosphere.

Although Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) acknowledge the efforts that exist to reform our high schools, they believe that due to the chronic underreporting of the dropout problem, research on this topic continues to be sparse. They call for improved methods of data collection. One such step relates to absenteeism and maintaining a reliable list of students who fail to attend school, and developing the mechanisms needed for maintaining daily communications with parents/guardians in their home language to ensure these students get the support they need to stay in school. Mentoring programs, which instill high expectations and help students develop interpersonal bonds, have been very effective in keeping students in school. Participation in extracurricular activities and school clubs, in which students develop relationships with peers, coaches, and mentors, reduces the chance of dropping out of high school. Out-of-school programs may provide an opportunity to strengthen primary language skills, provide exposure to cultural affinities, offer more relevance between home and school, and, consequently, better address individual differences. Formal mentoring programs specifically targeting ELs offer the expertise of personnel (teacher, advisor, counselor, coach) with specific skills to build on ELs' social and cultural capital in their journey to college and careers.

In seeking to build on this literature, which identifies academic and instructional challenges high school ELs face, as well as their challenges outside school, new data were collected to bring to light current thinking of educators (administrators, teachers, and counselors) working with ELs.

## **Factors contributing to English learners dropping out of high school: voices from the field**

### ***Method***

Researchers from the NYC RBERN surveyed the perceptions of teachers, counselors, and administrators on issues pertaining to school services, academic and instructional challenges of high school ELs to compare the reality of ELs in NYC public high schools to results gleaned from literature. A questionnaire was prepared to gather information from a group of teachers, administrators, and counselors who attended in service and orientation professional development activities organized by the NYC RBE-RN centers. The following three questions guided the study:

- (1) What academic challenges/factors contribute to high school English learners dropping out of high school?
- (2) What decisions regarding instructional changes are necessary to decrease the number of ELs who drop out of school?
- (3) What school services, if any, should be provided to ELs to improve academic and learning success?

**Table 5.** Participants responses.

Title	Participants	Respondents	Percent
Teachers	40	30	75%
Administrators	30	20	67%
Counselors	25	15	60%
Total	95	65	68%

Staff at NYC RBERNs assisted with recruitment of participants and data completion. After receiving permission from the respective school principals and obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the NYC RBE-RN staff provided teachers, administrators, and counselors who attended the NYC RBE-RN staff development meetings a letter explaining the study. We asked prospective participants to complete the consent form. Those who agreed to participate returned the completed survey, either in hard copy or on-line. A total of 65 participants (30 teachers, 20 administrators and 15 counselors) answered and returned the questionnaire. All responses were confidential because there was no personal identifier on the survey and participants did not provide their names at any time. Data were aggregated by role, namely teacher, administrator, and counselor. Ninety-five participants were part of the staff who participated in the RBERN training activities in one of the school calendar semesters. Every participant received a letter of invitation to participate and complete the survey.

As indicated in [Table 5](#), the questionnaire was given to 95 attendees (40 teachers, 30 administrators, and 25 counselors), and 65 of them (68%) completed and returned the questionnaire (30 teachers, 20 administrators and 15 counselors).

Six administrators had 20 or more years of experience, while ten had 11–15 years of experience, four had 6–10 years. Thirty teachers responded to the survey, comprised of 18 teaching ESL and 12 teaching content areas. There were 3 teachers with over 21 years of experience, 12 teachers with 11–15 years of experience, 8 teachers with 6–10 years of experience, and 7 teachers with 1–5 years of experience. Five counselors have 15 or more years of school experience, 6 with 9–14 years of experience, and 4 with 1–8 years of experience.

Data were analyzed in accordance with the three research questions and the list of factors extracted from the literature review.

## Findings

This section presents the tallies of participant responses by research question and participant role (administrator, teacher, and counselor).

### ***Question #1: what academic challenges/factors contribute to high school English learners dropping out of high school?***

[Table 6](#) summarizes the main challenges identified by teachers, administrators, and counselors.

According to the participants surveyed, there were other home and socioeconomic factors that directly affected EL high school academic performance, as listed in [Table 7](#).

Participants considered the passing of the Regents examinations as the greatest obstacle for ELs, closely followed by poor prior education as a significant challenge to blocking graduation. These findings are related to research conducted by Kent et al. (2017) who concluded that there is a significant relationship between the dropouts' decision to leave school and the need for real-world connection to the curriculum and engagement in the classroom. Respondents also indicated that language proficiency and acquisition was a significant challenge for ELs. Those challenges included English language acquisition and insufficient time to complete academic tasks. Teachers indicated that in order to reduce dropout rates, additional resources are necessary. For example, ELs might benefit from a Bridges program that will help students attain literacy skills, more class time, smaller

**Table 6.** Academic challenges of high school ELs.

Academic Challenges	Administrators	Teachers	Counselors	Total % of 65
Not able to pass NY State high school (Regents) tests required for graduation	15	18	8	41 63%
Inadequate/poor academic preparation	17	23	4	44 68%
Lack of English language proficiency	9	18	2	29 45%
Difficulty in catching up content and language at the same time	5	12	3	20 31%
Difficulty keeping up with the technical vocabulary and complex academic concepts	3	7	0	10 15%
Poor education prior to USA schooling	9	14	2	25 38%
Failing individual content area tests and course requirements	2	15	0	17 26%

**Table 7.** Family and socioeconomic challenges of high school ELs.

Challenges	Administrators	Teachers	Counselors	Total % of 65
Need to work	12	14	14	40 62%
Absenteeism/tardiness	9	12	6	27 42%
Home issues	14	22	8	44 68%

classes, bilingual counselors, programming that meets students' needs, mentoring, and more teachers. An important recommendation offered by teachers is the creation of alternate pathways to graduation. Furthermore, teachers suggested other opportunities to improve graduation outcomes, such as more parental involvement, bilingual school placement, and work-study programs. Participants indicated that factors causing high dropout rates relate to family issues, such as the need to work, and home issues such as lack of opportunities for parents to help with homework or other school activities as parents' legal documentation, immigration issues, and lack of parental support due to working situations, illness, and illiteracy, for instance. These factors have been documented by Hamilton-Boone (2011) and Kent et al. (2017) in previous studies. Challenges identified by counselors included the need for ELs to work due to socio-economic issues. As a result, there is insufficient time for students to study and pass State Regents exams and to seek support. Based on the responses of participants, recommendations include providing extended academic time to improve academic outcomes. Some counselors recommended reductions to their caseloads.

### **Question #2: what decisions regarding instructional changes are necessary to decrease the number of ELs who drop out of school?**

Table 8 summarizes the responses of the participating teachers, administrators, and counselors.

A significant group of teachers felt that ELs have difficulty in understanding reading material and that they spent a great deal of time in the process of reading for understanding, lacking the time to get involved in the diverse tasks that apply the class material. Teachers recommended smaller classes and additional assistants who can provide ELs with small group instruction and follow up activities. Notably, none of the three groups of participants perceived any difficulty related to instruction. Individualized instruction, grouping, and one to one guidance is provided to students. Prior research had identified instructional delivery as an important factor, and if not provided by the school, could affect the retention and graduation of ELs (Deussen, Hanson, and Bisht 2017; Blaise 2018). It was surprising that none of the three groups of participants indicated that quality of instruction was an important

**Table 8.** Instructional challenges of high school ELs.

Instructional Challenges	Administrators	Teachers	Counselors	Total % of 65
Difficulty in understanding reading material	7	24	2	33 51%
Insufficient time to complete tasks	5	22	2	29 45%
Size of class is too big	0	23	6	29 45%
Lack of mentoring	2	12	3	17 26%
Classrooms not providing a variety of activities (e.g. experiential, active learning, problem solving)	10	9	0	19 29%
Lack of connection of classroom content to real life situations or experiences	6	11	2	19 29%
'One size fit all' instruction or program approaches	7	7	6	20 31%

factor contributing to EL drop out. This is contrary to the literature (Hamilton-Boone 2011; Sugarman 2019). In particular, Sugarman (2019) identified the following factors as contributing to higher dropout rates among ELs: (a) academic and social disengagement; (b) diminished opportunities to learn; (c) teacher expectations; (d) disparity in teacher quality; and (e) consequences of accountability consequences. This research has helped educators understand the warning signs of students at risk of dropping out in order to target interventions to these students.

### **Question #3: what school services, if any, should be provided to ELs to improve academic and learning success?**

Table 9 presents tallies of responses to factors pertaining to school services.

Teachers were the most vocal group in identifying the need for additional school support. Teachers and administrators found that funding is one of the most significant factors affecting programs and academic support for ELs. This response may imply that making improvements at the school level cannot effectively take place without additional funding and places the blame on funding entities, rather than offering creative ways to improve outcomes for ELs. An alternative approach could be provision of professional development to increase the knowledge and capacity of educators working with ELs. Few counselors replied to the items pertaining to school services. Additional services might include higher quality extended day programs, alternative graduation requirements, work-study programs, flexible programming, and more bilingual and ESL teachers. Schools need to develop a plan to provide language, social, emotional, and academic support to ELs (Furger 2008; Hamilton-Boone

**Table 9.** Challenges pertaining to school services for high school ELs.

School Services	Administrators	Teachers	Counselors	Total % of 65
Adequate funding	16	15	3	34 52%
Language development support	2	17	2	21 32%
Core content homework support	4	20	4	28 43%
Social and emotional support	3	16	5	24 37%
Lack of one-to-one teacher support	6	10	1	17 26%
Lack of resources to offer tutorial or small instruction to students who need to catch up	8	25	4	37 57%
Lack of a plan for general school support	5	20	5	30 46%

2011). These findings are consistent with previous studies that considered effects of academic factors on English learners who have either dropped out or considered dropping out of high school.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Research and practice have pointed to possible solutions to reduce the dropout rate of high school ELs, which continues to be a threat to the educational, economic, and general well being of the nation, now and in the future. In light of the literature review and analyses of the latest data from a group of teachers, administrators, and counselors working in New York City public schools, the NYC RBERN staff makes the following recommendations to increase academic achievement of ELs at the high school level. The recommendations are also intended to reduce the number of ELs who drop out of high school.

- (1) There is a need for a comprehensive school-wide reform that systematically improves access of ELs to rigorous academic content and improved instruction delivered in successful schools by effective teachers. Addressing 'poor academic preparation' is crucial to eradicating one of the root causes of the EL dropout problem, namely the inability of many ELs to pass the state Regents exams, which is required for graduation (Belfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver 2007). Principals, teachers, and counselors need to assess the type and quality of services and instruction provided to high school ELs in each school. All educators must be responsible for the academic achievement of ELs and they need to continuously assess and evaluate the services provided in order to ensure that these students receive high quality instruction, which is based on the academic, instructional, and background needs of students. As discussed in the findings, the responses of the participants put most of the academic responsibilities on the EL without looking at how schools support and provide services to meet their individual academic, linguistic, core content and academic background needs. The leadership of the school, especially the school principal, is key to providing quality instruction and school support to all ELs, especially those at risk of dropping out (Furger 2008; Hamilton-Boone 2011).
- (2) Provide rigorous and relevant instruction in classrooms to better engage ELs. Engagement can be increased by introducing students to postsecondary opportunities. High school completion for the growing EL population is critical at both the individual and societal level. Ultimately, systemic reform is necessary to reframe ELs' educational programs to address the social and cultural beliefs about language and learning that today result in major inequities in educational experiences and outcomes. All students should have access to extracurricular activities in school, advanced placement, and other opportunities.
- (3) ESL and core content teachers play an important role in the quality of instruction provided to ELs (Callahan 2013). Consequently, those teachers need to ensure effective implementation of instructional strategies as ELs seek to attain the learning goals. Resources need to focus on the beginning of the students' high school career to develop instructional strategies for ELs to help them identify and attain academic goals and be recognized when they accomplish them. Schools can teach strategies to strengthen problem-solving and decision-making skills, and partner with higher education institutions to collaborate with schools to provide students with suitable interactions and support systems tailored to student needs (Cole 2008). This requires adequate pre-service and in-service preparation for all teachers who provide instruction to meet the linguistic and content area needs of ELs.
- (4) Schools must capitalize on the use of the primary language and flexible programming to facilitate EL acquisition of content knowledge while learning and improving their English. (Rodríguez, Carasquillo, and Lee 2014; Wright 2019). How much time is allocated to tasks and how the instructional time is used are critical factors in developing effective programs. Principals should ensure that teachers provide effective (experiential/engaging) instruction, individualized to each

student's levels and needs. Principals should also ensure the provision of services (resources, funding, continuous professional development of staff) targeted to the needs of ELs.

- (5) Schools need to have a plan to help ELs as soon as they begin to struggle with English language proficiency acquisition and core content acquisition. These two areas were mentioned as very important factors to attend to in order to decrease EL school dropout. School personnel should utilize data systems to identify and monitor ELs who need help because they are struggling with the school's environment and core content demands. This evaluation of students' risk needs to be done at the initial stage of their school program in order to identify which students are at high risk of dropping out. States, districts, and schools should develop comprehensive, longitudinal, student level databases with unique IDs that store data related to student academic performance, student absences, and grade retention in order to identify particular ELs who are at risk of dropping out. Data should be reviewed regularly, with a particular emphasis on avoiding students' academic failure and dropping out.
- (6) Provide academic support and enrichment services to improve academic performance and to reengage students in school. For example, implement flexible programming. When students enter high school with a skill gaps in some areas and advanced knowledge in others, programming needs to be flexible and adjusted for students to help them acquire needed skills and enable them to excel in particular fields of study (Rodríguez, Carrasquillo, and Lee 2014; Wright 2019; Herrera, Murry, and Cabral 2020). This requires constant monitoring of progress. In other words, student monitoring for instructional and curricular adjustments needs to be part of regular teaching practice.
- (7) Personalize the learning environment and instructional process. A personalized learning environment helps ELs create a sense of belonging and fosters a school climate in which students and teachers get to know one another and can provide academic, social, and behavioral encouragement (Rodríguez, Carrasquillo, and Lee 2014; Herrera, Murry, and Cabral 2020). Multiple and diverse extracurricular activities need to be offered and personalized to include students from different cultural backgrounds. To the extent possible, disseminate positive information on the academic achievement and improvement of ELs. As educators, we also need to disseminate the positive results of schools and districts with EL populations.
- (8) Evident in both the literature and the latest data were the importance of EL attendance and being at school at a regular time; both are necessary for academic success. Unfortunately, repeated references in the data show that work and home responsibilities were frequent reasons for EL absenteeism and lateness. There is a need to begin a dialogue on how community organizations, schools, and parents can deal with the issue of EL absenteeism (Sugarman 2019).

Whether ELs succumb to individual or societal pressures to drop out of high school or they are 'pushed out' through a mix of administrative and social pressures, the societal costs are great. Even though ELs belong to several groups that have a relatively high risk of dropping out, many educational systems exacerbate their challenges by measuring their value in terms of their lack of English proficiency. Targeted reforms can alleviate some of the challenges. While highly effective in many ways, the success of targeted reforms often rests on the individuals working within a specific local context. Darling-Hammond (2010) maintains that an equitable educational system needs to make sure that well-trained educators have resources at their disposal. They must have fundamental tools to help ensure the building of student capacities and classroom infrastructures that support in-depth learning and critical thinking. In the case of ELs, implementation of educational reforms, which demand proper education and assessment of ELs, are complicated by many issues, including student socioeconomic status, cultural backgrounds, and linguistic capabilities.

The authors acknowledge genuine efforts to reform our high schools. At the same time they remain concerned about the vulnerability of ELs and their families, as well as the chronic underreporting of the dropout problem. Research on this topic must continue. New research will potentially shed further light on the problems and lead to more effective and appropriate school reforms that could

address the EL dropout issue. By shedding some light on this topic and offering recommendations to better serve this student population, the authors hope to transform the perception that ELs are a problem in need of a solution to the perception of ELs as a group of individuals with limitless potential.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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