

# Educational Leadership, Teacher Preparedness, and Academic Success for English Language Learners in K–12 Schools

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**Abstract** - This research analyzes how inadequate support for English Language Learners (ELLs) constitutes a substantial obstacle to academic achievement in K–12 education, especially in Florida schools. Despite ESOL certification imparting essential knowledge to instructors, numerous educators continue to feel inadequately equipped to meet the varied language and academic requirements of multilingual learners. The study examines the correlation among educational leadership support, professional development, data-informed decision-making, teacher readiness, and the academic success of English Language Learners (ELL). A literature review underscores enduring achievement disparities between English Language Learners (ELLs) and their English-proficient counterparts, while accentuating the necessity of continuous professional development, instructional coaching, collaborative methodologies, and family involvement. The analysis reveals that insufficient instructional assistance impacts student success, school effectiveness, family-school partnerships, and community outcomes. The report suggests leadership-driven ways to tackle these difficulties, including ongoing professional growth, professional learning communities, increased family participation, and focused resource allocation. The results indicate that enhancing outcomes for ELL students necessitates comprehensive support systems that transcend certification mandates and emphasize equity, inclusion, and ongoing enhancement. Educational leaders are essential in establishing the environment required for teacher efficacy and student achievement.

**Keywords:** English Language Learners (ELLs), Educational Leadership, Teacher Preparedness, Professional Development, Academic Achievement.

## Introduction

In most Florida schools, the English Language Learner (ELL) population continues to increase, and many students continue to experience academic challenges because adequate instructional support is limited in mainstream classrooms. According to the Florida Department of Education (2025), English Language Learners represent a significant and growing segment of Florida's K–12 student population, with hundreds of thousands of students receiving ESOL services annually. This growth highlights the increasing importance of ensuring that teachers are adequately prepared to support multilingual learners. All teachers are required by the state to be certified in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). However, teachers also need ongoing professional development, instructional resources, and leadership support to effectively address the diverse linguistic and academic needs of ELL students. As a result, many ELLs continue to experience challenges in literacy development, classroom achievement, and equitable access to learning opportunities. Addressing these barriers is essential for understanding the relationship between language proficiency, instructional support, and student success. A review of current ESOL practices and leadership-driven supports can help schools develop more equitable learning environments for ELLs throughout Florida.

## Conceptual Framework

This paper seeks to examine the ways in which a lack of instructional supports for English Language Learners (ELLs) continues to perpetuate academic inequities and the potential for educational leadership practices, professional development, and data-driven decision making to build teacher readiness and student success. The conceptual framework guiding this paper consists of educational leadership support, professional development, data-driven decision making, teacher preparedness, and English Language Learner academic success. Leadership support includes administrative support, instructional coaching, resource support, and collaborative opportunities. These leadership practices influence the quality and frequency of professional development and the use of student achievement data to inform instructional decisions. Ongoing learning opportunities and data-informed practices support teachers in applying effective strategies for teaching ELLs. Better teacher preparedness leads to better classroom instruction, greater student engagement and better academic outcomes for multilingual learners. The framework indicates that ELL success is not only a function of teacher certification, but also of the systems of support established by educational leaders.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework for Educational Leadership Support and ELL Academic Success

## **Literature Review**

### **English Language Learners and Academic Achievement**

English Language Learners (ELLs) represent one of the fastest-growing student populations in the United States and particularly in Florida schools. While multilingual learners bring valuable linguistic and cultural assets to the classroom, many face significant challenges in achieving academic success when appropriate instructional support is not available. Research indicates that language barriers can affect students' ability to access grade-level content, participate in classroom discussions, and demonstrate mastery of academic standards. These challenges often contribute to lower academic achievement, reduced engagement, and achievement gaps between ELLs and their English-proficient peers (Pentón Herrera, 2024). Although federal and state policies require equitable access to education, the effectiveness of these efforts largely depends on the quality of instructional support provided within schools. State assessment data have consistently shown achievement gaps between English Language Learners and their English-proficient peers in reading and language arts. These differences suggest that language proficiency continues to influence students' ability to access academic content and demonstrate mastery of state standards. Such findings reinforce the importance of instructional support designed to address both language development and academic achievement simultaneously.

### **Teacher Preparedness for ELL Instruction**

Teacher preparedness is a critical factor influencing the educational experiences and outcomes of ELL students. General education teachers are increasingly responsible for serving multilingual learners, yet many reports feel insufficiently prepared to address the linguistic and academic needs of these students. ESOL certification provides foundational knowledge regarding language acquisition, instructional strategies, and legal requirements; however, certification alone may not fully equip teachers to meet the diverse needs of ELLs in contemporary classrooms. Edelman et al. (2022) found that effective language development practices require ongoing implementation support and instructional expertise beyond initial training. Teachers who receive continuous professional learning opportunities are more likely to incorporate evidence-based instructional strategies, differentiate instruction effectively, and create inclusive learning environments that support both language development and academic achievement. Research has shown that teacher effectiveness is among the most influential school-based factors affecting student achievement. Consequently, investments in professional development and instructional coaching may have a substantial impact on ELL outcomes by improving teachers' capacity to implement evidence-based instructional practices consistently across classrooms.

### **Educational Leadership and Professional Development**

Educational leadership plays a significant role in creating conditions that support effective instruction for English Language Learners. School leaders influence teacher preparedness through professional development opportunities, instructional coaching, resource allocation, and the establishment of collaborative learning environments (Schildkamp et al., 2019). Research suggests that sustained professional development is more effective than one-time training sessions because it allows teachers to refine instructional practices, analyze student data, and apply new strategies within authentic classroom settings (Robinson-Jones et al., 2026). Additionally, collaborative structures such as professional learning communities provide

opportunities for teachers to share successful practices, discuss student needs, and align instructional approaches. Effective leaders foster a culture of continuous improvement by ensuring that support systems remain focused on student achievement and equitable learning opportunities.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that educational leadership influences teacher preparedness through multiple interconnected mechanisms rather than isolated professional development activities. Schildkamp et al. (2019) argue that school leaders who establish collaborative structures centered on evidence-based decision making create environments where teachers continuously analyze instructional effectiveness and student progress. Similarly, Robinson-Jones et al. (2026) emphasize that sustained professional learning enables educators to refine instructional strategies over time rather than relying on one-time training experiences. These findings suggest that leadership support should be viewed as an ongoing organizational process that integrates coaching, collaboration, and data-informed instructional planning. When educational leaders consistently invest in these support systems, teachers become more confident in implementing effective instructional practices for multilingual learners, ultimately contributing to improved student achievement and stronger school performance.

### **Data-Driven Decision Making**

Data-driven decision making has become an essential leadership practice for improving instruction and monitoring student achievement. Educational leaders increasingly rely on student assessment data, language proficiency measures, attendance records, and classroom performance indicators to identify instructional needs and allocate resources effectively. Schildkamp et al. (2019) emphasize that effective data use depends not only on collecting information but also on creating collaborative structures that allow teachers to interpret data and develop instructional responses. When data are analyzed consistently within professional learning communities, educators are better able to identify learning gaps, monitor progress, and adjust instructional strategies to meet the needs of multilingual learners. Data-informed leadership also enables schools to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs and professional development initiatives over time. Rather than using student data solely for accountability purposes, educational leaders should encourage teachers to view data as a continuous improvement tool that informs instructional planning and supports equitable educational opportunities. The systematic use of educational data strengthens teacher preparedness while providing administrators with meaningful evidence to guide school improvement efforts.

### **Family and Community Engagement**

Family and community partnerships also contribute significantly to the academic success of ELL students. Meaningful communication between schools and families helps strengthen trust, increase parental involvement, and support student learning beyond the classroom. However, language barriers often limit families' access to important educational information and opportunities for engagement. Raubaugh and Purmensky (2022) emphasized the importance of culturally responsive communication practices that acknowledge and value the linguistic diversity of families. When schools provide multilingual resources, translation services, and opportunities for family participation, parents are better positioned to support their children's educational development. Strong school-family-community partnerships contribute to improved student outcomes and reinforce the shared responsibility for academic success.

The literature consistently demonstrates that successful outcomes for English Language Learners depend on more than compliance with certification requirements. Teacher preparedness, educational leadership support, ongoing professional development, and meaningful family engagement all contribute to creating equitable learning environments. These findings provide a foundation for understanding the barriers that continue to affect ELL students and inform the analysis of the problem presented in the following section.

### **Analysis of the Barrier**

Inadequate support for ELLs in mainstream classes is limiting student success at every grade in learning institutions. If the ELLs are taught in the general classroom with limited or no language support, they will not receive opportunities to receive language instruction for the specialized vocabulary, discussion in the classroom, and taking in complex reading text (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). These obstacles can result in decreased performance on assignments, academic tests, and graduation standards. Students may know a lot from their own language and be unable to demonstrate this in English. As time goes on, students may eventually lose self-confidence, engagement, participation, and motivation due to continued academic failure. Achievement gaps become exacerbated when the needs of language development are not filled adequately via language instruction. This barrier represents a lack of access to higher learning, enrichment, leadership and success. Achievement data from schools serving large ELL populations often reveal lower performance levels in reading, writing, and content-area assessments when compared to non-ELL students. While these outcomes may be influenced by multiple factors, the persistent nature of the achievement gap suggests that language support remains a critical component of educational equity. These data underscore the need for instructional systems that provide both academic and linguistic support to multilingual learners. Research suggests that language barriers limit students' ability to access grade-level content and demonstrate academic proficiency. While ELL students may possess strong conceptual understanding in their native language, inadequate instructional support can prevent them from fully participating in academic activities. This suggests that academic underperformance may not reflect a lack of ability but rather a lack of equitable access to instruction. Consequently, schools must address both language development and content mastery simultaneously to reduce achievement gaps.

Without sufficient training, support and time to collaborate with colleagues and the instructional support that they require, they may find themselves in a position to deliver suboptimal instruction. The sustained achievement evidence may be used to draw out academic achievement gaps that affect school ratings, school goals for improvement and accountability. In addition to an increasing need for specially trained teachers and staff, schools might find themselves requiring an increase in intervention services, tutoring programs, and other specially trained support (Jaramillo-López et al., 2025). These troubles may feel as a frustration for students, teachers and administrators, contributing to the overall school climate. Having effective systems and practices in place to encourage schools to be inclusive, equitable, and collaborative; achieve excellence; have good outcomes; make effective and sustainable improvements; be institutionally effective; build trust in the community; and ensure long-term growth.

Beyond the challenges experienced by teachers and schools, insufficient support also affects families and their ability to engage in their children's education. Without adequate linguistic and cultural support, families are adversely affected. Parents may desire to be involved in their children's education but may have language differences that may affect communication. In most

instances, families' languages may not be available at the time of their choice for important information regarding academic progress, school policies, special programs, and available services (Raubaugh & Purmensky, 2022). There can also be a lack of communication that can hinder collaboration and lower trust between school and families. Here, parents may have some difficult experiences in supporting homework requirements and knowing what is needed for education without directions. When schools strengthen multilingual communication and family partnerships, parents can be better prepared to advocate for their students, help their children with homework, be involved in the decision-making process, provide connections with teachers, and be part of student success. Language barriers frequently limit meaningful communication between schools and families. As a result, parents may be less able to engage in decision-making processes or support learning activities at home. This highlights the importance of multilingual communication systems as a strategy for strengthening family-school partnerships and promoting student success. When families are empowered to participate fully in the educational process, schools are better positioned to create equitable learning environments for multilingual learners.

Communities are also affected when ELLs fail to get sufficient support in schools. Learning outcomes can help build a strong workforce and a vibrant sense of opportunity. For some pupils, learning difficulties are persistent and they struggle to further their learning and future employment opportunities. This can impact the professional development of experts who can drive growth in the local or regional business (Rolstad et al., 2025). Schools that are successful in supporting multilingualism also bring benefits to the community: These learners can provide unique cultural insight and language and worldview skills. These support systems lead to the development of communities that are inclusive and welcoming to all members to participate in economic, educational, cultural and civic life. The activities strengthen bonds, foster understanding, generate opportunities, support development, deepen opportunities and foster cohesion.

An ESOL certificate provides basic information about language acquisition, instructional strategies, and legal issues. Yet, in most classrooms, pupils will have varying levels of English proficiency, prior education, or experiences in the classroom. It promotes the need for continuous professional development, coaching, mentoring and access to specialized resources for teachers to put practices in to work consistently and effectively (Edelman et al., 2022). It reduces opportunities for teachers and learners to share their problems and learn from one another about the successes of a strategy that they have been successful with, because they are not in collaboration with one another. Certification should not be seen as a goal in itself and needs to be considered as an initial step. Extra support contributes to teacher effectiveness, enhances instruction, and supports equity to positively contribute to increased achievement. Although ESOL certification provides foundational preparation, the literature indicates that certification alone may not ensure effective classroom implementation. Teachers often require ongoing coaching, collaborative planning opportunities, and access to instructional resources to successfully support multilingual learners. This finding suggests that teacher preparedness should be viewed as a continuous process rather than a one-time credentialing requirement. Educational leaders play a critical role in creating the conditions necessary for teachers to develop and sustain effective instructional practices for ELL students.

The lack of support for ELLs within the school setting also has a significant impact on communities directly, given that schools play a significant role in the social and economic development of the community. Limited language and communication skills exacerbate students' chances of underachievement, which affects their school completion and participation in higher

education or vocational or training. This amounts to less skilled employees on the job market for local employers and economic growth may be delayed (Pentón Herrera, 2024). Furthermore, language barriers in the school community lead to families feeling excluded causing implications for social cohesion and trust. These disparities can compound into a vicious circle of inequities over time and prevent certain groups from participating in civic, work-based and social skills-sharing experiences.

Inadequate support for ELLs is a systemic problem that has a wide impact on students, schools, the family, and the community. Students will experience a drop-in achievement, expectations will have been lowered, students' confidence will be fairly reduced, and the school will be tested on equity and accountability. There can be communication barriers between education processes and families (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). A coordinated response will be required to address this barrier, which will include ongoing professional development, certification, strong leadership, child families engaging with the program, as well as provision of resources. These can lead to better academic achievement, higher school effectiveness, better overall community and health outcomes, greater opportunity, better inclusion and equality, achievement, better participation, increased trust, and better benefits for all in the long run. Collectively, the literature and analysis suggest that inadequate support for ELLs is not solely a student-level issue but a systemic challenge influenced by leadership practices, professional learning opportunities, resource allocation, and family engagement. Addressing these interconnected factors requires a comprehensive approach that moves beyond compliance-based certification requirements and focuses on building sustainable systems of support for teachers and multilingual learners. Such an approach aligns with current educational leadership research emphasizing equity, continuous improvement, and data-informed decision-making as essential components of student success.

Another important consequence of insufficient instructional support is the inconsistency with which evidence-based instructional practices are implemented across classrooms. Even within the same school, multilingual learners may receive substantially different instructional experiences depending on individual teacher confidence, prior training, and access to instructional resources. Such inconsistency can contribute to unequal learning opportunities and widen achievement gaps among students receiving similar educational services. Educational leaders therefore play a critical role in promoting instructional coherence through common expectations, collaborative planning, and continuous monitoring of instructional effectiveness. By establishing schoolwide systems that emphasize equity and evidence-based instruction, leaders can reduce variability in instructional quality and create more consistent learning experiences for English Language Learners (Schildkamp et al., 2019).

### **Proposed Plan**

A notable plan is to build on existing professional development for teaching ELL and not just on initial certification as an ESOL teacher. School leaders need to establish ongoing professional development on sheltered instruction strategies, vocabulary development strategies, and culturally responsive instruction practices. This training will be incorporated into the school calendar, recognizing the importance of coaching cycles and teachers using strategies in a real classroom (Robinson-Jones et al., 2026). It will ensure all teachers who have students with ELLs needs are prepared, not only minimally certified but also adequately. Student performance data should also be used to pinpoint any gaps and focus the teaching activities on specific teacher needs. Effective professional learning enhances teacher confidence, quality of instruction, and

student learning and achievement, leading to a more equitable learning environment for all multilingual learners, grade levels, and disciplines.

The second plan is the need to consider better collaborative instruction and working in professional learning communities that focus on improving instruction for ELLs. In this context, teachers should review students' data regularly, discuss it with peers and design lessons with content and language outcomes. It is vital for school leaders to ensure collaboration time is reserved in the school schedule and not make it optional (Lopez, 2023). This partnership can mean working together to link language learning goals with academic standards by ESOL specialists planning with mainstream teachers. This cooperative teaching and planning approach promotes consistency of instruction in classrooms. Shared ELLs responsibility yields better students' success. In time, such collaborative systems promote teaching and learning alignment, minimize achievement disparities, and foster a school culture of inclusion, shared responsibility, and ongoing school development for all learners.

An additional plan is to have greater communication and engagement with ELL families. This helps to support better communication and engagement strategies through multilingual and culturally responsive approaches. Schools should make materials, interpretation, communication, and other modes of communication accessible for families to their printed and electronic versions so that they can best understand the school's expectations, policies, and progress. Schools can also hold workshops to inform parents about supporting their child's learning at home, boost assessment practices and enhance the curriculum (Uysal, 2023). In addition, it may be worthwhile to establish family liaison positions, which help to build trust and uniformity of communication between home and school. Familiar and dignified families are more likely to participate in school events and activities and support learning outside the classroom. This partnership enhances students' motivation, participation, and achievement and helps develop closer working relationships between schools and wider communities, fostering an equity of responsibility and a common purpose about students' success.

An additional plan is to increase the amount of work to target programs for instructional and support materials for ELLs. School administrators should plan for materials and resources such as bilingual texts, digitized resources for language learning, and materials that support children to understand and make sense in an English language learning context. In addition, there are small group, tutoring and proficiency-level language development programs available in the school that form the basis for programs that are expanded. (Oliver, 2021). These approaches inform how resources are to be allocated to and ensure they are effective. Community groups can also be contracted to be involved in other academic and language support services at schools. It ensures students are provided grade-level content and provided with appropriate tools and interventions to demonstrate grade-level content. This way, achievement gaps close, equity in learning is promoted, and all students have an equal chance to success regardless of language background.

### **Implications for Educational Leadership**

The findings presented in this paper have important implications for educational leaders seeking to improve outcomes for English Language Learners. School leaders play a critical role in establishing systems that support both teachers and students. Rather than viewing ESOL certification as the final stage of teacher preparation, administrators should recognize the need for ongoing professional development, instructional coaching, and collaborative learning opportunities that strengthen teacher capacity to serve multilingual learners effectively.

Educational leaders must also use data-driven decision-making processes to monitor ELL achievement, identify areas of need, and allocate resources strategically.

In addition, school leaders should foster a culture of collaboration in which general education teachers, ESOL specialists, instructional coaches, and support staff share responsibility for student success. Strong family engagement practices, multilingual communication systems, and community partnerships should be prioritized to ensure that families remain active participants in the educational process. By implementing comprehensive support systems and promoting equitable access to learning opportunities, educational leaders can help reduce achievement gaps and create learning environments where English Language Learners have the opportunity to thrive academically and socially.

Effective educational leadership also requires balancing accountability expectations with instructional support. While student performance data provide valuable information regarding academic progress, leaders should avoid creating environments in which teachers perceive data solely as evaluation measures. Instead, administrators should foster cultures characterized by trust, collaboration, and continuous professional learning. Such environments encourage educators to openly analyze student performance, discuss instructional challenges, and implement innovative teaching practices without fear of punitive consequences (Schildkamp et al., 2019). Leadership practices that promote shared responsibility for student success strengthen teacher efficacy and contribute to sustainable school improvement. Furthermore, allocating adequate time for collaborative planning, instructional coaching, and reflective practice enables educators to continuously refine their instructional approaches and respond more effectively to the evolving needs of multilingual learners.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research should further examine the relationship between educational leadership practices and teacher preparedness for supporting English Language Learners in mainstream classrooms. While existing literature highlights the importance of professional development, instructional coaching, collaboration, and data-driven decision-making, additional studies are needed to determine which leadership practices have the greatest impact on teacher effectiveness and student achievement. Research focusing on teachers' perceptions of leadership support may provide valuable insights into how schools can better address the academic and linguistic needs of multilingual learners.

Additionally, future studies could explore differences in ELL support across grade levels, school settings, and demographic populations. Investigating the long-term effects of sustained professional development and leadership initiatives on student outcomes may help educational leaders make more informed decisions regarding resource allocation and instructional support systems. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of how schools can create equitable learning environments that promote academic success for all English Language Learners.

### **Reflection and Conclusion**

Limited support for the ELLs in mainstream classes is still a major hurdle to academic success, especially in Florida schools. While teachers become better equipped to respond to the complex issues of language and conceptual understanding of student language learners through

becoming certified in ESOL, the certification process itself does not fully address their needs. Through my professional experience working with multilingual learners, I have observed firsthand the impact that language barriers can have on classroom participation, comprehension, and academic confidence. While ESOL certification provides a foundation for supporting multilingual learners, I've learned that sustained collaboration, professional development, and access to instructional resources are vital to meeting the varied needs of ELL students. These experiences reinforce the importance of school leaders creating ongoing systems of support to empower teachers with the tools to provide equitable learning opportunities for each student. This challenge is a major barrier for students to reach their best, teachers being sufficiently educated and schools providing an effective service. It also leaves pupils with a poor grasp of content and struggle to engage in class activities. Ideas of equity, inclusion and academic accessibility will become the core of the systems that support students and will not be addressed by compliance with certification requirements. These professional experiences reinforce the findings presented in the literature and further highlight the importance of systemic support for English Language Learners.

The findings presented in this article suggest that addressing the needs of English Language Learners requires more than compliance with ESOL certification requirements. Effective support for multilingual learners depends on comprehensive systems that include ongoing professional development, instructional coaching, collaborative planning, family engagement, and data-driven decision-making. Educational leaders play a critical role in establishing these systems and ensuring that teachers have the resources and support necessary to meet the diverse needs of ELL students. As schools continue to serve increasingly diverse student populations, leadership practices that promote equity, inclusion, and continuous improvement will become increasingly important. By investing in teacher preparedness and implementing evidence-based support structures, schools can reduce achievement gaps and create learning environments that promote academic success for all learners.

As student populations continue to become increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse, educational systems must recognize that effective instruction for English Language Learners requires comprehensive organizational support rather than isolated instructional initiatives. Teacher preparedness should be viewed as an evolving professional competency that develops through continuous learning, collaborative inquiry, and leadership support. Schools that invest strategically in professional development, instructional coaching, family partnerships, and evidence-based decision making are more likely to establish equitable learning environments where multilingual learners can succeed academically while maintaining their linguistic and cultural assets. These findings reinforce the importance of educational leadership as a driving force for sustainable instructional improvement and long-term student achievement.

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