Tracked Away from Opportunity

How language support can narrow access to electives and career pathways

By Jamie Goebel

Imagine the night before Fernanda's first day of high school. Her lavender JanSport backpack sits by the door, stuffed with sharpened pencils, notebooks, and colored highlighters. She joins her friends on FaceTime as they open the emails containing their class schedules. One by one, her friends excitedly name their electives: art, CTE nursing, STEM, AP Human Geography. Fernanda scans her schedule for the robotics class she requested. It's missing, and in its place is English Language Support. Before she has even walked through the high school doors, one opportunity has already slipped out of reach.

What does a student lose when the support she needs takes the place of an opportunity she wants?

Multilingual learners deserve strong language instruction and access to courses that develop their interests and ambitions. Schools should build schedules around both commitments. When language support repeatedly displaces other learning, we need to question the design of the school day.

When support restricts access

This concern has a long history. In Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality, first published in 1985, education scholar Jeannie Oakes examined how grouping students by perceived ability can reproduce racial and class inequalities in their educational opportunities [2]. Her work asks us to examine what students are taught after a placement decision is made.

Linda Harklau brought that question directly to language-minority students in her 1994 article, "Tracking and Linguistic Minority Students: Consequences of Ability Grouping for Second Language Learners" [3]. Her work examined the consequences of tracking for students learning English. Applied to today's schedules, the question remains urgent: Does language support expand access to the curriculum, or does its placement in the school day restrict that access?

California's English Language Arts and English Language Development (ELD) Framework describes a comprehensive approach that includes integrated ELD across subjects and designated ELD during protected instructional time [1].

It also states that designated ELD should be provided in addition to core content instruction and should not replace rich coursework across disciplines [1].

That distinction matters. It can provide purposeful instruction that helps students participate more fully in school. Placing students in a support class does not, by itself, show that they have meaningful access to the rest of the curriculum.

Consider a schedule with six periods. If required subjects occupy five and a separate support class occupies the sixth, there is no space left for an elective or higher-level class. If a career pathway begins with a course offered only during that same period, the conflict can affect more that one semester. The student may miss the entry point to a sequence of courses.

This hypothetical schedule does not tell us how frequently the problem occurs. It presents what districts should investigate.

The same scrutiny belongs in advanced-course placement. A student's developing English proficiency should prompt educators to identify needed instructional support. It should not end the conversation about the students' subject knowledge, interests, or readiness for rigorous courses.



Linguistic gains toward what future

Recent research shows why we must look carefully at what support programs accomplish. Johnson and Mercado-Garcia's 2025 study examined College Access, a pseudonym for a program serving long-term English learners in a large California district. Participants tended to have higher English-proficiency scores than students receiving other ELD services or no designated ELD. Reading results were less encouraging: within-year growth was similar or slower than in comparison groups [4].

Its findings suggest that a program can show promise on language measures while leaving important questions about broader academic progress unanswered [4]. CDE's College and Career Indicator provides another measure districts should examine alongside language

progress: whether students meet the state's criteria for being "Prepared" [5]. When multilingual learners leave high school without meeting those criteria, how can districts claim that the support provided has adequately prepared them for what comes next?

> If language support is intended to make those opportunities accessible, **its evaluation should ask whether students can reach them.**

Low readiness outcomes alone cannot tell us whether a particular ELD class helped a student or caused a problem. They do, however, challenge any definition of success limited to language scores. Districts should follow students' progress into advanced coursework, completed career pathways, and postsecondary opportunities. If language support is intended to make those opportunities accessible, its evaluation should ask whether students can reach them.

What an elective can make possible

The word *elective* can make a course sound expendable. For a student, that elective may be a place for them to discover their interest in engineering, perform on stage, or begin imagining a career. A schedule tells students what they will study. It also restricts what they can explore.

Many electives offer opportunities to use language with a purpose. In a Robotics class, students can explain their designs. In Theater, they can interpret dialogue and rehearse expression. In a career course, they can learn the vocabulary needed to describe a procedure.

Access also means having the chance to be seen differently. A student who struggles with an English essay may bring a strong visual imagination or a sophisticated understanding of mechanical problems. Schools need places where those abilities can become visible.

For students who remain classified as Multilingual Learners for multiple years, the questions become more urgent. Are their support courses changing as their needs change? Which opportunities have they missed? What evidence justifies the next class placement? Please don't say "test scores". A designation should not automatically determine their schedule. Rather, course placement should reflect their current needs, strengths, and goals, with careful

attention to the opportunities that placement may restrict.

When college is a first for the family

The stakes are especially high for multilingual learners who would be the first in their families to attend college. A 2017 NCES report followed a national cohort of students who were high-school sophomores in 2002 and subsequently enrolled in postsecondary education. Among first-generation college students—defined in that report as students whose parents had no postsecondary education—78% were native English speakers, meaning approximately 22% had another native language. Fifteen percent were native Spanish speakers, compared with 3% of students who had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree [6].

These historical figures show an overlap between first-generation college status and linguistic diversity. They do not tell us what percentage of today's California Multilingual Learners are first-generation, and having a native language other than English is not the same as being classified as an English learner.

For students navigating both language support and a college pathway unfamiliar to their families, schools should make college planning part of the support they provide. That means clear guidance about course sequences, applications, and financial aid, along with access to the classes that make those plans possible. If an ELD placement conflicts with a college-preparation elective such as AVID, the school should resolve the conflict rather than leave the student to choose between forms of support.

Who gets access to opportunity?

Districts can begin by examining actual schedules alongside course requests. How many Multilingual Learners requested an elective they did not receive? Which conflicts involved language support? Are students able to enter and complete career pathways? Do they have access to advanced courses when they meet the academic prerequisites?

Those questions require careful interpretation. Enrollment differences alone do not prove discriminatory placement. Course availability, student preferences, prerequisites, and scheduling conflicts all deserve examination. But a district cannot explain a pattern it has never reviewed.

Students and families should be part of that review. Schools should explain what a support course teaches, why the

placement was recommended or forced, what alternatives exist, and when the decision will be revisited. Families need that information in a language they understand, with a meaningful opportunity to raise concerns.

The ball is in the district's court. Offer additional sections? Reconsider when courses meet? Redesign the schedule to protect both? Removing support would leave another barrier in place.

Any proposed solution should be tested against the student's school day. A zero period or afterschool alternative may not be an option for a student who depends on a bus or has family responsibilities. An opportunity counts only when the student can realistically participate.

This paradox is one way to examine the educational exclusion of our Multilingual Learners. Losing an elective does not establish a path to career or college disengagement. It does give us a specific decision to investigate before we describe a student as disengaged or unprepared.

If we want students to see a future in school, we must give them room to explore one. The next times a Multilingual Learner receives a schedule, we should ask more than whether the required support is listed. We should ask which doors does their schedule open and which ones we still need to unlock.

References

1. California Department of Education. (2014). English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework. Chapter 2.

2. Oakes, J. (1985). Keeping track: How schools structure inequality. Yale University Press.

3. Harklau, L. (1994). Tracking and linguistic minority students: Consequences of ability grouping for second language learners. Linguistics and Education, 6(3), 217–244.

4. Johnson, A., & Mercado-Garcia, D. (2025). Targeted intervention for long-term English learners' English language development and reading outcomes.

5. California Department of Education. (2025). California School Dashboard: State of California. College/Career Indicator.

6. Redford, J., & Hoyer, K. M. (2017). First-generation and continuing-generation college students: A comparison of high school and postsecondary experiences. National Center for Education Statistics.