

Proposed Restructuring of the Office of English Language Acquisition

For more than 40 years, the U.S. Department of Education has had an office dedicated to helping states and districts provide equal education opportunities for English Learners. In February 2018, it was reported in various media outlets that the Secretary of Education had developed a proposal to reorganize the Department in response to an Executive Order to streamline government agencies. As part of this proposal, the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) would be consolidated into the larger Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. The rationale behind this proposal is that it would merge support for English learners with other disadvantaged groups served by the Department, and it would disperse expertise on English learners throughout the Department.

Although Department officials have indicated that the integrity and role of the office would be maintained, TESOL has serious concerns about the negative impact such changes would have upon English learners, schools, districts, and communities.

- English learners continue to be the fastest growing population of students in public schools in the United States. There are more than 5 million English learners in public schools speaking more than 150 languages, and over 3300 school districts have 25% or more of their students identified as English learners. Measures such as performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the high school graduation rate show that English learners continue to lag far behind their native English-speaking classmates, indicating that much more work needs to be done in order to help these students succeed academically.
- Having a specialized office at the Department of Education with the knowledge and expertise about the needs of these students is crucial. OELA has served an important role in providing technical assistance to states and districts, developing resources, administering grants for professional development programs for teachers working with English learners, and supporting research projects on English learner issues. This role not only needs to be maintained but strengthened.
- The intended effect of the proposed reorganization is to reduce redundancies, increase efficiency, and better integrate services to English learners with other programs within the Department of Education. However, TESOL's concern is that reorganizing the office under OESE will have the opposite effect. Consolidating the office sends the signal to states, schools, teachers, and parents that OELA is being downgraded, and English learner issues are no longer a priority for the Department of Education.
- OELA is specifically mandated by Congress under the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, as is the role of the Director of OELA, who is to report directly to the Secretary of Education. The current structure of OELA is the one intended by Congress, therefore it is not clear that the Secretary has the authority to make these changes without the approval of Congress.

TESOL urges Congress to exercise its oversight authority to ensure that OELA remains a separate office in the U.S. Department of Education and is not reorganized or absorbed into a larger office, which would seriously diminish the office's unique ability and expertise to serve the nation's English learners and teachers.