

## ESL Programs and LEP Students: A Comparison of Public and Private Schools along the Wasatch Front

By Tamee Roberts, Jeremy D. Brunner, & Shawn D. Bills

### Introduction

For nearly forty years under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), public schools have been required to implement English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in any school where Limited English Proficient (LEP) students are enrolled. As of 2001, federal mandates were made even more specific under the No Child Left Behind Act's (NCLB) Title III, declaring that educators are:

to help ensure that children who are limited English proficient, including immigrant children and youth, attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic attainment in English, and meet the same challenging State academic content and student academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet. (NCLB, Title III, Part A)

In the state of Utah, we questioned how effective ESL programs were being administered to Utah's LEP students.

Public schools are still under mandate to implement ESL programs, but the effectiveness of these programs remains to be measured as schools are given power to implement the NCLB policy as individual circumstances dictate. The number of LEP students enrolled in Wasatch Front schools each year continues to rise. In the last ten years, for example, the number of LEP students in the Alpine School District increased by 122% (Penny Weatherly, Alpine School District's ESL Coordinator, 2003). The efficacy of ESL programs is of greater

necessity than ever before. Is the private school arena a viable resource to rely upon in assisting with the ESL education of these Utah youth?

Our hypothesis was that public schools were more effective in meeting the educational needs of LEP students than private schools. Public schools risk losing federal funding if they have LEP students and do not implement ESL programs. Also, public school teachers are given a pay raise incentive to earn an ESL Endorsement to aid in LEP students' academic progress. We were curious to discover whether or not private schools had any ESL programs already implemented, and if not, if these private institutions would be willing to implement ESL programs if federal funding was made available.

### Literature Review

There is minimal research comparing the effectiveness of private and public school ESL programs. The research that *was* found seemed to show that although annually, the number of minority students in the United States is growing, overall, ESL programs are not being effectively administered in public schools. Thomas and Collier (1997) found:

In 1988, 70 percent of U.S. school-age children were of Euro-American, non-Hispanic background. But by the year 2020, U.S. demographic projections predict that at least 50 percent of school-age children will be of non-Euro-American background (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). By the year 2030, language minority students (approximately 40 percent), along with African-American students (approximately 12-15 percent), will be the majority in U.S. schools. By the year 2050, the total

U.S. population will have doubled from its present levels, with approximately one-third of the increase attributed to immigration. (Branigin, 1996, p. 12)

Another study found that:

About one-third of public schools with LEP student enrollments provide both ESL and bilingual education programs, and 71 percent of all LEP students attend these schools. Thirteen percent of schools (4,832) enrolling LEP students have neither ESL nor bilingual programs, and 3 percent of all LEP students (59,373) attend these schools. (NCES, 1997, p. vii)

With minorities, more specifically LEP students, entering the American public school system, effective policies regarding ESL programs in public education must be implemented in order to help these masses of children succeed in American society. Thomas and Collier stated:

But local and state decision-makers have had little or no guidance and have, by necessity, made instructional program decisions based on their professional intuition and their personal experience, frequently in response to highly politicized input from special interest groups of all sorts of persuasions. (p. 12)

In pursuing answers to our research questions concerning the efficacy of Utah public and private school ESL programs, we were curious to determine administrators' attitudes toward their own respective programs. Our research typified much of what Thomas and Collier reported, that "Schooling must thus be made accessible, meaningful, and effective for all students, lest we create an undereducated, underemployed generation of young adults in the early 21st century" (p. 13). The state of Utah is not immune to such a future.

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We further questioned if private schools would be an avenue by which LEP students could travel in order to receive much needed one-on-one tutoring in mastering the English language and becoming literate, productive American citizens. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2002 Special Analysis on Private Schools—A Brief Portrait, “private school students generally perform higher than their public school counterparts on standardized achievement tests” (Alt & Peter, 2002, p.24) and “on average, private schools have smaller enrollments, smaller average class sizes, and lower student/teacher ratios than public schools” (Alt & Peter, p. 5).

With this information, we supposed that LEP students may have an opportunity to receive the ESL assistance they greatly need. The biggest obstacle would be locating necessary funds and willing private schools to implement such programs. “Public schools were more likely than private schools to have any minority students in 1999–2000, as well as to have high concentrations of minority students (more than 30 percent). Although many private schools had a racially diverse student body, about 14 percent had no minority students, compared with only 4 percent of public schools” (Alt & Peter, p. 12). This statistic did not bode well for developing any prospective ESL program in Utah private schools.

In determining the likelihood that Utah Wasatch Front private schools would even consider developing ESL programs for minority, LEP students, we developed a survey using questions similar to the U.S. Department of Education’s Private School Teacher Questionnaire. Developed for the 2003-04 school year, purpose of the Department’s questionnaire was to “obtain information about teachers, such as professional background, teaching field, and workload” (NCES, 2004, p.2) Two questions were asked concerning LEP students at their respective schools: “Of all the students you teach at this school, how many are of limited-English proficiency?” and “In the last three years, have you had 8 hours or more of training or professional development on how to teach limited-English proficient students?” (NCES, 2004, p. 33). Questions like these plus other more specific inquiries were used in our research.

## Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to understand the effectiveness of schools at meeting the educational needs of LEP students. A series of

questions were asked to public and private school administrators. Quantitatively, we were interested in the enrollment at each school, the number of LEP students at each school, the number of Hispanic students in each school, and the number of hours the typical LEP student received ESL services each week. Private schools were also asked to indicate the annual tuition for their schools.

To collect qualitative data, we surveyed the attitudes of school administrators concerning ESL program effectiveness. Administrators indicated whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, were neutral toward, agreed, or strongly agreed with statements such as “LEP students are receiving the services they need,” and “The ESL coordinators at your school are qualified to help LEP students.” By comparing the different responses from private schools and public schools, the intention was to determine which type of school was better meeting the educational needs of LEP students.

Our sample consisted of administrators from 100 schools along the Wasatch Front. Forty-two of the schools were randomly selected from a list of all public schools in the Alpine School District, Davis School District, Granite School District, Jordan School District, and Salt Lake School District. We first identified every public school within the five districts. Then, we assigned each school a number.

We found that out of the 236 schools in the districts, 71% were elementary schools, 18% were junior high/middle schools, and 11% were high schools. To make our sample representative, out of the 42 public schools we wanted in our sample, 71% would be elementary schools, 17% would be junior high/middle schools, and 12% would be high schools. We used an available website, <http://www.random.org>, to generate lists of random numbers to select which schools would be included in the survey. If a duplicate number came up, another random number was generated by the website to replace it.

The other 58 schools in our sample were private schools. We obtained a list from the Utah State Office of Education online directory of all registered private schools within the same five Wasatch Front school district boundaries. Since there were only 58 schools on the list, we surveyed them all. The 42 public schools combined with the 58 private schools created a sample size of 100 schools.

## Pre-Evaluation of Private Schools

To determine which private schools would be most appropriate to survey and to determine which would be the most appropriate questions to ask, we performed a phone survey of all the private schools in our sample. We requested information regarding who to contact at the schools and who would be the best person to answer any further questions. We gathered information about the population size and diversity. Whether we spoke with a secretary or an administrator, we gauged the responses to determine the likelihood of each respective school in completing and returning the survey.

We requested information regarding the grade levels taught at the school and found a wider range of ages in private schools than in public schools. The number of students at each school also was diverse, ranging from only eight to nearly 1000 or so students. Because the information was so diverse we found it difficult to categorize the private schools into comparable categories as the public schools. We decided to survey the entire population of private schools.

## Surveys

We created two surveys, one for private schools and one for public schools. Since private school demographics were not easily comparable to public school demographics, we decided to create two different surveys based on the information from our initial phone conversations with the private schools. We determined that there were some topics that just would not be comparable between the private and public schools (i.e., cost of tuition). Many questions were left the same on both surveys.

For our benefit we printed the private school surveys on blue paper and the public school surveys on white paper for easy identification. We also coded the surveys and envelopes to determine which schools responded in case we chose to do perform any follow up interviews. Before mailing the surveys, we received Institutional Research Board approval from Brigham Young University.

## Incentive Offered

We included one crisp brand-new dollar bill with each survey. We attached with a paper clip the dollar bill to the request letter and consent form so participants would see it as soon as they opened the envelope. We wanted the participants to know that we valued their efforts and time.

A few administrators completed the form and returned the dollar with comments like “graduate school is expensive—keep the dollar.” We felt the dollar was a sufficient enough incentive to persuade participation in our survey. In considering the small scope and minimal risk in this study, the dollar was a positive investment.

### Limitations

Our research lacks high degrees of internal validity. Internal validity is the degree to which a causal relationship can be determined. As a result of our research, we would like to be able to say that being enrolled in one type of school *causes* better performance among LEP students. However, we are not able make such a claim based on our research.

We expected to find major differences in the ways the schools serve LEP students. We acknowledge that there are many variables to consider and that educational placement is only one factor that affects student learning. Without performing a longitudinal, long-term experiment that tracks students in and out of private schools, the degree to which causality can be determined will remain out of reach. However, we expect there will be a strong correlation between the type of school and the services provided.

Our research has strong external validity. External validity is the degree to which the results are generalizable and replicable. By using a stratified random sample for selecting public schools and selecting every private school, we ensured that our sample was representative. This process resulted in research that is generalizable and duplicable for schools in Utah. We hesitate to generalize our findings for schools outside of Utah.

The degree of construct validity of our research is not extremely high. Construct validity is the degree to which the variables measure the constructs. Our unit of measurement was ‘ESL program effectiveness.’ Our survey asked respondents to disclose the number of total students in the school; LEP students in the school; Hispanics in the school; Hispanics in ESL programs; and the hours the typical LEP student receives ESL services.

Respondents were then asked to indicate how they felt for these categories: LEP students are receiving the services they need; LEP students are excelling because of these services; the school has sufficient money to serve LEP students effectively; the school has sufficient personnel to serve LEP students effectively; the ESL coordinators are qualified to help LEP students; the teachers are sensitive to the language needs of LEP students; private schools are better equipped to meet the needs of LEP students; and in general, the parents of LEP students are involved in their children’s education.

Respondents were then asked to answer the following questions: What kind of programs/services do you use for educating LEP students? How are students selected/eligible for ESL services? What other Ethnic/minority groups are represented at your school? How could your school program for LEP students be improved?

We feel that these questions did somewhat address ‘ESL program effectiveness,’ but more accurately measured ‘Perceptions of ESL program effectiveness.’ At no point in our research do we examine test scores, reading abilities, or other measures of student learning. This presents a challenge to our construct validity, but it does not completely discount what we are trying to do.

## Results and Findings

### General Findings in All Schools

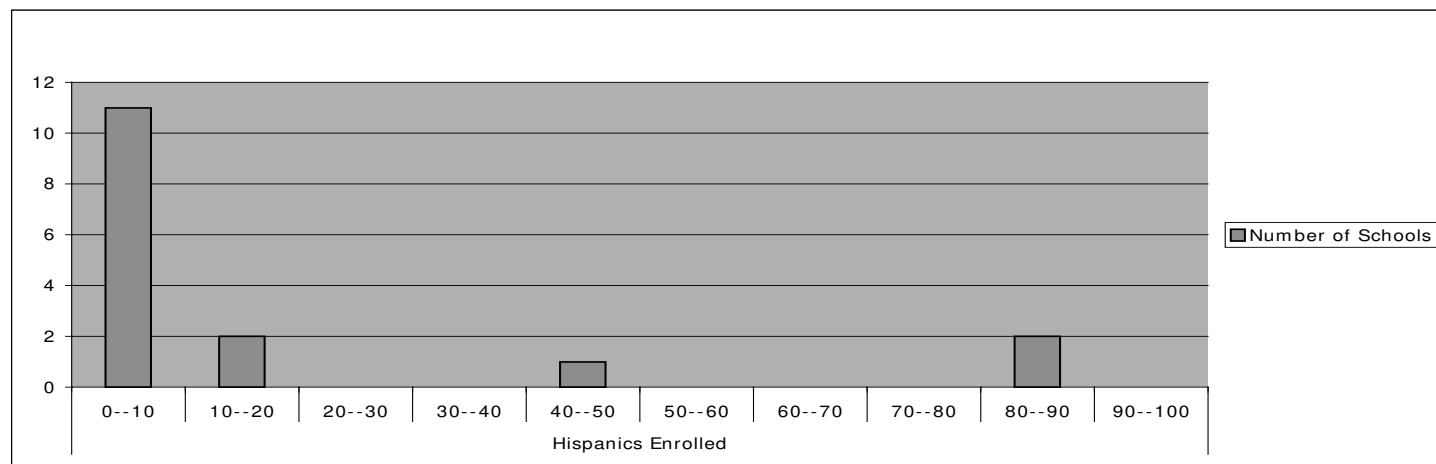
Our survey revealed information about the ethnic composition of public and private schools. In public schools, Hispanics accounted for 8% of the total enrollment. In private schools, Hispanics account for 2% of total enrollment. Only three private schools reported enrolling more than 20 Hispanics (see Figure 1). Other ethnic minorities in the private schools included Asians, specifically Koreans, Chinese, and Japanese. Ten private schools reported enrolling African Americans, and five private schools enrolled Pacific Islanders/Polynesians.

We performed two types of analyses of the survey responses. First, we were interested in combining the responses from both types of schools to get an idea of how schools in general were meeting the needs of LEP students. Then, we looked at how the public schools and private schools responded differently.

Most schools felt that the LEP students at their school were receiving the services they needed. Only 5 schools disagreed with the statement (see Figure 2). One of the administrators who did not think LEP students were receiving the services they needed wrote, “Because they are ESL, it is nearly impossible to qualify them for resource—at least 2 children need services and languages is not their only handicap.”

Most schools also felt that they did not have sufficient money to meet the needs of LEP students (see Figure 3). Eight schools indicated that they had sufficient money. We found a positive, statistically significant correlation ( $p = .025$ ) between schools that reported having sufficient money and whether or not they were meeting the needs of LEP students. This correlation

Figure 1: Hispanics Enrolled in Private Schools



## Research

seems to indicate that the schools that reported having enough money were the same schools who reported meeting the needs of LEP students.

Survey responses also indicated a

relationship between enrollment and LEP student needs. When comparing “student enrollment” to “teachers are sensitive to the language needs of LEP students” we found a negative correlation and a  $p$  score

of .010. This statistically significant correlation seems to indicate that in schools with smaller enrollment, the administrator is more likely to feel that teachers are sensitive the language needs of LEP students.

Out of all the schools, only three schools thought that private schools were better equipped to meet the needs of LEP students (see Figure 4). These findings show that the perception is that public schools are equally equipped or are better equipped to help LEP students.

Most administrators also thought that their ESL coordinators were well qualified to help LEP students (see Figure 5). Five administrators disagreed.

### Analysis of Public School Responses

We found an interesting correlation when comparing public school administrators’ responses about how their LEP students were doing and how private schools work with LEP students. When comparing the two variables “LEP students are excelling” and “private schools are better equipped to meet the needs of LEP students,” we found a negative correlation and a  $p$  value of .019. This correlation indicates that administrators who feel LEP students are not getting the help they need also have the perception that private schools have more resources.

One of the administrators who thought that private schools were better equipped wrote, “Private schools are not forced into a structure that they have to follow.” Ideally, the needs of LEP students should be met in all schools. In the public schools, we noticed an interesting relationship between four variables.

In the public schools, we found that the administrators who indicated that the needs of LEP students were being met also indicated they agreed that their schools had the following three components: sufficient money ( $p = .011$ ), sufficient personnel ( $p = .001$ ), and qualified ESL coordinators ( $p = .009$ ). We found it interesting that the relationship between having sufficient money and helping LEP students excel from ESL services was not statistically significant ( $p = .294$ ).

### Analysis of Private School Responses

We found that the families with LEP students in the private schools were generally at a higher income level than those in public schools. Analyzing the annual tuition of the private schools in our sample revealed evidence of this. The minimum an-

Figure 2

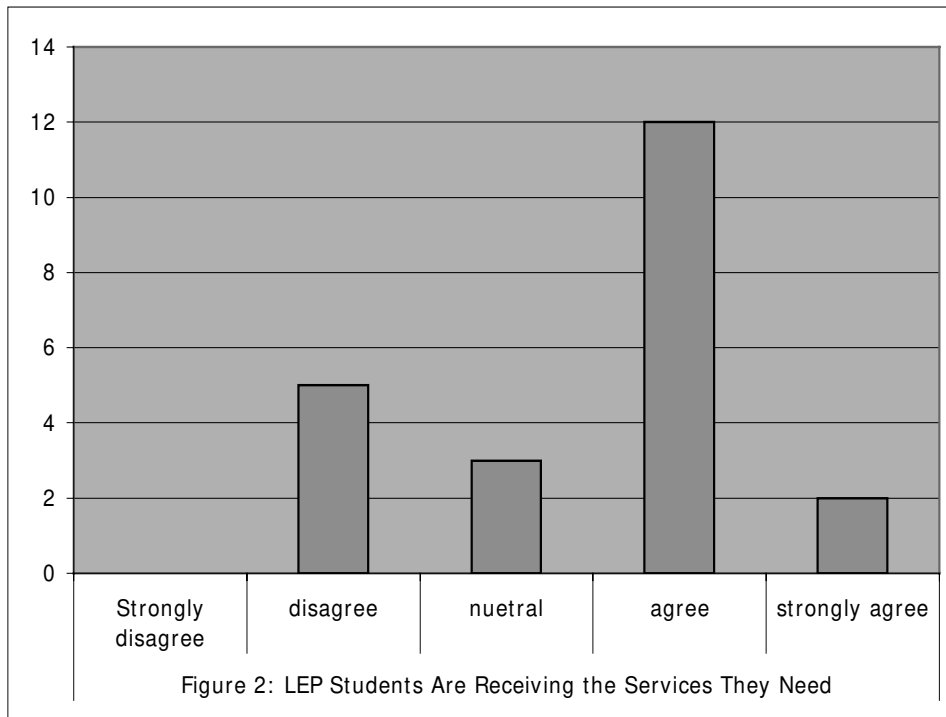
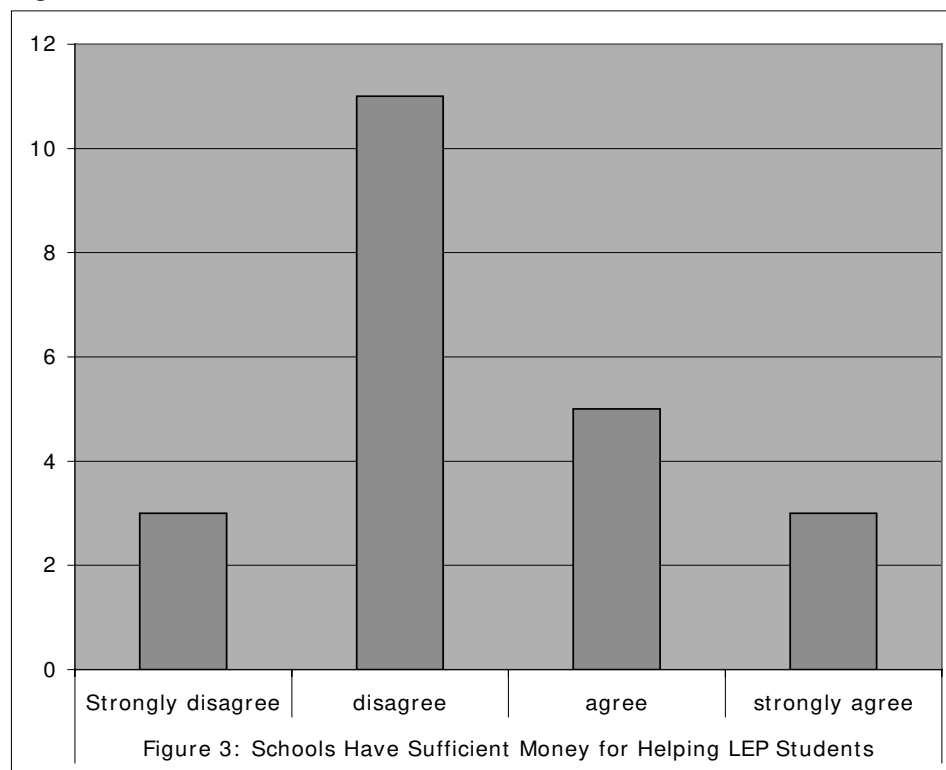


Figure 3



nual tuition for private schools was \$2,100. The maximum reported was \$30,000. Since Utah currently has no voucher system or tax credits for private school enrollment, we believe that more of the students in the public schools were in difficult economic circumstances.

In the private schools, we found statistically significant correlation with two sets of variables. First, we found that how sensitive teachers were to the needs of LEP students was positively correlated to the number of LEP students enrolled at a school ( $p = .017$ ). This seems to indicate that the private schools with higher numbers of LEP students were more sensitive to their needs. We also found that the schools that

reported having sufficient personnel to help LEP students also felt that private schools were better equipped to help LEP students than public schools are.

Most private schools that did not enroll LEP students indicated that students had to pass an English proficiency test as part of the admission screening process. Private schools with the language screening process reported they used the process because they were generally not equipped to provide the necessary language services to help LEP students. Most of the private schools did not offer ESL programs because either their mission did not include that service or there simply were no LEP students that could afford the tuition.

We asked the private schools, "If resources were available to your school and/or to parents of LEP students, enabling more LEP student in Utah to attend private schools, would you be interested in implementing an ESL program at your school and why or why not?" Half of the respondents expressed that they would not be interested in implementing ESL programs even if more resources made it possible. Some private schools cited lack of a large enough facility as their reason for not wanting to. One school cited the difficulty in communicating with non-English speaking parents as their primary reason for opposing the idea. Another shared being opposed to using public monies to support private education.

Some respondents gave more troubling responses. One administrator opposed the idea because, "Our program is for students who are academically [sic] advanced." Another wrote, "We could never meet the needs of those students." One administrator said no because their school "did not want to deal with paperwork." These responses seemed to reveal either a misunderstanding about LEP students, or a condescending attitude toward language minority students.

The other half of the private schools expressed that with sufficient resources they would consider implementing an ESL program. These schools mainly cited a lack of resources and a lack of need as their reasons for not implementing ESL programs. One administrator of a large private high school wrote, "We would probably look at the possibility more seriously due to the fact that cost is a big factor in considering the implementation of an ESL program." Another administrator wrote, "Our school

Figure 4

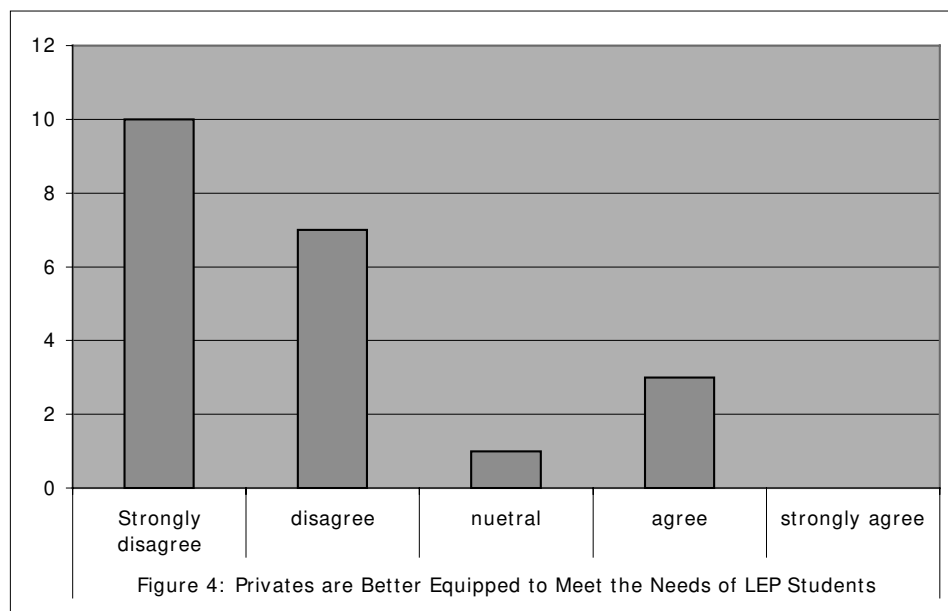
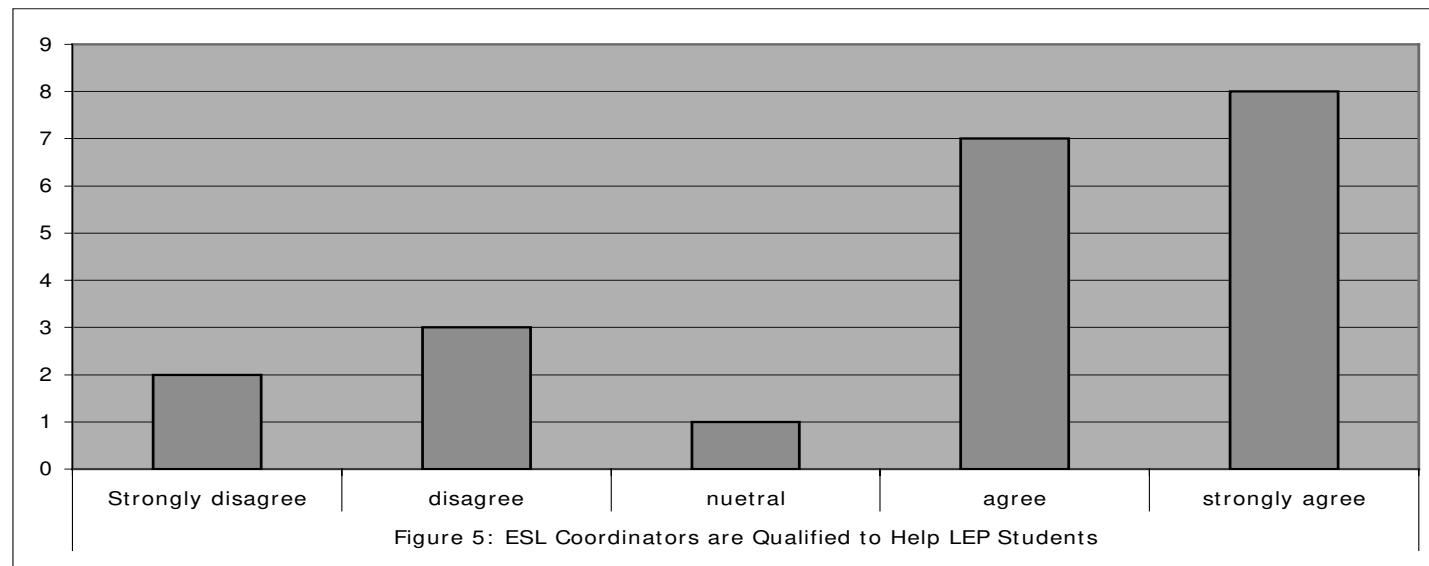


Figure 5



is open to all children and we would want to give the children the best chance to do well at our school.”

### Recommendations

Our first recommendation is that further research must be done in this area. Very little has been published about the different ways public and private schools educate LEP students. We suggest that a three- or four-year study be done to track LEP student achievement both in public schools and private schools. This research should look at actual assessments of student learning, not simply measuring school administrators' perception.

Our second recommendation is directed at public schools. Public school district leaders might conduct a survey of their own to ask their school administrators specific questions about funding, personnel, and qualified coordinators. Our research suggests that public school administrators, who felt they had those three components, also feel like they are meeting the needs of LEP students. If public school administrators feel they lack sufficient money, personnel, or qualified coordinators, the school district might take steps to remedy the situation.

Our third recommendation is directed at private schools. Private schools should become more aware of the needs of LEP students in their areas. Although many private schools are relatively small and focused on specific needs of only English-speaking students, some private school administrators are not even aware of the LEP rhetoric and basic meaning of programs. We are not suggesting that every private school incorporate an ESL program because it is unrealistic that some private schools could enroll LEP students.

However, it is important that these administrators understand the growing cultural needs of the student population they live with. We recommend that Utah private school administrators educate themselves in the statistics of the growing Utah LEP population and the body of literature regarding the needs and programs available for LEP students. We feel in this way that some private schools will find a place for these students in their curriculum and the LEP students will someday have another venue option for ESL instruction. Furthermore, the negative stigma of these

often times very capable and intelligent students will be dispelled.

### Vouchers Needed/Public Awareness

Some private school administrators are not familiar with the ESL/LEP jargon. Some answers to questions like “Have you considered implementing an ESL program at your school and enrolling LEP students when and why?” or “If the private schools could be more effective in helping LEP student excel, would you implement a program?” revealed that many private school administrators were unclear on the issues of LEP students.

Private school administrators need to understand the programs, studies and simple rhetoric of ESL. We believe more private schools could, and would, serve the needs of lower socioeconomic level LEP students if there were resources available. Then, we would be able to compare which of private and public schools best serve the needs of LEP students.

If a voucher program were implemented in the State of Utah, likely a number of LEP students would take advantage of the options available. Private schools that participated in such a voucher program and offered ESL programs would be given an opportunity to address the needs of this growing population. It would be interesting to see what results the private schools could bring.

### Minority Awareness

December 2004 marked the 50-year anniversary of the desegregating of American schools in the landmark Supreme Court Case *Brown v Topeka Board of Education*. Public Schools have made progress but according to the Harvard Civil Rights Project the desegregation in America peaked in the 1980s and then moved backward. Clearly race and ethnicity are still important issues in the public schools.

In Utah the largest and fastest growing minority is the Hispanic population. According to the 2000 census persons of Hispanic or Latino origin account for 9% of the population in Utah and 12% for the United States, and 12.5% of the Utah population speaks a language other than English at home. According to Utah State office of Education statistics in 2002 Hispanics accounted for 17.6% of the Granite

School District, 5.2% of the Davis District, 5.5% of the Jordan District, 6.4% of the Alpine District, and fully 31.4% of the Salt Lake City School District.

State office statistics for English Language learners in the year 2001 k-12 are a total of 2,302 students in the Alpine School District, 2,800 for the Davis District, 12,122 in the Granite District, 3,211 in the Jordan District, and 8,745 in the Salt Lake School District. State wide English language learners numbered 44,058 in 2001. The needs of these students can and should be met in various ways both in the public schools, in the homes and in private institutions.

The greatest need is simply awareness and respect for minorities among educators. As our research showed, when the minority is large and visible, those individuals receive attention in the private schools. It is important that regardless of their size, individuals of minority status, especially those with language proficiency needs in all institutions of learning, receive the attention and help they need to succeed in the society. There is no good excuse for exclusion and neglect.

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