

January 2005

## **English Language Learners in K–12: Trends, Policies, and Research in Washington State**

### **Study Direction**

The 2004 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to review the state transitional bilingual instructional program (TBIP) with a focus on the following:

- Trends in enrollment and average length of stay;
- Different types of programs and delivery methods in operation in Washington and other states;
- Academic and language acquisition effectiveness and the costs and benefits of different types of programs and delivery methods; and
- Potential changes to improve program cost-effectiveness.<sup>1</sup>

The Institute interviewed TBIP staff at the state and school district levels; analyzed student enrollment and assessment data; and reviewed laws, policies, and research on instruction for students learning English.

### **Background**

The state TBIP was created by the Legislature in 1979 to “insure equal educational opportunities” for English language learners (ELL students) in K–12 public schools.<sup>2</sup> Both state and federal law require that public schools provide ELL students with specialized instruction to help them access the academic curriculum. Washington State law authorizes school districts to implement bilingual programs that use students’ native languages in instruction; English as a Second Language (ESL) programs are authorized in situations where native language instruction is not feasible.<sup>3</sup>

State statute gives school districts broad discretion to select programs. TBIP funds contribute to district expenditures on staffing, training, and instructional materials for ELL students. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) develops policy guidelines and provides technical assistance to school districts implementing instructional services for ELL students.

<sup>1</sup> ESHB 2459, Sec. 607 (2)(g), Laws of 2004 (58th Legislature, 2004 Regular Session).

<sup>2</sup> RCW 28A.180.010

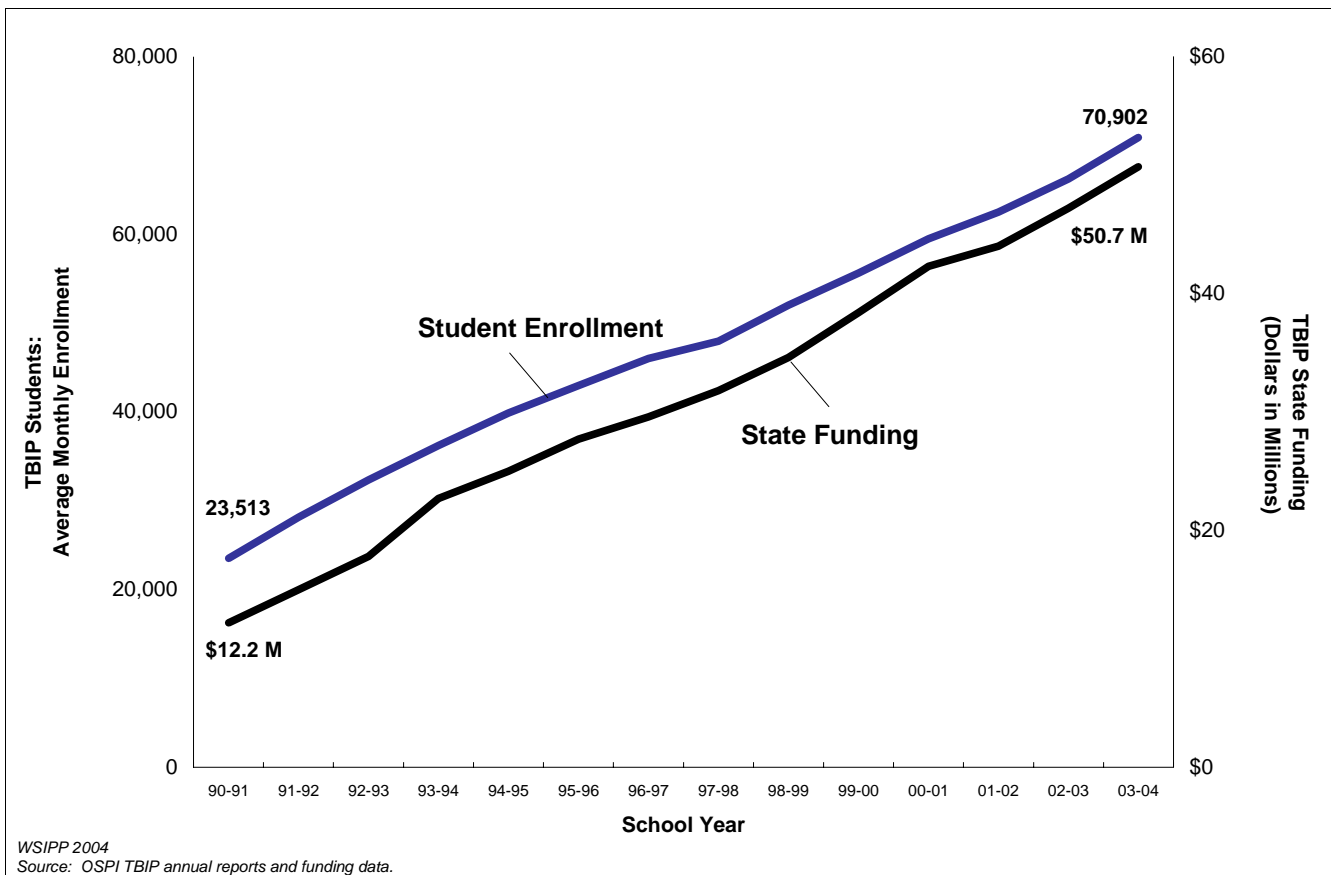
<sup>3</sup> Bilingual programs provide instruction both in English and students’ native languages. ESL programs are conducted in English. In ESL models, teachers use specialized teaching methods, adapting vocabulary and reading materials to match students’ English proficiency levels. ESL is usually provided by pulling students out of class for small group instruction.

## Rapid Enrollment and Expenditure Growth

TBIP student enrollment has grown rapidly since the program was created, driving parallel increases in state general fund appropriations (see Exhibit 1). Over the past two decades, TBIP enrollment increased from 2 to 7 percent of public K–12 students. Washington State now provides over \$50 million annually for more than 70,000 TBIP students.

TBIP student enrollment increases are partly explained by population growth among non-English speakers in Washington State. The ELL student-age population increased from 30,000 to nearly 60,000 during the 1990s. Enrollment growth is also due to students continuing in the TBIP across school years; the percentage of students remaining in the TBIP for more than three years increased from 9 to 28 percent between 1986 and 2002.

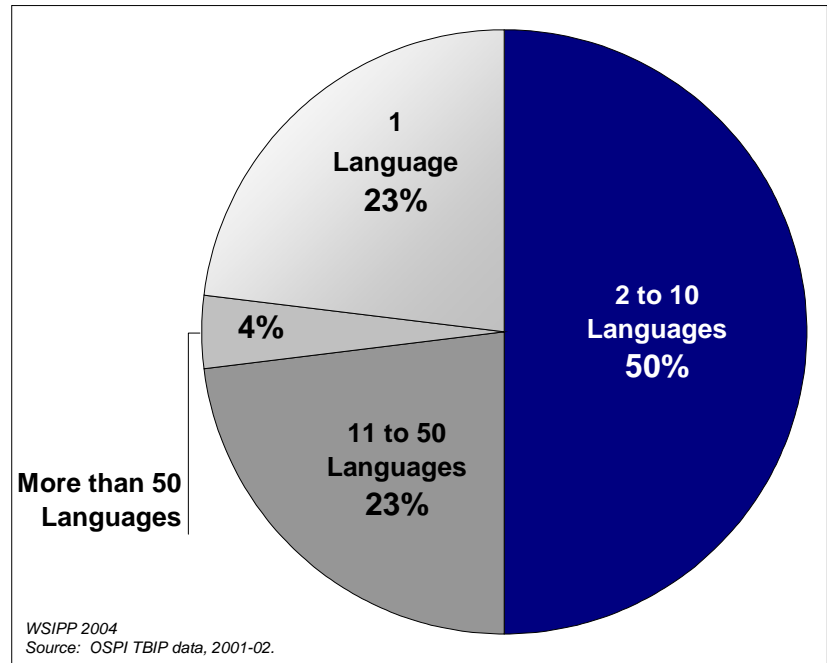
**Exhibit 1**  
**Steadily Increasing TBIP Enrollment**  
**Drives State Funding Increases**



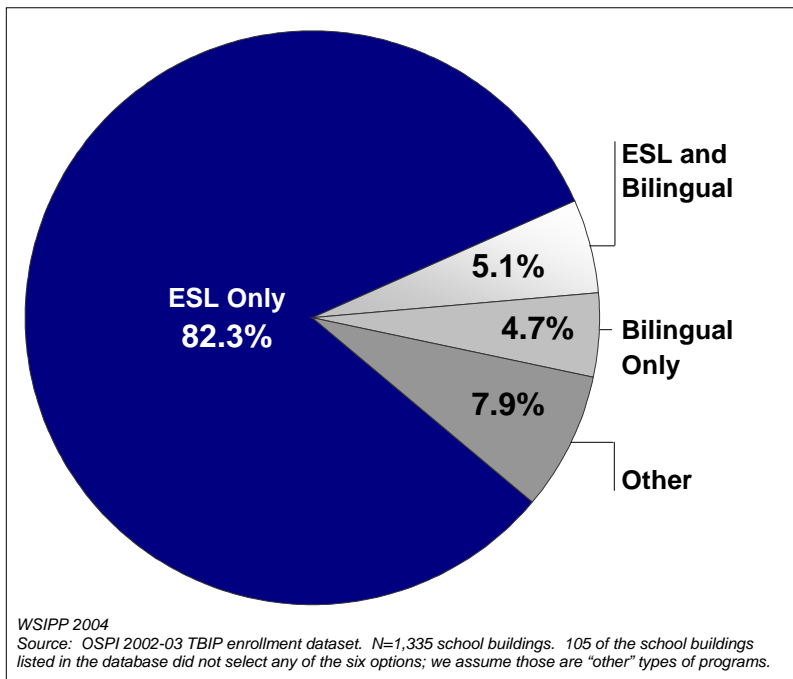
## Student Characteristics Influence Program Selection

Most TBIP students are in elementary school. Two-thirds of TBIP students speak Spanish, a proportion that has increased since the 1980s. There is, however, great diversity in TBIP students' native languages. In 2001–02, over 160 languages were represented in Washington schools (see Exhibit 2).

### Exhibit 2 Multiple Languages Are Found In Most Washington School Districts



### Exhibit 3 Most Washington Schools Operate ESL Programs for TBIP Students



Most Washington schools provide ESL instruction for TBIP students (see Exhibit 3). For a school district to implement a bilingual program, sufficient numbers of ELL students in the same grade, speaking the same language, and with a similar language proficiency level are needed. These conditions are rare among Washington school districts, particularly at the secondary level.

Elementary schools are more likely to implement bilingual programs because there are more elementary ELL students statewide, and they remain in the same classroom for the entire school day. At the middle and high school levels, ELL students have more varied educational backgrounds and lower English proficiency relative to their peers.

While the number of teachers obtaining bilingual and ESL endorsements has increased in recent years, recruiting qualified bilingual teachers can also be a challenge for districts interested in bilingual programs. Paraprofessional instructional assistants are widely used in the TBIP at all grade levels to provide special assistance, such as tutoring, and to facilitate communication among students, teachers, and parents.

### **Most Students Remain in the TBIP for Less Than Three Years**

Per-student TBIP funding is provided to school districts until an ELL student demonstrates sufficient English language and academic proficiency on assessment tests. State law sets a three-year target for students to transition out of the TBIP into mainstream classes.

Students' average length of stay in the TBIP has gradually increased over the life of the program, from about 1.4 to 2.2 school years. Analysis of district-level OSPI data could not conclusively link longer length of stay with student or program characteristics. Most students exit the TBIP within three years.

While there is no clear consensus, many researchers conclude it takes four to seven years for students to develop English language skills sufficient for academic work.

### **Effective Programs: Research Is Inconclusive**

State data on student outcomes reveal a gap between the academic performance of ELL students and Washington K–12 students overall. Reflecting a disparity found nationwide, 20 to 55 percent fewer Washington ELL students meet WASL standards than statewide averages. Analysis of district-level data could not identify programs associated with better test scores, due to data limitations.

A review of research literature revealed that few evaluations of bilingual education use sufficiently rigorous research designs to meet scientific standards. There is some evidence that bilingual programs can improve ELL student test scores, but the research does not address ESL instruction, the most common program in Washington schools.

### **Opportunity to Examine Cost-Effectiveness of Washington Programs**

Student-level TBIP data recently collected by OSPI will enable future research to identify instructional strategies associated with improved academic outcomes for ELL students. Washington State could invest in a research study using the new data to address the question of program cost-effectiveness. This investment in research would provide scientific evidence of what instructional strategies work best for Washington's ELL students.

*The full report on this topic is available at [www.wsipp.wa.gov](http://www.wsipp.wa.gov). For further information, contact Annie Pennucci at (360) 586-3952 or email [pennuccia@wsipp.wa.gov](mailto:pennuccia@wsipp.wa.gov).*

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