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EFP Takeaways

Does Developmental Education Reform Help or Hinder the Success of Language Minority Students? An Exploration by Language Minority, ESOL, and Foreign-Born Status

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The Study

Language minority (LM) students are those whose primary language is not English, and they represent a rapidly growing population within U.S. educational systems.

The authors examine whether LM students who are considered underprepared for college-level coursework benefit more from traditional developmental education programs or reformed programs; the latter provide additional support services while allowing most students to accelerate or bypass developmental requirements. This study uses an interrupted time-series design and disaggregates the statewide Florida data by whether students took English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) high school courses and whether they are native- or foreign-born students.

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Findings

Florida’s developmental education reform has tended to help rather than hinder non-native English speakers. All students, regardless of LM status, tended to experience improved outcomes after the reform – there was reduced enrollment in developmental reading and writing courses, increased enrollment in college-level English, and a greater share of students who both took and passed college-level English in the first year.

Overall, the reform’s benefits are similar for language minority and non-LM students, though there are important differences among LM subgroups indicating that ESOL and foreign-born students may benefit the most.

Implications and Recommendations

ESOL and foreign-born students may be particularly likely to be misplaced in coursework under traditional placement methods (i.e., a single high-stakes assessment), so they may experience greater benefits from being able to opt out of placement testing and developmental education. It is important to collect data and disaggregate results among LM subgroups to identify performance gaps and ensure reform efforts are also effectively meeting the needs of these students.

Moreover, developmental education reforms in other contexts would benefit from offering enhanced advising and academic support services as Florida does.