Getting Down to FACTS

Multilingual Learners of English: Progress of California's English Learners and the Resources That Support Their Educational Achievements

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May 2026

Stanford | SCALE Initiative
Accelerator for Learning

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Acknowledgments

The authors thank Jonathan Isler and Sela Fessehaie and members of the Multilingual Learners Division at the California Department of Education for support with accessing and interpreting data. We also thank our Learning Policy Institute (LPI) colleagues Linda Darling-Hammond, Jonathan Kaplan, Tara Kini, Stacy Loewe, Efrain Mercado, members of the Getting Down to Facts III team and Claude Goldenberg, Martha Hernandez, Anya Hurwitz, Linda Kaminski, Eduardo Munoz-Munoz, Laurie Olsen and Rachel Ruffalo for their review of and feedback on this work.

This research was supported by Sobrato Philanthropies.

Introduction

California's K–12 education system enrolls a large number of multilingual learners acquiring English.[1] Over the past two decades, the state has implemented a significant number of policy reforms intended to support the educational progress of all students, including multilingual learners of English (MLE). The state is thus at an important juncture to take stock of progress, understand remaining challenges, plan for the future, and define the work yet to be done. This Getting Down to Facts research report addresses the questions:

- Who are California's MLE? How has the composition of the population changed over time?
- What policy reforms occurred in the last two decades? What changes in performance occurred for California's MLE during this time period?
- Who are long-term English learners? What school characteristics are associated with greater proportions of LTEL among the MLE population?
- What conditions and resources are associated with districts that are doing exceptionally well in supporting the achievement performance of K–8 current and former MLE?
- What issues do these findings identify for future research?
- What policy considerations arise from these findings?

In this report, we synthesize findings from recent studies to provide an overview of progress in California towards supporting MLE.[2] First, we provide an overview of California's policy vision and history related to schooling for MLE. We then describe who California's MLE are, including their diversity. Second, we summarize research examining progress among students who were ever classified as an English learner, both prior to and following the policy reforms (Novicoff et al., 2024). Third, we describe the characteristics and contexts of students whose progress in English language learning has been slower and who have been designated as long-term English learners (LTEL) (Price et al., 2024). Fourth, we look at California's "positive outliers" districts whose current and former multilingual

[1] A TK–12 education system from 2023–24, as Transitional Kindergarten becomes a distinct grade.

[2] Note: In this report, we use both "multilingual learners of English" and "English learners" to refer to students who have a home language other than English and are classified as English learners. (For further details, see Why "Multilingual Learners of English"?)

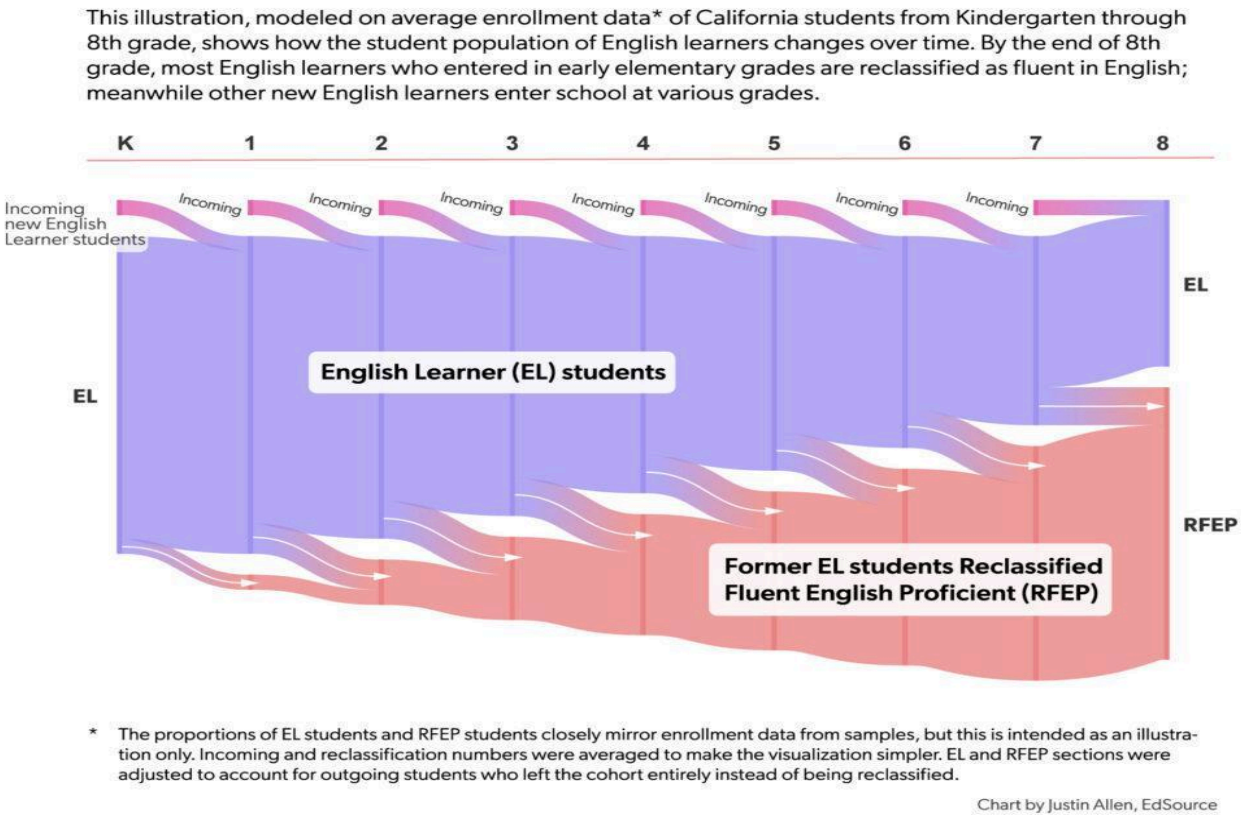
learners of English are academically growing at greater than predicted rates (Price & Burns, 2026). We review the districts' characteristics and the resources associated with their students' successes. Finally, we summarize these findings and propose policy recommendations for key actors in the state.

The "Ever-EL" Approach to Studying Multilingual Learners of English

Data reports on learning outcomes for multilingual learners of English typically show gaps with their English-fluent peers. Statewide data show, for example, that the Class of 2023 graduated 73% of students classified as English learners compared to 89% of the rest of the students who are not classified as an English learner (California Department of Education [CDE], n.d.-a). When the comparison group changes to include all currently or formerly classified EL students compared to those students never classified, then the graduation rate is 86% (ever-EL) to 85% (never-EL) (Price et al., 2024). In addition, data from the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) show a gap of 30 percentage points between students classified as English learners and their peers in the proportion of students meeting or achieving state standards in math (California Department of Education [CDE], n.d.-b). Similar achievement gaps are sustained over time.

However, these static snapshots can be misleading as they fail to capture the dynamic nature of who is a multilingual learner of English (Valdes & Castrechini, 2026). Each year, many students who develop a higher level of competency—thus achieving a measure of academic success—are reclassified as fluent English proficient (RFEP) and are thus removed from the pool of students classified as English learners. (See Figure 1.) Likewise, many new students become classified as English learners and join the pool. Thus, average test scores for students currently classified as English learners can change due to different students in the pool (Novicoff et al., 2024). Moreover, the academic successes of the recently reclassified fluent students are not considered in the average scores. State data show that RFEP students on average achieve at higher rates than their English Only counterparts (CDE, n.d.-b).

Figure 1. How the English learner Population Changes Over Time



Source: Reproduced from Stavely, Z., & Willis, D. J. (30 June). What to know about California's English learners. *EdSource*. Retrieved March 11, 2025, from https://edsource.org/2025/schools-in-california-english-learners-demographic-trends/735240. To understand the academic progress of multilingual learners of English, this report looks at California's "ever-ELs": students who have ever been classified as an English learner—either previously or currently. This approach allows us to follow multilingual learners of English over time, to assess their time to reclassification, and their subsequent learning.

Context

California's schools enroll one of the largest numbers of multilingual learners of English (MLE, also known as English learners, or ELs) in the United States (CDE, n.d.-a; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Of the more than 5.8 million K–12 students in the state, around a third (~1.9 million) are classified as current or former English learners. There are an additional 266,000 students who are "initially fluent English proficient"—those who speak a home language other than English but have also been assessed as English proficient. In total, nearly 38% (~2.2 million) speak a language other than English in the home (CDE, n.d.-a.), and many more students study additional languages at school.

Building a robust education system that supports and develops the multilingual skills of all students is critical to California's society and success in the global economy (CDE, 2019).

The composition of California's student population and that of its MLE is also changing. Over the past decade, K–12 enrollment in California decreased by around 6% to just under 6 million students, with decreases larger among MLE. Concurrently, the state's student body has become more racially and ethnically diverse and more linguistically diverse among students classified as English learners (presently around 18% of total enrollment) (CDE, n.d.-a.; Novicoff et al., 2024).

Persistent achievement gaps are recorded between students classified as English learners and their English-proficient peers. The persistence of this gap, however, is partially due to a selection effect where students who acquire proficiency are reclassified from English learner to fluent and are no longer counted in the "English learner" group. For those who are new to the English language, the gap is expected when teaching and assessments are primarily conducted in English.

Given this context, California's attention to educational supports for California's multilingual learners of English is particularly important. Students who achieve strong capabilities in English, while continuing to receive support to develop skills in their home language, are better able to access the full curriculum and have greater opportunity to achieve their educational potential.

California's Vision for Multilingual Learner of English Instruction

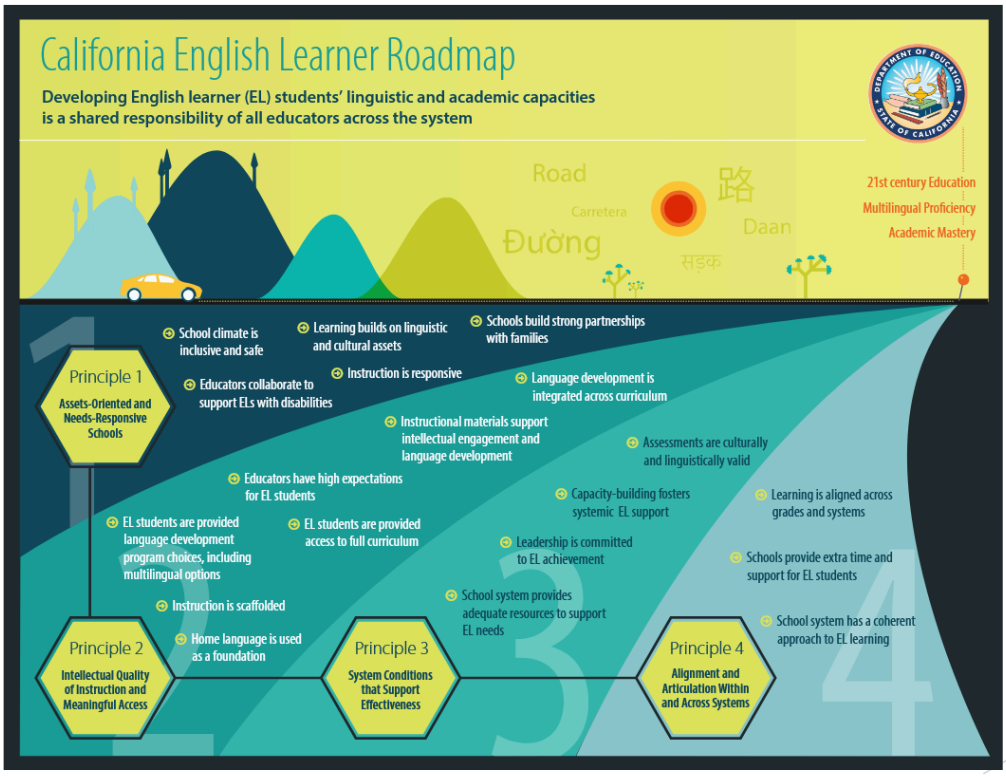
Building a strong education system requires policies that attend to each of the areas that support multilingual learners of English. This includes a vision and goals for learning, strong educator training and ongoing professional learning, funding to support the differentiated needs of multilingual learners, specialist curricula and resources appropriate to students' development levels, teaching modes and methods that can support development in more than one language, diagnostic tools, an effective system of assessments, and wraparound supports for students with particular needs. While these areas are not exclusive to California, this report focuses on how they are specific to the California educational system.

The California English Learner Roadmap describes this vision and policy system. (See Figure 2.) Acknowledging the importance of multilingualism to California's economic and social future, and both

the strengths and needs that the state's diverse multilingual learner population bring, the roadmap was developed to provide a vision for multilingual learner education, and lay out the elements needed to bring it to fruition. Adopted by the California State Board of Education in 2017, the roadmap provides guidance to local educational agencies (LEAs) on educating MLE. More specifically, it articulates the "aligned set of practices, services, relationships, and approaches to teaching and learning" intended to deliver a strong education for MLE in the state (Hakuta, 2018). The foundations of the roadmap are captured in four systems-wide principles:

- Assets-oriented and needs-responsive schools
- Intellectual quality of instruction and meaningful access
- System conditions that support effectiveness
- Alignment and articulation within and across systems

Figure 2. California English Learner Roadmap



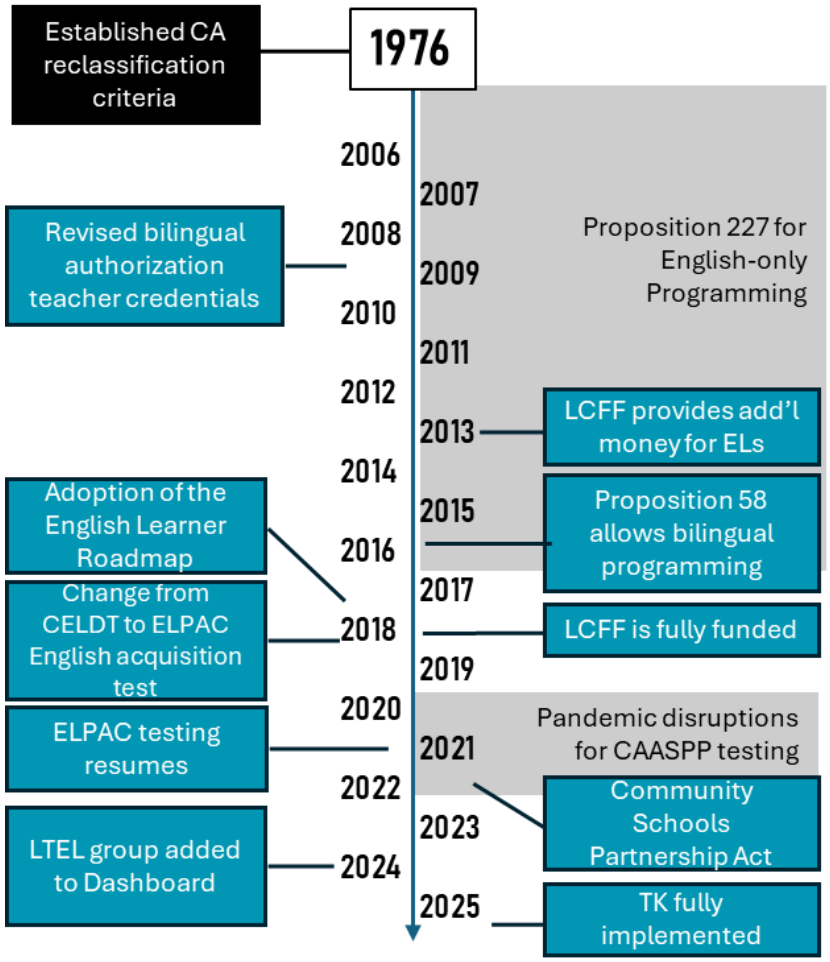
Source: Reproduced from Hakuta, K. (2018). California English learner roadmap: Strengthening comprehensive educational policies, programs, and practices for English learners. California Department of Education

Timeline of California Policy Changes

Over the past two decades, both leading up to and since the development of the roadmap, California has taken important steps towards constructing a policy system that supports MLE. (See Figure 3.) In the area of teacher training, for example, from 2004, all teacher training programs require educators be prepared to teach multilingual learners of English. Strengthened investment to encourage bilingual authorization credentialing for teachers also appears to be increasing the supply of qualified teachers (Jacobson et al., 2026). In 2012, California revised its English language development curriculum to align with the Common Core State Standards. The state likewise developed an assessment system aligned to the curriculum with the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) and later moved to the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) to assess English language proficiency.

California also enacted the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) that provides additional funding to local educational agencies (LEAs) to support English learners, which began to take effect in 2015. At the same time, California began to expand access to transitional kindergarten, allowing all 4-year-olds to participate in pre-Kindergarten programs. The California Community Schools grant program has enabled more schools to develop community partnerships for enhanced student supports. The passing of Proposition 58 in 2016 repealed Proposition 227—which had nearly eliminated bilingual programs and restricted special classes for English learners to just one year—again opened the doors for more LEAs and schools to develop bilingual programs. And the California English Learner Roadmap and Global California 2030 frameworks provide a vision and goals for California as a multilingual state. More recently, in 2024, the state also added a new definition and indicator of long-term English learners to the California School Dashboard, emphasizing the importance of addressing the needs of this vulnerable student group.

Figure 3. California Policies Regarding Multilingual Learners of English



Source: Adapted from Novicoff, S., Reardon, S. F., & Johnson, R. C. (2024). *California's English learners and their long-term learning outcomes*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/636.224

Current and Former Multilingual Learners of English

Why "Multilingual Learners of English"?

In this report, we use the term "multilingual learners of English," rather than "English learners," to describe those students who have a dominant home language other than English and who are also learning English. The choice of term underscores the state's goal that students be proficient in more than one language and particularly focuses on a subset of those students: those who are acquiring English in addition to their home language. This definition excludes those students who speak English as their home language who may be a multilingual learner of a language other than English. At times in the report, we use the terms "English learner," or "students classified as English learners," particularly when referencing specific definitions in legislation, policy, and/or data sources.

Multilingual Learners: Definitions

In addition to the terms multilingual learners of English (MLE) and English learners (EL) we also use the following terms:

Initial Fluent English Proficient (IFEP): A student in kindergarten through grade 12 for whom a language other than English is reported on the HLS (Home Language Survey) and who, upon initial assessment in California using an appropriate state assessment (currently the ELPAC; prior to the 2017–18 school year, the CELDT) and from additional information when appropriate, is determined to be proficient in English and not requiring any additional English learner-specific learning services.

Dual language learner (DLL): Students who are learning two or more languages or are learning a second language while continually developing their first language.

Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP): A student in kindergarten through grade 12 who, upon entering public school in California, is identified as an EL and subsequently reclassified/redesignated in California, per EC 313, as proficient in English.

English Only (EO): A student in kindergarten through grade 12 for whom the only language reported on the HLS is English or American Sign Language (ASL).

Long-Term English Learner (LTEL): The state uses two definitions of LTEL, each for a different purpose:

For the California School Dashboard:

- An English learner student is designated as LTEL if they have not attained English language proficiency within seven years of initial classification. (For more information see EC 52052.)

For DataQuest, CAASPP, and ELPAC: An English learner student is designated as LTEL when they meet all of the following criteria:

- Enrolled on Census Day (the first Wednesday in October) in grade six through twelve, inclusive; and
- Enrolled in a US school for six or more years; and
- Remained at the same English language proficiency level for two or more consecutive prior years, or has regressed to a lower English language proficiency level, as determined by the ELPAC; and
- For students enrolled in grades six through nine, inclusive:
    - Scored "Standard Not Met" on the previous year's administration on the English Language Arts (ELA) CAASPP. (For more information see EC 313.1.)

- Note: Pending legislation, if passed, would see the Dashboard definition of LTEL be used for all purposes (including DataQuest, CAASPP and ELPAC). Unless otherwise specified, we use the Dashboard definition in this report.

"Ever-EL": A student who is currently classified as an EL or who was formerly designated as an EL, but who has now been reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP).

Sources: Definitions reproduced or adapted from:
California Department of Education. *Glossary of terms for English learner (EL) reports.* Retrieved December 4, 2025, from https://preview.cde.ca.gov/DataQuest/LongTermEL/Glossary.aspx
California Department of Education. *Long-term English learner (LTEL) students.* Retrieved January 5, 2026, from https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/lteldef.asp
Californians Together. *Dual language learners.* Retrieved January 23, 2026, from https://californianstogether.org/what-we-do/policy-priorities/english-learner-profiles/dual-language-learners/

Who Are California's Multilingual Learners of English?

To effectively support the educational needs of California's MLE, it is important to understand the diversity of this student population. Though often grouped under the single header of "English learners," California's MLE are far from a monolith. California's multilingual students represent over 200 world languages (CDE, n.d.-a.). Some start schooling in California in TK while others first start in grade 12. For those who begin in later years, English language proficiency and curricular learning needs become more pressing, as it leaves fewer years to both master English and core curricular content with sufficient time to graduate.

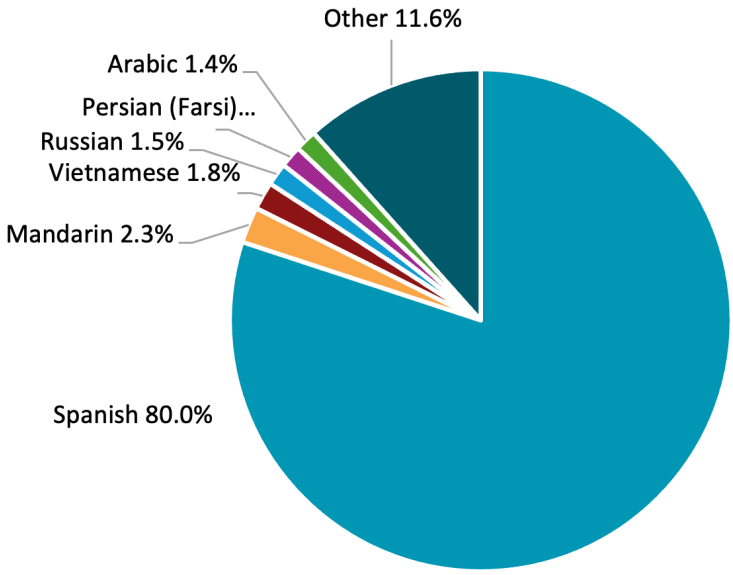
California's MLE also encompass both U.S.-born students from California and transferring from other states, as well as students from other countries in which English is not the dominant language. The most recent immigrant student arrivals are referred to as "newcomers." This latter group can also include a wide range of students, from those with high levels of literacy and multilingualism in their home countries to students with interrupted formal education (sometimes given the acronym "SIFE").[3] Some U.S.-born or immigrant multilingual learners can also be "migrant students" who move residential locations due to the nature of the work in which their families are engaged (CDE, n.d.-c.).

Each group of students has different educational and developmental needs. It is therefore important that California's schools have access to the resources, staffing, and training needed to support the breadth of learning needs of the students in their jurisdictions (Finn, 2023).

The composition of MLE in California is also changing, becoming more linguistically diverse. For example, the proportion of MLE whose home language is Spanish decreased from 83.7% to 80.0% from 2014–15 to 2024–25 (CDE, n.d.-a.). Across that same period, Mandarin overtook Vietnamese as the second most common language, with significant increases in the number and proportion of MLE whose home language was Russian and Farsi. The most common dominant home languages among MLE are shown in Figure 4.

[3] Students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) may also include refugee students, who left their country of origin due to persecution or violence.

Figure 4. Languages Spoken by Students Classified as English Learners, 2024–25



Source: California Department of Education. *DataQuest: English Learner Students by Language by Grade.* Retrieved February 18, 2026, from https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest

MLE initial proficiency at the most basic level of novice reached an all-time high in 2023–24: 74% of incoming English learners are entering schooling with little to no English language skills.[4] Since the pandemic, there has been a steady rise in the proportion of novice-level incoming MLE. Prior to the pandemic, novice rates were decreasing. Novicoff et al. (2024) found that the proportion of students scoring at the lowest level of English proficiency upon enrollment in kindergarten had decreased slightly from just over 46% in 2006 to 40% in 2018, while the proportion of enrolled English learner students from low socioeconomic backgrounds increased slightly from just under 68% to nearly 69% over the same period. A more recent study found that while the overall number of ever-EL students had decreased—with fewer newcomer students and those with less than 5 years classified as an

[4] LPI analysis of Initial ELPAC: Detailed Test Results for State of California. Retrieved March 23, 2026, from https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org/elpac/DashViewReportIA?ps=true&lstTestYear=2025&lstTestType=IA&lstGroup=1&lstSubGroup=001&lstGrade=13&lstSchoolType=A&lstCounty=00&lstDistrict=00000&lstSchool=0000000

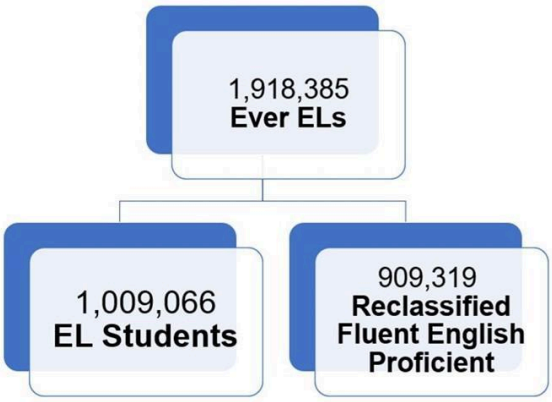
English learner—there had been an increase in the number of students designated as long-term English learners (Leger et al., 2023).

As the linguistic and demographic composition of K-EL cohorts changes and diversifies over time, this may have implications for the resources and language programming needs of schools and districts.

Understanding "Ever-ELs" in California

Of the approximately 5.8 million K–12 students in California in 2024–25, over 1.9 million (~33%) were students who were ever classified as English learners (Ever-ELs). Among these, 47% had been reclassified as fluent English proficient (RFEP) while the remaining 53% were still classified as English learners in 2024–25. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5. Ever-ELs in California, 2024–25



Source: California Department of Education. *DataQuest: 2024-25 Enrollment by English Language Acquisition Status (ELAS) and Grade.* https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DQCensus/EnrELAS.aspx?cds=00&agglevel=State&year=2024-25

Around 50% of current multilingual learners of English have been classified as an English learner for 3 years or fewer. However around a third have been classified as English learners in 7 or more school years and are designated as long-term English learners (LTEL).[5] Students designated as LTEL are more likely to have started at the lowest English proficiency levels, experience greater challenges in their

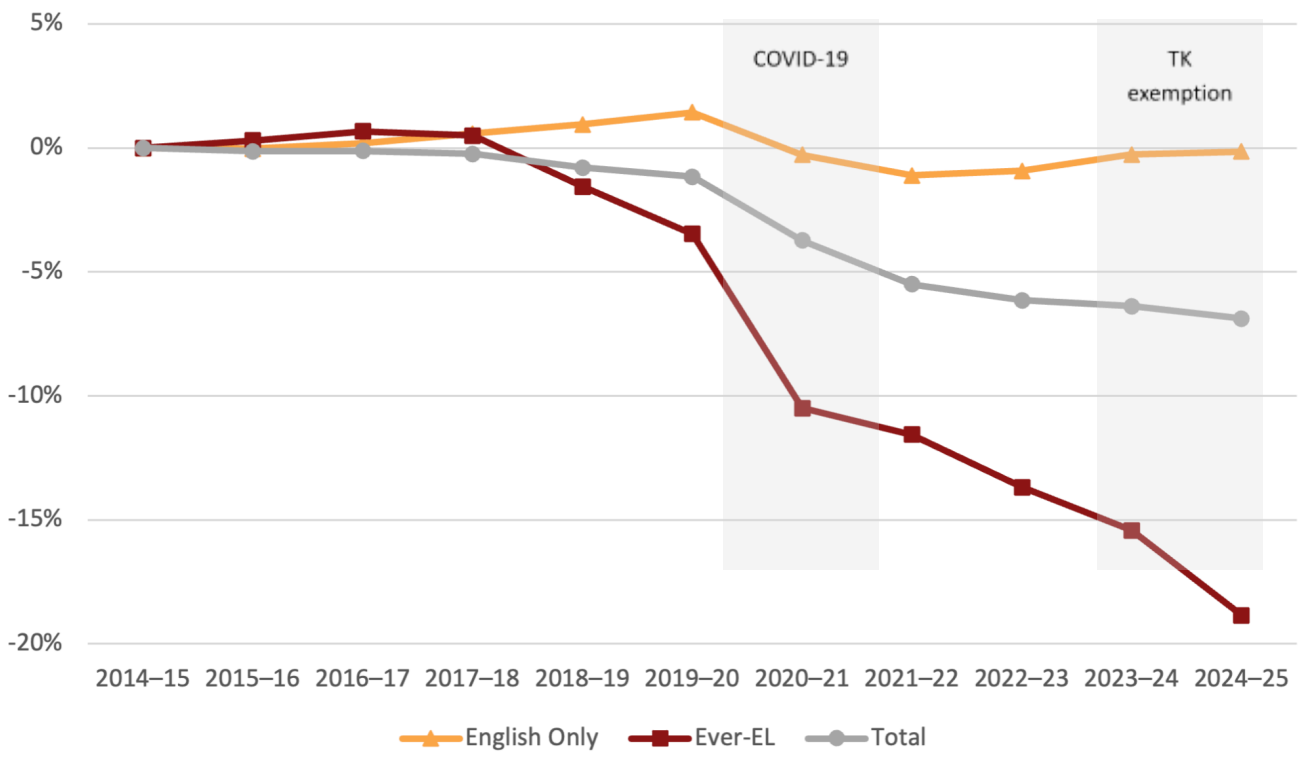
[5] Long-term English learner as defined by the California School Dashboard. See earlier in this report for definitions.

educational career, are less likely to graduate than other Ever-ELs, and thus may need more intensive supports (Price et al., 2024). We return to this student population later in this report.

Declines in the ever-EL student population, particularly in the years during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, have largely been the driver of notable declines in California's total K–12 population over the past decade. (See Figure 6.) Whereas the total student population has fallen by 6.9% over this period, the number of ever-EL students has declined by 18.8% (from 2.4 million to 1.9 million students); for English Only students, this number has been relatively stable over time (at around 3.5 million students). Despite these declines, ever-EL students still represent one third of all students in California.

This report does not provide a full accounting of the factors underlying the overall downward trend. However, demographic changes, including changing patterns of birthrates and migration, and to a lesser extent an uptick in homeschooling and private schooling, are thought to be among the contributing factors to the fall in the number of ever-EL students (Dee, 2023; Hill & Deng, 2025). The steepening of the decline in the most recent year of data (from 2023–24 to 2024–25) was due in part to a policy change—Assembly Bill 2268—that exempted students in Transitional Kindergarten from English language testing and so are excluded from the count of Ever-EL students.

Figure 6. Percentage Change in Ever-EL, English Only, and Total Enrollment Since 2014–15



Note: The right-side shaded region reflects a policy change such that Transitional Kindergarten students are exempted from English language testing. This change results in a steepening of the decline in the students classified as English learners for those years.

Sources: Adapted and extended from Hill, L., & Deng, B. (2025). *Adapting to changes in California's English learner population*. Public Policy Institute of California; California Department of Education. *DataQuest: Enrollment by English learner acquisition status (ELAS) and grade.* Retrieved February 18, 2026, from https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/

Declines in ever-EL enrollments have been most pronounced in large districts, including Los Angeles Unified, San Diego Unified, Long Beach Unified and San Francisco Unified (Hill & Deng, 2025). By contrast, some northern and central districts have experienced an increase in the number of ever-EL students. Given that just over half of ever-EL students are classified as English learners and therefore contribute to supplemental and concentration funding under LCFF, a large decline in this student group can have important financial implications for districts.

Key takeaways

- California's total enrollment has fallen over the past decade. This decline has been driven primarily by a drop in the number of students classified as English learners. Nonetheless, California still has among the largest number of multilingual learners of English (MLE)—also often referred to as English learners—in the United States.
- Declines in enrollment can have financial implications for school districts.
- Over the past two decades, California has enacted a number of policy reforms and investments to strengthen the learning environment for MLE. The California English Learner Roadmap sets out the vision for MLE education, and the "aligned set of practices, services, relationships, and approaches to teaching and learning" for implementation.
- To understand long-term trends and improvements in the context of policy reforms, it is important to use an "ever-English learner (ever-EL)" approach. This approach observes student outcomes both while they are classified as English learners and once they have been reclassified as fluent English proficient. Looking only at scores of current English learners can give a misleading picture of trends and progress.
- Among ever-EL students in California, around half are currently classified as English learners and half are reclassified as fluent English proficient.
- California's MLE have become more linguistically diverse over time, although Spanish still predominates as a home language for MLE.

Educational Progress of Multilingual Learners of English

Researchers have been able to follow MLE over time to assess their progression in English language development, reclassification trends, and outcomes on state assessments in math and ELA.

In this section we describe:

- The K-cohort EL method to study the long-term progress of ever-ELs in California

- Trends in 3rd and 5th grade Math and English learning outcomes for K-cohort ELs
- Trends in English language acquisition for K-cohort ELs
    - What ELPI levels tell us about the progress of MLE students
- Trends in reclassification as fluent English proficient for K-cohort ELs

This section draws primarily on a 2024 report by researchers Sarah Novicoff, sean reardon, and Rucker Johnson: *California's English learners and their long-term learning outcomes*. Their report relied on administrative data provided, under agreement, by the California Department of Education covering the years 2006–07 through 2018–19 (Novicoff et al., 2024).

Kindergarten-English Learner Cohorts: Approach to Studying Long-Term Outcomes

Due to the changing composition of California's multilingual learners of English, this study used a variation on the ever-EL approach to studying MLE students. The ever-EL approach used by Novicoff et al. (2024) specifically followed cohorts of students who began their schooling in California and were classified as English learners in kindergarten—known as K-EL cohorts. Following these K-EL cohorts over time allowed analysis of the status and trends in the pace of language development—from being classified as English learners to reclassified as fluent English proficient—and in ELA and math performance on state assessments. Their approach also compared students in the K-EL cohorts to those who were never classified as English learners in kindergarten (K-Never-EL) in efforts to observe the changes in achievement gaps over time. With this approach, the researchers sought to provide answers to the questions:

- Among students enrolled in California schools since kindergarten, to what extent did the achievement gap change between English learners and never-EL students over a decade?
- How do these kindergarteners fare in later grades during their K–12 schooling?

Trends in English Language Acquisition

Novicoff et al. (2024) found that English language proficiency for students in K-EL cohorts had improved over time (Novicoff et al., 2024). The researchers looked at the proportion of K-EL students meeting

state guidelines for English proficiency as measured by the English language proficiency test in place at the time.[6] The study found improvements in the listening, speaking, and reading domains, although scores in the written domain remained relatively flat. Overall, the researchers found that students in later cohorts were reaching proficiency more rapidly than those in earlier cohorts.

Figure 7 shows the findings for 10 cohorts of K-EL students, based on the year of entry, beginning with the first student cohort that entered kindergarten in 2006 through to the final cohort that entered in 2015. The stacked vertical bars identify the grade levels at which students in each cohort achieved a sufficient test score to be considered English proficient. As these English proficiency data were followed until the phasing out of the previous English proficiency test, more recent cohorts show fewer grades in their vertical bars.

The figure shows two key findings. First, the proportion of students reaching proficiency in earlier grades increased over time. For example, 40.0% of students in the 2015 cohort reached proficiency by the end of grade 1, compared to just 23.4% of those in the 2006 cohort, with the most significant growth occurring in more recent years, after the 2011 K-EL cohort.

More specifically however, the authors found that growth over cohorts was driven mainly by increases in the domains of listening and speaking, with the reading and writing domains (tests for which were administered to all elementary grades from 2009) being relatively stable. As Novicoff et al. (2024) note:

> The percentage of students scoring a 3 (Intermediate) or higher on the CELDT writing exam at the end of 1st grade was relatively flat between the entering cohorts from 2009 to 2015, while the percentage scoring Intermediate for reading improved by 23.0%, the percentage scoring Intermediate for speaking improved by 19.7%, and the percentage scoring Intermediate for listening improved by 16.7%. Additionally, as expected, K-cohort EL students generally scored Intermediate in listening and speaking much earlier than they did in reading and writing. Specifically, in the most recent cohort in our sample,

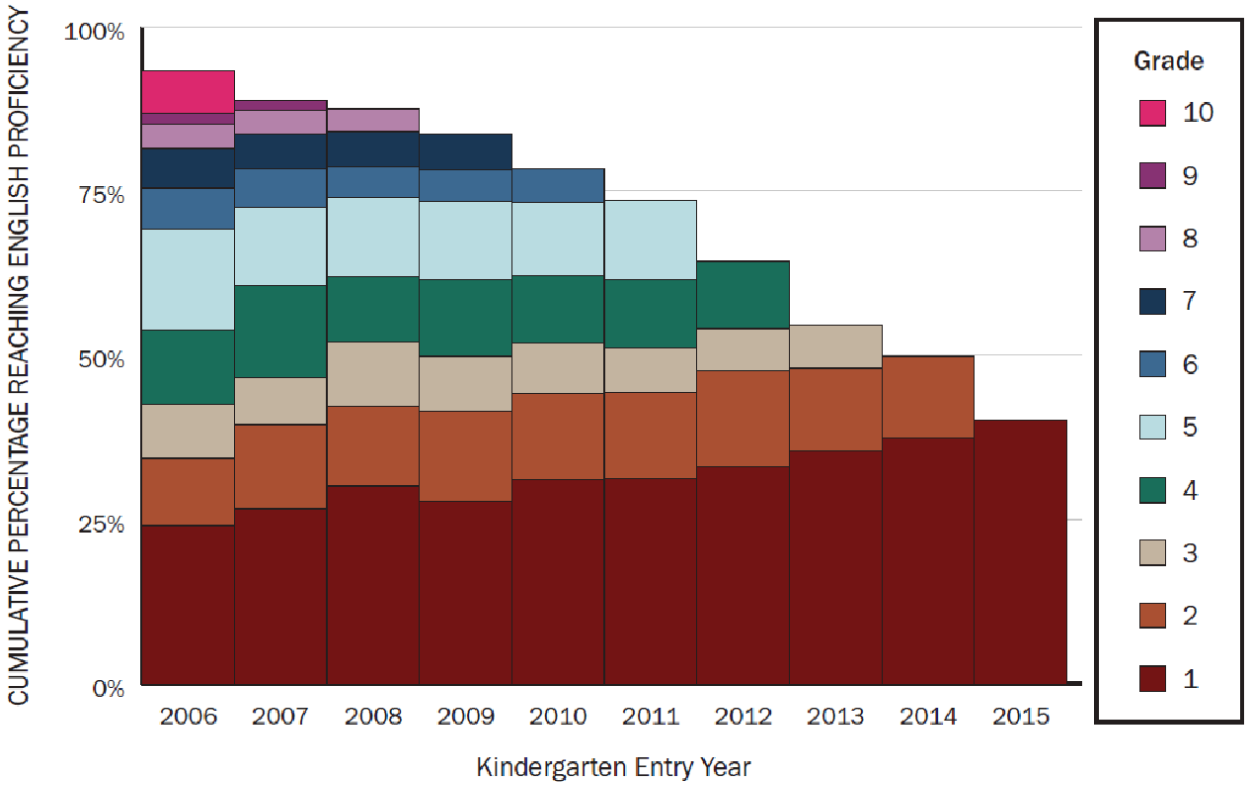
[6] Overall scores on the CELDT are calculated from a combination of scores on the speaking, listening, reading, and writing domains, depending on student grade level. A score of 3 on the five-point scale is the minimum level at which students were regarded as being proficient in each domain, with an overall score of 4 typically required to be regarded as proficient in English. For further information, see California Department of Education. *CELDT technical documentation*. Retrieved January 7, 2026, from https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pr/techreport.asp

> 69.7% of K-cohort EL students scored Intermediate in listening by the end of 1st grade, and 77.7% scored Intermediate in speaking, while only 43.1% scored Intermediate in reading and 34.3% scored Intermediate in writing. These differences shrink as students age, but they still persist. In our most recently observed cohort of 5th-grade K-cohort ELs, 96.3% scored Intermediate in listening, and 97.3% scored Intermediate in speaking, while 84.9% scored Intermediate in reading and 88.9% scored Intermediate in writing. This indicates that reading and writing may be areas with the potential for growth in the pursuit of English proficiency. (p. 15)

Second, among the K-EL cohorts that the researchers were able to follow, the proportion of students reaching proficiency by 5th grade remained relatively stable. Among the 2006 K-EL cohort, the proportion of students reaching proficiency by the end of 5th grade was 67.7%; for the 2011 cohort—the last cohort the researchers were able to follow through the end of 5th grade—the proportion who reached proficiency by the end of 5th grade was 72.2%.[7] Further research is needed to understand if the improvements in reaching proficiency by 1st grade noted above are reflected in 5th grade proficiency among later cohorts.

[7] Because the CELDT was phased out at the end of the 2016–17 school year, the 2011 K-EL cohort was the most recent through which the researchers could follow students through to the end of 5th grade.

Figure 7. Cumulative Percentage of K-Cohort ELs Meeting State Guidance for English Proficiency on CELDT



Source: Figure reproduced from Novicoff, S., Reardon, S. F., & Johnson, R. C. (2024). *California's English learners and their long-term learning outcomes*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/636.224. California Department of Education data. Researcher calculations.

Researchers also looked at rates of English proficiency depending on whether students entered kindergarten with low, medium, or high initial scores on the English proficiency tests. Findings showed improvements in rates of English proficiency across cohorts among all three initial score groups. For example, "the percentage of students with low initial scores who were proficient by the end of 1st grade improved by 112%" from the 2006 cohort to the 2015 cohort (p.15). Despite this, significant gaps remain. By the end of elementary school (5th grade), just 43.1% of K-EL students in the 2011 cohort (the most recent study cohort extending to 5th grade) entering kindergarten with low initial scores had achieved English proficiency, compared with 89.7% of those entering at the highest levels of proficiency (Novicoff et al., 2024, p.15).

English Language Proficiency and Time to Reclassification

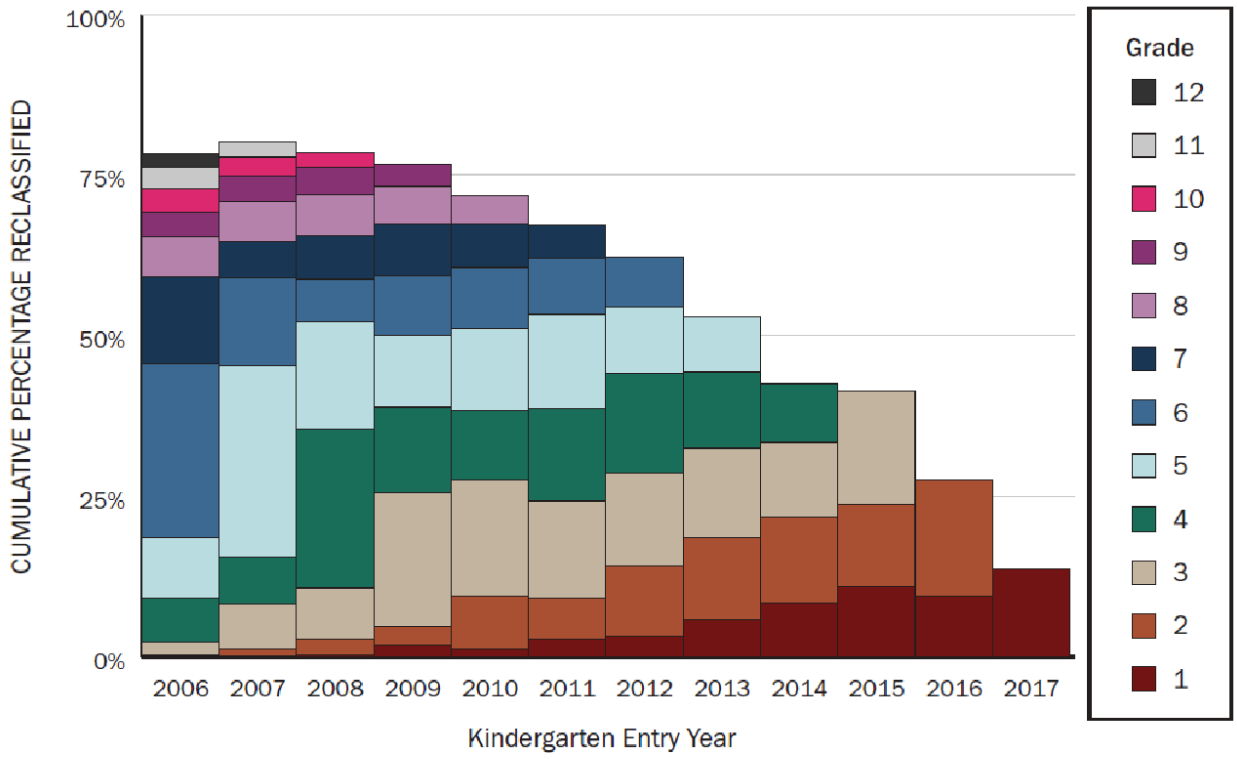
Achieving English proficiency alone is not sufficient to reclassify as fluent English proficient. As discussed more fully in the appendix to this report, English proficiency is one of four criteria used by LEAs in decision-making regarding reclassification. LEAs may apply these criteria in different ways, contributing to variation in time to reclassification.

Time to reclassification also depends on a range of other factors, including the programmatic approach (Umansky & Dumont, 2021). All of the students in these kindergarten cohorts started their schooling under Proposition 227 that codified English-Only immersion programming. In 2016, voters approved Proposition 58 that repealed many provisions of Proposition 227 and opened up options for a variety of bilingual programming. But these programs could not suddenly be built, staffed, and operated overnight, and so many of these K-cohort students spent most of their elementary years in English-Only EL programs.

The results under this majority English-Only programming found that more recent cohorts of students from 2012–2015 were reclassified to fluent English proficient in earlier grades. Novicoff et al. (2024) note that fewer than 1% of students in the 2008 cohort had reclassified by the end of 1st grade, but 13.7% had reclassified by 1st grade for the 2017 cohort (p. 17).

During this time period, earlier reclassification did not amount to more students being reclassified by the end of 5th grade—a key transition point as students exit elementary school. In fact, Novicoff et al. (2024) found that just over half of students in K-EL cohorts from 2008 to 2013 were reclassified 6 years later in 5th grade despite the encouraging findings of improvements in the rates of English language acquisition presented above. Novicoff et al. (2024, p. 17) note that was thus a considerable gap between the proportion of students deemed to have reached English proficiency by 5th grade as measured by the test (approximately 72% as shown in Figure 7) and the proportion of students reclassified by 5th grade (approximately 50% as shown in Figure 8). However, given that the dataset did not permit the researchers to follow cohorts of students who experienced the LCFF and Transitional Kindergarten investments through to 5th grade, future research should examine whether and how reclassification trends may have changed since these investments.

Figure 8. Cumulative Percentage of K-Cohort ELs Reclassified by Grade and Year



Source: Figure reproduced from Novicoff, S., Reardon, S. F., & Johnson, R. C. (2024). *California's English learners and their long-term learning outcomes*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/636.224. California Department of Education data. Researcher calculations.

The overall finding of a gap between the proportion of students reaching English proficiency and the proportion reclassified suggests a disconnect between the two. This may be in part due to differences among LEAs in how reclassification criteria are applied locally. Other studies of MLE in California also confirm this finding: Students can demonstrate proficiency in English and not be reclassified (Umansky et al., 2015). For example, analyzing the 2010 K-EL cohort—the latest cohort follow through to the end of middle school—Novicoff et al. (2024) underscored this disconnect:

> We observe that 48.5% of K-cohort ELs were reclassified in elementary school. Among those who were not reclassified (e.g., LTELs), we observe that more than half scored proficient on the CELDT, again demonstrating the gaps between proficiency and reclassification discussed earlier. In middle school, another 18.8% of K-cohort ELs were

> reclassified. Put another way, among K-cohort ELs for whom we can observe reclassification data in both elementary and middle school, 73.1% were reclassified by the end of middle school. This leaves more than one quarter of K-cohort ELs who were enrolled in California schools for 9 years but were yet not reclassified. (p. 18)

Earlier research suggested that the variation in local standards and interpretations of state law may have led some districts to conservatively reclassify students (Estrada & Wang, 2018). Further research is needed to understand the extent to which this remains a challenge. Students who reach proficiency but are not reclassified by the end of elementary school may then become labeled as long-term English learners as they enter middle school. Given that many schools create a separate track of coursework for students who remain classified as English learners, students who do not reclassify may miss out on taking core content courses, including A–G college preparatory courses that would prepare them for admission to a 4-year state college (Umansky et al., 2015).

Understanding the extent to which MLE students are able to reclassify as fluent English proficient provides valuable information about whether and when students are able to access the full curriculum and whether additional assessments or interventions are needed to assist learning growth. As Johnson and Goldenberg (2020) describe:

> If the [reclassification] threshold is too high, students who no longer need ELL [English Language Learner] services continue receiving them, but possibly at the cost of access to mainstream curriculum and non-ELL classmates. If the threshold is too low, students who still need ELL services don't receive them and are likely to have difficulties in mainstream classes. The heart of the matter is not solely whether the reclassification bar is set too high or too low, but rather where the reclassification bar is set *in relation to* the support ELLs might need and *combined with* adequate access to mainstream curriculum and peers.

MLE students who are not reclassified after more than 6 years (or 7 years by Dashboard definition) can become labeled as long-term English learners. We discuss this student group in the next section.

Trends in Math and English Learning Outcomes for Multilingual Learners of English

Studying K-EL cohorts, Novicoff et al. (2024) also found improvements in 3rd grade scores between cohorts in earlier years compared to more recent cohorts.[8] By converting CAASPP scores to national grade-level equivalent units based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP),[9] the researchers found that 3rd grade scores in English language arts (ELA) had improved by 0.70 grade levels—moving from an average of 1.55 grade-level ELA in 3rd grade to 2.24 grade-level equivalent units—between the 2006 and 2015 K-EL cohorts (p. 12). (See Figure 9, Panel A.) They also found that scores in math had improved by 0.19 grade levels—from 2.08 to 2.27 grade-level equivalent units—between the same two K-EL cohorts. (See Figure 9, Panel B.)

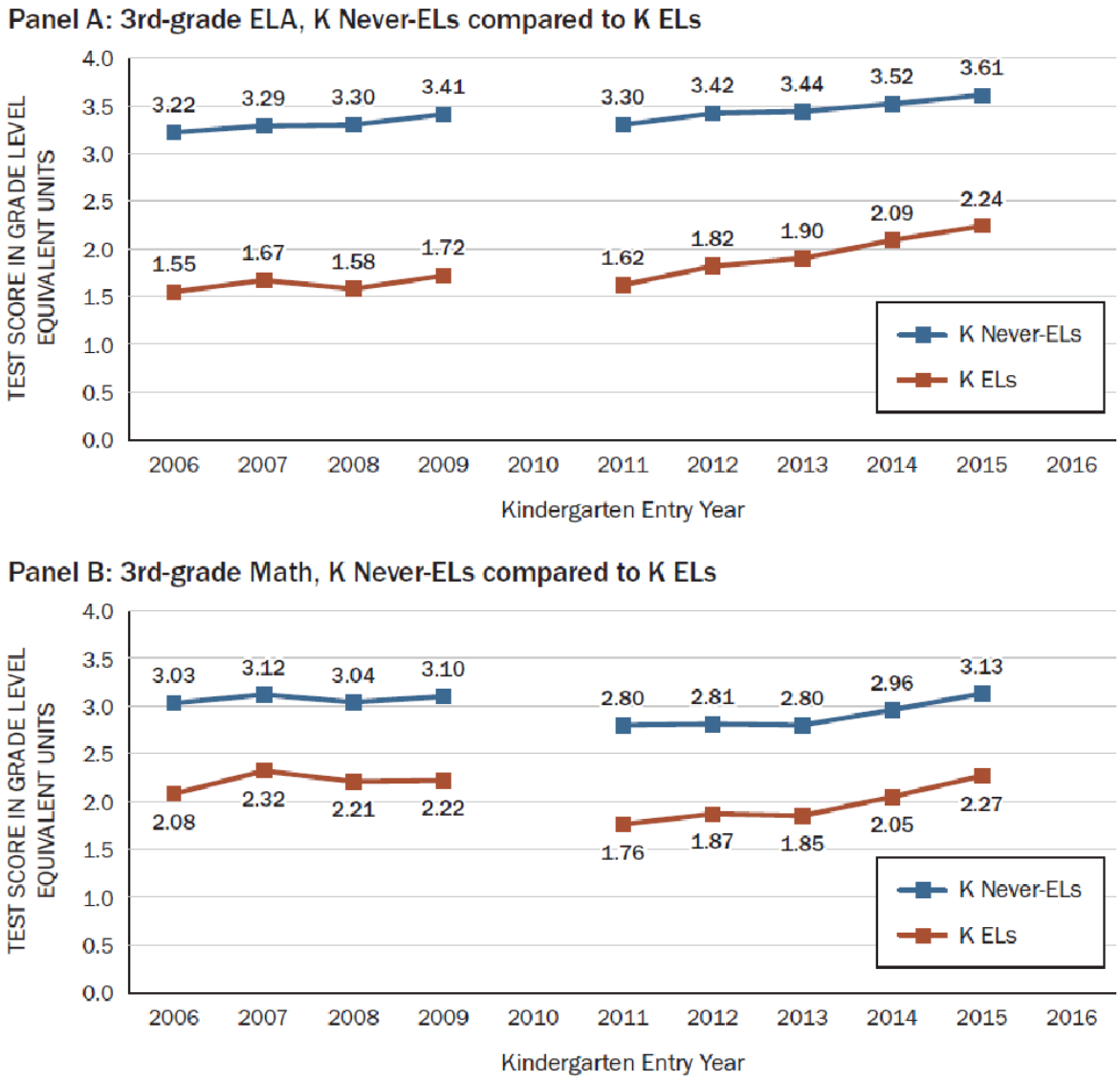
Moreover, Novicoff et al. (2024, p. 12) found that the achievement gap by 3rd grade between students classified as English learners in kindergarten (K-ELs) and those not classified as such (K-never-ELs) also decreased over the period. For the 2006 cohort, they found that K-never-EL students performed at 1.67 grade levels higher in ELA than their K-EL peers (3.22 vs. 1.55 grade-level units), and 0.95 grade levels higher (3.03 vs. 2.08 grade-level units) in math. For the 2015 cohort, they found that these gaps had reduced to 1.36 grade levels in ELA (a 19% decrease) and 0.85 grade levels in math (a 9% decrease).[10]

[8] Third grade appears as an important juncture in academic and language development. Often described as period in which students transition from primarily "learning to read" to developing stronger abilities in "reading to learn," it is a useful marker for assessing student learning outcomes. It is also the first tested grade on the CASSPP.

[9] Using NAEP grade-level equivalent units allows for measuring absolute changes relative to national averages in each subject.

[10] Note that this narrowing of the gap among cohorts (K-EL vs. K-never-EL) occurred despite a widening of the overall achievement gap between EL and non-EL students (see Figure 2 in Novicoff et al., 2024). This underscores the limitations of data snapshots and the value of a more nuanced approach, such as cohort analysis.

Figure 9. Academic Achievement of California's K-Cohort English Learners



Source: Figure reproduced from Novicoff, S., Reardon, S. F., & Johnson, R. C. (2024). *California's English learners and their long-term learning outcomes*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/636.224. California Department of Education data. Researcher calculations.

As the Novicoff et al. (2024) noted, the improvements in English language proficiency and in state assessments of math and ELA, especially for later cohorts, are suggestive of California's policy reforms, including state investments in teacher training, Transitional Kindergarten, and school funding (LCFF), beginning to take effect:

Taken together, these results show significant improvements in the academic achievement and English proficiency acquisition rates of California's kindergarten ELs for the cohorts that began kindergarten between 2006 and 2015, likely related to improvements in the school learning environments that kindergarten ELs experienced. Our results suggest that some combination of the policies described earlier—from more rigorous requirements for teacher preparedness for ELs to increased funding and the introduction of transitional kindergarten (TK)—has likely contributed to this improvement in EL outcomes. (p. 20)

Key takeaways

- There were improvements over time in 3rd grade scores of cohorts of students first classified as English learners in kindergarten (K-ELs) on state assessments (CAASPP) in English language arts and math across the period from 2006 to 2018. More recent cohorts narrowed the gap in both subjects between ever-EL and never-EL students. These findings coincided with state policy reforms and investments related to teacher training requirements, overall funding, and Transitional Kindergarten.
- Over the period from 2006 to 2017, more recent cohorts of K-ELs were achieving English language proficiency, as measured by the CELDT, more rapidly than previous cohorts.
- Students in more recent K-EL cohorts were reclassified to fluent English proficient in earlier grades. However, the proportion of students reclassified by the end of elementary school stayed relatively the same through the 5th grade 2013 K-EL cohort (5th grade in 2018–19). Students not reclassified by the end of elementary school may become labeled as long-term English learners with potential consequences for their educational trajectory.
- Gaps exist between when students reach English proficiency and when they are reclassified. Data from this study did not extend far enough to fully evaluate whether reclassification rates will eventually follow the increases seen in English language proficiency. Other studies suggest the use of multiple reclassification criteria sustains a prolonged disconnect (Umansky & Porter, 2020). In these specific cases, better understanding about how the other criteria factor into

reclassification may represent an area for further investigation. Despite these improvements, significant gaps persist for students entering kindergarten with the lowest levels of initial English proficiency. To further support language development, there may be a need for targeted interventions in elementary grades that differentiate between those entering with higher and lower English proficiencies.

Status and Progress of Multilingual Learners of English Classified as Long-Term English Learners

Multilingual learners of English who are classified as English learners in seven or more school years and do not reclassify as fluent English proficient (RFEP) are labeled as long-term English learners (LTELs).[11] Students labeled as LTEL may need additional supports to help their English language development, or they may have additional learning or other support needs to help them maximize their educational potential. Understanding who among MLE is most likely to become labeled as LTEL, their school contexts, and academic outcomes provides important information on how to shape policy to support the English development and learning progression of this group of MLE.

Taking longer to reach English proficiency, in and of itself, is not necessarily problematic, with research showing that even in the most successful teaching environments, proficiency in academic English can take 4 to 7 years to develop (Hakuta et al., 2000), or longer depending on a range of student and school factors (Collier & Thomas, 2017; Cook et al., 2012). However, if students are classified as English learners for long periods of time with stalled progress, they risk losing interest in school or confidence in their abilities (Estrada, Wang, & Farkas, 2020; Lee & Soland, 2023). Depending on the school schedule design in middle and high school that imposes tracking or other constraints, it can also lead to missing out on accessing the full curriculum (as reviewed by Umansky & Porter, 2020). These course

[11] In this section, we use the California School Dashboard definition of long-term English learner: a student classified as an English learner in 7 or more school years. Pending legislation, if passed, would make this the definition for both statutory and regulatory purposes.

exclusion practices potentially impact the likelihood of graduation and thus long-term prospects beyond school (Johnson, 2019; Umansky et al., 2015;).

Factors such as the mode of instruction can play a role. Some language programs are structured such that students progress along a slower trajectory to reach proficiency, with a view towards greater educational outcomes in the long run. For example, some dual immersion programs balance instruction in more than one language to develop biliteracy and, while they have a somewhat slower path to English proficiency, they show stronger long-term outcomes for students, including English proficiency, eligibility for reclassification, and achievement in English language arts (Collier & Thomas, 2017; Umansky & Reardon, 2014). (See an example in Table 1.) Additional research finds that strong literacy skills in a student's home language correlates with higher achievement in English than instruction in English alone (Collier & Thomas, 2017; Goldenberg, 2011). Nonetheless, the research is nuanced: effective instructional practices in reading for English Only students tend to also be effective for MLE, although additional supports for MLE may be needed to support ongoing English language development (Goldenberg & Cárdenas-Hagan, 2023).

Findings in this section draw significantly on the work on a 2024 study report from the Learning Policy Institute: *Long-Term English Learners in California*. In contrast with the previous section, which focused on K-ELs, this section looks at all ever-EL students, whether first enrolled in kindergarten or in later grades.

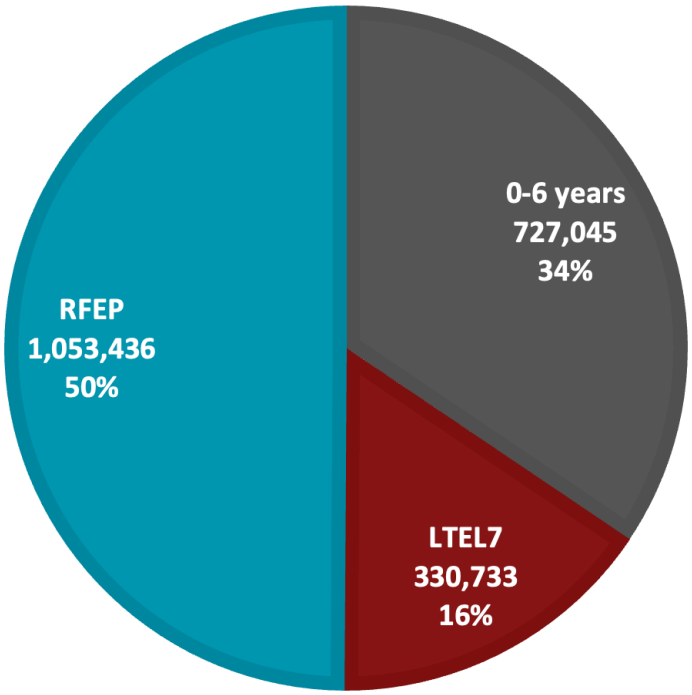
Table 1. Example: Approximate Balance of Language of Instruction in a Two-Way Dual Language Immersion Program in an Elementary School District

Grade	Balance of language of instruction
K–1	80% Mandarin; 20% English
2–3	60% Mandarin; 40% English
4–5	50% Mandarin; 50% English

Source: Padilla, A. M., Fan, L., Xu, X., & Silva, D. (2013). A Mandarin/English two-way immersion program: Language proficiency and academic achievement. *Foreign Language Annals*, *46*(4), 661–679. https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12060

Among MLE in California who have ever been classified as an English learner, around half have been reclassified as fluent English proficient, a third are classified as English learners, while around 1 in 6 such students are labeled as long-term English learners. In 2022–23, there were 330,733 students labeled as LTEL (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. California Enrollment by Ever-EL Status, 2022–23



Notes: The counts are based on cumulative enrollment counts. RFEP = Reclassified as fully English proficient.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of CALPADS enrollment data provided by the California Department of Education. Reproduced from Price, H., Burns, D., Loewe, S., Shields, P., Kaplan, J., & Lee, H. (2024). *Long-term English learners in California*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/496.998.

Grade Level and Years Classified as an English Learner

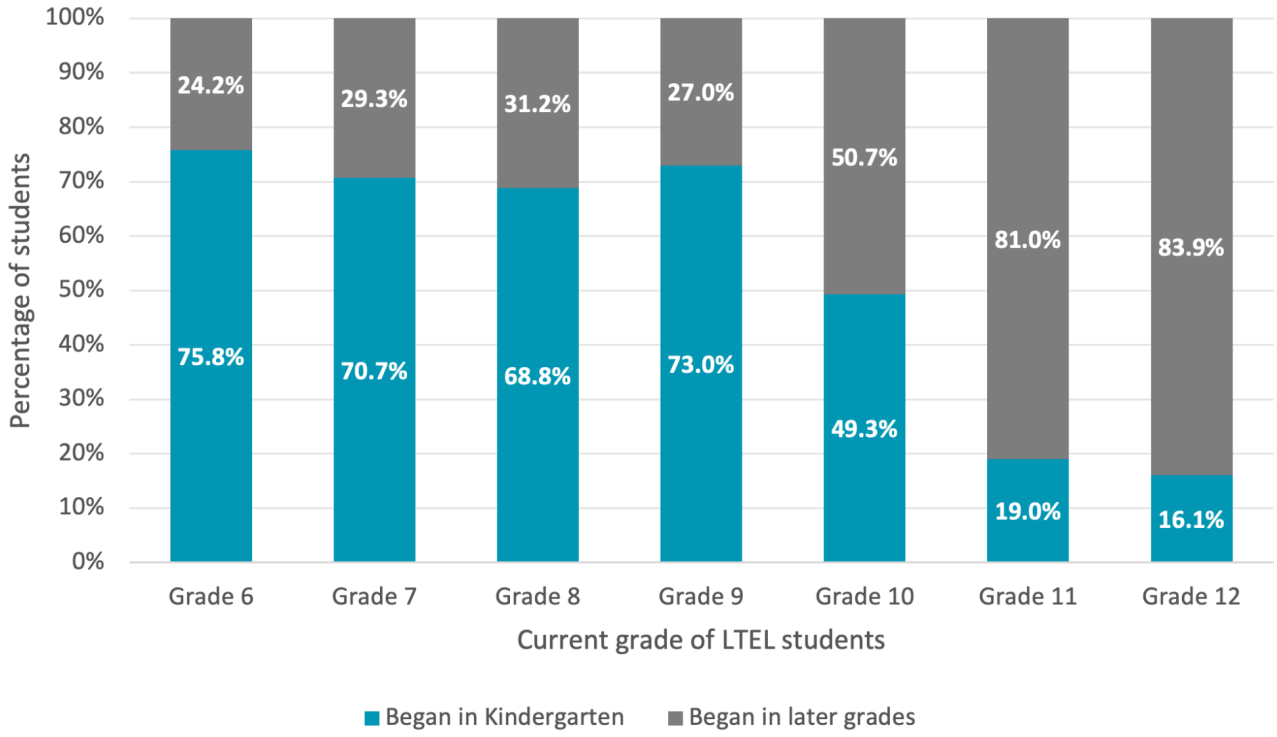
Almost all of the 330,733 students labeled as LTEL were enrolled in middle and high school grades, given that students with this label were those classified as English learners in 7 or more school years. (The few exceptions would be students who were retained in grade or had interrupted schooling.) Whereas the majority of students labeled as LTEL in grades 6–9 had been classified as English learners

in kindergarten, for those in grades 10–12, the majority of LTEL students began later than kindergarten grade. (See Figure 11.) This later start signals a recent move from another state or country, or some other disruption to the students' education.

Although the majority of students labeled as LTEL are U.S.-born (Valdes & Castrechini, 2026), this group also includes students who were newcomer students (i.e., those who began their formal schooling outside the U.S.). This includes both those who may have academic competency in the home language but lack English proficiency, as well as students who may have experienced disruptions to their educational trajectory, often known as SIFE—students with interrupted formal education.[12] Around 80% of newcomers students are initially classified as EL, and these students may need specialized curricula and instruction, appropriate both to their academic learning needs and English language development, to avoid stalled progress and/or becoming labeled as LTEL (Finn, 2023). This can be especially important for those newcomer students who arrive in later elementary grades, as this constrains the time available for students to both acquire English proficiency and accumulate sufficient academic credits to graduate.

[12] The acronym SLIFE is sometimes also used: students with limited or interrupted formal education.

Figure 11. Percentage of Students Designated as LTEL Who Began in Kindergarten by Grade in School, 2022–23



Source Learning Policy Institute analysis of CELDT data provided by the California Department of Education. Reproduced from Price, H., Burns, D., Loewe, S., Shields, P., Kaplan, J., & Lee, H. (2024). *Long-term English learners in California*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/496.998

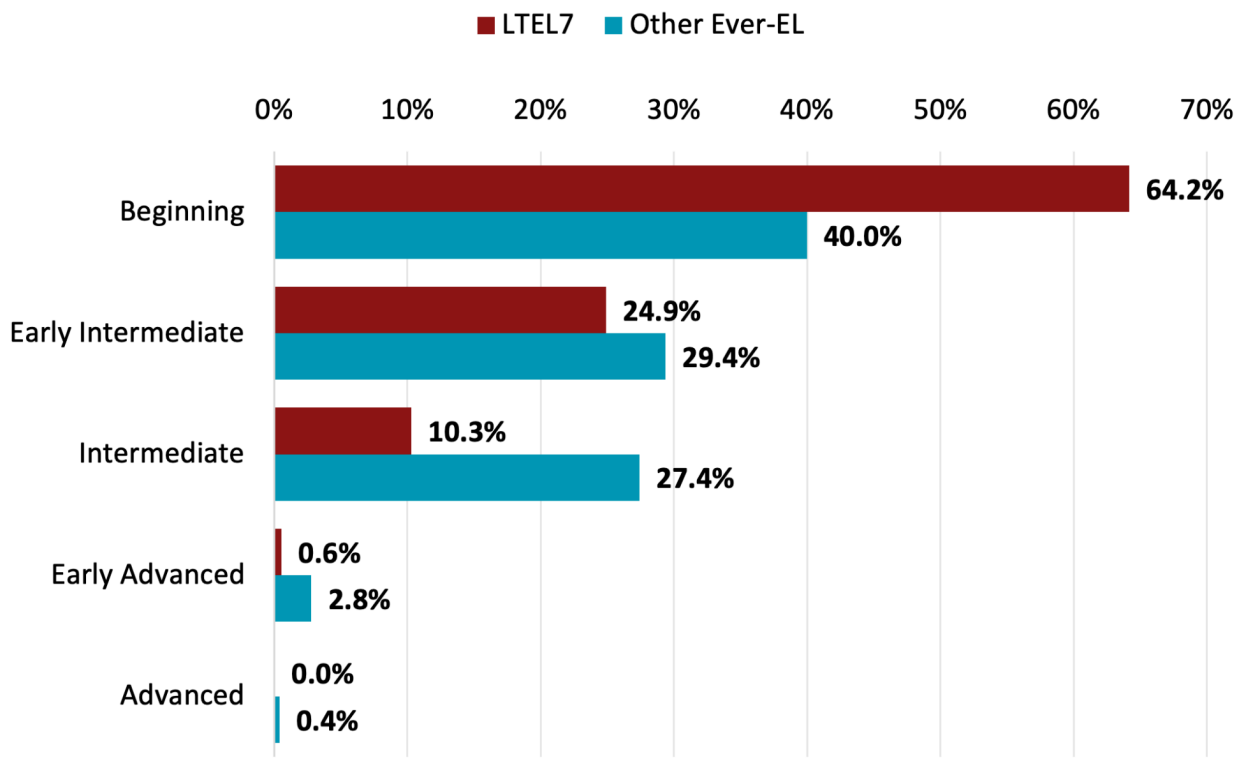
Demographics and Initial Proficiency of Students Labeled as Long-Term English Learners

Among ever-EL students designated as long-term English learners, boys, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, students with special education needs, and students with low levels of initial English proficiency were disproportionately represented among students labeled as long-term English learners (Price et al., 2024). For example, around 56% of students labeled as LTEL were boys, compared with 51% of all other ever-EL students. Likewise, around 89% of students labeled as LTEL were from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to 80% among other ever-EL students.

Students labeled as LTEL were more likely to have started at the lowest levels of English proficiency. Analysis of intake English proficiency data shows that nearly two thirds of students labeled as LTEL

began at the lowest level of the English proficiency test in place at the time, compared with 40% of other ever-ELs. (See Figure 12.)

Figure 12. Percentage of Initial English Proficiencies of Students Designated as LTEL and Other Ever-ELs, 2022–23



Note: Chi-square tests confirm that all differences between LTEL and other ever-ELs are significant at $p<0.001$.

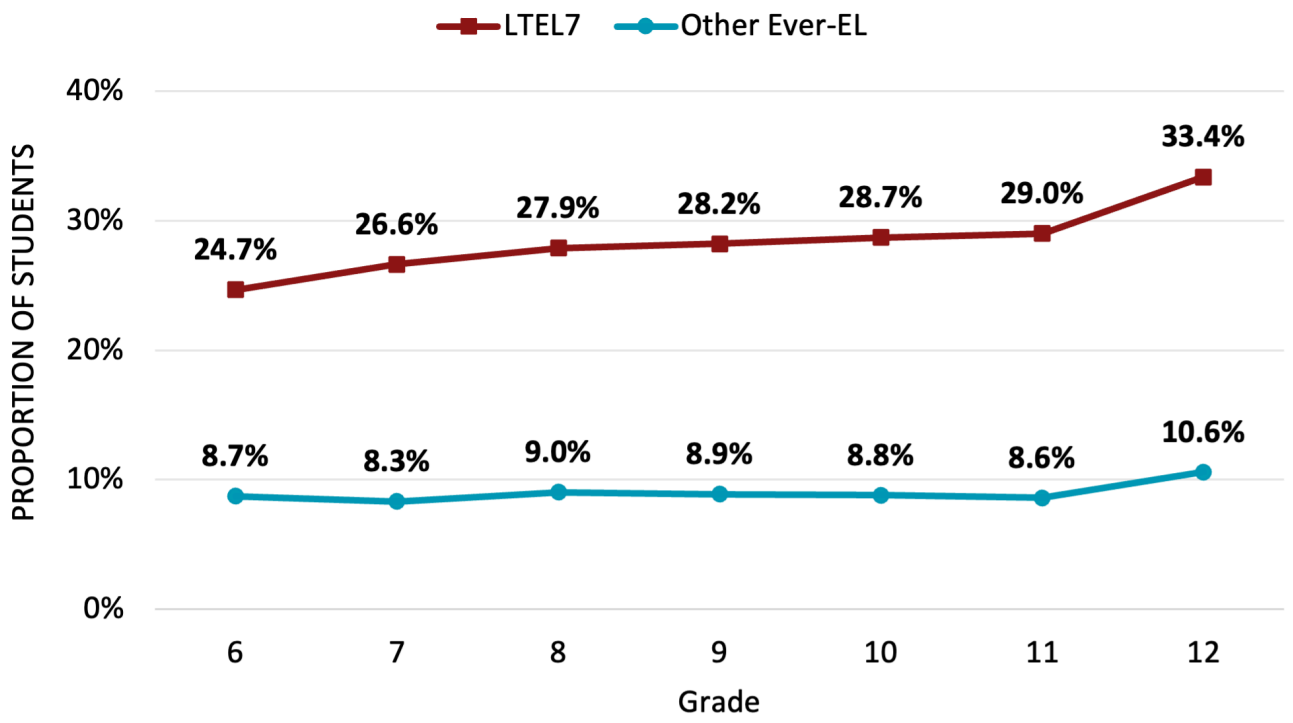
Source Learning Policy Institute analysis of CELDT data provided by the California Department of Education. Reproduced from Price, H., Burns, D., Loewe, S., Shields, P., Kaplan, J., & Lee, H. (2024). *Long-term English learners in California*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/496.998

Salient among the demographic characteristics of LTEL students was special education status. Previous research finds that long-term English learners are more likely to be identified as having special education needs (Murphy & Johnson, 2023). In particular, earlier studies showed that high school-aged students classified as English learners were disproportionately represented among students identified with special education needs, while elementary school-aged students were under-identified for special education (Umansky et al., 2015). A recent study of several Bay Area districts also found the nature of identified disabilities among students classified as English learners differed between those classified for

fewer than 7 years (speech or language impairment most commonly identified) and those labeled as LTEL (predominantly specific learning disability identified) (Valdes & Castrechini, 2026).

Price et al. (2024) found that among the 330,733 students identified as long-term English learners in 2022–23, nearly 28% were identified as having special education needs, around 2.5 times that of other ever-ELs (11%). (See Figure 13.) This percentage increased across grade levels, with around one third of students labeled as LTEL in grade 12 also being identified as having special education needs. Early identification of disabilities among students classified and English learners and their relationship with language processing will be important to support their learning growth. The Getting Down to Facts III report by Artiles and Souto-Maior (2026) provides an extensive look into this subpopulation of MLE students.

Figure 13. Percentage of Students with Special Education Needs: Students Designated as LTEL Compared to Other Ever-ELs by Grade Level, 2022–23



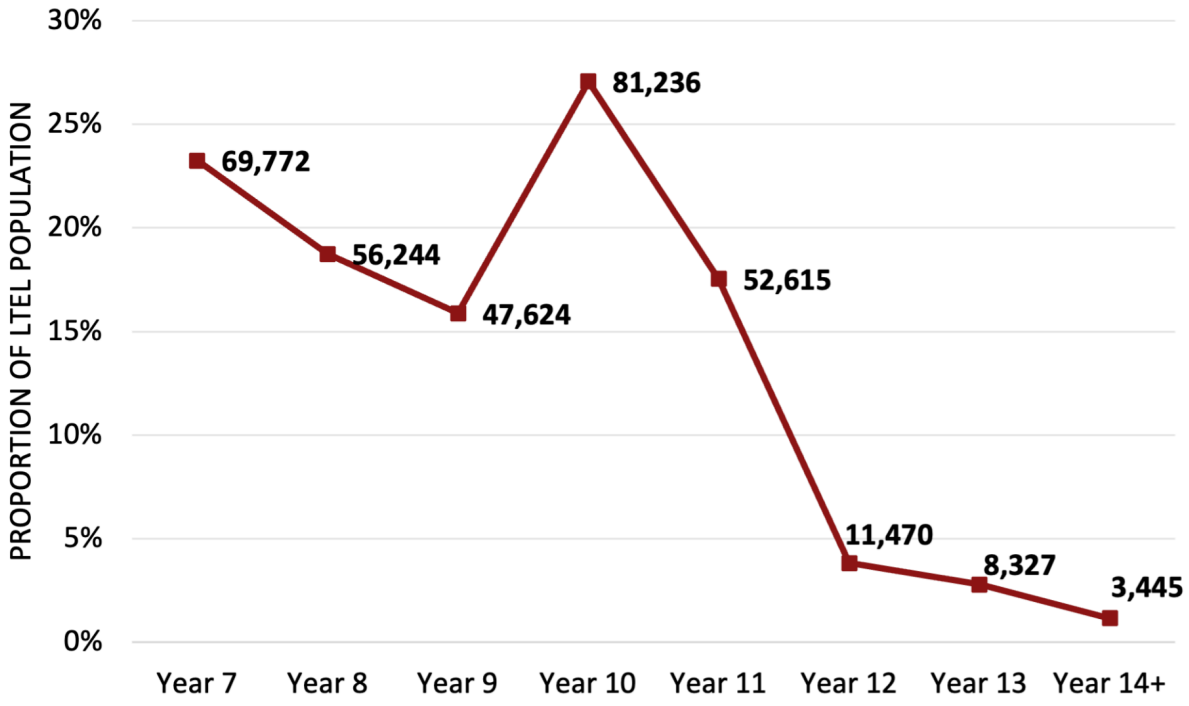
Source Learning Policy Institute analysis of CELDT data provided by the California Department of Education. Reproduced from Price, H., Burns, D., Loewe, S., Shields, P., Kaplan, J., & Lee, H. (2024). *Long-term English learners in California*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/496.998

Together, these data underscore the importance of early and accurate assessment of the nature of any special education needs and the relationship to language processing. An understanding of these issues in more detail may enable a better assessment of individual needs, and the timely deployment of appropriate interventions and resources to support student learning.

Academic Performance of Students Labeled as Long-Term English Learners

Among the 330,733 students labeled as LTEL in 2022–23, around about half were in their 7th, 8th, or 9th year of EL classification and a quarter were in their 10th year of EL programming (Price et al., 2024). Figure 14 shows how more than 20,000 students had been classified as an English learner for 12 or more years—nearly their entire schooling career—with these students less likely to graduate than their other ever-EL peers. To understand the academic progress of students labeled as LTEL, it is useful to look both at English language proficiency, as well as performance on state assessments.

Figure 14. Number of Years Classified as English Learners Among Students Designated as LTEL, 2022–23



Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of CALPADS enrollment data provided by the California Department of Education. Reproduced from Price, H., Burns, D., Loewe, S., Shields, P., Kaplan, J., & Lee, H. (2024). *Long-term English learners in California*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/496.998

Long-Term English Learner Progress Towards English Language Proficiency

Since 2018, the state implemented a new English language proficiency standardized assessment: Summative ELPAC. Per the State Board of Education, students must achieve proficiency level 4 (well-developed) on the four-level scale of the Summative ELPAC to be eligible for reclassification (Cal. Educ. Code § 313(f); California State Board of Education, 2019). This level 4 requirement is the sole state requirement, all other criteria for reclassification are locally determined.

Analysis of English proficiency data for 2022–23 shows that around 20% of students classified as English learners for 8 or 9 years achieved ELPAC level 4, indicating that they could soon be ready for reclassification. However, the proportion achieving this level was lower among those classified as English learners for 10 or more years. For example, at the other end of the scale, around 50% of students classified as English learners for 12 or more years—indicating they had retained EL classification across their entire schooling career—achieved ELPAC level 1 or 2.

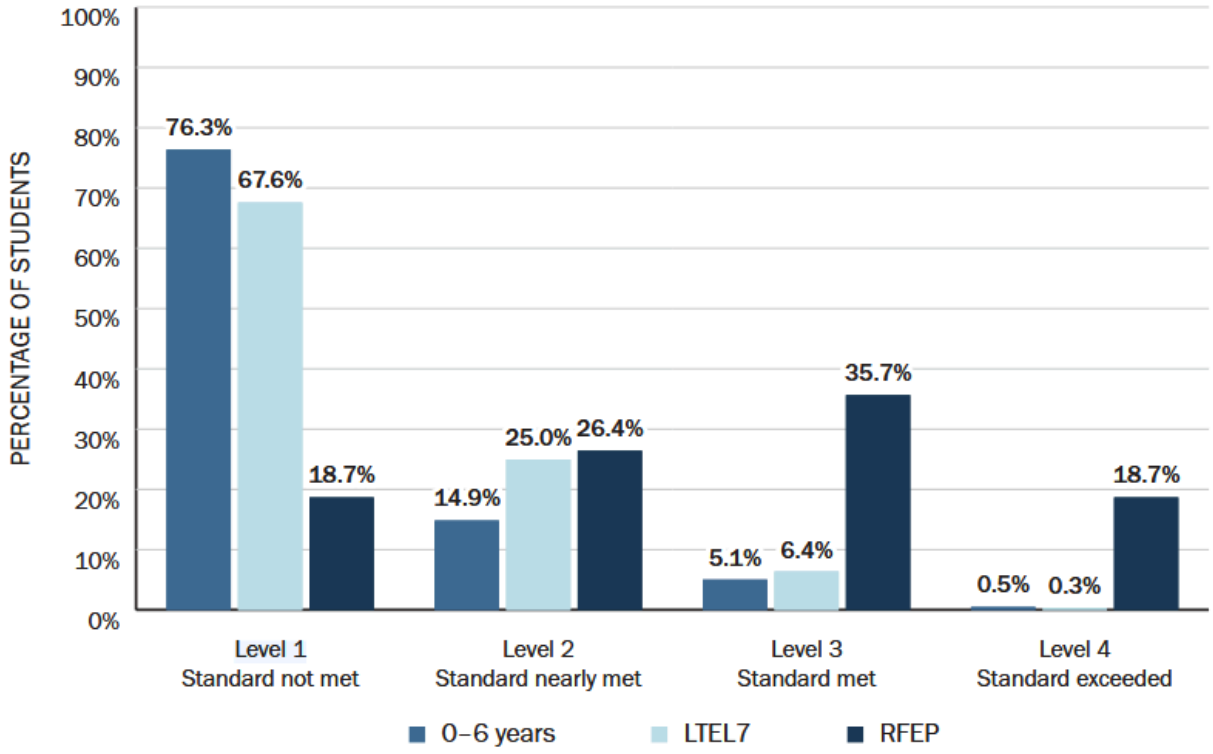
While many students labeled as LTEL have also been identified with special education needs, the majority, as described above, have not. For example, among the more than 20,000 students in 2022–23 who had been classified as English learners for 12 or more years, two thirds were not identified as having special education needs. Recent research has found that oral language scores among many LTEL students were comparatively high, but written language scores were concentrated at lower levels, leaving these LTEL students short of the overall score to make them eligible for reclassification. Other studies suggest that literacy can be a different barrier than communication skills (Umansky & Reardon, 2014). LTEL students with special education needs often showed lower proficiency in both oral and written language (Valdes & Castrechini, 2026). Thus, understanding the barriers to reaching language proficiency and the interventions that could support learning for LTEL students may be an area for increased attention by policy makers.

Academic Performance of Students Labeled as Long-Term English Learners

For the Class of 2023, 69% of students labeled as LTEL graduated, compared to 86% of their peers who were formerly classified or within their first six years of classification (Price et al., 2024).

As may be expected given their still-developing level of English proficiency, students labeled as LTELs perform at lower levels on state academic assessments than their other ever-EL peers. For example, in 2022–23, around 3% of students labeled as LTEL in grades 6–8 and 11 met or achieved state standards in math, compared to 8% among those classified as EL for less than 7 years, and over 31% for those reclassified as fluent English proficient.[13]

Figure 15. CAASPP ELA Performance of Students Classified as LTEL and Other Ever-EL Peers, 2022–23



Note: Percentages do not add to 100% since unscored tests are not included in this graphic.

[13] Note: these findings used the CA Dashboard definition of LTEL and thus may differ from those published at the CAASPP website (https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org), which uses a different definition of LTEL.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of CAASPP achievement data provided by the California Department of Education. Reproduced from Price, H., Burns, D., Loewe, S., Shields, P., Kaplan, J., & Lee, H. (2024). *Long-term English learners in California*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/496.998

In English language arts, Price et al. (2024) found that 6.7% of students labeled as LTEL met or exceeded the state proficiency standard, with percentages varying between 5% and 8% depending on the grade. (See Figure 15.) This has important implications for reclassification. While districts can decide on their own assessment for the "basic skills" criterion for reclassification as fluent English proficient, many have set Level 3 on CAASPP ELA as a threshold. This is a high bar in California, given that only around half of English Only students achieve the same.[14]

This requirement may impact students' long-term educational trajectory. Districts may choose not to move students classified as English learners into a standard coursework track of college preparatory courses (such as the A–G courses needed for a 4-year state college) until after they have been reclassified.[15] Recent research in several Bay Area districts suggests that many students labeled as LTEL can make academic progress in curricular content despite not being reclassified. Researchers found that nearly three quarters of students labeled as LTEL in the study districts were enrolled in at least one college preparatory course, with about two thirds of those enrolled passing the course (Valdes & Castrechini, 2026).

It is possible that many students labeled as LTEL who meet or exceed the state standard in ELA (Level 3 or higher) are reclassified shortly after. Where it is not occurring, it will be important for policymakers to understand the remaining barriers to reclassification for these students, given the importance of accessing the full curriculum to graduation prospects.

School Contexts of Students Labeled as Long-Term English Learners

A statewide scan of students labeled as LTEL shows different patterns on where LTEL students are concentrated. Unsurprisingly, the largest number of LTELs are enrolled in schools in the state's most

[14] See CAASPP-ELPAC Test Results for California's Assessments. Retrieved January 14, 2026, from https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org

[15] Completing a sequence of A–G college preparatory courses with grades of C or better is required for admission to the University of California and California State University systems.

populous counties: Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Diego, and San Bernardino counties. Together, half of all students labeled as LTEL reside in these five counties. However, many rural and less populous counties have disproportionately higher proportions of LTEL students among their ever-EL population. For example, students labeled as LTEL represented more than 1 in 5 ever-EL students in each of Del Norte, Modoc, Plumas, Inyo, Kings, and Stanislaus counties.

Students labeled as LTEL were also more likely to be enrolled in schools with access to fewer resources and facing greater educational challenges. Price et al. (2024) used multinomial regression models to test the likelihood of students labeled as LTEL being enrolled in schools with various school context and resourcing factors. (See Table 2.) Each of the models controlled for a range of contextual factors: proportion of ever-EL students enrolled, proportion eligible for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM), size of school population, grade levels taught, and urbanicity. (See Models 1–6.)

Table 2. Regression Models Testing the Associations Between School Context Factors With the Proportion of LTEL School Population, 2022–23

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Bi-variate correlation		-0.128	0.170	0.342	-0.282	-0.278
% Teaching assignments by fully credentialed staff		-0.001*** (0.000)				
% FTE staff teaching classes without full certification			0.001*** (0.000)			
% Chronic absentee rate				0.001*** (0.000)		
% 4-year HS diploma					-0.001*** (0.000)	
Seal of Biliteracy HS diploma offered						-0.036*** (0.004)
% Ever-EL	0.278*** (0.005)	0.283*** (0.005)	0.286*** (0.005)	0.277*** (0.006)	0.257*** (0.009)	0.263*** (0.009)
% FRPM	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)
Total school population	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)
Gr. 6–9	(reference)	(reference)	(reference)	(reference)	N/A	N/A
Gr. 9–12	-0.015*** (0.002)	-0.019*** (0.002)	-0.020*** (0.003)	-0.031*** (0.003)	-0.005 (0.004)	-0.013** (0.004)
Gr. K–12	-0.030***	-0.036***	-0.035***	-0.036***	(reference)	(reference)

	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)		
City locale	-0.021***	-0.021***	-0.019***	-0.028***	-0.036***	-0.025***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Rural or town locale	(reference)	(reference)	(reference)	(reference)	(reference)	(reference)
Suburban locale	-0.006*	-0.005*	-0.005	-0.012***	-0.015***	-0.007
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Constant	0.015***	0.069***	0.004	0.002	0.108***	0.043***
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.010)	(0.007)
Observations	4,360	4,360	4,360	4,155	1,772	1,772
Adjusted R-squared	0.545	0.565	0.567	0.575	0.512	0.501

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of CALPADS enrollment data provided by the California Department of Education merged with and publicly available school data. (2024). Reproduced from Price, H., Burns, D., Loewe, S., Shields, P., Kaplan, J., & Lee, H. (2024). *Long-term English learners in California*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/496.998

The researchers found that schools with higher proportions of students labeled as LTEL had: lower shares of teachers with full certification in the subject they were teaching and higher shares of courses taught by teachers with substandard credentials—those who were either teaching out of field or on a temporary teaching credential (intern, permit, or waiver). (See Models 2 & 3.) Schools with higher proportions of LTEL students also experienced higher rates of chronic absenteeism (Model 4), lower graduation rates (Model 5), and were less likely to offer the Seal of Biliteracy (Model 6).

Key takeaways

- Around half of ever-ELs have been reclassified as fluent English proficient. Of the remaining half that are classified as English learners, around one third are labeled as long-term English learners. In 6–9th grade most of these students labeled as LTEL had begun their schooling at the kindergarten grade level, but after 9th grade, most LTEL students started school in California later than kindergarten.
- Boys, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students with low levels of initial English proficiency were disproportionately represented among those labeled as LTEL.

- Students labeled as LTEL were disproportionately identified for special education, averaging rates 2.5 times that of their other ever-EL peers. More attention is needed to understanding the factors underlying slowed or stalled progress in English language development, and whether students are receiving the instruction and interventions most effective for them to progress towards proficiency. More attention is also needed to the early identification of special education needs among students classified as English learners and the relationship to language processing, in order to provide targeted supports.
- The differences in schooling characteristics suggest that more work could be done to ensure that students labeled as LTEL have equitable access to educational resources, including fully credentialed teachers.
- Additional data and research are needed to understand the language development and academic needs of newcomer and SIFE students, the extent to which they may become labeled as LTEL, and the resources needed to support their educational success.
- Some students labeled as LTEL meet or exceed state standards on CAASPP ELA—a high bar in California, even for English Only students. It is possible that these students are reclassified shortly thereafter. Where that does not occur, it will be important to understand the remaining barriers to reclassification. Continued attention to the equitable implementation of reclassification policies may help ensure that MLE are reclassified at time points appropriate to best support their long-term learning outcomes.

Understanding the barriers to reaching language proficiency, the role of reclassification, and the interventions that can best support students labeled as LTEL will be an area of importance for policymakers. Previous policy research suggests that while local control accountability plans often mentioned newcomers and students labeled as LTEL, they were short on detail as to how to provide differentiated supports (Lavadenz et al., 2022).[16]

[16] See Lavadenz, M., Armas, E. G., & Jáuregui Hodge, S. (2022).

Bright spots: Learning from California's Positive Outliers

One strategy for improving learning outcomes for MLE is to understand and learn from "bright spots"—places where students are achieving outsized learning growth given the diverse nature of multilingual learners of English, the assets they bring to learning, along with the challenges faced towards achieving English proficiency and academic success. This section summarizes research conducted by the Learning Policy Institute about California's English learner "positive outlier" districts, and the resources and programming associated with their ELPAC, math, and ELA successes.

Identifying Positive Outliers

What does it mean for a district to be a positive outlier? It means that students in these districts are outpacing growth in learning compared to their peers in other similar districts. Students can attend districts with similar socioeconomic contexts alongside students with similar needs but learn at different rates. We therefore want to know: what are some districts doing that exceed projected growth compared to others? From this information, we can identify what districts can do to raise the learning rates for all of their students.

Positive outlier districts are not simply those with the highest scores on ELPAC, math, or ELA. Ample research demonstrates that focusing on the highest test scores simply proxies the districts' predominant family background and community socioeconomic status (Sirin, 2005). In other words, focusing solely on the highest scoring districts risks identifying only those districts where students' affluent families have access to extra resources. Instead, we focus on growth: where students started and how much they gained over a school year. With growth, we can see how districts' key decisions around instructional programming and allocation of resources might play a role in how much students learn.

The positive outlier method follows four steps. First, in order to predict growth, we captured students' test scores at the end of the prior year. Most commonly, tests occur during spring of each school year. We then used statistical models to predict individual students' growth given where they left-off from previous year's score, their current grade level, and then control for any disability needs, household socioeconomic disadvantage, and racial/ethnic identity. From these individual estimates, we

aggregated all the students in the district to produce a predicted growth score for each district. Since the CAASPP math and ELA only test students in grades 3–8 and 11, we restricted all of our analyses only to the elementary and middle school years. We also limited our sample to those districts enrolling at least 150 students who were ever classified as an English learner (ever-ELs). Appendix B details the methods for these analyses.

Second, we aggregated the predicted scores of (1) all current or recently reclassified English learners on their English language proficiency test score (ELPAC), (2) all the CAASPP math scores for Grade 4–8 ever-EL students, and (3) all the CAASPP ELA scores for Grade 4–8 ever-EL students.[17]

Third, we compared these predicted scores to their actual scores at the district level for any district enrolling at least 50 ever-EL students. The positive outliers approach identifies the districts whose students are, on average, learning more in one year (based on districts' actual scores) than would be projected given the socioeconomic circumstances and enrollment characteristics in the district (the districts' predicted scores). Figure 16 shows that districts with actual scores that exceed the predicted score yield a "positive residual" error term. A positive residual value means students in a district are performing above-and-beyond similar students in other districts; these districts are referred to as "positive outliers" (Podolsky et al., 2019).

Finally, we then reran the models to include district practices in order to understand the extent to which the districts' coordination of their resources explained the outpaced learning taking place in positive outlier districts.

Figure 16. Identifying Positive Outlier Districts

[17] Since the models need the prior year score, we can predict growth on CAASPP in grades 4–8, using grade 3 as the prior year score.

The baseline estimates modeled how the actual growth of the district relates to the predicted growth. Coefficients that showed a statistically significant relationship with growth in ELPAC and CAASPP math and ELA scores are denoted with stars. Unsurprisingly, the coefficient on predicted growth was strongly related to districts' actual growth. Table 3 shows that these baseline measures that use the aggregate of the students' predicted progress accounted for 74%, 97%, and 94% of the variation between the predicted and actual district scores on ELPAC, math, and ELA for MLE and ever-EL students, respectively. (See Table 3, R-Squared.)

Table 3. Baseline Model: Predicting District Growth From Students' Predicted Progress, SY 2022–23 & 2023–24

	ELPAC	Math	ELA
Average Student Predicted Growth	1.005***	1.058***	1.054***
	(0.023)	(0.007)	(0.010)
2022–23 School Year	0.155***	0.009**	0.010**
	(0.009)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Intercept	-0.280***	-0.021***	-0.030***
	(0.012)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Observations	904	904	904
R-Squared	0.736	0.969	0.944

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Notes: Sample excludes districts not serving grades 4–8 or districts serving fewer than 150 ever-EL students.

OLS regressions with clustered district error terms. All scores are reported as z-scores with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1 that are centered within each grade level each year.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of student-level CAASPP, ELPAC, and demographic data provided by the California Department of Education. (2025).

As part of the multiyear model, we also controlled for the school year. The coefficient on school year 2022–23 can be thought of as the average growth recorded in that school year compared to 2023–24. As expected, 2022–23 had some hold-over effects from the pandemic where the boost in growth occurred as students returned to in-person learning with far fewer absences from the prior 2021–22 school year.

Characteristics of English Learner Positive Outlier Districts

On the surface, positive outlier districts did not look that different from other districts that enroll at least 50 ever-English learner students. Table 4 shows that positive outlier districts enroll, on average,

nearly the same total number of students who live in communities with similar socioeconomic circumstances. Positive outlier and other districts enroll a similar proportion of MLE students enrolled at the novice level of English proficiency and enroll students speaking more than nine home languages other than English. However, positive outlier districts do serve nearly 10 percent more ever-English learners among the K–8 population (38% compared to 35% of other districts) and 10 percent fewer MLE students who started their schooling at the kindergarten grade. More positive outlier districts are also unified school districts and those located in cities or suburbs.

Table 4. Sociodemographic Comparison of Positive Outlier Districts on ELPAC

	ELPAC positive outlier district n=521 districts		Not ELPAC positive outlier district n=579 districts	
American Community Survey Characteristics	mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.
Limited English proficiency (% ln)	1.805	(1.171)	1.721	(1.112)
Families with children below poverty (% ln)	2.337	(0.742)	2.334	(1.026)
Median family income (ln)	11.548	(0.381)	11.497	(0.386)
Unemployment rate (% ln)	1.359	(0.411)	1.353	(0.399)
BA+ education attainment	31.11%	(19.335)	27.92%	(16.568)
District Enrollment Characteristics				
Novice level, initial ELPAC	72.52%	(16.289)	71.87%	(14.645)
# languages served in district	9.545	(5.072)	9.228	(5.176)
Ever-EL enrollment	38.02%	(19.838)	35.47%	(19.127)
Rural	16.31%		17.62%	
Town	16.70%		19.52%	
Suburb	43.38%		41.62%	
City	23.61%		21.24%	
Total enrollment (ln)	8.383	(1.327)	8.315	(1.303)
Unified district	55.10%		51.60%	
ELs starting in KN %	36.93%	(8.666)	40.36%	(8.796)

Note: Estimates for both school years, 2022–23 & 2023–24. Sample excludes districts not serving grades 4–8 or districts serving fewer than 50 EL students. Results are similar when comparing positive outlier districts on CAASPP math and ELA. All scores are reported as z-scores with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1 that are centered within each grade level each year.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of student-level CAASPP, ELPAC, and demographic data provided by the California Department of Education as well as publicly available data on district characteristics. (2025).

These district characteristics also form the base model of regression analyses to understand the factors that correlate with student learning growth. Model 1 in Table 5 shows how these different district

characteristics relate to projected ELPAC growth, and less so to math and ELA growth. In addition, only a few of the community socioeconomic characteristics significantly matter above-and-beyond what the students' individual socioeconomic circumstances already capture. On the whole, these district characteristics do not provide us with additional insights into why some districts outperform projections. Notably, none of the demographic or enrollment characteristics associated with the MLE student population have any significant impact on the growth of never-EL students in the district (see Appendix Table B2).

Factors Associated with English Learner Growth in California Districts

What do districts do that propel ever-EL students in some districts to experience more growth on ELPAC English proficiency, math, and ELA than their peers in other districts? With quantitative measures, we can test a few hypotheses. We can test the extent to which (a) budgetary allocations of funds, (b) teacher hiring and assignment practices, (c) programming, and (d) attendance explain districts whose ever-EL students outpace the predicted growth on English proficiency, math, and ELA outcomes. To test these hypotheses, we used publicly available data from the California Department of Education (CDE) website as well as some restricted-access administrative data from the CDE. Appendix Table A1 lists the descriptive statistics for this analysis.

The full models (Model 2, Table 5) show the extent to which district practices improve the actual growth compared to what would otherwise be projected for their students. Notably, these models focus less on the disparities in resources between districts. Rather, these models highlight how districts put into practice and apply their specific resources. Adding these factors to the model can also reveal potential confounding relationships, where district practices can attenuate the impact of district characteristics. For example, the coefficient related to the impact of number of languages served in the district decreases when we account for resource practices. This change can be interpreted to mean that district practices can work to reduce the challenges associated with serving a multitude of different home languages. Similarly, the coefficient regarding unified districts grows in size from model 1 to model 2. This indicates that unified districts' practices relate to accelerated growth on ELPAC compared to students in elementary or Grade 7–12 districts.

Table 5. District Resources Projecting Growth Scores, Controlling for Community and District Socioeconomic Circumstances, SY 2022–23 & 2023–24

	Model 1			Model 2		
	ELPAC	Math	ELA	ELPAC	Math	ELA
American Community Survey Characteristics						
Limited English proficiency (% ln)	0.007	0.007	0.005	0.002	0.005	0.004
	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.006)
Families with children below	-0.005	0.000	-0.004	-0.008	-0.003	-0.008*
poverty (% ln)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Median family income (ln)	0.062*	0.008	0.012	0.036	-0.019	-0.008
	(0.028)	(0.020)	(0.024)	(0.027)	(0.019)	(0.022)
Unemployment rate (% ln)	-0.009	-0.003	0.004	-0.010	-0.004	0.002
	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.007)	(0.009)
BA+ education attainment (%)	-0.003***	-0.001+	-0.001**	-0.003***	-0.001*	-0.002***
	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)
District Enrollment Characteristics						
Novice level, initial ELPAC %	-0.003***	-0.000	-0.000	-0.003***	-0.000	-0.000
in the district	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
# languages served in district	-0.006***	-0.006***	-0.005***	-0.004**	-0.004***	-0.003*
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Ever-EL % in the district	-0.000	0.000	0.000	-0.001*	-0.000	-0.001+
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Rural	-0.021	-0.013	-0.019	-0.012	-0.002	-0.006
	(0.014)	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.010)	(0.012)
Town	-0.002	-0.024**	-0.019*	0.007	-0.015+	-0.009
	(0.012)	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.008)	(0.010)
City	-0.014	-0.005	-0.004	-0.015+	-0.005	-0.004
(reference is Suburb)	(0.009)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Total enrollment (ln)	0.013+	0.009*	0.007	0.007	0.005	0.005
	(0.007)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Unified district	0.018*	-0.003	-0.007	0.024*	-0.001	-0.005
(reference is Elem, 6–12)	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.005)	(0.007)
ELs starting in KN %				-0.000	-0.001+	0.000
				(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.001)
Budget funds use						
% expenditures on instructional resources				0.001	0.001	0.000
				(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Average expenditures per pupil (per $1k)				0.003**	0.001	0.003**
				(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
BA+60, maximum salary				0.001	0.000+	0.000
				(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Salary, missing flag				0.014	0.025+	0.034*
				(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.016)

Teacher hiring and assignment practices						
Teacher:student Ratio				0.202	0.319	0.515
				(0.504)	(0.307)	(0.414)
% teachers leave district				-0.001	-0.001	-0.001
				(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.001)
% principals leave district				-0.000*	-0.000*	-0.000
				(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Average teacher years in district				0.001	0.002+	0.002+
				(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)
% substandard credentialed teachers				0.001	-0.000	-0.001
				(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Programming						
% EL with misassigned teachers				-0.000	0.000	0.000
				(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Bilingual teacher:ever-EL student ratio				0.002	0.003	0.001
				(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Attendance						
% TK–8 chronic absent				-0.002***	-0.001*	-0.002***
				(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)
% TK–8 school stability				0.005**	0.005***	0.004***
				(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Predicted student growth	0.967***	1.095***	1.106***	0.873***	1.048***	1.045***
	(0.033)	(0.013)	(0.017)	(0.037)	(0.013)	(0.017)
School year 2022–23	0.140***	0.012***	0.013**	0.138***	0.031***	0.027*
	(0.011)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.016)	(0.009)	(0.011)
Intercept	-0.728*	-0.080	-0.107	-0.881**	-0.256	-0.378
	(0.326)	(0.237)	(0.290)	(0.334)	(0.245)	(0.271)
Observations, 2 yrs	904	904	904	904	904	904
R-squared	0.765	0.973	0.949	0.789	0.977	0.958
F test	183.9	1739.0	877.4	125.0	1311.0	708.6

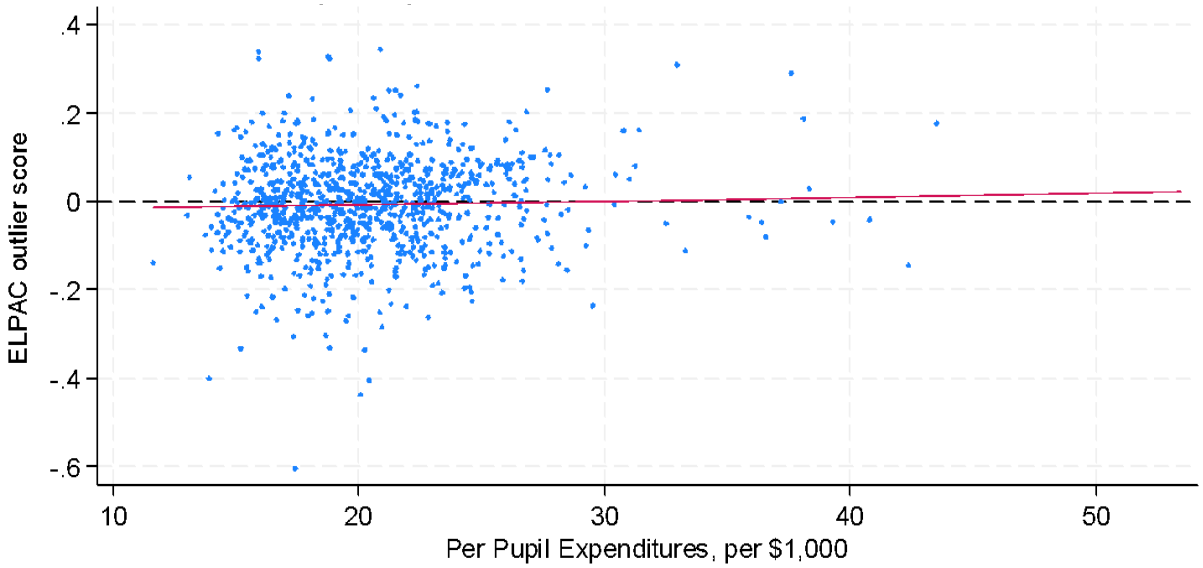
Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Notes: Sample excludes districts not serving grades 4–8 or districts serving fewer than 150 ever-EL students. OLS regressions with clustered district error terms. All scores are reported as z-scores with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1 that are centered within each grade level each year.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of student-level CAASPP, ELPAC, and demographic data provided by the California Department of Education as well as publicly available data on district characteristics. (2025).

The full models show that districts' budgetary use of funds matters for students' achievement growth. For math, it is about districts paying higher salaries[18] to their more educationally advanced teachers (BA+60) that accelerates growth. For ELPAC and ELA, districts that allocated more funds per pupil demonstrated greater-than-predicted growth. Figure 17 shows the relationship of per pupil expenditures to ELPAC outlier scores: dots in the upper half of the graph (above the horizontal dashed line) are the districts with positive outlier scores. The solid, red line shows the linear relationship of expenditures to positive outlier scores. The figure shows 54% of districts with positive outlier scores spent more than the overall median average of $19,783 per pupil compared to 46% of the other districts spending more than the median average.[19]

Figure 17. Per Pupil Expenditures Associated with ELPAC Growth



Notes: The red line represents the correlation of per pupil expenditure (per $1,000) to the districts' outlier score. Dots in the upper half (above the horizontal dashed line, y>0) are the districts with positive outlier scores. Per pupil expenditure is calculated for all students in the whole district. Sample excludes districts not serving gr. 4–8 or districts serving fewer than 150 ever-EL students.

[18] The 18 districts missing salary information exhibit higher than predicted growth on math and ELA among their ever-EL students. Further information about these districts would be qualitatively important to understand. Just 1 of these 18 districts is a basic aid district.

[19] All financial dollars are inflation-adjusted to 2024 $USD.

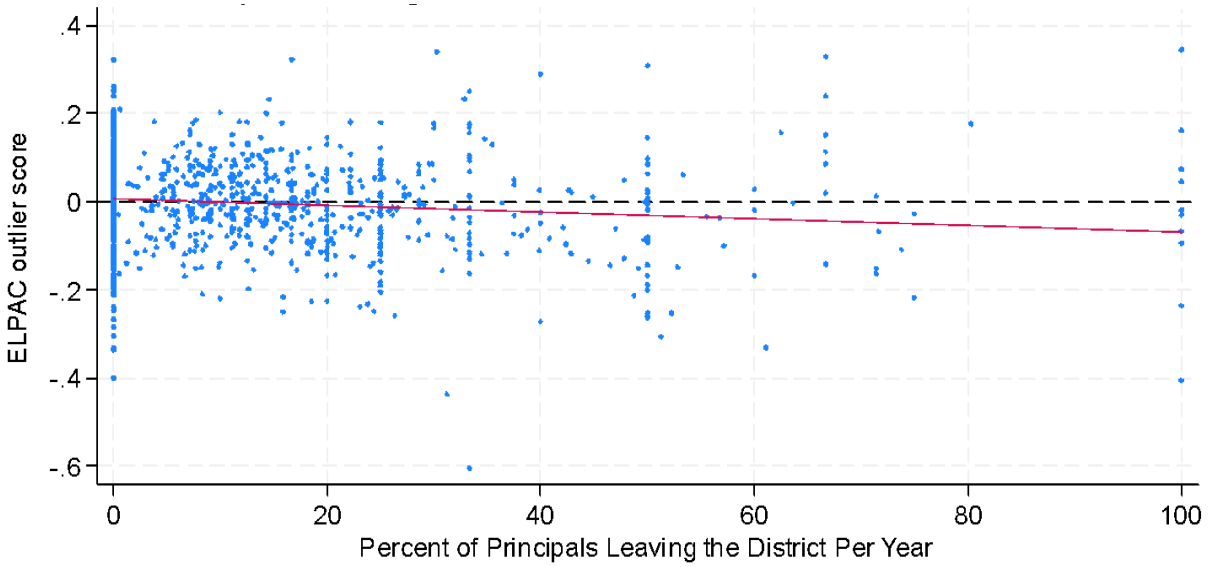
Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of student-level ELPAC and demographic data provided by the California Department of Education as well as publicly available data on district characteristics. (2025). School years 2022–23 and 2023–24.

Regarding teacher hiring and assignments, experience matters. Teachers' years of experience in their districts marginally improved growth on math and ELA: higher accumulated average years of teachers working in the district propelled growth. For ELPAC and math, higher rates of K–8 principals leaving their districts associated with slower growth (see Figure 18). For example, districts that averaged a high rate of K–8 principals leaving their district experienced, on average, a 5% dip in growth compared to the districts with the average principal leaver rate of 18%.[20] That said, districts that employ teachers with an average of five more years of in-district experience can offset the negative impact of districts with high K–8 principal leaver rates.

The findings of the positive effects of teacher experience are underscored by previous positive outlier research in California (not focused solely on MLE), which found that teacher preparedness—including qualifications and experience—was positively associated with achievement for African American and Hispanic students, as well as that of White students (Podolsky et al., 2019). Additional case study research identified systemic strategies in such districts, ranging from recruitment and hiring to staff development, support and feedback (Burns et al., 2019). While a greater proportion of teachers with substandard credentials (internship, temporary or short-term permits, waivers) slows the growth of never-EL students on math and ELA (see Appendix B), that same impact does not surface among these ever-EL student population outcomes.

[20] "High" leave rates is defined as a district with a principal leaver rate that is 1 standard deviation above the average district rate. For K–8 principals in these two school years, 1 standard deviation above the mean equates to an annual 33% principal leaver rate.

Figure 18. Principal Leaving District Rates Associated with ELPAC Growth



Notes:
The red line represents the correlation of K–8 principals' rate of leaving their district to the districts' outlier score. Dots in the upper half (above the horizontal dashed line, y>0) are the districts with positive outlier scores. Principal leaver rate is only calculated among principals in schools serving grades K–8. Sample excludes districts not serving gr. 4-8 or districts serving fewer than 150 ever-EL students.
Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of student-level ELPAC and demographic data provided by the California Department of Education as well as publicly available data on district characteristics. (2025). School years 2022–23 and 2023–24.

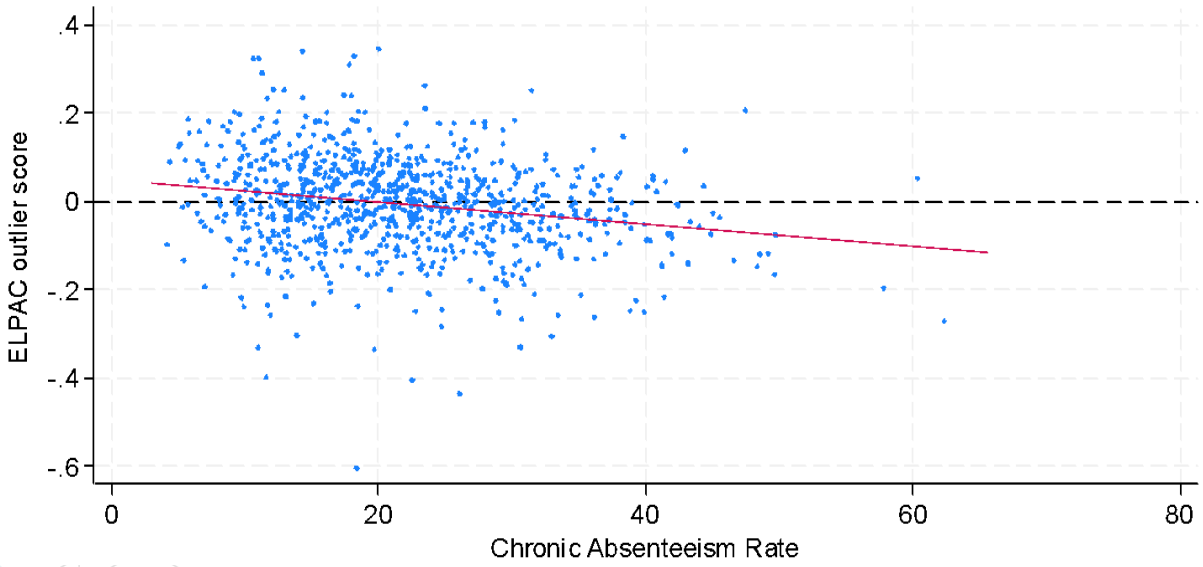
Students' access to multilingual programming is difficult to capture using statewide measures. Programming factors, such as the proportion of student enrollment in different MLL programs, are not adequately available statewide to include in these models. However, the two measures that are available regard teachers: bilingual authorizations and misassignment rates. The ratio of bilingual authorized teachers to ever-EL students in the district is calculated similarly to the teacher:pupil ratio. The bilingual teacher:ever-EL student ratio allows one way to assess how access to specialized professionals may matter: How do more bilingual authorized teachers attend to the needs of their ever-EL students? In addition, we now use information from the School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs) to evaluate how teachers with substandard credentials to teach English learners impact districts' outlier scores.[21] After accounting for the other budget, teacher, and attendance factors,

[21] In response to a court order from the *Williams v. State of California* case that ruled about the rights of English learners to not be deprived of basic educational necessities, the School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs) recently began reporting on EL misassignment rates per school.

differences in these two measures did not significantly differentiate districts' actual growth scores above-and-beyond the other district practices discussed in this section. Notably, these specific MLE teacher assignment measures also do not associate with any loss of growth for never-EL students (see Appendix Table B2).

Students' attendance is one of the most important factors related to student achievement and learning growth. While some absences or transfers are expected in every district, research shows that districts can implement practices and strategies that can help improve attendance. These include those aimed at increasing engagement and communication with families, strengthening student-teacher relationships, developing early warning systems to identify students experiencing difficulty and applying supports, and developing a community schools approach (Jordan, 2023). Across all of the growth outcomes, students' attendance associated positively to exceeding growth predictions. Districts with lower chronic absenteeism among their K–8 grade students experienced greater growth than projected. The impact of lower chronic absenteeism was stronger on ELPAC and ELA growth. Figure 19 highlights the association of chronic absenteeism to ELPAC growth. Fifty-five percent of positive outlier districts held chronic absenteeism below 15% compared to 45% of other districts.

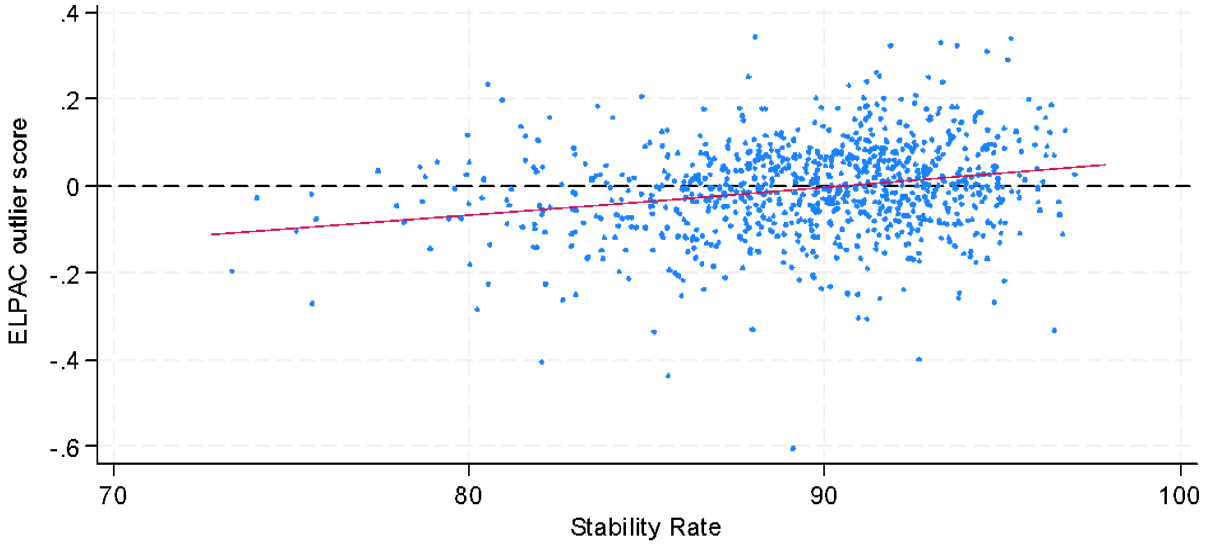
Figure 19. Chronic Absenteeism Rate Associated with ELPAC Growth



Notes: The red line represents the correlation of chronic absenteeism rate to the districts' outlier score. Dots in the upper half (above the horizontal dashed line, y>0) are the districts with positive outlier scores. Chronic absenteeism rate excludes high school grades. Sample excludes districts not serving gr. 4-8 or districts serving fewer than 150 ever-EL students.
Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of student-level ELPAC and demographic data provided by the California Department of Education as well as publicly available data on district characteristics. (2025). School years 2022–23 and 2023–24.

Even stronger than absenteeism is school stability: Districts' growth exceeded predictions when students stayed enrolled in the same school for the whole school year (see Figure 20). Sixty percent of positive outlier districts averaged school stability rates above 90% compared to 46% among the other districts. Notable also is that the impact of stable enrollment was even stronger for ever-EL students than for their never-EL peers. Appendix B shows that the impact of stable enrollment on math growth was 2.5 times greater for ever-EL students than for their never-EL peers and the impact was 1.3 times greater on ELA growth for ever-EL than never-EL students.

Figure 20. School Stability Rate Associated with ELPAC Growth



Notes: The red line represents the correlation of stability rate to the districts' outlier score. Dots in the upper half (above the horizontal dashed line, y>0) are the districts with positive outlier scores. Stability rate excludes high school grades. Sample excludes districts not serving gr. 4-8 or districts serving fewer than 150 ever-EL students.
Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of student-level ELPAC and demographic data provided by the California Department of Education as well as publicly available data on district characteristics. (2025). School years 2022–23 and 2023–24.

This section summarized recent and ongoing research by the Learning Policy Institute that investigates the factors associated with positive outlier districts whose current and reclassified English learners (ever-EL) exceeded growth projections on ELPAC, math, and ELA scores. While student-level trajectories shape learning growth, there are district practices that can accelerate the learning of all MLE students. In addition to these quantitative measures, there are certainly some qualitative aspects occurring in these positive outlier districts to understand. Subsequent qualitative research underway at the Learning Policy Institute will interview district and school leaders in English learner positive outlier districts to understand the local policies and practices that support their outsized growth projections.

Key takeaways

- Positive Outlier districts are those whose K–8 ever-EL students are achieving above projected rates in English proficiency (ELPAC) and on state assessments (CAASPP math and ELA) after accounting for a range of contextual factors and students' starting points. Analysis of Positive Outlier districts can help identify the districts' coordination of resources and practices that support student achievement for California's K–8 multilingual learners of English.
- After controlling for socioeconomic context, K–8 MLE enrolled in unified districts exceed their ELPAC growth projections compared to their peers in other districts. As districts serve more languages, overall growth of current or former EL students can slow.
- Never-EL students' growth in math and English language arts were not hindered by any of the district factors related specifically to MLE enrollment or teacher assignments specific to MLE.
- Districts' use of funds was associated with greater growth in K–8 ever-EL student achievement:
    - Greater per pupil expenditure was associated with above-projected growth in English language proficiency and CAASPP ELA.
    - Higher salaries for educationally advanced teachers (BA+60) were correlated with faster growth in math.
- Educators' experience matters for K–8 current or former EL students' learning growth:
    - Greater accumulated years of teacher experience in their districts was associated with increases in growth on CAASPP math and ELA.

  - K–8 principals leaving to other districts slows growth on ELPAC and math achievement. Compared to average leaver rates, growth dipped by 5% in the districts with high rates of principal turnover.

- Districts with lower K–8 chronic absenteeism experienced greater growth than projected. Chronic absenteeism especially impacted ELPAC and ELA growth.
- Student school stability matters a lot. Districts with higher within-year student stability rates experienced greater-than-projected growth on each of the growth outcomes of English language proficiency (ELPAC) and CAASPP ELA and math. The impact of school stability on rates of growth was considerably stronger for ever-EL students on ELA and math compared to their never-EL counterparts.

Discussion and Policy Considerations

This report provided information on the educational progress of California's MLE in the context of two decades of policy reforms and investments. It provided information on the status of the MLE population and presented findings to better understand the population of California's multilingual learners of English. It synthesized: a longitudinal study of cohorts of students first identified as English learners in kindergarten, a study of students labeled as long-term English learners, and an analysis of "Positive Outlier" districts, whose students are achieving greater-than-predicted learning growth.

This report used an "ever-English learner (ever-EL)" approach to better understand long-term trends and improvements in the context of policy reforms. This means observing student outcomes both while students are classified as English learners and after they have been reclassified as fluent English proficient. Looking only at scores of students who are currently classified as English learners can provide only part of the story and point to misleading conclusions.

Specifically, this report addressed the following questions:

Who are California's multilingual learners of English? How has the composition of the MLE population changed over time?

California has among the largest number of multilingual learners of English (MLE) in the United States. California's MLE are linguistically diversifying. Spanish still predominates as a home language for MLE.

Steady drops in the number of students classified as English learners (EL) drives much of California's decline in public student enrollment. Declines in EL enrollment can have financial implications for school districts.

Among students ever classified as English learners (ever-ELs) in California, around half are currently classified as English learners and half have been reclassified as now fluent and proficient in English.

What policy reforms have occurred in the last two decades and what changes in performance have occurred for MLE over that time period?

Over the past two decades, California enacted a number of policy reforms that helped to strengthen the learning environment for MLE. Some of the major reforms include: the LCFF funding formula, the ELPAC English proficiency test, multilingual programming options beyond English immersion, investments in teacher training, and Transitional Kindergarten. The California English Learner Roadmap sets out the vision for MLE education and an "aligned set of practices, services, relationships, and approaches to teaching and learning" for reforming and implementing policies.

The study of cohorts of students first classified as English learners in kindergarten (K-EL cohorts) using CELDT testing data from 2006–07 to 2018–19 found that, over time, more recent cohorts of K-ELs:

- achieved English language proficiency sooner,
- were reclassified to fluent English proficient in earlier grades,
- substantially improved in 3rd grade scores on state assessments (CAASPP) in English language arts and math, and
- narrowed the math and ELA achievement gaps between ever-EL and never-EL students.

Improvements in English language proficiency and CAASPP ELA and math across cohorts coincided with state policy reforms and investments in teacher training, funding allocation (LCFF) and Transitional Kindergarten taking hold. Among these improvements, however, the total proportion of students reclassified by 5th grade during 2013–2018 stayed relatively the same.

Gaps persisted between when students reached English proficiency and when they were reclassified. Students not reclassified by the end of elementary school may become labeled as long-term English learners with potential consequences for their educational trajectory, including access to college-preparatory coursework and likelihood of graduation.

Who are LTEL students and what school characteristics are associated with greater proportions of LTEL among the MLE population?

Despite trends of overall improvements in English language proficiency among ever-ELs over time, studying the LTEL student population showed that significant achievement gaps persisted for students entering kindergarten with the lowest levels of initial English proficiency.

Of those classified as English learners, around one third were labeled as long-term English learners—classified as English learners in 7 or more school years. In 6th–9th grades, most of these students labeled as LTEL had begun their schooling at the kindergarten grade level. For 10th–12th grades, most LTEL students started school in California sometime later than kindergarten. Boys, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students with low levels of initial English proficiency were disproportionately labeled as LTEL. Some LTEL students reached English proficiency but were not yet reclassified.

Students labeled as LTEL were disproportionately enrolled in schools with a lower proportion of teachers fully certified in the subjects they teach, higher chronic absenteeism rates, lower graduation rates, and less access to the State Seal of Biliteracy.

What conditions and resources are associated with districts that are doing exceptionally well in supporting the achievement performance of K–8 multilingual learners of English?

After controlling for socioeconomic context, K–8 MLE enrolled in unified districts exceeded their projected ELPAC growth compared to their peers in other districts. As districts served more languages, overall achievement growth slowed. On the whole, the district socioeconomic context does not sway projections above-and-beyond the individual students' circumstances which suggests that the local funding multipliers are working as intended.

Districts' use of funds correlated with greater growth in student achievement. Specifically, higher per pupil expenditures associated with above-projected growth in English language proficiency and CAASPP ELA. Districts with higher salaries for educationally advanced teachers (BA+60) demonstrated above-projected growth on CAASPP math.

Districts investing in experienced educators related to above-projected achievement growth. Districts' growth on CAASPP math and ELA exceeded projected growth when the average years of teacher experience in their district increased. Similarly, districts with lower rates of K–8 principals leaving the district averaged above-projected growth on ELPAC and math scores than districts with higher principal leaver rates.

Districts with strong student attendance demonstrated accelerated growth. Districts with lower K–8 chronic absenteeism experienced higher growth than projected, the effect of which was strongest on ELPAC and CAASPP ELA growth. Districts with higher student school stability rates experienced greater-than-projected growth on each of the outcomes of English language proficiency (ELPAC) and CAASPP ELA and math growth.

What issues do these findings identify for further research?

- Achievement improvements through 2018–19 coincided with key policy reforms and investments, including Transitional Kindergarten. Further research is needed to understand whether the trends continue through the pandemic and as these initiatives mature and subsequent reforms and investments have been implemented.
- These studies did not fully evaluate whether reclassification rates eventually followed the observed achievement in English language proficiency. Given the disconnect between English proficiency scores and CAASPP ELA scores evidenced in these studies, it seems some districts may be setting exceptionally high bars for the basic skills criterion. This raises questions about districts' reclassification policies and practices. Further research could investigate the length of time and the sequencing of criteria that leads to reclassification. Further research could also address continuing questions about the relationship between proficiency and the timing of

reclassification for different groups of MLE and the long-term educational outcomes for these students.

- A dearth of data and research exists regarding the language development and academic needs of different MLE subgroups, such as newcomer, migrant, and SIFE students (students with interrupted formal education). Further research could collect and analyze data to understand the extent to which these subpopulations may become labeled as LTEL, and the strategies and resources needed to support their educational success.
- These studies relied on quantifiable metrics to understand district and school resources and practices related to MLE trends and progress. More in-depth qualitative research is needed to understand how LEAs and schools hire, develop, and retain highly qualified teachers and administrators. Understanding these qualitative practices could allow strategies to be replicated by other LEAs seeking to improve educational outcomes for their MLE students.
- None of these studies were able to quantifiably measure how different multilingual programming—from dual language immersion in kindergarten to Seal of Biliteracy programs in high school—and the associated curricula and instructional pedagogies impact MLE progress and achievement. Statewide data on multilingual programming is spotty at the school/LEA level and nearly non-existent at the student-level. Collecting statewide metrics on programming could advance knowledge about the short-term and long-term effectiveness of programming for MLE in general as well as for different subpopulations and multilingual learners of a language other than English.

Together these findings point to several key considerations for policymakers:

Understand and broaden students' access to needed whole child supports. Eighty percent of MLE and nearly 90% of students who will struggle to reach proficiency in less than 7 years (LTEL) are socioeconomically disadvantaged. LTEL students are also more likely to be in schools with fewer resources. For a range of reasons, absenteeism and school instability also correlate with circumstances related to socioeconomic disadvantage (Attendance Works, n.d.; Welsh, 2017). Together, greater attention is needed to the availability of integrated student supports. In recent years, the state has made significant investments to extend whole-child supports to students, such as with the implementation of the California Community Schools Partnership Program and accompanying

framework (CDE, n.d.-d.). Early research indicates that this program has shown reductions in chronic absenteeism and suspensions, and increases in CAASPP ELA and math, with the gains largest for historically underserved students including MLE in those schools receiving community schools grants (Swain et al., 2025). Further research is required to understand the extent to which these kinds of supports are available to, and can be extended to, MLE statewide.

Revise multilingual communication standards. Given the diversification of home languages across California, communication with families may require additional skills of translators. This may incur additional costs to the districts to provide such translations. Current statute requires that schools provide translations of parental notifications when the number of students speaking a given language reaches 15% or more of a school's enrollment. However, given the importance of student engagement with school to attendance and learning outcomes, additional support to schools in communicating with parents and caregivers in their home languages could widen the possibilities to better serve MLE. Attention to communicating with parents and caregivers in their home language could widen possibilities to better serve MLE students.

Reconsider reclassification criteria. Across the period 2006–07 to 2018–19, there were gaps between when students reached English proficiency and when they were reclassified as fluent English proficient. In addition, some students labeled as LTEL appear to meet the ELPAC expectations for reclassification yet were not yet reclassified. Continued attention to the equitable implementation of reclassification policies may help ensure that MLE are reclassified at time points appropriate to best support their long-term learning outcomes.

The timing of reclassification as fluent English proficient can have important implications for students' educational trajectories. Reclassification, in accordance with the four state-approved criteria, is a district-level responsibility. Findings in this report and other research show that there is variability in reclassification practices across districts and schools. Additionally, some districts set achievement of Level 3 on the CAASPP ELA as a standard to meet reclassification Criterion 4, a high bar even for English-only students. The state can support efforts to streamline reclassification. This could begin with better data collection and understanding from districts of the criteria used in reclassification, and

analysis of the relationship between proficiency and the timing of reclassification for different groups of MLE and the long-term educational outcomes for these students.

Support early and better identification of learning needs for MLE, including special education. Findings in this report showed that many multilingual learners of English who do not make sufficient progress in English proficiency to reclassify by high school are subsequently identified as having special education needs. More attention is needed to understanding the factors underlying slowed or stalled progress in English language development, and whether MLE are receiving the instruction and interventions most effective for them to progress towards proficiency. Additionally, early understanding of the extent to which challenges in acquiring English proficiency are connected to a learning disability, the nature of special education needs, and the relationship with language processing, can help identify and provide targeted supports to aid learning growth.

Previous research finds a need for early identification of, and continued support for, MLE showing signs of reading difficulties (Goldenberg & Cárdenas-Hagan, 2023). In 2025, the state introduced a new requirement for annual screening for reading difficulties, including dyslexia, in grades K–2, with four screening tools approved, three of which are adapted for English and Spanish (Siebert et al., 2025). As the state rolls out this initiative, it will be important to collect evidence on how use of the screening tools are being implemented across the state. This could include the timing of screening in the context of students' development, how the tools are administered, and how teaching staff interpret results. Given that literacy is often a barrier to reclassification, there is also a need to understand whether MLE are being under- or over-identified for reading difficulties, how screening is working for those whose home language is neither English nor Spanish, and how results are used in communication with families to guide instruction and/or further diagnosis.[22]

Continue efforts to retain qualified teachers. The findings in this report show that schools serving higher numbers of long-term English learners were less likely to have staff qualified in the subjects they taught. By contrast, English learner positive outlier districts—those achieving outsized

[22] See also Californians Together & Teach+Plus (2025). *Considerations and suggestions when adopting a reading difficulties screener for multilingual learners.* https://californianstogether.org/resource/considerations-and-suggestions-when-adopting-a-reading-difficulties-screener-for-multilingual-learners/

success—showed that teachers with more experience related to greater growth in math and ELA. Research finds that pathways such as teacher residencies, early career support and mentoring, and incentives like loan forgiveness and targeted stipends for specialized positions can help retain teachers (Espinoza et al., 2018). Additional research suggests that California's investments in programs such as the Teacher Residency Grant Program, Golden State Teacher Grant Program, and National Board Certified Teacher Incentive Program have helped retain teachers (Carver-Thomas et al., 2024), signaling the importance of ongoing investments by the state. State data suggests that strengthened investments to encourage bilingual authorization credentials is gaining traction, but the disconnect between agencies holding these data hinders investigation about the extent to which the investment is having the desired impact on the placement of teachers in bilingual settings (Jacobson et al., 2026).

Attend to principal turnover and development. The findings about principal stability in K–8 schools not only benefit MLE growth. Other studies in the Getting Down to Facts series presents research on the importance of principal stability on all students' schooling experiences and on teacher retention and effectiveness. Statewide efforts to encourage principals to climb professional ladders while deepening tenure in their schools can work to build and maintain schoolwide initiatives and programming to support MLE and all students. Understanding and addressing the drivers to decrease principal turnover may be an area for policy attention.[23]

Support efforts to address chronic absenteeism and improved student stability. Positive outlier districts had lower chronic absenteeism and higher student stability. Concurrently, chronic absenteeism was problematic in high schools with high rates of LTEL students. While there may be individual student reasons for absenteeism, research also points to systemic reasons for absenteeism, from fear of safety outside of the home (Dee & Murphy, 2020) to feelings of ostracism from the schooling community to lack of engaging coursework (Fiel, Haskins, & Turley, 2013; Van Eck et al., 2017). Together, continuing to provide schools and districts with programs and strategies to understand the factors underlying student absenteeism and switching schools mid-year, build student engagement with school, and bolster stable

[23] See also Levin, S. & Bradley, K. (2019). *Understanding and addressing principal turnover: A review of the research*. National Association of Secondary School Principals.

student attendance may have substantial payoffs for further narrowing gaps and improving learning for MLE.

Support improved data collection and analysis. To ensure California has an education system that works for all students, including different groups of MLE students, there is a need for additional data collection and analysis. Importantly, these data need to be comparable across schools and LEAs so that policies can uplift what works. Among these needs are:

- *Reclassification:* As noted above, data on how districts implement each of the criteria needed for reclassification as fluent English proficient. Additionally, longitudinal analysis of ever-ELs students, the timing of reclassification and how it informs long-term educational trajectory could help shape how districts employ reclassification criteria.
- *Instruction.* Strikingly absent from many quantitative studies on the progress of MLE are metrics that capture instructional similarities and differences. Collecting quantitative data about instruction could be another important area for study.
- *Bilingual programs:* Given the evidence that some forms of bilingual programs can support high levels of proficiency and achievement in multiple languages, there is a need for additional data to understand which districts and schools are implementing different kinds of bilingual programming, which students enroll in these programs, and how this impacts their long-term educational trajectory should be a priority. Additional analysis is needed of how different modes of bilingual education intersect with curricula, instructional practices, and support for students exhibiting stalled progress. Programming data could capture variation in instructional strategies that cannot be measured using teacher assignment data. Such data could also inform the extent to which the state can support districts seeking to introduce or expand bilingual programs across the state.
- *Teachers with bilingual certification:* Additional data on the supply and demand for teachers trained with bilingual certification, which initial teacher education programs offer training, and the distribution of teachers across the state is critical for supporting the development of bilingual programs.
- *Differential analysis of MLE groups:* Some groups of MLE face particular challenges as they move through the education system. Students entering with the lowest levels of English

proficiency have a higher likelihood of being designated as long-term English learners. Additionally, students entering with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE/SIFE), many of whom enter in later grades, may require resources and programming differentiated from other MLE to meet their particular needs. Additional data and analysis of the educational trajectories of these students is needed to understand how districts and schools are serving these students, and what additional resources and training may be needed.

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Appendix A: California's Multilingual Learner System

What is the Structure of Support for Multilingual Learner Education?

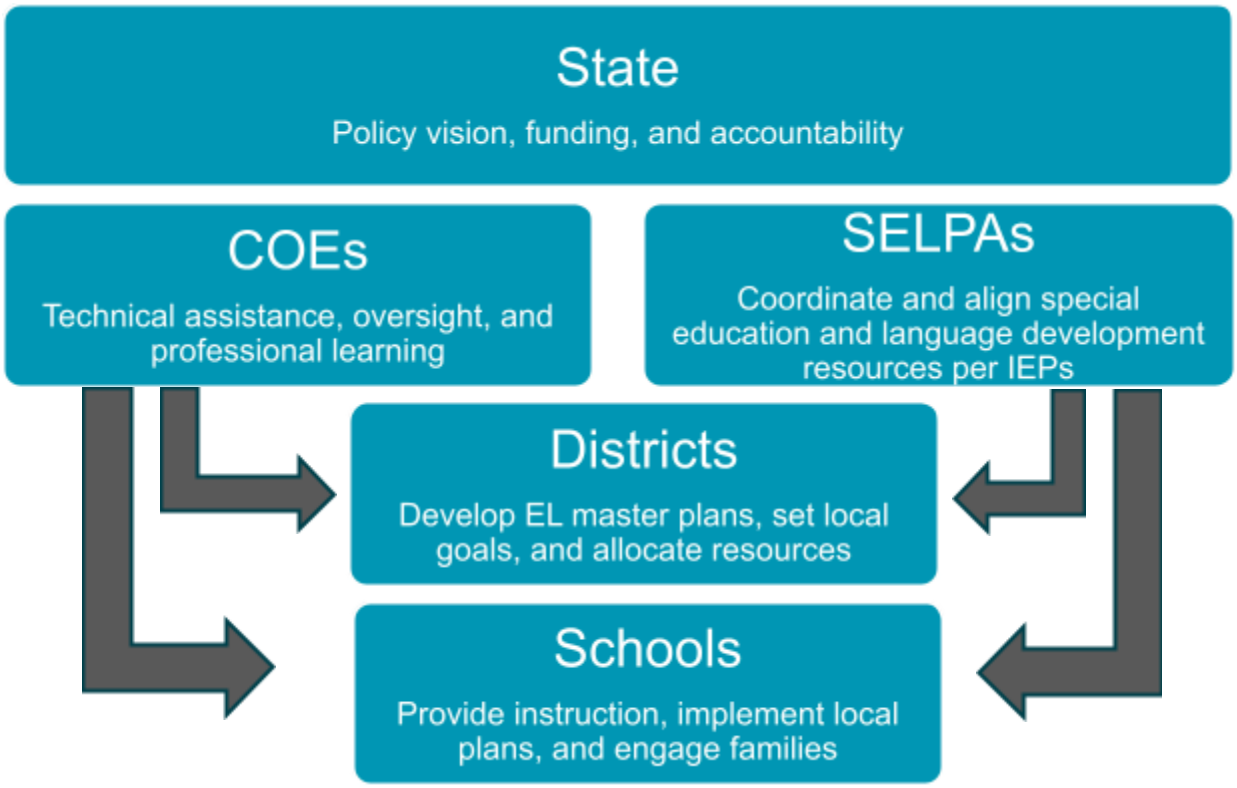
The functioning of an effective system of policy and implementation for multilingual learner education in California is based on agencies and organizations at multiple levels (see Figure A1). States and districts primarily structure resources that become implemented at the school level, with additional supports via county offices of education and special education local plan areas (SELPAs):

- **State**: Through the State Board of Education and the California Department of Education, the state sets the overall vision and goals for MLE education, as articulated in the English learner roadmap. The state provides funding through the LCFF—English learners are included in local educational agencies' unduplicated pupil counts that generate additional funding support—and establishes the accountability framework of Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and the California School Dashboard. Guidance on MLE education is provided through CDE's multilingual learner division.
- **Districts/local educational agencies (LEAs):** Districts make key decisions in implementing the CA English learner roadmap, establishing English learner master plans in conjunction with local district English learner advisory committees (DELACs), and allocating resources and setting local goals as articulated in LCAPs. Through this work, districts can set instructional programming models (e.g., dual language immersion), hire staff and provide professional learning, collect and use data for improvement, and engage families and communities.
- **Schools**: the main responsibility of schools is instruction, implementing locally determined programming and plans for English learners. School-level plans for English learners are reflected in the School Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA) aligned with the LCAP. Schools can also use building-level teams to examine data for MLE, run school site English learner advisory committees (ELACs), and engage families and communities.
- **County offices of education (COE):** As in other areas of education, COEs provide regional technical assistance and oversight essential to support the learning of MLE. COEs may provide professional learning to district staff and coordinate district coordinators of English learner services. In particular,

the state has funded Regional COE English learner specialists who provide guidance on best practices and instructional strategies to support learning for MLE (CDE, n.d.-e.).

- **Special education local plan areas (SELPA)**: SELPAs, typically comprised of multiple districts and often COEs, serve to uphold the educational rights of students with disabilities and help with the provision and coordination of special education services (CDE, n.d.-f.). Some MLE will be dually identified as both English learners and having a disability. SELPAs can help coordinate services to ensure that individual education plans (IEPs) provide alignment between factors and resources that support language development and broader learning needs.

Figure A1. Structure of State Support for Multilingual Learners of English



Source: Authors' rendition.

How Does California Identify English Learners?

Students typically become classified as English learners through a two-step process: a home language survey, followed by an English proficiency intake assessment using the Initial ELPAC.

Step 1. Home Language Survey: When a new student enrolls for the first time in a school in California, parents are asked to complete a home language survey.[24] This consists of four questions about which language or languages are most frequently spoken in the home, are spoken by parents and guardians, and spoken by the student.

Step 2. Intake Assessment: Depending on the responses, the student may be asked to complete an English language proficiency intake assessment. Since 2019, this intake assessment is the Initial English Language Proficiency Assessment for California (Initial ELPAC), or for students with significant cognitive disabilities, the Initial Alternate ELPAC.[25] The Initial ELPAC and reporting of results should take place within 30 days of the student first enrolling in school.

The Initial ELPAC has three levels: Novice English learner (L1); Intermediate English learner (L2); and Initial Fluent English Proficient (L3). The test, its administration, and weighted scores depend on the student's anticipated age-appropriate grade level.

Initial English Language Assessment in Transitional Kindergarten: With the increase in Transitional Kindergarten enrollments, there needed to be an important policy determination for the initial English proficiency intake assessment. The Initial ELPAC was psychometrically designed for students in grades K–12 and thus may not be developmentally appropriate for younger students. Following the passage of California Assembly Bill 2268 in 2024, the Initial ELPAC or Initial Alternate ELPAC requirements no longer apply to TK students. Parents of TK students still complete the home language survey. The state encourages local educational agencies (LEAs) to provide language development services to dual language learner TK students. As of the publishing of the report, there is not yet a statewide TK initial

[24] For more information, see California Department of Education. *Surveys, assessments, programs, and reclassification.* Retrieved December 15, 2025, from https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/parentinfo.asp

[25] In 2018, California transitioned to the ELPAC from the previous California English Language Development Test (CELDT). The ELPAC is aligned with the 2012 California English Language Development Standards.

English intake assessment, but the California State Board of Education has provided examples of assessments that may be appropriate for younger students that LEAs may use as formative assessment tools (California State Board of Education, 2024).

How Does California Assess English Learners' Language Proficiency?

Students classified as English learners are annually assessed on their English proficiency using the Summative ELPAC, or the Summative Alternate ELPAC for those students with significant cognitive disabilities. Students are tested in the Spring, between February 1st and May 31st. The Summative ELPAC assesses students in each of four domains—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—giving students a score in each domain, and from these combined oral and written scores, an overall composite score. This score is translated into one of four overall proficiency levels ranging from Level 1 (Beginning to Develop) to Level 4 (Well Developed). Students must achieve an overall score of level 4 to be considered for reclassification as fluent English proficient.[26]

To understand how schools, LEAs/districts, and the state support the progress of students classified as English learners towards English proficiency, a related measure—the English Language Progress Indicator (ELPI)—is used (CDE, n.d.-h.). The ELPI divides each of Summative ELPAC levels 2 and 3 to create a six-level scale: 1, 2L, 2h, 3L, 3H, and 4. Each school or LEA/district receives an ELPI status calculated by counting the number of students advancing one ELPI level (or maintaining the highest ELPI level) as a proportion of the total number of students classified as English learners with past and current Summative ELPAC scores. Importantly, the scores that determine each ELPAC (and ELPI) level vary depending on student grade level. Thus, if a student is judged to be at the same ELPI level in subsequent years, it does not indicate lack of development in English proficiency, but rather that the student has maintained a steady progress but insufficient to move them up a level.

Each school and LEA/district, along with the state, receives an ELPI status. This status and whether improvements have been made year to year, contribute to five-by-five color tables and are displayed on the California school dashboard (CDE, n.d.-i.). In 2025, for example, the state received a "yellow" rating,

[26] The Summative Alternate ELPAC has three proficiency levels. Students taking this assessment must achieve level 3 in order to be considered for reclassification.

with 46% of eligible students making progress, and a less than 1 percentage point increase from the previous year.[27]

How does California reclassify English learners as fluent English proficient?

Reclassification is the process by which a MLE is reclassified from English learner to fluent English proficient. Once students are reclassified as fluent English proficient, federal law requires monitoring their progress for four additional years.

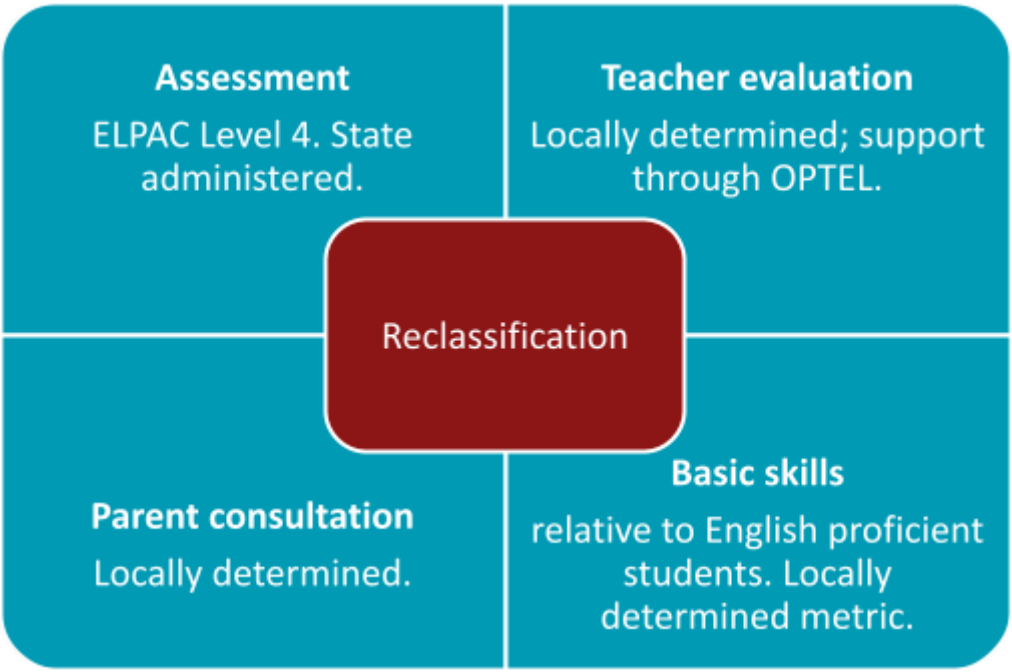
The timing of reclassification is a complicated decision. Research finds that for many students, reclassification can positively impact their academic self-efficacy (Lee & Soland, 2023). However, if students are reclassified too early, they may miss out on language supports that are beneficial to their English language development and then additionally suffer stifled learning because their literacy is not yet strong enough to comprehend the new academic content (Slama, 2014). The academic self-efficacy of these too-early reclassified students can decrease after reclassification (Slama, 2014). By contrast, if students are held back from reclassification for extended periods, they may miss out on access to the full curriculum and important learning opportunities (Betts et al., 2019; as reviewed by Umansky & Porter, 2020). While it is illegal in the State of California to withhold academic opportunities from students receiving English learner services, research continues to show that school schedules are often logistically designed in such a way as to precludes students classified as English learners from enrolling in advanced academic courses (Williams et al., 2024).

It is important to note that a faster time to reclassification should not be the sole goal of English learner programming. Rather, the focus should be on students' academic trajectory and ensuring they have maximum opportunity to achieve their educational potential. Research finds that even in successful teaching environments it can take 4 to 7 years to become proficient in a new language, and depends on a range of factors (Collier & Thomas, 2017; Hakuta et al., 2000). These include students' initial proficiency levels, the mode of instructional programming, and their early literacy skills in their home language. For example, a 2014 study found that schools that enrolled their MLE students in English-only

[27] Long-term English learners showed a green rating due to a more than 3 percentage point increase in students making progress over the previous year. See California Department of Education. *California school dashboard.* Retrieved January 26, 2026, from https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/fivebyfivecolortables.asp#EnglishIndicatorTable

programs experienced quicker progression to classification (3–4 years) whereas MLE students enrolled in dual language immersion programs took an additional 1–2 years longer to reclassify. However, the students in English-only programs achieved mid-fluency in English whereas in the long term, the dual language immersion students achieved higher proficiency scores, eligibility for reclassification, and academic outcomes in English language arts than their English-only peers (Umansky & Reardon, 2014).

Figure A2. English Learner Reclassification Criteria



Source: California Department of Education. *Reclassification.* https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/reclassification.asp.

The responsibility for determining reclassification sits with LEAs, based on four criteria set by the state. (See Figure A2). This means that although the state requires students to meet all four of the criteria for reclassification, for three of these, each LEA can locally determine the definitions, thresholds, and minimum performance standards. The four criteria are (CDE, n.d.-j.):

- **Criterion 1. Assessment**: Students take the Summative ELPAC and must achieve an overall proficiency of level 4. (Students with significant cognitive disabilities may take the Summative Alternate ELPAC and must achieve overall proficiency level 3.)

- **Criterion 2. Teacher evaluation**: this process is locally determined. LEAs collect feedback on the student's mastery of the curriculum across subject areas. Teachers may use the Observation Protocol for Teachers of English Learners (OPTEL) to support standardization of this process.
- **Criterion 3. Parent evaluation**: this process is also locally determined. LEAs are required to gain parental consultation and opinion to discuss the student's performance and goals, and should collaboratively develop plans prior to reclassification decisions.
- **Criterion 4. Basic skills** relative to English proficient students: LEAs set local criteria for establishing performance ranges compared to those of English proficient students of the same age. These may include scores on CAASPP, other assessments of English language arts, or other LEA benchmarks.

Previous research on reclassification policies across multiple states found that in states with more numerous or complex criteria, students that may otherwise have reclassified were more likely to be remain longer in English learner status (Umansky & Porter, 2020). There can be considerable variation in reclassification rates among California LEAs/districts, which may depend on a combination of local policies, instructional practices and the range of supports available to students (Leger et al., 2023). To improve standardization of the teacher evaluation criterion across LEAs/districts, in 2024, CDE launched the Observation Protocol for Teachers of English Learners (OPTEL) (CDE, 2025; WestEd, 2024). This tool is intended to help teachers assess English language use while engaged in content learning, and to provide evidence for reclassification.

Whereas a 2019 study of two large California districts did not find significant evidence of reclassification either too soon or too late (Betts et al., 2019), a more recent statewide longitudinal study found that despite overall improvements in English language acquisition, this had not been matched by concomitant increases in reclassification, suggesting a disconnect between the two (Novicoff et al., 2024). (See also "English Language Proficiency and Time to Reclassification" in this report.) To the extent that some LEAs/districts may rely on meeting state standards on CAASPP ELA—a high bar even for many English Only students—as sole evidence for meeting Criterion 4, students otherwise capable of being reclassified may find themselves held longer in English learner status (Price et al., 2024).

Appendix B: Methods for Bright Spots Analysis

We use student-level restricted access data from the California Department of Education to gain information on the individual test scores of students between the school years of 2021–22 through 2023–24. These student-level data are then aggregated up to the district level. In the district dataset, we then merge on publicly available data on district-level demographic, enrollment, absenteeism, and staffing data from the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). We also merge data from the Teacher Assignment Monitoring Outcome (TAMO) and the Certificated Salaries and Benefits data.

We merged these district data with the American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year rolling averages of limited English proficiency among adults, median family income, unemployment among adults, poverty for families with children, and educational attainment among adults.

I. Development of the instrumental variable

$$\hat{z}_{igy} = \beta_i z_{(t-1)} + \beta_1 ethnoracial\ affiliation_i + \beta_2 ses\_disadv_i + \beta_3 disability_i + e_{gy}$$

Where $\hat{z}_{ig}$ is the predicted value of an individual, *i,* student's test score is based on their prior year's score ($z_{(t-1)}$) and the average of all California students in the same grade level with similar ethno-racial affiliation, socioeconomic household disadvantage, and disability status for that school year, *y*.

Scores are transposed to standardized z-scores within test type, e.g., CAASPP Math and the alternate test of CAA Math, are standardized within each test type across all the students taking that type of test in that grade level in the same year. Within grade, all standardized z-scores can be interpreted with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1.

The district level variable of the expected/predicted district score comes from the average score ($\hat{z}_{ig}$) across all students, *n,* within a district, *d*, for that school year time, *t*, as denoted with:

$$\sum_{n_t=1}^{n_t} \frac{\hat{z}_{igt}}{n_{dt}}$$

II. Estimating the predicted district score

- $\hat{Z}_{dst} = \propto_{dst} + \propto_{1dt}[A]_{dt} + \propto_{2dt}[B]_{dt} + \propto_{3dt} \sum_{n_t=1}^{n_t} \frac{\hat{z}_{igt}}{n_{dt}} + year_d + e_{dst}$

Where $\hat{Z}_d$ is the outcome score expected for each school year time, *t*, for each district, *d*, that serves all the students, *n,* testing in the subject, *s*, of English proficiency (ELPAC), math (CAASPP, CAA), or ELA (CAASPP, CAA).

In addition, [A] is the vector of the American Community Survey measures of the socioeconomic circumstances of the people living within the district boundaries in the beginning of the school year: percentages of households with limited English proficiency (logged), median income (logged, USD$), percentages of adults unemployed (logged), percentages of families with children living below poverty (logged), and percentages of adults with different educational attainment levels. All ACS measures use the 5-year smoothed variables provided by the US Census Bureau.

[B] is the vector of the CDE measures of the socioeconomic circumstances of the students attending the district during that school year: percentages of novice (level 1) initial English proficiency for newly enrolled English learners[28], number of different languages students speak at home, percentages of ever-EL students enrolled, percentages of students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, type of district, locale of district, enrollment size of district (logged), and percentages of English learner students entering the California school system at different grade levels.

Since each district level *Z*-score is calculated within grade level and then averaged all together in a district. By calculation, if certain grades enroll more students, they will proportionally weight the district average by the number of students in each grade level.

The error term, e_{dst}, is clustered by district, *d,* for each subject, *s*, across each estimated school year's time, *t.*

[28] "Newly enrolled" is defined as the student is newly enrolled in the California school system in that year and who was required to take the initial ELPAC test because their intake form identified them as speaking a language other than English at home.

Population scope. All estimates are restricted to districts that enroll any students in grades K–8. High-school only districts are excluded. CAASPP and CAA scores only occur for students in grades 4-8 who had a prior year's CAASPP or CAA score. Since the CAASPP and CAA are transposed to z-scores, a student can have either test in math or ELA between the two years (e.g., the test type can differ). ELD scores occur for any current English learner students in grades 1-8 and who had a prior ELPAC score as well as the two most recent ELPAC scores of students who were reclassified since the prior school year.

Never-EL comparison. Models are separately estimated for math and ELA subjects for students who were never classified as an English learner (never-EL).

Weights. Since different numbers of students are tested, the district score is analytically weighted by the number of test takers in that subject. For math and ELA, weights are separately produced based on the number of ever-EL and never-EL test takers. These weights allow for more precise, shrunken error estimates as districts test larger numbers of students. These unbalanced weights constrain the modeling from a multilevel specification.

III. Resources associated with positive outlier districts

$$e_{dst} = \delta_{dst} + \delta_{1dt}[A]_{dt} + \delta_{2dt}[B]_{dt} + \delta_{3dt}[C]_{dt} + \delta_{4dt}\sum_{n_t=1}^{n_t}\frac{\hat{z}_{igt}}{n_{dt}} + year_d + \omega_{dst}$$

Where e_{ds} is the average outcome score expected for each school year for each district, *d*, that serves all the students, *n,* testing in the subject, *s*, of English proficiency (ELPAC), math (CAASPP, CAA), or ELA (CAASPP, CAA) for that school year time, *t*.

The vector of the American Community Survey measures [A] and the vector of the CDE measures of the socioeconomic circumstances [B] as well as the average predicted scores of the students serve as controls in the model estimates.

Vector [C] contains the quantitatively measurable variables hypothesized to associate with the district's resource practices to learn to the direction and magnitude of districts' actual growth performing higher or lower than statistically predicted.

- Budget use metrics include year-varying indicators of:
  - % expenditures on instructional resources

  - Average expenditures per pupil
  - Maximum salary of BA+60 teachers
  - Districts missing salary data
- Teacher hiring and assignment metrics include year-varying indicators of:
  - Teacher:student ratio among K–8 students in the district
  - % teachers in K–8 schools that leave the district
  - % of principals of K–8 schools that leave the district
  - Average years of teaching in the district
  - % substandard credentials (as defined as inexperienced teachers in TAMO)
- Programming metrics include year-varying indicators of:
  - Ratio of bilingual authorized teachers to the total number of ever-EL students in the district
  - % EL with misassigned EL teachers in schools serving K–8 grades
- Attendance metrics include year-varying indicators of:
  - School stability rate among all K–8 students in the district
  - Chronic absenteeism rate among all K–8 students in the district

The error term, ω_{dst}, is clustered by district, *d,* for each subject, *s*, across each estimated school year's time, *t*.

IV. Identifying positive outlier districts

The residual scores (e_{ds}) for each district are calculated for each subject. These estimates are compared to identify which districts are out-performing their predicted estimates ($Z_d > \hat{Z}_d$) on all three outcomes.

Supplementary Tables and Figure

Table B1 describes the variation in the variables used in the analytic sample.

Table B2 displays the full model results for English learner and never-English learner subgroups of students.

Table B1. Descriptive Statistics of the Analytic Sample

	Obs.	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Growth scores					
ELPAC actual, z-score	904	0.141	0.210	-0.651	0.985
ELPAC predicted, z-score	904	0.343	0.209	-0.201	1.205
ELPAC residual	904	-0.006	0.107	-0.604	0.344
Math actual, z-score	904	-0.225	0.369	-0.923	1.160
Math predicted, z-score	904	-0.197	0.343	-0.791	1.063
Math residual	904	0.004	0.063	-0.251	0.281
ELA actual, z-score	904	-0.256	0.315	-0.971	0.846
ELA predicted, z-score	904	-0.220	0.290	-0.742	0.833
ELA residual	904	0.004	0.073	-0.283	0.323
American Community Survey Characteristics					
Limited English proficiency (% ln)	904	1.940	0.829	-1.609	4.093
Families with children below poverty (% ln)	904	2.371	0.797	-5.000	3.978
Median family income (ln)	904	11.517	0.368	10.414	12.420
Unemployment rate (% ln)	904	1.363	0.377	-0.223	2.493
BA+ education attainment (%)	904	29.124	17.707	0	81.5
District Enrollment Characteristics					
Novice level, initial ELPAC %	904	72.691	14.392	20.400	100.000
# languages served in district	904	10.281	4.935	1.000	18.000
Ever-EL % in the district	904	38.391	18.511	7.093	89.130
Rural	904	0.096		0	1
Town	904	0.194		0	1
Suburb	904	0.460		0	1
City	904	0.250		0	1
Total enrollment (ln)	904	8.673	1.127	5.710	13.241
Unified district	904	0.582		0	1
ELs starting in KN %	904	38.978	8.802	5.395	58.894
Budget funds use					
% expenditures on instructional resources	904	58.438	5.136	36.000	73.000
Average expenditures per pupil (per $1k)	904	20.344	4.061	11.615	43.539
BA+60, maximum salary	904	99.056	13.844	52.914	158.665
Salary, missing flag	904	0.037		0	1
Teacher hiring and assignment practices					
Teacher:student Ratio	904	0.047	0.010	0.001	0.096
% teachers leave district	904	11.607	5.924	0.000	83.715
% principals leave district	904	14.942	18.422	0.000	100.000
Average teacher years in district	904	11.628	2.855	2.143	21.671

% substandard credentialed teachers	904	5.930	5.504	0.000	40.090
Programming					
% EL with misassigned teachers	904	4.220	5.698	0.000	63.000
Bilingual teacher:ever-EL student ratio	904	-5.476	1.519	-10.000	-2.690
Attendance					
% TK–8 chronic absent	904	21.616	9.058	4.208	62.349
% TK–8 school stability	904	89.659	3.914	73.333	97.032
School year 2022-23	904	0.496		0	1

Notes: Sample excludes districts not serving grades 4–8 or districts serving fewer than 150 ever-EL students.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of student-level CAASPP, ELPAC, and demographic data provided by the California Department of Education as well as publicly available data on district characteristics. (2025).

Table B2. District Resources Predicting Growth Scores for MLE and Never-EL Student Populations, SY 2022–23 & 2023–24

	(1) ELPAC Classified EL Students	(2) Math Ever-EL Students	(3) ELA Ever-EL Students	(4) MATH Never-EL Students	(5) ELA Never-EL Students
American Community Survey Characteristics					
Limited English proficiency (% ln)	0.002	0.005	0.004	0.010*	0.009
	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.006)
Families with children below poverty (% ln)	-0.008	-0.003	-0.008*	-0.003	-0.005
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Median family income (ln)	0.036	-0.019	-0.008	-0.036*	-0.025
	(0.027)	(0.019)	(0.022)	(0.018)	(0.020)
Unemployment rate (% ln)	-0.010	-0.004	0.002	-0.013+	-0.013
	(0.011)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.007)	(0.008)
BA+ education attainment (%)	-0.003***	-0.001*	-0.002***	0.000	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
District Enrollment Characteristics					
Novice level, initial ELPAC % in the district	-0.003***	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
# languages served in district	-0.004**	-0.004***	-0.003*	-0.002	-0.002
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Ever-EL % in the district	-0.001*	-0.000	-0.001+	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Rural	-0.012	-0.002	-0.006	0.008	0.008
	(0.016)	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.015)	(0.018)
Town	0.007	-0.015+	-0.009	-0.017*	-0.012
	(0.012)	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.008)	(0.010)
City (reference is Suburb)	-0.015+	-0.005	-0.004	-0.012*	-0.016**
	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)
Total enrollment (ln)	0.007	0.005	0.005	0.009*	0.015**
	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Unified district (reference is Elem, 6–12)	0.024*	-0.001	-0.005	-0.016**	-0.023**
	(0.009)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.007)
ELs starting in KN %	-0.000	-0.001+	0.000	-0.000	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Budget funds use					
% expenditures on instructional resources	0.001	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.000
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Average expenditures per pupil (per $1k)	0.003**	0.001	0.003**	0.002*	0.004**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
BA+60, maximum salary	0.001	0.000+	0.000	0.000	0.000+
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Salary, missing flag	0.014	0.025+	0.034*	0.002	0.015
	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.011)	(0.014)
Teacher hiring and assignment practices					
Teacher:student Ratio	0.202	0.319	0.515	0.414	0.370
	(0.504)	(0.307)	(0.414)	(0.301)	(0.393)
% teachers leave district	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.001)
% principals leave district	-0.000*	-0.000*	-0.000	-0.000+	-0.000

	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Average teacher years in district	0.001	0.002+	0.002+	0.002+	0.000
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
% substandard credentialed teachers	0.001	-0.000	-0.001	-0.001*	-0.002*
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Programming					
% EL with misassigned teachers	-0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Bilingual teacher:ever-EL student ratio	0.002	0.003	0.001	0.002	-0.001
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Attendance					
% TK–8 chronic absent	-0.002***	-0.001*	-0.002***	-0.001+	-0.001+
	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)
% TK–8 school stability	0.005**	0.005***	0.004***	0.002**	0.003**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Predicted student growth	0.873***	1.048***	1.045***	1.068***	1.100***
	(0.037)	(0.013)	(0.017)	(0.019)	(0.024)
School year 2022–23	0.138***	0.031***	0.027*	0.015	0.027*
	(0.016)	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.012)
Intercept	-0.881**	-0.256	-0.378	0.118	-0.173
	(0.334)	(0.245)	(0.271)	(0.221)	(0.260)
Observations	904	904	904	904	904
R-squared	0.789	0.977	0.958	0.981	0.970
F test	125.0	1311.0	708.6	1452.0	892.5

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Notes: Sample excludes districts not serving grades 4–8 or districts serving fewer than 150 ever-EL students. OLS regressions with clustered district error terms. All scores are reported as z-scores with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1 that are centered within each grade level each year.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of student-level CAASPP, ELPAC, and demographic data provided by the California Department of Education as well as publicly available data on district characteristics. (2025).