



English Learners in California

Demographics, Outcomes, and State Accountability Policies

By Julie Sugarman and Courtney Geary

This fact sheet provides an overview of key characteristics of the foreign-born and English Learner (EL) populations in California. It aims to build understanding of the state demographic context, how ELs are performing in K-12 schools, and the basics of state policies for EL education under the federal *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), enacted in December 2015. The transition to ESSA is ongoing, with states slated to update their data reporting systems by December 2018. As a result, the data this fact sheet uses to describe student outcomes primarily reflect systems and accountability policies developed under the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, in effect from 2002 through 2015). Many of the changes expected as ESSA is implemented will improve the accuracy and availability of these data.

The first section examines the demographics of California using U.S. Census Bureau 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) data, and EL students as reported by the California Department of Education. A discussion of EL student outcomes as measured by standardized tests follows, and the fact sheet concludes with a brief overview of California accountability mechanisms that affect ELs under ESSA.

I. Demographic Overview of Foreign-Born and EL Populations in California

In 2016, approximately 10,678,000 foreign-born individuals resided in California, accounting for 27 percent of the state population—twice the immigrant share of the U.S. population overall (14 percent), as seen in Table 1. Historically, California has been a destination for substantial numbers of immigrants, with the state home to about one-quarter of the U.S. foreign-born population. Table 1 also shows that the growth rate of the immigrant population in California slowed from 37 percent in the period between 1990 and 2000 to 21 percent between 2000 and 2016. Nevertheless, the immigrant population continues to grow more rapidly than the native-born population. Age group trends in California mirror broader national trends, with disproportionately smaller shares of foreign-born individuals in the birth-to-age-17 brackets compared to the native born.

With a large population of immigrants, it follows that the share of school-age children with one or more foreign-born parents is larger in California (52 percent) than in the United States overall (26 percent), as shown in Table 2. Additionally, about 89 percent of children of immigrants in California were native born, compared to 86 percent nationwide. In California, 60 percent of children in low-income families had one or more foreign-born parents, compared to 32 percent of children nationally.

Table 1. Foreign- and U.S.-Born Populations of California and the United States, 2016

	California		United States	
	Foreign Born	U.S. Born	Foreign Born	U.S. Born
Number	10,677,663	28,572,354	43,739,345	279,388,170
Share of total population	27.2%	72.8%	13.5%	86.5%
Population Change over Time				
% change: 2000-16	20.5%	14.3%	40.6%	11.6%
% change: 1990-2000	37.2%	7.3%	57.4%	9.3%
Age Group				
Share under age 5	0.6%	8.5%	0.7%	7.0%
Share ages 5-17	3.7%	21.8%	5.1%	18.5%
Share ages 18+	95.7%	69.8%	94.2%	74.5%

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub, “State Immigration Data Profiles: Demographics & Social,” accessed April 16, 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/CA/US/.

Number of ELs. ACS data on the Limited English Proficient (LEP) population rely on self-reporting of English proficiency, with LEP individuals counted as those who speak English less than “very well.” At the national level, ACS data indicate that 5 percent of U.S. children ages 5 to 17 are LEP,¹ while data the states submitted to the federal government put the EL share of the total K-12 population at 10 percent in Fall 2015.²

At the state level, ACS data indicate that 9 percent of California children ages 5 to 17 are LEP.³ In contrast, the most recent data from the California Department of Education, from school year (SY) 2017–18, indicate ELs represented 20 percent of the state K-12 student population, or 1,271,150 students.⁴

Table 2. Nativity and Low-Income Status of Children in California and the United States, 2016

	California		United States	
	Number	Share of Population (%)	Number	Share of Population (%)
Children between ages 6 and 17 with	5,802,391	100.0	47,090,847	100.0
Only native-born parents	2,816,402	48.5	34,838,528	74.0
One or more foreign-born parents	2,985,989	51.5	12,252,319	26.0
Child is native born	2,654,365	45.7	10,501,024	22.3
Child is foreign born	331,624	5.7	1,751,295	3.7
Children in low-income families	3,672,672	100.0	28,363,805	100.0
Only native-born parents	1,480,651	40.3	19,216,957	67.8
One or more foreign-born parents	2,192,021	59.7	9,146,848	32.2

Note: The definition of children in low-income families includes children under age 18 who resided with at least one parent and in families with annual incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold.

Source: MPI Data Hub, “State Immigration Data Profiles: Demographics & Social.”

Table 3. Nativity of California and U.S. LEP Students, 2012–16

	Share of K-12 LEP Children Born in the United States (%)		
	Grades K-5	Grades 6–12	Total
California	86.2	57.5	73.5
United States	82.3	56.5	70.6

Note: Analysis based on Limited English Proficient (LEP) children ages 5 and older enrolled in grades K-12.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012–16 American Community Survey (ACS) data, accessed through Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota, “Integrated Public Use Microdata Series,” accessed April 25, 2018, <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>.

Although ACS data seem to undercount EL children, they can be used to examine (with due caution) the nativity of ELs, a variable school data systems do not capture. Table 3 shows that in California, nearly three-quarters of school-aged children who were reported as LEP in census data were born in the United States, with a larger share among elementary school children than older students. The rate of native-born LEP children in the United States overall was slightly lower, at 71 percent.

Turning now to data collected by the California Department of Education, Table 4 shows the most commonly spoken home languages among the EL students in the state. Spanish leads the

list at 82 percent, with Vietnamese, Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, and Filipino/Tagalog rounding out the top five.

Among California school districts with enrollment of more than 10,000 ELs, four of the five districts with the largest number of ELs in SY 2017–18 were located in Southern California. Table 5 also shows that in the districts with the largest number of ELs, these students made up between 20 percent (Long Beach Unified) and 59 percent (Santa Maria-Bonita School District) of total enrollment. Additionally, 29 school districts reported enrollment of fewer than 10,000 EL students, but that these ELs comprised more than 60 percent of their students.

Table 4. Home Languages Spoken by California ELs, SY 2017–18

	Number of ELs	Share of ELs with a Home Language Other Than English (%)
Spanish	1,044,793	82.2
Vietnamese	27,573	2.2
Mandarin Chinese	22,661	1.8
Arabic	19,008	1.5
Filipino/Tagalog	16,124	1.3
Other (not specified)	15,985	1.3
Cantonese	15,280	1.2
Korean	10,035	0.8
Other (59 languages)	99,691	7.9

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: California Department of Education, Data Reporting Office, “English Learner Students by Language by Grade: State of California 2017-18,” accessed June 22, 2018, <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/SpringData/StudentsByLanguage.aspx?Level=State&TheYear=2017-18&SubGroup=All&ShortYear=1718&GenderGroup=B&CDSCode=00000000000000&RecordType=EL>.

Table 5. Number of ELs and EL Share of Students in California School Districts with More Than 10,000 ELs, SY 2017–18

	Number of ELs	EL Share of Students in District (%)
Los Angeles Unified	140,240	22.8
San Diego Unified	28,537	22.6
Santa Ana Unified	20,574	38.7
San Francisco Unified	16,868	28.0
Garden Grove Unified	15,752	36.5
Oakland Unified	15,646	31.2
Fresno Unified	15,080	20.5
Long Beach Unified	14,547	19.5
San Bernardino City Unified	13,497	25.5
West Contra Costa Unified	10,711	33.8
Fontana Unified	10,408	28.0
Anaheim Elementary	10,251	57.4
Stockton Unified	10,211	25.0
Santa Maria-Bonita School District	10,009	58.5

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: These data include prekindergarten and K-12 students, both enrolled in public schools and in charter schools.

Source: California Department of Education, “CALPADS Unduplicated Pupil Count (UPC) for Grades K-12 (2017-18),” updated February 1, 2018, www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/documents/CUPC1718-K12.xlsx.

Finally, Table 6 shows that as grade level increases, the population and share of ELs in California K-12 schools decrease. Whereas 32 percent of early-elementary students were ELs in SY 2017–18, that number was 11 percent for grades 9 through 12. This reflects the trend that more students achieve English proficiency (and thus exit EL status) over time than immigrate to the United States as adolescents or remain ELs beyond the typical five- to seven-year time frame.

II. EL Student Outcomes in California

Although California is in the process of transitioning to a new test (see “Identification and Reclassification of ELs” in the next section), as of SY 2016-17 the state used the California English Language Development Test (CELDT)⁵ for annual assessment of English language proficiency. Table 7 shows the share of ELs in different grade bands scoring at each overall performance level.

Table 6. Number of ELs and EL Share of Students in California, by Grade, SY 2017–18

	Grades K-2	Grades 3–5	Grades 6–8	Grades 9–12
EL share of students in grade band	32.3%	25.4%	16.2%	11.2%
Number of ELs	465,911	351,586	233,573	217,974

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: Additionally, out of 8,539 students in ungraded programs, 2,106 were ELs (25 percent) in SY 2017–18.

Source: California Department of Education, “2017-18 Enrollment by English Language Acquisition Status (ELAS) and Grade: Statewide Report,” accessed June 22, 2018, <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/longtermel/ELAS.aspx?cde=00&aglevel=State&year=2017-18>.

Table 7. Share of California ELs at Each CELDT Overall Performance Level (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Grades K-2 (%)	Grades 3–5 (%)	Grades 6–8 (%)	Grades 9–12 (%)	All Students (%)
Beginning	8.5	8.6	8.6	11.9	9.1
Early intermediate	16.5	13.4	10.1	12.2	13.4
Intermediate	36.5	38.6	32.3	31.3	35.5
Early advanced	29.3	29.5	37.7	35.2	32.1
Advanced	9.3	9.8	11.3	9.4	9.9

EL = English Learner; CELDT = California English Language Development Test; SY = School Year.

Source: California Department of Education, “California English Language Development Test, 2016–17,” updated June 19, 2017, <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/CELDLT/results.aspx?year=2016-2017&level=state&assessment=2&subgroup=1&entity>.

Across the state, two-thirds of K-12 ELs scored at the third or fourth highest of five CELDT performance levels during SY 2016–17, with that proportion remaining fairly constant across the grade bands.

Next, the fact sheet looks at outcomes of the EL subgroup on state standardized assessments. It is important to note two things about the participation of ELs on these assessments. First, compared to other student subgroups based on ethnicity, poverty, gender, and special education status, ELs are a much more dynamic population: as students gain proficiency, they exit the EL subgroup and new ELs are identified as they enter the U.S. school system. By definition, students who remain in the EL subgroup are not performing at a level where their achievement on mainstream assessments is comparable to that of their English-proficient peers. Whereas this lag is expected for students in their first several years of learning English, concerns about the significant numbers of long-term ELs—those identified as ELs for six or more years—not scoring proficient in English language arts (ELA) and math have driven policymakers to strengthen the ways they hold schools accountable for EL outcomes on academic assessments.

Second, under NCLB, states were allowed to exempt newly arrived EL students from taking the

ELA test for one year and to exclude the math scores of those newcomers from accountability reports. For that reason, the results below do not include all California ELs. The rules for including newly arrived ELs in reports on subgroup outcomes will change as ESSA provisions go into effect in 2018 (see “Accountability for EL Academic Achievement” below).

California administers the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment (SBSA) for accountability purposes. The SBSA for ELA and mathematics is given in grades 3–8 and in grade 11, and scores are reported at four achievement levels.⁶ Students scoring at level 3 (standard met) or level 4 (standard exceeded) are reported in Tables 8 and 9. Beginning in SY 2018–19, scores from the new California Science Test will count toward accountability measures for students in grades 5 and 8 and in high school. The old test was last administered in SY 2015–16, and the new test was in a trial period in SY 2016–17 and SY 2017–18, so no data are available for those two years.

Table 8 shows considerable achievement gaps between the share of ELs and non-ELs who met or exceeded the standard in ELA, with that gap growing larger at older grade levels. The gap was smallest in 3rd grade (36 points) and largest in 11th grade (55 points).

Table 8. Share of California ELs and Non-ELs Meeting or Exceeding Standards in English Language Arts (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 11 (%)
Share of ELs who met or exceeded standard	18.0	14.2	11.7	9.0	8.0	6.2	10.3
Share of non-ELs who met or exceeded standard	53.5	54.8	55.7	54.8	56.3	54.3	65.0

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: Data on non-ELs include both the fluent-English proficient and English-only categories.

Source: California Department of Education, “Smarter Balanced Assessment Test Results for:

State of California,” accessed May 14, 2018, <https://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/sb2017/ViewReport?ps=true&lstTestYear=2017&lstTestType=B&lstGroup=4&lstCounty=00&lstDistrict=00000&lstSchool=0000000>.

As with ELA, there are considerable gaps between ELs and non-ELs on the SBSA for mathematics (see Table 9). The gaps were fairly consistent across grades, ranging from 29 (grade 11) to 36 points (grade 6).

Finally, graduation rates in California have been increasing over the last five years for students overall and for subgroups such as ELs, but wide gaps remain between ELs and all students. For the class of 2016, the share of ELs to graduate within four years was 72 percent, compared to a four-year graduation rate of 83 percent for all students.⁷ These rates are similar to those at the national level for that year, which were 67 percent for ELs and 84 percent for all students.⁸

III. Accountability under ESSA

In 2017, all 50 states (plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) submitted plans to the U.S. Department of Education that outline their approach to complying with new accountability regulations under ESSA. Among the new requirements are provisions requiring states to standardize how they identify students for and exit them from EL status, extending the number of years schools can include former ELs’ scores in reporting on the outcomes of the EL subgroup, and allowing states to develop their own English language proficiency indicator (replacing the three required Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives in NCLB). Implementation of the new policies began in SY 2017–18. However, as many

Table 9. Share of California ELs and Non-ELs Meeting or Exceeding Standards in Mathematics (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 11 (%)
Share of ELs who met or exceeded standard	24.9	14.5	8.4	7.0	6.8	6.4	5.7
Share of non-ELs who met or exceeded standard	55.2	48.8	40.7	42.7	42.2	40.5	35.0

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: Data on non-ELs include both the fluent-English proficient and English-only categories.

Source: California Department of Education, “Smarter Balanced Assessment Test Results.”

states have adopted new or significantly revised English language proficiency assessments over the last few years, some intend to wait to update their English language proficiency benchmarks until they have collected sufficient data from the new assessments.

Learn More about ELs and ESSA

For additional analysis, maps, and state-level data on English Learner education in the United States, check out the MPI [ELL Information Center](#) and its [ESSA resources](#).

A. Identification and Reclassification of ELs

Following federal guidelines, all states require schools to follow a two-step process for identifying students as ELs. First, parents or guardians complete a home-language survey when they enroll their child in a new school district. The survey generally includes one to four questions to identify students whose first language is not English or who live in households where a language other than English is spoken.

If students in such circumstances do not already have scores from a state-approved English language proficiency test on file, they are given a screening test to gauge their English language ability in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (as required by ESSA). Students scoring below proficient are categorized as ELs. Schools must inform parents in a timely manner of their child's English language proficiency level and of the types of support the school can provide, including the right to opt out of services (but not the right to decline EL status and subsequent annual testing).⁹

California is in the process of transitioning from the CELDT to the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). Two versions of this assessment went into statewide use in 2018: an initial assessment used for

screening and a summative assessment given every spring to monitor student progress and determine which students can exit EL status. During the transition to the ELPAC, districts use preliminary overall threshold scores and performance descriptors to determine which students initially qualify for EL services and to determine English proficiency levels.

In addition to ELPAC scores, California schools use three other pieces of information in their decision about whether to allow a student to exit EL status: (1) teacher evaluation, (2) parental opinion and consultation, and (3) comparison of the EL student's performance in basic skills against the academic performance of English-proficient students of the same age. Final threshold scores and reclassification guidance will be published in Fall 2018.¹⁰

B. Accountability for English Language Proficiency

Whereas parents and teachers are primarily interested in the progress of individual students toward English language proficiency, state accountability systems track whether the ELs in entire schools and districts are progressing to and achieving proficiency within the state-determined timeline. States include English language proficiency in their accountability systems in two ways. First, they set a long-term goal for increasing the percent of students making progress toward proficiency (with interim goals along the way), and, second, they include an annual indicator of progress toward English language proficiency in the calculation they use to identify schools in need of improvement.¹¹

California ELs are expected to move up one performance level on the state English language proficiency assessment each year and thus take a maximum of five years to achieve English language proficiency. The state's overall goal is for every school to demonstrate that at least 75 percent of their ELs are making the expected progress every year. Only about 17 percent of schools reported such progress in the baseline years of SY 2013–14 and SY 2014–15; how-

ever, in the entire state, about 68 percent of ELs made the expected progress. This means that, on average, every school in the state needs to make about one percent progress per year for seven years for all schools to achieve the benchmark of 75 percent of students on track by 2022. In line with ESSA guidance, California plans to factor in whether schools are making relatively less progress in moving students toward English proficiency in their criteria for identifying schools in need of comprehensive support and improvement.¹²

C. Accountability for EL Academic Achievement

In addition to progress toward English proficiency, ESSA requires states to report and include in their accountability systems data on how well ELs, as a subgroup, are performing on the indicators that apply to all students (including ELA, math, and science tests; graduation rates; and a school-quality or student-success indicator such as attendance). Using this information, ESSA calls for states to identify schools for comprehensive support and improvement based on the performance of all students, including subgroups of students, and for targeted support and improvement for schools that have one or more underperforming subgroups such as ELs.

As noted earlier, the EL subgroup is unique in that students exit the subgroup once they reach a level at which their English proficiency is no longer keeping them from general academic achievement similar to that of their English-proficient peers. Because of this, ESSA allows states to include former ELs within the EL subgroup for up to four years after they have exited EL status. Former EL students' scores in math and reading can thus be used in accountability measures as a way to give schools credit for the progress those students have made. California will include for-

mer ELs in their calculation of academic achievement and academic progress indicators, but it is unclear from the state ESSA plan whether this will be done for two or four years.¹³

Unlike for other subgroups, ESSA also provides two types of exemption states may choose to apply to recently arrived ELs on state standardized tests:

1. In their first year in the United States, ELs can be exempt from taking the ELA test. They must be tested in math that year, but their scores will not be included in accountability calculations. Regular test-taking and accountability procedures will apply thereafter.
2. ELs take ELA and math tests in their first year, but their scores can be excluded from accountability measures. In the second year, outcomes on both tests are reported as a growth score from year one to year two. From their third year on, students are assessed and their scores included in accountability measures as is done for all students.

States also have a third option: they may assign option 1 to some recently arrived ELs and option 2 to others based on characteristics such as their initial English language proficiency level.¹⁴ California's ESSA plan indicates it will use option 1 for its recently arrived ELs.¹⁵

As states move forward with ESSA accountability plans, policymakers are taking the opportunity to revise existing regulations on funding, program requirements, teacher training, and other aspects of school administration. Provisions that affect EL students should be scrutinized closely by stakeholders at all levels, whether parents, teachers, or community organizations. Data on EL demographics and performance, such as those provided in this fact sheet, will prove an important tool in this effort.¹⁶

Endnotes

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- 16 For additional information on accessing and understanding state English Learner demographic and outcome data, see Julie Sugarman, *A Guide to Finding and Understanding English Learner Data* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/guide-finding-understanding-english-learner-data.

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