



English Learners in Massachusetts

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

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

In 2016, approximately 1,124,000 foreign-born individuals resided in Massachusetts, accounting for 17 percent of the state population—a larger share compared to immigrants in the United States overall (14 percent), as seen in Table 1. The growth rate of the foreign-born population in Massachusetts increased from 35 percent in the period between 1990 and 2000 to 46 percent between 2000 and 2016, and is comparable to that of the U.S. immigrant population more generally. Nevertheless, the growth of the immigrant population in Massachusetts far outpaces the growth rate of the native-born population. Age group trends in Massachusetts mirror broader national trends, with disproportionately smaller shares of foreign-born individuals in the birth-to-age-17 brackets compared to the native born.

The share of school-age children with one or more foreign-born parents in Massachusetts (29 percent) is slightly higher than in the United States overall (26 percent), as shown in Table 2. Additionally, about 82 percent of children of immigrants in Massachusetts were native born, compared to 86 percent nationwide. In Massachusetts, 40 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 Massachusetts and the United States, 2016

	Massachusetts		United States	
	Foreign Born	U.S. Born	Foreign Born	U.S. Born
Number	1,123,882	5,687,897	43,739,345	279,388,170
Share of total population	16.5%	83.5%	13.5%	86.5%
Population Change over Time				
% change: 2000-16	45.5%	2.0%	40.6%	11.6%
% change: 1990-2000	34.7%	2.5%	57.4%	9.3%
Age Group				
Share under age 5	0.8%	6.2%	0.7%	7.0%
Share ages 5-17	5.3%	16.9%	5.1%	18.5%
Share ages 18+	93.8%	76.9%	94.2%	74.5%

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub, “State Immigration Data Profiles: Demographics & Social,” accessed May 15, 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/MA/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 4 percent of Massachusetts children ages 5 to 17 are LEP.³ In contrast, the most recent data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, from school year (SY) 2017–18, indicate ELs represented 10 percent of the state preK-12 student population, or 97,334 students.⁴

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

	Massachusetts		United States	
	Number	Share of Population (%)	Number	Share of Population (%)
Children between ages 6 and 17 with	903,888	100.0	47,090,847	100.0
Only native-born parents	644,783	71.3	34,838,528	74.0
One or more foreign-born parents	259,105	28.7	12,252,319	26.0
Child is native born	212,790	23.5	10,501,024	22.3
Child is foreign born	46,315	5.1	1,751,295	3.7
Children in low-income families	347,432	100.0	28,363,805	100.0
Only native-born parents	209,110	60.2	19,216,957	67.8
One or more foreign-born parents	138,322	39.8	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 Massachusetts 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
Massachusetts	69.9	47.8	58.0
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 Massachusetts, 58 percent 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 somewhat higher, at 71 percent.

Turning now to data collected by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Table 4 shows the most commonly

spoken home languages among Massachusetts ELs. Spanish leads the list at 54 percent, with Portuguese, Chinese, Cape Verdean, and Haitian Creole rounding out the top five.

Among Massachusetts school districts with enrollment of more than 1,000 ELs, the three districts with the largest number of ELs are Boston, Worcester, and Lawrence, each of which has an EL population that made up more than 30 percent of the total district student population. Table 5 shows that in the districts with the largest numbers of ELs, these students made up between 15 percent (Fall River) and 37 percent (Chelsea) of total enrollment.

Table 4. Top Home Languages Spoken by Massachusetts ELs, SY 2015–16

	Number of ELs	Share of ELs with a Home Language Other Than English (%)
Spanish	46,845	54.0
Portuguese	8,460	9.8
Chinese	3,885	4.5
Cape Verdean	3,539	4.1
Haitian Creole	3,410	3.9
Arabic	2,946	3.4
Vietnamese	2,191	2.5
Khmer/Khmer	1,492	1.7
Russian	1,101	1.3
French	719	0.8

EL= English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Student Assessment—ACCESS for ELLs Results—ACCESS for ELLs 2017 Statewide Results,” accessed on June 7, 2018, www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/access/results.html.

Table 5. Number of ELs and EL Share of Students in Massachusetts School Districts with More Than 1,000 ELs, SY 2017-18

	Number of ELs	EL Share of Students in District (%)
Boston	16,685	31.7
Worcester	8,717	34.4
Lawrence	4,709	34.0
Springfield	4,007	15.6
Brockton	3,986	23.9
New Bedford	3,766	29.8
Lowell	3,496	24.2
Lynn	3,383	21.8
Chelsea	2,357	37.3
Framingham	1,914	21.9
Revere	1,724	22.8
Fall River	1,536	15.2
Quincy	1,509	16.0
Everett	1,433	20.3
Malden	1,318	20.2
Waltham	1,243	22.2
Holyoke	1,186	22.4
Marlborough	1,103	24.1

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: These data include prekindergarten students as well as K-12 students.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “2017-18 Selected Populations Report (District),” accessed April 18, 2018, http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/selectedpopulations.aspx?mode=district&year=2018&Continue=View+Report.

Finally, Table 6 shows that the greatest share of Massachusetts EL students were in grades 2 to 5 (37 percent) and the smallest share in grades 6 to 8 (16 percent). The preK share is very small

for both ELs and all students due to the small number of Massachusetts students enrolled in state-provided preschool compared to K-12 enrollment. This distribution of ELs—with greater

Table 6. Distribution of ELs and All Students in Massachusetts across Grade Bands, SY 2016–17

	Pre-Kindergarten (%)	Grades K-1 (%)	Grades 2–5 (%)	Grades 6–8 (%)	Grades 9–12 (%)
Share of ELs in each grade band	4	23	37	16	20
Share of all students in each grade band	3	14	30	22	30

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “District Analysis Review Tools (DARTs)—DART Detail: English Language Learners,” accessed April 18, 2018, www.doe.mass.edu/dart/.

shares in elementary school and lower shares in secondary grades—differs significantly from the distribution of all students across grade bands. The lower proportions in older grades 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 Massachusetts

Massachusetts uses the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs 2.0⁵ for annual assessment of students’ English language proficiency, which is scored on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 6 (highest). Table 7 shows the share of ELs scoring at each level, by grade band.

Across the state, 36 percent of K-12 ELs scored at the lowest proficiency levels (levels 1 and 2) and 60 percent at levels 3 and 4. Only 6 percent scored at level 5 or 6, likely because in SY 2016–17, students in Massachusetts could exit EL status once they reached once they reached an overall composite score of 5.0 out of 6.0 and a literacy composite score of 4.0. These levels changed in SY 2017–18 (see “Identification and

Reclassification of ELs” in the next section for more information).

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

Table 7. Share of Massachusetts ELs at Each ACCESS Composite Level (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Kindergarten (%)	Grades 1–2 (%)	Grades 3–5 (%)	Grades 6–8 (%)	Grades 9–12 (%)	All Students (%)
Level 1	55	9	7	13	18	17
Level 2	19	23	11	19	24	19
Level 3	15	48	35	34	36	36
Level 4	10	17	37	29	18	24
Level 5	2	3	9	4	4	5
Level 6	0	0	1	0	0	1

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Student Assessment—ACCESS for ELLs Results—2017 ACCESS for ELLs Results by District,” accessed on June 27, 2018, www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/access/results.html.

Table 8. Share of Massachusetts ELs and All Students Scoring Proficient in English Language Arts (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 10 (%)
Share of ELs scoring proficient	20	13	11	7	8	7	42
Share of all students scoring proficient	47	48	49	51	50	49	91

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Sources: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “MCAS Achievement Results,” accessed June 27, 2018, <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/mcas.aspx>; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results,” accessed June 27, 2018, <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx>.

not include all Massachusetts 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).

The state standardized testing system in Massachusetts has gone through considerable changes over the last four years. From 2001 to 2014, students participated in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). In 2015 and 2016, districts could use the MCAS or the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). In spring 2017, students in grades 3–8 took the Next-Generation MCAS in ELA and math, which combines aspects of the MCAS and PARCC testing systems.⁶ Students also took “legacy MCAS” tests in science and technology/engineering in grades 5 and 8 and in all three subjects in high school. Next-Generation MCAS scores

are reported as four achievement levels: not meeting, partially meeting, meeting, and exceeding expectations.⁷ For legacy MCAS tests, levels were warning/failing, needs improvement, proficient, and advanced. In both cases, students at the top two levels are considered proficient.

Table 8 shows considerable achievement gaps between the share of ELs and of all students who scored proficient in ELA, with that gap growing larger at older grade levels. The gap was smallest in 3rd grade (27 points) and largest in 10th grade (49 points).

As with ELA, there are substantial gaps between ELs and all students on the MCAS math assessment (see Table 9), with the smallest gap in 3rd grade (23 points) and increasing to 53 points in grade 10.

Table 9. Share of Massachusetts ELs and All Students Scoring Proficient in Math (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 10 (%)
Share of ELs scoring proficient	26	20	14	11	10	10	26
Share of all students scoring proficient	49	49	46	50	47	48	79

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Sources: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “MCAS Achievement Results;” Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results.”

Table 10. Share of Massachusetts ELs and All Students Scoring Proficient in Science and Technology/Engineering (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 10 (%)
Share of ELs scoring proficient	9	3	14
Share of all students scoring proficient	46	40	74

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “MCAS Achievement Results.”

Science test scores, as seen in Table 10, also show substantial gaps between ELs and all students, increasing from 37 points in grades 5 and 8 to 60 points in grade 10.

Finally, graduation rates in Massachusetts have increased 3 percent over the last five years for students overall but are basically unchanged for ELs, with large gaps between the two groups. For the class of 2017, the share of ELs to graduate within four years was 63 percent, compared to a four-year graduation rate of 88 percent for all students.⁸ These rates show a wider gap between ELs and all students than is seen at the national level for the most recent year available (SY 2015–16), where rates were 67 percent for ELs and 84 percent for all students.⁹

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 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).¹⁰

In Massachusetts, K-12 students are screened for initial EL identification using one of the WIDA Consortium's assessments (the WIDA Screener, the Kindergarten W-APT, or the Kindergarten MODEL). For prekindergarten students, the state uses either the Pre-ITP or the Pre-LAS.¹¹ Students are identified as ELs if they score below a designated level for each test; students in grades 1 to 12 given the WIDA Screener, for example, are classified as ELs if they have an overall score of less than 4.0 out of 6.0 and a composite literacy score of less than 4.0.¹² Once identified, ELs are given the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs 2.0 annually until they score highly enough to be reclassified as English proficient. Students with an overall score of at least 4.2 and a literacy composite score of at least 3.9 are evaluated by a school-based team using additional evidence such as teacher observations and other test scores to determine if they are ready to exit EL status.¹³

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.¹⁴

Massachusetts students are expected to take a maximum of six years to achieve English language proficiency, with expectations for individual students set based on their initial English proficiency level, the grade in which they were identified as an EL, and prior schooling. About 62 percent of ELs in Massachusetts made enough progress in 2016 to achieve proficiency within the given timeline. Using this baseline, the state aims to cut the share of ELs not making the expected amount of progress by about 50 percent over the next six years so that 81 percent of students are on target by 2022. In line with ESSA guidance, Massachusetts 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.¹⁵

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. Massachusetts will include former ELs for two years in their calculation of academic achievement and academic progress indicators. However, the state has indicated it plans to explore the possibility of increasing that to four years.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ Massachusetts's ESSA plan indicates it intends to use option 2 for its recently arrived ELs, but it plans to make a final decision after reviewing results from 2017 assessments.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

Endnotes

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- 5 The ACCESS for ELLs 2.0—which stands for Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners—is an English language proficiency assessment given annually to English Learners (ELs) in the 39 states and U.S. territories that make up the WIDA Consortium. For more information on the consortium, see WIDA, “Home,” accessed July 24, 2018, www.wida.us.
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- 11 When first published, IPT stood for IDEA Proficiency Test and LAS stood for Language Assessment Scales. The respective publishers no longer use those terms for their tests.
- 12 Memorandum from Paul Aguiar, Director, and Sibel Hughes, ELE Compliance Coordinator, Office of English Language Acquisition and Academic Achievement, DESE, *New Initial Identification Criteria – WIDA Screener for Grades 1–12*, July 24, 2017, www.doe.mass.edu/ell/guidance/InitialCriteria.pdf.
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- 14 Susan Lyons and Nathan Dadey, *Considering English Language Proficiency within Systems of Educational Accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act* (Chicago: Latino Policy Forum and Center for Assessment, 2017), www.latinopolicyforum.org/publications/reports/document/Considerations-for-ELP-indicator-in-ESSA_030817.pdf.
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- 16 Ibid.
- 17 EdTrust, “Setting New Accountability for English-Learner Outcomes in ESSA Plans,” accessed April 26, 2018, <https://edtrust.org/setting-new-accountability-english-learner-outcomes-essa-plans/>.
- 18 DESE, *Massachusetts Consolidated State Plan*.
- 19 For additional information on accessing and understanding state EL 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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