

Governance Brief

English Learners in Focus, Issue 1

Updated Demographic and Achievement Profile of California's English Learners

by Julie Maxwell-Jolly and Manuel Buenrostro

This brief is part of CSBA's effort to support governing boards in their work by shedding light on the educational needs of California's diverse student population. It is the first of a series focused on English learners. The goal of this brief is (1) to provide a profile of the state's English-learner students and a snapshot of how they are faring in our schools and (2) to present basic data and questions that can inform board discussions about policies and practices to help districts and counties best meet the needs of all students. This brief, originally published in March 2014, has been updated to reflect current demographic and assessment data.

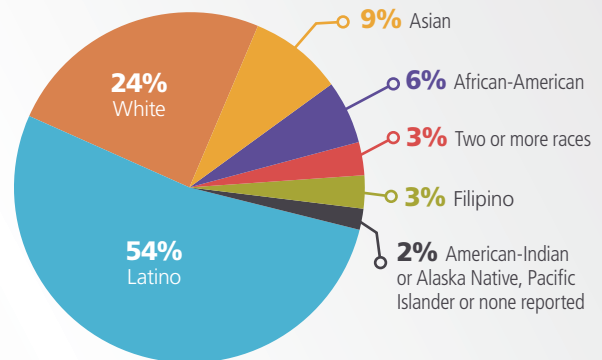
Demographic Profile and Trends

Diversity is a defining characteristic of California's student population. Our students are ethnically and linguistically diverse. If history is any indication, California's students and families will continue to be a culturally and linguistically rich mix. Viewing our diversity as both a challenge to our ability to address the different needs of multiple students, as well as an important resource and educational tool, will help us to do the best we can for all of California's students.

Ethnic Diversity

In 2015-16, 54 percent of California's students were Latino and 22 percent were from other nonwhite groups, principally Asian (9 percent), African American (6 percent) and students from a mix of other groups. White students represented just 24 percent of the state's K-12 population (Figure 1).¹

Figure 1: Ethnicity of California's K-12 Students, 2015-16



Linguistic Diversity

22 percent (or 1,373,724 of 6,226,737), of California's K-12 students were identified as English learners. An additional 21 percent (1,291,197) were identified as students whose primary language is other than English but who have met the district criteria for proficiency in English (reported as fluent English proficient by the California Department of Education).² This means that 43 percent of the state's students live in households where the language spoken at home — some, if not all of the time — is other than English. This has important implications for districts' education programs, and efforts to engage parents in their children's education and the development of Local Control and Accountability Plans.

California's level of linguistic diversity has remained relatively steady for the last decade. While the overall student population decreased slightly (by 85,699 students) between 2005-06 and 2015-16, the proportion of students who are English learners has declined only slightly during these same 10 years, from 25 percent to 22 percent.³

Socioeconomic Status

More than 86 percent of English learners are socioeconomically disadvantaged, as defined by the proportion of students eligible for the free and reduced price meal program. Additionally, 73 percent of fluent English proficient students are also socioeconomically disadvantaged. Overall, four in five students whose primary language is other than English are socioeconomically disadvantaged, compared to 59 percent of all students in California.⁴ These students are more likely to come from households or neighborhoods where both academic and non-academic resources are not as readily available. This has important implications for the strategies districts and counties employ to educate all of these students.

Distribution by Language, Grade and County

Concentration of English Learners by Language

While many of the world's languages are represented in California schools, the vast majority of English learners, 84 percent, speak Spanish. This proportion has remained relatively stable over the past 10 years.⁵ Nonetheless, California's English learners and their families speak many

other languages. There are 32 home languages spoken by 1,000 or more English learners in California's K-12 classrooms (Table 1). While the overall number of students in each of these groups may be small, they are often geographically concentrated. Thus, a language other than Spanish may be the principal language of English learners in some districts and schools, while others may enroll a range of English learners from a variety of different language groups, with only a small number who share a common home language.

Proportion of English Learners by Grade Level

The proportion of English learners varies across the grades but a higher proportion of these students are in the lower grades. Approximately 34 percent of all California kindergarteners were English learners in 2015-16.⁷ While the proportion of English learners decreases as the grade level increases, this number is never zero because English learners who are new to the U.S. continue to enter school at all grade levels. In addition, there are students who have been in U.S. schools for all or most of their education but have not attained the academic English skills to be reclassified as fluent English proficient. Looking at California students by grade span, 34 percent of students in grades K-3, 24 percent of students in grades 4-6 and 13 percent of students in grades 7-12 are English learners (Table 2).

Table 1: The 32 Languages Spoken by 1,000 or More of California's English Learners, Descending Order⁶

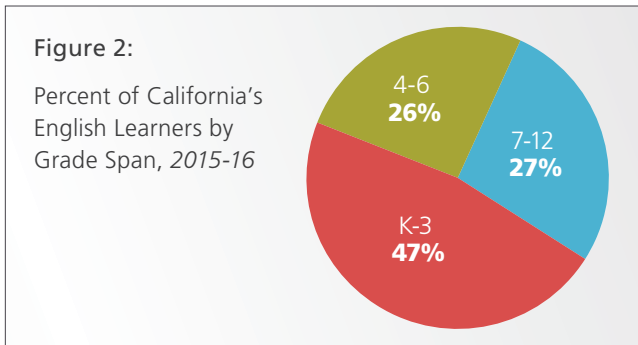
Language	# of ELs	Language	# of ELs	Language	# of ELs
Spanish	1,147,404	Armenian	7,336	Lao	1,915
Vietnamese	30,161	Farsi (Persian)	6,213	Ukrainian	1,725
Mandarin (<i>Putonghua</i>)	20,048	Japanese	5,852	Tamil	1,509
Filipino (<i>Pilipino or Tagalog</i>)	18,456	Hindi	4,638	Pashto	1,499
Arabic	17,689	Khmer (<i>Cambodian</i>)	4,374	Somali	1,395
Cantonese	16,741	Mixteco	3,300	Hebrew	1,372
Other non-English languages	13,170	Urdu	3,182	Thai	1,360
Korean	11,128	Portuguese	2,236	Gujarati	1,178
Hmong	10,732	Telugu	2,220	German	1,064
Punjabi	9,686	Chaldean	2,063	Bengali	1,045
Russian	8,146	French	1,937		

Table 2: California English Learner Enrollment by Grade Level, 2015-16⁸

Grade Level	Total Enrollment	EL Enrollment	EL %
K	530,531	180,263	34%
1	444,573	159,243	36%
2	463,881	160,995	35%
3	470,157	151,518	32%
4	485,885	142,870	29%
5	476,427	114,857	24%
6	471,467	93,528	20%
7	470,753	75,878	16%
8	465,322	65,658	14%
9	487,202	64,407	13%
10	488,004	61,360	13%
11	472,968	51,539	11%
12	492,835	49,995	10%
Total	6,226,737	1,373,724	22%

Distribution of English Learners by Grade Span

While the previous section focused on the proportion of English learners in each grade level, understanding their distribution by grade span is important for targeting services. Among California’s 1,373,724 English learners, nearly half (47 percent or 652,019 students) are in grades K-3. Nearly 26 percent of the state’s English learners (351,255 students) are in grades 4-6 and 27 percent (368,837 students) are in grades 7-12 (Figure 2).⁹



Long-Term English Learners

A significant number of secondary-level English learners have been in U.S. schools for six or more years but have remained at the same English language proficiency level for two or more consecutive years and have not reached the achievement threshold for reclassification. These students are called long-term English learners and make up 63 percent of the state’s secondary English learners.¹⁰ These students often have advanced social language skills but weak academic language skills and struggle in reading and writing.¹¹

These characteristics of many of the English learners in California secondary schools has important implications for how the state educates them. For example, it is critical that they receive adequate and explicit instruction in the academic language skills they need to master the complex content of the upper grade levels. It is also crucial that younger English learners receive high-quality instruction taught by skilled teachers to effectively foster learning and fluency.

Proportion of English Learners by County

The proportion of English-learner students also varies across school districts and counties. The distribution of English learners among California counties illustrates this diversity. Only 11 of the state’s 58 counties have a student population made up of less than five percent English learners. These counties tend to be in the more mountainous and less populated regions of the state. In contrast, 29 counties have a student population in which more than one in five students are English learners, and in two of these — Monterey and Imperial — more than 40 percent of the students are English learners. This diversity varies by district and within districts as well. Thus, even counties with fewer than 5 percent English learners may have districts or schools with a high concentration of English learners (Table 3).

This variation has implications for how districts deliver instruction and supports. Districts with few English learners may have the advantage of easier classroom integration, i.e., greater opportunity to place English learners in classrooms with native English speaking students who provide strong English language models. On the other hand, districts with more English learners may be better able to attract and hire education specialists with greater expertise and experience and may find it easier to provide targeted English language development instruction. In short, every district has its own advantages and challenges.

Table 3: California English Learners by County, 2015-16¹²

County	Percent	County	Percent	County	Percent
Alameda County	21.5%	Marin County	14.8%	San Mateo County	23.7%
Alpine County	0.0%	Mariposa County	3.1%	Santa Barbara County	32.9%
Amador County	1.7%	Mendocino County	21.7%	Santa Clara County	23.3%
Butte County	8.6%	Merced County	27.8%	Santa Cruz County	28.2%
Calaveras County	2.5%	Modoc County	18.8%	Shasta County	3.6%
Colusa County	39.3%	Mono County	28.9%	Sierra County	3.9%
Contra Costa County	17.7%	Monterey County	40.6%	Siskiyou County	3.6%
Del Norte County	8.1%	Napa County	23.9%	Solano County	13.8%
El Dorado County	7.7%	Nevada County	5.8%	Sonoma County	22.8%
Fresno County	21.7%	Orange County	24.9%	Stanislaus County	24.7%
Glenn County	24.4%	Placer County	8.2%	Sutter County	17.6%
Humboldt County	7.6%	Plumas County	3.9%	Tehama County	17.6%
Imperial County	43.8%	Riverside County	20.7%	Trinity County	1.8%
Inyo County	17.5%	Sacramento County	17.3%	Tulare County	28.8%
Kern County	22.7%	San Benito County	29.2%	Tuolumne County	2.1%
Kings County	21.4%	San Bernardino County	18.9%	Ventura County	23.5%
Lake County	12.7%	San Diego County	22.1%	Yolo County	22.4%
Lassen County	4.0%	San Francisco County	27.3%	Yuba County	17.4%
Los Angeles County	22.7%	San Joaquin County	23.4%		
Madera County	26.3%	San Luis Obispo County	14.9%		

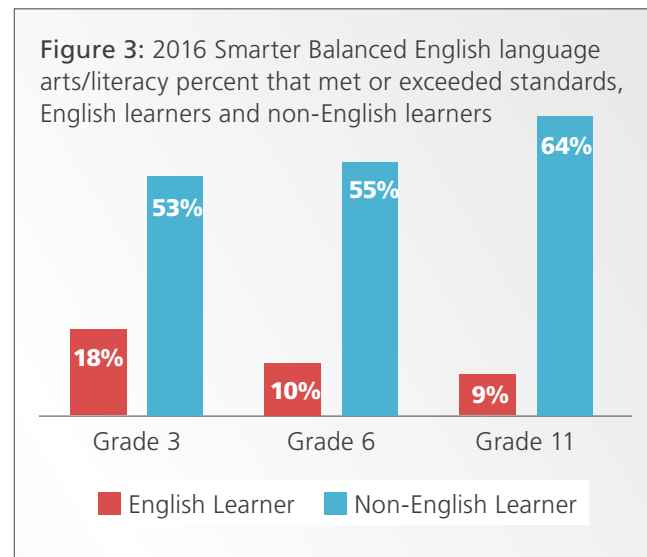
English Learner Achievement

English Language Arts/Literacy

In the 2016 California Smarter Balanced Assessment in English language arts/literacy, the proportion of English learners that met or exceeded standards was below that of non-English learners (students who are English only or fluent-English proficient, which includes both initially-fluent and reclassified-fluent English proficient students).

By definition, it is expected for English learners to score lower in English language arts/literacy than non-English learners. However, a point of concern is that the large gap between the percent of English learners who met or exceeded standards compared to their non-English learner peers increases for students in higher grades. For example, the gap between English learner and non-English learner students who met or exceeded standards in English language arts/literacy increases from 35 percentage points in third grade to 45 percentage points in sixth grade (Figure 3).¹³ This is a reminder that as school leaders

think about investments in improving education outcomes for English learners, they should consider the importance of ensuring that enough of those investments occur in the early grades.



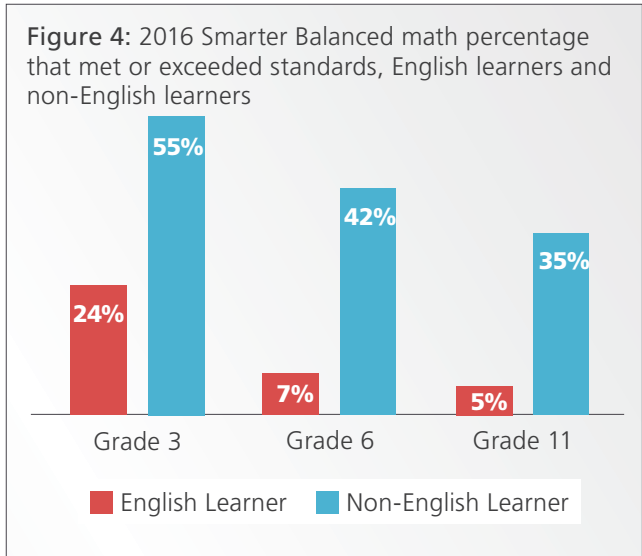
The California English Language Development Test is another instrument used to measure language achievement for English learners. The CELDT is designed to (1) determine English language proficiency when English learners enter school, (2) assess their progress toward English language fluency as they advance through the grades and (3) serve as an important indicator of readiness for reclassification as English fluent. Reaching a predetermined level of English proficiency as indicated by the CELDT is a key criteria for determining that English learners have the language skills necessary to compete — without support — on an equal footing with their English fluent peers. During the 2015-16 school year, 29 percent of third-grade students, 44 percent of sixth-grade students and 49 percent of 11th-grade students, were early advanced or advanced on the CELDT annual assessment.¹⁴

It should be noted that English learners score higher on the CELDT than on the Smarter Balanced Assessment for English language arts/literacy. This is due primarily to the fact that the CELDT focuses principally on communication skills while the Smarter Balanced Assessment has a greater focus on academic language skills.

Mathematics

English learners lag behind their English fluent peers in math achievement, as well. While we often think of math as being less language intensive than many other subject areas, a math gap raises questions about the importance of appropriate language instruction in every subject. The achievement gap in math could be due to a variety of factors in which language plays a role, including instruction that does not provide access to the content for English learners and the inability of existing tests to capture the student’s knowledge.

According to the 2016 Smarter Balanced Assessment results in math, only 7 percent of English learners in sixth grade met or exceeded standards, compared to 42 percent of non-English learners. These gaps also increase in math as students move up the grade levels. The 31-percentage point gap between third-grade English learners that met or exceeded standards in math and their non-English learner peers, increases to 35 percentage points by sixth grade (Figure 4).¹⁵



Ever-English Learner Achievement

Just looking at the gap between English learners and non-English learners does not tell the whole story. As discussed earlier, English learners will likely have lower proficiency rates in English language arts than their non-English learner peers. Additionally, unlike a subgroup based on race or socioeconomic status, the composition of the English-learner subgroup is always changing, as students who gain English proficiency leave the category, and new students who arrive in U.S. schools are added. In their 2014 publication, “The Language of Reform: English Learners in California’s Shifting Education Landscape” the Education Trust-West created an “ever-English learner” subgroup for their analyses, which combined English learners and reclassified-fluent English proficient students.¹⁶ This approach to measuring the achievement of ever-English learners allows districts, counties and states to track the progress of English learners over time, as it includes both the students who are still learning English and those who have met the criteria for reclassification.

As would be expected, the gap would narrow if English learners and reclassified-fluent English proficient students were combined into an ever-English learner subgroup. This is largely due to the comparable achievement of reclassified-fluent English proficient students, when compared to their English only peers. For example:

- » In English language arts/literacy, 58 percent of reclassified-fluent English proficient students met or exceeded grade-level standards compared to 54 percent of English-only students.
- » In math, 40 percent of reclassified-fluent English proficient students met or exceeded grade-level standards compared to 42 percent of English-only students.¹⁷

Reclassification

During the 2015-16 school year, 11 percent of the state's English learners were reclassified as English fluent.¹⁸ However, the most important consideration for districts should not be the speed of reclassification but whether reclassified students are well-prepared. A district policy that leads to more rapid reclassification but does not ensure that students have attained the necessary English language skills to compete on an even playing field with their peers is counterproductive. It is critical that English learners receive the academic support, instruction in classroom subjects and the necessary English language development to prepare them to meet the threshold for reclassification, and that they are reclassified as soon as possible after the threshold has been reached. While it is not advisable to let students languish as English learners when they are ready to be reclassified, neither is it sound practice to reclassify students who are not adequately prepared to thrive without the English language development instruction and other English-learner support.¹⁹

Dropouts

Nearly one in five English learners dropped out during the 2014-15 school year.²⁰ According to a report from the California Dropout Project, English learners drop out of school at twice the rate of their English-fluent peers. The report's author notes that English learners drop out due in part to language challenges but observes that they are also at high risk of dropping out due to other factors.²¹ For example, most of California's English learners — 86 percent — are also socioeconomically disadvantaged and therefore share the challenges of other low-income students regardless of language background. It remains unclear which factors best explain why English learners are more likely than their non-English learner peers to drop out of school: linguistic, academic, background, school characteristics or a combination of all of those.

Questions and Considerations for Board Members

As important decision-makers in their districts and counties, board members have the responsibility to ask questions and think strategically about closing achievement gaps for all students. While this brief has focused on state-level statistics, the challenges for individual districts and counties will be different depending on their demographics, geography, history and local community needs. To initiate a conversation regarding the English learners in their district or county, boards are encouraged to focus on the following key questions:

Enrollment

- » Who are our English learners and how are they distributed by school and grade?
- » Are administrators at every level aware of the characteristics of our English learners? How often do administrators receive this information, and in what format?
- » Are teachers aware of the characteristics of English learners in their classrooms and at their schools? How often do teachers receive this information, and in what format?

Student Achievement

- » What are the measures of success for English learner achievement in our county or district?
- » How do our measures and strategies change across the grade levels?
- » How do our English learners compare to non-English learners in academic achievement, graduation and dropout rates?
- » How does this compare to past performance (i.e., are we improving)?
- » What are our indicators that students are ready to successfully transition from English learner to English proficient?
- » What is the average number of years it takes for a student to be reclassified?
- » Over time, how do reclassified English learners compare to English-only students in math and English academic achievement, graduation and dropout rates?

Resource Supports

- » How are we distributing human and financial resources to support English learners based on where they are distributed in our district or county?
- » What professional development do we offer our teachers to help them gain expertise to teach English learners? How many teachers take part in this professional development? How does this professional development differ by grade level and span?
- » What other support do we provide to help teachers provide English learners with high-quality instruction?
- » What academic and other supports do we offer English learners? What have been the results of these supports?

Programs

- » What approaches and programs are we currently using to serve English learners in the early, middle and later grades?
- » What were the results of the most recent evaluations for these programs?

Conclusion

California's English learners are extremely diverse in their ethnicity, language, background and achievement. Recognizing who these students are, their current struggles and strengths, as well as the resources of culture and language that they bring to our schools will help educators to better meet their needs. This brief, while focusing on the condition of English learners in California, is a starting point from which local and state educational leaders can gain insight and take steps to improve student achievement.

CSBA will continue to support boards in their efforts to improve outcomes for California's diverse student population. We will continue to expand our existing series focused on English learners. The second brief in this series, "English Learners in Focus, Issue 2: The Promise of Two-Way Immersion Programs," highlights a proven strategy for improving English-learner achievement. The third brief, "English Learners in Focus, Issue 3: Ensuring High-Quality Staff for English Learners" explores the effect of the teacher shortage on English learners and how districts and counties can address this issue. Subsequent briefs will continue to focus on other English-learner issues of importance to our members.

Additional Resources

For links to a variety of helpful resources on English learners, please visit CSBA's English-learner webpage at www.csba.org/EnglishLearners.

Endnotes

- 1 California Department of Education, Dataquest, "Statewide Enrollment by Ethnicity." Accessed August 26, 2016, from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>.
- 2 California Department of Education, Dataquest, "English Learner Students by Language by Grade" and "Fluent-English-Proficient Students by Language by Grade." Accessed August 26, 2016, from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>.
- 3 California Department of Education, Dataquest, "English Learner Students by Language by Grade" and "Statewide Enrollment by Ethnicity." Accessed August 26, 2016, from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>.
- 4 See endnote 2

- 5 California Department of Education, Dataquest, "English Learner Students by Language by Grade." Accessed August 26, 2016, from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>.
- 6 See endnote 5
- 7 See endnote 5
- 8 California Department of Education, Dataquest, "English Learner Students by Language by Grade" and "Statewide Enrollment by Grade." Accessed August 26, 2016, from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>.
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- 17 See endnote 13
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- 19 Laura E. Hill, Margaret Weston and Joseph M. Hayes (2014), "Reclassification of English Learner Students in California," Public Policy Institute of California. Accessed from Institute of California. Accessed from <http://bit.ly/1hMmnRV>
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- 21 Rebecca M. Callahan (2013), "The English Learner Dropout Dilemma: Multiple Risks and Multiple Resources," California Dropout Research Project. Accessed from <http://bit.ly/2bzvUj7>

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