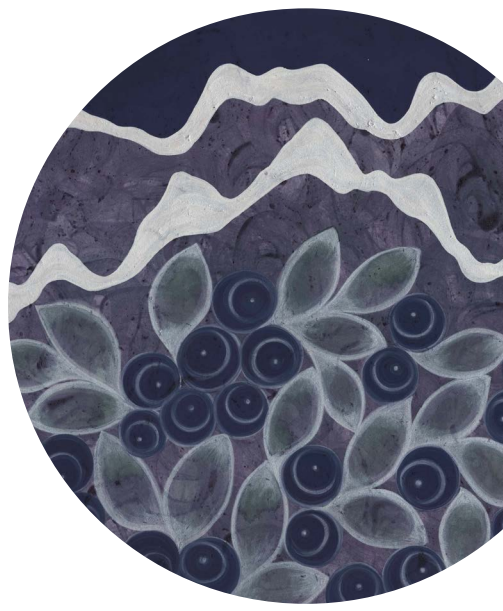
IES Institute of Education Sciences

REL Northwest at Education Northwest

Understanding the needs and experiences of Alaska Native English learner students



Most research on English learner (EL) education has centered on immigrant-origin students, and little research has examined the needs and experiences of Indigenous EL students in the United States or Alaska.[1] Indigenous and non-Indigenous students differ in their eligibility for EL services: Indigenous EL students may speak English as their primary language, but non-Indigenous EL students must speak a primary language other than English.[2] Rooted in a historical pattern of forced cultural assimilation and heritage language[a] deprivation, many Indigenous communities have faced—and continue to face—critical barriers to accessing culturally and linguistically sustaining, adequately resourced, and equitable schooling,[3] including EL services.

The Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northwest conducted **a study of Alaska EL policy and practice** as it relates to Alaska Native students to examine student characteristics and patterns in identification as an EL student, EL service provision, and reclassification[b] from EL to non-EL student. This infographic presents information from the study that may guide future policy and research to ensure that Alaska Native EL students receive culturally sustaining, high-quality education to support their academic progress, as well as the development of both their heritage and English language skills.

Characteristics of Alaska Native EL students

WHO ARE ALASKA NATIVE EL STUDENTS?[c]

From 2011/12 to 2018/19,

24% of Alaska Native kindergarteners were EL students **vs.** **12%** of non-Alaska Native kindergarteners were EL students

80% of Alaska Native EL kindergarteners reported Yupik as their home language **vs.** **24%** of non-Alaska Native EL kindergarteners reported Spanish as their home language

In spring of their kindergarten year, EL students were assessed on Standard American English proficiency. When compared with non-Alaska Native EL kindergarteners, Alaska Native EL kindergarteners on average had lower Standard American English proficiency levels across study years.

WHERE ARE ALASKA NATIVE EL STUDENTS?

Rural remote schools

Alaska Native EL students represented **23 percent of kindergartners in rural-remote schools,** which are schools in small, off-road communities. In urban, urban fringe, and rural hub/fringe locales, they represented **6 percent or less of kindergarteners.**

Economically disadvantaged schools

Alaska Native EL students represented 27 percent of kindergarteners in schools where **75 percent or more of the population was economically disadvantaged,**[d] compared to 6 percent or less in schools with lower percentages of economically disadvantaged students.

Schools without English as a second language (ESL) teachers

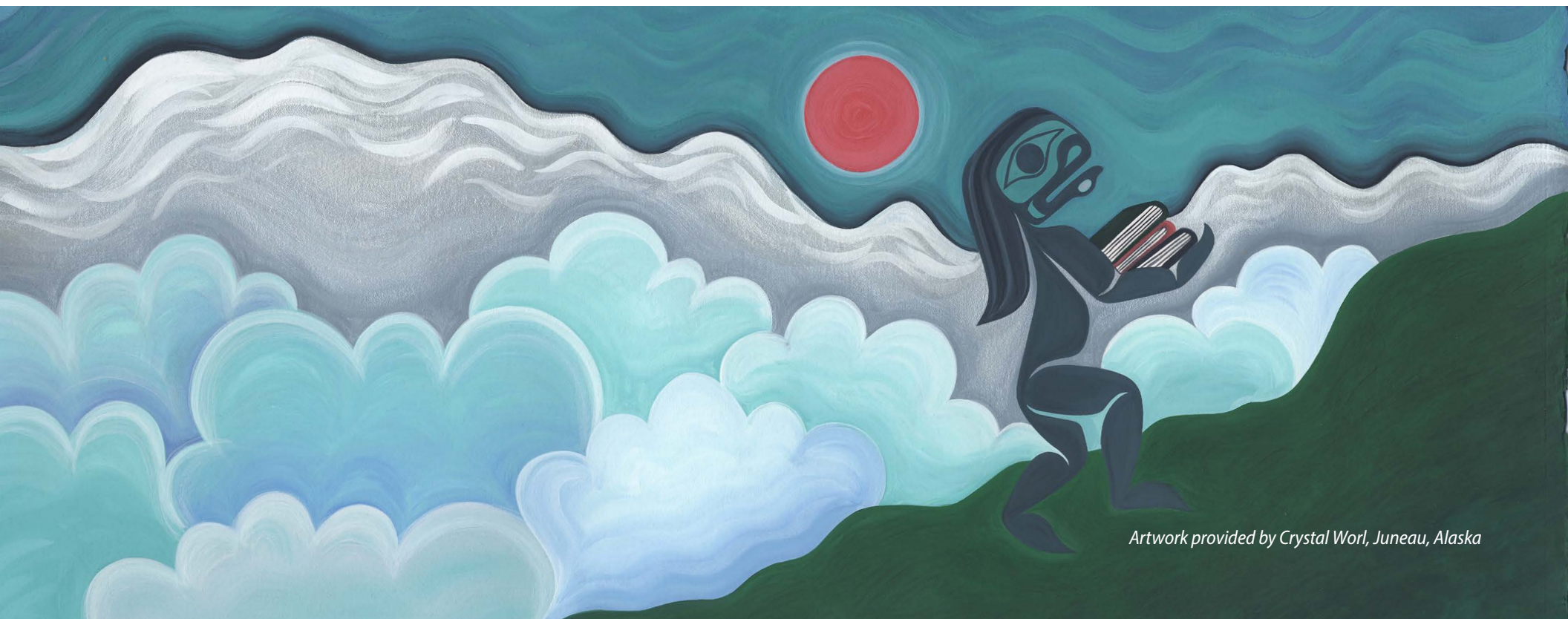
Alaska Native EL students represented **11 percent of kindergarteners in schools without ESL teachers,** compared to 3 percent or less in schools with one or more ESL teacher.

[a] Heritage language in this context refers to the Indigenous language spoken historically and/or currently by the Indigenous group to which an individual belongs/identifies.[4]

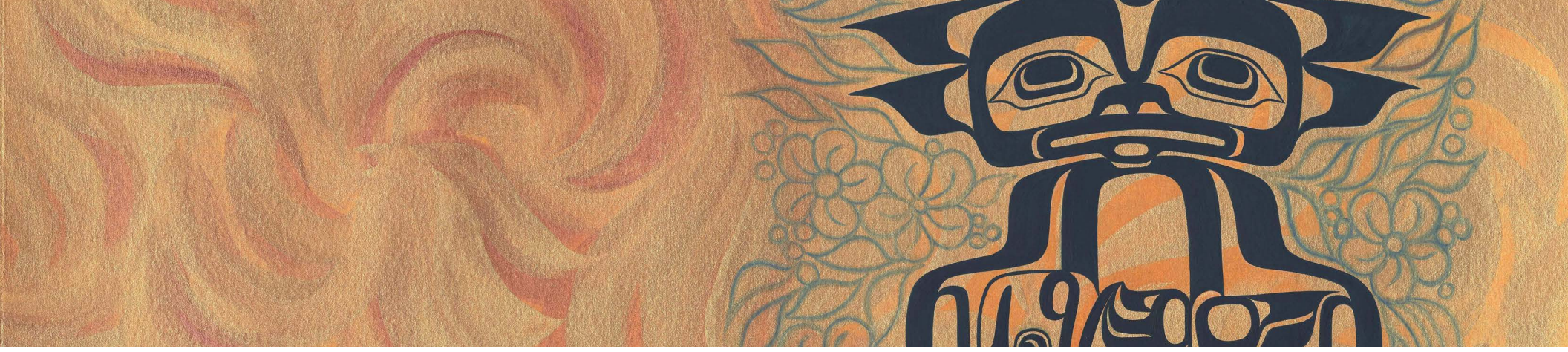
[b] Reclassified students are former EL students who have transitioned from EL status to fluent English proficient status based on meeting a set of criteria, typically determined by the state and based on assessment performance.

[c] This study focused on kindergarten cohorts to allow analysis of Alaska Native students as they first enter school and are evaluated for EL classification.

[d] Students who were ever eligible for the National School Lunch Program during the study period, as defined in a cash-based economy. This may not align with economic well-being as understood from a subsistence economy perspective, where families may draw on natural or collective resources, such as fish, game, and berries, for their livelihood.[5]



Artwork provided by Crystal Worl, Juneau, Alaska



Patterns in identification, EL service provision, and reclassification

IDENTIFICATION

In interviews conducted in four Alaska districts, EL identification processes, which typically occur as the student enters school in kindergarten, did not vary by whether a student was Alaska Native. Each district used the state's home language survey tool and gave teachers the option to use the state's language observation checklist. There were concerns among interviewees that these processes **did not appropriately identify Alaska Native students for EL screening,** as the home language survey only triggered screening for students with a non-English home language.

EL SERVICE PROVISION

Among 26 districts with EL Plans of Service,[e] only eight described services specific to the needs of Alaska Native EL students. Districts varied substantially in the ways they supported content learning and English language development, as well as in other key EL program features.

8 out of **26** **districts offered specific supports for Alaska Native EL students, including heritage language programs or outreach to Alaska Native communities and families**

[e] *In Alaska, districts that have at least one school serving eight or more EL students are required to submit an EL Plan of Service to the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED) that describes how the district will serve EL students.*

RECLASSIFICATION

Within Alaska, Alaska Native EL students had lower reclassification rates by grade 7 (the latest grade available in study data) compared to non-Alaska Native EL students. The time to reclassification from English learner to fluent English proficient among all Alaska EL students—Alaska Native and non-Alaska Native—was more than eight years. This is longer than the time to reclassification in most states, where five to seven years is typical,[6] potentially due to Alaska having multiple reclassification criteria.

11% **of Alaska Native EL students were reclassified by grade 7** **whereas** **30%** **of non-Alaska Native EL students were reclassified by grade 7**

Reclassification rates among Alaska Native EL students varied by student, school, and district characteristics. Alaska Native EL students were less likely to be reclassified if they:

- Were economically disadvantaged
- Were male
- Had an individual education plan
- Did not meet kindergarten readiness benchmarks
- Attended a school that was rural remote, had a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students, or was in a smaller district

Implications

State and local education leaders may consider the following strategies to better support Alaska Native EL students.

Collect and analyze additional data on Alaska Native EL students at the state level, such as English proficiency screener scores and home language survey results, to inform improvements to EL student identification policies and supports.

Include English as a possible primary language on the home language survey to help appropriately identify Alaska Native students for EL screening.

Add resources and tailor services to meet the unique needs of Alaska Native EL students; few districts had services specific to Alaska Native EL students in place.

Use different levels of EL funding to increase resources, especially for rural-remote schools. Develop services that honor and advance Alaska Native EL students' heritage languages and cultures as well as support their development of Standard American English.

Evaluate current EL services, language assessments, and criteria for reclassification to address acutely low reclassification rates among Alaska Native ELs.

Consider reducing the number of reclassification criteria and avoid penalizing students who speak non-standard English varieties.

References

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[2] Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. (2015). Pub. L. No. 114–95, 114 Stat. 1177. https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177.

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[4] Brinton, D. M., Kagan, O., & Bauckus, S. (2017). *Heritage language education: A new field emerging.* Routledge.

[5] Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980. (1980). Pub L. No. 96-487, 94 Stat. 2371.

[6] Takanishi, R. & Le Menestrel, S. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Access the report: Umansky, I., Porter, L., Moreno, E., & Pierson, A. (2021). *Alaska Native students as English learners: Examining patterns in identification, service provision, and reclassification (REL 2021–088).* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=5675

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