

Studies confirm need for targeted supports for English learner students

Out of increasing concern that English learner students are struggling academically more than their English-proficient peers, many educators are seeking ways to better understand and support English learner students' academic progress. The students' academic difficulties likely stem, at least in part, from needing to simultaneously develop English language skills and learn subject-matter content. And English learner students who are recent immigrants also have to learn about and adapt to the culture of U.S. schools.

To help provide policymakers and practitioners with a more nuanced understanding of English learner students' education experience, REL West researchers have been working with state and district partners over the last several years to examine academic progress and achievement across different groups of English learner students. Although REL West's studies each examined different student groups and different achievement metrics, there was a common overarching takeaway: English learner students are a heterogeneous group with a wide range of needs and outcomes.

"These studies confirm what we already know: that English learner students are not a uniform group," says Elizabeth Burr, a senior research associate who leads REL West's English Learner Alliance. "What these studies add — by disaggregating student data by various demographic and linguistic characteristics — is a better idea of which groups of English learner students are struggling, how they're struggling, and at which stages.

The findings can help policymakers and practitioners identify areas for targeted support to improve English learner students' learning outcomes and help narrow the achievement gap."

This article highlights key findings from two of the English Learner Alliance's most recently published studies.

Readiness to transition into mainstream English-only classes

Being reclassified as fluent in English and moved into mainstream English-only classes marks a major transition in the academic lives of English learner students. Given the importance of this transition, REL West researchers decided to examine the extent to which English learner students at different English language proficiency levels are likely to succeed in English-only subject-matter academics, as measured by performance on statewide content tests. Specifically, the research team looked at two cohorts in Arizona and Nevada — English learner students who began the study in grade 3 and

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grade 6 — and examined the relationship between their English language proficiency level in 2009/10 and their performance on English language arts (ELA) and math content tests from 2010/11 through 2011/12.

The study (available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4526>) found that, overall, English learner students at higher English language proficiency levels had higher passing rates on subsequent ELA and math tests. For instance, in the grade 3 cohort in Nevada, 4 percent of English learner students who began the study at the *Entry* level (level 1 of 5) of English language proficiency subsequently passed the ELA test at least once in grade 4 or 5, compared with 29 percent at the *Intermediate* level (level 3 of 5), and 94 percent at the *Proficient* level (level 5 of 5).

In addition, English learner students who were reclassified as English proficient earlier in their schooling had a higher probability of success in mainstream English-only classes. For instance, grade 3 English learner students had higher passing rates on the ELA and math tests than grade 6 English learner students at the same English proficiency level.

“The findings suggest that to succeed in mainstream English-only classrooms, middle and high school English learner students may need additional, or different, supports from students in lower grade levels,” says Min Huang, a REL West research associate and study co-author.

The study also found that grade 6 students — but not grade 3 students — had to score above the threshold required for reclassification as English proficient in order to have a 50-percent probability of passing the content tests in the subsequent years of the study.

Given that many English learner students struggle with academic content even after achieving English proficiency, says Huang, they would likely benefit from some sort of transitional assistance after being placed into mainstream English-only classes to help them thrive in these courses. In addition, says Huang, “Secondary school teachers in mainstream classes may want to focus more explicitly on helping students develop and improve

their academic language skills, which would benefit both recently reclassified English learner students and English-proficient students in mastering subject-matter content.”

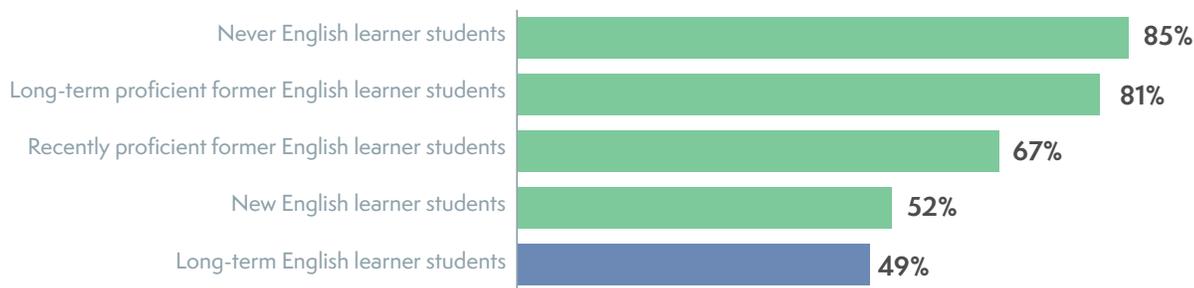
High school graduation rates across English learner student groups

Graduating from high school is one of the most important milestones in students’ college and career preparation and success. Although it was known that English learner students as a whole generally have lower graduation rates than native English speakers, REL West researchers wanted to identify variation in graduation outcomes among English learner students. Accordingly, the research team examined four-year high school graduation rates across five groups of English learner students at different stages of the English language development process.

The study (available at <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4527>) found that the earlier that English learner students achieved English proficiency, the higher their graduation rates. For instance, students who were either never classified as English learner students or were reclassified as English proficient prior to grade 2 had the highest four-year graduation rate, at 85 percent. By contrast, long-term English learner students — who had spent at least four years designated as English learners by the time they started grade 9 — had the lowest graduation rate, at 49 percent (Figure 1).

Huang notes that there could be several reasons for why achieving English proficiency earlier is associated with higher graduation rates. For instance, he says that students who are reclassified earlier have several more years of learning in mainstream English-only classes — and thus may have more successful academic outcomes — than English learner students who are reclassified later in their academic careers. “Given the findings,” he says, “educators and policymakers might want to consider ways to provide supports and services that help all English learner students reach English proficiency as early as possible.”

Figure 1. Long-term English learner students had the lowest graduation rate of all of the study’s English learner student groups, Arizona (2014)



Source: REL West analysis of Arizona Department of Education data.

The researchers also looked at English learner students' graduation rates in relation to their demographic characteristics (such as gender, ethnicity, eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunch programs, and eligibility for special education services) and their previous academic achievement. The study found that academic achievement prior to high school — not student demographic characteristics — accounted for most of the differences in graduation rates across the groups of English learner students, and may have been a key factor driving graduation outcomes. This suggests that to graduate on time, English learner students must enter high school with the skills to be successful in mainstream English-only classes. Accordingly, says Huang, English learner students in earlier grades would likely benefit from increased support in improving their academic English skills and content knowledge, in addition to their English language proficiency.

“Overall, our research findings point to the need for differentiated support,” says Burr. “Whether it’s working

more intensively with young English learner students to help them achieve English proficiency in elementary school, helping middle school English learner students master academic language and content, or providing additional supports to struggling long-term English learner students who are at high risk of not graduating.”

Building off of these and other research studies, notes Burr, REL West researchers have been working closely with states and districts in the English Learner Alliance to help them understand and use the findings to improve support for their English learner student populations. In addition, the alliance has been holding a series of related webinars to offer hands-on strategies and tools that practitioners can take back to their districts and classrooms.

For further information about the work of the English Learner Alliance, please contact Elizabeth Burr at 510.302.4218 or eburr@wested.org

Resources on English learner students

REL Northeast and Islands

Patterns of English learner student reclassification in New York City public schools

Using longitudinal data from 2003 to 2012, this study describes how long it took English learner students to become reclassified, as well as which student characteristics were associated with longer or shorter times to reclassification. (2016)

<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4487>

REL Southeast

Using computer-adaptive assessments of literacy to monitor the progress of English learner students

This study examined how educators administer computer-adaptive assessments of literacy to English learner students in grades 3–5, and how they use those assessments to monitor students' growth. (2016)

<https://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=REL2016149>

REL Northwest

Suspension, expulsion, and achievement of English learner students in six Oregon districts

Researchers examined whether English learner students in six Oregon districts received exclusionary discipline more often and were suspended for more instructional days than non-English learner students. (2015)

<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=429>

REL Southwest

Professional learning communities facilitator's guide: Teaching academic content and literacy to English learners in elementary and middle school (for the What Works Clearinghouse practice guide)

This facilitator's guide is designed to help professional learning communities apply evidence-based strategies to help K–8 English learner students acquire the language and literacy skills necessary for academic success. (2015)

<https://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=REL2015105>

Supporting long-term English learner students in mastering academic English: A framework for success *(Archived webinar)*

In this REL West webinar, two experts in the field shared promising strategies and practices to support long-term English learner students — and all English learner students generally. Implementing these practices in an intentional way, within a research-based framework, they argued, can help to improve English learner students' English writing and academic literacy.

Visit the webinar archive to access a recording of the event, along with several related resources:

<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Events/Details/342>.

(November 16, 2016)

Webinar provides practical strategies to identify and support English learners with disabilities

When working with English learner students who are struggling academically, educators sometimes have trouble telling the difference between the typical process of second language acquisition and the presence of a learning disability. The distinction is important, as misidentified students can end up in classrooms or programs mismatched to their needs, which can hinder their academic progress. A recent REL West webinar — *Telling the difference between second language acquisition and a possible learning disability* — provided over 250 participants with concrete strategies and tools for understanding the full context of English learner students' lives in order to better identify and support their specific language and learning needs.

Presenter Julie Esparza Brown — an associate professor in the Special Education Department at Portland State University (OR) — conveyed the importance of knowing five key dimensions of English learner students' lives in order to better understand the reason(s) for their academic struggles: language profile, cultural background, life experiences, educational experiences, and personal characteristics. Participants were given a template, the *Collaborative Problem Solving Form*, for recording this information about their students.

Brown also discussed the need to make appropriate comparisons when gauging whether a student's

progress seems to be hampered by a learning disability, as opposed to cultural and linguistic differences. To do this, she said, educators should compare their students with “true peers” — that is, other students who are the same age and grade and who have similar language proficiencies and cultural and experiential background.

In addition, Brown shared a student case study and asked participants to discuss how they would apply what they had learned to assess the student's needs, identify possible learning disabilities, and seek appropriate supports. “Providing a detailed scenario of a real English learner student and discussing what to do in his case was very insightful,” noted one participant.

In the feedback survey, 86 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they expected to apply information from the webinar in their work, with one participant noting, “I'm going to create a resource manual for the teachers at my school with all the materials from the webinar.”

For further information about the webinar, contact Elizabeth Burr (eburr@wested.org) or visit the event page to access the archived webinar and related resources: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Events/Details/334>.

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