

Progress of Arizona Kindergartners toward English Proficiency in Grade 3 by English Learner Student Classification

This study was prompted by the Arizona Department of Education's (ADE) interest in learning more about the progress of English learner students toward English proficiency in the early grades. The study examined, for the 2013/14 kindergarten cohort in Arizona, the English language proficiency of non-native English speaker students and their English language arts (ELA) proficiency (reading and writing at grade level) in kindergarten and by the end of grade 3. ADE wanted to inform its policy and practice to best identify and serve English learner students in the early grades.

The study followed a statewide cohort of students from kindergarten entry in fall 2013 through grade 3 in spring 2017, drawing on ADE records on enrollment, assessment, and eligibility for English learner services. The study used descriptive statistics and multilevel modeling to analyze how students' English language proficiency level in kindergarten and selected student and school characteristics were associated with their English language and ELA outcomes in grade 3.

Key findings

- **About 11 percent of 2013/14 kindergartners in Arizona were initially classified as English learner students.** At the end of kindergarten, Arizona retested all non-native English speaker students using a higher threshold for English language proficiency. After reassessment, the proportion of English learner students rose to 18 percent.
- **Students initially classified as English language proficient at kindergarten entry and reclassified as English learner students when reassessed at the end of kindergarten were no more likely to achieve proficiency by grade 3 than students initially classified at the basic/intermediate proficiency level (below proficient).** This finding suggests that students who were reclassified likely needed English learner services at kindergarten entry.
- **One group of students outperformed native English speakers on grade 3 proficiency assessments:** non-native English speaker students who were proficient when they entered kindergarten and confirmed as proficient when reassessed at the end of the year. This finding increases confidence that these non-native English speaker students were appropriately classified as not needing English learner services.
- **Most of the variation in English language proficiency and ELA proficiency by the end of grade 3 was attributable to student differences rather than to school differences.** This finding suggests that practitioners and policymakers might want to investigate how to reduce gaps in achievement among students within a school in addition to increasing overall student achievement levels. Student characteristics associated with lower outcomes in grade 3 in both English language proficiency and ELA proficiency included lower English language proficiency at kindergarten entry, being eligible for special education services, being a racial/ethnic minority student, and being male. Being socioeconomically disadvantaged was associated with a lower probability of achieving ELA proficiency but not with reaching English language proficiency in grade 3.