

Long-Term English Learners

What does “Long-Term English Learner Student” mean?

A goal under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is for all English learners (ELs)¹ to become proficient in English and exit, or reclassify, out of EL status.² Research has found that students may need at least five years to develop English skills needed to learn independently in academic settings.³ While “long-term EL” is not defined in the ESEA, students who do not exit from EL status within five to six years are often labeled as “long-term ELs.”

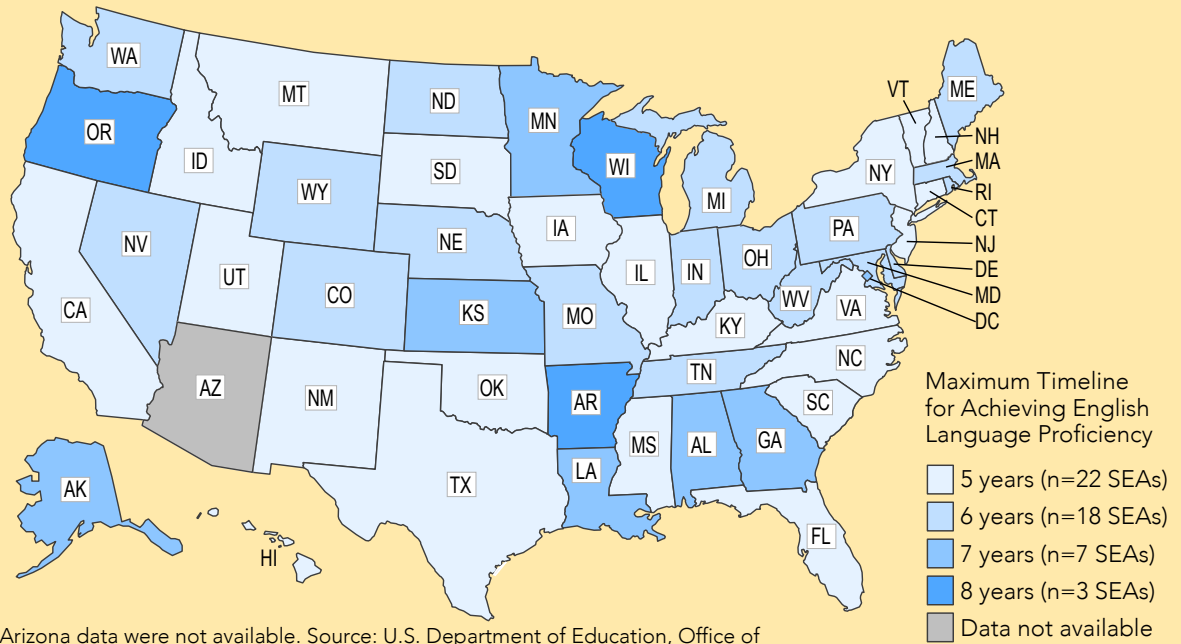
Why does it matter if students spend a long time in English learner status?

High numbers of long-term ELs can be a sign that programs and instruction for EL students may not be well-matched to certain students’ strengths or needs.⁴ This is further supported by the fact that students who do not exit EL status within five years often struggle to do so before graduation⁵ – meaning that more time in EL status does not appear to help them meet their state’s standards for exit. Meanwhile, students who retain EL status into secondary school may experience inequitable access to grade-level or higher core-content courses,⁶ and have lower self-confidence.⁷ Similarly, the EL label has been found to negatively impact teachers’ perceptions of students’ ability,⁸ particularly for students who retain EL status for five years and beyond.⁹ Thus, students pay a price for remaining in EL status for too long.

States’ Timelines for English Language Proficiency Achievement

State education agencies (SEAs) set their own standards for English language proficiency (ELP), their own criteria for exiting from EL status, and their own goals for maximum timelines for students to achieve both. This state-level discretion means that exit rates and timelines are based on different criteria in different states.

Across all SEAs, the maximum timelines to exit from EL status range from five to eight years. Nearly half of all SEAs (22) have a maximum timeline of five years, while only three have a maximum timeline of eight years.



Note: Includes data from 50 SEAs. Arizona data were not available. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, ESEA Consolidated State Plans. Retrieved from <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-formula-grants/school-support-and-accountability/essa-consolidated-state-plans/>

¹ The term English learner(s) refers to the population of students as defined in section 8101(20) of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act.

² ESEA section 3102.

³ Hakuta, K., Butler, Y. G., & Witt, D. (2000). *How Long Does It Take English Learners To Attain Proficiency?* University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute.

⁴ Brooks, M. D. (2015). “It’s Like a Script”: Long-Term English Learners’ Experiences with and Ideas about Academic Reading. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 383–406.; Umansky, I. M., & Avelar, J. D. (2023). Canaried in the coal mine: What the experiences and outcomes of students considered long-term English learners teach us about pitfalls in English learner education... and what we can do about it. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 28(1), 122–147.

⁵ Thompson, K. D. (2017). English Learners’ Time to Reclassification: An Analysis. *Educational Policy*, 31(3), 330–363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904815598394>

⁶ Umansky, I. M. (2016). Leveled and exclusionary tracking: English learners’ access to academic content in middle school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(6), 1792–1833.

⁷ Lee, M. G., & Soland, J. (2022). Does Reclassification Change How English Learners Feel about School and Themselves? *Policy Analysis for California Education, PACE*.

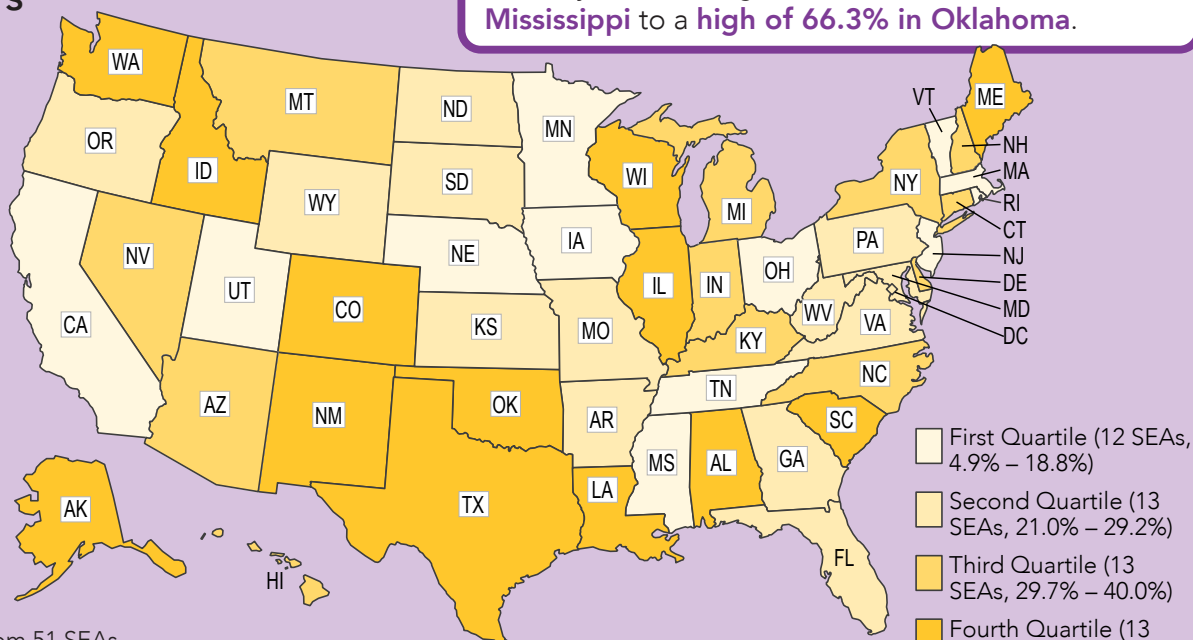
⁸ Umansky, I. M., & Dumont, H. (2021). English learner labeling: How English learner classification in kindergarten shapes teacher perceptions of student skills and the moderating role of bilingual instructional settings. *American Educational Research Journal*, 58(5), 993–1031.

⁹ Thompson, K. D. (2015). Questioning the long-term English learner label: How categorization can blind us to students’ abilities. *Teachers College Record*, 117(12), 1–50.

Percent of English Learners in English Learner Status for More Than Five Years

Across the U.S., the percentage of ELs who remained in EL status for more than five years in the 2021–22 school year (SY) ranged from a **low of 4.9% in Mississippi** to a **high of 66.3% in Oklahoma**.

The median SEA-level percentage of ELs who remained in EL status for more than five years during the SY 2021–22 was **29.7%.**



Note: Map includes data from 51 SEAs.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, *ED Data Express SY 2017–18 and SY 2021–22*. Retrieved February 2024.

Characteristics of Long-Term English Learners

Some students may remain in EL status longer because they are in dual-language programs where ELP may develop more slowly since students are also developing proficiency in a second language.¹⁰ Outside of this scenario, the students who are labeled as long-term ELs often come from the same student groups that are marginalized in the general student population.¹¹ These include

- students with disabilities,¹²
- students whose parents have not received an education beyond high school,
- students who are Hispanic,
- boys, and
- students who start school with very little knowledge of English (compared to those who already have some English proficiency when they are first identified).¹³



None of these groups lack the talent or potential to succeed. This means that gaps between their achievement or time to proficiency and that of other groups reflect larger issues in how education systems are designed and implemented relative to these students' profiles and abilities. For example

- if large numbers of Hispanic boys become long-term ELs, this may suggest that this group is experiencing bias in how they are viewed and treated relative to other, similar students.¹⁴
- if many EL students with disabilities remain in service beyond five years, this may suggest that EL programming is not preparing these students to meet state exit criteria within this time frame.

Importantly, neither scenario reflects student failures, motivation, or ability.

¹⁰ Umansky, I. M., & Reardon, S. F. (2014). Reclassification Patterns among Latino English Learner Students in Bilingual, Dual Immersion, and English Immersion Classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(5), 879–912.

¹¹ Brooks, M. D. (2018). Pushing past myths: Designing instruction for long-term English learners. *TESOL quarterly*, 52(1), 221–233. Umansky, I. M., & Avelar, J. D. (2023). Canaried in the coal mine: What the experiences and outcomes of students considered long-term English learners teach us about pitfalls in English learner education... and what we can do about it. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 28(1), 122–147.

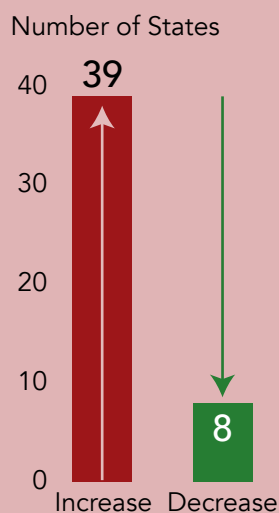
¹² Sahakyan, N., & Poole, G. (2023). "Every" student succeeds? Academic trends at the intersection of (long-term) English learner and IEP status. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 28(1), 69–96.

¹³ Shin, N. (2020). Stuck in the middle: Examination of long-term English learners. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 14(3), 181–205. Slama, R., Molefe, A., Gerdeman, R. D., Herrera, A., Brodzia de los Reyes, I., August, D., & Cavazos, L. (2017). Time to proficiency for Hispanic English learner students in Texas (REL 2018–280). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

¹⁴ Umansky, I. M., Callahan, R. M., & Lee, J. C. (2020). Making the Invisible Visible: Identifying and Interrogating Ethnic Differences in English Learner Reclassification. *American Journal of Education*, 126(3), 335–388.

Changes in the Percent of Students in English Learner Status for More Than Five Years: School Years 2017–18 to 2021–22

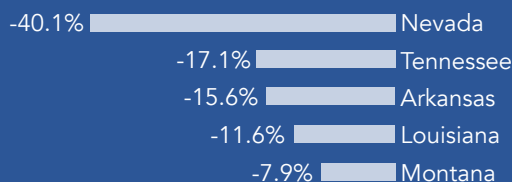
From SY 2017–18 to SY 2021–22, the percentage of students in EL status for more than five years increased in the majority of states—39. The percentage decreased in only eight states. Importantly, this interval includes the COVID-19 pandemic. Many states saw disruptions to learning and slower ELP growth in the wake of the pandemic.



Note: Includes data from 47 SEAs. Data for Maryland, Oklahoma, Utah, and Vermont were not available in 2017–18.

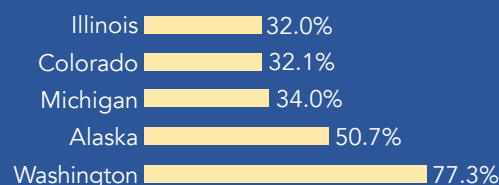
Source: U.S. Department of Education, *ED Data Express SY 2017–18 and SY 2021–22*. Retrieved February 2024.

The median state-level change in the percent of ELs in EL status for more than five years, from SY 2017–18 to SY 2021–22, was an **increase of 7.1 percentage points**. However, some states saw large decreases, while others saw large increases.



Among states with the largest decreases in the percent of students in EL status for more than five years, the **largest change was in Nevada**, which saw a decline of 40 percentage points.

Five states saw the percent of students in EL status for more than five years **increase by more than 30 percentage points**. The **largest change was in Washington**, with a jump of 77.3 percent.

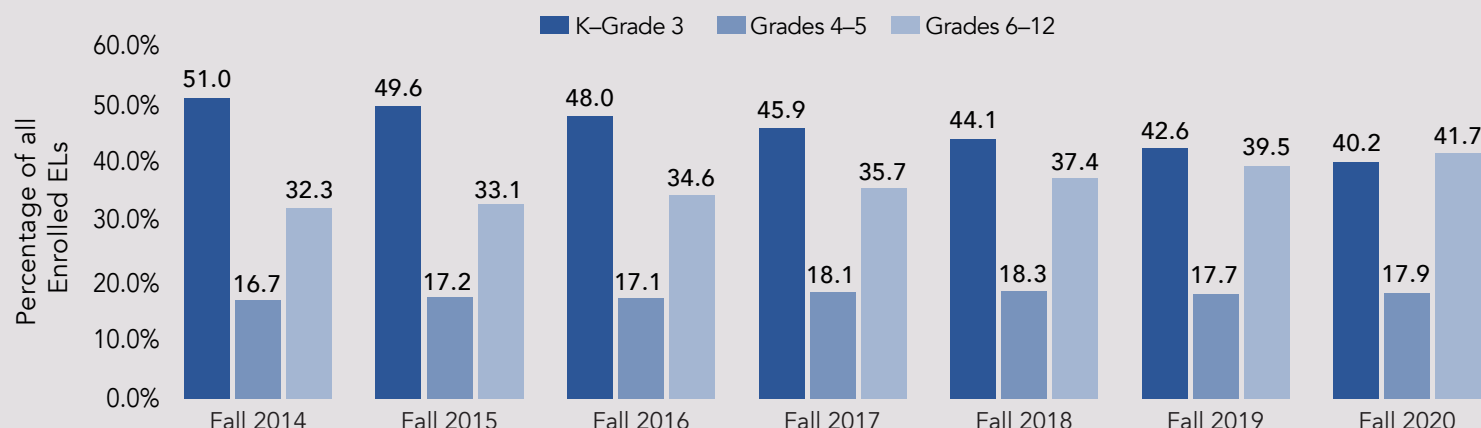


Note: Includes data from 47 SEAs. Data for Maryland, Oklahoma, Utah, and Vermont were not available in 2017–18.

Long-term English Learners and Changes in the Distribution of the English Learner Population Across Grades

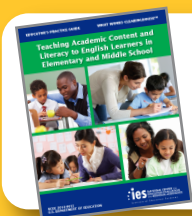
Across all grades, the EL population has always been largest in grades K through 2 compared to later grades. While this remains the case, longitudinal federal data also show that, over time, the proportion of the EL population in the earliest grades has been decreasing and the proportion in grades six through 12 has been increasing. This suggests that the overall EL population changed to include more students in higher grades, including those in EL status for more than five years.

The distribution of the EL population has shifted over time. In SY 2014–15, more than half of all ELs were enrolled in grades K–3, while less than a third of the population was in grades 6–12. By SY 2020–21, the proportion of the EL population in grades K–3 and 6–12 was more or less the same – about two out of every five students (40%).

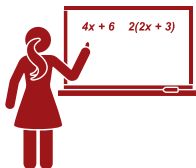


How can schools and districts support potential and current long-term EL students?

There are several ways that schools and districts can support potential and current long-term EL students.



Designing and implementing quality academic instruction using evidence-based approaches such as those in the What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide [Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School](#) can support ELs' language development as they engage in rigorous core content instruction.



Educators can work to ensure that EL status does not lead to a constriction of access to core content, as students will likely benefit from opportunities to develop authentic English language skills through embedded content learning.¹⁵ Districts and schools can examine roadblocks to reclassification, including assessment, and instructional policies that may be constricting opportunities for students.¹⁶



Educators can use an [asset-oriented framing](#)¹⁷ to highlight students' linguistic assets and proficiencies alongside providing support for developing English language skills needed to meet the reclassification criteria, moving away from a deficit lens that may negatively impact student confidence.¹⁸



Educators can provide opportunities, such as dual-language immersion programs, which have been found to produce higher reclassification rates than other language instruction educational programs.¹⁹

¹⁵ Walqui, A., & Bunch, G. C. (Eds.). (2019). *Amplifying the curriculum: Designing quality learning opportunities for English learners*. Teachers College Press.

¹⁶ Brooks, M. D. (2018). Pushing past myths: Designing instruction for long-term English learners. *TESOL quarterly*, 52(1), 221–233.

¹⁷ An Asset-Based Approach to Multilingual Learner Terminology. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/west/pdf/2.1.2.2.1_MultilingualLearners_Infographic01_Approved_508c.pdf

¹⁸ Brooks, M. D. (2018). Pushing past myths: Designing instruction for long-term English learners. *TESOL quarterly*, 52(1), 221–233. Umansky, I. M., & Avelar, J. D. (2023). Canaried in the coal mine: What the experiences and outcomes of students considered long-term English learners teach us about pitfalls in English learner education... and what we can do about it. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 28(1), 122–147.

¹⁹ Umansky, I. M., & Reardon, S. F. (2014). Reclassification Patterns among Latino English Learner Students in Bilingual, Dual Immersion, and English Immersion Classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(5), 879–912.