



# Pathways to Fluency

## Examining the Link between Language Reclassification Policies and Student Success

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### SUMMARY

Nearly 25 percent of the students attending California's K–12 public schools are English Learners (ELs). Their EL designation is intended to last only as long as they need supplemental language support to succeed in school. Some students attain English fluency quickly, but others remain ELs for six years or longer. Because outcomes for students reclassified as English proficient are much better than for students who remain ELs, policymakers are seeking answers to questions about how quickly EL students should be reclassified, whether reclassification criteria should be standardized, and the links between reclassification and academic success.

These issues are especially urgent now that California is implementing a major overhaul of K–12 standards, testing, and funding—as well as many elements of EL instruction. Because the new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) provides additional funding to districts with high numbers of ELs, there is more interest than ever in making sure that districts have the right incentives to help these students succeed.

In this report, we examine reclassification policies and the academic performance of ELs and former ELs in the two largest school districts in California, Los Angeles Unified and San Diego Unified, which together serve approximately 15 percent of the state's EL students. Using longitudinal student data over ten years, we can follow a cohort of 2nd grade students through their 12th grade year.

We find that students reclassified in elementary school (grades 2–5) have very strong academic outcomes throughout middle and high school. These students perform as well as or

better than native English speakers on state standardized tests and are as likely or more likely to make on-time grade progress. There is no evidence that the removal of language supports for ELs who are reclassified hurts their academic progress relative to that of native English speakers.

Reclassification criteria in both San Diego and Los Angeles are more stringent than minimum guidelines recommended by the State Board of Education (SBE). These more rigorous criteria are associated with somewhat improved outcomes for students but also lower reclassification rates.

Despite differences in reclassification criteria between the two districts, the factors that predict successful outcomes for EL students reclassified in elementary school in Los Angeles and San Diego are remarkably similar. The two standardized tests currently used to reclassify students—the California Standards Test (CST) and the California English Language Development Test (CELDT)—are individually strong predictors of future academic outcomes such as performance on middle school standardized tests and the high school exit exam. Elementary school marks are less useful as predictors.

Our findings lead us to recommend the following:

- Use the CELDT as the sole assessment for reclassification decisions until the CST replacement is available. More generally, consider allowing districts to reclassify students on the basis of just one test.
- In designing new English language development (ELD) tests and reclassification standards, consider the relative rigor of reading and writing requirements—our data suggest that the current CELDT writing requirement is relatively easy in comparison to the reading requirement.
- Reconsider the use of reclassification criteria that are more rigorous than those suggested in the State Board of Education guidelines. We find evidence in the state’s two largest school districts that English learners would benefit as a group from being reclassified slightly sooner, through an easing of reclassification standards.
- Consider a uniform standard for reclassification across school districts. Evaluating districts’ successes with ELs is very difficult when classification and reclassification policies vary.

Over the next few years, many elements of EL instruction, funding, and testing will be changing. Many policymakers have long been frustrated with the pace at which EL students are reclassified as fully English proficient and are concerned that the additional funds directed toward ELs under the LCFF might increase district incentives to delay reclassification for students on the cusp of English fluency. This is an ideal time to draw lessons from the recent past to inform state and local reclassification policies in 2014 and beyond.

For the full report and related resources, please visit our publication page:  
[www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=1089](http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=1089)

## Introduction

During the 2012–13 school year, more than 1.3 million English Learners attended public schools in California, accounting for about one-quarter of the state’s K–12 student population.<sup>1</sup> Nearly two-thirds of these students were enrolled in elementary schools. California school districts are charged with the dual goals of ensuring that English Learners acquire full proficiency in English as quickly as possible and that they meet the same rigorous grade-level academic standards that all students must meet.<sup>2</sup> The SBE has issued guidelines about the minimum criteria used to reclassify EL students, but districts are allowed a great deal of latitude in establishing more rigorous criteria.

The state’s interest in reclassification has been heightened by a number of recent changes to K–12 funding, standards, and assessments. The new LCFF allocates many more dollars per EL student than districts received under the old funding formula. This increases the effect of reclassification decisions for school districts and the importance of making sure that the funding is used to serve ELs effectively. In January 2014, the SBE passed temporary regulations for how these dollars are to be spent by districts and established an accountability framework, called the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP).<sup>3</sup>

The implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), changes to English language development (ELD) standards, and development of new assessments are also under way. Until 2013, California used the CST to

2013–14 academic year, and the individual student results that help determine readiness for reclassification will not be provided to districts. A new statewide testing system will phase in during the 2014–15 academic year, but until then, districts will need to decide how to reclassify EL students when their CST results become outdated. In addition, the state’s ELD standards were revised in 2012, and a new English language proficiency exam is expected to be fully implemented by 2016.

In light of the state’s interest in reclassification decisions (as evident in Senate Bill 1108, which mandated a statewide analysis of school district reclassification policies), the new CCSS and assessments, and the increased per-pupil funding for EL students, the timing is perfect

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determine whether ELs met the academic skills portion of the reclassification criteria. However, as part of the state’s transition to a new statewide assessment system aligned with the CCSS, there will be very little testing during the

### Abbreviations

CAHSEE	California High School Exit Examination
CCSS	Common Core State Standards
CDE	California Department of Education
CELDT	California English Language Development Test
CMA	California Modified Assessment
CST	California Standards Test
EL	English Learner
ELA	English language arts
ELD	English language development
EO	English-only or native English speaker
FEP	fluent English proficient
FRPL	free/reduced price lunch
GPA	grade point average
IFEP	initially fluent English proficient
LAUSD	Los Angeles Unified School District
LCAP	Local Control and Accountability Plan
LCFF	Local Control Funding Formula
LEA	Local Educational Agency
OPL	overall proficiency level
RFEP	reclassified fluent English proficient
SBE	State Board of Education
SDUSD	San Diego Unified School District
SEI	Structured English Immersion

for a retrospective examination of California’s current reclassification guidelines—and an analysis of the relative importance of each reclassification criterion in accurately predicting ELs’ readiness for English-only instruction.

PPIC recently published *Reclassification of English Learner Students in California*, a report about the relationship between reclassification policies and student outcomes four years later. In this report, we examine the academic progress of ELs in the two largest school districts in California—the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD). Together, Los Angeles and San Diego serve more than 200,000 ELs, about 15 percent of the ELs enrolled in the state. Because of a growing consensus that language acquisition during the elementary school years influences longer-term academic outcomes, we focus on students enrolled in these districts during the elementary school years and follow their progress through grade 12.

### Background on San Diego and Los Angeles

San Diego Unified and Los Angeles Unified are large and diverse California school districts. Although Spanish is the most common language spoken by ELs in both districts (94% in LAUSD and 76% in SDUSD), the distribution

**San Diego Unified and Los Angeles Unified are large and diverse California school districts. Although Spanish is the most common language spoken by ELs in both districts, the distribution of other languages spoken among ELs varies by district.**

of other languages spoken among ELs varies by district. In LAUSD, the other common languages are Armenian (1.1%), Korean (1.0%), and Filipino (1.0%); in SDUSD, the other common languages are Vietnamese (5.6%), Filipino (4.3%), and Somali (2.6%) (Table 1).

Students in Los Angeles are more likely to be low-income than students in San Diego (77% versus 61%). Los Angeles students are more likely to be Hispanic and less likely to be white or Asian than students in San Diego. It is important to take into account the varying demographic characteristics of the student population in each district when comparing academic outcomes for ELs and native English speakers.

### Goals of the Study

This report has four parts. The first part describes how students come to be reclassified in LAUSD and SDUSD, the data we use for each district, and how we define our student cohorts.

The second part examines whether attainment of current reclassification criteria in elementary school results in better student performance in middle school and high school—and whether the performance of ELs falters in the years after reclassification. Because we are looking at whether students are making the transition to English-only instructional settings at the appropriate time and tracking their long-term prospects, our cohort consists of English Learners enrolled in LAUSD and SDUSD during their *elementary school years*.<sup>4</sup> We focus on students reclassified in grades 2–5 in both school districts.<sup>5</sup> There are important policy questions about



AP PHOTO/RICH PEDRONCELLI

*Changes to K–12 funding, standards, and assessments have intensified California’s interest in reclassifying English Learners.*

Table 1. K–12 enrollment in California, LAUSD, and SDUSD, 2012–13

	California		LAUSD		SDUSD	
		Percentage		Percentage		Percentage
Total enrollment	6,226,989		655,494		130,270	
Race/ethnicity						
African American	394,695	6.3	61,786	9.4	13,261	10.2
Hispanic	3,282,105	52.7	482,534	73.6	60,616	46.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	725,819	11.7	42,264	6.4	18,799	14.4
White	1,589,393	25.5	60,266	9.2	30,271	23.2
Other	234,977	3.8	8,644	1.3	7,323	5.6
Free/reduced price meal eligibility <sup>a</sup>	3,472,481	57.5	489,777	76.6	76,846	60.7
Fluent English proficient <sup>b</sup>	1,339,566	21.5	239,753	36.6	27,032	20.8
English Learners	1,346,333	21.6	170,797	26.1	33,851	26.0
Top four languages spoken among ELs	Spanish, Vietnamese, Filipino, Cantonese	89.6	Spanish, Armenian, Filipino, Korean	96.7	Spanish, Vietnamese, Filipino, Somali	88.0

SOURCE: California Department of Education DataQuest for the 2012–13 school year.

NOTES: SDUSD and LAUSD have similar shares of EL students (26%), but LAUSD has a much higher percentage of students who are fluent English proficient (FEP)—students who were either former ELs who have been reclassified as fluent English proficient (RFEP) or were designated at school entry as fluent in English even though they were speakers of another language (initially fluent English proficient or IFEP).

<sup>a</sup> Free/reduced price meal numbers are from the 2011–12 school year.

<sup>b</sup> FEP numbers include both RFEP students and IFEP students. IFEP students speak a language other than English at home but were determined by their initial CELDT scores to be fluent in English.

EL students who arrive in the secondary school years, but these are beyond the scope of this report.

Using student-level data from both districts, we are able to follow students over time—while they are ELs, at the time of reclassification, and for many years beyond. Most previous research has relied on a cross-sectional approach, which shows large differences in academic achievement between native English-speaking students and ELs but often overlooks the confounding factor that the most successful EL students are reclassified in early grades and “drop out” of the analyses.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, we explore the following questions:

1. How do reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP) students fare on outcome measures such as the CST, the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE), retention in grade, and on-time graduation?
2. Do these outcomes vary by primary language or grade level at reclassification?<sup>7</sup>

Although this report has a wide scope with regard to reclassification of ELs, it cannot tackle many important questions. For example, it does not study EL latecomers arriving in higher grades, nor does it study instructional differences experienced by EL and RFEP students within either district or between districts. Rather, it provides a portrait of the progress of students who were ever ELs, dependent on their language status, in the contexts of the two districts.

The third part of the report explores relationships among individual reclassification criteria and a range of outcomes to determine which criteria are the most challenging for ELs and which are strongly associated with short- and long-term academic outcomes following reclassification. Because LAUSD and SDUSD have slightly different reclassification criteria, we can examine the relationship between more rigorous criteria and both academic outcomes and reclassification rates. We also explore



the possibility that difficult criteria could unnecessarily delay reclassification for students.

Finally, the fourth part of the report looks at combinations of several criteria (such as English proficiency level, performance on basic academic skills assessments, and report card grades) to determine which reclassification criteria are the best predictors of student success. This analysis may help these and other districts decide on the best criteria to use to reclassify EL students.

## How Do EL Students Get Reclassified?

The California Education Code requires that school districts develop policies and procedures to guide the reclassification of English Learners.<sup>8</sup> District-level reclassification standards must be based on four criteria approved by the SBE: performance in basic skills, an assessment of English proficiency, teacher evaluation of academic performance, and the opinion of a parent or guardian. To be considered for reclassification from EL to fluent English proficient (FEP), students should—at a minimum—meet all four criteria.

To meet the minimum basic skills recommendations for reclassification, students must score at the Basic level or higher on the CST in English language arts (ELA). Students must also demonstrate English proficiency by achieving an overall proficiency level (OPL) of Early Advanced or higher on the CELDT, and their scores on each subtest—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—must be rated as Intermediate or higher. In addition, teachers must certify that students meet district academic performance indicators and are ready to succeed in an English-only instructional program. The district must advise parents and guardians of their right to participate in the reclassification process and encourage them to attend a face-to-face meeting.

Districts have great latitude in setting their own reclassification policies, as long as they take into consideration the guidelines issued by the SBE. Reclassification criteria in LAUSD and SDUSD are somewhat more rigorous than

### The California English Language Development Test and the California Standards Tests

The CELDT is a state-mandated assessment of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English that is administered in kindergarten through grade 12. It is used to identify students with limited English proficiency to determine their levels of proficiency and to assess progress in learning English. The CELDT must be administered within 30 days of enrollment to all students whose Home Language Survey indicates that a language other than English is spoken at home and annually to all continuing ELs who have not yet been reclassified as FEP. CELDT results provide performance levels—Beginning, Early Intermediate, Intermediate, Early Advanced, and Advanced—for each of the subtests and an OPL. Until 2006, the listening and speaking subtests were combined into one. Starting in 2006–07, higher scores on the CELDT were required for each level of OPL.

All students in grades 2 through 11—including ELs and most students receiving special education services—take the CSTs, state-mandated criterion-referenced tests that assess students' mastery of the California content standards in English language arts, mathematics, science, and history-social science. Results are reported as performance levels—Far Below Basic (1), Below Basic (2), Basic (3), Proficient (4), and Advanced (5)—and are used to identify individual students' learning needs and assess school quality in state and federal accountability systems. Students with special needs who meet eligibility requirements may take the California Modified Assessment (CMA) or California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA) rather than the CSTs. Districts that reclassify students before the 2nd grade CST scores are available use other assessments to make their decisions.

the SBE guidelines. In San Diego, basic skills and English proficiency requirements are higher; in Los Angeles, the teacher evaluation component specifies minimum report card grades as a condition of reclassification. Table 2 details current statewide, LAUSD, and SDUSD reclassification criteria.

It is important to note that for the cohort we study, LAUSD also required marks in math courses of 3 or higher (on a 4-point scale) through the 2005–06 school year. SDUSD's reclassification criteria have not changed since 2002. SDUSD's reclassification rates are largely unchanged

In San Diego, basic skills and English proficiency requirements are higher; in Los Angeles, the teacher evaluation component specifies minimum report card grades as a condition of reclassification. Both districts include reclassification criteria that go beyond the state minimum.

from 2005–06 to 2012–13 (10.4 to 10.5), whereas LAUSD’s rates increased from 9.5 to 13.7.<sup>9</sup> LAUSD’s increasing reclassification rates are probably associated with eliminating the use of mathematics grades as a reclassification criterion after 2005–06.

### Student Data

For this study, we use longitudinal student-level data from Los Angeles and San Diego Unified School Districts for 2002 through 2012. (In this report, when we refer to

a single year, such as 2002, we mean the 2001–02 school year.) Starting in 2002, we follow 2nd grade students through what would be their 12th grade year if they made on-time progress.<sup>10</sup> Because students transition from EL to RFEP status at various times, comparisons of EL and RFEP students can be complicated. To make the comparisons as straightforward as possible, we focus our research on students who remain ELs through the end of 5th grade and students who are reclassified as FEP by the end of 5th grade—and we focus only on students who are observed

**Table 2. Elementary grade reclassification criteria (2012–13) in both LAUSD and SDUSD are more rigorous than the SBE guidelines**

	SBE guidelines	LAUSD Structured English Immersion or Mainstream English Program <sup>a</sup>	SDUSD
Performance in basic skills	ELA CST score of 300 (Basic) or above	2nd grade: score on Literacy Periodic Assessment #2 or #3 of Basic or above <sup>b</sup>  3rd to 5th/6th grade: score of Basic or above on ELA CST	<b>ELA CST score of 333 (mid-Basic) or above</b>
Assessment of English proficiency	CELDT OPL of Early Advanced or higher  All CELDT subtests at Intermediate or higher	CELDT OPL of Early Advanced or higher  All CELDT subtests at Intermediate or higher	CELDT OPL of Early Advanced or higher  <b>At least three CELDT subtests at Early Advanced or higher; fourth subtest at Intermediate or higher</b>
Teacher evaluation of student academic performance	Teacher certification that the student meets the district’s academic performance indicators	<b>Minimum marks of 3 on ELA courses of listening, speaking, reading, and writing</b>	Teacher certification that the student can be successful in core subject areas in a regular program designed for native and fluent speakers of English
Parent or guardian opinion and consultation	District provides notice to parents/guardians of their right to participate in reclassification process and encourages them to attend a face-to-face meeting	Parent consulted regarding student’s eligibility to reclassify, and letter must be printed and provided immediately; letter requires a parent signature	District notifies parent/guardian of reclassification decision and provides opportunity to consult with staff regarding programs to further increase their student’s academic achievement

SOURCES: California Department of Education (2012, p. 18). Los Angeles Unified School District (2011). San Diego Unified School District (2009).

NOTE: The more rigorous reclassification criteria are shown in boldface.

<sup>a</sup>Basic bilingual and dual-language programs have different teacher evaluation reclassification criteria.

<sup>b</sup>Periodic formative assessments to measure key ELA standards three times per year in grades 2–5 (Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and School Support, LAUSD Office of the Deputy Superintendent of Instruction, 2011).

in the data from 2002 to 2005. We compare both groups of students to native English speakers who must also be observed in their district data from 2002 to 2005.

As a way of making sure that our cohort is not somehow anomalous, we looked at a more recent cohort of elementary school students who entered kindergarten in 2006–07 and remained in the same district through the 2012 school year. Although we cannot follow these students through to graduation, we can compare their elementary grade outcomes to the earlier cohort to determine whether the longer-term outcomes of the earlier cohort are likely to be relevant for the present day in each district.

Native English speakers are a smaller percentage of the main cohort in LAUSD than in SDUSD (top panel, Table 3). The group of students who were ever ELs—the combination of current ELs and ELs reclassified by the end of grade 5—is a much larger proportion of students in LAUSD than in SDUSD.<sup>11</sup> Within the ever-EL group, students reclassified in elementary school constitute a greater

proportion of students in SDUSD (45%) than in LAUSD (19%). This suggests that more rigorous reclassification criteria were used in LAUSD at this time.

We find that the 2nd grade CELDT overall scores of students who were ever classified as ELs are fairly similar across the two districts (2.70 in LAUSD versus 2.51 in SDUSD).<sup>12</sup> However, when we separate the CELDT scores of EL students who remained ELs through 5th grade from those who were reclassified by the end of 5th grade, a gap emerges—the 2nd grade scores for both groups are much higher in Los Angeles (3.45 and 2.42) than in San Diego (3.08 and 2.07). This same pattern is observed in the 2nd grade CST scores (reported as the share of students scoring Basic or above).

The overall similarity of scores for all students who were ever ELs combined with the differences across two groups suggest that LAUSD’s reclassification criteria were more rigorous during the period we study. This may explain the higher average performance of EL students

**Table 3. Differences in test scores among student cohorts, LAUSD and SDUSD**

	LAUSD				SDUSD			
	2nd grade tests				2nd grade tests			
	CST % Basic or above				CST % Basic or above			
	No.	CELDT overall	ELA	Math	No.	CELDT overall	ELA	Math
<b>2nd grade in 2002</b>								
RFEP5	4,384	3.45	91.0	88.4	1,954	3.08	75.2	71.6
EL5	18,367	2.42	37.9	47.1	2,356	2.07	23.6	36.3
Ever EL (EL5 + RFEP5)	22,751	2.70	48.7	55.4	4,310	2.51	48.0	54.0
Native English speakers	7,074	NA	69.1	66.9	4,926	NA	83.1	78.8
<b>Kindergarten in 2007</b>								
RFEP5	10,996	3.72	96.8	95.3	4,573	3.26	95.3	94.9
EL5	11,255	2.56	49.6	59.0	4,121	2.08	46.9	61.8
Ever EL (EL5 + RFEP5)	22,251	3.08	74.4	78.0	8,694	2.70	72.4	79.2
Native English speakers	11,678	NA	85.3	84.9	9,569	NA	86.3	88.5

SOURCE: Authors’ tabulations from LAUSD and SDUSD student-level data, 2001–2012.

NOTES: CELDT overall is the overall performance level on the CELDT and can range from 1 to 5. A score of 4 or higher on the first CELDT taken results in a designation of IFEP (rather than EL). A score of 4 is required to be reclassified from EL to RFEP. For CST results, we report the share of students scoring Basic or above. Because the CELDT was not administered to all students until 2002, the SDUSD CELDT overall included only 2nd grade students in 2002, not 2nd grade students in 2001. RFEP5 students are those reclassified by the end of 5th grade. EL5 students are EL students who have not been reclassified by the end of 5th grade. Results were significantly different across the language proficiency groups.



who were and were not reclassified by the end of 5th grade in LAUSD: it is plausible that because only the highest-performing ELs were reclassified, many high-achieving students remained ELs, resulting in a higher average performance for both groups. Note also that native English speakers have much higher 2nd grade CST scores in SDUSD than in LAUSD in the main cohort we study (those in 2nd grade in 2002).

For the sake of comparison, we include a more recent cohort of students in Table 3. As shown in the bottom panel, almost half of the LAUSD students in the later cohort who were ever classified as EL were reclassified by the end of 5th grade. It is evident that the rate at which LAUSD's EL students are reclassified in elementary school has increased.<sup>13</sup> This is probably because LAUSD dropped the requirement that EL students earn marks of 3 or better in math courses to be reclassified. SDUSD's rate of reclassification in elementary school has also increased, but to a lesser extent.

Notably, the difference in 2nd grade CST ELA and math scores between students in LAUSD and SDUSD in the older cohort disappears in the younger cohort, which faced lower reclassification standards. This supports the hypothesis that the higher performance of LAUSD students in the older cohort was the result of some high-achieving LAUSD students not being reclassified, thus raising average achievement in both groups.<sup>14</sup>

The gap in the 2nd grade CELDT scores of students who were ever ELs in SDUSD and LAUSD increased for the 2007 kindergarten cohort, even though CST results are similar among ELs in the two districts. When we divide the EL group into those who remain ELs in 5th grade and those who are reclassified by the end of 5th grade for the kindergarten 2007 cohort, the CELDT scores for this cohort are much higher in LAUSD.<sup>15</sup>

Since we follow students over time, it is important to account for the possibility of students leaving LAUSD and SDUSD at different rates, thereby affecting our observation of student outcomes. We explored this possibility and concluded that attrition should not have a major effect on our results.<sup>16</sup> We include some results for students who later exit the district for comparison in technical appendix C.

## Long-Term Outcomes for Students Reclassified in Elementary School

In this section, we examine academic outcomes (annual standardized test scores, on-time progression including on-time high school graduation, and high school exit exam scores) to compare the longer-term performance of reclassified students with that of native English speakers and English Learners. We focus particularly on former English Learners who were reclassified in grades 2, 3, 4, or 5 and remained in the district for ten years (until 12th grade, if they made on-time progress). We compare outcomes for these reclassified students to those of EL students who were not reclassified by the end of 5th grade and also to those of native English speakers. We are interested not only in how students perform at a given grade level but also in their performance over time. This is an important issue for reclassified students because educators need to know if ELs reclassified in elementary school continue to be strong academic performers in middle and high school or if they might need supplemental services.

We examine academic outcomes to compare the longer-term performance of reclassified students with that of native English speakers and English Learners.

In both Los Angeles and San Diego, students reclassified in elementary school are among the best academic performers. Their elementary school outcomes are well above those of English Learner students and in many cases they are on par with those of native English speakers. The differences between students who were and were not reclassified in elementary school persist into middle and high school.<sup>17</sup> We see no evidence that the students who were reclassified in elementary school falter relative to other students later in their educational trajectories.

**Performance on California Standards Tests**

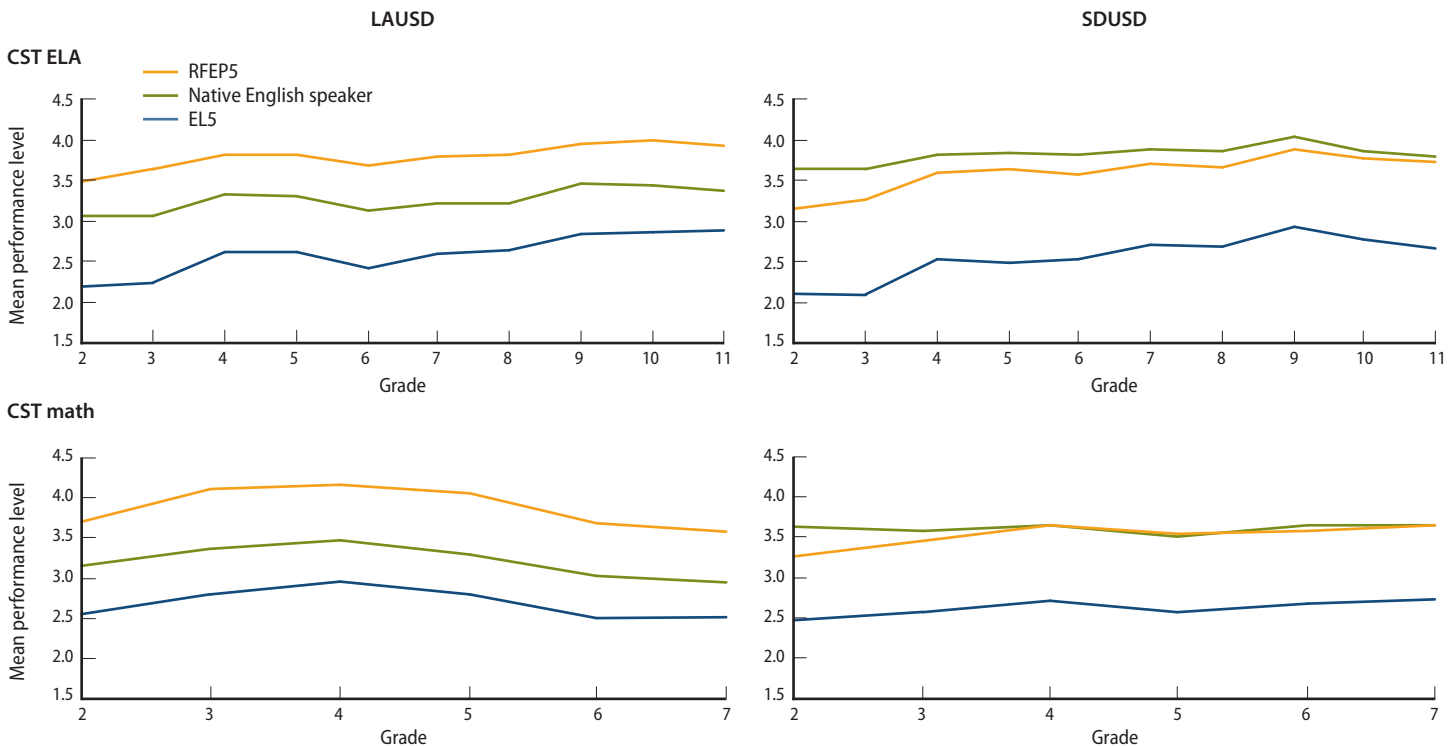
Students reclassified in elementary school in both districts are top performers on the English Language Arts portion of the CST (Figure 1). The mean ELA CST performance levels for reclassified students in both districts and for native English speakers in SDUSD are all high mid-Basic (above 3.7) in 11th grade. In LAUSD, native English speakers in all grades do worse than students reclassified in elementary school. Native English speakers in LAUSD also underperform their counterparts in SDUSD. This gap could be partly explained by the difference in the share of parents without high school diplomas: 10 percent of parents of native English speakers in LAUSD versus 2 percent of parents of native speakers in SDUSD (see technical appendix Tables A1 and A2). Performance levels for EL students who were not reclassified in elementary school

are below Basic in both districts (2.7 in SDUSD and 2.9 in LAUSD in 11th grade, for instance).

Math CST scores reveal similar patterns. In LAUSD, students reclassified in elementary school have much better math scores than native English speakers, probably because of the math grades required for reclassification in LAUSD at the time. In San Diego these students' math performance is virtually identical to that of native English speakers. The scores of SDUSD and LAUSD students who remained ELs throughout elementary school are within 0.3 mean performance levels of each other from 2nd to 7th grade.<sup>18</sup> In San Diego, students reclassified in elementary school and native English speakers have comparable mean performance levels on the math CST by grade level.<sup>19</sup>

We see no evidence in either the ELA or math CST scores that the reclassified students in our study falter at higher grade

**Figure 1. Students reclassified in elementary school perform well on the CST in later grades**



SOURCE: Authors' calculations from SDUSD and LAUSD student-level data, 2001–2012.

NOTES: Students in 8th grade can take many different math CSTs, so we present scores only through 7th grade. Students must be making on-time grade progression for their scores to be included here. We examine on-time grade progression separately in Table 4. CST scores are examined for students remaining in the district through 2012. RFEPS students are those reclassified by the end of 5th grade. EL5 students are EL students who have not been reclassified by the end of 5th grade. Mean differences for language proficiency groups are statistically significant as mean grade-level scores within each district in LAUSD and in SDUSD, with one exception: RFEPS math scores in grades 6 and 7 are not significantly different from native English-speaking students' scores.

levels relative to native English speaking students. Declines in these students' mean performance levels in the high school grades are similar to declines among native English speakers. For example, between 9th and 11th grade in LAUSD, ELA CST scores fell by 0.09 CST mean performance levels for native English speakers but only by 0.03 CST mean performance levels for students reclassified in elementary school. In SDUSD, the decline between 9th and 11th grade on ELA CST mean performance levels was 0.23 for native English speakers and 0.17 for these reclassified students. This is an important finding: removal of language supports for ELs who are reclassified does not seem to have hurt their academic progress relative to that of native English speakers.

### On-Time Progression toward Graduation

In both districts, English Learner students not reclassified by the end of 5th grade are the least likely to make on-time (or better) grade progress relative to other student language proficiency groups (Table 4). In Los Angeles, students reclassified by the end of 5th grade are more likely than native English speakers to progress on time, whereas in San Diego, outcomes are similar for the two groups. In both districts, there is a substantial drop-off in on-time grade progression from

9th to 10th grade. This is a greater issue in LAUSD, where only 73 percent of ELs not reclassified in elementary school are on time by grade 10 (compared to 82% of native English speakers). In SDUSD, 83 percent of ELs not reclassified in

In both districts, English Learner students not reclassified by the end of 5th grade are the least likely to make on-time (or better) grade progress relative to other student language proficiency groups.

elementary school and approximately 95 percent of students who were reclassified in elementary school and native English speakers are making on-time grade progress by 10th grade. In high school, grade progression is determined by unit accumulation: failing one or more classes can mean that a student is recorded as being in 9th grade for two years in a row. A similar pattern in 9th to 10th grade progression is observed statewide (Hill, Weston, and Hayes 2014).

**Table 4. Students reclassified in elementary school maintain high rates of on-time grade progression through high school**

	Percentage on-time advancement to:				Percentage on-time graduation <sup>a</sup>
	9th grade	10th grade	11th grade	12th grade	By 2012
<b>LAUSD</b>					
RFEP5	98	90	88	85	82
EL5	89	73	68	64	58
Native English speaker	94	82	77	74	66
<b>SDUSD</b>					
RFEP5	98	95	93	92	78
EL5	92	83	81	83	55
Native English speaker	98	95	93	92	78

SOURCE: Authors' calculations from SDUSD and LAUSD student-level data, 2001–2012.

<sup>a</sup>SDUSD's graduation requirements appear to be more challenging than LAUSD's. SDUSD students must have a minimum grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 and must successfully complete three years of science and three years of math. (See Table 1 in Betts, Zau, and Bachofer 2013.) LAUSD requires a minimum GPA of 1.0, two years of science, and two years of math (LAUSD 2010). Because we do not have dropout data for LAUSD, we exclude dropouts from our graduation calculations here and throughout the report. When we include dropouts in the SDUSD data, graduation rates decrease only slightly (see technical appendix Table C1). On-time grade-level progression and graduation were examined for students remaining in their district through 2012. RFEP5 students are those reclassified by the end of 5th grade. EL5 students are EL students who have not been reclassified by the end of 5th grade. Language proficiency group results are significantly different from each other for on-time grade progression in each grade in LAUSD and SDUSD, with one exception: in SDUSD, RFEP5 students are not significantly different from native English-speaking students. On-time graduation rates are statistically different for all language proficiency groups in both districts.

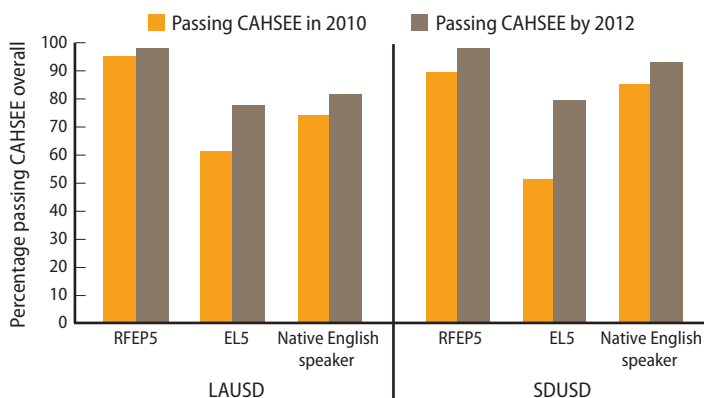
Students reclassified in elementary school maintain high rates of on-time grade progression throughout high school, and we see no evidence that their strong performance erodes relative to other language proficiency groups. This is especially true in Los Angeles, where native English speakers and students not reclassified in elementary school steadily lose ground from 9th to 12th grade relative to EL students who are reclassified in elementary school.

We also compare graduation rates, but it is important to note that graduation requirements are more rigorous in SDUSD than in LAUSD.<sup>20</sup> Graduating on time requires sufficient credit accumulation, minimum GPA requirements, and passing specific courses in addition to passing the CAHSEE. We find that in LAUSD, reclassified students in the cohort we study are more likely to graduate than native English speakers (82% versus 66%). In SDUSD, these two groups of students are equally likely to graduate (78%).

### Performance on the CAHSEE

In both Los Angeles and San Diego, students reclassified in elementary school are more likely than any other group to pass the CAHSEE in 10th grade and by 12th grade (Figure 2). In fact, nearly 100 percent do so by 12th grade.

**Figure 2. Virtually all students reclassified in elementary school pass the CAHSEE by grade 12**



SOURCE: Authors' calculations from SDUSD and LAUSD individual student data, 2001–2012.

NOTES: SDUSD data include students in grade 2 in 2001 or 2002; LAUSD data focus on those in grade 2 in 2002. The 2010 CAHSEE includes students taking the CAHSEE who should be 10th graders but have been retained in 9th grade. Not all retained 9th graders in LAUSD took the 2010 CAHSEE. Students making on-time progress would be in the 12th grade in 2012. CAHSEE scores are examined for students still in their district in 2012. RFEP5 students are those reclassified by the end of 5th grade. EL5 students are EL students who have not been reclassified by the end of 5th grade. Language proficiency group results are statistically significantly different from each other for CAHSEE passage in both 2010 and 2012 in both districts.

Students who are not reclassified in elementary school have low 10th grade CAHSEE passage rates in both districts (61% in LAUSD and 51% in SDUSD) but do make great strides by the end of grade 12, with approximately 80 percent passing in both districts.<sup>21</sup>

### Outcomes for Reclassified Students, by Language Spoken and Grade Level at Reclassification

Here, we briefly summarize analyses that examine academic outcomes for students reclassified by the end of 5th grade by their primary language and their elementary school grade level at reclassification. We find that Spanish-speaking students reclassified in elementary school have less positive outcomes than those who speak other languages. However, the performance of Spanish speakers is still stronger than that of native English speakers in LAUSD (although not always in SDUSD). (See technical appendix Tables C2, C3, and C4 and technical appendix Figure C3 for full results.) When we examine outcomes according to the grade level in which students are reclassified (grades 2 through 5), we find that students who are reclassified in 2nd or 3rd grade have better outcomes than those reclassified in 5th grade, on average, in both districts. (See technical appendix Figure C4 for CST results and further discussion of other outcomes.)

### Students Reclassified Early Have Good Outcomes and Reclassified Students Do Not Lose Ground

We have found that in both Los Angeles and San Diego, students reclassified by the end of 5th grade are among the best performers, and we see no evidence that their performance falters at higher grade levels relative to native English speakers. We also find evidence that students reclassified at the end of elementary school (5th grade) have slightly lower academic outcomes than students reclassified earlier. Research using a wider range of reclassification grade levels has found evidence that students reclassified in high school do not do as well as students reclassified at earlier grade levels (Hill, Weston, and Hayes 2014). This suggests an explanation for the apparent narrowing of the performance gap between reclassified students and other

students in high school in cross-sectional research findings: the RFEPs in these studies include students reclassified in high school, who do not perform as well as students reclassified in elementary or middle school (Hill 2012; Gándara and Rumberger 2006).

Is the stronger performance of reclassified students simply a result of skimming off the highest-achieving EL students (who may or may not have benefited from EL instruction), or do reclassified students make academic

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**We find that Spanish-speaking students reclassified in elementary school have less positive outcomes than reclassified students who speak other languages.**

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gains because of English Learner instruction and subsequent placement in mainstream instructional programs? Or is it simply that the student characteristics associated with elementary school reclassification are also associated with strong academic outcomes in middle and high school? The CST scores of English Learner students not reclassified by the end of 5th grade do improve by grade level more than native English speaker scores do, which suggests that ELD instruction benefits both ELs and reclassified students. Although these questions are beyond the scope of this report, it is important for districts and the state to consider them more fully.

Without a doubt, the use of reclassification criteria means that the best-performing students leave the English Learner group—indeed, many native English speakers do not meet the minimum CST scores that EL students are required to meet to be reclassified. This is most clear in LAUSD, where students reclassified in elementary school outperform not only native English speakers but also students who are initially fluent in two languages. In SDUSD, reclassified students also perform well but do not generally exceed the performance levels of native English speakers. The performance gap between the two districts is most

likely explained by the relative difficulty of reclassification criteria and, perhaps, also by the lower socioeconomic status of native English speakers in LAUSD relative to SDUSD.

## Reclassification Criteria and Long-Term Outcomes

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Districts have latitude in setting reclassification policies as long as they use the four criteria required in state law and take into consideration the SBE's guidelines. To develop effective policies, districts need to understand the relationship between the thresholds they establish for each criterion (or the use of additional criteria) and student outcomes. In this section, we examine the reclassification criteria that are most difficult for students to meet in each district. We also examine middle and high school academic outcomes to understand how they are affected by more rigorous reclassification thresholds in each district—in particular, we look at the effect of higher CST cut-off scores and the use of course grades.

### Which Criteria Are Most Challenging?

In a recent statewide survey of school districts' reclassification policies, respondents reported that the basic skills criterion (CST) was most difficult for their EL students to meet (53% for elementary grades, 62% for middle school grades, and 68% for high school grades). In elementary school, the English proficiency requirement (CELDT) was a close second (40%) (Hill, Weston, and Hayes 2014).

To find out whether these district perceptions are borne out by the data on student performance, we have adapted a technique used by Robinson (2011) to determine which of a district's reclassification criteria are actually the most difficult for students to meet. Since EL students who are not reclassified may not meet any of the reclassification criteria, we need to create a measure of which criterion is, on average, the most difficult for students to overcome.<sup>22</sup> This requires detailed knowledge of each district's reclassification criteria and many observations of student performance. For each EL student in each grade, we calculate the distance between that student's test scores or course marks



and the scores or grades that would allow that student to be reclassified under his or her district’s criteria.<sup>23</sup> The distance between the score or grade and the reclassification requirement determines the difficulty of the requirement.<sup>24</sup>

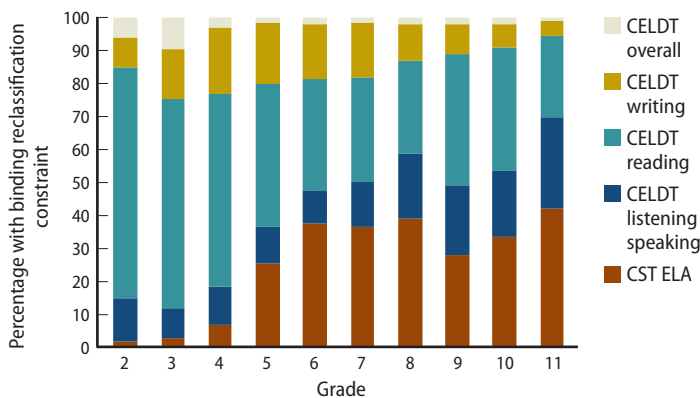
LAUSD has a lower ELA CST threshold than SDUSD (300 rather than 333) and allows two CELDT subtests to be below Early Advanced (SDUSD allows one). However, LAUSD requires a mark of 3 or better (on a 1- to 4-point scale) in ELA courses as a condition of reclassification (until 2006–07, it also required a 3 or better in math). SDUSD does not have any course mark requirement for reclassification, and such a requirement is not suggested in the SBE guidelines. In Figure 3, we show the biggest reclassification challenges for LAUSD’s ELs, taking into account the lower cut-point requirement on the CST but using the Early Advanced CELDT cut-off for overall proficiency level and all subtests. In elementary grades, the reading component of the CELDT is the bigger barrier for students. The CST is not a major obstacle until 5th grade, at which point it is the biggest constraint for about 40 percent of ELs and remains the most common difficulty through the end of middle school.

However, in analyses where we also included the ELA and math mark requirements for LAUSD elementary school

students, we found that marks are the most common stumbling block for 4th and 5th graders; nearly 70 percent had a math or ELA mark as their most difficult requirement (see technical appendix Table D1).<sup>25</sup> The ELA writing mark was the biggest challenge for about one-quarter of 4th and 5th grade students. Math marks were the biggest problem for 16 percent of 4th graders and 24 percent of 5th graders. With the mark requirement in place, the relative importance of the CST fell dramatically, and the CELDT reading subtest fell in importance by approximately 40 percentage points in 4th grade to 20 percent and approximately 30 percentage points in 5th grade to 15 percent. In discussions with district staff, we learned that LAUSD has recently convened meetings to discuss students who meet all reclassification criteria except ELA marks. In some cases, staff may decide to reclassify students with marks below 3.

When we analyze San Diego’s reclassification requirements, we find that the ELA CST requirement of 333 or higher (which is 33 points higher than both the LAUSD and suggested SBE thresholds) is the main criterion preventing students from being reclassified at grades 4 through 7, with a peak of nearly 60 percent in grade 5 (Figure 4). For grades 2 and 3, as well as grades 8 through 10, the CELDT subtest

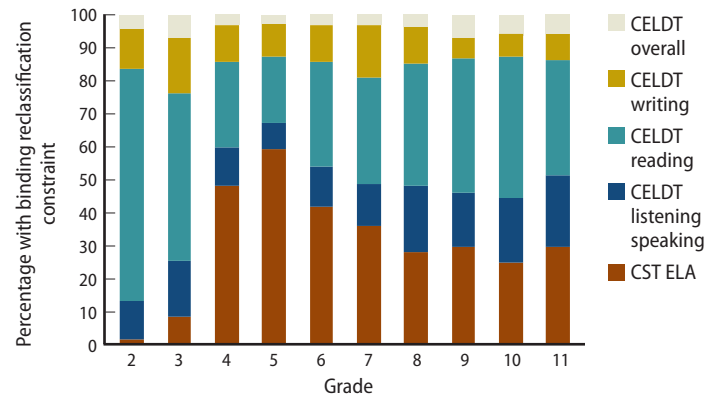
**Figure 3. In Los Angeles, the CELDT reading requirement is the most common obstacle to reclassification in elementary grades, but the CST becomes as big a barrier in later grades**



SOURCE: Authors’ calculations using LAUSD individual student data, 2002–2012. See note 23.

NOTES: Students must be in 2nd grade in 2002 and must have been in the sample with complete observations of test scores for three consecutive years. Binding reclassification criteria for LAUSD do not include grade requirement criteria. We do not show these results because we have only ELA and math marks for grades 4 and 5. Those are shown in technical appendix Table D1.

**Figure 4. In San Diego, the CELDT reading requirement and the ELA CST requirement are the main obstacles to reclassification**



SOURCE: Authors’ calculations using SDUSD individual student data, 2001–2012. See note 23.

NOTES: Binding reclassification criteria, SDUSD. Students must have been in 2nd grade in 2001 or 2002 and in the sample with complete test score observations for three consecutive years.

## Some of the reclassification criteria in LAUSD and SDUSD are more stringent than those suggested by the state's guidelines.

score in reading is furthest away from the reclassification threshold.<sup>26</sup> Rarely is the requirement of an overall performance level of Early Advanced or the score on the writing subtest the biggest obstacle for ELs. Listening/speaking is the third-most-challenging criterion.<sup>27</sup>

### Assessing the Effect of Rigorous Reclassification Criteria

As we have seen, some of the reclassification criteria in LAUSD and SDUSD are more stringent than those suggested by the state's guidelines. These differences in district criteria can help us answer some important questions. Suppose that some of the students who met the state's suggested reclassification criteria but not the more rigorous requirements set by their districts had indeed been reclassified. Would they have fared worse academically than those who met all of the district criteria? To explore this question, we divide the students who were reclassified in one district into two groups: those who would have met the other district's more stringent requirements and those who would not.<sup>28</sup>

### What If SDUSD Lowered Its CST Requirement?

We begin by looking at what would have happened in SDUSD if the district had allowed students scoring between 300 and 332 on the ELA CST to be reclassified. To do this, we compare LAUSD students who scored between 300 and 332 on the ELA CST to LAUSD students who scored between 333 and 366.<sup>29</sup> (These scores are from the year each LAUSD student was reclassified.) First, we find that 25 percent of the LAUSD students who were reclassified in elementary school scored between 300 and 332 in the final year before they were reclassified and therefore would not have been reclassified in SDUSD.

We find that in middle school, the reclassified students who scored in the higher range just before reclassification

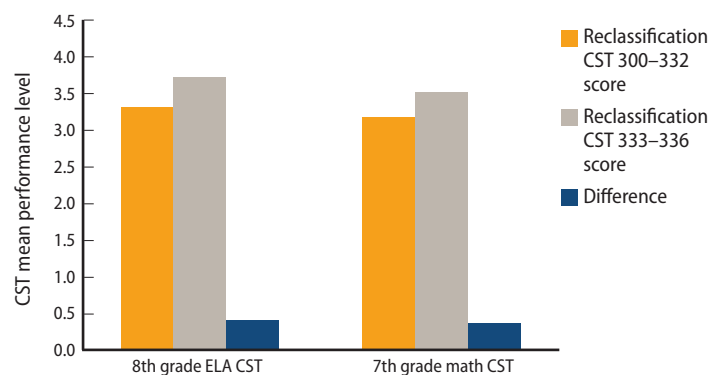
in elementary school obtained higher scores on the grade 8 ELA CST and grade 7 math CST than those who were reclassified with lower scores (Figure 5). However, these differences are relatively small—only about 0.35 mean performance level on the grade 7 math CST and 0.40 on the grade 8 ELA CST.

Results for other academic outcomes are similar. Students with higher CST scores (333–366) when they are reclassified in elementary school pass the CAHSEE at higher rates than students with scores in the lower range (300–332). This gap narrows as students continue to take the CAHSEE in grades 11 and 12; by 12th grade, 92 percent of those reclassified with lower CST scores pass the CAHSEE as compared to 97 percent of those with higher scores. (See technical appendix Figure E1.) There is almost no difference in on-time grade progression in high school or on-time graduation between students scoring in the high and low ranges on the CST in their year of reclassification. (See technical appendix Figure E2.)

### What If SDUSD Added Course Mark Requirements?

Now we examine what might happen if SDUSD added academic mark requirements to its reclassification criteria.<sup>30</sup> If we apply LAUSD's ELA and math mark requirement to reclassified EL students in SDUSD (using their estimated grades), we make a striking find: most of them

**Figure 5. Reclassified LAUSD students who meet SDUSD's CST requirement have slightly higher CST scores in middle school**



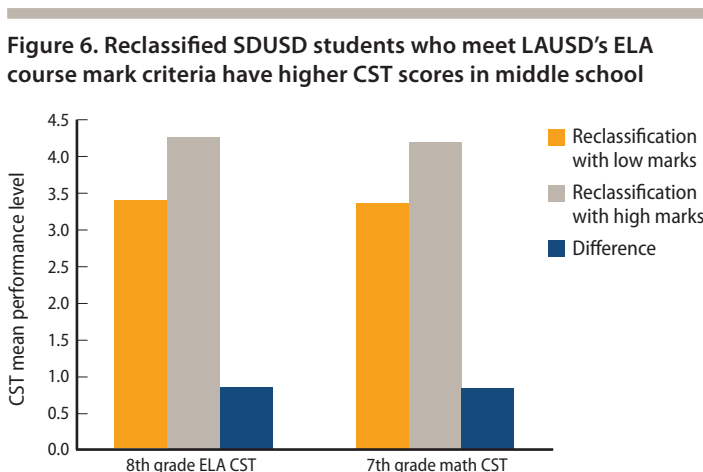
SOURCE: Authors' calculations using LAUSD individual student data, 2002–2012.

NOTE: Mean differences for students predicted to satisfy SDUSD CST requirements are statistically significant in LAUSD.

would not have been reclassified in the year SDUSD reclassified them. The percentage of students who would not have been reclassified ranged from 71.2 percent in grade 3 to 92.5 percent in grade 4.<sup>31</sup>

Students reclassified in elementary school in San Diego who met LAUSD’s ELA mark criteria scored higher in both the 8th grade ELA and 7th grade math components of the CST than students who did not (Figure 6). For the ELA CST, students who met the Los Angeles criteria averaged a performance level of 4.3 versus 3.4 for those who did not meet the criteria. For the math CST, students in San Diego who met the Los Angeles criteria averaged a performance level of 4.2 versus 3.4 among those who did not meet the criteria. These differences in middle school CST scores based on meeting the Los Angeles ELA GPA requirement (or not) are larger than those observed using high and low CST cut-offs (Figure 5).

In the longer term, the difference in outcomes can be quite large. Among reclassified students in SDUSD who met the LAUSD criteria, the passage rate on 10th grade CAHSEE was 97 percent, as opposed to 86.5 percent for those who did not meet the criteria. However, both groups had very high passage rates by the end of 12th grade (100% versus 97.8%).<sup>32</sup> Graduation rates ten years after grade 2 were also very similar overall (89.2% versus 88.3%),



SOURCE: Authors’ calculations using SDUSD individual student data, 2001–2012.  
 NOTE: Mean differences for students predicted to satisfy LAUSD GPA requirements are statistically significant in SDUSD.

although there is some variation depending on the grade level at which students were reclassified. SDUSD students who were reclassified in grade 2 without meeting the LAUSD criteria graduated from high school at a higher rate than students reclassified in grades 3 through 5 (92.6% versus 83.3%).<sup>33</sup>

**Are Rigorous Criteria Worth It?**

EL students in Los Angeles find the ELA course mark requirement for reclassification the most difficult criterion to meet. In San Diego, where grades are not a reclassification criterion, the ELA CST and the CELDT reading subtest are the most difficult criteria. In general, we find that outcomes for students who were reclassified in elementary school by meeting more challenging district-adopted reclassification standards are, in many cases, only slightly better than outcomes for students who were not reclassified. Given that large numbers of students are apparently held back from reclassification because of the more difficult criteria—with very little long-term gain—these findings suggest that setting more challenging reclassification criteria may not be beneficial.

When we compared reclassified students in one district who would and would not have been reclassified using the other district’s criteria, we found better outcomes for those reclassified who met the higher reclassification criteria. If LAUSD had used SDUSD’s higher CST cut-off, 25 percent of LAUSD’s students reclassified during elementary school would have faced delayed reclassification. Similarly, we estimate that over 70 percent of SDUSD’s students reclassified during elementary school would have faced delayed reclassification if SDUSD had used LAUSD’s ELA and math mark requirements. Our findings help to explain why, for the cohorts we study, students in the two districts who were ever classified as EL have similar CST and CELDT scores, but once we divide these students into those who were reclassified in elementary school and those who were not, LAUSD students have higher CST and CELDT scores than SDUSD students. It appears that LAUSD’s reclassification policies keep some of the top-achieving EL students in EL status.

**These findings suggest that  
setting more challenging reclassification criteria  
may not be beneficial.**

It is important to note that using each of the two districts' reclassified students to estimate differences in outcomes in the other district is an imperfect exercise. Ideally, we would instead examine outcomes for reclassified students in a third district that did not increase its reclassification criteria beyond the state-recommended minimum requirements. It is possible that such a comparison would have revealed larger gains (and bigger reductions in the share of high-performing EL students being reclassified) as a result of the more rigorous requirements in our two districts. Finally, this exercise cannot account for differences in English Language Development programs and supports across the two districts.

## Which Reclassification Criteria Best Predict Student Success?

SBE guidelines for reclassification advise districts to use CELDT and CST scores but allow the use of student grades in making reclassification decisions.<sup>34</sup> However, these guidelines are about to change. New ELD standards were adopted in 2012, and a replacement for the CELDT should be implemented by 2016. California is limiting statewide administration of the CST in 2013–14 in preparation for the introduction of the Smarter Balanced Assessments in 2014–15. Given these imminent changes to the state testing system, now is the perfect time to determine which of these three factors (CST, CELDT, and course marks) best predict success in middle and high school for elementary school students who are English Learners.<sup>35</sup> Will grades alone be sufficient? They are somewhat subjective, and grading standards can vary across districts and even across teachers within a district. We also consider whether the practice in

California of using both “basic skills” and “English proficiency” requirements through two separate tests produces complementary or redundant information.

We compared the predictive power of three indicators, measured in grade 5: the CELDT subtest performance levels, the ELA CST performance level, and ELA course marks.<sup>36</sup> We estimated models of five middle- and high-school outcomes as functions of these three indicators for EL students not reclassified in elementary school: ELA CST scores in grade 8, math CST scores in grade 7, CAHSEE passage in grade 10, grade retention before grade 10, and on-time graduation. For each EL student, we used variables from 1 to 5 for performance levels on the CST and the CELDT and from 1 to 4 to capture marks (in each of reading, writing, listening, and speaking in Los Angeles, and in each of reading, writing, and oral language in San Diego).

For both districts, when we attempted to explain test-score-based outcomes in 7th through 10th grades, CST test scores had the most explanatory power, followed by CELDT scores and ELA marks. Taken together, these three indicators captured one-third to one-half of the variation in grade 7 math CST achievement, grade 8 ELA CST achievement, and CAHSEE passage in grade 10. It is



MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN/THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

*With changes to the state testing system ahead, now is the perfect time to determine which factors best predict academic success for English Learners.*



perhaps unsurprising that grade 5 CST scores are strong predictors—like the outcome measures we used in our model, they are test-based measures of academic achievement. Figure 7 shows the percentage of the variation in student outcomes that we could explain using any one of these variables and all three variables together. Using CST scores alone led to models that explained slightly less variation than when we used all three predictors.

However, for the two high school outcomes (whether a student had been retained a grade by the end of grade 10 or graduated within ten years of entering grade 2), the explanatory power of these variables, alone or together, was much weaker.

We also estimated models that included all three combinations of pairs of these predictor variables: CST, CELDT, and GPA. Technical appendix Figure G1 shows that all three of these pairs perform almost as well as the model that includes all three sets of variables. We found that in LAUSD, using GPA together with either CST or CELDT scores explained almost as much of the variation in outcomes as did the full model with all three sets of variables. But in SDUSD, the models using CST and CELDT scores were the best in explaining middle school CST scores and CAHSEE passage, and all of the models performed about equally well in explaining grade retention and graduation on time. For the cohorts of students we studied,

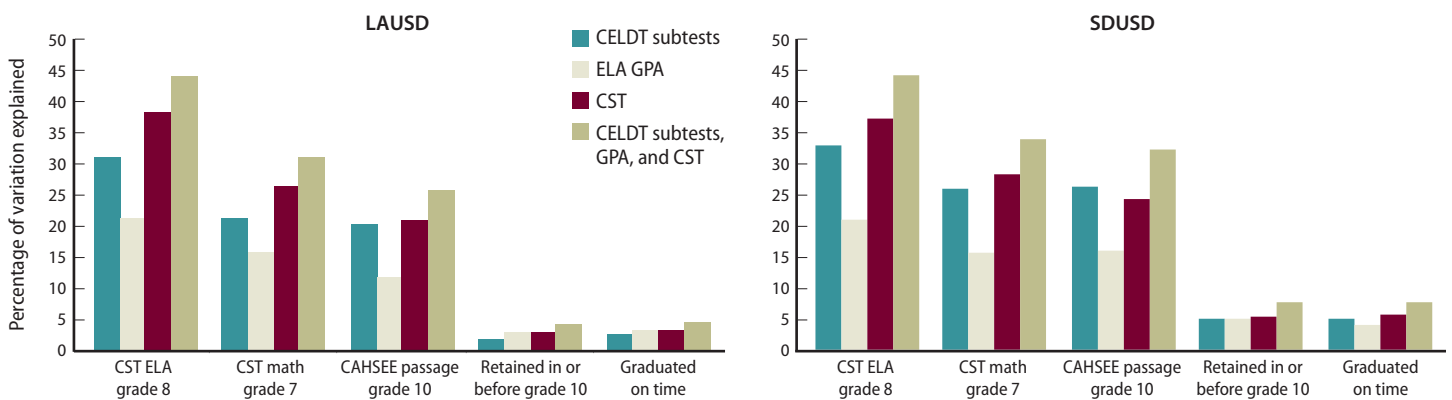
SDUSD (unlike LAUSD) was not yet using a standards-based report card that stipulates the criteria teachers must use to assign grades. It could be that standards-based report cards tend to contain more reliable information on student performance.

What insights does this analysis provide for state and district policymakers? Although one of the best predictors, the CST is no longer being administered in California schools; its replacement, which will be phased in during 2014–15, could have even better predictive power. In the interim, using only one indicator, such as the CELDT, would not produce markedly worse predictions of successful reclassified student outcomes than would a more complex measure.

## Policy Implications

In the context of the coming overhaul of the state testing system associated with the implementation of the CCSS, policymakers’ interest in instituting standardized reclassification criteria across the state, and the funding incentives of the LCFF, we have provided a timely review of the measures used by the state’s two largest school districts to determine when EL students are ready for English-only instruction.

Figure 7. The percentage of variation in student outcomes explained by grade 5 test scores and the ELA GPA of English Learners varies



SOURCE: Authors’ calculations from SDUSD and LAUSD individual student data, 2001–2012.  
 NOTES: SDUSD includes those in grade 2 in 2001 or 2002. LAUSD data focus on those in grade 2 in 2002.



We found that in both LAUSD and SDUSD, students who finished 2nd grade in 2002 and were reclassified as fluent English proficient by the end of grade 5 generally did very well in middle and high school, performing about the same as or better than native English speakers on a variety of academic outcomes. Further, we found no evidence that reclassified students' performance faltered relative to that of native English speakers. The key question is whether English Learners—in Los Angeles, San Diego, and other districts with more rigorous reclassification criteria than those suggested by the state—would benefit from being reclassified slightly sooner, through an easing of reclassification standards, which would allow districts to concentrate their resources on the most linguistically needy English Learners. Our findings in the two largest districts in California lead us to believe that the answer is yes. We also believe that, in the longer term, standardizing reclassification policies across districts would allow educators and policymakers to compare outcomes across the state—something that will be vitally important as the LCFF is implemented. We end with several recommendations to help ensure a successful transition to new policies.

- 1. Even though the CST will not be administered in 2013–14, our results suggest that districts can make accurate reclassification decisions using only the CELDT. When replacements for the CST and CELDT become available, the state should consider allowing districts to reclassify students on the basis of just one test.**

Despite the differences in student population (languages spoken, share of low-income students, and racial/ethnic distribution) and different reclassification criteria across the two school districts, the predictors of successful academic outcomes for ever-EL students are similar.

We doubt that California will ever abandon the CELDT or its successor, because schools need an objective method to evaluate the language abilities of new arrivals to the district whose first language is not English, and these students can arrive at any time of the school year. Tests such as the CST and its successor cannot accomplish this

goal. Further, the CELDT helps educators measure the progress of English Learners year to year. Because both the CELDT and the CST can predict EL students' subsequent outcomes quite well, it makes sense for the state to consider whether an EL student who demonstrates sufficient mastery of English on either test should be reclassified without having to face a second hurdle.

- 2. In the two largest districts in California, EL students find the CELDT writing requirement less challenging than the CELDT reading requirement. In designing new tests and reclassification standards, the state should consider the relative rigor of its reading and writing requirements.**

Our data suggest that the current CELDT writing requirement is relatively easy compared to the CELDT reading requirement. Indeed, in LAUSD, where ELA marks on report cards are part of the reclassification criteria, the writing grade requirement is more challenging for EL students to meet than the required mark in reading. Given that the replacement exam for the CELDT is currently being developed, this might be an ideal time for the state to reconsider its relative expectations about reading and writing for EL students.

- 3. Districts should carefully consider whether their reclassification standards need to be more rigorous than the state-recommended minimum.**

A difficult policy question is whether either San Diego or Los Angeles is setting reclassification criteria too high or low. In part, the answer depends on how well we expect English Learners to perform academically once reclassified. We examined reclassified students in one district to see whether higher reclassification standards in the other district held back from reclassification students who would have fared poorly, had they been reclassified. We found that more rigorous reclassification requirements in both districts—those related to CST scores in San Diego and academic marks in Los Angeles—were associated with slightly better outcomes in later grades, but the differences were small. Further, we found that there is a downside to

We found that more rigorous reclassification requirements in both districts were associated with slightly better outcomes in later grades, but the differences were small.

these additional requirements: they prevented or delayed the reclassification of large numbers of students.

We looked for variations across EL subgroups and found that students reclassified at earlier grade levels had somewhat better outcomes in secondary school than those reclassified later in the elementary school years. It is possible that students are benefiting from English-only classroom instruction in the early grades or from not being labeled as ELs in later elementary school. Or it could be that students reclassified early in elementary school had

initial advantages in language proficiency and academic preparation. Our current research cannot distinguish among these possibilities.

4. After careful consultation with districts, the state should consider establishing a uniform set of reclassification criteria for all school districts.

The issue of differing reclassification criteria is especially important, given that California's new Local Control



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*The key question is whether English Learners would benefit from being reclassified slightly sooner, allowing districts to concentrate on the most linguistically needy.*

Funding Formula increases funding for English Learners, which could create a disincentive for districts to reclassify students. The state needs to consider whether it makes sense for some districts to have more rigorous reclassification criteria than others. A standard set of criteria could improve fairness for students and make it much easier to monitor the progress of students who have ever been English Learners.

In sum, the process through which EL students are reclassified as fluent English proficient is quite complex. Not only must students reach thresholds on two different tests, but individual districts can and do set their own requirements, which can be quite different from the SBE

guidelines and from those of other districts. As the state implements new standards and assessments, and as the new funding formula takes effect, it should also consider making changes to reclassification criteria, including considering allowing EL students to meet the requirement on either the Smarter Balanced Assessment or the replacement for the CELDT. The establishment of statewide reclassification criteria at a reasonable level of difficulty could allow districts to concentrate their LCFF dollars on their lowest-performing students without slowing the academic progress of ELs who are performing well enough to be reclassified in elementary school. ●

Technical appendices to this report are available on the PPIC website:  
[www.ppic.org/content/pubs/other/514LHR\\_appendix.pdf](http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/other/514LHR_appendix.pdf)

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> California Department of Education (CDE) DataQuest.

<sup>2</sup> California Department of Education.

<sup>3</sup> It is expected that these regulations will be adapted depending on their success in the first year of LCFF implementation.

<sup>4</sup> Further, statewide in 2012–13, two-thirds of English Learners were enrolled in the elementary school grades (K–5) (California Department of Education DataQuest).

<sup>5</sup> In this cohort, very few students in SDUSD and almost none in LAUSD were reclassified in 2nd grade. Statewide, reclassification before 2nd grade is rare (Hill, Weston, and Hayes 2014).

<sup>6</sup> See Saunders and Marcelletti (2013), Hill (2012), EdSource (2008), and Gándara and Rumberger (2006) for examples. When RFEP and EL students are combined into an “ever-EL” group, the gap between ever-EL and native English-speaking students is considerably smaller and has declined somewhat over time (Saunders and Marcelletti 2013). However, even cross-sectional research that refines comparison groups for ELs cannot account for the time since reclassification or for new entrants to the EL population.

<sup>7</sup> Previous research has demonstrated a narrowing of the achievement gap following reclassification (Silver, Saunders, and Zarate 2008), but there is reason to believe that the timing of reclassification also matters. ELs who are reclassified quickly have better long-term academic outcomes than those who continue in EL status for many years (Flores, Painter, and Pachon 2009). Not surprisingly, there is a great deal of interest in understanding the role of reclassification standards in the ultimate success of ELs (Parish et al. 2006).

<sup>8</sup> California Education Code Section 313.

<sup>9</sup> Official CDE reclassification rates reported.

<sup>10</sup> Because SDUSD student data are available earlier and the size of the student population is smaller, the cohort of students for SDUSD combines 2nd graders from 2001 and 2nd graders from 2002 and follows students to 2011 and 2012, respectively.

<sup>11</sup> The size of the ever-EL group may itself affect educational outcomes for the ever-EL group. However, determining the effect of peers on educational outcomes for ELs and RFEPs is beyond the scope of this report.

<sup>12</sup> The OPL on the CELDT can range from 1 to 5. The correspondence between numbers and performance levels is as follows: 1 = Beginning, 2 = Early Intermediate, 3 = Intermediate, 4 = Early Advanced, and 5 = Advanced.

<sup>13</sup> The overall reclassification rates in LAUSD have increased (9.5% to 13.7%) during this period, whereas those in SDUSD have remained steady (10.4% to 10.5%).

<sup>14</sup> Note that 2nd grade CST scores increase for all student language proficiency groups between 2002 and 2008 in these two districts (Table 3) and statewide (California Department of Education 2013).

<sup>15</sup> It is possible that EL instruction between kindergarten and 2nd grade is more beneficial in LAUSD or that there are unobserved differences between students who were ever classified as ELs in the two districts.

<sup>16</sup> In technical appendix Tables A1 (LAUSD) and A2 (SDUSD), the demographic characteristics of students who remain in the district (“stayers”) and leave the district (“leavers”) are displayed separately. We find that students in LAUSD reclassified in elementary school who remain in the district are somewhat more likely to be low-income (as measured by free/reduced price meal eligibility) and have somewhat less educated parents, but the differences are slight. In SDUSD, students reclassified in elementary school who remain in the district have slightly better educated parents than those who leave the district.

<sup>17</sup> Recall that our focus is on ELs reclassified in elementary school. Some EL students who were not reclassified by the end of 5th grade may have been reclassified in middle or high school.

<sup>18</sup> We examine math CST scores only through 7th grade because beginning in 8th grade, students take a variety of math CST tests within each grade. For example, in 9th grade, students typically take the CST for Algebra I, Geometry, or (least commonly) Algebra II. Combining the mean performance levels across examinations measuring knowledge of different math content is not appropriate.

<sup>19</sup> A major difference between the two districts is the relatively stable math CST scores across grades in SDUSD versus the steady decline in math CST scores from the peak in 4th grade in LAUSD (across all language proficiency groups) to 7th grade. For example, the mean performance level among LAUSD reclassified students in 4th grade is 4.2, but by 7th grade it has fallen to 3.6. Our requirement that students must remain in their districts to be included in our sample does not affect our results much—we conduct the same analyses for students who eventually leave



their districts (technical appendix Figures C1 and C2) and find that the patterns by proficiency group are similar, but performance levels are somewhat lower in comparison to students who remain in their districts.

<sup>20</sup> SDUSD's graduation requirements appear to be more challenging than LAUSD's. SDUSD students must have a minimum GPA of 2.0 and must successfully complete three years of science and three years of math. (See Table 1 in Betts, Zau, and Bachofer 2013.) LAUSD requires a minimum GPA of 1.0, two years of science, and two years of math (LAUSD 2010). Because we do not have dropout data for LAUSD, we exclude dropouts from our graduation calculations here and throughout the report. When we include dropouts in the SDUSD data, graduation rates decrease only slightly (see technical appendix Table C1).

<sup>21</sup> Technical appendix Table C4 shows results for IFEP students as well. In San Diego, IFEP students pass the CAHSEE at higher rates than other students (96% by the end of 12th grade), but in Los Angeles, RFEP students pass CAHSEE by the end of 12th grade at higher rates than IFEP students (98% versus 94%).

<sup>22</sup> We refer to this criterion as the “binding constraint” because it is the criterion that the student is furthest from meeting. Within each grade level, we count the number of times a particular reclassification criterion is the furthest from being met for all the students in that grade.

<sup>23</sup> Our measure of distance has been standardized for each reclassification criterion by transforming students' scores into z-scores. For example, we take a student's overall score on the CELDT and subtract it from the score required (Early Advanced) and divide it by the standard deviation of the CELDT score for EL students in that grade in that district. We identify the binding constraint as the requirement for which the student's score is the greatest number of standard deviations below the required level. It is important to note that the students included in our analyses for Figures 3 and 4 are those in grade 2 in 2002 (or 2001 as well in SDUSD) who remain EL students in the given grade a number of years later. Thus, the figures do not include students who have been reclassified. The reclassification of students out of the group over time may, in part, be responsible for the gradual changes across grades in the binding constraint to reclassification for students who are still ELs in the given grade.

<sup>24</sup> In both districts, it appears that reclassification decisions are made according to the policies in place. In LAUSD, about 2 percent of all students should have been reclassified when they were not, and the same was true for about 4 percent of students in

SDUSD. There were almost no observations of reclassifications that did not meet the reclassification policy requirements—we saw 13 observations in total (or 0%) in LAUSD, and in SDUSD, about 2 percent of reclassifications should not have been made.

<sup>25</sup> We have no marks for 2nd graders and marks for only some of our 3rd graders, so we exclude them from this analysis. Implementing the grade level cut-off requirement for middle and high school is difficult because of the way course names are recorded at higher grade levels.

<sup>26</sup> For instance, the CELDT reading subtest requirement was the binding constraint for 43 percent of 10th graders.

<sup>27</sup> Recall that SDUSD students may score less than Early Advanced on one CELDT subtest, but for ease of exposition, we do not allow for that possibility here.

<sup>28</sup> Because both districts go beyond the state's recommended minimum reclassification requirement, students in one district who would have failed to meet the other district's requirement are not the perfect comparison group—they are still in some sense above average. If anything, this probably biases our analysis toward finding that higher reclassification requirements did not lead to big changes in outcomes.

<sup>29</sup> A category of similar size.

<sup>30</sup> Since marks are subjective and since LAUSD used a standards-based report card whereas SDUSD did not, we use the relationships we observe between test scores and marks in LAUSD to approximate marks for SDUSD students had they been enrolled in LAUSD. We use CELDT and CST scores to predict marks for EL and RFEP students in LAUSD. Coefficients from those models are used in estimating the marks of SDUSD students who were reclassified in elementary school. These regressions are found in technical appendix F.

<sup>31</sup> We reanalyzed the SDUSD data using the more recent LAUSD requirement that uses marks in ELA but not math. The results were virtually the same, with only three more students predicted to have met the LAUSD mark requirements.

<sup>32</sup> See technical appendix Figure E3.

<sup>33</sup> There were differences between students who met the LAUSD coursemark criteria and those who did not. Those who met the criteria tended to have higher CELDT OPL scores and higher CST scores. They also differed demographically, with those who met the LAUSD course mark criteria less likely to be Hispanic and with parents with higher education levels.



<sup>34</sup> Many school districts have decided to use students' grades as an element in the reclassification decision (Hill, Weston, and Hayes 2014).

<sup>35</sup> Assembly Bill 484 requires that districts administer the computer-based field test of the new Common Core Assessments in 2013–14, but the results of these tests will not be given to schools. A survey of California school districts estimated that only 33 percent to 40 percent of school districts are able to offer the computer-based tests in 2013–14. The new tests will be given in all districts in 2014–15 (Fensterwald 2013).

<sup>36</sup> Full results are shown in technical appendix Tables G1–G10.

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