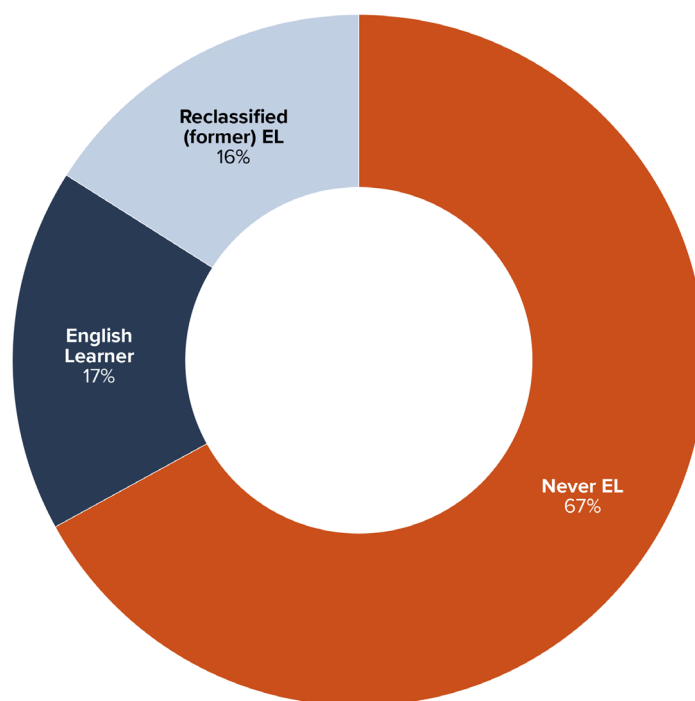


# Accelerating English Learner Progress by Improving Reclassification

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Many students start California schools not yet fluent in English. Each year, 160,000 new students are typically identified as requiring English language support. Because English support services are meant to be temporary, annual evaluations determine if continuing students would benefit from another year of English Learner (EL) instruction or if they should be reclassified out of EL services. About 1.8 million students in California’s K–12 schools are current and former ELs (33% of the student population).

## Current and former ELs comprise one-third of the state’s K–12 students



Source: Authors’ calculations using the California Department of Education’s Enrollment by English Language Acquisition Status, 2025–26, DataQuest.

Notes: Transitional kindergarten students and students with language acquisition status “TBD” are excluded. “Never EL” combines English Only and Initially Fluent English Proficient.

## The need to accelerate reclassification

The reclassification process needs to balance support with rigor. Reclassifying students too soon denies them the services they need to succeed. But delays in reclassification can [stunt academic progress](#) by [denying students access](#) to higher-level coursework and electives. It can also contribute to [low self-esteem](#) and may ultimately mean that some students are never reclassified, even when they should be.

Since accelerating EL students’ academic progress depends in large part on reclassification, how and when we reclassify students matters. Currently, the state requires students to pass an assessment of

English language proficiency and a district-determined assessment (or assessments) of basic skills in English language arts; students must also obtain a teacher recommendation and parent approval. However, some of these criteria are redundant, subjective, and onerous—and have likely held some students back. Districts may also require students to exceed the minimum state requirements, and those that impose additional criteria have [lower reclassification rates](#). Overall, only about half of EL students who started in California schools in kindergarten are [reclassified by fifth grade](#), and those who do not reclassify are designated Long-Term ELs (students receiving EL support for six or more years).

State laws have aimed to improve conditions and accountability for Long-Term ELs by requiring that districts report their number of long-term EL students and allow ELs in middle and high schools full access to standard instructional programs. Yet based on current trends, the number of long-term EL students is expected to grow because reclassification rates for younger students [were so low](#) during the pandemic. For students who are not reclassified by the end of high school, EL status is associated with [poor outcomes](#), including [lower graduation rates and less college preparation](#).

Below, we share five recommendations for improving reclassification—and, in turn, academic outcomes—for this large population of students. These recommendations are drawn from the research literature on reclassification, including multiple PPIC surveys of school districts over time (see full reference list in [Technical Appendix B](#)).

### **1. Simplify and standardize reclassification criteria.**

Requiring EL students to pass separate assessments for English language proficiency and basic skills creates unnecessary barriers to student progress. Currently, reclassification often requires more than two assessments, with [82 percent of districts](#) reporting using at least two assessments for basic skills in addition to the English proficiency assessment (see the description of our survey methodology in [Technical Appendix A](#)).

However, since 2018, the assessments to measure English language proficiency and basic skills in English language arts have been aligned and thus are largely redundant. Even before this alignment, [research](#) indicated that requiring multiple reclassification criteria provided little additional predictive value beyond having one requirement that was aligned to English language arts standards.

Further, the teacher evaluation criterion has long been criticized as subjective and is implemented in [widely variable ways](#) across the state. In our 2025 survey, districts report increasingly using the state’s teacher observation tool, yet some respondents say this measure is still subjective and excessively time-consuming. PPIC’s surveys of school districts have regularly found parent consultation is rarely used as intended for reclassification. To simplify the process, California should join the [24 other states](#) that rely on just one assessment to reclassify their EL students, with no teacher or parent criteria.

### **2. Automate reclassification to lower barriers and reduce administrative burden.**

After deciding that students should be reclassified, districts must manually change students’ reclassification status. Our recent survey asked districts how much time this takes and found that, for every student who met the reclassification criteria, district staff spent an average of 32.6 minutes changing their status in all relevant data systems. With approximately 100,000 students reclassified last year, this amounts to 71,000 hours in total.

The lag between when a student meets reclassification requirements and inputting the new status in all relevant data systems is greater than a month for almost half of districts (46.5%). If this status is not updated correctly and on time, then course enrollment decisions may be based on out-of-date information, obstructing student access to higher-level coursework.

In addition to being time-consuming and slow, this manual process also introduces opportunities for bias. [Research has shown](#) that students with the same test scores are not always treated the same when it comes to reclassification depending on where they live, their home language, or their

socioeconomic status. When Michigan switched from a manual reclassification process to an automatic one, reclassification rates among eligible students [increased by 35 percentage points](#). Districts also saved time, freeing up staff to work with students or teachers. California should adopt a similar policy, automatically reclassifying all students who meet the criteria.

### **3. Create meaningful paths to reclassification for special education students.**

Nearly 18 percent of English Learners—and [28 percent of long-term ELs](#)—have Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs). Designing sensible reclassification policies for such “dual-identified” students has long been a challenge for the state and districts.

The California Department of Education [recently issued new guidance](#) tightening reclassification requirements for ELs with disabilities. In contrast to [prior guidance](#) that allowed IEP teams to modify reclassification requirements, this guidance affirmed that only students with severe cognitive disabilities are eligible to take the state’s alternate English language proficiency assessment. Other students with disabilities can take the standard English language proficiency assessment with approved accommodations, but their IEP teams cannot exempt these students from the requirement to pass the assessment. Respondents to our 2025 school district survey expressed concern about this new lack of flexibility.

Efforts to create new reclassification policies for dual-identified students must be fair to students and applied uniformly across districts; they must not be burdensome for teachers, IEP teams, and districts to implement. Some survey respondents suggested that students with IEPs should be reclassified with lower scores (e.g., a score of three rather than the currently required level four) on the English proficiency assessment. Though this process would be neither automated nor standardized, it would apply to a small subset of students—statewide, roughly 30,000 EL students with disabilities score at a level three each year. This could be a workable solution if a student’s IEP team feels it is appropriate, the decision is supported by coursework or other assessments, and reclassification occurs in conjunction with enhanced monitoring.

### **4. Better define and fund monitoring.**

Monitoring students who have been reclassified in the last four years is required by both [federal and state law](#). Results from our recent survey show that 95 percent of districts monitor reclassified students’ grades and 83 percent monitor their test scores. Though it is promising that most districts monitor the academic performance of recently reclassified students, grades are subjective and sensitive to teacher perceptions; test scores are a more objective measure, but districts may be using different tests, leading to high variability across the state.

Other states more clearly define what monitoring should look like. For example, [in Arizona](#), districts must provide additional supports to any student reclassified in the last two years who is scoring below the standard on the state assessment. These supports are even funded by law in some states. [In Ohio](#), state law explicitly grants additional funds to districts to support students for two years after they achieve proficiency on the state’s English language proficiency exam.

California should set a clear cutoff on a statewide assessment to identify reclassified students who need support and then provide those students with the support they need to thrive. Notably, if California were to reform the reclassification process, more students would likely be reclassified, thus reducing the number of students who would receive funds based on their EL status. The state should consider reallocating these funds toward monitoring recently reclassified students.

### **5. Communicate with families more often and more transparently.**

Removing the parent consultation criteria would streamline the reclassification process, but districts should still engage with families of ELs as soon as students enroll and throughout the EL process and monitoring period. Federal Title III mandates districts to inform parents annually about students’

continued identification as EL, their qualifications for taking the alternate English language proficiency assessment, and their latest proficiency test scores. However, [research](#) from parent focus groups and workshops shows that families currently receive information in a “disjointed piecemeal fashion.” Therefore, it is [important to communicate early on and continuously](#) about the benefits of EL instruction, how districts protect student and family data, and how students may exit EL instruction.

Districts should be wary of sending communications to families through email, given the potential [digital barriers among EL families](#), and instead attempt to send text messages or conduct phone conversations. Given the ease of technologically enabled translations, all formal notices and other communication with parents should be in the parents’ native languages (this is currently required only for languages spoken by at least 15% of a school’s families). Finally, parent engagement should not stop once students are reclassified; ongoing communication will become especially important if ELs are reclassified sooner and monitoring becomes more robust.

Given current legislative activity, policymakers may be considering changes to EL reclassification. Research indicates that standardizing, simplifying, and streamlining reclassification could boost academic progress for English Learner students. Pairing any upcoming policy changes with improved and standardized monitoring and communication with families is critical to student success.

Finally, the state should report reclassification rates annually, as it did up until 2020–21. It should also begin to report outcomes and course access for both English Learners (by length of program participation) and reclassified students. Reporting helps families and districts better understand the progress of current and former English Learners.

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