

Adapting to Changes in California’s English Learner Population

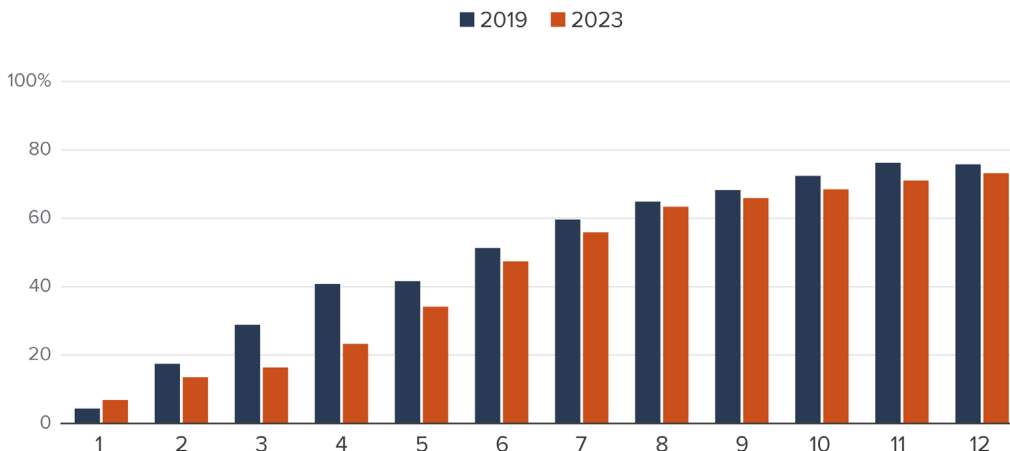
More than a quarter of California’s youngest children start public school not yet fluent in English. Federal law requires that these children receive supportive services to participate in school as they become fluent. From 2016 to 2023, however, the number of English Learners (ELs) fell by 372,000, or 15 percent—a population drop that has driven the overall enrollment decline in California public schools. The languages spoken among ELs have become more diverse, and the share who have been ELs for six years or more or who are new to the US is rising—all of which may require districts to adjust their programs.

Who are California’s English Learner students?

When parents enroll their children in school, they fill out a survey to determine whether the child speaks primarily English at home; those who do not are assessed to determine if they need supportive services—these students are English Learners. Roughly 1 million California students are currently English Learners and over 900,000 are former English Learners—constituting just over a third of total public school enrollment. Over 80 percent of ELs speak Spanish; other top languages are Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Arabic (each 2% or less of the total).

Reclassified students are former English Learners who have been assessed to no longer need EL supports. In 2023–24, the effects of the pandemic on reclassification still lingered: except for 1st grade, far fewer students were reclassified than before the pandemic, especially in 3rd and 4th grade. On the bright side, 6 percent of EL kindergarteners were reclassified before starting 1st grade, the highest share in the past five years. Reclassification by or in 1st grade had been rising even before the pandemic—perhaps because more children have been starting in public schools at four years old, through the Transitional Kindergarten (TK) program.

Today, fewer shares are reclassified as English Fluent Proficient in all but 1st grade



Source: California Department of Education Enrollment by English Language Acquisition Status, Long-Term English Learner, and At-Risk, by Grade, 2015–16 to 2023–24.

Notes: Bars represent the share of ever English Learners that are reclassified. See Technical Appendix B in the full report for our full methodology for calculating reclassification rates.

What programs are available for English Learners and how are they staffed?

EL students receive academic instruction intended to support them as they learn English; moreover, families of multilingual students may receive supportive services such as translation to help them participate in school. In terms of instruction, for 20 years, California law prioritized EL students learning in English immersion classes. Proposition 58 (2016) overturned this policy, widening the door to bilingual classes.

In 2022–23, roughly 13 percent of schools offered at least one language immersion program. These programs are not yet commonplace, but their popularity is growing. The most popular format is the dual-language immersion program (DLI), comprising half English native speakers and half speakers in the other language (given this requirement, many languages will never have enough students to offer DLI). Research shows that ELs educated in bilingual classrooms may take longer to reclassify, but they have better academic outcomes than ELs without bilingual instruction.

Despite the drop in EL students, and perhaps because of higher demand for bilingual instruction, districts report shortages of qualified teachers. This was a particular issue in more remote and less urban districts. One school that PPIC interviewed had to combine grade levels in the same classroom for a DLI course and rely on staff without full credentials.

“We also struggled with being able to staff [schools with] teachers that are meeting the requirements of Spanish-speaking instruction ... so we’ve had to [form] combo classes, [meaning]... the teacher is teaching two different grade levels [in a dual language immersion] within one classroom.”

How can efforts to identify and support English Learners be improved?

Starting in 2025–26, all kindergarten, first, and second graders will be screened using a reading difficulty assessment. An early screener may identify reading challenges sooner and with more accuracy for ELs—that is, distinguish between learning disabilities and the challenges of learning English. Prior research shows that students who remain English Learners for more than six years are likely to have a disability.

The State Board of Education should encourage districts to reclassify students throughout the year when new assessment results are available, rather than once a year, as some districts do. Reclassification could also be automated to facilitate timely reclassification and to help students not reclassified during the pandemic. The state should resume publishing reclassification rates to understand how EL students are faring.

Some districts report using technology and partnerships with community organizations to assist with translation as the makeup of multilingual communities changes and creates new challenges in communicating with students’ families. Given the ease of digital translation, these resources could be marshalled across districts.

Districts should also assess and address any stigma associated with English Learner status and help families understand the benefits of dual language courses. Meanwhile, demand for these classes is growing despite falling numbers of ELs—therefore, California must still graduate and train teachers prepared to meet this need.

Supported with funding from the Sobrato Family Foundation.

Source: Adapted by Stephanie Barton from [Adapting to Changes in California’s English Learner Population](#), by Laura Hill and Beyond Deng.