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Surveying the Landscape of California's English Learner Reclassification Policy



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SUMMARY

CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Understanding Current State Guidance	6
Implementing Reclassification Policies around California	7
Monitoring Reclassified Students	16
Serving English Learner Students with Disabilities	17
Conclusions and Recommendations	18
References	20
About the Authors	21
Acknowledgments	21

Technical appendices to this report are available on the PPIC website.

All students confronted obstacles during the 2020 school year, but for students learning English, the year presented a distinct set of difficulties. Even as English Learner (EL) students shared in the common struggles around internet-based instruction, the tools to measure their progress in becoming proficient in English became largely unavailable after California schools switched to distance learning in March 2020.

Before the pandemic, policymakers were interested in knowing how California school districts decide when students with the EL designation are ready to exit it through the process of “reclassification.” Although the state Education Code has four criteria to reclassify EL students, there is local discretion on all but one statewide criterion. As required by federal law, the California Department of Education (CDE) is in the midst of standardizing all criteria. Standardizing has many benefits: it may improve the timing for students to transition out of EL services and designation as well as create more equity across districts.

This report shares results from our survey of district policies for measuring English Learner progress and for removing the English Learner designation, before and during school closures. We find:

- **Over 99 percent of districts require that students take the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) to be reclassified;** over 90 percent apply the required cut point—an overall ELPAC level 4. This is the only criterion that is standardized. However, some districts also layer on additional measures of English proficiency.
- **Most districts assess English Language Arts (ELA) skills in grades 3–11 through the Smarter Balanced Assessments (SBAC).** Slightly more than half of districts reclassify with a performance level of “nearly met.” While this might sound as if we expect too little of ELs, over 50 percent of students who speak only English at home do not meet the standard on the SBAC.
- **Districts appear to be involving parents more in reclassification decisions.** Efforts to involve parents have improved since our last survey in 2013.
- **Most districts are monitoring reclassified students.** Seventy-eight percent monitor reclassified EL students for the required four years, using test scores, grades, and attendance to observe performance.
- **Most districts (56%) have adopted the EL Roadmap.** The Roadmap helps districts align accountability plans with guidelines from the State Board of Education. Nearly all districts are aware of the guidance of serving EL students with special education needs. Many districts have plans for assessing English Learners who also have differential learning needs for reclassification eligibility, even if students are not able to sit for the entire exam.

The pandemic may delay state efforts to standardize reclassification. However, in many ways, standardization is a misnomer—the state gives guidance, but districts can layer on more requirements, and many do. To truly standardize policy, we suggest tightening guidance to end this practice.

The pandemic has created two opportunities to improve reclassification. First, districts are now connecting more with families on reclassification decisions using teleconferencing, an approach that may lead to deeper relationships with families even when schools are back in session. Second, districts may learn whether using only the ELPAC test is sufficient for assessment—CDE guidance for 2020–21 suggests districts are “encouraged to prioritize ELPAC scores as the main driver for reclassification” due to concerns about validity and standardization of the other reclassification criteria during the COVID crisis.

Introduction

Nearly 40 percent of California’s schoolchildren are either current or former English Learners.¹ Students who start school without enough academic English to succeed in their courses receive required extra support until they no longer need it. Through reclassification policies, districts determine when English Learner (EL) students have sufficient English fluency to participate fully in instruction with limited or no support. State guidance requires the use of four criteria, one of which is standardized; districts have a bit more flexibility in how they implement the remaining three criteria.

Because California grants local educational agencies a fair amount of control over many educational decisions, the California Department of Education (CDE) does not have complete information about reclassification policies at the district level. Using a statewide survey of school districts, this report attempts to synthesize local practices across the state. We surveyed California’s 1,000-plus school districts to learn about reclassification policies in place before the pandemic, policies for monitoring reclassified students, how they reclassify students with disabilities, and how they have adapted policies in the absence of key assessments.

Reclassification policies can influence student success because they affect the timing around when a student is reclassified. Students held in English Learner status for too long may face a stigma and may have less access to core academic instruction. And the EL designation can ignore or even undermine the assets of being fluent in two languages. However, if districts remove EL status too soon, students may lose access to valuable language supports while they are still mastering academic English. It is important to design reclassification policies appropriately to ensure a smooth transition out of EL status.

Federal law now requires that states standardize reclassification decisions across school districts.² By standardizing policies, the state may help improve the timing of reclassification and ensure students are treated equally around California. Additionally, combining a consistent reclassification policy with a robust monitoring policy may alleviate concerns that incentives could keep students classified as ELs.

Recently, educators have proposed new labels for students learning English—Dual Language Learners and Emerging Bilingual—that signify assets students bring in the form of primary language fluency. As of now, English Learner (EL) is still the most common term to describe K–12 students.

Understanding how districts decide on measures and tests for reclassifying their students is especially important during the pandemic. When the spread of COVID-19 shut down schools in March 2020, many of the academic assessments typically used for reclassification decisions became unavailable for 2019–2020. Without these tests, many districts had to improvise. Districts also often use these same assessments to place students in courses; the tests would have provided helpful information about academic supports EL students might need after the extended period of distance learning.

¹ The term English Learner may be seen as highlighting deficits students must overcome rather than emphasizing that bilingual students may have additional educational assets. Recent changes in educational policy highlight the benefits to students of being bilingual. California’s [State Seal of Biliteracy](#) aims to recognize successful efforts to maintain home language literacy for those students who come from homes where English is not the primary language spoken and encouraging students who speak only English to develop their second language skills to the point where they are fully biliterate. In 2016, California voters passed Proposition 58, which allows school districts to more easily provide bilingual language instruction rather than the English-only model that was dictated by Proposition 227 in 1998. However, the English Learner label remains more common than Dual Language Learner or Emerging Bilingual.

² Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015. ESSA increased the length of time former EL students are monitored to ensure they are succeeding without the support of English Language Development courses.

Understanding Current State Guidance

Passed in 2015, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires that California standardize its guidance for EL reclassification across school districts. Because the state encourages local control, each school district has a fair amount of say in designing and implementing its own educational policies.

The California Department of Education (CDE) and the State Board of Education (SBE) provide guidance to encourage local policies that are grounded in research. For example, in July 2017, the State Board of Education, in conjunction with CDE, issued the [California English Learner Roadmap State Board of Education Policy](#). The Roadmap aims to help districts align their accountability plans with guidelines from the State Board of Education. And in July 2019, CDE issued [guidance](#) for educators serving English Learner students with disabilities, including recommendations on setting local policies for reclassifying ELs with disabilities.

California’s Education Code stipulates that schools must use four criteria for reclassification, but only one has been standardized statewide—districts determine how to implement the other three. With the exception of changes for the pandemic (issued July 1, 2020), guidance has been set to the following requirements since September 2019:³

1. Assessment of English language proficiency, using an objective assessment instrument, including, but not limited to, the state test of English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). The ELPAC Overall Performance Level 4 is the statewide standardization English language proficiency criterion. Districts that were unable to administer the ELPAC in 2019–20 used an optional fall testing window through October 2020;
2. Teacher evaluation, including, but not limited to, a review of the student's curriculum mastery;
3. Parent opinion and consultation; and
4. Comparison of student performance in basic skills against an empirically established range of performance in basic skills of English proficient students of the same age. Districts may use the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium test (SBAC) but are not required to and may use local academic assessments. Because the SBAC was not administered in 2019–20, districts may use the most recent SBAC.

The move towards standardization is somewhat challenging because districts are not required to share their reclassification policy with CDE, except for a small sample as part of the Federal Program Monitoring review conducted annually by CDE. Thus, as CDE considers how to further standardize the basic skills requirement (criterion 4 above), the department can benefit from information gathered from a statewide survey on how districts implement the reclassification policy.

Knowing how local policies vary will help standardize all four criteria at the state level. For California to create appropriate statewide standards, we must understand current reclassification policies and their local implementations.

³ [California Department of Education](#). The reclassification criteria are set forth in California Education Code Section 313 and Title 5 California Code of Regulations Section 11303

Controversies around EL designation

Since the US Supreme Court decided the *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) case, schools have been required to ensure that students who are not yet proficient in English receive a meaningful education. This has meant schools must provide additional language supports to ensure it.

To provide for these services, funding follows students who have been designated as English language learners (or ELs) if they change school districts. This funding comes in the form of Title I and Title III federal funding and through California’s per-pupil funding formula (Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) supplemental and concentration grant funding).

There is concern that a designation that generates funding creates an incentive to keep a student in that designation. However, compared to the prior state funding system, the current funding formula reduces this incentive because most EL students are also low-income (approximately 80 percent) and LCFF funding for low-income students also follows them to their districts. Students cannot be double counted for supplemental and concentration grants (i.e., a student who is both low-income and an EL will be counted only once).

Before California implemented the LCFF in 2013–14, a student who was both low-income and an EL would generate funding for their district based on both classifications. In addition, district dashboards include an EL progress indicator—reclassification rates in recent years appear to be increasing somewhat, suggesting that districts are not keeping students classified as ELs in order to keep funding. However, it is possible that the incentive to keep a student in EL status could exist in some settings.

The federal requirement that districts monitor reclassified English Learner students for four years is meant to guard against students being reclassified too soon and ensure that students continue to grow academically after English Language Development courses cease. An important question this research does not address is whether EL designations are valuable, or if there is a better way to support students who are mastering English as they integrate into core instruction. Because funding and required services follow English Learner status, this model is unlikely to change. However, a consistent and standardized statewide reclassification policy, in concert with a robust monitoring policy, should help address concerns about incentives to keep students classified as ELs and help students succeed after reclassification.

Implementing Reclassification Policies around California

Approximately 23 percent of school districts responded to the survey (Table 1), representing 31 percent of the state’s total public K–12 enrollment, and nearly 33 percent of the EL student population.⁴ Responding districts

⁴ The survey was developed in consultation with EL experts and piloted in three large school districts. PPIC conducted a similar survey in 2013 (Hill, Weston, and Hayes). A more complete description of the methods used to validate and distribute the survey is available in [Technical Appendix A](#). A copy of the questions in the survey instrument is in [Technical Appendix B](#).

served higher proportions of English Learner students than districts statewide; therefore, the districts in the survey have slightly more Latino and Asian American students than in California districts in general.⁵ Students receiving free and reduced-price meals are equally represented among responding districts and districts statewide. In all results, we weight the data to match the statewide distribution of districts based on these characteristics.

TABLE 1

The share of English Learner students at responding districts looks similar to all California districts.

	Responding districts	All districts
Enrollment	8,401	6,056
Distribution of district type (%)		
<i>Elementary + middle</i>	38.5	45.2
<i>High/middle + high</i>	11.7	7.7
<i>Unified</i>	49.8	47.1
Percent English Learner	19.9	17.3
Percent free/reduced price meals	56.9	56.8
Distribution of race/ethnicity (%)		
<i>Latino</i>	51.4	45.4
<i>White</i>	28.9	37.3
<i>Asian</i>	8.1	5.2
<i>Black</i>	3.4	3.0
Reclassification rate (%)	12.9	13.2
N	231	1,021

SOURCES: PPIC 2020 Survey of School District Reclassification Policies and CDE Dataquest 2020.

NOTES: Except for district type, entries in the table are averages across districts. The districts responding to our survey are a fairly close match to the state’s 1000-plus school districts. To improve the match, we weight survey responses by predicting the probability of being a respondent district based on district type, enrollment, percent EL, percent receiving free/reduced-price meals, and race/ethnicity. We then weight responses by the inverse of these predicted probabilities, scaling up responses from districts that were underrepresented and scaling down districts that were overrepresented, based on these characteristics. Predicted probabilities are reported in [Technical Appendix Table C1](#).

Forty percent of the survey respondents were directors of EL services or EL coordinators, and an additional 28 percent were superintendents or assistant superintendents (see [Technical Appendix Table C2](#) for the complete list of job titles). More than half of respondents indicated that their district had adopted the English Learner Roadmap (56%).

Criterion 1: English Proficiency

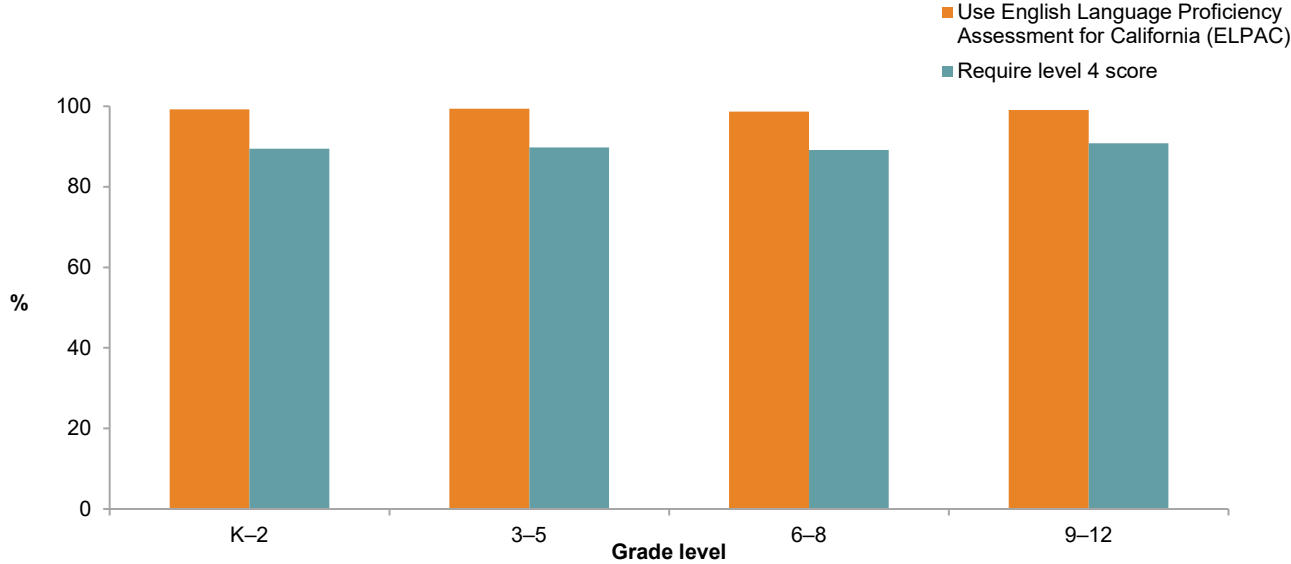
Close to 100 percent of districts use the state’s English proficiency assessment, the ELPAC (Figure 1), to reclassify students at each grade level.⁶ Among districts using the ELPAC, approximately 90 percent at each grade level also require an overall performance level of 4, as required by the state since January 2019. Of the 10 percent of respondents that do not require a performance level of 4, most require a 3, but some districts split the difference, and require an overall score midway between a 3 and 4.

⁵ Latino and Asian students are overrepresented among the EL student population (CDE 2018–19 Summative ELPAC data, by race and ethnicity and 2018–19 enrollment data by race and ethnicity). Approximately 80 percent of California’s EL students speak Spanish at home (Hill 2018).

⁶ The ELPAC has four levels, with the highest (level 4) signaling well-developed oral and written English skills. Level 3 corresponds to moderately developed oral and written English skills. Districts give the Initial ELPAC to all students who speak a language other than English at home when they start in California schools to determine if they should be classified as English Learners. Students who score at overall level 4 are classified as initially fluent, and not as English Learner students. Students who are classified as English Learners at school entry are assessed every year with the Summative ELPAC until they are reclassified.

While most districts follow the state guidance, some require the ELPAC and an additional assessment. For example, 19 percent of districts require the ELPAC *and* an additional assessment to reclassify in grades 3 through 5. These districts are somewhat more likely to have below-average reclassification rates; that is, 24 percent of students reclassified in districts where only the ELPAC is used, but 13 percent do so in districts where an extra measure is also used.

FIGURE 1
 Nearly all districts use the ELPAC to assess English proficiency



SOURCE: PPIC 2020 Survey of School District Reclassification Policies.

NOTE: The districts responding to our survey are a fairly close match to the state’s 1000-plus school districts. To improve the match, we weight survey responses by predicting the probability of being a respondent district based on district type, enrollment, percent EL, percent receiving free/reduced-price meals, and race/ethnicity. We then weight responses by the inverse of these predicted probabilities, scaling up responses from districts that were underrepresented and scaling down districts that were overrepresented, based on these characteristics. Predicted probabilities are reported in [Technical Appendix Table C1](#).

Typically, districts give the Summative ELPAC once a year in the late winter or early spring.⁷ Some districts reclassify students through the year and others just at particular times of the year. All districts rely on the current ELPAC scores until they can administer a new Summative ELPAC.

This year, some school districts were able to administer the 2019–2020 ELPAC to all grade levels in the district (29%) before schools moved to remote instruction. The remaining districts report that no students (27%) or only some grade levels (44%) took the 2019–2020 ELPAC. This means that more than two-thirds of school districts may alter in some way how they assess students.

⁷ Students classified as ELs take Summative ELPACs annually until they are reclassified. The Initial ELPAC is given at school entry to students who speak a language other than English at home in order to classify them as either English fluent or as an English Learner.

When we surveyed school districts in June, July, and early August of 2020, about 40 percent did not yet know how they would assess English proficiency for the year (Table 2). Across grade levels, upwards of 40 percent planned to use last year’s ELPAC scores. One respondent noted:

We are hoping that the state allows us to give the Summative ELPAC [2019–20] in the fall. However, we are waiting for the state budget approval to know if this will be a possibility or not. If it is not a possibility, we will have to use [2018/19] scores since there is no other state approved option. Using 18/19 scores will drastically decrease the number of students who are able to reclassify since the majority of students who scored 4’s in 18/19 also met the other three criteria and have already reclassified.

In July 2020, CDE announced plans to offer waivers to allow school districts to administer the 2019–20 ELPAC through October 2020 after schools reopened in fall 2020 (EdSource 2020). However, they had not yet made the announcement when we launched our survey, nor was it clear that most school districts would be reopening remotely.

CDE has since issued guidance that districts could administer the 2019–20 ELPAC remotely, but with no plans to extend the testing window beyond October 2020.⁸ Students not tested with the 2019–20 ELPAC will wait until districts offer the 2020–21 ELPAC in late winter/early spring 2021 for a new score.

TABLE 2

Many districts that did not administer the 2019–2020 ELPAC plan to use the prior year’s ELPAC scores

	% of districts					N
	Unknown	2018–19 ELPAC	2018–19 ELPAC plus additional assessment	Other	Total	
K–2	44.3	18.4	25.2	12.1	100.0	103
3–5	41.0	18.5	24.4	16.2	100.0	94
6–8	40.3	16.8	26.1	16.7	100.0	90
9–12	41.1	15.8	29.6	13.5	100.0	59

SOURCES: PPIC 2020 Survey of School District Reclassification Policies.

NOTES: Among districts that could not complete 2019–2020 ELPAC administration. The districts responding to our survey are a fairly close match to the state’s 1000-plus school districts. To improve the match, we weight survey responses by predicting the probability of being a respondent district based on district type, enrollment, percent EL, percent receiving free/reduced-price meals, and race/ethnicity. We then weight responses by the inverse of these predicted probabilities, scaling up responses from districts that were underrepresented and scaling down districts that were overrepresented, based on these characteristics. Predicted probabilities are reported in Technical Appendix Table C1.

Criterion 2: Teacher Evaluation

CDE is developing a protocol for teachers to evaluate whether EL students are ready for reclassification (Observation Protocol for Teachers of English Learners or OPTTEL). The pilot, however, was interrupted when COVID-19 closed schools in spring 2020. In the meantime, teachers are using a variety of methods to evaluate students, with grades being the most common (Figure 2).⁹

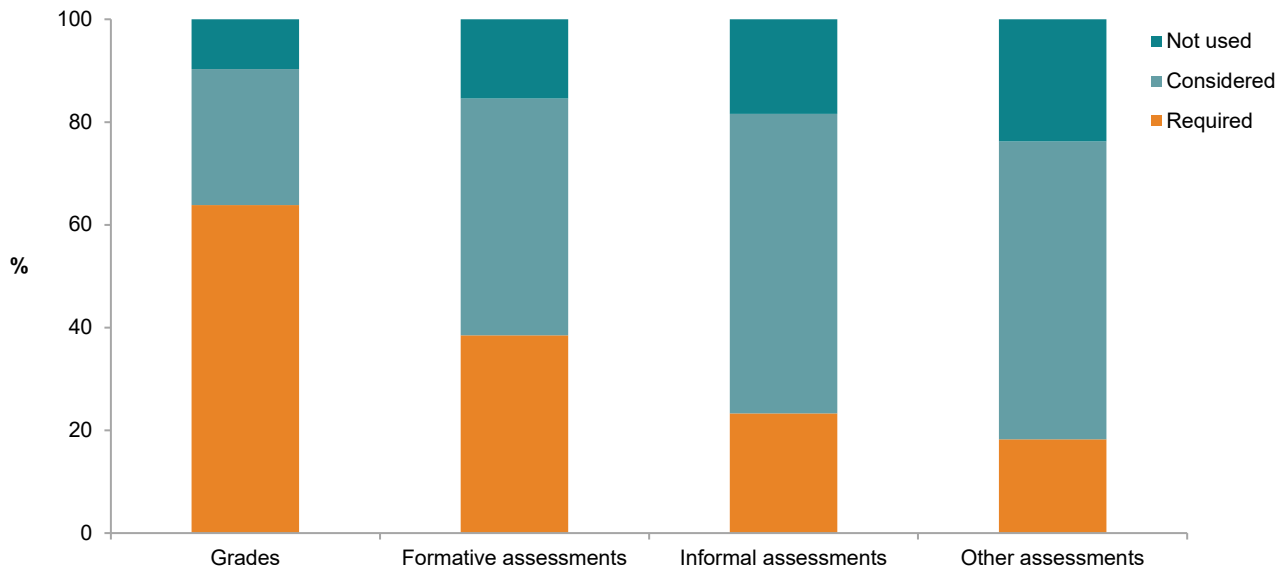
Nearly 40 percent of school districts require at least two of the following elements for reclassification in grades 9–12: grades, formative assessments, informal assessments, and other assessments. Across grade levels and districts, conventions vary for course grading, but the most common survey response to what grade or course mark is required was some form of passing or meeting grade level standards in ELA.

⁸ See the [ELPAC Test Administration Options](#) for further information.

⁹ We show results for districts serving grades 9–12 in the figure, but results were very similar for all grades, even grades K–2.

FIGURE 2

Grades are the most common way for teachers to evaluate EL students' preparation for reclassification



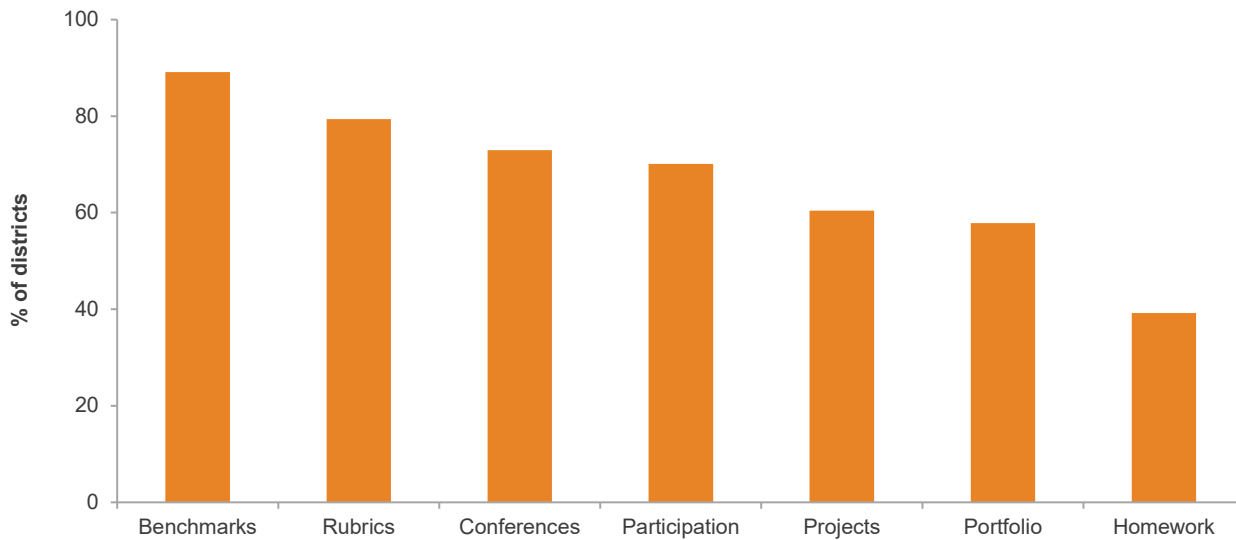
SOURCE: PPIC 2020 Survey of School District Reclassification Policies.

NOTES: Grades 9–12 shown; responses were very similar for other grade levels. The districts responding to our survey are a fairly close match to the state's 1000-plus school districts. To improve the match, we weight survey responses by predicting the probability of being a respondent district based on district type, enrollment, percent EL, percent receiving free/reduced-price meals, and race/ethnicity. We then weight responses by the inverse of these predicted probabilities, scaling up responses from districts that were underrepresented and scaling down districts that were overrepresented, based on these characteristics. Predicted probabilities are reported in [Technical Appendix Table C1](#).

Along with grades and assessments, teachers may consider other factors for evaluating students (Figure 3), and homework is one of the least considered factors. For EL students in high school, portfolios (assembled student work that represents their accomplishments) take on more importance than in elementary or middle school (64% in high school vs. approximately 57% in elementary school and middle school). Rubrics (scoring tools for evaluating student work) and benchmarks (assessments to measure students' progress towards skills, possibly administered throughout the year) are also relatively important.

FIGURE 3

Teachers consider a variety of other factors to make reclassification decisions



SOURCES: PPIC 2020 Survey of School District Reclassification Policies.

NOTES: We report on grades 3–5 in the chart, but other grade levels are fairly similar and are reported in [Technical Appendix Table C3](#). Grades 3–5 are typically the most common grades for reclassification. The districts responding to our survey are a fairly close match to the state’s 1000-plus school districts. To improve the match, we weight survey responses by predicting the probability of being a respondent district based on district type, enrollment, percent EL, percent receiving free/reduced-price meals, and race/ethnicity. We then weight responses by the inverse of these predicted probabilities, scaling up responses from districts that were underrepresented and scaling down districts that were overrepresented, based on these characteristics. Predicted probabilities are reported in [Technical Appendix Table C1](#).

If all of these factors were required for reclassification, they might hold students back. However, if teachers use these elements to demonstrate a student’s readiness even when other criteria show less certainty, then these factors could raise a student’s chances of being reclassified. Districts that require two or more teacher evaluation criteria have lower reclassification rates on average than those that require one or fewer, especially in grades 3–5 and 6–8. What is clear is that currently, the teacher evaluation criterion is far from standardized across school districts.

In light of the spring 2020 school closures, most responding school districts (62%) did not anticipate needing to change their reclassification criterion related to teacher evaluation. Among the 38 percent that expect to adjust teacher evaluation criterion, responses ranged from it was too soon to say, they were waiting on guidance from the state, and they were planning to place more emphasis on teacher recommendations. Changes could include evaluating students remotely (e.g., over Zoom) or instead focusing on participation—rather than performance—in distance learning activities. One district reported that teachers had helped identify students who might be ready to reclassify in the fall, and that those students would be prioritized for testing.

Criterion 3: Parent Consultation

State guidelines promote including parents in decisions about reclassifying students, suggesting that districts should consult parents and seek parents’ opinions about their student’s eligibility. Districts report that they communicate with parents through multiple formats. Ninety-eight percent of districts seek parental feedback, as required by the state. Most often, districts try to inform parents and solicit feedback in-person, and they also employ other means such as letters and phone calls (Table 4).

TABLE 4

Districts use multiple means to inform parents and solicit feedback

	% of districts	
	Parents are informed by:	Parent feedback is solicited by:
In Person	83.7	81.2
Letter	80.1	54.5
Parental signature	78.4	61.4
Phone Call	74.0	70.3
Other	10.7	7.5

SOURCES: PPIC 2020 Survey of School District Reclassification Policies.

NOTES: The districts responding to our survey are a fairly close match to the state’s 1000-plus school districts. To improve the match, we weight survey responses by predicting the probability of being a respondent district based on district type, enrollment, percent EL, percent receiving free/reduced-price meals, and race/ethnicity. We then weight responses by the inverse of these predicted probabilities, scaling up responses from districts that were underrepresented and scaling down districts that were overrepresented, based on these characteristics. Predicted probabilities are reported in [Technical Appendix Table C1](#).

Just 5 percent of responding districts indicated that the *only* way they inform parents is via a letter (not shown). The last time we asked about the role parents play in reclassification (in 2013), only 85 percent of districts reported soliciting parent feedback (Hill et al. 2014).

In our 2013 survey, no district reported that parental opinion and consultation were the most important criteria for reclassification (Hill et al. 2014), but the parental role appears to be a barrier in some cases now. In open-ended responses, some districts indicated that if they cannot reach parents to discuss reclassification, the student cannot be reclassified, whereas other districts said that if efforts to reach parents fail, an eligible student will be reclassified. More guidance from the state about how to handle situations where parents cannot be reached would improve the process.

At one district, the COVID-19 closures this spring made it difficult to reclassify students:

It has been tough to reach some parents during school closure. We have about 40 students eligible for reclassification but cannot change their status due to being unable to reach parents. How do we move forward with these students when we can’t reach parents despite various attempts?

A potential bright spot that arose from the spring 2020 school closures is that many districts were planning to reach out to parents via virtual meetings to consult about reclassification decisions. While most (62%) reported no planned changes to their policies for parent consultation, 38 percent did expect changes to their practices. If teleconferencing becomes an accepted way for families and schools to communicate, more parents may be able to attend parent-teacher conferences or develop stronger connections to schools and teachers. Indeed, a recent report (Williams 2020) identified a few districts where daily or weekly outreach to families of English Learners was a priority during distance learning.

Criterion 4: Basic Skills in English Language Arts

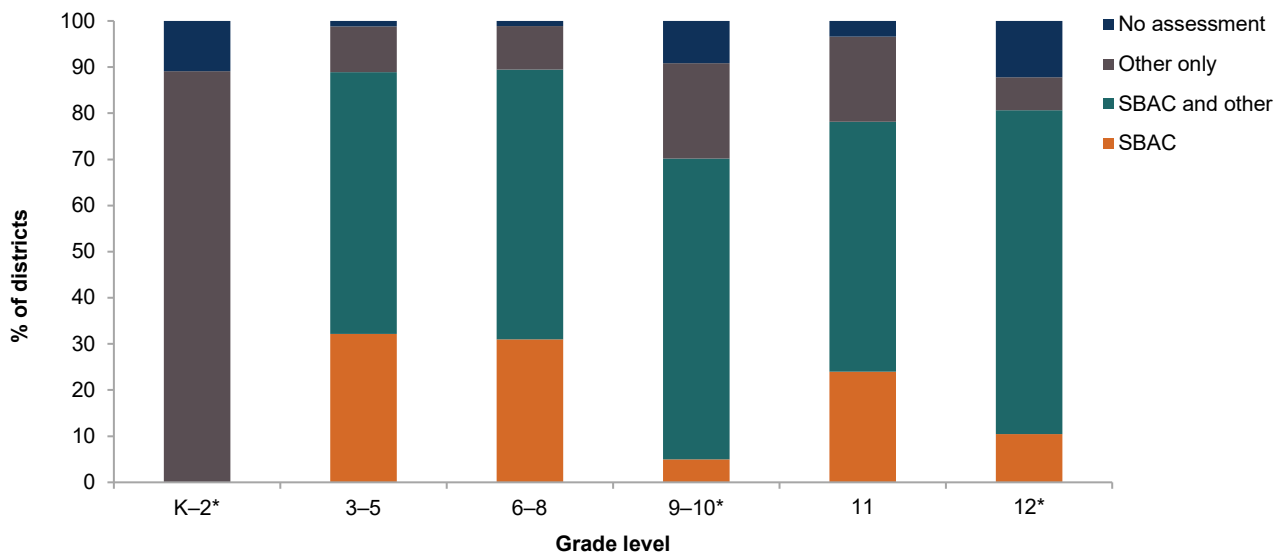
After the state moved from the California Standards Test to the Smarter Balanced Assessment to measure whether California schoolchildren were making progress towards the new curriculum standards, English Learner reclassification policies had to adapt. The old assessment had been a key criterion for reclassification.

Research is currently underway to determine the appropriate level on the SBAC for EL reclassification. The expectation was that students who scored as proficient (level 4) on the ELPAC would also “meet the standard” on the ELA portion of the SBAC. Research demonstrated that most ELs with a performance level 4 on the ELPAC are falling short of meeting the standard for ELA on the SBAC (Linquanti et al. 2018).

While the state is developing its standardized basic skills criterion, the state’s guidance allows districts to use the SBAC or an alternative, and to determine the appropriate cut-point. Our research can help CDE assess how districts are implementing this criterion using the current guidance. Even districts that want to use the SBAC must have alternatives for the grade levels in which it is not administered (e.g., grades K–2, grade 9, grade 10, or grade 12).

The majority of districts are using the SBAC. A minority use *only* the SBAC, even among the grade levels tested (Figure 4), while the majority use the SBAC plus another assessment. Even in the grade levels where the SBAC is not administered, many districts allow for the use of a prior year’s score (e.g., grades 9, 10, and 12). Most districts use the SBAC scores from a prior grade, but also use another assessment for grades 9, 10, and 12. Among districts with early elementary grades K–2, and districts with grade 12, slightly more than 10 percent do not use an assessment at all to measure those students’ progress with respect to basic skills in ELA.

FIGURE 4
Most districts use the SBAC to evaluate basic skills in English Language Arts



SOURCE: PPIC 2020 Survey of School District Reclassification Policies.

NOTES: *SBAC is not administered in grades K–2, 9–10, or 12, but some districts use test results from earlier years. The districts responding to our survey are a fairly close match to the state’s 1000-plus school districts. To improve the match, we weight survey responses by predicting the probability of being a respondent district based on district type, enrollment, percent EL, percent receiving free/reduced-price meals, and race/ethnicity. We then weight responses by the inverse of these predicted probabilities, scaling up responses from districts that were underrepresented and scaling down districts that were overrepresented, based on these characteristics. Predicted probabilities are reported in [Technical Appendix Table C1](#).

For the nearly 90 percent of districts serving K–2 students that use academic assessments, many forms were in use. Most popular were the DIBELS, iReady, NWEA, and STAR early literacy.¹⁰ The ELPAC was mentioned as well, although the ELPAC should be used only to assess English proficiency. Districts frequently mentioned benchmarks and writing samples as academic assessments.

A small number of districts (10) do not reclassify students in grades K–2, either as a policy or because students in those grades rarely score high enough on the ELPAC to be eligible for reclassification. Therefore, these districts

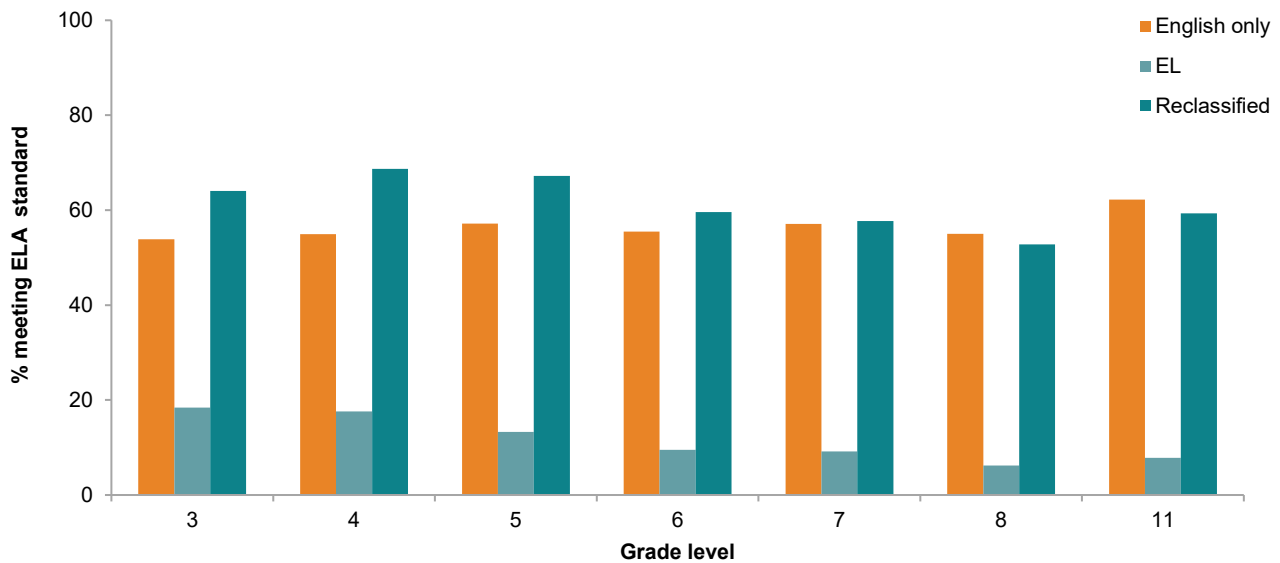
¹⁰ These are all assessments or assessment providers that offer assessments of English language arts for early grades.

have not developed a criterion for ELA basic skills. For grades 9, 10, and 12, many districts relied on a student’s prior year’s SBAC score. However, other assessments, such as the PSAT/SAT, STAR, NWEA, and benchmarks were common.

Among districts that use the SBAC for academic assessment, just over 50 percent require that students must at least “meet the standard” on the assessment to be reclassified in most grade levels (see [Technical Appendix Table C4](#)).¹¹ Most other districts allow scores at “nearly met” or something between nearly met and met. That seems to be a pragmatic approach given that so many students who speak only English at home do not meet the state standard in English language arts (57% overall, with variation by grade, Figure 5). Only 77 percent of students who speak only English at home score at levels of “nearly met” and above.¹² Requiring scores not readily attained by English-only speaking students may be too high of a threshold.

FIGURE 5

Only slightly more than half of students who speak only English at home meet the ELA standard



SOURCE: CDE, 2018–19 SBAC scores.

Another option for setting the cut-point, according to state guidance, is to set it at or above the average of other students at their grade level in order to be reclassified. Perhaps because so many English-only speaking students do not score at the “met” or “nearly met” level on the SBAC, a number of districts report using that option (1 to 4 percent, depending on grade level). This policy means that within a school district, the required score can vary from one school year to the next, depending on the SBAC scores of students who are not ELs. And EL students in high-performing districts will face more rigorous reclassification standards than EL students in low-performing districts.

As the state moves towards making recommendations for standardization, officials will need to consider the fact that districts use a huge range of assessments and benchmarks, especially in grade levels where the SBAC is not

¹¹ We report SBAC score requirements for districts that use only the SBAC and districts that use the SBAC and other assessments.

¹² CDE, 2018–2019 SBAC scores.

administered. However, even in grade levels that require the SBAC for reclassification, most districts use extra assessments, and most of those districts require these additional assessments for reclassification.¹³

A minority of EL students are not assessed for reclassification with the SBAC, mostly in grades K–2. For the other grade levels, districts have had to adjust their plans to reclassify students since the SBAC was not administered in 2019–20.

Monitoring Reclassified Students

After students are reclassified, districts are required to monitor them for several years. Before ESSA passed in 2015, districts had to monitor reclassified EL students for two years. But ESSA extended the monitoring period to four years. Only 22 percent of districts do not monitor for at least four years.

Districts report monitoring through test scores (85%), grades (91%), and courses taken (11%). Among those districts monitoring test scores, 89 percent monitor the SBAC, and among districts monitoring course grades, 98 percent monitor English (65% monitor math, and approximately 44% monitor science and history/social studies). Only 9 percent of districts monitor neither grades nor test scores.

In addition to these metrics, districts also report monitoring attendance (59%), AP/honors enrollment (28%), and extracurricular participation (11%). Given the importance of course-taking for students to graduate from high school and to achieve post-secondary success, perhaps the state should elevate guidance around monitoring how often reclassified students enroll in A–G, honors, and AP courses.

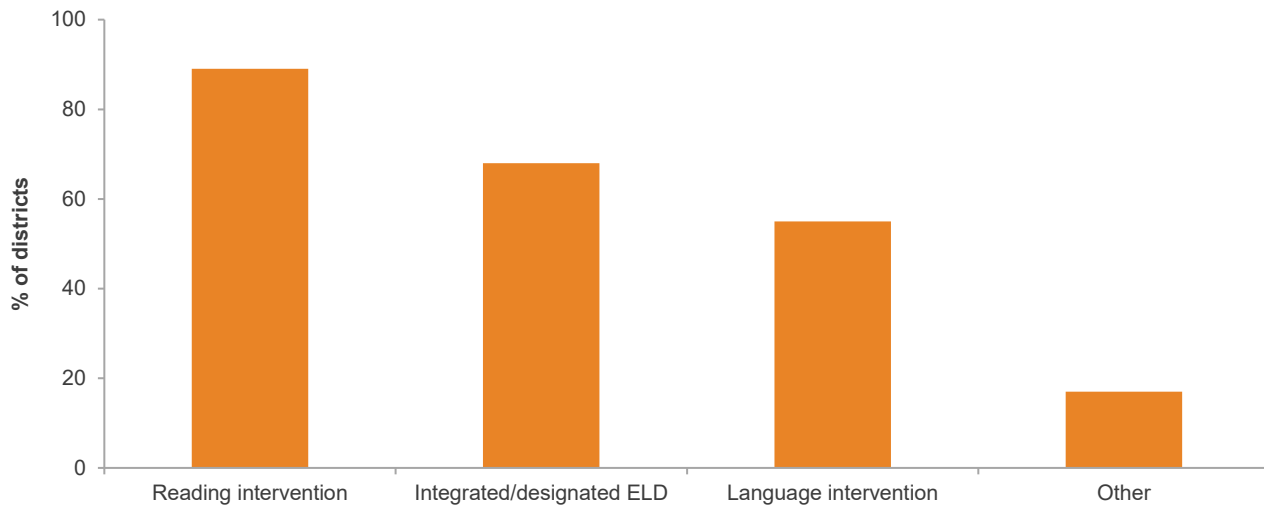
At 98 percent of districts, a teacher will know if they have a reclassified student in their class. Teachers with reclassified students in their classrooms will receive past test scores (72% of districts), past course grades (47% of districts), the reclassification date (87% of districts) and attendance history (26% of districts).

When monitoring reveals that reclassified students need extra support, districts often provide reading and language interventions as well as either integrated or designated English Language Development courses (ELD) (Figure 6). At the 17 percent of districts providing other supports, districts offer supplemental hours such as before/after/Saturday/summer schooling, and tutoring/tutorials. District officials also frequently mention other supports such as credit recovery (ways to make up failed courses), math support, writing support, and counseling.

¹³ In districts serving grades 3–5, for example, 55 percent required the use of the assessment in addition to the SBAC in order for a student to be reclassified.

FIGURE 6

Districts offer reading interventions and Integrated/Designated ELD to monitored students who need extra support.



SOURCE: PPIC 2020 Survey of School District Reclassification Policies.

NOTE: The districts responding to our survey are a fairly close match to the state’s 1000-plus school districts. To improve the match, we weight survey responses by predicting the probability of being a respondent district based on district type, enrollment, percent EL, percent receiving free/reduced-price meals, and race/ethnicity. We then weight responses by the inverse of these predicted probabilities, scaling up responses from districts that were underrepresented and scaling down districts that were overrepresented, based on these characteristics. Predicted probabilities are reported in [Technical Appendix Table C1](#).

Serving English Learner Students with Disabilities

Ninety percent of all school districts are aware of CDE’s [California Practitioners’ Guide for Educating English Learners with Disabilities](#), issued in July 2019. The guide reminds readers that all English Learners with disabilities, even those with severe cognitive disabilities, must have opportunities to be reclassified, and the guide makes recommendations for districts to consider.

Ninety-six percent of school districts report reclassifying EL students with disabilities. When we surveyed districts in 2013, over 90 percent indicated that students with disabilities can be reclassified, but that it depended on the type of disability, ranging from 87 percent of students who are deaf and blind to 95 percent of students with specific learning disabilities (Hill, Weston, and Hayes 2014).

Most EL students with disabilities are able to sit for the ELPAC and for assessments of basic skills in ELA (usually the SBAC). According to state guidance, districts must make alternative assessments available for those students who are unable, because of a disability, to be assessed by the exams used by the district. Fully 72 percent of responding districts have alternative assessments to the ELPAC. And most districts (70%) have an alternative assessment to the SBAC or whatever assessment the district typically uses to evaluate ELA basic skills criteria. Districts that do not have alternative assessments report other ways to reclassify.

Forty-two percent of districts with an alternative assessment listed the Ventura County Comprehensive Alternate Language Proficiency Survey for Students with Moderate-Severe Disabilities (VCCALPS) as their first criterion. A number of other assessments are mentioned, but the next most common alternative was the Alternate Language

Proficiency Instrument (ALPI), or some criteria determined in consultation with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team.

Students with disabilities who cannot take the SBAC are most often assessed with the California Alternative Assessment (CAA) (41%). Responding districts listed a few other assessments, but more often districts used benchmarks, consulted with classroom teachers, and used the IEP goals and IEP team.

Sixty-one percent of districts have planned professional development for staff who work with EL students with disabilities. Of those districts planning professional development, 95 percent indicated that special education teachers would get the training, and 83 percent said that EL teachers would receive it. According to write-in responses to the “other” option, 8 percent of districts will offer this professional development to all teachers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

English Learner students may have been among the most affected by the move to distance learning in spring 2020. Internet and device access has been especially challenging. And the lack of internet access, of translated materials, and of live contact likely impeded efforts by parents of EL students to engage with their children’s schools (Gao and Hill 2020; Williams 2020; PIQE Parent Survey 2020; EdTrust West 2020).

In 2019–2020, districts were not able to administer many of the assessments that usually advanced students through English Language Development coursework and reclassified them. Schools that missed the 2019–20 English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) in spring were able to administer it in fall 2020 (either in person or remotely) to students who met the other three reclassification criteria; approximately 41,000 additional Summative ELPACs were administered in the fall testing window (CDE 2020). Hopefully, districts gained more clarity about where individual EL students need the most assistance.

It is unclear when the SBAC exams will be administered next; shorter versions of the SBAC in ELA and math have been approved for use in 2020-21 (Johnson, 2020), but whether federal waivers may be possible and whether California might apply is not yet certain. Based on our 2020 survey of district reclassification policies, we offer two types of recommendations—those for refining existing criteria and those for the reclassification process more broadly.

Our survey results suggest reclassification criteria could be refined in a few ways:

- Consider additional research that evaluates the effectiveness of the ELPAC as the sole criterion for reclassification. Earlier research assessed the additional value of the ELA basic skills criterion in predicting EL student success and found it adds some, but not much, predictive value (Hill et al. 2014), and many states rely only on English language proficiency assessments for reclassification.
- If the SBAC continues as a reclassification criterion, consider requiring the score that most districts have already chosen: a score of “nearly met” on the ELA portion of the assessment. Given the difficulty of the SBAC—even for students who speak only English at home—this seems like a sensible approach.
- Move towards true standardization. The tension between federal standardization requirements and local control has not been resolved. The vast majority (98%) of districts adhere to policy when standardization guidance is clear, but some districts add their own requirements for meeting English proficiency.
- Leverage teleconferencing technology to involve parents in reclassification decisions and to increase engagement more generally. Districts mentioned challenges in contacting parents during the pandemic but also mentioned using technology to overcome these challenges.

A few other refinements to the reclassification process stood out.

- Make clear to districts that they can and should reclassify eligible K–2 students, as is required by state policy.
- Provide more guidance to districts about preferred alternative reclassification assessment tools and strategies for EL students with disabilities. Most districts are aware of the guidance of serving EL students with special education needs, but not all have well-developed plans and many may need additional resources to develop them.
- Provide more specific monitoring requirements. Seventy-eight percent of districts report monitoring students for the required four years. Districts that have layered on more reclassification requirements might better serve their students by using *only* the state requirements and using the monitoring period to assess if students need additional supports. Districts might be more willing to adopt this model if funding persisted for EL students beyond their reclassification date.

Getting the timing of reclassification right and standardizing reclassification policy across districts will help give our 1.1 million English Learner students the chance to be as prepared for college and career as students who arrive at California’s schools fluent in English.

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