

July 2025

Improving the Reclassification Process for Long-Term English Learners in California

Policy Implications from Research with Nine School Districts Engaged in Reform

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Summary

In 2023, California passed [SB 141](#), which requires school districts to report outcomes for Long-Term English Learners (LTELs), defined as students who have not attained English proficiency within seven years of entering U.S. schools (rather than six years as previously defined). Districts must now report disaggregated data about LTELs on the California School Dashboard ([California School Dashboard, 2024](#)), including key indicators like chronic absenteeism; suspension and graduation rates; college/career success; and English Language Arts, Math, and English Learner (EL) progress.

Since 2017, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center) at Stanford University has conducted research focused on improving the educational outcomes and experiences of multilingual learners¹ (MLLs) within the Stanford-Sequoia K–12 Research Collaborative (Sequoia Collaborative), a partnership that includes a high school district and its eight feeder elementary districts in southern San Mateo County.

Our research, along with prior literature, highlights that multilingual learners who are still labeled as English Learners entering high school are less likely to complete high school—or to do so college-ready—than peers who do reclassify. These findings point to an opportunity to improve the reclassification process for multilingual learners as a way to support their learning and achievement.

¹ We intentionally use the term multilingual learners rather than English learners to describe students so as to highlight their assets rather than define them by a deficit (Martínez, 2018). We use the term “English learner” only when referencing official designations.



In spring 2023, the nine partner districts agreed to key changes that (a) offered more ways for eighth and ninth grade English Learners to demonstrate basic skills for the purpose of reclassification; (b) improved the process for reclassification; and (c) removed administrative hurdles to reclassification.

In this brief, we offer lessons learned about reclassification from research conducted with the Sequoia Collaborative to understand new patterns we might observe in the California School Dashboard in the coming years. We conclude with recommendations based on our research about how districts may prevent students from being designated as LTEL by removing barriers to reclassification.

State Policy Context: English Learner Reclassification

In 2023–24, California's public schools served approximately two million students who were once designated by their school districts as an English Learner (EL). Nearly half (924,460) of those students reached a level of skill in English to be reclassified as fluent ([California Department of Education, 2024](#)).

An EL student is reclassified to **Fluent English Proficient (RFEP)** through a process established by each local education agency, adhering to four criteria listed in the California Education Code, Section 313 ([California Department of Education, 2024](#)):

- English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC)
- Teacher evaluations
- Parent consultations
- Assessment of "basic skills" relative to English Proficient students

Long-Term English Learners face particularly acute risks to their academic success

Our longitudinal research with the nine Collaborative districts, now in its eighth year, has consistently shown that LTELs are vulnerable to low academic outcomes relative to students who reclassify.

Consistent with other recent research about LTEL students, Sequoia Collaborative LTEL students' academic engagement and assessment performance was lower than that of their RFEP or English Only (EO) peers (Table 1). While English Only students showed the highest outcomes, reclassified students in the partner districts outperformed ELs and LTELs on a variety of measures, including higher grade point averages (GPAs) and better attendance rates in 9th grade. Reclassified students also had a lower likelihood of exiting school before 12th grade and a higher likelihood of graduating with the A–G credits necessary for California public university eligibility. Further, we found that EL students in high school had about a 20% lower chance of graduating on time than peers who were reclassified but had the exact same risk indicator profile (i.e., grades, truancy, attendance).

Table 1. High School Outcomes for the Class of 2017

	Average 9th Grade GPA	% Chronically Absent in 9th Grade	% Exiting before 12th Grade	Percent Meeting A–G Requirements
English Only (EO)	3.2	8%	11%	71%
RFEP	2.5	12%	12%	40%
EL < 6 years	2.3	21%	31%	18%
LTEL	2.0	25%	22%	15%

Common barriers prevent many students from reclassifying

Reclassification becomes increasingly unlikely as students move up in grade levels. In our research, up to 63% of students labeled as EL who were not reclassified by the fifth grade, and who remained in the district through eighth grade, became Long-Term English Learners. We also found that in the 2022–23 school year, 25% of LTELs in the partner districts had passed the ELPAC at least once in their academic careers—demonstrating that a sizeable portion of these students have shown readiness to reclassify based on at least one of the four state criteria.

Spurred by this research, from 2021 to 2024, Gardner Center researchers studied the reclassification policy and process implementation by the nine partner districts. During this time, the districts leveraged the research to develop collective agreements to make changes that would enhance timely reclassification for 8th and 9th grade students. Studying the implementation of these changes, we found that all nine districts made at least one of the following changes to their "basic skills" criterion by:

1. Offering multiple options to demonstrate basic skills;

We found that in 2021–22, 64% of LTELs who passed the ELPAC exam were reclassified within a year, indicating that the remaining students either struggled to meet the other criteria or are held back from reclassification by procedural barriers.

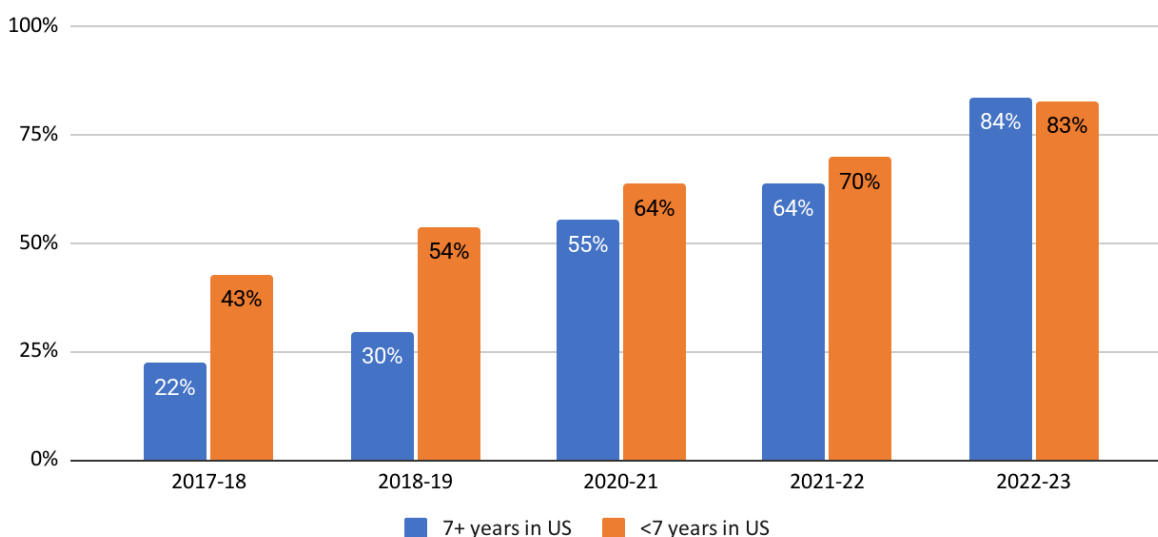
2. Changing the language assessments used to meet the basic skills criteria;
3. Adding course grades as an indicator option;
4. Lowering the cut scores that are required for reclassification on language assessments; and/or
5. Changing the timing or frequency of assessment administration.

Although the districts in the Collaborative have worked to improve their reclassification process, we found that some barriers remain. These challenges included variability in how school staff implemented the adopted changes to the basic skills criterion, some resistance to those adopted changes, and fragmented data systems within districts that hinder staff's timely gathering of indicators needed to make reclassification decisions.

Promising early results

Still, early results show that these changes have contributed to increased reclassification rates, including more equitable opportunities for districts' most vulnerable populations to reclassify. As Figure 1 shows, reclassification rates for LTELs who passed the ELPAC have increased from 22% to 84%, catching up to other students designated as ELs in our partner districts. It is worth noting that the changes benefited both LTEL and students with fewer years designated as EL, improving their reclassification rates and thereby decreasing the number of students who might otherwise become LTEL. According to those we interviewed in the Collaborative districts, this shift was due at least in part to the implementation of the revised basic skills criteria in 2022–23.

Figure 1. Percentage of students who reclassified within a year of passing the ELPAC, by years in US and academic year



Recommendations to improve the reclassification process

The research reveals opportunities to support English learners to achieve better educational outcomes through the process of reclassification. The need is particularly acute before students become LTELs, at which point they become especially at-risk of falling behind academically and reclassification becomes more unlikely. The lessons of the Collaborative's path-breaking work and efforts at collective action may inform other districts as they begin reporting on the status of their LTEL students for the California School Dashboard.

Prioritizing early reclassification

As previously discussed, the longer districts wait to reclassify students, the harder that reclassification becomes as the requirements become increasingly difficult in upper grades. Specifically, the ELPAC assessment remains the same for grades three, four, and five. By fifth grade, EL students who have been in California public schools throughout elementary school are more familiar with the format and content of the ELPAC and may have their best opportunity to pass. Additionally, the broader educational literature tells us that school transitions, including those from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school, are vulnerable moments in some students' educational lives (Benner & Graham, 2009; Douglass et al., 2014). Therefore, prioritizing reclassification prior to these major transitions will likely provide multilingual learners with the best opportunities for reclassifying.

Redefining the basic skills criterion

Districts have wide discretion to define the basic skills criterion in a way that will facilitate reclassification for those designated as ELs. The California statute that defines the basic skills criterion requires the following:

"Comparison of the performance of the pupil in basic skills against an empirically established range of performance in basic skills based upon the performance of English proficient pupils of the same age, which demonstrates whether the pupil is sufficiently proficient in English to participate effectively in a curriculum designed for pupils of the same age whose native language is English."

Our partner districts' experience shows that offering students multiple pathways to meet the basic skills criterion expands opportunity for EL students to demonstrate readiness.

Because the assessments used to meet the basic skills criterion must have an established performance range and be administered to both EL and non-EL students, our partner districts commonly used the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) and/or districtwide benchmark assessments as the evidence for reclassification decisions. However, the stakes for these assessments

are different for native English speakers and EL students, as reclassification decisions hinge on the results only for the latter.

Reconsidering the basic skills criterion through the lens of defining the minimum evidence needed to indicate that EL students' English proficiency is sufficient to access the same coursework as their non-EL peers without additional language supports drove the adoption of a more accessible set of criteria. Our partner districts' experience shows that offering students multiple pathways to meet the basic skills criterion expands opportunity for EL students to demonstrate readiness and helps prevent some students from becoming LTELs.

Streamlining the reclassification process

Districts can also work toward preventing students from becoming LTEL by removing administrative barriers to reclassification. For example, our research suggests that testing as early as possible during the ELPAC window (February to May each academic year) and immediately seeking teacher and parent approval (even before scores are released) has helped educators complete the reclassification process before students move to the next grade. District staff also shared the value of having a streamlined way to efficiently access updated data on course grades and scores from multiple assessments, so they can help flag multilingual learners eligible for reclassification or close to eligibility. These methods of facilitating more timely reclassification allow students the opportunity to enter the new school year free of any bias that may come with carrying the “EL” label and have more ability to schedule courses without needing to take English language development courses.

Facilitating professional conversations to build shared understanding of language development and assessment

Educators we spoke to in the course of our research had differing understandings of what the EL label means and when it is appropriate to reclassify a student, leading to differences in how reclassification criteria were understood and implemented. Refocusing the conversation on reclassification as having the language skills necessary to engage with grade-level curriculum—and setting criteria accordingly rather than requiring ELs and LTELs to reach levels of proficiency that many EO peers do not achieve—makes space for a more equitable and attainable goal for ELs to meet, potentially preventing many from becoming LTELs.

Focus on early literacy for multilingual learners and their families

Years of research points to the importance of family literacy practices on youth's language skills (Fikrat-Wevers et al., 2021). Our research shows particularly strong challenges in passing written language assessments for LTELs and that this gap widens as students get older. The Gardner Center's

earlier work in a full-service community school district showed that parent participation in family engagement programs was linked to improvements in English language development achievement scores for their children (Biag & Castrechini, 2016). Schools and districts do not have to go this alone but can leverage partnerships with community-based organizations that focus on family engagement and literacy to provide opportunities to families.

Conclusion

New state reporting requirements drawing attention to outcomes for Long-Term English Learners opens a window of opportunity for changes to better support these students. Meanwhile, state policy governing EL reclassification offers districts the flexibility to make changes to their processes and policies to make reclassification more attainable and potentially prevent more students from becoming Long-Term English Learners.

However, changes to entrenched practices may require an extended, iterative process to gain the support of all necessary stakeholders. It is important to recognize that the changes noted in this brief unfolded after seven years of research and discussion. Sequoia Collaborative districts are continuing to learn about ways to facilitate more timely reclassification for MLLs and participating in ongoing research to track outcomes for reclassified students.

As our research shows, policy changes are an important beginning, but ongoing attention to communication and the implementation of reforms is necessary to meet their intended goals. We are encouraged that, although the change process has been long, we have learned important lessons that can improve opportunities for MLL students.

Acknowledgements

The Gardner Center would like to acknowledge the Stanford-Sequoia Collaborative school districts that have made this work possible: Belmont-Redwood Shores, Las Lomas, Menlo Park, Portola Valley, Redwood City, Ravenswood City, San Carlos, Sequoia Union High, and Woodside School Districts. We would also like to thank Professor Amado Padilla for his guidance on this work and the generous support of the Stanford Graduate School of Education and California Education Partners. Finally, we thank the Gardner Center staff and students who have contributed to this analysis: Hadar Baharav, Brandon Balzer Carr, Sebastian Castrechini, Amy Gerstein, Trish Hernandez, Laurel Sipes, Brenda Valdes, Julia Vázquez, Charlotte Woo, and Tatiana Zamora.

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