

January 2026

## Stanford-Sequoia K–12 Collaborative

# Who Are Long-Term English Learners and How Can School Districts Support Them?



*Brenda L. Valdes, Sebastian Castrechini*

## Introduction

### Background

The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center) has partnered with the Stanford–Sequoia K–12 Research Collaborative for eight years to examine pathways for improving outcomes for multilingual learners. This research–practice partnership, which comprises nine school districts in San Mateo County and entities across Stanford, has supported changes in local policies and practices related to reclassification and services for English Learner (EL) students. Since 2016, the Collaborative has carried out more than 20 projects focused on multilingual learners, helping to build shared awareness among partners about the importance of addressing EL students’ needs (California Education Partners, n.d.). Within this broader population, Long-Term English Learners (LTELs, or students classified as EL for more than seven years) continue to face particular barriers, especially in meeting written language expectations for reclassification, and these challenges become more pronounced as students progress into higher grades (Castrechini & Sipes, 2025).

Meanwhile, previous research—both from within the Collaborative and in the field more broadly—has documented stark differences in academic outcomes for students identified as English Learners (ELs) compared with their peers. Numerous studies show that EL achievement lags behind that of non-EL

peers on standardized assessments of English Language Arts and Math, and that ELs experience lower high school persistence, graduation, and postsecondary enrollment (Buenrostro & Maxwell-Jolly, 2021; Hakuta et al, 1996; Johnson, 2019; Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000). Beyond achievement, EL students often have less access to native English-speaking peers in elementary school and are more likely to be placed in less rigorous coursework in high school (Thompson, 2017; Umansky, 2016, 2018).

While these findings underscore important challenges, the term English Learner is often treated as a stable and homogeneous category in education research and policy (Suárez-Orozco & Louie, 2016). Yet EL classification is both diverse and dynamic: students enter and exit this status over time, and those classified as EL vary widely in linguistic development, academic preparation, and institutional experience.

In California, identification begins with the Home Language Survey; when a language other than English is indicated, students are given an initial English language proficiency assessment and, if they do not meet the "proficient" threshold, they are classified as ELs. Under this broad EL umbrella, we distinguish between two overarching groups: students classified as EL for fewer than seven years and those classified for seven or more years (LTELs). Among students with fewer than seven years under the EL label, we focus on three subgroups: Newcomers (students enrolled in U.S. schools for fewer than three academic years); Dually Identified ELs (ELs receiving special education services); and ELs without reported disabilities who are not Newcomers. Among students classified as EL for seven or more years, we examine LTELs who are Dually Identified and LTELs without reported disabilities (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2024).

Treating ELs as a single group—or as a simple binary of EL versus non-EL—obscures differences within the subgroups and risks misrepresenting student trajectories (Carnoy & García, 2017). Subgroups within the EL population follow distinct pathways that merit individual attention.

**This study focuses specifically on one of the subgroups, LTELs.** Previous literature describes LTELs as students who are majority U.S.-born and have attended American schools since kindergarten, yet remain classified as ELs (Olsen, 2014; Shin, 2019). As shown in previous work, English Language Proficiency Assessment results reflect that LTELs have strong oral skills, but they struggle with academic literacy and face barriers embedded in reclassification policies that extend beyond language proficiency assessments (Umansky, 2014.; Callahan, 2006).

Research consistently shows that earlier reclassification—most often in elementary school—is linked to greater access to rigorous coursework, higher high school graduation rates, and stronger postsecondary outcomes (Shin, 2018; Johnson, 2019). Remaining in EL status into middle and high

school, as is the case for many LTELs, carries significant academic and social costs. Interviews with former high school students labeled LTEL revealed confusion and frustration at being placed in English Language Development (ELD) courses, despite their bilingualism and years in U.S. schools (Klassen & Chaparro, 2024). At the same time, prolonged classification has been linked to unintended consequences: lower rates of college-preparatory course taking and completion, reduced graduation rates and college enrollment, and experiences of stigma (Callahan et al., 2010; Estrada, 2014; Thompson, 2015; Umansky, 2016; Padilla et al., 2025)

## Research Questions

For the 2024–25 school year, we set out—along with the Collaborative districts—to continue examining the progress and ongoing barriers to reclassifying students identified as EL. Our research for that year was guided by one main research question:

*What are the demographic and academic characteristics of Long-Term English learners (LTELs), and what criteria are common barriers to reclassification for LTELs who do not reclassify?*

This study offers a descriptive portrait of LTELs across our partner districts, namely who LTELs are and the patterns that characterize their schooling histories and language profiles. In this brief, we center LTELs while also comparing their outcomes with those of other EL subgroups to highlight similarities and distinctions across trajectories. Rather than signaling fixed deficits, these descriptors include the contexts in which students in our partner districts are developing English language proficiency. They allow us to foreground students' assets, identify areas for growth, and establish a shared baseline for examining reclassification processes and supports. This focus responds to longstanding concerns in the literature and to district priorities to reduce barriers to reclassification and prevent students from remaining in EL status for extended periods.

## Research Methods

### Data

The analysis draws on 2023–24 administrative data from three districts: Ravenswood City School District and Redwood City School District (which together serve the majority of multilingual students in the elementary grades within the Collaborative) and Sequoia Union High School District, the district to which all K–8 students in the Collaborative transition for secondary schooling. The sample consisted of English Learner (EL;  $n = 4,465$ ) students. Within this group, 1,424 were flagged as Long-Term English Learners (LTELs) in 2024, meaning that they remained classified as EL for seven or more years without

meeting the reclassification criteria before June 30, 2024. These students are the focal group for this analysis.

## Method

Given the large number of students and variables in our dataset, we use descriptive statistics to summarize and compare across student groups. We compare LTELs with ELs who have fewer than seven years of U.S. schooling, and we examine differences for students with and without disabilities. The dataset includes student demographics, English proficiency classifications, and English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) scores, including both overall performance and subscale averages in oral, reading, listening, and writing skills. We also examine student transcripts, including course enrollment information and course grades in 2023–2024.

## Findings

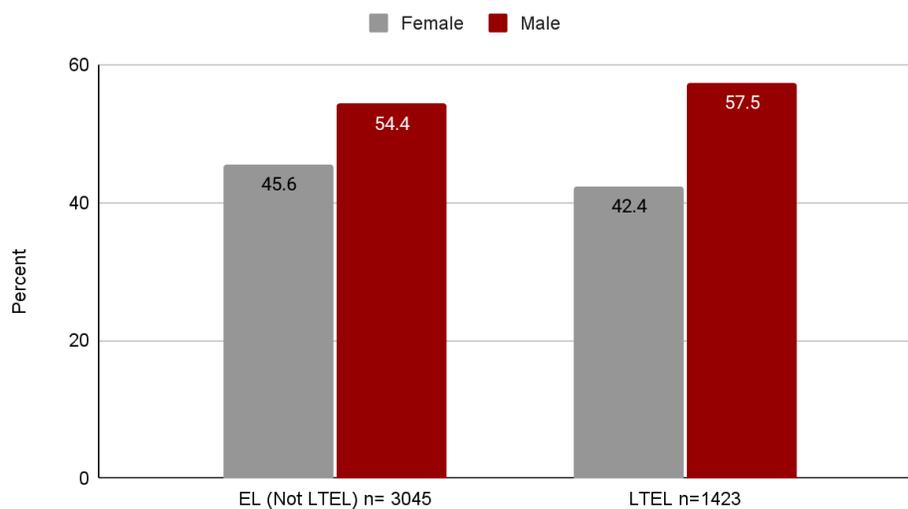
### Profile of LTELs

In the 2023–24 academic year, **1,424 students in our partner districts** were classified as Long-Term English Learners, **representing 31.9% of the EL population.**

### Gender

**Students identified as English learners were majority male, and the difference by gender was more evident within the LTEL subgroup.** As Figure 1 shows, females comprised 45% and males 55% of students identified as EL (but not LTEL). Among LTELs, however, the gender gap was more pronounced; the share of females was 42% compared to 58% for males.

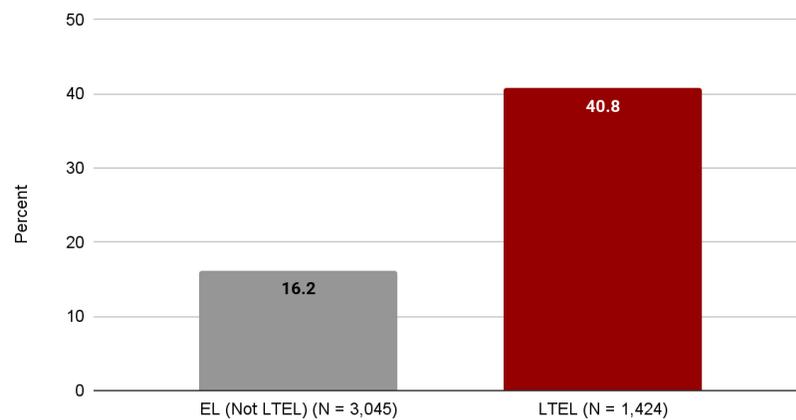
Figure 1. Gender Distribution of English Learners and Long-Term English Learners, 2023–24



**Disability**

**The share of LTELs with an identified disability was much higher compared to other ELs.** Within the LTEL population, about 40% of LTELs were identified with a disability (Figure 2). Also, when examining the distribution of disability types, clear differences emerged. As Table 1 shows, among students identified as EL for less than seven years, the most common classifications were Speech or Language Impairment (42.5%); Specific Learning Disability, such as brain injury, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia (20.7%); and Other Health Impairment (13.2%). In contrast, nearly 60% of LTELs with disabilities were identified with a Specific Learning Disability (58.9%) and Other Health Impairment (19.4%), while only 6.9% were classified with a Speech/Language Impairment.

Figure 2. Share of Students With Disabilities Among English Learners and Long-Term English Learners



**Table 1. Percent distribution of disability types among LTELs and EL-only students with disabilities, 2023–24**

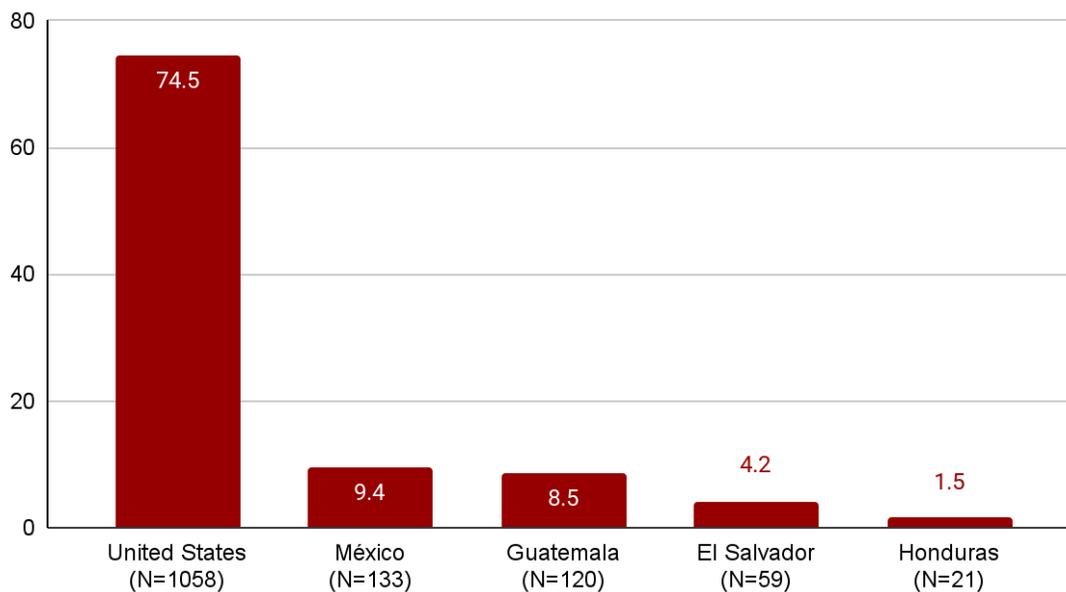
Disability	EL- Not LTEL (n=490)	LTEL (n=581)
Speech or Language Impairment (SLI)	42.5	6.9
Specific Learning Disability (SLD)	20.7	58.9
Other Health Impairment (OHI)	13.2	19.4
Autism (AUT)	12.2	2.8
Intellectual Disability (ID)	5.7	4.3
Emotional Disturbance (ED)	3	6.4
Other	2.2	1.3

**Note:** Values are the percentage of dually-identified students within each subgroup; totals may not equal 100% due to rounding. Other category represents disabilities with 1% or less incidence: Orthopedic Impairment = 1% EL, 0.5% LTEL; Multiple Disabilities = 0.6% EL, 0.2% LTEL; Visual Impairment = 0.4% EL, 0% LTEL; Deaf-Blindness = 0.2% EL, 0.3% LTEL; Traumatic Brain Injury = 0% EL, 0.3% LTEL.

### *Nationality*

**LTEs are disproportionately U.S.-born compared to the broader EL population.** Approximately 46% of all ELs were U.S.-born, while the share among LTEs was substantially higher at 74% (Figure 3). These findings indicate that LTEs are primarily not former newcomers who struggle to attain English proficiency after multiple years in the United States; rather, this group is disproportionately composed of students who have spent most, if not all, of their schooling in U.S. classrooms. Many U.S.-born LTEs are initially classified as English learners in early elementary school, often beginning in kindergarten, and they remain in EL status for seven or more years without reclassification.

Figure 3. Top Five Birth Countries Among Long-Term English Learners, 2023-24



### *Academic Performance for LTEs*

#### *ELPAC*

The English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) is the state-required assessment of English proficiency for students whose primary language is not English. The ELPAC includes an Initial Assessment, used to identify English Learners, and a Summative Assessment, which is administered annually to track students' progress in learning English and determine their proficiency level (California Department of Education, 2025b). The Summative ELPAC yields an overall proficiency score, as well as composite scores for Oral Language and Written Language, and subdomain scores in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In this brief, we focus on the Oral and Written Language composites: **Written Language scores combine the reading and writing subdomains, while Oral**

**Language scores combine speaking and listening.** There are four ELPAC levels: Level 1, Beginning to Develop; Level 2, Somewhat Developed; Level 3, Moderately Developed; and Level 4, Well Developed (California Department of Education, n.d.).

**The largest share of LTELs in 2024 scored at an overall proficiency level of 3, just below the threshold for reclassification (Figure 4).** For the overall score, 42% of LTELs scored at Level 3, followed by 36% at Level 2. A small proportion of LTELs scored an overall of Level 1 (15%) and Level 4 (6%). Beneath the composite, however, performance diverged by domain.

Oral Language scores were comparatively strong (43% Level 3; 33% Level 4) and remained a relative strength when compared with ELs who had not yet become LTEL (see Figure 5). On the other hand, Written Language scores were concentrated at the lower levels (13% Level 3, 1% Level 4). Taken together, the pattern indicates that written language was the principal barrier to reclassification for longer-tenured ELs; lower reading and writing proficiency pulled down the overall composite despite solid oral skills.

Figure 4. Distribution of LTELs Across ELPAC Proficiency Levels (n=1245)

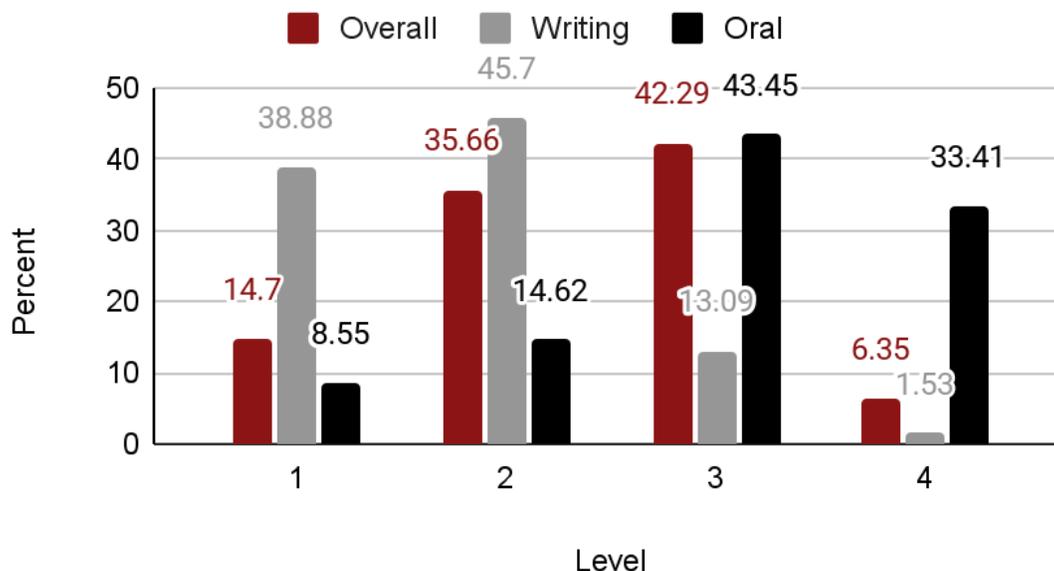
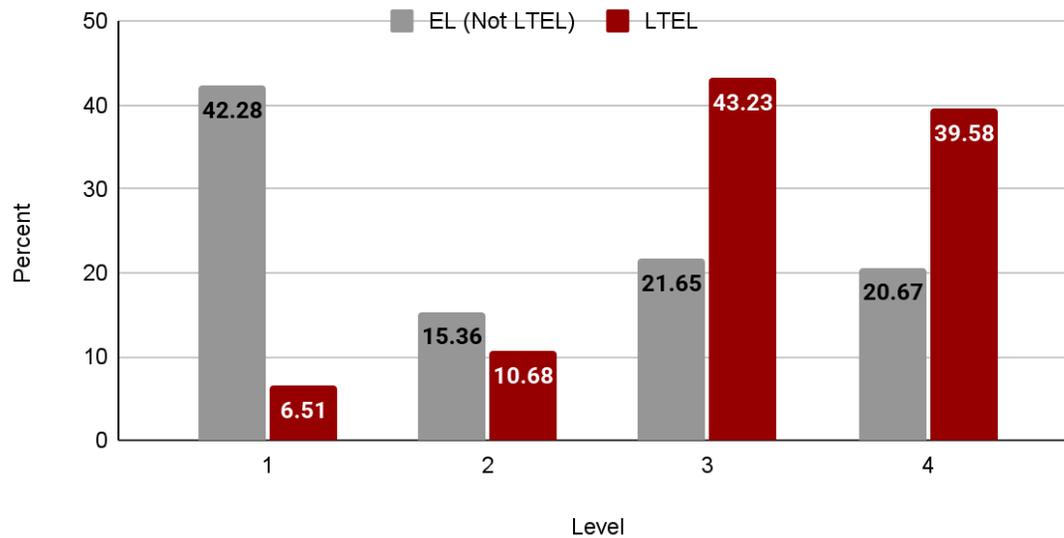


Figure 5: EL (Not LTEL) vs LTEL in Oral Skills in 2024 ELPAC by Level (N=1,394)



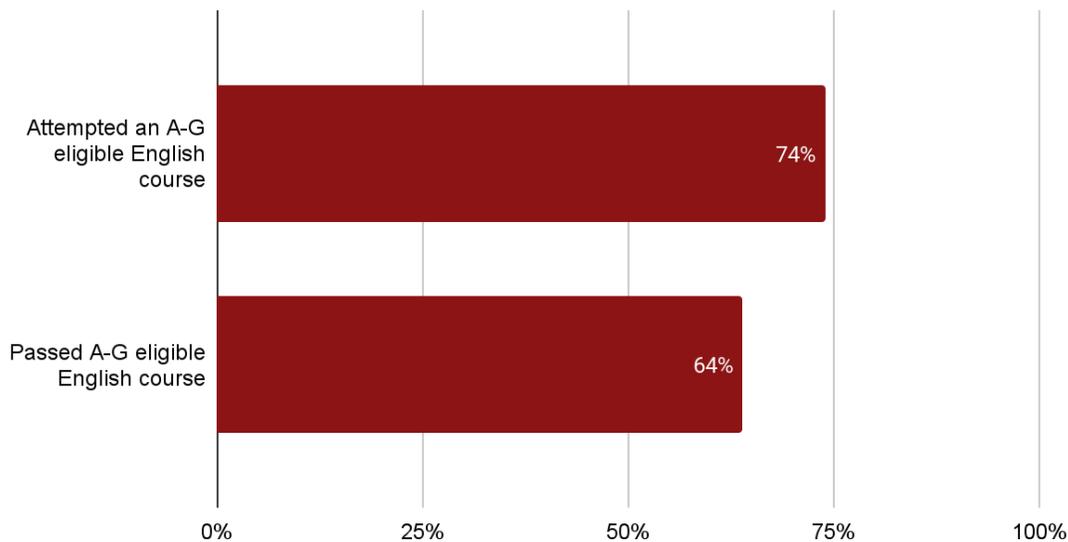
**Dually-identified LTEL's however, were concentrated at lower proficiency levels in both Written Language and Overall performance compared with LTELs without disabilities.** Nearly half (46%) scored at Written Language Level 1, just over one-third (37.01%) scored at Overall Level 2, and roughly one-third (35.97%) scored at Oral Language Level 3, underscoring the need for coordinated EL and special education support.

### *Course grades*

**LTELs are engaging in and succeeding with college-preparatory coursework, demonstrating ongoing language and literacy growth.** Figure 5 provides a more nuanced look at LTELs' academic progress beyond standardized testing, such as ELPAC and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). **Nearly three in four LTELs (74%) enrolled in an A–G-eligible English course during 2023–24, and about two-thirds of those who enrolled (roughly 64%) passed with a C– or better,** the state requirement for earning A–G credit.<sup>1</sup> These figures point to both promise and variation in LTELs' course-taking experiences. Many LTELs are demonstrating meaningful academic progress within their classrooms, even when standardized assessments like the SBAC or ELPAC scores may not fully capture their growth. At the same time, differences in enrollment and completion suggest that opportunities to participate in college-preparatory coursework vary across schools and programs.

<sup>1</sup> In California, the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems require students to complete a sequence of “A–G” college-preparatory courses (in English, math, science, social science, world language, visual/performing arts, and electives) with grades of C or better to be eligible for admission.

Figure 6. Percent of LTELs taking and passing A-G courses, 2023-24  
N=656



## Implications

Our analysis shows that LTELs represent a distinct and heterogeneous group within the broader English Learner population. According to our analysis, LTEL students are not predominantly foreign-born. Although the proportion of students with identified disabilities is higher among LTELs than among other ELs, the majority of LTEL students do not have a disability. LTELs demonstrated steady growth in English proficiency, particularly in oral language, yet many remained just below the reclassification threshold due to lower written language performance. Also, a vast majority of students identified as LTEL participated and succeeded in college-preparatory coursework.

These findings point to several takeaways for schools and districts seeking to strengthen supports and pathways for LTELs, including:

- **Classification and reclassification are not one-size-fits-all processes.** Our analyses show distinct patterns for LTELs relative to other students identified as English learners. These findings, along with prior research, demonstrate the importance of considering the unique needs of subgroups within the EL population, including Newcomers, Dually Identified ELs (EL + disability), and ELs without reported disabilities who are not Newcomers as well as LTELs. Examining these subgroups separately allows us to capture meaningful differences in experiences and needs that would be obscured in more aggregated EL categories. Routine reporting and monitoring of EL subgroups can help district partners and researchers identify

potential inequities, recognize areas of strength, and consider targeted, data-informed solutions that promote more equitable and effective policies

- **LTEs challenge deficit assumptions.** LTEL students are not a “newcomer issue.” The majority within these districts are U.S.-born, and although LTELs include a higher proportion of students with disabilities than short-term ELs, they are **not** predominantly students with disabilities. Also, their strong oral language scores demonstrate advanced language capabilities compared to ELs and dually identified students. Further, LTELs enroll in A–G English courses at high rates—74% in 2023–24—and more than half of those students passed. This indicates that providing opportunities for meaningful engagement and success in college-preparatory coursework can give these students a pathway to college, even if they have not yet met the requirements for reclassification. As such, LTELs demonstrated through course performance that when given the opportunity for access in rigorous coursework, students exceeded expectations.
- **Written language remains a key area for development.** Across all EL subgroups, the written language proficiency domain (reading and writing) continues to lag behind the oral language domain. These results highlight the need for targeted, integrated writing and reading support across content areas. From a response to intervention (RTI) perspective, this includes high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive instruction that intentionally weaves oral language, reading, and writing for all students at the **Tier 1 (universal)** level. At the **Tier 2 (targeted small-group)** level, supplemental interventions can provide additional, time-limited support in specific areas of need. Further, the strong oral language performance observed among LTEL students on the ELPAC indicates that these students bring English language assets that can be leveraged to strengthen written fluency. As districts continue implementation of state-mandated Reading Difficulties Risk Screener in accordance with Education Code (EC) Section 53008 (California Department of Education, 2025a), there is a timely opportunity to better capture early reading challenges for students identified as EL and consider how to address those with some of the same Tier 1 and 2 interventions<sup>2</sup> that benefits native-English speaking students.

Thanks to years of research and partnership, English Learners have become a central priority for school districts in San Mateo County and for the Gardner Center. Collectively, reclassification patterns

---

<sup>2</sup> Tier 1 *universal supports* refer to high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive core instruction and classroom practices provided to **all** students. Tier 2 *targeted small-group supports* refer to supplemental, time-limited interventions delivered in **small groups** to students who demonstrate early signs of difficulty based on screening and progress monitoring, without implying or requiring a special education placement (California Department of Education, 2024).

across districts have improved since the founding of this collaboration. Although these efforts have also benefited Long-Term English Learners, this group continues to face persistent challenges. With this brief, we aim to help contextualize LTELs' experiences, highlight their strengths, and identify areas where additional work and targeted support can provide them with more equitable educational opportunities.



## References

- Buenrostro, M., & Maxwell-Jolly, J. (2021). Renewing our promise: Research and Recommendations to Support California's Long-Term English Learners. Californians Together. [https://californianstogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Renewing\\_Our\\_Promise\\_to\\_LTEs.pdf](https://californianstogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Renewing_Our_Promise_to_LTEs.pdf)
- Callahan, Rebecca M. (2006). The intersection of accountability and language: Can reading intervention replace English language development? *Bilingual Research Journal* 30(1) : 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2006.10162863>
- California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Understanding Summative ELPAC summary reports*. <https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org/elpac/UnderstandingReportsSA>
- California Department of Education. (2025a). *Reading Difficulties Risk Screener Selection Panel (RDRSSP)*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/cc/rd/#background>
- California Department of Education. (2025b). *English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC)*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/ep/>
- California Department of Education. (2024). *Multi-Tiered System of Supports*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/ri/>
- California Education Partners. (n.d.). Stanford-Sequoia K–12 Research Collaborative. <https://www.caedpartners.org/rpp/stanford-sequoia-k-12-research-collaborative/>
- Carnoy, M., & García, E. (2017). Five key trends in U.S. student performance: Progress by Blacks and Hispanics, the takeoff of Asians, the stall of non-English speakers, the persistence of socioeconomic gaps, and the damaging effect of highly segregated schools. Economic Policy Institute. [epi.org/113217](https://www.epi.org/113217)
- Hakuta, K., & McLaughlin, B. (1996). Bilingualism and second language learning: Seven tensions that define the research. In D. C. Berliner & R. C. Calfee (Eds.), *Handbook of Educational Psychology* (pp. 603–621). USA. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1996-98614-017>
- Johnson, A. (2019). The effects of English Learner classification on high school graduation and college attendance. *AERA Open*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858419850801>

- Klassen, C. & Chaparro, S. (2024). A raciolinguistic analysis of the impact of the English Language Proficiency Act on students labeled long-term English learners in Colorado. *Educational Linguistics*, 3(2), 119-147. <https://doi.org/10.1515/eduling-2023-0013>
- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. (2024). *What do we know about dually identified students? An emerging research agenda*. <https://ncela.ed.gov/>
- Olsen, L. (2014). Meeting the unique needs of long-term English language learners. *National Education Association*, 1(1), 1-36. [https://californianstogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/NEA\\_Meeting\\_the\\_Unique\\_Needs\\_of\\_LTEs.pdf](https://californianstogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/NEA_Meeting_the_Unique_Needs_of_LTEs.pdf)
- Padilla, A. M., Chen, X., Swanson, E., & Mercado-Garcia, D. (2025). A 13-year longitudinal study of students who enter kindergarten as English learners: Early vs. late reclassified fluent English learners. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1562699/full>
- Ruiz de Velasco, J., & Fix, M. (2000). Overlooked and underserved: Immigrant students in U.S. secondary schools. The Urban Institute. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED449275.pdf>
- Shin, N. (2018). The effects of the initial English language learner classification on students' later academic outcomes. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 40(2), 175-195. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373717737378>
- Suárez-Orozco, C., & Louie, J. (2016). Transcending the deficit view of immigrant youth: Toward a developmental systems perspective. In N. Cabrera & B. Leyendecker (Eds.), *Handbook on Positive Development of Minority Children and Youth* (pp. 39-53). Springer. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED595620.pdf>
- Thompson, K. D. (2017). English learners' time to reclassify: An analysis. *Educational Policy*, 31(3), 330-363. [DOI:10.1177/0895904815598394](https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904815598394)
- Thacker, A., Dickinson, E., Paulsen, J., Buckland, W., & Watters, C. (2021). Summative English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) Alignment Study Report. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/ep/documents/sumelpacalignmentstudy21.pdf>
- Umansky, I. M. (2016). Leveled and exclusionary tracking: English learners' access to academic content in middle school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(6), 1792-1833. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216675404>

Umansky, I. M. (2018). According to plan? Examining the intended and unintended treatment effects of EL classification in early elementary and the transition to middle school. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 11(4), 588–621. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2018.1490470>

Umansky, I. M., & Reardon, S. F. (2014). Reclassification patterns among Latino English learner students in bilingual, dual immersion, and English immersion classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(5), 879-912. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831214545110>

University of California. (n.d.). Subject requirement (A–G). UC Admissions.

<https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/admission-requirements/first-year-requirements/subject-requirement-a-g.html>

