

# English Learners in California: What the Numbers Say

## ALMOST HALF OF PUBLIC SCHOOL

students in California live in homes where the most frequently spoken language is not English. Of those, about half are designated as “English learners” by their school district. State data make it clear that as a whole the “English learner” group faces particular hurdles to academic success. One key to understanding and addressing the challenge of effectively educating these students is to see beyond the English learner (EL) label to the diversity of students included in this subgroup.

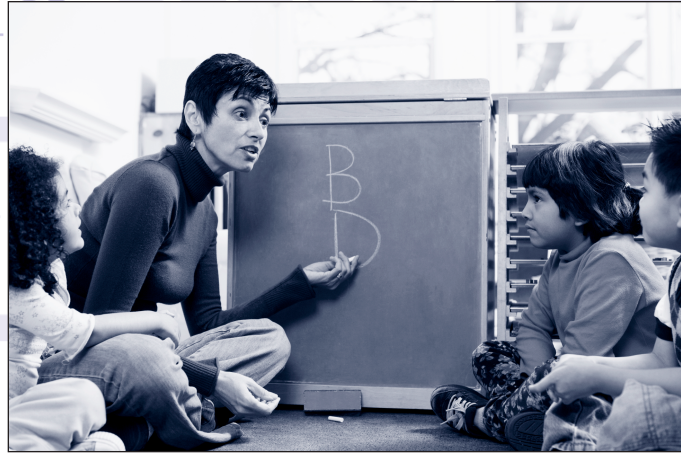
This report describes the state’s English learners with respect to their primary languages, distribution across the grades, and location in California. It also discusses variations in English proficiency and progress toward proficiency, including how it is defined in one county that represents the state’s diversity. Finally, the report considers how well these students are meeting the state’s rigorous academic standards by describing their achievement levels on the California Standards Tests in English language arts and math and on the California High School Exit Exam.

## Who are California’s English learners?

In California, a public K–12 pupil is called an “English learner” if the student’s home or primary language is not English and his or her district has not reclassified the student as “fluent English proficient” based on state test scores and other criteria.

## State law requires that districts identify and assess English learners

A student’s primary language is identified through the Home Language Survey. For



decades the state has required school districts to collect this information on all students with limited English proficiency and report it to the California Department of Education (CDE). Districts generally administer the survey to all parents as part of their new-student registration process. The Home Language Survey asks four questions pertaining to the first language the student learned to speak and the language used most frequently at home. If the parents indicate, or the district learns through further inquiry, that the home language is not English, the student is considered to have a non-English primary language.

Since 2001–02, schools must assess the English proficiency of all students whose primary language is not English using the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). Students who score in the lower three levels (of five) are considered English learners. (CELDT scores and their use are discussed in more detail beginning on page 6.)

## One quarter of the state’s public school students are English learners

Data from 2006–07, the most recent published by CDE, show that California had 6.3 million pupils in grades K–12. Of those, 1.6 million (25%) were considered English learners. This percentage has been very stable

over the last decade, ranging from 24.6% to 25.6%, though the definition of “English learner” has varied somewhat depending partly on what standardized assessments were used.

California’s English learners comprise about one-third of the nation’s ELs, according to 2005–06 data from the National Center for Education Statistics

(NCES). A survey of a few large, diverse states reveals that their definitions of “English learner” appear quite similar, but the specific assessments and criteria used to determine EL status likely differ somewhat.

## California’s ELs are found across all grades and throughout the state

The vast majority of English learners in California are Spanish-speaking; the others speak a wide variety of languages. English learners are only classified as such until their districts redesignate them as fluent English proficient based on performance on state tests, teacher evaluation, and parent consultation. With a significant portion of ELs entering the state’s schools in kindergarten, the early grades have a disproportionate share. The percentages diminish in the later grades as ELs are either reclassified as fluent in English or leave the public school system. Just as English learners are spread unevenly among all grades, they are also spread unevenly throughout the state, though they are found in rural, suburban, and urban areas of California. Data from the state’s 10 largest school districts presented in this report provide more detail regarding variations in how these students are distributed and the mix of primary languages represented.

*California’s English learners speak more than 50 different languages*

CDE reports on 55 individual non-English primary languages plus an “all other non-English languages” category, for a total of 56 categories. According to 2006–07 data, Spanish is the primary language for 85% of ELs, and those students are predominantly of Mexican heritage. The Census Bureau’s 2006 American Community Survey found that among a sample of California children ages 5–18 who speak Spanish at home, 83% were of Mexican heritage, 4% were Salvadoran, 2% were Guatemalan, and the rest had roots in other, primarily Latin American, countries.

**Inside This Report**

**This report does not cover many issues that are important to the education of English learners (ELs).** First, it does not delve into debates about the best curricular or instructional approaches for ELs. Nor does it cover the statistics on a number of issues affecting ELs, such as the qualifications of teachers who work with these students, the condition of their school facilities, or availability of instructional materials. Finally, it does not, except in limited instances, discuss the socioeconomic status of English learners. Rather, as indicated in the topics listed below, this report focuses on who these students are, where they are located in California, and what we know about their academic achievement.

**What Do the Data Indicate About English Acquisition?** .....6

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After Spanish, the most common primary language among California’s ELs is Vietnamese, spoken by 2.2% of English learners. Rounding out the top five are Filipino (consisting of Pilipino or Tagalog, spoken in the Philippines), Cantonese (a Chinese dialect), and Hmong (a group of dialects among an ethnic minority population in China and southeast Asia). Figure I displays data on the primary languages spoken by at least 1% of California’s English learners.

These data have changed somewhat over time. The percentage of Spanish-speaking ELs has increased moderately, causing corresponding decreases in the percentages of the other top languages. Spanish speakers, who comprise 85% of ELs today, constituted 83% in 2001–02 and 80% five years earlier. In addition, slight changes in already small percentages of Filipino, Hmong, and Cantonese speakers have caused their “rankings” to shift somewhat during the last few years, with Filipino growing slightly and Hmong shrinking a little.

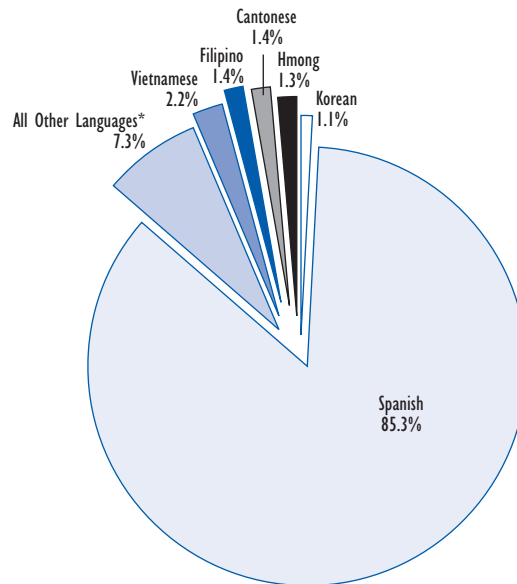
The makeup of English learners in California generally mirrors that of ELs in the United States except that Spanish speakers are a somewhat larger percentage of the whole in California. According to 2002 data, 77% of ELs in the nation speak Spanish. Vietnamese speakers comprise 2.4%, and Hmong, Korean, and Arabic are the third through fifth most common primary languages. (Korean and Arabic are, respectively, the sixth and 10th most common primary languages among California’s ELs.)

*The percentage of English learners decreases as students move through school*

Students are identified as ELs until they achieve district-specified scores on state tests and meet other academic criteria (discussed in detail on pages 6–7). The distribution of ELs across grade levels reflects that students, as they get older, are moved out of the EL category. About 8% of English learners are reclassified as fluent English proficient (RFEP) each year, and the imprecise dropout

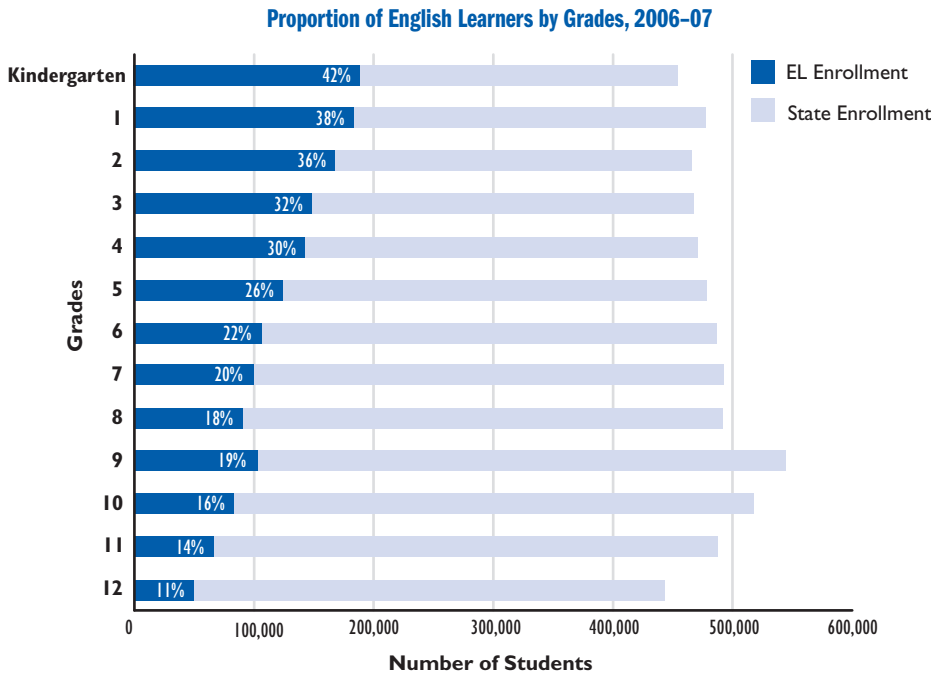
**figure 1 | Spanish is the primary language for 85% of English learners; but among the remaining 15%, a large variety of languages is spoken**

**Primary Languages of English Learners in 2006–07**



\*This includes 49 other CDE-identified languages, which comprise 6.4%, and CDE’s “all other non-English languages” category, which comprises several other languages totaling 0.9%.

**figure 2 | The concentration of English learners decreases as grade levels increase**

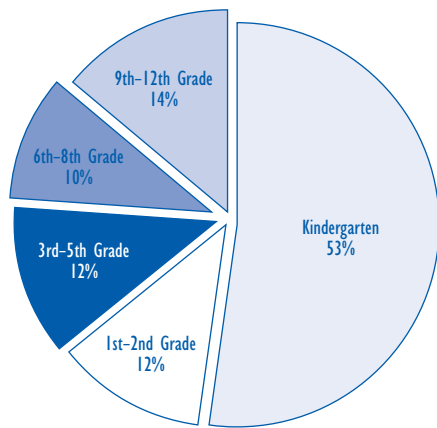


DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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**figure 3 | About half of students whose primary language is not English enter California's public schools in kindergarten**

**Percentages of First-time CELDT Takers in Five Grade Spans in 2006-07**



Note: The percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Students whose primary language is not English must take the CELDT when they first enter California public schools. This chart indicates the distribution of first-time CELDT takers across five grade spans. Data from 2006-07, which are similar to the five prior years, are shown here.

DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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data that the state has indicate that ELs drop out of high school disproportionately. As a result, ELs are not equally distributed across

grades kindergarten through 12. In kindergarten, about 42% of students are ELs, and the percentage generally decreases at each

successive grade until it is 11.3% in grade 12. (See Figure 2.) During the last five years, the concentration of ELs in the lower grades has declined very slightly and in the higher grades has increased very slightly.

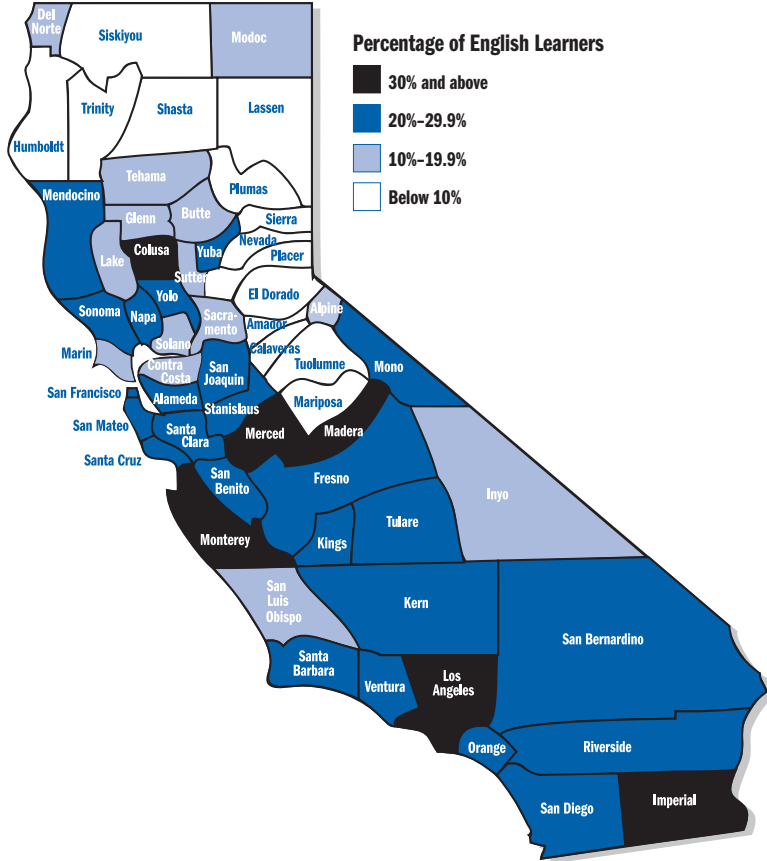
Data on first-time CELDT takers indicate the entry point of students whose primary language is not English. (About 18% of those students are not designated as ELs because of strong CELDT scores.) Since the state began administering the CELDT in 2001-02, about half of the first-time CELDT takers have been in kindergarten, with the remainder spread among the other grades in generally declining percentages with each higher grade. Figure 3 displays the percentages of first-time CELDT takers in five grade spans in 2006-07. The pattern has remained similar since the test was initiated.

**ELs are found throughout the state**

California's EL students defy stereotypes in many ways, including the schools they attend. They are found throughout the state, not just in urban or agricultural areas. In general, English learners are distributed across the major regions of California consistent with the overall distribution of K-12 students, except that they are somewhat over-represented in Los Angeles County. The majority of ELs are in Southern California, but sizable portions live in the San Francisco Bay Area and the most populated counties within the Central Valley. The sparsely populated areas along the mountainous northern and eastern edges of the state have few students and—with the exception of Imperial County in the far south—have few English learners.

The five most populous counties in California are all in the southern part of the state and include Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange, San Bernardino, and Riverside. Together, these counties have about 55% of the state's population and 56% of its schoolchildren. The schools in these counties educate about 59% of the state's English learners. With the exception of the eastern portions of Riverside and San Bernardino counties, this region can be considered urban and suburban.

figure 4 | California's 58 counties have different concentrations of English learners



DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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The five counties have 35 cities of more than 100,000 people, with the largest being Los Angeles. Los Angeles County alone serves 27% of the state's schoolchildren and 32% of its English learners. Of the nearly 500,000 EL students in Los Angeles County, about half attend school in Los Angeles Unified School District.

The state's other large metropolitan area is the San Francisco Bay Area. In the nine counties most often included as part of the region, the schools serve 15% of all K–12 students and about 207,000 EL students, or roughly 13% of English learners in the state. The Bay Area is dominated by its three big cities—Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose—but has a total of 13 cities with more than 100,000 people. For the most part, the rest of the region can be characterized as suburban.

California's Central Valley is much more difficult to fit neatly into an urban,

suburban, or rural category. Vast stretches of the region are agricultural, and in some of these areas the schools serve high percentages of English learners. At the same time, the region houses the state capital and the suburbs that surround it. It also includes Fresno and Bakersfield, which have 470,000 and 312,000 residents, respectively. All told, there are eight cities of more than 100,000 in the region's seven largest counties. Eleven other counties can reasonably be considered part of the Central Valley. Some are suburban, and some are rural and agricultural. Together, the schools in these 18 counties serve 20% of the state's schoolchildren and 19% of its English learners. Sacramento and its surrounding suburbs serve a somewhat smaller number of EL students than their population would predict.

This look at the percentage of the state's EL students in various regions does not make clear the extent to which some counties

have a particularly high or low concentration of EL students compared to the 25% in the state as a whole.

The map in Figure 4 shows the portion of students in each California county who are English learners. Counties with relatively few EL students—including 15 counties with less than 10%—are generally in the north and northeastern parts of the state. In contrast, the six counties that have more than 30% ELs are—with the exception of Los Angeles—generally rural, heavily agricultural counties. In five of these six counties, at least 95% of the ELs speak Spanish. In the sixth county, Merced, 86% of ELs speak Spanish, 9% Hmong, and the rest a variety of languages.

### *Districts and schools also differ in their percentage of English learners*

The section above describes the landscape of the state and each county as a whole; but even within counties, the concentration of ELs and the mix of primary languages can vary substantially.

Figure 5 shows the average percentage of EL students and number of primary languages spoken by ELs for districts and schools. Districts are separated by type: elementary, unified, and high school. Similarly, the data for schools are categorized by school type: elementary, middle, and high. In addition, Figure 5 shows the number of districts and schools with high concentrations of English learners—at least twice the average for the respective type.

Although elementary *grades* have greater percentages of English learners than the higher grades, elementary *districts* do not have the highest average percentage of ELs. Unified districts have on average 20% ELs, which is slightly more than the 19% average for elementary districts. And because unified districts tend to be larger, they typically serve greater numbers of ELs spread over larger attendance areas, which is why they also have the highest average number of primary languages represented.

Although on average elementary districts have only 19% ELs, 109 of the state's 559 elementary districts have at least twice that percentage (38% ELs). In addition, one key statistic that is not apparent in Figure 5 is

**figure 5** | **Percent English Learners and Number of Languages in Districts and Schools in 2006–07**

	Total Statewide Enrollment in Districts/Schools of This Type	Average Percent EL	Average Number of Primary Languages	Number of Districts/Schools with Twice the Average Percentage EL
<b>District Type</b> (976 districts in total)				
Elementary (559 districts)	1,229,048	19%	7	109
Unified (330)	4,355,233	20%	17	33
High (87)	624,215	12%	13	15
<b>School Type*</b> (8,563 schools in total)				
Elementary (5,776 schools)	3,076,548	30%	6	735
Middle (1,354)	1,161,000	20%	6	169
High (1,433)	1,868,062	13%	6	230

\*Excludes alternative and Special Education schools as designated for “adequate yearly progress.”

DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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that the 20 districts with the highest EL percentages in the state are elementary districts in rural counties. Small and isolated elementary districts such as these may struggle to provide the resources—especially qualified teachers—needed to help ELs succeed; but a thorough investigation of this issue is outside the scope of this report.

Among *schools* (as opposed to districts), the data are somewhat predictable, given that English learners are more heavily concentrated in the early grades. Elementary schools have on average higher percentages of ELs than middle schools, which have higher percentages than high schools. (However, differences among school types would not be

as large if students who have been reclassified from EL to fluent English proficient were included.) Across all schools, the average number of primary languages is six.

One noteworthy statistic from the data in Figure 5 is that 735 elementary schools have 60% or more ELs. Similarly, in 230 of the state’s high schools, at least 26% of students are labeled English learners. Those high schools must devote much of their energy to helping students attain fluency in English along with imparting the content called for in the state standards. (The difference between what is required for English proficiency and what is required for mastery of the state’s academic content standards starts out very small in the early elementary grades. It becomes more substantial as a student progresses through the grades into high school.) For all three school types—elementary, middle, and high—schools with twice the average percentage of English learners can be found throughout the state.

**California’s 10 largest districts serve more than one quarter of the state’s ELs**

Combined, the state’s 10 largest districts serve 21% of the state’s students—but 28% of California’s English learners. Several of the individual districts have EL percentages that are greater than the 25% in the state as a whole. (See Figure 6.) For example, Santa Ana Unified’s percentage (54%) is more than double the state proportion. In contrast, some of the 10 largest districts—such as Capistrano Unified with 11% ELs—have lower proportions than the state as a whole. EdSource investigated whether any of these large districts had a substantially disproportionate share of ELs with little or no proficiency in English (as measured by the CELDT) and found none.

These large districts also have many primary languages represented among their English learners. Considering the 55 specific languages that the state reports on, Long Beach Unified has the smallest number (26) and Los Angeles Unified the largest (54).

Although sizable numbers of primary languages are represented within each of the

**figure 6** | **In 2006–07 the state’s 10 largest districts tend to serve high percentages of English learners, and the ELs speak numerous primary languages**

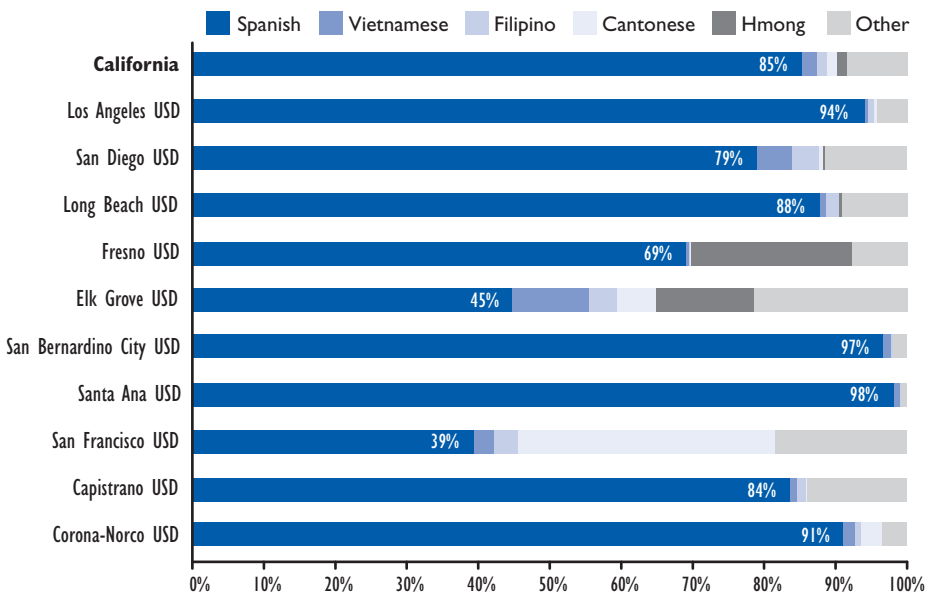
	Enrollment	Number of English Learners	English Learners as a Percentage of District Enrollment	Number of Languages Spoken*
<b>California</b>	<b>6,286,943</b>	<b>1,568,661</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>55</b>
Los Angeles USD	707,626	266,088	38%	54
San Diego USD	131,034	37,264	28%	40
Long Beach USD	90,663	20,975	23%	26
Fresno USD	77,555	22,194	29%	31
Elk Grove USD	61,881	10,728	17%	48
San Bernardino City USD	57,397	19,321	34%	38
Santa Ana USD	57,346	31,189	54%	31
San Francisco USD	56,183	15,461	28%	43
Capistrano USD	51,512	5,694	11%	41
Corona-Norco USD	49,865	8,314	17%	37

\*This column indicates the number of languages spoken among the 55 languages that California reports on. The California Department of Education combines several additional languages in a 56th category called “all other non-English languages.” That category is not part of the figures presented here.

DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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**figure 7** The state's 10 largest school districts have different mixes of primary languages among their English learners



Note: The "other" category in this figure includes all English learners whose primary languages are not Spanish, Vietnamese, Filipino, Cantonese, or Hmong.

DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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10 largest districts, the proportion of each language can vary substantially. For example, Spanish is the primary language for 98% of

ELs in Santa Ana Unified; but in San Francisco Unified, the figure is only 39%. And in Elk Grove Unified, Vietnamese is the primary

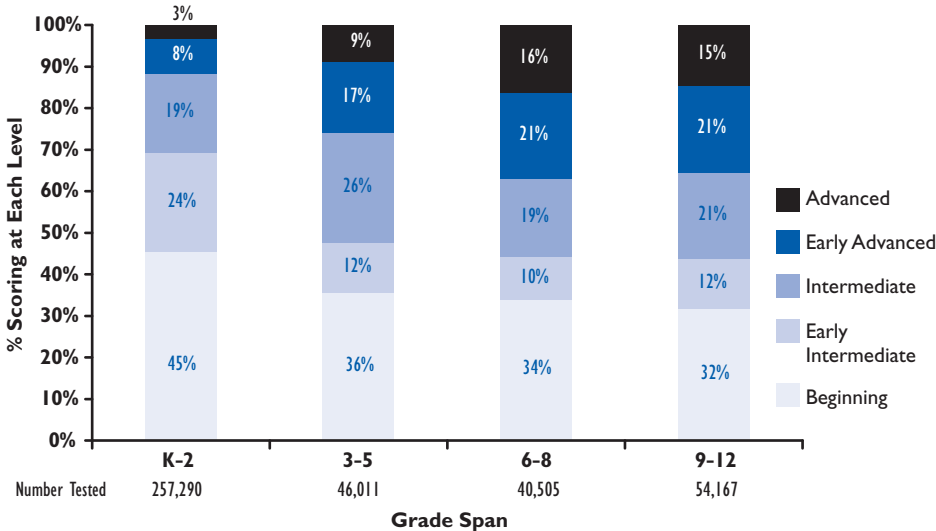
language for 11% of ELs, but only 0.3% in Fresno Unified. Furthermore, some languages that are relatively uncommon statewide have substantial representation in large districts. For example, 7% of ELs in Long Beach speak Khmer (Cambodian), and 4% speak Farsi (Persian) in Capistrano Unified.

Figures 6 and 7 show the percentage of students who are ELs, the number of primary languages represented, and the mix of primary languages in the state as a whole and in these 10 districts. These districts illustrate how variable the distribution of EL students can be in terms of their background, a variability that can be found throughout the state.

**What do the data indicate about English acquisition?**

State law requires that students whose primary language is not English be evaluated for their English proficiency when they enter school. The majority of these newcomers are identified as English learners, and their progress toward, and attainment of, English proficiency are subjects of intense interest. State policies have standardized some measures of this, but the decision about when students are officially removed from EL status still ultimately rests with local districts.

**figure 8** Overall scores on the 2006-07 Initial CELDT vary by grade span



Note: This chart displays only overall CELDT scores. It does not show the percentage of students who achieved the combination of overall and domain scores needed to be considered "initially fluent English proficient" (IFEP). Generally, the percentage of CELDT takers with scores qualifying them as IFEP is about one to three points lower than the percentage with overall scores in the top two levels. In addition, the percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

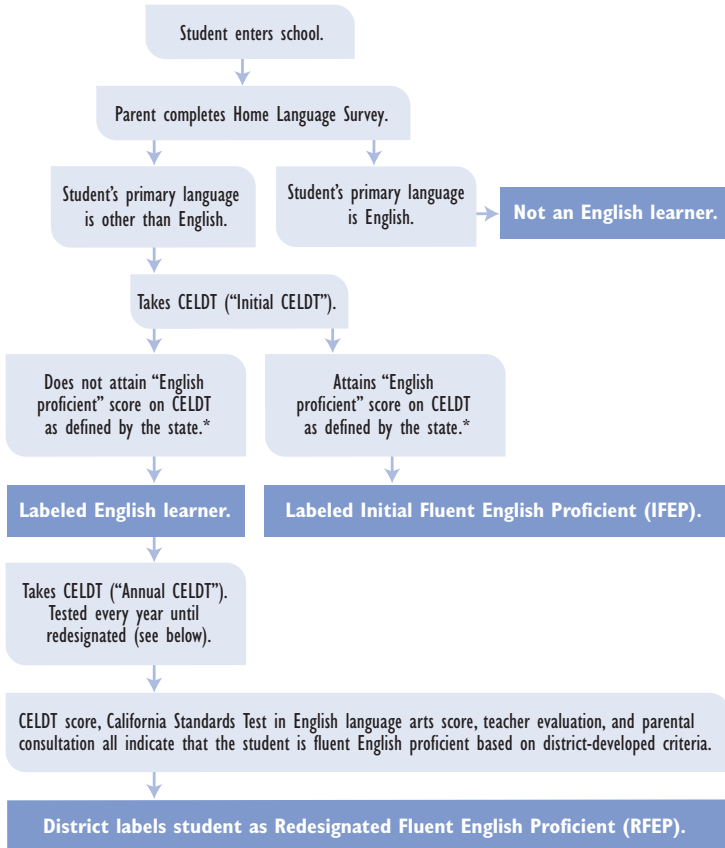
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*The state uses the CELDT as the measure of English proficiency*

Students whose primary language is not English take the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) within 30 days of their initial enrollment in the state's public schools. According to CDE, the CELDT is designed to measure English proficiency rather than performance on the state's academic content standards. Depending on the results, a student is identified as "initially fluent English proficient" (IFEP) or as an English learner. When the test is used in this way, it is referred to as the "Initial CELDT." (See the flow chart on page 7.)

Students who are identified as ELs must take the CELDT in subsequent years during the summer/fall assessment window (July 1–Oct. 31) until they have met all district-specific criteria (described later) to be

## English Learner Designation/Redesignation Process



\* The state defines “English proficient” on the CELDT as the overall score of early advanced or advanced, with no score below intermediate in listening/speaking (grades K-12) and reading and writing (grades 2-12).

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reclassified as fluent English proficient (RFEP). When students take the CELDT after having been identified as ELs, the test is referred to as the “Annual CELDT.”

The CELDT tests different material at each of four grade spans (kindergarten through grade two, grades 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12). All four versions are aligned with the relevant grade-level English language development (ELD) standards, according to CDE.

The CELDT assesses four skill areas, referred to as “domains.” The domains assessed vary according to the student’s grade. In kindergarten and first grade, the CELDT assesses only listening and speaking. The tests for students in grades two through 12 add reading and writing. Students receive an overall score and scores for each of the domains.

Student performance is rated using five performance levels:

1. beginning,
2. early intermediate,
3. intermediate,
4. early advanced, and
5. advanced.

A combination of an overall score of early advanced or advanced and domain scores of at least intermediate is referred to as an “English proficient” score. Students who achieve the “English proficient” score on the Initial CELDT are designated as initially fluent English proficient (IFEP), and students who do not achieve that score are identified as English learners.

An EL’s Annual CELDT scores are one of at least four criteria districts must use when considering students for reclassification. The State Board of Education recommends that districts use Annual CELDT scores as the first criterion and that students achieving the

“English proficient” score should move on to the next recommended criterion—results on the California Standards Test in English language arts (CST ELA).

The state recommends that students scoring at least “basic” on the CST ELA be considered for reclassification. (There are five performance levels: advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic.) However, districts set their own minimum score. Other criteria for student redesignation include teacher evaluation (which can be based on a number of factors such as grades and district assessments) and consultation with parents. Districts may add other criteria at their discretion.

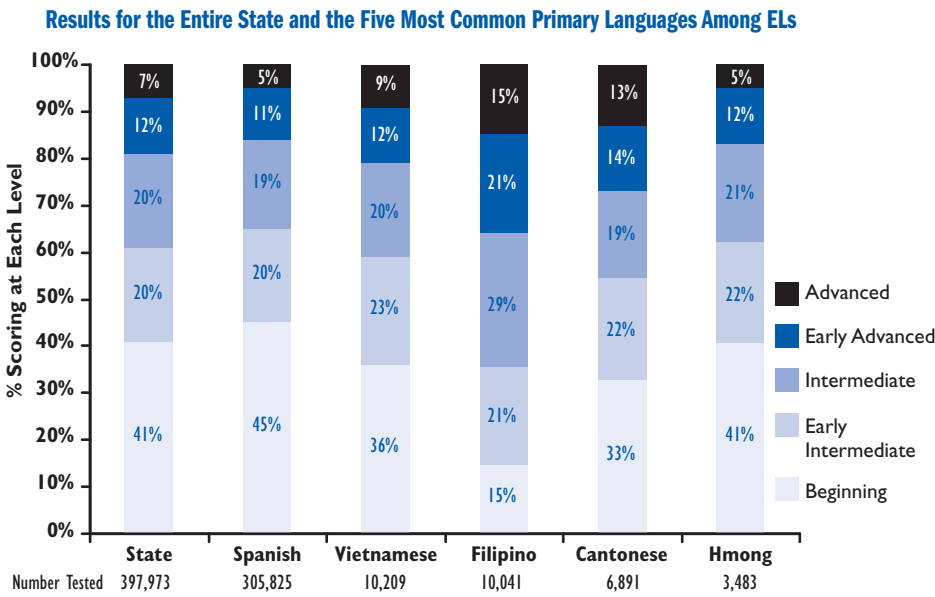
### About 1.7 million students took the CELDT in 2006–07

Across the state in 2006–07, about 398,000 students who were new to California’s schools and had a home language other than English took the CELDT for initial identification. In addition, slightly more than 1.3 million continuing students who had been classified at some point in the past as English learners took the Annual CELDT.

### Most students entering California’s schools with primary languages other than English are identified as English learners

Students with primary languages other than English enter the state’s schools with differing degrees of English proficiency. In 2006–07 more than 326,000 (82%) of the 398,000 newcomers did not score “English proficient” on the Initial CELDT and were classified as English learners. The other 71,000 (18%) hit the mark and were considered initially fluent English proficient (IFEP). As Figure 8 on page 6 illustrates, results vary somewhat by grade span, with younger students generally not doing as well. The figure displays only overall scores and not domain scores, so it does not precisely indicate the percentage of students who qualified as IFEP. Note also that the CELDT underwent major changes in 2006–07 that led to lower scores as compared to prior years. (For more on the changes and their effect on scores, see the box on page 9.)

figure 9 | Overall scores on the 2006–07 Initial CELDT differ by primary language



Note: The percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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**Students with different primary languages enter school with different levels of English proficiency**

Initial CELDT results vary not only by grade span, but also by primary language.

For example, Filipino speakers tend to have substantially higher English proficiency levels when they enter school than students with other primary languages. In 2006–07, 36% of Filipino speakers had overall scores

in the advanced or early advanced range, but only 16% of Spanish speakers scored at those levels.

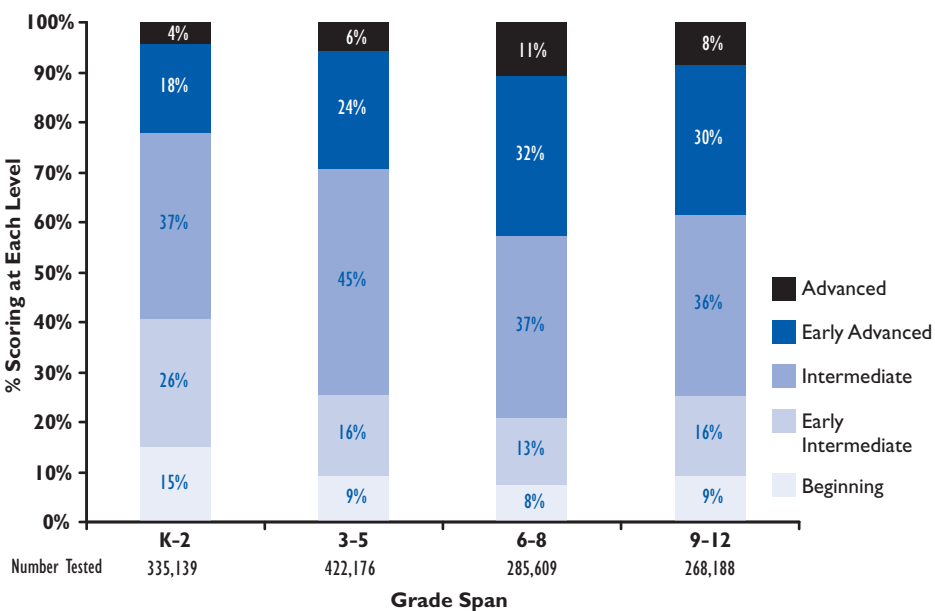
The results for students who speak Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Hmong fell somewhere in between those of Filipino- and Spanish-speaking students. Figure 9 shows the results for the state as a whole and the top five primary languages from 2006–07, which are similar to the prior year’s results in terms of the relative success of these major language groups.

**Among ELs taking the Annual CELDT in 2006–07, 29% scored “English proficient”**

In contrast to Initial CELDT takers, who are new to California’s schools, students who take the Annual CELDT have generally been in the state’s public education system for at least one—and in most cases—several years. Acquiring English proficiency is influenced by many factors, such as parent education level and income, age of entry to the United States, number of years in this country, Special Education status, mobility rates, whether English was taught as a second language in their country of origin, and whether they are literate in their native language. Although publicly available data do not allow for an examination of ELs’ English proficiency by any of these factors, a snapshot of the group’s performance broken down by grade span is possible.

In 2006–07, 381,000 (29%) of Annual CELDT takers scored “English proficient.” Figure 10 shows the overall scores from the 2006–07 Annual CELDT. As compared to the Initial CELDT results, the percentages scoring at the beginning and advanced levels are generally smaller, and the portions scoring at the middle three levels are larger. The students who take the Annual CELDT have typically been in the United States for at least a year and did not qualify as IFEP in the prior year. The extra year in this country can help some students score above “basic,” but those who lack initial proficiency tend to need several years of English instruction before they can score advanced on the Annual CELDT.

figure 10 | Overall scores on the 2006–07 Annual CELDT vary by grade span



Note: The percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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Much like the Initial CELDT results, the Annual CELDT scores in 2006–07 were generally lower than in previous years because of changes to the CELDT in 2006–07. (See the box on this page.)

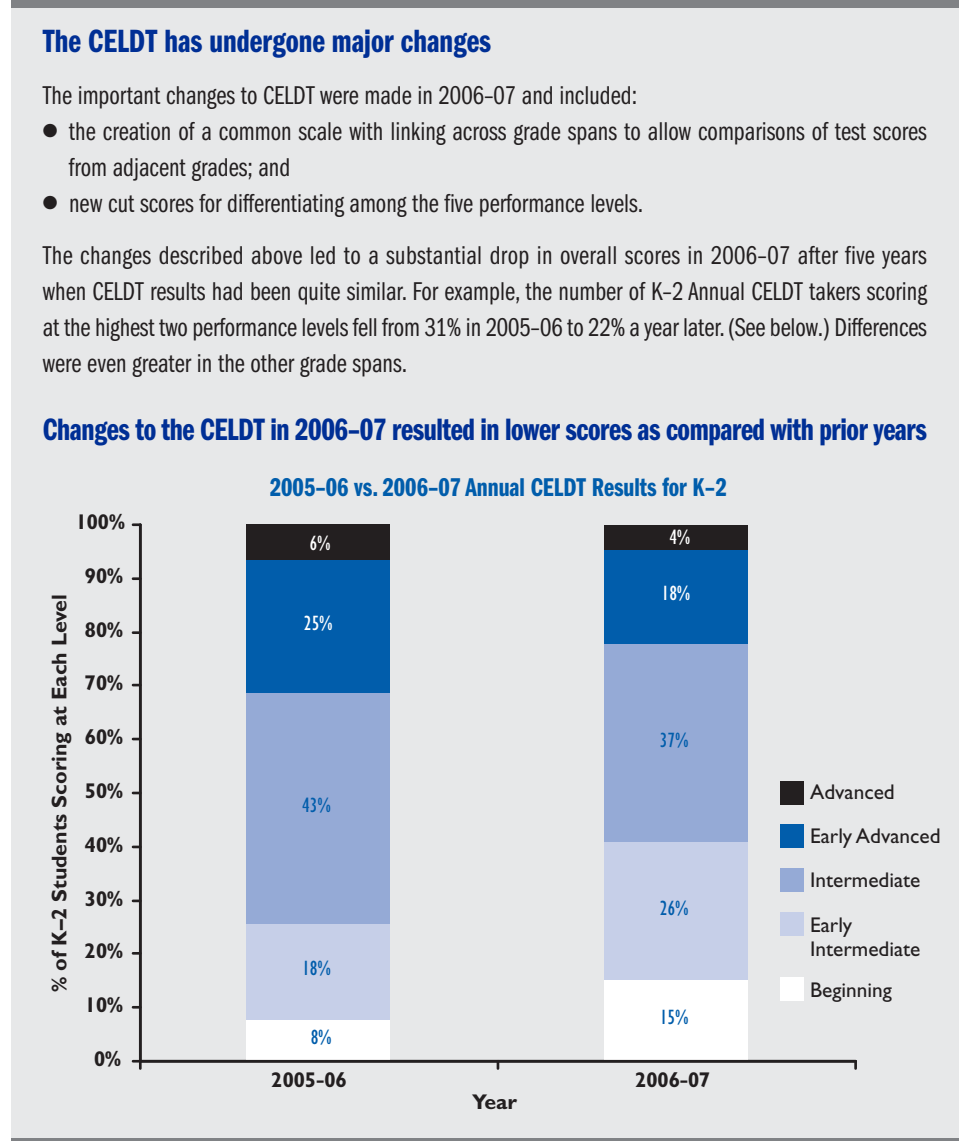
### *The state monitors how well California's local agencies help ELs progress toward and attain English proficiency*

The Initial and Annual CELDT results provide important information about students' English proficiency at a point in time, but what is perhaps more important is their progress. Unlike other state assessment data, individual students' CELDT results are tracked from one year to the next. This allows the state to measure growth. The rate of improvement in the state as a whole and the variation in improvement among local agencies are important for assessing school and district success in addressing the challenge of effectively educating ELs.

Measuring growth also allows the state to satisfy the funding conditions of Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This federal program provides supplemental funding to states to help ELs and immigrant students attain English proficiency and meet the state's academic content standards. The legislation requires states to monitor the performance of local entities receiving Title III funding. Specifically, Title III measures performance against three annual measurable achievement objectives (AMAOs).

AMAO 1 calculates the percentage of English learners who make annual progress toward English proficiency, as measured by their performance on the CELDT. Students at different proficiency levels have different growth targets: those performing at the beginning, early intermediate, and intermediate levels overall are expected to gain one proficiency level annually; those at the early advanced or advanced level the prior year are expected to score "English proficient" on CELDT; and those already scoring "English proficient" are expected to score similarly until they are reclassified.

AMAO 2 calculates the percentage of English learners who score "English proficient" out of those students who could be



DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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reasonably expected to, based on their previous CELDT score and how long they have been in the United States. (For more details, see the box on page 10.)

AMAO 3 is the same as the "annual measurable objective" that is part of making "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) under Title I of NCLB. Schools are monitored for ELs' participation in and performance on a test covering English language arts content standards. (Performance on this measure is discussed on pages 11–13.)

Figure 11 on page 10 indicates the specific targets for AMAOs 1 and 2 for 2003–04 through 2005–06 and the percentage of local entities (county offices of

education, specified charter schools, districts, and consortia of districts) receiving Title III funds that met those objectives. In 2005–06, the most recent year for which AMAO research databases are available, local agencies could meet the first objective if slightly more than half of their ELs made the desired annual progress. They could meet the second objective if about one-third of ELs attained English proficiency. Most agencies were able to meet those performance objectives in 2005–06: 86% met the first objective, and 87% met the second.

The data described in Figure 11 are useful for understanding the portion of districts meeting performance targets, but they do not

**figure 11 | Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives 1 and 2 and the Percentage of Local Agencies Meeting Those Objectives, 2003–04 through 2005–06**

Year	AMA O 1		AMA O 2	
	Requirement: Percent of Annual CELDT Takers Expected to Meet Annual Growth Target for Learning English	Percent of Agencies Meeting AMA O 1	Requirement: Percent of Annual CELDT Takers Expected to Attain English Proficiency	Percent of Agencies Meeting AMA O 2
2005–06	52.0%	86%	31.4%	87%
2004–05	51.5%	85%	30.7%	84%
2003–04	51.0%	90%	30.0%	83%

DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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### How California Defines an English Learner as Being Within Reach of English Proficiency

To meet federal Title III requirements for measuring English learners' progress in English proficiency, California counts ELs as being within reach of proficiency in a given year if they were one of the following:

- At the intermediate level overall in the prior year;
- At the early advanced or advanced level overall but not English proficient because of a lower-than-intermediate rating in one of the domains in the prior year; or
- At the beginning or early intermediate level overall in the prior year and were first enrolled in U.S. schools four or more years ago.

indicate how many students across the state are progressing toward or attaining “English proficient” scores on the CELDT.

CDE research files indicate that of 1.28 million students counted in calculations of AMA O 1 in 2005–06, 62% met their annual growth targets. With regard to AMA O 2, 609,000 students were deemed within reach of English proficiency in that same year, and 40% of them attained proficiency. Both of those percentages are similar to the results of the prior two years.

### Progress toward English proficiency varies by primary language and socioeconomic status

Not only do students with different primary languages vary in English proficiency when they enter school, but they also progress at different rates. A study of 2002 and 2003 data by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) found that differences in the improvement of CELDT scores varied by ELs' primary language. However, the study showed that

students varied not only in their primary language, but also in socioeconomic status. Overall, 85% of California's English learners are economically disadvantaged (as measured by participation in the free and reduced-price meals program) compared with 41% of the non-EL population, according to a 2007 report by the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO).

Using CDE data, the PPIC authors reported that students who spoke Korean, Mandarin, and Russian had the highest rates of CELDT growth. Using 2000 census data, the authors noted that students from these language groups also had relatively well-educated parents. The parent education level and rate of growth for Filipino-speaking ELs were in the mid-range (though, as mentioned earlier, Filipinos are the most likely among the major primary language groups to test *initially* fluent English proficient). Hmong- and Khmer-speaking students, who overall had parents with the lowest education rates, showed the lowest

rates of CELDT growth. Similarly, parents of Spanish speakers tend to have less education and higher rates of poverty, and Spanish speakers' gains on the CELDT were below the gains of speakers of most other languages. According to Census data reported in the study, parents of Spanish-speaking ELs had on average 9.6 years of education, which was more than Hmong- (6.1 years) and Khmer-speaking (7.3 years) parents, but less than, for example, Mandarin-speaking parents (16.2 years).

### Reclassification rates: An illustrative focus on Sacramento County

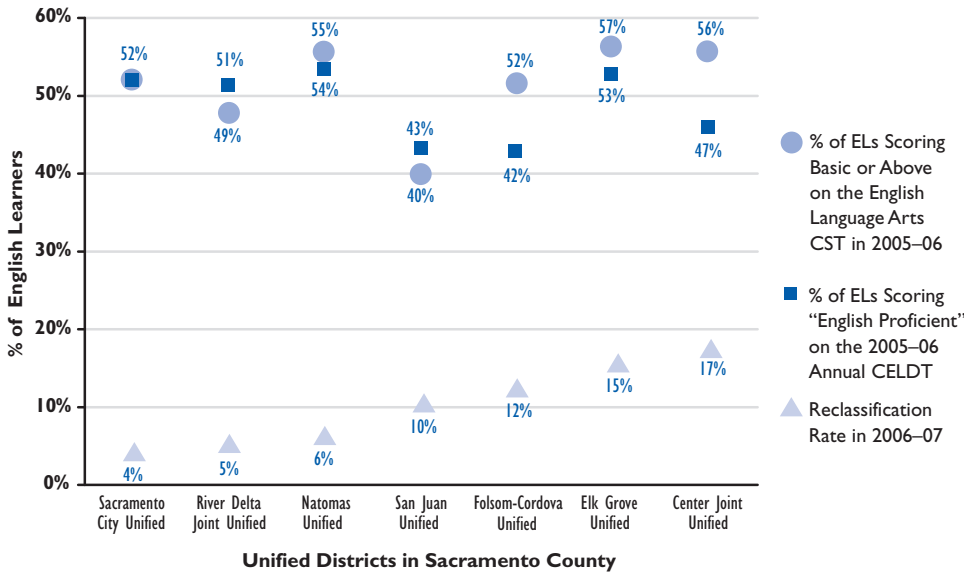
Regardless of English learners' starting points or rates of progress, one important goal is for them to be redesignated as fluent English proficient. Once a student has attained proficiency according to state guidelines and district policy, the district is supposed to redesignate that student. As mentioned earlier, districts vary in their redesignation policies and practices.

A multitude of variables is at play when examining districts' reclassification rates, which makes a statewide analysis difficult. Limiting the analysis to one county reduces some of the variables and makes an investigation more manageable. EdSource chose to focus on Sacramento County for several reasons:

- its students represent a wide variety of primary languages;
- it has urban, suburban, and rural locales;
- it has three of the state's 20 largest districts but also has some small- and medium-sized districts; and
- the vast majority of its students attend unified districts, which allows for “apples to apples” comparisons across most of the county.

Focusing on the unified districts of Sacramento County, EdSource compared the 2006–07 reclassification rates with 2005–06 performance on the CELDT and CST ELA. The goal was to see the extent to which districts' 2006–07 reclassification rates reflect the percentage of ELs who scored “English proficient” on the CELDT and basic or above on the CST ELA in the prior year. The state recommends that ELs earning those scores be

**figure 12** | **Reclassification rates in Sacramento County's unified districts do not always track with CELDT and CST performance data**



DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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### Districts receive funds based partly on the number of English learners they have

Economic Impact Aid (EIA), a \$994-million state program in 2007-08, provides funding to support additional services for English learners and students from low-income families. Under the program, student counts and funding formulas are complex, but in rough terms, districts receive on average \$318 per English learner and \$318 per low-income student each year. (Districts receive double-funding for students who are both EL and low-income.) This means that reclassifying a student from “English learner” to “fluent English proficient” costs a district \$318 for each year that the student would otherwise be considered an EL.

In addition to EIA funding, districts receive federal monies earmarked to support the education of immigrants, English learners, and migrants.

considered for reclassification. Large gaps between such CELDT and CST ELA performance on one hand and reclassification rates on the other can highlight differences between districts’ criteria on those two measures and what the state recommends. Such gaps may also reveal the role of teacher evaluation and parent consultation in reclassification decisions. Finally, differences among districts with similar performance levels but different reclassification rates highlight the variation in districts’ approaches to reclassifying students.

As can be seen in Figure 12, the percentage of ELs scoring “English proficient” on

the CELDT is often close to the percentage of ELs scoring basic or above on the CST ELA (though technically speaking, the two groups may not contain the same individual students). Although some districts have similar test scores and reclassification rates, others have similar test scores but very different reclassification rates.

Sacramento City and River Delta are two districts with similar test scores and reclassification rates. In contrast, Natomas and Elk Grove have similar performance data but quite different reclassification rates. In Natomas in 2005-06, more than half of

its ELs scored “English proficient” on the CELDT and basic or above on the CST ELA, but it reclassified only 6% of its ELs in 2006-07. In contrast, Elk Grove, with similar CELDT and CST scores, reclassified 15% of its ELs.

These data alone do not make it clear why Natomas has a low reclassification rate. One possibility is that the district has an extremely high bar for students to reach before they can be reclassified, or the district could be lax in reclassifying students. A third possibility is student mobility. The lack of a statewide system to track individual students’ data over time means the data do not indicate whether the students represented in the chart are the same students in both years (2005-06 and 2006-07). Finally, Figure 12 does not consider all factors that go into reclassification decisions; for example, teacher evaluation and parent consultation are not reflected here.

In addition, as stated above, districts have the authority to establish their own reclassification policies, so different approaches should be expected. However, it does raise the possibility that students in two nearby districts could have very similar levels of proficiency in English but could receive very different services, in part because of the funds the districts receive for English learners. For example, Economic Impact Aid is a state program that provides extra funding in part to help districts address the special needs of English learners. (See the box on this page.)

### Performance data offer another view

Although it is important for students to attain English proficiency, the state’s ultimate goal is to help them learn California’s academic content standards. Schools and districts are monitored for English learners’ academic achievement, as measured by the California Standards Tests (CSTs) and California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). Which students are counted in measures of achievement matters. When the “English learner” subgroup includes specified RFEP students, the

**figure 13** | The progress of the English learner subgroup\* on California Standards Tests has been similar to that of the state as a whole

Year	Percent Proficient or Above in English Language Arts		Percent Proficient or Above in Math	
	ELs*	State	ELs*	State
2006–07	25.7%	45.5%	35.7%	48.5%
2005–06	24.8%	44.8%	34.8%	48.0%
2004–05	21.9%	41.9%	31.9%	45.0%

\*Includes RFEP students who have not yet scored proficient or above on the CST in English language arts three times since being reclassified.

DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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group's achievement is still lower than the state as a whole; but the rates of improvement are similar in percentage-point terms.

### *The English learner subgroup has shown improvement on the English language arts CST*

Measuring the academic performance of English learners is complex because students are kept in this subgroup in part because of low academic achievement. When ELs begin competing equally with native English speakers, they are reclassified and thus are no longer considered English learners. By definition, then, the performance level of English learners will always be lower than their counterparts.

If, however, membership in the EL group is kept more stable, these students'

improvement can be seen more clearly. For example, for measuring performance against "adequate yearly progress" benchmarks under NCLB, the state includes in the EL subgroup students who have been redesignated fluent English proficient (RFEPs) until they have scored proficient or above on the CST ELA three times. Using this approach, the EL subgroup has shown progress similar to that shown by the state as a whole in terms of the percentage-point increase over time.

Over the last three years, the percentages of ELs—plus the specified RFEP students—scoring proficient or above in English and math has increased. For example, in 2006–07, 25.7% scored proficient or above in English, and 35.7% did so in math.

This compares with 24.8% in English language arts and 34.8% in math in 2005–06. The scores also improved between 2004–05 and 2005–06. Comparisons with even earlier years are not appropriate because the rules for whose scores were included in the percent-proficient calculation for this subgroup were slightly different.

Figure I3 shows how this "EL plus specified RFEP" subgroup has performed in both subjects. In addition, the data for the state as a whole are presented to put the EL results in context. The portion of the "EL plus specified RFEP" subgroup scoring proficient or above has increased by a larger percentage than is true for the state as a whole. Consider the results on the English language arts test as an example. The percent proficient in the subgroup increased from 21.9% to 25.7%, a 3.8 percentage point increase that translates to 17.4% growth. That compares to growth of 8.6% in the portion of students in the state as a whole scoring proficient or above. However, there is still a large gap between the subgroup and the state as a whole that has not changed.

In any case, this comparison is problematic because the state results *include* the achievement of the "EL plus specified RFEP" subgroup. (Unfortunately, it is not possible to compare the subgroup's improvement with that of *other* students because the state does not report the performance of the two distinct groups of RFEP students: those who have scored proficient or above on the CST ELA at least three times and those who have not. Only the data for the "EL plus specified RFEP" subgroup are publicly available.)

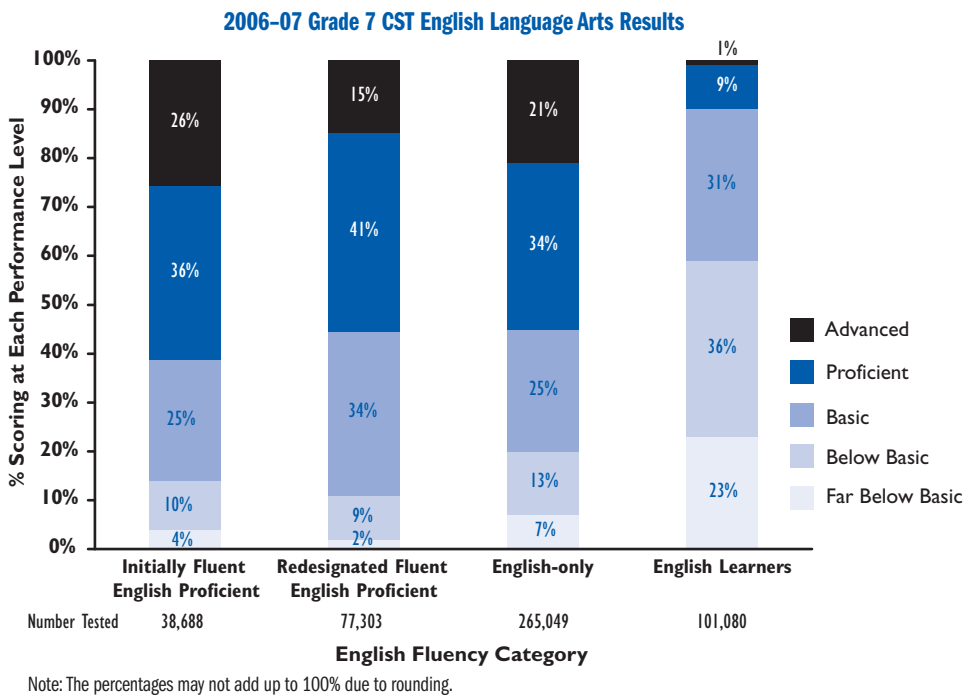
Setting aside the issue of improvement and instead focusing on how various types of students perform on the CST ELA at a moment in time, it is possible to delineate performance of four major groups of students based on their English fluency. Figure I4 shows the 2006–07 results for grade 7. Results are broken down by the four English fluency categories—initially fluent, reclassified, EL, and students who speak only English. The highest-performing group is the IFEPs—those students whose primary language is not

### **Proposition 227 curtails bilingual instruction**

In 1998 voters passed Proposition 227, a statewide ballot initiative intended to curtail the use of bilingual instruction for English learners. Although under Proposition 227 parents wanting bilingual instruction for their children may request it, only 8% of the state's EL students are currently taught using bilingual education techniques. This compares with 29% before the proposition's passage.

The overwhelming majority of ELs are taught in regular classroom settings with a variety of instructional modifications and strategies intended to provide meaningful access to the core curriculum as well as to accelerate their English language development. Under such structured or sheltered immersion, nearly all classroom instruction is in English but with a curriculum and presentation designed for children who are learning the language. Local districts determine when a student has a "good working knowledge" of English and can be placed in a mainstream classroom. The intention under Proposition 227 is that such structured immersion should not normally exceed one year.

**figure 14** | IFEP students consistently score higher than English-only students on the CST in English language arts, and English learners consistently have the lowest scores



DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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English but who scored “English proficient” on their Initial CELDT. The RFEPs had the next highest scores, followed by the “English-only” students and English learners.

Results from other grades are different. In the early grades, RFEPs performed best, followed by IFEPs and English-only students. And in the upper grades, initially fluent students scored highest, English-only students came next, and RFEPs scored lowest overall.

Two common themes emerge from these data: English learners had the lowest overall scores in every case, as expected, and IFEPs consistently outperformed English-only students. The fact that IFEPs tend to score higher than English-only students raises interesting questions. Does familiarity with two languages help IFEPs grasp California’s English language arts content standards? If so, why don’t RFEPs have consistently high performance? What is the socioeconomic status of the different groups, and how strongly does that relate to their performance?

### CAHSEE passage rates for ELs lag

Just as English learners generally score lower than their peers on the CSTs, they also pass the California High School Exit Exam at lower rates. Take, for example, the estimated cumulative passage rates for the classes of 2006 and 2007.

According to estimates by the state’s evaluator of the CAHSEE program, Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), 92% of all students in the class of 2006 passed both the English language arts and math portions of the exam by the time they finished 12th grade; but only 78% of ELs passed both portions. For the class of 2007, the disparity was greater, with 91% of all students clearing the hurdle and 72% of ELs passing. (Note that in both years the results of “all” students includes the results for English learners.)

The pass rates described above are important because they pertain to students’ ability to receive a high school diploma. However, they do not indicate how many attempts students needed to pass. Data on the number of attempts required are not

available, but the rates of passage on students’ first attempt speak to differences among groups’ readiness for the test.

**Reclassified and initially fluent English proficient students are more likely to pass the CAHSEE on the first attempt than English-only and English learner students**  
Results from the “census” CAHSEE administration—in which all students take the test for the first time in 10th grade—reflect associations between passing the test and English learner status. Within the EL category, the data can be broken down by English-proficiency level, primary language, and length of time in U.S. schools.

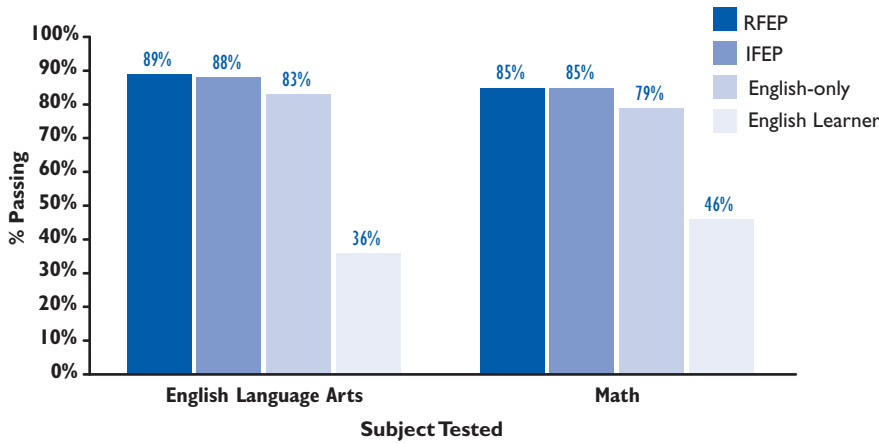
Data from the 2007 census administration, reflecting the performance of 10th graders in the class of 2009, show that ELs are far less ready to pass the exam than their peers. HumRRO estimates that 65% of all students in the class of 2009 (numbering about 502,000) passed both portions of the exam as 10th graders, but only 26% of the roughly 84,000 10th grade ELs did so. On the English language arts portion, 73% of all students passed and 34% of ELs cleared the bar. Although the gaps are large, it must be remembered that status as an English learner is partly determined by test performance that indicates a low level of academic proficiency, particularly in English. In math, the passage rate for all students—72%—was similar to the results on the English portion, but ELs did better here, with 44% passing.

Figure 15 on page 14 displays the CAHSEE passage rates of 10th graders in 2007 (the class of 2009), broken down by English-fluency category. It shows that reclassified and initially fluent English proficient students performed better than English-only and EL students.

### Passage rates on the CAHSEE differ by primary language

Just as performance on the CELDT varies by primary language, so does CAHSEE performance. Among the 14 primary language categories that HumRRO reports on, including “other/unknown” and “Chinese,” which combines Cantonese and

**figure 15 | 10th grade RFEP and IFEP students have higher passing rates on the 2007 CAHSEE than their English-only peers, but English learners lag far behind**

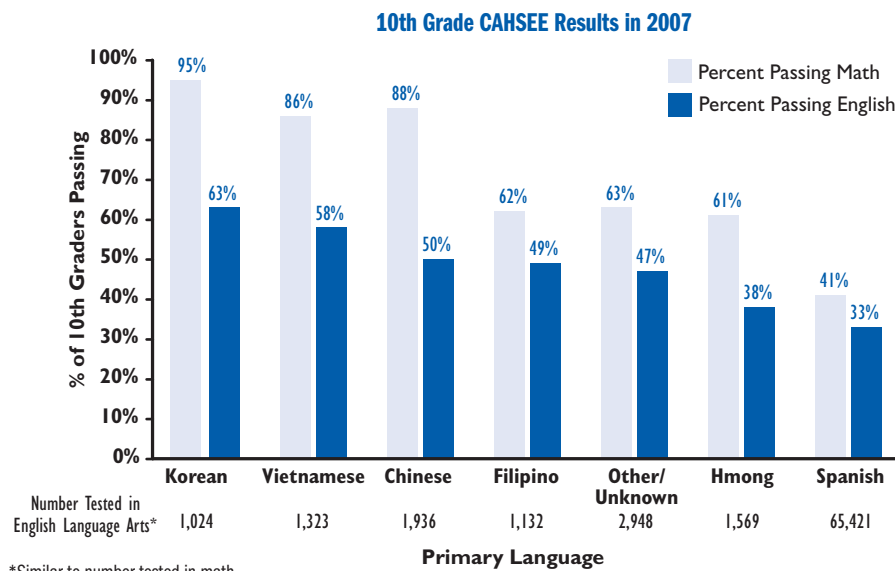


Note: The passing rates indicated in this figure are based on test-takers, which is in contrast to the passing rates for the class of 2009 and its English learners described on page 13. Those rates are based on the estimated total enrollment.

DATA: HUMAN RESOURCES RESEARCH ORGANIZATION (HUMRRO)

EdSource 3/08

**figure 16 | CAHSEE first-time passage rates vary substantially by primary language**



\*Similar to number tested in math.

Note: This figure displays only the results of groups with more than 1,000 students.

DATA: HUMAN RESOURCES RESEARCH ORGANIZATION (HUMRRO)

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Mandarin, passing rates vary substantially. For 10th graders in 2007, passage rates ranged from 31% (Khmer) to 63% (Korean) on the English portion. In math, pass rates went from 41% (Spanish) to 95% (Korean). However, the higher-scoring groups tend to have relatively few members.

The CAHSEE passing rate for all English learners reflects the fact that the vast majority of ELs are Spanish-speaking (83% of 10th grade test-takers in 2007) and that these Spanish-speaking English learners struggle to match the performance of ELs with other primary languages.

Figure 16 shows the 2007 10th grade CAHSEE performance of the seven primary language groups with 1,000 or more students. It shows that Spanish-speaking English learners score at or near the bottom in English and math. Korean-speaking students perform very well on both, and other groups fall somewhere in between. (The passing rate for Khmer-speaking ELs—not displayed in the figure below because the group is comprised of fewer than 1,000 students—is lower than the rate for Spanish speakers.) The socioeconomic status data from the Public Policy Institute of California noted earlier suggest that parent education levels and poverty among these groups could be important variables. However, HumRRO does not provide data that connect primary language with socioeconomic status.

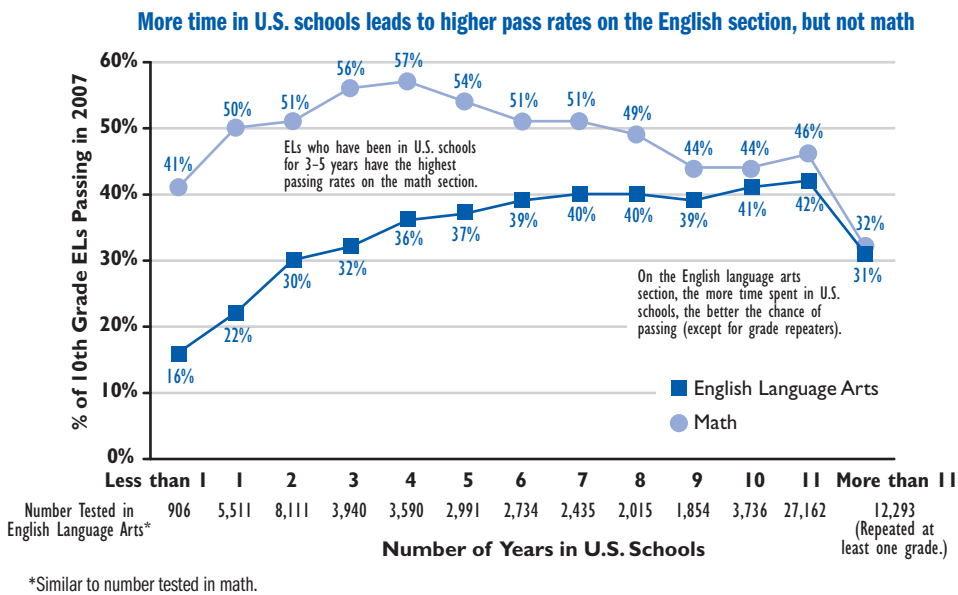
**The relationship between time spent in U.S. schools and CAHSEE passage rates is complex**

It may seem reasonable to assume that the longer students spend in U.S. schools, the more likely they would be to pass the CAHSEE. However, with English learners, the relationship between the number of years in American schools and performance on the CAHSEE is complex. The English learner group in grade 10 has recent arrivals with strong academic backgrounds and others with little schooling; it also has those who have been in California schools since kindergarten but have not yet been reclassified.

The relationship between time in American schools and CAHSEE performance is different for English language arts and math. HumRRO reports the passage rates of 10th graders in 2007, broken down by the number of years of schooling the students have had in the United States.

For the English language arts section, passage rates generally increase with the number of years spent in American schools. The major exception is students with more than 11 years of schooling (those who have repeated at least one grade). Their performance is below that of all other ELs except those with two or fewer years of schooling in the United States.

figure 17 | English learner CAHSEE passage rates differ as length of enrollment changes



DATA: HUMAN RESOURCES RESEARCH ORGANIZATION (HUMRRO)

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In contrast, 10th grade students who have spent 3–5 years in U.S. schools have the highest passage rates (54%–56%) on the math portion. Students who have been in U.S. schools for somewhat less time or somewhat more time pass the CAHSEE at slightly lower rates—about 50%. Those at either end of the spectrum—students who have been here less than one year and those who have been here for nine or more years—have the lowest passing rates. (See Figure 17.)

These data raise a number of questions. Why do the English language arts results follow a pattern that is different from the math results? If these students are truly *English learners*, how are they able to pass the exam at all? What are the appropriate criteria for labeling students as English learners? Should students not be reclassified because of difficulty with *academic* English as opposed to a lack of English fluency?

### English learners appear to have a disproportionately high dropout rate

Information on dropouts in California is always an estimate because the state does not have a system of tracking individual students over time. That said, CDE

publishes data that school districts report about dropouts, with students categorized in a number of ways. The most recent data available from 2005–06 show that English learners constituted 33% of the roughly 68,000 dropouts from grades 9–12. With ELs comprising 15% of students enrolled in those grades, it is clear that ELs are over-represented among the dropouts. Whether a lack of English proficiency was the sole or major factor that drove students to stop attending school is unclear, but the data raise questions about the relationship between proficiency in English—or at least the “English learner” designation—and students’ persistence in high school.

### The numbers show that despite some progress, English learners face considerable challenges

English learners make up 25% of the state’s students, but they are found in different proportions throughout the grades and regions of the state. Although they are predominantly Spanish-speaking, California’s ELs represent more than 55 primary languages. They also come to school with different levels of English fluency and socioeconomic backgrounds.

In addition, EL students achieve English proficiency at varying rates. In 2005–06, 62% of English learners met annual growth targets, and 40% of ELs deemed within reach of English proficiency actually attained it. However, local agencies’ targets for student improvement (“AMAOs”), established under federal Title III regulations, are structured such that nearly nine in 10 agencies met their annual goals that year. The high rate of district success causes some to question whether the bar is high enough. Others are happy to see that the state has an assessment of English proficiency and that ELs’ progress toward fluency is being monitored—which was not the case seven years ago. However, California High School Exit Exam results and this report’s close look at Sacramento County unified districts’ relationship between performance data and reclassification rates raise questions about the consistency of the criteria used to reclassify students as fluent.

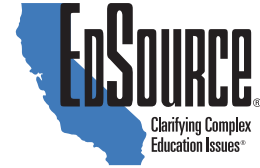
Through the CST ELA, the state also monitors English learners’ and recently redesignated students’ mastery of the *academic content standards* (not simply fluency) in English language arts. The results are in some ways positive: the percentage of that subgroup scoring proficient or above has grown faster than the portion of all students statewide scoring at that level. However, there is still a large and persistent gap between the subgroup and the state’s students as a whole.

Despite some progress being made by the state’s English learners, the statistics presented in this report confirm that meeting their educational needs remains an ambitious and difficult task for California’s public schools. The challenges vary from school to school and from district to district throughout the state. This report has described the extent of that variation, which can help inform policymakers, educators, and community leaders as they take on their important work on behalf of California’s English learners. ■■

## ● | To Learn More

There exists a large body of resources representing a variety of perspectives on EL issues. The following list is a sampling of reports or data sources that may be useful for readers wishing to do further research into some of the topics presented in this report.

- California Department of Education
  - CELDT home page: [www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/el/](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/el/)
  - DataQuest allows users to look up information on English learners and “fluent English proficient” (FEP) students, such as their primary languages, distribution among grades, and instructional settings.  
<http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>
  - To see the evaluations of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE): [www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/evaluations.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/evaluations.asp)
- Ed-Data: A wealth of information can be found on this interactive website, including financial, demographic, and accountability data for schools, districts, counties, and the state. The site also provides powerful school and district comparison functions. [www.ed-data.k12.ca.us](http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us)
- EdSource
  - Williams, T., Hakuta, K., Haertel, E., et al. *Similar English Learner Students, Different Results: Why Do Some Schools Do Better?* A follow-up analysis, based on a large-scale survey of California elementary schools serving low-income and EL students. May 2007. [www.edsource.org/pdf/SimELreportcomplete.pdf](http://www.edsource.org/pdf/SimELreportcomplete.pdf)
- California State Auditor: Bureau of State Audits
  - *Department of Education: School Districts’ Inconsistent Identification and Redesignation of English Learners Cause Funding Variances and Make Comparisons of Performance Outcomes Difficult.* June 2005.  
[www.bsa.ca.gov/pdfs/reports/2004-120.pdf](http://www.bsa.ca.gov/pdfs/reports/2004-120.pdf)
- Public Policy Institute of California
  - Jepson, C. and de Alth, S. *English Learners in California Schools.* 2005.  
[www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R\\_405CJR.pdf](http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_405CJR.pdf)
- Legislative Analyst’s Office
  - *The Progress of English Learner Students: Update 2002–2004.* Jan. 26, 2006.  
[www.lao.ca.gov/2006/eng\\_lnr\\_updt/eng\\_lnr\\_updt\\_012606.pdf](http://www.lao.ca.gov/2006/eng_lnr_updt/eng_lnr_updt_012606.pdf)
  - *A Look at the Progress of English Learner Students.* Feb. 12, 2004.  
[www.lao.ca.gov/2004/english\\_learners/021204\\_english\\_learners.pdf](http://www.lao.ca.gov/2004/english_learners/021204_english_learners.pdf)
- American Institutes for Research, et al.  
Evaluations of Proposition 227 done from 2001 through 2004. [www.air.org/publications/pubs\\_ehd\\_school\\_reform.aspx](http://www.air.org/publications/pubs_ehd_school_reform.aspx)
- University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute’s website contains links to data sources and the many reports it has issued, including some listed below. In addition, it has a searchable database that allows users to view and search through research reports published by outside sources. [www.lmri.ucsb.edu](http://www.lmri.ucsb.edu)
  - Gándara, P. and Rumberger, R. *Resource Needs for California’s English Learners.* Dec. 30, 2006.  
[http://irepp.stanford.edu/documents/GDF/STUDIES/22-Gandara-Rumberger/22-Gandara-Rumberger\(3-07\).pdf](http://irepp.stanford.edu/documents/GDF/STUDIES/22-Gandara-Rumberger/22-Gandara-Rumberger(3-07).pdf)
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  - Linqanti, R. *The Redesignation Dilemma: Challenges and choices in fostering meaningful accountability for English learners.* September 2001. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=lmri>
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[www.lmri.ucsb.edu/publications/03\\_scarcella.pdf](http://www.lmri.ucsb.edu/publications/03_scarcella.pdf)



**Trish Williams**  
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