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Title
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Publication Date
2023-06-14

Peer reviewed

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The Landscape of Language Learners in California's MTSS

The State of High School Graduation Rates

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SUMMARY

This brief is part of the Landscape of Language Learners in California's MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support). **This brief examines the notable trends and disparities in high school graduation rates between English-Learner classified students[1] (ELs) and non-English-Learner classified students in California over the past five years.** The analysis reveals that while overall graduation rates have shown a positive increase, English-Learner classified students continue to have consistently lower graduation rates compared to their non-EL peers. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions and support systems to address the unique challenges faced by English-Learner classified students and ensure equitable access to educational opportunities.

One key framework that can support increasing high school graduation rates for English-Learner classified students is the implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). MTSS offers a comprehensive, evidence-based approach that provides a tiered system of interventions tailored to students' individual needs. It emphasizes proactive and preventive intervention strategies to address the diverse needs of all students, including English-Learner classified students. By implementing MTSS and tailoring interventions to the specific needs of English-Learner classified students, schools can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that promotes their academic success. This involves collaboration among educators, administrators, support staff, families, and community organizations to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of English-Learner classified students.

Addressing the disparities in high school graduation rates for English-Learner classified students requires a multifaceted approach. By employing targeted strategies like MTSS, English-Learner classified students can receive academic, linguistic, and social-emotional support, ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities and resources. The findings presented in this brief provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators, informing evidence-based decision-making and the development of policies and interventions that promote equity and enhance the educational outcomes of English-Learner classified students in California.

1 We understand the deficit-laden connotations of the label "English-Learner classified students" and acknowledge that in other research we have used other terms such as "emergent bilinguals" or "dual language learners." For purposes of this brief, we refer to students as English-Learner classified students (EL) to indicate the actual classification and not to the person.

ABOUT THE SERIES

California is home to the nation's largest EL population, with over 1.1 million students designated as English Learners.[2] This represents roughly 19.1% of California's 5.9 million public school student population. With the expansion of the CA MTSS framework intended to impact the educational experiences of *all* students, it is important to consider how MTSS might benefit this population of students.

This brief is part of a series of reports that summarize the current trends in enrollment and representation of EL students across the state of California and how these trends have changed over the last decade. These trends are contextualized in an overview of current policies and persistent challenges in EL education. In each brief, we discuss the landscape of California English Learners and the possible policy implications for CA MTSS. To better understand how MTSS has and can be used to support EL-classified student success, it's necessary to understand the challenges and trends that describe this population of students. As such, this series summarizes findings on the enrollment rates, language diversity, ethnicity, geographic density, and reclassification status of EL students.

2 According to data published by the California Department of Education on 2021-2022 enrollment patterns, as seen here.

KEY FINDINGS

In California, how have English Learners' high school graduation rates changed over the last five years?

An analysis of high school graduation rates in California over the last five years reveals notable trends and disparities between English-Learner classified students (ELs) and non-English-Learner classified students. Table 1 below depicts graduation rates in California for the last five years, clearly illustrating a disparity in graduation rates among EL and non-EL-classified students.[3]

High school graduation rates for all students in California have improved over the past five years. Between 2018 and 2022, graduation rates for all students increased from 83% to 87%. But when specifically considering English-Learner classified students, graduation rates remain consistently lower compared to non-English-Learner classified students. Between 2018 and 2022, EL-classified student graduation rates increased from 67.9% to 71.8%. Despite this improvement, a considerable gap persists between the graduation rates of EL and non-English-Learner classified students.

These disparities in graduation rates between EL and non-English-Learner classified students reflect the persistent challenges faced by English-Learner classified students in attaining academic success. Some of the factors that affect EL educational progressions and could impact their ability to graduate include tracking into lower-level and remedial courses, inadequate assessment practices, inconsistent services and instruction, and challenges around classification in disability categories *(Santibañez & Umansky, 2018)*.[4] Disparities in graduation rates highlight the need for targeted interventions and support systems to address the unique needs of English-Learner classified students and ensure equitable access to educational opportunities.

Table 1: Comparison of California High School Graduation Rates (2018–2022)

Year	All Students	English-Learner classified students	Non-English-Learner classified students
2022	87.0%	71.8%	89.5%
2021	83.6%	67.1%	86.1%
2020	84.2%	69.0%	86.8%
2019	84.5%	68.7%	87.2%
2018	83.0%	67.9%	85.6%

3 To run these analyses, we used Four-Year Adjusted Graduation Cohort Rate (AGCR). AGCR, which refers to the percentage of cohort students who received the standard high school diploma from a school aligned with State education standards. For more information on AGCR, please see https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/acgrinfo.asp

4 Santibanez L., and Umansky, I. (2018) English Learners: Charting their Experiences and Mapping their Futures in California Schools. PACE Research Brief. September, 2018. Available at: https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/english-learners-charting-their-experiences-and-mapping-their-futures-california

What are the graduation rates of English-Language Learners in the largest districts in California?

Table 2 depicts graduation outcomes for the 20 largest districts in California.

EL graduation rates trail behind graduation rates for all students. Among the 15 largest districts in California, there was an average gap of 11.64 percentage points between the total student graduation rates and the EL cohort graduation rates. There are several districts that had reduced this disparity, including Clovis (2 percentage points) and Capistrano (5.50 percentage points).

The disparity between the rate of English-Learner classified students who qualified for UC/CSU admission and the total student cohort is even starker. Amongst the 15 largest districts in California, there was an average gap of 24.31 percentage points between the rate of total students who met UC/CSU admission criteria and the rate of English-Learner classified students. There are several districts that have reduced this disparity, including Los Angeles (13.10 percentage points) and Oakland (15.30 percentage points).

These trends are particularly concerning, especially given that University of California or California State University admission requirements are a measure of academic preparation. By the end of their tenure in California schools, ELs are less likely to graduate from high school ready for admission to a UC or CSU.

Table 2: High School Graduation & Achievement Rates of EL-classified students in California's 15 Largest Districts

Rank	District Name	District EL Cohort[1]	EL Grad Rate[2]	Grad Rate for All Students[3]	EL Met Rate for UC/CSU Grad Req's[4]	Total Student Met Rate for UC/CSU Grad Req's[5]
1	Los Angeles Unified**	6,993	65.3%	87.4%	52.1%	65.2%
2	San Diego Unified*	1,199	69.3%	87.9%	47.4%	68.8%
3	Fresno Unified	729	78.5%	88.5%	26.9%	48%
4	Long Beach Unified**	749	64.9%	85.2%	26.1%	59.4%
5	Elk Grove Unified	621	81%	91.1%	23.1%	56.4%
6	San Francisco Unified	1,929	37.4%	47.5%	48.1%	66.6%
7	San Bernardino City Unified	651	77.4%	83.4%	18.5%	38%
8	Corona-Norco Unified	452	88.7%	96.1%	19.2%	55.4%
9	Capistrano Unified	236	88.6%	94.1%	14.4%	59.2%
10	San Juan Unified	477	70.4%	81.6%	15.8%	34.4%
11	Oakland Unified	1,056	58.3%	78.8%	49.2%	64.5%
12	Santa Ana Unified	915	83.3%	92.4%	20.9%	38.9%
13	Sacramento City Unified	495	73.5%	85.2%	27.5%	48.8%
14	Kern High***	1,196	78.8%	88.8%	10.6%	37.2%
15	Clovis Unified	123	93.5%	95.5%	31.3%	58.4%

*Indicates a Phase 1 district in OCDE's MTSS implementation

** Indicates a Phase 2 district in OCDE's MTSS implementation

***Indicates a Phase 3 district in OCDE's MTSS implementation

1 District EL Cohort refers to the total count of ELs in the district's graduation rate.

2 EL Grad Rate refers to the high school graduation rate for English-Learner classified students in the district.

3 Grad Rate for All Students refers to the high school graduation rate for all students in the district.

4 EL Met Rate for UC/CSU Grad Req refers to the rate of English-Learner classified students in a district who met the requirements for admission to a University of California or California State University.

5 Total Student Met Rate for UC/CSU Grad Reqs refers to the rate of total students in a district who met the requirements for admission to a University of California or California State University.

MTSS to Support Graduation Rates

An analysis of high school graduation rates in California over the last five years reveals notable disparities between English-Learner classified students (ELs) and non-English-Learner classified students. Overall, high school graduation rates for all students in California have shown a gradual increase, indicating a positive trend in high school completion across the state. However, English-Learner-classified students' graduation rates remain consistently lower compared to non-English-Learner-classified students.

The persistent disparities in graduation rates between EL and non-English-Learner classified students highlight the ongoing challenges faced by English-Learner classified students in achieving academic success. This calls for targeted interventions and support systems to address the unique needs of English-Learner classified students and ensure equitable access to educational opportunities.

One potential framework that can help support increasing high school graduation rates for English-Learner classified students is a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). MTSS is a comprehensive, evidence-based approach that provides a tiered system of support to address the diverse needs of students. It emphasizes a proactive and preventive approach to intervention by providing a continuum of support to all students, including English-Learner classified students, based on their individual needs.

Within the context of improving high school graduation rates for English-Learner classified students, MTSS can offer targeted interventions at different levels. At the universal level (Tier 1), schools can provide comprehensive language and academic supports to all English-Learner classified students, including effective English language development instruction, culturally responsive teaching practices, and access to rigorous and relevant curriculum.

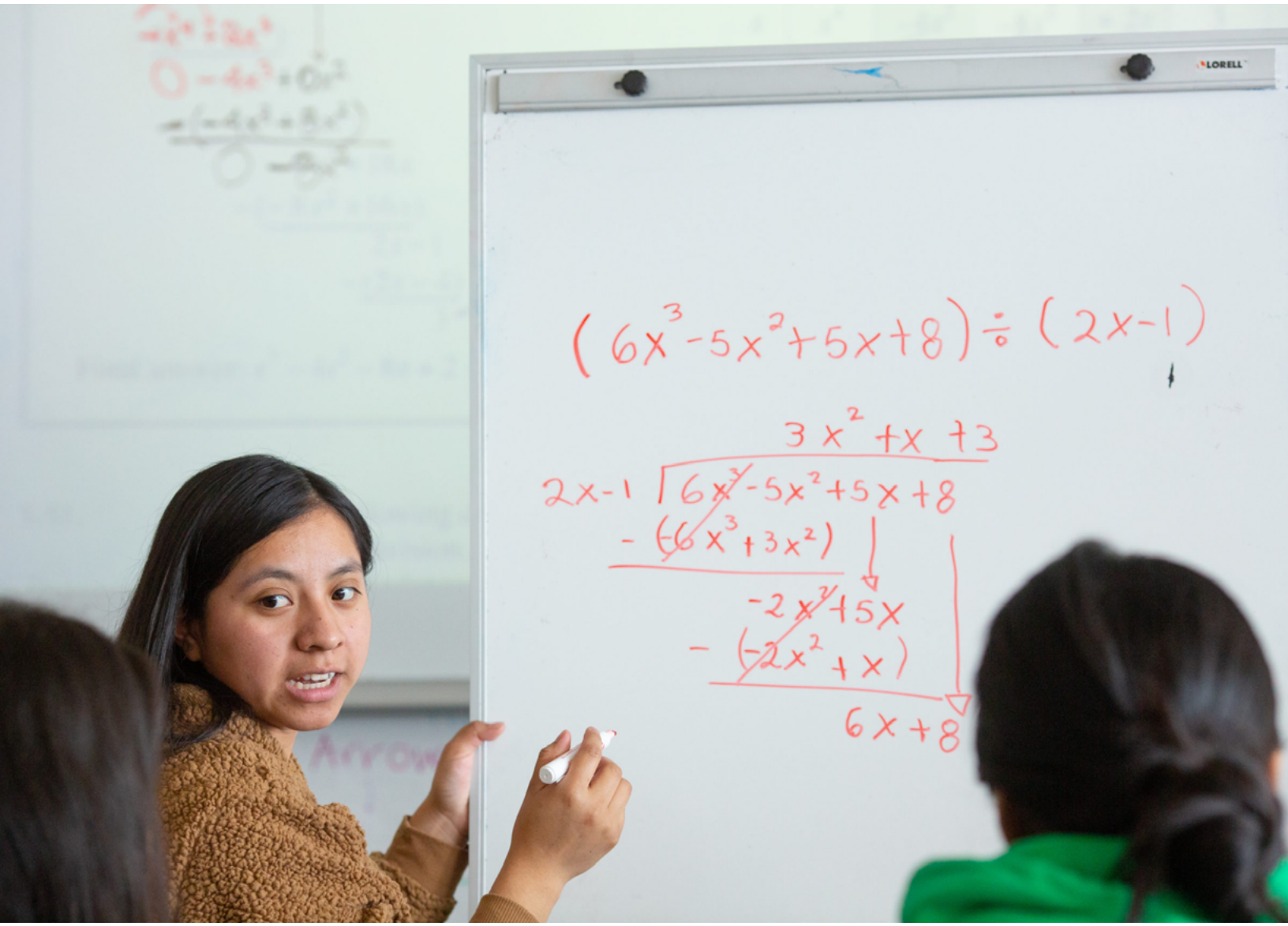
For English-Learner classified students who require additional support, Tier 2 interventions can be implemented. This may include small-group interventions, targeted language and literacy instruction, and additional academic supports tailored to their specific needs. These interventions can help address language barriers, accelerate language acquisition, and improve academic performance, ultimately leading to increased graduation rates.

For a smaller subset of English-Learner classified students who require intensive support, Tier 3 interventions can be provided. These may involve individualized instruction, specialized interventions, and close collaboration between educators, families, and community resources. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and personalized learning plans can be developed to meet the unique needs of English-Learner classified students with specific learning disabilities or other exceptionalities, ensuring that they receive the necessary support to succeed academically and progress toward high school graduation.

Moreover, a key aspect of MTSS is the coordination and scheduling of learning opportunities. By strategically organizing classes and educational activities, schools can ensure that English-Learner classified students receive the language supports they need while still having access to A-G courses.

By implementing MTSS and tailoring interventions to the specific needs of English-Learner classified students, schools can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that promotes their academic success. This can involve collaboration among educators, administrators, support staff, families, and community organizations to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of English-Learner classified students.

In conclusion, addressing the disparities in high school graduation rates for English-Learner classified students in California requires a multifaceted approach. It is crucial to implement targeted strategies, such as MTSS, to support English-Learner classified students academically, linguistically, and socio-emotionally, ensuring they have equal access to educational opportunities and resources. By providing a continuum of support through universal, targeted, and intensive interventions, schools can enhance the educational experiences and outcomes of English-Learner classified students, ultimately leading to increased high school graduation rates. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators to inform evidence-based decision-making and develop policies and interventions that promote equity and enhance the educational outcomes of English-Learner classified students in California.



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