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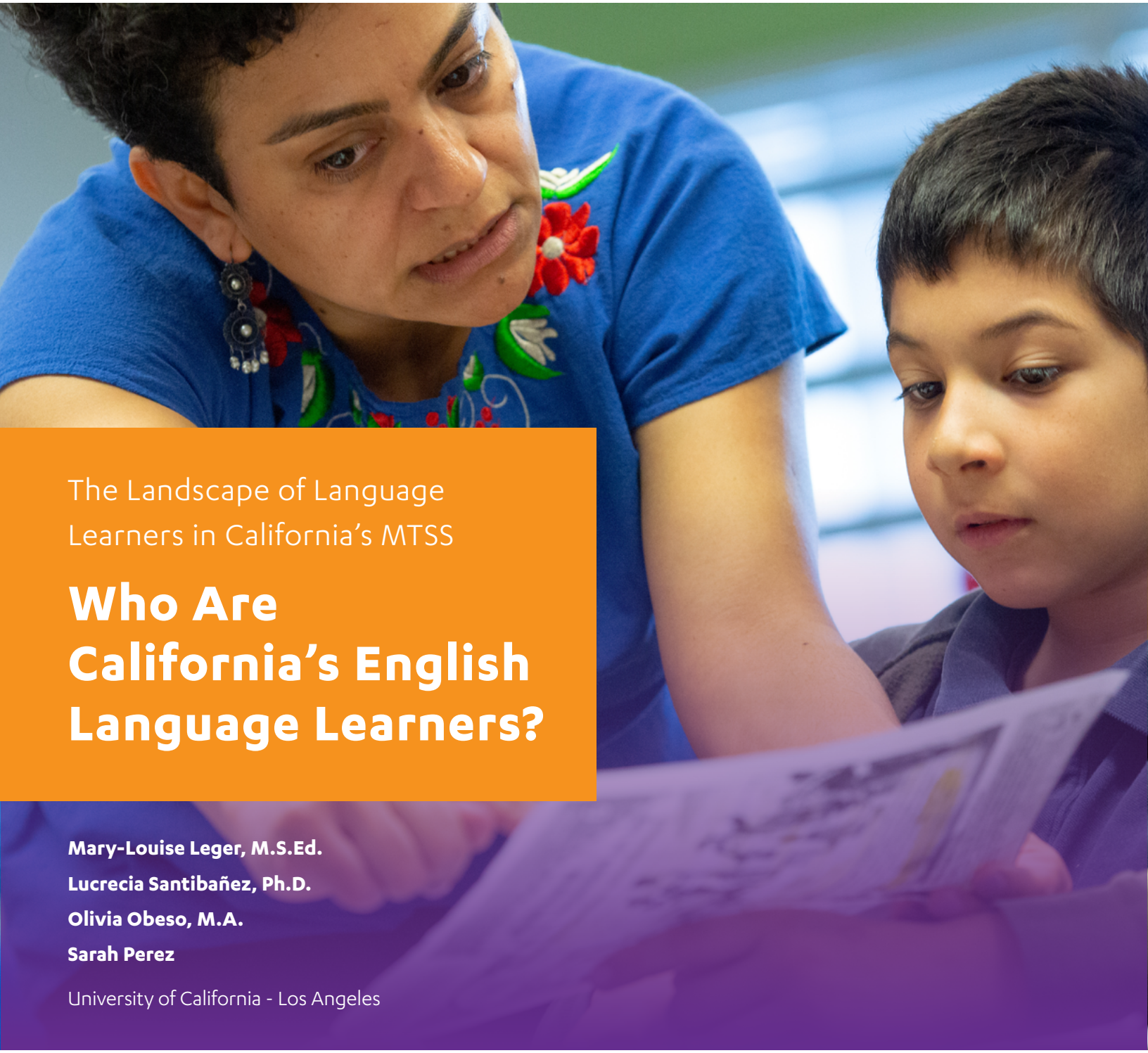

The Landscape of Language Learners in California's MTSS

Who Are California's English Language Learners?

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SUMMARY

This brief is part of the Landscape of Language Learners in California's MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support). **It depicts demographic trends and the rich diversity of the English-Learner (EL) classified students[1] enrolled in California's public schools, including the number of language learners, geographic trends in where they live, their home language, and their race.**

Key findings include:

- **The number and proportion** of EL-classified students in California is decreasing;
- **The majority of EL-classified students are Latinx and Spanish speaking,** but within this classification there remain rich diversity;
- **While Spanish remains the predominant language,** the proportion of EL-classified students who speak Spanish has experienced a slight decline; and
- **Only 5% of California districts** have proportions of EL-classified students equal to or exceeding 50%.

CA MTSS is a comprehensive framework that aligns academic, behavioral, social and emotional learning, and mental health supports in a fully integrated system of support for the benefit of all students.[2] Understanding the landscape of language learners in California may be helpful in informing policy and implementation recommendations that help CA MTSS to provide targeted, impactful support to EL-classified students. To this end, we conclude with a brief discussion of the significance of these findings and policy recommendations related to CA MTSS.

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 refer to the actual classification and not to the person.
2 According to the Orange County Department of Education
3 According to data published by the California Department of Education on 2021-22 enrollment patterns.

ABOUT THE SERIES

California is home to the nation's largest EL population, with over 1.1 million students designated as English Learners.[3] 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 ELs and the possible policy implications for CA MTSS. To better understand how CA 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.

3 According to data published by the California Department of Education on 2021-22 enrollment patterns.

KEY FINDINGS: ENROLLMENT TRENDS

How has EL-classified enrollment changed over time?

According to 2022 data, 1.1 million students are designated as EL-classified students in California. These students represent 19% of the total public school student population. Over the last five years, both the number and proportion of students designated EL have decreased. In the 2018 school year, there were close to 1.3 million EL-classified students in California, representing 20% of public school students.

Figure 1 depicts changes in EL-classified student enrollment over time, where:

EO refers to English Only. Students in this category are not, nor have they been, considered EL-classified students.

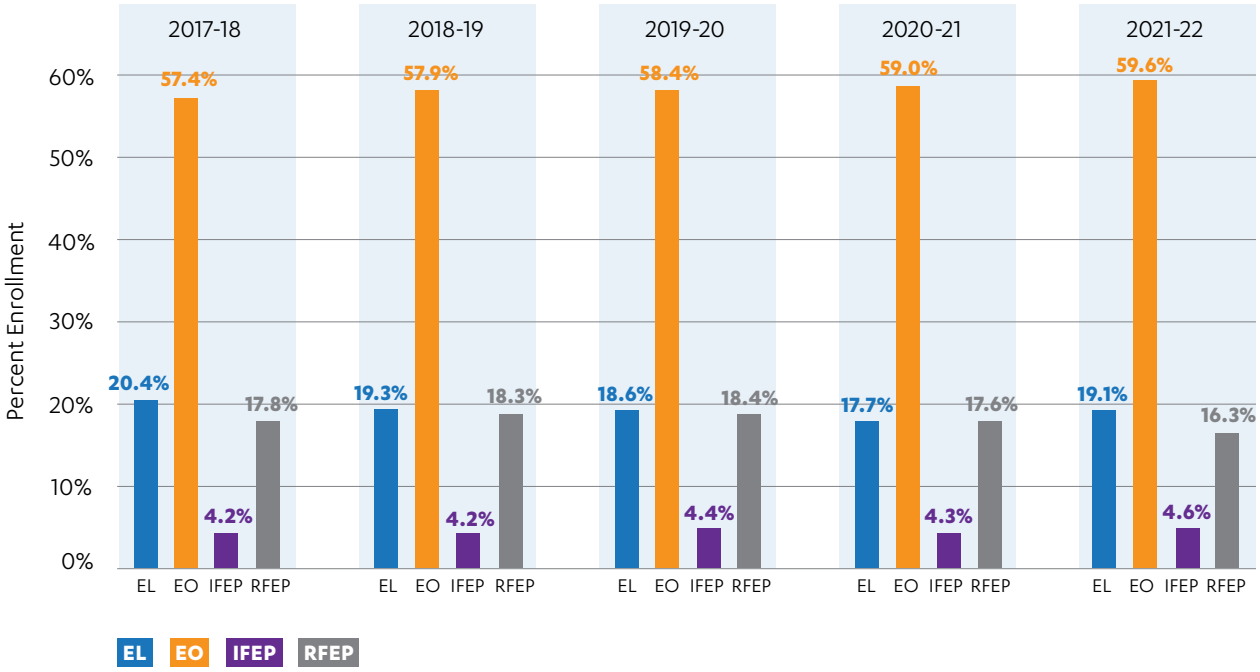
IFEP refers to Initial Fluent English Proficient. Students at this level have well-developed oral and written skills. They may need occasional linguistic support to engage or communicate in certain social and academic contexts.

EL refers to EL-classified students. Students at this level are students who 1) enroll in a California school beginning in any grade level from transitional kindergarten through grade 12, 2) have a language other than English identified on the Home Language Survey, and 3) upon assessment, obtained a level of English proficiency that indicates programs and services are necessary.

RFEP refers to Reclassified Fluent English Proficient. Students in this category are former EL students who have met the four criteria specified in California EC Section 313(f).

Figure 1 reveals that, over the last five years, there have not been major proportional shifts in California's population of EL-classified students. Before COVID-19, the proportion of EL-classified students was decreasing and the proportion of RFEP students increased. However, in the two years after most schools in California first shut down for in-person instruction, the trend reversed.

Figure 1. Changes in Proportion of English Learning Students Enrollment Over Time, by EL Designation (EL, EO, IFEP, and RFEP)



Which public school districts have the highest percentage of EL-classified students?

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of districts in California based on the percentage of their enrolled students who are designated as EL-classified students. The data shows that of the 1,021 districts examined, only 16 have 60% or more of their enrolled students designated as EL-classified students. The vast majority of districts have 20% or less of their student population classified as EL students.

CA MTSS aims to serve all students at Tier 1, and having a higher concentration of EL-classified students within a given context facilitates the organization of that tier due to their shared needs. This does not mean that it is easier to serve these students, but that it is easier to organize a coherent set of supports.

However, as seen in **Figure 2,** only 52 districts in the entire state of California, which represent 5% of total districts and 6% of total EL student enrollment, have proportions of EL-classified students equal to or exceeding 50%.

Figure 2. Distribution of Districts and Enrolled EL-Classified Students by Percentage

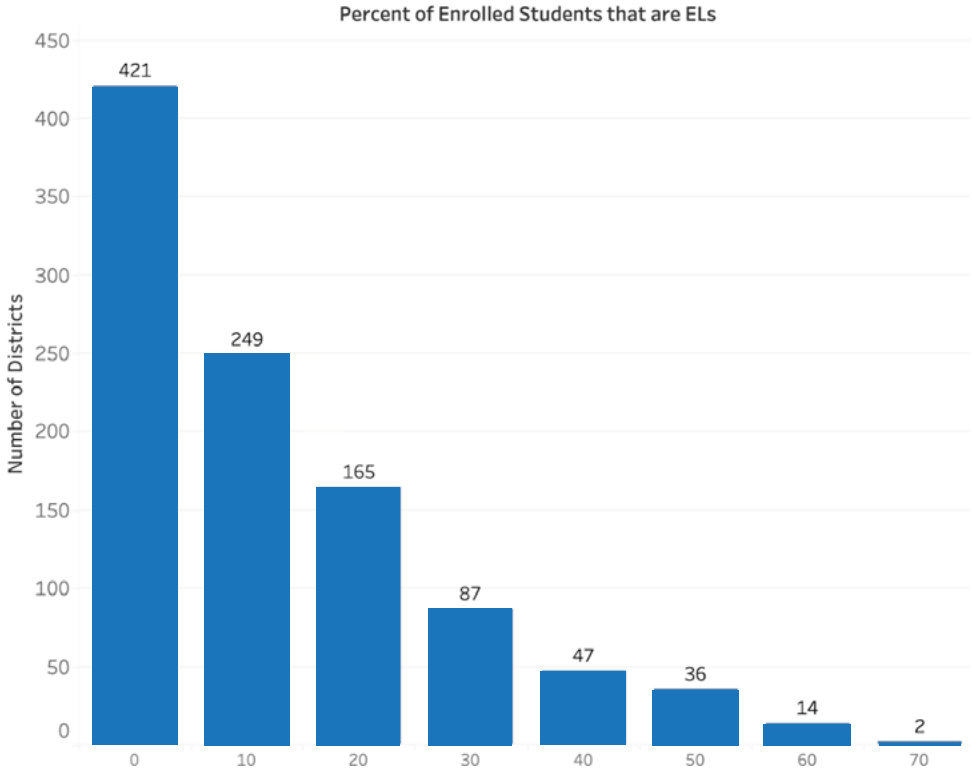


Table 1. English Learner Progress Indicator Status Levels

Status Level (Denotes Progress)	Numeric Level	Percentage of English-Learner classified students who increased at least one ELPI level or maintained the ELP criterion (Level 4)
Very Low	1	Less than 35%
Low	2	35%
Medium	3	45%
High	4	55%
Very High	5	65%

Table 2 & Figure 3 depict the public school districts with the highest percentage of EL-classified students and two measures of EL progress: reclassification rates and ELPI Status Level. Reclassification refers is the process whereby a student is reclassified from English-Learner (EL) status to Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) status[4], and a reclassification rate is an overall indicator of the proportion of EL-classified students reclassified during a school year.

English Learner Status is an indicator provided by the California Department of Education. ELPI Status measures progress toward English language proficiency (ELP)[5]. There are five status levels that represent a district's overall progress in supporting English language proficiency.

Reclassification rates tend to be higher in elementary grades than in later grades, which reflects a number of factors, such as the difficulties of supporting newcomer students who enter U.S. schools in later grades and the increased linguistic and content knowledge needed to engage in learning at higher grades.[6] Because of this, using reclassification rates to compare progress across districts can be difficult, especially when comparing elementary and high school districts. ELPI status level provides a less common, but more apt indicator of district progress in supporting English language proficiency.

Although there are certain smaller districts with higher percentages of EL student enrollment, this table includes only districts with a total enrollment of 5,700 students or more, which approximates state mean number of students enrolled in a district. **Table 2** provides information on which districts may need or may benefit from targeted MTSS support given the high proportion of students who are identified as language learners. It is worth noting that some of these districts are smaller, like Alisal and Calexico. Smaller districts may not confront the same coordination challenges that larger districts do. However, the school districts with high ELPI status, regardless of size, provide positive outliers with strong records of supporting EL progress. Moreover, MTSS purports to support higher needs districts and districts in **Table 1** with lower ELPI status levels. High proportions of EL-classified students can be used to identify districts that may need more support.

4 This is the definition provided by the California Department of Education
5 For more information about the EL Progress Indicator Status Levels, please see the California Department of Education's guidance and definition of the English Learner Progress Indicator Calculation.
6 Gándara, P., Rumberger, R., Maxwell-Jolly, J., & Callahan, R. (2003). English-Learner classified students in California Schools: Unequal resources, 'Unequal outcomes. Education Policy Analysis Archives, 11, 36.

Table 2: Enrollment Trends in the Top 20 California School Districts, Ranked by Highest EL-Classified Students

Rank	District	Percent of Students in District Designated EL-classified in 2022	Total Number of EL-classified Students Enrolled in 2022	Total Number of Students Enrolled in 2022	District Reclassification Count and Rate+	ELPI Status Level++
1	Alisal Union	63.69%	5,000	7,851	244 (4.5%)	3
2	Calexico Unified	62.61%	5,361	8,563	205 (3.8%)	2
3	Santa Maria-Bonita	57.51%	9,529	16,569	369 (4.3%)	3
4	Salinas City Elementary	52.35%	4,338	8,287	308 (7.2%)	3
5	Oxnard	50.30%	7,234	14,381	629 (8.6%)	2
6	Anaheim Elementary	49.43%	7,616	15,409	194 (2.2%)	3
7	Franklin-McKinley Elementary	48.36%	4,063	8,402	246 (5.8%)	4
8	South Bay Union	47.44%	2903	6119	260 (7.5%)	2
9	Hueneme Elementary	43.77%	2903	6119	164 (5.0%)	4
10	Coachella Valley Unified	43.44%	7,326	16,865	327 (4.6%)	2
11	Delano Union Elementary	43.44%	2730	6285	207 (6.9%)	4
12	Alum Rock Union Elementary	43.07%	3,974	9,226	88 (2.3%)	3
13	Santa Ana Unified	40.42%	17,828	44,102	261 (1.4%)	3
14	Redwood City Elementary	39.54%	3032	7669	83 (3.4%)	2
15	Pajaro Valley Unified	38.59%	7,207	18,675	587 (7.6%)	4
16	Lennox	38.32%	2314	6039	83 (3.4%)	3
17	Westminster	37.82%	3,102	8,203	508 (14.1%)	2
18	Santa Clara County Office of Education	37.54%	4,480	11,935	48 (1.1%)	1
19	Patterson Joint Unified	34.68%	2155	6214	156 (7.3%)	3
20	Cajon Valley Union	34.48%	5,797	16,812	318 (5.5%)	3

+ At the time of completion, the 2021-22 reclassification rate had not been released. Therefore, we report the district reclassification rates for school year 2020-21.
++ For more information about the EL Progress Indicator Status Levels, please see the California Department of Education's guidance and definition of the English Learner Progress Indicator Calculation.

Figure 3: Map of Enrollment Trends in the Top 20 California School Districts, Ranked by Highest EL-Classified Students

Table 3: Enrollment Trends in the Top 20 California School Districts, Ranked by Largest Number of Enrolled Students

Rank	District	Total Number of EL-classified Students Enrolled in 2022	Percent of Students in District Designated EL-classified in 2022	Total Number of Students Enrolled in 2022	District Reclassification Count and Rate+	ELPI Status Level++
1	Los Angeles Unified**	116,930	21.32%	548,338	6,414 (5.4%)	3
2	San Diego Unified*	22,453	19.62%	114,467	2,297 (9.6%)	3
3	Fresno Unified	14,130	19.50%	72,455	178 (1.4%)	2
4	Long Beach Unified**	10,505	15.55%	67,573	252 (2.4%)	2
5	Elk Grove Unified	10,496	16.65%	63,041	26 (0.3%)	3
6	San Francisco Unified	14,598	26.26%	55,592	1,931 (11.4%)	2
7	San Bernardino City Unified	11,157	21.87%	51,013	623 (5.6%)	3
8	Corona-Norco Unified	7,381	14.50%	50,889	832 (10.7%)	3
9	Capistrano Unified	4,805	9.61%	49,974	481 (10.1%)	3
10	San Juan Unified	7,578	15.40%	49,220	253 (3.6%)	3
11	Oakland Unified	15,514	33.29%	46,600	506 (3.3%)	2
12	Santa Ana Unified	17,828	40.42%	44,102	261 (1.4%)	3
13	Sacramento City Unified	8,562	19.53%	43,830	298 (3.6%)	3
14	Kern High***	4,027	9.40%	42,863	406 (13.4%)	2
15	Clovis Unified	2,042	4.78%	42,699	111 (5.7%)	4
16	Riverside Unified	6,577	16.34%	40,247	343 (5.4%)	3
17	Stockton Unified	9,599	24.12%	39,803	530 (5.6%)	3
18	Garden Grove Unified	12,730	33.01%	38,560	760 (5.6%)	3
19	Sweetwater Union High	8,690	22.85%	38,026	640 (7.4%)	2
20	Irvine Unified	5,902	16.36%	36,083	1,924 (26.5%)	4

*Indicates a Phase 1 district in Orange County Department of Education's (OCDE) MTSS implementation.
** Indicates a Phase 2 district in OCDE's MTSS implementation.
***Indicates a Phase 3 district in OCDE's MTSS implementation.
+ At the time of completion, the 2021-22 reclassification rate had not been released. Therefore, we report the district reclassification rates for SY 2020-21.
++For more information about the EL Progress Indicator Status Levels, please see the California Department of Education's guidance and definition of the English Learner Progress Indicator Calculation. The ELPI Status Level listed here is for SY 2021-22 school year.

Of the top 20 largest districts in the state, what percentage of enrolled students are designated EL-classified?

Table 3 depicts the top 20 largest public school districts, the total number of students designated EL, and the percent of the student body who are designated EL. Like **Table 2**, it also includes the district's reclassification rate and its ELPI Status Level.

The districts presented in **Table 2** and **Table 3** can help inform implementation by pointing to districts who can provide important lessons on successfully supporting English proficiency and those that may need more targeted support. Throughout California, certain districts appear to be more successful in supporting students to English language proficiency, as indicated by ELPI status levels. These districts include Irvine, Clovis, Franklin-McKinley Elementary, Hueneme Elementary, Delano Union Elementary, and Pajaro Valley, where 55-65% of EL-classified students increased at least one ELPI level or maintained the ELP criterion. Because they enroll large numbers or proportion of EL-classified students and have evidence of providing positive indicators of progress, these districts might represent positive outliers that can inform implementation of MTSS. However, more investigation is needed into these districts, their historical progress, and the contextual factors that support higher ELPI status levels.

It's evident that these districts have a high-level of variation; they vary in size, geographic location, ELPI status, and other contextual factors. This may matter because the effectiveness of supporting EL-classified students can be influenced by these various contextual factors. For example, districts in different geographic locations may have diverse demographics and community resources that can impact the availability of support services and programs. Additionally, districts of different sizes may face unique challenges in implementing effective strategies due to resource allocation, teacher-student ratios, and administrative capacity.

The variation in ELPI status levels among districts also highlights the importance of examining the specific practices and interventions implemented in districts with higher levels of English language proficiency. Identifying successful strategies employed by these districts can inform and guide other districts in developing effective support systems for EL-classified students. Furthermore, the presence of both larger and smaller districts in **Tables 1** and **2** indicates that effective support for English language proficiency is not solely determined by district size. Smaller districts like Alisal Union and Calexico Unified demonstrate that even with limited resources, targeted and well-implemented interventions can contribute to positive outcomes for EL-classified students. Considering the range of contextual factors and the variation in ELPI status levels among districts, it becomes crucial to study successful districts in more detail to understand the specific practices, policies, and approaches that contribute to their positive outcomes. This analysis can help identify best practices that can be shared and implemented across districts to better support EL-classified students throughout the state of California.

LANGUAGE TRENDS

What are the most common languages spoken by EL-classified students?

Table 4 on the following page depicts the top 20 languages spoken by EL students, according to 2021 data, and **Figure 4** below depits how language representation for these languages has changed over the last decade. While Spanish remains the predominant language, it is also experiencing a slight decline in the proportion of EL students who speak it. The same is true of Vietnamese, Cantonese, Filipino, Korean, Hmong, and Khmer. Languages that experienced a slight increase in the proportion of EL-classified students who speak them included Mandarin, Arabic, and Punjabi.

Figure 4: Changes in the Top 20 Languages Spoken by California's EL-Classified Students, Ranked by Number of Speakers

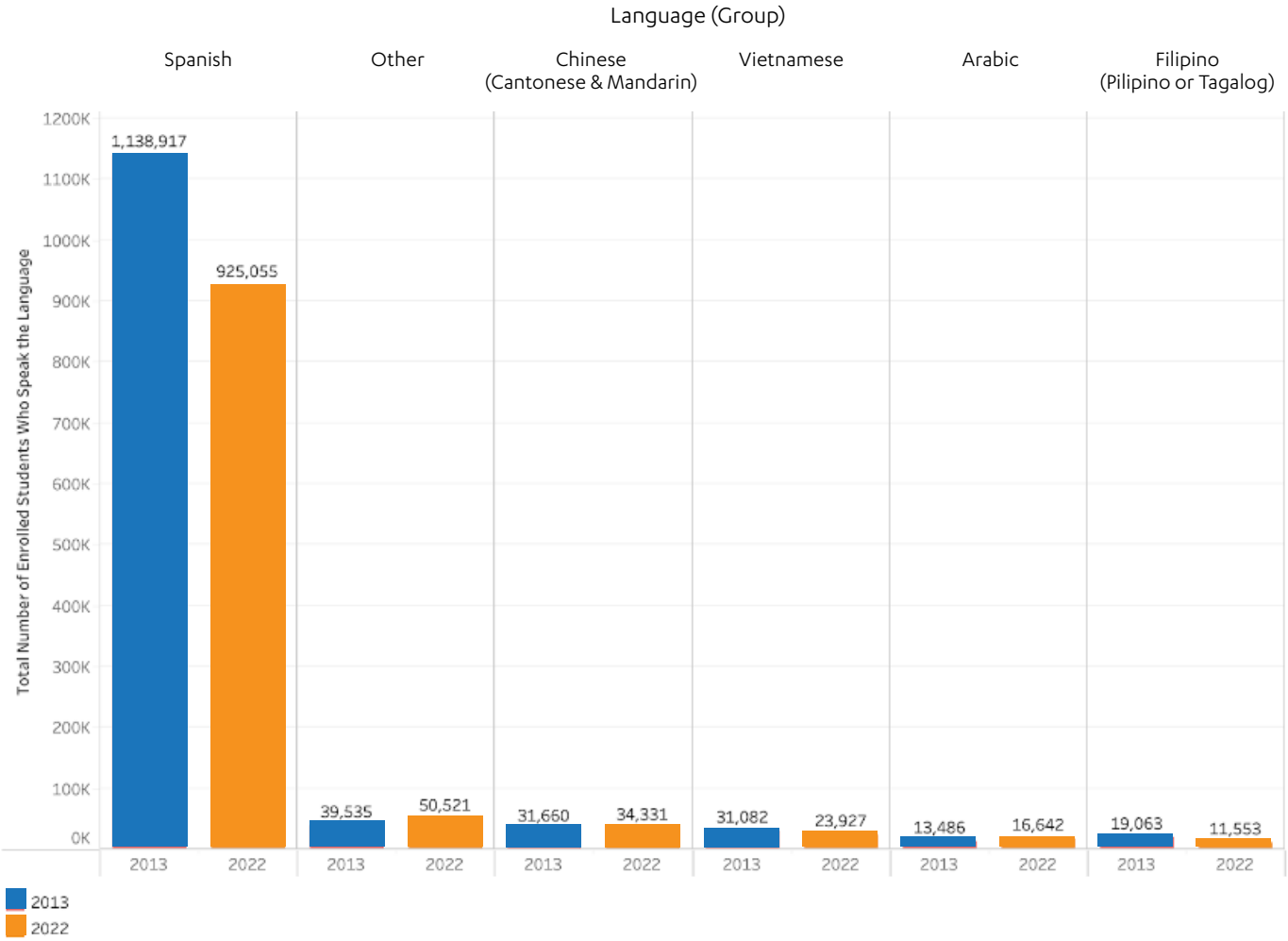


Table 4: The Top 20 Languages Spoken by California's EL-Classified Students, Ranked by Number of Speakers

Rank	Language	Total Number of EL Students Enrolled in 2022	Percent of Students in District Designated EL in 2022	Total Number of Students Enrolled in 2022
1	Spanish	925,055 (82.03%)	1,138,917 (84.59%)	548,338
2	Vietnamese	23,927 (2.12%)	31,082 (2.31%)	114,467
3	Mandarin (Putonghua)	20,648 (1.83%)	14,151 (1.05%)	72,455
4	Arabic	16,642(1.48%)	13,486 (1.00%)	67,573
5	Other non-English languages	15,213 (1.35%)	11,581 (0.86%)	63,041
6	Cantonese	13,683 (1.21%)	17,509 (1.30%)	55,592
7	Filipino (Pilipino or Tagalog)	11,553 (1.02%)	19,063 (1.42%)	51,013
8	Punjabi	9,375 (0.83%)	8,241 (0.61%)	50,889
9	Russian	8,933% (0.79%)	6,866 (0.51%)	49,974
10	Farsi (Persian)	8,315 (0.74%)	5,324 (0.40%)	49,220
11	Korean	7,889 (0.70%)	11,424 (0.85%)	46,600
12	Hmong	7,339 (0.65%)	12,250 (0.91%)	44,102
13	Armenian	6,488 (0.58%)	6,678 (0.50%)	43,830
14	Mixteco	4,799 (0.43%)	2,275 (0.17%)	42,863
15	Japanese	4,738 (0.42%)	5,103 (0.38%)	42,699
16	Pashto	4,190 (0.37%)	1,123 (0.80%)	40,247
17	Hindi	3,710 (0.33%)	3,990 (0.30%)	39,803
18	Portuguese	3,027 (0.27%)	1,798 (0.13%)	38,560
19	Khmer (Cambodian)	2,899 (0.26%)	4,718 (0.35%)	38,026
20	Urdu	2,761 (0.24%)	2,800 (0.21%)	36,083

ETHNICITY TRENDS

What is the current ethnic demographic makeup of EL-classified students and how has this changed over the last five years?

Table 3 depicts the top 20 largest public school districts, the total number of students designated EL, and the percent of the student body who are designated EL. **Figure 5** and **Table 5** depict how the ethnicity of EL-classified students has changed in the last five years. Consistent with declining enrollment rates, the absolute number of EL students in each racial-ethnic group declined. However, the proportional enrollment rate of most ethnic groups of English Learners stayed the same. The proportion of White EL students increased by 0.1%, as did the proportion of American Indian or Alaskan Native EL students. The proportion of Hispanic or Latino EL students increased by 0.2%. The only ethnic group of EL students to decline in proportion were Filipino EL students, who decreased in overall proportion by -0.2%.

Figure 5: Changes in the Ethnicity of EL-Classified Students, 2018-2022

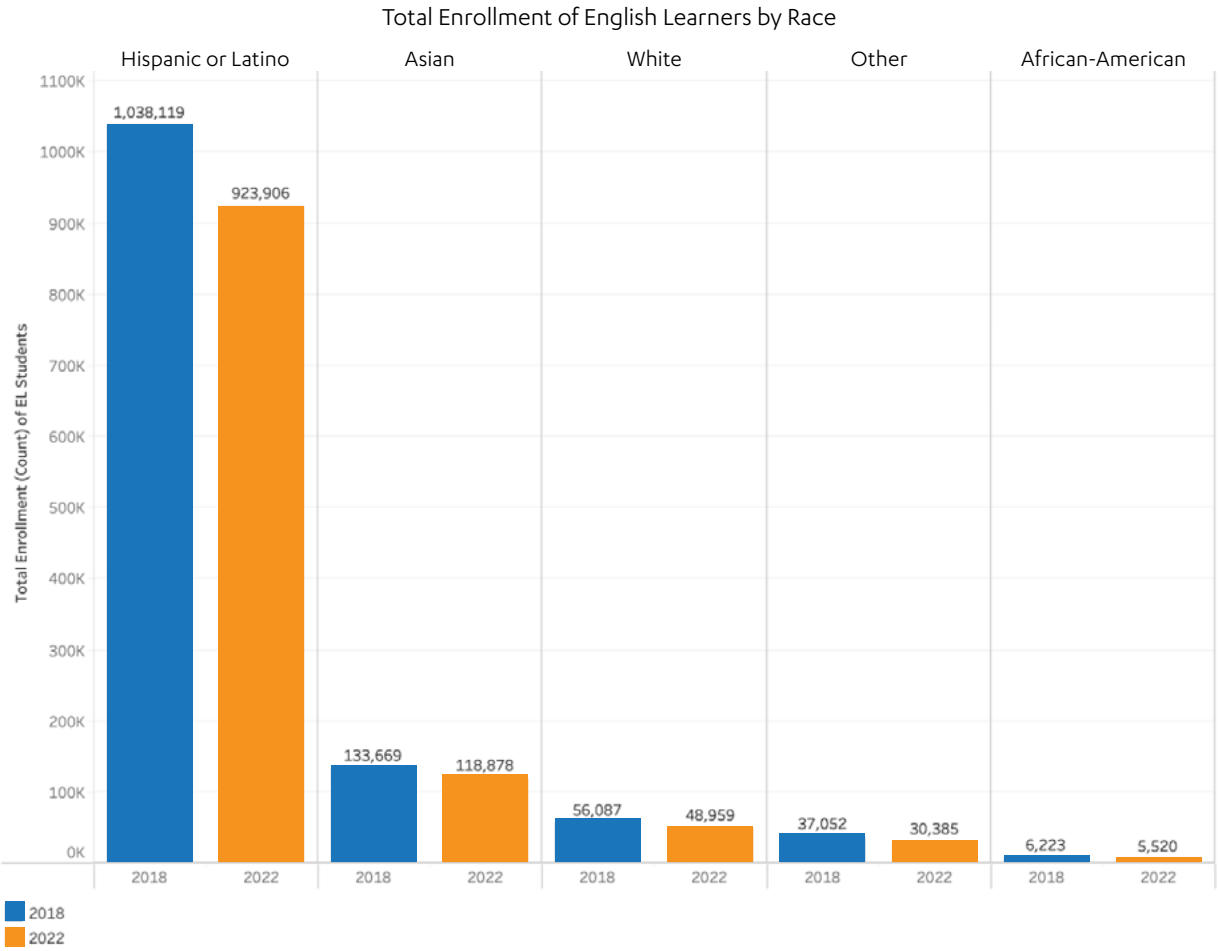


Table 5: Changes in the Ethnicity of EL-Classified Students, 2018-2022

Ethnicity	Enrollment Totals in SY 21-22 (Count & Percent)	EL Enrollment Totals in SY 2017-18 (Count & Percent)	5-Year Change
African American	5,520 (0.5%)	6,223 (0.5%)	-703 (0%)
American Indian or Alaska Native	1,721 (0.2%)	1,734 (0.1%)	-13 (0.1%)
Asian	118,878 (10.5%)	133,669 (10.5%)	-14,791 (0%)
Filipino	11,954 (1.1%)	16,509 (1.3%)	-4,555 (-0.2%)
Hispanic or Latino	923,906 (81.9%)	1,038,119 (81.7%)	-114,213 (0.2%)
Pacific Islander	3,258 (0.3%)	4,008 (0.3%)	-750 (0%)
White	48,959 (4.3%)	56,087(4.4%)	-7,128 (0.1%)
Two or More Races	4,702 (0.4%)	5,040 (0.4%)	-338 (0%)
Not Reported	8,750 (0.8%)	9,761 (0.8%)	-1,011 (0%)
Total	**1,127,648**	**1,271,150**	**-143,502**

CONCLUSION

CA MTSS is a comprehensive framework that aligns academic, behavioral, social and emotional learning, and mental health supports in a fully integrated system of support for the benefit of all students.[7] Understanding the landscape of language learners in California may be helpful in informing policy and implementation recommendations that help CA MTSS to provide targeted, impactful support to EL-classified students. The findings presented here paint a portrait of the English language learners enrolled in California's public schools—one that highlights the rich diversity of this cohort of students and the opportunities to better support them. California's multi-tiered system of supports can, when implemented correctly, provide the holistic support necessary for academic progress and well-being.

7 According to the Orange County Department of Education

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementing CA MTSS for English language learners should emphasize the rich diversity of this group: Often EL-classified students are discussed as a monolith, agnostic of the diversity in their language, racial, and cultural identities. This study has highlighted that although the majority of English language learners are Latinx Spanish speakers, they are certainly not uniform. Over 15% of EL-classified students speak a language other than Spanish and over 18% identify as a race other than Hispanic or Latinx. To ensure inclusive, impactful implementation of CA MTSS will require translation and interpretation resources commensurate with this diversity. It will require a culturally and linguistically responsive approach to implementation to ensure that teachers, counselors, and school leaders implement CA MTSS with EL-classified students and their families in culturally responsive, identity-affirming ways.

Providing targeted implementation support to districts with larger numbers or proportions of EL-classified students and lower records of progress: Some districts enroll a significantly larger portion of ELs than others (see the districts in **Table 2**) or a significantly larger number of ELs (see the districts in **Table 3**). Districts with high proportions of EL-classified students and lower records of progress include Santa Clara County Office of Education, Oxnard, and Westminster (for more information see **Table 2**). The districts with significantly larger numbers of EL-classified students and lower records of progress include those in Table 3, such as Oakland and Fresno. These districts are where MTSS can and should provide targeted support.

Provide targeted support and learning opportunities for using MTSS to differentiate EL support: MTSS is designed to assist with differentiation in education. However, differentiation becomes more challenging when there is less uniformity within educational settings. Allocate additional resources and funding to districts to help them implement effective MTSS strategies and provide appropriate support tailored to the needs of EL-classified students.

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