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The Landscape of Language Learners in California's MTSS

The State of Reclassification

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CONTENTS

01 Summary

02 About the Series

03 Key Findings: Trends in LTEL, RFEP, and Newcomer Designation

06 Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

07 References

SUMMARY

This brief is part of the Landscape of Language Learners in California's MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support). **This brief presents key findings on English-Learner classified students (ELs) in California and their reclassification, offering valuable insights for policymakers and educators.** It depicts trends related to academic performance, namely trends in English-Learner classified student[1] reclassification rates.

Key findings include:

- **The number of Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) students has shown an upward trend,** with an increase from 183,272 in 2017 to 193,899 in 2018.
- **The overall enrollment of ELs has declined** from 1,332,405 in 2017 to 1,062,290 in 2021.
- **The percentage of ELs in the overall enrollment has decreased** from 21.4% in 2017 to 17.7% in 2021.
- **The reclassification rate for ELs has varied,** with the highest rate of 14.6% in 2018 and the lowest rate of 6.9% in 2021.
- **In the top 10 largest districts,** the proportion of ELs who are Long-Term English-Learner classified students (LTELs) ranges from 13.1% to 21.9%.
- **The percentage of Ever-ELs who are RFEP in the top 10 districts** ranges from 37.1% to 53.9%.

Based on these findings, a set of policy recommendations is proposed to leverage the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework in supporting EL reclassification. The recommendations include implementing targeted interventions for LTELs, ensuring comprehensive language support, promoting collaboration and professional development, utilizing data-informed decision-making, fostering family and community engagement, offering transition support for reclassified students, and allocating adequate resources.

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.

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% 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.

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

KEY FINDINGS: TRENDS IN LTEL, RFEP, AND NEWCOMER DESIGNATION

What is the current number of LTELs, RFEPs, and newcomers in California and how has this changed over the last five years?

Many terms are used to describe English-Learner classified students and monitor EL student progress. The California Department of Education defines the following:[3]

- **English Learner (EL):** A student in kindergarten through grade 12 for whom there is a report of a language other than English
- **Long-Term English Learner (LTEL):** An English-Learner Classified student to which all of the following apply: (1) is enrolled on Census Day (the first Wednesday in October) in grades 6 to 12, inclusive; and (2) has been enrolled in a U.S. school for six or more years; and (3) has remained at the same English language proficiency level for two or more consecutive prior years, or has regressed to a lower English language proficiency level, as determined by the English Language Proficiency Assessment of California (ELPAC)
- **Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP):** A student in kindergarten through grade 12 who, upon entering public school in California, is identified as an EL and subsequently reclassified/re-designated in California, as proficient in English. EC 313 criteria include, but are not limited to, an assessment of English proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing as currently measured by the ELPAC (prior to the 2017–18 school year the CELDT was used), teacher evaluation of curriculum mastery, parental opinion/consultation, and student's performance of basic skills, as measured by the CAASPP-ELA that demonstrates sufficient proficiency in English to participate effectively in a curriculum designed for students of the same age whose native language is English
- **Ever-EL:** A student who is currently an EL or who was formerly designated as an EL, but who has now been reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP)
- **Newcomer:** According to CDE, newcomers refer to "foreign-born students who have recently arrived in the United States. Newcomer students may include, but are not limited to, asylees, refugees, unaccompanied youth, undocumented youth, migratory students, and other immigrant children and youth identified by the local educational agencies (LEAs)."[4]

Over the five-year period covered in Table 1, there have been notable changes in the number of students in each designation category. Comparing the data across years, it is evident that the numbers within each designation category have fluctuated. For instance, the number of Ever-EL students has decreased since 2018. This is not necessarily due to an increasing trend in reclassifications, but in lower numbers of newcomer students as well as lower numbers of younger ELs (those who have been EL-classified for less than five years and for the most part are in elementary school). The number of LTELs, however, has grown considerably since 2018 and could present significant challenges for school districts that enroll high proportions of these students.

Table 1: Enrollment by English Learner (EL) Designation (2018–22)

Year	Newcomer 0-3 Years	EL 4-5 Years	LTEL 6+ Years	EL Total	RFEP	Total (Ever-EL)
2022	497,471	227,223	402,954	1,127,648	963,056	2,090,704
2021	463,337	237,471	361,482	1,062,290	1,053,625	2,115,915
2020	576,805	367,177	204,042	1,148,024	1,133,977	2,282,001
2019	607,888	245,117	342,983	1,195,988	1,131,092	2,327,080
2018	658,390	394,625	218,135	1,271,150	1,104,495	2,375,645

3 We recognize the deficit implications of many of these terms and in our own writing often use other terms such as English-learner classified, emergent-bilingual or dual-language learners. In this brief however, and for simplicity, we use the California Department of Education's preferred terms. For more information, please see: https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/longtermel/Glossary.aspx.
4 For more information, please see: https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/newcomerstudnts.asp

These findings highlight the importance of ongoing monitoring and support for students' English language learning journey. The increase in LTELs suggests the need for targeted interventions and resources to help these students achieve English proficiency. However, it is worth noting that this trend might also reflect a trend that other research has reported: English-Learner classified student disengagement during virtual instruction wrought by the pandemic.[5] As many California districts moved to virtual instruction, they struggled to engage students regularly in classes. This meant that many English-Learner classified students missed out on targeted language development during this time. Additionally, the growth in the number of students achieving RFEP status demonstrates the progress made in supporting English-Learner classified students' language development.

How has enrollment of English-Learner classified students, Fluent-English Proficient (FEP) Students, and RFEP students changed over the last five years?

Over the last five years, there has been a noticeable change in the enrollment of English-Learner classified students (ELs), Fluent-English Proficient (FEP) students, and students reclassified as FEP in California. The table presents the enrollment trends and reclassification rates from 2017 to 2021.

There has been a consistent decline in EL-classified enrollment since 2017. This represents a decrease of approximately 20% over the five-year period. EL-classified students now represent 17.7% of total enrollment in the state.

Reclassification percentages indicate the proportion of English-Learner classified students re-designated as RFEP since the previous census. After hovering around 14%, the reclassification rate took a sharp dip in 2021 to 6.9%. This could have been due to COVID-19 restrictions that made it difficult to assess EL students for linguistic proficiency (which is needed for reclassification). Future data should indicate whether this was an anomaly or whether there really is a downward trend in reclassification.

Table 2: English-Learner classified students and Reclassified Fluent-English-Proficient Students: Enrollment Trends and Reclassification Rates (2017–21)

Year	English-Learner classified students (Number and Percentage)	Students Re-designated Fluent English Proficient (Number and Percentage)
2021	1,062,290 (17.7%)	79,667 (6.9%)
2020	1,148,024 (18.6%	164,653 (13.8%)
2019	1,195,988 (19.3%)	175,746 (13.8%)
2018	1,271,150 (20.4%)	193,899 (14.6%)
2017	1,332,405 (21.4%)	183,272 (13.3%)

At the time of completion, the 2021–22 reclassification rate had not been released. Therefore, we report the statewide reclassification data up to SY 2020–21.

5 For more information, see here: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/english-learners-covid-19-pandemic-policy-ideas

In the top 10 largest districts, what are the numbers and percentages of English-Learner classified students who are LTELs and RFEPs?

Table 3 depicts the count of LTEL and RFEP students in the top 10 largest districts in California, as well as the percentage of Ever-ELs that are LTELs and RFEPs.

The analysis of EL student data and reclassification rates in the top 10 largest school districts in California reveals some notable trends. Across these districts, there are variations in the numbers and percentages of LTEL and RFEP students. Among the largest districts, there is a range in the proportion of LTELs among the EL population. For instance, Fresno Unified and Elk Grove Unified School Districts have relatively higher percentages of LTELs at 21.9% and 15.9% respectively, indicating a significant number of students who have been identified as long-term English-Learner classified students. On the other hand, San Francisco Unified and San Juan Unified School Districts have lower percentages of LTELs at 14.2% and 13.1%, respectively.

Regarding RFEP students, there is also variability among the districts. Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and Long Beach Unified School District have higher percentages of RFEPs at 53.9% and 51.9%, respectively. These districts have made substantial progress in reclassifying English-Learner-classified students as fluent English proficient.

It is worth noting that reclassification rates can be influenced by various factors, including district policies, instructional practices, and the support provided to English-Learner classified students. Additionally, the reclassification rates reported are for the 2020–21 school year, and it is important to consider the possibility of fluctuations in rates over time due to external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, the analysis highlights the importance of monitoring and addressing the needs of English-Learner classified students, particularly LTELs who may require targeted interventions and support to improve their English proficiency. Efforts to increase the reclassification rates and facilitate successful transitions for English-Learner classified students into mainstream English-only classrooms should be a priority for these large districts in California.

Table 3: EL student data and reclassification rates in the largest California school districts

Rank	District Name	Number of current EL students	Number of LTELs	Percentage Ever-ELs that Are LTELs	Number of RFEPs	Percentage Ever-ELs that Are RFEPs	District Reclassification Count and Rate+
1	Los Angeles Unified**	116,930	30,461	12.0%	136,954	53.9%	6,414 (5.4%)
2	San Diego Unified*	22,453	7,121	17.0%	19,485	46.5%	2,297 (9.6%)
3	Fresno Unified	14,130	5,491	21.9%	10,971	43.7%	178 (1.4%)
4	Long Beach Unified**	10,505	3,844	17.6%	11,349	51.9%	252 (2.4%)
5	Elk Grove Unified	10,496	3,164	15.9%	9,383	47.2%	26 (0.3%)
6	San Francisco Unified	14,598	3,642	14.2%	11,065	43.1%	1,931 (11.4%)
7	San Bernardino City Unified	11,157	3,609	16.5%	10,707	49.0%	623 (5.6%)
8	Corona-Norco Unified	7,381	2,656	18.9%	6,696	47.6%	832 (10.7%)
9	Capistrano Unified	4,805	1,698	19.6%	3,862	44.6%	481 (10.1%)
10	San Juan Unified	7,578	1,581	13.1%	4,479	37.1%	253 (3.6%)

*Indicates a Phase 1 district in OCDE's MTSS implementation
**Indicates a Phase 2 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.

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings presented in this brief provide valuable insights into the trends and characteristics of English-Learner (EL) students in California and their reclassification. Based on the findings presented, here are some policy recommendations on how Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) can support reclassification for English-Learner classified students (ELs):

- **Provide targeted interventions within the MTSS framework** to help address the needs of Long-Term English-Learner classified students (LTELs). LTELs, who have been English-Learner classified students for six or more years and have not made significant progress in English proficiency, require specific interventions tailored to their individual needs. Because many LTELs have lived and attended school only in the U.S., the support that these students need might be served through instruction and interventions that work for non-EL-classified students struggling with literacy development. These interventions could include intensive language instruction, academic support, and culturally responsive teaching practices.

- **Provide comprehensive language support** to English-Learner classified students throughout their educational journey. This includes providing high-quality English Language Development (ELD) instruction, access to bilingual education programs when appropriate, and ongoing monitoring of their progress in language acquisition. MTSS can facilitate the coordination and delivery of these language support services across tiers of instruction.

- **Ensure coordination between ESL teachers, content-area teachers, and support staff** to support EL-classified students and improve reclassification rates. Districts can use the MTSS framework and supports to provide targeted professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills in working with ELs, including strategies for language development, cultural responsiveness, and differentiation of instruction.

- **Utilize data collected through ongoing assessments,** such as the English Language Proficiency Assessments, to inform instructional decisions and interventions for ELs. Regularly analyze data to identify trends, monitor progress, and determine the effectiveness of interventions. MTSS can provide a framework for using data to make informed decisions and adjust instruction accordingly.

- **Develop a systematic and supportive transition process** for English-Learner classified students who have achieved Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) status. Ensure that RFEP students receive continued academic support to help them successfully transition into mainstream English-only classrooms. Monitor their progress to address any potential challenges they may face during this transition.

- **Allocate sufficient resources,** including personnel, materials, and professional development opportunities, to support English-Learner classified students within the MTSS framework. Consider the specific needs of English-Learner classified students and the districts with a higher concentration of English-Learner classified students when allocating resources to ensure equitable access to support services.

By incorporating these policy recommendations into the implementation of MTSS, districts can enhance their support for ELs, improve reclassification rates, and promote equitable educational opportunities for all students. It is essential to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies and make adjustments based on ongoing data analysis and feedback from stakeholders.

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