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The Landscape of Language Learners in California's MTSS

The State of Academic Performance

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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 trends related to academic performance, namely trends in English-Learner (EL) classified student¹ performance on Math and English Language Arts (ELA) SBAC (Smarter Balanced Assessment System) assessments. California's multi-tiered system of supports, or 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 to benefit all students.² By providing a comprehensive and individualized approach to academic support, MTSS can help EL-classified students overcome academic challenges and achieve academic success.

This brief describes trends in academic performance across districts, time, and student groups. The data reveals that EL-classified students have lower test scores than non-EL students—an unsurprising finding given that students are designated in EL status partly due to below-proficient test scores. The data also show, however, that students who have exited EL status—those deemed “Reclassified Fluent English Proficient”—perform better than other students, including English-Only students (EOs).

To address these disparities, policy recommendations are proposed. First, targeted support should be provided to districts with high concentrations of ELs, including resources for specialized language instruction, smaller class sizes, and comprehensive support services. Second, professional development opportunities should be offered to educators, focusing on evidence-based instructional practices that enhance language acquisition and academic achievement for EL-classified students. The importance of the CA MTSS framework is emphasized as a means to address EL needs and reduce disparities. CA MTSS provides structures, resources, and guidance for identifying and supporting the needs of EL-classified students, emphasizing comprehensive needs assessments, evidence-based instruction, culturally responsive practices, continuous progress monitoring, and collaboration and coordination among stakeholders.

By implementing targeted policies and leveraging the CA MTSS framework, educational institutions can create an inclusive and supportive environment that promotes the academic success of ELs.



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.

² According to the Orange County Department of Education

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 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.



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

KEY FINDINGS

In California, how does EL-classified performance on SBAC assessments compare to that of their peers, and how has this changed over the last five years?

Figures 1 and 2 depict the percentage of students who met the standard or performed above the standard on the Math and ELA SBAC scores from 2017 to 2022.⁴ The percentage of students who met the standard or performed above the standard are depicted for all students (All), reclassified fluent English proficient students (RFEP), students who were currently an EL or who were formerly designated as an EL but who have been reclassified fluent English (Ever-EL), and current English-Learner classified students (EL). Because the SBAC test was not offered in the 2019–2020 school year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, no scores are depicted for that year.

In 2021–22, only 9.2% of EL-classified students met or exceeded standards in mathematics, and only 12.5% met or exceeded standards in ELA. The statewide average for EL-classified students who met the proficiency standard for math continues to trail 2.9% points behind pre-pandemic. Math performance has historically trailed below ELA, with far fewer students performing at or above the proficiency standard.

Since the onset of COVID-19, average academic performance dropped for all students, but more so for EL-classified students. The results indicate that since the pandemic, performance across all subgroups has decreased in both math and English. EL performance has typically been far lower than their English-Only and Reclassified Fluent Proficient peers, and this continued to be true since 2020 and the disruptions in learning caused by the pandemic.

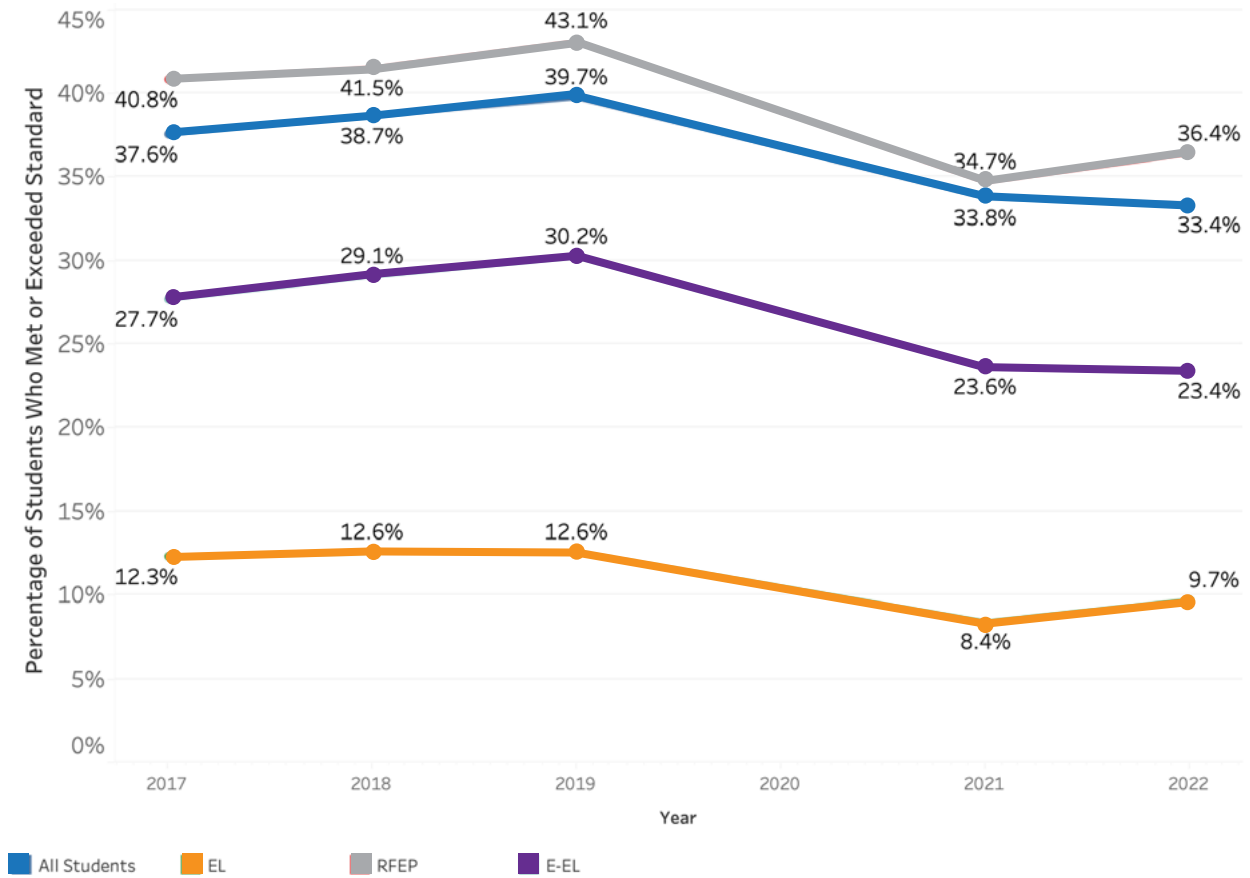
Comparing RFEP and EL students' performance suggests EL students can achieve at high levels, but tracking and lack of services, among other factors, may contribute to students not being able to exit the EL designation. One of the most consistent findings in the literature is that EL students are exposed to a lower-rigor curriculum during secondary school. In addition, there is a significant proportion of EL-classified students not receiving services that would allow them to reclassify before the end of elementary schools—and before most of the tracking into lower-rigor content happens.⁵



⁴ Due to factors surrounding the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, testing participation in 2020–21 varied.

⁵ Buenrostro & Maxwell-Jolly, 2021. Available: https://californianstogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Renewing_Our_Promise_to_LTEls.pdf

Figure 1. 5-Year Statewide Trends in Math SBAC Performance, 2017-22

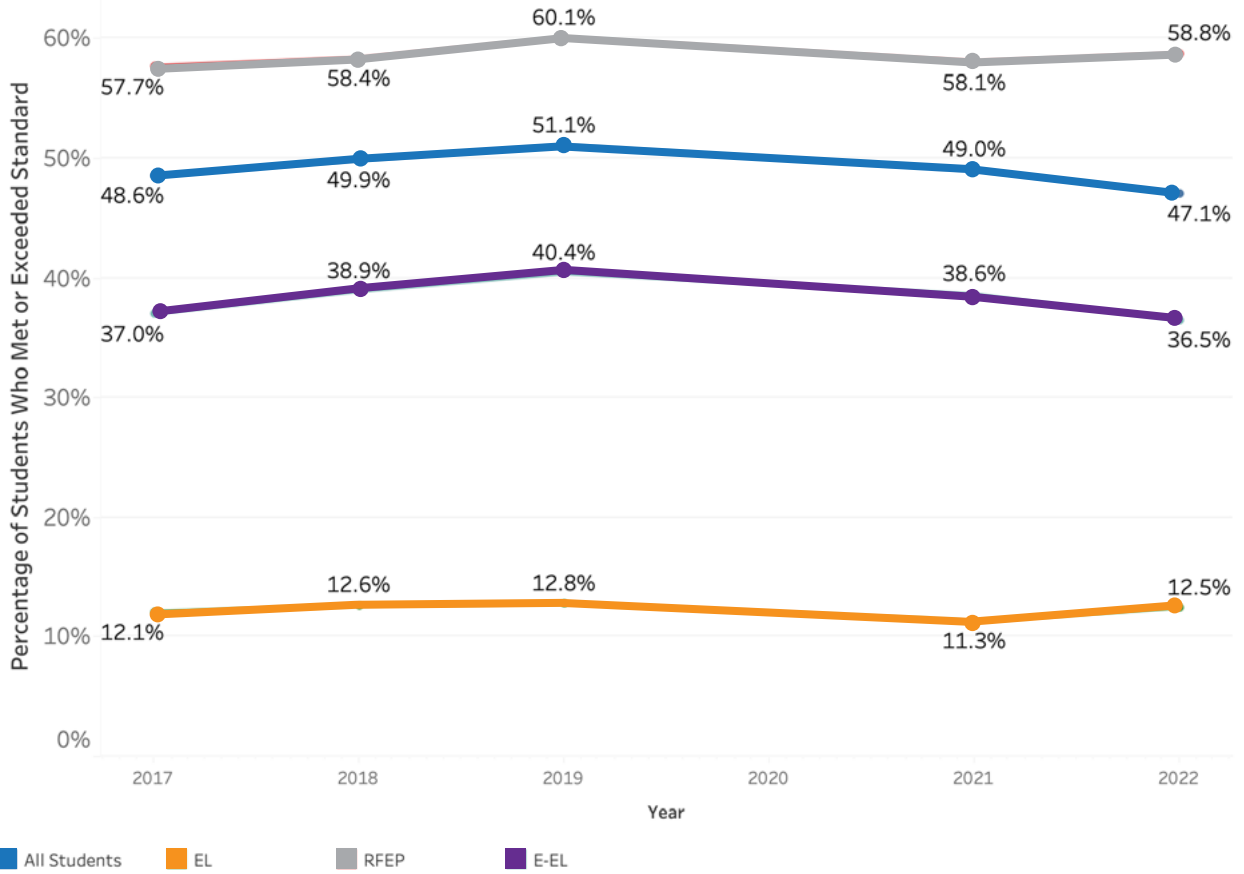


EL: current English-Learner classified students

RFEP: reclassified fluent English proficient students (RFEP)

E-EL (Ever-EL): students who were currently an EL or who were formerly designated as an EL but who have been reclassified fluent English

Figure 2. 5-Year Statewide Trends in ELA SBAC Performance, 2017-22



EL: current English-Learner classified students

RFEP: reclassified fluent English proficient students (RFEP)

E-EL (Ever-EL): students who were currently an EL or who were formerly designated as an EL but who have been reclassified fluent English

Table 1. Comparison of Math and ELA Proficiency Rates by Grade Level and Language Proficiency Status (percentage meeting or exceeding standards), 2021–22

Grade	Math			ELA		
	RFEP	Ever-EL	EL-classified	RFEP	Ever-EL	EL-classified
Grade 3	68.84%	30.83%	20.72%	68.15%	27.81%	16.81%
Grade 4	56.68%	27.46%	14.16%	66.07%	32.26%	16.52%
Grade 5	41.18%	21.79%	7.03%	63.20%	34.35%	13.68%
Grade 6	38.27%	23.25%	5.78%	55.90%	34.66%	9.09%
Grade 7	35.86%	22.67%	4.93%	59.00%	38.55%	10.36%
Grade 8	30.54%	20.90%	3.31%	53.28%	37.08%	6.70%
Grade 11	24.65%	19.22%	2.64%	58.36%	46.07%	7.74%
All Grades	36.38%	23.39%	9.71%	58.75%	36.48%	12.47%

In California, how does EL-classified performance on SBAC assessments vary across grades?

EL students have higher academic performance in elementary than in the secondary grades. This is due to how the EL designation works: It is partly based on meeting or exceeding expectations in standardized tests such as SBAC. As students continue in EL status through secondary school, the quality of their educational experience is diminished—one of the factors that has been found to be related to worse academic performance.



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.

In the top 15 largest school districts, how do EL-classified students compare to their peers on SBAC assessments?

Table 2 depicts the percentage of students who met the standard or performed above the standard on the Math and ELA SBAC scores from 2017 to 2022 in the 15 largest districts. The percentage of students who met the standard or performed above the standard are depicted for: reclassified fluent English proficient students (RFEP), students who were currently an EL or who were formerly designated as an EL, but who have been reclassified fluent English (Ever-EL), and current English-Learner classified students (EL).

In most of the largest districts, the percentage of EL students and Ever-EL students who performed at or above the standard in math and ELA trailed significantly behind reclassified students. In terms of math performance in the top 15 largest districts, there is a 27-point difference in the average between the percentage of RFEP and EL who meet or exceed the standard. The disparity is even greater for ELA performance. In terms of math performance in the top twenty largest districts, there is a 47 percentage point difference between the percent of RFEP students and EL students who meet or exceed the standard. This suggests there is something in the EL-educational experience in these districts that is not conducive to higher achievement.

Collectively, these districts enroll over 268,000 EL-classified students—or about 24% of the state's EL-classified students—and yet there are significant variations in performance across these districts. In the state as a whole, 19% of students are classified as ELs. Some of these districts enroll similar proportions of ELs but report starkly different achievement outcomes. Other districts enroll similar proportions of ELs as the state average yet perform well below the state average. Intervention in these 15 districts would have an enormous impact as collectively they account for close to one-quarter of EL enrollment in the state.

Higher ELPI Status levels generally correspond to higher proficiency rates for EL students in both Math and ELA. English Learner Status is an indicator provided by the California Department of Education. ELPI Status measures progress toward English language proficiency (ELP).⁶ There are five status levels that represent a district's overall progress in supporting English language proficiency (see **Table 3**). Districts with higher ELPI Status levels, such as Elk Grove Unified, San Francisco Unified, and Corona-Norco Unified, tend to have higher proficiency rates for EL students. These districts demonstrate a greater overall progress in supporting English language proficiency, which positively impacts EL students' performance on SBAC assessments. In contrast, districts with lower ELPI Status levels, like Santa Ana Unified and Sacramento City Unified, have lower proficiency rates for EL students. These districts may need additional support and resources to enhance their English language programs and improve EL students' academic achievement.

Overall, the trends suggest that there is variation in the performance of EL students across the top fifteen largest school districts in California. Some districts show higher proficiency rates for EL students, indicating potentially more effective language support programs and instructional strategies, while others demonstrate lower proficiency rates, pointing to the need for targeted interventions and resources. Narrowing the performance gap between EL and RFEP students, and between Ever-EL and all students remains a key challenge.



⁶ 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.

Table 2. EL-Classified Student Performance on ELA and Math SBAC Assessments in California's 15 Largest Districts

Rank	District Name	EL-classified students (2022)	ELPI Status Level*	Math			ELA		
				RFEP	Ever-EL	EL-classified	RFEP	Ever-EL	EL-classified
1	Los Angeles Unified**	21.3%	3	28.3%	5.38%	19.79%	47.38%	5.12%	32.17%
2	San Diego Unified*	19.6%	3	36.18%	9.86%	24.99%	55.13%	11.44%	37.07%
3	Fresno Unified	19.5%	2	30.43%	7.71%	18.85%	52.52%	9.32%	30.6%
4	Long Beach Unified**	15.6%	2	32.51%	8.74%	22.11%	55.84%	13.25%	37.37%
5	Elk Grove Unified	16.7%	3	50.21%	16.27%	34.06%	71.4%	19.22%	46.91%
6	San Francisco Unified	26.3%	2	54.64%	20%	37.89%	69.71%	18.03%	39.77%
7	San Bernardino City Unified	21.9%	3	25.91%	8.43%	17.57%	52.13%	11.79%	32.99%
8	Corona-Norco Unified	14.5%	3	42.63%	12.62%	28.48%	67.77%	15.83%	43.64%
9	Capistrano Unified	9.6%	3	48.02%	14.3%	31.79%	69.71%	16.16%	32.16%
10	San Juan Unified	15.4%	3	33.18%	5.29%	15.6%	54.94%	7.74%	26.48%
11	Oakland Unified	33.3%	2	35.53%	7.99%	16.86%	57.05%	9.67%	25.35%
12	Santa Ana Unified	40.4%	3	25.81%	5.98%	15.98	46.94%	8.19%	27.8%
13	Sacramento City Unified	19.5%	3	37.98%	7.99%	18.59%	62.08%	10.42%	29.06%
14	Kern High***	9.4%	2	14.68%	0.63%	11.99%	51.53%	3.89%	42.65%
15	Clovis Unified	4.8%	4	49.89%	19.26%	38.53%	75.44%	25.4%	57%

*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.

+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 2021-22 school year.

Table 3. English Learner Progress Indicator Status Levels

Status Level (Denotes Progress)	Numeric Level	Percentage of EL-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%

Does the percentage of EL-classified students in a district predict district performance on Math and ELA SBAC assessments?⁷

The percentage of ELs in a district is not related to mathematics achievement. Our analysis reveals a significant and negative relationship between the number of EL-classified students in a district and performance on the ELA assessment. This is to be expected given how the EL-designation occurs. With mathematics, we did not observe a statistically significant relationship between the number of EL-classified students in a district and performance on the SBAC Math assessment.



⁷ We used robust standard errors to help us answer the question, “Does the number of English-Learner classified students in a district predict performance on the end-of-year Math or English SBAC assessments?” By employing robust standard errors and controlling for other district characteristics, we aimed to examine whether the concentration of English-Learner classified students in a district predicts academic performance.

CONCLUSION

The data indicate that only a small percentage of EL-classified students are meeting or exceeding standards in ELA and mathematics. The results on ELA are to be expected, since these tests are used in the EL-designation. But the dire results in math highlight an important roadblock for these students to graduate high school and go on to college. The data suggest that the current educational system may not adequately support the progression and achievement of EL-classified students, particularly as they advance to higher grade levels.

There is wide variation even in districts with similar proportions of EL students. This is consistent with our regression analysis that suggests that the number of EL students (or proportion) is not related to mathematics achievement once other district characteristics are controlled for.⁸ Thus, even districts with high proportions of EL students are able to over-perform. We focused our analysis on the 15 largest districts (in terms of EL enrollment). Considering that the top 15 largest districts collectively enroll nearly 345,928 students, accounting for approximately 24% of the state's English-Language learners, these findings underscore the urgent need for targeted support to address the academic achievement gap among English-Language learning students.

To improve overall academic outcomes for EL-classified students, policymakers should consider allocating additional resources and support to districts to provide targeted interventions, such as specialized language instruction, smaller class sizes, and comprehensive support services. ELs should be afforded equitable access to content and rigor, particularly in secondary schools — where results tend to be particularly low. Furthermore, professional development opportunities for educators should emphasize evidence-based instructional practices that enhance language acquisition and academic achievement for EL-classified students. By addressing the unique needs of EL-classified students and implementing targeted interventions, districts can strive toward improving outcomes in ELA and ensuring equitable education for all students, regardless of language background.



⁸ While the relationship with ELA achievement is statistically significant, we do not highlight that here because EL status depends partially on underachieving in ELA. In other words, by design EL students will have lower ELA test scores than non-EL students.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

CA MTSS may provide the structures, resources, and guidance to address EL needs and reduce disparities. CA MTSS is a framework that provides a systematic approach to identifying and supporting the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of all students, including EL-classified students. CA MTSS can support the academic achievement of EL-classified students in a number of ways, including:

- **Comprehensive needs assessments:** CA MTSS requires that schools conduct comprehensive needs assessments to identify the specific needs of their EL-classified student population. This includes assessing their academic, linguistic, cultural, and social-emotional needs.
- **Evidence-based instruction:** CA MTSS emphasizes the use of evidence-based instructional practices that have been shown to be effective for EL-classified students. This includes using explicit language instruction, providing opportunities for language practice and development, and integrating language and content instruction.

- **Culturally responsive practices:** CA MTSS promotes the use of culturally responsive practices that acknowledge and value the cultural and linguistic diversity of EL-classified students. This includes involving families and communities in the education process, providing bilingual resources and support, and creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment.
- **Continuous progress monitoring:** CA MTSS emphasizes the importance of continuous progress monitoring to assess the academic progress of EL-classified students and to adjust instruction and support as needed.
- **Collaboration and coordination:** CA MTSS emphasizes the importance of collaboration and coordination between teachers, administrators, families, and community partners to support the academic achievement of EL-classified students. This includes developing partnerships with community organizations, providing professional development for teachers and staff, and involving families in the education process.

By implementing targeted policies in these areas, educational institutions can create an inclusive and supportive environment that empowers EL-classified students to thrive academically. The aim should be to provide equitable opportunities for all students, regardless of their English proficiency level, and ensure their successful integration into the academic community.



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