



## English Language Learners and NAEP: Progress Through Inclusion

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two important developments have impacted English Language Learners (ELLs) in U.S. public schools during the past decade. The first is that their performance on standardized tests has become a meaningful factor in mainstream school accountability systems, a change stipulated in the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The second is that their numbers have continued to grow substantially, to a population of well over 5 million children, more than 10 percent of all U.S. students nationally, with increases concentrated in particular states and metropolitan areas.

Both developments have contributed to a broadening understanding that the implications of this group's academic progress extend far beyond their own diverse communities. To date, this has led to two results visible on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

First, English Learners are increasingly being included both on NAEP and in many state accountability systems. Nationally, the 24 percent of all English Learners who had been excluded from the fourth grade NAEP reading test in 2003 fell to 11 percent in 2011. Driving this trend were several states with the largest numbers of ELL students, particularly California, Arizona and Illinois. But other states, notably Maryland, New Jersey,

Kentucky and Texas, continued their widespread exclusion of large portions of their ELL populations.

Second, results on NAEP reading for English Learners have ranged from flat to slightly improved over this period, with more substantial gains at the lower ends of the achievement spectrum: proficiency rates in reading have generally held at the same, low levels (7 percent nationally) while the percent of EL students testing Basic or above has increased slightly (from 28 to 30 percent) over this period.

Each of these results included large numbers of students who had previously been excluded from the test, although the effect of their inclusion is unclear. While it has often been the case on standardized tests that excluding the lowest-performing students has been a strategy for raising average scores, such "gamesmanship" has not been documented on NAEP.

Among those states that are home to most of the nation's English Learners, California, which alone has one in four, reduced its exclusion rate from 12 percent in 2003 to 4 percent, while its rate of ELLs scoring at or above Proficient fell from 6 to 5 percent, and those scoring at Basic or above increased from 25 to 27 percent. Illinois reduced its exclusion rate from 46 to 8 percent over the same period, with testing outcomes virtually unchanged.

### Number and Percentage of ELL Enrollment Students, by State (2007-2008)

	Total ELL Enrollment	ELL Percent of National Total
California	1,526,036	28.7%
Texas	701,799	13.2%
Florida	234,934	4.4%
New York	213,000	4.0%
Illinois	175,454	3.3%
Arizona	166,572	3.1%
Nevada	134,377	2.5%
North Carolina	106,180	2.0%
Nation	5,318,164	

Source: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition

## INTRODUCTION

The educational landscape for English Language Learners (ELLs) in the United States was changed dramatically as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The federal law required bringing these students into mainstream systems of accountability so that their test scores, in effect, now count as much as those of any other child. As a result, many states took crucial steps including establishing what it means to be an English Learner, and from there proceeded toward including them in state testing systems and content standards.

The number of English Learners enrolled in U.S. elementary and secondary schools has been growing at a rapid rate in comparison to the general student population. The 3,540,673 ELLs enrolled in 1998-99, constituting 7.7 percent of all students, had grown to 5,346,673 in 2008-09, or 10.8 percent of all students.<sup>1</sup> These expanding numbers bring unique education challenges to schools all around the country.

While immigration patterns are certainly a contributing factor to the growth of ELLs, it would be highly inaccurate to think of all English Learners as immigrants. In fact, the 2000 Census showed that three out of five elementary school English Learners (59 percent) were born in this country to immigrant parents. Another one in five (18 percent) are actually third-generation Americans.

Of course, such statistics are not found uniformly, and this highly diverse population varies greatly from community to community. For example, as Heather MacDonald noted recently in an article for *City Journal*, 55 percent of Los Angeles County's child population has immigrant parents.<sup>2</sup>

English Learners participate more in educational accountability systems in all fifty states today than at any time in history. This represents a marked departure from the culture of minimal accountability for results that has largely characterized this sector of American public education for the past half century. "Prior to NCLB, the English Learner student population was often overlooked. Little to no accountability for the learning of these students existed," noted a report by the National Council of La Raza in 2006.<sup>3</sup>

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card, has served since 1990 as the common yardstick of how much students are learning. Since 2002, it has also served as a required instrument to add perspective to the results of individual states' standardized testing systems.

Comparing outcomes for English Learners across states is difficult for several reasons, even when they are taking the same national assessment. Many states have different definitions for what constitutes English Learner status, different content and English proficiency standards, and different tests and procedures. Within particular states, each of these has changed substantially during the past decade. As a result, English Learners' performance on the one test administered uniformly in every state, NAEP, runs the risk of comparing apples with oranges.

While NAEP scoring remains consistent across all states, policies in individual states impact results for English Learners in important ways. First, states set their own definitions and processes by which students are classified as English Learners when they take the

2 Heather MacDonald, "California's Demographic Revolution," *City Journal*, Winter 2012. [http://www.city-journal.org/2012/22\\_1\\_california-demographics.html](http://www.city-journal.org/2012/22_1_california-demographics.html)

3 Melissa Lazarín, "Improving Assessment and Accountability for English Language Learners in the No Child Left Behind Act," National Council of La Raza, 2006, p. 4.

1 [http://www.ncele.gwu.edu/files/uploads/9/growingLEP\\_0809.pdf](http://www.ncele.gwu.edu/files/uploads/9/growingLEP_0809.pdf)

test – a child considered an English Learner in one state may not be in another. Second, states are permitted to exclude certain English Learners from taking the test, and do so according to different, and often changing, policies. The same holds true for the use of testing accommodations, which vary significantly in both substance and frequency of use.

## THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

When comparing results for English Learners over this period, it is important to consider some changes caused by the implementation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The law fundamentally changed the way English Language Learners were identified, and assessed, and in many cases taught across U.S. public schools. For example:

- As a result of NCLB, identification of English Learners became much more standardized. Prior to the law, children from language minority backgrounds were assessed for English proficiency using a variety of different commercial tests. These included the Woodcock-Munoz Language Survey, the Language Assessment Scales, and the Basic Inventory of Natural Language – assessments that often produced unlike outcomes. Arizona did not use a statewide assessment, and relied on self-reported data by school districts.
- The 2001 changes brought English Learners into mainstream state accountability systems, often for the first time. Prior to NCLB, ELLs were regularly

excluded from standardized tests, and educated in a culture where accountability for results was minimal, and generally held little or no consequence for schools. Under NCLB, ELLs are one of the required subgroups whose performance on state assessments is used to determine whether schools meet goals for Adequate Yearly Progress. They are held to the same expectations as all other students concerning participation and results on standardized tests (although a grace period is permitted during which their scores do not count).

- Federal accountability requirements now mandate that schools demonstrate that ELL students are making progress toward proficiency in English.
- Federal funding for English language acquisition programs, previously provided under the Bilingual Education Act through competitive grants to school districts, was replaced in 2001 by formula funding to be allocated by states. Participating schools are subject to the same accountability requirements, in sharp contrast to the prior system where accountability for results was frequently selectively reported and based on minimal achievement goals.

A more recent development is the involvement of 27 states in the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium. Established in 2004, WIDA has worked to establish English Language proficiency standards and assessments, and to make gains across states improving their implementation and

**Grade 4 English Language Learners: NAEP Scores - Reading**

	At or Above Proficient			Below Basic		
	2003	2007	2011	2003	2007	2011
Nation (public)	7	7	7	72	70	70
Arizona	4	3	1	81	84	86
California	6	6	5	75	74	73
Florida	15	12	7	57	62	65
Illinois	5	3	5	78	77	77
Nevada	4	4	10	79	77	64
New York	5	5	5	73	74	71
North Carolina	15	8	7	56	64	68
Texas	7	9	9	73	62	62

alignment. Its work has driven promising progress in the instruction of English Learners in some states where their presence has increasingly impacted the overall education landscape, such as Illinois and New Mexico. But the consortium does not include other states with the largest ELL populations, such as California, Florida, New York, and Texas, where education officials have established their own policies and standards.

While NAEP inclusion for English Language Learners has improved nationally and in many states, prominent holdouts remain as well. As Foundation for Excellence in Education Senior Advisor Matthew Ladner has noted, a handful of states have declined to reduce ELL exclusions. These include Kentucky, where 63 percent of English Learners were excluded from the fourth-grade NAEP reading assessment, as well as Maryland (48 percent excluded), New Jersey (45 percent), Delaware (37 percent), North Dakota (36 percent), Georgia (31 percent) and Texas (25 percent).

Local school staff are responsible for making inclusion decisions for specific children based on written criteria provided by NAEP staff. The NAEP and its governing body, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), have emphasized greater inclusion of English Learners, particularly since state participation in NAEP was made mandatory in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.<sup>4</sup> A technical advisory panel on uniform national rules for NAEP testing of English Language Learners recommended in 2009 that all ELLs who have attended U.S. schools for one year or more be included in the test.<sup>5</sup> The panel observed that a uniform participation rate of 95 percent of all English Learners adopted as a target by the test's governing board. The 2011 Reading NAEP retained an inclusion goal of 85 percent for ELLs.

In 2005, NAGB issued a series of resources and a decision tree detailing and clarifying the relevant process for local decisionmakers. These, in combination with other state inclusion policies for standardized tests, have contributed to the increase in English Learners tested.

The NAEP governing body has also approved some specific ELL testing accommodations designed to address the linguistic needs of students who are in the process of learning English. Starting in 2002, such accommodations, while limited, have been made more widely available to schools.<sup>6</sup> Approved accommodations for English Learners taking NAEP reading include extended time, small group test administration, and breaks. The 2009 advisory panel recommended that these be expanded significantly.<sup>7</sup>

## RESULTS

Geographic concentration of English Language Learners has been quite common in the United States. Subsequently, eight states (California, Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois, Arizona, Nevada and North Carolina) are home to more than 60 percent of them. California alone has more than one-fourth of all ELL students enrolled in this country. The following analysis discusses trends in NAEP fourth grade reading scores along with other developments.

### Achievement levels and examples of knowledge and skills for fourth grade reading

*Basic* denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade.

Example: Interpret a character's statement to describe a character trait.

*Proficient* represents solid academic performance. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter.

Example: Recognize the main problem that the character faces in a story.

*Advanced* represents superior performance.

Example: Use story events to support an opinion about story type.

### California

Proficiency rates by California ELLs on fourth grade NAEP reading declined slightly, to 5 percent between

4 "SD/LEP Inclusions/Exclusions in NAEP: An Investigation of Factors Affecting SD/LEP Inclusions/Exclusions in NAEP, Final Report," American Institutes for Research, January 2007, p. 1.

5 "Technical Advisory Panel on Uniform National Rules for NAEP Testing of English Language Learners," Report to the National Assessment Governing Board, July 22, 2009, p. 4.

6 American Institutes for Research, p. 1.

7 Technical Advisory Panel, p. 4.

2003 and 2011. ELLs scoring at or above Basic increased from 25 to 27 percentage points. But these scores were achieved amid dramatic changes in the population tested, particularly among students who are generally lower performers. In 2003, 12 percent of English Learners were excluded from the fourth-grade NAEP reading assessment (4 percent of the overall population). By 2011, only 4 percent were excluded (or 1 percent of the total fourth grade population).

These trends hold generally compared with other statewide results for this population, with the largest gains at the lowest end of the achievement spectrum. For example, sixth-grade English Learners have improved their scores on the California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) assessment, improving the percentage scoring at Basic or above at a significantly faster rate than the rest of the student population, particularly between 2007 and 2009. State officials report no changes in cut scores on the state assessments over this period that would have impacted the results.

Nearly 30 percent of all English Learners in U.S. public schools live in California, where this population totals over 1.5 million.

### Arizona

Among states with large English Learner populations, Arizona has consistently shown the lowest proficiency rates in fourth grade reading by these students, and the highest rates of ELL students testing at “Below Basic” levels. While these rates have fallen between 2003 and 2011, the rate at which English Learners have been excluded from NAEP has also decreased at even greater rates. In 2003, 21 percent of fourth grade English Learners were excluded from NAEP reading. In 2011, that rate had fallen to just one percent.

Still, only one percent of English Learners scored at Proficient on fourth grade NAEP reading in 2011, and 86 percent tested at Below Basic. In the 2007-08 school year, Arizona had 1,087,447 English Learners in grades K-12, or 15 percent of the public school population.

Prior to the 2004-05 school year, Arizona lacked a statewide system of determining a child’s status as

an English Learner. Each school district used a different home language survey, and reported their own data to the state Department of Education. As a result, a student classified in one school district as an English Learner would not necessarily have held this designation in another district. This complicated any standard measurement of progress by ELL students statewide, and undermines the reliability of comparisons of results before and after the change.

### Illinois

Illinois had 175,454 English Learners enrolled during the 2007-08 school year, or 8 percent of its overall elementary and secondary school population.

Although there have been recent improvements, two factors have long characterized English Learners’ involvement in Illinois public education: little accountability for their academic progress and exclusion from most assessments. Changes have largely been driven by federal requirements.

As a result, Illinois had a 1,141 percent increase in ELL students taking the fourth grade state reading test as a result of NCLB testing rules. The rate at which they were excluded from the fourth grade NAEP reading test was less dramatic, but still more than five times higher in 2003 than in 2011. In 2003, an unfortunate 46 percent of fourth-grade ELLs were excluded from the NAEP reading assessment. In 2011, this number had declined to just 8 percent.

Perhaps more than any other large city school system in recent decades, the Chicago Public Schools has shielded programs for English Learners from transparency and accountability for academic results. Since, in general, students excluded from standardized tests in Illinois have tended to be the lowest performers, the recent trend toward inclusion is more likely to have placed downward, rather than upward pressure on test scores.

Despite these major increases in participation by low-scoring students, Illinois’ results on fourth grade NAEP reading held consistent over this period. The



percent of ELLs testing Proficient held at 5, while those testing Below Basic fell from 78 to 77 percent.

Illinois remains one of just a handful of states that require schools to offer bilingual education, and the only one among the states with the largest English Learner populations.

### Florida

At first glance, Florida's English Learners demonstrated serious declines in achievement, with 8 percentage points fewer testing at Proficient, and 8 percentage points more testing Below Basic in 2011 than in 2003. But the state deserves substantial credit for including these students at a much higher rate – three times as many were excluded from the test in 2003 than in 2011, a decline from 23 percent of identified English Learners to 8 percent.

Earlier this year, Florida's application for a waiver from No Child Left Behind requirements was approved conditionally, based specifically on the need to ensure adequate accountability for the state's English Learners (along with students with disabilities). The first condition federal officials attached to the waiver was that the state change its plan to ensure that English Learners be more fully included in its accountability and support system.

### Nevada

Nevada has seen some of the nation's most dramatic, recent increases in its English Learner population during the past decade. During the 2007-08 school year, Nevada had 134,377 English Learners attending its schools, comprising 31 percent of its overall student population. This was nearly double the population of 72,000 English Learners in Nevada as recently as 2004-05.

Nonetheless, 10 percent of Nevada's fourth grade English Learners tested at or above Proficient in reading in 2011, up from just 4 percent in 2003. And while 79 percent tested Below Basic in 2003, just 64 percent did in 2011.

### Texas

While Texas made some progress toward the national trend of greater inclusion on NAEP, it made far less than other states with large ELL populations, and trailed the national average. In 2003, one in three fourth grade ELL students (33 percent) were excluded from the test. In 2011, this exclusion had fallen, but only slightly, to one in four (25 percent) excluded, still well above the national average of 11 percent.

This trend of limited gains in inclusion produced more students testing at Proficient levels on the fourth-grade NAEP reading test – 9 percent in 2011, up from 7 percent in 2003. The proportion testing Below Basic declined from 73 to 62 percent over this same period.

## CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

NAEP reading scores for English Learners over the past eight years have remained fairly flat. While it must be taken into account that a unique defining attribute of this particular student population is that it is effectively defined by its low performance, 7 percent proficiency rates and 70 percent of fourth graders testing Below Basic in reading represents an essential area for growth.

However, substantial progress has been made ending the historically high exclusion rates for English Learner students from the test. Bringing these students into the mainstream accountability system without scores for English Learners decreasing, constitutes some meaningful progress.

Ultimately, standardized assessments including NAEP simply offer perspectives on the performance students demonstrate based on the educational opportunities they receive. Few groups, if any, have been more challenged in terms of the opportunities to which they receive access than the nation's English Learners. Whatever advantages increased accountability can offer must translate into classroom success. For this, innovative approaches, and a framework which supports them, will be increasingly necessary.

It is also valuable to note the contribution that new education approaches, such as those found in the charter school movement, are demonstrating in advancing progress for this important student population. Charter schools operate in an environment with heightened accountability for results, as their future success is more dependent on students' academic performance than traditional public schools.

Charter schools seeking to gain instructional efficiency to make up time for underperforming students have increasingly incorporated innovations developed within the private sector. Santa Clara, California's Rocketship Education, for instance, widely recognized as one of the nation's most successful charter school networks in terms of success teaching ELLs, utilizes Rosetta Stone software for English language development. In Santa Clara Unified School District, three of the top ten schools serving low-income students, all with sizeable ELL populations, are Rocketship schools.

Rocketship's model employs blended learning, where students log daily blocks of time using adaptive educational software. The software in turn provides real-time data to inform differentiated instruction by classroom teachers. The increased educational efficiencies offered by high-quality blended learning programs, whether in charter, traditional public or even private school settings, are important examples of the crucial role innovation can play in meeting the needs of this growing population.

But such high-quality blended learning programs are rare and unlikely to provide a near-term solution for the vast majority for the roughly 5.5 million English Learners currently enrolled in U.S. schools. For these, it will be crucial that successful instructional best practices, technological innovations, and access to high quality programs be leveraged to address language and achievement gaps. Similarly, access to effective early childhood and adult education programs that emphasize English literacy must also be important components to overall education strategies to combat cycles of linguistic isolation that have been well documented in a growing number of communities around the nation.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. NAEP inclusion policies should be followed uniformly across all states. Inclusion decisions for individual children can still be made locally by educators familiar with their status and consistent with state standards, in accordance with NAEP procedures, but consistent statewide inclusion and exclusion rates for ELLs are vital to understanding their progress.
2. Following the recommendation of NAGB's 2009 Technical Advisory Panel on Uniform National Rules for NAEP Testing of English Language Learners, 95 percent participation should be a uniform goal for ELL students. A broader range of valid testing accommodations should be available to make participation as meaningful as possible, also a recommendation of the panel.
3. These results underscore the importance of ensuring that accountability systems include ELLs, employing valid accommodations where appropriate, so that their progress is no less meaningful to schools than that of other students. In states that have pursued aggressive strategies for inclusion of ELLs, results indicate that improved performance often accompanies increased accountability. Such approaches should be adopted more widely to the benefit of students involved.
4. Innovations such as high-quality blended and online learning programs are demonstrating remarkable potential serving ELL populations. Establishing legal, operational and funding frameworks to support them will be essential to expanding access. Important aspects include performance-based advancement systems, rather than using strictly "seat time" credit systems, equitable funding that truly follows the child, and accountability regimes that recognize individual student growth using longitudinal data.