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Examining English Learner Testing, Proficiency, and Growth: Continued Trends since the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This report examines English learners' testing, proficiency, and growth during the six most recent school years (2018-2023) to shed light on the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on English learners' educational outcomes.

WIDA Research

WIDA advances academic language development and academic achievement for children and youth who are linguistically diverse through high quality standards, assessments, research, and professional learning for educators.

The overarching goal of research at WIDA is to promote educational equity and academic achievement for linguistically and culturally diverse students.

To achieve this goal, we work in partnership with districts, states, and national experts to conduct research focused on understanding and explaining the educational experiences and outcomes of language learners. Through our research, we also aim to inform the decision-making needs of educators and policymakers who serve these children and youth.

The WIDA research team is housed within the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER). Located at the highly ranked School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, WCER is one of the first and most productive education research centers in the world.

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Introduction

This report documents and highlights how academic English proficiency has continued to decline, on average, for the overall population of English learner (EL) students since the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis draws on aggregated individual-level data from the ACCESS for ELLs Online assessment (hereafter referred to as ACCESS), taken annually by students identified as ELs across the WIDA Consortium (hereafter referred to as WIDA). We present the number of tested ELs as well as their average proficiency and gain scores for the six academic years from 2017-2018 through 2022-2023. This is the third report examining aggregate trends in English learner proficiency and growth since the pandemic, adding the most recent ACCESS assessment data from the 2022-2023 school year. It is also the first report in the series to disaggregate and present outcomes by English learner subgroup, drawing attention to persistent and growing disparities in the average proficiency of ELs identified as Hispanic and non-Hispanic.

The report presents findings for these questions: 1) How many English learners were tested in the academic years 2018 to 2023 across the WIDA Consortium? 2) What were the average proficiency scores for EL students in those years, both in terms of overall composite proficiency and for the individual language domains of Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing? 3) How much growth, as measured by average gains in ACCESS proficiency, did EL students demonstrate each year? 4) How did these outcomes compare for ELs identified as Hispanic compared to those of non-Hispanic ELs?

Figure 1: The WIDA Consortium[1]

WIDA Alternate ACCESS user.
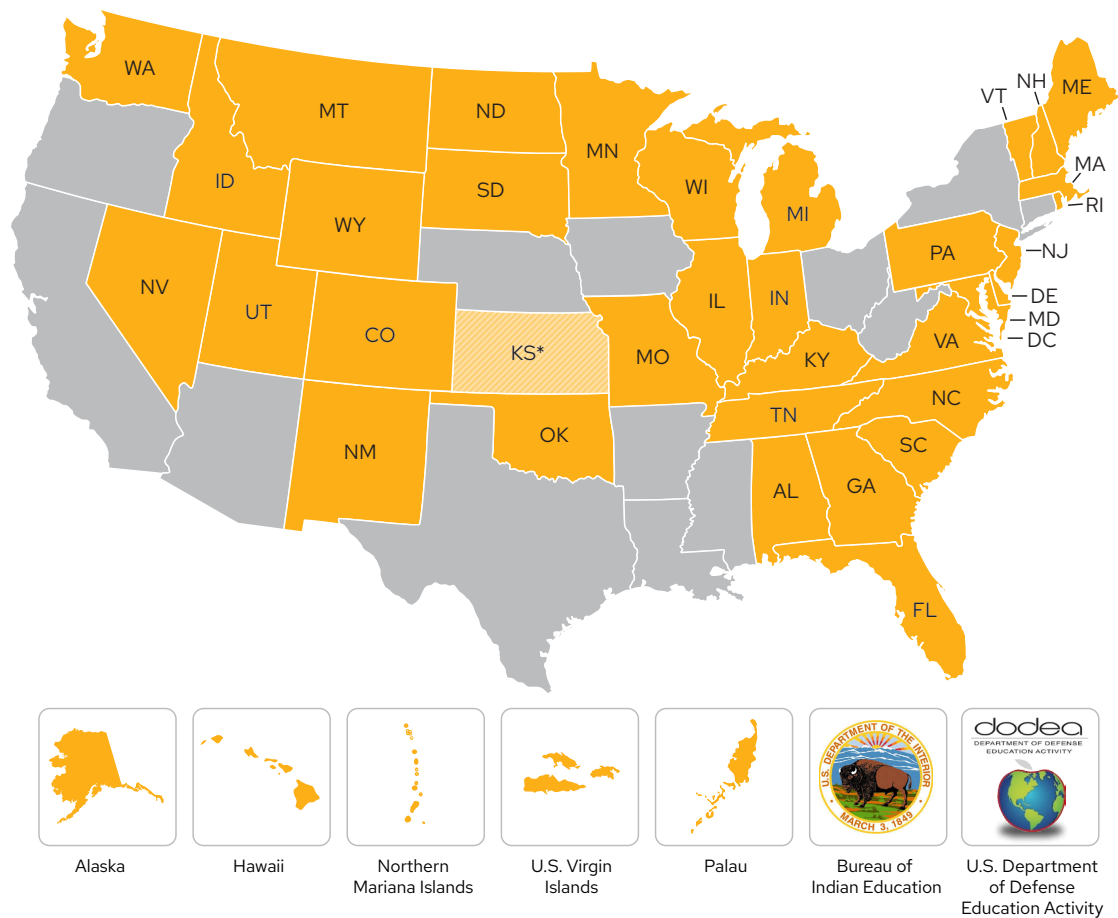
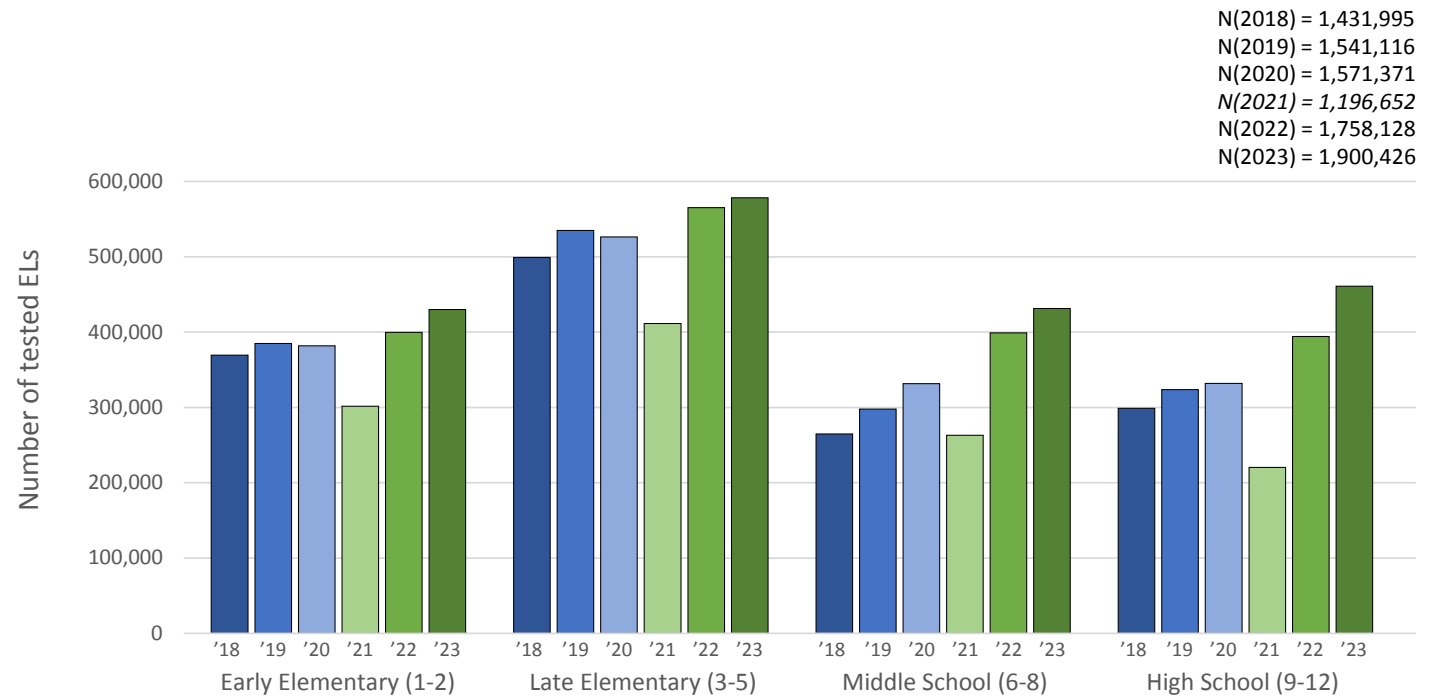
[1] This map shows the current members of the WIDA Consortium. The analyses herein do not include English learner scores from Washington state and Palau, as states and territories that joined the WIDA Consortium after 2020 are excluded from this report. Data from Florida is also not included in the analysis because students in Florida take only ACCESS for ELLs Paper, not the online assessment.

English Learner Testing

Across the WIDA Consortium, the population of tested English learners has continued to increase over the last five years. Although many test scores were missing in 2021 due to pandemic-related disruptions, testing resumed as normal in 2022. Testing rates were even higher in 2023, with a total population of over 1.9 million students. Figure 2 presents the number of tested ELs by grade-level cluster for the six most recent academic years.

Figure 2: English learner testing. ACCESS Online, 2018-2023.

N(2018) = 1,431,995
N(2019) = 1,541,116
N(2020) = 1,571,371
N(2021) = 1,196,652
N(2022) = 1,758,128
N(2023) = 1,900,426

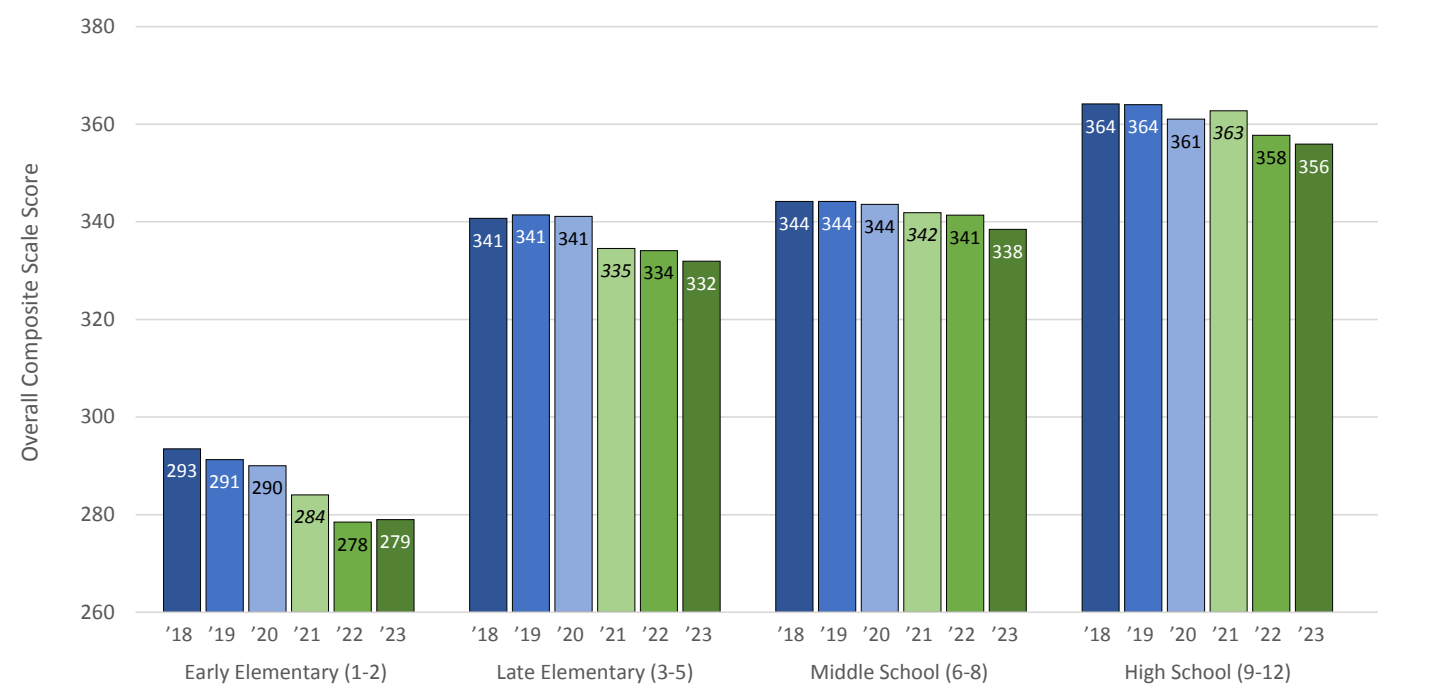| Grade-level Cluster	2018	2019	2020	*2021*[2]	2022	2023
Early Elementary (1-2)	369,339	384,932	381,637	*301,737*	399,855	429,844
Late Elementary (3-5)	499,226	534,869	526,363	*411,495*	565,155	578,318
Middle School (6-8)	264,624	297,836	331,565	*263,106*	398,864	431,355
High School (9-12)	298,806	323,479	331,806	*220,314*	394,254	460,909

In this report, we shift from the grade-specific averages presented in earlier reports to focus instead on grade-level clusters: early elementary (grades 1-2), late elementary (grades 3-5), middle school (grades 6-8), and high school (grades 9-12). We present cluster-level averages instead of grade-level averages because overall trends are more easily interpreted at the cluster level. Especially after adding test scores from the 2023 administration of ACCESS, grade-level graphs become visually overwhelming. Cluster-level graphs are more legible while remaining faithful to underlying trends as students move through different phases of public schooling.

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[2] Overall proficiency averages in all figures are italicized for the 2021 school year to emphasize the possibility that those values were not representative of the entire population of English learners across the WIDA Consortium in 2021, due to the substantial number of missing test scores. Because many EL students did not take ACCESS Online in the spring of 2021 (an estimated 30%), we advise caution in interpreting the 2021 estimates of average EL proficiency or comparing those values to the averages reported for other years.

English Learner Proficiency

Figure 3 presents the average English proficiency of ELs across the WIDA Consortium for the academic years 2018-2023, as measured by overall composite scale scores on the ACCESS Online assessment. Overall proficiency has continued to decline since the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown by the bars in green. Average performance for early elementary students was just 1 scale score point higher in 2023 than in 2022, and scores remained substantially lower than pre-pandemic averages. Early elementary student scores still show the largest declines, relative to other grade-level clusters, when compared to pre-pandemic years. Although declines are somewhat less pronounced for other grade-level clusters, average scores for those groups in 2023 were even lower than 2022 averages, representing a continued downward trend in overall student proficiency.

Figure 3: Average English proficiency of ELs across the WIDA Consortium. ACCESS Online, 2018-2023.
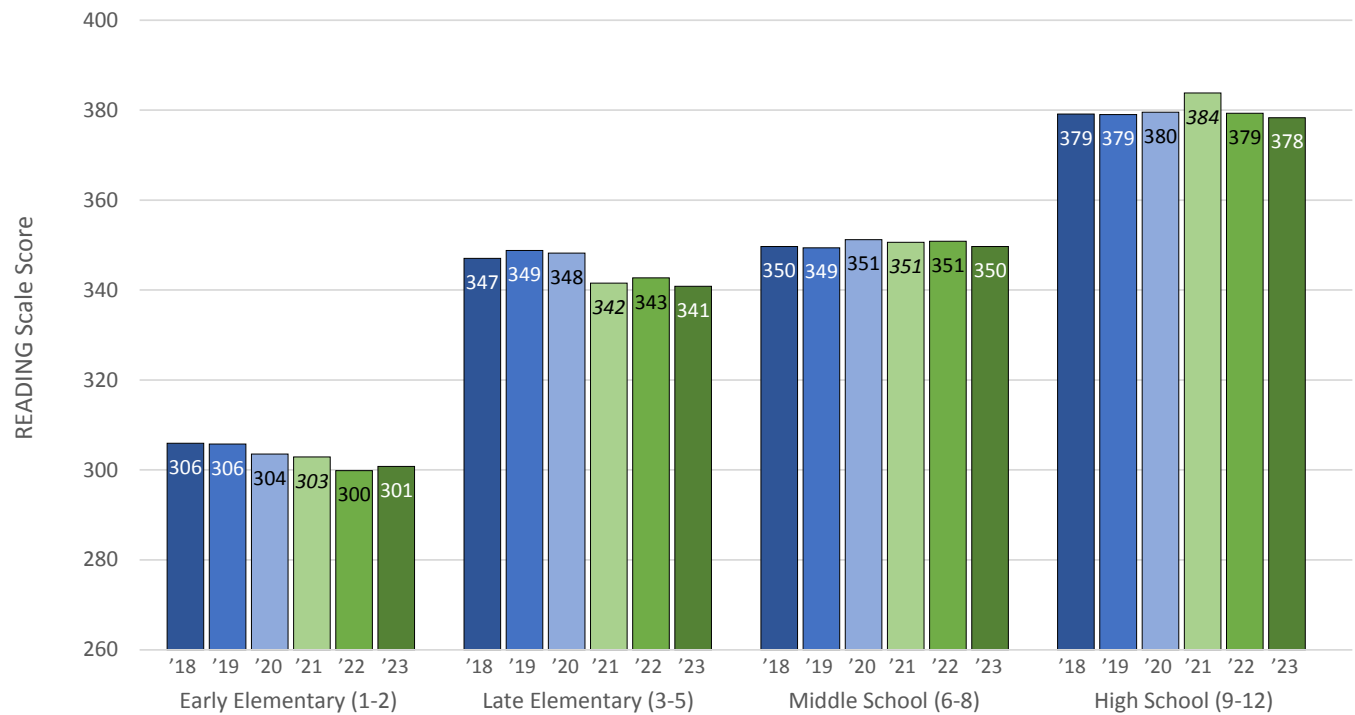

Grade-level Cluster	2018	2019	2020	*2021*	2022	2023
Early Elementary (1–2)	293	291	290	*284*	278	279
Late Elementary (3-5)	341	341	341	*335*	334	332
Middle School (6-8)	344	344	344	*342*	341	338
High School (9-12)	364	364	361	*363*	358	356

The test scores for middle and high school students in 2022 showed smaller decreases from pre-pandemic averages, relative to test scores for elementary school students—reductions of about 3 points in higher grade-level clusters, compared to 7 to 12 point decreases for late and early elementary school students, respectively. In most grades, however, average proficiency continued to decline in 2023.

The four bar charts in Figure 4 present the corresponding averages in student test scores for the four language domains of Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing, as measured by average scale scores in each domain. Importantly, while scores are vertically scaled within each domain and therefore comparable across grades, scores are not scaled across domains. For that reason, averages for one domain cannot be compared directly to averages for another domain. We therefore focus on each domain separately, describing trends across domains without direct comparisons in terms of scale score points.

Figure 4: English learners' proficiency in individual domains of Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing. ACCESS Online, 2018-2023.

Figure 4a: Reading

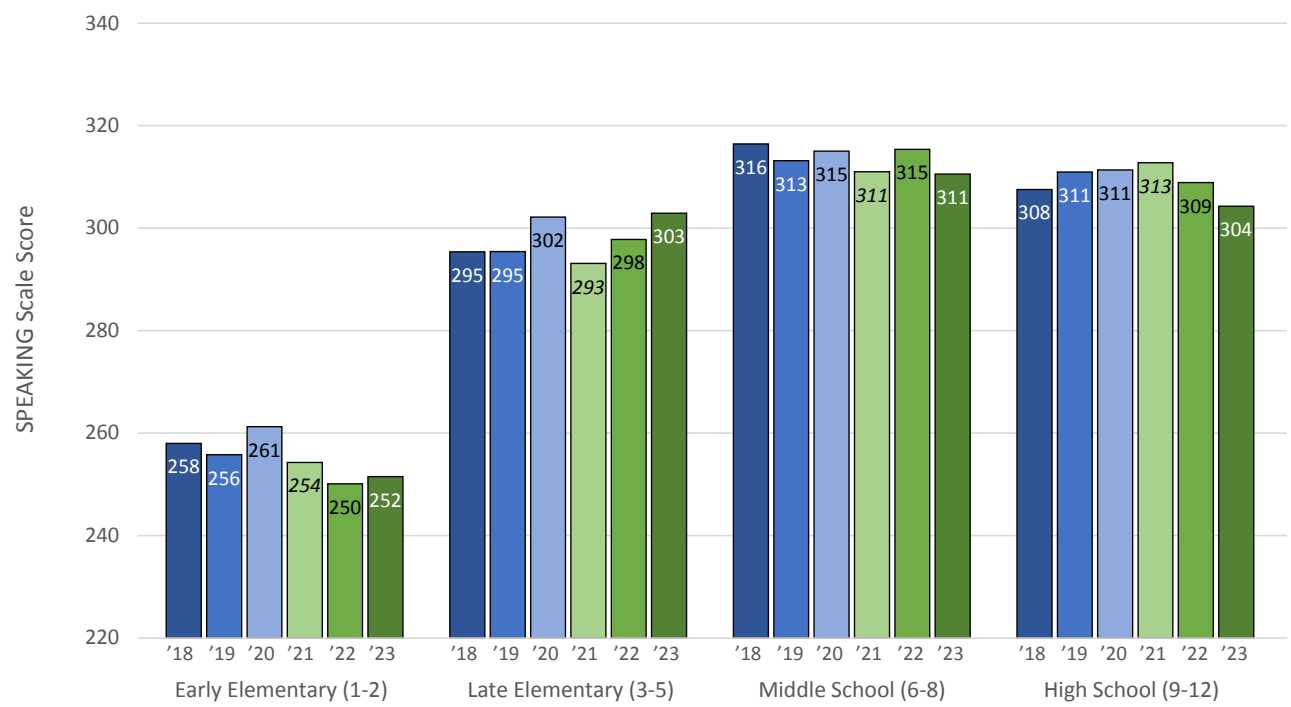| Grade-level Cluster	2018	2019	2020	*2021*	2022	2023
Early Elementary (1-2)	306	306	304	*303*	300	301
Late Elementary (3-5)	347	349	348	*342*	343	341
Middle School (6-8)	350	349	351	*351*	351	350
High School (9-12)	379	379	380	*384*	379	378

Figure 4b: Listening
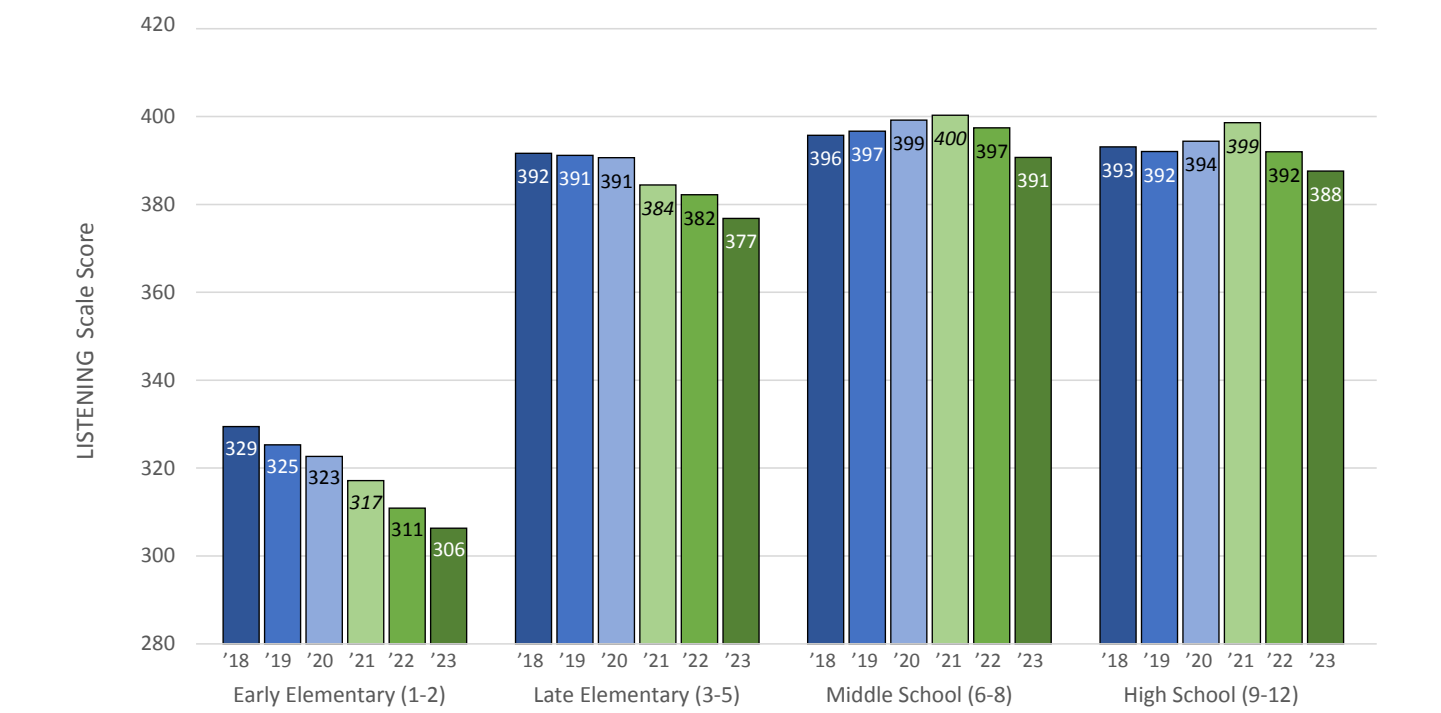
Grade-level Cluster *	2018	2019	2020	*2021*	2022	2023
Early Elementary (1–2)	329	325	323	*317*	311	306
Late Elementary (3–5)	392	391	391	*384*	382	377
Middle School (6–8)	396	397	399	*400*	397	391
High School (9–12)	393	392	394	*399*	392	388

* Errata in this table have been corrected on 3/31/2025

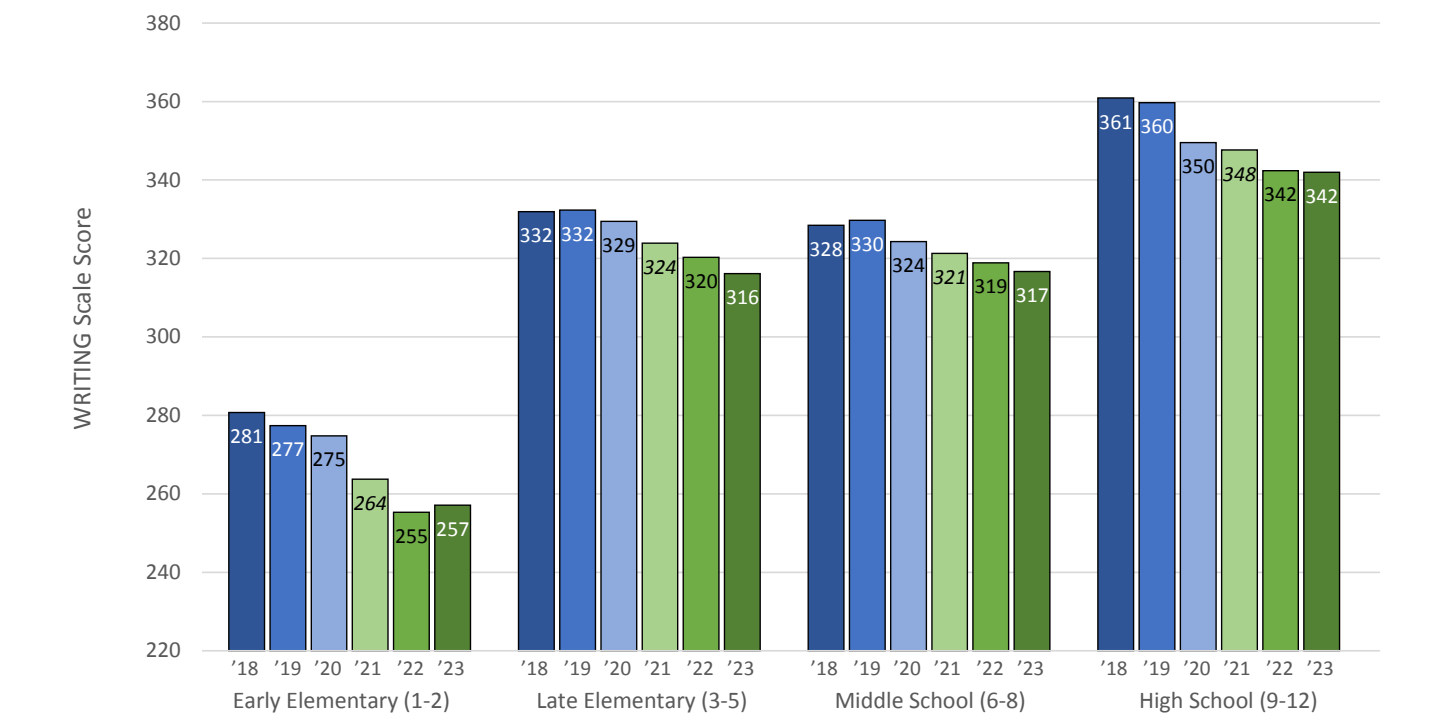**Figure 4c: Speaking**

Grade-level Cluster	2018	2019	2020	*2021*	2022	2023
Early Elementary (1–2)	258	256	261	*254*	250	252
Late Elementary (3–5)	295	295	302	*293*	298	303
Middle School (6–8)	316	313	315	*311*	315	311
High School (9–12)	308	311	311	*313*	309	304

Figure 4d: Writing

Grade-level Cluster	2018	2019	2020	*2021*	2022	2023
Early Elementary (1-2)	281	277	275	*264*	255	257
Late Elementary (3-5)	332	332	329	*324*	320	316
Middle School (6-8)	328	330	324	*321*	319	317
High School (9-12)	361	360	350	*348*	342	342

Proficiency in Reading

Compared to other tested language domains, average scale scores in Reading have been relatively consistent throughout the last six years. Average scores for early elementary students rose by 1 point in 2023, compared to 2022. Higher grade-level clusters saw marginal decreases from 2022 to 2023, but middle and high school averages were similar to pre-pandemic levels. Reading scores for elementary school students, however, remained lower than pre-pandemic averages.

Proficiency in Listening

Across all grade-level clusters, average scale scores in Listening have continued to decline relative to pre-pandemic averages. The largest decreases have been in early elementary averages, which had already been trending downward since 2018. The decrease in Listening scores from 2022 to 2023 was larger, however, for late elementary and middle school averages (6 point decreases in each) than early elementary or high school averages (4 and 5 point decreases, respectively). Regardless, Listening scores in all clusters remained lower than pre-pandemic averages.

Proficiency in Speaking

Similar to trends in Reading proficiency, average scale scores in Speaking have shown relatively low variability year to year since 2018. Averages in 2023 were still lower overall than they were prior to the pandemic, however. Early elementary Speaking scores in 2023 were 1 point higher on average than in 2022, and late elementary scores slightly surpassed pre-pandemic averages. Middle and high school scores, meanwhile, remained lower than pre-pandemic averages and decreased by another 5 points in 2023, relative to 2022.

Proficiency in Writing

While Writing proficiency was already trending downward even prior to the pandemic, average scores have descended even further for most grade-level clusters in each year since 2019. The exception is in early elementary grades, where averages in 2023 were 2 points higher than in 2022, but remained much lower than average scores from 2018—the largest decrease for any grade-level cluster. 2023 scores for late elementary and middle school grades, meanwhile, declined further from already-low averages in 2022. High school Writing scores were stagnant from 2022 to 2023, and remain substantially lower than pre-pandemic averages.

Summary of EL Proficiency in Individual Domains

The average scale scores presented in Figure 4 for the domains of Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing corroborate the continued decline of overall proficiency reported in Figure 3. Apart from small increases in early elementary averages, and an increase in late elementary Speaking proficiency, average proficiency has continued to decline for tested ELs across all domains. The most dramatic decreases have been in Listening and Writing, as scores were even lower in 2023 than in 2022 for almost all grade-level clusters and remain well below pre-pandemic averages.
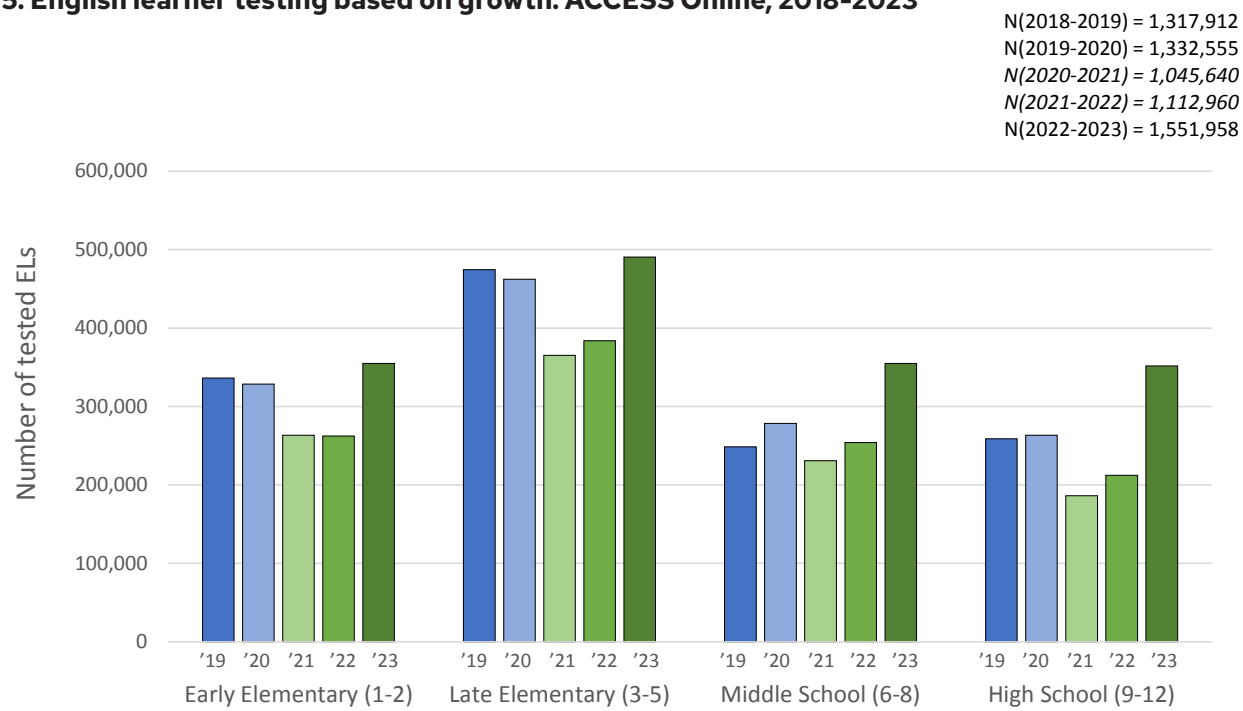
English Learner Growth

The graphs in Figures 3 and 4 track average proficiency for all tested ELs in the WIDA Consortium, providing a snapshot based on the population in each academic year. Because the EL population changes each year, however—new students are identified as ELs while others reclassify out of English learner status—we also present average annual growth estimates for the last five cycles. Growth estimates are calculated from student-level differences in composite scale scores across adjacent years, aggregating individual student gains in English proficiency to the cluster level for each of the five growth cycles presented. Figure 5 graphs the number of ELs for whom composite scale score gains can be calculated, based on consecutive annual assessments.[3]

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[3] Average growth estimates are based on the population of students with non-missing composite scale scores. Students are excluded from the average for a given growth cycle if they are missing one or more domain scores in one of the two years used to calculate average growth in that cycle.

**Figure 5: English learner testing based on growth. ACCESS Online, 2018–2023**

N(2018-2019) = 1,317,912
N(2019-2020) = 1,332,555
N(2020-2021) = 1,045,640
N(2021-2022) = 1,112,960
N(2022-2023) = 1,551,958

Grade-level Cluster	2018	2019	2020	*2021*[4]	*2022*	2023
Early Elementary (1–2)	369,339	384,932	381,637	*301,737*	*399,855*	429,844
Late Elementary (3–5)	499,226	534,869	526,363	*411,495*	*565,155*	578,318
Middle School (6–8)	264,624	297,836	331,565	*263,106*	*398,864*	431,355
High School (9–12)	298,806	323,479	331,806	*220,314*	*394,254*	460,909

Figure 5 shows that substantially fewer EL students recorded the two consecutive assessments necessary for growth calculations from 2020 to 2021 and 2021 to 2022. This is due to the large number of missing (untested) students in 2021, as reported in Figure 2. Because testing resumed as normal in 2022, however, average growth from 2022 to 2023 is based again on the full population of English learners, exceeding 1.5 million students across the WIDA Consortium with composite scale scores in both 2022 and 2023.

Figure 6 presents the average growth in English proficiency for individual ELs in each of the last five growth cycles. While average proficiency across the WIDA Consortium continued to decline in 2023, many students reported higher proficiency gains than in prior growth cycles. Given the potentially selective nature of the sample in 2021, the growth estimates for 2021 and 2022 should be interpreted with caution. In what could be an early sign of post-pandemic recovery, however, growth in 2023 was higher for many English learners than even pre-pandemic averages, especially for many students in elementary grades. Growth for middle school ELs in 2023 dropped slightly, relative to 2022, while growth for high school ELs held steady, albeit also slightly lower than pre-pandemic averages.

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[4]   Overall proficiency growth averages in this figure, as well as the domain-specific growth averages in Figure 6, are italicized for the growth cycles of 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 to emphasize the possibility that those values were not representative of the entire population of English learners across the WIDA Consortium in 2020–2021 and 2021–2022, due to the substantial number of missing test scores. Because many EL students did not take the ACCESS Online test in the spring of 2021, we advise caution in interpreting the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 estimates of average EL growth or comparing those values to the averages reported for other growth cycles.

Figure 6: Average growth of ELs across the WIDA Consortium. ACCESS Online, 2018-2023.
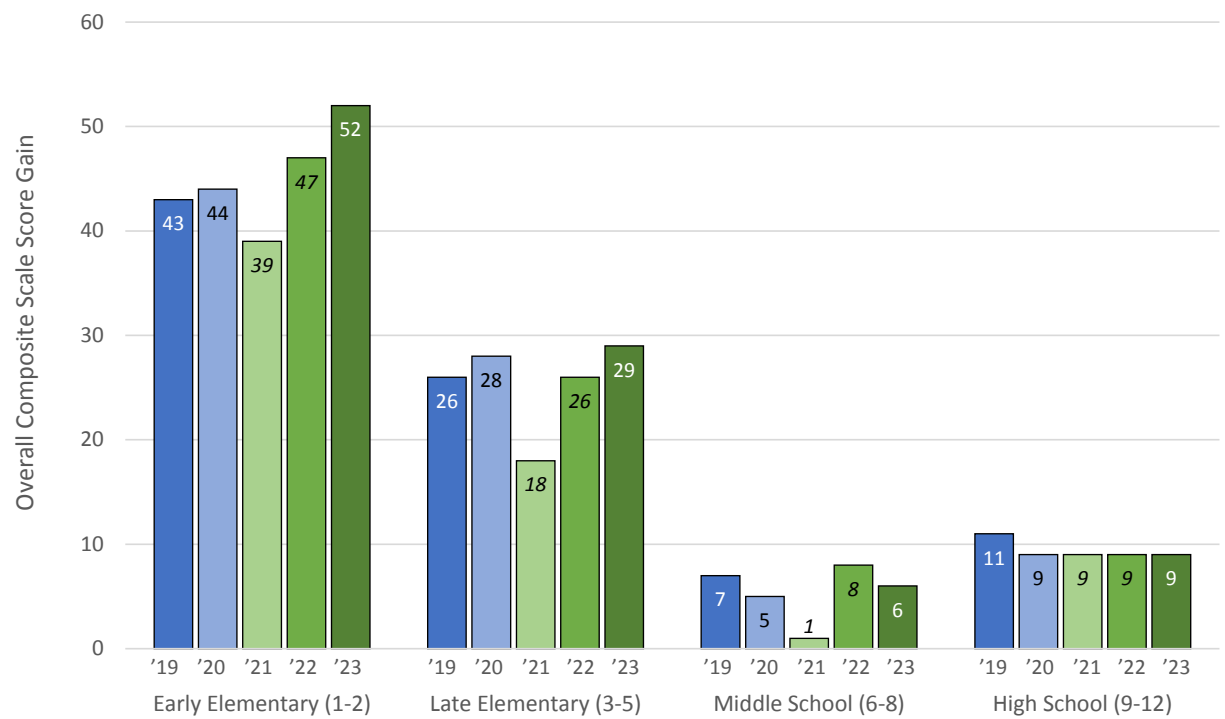
Grade-level Cluster	2019	2020	*2021*	*2022*	2023
Early Elementary (1–2)	43	44	*39*	*47*	52
Late Elementary (3–5)	26	28	*18*	*26*	29
Middle School (6–8)	7	5	*1*	*8*	6
High School (9–12)	11	9	9	9	9

Similar to the charts presented in Figure 4 summarizing average proficiency scores for the four language domains of Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing, Figure 7 presents average growth estimates for the individual domains, as measured by aggregating individual students' annual scale score gains in each domain within grade-level clusters. Keeping in mind that individual domains are scaled independently, we avoid making cross-domain comparisons of average gains. Instead we focus on each domain separately, describing trends without making direct comparisons in terms of absolute scale score gains.

Growth in Reading

Scale score gains in Reading continued to increase in 2023 for ELs in early elementary grades, continuing the trend from the prior two years. Growth in Reading declined for EL students in higher grade-level clusters, however. Average gains in late elementary grades especially were lower in 2023 than pre-pandemic averages. High school students, meanwhile, demonstrated slightly higher growth in 2023 compared to 2022, closer to pre-pandemic averages.

Growth in Listening

Scale score gains in Listening remained relatively stable for 2023, with marginal increases for elementary school ELs but small declines for middle and high school students. Growth rates have returned to or slightly exceeded pre-pandemic averages in elementary grades, but they remain slightly lower for English learners in middle and high school grades.

Growth in Speaking

Scale score gains in Speaking showed continued improvement in 2023 for ELs in both early and late elementary grades, exceeding pre-pandemic averages. Growth declined in 2023 for ELs in middle school grades, however, after relatively higher growth in 2022. Growth declined in 2023 for ELs in high school as well, dropping below pre-pandemic averages to approximately the same low growth seen in 2021.

Growth in Writing

Scale score gains in Writing continued to increase in 2023 for ELs in elementary grades, exceeding pre-pandemic averages. Growth for ELs in middle school also improved slightly, relative to growth in the previous two cycles, but remained slightly lower than pre-pandemic averages. Writing growth for ELs in high school improved in 2023 as well, nearly returning to pre-pandemic averages.
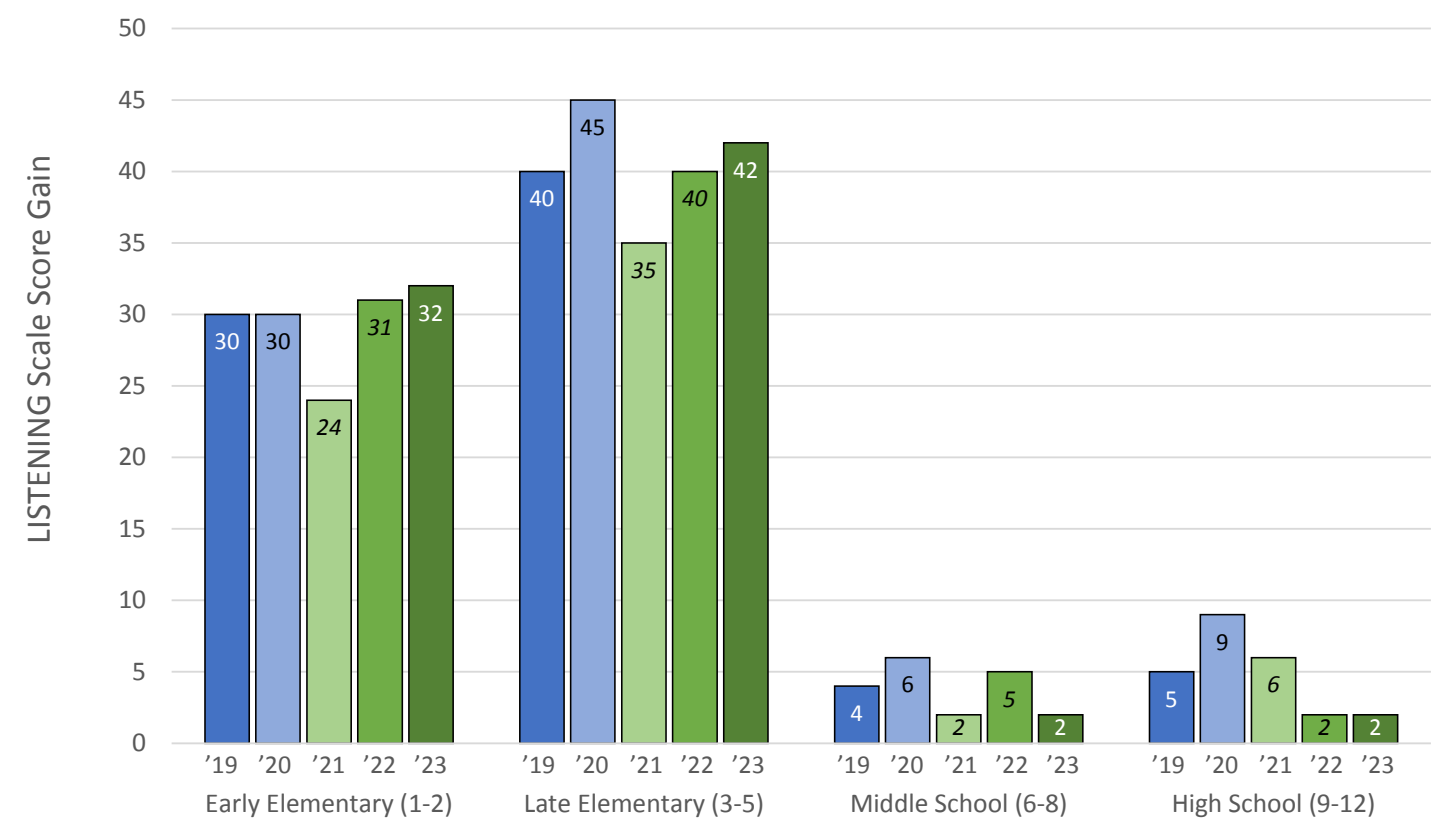
Figure 7: English learners' growth in individual domains of Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing. ACCESS Online, 2018–2023.

Figure 7a: Reading
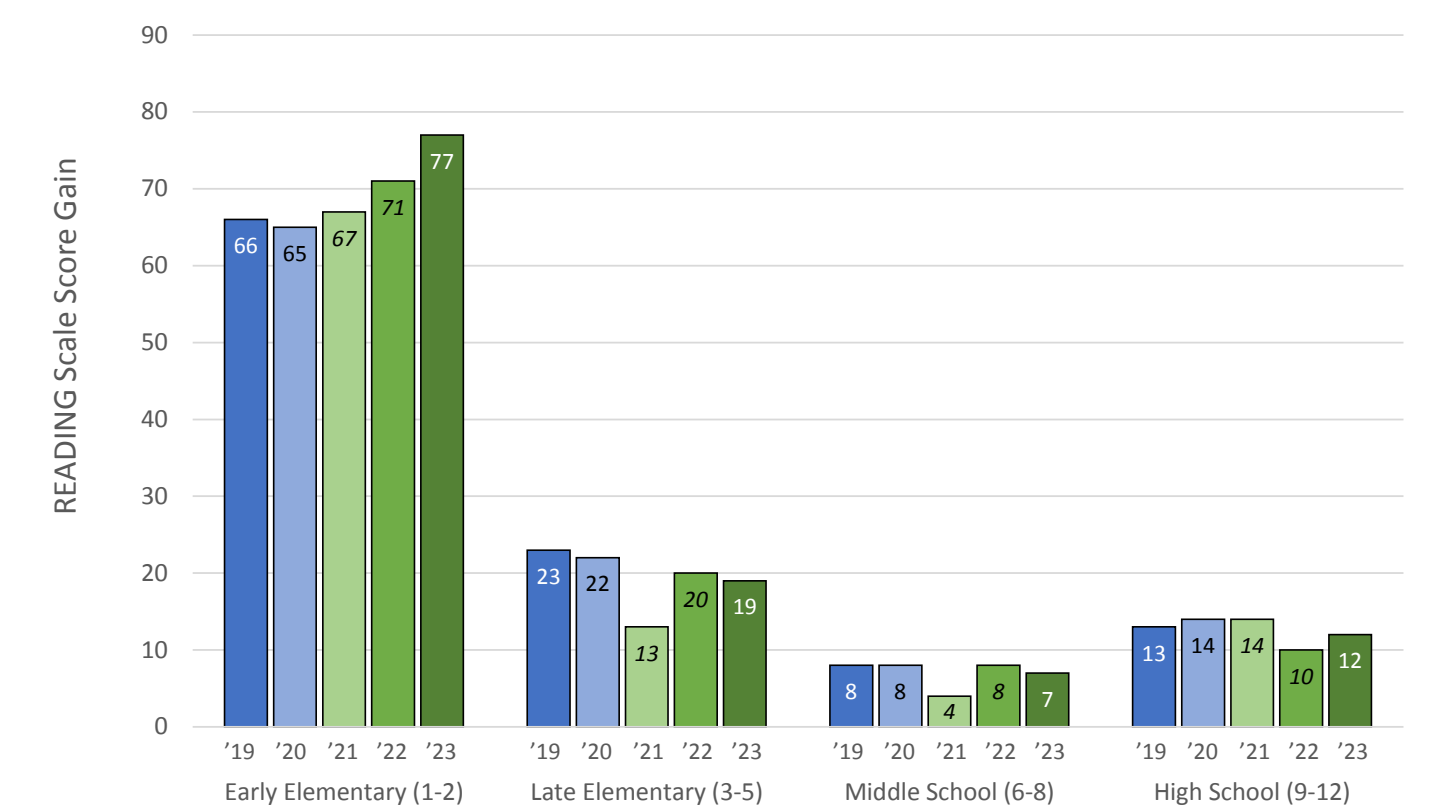
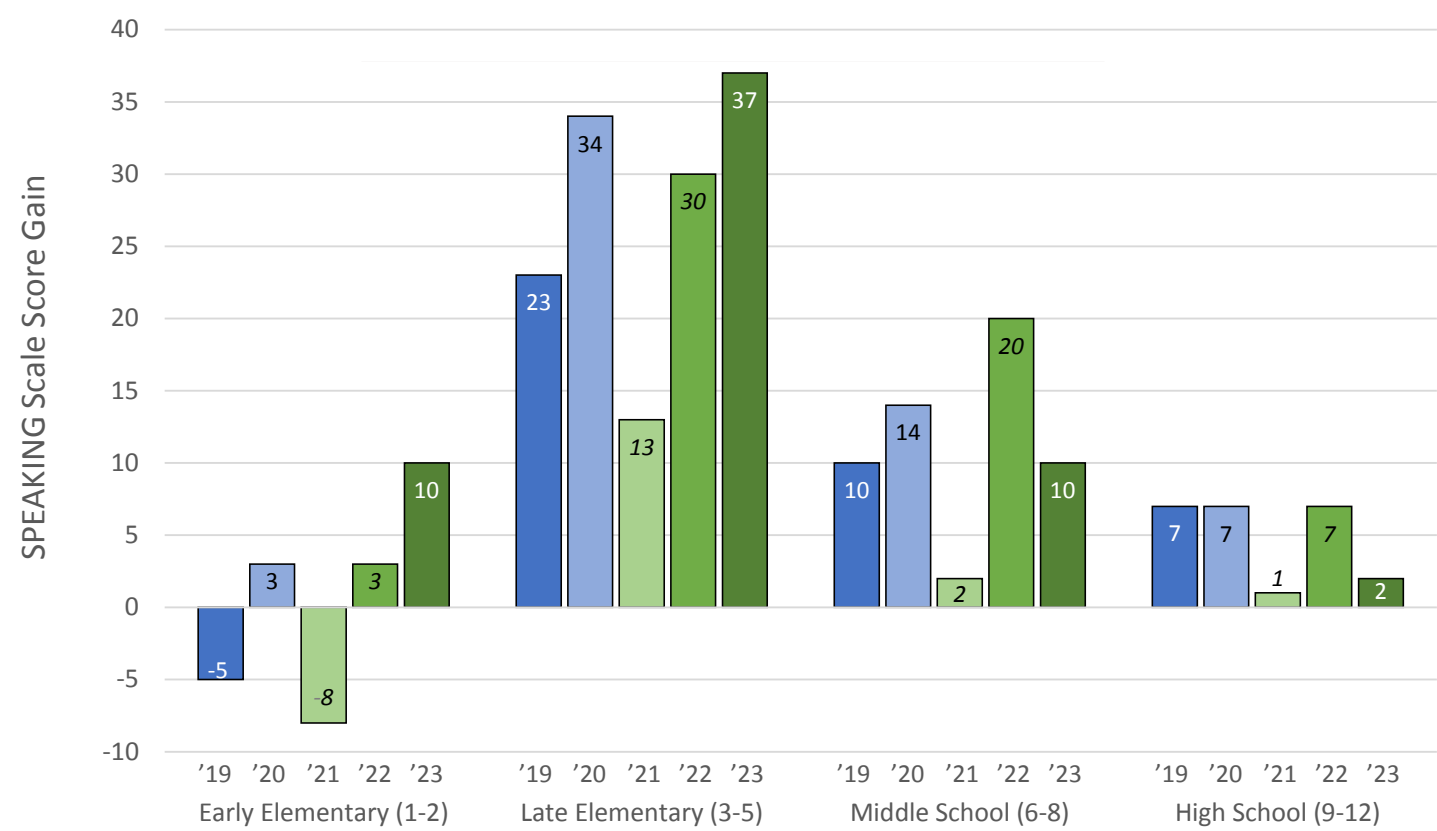| Grade-level Cluster	2019	2020	*2021*	*2022*	2023
Early Elementary (1–2)	66	65	*67*	*71*	77
Late Elementary (3–5)	23	22	*13*	*20*	19
Middle School (6–8)	8	8	*4*	*8*	7
High School (9–12)	13	14	*14*	*10*	12

Figure 7b: Listening

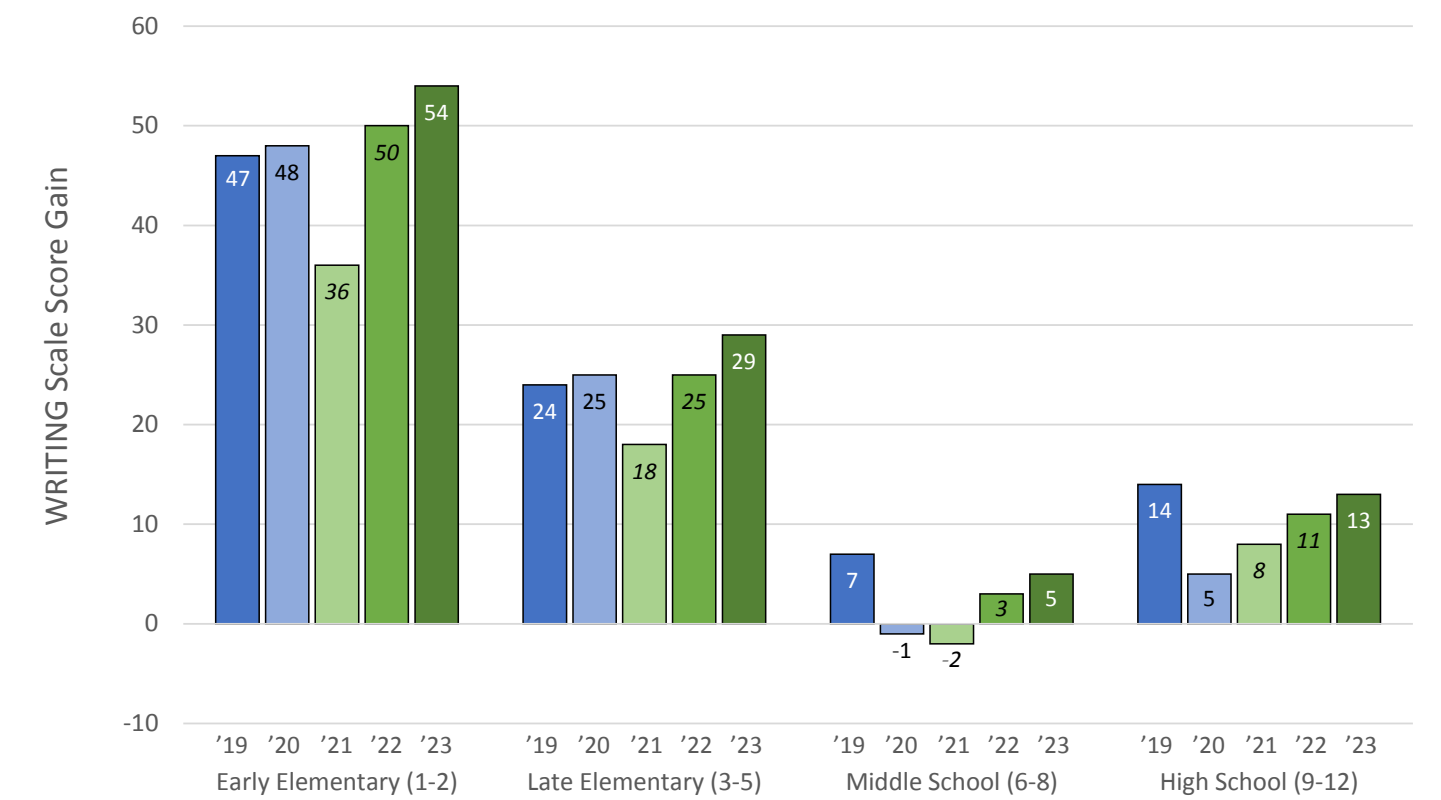| Grade-level Cluster	2019	2020	*2021*	*2022*	2023
Early Elementary (1–2)	30	30	*24*	*31*	32
Late Elementary (3–5)	40	45	*35*	*40*	42
Middle School (6–8)	4	6	*2*	5	2
High School (9–12)	5	9	6	*2*	2

Figure 7c: Speaking

Grade-level Cluster	2019	2020	*2021*	*2022*	2023
Early Elementary (1–2)	-5	3	*-8*	*3*	10
Late Elementary (3–5)	23	34	*13*	*30*	37
Middle School (6–8)	10	14	*2*	*20*	10
High School (9–12)	7	7	*1*	*7*	2

Figure 7d: Writing

Grade-level Cluster	2019	2020	*2021*	*2022*	2023
Early Elementary (1–2)	47	48	*36*	*50*	54
Late Elementary (3–5)	24	25	*18*	*25*	29
Middle School (6–8)	7	–1	*–2*	*3*	5
High School (9–12)	14	5	*8*	*11*	13

Summary of EL Growth in Individual Domains

Although overall proficiency continued to decline across the WIDA Consortium in 2023, many students recorded growth in their individual language abilities. Annual gains were higher for WIDA's youngest language learners, exceeding pre-pandemic levels for early elementary students in all domains and for late elementary students in most domains, except for Reading. Growth for ELs in middle school declined across most domains, however, and the slight increase in Writing growth was still lower than the average gains that students recorded prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, small increases in literacy (Reading and Writing) growth for high schoolers in 2023 were still lower than pre-pandemic averages, and the verbal domains of Listening and Speaking showed continued declines for high school students as well.

These figures do reflect some recent progress in English acquisition for many EL students, especially in younger grades. Many other ELs remain at low proficiency levels, however. While the average estimates presented above are based on the entire universe of data on ELs taking the WIDA ACCESS Online assessment, there exists significant variation in average proficiency and growth at the state, district, school, and especially individual levels. These snapshots of English proficiency and estimates of average individual growth, averaged across the entire WIDA Consortium (by grade-level cluster and

for individual language domains), can inform our understanding of aggregate trends and the impact of the pandemic on students' English acquisition over the last five academic growth cycles. At the same time, due to the importance of individual and institutional contexts, these average estimates and trends may not be representative for any particular student, school, or district. It is likely that local factors have influenced how English learners—and subgroups of the EL population—experienced the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its ongoing effects. We therefore encourage state and local education agencies to conduct similar analyses for a more accurate, informed, and nuanced understanding of their own context, including disaggregated analyses for EL subgroups, similar to the analysis described in the next section.

Disparities by Hispanic Status

To highlight one potential subgroup analysis relevant to many EL students, educators, and researchers, we also present average English learner proficiency and growth disaggregated by Hispanic status. Across the WIDA Consortium, approximately two-thirds of tested EL students are identified as Hispanic. This report documents evidence of persistent and deepening disparities in English proficiency outcomes for these students, relative to their non-Hispanic peers. Acknowledging the tremendous variation implicit within overall averages—as well as the limitations in categorizing students by demographic labels—we nonetheless highlight these patterns to raise awareness and help local educators consider how these students may be facing additional barriers or challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Disparities in Average Proficiency

As documented in the previous section, overall proficiency has been declining in all grade-level clusters; when that overall average is broken down by ethnicity, however, disparate trends emerge. Figure 8 graphs the average proficiency of students identified within the Hispanic and non-Hispanic subgroups for each grade-level cluster in academic years 2018 through 2023, as measured by overall composite scale scores.

As shown in the first three groups of bars in Figure 8, even prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, students identified as Hispanic reported lower average proficiency than their non-Hispanic peers in each grade-level cluster. That disparity was largest for students in early elementary grades, but it was relatively stable from 2018 to 2019. For students in late elementary and middle school grades, the disparity was also persistent but much smaller and declining from 2018 to 2019. The Hispanic/non-Hispanic difference in average proficiency for high school students in 2018 was closer to the disparity for students in early elementary grades, but it decreased from 2018 to 2019. Overall, the average difference between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students' composite scale scores was stable or shrinking in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, except for a small increase in the disparity for students in early elementary grades.
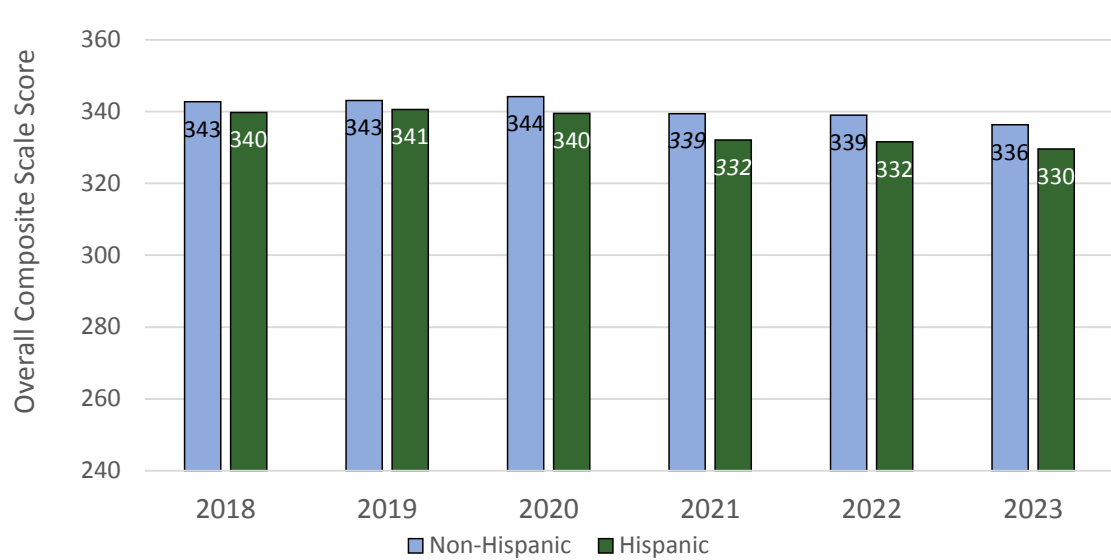
Figure 8: English learners' proficiency by Hispanic status. ACCESS Online, 2018-2023.
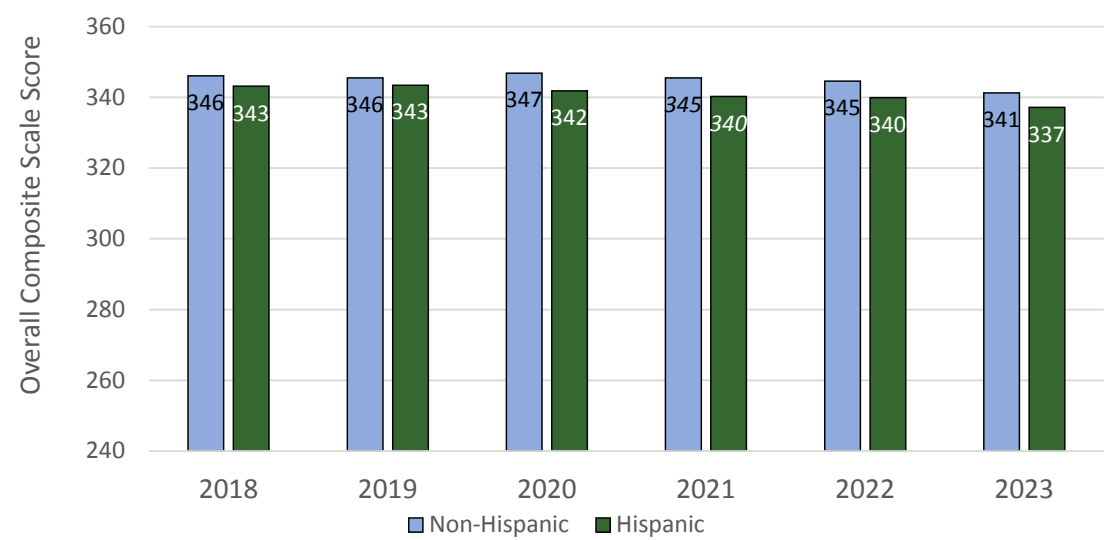
Figure 8a: Early Elementary School, Grades 1–2
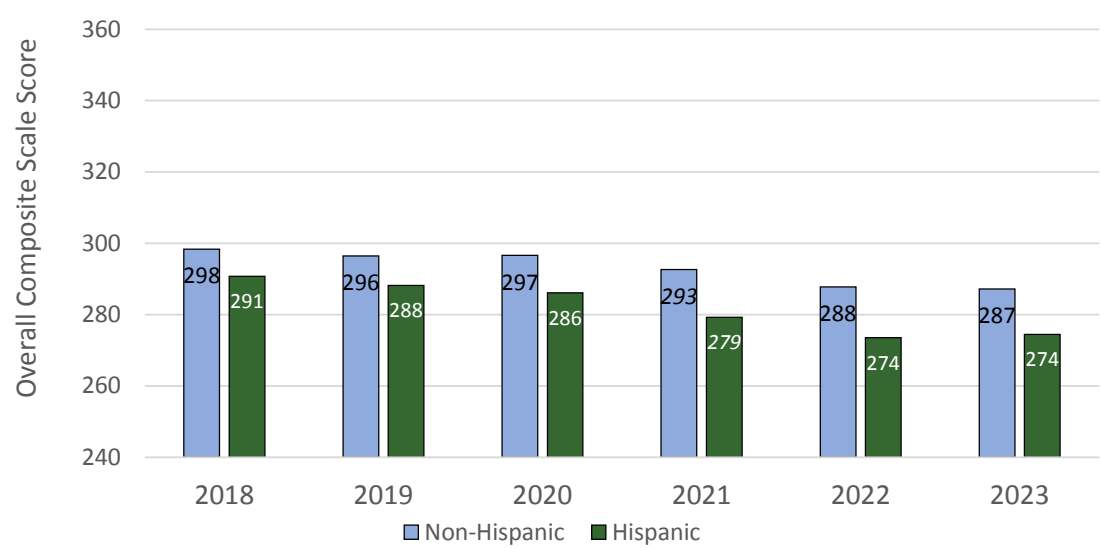
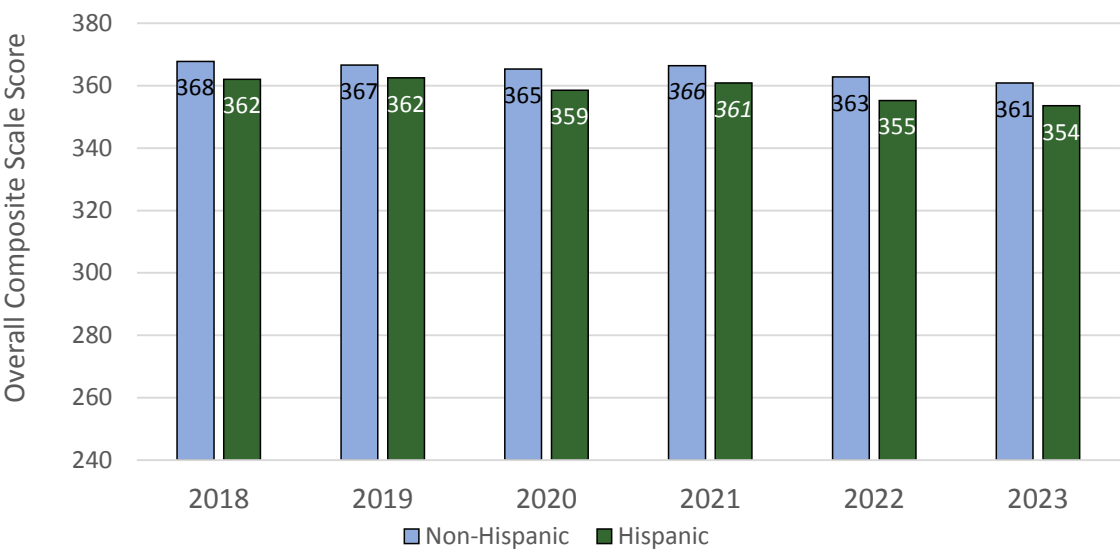| Subgroup	2018	2019	2020	*2021*	2022	2023
Non–Hispanic	298	296	297	*293*	288	287
Hispanic	291	288	286	*279*	274	274

Figure 8b: Late Elementary School, Grades 3–5

Subgroup	2018	2019	2020	*2021*	2022	2023
Non–Hispanic	343	343	344	*339*	339	336
Hispanic	340	341	340	*332*	332	330

Figure 8c: Middle School, Grades 6–8

Subgroup	2018	2019	2020	*2021*	2022	2023
Non–Hispanic	346	346	347	*345*	345	341
Hispanic	343	343	342	*340*	340	337

Figure 8d: High School, Grades 9–12

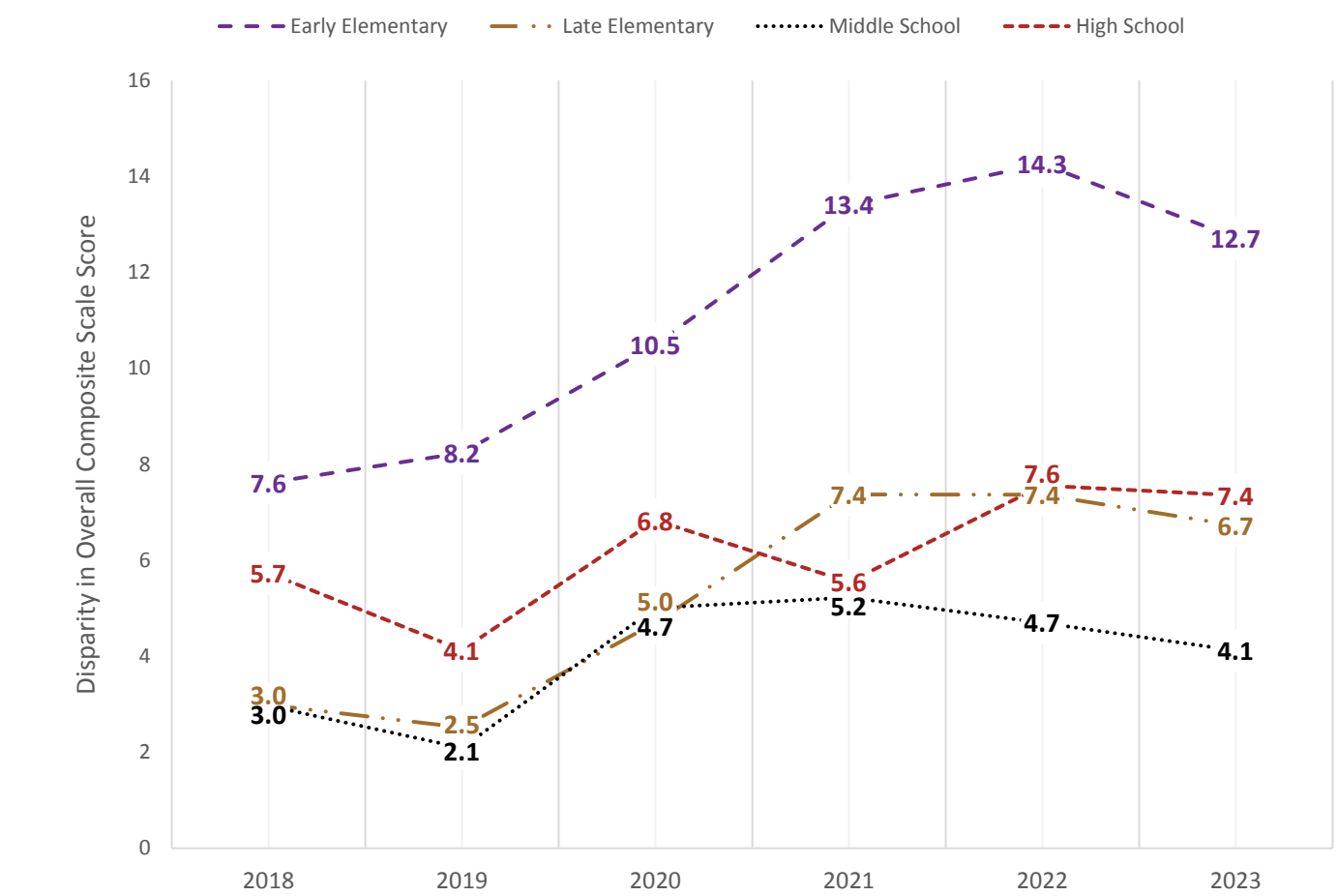| Subgroup *	2018	2019	2020	*2021*	2022	2023
Non–Hispanic	368	367	365	*366*	363	361
Hispanic	362	362	359	*361*	355	354

* errata in this table has been corrected on 3/31/2025

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, while composite scale score averages have declined in all grade-level clusters, averages for Hispanic students have declined at an even faster rate than they have for non-Hispanic students. Figure 9 graphs the average disparity in overall proficiency between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students for each grade-level cluster. That disparity increased in 2020 across all clusters and then increased again in 2021 for elementary school students. 2022 saw further increases for the disparity in early elementary grades, while the gap remained higher than pre-pandemic levels for students in late elementary and middle school grades. For students in high school, the disparity in average proficiency between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students dipped in 2021 (the year when many student test scores were "missing not at random") but then peaked in 2022. Although this disparity appears to have decreased in 2023, especially for students in early elementary grades, the differences in average composite proficiency outcomes between Hispanic and non-Hispanic ELs remain higher than in pre-pandemic years across all grade-level clusters.

Figure 9: Disparities in average proficiency by Hispanic status: ACCESS Online, 2018–2023

Grade-level Cluster	2018	2019	2020	*2021*	2022	2023
Early Elementary (1–2)	7.6	8.2	10.5	*13.4*	14.3	12.7
Late Elementary (3–5)	3.0	2.5	4.7	*7.4*	7.4	6.7
Middle School (6–8)	3.0	2.1	5.0	*5.2*	4.7	4.1
High School (9–12)	5.7	4.1	6.8	*5.6*	7.6	7.4

Disparities in Average Growth

Figure 10 graphs average growth in English proficiency, as measured by overall composite scale score gains from one academic year to the next, disaggregated by Hispanic or non-Hispanic status. Each graph presents cluster-level averages for the five growth cycles of 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023. The substantial drop in growth across all clusters for both Hispanic and non-Hispanic subgroups from 2020 to 2021 suggests that individual students were on average much less likely to make gains in English proficiency after the COVID-19 pandemic began. High school students appear to have been least affected by this decrease, but their gain scores in 2023 remain slightly lower than pre-pandemic averages. The difference between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students' growth also decreased in 2023, relative to the disparity in prior years.

Middle school growth, meanwhile, bounced back somewhat in 2022 after a large dip in 2021—especially for students in the Hispanic subgroup, who averaged nearly zero growth from 2020 to 2021. Growth for middle school students declined again in 2023, relative to 2022, and was slightly lower than pre-pandemic averages. The difference between Hispanic and non-Hispanic growth also decreased, though, and the disparity was smaller in 2022 and 2023 than in pre-pandemic cycles.

Average growth for late elementary school students followed a trend similar to growth in middle school grades: a substantial decrease in 2021 for both subgroups, with a slightly larger disparity between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students, followed by greater gains and smaller disparities in 2022. Scores from 2023 show slightly larger growth for both subgroups and an overall smaller disparity than pre-pandemic averages.

Average growth for early elementary school students, on the other hand, has risen since the dip in 2021 and now exceeds pre-pandemic averages. Importantly, that trend has been even more true for the Hispanic subgroup. Hispanic students in early elementary grades were already making similar gains in English proficiency as their non-Hispanic peers prior to the pandemic, and since then have demonstrated increasingly higher growth each year. For example, in 2023, Hispanic students in early elementary grades gained 6 more points on average than their non-Hispanic peers.

Corroborating these trends, Figure 11 presents the disparities in average growth between Hispanic and non-Hispanic ELs in each of the grade-clusters compared across time.

Figure 10: English learners' average growth by Hispanic status. ACCESS Online, 2018-2023.
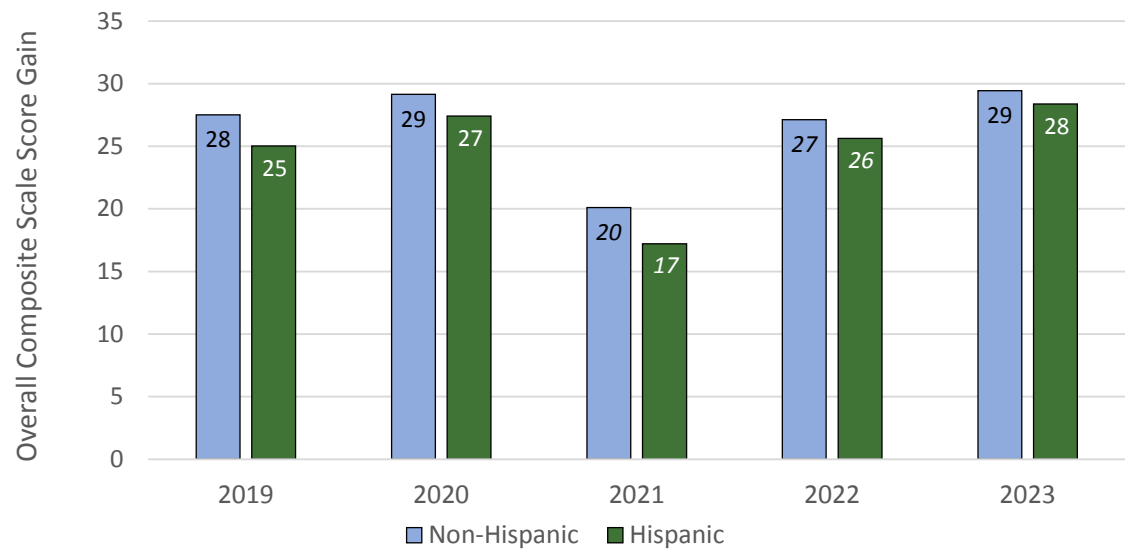
Figure 10a: Early Elementary School, Grades 1–2
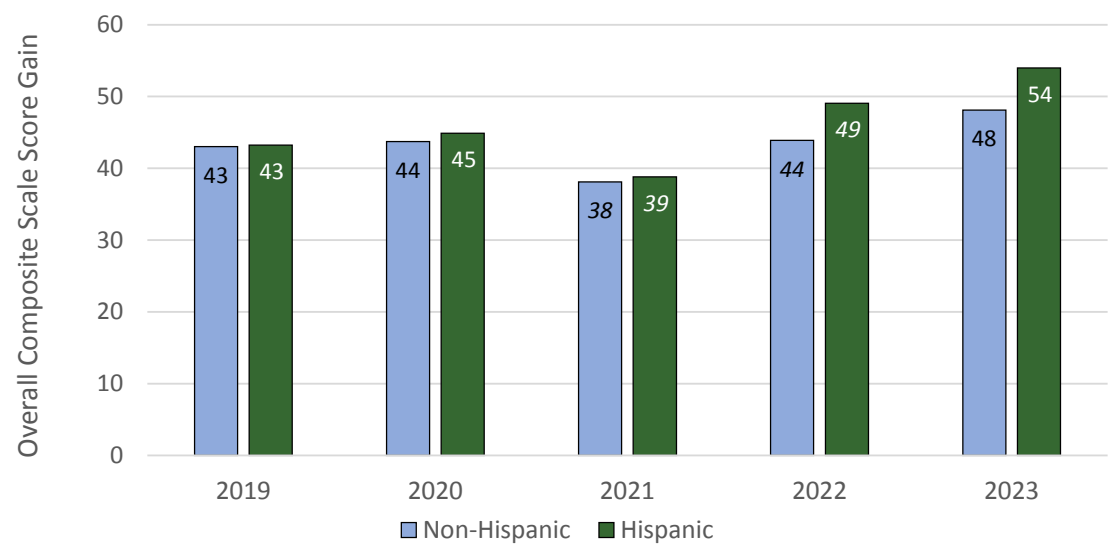
Subgroup *	2019	2020	*2021*	*2022*	2023
Non–Hispanic	43	44	*38*	*44*	48
Hispanic	43	45	39	*49*	54

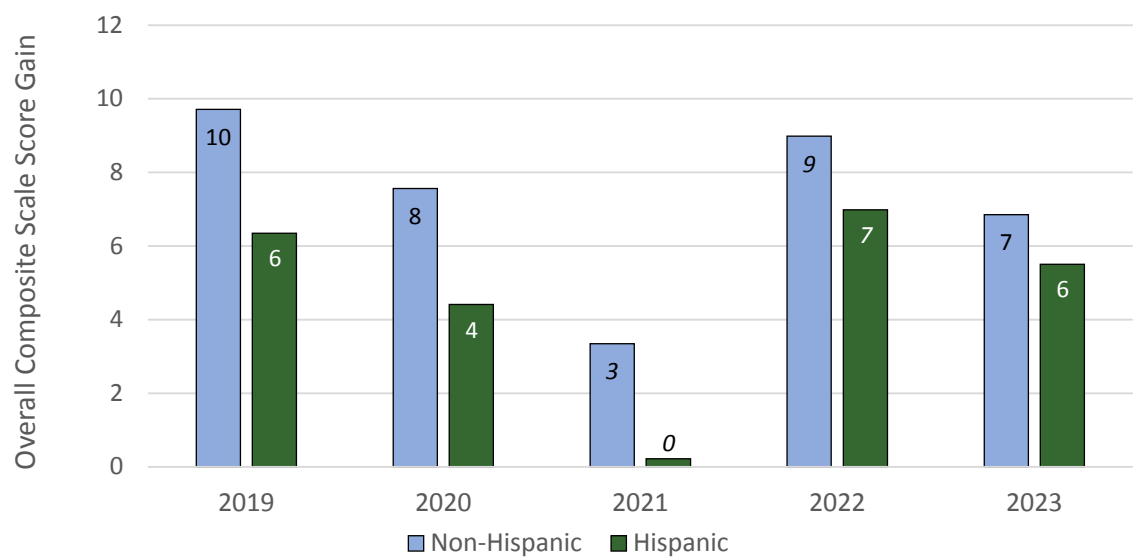** errata in this table has been corrected on 3/31/2025*

Figure 10b: Late Elementary School, Grades 3–5

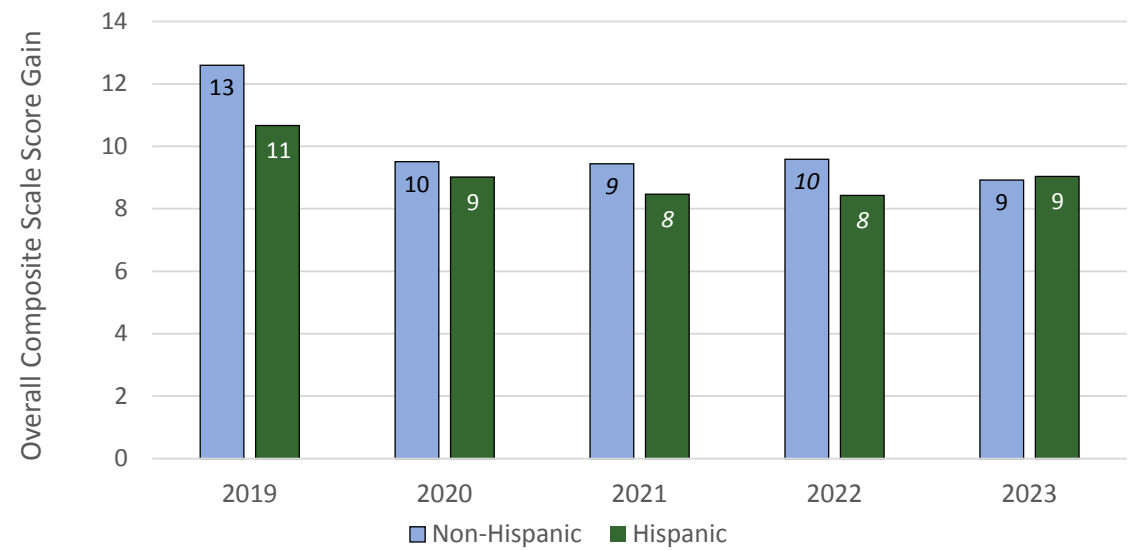| Subgroup	2019	2020	*2021*	*2022*	2023
Non–Hispanic	28	29	*20*	*27*	29
Hispanic	25	27	*17*	*26*	28

Figure 10c: Middle School, Grades 6–8

Subgroup	2019	2020	*2021*	*2022*	2023
Non–Hispanic	10	8	*3*	9	7
Hispanic	6	4	*0*	*7*	6

Figure 10d: High School, Grades 9–12

Subgroup	2019	2020	*2021*	*2022*	2023
Non–Hispanic	13	10	*9*	*10*	9
Hispanic	11	9	*8*	*8*	9

Figure 11: Disparities in average growth by Hispanic status. ACCESS Online, 2018–2023.
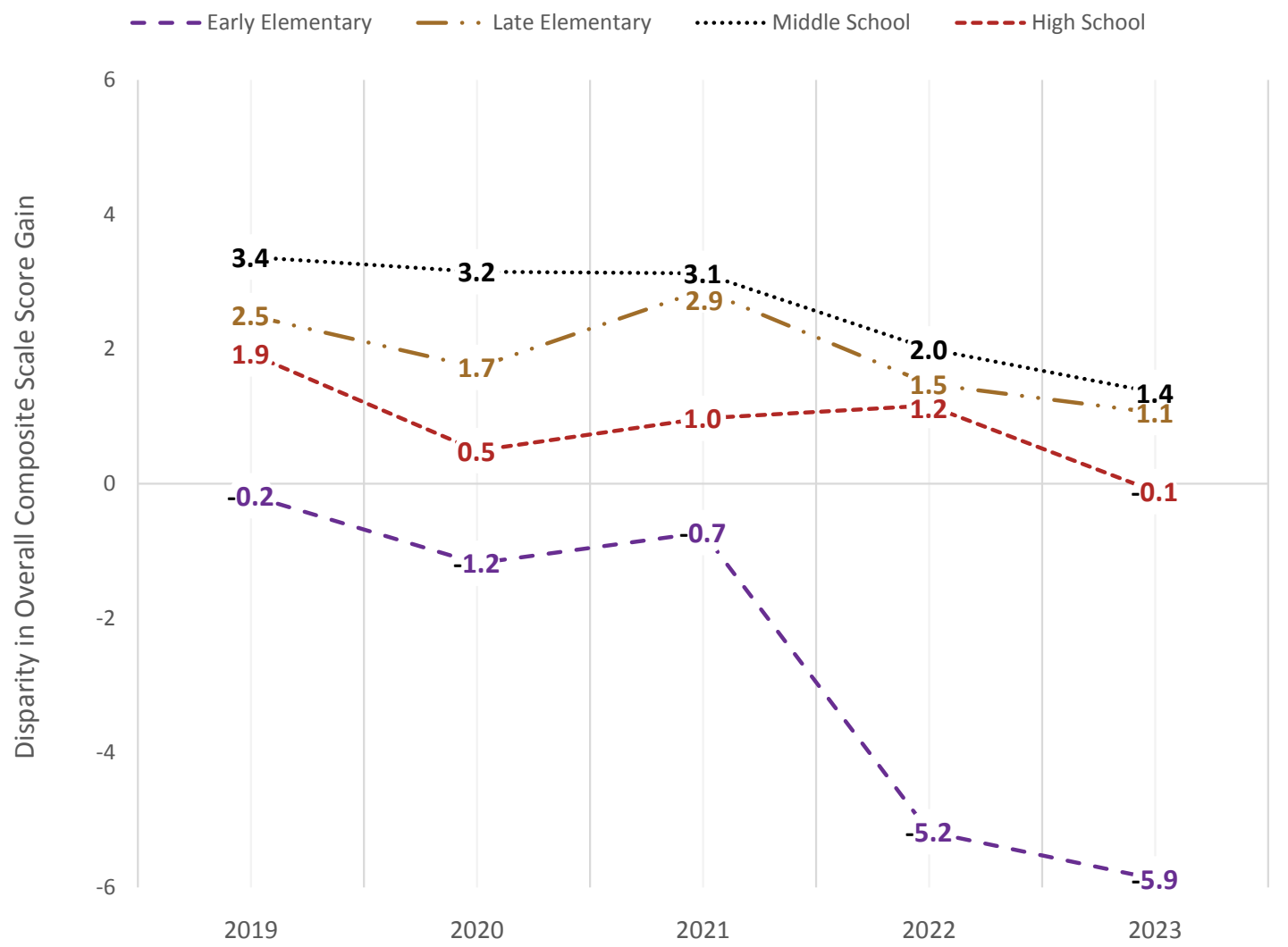
Grade-level Cluster *	2018	2019	2020	*2021*	*2022*	2023
Early Elementary (1–2)	N/A	–0.2	–1.2	*0.7*	–5.2	–5.9
Late Elementary (3–5)	N/A	2.5	1.7	*2.9*	1.5	1.1
Middle School (6–8)	N/A	3.4	3.2	*3.1*	2.0	1.4
High School (9–12)	N/A	1.9	0.5	*1.0*	1.2	–0.1

* errata in this table has been corrected on 3/31/2025

Summary of Disparities by Hispanic Status

In this section we examined average overall proficiency and growth for students identified as either Hispanic or non-Hispanic, aggregated across the WIDA Consortium. We documented how disparities existed in each grade-level cluster even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these disparities have increased in the years since the pandemic started. Although these averages do not necessarily reflect the experiences of English learners in any particular state, district, or school, the overall patterns suggest that there may be systematic differences in the barriers and challenges that subgroups of EL students have faced since 2020.

The disparity in overall proficiency between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students has grown most for students in early elementary grades, where the disparity was already largest. Alarmingly, this is also the cluster with the highest proportion of EL students. Although subgroup-average scores from 2023 indicate a reduction in these disparities for each grade-level cluster, average differences by Hispanic status are still higher than pre-pandemic levels in all grade-level clusters. These disparate trends point to consistent differences in how average proficiency has declined for different subgroups of English learners since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Disparities in average growth, meanwhile, have also decreased in recent years, and the average gains of Hispanic students now outpace non-Hispanic students in early elementary grades. Growth is closely related to proficiency, however; if Hispanic students are entering school with lower average initial proficiency than their non-Hispanic peers, as Figure 9 suggests, that could affect their annual gain scores as well, inflating them relative to non-Hispanic ELs' growth.

Because overall averages for Hispanic and non-Hispanic subgroups are aggregated across demographically and geographically diverse contexts, we recommend caution in interpreting these descriptive trends. Many factors at the individual, school, district, and state level contribute to patterns in English learner test scores. The overall patterns point to potential areas for state agencies and local educators to conduct their own disaggregated analyses to understand which students are facing the steepest barriers to an equitable education, and how best to support students' academic English development within local contexts.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted many aspects of daily life across the country, including in our public education system. Studies suggest that English learners may have been especially vulnerable to the ways in which the pandemic disrupted instruction and support for many students. Evidence presented in this and previous WIDA reports shows that since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, the average proficiency of English learners in the WIDA Consortium has continued to decline in almost all grade levels and in most language domains. Though student assessment fully resumed in 2022 and more students than ever took ACCESS Online in 2023, their average test scores do not indicate a return to pre-pandemic "normalcy." Even as many of the youngest ELs exhibited growth in their individual language skills, many other students continue to test at low proficiency levels. Preliminary analyses suggest that ELs in higher grade levels especially are showing slower growth than pre-pandemic averages. If students do not receive the supports they need to reach reclassification-level proficiency, many more are likely to receive the "long-term" label, which—in addition to further stigmatizing students identified as ELs—has implications for school and district accountability. Delayed language proficiency or reclassification may also contribute to additional barriers that many English learners face in accessing advanced coursework and academic milestones important for college and career readiness.

In addition to the overall trends in declining proficiency, disaggregated analyses by subgroup suggest that pandemic-related disruptions may have exacerbated some of the existing disparities within the English learner population, in particular between Hispanic and non-Hispanic English learners' average outcomes. As many ELs continue to face disproportionately low rates of English language development, these analyses point to uneven barriers in their academic experiences—even after schools returned to in-person instruction. More nuanced analyses are needed to unpack and understand how different subgroups of students may have faced disproportionate challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and how those challenges may continue to affect students in ongoing ways.

As the latest administration of ACCESS wraps up across the Consortium, WIDA research reports will continue to inform the national conversation around post-pandemic recovery and English learner outcomes in K-12 education. In the meantime, we recommend that states and districts conduct their own local analyses of overall and disaggregated student outcomes to determine what resources and supports are most appropriate to meet the unique needs of their students. In particular, educators can consider the potentially ongoing ways in which the pandemic may have exacerbated disparities within their community—not only between emergent multilingual students and their peers, but also within the English learner population as well.

Research Report

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