

# Long-term English Learners across 15 WIDA States



Despite bringing numerous strengths and assets to the classroom, many English learner students (ELs) continue to experience uneven access to high-quality educational opportunities relative to their English-fluent and never-EL peers. For example, ELs too often experience limited access to academically rigorous curricula and are disproportionately placed in non-college bound tracks. Inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes are especially pronounced among students who remain classified as ELs for an extended period, into their middle or high school years. In scholarly literature and policy documents, these students are increasingly referred to as *long-term ELs*, or *LTEs*. Some estimates suggest that as many as one quarter to one half of ELs will remain classified as such for six or more years, making so-called LTEs a group with growing national significance. However, the little we know about this group of students comes from studies conducted in only a handful of states and districts.

## Key Findings

1.

The potential LTE population varied markedly across states, from 2% to 24%. This variability remained substantial even when grouping and comparing states with similar reclassification criteria.

2.

The share of ELs dropped from the analytic cohort due to mobility or other factors was substantial and also varied widely across states.

3.

While only 13% of ELs in the analytic cohort were identified as potential LTEs across states, this rate was over three-fold, at 45%, for ELs with an IEP.

This research brief summarizes findings from a recent WIDA study exploring the potential LTE population across 15 WIDA states representing all four quadrants of the United States. We identified as potential LTEs those ELs who had not yet reached a minimum threshold of English language proficiency after six years. We defined the minimum threshold as a composite proficiency level (CPL) of 4.5 on the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency assessment; this was the minimum CPL used across all 40 WIDA states and territories when making decisions about EL reclassification as English proficient during the period covered in this study. Our analysis, which was based on the population of all students initially identified as ELs in grades K, 1, or 2 in these 15 states during the 2009–10 school year (N ≈ 167,000), considered the following questions:

<sup>1</sup> We use the LTE terminology while also acknowledging its limitations (see Sahakyan & Ryan, 2018).

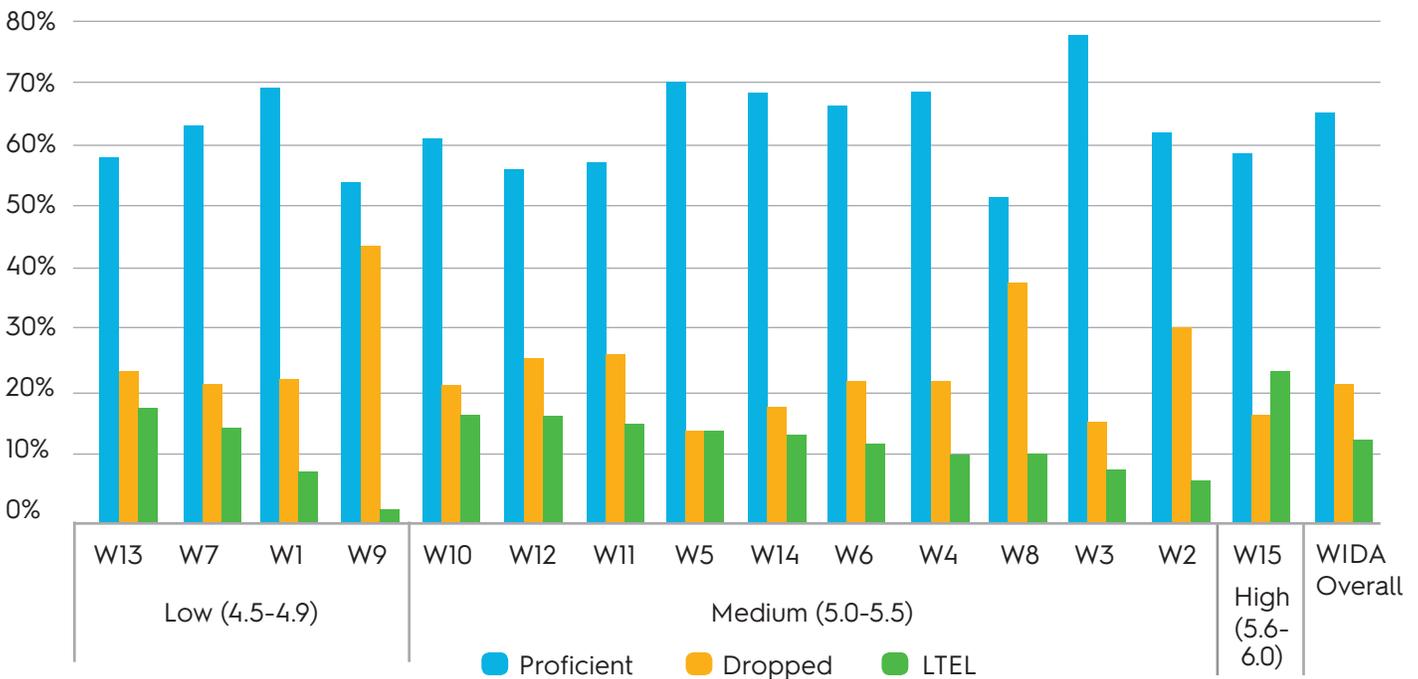
- What proportion of students initially identified as ELs while in Grades K, 1, or 2 had not yet reached a minimum level of English language proficiency required for reclassification as English fluent after six years? How does this vary across states?
- What are the demographic characteristics of potential LTEs?

To provide a more comprehensive picture of the entire 2009-10 cohort, we also identified *potentially proficient* and *dropped* ELs. Potentially proficient ELs included students who reached a composite proficiency level of at least 4.5 within six years. Although we were able to track students who moved within states, we were not able to track students who moved out of state or out of the country; we refer to this latter group as dropped ELs because they were dropped from the analytic cohort.<sup>2</sup>

### Findings

Across the 15 WIDA states included in this research, approximately 13% of ELs in the 2009-10 cohort were identified as potential LTELs, while 65% were classified as potentially proficient. Approximately 22% of ELs in the 2009-10 cohort were dropped from the analysis at some point prior to 2014 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Proportions of potentially proficient, dropped and long-term ELs across 15 WIDA states.**

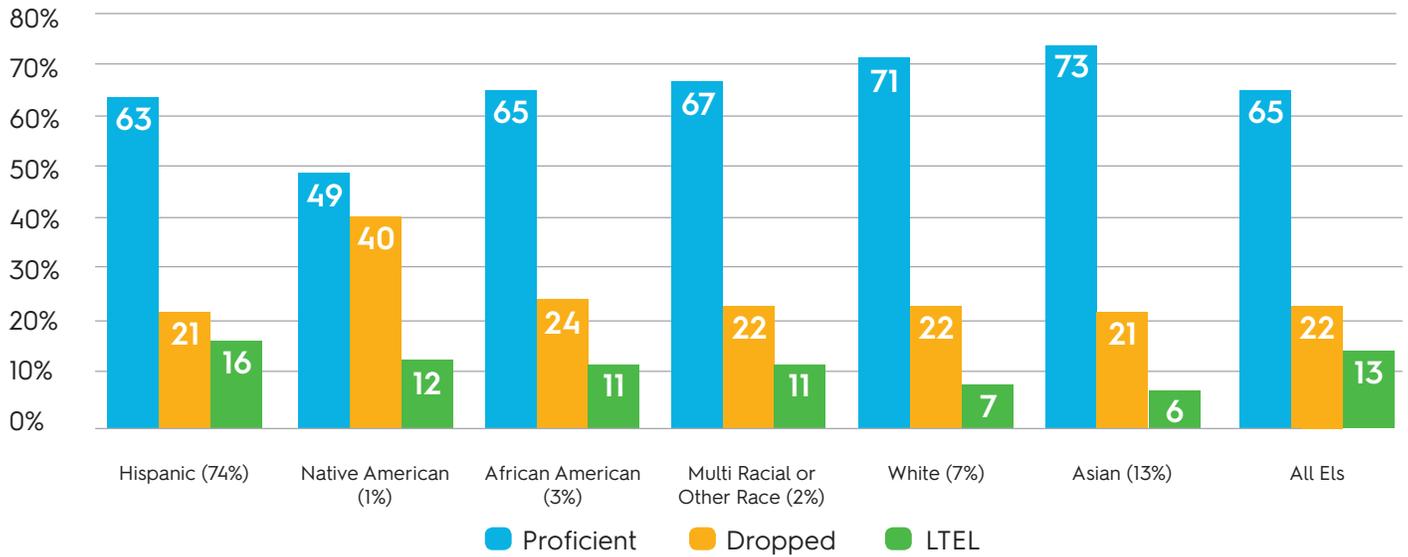


We found notable differences in potential LTEL proportions across states. This was true even among states that used a relatively similar composite proficiency level (CPL) criterion for EL reclassification as English fluent. For example, the proportion of the 2009-10 K-2 cohort identified as potential LTELs in states using a low (4.5-4.9 CPL) criterion ranged from 2% to 18%.

The size of the dropped subgroup of ELs also varied markedly across states, and in some states it was substantial. This is an important caveat to keep in mind when comparing the potential LTEL population across states. For example, if students from particularly mobile families are more likely to remain classified as ELs for a prolonged period, the potential LTEL proportions reported in Figure 1 would be conservative estimates.

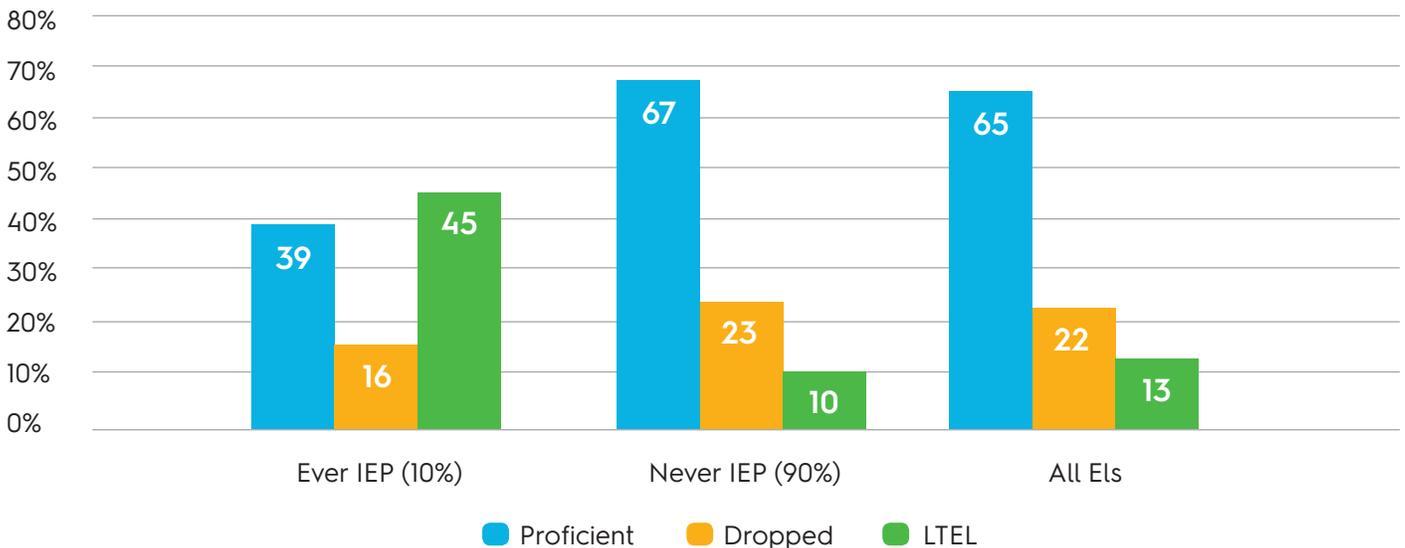
<sup>2</sup> The dropped EL subgroup could also include students who moved within states but were not identified as an EL in the receiving district.

Figure 2: Proportions of potentially proficient, dropped and long-term ELs by ethnicity/race.



Hispanic students made up the majority of ELs (74%) across the 15 included states, and 16% of Hispanic ELs were identified as potential LTELs—somewhat higher than the cohort average of 13%. Potential LTEL rates among Asian and White students, at 6% and 7% respectively, were lower than among other ethnicity and race groups. Among Native American ELs, 12% were identified as potential LTELs. It is worth noting that 40% of Native American ELs were dropped from the analytic cohort—a rate twice as high as that of any other ethnic/racial subgroup.

Figure 3: Proportions of potentially proficient, dropped and long-term ELs by IEP status.



Those EL students who had an individualized education plan (IEP) at some point between 2009 and 2015 (ever-IEP subgroup) were identified as potential LTELs at a much higher rate than their never-IEP peers. Almost half (45%) of ELs who had an IEP were also identified as potential LTELs. The same was true only for 10% of ELs in the never-IEP subgroup.

## Implications for Educators and Policymakers

Findings from this research suggest several implications for educators, policymakers, and researchers.

- The proportion of the 2009–10 cohort later identified as potential LTELs varied widely across the 15 states included in this research, from 2% to 24%. This was true even after applying a uniform definition and grouping states by reclassification criteria. This finding raises questions about the extent to which state policy context drives the state-to-state variability we observe. Stakeholders should work with researchers to better understand which factors are associated with variation in LTEL rates.
- The share of ELs dropped from the initial analytic cohort due to mobility also varied widely across states. The inability to track these ELs likely contributed to underestimation of the LTEL population. Students who frequently move across states or between the U.S. and other countries may be more likely to be identified as LTELs. States and districts must identify ways to ensure greater consistency in language support services for ELs when they move out of the district or state, and how to effectively support ELs who make one or more transnational moves over the course of their K-12 education.
- Students from Spanish-speaking homes were identified as potential LTELs at a higher rate than students from other home language backgrounds, a finding consistent with prior research on the LTEL population. There is a continuing need to better understand the factors that contribute to higher rates of LTEL identification among particular groups of students. As a recent report from the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine notes, research is limited about why students from some groups may require more time to attain proficiency in English.
- Across states, the proportion of the 2009–10 cohort later identified as potential LTELs was 13%; this same rate was over three times as high for ELs with an IEP (45%). This finding draws attention to the limitations of the very definition of a long-term English learner, based primarily on the assumption that all students will meet criteria for reclassification as English fluent within 5 to 7 years. A substantial body of literature indicates that some students, including ELs with disabilities, will require more time. There is a continuing need for research on appropriate ways to measure the progress of ELs with disabilities on English language proficiency assessments.

### Suggested citation:

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