



Exploring the Long-term English Learner Population Across 15 WIDA States

Prepared by Narek Sahakyan, M.S. and Sarah Ryan, Ph.D.
Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin–Madison





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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

English learner students (ELs) in the United States make up 9.4% of all students in Kindergarten through Grade 12 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Despite bringing numerous strengths and assets to the classroom, ELs continue to experience uneven access to high-quality educational opportunities and significantly poorer educational outcomes compared to their English-fluent and never EL peers (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2017; Ream, Ryan, & Yang, 2017).

Educational outcomes are especially troubling for students who remain classified as ELs for an extended period, into their middle or high school years (Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2012). In scholarly literature and policy documents, these students are increasingly referred to as long-term ELs (LTELs).

In this report, we build greater knowledge about the population of students referred to as LTELs by exploring the size and characteristics of this subgroup of ELs across 15 states. As members of the WIDA Consortium, all 15 states annually administer the same English language proficiency assessment to their ELs (i.e., ELs not yet reclassified as proficient in English). We focus on the cohort of new ELs in 2009-10 in these 15 states who were not reclassified as English proficient within six years.

The results shed light on factors, including students' initial English proficiency, state reclassification criteria, and student mobility, that shape the LTEL population in different ways across states. The results also suggest differences in the likelihood of being identified as an LTEL according to student race/ethnicity, native language, and Individualized Education Program (IEP) status.

To the best of our knowledge, this research is the first to consider the profile of the LTEL population across a wide range of states. Moreover, this study is one of the first to explore the profile of the LTEL population in states outside of Arizona, California, New York, and Texas, where almost all previous research on LTELs has been conducted. We find substantial heterogeneity across states in the size and characteristics of the population of students referred to as LTELs, supporting the notion that local policies and other contextual factors shape the contours of this student subgroup (Brooks, 2018). The findings highlight a continuing need for research that rejects an overly simplistic understanding of the LTEL designation as something inherent within students. Future research is needed to better understand how educational and social systems, practices, and policies structure the educational experiences and diverse trajectories of students identified as LTELs.

Brief Background

Students identified as LTELs have attended U.S. schools for over 5–7 years—the number of years research suggests the average student will require to achieve both social and academic English proficiency (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; NASEM, 2017)—without meeting state-required criteria for reclassification as Fully English Proficient. According to some estimates, between one-quarter and one-half of ELs who enroll in U.S. schools will be “captured” by the long-term English learner label (Thompson, 2015).¹

Prior research suggests that most LTELs have not had the opportunity to benefit from consistent programs of language support (Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2007; Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Olsen, 2014). Either within the same school district or when moving from one district to another, many LTELs have been shifted among variants of bilingual education and

¹ Current estimates of the size of the LTEL population are heavily informed by data available from states and metropolitan areas serving the highest numbers of ELs. For example, Menken, Kleyn, and Chae (2012) reported that LTELs constituted one-third of the EL population in Chicago, 23% in Colorado, and 59% among 40 California school districts (Olsen, 2010).

English as a second language programs. In addition, 25% to 75% of LTELs have experienced one or more years in mainstream classroom placements with no language support services (Olsen, 2014). Some LTELs also experience disruptions in programming as a result of moving back and forth from the United States and their families' countries of origin (Menken et al., 2007).

Prevailing descriptions of LTELs often position these youth as low-achieving and even as "languageless" (Flores, Kleyn, & Menken, 2015; Rosa, 2010). For example, based on research with students in California, Olsen (2014) found that LTEL students often read and write below grade level, and that their course grades tend to drop in middle and high school.

Other research suggests the characteristics and educational trajectories of LTELs observed in earlier studies are not consistent across contexts and do not fully represent the linguistic and academic abilities of LTELs (Brooks, 2018; Thompson, 2015). Some students classified as ELs for six or more years indeed experience academic difficulties. Yet research also points to many ways in which students identified as LTELs succeed academically and use multiple languages in complex ways (Brooks, 2018).

When the LTEL label is used to describe students as lacking language and academic skills, this terminology can be stigmatizing. Yet the LTEL terminology, however imperfect, can also draw needed attention to disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes that systematically place this student subgroup at a disadvantage in terms of their short- and long-term educational and social outcomes.

Throughout this report, we were mindful of the potential costs and benefits that come with the LTEL label. The process of identifying and labeling a subgroup of students as LTELs can perpetuate the inequity we aim to address. Yet by not using this terminology, we might silence growing and necessary attention focused on meeting these students' needs. We have no easy or simple solutions to this dilemma, and we continue to grapple with it. In describing characteristics of LTELs across state contexts, we highlight the need to understand more fully how the needs and experiences of these students are shaped by complex interactions among individual, institutional, and policy factors.

Analytic Approach

Identifying Long-term English Learners across WIDA

To identify and explore the characteristics of the LTEL population across contexts requires a uniform LTEL definition. Yet states vary in their reclassification criteria, and in how they implement these criteria (Estrada & Wang, 2018), making it challenging to arrive at a LTEL definition that applies across WIDA. Comparing the size and characteristics of the LTEL population across states while using each state's reclassification criteria to identify LTELs can be also problematic. The size of the LTEL population would be under-reported in states where ELs are reclassified at a lower English proficiency level relative to states where the reclassification threshold is higher. Variability in state policy context, more so than any real differences in the size and characteristics of the LTEL population, might drive apparent state-to-state variability.

To address this challenge, we define as *potential LTELs* those students who qualify for language support services for six or more years without reaching an overall composite proficiency level of 4.5 on ACCESS for ELLs. ACCESS for ELLs is the large-scale English language proficiency assessment administered to Kindergarten through 12th-grade students identified as ELs in 40 U.S. states and territories. We use an overall composite proficiency level of 4.5 because this is the lowest threshold WIDA member states used to reclassify students during the period under study.²

² The overall composite proficiency level is a weighted average of student scores on the reading, writing, listening, and speaking domain tests of ACCESS for ELLs.

Although this definition excludes LTELs in certain states,³ this tradeoff enables us to generate a broadly representative profile of the population of potential LTELs across multiple WIDA states in a way that allows for meaningful comparisons. Moreover, ELs who do not reach a composite proficiency level of 4.5 for six or more years constitute a population that merits the attention of practitioners, policy makers, caregivers, and researchers, regardless of the reclassification criteria used in a particular state.

Data and Sample

Data for this study include longitudinally connected ACCESS for ELLs assessment data and student demographic characteristics. These data come from the ACCESS for ELLs data warehouse, which is housed and managed at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research under Institutional Review Board protocol #2013-0558. From among 40 WIDA states and territories, requisite longitudinal ACCESS for ELLs assessment data (i.e., six or more years of data) were available for 18 states. Two states were excluded due to small samples (<1,000 ELs) and/or state policy regarding student-level data reporting, and a third state was excluded due to interrupted WIDA membership status. Thus, the analytic sample for this exploratory study comprises all ELs in 15 WIDA states who took the ACCESS for ELLs assessment *for the first time* in 2009–10 while in Kindergarten, Grade 1, or Grade 2.⁴ The 15 included states, which we reference using the numbers W(IDA)1 through W15 for purposes of anonymity, represent all four quadrants of the United States.

From the initial sample of 166,770 ELs, we identified potential LTELs as the subgroup of ELs who continued to qualify for language support services for six or more years without reaching a composite proficiency level of 4.5 on the ACCESS for ELLs assessment by 2014–15.⁵ We refer to a second subgroup of sample students—those who reached a composite proficiency level of 4.5 within six years, as *potentially proficient ELs* because they achieved the minimum composite proficiency level threshold used across the 15 sample states for reclassification. We refer to the remaining subgroup of students—those who exited the initial sample before reaching a composite proficiency level of 4.5—as *dropped*. Figure A1 (in the Appendix) depicts with greater detail how we defined potential LTELs, potentially proficient ELs, and dropped ELs.

Methods

We use descriptive statistics, including sample means and percentages, to explore factors that may influence the proportion of ELs in a state who are identified as LTELs. Similarly, we summarize the characteristics of the potential LTEL, potentially proficient EL, and dropped EL subgroups using percentages.

Results

In this section, we begin by describing the size of the potential LTEL population across grades and states. We then explore whether this population appears to vary by state according to three factors that may influence the proportion of a state's students identified as LTEL: the initial average English language proficiency level (Haas, Huang, & Tran, 2014), state reclassification criteria (Brooks, 2018; Estrada & Wang, 2018), and student mobility (Menken et al., 2007). Finally, we examine the characteristics of potential LTELs across several demographic variables, including gender, ethnicity, native language, and IEP status.

³ For example, an EL who has received language support services for six years or more and is at a proficiency level of 5.5 in a state that requires a composite proficiency level of 6.0 for reclassification.

⁴ Those ELs who did not receive valid composite scale scores, and thus were not assigned composite proficiency levels in their first test administration, were excluded from the sample.

⁵ In the remainder of this report, composite proficiency level refers to the overall composite proficiency level.

Initial English Language Proficiency and the Long-term English Learner Population

The proportion of potential LTELs observed among the 2009-10 cohort for a particular state may depend in part on the initial English language proficiency levels of students in that cohort. However, we can compare the initial English language proficiency levels of the 2009-10 cohort in each state by examining average composite proficiency levels on their first ACCESS for ELLs assessment in 2010. These results are provided in Table 1. Table 1 also presents the percentage of 2009-10 ELs in each state that we identify as potential LTELs. For example, out of State W5's Grade K-2 ELs, 15% were identified as potential LTELs.

Table 1: Average composite proficiency levels of the 2009-10 cohort and proportions of potential LTELs

State	Average Composite Proficiency Level (2009-10)				Percentage of potential LTELs
	Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 2	Average K-2	
W5	2.0	3.1	3.5	2.2	15%
W12	2.1	2.9	3.1	2.3	17%
W15	2.0	3.2	3.7	2.3	24%
W1	2.3	3.6	3.7	2.7	8%
W4	2.5	3.5	3.8	2.7	10%
W6	2.4	3.4	3.5	2.7	12%
W11	2.2	3.3	3.6	2.7	16%
W9	2.6	3.4	3.6	2.9	2%
W10	2.6	3.7	4.0	3.0	17%
W3	3.1	3.7	4.0	3.2	8%
W2	3.0	3.9	4.0	3.3	7%
W8	3.0	3.8	3.9	3.3	10%
W7	2.2	3.5	4.1	3.3	15%
W13	2.2	3.6	4.1	3.3	18%
W14	2.8	3.7	4.1	3.4	14%
Average across states	2.3	3.5	4.0	2.9	13%

States vary considerably in their K-2 cohort composite proficiency levels in 2009-10, which range from 2.0 to 3.4. However, a comparison of the last two columns of Table 1 suggests that states differences in 2009-10 proficiency levels do not necessarily dictate the observed differences in potential LTEL proportions.⁶ For example, in the four states (W2, W8, W7, and W13) with an identical average composite proficiency level of 3.3 in 2009-10, the potential LTEL proportions range from 7% to 18%. The state with the lowest proportion of LTELs (State W9) has the same cohort average composite proficiency level (2.9) in 2009-10 as the overall WIDA cohort, yet just 2% of ELs in State W9 are classified as potential LTELs compared to 13% in the overall WIDA cohort.

⁶ Estimated at $\rho = -0.36$, the Spearman correlation coefficient is not statistically significant, which suggests that in this population no observable relationship exists between cohort initial composite proficiency levels and potential LTEL rates.

State Reclassification Criteria and the Long-term English Learner Population

Our analyses set a common, hypothetical reclassification threshold of a composite proficiency level of 4.5 across WIDA states to identify the potential LTEL population. However this approach may not fully account for differences in states' reclassification mechanisms, including differences in the conjunctive criteria (e.g., content assessment scores, teacher input, district and school discretion) many states use for reclassification decisions. State differences in reclassification criteria might still influence the identification of the potential LTEL population we observe if, for example, these additional conjunctive criteria are more difficult to satisfy in the same states that have higher composite proficiency level thresholds for reclassification. To explore this possibility, we examined the potential LTEL proportion in each state together with the composite proficiency level required for reclassification in that state. Based on the different composite proficiency level thresholds required for EL reclassification, we divided the states into low range, middle range, or high range threshold subgroups; these results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Percentage of potential LTELs by state reclassification criteria

State	Percentage of Potential LTELs			
	Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 2	Average across Kindergarten–Grade 2
Low range reclassification criteria				
W9	2%	2%	2%	2%
W1	8%	7%	9%	8%
W7	17%	15%	14%	15%
W13	16%	20%	18%	18%
Middle range reclassification criteria				
W2	9%	4%	5%	7%
W3	8%	9%	6%	8%
W4	10%	8%	7%	10%
W8	9%	11%	12%	10%
W6	12%	11%	14%	12%
W14	12%	12%	15%	14%
W5	16%	12%	12%	15%
W11	16%	15%	14%	16%
W10	18%	15%	11%	17%
W12	18%	14%	18%	17%
High range reclassification criteria				
W15	25%	20%	21%	24%
Average				
Average across states	13.6%	13.4%	13.3%	13.5%

Among states that use low range composite proficiency levels for reclassification, the proportions of potential LTELs among the 2009–10 cohort (averaged across Kindergarten and Grades 1 and 2) range from 2% to 18%. Among states that use a middle range for reclassification, the proportions of potential LTELs range from 7% to 17%. The state with the highest reclassification threshold has the highest potential LTEL proportion (24%). This pattern of results suggests that state reclassification criteria may have some influence on the potential LTEL proportions we observe, even though we set a common composite proficiency level threshold across states. The pattern is less evident, however, if we exclude the states with the lowest (State W9) and highest (State W15) composite proficiency level reclassification criteria, suggesting that the reclassification criteria and processes used in these two outlier states may differ in important ways from those used in the remaining states.

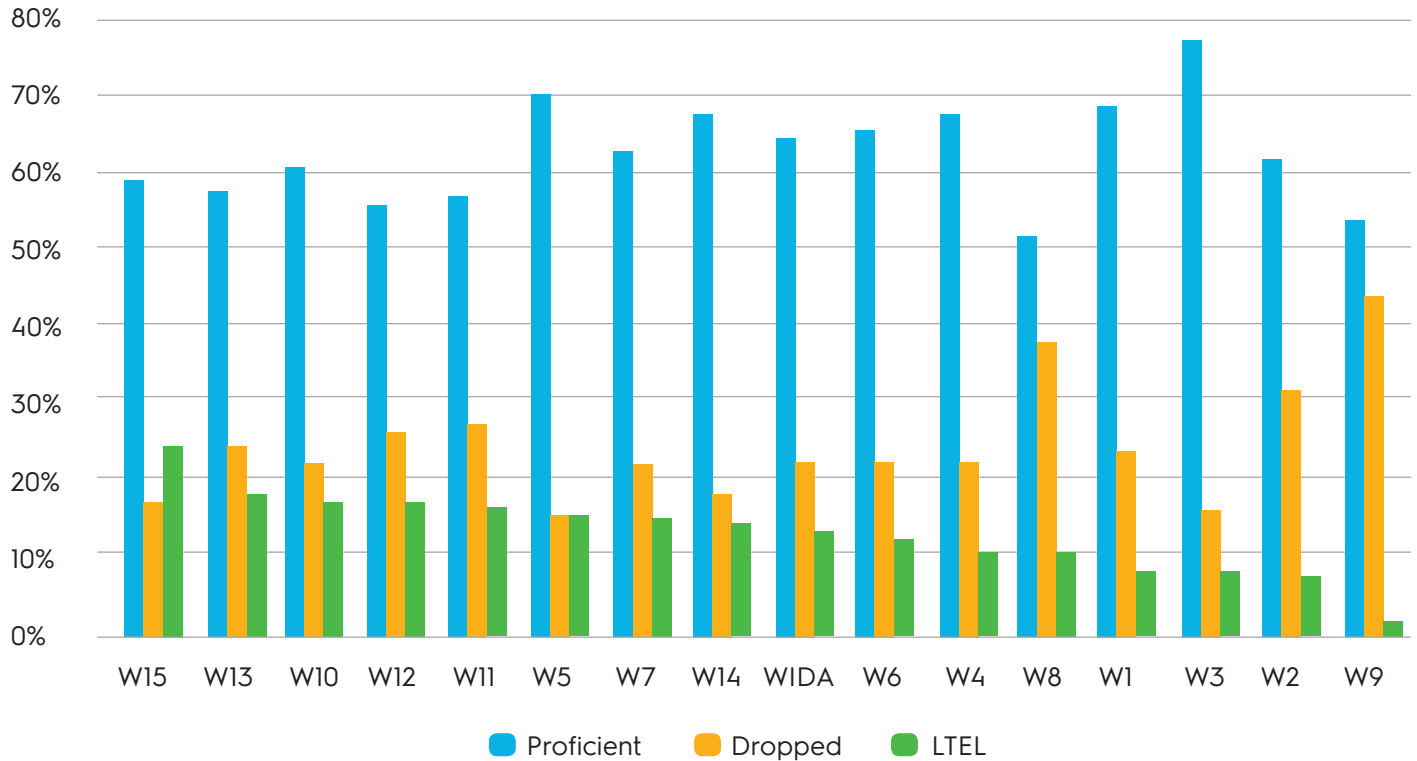
The results presented in Table 2 also suggest little across-grade variability in proportions of potential LTELs. The largest within-state difference across grades was fewer than five percentage points. Given this finding, we present the potential LTEL proportion for each state as the K–2 average in the remaining analyses.

Student Mobility and the Long-term English Learner Population

Student mobility also likely influences the proportions of potential LTELs observed within a state. Although WIDA uses a statistical algorithm to track students when they move between districts within a state, we are not able to track students when they move out of state or out of the country. For those ELs identified in 2009–10 who later moved out of state or the country, or who, for whatever reason, were no longer enrolled in EL classification and services despite not having met the state reclassification criteria, we simply observe missing ACCESS for ELLs assessment data. Because we cannot ascertain all specific sources of student departure from the initial sample, we refer to students who exit the initial sample before reaching a composite proficiency level of 4.5 as *dropped* (see Figure A1 in the Appendix).

A high number of ELs dropped from the initial sample within a state could lead to underestimation of potential LTEL proportions in that state if, for example, these students were more likely to become LTELs. To account for this possibility, we examined the potential LTEL proportions together with the dropped EL proportions for each state, averaged across the Grade K, 1, and 2 cohorts. The results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Percentage of the 2009–10 WIDA cohort identified as potentially proficient ELs (proficient), as ELs dropped from the sample (dropped), or as potential LTELs (LTEL)



Note: N = 166,770.

As Figure 1 shows, the dropped rate is highest (44%) in the state with the lowest proportion of potential LTELs (2%; State W9). On the other hand, the state with the highest proportion of potential LTELs (24%; State W15) has a drop rate of 17%—well below the across-state average of 22%. These results suggest that direct comparisons of estimated potential LTEL proportions across states could be misleading without accounting for differences in rates of dropped students. For this reason, in the subsequent analyses we present results for each of the three groups included in Figure 1: potentially proficient ELs, dropped ELs, and potential LTELs.

Demographic Characteristics and the Long-term English Learner Population

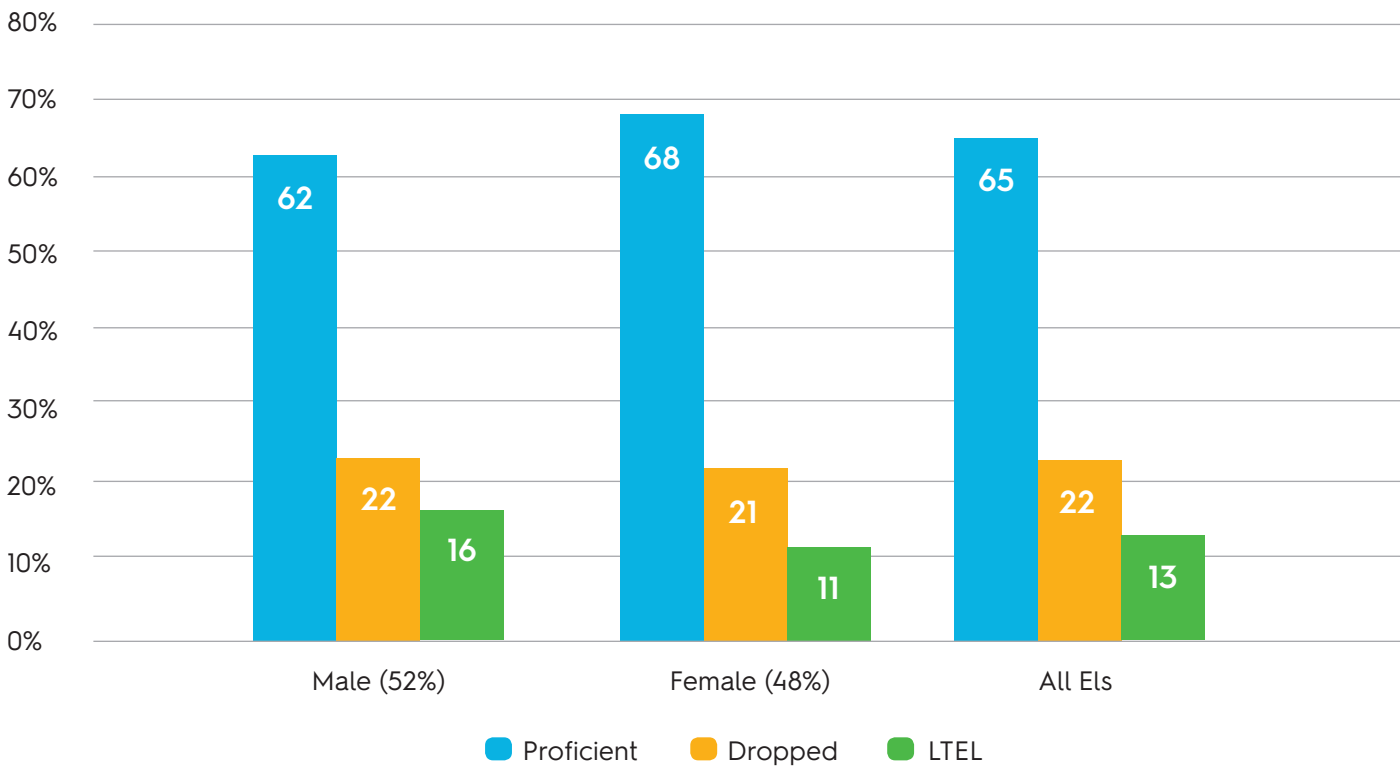
In this section, we describe the potential LTEL population across states according to select demographic characteristics: Gender, race/ethnicity, native language, and IEP status.⁷ To provide additional context, we describe the dropped and potentially proficient EL populations according to these characteristics.⁸

⁷ Tables A2 and A3 in the appendix break down of EL proportions by state for key demographic variables.

⁸ Sample sizes vary slightly across these analyses due to missing data on demographic variables, which is under 1%.

Gender. Males constitute 52% of the 2009–10 cohort of ELs in Grades K–2, and females make up 48%. Figure 2 shows the percentage of each gender subgroup classified as potentially proficient ELs, dropped, and potential LTELs. While the drop rates are similar across gender, a larger proportion of males (16%) are identified as potential LTELs relative to females (11%).

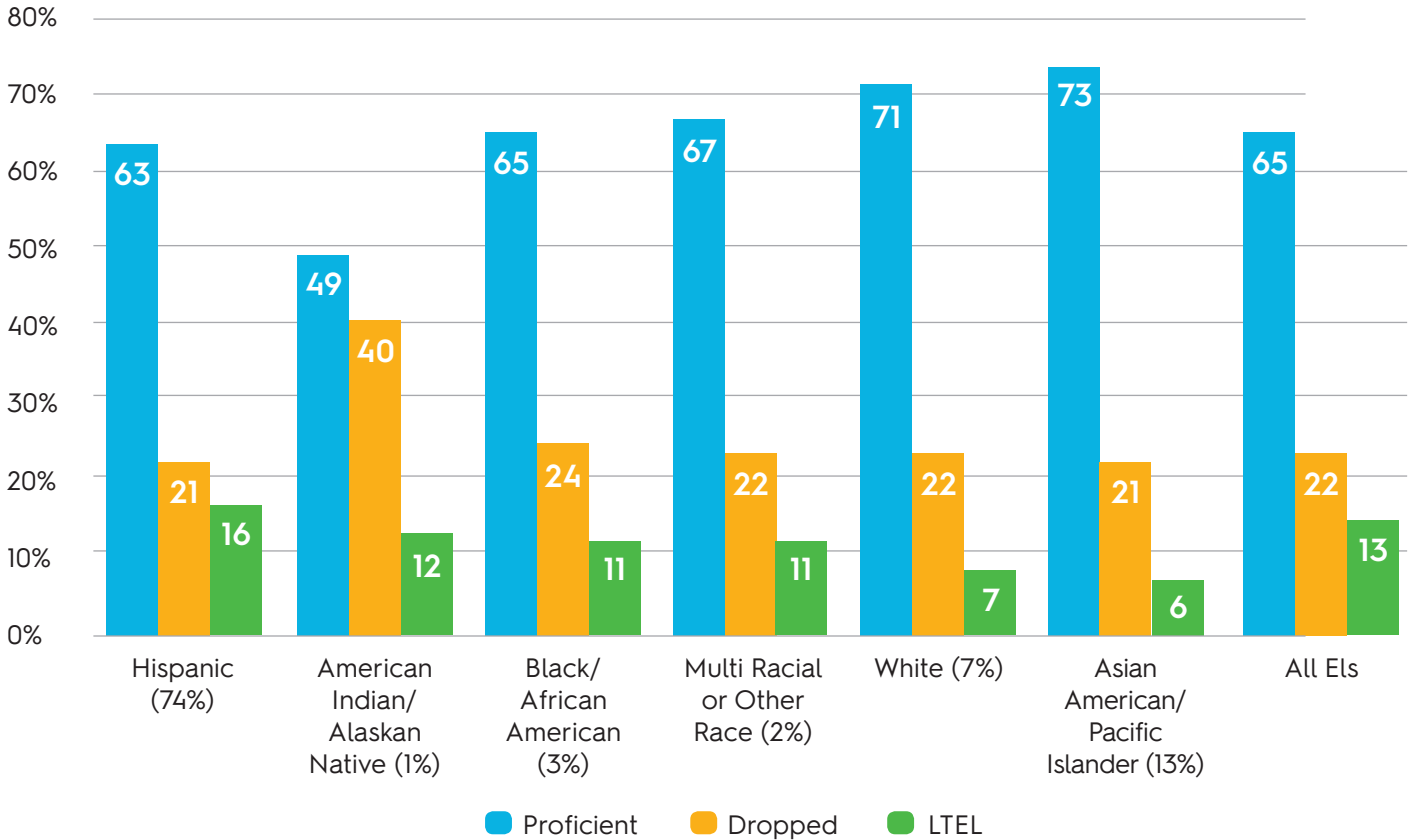
Figure 2: Percentage of the 2009–10 cohort classified as potentially proficient ELs, dropped ELs and potential LTELs, by gender



Note: N=165,591. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Race/ethnicity. The majority of ELs in this cohort, as well as nationally, are Hispanic (74%), followed by Asian American / Pacific Islander (13%), White (7%), Black / African American (3%), multi-racial (2%), and American Indian / Native American (1%). In Figure 3, we consider the percentage of each race/ ethnicity subgroup classified as potentially proficient ELs, dropped ELs, and potential LTEs.

Figure 3: Percentage of the 2009–10 cohort classified as potentially proficient ELs, dropped ELs and potential LTEs, by race/ethnicity

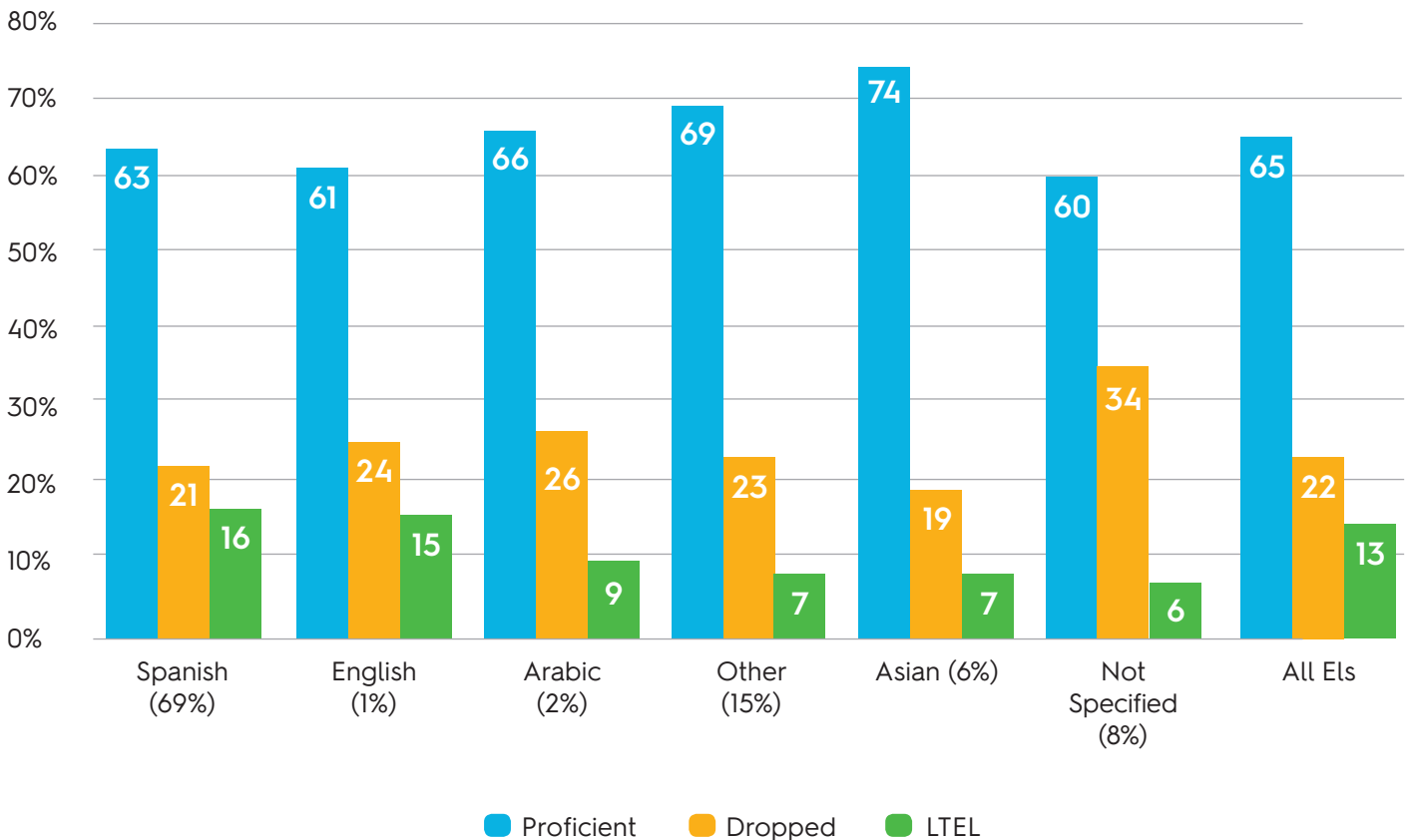


Note: N=165,246. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Among ELs in the 2009–10 cohort, we observe the lowest proportions of potential LTELs among Asian American (6%) and White (7%) students, and the highest proportion among Hispanic (16%) students. It is more difficult to draw conclusions about the proportion of potential LTELs among American Indian ELs, given their much higher rates in the dropped group. On average across the 15 states in the sample, the proportion of American Indian ELs dropped from the initial analytic sample is almost twice that of ELs from most other racial/ethnic backgrounds. This result highlights that state-specific patterns in the proportion of potential LTELs according to students’ race/ethnicity (or other demographic variables) are likely to vary, sometimes substantially. For example, the results in Figure 3 for American Indian ELs are largely driven by the two states where these ELs are concentrated in our analytic sample (see Table A2 in the appendix).

Native language. Spanish (70%) is the predominant native language among ELs in the 2009–10 cohort (see Figure 4). Students who come from native language backgrounds other than those presented in Figure 4 make up 15% of the sample. ELs for whom native language was unspecified make up about 8% of the sample, while the Asian American native language subgroup (6%) includes ELs with Chinese, Korean, Hmong/Mong, or Vietnamese specified as their native languages. ELs with an Arabic native language make up about 2% of the sample.⁹

Figure 4: Percentage of the 2009–10 cohort classified as potentially proficient ELs, dropped ELs and potential LTELs, by native language



Note: N=166,770. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

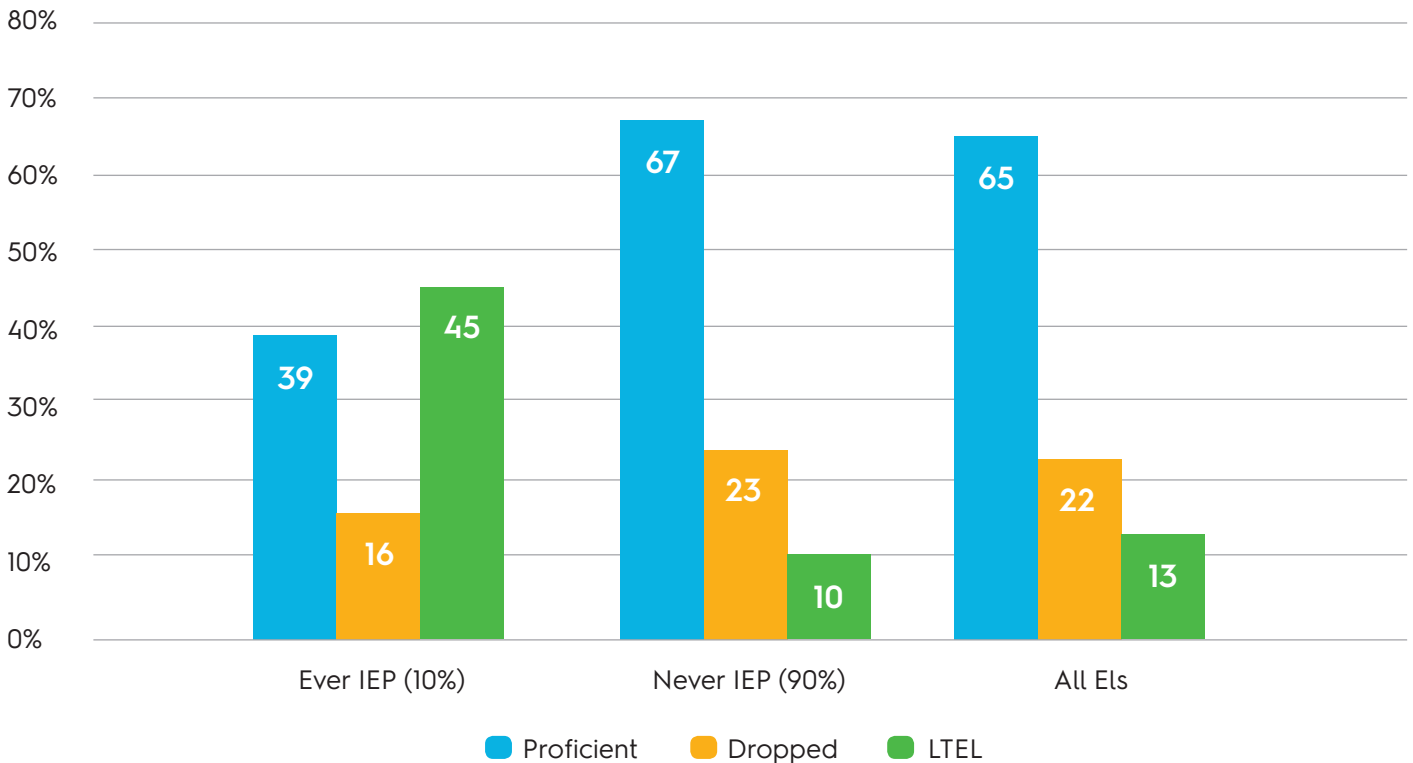
The highest proportion of potential LTELs (16%) is observed among native Spanish speakers, although a similar proportion (15%) is observed among potential LTELs reporting English as their native language. The lowest proportion of potential LTELs is found among the Not Specified subgroup, but this subgroup also demonstrates the highest proportion of dropped ELs (34%). ELs reporting an Asian native language have the highest potentially proficient rate (74%) along with the lowest dropped rate (19%).

⁹ Students taking the ACCESS for ELLs assessment during the period covered by this research collectively reported over 200 native languages. We include the most frequently reported native language groups, along with a category (“Other”) for less commonly reported languages.

Individualized Education Program status. Approximately 10% of ELs in the 2009–10 cohort reported IEPs at some point from 2009 to 2015; we refer to this student subgroup as *ever IEP*. We refer to their EL peers who did not have IEPs at any point during that time span as *never IEP*.

As shown in Figure 5, almost half (45%) of the ELs who had IEPs at some point from 2009 to 2015, were also classified as potential LTELs, while this is the case for only one in ten of ELs in the never IEP subgroup.

Figure 5: Percentage of the 2009–10 cohort classified as potentially proficient ELs, dropped ELs and potential LTELs, by individualized education program status



Note: N = 166,770. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

While these differences are substantial, it should be noted that any relationship between IEP and potential LTEL designation is likely to vary across states, particularly given that the proportions of students identified as never IEP or as ever IEP differ widely across states. For example, less than 1% of ELs were classified as ever IEP in State W7, while almost 20% were classified as ever IEP in State W13 (see table A3). State-specific analyses would be required to get a better understanding of the relationship between the students’ IEP status and potential LTEL classification.¹⁰

¹⁰ Note that the analytic sample does not include those ELs with identified disabilities for whom a valid composite proficiency level was not calculated. Such students include those who could not complete one or more of the four domains (Reading, Speaking, Writing, and Listening) included in the ACCESS for ELLs assessment, for example due to a visual or auditory impairment or a significant cognitive disability.

Summary and Implications

We began this research by exploring whether the proportions of potential LTELs in the 15 included states appeared to vary according to three factors: initial average English language proficiency of each state's cohort (Grades K, 1, 2) at entry, state reclassification criteria, and student mobility.

Considering newly identified Grade K-2 ELs in 2009-10, we observed considerable variation across states in initial average proficiency levels (2.0 to 3.4). However, state differences in initial average proficiency levels did not necessarily correspond to differences across states in eventual potential LTEL proportions six years later. While previous research shows that LTELs demonstrate lower initial English language proficiency levels than their EL peers reclassified within six years (Haas et al., 2014), prior studies have focused on students within a particular state. The results suggest that the relationship between aggregate initial English language proficiency and LTEL rates likely varies across states. Future research should further explore how and why this relationship differs across contexts; identifying student, school, and community factors that help explain such variability could shed light on where educators and policy makers might target efforts to better support the development of English language proficiency among all ELs, regardless of where they start.

Our analyses set a common composite proficiency level reclassification threshold of 4.5 across states to identify the potential LTEL population. Although we did not observe the additional criteria (e.g., domain-specific criteria, content assessment scores, teacher input) that many states use for reclassification decisions, our results suggest these criteria also shape the potential LTEL population. Further, the relationship between reclassification processes and LTEL designation seems to vary across states. This finding resonates with the observation (Brooks, 2018; Estrada & Wang, 2018) that the LTEL label is constructed in part through federal and state policies and their implementation. Variation across states in how language proficiency is defined and how reclassification processes are implemented leads to differences in how and which students are labeled as LTEL. We see a benefit in future research exploring the reliability and validity of additional measures used for reclassification decisions across states, as well as variation in how consistently these criteria are implemented.

The observed proportions of potential LTELs across the 15 WIDA states also appeared to vary with rates at which students were dropped from the initial sample. These results suggest that direct comparisons of potential LTEL proportions across states are likely to be misleading without also attending to differences in the rates at which ELs depart state data systems before meeting reclassification criteria. As noted earlier, one possible reason for student departure from our sample is out-of-state mobility. Because highly mobile students are more likely to be classified as LTELs (Menken et al., 2012; Olsen, 2014), there is a need to understand how different kinds of mobility influence EL outcomes, and how states and districts can better support especially mobile ELs.

In the latter half of this report, we described the potential LTEL population, along with the potentially proficient and dropped EL subgroups, across 15 WIDA states according to gender, race/ethnicity, native language, and IEP status. Among new ELs taking ACCESS for ELLs in Grades K-2 in 2009-10, we observed slightly lower proportions of potential LTELs among female (11%) ELs relative to their male peers (16%). The proportions of potential LTELs were lowest among Asian American (6%) and White (7%) students, and the highest proportion was observed among Hispanic (16%) students. Results for students' reported native languages paralleled the latter pattern: 16% of native Spanish speakers were identified as potential LTELs, while the same was true for 7% of ELs reporting Asian native languages. American Indian ELs were also identified as potential LTELs at a comparatively higher rate (12%), but this proportion is especially prone to uncertainty given that American Indian students were dropped from the analytic sample at almost twice the rate of ELs from most other racial/ethnic backgrounds. These average cross-state patterns in potential LTEL identification according to race/ethnicity and native language can mask a great deal of variability within states. This

distinction suggests the importance of future analyses that more closely examine the interaction between student characteristics and contextual factors within particular states and districts.

We found substantial overlap between IEP and potential LTEL status, but also wide variability in the proportion of ELs referred to special education across states. The latter finding is consistent with a large literature indicating that ELs with disabilities are often over- or under-identified. The pattern we encountered raises important questions about the extent to which some ELs find it difficult or impossible to achieve local reclassification criteria due to learning or other disabilities rather than because they lack the English language proficiency necessary to access academic content instruction. Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers alike must continue to grapple with this issue.

Limitations and Future Research

This research provides an overall description of the potential LTEL population across 15 WIDA states. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to consider the size and characteristics of the potential LTEL population across a wide range of state contexts. This study also expands knowledge about the LTEL population beyond the small number of states where almost all previous research on LTELs has been conducted (specifically, Arizona, California, New York, and Texas).

We remind the reader, however, that these results are descriptive and exploratory, and they rely in part on the quality and accuracy of student demographic data provided by states and districts. Additionally, the demographic characteristics of the potential LTELs we identify represent the average pattern observed across the 15 included WIDA states. Yet, as noted above, the demographic characteristics of LTELs are likely to vary within and among states, sometimes substantially. Future research could further probe this variability through state-specific analyses, an approach that would allow for use of state-specific reclassification criteria to identify LTELs.

Future research at the state and/or district levels could also address a key factor that we were unable to include, namely the type, quality, and consistency of the language support programming and academic content instruction available to ELs. Some scholars note that LTELs often experience weak language program models (Menken et al., 2012). Others note that broad and generic “quick fixes” such as particular curricula or isolated courses are unlikely to provide effective support to students (Brooks, 2018). Future research on the relationship between specific types of programming, and the needs and resources of LTELs could inform our current understanding about the language trajectories of students in this subgroup as well as state policies and practices.

Finally, the results do not account for the combined influence of multiple factors and student characteristics. As others have noted (Brooks, 2018; Collins & Blige, 2016), socially significant identities, such as native language or IEP status, do not structure individual student experiences and opportunities in isolation; instead, they operate simultaneously, and often in complex ways. As policy makers, researchers, practitioners, and caregivers continue working together to better understand and support the needs of all ELs, appreciation for the multifaceted identities and experiences of these students must be central to these efforts.

Appendix: Supplementary Tables and Figures

Table A1: Potentially proficient ELs, dropped ELs and potential LTELs, by state and grade

Grade	Grade	% Proficient	% Dropped	% LTEL
W1	K	72	20	8
	1	60	33	7
	2	62	29	9
W2	K	64	27	9
	1	54	41	4
	2	62	34	5
W3	K	79	13	8
	1	62	29	9
	2	69	25	6
W4	K	70	20	10
	1	57	35	8
	2	62	31	7
W5	K	72	12	16
	1	59	29	12
	2	58	30	12
W6	K	67	21	12
	1	63	26	11
	2	60	26	14
W7	K	56	27	17
	1	63	22	15
	2	68	18	14
W8	K	54	37	9
	1	49	41	11
	2	49	39	12
W9	K	54	44	2
	1	50	48	2
	2	59	38	2
W10	K	63	19	18
	1	58	27	16
	2	60	29	11
W11	K	56	28	16
	1	58	27	15
	2	59	27	14
W12	K	60	22	18
	1	46	39	14
	2	45	37	18
W13	K	57	27	16
	1	58	22	20
	2	61	21	18
W14	K	64	25	12
	1	70	14	15
	2	73	12	15
W15	K	59	15	25
	1	54	26	20
	2	57	22	21

Table A2: Distribution of ELs across ethnicity/race, by state

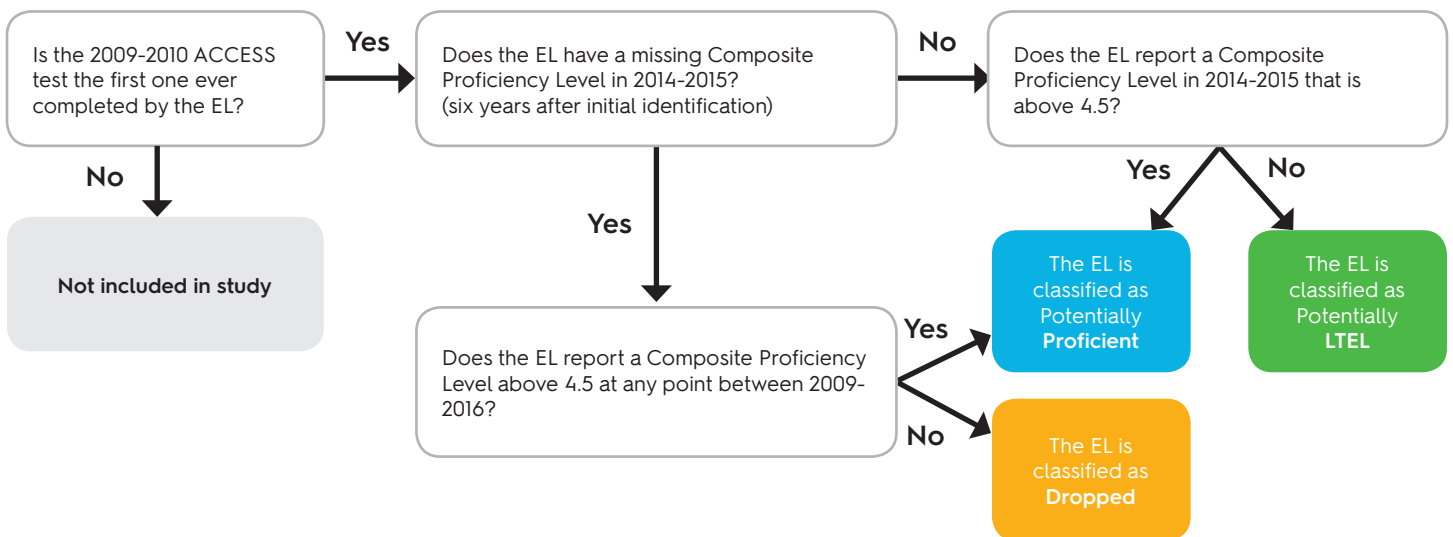
State	Race/Ethnicity (%)					
	Hispanic	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	Black/African American	Multi-racial or Other Race	White	Asian American/ Pacific Islander
W1	83.0	0.4	1.4	1.0	2.9	11.3
W2	67.2	0.1	16.7	2.7	7.8	5.5
W3	74.9	0.1	5.8	0.3	2.5	16.5
W4	79.1	0.2	3.5	1.6	3.5	12.2
W5	77.7	0.1	1.2	1.2	10.2	9.6
W6	59.9	0.2	7.3	7.1	9.2	16.4
W7	83.5	0.1	1.9	1.8	3.3	9.4
W8	10.5	64.7	10.5	0.2	7.2	7.0
W9	67.8	0.1	2.7	0.6	10.0	18.9
W10	79.2	4.3	1.5	1.1	4.7	9.2
W11	56.5	0.2	6.1	2.8	10.8	23.6
W12	72.9	0.4	7.6	0.4	8.3	10.5
W13	9.1	32.4	18.6	0.1	33.0	6.7
W14	59.8	0.1	6.0	3.6	8.8	21.7
W15	64.2	0.4	1.9	0.5	7.3	25.7
Average across states	73.0	1.0	3.3	1.9	7.0	13.8

Note: Shading reflects the density of the racial/ethnic subgroup within a state.

Table A3: Distribution of ELs across gender and individualized education program status, by state

State	Gender		Individualized Education Program	
	% Female	% Male	% Ever IEP	% Never IEP
W1	47.1	52.9	7.5	92.5
W2	50.3	49.7	11.1	88.9
W3	48.9	51.1	12.1	87.9
W4	48.2	51.8	10.2	89.8
W5	47.8	52.2	17.3	82.7
W6	48.8	51.2	12.2	87.8
W7	48.1	51.9	0.6	99.4
W8	46.6	53.4	16.8	83.2
W9	47.4	52.6	8.4	91.6
W10	49.0	51.0	11.3	88.7
W11	46.7	53.3	15.7	84.3
W12	45.6	54.4	16.6	83.4
W13	45.7	54.3	19.7	80.3
W14	47.0	53.0	16.3	83.7
W15	49.0	51.0	17.3	82.7
Average across states	47.80	52.2	10.5	89.5

Figure A1: Identifying potentially proficient ELs, dropped ELs and potential LTELs in Grades K, 1 and 2.



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Wisconsin Center for Education Research
University of Wisconsin–Madison
1025 West Johnson St., MD #23
Madison, WI 53706

Client Services Center toll free:
(866) 276-7735
help@wida.us
wida.wisc.edu

