

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

English Learners in ESSA:

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides special funding to address the unique needs of English Learners (EL). But the law goes beyond funding, requiring states to adopt new accountability systems that hold schools responsible for the English-language development of ELs.

Currently, nearly 5 million students in America’s public schools — roughly 10 percent — are classified as ELs. An EL is a student between the ages of 3 and 21 in elementary or secondary school who was not born in the U.S. or whose native language is a language other than English. An EL can also be a migrant, Native American, or Alaska Native student; or a student who has difficulty in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language. A sample process for ELs to enter and exit programs is diagrammed here.



English-language proficiency: An overview

ESSA requires states — for the first time — to include progress toward English-language proficiency in school accountability systems as a core measure of academic success for current ELs. Prior to ESSA, only districts receiving Title III funds (as well as districts in states that voluntarily added EL accountability) were accountable for EL progress.

The English-language proficiency (ELP) indicator measures an EL’s ability to use the English language for communication and academic work. This indicator is required to be included in the accountability system. The ELP indicator is based on results on an English proficiency assessment designed for students who are learning English as a second language and aligned with English-as-a-second-language standards

How is it measured?

English-language proficiency is measured by an English-language proficiency test chosen by each state (the WIDA and ELPA21 consortia provide the assessments used by 45 states). No matter what test a state uses, that test must align with the state-determined ELP standards, which in turn must align with the state’s challenging academic state standards. ESSA also added new reporting requirements on the number of ELs that have not been reclassified in five years or more.

After students are identified as ELs, their English proficiency is assessed annually on the English-language proficiency test. The annual assessments generate information on individual students, showing which need additional help and which may be ready to exit from EL status, as well as for school accountability.

To measure progress for ELs, states must use the ELP exam, though the law does not specify how. But the state may also include other indicators, depending on the characteristics of their population and the other features of their accountability systems. Among the approaches states may consider are the following:

Progress on ELP test alone. The law allows states the option of just using results from their ELP exams. There are a variety of possible approaches, including:

- Measuring the percentage of students who have attained a higher performance level on the ELP exam (i.e., moving from a level one to a level two or low level one to a high level one);
- Measuring the percentage of students who make desired annual progress (e.g., half-score increase or more) and measuring how many students make that progress; or,
- Measuring the percentage of students who move from below proficient to proficient on the ELP exam.

Progress on ELP test plus reclassification rate. As an additional measure in their EL indicator, states can set statewide goals for the reclassification of ELs, then use a school's reclassification rate — in general, the number of ELs no longer identified as ELs divided by the total number of ELs — to determine the school's progress against statewide goals.

Composite indicator. States that want an even more robust picture of EL student progress might want also to account for time in program. Such states could include 1) a measure of growth on the ELP exam; 2) reclassification rates; and 3) the number/percentage of long-term ELs (students who are not proficient after five or more years as ELs).

Key question to ask as your state develops its measure of progress toward English proficiency

Does the measure of progress toward English proficiency set the expectation that students will, in fact, reach proficiency in a reasonable amount of time?

Research indicates that EL students require 3 to 5 years to achieve oral fluency and 4 up to 7 years to develop grade-level academic literacy skills in a second language.

While full English-language proficiency takes time, too much time can be problematic. Research on long-term ELs shows that the longer students are identified as ELs, the less likely they are to get access to the full set of courses they need to finish high school — and to graduate. As states make decisions about how to measure progress for ELs, advocates should make sure that these measures expect ELs to reach English-language proficiency within a reasonable timeframe.