



English Learners in Arizona

Demographics, Outcomes, and State Accountability Policies

By Julie Sugarman and Courtney Geary

This fact sheet provides an overview of key characteristics of the foreign-born and English Learner (EL) populations in Arizona. It aims to build understanding of the state demographic context, how ELs are performing in K-12 schools, and the basics of state policies for EL education under the federal *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), enacted in December 2015. The transition to ESSA is ongoing, with states slated to update their data reporting systems by December 2018. As a result, the data this fact sheet uses to describe student outcomes primarily reflect systems and accountability policies developed under the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, in effect from 2002 through 2015). Many of the changes expected as ESSA is implemented will improve the accuracy and availability of these data.

The first section examines the demographics of Arizona using U.S. Census Bureau 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) data, and EL students as reported by the Arizona Department of Education. A discussion of EL student outcomes as measured by standardized tests follows, and the fact sheet concludes with a brief overview of Arizona accountability mechanisms that affect ELs under ESSA.

I. Demographic Overview of Foreign-Born and EL Populations in Arizona

In 2016, approximately 935,000 foreign-born individuals resided in Arizona, accounting for 14 percent of the state population—comparable to the immigrant share in the United States overall, as seen in Table 1. The growth rate of the foreign-born population in Arizona slowed considerably from 136 percent in the period between 1990 and 2000 to 43 percent between 2000 and 2016, a rate similar to that of the U.S. immigrant population more generally (41 percent). Nevertheless, the immigrant population growth rate in Arizona outpaces that of the native-born population. Age group trends in Arizona mirror broader national trends, with disproportionately smaller shares of foreign-born individuals in the birth-to-age-17 brackets compared to the native born.

While the share of immigrants in Arizona's population is comparable to that of the United States more broadly, the share of school-age children with one or more foreign-born parents is slightly higher in Arizona (30 percent) than in the United States overall (26 percent), as shown in Table 2. Additionally, about 88 percent of children of immigrants in Arizona were native born, compared to 86 percent nationwide. In Arizona, 38 percent of children in low-income families had one or more foreign-born parents, compared to 32 percent of low-income children nationally.

Table 1. Foreign- and U.S.-Born Populations of Arizona and the United States, 2016

	Arizona		United States	
	Foreign Born	U.S. Born	Foreign Born	U.S. Born
Number	934,883	5,996,188	43,739,345	279,388,170
Share of total population	13.5%	86.5%	13.5%	86.5%
Population Change over Time				
% change: 2000-16	42.5%	34.0%	40.6%	11.6%
% change: 1990-2000	135.9%	32.1%	57.4%	9.3%
Age Group				
Share under age 5	0.7%	7.2%	0.7%	7.0%
Share ages 5-17	4.7%	19.2%	5.1%	18.5%
Share ages 18+	94.5%	73.7%	94.2%	74.5%

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub, “State Immigration Data Profiles: Demographics & Social,” accessed May 16, 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/AZ/US/.

Number of ELs. ACS data on the Limited English Proficient (LEP) population rely on self-reporting of English proficiency, with LEP individuals counted as those who speak English less than “very well.” At the national level, ACS data indicate that 5 percent of U.S. children ages 5 to 17 are LEP,¹ while data the states submitted to the federal government put the EL share of the total K-12 population at 10 percent in Fall 2015.²

At the state level, ACS data indicate that 4 percent of Arizona children ages 5 to 17 are LEP.³ However, the most recent data from the Arizona Department of Education, from school year (SY) 2016-17, indicate ELs represented 6 percent of the state preK-12 student population, or 72,261 students.⁴

Table 2. Nativity and Low-Income Status of Children in Arizona and the United States, 2016

	Arizona		United States	
	Number	Share of Population (%)	Number	Share of Population (%)
Children between ages 6 and 17 with	1,040,557	100.0	47,090,847	100.0
Only native-born parents	728,144	70.0	34,838,528	74.0
One or more foreign-born parents	312,413	30.0	12,252,319	26.0
Child is native born	276,311	26.6	10,501,024	22.3
Child is foreign born	36,102	3.5	1,751,295	3.7
Children in low-income families	733,063	100.0	28,363,805	100.0
Only native-born parents	459,312	62.7	19,216,957	67.8
One or more foreign-born parents	273,751	37.5	9,146,848	32.2

Note: The definition of children in low-income families includes children under age 18 who resided with at least one parent and in families with annual incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold.

Source: MPI Data Hub, “State Immigration Data Profiles: Demographics & Social.”

Table 3. Nativity of Arizona and U.S. LEP Students, 2012–16

	Share of K-12 LEP Children Born in the United States (%)		
	Grades K-5	Grades 6–12	Total
Arizona	87.9	63.9	77.1
United States	82.3	56.5	70.6

Note: Analysis based on Limited English Proficient (LEP) children ages 5 and older enrolled in grades K-12.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012–16 American Community Survey (ACS) data, accessed through Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota, “Integrated Public Use Microdata Series,” accessed April 25, 2018, <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>.

Although ACS data seem to undercount EL children, they can be used to examine (with due caution) the nativity of ELs, a variable school data systems do not capture. Table 3 shows that in Arizona, more than three-fourths of school-aged children who were reported as LEP in census data were born in the United States, with a larger share among elementary school children than older students. The rate of native-born LEP children in the United States overall was somewhat lower, at 71 percent.

The most recent data available that show the top languages spoken by Arizona ELs come from the Consolidated State Performance Reports submitted by each state to the federal

government. Table 4 shows data from SY 2015-16 that indicate Spanish was spoken by slightly more than three-quarters of Arizona ELs. Arabic, Vietnamese, Navajo, and Somali round out the top five home languages.

Among Arizona school districts with enrollment of more than 1,500 ELs (shown in Table 5), four of the top five districts with the largest number of ELs were in the Phoenix metropolitan area (the exception being Tucson Unified School District). Among the districts with the highest numbers of ELs, these students made up between 6 percent (Paradise Valley Unified District) and 42 percent (Gadsden Elementary District) of total enrollment.

Table 4. Top Home Languages Spoken by Arizona ELs, SY 2015–16

	Number of ELs	Share of ELs with a Home Language Other Than English (%)
Spanish; Castilian	50,677	75.6
Arabic	1,360	2.0
Vietnamese	525	0.8
Navajo; Navaho	460	0.7
Somali	399	0.6

ELs = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: Share calculated based on 67,050 Limited English Proficient (LEP) students reported by the state in 2015–16.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, “SY 2015-16 Consolidated State Performance Reports Part I—Arizona,” updated October 18, 2017, www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/sy15-16part1/index.html.

Table 5. Number of ELs and EL Share of Students in Arizona School Districts with More Than 1,500 ELs, SY 2016–17

	Number of ELs	EL Share of Students in District (%)
Mesa Public Schools	4,344	6.8
Cartwright School District	3,692	20.5
Tucson Unified School District	3,583	7.5
Washington Elementary School District	3,082	12.8
Alhambra Elementary School District	2,594	19.1
Isaac School District	2,348	31.8
Glendale Elementary School District	2,299	17.2
Gadsden Elementary School District	2,251	41.8
Sunnyside Unified School District	2,058	12.6
Paradise Valley Unified School District	1,952	6.1
Phoenix Union High School District	1,770	6.5
Roosevelt School District	1,680	17.3
Creighton School District	1,538	23.7

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: These data include prekindergarten students in addition to K-12 students.

Source: Arizona Department of Education, “Accountability & Research—Enrollment—2016-2017 School Year,” accessed May 30, 2018, www.azed.gov/accountability-research/data/.

II. EL Student Outcomes in Arizona

This section examines outcomes of the EL subgroup on state standardized assessments. It is important to note two things about the participation of ELs on these assessments. First, compared to other student subgroups based on ethnicity, poverty, gender, and special education status, ELs are a much more dynamic population: as students gain proficiency, they exit the EL subgroup and new ELs are identified as they enter the U.S. school system. By definition, students who remain in the EL subgroup are not performing at a level where their achievement on mainstream assessments is comparable to that of their English-proficient peers. Whereas this lag is expected for students in their first several years of learning English, concerns about the significant numbers of long-term ELs—those identified as ELs for six or more years—not scoring proficient in English language arts (ELA) and math have driven policymakers to strengthen the ways they hold schools

accountable for EL outcomes on academic assessments.

Second, under NCLB, states were allowed to exempt newly arrived EL students from taking the ELA test for one year and to exclude the math scores of those newcomers from accountability reports. For that reason, the results below do not include all Arizona ELs. The rules for including newly arrived ELs in reports on subgroup outcomes will change as ESSA provisions go into effect in 2018 (see “Accountability for EL Academic Achievement” below).

Arizona’s Measurement of Educational Readiness to Inform Teaching (AzMERIT) is the state system of assessment for accountability purposes. Students take ELA tests in grades 3 through 11 and math in grades 3 through 8. Scores are reported at four performance levels: minimally proficient, partially proficient, proficient, and highly proficient. Students also take science tests developed under an older assessment system, Arizona’s Instrument to

Table 6. Share of Arizona ELs and All Students with a Passing Score in English Language Arts (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 9 (%)	Grade 10 (%)	Grade 11 (%)
Share of ELs passing	5	7	2	2	2	1	1	0	1
Share of all students passing	44	49	44	42	44	34	36	31	25

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Arizona Department of Education, “Accountability and Research—Assessment Results—AzMERIT and MSA 2017” accessed June 4, 2018, www.azed.gov/accountability-research/data.

Measure Standards (AIMS). Scores for those tests are reported at four levels: far below, approaches, meets, and exceeds standards. On both sets of tests, students at the highest two levels are considered passing.⁵

As with ELA, there are considerable gaps between ELs and all students on the AzMERIT math assessment (see Table 7). The gap was largest in grade 5 (38 points) and smallest in grade 8 (25 points).

Table 6 shows considerable achievement gaps between the share of ELs and of all students who met or exceeded the standard in reading, with that gap staying relatively constant between grades 3 through 7 (39 to 42 points) before narrowing in higher grades, reaching low of 24 points in grade 11.

AIMS science test scores from SY 2015–16 also show considerable gaps between ELs and all students, increasing from 49 points in grade 5 to 55 points in grade 8 (see Table 8).

Table 7. Share of Arizona ELs and All Students with a Passing Score in Math (%), by Grade or Course, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Alg. I (%)	Alg. II (%)	Geometry (%)
Share of ELs passing	12	11	9	5	3	4	4	6	4
Share of all students passing	47	47	47	42	34	29	39	34	34

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year; Alg. = Algebra.

Source: Arizona Department of Education, “Accountability and Research—Assessment Results—AzMERIT and MSA 2017.”

Table 8. Share of Arizona ELs and All Students with a Passing Score in Science (%), by Grade, SY 2015–16

	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 8 (%)
Share of ELs passing	11	5
Share of all students passing	60	60

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: Science test results were not available for 2016–17 with EL subgroup scores.

Source: State of Arizona Department of Education, *School Year 2015-2016 State Report Card* (Phoenix, AZ: Arizona Department of Education, 2016), <https://cms.azed.gov/home/GetDocumentFile?id=592f13843217e10e8022c6e5>.

Finally, graduation rates in Arizona have been increasing over the last three years for students overall and for subgroups such as ELs, but wide gaps remain between ELs and all students. For the class of 2017, the share of ELs to graduate within four years was 34 percent, compared to a four-year graduation rate of 80 percent for all students.⁶ While the all-student graduation rate was comparable to the national rate of 84 percent for the most recent year available (SY 2015–16), the graduation rate for ELs in Arizona was markedly lower than the national rate of 67 percent.⁷

III. Accountability under ESSA

In 2017, all 50 states (plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) submitted plans to the U.S. Department of Education that outline their approach to complying with new accountability regulations under ESSA. Among the new requirements are provisions requiring states to standardize how they identify students for and exit them from EL status, extending the number of years schools can include former ELs' scores in reporting on the outcomes of the EL subgroup, and allowing states to develop their own English language proficiency indicator (replacing the three required Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives in NCLB). Implementation of the new policies began in SY 2017–18. However, as many states have adopted new or significantly revised English language proficiency assessments over the last few years, some intend to wait to update their English language proficiency benchmarks until they have collected sufficient data from the new assessments.

Learn More about ELs and ESSA

For additional analysis, maps, and state-level data on English Learner education in the United States, check out the MPI [ELL Information Center](#) and its [ESSA resources](#).

A. Identification and Reclassification of ELs

Following federal guidelines, all states require schools to follow a two-step process for identifying students as ELs. First, parents or guardians complete a home-language survey when they enroll their child in a new school district. The survey generally includes one to four questions to identify students whose first language is not English or who live in households where a language other than English is spoken.

If students in such circumstances do not already have scores from a state-approved English language proficiency test on file, they are given a screening test to gauge their English language ability in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (as required by ESSA). Students scoring below proficient are categorized as ELs. Schools must inform parents in a timely manner of their child's English language proficiency level and of the types of support the school can provide, including the right to opt out of services (but not the right to decline EL status and subsequent annual testing).⁸

In Arizona, students are screened for initial EL identification using the Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA). Students are identified as ELs if they score below proficient (at pre-emergent/emergent, basic, or intermediate levels). Once identified, ELs are given the AZELLA annually until they score highly enough to be reclassified as English proficient. To be reclassified, students must achieve a score of proficient in the reading and writing domains as well as overall (a composite of listening, speaking, reading, and writing scores).⁹

B. Accountability for English Language Proficiency

Whereas parents and teachers are primarily interested in the progress of individual students toward English language proficiency, state accountability systems track whether the ELs

in entire schools and districts are progressing to and achieving proficiency within the state-determined timeline. States include English language proficiency in their accountability systems in two ways. First, they set a long-term goal for increasing the percent of students making progress toward proficiency (with interim goals along the way), and, second, they include an annual indicator of progress toward English language proficiency in the calculation they use to identify schools in need of improvement.¹⁰

Arizona's ESSA plan does not specify a maximum number of years within which students are expected to achieve English language proficiency. Rather, it includes a table that shows the expected annual progress to higher levels of English proficiency, based on initial English proficiency level and grade in which a student was identified as an EL. The table corresponds roughly to a gain of one proficiency level each year (pre-emergent/emergent, basic, intermediate, high-intermediate), with 7th through 12th grade students expected to take about four years to progress through the two intermediate levels.

About 30 percent of Arizona ELs made the expected progress for their English level and grade in 2016. Using this baseline, the state aims to increase the share of ELs making the expected amount of progress by about 3 percent each year with a goal of reaching 60 percent by 2028. In line with ESSA guidance, Arizona plans to factor in whether schools are making relatively less progress in moving students toward English proficiency in their criteria for identifying schools in need of comprehensive support and improvement.¹¹

C. Accountability for EL Academic Achievement

In addition to progress toward English proficiency, ESSA requires states to report and include in their accountability systems

data on how well ELs, as a subgroup, are performing on the indicators that apply to all students (including ELA, math, and science tests; graduation rates; and a school-quality or student-success indicator such as attendance). Using this information, ESSA calls for states to identify schools for comprehensive support and improvement based on the performance of all students, including subgroups of students, and for targeted support and improvement for schools that have one or more underperforming subgroups such as ELs.

As noted earlier, the EL subgroup is unique in that students exit the subgroup once they reach a level at which their English proficiency is no longer keeping them from general academic achievement similar to that of their English-proficient peers. Because of this, ESSA allows states to include former ELs within the EL subgroup for up to four years after they have exited EL status. Former EL students' scores in math and reading can thus be used in accountability measures as a way to give schools credit for the progress those students have made. Arizona will include former ELs in their calculation of academic achievement and academic progress indicators, but it is unclear from the state ESSA plan whether this will be done for two or four years.¹²

Unlike for other subgroups, ESSA also provides two types of exemption states may choose to apply to recently arrived ELs on state standardized tests:

1. In their first year in the United States, ELs can be exempt from taking the ELA test. They must be tested in math that year, but their scores will not be included in accountability calculations. Regular test-taking and accountability procedures will apply thereafter.
2. ELs take ELA and math tests in their first year, but their scores can be excluded from accountability measures. In the second year, outcomes on both tests are reported as a

growth score from year one to year two. From their third year on, students are assessed and their scores included in accountability measures as is done for all students.

States also have a third option: they may assign option 1 to some recently arrived ELs and option 2 to others based on characteristics such as their initial English language proficiency level.¹³ Arizona's ESSA plan indicates it will use option 2 for its recently arrived ELs.¹⁴

As states move forward with ESSA accountability plans, policymakers are taking the opportunity to revise existing regulations on funding, program requirements, teacher training, and other aspects of school administration. Provisions that affect EL students should be scrutinized closely by stakeholders at all levels, whether parents, teachers, or community organizations. Data on EL demographics and performance, such as those provided in this fact sheet, will prove an important tool in this effort.¹⁵

Endnotes

- 1 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub, “State Immigration Data Profiles: Language & Education,” accessed April 25, 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/language/AZ/US/.
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- 12 ADE, *Revised State Template for the Consolidated State Plan*.
- 13 EdTrust, “Setting New Accountability for English-Learner Outcomes in ESSA Plans,” accessed April 26, 2018, <https://edtrust.org/setting-new-accountability-english-learner-outcomes-essa-plans/>.
- 14 ADE, *Revised State Template for the Consolidated State Plan*.
- 15 For additional information on accessing and understanding state English Learner demographic and outcome data, see Julie Sugarman, *A Guide to Finding and Understanding English Learner Data* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/guide-finding-understanding-english-learner-data.

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