



English Learners in Arkansas

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 Arkansas. 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 Arkansas using U.S. Census Bureau 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) data, and EL students as reported by the Arkansas 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 Arkansas accountability mechanisms that affect ELs under ESSA.

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

In 2016, approximately 139,000 foreign-born individuals resided in Arkansas, accounting for 5 percent of the state population—a smaller share compared to immigrants in the United States overall (14 percent), as seen in Table 1. The growth rate of the foreign-born population in Arkansas slowed considerably from 196 percent in the period between 1990 and 2000 to 88 percent between 2000 and 2016. Nevertheless, this growth rate is more than double that of the U.S. immigrant population more generally, and it far outpaces the growth rate of the native-born population. Age group trends in Arkansas mirror broader national trends, with disproportionately smaller shares of foreign-born individuals in the birth-to-age-17 brackets compared to the native born.

With a relatively small population of immigrants, it follows that the share of school-age children with one or more foreign-born parents is considerably smaller in Arkansas (12 percent) than in the United States overall (26 percent), as shown in Table 2. Additionally, about 90 percent of children of immigrants in Arkansas were native born, compared to 86 percent nationwide. In Arkansas, 16 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 Arkansas and the United States, 2016

	Arkansas		United States	
	Foreign Born	U.S. Born	Foreign Born	U.S. Born
Number	138,592	2,849,656	43,739,345	279,388,170
Share of total population	4.6%	95.4%	13.5%	86.5%
Population Change over Time				
% change: 2000-16	88.1%	9.6%	40.6%	11.6%
% change: 1990-2000	196.3%	11.8%	57.4%	9.3%
Age Group				
Share under age 5	1.0%	6.6%	0.7%	7.0%
Share ages 5-17	5.9%	17.9%	5.1%	18.5%
Share ages 18+	93.1%	75.5%	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/AR/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 2 percent of Arkansas children ages 5 to 17 are LEP.³ In contrast, the most recent data from the Arkansas Department of Education, from school year (SY) 2017–18, indicate ELs represented 9 percent of the state K-12 student population, or 41,456 students.⁴

Although ACS data seem to undercount EL children, they can be used to examine (with

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

	Arkansas		United States	
	Number	Share of Population (%)	Number	Share of Population (%)
Children between ages 6 and 17 with	443,724	100.0	47,090,847	100.0
Only native-born parents	391,029	88.1	34,838,528	74.0
One or more foreign-born parents	52,695	11.9	12,252,319	26.0
Child is native born	47,744	10.8	10,501,024	22.3
Child is foreign born	4,951	1.1	1,751,295	3.7
Children in low-income families	330,139	100.0	28,363,805	100.0
Only native-born parents	276,409	83.7	19,216,957	67.8
One or more foreign-born parents	53,730	16.3	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 Arkansas 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
Arkansas	88.3	57.9	76.7
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/>.

due caution) the nativity of ELs, a variable school data systems do not capture. Table 3 shows that in Arkansas, 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.

Turning now to data collected by the Arkansas Department of Education, Table 4 shows the most commonly spoken non-English home languages among Arkansas students (including but not limited to ELs). Spanish leads the list

at 83 percent, with Marshallese, Vietnamese, Arabic, and Laotian rounding out the top five. Additionally, 8 percent of Arkansas students speak one of more than 95 other languages.

Among Arkansas school districts with enrollment of more than 700 ELs, the two districts with the largest number of ELs were Springdale and Rogers, both located in northwest Arkansas. Table 5 also shows that in the districts with the most ELs, these students made up between 4 percent (Bentonville School District) and 51 percent (DeQueen School District) of total enrollment.

Table 4. Home Languages Other Than English Spoken by Arkansas Students, SY 2017–18

	Number of Students	Share of Students with a Home Language Other Than English (%)
Spanish	44,628	82.7
Marshallese	3,381	6.3
Vietnamese	852	1.6
Arabic	555	1.0
Laotian	523	1.0
Other (95 languages)	4,033	7.5

SY = School Year

Notes: Counts include but are not limited to English Learners. This table uses data from the October 1, 2017 student count.

Source: Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), “ADE Data Center—Student Home Language by District,” accessed July 10, 2018, <https://adedata.arkansas.gov/statewide/Districts/StudentHomeLanguage.aspx>.

Table 5. Number of ELs and EL Share of Students in Arkansas School Districts with More than 700 ELs, SY 2017–18

	Number of ELs	EL Share of Students in District (%)
Springdale School District	10,228	47.5
Rogers School District	5,378	34.9
Fort Smith School District	4,067	28.4
Little Rock School District	2,917	12.8
DeQueen School District	1,214	50.9
Fayetteville School District	943	9.6
Siloam Springs School District	818	19.4
Russellville School District	734	14.0
Bentonville School District	730	4.4
Clarksville School District	717	27.5

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year

Note: To generate the data report used to create this table, visit the ADE Data Center and select “Students,” then within the “Demographics” section, select “English Learners” and “Total.”

Source: ADE, “ADE Data Center—Generate Statewide Report,” accessed July 10, 2018, <https://myschoolinfo.arkansas.gov/Plus/Districts>.

II. EL Student Outcomes in Arkansas

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 Arkansas 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).

Arkansas uses the ACT Aspire system to assess 3rd to 10th grade students in literacy (comprising English, reading, and writing), math, and science. The ACT Aspire student score report provides scores as four levels: in need of support, close, ready, and exceeding.⁵ In the Arkansas Department of Education Data Center, the latter two categories are combined and labeled as “meets or exceeds standards.”

Table 6. Share of Arkansas ELs and All Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards in Literacy (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 9 (%)	Grade 10 (%)
Share of ELs who met or exceeded standards	23.9	29.2	39.0	45.1	29.4	33.8	25.4	21.4
Share of all students who met or exceeded standards	42.2	49.4	55.5	62.8	56.5	58.4	52.9	52.4

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: To generate data report used to create this table, visit the ADE Data Center and select “2016-2017” under “School Year Range” and “Add State of Arkansas” under “Districts.” Then, in the “Student Assessment” category, select “ACT Aspire Achievement (2016-2018),” and when asked to “copy selections to all grades and subjects listed below” select “English Learners” and “Combined Population.”

Source: ADE, “ADE Data Center—Generate Custom Report,” accessed July 10, 2018, <https://myschoolinfo.arkansas.gov/CustomReport/Districts>.

Table 6 shows considerable achievement gaps between the share of ELs and of all students who met or exceeded the standard in literacy, with a larger gap at older grade levels. The gap was smallest in 5th grade (17 points) and largest in 10th grade (31 points).

As with literacy, there are considerable gaps between ELs and all students on the MCA math assessment (see Table 7). The gaps were lower in the younger grades, ranging from 12 points (grade 6) to 18 points (grade 4). Gaps were larger in the older grades, ranging from 19 points (grade 10) to 25 points (grade 7).

Table 7. Share of Arkansas ELs and All Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards in Math (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 9 (%)	Grade 10 (%)
Share of ELs who met or exceeded standards	43.2	38.8	38.5	50.9	24.0	22.6	10.1	7.0
Share of all students who met or exceeded standards	59.5	56.3	53.3	62.9	49.4	45.2	31.5	26.2

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: To generate data report used to create this table, visit the ADE Data Center and select “2016-2017” under “School Year Range” and “Add State of Arkansas” under “Districts.” Then, in the “Student Assessment” category, select “ACT Aspire Achievement (2016-2018),” and when asked to “copy selections to all grades and subjects listed below” select “English Learners” and “Combined Population.”

Source: ADE, “ADE Data Center—Generate Custom Report.”

Table 8. Share of Arkansas ELs and All Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards in Science (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 9 (%)	Grade 10 (%)
Share of ELs who met or exceeded standards	18.3	20.1	27.1	27.9	20.1	21.1	9.7	9.3
Share of all students who met or exceeded standards	39.2	43.5	42.8	50.1	45.7	43.4	33.5	35.1

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: To generate data report used to create this table, visit the ADE Data Center and select “2016-2017” under “School Year Range” and “Add State of Arkansas” under “Districts.” Then, in the “Student Assessment” category, select “ACT Aspire Achievement (2016-2018),” and when asked to “copy selections to all grades and subjects listed below” select “English Learners” and “Combined Population.”

Source: ADE, “ADE Data Center—Generate Custom Report.”

Science test scores—shown in Table 8—also show steady gaps between ELs and all students, generally between 21 points (grade 3) and 26 points (grade 10), except in grade 5 when the gap was slightly less (16 points).

Over the last several years, Arkansas has shown a modest gap between ELs and all students in their four-year graduation rate. For the class of 2017, the share of ELs to graduate within four years was 82 percent, compared to a four-year graduation rate of 88 percent for all students.⁶ Both of these rates are higher than the national level for the most recent year available (SY 2015–16), which were 67 percent for ELs and 84 percent for all students.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

Up to SY 2017–18, Arkansas school districts could choose one of three state-approved instruments to screen new students for EL status. Beginning in SY 2018–19, all potential ELs are to be screened using the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21) screener. Students are identified as ELs if they score below proficient. Once identified, ELs are given the ELPA21 annually until they score highly enough to be reclassified as English proficient. To be reclassified, students must score at level 4 or 5 (out of 5 levels) on each of the listening, speaking, reading, and writing domains, and the school language proficiency and assessment committee must recommend they exit EL status.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

At the time Arkansas wrote its ESSA plan, the state was in the midst of transitioning to ELPA21 assessments. Therefore, the state definition of progress toward proficiency and long-term goals are considered provisional until data from the new assessment system become available. Under this transitional plan, Arkansas students are expected to take a maximum of eight years to achieve English language proficiency, with the expectations for individual students set based on their initial English proficiency level and grade in which they were identified as an EL. Students will be considered on track if they meet time-to-proficiency expectations in at least three language domains each year or exit EL status. These expectations acknowledge that it takes longer to advance from one level to the next at higher proficiency levels and for students who enter U.S. schools in middle or high school.

Arkansas set their baseline measure and long-term goal for progress in developing English language proficiency based on the outcomes of ELs in schools at the 25th percentile¹¹ and the 75th percentile in 2017. That is to say, in 2017, a school at the 25th percentile had 32 percent of ELs making sufficient progress, while a school at the 75th percentile had 52 percent of ELs making sufficient progress. Setting 32 percent as the baseline and 52 percent as the goal, the state aims to increase the share of ELs making the expected amount of progress by about 5 percent every three years with a goal of reaching 52 percent by 2029. In line with ESSA guidance, Arkansas 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.¹²

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. Arkansas will include former ELs for four years in their calculation of academic achievement and academic progress indicators.¹³

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.¹⁴ Arkansas's ESSA plan indicates it will use option 2 for its recently arrived ELs.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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/AR/US/.
- 2 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), “Table 204.20: English Language Learner (ELL) Students Enrolled in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by State: Selected Years, Fall 2000 through Fall 2015,” updated October 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_204.20.asp?current=yes.
- 3 MPI Data Hub, “State Immigration Data Profiles: Language & Education.”
- 4 Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), “ADE Data Center—Generate Statewide Report,” accessed July 10, 2018, <https://myschoolinfo.arkansas.gov/Plus/Districts>. To generate the data report used for this calculation, visit the ADE Data Center and select “Students,” then within the “Demographics” section, select “English Learners” and “Total.”
- 5 ACT, Inc. *Understanding Your ACT Aspire Results* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, Inc., 2017), www.arkansased.gov/public/userfiles/Learning_Services/Student%20Assessment/2017/Understanding_Your_Aspire_Results_Spring_2017.pdf.
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- 7 NCES, “Table 219.46. Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), by Selected Student Characteristics and State: 2010-11 through 2015-16,” updated December 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_219.46.asp?current=yes.
- 8 U.S. Department of Education, *Tools and Resources for Identifying all English Learners* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2016), www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/english-learner-toolkit/chap1.pdf.
- 9 ADE, *Every Student Succeeds Act Arkansas State Plan* (Little Rock, AR: ADE, 2018), www.arkansased.gov/public/userfiles/ESEA/Arkansas_ESSA_Plan_Final_rv_January_30_2018.pdf.
- 10 Susan Lyons and Nathan Dadey, *Considering English Language Proficiency within Systems of Educational Accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act* (Chicago: Latino Policy Forum and Center for Assessment, 2017), www.latinopolicyforum.org/publications/reports/document/Considerations-for-ELP-indicator-in-ESSA_030817.pdf.
- 11 A percentile describes the percentage of a total count (be it people, districts, or schools) that scored below the given level. For example, a school at the 75th percentile had a higher share of students making sufficient progress than 75 percent of all other Arkansas schools.
- 12 ADE, *Every Student Succeeds Act Arkansas State Plan*
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 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/>.
- 15 ADE, *Every Student Succeeds Act Arkansas State Plan*.
- 16 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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