



English Learners in Colorado

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

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

In 2016, approximately 545,000 foreign-born individuals resided in Colorado, accounting for 10 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 Colorado slowed considerably from 160 percent in the period between 1990 and 2000 to 47 percent between 2000 and 2016. Nevertheless, the growth of the immigrant population in Colorado still outpaced that of the U.S. immigrant population more generally and of the native-born population. Age group trends in Colorado mirror broader national trends, with disproportionately smaller shares of foreign-born individuals in the birth-to-age-17 brackets compared to the native born.

The share of school-age children with one or more foreign-born parents is smaller in Colorado (23 percent) than in the United States overall (26 percent), as shown in Table 2. Additionally, about 88 percent of children of immigrants in Colorado were native born, compared to 86 percent nationwide. In Colorado, 38 percent of children in low-income families had one or more foreign-born parents, which is comparable to the share of low-income children nationally (32 percent).

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

	Colorado		United States	
	Foreign Born	U.S. Born	Foreign Born	U.S. Born
Number	544,733	4,995,812	43,739,345	279,388,170
Share of total population	9.8%	90.2%	13.5%	86.5%
Population Change over Time				
% change: 2000-16	47.3%	27.1%	40.6%	11.6%
% change: 1990-2000	159.7%	24.7%	57.4%	9.3%
Age Group				
Share under age 5	1.1%	6.6%	0.7%	7.0%
Share ages 5-17	6.3%	17.8%	5.1%	18.5%
Share ages 18+	92.6%	75.6%	94.2%	74.5%

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub, “State Immigration Data Profiles: Demographics & Social,” accessed May 15, 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/CO/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 3 percent of Colorado children ages 5 to 17 are LEP.³ In contrast, the most recent data from the Colorado Department of Education, from school year (SY) 2017–18, indicate ELs represented 14 percent of the state preK-12 student population, or 128,274 students.⁴

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

	Colorado		United States	
	Number	Share of Population (%)	Number	Share of Population (%)
Children between ages 6 and 17 with	818,321	100.0	47,090,847	100.0
Only native-born parents	629,709	77.0	34,838,528	74.0
One or more foreign-born parents	188,612	23.0	12,252,319	26.0
Child is native born	165,777	20.3	10,501,024	22.3
Child is foreign born	22,835	2.8	1,751,295	3.7
Children in low-income families	392,652	100.0	28,363,805	100.0
Only native-born parents	244,860	62.4	19,216,957	67.8
One or more foreign-born parents	147,792	37.6	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 Colorado 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
Colorado	83.1	58.8	73.4
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 Colorado, almost 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 slightly lower, at 71 percent.

Turning now to data collected by the Colorado Department of Education, Table 4 shows that nearly all Colorado school districts with enrollment of more than 3,000 ELs are in the greater Denver metropolitan area. In the districts with the largest numbers of ELs, these students made up between 5 percent (Douglas County School District) and 48 percent (Adams County District 14) of total enrollment.

Table 4. Number of ELs and EL Share of Students in Colorado School Districts with More Than 3,000 ELs, SY 2017–18

	Number of ELs	EL Share of Students in District (%)
Denver Public Schools	30,638	33.4
Adams-Arapahoe 28J (Aurora Public Schools)	15,964	39.0
Adams 12 Five Star Schools	7,085	18.2
Jefferson County Public Schools	6,719	7.8
Cherry Creek School District	6,053	10.9
Greeley-Evans School District 6	5,282	23.7
St Vrain Valley School District	4,429	13.7
Westminster Public Schools	3,615	38.3
Douglas County School District	3,562	5.3
Adams County School District 14	3,536	47.8
Charter School Institute	3,493	19.9
Boulder Valley School District	3,022	9.7

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Notes: These data include prekindergarten students as well as K-12 students. Counts of ELs in Colorado include students in their first and second year of monitoring after being reclassified as fluent English proficient.

Source: Colorado Department of Education, “Pupil Membership—District Level Data—2017–18 Instructional Program by District,” accessed April 16, 2018, www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/pupilcurrent.

Table 5. Top Home Languages Spoken by Colorado ELs, SY 2015–16

	Number of ELs	Share of ELs with a Home Language Other Than English (%)
Spanish	103,646	83.4
Vietnamese	2,037	1.6
Arabic	1,979	1.6
Russian	1,244	1.0
Mandarin Chinese	1,194	1.0

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Colorado Department of Education, “Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners in Colorado, State of the State, 2016” (presentation, March 31, 2017), www.cde.state.co.us/cde_english/elstateofthestate.

The most recent data on EL student characteristics come from an analysis of data by the Colorado Department of Education.⁵ Table 5 shows that in SY 2015–16, Spanish was the most commonly spoken home language of EL students, at 83 percent, with Vietnamese, Arabic, Russian, and Mandarin Chinese rounding out the top five.

II. EL Student Outcomes in Colorado

This section looks at 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 Colorado 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).

Colorado is in the process of changing some of the tests conducted by the Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS)—the system used to assess the academic achievement of students for accountability purposes. In Spring 2017, the most recent year for which scores are available, CMAS exams for ELA were administered in grades 3–9 and those for math in grades 3–8; end-of-course math tests were also given to students completing high school. In 2017–18, the 9th grade ELA exam was discontinued. The CMAS science and social studies tests are given to students in one-third of schools each year—science in grades 5, 8, and 11, and social studies in grades 4 and 7. There are five CMAS achievement levels in ELA and math: not yet meeting standards, partially meeting standards, approaching standards, meeting standards, and exceeding standards. CMAS exams for science and social studies have four achievement levels: partially meeting, approaching, meeting, and exceeding standards. For both sets of tests, students who have met or exceeded standards are said to have attained proficiency.⁶

Table 6. Share of Colorado ELs and Non-ELs Meeting or Exceeding Standards in English Language Arts (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 9 (%)
Share of ELs who met or exceeded standard	19.6	24.9	26.8	22.1	26.3	27.6	21.4
Share of non-ELs who met or exceeded standard	44.6	48.8	51.4	45.5	49.0	47.7	40.4

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Colorado Department of Education, “Disaggregated CMAS PARCC Spring 2016–2017 Achievement Results: English Language Arts by Language Proficiency,” updated September 18, 2017, www.cde.state.co.us/assessment/disaggregatedreportelalangproficiency102017.

Colorado state databases that report outcomes for ELs do so by breaking these learners into three categories: those who are Non English Proficient (NEP), those who are LEP, and Fluent English Proficient (FEP) students in their first or second year of monitoring after exiting EL status. Together, students in these three categories make up the EL subgroup, as defined by the state.⁷

Table 6 shows moderate achievement gaps between the share of ELs and non-ELs who met

or exceeded the standard in ELA, with that gap narrowing at older grade levels. The gap was largest in 3rd grade (25 points) and smallest in 9th grade (19 points).

In math, achievement gaps between ELs and non-ELs decreased between 3rd grade (22 points) and 8th grade (10 points), before increasing again to between 16 and 24 points in high school (see Table 7).

Table 7. Share of Colorado ELs and Non-ELs Meeting or Exceeding Standards in Math (%), by Grade or Course, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Algebra I (%)	Geometry (%)	Integrated Math I (%)
Share of ELs who met or exceeded standard	22.8	17.5	18.4	14.6	13.2	13.7	16.5	39.3	19.0
Share of non-ELs who met or exceeded standard	44.3	38.4	37.6	35.3	29.4	23.5	36.4	63.5	35.0

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: Algebra II, Integrated Math II, and Integrated Math III are not included in this table because fewer than 500 ELs took these tests statewide.

Source: Colorado Department of Education, “Disaggregated CMAS PARCC Spring 2016–2017 Achievement Results: Math by Language Proficiency,” updated September 18, 2017, www.cde.state.co.us/assessment/2017math-langproficiency.

Table 8. Share of Colorado ELs and Non-ELs Meeting or Exceeding Standards in Science (%), by Grade SY 2016–17

	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 11 (%)
Share of ELs who met or exceeded standard	14.3	12.2	10.1
Share of non-ELs who met or exceeded standard	40.4	35.2	28.8

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Sources: Colorado Department of Education, “Disaggregated CMAS Spring 2016–2017 Achievement Results: Science by Language Proficiency,” updated September 18, 2017, www.cde.state.co.us/assessment/2017sci-langproficiency.

Science test scores also show moderate gaps between ELs and non-ELs (see Table 8). The largest disparity occurred in 5th grade (26 points), with the gaps narrowing in older grades.

Data that would allow the calculation of overall EL outcomes were not available for the 2017 CMAS social studies test as they were for ELA, math, and science. A summary document indicates that less than 5 percent of NEP and LEP students met or exceeded expectations in 4th and 7th grade, compared to 29 percent of non-ELs in 4th grade and 22 percent of non-ELs in 7th grade.⁸

Finally, graduation rates in Colorado have been increasing over the last five 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 65 percent, compared to a four-year graduation rate of 79 percent for all students.⁹ These rates are just shy of those at the national level for the most recent year available (SY 2015–16), which were 67 percent for ELs and 84 percent for all students.¹⁰

countability 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](#).

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 ac-

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).¹¹

In Colorado, students identified as potential ELs are given the WIDA-ACCESS Placement Test (W-APT), and additional evidence—such as other assessments or a family interview—is considered in determining their eligibility for EL services. Identified ELs are categorized as NEP or LEP and are given the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs 2.0¹² annually until they meet reclassification requirements. To be reclassified, students must have a composite score of at least 4.0 out of 6.0 on the ACCESS, with a score of at least 4.0 on the literacy component. Additionally, districts must examine at least one piece of local data demonstrating success in reading and one in writing, chosen from a list of approved types of evidence (e.g., student journals and district assessments). There are also two alternative pathways to exit: districts can use additional evidence of a student's oral fluency in place of a 4.0 overall composite score (although the 4.0 literacy requirement still stands), or they can use evidence of the student's fluency in English listening, speaking, reading, and writing to substitute for the ACCESS scores entirely.¹³ Unlike most other states, students who are reclassified as FEP are still counted as ELs for their first two years in that status.

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.¹⁴

Colorado students are expected to take a maximum of six years to achieve English language proficiency, with expectations for individual students set based on their initial English proficiency level. Students will be considered on track if they meet their personalized growth targets from one year to the next; these are set based on the expectation that it takes one year to move from ACCESS level one to level two, two years to move from level two to three, and three years to move from level three to four (and thus to exit). About 68 percent of elementary-school-age ELs and 44 percent of those in secondary school made enough progress in 2017 to achieve proficiency within the given timeline. Colorado has set a goal of reducing the gap between these baseline progress rates and their ultimate goal of 80 percent by 25 percent in the next five years. That would increase the share of ELs making the expected amount of progress to 71 percent for elementary and 53 percent for secondary students by 2022. In line with ESSA guidance, Colorado 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.¹⁵

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. Colorado will include former ELs for four years in their calculation of academic achievement and academic progress indicators.¹⁶

Unlike for other subgroups, ESSA also provides two types of exemption states may choose to ap-

ply 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.¹⁷ Colorado's ESSA plan indicates it has chosen this third approach, with students classified as NEP assigned option 1 and those classified as LEP assigned option 2.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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/CO/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 Colorado Department of Education (CDE), “Pupil Membership—District Level Data—2017-18 Instructional Program by District,” accessed April 16, 2018, www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/pupilcurrent.
- 5 This state analysis also provides additional information on topics such as English Learner (EL) enrollment growth over time and by grade level. See CDE, “Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners in Colorado, State of the State, 2016” (presentation, March 31, 2017), www.cde.state.co.us/cde_english/elstateofthestate.
- 6 CDE, “CMAS – Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies Assessments,” accessed July 9, 2018, www.cde.state.co.us/assessment/cmas.
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- 10 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.
- 11 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.
- 12 The ACCESS for ELLs 2.0—which stands for Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners—is an English language proficiency assessment given annually to ELs in the 39 states and U.S. territories that make up the WIDA Consortium. For more information on the consortium, see WIDA, “Home,” accessed July 24, 2018, www.wida.us.
- 13 CDE, “Redesignation Guidance Effective for the 2017-2018 School Year,” updated Spring 2017, www.cde.state.co.us/cde_english/1718redesignationguidancespring2017.
- 14 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.
- 15 CDE, *Consolidated State Plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* (Denver: CDE, 2018), www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/co-consolidatedstateplan-final-websitepdf.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 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/>.
- 18 CDE, *Consolidated State Plan*.
- 19 For additional information on accessing and understanding state EL 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.

About the Authors



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