



English Learners in North Carolina

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

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

In 2016, approximately 790,000 foreign-born individuals resided in North Carolina, accounting for 8 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 North Carolina slowed considerably from 274 percent in the period between 1990 and 2000 to 84 percent between 2000 and 2016. Nevertheless, this growth rate is 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 North Carolina 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 smaller in North Carolina (19 percent) than in the United States overall (26 percent), as shown in Table 2. Additionally, about 86 percent of children of immigrants in North Carolina were native born, equal to the nationwide figure. In North Carolina, 26 percent of children in low-income families had one or more foreign-born parents, which is lower than the share of low-income children nationally (32 percent).

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

	North Carolina		United States	
	Foreign Born	U.S. Born	Foreign Born	U.S. Born
Number	789,638	9,357,150	43,739,345	279,388,170
Share of total population	7.8%	92.2%	13.5%	86.5%
Population Change over Time				
% change: 2000-16	83.6%	22.8%	40.6%	11.6%
% change: 1990-2000	273.7%	17.0%	57.4%	9.3%
Age Group				
Share under age 5	0.9%	6.3%	0.7%	7.0%
Share ages 5-17	6.6%	17.6%	5.1%	18.5%
Share ages 18+	92.5%	76.1%	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/NC/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 North Carolina children ages 5 to 17 are LEP.³ In contrast, the most recent data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, from school year (SY) 2017–18, indicate ELs represented 7 percent of the state K-12 student population, or 108,644 students.⁴

Although ACS data seem to undercount EL children, they can be used to examine (with due caution) the nativity of ELs, a variable

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

	North Carolina		United States	
	Number	Share of Population (%)	Number	Share of Population (%)
Children between ages 6 and 17 with	1,483,061	100.0	47,090,847	100.0
Only native-born parents	1,202,946	81.1	34,838,528	74.0
One or more foreign-born parents	280,115	18.9	12,252,319	26.0
Child is native born	240,744	16.2	10,501,024	22.3
Child is foreign born	39,371	2.7	1,751,295	3.7
Children in low-income families	970,094	100.0	28,363,805	100.0
Only native-born parents	722,633	74.5	19,216,957	67.8
One or more foreign-born parents	247,461	25.5	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 North Carolina 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
North Carolina	84.3	50.5	71.5
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/>.

school data systems do not capture. Table 3 shows that in North Carolina, 72 percent 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 comparable at 71 percent.

Turning now to data collected by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, a 2018 analysis of language diversity in the state noted that about 17 percent of the total student population has a primary home language other than English. Three-quarters

of those students speak Spanish, with Arabic, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Hindi/Urdu rounding out the top five. They also report that a total of 336 languages are represented in the homes of North Carolina students.⁵

Table 4 shows that the two school districts in North Carolina with the highest number of ELs are Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Wake County. Among the nine school districts with more than 2,000 ELs, these students made up between 6 percent (Union County and Cabarrus County) and 15 percent (Durham Public Schools) of total enrollment.

Table 4. Number of ELs and EL Share of Students in North Carolina School Districts with More Than 2,000 ELs, SY 2017–18

	Number of ELs	EL Share of Students in District (%)
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools	19,794	13.3
Wake County Schools	13,414	8.3
Guilford County Schools	6,503	9.0
Winston Salem / Forsyth County Schools	6,460	11.7
Durham Public Schools	4,953	14.8
Johnston County Schools	2,912	8.0
Union County Public Schools	2,506	6.0
Alamance-Burlington Schools	2,240	9.8
Cabarrus County Schools	2,018	6.2

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Sources: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, “Principal’s Monthly Report, 2017-2018, Month 1 Revised,” accessed June 28, 2018, www.dpi.state.nc.us/fbs/accounting/data/; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, *Report to the North Carolina General Assembly: Headcount of English Learners* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2017), www.ncleg.net/documentsites/committees/JLEOC/Reports%20Received/2017%20Reports%20Received/Students%20with%20Limited%20English%20Proficiency%2012.15.17.pdf.

II. EL Student Outcomes in North Carolina

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 North Carolina 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).

North Carolina administers end-of-grade assessments in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and in science in grades 5 and 8. High school students enrolled in Math 1 (typically in 9th grade) and Biology and English 2 (typically in 10th grade) must also take end-of-course exams that are reported for accountability purposes. Students scoring at levels 3 through 5 on a 5-point scale are deemed to be at or above grade level; students at level 4 or level 5 are classified as college and career ready.⁶ Students must also take the ACT (typically in 11th grade) or ACT WorkKeys for those enrolled in the career and technical education program (typically in 12th grade; scores are not reported here due to the very small number of ELs participating). Results for ACT and ACT WorkKeys are reported as the share of students meeting a state-determined benchmark.⁷

Table 5 shows considerable achievement gaps between the share of ELs and of all students who were at or above grade level in reading and English 2, with that gap growing larger at older grade levels. The gap was smallest in 3rd grade (29 points) and largest in 6th grade and on the English 2 exam (54 points).

As with reading, there are considerable gaps between ELs and all students on state math

Table 5. Share of North Carolina ELs and All Students at or above Grade Level in Reading/English (%), by Grade or Course, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	English 2 (%)
Share of ELs at or above grade level	28.7	10.3	8.3	7.1	9.0	7.9	7.2
Share of all students at or above grade level	57.8	57.7	56.6	61.0	58.2	53.7	60.7

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, “Accountability and Testing Results—2016-17 State, District, and School Level Drilldown Performance Data,” accessed April 20, 2018, www.dpi.state.nc.us/accountability/reporting/.

Table 6. Share of North Carolina ELs and All Students at or Above Grade Level in Math (%), by Grade or Course, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Math 1 (%)
Share of ELs at or above grade level	48.0	20.9	19.4	13.1	10.9	10.2	21.3
Share of all students at or above grade level	63.6	58.6	60.3	53.1	49.8	45.8	64.3

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, “Accountability and Testing Results—2016-17 State, District, and School.”

assessments (see Table 6). The gap was lowest in 3rd grade (16 points) before increasing to between 36 and 43 points for higher grade levels.

Science test scores show steady gaps between ELs and all students of around 46 points to 48 points at all three grade levels tested (see Table 7).

Among the 2,100 EL students in 11th grade who took the ACT in SY 2016–17, Table 8 shows that

less than 5 percent scored at benchmark on each subject, although exactly 5 percent scored at benchmark on the composite score.⁸

Finally, graduation rates in North Carolina 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 58 percent, compared to a four-year graduation rate of 87 percent for all students.⁹ While the all-student

Table 7. Share of North Carolina ELs and All Students at or Above Grade Level in Science (%), by Grade or Course, SY 2016–17

	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Biology (%)
Share of ELs at or above grade level	21.9	29.1	10.3
Share of all students at or above grade level	70.1	75.5	56.1

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, “Accountability and Testing Results—2016-17 State, District, and School.”

Table 8. Share of North Carolina ELs and All Students at Benchmark on the ACT (%), by Subject, SY 2016-17

	English (%)	Reading (%)	Math (%)	Science (%)	Writing (%)
Share of ELs at benchmark	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
Share of all students at benchmark	42.8	31.8	28.5	21.9	29.2

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, “Accountability and Testing Results—2016-17 State, District, and School.”

graduation rate in North Carolina is comparable to the national rate (84 percent) for the most recent year available (SY 2015–16), the rate for ELs is considerably lower than the national rate (67 percent).¹⁰

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. In North Carolina, when families indicate a home language other than English on the survey, district personnel follow up with an interview to confirm the home language.

If students are considered potential ELs based on the survey and interview, and they 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 North Carolina, students are screened for initial EL identification using one of the WIDA Consortium's assessments (the WIDA Screener or the W-APT). Students are identified as ELs if they score below a designated level for each test.¹² Once identified, ELs are given the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs 2.0¹³ annually until they score highly enough to be reclassified as English proficient. To be reclassified, students must have an overall score of at least 4.8 out of 6.0 on the ACCESS, with a score of at least 4.0 on the reading domain and at least 4.0 on writing.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

North Carolina 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 are considered on track if they meet their personalized growth targets from one year to the next; these targets are set based on the idea that students will make slightly more annual progress at lower proficiency levels and slightly less at higher levels. About 25 percent of North Carolina ELs made enough progress in 2017 to achieve proficiency within the given timeline. Using this baseline, the state aims to increase the share of ELs making the expected amount of progress by between 3 percent and 4 percent each year with a goal of reaching 60 percent by 2027. In line with ESSA guidance, North Carolina 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.¹⁶

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. North Carolina 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸

North Carolina's ESSA plan indicates it will use option 2 for its recently arrived ELs.¹⁹

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.²⁰

Endnotes

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About the Authors



Julie Sugarman is a Senior Policy Analyst at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, where she focuses on issues related to immigrant and English Learner students in elementary and secondary schools. Among her areas of focus: policies, funding mechanisms, and district- and school-level practices that support high-quality instructional services for these youth, as well as the particular needs of immigrant and refugee students who first enter U.S. schools at the middle and high school levels. Dr. Sugarman earned a B.A. in anthropology and French from Bryn Mawr College, an M.A. in

anthropology from the University of Virginia, and a Ph.D. in second language education and culture from the University of Maryland, College Park.



Courtney Geary was an intern at the MPI National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, where she provided research assistance on a variety of projects related to English Learner education policy. She has worked as a Title III ESL Tutor for the Tuscaloosa County School District in Alabama since 2016, primarily with elementary-age Arabic speakers. Her research interests include educational access and outcomes for English Learners in the Deep South, and educational and social services for refugees and victims of conflict. She is a student at the University of Alabama, where she is pursuing a B.S. in interdisciplinary studies

with a focus in international crisis management.

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