



English Learners in Tennessee

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

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

In 2016, approximately 320,000 foreign-born individuals resided in Tennessee, 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 Tennessee slowed considerably from 169 percent in the period between 1990 and 2000 to 101 percent between 2000 and 2016. Nevertheless, this growth rate is more than double that of the U.S. immigrant population overall, and it far outpaces the growth rate of the native-born population. Age group trends in Tennessee 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 Tennessee (12 percent) than in the United States overall (26 percent), as shown in Table 2. Additionally, about 83 percent of children of immigrants in Tennessee were native born, compared to 86 percent nationwide. In Tennessee, 15 percent of children in low-income families had one or more foreign-born parents, which is considerably lower than the share of low-income children nationally (32 percent).

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

	Tennessee		United States	
	Foreign Born	U.S. Born	Foreign Born	U.S. Born
Number	320,021	6,331,173	43,739,345	279,388,170
Share of total population	4.8%	95.2%	13.5%	86.5%
Population Change over Time				
% change: 2000-16	101.3%	14.5%	40.6%	11.6%
% change: 1990-2000	169.0%	14.8%	57.4%	9.3%
Age Group				
Share under age 5	1.1%	6.3%	0.7%	7.0%
Share ages 5-17	8.4%	16.9%	5.1%	18.5%
Share ages 18+	90.5%	76.8%	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/TN/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 Tennessee children ages 5 to 17 are LEP.³ In contrast, the most recent data from the Tennessee Department of Education, from school year (SY) 2016–17, indicate ELs represented 5 percent of the state preK-12 student population, or 52,912 students.⁴

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

	Tennessee		United States	
	Number	Share of Population (%)	Number	Share of Population (%)
Children between ages 6 and 17 with	947,166	100.0	47,090,847	100.0
Only native-born parents	832,764	87.9	34,838,528	74.0
One or more foreign-born parents	114,402	12.1	12,252,319	26.0
Child is native born	94,685	10.0	10,501,024	22.3
Child is foreign born	19,717	2.1	1,751,295	3.7
Children in low-income families	646,384	100.0	28,363,805	100.0
Only native-born parents	548,747	84.9	19,216,957	67.8
One or more foreign-born parents	97,637	15.1	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 Tennessee 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
Tennessee	74.5	43.2	60.4
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 Tennessee, 60 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 somewhat higher, at 71 percent.

The most recent data available that show the top languages spoken by ELs in Tennessee

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 more than three-quarters of Tennessee ELs, with Arabic, Kurdish, Somali, and Vietnamese rounding out the top five.

According to data from the Tennessee Department of Education, there are six school districts in the state with more than 1,000 ELs, shown in Table 5. The EL share of students in these districts ranges from 5 percent in Knox County to 19 percent in Davidson County.

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

	Number of ELs	Share of ELs with a Home Language Other Than English (%)
Spanish; Castilian	30,879	76.0
Arabic	2,782	6.8
Kurdish	494	1.2
Somali	483	1.2
Vietnamese	446	1.1

LEP = Limited English Proficient; SY = School Year.

Note: Share calculated based on 40,627 Limited English Proficient students reported by the state in 2015–16.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, “SY 2015-16 Consolidated State Performance Reports Part I—Tennessee,” 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 Tennessee School Districts with More Than 1,000 ELs, SY 2016-17

	Number of ELs	EL Share of Students in District (%)
Davidson County	16,165	18.9
Shelby County	9,782	8.9
Knox County	3,094	5.1
Hamilton County	2,804	6.3
Rutherford County	2,775	6.3
Hamblen County	1,364	13.1

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: These data include prekindergarten students as well as K-12 students.

Source: Tennessee Department of Education, “Data Downloads and Requests—Profile and Demographic Information—Profile Data Files Updated 2/5/18—2017,” updated February 5, 2018, www.tn.gov/education/data/data-downloads.html.

II. EL Student Outcomes in Tennessee

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 Tennessee 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).

Tennessee administers the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) for accountability purposes. Students in grades 3–8 take the TCAP in reading, math, science, and social studies. Students in high school take end-of-course exams in English I, II, and III; Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry or Integrated Math I, II, and III; Biology and Chemistry; and U.S. History.⁵ For each of the TCAP assessments, there are four achievement levels: below, approaching, on track, and mastered. Students who score on track or mastered are said to have met state standards.⁶

Table 6 shows considerable achievement gaps between the share of ELs and of non-ELs who met standards in reading/English. Gaps varied across grade levels, with a low of 29 points (grades 3 and 5, and English I) and a high of 37 points (English II).

Table 6. Share of Tennessee ELs and Non-ELs Meeting Standards in Reading/English (%), by Grade or Course, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	English I (%)	English II (%)
Share of ELs who met standards	8.3	3.6	2.5	2.5	3.7	1.6	2.0	3.7
Share of non-ELs who met standards	36.9	38.1	31.7	35.0	36.9	31.8	30.5	40.2

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Tennessee Department of Education, “Data Downloads—State Assessments—Base Accountability File Updated 5/31/18—2017,” accessed June 7, 2018, www.tn.gov/education/data/data-downloads.html.

As with reading/English, there are gaps between ELs and non-ELs on TCAP math assessments (see Table 7). The average gap between ELs and non-ELs for math scores is smaller than for reading/English scores, ranging from 19 points (Algebra I) to 32 points (grade 6).

Science test scores also show considerable gaps between ELs and non-ELs, with the average gap greater than that of either reading/English or math scores (Table 8). The smallest gap was in 3rd grade (30 points) and the highest in Biology (50 points).

For both ELs and non-ELs, relatively few students met the standards in high school U.S. history. Slightly more than 1 percent of ELs and 31 percent of non-ELs scored proficient in the subject—a 30-point gap.⁷

Finally, gaps also exist between ELs and all students in terms of graduation rates. For the class of 2017, the share of ELs to graduate within four years was 73 percent, compared to a four-year graduation rate of 89 percent for all students.⁸ These rates are higher than 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.⁹

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

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Algebra I (%)	Algebra II (%)	Geometry (%)
Share of ELs who met standards	21.6	11.3	7.9	8.3	5.5	6.2	3.0	2.2	2.6
Share of non-ELs who met standards	42.6	42.7	39.1	40.1	32.7	32.1	22.1	23.8	26.9

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Tennessee Department of Education, “Data Downloads—State Assessments—Base Accountability File Updated 5/31/18—2017.”

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

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Biology (%)	Chemistry (%)
Share of ELs who met standards	34.7	10.0	12.6	15.8	19.8	18.1	10.5	4.9
Share of non-ELs who met standards	64.4	50.2	60.0	60.4	63.5	66.4	60.4	41.8

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Tennessee Department of Education, “Data Downloads—State Assessments—Base Accountability File Updated 5/31/18—2017.”

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).¹⁰

In Tennessee, students are screened for initial EL identification using one of the WIDA Consortium’s assessments (the WIDA Screener or the Kindergarten W-APT). Students are identified as ELs if they score below a designated level for each test. Once identified,

ELs are given the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs 2.0¹¹ annually until they score highly enough to be reclassified as English proficient. To be reclassified, students must have an overall score of at least 4.2 out of 6.0 on the ACCESS, with a literacy composite score of at least 4.0.¹²

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.¹³

Tennessee 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. About 51 percent of Tennessee ELs made enough progress in 2016 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 2 percent and 3 percent each year with a goal of reaching 75 percent by 2025. Although school success in supporting their students' progress toward English language proficiency factors into school ratings (an A-F system), it does not appear to be included in the criteria used to identify priority schools requiring comprehensive support (those earning an overall F letter grade based on specific indicators).¹⁴ This runs contrary to ESSA guidelines, which state that the English language proficiency indicator must factor into the state's

identification of schools for comprehensive support and improvement.

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. Tennessee will include former ELs for four years in their calculation of academic achievement and academic progress indicators.¹⁵

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 account-

ability 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.¹⁶ Tennessee's ESSA plan indicates it will use option 2 for its recently arrived ELs.¹⁷

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.¹⁸

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/TN/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 Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), “Data Downloads and Requests—Profile and Demographic Information—Profile Data Files Updated 2/5/18—2017,” updated February 5, 2018, www.tn.gov/education/data/data-downloads.html.
- 5 For 2016–17, the TDOE website did not publish results for grade 3–8 social studies; English III and Integrated Math results are not reported in this fact sheet due to low numbers of participating English Learners.
- 6 TDOE, “Overview of Testing in Tennessee,” accessed July 12, 2018, www.tn.gov/education/assessment/testing-overview.html.
- 7 TDOE, “Data Downloads—State Assessments—Base Accountability File Updated 5/31/18—2017,” accessed June 7, 2018, www.tn.gov/education/data/data-downloads.html.
- 8 TDOE, “Data Downloads—Additional Data—Graduation Cohort Data—2016-17,” accessed June 27, 2018, www.tn.gov/education/data/data-downloads.html.
- 9 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.
- 10 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.
- 11 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 English Learners (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.
- 12 TDOE, *English as a Second Language Manual* (Nashville: TDOE, 2018), www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/cpm/ESL_Manual.pdf.
- 13 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.
- 14 TDOE, *Every Student Succeeds Act: Building on Success in Tennessee, ESSA State Plan* (Nashville: TDOE, 2018), www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/documents/TN_ESSA_State_Plan_Approved.pdf.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 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/>.
- 17 TDOE, *Every Student Succeeds Act*.
- 18 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.

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