



English Learners in Virginia

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

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

In 2016, approximately 1,031,000 foreign-born individuals resided in Virginia, accounting for 12 percent of the state population—comparable to the immigrant share of the U.S. population overall (14 percent), as seen in Table 1. The growth rate of the foreign-born population in Virginia has remained relatively constant, at 83 percent in the period between 1990 and 2000 and 81 percent between 2000 and 2016. This growth rate is about 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 Virginia 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 slightly smaller in Virginia (23 percent) than in the United States overall (26 percent), as shown in Table 2. Additionally, about 84 percent of children of immigrants in Virginia were native born, compared to 86 percent nationwide. In Virginia, 27 percent of children in low-income families had one or more foreign-born parents, which is slightly less than the share of low-income children nationally (32 percent).

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

	Virginia		United States	
	Foreign Born	U.S. Born	Foreign Born	U.S. Born
Number	1,031,169	7,380,639	43,739,345	279,388,170
Share of total population	12.3%	87.7%	13.5%	86.5%
Population Change over Time				
% change: 2000-16	80.8%	13.4%	40.6%	11.6%
% change: 1990-2000	82.9%	10.8%	57.4%	9.3%
Age Group				
Share under age 5	0.8%	6.7%	0.7%	7.0%
Share ages 5-17	5.8%	17.7%	5.1%	18.5%
Share ages 18+	93.4%	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/VA/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 Virginia children ages 5 to 17 are LEP.³ In contrast, the most recent data from the Virginia Department of Education, from school year (SY) 2017–18, indicate ELs represented 12 percent of the state preK-12 student population, or 159,152 students.⁴

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

	Virginia		United States	
	Number	Share of Population (%)	Number	Share of Population (%)
Children between ages 6 and 17 with	1,191,633	100.0	47,090,847	100.0
Only native-born parents	914,591	76.8	34,838,528	74.0
One or more foreign-born parents	277,042	23.2	12,252,319	26.0
Child is native born	231,400	19.4	10,501,024	22.3
Child is foreign born	45,642	3.8	1,751,295	3.7
Children in low-income families	551,378	100.0	28,363,805	100.0
Only native-born parents	400,029	72.6	19,216,957	67.8
One or more foreign-born parents	151,349	27.4	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 Virginia 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
Virginia	68.3	45.2	56.8
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 Virginia, 57 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 on the top languages spoken by ELs in Virginia 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 about two-thirds of Virginia ELs, with Arabic, Vietnamese, Urdu, and Chinese rounding out the top five.

Among Virginia school divisions⁵ with enrollment of more than 2,000 ELs, the five with the largest number of ELs are all in northern Virginia. Table 5 also shows that in the divisions with the largest numbers of ELs, these students represented between 8 percent (Stafford County) and 49 percent (Manassas City) of total enrollment.

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

	Number of ELs	Share of ELs with a Home Language Other Than English (%)
Spanish; Castilian	73,017	67.9
Arabic	6,019	5.6
Vietnamese	2,529	2.4
Urdu	2,500	2.3
Chinese	1,812	1.7

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Note: Shares calculated based on 107,547 Limited English Proficient students reported by the state in 2015-16.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, “SY 2015-2016 Consolidated State Performance Reports Part I—Virginia,” 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 Virginia School Divisions with More Than 2,000 ELs, SY 2017–18

	Number of ELs	EL Share of Students in Division (%)
Fairfax County	54,451	28.9
Prince William County	23,646	26.1
Loudoun County	12,753	15.8
Arlington County	8,145	30.2
Alexandria City	6,431	40.7
Chesterfield County	5,437	8.9
Henrico County	5,060	9.8
Manassas City	3,823	48.9
Harrisonburg City	2,811	44.6
Richmond City	2,562	10.2
Stafford County	2,415	8.3

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

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

Sources: Virginia Department of Education, “Fall Membership Reports—2017–2018—Division Totals by Grade All Students,” accessed April 20, 2018, www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/enrollment/fall_membership/report_data.shtml; Virginia Department of Education, “Fall Membership Reports—2017–18—Division Totals by Grade English Learner Students,” accessed April 20, 2018, www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/enrollment/fall_membership/report_data.shtml.

Finally, Table 6 shows that as grade level increases, the population and share of ELs in Virginia K-12 schools generally decrease. Whereas 15 percent of early-elementary students were ELs in SY 2017–18, that share dropped to 8 percent for grades 9 through 12. This reflects the trend that more students achieve English proficiency (and thus exit EL status) over time than immigrate to the United States as adolescents or remain ELs beyond the typical five- to seven-year time frame.

II. EL Student Outcomes in Virginia

This section examines the 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:

Table 6. Number of ELs and EL Share of Students in Virginia, by Grade, SY 2017–18

	Grades K-2	Grades 3–5	Grades 6–8	Grades 9–12
EL share of students in grade band	15.3%	15.9%	12.4%	8.3%
Number of ELs	42,643	47,148	36,044	32,530

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Sources: Virginia Department of Education, “Fall Membership Reports—2017-2018—Division Totals by Grade All Students;” Virginia Department of Education, “Fall Membership Reports—2017-2018—Division Totals by Grade English Learner Students.”

Table 7. Share of Virginia ELs and All Students with a Passing Score in Reading and Writing (%), by Grade, SY 2016–17

	Reading							Writing	
	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	High School (%)	Grade 8 (%)	High school (%)
Share of ELs passing	64	67	69	66	67	48	59	47	58
Share of all students passing	75	79	81	78	82	76	87	73	84

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Virginia Department of Education, “State Report Card,” accessed April 20, 2018, <http://schoolquality.virginia.gov/>.

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 Virginia 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).

Virginia administers the Standards of Learning (SOLs) for accountability purposes. SOLs in reading and math are given in grades 3 through 8, writing in grade 8, science in grades 5 and 8, and social studies in grades 4 and 8. End-

of-course tests for high school students are given for reading, writing, Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II, as well as a variety of science and social studies courses. There are four performance levels for grades 3 to 8 reading and math: below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced. The latter two count as a passing score. For all other tests there are three levels: does not meet [standards], proficient, and advanced (or advanced/college path for Algebra II), with proficient and advanced counting as a passing score.⁶

Table 7 shows considerable achievement gaps between the share of Virginia ELs and of all students who passed reading SOL tests, with that gap remaining between 11 points and 15 points for grades 3 through 7 before rising to 28 points for grade 8 and high school. The achievement gap on the SOL writing exam was 26 points in both grade 8 and high school.

In math, Table 8 shows that there were moderate and fairly stable gaps between ELs and all students between grade 3 and the high school end-of-course exams, remaining between 6 points (grade 6) and 14 points (Algebra II), with the exception of Geometry, which had a considerably larger gap at 22 points.

There were considerable gaps between Virginia ELs and all students on the science SOLs and high school end-of-course exams (Table 9), with

Table 8. Share of Virginia ELs and All Students with a Passing Score in Math (%), by Grade or Course, SY 2016–17

	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Algebra I (%)	Geometry (%)	Algebra II (%)
Share of ELs passing	64	72	71	76	59	63	70	56	76
Share of all students passing	75	81	79	82	71	74	82	78	90

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Virginia Department of Education, “State Report Card.”

the smallest gap at 15 points (grade 5) and the largest at 29 points (grade 8 and Biology).

On the social studies SOLs and end-of-course exams, there was considerable variation in the size of the gap between ELs and all students. The smallest, 3-point gap, can be seen in grade 4, with all others ranging between 16 points and 24 points for the grade 8 and high school end-of-course exams (Table 10).

Finally, there are gaps 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 74 percent, compared to a four-year graduation rate of 91 percent for all students.⁷ These rates are considerably 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.⁸

Table 9. Share of Virginia ELs and All Students with a Passing Score in Science (%), by Grade or Course, SY 2016–17

	Grade 5 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Earth Science (%)	Biology (%)	Chemistry (%)
Share of ELs passing	64	50	57	53	70
Share of all students passing	79	79	82	82	89

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Virginia Department of Education, “State Report Card.”

Table 10. Share of Virginia ELs and All Students with a Passing Score in Social Studies (%), by Grade or Course, SY 2016–17

	Grade 4 Virginia Studies (%)	Grade 8 Civics and Economics (%)	Virginia and U.S. History (%)	World History I (%)	World History II (%)	World Geography (%)
Share of ELs passing	84	71	64	68	65	59
Share of all students passing	87	87	86	85	87	83

EL = English Learner; SY = School Year.

Source: Virginia Department of Education, “State Report Card.”

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 division. 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).⁹

In Virginia, students are screened for initial EL identification using one of the WIDA Consortium's assessments (the WIDA Screener, the Kindergarten W-APT, or the Kindergarten MODEL). 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 2.0¹⁰ annually until they score highly enough to be reclassified as English proficient. To be reclassified, students must have a composite score of at least 4.4 out of 6.0 on the ACCESS.¹¹

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 divisions 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.¹²

Virginia students are expected to take a maximum of five years to achieve English

language proficiency, with expectations for individual students set based on their initial English proficiency level and grade in which they were identified as an EL. About 44 percent of Virginia 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 about 2 percent each year, with a goal of reaching 58 percent by 2025. In line with ESSA guidance, Virginia 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.¹³

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. Virginia will include former ELs in their calculation of academic achievement and academic progress indicators, but it is unclear from the state ESSA plan whether for two or four years.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ Virginia's ESSA plan indicates it will use option 1 for its recently arrived ELs.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

Endnotes

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- 5 Virginia uses the term “school division” where other states use the term “school district.”
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- 9 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.
- 10 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.
- 11 Memorandum from Steven R. Staples, Superintendent of Public Instruction, VDOE to division superintendents, *Entrance Procedures and Recommended Entrance Criteria for Identifying English Learners*, June 30, 2017, www.doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents_memos/2017/194-17.shtml.
- 12 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.
- 13 VDOE, *Revised State Template for the Consolidated State Plan: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as Amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act* (Richmond: VDOE, 2018), www.doe.virginia.gov/federal_programs/esea/essa/essa-state-plan.pdf.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 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/>.
- 16 VDOE, *Revised State Template for the Consolidated State Plan*.
- 17 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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