

Understanding English Learner Achievement in California

This document is intended to support users in understanding and interpreting information about the achievement of English learner (EL) students in California. While it is designed specifically to support interpretations of the new performance trend reports, it includes information about other reporting platforms and resources offered by the state.

Understanding the English Learner

EL students are students in kindergarten through grade twelve who, based on objective assessment, have not developed sufficient listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiencies in English to participate in the regular school program. The EL subgroup contains all students who meet this definition. However, there are different ways of defining or grouping the EL population to understand their education and achievement.

- **“Current ELs”** is a term that refers to all students who are classified as ELs by the state in a given year. Among current ELs, two other subgroups often are relevant for interpreting achievement data:
 - **Newly arrived ELs**, who have been in the U.S. for less than one school year.
 - **Long-term ELs**, who have been initially or continually classified as English learners for six or more years without reclassifying; they also meet other criteria in their English language proficiency (ELP) and English language arts achievement for the state definition of Long-term ELs. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has a different definition.
- **Reclassified fluent-English proficient (RFEP) students** are students with a primary language other than English who were initially classified as ELs, but who have subsequently met the state criteria and any additional local criteria for ELP.
- **“Ever ELs”** is a term that includes all students who have ever been classified as ELs, now or in the past. It includes all current ELs and all RFEP students in the state.

Different Groupings for Different Purposes

Although the definitions above seem straightforward, ELs often are grouped, counted, or labeled in slightly different ways across different reporting contexts. In particular:

- On the [California School Dashboard](#), the **“Current ELs”** group also includes RFEP students who have been reclassified in the past four school years for the academic indicator.

- On the [California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress \(CAASPP\) and English Language Proficiency Assessments for California \(ELPAC\) public reporting website](#), students are referred to simply as English learners (not “current English learners”).
 - For ELPAC, separate results are also available for newly arrived EL students.
 - For CAASPP, separate results are available for six other EL-related groups, including students whose ELP was assessed upon starting school but who were not ultimately classified as ELs.

Multiple laws and regulations dictate how ELs must participate in various assessments and how states and districts must report and be held accountable for their students’ progress. Those policies are what determine the most appropriate groupings and language for a given reporting context. In each of the examples above, the reporting differences are driven by specific underlying policy contexts. For example, the inclusion of recent RFEP students on the academic indicator on the Dashboard derives from the accountability flexibility now allowed under the ESSA.

Interpreting the Performance of Different Groupings of ELs

On the California performance trend reports, graphs are available to represent the achievement of current ELs, RFEPs, and Ever ELs. Each of these groups provides a different lens for understanding ELs’ achievement at the student or program level within the state. The most appropriate group to look at may depend on the question being asked. Below are some examples of how information about different groups might be used to answer common questions:

Question	Current ELs	RFEPs	Ever ELs
Is the achievement of the ELs changing over time?	NO	NO	YES
Are students who meet the state’s reclassification criteria prepared for instruction without EL supports?	NO	YES	NO
Are ELs receiving instruction that prepares them to meet California’s academic content standards?	MAYBE	NO	YES

English Only vs. ELs

This performance trend report compares the scores of all currently identified EL students to those of English only (EO) students. The average achievement of current ELs will typically be lower than for other EL groupings such as RFEPs and Ever ELs

because it includes only students who, by definition, have not yet mastered English. Even on a well-designed assessment with linguistic supports, some of these students (particularly those who are true beginners) may, at times, struggle to understand test content and show what they know and can do in English. (Translated test forms typically do not solve this problem unless the students also have been instructed and had the opportunity to learn academic language and content in their home language). Current EL students' performance also may reflect these students' opportunity to learn in English: they may have a harder time accessing instruction delivered in English or may even receive less rigorous coursework based on the mistaken belief that they cannot handle grade-level content until after they have learned English. Some newly arrived EL students also may have experienced interruptions to their education before entering U.S. schools. As a result of these types of factors, it is not atypical for current ELs to exhibit lower achievement than their English only peers.

- **This performance trend report *is not appropriate* for** judging whether the achievement of the EL subgroup is changing over time. Each year, new students enter the EL subgroup who are just beginning to learn English. Also each year, students with very high levels of English proficiency are reclassified out of the group. Because of this constant cycling, the average achievement of the EL subgroup tends to stay the same over time. In fact, the more students are reclassified (a potentially positive outcome), the lower the average achievement score will be for the students who remain. As a result, these graphics should not be used to draw conclusions about trends in EL achievement over time.
- **This performance trend report *may be useful* for** determining whether ELs are being prepared to meet grade-level achievement standards. However, it is important to keep in mind that gaps between current ELs and EOs reflect both the composition of the current EL population—which changes from year to year—and the rigor and quality of the instruction that EL and EO students receive. It can be difficult to disentangle these factors to interpret achievement, particularly when looking across time. For this reason, it is strongly recommended that this performance trend not be used as the sole basis for drawing conclusions about EL achievement within the state.

EOs vs. RFEPs

This performance trend report shows the scores of students who have been reclassified compared to English only students. The average achievement of this group will typically be higher than for other EL subgroupings, because this group contains only students at the highest levels of ELP.

- This performance trend report **may be useful for** judging whether students who meet the state's reclassification criteria have developed the language skills and received the learning opportunities they need to be prepared for instruction without EL supports.

- This performance trend report **is not appropriate for** judging whether programs for ELs (e.g., designated language instruction, content instruction, and language instruction that is integrated with content) are effective. Because these scores reflect only the students who have been successful after receiving these services, they do not provide information about how well the programs are serving other students.

EOs vs. Ever ELs

This performance trend report shows the scores of all current ELs and RFEPs compared to English only students. The average achievement of this group falls between the other two groupings because it contains all current EL students (including those with the lowest levels of ELP) *and* RFEP students (who have the highest levels of ELP).

- **This performance trend report *may be useful for*** judging whether the performance of ELs is improving over time. Because this group also includes both current ELs and RFEP students, it is possible to see trends over time.