

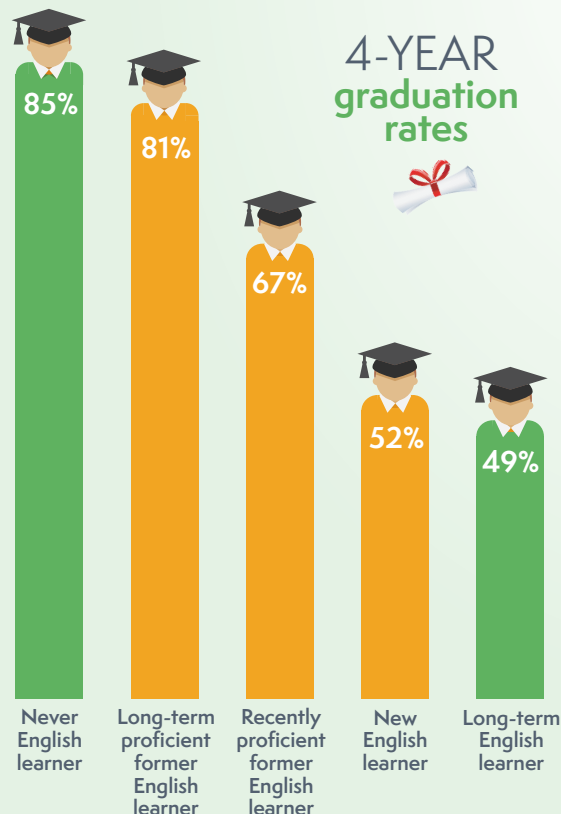
# Long-term English learner students: Spotlight on an overlooked population

November 2016

## Who are long-term English learner students?

Definitions vary across states and school districts but, in general, the term “long-term English learner (LTEL)” refers to English learner (EL) students who have been enrolled in a U.S. school for six years or more and have not been reclassified as fluent English proficient. These students may have had inadequate prior schooling experiences and they are usually struggling academically due to their limited literacy skills in English.<sup>1, 2</sup>

**Figure 1. Example from Arizona: The observed four-year graduation rate for LTEL students in 2014 was 36 percentage points lower than for never English learner students**



Source: Arizona Department of Education, 2003/04–2013/14.

## Why is this topic important?

The academic performance of LTEL students lags behind their peers (e.g., other EL student groups, students who have never been EL students), and the number of LTEL students across the country is growing.

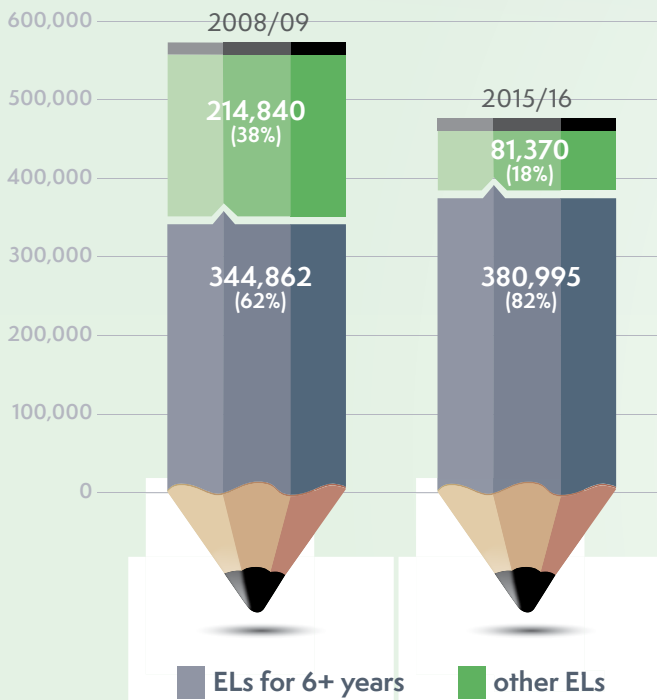
**Poor academic outcomes.** LTEL students’ academic performance is lower than that of other student groups.<sup>3,4,5</sup> In addition, a recent study on high school graduation rates in Arizona across five EL student groups found that LTEL students had the lowest observed graduation rate at 49 percent, compared to new EL students at 52 percent, recently proficient former EL students at 67 percent, and never English learner students\* at 85 percent (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

**Growing population of LTEL students.** Because definitions and classification criteria vary widely from place to place, there are no nationwide data on the numbers of LTEL students. However, regional data from New York City, Chicago, Colorado, and California indicate that the percentage of LTEL students among the secondary EL population in those areas ranged from 23 percent to 74 percent in 2013/14.<sup>2, 6</sup> And that percentage is increasing: In California, for instance, the number of LTELs in California secondary schools grew from 344,862 in 2008/09 to 380,995 in 2015/16; in other words, the percentage of LTEL students among the total EL population in secondary schools increased in seven years by 20 percentage points (Figure 2).<sup>†</sup>

\*Never English learner students: Students who were either never classified as EL students in Arizona or were reclassified as fluent English proficient in Arizona prior to grade 2 (these students include native English speakers).

† While the percentage of LTELs in California secondary schools increased between 2008/2009 and 2015/16, the total number of ELs in secondary schools decreased between those two periods. It is beyond the scope of this brief to investigate the reasons for this decrease in the EL population overall.

**Figure 2. Example from California: The number of secondary school students classified as ELs for six or more years increased by 20 percentage points between 2008/09 and 2015/16**



**Sources:** California Department of Education’s DataQuest system and a study by Californians Together.<sup>7</sup>

## Who can make a difference for these students?

EL specialists and general education teachers who serve LTEL students in secondary schools, and policymakers and district leaders who make decisions about how to support these students.

## What are some characteristics of LTEL students?

Related to their relatively low academic achievement and graduation rates, LTEL students may also have the following characteristics:

- ◇ Usually orally bilingual, but often with limited literacy skills in their first language; and their academic literacy skills in English are not as well developed as their oral language abilities.<sup>7,8</sup>
- ◇ Often “stuck” at intermediate levels of English proficiency or below. Some reach higher levels of English proficiency but do not attain adequate English academic language to be reclassified.<sup>4,5</sup>
- ◇ More likely than other students to be identified as having learning disabilities.<sup>4,5,9</sup>
- ◇ May become discouraged in school and be at risk of dropping out of school.<sup>2,7,8</sup>

## What are factors that may impede EL students’ academic literacy development?

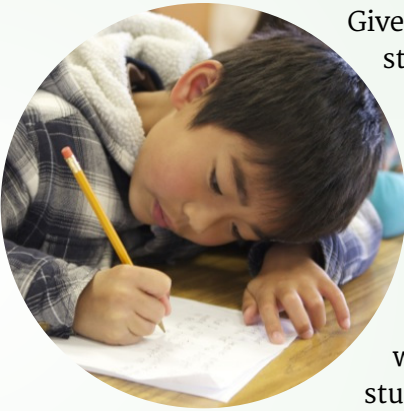
Students may become classified as LTEL students for a number of reasons, including:

- ◇ Receiving weak English language development services at some point in their schooling.<sup>2,7</sup>
- ◇ Experiencing a narrowed curriculum (in which English language development classes supersede subject classes); this narrowed curriculum may impede their progress toward proficiency in both academic content and English, both of which are needed for reclassification in many states.<sup>2,7</sup>
- ◇ Attending multiple schools, each with different — and possibly unrelated — curricula, support programs, and teaching practices.<sup>2,3</sup>
- ◇ Missing school, also known as “interrupted formal education,” due to mobility and family obligations.<sup>2</sup>

- ◇ Being enrolled in inappropriate courses and programs due to unidentified or misidentified learning disabilities.<sup>4,9</sup>

- ◇ Teach academic vocabulary words intensively across several days, using a variety of instructional activities.<sup>13,14,15,16,17</sup>
- ◇ Integrate oral and written English language instruction into content-area teaching.<sup>11,12,13,16,17</sup>

## What are some promising practices that may improve academic outcomes for LTEL students?



Given the academic struggles of many LTEL students, policymakers and practitioners might want to consider the following research-based practices as potential ways to support LTEL students, as well as EL students in general, to

develop the English proficiency and the academic knowledge needed for their success in school. This list is intended as a sampling of research-based practices, rather than an exhaustive record of ways to support LTEL students.

- ◇ Ensure placement of LTEL students in heterogeneous and rigorous grade-level content classes alongside English-proficient students.<sup>5,6,10,11</sup>
- ◇ Offer classes to develop literacy in students' home language, either enrolling students in a school's world language courses through advanced levels or offering heritage language classes specifically for those who speak or hear the language at home.<sup>6,10</sup>
- ◇ Promote engagement of adolescent EL students through culturally relevant activities and links to college and career development.<sup>5,6,10,11</sup>

## What are the implications for policymakers and practitioners?

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes policies addressing the needs and diversity of EL students and requires state accountability for the achievement of EL students. Under ESSA, states and districts are required to report on the percentage of students who have been identified as LTEL students, as measured by students who have maintained the EL classification for five or more years (ESSA, Section 3121 (a) (6)). States are also required to report on the academic progress of LTEL students. These new policies highlight the need to identify high-quality programs and practices that support LTEL students' academic progress and the need to provide educators with knowledge and training to effectively implement those programs and practices.

### For more information

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## Endnotes

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