



CONNECTICUT STATE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**A Closer Look
at Connecticut's
High School
English Learners
(SY 2018-19)**

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A Closer Look at Connecticut’s High School English Learners (SY 2018-19)

Introduction

In SY 2018-19, English learners (ELs) were a small subgroup of Connecticut’s high school students (5 percent), unique from their non-EL peers in terms of the educational challenges they face and sometimes even in their demographic characteristics. Similarly, high school ELs are a smaller subgroup of all ELs, accounting for just 20 percent. With the majority of ELs in both Connecticut (62 percent) and nationally in elementary grades, much of the English language acquisition literature focuses on serving ELs in those grades and far less about supporting those in high school.

While the high school EL student group shared many of the same demographic characteristics with ELs at other grade levels (**Table 1**), they face the additional challenge of accessing and mastering secondary-level academic content while concurrently trying to develop English language proficiency (ELP). In particular, they must do this within a compressed time frame because they have fewer years to graduation. While this compressed time frame may be particularly evident for recently arrived ELs, all ELs are faced with attaining English language proficiency (ELP) and mastering academic content in a limited number of years once they reach high school. This may become even more challenging for the high percentage of high school ELs who have either been identified as students with disabilities or immigrants. National research posits that many immigrants are also students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE).¹ It also indicates that high school ELs are more likely to be SLIFE than students at lower grade levels.² As a result of these and other factors, 46 percent of high school ELs were considered “long term ELs,” or students who have been ELs for five or more years.³ With all these socio-economic, educational, and individual factors in mind, high school ELs may require more tailored, intensive, and novel instructional approaches as compared to ELs at lower grade levels.

Table 1: A Quick Glance at Connecticut's 8,300 High School English Learners (SY 2018-19)

Characteristic	Percentage of High School ELs (SY 2018-19)	5-Year Change in Number of High School ELs
Spanish is Native Language	77%	13%
Students with Disabilities	27%	37%
Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Meals	78%	8%
Immigrants	28%	3% ¹
Districts with at least one high school EL	127	Increase of 5 districts
Percent of high school ELs in high-incidence districts ²	45%	0%
Grade distribution	Grade 9 (29%), Grade 10 (26%), Grade 11 (23%), and Grade 12 (22%)	Grade 9 (-5%), Grade 10 (13%), Grade 11 (13%), and Grade 12 (34%)

¹-CSDE began collecting individual student immigrant status in SY 2017-18 so the growth percentage is from then to SY 2018-19.

²-High Incidence Districts refers to districts that have at least 500 ELs in Grades 9 through 12.

¹ Short, D., & Boyson, B. (2012). Helping newcomer students succeed in secondary schools and beyond. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

² Wisconsin Center for Education Research (2015). *Focus on SLIFE: Students with limited or interrupted formal education*. Madison, WI: WIDA Consortium. <https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/FocusOn-SLIFE.pdf>

³ ELs in high school had the highest average number of years reported as an EL (5.3 years) compared to those at the primary and middle school levels. Percentage of long-term ELs and average years reported as EL: Grades PK-5, 18 percent and 2.8 years; Grades 6-8, 54 percent and 5 years respectively.

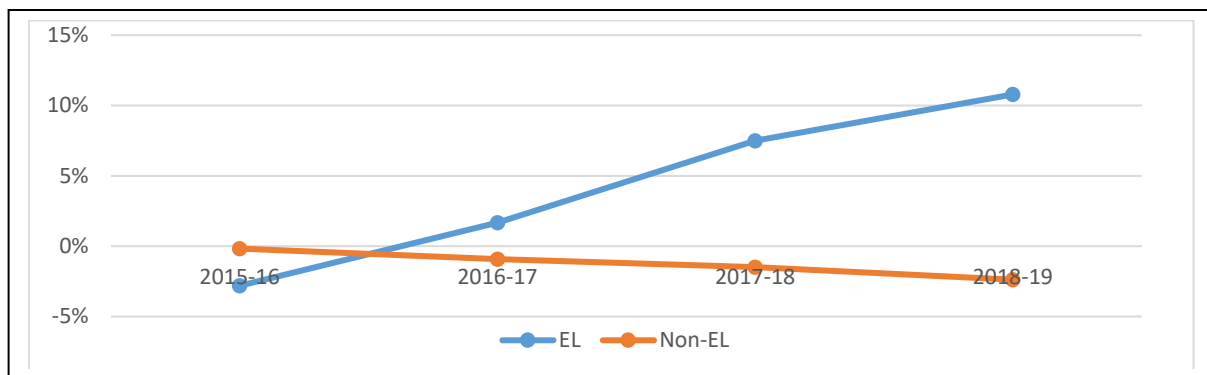
At the October 2019 Performance Matters Forum, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) staff presented much of the material in this paper alongside a panel of district EL administrators and teachers. The panel discussed their practices for providing English language services and other supports for high school ELs to an audience of other EL and generalist educators. The first goal of the presentation and this paper is to provide information regarding a statewide picture of high school ELs, including their demographics, assessment results, and trends in these areas. The second goal is to encourage greater discussion among EL administrators and teachers across districts to foster the sharing of experience, knowledge, and resources to support high school ELs.

Who Are High School ELs?

Current and Longitudinal EL Status at the Secondary School Level

High School ELs comprise 5 percent of all high school students (approximately 8300 students) and their numbers increased 11 percent over the last five years. Much of this growth occurred beginning in SY 2017-18 with the influx of students that arrived after Hurricane Maria significantly affected Puerto Rico. As the number of ELs increased during this five year period, the number of their non-EL peers declined by over 2 percent (**Figure 1**). This EL growth was not consistent across grades as it occurred in Grades 10 (13 percent), 11 (13 percent) and especially Grade 12 (34 percent), but the number of ELs in Grade 9 fell (-5 percent).

Figure 1: Annual Percentage Growth in the Number of High School Students Relative to the Baseline of SY 2014-15 by EL Status, SYs 2015-16 to 2018-19

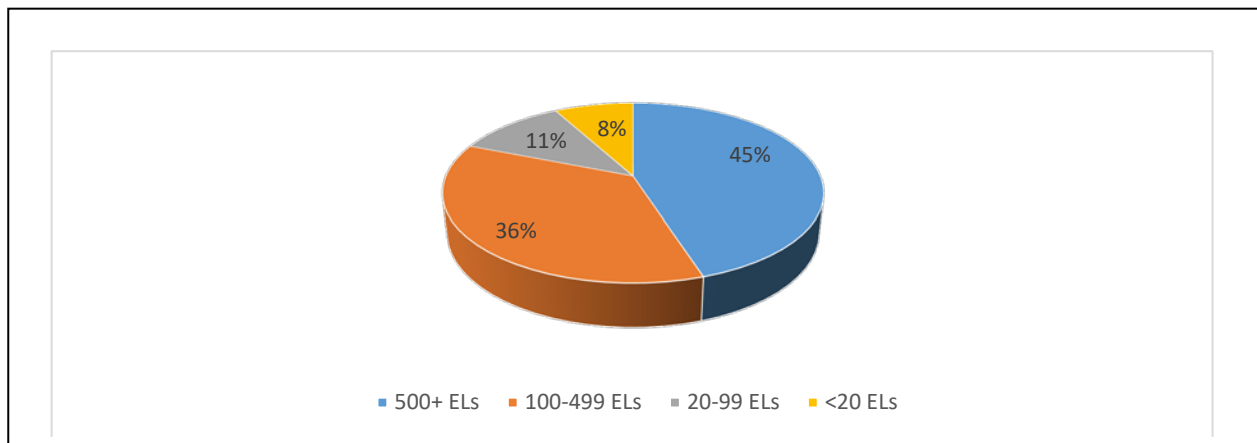


In addition to current-ELs, there are a sizeable number of students who were an EL at some point during their public school education but have exited EL status and services. These former-ELs along with current-ELs may be collectively referred to as “ever-ELs.” In SY 2018-19, ever-ELs in high school numbered over 23,000 and accounted for 14 percent of all secondary students. Ever-EL is an important concept in both educational programming and analyzing assessment outcomes. For example, former-ELs have reached the CSDE’s English language proficiency mastery criteria, but they may still have unique linguistic needs as compared to their peers who have never been an EL (“never-EL”) and may require English language support and/or tailored learning strategies.

The Concentration of High School ELs Varied Widely Across Connecticut Districts

Historically, the majority of all ELs have been concentrated in a handful of large urban districts, with the remaining smaller number of ELs distributed across most of Connecticut's other districts. This is particularly true for high school ELs. In SY 2018-19, there were 127 districts with at least one EL at the secondary school level, however just five districts accounted for 45 percent of Connecticut's high school ELs (Figure 2).⁴ Each of these five districts had at least 500 ELs at the high school level. An additional 11 districts with between 100 and 499 ELs accounted for a further 36 percent of all high school ELs.⁵ As a result, 81 percent of secondary school ELs were in just 16 districts. The concentration of ELs was also evident at the secondary school level as only a dozen high schools accounted for 40 percent of all ELs. In addition to their large EL populations, 13 of these 16 high-incidence high school EL districts are participants in the CSDE's Alliance Program. The Alliance District program is a unique and targeted investment in Connecticut's lowest-performing districts. Alliance Districts receive increased Education Cost Sharing (ECS) funding to support district strategies to dramatically increase student outcomes and close achievement gaps by pursuing bold and innovative reforms.

Figure 2: Distribution of Connecticut's High School ELs by Size of District High School EL Population, SY 2018-29



In addition to the concentration of ELs in larger urban districts, there has been a trend in the growth in the number of ELs in districts with small to moderate numbers of high school ELs. In SY 2018-19, there were 19 districts with between 20 and 99 ELs, and 92 with between 1 and 20 ELs (11 and 8 percent respectively of all ELs).

These widely divergent demographics pose unique challenges. For instance, a district with a small number of ELs in high school may not have robust EL supports, resources, and institutionalized experience, while those with a large population of high school ELs may struggle to meet the varied needs and characteristics of this population.

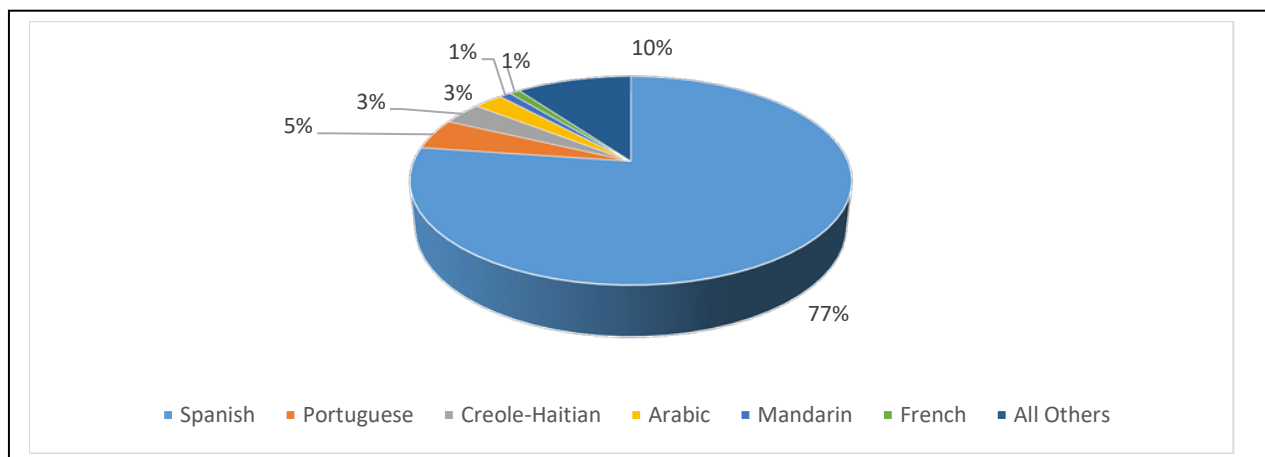
⁴ The five districts that accounted for 45 percent of high school ELs were Hartford (901), Bridgeport (814), New Haven (701), Waterbury (651), and Stamford (650).

⁵ The 11 districts with between 100 and 499 high school ELs were Danbury (440), New Britain (431), the Connecticut Technical Educational System (405), Norwalk (401), Meriden (312), New London (211), Windham (190), Norwich Free Academy (188), East Hartford (166), West Haven (127), and West Hartford (102).

Six Native Languages Accounted for 90 Percent of High School ELs

In SY 2018-19, high school ELs collectively spoke 95 different native languages. However, 91 percent spoke one of only six of these languages, with 77 percent being Spanish speakers (**Figure 3**). Conversely, there were fewer than 50 ELs per language statewide for 86 of these 95 native languages. While students speaking multiple native languages brings rich linguistic and cultural diversity to districts, it can also be challenging to find or develop native-language resources and materials for those ELs who are speakers of low incidence languages. This is particularly true as there may be few or no certified bilingual and/or English as a Second Language (ESL) staff who speak these languages in Connecticut. These students may also be SLIFE students and therefore, require supportive instructional and linguistic strategies. In addition to offering robust language instruction education programs for high school ELs, it is paramount that accessibility tools and strategies, such as the use of sheltered instruction, are integrated in mainstream content. Sheltered instruction includes the use of scaffolds and other supports to access mainstream content. Districts may also reach out to cultural or religious organizations and use personnel, technology, and telephonic supports for translation and interpretation for students and their families. Note that, if needed, families are entitled to receive communications in a language that they understand, through translation and/or interpretation.

Figure 3: Native Languages for High School ELs, SY 2018-19



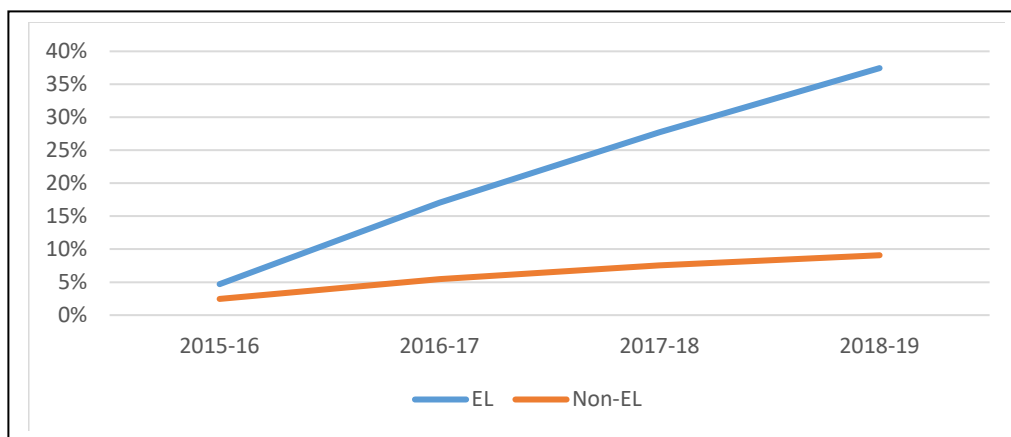
Twenty-Eight Percent of High School ELs are Immigrants

In SY 2018-19, 28 percent of high school ELs were also immigrants. This means that they were born outside of the U.S. and have attended U.S. schools for fewer than three full school years. This was a higher percentage than ELs in primary school Grades (PK-5: 16 percent) and middle school (Grades 6-8: 20 percent). National research posits that many immigrants are often also SLIFE students. As SLIFE students, they need to develop foundational academic skills while acquiring English and engaging in secondary-level coursework simultaneously. Some of these students are refugees and are fleeing countries due to natural disasters, political turmoil or civic disorder, and as a result, they may have mental health and emotional needs related to these circumstances and the trauma they experienced.

More Than One Quarter of High School ELs Have Also Been Identified as Students with Disabilities

Among high school ELs, 27 percent were also identified as students with disabilities (SWD) in SY 2018-19, and they are also referred to as “dually- identified” students. In contrast, just 16 percent of high school students who were non-ELs were identified as SWDs. The most common primary disabilities for dually-identified students were Learning Disabilities (55 percent), ADD/ADHD (12 percent), Intellectually Disabled (9 percent), and Speech/Language Disabilities (5 percent). From SY 2014-15 through 2018-19, there was a 37 percent increase in the number of high school ELs identified as SWD compared with 9 percent for students who were non-ELs (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Annual Growth in the Number of SWDs Relative to Baseline of SY 2014-15 by EL Status, SYs 2015-16 Through 2018-19



It is important to note the growth of dually-identified high school students as a significant factor in the overall increase in the number of high school ELs. As noted, the number of dually-identified high school students increased by 37 percent, but during the same time the number of high school ELs who were not identified as SWD increased by just 3 percent. The result is that dually-identified students accounted for three quarters of the growth in the number of high school ELs.

The large percentage of dually-identified students in high school may be due, in part, to the difficulty of these students to achieve the required proficiency levels needed on the annual ELP assessment required to exit EL status. Additionally, Connecticut does not currently have an alternate ELP Assessment specifically designed to assess dually-identified students with the most severe cognitive disabilities. These ELs do not have an assessment by which to demonstrate English proficiency and are thereby unable to exit EL status. For some perspective on the number of ELs eligible to take an alternate assessment, in SY 2018-19, 2.7 percent of ELs in Grade 11 were approved to take the Connecticut Alternate Assessment (CTAA). These factors contribute to the large percentage of high school ELs who are considered “long-term” ELs (46 percent in high school), or those who have not attained language proficiency within five years of being identified as an EL (Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Section 3121(a)(6)).

Given Their Uniqueness High School ELs Require Nuanced and Tailored Approaches to English Language Services

Table 2 presents the types of English language services that high school ELs received in SY 2018-19 but it is important to keep in mind certain caveats when considering these data. Districts report to the CSDE the principal language support service received by each EL. In practice, however, most ELs receive a mix of language support services as a result of individual student needs, as well as district programming and resources. Student and staff mobility, differences across districts related to EL programming, and even the interpretation of CSDE’s EL program codes, may mean that CSDE EL program data does not always fully reflect the services provided.

Twenty percent of high school ELs participated in a bilingual education program (**Table 2**) and this was lower than the percentage for ELs in primary and middle school (29 percent). A significant factor for this disparity is that the state’s bilingual statute precludes students with fewer than 30 months to graduation from participating in bilingual programs. In SY 2018-19, over 8 percent of high school students were in a school with a mandated bilingual program in their native language but were unable to participate because they had fewer than 30 months to graduation. Twenty-two percent of high school ELs received Language Transitional Support Services, which are a varied mix of ESL services for ELs who had participated in a bilingual program but exhausted their eligibility to continue before meeting the CSDE’s English Mastery Standard to exit EL status. High school ELs also received specific types of ESL, such as pull-out (17 percent), push-in/co-teaching (5 percent), sheltered instruction (13 percent), or another model (11 percent). Co-teaching is less prevalent in high school than at other school levels (11 percent) because, at the secondary level, it requires teachers certified in ESL and a secondary subject area. Factors that pertain specifically to high school, such as graduation requirements and the inability to offer bilingual services to many students, may make it more challenging to tailor language instruction to the unique and varied needs of students at this grade level.

Table 2: English Language Programs for High School ELs, SY 2018-19

Program	ELs	% of ELs	5-Year Change in Number of ELs
Bilingual	1656	20%	13%
Bilingual available, but 30 months or fewer to graduation so receiving ESL	693	8%	71%
Language Transition and Academic Support Services	1818	22%	-11%
ESL	3774	46%	19%
Parental Refusal of Services	337	4%	-10%
Totals	8278	100%	11%

English Language Proficiency Assessment

High School ELs are less likely than ELs at Other Grade Levels to Demonstrate English Language Proficiency

Under Federal law, all ELs in Grades K-12 are required to participate in an annual ELP Assessment that includes the domains of speaking, listening, reading and writing. In Connecticut, the ELP Assessment is the LAS Links. From SY 2015-16 through 2018-19, the percentage of all ELs demonstrating proficiency on the four subtests and the five composite scores (averages of combinations of the subtests) have all declined for all ELs regardless of grade level as the assessment transitioned to being delivered online. The percentages of high school ELs that demonstrated proficiency on such key metrics as Literacy (average of the Reading and Writing subtests) and Overall (average of the four subtests) has been lower than at other grade levels (**Table 3**). While the percentage of ELs who demonstrated Oral proficiency was lower for those in high school compared to ELs in middle school, it was still higher than for those in Grades K-5.

Table 3: Percentage of ELs Demonstrating Proficiency on the ELP Assessment by Grade Level, SY 2018-19

Grade Level	Oral	Literacy	Overall
K - 5	19%	17%	16%
6 - 8	31%	23%	23%
9 - 12	25%	12%	13%
All ELs	22%	18%	17%

As previously noted, a large percentage of ELs in high school have also been identified as students with disabilities and this could potentially account for differences in the ELP Assessment results by grade level. To address this, **Table 4** presents the percentage of ELs who demonstrated proficiency taking into account both grade level and SWD status. That is, Table 4 presents separate comparisons of ELs who were dually identified and those who were not. Regardless of SWD status, fewer high school ELs demonstrated Literacy and Overall proficiency than their respective counterparts at the other grade levels. For Oral proficiency, their percentages were lower for both the SWD and not SWD groups in comparison with their middle school counterparts but higher than for those in Grades K-5.⁶

Table 4: Percentage of ELs Demonstrating Proficiency on the ELP Assessment by Grade Level and Students with Disability Status, SY 2018-19

Grade Band	Oral		Literacy		Overall	
	SWD	Not SWD	SWD	Not SWD	SWD	Not SWD
K – 5	10%	20%	8%	20%	7%	19%
6 – 8	26%	33%	13%	27%	15%	27%
9 - 12	17%	27%	5%	14%	5%	14%
All ELs	16%	24%	9%	20%	8%	19%

⁶ The grade-band structure of the LAS Links Assessment may also be a factor in the lower levels of proficiency at the secondary level. Specifically, all high school ELs take the same assessment in Grades 9-12. This is a challenge for students in Grade 9 as evidenced by their lower rates of proficiency compared to those in the other high school grades, as well as Grade 8 students. For example, the percentage of overall proficiency for Grade 9 (8 percent) compared with Grades 8 (26.9 percent), 10 (13.5 percent), 11 (15.7 percent), and 12 (15.7 percent).

The Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to create ELP growth targets that will move ELs to proficiency. In response, the CSDE calculated Oral and Literacy growth targets based upon analyses of multiple years of Connecticut ELs' LAS Links results. These annual targets establish trajectories for each student to attain Oral and Literacy proficiency within five school years. Specifically, they are increments of Oral and Literacy scale-score points that each EL is expected to grow from one school year to the next. Each EL has individualized Oral and Literacy growth targets that are based on the combination of their grade and performance levels in the previous school year.

In SY 2018-19, English learners in Grades 9-12 had some of the highest percentages of those who met their Oral growth targets (Figure 5). In contrast, they also had some of the lowest percentages of those that met their Literacy growth targets (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Percentage of ELs Meeting Oral Growth Targets by Grade, SY 2018-19

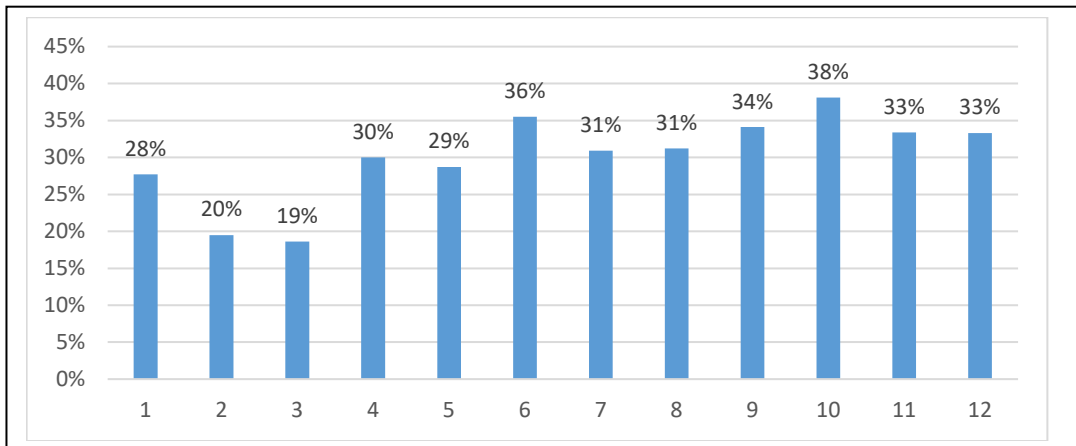
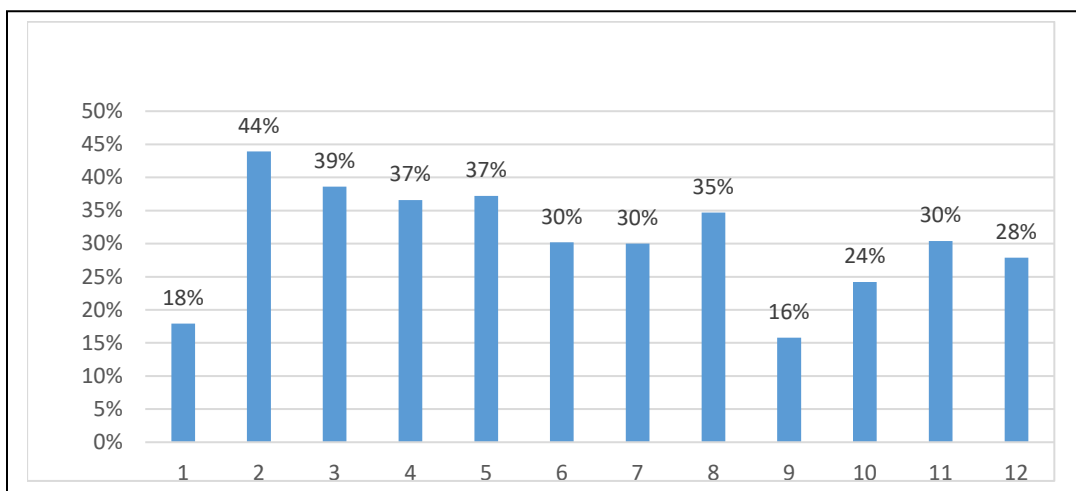
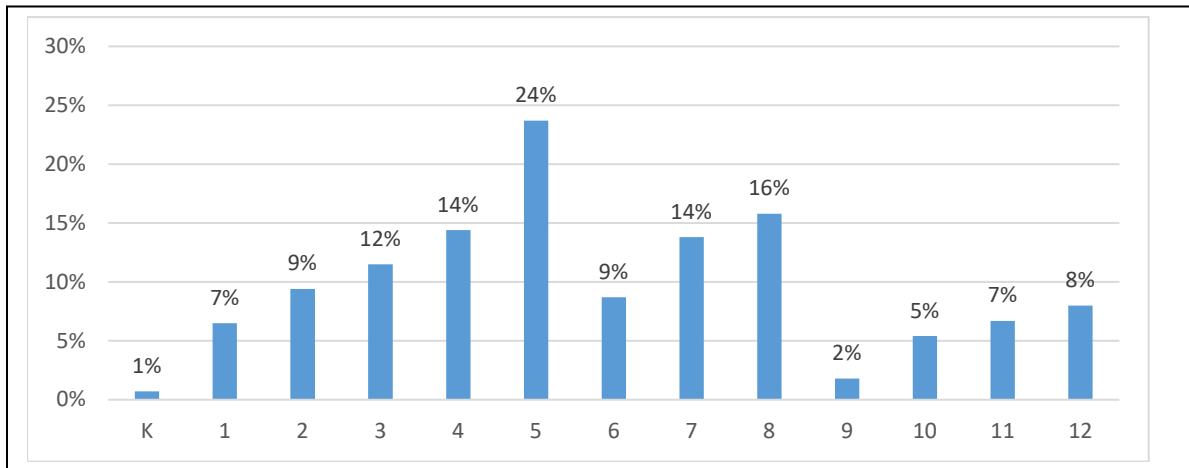


Figure 6: Percentage of ELs Meeting Literacy Growth Targets by Grade, SY 2018-19



The CSDE’s English Mastery Standard is the criteria that students must meet in order to exit EL status. The Mastery Standard’s exit criteria requires ELs to demonstrate Overall proficiency on the LAS Links, as well as proficiency on both its Reading and Writing subtests. The percentage of high school students who met the Mastery Standard in SY 2018-19 was 5 percent, which was down from 10 percent in SY 2015-16. With the exception of kindergarten, the individual high school grades had the lowest percentages of ELs who demonstrated English language mastery (**Figure 7**).

Figure 7: Percentage of ELs Demonstrating English Mastery by Grade, SY 2018-19

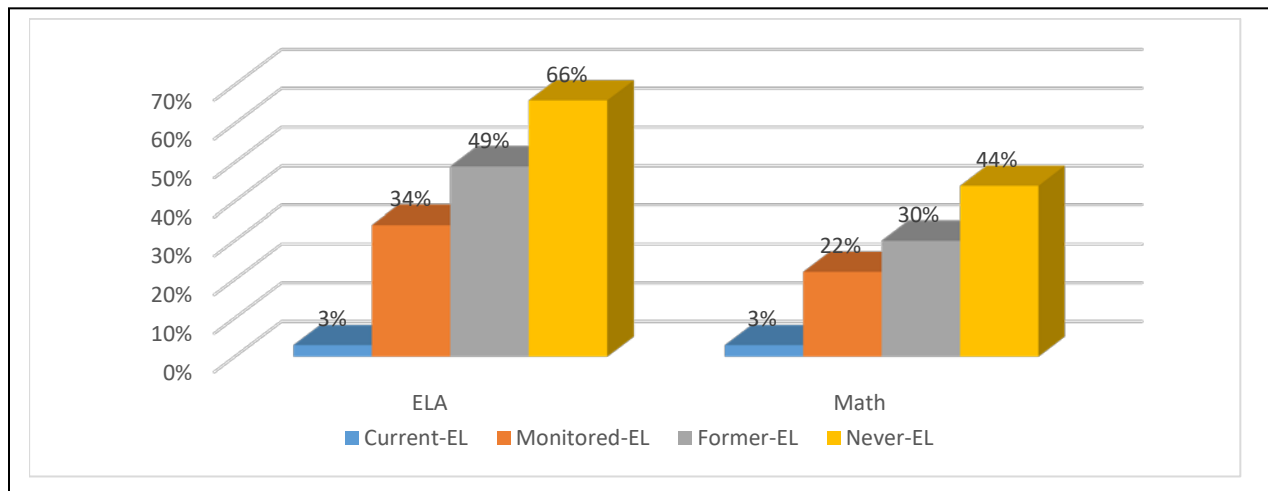


Academic Assessments

Ever-EL Status is a Significant Variable Related to the Long-Term Academic Performance of Students

When considering outcomes on the Connecticut SAT School Day, there were marked differences between students related to longitudinal EL status. **Figure 8** shows that students who had never been identified as ELs (“never-ELs”) were more likely to demonstrate ELA and math proficiency than either current-ELs, monitored-ELs (students that met the Mastery criteria and exited EL status within the last two years but were still eligible to receive English language support services as needed), and former-ELs (students that exited EL status more than two school years ago). Similarly, participation rates and ELA and math average scale scores also varied by longitudinal EL status as never-EL students outperformed the other groups.⁷ There is national research which shows that ever-ELs can perform comparably or even outperform never-ELs on certain metrics.⁸

Figure 8: Percentage of Students Attaining Level Three or Better on the Connecticut SAT School Day by Longitudinal EL Status, SY 2018-19



Typically most ELs are eligible for free or reduced price meals and this status may be seen as a proxy for socio-economic status (SES). Lower SES can be a factor in academic assessment outcomes. We can take into account SES by restricting the comparison of Connecticut SAT School Day results to those students who were eligible for either free or reduced price meals. Doing this illuminates that former-ELs eligible for free or reduced price meals slightly outperformed their comparable never-EL peers who were also eligible for either free or reduced price meals (ELA 44 percent vs. 43 percent at level three or better and math 23 percent vs. 20 percent respectively). Current-ELs (ELA: 3 percent and Math 2 percent) and

⁷ Participation rates and average SAT ELA and Math Scale scores by longitudinal EL status: Current-EL (91 percent; 372 and 375), Monitored-EL (94 percent; 457 and 466), Former-EL (97 percent; 485 and 477) and Never-EL (97 percent; 524 and 508). The CSDE ESSA performance targets for School Day SAT are Performance Level 3 or above and the minimum scale score for Level Three on ELA is 480 and for math it is 530.

⁸ Collier, V. P., & Thomas, W. P. (2004). The astounding effectiveness of dual language effectiveness for all. *NABE Journal of Research and Practice*, 2(1), 1-20.

monitored-ELs (ELA: 29 percent and Math 16 percent) eligible for free or reduced price meals still lagged behind these other groups of students.

Divergent outcomes on the Connecticut SAT School Day based on longitudinal EL status points to the importance of considering “ever-EL” status in analyses of academic assessment outcomes. It reveals the full trajectory of EL outcomes and emphasizes the importance of academic and linguistic supports necessary for both current and former-ELs across the general education program. While former-EL students have met the CSDE’s English Mastery Standard, they may still have language needs and will benefit from embedded supports and the implementation of intentional strategies and tools to further develop proficiency with academic language. Focused comparisons of the SAT results also showed the significance of demographic factors such as SWD and SES status. It underlines the importance of considering both longitudinal EL status and other demographic characteristics in supporting students.

Graduation Rates

From SY 2014-15 through 2018-19, four- and six-year graduation rates were fairly steady for both the EL group and non-EL student group (Figure 9 and Figure 10). The EL graduation rate improved in SY 2018-19 and the gap with the non-EL group narrowed slightly. The EL group in the graduation rate calculations includes all students who were an EL while in high school, regardless of their EL status at the time of graduation. Thus the graduation rates for ELs encompass “ever-EL” status during high school.

Figure 9: Four Year Graduation Rates by EL Status, SYs 2014-15 to 2019-19

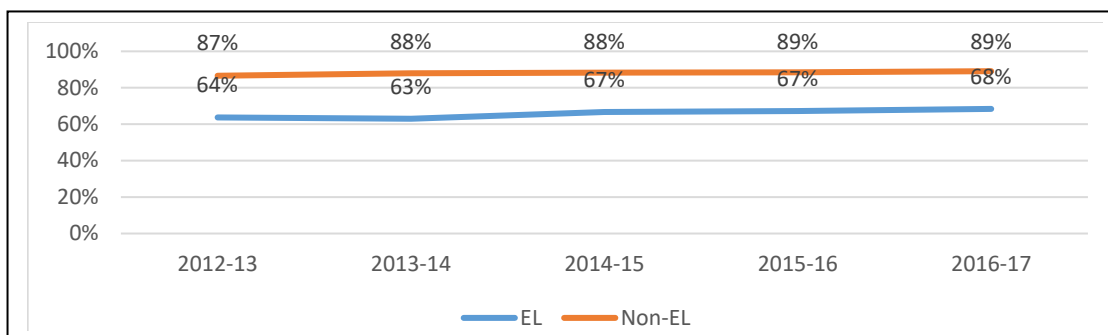
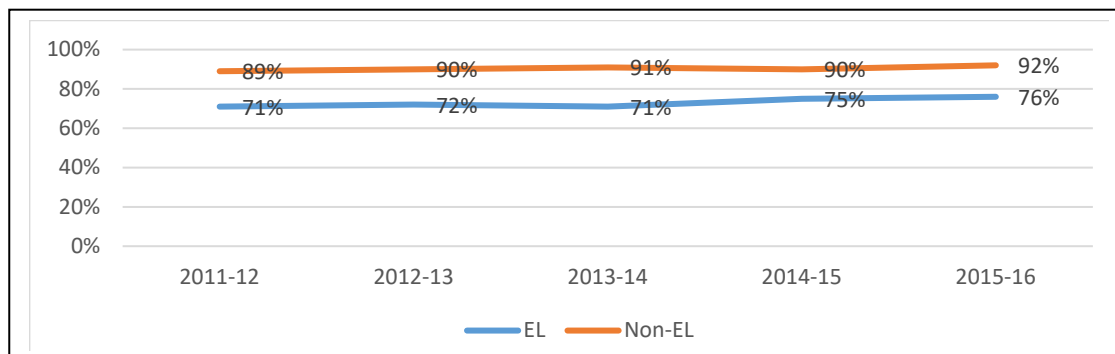


Figure 10: Six Year Graduation Rates by EL Status, SYs 2011-12 to 2015-16



Conclusion

The unique challenges and characteristics of high school ELs require thoughtful, nuanced, and inventive educational approaches. Not only are these students entitled to receive supplemental language support programs, but they also must be supported in general education content-area courses with research-based strategies and by teachers that understand their linguistic and academic needs. In fact, these types of supports are not just needed by current-ELs. Incorporating longitudinal EL status into school analyses illuminates that even students who are former-ELs may continue to benefit from intentional instructional and linguistic supports. With continued research and collaboration among educators in the field, we will be better able to serve this unique high school population of current and former-ELs.

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