

# Ensuring Best Practices in English Learner Programs

Celeste Dorantes | July 2024

As the nation's demographics shift, schools must create an equitable and positive learning environment for all students, including English learner (EL) students. ELs hold diverse identities, some arriving from around the world as newcomers and others who are U.S. citizens born into immigrant families. Despite several laws passed over the years to protect the educational rights of ELs, they still often encounter barriers to educational achievement. ELs disproportionately come from families with low incomes and low parental education attainment, leading to a widened racial achievement gap. Adopting effective EL programs in public schools enables these students to fully and equitably participate both in the classroom and in broader society.

## History

In 1968, **under** Title VII of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Bilingual Education Act was the first federal policy to provide educational agencies with funding to serve students with limited English proficiency. Today, the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—a reauthorization of the ESEA—aims to ensure equal access to high-quality education for all students in the nation. ESSA provides resources and lets states make decisions about how their school districts accommodate EL students. This has led to wide variation in how states and local education agencies implement procedures to identify EL students and close the academic gap between them and their peers.

## Quick Facts about ELs

- **Among English learners**, Spanish and Arabic are the first- and second- most reported home languages, respectively.
- **Between** 2011 and 2021, the largest changes in the number of ELs' reported home languages were Swahili and Portuguese.
- As of fall 2021, more than **5.3 million ELs** were enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools, representing nearly 11 percent of total K-12 enrollment.

- **Fewer than one in 10** (7 percent) of ELs enroll in AP courses, compared to more than one in five students overall (22 percent).
- **Thirty-seven percent** of ELs live in poverty.

**37% of ELs live in poverty**

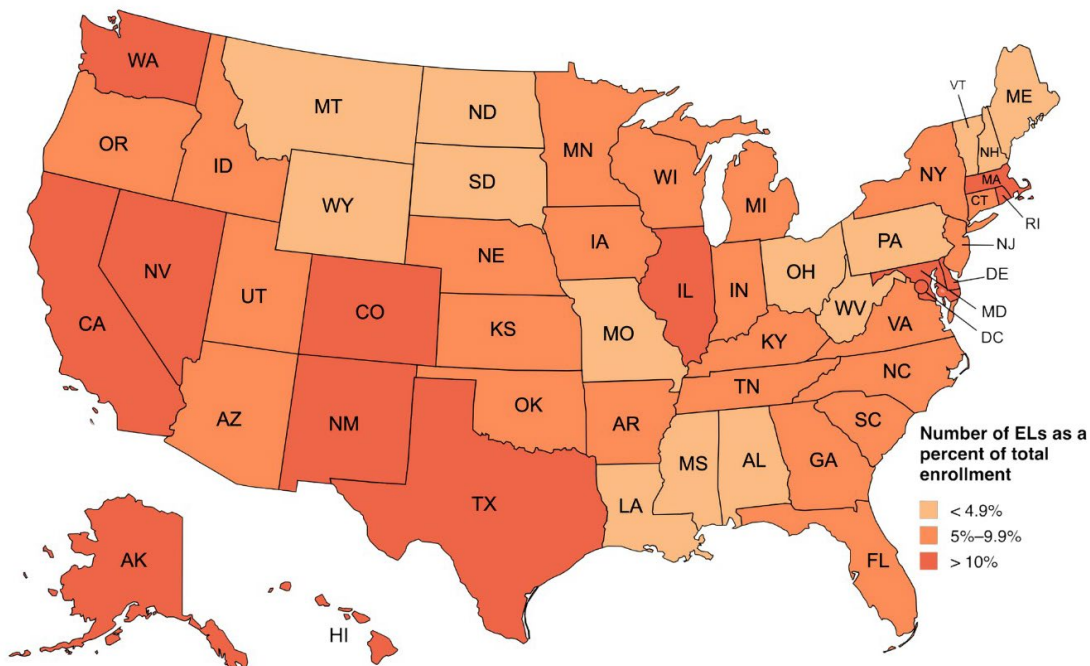


**ELs represent nearly 11% of total k-12 enrollment**



## The Importance of Implementing Best Practices to Support ELs

ELs constitute one of the fastest-growing student populations in the United States. **By 2025**, a projected one out of four children in classrooms nationwide will be an EL student. The success of the EL student population is integral to our country’s economic prosperity. Therefore, schools must be supported to meet their legal obligations to serve ELs, including receiving sufficient funds as well as guidance on best practices.



## Case Studies

Public schools have adopted various approaches to serve ELs from pre-K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The following two successful case studies examine the Sobrato Early Academic Literacy (SEAL) program in California and Las Americas Newcomer School in Houston, TX.

### California's SEAL Model

The Sobrato Family Foundation launched the SEAL program for ELs in preschool through third grade. Initially piloted in just two counties, the program was designed to develop the language and literacy skills of young EL children to close the academic achievement gap by fourth grade. The program focused on meeting California's Common Core standards while addressing the needs of ELs, their parents, and their teachers.

After five full years of implementation, the SEAL program showed that:

- It had a significant impact on parents and literacy activities at home.
- It had a statistically significant impact on student growth and development in language, literacy, and cognition.
- Students consistently outperformed demographically similar comparison groups in growth and achievement.
- One year of SEAL provided benefits in the form of greater language and literacy growth and achievement in comparison to non-SEAL students, and cumulative years of SEAL education amplified these benefits.

In California, nearly half of ELs who start kindergarten are at risk of becoming long-term English learners. These students often experience significant academic gaps over time and fail to achieve the English proficiency needed for academic success. SEAL provides a promising model for educating EL students and their families. Over 360 preschool sites and elementary schools in California use the **SEAL** model.

### Las Americas Newcomer School, Houston, TX

**Newcomer** students are ELs who recently immigrated to the United States. They frequently require additional support in developing English acquisition and transitioning to mainstream schools.

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) is the largest public school district in Texas. HISD operates the Las Americas Newcomer School for students in grades 4-8 who have been in the U.S. for less than a year. Las Americas offers a content-based EL curriculum, striving for the English language acquisition and cultural integration of its students.

For students who attended Las Americas, the school:

- Had a positive effect on students' English end-of-course exam scores.
- Decreased the likelihood of students receiving disciplinary actions, which was primarily due to a reduction of in-school suspensions.
- Showed that students who had been in the school for three years were more likely to be reclassified as English proficient. This allowed students to take a smaller share of ESL courses and freed up their schedules to take classes required for high school graduation and college enrollment.

Las Americas is in southwest Houston, which has a high proportion of immigrant residents. Historically, the school has been committed to serving students with the greatest academic and socio-emotional needs. For schools that serve a large newcomer and immigrant population, Las Americas can be a model for providing EL student achievement and integration.

## Conclusion

All children deserve an equitable chance of quality education. Las Americas and the SEAL model demonstrate how schools are providing ELs the opportunity to attain educational achievement and integration to prepare them for a successful future. In striving for fair EL education, it is important to be aware of the looming threats, including efforts to cut funding for programming designed to serve ELs or undermine their rights. Advocating for the rights of English learners and advancing policies that protect and expand their access to education is ultimately critical for both their individual prosperity and that of our entire nation.