



# 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 performance trend reports, it includes information about other reporting platforms and resources offered by the state.

## Understanding the English Learner Student

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 student group includes all students who meet this definition. However, there are different ways to define or group the EL student population to understand these students' education and achievement. Key EL student group definitions are as follows:

- **“Current ELs”** refers to all students who are classified as EL students by the state of California in a given year. Among current EL students, two student groups are relevant when interpreting achievement data:
  1. **Newly arrived EL students**, who have been in the US for less than one school year
  2. **Long-term EL students**, who have been initially or continually classified as English learner students 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 EL students (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 EL students, but who have subsequently met the state criteria and any additional local criteria for ELP to be reclassified as fluent English proficient.
- **“Ever ELs”** refers to all students who have ever been classified as EL students, now or in the past. It includes all current EL students and all RFEP students in the state.

## Different Groupings for Different Purposes

Although the definitions just provided seem straightforward, EL students often are grouped, counted, or labeled in slightly different ways across different reporting contexts. In particular, note the following:

- On the [California School Dashboard \(Dashboard\)](#), the “Current ELs” vary by state indicator. For more information on how EL students are defined by state student group, refer to the California Department of Education [English Learner Students on the California School Dashboard](#) web document.
- On the [Test Results for California’s Assessments](#) website, students are referred to simply as “ELs” (not “Current ELs”). Separate results, as follows, are also available:
  - For the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, separate results are available for other EL student–related groups, including students whose ELP was assessed upon starting school but who were not ultimately classified as EL students.
  - For the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California, separate results are also available for newly arrived EL students.

Multiple laws and regulations dictate how EL students must participate in various assessments and how states and local educational agencies 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 provided in this section, 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 EL Students

Performance trend reports include graphs that represent the achievement of different EL student groups. Each student group provides a unique lens for understanding EL students’ achievement at the student or program level within the state. The most appropriate student group to look at may depend on the question asked. [Table 1](#) shares examples of how information about different student groups answers common questions:

**Table 1. Examples of How EL Student Group Information Answers Questions**

Question	Current EL Students	RFEPs	Ever ELs
Is EL student achievement 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 EL students receiving instruction that prepares them to meet California’s academic content standards?	Maybe	No	Yes

## English Only versus EL

The English Only (EO) versus EL performance trend report compares the scores of all currently identified EL students to those EO students. The average achievement of current EL students will typically be lower than for other EL student groups such as RFEPs and Ever ELs, because it includes only students who, by definition, are progressing toward mastery of 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 in and had the opportunity to learn academic language and content in their home language.

Current EL students' performance also may reflect the students' opportunity to learn in English; they may have a harder time accessing instruction delivered in English or may even receive less rigorous coursework on the basis of 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 US schools. As a result of these types of factors, it is not atypical for current EL students to exhibit lower achievement than their EO peers. The following should be considered when using this report:

- **This performance trend report *is not appropriate* for** judging whether the achievement of the EL student group is changing over time. Each year, new students enter the EL student group who are just beginning to learn English. Also, each year, students with very high levels of English proficiency are reclassified out of the student group. Because of this constant cycling, the average achievement of the EL student group 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 EL students are being prepared to meet grade-level achievement standards. However, it is important to keep in mind that gaps between current EL students and EO students 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 student achievement within the state.

## EO versus RFEP

This performance trend report shows the scores of students who have been reclassified compared to students classified as EO. The average achievement of this student group will typically be higher than for other EL student groups, because this student group contains only students at the highest levels of ELP. The following should be considered when using this report:

- 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 EL students (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.

## EO versus Ever EL

This performance trend report shows the scores of all current EL students and RFEP students compared to EO students. The average achievement of this student group falls between the other two student groups 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. The following should be considered when using this report:

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