

New Report Spotlights English Learners in Urban Districts

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By [Ingrid T. Colón](#)

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The U.S. has rich linguistic diversity with over **300 languages** spoken. This linguistic diversity is evident in our nation's public schools where close to **one in ten students are English learners** (ELs). Although ELs attend schools throughout the country, most ELs are concentrated in urban areas. In April, the Council of Great City Schools, a national membership organization focused on addressing the needs of K-12 public schools in urban settings, released a **report** centered on the EL students in their **74 member districts**. Specifically, the Council surveyed districts on EL enrollment (i.e., total numbers, percentages, enrollment by school level, languages spoken, and ELs receiving special education services), academic performance, staffing, professional development, and **Title III** allocations. Several compelling findings emerged from the report, including that ELs are the fastest-growing student subgroup within member districts, now making up 17 percent of all student enrollment.

In 14 districts, the percent of ELs compared to non-ELs grew by more than five percentage points. Between 2007 to 2016, districts across Texas, such as Dallas, Houston and Austin, saw their EL student enrollment grow by 13 to 23 percent. Moreover, 28 districts saw increases in their EL enrollment and declines in their non-EL student enrollment. The report suggests that ELs in these districts were helping to stave off larger enrollment declines. This finding aligns with larger demographic trends showing that immigrants are helping to **mitigate population declines** in cities across the Midwest.

The report also sheds light on the number of students classified as Long Term ELs (students who have been in EL programs for six or more years). Over 35 districts had more than 10 percent of their ELs classified as Long Term ELs. And, in six of these districts (Columbus, Cleveland, Albuquerque, Wichita, Denver, and Dallas), more than 30 percent of ELs were considered Long Term ELs. These findings are **especially problematic** given that these students often have less opportunities to access the full curriculum (i.e., science, social studies), take credit bearing courses necessary for high school graduation, and college preparatory classes. A 2014 **report** by Laurie Olsen suggests that Long Term ELs are often placed in classes designed for newcomer ELs focused on developing basic English skills or mainstream classes where they lack support in developing English proficiency. Moreover, interventions often do not differentiate between the unique language and learning needs of Long Term ELs.

The performance of former ELs (students who were formerly classified as ELs) was also reported using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Interestingly, from 2005 to 2017 former ELs performed on par with non-EL students in both reading and math, and in some cases, outperformed their English speaking peers. However, the report shows nuances in NAEP performance based on ELL status and eligibility for free and reduced price lunch (FRPL). In 2017, students who were both EL and eligible for FRPL had the lowest rates of achievement on NAEP. By contrast, ELs who were higher income had higher rates of achievement than their lower income peers.

This finding is important because it highlights the relationship that exists between poverty and the educational outcomes of ELs. According to my former colleague Janie T. Carnock's [report](#), *Seeing Clearly: Five Lenses to Bring English Learner Data into Focus*, multiple studies have found that, "academic differences between ELs and non-ELs are eliminated when socioeconomic status is taken into account, and wealthier ELs achieve English proficiency faster than poorer ELs."

In addition, the Council's report describes the linguistic diversity of ELs in member districts. Between 2013 and 2016, the language diversity in the Council's membership increased from 38 languages to 50 languages. For instance, Q'anjob'a, Mam, and Akateko—which are Mayan languages from the Guatemalan region—appeared as new languages spoken by students in this year's report.

According to the report, over 90 percent of ELs speak one of the following languages: Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Haitian Creole, and Vietnamese. While Spanish is the most common language in many districts, other languages in schools have been on the rise. For example, Somali was reported as a top five language in 16 districts. In SY 2016-17, the number of Somali speakers increased by about 13 percent compared to 2 percent from the preceding school year. In [Minneapolis Public Schools](#) (MPS), for example, 40 percent of ELs' home language is Somali. As a result, MPS has taken steps to better serve their Somalian population. For example, the district has a [Multilingual Family Outreach Program](#) that provides services for families of ELs such as presentations and workshops facilitated by bilingual program specialists focused on bridging home, school, and community.

Taken together, the report provides a view of important issues and trends pertaining to ELs in urban schools, including Long Term ELs and former ELs who are often overlooked in the data. One key implication raised in the report is that despite the growing number of EL students, state level policy and district level programs have failed to keep up. So what can urban districts do to better serve ELs?

One solution is for school districts to support and build on students' home languages to facilitate their learning and recognize the knowledge they bring to school. The need for qualified teachers, administrators, and school personnel who can serve all of the languages that

ELs speak remains a major challenge; however, districts across the country are leveraging a variety of strategies to help all teachers learn how to support ELs' home languages.

For example, researchers at the International Consortium for Multilingual Excellence in Education (ICMEE) at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln are offering “eWorkshops” for teachers serving K–12 students who speak languages other than English. These workshops are free and seek to engage educators in professional learning communities to collaborate and learn effective practices to teach students who are learning English and who speak multiple languages. As Araceli Lobato, a graduate research assistant at ICMEE, reflected in an [article in *The Daily Nebraskan*](#), some teachers think that ELs should not use their home language at all in the classroom due to a lack of knowledge on the role of a student's first language in supporting their acquisition of English.