Improving Education Finance Equity for English Learners in the Southeast

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BELLWETHER EDUCATION PARTNERS

Executive Summary

English learners (ELs) are a fast-growing and diverse student population in the U.S. K-12 public school system. Representing more than 400 languages spoken, EL students bring rich linguistic and cultural traditions to their communities.[1] In the Southeast region of the U.S., there are 713,245 EL students, making up nearly 15% of the national population of EL students.[2] Some states in the region have experienced a rapid increase in the number of EL students enrolled in the public school system. For example, between 2000 and 2018, South Carolina experienced a more than nine-fold increase in EL student enrollment, a rate of growth that is 24 times higher than the national average.[3]

Despite this notable trend, state education finance systems in the Southeast have not kept up with the learning needs that many EL students have. Some state funding systems provide little or no additional funding for school districts to support their needs. Those districts with better funding mechanisms still treat all EL students as a monolithic group, not accounting for unique and differentiated needs such as age/grade level, language spoken at home, proficiency level in both English and their home language, and the amount of time they have been enrolled in a U.S. school. While the federal government does provide some funding to states for EL students via Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the primary responsibility of funding EL services falls on states and districts.

To better understand education finance equity for EL students in the Southeast, our analysis focuses on nine states — Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.[4] We examine funding policy structures in each state and compare them against promising practices in state funding systems for EL students. Just two states in the region, Florida and South Carolina, receive our highest rating for policy structures, and they still have substantial room to improve. We also examine data on state and local revenues linked to EL students, EL-specific budget allocations, EL enrollment, and Title III federal funding for the four-year period from 2015-16 to 2018-19.

As policymakers and advocates consider how to meet the funding needs of EL students, there are three key opportunities to implement policies that better support EL students in the Southeast region, especially as enrollment continues to grow:

State funding formulas should move toward weighted, student-based systems with multiple EL weights. EL students with greater needs must receive more funding support through state funding formulas. For states that already have a weighted, student-based funding formula, policymakers should consider how to differentiate among a range of EL needs.

The federal government should increase Title III funding. While increasing EL allocations at the state level holds the most promise for meeting the needs of EL students, federal funding must also keep up with the growing enrollment of EL students in the Southeast region and nationwide.

State education agencies and the federal government should improve transparency of EL data. Although ESSA mandated annual reports of school-level spending, policymakers should increase the level of publicly available state and district data about funding for EL students.

Explore more data for each state in our analysis using our interactive data tool:

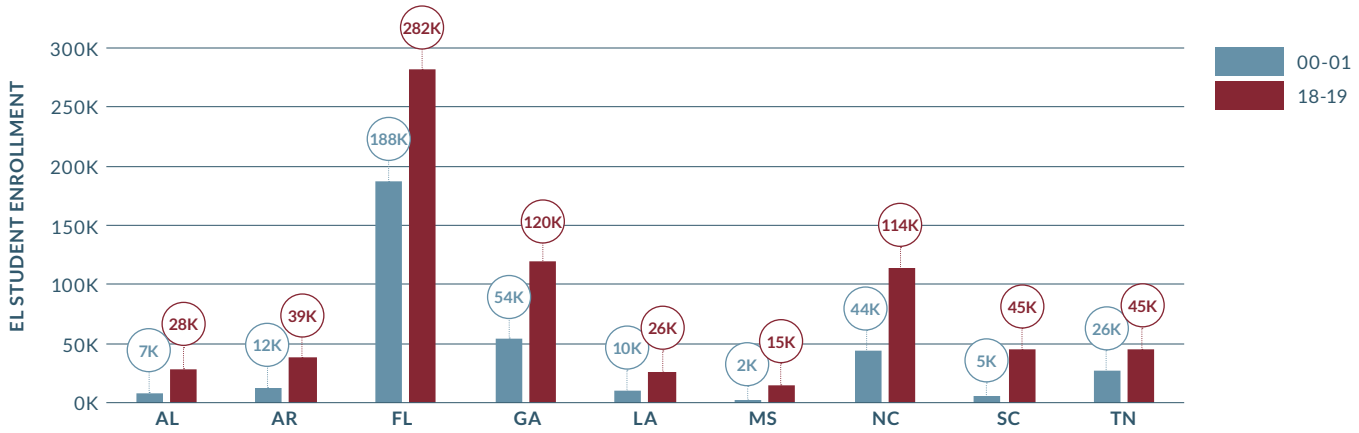
VIEW TOOL →

Introduction

ELs are one of the fastest-growing student populations in the U.S. Since 2000, nationwide EL enrollment in K-12 public schools has increased by more than 1.2 million students.[5] Despite the rapid growth in EL enrollment, the financial resources available to support ELs at the state and federal level have not kept up with students' needs. Inequitable, inadequate funding supports for EL students inhibit districts and schools from providing ELs with the resources they need to meet their full learning potential.

This is especially true in Southeastern states. While most of the country has seen an increase in the number of ELs in the public school system, the Southeast in particular has experienced a significant increase in EL enrollment (Figure 1).[6] Across the nine states in our analysis, EL student enrollment grew from 657,612 students in 2015 to 713,245 students in 2019, representing a nearly 9% growth in that time period (Figure 2).[7] Some Southeastern states with very few EL students 20 years ago now have tens of thousands statewide. Between 2000-01 and 2018-19, South Carolina experienced a more than nine-fold increase in EL enrollment, growing from 5,121 students to 45,411 students, a rate of growth that is 24 times higher than the national average.[8]

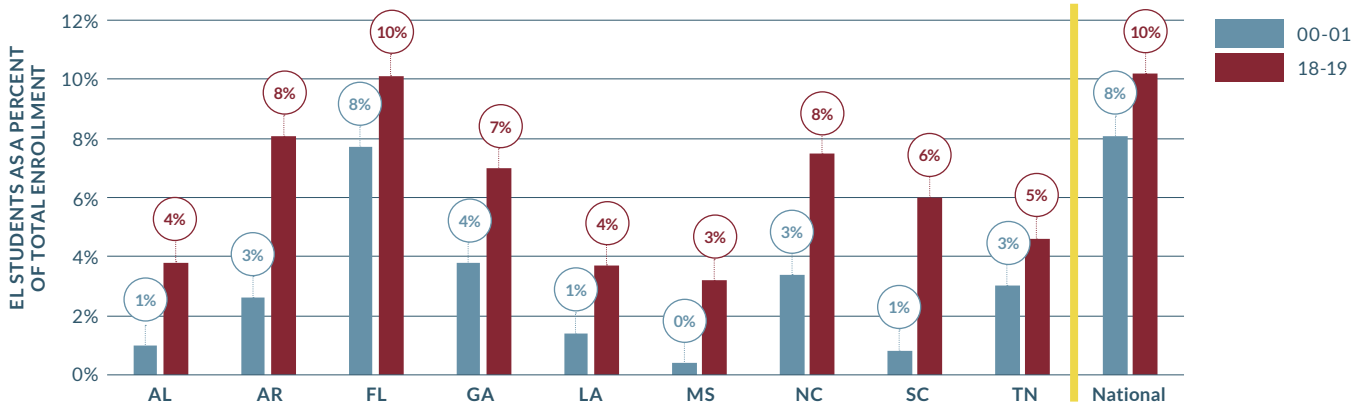
FIGURE 1: EL STUDENT ENROLLMENT IN THE SOUTHEAST REGION, 2000-01 TO 2018-19



Source: National Center for Education Statistics[9]

FIGURE 2: SOUTHEAST REGION GROWTH IN EL STUDENTS AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL STUDENT ENROLLMENT

Change in ELs as a Percent of Total Student Enrollment in the Southeast and Nationally, 2000-01 to 2018-19



Source: National Center for Education Statistics[10]

As enrollment of EL students grows, especially in the Southeast, the overall allocation of resources provided to schools to support these students' learning should also increase. But more money is not the only goal. These funds must also be allocated more equitably and thoughtfully in acknowledgment of the differentiated learning needs among the EL student population.[11]

Inequity in funding for EL students is a long-standing problem, but the COVID-19 pandemic has created a new level of urgency to close the opportunity gap that is perpetuated by inadequate learning resources. In the past two years, EL students continue to be much more likely to experience severe learning disruption and slowdowns in academic and language progress amid shifts to virtual learning. This has widened preexisting gaps in literacy, language proficiency, and math scores.[12] Some school districts reported that almost half of ELs were not logging into online classrooms in early 2020.[13] While some of the sources of challenges for EL students were related to internet connectivity and accessibility, EL students may also have been more likely to experience other barriers to learning, such as lack of access to virtual language support and accommodations, and caretaking of younger relatives.[14]

All these challenges underscore why school systems must understand and prioritize the linguistic and academic needs of EL students. These systems must also acknowledge the assets that EL students and their families bring to schools and their communities (Sidebar 1). Policymakers should take this opportunity to focus on the linguistic and cultural strengths of EL students and the ways in which they enrich schools, and use additional funding to ensure they receive the high-quality instructional supports they deserve. Federal stimulus funds and a stronger-than-expected economic recovery may provide new resources and opportunities for states to focus on funding equity for ELs and other historically underserved students.

While the population of EL students is growing across the country, we chose to focus our analysis in the Southeastern U.S. because the especially rapid growth of this group of students across the region creates a greater sense of urgency in addressing challenges and ensuring students thrive. To better understand the landscape of EL funding for students in the region, we examine current state funding policies and structures, as well as enrollment trends, and state, local, and federal funding data. We compare current funding policies with promising state education finance practices to support EL students. We also make recommendations for greater education finance equity for ELs in the Southeast and elsewhere.

SIDEBAR 1

Benefits of Multilingualism

ELs enrolled in public schools speak more than 400 different languages.[15] The rich linguistic assets that these students bring to schools has several long-term benefits. Researchers have found that multilingual learners have a range of cognitive advantages, including enhanced executive functioning and short-term memory.[16] One study of dual language immersion in Oregon's Portland Public Schools found that students in the program outperformed their peers in English reading in grades 5 and 8 and were less likely to be EL students by grades 5 and 6.[17] Another study from California found that EL students in bilingual/dual language programs have a higher long-term likelihood of becoming proficient in English.[18]

Who Are EL Students, and Why Do They Need Additional Funding in School?

Title III of ESSA requires states to ensure that EL students "attain English proficiency and develop high levels of academic achievement in English."[19] While states often categorize ELs in different ways, federal law defines ELs as young people between the ages of 3 and 21 years old who were either not born in the U.S. or whose native language is not English.[20] While there is limited research on how long it takes for ELs to develop proficiency in the English language, and individual experiences among ELs vary widely, recent research has shown that it typically takes five to seven years for EL students to develop academic English proficiency.[21] Once students exit EL status, states are required to monitor them for at least two years to ensure they are continuing to progress academically.[22]

EL students bring unique strengths to the classroom as multilingual learners, but in order to successfully develop their English language skills alongside other learning and development, they often require additional resources. Some of these resources include specialized or multilingual curricula and learning materials, teachers trained and certified to support ELs, ongoing EL instruction professional development for all teachers, paraprofessionals to provide additional classroom support, and translators or interpreters to provide language access to families. Staffing, materials, training, and special services all add up to a need for greater funding to support EL students' learning, and states and local school districts are obligated to ensure that students receive the necessary supports to be successful.[23]

But there is also a lot of variation in the types of resources needed for ELs to be successful, since they represent numerous home languages and countries of origin, varying lengths of time spent in the U.S, and a range of individual learning needs.[24] While there is little research available about the true cost of providing differentiated resources to EL students based on their learning needs and different instructional approaches/models, we know that not accounting for these factors could lead to an inequitable allocation of resources.[25] For example, a kindergartener who is learning to read and write in English and simultaneously learning to read and write in their home language will have different needs than a high school-aged student who is a new arrival to the country and is already a proficient reader in their home language. Or, a school serving a majority of EL students who all speak the same home language will likely have a different learning plan than a school serving EL students who speak 20 different home languages.

Knowing that an equitable education for EL students will likely require more money, it should follow that districts and schools serving more ELs should receive additional funding. But too few state education finance systems provide the resources that ELs need. Federal funding makes up only 8% of education spending overall, and states are constitutionally responsible for providing *all* children with an adequate education, including EL students.[26]

Title III funding from the federal government is designed to supplement, not supplant, state funding for EL programs (Sidebar 2).[27] While increasing federal funding via Title III is an important lever for better supporting EL students, states largely direct the allocation of the other 92% of funding for public schools, and therefore bear the lion's share of responsibility for ensuring sufficient resources to support all student needs. This responsibility includes targeting increased funds equitably, specifically toward EL students, within their own state funding systems. Further, given the variation in the characteristics and needs of EL populations state to state and even district to district, state and local school districts are best positioned to understand the unique needs of EL students in their communities. As a result, this state and local funding would be much more impactful than increasing Title III allocations alone. In the Southeast region and nationally, Title III funding has remained relatively flat, even as the student population has grown (Figure 3).

Particularly in the Southeast, the funding allocated by states to schools for EL services must reflect the growing enrollment and learning needs of students. Our analysis of state funding policies and data on EL funding allocation in the region finds that all states in the Southeast could greatly improve the equity, adequacy, and transparency of their funding for EL students, as explained in greater detail in the sections that follow.

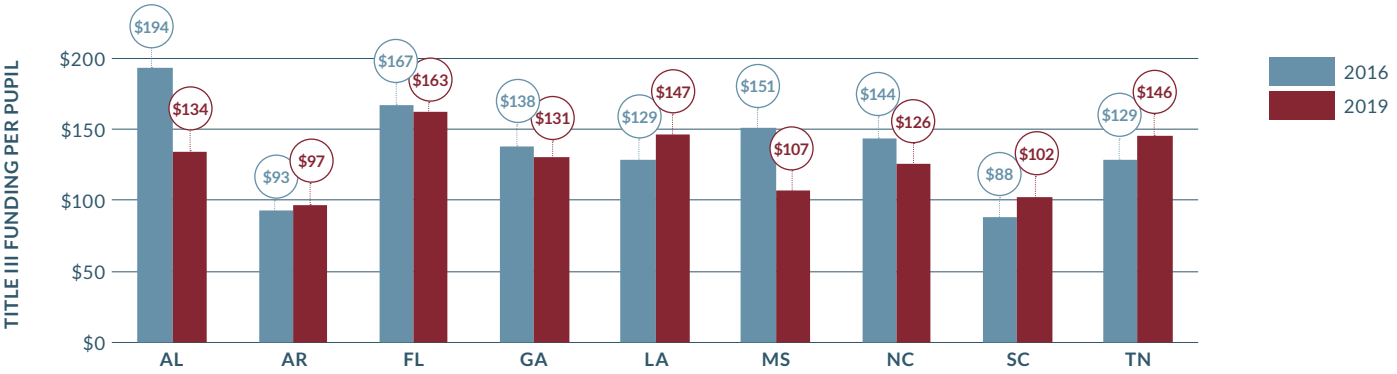
SIDEBAR 2

Federal Funding for EL Students

Title III of ESSA requires states to ensure that ELs are receiving the services they need.[28] It provides formula grant funding based on EL enrollment for all states to fund federal mandates around EL education. Title III funds are the primary federal source of EL funding for K-12 public schools. However, this funding is intended to supplement, not supplant, state funding for EL services.[29]

Title III funding has remained relatively flat despite a steady growth in the EL population. The No Child Left Behind Act authorized up to $750 million in federal Title III funding, and ESSA increased Title III funding from $756 million in 2017 to $884 million in 2020.[30] Advocates and researchers generally agree that these federal funds are insufficient to fully meet EL students' needs, but what would constitute an adequate level of Title III funding is up for debate. One estimate found that in order to maintain the per-pupil EL funding standard set by the federal government in the early 2000s, Title III would need to grow to at least $1.21 billion, accounting for the growing EL population as well as inflation.[31]

FIGURE 3: TITLE III FUNDING PER EL PUPIL IN THE SOUTHEAST REGION



Source: Authors' own analysis[32]

Promising Practices in State Funding Systems for ELs

One of the key challenges with designing an equitable funding system that meets the needs of EL students is determining the cost of an adequate education at a state level. State economies, district and community factors, and the particular mix and distribution of EL students can all affect cost. There is not, and may never be, one clear, research-backed answer or single best formula in research to determine how much ELs need versus how much schools spend today. Despite the lack of research on this, it is clear from student achievement trends, opportunity gaps, and growth in enrollment that ELs deserve and need additional funding, and the Southeast region must do more to support them.

One gap in the research comes from studies focused on determining the financial cost of providing an adequate education, often referred to as "costing out" studies. These studies typically look at EL students as a singular group and do not account for ELs and the diversity of their needs.[33] For example, older newcomer ELs (those newly arrived in the country) and younger ELs will require a different set of resources compared with older ELs who have been in the country for a longer period of time, and some studies do not take these differences into consideration.[34]

As states consider the best way to meet the needs of ELs, certain design principles must be in place to promote equitable and adequate funding systems for EL students:

- Consider **differences in resources based on the diversity of EL needs**, including languages spoken at home, number of years spent in the U.S., age of students, grade level, and time spent in EL programs.
- Account for **how EL status overlaps with other learning needs**, including special education services. EL students who also receive special education services should receive funding that corresponds with the full range of their learning needs.
- Offer **transparency** and allow schools, districts, and the general public to track the amount of money being allocated to support specific learning needs of ELs.
- Remain **responsive to evolving student needs** and allow state education agencies and school districts to easily make funding adjustments to support EL students.

There are four general ways in which states direct funding to support students with additional learning needs: 1) weighted, student-based funding formulas, 2) categorical grant programs, 3) cost reimbursement, and 4) resource-based funding.[35] Some states use a combination of funding types.

TABLE 1: FOUR STATE POLICY VEHICLES FOR FUNDING EL STUDENTS[36]

Weighted, student-based funding formula	All students generate a base amount of funding that is determined by the state. School districts then receive additional funding per student in a specific category, based on weights designed to support differentiated learning needs.
Categorical grant program	Grants for a specific purpose are distributed through either a formula or a competitive process.
Cost reimbursement	The state reimburses districts for actual additional costs associated with providing services to students, such as the actual cost of a translator who works with EL families.
Resource-based funding	States allocate funding based on specific inputs such as teacher aides or translators based on the number of students with additional needs.

While each of these four systems have some benefits and drawbacks, the design of a weighted, student-based funding formula offers the greatest potential to ensure that EL students receive the resources they need to be successful (Table 1).[37] In a weighted funding system, districts receive additional funding in direct relationship to their student population, and additional resources are directed toward student groups based on their needs. A weighted, student-based funding formula allows for straightforward adjustments to weights or base funding as costs change, and subgroups of ELs with different resource-intensive needs can receive different weighting as appropriate. Weighted, student-based formulas also provide flexibility at the local level to determine how best to use resources, rather than prescribing spending on specific programs.

While a weighted funding formula has the most potential of the four systems to support the needs of ELs, this structure alone will not ensure that either enough resources are provided or that they are allocated equitably based on specific student needs. The details of a formula design can make a huge difference (Table 2). For example, 36 states nationwide incorporate a student-based funding model that accounts for the additional cost of educating certain student groups.[38] However, not all student-based funding includes a dedicated EL student weight, and very few account for varying needs among EL students based on characteristics like grade level, level of English proficiency, and years in the country.[39]

State funding formulas that have a singular weight for all ELs are likely to be misaligned with actual student needs at the district level, especially in schools with a disproportionate number of newcomers, who usually have more resource-intensive needs.[40] While singular weights may not capture the diversity of the EL student population, there may be drawbacks to multiple weights. A more nuanced system can be more complex and make it more difficult to understand how money flows to districts based on EL student needs. Multiple EL weights could also create administrative difficulties for states and their ability to track data. Concentration of ELs is another factor that might go into a more nuanced state funding formula, on top of per-pupil funding. Districts with either a very high *or* very low population of ELs might have different costs to consider to ensure EL students have access to the services they need. Examples of funding policy solutions could include:

- Extra funding or additional funding weight for districts with very few EL students and thus higher per-student staffing and resource costs to ensure those students' needs are met.
- Extra funding or additional funding weight for districts with very high concentrations of EL students or wide diversity in student languages.[41]

Finally, any attempt by state policymakers to move toward a more equitable weighted, student-based funding formula must be accompanied by an adequate underlying base amount allocated on a per-pupil basis. If the base amount is inadequate, most attempts to increase EL funding through weights will not sufficiently meet the needs of EL students, and schools will be inadequately funded overall.

TABLE 2: WEIGHTED FUNDING MODEL DESIGNS

Category	Student-based funding with flat per-pupil allocation	Student-based funding with EL weight	Student-based funding with multiple EL weights
State example	**Arkansas:** **$7,018** base funding + **$352** additional funds per EL student in 2020-21[42]	**South Carolina:** **$2,489** base funding **+ .20** additional weight per EL student[43]	**Hypothetical example:** **$6,000** base funding **+2.0** weight for ELs with English proficiency between 1.0 and 1.9 on WIDA ACCESS for English language learners **+1.0** weight for ELs for English proficiency between 2.0 and 3.9 on WIDA ACCESS for English language learners **+2.0** weight for additional funds per newcomer student in high school grades **+0.5** weight for ELs enrolled in low-EL concentration districts

Southeast State Funding Profiles

Our analysis of funding equity for ELs in the Southeast focused on nine states — Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. There are two ways we examined equity in state funding systems for ELs in the Southeast with the data and information available.

First, we looked at the policy structures in each state and compared them against the promising practices in state funding systems for EL students described above.
In this policy review, we developed a four-tiered system to categorize state funding policies (Table 3). This tiering system allows for easier grouping and comparisons across all nine states to better identify opportunities for improvement.

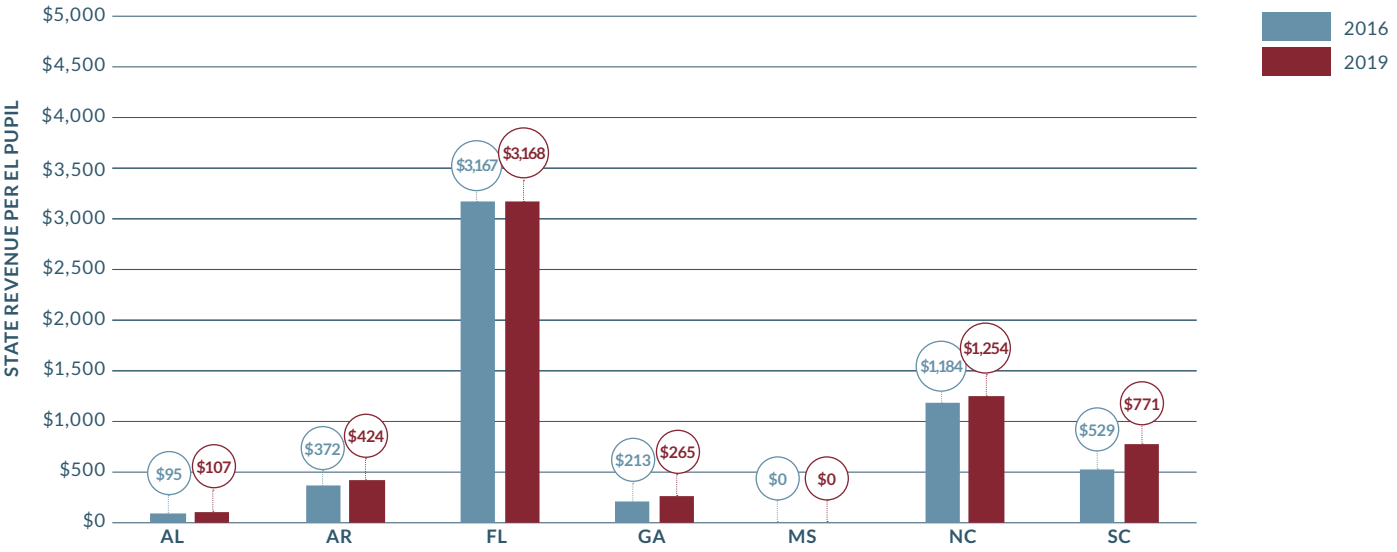
Second, we examined total student spending in the state compared with state and local spending on EL-specific budget allocations, EL enrollment as a percentage of total student population, Title III funding, and per-pupil funding on ELs (Figure 4).

- **Tier 1** states use a weighted, student-based funding system and include an additional weight for EL students.
- **Tier 2** states use a weighted, student-based funding system that either does not include dedicated additional weights for EL students or provides an additional flat dollar amount.
- **Tier 3** states use a resource-based formula that provides dedicated funding for EL students/EL instructional costs.
- **Tier 4** states have no additional weight, categorical aid, or resource component funding for EL students.

TABLE 3: STATE TIERS BASED ON FUNDING FORMULA TYPE

Tier	State	Funding Formula Type
Tier 1	Florida	Weighted, student-based
Tier 1	South Carolina	Primarily weighted, student-based
Tier 2	Arkansas	Weighted, student-based
Tier 2	Louisiana	Primarily weighted, student-based
Tier 3	Alabama	Resource-based
Tier 3	Georgia	Primarily resource-based
Tier 3	North Carolina	Resource-based
Tier 3	Tennessee	Resource-based
Tier 4	Mississippi	Primarily resource-based

FIGURE 4: PER-PUPIL STATE REVENUE FOR EL STUDENTS FOR THE SOUTHEAST REGION



Source: Authors' own analysis[44]

Our analysis shows that the Southeast region can do more to better support the unique learning needs of EL students. Four of the nine states in the region use a resource-based formula to determine funding for students, placing them in the Tier 3 category. Districts in Tier 3 states receive the bulk of their funding based on the cost of inputs, such as staff salaries and course materials.[45] These inputs may be determined based on total student enrollment or EL student enrollment, and may incorporate EL-specific staffing estimates for teaching staff or materials. This brings in elements of student-based funding to a resource-based formula, but still makes the links between funding and student need difficult to trace. Because the elements and assumptions of a resource-based formula differ so much from state to state, as do data reporting practices, we are unable to include resource-based data elements such as allocations for EL instructors in our data analysis. Some states in the region with resource-based formulas, including Alabama and North Carolina, supplement this funding with additional funding for students receiving EL services, which are included in our data. The challenge with such a system is that it makes it harder to connect additional resources with student enrollment figures and learning needs.[46] The per-pupil value of these additional categorical funding streams is quite small in most Tier 3 states (Table 4). One state, Mississippi, is in the Tier 4 category because it does not provide any additional funding for EL students.

The two states in the Tier 2 category, Arkansas and Louisiana, use a student-based formula, but do not meet Tier 1 standards. Arkansas has a student-based funding system, but allocates a flat dollar amount to ELs rather than a weight ($352 in FY21).[47] The main challenge with flat allocations is that they can often lag behind the base amount or fluctuate over time based on the annual budget. Louisiana does have a weighted, student-based funding formula, but it does not include a separate weight for EL students. Louisiana includes EL students in the economically disadvantaged student weight, which generates less money for EL students who are also economically disadvantaged, and creates challenges around determining the appropriate level of funding needs for EL services specifically.[48]

Two states in the region, Florida and South Carolina, are in the Tier 1 category because they clearly link resources with the needs of EL students by implementing a weighted, student-based funding system. This clear link provides more flexibility to districts and schools to determine how to allocate resources efficiently. Florida and South Carolina have the opportunity to lead the way for the rest of the region by differentiating between varying needs of ELs in the state and incorporating multiple EL weights based on these needs.

None of the nine Southeastern states in our analysis meet the design standards for a fully equitable, transparent funding system because they do not incorporate a weighted, student-based formula that accounts for the diversity in learning needs for EL students. No state in the region incorporates multiple EL weights that are tied to different learning profiles of EL students, including newcomer students and students in older grades.

Nationally, a few states incorporate multiple EL weights in their funding formulas. For example, Ohio's funding weights for EL students are differentiated based on time enrolled in a U.S. public school as well as proficiency on the state's English language arts assessment.[49] Another state that differentiates funding for EL students based on their English language proficiency is Michigan.[50] For states that provide categorical funding for EL students, it is unclear whether the funding provided meets the diverse needs of students.

TABLE 4: STATE PROFILES, SOUTHEASTERN REGION[51]

ALABAMA: TIER 3

Policy Summary	Key Data (2018-19, unless otherwise stated)
• Resource-based funding system. — Uses four components: salaries, benefits, classroom instructional support, and other current expenses.[52] • Provides a separate categorical funding stream, allocated based on percentage of EL student enrollment in each district.[53]	• **Total EL enrollment**: 27,702 • **ELs as a % of students**: 3.7% • **Title III allocation**: $3,714,000 • **State and local EL revenue**: $2,959,652 • **State and local EL revenue per EL student (est.)**: $107

ARKANSAS: TIER 2

Policy Summary	Key Data
• Weighted, student-based funding system. — Based on the cost of personnel and other resources needed to operate a prototypical school of 500 students.[54] • Districts also receive four types of state categorical funding, one of which is earmarked for EL students. • In 2020-21, districts received an additional $352 per EL student.[55]	• **Total EL enrollment**: 38,531 • **ELs as a % of students**: 7.8% • **Title III allocation**: $3,723,000 • **State and local EL revenue**: $16,353,943 • **State and local EL revenue per EL student (est.)**: $424

FLORIDA: TIER 1

Policy Summary	Key Data
• Weighted, student-based funding system. — Base amount of funding based on full-time enrolled students and a cost factor (or weight) to reflect the additional cost of providing services to students.[56] • For ELs, the cost factor is 1.199.[57]	• **Total EL enrollment**: 282,023 • **ELs as a % of students**: 9.9% • **Title III allocation**: $45,999,000 • **State and local EL revenue**: $893,352,933 • **State and local EL revenue per EL student (est.)**: $3,168

GEORGIA: TIER 3

Policy Summary

- Primarily resource-based system.
  - Based on student counts in 19 instructional programs.
- For K-12, the additional funding amount is $1,196 for EL students.[58]

Key Data

- **Total EL enrollment**: 119,610
- **ELs as a % of students**: 6.8%
- **Title III allocation**: $15,665,000
- **State and local EL revenue**: $31,672,332
- **State and local EL revenue per EL student (est.)**: $265

LOUISIANA: TIER 2

Policy Summary

- Primarily weighted, student-based funding system.
  - Base amount calculated using the number of students enrolled in the school system in addition to weighted counts.[59]
- Five weights: economically disadvantaged students (22%), Career Technical Education (6%), students with disabilities (150%), gifted and talented (60%), and economy of scale for school systems with fewer than 7,500 students (up to 20%).[60]
- EL students included in the economically disadvantaged student weight category, but no separate funding component for ELs.

Key Data

- **Total EL enrollment**: 25,568
- **ELs as a % of students**: 3.6%
- **Title III allocation**: $3,768,000
- **State and local EL revenue**: N/A
- **State and local EL revenue per EL student (est.)**: N/A. The state does allocate additional funding for EL students, but this data was not available in a publicly accessible format.

MISSISSIPPI: TIER 4

Policy Summary

- Primarily resource-based funding system.
  - Base amount calculated using four components: instruction, administration, operation and maintenance of plant, and ancillary support.[61]
- The state uses data from districts that are considered "successful and efficient" for the four components.[62]
- No additional funding for EL students.[63]

Key Data

- **Total EL enrollment**: 14,771
- **ELs as a % of students**: 3.1%
- **Title III allocation**: $1,575,000
- **State and local EL revenue**: $0
- **State and local EL revenue per EL student (est.)**: $0

NORTH CAROLINA: TIER 3

Policy Summary

- Resource-based funding system.
  - Three types of allotments used to determine funding for districts and schools.
- Categorical funding provided for students with limited English proficiency (LEP).[64] LEP allotment is calculated using the base of a teacher assistant salary ($35,892), and the remainder is based on the number of funded LEP students (50%) and LEA's concentration of LEP students (50%).[65]

Key Data

- **Total EL enrollment**: 114,363
- **ELs as a % of students**: 7.4%
- **Title III allocation**: $14,437,000
- **State and local EL revenue**: $143,461,659
- **State and local EL revenue per EL student (est.)**: $1,254

SOUTH CAROLINA: TIER 1[66]

Policy Summary

- Primarily weighted, student-based funding system.
- Base unit cost calculated using several components, including instructional positions and maintenance/operational costs; additional funding provided based on weighted pupil units, including LEP students.[67]
- The LEP weight is 0.20.[68]

Key Data

- **Total EL enrollment**: 45,411
- **ELs as a % of students**: 5.8%
- **Title III allocation**: $4,625,000
- **State and local EL revenue**: $35,023,892
- **State and local EL revenue per EL student (est.)**: $771

TENNESSEE: TIER 3[69]

Policy Summary

- Resource-based funding system.
  - Four major categories (instruction, benefits, classroom, and non-classroom), each made up of separate components related to the basic needs of students, teachers, and administrators within a school system.[70]
- 47 resource-based components, and two are directly tied to EL students: ELL instructors (one per 20 EL students) and ELL translators (one per 200 EL students).[71]

Key Data

- **Total EL enrollment**: 45,266
- **ELs as a % of students**: 4.5%
- **Title III allocation**: $6,625,000
- **State and local EL revenue**: N/A
- **State and local EL revenue per EL student (est.)**: N/A. The state does allocate additional funding for EL instruction via their resource-based formula, but this data was not available in a comparable format.

Policy Recommendations

Our research shows the growing urgency with which states in the Southeast must address funding equity for ELs. These students represent a growing population in the region, and in order for states to meet their academic achievement goals, state and federal policymakers must prioritize EL students. The region also has an important opportunity to be a leader nationally and demonstrate what transformational and equitable funding systems for EL students can look like. Even at time of writing, two states in our analysis, Tennessee and South Carolina, were considering legislative proposals that would change funding for ELs, among other students. The Southeast can lead and implement policies that better support EL students in several ways:

State funding formulas should move toward a weighted, student-based system with multiple EL weights. An equitable funding system should tie funding more clearly to student needs. EL students with multiple, intersecting needs must receive more resources through state funding formulas. For states that already have a weighted, student-based funding formula, policymakers should consider how to differentiate among different EL needs. Currently, very few states differentiate funding formulas based on the characteristics of their EL population. Thus, an important opportunity exists for policymakers in Southeastern states to move toward a more differentiated funding system. States with a weighted funding formula should also consider increasing their base funding for students, because a generous EL weight will not accomplish its goal of serving students if it is not accompanied by a sufficient funding base.

The federal government should increase Title III funding. While increasing EL allocation at the state level holds the most promise for meeting the needs of EL students, federal funding must also keep up with the growing enrollment of EL students in the Southeast region and nationwide. Title III funding has stagnated over the past decade and has not kept up with growth in EL students' enrollment or inflation. But even more is needed to fully fund federal educational requirements in Title III, and ensure that EL students in every state have access to an equitable education.

State education agencies and the federal government should improve transparency of EL data. Since 2001, federal law has required states to publish annual data on EL student performance, which has been an important step in transparency.[72] More recently, ESSA mandated annual reports of school-level spending data, which is a step toward finance equity transparency.[73] However, critical data on state and district funding for EL students is still not consistently publicly available, especially for several states in our analysis. For example, there was little available data on state-level revenues for EL students. Sharing more accessible data about EL funding is an important tool for equity advocates to ensure that schools and districts are meeting the needs of all EL students.

The coming decade represents an important leadership opportunity for the Southeast region to ensure that funding systems fully support the unique learning needs of EL students. The region must prioritize this community of learners because of the scale of growth among EL students in the U.S., and the growing diversity among them. EL students are a critical part of overall student success in the Southeast and deserve all the resources they need to thrive. As state policymakers in the region focus on improving academic outcomes, efforts to elevate the needs of EL students will ensure that all students in the South, regardless of their background, fully meet their potential.

The coming decade represents an important leadership opportunity for the Southeast region to ensure that funding systems fully support the unique learning needs of EL students. The region must prioritize this community of learners.

Data Notes

The primary data source for our analysis was the EdBuild dataset of school district finance, student demographics, and community economic indicators for every school district in the United States, publicly available as a data package for R.[74] This dataset is built from the U.S. Census, Annual Survey of School System Finances (F33) and joins data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data; the U.S. Census, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates; and the U.S. Census, Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates.[75] The finance data in the master dataset was processed and state and local revenues were adjusted using the following guidelines:

1. Because it can contribute to large fluctuations in district revenues from year to year, revenue for capital is excluded from the calculation of state revenues.
2. Similarly, money generated from the sale of property is excluded from local revenues, because it, too, can contribute to large fluctuations in revenues.
3. In just under 2,000 districts, revenues received by local school districts include monies that are passed through to charter schools that are not a part of the local school district but are instead operated by charter local education agencies (charter LEAs). This artificially inflates the revenues in these local school districts because they include money for students educated outside of the district who are not counted in enrollment totals. To address this, a proportional share of the total amount of money sent to outside charter LEAs (an expenditure category included in the F33 survey) is subtracted from state and local revenues.
4. In Texas, many districts report high per-pupil revenues. This is in part because of the policy and procedures for recapturing and redistributing local revenues raised by property-wealthy districts in the state. In the F33 survey, recapture is reported as expenditure code L12. Because these monies are included in the state revenue for other, receiving districts, districts' L12 expenditures are subtracted from their local revenues for the state of Texas.

We calculated the number of students, number of EL students, and total state and local revenue per pupil for each state in the Southeast and for the nation. Title III allocations at the state and national level were retrieved from the ED Data Express website.[76] State EL allocations were retrieved from either the state education agency website or the state budget office. We were unable to locate state EL funding information for two states, Louisiana and Tennessee. This is in part because of the structure of their funding formula policies. While both states do allocate additional funding for ELs, these figures were not available in a comparable, publicly accessible format. In Louisiana, there is one pool of funding for ELs and economically disadvantaged students, among a few other categories of students that are not de-duplicated. In Tennessee, we were unable to segment out resource-based funding formula allocations for EL instruction from other elements of the formula in a comparable way. We use the N/A designation for those two states' EL per-pupil spending. Mississippi does not provide any additional state funding for EL students in its formula or other funding streams, so we assigned "$0" for the allocation.

State	State Funding Data Sources
Alabama	State of Alabama Budget Documents[77]
Arkansas	State of Arkansas Appropriations[78]
Florida	Florida Education Finance Program Final Calculations[79]
Georgia	Quality Basic Education — Reports[80]
Mississippi	EdBuild[81]
North Carolina	Current Expenditures[82]
South Carolina	District Expense Information[83]

Endnotes

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Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice. Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.