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English proficiency and the pandemic: How Texas English learner students fared during the COVID-19 pandemic

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English proficiency and the pandemic: How Texas English learner students fared during the COVID-19 pandemic

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This study examined levels of English proficiency before and during the COVID-19 pandemic among English learner students in grades 3-12 in Texas. In 2020/21, nearly 750,000 students in grades 3-12—approximately one in five Texas students—were English learner students. In accordance with Texas state law and the Every Student Succeeds Act, English proficiency is measured annually using a statewide assessment, the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS), which assesses English learner students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English. This study focused on TELPAS scores among students who took the test in 2020/21 and compared those scores with a matched cohort of similar students from 2018/19. The study found that, despite missing data because of pandemic-related disruptions to testing, students who took the TELPAS were representative of the overall Texas English learner student population in the years prior to and during the pandemic. The study also found that rates of reclassification from an English learner student to an English proficient student declined between 2017/18 and 2020/21, and trends in the characteristics of reclassified students changed, with lower percentages of students in major urban areas, eligible for the National School Lunch Program, who spoke primarily Spanish at home, and who identified as Hispanic reclassified in 2020/21 than in 2017/18. On average, during the pandemic, English learner students in elementary grades earned meaningfully lower scores on the listening, speaking, and reading domains of the TELPAS than similar students earned before the pandemic, particularly in speaking. The findings for secondary grades were mixed; middle school students earned lower scores in listening and high school students earned higher scores in speaking. Finally, the study did not find evidence that English learner program models, such as dual-language immersion or English as a second language programs, were meaningfully associated with English proficiency in 2020/21. Leaders at the Texas Education Agency and Texas school districts could consider focusing recovery resources on elementary schools and to some degree on middle schools and identifying and supporting evidence-based strategies to cultivate proficiency. The Texas Education Agency may consider studying the effect of program models on language proficiency and the relationship between reclassification, shifting English proficiency levels, and changing reclassification standards.

Why this study?

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted education across the United States. These disruptions were particularly acute for English learner students, who comprise 10 percent of public school students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). One fifth (20 percent) of U.S. English learner students are in Texas, and Texas has the highest concentration of English learner students of any U.S. state

For additional information, including background on the study, technical methods, and supporting analyses, access the report appendices at https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Publication/100897

(20 percent), with more than 1 million English learner students in 2019/20 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Texas' English learner students are concentrated in large urban districts and districts in the Rio Grande Valley (see figure A1 in appendix A), and 90 percent speak Spanish as their primary language (see table 1).

English language development relies on opportunities to use English frequently and flexibly in both oral and written modes (Fisher & Frey, 2018; Gámez & Levine, 2013; Saunders et al., 2006). During the early months of the pandemic, many students experienced shorter school days, less interaction with teachers and peers, school building closures, and challenges related to distance learning. These occurrences may have resulted in fewer formal and informal opportunities to cultivate conversational and academic English. In addition, many districts and schools struggled to provide English learner students with the specialized services and instructional supports that are critical for developing English proficiency (Garcia-Arena & D'Souza, 2020). Although districts and schools maintained a range of approaches to English language development, it is unclear whether these approaches supported English language development in the atypical education settings of the pandemic (for example, fully remote synchronous or asynchronous instruction and hybrid instruction).

National studies of English proficiency among English learner students during the pandemic have yielded mixed findings. Between 2019/20 and 2020/21, growth in English language proficiency measured by the ACCESS for ELLs assessment—an English language proficiency assessment used by 41 states but not Texas (WIDA, 2022)—declined across nearly all grades and all four language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Sahakyan & Cook, 2021). The most dramatic declines were in speaking, followed by listening and writing, with smaller but still meaningful declines in reading, especially in older grades. These declines in language development coincided with weaker academic outcomes among English learner students. Several large districts reported early in the pandemic that English learner students experienced a larger increase in failing course grades than non–English learner students (Alvarez et al., 2020; Office of Research and Strategic Improvement, 2020). Analyses of a small sample of English learner students from a large-scale national progress monitoring assessment found that English learner students' growth in reading and mathematics was similar to that of non–English learner students as of fall 2020/21 (Renaissance, 2020). However, by winter 2020/21, their growth in reading and mathematics had slowed relative to non–English learner students' growth (Renaissance, 2021).

In March 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, school buildings closed nationwide, including in Texas, and remained closed in most districts for the remainder of the school year, dramatically changing students' learning environments. By October 2020, most states allowed at least some in-school instruction depending on local health metrics (Education Week, 2021). In Texas, districts were required to offer families the choice of in-school or remote learning (Texas Education Agency, 2020a). In October 2020, 54 percent of all Texas students received in-school instruction, whereas 46 percent received remote synchronous or asynchronous instruction (Texas Education Agency, 2021a). Scores on statewide standardized achievement assessments declined from 2018/19 to 2020/21 across school levels and subject areas for all students (Texas Education Agency, 2021b).

The Texas Education Agency needs a clear understanding of how English learner students' English proficiency may have been influenced by pandemic-induced learning disruptions. To achieve this understanding, the agency partnered with Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest to examine differences in patterns of English proficiency among English learner students in Texas before and after the onset of the pandemic. This study examined four areas of interest. First, the study compared the composition of English learner students who took the English proficiency assessment to the composition of all English learner students to understand the extent to which these populations differ. Then the study examined rates of reclassification from an English learner student to an English proficient student and the characteristics of reclassified students to understand potential shifts in these rates and characteristics over time. Next, the study estimated changes in English proficiency assessment scores, comparing scores of students in 2020/21 to those of similar students in 2018/19 to understand changes in proficiency over time. Finally, the study examined the association between participating in specific English learner program models (an education model used to support English learner students' English development) and English proficiency during the first full school year after the onset of the pandemic. The findings from the study can inform decisions about how to use resources such as federal funds from the American Rescue Plan and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund to support English learner students' academic and language recovery and growth. The study findings also highlight the need for additional research on English learner program models and reclassification.

Research questions

This study addresses four research questions:

1. To what extent is the composition of Texas English learner students who took the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) representative of the enrolled English learner student population in the years spanning the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (between 2017/18 and 2020/21)?
2. What are the rates of reclassification of Texas English learner students and the characteristics of reclassified students in the years spanning the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (between 2017/18 and 2020/21)?
3. To what extent do the English proficiency scores of Texas English learner students in 2020/21 differ from scores of similar students in 2018/19, prior to the pandemic?
4. Is student participation in a particular English learner program model associated with the English proficiency scores of Texas English learner students in 2020/21?

The key terms used in the report are defined in box 1, and the data sources, sample, and methods used to answer the research questions, as well as limitations of the study, are summarized in box 2 and detailed in appendix A.

Box 1. Key terms

Bilingual programs. Bilingual programs support two languages simultaneously. There are two types: transitional bilingual and dual-language immersion programs. Transitional bilingual programs provide English learner students instruction in literacy and academic content in their primary language and in English and phase out the primary language over time.

- Early-exit transitional bilingual models transition a student to English-only instruction between two and five years after the student is designated an English learner student.
- Late-exit transitional bilingual models transition a student to English-only instruction between six and seven years after the student is designated an English learner student.

Dual-language immersion programs provide at least half of classroom instruction in the primary language and the other half in English. There are two types of dual-language immersion programs, both of which are considered bilingual or biliteracy programs in Texas (Texas Administrative Code, Sec. 89.1210(c), 2020).

- One-way dual-language immersion programs include only English learner students in the same classroom.
- Two-way dual-language immersion programs include English learner students and English proficient students in the same classroom (Texas Education Code, Sec. 29.066, 2021).

English as a second language (ESL) programs. ESL programs seek to ". . . enable English learners to become proficient in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the English language through the integrated use of second language acquisition methods" (Texas Administrative Code, Sec. 89.1201(c), 2020). Students may be enrolled in an ESL pullout program, in which they receive at least their English language arts and reading instruction by ESL-certified teachers, or in an ESL content-based program, in which they receive instruction in all content areas by ESL-certified teachers (Texas Education Agency, 2014).

English learner program model. This education model is used to support English learner students' English development and their access to curricular content. Texas has two main categories of program models: bilingual programs and ESL programs.

English learner student. This type of student, also known in Texas as an emergent bilingual student, is one who " . . . is in the process of acquiring English and has another language as the student's primary or home language" (Texas Administrative Code, Sec. 89.1203(7), 2020). By law, English learner students are entitled to specialized supports to develop English language skills and accommodate their language needs while they learn general academic content.

Reclassified as English proficient (reclassified). This designation is for an English learner student who has demonstrated sufficient English language proficiency to be considered English proficient. In Texas, a student's English learner status is reviewed in the spring after language proficiency testing. Reclassification criteria require a student to achieve an advanced high rating on all four Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) domains, meet grade-specific reading and writing requirements, and meet satisfactory performance as measured by subjective teacher evaluation.[1] Reclassification decisions are made in the spring of the school year, and changes in student status are entered in the state data system in the fall of the following school year. For this study, a reclassified student was defined as a student who met reclassification criteria in the spring of the prior year and whose status changed in the state data in the current year.[2]

Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS). TELPAS is Texas's statewide annual assessment of English proficiency administered to English learner students each spring. It measures the four

domains of language that the Every Student Succeeds Act mandates be assessed annually for English learner students: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Scores on the four domains and a composite score categorize a student's English proficiency level as beginning (1), intermediate (2), advanced (3), or advanced high (4). The composite score is calculated by averaging the domain scores; if any domain scores are missing, the composite score cannot be calculated. These scores are used in instructional support and reclassification decisions.

Notes

1. Reclassification requirements allow for waivers and special considerations (Texas Education Agency, 2021c). In a subjective teacher evaluation, a teacher completes a form confirming that the student demonstrates readiness for reclassification (Texas Education Agency, n.d.a).

2. During the study window, Texas's reclassification policy for English learner students changed (see appendix A for details).

Box 2. Data sources, samples, methods, and limitations

Data sources. The study used administrative data for current and reclassified Texas English learner students from 2017/18 to 2020/21. The Texas Education Agency provided the administrative data to the University of Texas Education Research Center, which provided access to Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest. The administrative data included student enrollment, demographic characteristics, Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) scores and proficiency levels, and participation in English learner program models. See table A1 in appendix A for additional information on the data sources and key variables.

Sample. For all research questions, the study sample was limited to English learner students or reclassified students in grades 3–12 in a given year.[1]

- For research question 1, the study used data on the population of English learner students in 2017/18 through 2020/21 (ranging from 617,720 to 747,178 students) and on English learner students who had a score for at least one domain of the TELPAS test administered in the spring of that year (ranging from 593,318 students in 2017/18 to 669,636 students in 2020/21; see table A2 in appendix A).
- For research question 2, the sample consisted of students who were reclassified from English learner status based on state criteria in 2017/18 through 2020/21 (ranging from 76,190 to 30,840 students; see tables A3 and A4 in appendix A).
- For research question 3, the sample consisted of 2020/21 English learner students with prior-year TELPAS scores and demographic characteristics and a matched comparison group of 2018/19 English learner students with prior-year TELPAS scores and demographic characteristics (in each group, 2020/21 and 2018/19, there were 404,470 students with listening scores, 404,470 with speaking scores, and 440,813 with reading scores; see tables A5 and A6 in appendix A).
- For research question 4, the study team used similar inclusion criteria as research question 3, with the addition of attendance records. All English learner students in 2020/21 were included if they were matched to 2020/21 attendance records containing English learner program model data and had a TELPAS score in at least one domain in 2019/20 and 2020/21 (588,392 students in listening, 588,392 in speaking, and 589,250 in reading; see table A7 in appendix A).

Methodology. For research question 1, for each student and district characteristic, the study team calculated the percentage of English learner students in grades 3–12 with that characteristic in the overall English learner student population and in the TELPAS test-taking sample. The study team considered differences in average characteristics between the TELPAS test-taking sample and the English learner student population of greater than or equal to 5 percentage points to be meaningful.

For research question 2, the study team calculated the annual reclassification rate as the proportion of English learner students continuing in Texas schools from one year to the next who were reclassified in the continuing year. For example, the reclassification rate for 2018/19 was the number of students whose status changed from English learner student to reclassified in fall 2018/19 statewide data (reflecting decisions from spring 2017/18) divided by the total number of English learner students from spring 2017/18 who remained enrolled in 2018/19. The study team also compared the characteristics of the English learner student population with the characteristics of the reclassified sample in each study year, considering differences of greater than or equal to 5 percentage points to be meaningful.

For research question 3, the study team used statistical procedures called propensity score matching and regression methods to compare TELPAS scores of similar students in the 2018/19 and 2020/21 cohorts. The study team conducted matching and analyzed data separately for each school level (elementary, middle, and high school) by TELPAS domain, standardized within grade. The study team first excluded students with missing prior-year TELPAS scores from the same domain as the outcome. The study team next constructed a matched sample of students from the 2018/19 cohort to the 2020/21 cohort (see appendix A for more information). The two samples demonstrated baseline equivalence across cohorts (that is, they were similar on key characteristics; see tables A8 and A9 in appendix A). The study team then estimated a series of regression models predicting TELPAS performance, controlling for cohort; baseline TELPAS performance; and student, school, and district characteristics. Results can be interpreted as differences between the two cohorts, conditional on prior-year TELPAS performance and student, school, and district characteristics. The study team considered differences greater than or equal to 0.1 standard deviation between the two cohorts to be meaningful.

For research question 4, the study team used regression models to understand the association between TELPAS performance and English learner program participation. For each school level and TELPAS domain, the study team estimated a series of regression models predicting TELPAS performance, controlling for baseline TELPAS performance and student, school, and district characteristics. The study team considered differences greater than or equal to 0.1 standard deviation between a given program model and the reference program model (the program model that serves the largest percentage of students) to be meaningful.

For research questions 3 and 4, the study team limited findings in the main report to those in the listening, speaking, and reading domains because of high rates of missing data in the writing domain and for composite scores in 2020/21 (see table A5 in appendix A).[2] For research question 4, the study team excluded results for grades 6–12 because of low variation in program models among those grades.

Limitations. The study has five primary limitations. First, the results should not be interpreted as causal. Changes made to the TELPAS after 2016/17 meant that the study team could not analyze trends in prepandemic test scores over a long enough period to be able to attribute changes in English language proficiency to the pandemic (Hallberg et al., 2018). In 2017/18, the assessment was updated in several ways, including changing the listening and speaking domains from holistic ratings to online item-based ratings as well as reweighting the composite score to reflect all four language domains equally (Texas Education Agency, n.d.b). Given these changes and the correlational design of the study, differences in TELPAS performance between the 2018/19 and 2020/21 cohorts could be caused by other factors, such as the changing nature of language program services or students' growing familiarity with the revised TELPAS. Furthermore, the Texas Education Agency's reclassification criteria and guidance changed during the study period, including changes to which English language proficiency assessments could be used and waiving the requirement for proficiency on the state standardized reading assessment in 2019/20 (see table A3 in appendix A for details). These changes may have affected how many and which students were reclassified as English proficient during the study period.

Second, some 2019/20 TELPAS data were missing, ranging from 22 percent to 65 percent depending on the grade and domain. The analyses used to answer research question 3 required prior-year TELPAS scores. For the 2020/21 cohort, the missing TELPAS data in 2019/20 meant that prior-year TELPAS scores were not available for a substantial percentage of the sample (see table A5 in appendix A). The study team conducted sensitivity analyses using the full sample and imputing baseline language proficiency when missing to test the robustness of the study's findings to this limitation, as well as excluding baseline language proficiency as a covariate to avoid excluding students with missing prior-year TELPAS. The findings from sensitivity analyses were similar to the findings from the main analyses (see tables C1 and C2 in appendix C).

Third, the study's primary analyses are limited to students in only grades 3–12 because English proficiency test scores in the lowest grade levels were not comparable to those in grades 2–12 because of differences in scoring practices. Students in grade 2 could not be included because comparable prior-year English proficiency test scores were unavailable. This resulted in excluding more than 250,000 of the youngest English learner students in Texas.

Fourth, the results are not generalizable to other groups of English learner students, but the findings may provide insights about the education and outcomes for English learner students in other areas of the country who have similar characteristics as those in the analytic sample. For example, in Texas, more than 90 percent of English learner students speak primarily Spanish at home, and the findings may be useful to other states with high proportions of Spanish-speaking English learner students.

Finally, in grades 6–12, there was little variation in the English learner program model used; more than 70 percent of the students were served through English as a second language pullout programs. For this reason, the study team excluded the analysis of associations between participating in a particular English learner program model and English language proficiency scores for students in grades 6–12. Furthermore, in all grades, students' assignment to a program model was not random because student placement into a program model may be influenced by school resources or other factors. The availability of different program models may be related to school resource constraints, such as the presence of a certified teacher. As such, the results related to the relationship between the program model and language proficiency should be interpreted with caution.

Notes

1. Students in grades K and 1 were excluded because of differences in the administration and scoring of TELPAS between grades K and 1 and grades 2 and up (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). Students in grade 2 were excluded because they did not have a baseline TELPAS measure available for the study.

2. Higher rates of missing data in the writing domain compared with other domains in 2020/21 may have resulted from the difficulty of collecting and submitting writing samples during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

The following section describes the main findings. Detailed findings are in appendix B, and supplemental analyses are in appendix C.

English learner students who took the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System were similar to all English learner students in Texas from 2017/18 to 2020/21, although the percentage of students who took the assessment after the onset of the pandemic in 2019/20 was smaller

The percentage of English learner students who took the TELPAS declined after the onset of the pandemic in 2019/20, but student and district characteristics among all English learner students and those who took the TELPAS remained similar during this period (see table B1 in appendix B). For English learner students, taking the TELPAS or another English language proficiency assessment annually is a state and federal requirement. In the two years before the pandemic (2017/18 and 2018/19), 96 percent of English learner students took the TELPAS. In 2019/20, the percentage of English learner students who took the TELPAS declined to 83 percent, likely the result of statewide school building closures in March 2020 before testing was completed. The percentage rose to 90 percent in 2020/21 but remained below prepandemic levels likely because of lower than typical attendance during the pandemic in 2020/21 or difficulties administering the assessment to students attending school remotely (see table A2 in appendix A).

Despite lower test-taking rates in 2019/20 and 2020/21, English learner students who took the TELPAS were similar to all English learner students on observed demographic characteristics in all four years from 2017/18 to 2020/21 (see table 1 for 2017/18 and 2020/21 as examples, and table B1 in appendix B for all four years).[1,2] Across all characteristics examined, the difference between the sample of English learner students who took the TELPAS and the population of English learner students in that year never exceeded 5 percentage points.

[1] The study team could not compare TELPAS takers to all English learner students on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) in 2019/20 and 2020/21 because STAAR data were not available for those years.

[2] It is possible that English learner students had higher English language proficiency in 2019/20 and 2020/21 than in previous years because of changes in the reclassification guidelines. Students who may have been reclassified in earlier years under different reclassification guidelines may have remained classified as English learner students for longer under more recent guidelines. There is some evidence for this possibility in the overall average performance of English learner students on the STAAR in reading: the proportion of English learner students scoring at the proficient level on their prior-year STAAR grew from 40 percent for 2017/18 English learner students to 51 percent for 2019/20 English learner students (see table B1 in appendix B).

Table 1. Characteristics of all Texas English learner students and tested English learner students (percentage), 2017/18 and 2020/21

Characteristic	2017/18		2020/21	
	All English learner students (*n* = 617,720)	Tested English learner students (*n* = 593,318)	All English learner students (*n* = 747,178)	Tested English learner students (*n* = 669,636)
Student characteristic				
Asian	4.7	4.6	4.8	5.0
Black	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6
Hispanic	90.4	90.6	90.2	89.9
White	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.7
Eligible for the National School Lunch Program	84.5	84.8	84.8	84.8
Receiving special education services	10.4	10.1	12.1	11.2
Identified as gifted/talented	3.6	3.7	4.5	4.7
Primary home language is Spanish	91.2	91.4	90.3	90.1
Student achievement				
Proficient on prior-year STAAR reading assessment	39.8	40.0	–[a]	–[a]
Advanced high level on prior-year TELPAS reading subtest	16.2	16.2	12.8	12.6
Advanced high level on prior-year TELPAS speaking subtest	42.0	42.0	16.1	14.8
Advanced high level on prior-year TELPAS listening subtest	51.5	51.6	6.0	5.7
Advanced high level on prior-year TELPAS writing subtest	24.6	24.5	8.8	8.8
Advanced high level on prior-year TELPAS composite	24.9	24.8	4.1	3.9
District characteristic				
Major urban	26.4	26.4	24.8	23.5
Suburban	31.7	31.8	31.8	32.4
Rural	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2
Charter	7.3	7.1	9.4	9.2
English learner program model				
Transitional bilingual, early-exit	13.4	13.7	8.4	9.0
Transitional bilingual, late-exit	4.8	5.0	2.9	2.6
One-way dual-language immersion	10.2	10.0	9.7	8.9
Two-way dual-language immersion	4.1	4.1	4.5	4.2
English as a second language, pullout	47.5	47.8	48.3	50.2
English as a second language, content-based	17.6	17.8	9.0	8.7
Percentage tested	**96.0**	**100.0**	**89.6**	**100.0**

– is not available. STAAR is State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness. TELPAS is Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System.

Note: The characteristics presented here are a subset of those examined. Full results are in table B1 in appendix B.

a. STAAR was not administered in 2019/20; therefore, there were no prior-year data for the 2020/21 cohort.

Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Texas Education Agency and the University of Texas Education Research Center.

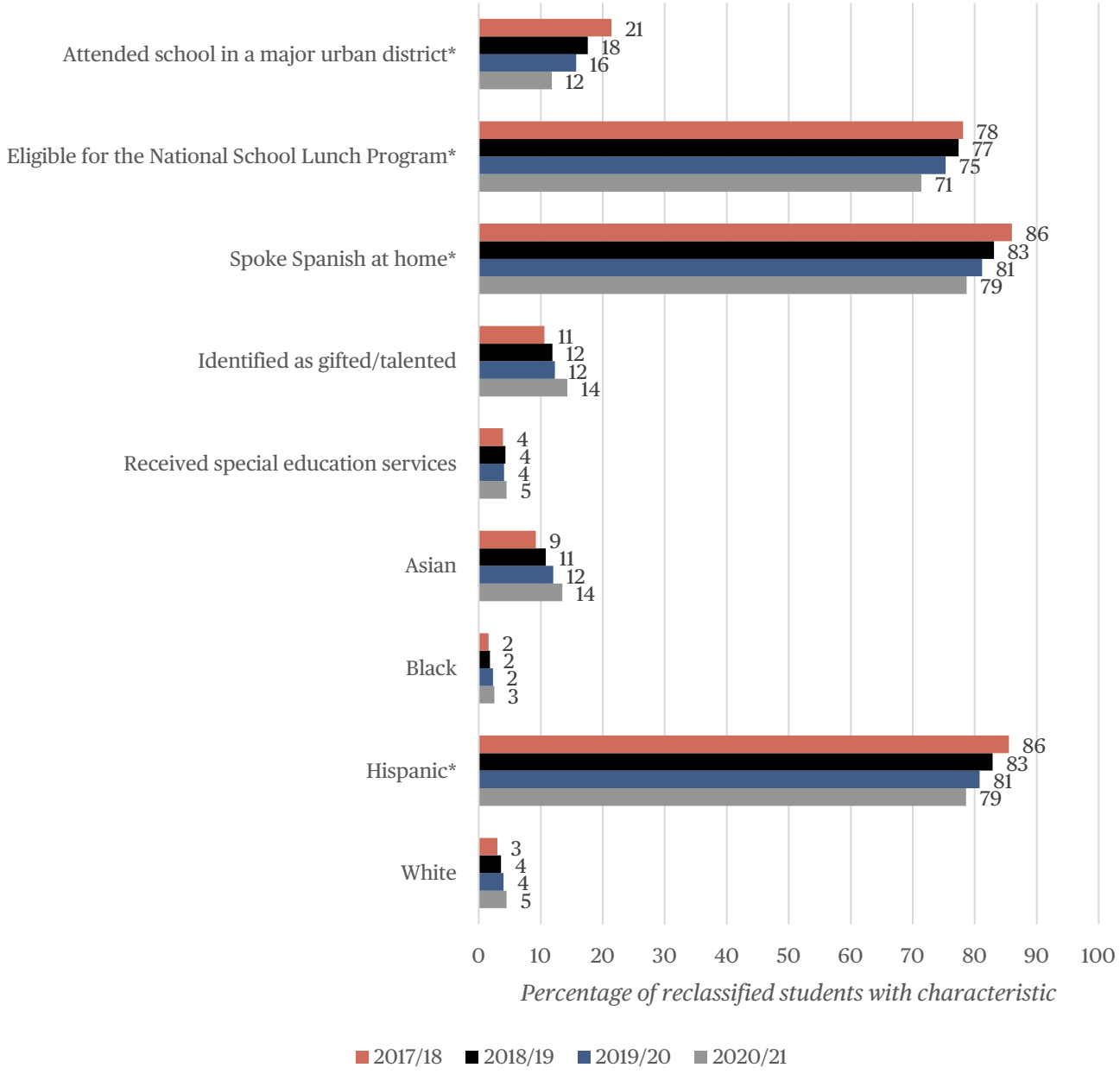
Reclassification rates declined between 2017/18 and 2020/21

The proportion of grades 3–12 English learner students who were reclassified as English proficient declined 7.6 percentage points during the period examined, from 11.8 percent (76,190 students) in 2017/18 to 4.2 percent (30,840 students) in 2020/21 (see table A4 in appendix A). Three factors may have influenced this decline. First, 2018/19 reclassification relies on TELPAS performance in 2017/18, the first year the TELPAS was revised, and these revisions may have made the test more difficult. The reclassification rate declined from 11.8 percent in 2017/18, when the earlier test version would have been used, to 6.5 percent in 2018/19, when the revised test was used. Second, Texas changed reclassification guidelines in 2019/20 from allowing several alternative English fluency assessments to allowing only the TELPAS (see table A3 in appendix A; Texas Education Agency, 2019; Texas Education Agency, 2020c, 2021c). However, a special waiver was instituted in 2019/20 allowing one alternative assessment (Texas Education Agency, 2020c), although fewer students were still reclassified than when multiple assessments were allowed. Third, lower rates of reclassification in 2020/21 (reflecting spring 2019/20 reclassification decisions) may reflect pandemic-related disruptions of typical reclassification meetings, processes, and decisions.

Among students who were reclassified during the four-year period from 2017/18 to 2020/21, the percentage of students who were from a major urban district, were eligible for the National School Lunch program, spoke primarily Spanish at home, and were Hispanic decreased

In 2017/18, 21 percent of the English learner students who were reclassified attended a school in a major urban district. By 2020/21, this percentage decreased to 12 percent (see figure 1 and table B2 in appendix B). In 2017/18, 78 percent of reclassified English learner students were eligible for the National School Lunch Program compared with 71 percent of reclassified English learner students in 2020/21. Across these four years, the percentage of students who spoke Spanish at home and the percentage who were Hispanic declined by 7 percentage points—from 86 percent in 2017/18 to 79 percent in 2020/21 for both characteristics. There were no meaningful differences in any other observed characteristics among students reclassified between 2017/18 and 2020/21, despite changes to the state's reclassification criteria during the study period.

Figure 1. Among students who were reclassified during the four-year period from 2017/18 to 2020/21, the percentage of students who were from a major urban district, eligible for the National School Lunch program, spoke primarily Spanish at home, and were Hispanic decreased



* denotes a difference of 5 percentage points or greater between 2017/18 and 2020/21, which was considered a meaningful difference.
Note: The sample size included 76,190 English learner students in 2017/18, 42,473 English learner students in 2018/19, 35,666 English learner students in 2019/20, and 30,840 English learner students in 2020/21.
Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Texas Education Agency and the University of Texas Education Research Center.

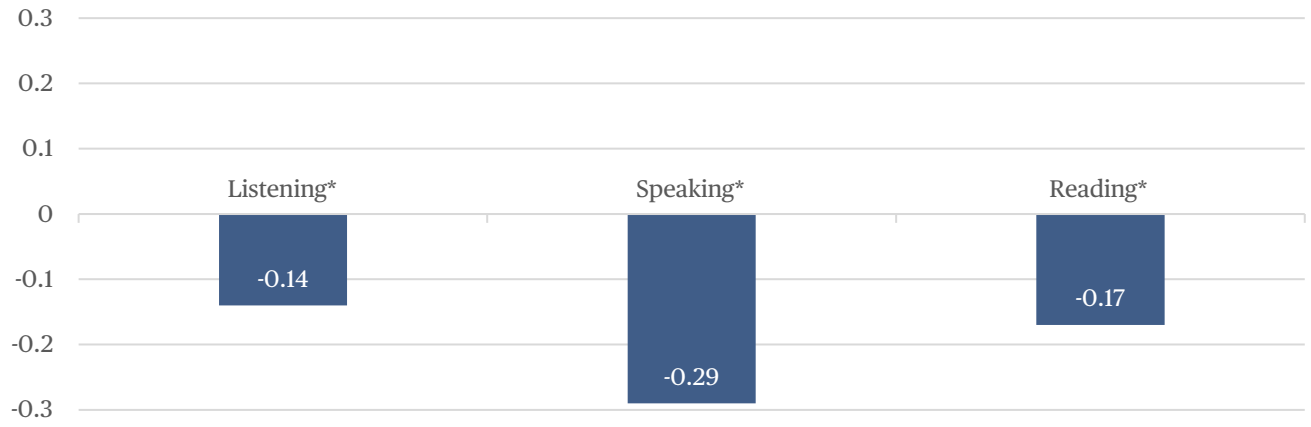
Listening, speaking, and reading scores among English learner students in grades 3–5 were lower in 2020/21 than those of similar students in 2018/19

In 2020/21, English learner students in grades 3–5 had lower scores on all TELPAS domains compared with similar students in 2018/19 (see figure 2 and tables B3 and B4 in appendix B). The largest differences were for speaking, followed by reading and then listening; all estimated differences were greater than 0.1 standard deviation and statistically significant. Translating this difference in scores to a predicted percentile based on student characteristics and prior performance, students who would have been expected to score at the 50th percentile for a given domain in 2018/19 would, in 2020/21, instead be expected to score at the 44th percentile for listening, the 43rd percentile for reading, and the 38th percentile for speaking. Students' scores overall and on the writing domain also were substantially lower in 2020/21 than in 2018/19, but these results should be interpreted with caution because of high rates of missing data for these scores in 2020/21 (see table B3).

The decrease in speaking scores across time may be tempered by a practice effect for students. That is, changes to the format of the TELPAS speaking assessment in 2017/18 meant that students in 2020/21 would have had four opportunities to take the assessment in its new format compared with two opportunities for students in 2018/19. If a practice effect exists, the decrease in speaking performance from 2018/19 to 2020/21 might actually have been greater in the absence of a change in the assessment that could have led to lower-than-usual scores in 2018/19.

Figure 2. Listening, speaking, and reading scores on the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System among Texas English learner students in grades 3–5 were lower in 2020/21 than those of similar students in 2018/19

Differences between 2020/21 and 2018/19 TELPAS scores (standard deviation units)



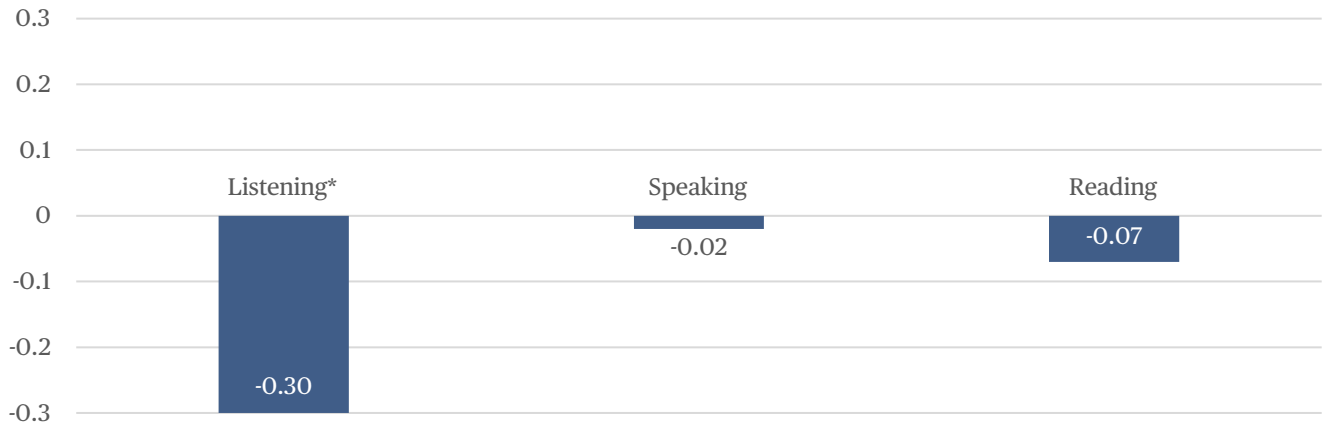
* Denotes a difference of greater than or equal to 0.1 standard deviation, which was considered a meaningful difference.
TELPAS is Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System.
Note: The sample included 354,156 English learner students for the listening domain, 354,156 English learner students for the speaking domain, and 387,808 English learner students for the reading domain. The results for the composite and writing domain are not shown because of high rates of missing data. They are in table B3 in appendix B. Regression-adjusted estimates are based on a matched sample of similar students.
Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Texas Education Agency and the University of Texas Education Research Center.

Listening scores among English learner students in grades 6–8 were lower in 2020/21 than those of similar students in 2018/19

For English learner students in grades 6–8, estimated differences in TELPAS scores in 2020/21 compared with 2018/19 varied by domain. Similar to grades 3–5 students, grades 6–8 students' listening scores were lower in 2020/21 than in 2018/19 (see figure 3 and table B5 in appendix B). Translating differences in scores to a predicted percentile based on student characteristics and prior performance, students who would have been expected to score at the 50th percentile for listening in 2018/19 would be expected to score at the 41st percentile in 2020/21. However, grades 6–8 students' speaking and reading scores did not differ meaningfully between the two years (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Listening scores on the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System among Texas English learner students in grades 6–8 were lower in 2020/21 than those of similar students in 2018/19

Differences between 2020/21 and 2018/19 TELPAS scores (standard deviation units)



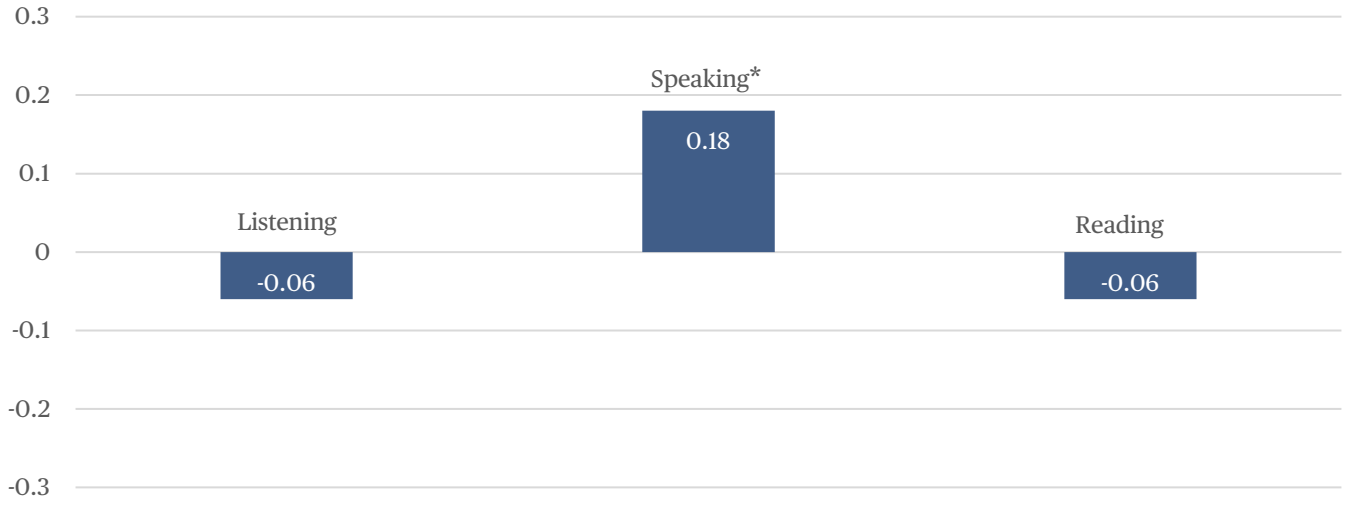
* Denotes a difference of greater than or equal to 0.1 standard deviation, which was considered a meaningful difference.
TELPAS is Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System.
Note: The sample included 268,818 English learner students for the listening domain, 268,818 English learner students for the speaking domain, and 293,902 English learner students for the reading domain. The results for the composite and writing domain are not shown because of high rates of missing data. They are in table B3 in appendix B. Regression-adjusted estimates are based on a matched sample of similar students.
Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Texas Education Agency and the University of Texas Education Research Center.

Speaking scores among English learner students in grades 9–12 were higher in 2020/21 than those of similar students in 2018/19

For English learner students in grades 9–12, differences in TELPAS scores in 2020/21 compared with 2018/19 also varied by domain. Grades 9–12 students in 2020/21 had higher scores on the speaking domain than similar students in 2018/19, whereas there was no meaningful difference in their listening or reading scores (see figure 4 and table B6 in appendix B). Translating differences in speaking scores to a predicted percentile based on student characteristics and prior performance, a student who would have been expected to score at the 50th percentile in 2018/19 would, in 2020/21, be expected to score at the 57th percentile.

Figure 4. Speaking scores on the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System among Texas English learner students in grades 9–12 were higher in 2020/21 than those of similar students in 2018/19

Differences between 2020/21 and 2018/19 TELPAS scores (standard deviation units)



* Denotes a difference of greater than or equal to 0.1 standard deviation, which was considered a meaningful difference.
TELPAS is Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System.
Note: The sample included 185,966 English learner students for the listening domain, 185,966 English learner students for the speaking domain, and 199,916 English learner students for the reading domain. The results for the composite and writing domain are not shown because of high rates of missing data. They are in table B3 in appendix B. Regression-adjusted estimates are based on a matched sample of similar students.
Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Texas Education Agency and the University of Texas Education Research Center.

Grade 3–5 students in two-way dual-language immersion, English as a second language content-based, and other English learner program models showed no meaningful differences in scores on the listening, speaking, and reading domains compared with students in one-way dual-language immersion programs in 2020/21

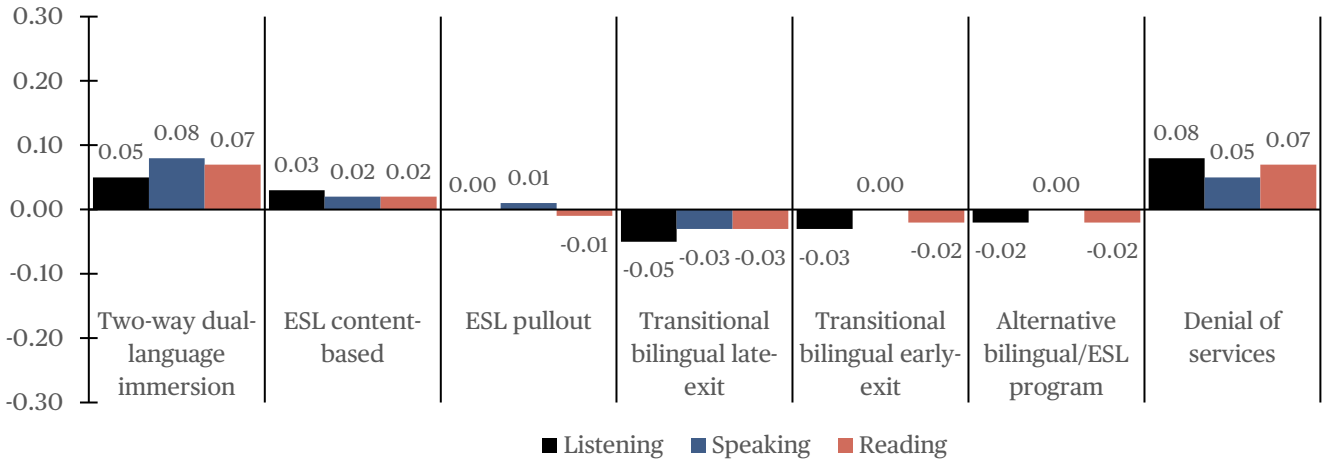
In 2020/21, English learner student participation in two-way dual-language immersion programs and English as a second language (ESL) content-based programs in grades 3–5 was not associated with meaningfully higher scores on the listening, speaking, and reading domains of the TELPAS compared with participation in one-way dual-language immersion programs after adjusting for student, school, and district characteristics (figure 5).[3] Participation in other language programs was not associated with higher or lower TELPAS scores relative to participation in one-way dual-language immersion programs.

[3] Although several of these associations were positive and statistically significant, they did not reach the threshold for being meaningful. The threshold for being meaningful was 0.1 standard deviation. Associations between program model and writing and composite scores followed a similar pattern (see table B7 in appendix B). The associations between participation in two-way dual-language immersion programs and the writing and composite scores (compared with participation in one-way dual-language immersion programs) were positive, statistically significant, and meaningfully large (0.12 standard deviation for both writing and composite scores). However, results for writing and composite scores should be interpreted with caution because of high rates of missing data.

One-way dual-language immersion programs were the most common program model in grades 3–5, serving 22 percent of English learner students in these grades, followed by transitional bilingual early-exit programs (21 percent; see figure B1 in appendix B). The percentages for additional program models were as follows: transitional bilingual late-exit (6 percent), two-way dual-language immersion (9 percent), ESL pullout (9 percent), and ESL content-based (15 percent). Fourteen percent received services by staff not appropriately certified for the bilingual or ESL program model. An additional 4 percent did not receive services because parents or guardians denied service. These results should be interpreted with caution; how students are assigned to a program model by their school or district may be based on what program models are offered at the school, student and family preference, school resource constraints, or other factors.

Figure 5. Grades 3–5 students in two-way dual-language immersion, English as a second language content-based, and other English learner program models showed no meaningful differences in scores on the listening, speaking, and reading domains compared with students in one-way dual-language immersion programs, 2020/21

Standard deviation difference in English proficiency assessment performance compared with one-way dual-language immersion programs



ESL is English as a second language.
Note: No results reached the 0.1 standard deviation threshold for being meaningful. The sample included 252,446 English learner students for the listening domain, 252,446 English learner students for the speaking domain, and 252,726 English learner students for the reading domain. One-way dual-language immersion programs are the reference category. Denial of service refers to a family's choice for their student not to participate in a bilingual or ESL program. Alternative bilingual/ESL program refers to program models in which the instructor is not certified to teach that program model. All results except ESL pullout for the listening, reading, and speaking domains, transitional bilingual early-exit for the speaking domain, and alternative bilingual/ESL program for the speaking domain were statistically significant at $p < .05$.
Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Texas Education Agency and the University of Texas Education Research Center.

In grades 6–12, there was less variation in participation by program model; with this lack of variation, the study team did not conduct a similar analysis for these grades. In grades 6–8, ESL pullout programs were the most common program model (72 percent of English learner students), whereas 13 percent of the students were served by an alternative bilingual or ESL program (indicating that the instructor was not certified to teach that program model), 10 percent were served by other program models, and 5 percent did not receive services because of parent or guardian denial (see figure B1 in appendix B). ESL pullout programs also were the most common program model for high school students, serving

81 percent of English learner students in grades 9–12. In addition, 10 percent of high school students were served by an alternative bilingual or ESL program, 5 percent did not receive services because of parent or guardian denial, and 4 percent were served by other program models (see figure B1).

Implications

The findings from this study suggest several opportunities for education leaders in Texas to improve English learner students' English language proficiency and to ensure that reclassification criteria and processes serve the state's goals for its English learner student population. As a reminder, this study was descriptive, so its findings should not be interpreted as causal.

First, leaders at the Texas Education Agency and in Texas districts may consider focusing recovery resources on elementary schools to help improve proficiency. The study found that the largest differences in English proficiency scores in listening, speaking, and reading compared with a prepandemic cohort of similar students were among Texas English learner students in grades 3–5 in 2020/21. This finding suggests the need for targeted investment of recovery resources in the elementary grades, when students are in a critical stage that will determine whether they are reclassified as English proficient before middle school. The percentage of students classified as long-term English learner students in Texas has risen in recent years, with nearly 70 percent of English learner students who started grade 1 in 2014/15 becoming long-term English learner students by grade 6 (Cashiola & Potter, 2021). Remaining classified as an English learner student for six or more years, often referred to as a long-term English learner student (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), is associated with adverse educational outcomes (Olsen, 2010). In contrast, students who are reclassified before they would become long-term English learner students have attained outcomes comparable to those who were never classified as English learner students (de la Torre et al., 2019). Furthermore, the study's findings suggest that investing in supports specifically for listening skills may be valuable for students who were in grades 6–8 at the height of the pandemic, should resources permit.

Second, the Texas Education Agency and Texas districts may consider identifying and supporting the use of strategies to cultivate elementary school English learner students' speaking proficiency, which appears to have stagnated the most during the pandemic. The study found that students in grades 3–5 had lower scores in 2020/21 than similar students in 2018/19 on the listening, speaking, and reading domains of the TELPAS; however, the largest differences were on the speaking domain, indicating that if resources are limited, supporting speaking skills should be prioritized. These skills could be supported through regular opportunities to practice oral language skills using evidence-based approaches to language and literacy development, such as those outlined in the What Works Clearinghouse practice guide *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* (Baker et al., 2014). Districts also may access resources designed to help educators implement these evidence-based approaches in the *Professional Learning Communities Facilitator's Guide for the What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide* toolkit developed by Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest (Dimino et al., 2015). The findings also indicated that Texas grades 9–12 students showed an increase in English speaking skills. The Texas Education Agency could collect data to better understand how high school

students developed speaking skills during the pandemic and how high schools supported these skills and use this information to consider revisions to instructional guidance.

Third, leaders at the Texas Education Agency may consider studying the effect of English learner program models on language proficiency, particularly related to the effectiveness of two-way dual-language immersion programs. The study found that participation in two-way dual-language immersion and ESL content-based programs was associated with higher scores on the listening, speaking, and reading domains relative to one-way dual-language immersion programs for grade 3–5 students, although these differences were not large enough to be meaningful. Other research has highlighted the effectiveness of two-way immersion programs in promoting English language acquisition (Serafini et al., 2022), indicating that Texas may wish to conduct further research on program models to determine how best to support English learner students' progress toward proficiency. Possible avenues for this research include examining implementation of the various program models across schools and districts, teacher certification and training in English language development across those models, and the relationship between student demographic characteristics (for example, primary language spoken at home) and program models' effectiveness. Understanding more about these areas could lead to changes in teacher certification policy or policy regarding district requirements for offering certain program models.

Finally, the findings related to decreases in reclassification rates indicate more research is needed to understand the relationship between reclassification, shifting English language proficiency levels during the pandemic, changes in proficiency assessments, and modified reclassification criteria. The study found a large decline in reclassification rates from 2017/18 to 2018/19 and smaller declines in subsequent years. The study also found that the composition of reclassified students changed: those reclassified in 2020/21 were less likely to be in major urban districts, less likely to be eligible for the National School Lunch program, less likely to be from homes where Spanish was the primary language and less likely to be Hispanic. This changing composition of the group of students who were reclassified points to a need for further research on how reclassification criteria are related to student, school, and district characteristics, how the pandemic may have affected different student groups, and the potential equity implications of changing reclassification criteria. The Texas Education Agency could conduct a study to better understand the reasons why reclassification rates declined and why the demographic characteristics of reclassified students shifted. The agency could then promote the use of evidence-based practices in schools and districts to address those reasons or consider changes to reclassification policy.

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REL 2023-144

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