

## ¿Qué Pasa?: Are English Language Learning Students Remaining in English Learning Classes Too Long?

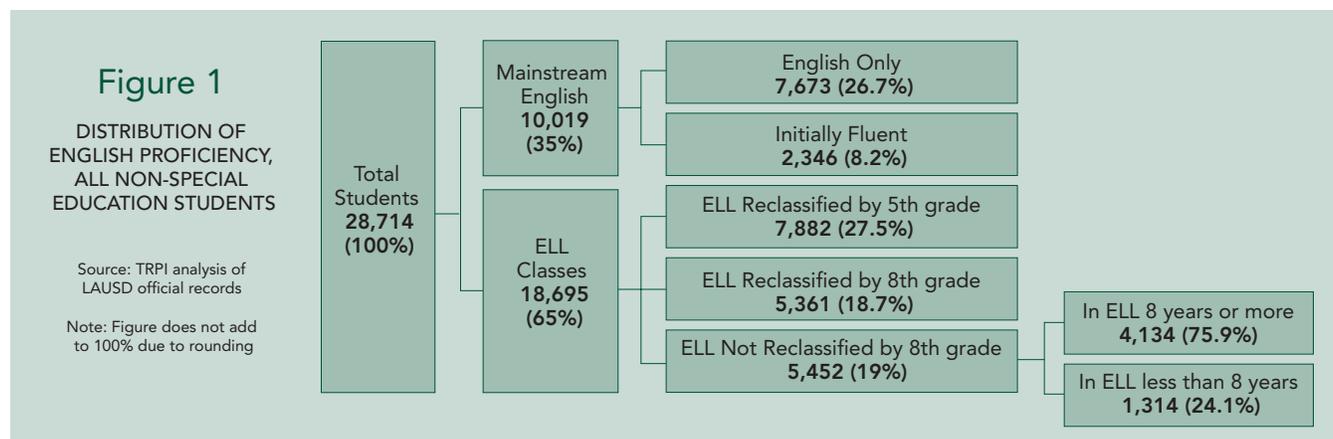
By Edward Flores, ABD; Gary Painter, PhD; Zackary Harlow-Nash, MPP Candidate; Harry Pachon, PhD\*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

English language learners (ELLs) have typically performed worse academically when compared to their English-fluent peers. Studies point to a number of possible causes for ELLs' poor performance, and offer differing recommendations for how best to educate them. This study by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) demonstrates the significant value of ELLs' transitioning into mainstream English classrooms, and emphasizes the need for action despite the ongoing policy debate over best practices for educating ELLs. The TRPI study is based on analysis of official records provided by the Los Angeles Unified School District for all non-special education students who were in 6th grade in 1999 (N=28,714). This study finds that even after accounting for other important factors, obtaining sufficient English skills to transfer from English

learning classes to mainstream English classes (here in referred to as reclassification) results in improved academic performance.

Three critical points emerge from the data: (1) that reclassification into mainstream English classrooms is associated with improved academic outcomes in high school, (2) that reclassification as late as 8th grade is still significantly associated with improved academic outcomes, and (3) that a large number of students who are not reclassified by 8th grade have been in the district since at least first grade (Figure 1)—a majority of whom are native born (Figure 2). These findings emphasize the value of devoting more resources to English language learning in elementary and middle school, in order to improve academic outcomes.



### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## THE DEBATE OVER BEST PRACTICES

English language learner status, without reclassification, has been shown to correlate with negative academic outcomes. While some research suggests this is the result of ELLs' limited proficiency in English,<sup>i</sup> other studies point to an inferior education in English learning classes.<sup>ii</sup>

There is similar uncertainty in evaluations of the various methods of educating ELLs, which not surprisingly has produced a long-running debate across the nation over how to teach the country's growing ELL population. The most publicized legislative product of that debate was Proposition 227, which required that schools teach curriculum in English. Although this ended most bilingual education programs, exceptions can be made with parental consent.

The cohort tracked in the TRPI study was in middle school when Prop 227 was passed, thus the findings should not be misconstrued as furthering the debate over how best to teach ELLs. Instead what is evidenced quite clearly is the need to focus more resources and attention on helping ELLs acquire English skills because regardless of existing policy, language learning is associated with improved academic performance.

## THE TRPI STUDY

To analyze the impact of reclassification on academic performance, the TRPI study used six indicators: SAT9 Math and Reading scores in 8th grade, failing the 9th grade, dropping out, passing the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), and ever taking an Advanced Placement (AP) course. The richness of the data provided by LAUSD allowed the analysis to take into account multiple school level differences (e.g. percent of full credentialed teachers, percent of school that is ELL, percent of school receiving free or reduced lunch) and student characteristics (e.g. nativity, socioeconomics, prior performance) that also might affect these indicators.

### Reclassified ELLs outperform English learners

English language learners performed significantly better on all academic indicators than ELLs who were not reclassified by 8th grade. Reclassification by 5th grade was associated with SAT9 Reading scores about 10 points higher and SAT9 Math scores about 5 points higher, a significant relationship considering that the average score for the whole cohort on both exams was around 36. Reclassified ELLs were also significantly less likely to fail 9th grade or to dropout, and much more likely to pass the CAHSEE or to take an AP course.

English language learners who were reclassified in middle school also fared well when compared to with students who were not reclassified by 8th grade. In fact, students reclassified in 8th grade as "proficient" in English had two-thirds the odds of failing the 9th grade, and half the odds

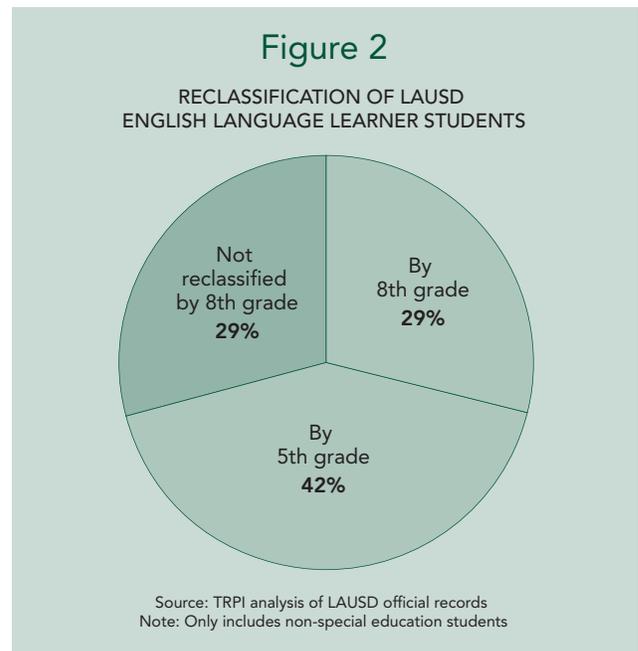
for dropping out—some of the lowest figures among all students ever identified as ELL.

### Reclassified ELLs outperform English fluent peers

In addition to the above findings comparing reclassified English learners and persisting English learners, we also found that reclassified ELLs outperformed English only students on many important indicators. Although they performed roughly similar on 8th grade standardized tests, reclassified ELLs had a reduced likelihood of dropping out, were generally more likely to pass the CAHSEE, and much more likely to take an AP course. This confirms previous research on the school performance of bilingual students.

### ELLs are not just recent immigrants

Students who were English language learners at some point in their academic career comprised nearly two-thirds of the entire cohort. Nearly 30% of these students were not reclassified by the 8th grade, meaning 1 in 5 students were ELL heading into the 9th grade (Figure 2). Most striking is that three quarters of students who were not reclassified had been in LAUSD since first grade, the large majority of which were native-born students (Figure 3). Overall, 1 out of every 10 students was native-born, spent all or nearly all of his or her academic career at LAUSD, and never transitioned out of English learning classes.

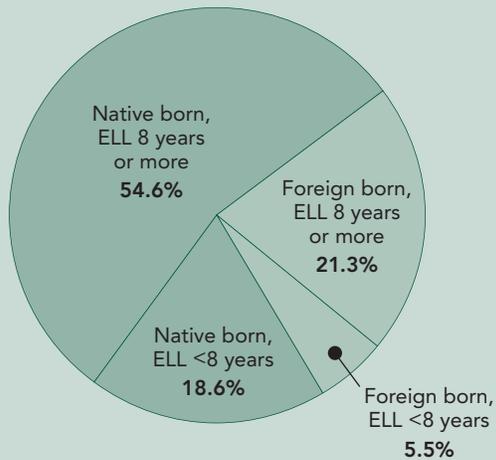


### Benefits for Native and Immigrant ELLs

Reclassification has a significant positive effect for both native-born and immigrant English language learners. The positive effect of being reclassified appeared to be slightly larger for immigrants, but in many cases, the effect of reclassification for immigrants is not statistically different from the benefits for native-born ELLs.

**Figure 3**

ELLS NOT RECLASSIFIED BY 8TH GRADE,  
BY NATIVITY AND LENGTH IN LANGUAGE LEARNING



Source: TRPI analysis of LAUSD official records

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Given that this study is a snapshot of a single cohort that was in 6th grade a decade ago, it is reasonable to question the findings' relevance in designing future policy for English language learners. However, a review of the current rates of reclassification for LAUSD schools suggests that the average annual rate of reclassification has not changed significantly in the last decade. This suggests that there are still a large number of ELLs missing out on the academic benefits associated with reclassification.

### **Increase resources to assist early English language learning**

Reclassification in elementary or early middle school is associated with improved academic outcomes for English language learners. In addition, there are a large number of students who are in the district from a young age but are never reclassified. This implies the need to build upon early efforts; research suggests it takes anywhere from three to seven years for an ELL to acquire the necessary English skills to succeed in mainstream classes.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Persist with English language learning in middle school**

Among students ever classified as ELL, 29% are never reclassified as English proficient. Some may assert that cognitive skills or ability are affecting learning outcomes. However, this is not plausible; a rate of 29% defies the normal distribution of cognitive skills that education researchers assume in any given population, and research suggests that ELLs need five to seven years to learn English with native fluency.<sup>iv</sup>

In addition, the highest activity in ELL reclassification occurs in the 5th grade then drops off during middle school. Although some may believe that reclassification in the 7th or 8th grade is too late to affect the trajectory of ELLs at-risk of dropping out, our research showed that reclassification in 7th and 8th grade had a very positive effect. Future LAUSD education policies should address how to increase reclassification rates throughout middle school.

For the full report, please visit [www.trpi.org](http://www.trpi.org).

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The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) advances informed policy on key issues affecting Latino communities through objective and timely research contributing to the betterment of the nation.