Accountability and Monitoring Former ELs

This chapter provides an overview of how school accountability, legislated under the Every Student Success Act (ESSA), provides an amplified focus on both the English language development and academic achievement of ELs. With an opportunity to move away from certain aspects of accountability that have long been a part of the educational landscape under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), this chapter delves into novel and fairer ways to track current and former EL achievement over time. With data-monitoring recommendations from national think tank New America as the cornerstone of this chapter, recommendations and guiding questions are provided for how school leadership might consider monitoring student growth in English language proficiency along with tracking students once they leave the EL classification in order to have a complete picture of their academic trajectory.

How will ELs be reported in school accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act?

In 2015 the federal ESSA was passed as a reauthorization of federal funding for education K-12. The legislation has a central theme of calling on schools to ensure equity of educational opportunity. According to national think tank New America (2018), ELs now have a more prominent focus within accountability systems:

“...federal policy is reshaping how public education systems must respond to these learners...state leaders face increased autonomy and decision-making related to EL students. Moving the core of EL accountability from the law’s Title III to more heavily-funded Title I has increased the visibility of EL data collection, reporting and use in accountability systems to flag the lowest-performing schools for ELs.” 90
Previously under NCLB the focus was placed on reducing the achievement gap between subgroups of students, such as low-income, ELs, racial subgroups and those receiving special education services. While some academic gains were achieved, the EL subgroup continued to lag behind its peers on national and state assessments.

_Schools are now accountable for EL progress; how can we ensure fairness?_

Most states administer academic content assessments in English, which is a language ELs, by definition, are still acquiring. According to experts in the field, Patricia Gándara and Maria Estela Zarate (2014), “Academic achievement testing in English while students are still learning English, however, should not be used for high stakes purposes such as grade placement, school accountability, or teacher evaluation. Academic content examinations in English administered to students who are not English proficient will yield invalid results.”

In states, such as Texas, where content assessments were made available in Spanish for students in grades 3-5, the achievement gap has been significantly less than in other states. More ELs are able to demonstrate their content knowledge once they are provided questions in their primary language. It is also important to note that English learners were moved out of the subgroup once they had mastered English. This meant that the subgroup continually consisted only of students who were learning the language, which perpetuated the achievement gap.
**What Does the Illinois ESSA State Plan Require?**

*ELs have a 5-year timeline* to master English language proficiency on the state-administered ACCESS assessment.

Schools must demonstrate adequate growth toward English proficiency for 20 or more ELs enrolled at the site.

ELs who do not master English proficiency within seven years will be categorized as *long-term ELs under ESSA*. That is, that if on the 8th measure of English language proficiency the student does not meet the exit criteria, they become a long-term EL.

ELs must also make adequate progress as a subgroup on content exams.

*ELs must master content* such as English Language Arts, Mathematics and Science in English.

ELs at the high school level must pass courses and stay on track for graduation.

ELs in high school must take the SAT and meet standards.

ELs must have access to rigorous courses, AP, IB, Dual Credit.

Former ELs will be a new subgroup monitored under ESSA. Former ELs who have received adequate support should perform at or above the level of their English-speaking peers.

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**LOCAL CONVERSATIONS AND ACTIVITIES**

Providing an equitable education for all students takes commitment on the part of all school leaders, as students vary in their specific needs. Considerations for ELs:

- What measures has your school district taken to ensure that administrators are aware of the changes in accountability for ELs?
- How does the board ensure that schools with the highest number of ELs receive adequate support?
- How can the funding streams support your local vision for ELs?

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**Monitoring the EL Vision: Five Key Principles for Understanding EL Data**

For more than 15 years under NCLB, the accountability focus was solely on active EL performance on math and English Language Arts assessments. More often than not, these students did not meet state standards. This is due to the fact that they were acquiring English and did not have sufficient proficiency to perform well on academic tasks.

It is time to shift the paradigm on how EL data is viewed and broaden the scope to consider the progress of former ELs. The true barometer for EL program evaluation is how students perform academically once they leave the EL program. Successful programs can demonstrate that former ELs are on par with their native English-speaking peers on various academic measures.
In previous chapters, the development of English as a second language has been a key topic of discussion. Misconceptions about second-language acquisition linger, including the differences between social and academic language, as well as the length of time it takes for ELs to become proficient. In Illinois, ELs are tested annually in listening, speaking, reading and writing. The expectation is that the majority of ELs will become proficient in English within five years after first grade, provided they receive quality specialized language services (bilingual and/or ESL).

The New America policy paper “Rethinking English Learner Data: Illinois’ Plans Under the Every Student Succeeds Act” (2018) featured ways in which Illinois approaches EL data representing “a compelling example of trying to navigate data quandaries thoughtfully.” The policy paper presents five key principles for understanding how the data on ELs is different and should be approached with caution. With permission, their principles are outlined below followed by how this is applied in the Illinois context.

1 The EL subgroup is not static.

Each year, students move through EL status like a revolving door, with some entering the subgroup to receive extra language services while at the same time others are exiting the subgroup. Under its ESSA plan, Illinois decided to create a distinct subgroup category of “former ELs” in addition to other subgroups required by ESSA. The state will collect and report data on these students through grade 12, beyond the four-year monitoring window required under ESSA. Tracking outcomes more longitudinally—after students exit EL services—is vital for getting a fuller picture of how ELs fare in the long run. Nationally, Illinois appears to be one of the only states planning to report former EL data in such an overt way.

For accountability purposes, Illinois will combine current and former ELs who have transitioned from services within the last four years into the one subgroup as the law allows. In theory, this is a subject of lively debate between various groups of EL researchers and advocates. On one hand, including former ELs helps to address the “moving target” nature to the EL subgroup, wherein schools do not get credit for their most academically successful ELs who exit the status. Discounting such success can be extremely demoralizing to classroom educators. But others view former EL inclusion as a form of “masking,” i.e., the inclusion of former ELs will “mask” current EL performance and skew the data in the opposite way, obscuring the needs of struggling ELs.

What does this mean for Illinois districts and schools?

In Illinois, any school with 20 or more ELs automatically has an EL subgroup that consists of both active and former ELs who reclassified within the last four years. Given that the data on active and former ELs from statewide assessments is combined for accountability purposes, it is difficult to determine if either current or former ELs need additional support. The data may show that ELs are not meeting state standards. To improve outcomes, it is necessary to look at each group separately. School districts need to disaggregate student performance between active ELs and former ELs on state academic assessments. Former ELs should be performing on par with English-speaking peers within five years of transitioning out of the TBE or TPI programs on state academic assessments.
Assessments alone do not tell the whole story: Multiple indicators point to success in college and careers. School districts may wish to look at attendance, graduation rates and grades in core academic courses for former ELs to determine if academic performance and growth are adequate. If EL services were adequate, former ELs should graduate from high school within four years if they entered the school system before third grade.

2 Learning a language takes time—but not forever. There is a need for reasonable timeframe.

Illinois establishes a reasonable timeframe for most ELs to attain English proficiency, although it should further consider its data metrics and reporting in this area. Research suggests that reaching academic proficiency in a new language takes four to seven years, based on a variety of contextual factors. Illinois has decided to set a rigorous goal of a five-year timeframe for ELs to achieve English-language proficiency. This timeframe starts in first grade, when students are first legally mandated to attend school in Illinois, or at the grade of entry for EL students who arrive later.

Illinois' uniform expectation for language learning, five years maximum, is a simple, straightforward goal, which has the benefit of transparency for all. However, this five-year expectation may not be realistic for all ELs, particularly those with disabilities, those with limited or interrupted education, or in certain bilingual models. Research suggests that these groups take longer, on average, to reach English proficiency.

Local school districts may wish to collect data on transition rates for English Learners. It is reasonable to expect students to transition from EL services in a timely manner if adequate services are offered. Statewide, students who begin services in early childhood or kindergarten are transitioning from services by fourth grade. Older students who enter the country after third grade may require additional supports.

What does this mean for Illinois districts and schools?

ELs who have not reached English proficiency within seven years (based on data from local schools), will be classified as long-term ELs. This group tends to be at highest risk of dropping out of high school, so it is important to monitor and provide supports as early as possible. ELs who do not demonstrate sufficient growth on ACCESS from year to year may require additional academic and language supports, for example after-school tutoring or ESL classes in the summer.

If the long-term EL subgroup is greater than 10 to 20 percent of ELs not reaching proficiency by eighth grade, systemic causes for their lack of progress are likely at play. For example, is the time devoted to ESL classes adequate? Are the ESL curriculum, materials and instructional approaches appropriate and in line with how students best acquire a second language? A student who is approaching proficiency may still require at least one hour of support five days per week. Newly arrived students require more time and may need two or more supported class periods per day with ESL and native language instruction from a qualified teacher.

3 ELs at different stages progress at different rates.

It is unrealistic to set one-size-fits-all expectations for year-to-year English language proficiency growth. The solution might be to use growth models that account for contributing factors, like initial English language proficiency level and grade level. Illinois laudably takes into account the developmental realities that impact different ELs' trajectories for language acquisition. Researchers have widely noted a "lower is faster, higher is slower" rule for English development: on average, ELs in lower grades and lower English language proficiency levels make more yearly growth than ELs in higher grades and higher English language proficiency levels.
In recognition of this nonlinear nature to language growth, Illinois’ model incorporates initial English language proficiency level and grade level to differentiate interim targets for individual ELs.

Over the first-year timeframe, Illinois plans to use a “growth-to-proficiency” model that establishes a series of interim targets for each student to make year to year based on his or her entry level performance data. Students are considered “making progress” if they score at or above their yearly targets.

**What does this mean for Illinois district and schools?**

ELs progress in their acquisition of English and content knowledge at different rates. While making progress is important, factors such as age, family income, mobility, trauma, qualified and well-prepared teachers, quality programs and support services are all factors that affect the academic and linguistic growth of ELs.

ELs’ level of English upon entry into the school is also a significant factor in determining when they will transition from services. A 2019 cohort study done by the University of Chicago on ELs in Chicago Public Schools demonstrated that students who entered early childhood or kindergarten with some level of English proficiency often transitioned by third and fourth grade. Their growth rates were adequate, and they performed as well or better than peers after transition.

Those who entered school after third grade with little or no English progressed at a higher rate than most, yet they took longer to reach English proficiency. Supports designed to assist these students can make a difference. Summer school, credit recovery and participation in extracurricular activities are ways to boost ELs’ acquisition of English.

**English skills impact academic performance.**

Below a certain threshold of English proficiency, it is impossible to make valid claims about academic proficiency in English. In general, use academic achievement data with extreme caution; emphasize academic growth models for current ELs; set different academic targets based on English language proficiency level.

**What does this mean for Illinois districts and schools?**

A basic tenet for education is that assessment must match instruction. In this case, the language of assessment should match the language of instruction. Therefore, if students receive instruction in Spanish, for example, the state assessment system should include tests written in that language for accountability purposes. Districts should have the prerogative to implement appropriate assessments based on ELs’ level of English proficiency and the language used in the classroom.

Illinois has a history of utilizing trans-adapted assessments for mathematics. When assessments are trans-adapted, test items are reviewed for academic content and any complicating or extraneous language is removed from the test question. Another feature of trans-adapted assessments is to add illustrations, tables, or graphic information to support the concept being assessed. These assessments may also feature directions translated into languages, such as Spanish. Trends in achievement data for ELs show stronger performance in math over time. This could be due to availability of Spanish instructions and terminology within the assessment. Based on lessons learned, offering language arts and science tests in Spanish would provide more accurate data on ELs’ overall growth. Another New America recommendation is for Illinois to consider different targets for the EL population based on their levels of English proficiency at the time of testing. For example, a student who scores at a basic level of English on the ACCESS assessment has a projected score range on the content assessments. This adjustment would correlate ELs’ command of English with an acceptable range of performance in the content.
Without consideration of how poverty impacts the EL population, interpretations of EL data may misdiagnose root causes. There is a need to report demographic needs data alongside outcomes data to highlight the realities of school and district needs.

**What does this mean for Illinois districts and schools?**

Most school districts in Illinois have ELs. In 2017, at least 53 percent of schools had 20 or more ELs necessitating the creation of a subgroup. ELs are more likely to be enrolled in schools in which 20 percent or more of students also qualify as low-income as per federal guidelines. When reporting achievement data for ELs on state academic assessments, it is helpful to report the school status for Title I as well.

If the school has an underperforming EL subgroup and also has Title I status, the district administration and school board should consider ways to add qualified staff and programs that follow recommendations found in current research.

Under the ESSA Plan for Illinois, ELs qualify as a group entitled to Title I funding due to their need to acquire both English and academic skills at the same time. For more information about the use of Title I funds for ELs, refer to Chapter 8.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Key Principle</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Included in the Illinois ESSA Plan</th>
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<tr>
<td>The EL Subgroup is not static</td>
<td>It is important to follow the progress of ELs after they have mastered English</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning language takes time but not forever</td>
<td>Research has shown that ELs can take 5-7 years to master academic English. For some ELs, it can take 5-to-9 years</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<td>ELs at different stages progress at different rates</td>
<td>Research has shown that ELs can take 5-7 years to master academic English. For some ELs, it can take 5-to-9 years</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English skills affect ELs’ academic performance</td>
<td>Onboarding and Teacher Orientation for new EL staff</td>
<td>MAYBE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty most affects ELs, and as a result, their educational outcomes</td>
<td>Assign mentors for new EL teachers</td>
<td>NO</td>
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EL Data Monitoring: Guiding Questions for School Districts

It is important for schools and districts to review their EL programs every three years, per federal guidelines from the Office of Civil Rights. While conducting a review, data should be analyzed over the long-term to determine whether EL outcomes are commensurate with their peers. Below are some ways to consider monitoring the progress of the EL vision and services:

**District-Level Data:**

- What policies are adopted to ensure that school leaders are knowledgeable about the specific needs of ELs?
- What protocol does the local school board have in place to ensure a commitment to equity for the EL population?
- What procedures have leaders and the community engaged in to implement a vision-setting process?
- How does school district policy align with the vision?
- What policies are in place to ensure that adequate resources are allocated to support ELs?
- How many teachers are needed to ensure an adequate number of staff credentialed to serve the EL population?
- Is there a gap between the number of staff employed and the number needed to serve your population?
- Does the district/school offer research-based support services?

**School-Level Data:**

- What is the adopted vision for EL programs?
- How does the program offered to ELs align with the stated vision?
- Have the vision and goals of the program been communicated to staff and parents?
- Does the school have an adequate number of bilingual education and ESL teachers to serve ELs?
- How does the rate of retention of bilingual education teachers differ from the rest of the staff?
- Is there adequate professional development scheduled to support the program model?
- Are all teachers, district administrators and principals included in professional development about ELs?

**Parent and Community Involvement in the Data:**

- How are EL parents welcomed in the school?
- What procedures are in place to provide signs and visuals to support EL families?
- How does the front office communicate with parents?
How does the district provide information in languages parents of ELs understand?
How does the district ensure that EL parents understand the goals of the EL programs?
How are EL parents involved in decision-making at the school level?
How does the district provide interpretation services for parents during parent/teacher conferences?
How does the local school board consult with EL parents when making decisions that affect their children?
What procedures are in place for EL parents to have access to the school and district leadership including the superintendent?

**Student-Level Data:**

- Is EL enrollment increasing over time?
- What types of programs are ELs enrolled in (e.g. TBE, TPI, Dual Language)?
- What percentage of the district enrollment is the EL subgroup when both active and former ELs are included?
- Are the majority of ELs transitioning from EL services by eighth grade?
- What percentage of ELs are classified as long-term? How many families are refusing services?
- How is the EL subgroup performing on state academic assessments?
- How do the groups perform when disaggregated?
- Do former ELs perform on par with the English-speaking peers five years after transition from services?
- How do ELs perform on local assessments?
- What is the attendance rate for both former and active ELs?
- Are report card grades in core subject areas the same or different from their English-speaking peers?
- Are both former and active ELs enrolled in AP, IB and dual credit courses?
- Are they enrolled in extracurricular activities?
- Do ELs have access to English-speaking peers during the school day?
- Are former ELs graduating high school within four years?

In summary, investing in a solid process for creating a long-term vision for ELs sets a foundation for future success. The vision will guide district policy and practice in key areas that include budget allocation, recruitment of staff, curriculum and instruction, assessment and parent participation and engagement.
District Highlight

**Schaumburg SD 54: Low-Incident Language Programming**

Danette Meyer, Assistant Superintendent for Language and Culture

Academic excellence within a diverse school community is a point of pride for District 54 staff and families. For many years, the District 54 staff and community have worked collaboratively to ensure the success of every child. Like all students, ELs in District 54 are demonstrating whole child success according to the goals set by the Board of Education.

The District 54 Strategic Plan identifies three goals by which we will measure our success:

- Ensure the success of the whole child by providing comprehensive approaches and programming, grounded in the belief that each child deserves to be Healthy, Safe, Engaged, Supported and Challenged.
- Perform in the top 10 percent of all schools in reading and math growth and proficiency as measured by state and local assessments.
- Close the achievement gap for ALL students in reading and math as measured by state and local assessments.

Fifty-seven percent of District 54 students live in a home where a language other than English is spoken. Over 1,400 students are enrolled in District 54's highly successful dual language programs in Spanish and Japanese or immersion program in Chinese at 11 District 54 schools. According to Jana Echevarria, a leading researcher and author:

> “English learners arrive at school with a wealth of experiences, knowledge, preferences, abilities, interests and native language proficiencies. In other words, they are not blank slates; they are multidimensional individuals who happen to be in the process of acquiring the English language.”

District 54 teachers know each student by name and need. For example, at Muir school, teachers Julia Bolotin and Traci Reiner post a heritage wall in their classroom where each week a student brings in an item that represents their culture or a family tradition. Whether students are born in the U.S. or abroad, by talking with their classmates about their families, they learn about each other and create a positive classroom environment. District 54 staff participate annually in cultural competency training to better understand some of the differences they encounter when working with students and families from cultures different from their own.

In order to meet the high expectations and perform in the top 10 percent of schools in Illinois, ELs must develop high levels of academic English proficiency. Last year 2,843 English learners in District 54 participated in Illinois’ annual assessment of English proficiency. Twenty-four percent of the students reached English proficiency, the highest rate in Illinois for any school district with more than 150 ELs. A focus on the whole child, high expectations and a collaborative school culture ensure the success of ELs in District 54. ELs benefit from the rigorous curriculum whether they receive support from EL resource teachers at their neighborhood school or continue to develop their native language or a third language in our dual language immersion programs. District 54 teachers continue to enroll in professional development courses to increase their knowledge of instructional strategies to engage ELs.
Each year District 54 teachers assess more than a thousand students new to the country or new to the district. When ELs first arrive, there is a gap in their achievement on English assessments, as one would expect. District 54 staff know that this is just a temporary state for students and that they are only in need of some additional focused time and support to become proficient. One way that extra time and support is offered is through an after-school writing program offered to ELs funded through a federal grant.

***After reaching English proficiency, former ELs meet or exceed standards at the same rate as other students in District 54 and achieve the goal of performing in the top 10 percent of students statewide on Illinois assessments.***

What can other districts learn? When selecting a program model and structures, consider your local context. We have fewer students entering our district as monolingual Spanish speakers and more as bilingual students with some skills in English and others in their native languages. So, our program model needed to change to address the demographic shift. Review your student achievement data as well as your language proficiency data to ensure students are successful, rather than just complying with federal, state or local regulations.

Gathering data for evaluating EL programs necessitates taking a long-term view with emphasis on demographic, qualitative, quantitative and achievement data. Highlighted throughout this guide are examples of school districts across Illinois that have employed a variety of practices and strategies and have also taken innovative and brave approaches to educating ELs, including refugee and immigrant students.

The rewards often are realized after ELs leave the school system and go on to pursue careers or postsecondary education. The support offered by teachers as well as district and school leaders helps families navigate the educational system in the U.S.—something that is quite challenging to do on their own. Welcoming environments should focus on the following: specialized language and academic development, culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, opportunities for advanced coursework, extracurricular activities, well-designed language programs, and well-prepared teachers and leaders who can change these students’ lives. Educating ELs to their highest potential continues to be a source of pride in many communities across Illinois.