

English Learners in Public Schools

The percentage of public school students in the United States who were English learners (ELs) was higher in fall 2020 (10.3 percent, or 5.0 million students) than in fall 2010 (9.2 percent, or 4.5 million students). In fall 2020, the percentage of public school students who were ELs ranged from 0.7 percent in West Virginia to 20.1 percent in Texas.

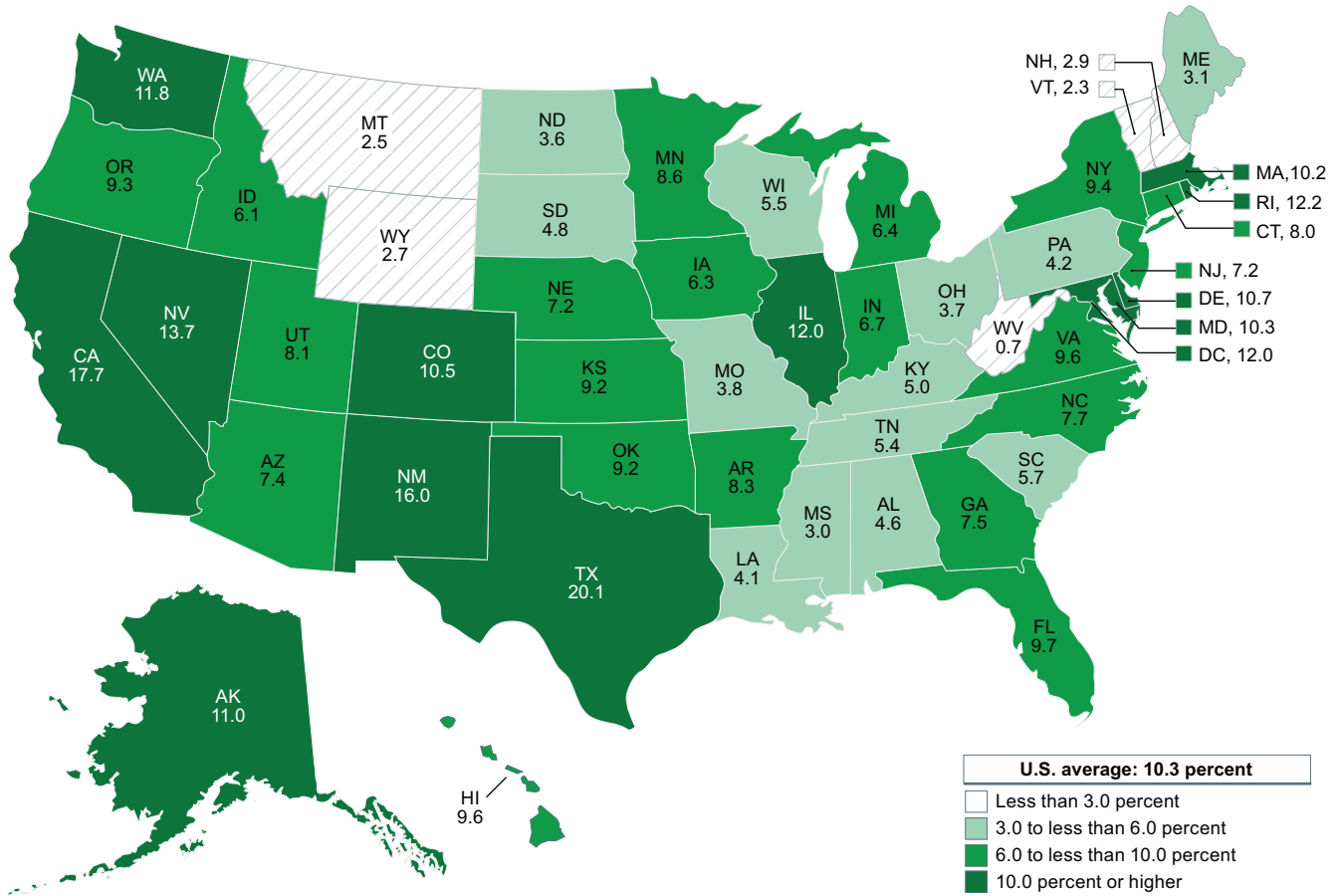
Students who are identified as English learners (ELs) can participate in language assistance programs to help ensure that they attain English proficiency and meet the academic content and achievement standards expected of all students. This indicator looks at the number and percentage of ELs in kindergarten and higher grades over time. Data on ELs include students with a current EL identification, but not students who were formerly identified as ELs and no longer are. Note also that data on ELs enrolled in public schools have changed over time. For fall 2014 and earlier years, EL data include only those ELs who participated in EL programs. Starting with fall 2015, data include all currently identified ELs, regardless of program participation. However, the proportion of ELs who participate in EL programs is large. For example, in the 2020-21 school year, 98 percent of identified ELs were

served by EL programs. Comparisons over time should be interpreted with caution due to this change in the data reported.

English Learners as a Percentage of Public School Enrollment

The percentage of public school students in the United States who were ELs increased overall between fall 2010 (9.2 percent, or 4.5 million students) and fall 2020 (10.3 percent, or 5.0 million students). However, this upward trend was disrupted between fall 2019 and fall 2020—during the first school year of the coronavirus pandemic—when EL enrollment fell from 5.1 to 5.0 million students (from 10.4 to 10.3 percent of public school enrollment).¹

Figure 1. Percentage of public school students who were English learners (ELs), by state: Fall 2020



NOTE: U.S. average is for the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Excludes EL students who are enrolled in prekindergarten. Categorizations are based on unrounded percentages.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, EDData file 141, Data Group 678, extracted March 31, 2021; and Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2020–21. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 204.20.

In fall 2020, EL students represented 10.0 percent or more of public school students in 12 states—half of which were located in the West—and the District of Columbia.² The states were Alaska, California, Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Texas, and Washington. The states with the highest percentages of ELs were

- Texas (20.1 percent);
- California (17.7 percent); and
- New Mexico (16.0 percent).

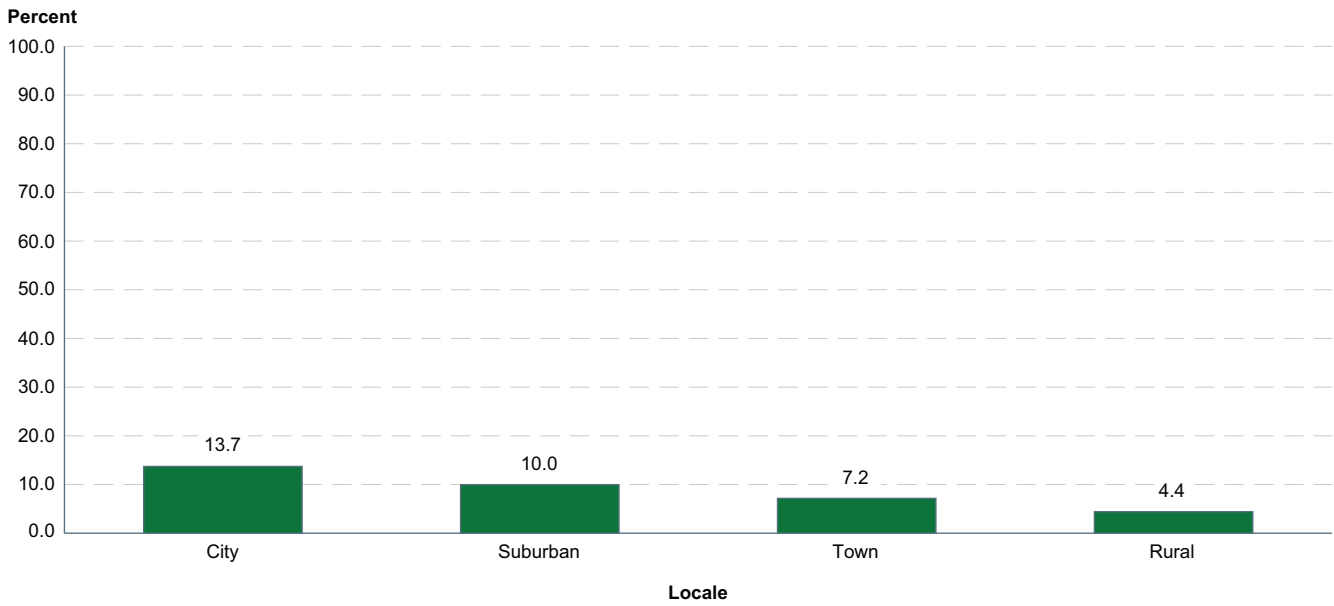
An additional 20 states identified at least 6.0 but less than 10.0 percent of their students as ELs, and 13 states identified at least 3.0 but less than 6.0 percent of their students as ELs. The percentage of students who were ELs was less than 3.0 percent in 5 states:

- New Hampshire (2.9 percent)
- Wyoming (2.7 percent)
- Montana (2.5 percent)
- Vermont (2.3 percent)
- West Virginia (0.7 percent)

The percentage of public school students who were ELs was higher in fall 2020 than in fall 2010 in 41 states and the District of Columbia, and lower in the remaining 9 states. From fall 2010 to fall 2020, the largest positive

percentage point change occurred in Rhode Island (7.3 percentage points higher in 2020), and the largest negative percentage point change occurred in Nevada (7.2 percentage points lower in 2020).

Figure 2. Percentage of public school students who were English learners (ELs), by locale: Fall 2020

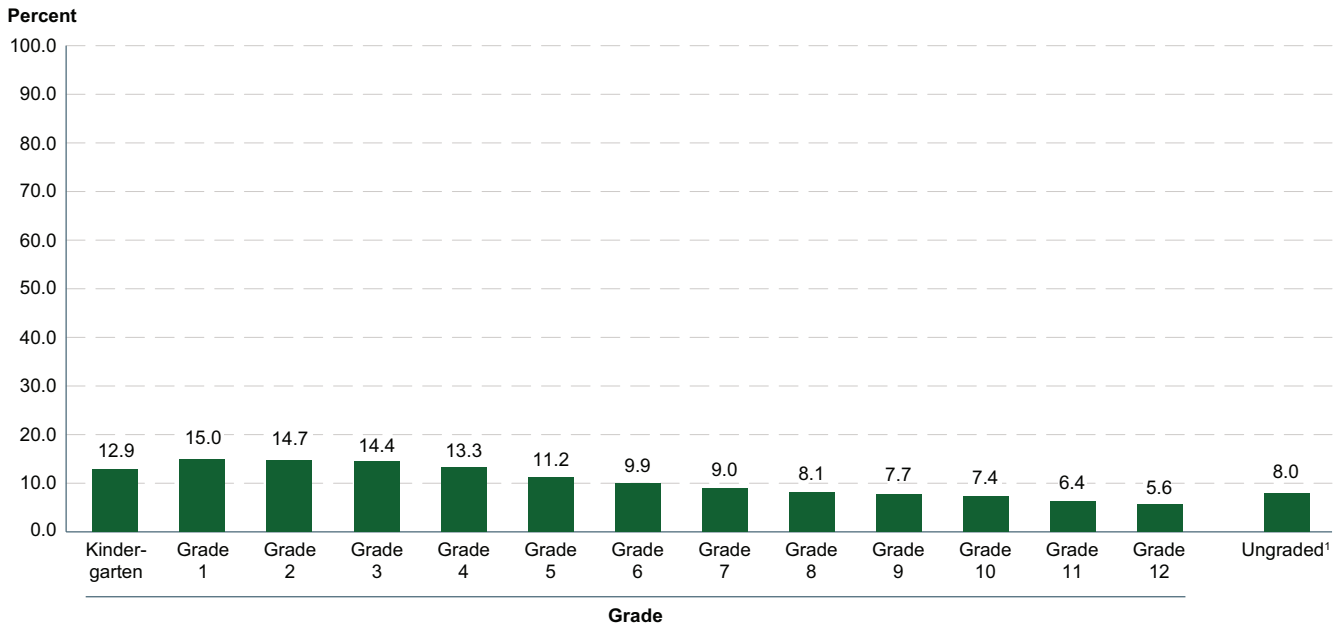


NOTE: Data in this figure represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Data are based on locales of school districts. Excludes EL students who are enrolled in prekindergarten.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, EDData file 141, Data Group 678, extracted December 10, 2021; and Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2020–21. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 214.40.

In fall 2020, the percentage of students who were ELs was higher for school districts in more urbanized locales than for those in less urbanized locales. ELs constituted an average of

- 13.7 percent of total public school enrollment in cities;
- 10.0 percent in suburban areas;
- 7.2 percent in towns; and
- 4.4 percent in rural areas.

Figure 3. Percentage of public school students who were English learners (ELs), by grade level: Fall 2020



¹ Ungraded students can include elementary/secondary school students of any age. Also includes students reported as being enrolled in grade 13.

NOTE: Data in this figure represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, EDData file 141, Data Group 678, extracted October 10, 2022; and Common Core of Data (CCD), “State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education,” 2020–21. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 204.27.

In general, a higher percentage of public school students in lower grades than of those in upper grades were ELs in fall 2020. For example, 12.9 percent of kindergarteners were ELs, compared with 9.9 percent of 6th-graders, 8.1 percent of 8th-graders, and 5.6 percent of 12th-graders. This is consistent with the expected pattern if students, who are identified as ELs in early grades, tend to obtain English language proficiency by the time they reach the upper grades.³

For the majority of grade levels, the percentage of public school students who were ELs was higher in fall 2020 than just before the pandemic in fall 2019. However, the percentage of ELs was lower in fall 2020 than in fall 2019 in kindergarten and grades 1, 2, 5, and 9. The difference was largest in kindergarten. Specifically, from fall 2019 to fall 2020, the percentage of EL kindergarteners declined by 2.1 percentage points (15.0 to 12.9 percent), compared with changes of half of a percentage point or less in every other grade.

Characteristics of English Learners**Table 1. Number and percentage distribution of English learner (EL) students in public schools and number of EL students as a percentage of total public school enrollment, by the 10 most commonly reported home languages of EL students: Fall 2020**

Home language	Number of EL students	Percentage distribution of EL students ¹	Number of EL students as a percent of total enrollment
Spanish, Castilian	3,745,460	75.5	7.8
Arabic	128,641	2.6	0.3
English ²	124,917	2.5	0.3
Chinese	93,339	1.9	0.2
Vietnamese	73,075	1.5	0.2
Portuguese	43,426	0.9	0.1
Russian	37,159	0.7	0.1
Haitian, Haitian Creole	30,063	0.6	0.1
Hmong	28,719	0.6	0.1
Urdu	25,192	0.5	0.1

¹ Detail does not sum to 100 percent because not all home language categories are shown.

² Examples of situations in which English might be reported as an English learner's home language include students who live in multilingual households and students adopted from other countries who were raised speaking another language but currently live in households where English is spoken.

NOTE: Data in this table represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Excludes EL students who are enrolled in prekindergarten.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, EDData file 141, Data Group 678, extracted October 10, 2022; and Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education," 2020–21. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 204.27.

Spanish was the most commonly reported home language of EL public school students in fall 2020 (3.7 million students), representing 75.5 percent of all ELs and 7.8 percent of all public school students. Arabic was the second most commonly reported home language (128,600 students). English was the third most commonly reported home language (124,900 students), which may reflect students who live in multilingual households or students adopted from other countries who were raised speaking another language but currently live in households where English is spoken. The next most commonly reported home languages of ELs in fall 2020 were Chinese (93,300 students), Vietnamese (73,100 students), Portuguese (43,400 students), Russian (37,200 students), Haitian (30,100 students), Hmong (28,700 students), and Urdu (25,200 students).

The prevalence of each of these reported home languages among ELs changed between school year 2009-10 and fall 2020. The largest percent change was in the number of ELs whose reported home language was Portuguese, which nearly tripled from 15,200 to 43,400 students.⁴

In fall 2020, more than three-quarters of ELs were Hispanic.⁵ Specifically, the racial/ethnic composition of ELs was

- 77.1 percent Hispanic (3.8 million students);
- 10.2 percent Asian (503,800 students);
- 6.3 percent White (314,800 students);
- 4.3 percent Black (213,700 students);
- 0.8 percent Two or more races (37,600 students);
- 0.7 percent American Indian/Alaska Native (36,400 students); and
- 0.6 percent Pacific Islander (31,700 students).

In addition, 800,600 ELs were identified as students with disabilities in fall 2020, representing 16.1 percent of the total EL enrollment. In comparison, students with disabilities made up 14.5 percent of total public school enrollment in 2020-21.

Endnotes:

¹ Total public school enrollment also decreased during the first school year of the coronavirus pandemic. For more information, see [Public School Enrollment](#).

² Categorizations are based on unrounded percentages.

³ Saunders, W.M., and Marcelletti, D.J. (2013). The Gap That Can't Go Away: The Catch-22 of Reclassification in Monitoring the Progress of English Learners. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 35(2): 139-156. Retrieved November 25, 2022, from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/0162373712461849>.

⁴ School year 2009-10 data include all ELs enrolled at any time during the 2009-10 school year, except data for California,

which reflect ELs enrolled on a single date. All other data in this indicator include only ELs enrolled on October 1 of the corresponding year.

⁵ The number of Hispanic ELs is larger than the number of ELs whose reported home language is Spanish. Some Hispanic ELs speak a language other than Spanish at home (such as a language that is indigenous to Latin America). In addition, home language data may be missing for some Hispanic ELs.

Reference tables: *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, tables 204.20, 204.27, 204.70, and 214.40

Related indicators and resources: [English Language Learners in Public Schools](#) [*Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups*]; [Mathematics Performance](#); [Programs and Services for High School English Learners in Public School Districts: 2015-16](#); [Public School Enrollment](#); [Reading Performance](#); [Science Performance](#); [Students With Disabilities](#); [Technology and Engineering Literacy](#)

Glossary: Disabilities, children with; English learner (EL); Enrollment; Geographic region; Household; Locale codes; Public school or institution; Racial/ethnic group; School district