

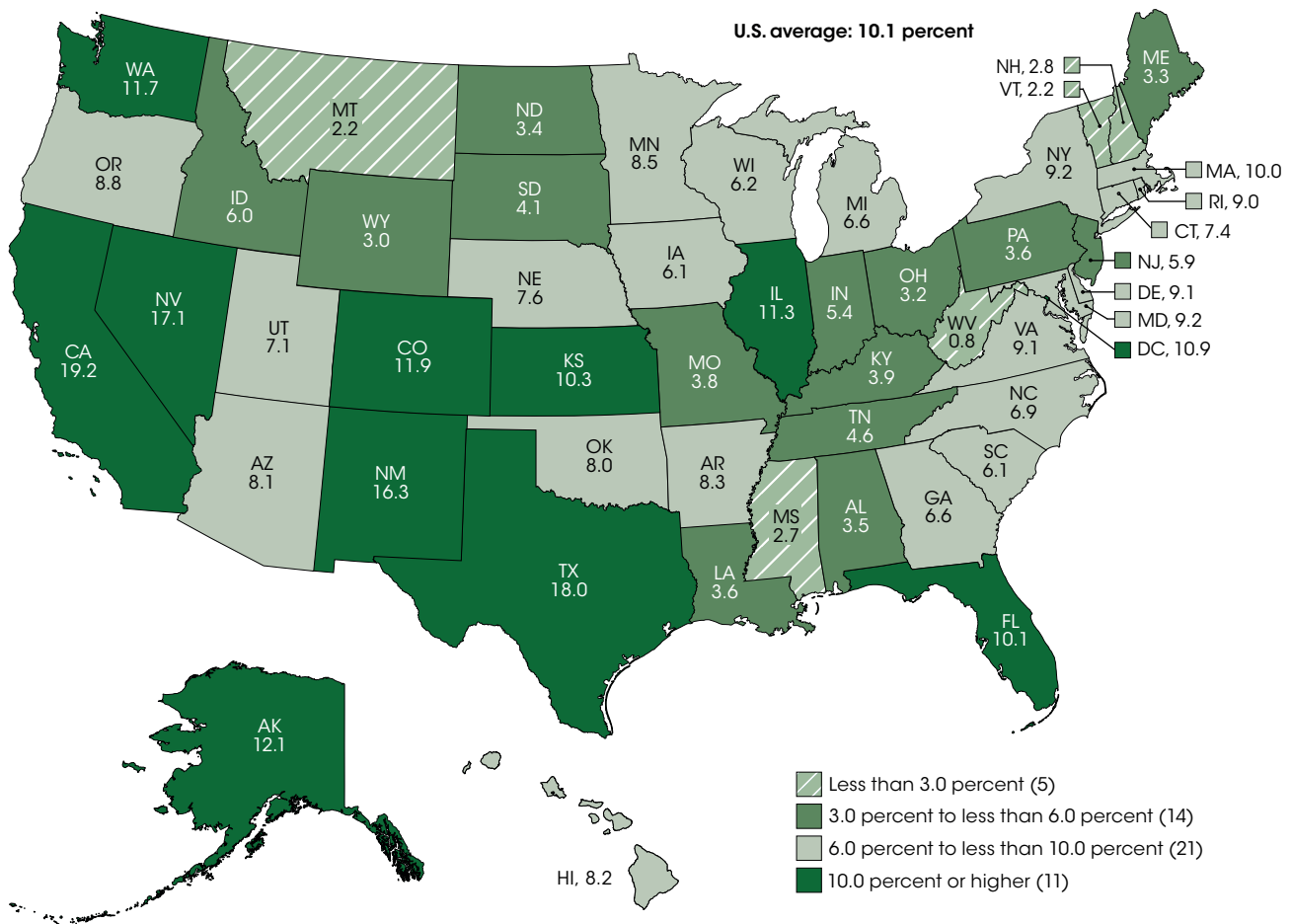
# English Language Learners in Public Schools

*The percentage of public school students in the United States who were English language learners (ELLs) was higher in fall 2017 (10.1 percent, or 5.0 million students) than in fall 2000 (8.1 percent, or 3.8 million students). In fall 2017, the percentage of public school students who were ELLs ranged from 0.8 percent in West Virginia to 19.2 percent in California.*

Students who are identified as English language learners (ELLs) can participate in language assistance programs to help ensure that they attain English proficiency and meet the academic content and achievement standards that all students are expected to meet. Participation in these types of programs can improve students' English language

proficiency, which in turn has been associated with improved educational outcomes.<sup>1</sup> The percentage of public school students in the United States who were ELLs was higher in fall 2017 (10.1 percent, or 5.0 million students) than in fall 2000 (8.1 percent, or 3.8 million students).<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1. Percentage of public school students who were English language learners, by state: Fall 2017**

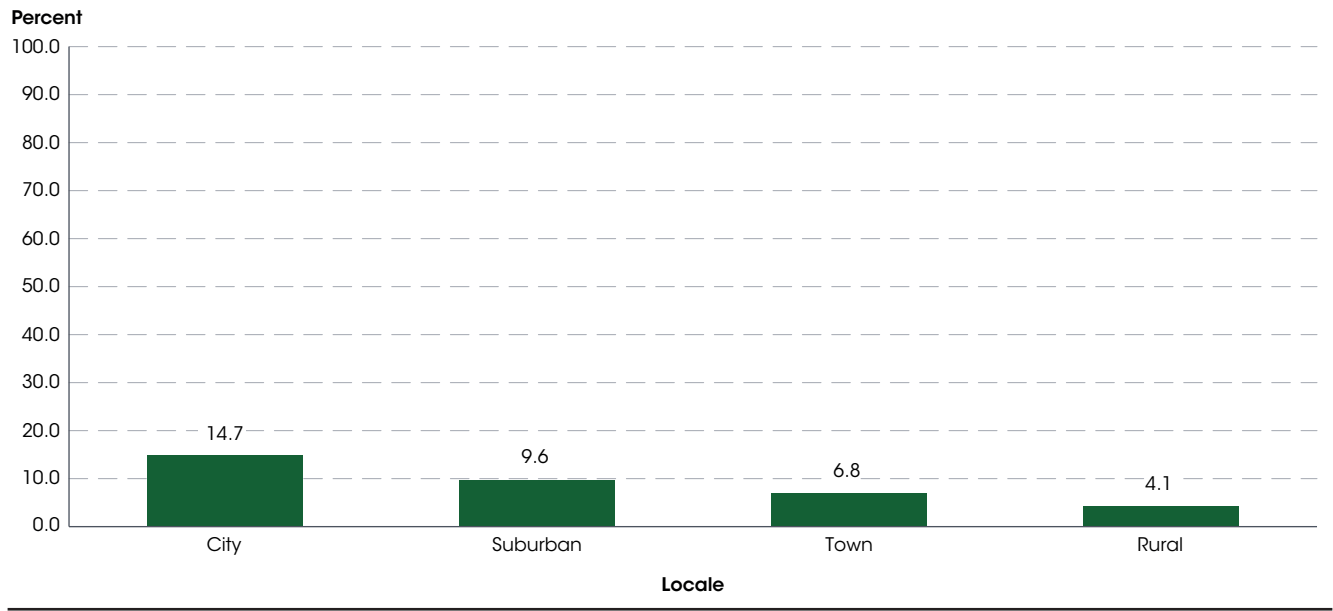


NOTE: Categorizations are based on unrounded percentages.  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2017-18. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, table 204.20.

In fall 2017, the percentage of public school students who were ELLs was 10.0 percent or more in 10 states, most of which were located in the West, and the District of Columbia.<sup>3</sup> The states were Alaska, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington. California reported the highest percentage of ELLs among its public school students, at 19.2 percent, followed by Texas (18.0 percent) and Nevada (17.1 percent). Twenty-one states had percentages of ELL students that were 6.0 percent or higher but less than 10.0 percent, and 14 states had percentages that were 3.0 percent or higher but less than 6.0 percent. The percentage of students who were ELLs was less than 3.0 percent in five states, with Vermont (2.2 percent), Montana (2.2 percent), and West Virginia (0.8 percent) having the lowest percentages.

Reflecting the national change, the percentage of public school students who were ELLs was higher in fall 2017 than in fall 2000 for all but seven states and the District of Columbia. The largest percentage point increase occurred in Delaware (7.3 percentage points) and the largest percentage point decrease occurred in Arizona (7.0 percentage points). More recently, the percentage of public school students who were ELLs was higher in fall 2017 than in fall 2010 in 40 states and the District of Columbia, with the largest increase occurring in Massachusetts (4.3 percentage points). In contrast, the percentage of public school students who were ELLs was lower in fall 2017 than in fall 2010 in 10 states, with the largest decrease occurring in California (4.1 percentage points).

**Figure 2. Percentage of public school students who were English language learners, by locale: Fall 2017**

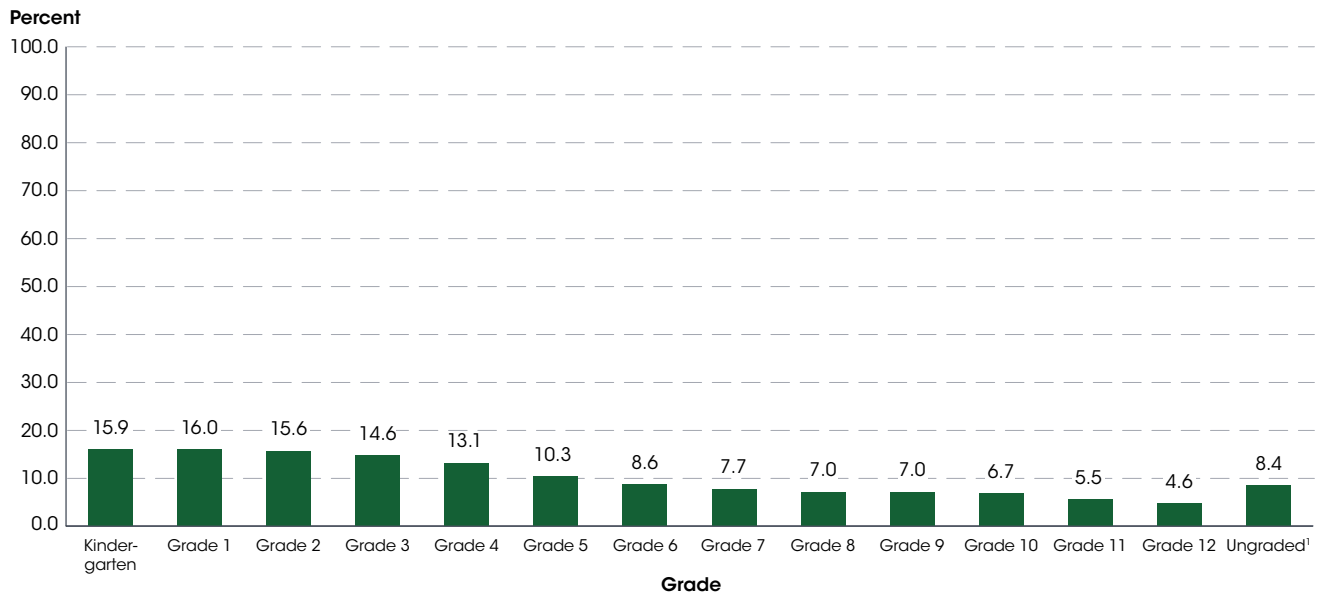


NOTE: Data are based on locales of school districts.  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2017–18. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, table 214.40.

In fall 2017, the percentage of students who were ELLs was higher for school districts in more urbanized areas than for those in less urbanized areas. ELL students

constituted an average of 14.7 percent of total public school enrollment in cities, 9.6 percent in suburban areas, 6.8 percent in towns, and 4.1 percent in rural areas.

**Figure 3. Percentage of public school students who were English language learners, by grade level: Fall 2017**



<sup>1</sup> Includes students reported as being enrolled in grade 13.

NOTE: Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, ED*Facts* file 141, Data Group 678, extracted August 30, 2019; and Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education," 2017–18. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, table 204.27.

In general, a higher percentage of public school students in lower grades than of those in upper grades were ELL students in fall 2017. For example, 15.9 percent of kindergarteners were ELL students, compared with 8.6 percent of 6th-graders and 7.0 percent of 8th-graders.

Among 12th-graders, only 4.6 percent of students were ELL students. This pattern was driven, in part, by students who are identified as ELLs when they enter elementary school but obtain English language proficiency before reaching the upper grades.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1. Number and percentage distribution of English language learner (ELL) students in public schools and number of ELL students as a percentage of total public school enrollment, by the 10 most commonly reported home languages of ELL students: Fall 2017**

Home language	Number of ELL students	Percentage distribution of ELL students <sup>1</sup>	Number of ELL students as a percent of total enrollment
Spanish, Castilian	3,749,314	74.8	7.6
Arabic	136,531	2.7	0.3
Chinese	106,516	2.1	0.2
English <sup>2</sup>	94,910	1.9	0.2
Vietnamese	77,765	1.6	0.2
Somali	41,264	0.8	0.1
Russian	36,809	0.7	0.1
Portuguese	33,252	0.7	0.1
Haitian, Haitian Creole	32,655	0.7	0.1
Hmong	32,174	0.6	0.1

<sup>1</sup> Detail does not sum to 100 percent because not all categories are reported.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of situations in which English might be reported as an ELL student's home language include students who live in multilingual households and students adopted from other countries who speak English at home but also have been raised speaking another language.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, ED*Facts* file 141, Data Group 678, extracted August 30, 2019; and Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education," 2017–18. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, table 204.27.

Spanish was the home language of 3.7 million ELL public school students in fall 2017, representing 74.8 percent of all ELL students and 7.6 percent of all public K–12 students. Arabic and Chinese were the next most commonly reported home languages (spoken by 136,500 and 106,500 students, respectively). English was the fourth most common home language for ELL students (94,900 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. Vietnamese (77,800 students), Somali (41,300 students), Russian (36,800 students), Portuguese (33,300 students), Haitian (32,700 students), and Hmong (32,200 students) were the next most commonly reported home languages of ELL students in fall 2017. The 30 most commonly reported home languages also include several whose prevalence has increased rapidly in recent years. For example, the number of ELLs who reported that their home language was Swahili, Nepali, or a Karen language<sup>5</sup> more than quadrupled between school year 2008–09 and fall 2017 (the increases were from 3,500 to 16,100

for students who reported that Swahili was their home language, from 3,200 to 14,100 for students who reported that Nepali was their home language, and from 3,000 to 12,800 for students who reported that a Karen language was their home language).<sup>6</sup>

In fall 2017, there were about 3.8 million Hispanic ELL public school students, constituting over three-quarters (76.5 percent) of ELL student enrollment overall.<sup>7</sup> Asian students were the next largest racial/ethnic group among ELLs, with 530,900 students (10.7 percent of ELL students). In addition, there were 327,300 White ELL students (6.6 percent of ELL students) and 211,000 Black ELL students (4.3 percent of ELL students). In each of the other racial/ethnic groups for which data were collected (Pacific Islanders, American Indians/Alaska Natives, and individuals of Two or more races), fewer than 40,000 students were identified as ELLs. In addition, some 718,400 ELL students were identified as students with disabilities, representing 14.3 percent of the total ELL population enrolled in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools.

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#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Genesee, F., Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W., and Christian, D. (2005). English Language Learners in U.S. Schools: An Overview of Research Findings. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 10(4): 363–385. Retrieved November 25, 2019, from [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327671espr1004\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327671espr1004_2).

<sup>2</sup> For 2014 and earlier years, data on the total number of ELLs enrolled in public schools and on the percentage of public school students who were ELLs include only those ELL students who participated in ELL programs. Starting with 2015, data include all ELL students, regardless of program participation. Due to this change in definition, comparisons between 2017 and earlier years should be interpreted with caution. For all years, data do not include students who were formerly identified as ELLs but later obtained English language proficiency.

<sup>3</sup> Categorizations are based on unrounded percentages.

<sup>4</sup> 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, 2019, from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/0162373712461849>.

<sup>5</sup> Includes several languages spoken by the Karen ethnic groups of Burma and by individuals of Karen descent in the United States.

<sup>6</sup> School year 2008–09 data include all ELL students enrolled at any time during the 2008–09 school year, except data for California which reflect ELL students enrolled on a single date. All other data in this indicator include only ELL students enrolled on October 1 of the corresponding year.

<sup>7</sup> The number of Hispanic ELL students is larger than the number of ELL students who speak Spanish. Home language data may be missing for some Hispanic ELL students. In addition, some Hispanic ELL students may report that they speak a language other than Spanish at home (such as a language that is indigenous to Latin America).

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**Reference tables:** *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, tables 204.20, 204.27, 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](#) [*web-only*]

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