

Methodology

The State of English Learner Reclassification Under ESSA

Eight years out from full implementation of ESSA in the 2018–19 school year,¹ New America conducted a national scan of state-level English learner reclassification policies and trends to get a sense of what these have looked like under ESSA and how, if at all, they have evolved.

We had three research questions:

1. What is the state of English learner reclassification policy in 2025 and how have things changed since 2018–19?
2. How have states performed according to their English learner reclassification criteria between 2018–19 and 2025?
3. What can be observed about the dynamic between English learner reclassification outcomes and reclassification criteria during this time frame?

To answer these questions, we collected the following data:

- State exit/reclassification criteria as reported in initial ESSA plans and as of the 2024–25 school year
- The percentage of English learners scoring “proficient” on the statewide English language proficiency (ELP) assessment between 2018–19 and 2024–25
- Statewide EL exit/reclassification rates based on exit/reclassification criteria between 2018–19 and 2024–25

Data was gathered by searching through state education agency (SEA) websites and contacting relevant SEA staff when data were not publicly available or where clarification was needed. Google’s generative AI tool Gemini was consulted in initial searches to locate the appropriate data files on SEA websites. Data from The Biennial Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Title III State Formula Grant Program for school years 2018–2020 and 2020–2022 were also used to fill gaps for

¹ U.S. Department of Education, “Every Student Succeeds Act, Accountability, State Plans, Data Reporting: Summary of Final Regulations,” n.d., <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essafactsheet170103.pdf>.

these years, when applicable.² Data for 2019–20 and 2020–21 were excluded from our sample because of the interruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.³

Information gathered on reclassification criteria made it clear that a straight comparison between all 50 states and the District of Columbia is neither possible nor necessarily useful. There are simply too many variables. To mitigate data asymmetries between states' reclassification criteria, we created smaller units of analysis. First, we divided states into four groups based on the ELP assessment used (e.g., WIDA ACCESS, ELPA21, LAS Links, independent measure). Then states were placed in one of three subcategories:

1. "ELP Only": reclassification decisions are based only on whether English learners meet the state's ELP threshold
2. "ELP + Additional Criteria": in addition to meeting the ELP threshold, the state requires English learners to satisfy additional metrics in order to be reclassified
3. "ELP + Alternative Pathway": for English learners who score below the state's ELP threshold but whose proficiency can be corroborated with other academic information, the state offers an alternative pathway to exit language support services.

These three subcategories are consistent with the range of approaches employed by states described in a report released by WIDA in April 2026.⁴ Once we had these groups, the ELP score that English learners need to achieve to be considered "English proficient" in each state was layered in, when applicable.

States that do not belong to a consortium were clustered together, though inter-state comparisons cannot be drawn. The three states that changed their ELP assessment during the time period we analyzed (Mississippi, Tennessee, and Washington) were grouped according to their 2025 assessment. For cross-cutting comparative purposes, these states were grouped according to the ELP assessment used for the majority of the years covered. Washington changed its ELP assessment from ELPA21 to WIDA in 2021 and was included in both the total WIDA count and cross-state comparisons. Tennessee changed its ELP assessment from WIDA to ELPA21 in 2024 and was not included in the total WIDA count, but it was included in cross-state comparisons. Mississippi

² U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, *The Biennial Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Title III State Formula Grant Program: School Years 2018–2020*, (Washington, D.C., 2023), <https://ncela.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2023-06/OELABiennialReportSYs2018-20c-508.pdf#page=167>; and U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, *The Biennial Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Title III State Formula Grant Program: School Years 2020–2022*, (Washington, D.C., 2023), <https://ncela.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2025-04/2020-22-oela-biennial-20250314-508-1%29.pdf#page=16>.

³ EL assessment was significantly disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information, see Melissa Lazarin, *English Learner Testing during the Pandemic: An Early Readout and Look Ahead* (Migration Policy Institute, May 2022), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/publication/english-learner-testing-during-pandemic-early-readout-and-look-ahead>.

⁴ Kenneth Bond and Edynn Sato, *An Overview of English Learner Reclassification Policy: Approaches and Planning Considerations for State Education Agencies*, (WIDA and the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2026), 11, <https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/ResearchReport-Overview-EL-Reclassification-Policy.pdf#page=11>.

transitioned from LAS Links to ELPA21 during the 2024–25 school year and was included in the total ELPA21 count, but also included in the LAS Links section for cross-state comparisons.

New York also changed its ELP assessment, from the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test to WIDA in 2025. However, it was not included in the WIDA count or cross-state comparisons because the changes are set to take effect in 2027, beyond the scope of our two-brief series.

Applying this multilayered analytic framework allowed reclassification rate trends between states with similar exit criteria to be observed more easily, and it allowed reclassification rate trends to be observed. However, because the rules used to calculate reclassification rates can vary by state—and the methodology is not necessarily transparent—observed trends across states with similar criteria must be scrutinized.

Data reflected in this series was shared with the appropriate SEA staff for each respective state prior to publishing for their review. Data on reclassification rates were not available for every year in every state. The 10 states with reclassification data gaps are: California (2021–24), Florida (2022–25), Kansas (2022–25), Montana (2022–25), New Hampshire (2022–25), North Carolina (2022–23), Rhode Island (2022–25), Texas (2021–25), Vermont (2022–25), and West Virginia (2024–25).