

POLICY BRIEF

ENGLISH LEARNER STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

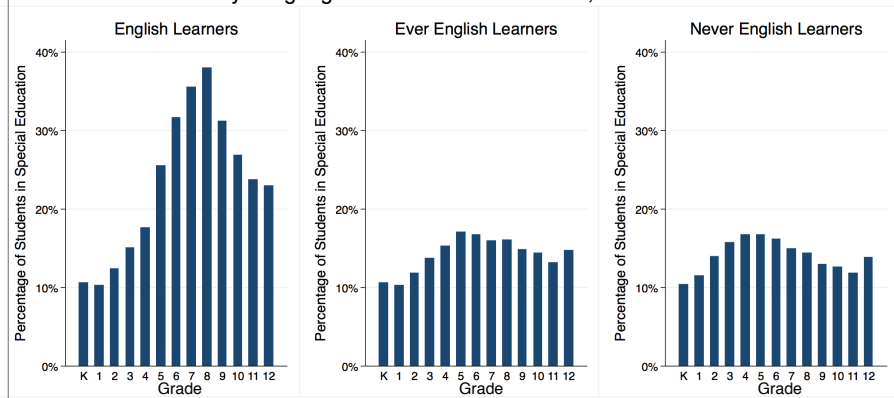
The Ever English Learner Category

Most students who enter school not yet fluent in English eventually become fluent and exit English learner (EL) services. Thus, to better understand student outcomes, we must examine outcomes for: 1) students *currently* classified as ELs and 2) *former* ELs who have exited EL services. The combined group of current and former ELs is referred to as Ever ELs.

Types of Disabilities among Ever ELs and Other Students

For Ever ELs and for other students, the most common disability type in the primary grades is Communication Disorder. At the secondary level, Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) is the most common disability type for both groups. There is some evidence that Ever ELs may be identified with SLD later than other students.

Figure 1. Percentage of Students in Special Education by Language Classification and Grade, 2013-14



English Learners' Participation in Special Education

In recent years there has been growing concern about English learner students with disabilities (ELSWDs). Analysis of Oregon data from 2013-14 shows that by middle and high school, approximately 20-40% of students currently classified as English learners qualified for special education, as illustrated in the far lefthand panel of Figure 1.

At first glance, this might suggest that English learners (ELs) are being over-identified for special education. However, comparing rates of special education participation for all students who have ever been classified as English learners (Ever ELs, see the middle panel of Figure 1) to rates for students who have never been classified as ELs (see the far righthand panel of Figure 1), illustrates that these rates are quite similar, ranging between approximately 10-15% depending on the grade level.

There is variation in this overall pattern across particular disability categories and across particular districts.



Exiting English Learner Services

English learner students with disabilities are much less likely to attain the criteria necessary to be considered proficient in English and exit EL services. Analysis of data for students entering kindergarten as ELs shows that after 8 years in Oregon schools, the likelihood that students will exit EL services is:

- 86% for students without disabilities
- 66% for students identified with a communication disorder
- 40% for students identified with a learning disability
- 33% for students identified with other disabilities

These statistics do not control for demographic or achievement differences between EL students with and without disabilities.

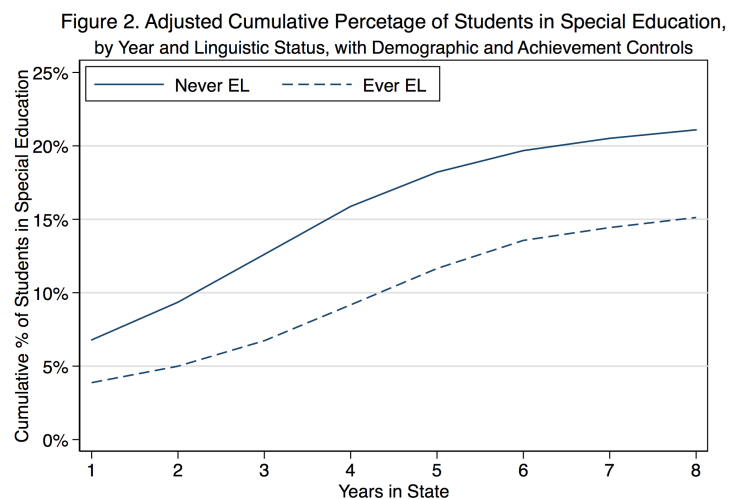
High School Outcomes

Approximately one-fourth of ELs with disabilities either drop out or are pushed out of high school. This is comparable to rates for non-ELs with disabilities and to rates for ELs without disabilities.

Comparing Likelihood of Special Education Identification for Ever ELs and Never ELs

Following cohorts of Oregon students from kindergarten into middle school shows that after controlling for a variety of factors, Ever ELs are approximately 6% less likely to qualify for special education than their peers who were never classified as ELs. (See Figure 2 below.) This gap varies somewhat by disability type. For example, there is some evidence that Ever ELs are ultimately *more* likely than Never ELs to be identified with learning disabilities. However, in all other disability categories, Ever ELs are *less* likely than Never ELs to qualify for special education services.

The high proportion of ELs who participate in special education at the secondary level appears does not appear to be driven primarily by over-identification of ELs with disabilities but by the fact that ELs with disabilities are much less likely than their peers to attain English proficiency and exit EL services. (See sidebar.)



Policy Implications

- Because most ELs without disabilities exit EL services, it is important to compare special education identification rates for Ever ELs and Never ELs.
- More guidance is needed regarding how to determine when ELSWDs have demonstrated that they have attained English proficiency and should exit EL services.
- There is a need for collaboration between special education teachers and EL specialists to best meet students' needs.