

English Language Learners:

The Nation's Fastest-Growing Student
Demographic

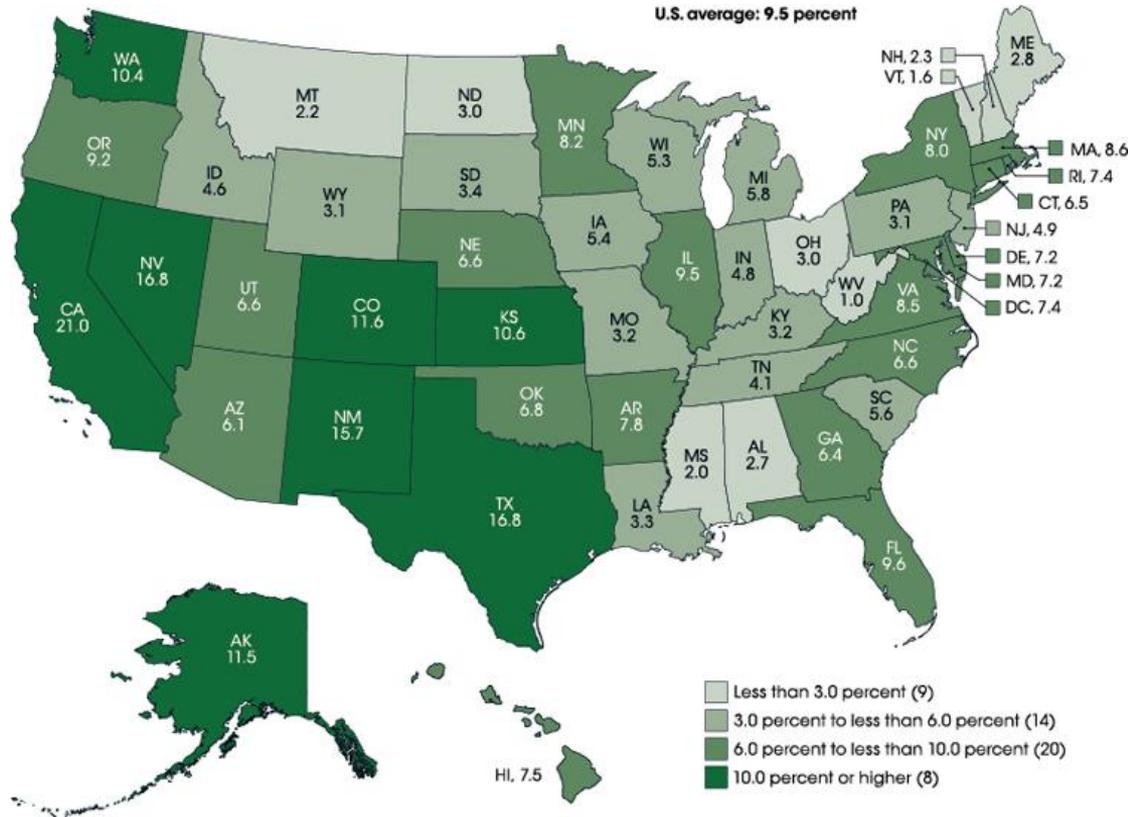
The number of English language learners in American public schools continues to rise.

- There were nearly 5 million English language learners in U.S. public schools in fall 2015, according to the most recent available data from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#). This represented 9.5% of U.S. public school enrollees, an increase from 8.1% in 2000.
- The state with the highest number of ELL students is California. Twenty-one percent of its public school students were English language learners in 2015. The next highest states were Texas and Nevada. Nearly 17 percent of both states' students were ELLs.

Who are English Language Learners?

- English language learners, also known as ELLs, are students with limited English abilities. They are a diverse group from many different states and native language backgrounds. The educational experiences of ELLs also vary greatly across the country, as states and schools differ in how to identify ELL students and in how to teach them.
- The goal is to give ELL students the language skills they need to fully take part in educational activities and help them succeed in the classroom. Studies have shown clear links between English-language **proficiency** and improved educational results.

Percentage of public school students who were English language learners, by state: Fall 2015



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2015–16. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2017*, [table 204.20](#).

ELL Demographics

- In eight states, ELLs made up 10 percent or more of the total public school students.
- Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia saw a rise in the number of ELL students from 2010 to 2015. The largest increase – 3 percent – was reported in Massachusetts.
- In 14 states, the percentage of ELLs fell in 2015 compared to 2010. The largest drop, which was 4 percent, was reported in the western state of Nevada.

Top Language Spoken by ELLs Nationally and by State

- Spanish is by far the most common language spoken at home by ELLs in 45 states, as well as Washington, D.C. Twenty-one percent of Spanish-speaking ELLs live in California.
- Arabic is the second most common language spoken at home by ELL students. Across America, 2.4 percent of English learners reported speaking mainly Arabic at home. But that percentage was much higher in some U.S. states. For example, about 24 percent of ELLs reported speaking Arabic at home in the northern state of Michigan.

Top Language Spoken by ELLs Nationally and by State ²

- Chinese is the third most commonly spoken language by American ELL students. About 2 percent of the total – or about 101,000 students - identified themselves as Chinese speakers at home. Pew’s report also noted that across all 50 states, Chinese is among the five most common languages spoken by ELLs.
- Vietnamese is the fourth most common language. About 81,000 ELL students reported speaking Vietnamese at home. That is 1.7 percent of all ELLs.

Top Language Spoken by ELLs Nationally and by State ³

- In Hawaii and Alaska, however, the most common language spoken by the states' ELLs were none of the major languages reported across the country. Instead, the most commonly spoken languages match each state's main immigrant or **indigenous** populations, the Migration Policy Institute [reported](#).
- In Hawaii, 21 percent of students reported speaking Ilokano, a language native to the Philippines. In Alaska, 40 percent reported speaking Yupik – a family of languages used by the Yupik indigenous population.

Top Language Spoken by ELLs Nationally and by State ⁴

- While these are among the most common languages spoken at home, ELL students in the U.S. speak more than 400 languages, many with large pockets in certain states. For example, Hmong is spoken by relatively large shares of ELL students in Minnesota (16%) and Wisconsin (15%).

Cities are more likely than rural areas to have students who are ELLs

- About 14 percent of ELLs live in cities, the National Center for Education Statistics reported. Nine percent live in suburban areas. And around 6.5 percent lived in small towns, while 3.6 percent were in rural areas.
- Not surprisingly, most English language learners were in lower grade levels. In 2015, 67 percent of students were either in kindergarten or grades 1 through 5. The other 33 percent were in sixth through 12th grades.
- However, 62 percent of American public school districts reported having at least some high school English language learners

Most English language learners are in elementary school grades

- In 2015, two-thirds of ELL students (67%) were in grades K-5, while just one-third (33%) were in grades 6-12. Looked at a different way, 16% of kindergartners were ELL students, compared with only 4% of 12th-graders.
- Many students are identified as English language learners when they enter elementary school but gain enough English language ability in upper grades to be reclassified as proficient.

A majority of public school districts in the U.S. have English learners in high school

- Although ELL students tend to be in elementary school, 62% of public school districts in 2015 had at least some high school English learners.
- Nationwide, the U.S. had nearly 800,000 high school ELL students, according to a separate NCES survey on [programs and services for high school English learners](#).
- Although most districts have high school English learners, many districts only have a few ELL students in high school: Half had 10 or fewer English learner students, while half had 11 or more.

Most U.S. public school students with limited English proficiency are U.S. citizens

- Among public school students ages 5 to 17 who report speaking English “less than very well,” 72% were born in the United States, compared with 28% who were foreign born.
- Only 23% of limited English proficiency students ages 5 to 17 are not U.S. citizens. Older public school students are more likely to be noncitizens.
- Around a third (32%) of limited English proficiency students in grades 6-12 are noncitizens, compared with 17% of students in grades K-5.



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