



Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA)

The Top Languages Spoken by English Learners (ELs) in the United States

States annually report the five languages other than English most commonly spoken by English learners (ELs) as well as the number of ELs who speak each of the “top five” languages. This fact sheet gives an overview of the five most commonly spoken languages in each state during the 2016–17 school year. Fifty languages or language categories¹ appear in one or more states’ top-five lists. The number of speakers reported include only those who speak the language in a state where that language is among the top five. This fact sheet does not include all speakers of the particular language by the nation’s ELs.

The Top 20 Languages on States’ “Top Five” Lists of Languages Spoken by K–12 ELs: 2016–17 School Year

Ranking	States’ Top 5 Languages: SY 2016-17	Number of Speakers Reported ^{a/}	Percent of Total U.S. EL Students ^{b/}
1	Spanish; Castilian	3,790,949	76.44%
2	Arabic	122,227	2.46%
3	Chinese	94,711	1.91%
4	Vietnamese	63,078	1.27%
5	Somali	29,460	0.59%
6	Haitian; Haitian Creole	26,032	0.52%
7	Hmong	19,616	0.40%
8	Tagalog	19,169	0.39%
9	Portuguese	18,305	0.37%
10	Russian	12,619	0.25%
11	Urdu	10,216	0.21%
12	Bengali	9,303	0.19%
13	Navajo; Navaho	7,943	0.16%
14	Karen Languages	6,574	0.13%
15	Polish	5,989	0.12%
16	Marshallese	5,014	0.10%
17	Portuguese-based Creoles and Pidgins	3,902	0.08%
18	Burmese	3,822	0.08%
19	Amharic	3,575	0.07%
20	Nepali	3,328	0.07%

FACT

During the 2016-17 school year, approximately 76 percent of all ELs spoke Spanish. Spanish was on all states’ ‘top five’ lists and was the most commonly spoken language of ELs in 46 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The top languages of the remaining four states were:

- Alaska—the Yupik languages, representing 38.81 percent of its ELs^{b/}.
- Hawaii—Iloko, representing 18.22 percent of its ELs^{b/}.
- Maine—Somali, representing 31.28% of its ELs^{b/}.
- Vermont—Nepali, representing 23.86% of its ELs^{b/}.

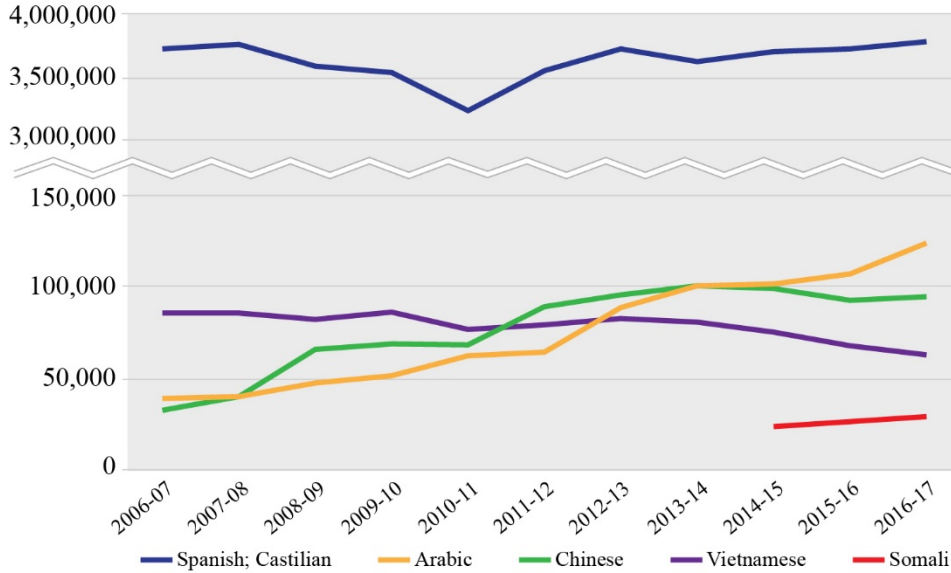
NOTE: State Educational Agencies (SEAs) report the top five languages and the number of all ELs, not just ELs receiving Title III services, speaking each of the top five languages.

^{a/} The total number of ELs reported in grades K-12 for the 2016-17 school year was 4,959,088.

^{b/} Author calculation. Percent = Total number of state-reported speakers of top five languages divided by the total number of ELs in grades K-12, multiplied by 100. The percent of total U.S. EL students does not necessarily represent the portion of all ELs in U.S. schools who speak a language, only those in states where the language is in the top five.

¹ Language categories, or language families, are groups of languages that exhibit linguistic similarities, often due to geographic region. The Library of Congress is the registration authority for the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 639 standards, as set of codes to represent languages and language families. For more information, see <https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-5/id.php>

Ten-Year Trends of the Five Most Common Languages of the 2016–17 School Year



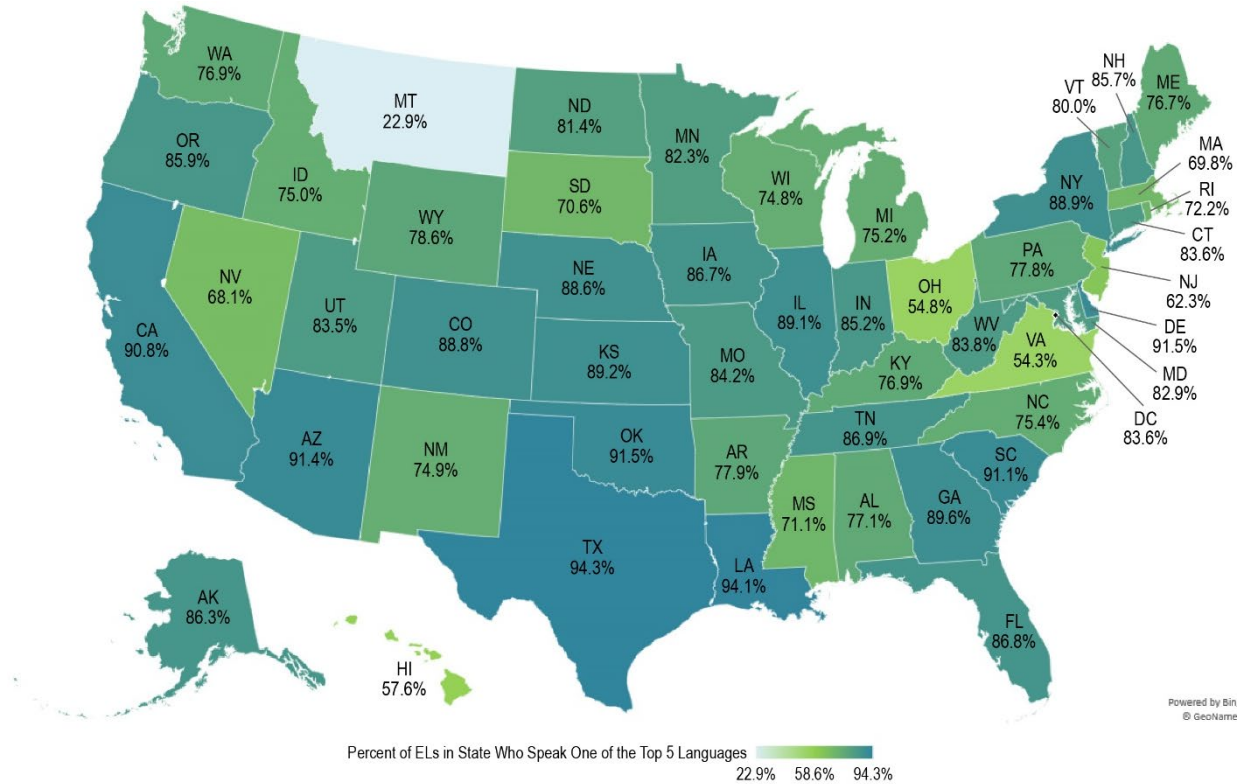
FACT

In 38 states and the District of Columbia, more than 75 percent of states’ ELs spoke one of the state’s “top five” languages during the 2016–17 school year.

Montana was the only state to report that less than half of their ELs spoke one of the state’s five most common languages. Though ELs in Montana speak many diverse languages, at least 75 percent speak one of many Native American languages.²

NOTE: Somali was not a top five language prior to the 2014-15 school year. During the 2012-13 and 2013-14 school years, Haitian Creole was the fifth most common language in states’ top five lists. From the 2006-07 school year to the 2011-12 school year, Hmong was among the top five languages reported by states.

Percentage of ELs Who Are Speakers of a State’s Top 5 Languages, by State 2016–17 School Year



SOURCE for entire document: U.S. Department of Education, Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR): Part I: SY 2016-17 (OMB #1810-0724). The data used for this document were reported by SEAs from the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Data were accessed in Fall 2018.

² SOURCE: Montana Office of Public Instruction. (2013). Montana’s English Language Learners: Guidance for School Districts, June 2013. Retrieved from <https://opi.mt.gov/Portals/182/Page%20Files/Statewide%20Testing/ELP%20Page/Montana%27sEnglishLanguageLearnersGuidanceforSchoolDistricts.pdf>



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