

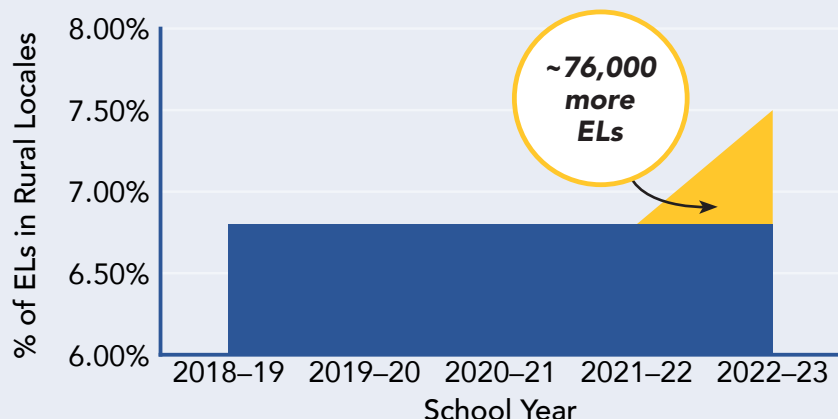
English Learners in Rural Localities



Nationally, in school year (SY) 2021–22 over 350,000 students enrolled in rural locales were English learners (ELs). These students bring unique cultural, educational, and linguistic experiences that enrich their communities. However, they may also encounter educational challenges, such as high levels of poverty, limited educational funding, and educator shortages, that affect their educational achievement. This infographic provides an overview of this student group and highlights demographic information, enrollment concentrations, and languages spoken by ELs who attend schools in rural localities.¹

Rural English Learner Enrollment: School Years 2018–19 to 2022–23

In the last several years, there has been a slight growth in the enrollment of ELs in public schools in rural locales. While EL enrollment increased by less than 1%, this represented almost 76,000 additional ELs enrolled in schools in rural areas in SY 2022–23.

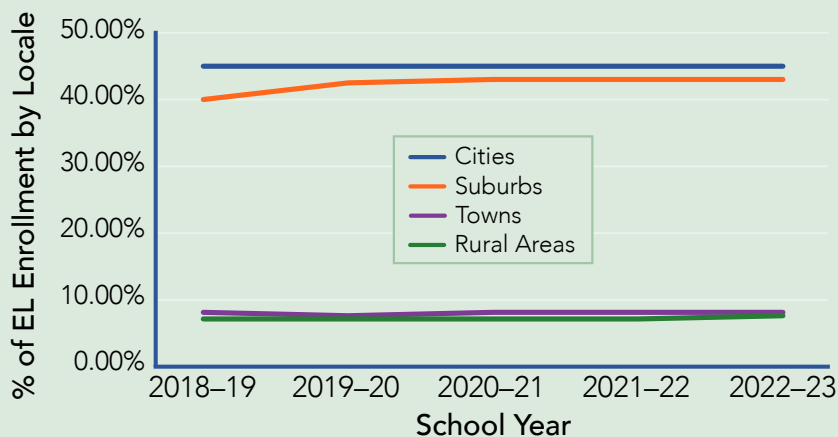


Out of all ELs enrolled in public schools, the percentage of ELs enrolled in rural area schools grew from 6.8% in SY 2018–19 to 7.5% in SY 2022–23, or by almost 76,000 students.

English Learner Enrollment by Locale: School Years 2018–19 to 2022–23

Between SY 2018–19 and SY 2022–23, trends in EL enrollment by locale remained steady, with the majority of ELs enrolled in urban and suburban schools.

Out of all ELs enrolled in public schools, an average of 85% were enrolled in urban and suburban districts. Only about 15% were enrolled in towns and rural area locales. EL enrollment in towns remained at around 8%, slightly higher than EL enrollment in rural areas.



Note: The data presented in this infographic do not include data on charter schools. Charter schools are concentrated mostly in urban areas, and their enrollment trends were not analyzed for the purpose of this document.

Note: The data presented in this infographic include 51 U.S. state education agencies and do not include data on Puerto Rico.

Note: For SY 2018–19, five states were excluded from data analysis. They were Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, and Missouri. The reason for this exclusion was incomplete data from the EDFacts FS 141 – DG678 LEA file.

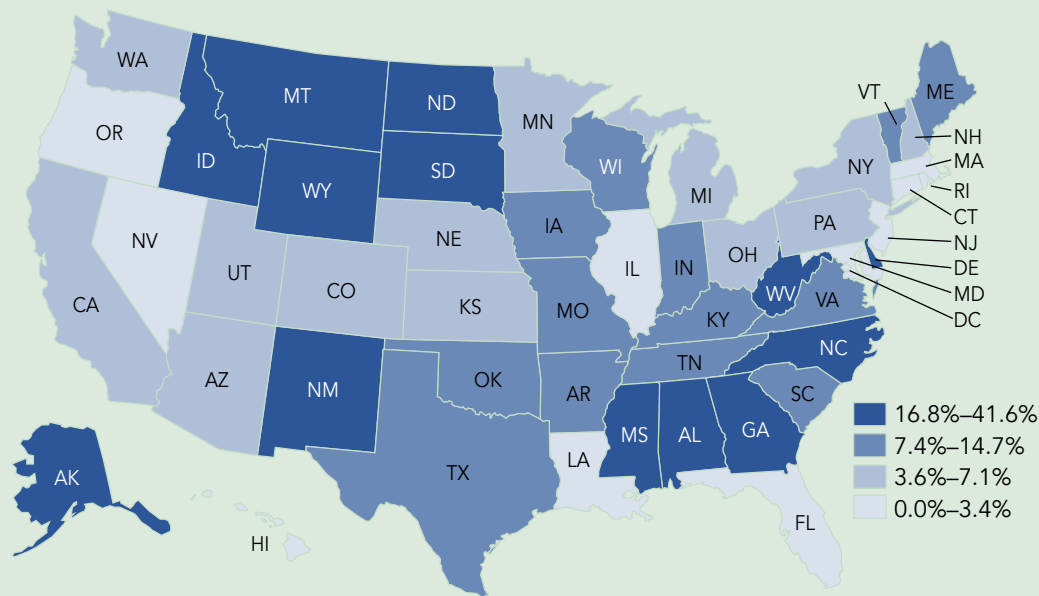
Source: U.S. Department of Education, *EDFacts*. FS141 – DG678, 2018–19 through 2022–23. Retrieved from ED Data Express.

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Source: U.S. Department of Education, *EDFacts*. FS050 – DG151, 2021–22. Retrieved from ED Data Express.

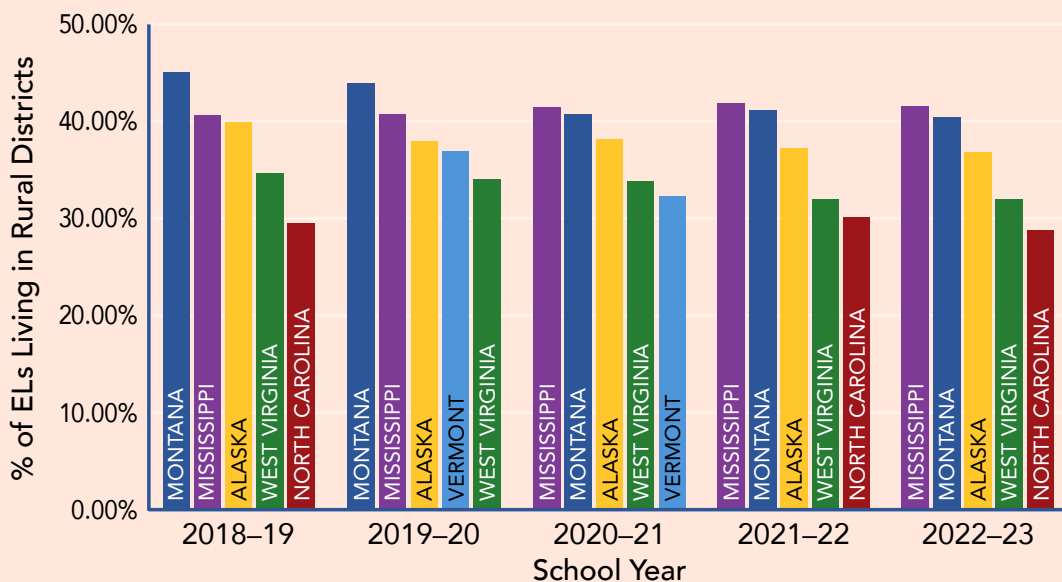
Percentage of English Learners in Rural Districts by State in School Year 2022–23

Between SY 2018–19 and SY 2022–23, most state education agencies (SEAs) did not experience significant changes in EL enrollment in rural districts. During that period, the percentage of ELs in rural districts increased or decreased by less than 1% in more than half of the SEAs. Delaware was an SEA that experienced a large increase in rural EL enrollment. The percentage of ELs enrolled in rural districts in Delaware increased by 23%, or by over 3,000 students.

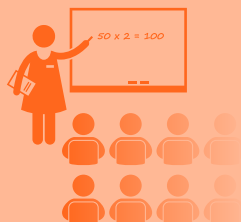


State Education Agencies With Highest and Lowest Percentages of English Learners in Rural Locales: School Years 2018–19 to 2022–23⁵

Between SY 2018–19 and 2022–23, six SEAs had **high percentages of ELs enrolled in rural districts**. Several of these SEAs also had the lowest overall EL enrollment. In SY 2019–20 to SY 2022–23, Vermont had the lowest EL enrollment out of all 51 SEAs. West Virginia and Montana were also among the SEAs with the lowest overall EL enrollment.



Between SY 2018–19 and 2022–23, **Montana** and **Mississippi** were the two SEAs with the **highest percentages** of ELs enrolled in rural districts. On average, out of all ELs enrolled in Montana public schools, over 42% were enrolled in rural districts. In Mississippi, over 41% of all ELs attended rural schools during these five school years.



Out of the six SEAs with high percentages of ELs enrolled in rural districts in SY 2021–22, three also had very high student–teacher ratios. **Alaska** had the highest ratio of 275 ELs to one EL teacher, **Mississippi** had a ratio of 101 ELs to one teacher, and **North Carolina** had a ratio of 61 ELs to one teacher. These ratios exceed the **national ratio of 12 ELs per teacher**² and may indicate a shortage of EL educators in SEAs with high percentages of ELs in rural areas.

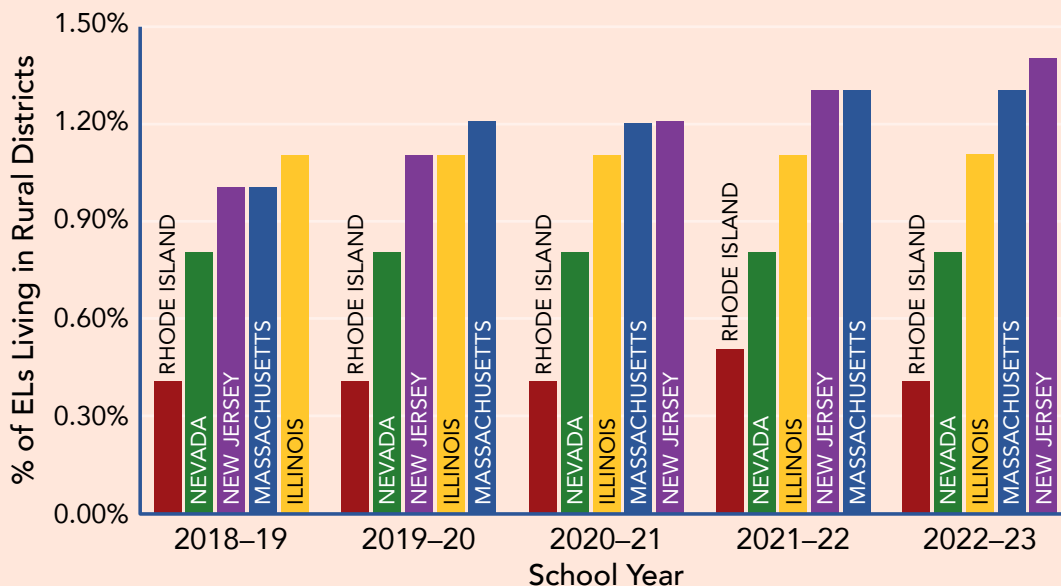
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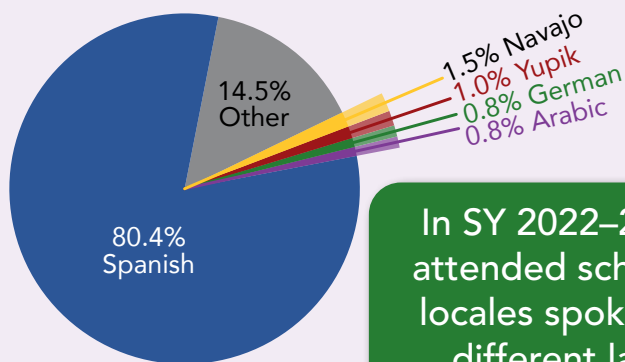
Between SY 2018–19 and SY 2022–23, five SEAs had low percentages of ELs enrolled in rural districts. Illinois, one of the five states with the **lowest percentages of ELs enrolled in rural districts**, was also one of the five states with the highest overall population of ELs during SYs 2018–19 to 2022–23.

Between SY 2018–19 and 2022–23, **Rhode Island** and **Nevada** had the lowest percentages of ELs enrolled in rural districts. Out of all ELs enrolled in Rhode Island public schools, less than 0.5% were enrolled in rural districts. In Nevada, approximately 0.8% of all ELs attended rural schools during this period.



Languages Spoken by English Learners in Rural Locales: School Years 2018–19 to 2022–23

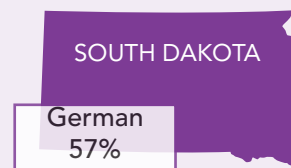
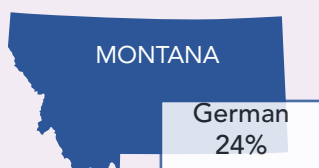
In SY 2022–23, the five most common languages spoken by ELs in rural locales were Spanish, Navajo, Yupik, German, and Arabic. Out of all ELs enrolled in rural districts, Spanish was the predominant native language, spoken by more than 80% of ELs, followed by Navajo, spoken by about 1.5% of ELs in rural districts. The other three languages were spoken by less than 1% of rural ELs.



In SY 2022–23, ELs who attended schools in rural locales spoke over **120** different languages.

When comparing the five most common languages spoken by ELs in rural districts to the most common languages spoken by ELs nationwide, only two of the languages, Spanish and Arabic, are the same. The other three languages, Navajo, Yupik, and German, are not among the top five or even the top ten of the most common languages for ELs nationwide.³ This may suggest that ELs in rural locales are very diverse linguistically, culturally, and demographically.

In SY 2022–23, there were only three states where the most common language spoken by ELs enrolled in rural districts was a language other than Spanish. They were Alaska, where the most common language was Yupik, and Montana and South Dakota, where the most common language was German.



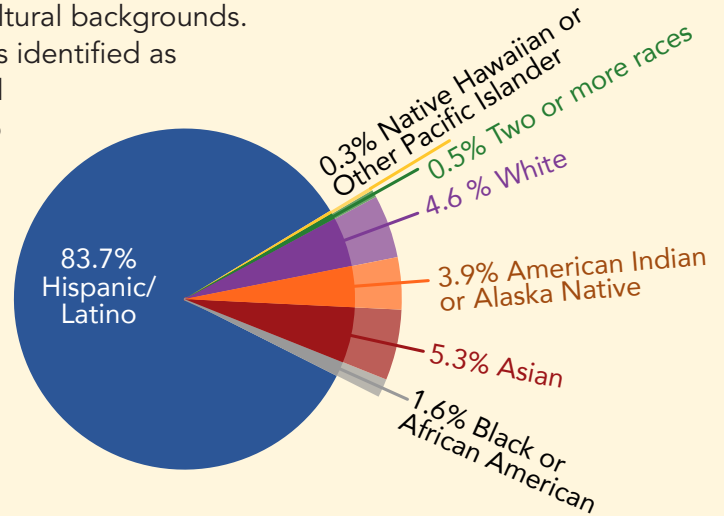
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Source: U.S. Department of Education, *EDFacts*. FS050 – DG151, 2021–22. Retrieved from ED Data Express.

Ethnicities of English Learners in Rural Locales in School Year 2022–23

ELs in rural locales represent multiple ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. During SY 2022–23, the largest ethnic group of students identified as Hispanic/Latino and made up almost 84% of ELs in rural districts. The second-largest group were Asian ELs, who made up more than 5%, and the third-largest group were White ELs at 4.6%. The top three rural EL ethnicities reflect the national EL ethnicities trend, where Hispanic, Asian, and White students make up the three top ethnic categories. The biggest difference between rural ELs and ELs nationwide is in the American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) ELs. Nationally, less than 1% of ELs identify as AI/AN,⁴ but among ELs in rural locales, this ethnic group makes up almost 4%.



Language Proficiency, Needs, and Support for English Learners in Rural Locales

In SY 2021–22, an average of **11% of ELs in rural districts** scored proficient on English language proficiency (ELP) assessments. This percentage was slightly lower than the **nationwide percentage for all identified ELs out of which 12%** scored proficient on ELP assessments.

Meanwhile, an average of **32% of rural ELs made progress** on ELP assessments. This percentage was slightly higher than the **percentage for all identified ELs out of which 28%** made progress on ELP assessments.

While all ELs have educational needs, a unique challenge for ELs in rural locales is limited research into their educational contexts.⁵ Most research on EL education focuses on the populations residing in urban and suburban areas.⁶ There has not been a very robust research agenda focusing on ELs in rural districts. The **challenges** that have been identified for ELs who attend schools in rural locales include, but are not limited to



- **Limited resources**⁷
- **Shortage of qualified educators**⁸
- **Limited funding and capacity**⁹
- **Family engagement barriers**¹⁰



Source: U.S. Department of Education, *EDFacts*. FS141 – DG678, 2018–19 through 2022–23. Retrieved from ED Data Express.

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Source: U.S. Department of Education, *EDFacts*. FS050 – DG151, 2021–22. Retrieved from ED Data Express.

	 Challenges	 Evidence-Based Best Practices
Resources and Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer types of language instruction educational programs,¹¹ and language supports such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Newcomer programs – Dual language/bilingual programs – Sheltered instruction • Limited access to technology and broadband internet¹² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hybrid/distance support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Virtual Newcomer programs – Partial dual language/bilingual programs – High-quality scaffolded Tier 1 instruction • School-based connectivity hubs • Offline language-development platforms • Technology-focused teacher training programs
Teacher Shortage and Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited numbers of ESL and bilingual educators in rural areas • Limited access to quality professional development for EL teachers • ESL educators serve multiple schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured co-teaching and co-planning models <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Team teaching – Station teaching – Joint content and ESL planning • Grow your own programs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Paraprofessional/community members pathways to certification – Partnerships with regional universities • Online and micro credentials • Online and virtual professional development
Funding and Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small Title III allocations • Lower tax bases • Limited access to regional partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic use of Title III funds <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Pooling funds across districts – Prioritizing high-impact investments • Multi-district EL coordinator positions
Family Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barriers • Limited access to translation services • Transportation challenges • Fewer resources for family outreach programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based engagement models <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Family events in safe and familiar community locations • Virtual and online translation/interpretation services • Part-time bilingual family liaison • Language classes for parents

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Source: U.S. Department of Education, *EDFacts*. FS050 – DG151, 2021–22. Retrieved from ED Data Express.

End Notes

- ¹ National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). *English learners in public schools* (Condition of Education). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved February 19, 2026, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf/english-learners-in-public-schools>
- ² U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. (2025). *Biennial report to Congress on the implementation of the Title III state formula grant program: School years 2020–2022*. National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. <https://ncela.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2025-04/2020-22-oela-biennial-20250314-508-1%29.pdf>
- ³ U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. (2026). *Top languages of English learners* [Fact sheet]. National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. https://ncela.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2026-01/toplanguages_12192025-508.pdf
- ⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. (2022). *Heritage language learners and AI/AN students* [Infographic]. National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. https://ncela.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2022-09/HeritageLanguageInfographic_FINAL_508.pdf
- ⁵ Coady, M. R. (2020). Rural English learner education: A review of research and call for a national agenda. *Educational Researcher*, 49(7), 524–532. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20931505>
- ⁶ Williams, S. M., & Grooms, A. A. (2016). *Educational opportunity in rural contexts: The politics of place*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- ⁷ Fischer, L. W., & Weeks, O. (2024, August 22). *Teaching bilingual learners in rural schools*. EdSurge. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2024-08-22-teaching-bilingual-learners-in-rural-schools>
- ⁸ Metz, R. (2023). *Rural California school faces teaching shortage, Transitional Kindergarten program at risk*. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-08-01/rural-california-school-teaching-shortage-transitional-kindergarten?utm>
- ⁹ Mokuia, L. (2024). *Understanding funding challenges for rural schools: Impacts on educational quality*. Rural Debate Initiative. <https://www.ruraldebateinitiative.org/post/understanding-funding-challenges-for-rural-schools-impacts-on-educational-quality>
- ¹⁰ Coady, M. (2019). Rural multilingual family engagement: Review of research and model of engagement. *The Rural Educator*, 40(3), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v40i3.545>
- ¹¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. (2025). *Biennial report to Congress on the implementation of the Title III state formula grant program: School years 2020–2022*. National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. <https://ncela.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2025-04/2020-22-oela-biennial-20250314-508-1%29.pdf>
- ¹² National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). *Rural students' access to the Internet* (Indicator LFC). The Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/lfc/internet-access-students-rural?tid=1000>