# English Learner Engagement

English learner (EL) engagement extends beyond classroom participation. It includes academic, behavioral, social, emotional, and family engagement—all of which contribute to EL students' learning and success. Research shows that engaged ELs are more likely to attend school regularly, achieve academically, graduate from high school, participate in advanced learning opportunities, and successfully transition to college and careers. Creating welcoming schools, building strong family partnerships, and ensuring access to a variety of learning opportunities help ELs thrive in K-12 schools and beyond.

## Why Engagement Matters

1. Attendance supports graduation. Newcomer ELs missing more than 20 days had less than a 50% probability of graduating.[1]

2. Family engagement supports EL success. A synthesis of 28 studies linked family involvement with improved academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional outcomes.[2]

3. Family-school partnerships matter. ELs benefit when schools create consistent and meaningful opportunities for family input and celebrate families' experiences and expertise.[3]

4. Engagement and achievement are connected. Student engagement is associated with English language proficiency and academic achievement.[4]

# School Responsibility: Increase Graduation and Regular Attendance

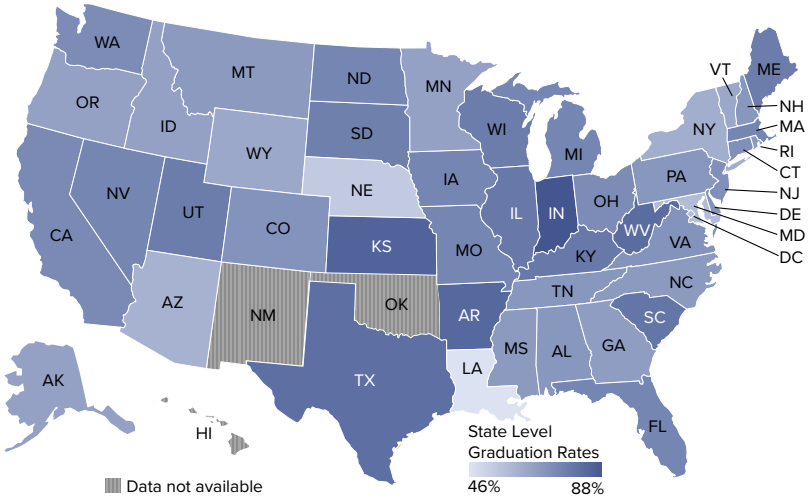
Graduating from high school is an important milestone that opens pathways to college, careers, military service, and other postsecondary opportunities. The four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate measures the percentage of students who earn a regular high school diploma within four years of entering ninth grade.

In school year (SY) 2021–22, the national four-year graduation rate for ELs was *72.1%*, compared with *86.6% for all students.* EL graduation rates varied considerably across states, ranging from *46.0% to 88.0%* among states with reported data. Several states reported EL graduation rates greater than 80%, demonstrating that ELs are reaching this important milestone across diverse educational contexts.

Regular school attendance is an important indicator of student engagement and a strong predictor of academic success. Students who attend school consistently have more opportunities to develop ELP, access grade-level instruction, build relationships with teachers and peers, and participate in enriching school experiences such as clubs, sports, and other extracurricular activities. Chronic absenteeism can interrupt learning, making it more difficult for ELs to meet academic milestones and remain on track for high school graduation. Examining attendance patterns can help identify barriers to ELs' success. In SY 2020–21, 28.7% of all students were chronically absent. ELs comprised 13.5% of students labeled chronically absent in that school year.

*Source: Civil Rights Data Collection SY 2020–21*

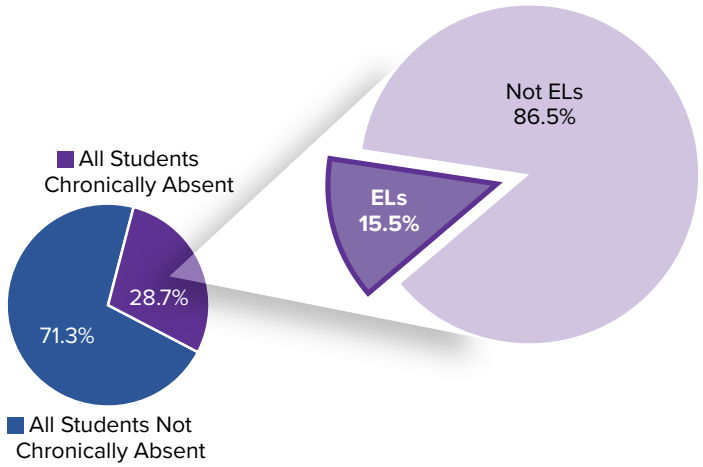
## *Graduation Rates for English Learners: School Year 2021–22*




Graduation is one potential outcome associated with sustained student engagement. Examining state-level graduation data alongside indicators such as attendance, academic participation, and school connectedness can help educators and leaders identify opportunities to strengthen engagement and support more ELs on their pathways to postsecondary success.

*Source: U.S. Department of Education, EDFacts SY 2021–22*

## *English Learners School Attendance School Year 2020–21*



# Family Engagement: Building Strong Partnerships

Families play a vital role in supporting ELs' academic success, language development, and overall well-being. Meaningful family engagement is built on trusting partnerships between schools and families where communication is two-way, responsive, and focused on supporting student learning. When schools actively engage families as partners, English learners are better positioned to develop language and literacy skills, attend school regularly, achieve academically, and prepare for future educational and career opportunities.

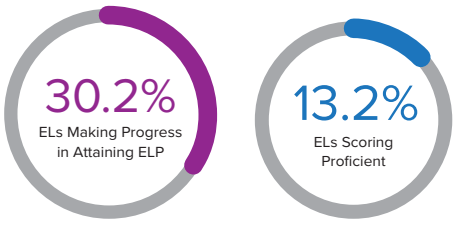
### Check out these resources to learn more:

- NCELA Family Toolkit
- REL Pacific Part 1 – Building an Understanding of Family and Community Engagement
- REL Pacific Part 3 – Building Trusting Relationships Through Effective Communication
- REL Northwest – Strengthen Literacy Through Family Engagement
- WestEd – Supporting Effective Family Engagement and Community Partnerships

# English Language Proficiency and Academic Achievement

Academic success for ELs includes both developing proficiency in English and mastering grade-level academic standards. Academic engagement creates opportunities for ELs to participate in rigorous instruction, collaborate with peers, and apply new knowledge in meaningful ways. Progress on English language proficiency (ELP) assessments and achievement in reading/English language arts (ELA), science, and mathematics reflect important milestones in ELs' educational journeys and help educators understand how well schools are supporting ELs.

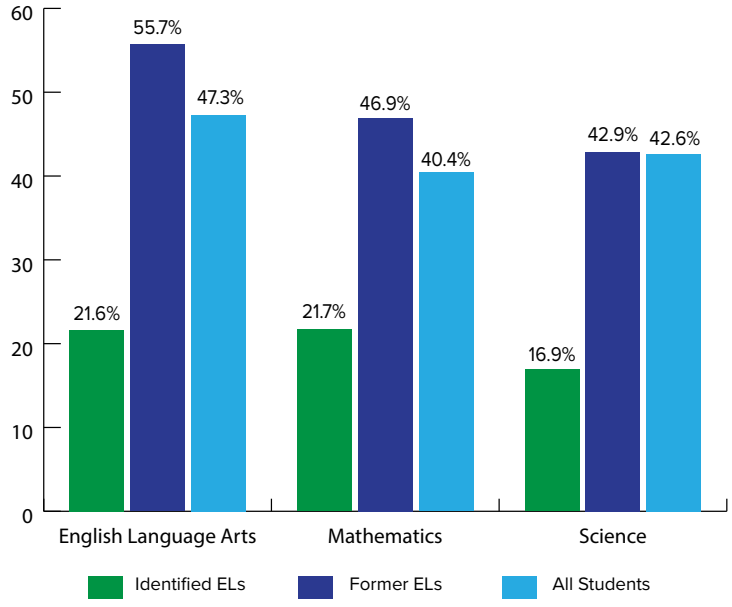
### English Learners Making Progress and Attaining English Language Proficiency in School Year 2022–23




In SY 2022–23, more than 30% of identified ELs made progress toward attaining ELP, while over 13% scored proficient. In SY 2022–23, identified ELs scored, on average, 23 percentage points lower than all students on ELA, math, and science. However, former ELs outperformed all students and identified ELs on ELA and mathematics assessments and performed similarly to all students on science assessments.

*Source: U.S. Department of Education, EDFacts SY 2022–23*

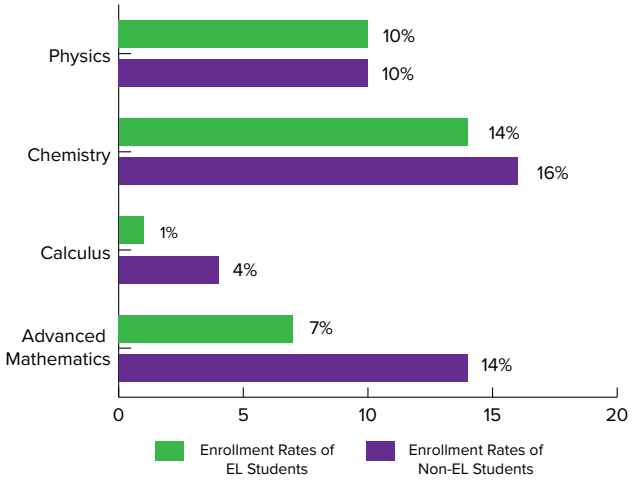
### Percentage of Identified English Learners, Former English Learners, and All Students Scoring Proficient or Above on State Assessments: School Year 2022–23



# Opportunities to Engage With Rigorous Coursework

Access to rigorous coursework is an important factor in student engagement and educational opportunities. Participation in Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), advanced mathematics, and advanced science courses enables ELs to deepen their academic knowledge, prepare for college and careers, and earn college credit while still in high school. Examining participation rates helps educators identify opportunities to expand access to challenging coursework and ensure that ELs can fully engage in high-quality learning experiences.

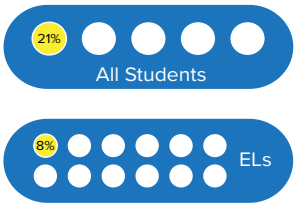
## Enrollment Rates of English Learners in Advanced Science and Math Classes SY 2020–21




With the exception of physics, ELs enrolled in advanced science and math courses at lower rates when compared to non-ELs.

*Source: Civil Rights Data Collection SY 2020–21*

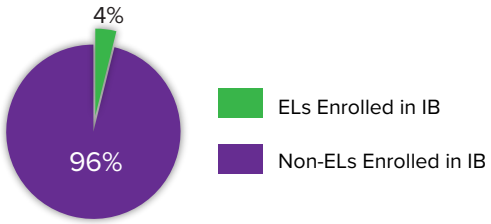
## AP Enrollment for English Learners and All Students SY 2020–2021




Enrolling in AP courses reflects students' engagement in rigorous academic learning and their readiness to demonstrate college-level knowledge. Participation provides ELs with opportunities to earn college credit, strengthen college applications, and prepare for postsecondary success. In SY 2020–21, approximately *21%* of all grade 9–12 students were in enrolled in an AP course, whereas only *8%* of grade 9–12 ELs were enrolled.

*Source: Civil Rights Data Collection SY 2020–21*

## IB Enrollment Rates English Learners and Non-English Learners SY 2020–2021




The IB offers the Diploma Program for students ages 16–19. Students in this program study language and literature; language acquisition; individuals and societies; sciences; mathematics; and the arts. In SY 2020–21, ELs represented *8%* of students in grades 9–12 enrolled in U.S. schools, but comprised only *4%* of students enrolled in IB.

*Source: Civil Rights Data Collection SY 2020–21*

## Promising Practices: Evidence-based Strategies to Improve and Enhance English Learner Engagement[5,6]

- Creating welcoming learning environments
- Partnering with families
- Supporting regular attendance
- Expanding access to rigorous coursework
- Providing language-rich instruction
- Encouraging participation beyond the classroom
- Recognizing multilingualism as an asset

### Cited Works:


[1] Chu, H., & Fong, A. B. (2015). *Ninth grade newcomers in the Fort Worth Independent School District: Predictors of graduation outcomes.* WestEd.
[2] He, B., & Thompson, C. (2022). Family involvement and English learners' outcomes: A synthetic analysis. *International Review of Education, 68*(3), 409–440. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11159-022-09958-6
[3] National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. (2023). *English learner family toolkit.* U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. https://ncela.ed.gov/educator-support/toolkits/family-toolkit
[4] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures.* The National Academies Press. https://www.nationalacademies.org/projects/IOM-BCYF-14-06/publication/24677
[5] National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. (2025). *Implementing evidence-based instructional practices for English learners.* U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. https://ncela.ed.gov/resources/brief-implementing-evidence-based-instructional-practices-for-english-learners-january
[6] National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. (2023). *English learner family toolkit.* U.S Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. https://ncela.ed.gov/educator-support/toolkits/family-toolkit