

# English Learners in Public Schools

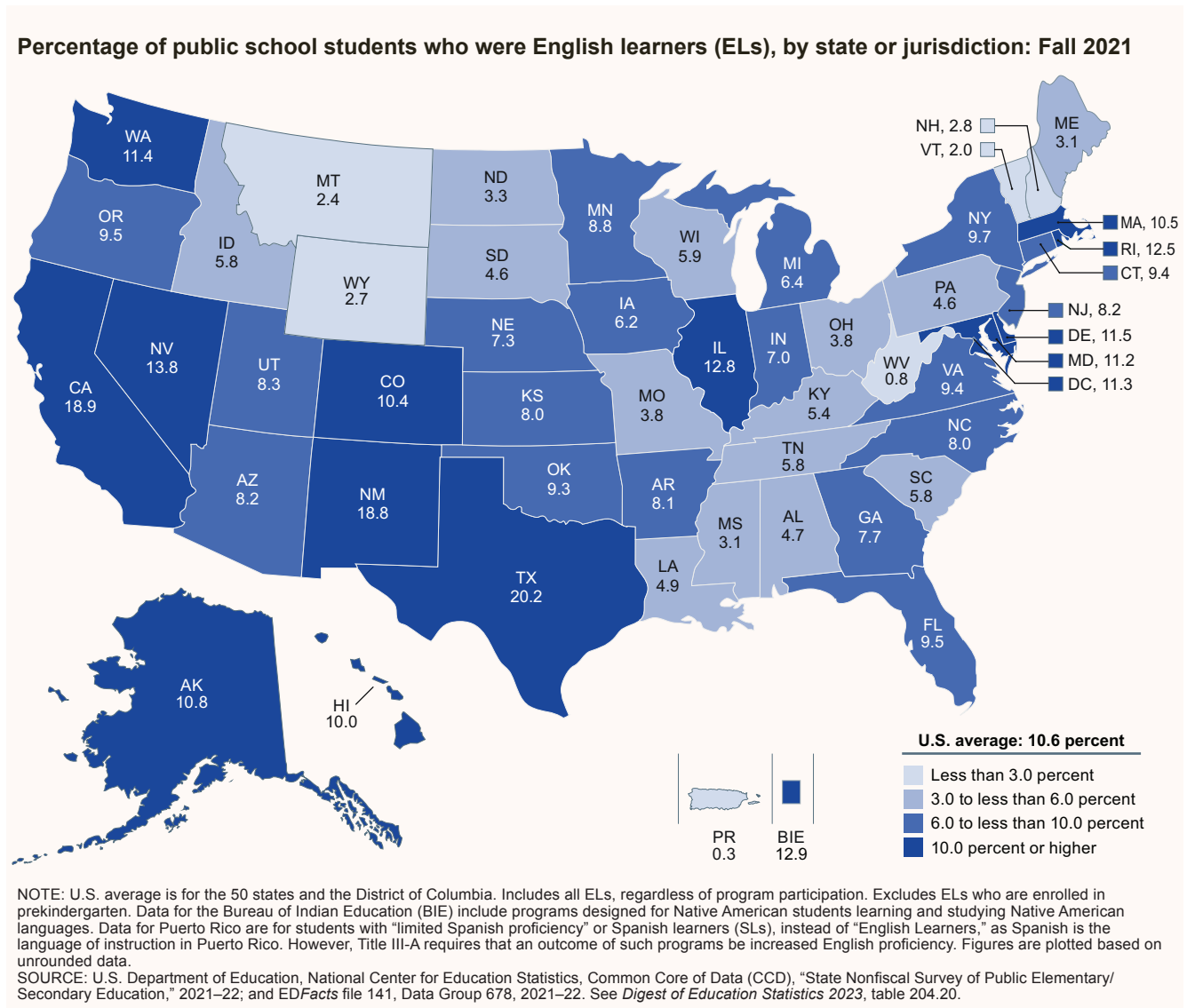
***The percentage of public school students in the United States who were English learners (ELs) was higher in fall 2021 (10.6 percent, or 5.3 million students) than in fall 2011 (9.4 percent, or 4.6 million students). In fall 2021, across the 50 states and the District of Columbia, the percentage of public school students who were ELs ranged from 0.8 percent in West Virginia to 20.2 percent in Texas.***

Students who are identified as English learners (ELs) can participate in language assistance programs to help ensure that they attain English proficiency and meet the academic content and achievement standards expected of all students. This indicator first looks at the number and percentage of ELs in kindergarten and higher grades over time.<sup>1</sup> Data on ELs include students with a current EL identification but not students who were formerly identified as ELs but no longer are. This indicator then examines the percentage of ELs who received services, as well as the percentage who attained language proficiency on state assessments. For more information on the educational outcomes of ELs, see [Reading Performance](#), [Mathematics Performance](#), and [High School Graduation Rates](#).

## ***English Learners as a Percentage of Public School Enrollment***

The percentage of public school students in the United States<sup>2</sup> who were ELs increased overall between fall 2011 (9.4 percent, or 4.6 million students) and fall 2021 (10.6 percent, or 5.3 million students). However, this upward trend was disrupted between fall 2019 and fall 2020—during the first school year of the coronavirus pandemic—when EL enrollment fell from 5.1 million to 5.0 million students (although the percentage of public school students who were ELs rounded to 10.1 percent in both years).<sup>3</sup>

**FIGURE 1.**



In fall 2021, ELs represented 10.0 percent or more of public school students in 13 states—more than half of which were located in the West—and in the District of Columbia. These states were Alaska, California, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Texas, and Washington. The states with the highest percentages of ELs were

- Texas (20.2 percent);
- California (18.9 percent); and
- New Mexico (18.8 percent).

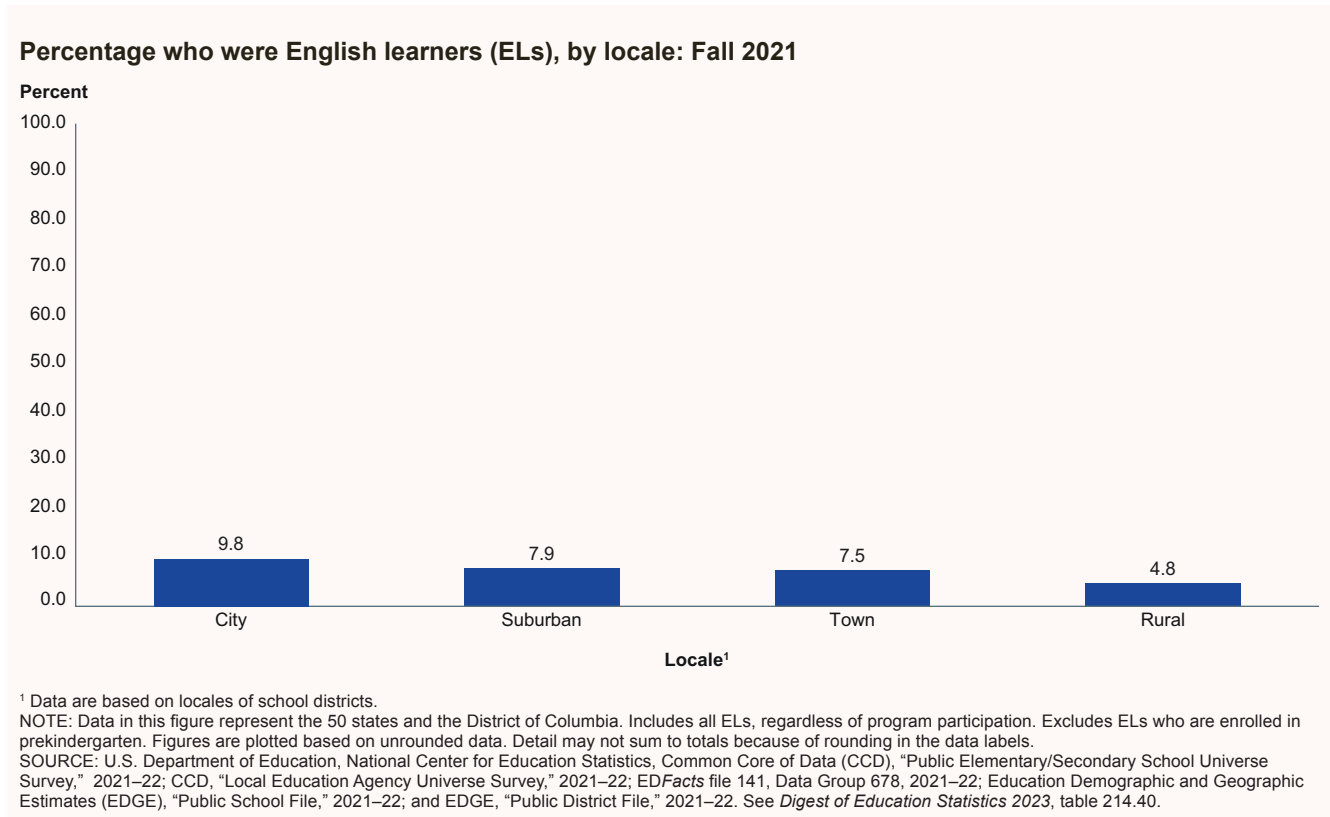
An additional 18 states identified at least 6.0 but less than 10.0 percent of their students as ELs, and 14 states identified at least 3.0 but less than 6.0 percent of their students as ELs. The percentage of students who were ELs was less than 3.0 percent in 5 states:

- New Hampshire (2.8 percent)
- Wyoming (2.7 percent)
- Montana (2.4 percent)
- Vermont (2.0 percent)
- West Virginia (0.8 percent)

The percentage of public school students who were ELs was higher in fall 2021 than in fall 2011 in 38 states and the District of Columbia and lower in the remaining 12 states. From fall 2011 to fall 2021, the largest positive percentage point change occurred in Rhode Island (6.9 percentage points higher in 2021), and the largest negative percentage point change occurred in Nevada (4.3 percentage points lower in 2021).

Data on the enrollment of ELs were also available for Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools and Puerto Rico.<sup>4</sup> In fall 2021, ELs accounted for 12.9 percent of the total enrollment in BIE schools and 0.3 percent in Puerto Rico. The percentage of public school students in Puerto Rico who were ELs was lower in fall 2021 (0.3 percent) than in fall 2011 (0.7 percent).<sup>5</sup>

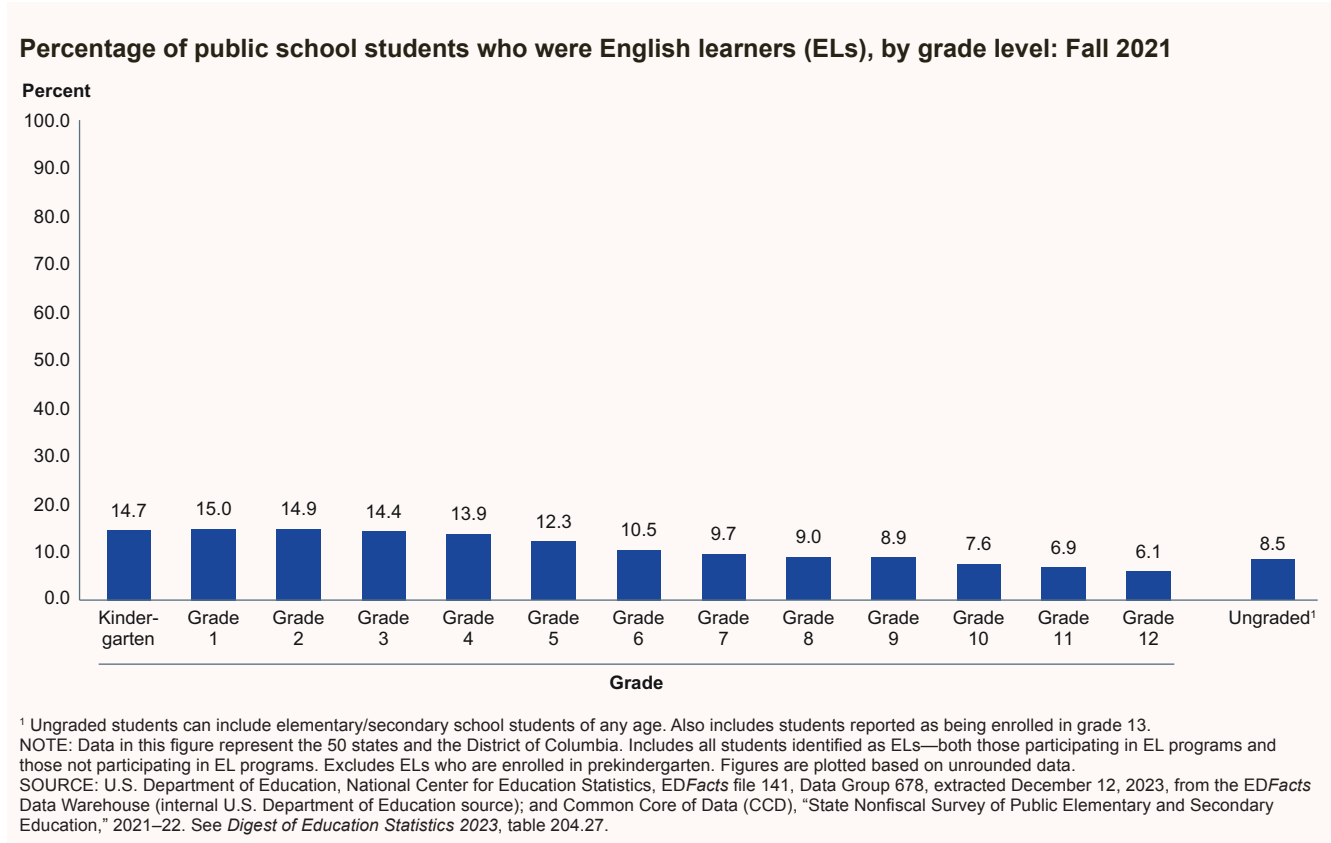
**FIGURE 2.**



In fall 2021, the percentage of public school students who were ELs was higher for school districts in more urbanized locales (e.g., cities) than for those in less urbanized locales (e.g., rural areas). ELs constituted an average of

- 9.8 percent (1.5 million students) of total public school enrollment in cities;
- 7.9 percent (1.6 million students) in suburban areas;
- 7.5 percent (386,000 students) in towns; and
- 4.8 percent (356,000 students) in rural areas.

**FIGURE 3.**



In general, a higher percentage of public school students in lower grades than of those in upper grades were ELs in fall 2021. For example, 14.7 percent of kindergarteners were ELs, compared with 10.5 percent of 6th-graders, 9.0 percent of 8th-graders, and 6.1 percent of 12th-graders. This is consistent with the expected pattern if students eventually attain English language proficiency and are reclassified as non-ELs.

For the majority of grade levels, the percentage of public school students who were ELs was higher in fall 2021 than just before the pandemic in fall 2019. However, the percentage who were ELs was lower in fall 2021 than in fall 2019 in kindergarten and grades 1 and 2 (ranging from 0.2 to 0.3 percentage points lower).

**Characteristics of English Learners****TABLE 1.**

**Number and percentage distribution of English learners (ELs) in public schools and number of ELs as a percentage of total public school enrollment, by the 10 most commonly reported home languages of ELs: Fall 2021**

Home language	Number of ELs	Percentage distribution of ELs <sup>1</sup>	Number of ELs as a percent of total enrollment
Spanish, Castilian	4,023,289	76.4	8.4
Arabic	130,917	2.5	0.3
English <sup>2</sup>	116,771	2.2	0.2
Chinese	95,584	1.8	0.2
Vietnamese	75,070	1.4	0.2
Portuguese	50,205	1.0	0.1
Russian	39,403	0.7	0.1
Haitian, Haitian Creole	31,122	0.6	0.1
Hmong	30,181	0.6	0.1
Urdu	26,567	0.5	0.1

<sup>1</sup> Detail does not sum to 100 percent because not all home language categories are shown.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of situations in which English might be reported as an English learner's home language include students who live in multilingual households and students adopted from other countries who were raised speaking another language but currently live in households where English is spoken.

NOTE: Data in this table represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Includes all students identified as ELs—both those participating in EL programs and those not participating in EL programs. Excludes ELs who are enrolled in prekindergarten.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, EDData file 141, Data Group 678, 2021–22, extracted December 12, 2023. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2023*, table 204.27.

Spanish was the most commonly reported home language of EL public school students in fall 2021 (4.0 million students), representing 76.4 percent of all ELs and 8.4 percent of all public school students. Arabic was the second most commonly reported home language (130,900 students). English was the third most commonly reported home language (116,800 students), which may reflect students who live in multilingual households or students adopted from other countries who were raised speaking another language but currently live in households where English is spoken. The next most commonly reported home languages were Chinese (95,600 students), Vietnamese (75,100 students), Portuguese (50,200 students), Russian (39,400 students), Haitian (31,100 students), Hmong (30,200 students), and Urdu (26,600 students).

The prevalence of reported home languages among ELs changed between the 2011-12 school year and fall 2021.<sup>6</sup> Among the 15 most common languages in fall 2021,<sup>7</sup> the largest changes were in the number of ELs whose reported home language was Swahili or Portuguese, both of which more than tripled (from 6,000 to 21,800 students and 15,700 to 50,200 students, respectively).

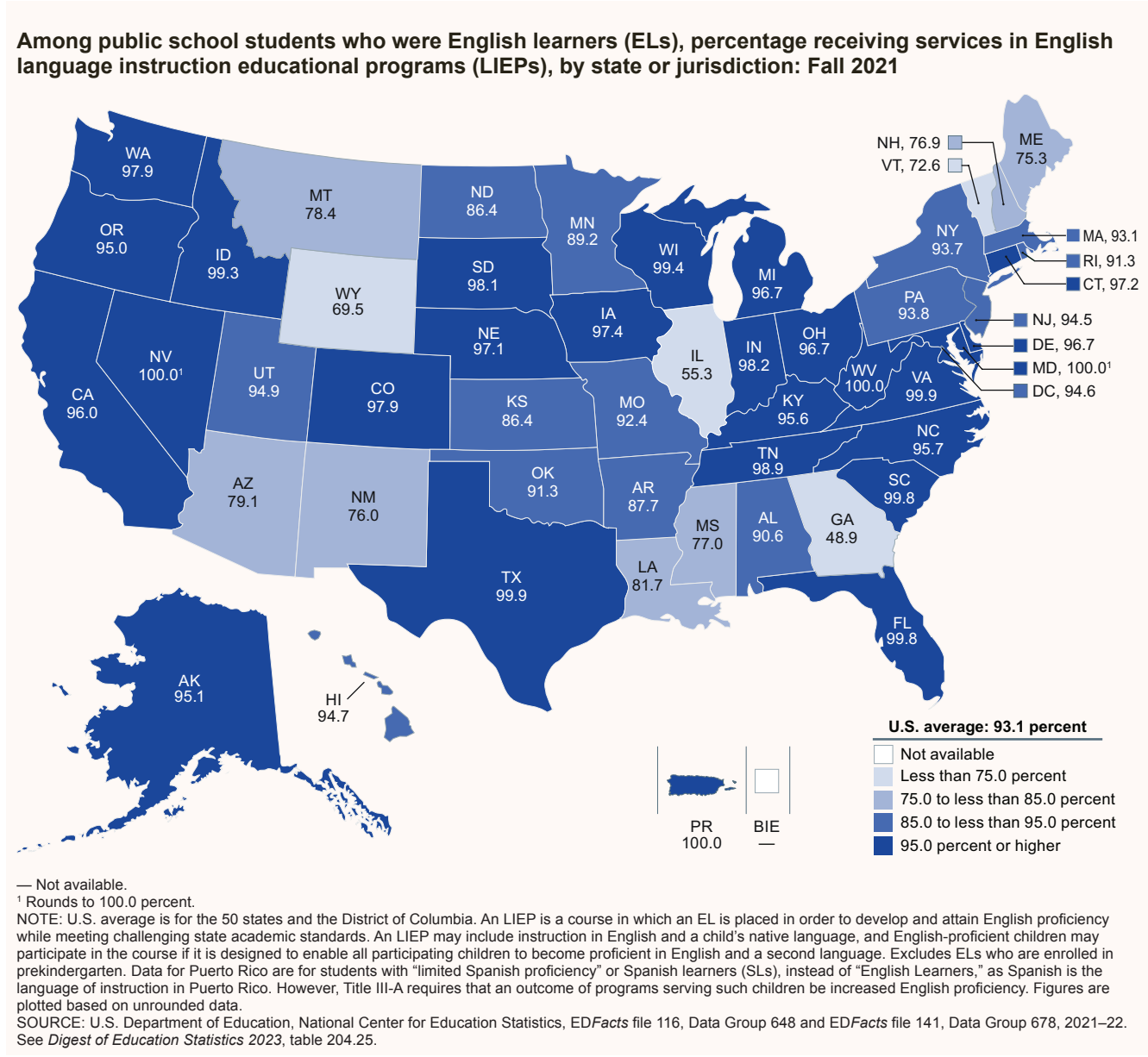
In fall 2021, more than three-quarters of ELs were Hispanic.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, the racial/ethnic composition of ELs was

- 77.9 percent Hispanic (4.0 million students);
- 9.7 percent Asian (500,800 students);
- 6.1 percent White (313,300 students);
- 4.2 percent Black (213,800 students);
- 0.8 percent Two or more races (41,100 students);
- 0.7 percent American Indian/Alaska Native (37,400 students); and
- 0.6 percent Pacific Islander (33,400 students).

In addition, 832,200 ELs were identified as students with disabilities in fall 2021, representing 15.8 percent of the total EL enrollment. In comparison, students with disabilities made up 14.7 percent of total public school enrollment in 2021-22.

English Learners Who Received Services

FIGURE 4.



In fall 2021, some 93.1 percent of ELs (or 4.9 million students) received services in English language instruction educational programs (LIEPs) in public elementary and secondary schools.<sup>9</sup> Although the number of students who received services in LIEPs increased between fall 2011 and fall 2021 (from 4.4 million to 4.9 million students), the percentage of ELs who received services in LIEPs was lower in fall 2021 than in fall 2011 (93.1 vs. 94.5 percent).

Twenty-five states reported that at least 95.0 percent of ELs received services in LIEPs in fall 2021. The 10 states with the highest percentages of ELs who received services in LIEPs were

- West Virginia, Nevada, and Maryland (100.0 percent);<sup>10</sup>
- Virginia and Texas (99.9 percent);
- Florida and South Carolina (99.8 percent);
- Wisconsin (99.4 percent);
- Idaho (99.3 percent); and
- Tennessee (98.9 percent).

An additional 14 states and the District of Columbia reported at least 85.0 percent but less than 95.0 percent of ELs receiving services in LIEPs, and 7 states reported at least 75.0 percent but less than 85.0 percent of ELs receiving services in LIEPs. The percentage of ELs who received services in LIEPs was less than 75.0 percent in 4 states:

- Vermont (72.6 percent)
- Wyoming (69.5 percent)
- Illinois (55.3 percent)
- Georgia (48.9 percent)

Data on the percentage of ELs who received services in LIEPs were also available for Puerto Rico. In fall 2021, all ELs (100.0 percent) in Puerto Rico received services in LIEPs. Data on the percentage of ELs who received services were not available for BIE schools.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> For general technical notes related to data analysis, data interpretation, rounding, and other considerations, please refer to the [Reader's Guide](#).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, United States includes the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

<sup>3</sup> Total public school enrollment also decreased during the first school year of the pandemic. For more information, see [Public School Enrollment](#).

<sup>4</sup> Data for the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) include programs designed for Native American students learning and studying Native American languages. Data for Puerto Rico are for students with “limited Spanish proficiency” or Spanish learners (SLs), instead of “English Learners,” as Spanish is the language of instruction in Puerto Rico. However, Title III-A requires that an outcome of such programs be increased English proficiency.

<sup>5</sup> Data on EL enrollment were not available for Bureau of Indian Education schools in fall 2011.

<sup>6</sup> 2011-12 data include all ELs enrolled at any time during the 2011-12 school year. All other data in this indicator include only ELs enrolled on October 1 of the corresponding year.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the top 10 most common languages reported in Table 1 and discussed above, these 15 languages include Korean, French, Swahili, Somali, and Tagalog.

<sup>8</sup> The number of Hispanic ELs is larger than the number of ELs whose reported home language is Spanish. Some Hispanic ELs speak a language other than Spanish at home (such as a language that is indigenous to Latin America). In addition, home language data may be missing for some Hispanic ELs.

<sup>9</sup> Students who are identified as English learners (ELs) can participate in language assistance programs to help ensure that they attain English proficiency and meet the academic content and achievement standards expected of all students.

<sup>10</sup> In West Virginia, all ELs received services in LIEPs (true 100.0 percent). In Nevada and Maryland, nearly all ELs received services in LIEPs (rounding to 100.0 percent).

**Reference tables:** *Digest of Education Statistics 2023*, tables [204.20](#), [204.25](#), [204.27](#), and [214.40](#); *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table [204.70](#)

**Related indicators and resources:** [English Language Learners in Public Schools](#) [*Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups*]; [Mathematics Performance](#); [Programs and Services for High School English Learners in Public School Districts: 2015-16](#); [Public School Enrollment](#); [Reading Performance](#); [Science Performance](#); [Students With Disabilities](#); [Technology and Engineering Literacy](#)

**Glossary:** [Disabilities, children with](#); [English learner \(EL\)](#); [Enrollment](#); [Geographic region](#); [Household](#); [Locale codes](#); [Public school or institution](#); [Racial/ethnic group](#); [School district](#)