

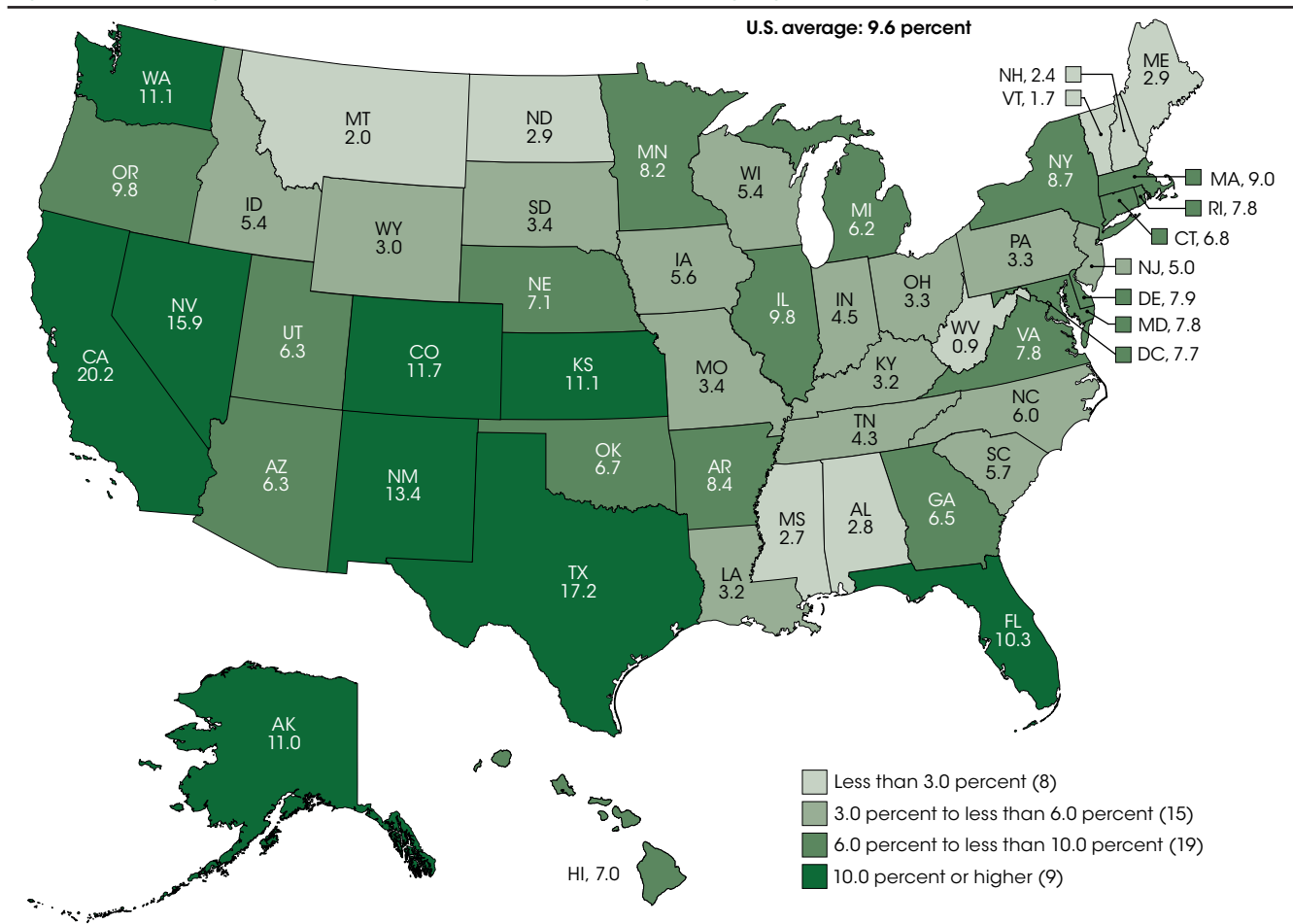
# English Language Learners in Public Schools

*The percentage of public school students in the United States who were English language learners (ELLs) was higher in fall 2016 (9.6 percent, or 4.9 million students) than in fall 2000 (8.1 percent, or 3.8 million students). In fall 2016, the percentage of public school students who were ELLs ranged from 0.9 percent in West Virginia to 20.2 percent in California.*

Students who are identified as English language learners (ELLs) can participate in language assistance programs to help ensure that they attain English proficiency and meet the academic content and achievement standards that all students are expected to meet. Participation in these types of programs can improve students' English language

proficiency, which in turn has been associated with improved educational outcomes.<sup>1</sup> The percentage of public school students in the United States who were ELLs was higher in fall 2016 (9.6 percent, or 4.9 million students) than in fall 2000 (8.1 percent, or 3.8 million students).<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1. Percentage of public school students who were English language learners, by state: Fall 2016**

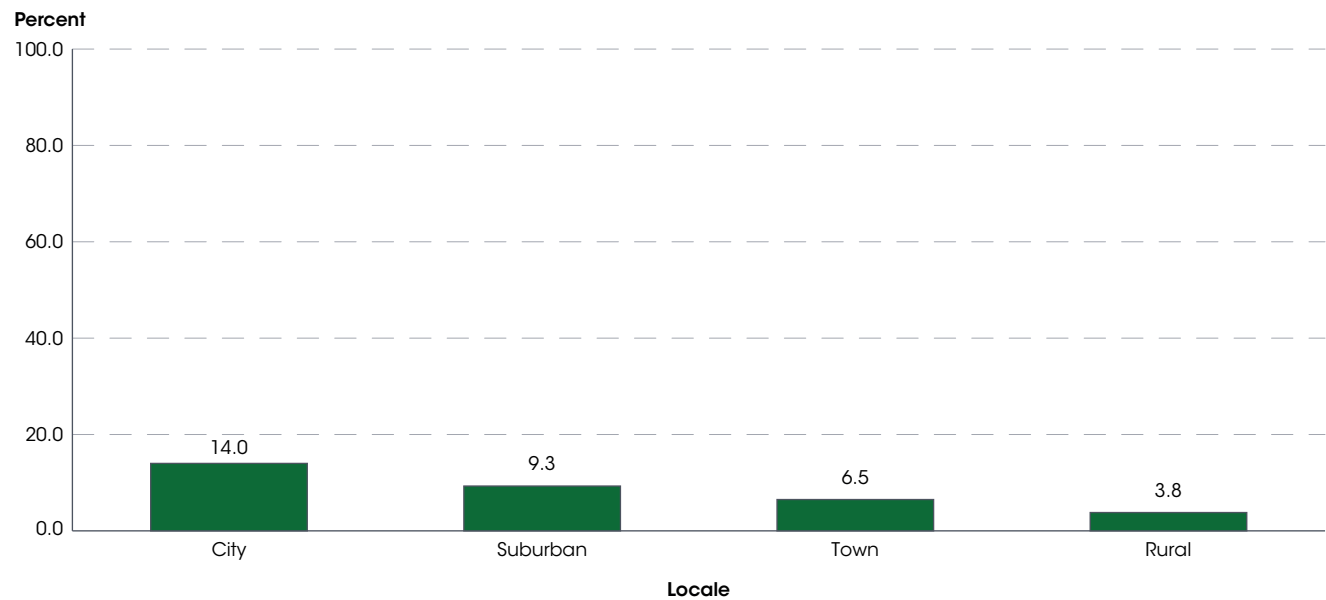


NOTE: Categorizations are based on unrounded percentages.  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2016-17. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2018*, table 204.20.

In fall 2016, the percentage of public school students who were ELLs was 10.0 percent or more in nine states.<sup>3</sup> These states, most of which are located in the West, were Alaska, California, Colorado, Florida, Kansas, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington. California reported the highest percentage of ELLs among its public school students, at 20.2 percent, followed by Texas (17.2 percent) and Nevada (15.9 percent). Eighteen states and the District of Columbia had percentages of ELL students that were 6.0 percent or higher but less than 10.0 percent, and 15 states had percentages that were 3.0 percent or higher but less than 6.0 percent. The percentage of students who were ELLs was less than 3.0 percent in eight states, with Montana (2.0 percent), Vermont (1.7 percent), and West Virginia (0.9 percent) having the lowest percentages.

Reflecting the national change, the percentage of public school students who were ELLs was higher in fall 2016 than in fall 2000 for all but seven states and the District of Columbia. The largest percentage point increase occurred in Kansas (7.9 percentage points) and the largest percentage point decrease occurred in Arizona (8.8 percentage points). More recently, the percentage of public school students who were ELLs was higher in fall 2016 than in fall 2010 in 35 states and the District of Columbia, with the largest increase occurring in Massachusetts (3.3 percentage points). In contrast, the percentage of public school students who were ELLs was lower in fall 2016 than in fall 2010 in 15 states, with the largest decrease occurring in Nevada (4.9 percentage points).

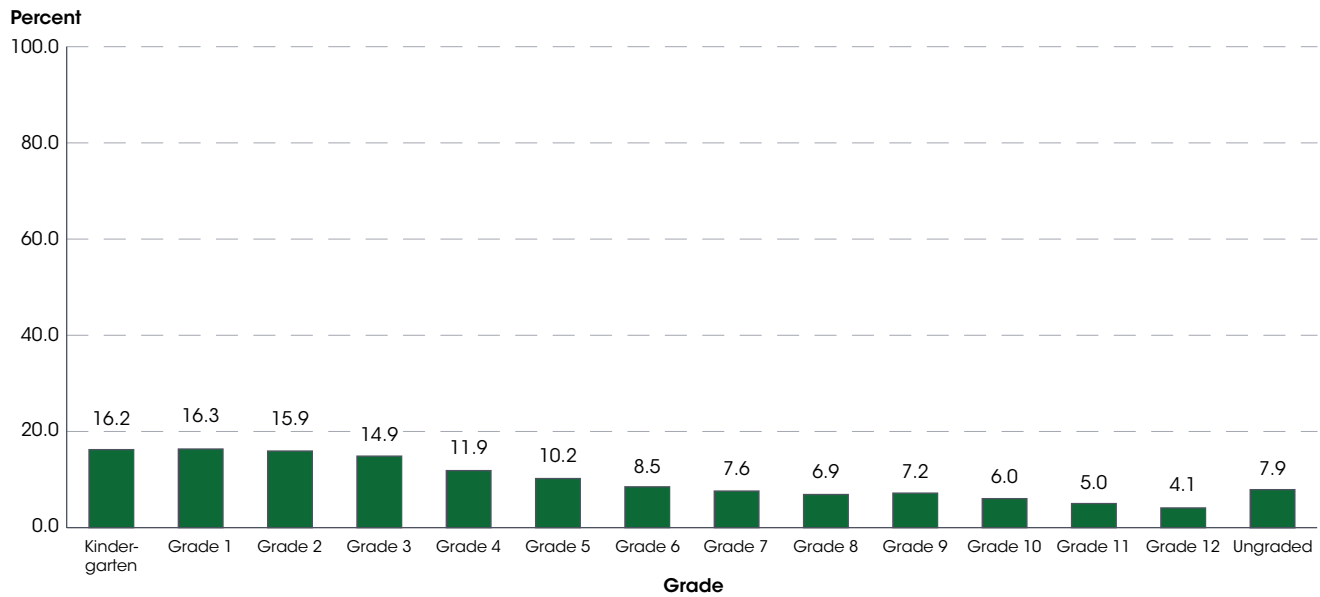
**Figure 2. Percentage of public school students who were English language learners, by locale: Fall 2016**



NOTE: Data are based on locales of school districts.  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2016–17. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2018*, table 214.40.

In fall 2016, the percentage of students who were ELLs was higher for school districts in more urbanized areas than for those in less urbanized areas. ELL students

constituted an average of 14.0 percent of total public school enrollment in cities, 9.3 percent in suburban areas, 6.5 percent in towns, and 3.8 percent in rural areas.

**Figure 3. Percentage of public K–12 students who were English language learners, by grade level: Fall 2016**

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, ED*FACTS* file 141, Data Group 678, extracted October 18, 2018; and Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education," 2016–17. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2018*, table 204.27.

In general, a higher percentage of public school students in lower grades than of those in upper grades were ELL students in fall 2016. For example, 16.2 percent of kindergarteners were ELL students, compared with 8.5 percent of 6th-graders and 6.9 percent of 8th-graders.

Among 12th-graders, only 4.1 percent of students were ELL students. This pattern was driven, in part, by students who are identified as ELLs when they enter elementary school but obtain English language proficiency before reaching upper grades.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1. Number and percentage distribution of English language learner (ELL) students in public schools and number of ELL students as a percent of total public school enrollment, by the 10 most commonly reported home languages of ELL students: Fall 2016**

Home language	Number of ELL students	Percentage distribution of ELL students <sup>1</sup>	Number of ELL students as a percent of total enrollment
Spanish, Castilian	3,790,949	76.6	7.7
Arabic	129,386	2.6	0.3
Chinese	104,147	2.1	0.2
Vietnamese	78,732	1.6	0.2
English <sup>2</sup>	70,014	1.4	0.1
Somali	38,440	0.8	0.1
Russian	34,843	0.7	0.1
Hmong	33,059	0.7	0.1
Haitian, Haitian Creole	31,608	0.6	0.1
Portuguese	28,214	0.6	0.1

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

<sup>2</sup> Examples of situations in which English might be reported as an ELL student's home language include students who live in multilingual households and students adopted from other countries who speak English at home but also have been raised speaking another language.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, ED*FACTS* file 141, Data Group 678, extracted October 18, 2018; and Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education," 2016–17. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2018*, table 204.27.

Spanish was the home language of 3.79 million ELL public school students in fall 2016, representing 76.6 percent of all ELL students and 7.7 percent of all public K–12 students. Arabic, Chinese, and Vietnamese were the next most commonly reported home languages (spoken by 129,400; 104,100; and 78,700 students, respectively). English was the fifth most common home language for ELL students (70,000 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. Somali (38,400 students), Russian (34,800 students), Hmong (33,100 students), Haitian (31,600 students), and Portuguese (28,200 students) were the next most commonly reported home languages of ELL students in fall 2016. The 30 most commonly reported home languages also include several whose prevalence has increased rapidly in recent years. For example, the number of ELLs who reported that their home language was Nepali or a Karen language<sup>5</sup> more than quadrupled

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between school year 2008–09 and fall 2016 (from 3,200 to 13,800 students for Nepali and from 3,000 to 13,400 students for Karen languages).<sup>6</sup>

In fall 2016, there were about 3.82 million Hispanic ELL public school students, constituting over three-quarters (77.2 percent) of ELL student enrollment overall.<sup>7</sup> Asian students were the next largest racial/ethnic group among ELLs, with 521,300 students (10.5 percent of ELL students). In addition, there were 314,000 White ELL students (6.3 percent of ELL students) and 193,500 Black ELL students (3.9 percent of ELL students). In each of the other racial/ethnic groups for which data were collected (Pacific Islanders, American Indians/Alaska Natives, and individuals of Two or more races), fewer than 40,000 students were identified as ELLs. In addition, some 700,900 ELL students were identified as students with disabilities, representing 14.2 percent of the total ELL population enrolled in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Genesee, F., Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W., and Christian, D. (2005). English Language Learners in U.S. Schools: An Overview of Research Findings. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 10(4): 363–385. Retrieved January 22, 2019, from [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327671espr1004\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327671espr1004_2).

<sup>2</sup> For 2014 and earlier years, data on the total number of ELLs enrolled in public schools and on the percentage of public school students who were ELLs include only those ELL students who participated in ELL programs. Starting with 2015, data include all ELL students, regardless of program participation. Due to this change in definition, comparisons between 2016 and earlier years should be interpreted with caution. For all years, data do not include students who were formerly identified as ELLs but later obtained English language proficiency.

<sup>3</sup> Categorizations are based on unrounded percentages.

<sup>4</sup> Saunders, W.M., and Marcelletti, D.J. (2013). The Gap That Can't Go Away: The Catch-22 of Reclassification in

Monitoring the Progress of English Learners. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 35(2): 139–156. Retrieved September 28, 2017, from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/0162373712461849>.

<sup>5</sup> Includes several languages spoken by the Karen ethnic groups of Burma and by individuals of Karen descent in the United States.

<sup>6</sup> School year 2008–09 data include all ELL students enrolled at any time during the 2008–09 school year, except data for California that reflect ELL students enrolled on a single date. All other data in this indicator include only ELL students enrolled on October 1 of the corresponding year.

<sup>7</sup> The number of Hispanic ELL students is larger than the number of ELL students who speak Spanish. Home language data may be missing for some Hispanic ELL students. In addition, some Hispanic ELL students may report that they speak a language other than Spanish at home (such as a language that is indigenous to Latin America).

**Reference tables:** *Digest of Education Statistics 2018*, tables 204.20, 204.27, and 214.40

**Related indicators and resources:** [Children and Youth With Disabilities](#); [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](#); [Technology and Engineering Literacy \[web-only\]](#)

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