



English Learner Testing during the Pandemic

An Early Readout and Look Ahead

By Melissa Lazarin

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic brought enormous disruptions to K-12 school systems across the United States. Now in their third school year under pandemic, students have faced shifting approaches to schooling as public-health conditions and policies continue to change. Many students re-entered the classroom in Fall 2021 for the first time in more than 18 months, and for some of the country's youngest children, this marked their first time attending school in person. Remote and hybrid learning during the pandemic have affected all students, but the nation's 5 million English Learners (ELs) have endured disproportionate impacts because of digital access and literacy gaps, inadequate language access to support family engagement and at-home learning, as well as a trail of systemic inequities that long preceded the pandemic.

Instruction and learning varied dramatically across states and school districts during the 2020–21 school year. In general, remote and hybrid learning were the default forms of instruction for many students in urban school districts, either because of parent choice or school district offerings. Most states and school districts did not track or publicly report how instruction varied across key demographics, but ELs, students of color, and low-income students—many of whom are concentrated in city districts—were disproportionately likely to be learning remotely.

The pandemic also upended statewide assessment systems. After receiving permission from the federal government to offer state annual tests more flexibly in school year 2019–20, states faced the challenge in 2020–21 of deciding how to administer a suite of tests in a year when many students were not attending classes in person and instruction was of variable quality. The merits of states and schools testing students during such a tumultuous period sparked debate nationwide. Long-standing concerns regarding the role of assessments re-emerged, including how they are used and the limitations of the information they provide about a student's educational experience. In addition, low test participation rates, states' modifications to how and when they administered assessments, changes to the tests themselves, and dramatically uneven instruction challenged how stakeholders should interpret states' 2020–21 assessment results.

States faced the challenge in 2020–21 of deciding how to administer a suite of tests in a year when many students were not attending classes in person and instruction was of variable quality.

Still, despite their shortcomings and especially during the pandemic, assessments are one of the few transparent measures parents and stakeholders seeking to advance educational equity have to evaluate student growth and identify new or growing learning gaps that demand attention. Declines in English language arts and especially math proficiency rates were evident across all demographics in many states. Some states also identified widening achievement gaps between ELs and non-ELs, even as ELs in some contexts were already scoring in the teens or single digits before the pandemic. State tests also point to critical setbacks in ELs' English language development. While not unexpected, given these students have had fewer opportunities to hone their academic and conversational English skills through interactions with teachers and peers while in remote or hybrid learning settings, these setbacks may take significant time and dedicated resources to make up.

School data derived from sources other than tests provide further evidence of these trends. Over the course of the 2020–21 academic year, there were signs that disrupted learning was taking a disproportionate toll on ELs, children of color, and certain other student groups. Chronic absenteeism, declines in enrollment, and failing grades have all pointed to potentially depressed learning outcomes among ELs. At the same time, these non-testing data indicate that public school systems were woefully underprepared to support ELs effectively during this turbulent period.

While downward trends are visible across all student groups, responses to them should not be uniform. As decisions are made about how to use federal relief dollars, state policymakers and school leaders should use state assessment data coupled with other metrics to inform investments and interventions that are personalized for ELs. Strategies for doing so include investing in:

- ▶ high-dosage tutoring and acceleration initiatives that are staffed with teachers and paraprofessionals who are experienced with classroom content and working with ELs;
- ▶ sustained and content-focused professional development for all teachers to support ELs in their classrooms; and
- ▶ strengthened partnerships with immigrant-led, community-based organizations to support family engagement, increased learning time efforts, and student social and emotional well-being.

In addition, the pandemic's effects on state summative assessments have renewed efforts to improve state testing and accountability systems. These conversations would benefit from deeper consideration and research on a number of issues relevant to ELs, including:

- ▶ how data derived from sources other than assessments are used alongside testing data;
- ▶ what schools should consider "normal" and "ambitious" growth in students' language and academic development, given the pandemic's disruptions to student learning trajectories; and
- ▶ how to boost data transparency and reporting to support and inform equity efforts.

Perhaps one of the greatest lessons to come out of the last few years of the pandemic is how important high-quality data are to understanding students' educational experiences and ensuring equitable learning environments for all students. States faced enormous hurdles in administering assessments during the 2020–21 school year, and their efforts to overcome these barriers are notable. Equally important, however, are the choices states, districts, and school officials have made about how they publicly report the data these tests gather. Data reporting on ELs in many states was not transparent, contextualized, or accessible, and in some cases, such data simply went unreported. While such concerns precede the pandemic, this unprecedented period has raised the stakes. Education officials at all levels should uphold their responsibility to ensure that assessment and other data are effectively communicated to parents and other stakeholders.

1 Introduction

Across the United States, as in much of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education systems for the third school year running. From well-documented digital access gaps to widespread reports of students missing or disengaged since March 2020, it is evident that English Learners (ELs) have endured some of the pandemic's gravest impacts.¹ There is also consensus among education officials and stakeholders that the pandemic and remote learning have exacerbated academic gaps. However, because the pandemic has affected state assessment systems, it is challenging to precisely measure the impacts on student learning.

To be sure, there have been notable efforts to quantify some of the effects. Researchers have made some estimates of how students are faring based on school- and district-level interim assessments in reading and math. These findings indicate that students, on average, have made some gains but at a lower rate compared to years preceding the pandemic, with larger impacts among children of color and students attending high-poverty schools.²

Standardized testing, despite its name, was far from uniform across states during this second pandemic-affected school year.

Between January and June 2021, most—though not all—states administered assessments in reading, math, and science to students, as federal law requires. Many states also administered a test of English language proficiency to ELs. Standardized testing, despite its name, was far from uniform across states during this second pandemic-affected

school year. Many students who were in remote learning did not take the tests, and this varied by district, school, and even grade level. Under normal circumstances, states use the same assessments statewide for all students (with a few exceptions), but in 2020–21, some states used different assessments across districts or grade levels. Timing also varied considerably, with some states or districts testing students in the spring and others in the fall of the 2021–22 school year.

Despite the challenges of administering statewide tests during this period, states' 2020–21 assessments still provide an important window into the pandemic's effects on student learning. Because federal law requires states to publicly report state assessment results, disaggregated across factors such as race, ethnicity, and English proficiency, the data are among the most transparent markers of how some of the most marginalized students have fared during the pandemic. These data are also routinely used to inform education officials and other stakeholders of which school districts and schools are struggling the most and could benefit from targeted support—something that has taken on new importance, given the variability of states' and school districts' responses to the pandemic.

1 Julie Sugarman and Melissa Lazarin, *Educating English Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Policy Ideas for States and School Districts* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2020).

2 Karyn Lewis, Megan Kuhfeld, Erik Ruzek, and Andrew McEachin, *Learning during COVID-19: Reading and Math Achievement in the 2020–21 School Year* (Portland, OR: NWEA, 2021).

It is important to note that statewide summative assessments, which are often administered near the end of the school year, typically make up just one component of states' and school districts' assessment systems. Schools also administer formative assessments, which teachers use in the classroom on an ongoing basis to evaluate students' understanding of instruction, and interim assessments, often administered at the end of a semester or other midpoint to test students' learning against a set of standards.³ However, state summative assessments typically garner the greatest attention because they are federally required under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) and are traditionally tied to high-stakes decision-making, including funding, student promotion, and teacher evaluations. In addition, ESSA requires states and school districts to publicly report state summative test data, making the data more accessible to the public than other assessments data.

This report presents an overview of the schooling experience of many of the nation's 5 million ELs⁴ during the 2020–21 academic year. It then considers how states approached administering statewide summative assessments in the 2020–21 school year and what data from these tests can and cannot tell us about ELs' learning during this unprecedented period. The report concludes with a discussion of some early warning indicators related to the pandemic's effects on ELs and strategies for supporting them in educational recovery plans.

2 Schooling Conditions during the 2020–21 Academic Year

After ending the 2019–20 academic year prematurely or remotely, virtual and hybrid instruction continued in many school districts throughout the 2020–21 school year as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to devastate communities across the United States. While some state governors strongly encouraged or required in-person learning, most school districts navigated their own path.

Urban school districts, in which ELs are concentrated, were far more likely to operate remotely than rural and suburban districts.⁵ Among the ten districts with the highest enrollment of ELs, however, ELs participated in a mix of instructional approaches in 2020–21 (see Table 1). Half of these districts are in Florida and Texas (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Dallas Independent School District, Houston Independent School District, Orange County Public Schools, and Broward County Public Schools), where schools generally operated in person full time, with an option to attend remotely.

The New York City Department of Education, the district with the largest number of enrolled ELs, offered some students the option of attending school in person in Fall 2020 but mostly on a hybrid schedule, in which students attended school in person two or three days per week and remotely for the other days. Only

3 Sarah D. Sparks, "Types of Assessments: A Head-to-Head Comparison," *Education Week*, accessed November 9, 2021.

4 Based on data from the Common Core of Data, Public School Universe for 2018–19, accessed via U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Elementary/Secondary Information System (ELSI)," accessed December 15, 2021.

5 Betheny Gross, Alice Opalka, and Padma Gundapaneni, "One Step Forward, One Step Back: Public Health Fears Keep America's School Districts on a Reopening Treadmill" (brief, Center for Reinventing Public Education, Seattle, WA, November 2020).

one-quarter of the city's 1 million students returned to their classrooms before they were forced to pivot to virtual learning for several weeks because of the pandemic's worsening conditions.⁶

Other school districts operated largely remotely, including Los Angeles Unified School District, CA; Chicago Public Schools, IL; Clark County School District, NV; and Fairfax County Public Schools, VA. Both the Los Angeles and Fairfax County districts offered some degree of in-person learning to ELs and other targeted student groups, but the vast majority of students were in remote learning for school year 2020–21. Moreover, in-person learning for ELs in these districts did not resemble traditional pre-pandemic school instruction in most cases. Instead, it often still incorporated online instruction, but from the school campus instead of students' homes while non-teaching staff monitored the classroom.

Many families of ELs opted for online learning, even as school districts sought to prioritize this population for limited face-to-face instruction and schools began to reopen their doors in Spring 2021.

The limited opportunities for in-person schooling were mostly met with ambivalence from parents, many of whom were reluctant to send their children to school because of health and safety concerns. Many families of ELs opted for online learning, even as school districts sought to prioritize this population for limited face-to-face instruction and schools began to reopen their doors in Spring 2021.⁷ In Texas, where state education officials required school districts to offer full-time, in-person

instruction to those who opted in, nearly 550,000 ELs—a little more than half of the state's EL population—participated in school remotely instead of attending in person.⁸ And despite well-documented disparities in access to digital devices and reliable internet, only 3 percent of ELs in New York State enrolled in in-person instruction; this rate was lower than for students in the state overall (7 percent) and for some student subgroups, including White students (13 percent).⁹

The overwhelming preference for remote learning came with significant shortcomings, especially for ELs. Many ELs were effectively derailed from fully participating in instruction because of inequitable access to digital devices and reliable internet, as well as digital literacy gaps.¹⁰ Many also faced challenging home learning environments, with ELs' households disproportionately facing economic and food insecurity, unstable child-care arrangements, and high COVID-19 infection rates.¹¹ Moreover, with few teachers adequately prepared to teach ELs, especially virtually, schools were not prepared to effectively support this population. A shortage of digital resources appropriate for ELs and an inability to effectively engage and communicate with parents compounded the problem.

6 Eliza Shapiro, "Only 26% of N.Y.C. Students Attend In-Person Classes, Far from Goal," *New York Times*, October 26, 2020.

7 Betty Márquez Rosales and Zaidee Stavely, "Many English Learners Reluctant to Return to In-Person Instruction at California Schools," EdSource, April 13, 2021.

8 Texas Education Agency, "State of Texas ESSER III State Plan: Required Data Posting," accessed October 19, 2021.

9 New York State Education Department, *New York State Education Department American Rescue Plan (ARP) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSR) State Plan* (Albany, NY: New York State Education Department, 2021), 8.

10 Sugarman and Lizarin, *Educating English Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

11 Sugarman and Lizarin, *Educating English Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

TABLE 1

School Districts with the Highest Enrollment of English Learners and Their Primary Modes of Instruction, Fall 2020 through Winter 2020–21

School District	No. of English Learners	Primary Modes of Instruction Offered	ELs Prioritized for In-Person Learning?	Notes
New York City Department of Education, NY	137,467	Hybrid; remote	Encouraged but not required	The New York City Department of Education offered families a choice between in-person or remote learning at the start of the school year. The city agency, in addition to the state education department, encouraged schools to consider the unique needs of their student populations for in-person learning and issues of equity in their decisions regarding in-person learning. Approximately 26 percent of students began the school year in person, but a surge in COVID-19 cases caused all schools to go remote in November. Students in grades preK-5 returned to in-person learning in early December 2020; grades 6-8 in late February 2021; and high school students in March 2021.
Los Angeles Unified School District, CA	101,827	Remote	Yes	Students receiving specialized services, including ELs, began returning to school in September 2020 until the district shut down all in-person services in December 2020 because of rising COVID-19 cases. The district began reopening schools for hybrid instruction for all students in April 2021. By May 2021, a small proportion of the district's students participated in person (30 percent of elementary school students, 12 percent of middle school students, and 7 percent of high school students).
Chicago Public Schools, IL	65,398	Remote	No	The school district was fully remote until it began a phased reopening starting in February 2021, with students across all grade levels eligible to attend in person by April 2021.
Miami-Dade County Public Schools, FL	63,954	Full-time in person; remote	N/A	The district's students began the school year remotely, but all students had the option to attend full-day, in-person classes by the end of October 2020.
Dallas Independent School District, TX	63,098	Full-time in person; hybrid; remote	N/A	At the start of the 2020–21 school year, parents could opt for either remote or in-person instruction. Choosing remote was binding through the end of the grading cycle. If parents chose in-person instruction, they could return to remote learning at any point. Schools that had more than 60 percent of students returning for in-person learning had the option of implementing a hybrid model or providing an alternate five-day site. In a parent survey conducted before the start of the school year, 53 percent of respondents elected in-person learning for their children.
Houston Independent School District, TX	59,917	Full-time in person; remote	N/A	The district began offering in-person instruction for all students in October 2020. Parents had the choice to continue virtual learning for the fall semester or entire school year. By March 2021, approximately 42 percent of all students attended in person.

TABLE 1 (cont.)

School Districts with the Highest Enrollment of English Learners and Their Primary Modes of Instruction, Fall 2020 through Winter 2020–21

School District	No. of English Learners	Primary Modes of Instruction Offered	ELs Prioritized for In-Person Learning?	Notes
Clark County School District, NV	55,714	Mostly remote; hybrid or in person in a few schools	No	Until March 2021, most of the school district's campuses operated remotely, except for three rural schools that operated a hybrid model and four rural schools that operated in person full time. The district began a phased reopening starting March 2020.
Fairfax County Public Schools, VA	35,651	Remote	Yes	The school district operated with remote instruction through February 2021, when schools started to reopen using a hybrid model. ELs were among the select cohort of student groups the district prioritized for in-person learning even while campuses were operating remotely. The quantity or regularity of this in-person learning varied based on each campus' capacity. The school district also offered supplemental instruction outside the regular class schedule, either virtually or in person.
Orange County Public Schools, FL	33,113	Full-time in person; remote	N/A	Families had three options for schooling beginning August 2020; approximately 30 percent selected in-person instruction, 5 percent enrolled in the county's virtual school program, and 65 percent chose an option that allowed students to conduct their learning at home while remaining registered at their regular school.
Broward County Public Schools, FL	31,615	Full-time in person; remote	N/A	The school district started with remote learning and gradually reopened schools in October 2020 for all students who opted for in-person learning. The district also provided a virtual alternative. In December 2020, 25 percent of students were attending in person, and 45 percent were by April 2021.

Sources: Enrollment numbers for English Learners are based on data from the Common Core of Data, Public School Universe for 2018–19, accessed via U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, “Elementary/Secondary Information System (EISi),” accessed December 15, 2021; New York State Education Department, *Recovering, Rebuilding, and Renewing: The Spirit of New York's Schools* (Albany, NY: New York State Education Department, 2020); Juliana Kim, “With Remote Learning, a 12-Year-Old Knows Her English Is Slipping Away,” *New York Times*, December 29, 2020; Giulia Heyward, “From Shutdown to Reopening: Here's a Look at N.Y.C. Schools' Trek Through the Pandemic,” *New York Times*, September 13, 2021; Nina Agrawal, Howard Blume, and Sonja Sharp, “L.A. County Schools Can Reopen Small In-Person Classes for Their Neediest Students on Sept. 14,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 2020; Betty Márquez Rosales and Zaidée Stavely, “Many English Learners Reluctant to Return to In-Person Instruction at California Schools,” EdSource, April 13, 2021; City News Service, “Majority of LAUSD Students Choose Not to Return to School,” NBC Los Angeles, May 10, 2021; Chicago Public Schools, “February 7: Agreement Reached with CTU Leadership: Phased In-Person Learning to Begin on Thursday, February 11” (community update, accessed February 22, 2022); EdSurge, “Miami-Dade Becomes Largest School District to Announce Fully In-Person Learning Option,” EdSurge, September 24, 2020; Dallas Independent School District, “Parent Survey for 2020–2021 Return to School,” accessed February 16, 2022; Corbett Smith, “A Little More Than Half of DISD Families Say They'll Return to Campus. But Who Chooses to Come Back Depends on Family Income, Survey Indicates,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 28, 2020; Houston Independent School District, “Reconnect Safely, Return Strong,” accessed October 17, 2021; Shelby Webb, “Some 250,000 Houston-Area Students Haven't Returned to Classrooms, Will Finish School Year at Home,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 31, 2021; Clark County School District, *Plan to Transition to the Hybrid Instructional Model* (Las Vegas, NV: Clark County School District, 2020); Fairfax County Public Schools, *Reopening Schools Plan: School Year 2020–21* (Falls Church, VA: Fairfax County Schools, 2021); Orange County Public Schools, “Students Return for Face-to-Face Instruction” (news release, August 24, 2020); Ari Odzer, “Broward School District Urges Parents to Allow Students to Return for In-Person Learning,” NBC 6 South Florida, December 14, 2020; Ari Odzer, “Broward Schools Wants Everyone Back in the Classroom Next Year,” NBC 6 South Florida, April 12, 2021.

Indicators of Educational Setbacks Emerge

It was not long before the early effects of the pandemic and remote learning on ELs began to emerge. Although chronic absenteeism is not especially characteristic of ELs,¹² school districts across the country started reporting lower attendance rates among these students. Between school years 2018–19 and 2020–21, chronic absenteeism increased at a higher rate for Ohio’s ELs than for its non-EL students (by 16 percentage points compared to 7 percent).¹³ In Connecticut, the percentage of ELs who were chronically absent doubled between 2019–20 and 2020–21, from 17 percent to 34 percent.¹⁴ Connecticut’s data tracking also revealed that EL attendance rates were lower on remote instructional days compared to in-person learning days, and ELs eligible for free lunch had lower attendance rates than non-eligible ELs.

School districts also experienced a decline in EL enrollment in 2020–21. The District of Columbia Public Schools reported that EL enrollment declined 8 percent—more than for any other student group—affecting school staffing decisions and budgeting.¹⁵ In Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 500 probable ELs never re-enrolled.¹⁶

With decreased school engagement, ELs’ grades have also fallen during the pandemic. In Fairfax County Public Schools, ELs and students with disabilities earned more unsatisfactory marks compared to all other student groups.¹⁷ The percentage of ELs who earned Fs in two or more classes during the first quarter of the school year also doubled from 17 percent in 2019–20 to 35 percent in 2020–21.¹⁸ The setbacks appeared to be most devastating for middle schoolers, as the proportion of EL middle schoolers earning Fs in two or more classes quadrupled. Moreover, although performance among most student groups rebounded to some extent as the year went on, the large majority of ELs were still struggling, with 66 percent earning at least one D or F in the second quarter.¹⁹ The district’s analysis concluded that the pandemic had generally not exacerbated performance gaps across groups—with the exception of ELs. Other school districts across the country reported similar trends, including Broward County, FL, where nearly half of all ELs received at least one F, up from 29 percent the previous year.²⁰

School district interim test results, which are intended to inform teaching and learning throughout the year, also offered a preview of what school officials might expect from spring statewide summative assessments.

12 U.S. Department of Education, “Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools: A Hidden Educational Crisis,” accessed August 5, 2020.

13 Ohio Department of Education, “Data Insights: Evidence of the Pandemic’s Impact on Students in 2020–2021,” accessed October 19, 2021.

14 Connecticut State Department of Education, *Student Attendance Report for School Year 2020–2021* (Hartford, CT: Connecticut State Department of Education, 2021).

15 Perry Stein, “Immigrant Families Are Leaving DC’s Public Schools. Will They Return?” *Washington Post*, April 4, 2021.

16 Linda Robertson, Colleen Wright, David Goodhue, and David Brothers, “I Can’t Wait to Go Back to School—Remote Learning and the Harm It Has Done to Our Kids,” *Miami Herald*, updated March 12, 2021.

17 Hannah Natanson, “Failing Grades Spike in Virginia’s Largest School System as Online Learning Gap Emerges Nationwide,” *Washington Post*, November 24, 2020.

18 Fairfax County Public Schools, Office of Research and Strategic Improvement, *Study of Teaching and Learning during the Covid 19 Pandemic: Analyses of Q1 Secondary Marks* (Falls Church, VA: Fairfax County Public Schools, 2020).

19 Fairfax County Public Schools, Office of Research and Strategic Improvement, *Study of Teaching and Learning during the COVID Pandemic: Findings from Fall/Winter SY 2020–21* (Falls Church, VA: Fairfax County Public Schools, 2021).

20 David Goodhue, “Broward Schools Expanding Its Summer School Dramatically to Help Failing Students Catch Up,” *Miami Herald*, May 26, 2021.

An analysis of multiple interim assessments across 19 California school districts found that ELs, along with Latinos and students from low-income families, experienced greater setbacks than other student groups. ELs demonstrated a learning lag of 3.8 months in English language arts (ELA) and 3.1 months in math.²¹

There is also anecdotal reporting describing ELs' setbacks in English language development during the pandemic.²² Remote learning isolated many ELs from both formal and informal opportunities to engage in rich academic and conversational English.²³ And, many school districts were not prepared to deliver high-quality English language development instruction remotely when the pandemic began. Californians Together, a statewide coalition advocating for improved policies that support EL education, analyzed 41

Remote learning isolated many ELs from both formal and informal opportunities to engage in rich academic and conversational English.

California school districts' plans to invest state resources to address student learning during the pandemic and found that more than half provided little or no evidence of how they would deliver English language development services. Only one-quarter of these district plans stated that they would deliver daily, live language instruction.²⁴ Meanwhile, according to the analysis, few districts indicated that they would take steps to adequately support teachers in delivering language instruction through professional development or outlined strategies to integrate language development in all core subject areas.

Notably, data are limited regarding the social and emotional well-being of ELs and children of immigrants during the pandemic, despite the disproportionate impact COVID-19 and remote learning have had on immigrant families and ELs. However, several indicators suggest that, generally, children and youth have experienced elevated stress, anxiety, and depression since the onset of the pandemic.²⁵ The effects appear to be more pronounced among girls and students of color.²⁶ And, in a survey of more than 300 Spanish-speaking, low-income parents, many reported that their children's mental health had deteriorated due to the pandemic.²⁷

Altogether, there is ample evidence that the pandemic has taken a disproportionate toll on ELs. However, with school districts largely operating independently and under different conditions, objective data are limited regarding student learning during what has been a public education emergency as well as a public-health crisis.

21 Libby Pier, Michael Christian, Hayley Tymeson, and Robert H. Meyer, *COVID-19 Impacts on Student Learning: Evidence from Interim Assessments in California* (Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education, 2021).

22 See, for example, Juliana Kim, "With Remote Learning, a 12-Year-Old Knows Her English Is Slipping Away," *New York Times*, December 29, 2020.

23 Zaidee Stavely, "Teachers Struggle to Recreate Language-Rich Classes for English Learners Online," EdSource, October 7, 2020.

24 Conor P. Williams and Manuel Buenrostro, *Teaching and Learning during Uncertain Times: A Review of Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans* (Long Beach, CA: Californians Together, 2021).

25 Lisa Chu and Robin Lake, *The Kids Are (Really) Not Alright: A Synthesis of COVID-19 Student Surveys* (Seattle: The Evidence Project, Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2021); YouthTruth, *Students Weigh In, Part III: Learning and Well-Being during COVID-19* (San Francisco: YouthTruth, 2021).

26 Challenge Success and NBC News, *Kids under Pressure: A Look at Student Well-Being and Engagement during the Pandemic* (Stanford, CA: Challenge Success, 2021).

27 Laura Isensee, "Survey: COVID-19 Hurts Latino Children's Mental Health Learning," Houston Public Media, August 19, 2020.

3 Statewide Summative Testing during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic has disrupted state assessment systems in addition to instruction and learning. All states canceled their 2019–20 summative academic assessments due to the pandemic, with permission from the federal government. And although many states had completed their administration of English language proficiency (ELP) testing for ELs before schools shut down in March 2020, some states suspended what was left of their ELP testing. California, home to 1.1 million ELs, completed only about one-quarter of its summative ELP assessments before the 2019–20 academic year concluded, and then test administration ran through October 2020.²⁸

As many school districts struggled to reopen for the 2020–21 school year, with severe COVID-19 outbreaks affecting communities across the United States and large numbers of students participating remotely, state officials and educators questioned whether to cancel the assessments for a second consecutive year. Testing students remotely was likely not a feasible or valid option for many states.²⁹ Developers of the WIDA ACCESS Test for ELLs and ELPA21, the two primary ELP assessments that most states use, also announced that they would not offer remote versions of their tests.³⁰ The tumultuous transition between the Trump and Biden administrations following the 2020 election further fueled uncertainty over whether the federal government would enforce federal testing requirements, though the Trump administration did encourage states to prepare for the testing season.³¹

In February 2021, the Biden administration confirmed that states should take steps to administer statewide summative assessments and publicly report disaggregated data for the 2020–21 school year. However, it also encouraged states to adjust their assessment plans by shortening their tests, offering them remotely, or expanding their testing window. With respect to ELP assessments, the U.S. Department of Education “specifically encourage[d] states to extend the testing window for their ELP assessment, including beyond the end of the 2020–2021 school year.”³²

While the administration’s guidance reaffirmed states’ responsibility to administer statewide assessments in the 2020–21 school year, it also offered states some flexibility around assessment-based accountability requirements. Specifically, the U.S. Department of Education invited states to seek relief from federal requirements that they identify a new annual cohort of struggling schools for interventions, calculate progress toward interim and long-term academic goals, and differentiate performance among schools for the 2020–21 school year.³³

28 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) communication with Veronica Aguila, Director, English Learning Support Division, California Department of Education, July 27, 2020.

29 Michelle Boyer and Leslie Keng, “Test Score Meaning under Remote Test Administration,” CenterLine, Center for Assessment, October 20, 2020.

30 WIDA, “FAQ: Access for ELLs Testing in 2020–21 and 2021–22 School Years,” updated September 7, 2021; Corey Mitchell, “Millions of ELL Students Face Prospect of In-Person, Federal Testing During COVID-19,” *Education Week*, December 22, 2020.

31 Letter from Betsy DeVos, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education, to chief state school officers, *Key Policy Letters Signed by the Education Secretary or Deputy Secretary*, September 3, 2020.

32 Letter from Ian Rosenblum, U.S. Department of Education, to chief state school officers, *Dear Colleague Letter on Accountability, School Improvement, and Assessments for the School Year 2020–2021*, February 22, 2021

33 Letter from Rosenblum to chief state school officers.

In addition, the federal government stated it would not penalize states if they did not meet the usual participation threshold for statewide testing. Federal law typically holds states to a 95 percent participation threshold in state assessments, meaning that states must test 95 percent of all students within the state, district, and school and within major student demographic groups, such as race and ethnicity. This provision is intended to strengthen test validity and equity, ensuring that struggling students are not overlooked in assessment results. However, with so many students attending school remotely during the 2020–21 school year, a 95 percent test participation rate might be unrealistic for some states and school districts.

In exchange for this flexibility, the U.S. Department of Education required states to report data on chronic absenteeism and access to digital devices and the internet among students and educators to help contextualize state assessment data. In addition, the department underscored the importance of maintaining federal requirements related to public reporting and transparency of data. Most states and the District of Columbia sought and received this federal accountability flexibility.³⁴

A. *Key Considerations for Administering Assessments in 2020–21*

Testing students during a pandemic raised unique challenges and prompted several questions. For one, testing experts raised concerns about the validity of the test results. Given the number of students learning at home or who had disengaged altogether, many students—especially those most affected by the pandemic and remote learning—might be missing in testing data. In addition, instruction was time constrained, and schools likely focused instruction on a reduced set of standards or content.³⁵ Yet few states made comparable adjustments to their summative assessments, creating the plausible scenario in which students were tested on content that was never taught.³⁶ This raised important questions about the value of administering statewide tests when little might be gleaned from the results.

Given the number of students learning at home or who had disengaged altogether, many students—especially those most affected by the pandemic and remote learning—might be missing in testing data.

With the validity of test results in question, educators and families alike were concerned with how the scores would be used to evaluate schools and teachers. The unintentional consequences—including inducing stigma or additional trauma—of testing students who might be insufficiently prepared because of poor or limited instruction and support concerned both families and educators.³⁷

34 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, “State Requests for Waivers of ESEA Provisions for SSA-Administered Programs,” accessed August 17, 2021. As of the writing of this publication, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Wyoming had not requested or received waivers of accountability and school identification.

35 Student Achievement Partners, “Priority Instructional Content in English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics,” updated August 9, 2021.

36 Scott Marion, Chris Domaleski, and Juan D’Brot, *Rationale for States Considering Assessment Flexibility* (Dover, NH: Center for Assessment, 2021).

37 Dana Goldstein, “Does It Hurt Children to Measure Pandemic Learning Loss?” *New York Times*, April 8, 2021.

The logistics of testing students while adhering to health and safety guidelines also presented challenges, especially in districts where most students attended remotely. As noted previously, remote testing for academic assessments was not feasible in many states, or it risked student privacy or test comparability.

Finally, public support for testing students was mixed. Given the challenges of testing students during a pandemic and questions surrounding the quality of the data that tests might yield, critics of testing students argued that limited in-person time should be used for instruction and addressing students' needs. Several governors and state officials expressed disappointment in the federal government's decision to move forward with assessments in the 2020–21 school year, and a few states were determined to skip assessments for a second consecutive year despite the administration's guidance.³⁸

However, some parents—worried that their children had fallen behind—saw value in the information that state tests might provide.³⁹ Some civil-rights groups, meanwhile, underscored the importance of measuring student learning, given that the pandemic had exacerbated opportunity and equity gaps.⁴⁰ With varied responses to the pandemic across school districts, they argued that state summative assessments would help reveal trends or large disparities across schools and districts and, in tandem with other information, inform how states and districts target resources to schools and students.

B. State Approaches to Summative Academic and ELP Assessments and Accountability in 2020–21

Although the U.S. Department of Education's policy guidance outlined a commitment to state assessments for the 2020–21 school year, several states initially requested a waiver to cancel their statewide assessments. These states included Georgia, Michigan, Montana, New York, Oregon, and South Carolina.⁴¹ The reason Georgia cited for wanting to waive assessments for a second year was that it would help maximize instructional time and allow educators to focus on "the essentials of students."⁴² Meanwhile, New York state officials determined that the spring assessments "cannot be safely, equitably, and fairly administered to students in schools across the state," especially for students of color who were more likely to depend on remote learning during 2020–21 than other students.⁴³ Instructional time should focus on supporting students academically and socioemotionally, they noted.

38 Andrew Ujifusa, Evie Blad, and Sarah Schwartz, "Biden's Testing Stance Leaves States Tough Choices. Some May Still Try to Avoid Exams," Politics K-12 (blog), *Education Week*, February 23, 2021.

39 National PTA and Learning Heroes, "Year-End Assessments Survey: Initial Findings from a Nationwide Survey of Public-School Parents" (presentation, survey conducted by Edge Research and HCM Strategists, February 2021); Data Quality Campaign, "National Poll Finds Parents and Teachers Want More Data and Better Support to Use It Effectively to Help Students during COVID-19" (press release, June 24, 2020); Data Quality Campaign, "New Polling Highlights Disconnects in Perceptions of Data Use That Threaten COVID-19 Recovery" (press release, August 18, 2021).

40 Letter from National Urban League et al. to Ruth E. Ryder, Deputy Assistant Secretary, U.S. Department of Education, November 20, 2020.

41 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, "State Requests for Waivers."

42 Letter from Brian P. Kemp, Georgia Governor, and Richard Woods, Georgia State Superintendent, to Miguel Cardona and Phillip Rosenfelt, Secretary-Nominee and Acting Secretary, U.S. Department of Education, February 18, 2021.

43 Letter from Betty A. Rosa, Commissioner, New York State Department of Education, to Phillip H. Rosenfelt, Acting Secretary, U.S. Department of Education, *Request for a Waiver of Statutory and Regulatory Requirements of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Pertaining to Assessments and Accountability*, February 12, 2021.

The U.S. Department of Education denied these requests. With 88 percent of its students participating remotely most of the year, the District of Columbia state education agency, which has certain oversight responsibilities over District of Columbia Public Schools and the district's charter schools, was the only one to receive an exemption from administering its academic assessments.⁴⁴ It did, however, conduct ELP testing.

Many states ultimately took advantage of the administration's guidance to modify state summative assessments and administration practices. To place the results of states' assessments into context, the following subsections outline how states approached their statewide ELP and academic assessments during the 2020–21 school year. In some cases, states made significant changes to their assessments and their test administration windows, coloring the way the data should be shared and interpreted. Some states also modified their accountability systems during the pandemic.

In some cases, states made significant changes to their assessments and their test administration windows, coloring the way the data should be shared and interpreted.

Modified Testing Windows

Many states expanded their testing window for ELA, math, science, and ELP to accommodate smaller and socially distanced testing groups over a longer period. Most states that extended their testing window did so by only a few weeks or through the remainder of the school year. However, a few states made more significant adjustments to their testing timelines. Pennsylvania, for example, had one of the longest testing windows for academic testing—from mid-April 2021 through the end of September 2021.⁴⁵ Some moved their academic testing windows entirely to Fall 2021, including Maryland,⁴⁶ Washington State,⁴⁷ and New Jersey.⁴⁸ Students in these states took the assessment for the grade level in which they were enrolled during the 2020–21 school year, even though the testing occurred early in school year 2021–22.

Similarly, for ELP, testing windows in many states took place through spring or the end of the academic year. However, a handful of states administered assessments through Summer and Fall 2021, including California, Illinois, Nevada, and Pennsylvania.

Notably, in extending its ELP testing window, Oregon offered detailed guidance to school districts on how best to prioritize EL students, anticipating limited space and school personnel to administer assessments. The state encouraged districts to prioritize ELP summative testing for students who demonstrated a likelihood of scoring at the proficient level, which would affect formal decisions about whether to reclassify

44 Letter from Ian Rosenblum, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Programs, U.S. Department of Education, to Shana Young, Interim Superintendent, Office of the State Superintendent of Education, District of Columbia, April 6, 2021.

45 Pennsylvania Department of Education, "PSSA Testing Windows," accessed September 11, 2021.

46 Liz Bowie, "Maryland State Board of Education Votes to Delay Standardized Tests until Fall," *Baltimore Sun*, March 4, 2021.

47 Dahlia Bazzaz, "Washington Students Won't Take Standardized Tests This School Year," *Seattle Times*, April 15, 2021.

48 Letter from Ian Rosenblum, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Programs, U.S. Department of Education, to Angelica Allen-McMillan, Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Education, April 6, 2021; New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Assessments, "Start Strong: Fall 2021 Administration" (presentation, New Jersey Department of Education, Trenton, NJ, June 2021).

these students as English proficient.⁴⁹ The state also encouraged districts to prioritize students whose assessment results might influence the courses they would take in the future, such as secondary students.

Shortened State Assessments or Test Administration

Several states opted to shorten their state academic assessments to minimize the time students spent taking these tests. California, Georgia, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Oregon, and New Jersey were among the states that modified or cut portions of their state tests.⁵⁰

States also minimized the test burden on students by administering less than the full suite of state academic assessments to all students. Colorado administered its ELA assessments to students in grades 3, 5, and 7 and its math assessments to students in grades 4, 6, and 8. Oregon also assigned students in certain grade spans to take one or two assessments of the three typically administered. For example, the state administered the ELA assessment to grade 3 students, while grade 8 students tested in math and science.⁵¹

Remote Test Administration

Concerned about digital access gaps, test security, and test validity, most states did not offer a remote option for assessing students. But there were a few exceptions. California, Connecticut, and Iowa offered their academic tests remotely.⁵² EL students in California and Connecticut, which are not members of the WIDA or ELPA21 consortia and have their own ELP assessments, were also able to take the ELP test remotely.⁵³

Flexibility to Use Alternative Assessments or Increased Local Control

A few states gave school districts the flexibility to use alternative assessments if administration of the state assessment was not feasible. California allowed districts to administer a local alternative aligned to the state's standards when administration of the state's assessments was not viable. Possible reasons for choosing an alternative assessment included internet access and security, whether instruction has been in person, and local pandemic considerations.⁵⁴ The state department of education did not provide a

49 Oregon Department of Education, "Administering the ELPA Screener and Summative in 2020–21" (guidance document, Oregon Department of Education, Salem, OR, January 4, 2021).

50 California Department of Education, "State Board of Education Approves Shorter Standardized Tests to Give Schools Flexibility amidst COVID-19 Uncertainties" (news release 20-90, November 6, 2020); Georgia Department of Education, "GaDOE FAQ on Spring 2021 Federal Accountability, School Identification, and Report Card Waiver in Response to COVID-19 Pandemic" (fact sheet, Georgia Department of Education, Atlanta, GA, March 29, 2021); Kentucky Department of Education, "Kentucky Summative Assessment Administration Guidance 2020–2021 School Year" (guidance document, Kentucky Department of Education, Frankfort, KY, March 11, 2021); Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Makes Changes to the MCAS Schedule, Graduation Requirements for 11th Graders" (press release, April 1, 2021); New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Assessments, "Start Strong: Fall 2021 Administration"; Oregon Department of Education, "Amended Assessment Waiver Request" (bulletin to superintendents, Oregon Department of Education, Salem, OR, April 1, 2021).

51 Oregon Department of Education, "Amended Assessment Waiver Request."

52 California Department of Education, "COVID-19 Assessment FAQs," accessed September 11, 2021; Iowa Department of Education, "Iowa Department of Education Releases New Spring Student Assessment Results, Updates Postsecondary Readiness Reports" (press release, August 4, 2021); Connecticut State Department of Education, *Statewide Summative Assessment Report* (Hartford, CT: Connecticut State Department of Education, 2021).

53 California Department of Education, "COVID-19 Assessment FAQs"; memorandum from Janet Stuck, Department of Education, State of Connecticut, to English Learner assessment coordinators, *LAS Links Remote Test Administration Guidance Resources*, January 4, 2021.

54 California Department of Education, "COVID-19 Assessment FAQs."

list of approved alternatives or require school districts to submit evidence of the need to use a different assessment. At least 18 of the state's 25 largest school districts opted to use an alternative assessment.⁵⁵ In most of these cases, school districts leaned on interim assessments that they already use throughout the year. These tests vary from district to district.

New Mexico, like California, gave districts and schools flexibility in choosing a testing instrument. They had the option to use locally designed assessments, the state's formative assessment system, or other local measures of progress to assess students who were enrolled in schools remotely.⁵⁶ In general, New Mexico school districts did not aggressively encourage the state's academic assessment. Only 1 percent of students in the state's largest school district, Albuquerque Public Schools, ultimately participated in the state's test.⁵⁷

Some school districts defied state guidance to test students. In Oregon, for example, two school boards representing Oregon's largest school districts—Portland Public Schools and Salem-Keizer Public Schools—passed resolutions to bar their schools from participating in statewide testing.

Modifications to State Accountability Policies

As noted previously, many states sought and received relief from certain federal accountability requirements as a result of the Biden administration's guidance. However, states relaxed additional accountability policies for districts, schools, teachers, and students that are not part of federal law. Like many states, Florida and Texas typically attach ratings or rankings to schools based at least in part on assessment results, but neither state did so for the 2020–21 school year.⁵⁸ Similarly, some states and districts that incorporate measures of student growth (which may include state assessment data) into teacher evaluations revised their policies for the 2020–21 school year.⁵⁹ Georgia also drastically scaled back the weight of assessment results in a student's final grade for algebra, history, biology, and literature to 0.01 percent.⁶⁰

4 A Preliminary Review of What State Assessment Data Say about English Learners during COVID-19

State summative assessment results provide some insight into the pandemic's impact on students, though they should be evaluated with caution, given how widely variable students' schooling was in 2020–21 and, perhaps more importantly, how few state assessment systems were nimble enough to capture the unusual testing conditions created by the pandemic. And when they released their test performance data, most

55 Sydney Johnson, "Hundreds of Thousands of California Students Won't Take Statewide Standardized Tests This Spring," EdSource, May 4, 2021.

56 New Mexico Public Education Department, "Feds Approve New Mexico Request for Spring Testing Waiver: Testing Focus Shift to Information-Gathering to Target Resources" (news release, April 22, 2021).

57 Jessica Pollard, "New Mexico Public Education Department Says Spring Testing Data Won't be Released to Public," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, September 27, 2021; Patrick Hayes, "New Mexico Students Not Required to Take Standardized Test This Year," KOB4, April 29, 2021.

58 Florida Department of Education, "Florida Department of Education Issues Emergency Order" (news release, April 9, 2021); Texas Education Agency, "Texas Education Agency Pauses A-F Ratings for 2020–21 School Year" (news release, December 10, 2020).

59 Shannon Holston, "Evaluating Teachers during the Pandemic," National Council on Teacher Quality, November 9, 2020; Patricia Saenz-Armstrong, "Tracking District Teacher Policies in the COVID-19 Environment," National Council on Teacher Quality, January 14, 2021.

60 Anika Chaturvedi, "State Education Board OKs Weighing Milestones Tests at 0.01% of Grade," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 21, 2020.

states did not contextualize test participation or assessment performance with other important information, including mode of instruction, attendance, student engagement metrics, or reasons some students did not take the test. States' assessment modifications—either to the testing window or the testing instrument itself—further cloud assessment results and their meaning, and limit data comparability across years. With these important caveats, this section takes a look at several states' ELA, math, and ELP assessment data, highlighting examples that illustrate both some trends and variability in how ELs participated and performed in states' 2020–21 summative testing, and how states collected and reported EL data.

A. *Participation in State Academic Summative Assessments*

Overall participation in state summative assessments in 2020–21 was highly variable across states, and EL participation was similarly uneven. And because the U.S. Department of Education relaxed the requirement that states meet the standard 95 percent participation threshold, experts have cautioned against drawing comparisons or conclusions from 2020–21 assessment results due to low participation rates in some places.⁶¹

A few states reported overall test participation rates that resembled pre-pandemic rates, including Iowa (98 percent), Arkansas (97 percent), Indiana (97 percent), and Tennessee (95 percent).⁶² At the other end of the spectrum, New Mexico reported a 10 percent participation rate among students in grades 3–8.⁶³

Many states' participation rates fell somewhere in the middle. Delaware reported a participation rate of 60 percent for ELA and math in grades 3–8.⁶⁴ Virginia had participation rates ranging between 76 percent in ELA and 79 percent in math, while overall participation rates in Arizona and Texas hovered between 84 percent and 86 percent.⁶⁵ In Connecticut, 82 percent of grade 3–8 students tested in person, and an additional 11.5 percent tested remotely.⁶⁶

There were also notable differences in participation rates depending on a district's urban density and demographics.

There were also notable differences in participation rates depending on a district's urban density and demographics. In Tennessee, for example, all students (including ELs) in urban districts were less likely to participate in state testing. Black, Latino, and EL students in rural districts were less likely to participate

61 Chris Domaleski, Juan D'Brot, Scott Marion, and Michelle Boyer, "Sensible Reporting of Spring 2021 State Assessments" (policy brief, Center for Assessment, Dover, NH, June 2021).

62 Iowa Department of Education, "Iowa Department of Education Releases New Spring Student Assessment Results"; Arkansas Department of Education, Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, "DESE Releases ACT Aspire Test Results" (news release, Arkansas Department of Education, July 14, 2021); Indiana State Board of Education, "Indiana Performance and Academic Impact" (presentation, Indiana State Board of Education, Indianapolis, July 14, 2021); Tennessee Department of Education, "Spring 2021 TCAP Release" (presentation, Tennessee Department of Education, Nashville, TN, August 2021).

63 Pollard, "New Mexico Public Education Department Says Spring Testing Data Won't be Released to Public."

64 Delaware Department of Education, "2021 State Assessment Results" (presentation, Delaware Department of Education, Dover, DE, August 10, 2021).

65 Virginia Department of Education, "2020-2021 SOL Test Results Reflect National Trends, Unprecedented Challenges: Results Set Baseline for Recovery" (news release, Virginia Department of Education, August 26, 2021); Morgan Dick, "Arizona Department of Education Releases Statewide Assessment Results from School Year 2020/2021" (news release, Arizona Department of Education, August 27, 2021); Texas Education Agency, "TEA Releases Spring 2021 STAAR Grades 3-8 and End-of-Course Assessment Results; Outcomes for In-Person Learners Appreciably Higher Than for Those Who Were Remote" (news release, June 28, 2021).

66 Connecticut State Department of Education, *Statewide Summative Assessment Report*.

compared to other rural students. And ELs enrolled in city and rural districts were less likely to participate in state testing compared to those in the suburbs and towns.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, in Colorado, where EL participation rates in ELA and math were lower than those of non-ELs across tested grades, participation was particularly low among ELs who took the Spanish-language literacy assessment (59 percent in grade 3), an alternative to the regular ELA assessment for certain EL students.⁶⁸ By comparison, rates were considerably higher among ELs who took the regular ELA assessment (74 percent) and non-ELs (77 percent).

EL participation was not uniformly lower across all states, however. In fact, ELs participated in state assessments at higher rates than other students in certain states. This was true both in some states that experienced high overall test participation rates as well as some that had low participation. In Delaware, which had relatively low participation rates across the board, ELs had the highest participation rate of any student subgroup in the state's ELA assessment (73 percent), followed by Hispanic and White students (68 percent and 67 percent, respectively).⁶⁹ Yet in math, EL participation was much lower and, conversely, other student groups' participation much higher. Alabama, which had very high test participation among all students (94 percent in both ELA and math), demonstrated similarly high participation rates among ELs (95 percent in ELA and 96 percent in math).⁷⁰

Finally, participation rates were generally highest among elementary-age students and lower among middle and high school-age students for ELs and non-ELs alike. In Georgia, for example, high school-age students were less likely to participate in testing than students in lower grade levels (55 percent compared with 79 percent of grade 3 students).⁷¹ In Colorado, where students took either the math or ELA assessment depending on their grade level, EL participation rates were at their highest in grades 3 (74 percent in ELA) and 4 (71 percent in math) and dropped down to 62 percent in grade 7 for ELA and to 59 percent in grade 8 for math.⁷² This downward trend in test participation as grade levels rose was evident across most states.

B. Performance on English Language Arts and Math Tests

Because of the unprecedented testing conditions in 2020–21, it is not possible to make valid comparisons with students' ELA and math test performance in other years. This is also true for ELP performance, as will be discussed in Section 3.C. The sample of students tested was not comparable, except perhaps in states with near normal participation rates. And even in several of these states, officials may have altered test administration logistics in ways that are not readily apparent from the available data. While this report does contrast 2020–21 assessment performance with student performance prior to the onset of the pandemic, this is done to contextualize some of these outcomes and is not intended to suggest that the variances are authentic.

67 Tennessee Department of Education, "Spring 2021 TCAP Release."

68 Colorado Department of Education, "Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) 2021 State Achievement Results" (data tables, accessed February 22, 2022).

69 Delaware Department of Education, "2021 State Assessment Results."

70 Alabama Department of Education, "School Performance: Proficiency 2020–2021" (data tables, accessed February 22, 2022).

71 Georgia Department of Education, "Overview of the 2021 Georgia Milestones Public Release" (presentation, Georgia Department of Education, Atlanta, GA, accessed October 19, 2021).

72 Colorado Department of Education, "Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) 2021."

Decline in Performance, Especially in Math, for ELs and Non-ELs Alike

In many cases, performance in ELA and math declined across all students, including ELs. Students across all racial and ethnic categories had lower test scores in ELA and math in many states than in 2018–19. In Florida, the bit of progress ELs had experienced in ELA during the last few years appears to have been erased during the pandemic. The percentage of ELs in grades 3–10 who performed at a satisfactory level or above declined to levels not seen since 2016. And the proportion of ELs performing at the state’s lowest proficiency level rose from 57 percent in 2018–19 to 62 percent. The impacts appear to have been greatest in grades 6–8 and 9–10.⁷³

North Dakota is another good example of a state in which it appears that the proportion of ELs in the lowest rungs of academic proficiency grew. The proportion of EL students who scored proficient or above in ELA dropped slightly from approximately 14 percent in 2018–19 to 12 percent in 2020–21, but the proportion at the lowest level of proficiency grew by 4 percentage points.⁷⁴

In Texas, 53 percent of ELs did not meet the state’s math standards in the 2020–21 school year, up from 29 percent in 2018–19.⁷⁵ Similarly, the proportion of ELs who did not meet the state’s 4th grade reading standards rose from 35 percent in 2018–19 to 52 percent in 2020–21. Texas students who had been ELs but were recently reclassified as English proficient saw a similar trend. Fifteen percent of newly reclassified students in grade 4 who exited the EL category within the last year did not meet the state’s standards in math in 2020–21, more than double the 7 percent in 2018–19. In ELA, the percentage not meeting standards increased from 6 percent in 2018–19 to 8 percent in 2020–21.

Across all student groups, several states reported greater declines in math assessment scores compared with other subject areas. In Virginia, the percentage of students who passed the state’s math test fell 28 percentage points to 54 percent from 2018–19 to 2020–21. Among ELs, the drop was greater—by 38 percentage points to 21 percent.⁷⁶ In Tennessee, proficiency dropped 12 percentage points since 2018–19. And among ELs, the percentage of students scoring below proficiency was substantially higher in 2020–21 (60 percent) than in 2018–19 (44 percent).⁷⁷

At the district level, the Houston Independent School District confirmed that some of the steepest declines for all students were in math. Among ELs, the percentage of students who approached grade-level standards in math dropped from 65 percent in 2018–19 to 40 percent in 2020–21. By comparison, the drop was more modest in reading (from 53 percent to 45 percent).⁷⁸

73 Florida Department of Education, *Florida Standards Assessments: English Language Arts and Mathematics* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida Department of Education, 2021).

74 State of North Dakota, “North Dakota: Student Achievement,” accessed October 19, 2021.

75 Texas Education Agency, “STAAR Statewide Summary Reports 2020–2021,” accessed August 21, 2021; Texas Education Agency, “STAAR Statewide Summary Reports 2018–2019,” accessed August 21, 2021. Texas also offers a Spanish-language version of its statewide math and reading assessments. The percentages discussed here reflect performance among EL students who took the English version of the state’s math and reading assessments.

76 Virginia Department of Education, “SOL Test Pass Rates & Other Results” (2018–19 and 2020–21 test administration data tables, accessed February 23, 2022).

77 Tennessee Department of Education, “Spring 2021 TCAP Release.”

78 Houston Independent School District, *Research Educational Program Report: STAAR 3–8, 2020–2021* (Houston, TX: Houston Independent School District, 2021).

ELs among the Most Affected

A few states, including Florida and Arkansas, reported that gaps did not widen between student groups in general, but that scores fell at approximately the same rate for all students across the board. However, several other states, including Tennessee⁷⁹ and Minnesota,⁸⁰ reported disproportionately large drops among ELs.

In Ohio, for example, ELs—along with students who are low income, homeless, or have a disability—experienced declines in ELA two to three times larger than other students.⁸¹ In Indiana, all student subgroups experienced significant impacts in math, but ELs—together with Asian, Black, and Hispanic students and students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch—experienced significant impacts in both ELA and math. State officials defined “significant impacts” as those from which students would need more than one year to recover.⁸²

And, in Colorado, ELs’ scores in 2020–21 were lower than those of students with disabilities, despite the fact that the two groups performed similarly in 2018–19.⁸³ In addition, the decline in grade 3 language arts test performance was steepest among ELs who took the Spanish language assessment compared to all grade 3 students; their performance fell by almost half, from 28 percent of ELs meeting or exceeding state benchmarks of proficiency in 2018–19 to 15 percent in 2020–21.⁸⁴

Remote Learners Fared Worse

Test data from a number of states suggest that students in remote learning lost more ground than those who primarily learned in person. In Texas, for example, districts in which 25 percent or less of students were primarily learning remotely experienced less of a decline in the proportion of students meeting state benchmarks in math compared with districts in which 75 percent or more of students were in remote learning (9 percent versus 32 percent).⁸⁵ In Connecticut, 14 percent of ELs who were learning in person met or exceeded state ELA benchmarks compared with 8 percent who were in hybrid learning and 8 percent who were in remote learning.⁸⁶ In addition, both remote and in-person learners in Connecticut experienced a greater decline in math than in ELA, but the drops were more pronounced among remote learners.

Test data from a number of states suggest that students in remote learning lost more ground than those who primarily learned in person.

79 Tennessee Department of Education, “Spring 2021 TCAP Release.”

80 Minnesota Department of Education, “Minnesota Launches Statewide System to Support Student Learning Recovery” (press release, August 27, 2021).

81 Vladimir Kogan and Stéphane Lavertu, *How the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Student Learning in Ohio: Analysis of Spring 2021 Ohio State Tests* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 2021).

82 Indiana State Board of Education, “Indiana Performance and Academic Impact.”

83 Erica Meltzer and Yesenia Robles, “CMAS Results: Colorado Students Lost Ground during Year of Disrupted Learning,” Chalkbeat Colorado, August 12, 2021.

84 Colorado Department of Education, “Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) 2021.”

85 Texas Education Agency, “TEA Releases Spring 2021 STAAR Grades 3-8 and End-of-Course Assessment Results.”

86 Connecticut State Department of Education, *Statewide Summative Assessment Report*.

C. *Participation in and Performance on ELP Tests*

Some states—though not all, as required by federal law—have publicly released ELP results for the 2020–21 school year. In addition, WIDA published its analysis of results from its ACCESS for ELLs test, which is used by 37 states. This section draws on the WIDA analysis and is supplemented with examples from individual states, including states that use the ACCESS test and those that use other assessments of English language proficiency.

According to WIDA, the number of students who participated in the consortium’s test was 30 percent lower in 2020–21 compared to previous years, and the drops were most significant in elementary grades (grades 1–5) and high school (grades 9–12).⁸⁷ In Massachusetts, participation decreased 22 percentage points from 2019 to 76 percent, despite the state extending the testing window by 14 weeks.⁸⁸ The percentage decrease was greatest in grades 9–12, where participation dropped 35 percentage points compared to 17–20 percentage point drops in grades K–8. In addition, participation rates were lower among ELs in urban school districts, economically disadvantaged EL students, and ELs with disabilities compared to other ELs.

In Delaware, where only 13 percent of all students were learning in person, participation in the state’s ELP assessment was 82 percent, with higher participation rates hovering in the 80th percentile in the early grades and dropping to the 50–60th percentile in grades 9–12,⁸⁹ a trend also seen in the academic assessments. And in California, which uses its own ELP assessment, ELs participated at a rate of 89 percent.⁹⁰ Notably, participation rates were relatively high in some states. Indiana, for example, had a participation rate of 94 percent in its ELP testing.⁹¹ And in Iowa, EL participation in the ELPA21 test, although lower than normal, was 93 percent.⁹²

ELs’ performance in ELP assessments dropped following the onset of the pandemic among students participating in the ACCESS test, especially in grades 1–6.

ELs’ performance in ELP assessments dropped following the onset of the pandemic among students participating in the ACCESS test, especially in grades 1–6 (see Figure 1). Between 2019–20 and 2020–21, proficiency fell 6 overall composite scale points in grades 1–5 and 4 composite scale score points in grade 6. Notably, ELs’ English proficiency did not change remarkably in grades 7–12, except for grade 9.⁹³

87 Narek Sahakyan and H. Gary Cook, *Examining English Learner Testing, Proficiency, and Growth: Before and throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2021).

88 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, *ACCESS for ELLs: 2021 Statewide Results* (Malden, MA: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022).

89 Delaware Department of Education, “2021 State Assessment Results.”

90 California Department of Education, “Interpretation Guide to the 2020–21 Statewide Assessment Results” (assessment results news release, California Department of Education, Sacramento, CA, January 2022).

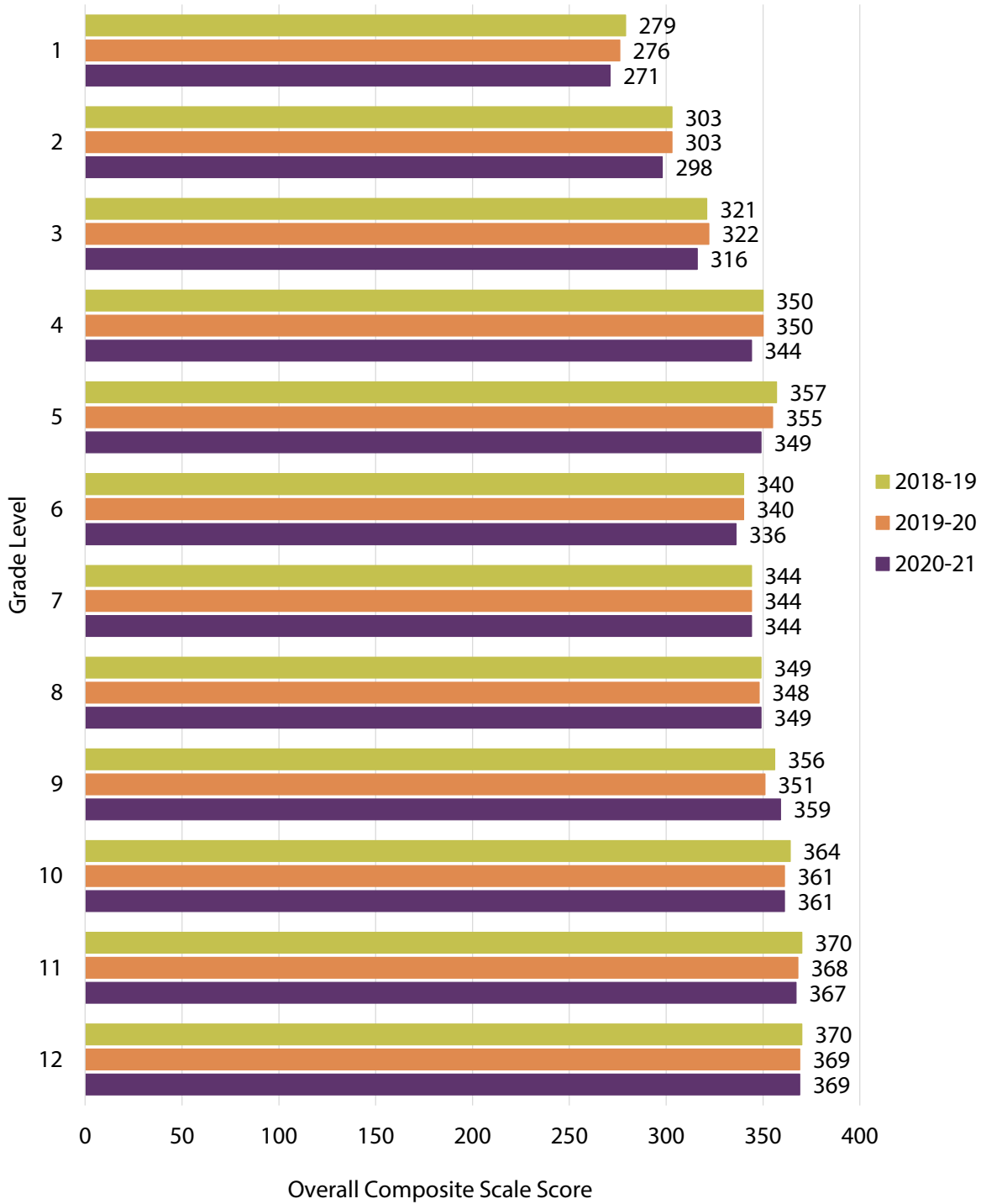
91 Indiana State Board of Education, “Indiana Performance and Academic Impact.”

92 State of Iowa, “State Summary: English Language Proficiency” (2021 state performance report, accessed March 2, 2022).

93 Sahakyan and Cook, *Examining English Learner Testing, Proficiency, and Growth*.

FIGURE 1

English Learners’ English Language Proficiency Scores on ACCESS for ELLs Tests, by Grade, 2019–19 to 2020–21



Note: The ACCESS for ELLs is a test used by 37 states to test ELs’ English language proficiency each year.
 Source: Narek Sahakyan and H. Gary Cook, *Examining English Learner Testing, Proficiency, and Growth: Before and Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2021).

These drops in performance bear out in individual states that use the ACCESS test. The share of students scoring proficient on Michigan’s test fell from 18 percent in 2019–20 to 14 percent in 2020–21, the lowest rate since at least 2013–14.⁹⁴ And in Tennessee, the proportion of students scoring proficient in English dropped by about half, from 50 percent 2019–20 to 26 percent 2020–21.⁹⁵ Finally, a July 2021 presentation by the Indiana State Board of Education concluded that the “2021 WIDA-ACCESS data confirms significant academic impact for most English language learners.”⁹⁶ ELs in grades 1–4 experienced significant impacts from which it will take more than one year to recover. Notably, ELs in grades 5–8 generally experienced moderate impacts that state officials predicted would require less than one year of recovery, and students in grades 9–12 encountered minimal to no impacts in English language development.⁹⁷

While the learning and testing conditions in the 2020–21 school year make it impossible to draw direct comparisons, these assessment data offer some indication of the pandemic’s impact on student learning and language development. Participation in summative tests varied substantially among districts, states, and demographics. For ELs, the pandemic conditions driving language development losses are new territory, and the trajectory for recovery is equally uncertain.

D. Data Transparency and Accessibility

Although the U.S. Department of Education urged states to transparently report disaggregated data regarding assessment participation and performance by race, ethnicity, language proficiency, and other categories in its February 2021 guidance (and as ESSA requires), some states have made these data more accessible than others. Several states issued summaries outlining key trends in assessment performance, many with cautionary language regarding interpretation and comparability across years and other schools, given the circumstances of the pandemic.

In addition to overall participation rates and outcomes, some but not all states published disaggregated data for performance and participation rates. Colorado, for example, included both participation and outcome data for each tested grade and subject disaggregated by race and ethnicity, income, disability, and language proficiency.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the state’s summary includes data disaggregated by finer levels of language proficiency, including ELs who do not have any proficiency in English, those who have some limited degree of English, those who were reclassified as fluent English proficient within the last year, and those who were reclassified within the last two years. Meanwhile, Connecticut issued one of the most comprehensive reports, which clearly identifies key trends and analyzes growth. In addition, performance and participation data are disaggregated by mode of learning for each student group.⁹⁹

Despite the significance of participation rates for the 2020–21 school year, some states, including Virginia and Florida, did not include disaggregated participation data for ELs. And some states, including Georgia, did not disaggregate either performance, participation, or mode of learning data by subgroup at the state or district level.

94 State of Michigan, “MI School Data—English Learner Dashboard,” accessed October 5, 2021.

95 Tennessee Department of Education, “Progress on English Language Proficiency” (state report card, accessed March 3, 2022).

96 Indiana State Board of Education, “Indiana Performance and Academic Impact.”

97 Indiana State Board of Education, “Indiana Performance and Academic Impact.”

98 Colorado Department of Education, “Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) 2021.”

99 Connecticut State Department of Education, *Statewide Summative Assessment Report*.

5 Looking Ahead

There has been no shortage of discussion in recent decades regarding the value of testing students, and particularly the value of statewide assessments. Testing during a once-in-a-generation pandemic has further complicated the testing debate. With large numbers of students learning partially or entirely remotely and disparate digital access and home learning support, some education stakeholders have described statewide assessments as an unnecessary distraction from instruction, and one that would reveal only limited useful information.

Indeed, there are clear limitations to states' 2020–21 summative assessment data. States made significant modifications to their assessments and how they administered them. In addition, far more students are missing from 2020–21 state assessment data compared to previous years, and the characteristics of these students and their reasons for not participating are not well documented. On their own, states' 2020–21 assessment results might convey little about students' learning.

Statewide assessment results are among the few sources of data related to student learning that are shared broadly with the public, and they are thus an important lever for equity.

However, the widespread variation in students' educational experiences during the pandemic has also fueled calls for state assessments as a way to document student performance during this highly unusual period and inform investments to support recovery. Importantly, statewide assessment results are among the few sources of data related to student learning that are shared broadly with

the public, and they are thus an important lever for equity. Although state data systems lacked the agility to precisely document and measure the pandemic's impact on students and their academic learning, the evidence that is available points to students having experienced adverse effects on their social and emotional well-being and academic development. There are also strong indications from both testing and non-testing data that ELs have been among the most disproportionately affected groups of students. Even in states where the decline in proficiency rates among ELs does not differ markedly from other groups, additional drops in EL performance—which were exceptionally low in many states before the pandemic—should set off alarm bells.

States and school districts should use state summative assessment results, along with other data, to inform their spending of the historic \$122 billion Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund that was passed as part of the American Rescue Plan. Indeed, some states are making strategic investments based on state outcome data. In Texas, for example, any student who did not pass the state's assessment is eligible for accelerated instruction in school year 2021–22.¹⁰⁰ Specifically, these students either have a teacher recognized as exemplary or participate in no less than 30 hours of one-on-one or small group tutoring.

¹⁰⁰ Texas Education Agency, "House Bill 4545 Implementation Overview" (To The Administrator Addressed correspondence, Texas Education Agency, Austin, TX, June 25, 2021).

Prior research by the Migration Policy Institute's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy has proposed some additional ideas.¹⁰¹ These include: (1) ensuring that high-dosage tutoring and acceleration efforts are staffed with teachers and paraprofessionals who are experienced both with course content and in working with ELs; (2) investing in sustained, content-focused professional development for all teachers; and (3) leveraging community partnerships to support family engagement, communication, social and emotional supports, and increased learning time initiatives. As school districts continue to spend their ESSER dollars through 2024, these investments will remain relevant.

In addition, with the pandemic having renewed and added new layers of complexity to debates on the future of assessment and accountability systems, there is a pressing need for additional research and consideration of a range of issues that are particularly relevant for ELs, including:

- ▶ **Additional metrics.** The pandemic reinforced the significance of non-testing data for understanding students' educational experiences. Indicators of student engagement as well as digital access and literacy gaps are just a few of the markers that merit additional attention in statewide data systems and reporting. However, there may be additional indicators that are especially relevant to ELs that future research can explore.
- ▶ **Expected gains.** After a few unpredictable, turbulent years in public education, it is difficult to determine what the learning and recovery trajectory will be for ELs. What should educators and policymakers consider normal or ambitious growth for these students' language and academic development? Exploring these questions is particularly pressing given the generally accepted push for acceleration instead of remediation to support unfinished learning and to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional and nonacademic interventions.¹⁰²

Finally, all data—both testing and non-academic data—are of limited use if they are not disaggregated across key demographics, including race, ethnicity, free and reduced-price lunch status, and language proficiency. This review of state assessment data found that several states failed to report assessment results for ELs at the state or district level or both. The accessibility of these data also varied widely across states. As states and districts reinvent and enhance their assessment and data systems, they must also configure their public reporting systems and strategies to reach and inform all stakeholders equitably.

101 See Melissa Lazarin and Jazmin Flores Peña, "Rebuilding the U.S. Education System for the Nation's English Learners" (commentary, MPI, Washington, DC, June 2021).

102 See, for example, Beth Hawkins, "A Better Equation: New Pandemic Data Supports Acceleration Rather than Remediation to Make Up for COVID Learning Loss," *The 74*, May 24, 2021.

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