

## Another Alarming Achievement Gap

*Measures of academic achievement for English Learners (ELs) in Wisconsin are far below those of their English-proficient peers. Only 17% of ELs in third grade can read proficiently, while just 4% of EL eighth graders are proficient in math. What does this mean in light of the state’s responsibility to close student achievement gaps?*

Last month, the Wisconsin Policy Forum unveiled our new School DataTool, an interactive dashboard of key educational data for school districts throughout the state. Featured in the tool are enrollment and academic indicators for specific student groups (i.e., low-income students, students with disabilities, and students of color) for which the state and schools are expected to make progress toward closing achievement gaps. One important group that will be included in future editions of the DataTool is English Learners (ELs)—students with limited English proficiency.

Over the past year, the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding and Governor Tony Evers’ proposed 2019-21 budget have given considerable attention to ELs and the state’s role in ensuring they have equitable and adequate resources. Here, we provide a brief background on ELs in Wisconsin and preview what the DataTool will include for them.

In the 2018-19 school year, over 350 of Wisconsin’s 421 school districts reported serving at least one EL. Wisconsin’s EL population has grown from about 30,000 students in 2000-01 to 51,825 in 2018-19, marking the fourth consecutive year of growth. These students now comprise 6% of the state’s overall K-12 enrollment.

Under state and federal law, school districts must identify and assess students with limited English proficiency and adopt educational programming to support them. Such programming tends to exceed average per pupil costs.

However, the state only provides additional funding to a relatively small number of districts that are legally required to offer specialized bilingual-bicultural program-

ming—52 districts in 2016-17 serving just over half the ELs in the state. These districts have certain concentrations of ELs who speak the same language in a given band of grades. (The thresholds are 10 students in grades K to 3, or 20 students in grades 4 to 8 or in high school.) The state’s only EL-specific aid reimburses those school districts for about 8% of a relatively narrow range of costs they incur to provide this programming. All other districts that enroll ELs must meet the mandates to serve these students (almost 23,000 in 2016-17) with existing district resources. See Policy Notes for Evers’ proposed EL funding increase.

### EL Populations By District

Figure 1 shows the top 10 school districts in terms of the number of ELs enrolled in 2018-19. The proportion of their students who were ELs ranges widely, however. For example, the 9,013 ELs in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) made up about 12% of the district’s student body. Green Bay Area’s EL student count of 4,552 was about half that of MPS, but it comprised almost a quarter (22.3%) of total enrollment.

The three districts with the highest percentage of ELs in 2018-19 were Arcadia, Abbotsford, and Independence—all relatively small districts in which ELs accounted for 30% or more of their students. But none of the three received state aid for their EL programs as of the 2016-17 school year (the most recent available).

### EL Academic Achievement Trends

Most ELs enroll in kindergarten and take at least five years to be reclassified as fully English proficient. However, new ELs are continuously entering the school system at all grade levels, and the older they

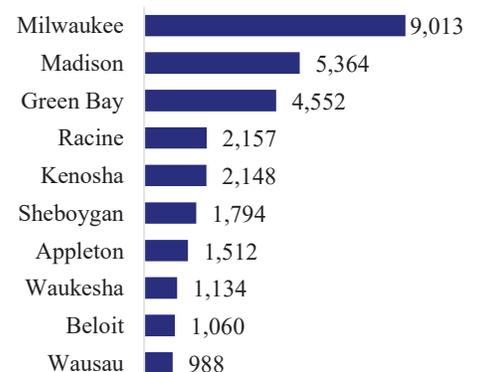
are when they enter an English-speaking school, the more services they are likely to need and the longer it typically takes to reach full English language proficiency. Nevertheless, both state and federal education accountability laws require Wisconsin to monitor EL performance on statewide achievement measures.

Below, we provide a snapshot of EL performance on three key indicators of future success: third grade reading, eighth grade math (both are measured by Wisconsin’s Forward Exam), and the four-year high school graduation rate.

In 2017-18, 16.6% of third grade ELs scored at the proficient or advanced level in reading. This marks a gap of 26 percentage points below English-proficient students. It is also down from 17.4% the previous year and 19.9% in 2015-16. To put this in context, 2017-18 also marked a three-year low of 40.2% of all students statewide scoring at the proficient level or higher.

In eighth grade math, 36.6% of all students statewide scored at the proficient or advanced level in 2017-18, but only

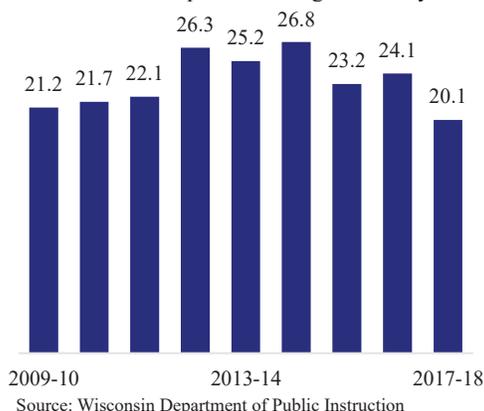
**Figure 1: Districts With the Most ELs**  
Top 10 School Districts by EL Count, 2018-19



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

4.3% of ELs did so. This represents a margin of 33.8 percentage points below the measure for English-proficient students.

**Fig. 2: EL Graduation Rate Gap Shrinks**  
EL Grad. Rate Gap in Percentage Points by Year



At the same time, the trend in the four-year high school graduation rate for ELs appears to be improving. In 2017-18, 70.1% of EL high schoolers had graduated within four years. This was up five percentage points over the previous year and represented the highest EL four-year graduation rate in at least a decade. As shown in Figure 2, the high school graduation achievement gap between ELs and English-proficient students has been dropping from a 10-year peak of 26.8 percentage points in 2014-15 to just over 20 percentage points in 2017-18.

These three measures of EL outcomes are indicative of the Department

of Public Instruction's assertion that ELs have the lowest achievement scores of any student subgroup. These basic indicators of academic achievement for ELs are cause for alarm, particularly if their number keeps growing.

The data raise critical questions: Why do so few EL students demonstrate proficiency in math and reading? And, how can EL reading and math benchmarks be so low while high school graduation rates are going up? Leaders at all levels of Wisconsin's K-12 education system may wish to elevate these questions in ongoing discussions on the state budget and education accountability. □

## Wisconsin Policy Forum

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## Policy notes

■ According to the Education Commission of the States, Wisconsin is one of only three states that funds EL services through reimbursement for program-based costs. Most states fund ELs by weighting or providing per-pupil amounts in their primary funding formula. Wisconsin has appropriated \$8.6 million annually for its bilingual-bicultural aid program since 2011-12, maintaining an overall reimbursement rate between 7.4% and 8.8% of eligible costs for qualified districts. As of 2016-17, those districts received about \$300 per EL in state aid

out of average eligible per-pupil costs of \$3,800. In testimony to Wisconsin's Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding, an EdBuild analyst estimated Wisconsin's aid for ELs to be the lowest in the nation on a per pupil basis.

■ In his budget, Governor Evers proposed increasing state support for ELs in several ways. First, the bill would increase the reimbursement rate for the bilingual-bicultural aid program from 8% of costs to 15% (\$8.5 million) in 2019-20 and 30% (\$26.8 million) in

2020-21. The budget also would appropriate \$2.4 million to create a new form of aid that provides \$100 per EL to districts that do not qualify for existing bilingual-bicultural aid. The bill also seeks to close extreme EL achievement gaps by targeting \$3.4 million new aid to ELs classified at the lowest levels of English proficiency. The proposal would encourage school districts to expand EL programming by making \$2.5 million in discretionary grants available. Finally, it would allocate \$95,500 for a bilingual-bicultural support position at DPI.