

# A CLOSER LOOK AT ENGLISH LEARNERS IN WISCONSIN

*After four straight years of growth, the enrollment of students labeled as English Learners (ELs) in Wisconsin public schools has fallen for the second year in a row. This decrease is noteworthy because of the particular needs of this population and the potential impact on funding for EL education under the state formula. In addition, state data show EL students from many language groups lack access to bilingual programs. Together, these findings offer important considerations for policymakers as they debate the next state budget.*

For two decades, students identified as ELs in Wisconsin schools increased sharply. Between 2001 and 2019, Wisconsin’s EL population grew 78.6%, from about 30,000 to 51,825 students. In the two years since, however, it has seen a modest reversal.

After Wisconsin saw a slight decrease in its EL population in the 2019-20 school year to 51,706 students, the state experienced a sharper 2.1% decline to 50,630 students in 2020-21 (see Figure 1). Though the decrease in EL students was likely influenced by the pandemic and was not as great as the 3% drop in English-proficient students, it represents a shift for now at least from the previous expansion and one that is not well understood.

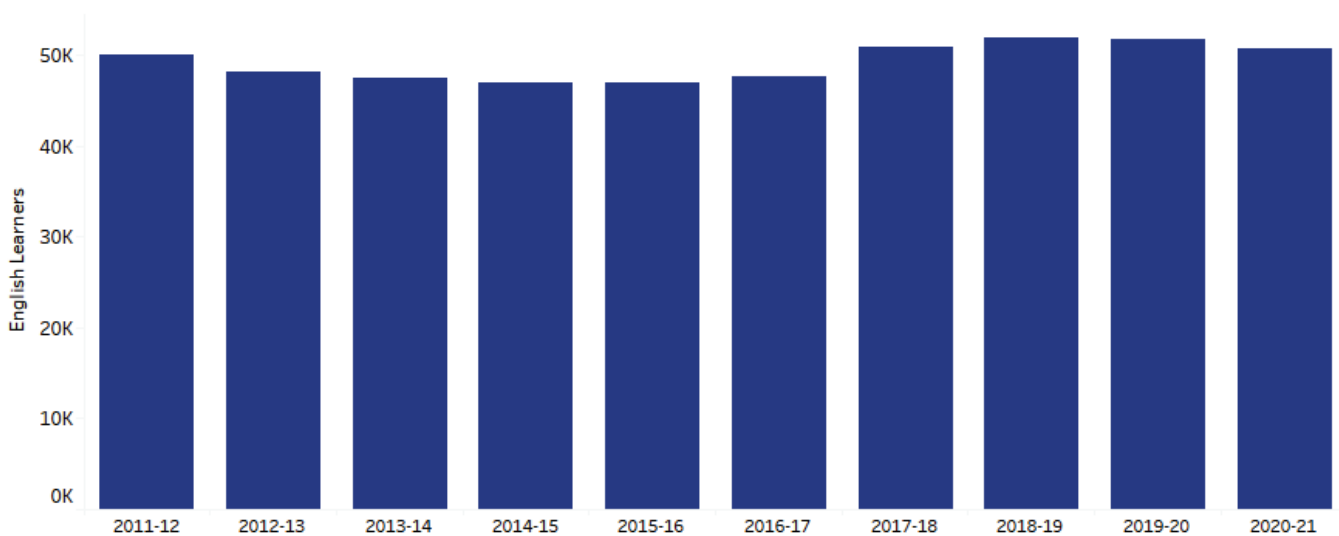
Some random variation in enrollments is normal and impacts from the pandemic in particular might be later

The report’s lead author, Maddie Hahn, is the Wisconsin Policy Forum (WPF) 2020-2021 Todd A. Berry Fellow. The fellowship supports research on key policy issues confronting state and local governments and was named after Berry, who led the Madison-based Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance (a predecessor to the WPF) for more than 20 years.

reversed. However, the fact that the drop has been most pronounced among students at lower grades suggests it might continue.

This decrease could carry important fiscal and programmatic implications, especially if it does reflect the beginning of a long-term trend. Under the current formula, EL enrollment determines a district’s eligibility for state aid and impacts how much funding a district might receive, which can inform the types of language

**Figure 1: English Learner Numbers Fall for Second Consecutive Year**  
*Statewide EL student population by year*



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



and literacy support that a district offers. As we will see, current enrollment in bilingual programs shows differences in the type of support by language group.

Funding for students labeled as ELs is important to consider because of ongoing questions about Wisconsin's unusual approach to distributing aid as well as the state's responsibility in ensuring these students have adequate and equitable resources (for more see [this March 2019 Forum brief](#)). EL students consistently and significantly test below their English-proficient peers in reading and math – data that speak to the need to address language barriers and potentially provide other supports.

A [report from the Migration Policy Institute](#) argues that the ongoing public health emergency could have pronounced negative effects for the academic achievement of the nation's EL population because of disrupted schooling, disparities in access to remote learning, and pandemic-caused health and economic distress, which has disproportionately affected marginalized groups like immigrant and migrant communities.

In addition, programming for EL students represents a cost that goes beyond the typical expense for instruction. In light of these factors, it is important to consider what programming EL students receive and how it is funded.

## **BILINGUAL-BICULTURAL CATEGORICAL AID**

State aid for EL education is allocated to Wisconsin school districts through Bilingual-Bicultural (BLBC) categorical aid. School districts become eligible for BLBC aid if they have enrolled 10 students from the same native language group in grades K to 3 or 20 students from the same native language group in grades 4 to 8 or high school.

Districts that don't meet these thresholds must provide for the education of their students identified as ELs without dedicated state financial support, which can be particularly challenging if their EL enrollment declines or fluctuates. Most districts receive no BLBC aid.

In 2020 (i.e. the 2019-20 school year) – the most recent academic year for which these data are available

– only 51 districts in Wisconsin received state aid to support BLBC programming, despite 361 districts reporting ELs in their student populations. Consequently, only 29,321 (56.7%) of Wisconsin ELs were enrolled in BLBC programs that received state funding. Many of the districts that did not receive BLBC aid were smaller, non-urban districts. The statewide drop in EL enrollment could result in additional districts losing some BLBC funding or becoming ineligible for it altogether.

Regardless of districts' enrollment numbers, their reported expenditures for BLBC aid are only partially covered by state reimbursements. The average reimbursement rate for eligible BLBC expenditures in Wisconsin has been steadily decreasing since the 1990s due to both stagnant funding and what was until recently a growing EL population.

BLBC categorical aid last saw a funding increase in 2007, when it rose to \$9.9 million. Since then, funding set aside for BLBC aid has decreased twice – in both the 2009-11 and 2011-13 state budgets – and has since remained the same at \$8.6 million despite previous growth in the EL population and the programming to serve them. As a result, the average reimbursement rate fell drastically from 32% in 1995 to just 8% in 2020.

In addition, there is relatively little federal aid to make up for the shortfall in state funding. This year, Wisconsin received \$7.5 million in Title III funds for EL instruction and for supporting immigrant children, which can only be used to supplement existing programs that districts are required to have.

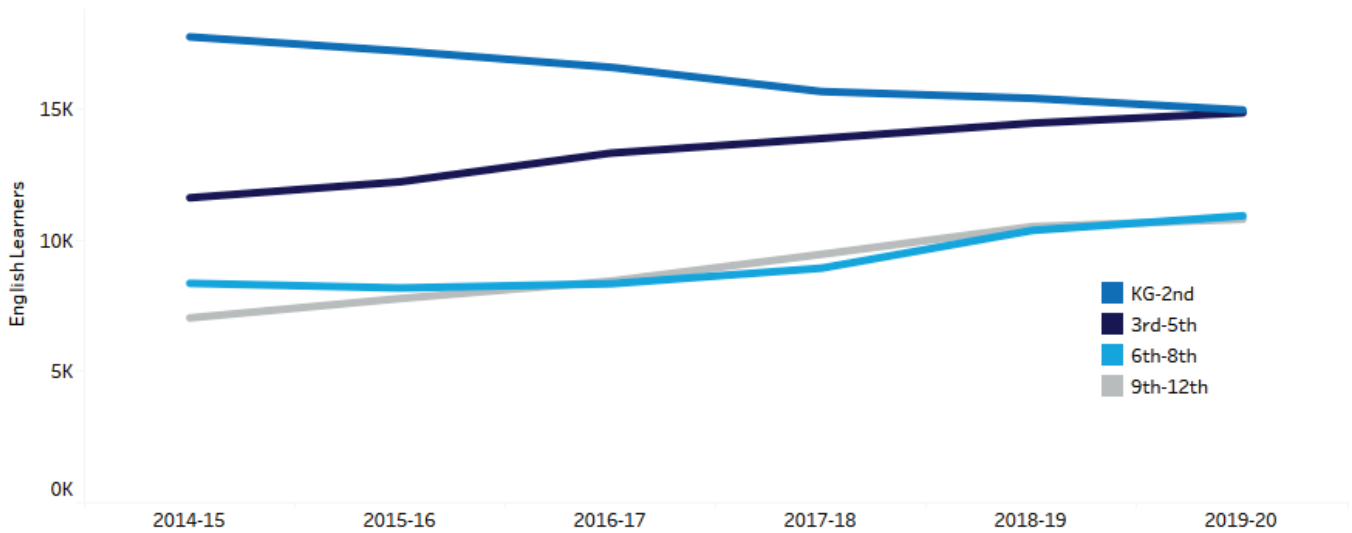
## **LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS**

The larger drop in EL enrollment for the 2021 academic year may be at least partially linked to the pandemic. Yet, changes in enrollment by grade band also offer evidence of potential long-term downward pressure on the EL population.

As shown in Figure 2 on the next page, statewide DPI data reveal that the number of students labeled as ELs for the kindergarten (5K) to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade band decreased from 17,763 in 2015 to 14,975 in 2020. This 15.7% decline in the lower grades is noteworthy because this group has the largest number of ELs to start with and because it might be expected to flow through to at least



**Figure 2: EL Student Numbers Falling in Lower Grades**  
Numbers of EL students statewide by grade band and by year



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

the next grade band (3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grade) as students age.

Given the current funding formula for BLBC state aid, these trends could similarly result in at least some districts losing state funding as enrollment numbers per grade potentially fall below the state thresholds. Yet, at the same time, the slowdown in growth in the EL population also may give the state an opportunity to achieve more adequate levels of aid to districts for those students and, perhaps, a more balanced bilingual program enrollment.

### BILINGUAL PROGRAMMING ENROLLMENT IN WISCONSIN

Of the 52,475 students identified as English Learners in Wisconsin in 2020, more than half (51.3%) were enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and the remainder received instruction in their native language. Note that this represents a slightly different form of count than the historical data that was available to make Figure 1.

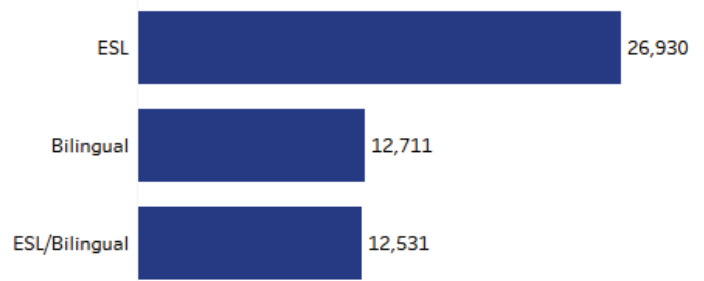
According to state law, when a student is identified as an EL, the enrolling district must provide him or her with services to support the student’s English language proficiency and academic achievement. These bilingual-bicultural (BLBC) programs are broadly categorized into two main types based on the language goals and the use of a student’s native language during instruction.

The first type, ESL, focuses on instruction in English to help students labeled as ELs acquire the language. The other type, bilingual, uses the student’s native language during instruction to seek to develop proficiency and literacy in both English and their native language.

In 2020, 24.2% of the state’s ELs were enrolled in bilingual programs, 23.9% were enrolled in an ESL/bilingual combination, while the remaining 51.9% were enrolled in ESL. In a combination program, students labeled as ELs may receive targeted English instruction in a separate ESL classroom as well as general classroom support in their native language from a bilingual aide. Figure 3 shows the ESL and bilingual program enrollment numbers from 2020.

This concentration of a majority of the state’s EL population in ESL programming raises the question of which approach is most effective. There may not be a

**Figure 3: More Students in ESL Programs**  
EL Enrollment in BLBC Programs 2020



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



simple answer to this question, however, since different EL groups have different backgrounds and needs.

According to [another report from the Migration Policy Institute](#), there is some evidence that bilingual programming that uses a student’s native language can be more effective than English-only models as measured by the academic achievement of students labeled as ELs. Similarly, a [report](#) from the U.S. Department of Education on dual language programs, a type of bilingual programming, argues that proficiency and literacy in a student’s native language can facilitate English literacy development. The report also maintains bilingualism has been associated with higher high school graduation rates among children of immigrants.

Still, comparing the effectiveness of English-only and bilingual models is tricky, particularly when making broad statements. Contextual factors like student and family background and preference as well as school and district demographics make it challenging to draw clear conclusions about one model being better than the other in all cases. In Wisconsin, the task of selecting language assistance services to support EL populations is left to the enrolling district, which allows districts to implement programs that are responsive to the needs and desires of their specific EL population and community.

Though districts have this flexibility, they are also required to have the personnel and resources needed to effectively implement their chosen BLBC program, including qualified teachers and appropriate instructional materials. Some may lack sufficient bilingual staff, which may limit the range of programming they can offer to their population, particularly if it consists of multiple language groups.

This challenge may mean that similar BLBC programming is not being offered to EL students across districts or across language groups. Below, we reflect on some of the notable differences in current programming across groups.

### **MOST ELS IN BILINGUAL PROGRAMS ARE NATIVE SPANISH SPEAKERS**

Of the 12,711 students labeled as ELs enrolled in bilingual programming in 2020, 11,194 are native Spanish-speakers. Those native Spanish-speakers made up 61.4% of the statewide EL population in 2020,

but they accounted for 88.1% of bilingual program enrollment among students labeled as ELs.

Students who are labeled as ELs and identify as native Hmong speakers make up the second largest language group in bilingual program enrollment. However, only 107 Hmong-speaking ELs were enrolled in bilingual programs in 2020. This means that of the 6,850 Hmong-speaking ELs in 2020, only 1.6% were enrolled in bilingual programs. In comparison, all other native language groups reported 55 or fewer students enrolled in bilingual programs. Figure 4 shows the counts for the five native language groups with the highest enrollment in bilingual programs in 2020.

The nearly exclusive statewide enrollment of native Spanish speakers in bilingual programs is not necessarily surprising. They represent a significant population in terms of EL students and Wisconsin districts also may encounter fewer difficulties in recruiting and retaining Spanish-speaking teachers as compared to instructors from other language groups with smaller populations in the United States.

Still, there are many other native languages spoken by Wisconsin students – more than 220 native languages have been recorded for Wisconsin’s EL population since 2014. Of these, the most common languages are Spanish, Hmong, Somali, Arabic, and Chinese. If dialects within these broad language groups were also recorded, the number of languages would likely be even greater.

Figure 5 on page 5 shows the numbers for each native language group, capturing the variety of groups enrolled in districts throughout the state. Yet, despite this linguistic diversity, only a fraction of students who speak

**Figure 4: Native Language Groups with Largest Bilingual Enrollment by Count, 2020**

*Five Largest Language Groups in Bilingual Programming*

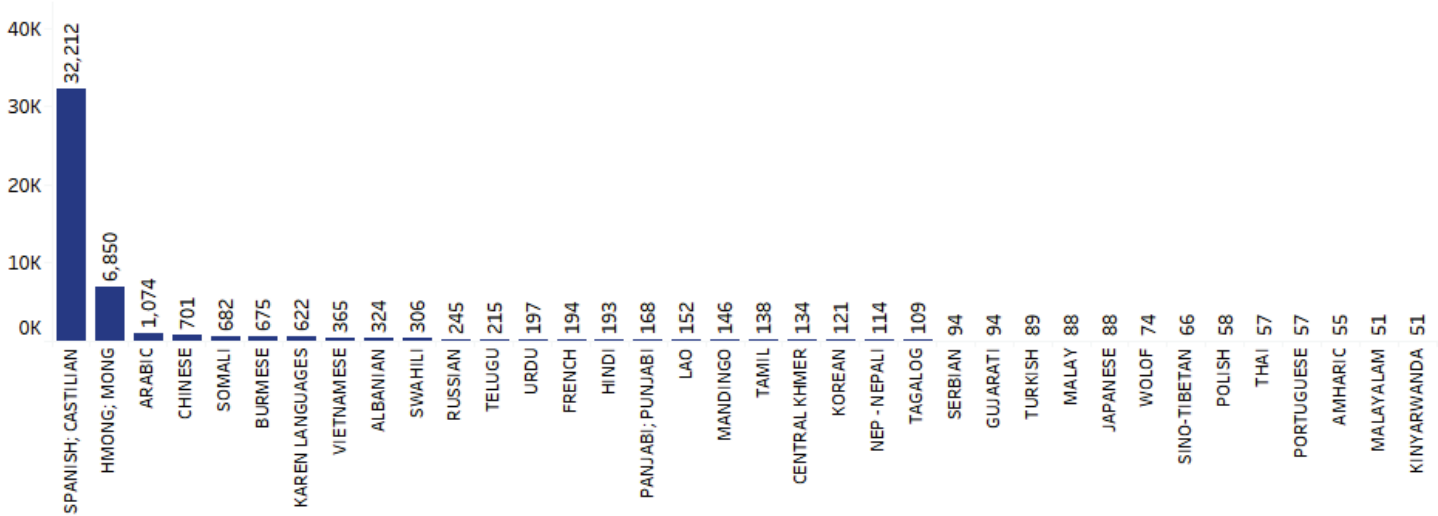


Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



**Figure 5: EL Students in Wisconsin Speak Many Languages**

Number of EL students statewide for each language group, 2020



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

a native language other than Spanish are enrolled in bilingual programming.

In addition to the amount of aid provided and the approach for distributing it, policymakers also may wish to consider how they might help districts provide a greater variety of BLBC programs. Doing so would likely mean providing additional state aid, but at least some state officials have proposed increasing that funding, as we will discuss next.

### **EFFORTS TO CHANGE FUNDING FORMULA AND BETTER SERVE EL POPULATION**

According to a 2020 [report from the Education Commission of the States](#), Wisconsin’s funding model for EL education is unique. Most states use a foundation formula that gives districts a base amount of funding per student with additional weights added to support students with specific needs such as those identified as ELs. Wisconsin is the only state to use reimbursement as its basis for funding EL education. Governor Evers’ proposed 2021-23 budget, however, would change this.

The governor’s proposal would increase funding by 163.2% over current levels and establish a funding floor of \$10,000 per EL in Wisconsin school districts that serve between 1 and 20 ELs. Districts that serve 21 ELs or more would receive an additional \$500 per pupil. If passed, this would be the first increase in BLBC categorical aid since the 2005-07 budget. Though

districts might still have their eligible funding prorated under the proposal, it could not fall initially below 2021 levels.

If Evers’ proposal were implemented, then more than 360 school districts would become eligible for state BLBC aid – or 300 more than under the current funding model according to DPI data. This change to the funding model would offer protection for districts that are at risk of losing state-level funding due to fluctuations in EL enrollment. Additionally, these changes would ensure that districts with any number of ELs receive a minimum amount of funding to support them.

The Evers proposal also included a request for capacity-building grants to grow the statewide workforce of ESL and bilingual licensed educators. The goal of these grants would be to increase the number of qualified EL educators in schools. Through the grants, districts would be provided with the resources to “grow their own” qualified ESL/bilingual education staff, including supports for existing teachers and paraprofessionals to earn a bilingual or ESL supplemental license at no additional cost to them.

This grant program may be justified by the disparity in bilingual programming across different language groups in Wisconsin and the shortage of bilingual-certified teachers as outlined in this [2021 Forum report](#). Additional policy initiatives also could be explored. For example, policymakers might consider additional ways





to bolster the state's capacity to offer a variety of BLBC programs to serve the EL population. These may include providing content area and general education teachers with preparation and ongoing professional development in language instruction and supporting the development of curricula and materials in the native languages of students identified as ELs.

Better statewide data and further study of BLBC programs and their results might also provide a clearer picture of where and how ESL and bilingual programs could be used and improved. Policymakers might consider data that looks at the long-term academic achievement of native English speakers and former ELs who are now assessed as English-proficient. This could provide insights into whether former ELs perform at the same academic level as native English speakers or whether persistent disparities suggest the need for further efforts to ensure the best possible outcomes for these students.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the high numbers of EL learners in Wisconsin, the state's funding levels and approach to educating them have seen little change in recent years. This inattention is especially notable given the disparities in academic outcomes for these students and in the marked differences between Wisconsin's approach and those of other states. To remedy the situation, a number of steps could be considered.

First, understanding the recent drop in EL enrollments might shed light on the future trajectory of this student population and help to clarify potential funding and programming options. Specifically, policymakers may consider looking into data and speaking with districts to uncover causes of enrollment drops. In the Madison Metropolitan School District, for example, officials have stated that drops in EL enrollment are due in part to international university students with children returning home over the past year.

Also, as data on the impact of COVID-19 on longstanding disparities for English Learners become available, they may yield important insights into those students' current needs. Going forward, policymakers might wish to consider ways to better align those needs with state funding levels and to find more equitable ways to distribute that funding among districts.

In addition, the state might benefit from greater clarity about the potential benefits of bilingual programming, which is largely limited to native Spanish speakers. Wisconsin is home to 6,850 Hmong-speaking ELs, and yet only a fraction are enrolled in a bilingual program. This should raise questions for policymakers about access to different BLBC program types and whether there may be advantages to growing the currently limited bilingual programming in the state.

In many cases, it will be difficult and perhaps even impractical to find the staffing and resources needed to expand bilingual programming to other language groups. Still, state and local officials may wish to consider ways to do so, particularly in cases where families and the communities in question are requesting it.

Though EL students are decreasing for now at least, their needs are still significant, particularly in light of the pandemic. Ensuring that the state has the right data, funding approach, and programming to serve them will remain a significant task for policymakers for years to come.

