

Effects of Reclassifying English Learner Students on Student Achievement in New Mexico

Attaining English proficiency is a critical juncture for English learner students. When English learner students are reclassified as fluent English proficient, it is a sign that they can engage in academic learning without specialized English language learning supports. New Mexico established a state-level policy that requires English learner students to achieve an overall English proficiency level score of 5.0 or higher on the ACCESS for ELLs (ACCESS) assessment in order to be reclassified. In summer 2016, the WIDA consortium undertook a standards setting process to better align the ACCESS assessment's proficiency level scores with current college- and career-ready standards.¹ Following the standards setting, fewer English learner students in New Mexico met the English proficiency criterion for reclassification, although New Mexico's required proficiency level score for reclassification remained the same, at 5.0. The Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest English Learners Research Partnership wanted to understand whether the score threshold for reclassification appropriately identifies New Mexico students who have attained English proficiency.

Key findings

- **Fewer English learner students attained English proficiency and were reclassified each year after the ACCESS standards setting.** In 2014/15–2016/17, before the ACCESS standards setting, the percentage of English learner students in grades 3–8 who attained English proficiency and were reclassified each year ranged from 17 percent to 20 percent. In 2017/18–2018/19, after the ACCESS standards setting, the percentage of English learner students who attained English proficiency and were reclassified each year ranged from 2 percent to 5 percent.
- **In the years before and after the ACCESS standards setting, English learner student reclassification did not affect students' next-year English language arts or math achievement, on average.** Following the standards setting, reclassified students did not have statistically significantly different English language arts or math achievement scores in their first year after reclassification, on average, than English learner students who had come close to a 5.0 overall proficiency level score but were not reclassified in that year. The average difference was less than 2 scale score points, which was not statistically significant. In the years before the ACCESS standards setting (2014/15–2016/17), the average effect of reclassification was less than 1 scale score point, and this difference also was not statistically significant.
- **After the standards setting, English learner student reclassification did not affect next-year English language arts and math achievement among most groups of students with different characteristics.** There were no statistically significant differences in the effects of reclassification among students in grades 3–5, students in grades 6–8, students of Hispanic ethnicity, female students, and male students.

New Mexico Public Education Department leaders could use these findings to consider maintaining the current statewide reclassification criterion of an overall proficiency level score of 5.0 or higher. In addition, New Mexico school district leaders could consider opportunities to strengthen the supports provided to English learner students leading up to and immediately after reclassification.

1. Cook, H. G., & MacGregor, D. (n.d.). *ACCESS for ELLs 2.0 assessment proficiency level scores: Standard setting report*. WIDA Research and Center for Applied Linguistics. <http://www.cde.state.co.us/assessment/accessforellsstandardsettingreport>