

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

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

Rachel Garrett, Eric Larsen, and Melissa Arellanes

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This study examined how attaining English proficiency and being reclassified as fluent English proficient affected achievement in English language arts and math in the first year after student reclassification in grades 3–8 in New Mexico. State policy in New Mexico bases student reclassification decisions on whether students attain a minimum overall English language proficiency level score of 5.0 on the ACCESS for ELLs (ACCESS) assessment. The study focused on achievement among English learner students in 2014/15–2018/19, a time when the ACCESS underwent a standards setting process to better align its language proficiency scoring scale with the expectations of college- and career-ready standards. After the standards setting, a smaller percentage of English learner students in New Mexico attained English proficiency and were reclassified each year. At the same time, students who scored near the English proficiency level required for reclassification performed above the statewide average in English language arts and math and were more likely to meet state content proficiency standards. However, the study found no effects of reclassification on student achievement either before or after the ACCESS standards setting. In addition, the study found no effect of reclassification on next-year English language arts and math achievement among most groups of students with different characteristics and among most districts in the study. Leaders at the New Mexico Public Education Department could use the findings of this study to consider maintaining the current reclassification threshold. In addition, the state and its districts might want to identify opportunities to strengthen the supports provided to English learner students. This could begin by collecting more systematic information on the education services and supports that English learner students receive leading up to and after they attain English proficiency.

Why this study?

Demonstrating fluent English proficiency, and thereby ending participation in specialized English language learning supports, is a critical juncture for English learner students. The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 requires that states conduct annual English language proficiency testing for English learner students and set a statewide score threshold for demonstrating English proficiency to be used in decisions about reclassifying students as fluent English proficient. In New Mexico, English learner students must achieve an overall score of 5.0 or higher on the ACCESS for ELLs (ACCESS) assessment, a statewide English language proficiency assessment. This threshold was set to ensure that students have the English language proficiency needed to participate meaningfully in standard instruction, while minimizing the risk of premature reclassification for students who might still require English learner services to succeed. The threshold is the only formal criterion used to determine English learner student readiness for reclassification in New Mexico.

In July and August 2016, the WIDA consortium¹ undertook a standards setting process to better align the ACCESS assessment's proficiency scoring scale with current college- and career-ready standards at each grade level. Following the ACCESS standards setting, many WIDA consortium states lowered the threshold

For additional information, including background on the study, technical methods, and supporting analyses, access the report appendices at <https://go.usa.gov/xSwn6>.

1. The WIDA consortium includes 41 states, U.S. territories, and federal government agencies advancing academic language development and academic achievement for linguistically diverse students. See <https://wida.wisc.edu/>.

score for reclassifying English learner students as fluent English proficient. However, New Mexico, applying the data available to it at the time, chose to continue using 5.0 as the threshold for reclassification, waiting to consider changes until information was available on how New Mexico students performed on the ACCESS after the standards setting. Although the threshold score for reclassification remained the same, stakeholders in New Mexico were concerned by the decline in the percentage of students who met the reclassification criterion after the standards setting (M. Valtierrez, personal communication, November 6, 2018), suggesting that an overall proficiency score of 5.0 on the ACCESS might have been harder to achieve in 2017/18 than in 2016/17.

The consequences of state decisions to maintain or to change the threshold score for reclassification after the ACCESS standards setting underscore the importance of having policies and practices to identify the appropriate timing for reclassifying English learner students as fluent English proficient and ending English learner services. Educators are responsible for providing English learner students with instruction to support their language development and enable them to participate meaningfully and acquire knowledge in classes taught in English (Linguanti & Cook, 2015). Premature reclassification can impede academic progress if students are asked to learn material that is not accessible to them after reclassification without ongoing English language development supports (Linguanti, 2001; Robinson, 2011). Late reclassification can also impede academic progress if English learner students do not have opportunities to access rigorous, grade-level content that they are prepared to learn, whether because of less access to elective or advanced courses or lower teacher expectations (Abedi, 2008; Callahan, 2005; Callahan et al., 2010; Estrada, 2014; Estrada & Wang, 2018; Robinson, 2011; Thompson, 2017). Continuing to provide English learner services to students who no longer require them is also an inefficient use of education resources. Increasing the share of students who receive these services could raise district costs, reduce the resources devoted to each English learner student, or both.

The Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest English Learners Research Partnership² conducted this study to better understand whether the current minimum score threshold—an overall proficiency level score of 5.0 on the ACCESS—appropriately identifies New Mexico English learner students who are ready to be reclassified as fluent English proficient. The study examined the effect of reclassification on students' next-year English language arts and math achievement after the ACCESS standards setting (2017/18–2018/19) for all English learner students, as well as among different groups of English learner students. To provide context for the findings, the study also examined the effect of reclassification on next-year English language arts and math achievement before the ACCESS standards setting (2014/15–2016/17), when the proficiency level score for reclassification was the same but was achieved by more students. The findings from this study can inform decisions about potential revisions to the state's reclassification policy, which could affect the education experiences of English learner students across the state.

Research questions

This study addressed four research questions:

1. What percentage of English learner students in New Mexico in grades 3–8 were reclassified as fluent English proficient each year in 2014/15–2018/19?
2. What was the effect of English learner student reclassification on grades 3–8 English language arts and math achievement in 2017/18–2018/19, after the ACCESS standards setting?

2. Members of the Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest English Learners Research Partnership include the New Mexico Public Education Department, several local education agencies across New Mexico, faculty from New Mexico institutions of higher education, and Dual Language Education of New Mexico, a nonprofit organization that supports dual language education programs in New Mexico.

3. What was the effect of English learner student reclassification on grades 3-8 English language arts and math achievement in 2014/15-2016/17, before the ACCESS standards setting?
4. Did the effect of English learner student reclassification vary by student group (student grade band of 3-5 or 6-8, race/ethnicity, gender) or school district in 2017/18-2018/19, after the ACCESS standards setting?

Definitions of key terms used in the report are in box 1, and the data source, sample, and methods used to answer the research questions are summarized in box 2 and detailed in appendix A.

Box 1. Key terms

ACCESS for ELLs (ACCESS). An annual assessment to determine growth in English language proficiency for English learner students that is administered by states that are part of the WIDA consortium (Cook & MacGregor, n.d.). In New Mexico, where ACCESS is administered in late winter to early spring of each academic year, the assessment is used as the statewide criterion for determining whether an English learner student has attained fluent English proficiency and is ready to be reclassified. Students receive an overall proficiency level score, which aggregates student performance across the English language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Proficiency level scores are assigned on a scale of 1.0 (lowest) to 6.0 (highest), in increments of 0.1. ACCESS underwent a standards setting process in summer 2016, and in 2017 New Mexico and other WIDA consortium states began using a version of ACCESS with an updated language proficiency scoring scale that was intended to align better with current college- and career-ready standards at each grade level.

Baseline year. In this study, the baseline year refers to any year in which an English learner student's ACCESS score was used to determine readiness for reclassification in the following year. The baseline years in this study are 2013/14, 2014/15, 2015/16, 2016/17, and 2017/18. The study then examines student achievement outcomes in the following year, when some students have been reclassified and others have not.

English learner student. A student whose first or heritage language is not English and who is still developing the skills to read, write, speak, or understand English at a level comparable to grade-level English proficient peers and native English speakers. English learner students are entitled to specialized supports to develop their English language skills and accommodate their language needs while they learn general academic content.

Reclassified as fluent English proficient. A designation for an English learner student who has demonstrated sufficient English language proficiency to be considered fluent English proficient. In New Mexico, English learner students who earn an overall proficiency level score of 5.0 or higher on the ACCESS are reclassified the following academic year.

Box 2. Data source, sample, methods, and limitations

Data source. The study used student demographic and assessment data provided by the New Mexico Public Education Department for New Mexico public school English learner students and reclassified students in 2013/14-2016/17, before the ACCESS for ELLs (ACCESS) standards setting, and in 2017/18-2018/19, after the standards setting. Each student had a unique, masked identification number that enabled linking student information across files and school years and linking students to their schools and districts. Student-level data used for the study included student records of enrollment in New Mexico public schools, student demographic characteristics, overall proficiency level scores on the ACCESS assessment, and achievement scores in English language arts and math on the New Mexico state assessments.

For assessing English language arts and math, students in grades 3-8 took the Partnership for Assessing Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments in 2014/15-2017/18 and the New Mexico Standards-Based Transition Assessment of Mathematics and English Language Arts (TAMELA) in 2018/19. In a January 2019 memo from the New Mexico lieutenant governor announcing the change to TAMELA, the New Mexico Public Education Department stated that TAMELA would be shorter than PARCC but would remain consistent with PARCC in scaling and performance levels (Morales, personal

communication, January 10, 2019; see https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Transition-from-PARCC-to-the-Spring-2019-Summative-Assessment_Memorandum....pdf). The study team standardized student outcome test scores on the PARCC and TAMELA based on the overall distribution of student scores on each assessment in each grade, subject, and year.¹

The available baseline year English language arts and math achievement scores varied for students according to academic year and grade level. For students in grades 3-7 in the baseline year, the study team used English language arts and math scores on the Standards-Based Assessment (SBA) for 2013/14 and PARCC scores for 2014/15-2017/18. For English language arts scores for students in grade 2 in the baseline year, the study team used scores from the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) for 2013/14-2015/16 and from iStation for 2016/17-2017/18. Scores on the SBA, PARCC, DIBELS, and iStation were standardized based on the overall distribution of student scores on each assessment in each grade, subject, and year.

Sample. The sample for research question 1 included students in grades 2-7 who were identified as English learner students, who took the ACCESS in a baseline year (2013/14-2017/18), and for whom valid data were available in the next year (2014/15-2018/19). The analysis sample included 123,461 students who met these criteria.²

For the samples for research questions 2-4, the study team first identified English learner students in grades 2-7 who received an ACCESS overall proficiency level score of 4.0-6.0 in a baseline year and who then, in the following year (in grades 3-8), took an English language arts or math assessment. Next, the study team identified students whose ACCESS scores were close to the reclassification threshold. This required finding a balance between narrowing the range of ACCESS scores and retaining a large enough sample of students to enable analyses. The study used an established process that identified the appropriate balance between these considerations (Calonico et al., 2014; see appendix A).

The analysis sample for research question 2, which focused on student achievement outcomes in 2017/18 and 2018/19, after the ACCESS standards setting, included 1,896 students. The analysis sample for research question 3, which focused on student achievement outcomes in 2014/15-2016/17, before the standards setting, included 11,145 students. (Because fewer students scored near the reclassification threshold in 2017/18 and 2018/19 than in the earlier years, the number of students in the analysis is lower in 2017/18 and 2018/19.) The numbers of students included in the analysis samples for research question 4 are in tables A7-A9 in appendix A. The district estimates for research question 4 focused on outcomes from 2014/15 to 2018/19 and included 11,339 students.³ The number of student-year combinations included in the other analysis samples for research question 4 are in tables B2 and B3 in appendix B. The criteria used to include students in the analyses for research questions 2-4 are described in appendix A.

Methodology. For research question 1, the study team calculated the percentage of English learner students who were newly reclassified each study year as fluent English proficient.

For research questions 2-4, the study team used a regression discontinuity design to compare the outcomes of students who scored just above the 5.0 reclassification threshold and those who scored just below it. The premise of this approach is that students who score just below the threshold will have similar observable and unobservable characteristics that predict student achievement as students who score just above the threshold. In the absence of a systematic intervening factor, such as a change in the English learner services provided, the two groups of students would be expected to have similar average English language arts and math achievement in the following year. Any differences in achievement between the two groups could then be credibly attributed to reclassification.

English learner students' ACCESS scores should be the only factor determining reclassification, according to New Mexico state policy. However, the study team found a small proportion of cases in which a student's overall proficiency level score did not correspond with their subsequent reclassification status.⁴ For this reason, the study team used a variation on the regression discontinuity design, called a fuzzy regression discontinuity design, to estimate the effect of reclassification on next-year student English language arts or math achievement for students who scored below 5.0 and were not reclassified and for students who scored at or above 5.0 and were reclassified.

The study team used regression models to compare achievement on the New Mexico state assessment in English language arts and math between students who scored below 5.0 and were not reclassified and students who scored at or above 5.0 and were reclassified. The analyses for research questions 2-4 included students who scored 4.7-5.2 on the ACCESS, except that for district-specific analyses the range of baseline ACCESS scores varied across districts, from 4.8-5.1 to 4.5-5.4.

Students who scored 4.7-4.9 on the ACCESS had similar background characteristics and baseline achievement to students who scored 5.0-5.2. (See table A6 in appendix A.) The models accounted for the following student and school characteristics: student and school-level demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity, gender, eligibility for the National School Lunch Program, eligibility for special education services, and English learner status), baseline English language arts and math achievement, baseline ACCESS score, and grade level.

A statistically significant and negative effect of reclassification on next-year achievement would suggest that students were reclassified prematurely and would benefit from additional language supports. In that case, the threshold for reclassification might be too low. A statistically significant and positive effect of reclassification would suggest that students might benefit from being reclassified earlier. In that case, the threshold for reclassification might be too high. A finding of no statistically significant difference between the two groups of students in next-year achievement would indicate no effect of reclassification within the existing supports for students. This finding would not suggest the need to change the threshold from its current level.

Interpreting these findings depends on the supports and education experiences of English learner students and newly reclassified students. For example, in a general education setting that requires more rigorous academic language, students might benefit from a policy requiring a higher ACCESS score to demonstrate fluent English proficiency before ending language services. In addition, changes in the types of supports and education experiences for students could alter the impact of reclassification at the existing 5.0 cutpoint. Moreover, a finding of no effect of reclassification does not provide information about the quality of services students receive before and after reclassification.

Limitations. This study had three primary limitations. First, the regression discontinuity approach evaluates only the effect of the policy at the current threshold. It also evaluates only the policy given the concurrent education experiences and English learner services provided to students. The study approach does not provide information that would support decisions about how to select a different policy threshold. For example, it does not evaluate whether 4.2 rather than 5.0 would be the optimal score threshold. Second, the study team relied on existing data from administrative records, which did not provide information to examine the educational experiences of English learner students leading up to or just after reclassification and the supports that they received over that time. Without this information, it is difficult for educators to understand how to adjust their practices to better support students. Third, caution should be used in interpreting the findings for research question 4 on whether the effects of reclassification varied by student group or district. Repeating analyses over multiple groups of students from the same study sample can produce a small number of findings that appear to be statistically significant but that could instead have been due to chance (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995). These exploratory analyses can still provide insights that can inform decisions about the supports the New Mexico Public Education Department provides districts; they also highlight areas for further exploration for districts.

Notes

1. This standardization should account for any change in difficulty between the two assessments. In addition, the study team performed sensitivity checks and found no evidence that the two tests had different levels of difficulty or covered different academic content (see p. C-15 in appendix C).
2. Across the five study years, 5.9 percent of students were removed from the analysis because their English proficiency status was not consistent in the administrative data (see appendix A).
3. For analyses based on individual districts, the study required that at least 300 students per district meet the data availability criteria so that the sample would be large enough to conduct analyses.
4. According to state administrative data, 96 percent of students who score from 5.0 to 5.2 on the ACCESS are reclassified, and 97 percent of students who score 4.7-4.9 are not reclassified. The New Mexico Public Education Department shared with the study team that all students scoring a 5.0 or higher should be reclassified, so this could reflect some small inaccuracies in the data.

Findings

This section presents the main findings of the study. Additional information about the analysis sample is in appendix A. The descriptive findings for research question 1 present information about English learner students across the state, as well as descriptive information about students who scored near the ACCESS 5.0 proficiency level score for reclassification. The impact analyses for research questions 2-4 are based on regression models that compare achievement on the New Mexico state assessment in English language arts and math of students

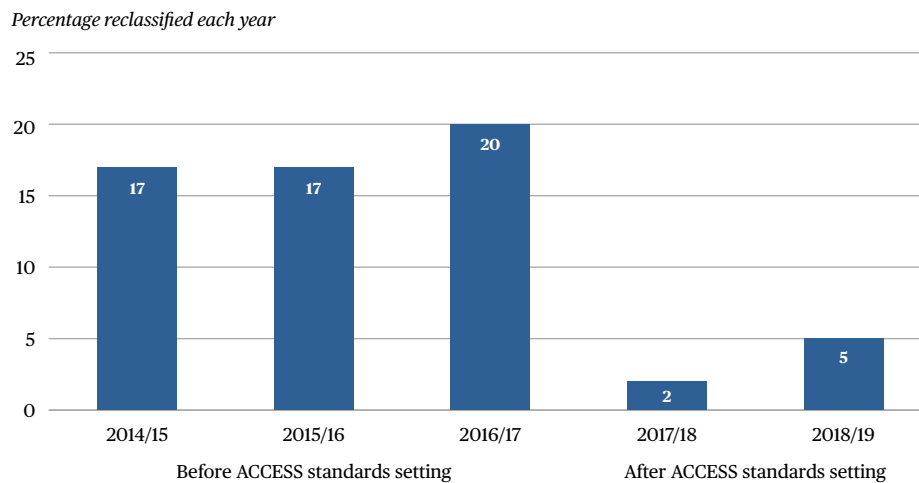
who scored just above the 5.0 proficiency level threshold and students who scored just below it. More detailed findings are in appendix B, and supplementary analyses to test the validity and sensitivity of the methodology are in appendix C.

After the ACCESS for ELLs standards setting, fewer English learner students were reclassified as fluent English proficient in both study years

Before the ACCESS standard setting, 17-20 percent of English learner students in grades 3-8 were reclassified as fluent English proficient in 2014/15-2016/17 based on their scores on the ACCESS in the baseline year (figure 1). After the ACCESS standards setting, the percentage of students who attained English proficiency and were reclassified declined to 2 percent in 2017/18 and 5 percent in 2018/19.

Before the ACCESS standards setting, students who scored near the reclassification threshold on the ACCESS in 2014/15-2016/17 were below statewide averages in English language arts and math achievement (see table A6 in appendix A). The share of students who met state proficiency standards ranged from 5 percent to 11 percent in English language arts and from 6 percent to 15 percent in math. After the ACCESS standard setting, students who scored near the reclassification threshold on the ACCESS in 2017/18 and 2018/19 were above the statewide average in English language arts and math achievement. The share of students who met state proficiency standards ranged from 33 percent to 56 percent in English language arts and from 30 percent to 48 percent in math. Further, among students scoring near the reclassification threshold on the ACCESS in 2017/18-2018/19, there were higher percentages of Asian students and lower percentages of American Indian students, students eligible for the National School Lunch Program, and students eligible for special education services compared with students who scored near the reclassification threshold on the ACCESS in 2014/15-2016/17.

Figure 1. The percentage of English learner students in New Mexico in grade 3-8 who were reclassified as fluent English proficient decreased in the two years after the ACCESS for ELLs standards setting, 2014/15-2016/17 and 2017/18-2018/19



Note: The sample of students in grades 3-8 included 25,024 students in 2014/15, 25,324 students in 2015/16, 24,817 students in 2016/17, 24,620 students in 2017/18, and 23,676 students in 2018/19. Reclassification is based on ACCESS for ELLs scores from the prior, baseline year.

Source: Authors' analyses based on data from the New Mexico Public Education Department.

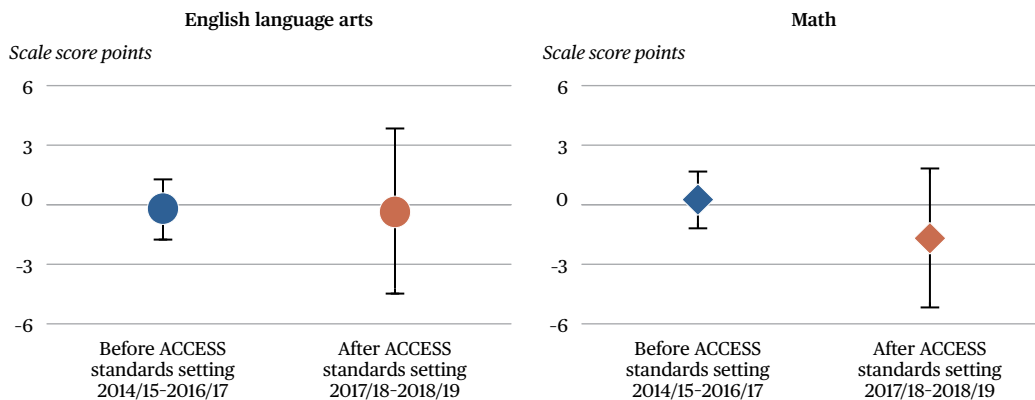
English learner student reclassification did not affect students’ next-year English language arts or math achievement, on average, either before or after the ACCESS for ELLs standards setting

In the years after the ACCESS standards setting (2017/18-2018/19), English language arts and math achievement were similar one year after reclassification for students who were reclassified and English learner students who had come close to the reclassification threshold but were not reclassified in that year (see points labeled “2017/18-2018/19” in figure 2). The average difference was less than 2 scale score points, which was not statistically significant.³

There also was no clear effect of reclassification on next-year English language arts and math achievement in the years before the ACCESS standards setting (see points labeled “2014/15-2016/17” in figure 2). The average effect of reclassification was less than 1 scale score point and was not statistically significant.⁴

The standard errors shown in tables B1 and B5 in appendix B show that the analyses have sufficient statistical power to detect effects of reclassification of 6.0 scale score points or larger in English language arts and 5.0 scale score points or larger in math in 2017/18-2018/19 (after the ACCESS standards setting)⁵ and 2.2 scale score

Figure 2. On average, there was no effect of English learner student reclassification on next-year English language arts and math achievement among New Mexico students in grade 3-8 either before or after the ACCESS for ELLs standards setting, 2014/15-2016/17 and 2017/18-2018/19



Note: For English language arts, the sample included 10,783 students in 2014/15-2016/17 and 1,880 students in 2017/18-2018/19. For math, the sample included 11,111 students in 2014/15-2016/17 and 1,892 students in 2017/18-2018/19. In 2014/15-2017/18 the New Mexico state assessment was the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and in 2018/19 it was the New Mexico Standards-Based Transition Assessment in Math and English Language Arts (TAMELA). No results were statistically significant at $p < .05$. Analyses included English learner students who attained an ACCESS for ELLs overall proficiency score of 4.7-5.2 and took the PARCC or TAMELA English language arts or math assessments the following year. Analyses were based on regression models that accounted for student and school characteristics (see appendix A). Each point and bar represents the findings for a given period. The point represents the average effect of reclassification on English language arts and math achievement, and the vertical bar above and below each point represents the range of values that could be expected. Bars that cross the zero line are not statistically significant.

Source: Authors’ analyses based on data provided by the New Mexico Public Education Department.

- In the two years after the ACCESS standards setting, relative to the statewide distribution of achievement among all students, the difference between the percentile rank corresponding to the mean standardized English language arts scores among students scoring 5.0-5.2 on the ACCESS and the percentile rank corresponding to the mean standardized English language arts scores among students scoring 4.7-4.9 on the ACCESS was -0.4 percentage points in English language arts and -2.3 percentage points in math.
- In the three years before the ACCESS standards setting, relative to the statewide distribution of achievement among all students, the difference between the statewide percentile rank corresponding to the mean standardized English language arts scores among students scoring 5.0-5.2 on the ACCESS and the percentile rank corresponding to the mean standardized English language arts scores among students scoring 4.7-4.9 on the ACCESS was -0.3 percentage points in English language arts and 0.3 percentage points in math.
- Effects of reclassification of 6.0 scale score points in English language arts and 5.0 scale score points in math are equivalent to an effect size of 0.17 in each subject for 2017/18-2018/19.

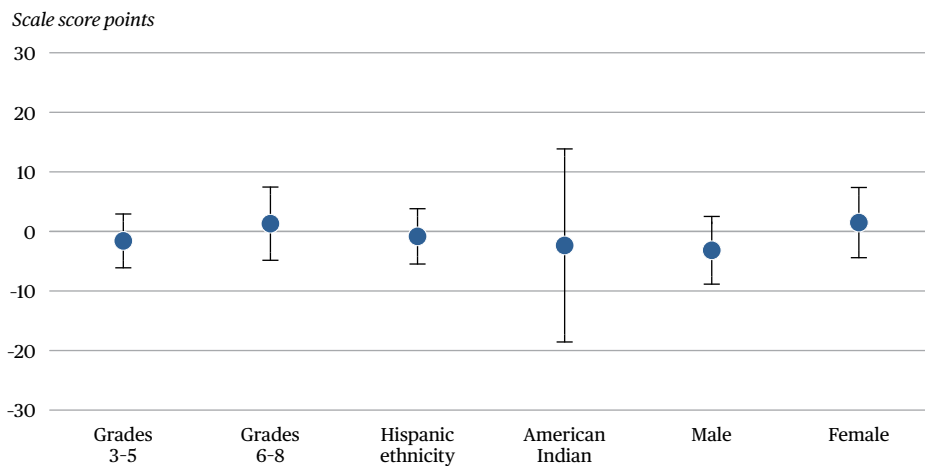
points or larger in English language arts and 2.1 scale score points or larger in math in 2014/15-2016/17 (before the standards setting).⁶

These findings were consistent in all validity and sensitivity analyses conducted (see tables C1-C7 in appendix C).

English learner student reclassification also did not have an effect on next-year English language arts achievement across groups of students with different characteristics

There were no statistically significant effects of English learner student reclassification on next-year English language arts achievement in 2017/18-2018/19 for students with different characteristics, including students in grade 3-5, students in grade 6-8, students of Hispanic ethnicity, American Indian⁷ students, female students, and male students. Across these groups, the differences in next-year achievement in English language arts scores between English learner students who were reclassified and those who came close to the reclassification threshold but were not reclassified were less than 4 scale score points (figure 3).

Figure 3. Across groups of grade 3-8 students in New Mexico with different characteristics, on average there was no effect of English learner student reclassification on next-year English language arts achievement after the ACCESS for ELLs standards setting, 2017/18-2018/19



Note: The sample included 1,667 students in grade 3-5, 694 students in grade 6-8, 1,534 students of Hispanic ethnicity, 165 American Indian students, 856 male students, and 1,024 female students in 2017/18-2018/19. In 2017/18 the New Mexico state assessment was the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and in 2018/19 it was the New Mexico Standards-Based Transition Assessment in Math and English Language Arts (TAMELA). No results were statistically significant at $p < .05$. Analyses included English learner students who attained an ACCESS for ELLs overall proficiency score of 4.7-5.2 and took the PARCC or TAMELA English language arts or math assessments the following year. Each point and bar represents the findings for a given characteristic. The point represents the average effect of reclassification on English language arts achievement, and the vertical bar above and below each point represents the range of values that could be expected. Bars that cross the zero line are not statistically significant.

Source: Authors' analyses based on data provided by the New Mexico Public Education Department.

6. Effects of reclassification of 2.2 scale score points in English language arts and 2.1 scale score points in math are equivalent to an effect size of 0.06 in English language arts and 0.08 in math for 2014/15-2016/17.

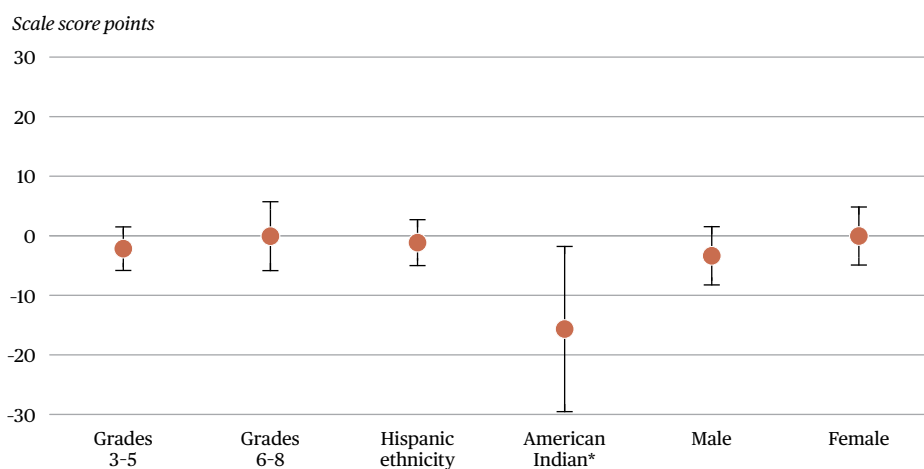
7. The study team consulted with the New Mexico Department of Public Education and determined that most students would be considered American Indian and not Alaska Native, although this is not distinguishable in the data category. As such, the study team uses the simplified term American Indian to refer to this group of students rather than American Indian/Alaska Native.

English learner student reclassification did not have an effect on next-year math achievement across most groups of students with different characteristics, except for a negative effect for American Indian students

There were no statistically significant effects of reclassification on next-year math achievement in 2017/18-2018/19 for most groups of students, including students in grade 3-5, students in grade 6-8, students of Hispanic ethnicity, female students, and male students.

However, there was a statistically significant, negative effect of reclassification on next-year math achievement in 2017/18-2018/19 among American Indian students. American Indian English learner students who were reclassified as fluent English proficient performed on average 15.7 scale score points lower on the New Mexico state assessment in math the following year than American Indian English learner students who came close to the reclassification threshold but were not reclassified (figure 4). Relative to the statewide distribution among all students, the difference between the percentile rank corresponding to the mean standardized English language arts scores among American Indian students scoring 5.0-5.2 on the ACCESS and the percentile rank corresponding to the mean standardized English language arts scores among American Indian students scoring 4.7-4.9 was 20 percentage points in math. Caution is warranted when interpreting this finding, however, because analyses were based on a small sample of 165 American Indian students.

Figure 4. Across groups of grade 3-8 students in New Mexico with different characteristics, on average there was no effect of English learner student reclassification on next-year math achievement after the ACCESS for ELLs standards setting, with the exception of a negative effect for American Indian students, 2017/18-2018/19



* Significant at $p < .05$.

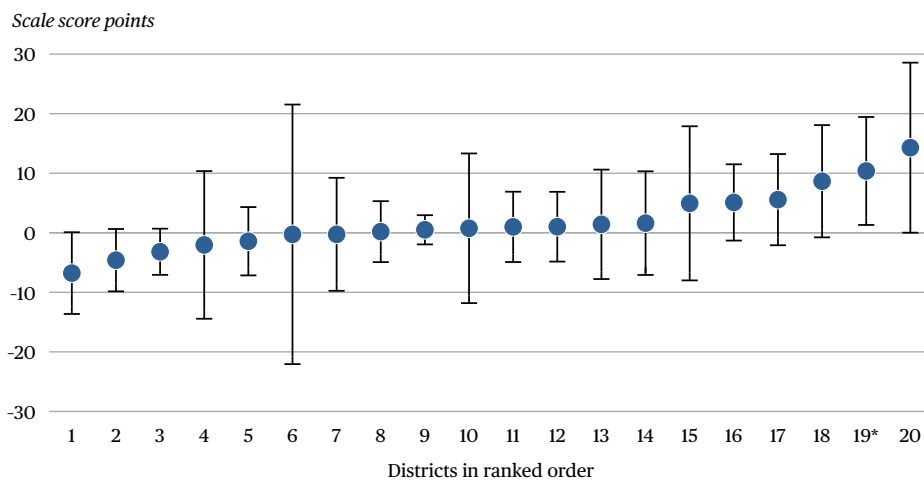
Note: The sample included 1,693 students in grade 3-5, 690 students in grade 6-8, 1,548 students of Hispanic ethnicity, 165 American Indian students, 861 male students, and 1,031 female students. In 2017/18 the New Mexico state assessment was the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and in 2018/19 it was the New Mexico Standards-Based Transition Assessment in Math and English Language Arts (TAMELA). Analyses included English learner students who attained an ACCESS for ELLs overall proficiency score of 4.7-5.2 and took the PARCC or TAMELA English language arts or math assessments the following year. Each point and bar represents the findings for a given characteristic. The point represents the average effect of reclassification on math achievement, and the vertical bar above and below each point represents the range of values that could be expected. Bars that are fully below the zero line represent a statistically significant, negative effect of reclassification. Bars that cross the zero line are not statistically significant.

Source: Authors' analyses based on data provided by the New Mexico Public Education Department.

In most districts, there was no clear effect of English learner student reclassification on student achievement

The study also considered the effects of English learner student reclassification for each of 20 districts in New Mexico with the largest enrollment of English learner students.⁸ The effect of reclassification on next-year English language arts and math achievement was statistically significant only in a few districts. Reclassification had a positive effect on English language arts achievement on average in only one district (district 19 in figure 5) and had no effect for the other districts. Reclassification had more varied effects on math achievement: a negative effect in one district (district 2 in figure 6), a positive effect in two districts (districts 19 and 20), and no effect in the remaining districts.

Figure 5. English learner student reclassification of grade 3-8 students in New Mexico had a clear effect on next-year English language arts achievement on average in only 1 of 20 districts studied, 2014/15-2016/17 and 2017/18-2018/19



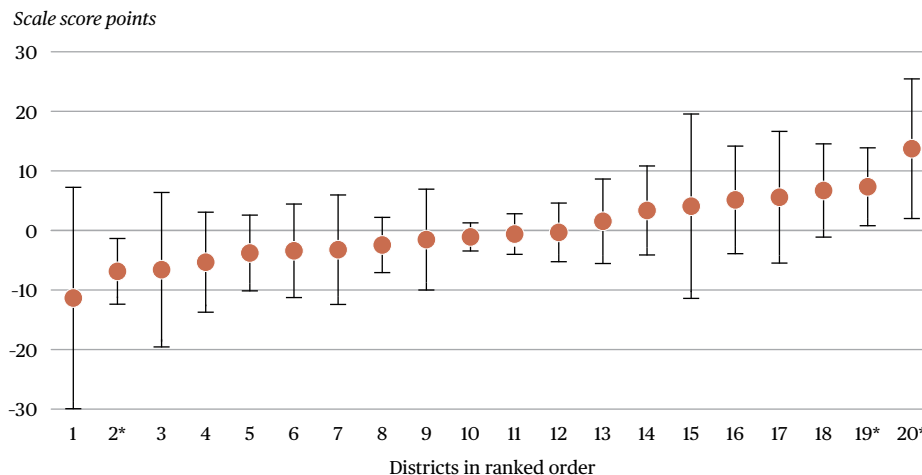
* Significant at $p < .05$.

Note: District results are presented in the ranked order from the smallest to largest effect of reclassification on English language arts achievement. The sample included a total of 340 students in district 1, 826 students in district 2, 1,536 students in district 3, 131 students in district 4, 583 students in district 5, 142 students in district 6, 280 students in district 7, 719 students in district 8, 3,666 students in district 9, 142 students in district 10, 701 students in district 11, 504 students in district 12, 372 students in district 13, 315 students in district 14, 230 students in district 15, 501 students in district 16, 293 students in district 17, 241 students in district 18, 303 students in district 19, and 162 students in district 20. In 2014/15-2017/18 the New Mexico state assessment was the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and in 2018/19 it was the New Mexico Standards-Based Transition Assessment in Math and English Language Arts (TAMELA). Analyses included English learner students who attained an ACCESS for ELLs overall proficiency score of 4.7-5.2 and took the PARCC or TAMELA English language arts or math assessments the following year. Analyses were based on 20 districts with at least 300 English learner students who met sample eligibility criteria before restricting the sample further based on the selected bandwidth, combined across the study years (2014/15-2017/18). The study team focused on districts meeting these inclusion criteria so the analysis sample would be large enough for each district after further restricting the sample within the selected bandwidth. Each point and bar represents the findings for a given district. The point represents the average effect of reclassification on English language arts achievement, and the vertical bar above and below each point represents the range of values that could be expected. Bars that are fully above the zero line represent a statistically significant positive effect of reclassification. Bars that are fully below the zero line represent a statistically significant negative effect of reclassification. Bars that cross the zero line are not statistically significant.

Source: Authors' analyses based on data provided by the New Mexico Public Education Department.

8. To be included in the analysis, a district needed to have a large enough number of students. Given the consistent effects of reclassification before and after the ACCESS standards setting, the study team combined all years of data to include as many districts as possible. The analysis included all districts that had at least 300 students across study years that met the basic sample eligibility criteria: students in grades 2-7 who were identified as English learner students and received an ACCESS overall proficiency score of 4.0-6.0 in a baseline year (2013/14-2017/18) and who were then assessed in grades 3-8 English language arts or math the following year (2014/15-2018/19). After applying this sample inclusion criteria, the study team identified the optimal bandwidth for each district. Bandwidths ranged from as narrow as 4.8-5.1 in some districts to as wide as 4.5-5.4 in others.

Figure 6. English learner student reclassification of grade 3-8 students in New Mexico had a clear effect on next-year math achievement on average in only 3 of 20 districts studied, 2014/15-2018/19



* Significant at $p < .05$.

Note: District results are presented in the ranked order from the smallest to largest effect of reclassification on math achievement. The sample included 143 students in district 1, 768 students in district 2, 157 students in district 3, 281 students in district 4, 340 students in district 5, 352 students in district 6, 368 students in district 7, 890 students in district 8, 292 students in district 9, 3,725 students in district 10, 1,652 students in district 11, 720 students in district 12, 435 students in district 13, 319 students in district 14, 170 students in district 15, 303 students in district 16, 162 students in district 17, 240 students in district 18, 530 students in district 19, and 132 students in district 20. In 2014/15-2017/18 the New Mexico state assessment was the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and in 2018/19 it was the New Mexico Standards-Based Transition Assessment in Math and English Language Arts (TAMELA). Analyses included English learner students who attained an ACCESS for ELLs overall proficiency score of 4.7-5.2 and took the PARCC or TAMELA English language arts or math assessments the following year. Analyses were based on 20 districts with at least 300 English learner students who met sample eligibility criteria before choosing the optimal bandwidth, combined across the study years. The study team focused on districts meeting these inclusion criteria so there would be a large enough analysis sample for each district after further restricting the sample within the selected bandwidth. Each point and bar represents the findings for a given district. The point represents the average effect of reclassification on math achievement, and the vertical bar above and below each point represents the range of values that could be expected. Bars that are fully above the zero line represent a statistically significant positive effect of reclassification. Bars that are fully below the zero line represent a statistically significant negative effect of reclassification. Bars that cross the zero line are not statistically significant.

Source: Authors' analyses based on data provided by the New Mexico Public Education Department.

Implications

This study contributes to a body of rigorous research that has examined the effects of English learner student reclassification on student achievement in elementary and middle grades. The prior research found some evidence of positive or negative impacts but primarily finds no effects of reclassification (Betts et al., 2019; Chin, 2021; Cimpian et al., 2017; Onda & Seyler, 2020; Robinson, 2011; Robinson-Cimpian & Thompson, 2016). However, this study provides a new contribution by studying reclassification in a state that uses the ACCESS after the 2016 standards setting. The findings from this study have several implications.

First, leaders at the New Mexico Public Education Department could use this information to consider maintaining the current reclassification threshold. The study found no effect of reclassification on next-year English language arts and math achievement during either the years before or the years after the ACCESS standards setting. This evidence does not suggest the need to change the reclassification threshold. This finding is one piece of information that New Mexico Public Education Department leaders might consider when deciding the ACCESS overall proficiency score required for an English learner student to be reclassified. The state may also consider that after the ACCESS standards setting fewer students attained fluent English proficiency and were reclassified and that students near the reclassification threshold performed above statewide average achievement in English language arts and math and were more likely to meet state content proficiency standards.

Other factors to consider include the alignment of the reclassification threshold with the state's Every Student Succeeds Act goals and input from stakeholders.

Second, state education leaders might consider exploring the amount and quality of services and supports English learner students receive leading up to and immediately after reclassification. Given that the study found no effect of reclassification in most instances, it is plausible that English learner students and recently reclassified students received appropriate supports before and after reclassification before the ACCESS standards setting and that educators in New Mexico adjusted these supports to meet the needs of higher proficiency English learner students after the ACCESS standards setting. However, it also is plausible that English learner students have not, on average, received helpful supports as they approached reclassification. In this scenario, removing supports after reclassification would not be likely to affect achievement. Further research is needed to understand English learner students' education experiences before and after reclassification. Currently, districts report the type of language instruction (for example, dual-language immersion, heritage/indigenous language, development or maintenance bilingual, and transitional bilingual) that they provide to English learner students. New Mexico Public Education Department leaders might examine the reliability of these data reports; collect additional, more detailed data on the amount and quality of the supports English learner students receive before and after attaining English proficiency; and examine these data to identify opportunities to strengthen the supports. Further research might help state education leaders identify ways to strengthen educator capacity for meeting the needs of English learner students, which can inform the professional development provided to districts.

Related to the second point, New Mexico educators serving American Indian English learner students might wish to consider how these students' education experiences after reclassification have changed in recent years. Among the small number of American Indian students included in the analysis sample, there was, on average, a negative effect of reclassification on math achievement in the years after the ACCESS standards setting. It is possible that some other factor not captured in the data explains this negative effect. For example, the ACCESS standards setting could have coincided with improvements in services provided to American Indian English learner students, and ending those services after reclassification could have negatively affected student achievement. Additional research can promote better understanding of the negative impact of reclassification on the math achievement of American Indian students in 2017/18 and 2018/19.

Finally, district leaders might want to reflect on ways to strengthen their local supports for students leading up to or immediately after reclassification. For example, a small number of districts demonstrated positive effects of reclassification on English language arts or math achievement, suggesting localized opportunities to strengthen the instruction students receive before reclassification in some settings. Likewise, one district experienced a negative effect of reclassification on math achievement, indicating the opportunity to improve the math instruction students receive after reclassification. As a group, the districts with positive or negative effects of reclassification represented a range of settings in terms of characteristics such as size, number of English learner students served, and geographic location. This suggests that opportunities to strengthen student supports are not concentrated in specific types of districts, and educators across the state might wish to examine how they could better serve English learner students. Moreover, districts with positive or negative effects of reclassification might be interested in further analyses to explore whether these effects tend to concentrate among students with particular language backgrounds or demographic characteristics, which could provide insights into how to further tailor supports for students as they attain English proficiency and reclassification.

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