# Understanding the Characteristics of English Learners with Disabilities to Meet Their Needs During State and Districtwide Assessments

**During the past two and a half** decades, attention to the needs of students with disabilities and English learners during assessments has increased dramatically. Since the 1990s, states have been required to ensure that all students participate in state assessments, including students with disabilities and English learners. It is only relatively recently that attention has been paid to the inclusion of English learners with disabilities in state and districtwide assessments.

Understanding the characteristics of English learners with disabilities is critical to ensuring that their needs are met appropriately during the assessment process. The purpose of this Brief is to highlight available federal data about the characteristics of English learners with disabilities, including how the population has

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changed over time. In this Brief, the term "students with disabilities" refers to those students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) who receive special education services. Federal data are not available for students with disabilities on Section 504 accommodation plans. Three characteristics are highlighted: (a) percentage of all students with disabilities identified as English learners, (b) disability categories of English learners with disabilities, and (c) classroom placements of English learners with disabilities. The implications of these characteristics for assessment are discussed in this Brief.

## Percentage of English Learners with Disabilities

The overall population of school-age English learners in the U.S. increased from 9.0% of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools (approximately 4.5 million students) in fall 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015) to 10.1% (approximately 5.0 million students) in fall 2017 (NCES, 2020). NCES also provided state-level data, which indicated that the majority of states and the District of Columbia showed increasing percentages of English learners from fall 2012 to fall 2017 (ranging from 0.05 percentage points to 3.32 percentage points). The four states with a decreasing percentage of English learners from fall 2012 to fall 2017 were California (3.4 percentage points), Colorado (0.1 percentage points), Hawaii (0.7 percentage points), and Montana (0. 5 percentage points).

During approximately the same time period, the percentage of English learners with disabilities increased from 1.2% (approximately 0.5 million students) in 2012-13 to 1.6% (approximately 0.7 million students) in 2018-19 (1.5% in 2017-18) for students age 6-21 who were enrolled students in grades 1-12.[1] Regardless of the reasons that may underlie the change in percentages, the data confirm that there were larger increases in the percentage of English learners with disabilities than there were increases in the overall population of English learners (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Numbers of English Learners and English Learners with Disabilities Across Years in the 50 States and the District of Columbia**
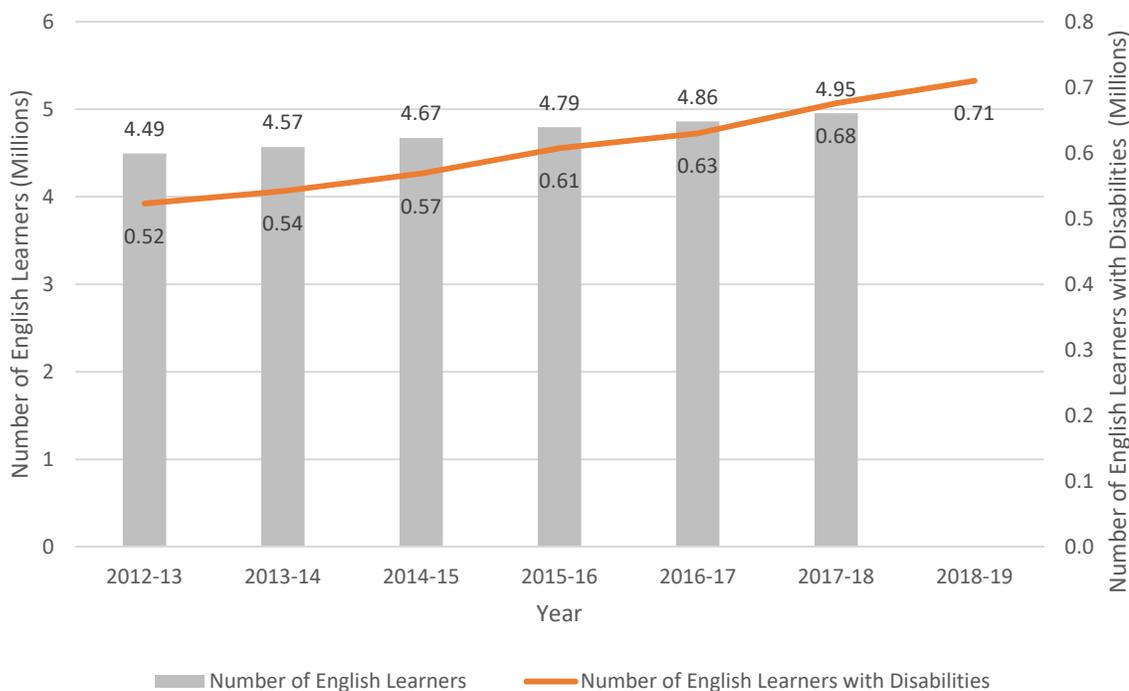
Sources: Data for English learners with disabilities are from the U.S. Department of Education, Child Count and Educational Environments in 2012 to 2018. Data for English learners are from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, English language learner students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools, by state: Selected years. See Digest of Education Statistics 2017 and Digest of Education Statistics 2019, tables 204.20.

[1]Data on English learners with disabilities were available only starting in 2012-13. Disability category data for English learners with disabilities were available starting in 2013-14. The number of English learners with disabilities included only ages 6-21. Overall enrollment data for grades 1-12 were generated from ElSi Table Generator (https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/tablegenerator.aspx) at National Center for Education Statistics for grades 1-12.

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The increase in percentage of English learners with disabilities also was greater over time than the increase in percentage of all students with disabilities. On average, the percentage of students with disabilities identified as English learners increased 2.2 percentage points across the 50 states and the District of Columbia from 9.2% in 2012-13 to 11.4% in 2018-19, while the change in percentage for all students with disabilities was 0.9%. Figure 2 shows the steady increase across years in the percentage of students with disabilities who are English learners.

One of the challenges in meeting the needs of English learners with disabilities during state and districtwide assessments is that the size of this group varies across states, as reflected in Figure 3. For example, one state had just 0.7% of its students with disabilities identified as English learners, while another state had 27.7% of its students with disabilities identified as English learners. Further, even in those states that did not have large increases in the percentage of English learners with disabilities, the population of students may be quite large. The map in Figure 3 shows that there were 19 states in which 10% or more of the population of students with disabilities were English learners with disabilities in 2018-19.

Changes in the percentages of English learners with disabilities also varied across states. Over the six-year period from 2012-13 to 2018-19, five states had more than a five-percentage point increase in

the percentage of English learners with disabilities. One of these states had more than a 10-percentage point increase during the same period. These states and the changes in percentages are shown in Figure 4. Although there were seven states during the same six-year period that had a decrease in the percentage of English learners with disabilities, all but one of them had a decrease of less than 1 percentage point. The one state with a larger decrease was California, which decreased from 31.1% to 27.6%.

## Disability Categories of English Learners with Disabilities

Disability category data have been available for English learners with disabilities only since 2013-14. The disability categories in which English learners with disabilities most frequently received special education services were similar to those of students with disabilities overall (see Table 1). The top two disability categories of all students with disabilities and English learners with disabilities, in both 2013-14 and 2018-19, were specific learning disability and speech-language impairment. Other health impairment was the third most frequent in both 2013-14 and 2018-19 for students with disabilities. For English learners with disabilities, other health impairment was also the third most frequent category in 2018-19 while intellectual disabilities was the third most frequent category in 2013-14. Except for this

**Figure 2. Percentages of School Age English Learners with Disabilities Across Years**
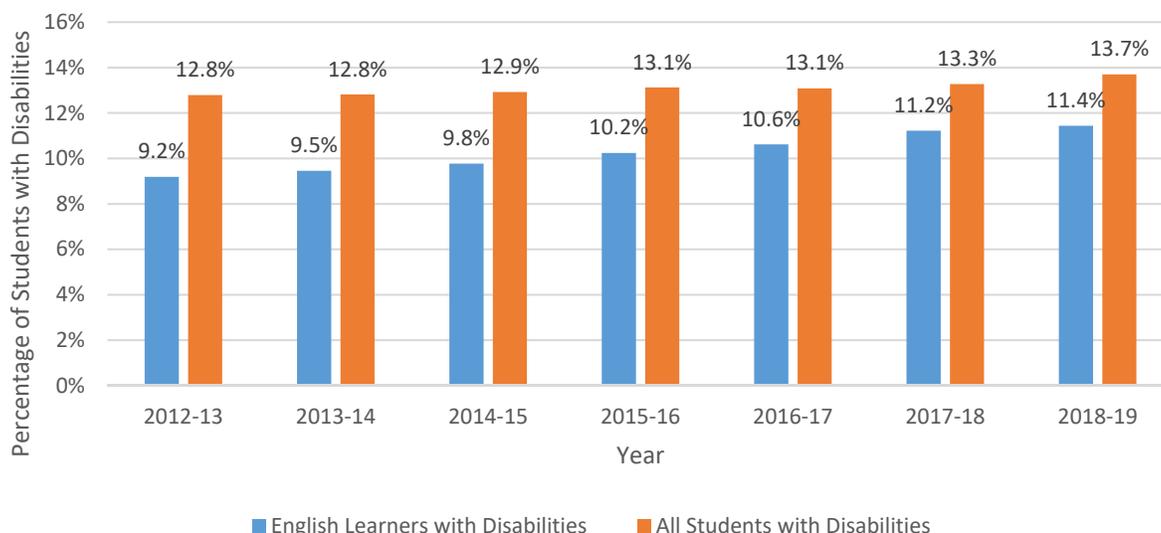


Source: Data are from the U.S. Department of Education, Child Count and Educational Environments in 2012 to 2018.

**Figure 3. Percentages of English Learners with Disabilities in State Populations of Students with Disabilities, 2018-19**
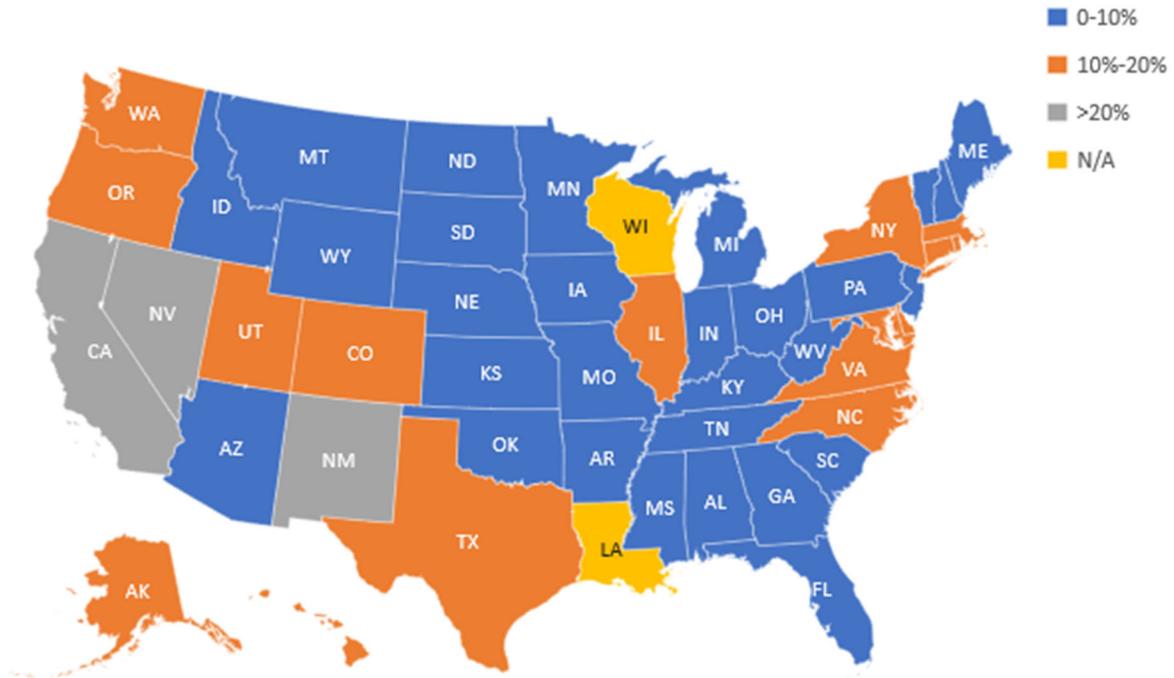


Source: Data are from the U.S. Department of Education, Child Count and Educational Environments in 2018. Percentages are number of English learners with disabilities divided by number of students with disabilities times 100.

**Figure 4. Percentages of Students with Disabilities who Were English Learners in 2012-13 and 2018-19**
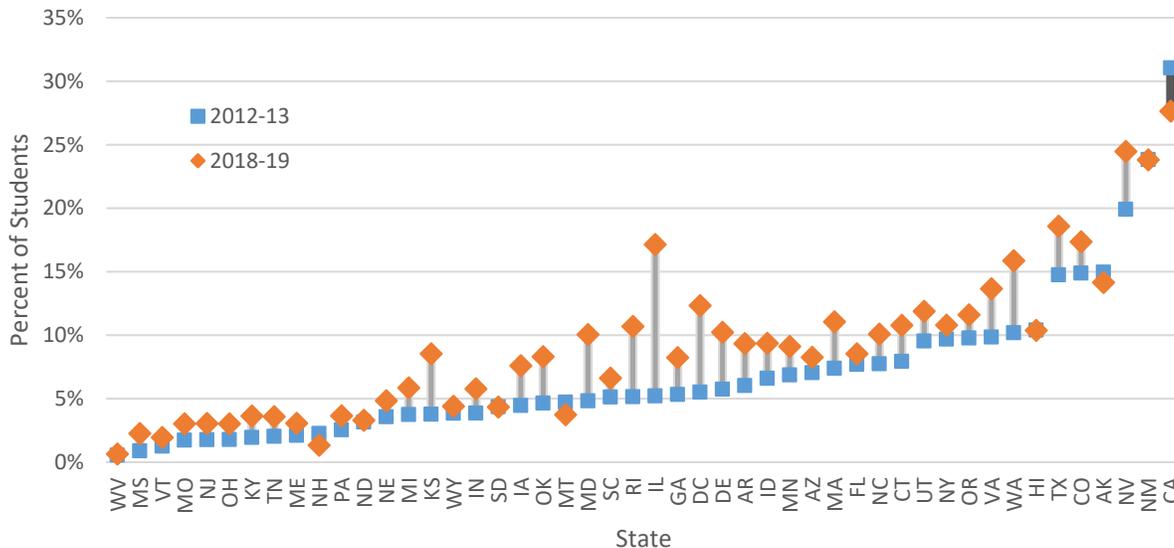


Source: Data were taken from U.S. Department of Education, Child Count and Educational Environments in 2012 and 2018.

**Table 1. Percent of All Students with Disabilities and English Learners with Disabilities in Disability Categories**

| Disability Category | 2013-14 | | 2018-19 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | English Learners with Disabilities | All Students with Disabilities | English Learners with Disabilities | All Students with Disabilities |
| Specific learning disability | 50.4 | 39.3 | 48.0 | 37.5 |
| Speech-language impairment | 21.6 | 17.8 | 18.2 | 16.4 |
| Other health impairment | 6.8 | 13.9 | 8.9 | 16.1 |
| Autism | 5.8 | 8.3 | 8.3 | 10.6 |
| Intellectual disability | 6.9 | 7.2 | 7.0 | 6.7 |
| Others | 8.5 | 13.6 | 9.5 | 12.6 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Source: Data are from the U.S. Department of Education, Child Count and Educational Environments in 2013 and 2018.
Note: Other disability categories included Emotional Disturbance, Developmental Delay, Multiple Disabilities, Hearing Impairment, Orthopedic Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, Visual Impairment, and Deaf-Blindness.

one difference in 2013-14, the distribution of English learners with disabilities among the five categories identified in Table 1 was the same as the distribution of all students with disabilities.

Despite the similarity in the distributions of the five disability category labels, there were substantive differences in the percentage of students in the various categories. Even though the top two disability categories were the same for both English learners with disabilities and all students with disabilities in both years, the percentages were higher for English learners with disabilities. For example, about half of the English learners with disabilities were in the specific learning disability category (approximately 10 percentage points higher than the percentage of students with disabilities), and about one-fifth of English learners with disabilities were in the speech-language impairment category (approximately two percentage points higher than the percentage of students with disabilities).

Changes over time in the percentages of all students with disabilities and English learners with disabilities were generally similar. Reductions in the percentages from 2013-14 to 2018-19 in the categories of specific learning disability and speech language impairment occurred for all students with disabilities and for English learners with disabilities, although the reductions were greater for English learners with

disabilities. Different trends, though small, were evident for the category of intellectual disabilities, where there was a reduction (0.5 percentage points) for all students with disabilities and an increase (1.0 percentage point) for English learners with disabilities. The largest differences in trends were in the low-incidence categories combined into the "Others" group, where there was a 1.0 percentage point reduction for all students with disabilities and a 1.0% increase for English learners with disabilities.

## Classroom Placement of English Learners with Disabilities

A common measure of the extent to which students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) is the percentage of students in the regular class for at least 80% of the school day. Figure 4 shows the percentage of English learners with disabilities and all students with disabilities by classroom settings across years (including in the regular classroom at least 80% of the day, in the regular classroom 40% to 79% of the day, in the regular classroom less than 40% of the day, and other settings). The percentage of students in the regular classroom at least 80% of the day increased for English learners with disabilities and for all students with disabilities from 2012-13 to 2018-19. For English learners with disabilities, this percentage in

2018-19 was 60.4%, an increase from 57.1% in 2012-13. Just over two-thirds of students with disabilities were in the regular class at least 80% of the day (a slight increased from 61.2% in 2012-13 to 63.9% in 2018-19).

Overall, as shown in Figure 5, there has been a slow but steady increase in the percentage of students with disabilities and the percentage of English learners with disabilities in the regular class for 80% or more of the school day, and a similar small decrease over time in the percentage of English learners with disabilities in the regular class between 40% and 80% of the school day. The percentages in the regular class less than 40% of the day or in other settings (e.g., segregated placements, homebound/hospital) have remained fairly steady across the years.

## Implications for Meeting the Needs of English Learners with Disabilities During State and Districtwide Assessments

Data on the numbers of English learners with disabilities and their classroom placements have been available only since 2012-13. Data on the disability categories of these students have been available only since 2013-14. Despite the limited number of years for which data are available, the data have several implications for ensuring that their needs are met appropriately during the assessment process.

First, the increases in the population, as well as the percentage of English learners with disabilities in many states increases the need for professional development on the characteristics of these students and how to meet their education needs. Watkins and Liu (2013) noted that the identification process of English learners with disabilities varies across the U.S. This variability has implications for the kinds of professional development needed for educators and administrators to help ensure improved services for English learners with disabilities.

It is also important for IEP teams to understand how to assign English learners with disabilities to statewide accountability assessments. Most of these students should be assigned to general content assessments (e.g., reading/English language arts [ELA], Math) and to the English language proficiency (ELP)

assessment, but some may appropriately be assigned to the state alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS) and the state alternate ELP assessment (alt-ELP). Although the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) indicates that students assigned to take the AA-AAAS or alt-ELP are to be "students with the most significant cognitive disabilities," this is not a disability category. Every state varies in how English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are identified. States will need to develop guidelines specifically for English learners with disabilities to aid IEP teams in the assessment participation decision for these students. The participation guidelines will need to recognize both disability and language learning characteristics in an integrated manner, instead of treating disability and language ability separately. These guidelines are needed regardless of the size of the population of English learners with disabilities in a state.

Also, policies on accessibility features and accommodations for English learners with disabilities will be needed for both assessment and instruction. Again, these policies will need to recognize the integrated disability and language learning needs of these students. Considerable professional development will need to be provided to educators and IEP teams, both to support the provision of accessibility features and accommodations during instruction and in identifying those needed for assessments.

Finally, as for students with disabilities in general, there will continue to be a need to examine the settings in which English learners with disabilities receive instruction. The finding that smaller percentages of English learners with disabilities were placed in the regular class for 80% or more of the day than were all students with disabilities requires further study to ensure that the placement decisions are not incorrectly influenced by a student's language learning characteristics. This is especially important because the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and research indicates that nearly all students with disabilities, including nearly all English learners with disabilities, are best served in the regular classroom (Cosier et al., 2013; Gee et al., 2020).

**Figure 5. Percentages of All Students with Disabilities and English Learners with Disabilities in Classroom Settings Across Years**
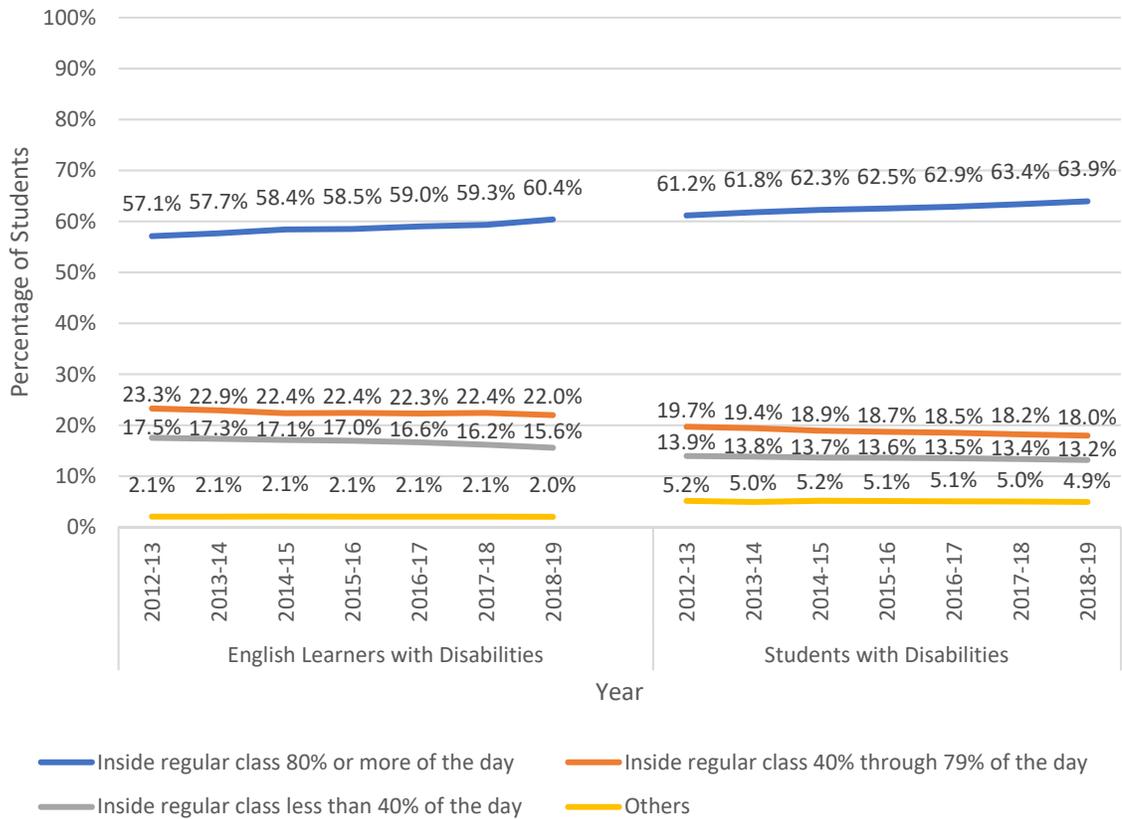


Source: Data are from the U.S. Department of Education, Child Count and Educational Environments in 2012 to 2018.

Note: "Others" includes correctional facilities, home, homebound/hospital, residential facility, separate class, separate school, services in other location than regular early childhood program (attend at least 10 hours), and services in other location than regular early childhood program (attend less than 10 hours).

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