

Rethinking English Learner Reclassification in California

Webinar moderated by Lupita Cortez Alcalá

February 24, 2026 | 1:30 – 2:30 PM

Panelists



**Lupita
Alcalá**

Moderator | Executive Director
PACE, Stanford University



**Diana
Mercado-Garcia**

Associate Director | Research
Practice Partnerships
California Education Partners



**Molly
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Research Director | English
Learner & Migrant Education
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Umansky**

Associate Professor | Education
Policy & Leadership, Quantitative
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*University of Oregon
College of Education*

Why does reclassification matter?

- Removes the requirement for designated or sheltered ELD
- Expands access to grade-level coursework and pathways
- Changes labels, influencing teacher expectations, placement, and academic self-concept
- Linked to stronger high school completion and college-readiness trajectories
- Shifts accountability reporting (English Learner Progress Indicator → Reclassified Fluent English Proficient)
- Can affect district resources and incentives

California has 4 criteria for reclassification

1. **Assessment of English language proficiency**, using an objective assessment instrument, including, but not limited to, the state test of English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). The ELPAC Overall Performance Level 4 is the criterion.
 2. **Teacher evaluation**, including, but not limited to, a review of the student's curriculum mastery;
 3. **Parent opinion and consultation**; and
 4. **Student performance in basic skills** in comparison against an empirically established range of performance in basic skills of English proficient students of the same age. Districts may use the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium test (SBAC) but are not required to and may use local academic assessments.
- Only Criterion 1 is standardized statewide—districts determine how to implement the other three.
 - Unlike California, 44 states relied exclusively on English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessments for reclassification determinations.
 - Most districts have developed more rigorous reclassification standards than required by the state

Creating Coherence:

Lessons on English Learner Reclassification

Diana Mercado-Garcia

Director, Research Practice Partnerships
California Education Partners

Laurel Sipes

Senior Research Associate
The John W. Gardner Center

Guillermo Solano-Flores

Professor of Education
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Creating Coherence:

Lessons on English Learner Reclassification

Diana Mercado-Garcia, Laurel Sipes, & Guillermo
Solano-Flores

PACE Webinar on February 24, 2026





**Diana
Mercado-Garcia**

Director



**Laurel
Sipes**

Senior Research Associate

john w. gardner
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**Guillermo
Solano-Flores**

Professor

Stanford
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
EDUCATION

Stanford-Sequoia Collaborative

STANFORD-SEQUOIA K-12 RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE



9 SCHOOL
DISTRICTS



55 SCHOOLS



33K STUDENTS



1.8K TEACHERS

Featured Studies

Long-Term English Learners: Policy and Practice Implications of a New Category

2017 - 2020

**Co-PIs: Guillermo Solano-Flores &
Guadalupe Valdés**

Making Reclassification Meaningful: A Design-Based Implementation Research Approach to Systemic Change

2021 - Current

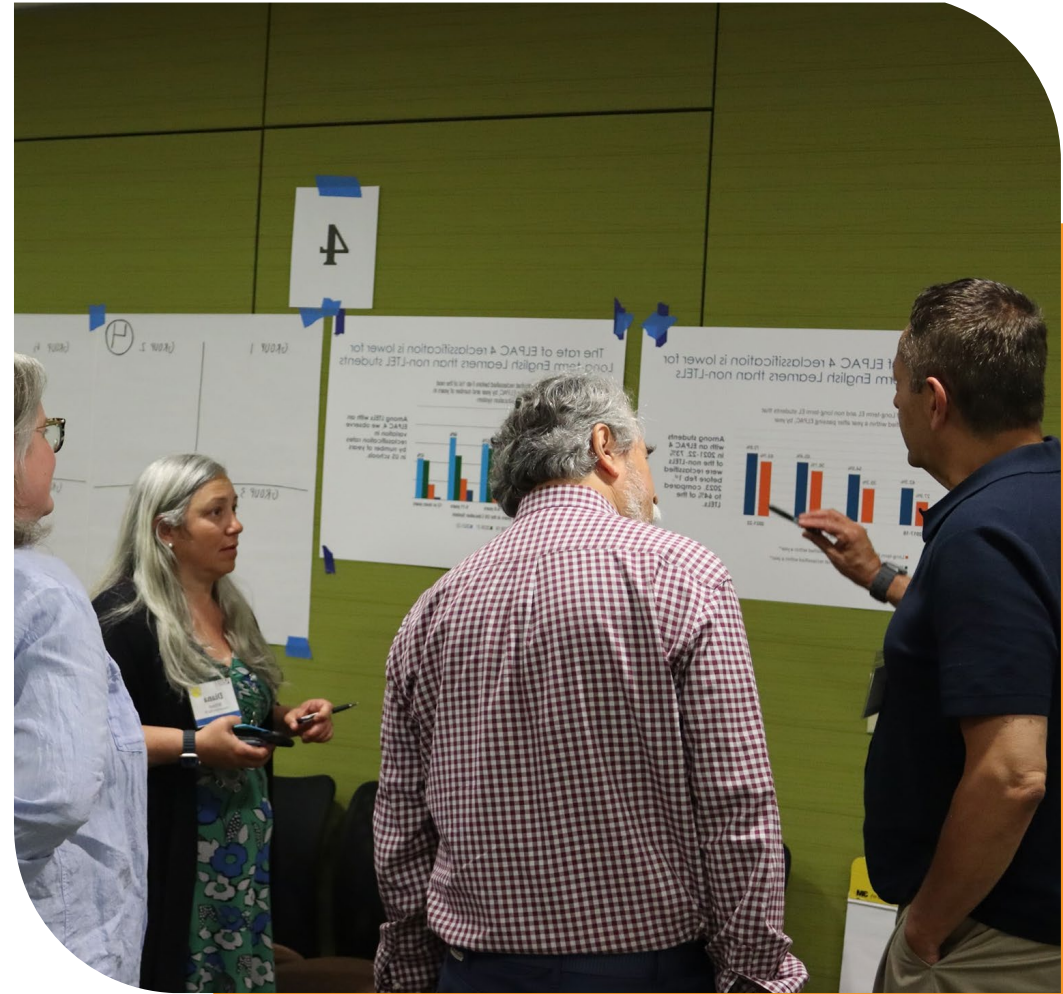
**Co-PIs: Amy Gerstein &
Amado Padilla**

Defining the Issue

“In 2020-21, only 61 percent of students who had achieved a Level 4 on the ELPAC were reclassified within the subsequent year...”

Barriers to Reclassification

1. Local variability results in unequal reclassification opportunities across districts
2. Administrative procedures contribute to lack of or delayed reclassification
3. Basic skills is the biggest obstacle to reclassification



Typical Reclassification Sequencing

	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
ELPAC												
				ELPAC results available								
F&P (K-2)			F&P #3	F&P #3			F&P #1	F&P #1			F&P #2	F&P #2
CAASPP ELA (3-8, 11)		CAASPP ELA	CAASPP ELA	CAASPP ELA								
Reading Inventory (9-12)							RI	RI	RI	RI	RI	RI
Teacher Evaluation												
Parent/Guardian Consultation												

District Variability in Basic Skills Requirements

*Basic Skills
Requirement for 8th
Grade Students*

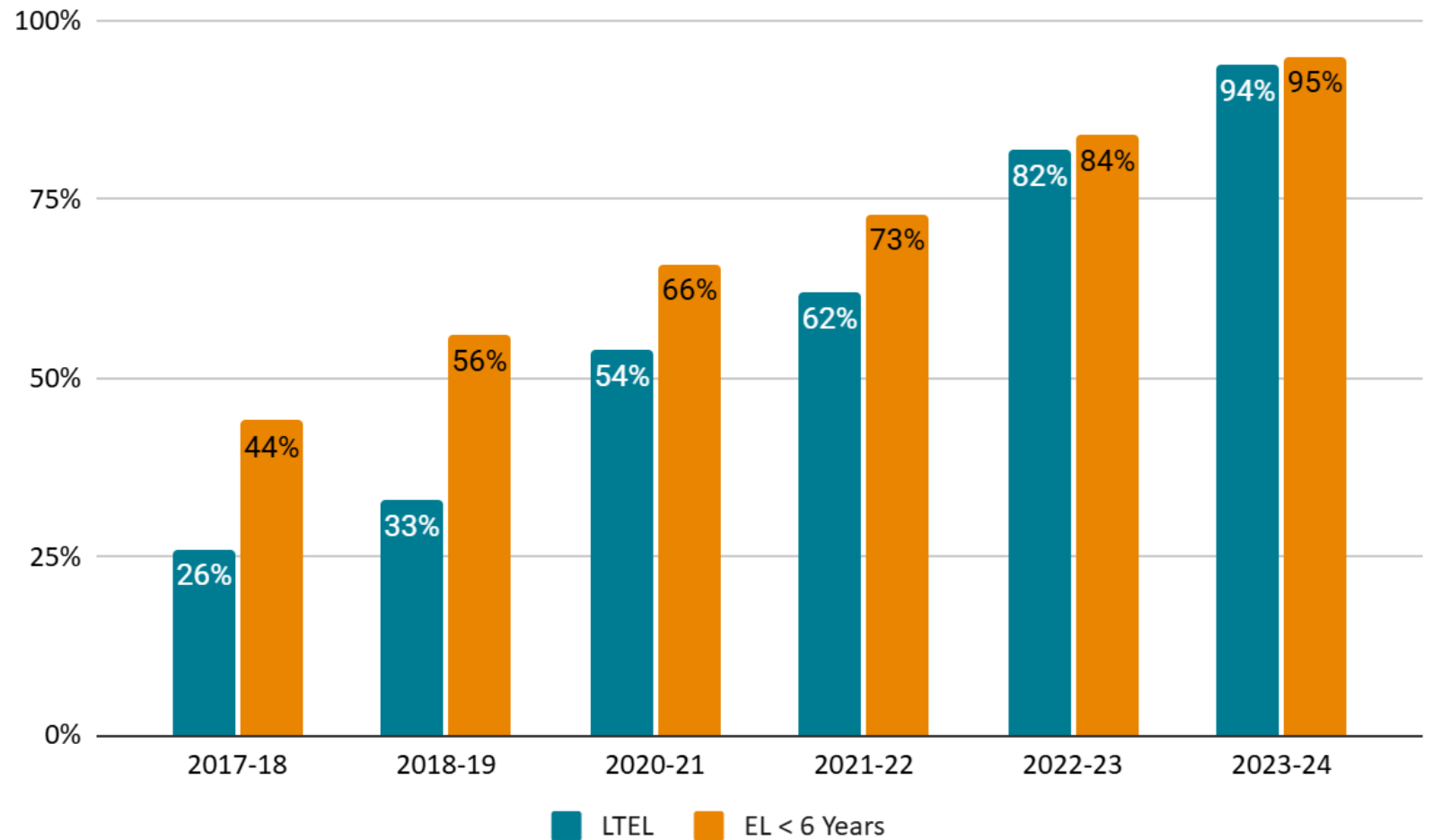
District 1	District 2	District 3
CAASPP: Level 3	CAASPP: Level 2 OR iReady: "Meets Grade Level"	CAASPP: Level 2
	AND	AND
	District Writing Assessment: "Approaching Standards"	Reading Inventory: Spring Lexile Score 1110

District Changes to the Basic Skills Criteria

1. Lowering the CAASPP cut score from “Standard Met” to “Standard Nearly Met”
2. Reducing cut scores on other assessments
3. Reducing the number of requirements for students to meet the basic skills criteria
4. Offering additional opportunities for students to demonstrate basic skills

Early Results: Higher Reclassification Rates

Figure 1. Reclassification Rates within One Year of Passing the ELPAC, by Years in US Schools and Academic Year



Early Results:

Promising Academic Outcomes

Students reclassified under the revised criteria in middle school are performing well in high school

70%

Passed 10th Grade
A-G English

2.43

Average 10th
Grade GPA

74

Average A-G
Credits
Accumulated by
End of 10th Grade

Policy Recommendations

1. Eliminate the basic skills criterion
2. Track reclassification rates and disaggregate EL categories
3. Reduce administrative burdens through guidance, standardized timelines, and streamlined processes



Thank you!

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Finding the Sweet Spot for English Learner Reclassification: A Study of California's Criteria

Molly Faulkner-Bond

Research Director | English Learner & Migrant Education Services

WestEd

February 24, 2026



Finding the Sweet Spot for English Learner Reclassification



A Study of California's Criteria

Molly Faulkner-Bond, Research Director, English Learner and
Migrant Education Services, WestEd



Project Partners



Region 15 Comprehensive Center at WestEd

Molly Faulkner-Bond

Min Huang

Angela Acuna

Christine Snyder

Lorna Porter

Robert Linquanti, Eric Crane

Assessment Development & Administration Division (ADAD)

Kelly Bacher

Caroline Ramirez-Faghih

Mylou Moua

Sarah Fulton

Mao Vang

Traci Albee

Multilingual Support Division (MSD)

Alesha Moreno-Ramirez

Geqigula Dlamini

Emily Ingram

Gustavo Gonzalez

Study Goals

Analyze recent statewide assessment data to answer two questions:

Is the Criterion 1 Threshold on the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) Still in the Right Place?

What Does Meeting the ELPAC Threshold Tell us About English Learners' Academic Preparedness?

Why This Study?

Three Contextual Motivators

1. Desire / need to affirm and validate the state's existing criteria



Current Criterion 1 thresholds were set in 2018-19 using only one year of data (first operational ELPAC administration).



Attachment 1

Updated Report on Supplemental Empirical Analyses of the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California

Robert Linquanti, Min Huang, and Eric Crane

California Comprehensive Center at WestEd

Background

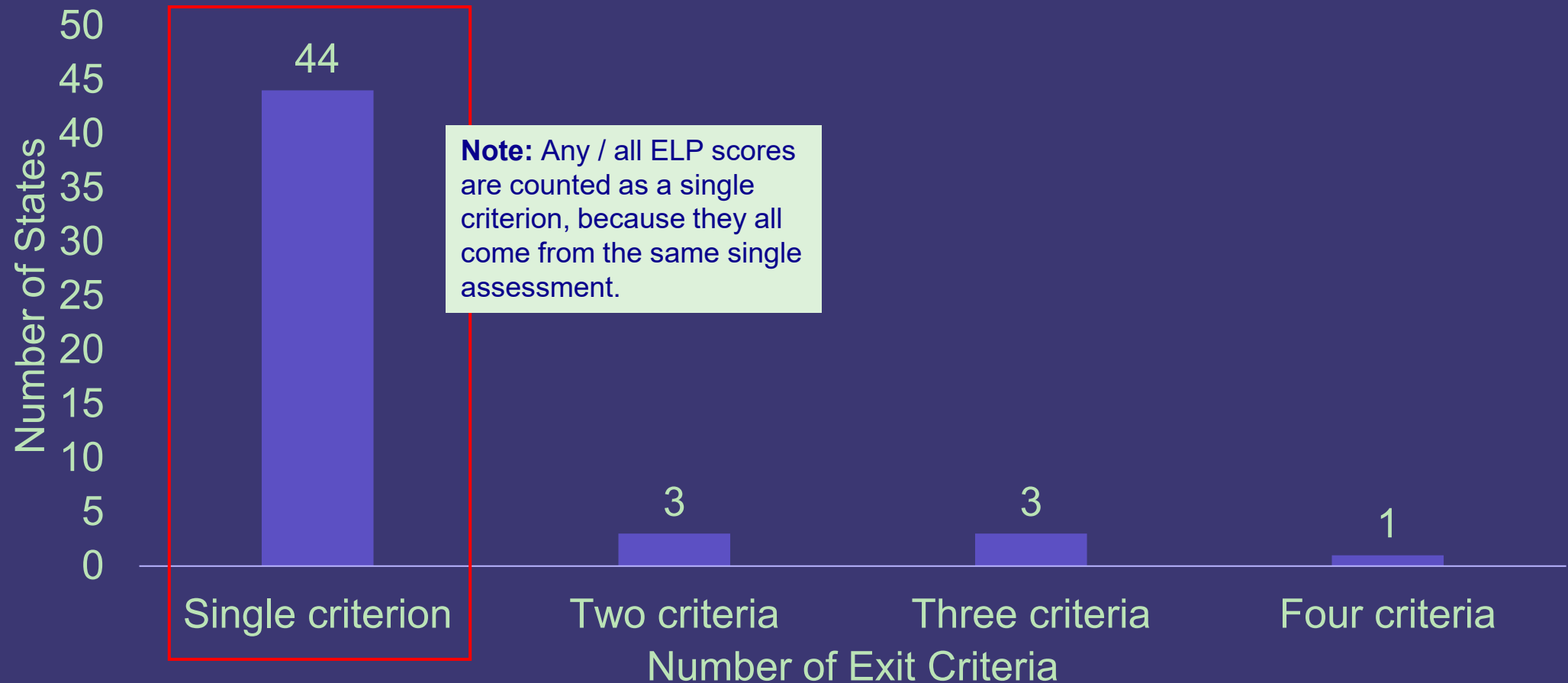
At the request of the California Department of Education (CDE), in August through September 2018, the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd (CA CC) conducted initial supplemental empirical analyses to examine the relationship of English Learners' (ELs) achievement on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) English language arts/literacy (ELA) relative to their Summative English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) performance. These analyses of ELs' CAASPP ELA performance by ELPAC Overall performance level used preliminary ELPAC threshold scores approved by the State Board of Education (SBE) in November 2017. In addition, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) conducted a threshold score validation study utilizing teacher judgments of students' English language proficiency compared to student performance on the Summative ELPAC. Validation of threshold scores and empirical analyses of the relationship of ELPAC to CAASPP ELA are critical for appropriate test use and state-level policy discussions on establishing an ELPAC criterion for EL reclassification decisions.

The results from the threshold score validation study and the initial empirical analyses suggested that increasing the threshold scores, particularly where ELPAC Overall performance level (PL) 3 ends and PL 4 begins, would set the ELPAC Overall PL 4 threshold to more closely approximate the performance level estimations of EL students given by teachers and the achievement distribution of the English-only (EO) students on the CAASPP ELA assessment. The CDE therefore proposed new threshold scores for the summative ELPAC, which the SBE unanimously approved at its November 2018 meeting. As a result, the CDE requested the CA CC to conduct further supplemental analyses of the achievement of EL students on CAASPP ELA disaggregated by the Summative ELPAC performance levels using the SBE's newly adopted Summative ELPAC threshold scores. These additional empirical analyses are intended to help inform the CDE's proposal to the

Three Contextual Motivators

1. Desire / need to affirm and validate the state's existing criteria
2. Differences between California's exit policy compared to other states

Number of Exit Criteria Used by States (SY23 – 24)



Note: Total excludes South Dakota, but includes Florida twice due to different numbers of criteria for students K – 2 vs. 3 – 12.

Three Contextual Motivators

1. Desire / need to affirm and validate the state's existing criteria
2. Differences between California's exit policy compared to other states
3. Perceptions and concerns from the field

From Listening Sessions with California Educators (2023 – 24)

Q: What are the most common barriers to reclassification for EL students?

*“Students have to score on a local assessment in addition to ELPAC 4. **Many EO students would not be able to pass** this criteria.”*

*“Basic skills (3+ on CAASP) is **very difficult for all students to pass** (EL and non-EL).”*

*“Criterion 4—no approach where districts are annually evaluating this criterion based on how their peers are performing—**cut-off scores should be in flux based on cohorts**. Inconsistency in cut-off scores and assessments.*

*“SBAC is much more difficult. If I look at **EOs, they are struggling** to pass. .”*

What Did We Find?

Study Findings

Is the Criterion 1 Threshold on the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) Still in the Right Place?

What Does Meeting the ELPAC Threshold Tell us About English Learners' Academic Preparedness?

**National Evaluation of Title III Implementation
Supplemental Report—
Exploring Approaches to Setting
English Language Proficiency
Performance Criteria and
Monitoring English Learner Progress**

Three Methods

1. **Descriptive Box Plots** of Academic Performance Based on ELP
2. **Logistic Regression** Predicting Academic Performance Based on ELP
3. **Decision Consistency Analysis** to Maximize Agreement Between Academic Achievement and ELP



Multiple Types of Insight

At what level of ELP do English learners....

...**have a 50% chance of attaining proficiency** on academic content assessments?

...**most closely resemble English-only students** in their achievement distribution?

...have the **most consistent results** between ELA and ELP (proficient on both, or neither)?

National Evaluation of Title III Implementation
Supplemental Report—
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**See the Full
Results in our
Forthcoming
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WestEd 

Finding the Sweet Spot for English Learner Reclassification:

A Study of California's Criteria

Report prepared by
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2023–24 Analyses and Interpretations completed by
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Traci Albee, and Mao Vang,
CDE Assessment Design and Administration Division

Alesha Moreno-Ramirez, Geqigula Dlamini, Emily
Ingram, and Gustavo Gonzalez,
CDE Multilingual Support Division



**All methods converge on
ELPAC overall PL 4 as the
optimal cut score for exit.**

**This finding is robust
across grades and over
time.**

Results

*Is the Criterion 1 Threshold on the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) Still in the Right Place? **Yes.***

What Does Meeting the ELPAC Threshold Tell us About English Learners' Academic Preparedness?

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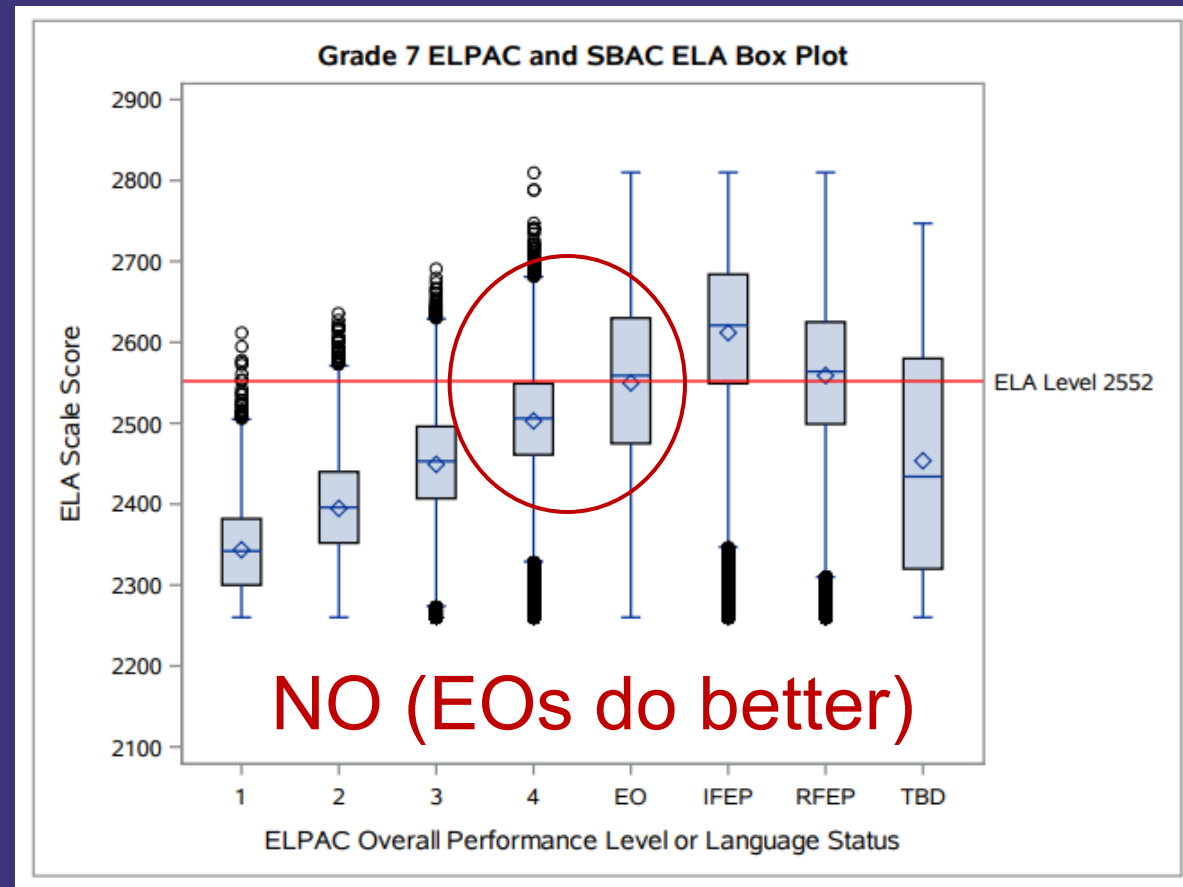
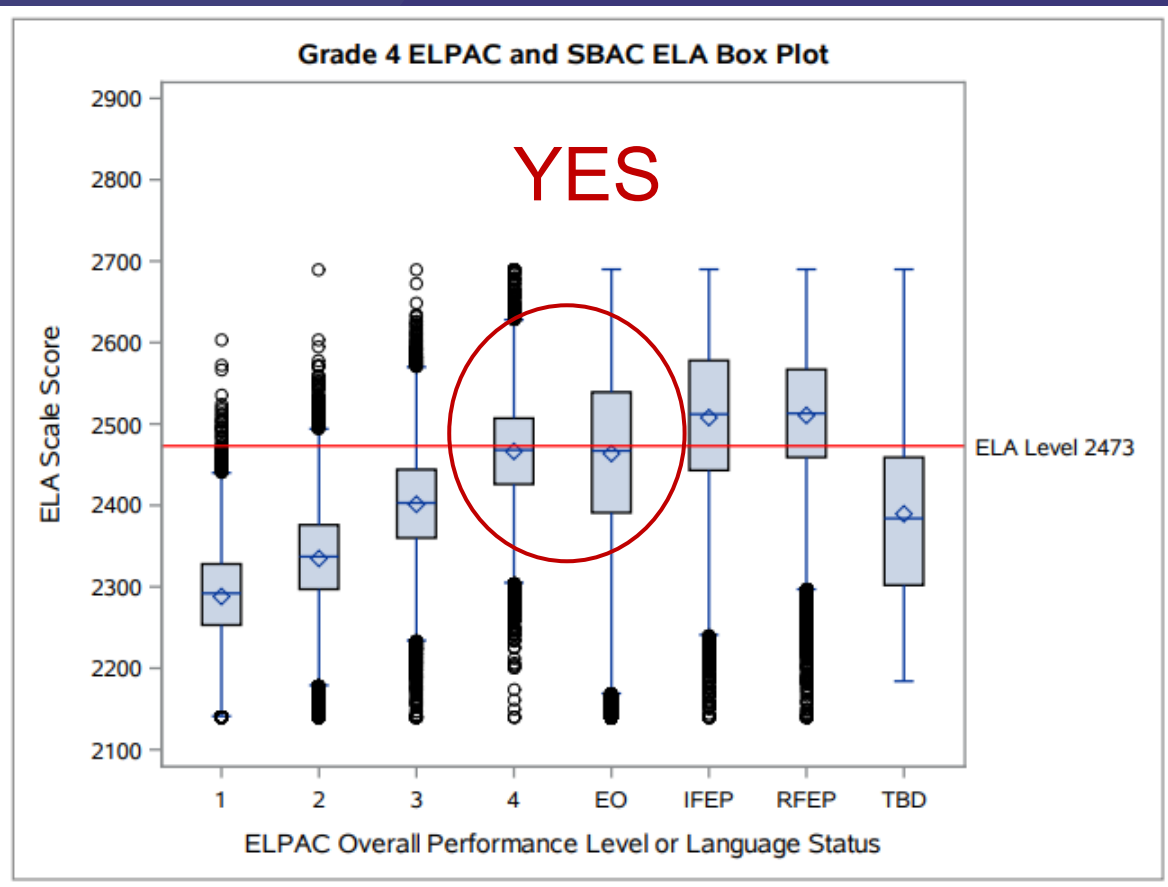
Additional Comparisons

How does the achievement of English learners at ELPAC overall PL 4 compare to...

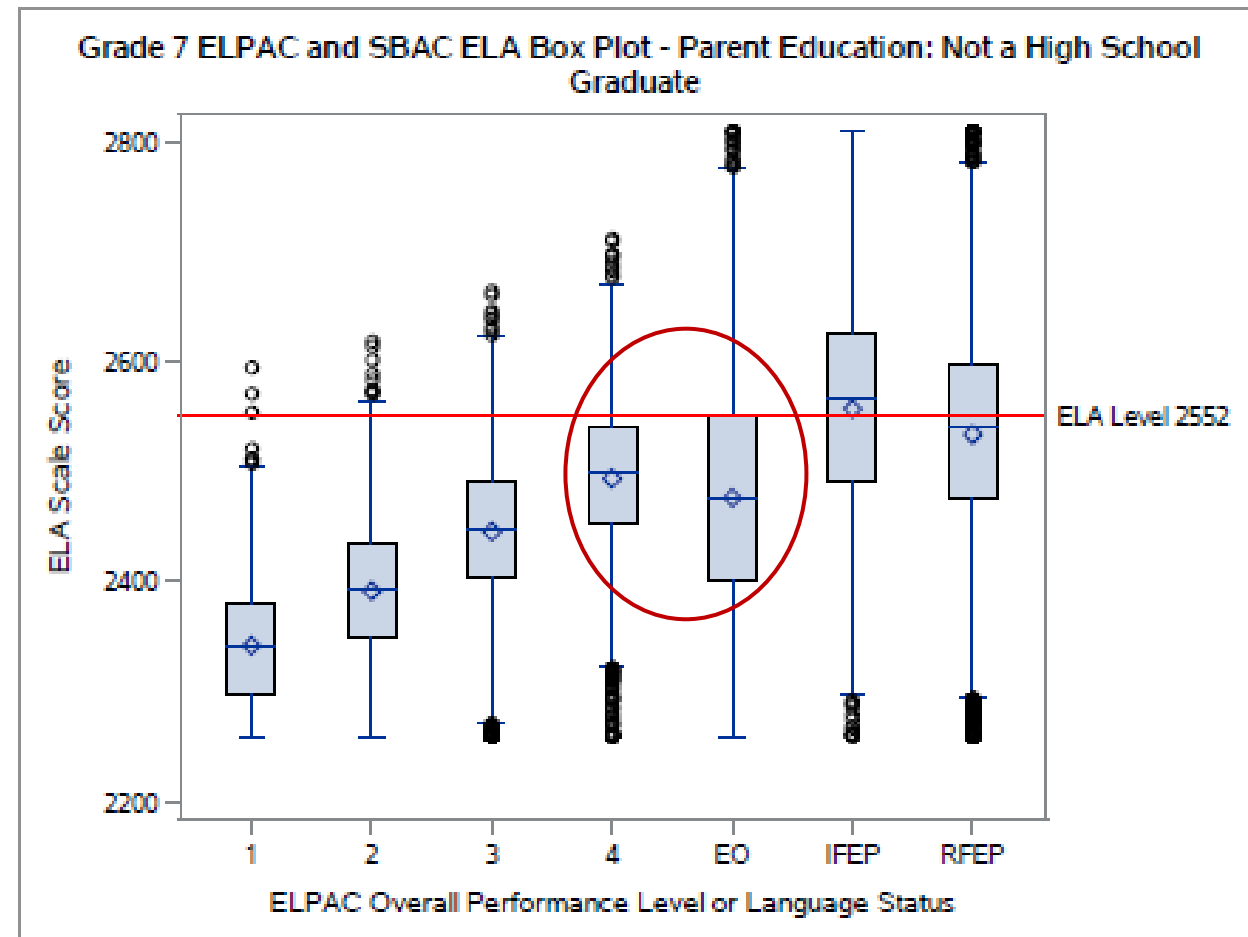
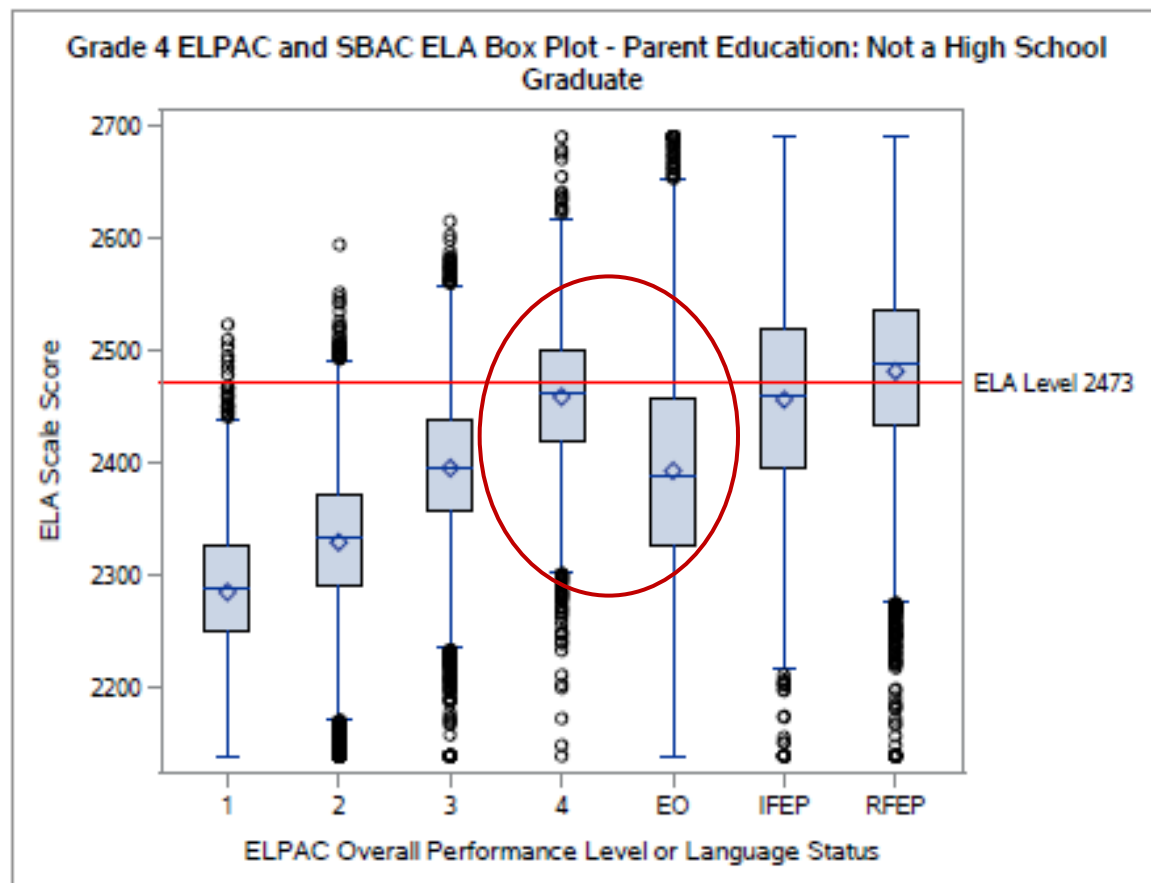
- English-only students with similar levels of parental education or socioeconomic status?
- English-only students with similar disability status?
- One another, based on whether they reclassify the following school year, or not?



Do ELPAC Level 4 Students Have Comparable Achievement to English-only (EO) Peers? (All Students)



Do ELPAC Level 4 Students Have Comparable Achievement to EO Peers? (No High School Degree)



NO (Level 4s do better)

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**English learners at ELPAC
overall PL 4 are at least as likely
as EO peers with similar
backgrounds to meet the
proficiency standard on the
SBAC ELA assessment, if not
more so.**

**True for all levels of parental
education, disability status, and
socioeconomic disadvantage.**

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Students who score at ELPAC overall PL 4 achieve at the same level next year regardless of whether they remain in EL status or exit—particularly after controlling for socioeconomic status (SES).

No academic benefit from remaining in EL status an extra year.

Results

*Is the Criterion 1 Threshold on the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) Still in the Right Place? **Yes.***

*What Does Meeting the ELPAC Threshold Tell us About English Learners' Academic Preparedness? **They do as well as or better than peers from similar backgrounds, and gain no academic benefit from staying in status an extra year.***

So, what?

If ELPAC Level 4 students are outperforming comparable EO students in ELA...

- What does this mean for students?
- What does this mean for criterion 4?



Recommendations for Policy

1. **Maintain ELPAC Overall PL 4 as the Threshold for Criterion 1**
2. **Consider Removing Criterion 4 as a Reclassification Requirement**
3. If Criterion 4 Is Removed, Engage With the Field to **Consider the Value of Criterion 2 and Criterion 3**
4. Consider Using **Additional Criteria Only In Particular**, Prespecified Circumstances



Recommendations for Practice

1. Support LEAs and Schools to **Reduce Opportunity Differences** Between English Learners and Other Students
2. Integrate **Post-Reclassification Monitoring** More Meaningfully into EL Students' Overall Education Trajectory
3. Continue to **Monitor the Opportunities and Achievement** of EL Students, Particularly Those at ELPAC overall PL 4



Thank you!

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Bluesky

Academic Gatekeeping of English Learner-Classified Students: Findings from an Evaluation and Validation Study of California's Criteria

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University of Oregon College of Education

Academic Gatekeeping of English Learner-Classified Students:

The Case of California

Ilana Umansky & Havisha Khurana
University of Oregon

February 24, 2026

With thanks to the California Department of Education, the
Learning Policy Institute, and Getting Down to Facts III.



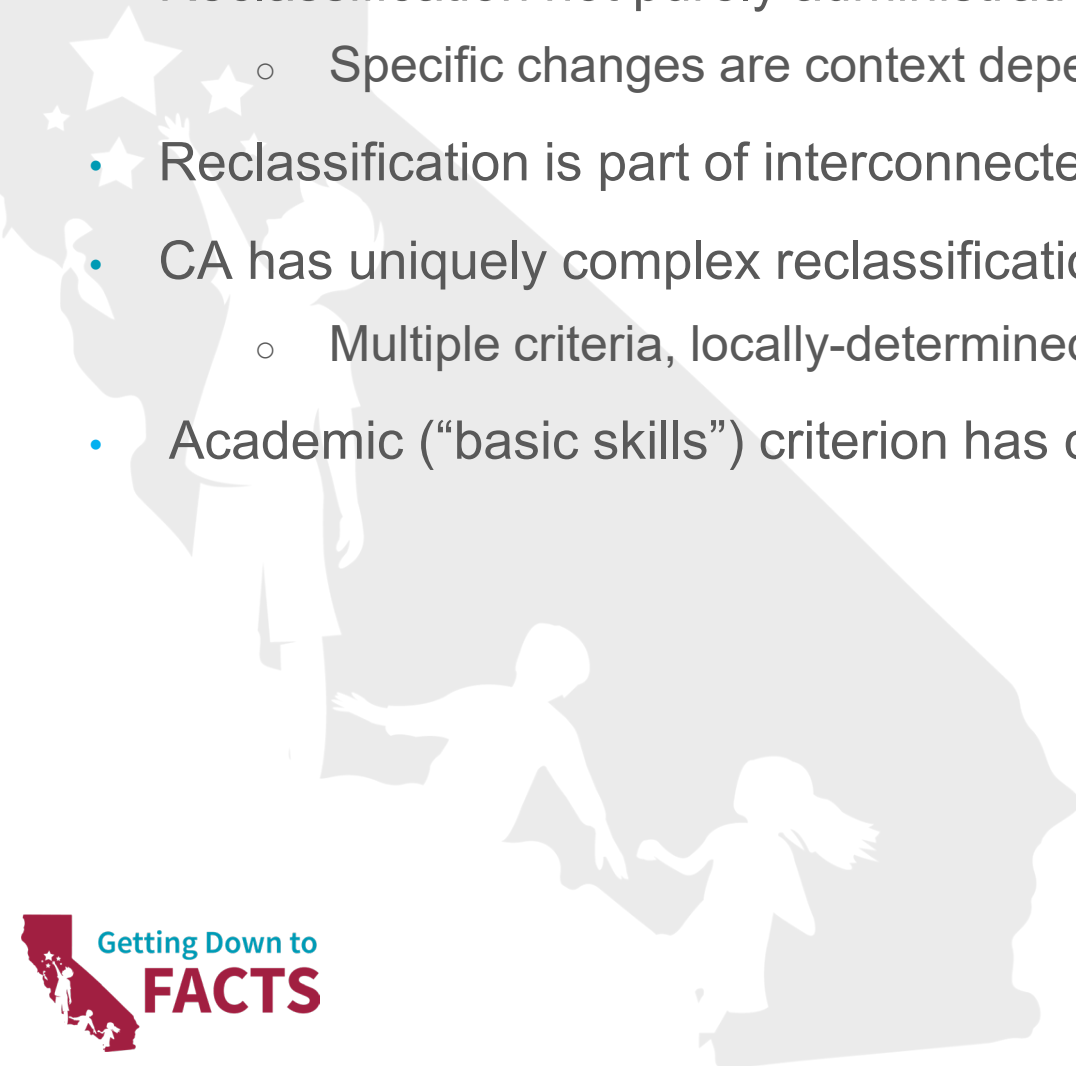
Getting Down to
FACTS

Stanford

SCALE Initiative
Accelerator for Learning

Background

- Reclassification not purely administrative; changes students' opportunities & outcomes
 - Specific changes are context dependent
- Reclassification is part of interconnected system with EL & RFEP services
- CA has uniquely complex reclassification statute
 - Multiple criteria, locally-determined criteria, non-ELP criteria
- Academic ("basic skills") criterion has credible arguments for and against



This study asks:

1. How do districts' define their basic skills (BS) criteria?
2. How many students meet BS compared to ELP criteria?
3. How does being held in EL status impact otherwise eligible English proficient students?
 - a. Do these effects differ based on the difficulty level of the BS criterion?
 - b. Do these effects differ among districts with similar BS difficulty levels?

Details about regression discontinuity RQs (3-5):

- Sample: Among English proficient students near their district's BS threshold (grades 3-8, 11)
- Outcomes: Test scores, likelihood of meeting academic standards, suspension, attendance
- Timeframe: Effects after one year
- Limitations: Small districts excluded; short effects window

Data

- CDE student level data 2021/22 – 2023/24
 - ELPAC & SBAC scores, language status, demographics, outcomes of interest
- Stratified random sample of districts
 - Locale (city, town, suburb, rural)
 - Percent ever-EL (high, medium, low terciles)
- Of 187 (120 + 67 replacements) we ended up with **76 districts**
 - Excluded & replaced: Districts with no reclassification criteria online
 - Excluded and replaced: Districts that didn't use SBAC in basic skills criterion
- Coded basic skills and ELP criteria
 - Image and text-scraping
- Final sample: **112,077 student-year observations** across 2022/3 – 2023/4 years (**11% of state**)

	Statewide	Sampled Districts
Reclassified	23.40%	21.8%
Female	46.0%	46.1%
Elementary Grades	53.7%	55.3%
Asian	8.70%	13.8%
Hispanic	84.40%	79.40%
Spanish	84.40%	79.3%
Chinese	2.2%	2.7%
Vietnamese	1.80%	3.1%
Special Education	19.9%	19.1%
Newcomer (<3)	7.6%	7.0%
Long-term ELs (>5)	70.9%	69.60%
Past ELA Performance 1/2	87.8%	86.2%
Past Math Performance 1/2	89.6%	88.3%
City	48.20%	47.9%
Suburb	40.1%	37.7%
Town	7.5%	12.4%
Rural	4.2%	2.0%

District basic skills criteria vary widely

	#District-Grade Combinations	#Student-years
Total	430 (76 districts)	112,077
SBAC or	344 (80.0%)	95,433 (85.1%)
SBAC only	61 (14.2%)	10,845 (9.7%)
SBAC and	25 (5.8%)	5,799 (5.2%)
Level 2	138 (32.1%)	45,154 (40.3%)
2 < Level < 3	98 (22.8%)	31,293 (27.9%)
Level 3	194 (45.1%)	35,630 (31.8%)

- 85% of student and 80% of district observations provide multiple pathways to BS
- A small proportion (5% of students) have to hit multiple academic thresholds
- Variation also by required proficiency level

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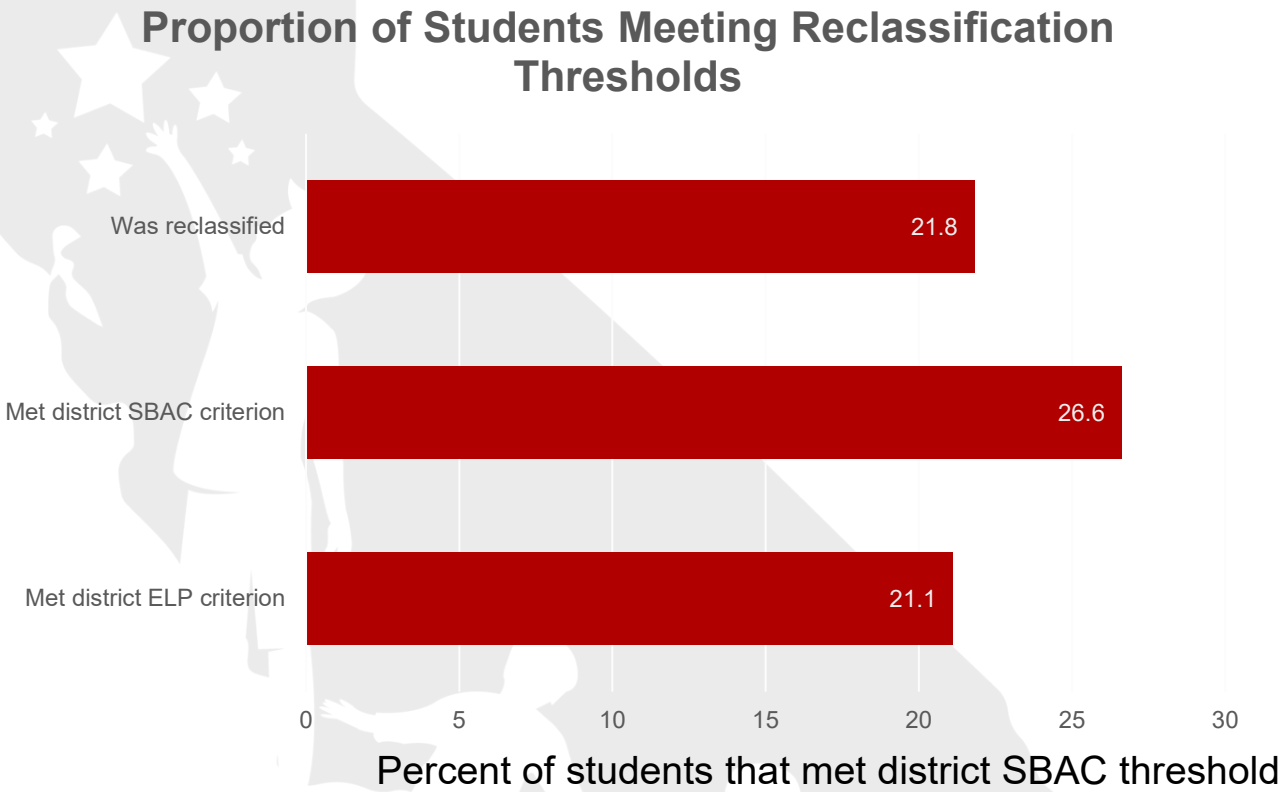
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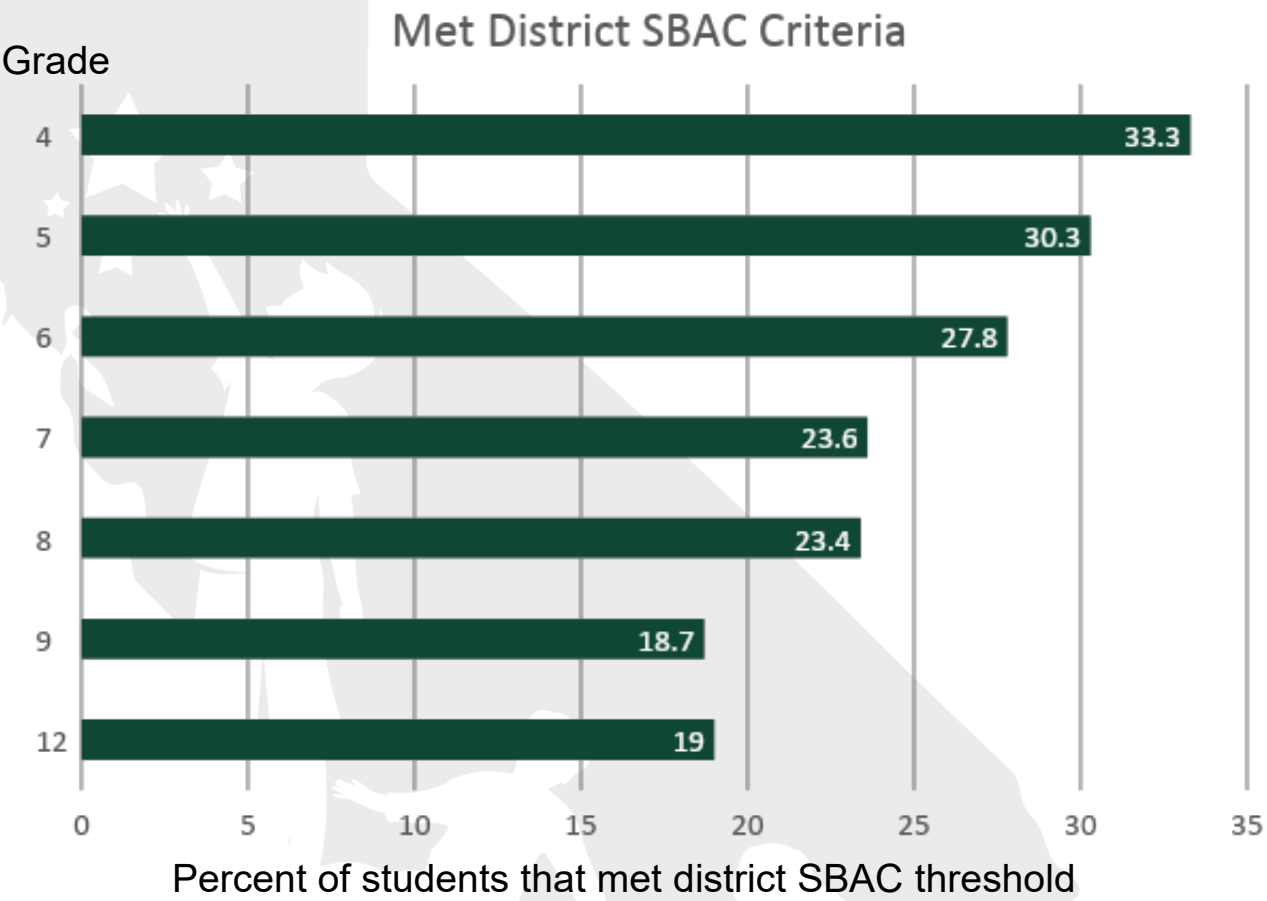
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BS a barrier in higher grades & for specific populations & in specific settings

- More students clear district SBAC than ELPAC criteria

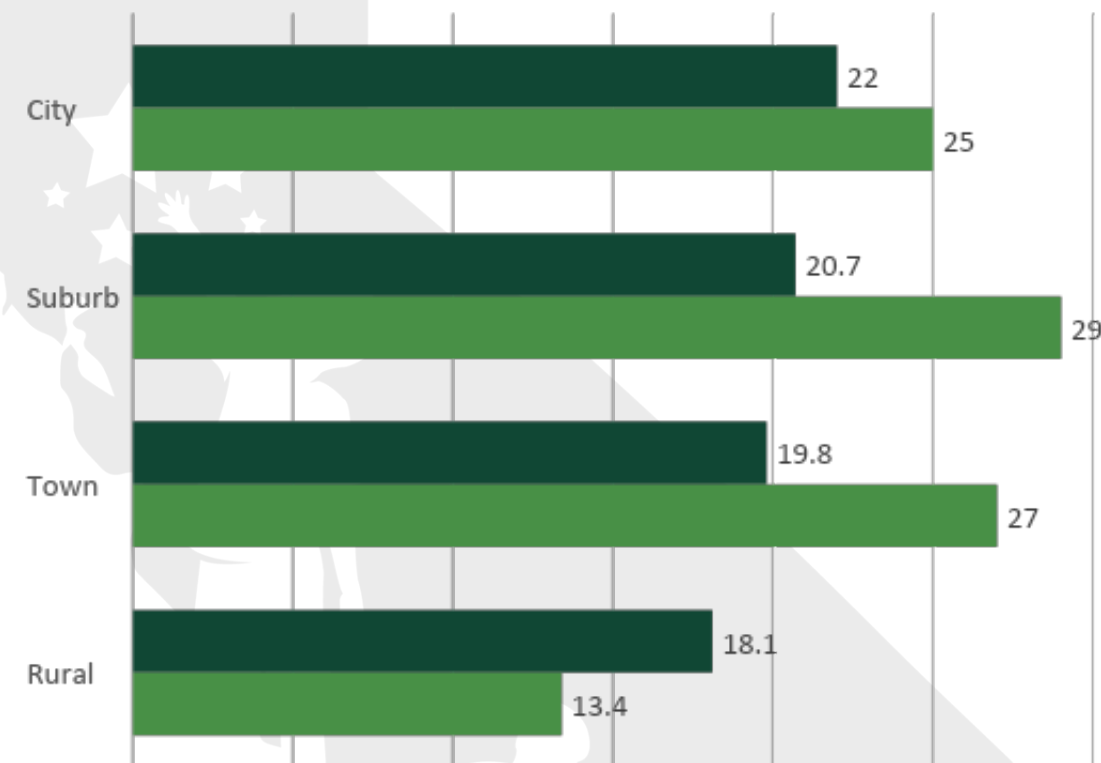


BS a barrier in higher grades & for specific populations & in specific settings



- More students clear district SBAC than ELPAC criteria
- Lower SBAC pass rates by grade

BS a barrier in higher grades & for specific populations & in specific settings

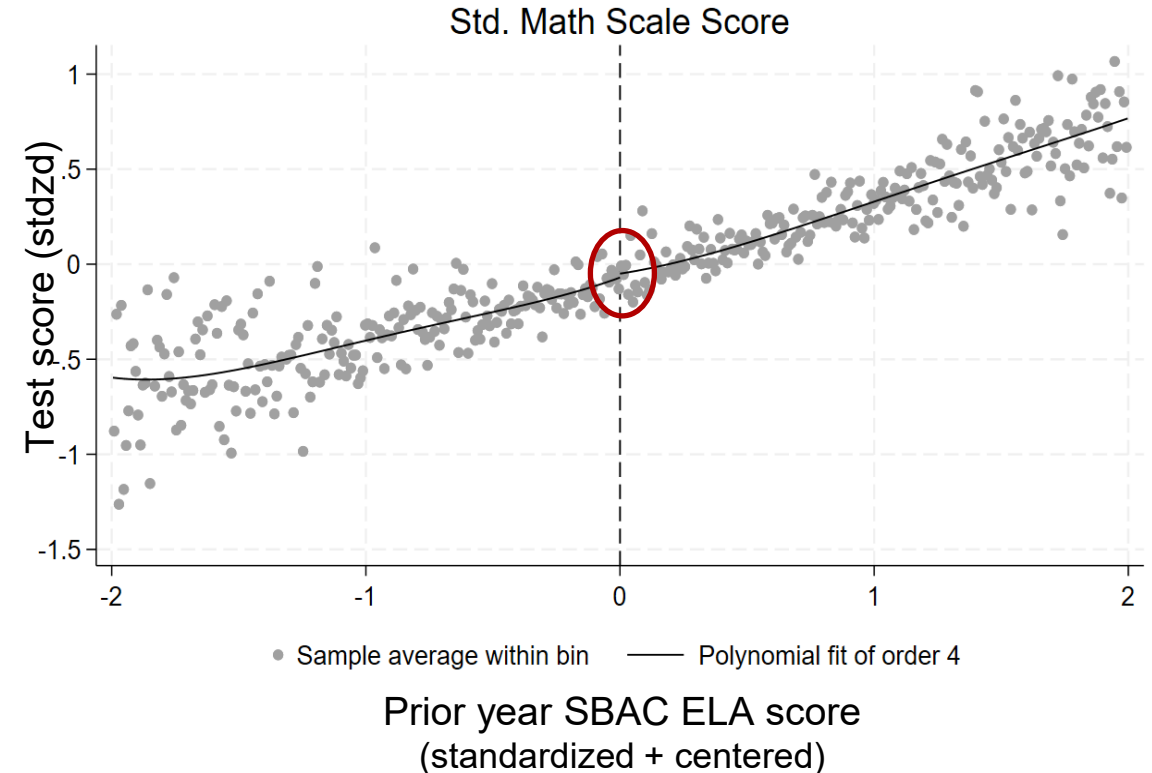
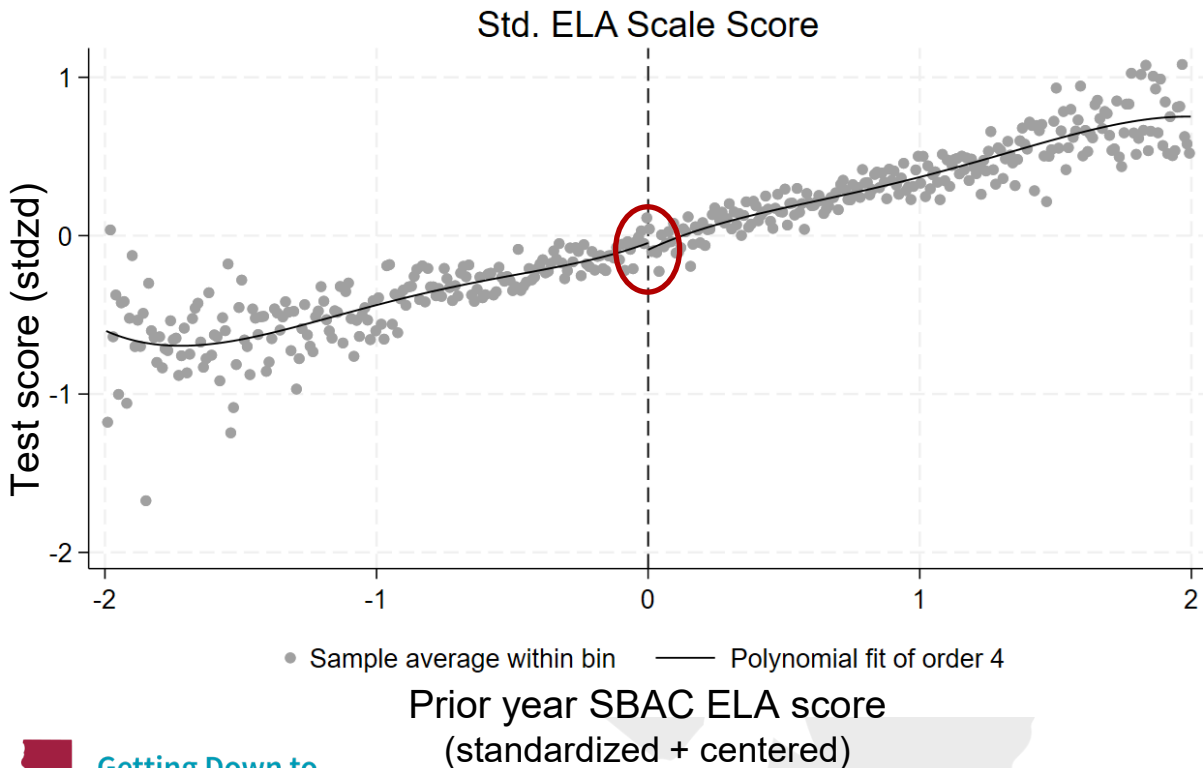


■ Met District ELPAC Criteria ■ Met District SBAC Criteria
Percent of students

- More students clear district SBAC than ELPAC criteria
- Lower SBAC pass rates by grade
- Rural settings have low SBAC pass rates

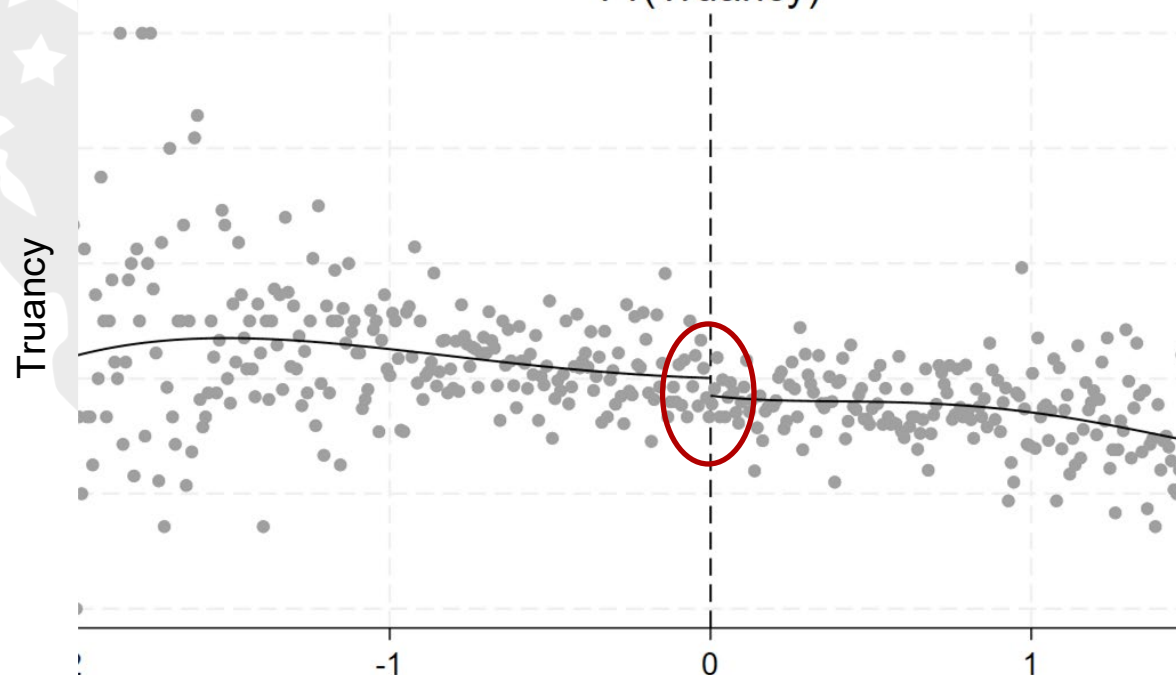
No average effects on achievement or behavioral outcomes one year after being held in EL status

- Students with higher prior year BS scores have higher ELA and math performance, but no meaningful discontinuity at the reclassification threshold



No average effects on achievement or behavioral outcomes one year after being held in EL status

Effect of Being Held Back on
Next-Year Truancy Likelihood
 $\text{Pr}(\text{Truancy})$



• Sample average within bin — Polynomial fit of order 4

Prior year SBAC ELA score
(standardized + centered)

- Students with higher prior year BS scores have higher ELA and math performance, but no meaningful discontinuity at the reclassification threshold
- The largest estimates relate to a **increase** in the likelihood of truancy associated with being held back, but not stat sig

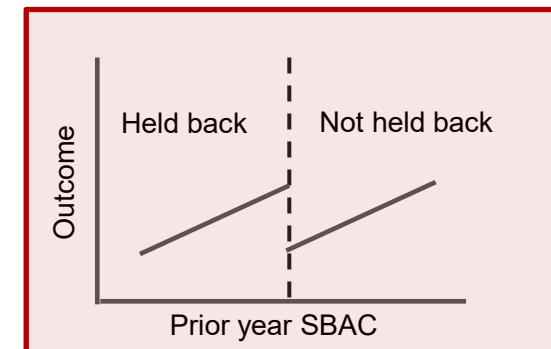
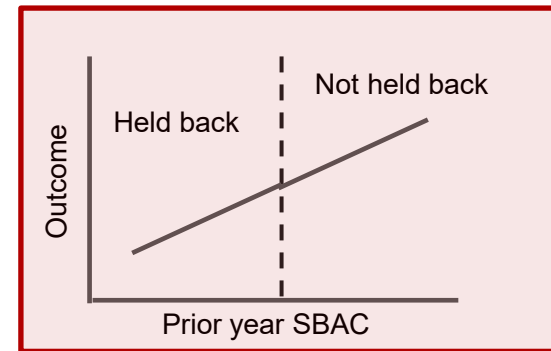
Do effects of being held as EL differ depending on BS difficulty level?

Conventional theory would suggest that we'd find one of two scenarios:

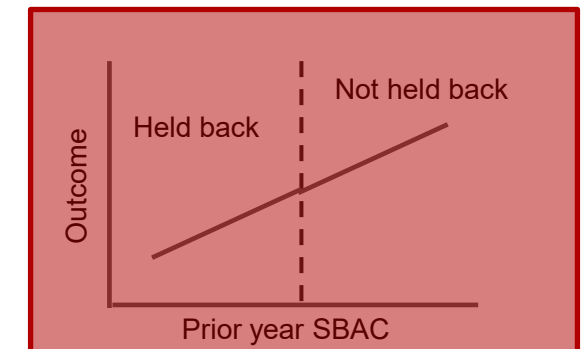
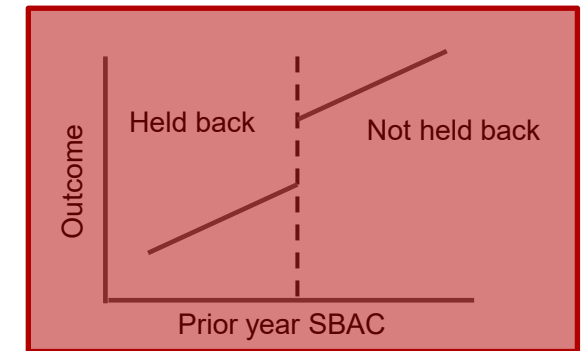
(1) Hard districts set threshold too high, hurting ELs:

(2) Easy districts set threshold too low, hurting RFEPs:

Districts with **lenient** BS criteria



Districts with **strenuous** BS criteria



Either scenario would help policymakers evaluate if BS criterion is working well.

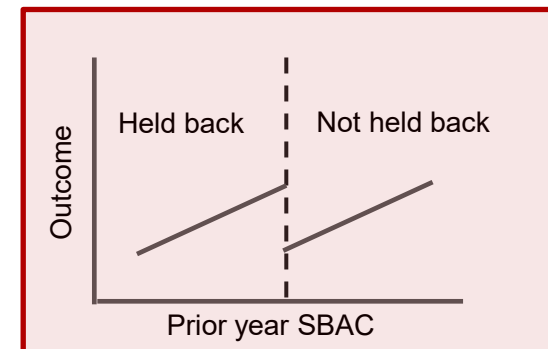
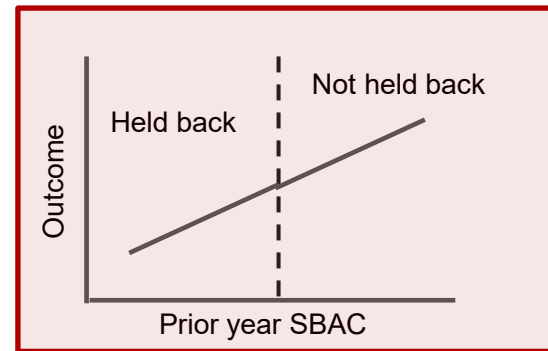
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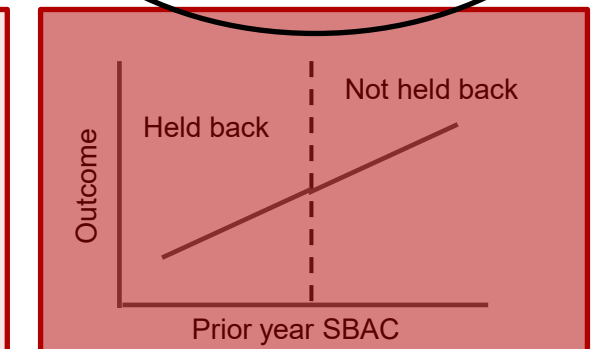
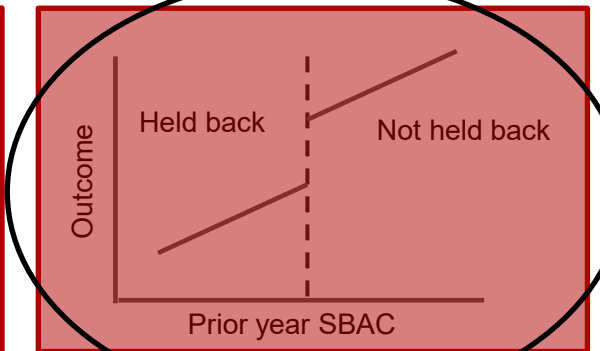
(1) Hard districts set threshold too high, hurting ELs:

(2) Easy districts set threshold too low, hurting RFEPs:

Districts with **lenient** BS criteria



Districts with **strenuous** BS criteria



Either scenario would help policymakers evaluate if BS criterion is working well.

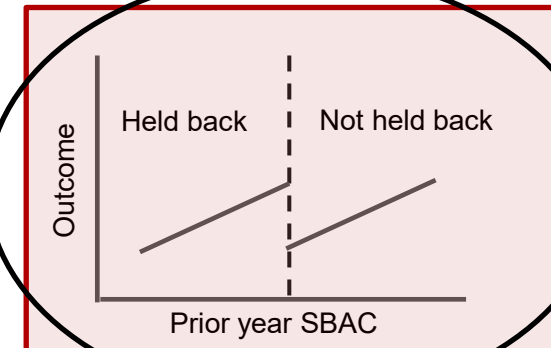
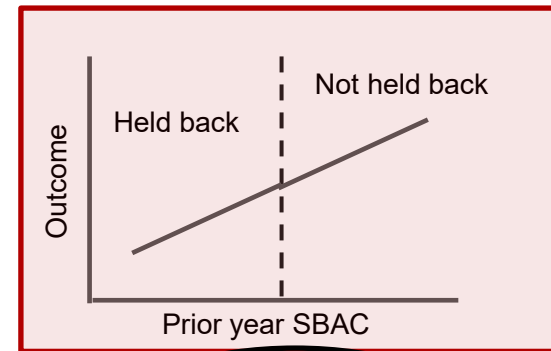
Do effects of being held as EL differ depending on BS difficulty level?

Conventional theory would suggest that we'd find one of two scenarios:

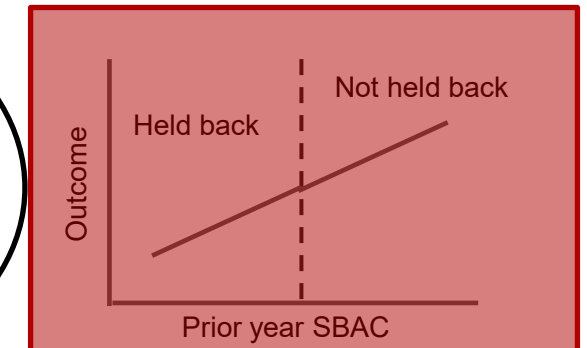
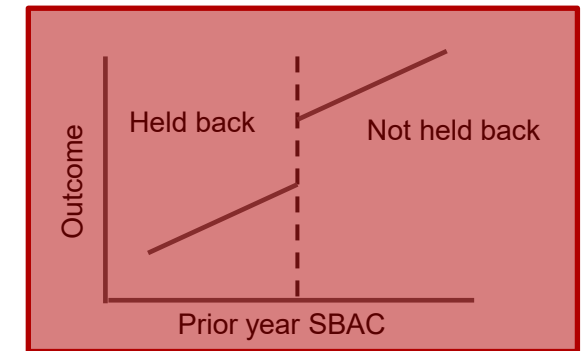
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Districts with **lenient** BS criteria



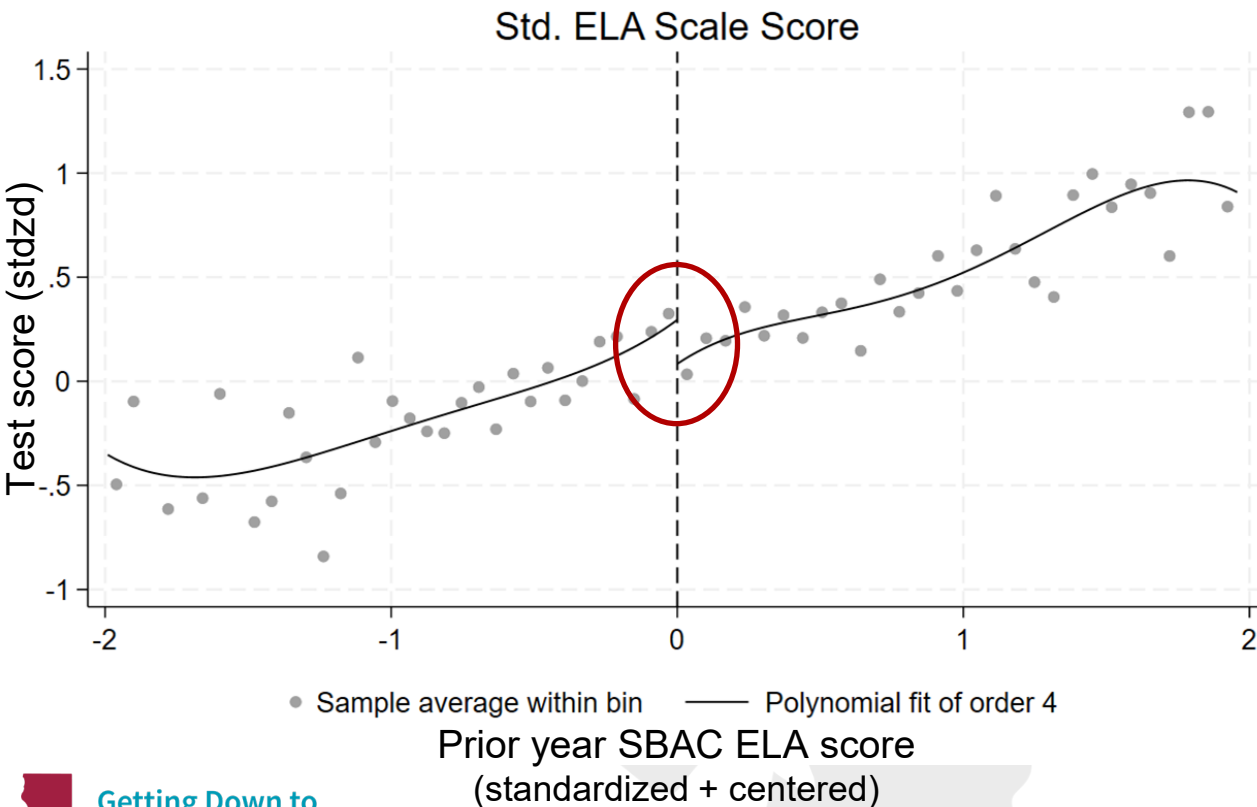
Districts with **strenuous** BS criteria



Either scenario would help policymakers evaluate if BS criterion is working well.

Being held back positively impacts subsequent year ELA scores in districts with harder BS criteria

Effect of Being Held Back on Next-Year ELA Score, Among Students in "SBAC Only" Districts



- Not aligned with conventional framework
- Large estimated effects (ITT: 0.24 SD; TOT: 0.55 SD)
- Estimates in "SBAC or" districts are close to zero
- Some evidence of positive effects on math scores, as well ("SBAC and")
- Results hold when looking at difficulty as measured by required PL (3)

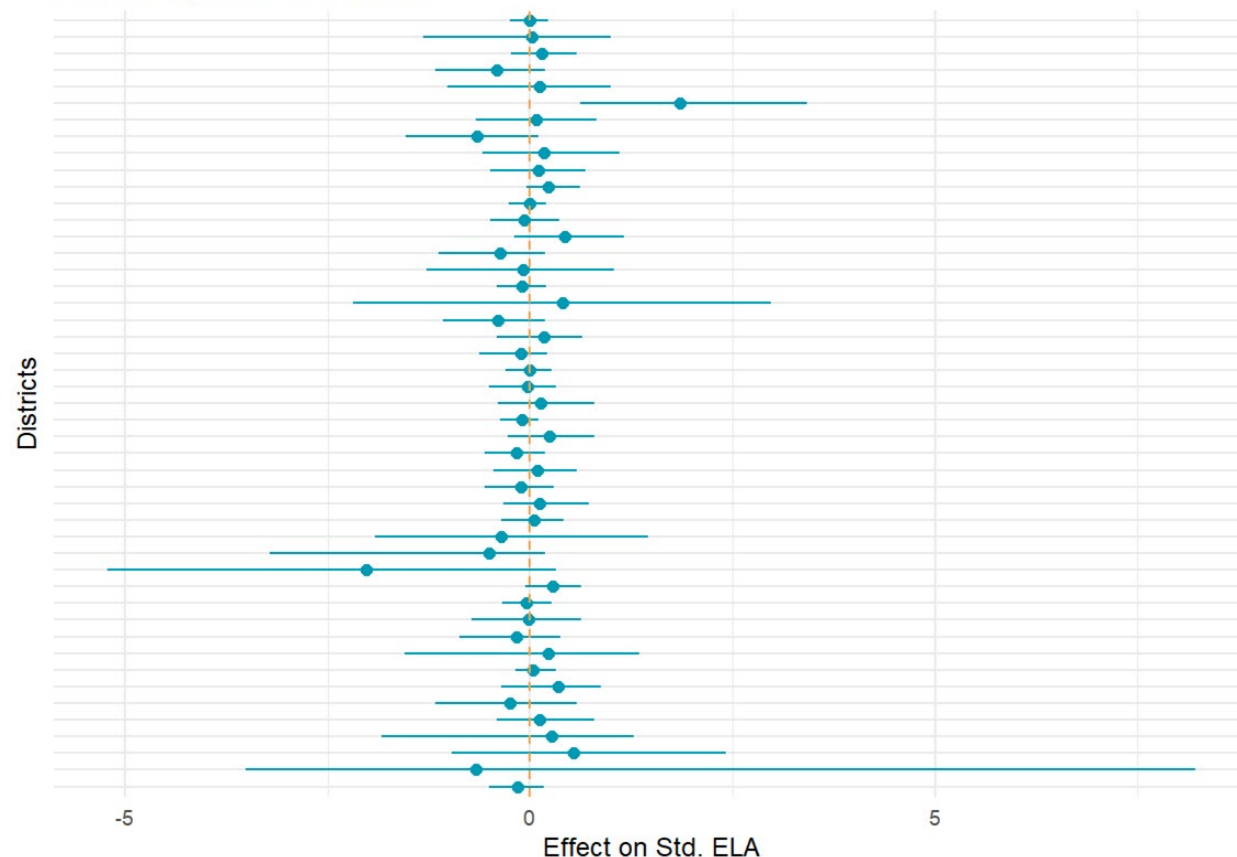
Why might we have this counterintuitive finding?

- Districts that select harder BS criteria differ in other ways as well (instructional?)
- Effects of being held v. reclassified may be driven by other factors (instructional?)

★ Student and District Characteristics, by BS Difficulty Level

	SBAC-Or	Only SBAC	SBAC-And
N	19,482	2,522	1,689
Asian	18.8%	21.7%	39.3%
Latine	73.4%	67.0%	47.2%
White	4.1%	6.3%	10.4%
Newcomer	2.3%	3.6%	8.7%
Prior year math PL 4	8.9%	4.2%	20.5%
City	47.9%	51.8%	68.7%
Suburb	37.3%	37.6%	30.4%
Town	13.5%	4.3%	0.9%
Rural	1.3%	6.3%	*

District-Specific ITT Effect



Take-aways

- Districts vary widely in both operationalization and level of BS criterion
- Many districts appear to have set BS criterion to minimize barriers to reclassification
- The criterion poses particular challenges for students in higher grades and rural settings
- Across districts, there is no evidence of a meaningful impact of being held back on academic or behavioral outcomes in the subsequent year
- An exception is a possible negative effect of being held back on attendance
- Challenging conventional frameworks, we find positive academic effects of being held back among students in districts with more challenging BS criteria, perhaps driven by service and support disconnects/weaknesses in these settings

Panelist Q&A



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