Creating Coherence

Lessons on English Learner Reclassification

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Policy Analysis for California Education

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Executive Summary

Federal and state laws mandate language support services for students designated as English learners (ELs). Yet decades of research findings suggest that keeping students in the EL category too long can lead to unequal academic outcomes. Practices used to transition students out of this category—a process known as *reclassification*—can also generate unequal outcomes. This report examines how California's policy context, characterized by a complex reclassification process and a high degree of local control, contributes to systemic obstacles. Drawing on findings from the Stanford–Sequoia K–12 Research Collaborative, a research–practice partnership, this report highlights how locally variable criteria—specifically the "basic skills" requirement—as well as administrative hurdles can lead to missed or delayed reclassifications. Local variability can result in unequal reclassification opportunities across districts, especially for students enrolled in nonunified systems (e.g., separate elementary and high school districts). Fragmented data systems and the delayed release of state test results often compound these challenges.

To address these obstacles, the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts worked together over nine years to streamline their practices in three ways:

- **Align and broaden pathways to meet basic skills.** Districts calibrated thresholds between elementary and high school districts, and provided multiple pathways and test windows for students to demonstrate basic skills.
- **Shift mindsets and build support.** Districts used research to build visible support for EL students in their strategic visions and accountability plans.
- **Reduce procedural frictions.** Districts shifted from sequential to concurrent processing of reclassification criteria, enabling more end-of-year reclassifications.

These changes produced significant results. To scale these successes across California, we recommend three state-level reforms:

- **Eliminate the basic skills criterion.** Removing this requirement would keep arbitrary and unnecessarily high barriers from trapping English-proficient students in the EL category.
- **Reform accountability systems.** Report reclassification rates and disaggregated multilingual learner categories on the California School Dashboard to ensure that districts are not penalized for reclassifying high-performing EL students.
- **Reduce administrative burdens.** Standardize the timing of the release of English language proficiency scores, implement alerts for students who are ready to reclassify, and provide clear guidance on reclassification processes.

Introduction

In California, reclassification of students designated as English learners (ELs)[1] is a critical process that determines when students transition to being Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP). This process is governed by state policies that mandate using multiple criteria to ensure fairness and accuracy. Although these policies aim to create equitable pathways for reclassification, discrepancies in local implementation can present barriers for students. One such criterion, the assessment of basic skills relative to English-proficient students, often fails to reflect the true capabilities and potential of multilingual learners (MLLs), partly because of inconsistencies in testing practices across districts.

This report explores the complexities of reclassifying students designated as ELs in California, emphasizing the dual nature of state policy as both a framework for support and a potential source of inequity. Through an illustrative case study featuring the Stanford–Sequoia K–12 Research Collaborative (Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative), a research–practice partnership between Stanford University and nine school districts in San Mateo County, we examine how varying interpretations and applications of reclassification criteria can affect students' educational trajectories. Our findings underscore the need for policymakers and educators to consider adjustments to policies and practices that better serve MLLs.

What Is EL Reclassification, and Why Does It Matter?

In California, almost one in five students (17 percent) is classified as an EL (California Department of Education [CDE], 2025b). Under federal law, when a school district determines that a student speaks a language other than English at home, the district must assess the student's English language proficiency (ELP). If test results indicate that the student is not English proficient, the student is entitled to receive language services in the K–12 school system to help them access core academic content, such as through designated or integrated English language development (ELD) or other supports.[2] While these supports aim to assist MLL students in accessing core curriculum and achieving ELP, decades of research have pointed to ways in which EL classification systems and reclassification timing can generate inequalities in academic outcomes for some students labeled as ELs (Callahan, 2005; Estrada & Wang, 2017; Johnson, 2019; Mavrogordato & White, 2017; Umansky, 2016).

[1] We use the term *English learner* only when referring to the official designation because the term focuses on the deficits of students (Martínez, 2018). We use the term *multilingual learner* when referring to students who speak more than one language, including those whose native language is not English.

[2] Federal protections for students classified as ELs include regulations for access to qualified staff and instructional materials, communication with families in languages they understand, monitoring supports, and other rights; see Title VI of the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Once a student achieves ELP, they are no longer categorized as an EL—a process referred to as *reclassification*. When students designated as ELs reclassify within 7 years,[3] they often outperform or perform similarly to their English-only (EO) peers on standardized assessments (Hill, 2018; Hill et al., 2014). However, students who stay in the category longer—typically referred to as *long-term English learners* (LTELs)—experience difficulties in their academic trajectories. They are less likely to gain access to core academic content in middle school and high school (Callahan, 2005; Umansky, 2016), which means they have fewer chances to enroll in coursework enabling them to meet high school graduation or University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) college entrance requirements (Johnson, 2019). This pattern is reflected in California school accountability data. During the 2024–25 academic year, students designated as ELs had a 4-year graduation rate of 79.7 percent compared to a rate of 87.8 percent for their EO peers (California School Dashboard, 2025). Additionally, students identified as LTELs are often enrolled in courses that linguistically isolate them from their EO peers (Flores & Rosa, 2015). They may encounter stigma from educators who conflate linguistic proficiency differences with academic ability (Kibler et al., 2018; Thompson, 2015) and may underestimate their academic potential (Martínez, 2018).

Given these disparities, policymakers and researchers have focused on understanding the effects of reclassification systems. For example, the state now tracks and publicly reports LTEL performance on the school accountability dashboard (CDE, 2025b). What remains less well understood, however, is how school districts interpret and implement policies for serving and reclassifying students labeled as ELs as well as how local efforts to serve those students may inadvertently widen achievement gaps relative to peers who do not carry the EL label.

How Does California's Reclassification System Work?

Unlike other states (such as Oregon, Michigan, and New Mexico), which use only one test-based criterion to evaluate ELP, California mandates multiple criteria for reclassification (Morales & Lepper, 2024). These criteria include a mix of test-based and non-test-based elements.

- **English language proficiency:** ELP is evaluated via the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) test, which is administered every spring to all students labeled as ELs in the state. The ELPAC measures annual progress in ELP across four domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A student meets this criterion when they score a Level 4 on the summative ELPAC.
- **Basic skills relative to English-proficient students:** These skills are evaluated via a measure that compares students designated as ELs to their English-proficient peers to determine whether the student can "participate effectively in a curriculum designed

[3] In 2023, California Assembly Bill 141 changed the definition of *long-term English learner* from those students who hold EL status longer than 6 years to longer than 7 years.

for pupils of the same age whose native language is English" (CDE, n.d.). School districts have flexibility to choose this measure, which may include results from the state Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), other district benchmarks or local assessments (e.g., i-Ready, Fountas and Pinnell, FastBridge, or the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress [NWEA MAP]), and/or course grades. Thresholds for proficiency are locally determined and vary across districts (Hill et al., 2021).

- **Teacher recommendation:** Teacher input is required to assess mastery of academic language for students designated as ELs. California has created the Observation Protocol for Teachers of English Learners (OPTEL), but school districts can also develop their own processes. Approaches are varied and include student-data review meetings with teachers and site administrators, email requests, review of English language arts (ELA) course grades and assessment scores, and use of the OPTEL.
- **Parent/guardian consultation:** Parents must be consulted as part of the reclassification process. School districts develop their own processes for soliciting parental input. Approaches include holding face-to-face meetings or calls with site staff and parents, adding this discussion to existing meetings (such as parent–teacher conferences or Individualized Education Program meetings), and sending documentation home with information about the student's readiness to reclassify.

These state criteria for reclassification, while comprehensive, introduce a high level of complexity. Local discretion in three out of the four criteria also creates variability in reclassification practices, especially in nonunified school district systems (e.g., separate districts for transitional kindergarten through Grade 8 and Grades 9–12), where processes and criteria can differ as students transition between elementary and high school.

How Did California's Reclassification System Develop?

From 2001 until the development of the current policy, California had a similar multipronged approach to reclassifying students designated as ELs. Although different tests were used (such as the California English Language Development Test, or CELDT, before the ELPAC or the California Standards Test before the SBAC), the state still required districts to use four criteria for reclassification: (a) a measure of English proficiency (e.g., the CELDT); (b) a measure of basic skills in English (e.g., the California Standards Test, the California High School Exit Exam, or other locally determined assessments); (c) a teacher recommendation (e.g., based on course grades or performance); and (d) a parent consultation (California Education Code § 313(f)), with variations in the specific requirements and guidance throughout the years (Hill, 2018).

Reclassification processes in the state have historically been characterized by a high degree of local control. Earlier policy analyses found that districts often exceeded the criteria outlined in state guidelines (Hill et al., 2014) and could set different thresholds for English proficiency or basic

skills and include other forms of evidence (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2006). After the landmark *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) ruling,[4] California lacked a statewide ELP assessment system. Instead, assessment of English language skills was decentralized and determined by local educational agencies. School districts could use local assessments—most often the language assessment scales or other commercial tests, such as the Stanford Achievement Test—to evaluate language proficiency (Gándara, 1999). It was not until 1998 that California began to adopt statewide assessment standards (Gándara et al., 2003).

When evaluating criteria for state reclassification, policymakers and researchers have debated for decades how to define appropriate procedures and set thresholds for determining ELP (Linquanti, 2001). A key concern has been ensuring that language services are not removed too soon for students who may still need them (Betts et al., 2020). Yet determining appropriate levels of ELP for participation in mainstream classrooms is difficult, and states have varied approaches (Education Commission of the States, 2020; Morales & Lepper, 2024). Comprehensive policy histories examining the rationale for the adoption of multiple criteria in California (and other states) are also largely nonexistent. As surmised from research and public discourse, proponents of multiple measures argue that they encourage a more comprehensive evaluation of ELP, with greater flexibility and nuance, and they avoid the pressure of a single high-stakes test on students. Others argue that multiple measures, specifically those that test basic skills, ensure that educators are held accountable for teaching academic content to students classified as ELs. Critics of multiple measures, meanwhile, point to the fact that they can prolong the number of years a student remains in the EL category, introduce educator bias (Estrada & Wang, 2017; Mavrogordato & White, 2019), and rely on tests not designed to evaluate language proficiency (Linquanti, 2001). More recent research increasingly points to the effectiveness of a streamlined approach that bases reclassification on a single ELP test (Mavrogordato & White, 2017).

Why Do Nonunified School Districts Face Extra Challenges?

Because of variability in practices across three of the four reclassification criteria, district leaders in nonunified school systems[5] face particular challenges, especially when students still classified as ELs transition from eighth to ninth grade. Elementary districts, which serve transitional

[4] This Supreme Court case gave students classified as ELs the right to English language supports so as to provide them with the ability to meaningfully participate in public schools and to access educational content (U.S. Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, 2024).

[5] During the 2024–25 academic year, there were 516 elementary school and 76 high school districts in the state (compared to 345 unified school districts) serving 1,720,142 public school students in California (CDE, 2025c): 29.6 percent of all public school students in the state. The proliferation and configuration of nonunified school districts in California is complex and tied to various factors, such as: (a) demographic or historical context (e.g., student enrollment and growth, prior creation of districting boundaries); (b) community advocacy for local control (e.g., desire for maintaining independence and autonomy); and (c) funding considerations (e.g., tax bases, economies of scale). Historically, there have been numerous efforts towards consolidation, which have often faced resistance and opposition (Silicon Valley Community Foundation, 2012). In the context of San Mateo County, one relevant factor against unification of elementary and high school districts was opposition to racial integration, which enabled smaller district configurations to remain by voter and community preference (Silicon Valley Community Foundation, 2012, p. 6).

kindergarten (TK) through Grade 8, may use different basic skills assessments than their receiving high school district, which serves Grades 9 through 12. Even if the feeder TK–8 elementary districts use the same basic skills test, they may have different reclassification thresholds than the receiving high school district. Or TK–8 elementary districts may employ a reclassification process that relies on receipt of ELPAC, SBAC, or other test data in the spring before proceeding with teacher and parent consultations, making reclassification before the start of ninth grade difficult. As a result, students designated as ELs and LTELs sometimes "get lost in the shuffle" as they transition between districts.

To explore how districts implement state policy, we profile the experiences of districts in the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative to share the challenges and successes they encountered as they partnered to address reclassification. Because the elementary (TK–8) districts feed into a shared high school district (9–12), the partnership's context offers an instructive opportunity to examine the challenges that emerge at the feeder-to-high-school transition and how local decision-making is shaped by state policy. As we demonstrate throughout this report, inconsistencies in reclassification processes led to a lack of alignment between the eight TK–8 elementary districts and their high school district. These inconsistencies, coupled with administrative hurdles and mindsets that prevented many students from reclassifying, created barriers for students designated as ELs. See Table 1 for a description of the size and demographics of each member district.

Table 1. Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative District Demographics, 2024

District	Grades	Number of schools	Enrollment (*N*)	Demographics	
				Percent SED	Percent EL
Belmont-Redwood Shores School District	TK–8	7	4,019	10	13
Las Lomitas School District	TK–8	2	1,161	6	13
Menlo Park City School District	TK–8	4	2,730	12	8
Portola Valley School District	TK–8	2	504	7	4
Ravenswood City School District	TK–8	4	1,416	88	55
Redwood City School District	TK–8	12	6,332	58	34
San Carlos School District	TK–8	8	2,770	10	6
Sequoia Union High School District	9–12	6	8,553	32	13
Woodside School District	TK–8	1	367	9	4

Source. California School Dashboard (caschooldashboard.org). *Note.* SED = socioeconomically disadvantaged; EL = English learner.

Stanford–Sequoia K–12 Research Collaborative

Established in 2017, the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative is a long-standing research–practice partnership between the Stanford Graduate School of Education (GSE) and nine local school districts (listed in Table 1) that supports collective research inquiries of interest to partner districts and researchers. Since its inception, a key focus has been improving academic outcomes for students classified as ELs.

As part of the partnership, Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts engage in research inquiries that guide local decision-making, working with various GSE faculty and research centers. Since the start of the collaboration, research conducted within the partnership has explored disparities in student outcomes by EL status across the K–12 academic trajectory, the conditions that contribute to LTEL status, course-placement patterns for students designated as ELs and LTELs, between-district variation in reclassification criteria, challenges and successes in implementing reclassification reforms, and outcomes for students reclassified after districts instituted changes.

We profile findings from two specific studies related to the academic trajectories of students identified as ELs or LTELs and the implementation of collective changes to reclassification practices across the nine districts. Additional details about the research questions and methodologies for these studies are included in the Appendix.

In the remainder of this report, we delve deeper into the obstacles that district leaders confronted when working to improve LTEL and EL reclassification rates during the transition from eighth to ninth grade, and we highlight the lessons learned through the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative as district partners aligned practices to improve reclassification rates for all students classified as ELs.

Barriers to Reclassification Beyond English Language Proficiency

As Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative district leaders embarked upon a series of collective research inquiries to examine the academic trajectories of students labeled as ELs and LTELs, they found that during the 2020–21 school year, only 61 percent of students who had achieved a Level 4 on the ELPAC were reclassified the following year. This is similar to research using statewide data, which has shown that only 53 percent of students who pass the ELPAC by fifth grade are reclassified (Novicoff et al., 2025). In addition, at least 25 percent of students designated as LTELs in the partner districts had obtained a Level 4 on the ELPAC at some point during their

academic careers. Consistent with the broader literature, local data showed that students who did not reclassify within 7 years had poorer outcomes as they moved through high school than other MLLs who had reclassified. These patterns suggested that some students remained in the EL category for reasons beyond ELP. Not reclassifying had important consequences for students' equitable access to academic content at the high school level, prompting further investigation by the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts.

The Basic Skills Criterion: The Biggest Obstacle to Reclassification

The fact that a group of students demonstrated ELP on the ELPAC but remained in EL status for 1 or more subsequent years indicated that other factors were driving reclassification decisions. Interviews with district and site leaders revealed that it was very rare for a teacher recommendation or parent consultation to prevent a student from reclassifying. The reasons most cited for teacher hesitation to reclassify were a desire to protect the student by continuing to provide access to ELD supports, a lack of familiarity with the student, and a misunderstanding of the evidence they should use to make their recommendation. Interviews also surfaced bias and inconsistencies among teachers about what the EL designation and reclassification should mean, which could further delay the process. District and school staff in all nine Collaborative districts shared that parents or guardians rarely opposed reclassification. Most interviewees indicated that they had never encountered opposition or pointed to only one or two instances throughout their careers. These data suggested that the basic skills criterion was most likely to prevent or delay reclassification.

An inventory of the assessments and thresholds used by the nine Collaborative districts for the basic skills criterion revealed that all eight TK–8 elementary districts were using a local measure for grades K–2 (e.g., Fountas and Pinnell, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, or i-Ready), and most (seven out of eight) were using the SBAC ELA for Grades 3–8. Yet even though the elementary districts used similar assessments for Grades K–2 and Grades 3–8, they had different thresholds and requirements for demonstrating basic skills. Several districts included additional elements for the basic skills criterion, such as requiring students to pass multiple tests—for example, the SBAC ELA as well as a locally adopted assessment or a district writing test (see Table 2 later in this report).

These locally established requirements meant that students with the EL designation were sometimes held to higher standards than their EO peers. EO students are not required to take the ELPAC or any other test to access the mainstream academic curriculum, and many would not meet the basic skills thresholds themselves. In 2024–25, proficiency rates on the SBAC ELA among Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts ranged from 17 to 91 percent for EO students. Statewide, fewer than half (48.8 percent) of all students met or exceeded SBAC ELA standards during the 2024–25 academic year (CDE, 2025d). In effect, requiring students designated as ELs to achieve "met" on the SBAC ELA to reclassify held them to higher standards than many of their EO peers.

Unequal Reclassification Opportunities Across Districts

Another complicating factor was that variability in assessment types and thresholds led to differing experiences across the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative feeder districts, with consequences for students designated as ELs in eighth grade. Such students experienced different reclassification outcomes depending on the TK–8 elementary district they attended. For example, an eighth-grade student designated as an EL in one district might meet the basic skills criterion by earning a "standard nearly met" on the SBAC ELA and be eligible for reclassification based on their ELPAC score, teacher recommendation, and parent consultation. However, the same student in a neighboring TK–8 elementary feeder district would not be eligible because they needed a "standard nearly met" on the SBAC ELA in addition to passing a local assessment. Local variation in the definition of the criteria meant that students experienced differential reclassification opportunities driven by the district they attended.

The TK–8 elementary districts and the receiving high school district were also not aligned in their reclassification cut scores and thresholds for the basic skills criterion in Grades 7 through 9. The receiving high school district required that students either "met or exceeded standards" on the SBAC ELA or received a specific Lexile level on any MetaMetrics-approved test (e.g., i-Ready, NWEA MAP, etc.). However, TK–8 elementary feeder districts often had different thresholds, meaning that a student with similar test scores might be eligible for reclassification in the high school district but not in their feeder district. This lack of alignment created challenges and missed opportunities as students transitioned from eighth to ninth grade with the EL designation.

Administrative Procedures Contributing to Delayed Reclassification

Research findings demonstrated that 63 percent of students who did not achieve ELP by fifth grade became classified as LTELs. Interviews with district leaders and site administrators revealed several administrative practices that contributed to delayed reclassification. District leaders spoke about the hurdles of tracking the data needed to assess whether students had met reclassification criteria across multiple platforms, including the challenge of selecting which assessments to use, how many to require, and where to set thresholds with minimal guidance from the state. The challenge of receiving ELPAC results before the end of the academic year compounded these difficulties.

Reclassification was also complicated by fragmented, decentralized data systems, which remained difficult to navigate even when districts contracted with third-party vendors, such as Ellevation or Clever, to consolidate data sources. Locating information about reclassification was challenging because it was often stored in various digital and physical locations. In one district, researchers reviewed cumulative files and found that only SBAC and local test scores were consistently recorded, whereas other key reclassification documentation, such as ELPAC scores or teacher notes, was frequently missing. In another district, cumulative files for students labeled as ELs contained ELPAC scores but lacked information about local tests.

For districts using assessments beyond the SBAC ELA for the basic skills criterion, tests were often administered two or three times during the year. District and school staff faced decisions about which results to consider for reclassification and whether fall results could be reviewed and a decision made before the next ELPAC window opened in February. Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative TK–8 elementary districts also processed the criteria sequentially: waiting for spring ELPAC scores to be released first, then checking whether eligible students met the basic skills criterion, and only then seeking to obtain the teacher recommendation and parent consultation. This sequential process posed challenges in years when ELPAC scores were released late—sometimes not until summer recess—since districts often did not have sufficient time to gather the required documentation before the next academic year. For students who received a passing score on the ELPAC, this sometimes meant that teacher recommendations had to be postponed until the new academic year and completed by an educator who had been teaching the student for only a few weeks or months. Similarly, scheduling parent consultations and gathering written acknowledgement of a student's readiness to reclassify were difficult to complete between the receipt of ELPAC scores and the end of the academic year. These procedural frictions resulted in missed or delayed reclassification—even for students who earned a passing ELPAC score.

Administrative Processes That Delay Reclassification

District leaders identified several bureaucratic procedures that resulted in missed or delayed reclassification. These are some of the challenges they mentioned as pertaining to each of the criteria for reclassification and the data systems for tracking reclassification.

English language proficiency:

- Timing of receiving ELPAC scores making it difficult to reclassify students before the end of the academic year (e.g., if scores are received after the end of the academic year, reclassification would have to occur during the fall of the next academic year)
- Treating the criteria as sequential, meaning that districts waited to confirm that a student had passed the ELPAC before beginning other parts of the process, so score-reporting delays could further hinder reclassification

Basic skills:

- Selecting assessments and determining how many are necessary
- Setting appropriate thresholds with minimal guidance from the state
- Gathering scores from multiple data systems (e.g., SBAC, i-Ready, NWEA MAP, etc.)
- Not knowing whether to review and consider multiple administrations of basic skills assessment results (e.g., fall, winter, spring)

Teacher consultation:

- Gathering teacher consultation information after receipt of spring ELPAC scores but before the end of the academic year
- Gathering teacher consultation information at the start of the academic year if that teacher had been teaching the student only for a few weeks
- Overcoming bias, misunderstandings, or inconsistencies among teachers about what the EL designation and reclassification should mean

Parent notification:

- Scheduling time to consult with parents and/or gathering written acknowledgement of their student's readiness to reclassify after receipt of ELPAC scores but before the end of the academic year

Data systems:

- Tracking and monitoring EL progress using fragmented data systems, even when contracting through third-party vendors to streamline various data sources (such as Ellevation or Clever)

How the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative Removed Barriers

Research findings from the partnership generated both urgency and a roadmap for change. During the 2022–23 academic year, district leaders across all nine Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts reached shared agreements for building greater alignment in reclassification practices. District partners continue to work towards improvement and still face challenges. In this section, we describe the practices that have helped remove barriers and improved reclassification rates thus far.

Creating Greater Local Alignment Around Reclassification

In 2022–23, all nine Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts formally agreed to shift their basic skills criteria to better align with ninth-grade reclassification practices and to offer more opportunities for students to meet the basic skills criteria throughout the academic year. Districts made several changes, with a specific focus on eighth- and ninth-grade students who had already met the ELP criterion by achieving Level 4 on the ELPAC. As Table 2 shows, these changes included the following:

- Four districts **lowered the SBAC ELA threshold** from a 3 (Standard Met) or 2.5 to a 2 (Standard Nearly Met), joining three other TK–8 elementary districts already using that threshold. This included two TK–8 elementary districts reducing thresholds to two levels below grade-level standards, reflecting parity with the average EO student performance in their districts.
- Seven districts **reduced the threshold scores that students needed on local assessments** (such as i-Ready, Fountas and Pinnell, FastBridge, or Reading Inventory) to meet the basic skills criteria. These changes were aimed at both calibrating the cut scores to the proficiency level needed for students to access grade-level curriculum and aligning them more closely with ninth-grade entry criteria.
- Six districts **reduced the number of measures that a student needed to meet to fulfill the basic skills requirement**. Typically, this meant that, rather than needing to meet a threshold on the SBAC *and* another reading assessment, a student was deemed eligible if they met the threshold on *any* assessment option.
- Six districts **added options for students to demonstrate the basic skills requirement**. For example, two districts made course grades one of their options. Others offered more testing windows; in districts that administer the i-Ready reading assessment three times per year, for instance, attaining an eligible score on any administration could fulfill the requirement.

Table 2. Summary of Basic Skills Reform by District

District	Prereform 2021–22			Demographics			
	SBAC threshold	More than one test required?	Other tests used	SBAC threshold lowered?	Other test thresholds lowered?	Reduced number of requirements?	Added assessment options?*
Belmont-Redwood Shores	Standard Met	No	F&P (only K–2)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Las Lomitas	Standard Met	Yes	F&P	No	No	No	Yes
Menlo Park City	Standard Nearly Met	Yes	F&P	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Portola Valley	Standard Met	Yes	F&P, Literably	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Ravenswood City	Standard Nearly Met	Yes	DIBELS, i-Ready	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Redwood City	Standard Nearly Met	Yes	F&P, Literably, i-Ready	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
San Carlos	Standard Nearly Met	Yes	F&P, district writing assessment	No	Yes	Yes	No
Sequoia Union High	Standard Met	Yes	Reading Inventory, i-Ready, NWEA MAP	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Woodside	Standard Met	No	F&P (only K–2)	Yes	No	No	No

Note. DIBELS = Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills; F&P = Fountas and Pinnell.

*Additional assessment options include administering tests at different points during the academic year to give students more opportunities to demonstrate proficiency as well as adding measures that can qualify a student for reclassification.

Through partnership discussions, the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts agreed to shift the order of operations for processing reclassification criteria. Although the districts would continue administering the ELPAC, SBAC, and other local tests according to the timelines recommended by the state, they changed the order in which they obtained the requisite paperwork. Educators would no longer wait for test scores before gathering paperwork for teacher and parent consultations. When scores for the ELPAC, SBAC, and other local tests became available in the late spring, the files of students designated as ELs would already have these components completed. If scores indicated that students were eligible for reclassification, the district could quickly process their reclassification before the end of the academic year.

Shifting Mindsets and Generating Visible Support

To reach these agreements, Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts undertook intentional work to shift mindsets about MLLs among district and school staff. Over several years, district leaders relied on partnership research to rethink how and why they were not reclassifying students who later became designated as LTELs. The following are some of the practices that enabled greater alignment and visible support for students designated as ELs.

Using data to raise awareness. Research findings, for example, indicated that many educators were not previously aware of the serious consequences that being labeled an EL or LTEL may have on a student's long-term academic trajectory, especially since TK–8 elementary district leaders weren't always informed about a student's opportunities and outcomes once they enrolled in high school. Data on adverse academic outcomes for students who did not reclassify before high school galvanized support for reform. During an interview, one district administrator recalled:

> *The way that they presented all of the stories and the case studies and the statistics … I think we were like, 'Oh my gosh, everybody has to change their practice today or yesterday or the day before. This is not okay.'*

Additionally, some district leaders were unaware of the local flexibility afforded to them in determining the basic skills criteria. One noted: "The great reveal is that … if there is flexibility, why aren't we exercising it? It seems maybe people don't realize we have flexibility."

Creating a common understanding of the EL label. A key barrier that consistently emerged was differing interpretations of the EL designation. Some district leaders and administrators saw the EL label as appropriate until MLLs performed on par with their non-MLL peers and expressed hesitancy about reclassifying students before they had reached that bar, fearing that doing so meant they were "lowering their standards." One educator shared their apprehension about making changes to their basic skills approach because the criterion "is supposed to be in comparison to their peers. And in our district, our students do very well on

the assessment … [so] is that lowering our expectations for English language learners considering where their English-only peers are scoring, or is it not?" Uncertainty about the basis of comparison for basic skills created difficulties for district leaders, who were unsure whether the grade-level criterion should reference their district, the county, or state averages for students designated as English proficient. District leaders also shared that earlier reclassifications were not always desirable, since the EL label helped ensure that students received appropriate ELD support.

In response to these concerns, researchers within the partnership conducted a longitudinal study of a kindergarten cohort of students designated as ELs. They found that students who reclassified earlier had better academic outcomes than students who reclassified later (Padilla et al., 2025). This finding helped ease anxieties among district leaders who were worried about students exiting "too early." Data analysis showing that students who reclassified under the revised criteria are performing well in high school also allayed fears that removing the EL designation too early would have adverse effects.

Setting reclassification as a priority. As awareness and mindsets shifted, districts began building more visible support for collective goals into their accountability plans and strategic visions. For example, one district explicitly mentioned the collective goal of reducing the number of students designated as LTELs in their Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP),[6] stating:

> Bring to zero the number of 'long-term' English Language Learners who have been in [school district] since Kindergarten and/or at least 5 years as measured by annual ELPAC data and formative assessments to qualify for fluent English redesignation by their 6th concurrent year in [school district].

Another district's LCAP described precise measures of reclassification improvement as follows:

> By June of 2027, 55% of 2nd–8th grade English Learner (EL) students will progress by a minimum of one level on the ELPAC each school year as measured by Summative ELPAC Assessment. Increase our reclassification rate to 20%. Decrease our Long Term English Learners to 10%.

Addressing Administrative Obstacles

Beyond shifting criteria and mindsets, districts took steps to address the procedural bottlenecks described previously in this report. In terms of local practices, Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts began centralizing some of their efforts. For example, some assigned

[6] California state policy mandates that all districts generate an LCAP to "set goals, plan actions, and leverage resources to meet those goals to improve student outcomes" (CDE, 2026). It is a 3-year plan that includes information about how districts "address state and local priorities."

specific administrators to prioritize and take ownership of the goal of reclassification before the end of the year. In one district, an administrator began sending monthly reports on reclassification-eligible students to all bilingual-resource teachers at each school site.

District leaders noted that new statewide approaches had been helpful to their local efforts. The state has been releasing ELPAC scores earlier, in May, which has been pivotal for ensuring that eighth graders reclassify within the same academic year. The state has also begun sending districts automated lists of students who have achieved proficiency but have not yet been reclassified before the next ELPAC testing window. These improvements have helped district leaders prioritize these students for reclassification. One district leader shared:

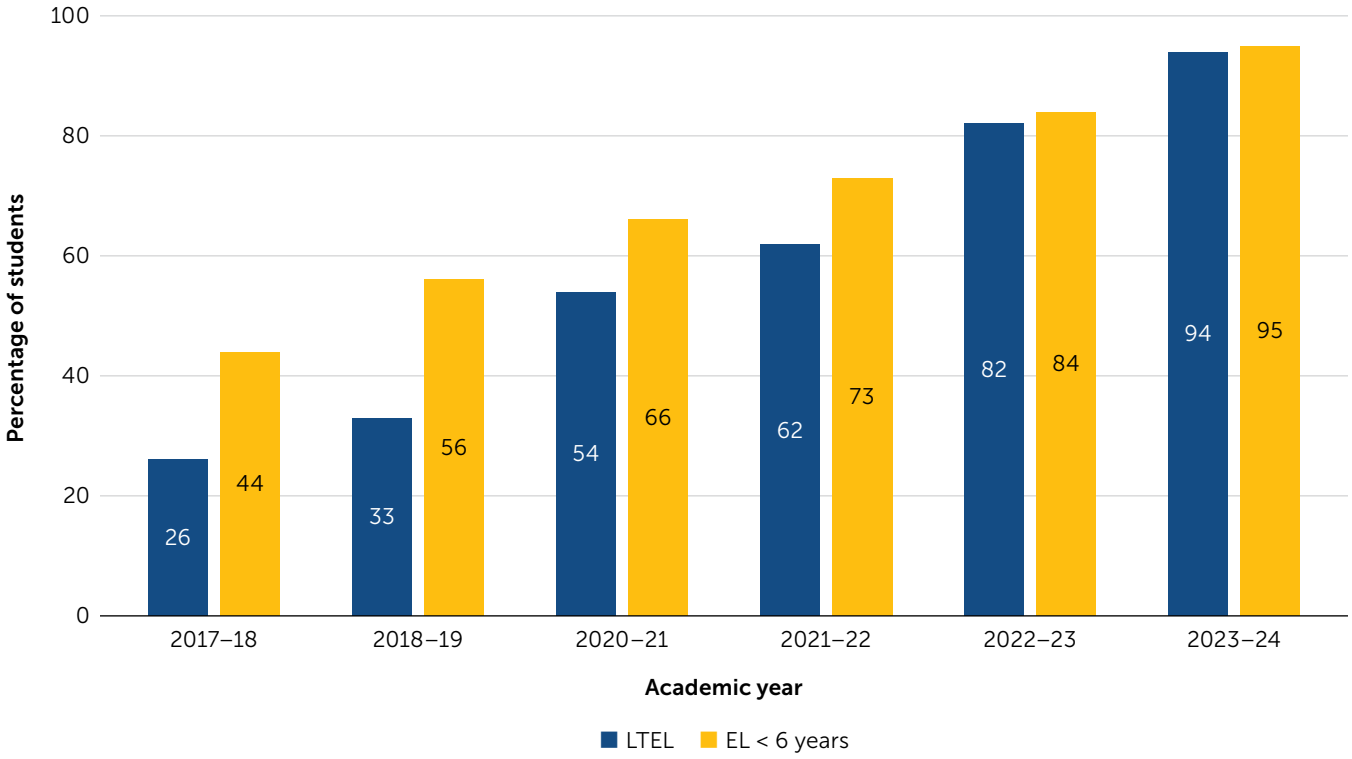
> *This year, there was a report that told me who is eligible for reclassification, which was great. I do appreciate when [the state] send[s] me information that all students don't have all pieces of the test submitted … that they are verifying the work is very helpful. I always worry that we forgot something.*

These reflections suggest that the state could play a larger role in building data infrastructure and automation systems that consolidate reclassification data in one place to reduce administrative burdens.

Early Results: Higher Reclassification Rates and Strong Academic Outcomes

Although Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts acknowledge that there is still room for improvement, these collective changes have helped streamline local processes, allowing more students designated as ELs to reclassify. Overall, reclassification rates increased across all nine districts after districts implemented multiple pathways and test windows for meeting basic skills. The reclassification rate among those who passed the ELPAC increased from 36 percent in 2017–18 to 95 percent in 2024–25. Gaps in reclassification rates by socioeconomic status have also closed (e.g., students designated as ELs who are of higher socioeconomic status are no longer reclassifying at higher rates than those who are of lower socioeconomic status). Disparities in reclassification rates for students labeled as LTELs have also narrowed relative to other MLLs. Before the changes were made, among students who had passed the ELPAC, there was a 20-percentage-point gap in reclassification rates within 1 year between students labeled as ELs with fewer than 6 years in U.S. schools and those labeled as LTELs. However, among students who passed the ELPAC during the 2023–24 school year—the first year in which districts implemented changes to their reclassification criteria and processes—this gap had virtually disappeared (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Reclassification Rates Within 1 Year of Passing the ELPAC by Years in U.S. Schools and Academic Year



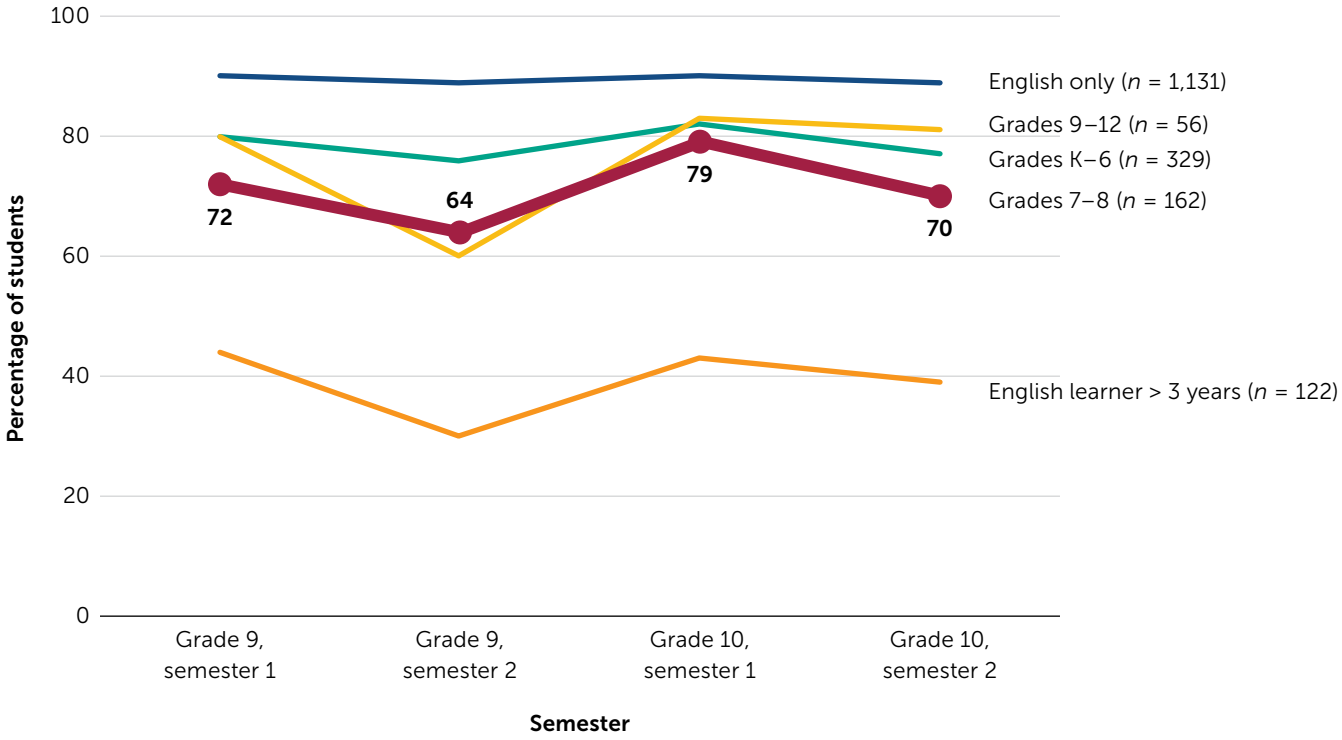
While districts were shifting and aligning their reclassification practices, some began noticing positive effects on students exiting the EL category, especially those designated as LTELs. Educators pointed out that reclassified students tended to perform well. One administrator noted: "Our reclassified students are our highest achievers … and they start off, and they do well … from the beginning." Another educator said:

> *These changes, I like them, it's great for the students, and ultimately, it gives our English learners more opportunities, and these are opportunities that non-English learners are able to access, whether they read at level, or not at level.*

As the partnership continues, researchers have been tracking the academic outcomes of these students in Grades 9 and 10. Districts want to do more than increase reclassification rates; they also want to ensure that students perform well academically after reclassification. Early data show that students who reclassified under the revised basic skills criteria perform well once they reach high school (Zamora & Castrechini, 2026). As Figure 2 shows, around three quarters of students who reclassified in Grades 7 or 8—the grade levels prioritized under the collective agreements—received a C– or better in an A–G-eligible English course (courses that count towards students' eligibility to enroll in UC or CSU). While this was slightly lower than the

rate for students who reclassified earlier, it was significantly higher than the rates for students who retained the EL label into high school and had been in U.S. schools for more than 3 years. Students who reclassified in Grades 7 or 8 also accumulated significantly more A–G-eligible credits than students who had not reclassified and had significantly higher GPAs. Although it is still early in their high school careers to assess the long-term trajectories of these students, the preliminary results suggest that the majority of students reclassified under the revised criteria are on track to graduate high school college-ready.

Figure 2. A–G English Course Passing Rates Among Ninth Graders, 2023–24



Policy Recommendations

The multiyear process of relationship and trust building among researchers and practitioners that led to collective agreements grounded in research evidence among the nine Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts points to the promise of and potential for improvement. Certain practices can be enacted at the state level to improve opportunities for all MLL students in California. Many of the challenges described in this report occur statewide and are not unique to the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative. Other statewide studies suggest that it is time to reconsider existing practices for reclassification in California. In this section, we present a set of policy recommendations for state leaders.

Recommendation 1: Eliminate the Basic Skills Criterion

The state should eliminate the basic skills criterion as a reclassification requirement for students designated as ELs in California. This criterion is one of the main obstacles to reclassification for students who have demonstrated ELP by achieving a Level 4 on the ELPAC. Our partnership research points to a subgroup of students designated as ELs who consistently demonstrate ELP but remain stuck in the EL category because they cannot meet the basic skills threshold set by their school districts. As we previously described, this can be because districts set score thresholds too high relative to the average performance of EO peers across the state and/or require students to demonstrate proficiency on multiple tests. Each additional year in EL status requires students to take the ELPAC, with no guarantee that they will again achieve a Level 4 as the test becomes more difficult. This pattern extends beyond the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative. Statewide data show a similar gap between the share of students designated as ELs who achieve ELP and the share that actually reclassify (Novicoff et al., 2025, p. 11), suggesting that basic skills requirements are a barrier across California.

Over the last several decades, a growing body of research has raised questions about the validity of using academic achievement assessments, as opposed to measures of ELP, for determining EL status (Estrada & Wang, 2017; Linquanti & Cook, 2015; Solano-Flores, 2006, 2008; Solano-Flores & Li, 2009). Within the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative, most districts use SBAC ELA scores to evaluate basic skills. However, the SBAC ELA is designed to measure grade-level content mastery for native English speakers rather than ELP. Evidence from our partnership research suggests that the basic skills criterion may be an arbitrary and misaligned requirement, creating unnecessarily high barriers to reclassification. Nationwide, only 18 states require non-ELP assessments as part of the reclassification process (Morales & Lepper, 2024). Descriptive analyses of these types of reclassification policies further suggest that "states that mandate non-ELP requirements have higher shares of long-term ELs compared to states that rely exclusively on ELP assessments or those that incorporate non-ELP criteria optionally" (Morales & Lepper, 2024, p. 8).

Recommendation 2: Track Reclassification Rates and Disaggregate English Learner Categories

The state should improve the incentives and accountability for reclassification. Currently, the California School Dashboard accountability system disincentivizes districts from reclassifying students. Districts that keep high-performing students in the EL category can artificially boost their EL subgroup accountability scores and English Learner Progress Indicator (ELPI). After enacting changes to improve reclassification rates, one administrator noted that their average ELPAC scores went down because high-achieving students who had been designated as ELs were now being reclassified rather than retaking the ELPAC. Existing state accountability policies can inadvertently encourage districts to maintain students in the EL category for reasons other than their demonstrated English proficiency.

To address these issues, we recommend that the state (a) report reclassification rates and (b) report achievement and reclassification rates by disaggregated MLL subgroups. Even though the state has the ELPI to track progress towards ELP for students designated as ELs and LTELs (CDE, 2025a), the state does not report how many students who received a 4 on the ELPAC actually reclassified by the end of the academic year or prior to the next ELPAC administration. As a result, districts that promptly exit students from the EL category are not rewarded for progress and may actually be penalized for exiting the highest performing students under both ELPI and EL subgroup accountability categories.

Reporting reclassification rates could also help districts set more specific local goals for reclassification, not just goals for ELPAC progress. One administrator noted that they have to calculate their own reclassification rates when generating their LCAPs, which creates complications for comparing rates across districts because there is no standardized methodology. The administrator shared that they would appreciate it if the state could "give us a way to showcase [and track] our progress" regarding reclassification.

Including disaggregated data for all MLL subgroups (e.g., current EL, LTEL, RFEP, ever-EL) would also allow districts to demonstrate progress across the range of MLL students they serve, including those who have been reclassified. Researchers have consistently pointed out that existing EL categories and accountability metrics can "produce a 'revolving door' effect, as more proficient students exit and less proficient students enter the EL subgroup" (Hopkins et al., 2013, p. 102). By adding accountability metrics that paint a holistic picture of MLL progress and reclassification, the state would enable districts to communicate a more nuanced portrait of MLL performance.

Recommendation 3: Reduce Administrative Burdens Through Guidance, Standardized Timelines, and Streamlined Processes

The state should provide more guidance and support to help districts improve the reclassification process. State guidance could include a recommended sequencing for the reclassification process or could specify the period during which teacher-consultation results are valid for reclassification decisions. For example, is it acceptable to use OPTEL or other observation tool results, teacher reviews of students' work and participation, students' grades, or other data collected any time during the year before the student reaches ELPAC 4? Similarly, the state could issue guidance on how long parent-consultation results are valid for reclassification decisions. Is it acceptable to use conversations about readiness to reclassify from any meeting with parents or guardians during the academic year leading up to the ELPAC 4 result?

In addition to clarifying guidance, standardizing when ELPAC results are returned to districts and providing results on a rolling basis would enable districts to expedite reclassifications. A key issue hindering reclassification among nonunified districts navigating the transition from eighth to ninth grade is that ELPAC scores arrive too late in the academic year. We encourage the

state to continue providing earlier releases of ELPAC scores and to standardize this timeline so that districts can plan accordingly. In addition, the state could return individual students' ELPAC results to districts on a rolling basis throughout the spring, rather than waiting until all students in the district have completed the ELPAC. This would support districts with reclassifying, before the end of the school year, those students who took the ELPAC earlier in the testing window.

Finally, the state can reduce administrative burdens by streamlining data workflows. This includes automating alerts and notifications to districts regarding students' eligibility for reclassification. Recent efforts to provide state reports on students who scored 4 on the ELPAC have been helpful. The state could build on these efforts by generating automated recommendations for reclassification triggered by ELPAC scores to call attention to students on the cusp of reclassification or at risk of being designated as LTELs. Creating a single data system to support reclassification would provide one place to view data on all eligibility criteria. For example, districts using state-developed protocols, such as the OPTEL, report that there is no way to capture teacher feedback that also allows them to track parent consultations or ELPAC data. Finally, the state should consider "auto-exit" procedures for reclassification. Other states, such as Michigan, have experimented with auto-exit procedures that still allow local educational agencies to override automated decisions if they believe a student should remain in the category (Michigan Department of Education, 2025). Having an auto-exit system would dramatically reduce the amount of manual data preparation required at the district level.

Conclusion

A simplified and standardized reclassification system—grounded in the timely release of ELPAC data, improved support for monitoring reclassified students, automated data alerts, and more nuanced state accountability systems—has the potential to eliminate administrative inefficiencies and improve reclassification outcomes for students classified as ELs statewide.

In concluding, we note additional considerations and guardrails for implementing these recommendations. We recognize that some of our recommendations raise new questions. For example, if the basic skills criterion is eliminated and more emphasis is instead placed on the ELPAC, what effects could this have on classroom instruction? What are the implications and timelines for streamlining state data systems? Would reporting new accountability metrics—such as reclassification rates and disaggregated MLL subgroups—create new administrative burdens for district leaders? These questions merit additional analysis. With changes to accountability systems, the state would need to ensure that policy mechanisms incentivize appropriately timed reclassifications.

We also acknowledge that the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts are still implementing and learning from the changes they have made. They continue to navigate challenges as they strive for improvement. Nevertheless, given that the districts vary in terms of MLL enrollment, per-pupil funding, and district demographics, we believe the lessons learned here apply to other districts throughout the state. Most importantly, we believe the lessons described in this report highlight the burden placed on local educational agencies to navigate California's complex reclassification system. The state can help other districts improve their reclassification practices by streamlining the process in line with the recommendations in this report. Clearer state guidance and policies would allow districts to shift from fixing administrative problems in reclassification to focusing on improving ELD instruction and classroom practices for students who remain in the EL category. Research–practice partnerships like the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative can support this shift, and we urge the state to foster more such partnerships to bridge research and practice in effectively implementing and evaluating state policies.

Ultimately, the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative research findings challenge two assumptions commonly held by state leaders and policymakers. The first is that using multiple measures for evaluating language proficiency is always beneficial. We strongly encourage state leaders and policymakers to consider the necessary conditions for multiple measures to have their intended effect of exiting students from the EL designation at the appropriate time. Research from our partnership provides strong evidence that the existing system for evaluating language proficiency keeps some students in the EL category longer than is necessary. The second assumption is that local control is always preferable. Within the nonunified school district context of the Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative, our findings point to the complications that emerge when districts locally define the basic skills criterion to make reclassification decisions. Without reconsidering these assumptions, the state risks perpetuating the inequalities described in this report that limit opportunities for MLLs and generate unequal outcomes.

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Appendix

The findings in this report are based on two studies conducted over 7 years.

Study 1: Examining Outcomes of LTEL Students and Practices That Lead to LTEL Status

The first study—led by Dr. Guillermo Solano-Flores, Dr. Guadalupe Valdés, and their research teams; and titled "Long-Term English Learners: Policy and Practice Implications of a New Category"—ran from 2017 through 2020. It employed both qualitative case studies and quantitative cohort analysis to (a) identify district practices that might lead a student to be classified as an LTEL and (b) investigate possible improper classifications and course placements that might limit LTELs' access to college-eligible coursework in high school. Researchers focused their analysis on three Stanford–Sequoia Collaborative districts with the highest concentration of EL students (Ravenswood, Redwood City, and Sequoia Union High). Over 3 years, they conducted classroom observations and interviews with district leaders, teachers, and LTEL students, and they analyzed cumulative student files. These qualitative methods examined assessment practices, access to grade-level content, students' perceptions, and the challenges of the high school experience. Quantitative analysis involved examining ninth-grade placement practices in math and course-completion rates for four student cohorts as well as estimating the probabilities of graduating and completing college-readiness coursework by English proficiency designation.

Study 2: Identifying Actionable Opportunities for Improving Reclassification Practices

The second study, "Making Reclassification More Meaningful: A Design-Based Implementation Research (DBIR) Approach to Systemic Change," was led by Dr. Amy Gerstein and her research team at the John W. Gardner Center. The first phase ran from 2021 through 2023. The study team used both qualitative and quantitative methods to (a) describe the implementation of EL reclassification criteria across all nine districts, (b) understand students' reclassification rates and key academic indicators predicting reclassification, and (c) identify opportunities and obstacles in each district's approach to reclassification.[7] During the first year, the team met three times with district team members from each of the nine districts to identify areas for growth and systems change. In subsequent years, the team conducted interviews with key contacts in each district, including district EL coordinators and staff responsible for EL services, as well as site leaders, including lead EL teachers or staff responsible for monitoring reclassification at each site. The team also conducted quantitative, descriptive analyses of ELPAC scores, SBAC ELA scores, and other demographic data to identify reclassification patterns and to compare reclassification rates within and across districts.

[7] The research team is currently engaged in a second phase of this study, which began in 2024 and is ongoing, to document changes that district leaders have been making and to understand whether alignment in reclassification practices has had the intended effects in terms of reclassification rates and academic outcomes in ninth grade as well as what factors may be affecting these outcomes.

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Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

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PACE is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. Founded in 1983, PACE bridges the gap between research, policy, and practice, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local decision makers to achieve improvement in performance and more equitable outcomes at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. We do this through:

1. bringing evidence to bear on the most critical issues facing our state;
2. making research evidence accessible; and
3. leveraging partnership and collaboration to drive system improvement.

PACE
Policy Analysis for California Education

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