

# RURAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN WISCONSIN

Many of Wisconsin's rural schools have recently begun to serve increasing numbers of English language learners (ELLs). Others have long histories of serving these students. What do we know about rural ELLs? How are they similar to and different from urban ELLs and rural English-proficient students? How much time do rural ELLs need to attain English proficiency?

## Language

**Spanish and Hmong are the most common native languages in both urban and rural areas.**

- Native Spanish speakers account for 58% of rural ever ELLs and 52% of urban ever ELLs. 9% of rural ELLs are native speakers of Hmong, compared with 15% of urban ELLs. 34% of rural and 32% of urban ELLs speak an other or unknown language.

## Demographics

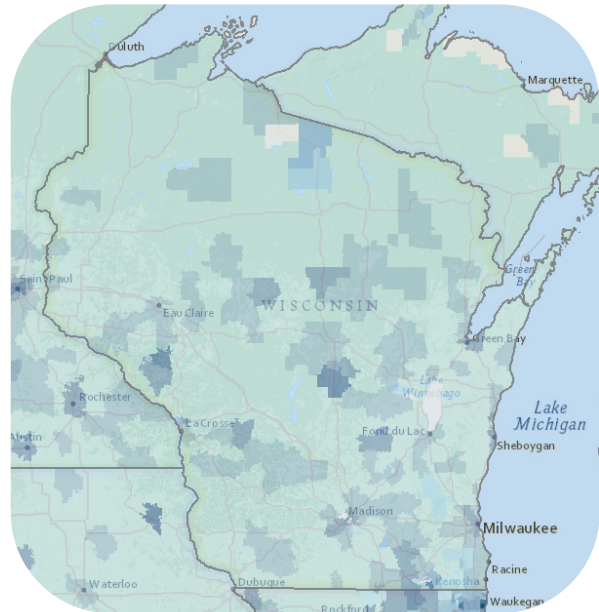
**Rural ELLs differ significantly from their non-ELL peers in terms of race/ethnicity and income.**

- *Rural ELLs are much more likely to be from low-income households.* 82% of rural current ELLs are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, compared to 34% of rural non-ELLs.
- *ELL status often aligns with race and ethnicity in rural areas.* 74% of current rural ELLs are Latino and 15% are Asian, while 91% of rural non-ELLs are white and non-Latino.
- *Latinos constitute a larger proportion of rural ELLs than urban ELLs.* 74% of rural current ELLs are Latino, compared with 68% of urban current ELLs.

## Mobility

**Student mobility is generally similar among rural ELLs, urban ELLs, and rural non-ELLs - with a few key differences.**

- *Most students in all three groups are stably enrolled.* 94% of rural current ELLs, 96% of urban current ELLs, and 98% of rural non-ELLs were enrolled at the same school throughout the school year.



Blue shading shows districts where a larger proportion of students speak a language other than English at home  
(Source: ACS 2012-16, ACS-ED Maps)

- *Rural ELLs have spent the least amount of time in Wisconsin schools.* 34% of rural ever ELLs have been enrolled in Wisconsin schools for at least 10 years, compared with 38% of urban ever ELLs and 47% of rural non-ELLs. On average, rural non-ELLs have been enrolled in Wisconsin schools one year longer than rural ELLs.
- *Many rural ELLs may be formerly non-rural ELLs.* Among 12th grade ever ELLs enrolled in an urban, suburban, or town school, 84% had never been enrolled in a rural school. Among 12th grade ever ELLs enrolled in a rural school, only 41% had always attended a rural school, suggesting that ELLs are moving into rural areas from more urbanized ones.

**A "current ELL" is a student currently formally classified as an English language learner. An "ever ELL" is any student who has ever been classified as an ELL, including current ELLs. A "non-ELL" is a student who has never been classified as an ELL.**

## Students with Disabilities

**Patterns in disability status and specific diagnoses differ among ELLs and between ELLs and non-ELLs.**

- *Current ELLs are somewhat more likely to be identified as students with disabilities.* About 17% of current ELLs are classified as students with disabilities, compared with about 13% of non-ELLs and about 12% of ever ELLs.
- *Rural and urban ELLs receive some disability diagnoses at slightly different rates.* Among students with disabilities, rural current ELLs are more likely to be diagnosed with a specific learning disability or a speech or language impairment. Urban current ELLs are more likely to be diagnosed with autism or other health impairment.

## Test Scores

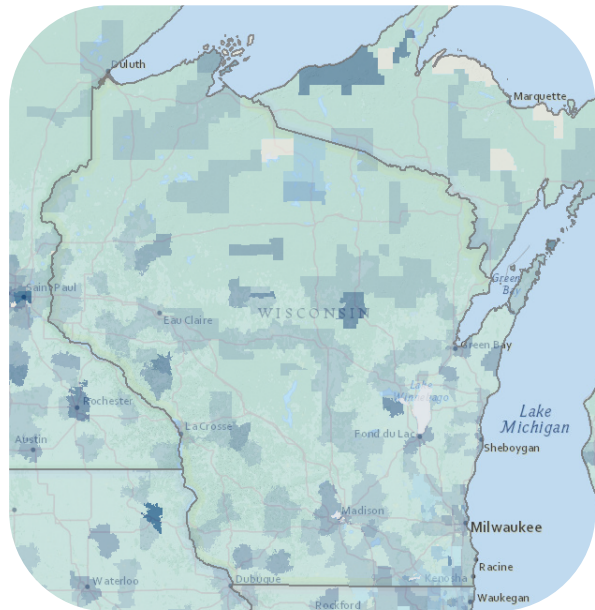
**Rural ELLs tend to outperform urban ELLs on standardized tests, but the differences can be minor.**

- *Rural ELLs score higher than urban ELLs on the Forward Exam in certain core content areas.* On average, urban current ELLs lag behind rural current ELLs by about 15 points in English Language Arts (ELA) in 4th grade and ELA and Mathematics in 8th grade. Rural current ELLs score about 25 points higher than urban current ELLs in Mathematics in 4th grade.
- *Rural ELLs show a minimal advantage over urban ELLs on the ACT.* Current rural ELLs tend to have Reading, English, Mathematics, and Composite scores about one point higher than current urban ELLs, but among ever ELLs, rural ELLs outscore urban ELLs only in English.
- *ELLs as a whole are less likely to reach college readiness benchmarks than non-ELLs.* 32% of rural ever ELLs and 25% of urban ever ELLs reached the college readiness benchmark on the ACT English test, compared with 57% of rural non-ELLs.

## High School Completion

**Rural ELLs are more likely than urban ELLs to complete high school in four years, but they are also more likely to leave Wisconsin schools during their high school years.**

- *Rural ELLs are more likely than urban ELLs to complete high school in Wisconsin within four years.* 81% of rural ELLs completed high school within four years of beginning 9th grade, compared with 74% of urban ELLs. 91% of rural non-ELLs completed high school within this timeframe.
- *Urban ELLs may be more likely to persist in school if they don't complete within four years.* An additional 2% of rural ELLs and 5% of urban ELLs completed high school between their fourth and sixth years of high school enrollment. This cuts the gap in high school completion rates between rural and urban ELLs nearly in half.
- *Rural ELLs are less likely to remain enrolled in Wisconsin schools through 12th grade.* Among ELLs enrolled in Wisconsin schools during 9th grade but with no record of completing high school, 67% of rural ELLs and 56% of urban ELLs were no longer enrolled in Wisconsin schools after four years.

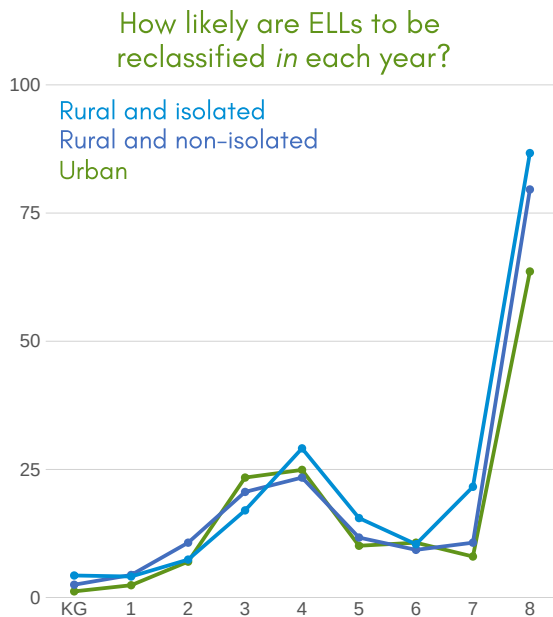


Blue shading shows districts where a larger proportion of students are foreign-born (Source: ACS 2012-16, ACS-ED Maps)

## Reclassification to Fully English Proficient

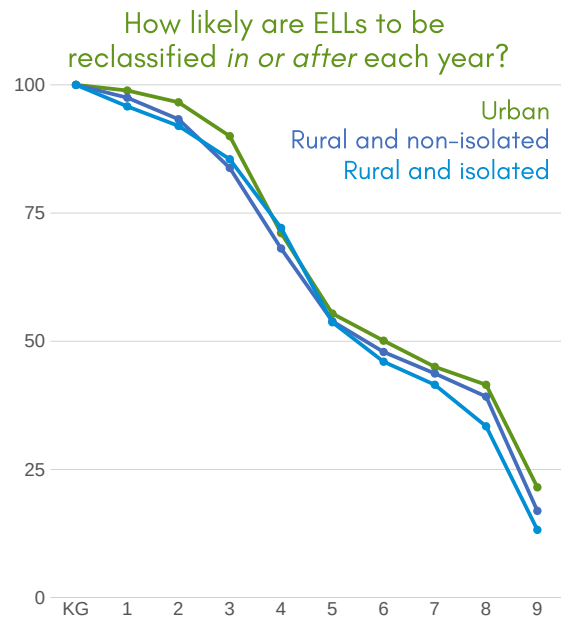
Rural and urban students generally appear similarly likely to be reclassified from English language learners to fully English proficient, with a few exceptions.

- Isolated rural ELLs, non-isolated ELLs, and urban ELLs have slightly different levels of English proficiency when entering kindergarten. In 2010, 77% of urban ELLs in kindergarten scored at Level 1 on the ACCESS English proficiency assessment, compared to 71% of non-isolated rural ELLs and just 59% of isolated rural ELLs. 5% of urban ELLs in kindergarten, 11% of rural non-isolated ELLs, and 10% of rural isolated ELLs scored at Level 3. Very few students from any of these categories scored at Level 4 or above.



- Differences in the likelihood of reclassification between rural isolated ELLs, rural non-isolated ELLs, and urban ELLs are small in students' early years, but they grow during the middle school years. In all three groups, 3rd graders who had not already been reclassified had about a 17–23% chance of being reclassified in that year. By 8th grade, among students who had not already been reclassified, likelihood of reclassification was 87% among isolated rural ELLs, 80% among non-isolated rural ELLs, and only 64% among urban ELLs. These differences could be related to differences in English proficiency in kindergarten.

An "isolated ELL" is a student enrolled in a school and grade range that does not have enough ELLs to meet the state's threshold for requiring a bilingual-bicultural education program. The threshold is 10 students enrolled in grades K-3, 20 students in grades 4-8, and 20 students in grades 9-12.



- The typical time needed to achieve proficiency is between 6 and 7 years across all three groups. Although time to proficiency can vary widely among students, ELLs are often reclassified as fully English proficient by 5th or 6th grade. This is consistent with a well-known study that found that reaching academic proficiency in English typically took 4 to 7 years. Other studies have estimated that longer or shorter times are needed to be reclassified as fully English proficient, but both the standards for reclassification and the characteristics of the ELLs themselves may be different across these studies.

- *Rural non-isolated ELLs are less likely than urban non-isolated ELLs to be reclassified as fully English proficient when comparing students with similar English proficiency test scores.* Accounting for English proficiency in kindergarten, current English proficiency test scores, and other student characteristics, rural non-isolated ELLs are about 14% less likely than urban non-isolated ELLs to be reclassified in a given year. It is not clear whether rural isolated ELLs are similarly less likely to be reclassified compared to urban isolated ELLs.
- *There is no firm evidence that isolated and non-isolated ELLs have different likelihoods of being reclassified as fully English proficient.* It is not clear whether the likelihood of being reclassified is different between isolated and non-isolated students, once students' English proficiency in kindergarten and other student characteristics are taken into account.

Except where otherwise noted, findings on student characteristics are based on students enrolled in the 2015–16 school year and findings on reclassification to fully English proficient are based on students who enrolled in kindergarten between the 2005–06 and 2009–10 school years.

## References

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## Other Resources

- ERIC: Collection of research articles, reports, and briefs on diverse topics in education, including ELLs, curated by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education. <https://eric.ed.gov>
- National Education Association English Language Learners: Resources and links related to ELL education. <http://www.nea.org/home/32346.htm>
- New York State Education Department English Language Learner/Multilingual Learner Educator Tools and Best Practices: Resources and tools related to ELL education, both general and specific to New York. <http://www.nysed.gov/bilingual-ed/english-language-learnermultilingual-learner-educator-tools-and-best-practices>
- REL Midwest: One of several Regional Educational Laboratories funded by the Institute of Education Sciences to provide training and research to policymakers and practitioners. The Ask a REL feature provides help finding research related to specific questions. REL Midwest serves Wisconsin and neighboring states; other REL websites may have additional resources on ELLs. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/default.aspx>
- U.S. Department of Education Office of English Language Acquisition English Learner Toolkit: Includes guidance and resources on providing services to ELLs in accordance with federal policy. A Newcomer Toolkit for recently arrived students is also available. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/english-learner-toolkit/index.html>
- What Works Clearinghouse: Collection of research reviews, practice guides, and reports on specific programs and interventions related to diverse areas of education, including ELLs, commissioned and curated by the Institute of Education Sciences. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>
- WIDA Resource Library: Information on WIDA's English proficiency standards and assessments (e.g. ACCESS for ELLs) and other research and professional development resources related to ELLs. <https://wida.wisc.edu/resources>
- Wisconsin Center for Education Research Working Paper Series: Pre-publication drafts of research articles on diverse topics in education written by WCER-affiliated researchers. <https://wcer.wisc.edu/publications/working-papers>
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Bilingual and English Learner Education: Main webpage for information on ELL/bilingual education policies in Wisconsin. Includes information on English language development standards, bilingual-bicultural programs, Title III, and more. <https://dpi.wi.gov/english-learners>

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