

UNCOVERING DIVERSITY:

Examining the Representation of English Learners in Special Education in Washington State

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REL Northwest examined the representation of Washington state's English learners in special education and their grade of identification in response to a request from the Road Map Project's English Language Learner Workgroup, a REL Northwest research alliance. The Road Map Project is a collective action, cradle-to-career initiative in Washington that seeks to double the percentage of students who are college or career ready by 2020. Improving the outcomes of all English learners is central to that effort.

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Executive Summary

English learners and students with disabilities both need educational supports to succeed in school. However, the kinds of support these two groups of students need may be different, and not receiving appropriate supports may have negative consequences on student learning (Callahan, 2013; Scott, Boynton Hauerwas, & Brown, 2014). To provide appropriate supports, schools need to accurately identify students who are both English learners and have disabilities. Research that examines the proportion of English learners identified for special education often has contradictory findings. Depending on the population examined or the method used, English learners may be over- or underrepresented in special education compared to students who are not English learners (Morgan et al., 2015; Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2016). Either way, these students are at risk of not receiving appropriate educational supports.

This study uses 2012/13 data from Washington state to compare the percentages of current and former English learners (“ever-English learners”) in special education to the percentage of never-English learners in special education. It also compares the grades at which ever- and never-English learners are first identified for special education. The study further examines whether representation in and identification for special education varies by gender, home language, race and ethnicity, English learner status, and level of English proficiency.

The study found that overall, ever-English learners were as likely to be in special education as never-English learners. During the 2012/13 school year in K–12 schools, 13 percent of both ever- and never-English learners were in special education. The study also found that ever-English learners were identified for special education in later grades than never-English learners.

Some groups of ever-English learners were under- or overrepresented in special education or identified in later grades compared to never-English learners.

- Girls were underrepresented in special education and identified for special education in later grades than boys, regardless of their English learner status
- American Indian/Alaska Native ever-English learners were overrepresented in special education and identified in earlier grades than other never- and ever-English learners
- English learners who spoke home languages other than Somali or Spanish were underrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners
- English learners who had been classified for five or more years, without attaining proficiency in English, were overrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners, and former English learners who had been proficient in English for two or more years were underrepresented in special education
- English learners with beginning and intermediate English proficiency were overrepresented in special education and identified in later grades than never-English learners

The study found that overall, ever-English learners were as likely to be in special education as never-English learners. However, some groups of ever-English learners were under- or overrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners.

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English learners in special education

To succeed in school, all students need appropriate services and instruction. This is especially important for English learners, who are learning grade-level content and developing English proficiency at the same time (Short & Boyson, 2012). It is also critical for students with disabilities who, like English learners, need specific supports to help them learn (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). However, the supports that English learners and students with specific disabilities need may not be the same, and being enrolled in an inappropriate program or not receiving appropriate supports may have negative consequences on student learning (Callahan, 2013; Scott, Boynton Hauerwas, & Brown, 2014).

English learners may be overidentified for special education because schools incorrectly interpret learning challenges associated with developing English proficiency as evidence of a speech or language impairment or of learning disabilities (Sullivan, 2011). Conversely, English learners may be underidentified for special education because teachers inaccurately attribute the challenges associated with a genuine disability to the lack of English proficiency (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Either way, English learners may not receive appropriate educational supports.

This study examines whether current and former English learners (“ever-English learners”) are disproportionately represented in special education in Washington state (box 1). In other words, the study examines whether ever-English learners are as likely to be identified as having a disability as students who were never classified as English learners (“never-English learners”). Disproportional representation in special education is not necessarily caused by incorrectly identifying students as having or not having disabilities. Rather, investigating disproportional representation is a first step in determining whether certain groups of students may be more likely than others to be incorrectly identified as having or not having disabilities.

To examine this issue, we first review other research on the representation of English learners in special education and then examine this in the context of Washington. We then compare the percentage of ever-English learners who are in special education to the percentage of never-English learners in special education. This study also examines the grade at which students are identified for special education services as another indicator of disproportionate representation in special education. These findings are disaggregated by gender, home language, race and ethnicity, English learner status (box 2), and English proficiency level.

Research often presents contradictory findings on the representation of English learners in special education

Despite concern since the late 1960s that minority children are overrepresented in special education (Dunn, 1968), research investigating disproportionality has mixed and contradictory findings (Morgan et al., 2015; Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2016). Depending on the population studied and the method used to calculate representation, English learners have been reported as both over- and underrepresented in special education programs (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higuera, 2005; Gage, Gersten, Sugai, & Newman-Gonchar, 2013; Rueda & Windmueller, 2006; Sullivan, 2011).

Box 1. Disproportionate representation in special education means that different groups of students have different likelihoods of being identified as having a disability.

In this report, disproportionate representation refers to higher or lower percentages of ever-English learners in special education among all ever-English learners in comparison to the percentage of all students who were never English learners and are in special education. For the purposes of this study, being in special education is defined as having an individualized education program (IEP).

This report does not assess whether students are incorrectly identified for special education services.

Nationally, English learners do not appear to be disproportionately represented in special education compared to non-English learners. In the 2011/12 school year approximately 13 percent of both current English learners and non-English learners were students with disabilities served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

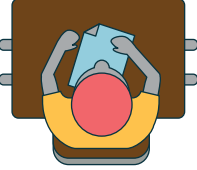
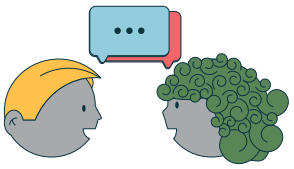
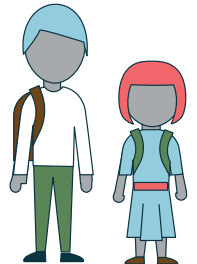
However, national averages may conceal variation across locations and demographic groups. Some groups of English learners may be overrepresented and other groups underrepresented in special education. As a result, disproportionate representation may not be visible unless outcomes are disaggregated by students' gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other student characteristics (Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

Evidence of disproportionate representation in special education for English learners is often difficult to come by. States are required to collect and examine data to investigate disproportionalities by race and ethnicity (Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004), but they are not required to investigate disproportionalities related to identification for special education services by English learner status.

The percentage of current English learners in special education in Washington state increased dramatically between 2005 and 2012

Washington's English learner population is diverse and growing. In 2012, 9 percent of the students enrolled in public K–12 schools in Washington were current English learners. These students spoke 229 home languages, including Spanish (61 percent), Russian or Vietnamese (5 percent each), as well as

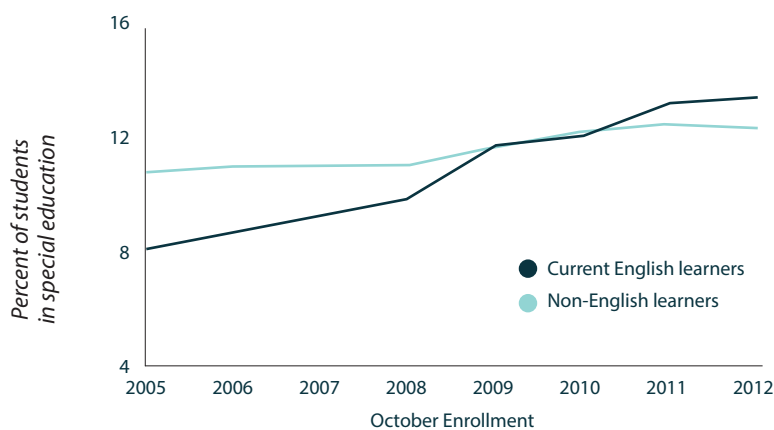
Box 2. English learners are a constantly changing population. When an English learner gains English proficiency, she or he is reclassified as a former English learner and drops the English learner designation. At the same time, new English learners are entering schools (Hopkins, Thompson, Linquanti, Hakuta, & August, 2013). This report uses the following terms to describe the status of English learners:

Ever-English Learners	
CURRENT	 <p>Current English learners are all students who are currently classified as English learners and are eligible to receive English learner services from their school.</p> <p>Long-term English learners are a subgroup of current English learners. These are students who have been classified as English learners for five or more years.</p>
FORMER	 <p>Recently proficient students are former English learners who were reclassified as English proficient less than two years ago. These students are sometimes referred to as “monitored” students.</p> <p>Long-term proficient students are former English learners who were reclassified as English proficient more than two years ago.</p>
Never-English Learners	
NEVER	 <p>Never-English learners are students who have never been classified as English learners. This includes monolingual English speakers and multilingual students who enter school as English proficient.</p>

Ukrainian, Korean, Somali, or Tagalog (2 percent each) and Arabic and Cantonese (1 percent each). The number of current English learners in Washington increased 32 percent from 2005 to 2012. In comparison, the number of non-English learners rose just 2 percent in the same time period (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2016).

Between 2005 and 2012, there was also an increase in the percentage of Washington students in special education. That increase was larger for current English learners than for non-English learners. The percentage of current English learners in special education rose from 9 percent of all current English learners in 2005 to 14 percent in 2012 (figure 1). In comparison, the number of non-English learners (including former and never-English learners) in special education in Washington rose from 11 percent of all non-English learners in 2005 to 12 percent in 2012.

Figure 1. The percentage of current English learners in special education has risen faster than the percentage of non-English learners in special education in Washington between 2005 and 2012



Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Enrollment download files, 2005–2012.

Until 2009, the percentage of current English learners in special education among all current English learners was lower than the percentage of non-English learners in special education among all non-English learners. After 2010, however, a higher percentage of current English learners were in special education compared to non-English learners.

These results are for all students, without disaggregating by student demographic characteristics, such as gender, home language, and race and ethnicity. However, these characteristics have been shown to be correlated to disproportionate representation in special education (Morgan et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2016). For example, boys have been shown to be more likely to be in special education than girls (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Similarly, these aggregated results do not distinguish between former English learners and never-English learners—two groups that may have different representation in special education (Thompson, 2015).

Another indicator of disproportionate representation is the grade in which students are identified for special education. Some students are identified for special education earlier than others and consequently receive support for disabilities earlier in their school careers. Other students, often English learners, may be identified for special education later than others and may not receive appropriate educational supports in their first years of school (Samson & Lesaux, 2009; O’Connor, Bocian, Beach, Sanchez, & Flynn, 2013). Identification of English learners for special education is guided by federal regulations preventing placement in special education because of factors related to language proficiency. As a result, educators are often reluctant to refer English learners for special education until language proficiency is established (Hibel & Jasper, 2012; Samson & Lesaux, 2009). However, if students have learning disabilities, they may not be able to achieve English proficiency or the achievement may be significantly delayed (Thompson, 2015; Umansky et al., 2015).

Box 3. Study research questions, data sources, sample, and methods

This study addresses two research questions related to the representation of English learners in special education:

1. What percentage of ever-English learners are in special education compared to never-English learners?
2. In what grade are ever-English learners first identified for special education compared to never-English learners?

For each research question, the study examines whether enrollment and identification for special education vary by gender, race and ethnicity, home language, level of English proficiency, and number of years classified as an English learner.

DATA SOURCES. To address these questions, this study uses data from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction collected from 2009/10–2012/13. The student-level data include enrollment, demographic characteristics, dates of special education eligibility, and information specific to English learners, such as English learner status, dates of classification and reclassification, proficiency level, and home language for all students enrolled in Washington state K–12 public schools.

SAMPLE. The study uses the 2012/13 population to calculate the percentage of ever-English learners in special education compared to never-English learners (research question 1). This sample comprises the population of 1,150,242 students who attended Washington public K–12 schools in 2012/13. This includes 262,921 ever-English learners, 146,111 students in special education, and 32,892 students who were ever-English learners and in special education. Additional details about the 2012/13 population’s demographic characteristics and enrollment are provided in table A1 in the appendix.

A subset of the sample, the 2009/10 cohort, is used to calculate the grade at which students are first identified for special education (research question 2). This subset consists of 75,238 students who began kindergarten in Washington in 2009/10. This includes 16,096 ever-English learners, 13,511 students in special education, and 2,287 students who were ever-English learners and in special education. Students who joined this cohort after kindergarten are excluded from the analysis. Additional details about the demographic characteristics and enrollment of this subset are provided in table A2 in the appendix.

METHODS. This study calculates the percentage of ever-English learners and never-English learners who were in special education in 2012/13. For example, to determine the percentage of ever-English learners in special education (13 percent), the number of ever-English learners in special education (32,892) is divided by the total number of ever-English learners (262,921). Results are disaggregated by gender, race and ethnicity, home language, level of English proficiency, and English learner status.

The study uses the percentage of never-English learners in special education among all never-English learners as a benchmark of proportionate representation (13 percent in 2012/13) and defines the range of proportionate representation from 10–15 percent. Groups with less than 10 percent of students in special education are considered underrepresented in special education in comparison to never-English learners, and those with more than 15 percent of students in special education are considered overrepresented in special education in comparison to never-English learners. An explanation of how the range of proportionate representation was calculated can be found in the appendix.

The study also calculates the percentage of students who were identified for special education at each grade from K–3. The database used for this research included four years of data. Therefore, students identified for special education after 2012/13 (the end of the study period) are excluded from the analysis. Results from this analysis are disaggregated by gender, race and ethnicity, and initial English proficiency level in kindergarten. This analysis was not disaggregated by home language or English learner categories to protect student confidentiality because there were fewer than 10 students in some categories.

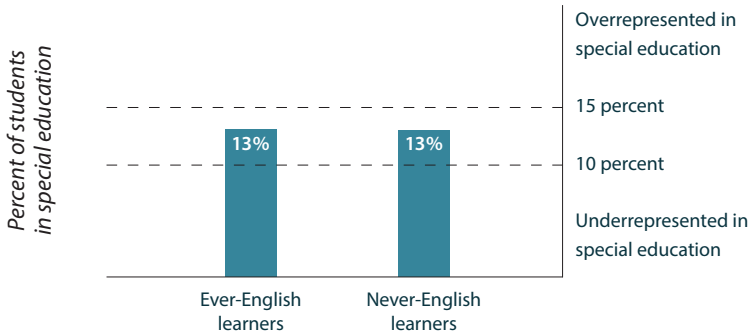
Findings

This section compares the percentage of ever-English learners in special education (among all ever-English learners) to the percentage of never-English learners in special education (among all never-English learners). It also compares the grades at which ever- and never-English learners are first identified for special education. Because English learners are a heterogeneous group, results are disaggregated by students' gender, race and ethnicity, home language, status as English learners, and English proficiency level. The research questions, data sources, sample, and methods used to conduct the study are summarized in box 3 and are described in more detail in the appendix.

Ever-English learners were as likely to be in special education as never-English learners, although there was over- and underrepresentation within specific groups

During the 2012/13 school year in Washington K–12 schools, 13 percent of both ever-English learners and never-English learners were in special education. In other words, English learners were equally as likely to be in special education as their peers who had never been English learners (figure 2).

Figure 2. Ever-English learners, as a whole, and never-English learners were equally represented in special education in Washington in 2012/13



Note: This figure shows the percentage of ever-English learners and never-English learners in special education in Washington in 2012/13. Anything below the line at 10 percent is considered underrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. Anything above the line at 15 percent is considered overrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. An explanation of how the study calculates the range of proportionate representation can be found in the appendix.

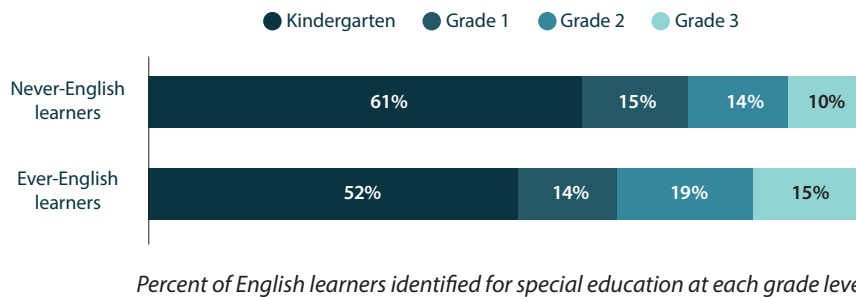
Source: Authors' analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data from 2012/13.

However, some groups of ever-English learners were disproportionately represented in special education compared to never-English learners. For example, girls, students who spoke a home language other than Somali or Spanish, and former English learners were underrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners. Meanwhile, boys, American Indian/Alaska Native English learners, and long-term English learners were overrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners. These findings are explored below.

Ever-English learners were identified for special education in later grades than never-English learners

Although as a group ever- and never-English learners were proportionately represented in special education, ever-English learners were, on average, identified for special education in later grades than never-English learners. For example, out of all Washington students who started kindergarten in 2009/10, 52 percent of ever-English learners who were identified for special education by 2012/13 were identified in kindergarten, compared to 61 percent of never-English learners (figure 3).¹ Conversely, a higher proportion of ever-English learners were identified in grades 2 and 3, compared to never-English learners.

Figure 3. A lower percentage of ever-English learners were identified for special education in kindergarten than never-English learners in Washington between 2009/10 and 2012/13



Note: This figure shows the percentage of ever-English learners and never-English learners first identified for special education in each grade, K–3, between 2009/10 and 2012/13. Students who entered Washington schools after kindergarten or were identified for special education after grade 3 are excluded from this analysis. Totals may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

Source: Authors’ analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data from 2009/10–2012/13.

However, some groups of ever-English learners were identified for special education in earlier or later grades than never-English learners. On average, girls and English learners who entered kindergarten with beginning and intermediate English proficiency were identified for special education in later grades than never-English learners in Washington. A higher percentage of boys and American Indian/Alaska Native English learners were identified for special education in kindergarten than never-English learners.

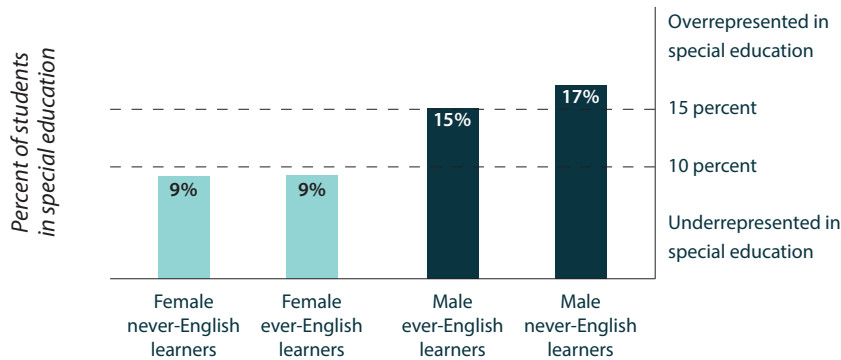
Girls were underrepresented in special education and identified for special education in later grades than boys

Regardless of their status as English learners, a lower percentage of girls were in special education than boys. Nine percent of both female ever- and never-English learners were in special education, while 15 percent of male ever-English learners and 17 percent of male never-English learners were in special education (figure 4).

This means that girls, both ever- and never-English learners, were underrepresented in special education compared to the statewide average of 13 percent of never-English learners in special education. Boys, both ever- and never-English learners, were overrepresented.

¹ Some Washington students may have been identified for special education prior to kindergarten entry. For example, they may have been identified for special education in preschool. However, the dataset did not provide information about whether a student was identified prior to kindergarten. Consequently, in the dataset they show up as having been identified for special education for the first time in kindergarten.

Figure 4. Girls were underrepresented and boys were overrepresented in special education in Washington in 2012/13, regardless of English learner status

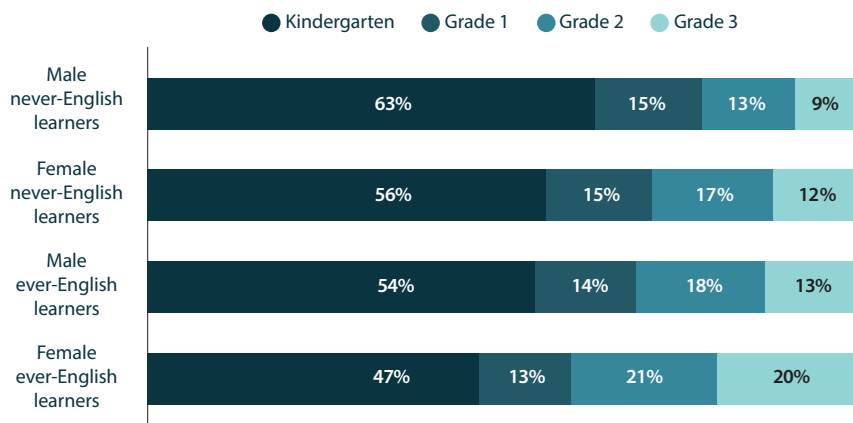


Note: This figure shows the percentage of ever-English learners and never-English learners in special education in Washington by gender in 2012/13. Anything below the line at 10 percent is considered underrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. Anything above the line at 15 percent is considered overrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. An explanation of how the study calculates the range of proportionate representation can be found in the appendix.

Source: Authors' analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data from 2012/13.

In addition to being underrepresented in special education, girls were identified for special education later than boys, on average. For example, 47 percent of female ever-English learners and 54 percent of male ever-English learners who entered kindergarten in 2009/10 and were eligible for special education by 2012/13 were identified for special education in kindergarten. Similarly, 56 percent of female never-English learners and 63 percent of male never-English learners were identified for special education in kindergarten (figure 5).

Figure 5. A lower percentage of girls were identified for special education in kindergarten than boys in Washington between 2009/10 and 2012/13, regardless of English learner status



Percent of English learners identified for special education at each grade level

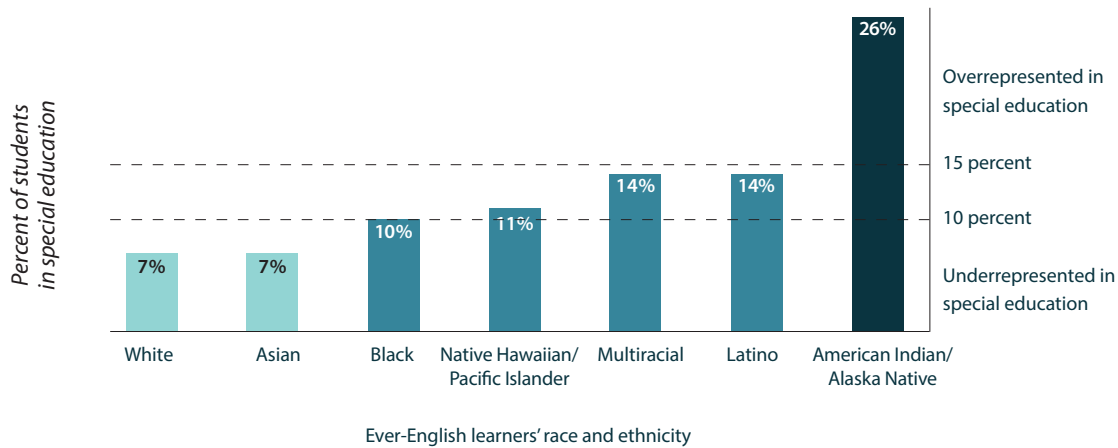
Note: This figure shows the percentage of ever-English learners and never-English learners first identified for special education in each grade, K–3, by gender between 2009/10 and 2012/13. Students who entered Washington schools after kindergarten or were identified for special education after grade 3 are excluded from this analysis. Totals may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data from 2009/10–2012/13.

American Indian/Alaska Native ever-English learners were overrepresented in special education and identified in earlier grades than never-English learners and other ever-English learners

Most racial or ethnic groups of ever-English learners—including Black (10 percent), Latino (14 percent), multiracial (14 percent), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (11 percent)—were proportionally represented in special education when compared to the average for all never-English learners.² However, American Indian/Alaska Native ever-English learners were markedly overrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners; 26 percent of all American Indian/Alaska Native ever-English learners were in special education compared to 13 percent of all never-English learners. In contrast, Asian and White ever-English learners were underrepresented in special education in comparison to never-English learners; 7 percent of Asian and White ever-English learners were in special education (figure 6).

Figure 6. American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, and White English learners were disproportionately represented in special education compared to never-English learners in Washington in 2012/13



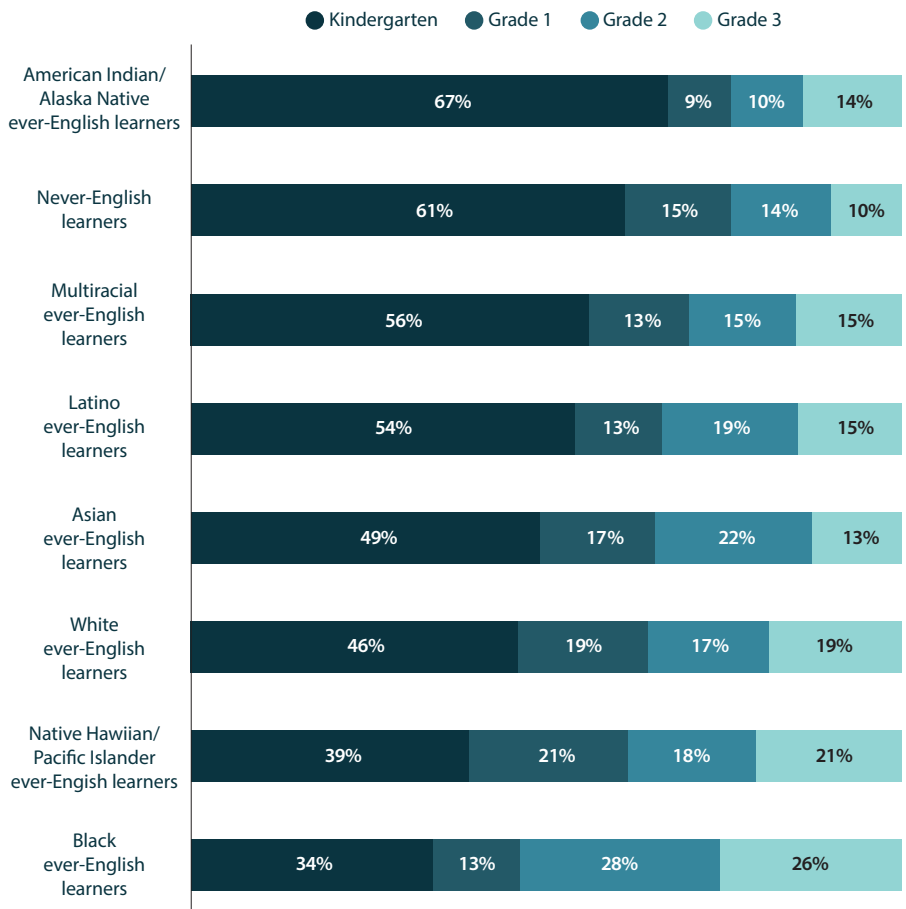
Note: This figure shows the percentage of ever-English learners in special education in Washington by race and ethnicity in 2012/13. Anything below the line at 10 percent is considered underrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. Anything above the line at 15 percent is considered overrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. An explanation of how the study calculates the range of proportionate representation can be found in the appendix.

Source: Authors' analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data from 2012/13.

American Indian/Alaska Native ever-English learners were also, on average, identified for special education in earlier grades than never-English learners and other groups of ever-English learners; 67 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native ever-English learners were identified for special education in kindergarten, compared to 61 percent of never-English learners. Other groups of ever-English learners were identified for special education in later grades than never-English learners. For example, 34 percent of Black and 39 percent of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ever-English were identified for special education in kindergarten (figure 7).

² Asian English learners in this sample were mostly speakers of Cantonese, Korean, and Vietnamese. Black English learners were primarily speakers of Somali and Eritrean. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander English learners were primarily speakers of Marshallese, Samoan, and Tagalog. White English learners were primarily speakers of Arabic, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian.

Figure 7. A higher percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native ever-English learners were identified for special education in kindergarten than other groups in Washington between 2009/10 and 2012/13



Percent of English learners identified for special education at each grade level

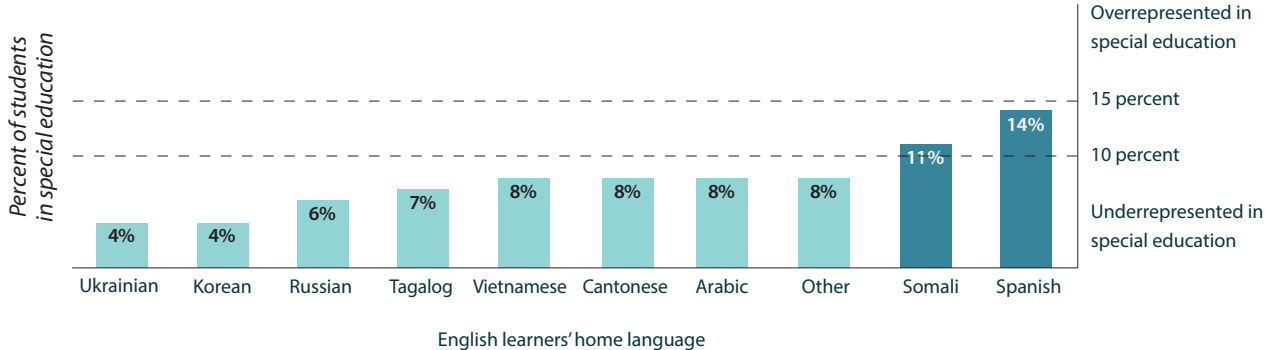
Note: This figure shows the percentage of ever-English learners and never-English learners first identified for special education in each grade, K–3, by race and ethnicity between 2009/10 and 2012/13. Students who entered Washington schools after kindergarten or were identified for special education after grade 3 are excluded from this analysis. Totals may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data from 2009/10–2012/13.

English learners who spoke home languages other than Somali or Spanish were underrepresented in special education

Ever-English learners whose home language was Somali or Spanish were equally represented in special education compared to never-English learners in special education. However, ever-English learners who spoke Ukrainian and Korean (4 percent each), Russian (6 percent), Tagalog (7 percent), as well as Vietnamese, Cantonese, Arabic, and 220 other home languages combined (8 percent each), were underrepresented in special education in comparison to the statewide average of never-English learners (figure 8).

Figure 8. Ever-English learners who spoke home languages other than Somali or Spanish were underrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners in Washington in 2012/13



Note: This figure shows the percentage of ever-English learners in special education in Washington by their home language in 2012/13. Anything below the line at 10 percent is considered underrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. Anything above the line at 15 percent is considered overrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. An explanation of how the study calculates the range of proportionate representation can be found in the appendix.

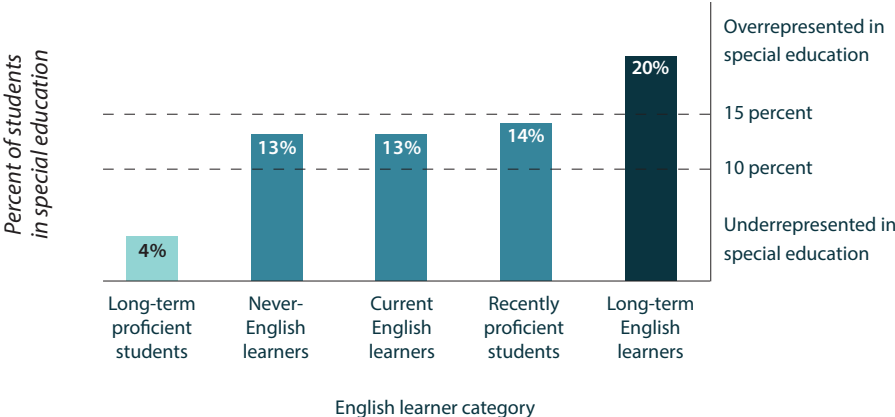
Source: Authors' analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data from 2012/13.

Long-term English learners were overrepresented in special education, and long-term proficient students were underrepresented

Long-term English learners—students who had been classified as English learners for five or more years—were overrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners. Twenty percent of long-term English learners were in special education compared to 13 percent of Washington’s never-English learner population.

On the other hand, long-term proficient students—those who had been reclassified as English proficient for more than two years—were underrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners in Washington. Only 4 percent of Washington’s long-term proficient students were in special education compared to 13 percent of Washington’s never-English learners (figure 9).

Figure 9. Long-term English learners and long-term proficient students were disproportionately represented in special education compared to never-English learners in Washington in 2012/13



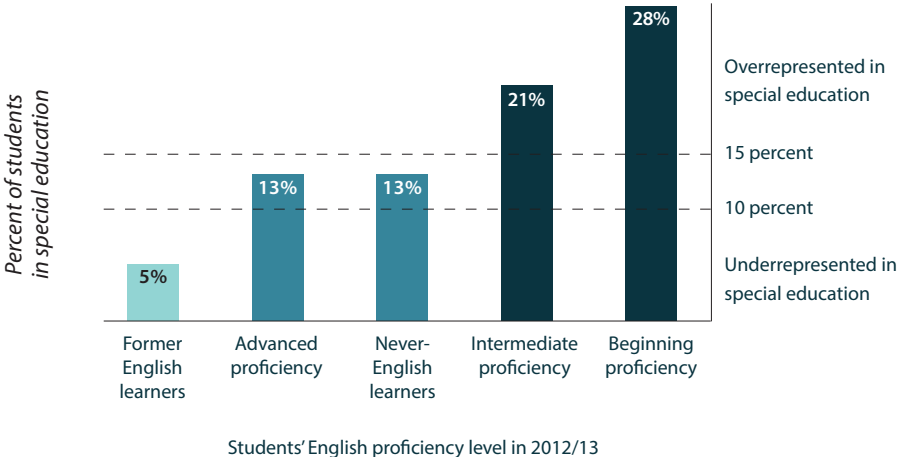
Note: This figure shows the percentage of students in special education in Washington by their English learner category in 2012/13. Anything below the line at 10 percent is considered underrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. Anything above the line at 15 percent is considered overrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. An explanation of how the study calculates the range of proportionate representation can be found in the appendix.

Source: Authors’ analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data from 2012/13.

English learners with beginning and intermediate English proficiency were overrepresented in special education and identified for special education in later grades than never-English learners in Washington

Current English learners whose English proficiency was at beginning or intermediate levels in 2012/13 were overrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners; 28 percent of current English learners who had beginning proficiency (the lowest level) in 2012/13 were in special education, and 21 percent with intermediate proficiency (the middle level) in 2012/13 were in special education. The percentage of current English learners with advanced English proficiency in 2012/13 was the same as the percentage of never-English learners (13 percent). Former English learners, including both long-term proficient and recently proficient students, were underrepresented, with only 5 percent in special education (figure 10).

Figure 10. Current English learners with beginning and intermediate English proficiency were overrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners in Washington in 2012/13

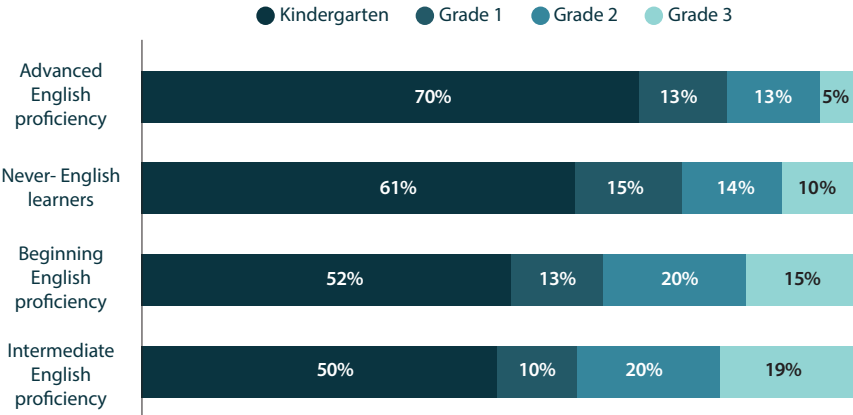


Note: This figure shows the percentage of ever-English learners in special education in Washington by their English proficiency level in 2012/13. Anything below the line at 10 percent is considered underrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. Anything above the line at 15 percent is considered overrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners. An explanation of how the study calculates the range of proportionate representation can be found in the appendix.

Source: Authors' analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data from 2012/13.

Examining the level of English proficiency that ever-English learners had when they entered kindergarten, the study found that ever-English learners who entered kindergarten in 2009/10 with beginning or intermediate English proficiency were identified for special education later than never-English learners. Approximately half of ever-English learners entering kindergarten with beginning (52 percent) or intermediate (50 percent) English proficiency were identified for special education in kindergarten, compared to 61 percent of never-English learners and 70 percent of ever-English learners entering kindergarten with advanced English proficiency (figure 11).

Figure 11. A higher percentage of English learners entering kindergarten with beginning and intermediate English proficiency were identified for special education in kindergarten than students entering with high levels of English proficiency in Washington between 2009/10 and 2012/13



Percent of English learners identified for special education at each grade level

Note: This figure shows the percentage of students first identified for special education in each grade, K–3, by their initial English proficiency level when they entered kindergarten between 2009/10 and 2012/13. Students who entered Washington schools after kindergarten or were identified for special education after grade 3 are excluded from this analysis. Totals may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data from 2009/10–2012/13.

Implications

This study found that ever-English learners as a group were represented in special education at very similar percentages as never-English learners in Washington state. However, the term “English learner” covers a broad spectrum of student experiences and characteristics. Failing to disaggregate English learner data can conceal disproportionate representation for certain groups (Gage et al., 2013; Morgan et al., 2015; Sullivan & Bal, 2013), such as the dramatic overrepresentation of American Indian/Alaska Native ever-English learners and long-term English learners in special education compared to never-English learners in Washington.

A common explanation for the disproportionate representation of English learners in special education is that educators lack knowledge about the process of English language acquisition and are not universally well prepared to work effectively with English learners (Burr, Haas, & Ferrière, 2015; Figueroa & Newsome, 2006; Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006; Samson & Lesaux, 2009). However, this explanation does not adequately address the fact that certain groups of English learners are disproportionately represented in special education and others are not.

The term “English learner” covers a broad spectrum of student experiences and characteristics. Failing to disaggregate English learner data can conceal disproportionate representation for certain groups.

This study found that ever-English learners who were boys, American Indian/Alaska Native, or whose English proficiency was at beginning or intermediate levels were overrepresented in special education compared to never-English learners. At the same time, ever-English learners who were girls, Asian or White, or speakers of languages other than Spanish or Somali were underrepresented in comparison to the state average for never-English learners. Based on previous research, the reasons for the over- and underrepresentation of each of these student groups may differ.

Nationally, boys are much more commonly identified for special education than girls. For example, one national study found that two-thirds of students with learning disabilities were male, a pattern that held across racial and ethnic groups (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). The reasons for this are debated. Some researchers suggest that the predominantly female population of teachers responds to boys’ struggles differently than girls’ and may refer boys to special education more often. However, other researchers note that girls struggle with reading (the most common reason for a learning disability diagnosis) as often as boys. Therefore, the different rates of identification

for special education between boys and girls may actually represent the underidentification of girls rather than the overidentification of boys (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

In discussions of racial and ethnic disproportionality in special education, researchers sometimes point to the inequalities in the resources and academic attainment of schools that serve high numbers of non-White students. These differences, they argue, translate into perceptions that racial and ethnic minority students have more disabilities rather than fewer opportunities (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007; Sullivan, 2011). Other research using multivariate, multilevel modeling to explore disproportionality suggests that differences in family income may account for all the overidentification of Black and Latino students in special education (Shifrer, Muller, & Callahan, 2011).

The overrepresentation of American Indian/Alaska Native students in special education is a pattern that has been observed in a wide variety of communities, as well as nationally, for many years (Collier, 2012; Bal, Sullivan, & Harper, 2014). This overrepresentation is often attributed to inadequate teacher preparation to deliver culturally and linguistically responsive instruction to American Indian/Alaska Native students (Collier, 2012).

Finally, some recent research suggests that long-term English learners may be overrepresented in special education because having a disability and struggling with standardized assessments may go together. That is, students with disabilities may be more likely to obtain low scores on the assessments that would allow them to reclassify as former English learners (Umansky et al., 2015). This might partially explain why a high percentage of long-term English learners—not only in this study but also in other samples—are identified to receive special education services (Thompson, 2015).

In sum, multiple factors appear to be contributing to disproportionality in special education, suggesting that schools and districts may need to employ multiple strategies to address the causes. This might increase the likelihood that students who need additional services get them, while those who need other supports (such as culturally responsive instruction, bilingual education, or effective English language development instruction) also receive what they need.

This study also found that, overall, ever-English learners were identified for special education in later grades than never-English learners. This may be due in part to educators delaying the referral of English learners for special education services until they demonstrate English proficiency (Hibel & Jasper, 2012; Samson & Lesaux, 2009). While this may prevent the unnecessary referral of students for special education services, it may also have the unintended consequence of delaying the access of English learners with genuine disabilities to important services.

However, delaying the referral of English learners for special education services until they demonstrate English proficiency does not explain why a higher percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native ever-English learners were identified for special education in kindergarten than other groups of ever-English learners. Nor does it explain why fewer Black ever-English learners were identified for special education in kindergarten than other ever- or never-English learners.

Overall, our findings suggest that to understand English learner representation in special education, school systems should consistently disaggregate data by students' gender, race and ethnicity, home language, English learner status, and English proficiency level. By examining disaggregated findings, educators can identify groups who are disproportionately represented and can start the process of determining whether individuals in these groups are being incorrectly identified as having disabilities or, conversely, whether they have disabilities that are not being identified.

Policymakers can play an important role by requesting that reports on special education participation include disaggregated findings and by questioning why certain groups are disproportionately represented. Policymakers can also focus on identifying the policies, procedures, and supports for educators that can ensure all students receive what they need to succeed in school. This is particularly important for American Indian/Alaska Native English learners, who are substantially overrepresented in special education compared to any other student groups in Washington and nationally (see table A1 in the appendix for the Washington data). Addressing this challenge should be an important consideration for policymakers.

To understand English learner representation in special education, school systems should consistently disaggregate data by students' gender, race and ethnicity, home language, English learner status, and English proficiency level.

Limitations

This study has four major limitations. First, it does not assess whether students are correctly or incorrectly identified for special education services. Disproportional representation in special education is not necessarily caused by incorrectly identifying students having (or not having) disabilities. Some groups of students may be more or less prone to having disabilities than others and therefore would appear to be disproportionately represented in special education. However, investigating disproportional representation is a first step in determining whether certain groups of students may be more likely than others to be incorrectly identified as having or not having disabilities. Further investigation of the roots of disproportionality in special education will require attention to the systems, tools, and routines used to identify students (Sullivan, 2011).

Second, there are limitations with the study methodology. Variations in the proportion of students in special education explored in this study are descriptive and cannot be interpreted as the cause of the differences. These variations could be related to factors that were not available for analysis in this study. These include aspects of student demographics, such as socioeconomic status and parent education levels. In addition, this study does not take into account differences in instructional programs and identification practices for English learners and students in special education, which could impact the estimates.

Third, there were limitations to the data used to examine the proportion of students identified as eligible for special education. The data did not include specific disability categories, and therefore the analysis cannot determine whether ever-English learners may be underrepresented in some disability categories and overrepresented in others (Gage et al., 2013; Morgan et al., 2015). The dataset also included only four years of data for the 2009/10 cohort. Therefore, the grade of identification analysis (research question 2) was able to track these students from kindergarten to grade 3. Students who were identified after grade 3 are excluded from this study. There is some evidence that among students identified for learning disabilities, up to a third of students are identified after grade 3 (O'Connor et al., 2013). Furthermore, one study suggested that the percentage of English learners identified for special education increases after grade 5 and continues to increase into secondary school (Artiles et al., 2005). It may be that the focus on K–3 does not fully capture the experience of English learners in special education.

Fourth, there were instances of missing demographic data that could have affected the results of the analysis. Specifically, race and ethnicity data were missing for 7 percent of the statewide sample but less than 1 percent of the 2009/10 cohort sample. Home language data were missing for 9 percent of the statewide sample and 5 percent of the 2009/10 cohort sample. Students who were missing demographic data were excluded from the specific analysis that used those data.

Appendix: Methods and Data Tables

This appendix explains the methods used in the report and provides detailed results from the analysis.

The analysis uses all Washington never-English learners as the comparison group to ensure consistency and anonymity

This analysis compares the percentage of ever-English learners in Washington state in special education and the grade they were first identified for special education to all never-English learners in Washington. Results are disaggregated by groups of ever-English learners. However, the comparison group is not disaggregated. In other words, the over- or underrepresentation of different groups of ever-English learners in special education is always in relation to the 13 percent of never-English learners in special education.

While the subgroup-to-subgroup comparison is important, it does not permit the same “calculations to be made for all [groups] and for those calculations to be made in the same manner” (Bollmer, Bethel, Munk, & Bitterman, 2011). In addition, there were some groups with too few (fewer than 10) individuals who were both never-English learners and in special education to calculate their likelihood of being in special education without compromising their anonymity.

The analysis used risk ratios to determine the relative likelihood of groups being identified for special education

The representation of ever-English learners in special education analysis includes a “risk ratio.” This ratio represents the likelihood that ever-English learners will be identified for special education in comparison to never-English learners (Bollmer, Bethel, Garrison-Mogren, & Brauen, 2007). The risk ratio is calculated by dividing the percentage of ever-English learner subgroup members in special education by the statewide average of never-English learners in special education. A risk ratio of 1 suggests that groups are equally likely to be in special education. A risk ratio of more than 1 suggests that one group is more likely to be identified for special education than the comparison group, while a risk of less than 1 suggests that one group is less likely to be identified for special education than the comparison group.

For example, to calculate the risk ratio for Vietnamese-speaking ever-English learners, we divided the percentage of Vietnamese-speaking ever-English learners in special education (8 percent) by the percentage of never-English learners in special education (13 percent) and arrived at a risk ratio of .62. This means that Vietnamese-speaking ever-English learners are less likely to be identified for special education than the statewide average for never-English learners. To make the findings easier to interpret, these risk ratios were converted into percentages in the body of the report. This is described in more detail below.

The analysis set the bounds of under- and overrepresentation in special education based on a district-level analysis and established ranges in the field

The study adopted a risk ratio range of .77–1.12 of proportionate representation in special education for Washington schools. This means that any ever-English learner subgroup with a risk ratio between .77 and 1.12 is represented in special education in similar proportions as never-English learners.

Sullivan notes that “delineations of overrepresentation and underrepresentation have varied considerably within the research literature and in state and district practice,” and adopts a range of .80–1.20 for proportionate representation in special education that is “consistent with recommendations from the field” (Sullivan, 2011). However, the intent of this study is to examine the representation of English learners in special education within Washington’s specific context. Therefore, we adopted a range of proportionate representation that was typical of Washington’s districts.

We determined this range by calculating an average risk ratio for Washington’s school districts. To do this, we divided the percentage of a district’s students in special education by the percentage of all Washington students in special education. We then placed district risk ratios into quartiles and fixed the range of risk ratios from the middle two quartiles as being proportionately represented. In other words, we set the risk ratios for the middle 50 percent of Washington’s school districts as representative. Risk ratios outside these bounds, in the upper or lower quartiles, were set as disproportionate. This means that risk ratios of less than .77 indicate a group is underrepresented in special education, and risk ratios higher than 1.12 indicate a group is overrepresented in special education.

These risk ratios were converted into percentages in the body of the report to make the findings easier to interpret. A risk ratio of 1.00 is equal to the 13 percent of never-English learner students identified for special education. Anything below 10 percent (a risk ratio of .77) is considered underrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners.³ Anything above 15 percent (a risk ratio of 1.12) is considered overrepresentation in special education in comparison to never-English learners.

³ To calculate this, we multiplied the risk ratio of .77 by .13 (the proportion of never-English learners in special education) and arrived at .100 (or 10 percent) of students in a group being identified for special education. Similarly, the risk ratio of 1.12 multiplied by .13 is .145 (or 15 percent) of students in a group being identified for special education.

Table A1. Washington's English learner population in special education in 2012/13

	Total enrollment	Ever-English learners		Percent in special education		English learner risk ratio
		Number	Percent	Never-English learners	Ever-English learners	
Statewide population	1,150,242	262,921	23	13	13	0.98
Gender						
Female	556,056	124,354	22	9	9	▼0.72
Male	593,884	138,461	23	17	15	▲1.21
Race and ethnicity						
American Indian/Alaska Native	18,186	2,164	12	18	26	▲2.04
Asian	78,291	32,345	41	6	7	▼0.56
Black	52,017	8,731	17	19	10	0.80
Latino	219,506	116,256	53	13	14	1.09
Multiracial	62,962	2,728	4	13	14	1.09
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	10,515	3,465	33	9	11	0.83
White	633,481	22,675	4	13	7	▼0.52
English learner category						
Never-English learner	887,321	0		13		1.00
Current English learner		19,160	100		13	1.03
Long-term English learner		18,179	100		20	▲1.59
Recently proficient		6,688	100		14	1.09
Long-term proficient		22,733	100		4	▼0.33
English proficiency						
Beginning proficiency		6,132	100		28	▲2.22
Intermediate proficiency		50,021	100		21	▲1.68
Advanced proficiency		93,511	100		13	0.99
Former English learner		21,426	100		5	▼0.39
Home language						
Arabic	2,385	1,992	84	11	8	▼0.63
Cantonese	2,551	1,770	69	3	8	▼0.65
English	840,948	30,001	4	13	14	▲1.13
Korean	3,956	2,456	62	3	4	▼0.35
Other	37,720	22,288	59	9	8	▼0.64
Russian	9,984	7,909	79	5	6	▼0.43
Somali	4,182	3,642	87	9	11	0.85
Spanish	123,505	95,134	77	11	14	1.08
Tagalog	3,508	2,309	66	5	7	▼0.51
Ukrainian	4,327	3,617	84	4	4	▼0.31
Vietnamese	9,665	7,648	79	6	8	▼0.62

Note: In this table the symbol ▼ represents underrepresentation in comparison to never-English learners in Washington (a risk ratio of less than 0.77), and ▲ represents overrepresentation in comparison to never-English learners in Washington (a risk ratio of more than 1.12). Numbers may not add up to the total statewide enrollment because of missing data.

Source: Authors' analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data for 2012/13.

Table A2. Cohort 2009/10 English learner population in special education

	Total enrollment in 2012/13	Ever-English learners in 2012/13		
		Number	Percent	Percent in special education
2009/10 cohort	75,238	16,096	21	14
Gender				
Female	36,508	7,870	22	10
Male	38,730	8,226	21	19
Race and ethnicity				
American Indian/Alaska Native	1,229	197	16	29
Asian	5,051	2,497	49	10
Black	3,273	621	19	13
Latino	16,934	10,388	61	16
Multiracial	4,501	202	4	19
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	706	228	32	14
White	43,375	1,817	4	8
English proficiency in kindergarten (2009/10)			4	13
Beginning proficiency	7,818	7,818	100	20
Intermediate proficiency	5,548	5,548	100	7
Advanced proficiency	1,206	1,206	100	3

Source: Authors' analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data from 2009/10–2012/13.

Protection of personally identifiable information

Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest complied with applicable federal and state laws and regulations protecting the privacy of study participants, including the requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. All data, including personally identifiable information, were protected, stored, disposed of, and otherwise kept confidential, as required by a data use agreement with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and all applicable state and federal law, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

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