

Alaska Native Students as English Learner Students: Examining Patterns in Identification, Classification, Service Provision, and Reclassification

Strengthening supports for Alaska Native students who are classified as English learner (EL) students is a key priority for Alaska's education leaders. Because policy and research nationally have focused on the needs and experiences of immigrant-origin EL students, there are critical gaps in understanding how EL policies function for Indigenous students.¹ In Alaska, where Alaska Native students constitute the largest racial/ethnic group of EL students, it is an open question whether and how EL policies and services meet the unique needs of Indigenous EL students. A stronger understanding of how Alaska Native students experience EL identification, classification, service provision, and reclassification can guide policy and research efforts to ensure that these students receive appropriate supports for heritage language, English language, and academic development.

Conducted in partnership with Alaska education leaders, this study offers Alaska state and district leaders, families, and communities information about the percentage and characteristics of Alaska Native kindergarten students who are classified as EL students, EL identification and classification practices in four districts, and EL service provision in all districts with at least one school with eight or more EL students. This study also examined reclassification of EL students as English proficient, including how long it takes Alaska Native EL students to be reclassified compared with other students and what factors are associated with that timing.

Key findings

- **From 2011/12 to 2018/19 roughly a quarter of Alaska Native kindergarten students were classified as EL students, in a variety of schools and districts with diverse backgrounds and characteristics.** On average, however, the percentage of kindergarten students who were Alaska Native EL students was highest in schools that were rural, schools that had higher rates of economic disadvantage, and schools that employed fewer (if any) English as a second language teachers.
- **EL identification and classification processes in four districts did not vary between Alaska Native and non-Alaska Native students.** Federal law defines EL status differently for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, yet EL identification processes were the same for both sets of students.
- **Less than a third of district EL service plans described policies and services directed specifically toward Alaska Native EL students.** These included heritage language programs, community outreach, and collaboration between district Alaska Native education programs and EL programs. In interviews, EL service directors in four districts noted limited financial and human resources as constraints on EL services.
- **From 2011/12 to 2018/19 only 11 percent of Alaska Native students classified as EL students in kindergarten were reclassified by the end of grade 7 compared with 30 percent of their non-Alaska Native EL peers.**

1. Carjuzaa, J., & Ruff, W. G. (2016). American Indian English language learners: Misunderstood and under-served. *Cogent Education*, 3(1), 1–11. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1138210>. Villegas, L. (2020). *Ever-present, but unexpected: Native American English learners*. New America. Retrieved January 26, 2021, from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/ever-present-unexpected-native-american-english-learners/>.