

Overview. The number of English learners (ELs) who do not reclassify as English proficient in the first five years of schooling has increased across the state of Texas. ELs are a diverse population of students with varying levels of English proficiency. Many students who begin school as an EL reclassify as English proficient in a timely manner and go on to achieve academic success. Students who remain EL after five years in school are considered “long-term English learners” (LTELs). Research has shown that LTEL status corresponds with negative academic outcomes, such as lower test scores, higher risk of drop out, and lower on-time high school graduation rates. Between the 2000-01 and 2014-15 school years, the percent of first graders who began school as ELs has increased slightly. In contrast, the percent of ELs who go on to become LTELs during this same time frame has increased by almost 90 percent. Similar trends were found in many urban and non-urban areas throughout the state. The increased proportion of EL students becoming LTEL threatens to undermine the educational success of EL students in Texas. This brief highlights the increasing percent of ELs becoming LTEL in the last two decades, and points to a set of mechanisms that may serve to explain this increase.

KEY TERMS:

ENGLISH LEARNER (EL): A student whose primary language is other than English and whose English language skills are such that the student has difficulty performing ordinary classwork in English¹

LONG-TERM ENGLISH LEARNER (LTEL): An EL student who remains EL after five years in school

RECLASSIFICATION: The process by which an EL student is identified as English proficient and no longer classified as an EL

Key Findings

In Texas, both the number and percent of ELs who go on to become LTELs has increased over time.

- Around 24,800 EL students who started first grade in 2000-01 became LTEL – or about 36 percent.
- More than 72,500 EL students who started first grade in 2014-15 became LTEL – more than 67 percent.

The proportion of ELs who become LTEL was stable for first graders entering Texas public schools from 2000-01 to 2007-08, but began increasing in 2008-09.

- About 42 percent of ELs entering first grade in Texas schools in 2007-08 became LTEL, which is slightly higher than the 36 percent of ELs entering first grade in 2000-01 who became LTEL.
- In contrast, more than 67% of ELs entering first grade in Texas schools in 2014-15 became LTEL.
- Increases in the percent of ELs becoming LTELs were found in urban and non-urban areas.

Study Background

Reclassification is a critical educational milestone for English learners (ELs) because, until they reclassify, ELs do not have access to their schools’ full range of educational programs (Umansky, 2016). For most schools and districts, the expectation is for ELs to reclassify in elementary school, and students who do reclassify in these early years tend to go on to achieve on par with, and in some cases outperform, their never EL peers (Phillips et al., 2017). In contrast, ELs who take longer to reclassify tend to struggle in school: they tend to have lower grades and score lower on state and national tests (Cashiola & Potter, 2020). More concerning, students who take longer to reclassify have a higher risk of dropping out of high school and are only half as likely to go to college as their never EL peers (Holzman et al., 2020).

¹ As defined in [Texas Education Code, Sec.29.052](#).

LTEL Trends in Texas

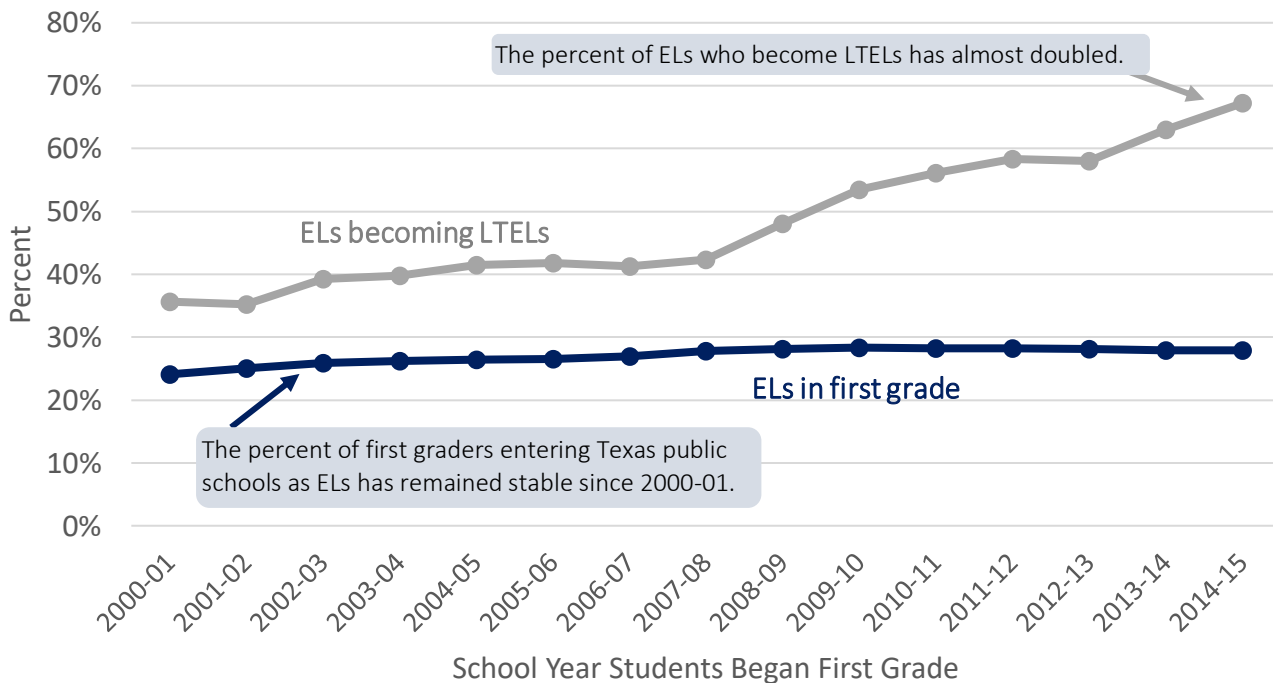
Study Method

To calculate the percent of ELs who go on to become LTELs, cohorts of EL students who began first grade and were in Texas public schools five years later were identified using Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) data. EL students were determined to be LTEL if they had not reclassified after five years (i.e., if they were still classified as EL). Cohorts of ELs who began first grade from 2000-01 until 2014-15 were included, meaning the LTEL status of the last cohort was determined in the 2019-20 school year. These analyses are focused only on EL students who entered Texas public schools to start first grade. Additional analysis is needed to examine the percent of EL students who enter after first grade and go on to become LTEL.

LTEL Trends in Texas

In Texas, the number of ELs who began first grade increased over time, but largely in proportion to the overall increases in student enrollment, so the percent of ELs starting first grade remained mostly stable (Figure 1). From 2000-01 through 2007-08, the percent of ELs becoming LTEL, also remained relatively stable (see gray bar in Figure 1), but starting with ELs in first grade in 2008-09, the percent of ELs becoming LTELs began to increase, reaching almost 70 percent for ELs who began first grade in 2014-15. In other words, **almost seven in ten students who began first grade as an English learner in Texas public schools in 2014-15 did not reclassify within five years.**

Figure 1. Percent of first graders as English learners remained stable, while the percent becoming LTEL increased.



LTEL Trends in Urban and non-Urban Areas in Texas

Despite differences in the percent of students entering first grade as ELs, all urban and non-urban areas around the state experienced an increase in the percent of ELs becoming LTEL – though the size of this increase was not always the same. The percent of students beginning first grade as EL differed depending on the area, but also remained relatively stable over time. For example, in both the Houston (Figure 5) and Dallas/Fort Worth (Figure 3) areas, the percent of students starting first grade as EL was relatively stable, between 30 and 37 percent. The percentages of ELs starting first grade were lower in the Austin (Figure 2) and San Antonio (Figure 6) areas, though both areas were also relatively stable. Despite the stability of the percent of ELs becoming LTEL, each area experienced a significant increase in the percent of ELs becoming LTELs – though the size and timing of the increase varied.

LTEL Trends in Texas

For example, in the Dallas/Fort Worth area (Figure 3), the percentage of ELs who became LTEL increased from about 30 percent to 50 percent for the 2000-01 and 2006-07 cohorts. After leveling off for a year, it made a second increase starting with the 2008-09 cohort, and increased to nearly 80 percent for the 2014-15 cohort. **About eight in ten students who started elementary school as EL did not reclassify within five years in Dallas/Fort Worth area public schools, a 150 percent increase since 2000-01.**

The pattern for Austin area public schools (Figure 2) and San Antonio area public schools (Figure 6) showed a similar two-tier pattern of increase. In Austin area public schools, the percent of ELs becoming LTEL increased from about 40 percent for the 2000-01 cohort to about 50 percent for the 2002-03 cohort, remaining relatively consistent until about 2008-09, when it began increasing again. In San Antonio area public schools, the percent of ELs becoming LTEL increased from about 36 percent in the 2000-01 cohort to 50 percent for the 2005-06 cohort. In both these areas, these percentages started to increase again with the 2008-09 cohort and continued to increase through the final cohort of this analysis. **About three-quarters of students entering first grade as EL in Austin area public schools and San Antonio area public schools in 2014-15 had not reclassified five years later, an 85 percent increase since 2000-01.**

Following a somewhat different pattern, El Paso area public schools (Figure 4) initially had a decrease in the percent of ELs becoming LTEL – from about 47 percent to 33 percent for the 2004-05 cohort and 2007-08 cohort – but that trend reversed beginning with the 2008-09 cohort. **For students entering first grade as EL in El Paso area public schools in 2014-15, about seven in ten had not reclassified within five years, a 60 percent increase since 2000-01.**

Public schools in non-urban areas of Texas followed closely with the trends of the state – the percent of ELs becoming LTEL was relatively stable for the cohorts between 2000-01 (about 37 percent) and 2007-08 (about 40%), but started to increase for those students entering first grade as EL in 2008-09. **In the most recent cohort of first graders living in non-urban areas, about 68 percent of students who entered as EL had not reclassified within five years, an increase of 85 percent since 2000-01.**

Houston area public schools (Figure 5) followed state trends but deviated in terms of the limited increase in the percent of ELs becoming LTELs. For students entering first grade as EL in 2000-01, about 35 percent had not reclassified within five years. This percentage increased to around 40 percent starting with the 2002-03 cohort, but then stabilized and remained near that percentage for each subsequent cohort through 2007-08. Similar to the rest of the state, the percent of first grade ELs becoming LTEL started to increase and continued to increase starting with the 2008-09 cohort. However, unlike other areas in the state that had percentages nearing 80 percent, in the Houston area the percent of ELs becoming LTELs reached 55 percent -- more than 20 percentage points lower than Dallas/Fort Worth, Austin and San Antonio area public schools. **Despite the lower rate, it still means more than half of students who entered Houston area public schools in 2014-15 as EL had not reclassified within five years, an increase of about 60 percent since the 2000-01 cohort.**

Next Steps

The increased number and proportion of ELs becoming LTEL means an untold magnitude of students are positioned for future academic struggles if quick action is not taken. Further understanding the factors contributing to the increase in the percent of ELs becoming LTELs is needed to address current high levels and reverse the current upward trend. HERC has identified potential explanations for study in future research:

Potential Policy/Practice Explanations

- Policies around grade retention for ELs
- Changes in assessment practices related to reclassification
- Changes in accountability structures for current and former ELs

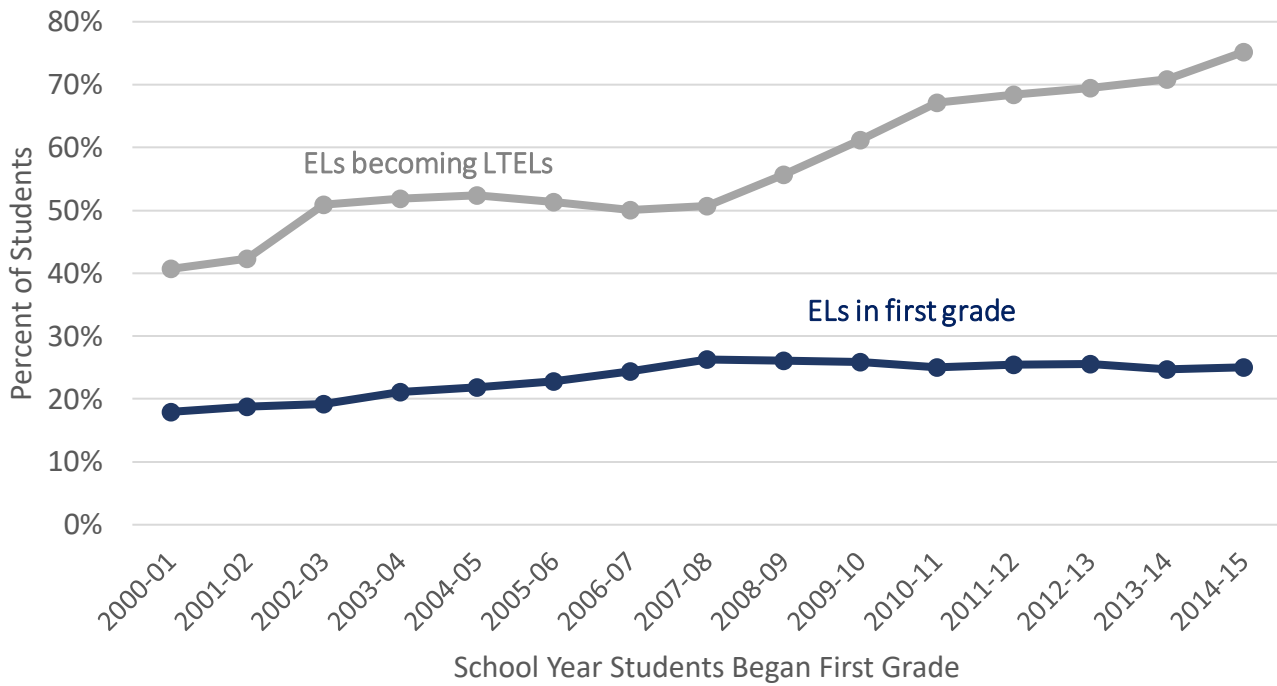
Potential Funding Explanations

- Funding not matching the increase in EL students over time
- Funding cuts related to the Great Recession
- Shortage of bilingual teachers, particularly in the early 2010s

LTEL Trends in Urban and non-Urban Areas

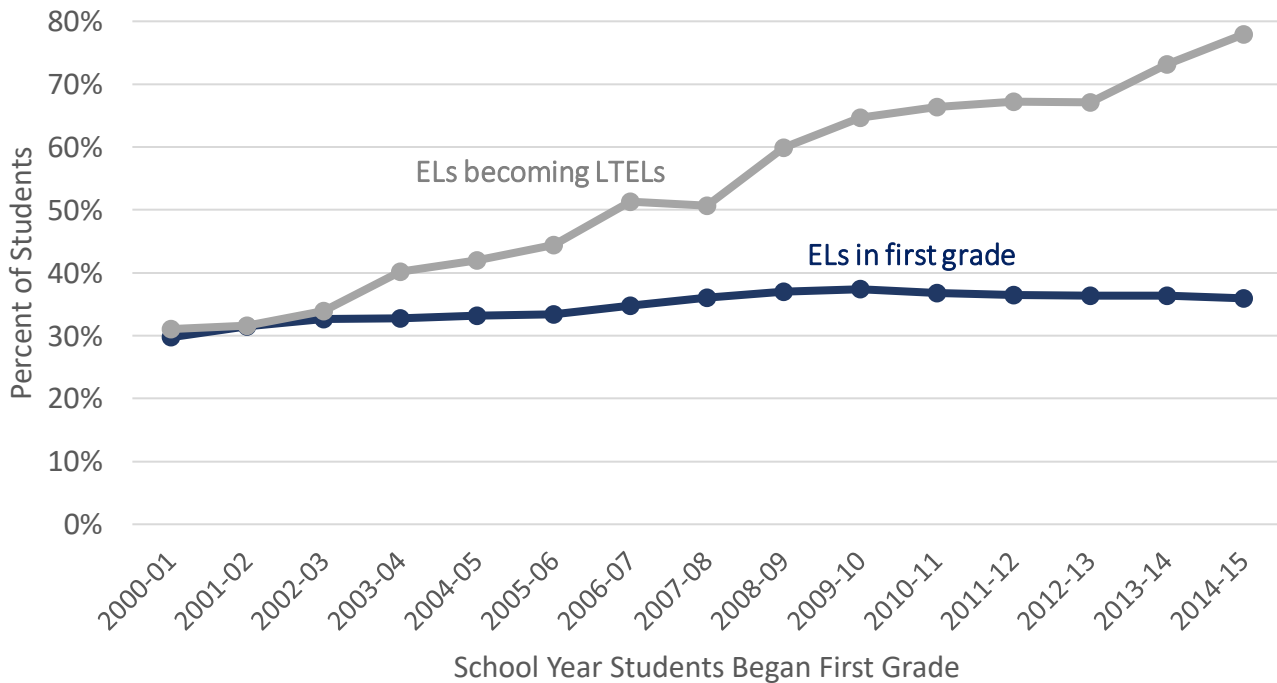
Trends in the Austin area

Figure 2. The percent of ELs becoming LTELs in the Austin area is higher and has increased significantly.



Trends in the Dallas/Fort Worth area

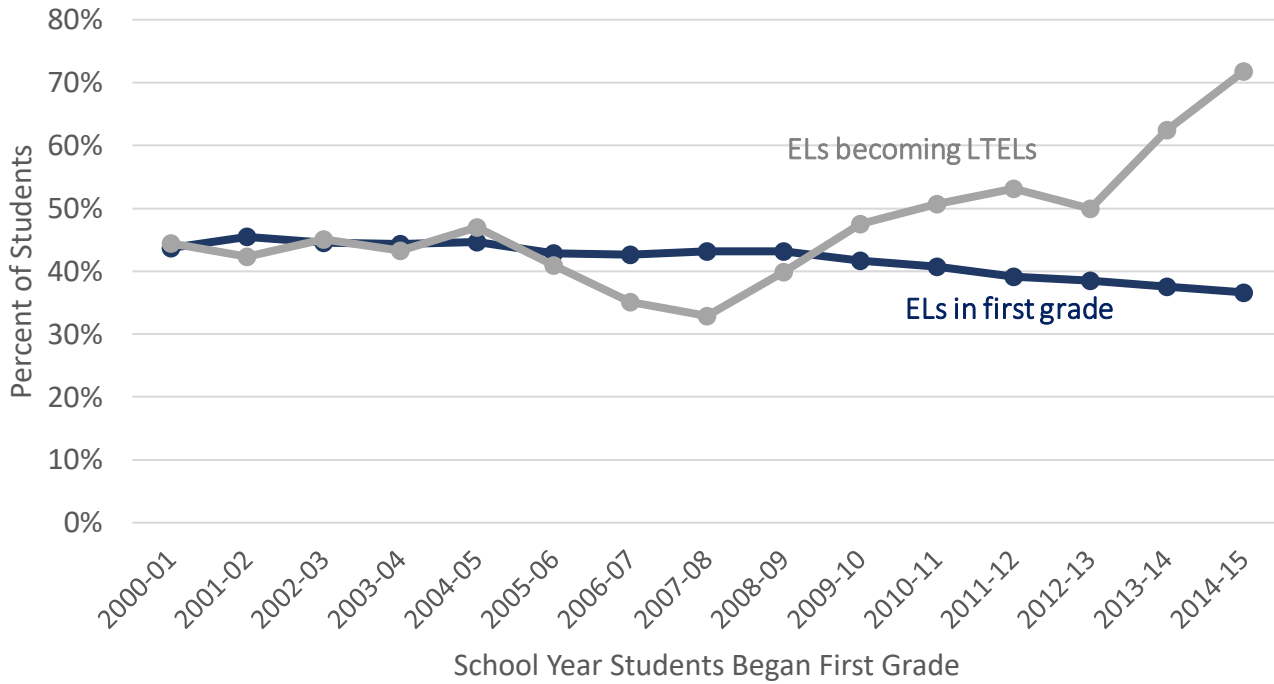
Figure 3. The percent of ELs becoming LTELs in the Dallas/Fort Worth area has increased significantly.



LTEL Trends in Urban and non-Urban Areas

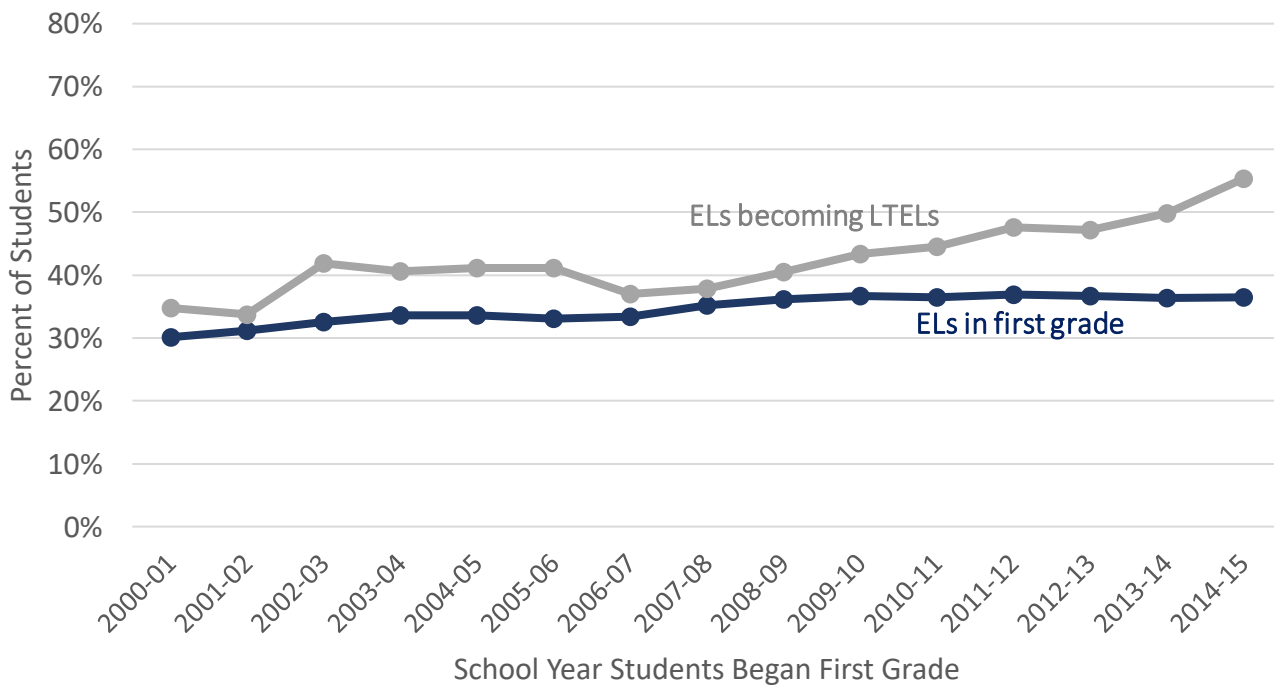
Trends in the El Paso area

Figure 4. The percent of ELs becoming LTELs in the El Paso area increased significantly, but slightly later than the state.



Trends in the Houston area

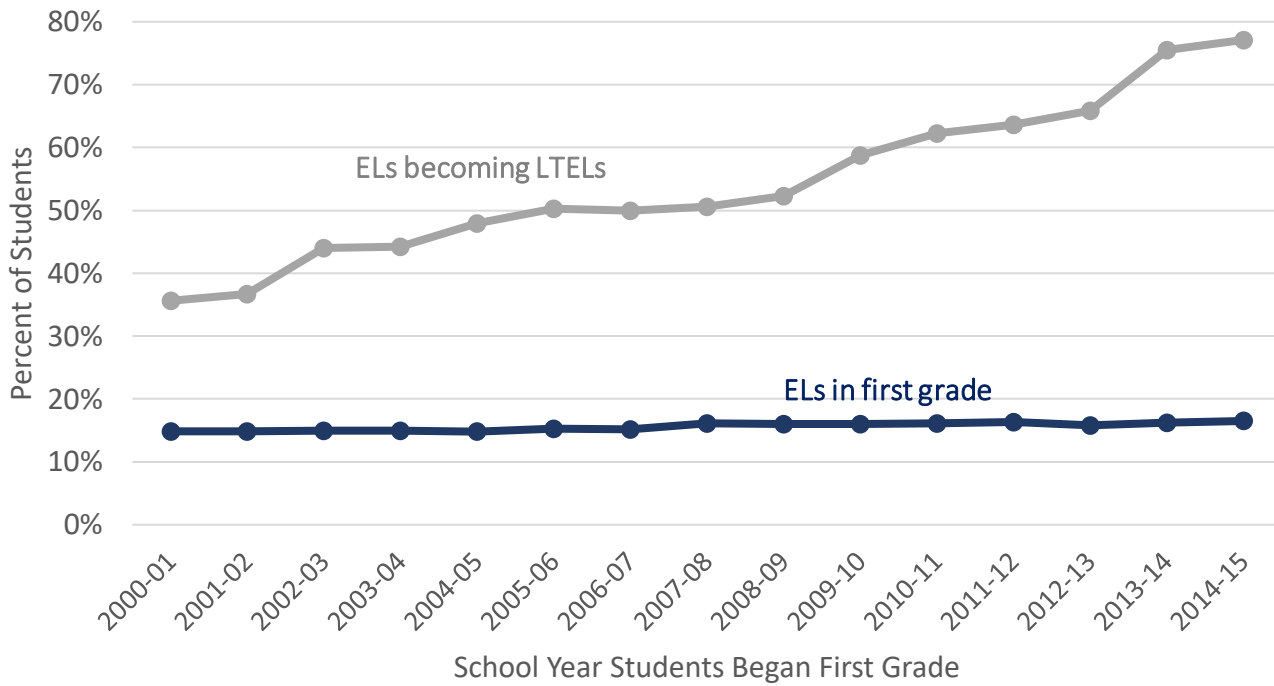
Figure 5. The percent of ELs becoming LTELs in the Houston area has increased, but at a lower rate than the state.



LTEL Trends in Urban and non-Urban Areas

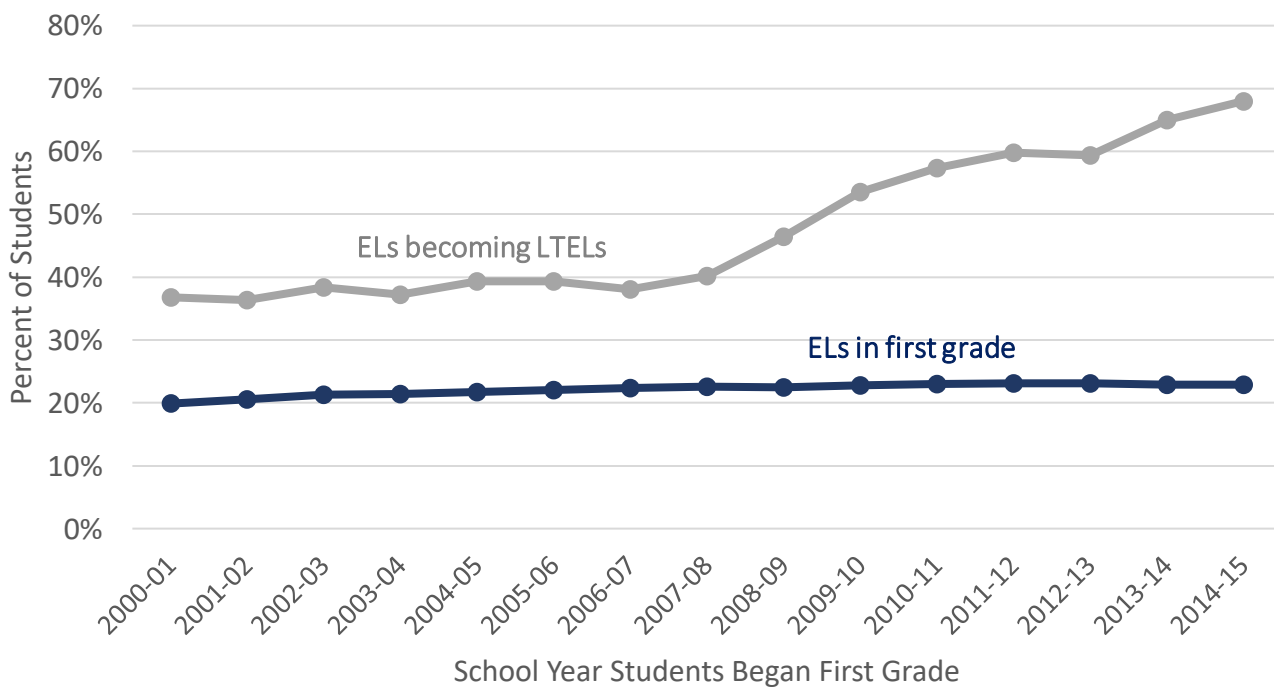
Trends in the San Antonio area

Figure 6. The percent of ELs becoming LTELs in the San Antonio area has increased significantly.



Trends in non-urban areas

Figure 7. The percent of ELs becoming LTELs in non-urban areas has increased significantly.



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Note on the authors. Lizzy Cashiola is a research scientist at HERC. Daniel Potter is the associate director for regional research at HERC.

About HERC. Focusing on the most pressing challenges facing the region, the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between Rice University and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC aims to improve the connection between education research and decision making for the purpose of equalizing outcomes by race, ethnicity, economic status, and other factors associated with inequitable educational opportunities.



Houston Education Research Consortium,
a program of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research
713-348-2532 | herc@rice.edu
Find us online: herc.rice.edu