

PURPOSE

The Austin Independent School District's (AISD) executive director of special programs requested research addressing English language learners' (ELLs) likelihood of dropping out of high school. Of the 492 AISD students who dropped out by their third year¹ from the 2006–2007 cohort of first-time AISD 9th-grade students² (i.e., students whose on-time graduation would have been in Spring 2010), 29% were ELLs, even though ELLs represented 16% of the cohort. This research brief addresses the characteristics of ELLs who were likely to drop out of school within 3 years of 9th grade and the impact of International High School on ELLs' risk of dropping out.

STUDENTS' RISK OF DROPPING OUT

Department of Program Evaluation (DPE) staff examined predictors of dropout risk among all first-time AISD 9th grade students from the 2006–2007 year. The risk of dropping out³ for this cohort was .066 for non-ELLs (6.6%) and .14 for ELLs (14%). Without accounting for mitigating factors, ELLs were 2.2 times more likely to drop out of school within 3 years than were non-ELLs ($p < .001$). However, monitored ELLs (i.e., former ELLs who exited the program) were significantly less likely to drop out of school than were other non-ELLs [Odds Ratio (OR) = 0.8, $p < .001$].

Consistent with the findings for the 2005–2006 9th-grade cohort,⁴ the characteristics that best predicted 2006–2007 9th-grade students' overall likelihood of dropping out were (a) being 16 years⁵ or older on September 1 of the seed year⁵ (OR = 4.2), (b) earning fewer than 5 credit hours during the seed year (OR = 3.5), (c) having an attendance rate below 90% (OR = 2.6), (d) attending a disciplinary campus (OR = 2.4), and (e) failing a mathematics course in any semester (OR = 1.5).

ELL status was a significant predictor of dropout after controlling for the above factors. ELLs were 1.7 times more likely to drop out of high school than were non-ELLs, controlling for the above predictors. ELLs and non-ELLs who dropped out of high school within 3 years significantly differed from one another based on disciplinary school attendance (more non-ELLs than ELLs attended, see Figure 1).

Table 1 presents the characteristics of all ELLs in the cohort and ELLs categorized as having dropped out of high school. The highest risk factor for dropping out, without controlling for additional indicators, was attending a disciplinary campus. One in three ELLs eventually dropped out of school.

Key Findings

- ELLs were 2.2 times more likely to drop out of high school within 3 years of starting 9th grade than were non-ELLs.
- Monitored ELLs were less likely to drop out than were non-ELLs.
- One in three ELLs who attended a disciplinary campus in their 9th-grade year dropped out of high school within 3 years.
- Ninth-grade predictors of overall dropout risk among ELLs were
 - having an attendance rate below 90%,
 - being 16 years or older at the beginning of the seed year,
 - earning fewer than 5 credits,
 - attending a Title I campus, and
 - scoring beginning or intermediate on the reading component of the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS).
- International High School students were significantly less likely to drop out of school than were similarly matched students.

¹ At the time of this report, the 2009–2010 leaver codes (PEIMS 203 submission) were not finalized.

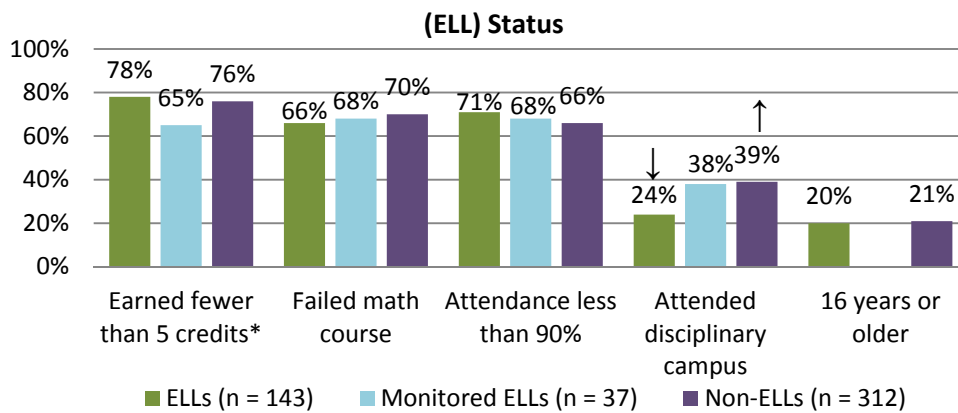
² Previous 9th-grade enrollment could not be determined for transfer students from outside AISD. All 9th-grade transfers are included in the analyses.

³ The calculated absolute risks (AR) in this paper are based on total enrollment of the first time 9th-grade cohort for 2006–2007. AR equals the number of students in a category who dropped out divided by total number of students in the category.

⁴ Brunner, J. (2010). *Ninth grade predictors of dropout risk research brief*. (Publication No. 08.104 RB). Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District.

⁵ Seed year refers to the academic year a student begins 9th grade.

Figure 1. Overall Percentage of Dropouts, by 2006–2007 9th-Grade Cohort Characteristic, by English Language Learner



Source. AISD student records

Note. The bar for monitored ELLs who were 16 years or older is not shown.

Arrows ↑ and ↓ indicate significant difference.

*Does not include all students (ELLs, *n* = 138; Non-ELLs, *n* = 264).

Table 1. Ninth-Grade Cohort of English Language Learners' (ELL) Characteristics, 2006–2007

	All ELLs (<i>N</i> = 1,023)		ELLs who dropped out (<i>n</i> = 143)		Dropout Risk
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	
Gender					
Female	447	44	53	37	.12
Male	573	56	90	63	.16
Primary language spoken at home					
Spanish	955	93	135	94	.14
Other	68	7	8	6	.12
Recent immigrant status	271	26	32	22	.12
Low-income family					
Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	904	88	121	85	.13
Not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	119	12	22	15	.18
Student stability					
Attended AISD school in 8 th grade	731	71	102	71	.14
Attended more than 1 regular campus in year	53	5	9	6	.17
Attendance below 90%	365	36	102	71 ↑	.28
Enrolled fewer than 170 days	342	33	74	52 ↑	.22
Discipline					
Had 1 or more suspensions (partial or full day)	282	28	61	43 ↑	.22
Attended a disciplinary campus	96	9	35	24 ↑	.36
Academic progress					
16 years or older on Sept. 1, 2006	118	12	29	20 ↑	.25
Earned fewer than 5 credits	433	42	112	78 ↑	.26
Failed mathematics course in any term*	455	46	92	67 ↑	.20
Failed English language arts (ELA) course in any term*	426	43	91	66 ↑	.21
Attended Title I campus or received services**	517	59	93	75 ↑	.18
Received special education services	166	16	30	21	.18

Source. AISD student records

Note. Not shown are the descriptive statistics for ELL students who were not categorized as having dropped out of high school.

* *N* = 994, *n* = 138. ** *N* = 877, *n* = 124. Arrows ↑ indicates significantly higher difference in percentages for ELLs who dropped out than those who did not. Overall, the percentages for ELLs who did not drop out did not differ much from the “all students” column.

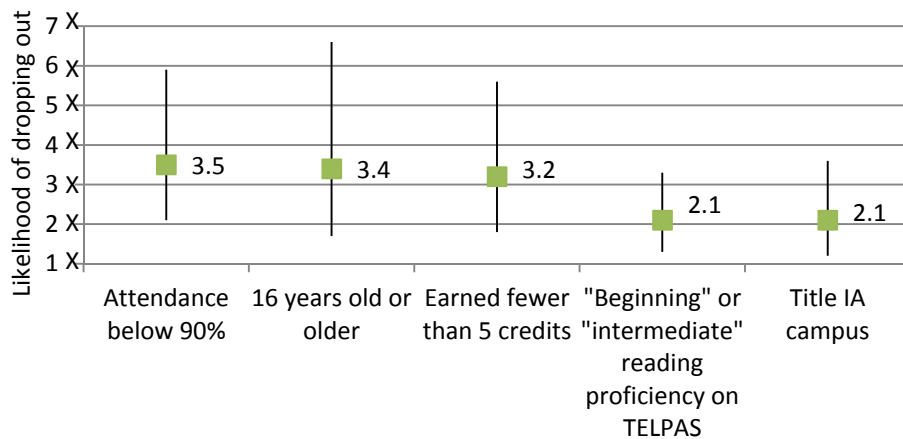
CURRENT ELLS' RISK OF DROPPING OUT

Further analyses were conducted on ELL students to examine the following indicators: years in language program; home language; Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) scores in each content area (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, writing, and composite); immigrant status; parent denial of language program services; and attendance at a Title I school.

Of the indicators modeled, the most powerful predictors of overall dropout risk among ELLs were (a) having an attendance rate below 90%, (b) being 16 years or older at the beginning of the school year, (c) earning fewer than 5 credits, (d) attending a Title I campus, and (e) scoring *beginning* or *intermediate* on the reading component of the TELPAS (Figure 2). Attendance at a disciplinary campus was not significant in the logistic regression model for ELLs' dropout risk; however, 80% of ELLs attending a disciplinary campus had attendance rates below 90%, 89% had fewer than 5 credits, and 66% had attended a Title I school, possibly attributing to the indicator's loss in significance.

TELPAS reading (see side panel) was the area in which ELLs who stayed in school were most likely to score *advanced* or *advanced high* (64%).

Figure 2. English Language Learners' Likelihood of Drop Out, by 9th-Grade Characteristics, 2006–2007 to 2008–2009

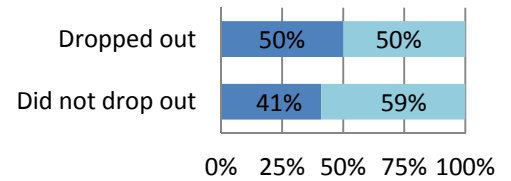


Source. AISD student records

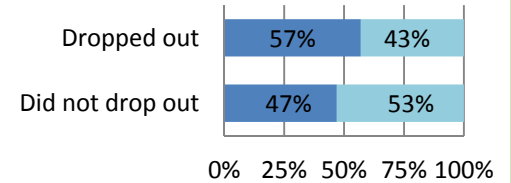
Note. Likelihoods were in comparison with students who were not in the category. Estimates statistically controlled for each of the other characteristics. The vertical axis shows the number of times more likely a student is to drop out, ranging from 1X (same odds) to 7X (seven times) more likely. The line through each regression estimate indicates the width of the 95% confidence interval.

TELPAS Performance

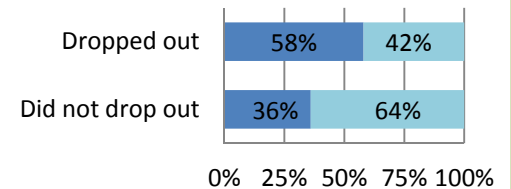
Listening



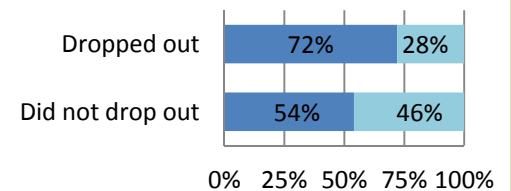
Speaking



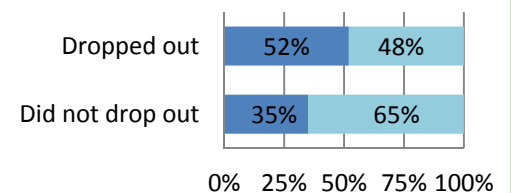
Reading



Writing



Composite



- Beginning or intermediate rating
- Advanced or advanced high rating

Source. AISD student TELPAS records
 Note. ELLs' most recent scores between 2005–2006 and 2006–2007 were used.

INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

International High School (IHS) is a 2-year program (9th and 10th grades) that was established in 2006–2007 to serve ELLs who were recent immigrants to the U.S. In its first year, 180 students enrolled at IHS. Table 2 provides the characteristics of students who enrolled.

Table 2. Characteristics of International High School Students

	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	93	52
Male	87	48
Primary language spoken at home		
Spanish	164	91
Other	16	9
Recent immigrant status	157	87
Low-income family		
Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	168	93
Not eligible for free or reduced-price	12	7
16 years or older on Sept. 1, 2006	60	33

Source. AISD student records, 2006–2007

ELLs who attended IHS in their 9th-grade year were significantly less likely to drop out of high school than were all other ELLs who did not attend IHS (OR = .47, $p < .01$). As a more rigorous test of the effect of IHS, DPE staff employed a quasi-experimental design to eliminate any selection bias in the control group, related to ELLs not attending IHS.

Given the specific qualifications to attend IHS, ELLs were first matched based on being served in language programs for 3 or fewer years. ELLs served by special education services were eliminated to mirror the enrollment of IHS. Propensity scores⁶ were calculated based on ELLs' gender, immigrant status, home language, years in a language program, economic disadvantage, and being over age 16 at the beginning of the seed year. The final sample comprised 179 IHS students and 70 control students.

Of the ELLs in the sample, 30 ELLs had dropped out of school within 3 years of 9th grade (12%). ELLs attending IHS were significantly less likely to drop out of school than were similar students who did not attend IHS. Similar ELLs who did not attend IHS were 4.4 times more likely to drop out. Although being 16 years or older at the beginning of the seed year and scoring *beginning* or *intermediate* on TELPAS reading⁷ were associated with higher dropout rates, IHS was able to mediate these effects. Furthermore, IHS students, on average, earned more credits and had higher attendance rates than did the control group during their 9th-grade year. IHS students also scored higher on TELPAS listening and had fewer suspensions than did the control group.⁸ Further study on IHS, although it serves a limited population, might provide insight into what practices are important in keeping ELLs in school. These findings suggest that earning more credit hours and maintaining higher attendance may be key factors in overcoming ELLs' lower English proficiency and over-age status and in reducing the likelihood of dropping out.

⁶ DPE staff used the caliper method with replacement to match students. The group means of the propensity scores were less than a half standard deviation apart. The control group was weighted to be representative of the IHS student population. No significant differences were found in the covariates between control and treatment groups.

⁷ Of the IHS students with a TELPAS reading score, 82% scored *beginning* or *intermediate*.

⁸ The number of students who attended a disciplinary campus is not shown in this report; however, the control group had significantly lower disciplinary campus attendance than did IHS students.

Demographics of IHS and Matched Students

	IHS (n = 179)		Control (n = 70)	
	N	%	N	%
Female	93	52	35	50
Spanish	163	91	56	80
Recent immigrant	157	88	49	70
Economic disadvantage	167	93	60	86
16+ years old	59	33	23	33
1 or more suspensions	24 ↓	13	14 ↑	20
Dropped out	14	7.8	16	23
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Years in program	.07	.3	.08	.3
Attendance	.93 ↑	.1	.90 ↓	.1
Credits earned	7.5 ↑	3.5	5.4 ↓	2.7
TELPAS composite	1.7	.8	1.6	.8
TELPAS listening	1.9 ↑	.8	1.6 ↓	.8

Source. Department of Program Evaluation records

Note. The control group was weighted to reflect the population of IHS students based on the matching procedure.

Arrows ↑ and ↓ indicate significant differences at $p < .05$ based on weighted control.