RESEARCH BRIEF

Background. In Fall 2011, the Department of English Language Learners (ELLs) requested research on long-term ELLs, based on a definition that only accounted for years a student was in the United States (i.e., assuming the student was in a language program). Based on the results of the first phase of analysis, Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) staff concluded identification of long-term ELLs based on years in U.S. schools alone was insufficient to group ELLs according to instructional need (Brunner, 2011). Long-term ELLs (i.e., defined soley by years in the United States) represented a diverse range of performance in English proficiency and content area mastery. DRE staff recommended administrators create a system to flag potentially ready-to-exit ELLs and ELLs struggling in English proficiency, in content areas, or in both. In a report on California's long-term ELL population, Olsen (2010) also recommended that a data system be put in place to support monitoring, identifying, planning, and responding to long-term ELLs through an adequate, standard definition that includes academic performance.

Performance groups. The purpose of this report is to define groups of 9th-grade ELLs based on different instructional needs using their English language proficiency (i.e., Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment Scales [TELPAS]), academic (English) reading performance (as determined by the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness [STAAR]), and years in U.S. schools. The 9th-grade cohort was chosen because STAAR Level II (i.e., ready for next grade level) scores were available. Six preliminary categories of ELLs were determined based on the above dimensions (Table 1).

Table 1. Initial Categorization of Ninth-Grade English Language Learners (ELLs), Spring 2012

Reading performance (STAAR)	English proficiency (TELPAS)	Years in U.S. schools	n^*	%	Group
Satisfactory	High (advanced/advanced high)	5 or more years	96	15	1
		Fewer than 5 years	21	3	2
Not satisfactory		5 or more years	270	43	3
		Fewer than 5 years	75	12	4
	Low (beginner/intermediate)	5 or more years	38	6	5
		Fewer than 5 years	123	20	6

Source. AISD student TELPAS and STAAR records, 2012

Note. TELPAS is Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment Scales. STAAR is State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness. Highlighted boxes represent: blue = high English proficiency and passed STAAR; orange = high English proficiency and did not pass STAAR; and pink = low English proficiency and did not pass STAAR.

* A category with fewer than 5 ELLs was omitted.

Table 2. Comparison of Ninth-Grade English Language Learners Groups, by English Proficiency and Reading Performance, Spring 2012

| | TELPAS | | | | STAAR | |
| | Receptive | | Productive | | Cognitive | |
Group	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing	Reading	Group description
1	3.8, 1	3.9, 1	3.7, 1	3.5, 1	1981, 1	Approaching or ready to exit language program
2	3.7, 1	4.0, 1	3.5, 1	3.5, 1	1951, 1	
3	3.5, 2	3.6, 2	3.5, 1	3.2, 2	1678, 2	English communicators
4	3.1, 3	3.5, 2	2.8, 2	2.6, 3	1648, 2	Comprehends English
5	2.9, 3	1.8, 3	2.7, 2	2.3, 3	1579, 3	Basic Understanding English
6	1.7, 4	1.5, 4	1.5, 3	1.5, 4	1508, 4	Newcomers/limited English

Source. AISD student TELPAS and STAAR records, 2012

Note. TELPAS is Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment Scales. STAAR is State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness. Group number is based on Table 1 in this report. Each assessment column contains the groups' average score, followed by its statistical rank (high = 1, low = 4). Averages with the same rank number are statistically the same and are separated from statistically different scores with a blue line. Cells highlighted in green were group averages that met the cut score for advanced (i.e., 3) for TELPAS and satisfactory (i.e., 1813 initial minimum, 1936 final minimum; TEA, 2012) for STAAR.

DRE staff performed analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests for each TELPAS domain (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and the STAAR reading scale scores for the six preliminary categories of ELLs to determine whether groups had statistically different levels of performance within each indicator. Table 2 provides a summary of the analysis.

The data suggest distinct categories of ELLs based on statistical differences in combined English proficiency and STAAR reading performance. On average, ELLs who met the Level II STAAR standard in reading demonstrated high receptive (i.e., listening and reading) and productive (i.e., speaking and listening) skills in English. Receptive skills do not require students to produce language (i.e., passive), while productive skills require active use of language. Years in U.S. schools was not an important indicator in distinguishing performance among students in this group, and these students were categorized as approaching or ready to exit the language program (see Table 2).

Enrollment of 9th-Grade ELLs

- Forty-eight percent of 9th-grade ELLs who took TELPAS and STAAR in Spring 2012 first enrolled in Austin Independent School District (AISD) at an early elementary grade level (i.e., prekindergarten through 2nd grade).
- Twenty-one percent of 9th-grade ELLs who took TELPAS and STAAR in Spring 2012 enrolled in AISD at the 9th grade.
- Sixty-eight percent of 9th-grade ELLs enrolled in International High School in 2011–2012 had limited English skills.

However, years in U.S. schools appeared important for those ELLs who did not meet the Level II standard on STAAR reading. The largest group of 9th-grade ELLs (43%) was in the category of "English communicators," characterized by those who had been in U.S. schools for 5 or more years and scored at least *advanced* on the composite TELPAS, but did not pass reading STAAR. These ELLs had oral (i.e., listening and speaking) abilities in English that were similar to those of ELLs who were approaching exit; however, their abilities in reading and writing in English were lower than those of ELLs who were approaching exit. Although many scored *advanced* in the TELPAS reading and writing domain, they did not demonstrate sufficient English cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) for the next grade level.

The next group of 9th-grade ELLs were included in the category of "comprehends English." These students had not been in U.S. schools for 5 or more years, but on average, had developed advanced receptive skills in English. Note that their reading score (3.5), on average, was higher than their listening score (3.1; Table 2). This may be a grade-level effect, and lower secondary grade levels might not reflect this finding. ELLs who have been in the United States for fewer than 5 years and who are at the 9th-grade level may have a foundation in reading in another language and be able to transfer their knowledge to English quickly. For these students, English listening skills and advanced productive skills in English may require more time and exposure, and thus are most likely related to years in U.S. schools.

Another group of ELLs had been in U.S. schools for more than 5 years and fell into the category of "understands spoken English;" however, their productive skills and reading ability in English had not been developed.

Finally, the last group of ELLs, "newcomers/limited English*,*" included students who had been in the United States for fewer than 5 years and who scored *beginning* or *intermediate* on TELPAS. Half (*n* = 64) of these ELLs were in the United States their first semester, and 78% (*n* = 96) were in the United States for less than 3 years.

Modified STAAR. Some ELLs receiving special education (SpEd) services took the modified version of STAAR and did not receive a scale score (at the time of analysis). For those with TELPAS scores (*n* = 52; Table 3), DRE staff determined the differences in performance in each TELPAS domain by overall English proficiency (i.e., high = composite score of *advanced* or *advanced high*; low = composite score of *beginning* or *intermediate*) and compared these scores with their specified performance categories. Nearly all the ELLs who took the modified STAAR were in the district for 5 or more years. ELLs receiving SpEd services who took the modified version of STAAR and scored *beginning* or *intermediate* on TELPAS (*n* = 21) were rated statistically similar to ELLs in the "understands English" category (Table 3). The ELLs receiving SpEd services who took the modified version of STAAR and scored *advanced* or *advanced high* on TELPAS (*n* = 31) were rated statistically similar to ELLs in the "English communicators" group in terms of speaking and listening (i.e., oral skills), but were statistically similar to the "comprehends English" group in terms of reading and writing. Due to their performance, DRE staff categorized this group as "oral English only."

Table 3. Ninth-Grade English Language Learners (ELL) English Proficiency Ratings, by Domain, Performance Group, and Reading State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Modified Version, Spring 2012

Group description	ELLs in sample	Receptive		Productive	
		Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing
English communicators	270	3.5	3.6	3.5	3.2
Modified,* high TELPAS	31	3.4	3.2	3.3	2.7
Comprehends English	75	3.1	3.5	2.8	2.6
Understands English	38	2.9	1.8	2.8	2.3
Modified, low TELPAS	21	2.4	1.6	2.4	2.1

Source. AISD student TELPAS and STAAR records, 2012

Note. Cells highlighted in green were group averages that met the cut score for advanced (i.e., 3) for TELPAS. The blue lines separate average scores that were statistically different from each other.

* Modified refers to students who took the modified version of STAAR.

Characteristics of ELL performance groups. Many ELLs (48%) who took STAAR and TELPAS in Spring 2012 first enrolled in AISD in early education (EE) through 2nd grade (Table 4); 61%[1] of them were English communicators. This suggests the majority of 9th-grade long-term ELLs had not developed academic English, but had developed advanced English proficiency. This slightly contrasts with Olsen's study of long-term ELLs in California, in which the majority of long-term ELLs had

> high functioning social language, very weak academic language, and significant deficits in reading and writing skills. The majority of Long Term English learners are "stuck" at intermediate levels of English proficiency or below, although others reach higher levels of English proficiency without attaining the academic language to be reclassified. (p. 2)

The latter finding was reversed for AISD and might be related to the difference between Texas accountability standards and exit criteria for ELLs and California standards and criteria.

As expected, ELLs who comprehend English (38%) were among the largest performance group who first enrolled in AISD in middle school, while students new to the district in 9th grade were mostly newcomers with limited English (66%). This finding supports the hypothesis that ELLs' AISD grade-level entry relates to their English proficiency and academic performance.

According to analysis of variance tests, ELLs in the "newcomer/limited English" performance category were significantly older than were ELLs in the other categories. The average age for a 9th-grade newcomer or ELL with limited English was 15.5 years old, and 28% of "newcomers/limited English" students were 16 years old or older on September 1, 2011. The other groups were younger than 15 years old, on average, at the start of the 2011–2012 year.

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[1] Calculated by the following: number of communicators enrolled in EE divided by total number of ELLs enrolled in EE, i.e., (122+42+15+19)/326

Table 4. 2011–2012 Ninth-Grade English Language Learners' (ELL) AISD Grade Level Entry Patterns

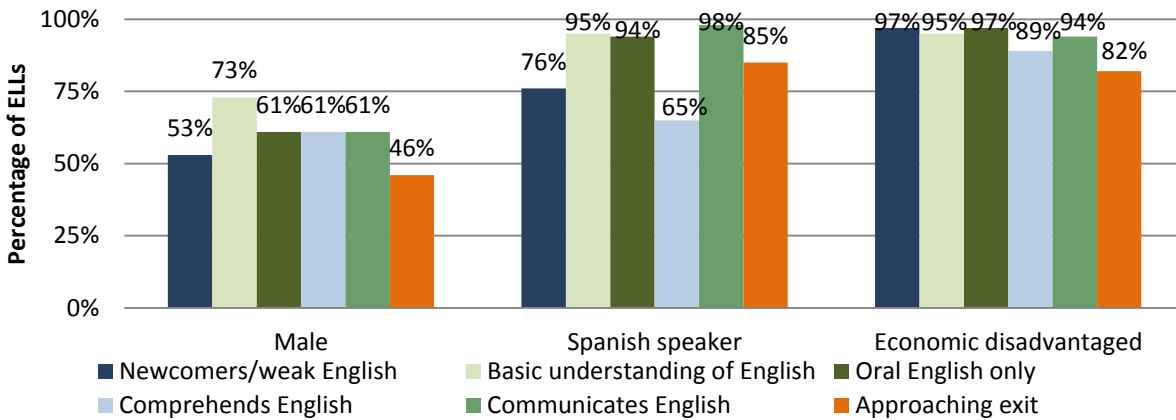| | Grade levels of AISD entry | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Early elementary (EE) | | | | | Late elementary | | | Middle school | | | |
Group	EE	Pre-K	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Approaching exit	-	42 (36%)	15 (13%)	8 (7%)		8 (7%)	9 (8%)	7 (6%)	18 (13%)			10 (9%)
Communicators	122 (45%)		42 (16%)	15 (6%)	19 (7%)	17 (6%)	23 (9%)	16 (6%)	9 (3%)	7 (3%)		
Comprehends	-								10 (13%)	18 (24%)	14 (19%)	33 (44%)
Oral only	5 (16%)	16 (52%)	10 (32%)									
Understands	23 (39%)		9 (15%)	6 (10%)		6 (10%)	5 (8%)		10 (16%)			
Newcomers/ limited English	-								7 (6%)	13 (11%)	10 (8%)	92 (75%)
n	326					97			112			140
%	48%					14%			17%			21%

Source. AISD student records, 2003–2012

Note. Some percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding. *Orange* = AISD grade entry in early elementary (i.e., EE–2); *blue* = late elementary (i.e., grades 3–5); *green* = middle school (i.e., grades 6–8); and, *white* = high school. Cells with fewer than 5 students are joined to redact data.

Spanish-speakers had a high representation among communicators (98%) and had lower representations among newcomers/limited English (76%) and comprehends English (65%) groups (i.e., groups who were in U.S. schools for fewer than 5 years, see Figure 1). Males had greater representation among the basic understanding of English group (73%) compared with the other performance groups, most likely related to SpEd placement. Finally, ELLs who qualified for free or reduced-priced lunch (i.e., economically disadvantaged) had a high representation among newcomers/limited English (97%) and oral only (97%) groups, and slightly lower representation among the approaching exit group (82%).

Finally, 85% (*n* = 70) of ELLs receiving SpEd services (*n* = 82) had a learning disability as their primary disability. Among the ELLs with learning disabilities, 30% (*n* = 21) were English communicators, 34% (*n* = 24) were oral only, and 29% (*n* = 20) were grouped in understands English. Three out of four (78%) ELLs who were receiving SpEd services enrolled in AISD in 2nd grade or prior; 88% enrolled in AISD in an elementary grade level (i.e., EE through 5th grade).

Figure 1. Difference in Demographic Characteristics Among Ninth-Grade English Language Learner (ELL) Performance Groups, 2011–2012
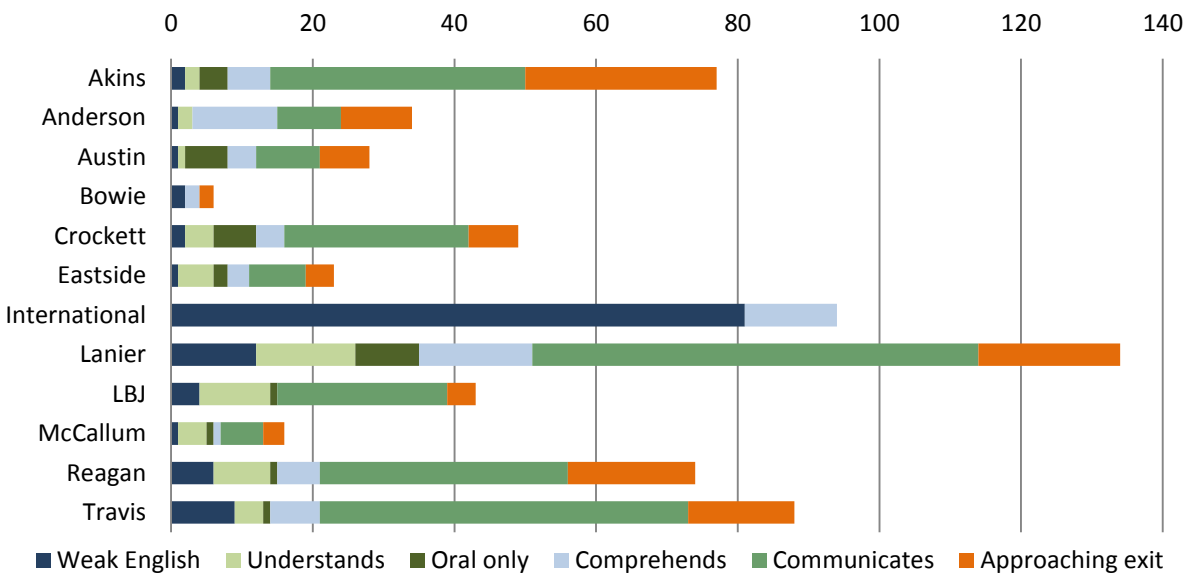

Source. AISD student records, 2011–2012

ELL performance groups, by campus. As designed, International High School (IHS) enrolled the majority (68%, *n* = 94) of 9th-grade ELLs who had recently entered the United States (i.e., less than 3 years ago). Relatively few (14%) IHS 9th-grade students had advanced English comprehension skills.

Lanier High School had the largest enrollment of 9th-grade ELLs, compared with all the schools, and was the most diverse in terms of performance levels (Figure 2). Nearly all high schools, with the exception of IHS and Bowie, had long-term ELLs who were proficient in English but did not demonstrate academic reading proficiency based on the Level II standard on STAAR.

Figure 2. English Language Learner Performance Groups, by Campus, Spring 2012

Source. AISD STAAR and TELPAS records, 2011–2012

Note. Blue segments represent students who had been in U.S. schools for fewer than 5 years. Green segments represent students who had been in U.S. schools for 5 or more years and did not meet the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness standard. Numbers are not presented due to low counts.

Conclusion. Ninth-grade ELLs can be categorized into six distinct groups, based on their English proficiency, academic reading ability, and years in U.S. schools. Administrators should consider using these performance groups to help define students' needs for differentiated instruction. Further research should be done to see how well these groups translate to other grade levels.

The majority of long-term ELLs in 9th grade were proficient in English, but were struggling with academic English. Future research might examine the academic history of these students to determine any commonalities that can be used to identify students more quickly for interventions to improve their academic English reading abilities.

References

Brunner, J. (2011). *Identifying long-term English language learners, Issue 1: Common characteristics of the 2010-2011 cohort* (Publication no. 11.13 a RB). Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District.

Olsen, L. (2010). *Reparable harm: Fulfilling the unkept promise of educational opportunity for California's long term English learners*. Long Beach, CA: Californians Together.

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