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Supporting Success: Attendance Solutions for Multilingual Students

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Introduction

The terms **English learner** and **multilingual learner** are used interchangeably in this piece.

Nearly 1 in 10 students in the United States—approximately 4.9 million—are considered English learners,¹ also referred to as “multilingual learners.” Schools have long been a cornerstone for families of English learners, who come to this country with the hope of providing their children with a brighter future. This belief in the transformative power of education is likely why, before the COVID-19 pandemic, English learners were often slightly more likely than their peers to attend school regularly. However, the challenges brought on by the pandemic disrupted this trend, leading to a rise in chronic absenteeism among English learners. Additionally, the language barriers, cultural differences, and sometimes negative attitudes and perceptions shaped by U.S. immigration policies have contributed to unwelcoming environments that can hinder regular attendance.

Yet this is a challenge that can be overcome. When schools, districts, and communities work together, we can help ensure that English learners regain their place in the classroom and continue to pursue their educational dreams.

In this brief, we will take a closer look at

- the extent of chronic absenteeism among multilingual learners,
- the challenges and barriers experienced by multilingual learners and their families, and
- the multifaceted approaches needed to support multilingual learners and the promising practices that contribute to increased attendance.

1 National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). *The condition of education: English language learners in public schools*. U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/2021/cgf_508c.pdf

Who are the multilingual learners served by the U.S. school system?

English learners come from a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, each with unique experiences, needs, and challenges in acquiring English proficiency. The majority of English learners are born in the United States but may speak a language other than English at home with their parents who migrated from other countries.² The families of English learners come from a wide array of countries that include, but are not limited to, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Korea, India, Haiti, Brazil, Russia, Somalia, and Syria.³ Although Spanish is the most commonly reported home language,⁴ Arabic, Chinese, and Vietnamese are other common languages spoken in English learner households. Newcomer students,⁵ including refugees and students who have immigrated recently, add another layer of diversity to multilingual learners.

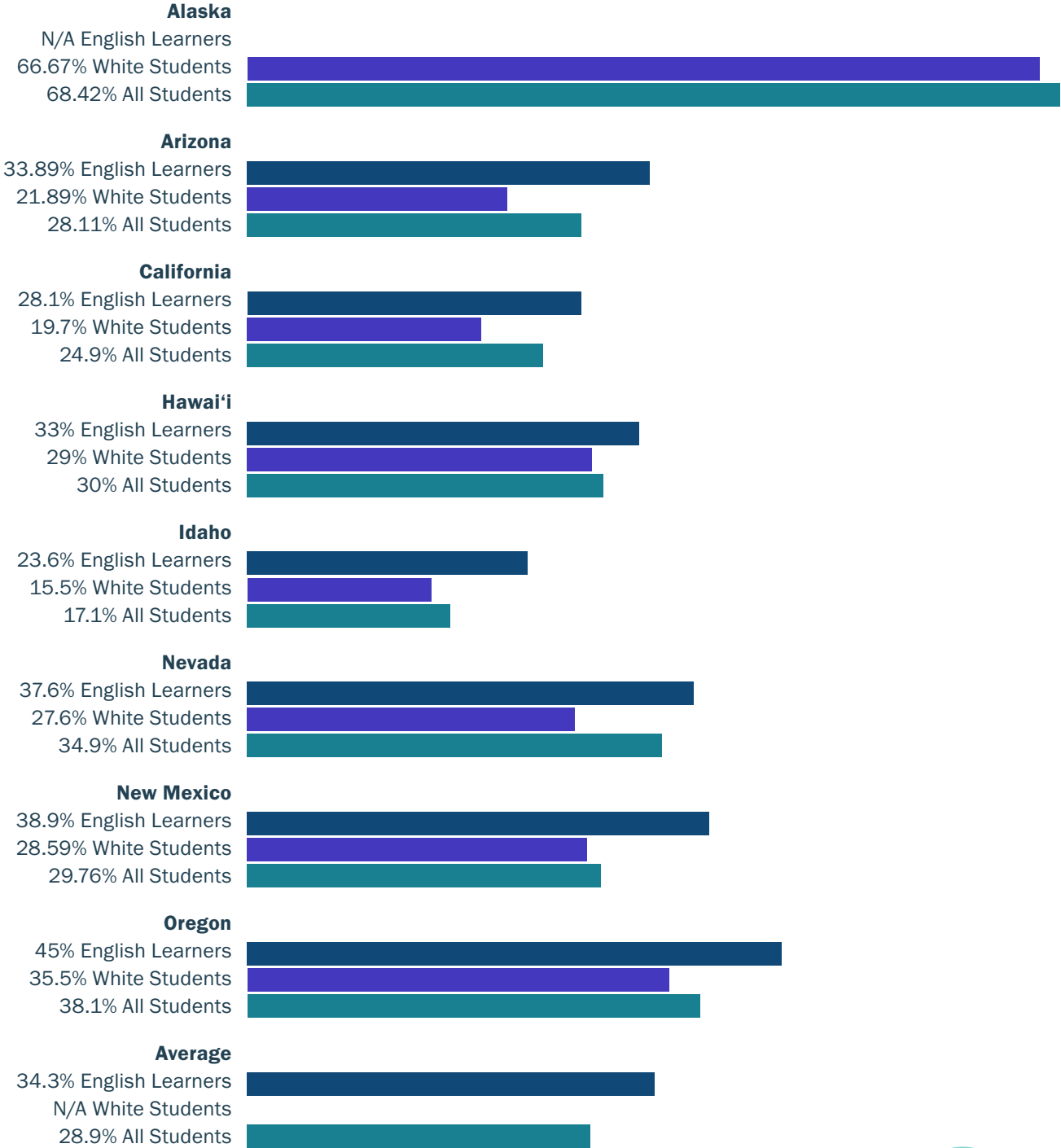
What is the scale of chronic absenteeism among multilingual learners?

Although prepandemic data indicated that English learners were performing better in terms of attendance and were 1.2 times less likely to be chronically absent than non-English learners were,⁶ the postpandemic situation presents a different picture. By 2021–22, 36 percent of English learners were chronically absent versus 30 percent of students overall.⁷ Similarly, in the Western United States the chronic absence rate for multilingual learners surged to an average of 34.3 percent during the 2022–23 school year versus 28.9 percent for all students (Figure 1).

- 2 Gonzalez, A. (2016, November 1). 10 assumptions to rethink about English-language learners. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-10-assumptions-to-rethink-about-english-language-learners/2016/11>
- 3 Migration Policy Institute. (2015). *Top languages spoken by English learners nationally and by state*. ELL Information Center Fact Sheet Series. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/ELLFact%20Sheet-No4.pdf>
- 4 National Center for Education Statistics, 2021.
- 5 California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Newcomer students*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/newcomerstudnts.asp>
- 6 National Center for Education Statistics, 2021.
- 7 Attendance Works. (2023, November 17). All hands on deck: Today's chronic absenteeism requires a comprehensive district response and strategy. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/todays-chronic-absenteeism-requires-a-comprehensive-district-response-and-strategy>. A link to the [national demographic data for the 2021–22 school year](#) is available at this page.



Figure 1. Western States Chronic Absence Rates, 2022–23



Note. State Departments of Education for AK, AZ, CA, HI, ID, NM, NV, and OR. (2023). Alaska is excluded from the average calculation above because its EL data are suppressed.



The impact of chronic absenteeism on our youngest learners is particularly alarming. In California, the rate of chronic absenteeism for kindergarten English learners nearly tripled from 14.5 percent to 43.1 percent from 2018 to 2022 (Figure 2). In 2022–23, that rate went down to 37.1 percent, but the decrease has been gradual. And the reality is that it accounts for 53,655 multilingual learners in the state who, along with their families, should be building the habit of going to school.⁸ Given what we know about the impact of regular attendance on early learning and development and high school graduation, we must prioritize helping our youngest learners be present as they start school.⁹

Figure 2. California English Learner Chronic Absence Rate, 2018–2023



Note. California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Absenteeism data (2023–24)*. DataQuest.

What challenges and barriers are impacting regular school attendance?

The pandemic disproportionately affected English learners and their families, with many facing higher rates of job loss, financial instability, limited access to health care, and COVID infection and death.¹⁰ During remote learning, English learners faced limited technology access¹¹ and increased home responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings, which often made meaningful participation in remote lessons difficult.¹²

8 California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Absenteeism data (2023–24)*. DataQuest.

9 Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *The importance of being in school: A report on absenteeism in the nation's public schools*. Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. https://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf

10 Gelatt, J., & Chishti, M. (2022). *COVID-19's effects on U.S. immigration and immigrant communities, two years on*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/covid19-effects-us-immigration>

11 Cherewka, A. (2020, September 3). *The digital divide hits U.S. immigrant households disproportionately during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/digital-divide-hits-us-immigrant-households-during-covid-19>

12 U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2022). *Pandemic learning: Teachers reported many obstacles for high-poverty students and English learners as well as some mitigating strategies* (GAO-22-105815). <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-105815.pdf>

Additional challenges include

- ineffective communication from districts and schools;¹³
- limited access to health care for students and their families;¹⁴
- trauma and anxiety;¹⁵
- fears of bullying¹⁶ and lack of school safety, particularly among immigrant students facing negative perceptions and aggressive immigration enforcement;¹⁷
- lack of access to linguistically and culturally relevant curricula;¹⁸
- family responsibilities that often require older students to work;
- social–emotional challenges, such as stress and feeling isolated and disconnected, especially for newcomers and refugees navigating the complexities of being in a new country; and
- lack of clarity in families about when to send students to school when they show signs of illness.

Recognizing that these diverse challenges continue to exist in the postpandemic era allows schools to implement targeted interventions that support English learners at every stage of their educational journeys.¹⁹

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- 13 Premo, E., Ros Pilarz, A., & Lin, Y.-C. (2023). Pre-kindergarten teachers' family engagement practices and English Language Learners' attendance and early learning skills: Exploring the role of the linguistic context. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 63, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.10.005>
- 14 Sifuentes, A. M. F., Cornejo, M. R., Li, N. C., Castaneda-Avila, M. A., Tjia, J., & Lapane, K. L. (2020). The role of limited English proficiency and access to health insurance and health care in the Affordable Care Act era. *Health Equity*, 4(1), 509–517. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7757700/>
- 15 O'Loughlin, J. B., & Custodio, B. K. (2021). *Supporting the journey of English learners after trauma*. University of Michigan Press ELT. <https://press.umich.edu/Books/S/Supporting-the-Journey-of-English-Learners-after-Trauma>
- 16 Ferson, A., Escobedo, M., Lugo, D., Cox, I., & Gallego, I. (2024). *Family needs assessment*. Parent Institute for Quality Education. <https://www.piqe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024-Family-Needs-Assessment-5.pdf>
- 17 Gándara, P., & Santibañez, L. (2023). *The impact of a broken immigration system on U.S. students and schools*. University of California, Los Angeles; Latino Policy & Politics Institute. <https://latino.ucla.edu/research/immigration-impact-students/>
- 18 Yoon, B. (2023). Research synthesis on culturally and linguistically responsive teaching for multilingual learners. *Education Sciences*, 13(6), 557. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13060557>
- 19 Attendance Works. (2022). *Chronic absence: Root causes*. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/root-causes>



What works to support attendance and engagement for multilingual learners?

Ensuring the success of English learners requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach that addresses their unique needs and challenges. By implementing targeted strategies and fostering a supportive, inclusive school environment, we can help English learners thrive both academically and socially.

Here are some key practices for fostering the attendance, well-being, and success of English learners:

Promote a shared districtwide and schoolwide responsibility for the success of multilingual learners.

A collective commitment to ensuring English learners receive the necessary support for strong attendance and engagement begins with adopting a multitiered approach,²⁰ with a strong focus on the foundational tier, which includes creating positive conditions for learning.²¹ This involves building trusting relationships with students and fostering strong partnerships with their families in their home languages.

Here are some strategies for building strong connections:

- Hold orientation sessions at the beginning of the school year in multiple languages.
- Conduct home visits during the summer or at the start of the school year to build trusting relationships. (See [how teachers are key to home visits](#).)²²
- Use student surveys to capture their perspectives. (See this [survey for preK Head Start students](#)²³ and this [survey for secondary students](#).)²⁴
- Implement effective attendance messaging and maintain two-way communication²⁵ with families in their home languages. (See this [Talking Points](#) article for tips.)
- Clearly explain to families the importance of attendance and how it relates to social-emotional and academic success.

20 Attendance Works. (2018). *Chronic absence: 3 tiers of intervention*. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/>

21 Chang, H. (2022, February 4). Student and adult well-being are key to positive conditions for learning. *Attendance Works*. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/student-and-adult-well-being-are-key-to-positive-conditions-for-learning/>

22 Attendance Works. (2018, December 10). Improve attendance with teacher home visits. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/improve-attendance-with-teacher-home-visits/>

23 Humm Brundage, A., & Castillo, J. (2018). *Reasons for chronic absenteeism—Parent preK/Head Start (RCA-P)*. Florida's Problem Solving/Response to Intervention Project, University of South Florida. <https://floridarti.usf.edu/resources/format/pdf/PreK%20RCA%20Parent%20Version%20Items.pdf>

24 Brundage, A., & Castillo, J. (2017). *Reasons for chronic absenteeism (RCA)*. Florida's Problem Solving/Response to Intervention Project, University of South Florida. http://www.floridarti.usf.edu/resources/format/pdf/rca_educator_version.pdf

25 Smythe-Leistico, K., & Page, L. C. (2018). Connect-text: Leveraging text-message communication to mitigate chronic absenteeism and improve parental engagement in the earliest years of schooling. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 23(1-2), 139–152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2018.1434658>



- Ensure access to reliable internet service and access to school portals. Provide these services in families' home languages so they can check students' grades and progress, monitor what is happening in the classroom, and help students catch up if they are falling behind.
- Connect English learners with enrichment opportunities—such as after-school programs, academic clubs, and summer learning experiences—to enhance their language proficiency, academic achievement, and overall engagement in school.

Create a positive, culturally inclusive, and welcoming school and classroom.

Use a [strengths-based approach](#) to help English learners feel seen, valued, and supported. Establish routines at the classroom level, and offer school enrichment opportunities that reflect students' interests and that will enhance their engagement and attendance.

Here are some strategies for creating inclusive and welcoming schools:

- Create a space specifically for English learners and their families to be connected to the resources they need (e.g., [newcomer welcome centers](#)).
- Host [attendance cafés](#) in families' home languages.
- Conduct summer kindergarten-readiness camps, such as [Jumpstart](#), to encourage younger students to begin building the routines and habits of going to school.
- Design [culturally and linguistically responsive lessons](#) that allow students from diverse backgrounds to connect with materials and contribute to classroom discussions.
- Use preventative measures, such as [restorative circles](#), to reduce bullying and strengthen peer-to-peer relationships, especially for older students.
- [Equip teachers](#) to address and reduce anxiety in the classroom, especially for students who are [learning to speak a second language](#), and create space for [peer-to-peer connection and interactions](#).
- Treat home language as an asset to be nurtured, and explore programs like the [Seal of Biliteracy](#) to support language development.
- Address the needs of older students who may need to work to support their families by offering [flexible schedules](#), and connect them with paid opportunities to serve as peer mentors.
- Include parents of English learners in school and district decision-making bodies, such as school-site parent committees, district advisory committees, and curriculum development teams.

Identify partners and community-based organizations that can help deliver critical services.

Districts and schools alone cannot reduce chronic absenteeism—it really takes a collective to deploy support and services for English learners. Community organizations often have the cultural competency, capacity, and established trust and relationships to supplement the work of districts and schools.



Here are some examples of partners providing valuable resources to English learners:

- Faith-based organizations and churches can support your message of attendance. (See the brief [Effective Strategies: Family & Community Engagement for Newcomer Students in Hawai'i](#).)
- School-based health services provided through school nurses and [school-based health centers](#), such as [La Clínica](#), offer in-school access to basic preventative health, dental, and vision screenings (in person and virtual) and can respond to families' concerns when their children have symptoms of illness.
- [Promotoras](#), or health workers, can deliver critical health resources directly to families' homes and are well trusted in Latine neighborhoods.
- [Abriendo Puertas](#) offers a culturally relevant curriculum for family engagement centers and helps build parent leadership.
- [The Community Schools](#) model integrates community resources, such as health care, directly into schools, establishing them as central hubs for students and families. This type of resource delivers critical services that help address the achievement and support gaps, including services for immigrant families. (See the video [How a Community School Helps ELLs Succeed](#).)

Conclusion

Addressing chronic absenteeism among English learners requires a coordinated approach from schools and districts. This means fostering shared responsibility, building trust, and addressing students' unique challenges. Key strategies include creating inclusive environments, offering enrichment opportunities, and partnering with community organizations for critical resources. Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted relationships, schools can now rebuild and enhance their role as vital resources for immigrant families, helping them overcome attendance barriers and succeed academically and socially.

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