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A Brief History of English Language Learners in Arkansas

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Summary Points

- Nearly 40,000 of Arkansas' students are English Learners (EL), which is 8% of the total student population.
- The number of ELs enrolled in Arkansas schools has more than doubled since 2004-05.
- The majority of ELs attend school in Northwest Arkansas.
- The Central and Southwest regions of the state have had the greatest increase in EL enrollment.
- Most districts in the state enroll EL students, and there are 30 districts where EL students comprise at least 10% of the student enrollment.
- There has been a decline the percentage of students identified EL since the English proficiency assessment was changed in 2016-17.

A Brief History of English Language Learners in Arkansas

This brief will provide an overview of the context of English Learner education policies at the national and state level. In addition to examining these policies, this brief will provide an overview of state-wide and region-wide trends in the growth of English Language Learner student population.

Introduction

As with most public education policies prior to the 20th century, decisions on how to educate students who did not speak English were left to the local school districts. Second language learning policies varied widely across location and time in how accommodating or restrictive they were. While, in general, localities may have been accommodating in the early 1800s, by the end of the 19th century, many states began passing laws prohibiting education in any language other than English.¹ In 1968, Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act, granting monies to support Limited English Proficient students as they became proficient in English.² The Supreme Court, in *Lau v. Nichols* 1973, decided unanimously that schools are required to provide supplemental instruction for students who are English Learners (EL).³ Today, federal and state laws require public school districts to provide support services to English Learners which help them “achieve English language proficiency and perform academically at the same high levels as their non-EL peers”.⁴

This Brief

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School districts can provide supplemental support to English Language learners (ELs) through a variety of interventions where the main difference is the language of instruction. For example, identified EL students could learn English in a program using content-based English as a Second Language, where teachers “use instructional materials, learning tasks, and classroom techniques from academic content areas as the vehicle for developing language, content, cognitive and study skills” in English.⁵ Other programs may teach in both the students’ home language as well as English.⁶ Due to “English-Only” laws passed in 1987 and 2010, school districts in Arkansas are only able to provide instruction to their English Learners in English.⁷

Identifying English Learners

In Arkansas, school districts identify students English Learners (ELs) following protocols set forth by the state. The state requires that new-to-district students complete a home language survey. The survey asks which languages the child learned to speak first; which languages the child currently speaks; and which languages are spoken in the home. If the parent or guardian responds anything other than English, then the child qualifies for an initial English proficiency assessment.⁸

Students who do not pass this initial exam will receive services to help them become proficient in English. Students identified will receive language development instruction throughout the academic year. Parents have a right to decline or opt their children out of a school district's EL program or out of particular EL services within the program. All students identified as EL, even those whose parents/ guardians decline services, are required to be annually assessed on their English proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Students who meet or exceed proficiency criteria in all sections of the English Language Proficiency Assessment may be exited from the EL program. Additional criteria, such as proficiency on state standardized assessments and teacher recommendations may also be required as evidence that EL students have achieved English proficiency. Districts are required to monitor and to provide assistance to EL students for two years after exiting the program.

English Learners in the United States

The most recent statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that English learners comprise about 9.5% of K-12 students in the United States. Some states have a larger share of EL students than others. For example, in fall 2015, only 1% of West Virginia's student population were ELs while 16.8% of

students in Nevada were ELs. Additionally, some states may be experiencing faster growth in the proportion of EL students than others. Between academic years 2005 and 2012, California, currently home of the largest proportion of EL students at 21%, experienced a decrease in percentage of the student population identified as EL, while states like Kansas and Louisiana experienced over 100% increases in their EL student populations.

English Learners in Arkansas

Using publicly available data from the Arkansas Department of Education, we will examine the EL enrollment numbers from academic year 2005 through academic year 2019. Table 1, below, presents the number of students enrolled in English language learning programs over the last 15 academic years. The overall enrollment numbers more than doubled from just under 20,000 students in the 2005 academic year to just under 40,000 in the 2019 academic year. All regions have seen increases in the number of EL students from 2005 to 2019. The vast majority of EL students attend schools in the Northwest region of Arkansas, where over 23,000 EL students were enrolled in 2018-19.

The regional enrollment numbers, however, do not reflect important variation in the proportions of EL students by district. For example, between academic years 2010 and 2015, DeWitt experienced a 200% increase in the number of enrolled EL students in their district, while Dover experienced over a 50% decrease in the number of EL students enrolled.

Table 1. English Learner Enrollment By Region, 2004-05 through 2018-19

	Northwest	Northeast	Central	Southwest	Southeast	Arkansas Overall
04-05	14,012	732	2,097	1,102	533	18,476
05-06	15,485	859	2,399	1,145	526	20,414
06-07	17,610	976	2,559	1,639	573	23,357
07-08	18,899	1,064	3,230	1,913	593	25,699
08-09	20,347	1,118	3,514	2,182	641	27,802
09-10	21,852	1,328	4,107	2,249	827	30,363
10-11	22,475	1,435	4,375	2,430	688	31,403
11-12	23,048	1,510	4,873	2,576	737	32,744
12-13	23,671	1,535	5,444	2,565	685	33,900
13-14	24,845	1,730	5,784	2,904	698	35,961
14-15	25,726	1,859	6,435	2,923	803	37,746
15-16	25,855	1,827	6,717	3,127	765	38,291
16-17	27,607	2,187	7,513	3,248	901	41,456
17-18	26,058	2,302	7,442	3,070	928	39,800
18-19	23,597	2,677	8,340	2,893	994	38,501

Note: Total EL student enrollment, by academic year, taken from Arkansas Department of Education publicly available data.

Changes in the proportion of EL students in Arkansas from 2004-05 through 2018-19 are illustrated in Figure 1, below. The figure shows the EL percentage of the general student population in Arkansas, by academic region, and in the United States overall. The available data for the national EL rate, represented by the blue dotted line, reflect that the overall share of the EL K-12 population is consistently between nine and ten percent of the general school population.

Although Arkansas enrolls a smaller percentage of EL students than the national average, the share of Arkansas public school students identified as EL is increasing. As represented by the red dashed line, in 2004-05, 4% of Arkansas students were identified as EL, and by the 2014-15 school year the percentage had doubled to 8%. While districts in Northeast Arkansas enroll the lowest percentage of EL students at fewer than 3%, Northwest Arkansas has consistently enrolled has the highest percentage of EL students in the general student population, with just under 14% in the most recent year. The Southwest region of the state has seen the greatest relative in-

crease in the percentage of EL students enrolled. In 2004-05, only 2% of the students enrolled in regional school were identified as EL. By 2018-19, however, the percentage has increased to 7%. Schools in the Central region are also serving a greater percentage of EL students than they were 15 years ago. In 2005, less than 2% of the general student population in the Central region were identified as EL. In 2019, nearly 6% of the general student population is identified as EL.

A recent decline in the percentage of EL students is evident in Figure 1. Starting with academic year 2016-17, there is a downturn in the percentage of EL students in Arkansas overall, and a sharp decline in the Northwest region in particular. This decline coincides with a change in the assessments used to reclassify EL students as proficient in English. Beginning in academic year 2016-17, Arkansas replaced the ELDA with ELPA21, and although not evident in all regions, the decline in identified students overall is likely due to a greater percentage of EL students being identified as English Proficient through the new assessment.

Figure 1: Percentage of Student Enrollment Identified as English Learners, 2004-05 through 2018-19

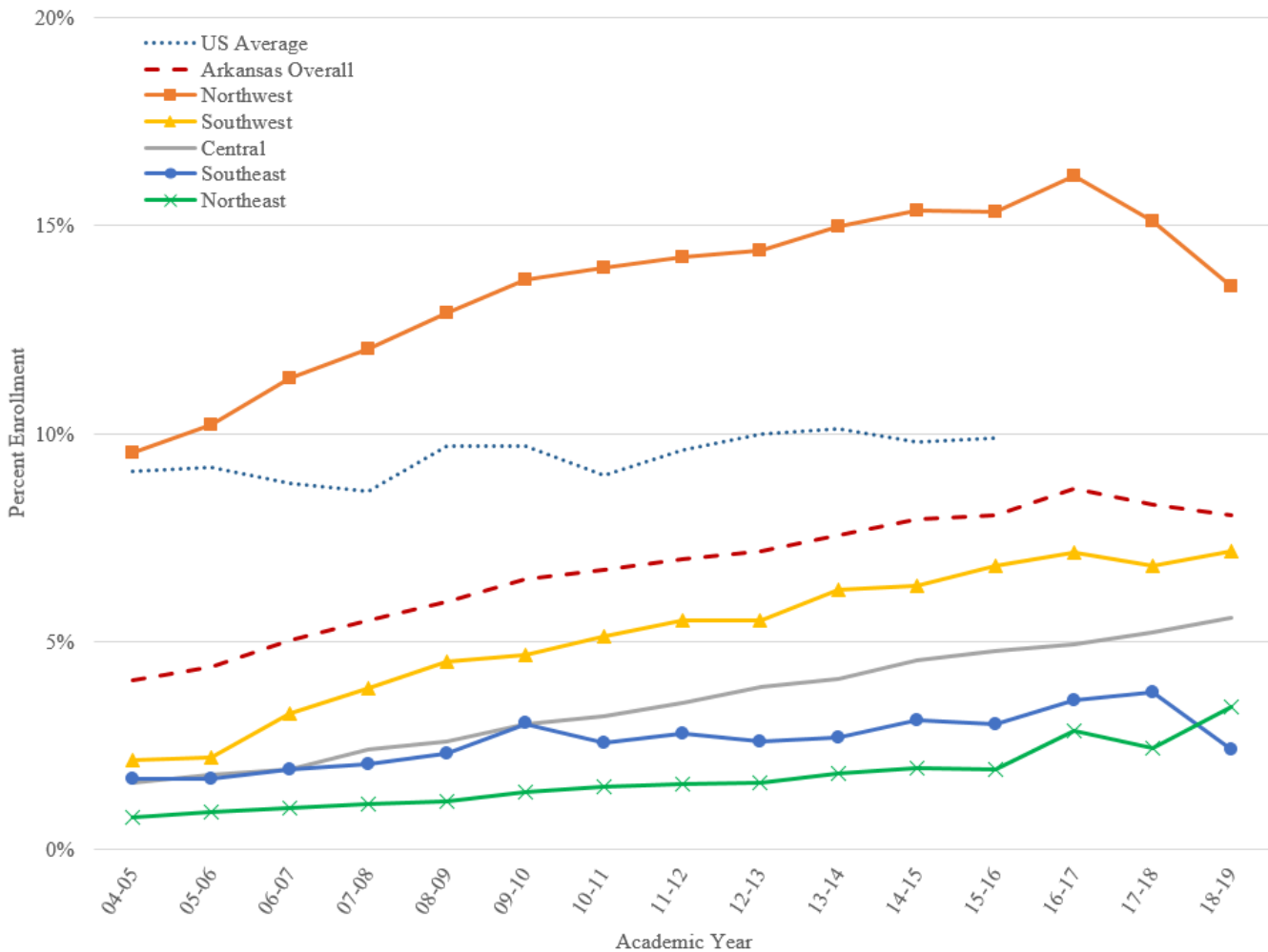


Figure 2 illustrates the shift in the overall share of EL students between the academic regions over the last 15 years. While all regions demonstrate growth in overall numbers of EL students, examining where the population growth is occurring as a proportion of the EL population illustrates a slightly different story. While Northwest Arkansas consistently has the highest number of EL students enrolled, the region’s proportion of the EL population in the state is decreasing, due, in part, to an increase in the numbers in the Central region.

More than two-thirds of the state’s EL students were enrolled in Northwest Arkansas schools in the 2004-05 academic year. Both the Central and Northeast regions, however, have experienced growth in the share of the overall proportion of EL students, relative to the other regions in the state. The Central region’s share, for example, has increased from 11% to 2005 to over 21% in 2018-19. The trends in the Southwest and Southeast seem relatively stable throughout the past 15 academic years, and the share of EL students in schools located the Northwest region have declined from about 75% to about 65% of the total number of EL students statewide.

Finally, we consider the distribution of ELs throughout the school districts in each region. While the number of EL students in Arkansas has increased, so has the number of individual districts that enroll these students. Figure 3 illustrates the widening distribution of EL students by presenting the number of districts in each region with no EL students and the number of districts where EL students comprise at least 10% of the overall student population. For example, the Northeast region, represented in green, had 56 out of 75 districts enrolling no EL students in 2005. None of the remaining 16 districts in the Northeast region had EL enrollments that comprised 10% of the overall student population. By 2019, however, only 17 districts in the Northeast have no EL enrollment and two districts had EL enrollments that comprised over 10% of their student population. The Central region, which includes Little Rock School District, has increased from zero to five school districts with at EL enrollments of at least 10% in 15 years. In 2019, every academic region of Arkansas has at least two school districts where at least 10% of their student population are English learners.

Figure 2: Proportion of Arkansas EL Student Population by Academic Region, 2004-05 through 2018-19

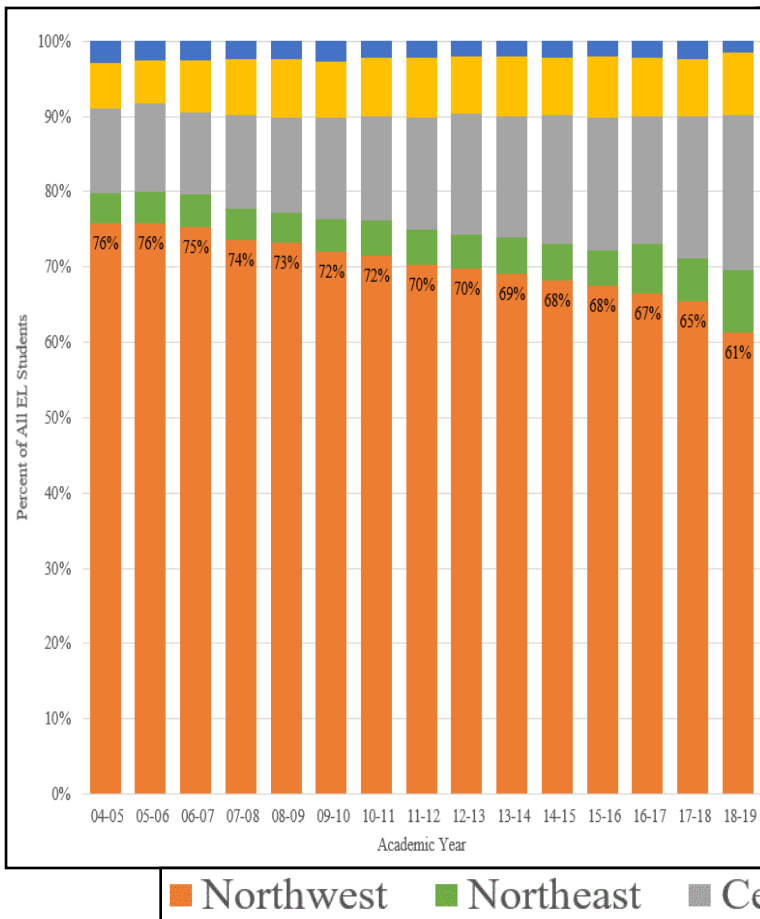
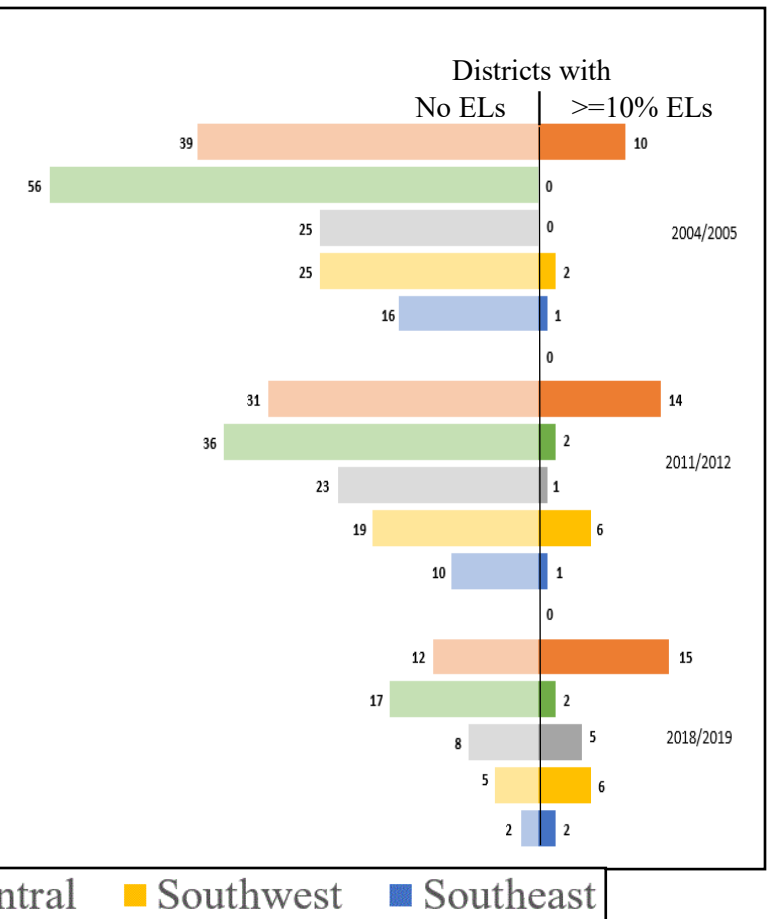


Figure 3: Number of Districts with no EL Students or at least 10% of Enrolled Students EL. By Academic Region, selected years



Summary

The English Learner student population in Arkansas has more than doubled over the last decade and a half. The majority of EL students attend schools in Northwest Arkansas, but growth in the proportion of EL students has been concentrated in the Central and Southwest regions of the state. Additionally, schools in the Northeast academic region account for whittling some of the Northwest region's share of EL students. The share of EL students in the Northeast has grown by over 2.5 percentage points from 2018 to 2019.

While the number of EL students has grown, so has the number of districts in which they are enrolled. In 2004-05, 155 districts throughout the state enrolled no EL students, but in 2018-19 there were only 44 such districts. In addition, over 30 districts have at least 10% of their students identified as EL, compared to fewer than half that 15 years ago.

The growth in EL populations where, previously, there had been few or no EL students offer areas of concern and opportunities. Districts who have long welcomed EL students into their classrooms may have greater institutional knowledge to identify and support their EL students as they learn and become proficient in English. Districts who have experienced high EL growth, or have recently received their first EL students, may struggle with how best to meet the learning needs of these students.

It is important to ensure that EL students who attend schools in all regions of Arkansas are afforded the opportunities to succeed in learning English as well as core academic content. To do this, we begin by providing descriptive information about the educational contexts EL students find themselves in and how they are faring, academically. This first brief provided an overview of the last decade and a half of EL students in Arkansas and where they are attending school. Future briefs will examine how EL students are performing at school and whether they are meeting important educational goals at the same rate as non-EL students. Finally, it is important to examine whether the teachers in Arkansas' academic regions are equipped to be successful – namely whether they have received training and accreditation to meet the needs of EL students.

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