Reclassification Patterns for English Learners in L.A. Unified

Los Angeles Unified School District
Independent Analysis Unit

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The views expressed herein are those of the Independent Analysis Unit and do *not* necessarily reflect those of the District, the Board of Education, or any individual Board Member.

DEFINITIONS

English Learner (EL)
A student who speaks a primary language other than English and is in the process of becoming bi or multilingual in English

Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP)
A student who was previously an English learner who has now met certain academic standards for academic English proficiency

Long-Term English Learner (LTEL)
A student who has been an English learner for six or more years

CELDT
The California English Language Development Test, an English language proficiency assessment used by L.A. Unified through 2017- 2018

ELPAC
English Language Proficiency Assessments for California, an English language proficiency assessment that will be used by L.A. Unified starting in 2018-2019

English Language Development (ELD)
Specialized language support services and courses for English learners

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Several policies in the District use reclassification rates as a way of measuring English learner progress towards English proficiency. For example, the District's Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) sets the reclassification goal for all schools during the 2017-2018 school year as 20%. In addition, the upcoming Board Resolution, "Realizing the Promise for All: Close the Gap by 2023," proposes that one hundred percent of students initially identified as English Learners (EL) in kindergarten or first grade should be Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) by the end of sixth grade.

This report, the first of three from the Independent Analysis Unit (IAU) on English learners, finds that the majority (72%) of ELs do reclassify by the end of sixth grade. Though the median time to reclassification is 4 to 6 years for most students in L.A. Unified, reclassification rates vary greatly by student characteristics and program model:

- Students who are eligible for special education services are about three times less likely to be reclassified in a given period than their peers who were never eligible.
- Female ELs are more likely than their male counterparts to be reclassified in a given period.
- Students with parents with higher education levels are more likely to be reclassified in a given period compared to students from households with lower education levels.
- Students who start kindergarten with higher levels of English proficiency have significantly higher probability of reclassification in a given period.
- Likewise, proficiency in a student's native language has a significant positive association with the likelihood of reclassification in a given period.

There are differences in time to reclassification by program model. **English learners in dual language programs have a lower likelihood of reclassifying in the early years, but their likelihood of reclassifying significantly *increases* as they spend more time in a dual language program, ultimately exceeding the likelihood for students in other program models.** By the end of high school, 95% of students who have ever attended a dual language program have reclassified compared to 92% in transitional bilingual programs, 91% in structured English immersion programs, and 88% in mainstream English classrooms. In other words, by the end of high school, a greater share of ELs in dual language programs have reclassified compared to ELs in English-only programs. However, the greater cumulative likelihood of reclassification seen in dual language programs may be attributable to students' access to resources and not necessarily attributable to program effectiveness.

Reclassification is a primary **goal** for all English learners, and therefore for the District. Thus, it seems appealing to use annual reclassification rates to measure how effectively schools are serving ELs. However, as a **performance metric**, annual reclassification rates have important disadvantages, and it is better to avoid using them as the sole method of assessing effectiveness.

Reclassification rates may be a better measure of students' access to resources than of program quality.

Reclassification rates are significantly lower for students with special needs, and may indicate factors more than simply program quality, such as timely identification of multiple needs and the appropriateness of supports provided for such students.

Using reclassification rates as accountability indicators may create incentives to reclassify English learners too early.

The English Learner Progress Indicator, proposed by the California Department of Education, is an example of a measure that could replace, or supplement, reclassification rates in understanding EL progress.

Our study finds that there are two main groups of students who need more support in meeting the Districts' reclassification goals. First, students with special needs require extra support because their median time to reclassification is 11 years, which is nearly double the median time for all students. Second, students from households with lower education levels have significantly lower chances of being reclassified.

In sum, time to reclassification is significantly correlated with program model and student background characteristics. As such, reclassification rates alone are an inaccurate measure of English learner progress. Schools that have higher annual reclassification rates are not necessarily serving students better than other schools. If the Board is interested in assessing the effectiveness of various EL programs, we should consider long-term outcomes (e.g., beyond elementary school) and appropriate research designs (e.g., random assignment) to avoid inaccurate conclusions about program effectiveness. If further research demonstrates that dual language programs are indeed more effective than other models, after controlling for student advantages, it will support the District's continued expansion of dual language programs.

Contents

SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND

Overview

English learners (ELs) arrive at school with vast linguistic and cultural assets. In L.A. Unified, ELs represent 92 different languages. The most common languages are: Spanish (92%), Armenian (1.26%), Tagalog (0.79%), and Korean (0.71%). ELs comprise a heterogeneous population of students, representing many countries of origins and generational statuses.

Despite the immense assets that ELs bring to the classroom,[1] ELs have been historically underserved in American public schools. Not only do ELs have the dual task of learning the dominant language and academic content, ELs are also more likely to be "triply segregated"—more likely to attend schools with other ELs, racial minorities, and low-income students.[1] Research shows that linguistic segregation intensifies all the negative impacts of racial and socioeconomic segregation.[2]

Given the systemic barriers that have prevented ELs from accessing high-quality educational programs, federal court cases have required that EL programs be effective. In 1974, the Supreme Court ruled in *Lau v. Nichols* that schools must teach language minority students English and provide them with access to content-area curriculum. Subsequently, *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981) further elevated the status of ELs by mandating that EL educational programs be based on sound educational theory, be well-implemented, and produce positive results.

In California and Los Angeles, several initiatives have been enacted with the aim of improving academic outcomes for ELs. First, the passage of Proposition 58 afforded the families of ELs the right to access dual language programs. Furthermore, the adoption of the Board Resolution, "Establishing a Commitment to Biliteracy for All," proposed that the class of 2032 should be the first to graduate biliterate and bilingual. In May 2018, California State Superintendent of Instruction Tom Torlakson launched the Global California 2030 initiative which aims to quadruple the number of dual immersion programs and double the current number of bilingual teachers by 2030. Since research shows that students with greater proficiency in their native language have higher reclassification rates,[3] these initiatives to increase access to dual language programs may also be able to improve EL academic outcomes.

With roughly 126,000 ELs, L.A. Unified enrolls the second highest number of ELs in the United States. ELs make up 25% of the District's student enrollment, and students who were formerly English learners and are now identified as Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) students comprise an additional 23% of students. As seen below, approximately half of the District's student population is or has been an English learner.

Figure 1. English Learners in L.A. Unified (2016-2017)
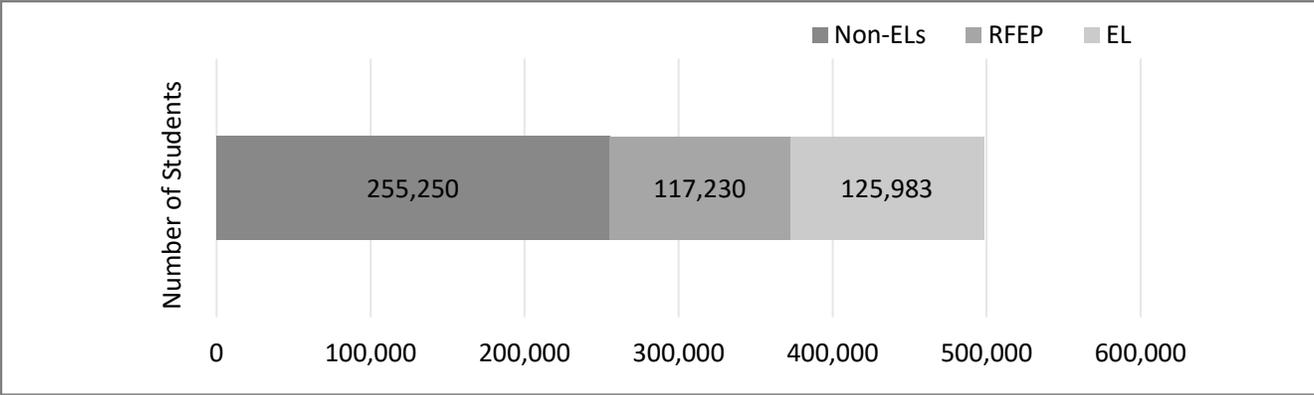
How are ELs Identified in L.A. Unified?

In order to identify whether or not a student is an English learner, a parent of a newly enrolled L.A. Unified student is required to take the Home Language Survey (HLS). An example of a survey question is: Which language is most often used by the adults at home?[4]

If the family indicates the home language is a language other than English, a designated school employee explains that the student will need to take an English language proficiency assessment. Students may also be administered the English language proficiency exam if there is reasonable doubt that the child is English proficient. Prior to 2017-2018, the District administered the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) to assess students' English language proficiency. Currently, the District is switching to a new

assessment called the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). The student's score on the English language proficiency assessment determines whether or not the student qualifies for specialized services.
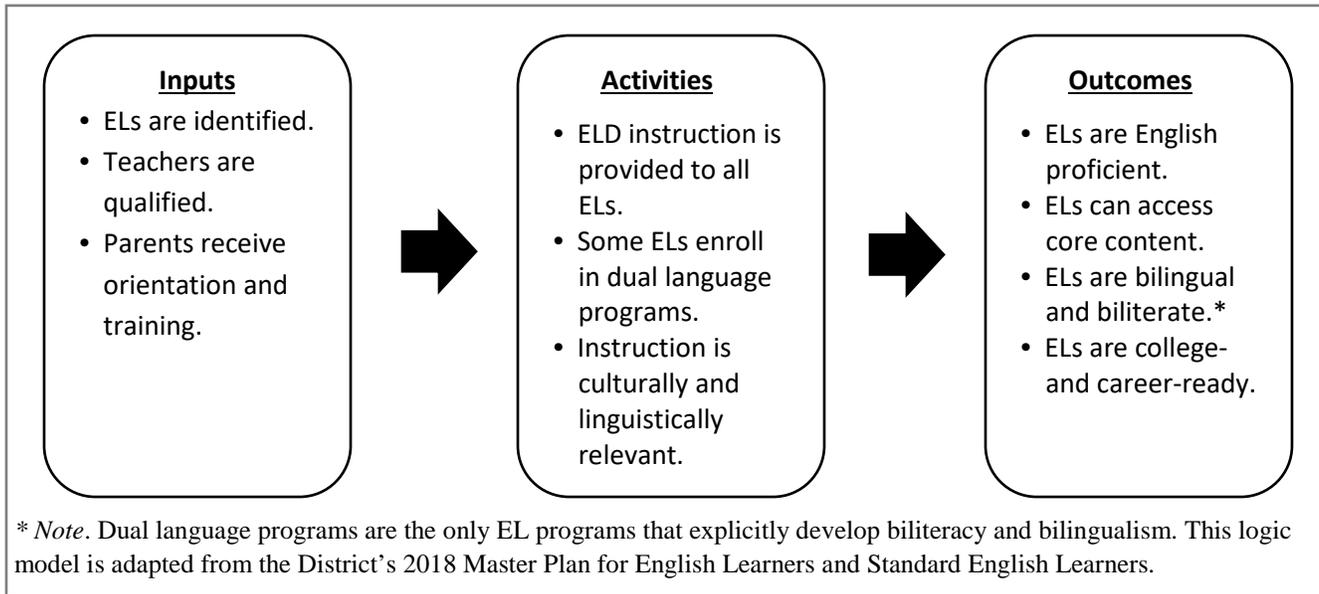
Once students are identified, parents are notified of program options for their child. Several programs, detailed in Table 1, are available to ELs in the District.

It should be noted that the District is writing a new EL Master Plan and is also moving away from transitional bilingual programs, as they do not promote biliteracy. The number of dual language programs in the District has grown tremendously during the past 5 years, from 44 in 2012-2013 to 101 in 2017-2018. The District exists in a dynamic environment in which state and district policies are changing rapidly to address EL needs.

Table 1. Master Plan Programs for English Learners (2018)[5]

	Grades Served	Program Description
Mainstream English	K-12	ELs are instructed in English. ELs acquire English language proficiency and master grade-level academic content through differentiated instruction and appropriate supports. Mainstream English programs are available to ELs with ELD level 4-5, or for ELs with a parent waiver
Language & Literacy in English Acceleration Program	K-12	ELs are instructed in English. This program's goal is to promote English proficiency and provide content accessible to ELs. This program was formerly called structured English immersion and is available to ELs at ELD level 1-3.
Transitional Bilingual	K-3	Transitional bilingual programs use the student's home language to support English language acquisition.
Dual Language	K-12	Instruction is delivered in both English and a target language, but the student body is comprised of speakers from both languages. The goal is for both groups of students to develop proficiency in both languages.
English Learner Newcomer Program	6-12	This program is for students who have arrived in the United States within the past 2 years. The goal is for newcomers to acquire early intermediate/ intermediate academic English language proficiency while also developing core academic skills.
Accelerated Learning Program for LTELs	6-12	The goal of this program is to accelerate both academic ELD and attain academic proficiency in core content subjects for ELs who have been in L.A. Unified's school system for more than 5 years.

Figure 2. Logic Model for L.A. Unified EL Programs

Inputs		Activities		Outcomes
• ELs are identified. • Teachers are qualified. • Parents receive orientation and training.	→	• ELD instruction is provided to all ELs. • Some ELs enroll in dual language programs. • Instruction is culturally and linguistically relevant.	→	• ELs are English proficient. • ELs can access core content. • ELs are bilingual and biliterate.* • ELs are college- and career-ready.

* Note. Dual language programs are the only EL programs that explicitly develop biliteracy and bilingualism. This logic model is adapted from the District's 2018 Master Plan for English Learners and Standard English Learners.

All EL programs in the District have the ultimate goal of developing English proficiency, ensuring that ELs can access core content, and making sure that ELs are college- and career-ready. All ELs, regardless of program enrollment, should receive English language development (ELD), an instructional block that focuses on developing the four domains of language: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Though a recent Board Resolution (047-17/18) proposes that all students will graduate bilingual and biliterate, not all EL programs develop biliteracy and bilingualism (e.g., structured English immersion, mainstream English, transitional bilingual education).

Logic models, as seen above, can help stakeholders understand the relationship between program inputs, activities, and outcomes. Figure 2 outlines the major components of EL programs in the District. For example, crucial inputs into a successful EL program include, but are not limited to, qualified teachers and informed parents. Qualified teachers can then deliver the activities needed (e.g., ELD instruction) for ELs to achieve the desired outcome of being college- and career-ready.

How are ELs Reclassified?

For English learners, reclassifying to fluent English proficient indicates the ability to function in participation in the core curricula and greater interaction with fluent English-speaking peers, both of which support college- and career-readiness.

In L.A. Unified, the reclassification criteria consist of:

1. Objective assessment of English language proficiency;
2. Teacher evaluation in the form of course marks;
3. Basic skills assessments, which can include SBAC scores, Reading Inventory, or DIBELS; and
4. Parent approval.

Though these four criteria are present across all grades, the specifics may vary. For instance, ELs in first grade can demonstrate proficiency in basic literacy skills by taking the DIBELS, but ELs in the middle and high school grades must demonstrate proficiency through the SBAC or the Reading Inventory. ELs must meet all four criteria in order to reclassify.

Measures of English language proficiency are the most fundamental requirement for reclassification because they assess whether an EL still requires English language development support or no longer needs specialized language support services. It is common for state and local educational agencies to include an academic criterion for reclassification, but this practice is debated amongst researchers and policymakers.

The main argument for including academic criteria is to ensure that students are linguistically and academically prepared to succeed in mainstream academic courses. However, critics argue that ELs should not be held accountable for poor academic performance that may stem from limited educational opportunities rather than lack of English proficiency. In addition, critics also posit that academic proficiency is different from language proficiency, and one should not be used to assess the other.

Some researchers suggest that reclassification decisions should emphasize scores on English mainstream classrooms without specialized language and academic support. Reclassification is a milestone for English learners because it can lead to full

language proficiency tests and deemphasize academic test scores.[6] In addition, some argue that it is more appropriate to view reclassification as a cause potentially *affecting* academic outcomes, rather than a yardstick to measure the effectiveness of a program.

It may be tempting to compare reclassification rates between districts as a way of comparing EL progress; however, we caution against doing so. Comparing reclassification rates across districts is difficult because districts and states set their own reclassification criteria. As an example, approximately half of ELs were reclassified within 3 years of school entry in New York City and Massachusetts.[7] However, researchers looking at a medium-sized, urban district in California found that the median time to reclassification in their study was 8 years.[8] One possible explanation for this difference is that New York and Massachusetts rely on the state English language proficiency assessment for reclassification and do not consider content-area assessments in English language arts. As a result, students reclassify more quickly in these states than they do in California.

There are also differences in reclassification criteria between districts that reside in the same state. While L.A. Unified required a score of 300 or above on the California Standards Test for reclassification, other districts in California required a score of 325 or above.[9] If the District is interested in comparing its reclassification rate to other districts, it should only do so with districts that require the same criteria for reclassification.

In L.A. Unified, ELs become long-term English learners (LTELs) if they have not reclassified after more than 6 years in U.S. schools. LTELs are not unique to L.A. Unified. Estimates suggest that between 25%-50% of all ELs who enter U.S. schools in primary grades become LTELs. LTELS require close monitoring because they are more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to complete college.[10]

Research Questions

Reaching the threshold for reclassification is important for ELs, as it should lead to full access to core content classes, which, in turn, can affect college- and career-readiness. Since reclassification can affect long-term academic outcomes, it is important to understand reclassification trends in the District. This report aims to understand these trends and ensure that District policies are providing the greatest benefit for our English learners. The research questions addressed in this report are:

1) How long does it take ELs to reclassify in L.A. Unified?
2) What factors are associated with reclassification?
3) What is the relationship between native language proficiency and reclassification?
4) Do reclassification probabilities differ across programs (e.g., dual language, transitional bilingual, structured English immersion, and mainstream English)?
5) How do reclassification patterns change across cohorts?

SECTION TWO: METHODS

Data

To estimate time to reclassification in L.A. Unified, we followed 14 cohorts of students who entered the District as ELs in kindergarten. The data span the years 2002-2003 through 2016-2017 and contains information from 345,078 students. Each cohort is defined by the year that students entered kindergarten. The earliest cohort entered kindergarten during the 2002-2003 school year and the most recent cohort entered kindergarten in 2015-2016.[11]

Since we only look at ELs who enter the district in kindergarten, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to all ELs in the district. Although it is important to assess time to reclassification for ELs who enter the District at other grades, we are missing important information from this group of students, such as initial English language proficiency. ELs who enter the District at other grades may have attended school in other districts in the United States or in other countries prior to enrolling in L.A. Unified. As such, we have limited information on their prior schooling which makes it difficult to accurately model their time to reclassification.

The data contain information on student background characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, grade level, participation in gifted and talented education, eligibility for special education services, free/reduced price meal eligibility, and parent education level), scores on the California English Language Development Test, reclassification dates, participation in bilingual programs, and native language proficiency (measured by preLAS Spanish scores).[12]

Across all cohorts of students, approximately 92% of students are native Spanish speakers, 92% qualify for free or reduced price meals, 13% qualify for special education services, and 10% were ever in a bilingual or dual language program during their time in the District.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Sample (N=345,078)

	Percent
Female	49.0%
Home language	
Spanish	92.4%
Korean	1.2%
Armenian	1.1%
Tagalog	0.7%
Cantonese	0.5%
Other language	3.9%
Free/reduced price meal eligible	91.9%
Transitional bilingual program	6.3%
Dual language program	3.7%
Gifted	9.2%
Special education	13.1%
Parent education Level	
High school or less	51.4%
Some college or more	12.9%
Unknown	35.7%

Methods

Prior studies that estimate time to reclassification have been largely unable to provide an accurate picture of EL reclassification patterns because it is difficult to account for ELs who leave the district before being reclassified. For these students, we do not know how long it took for them to reclassify. Even studies that have followed large cohorts of ELs over time have been unable to account for this group of ELs.[13] Failing to account for these students leads to inaccurate estimates of time to reclassification because students who leave the district are typically different from those who remain in the district. As a result, the estimates from these prior studies cannot be generalized to all ELs within a school district.

To more accurately estimate time to reclassification, we employ a statistical method called discrete-time survival analysis. We chose this method because it was explicitly designed to estimate time to an event—in this case, time to reclassification. In addition, this method allows us to account for ELs who leave the District before reclassifying. More information about the statistical methods used in this study can be found in the Appendix.

In our study, time is modeled as years in the District and *not* grade level. For the vast majority of students (91%), their grade level is an appropriate indicator of the number of years they have spent in school. However, for students who are retained or skipped a grade, their grade in school does not reflect the number of years they have spent in school. To more accurately capture the amount of time students have spent in school, we use years in the District, and the results in the following section should be interpreted using the appropriate time unit.

SECTION THREE: RESULTS

How Long Does it Take Kindergarten ELs to Reclassify?

Research shows that it takes 4 to 7 years for English learners to acquire academic English. Indeed, we find that the median[14] time to reclassification in L.A. Unified is 6 years, and this number ranges between 4 and 6 years across the various subgroups. For instance, the median time to reclassification is 5 years for female students and 6 years for male students. The median time to reclassification for students in transitional bilingual and dual language programs is 6 years and 5 years, respectively.

Though students in mainstream English have a median reclassification time of 3 years, it is important to note that students in dual language programs have higher *overall* reclassification rates compared to students in mainstream English programs. We present median time to reclassification as a way of understanding the variation in reclassification time; different students have different needs. Median time to reclassification should *not* be used to measure program effectiveness.

Table 3. Median Time to Reclassification by Student Group (N=345,078)

	Number	Median Time to Reclassification
Female	169,000	5 years
Male	176,000	6 years
Migrant	1,000	5 years
Home language		
Spanish	319,000	6 years
Korean	5,000	4 years
Armenian	4,000	4 years
Tagalog	3,000	4 years
Cantonese	1,632	4 years
Other language	13,000	5 years
Free/reduced price meal eligible	334,000	6 years
Program model		
Transitional bilingual	21,000	6 years
Dual language	13,000	5 years
Mainstream English (ELD level 4-5 or parent waiver)	18,000	3 years
Structured English immersion (ELD level 1-3)	293,000	6 years
Gifted	32,000	4 years
Special education	45,000	11 years
Parent education level		
High school or less	177,000	5 years
Some college or more	44,000	5 years
Unknown	123,000	6 years

Estimates for student subgroups are presented in Table 3. All subgroups of students fall within the 4 to 7 year reclassification window except for students with special needs. For students with special needs, the median time to reclassification is 11 years.

The time frame for reclassification identified by prior research[15] appears consistent with data for the vast majority of students in L.A. Unified. More research is needed to understand why the median time to reclassification for students with special needs is substantially higher.

After spending 6 years in the District, approximately 64% of students have been reclassified. By definition, all students who have not reclassified after 6 years are labeled as long-term English learners (LTELs). In our sample, roughly 36% of students become LTELs. After spending 9 years in the District, which is the end of middle school for most students, we see that 80% of students have reclassified. After 13 years in the District which is the amount of time most students spend in K-12 schooling, 91% of students have reclassified.

Though the vast majority of ELs have reclassified by the end of high school, roughly nine percent of students have not met the criteria for reclassification. A closer look at the nine percent of students who have not reclassified after 13 years in the District reveals that these students are significantly more likely to have qualified for special education services during their time in L.A. Unified. Specifically, 58% of these students are eligible for special education services, compared to 13% for the overall sample. In addition, this group of students is significantly more likely to be male, more likely to qualify for free/reduced price meals, and less likely to have participated in dual language education.

Table 4 displays the number of EL students present in the dataset at the beginning of each year, the number who reclassify during that year, the cumulative likelihood of reclassification, and the probability of reclassification in that year.[16] Year 1 represents the first year that students are in the District, Year 2 represents the second year that students are enrolled in the District, and so on.

Table 4. Life Table for Reclassification of Students Entering L.A. Unified as ELs in Kindergarten, 2002-2003 through 2016-2017

| Years in District	Beginning Number of ELs	Cumulative Likelihood of Reclassification Over Time	Probability of Reclassification in This Year
1	345,078	0.1%	0.1%
2	324,755	6%	6%
3	278,685	21%	18%
4	215,089	37%	22%
5	158,608	49%	21%
6	116,388	64%	35%
7	69,787	72%	25%
8	47,964	77%	18%
9	35,522	80%	18%
10	24,865	83%	14%
11	17,975	85%	16%
12	11,937	89%	24%
13	6,185	91%	29%

Figure 3 visually displays the cumulative likelihood of reclassification, which is the likelihood that ELs will have reclassified by a certain time point. As an example, let's say that we follow a cohort of 1,000 students who entered the District in kindergarten as ELs. At the end of their first year in the District, their cumulative likelihood of reclassification is 0.1%. This means, that by the end of the first year, we predict that one student has reclassified. The cumulative likelihood of reclassification by the end of 2 years is six percent. This means that after 2 years in the District, we predict that 61 students out of the original group of 1,000 will have reclassified; note that this group of 61 includes the one student that reclassified during the first year.

We visually present cumulative probability of reclassification for three groups: all ELs, ELs who have ever qualified for special education (SPED) services, and ELs who never qualified for special education services.

There is a steep increase in the cumulative reclassification rate during the elementary school years (years one through six), and the cumulative probability of reclassification levels off during the middle and high school years. At all points in the graph there is a positive slope, indicating that the District is making progress towards reclassification at all grade levels.

There are differences in reclassification patterns between non-SPED students (see dashed line) and SPED students (see dotted line). After 6 years of schooling, 71% of non-SPED ELs have reclassified compared to 22% of SPED ELs. After 13 years of school, 96% of non-SPED English learners are predicted to reclassify compared to 65% of SPED English learners. It appears that ELs who qualified for special education services may need more support in attaining English proficiency. Policy recommendations for this group of students are discussed later in the report.

Figure 3. Cumulative Probability of Reclassification for Students Entering L.A. Unified as ELs in Kindergarten, from 2002-2003 through 2016-2017
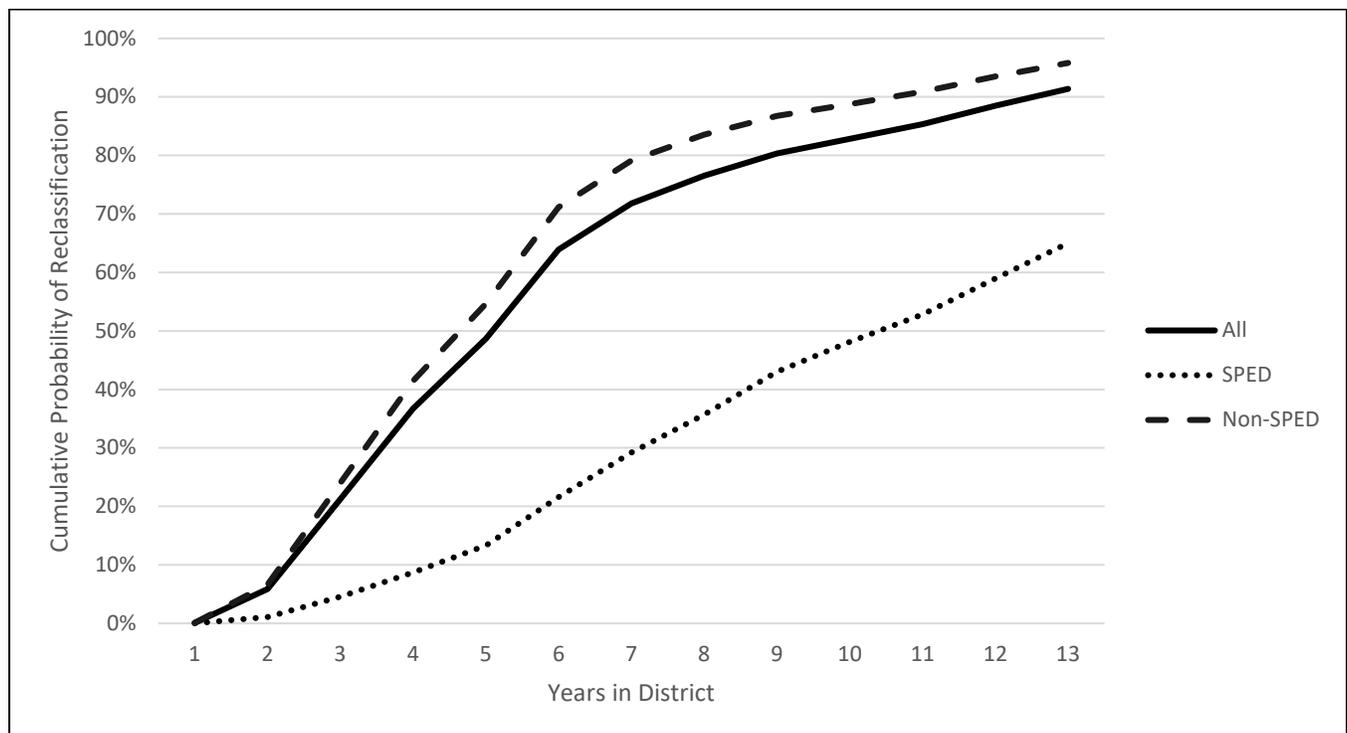
While Figure 3 displays the cumulative reclassification rate over time, Figure 4 models the probability of reclassification for a particular year. Though they appear to be similar, these two statistics provide different information about reclassification patterns. As a reminder, the cumulative reclassification rate includes *all* the students who have reclassified up until, and including, that time period. The probability of reclassification for a particular time period is the likelihood that a student who has *not* yet reclassified will reclassify in that particular year.
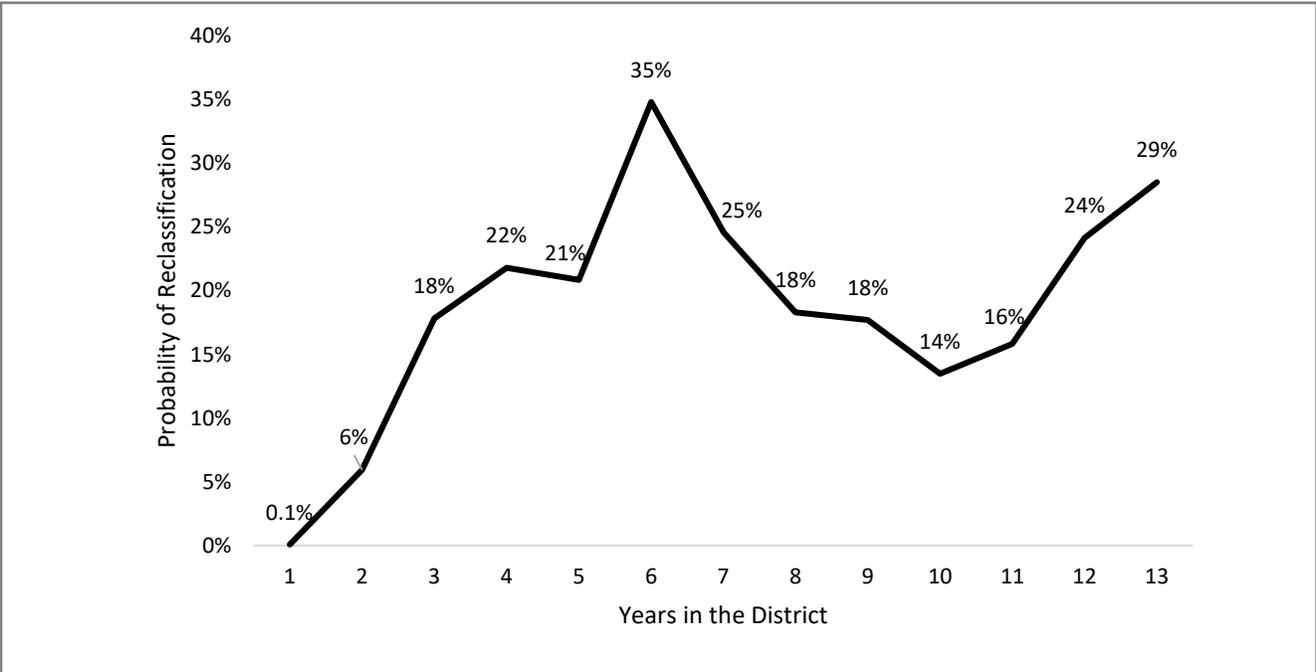
Graphing the probability of reclassification over time reveals that students' likelihood of reclassification rises steadily during elementary school, peaking after students have spent 6 years in the district (when the majority of students are in fifth grade). A students' probability of reclassification climbs from a low of 0.1% during the first year of school, which is kindergarten, and reaches a maximum of 35% in the sixth year of schooling. It

should be noted that low reclassification probabilities in the early grades are not necessarily a concern, because research shows that ELs require 4 to 7 years to acquire academic English.

After this peak at the end of elementary school, the likelihood of reclassification drops steadily, reaching a low of 14% after 10 years in the District. Afterwards, we see that the likelihood of reclassification increases in the second half of high school, reaching a peak of 29%. Future research can examine the middle grades to understand why the likelihood of reclassification drops during this time.

This data indicates that there is a reclassification window during the upper elementary grades. Students not reclassified by this point in time become less likely to do so. This finding echoes other research on time to reclassification.[17] However, there appears to be a second, though smaller, reclassification window during the end of the high school years.

Figure 4. Probability of Reclassification for Students Entering L.A. Unified as ELs in Kindergarten, 2002-2003 through 2016-2017

What Factors are Associated with Reclassification?

We find that several factors are associated with a student's probability of reclassification. Students who start kindergarten with higher levels of English proficiency, as measured by the California English Language Development Test, have significantly higher probability of reclassification. Students who score 71 points, or one standard deviation, above the average on the CELDT have 80% higher probability of reclassification than their peers who have average scores on the CELDT. In addition:

- Students who are eligible for special education services are three times *less* likely to be reclassified than their peers.
- Female ELs have 8% higher probability of reclassification than their male counterparts.
- Students with parents with some college education have 14% higher probability of reclassification compared to students whose parents have no college education.

The probability of reclassification also varies by home language. Those who report Spanish as their home language experience lower likelihood of reclassification compared to other home languages. Compared to their Spanish-speaking peers:

- Cantonese-speaking students have 63% higher probability of reclassifying;
- Armenian-speaking students have 11% higher probability of reclassifying;
- Korean-speaking students have 43% higher probability of reclassifying; and
- Tagalog-speaking students have 37% higher probability of reclassifying.

It is important to be clear about what these results are *not* suggesting. These numbers do *not* suggest that Spanish-speaking students come from linguistically impoverished backgrounds. In fact, research shows that students from Spanish-speaking backgrounds come from households rich in linguistic and intellectual resources.[18] The differences in reclassification probabilities across language groups may be explained by systemic factors such as discrimination which may lead to differences in income level or access to financial resources. As an example, 98% of Spanish-speaking ELs in our study qualify for free/reduced meals compared to 65% of Korean-speaking students. There is a significant correlation between language background and eligibility for free/reduced price meals.

These findings show that time to reclassification alone is a poor measure of program effectiveness because it encompasses the relationship between student background characteristics and reclassification. Comparing reclassification rates between schools is misleading.

For example, Sunshine Elementary experiences a reclassification rate of 20% and Rainbow Elementary has a reclassification rate of 15%. These numbers alone do not mean that Sunshine Elementary is better serving their ELs. The higher reclassification rates at Sunshine Elementary might be better explained by the types of students attending the school. ELs at Sunshine Elementary might come from families with greater access to resources (e.g., books in the home, financial resources), and it may be those resources that lead to higher reclassification rates.

Though our model accounts for variables such as parent education level and free/reduced price eligibility, it does not account for all of the factors that may influence reclassification rates (e.g., teacher qualifications). The appendix provides more information on the variables used in this statistical model.

What is the Relationship between Native Language Proficiency and Reclassification?

Native language proficiency is also significantly and positively associated with reclassification rates. We find that a 25 point, or one standard deviation, increase on the preLAS Spanish test is associated with a 12% increase in the likelihood of reclassification, adjusting for student characteristics and program type. To make sense of these numbers, it is useful to know that scores on the preLAS Spanish test range from 0 to 100.

We visually present the relationship between native language proficiency and reclassification probability in Figure 5. We graph the probability of reclassification for three groups of students: students with low proficiency (10th percentile), average proficiency (50th percentile), and high proficiency (90th percentile) on the preLAS Spanish test. For all three groups, reclassification peaks when students have been in the district for 7 years. After this reclassification window, the likelihood of reclassification declines. The probability of reclassification are highest for students with high proficiency in their native language and this is true across all grade levels.

In sum, students have a higher chance of reclassifying when they have strong language skills in their native language.

Figure 5. Probability of Reclassification by Native Language Proficiency in Spanish
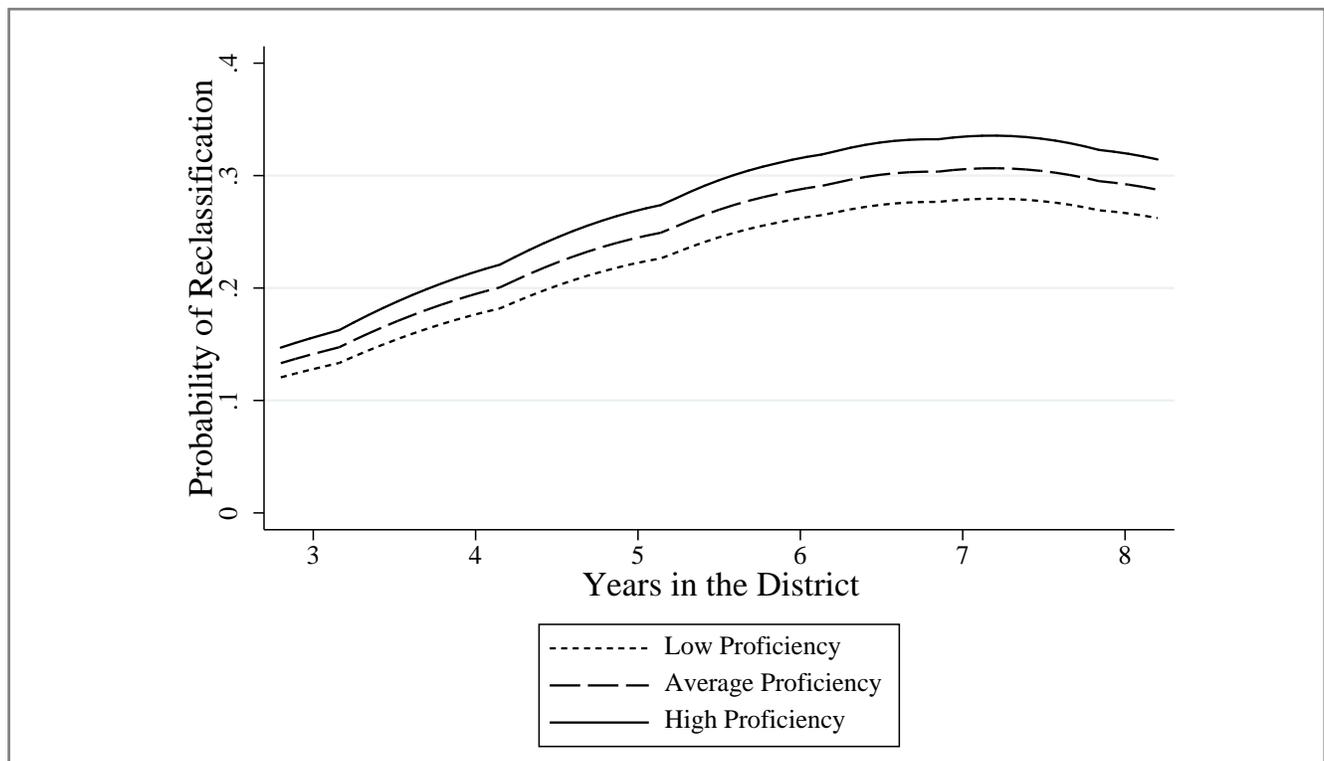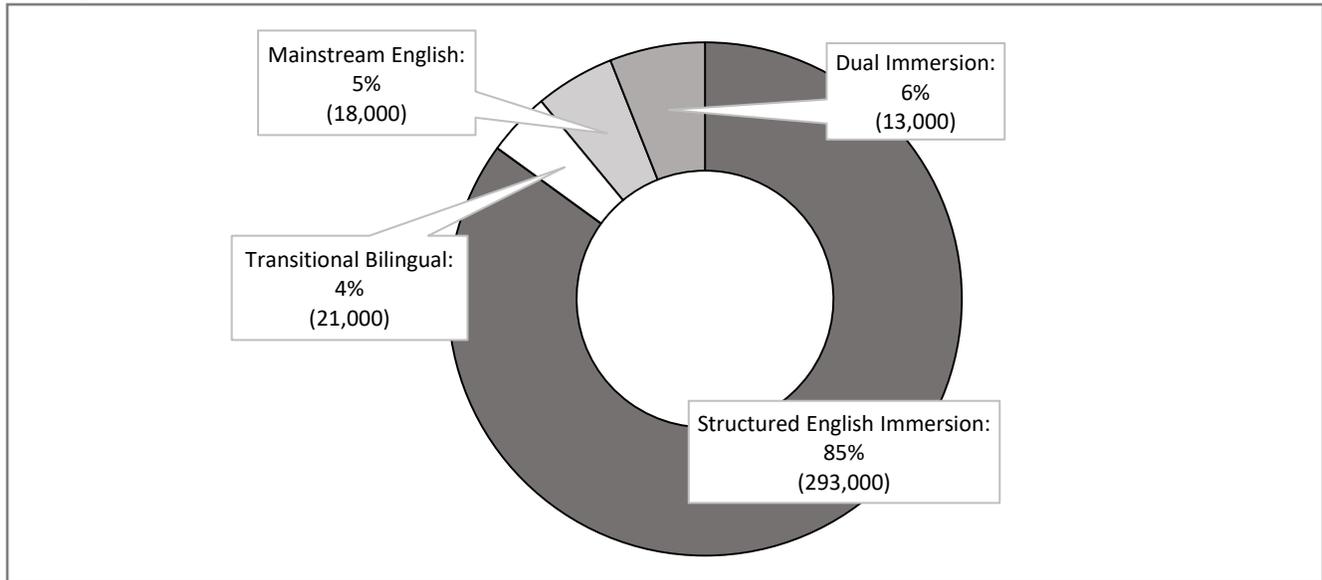
Figure 6. Program Participation Rates for Students Entering L.A. Unified as ELs in Kindergarten, 2002-2003 through 2016-2017

## *Do Reclassification Probabilities Differ by Program?*

During the 2002-2003 through 2016-2017 school years, ELs in L.A. Unified attended four main types of programs: dual immersion, transitional bilingual, structured English immersion, and mainstream English. Across all 14 cohorts of ELs in our study, the majority of students attended a structured English immersion program (85%) at some point during their time in the District, as seen below. Our study finds differences in reclassification patterns across these four program models.

Figure 7 shows the probability of reclassification over time by program model. Students in mainstream English programs reach peak reclassification probability after 3 years in the District. Students in the other three programs—dual immersion, transitional bilingual, and structured

English immersion—reach their peak reclassification window after 6 years in the District. By high school, the reclassification probability for students who previously attended a transitional bilingual program mirror those of students in structured English immersion, as evidenced by the overlap in these two lines.

Though ELs in dual language programs have lower initial likelihood of reclassifying, their likelihood of reclassifying significantly *increases* as they spend more time in a dual language program. For every additional year spent in a dual language program, students' likelihood of reclassification increases by five percent. Compared to ELs in mainstream programs, students in transitional bilingual programs have lower likelihood of reclassification. For every additional year spent in a transitional bilingual program, students' likelihood of reclassification decreases by about nine percent.

Figure 7. Probability of Reclassification by Program, 2002-2003 through 2016-2017
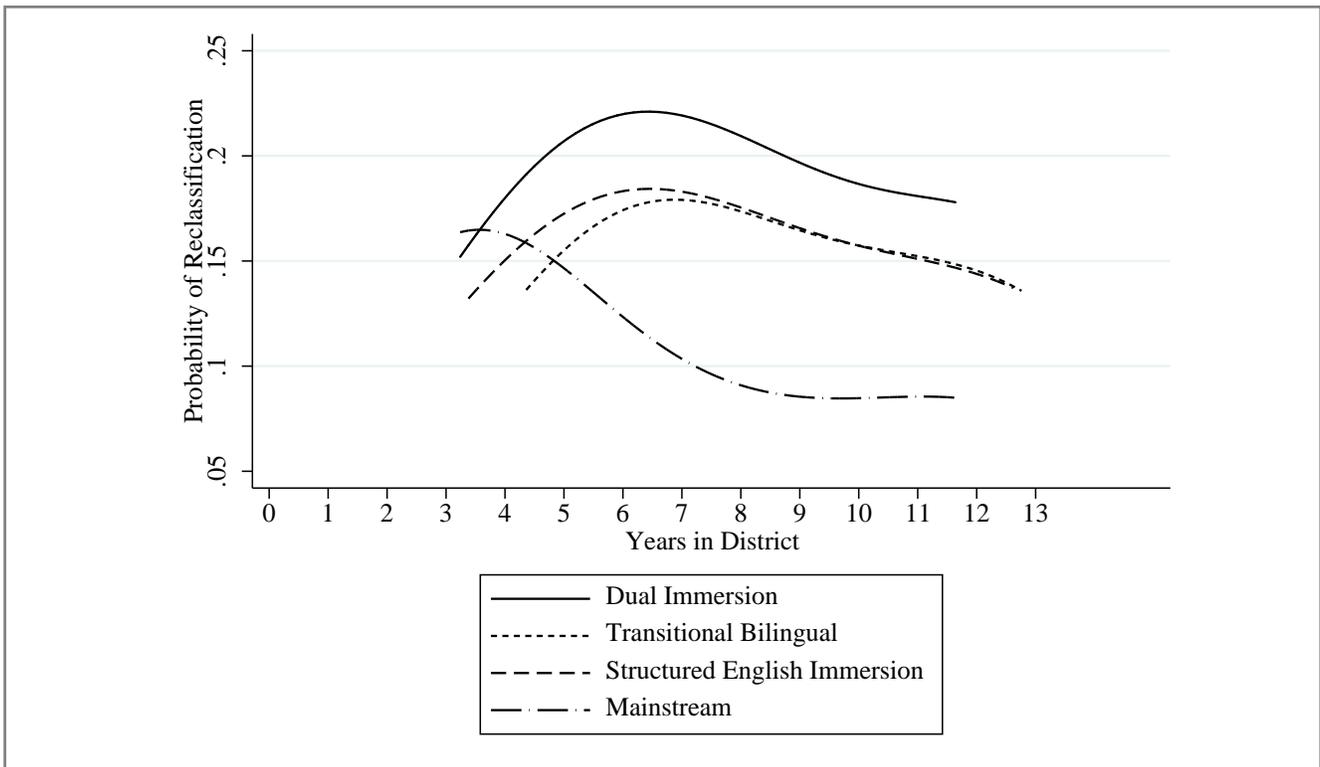
These results mirror those in other studies of dual language programs in California. For instance, researchers studying a large urban district in California with an enrollment of over 50,000 students also found that students in dual language programs have lower initial probability of reclassification but higher probability of reclassification in the later grades.[19] Similarly, a prior study of ELs in L.A. Unified using data from 2001-2002 through 2009-2010 showed that students in bilingual programs may have had lower likelihood of reclassifying compared to students in English immersion. However, students in bilingual programs become increasingly likely to be reclassified in later years. In fact, this prior research found that after 9 years in the District, there are no significant differences in cumulative reclassification probabilities between students in bilingual programs and students who never attended a bilingual program.[20]

Cumulative likelihood of reclassification (Table 5) varies across programs. After 13 years in the District, the cumulative likelihood of reclassification is highest for students who participated in a dual immersion (95%). Students in mainstream English programs have the lowest cumulative probability of reclassification; 88% of students in mainstream English programs have reclassified after 13 years in the District.
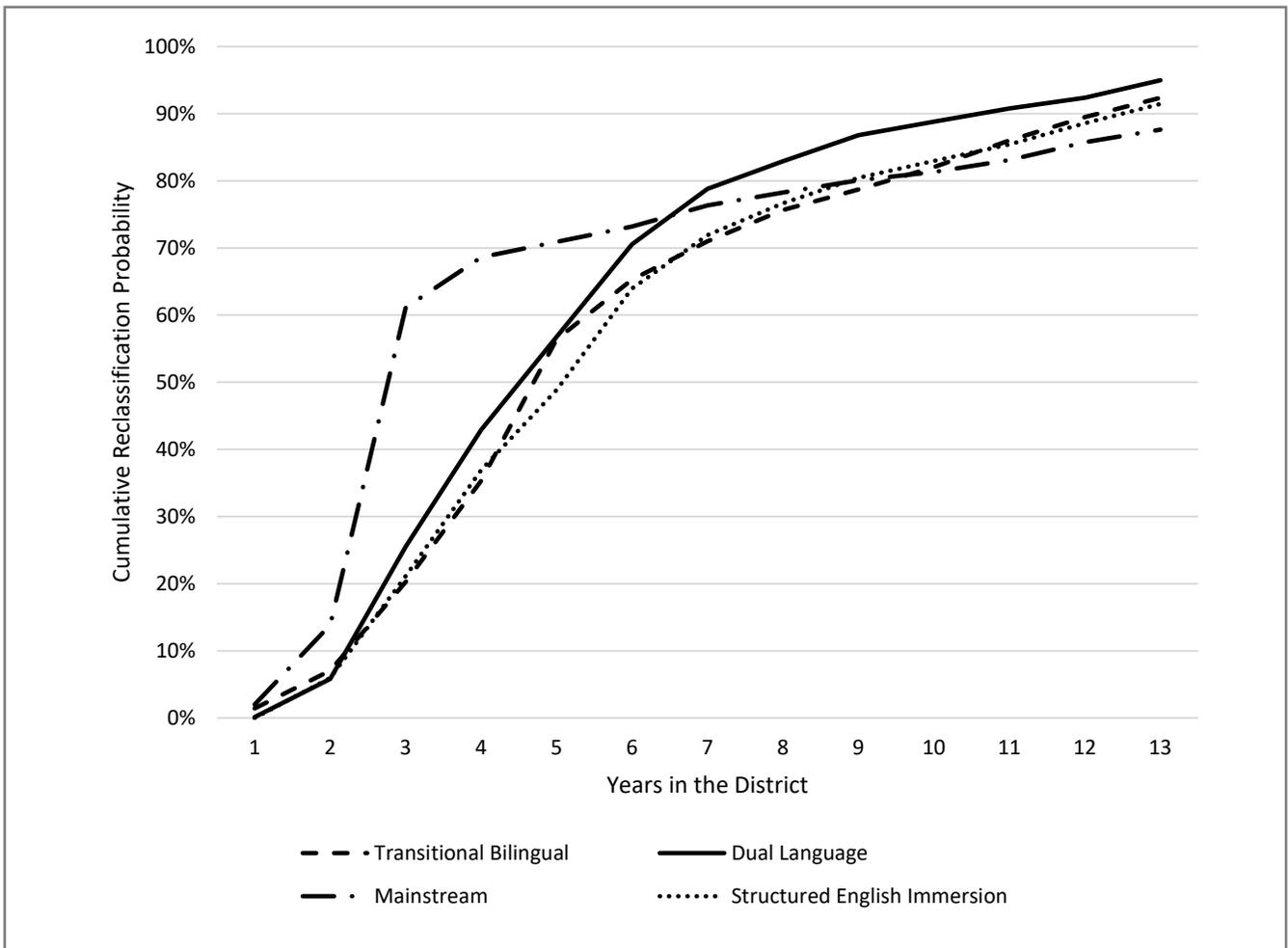
Table 5. Cumulative Likelihood of Reclassification by Program, 2002-2003 through 2016-2017

Years in the District	Transitional Bilingual	Dual Language	Mainstream	Structured English Immersion
1	1%	0%	2%	0%
2	7%	6%	14%	6%
3	20%	26%	61%	21%
4	35%	43%	69%	37%
5	56%	57%	71%	49%
6	65%	71%	73%	64%
7	71%	79%	76%	72%
8	76%	83%	78%	77%
9	79%	87%	80%	80%
10	82%	89%	81%	83%
11	86%	91%	83%	85%
12	90%	92%	86%	89%
13	92%	95%	88%	91%

Short term student outcomes may be misleading, and it is important to consider long-term outcomes when evaluating EL programs, as demonstrated by the various curves in Figure 8. Had we only looked at outcomes after 3 years of school entry, we would come to the inaccurate conclusion that mainstream English programs are better serving ELs than other programs. Three years after school entry, 61% of ELs in mainstream English programs have reclassified compared to 26% of students in dual language programs. However, long-term outcomes paint a very different picture. Eight years after school entry, 87% of students in dual language programs are predicted to reclassify compared to 80% of students in mainstream English programs. Though students in dual language programs experience lower reclassification rates during the early elementary grades, they *surpass* the cumulative likelihood of reclassification for students in mainstream English programs by roughly 6th grade.

Figure 8. Cumulative Likelihood of Reclassification by Program, 2002-2003 through 2016-2017

How Do Reclassification Patterns Change Across Cohorts?

For the first three cohorts in the study, we are able to follow students for at least 13 years. As a result, we are able to compare cumulative likelihood of reclassification across these three cohorts over the entire course of their K-12 schooling.

We find that cumulative likelihood of reclassification has improved across the cohorts.

Students who entered kindergarten in the District as ELs in 2002-2003 reached an overall reclassification rate of 85% compared to students in the 2004-2005 cohort, who reclassified at a rate of 89%. In addition, the 2004-2005 cohort, represented by the solid black line in Figure 9, surpasses the other two lines at all points in the graph. The most recent cohort in this analysis has the highest likelihood of being reclassified at every stage, suggesting that the District is making progress towards reclassifying a greater number of students.

Figure 9. Cumulative Reclassification Rate by Cohort
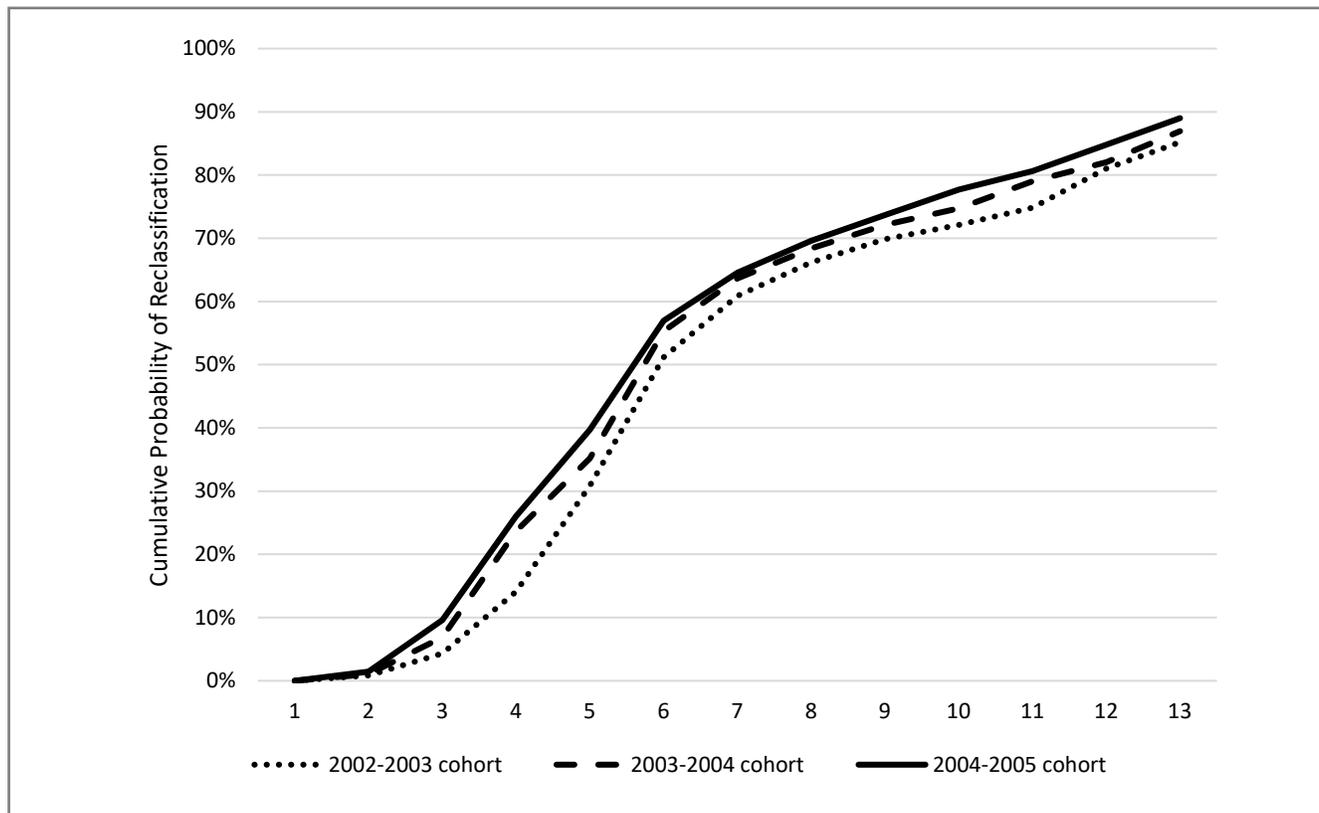
Limitations

In order for the survival analysis used in this report to yield valid estimates of time to reclassification, there should be no differences between students who reclassify during the study (2002-2003 to 2016-2017) and students who leave the district before they reclassify. However, comparing these two groups of students reveals that there are significant differences between the two. As an example, students who reclassify during the study have significantly higher initial English proficiency than students who leave the District before they reclassify. However, the majority (58%) of students do reclassify during the 2002-2003 through 2016-2017 school years, which alleviates some of the concerns about inaccurate estimates. More information on this limitation can be found in Appendix C.

Since our study only includes students who started school with the District in kindergarten as ELs, the results should not be generalized to all ELs. Although it is important to assess time to reclassification for ELs who enter school at other grades, we are missing important information from this group of students, such as participation in dual language programs. ELs who enter the District at other grades may have attended school in other districts in the United States or in other countries prior to enrolling in L.A. Unified. As such, we have limited information on their prior schooling which makes it difficult to accurately model their time to reclassification. Therefore, the findings from this study *only* apply to students who enter the District in kindergarten as ELs.

To accurately measure the relationship between factors such as program model and time to reclassification, our statistical model needs to include all other factors that play a role in time to reclassification. For example, research shows that a teacher's fluency in students' home language is correlated with EL academic outcomes.[21] As such, our model should account for teacher's fluency in students' native language. However, it is difficult to systematically and accurately collect data on teachers' fluency in non-English languages. At best, we have information on whether or not teachers are bilingually certified, but this is a very crude measure for language fluency. Our inability to accurately account for teacher abilities may lead to inaccurate estimates of time to reclassification.

Relatedly, the validity of the estimates relies on the quality of the data. If students are missing information on important dimensions such as parent education level or eligibility for free/reduced price meals, then there is a possibility that the results from this study are inaccurate. As an example, 39% of the students in the study do not have information on parent education level. Measuring the relationship between parent education level and likelihood of reclassification becomes difficult when we do not know the parent education level for a substantial number of students in the study.

Despite these data limitations, there is reason to believe that our estimates are valid. Our statistical model is able to account for a variety of factors including, but not limited to, parent education level, student demographics, school characteristics, program model, and cohort characteristics.

SECTION FOUR: RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Do Not Assume that Schools with Higher Annual Reclassification Rates are Serving Students Better

We demonstrate that time to reclassification varies by program model and by student characteristics. **Students in dual language programs may need more time to reclassify, but they have higher overall reclassification rates in the long run compared to ELs in English-only programs.** In addition, since time to reclassification is strongly correlated with parent education level and other student background characteristics, reclassification rates by themselves are not a valid measure of program quality.

2. Consider English Language Proficiency Growth Measures

Reclassification rates are a rough, and potentially misleading, measure of English learner progress. As such, other factors like CELDT/ELPAC growth measures should be considered alongside reclassification rates. By using growth measures, we can better capture the progress that ELs are making from year to year, particularly in dual language settings where students need more time to reclassify.

The English Learner Progress Indicator, proposed by the California Department of Education, is an example of a growth measure that could replace, or supplement, reclassification rates in understanding EL progress.

3. Ensure Equitable Access to Core Content Instruction

Reclassifying as fluent English proficient can give students greater access to the core curricula and could potentially free up space in their schedule to take college-track courses. According to the 2012 English Learner Master Plan, students receive elective credit for English language development (ELD) courses, and ELD courses do not replace core English classes. In other words, **ELs in high school are required to take ELD courses that do not count towards A-G requirements, which makes it much harder for ELs to complete the coursework required to attend a four-year university in California.**

To ensure that ELD courses are not crowding out content-area courses, the District may consider providing ELs with the opportunity to extend their school day/year. Though some schools offer a "zero period" to increase instructional time for certain students, it is unclear the extent to which all ELs have access to this opportunity.

4. Expand and Evaluate Dual Language Programs in Early Childhood

Students with higher levels of proficiency in their native language and in English are more likely to reclassify, suggesting that a strong foundation in the native language benefits students. Various researchers have already called for the expansion of preschool programs in students' native language.[22] Expanding dual language programs into early childhood education, which the District is already doing, is a step in the right direction. These programs can build on students' existing skills in their native language so they are better positioned for academic success in kindergarten.

During the 2017-2018 school year, the District launched the Dual Language Immersion Pilot for Early Childhood Education in 10 locations across the district, with at least one pilot program in every local and board district. The strategic placement of the pilot programs across the District allows a wide range of families to access these programs.

Since dual language preschool programs are still uncommon, teachers in these new programs may not have adequate resources in the target language and English. An evaluation of the Dual Language Immersion Pilot can include, among many other things, a survey of instructional materials in both languages, language composition of the classrooms, parent trainings, and opportunities for teacher professional development specific to the target language.

5. Target Recruitment for Dual Language Programs Towards Parents of Spanish-Speaking ELs

ELs in dual language programs have higher cumulative reclassification probabilities than ELs in other programs. As discussed previously, 87% of students in dual language programs are predicted to have reclassified after 9 years in the District, compared to 80% of ELs in mainstream English programs.

The outcomes for dual language education are promising. However, **the language group most underserved in the District, Spanish-speaking ELs, are less likely to enroll in dual language programs compared to ELs from other language groups**. While 34% of Korean-speaking ELs in our study have ever participated in a dual language program, only 3% of Spanish-speaking ELs in our study have ever enrolled in a dual language program in the District.

Targeted recruitment of Spanish-speaking ELs can help ensure that ELs from all language groups have equal access to quality instructional programs.

6. Consider Unintended Consequences of Reclassification Policies

We caution against using annual reclassification rates as the sole criteria for evaluating English learner progress. A narrow focus on reclassification rates may pressure schools, fearing corrective action, to reclassify ELs before they are ready to exit the program.

This is **not** to say that reclassification is unimportant as an aspirational goal. The proposed Board Resolution, "Realizing the Promise for All: Close the Gap by 2023," proposes that 100% of students initially identified as English Learners in kindergarten or first grade should be Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) by the end of sixth grade. By the end of sixth grade, the majority of students will have attended school for 7 years. Our study finds that, in the status quo, 72% of ELs reclassify after seven years of school. **It is vital to provide more support to the remaining 28%, which research suggests should be earlier support**

targeted to the needs of those students and not merely program improvement as such.

Earlier reclassification is not necessarily a good thing for everyone. It is important to remember that California policymakers changed the reclassification criteria on the California English Language Development Test in 2006 because of concerns from teachers that ELs were being reclassified too early. Indeed, a study using data from L.A. Unified showed that Latino ELs benefitted when the reclassification criteria were raised.[23] **Specifically, increasing the difficulty for reclassification had a *significant positive effect* on high school ELs' English language arts achievement and graduation rates.** Thus, removing specialized language services prematurely can have negative impacts on EL achievement.

7. Leverage Classroom-level Data to Serve ELs

The District has taken steps to identify and monitor potential and current LTELs. For instance, the Multilingual and Multicultural Education Department (MMED) Dashboard contains a wealth of information about ELs and allows administrators and teachers to track ELs' progress on all of the reclassification criteria.

However, it is unclear the extent to which teachers and administrators are able to leverage the information on the Dashboard. **Reviewing this data at the classroom level is important because the barrier to reclassification varies across grade levels.** Researchers find that the academic requirement for reclassification (e.g., CST, SBAC) is the biggest hurdle for secondary students while the CELDT Reading subtest is the largest hurdle for elementary school ELs.[24] Data from the MMED Dashboard will allow teachers to identify the specific barriers to reclassification for their students and tailor instruction to address these areas.

8. Focus on ELs with Special Needs

It is concerning to see that the median time to reclassification for ELs with special needs is 11 years, which is nearly twice as long as the median time to reclassification for all students in our sample.

More research is needed to understand why ELs with special needs take longer to reclassify and how we can increase their access core content. It might be tempting to attribute this delay to their special needs, but that is an unsatisfactory answer. **It may be more likely that the primary reasons for the difference are related to difficulties with the simultaneous identification of EL and special needs, limited access to quality English Language Development programs, and variations in applying the criteria for reclassification.** Research is needed to parse out these factors, but the results should help the District improve outcomes for ELs with special needs.

As a starting point, Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) is a peer-tutoring program that has been proven to have *positive impacts* on the academic achievement of ELs with special needs. In fact, PALS was rigorously assessed using a randomized control trial. Teachers were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups which consisted of Spanish-speaking ELs with special needs.[25] During the peer-tutoring sessions, students take turns acting as the tutor. Teachers assign tutoring pairs and skill assignment based on student needs and abilities, and teachers reassign tutoring pairs regularly.

9. Identify Barriers to Reclassification in the Middle Grades

More research is needed to understand why the likelihood of reclassification drops in middle school. Students who do not reclassify by the end of 8th grade will continuing taking ELD in high school, which means that there is less time to complete the required coursework to enroll in college.

Recommendations

1. Do not assume that schools with higher annual reclassification rates are serving students better

2. Consider English language proficiency growth measures

3. Ensure equitable access to core content instruction

4. Expand and evaluate dual language programs in early childhood

5. Target Recruitment for Dual Language Programs Towards Parents of Spanish-Speaking ELs

6. Consider unintended consequences of reclassification policies

7. Leverage classroom-level data to serve English learners

8. Focus on English learners with special needs

9. Identify barriers to reclassification in the middle grades

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SECTION FIVE: CONCLUSION

In sum, reclassification rates in L.A. Unified have improved over the last 15 years. The median time to reclassification in the District is 6 years, which aligns with prior research that says ELs need 4 to 7 years to acquire academic English. Cohort cumulative likelihood of reclassification has risen from 85% for the 2002-2003 cohort to 89% for the 2004-2005 cohort. However, there is more work to be done. Six years after school entry, 64% of ELs in the District have reclassified, leaving 36% of ELs to become long-term English learners.

The District should consider utilizing growth measures to more accurately assess English learner progress. CELDT/ELPAC growth measures are objective and provide a more exact scale for measuring growth compared to the binary reclassify-or-not indicator. The English Learner Progress Indicator, proposed by the California Department of Education, is an example of a growth measure that could be used to measure EL progress.

It is important to note that the results in this study should *not* be used as evidence for program effectiveness in the District. Though the District has taken many steps towards improving the educational outcomes of ELs and it is possible that dual language programs in the District are effective, the research design employed in this study does not allow for cause-and-effect statements. If the District is indeed interested in assessing the effectiveness of dual language programs, the John Hopkins University study of bilingual programs which uses random assignment is a good example of an appropriate research design.[26]

The majority of ELs are reclassifying within the literature suggested time frame of 4 to 7 years, and the District has taken serious steps towards monitoring and supporting ELs. Annual reclassification rates are a poor indicator of program quality, because students require different times to meet the threshold for reclassification, and the criteria may be applied inconsistently to different groups of students. We caution against reclassification policies that pressure teachers to reclassify ELs as quickly as possible. The proper timing of reclassification—not too early and not too late—is crucial in helping ELs become college- and career-ready.

APPENDIX

Appendix A

Discrete-time survival analysis is superior to other regression techniques because it can account for ELs who leave the district or do not experience reclassification by the end of the observation window. Studies that do not account for ELs who experience reclassification outside of the observation window may yield inaccurate estimates of time to reclassification. Furthermore, the model used in this study accounts for students' home language, special education participation, eligibility for free or reduced price meals, participation in a bilingual program, parent education level, cohort year, and school characteristics.

Specifically, we use the Cox proportional hazards model with cohort and school fixed effects to adjust for systematic differences between students within the same cohort and between students within the same school. In other words, estimates from the survival analysis model can be interpreted as the probability of reclassification for students within the same school and the same cohort.

Students with gaps in the dataset (N=3,199) are not included in the survival analysis. In other words, students who left the District as English learners and reentered the district some years later as reclassified English proficient (RFEP) students are excluded from the analysis because it is unclear when these students reclassified. As an example, an EL student who left the district after 2nd grade and returned to the district in 7th grade as RFEP is not included in our survival analysis. This student could have reclassified in 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, or even 7th grade, and there is not enough information in the dataset to make assumptions about when these students reclassified. Students with gaps are significantly less likely to be eligible for special education services, more likely to qualify for free/reduced price meals, and more likely to have attended a transitional bilingual program at some point in their L.A. Unified tenure (see Appendix A Table A). Though students who are dropped from the analysis differ somewhat from students retained in the sample, the students with gaps comprise a small group (N=3,199) relative to the rest of the sample (N=345,078).

Table A. Descriptive Statistics for Final Sample (N=345,078) and Students with Gaps (N=3,199)

	Final Sample (mean/SD)	Students with Gaps (mean/SD)	T-statistic	P-value
Special Education Eligibility	0.13 (0.001)	0.09*** (0.005)	6.38	0.000
Free/Reduced Price Meal Eligibility	0.92 (0.001)	0.95** (0.009)	-2.70	0.007
Female	0.49 (0.001)	0.50 (0.009)	-1.00	0.318
Dual Language	0.04 (0.0003)	0.03 (0.003)	0.74	0.458
Transitional Bilingual	0.06 (0.0004)	0.08*** (0.005)	-2.70	0.007

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses. * p < 0.05. ** p < 0.01. *** p < 0.001.

Appendix B

Table A. Hazard Ratios from Discrete-Time Hazard Model

	Hazard Ratio
Initial English proficiency	1.80***
	(0.008)
Female	1.08***
	(0.005)
Some College Education	1.14***
	(0.007)
Language	
Korean	1.45***
	(0.032)
Armenian	1.12***
	(0.023)
Tagalog	1.37***
	(0.031)
Cantonese	1.63***
	(0.060)
Other Language	1.17***
	(0.016)
Special Education	0.39***
	(0.004)
Free/Reduced Price Meal	1.00
	(0.004)
English Immersion	0.48***
	(0.009)
Dual Language	0.44***
	(0.014)
Years in Dual Language	1.06***
	(0.006)
Transitional Bilingual	0.65***
	(0.018)
Years in Transitional Bilingual	0.93***
	(0.006)

Appendix C

For survival analysis to yield valid estimates, there should be no differences between students who reclassify during the observation window (2002-2003 to 2016-2017) and students who leave the district before they reclassify. Students in the latter group are known as "censored." One way to check for differences between "censored" students and non-censored students is to examine the extent to which these two groups differ on various dimensions such as eligibility for free/reduced price meal. If there is no relationship between student characteristics and censoring, then there is reason to believe that the estimates in the study are valid. If there is a significant relationship between certain variables and censoring, analysis of the direction of these relationships can provide information about the direction of potential bias.

Results from a regression model predicting censoring suggests that there are significant differences between "censored" students and non-censored students (see Table C below). Students with higher CELDT scores are less likely to leave the district before the end of the observation window, suggesting that estimates of time to reclassification might contain positive bias. Another source of potential positive bias is that students in dual language programs are less likely to leave the district compared to students in mainstream English programs. However, students eligible for free/reduced price meals are less likely to leave the district, suggesting negative bias in estimates of time to reclassification. Although we cannot ignore the possibility of biased estimates caused by censoring, analysis suggests that these estimates contain both positive and negative bias.

Table A. Logistic Regression Model Predicting Likelihood of Leaving District before Observation Window Ends

	Hazard Ratios
Initial English proficiency	0.97***
	(0.005)
Female	0.91***
	(0.010)
Some College Education	1.05***
	(0.016)
Language	
Korean	1.04
	(0.048)
Armenian	0.59***
	(0.03)
Tagalog	0.56***
	(0.041)
Cantonese	0.69***
	(0.070)
Other Language	0.74***
	(0.019)
Special Education	1.68***
	(0.025)
Free/Reduced Price Meal	0.86
	(0.005)
English Immersion	0.29***
	(0.012)
Dual Language	0.29***
	(0.012)
Transitional Bilingual	0.48***
	(0.017)

Endnotes

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[11] Even though the 2015-2016 cohort of kindergarten ELs has only been in the District for 2 years, our statistical method—discrete-time survival analysis—can use data from this cohort to estimate time to reclassification.

[12] The preLAS Assessment System (preLAS) is designed to measure primary language proficiency and pre-literacy skills of learners in early childhood—students aged 3 to 6 years old. As of 2013, L.A. Unified does not require ELs to take the preLAS; however, the 2012 English Learner Master Plan does require ELs in bilingual and dual language programs to be assessed in their primary language.

[13] Grissom, J. B. (2004). Reclassification of English learners. E*ducation policy analysis archives*, *12*, 36.

[14] We present median instead of mean time to reclassification because mean estimates are sensitive to outliers, and there are outliers in the data. Our reason for representing median time to reclassification is akin to how the U.S. Census reports median household income instead of mean household income. If a billionaire moved into a low-income neighborhood, her income would dramatically increase the mean household income in the area; therefore, the mean household income in the area is no longer reflective of the neighborhood. Similarly, students who take a very long/short time to reclassify could substantially alter the mean time to reclassification. Thus, median time to reclassification is presented because it is less sensitive to anomalous cases.

[15] Hakuta, K., Butler, Y. G., & Witt, D. (2000). *How Long Does It Take English Learners To Attain Proficiency?*. (Policy Report 2000). Berkeley, CA: University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute.

[16] The results displayed in Table 4 are also known as the baseline estimates because they do not account include adjustments for student and school characteristics; these adjustments are used in answering the second research question.

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