

# California English Learners Raising Achievement From the Bottom

Don Soifer



*July 2010*

## California English Learners Raising Achievement From the Bottom

By Don Soifer  
July 2010

### Executive Summary

California English learners continue to score extremely low on state standardized tests – two out of five at the sixth grade level scored below basic in English Language Arts in 2009, and more than half did so in math. But the trajectory is improving, and the growth significant, especially at the lowest levels of achievement.

For instance:

- Sixth grade English learners scoring below basic in English declined 14 percentage point from 2007-09, a much larger gain than made by English-proficient students.
- Statewide, the 10.8 percent of English learners successfully reclassified as English proficient in 2008-09 represents a 30 percent increase over those reclassified five years earlier.

Meanwhile, a newly-established environment where accountability for results for English learners holds consequences for their school districts, and test scores for all children matter regardless of the language they speak at home, has produced an important new focus on early English learning. This includes innovative new programs around the state that offer reason for optimism that the academic progress underway for this crucial population can continue, and accelerate, to meet the urgent educational needs of the state's 1.5 million English learners. Details follow.

## Introduction

Since California voters approved Proposition 227 in 1998, the language education of the state's English learners has remained a subject of considerable controversy. But as the 1998 kindergarten class prepares to enter its senior year of high school, it would appear that it was the federal No Child Left Behind Act that ultimately produced more significant changes to the education of California's English learners.<sup>1</sup>

For the most part, the drastic changes Proposition 227 required never materialized: rather than a statewide bilingual ban and one-year English immersion classes, a new emphasis on early English instruction has been broadly, although gradually, implemented. New innovations being implemented in schools across the state, such as formal Response to Intervention programs for English learners (Chula Vista), structured English immersion (Madera and elsewhere) and dual-language immersion (widespread), and the development of new, research-based strategies for professional development for teachers (Los Angeles Unified), have begun to demonstrate important results.

English learners still remain the lowest performing group in California schools. But this new momentum has produced standardized test scores that have varied between keeping pace with other students and making impressive gains.

These gains have largely slipped by under the radar and seem to be seldom discussed. One reason for this lack of attention to significant growth may be that the most impressive gains occurred at the lowest ends of the learning spectrum – specifically referring to the increased number of English learners who have advanced enough to escape the dreaded “below basic” categories of performance on standardized state English Language Arts and math tests. These are essential gains, and in many cases, especially for elementary school children, they may represent the difference between graduating high school and dropping out. When it comes to demonstrating proficiency as defined by state standards, and at higher levels of student achievement, the growth by California English learners have been more modest.

### *Sixth grade EL students scoring below basic in English declined 14 percentage points from 2007-09.*

The gains by English learners (who have attended U.S. schools for at least 12 months) at the third and sixth grade levels have held steady and significant as the percentage of Spanish-speaking English learners in California elementary schools has remained relatively flat. Combined with slow but consistent growth in the rates at which these students

have been successfully reclassified into the mainstream as English proficient, they represent important, if hard-fought movement in a positive direction in the state whose schools educate more than one-fourth of the nation's English learners.

Sixth grade English learners (EL) raised their scores on California's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) assessment program at a pace that lifted their scores out of “below basic” in English Language Arts significantly faster than the rest of the school population between 2007 and 2009.

In 2007, 57 percent of sixth grade EL students with a year of U.S. schooling scored below basic in English. By 2009, that number had fallen to 43 percent, a decline of 14 percentage points. In comparison, the number of all California sixth graders, including EL students, scoring below basic fell by 8 percentage points over this period, to 19 points.

They also made gains in math that were comparable to, but slightly less than, state averages. English learners in the sixth grade also improved their math scores, at levels comparable to, but slightly less than, state averages. Three percent climbed above the below basic category between 2007-09, just slightly less than the four percent of sixth grade students overall who made the same transition.<sup>2</sup>

At the third grade level, English learners also outgained students as a whole: the number testing below basic in 2009 was 4 percentage points lower in reading (46 percent), and 8 percentage points lower in math (24 percent), than in 2007. This compared with gains of 3 percentage points in reading, and 6 points in math, at these levels for third grade students statewide.

Generally, English learners in California improved their scores on state tests for reading and math at the third and sixth grade levels at a comparable rate with all students overall. Nonetheless, the fact remains that 43 percent of English learners in the sixth grade scored below basic in English, with 52 percent scoring below basic in math.

*A 30 percent increase over the number of English learners redesignated during 2003-04 statewide.*

Overall, California Latinos (including Spanish-speaking English learners) made slight gains in the learning gap with white students between 2003 and 2009. At all grade levels, Latinos improved their proficiency rates by 17 percentage points in English Language Arts, while white and black students each increased by 15 percentage points over this same period. English learners as a group (all grades) lost ground, gaining 10 percentage points.<sup>3</sup>

There were no changes in “cut score” or definitions of the performance levels between 2003 and 2009, according to the California Department of Education. It should also be noted that these scores represent a “snapshot” comparison of the performance of students in each grade, as opposed to a “longitudinal” tracking of individual student growth. See appendix for data tables.

## Reclassification Gains

Meanwhile, the rate at which children are reclassified from English learner status into the educational mainstream also continues to climb. At 10.8 percent statewide for the 2008-09 school year, this represents a 30 percent increase over the number of English learners redesignated during 2003-04.

While this represents a positive direction, it still means that it will take, on average, 10 years for the average English learner to obtain adequate English skills to be reclassified into the educational mainstream. While students who have successfully been reclassified as proficient are among California's top-performing, English learners face steep educational odds with many important indicators working against them. California's English learners are significantly more likely to attend overcrowded middle or high schools, and less likely to be taught by qualified teachers.<sup>4</sup>

**Percentage of EL Students Redesignated to English Proficient  
Top 50 California School Districts by EL Population**

<b>DISTRICT</b>	<b>Averaged 2003-04 and 2004-05</b>	<b>2008-09</b>	<b>% Change 2003-05 to 2008-09</b>
LOS ANGELES UNIFIED	6.0	14.8	8.8
SAN DIEGO UNIFIED	9.4	8.2	-1.2
SANTA ANA UNIFIED	8.3	6.9	-1.4
LONG BEACH UNIFIED	17.5	11.8	-5.7
SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED	10.0	8.7	-1.3
ELK GROVE UNIFIED	16.5	15.6	-0.9
SAN JOSE UNIFIED	6.5	10.2	3.7
ALUM ROCK UNION ELEMENTARY	5.5	10.1	4.6
CORONA-NORCO UNIFIED	10.4	19.9	9.5
MADERA UNIFIED	4.2	11.4	7.2
ALHAMBRA UNIFIED	0.0	13.8	13.8
GLENDALE UNIFIED	22.7	16.2	-6.5
<b>STATE TOTALS</b>	<b>8.7</b>	<b>10.8</b>	<b>2.1</b>

Source: California Department of Education, Dataquest

California state policies delegate to school districts the establishment of procedures and criteria for reclassifying English learners. Districts must include student performance on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), which English learners are required to take annually, as one of four criteria.<sup>5</sup> Major changes to CELDT during the 2006-07 school year, including incorporating a common scale and new cut scores between performance levels, complicate efforts to track progress on the test comparatively.<sup>6</sup>

### **Districts Report Varying Results**

The proficiency improvements were largely driven by impressive gains in a number of California's largest school districts. Santa Ana Unified, for instance, with the highest percentage of English learners among California's ten largest school districts, was also one of the most successful at reducing the rate at which these students placed in scores of below basic. While 62 and 63 percent of English learners in Santa Ana scored at below basic in English and math in 2007, these numbers were reduced to 44 and 54 percent, respectively, in 2009.

Madera Unified in Central California was among the school districts with the most success lowering the numbers of third grade English learners scoring below basic (from 48 to 43 percentage points in English Language Arts and from 11 to 7 in math). The district implemented a range of new programs and interventions that included a structured English immersion program as well as a general emphasis on early English instruction, according to educational consultant Kevin Clark. The programs produced substantially higher test scores for English learners, and also resulted in the reclassification rate quadrupling to 12 percent, says Clark.<sup>7</sup>

Riverside County's Corona-Norco Unified was one of California's top performers at lifting English learner test scores out of the below basic range. A full 15 percent fewer English learners fell into this category in 2009 than had two years before in both English Language Arts and math.

The district's EL reclassification rate has remained one of the highest in the state, at 19.9 percent for 2008-09. Normally, a school district that is more aggressive about moving English learners to proficiency and reclassifying them accordingly would be expected to have lower average test scores for those children who remain in that category, but Corona-Norco has dispelled such low expectations. District officials point to a comprehensive range of reforms, including deploying dedicated staff as "EL specialists" to review individual growth plans and interventions that keep children engaged, as well as a two-way immersion programs in some schools.<sup>8</sup>

## Los Angeles Trends

Los Angeles Unified, as the second largest school district in the country, inevitably holds a prominent place in discussions of state education policies. This is especially true where English learners are involved, because it is among California's ten largest districts with the next-largest English learner population after Santa Ana, just over one in three students. Statewide, one in four California elementary and secondary students are English learners. While children attending Los Angeles Unified schools speak over 50 languages, 85 percent of them speak Spanish, according to the California Department of Education.

Los Angeles is also one of the school districts driving the state's rising rates at which English learners are transitioned to the mainstream. While only 4.2 percent of Los Angeles English learners were reclassified during the 2003-04 school year, this number has grown to 14.8 percent during 2008-09.

***14.8 percent of Los Angeles English learners were reclassified during 2008-09, more than three times the rate from five years earlier.***

This increase makes Los Angeles one of a number of school districts leading the increases in statewide reclassification rates. Glendale (16.2 percent), Long Beach (11.8), Anaheim

Elementary (13.4) and Elk Grove (15.6) all exceed state averages for 2008-09, and Corona-Norco has set the pace at 19.9 percent.

A 2009 analysis of the academic performance of Los Angeles' English learners by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute showed that reclassification did not occur uniformly, and that large groups of children were missing the opportunity. Using data for the six years prior to 2006, the study noted that fifth grade was by far the most frequent year for reclassifying English learners, followed by sixth grade. It also noted that 29 percent of English learners had still not been reclassified by the eighth grade.<sup>9</sup> These children face extremely steep odds academically, and are more likely to drop out of school than ever to achieve "English proficient" status.

Some of its strongest improvements in standardized test scores by English learners occur in sixth grade English Language Arts, where scores remain low, but are improving – 67 percent of Los Angeles Unified sixth graders scored below basic in 2009, down from 76 percent in 2007.

## Other Trends and Implications

A 2010 study by the Center on Education Policy seems to reinforce the data from Los Angeles and other large districts, noting varying degrees of consistent test score gains by California English learners. The report observed that fourth grade English learners demonstrated smaller percentage-point gains in reading than students as a whole between 2006 and 2008 at the advanced and proficient levels, but slightly larger gains than average at reaching the basic level of achievement. Over this period, the rate of all students scoring basic or higher increased from 90 to 95 percent, while the number of English learners increased from 83 to 89 percent.<sup>10</sup>

The Center also noted a decline of 14 percent in the number of English learners taking state reading tests between 2006 and 2008. The report attributed this to fluctuation in immigration patterns, and did not suggest that the former trend was influenced by the latter.<sup>11</sup>

California's track record over the past decade compares favorably with most other states with regard to including English learners in school accountability systems, but this trend has improved under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability requirements.

"Prior to NCLB, the English learner student population was often overlooked. Little to no accountability for the learning of these students existed," wrote the National Council of La Raza in 2006.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Illinois had a 1,141 percent increase in English learners taking the fourth grade state reading test as a result of NCLB testing rules.<sup>13</sup>

The increased transparency and implications for English learner performance on standardized tests has made schools, and the school boards responsible for their policy directions, regularly mindful of their results. One aspect of these accountability requirements is to maintain a focus on the rate at which English learners are successfully transitioned to proficiency in English. California has fiercely resisted federal proposals to mandate statewide policies, as opposed to the state's current system which allows states to determine their own reclassification rules and procedures.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act “Blueprint” documents published by the Obama Administration earlier this year emphasized that it would be a legislative priority to evaluate the effectiveness of state language instruction programs. While no supporting details were included, it is doubtful that any comprehensive new federal accountability proposals in this area would allow for large discrepancies between districts like those that have become common California.

In 2010, for example, 41 percent of Spanish-speaking English learners passed the CELDT English proficiency test, four times higher than the number of students reclassified statewide last year as proficient in English.<sup>14</sup>

Last year, the Chair of California’s Senate Education Committee proposed moving the timeframe that students take CELDT to later in the fall. “Students return from summer break and are tested just weeks into their new classes,” she said. “It’s inconceivable that we would test children for language proficiency before they are taught what they need to learn.”<sup>15</sup>

As policymakers deliberate future policy directions for this crucial and growing segment of the U.S. population, it is essential that these trends and results remain a central focus. This is especially true in California, and its more than 1.5 million English learners, whose educational and economic futures hold major implications far beyond the communities in which they live.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Edward Flores et.al., *¿Que Pasa? Are ELL Students Remaining in English Learning Classes Too Long?* Tomás Rivera Institute, 2009; *Has Progress Been Made in Raising Achievement for English Language Learners*, Center on Education Policy, April 2010; *Effects of the Implementation of Proposition 227 on the Education of English Learners, K-12*, American Institutes for Research, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> State testing rules require that Spanish-speaking English learners who either received instruction in Spanish or were enrolled in a U.S. school for less than 12 months must take the Standards-based Tests in Spanish (STS), and school districts have discretion to administer the STS to other Spanish-speaking English learners. But students who take the STS are also required to take the relevant English-language state standardized exam. Statewide, the number of students taking the STS test has declined slightly since 2007, especially in the lower primary grades.

<sup>3</sup> *Standardized Testing and Reporting Program: Summary of 2009 Results*, California Department of Education, August 18, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> John Rogers, et.al., *California Educational Opportunity Report*, UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education and Access, 2009, pp 7-12.

<sup>5</sup> *California English Language Development Test: Information for School Districts and School Staff*, California Department of Education, August 2009.

<sup>6</sup> *English Learners in California: What the Numbers Say*, EdSource, March 2008, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Clark, "The Case for Structured English Immersion," *Educational Leadership* (April 2009), pp. 42-46.

<sup>8</sup> Joanne Jacobs, *The Education of Jaime Capellan*, Lexington Institute, June 2008, pp. 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Flores et.al., p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Has Progress Been Made in Raising Achievement for English Language Learners*, Center on Education Policy, April 2010, Table CA-8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, page 8.

<sup>12</sup> Melissa Lazarín, *Improving Assessment and Accountability for English Language Learners in the No Child Left Behind Act*, National Council of La Raza, 2006, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Has Progress Been Made in Raising Achievement for English Language Learners*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Fermin Leal, "44 Percent of Orange County English Learners Pass Test," *The Orange County Register*, May 21, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Senator Gloria Romero, Press Release, May 1, 2009.

California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Results, 2007-2009

All Students

	2007 3rd Grade		2008 3rd Grade		2009 3rd Grade		2007 6th Grade		2008 6th Grade		2009 6th Grade	
	<Basic	≥Prof.	<Basic	≥Prof.	<Basic	≥Prof.	<Basic	≥Prof.	<Basic	≥Prof.	<Basic	≥Prof.
<b>LOS ANGELES UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	38	28	36	29	35	34	43	26	33	33	31	37
Math	25	53	21	57	20	60	44	26	40	31	39	35
<b>SAN DIEGO UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	29	39	27	40	25	48	24	44	21	49	17	55
Math	20	61	19	62	15	66	27	43	26	46	25	50
<b>SANTA ANA UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	44	20	35	22	40	25	38	25	30	29	30	33
Math	29	46	21	53	18	59	42	25	36	29	38	34
<b>LONG BEACH UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	30	36	28	35	29	41	28	38	22	43	20	46
Math	18	62	12	68	12	69	33	34	31	38	28	42
<b>ELK GROVE UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	25	44	24	43	24	48	20	51	17	55	14	59
Math	17	63	17	64	15	66	20	55	21	52	20	57
<b>SAN JOSE UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	29	41	26	42	27	48	26	47	25	48	22	53
Math	21	61	18	61	18	66	31	44	30	45	29	49
<b>ALUM ROCK UNION ELEM.</b>												
ELA	41	25	40	22	35	31	39	28	37	29	28	38
Math	29	49	26	49	21	57	42	29	41	28	32	39
<b>CORONA-NORCO UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	25	42	19	44	21	50	18	51	14	55	7	55
Math	18	64	13	67	11	71	19	52	19	53	14	62
<b>MADERA UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	38	27	33	27	34	33	29	31	23	39	20	45
Math	26	51	18	56	17	62	28	39	28	41	25	44
<b>ALHAMBRA UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	25	43	18	46	18	54	21	54	15	56	13	62
Math	15	70	10	74	10	79	20	55	17	59	18	62
<b>GLENDALE UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	21	48	18	51	19	55	16	58	12	63	11	69
Math	13	70	11	72	12	72	17	59	15	60	16	63
<b>STATE TOTALS</b>												
<b>ELA</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Math</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>49</b>

California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Results, 2007-2009  
English Learners in School in the U.S. 12 months or longer

	2007		2008		2009		2007		2008		2009	
	3rd Grade		3rd Grade		3rd Grade		6th Grade		6th Grade		6th Grade	
	<Basic	≥Prof.	<Basic	≥Prof.	<Basic	≥Prof.	<Basic	≥Prof.	<Basic	≥Prof.	<Basic	≥Prof.
<b>LOS ANGELES UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	58	9	54	9	58	11	76	2	66	3	67	4
Math	36	38	31	40	30	42	72	6	69	7	71	7
<b>SAN DIEGO UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	44	20	43	21	38	28	56	6	45	13	42	13
Math	28	48	27	49	21	56	52	14	49	17	50	17
<b>SANTA ANA UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	48	16	29	18	44	20	62	6	50	7	44	12
Math	30	43	22	50	19	57	63	8	54	11	54	16
<b>LONG BEACH UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	53	9	47	10	52	12	62	6	47	9	48	8
Math	27	43	18	51	18	53	62	8	56	12	53	12
<b>ELK GROVE UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	42	19	44	14	46	18	43	16	33	20	38	16
Math	23	47	26	46	24	48	38	28	35	24	44	25
<b>SAN JOSE UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	54	13	46	15	49	20	65	4	59	7	55	9
Math	35	43	29	46	29	49	66	8	61	8	63	11
<b>ALUM ROCK UNION ELEM.</b>												
ELA	44	21	44	17	40	23	56	10	49	13	50	9
Math	29	48	28	45	24	51	56	15	50	17	57	17
<b>CORONA-NORCO UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	46	16	41	17	48	15	58	7	47	11	33	15
Math	30	44	25	46	24	47	53	15	55	14	48	18
<b>MADERA UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	48	17	40	19	43	22	44	12	37	17	36	16
Math	30	45	21	51	21	54	37	22	39	23	41	21
<b>ALHAMBRA UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	25	41	17	47	17	54	31	29	23	38	19	42
Math	11	75	8	77	7	83	25	44	19	53	21	54
<b>GLENDALE UNIFIED</b>												
ELA	35	26	27	32	29	35	37	16	29	27	26	34
Math	21	57	17	63	17	58	41	26	32	30	37	31
<b>STATE TOTALS</b>												
<b>ELA</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Math</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>19</b>

Source: <http://star.cde.ca.gov/>



1600 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 900  
Arlington, VA 22209  
Tel: 703.522.5828 Fax: 703.522.5837  
[www.lexingtoninstitute.org](http://www.lexingtoninstitute.org)  
[mail@lexingtoninstitute.org](mailto:mail@lexingtoninstitute.org)