



# *“Lento Pero Seguro”*

## English Learners Maintain Consistent Gains

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

English learners scored at 7 percent proficiency nationally in fourth-grade reading on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), an outcome that has remained effectively unchanged since 2003. But despite inherent difficulties in comparing outcomes, most notably the different definitions and systems used for identifying English learners in different states, the wide range of disparate outcomes across different states seems worthy of some analysis.

- Among states with the nation’s largest English learner populations, New Jersey, Nevada, Florida and Texas had overall results above the national average.
- Major differences between proficiency rates on NAEP and those produced by different state accountability systems were found in all states examined. In California, Illinois and Texas, the rate of fourth-grade English learners scoring proficient or above in reading was much higher on state tests than on NAEP.
- Declining rates of English learners scoring at below basic levels continued to be a promising trend overall, especially in light of falling exclusion rates.

### INTRODUCTION

*“Lento Pero Seguro,”* a common Spanish phrase that means “slowly but surely,” could aptly describe the even English reading gains by English learners across U.S. classrooms over the past decade.

Results on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that the nation’s fourth-grade English learners maintained the same 7 percent rate of students scoring at or above proficiency on the English reading test that has held constant since 2003.

But these national results were not uniform across different states, and in fact varied widely. This is where things can get confusing. Even though there are various factors that contribute to differences between states which complicate comparisons, it is the differences in the ways English learners are taught and assessed which can also make such discussions useful.

The NAEP is widely regarded as the best indicator for student achievement across states. It has limitations, starting with the fact that it measures snapshots of how specific groups of students perform rather than measure the growth of individual students over time. This limitation is particularly important when considering English learners, the one student population whose membership sees the most change and turnover.

As Grover M. “Russ” Whitehurst, Education Director at the Brookings Institution reminds us, “the ability to draw causal inferences about any education variable using NAEP can often amount to leaping to conclusions erroneously.”<sup>1</sup> But absent a more reliable indicator of progress by this crucial student population across the United States, there may well be insights to gain from some side-by-side comparisons between states with the largest populations of English learners.

## DISPARATE READING GAINS

Among those states with the largest English learner populations, New Jersey, Nevada, and Texas showed gains that were higher than the national average. But Illinois, New Mexico, Arizona and New York all had substantially fewer fourth-grade English learners scoring at or above proficiency in English reading compared with the national average.

One area where performance in English reading did improve substantially nationally was in reducing the much larger numbers of English learner students at the lowest levels of performance – those scoring “Below Basic” on the test. In 2013, 69 percent of English learners scored Below Basic in fourth-grade reading, continuing a trend of reducing that number from 72 percent in 2003. New Jersey, Nevada and Texas all were national leaders among states in this area as well.

But perhaps the most troubling trend was driven by a handful of states where the number of fourth-grade English learners at Below Basic levels in English reading was significantly larger than ten years earlier. North Carolina, Arizona, New Mexico, and Illinois all showed large increases in this group. In Arizona, more than nine out of ten English learners demonstrated Below Basic levels in fourth grade English reading in 2013.

## FALLING EXCLUSION RATES

Nationally, only 8 percent of fourth-grade English learners were excluded from the reading test in 2013, while 24 percent of English learners were excluded ten years ago (this number has fallen steadily

since 2003). While specific policies for exclusion are left for states to establish and to schools to follow, there has been a national emphasis on including more students in testing, and allowing fewer students to be sidelined.

While states with the largest English learner populations conformed to this trend toward greater inclusion, changes tended to occur at uneven rates. In four states, exclusion rates remained above ten percent: Florida, Hawaii, New Jersey and Texas.

In New Jersey, the rate at which English learner students were excluded from the fourth-grade reading test fell from 45 percent excluded in 2011 to 10 percent in 2013. Texas reached its 11 percent exclusion rate after falling from 25 percent in 2011 and 34 percent in 2007.

Nevada led the trend toward greater inclusion, with only two percent of English learners left out of the assessment in 2013, a major drop from the 32 percent excluded in 2003. New Mexico also excluded only two percent, down from 17 percent in 2003.

## INTERPRETING NAEP RESULTS

When considering different state NAEP results for English learners, it is also necessary to be mindful of the fact that states utilize different criteria for English proficiency. “In California, where more than 1,000 school districts can make their own rules for deciding when an English learner has reached proficiency in the language, a student who meets one district’s criteria can easily fall short in another,” noted *Education Week’s* Lesli Maxwell in February 2013.<sup>2</sup>

The vast majority of English learners in the United States speak Spanish. With Spanish-speakers comprising 76 percent of ELLs who are students in U.S. schools in 2010, other languages (Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic and Hmong) followed, respectively, each with less than two percent of students.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the prevalence of Spanish among English learners, those from other language backgrounds tend to be grouped together for instructional pur-

pose, except when concentrated within particular schools or school districts. Navajo-language speakers totaled 12 percent of New Mexico’s English learners, as did Haitian-Creole speakers in Florida. Figuring most prominently among other states with the largest English learner populations was Nevada (Tagalog, 6 percent), New York (Chinese, 3.4 percent, Arabic, 2.8 percent), Illinois (Polish, 3 percent), New Jersey (Arabic, 2.6 percent), California (Vietnamese and Chinese, 2.5 percent), Texas (Vietnamese, 1.8 percent), and Arizona (Navajo, 1.3 percent).<sup>4</sup>

Recently, a report by the federal Department of Education noted that the number of English learners enrolled in U.S. elementary and secondary schools actually fell slightly between the 2007-08 school year and 2008-09, and then again the following year.<sup>5</sup>

This is significant because English learners have been among the fastest-growing student populations in the country over recent decades. The total number of English learners enrolled in U.S. schools increased from 3.5 million in the 1998-99 school year to 5.3 million in 2007-08.<sup>6</sup>

It should also be noted that these indicators of testing outcomes do not take into account major inputs like funding levels. *Education Week* recently noted wide differences in state aid to schools tied specifically to teaching English learner students. Some states, like North Carolina and Virginia provided state funding between \$450 and \$750 per English learner, while other states offered none. Nevada, with among the nation’s fastest-growing population of English learners students, only began providing funding targeted to schools serving them this year.<sup>7</sup>

## STATE TEST RESULTS AND NAEP

While different state assessment systems vary widely, one widely-documented pattern is that proficiency standards on NAEP generally prove to be more difficult than those on state tests. This is certainly the case with English learners on the fourth-grade NAEP reading test, as these examples show.

California, the state whose schools are home to more than one-fourth of the nation’s English learners, uses definitions on its state assessment systems that make it easy to infer different results than NAEP’s. In 2013, 34 percent of fourth-grade English learners were assessed as possessing proficient or advanced English Language Arts skills, while 26 percent tested at below basic levels (These totals on the state assessment only include students who have been enrolled in school in the United States for 12 months or more.)

On NAEP in 2013, just five percent of California’s fourth-grade English learners scored at or above proficient levels in reading, while 74 percent scored Below Basic.

On the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, 47 percent of fourth-grade English learners scored “Level One: Unsatisfactory” in 2013, while 53 percent scored at Levels Two or Three (“Satisfactory” or “Advanced,”) in reading.<sup>8</sup> On NAEP, 9 percent of Texas fourth graders scored at or above Proficient, while 64 percent scored Below Basic.

The Illinois State Report Card clearly provides NAEP and state assessment results (although the 2013 report card, published before the current year NAEP scores were released, includes them for 2011). On the Illinois Standards Achievement Test for reading, fourth-grade English learners scored at rates of:

Academic Warning (Level One)	22.1 percent
Below Standards (Level Two)	64.2 percent
Meets Standards (Level Three)	13.1 percent
Exceeds Standards (Level Four)	0.6 percent <sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile on the 2013 NAEP reading test, just 3 percent of Illinois fourth graders scored at or above proficient, while 82 percent scored below basic.

So while different state assessments, built around different standards and definitions, vary greatly, it can be seen from these examples, and others, that they are constructed to produce substantially higher outcomes for English learners than the highly consistent patterns on NAEP results in recent years.

**NAEP Results for English Learners in States With the Largest English Learner Student Populations**

	2003	2007	2011	2013	2003	2007	2011	2013
	At or above Proficient	At or above Proficient	At or above Proficient	At or above Proficient	Below Basic	Below Basic	Below Basic	Below Basic
<b>Nation (public)</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>69</b>
Arizona	4	3	1	1	81	84	86	92
California	6	6	5	5	75	74	73	74
Florida	15	12	7	10	57	62	65	59
Hawaii	3	8	3	3	87	67	79	86
Illinois	5	3	5	3	78	77	77	82
Nevada	4	4	10	6	79	77	64	70
New Jersey	5	7	*	9	80	70	*	67
New Mexico	8	6	2	3	75	73	86	84
New York	5	5	5	4	73	74	71	75
Texas	7	9	9	9	73	62	62	64

\*Reporting Standards were not met.

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Sawchuk, “NAEP Data Misused to Promote Policies,” *Education Week*, August 7, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Lesli A. Maxwell, “Push Under Way to Standardize ELL Definitions,” *Education Week*, February 27, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Title III Biennial Report to Congress, School Years 2008-2010, Table 3.

<sup>4</sup> Title III Biennial Report to Congress, School Years 2008-2010, state profiles.

<sup>5</sup> Title III Biennial Report to Congress, School Years 2008-2010, Figure 1.

<sup>6</sup> National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, <http://www.ncela.us/data/dataclearinghouse/>.

<sup>7</sup> Lesli A. Maxwell, “In Some States, ELL Populations Boom – But Not in Funding,” *Education Week*, October 2, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, <ay 2013 Summary Report.

<sup>9</sup> Illinois State Report Card, 2013.