TN EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE DISTRICTS

English Learners in Tennessee

A Case Study of Four Districts

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Introduction

Tennessee students classified as English Learners (ELs) have increased from about 43,000 students in the 2015-16 school year to 63,000 in 2021-22, a 46% growth rate over seven years. While these EL students are heavily concentrated in a small handful of the state's 148 districts, many districts within the state are likely experiencing growth among their EL student populations and will need to adapt accordingly to best leverage these students' strengths and address challenges that may arise in the classroom. Going forward, the districts that serve EL students will need a better understanding of the diversity within the EL student body, their academic and non-academic needs, and the capacity of their teachers and other staff to best support them.

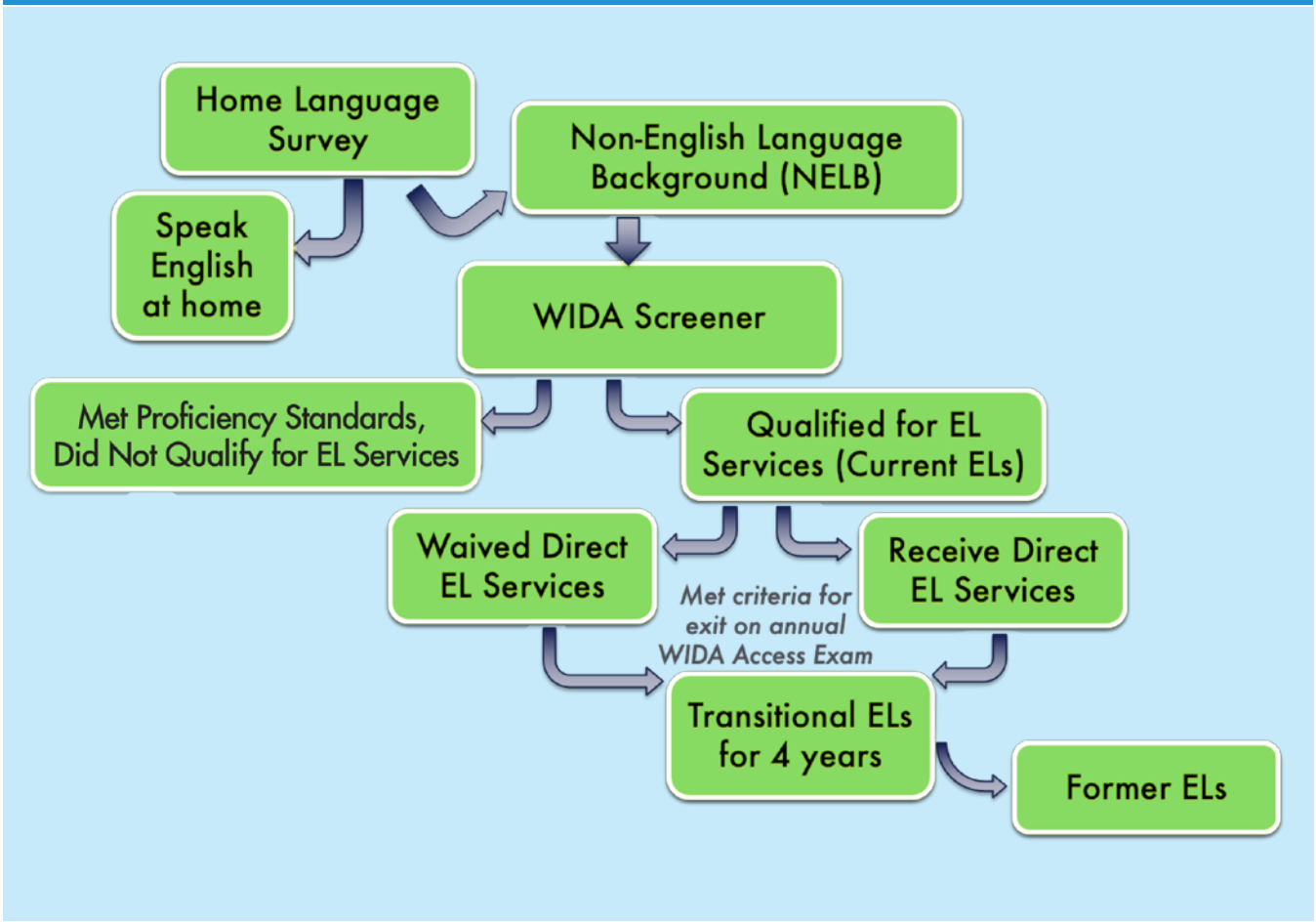
Against this background, TERA researchers partnered with four districts in Tennessee that have a high EL student population to learn more about the schooling experiences of their EL students through a series of data analyses and discussions with district leaders. These four districts –three urban and one rural– represent about half of all the ELs and ESL-endorsed teachers in Tennessee. Each of the four districts has at least 15% EL students. This brief presents findings across all four districts about the characteristics of EL students, how they perform in school compared to their native English-speaking peers (non-ELs), and the distribution of English as a Second Language (ESL)-endorsed teachers across these districts.

Key Findings:

1. ***Across the four districts, the share of EL students born outside of the U.S. has increased, and the majority of EL students speak Spanish at home.***
2. ***EL students are less likely to be classified as economically disadvantaged compared to non-EL students in 3 of the 4 districts.***
3. ***EL students in the four districts have similar attendance, chronic absenteeism, and suspension rates as non-EL students, but they lag behind in graduation rates and TNReady assessment scores.***
4. ***Across the four partner districts, students who test well enough to exit the EL program have lower dropout rates and perform similarly to non-EL students on state assessments.***
5. ***Across the four districts, not all EL students are taught by an ESL-endorsed teacher, and schools with the most EL students are not always the schools with the most ESL-endorsed educators.***

In this brief, we report on student and educator data from school years 2015-16 through 2021-22 in four Tennessee school districts that each serve over 15% EL students. Current EL students are defined here as students who receive direct EL services as a result of qualifying for those services on a screening exam given to all students who report that they do not speak English at home.[1] Each year, EL students take the WIDA exam which assesses their listening, oral, speaking, comprehension, reading, literacy, and writing abilities, as well as Tennessee's usual standardized exams.[2] After meeting the criteria for exit set by Tennessee on the WIDA exam, students are defined as Former ELs. Consistent with policies in the four partner districts, students who fail to meet the exit criteria for seven or more years in the program are defined in this analysis as long-term ELs (LTELs).

FIGURE 1: Definition of English Learners



ESL-endorsed educators are teachers with an assignment label that included the word "teacher" for their primary staff assignment and had an ESL endorsement listed in the professional certification data. This definition may therefore exclude school support staff with ESL endorsements or the secondary/tertiary assignments of teachers who work across multiple schools.

1. Students who score high enough on the screening exam to not qualify for direct EL services are labeled as "tested out" or "non-English language background," depending on district policy.

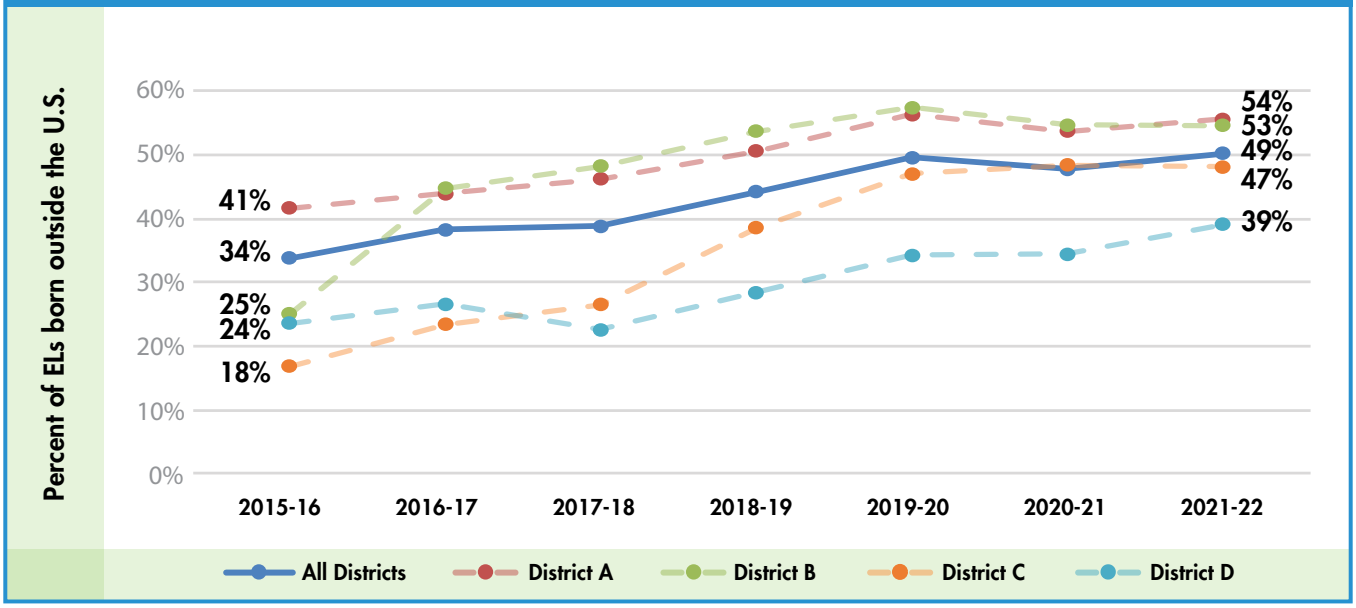
2. Students who are qualified for but waived direct EL services are also required to take the WIDA exam each year, but are not counted as current ELs.

KEY FINDINGS

1 Across the four districts, the share of EL students born outside of the U.S. has increased, and the majority of EL students speak Spanish at home.

Across TERA's four partner districts, the number of EL students has grown by 38% in the past seven years, a rate that is slightly lower than that of the state as a whole (46%). Since 2000, the share of Tennesseans born outside of the United States has doubled from 3% to 6%, which mirrors demographic changes within the EL student population in the state.[3] Within TERA's partner districts and depicted in Figure 2, the share of EL students born outside of the U.S. grew by around 15 percentage points from an average rate of 34% in 2015-16 to 49% in 2021-22 across the four districts.

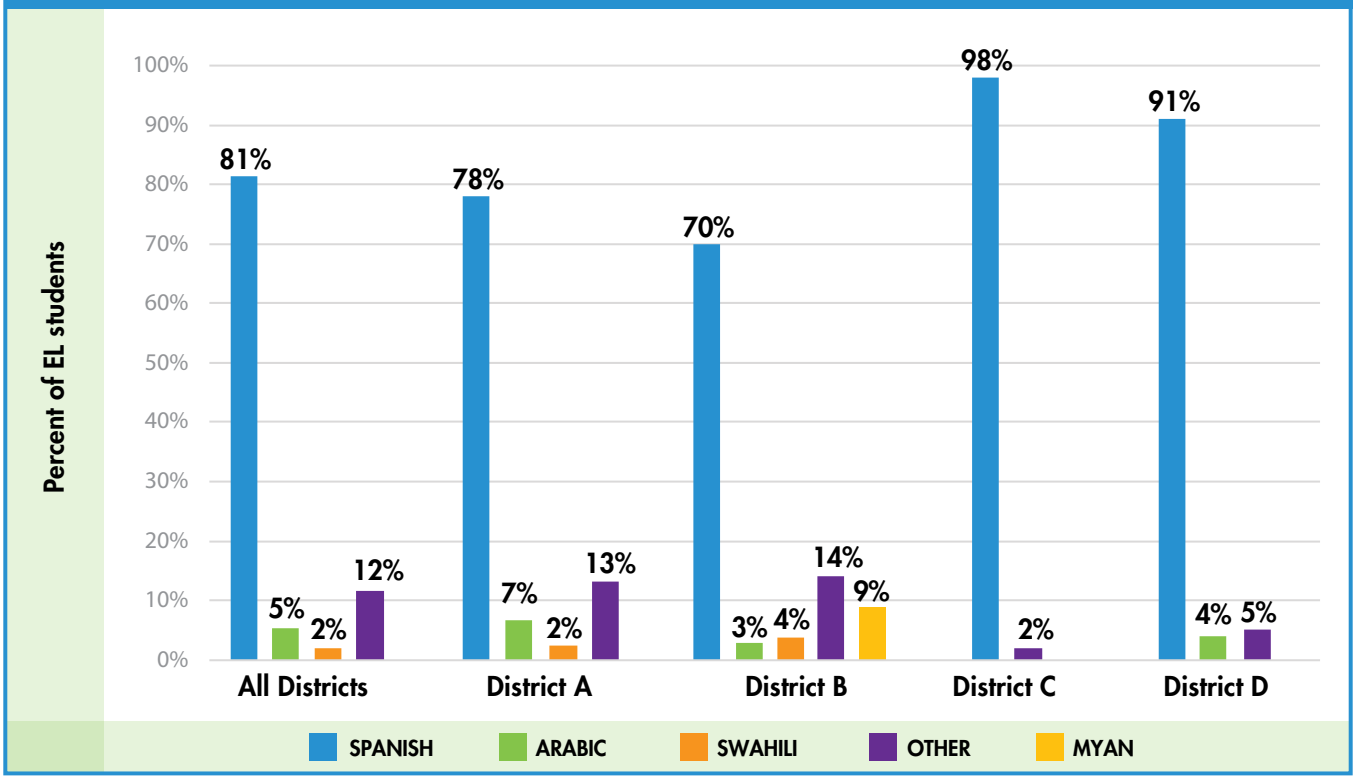
FIGURE 2: From 2025-16 to 2021-22, the percentage of EL students born outside the U.S. increased across all four participating districts.



3. Source: Migration Policy Institute tabulations of the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) and Decennial Census.

In the 2021-22 school year and displayed in Figure 3, 81% of EL students across the four districts reported speaking Spanish at home and the majority identified as Hispanic (ranging from 77% to 97% across the districts), while the next two most common languages students identified were Arabic (5% overall) and Swahili (2% overall). Notably, although small shares of the overall EL population, more than 100 ELs in the four districts spoke Kurdish, Mayan, Burmese, Kinyarwanda and Nepali representing a wide range of linguistic and geographic diversity that is present across the school districts.

FIGURE 3: In 2021-22, most EL students across the four partner districts identified that they speak Spanish at home.

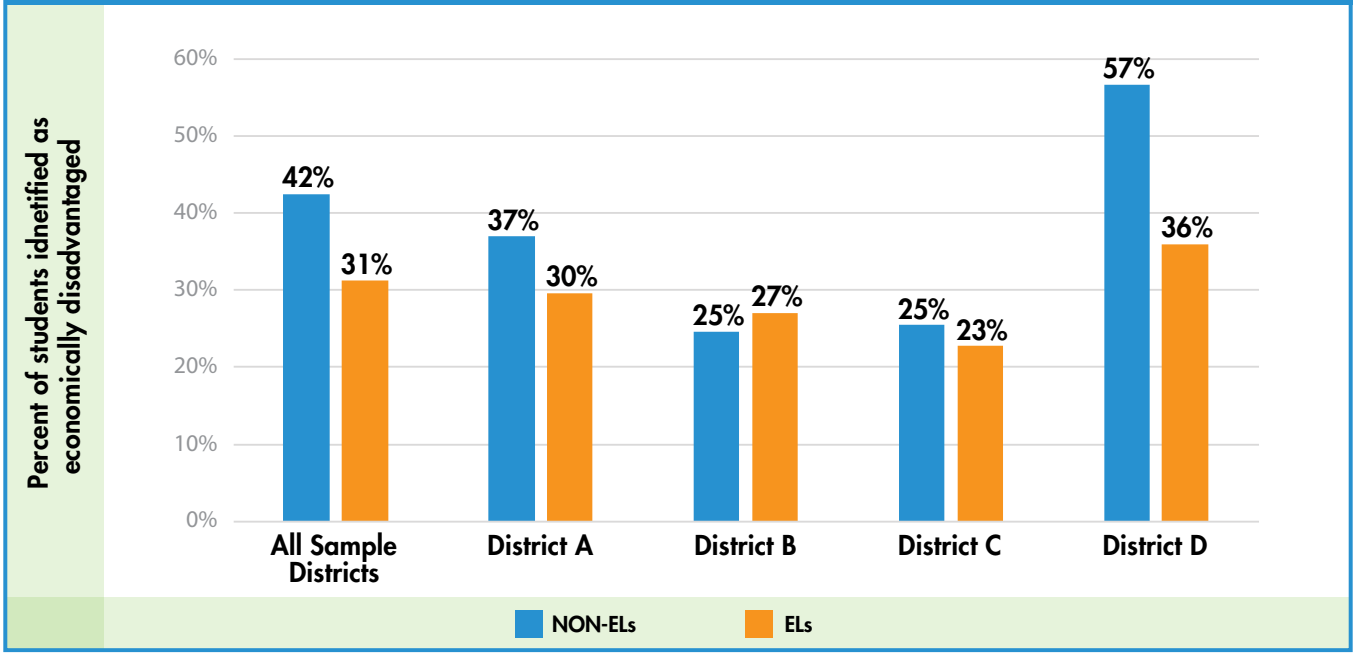


2 EL students are less likely to be classified as economically disadvantaged compared to non-EL students in 3 of the 4 districts.

EL students in participating districts experience economic disadvantage (ED) and disability classification at rates mostly similar to their non-EL student peers with notable variation between districts. In 2017-18, the first year that school districts in Tennessee used a measure of economic disadvantage that includes students receiving SNAP or TANF benefits, as well as homeless and migrant students, 49% of EL students across the four districts classified as economically disadvantaged compared to 46% of non-EL students. However, the share of economically disadvantaged EL students dropped in each successive year to 31% in 2021-22. Conversely, non-EL students' ED classification rates were similar to those of previous years. District leaders noted that this is most likely a reflection of how difficult it is to directly certify undocumented families, not a true decline in poverty amongst the EL population.

As seen in Figure 4, all four districts are distinct from each other in rates of student economic disadvantage identification. In 2021-22, district ED identification rates ranged from 23% to 36% for ELs and 25% to 57% for non-ELs. Three districts reported that non-ELs experienced higher rates of economic disadvantage than their EL peers. While these differences between districts could be a reflection of the change in process for identifying economically disadvantaged students, it is possibly a reflection of the range of economic conditions experienced by both ELs and non-ELs in their respective districts.

FIGURE 4: In 2021-22, EL students in 3 out of 4 partner districts had lower reported rates of economic disdvantage than non-EL students.



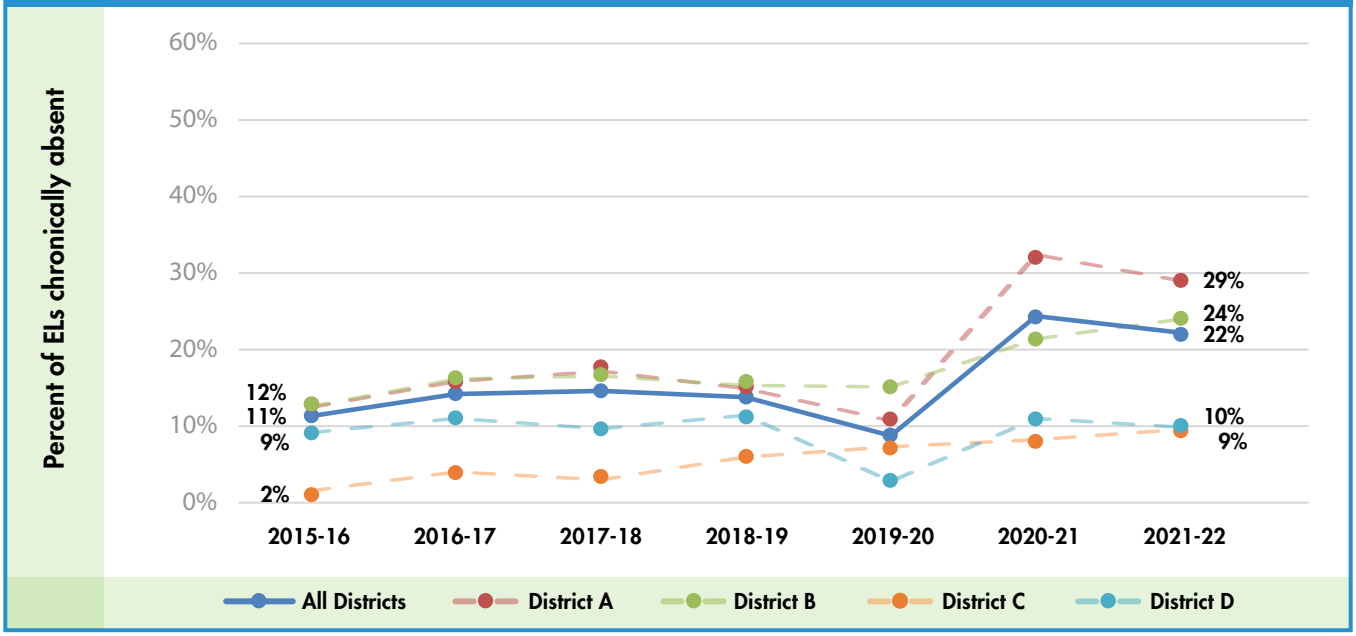
Further, while EL students are slightly less likely to be identified as having a disability, this percentage has remained relatively steady over the years for this study. The lower disability classification rates could be because of the complexities of identifying students for having a disability when there is also a language barrier present.[4] In 2021-22, 10% of ELs had disabilities, compared to 14% of non-ELs.

4. Wegner et ald, 2005

3 EL students in the four districts have similar attendance, chronic absenteeism, and suspension rates as non-EL students, but they lag behind in graduation rates and TNReady assessment scores.

Across all four districts, current EL students have similar or preferable rates of absenteeism, attendance, and suspension as compared with non-EL students.[5] Since 2015-16, attendance rates for both EL students and non-EL students have declined by around two percentage points. During that same timeframe and for those same groups, chronic absenteeism increased by 8 and 10 percentage points respectively with most of that change occurring during the pandemic in 2019-20 and 2020-21. Figure 5 shows the increase in chronic absenteeism rates for EL students across the four partner districts over this time period.

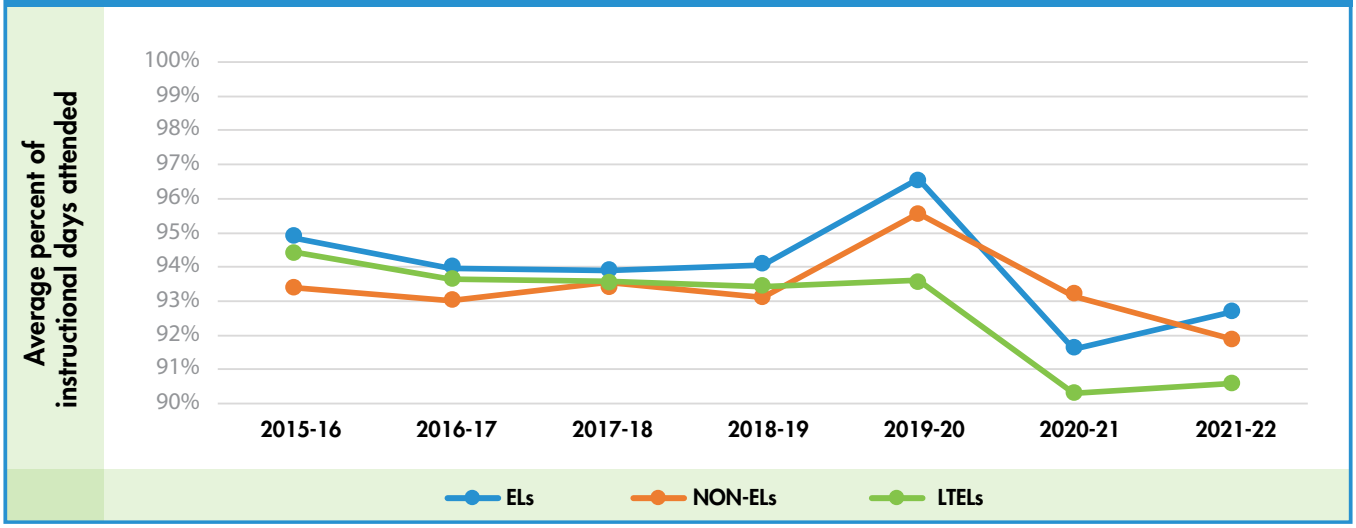
FIGURE 5: From 2015-16 to 2021-22, chronic absenteeism rates increased for EL students in all partner districts.



5. Attendance rates are defined as the number of days a student is marked present divided by the total number of instructional days for that academic year. Chronically absent indicates a student who was marked as absent for more than 10% of all instructional days in a given academic year.

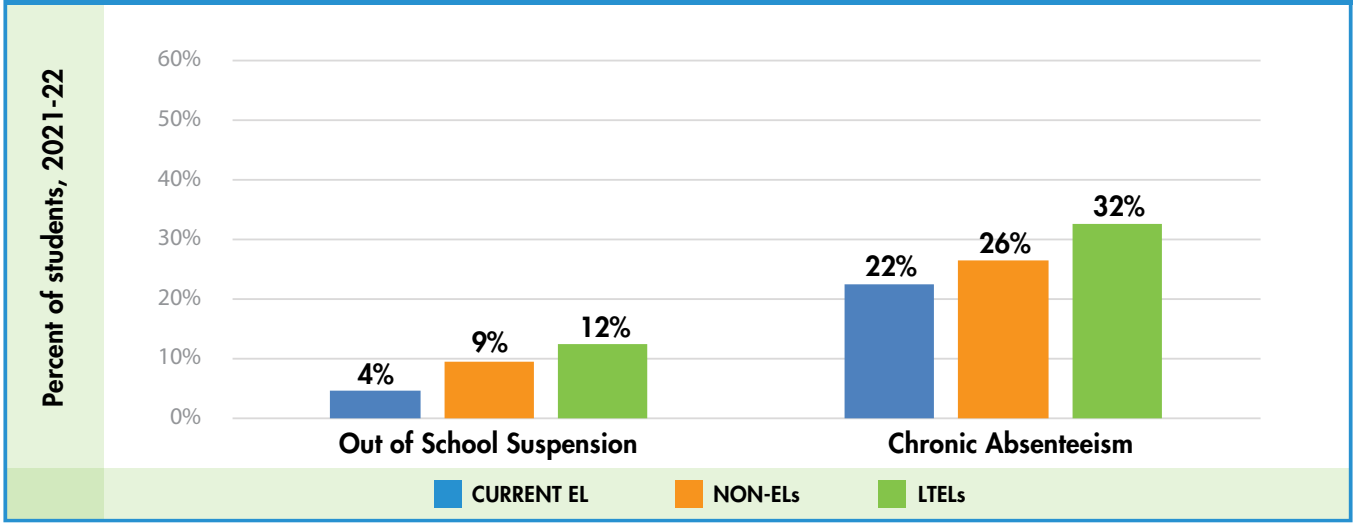
In 2021-22, current EL students reported an attendance rate of approximately 93% compared to 92% for non-EL students, and a chronic absenteeism rate of 22% compared to 26% for non-EL students. Long term EL students (LTELs) - defined as students that have been enrolled in an EL program for seven or more years who comprise 13% of the current EL student population - are an exception. In recent years, LTEL students have had lower attendance rates on average (91% in 2021-22) and higher rates of chronic absenteeism on average (32% in 2021-22) than both non-EL students and other EL students. Figure 6 shows the attendance rates over time for EL, non-EL, and LTEL students.

FIGURE 6: From 2015-16 to 2021-22, EL students on average had higher attendance rates than non-EL students, and LTEL students had the lowest attendance rates.



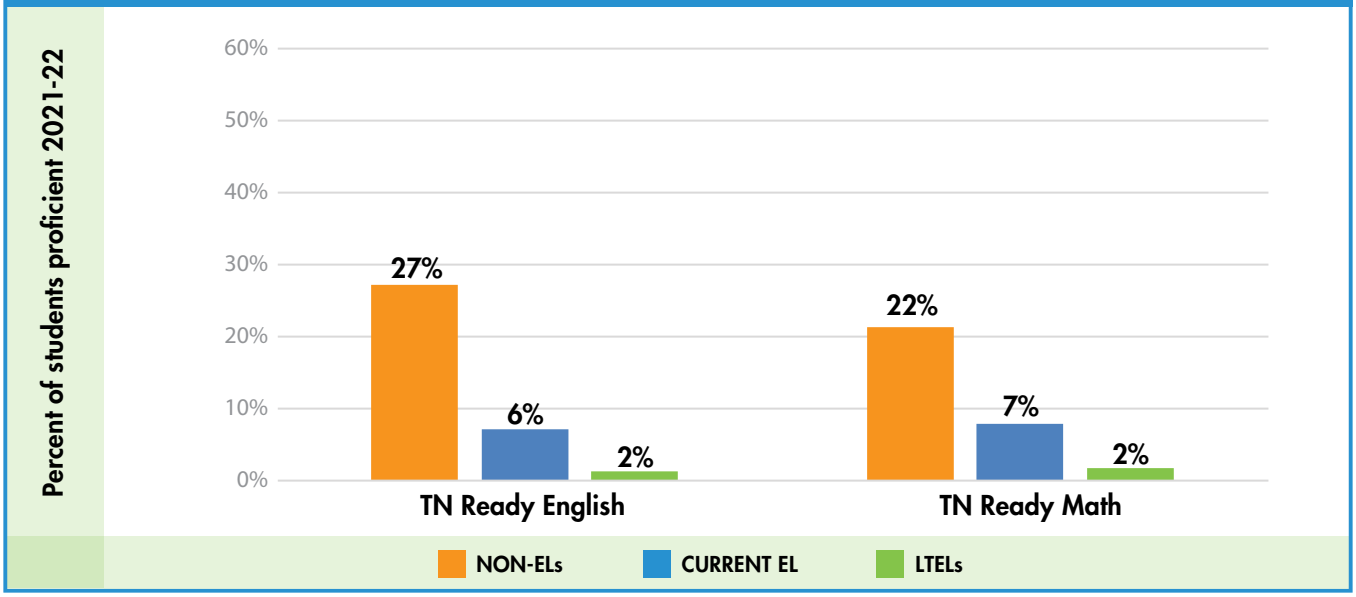
Further, when examining disciplinary outcomes, we identified the percentage of students who ever received an out-of-school suspension (OSS) during a given academic year. OSS rates remained stable across all years of the analysis, and in 2021-22, EL students reported a lower OSS rate than their non-EL peers: 5% and 9%, respectively. Figure 7 shows the average OSS and chronic absenteeism rates for both EL students and non-EL students across the four partner districts in 2021-22.

FIGURE 7: In 2021-22, the average current EL had lower out of school suspension and chronic absenteesim rates than non-EL and LTEL students.



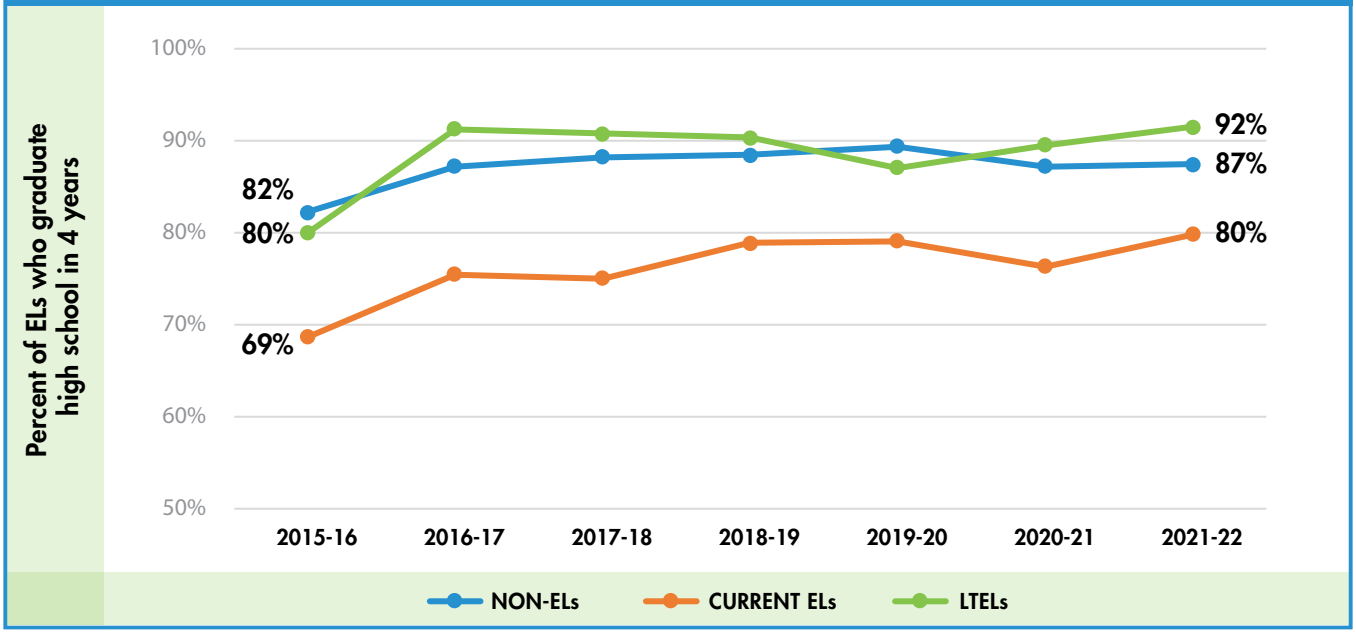
However, EL students in the four districts do not perform as well as their non-EL peers on key measures of academic performance. As shown in Figure 8, in 2021-22, just 7% of EL students scored proficient or above on the TN Ready Math assessment, and 6% scored proficient or above on the ELA assessment. Comparatively, 22% of non-EL students reached the proficiency benchmark on the Math assessment and 27% scored at the proficient level in ELA that same year. Notably, language barriers could contribute to the proficiency gap in ELA between EL students and non-EL students.

FIGURE 8: In 2021-22, non-EL students performed better, on average, on TN Ready assessments than current EL and LTEL students.



Additionally, current EL students have lower on-time graduation rates than non-EL students. In 2021-22, 80% of ELs in their fourth year of high school graduated as compared to 87% of non-ELs. Importantly, however, across all school years in each of the four districts, and as shown in Figure 9, the on-time graduation gap between EL students and non-EL students has shrunk, and LTEL on-time graduation rates have been on par with non-EL students. Since 2015-16, on-time graduation rates among EL students have increased by 11 percentage points, and the difference between non-EL and EL graduation rates of 7 percentage points in 2021-22 is the smallest difference between the two groups across all years examined in this analysis.

FIGURE 9: The four-year graduation rate gap between current EL students and non-EL students has decreased in recent years.



4 Across the four partner districts, students who test well enough to exit the EL program have lower dropout rates and perform similarly to non-EL students on state assessments.

We examined the TNReady ELA and Math assessment scores and dropout rates of students who participated in and later exited the EL program (former ELs). Since 2015-16, former EL students have had lower dropout rates than both EL students still in the program (current ELs) and non-EL students. In 2021-22, former ELs had a 1% dropout rate as compared to a 2% dropout rate among current ELs and 1.5% dropout rate among non-ELs.

Former EL students also demonstrated proficiency in both Math and ELA at higher rates than their EL and non-EL peers during all years across our districts. In 2021-22, 29% of former EL students scored proficient in Math and 32% scored proficient in ELA. When comparing proficiency rates between each of the partner four districts, District D reported markedly lower proficiency rates among non-ELs than other districts while proficiency rates among current and former ELs remained static (see Figures 10A and 10B). This is a stark contrast with the other districts where non-ELs performed as well or slightly better than former ELs in both TNReady ELA and Math assessments on average.

FIGURE 10A: In 2021-22, former EL students performed similiarly on TNReady ELA assessments as their non-EL peers in most partner districts.

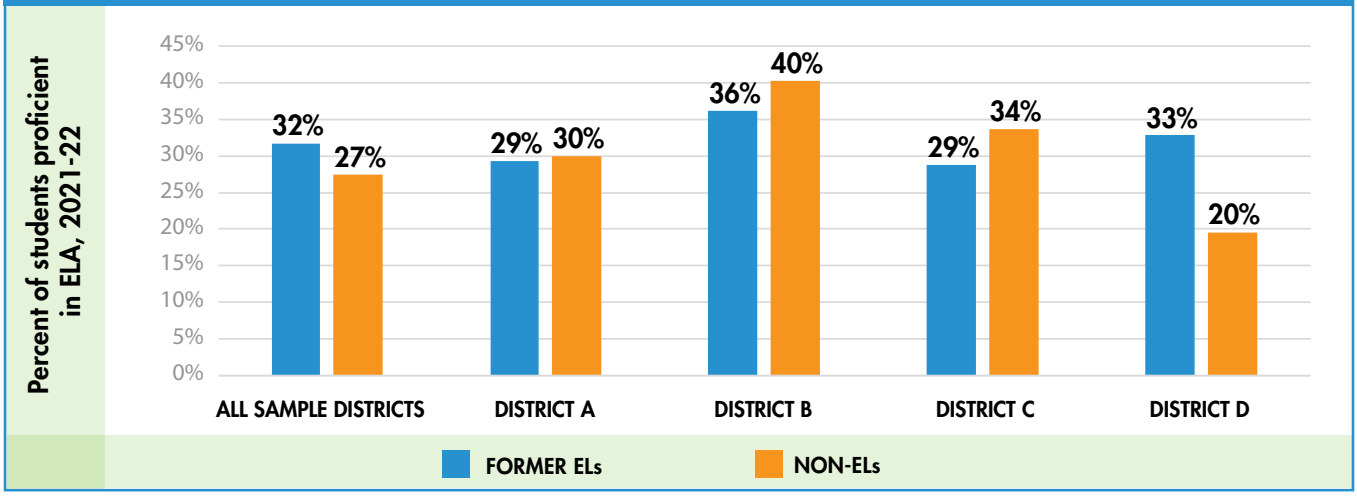
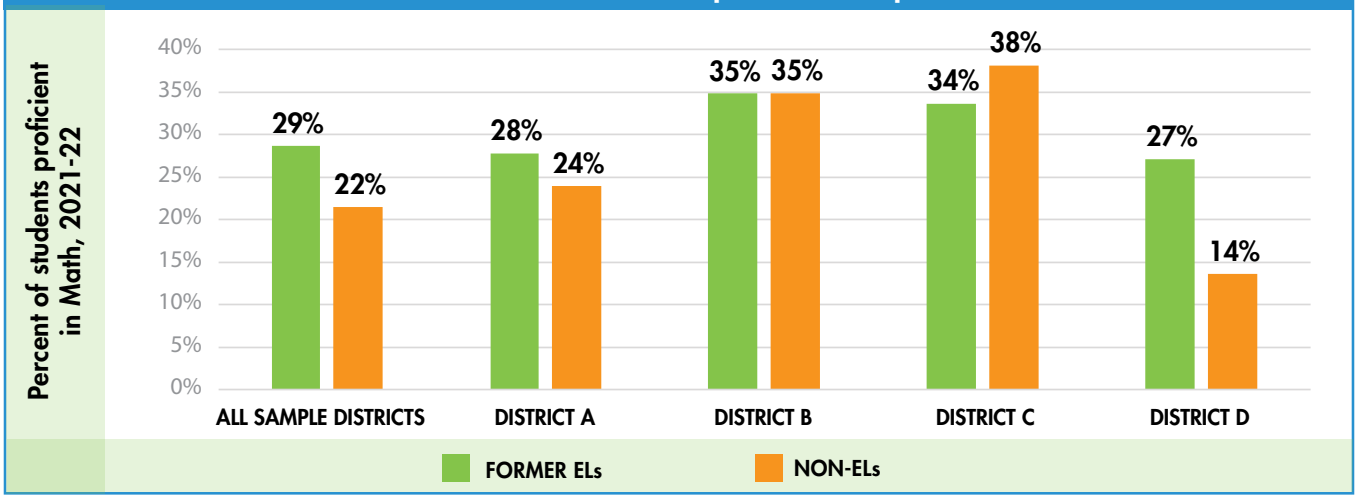


FIGURE 10B: In 2021-22, former EL students performed as well or better on TNReady Math assessments than their non-EL peers in most partner districts.



5 Across the four districts, not all EL students are taught by an ESL-endorsed teacher, and schools with the most EL students are not always the schools with the most ESL-endorsed educators.

The nearly 1,500 ESL-endorsed teachers in the four partner districts represent almost half of all ESL-endorsed teachers in the state. The number of teachers with ESL endorsements has increased by more than 1,000 since 2015-16, even as the total number of educators in these districts has decreased.

Who are ESL-endorsed Teachers?

Data from the Four Partner Districts

- ESL-endorsed teachers are more likely than their non-ESL endorsed colleagues to be female (89% compared to 77%), White (64% to 56%), have a Master's degree (62% to 54%), and have an alternative teaching license (30% to 25%).
- Turnover rates for both ESL-endorsed teachers and non-ESL endorsed teachers were similar: about 16% left teaching between 2020-21 and 2021-22, and about 4% switched districts, but ESL-endorsed teachers were slightly more likely to switch schools within the same district (8% compared to 6%).
- On aggregate over the four districts, ESL-endorsed teachers are just as likely to be in the first three years in their teaching career as non-ESL endorsed teachers (22%), but in two of our larger counties they were slightly less experienced, showing the difficulty of hiring qualified teachers to meet growing EL needs in those counties.

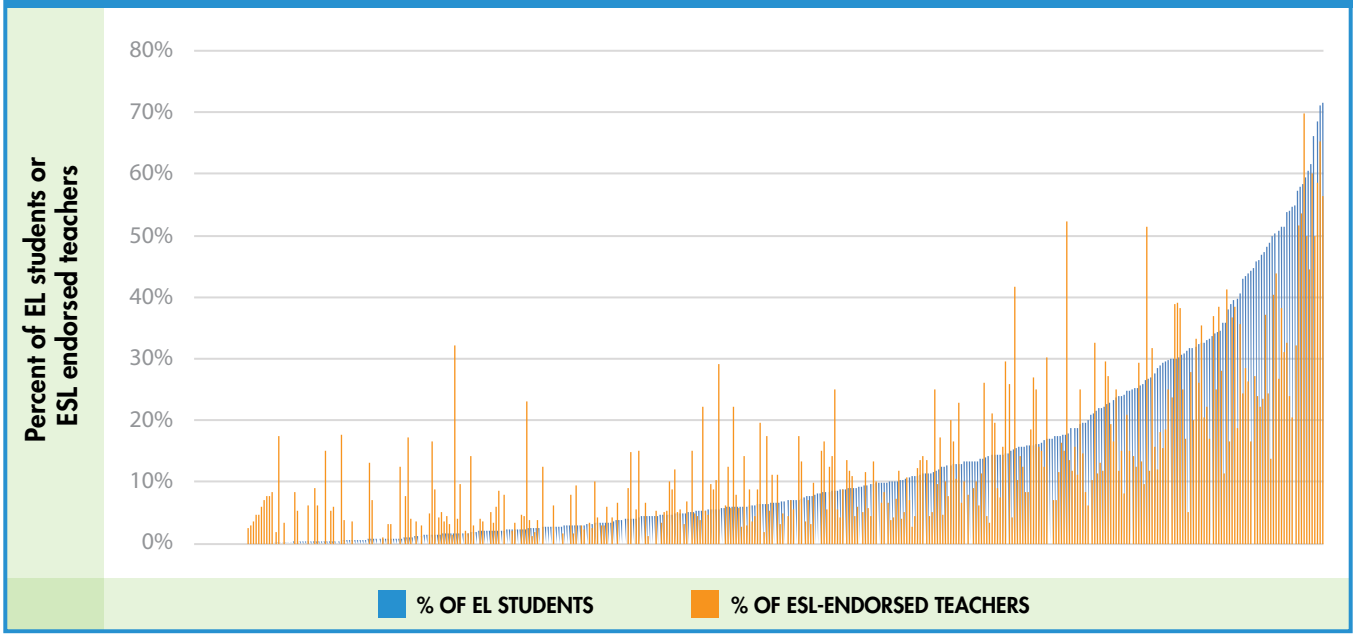
Across the four partner districts, about 8% of grade 3-8 teachers are ESL-endorsed, and the percentage of EL students in grades 3-8 who have an ESL-endorsed teacher in a tested subject (ELA or Math) ranges from 65% to 76% in each of the districts.[6] During the same year, only 3% of high school teachers were ESL-endorsed and the percentage of high school EL students who had at least one ESL-endorsed teacher in a tested subject with an end of course exam ranged from 25% to 38% in each of the districts.

Further, the share of teachers with ESL endorsements in each of the four partner districts either matches or surpasses the share of EL students within each respective district. However, these proportions do not often match up at the school level, indicating a need for districts to strategically reallocate their ESL-endorsed teachers to schools where they are most needed.

6. Because they are not responsible for tested subjects, and are therefore not matched to students in our data, this calculation excludes ESL teachers, of which 95% are ESL-endorsed.

Figure 11 shows the share of ESL-endorsed teachers (in orange) and EL students (in blue) at each of the 410 schools in our four districts. The left side of the graph shows schools with very low shares of EL students, and higher orange bars indicate that many of these schools employ far higher shares of ESL-endorsed teachers. On the right side of the graph, where EL shares go as high as 70% of students at each school, some orange bars surpass the blue but many fall below, indicating a shortage of ESL-endorsed teachers compared to the share of ELs at those schools.

FIGURE 11: In 2021-22, schools with the most EL students were not always the schools with the most ESL-endorsed educators.



FINAL THOUGHTS & CONSIDERATIONS

This research across four Tennessee districts focused on EL student backgrounds and their educational experiences in Tennessee schools. While we present trends across the districts in this brief, we also held individual district data discussions on the make-up and performance of their EL students. District leaders are aware of the promise of these young learners and are working hard to match the right resources to the diverse needs of these students.

The EL student population in Tennessee has grown overall in recent years and an increasing share of EL students were not born in the United States. Across TERA's four partner districts, most EL students identify as Hispanic and report that they speak Spanish at home and many face similar challenges with school attendance, chronic absenteeism, and academic performance on state tests. However, the make-up of the EL student population varies by district as each district's unique context influences how EL students experience schooling. For example, rural districts have distinct resource allocation challenges from urban districts, and some districts have higher EL student poverty levels than others. Further, the proportion of teachers with ESL endorsements in each of the four partner districts often does not align with the share of EL students at certain schools, meaning districts may want to consider means of increasing and/or more equitably distributing their ESL-endorsed teachers.

Notably, EL students who test well enough to exit the program (former ELs) experience academic success comparable to non-EL peers. The higher achievement and lower drop-out rates show what is possible for current EL students in these districts.

In light of the data across TERA's four partner districts, district leaders may want to consider the following:

- *Continue to leverage data to learn about the unique backgrounds of emerging EL student populations.*
- *Learn about and support the needs and unique circumstances of LTELs - especially with regard to challenges in attendance, chronic absenteeism, and academic performance - and leverage their strengths as long-term residents in the U.S. (e.g., many also have high cultural competence).*
- *Identify and be responsive to the ways that economic disadvantage, disability, and other student and group characteristics can intersect with language development.*
- *Highlight the successes of current and former EL students both inside and outside of the classroom.*
- *Monitor the placement and allocation practices for existing ESL-endorsed educators.*

State leaders may want to consider the following:

- *Examine the ways that EL students are identified as economically disadvantaged through current policies.*
- *Continue to ensure districts have flexibility and available funding to address differing needs as their EL student populations grow and shift.*
- *Ensure there is data transparency in reporting so districts can adequately track and support their EL students.*

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