

# Excellence for All:

## *Supporting English Language Learners in Massachusetts*

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### Introduction

Across the state, educators work to help all of our diverse students to succeed in school and develop into joyful and productive members of our economy and community. When all students receive a high-quality education that allows them to reach their full potential, we are all better off.

English Language Learners (ELL) are among the most diverse of all students in Massachusetts. In Boston, the largest district in our state, 30 percent of all kids (16,700 students) are ELL.<sup>1</sup> These young people and their families represent 138 different nationalities and speak over 70 languages.<sup>2</sup> Spanish, Haitian Creole, Cape Verdean Creole, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Portuguese are the most prevalent languages in the district.

Our state defines students as ELL if they do not speak English or are unable to undertake critical academic tasks in English.<sup>3</sup> ELL students have also been identified over the years using terms such as Limited English Proficient, non-native English speaker, English as Second Language (ESL), or emergent bilingual students.<sup>4</sup>

Nationally and in Massachusetts, the ELL population has grown significantly in recent years. Looking back several decades, the ELL population across the United States increased from 2 million to over 5 million between 1990 and 2005.<sup>5</sup> A similar trend has occurred more recently in the Commonwealth where the ELL population has nearly doubled from 45,400 in 1998 to 90,200 in 2017.<sup>6</sup> This growth happened while the overall student population in Massachusetts remained basically level. A majority of ELL students – both nationally and in Massachusetts – have Spanish as their primary language.<sup>7</sup>

### Policy Landscape for ELL Students in Massachusetts

Under federal and state laws, school districts must take steps to identify ELL students and provide services for them to gain English and other subject area skills.<sup>8</sup> These steps include determining what languages are spoken in the home, assessing their English skills, communicating with parents, and reporting academic results in a way that allows ELL outcomes to be monitored.<sup>9</sup>



### ROADMAP TO Expanding Opportunity

Evidence on What Works in Education

The promise of a high-quality education leading to opportunity and shared prosperity for all children is a deeply held value in Massachusetts. Despite a record of prominent successes, however, our Commonwealth has struggled to provide students from all backgrounds the supports necessary for long-term life success. To confront this challenge, the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center and the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy are undertaking this shared research project: the *Roadmap for Expanding Opportunity: Evidence on What Works in Education*.

This series of reports builds on progress initiated with the Education Reform Act of 1993, addressing critical areas in which progress has stalled. Ultimately, this project will provide a roadmap for bringing education reform into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Reports will examine promising evidence-based strategies for supporting all children in achieving college, career, and life success. In particular, analyses will be grounded in a recognition that learning must extend beyond traditional school structures and offerings.

Reports will offer strategies for adapting a broad evidence base to local contexts, including cost analyses to assess the level of resources required to support district and statewide innovation. Ultimately, these briefs are designed to provide education leaders and practitioners with building blocks for driving future educational reforms across the Commonwealth.

The framework for how Massachusetts schools serve ELL students has evolved significantly in recent decades. In the early 1970s, Massachusetts became the first state to adopt a form of bilingual education as its ELL program.<sup>10</sup> Bilingual education is a broad array of programs that include instruction in English along with and other languages. Massachusetts adopted a specific bilingual approach called Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE), which involves several years (typically three) of academic instruction in students' native language in addition to English. Over time, instruction transitions into English full time.<sup>11</sup>

In 2002, the Commonwealth reversed course and joined a small number of states (including Arizona and California) that have restricted bilingual education. This was undertaken through a ballot question approved by Massachusetts voters.<sup>12</sup> This ballot measure shifted the state's main ELL program from TBE education to Sheltered English Immersion (SEI). SEI is a form of instruction where ELL students receive English as a second language (ESL) support, but have subject area classes (e.g., math, social studies) almost entirely in English with modified (sheltered) content designed to be accessible to ELL kids.<sup>13</sup>

There are several other notable pieces of the 2002 ballot measure. Though the law significantly altered the landscape for serving ELL students, it did not constitute an outright ban on bilingual education. Instead, it set SEI as the default program for ELL students, while allowing for some exceptions.<sup>14</sup> One exception is that the law does not affect "two-way" programs where students from all language backgrounds simultaneously learn English and another language with the goal of proficiency in both.<sup>15</sup> The law also provided for a somewhat difficult waiver process, by which parents may have their children participate in an ELL program other than SEI, such as a bilingual program, if they make a written request to their school each year.

Though the 2002 ballot initiative shifted how schools educate ELL students, it did not lead to a consistent or clear change in how ELL students performed in our schools. The most rigorous study looking at the differences in achievement of Massachusetts ELL students before and after the shift found no sizeable effect, either positive or negative, on third grade reading performance.<sup>16</sup> Similar ballot initiatives in other states have not shown consistent impact on ELL student achievement, particularly when controlling for other trends happening at the same time.<sup>17</sup>

Other studies and reports pointed to significant concerns with the quality of ELL services in the period after the 2002 ballot question, though some of these issues may have also existed before 2002. These concerns included whether ELL students were being properly identified, variations in ELL services across districts, over-enrollment of ELL students in special education, and poor growth in Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) achievement, particularly relative to non-ELL peers.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most troubling situations occurred in Boston, where a 2010 federal civil rights investigation found that the city had been failing to provide appropriate instruction to thousands of ELL students over multiple years, due to ineffective screening of language skills and a lack of ELL programs.<sup>19</sup> This investigation resulted in an agreement between the city and federal officials, including requirements to reassess the language skills of 7,000 young people and offer summer programs, among other remedies.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, Boston was not the only city that faced this type of situation. Similar investigations occurred in Worcester and Somerville.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, the United States Departments of Education and Justice found in 2011 that inadequate training for teachers of ELL students was a statewide problem, having occurred in 275 districts (70 percent of all Massachusetts school districts).

The alarming results of state and federal reviews of Massachusetts ELL programs led to significant efforts to reform and improve these services in the Commonwealth. Many of these efforts fell under a Department of Elementary and Secondary Education initiative called Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners (RETELL). RETELL consists of updated teaching and learning standards for ELL students, as well as licensing and professional development requirements for teachers.<sup>22</sup> Starting in 2014-2015, all new teachers and building administrators were required to undergo training on SEI and all incumbent teachers were expected to gain SEI training by the following year.<sup>23</sup> The RETELL initiative has resulted in over 37,000 teachers being trained on implementing SEI.<sup>24</sup> This training extends 45 hours and covers language development, cultural proficiency, and SEI teaching practices.<sup>25</sup>

The approach to educating ELL students in Massachusetts also shifted under the RETELL initiative by incorporating new learning standards. Massachusetts updated its statewide academic standards in math and English

in 2010 to reflect an improvement effort across multiple states called the Common Core. On specific benchmarks for ELL learning, Massachusetts also joined a consortium of several dozen other states using English language development standards aligned with the Common Core, called the WIDA consortium.<sup>26</sup>

## **Achievement Trends for ELL Students**

ELL students have made some important gains in recent years, but promoting the academic achievement of ELL students overall has proven challenging for many schools. As ELL students strive to learn English, sometimes from a position years behind classmates, they also have to keep up with content in other subject areas, which depend on language skills. Some ELL students also come from low-income backgrounds or from families with limited education, factors often associated with greater challenges in academic achievement. This can be a particular concern for young people and families coming from areas affected by political instability or conflict or without formal education systems.<sup>27</sup> A substantial share of ELL students, particularly teens, have missed multiple years of education in their country of origin before they arrive in schools in the United States.<sup>28</sup> This can mean some ELL students are not academically proficient in their first language, much less a new one.

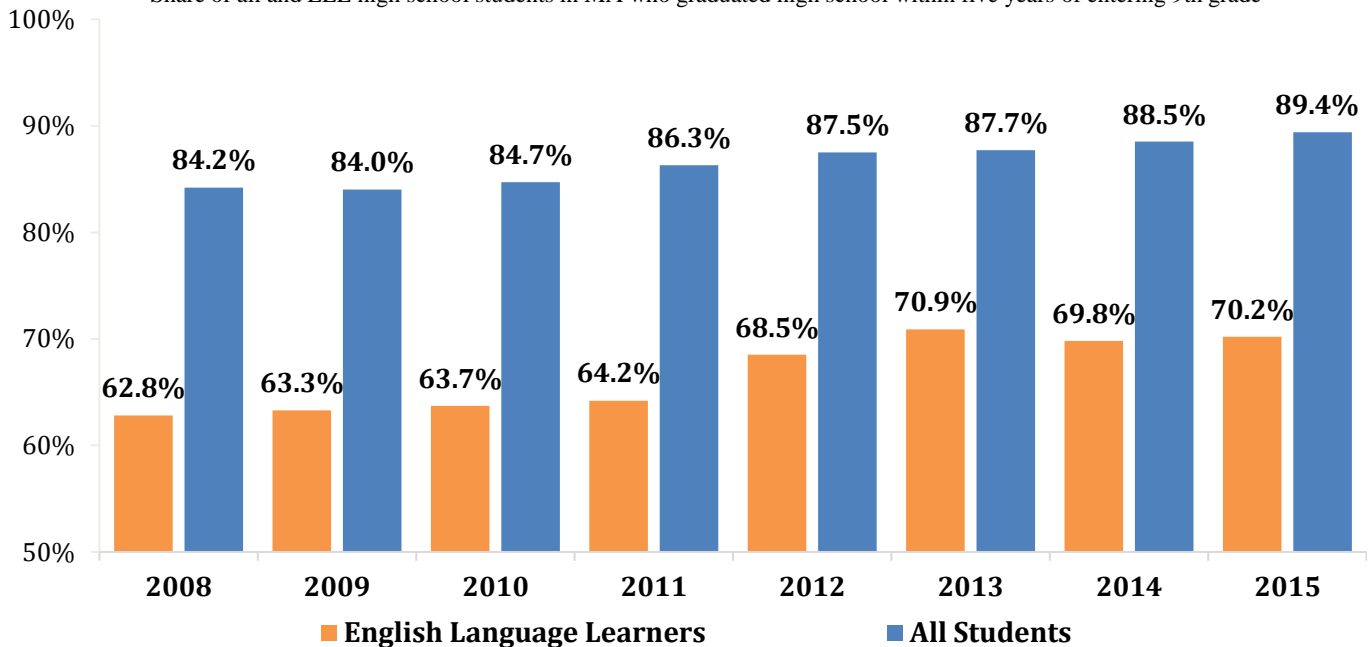
Given the challenges that some ELL students face in and out of school, their relative lack of proficiency on some academic measures is not entirely surprising. Overall, research has consistently shown low reading proficiency levels for ELL students.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, schools have also failed to graduate ELL students more often than students overall.<sup>30</sup> In Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) authored a review of ELL performance in 2009 and found that ELL students had the lowest five-year graduation rate among all groups of students, at only 61 percent.<sup>31</sup> When graduation rates (four year) could first be accurately compared across the country in 2010-2011, Massachusetts ranked 12<sup>th</sup> in overall graduation rates at 83 percent, but 28<sup>th</sup> in the country for ELL students at 56 percent, slightly behind the country at large.<sup>32</sup> This lack of achievement and success for ELL students means many of these young people cannot fully participate in our society. Over the long-term, everyone loses out when we fall short of supporting these children to reach their full potential.

In recent years, there have been some gains for ELL students. For example, between 2009 and 2014, the share of ELL and former ELL students, across all grades, who scored proficient on the MCAS English test increased from 30 percent to 36 percent.<sup>33</sup> This was greater growth than the state as a whole, where MCAS English proficiency for all students statewide increased from 67 percent in 2009 to 69 percent in 2014.<sup>34</sup> The ELL students who are most successful in gaining English skills (based on yearly assessments and input from educators) move out of the ELL category and into the mainstream.<sup>35</sup> Including these students in the analysis gives a more complete picture of ELL performance over time. Additionally, the share of ELL high school youth who drop out before graduation declined from 8.9 percent in 2008 to 6.6 percent in 2016.<sup>36</sup> The share of ELL students who graduated within five years also rose significantly between 2008 and 2015 at a rate greater than for students across the state overall (see chart below).<sup>37</sup> Even with this progress, these figures still show significant gaps in how ELL students are faring. For example, the ELL five-year graduation rate is 19 percentage points lower than that of all high schoolers in the state.<sup>38</sup>

While trends in MCAS scores and graduation and dropout rates tell us something about the performance of ELL young people in Massachusetts, it is important to consider the drawbacks of using one particular metric, as opposed to a range of indicators. MCAS scores, in particular, may not be valid indicators of how ELL students perform. Students' answers to MCAS questions, which are aligned with our state's academic standards, may reflect their ability to understand the text of questions, as opposed to the underlying content.

## Since 2008, Greater Share of Students Have Graduated Within 5 Years

Share of all and ELL high school students in MA who graduated high school within five years of entering 9th grade



Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

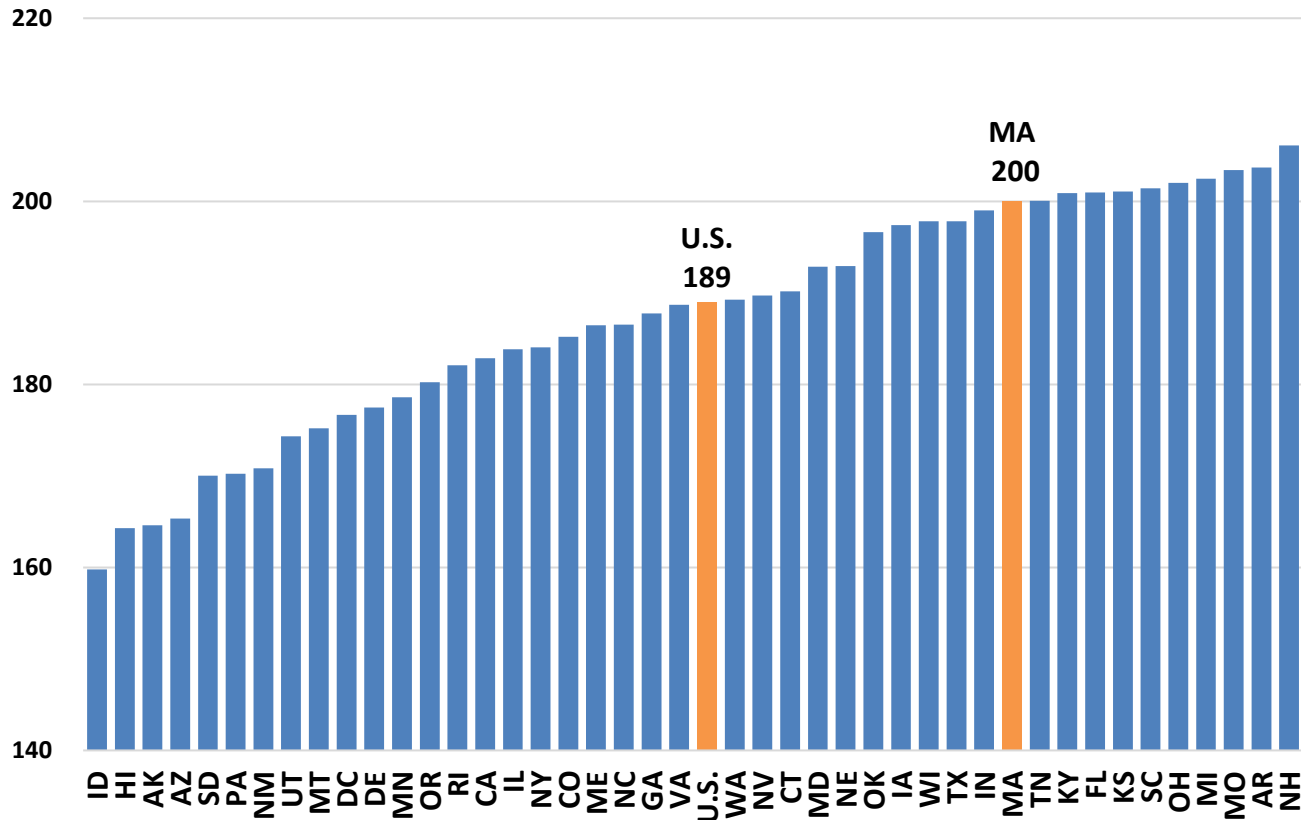
Massachusetts has also employed specific English language development tests that can offer more reliable data on ELL achievement. Since joining the interstate WIDA consortium in 2012, Massachusetts has implemented the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners (ACCESS) test as the state's measure of English proficiency.<sup>39</sup> ACCESS consists of specific English language development tests that better isolate and evaluate students' English skills apart from academic content. English skills are measured on the ACCESS test annually for all ELL students in the areas of listening, reading, speaking, and writing.<sup>40</sup>

ELL students' English skills as measured by the ACCESS test are more encouraging than the MCAS results, particularly in recent years. Between 2014 and 2016, the number of ELL students making sufficient progress in listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills to gain English proficiency within 6 years has increased from 52 percent to 62 percent.<sup>41</sup> Despite this progress, however, the results show that a sizable share of Massachusetts ELL students are not making sufficient gains.

Examining Massachusetts' data in isolation could leave the impression that our state has particular challenges serving ELL students. Data from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) suggests, however, that promoting ELL student achievement is a national challenge. In 2015, ELL 4<sup>th</sup> graders nationally scored 9 percent below the basic achievement level on the NAEP reading exam, and no individual state's ELL 4<sup>th</sup> graders on average attained the NAEP basic level. This means that these ELL students were on average unable to locate information, make simple inferences, or use text to draw conclusions.<sup>42</sup> Massachusetts' ELL 4<sup>th</sup> graders scored around 4 percent below the basic level. These results were 11<sup>th</sup> highest in the country out of 43 states with data (see chart below). Massachusetts' results on this NAEP exam remain better than most peers across the country. Our rank for ELL scores, however, lagged behind our Commonwealth's top-in-the-nation ranking for all 4<sup>th</sup> graders.<sup>43</sup>

## Massachusetts Ranks 11th in United States in ELL Fourth Grade Reading

National Assessment of Educational Progress, 4th Grade Reading Scores, 2015 (500 point scale)

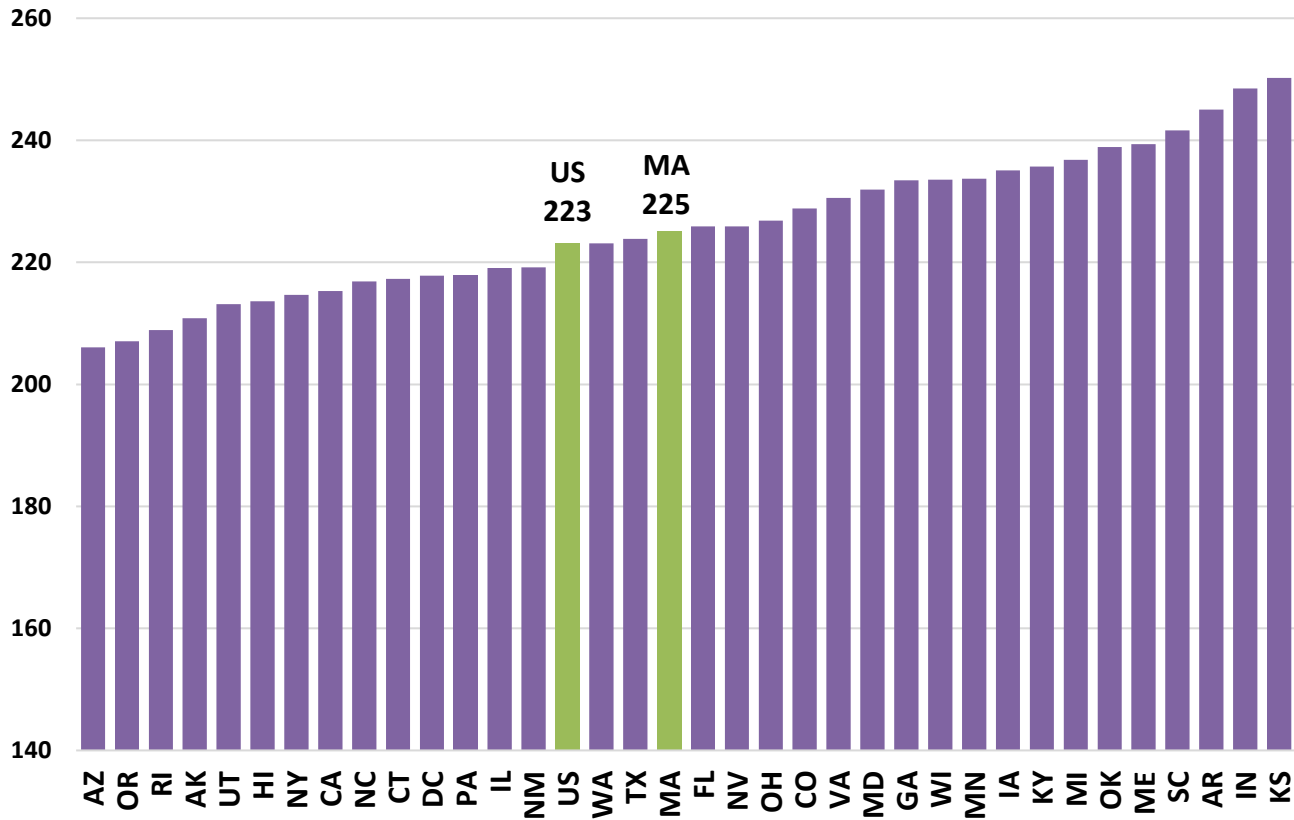


Source: Nation's Report Card, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015

In the 2015 NAEP reading exam, ELL 8<sup>th</sup> graders in Massachusetts scored 19<sup>th</sup> in the country out of 35 states with data (see chart below). This score was 7 percent below the basic level. Unlike with the 4<sup>th</sup> grade exam, three states did achieve the basic level with ELL 8<sup>th</sup> graders, though no state's students attained proficiency. The presence of more long-term ELL students and those who arrive in Massachusetts schools in the middle grades may be a factor in the difficulty of promoting the achievement of 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELL youth in Massachusetts.<sup>44</sup> Our roughly average performance relative to other states could also be affected by different procedures for classifying ELL students, although NAEP is administered through unified guidelines across the country that attempt to create as much consistency as possible. Nonetheless, this data is a concerning indicator of how some ELL students are faring.

## Massachusetts Ranks 19th in United States in ELL 8th Grade Reading

National Assessment of Educational Progress, 8th Grade Reading Scores, 2015 (500 point scale)



Source: Nation's Report Card, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015

## Policy Options for Serving English-Learners

There is a range of options available for services to support ELL students, both in their traditional classrooms and through extended opportunities. Our [Roadmap to Expanding Opportunity](#) series highlights reforms beyond the typical school day that, if well implemented, may provide particular benefits for English Language Learners. Additional learning time through after-school, extended day, or summer learning can help accelerate the language skills and academic achievement of ELL students. For in-depth discussion of these initiatives, see [Beyond the Bell: Options for Increased Learning Time](#). Additionally, because some ELL students face a variety of challenges outside of school, they may particularly benefit when schools provide wraparound services that include health, prevention, wellness, and family outreach. For detail on these programs, see [Uplifting the Whole Child: Using Wraparound Services to Overcome Social Barriers to Learning](#).

With respect to traditional classroom instruction, much of what we know works for all kids also applies to promoting the academic growth of ELL young people. Educators who provide kids with clear objectives, engaging and well-designed content, and opportunities to apply skills and receive feedback, will tend to be more successful in supporting students.

ELL students, like others who may need extra support in our schools, also have unique needs that schools need to take into account. Significant evidence suggests that teachers can improve students' reading abilities by focusing on the key fundamentals—like understanding the relationship among syllables, sounds, and words; building vocabulary; and using these tools to interpret text.<sup>45</sup> While these building blocks are important for all kids, schools



can find particular success in modifications specific to the needs of ELL students, like focusing on sounds and words that do not have parallels in students' home languages. Increasing the depth and diversity of ELL students' vocabulary is also positively connected to ELL reading achievement.<sup>46</sup> Finally, intentionally working on and developing speaking skills that may not be occurring as naturally at home is a vital bridge that connects ELL students to higher order skills, such as writing and interpreting complicated text. ELL research studies have shown links between ELL academic English speaking skills and achievement.<sup>47</sup>

Within the classroom, teachers can support students by modifying instruction based on the language development needs of ELL kids. Research has found that some potentially helpful modifications include selecting reading material that ELL young people are familiar with, using pictures and visual aids along with text, and strategically using the first language of students to support content in English.<sup>48</sup>

## **Bilingual Versus English-Only Instruction: Research Evidence on a Long-Standing Debate**

As mentioned above, since 2002, Massachusetts has used SEI (Sheltered English Immersion) as the default approach for educating ELL students. With few exceptions, this has deemphasized ELL students' first language in our schools in order to focus on English instruction. In past years, there has been fierce debate in research and practice, as well as dozens of studies, about whether embracing first language instruction through bilingual programs, or limiting instruction to English is the best approach. A balanced review of this research reveals that there is generally more evidence supporting bilingual programs. The difference between bilingual education and SEI appears to be less important, however, than the quality of instruction.

Critics of bilingual education have argued that focusing on the native language may interfere with or delay ELL kids' ability to learn English and may separate them into lower quality programs.<sup>49</sup> They cite several studies showing that in the early elementary years (grades K-3) ELL students in bilingual programs underperform compared to peers in other models. This finding does not carry over to bilingual programs serving older elementary and secondary students, which have shown significant academic benefits.<sup>50</sup>

Research that avoids certain technical problems found in other studies, for example by randomly assigning students to specific ELL programs, has on balance favored bilingual education. One expert taskforce convened to evaluate ELL instruction, called the National Literacy Panel, found that multiple rigorous studies using random control groups substantiated a positive effect of bilingual education on reading achievement in English.<sup>51</sup> Finding that first language instruction actually helps English development is somewhat counterintuitive. These studies have shown, however, that tapping into first language literacy skills can provide ELL students with advantages. For example, in a language like Spanish, there are words with similar spelling and meaning in both languages.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, ELL students can often apply first language skills, such as reading comprehension and pronunciation, to pursuing English. This is borne out by several studies showing that students more advanced in their first language are also more advanced in English.<sup>53</sup>

One study that accounted for technical challenges found that TBE (Transitional Bilingual Education) and SEI can be equally successful in supporting ELL students. In this study, six schools from diverse areas of the country, including Los Angeles, Denver, Minnesota, New Mexico, and South Texas, had groups of ELL kindergarteners randomly receive either SEI or TBE instruction.<sup>54</sup> The program for both groups was based on a quality model validated in prior studies.<sup>55</sup> After tracking these kids performance over five years, this research concluded that the most important factor is the quality of instruction, not the language used.<sup>56</sup> By the fifth year of the study, students who had SEI programs scored no better than kids who had TBE. Any differences had faded away by fourth grade, leaving both groups of students with strong skills in both English and Spanish. Though the two approaches had the same results for elementary students, it is important to consider factors such as the age of students, the mix of languages spoken, and local context, in making decisions about whether a TBE or SEI approach is preferable. In some cases, older students, and those with a single language background may be better served with a bilingual approach that draws more on existing first language skills.

## Effective Practices for Serving ELL Students

Given the central role of program quality in effectively serving ELL students, it is important to closely examine some of the practices shown to improve educational outcomes for students. Clearly combining and integrating multiple effective practices is likely to promote greater gains for ELL students. Reviews of ELL practices have found that there are several critical elements to quality teaching and learning for ELL students.<sup>57</sup> These elements include:

1. **Strong professional development** for all staff and administrators working with ELL students and teachers. This training should be ongoing with consistent peer and expert feedback on improving practices.
2. **Creating a culture of collaboration** in schools where educators share information, monitor outcomes, and hold all peers accountable for making progress towards learning goals.
3. **Strong vocabulary instruction** for ELL students where foundational words and those specific to each academic subject are previewed, actively taught, and reviewed. This also includes providing strategies to unlock text by understanding phrases, root words, and prefixes and generally promoting the importance of building vocabulary every day.
4. **Cooperative learning** that allows students to work in small groups, while helping and encouraging each other. Cooperative learning can provide more advanced students leadership opportunities while allowing struggling students to gain additional peer support and ability to engage in a more close-knit environment.
5. **Well-structured behavior management systems** with high standards for behavior, well-organized classrooms, and strategies that promote motivation and engagement for students.
6. **Support for parents and families of ELL students** that opens lines of communication and collaboration with educators. Explicit efforts to bridge divides between home and school can help parents overcome barriers and become active participants in schools while giving teachers greater access to the resources families offer in support of their work.
7. **Effective collection and use of relevant data selected by educators** on ELL teaching, learning, engagement, behavior, and other key outcomes in order to proactively address challenges and adjust solutions in real time.
8. **Specialized and intensive support for the young people who are the furthest behind**, such as one-to-one tutoring, to catch up students who are reading behind their grade level. This type of intervention is most beneficial when undertaken by well-trained teachers and aides. There are several structured programs, like Reading Recovery, that focus on short-term, intensive support in a one-to-one setting. Reading Recovery has shown positive results and academic gains for students.<sup>58</sup>

While integrating all of these practices for ELL students is a significant effort, there is a range of programs in schools across Massachusetts and the country implementing these specific practices. One district in the Commonwealth undertaking several of these approaches is Brockton Public Schools. Brockton has maintained a bilingual department even after the restrictions that came with the 2002 ballot question. Brockton Public Schools works with families to systematically seek waivers to implement dual language programs when it is determined to be in the best interest of kids.<sup>59</sup> The bilingual department promotes a philosophy that focuses on the benefits of second language learning in terms of promoting achievement, cultural awareness, and global citizenship.<sup>60</sup>

ELL programming in Brockton has promoted consistent language awareness in the classroom, moving from the vocabulary level, into creating sentences and undertaking broader discourse that builds deeper language skills.<sup>61</sup> As ELL students first build English skills, the district assigns them to classrooms together with students speaking the same first language.<sup>62</sup> This maximizes the time that students speaking the main first languages in the district, including Cape Verdean Creole, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Spanish, can learn material in English with first language support. This also allows Brockton Public Schools to deploy expert bilingual teachers with deep knowledge of the first and second languages. When students advance further in their language development,



Brockton integrates ELL students into content classrooms with SEI trained teachers, while continuing to offer ESL support appropriate for continued language development. In mainstream content classes, support teachers focus on providing additional challenging material to accelerate the students who are ahead of the curve, while the main classroom teachers focus on a program for the other young people, allowing everyone to make progress. While using MCAS and ACCESS scores to assess trends in academic performance at a high level, the district also uses assessment tools that can be scored and analyzed by teachers right away to figure out ways to shift teaching to meet student needs.<sup>63</sup>

Brockton has several bilingual programs across various grade levels. Students coming into the system meet with an ESL specialist at a centralized welcome center where options are explained, and if needed, parents are supported by these specialists in requesting a waiver for bilingual support. This type of organization means that there is a coherent, city-wide process, allowing expert ESL teachers at the school level to continue with classroom instruction, as opposed to being called away on an ad-hoc basis to evaluate incoming student language skills. At the elementary level, Brockton has a longstanding two-way English/Spanish bilingual programs where both ELL and mainstream young people study both languages.<sup>64</sup> This approach has recently been expanded to also include English/Portuguese two-way instruction. Brockton High School also has a specific program for students with interrupted or limited formal education (SIFE/SLIFE) where these students in a particularly challenging situation get targeted support such as extra afternoon and evening classes.

Outside of the classroom, there is a range of teacher and family supports that work to reinforce ELL and bilingual instruction in Brockton Public Schools. The district currently employs nine community facilitators who speak the main languages of ELL students in the district.<sup>65</sup> This allows greater collaboration and communication with families. In its teacher professional development process, there is a focus on ensuring that ELL support training is ongoing, instead of being covered solely in the one-time training series required through the RETELL initiative. The aim is for all subject teachers, including math, social studies, English, and science, to teach the vocabulary of each academic field in ways that promote ELL student understanding.

A national program incorporating many effective practices for ELL students is Success for All (SFA). While SFA is primarily aimed at ensuring that all students read at grade level, it has specific components aimed at helping ELL students that also align with other evidence-based approaches. SFA is generally designed to support elementary students.

There are several main components of the SFA approach that work across participating schools.<sup>66</sup> These include:

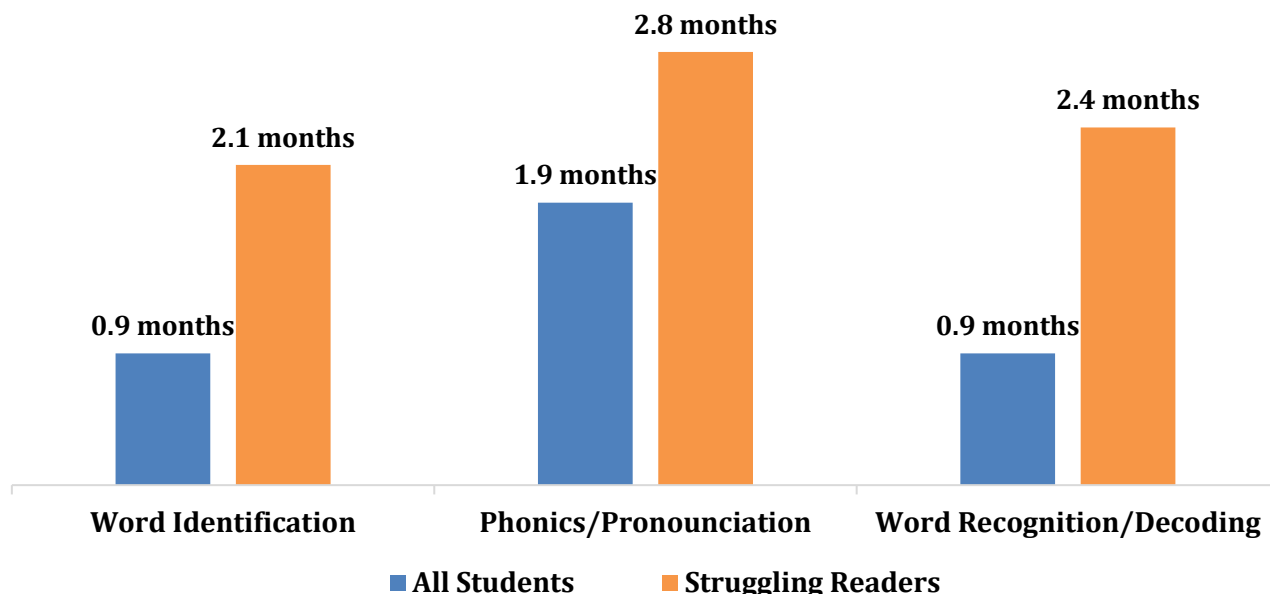
1. Research-based curriculum for reading in grades K-6 focused on phonics, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.
2. Classroom emphasis on cooperative group or pair work for students. These groups are formed based on reading and literacy skills, not age or grade.
3. Professional development for participating teachers, particularly on using data, monitoring student progress, and setting achievement goals.
4. Regular assessment of student literacy skills, roughly every two months, to tailor instruction.
5. Tutoring for students who need additional support, providing small group and individualized attention to struggling readers.
6. School-based family support teams to engage parents.
7. Additional classroom programs focused on social-emotional development.
8. School-based site coordinators to oversee the approach and support the educators involved.

Though SFA is not entirely focused on ELL students, there are several reasons to consider it a promising ELL support program. First, there is a Spanish version of the SFA curriculum, which operates as a transitional bilingual program, with students moving from Spanish to English after several years.<sup>67</sup> There is also an English immersion ELL adaptation of the program that provides specific support for ELL kids, such as vocabulary building, aligned with the main SFA program.<sup>68</sup> Finally, there is particular evidence about the effect of SFA on struggling readers,

which can often include ELL students. In an independent, rigorous study, SFA was shown to improve reading test scores relative to control groups. There were greater gains on reading skills for students who came into Kindergarten behind on key reading measures (see chart below).

## Students Gained, Struggling Readers Gained More From Success For All Program

Impact on specific reading skills for students in Success for All program over a control group, in months of expected learning for 2nd graders



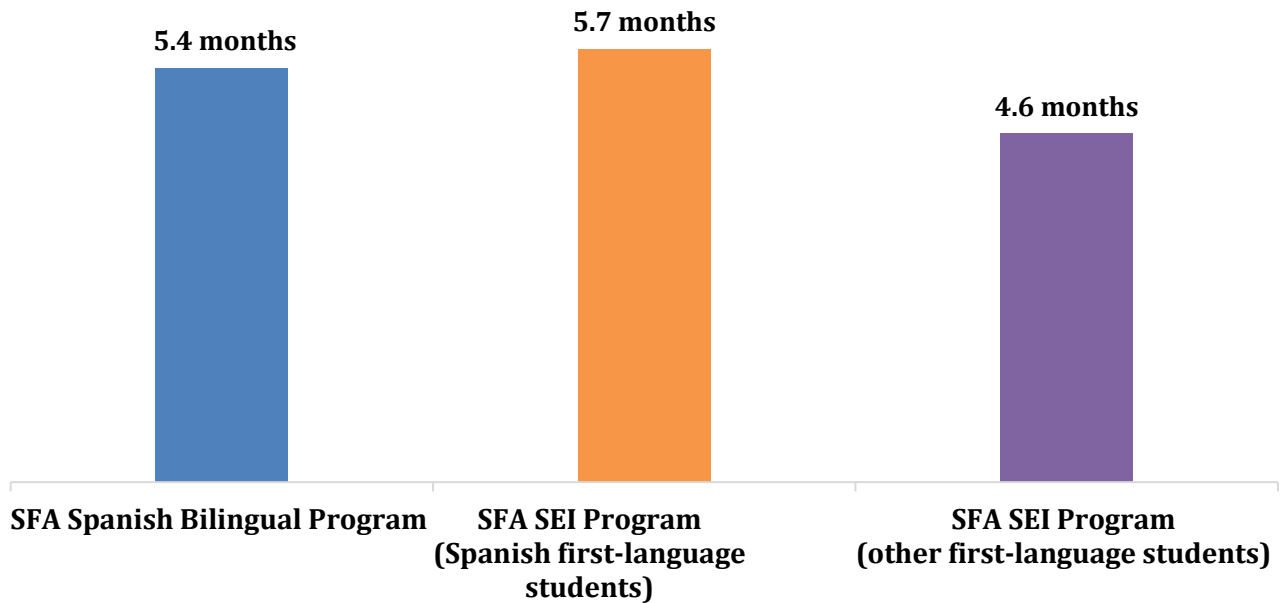
Source: MDRC 2015

The positive effects of the overall SFA program have also carried over to its adaptations for ELL students. Studies of the SFA ELL adaptation showed that it boosted ELL students' reading by up to two grade levels versus matched comparison schools.<sup>69</sup> Other studies showed strong impact for Spanish-speaking ELL students, including increased transition from ELL services to mainstream classes and increased reading scores.<sup>70</sup> These positive results also included ELL students who spoke languages other than Spanish (see chart below). These results were achieved in several cities where 80 percent or more of the young people served were low-income or students of color.<sup>71</sup>

Given the positive impact of the SFA program, it has reasonable implementation costs. The randomized control study discussed above found that the SFA reading program had modest additional costs over programs used by comparison schools.<sup>72</sup> Those costs primarily covered additional teacher training, but also included the program facilitators, tutors, and materials.<sup>73</sup> SFA schools allocated \$276 per student for their reading program compared to \$157 per student spent by control group schools, suggesting an additional cost of \$119 per student for the SFA program.<sup>74</sup> Adjusting these figures to 2017-2018 dollars would yield \$301 per student for the SFA reading program and \$130 in spending above control group schools. These estimates assume that schools implementing SFA would reallocate existing resources that support reading initiatives, including teacher and principal time, building space, and instructional materials, towards implementing SFA. Considering the total cost of SFA, instead of the expenses above existing programs, schools spent just over \$1,800 per student, which translates to \$1,975 in 2017-2018.<sup>75</sup>

## ELL 2nd Graders Made Significant Gains in Reading in Various SFA Programs

Gains over matched comparison groups in reading skills for Success For All 2nd graders, in months of expected learning in 2nd grade, by program type



Source: Slavin and Madden, 1998, Livingston and Flaherty, 1997, Lipsey et. al. 2012

## The Challenge of Serving Adolescent ELL Students

Providing effective support for ELL students in the elementary years is a significant challenge. The difficulty is amplified for teachers in the middle and upper grades who work with teens lacking the language skills to be successful in completing secondary material. Typically, the foundational literacy, reading, and comprehension skills that ELL students need have long been mastered by non-ELL peers in the upper grades. This makes the instructional tasks of serving middle and high school ELL students all the more challenging. Unfortunately, there have been few rigorous research studies focused on middle and high school ELL students who arrive in our schools with limited English skills or who have up to that point been unable to reach proficiency.

Expediting Comprehension for English Language Learners (ExC-ELL) is an approach that has gained significant attention among practitioners focused on the challenges of secondary ELL students. The goal of the ExC-ELL program is to provide middle and high school teachers working with ELL students explicit training on reading and second language development. It is organized as a whole school professional development program where all academic teachers (including math, science, and social studies, in addition to English and ESL) learn how to support the specific needs of ELL students in all subjects.

There are several key components of the ExC-ELL program.<sup>76</sup> These include:

1. Supporting teacher professional development on effective ELL instruction and support for below-grade-level adolescents. This focuses on the basic elements that secondary ELL students have missed, including vocabulary, reading comprehension, and phonics.
2. Grouping teachers in teams to practice and develop the ELL support techniques that were the focus of their training.
3. Having specific ELL support and ESL curriculum designed to meet the varied needs of students. This particularly helps students with acute needs, such as those who lacked education in their home country or who have been persistently unable to reach English proficiency in earlier years. These students begin with

basic reading skills courses and then proceed to social studies, science, and math courses that have been designed to be accessible for ELL students.

4. Using observation tools designed for administrators and literacy coaches to support classroom teachers. This includes providing specialized training for support personnel on how to implement these tools and foster effective ELL instruction.

Teachers undertake up to 50 hours in training and receive coaching throughout the year. They are also grouped into professional learning communities.<sup>77</sup> These training systems allow teachers to redesign ELL instruction by identifying the diverse needs of ELL students and returning to reading fundamentals throughout all courses of instruction.<sup>78</sup>

The ExC-ELL program has shown some encouraging preliminary results, but it has yet to be as rigorously evaluated as SFA. ExC-ELL contains an extensive professional development program. One initial analysis found that within two years, ExC-ELL students earned 45 percent higher reading scores.<sup>79</sup> With this growth, the majority of high-needs ELL students had met or exceeded grade level reading, and the schools involved were able to turn around their overall performance.<sup>80</sup>

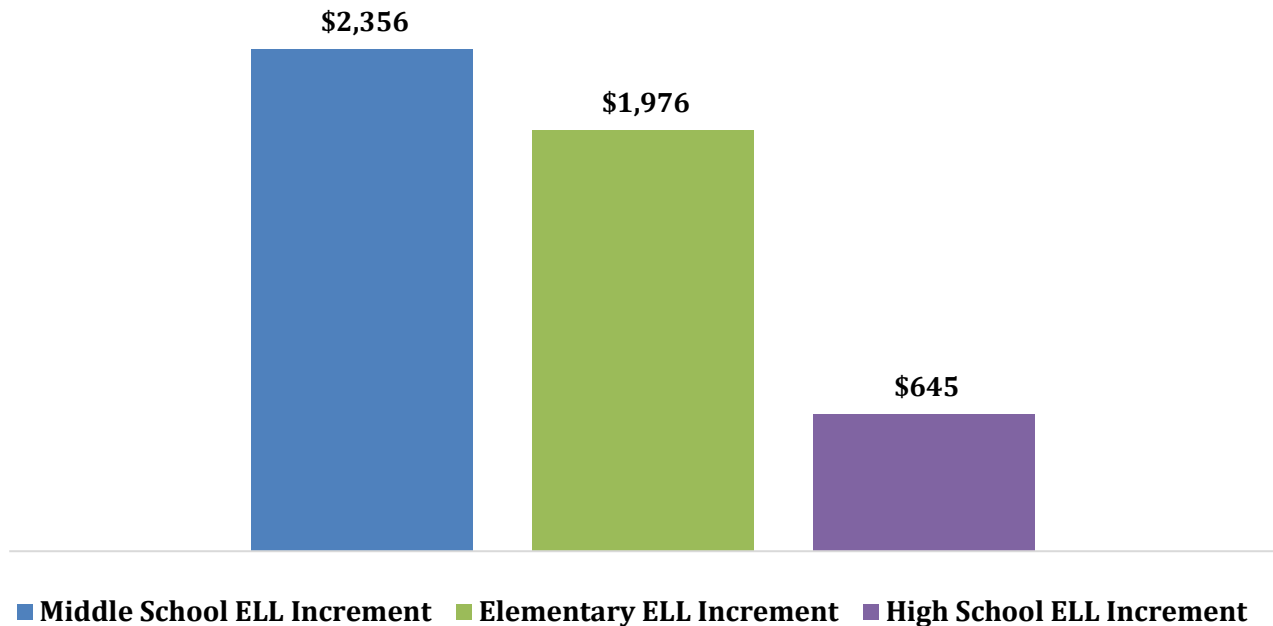
## **Funding for ELL Supports and Cost Analysis**

There are costs to implementing effective programs for serving ELL students. The Commonwealth's foundation budget, which estimates the cost of educating students in our public schools, contains specific funding rates for ELL students that are greater than those for non-ELL peers. This reflects the additional cost of supports that help these students learn English and succeed in school.

In the 2016-2017 school year, ELL students had a funding rate of roughly \$9,300.<sup>81</sup> This compares to traditional elementary, middle, and high school rates of between \$6,900 and \$8,600. Districts separately receive an additional increment for each low-income student. Since the state has an across-the-board ELL funding rate for all ELL students, instead of the rate corresponding to their age group (e.g. a middle school ELL student has a weight of \$9,300 instead of \$6,900), districts receive extra funding between a minimum of roughly \$650 (7 percent more) for high school students to a maximum of \$2,350 in extra funding (34 percent more) for middle school (see chart below).

## Middle School ELL Students Have Largest Funding Increment in Funding Formula

Difference in Chapter 70 foundation budget rates for ELL students compared to different student age groups, 2016-2017



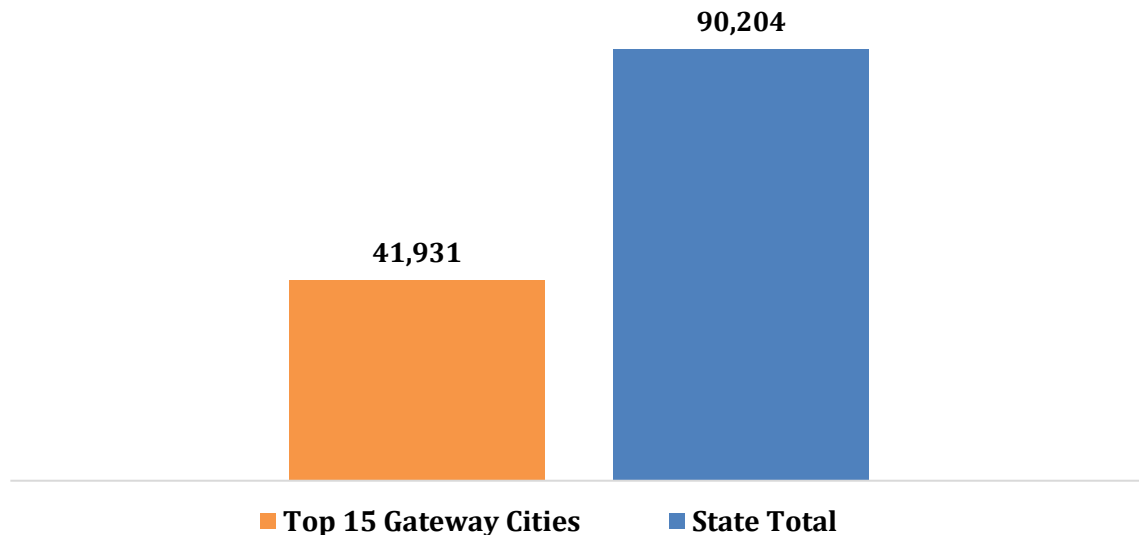
Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Currently, ELL kids in Massachusetts face disproportionate challenges due to the school funding issues that affect students statewide. The 2015 Foundation Budget Review Commission (FBRC), which examined potential improvements to the Massachusetts school funding formula, underscored that our system is based on assumptions that are increasingly out of line with costs in education today.<sup>82</sup> Relatively affluent communities often raise funds locally to ensure students receive the supports originally envisioned within the foundation budget. Lower-income districts generally lack the capacity to raise additional money locally. So when the foundation budget and corresponding state aid fails to cover the costs schools now face to provide the educational program outlined in law, schools are forced to cut back on services. Many ELL students attend school in cities with the lowest capacity to raise additional funds to support education. Nearly half of all ELL students in the state are currently served in the 15 largest Gateway City districts (see chart below).<sup>83</sup> The cities of Worcester, Lawrence, Springfield, Lowell, Brockton, New Bedford, and Lynn educate the largest number of ELL young people within this group, ranging from over 3,000 in Lynn to 8,700 in Worcester.<sup>84</sup>



## Nearly Half of ELL Students Attend School in 15 Largest Gateway Cities

ELL student enrollment, statewide, and in 15 gateway cities with the largest ELL population, 2016-2017

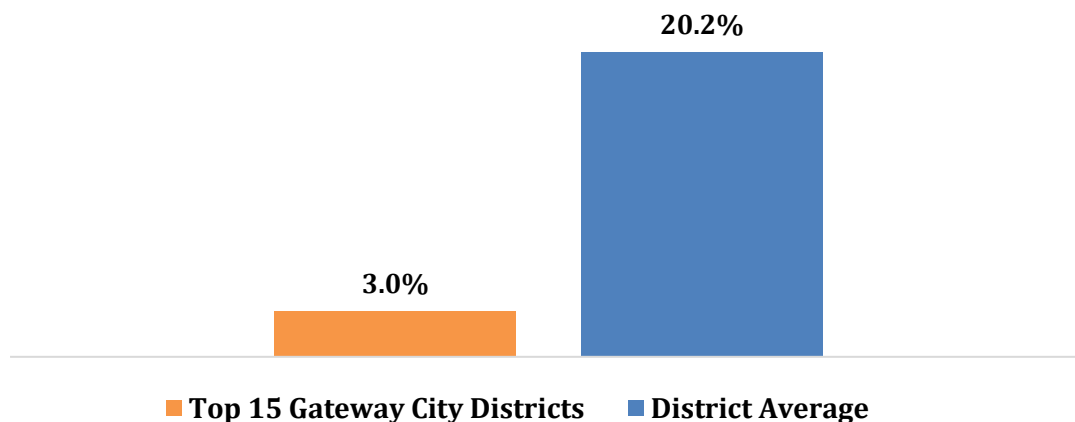


Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

On average, these Gateway City districts spend much closer to the outdated minimum requirement in our school finance system than do cities overall (see chart below).<sup>85</sup> Students in these cities would receive \$410 million (over \$2,000 for each student) in additional support if their districts spent at the state average relative to their requirement.

## Gateway Cities with the Most ELL Students Spend Less Relative to Requirement than Massachusetts Overall

Additional local spending above Chapter 70 requirement, 2015-2016



Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

There is significant debate in research and practice as to what additional funding amounts are appropriate for ELL students to gain the services necessary to achieve state academic standards. Massachusetts' additional funding for ELL students is within the range of what is provided in other states. The FBRC found that our additional funding amounts of between 7 percent and 34 percent were within, but on the low end, of these amounts nationally. National literature cited by the commission found that other states have between 9 percent and 99 percent more funding for ELL students.<sup>86</sup> The commission argued that there is just as great, if not more, need at the high school level. It recommended increasing the ELL funding increment for all kids to at least the maximum middle school increment of roughly \$2,350.<sup>87</sup> Following the FBRC recommendation would push additional ELL funding up to 32 percent in elementary school and 27 percent in high school, still below the existing 34 percent in middle school.

The changes suggested by the FBRC would still leave Massachusetts significantly below what some relevant research on ELL funding has determined is necessary for these students to attain high reading and math achievement and strong graduation rates. For example, a highly-detailed study of ELL funding in the state of New York that used multiple approaches (e.g. expert panels, research literature, and reviewing practices of successful schools) found that ELL students require double the funding of the general population to attain these high academic benchmarks.<sup>88</sup> An in-depth study on Massachusetts ELL students and their needs would help the state to fully ascertain the appropriate funding rate.

## Conclusion and Considerations

Large changes to make school funding more robust and equitable, such as implementing the recommendations of the FBRC, could significantly enhance the resources available to support students across Massachusetts, and would likely have particular benefits for ELL students. Such changes would likely be phased in over a series of years, leaving the current situation for ELL students generally in place. It is worthwhile to consider interim steps that could increase the availability of evidence-based programs to support ELL students. Efforts to increase effective programs could also be modified and evaluated in our specific context to make improvements that could yield even greater benefits.

Given the diversity of the ELL population in Massachusetts, it is unlikely that all districts serving ELL students would follow the same approach. There are specific considerations in serving different age groups and kids from varied backgrounds. The details of implementation would need to be adjusted to take local conditions into account. With those caveats in mind, districts could be given the flexibility to use resources towards evidence-based approaches that promote student achievement and fit their specific needs.

Gains for ELL students will be more likely if educators, school leaders, and community members are actively engaged in creating programs that fit the needs of students in local schools. Statewide efforts to foster improvement in ELL student services and outcomes could also provide greater capacity to implement and expand the reach of promising new methods. Initiatives shown to be effective in other states provide hope that ELL students in Massachusetts can be supported to more fully succeed in education, participate in our society, and help all of us realize the full potential of our Commonwealth.

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