

Graduation Policy and Predictors of College Career Readiness for English Learners

Research Overview

The study examines how English Language exit statuses, time enrolled in the U.S. schools, WIDA ACCESS scores and demographics correlated with 4-year and 5-year graduation rates and college career readiness measures for English Learners. English Learners who especially benefited from a 5-year graduation pathway are identified.

Key Words: English Learners, Graduation Rate, Graduation Policy, College Readiness

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Propose of Study

While conversational English may develop within 1 to 2 years, academic language proficiency often requires 5 to 7 years (Thomas & Collier, 2002). ELs with fewer years in U.S. schools, particularly those arriving in high school, are less likely to graduate within four years but show improved graduation outcomes when provided additional time and targeted supports (Sugarman, 2021).

English Language Proficiency (ELP) measured by WIDA ACCESS is a strong predictor of academic and graduation outcome (WIDA, 2025). ELs entering high school with higher ELP are more likely to graduate on time. English Language Development (ELD) exit policies emphasize ELP without considering academic readiness (Linguanti & Cook, 2013). Early exit without substantial support may risk ELs for on-time graduation while prolonged ELD without access to rigorous coursework can also hinder graduation. Long Term English Learners (LTELs) often have lower test scores, lower graduation rate, and decreased self-esteem.

Research Method

This study adopted a longitudinal framework to examine how initial conditions in Grade 9 (G9) predict graduation rates and College and Career Readiness (CCR) measures. All first-time G9 (834 Ever-EL and 4454 Never-ELs) who enrolled in our school district during the 2020–21 school year without transferring out of our schools in the following five years were included in this study. Point- Biserial, Spearman, Pearson, Phi correlations and Chi Square analyses were used to correlate the influential factors with graduation and CCR outcomes. Bonferroni, Fisher's Exact, or One-Way ANOVA test were performed for pairwise comparisons on graduation rate

and CCR performance among LTEL status (Yes/No) and year ranges (<1 year, 1-2 years, 3-5 years, >=6 years) enrolled in U.S. schools prior to G9.

Results and Discussion

Adding one additional year significantly narrows the graduation gap. This study agrees with other research that supports the inclusion of 5-year graduation rates as a more equitable accountability metric for ELs (Sugarman, 2019). Understanding the relationship between time to exit ELD and graduation outcomes is critical for policy decisions.

Four-Year Graduation Rate and Dropout Rate - By G9 EL Exit Status

G9 Ever-ELs had a higher dropout (7.6% vs. 2.9%) and a lower graduation rate (81.9% vs. 92.4%) than Never-ELs. Ever-ELs who exited ELD within two years before G9 had the lowest dropout rate (0%) and the highest graduation rate (90%) while Active-ELs had the highest dropout rate (17.9%) and the lowest graduation rate (66.7%).

Five-Year Graduation Rate - By G9 EL Exit Status

Although Ever-ELs still had a lower 5-year graduation rate (87.1% vs. 93.8%) than their Never-EL peers, the 5.2% of Ever ELs who graduated in their 5th year of high school was significantly higher than that (1.4%) of Never-ELs. The graduation gap significantly decreased between Never-EL and Ever-EL when extending one year of graduation timeline.

Impact of Time in U.S. Schools and LTEL at G9 Entry

Non-LTEs who have enrolled in U.S. schools for less than a year, 3-5 years or at least 6 years prior to G9 had significantly higher 5-years graduation rates (96%, 88%, and 90%) than LTEs (73%) and first two years of EL newcomers (73%). No matter how long ELs have enrolled in U.S. schools before entering high school, they were all significantly benefited from having an additional year to fulfill graduation requirements than Never-ELs. The benefits were

especially higher (19% & 7% graduate-rate increases) for the first two years of EL newcomers. Excluding LTELs and first year G9 newcomers, the longer students enrolled in U.S. Schools, the higher their graduation chance and SAT scores are.

The point-biserial correlations indicate that LTELs had moderately or strongly negative impacts on students' CCR performance. The first-year G9 newcomers entered our schools during 2020 Covid pandemic. More studies should be done when there were a larger number of first-year G9 newcomers.

Impact of WIDA ACCESS at 9th Grade Entry

ELs' WIDA scores upon entering G9 showed moderate Point-Biserial correlations (0.22 to 0.23) with graduation rates, moderate Pearson correlations (0.46 to 0.52) with SAT and G10 State English Language Arts (ELA) performance, and weak to moderate correlations (0.29 to 0.38) with AP performance.

Demographic Impact on EL Graduation Rate

Hispanic ELs or ELs receiving Free or Reduced Price Meals (FARMS) had significantly lower graduation rates and WIDA scores than their counterparts. Special Education (SPED) ELs had moderately lower WIDA scores but no significantly different graduation rate compared to non-SPED ELs.