



# Deconstructing the EL Gap

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## POLICY ISSUE

Across U.S. schools, students classified as English learners (ELs) tend to achieve lower educational outcomes than their non-EL peers. What explains these differences? Are they a product of ELs' developing English language proficiency and/or the services they receive at school, or do other factors play a role? For policymakers and educators, understanding the nature of the "EL gap" is an important first step toward improving outcomes for ELs and fulfilling a legal and moral responsibility to provide these students with equal access to learning opportunities. The authors of this study attempt to deconstruct the EL gap in Massachusetts relative to student test scores, educational attainment, and high school coursework. Specifically, they examine the extent to which differences in these outcomes between ELs and non-ELs can be attributed to factors that are unrelated to a student's English proficiency or receipt of EL services.

## STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

The authors use student-level data from Massachusetts for all public-school students in the state from 2006 through 2016. They compare the later educational outcomes of students based on their EL status in either fifth or ninth grade, two important transition points in a student's academic trajectory. They first examine raw differences in these outcomes between ELs and non-ELs, then see whether the gaps narrow when student characteristics—e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, free lunch eligibility, prior achievement—are taken into consideration. The extent to which these differences in student outcomes diminish as the statistical model controls for more characteristics reveals the extent to which the EL gap reflects underlying differences in the characteristics of ELs and non-ELs, other than the linguistic status assigned to them at school.

Here's what the study finds:

- For students in both fifth and ninth grades, EL gaps in test scores, educational attainment, and high school coursework become substantially smaller, and in some cases completely disappear, after accounting for factors such as students' demographic characteristics and prior achievement. For example:
  - Fifth-grade ELs and non-ELs with similar demographics end up completing high school and enrolling in college at similar rates. In fact, the ELs are in fact slightly more likely to complete high school and enroll in college than the non-ELs with similar demographics and similar prior test scores. (Figure 1.)
  - Ninth-grade ELs remain less likely to complete high school and enroll in college than non-ELs with similar demographics, but the gaps are much larger when demographic characteristics are not taken into account (Figure 2).

## KEY FINDINGS

- Demographic and prior achievement differences explain much of the "EL gap" in educational outcomes such as test scores, educational attainment, and high school coursework.
- When ELs are compared to non-ELs with similar characteristics—e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, free lunch eligibility, prior achievement—the gaps narrow substantially, and in some cases completely disappear.

Figure 1: Differences in Later Outcomes Between 5th-Grade ELs and Non-ELs

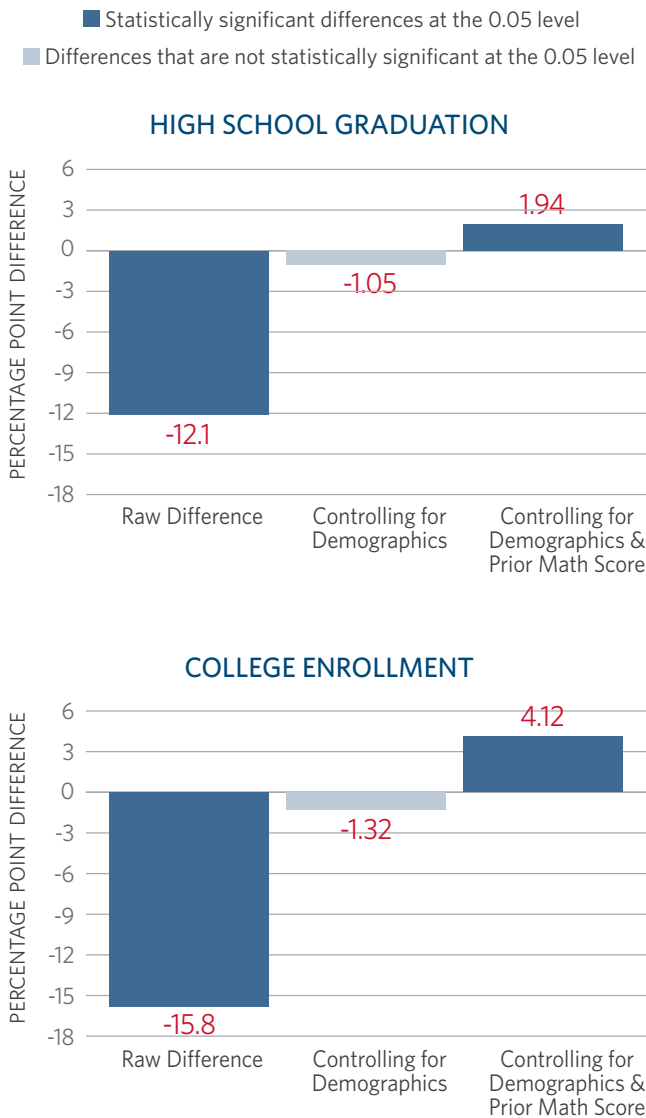


Figure 1 shows that the high school graduation and college enrollment rates (in both two-year and four-year institutions) of students classified as ELs in fifth grade are 12.1 and 15.8 percentage points lower, respectively, than those of students who were not ELs in fifth grade. However, these gaps disappear when the students' demographic characteristics are taken into account—in other words, fifth-grade ELs and non-ELs with similar demographics end up completing high school and enrolling in college at similar rates. Furthermore, fifth-grade ELs actually appear to have slightly higher high school graduation and college enrollment rates than their non-EL peers with similar demographics and similar prior math test scores.

Figure 2: Differences in Later Outcomes Between 9th-Grade ELs and Non-ELs

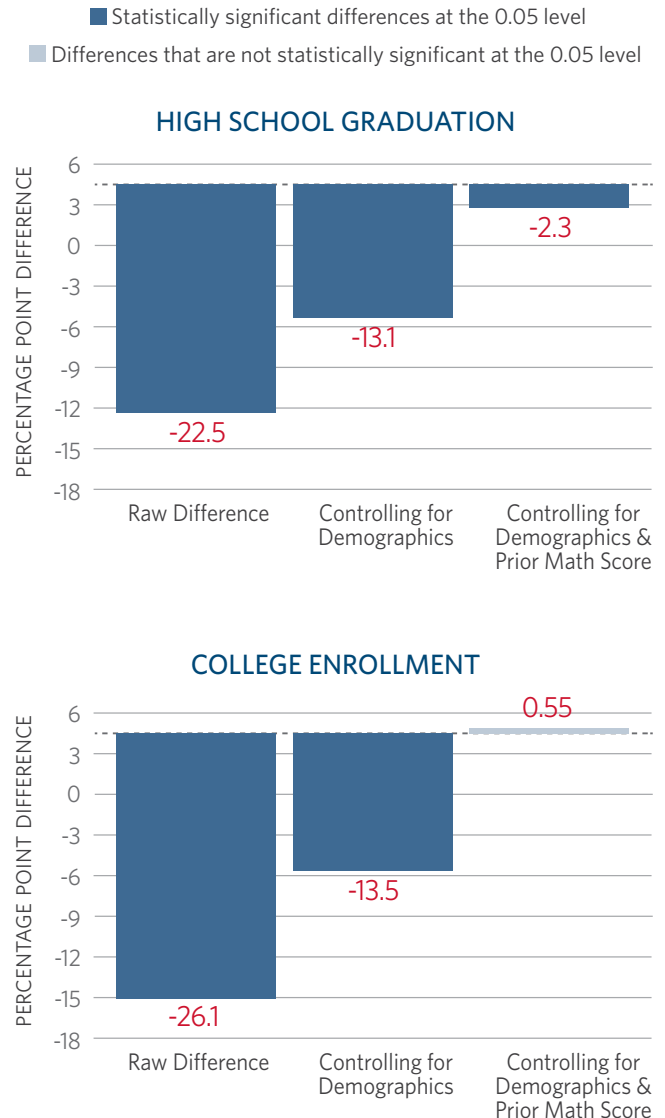


Figure 2 shows that students who are classified as ELs in ninth grade have much lower high school graduation and college enrollment rates than their non-EL peers (22.5 and 26.1 percentage points lower, respectively). These gaps shrink after accounting for students' demographic characteristics, but ninth-grade ELs are still about 13-14 percentage points less likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college than their peers with similar demographics. However, after prior math test scores are taken into consideration, the gap in high school graduation rates narrows considerably, and the gap in college enrollment rates disappears. This means that ninth-grade ELs and non-ELs with similar demographics and prior achievement levels are similarly likely to complete high school and enroll in college.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study finds that the EL gap in educational outcomes largely reflects the fact that ELs are very likely to be students of color who come from lower-income households—students for whom there are well-documented achievement and attainment gaps unrelated to language status. When ELs are compared to non-ELs with similar characteristics, these gaps are less apparent, and in some cases completely absent. This means that unequal educational outcomes between ELs and non-ELs are not a product of EL classification itself or of the language services ELs receive in school. At least in Massachusetts, the current system of language supports provided to ELs seems to be successfully offsetting the additional challenges of being an EL at the elementary level.

However, these results do *not* imply that ELs are achieving adequate educational outcomes overall, or that EL services are unnecessary. Inequitable opportunities and outcomes for ELs are staggering, real, and important, and if schools were to eliminate or reduce the supports they currently provide to ELs, these gaps would likely become even more severe. Instead, this study highlights the overlapping experiences of ELs, students of color, and lower-income students and the persistent undereducation they face in public schools. The main implication of these findings is that school systems must continue providing high-quality language supports for ELs in order to ensure that gaps do not widen. A secondary implication is that policies that effectively improve opportunities and outcomes for students of color and lower-income students will also play an important role in decreasing the EL gap.

Finally, it's important to note that the results of this study differ for fifth-grade versus ninth-grade students. In general, demographic characteristics explain more of the gap in later outcomes for fifth-grade ELs than for ninth-grade ELs. This may be because ninth-grade ELs are likely to be either long-term ELs or new immigrants. Long-term ELs' severely constricted opportunity to learn is well-documented.<sup>1</sup> As for new immigrants, part of the reason they don't reach parity with non-ELs with similar demographics may be that they have a significant amount of English learning to do, and there simply isn't enough time in four years of high school for them to acquire grade-level English proficiency and catch up to their non-EL peers. That said, there is also growing evidence that high school ELs experience unique institutional barriers that inhibit their access to advanced coursework in high school.<sup>2</sup> So, in addition to a simple lack of time to reach English proficiency, high school ELs may face systemic barriers in school in a way that younger ELs do not. These findings suggest that policymakers and educators seeking to improve equitable outcomes for ELs must pay particular attention to the experiences of high school ELs.

## FULL REPORT

For the complete working paper, visit [wheelockpolicycenter.org](https://wheelockpolicycenter.org).

## ENDNOTES

1 Clark-Gareca et al., 2020; Olsen, 2010; Thompson, 2015

2 Callahan, 2005; Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Kanno, 2021

Full citations are available in the full working paper at [wheelockpolicycenter.org](https://wheelockpolicycenter.org).

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