



# English Learners' Access to Massachusetts Early College Programs

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## POLICY ISSUE

Early college programs (ECPs) are an increasingly common approach for promoting college enrollment and degree/credential completion, particularly for historically marginalized students. Unlike stand-alone dual enrollment opportunities, ECPs are formally designed to help students earn more credits, develop college-going identities, reduce college cost, and enter clear pathways to a college degree. Prior research has demonstrated the effectiveness of ECPs for recruiting and improving outcomes for students of color and low-income students.<sup>1</sup> Less is known, however, about the experiences of students identified as English learners (ELs) in these programs, even though ELs are notably underrepresented in higher education and therefore an important audience for Early College.

In Massachusetts, ECPs launched in 2017 and have since scaled rapidly, with 50 approved programs serving 8,200 students in the 2023–24 school year. Massachusetts ECPs enroll large shares of Black and Hispanic/Latinx students (60%) and low-income students (56%),<sup>2</sup> demonstrating their potential for addressing persistent representation gaps in college access and success. To better understand whether ELs are also taking advantage of these promising programs, the authors of this study examined the extent to which ELs are participating in Massachusetts ECPs, analyzing patterns across schools and subgroups. Their findings carry important statewide and national implications for policy efforts to improve equitable access to Early College opportunities and outcomes.

## STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

The authors used student-level data from Massachusetts 12th-graders in three academic years: 2021–22 through 2023–24. They identified two groups of students: those currently classified as ELs in 12th grade (*current ELs*) and those who entered high school as ELs but were reclassified as English proficient before 12th grade (*former ELs*). Their sample included over 6,000 current ELs and about 1,500 former ELs across more than 50 Massachusetts high schools with ECPs. The authors compared the extent to which current and former ELs were participating in ECPs at equal rates to their peers across schools and colleges in the state. They also examined whether student characteristics such as race, gender, or low-income status predicted a current or former EL's likelihood of participating in an ECP.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Current ELs in 12th grade are substantially **underrepresented** in Massachusetts ECPs.
- Former ELs in 12th grade are slightly **overrepresented** in Massachusetts ECPs.
- Current ELs are more underrepresented in ECPs at schools with higher shares of Hispanic/Latinx students, low-income students, and ELs.

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The authors found:

### Current ELs are substantially underrepresented in Massachusetts ECPs.

- Current ELs in 12th grade are about 9 percentage points less likely to participate in ECPs compared to their peers with similar backgrounds and characteristics in ECP-participating schools.
- Current ELs in 12th grade are at parity or overrepresented in only 7 out of 55 ECPs.

### In contrast, former ELs are overrepresented in Massachusetts ECPs.

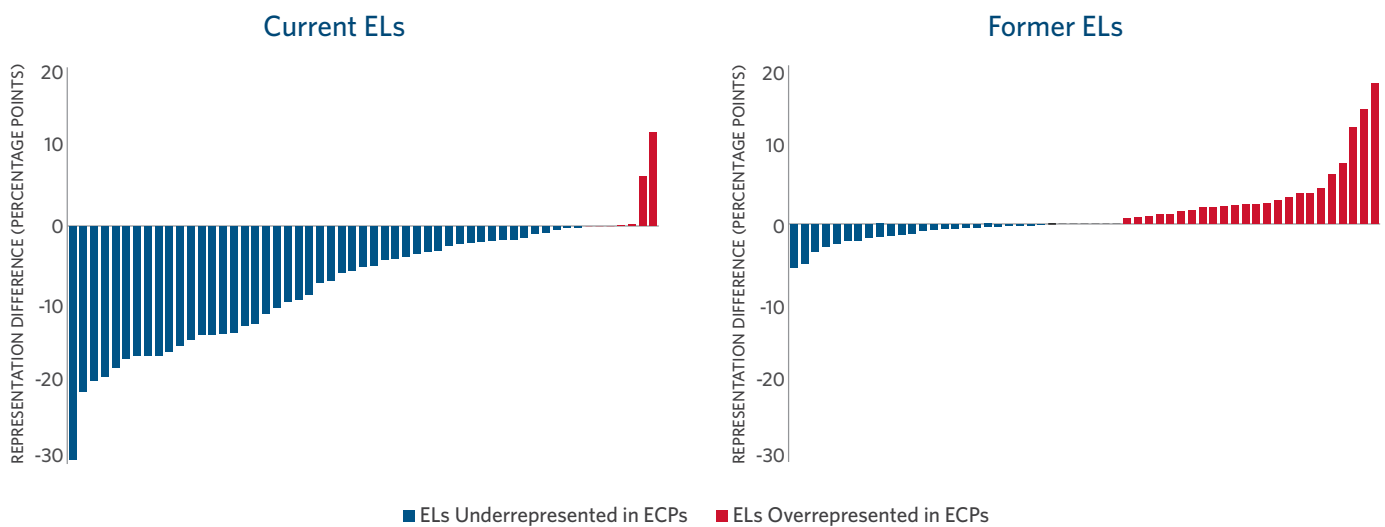
- Former ELs in 12th grade are about 9 percentage points more likely to participate in ECPs compared to their peers with similar backgrounds and characteristics in ECP-participating schools.
- Notably, former ELs are a much smaller subgroup,

representing 4% of all 12th-graders at schools with ECPs, while current ELs account for 16%. Thus, this overrepresentation of former ELs in ECPs does not make up for the severe underrepresentation of current ELs.

### The representation of current ELs in ECPs varies widely across Massachusetts schools and colleges.

- Both high schools and colleges show a wide range in how well current ELs are represented in ECPs, ranging from a 30 percentage point underrepresentation to a 12 percentage point overrepresentation.
- Current ELs are more underrepresented in ECPs at schools with greater shares of Hispanic/Latinx students, low-income students, and current and former ELs.
- Current ELs are also more underrepresented in ECPs with four-year college partners (by 11 percentage points) compared to two-year college partners (by 5 percentage points).

## English Learner Representation in Massachusetts Early College Programs



These figures show school-level differences between the share of current ELs (left) or former ELs (right) who participate in Early College relative to the share of current ELs or former ELs in each school. Each bar represents a high school. Blue bars represent schools where current/former ELs are underrepresented in ECPs; red bars represent schools where current/former ELs are overrepresented in ECPs. For example, if 20% of a school's 12th-grade students are ELs, but only 5% of 12th-grade ECP participants are ELs, that represents a 15 percentage point underrepresentation.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study finds that current ELs are substantially underrepresented in ECPs in Massachusetts. Notably, this lack of access persists despite Massachusetts prioritizing equitable access as a guiding principle for its Early College Initiative. Additionally, Massachusetts ECPs are located in schools that tend to serve a higher proportion of Hispanic/Latinx, and low-income EL students compared to the average school in the state. Thus, simply offering ECPs in schools with a large EL population does not ensure equitable access for this subgroup.

To address this issue, a critical first step is to systematically track EL participation in ECPs. Massachusetts recently released an [Early College Data Dashboard](#) that provides disaggregated data on ECP enrollment. Other states and districts could adopt similar strategies for sharing ECP participation data, making sure ELs and other targeted groups, such as students with disabilities, are not overlooked in data tracking. However, data tracking is not sufficient for changing student outcomes. This study highlights the need for better understanding the mechanisms driving enrollment disparities.

The disparity between current and former ELs is a useful example. Why would these two groups show such different patterns of participation? One possible explanation is that students still classified as ELs in 12th grade are often newcomers who arrive after 9th grade. This may cause students to miss on-ramps, recruitment events, or the start of an ECP, all of which typically occur early in high school. Thus, ECPs should carefully consider these entry points to Early College and explore ways to create opportunities for participation across grade levels. Further exploration of disparities between current and former ELs could reveal additional barriers and highlight opportunities for addressing them. Other ongoing analyses by this study's authors will examine short-term and long-term outcomes for ELs enrolled in ECPs. These types of analyses are important for deepening our understanding of enrollment metrics and the impact of ECPs for different student groups.

Additionally, despite state policies designed to center historically marginalized student groups, including ELs, it

appears implementation varies too widely. This suggests that some ECPs may have policies and practices that better support the recruitment and retention of ELs, while other schools may inadvertently create additional obstacles. Future work by this study's authors will delve deeply into case studies from Massachusetts ECPs to identify and share successful practices. States and districts can highlight local exemplars and facilitate opportunities for ECPs to exchange strategies for ensuring equitable access across subgroups. Ongoing monitoring and support is needed to ensure participation in ECPs aligns with program goals.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Haxton et al., 2016; Song et al., 2021
- 2 Lucien, 2024, March

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Massachusetts Early College Programs](#)
- [Berger et al. \(2013\). \*Early college, early success: Early College High School Initiative impact study\*. American Institutes for Research.](#)

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