

## Predictive power of grades and other indicators for English Learners

by Elaine M. Allensworth, Marisa de la Torre,  
Kaitlyn Franklin, and Jinqing Xu

Most reporting on the educational attainment of English Learners (ELs) focuses on standardized test performance. However, other indicators—including students' course grades and behaviors—are more predictive of high school graduation and college outcomes among non-English Learners.

This study asks: **How predictive are different indicators for high school graduation, college enrollment, and degree completion for different groups of English Learners?**

Using these indicators can improve schools' ability to understand the needs of English Learners, enabling them to provide better support and increase students' educational attainment.

The study followed students who started ninth grade for the first time in the fall of 2008 through the fall of 2017 in district-run (non-charter) schools in Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

Students were grouped according to their English Learner status at the beginning of ninth grade:

- **Former English Learners:** Students who were formerly classified as English Learners during their time in CPS but demonstrated English proficiency and exited English learner status by the ninth grade.
- **Long-term English Learners without an Individualized Education Plan (IEP):** Active English Learners in the ninth grade who had been in CPS for six or more years (i.e., third grade or earlier) without demonstrating English proficiency through the ACCESS test and did not have an IEP for an identified disability at the beginning of ninth grade.
- **Long-term English Learners with an IEP:** Active English Learners in the ninth grade who had been in CPS for six or more years (i.e., third grade or earlier) without demonstrating English proficiency through the ACCESS test and who had an IEP for an identified disability at the beginning of ninth grade.
- **Late-arriving English Learners:** Active English Learners in the ninth grade who had been in CPS for fewer than six years (i.e., after third grade).<sup>1</sup>

## Findings

**Which single indicators were most predictive of educational attainment?**

- **GPA's were the most predictive** of high school graduation, college enrollment, and degree completion for **all English Learner groups**, followed by attendance and course failure rates.
  - These were more predictive than level of English proficiency, standardized test scores, suspensions, and background characteristics.

---

<sup>1</sup> Students who have never been classified as English Learners will be referred to as Never English Learners.

### Which combinations of indicators substantially improved the prediction of educational attainment beyond single indicators?

- Combining GPA and attendance data, or course failure rates and attendance data, provided the best prediction of *high school graduation* for **most English Learner groups**. (except long-term English Learners with IEPs)
- The combination of GPA with test scores was the best prediction of which students eventually *attained a college degree* for **all English Learner groups**.<sup>2</sup>

### What is the relationship of the strongest indicators with educational attainment outcomes?

- English Learners with greater than a 2.0 GPA were very likely (~90%) to graduate high school, **except for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)**.
- Only **active English Learners** in high school with attendance above 95% were very likely to graduate (around 90% graduated), while **former and never English Learners**, were very likely to graduate with 90% attendance or higher.
- Only students with at least a “B” average (3.0 GPA) in ninth grade had greater than a 1-in-4 chance of attaining a college credential, **across all groups, except for long-term English Learners with IEPs**.

### Data on key indicators

#### Ninth grade GPA and Attendance

- Ninth grade GPAs and attendance were stronger among **former English Learners** (33% had A-B GPA and 30% with 98% attendance or better in ninth grade) and **late-arriving English Learners** (33% had A-B GPA and 26% with 98% attendance) than **never English Learners** (29% had A-B GPA and 20% with 98% attendance).
  - **Long-term English Learners without IEPs** had much lower GPAs than other students (14% had A-B GPA), while 22% of **long-term English Learners with an IEP** did.

#### Standardized tests

- **Active English Learners** were more likely to score low or very low on standardized tests given in English than **former and never English Learners**.
  - Among **late-arriving English Learners**, 63% scored in the low or very low range.
  - Seventy-five percent of **long-term English Learners without IEPs** and 93% of **long-term English Learners with IEPs** scored in the low or very low range, while 30% of **never English Learners** and 27% of **former English Learners** scored in the low or very low range.

---

<sup>2</sup> But the strength of relationship of test scores with college outcomes partially results because students with high test scores are more likely to be at particular high schools and when you compare students with different test scores in the same high schools the relationship weakens (see Table 5 in the study).

Table 1. GPA, Attendance, and Test Scores for Different English Learner Student Groups

	Ninth grade outcomes (Fall cohorts 2008-2017)		
	Percent of students		
	GPA 3.0-4.0	Attendance 98%+	Test Score Range = Very low-Low
Former English Learners	33%	30%	27%
Late-arriving English Learners	33%	26%	63%
Long-term English Learners without an IEP	14%	20%	75%
Long-term English Learners with an IEP	22%	17%	93%
Never English Learners	29%	20%	30%

## Policy & practice takeaways

- **Schools do not need different systems of early warning and college readiness indicators for English Learners.** This study confirms that the best indicators are the same for most students, but the *threshold* at which students become at risk for meeting/not meeting an educational attainment milestone is different for active English Learners in high school.
  - For example, in order to be very likely to graduate, **active English Learners** need attendance above 95%, while **former and never English Learners** need attendance of 90% or higher.
- **Identifying how each group of English Learners perform on these indicators can help school staff estimate the leverage they would have in improving students' outcomes by focusing on those indicators.** This may include:
  - Improving GPAs of **former English Learners** so that more of them earn 3.0 or higher to further increase their college degree attainment rates.
    - More than one-third of former ELs have ninth grade GPAs between 2.0 and 3.0, which means they are engaged in school but not at the levels needed to be likely to attain a college degree
  - Monitoring and checking-in with **late-arriving English Learners** through their first two years of high school because their grades and attendance seem to be more in-flux between ninth and tenth grade than typical for other groups of students.
  - Supporting **long-term English Learners without IEPs** to keep up with attendance and not failing their courses is more critical than their level of English proficiency.
  - Improving attendance is particularly important for **long-term English Learners with IEPs**; 33% of these students were chronically absent. The risk of low outcomes for these students were similar to other students.
    - Although educational outcomes were harder to predict for this group, they were equally at risk of low outcomes as other groups if they had low attendance.

## Data & methods

The analytic sample used for this study consists of 185,441 students who started ninth grade for the first time in the fall of 2008 through the fall of 2017 in district-run (non-charter) schools in CPS. The data contain student demographic information, course grades, standardized test scores, and attendance rates. The administrative data files also include information on the ACCESS assessment that determines whether English Learners demonstrate English proficiency in a given year. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) provides information on students' post-secondary education and allows us to identify students enrolling in two-year and four-year colleges, and degree completion. To determine which variables are the best predictors of educational attainment, logistic regression models were used to predict each educational attainment outcome separately for each subgroup and McFadden pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> statistics were compared from across the models to determine the best predictors. We omitted the 2010 and 2016 cohorts of first-time ninth graders to use for confirmatory analyses. In addition, we run machine learning models with all cohorts to validate the results.

## Study details:

Allensworth, E.M., de la Torre, M., Franklin, K., & Xu, J. (2025). Identifying Indicators to Support Educational Attainment for Different Groups of English Learners in High School. (Working Paper). Providence, RI: Annenberg EdExchange. Retrieved from: <https://edworkingpapers.com/ai25-1241>.

Note: This summary is based on the working paper above. Working papers are shared to make technical details publicly available. They have not been peer reviewed or subject to the full review by Consortium research and communications staff that accompanies official Consortium publications. Working papers do not go through the Consortium editorial process, and all opinions are the responsibility of the author(s).

## About the authors

**Elaine M. Allensworth** is the Lewis-Sebring Director of the UChicago Consortium, where she has conducted research on educational policy and practice for over 25 years. Her research examines factors influencing students' educational attainment, school leadership, and school improvement. She works with policymakers and practitioners to bridge research and practice, serving on panels, policy commissions, and working groups at the local, state and national levels.

**Marisa de la Torre** is a Senior Research Associate and Managing Director at the UChicago Consortium. Her research interests include urban school reform, school choice, early indicators of school success, and English Learners. Before joining the UChicago Consortium, Marisa worked for the Chicago Public Schools in the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability. She received a master's degree in economics from Northwestern University.

**Kaitlyn Franklin** is a Research Analyst I at the UChicago Consortium, providing data and analytic support across Consortium projects by building and analyzing large-scale databases. Her current research involves indicators of student success and academic attainment for English Learners and improving student outcomes through career development opportunities. She holds bachelor's degrees in economics and political science from the University of Georgia.

**Jinjing Xu** is a Research Analyst II at the UChicago Consortium. She specializes in causal inference design, applied econometrics, machine learning, and structural macro-labor modeling. Her recent work focuses on high school ELs course-taking patterns, graduation pathways, and the impact of centralized hiring reforms in public education. She holds a master's degree in economics and social policy from Northwestern University.

Published: July 2025

## Cite as:

Allensworth, E.M., de la Torre, M., Franklin, K., & Xu, J. (2025). *Predictive power of grades and other indicators for English Learners*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.