

Northwestern

Center for Education Efficacy,
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SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL POLICY

English Learner Reclassification Policy Structures and Student Characteristics

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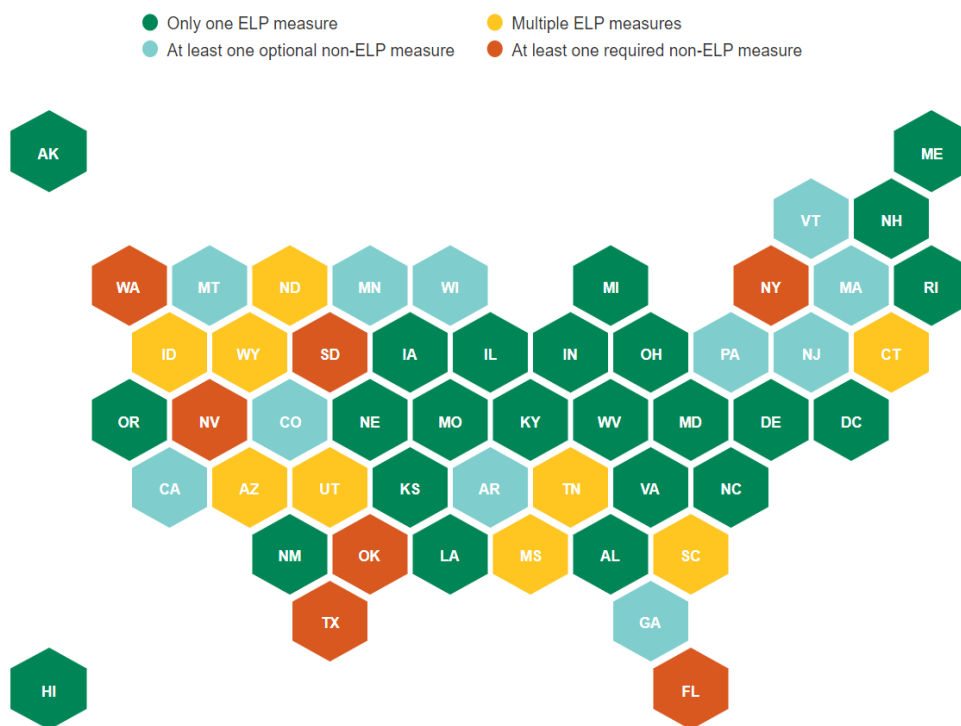
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Introduction

English Learner (EL) reclassification policies outline the criteria for attaining English proficiency and consequently determine when ELs cease to receive targeted language support services. These policies are marked by substantial variation across and within states, ranging from differences in the *number* of requirements and *kind* of reclassification criteria, including test-based vs. non-test-based parameters (Cimpian et al., 2017; Estrada & Wang, 2017; Morales & Lepper, 2024).¹

By 2023, as detailed in the first brief of this series titled [The Changing Landscape of States' English Learner Reclassification Policies](#), 33 states relied exclusively on English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessments—whether a single composite score or multiple domain-specific cutoffs—while the remaining 18 also incorporated non-ELP assessments into reclassification determinations.² The manner in which non-ELP evaluations are integrated into reclassification policies also differs across states: some include them among a range of alternative options for assessing ELs' readiness for exiting language supports, which we refer to as “optional” non-ELP requirements, whereas others mandate the use of non-ELP tests, providing less flexibility on policy implementation. This patchwork of EL reclassification policies across states implicates unequal standards for ELs to demonstrate English language proficiency.

Test-Based Reclassification Requirements, 2023



¹ Research has also documented policy differences within states due to variation in policy interpretation, implementation, and practice, resulting in disparate reclassification outcomes (Mavrogordato & White, 2017).

² For the purpose of this brief, the District of Columbia is counted as a state.

Following the sorting of various reclassification policy structures shown in the map, **this report aims to document systematic patterns in reclassification policy regimes and the characteristics of the EL population across states.** Specifically, we focus on differences in the prevalence and growth of ELs, their demographic characteristics (e.g., race and age), and the share of long-term ELs across states organized into four categories: 1) states with a single ELP criterion, 2) states with multiple ELP criteria, 3) states with non-ELP criteria listed as an optional requirement, and 4) states with mandated non-ELP criteria. Insights from this analysis provide an understanding of how varying policy complexities relate to the composition, growth, and long-term status of ELs nationwide.

Methods

We examine the relationship between reclassification policy structures and the characteristics of ELs by combining data from multiple sources:

1. Consolidated State Performance Reports (CSPR): A mandated annual report managed by the Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education that collects data on student demographics, program participation, and academic performance from all K-12 schools that receive federal funds.³ We accessed CSPR data from 2018, 2019, and 2022 and constructed state-level averages of the following variables: number of ELs enrolled, number of Title III-served ELs who were not proficient within 5 years of first enrollment, and number of ELs by race and grade level.⁴ We leverage the number of ELs not proficient within 5 years as a proxy for long-term EL status.
2. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): We merged state-level CSPR records with data from the NCES on the number of K-12 students by state and the total of ELs enrolled in the school years 2000 and 2010. These variables were used to construct the percentage of ELs enrolled by state and the growth rate in the EL population since 2000 and 2010.
3. EL reclassification policy documents: We gathered information on EL reclassification policies from each state's Department of Education website as of December 2023. From these policy documents, we created a database identifying the *number* and *kind* of test-based criteria necessary for reclassification eligibility. Specifically, we distinguish between ELP assessments and academic content evaluations, such as summative or formative tests. Furthermore, we account for whether non-ELP test-based requirements are mandated or optional, where "optional" refers to instances in which assessments are included as part of a range of alternatives such as course grades, GPAs, etc. For the subset

³ See details on [CSPR](#) from the Office of Elementary & Secondary Education.

⁴ The data in CSPR records are self-reported by each state. The U.S. Department of Education does not verify the quality of these files. Rather, it is up to each state to report accurate information as these records are used for ESSA compliance. Therefore, we average the three most recent years of data to minimize issues related to year-to-year data inaccuracies.

of states that participate in the WIDA consortium, we also collected data on the minimum composite score required for EL reclassification. [More information about these data can be found in the first brief of this research series.](#)

Our analysis resulted in a series of descriptive summary statistics detailing how EL student characteristics vary across states, grouped by EL reclassification policy structure. Specifically, we identify four distinct groups arranged in ascending order of reclassification policy complexity according to the *kind* of reclassification requirements: 1) states with a single ELP criterion, 2) states with multiple ELP criteria, 3) states with non-ELP criteria listed as an optional requirement, and 4) states with mandated non-ELP criteria.⁵ The findings that follow explore differences across these four reclassification policy structures along several dimensions, including the share and growth of EL students, demographic characteristics, and duration of EL status.⁶

Findings

EL Reclassification Policy Structures and Characteristics of the EL Population

We began our analysis by examining differences in the share of EL students across reclassification policy structures to ascertain the general reclassification requirements used in settings where ELs are a more prominent segment of the student population. Our findings are depicted in Figure 1 shown below.

In general, **states with more complex EL reclassification policies educate a higher share of ELs as a proportion of their student population.** This is most pronounced among states that implement reclassification policies with mandated non-ELP requirements, such as Florida, Nevada, New York, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington. The average share of EL students within this group of states corresponds to nearly 11 percent—higher than the national average as of 2020. As a whole, this group educates 35 percent of ELs nationwide, or nearly 1.8 million students, indicating that for more than one-third of ELs, it is necessary to demonstrate proficiency in a non-ELP assessment to be eligible for reclassification.

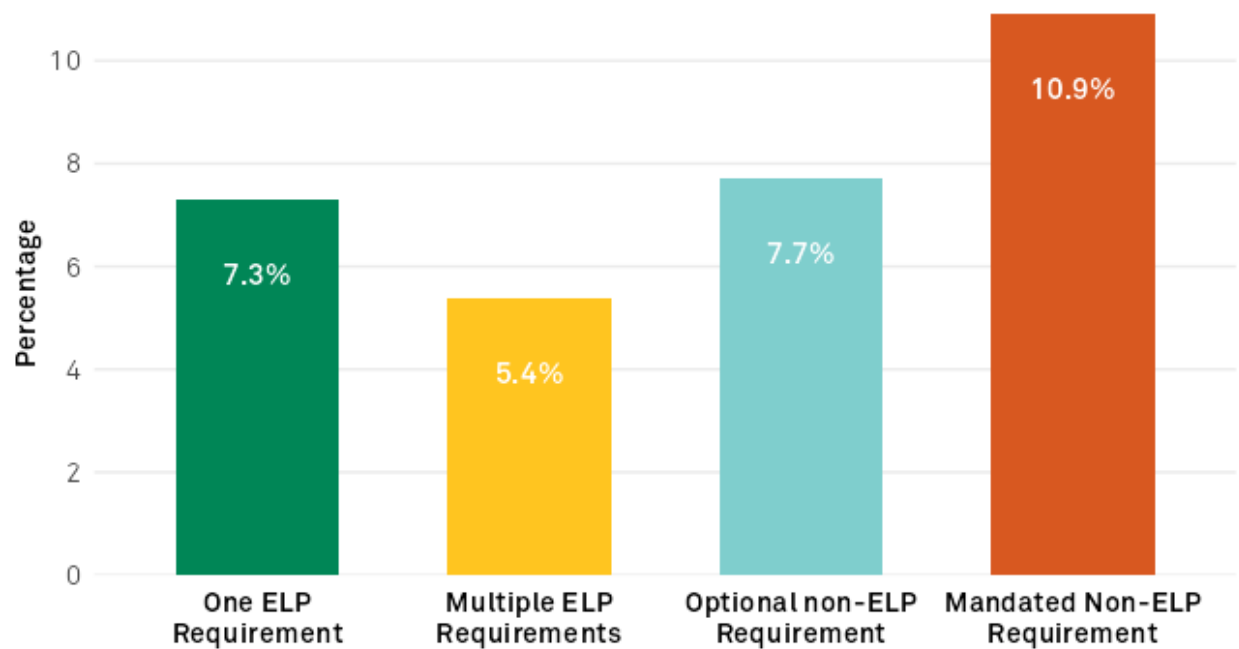
We also conducted supplementary analyses describing differences in the percentage of ELs across states grouped by the *number* of reclassification criteria. See Figure A1 in the accompanying appendix. In alignment with our primary findings, states with reclassification policies involving the most criteria have a higher average share of ELs in their public schools. In sum, states where ELs represent a meaningful share of the student population tend to

⁵ All states mandate ELP assessments as part of their reclassification policies. Groups 3 and 4 add non-ELP criteria to this baseline requirement.

⁶ We also explored differences in student characteristics according to state reclassification policies grouped by the number of criteria. These figures are shown in the accompanying appendix.

implement complex reclassification policies with more test-based criteria and non-ELP requirements.

Figure 1: Average Percentage of EL Students by Reclassification Policy Structure

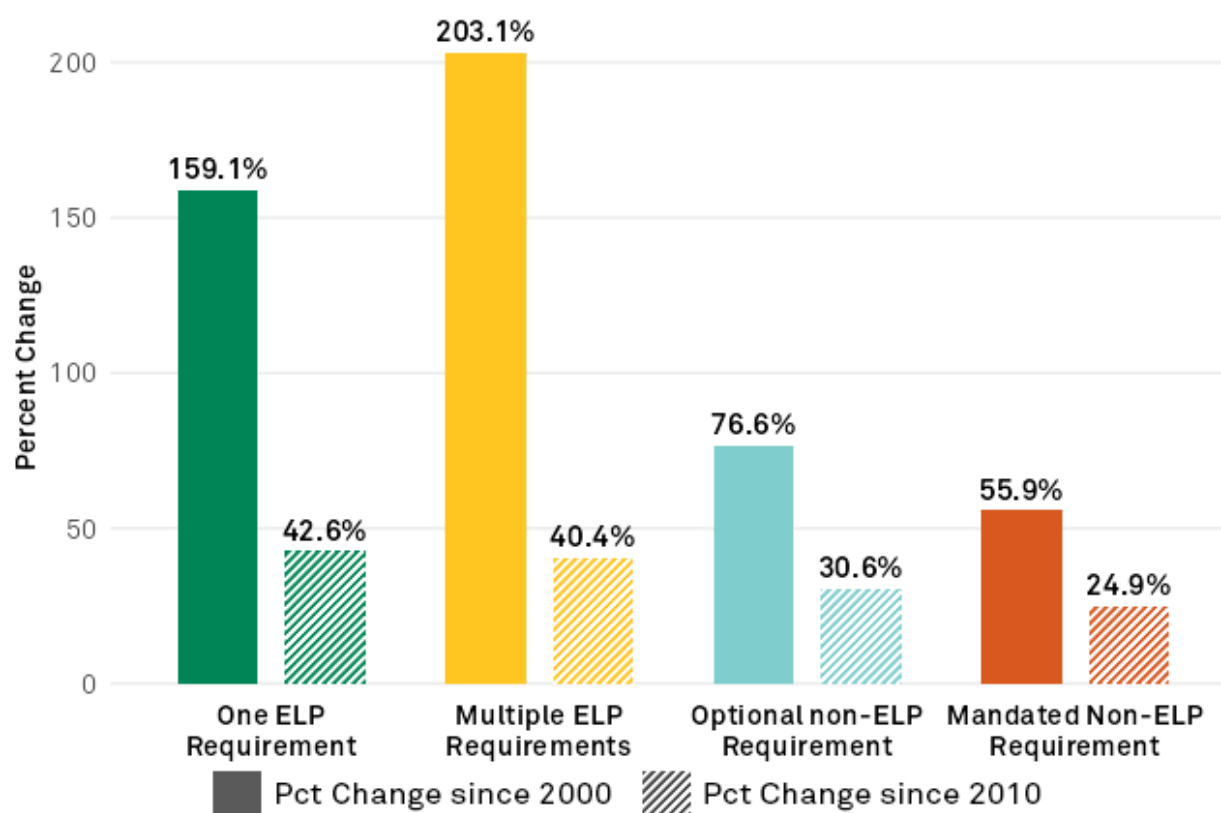


Note: "One ELP Requirement" refers to reclassification policies that rely on a single ELP component, typically a composite score. "Multiple ELP Requirements" indicates states that implement a minimum composite score along with a minimum domain-specific score. "Optional non-ELP Requirement" refers to states that augment their reclassification policy with at least one non-ELP requirement (e.g., a state assessment) as part of a suite of alternatives such as grades and GPA. "Mandated non-ELP Requirement" denotes states that mandate academic content assessments for reclassification eligibility. Data on the number of ELs enrolled by state were obtained from CSPR and NCES records.

Next, we assessed the relationship between reclassification policy complexity and growth of the EL population. We considered the percentage change in the number of ELs over a long- and shorter-term horizon, namely between the years 2000 and 2020 and between 2010 and 2020.⁷ Figure 2 illustrates the average percentage change in ELs across states categorized by reclassification policy structure.

⁷ These two years roughly coincide with periods of rapid changes in immigrant flows and the proliferation of immigration policies at the interior of the country.

Figure 2: Average Growth Rate of the EL Student Population From 2000 and 2010 to 2020 by Reclassification Policy Structure



Note: "One ELP Requirement" refers to reclassification policies that rely on a single ELP component, typically a composite score. "Multiple ELP Requirements" indicates states that implement a minimum composite score along with a minimum domain-specific score. "Optional non-ELP Requirement" refers to states that augment their reclassification policy with at least one non-ELP requirement (e.g., a state assessment) as part of a suite of alternatives such as grades and GPA. "Mandated non-ELP Requirement" denotes states that mandate academic content assessments for reclassification eligibility. Data on the number of ELs enrolled by state were obtained from CSPR and NCES records.

First note that, on average, states have experienced extensive growth in their EL population independent of reclassification policy structure, with faster rates observed over a longer timeframe. Indeed, ELs have been consistently recognized as the fastest-growing student demographic over the past decades. For instance, since the year 2000, the growth rate of EL students nationwide has been 31 percent compared to a growth rate of 4.6 percent for the total number of K-12 students in US public schools (NCES 2022a, NCES 2022b). Much of the growth of ELs has been concentrated in regions traditionally characterized by low levels of this demographic, such as states in the Southeast. These states are commonly referred to as "new destination states" due to the relative surge in immigrant populations in recent years.⁸

Across policy structures, states with the highest EL population growth rates also tend to implement the least complex reclassification policies, relying exclusively on ELP

⁸ See Figure A2 in the appendix for state-level population growth rates from 2000 to 2020.

assessments. As a corollary, states with comparatively slower growth in the EL population over time impose more reclassification requirements, including non-ELP criteria. Given the characteristics of states that have exhibited faster EL population growth, we can conclude that **states with more experience educating ELs are opting for complex reclassification policies that impose multiple requirements of various kinds**. Supplementary analyses, which compare states based on their average EL population growth rate and the *number* of reclassification criteria, also confirm our main conclusions. See Figure A3 in the appendix for more details.

Table 1: Summary Statistics by Reclassification Policy Structure

	One ELP Requirement		Multiple ELP Requirements		Optional non-ELP Requirements		Mandated non-ELP Requirements	
	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE
% Hispanic	61.08	4.72	73.64	5.39	59.39	8.01	72.59	6.51
% Asian	16.11	3.27	8.99	1.56	16.05	2.81	11.13	2.25
% Black	9.22	2.27	6.58	3.30	9.23	3.31	6.86	2.75
% White	9.49	1.51	7.86	1.05	8.55	1.62	7.88	2.31
% Other	4.11	1.96	2.98	0.75	6.79	5.52	1.54	0.44
% in Elementary Grades	61.03	1.10	60.86	1.34	59.68	1.52	61.24	1.62
% in Middle Grades	17.58	0.48	18.96	0.60	18.74	0.94	18.30	0.79
% in High School Grades	21.34	0.76	20.02	1.10	21.29	0.94	20.01	0.99
Number of States	24		9		11		7	

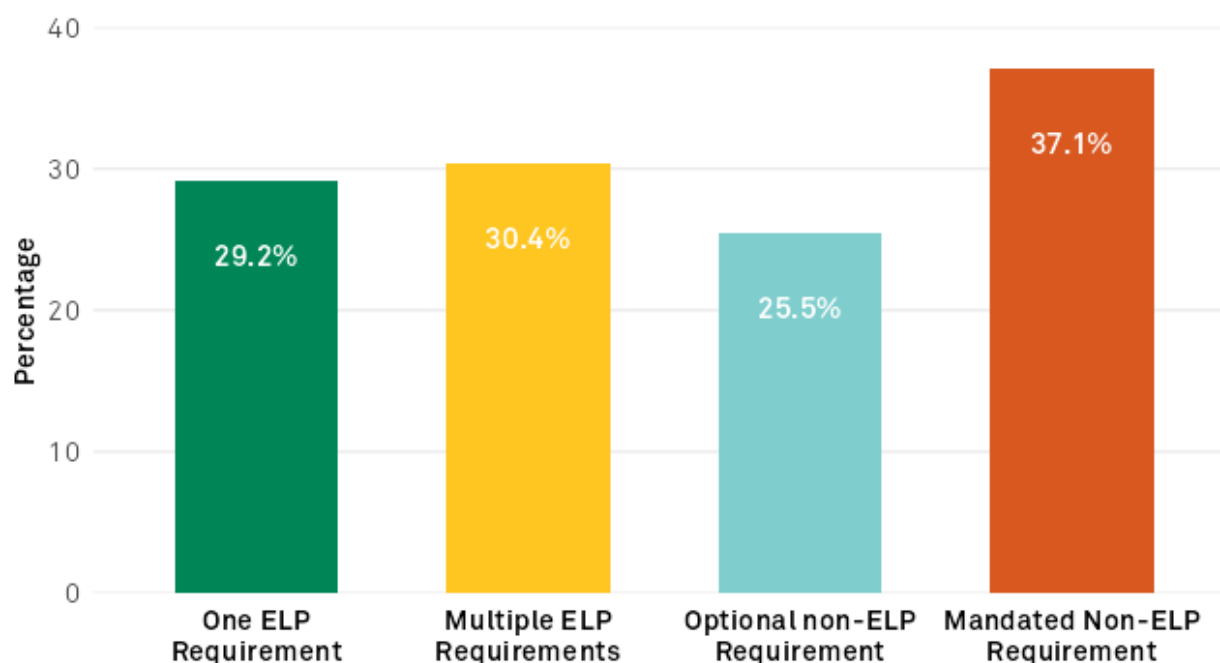
Note: "One ELP Requirement" refers to reclassification policies that rely on a single ELP component, typically a composite score. "Multiple ELP Requirements" indicates states that implement a minimum composite score along with a minimum domain-specific score. "Optional non-ELP Requirement" refers to states that augment their reclassification policy with at least one non-ELP requirement (e.g., a state assessment) as part of a suite of alternatives such as grades and GPA. "Mandated non-ELP Requirement" denotes states that mandate academic content assessments for reclassification eligibility. Data on the number of ELs enrolled by state and demographic category were obtained from CSPR and NCES records.

We conclude our assessment of student characteristics by generating summary statistics detailing the demographics of EL students by states with varying reclassification policy structures. Table 1 reports the means and standard errors for the percentage of ELs within five mutually exclusive race/ethnicity categories, along with the distribution of ELs across broad grade levels as a proxy for age. Overall, we do not find evidence of systematic patterns in the racial/ethnic and age composition of ELs across states with varying reclassification policy structures. Across policy types, most ELs are enrolled in elementary grades, with the remaining proportions fairly evenly distributed between middle and high school grades. Not surprisingly, Hispanic students comprise the majority of ELs, ranging from 60 to nearly 74 percent across state groups, with Asian ELs typically constituting the second largest demographic.

EL Reclassification Policy Structures and Long-Term EL Status

Of particular interest is the hypothesis that reclassification policies with increased variety in their test-based criteria and policies imposing multiple requirements for exiting EL status may contribute to a higher proportion of long-term ELs (Estrada & Wang, 2017). In this second set of analyses, we begin to assess this claim by examining the relationship between reclassification policy groupings according to the *kind* of test-based criteria and the percentage of ELs who have maintained their status for at least 5 years, which we denote as long-term ELs. Importantly, this analysis does not establish a causal link between these two factors. Rather, our objective is to explore the extent of systematic variation between these two variables and elucidate its implications.

Figure 3: Percentage of Long-Term ELs by Reclassification Policy Structure



Note: "One ELP Requirement" refers to reclassification policies that rely on a single ELP component, typically a composite score. "Multiple ELP Requirements" indicates states that implement a minimum composite score along with a minimum domain-specific score. "Optional non-ELP Requirement" refers to states that augment their reclassification policy with at least one non-ELP requirement (e.g., a state assessment) as part of a suite of alternatives such as grades and GPA. "Mandated non-ELP Requirement" denotes states that mandate academic content assessments for reclassification eligibility. Data on the number of ELs enrolled by state was obtained from CSPR and NCES records.

Generally, states that mandate non-ELP requirements have higher shares of long-term ELs compared to states that rely exclusively on ELP assessments or those that incorporate non-ELP criteria optionally. On average, over one-third of ELs in states that mandate non-ELP requirements have not attained reclassification within 5 years, with an 8 percentage point

difference in the share of long-term ELs between states that rely on a single ELP requirement and those that mandate non-ELP assessments for reclassification.

Interestingly, this pattern does not hold when considering the *number* of test-based reclassification criteria. In supplemental analyses examining differences in the share of long-term ELs across states grouped by the *number* of test-based criteria, we find that states requiring three criteria for reclassification (Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Florida) exhibit, on average, the lowest share of long-term ELs compared to states that impose fewer criteria. For example, the difference between states that impose three versus one criteria corresponds to roughly 10 percentage points. See Figure A5 in the appendix for details.

Together, **these findings suggest that the *kind* of test-based criteria, rather than the *number*, might be a more salient determinant of the likelihood that students become eligible for reclassification and exit EL status within 5 years of initial identification.** More research is needed to establish a clearer conclusion, however, given that our analyses do not account for confounding factors and are purely descriptive. Notwithstanding, our findings shed light on the importance of distinguishing state reclassification policies by the kind and number of components, as these may have different implications on reclassification outcomes.

Minimum Proficiency Scores Across States and Reclassification Policy Structures

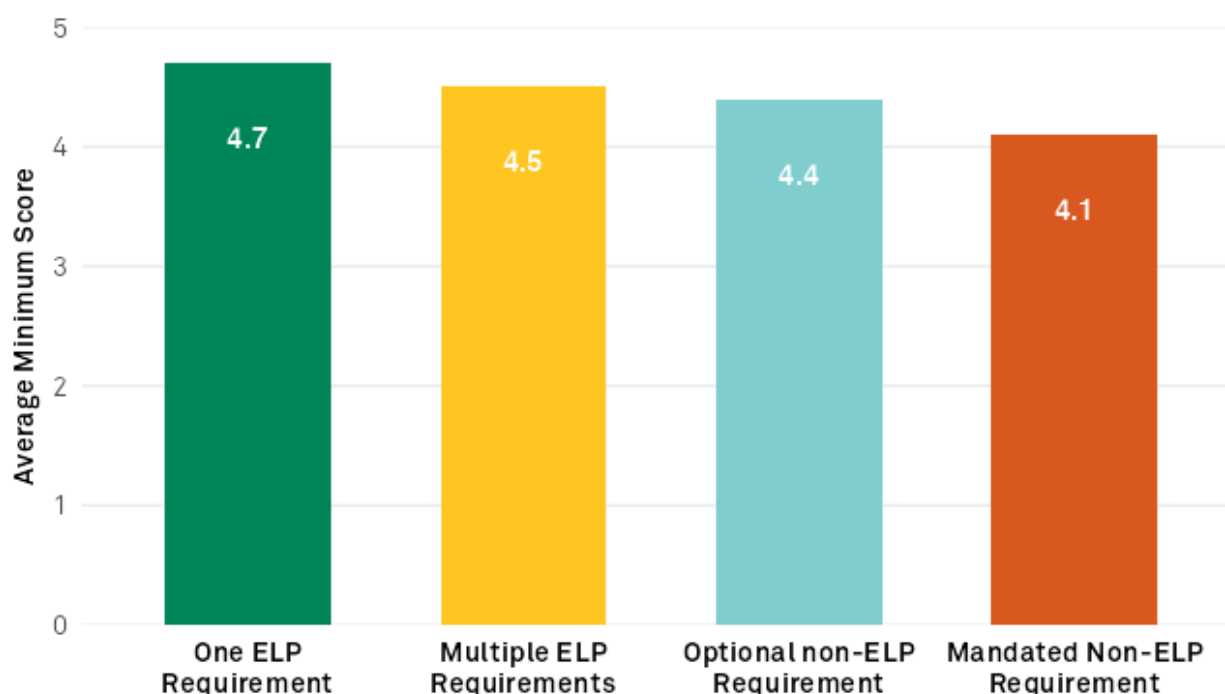
In the last set of analyses, we explore the relationship between the share of ELs and the minimum composite score required for reclassification. For ease of interpretation, we limit the sample to the 36 states that participate in the WIDA consortium and, therefore, use the ACCESS 2.0 assessment to monitor ELs' progress toward English proficiency and make reclassification decisions.⁹

As reported in Figure 4, we find small yet significant differences in required average composite scores across states with varying reclassification policy structures. In particular, there is a negative relationship between policy complexity and minimum composite scores. For instance, states that rely on a single ELP requirement set their reclassification policy's minimum composite score, on average, 0.6 proficiency points higher than the composite score for states with multiple mandated requirements, including non-ELP assessments. We replicated this analysis considering disparities in minimum composite scores across states categorized by the *number* of reclassification criteria and find the same pattern: states that

⁹ As of 2023, there are 36 states in the WIDA consortium. ACCESS 2.0 is a standards-reference test measuring language skills across four domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Assessment reports contain domain-specific scores along with summative measures, such as the overall composite score which is a weighted average of the four domains. Assessment results are reported as proficiency scores ranging from 1.0 to 6.0 in 0.1 intervals. Each proficiency level corresponds to a set of proficiency descriptors which anchor a given score to specific skills. For more details, see the ACCESS for ELLs Interpretive Guide for Score Reports.

impose multiple requirements set lower minimum composite scores.¹⁰ Collectively, **these results indicate that states that tend to impose more complex reclassification policies moderate these structures by imposing relatively less rigorous cutoffs on the composite ELP requirement.**

Figure 4: Average WIDA Composite Score Required for Reclassification by Reclassification Policy Structure



Note: “One ELP Requirement” refers to reclassification policies that rely on a single ELP component, typically a composite score. “Multiple ELP Requirements” indicates states that implement a minimum composite score along with a minimum domain-specific score. “Optional non-ELP Requirement” refers to states that augment their reclassification policy with at least one non-ELP requirement (e.g., a state assessment) as part of a suite of alternatives such as grades and GPA. “Mandated non-ELP Requirement” denotes states that mandate academic content assessments for reclassification eligibility. Data on minimum composite scores were obtained from individual states’ EL reclassification plans.

We also explore correlations between minimum composite scores and characteristics of the EL student population across states, such as the percentage of ELs, population growth, and the share of long-term ELs. On average, we do not find evidence of systematic patterns: the correlations are small and statistically insignificant.

¹⁰ See Figure A6 in the appendix.

Conclusion and Implications

Studies have documented extensive differences in EL reclassification policies nationwide. In this report, we examined how different reclassification policy structures relate to various factors that describe the EL student population, including the percentage and growth of ELs, their demographic characteristics, and the duration of EL status. We categorized states into four groups based on the complexity of their reclassification policies and compared the proportions and growth of EL students across these categories. In general, our analysis found meaningful differences in the characteristics of the EL population across policy structures.

Specifically, our analysis revealed the following:

- States with a higher share of EL students generally implement more complex reclassification policies involving multiple criteria and non-ELP requirements. Approximately one-third of ELs nationwide must demonstrate proficiency in non-ELP assessments to qualify for reclassification.
- States that have experienced faster growth in their EL population over time are more likely to rely exclusively on ELP requirements and impose fewer criteria as part of their reclassification policies.
- The *kind* of test-based criteria, rather than the *number*, is likely a more salient determinant of long-term EL status.
- When states impose relatively more complex reclassification policies, they tend to moderate these structures by selecting comparatively less rigorous cutoffs on the composite ELP assessment requirement.

Our findings emphasize the wide variation in reclassification policy structures and identify state-level characteristics associated with the choice of test-based policy components. That states with more established and larger EL student populations opt for more complex policies may reflect years of policy fine-tuning and possible experimentation. However, it is notable that these are the states that also, on average, have a higher share of long-term ELs. More research is needed to establish a causal link between policy structures and reclassification outcomes.

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