

ENGLISH LEARNERS' ACCESS TO CORE CONTENT

ACADEMIC COURSE ENROLLMENT IN HIGH SCHOOL

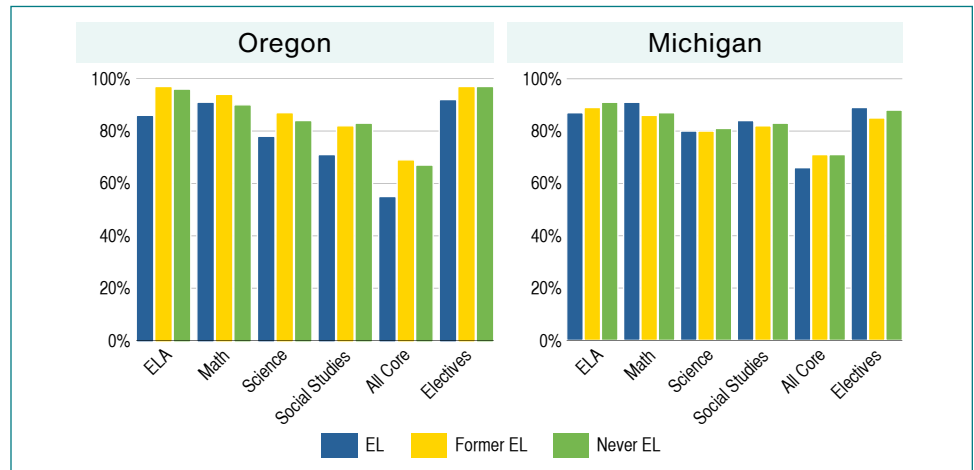
Exploring English Learner Students' Access to Content

Despite the U.S. Supreme Court's *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) ruling 50 years ago, students classified as English Learners (**EL students**) still face multiple and intersecting challenges to their opportunity to learn. One example is **exclusionary tracking** in which EL students are less likely to be enrolled in content courses than students who have exited EL status (**former EL students**) and those who were never EL-classified (**never EL students**).

EL exclusionary tracking potentially undermines one of EL students' core rights under *Lau v. Nichols*, which asserts that EL students have the right to equitable, grade-level curricular content.

Using statewide data from Oregon (2013/14–2018/19) and Michigan (2011/12–2014/15), this brief explores the prevalence of EL students' exclusionary tracking in high school, compared to former and never ELs. The brief also examines the factors that were associated with EL students' course enrollment and whether English language development (ELD) classes crowded out EL students' schedules. Because the data are not current, they do not necessarily represent patterns in more recent years.

Percentages of EL, Former EL, and Never EL Students Enrolled in Content Courses



Data: Oregon Department of Education, 2013/14–2018/19, and Michigan Department of Education, 2011/12–2014/15. Note: All Core = enrolled in ELA, math, science, and social studies.

EL-classified students experienced exclusionary tracking in both Oregon and Michigan

Over the period examined, EL students experienced exclusionary tracking in both Oregon and Michigan, meaning they had lower rates of content enrollment compared to former and never EL students. In Oregon, 55% of EL students were in all core courses (English language arts [ELA], math, science, and social studies), compared to 69% of former EL students and 67% of never EL students. EL students in Oregon experienced exclusionary tracking across all subject areas, with the largest enrollment gaps in ELA (10% less likely to be enrolled than never EL students), social studies, and science. In Michigan, EL exclusionary tracking was less prevalent. Sixty-six percent of EL students were enrolled in all core courses, compared to 71% of former and never EL students. Across content subject areas, gaps were smaller than those in Oregon and were primarily in ELA. EL students in Michigan were 4% less likely to be enrolled in ELA than former and never EL students.

Differences in exclusionary tracking between Oregon and Michigan may have been due to structural, organizational, and demographic differences between the two states. For example, EL students in Oregon were more likely to take standalone ELD classes than their Michigan peers, leading to fewer periods available for content courses. In addition, EL students in Oregon were more likely to be economically disadvantaged (81%) and Latino/a (67%)—groups that face inequitable core content access irrespective of EL status—than their counterparts in Michigan (63% and 44%, respectively). In both states, exclusionary tracking decreased year-by-year as EL students' content enrollment improved.

These analyses were conducted by Dr. Ilana Umansky (University of Oregon [UO]), Dr. Nami Shin (ATLAS/University of Kansas), Dr. Karen D. Thompson (Oregon State University [OSU]), Janette Avelar (UO), and Jaclyn Bovee (OSU). The authors thank the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) for providing the data used in this analysis. This research was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305C200008, to WestEd. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute, the U.S. Department of Education, ODE, or MDE. Data sources for analyses: Oregon Department of Education, 2013/14–2018/19, and Michigan Department of Education, 2011/12–2014/15.

Structural, organizational, and demographic factors predicted exclusionary tracking patterns in both states

Structural factors. Grade, academic year, and district predicted the likelihood of enrollment in a full course load.

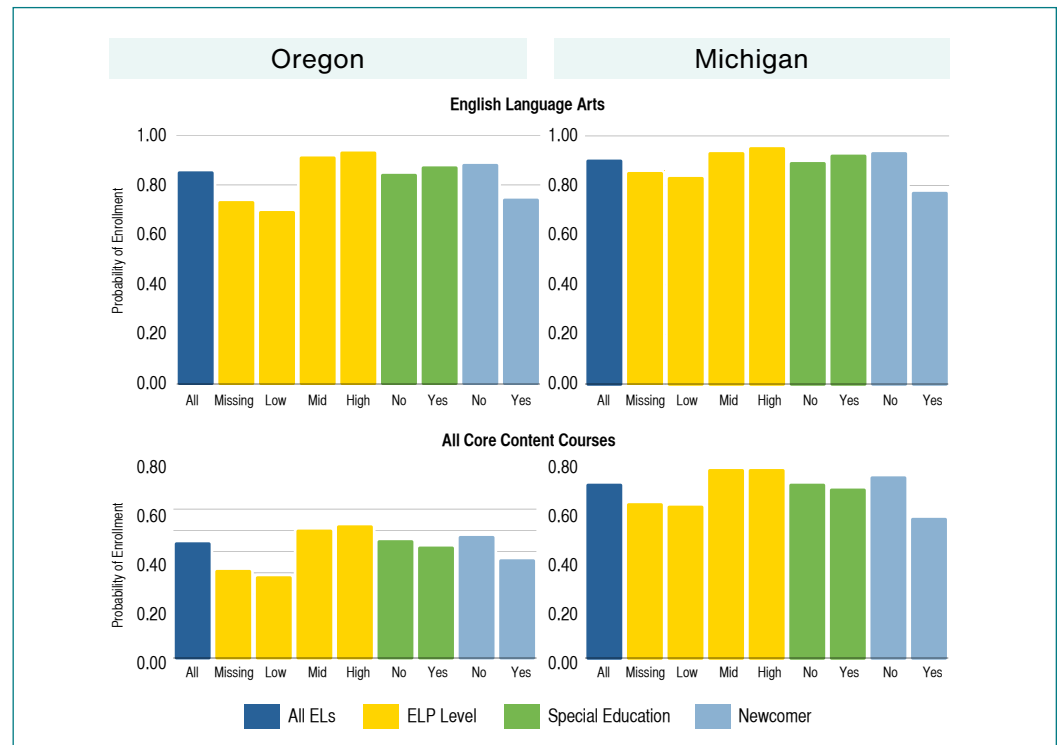
Organizational factors. Students with lower English proficiency, those with disabilities, and newcomer students all faced greater exclusion. In Oregon, bilingual program enrollment appeared to act as a buffer, potentially allowing for fuller course access in school.

Demographic factors. Race, gender, and socioeconomic status were critical predictors of exclusionary tracking patterns.

ELD enrollment. Enrollment in ELD courses did not explain the prevalence of exclusion from core courses for students in either state. However, enrollment in more than one ELD period may crowd out course access for students with beginning English proficiency.

EL-classified students with beginning English proficiency, special education status, or newcomer status were more likely to experience exclusionary tracking

Predicted Probability of EL Students' Enrollment in English Language Arts and All Core Content Areas in Oregon and Michigan



Data: Oregon Department of Education, 2013/14–2018/19, and Michigan Department of Education, 2011/12–2014/15.

Exclusionary tracking may be exacerbated by specific organizational structures, including practices or policies that determine course placement by English language proficiency (ELP) level, special education status, and newcomer status (fewer than 3 years in the United States). For example, in Oregon, an EL student with beginning English proficiency had a 70% chance, on average, of being enrolled in an ELA course, accounting for other structural, organizational, and demographic factors. A newcomer student had a slightly higher chance (75%), but both groups had a much lower chance of enrollment in an ELA course than the average EL-classified student (86%). Similarly, in Michigan, EL students with beginning English proficiency (84%) and newcomers (78%) had a significantly lower chance of enrollment in ELA than the average EL student (91%).

Key Takeaways

- In Oregon and Michigan, over the time examined, EL students experienced exclusionary tracking, as shown by lower enrollment across content courses compared to former and never EL students. Across states, exclusionary tracking was most pronounced in English language arts. This exclusion may have had significant implications for EL students' high school graduation eligibility.
- EL students who had lower ELP levels, participated in special education, and/or were newcomers were more likely to experience exclusionary tracking. However, exclusionary tracking rates varied across states and districts.
- Crowd-out caused by ELD course enrollment did not appear to be a primary driver of exclusionary tracking.
- In recent years, both states have implemented important interventions to improve EL students' course access. These include expanded teacher professional learning, more robust EL programming, coteaching models, standardized EL entrance and exit criteria, and bilingual content course options.