



# How Do School Finance Systems Support English Learners?

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English learners (ELs) are one of the fastest-growing student groups in the U.S. K-12 system, making up about one in 10 students enrolled in public schools nationwide.<sup>1</sup> Despite research showing that EL students need more resources and supports to be successful in school, funding at the federal, state, and local levels to provide those additional resources is largely inadequate and not well targeted to students' needs.<sup>2</sup> For example, an Education Trust analysis of districts nationwide found that the districts with the most EL students receive \$2,200 less state and local funding per student on average, compared with districts with the fewest EL students.<sup>3</sup>

## Why Is Funding for EL Students Important?

EL students bring many linguistic and cultural assets to schools and communities. Rather than view this group of students as “deficient,” states should embrace the responsibility to develop the next generation of bilingual, bicultural leaders.<sup>4</sup> This requires states to ensure that EL students have the extra supports they need to be successful.

Some examples of extra supports that can benefit ELs include:<sup>5</sup>

- An intentional instructional model (such as bilingual co-teaching).
- Instructional materials with embedded multilingual options.
- Professional development for teachers.
- Tutoring.
- Linguistically and culturally inclusive parent engagement.

While the specific costs of these interventions will vary by school, region, and student, all of these approaches take staff time (or additional staff) and resources.

# What Characteristics in the EL Population Are Important To Consider in Funding Systems?

EL students make up about 10% of total K-12 public school enrollment and their enrollment varies considerably by state, ranging from 20% in Texas to 0.7% in West Virginia.<sup>6</sup> This variation suggests that there is not a one-size-fits-all policy solution to better support EL students.

There is also considerable diversity within the EL student population that may affect the intensity and kinds of resources individual students need, including but not limited to languages spoken at home, English proficiency levels, grade level, and how recently students arrived in the country.

EL status is also not permanent: Once students attain English language proficiency, they are no longer classified as EL but may still need other forms of support as multilingual learners. School finance systems often do not factor in this range of diverse experiences when allocating resources to EL students.

## NOTE

For a broader discussion of how K-12 public schools are funded, refer to [Splitting the Bill: How Are Public Schools Funded?](#)

## How Are Programs and Services for EL Students Currently Funded?

The federal government and all but two states (Mississippi and Montana) have some kind of funding mechanism to support ELs.

### Federal Funding

The primary source of this funding is provided via Title III of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Federal allocations to Title III increased from \$664 million in 2002 to \$890 million in 2023 but have not kept up with the rapid expansion in the EL population.<sup>7</sup> This has resulted in a slight decline in federal funding per pupil, from approximately \$175 per EL student in 2002 to \$173 per EL student in 2023.<sup>8</sup> Current Title III funding is much lower than the authorized amount in ESSA, and advocates argue that this level of funding is inadequate for EL students.<sup>9</sup>

### State Funding

State funding streams make up the majority of funding allocated for EL students. Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia allocate additional state and local funding specifically for EL students through their state funding formulas. There are five primary policy structures through which states allocate funding to EL students.<sup>10</sup> Some states use a combination of these mechanisms.

## FIVE POLICY STRUCTURES FOR STATE EL FUNDING

Policy Structure	Number of States <sup>11</sup>	State Example	Pros	Cons
<p><b>Weighted Student Funding: Single Flat Weight</b></p> <p>All students generate a base amount of funding that is determined by the state. School districts then receive additional funding per EL student based on a singular weight. There is wide variation in the amount of an EL weight, ranging from 8% in Colorado to 100% in Maryland.<sup>12</sup></p>	27 + District of Columbia	<b>Florida</b> has a funding weight of 20% in addition to its base amount for EL students. <sup>13</sup>	Clearly tied to enrolled student need, predictable for districts, and easily adjusted by policymakers if needed.	Does not differentiate within the EL student subgroup or consider additional needs with low or high concentrations of EL students.
<p><b>Weighted Student Funding: Variable EL Weights</b></p> <p>In addition to the base amount, districts receive funding based on multiple EL weights. These weights might consider the amount of time a student has been classified as an EL, or the level of English proficiency to adjust for different resource needs among EL students.<sup>14</sup></p>	10	<b>Tennessee</b> uses three factors (EL status, English proficiency scores, and years of services received) to create a three-tiered system of weights that ranges from 20% to 70% of the base funding amount. <sup>15</sup>	Clearly tied to enrolled student need; differentiates needs within the EL student subgroup.	May necessitate new data collection processes; could be complicated to predict or adjust.
<p><b>Categorical Grant Program</b></p> <p>Grants for a specific purpose are distributed through either a formula or a competitive process.</p>	6	<b>Delaware's</b> Opportunity Funding program provides additional funding for both EL students and low-income students. In fiscal year (FY) 2022, districts received \$500 per EL student and \$300 per low-income student. <sup>16</sup>	Might require that grant funds are spent exclusively on supports for EL students.	Not necessarily aligned with student need; more vulnerable to cuts and underfunding; less flexible for districts.
<p><b>Resource-Based Funding</b></p> <p>States allocate funding based on specific inputs such as teacher aides, textbooks, or translators based on the number of ELs with additional needs.</p>	4	<b>North Carolina</b> provides funding for EL staff positions and an additional allocation based on the number and concentration of ELs in each district. <sup>17</sup> As a result of this calculation, districts that serve higher concentrations of EL students receive a larger funding allocation.	Linked to averages for some of the biggest cost drivers for EL support, including the cost of staffing.	Not clearly differentiated or aligned with enrolled student needs; complicated to adjust; might not anticipate all relevant cost drivers or intervention strategies.

## FIVE POLICY STRUCTURES FOR STATE EL FUNDING *(continued)*

Policy Structure	Number of States	State Example	Pros	Cons
<p><b>Cost Reimbursement</b></p> <p>The state reimburses districts for actual additional costs associated with providing services to students, such as the cost of a translator who works with EL families.</p>	1	<p><b>Wisconsin</b> districts are partially reimbursed for the cost of providing bilingual and bicultural education programs that serve EL students.<sup>18</sup> In FY23, the reimbursement rate for districts was 7.65%.<sup>19</sup> The state also has a small categorical grant for bilingual education.</p>	Tied to actual costs unique to each district.	Administratively onerous; provides districts with less flexibility in responding to student needs — especially when reimbursement rates are set too low.

A weighted, student-based funding formula holds the most promise for states to direct extra funds to districts serving students with additional learning needs, including ELs.<sup>20</sup> Weighted, student-based funding formulas also provide districts with the flexibility to direct resources where they are needed the most.<sup>21</sup> If a state is deciding between a single or variable weight for ELs, variable weights can create more nuanced differentiation in funding and send an important signal about the diversity of needs among ELs. However, variable weights can also be more complex to create and administer because they require collecting more types of EL data. The ultimate efficacy of a weighted student funding formula comes from the combination of base amounts, the weights themselves, and a constellation of other policy decisions that can help or hinder EL students.

## Questions for Advocates

- *How many EL students does your state serve, and what do you know about the different needs and trends among those students?*
- *How does your state distribute funding to EL students?*
  - *Does your state provide additional resources to this student group?*
  - *Are these resources differentiated based on student need?*
  - *How, if at all, are districts held accountable for supporting EL students with those resources?*
- *How does your state support schools and districts to implement effective EL interventions and supports?*
- *Is there any research in your state about the cost of educating EL students?*

# Endnotes

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## About the Authors



### INDIRA DAMMU

Indira Dammu is an associate partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. She can be reached at [indira.dammu@bellwether.org](mailto:indira.dammu@bellwether.org).



### BONNIE O'KEEFE

Bonnie O'Keefe is a senior associate partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. She can be reached at [bonnie.okeefe@bellwether.org](mailto:bonnie.okeefe@bellwether.org).

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## ABOUT THE SERIES

Splitting the Bill is a crash course in the essentials of school finance equity for advocates and others interested in reforming state education finance systems. Learn more and read the other briefs in this series [here](#).

## About Bellwether

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