



## CHARACTERISTICS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

in the School District of Philadelphia

*PERC Research Brief • June 2016*



*Authors:* Joshua Lin, Rosemary Hughes, Daniel Long, Dae Kim

As a group, ELLs are diverse and come from a variety of home languages, cultures, educational backgrounds, and educational needs. This brief focuses on descriptive characteristics of the ELL students served by the School District of Philadelphia in 2014-2015. Specifically, this brief highlights the diversity of the ELL population in three key characteristics that impact schools' resource needs and program decisions: ELL population concentration, linguistic diversity, and English language proficiency levels.

## Overview

In Philadelphia, a growing and increasingly diverse population of English Language Learners (ELLs) is intensifying demands on the city's public schools as they work to meet the educational needs of these students. Overall, the ELL student population grew from 11,549 students in 2009-10<sup>1</sup> to 12,129 students in 2014-15, a 5% increase. The catchment areas which saw the largest growth in ELL population were those served by West Philadelphia High School (75% increase) and Furness High School (44% increase). Four additional catchment areas saw increases in their ELL populations ranging from 25% to 37% (Overbrook, Franklin, Olney, and Gratz). As in many cities across the country, educators in Philadelphia are searching for ways to more efficiently and effectively meet the needs of ELLs and close long-standing achievement gaps<sup>2</sup> between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers.<sup>i</sup>

As a group, ELLs are diverse and come from a variety of home languages, cultures, educational backgrounds, and educational needs. This brief focuses on descriptive characteristics of the ELL students served by the School District of Philadelphia in 2014-2015. Specifically, this brief highlights the diversity of the ELL population in three key characteristics that impact schools' resource needs and program decisions: ELL population concentration, linguistic diversity, and current English language proficiency levels.

This brief is part of a larger project focused on better understanding the characteristics and needs of ELLs in Philadelphia's public K-12 schools as well as how schools are serving these students. Leaders in Philadelphia's public district and charter schools commissioned the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium (PERC) to work with them on a series of studies to determine how best to meet the needs of ELLs. The information contained within this brief is based on administrative and assessment data provided by the School District of Philadelphia.<sup>3</sup>

A full report describing the methodology and overall findings of the larger project will be disseminated in August 2016. The full report will also include an analysis of students' paths to language proficiency and exit from ESL programs and findings from a qualitative study focused on instructional approaches and services in nine select district and charter schools with strong ELL achievement.

## About this Brief

**One in 10 students (12,129) in the School District of Philadelphia in 2014-15 were ELLs.** All of the data contained within this brief are based on these 12,129 students. This brief provides a deeper dive into the concentration and linguistic diversity of ELLs across neighborhoods and schools, as these factors may affect schools' staffing and resource needs. Additionally, this brief examines English language proficiency levels across grade spans and schools, focusing on high schools. English language proficiency levels are important to examine, as they are related to ELLs' general academic performance and time to reclassification.<sup>ii</sup> The following sections provide an overview of the ELL population enrolled in the School District of Philadelphia during the 2014-15 school year and highlight the manner in which these characteristics might inform an understanding of student needs, decisions about resource allocation, and the direction of future research.

---

<sup>1</sup> Schools that eventually converted to Renaissance Charter Schools were excluded from this analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress have consistently shown **large gaps in achievement** between ELLs and their non-ELL peers **for some 40 years**. In high school, ELLs tend to have **lower GPAs and earn fewer course credits** and are **more likely to drop out** compared to their non-ELL peers.

<sup>3</sup>Administrative and assessment data are being provided by some charter schools. However, due to the fact that the data were de-identified prior to transmission to the research team, we were unable to ensure the absence of duplication of students between the charter school files and district files. As such, the research team is working to resolve these issues through alternative means of data collection.

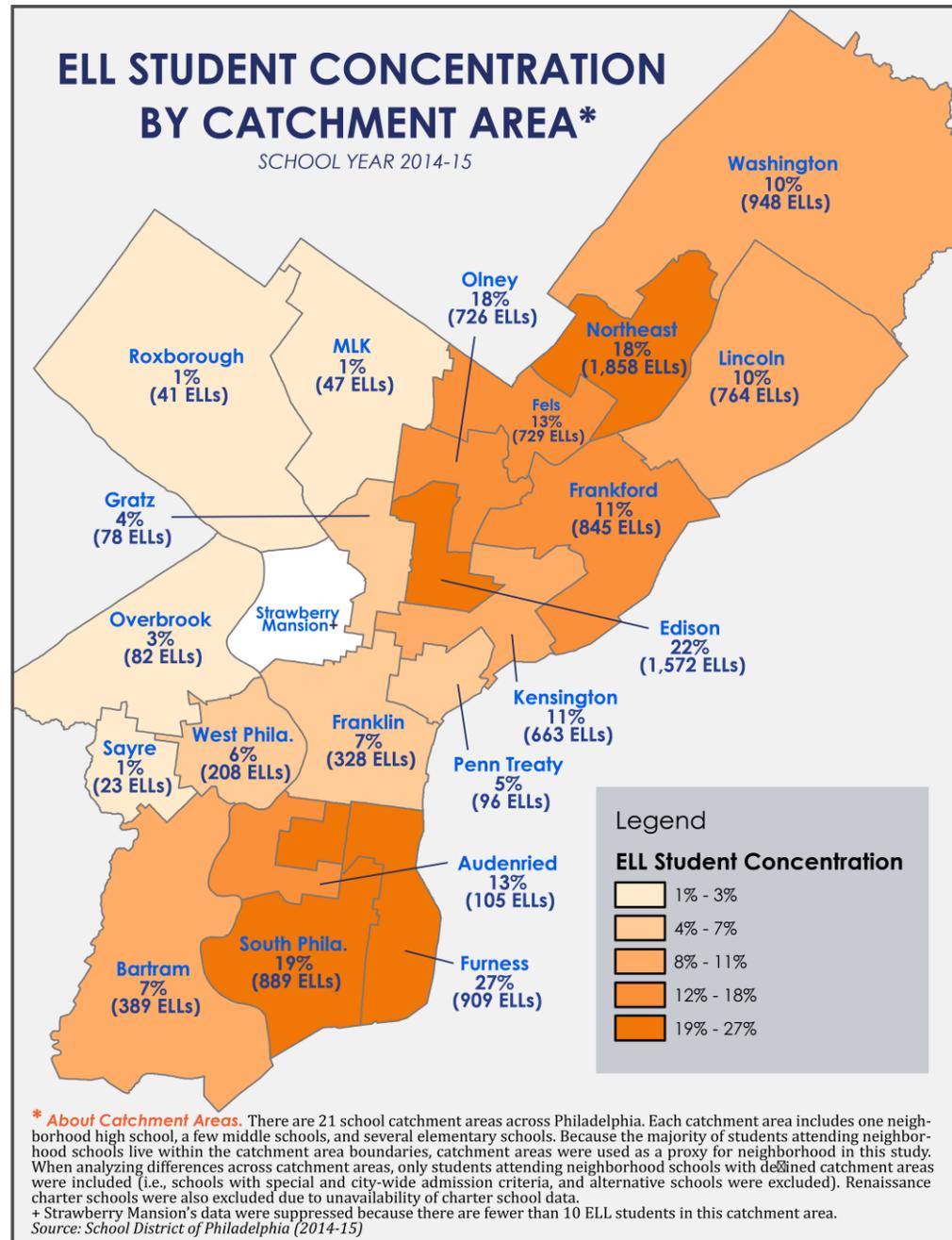
# Does the Concentration of ELLs Across the District Vary?

To examine the distribution of ELLs across the city, we calculated the percentage of all students in each catchment area and school who were identified as an ELL (*i.e.*, concentration).

## Concentration by Catchment Area

English Language Learners are not evenly distributed across Philadelphia. As can be seen in Figure 1, concentrations of ELLs vary significantly between catchment areas. Across the district, the average percentage of ELLs in a catchment area is 10%. **However, in half of the catchment areas, the concentration of ELLs exceeded 10% (*i.e.*, were above average), with two areas—Furness and Edison—exceeding 20%.** The catchment area with the highest concentration of ELLs was the one served by Furness High School, where there were 27 ELLs for every 100 students. The catchment area served by Strawberry Mansion had the lowest concentration of ELLs, with one ELL for every 300 students.

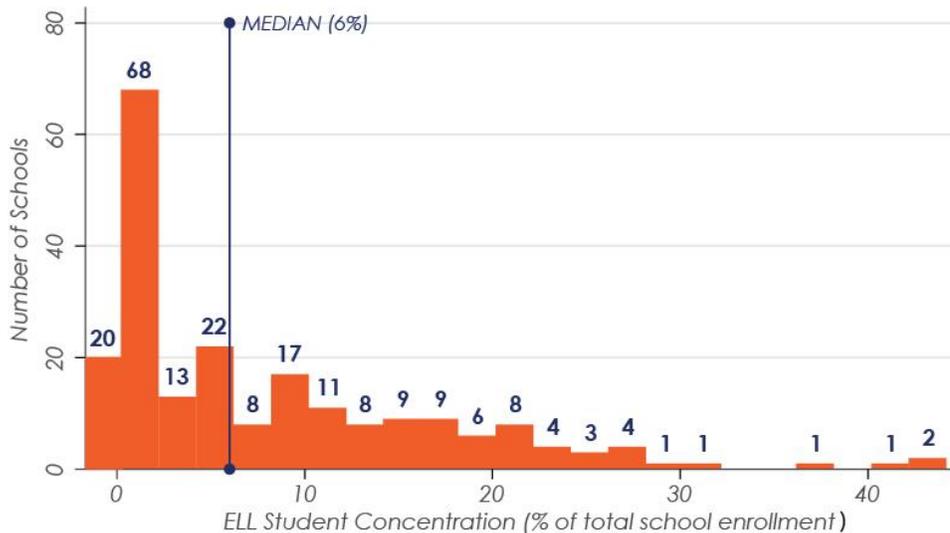
Figure 1. ELL Student Concentration by School District Catchment Areas



## Concentration by School

At the school level, the concentration of ELLs also varied. Figure 2 displays the concentration of ELLs across schools. In fact, the ELL population at 30 schools accounted for over half of the district’s entire ELL population. There were 25 schools where ELLs accounted for more than 20% of their overall student body.

**Figure 2. Distribution of ELL Population Concentrations across Philadelphia Schools**



Source: School District of Philadelphia (2014-15).

## An Important Note about How the Size of a School’s ELL Population Affects its Ability to Serve these Students

All schools are mandated by state regulations to “provide a program for each student whose dominant language is not English for the purpose of facilitating the student’s achievement of English proficiency and the academic standards under § 4.12.”<sup>iii</sup> This mandate applies to schools with one ELL, as well as those with one thousand.

Academic success for ELLs depends on high quality instruction and the infrastructure supporting it.<sup>iv</sup> A school’s capacity to establish a strong infrastructure for ESOL programs may be affected by the size of the population it serves, as the number of ELLs enrolled is one factor considered in staffing decisions.<sup>4</sup> Schools with a small number of ELLs may lack access to a full-time certified ESOL teacher and other resources. General education teachers in these schools could have limited to no experience supporting ELLs in their classrooms. On the other hand, schools with a large number of ELLs may experience unmanageable caseloads, more diversity in students’ linguistic and cultural heritages, and an increased need for training for all general education teachers in the school.

**In 2014-15, 219 district schools reported enrolling at least one ELL; 20 schools reported zero ELLs.** Forty percent (40%) of schools serve 10 or fewer ELLs; 20% of schools serve more than 100 ELLs.

<sup>4</sup> The number of students at each English language proficiency is the other, but this characteristic is discussed later in the brief.

## Does Linguistic Diversity Vary Across the District?

The extent of linguistic diversity among ELLs affects decisions about program design and staffing, and can impede access to resources in students' home languages. For example, schools and/or districts in which all ELLs speak the same home language have more programmatic options, and may require fewer resources to (a) create opportunities for students to practice and apply skills in their home languages, (b) obtain or create curricular materials in students' home languages, and (c) meet all families' translation and interpretation needs. On the other hand, systems with a large degree of linguistic diversity must design a program that can accommodate students from different language backgrounds in the same class—limiting their options for program type—and require more resources to meet the needs of students and families.

The ELLs enrolled in the School District of Philadelphia in 2014-15 were extremely diverse in their home languages. As can be seen in Table 1, **together, they spoke more than 100 different languages.** The most common home languages were Spanish (spoken by 52% of ELLs), Mandarin (spoken by 6% of ELLs), and Arabic (spoken by 6% of ELLs).

**Table 1. Most popular home languages other than English spoken district-wide**

LANGUAGE (in order of 2014-15 population size)	2014-15 NUMBER OF SPEAKERS	% OF ALL ELLs DISTRICT-WIDE (n=12,129)
Spanish	6,260	52%
Chinese (Mandarin)	736	6%
Arabic	697	6%
English	463	4%
Vietnamese	443	4%
Khmer	384	3%
Creoles and Pidgins (English and French-based)	359	3%
Russian	254	2%
French	221	2%
Portuguese	218	2%
Nepali	211	2%
Chinese (Cantonese)	188	2%
Pashto	134	1%
Malayalam	124	1%
Ukrainian	111	1%
Albanian	105	1%
Bengali	104	1%
Other <sup>5</sup> (82 languages)	1,124	9%
<b>Total Languages Spoken in Philadelphia Public Schools</b>		<b>107*</b>

\* This number is approximate and does not separate out all unique creoles and pidgins.

Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Source: School District of Philadelphia (2014-2015).

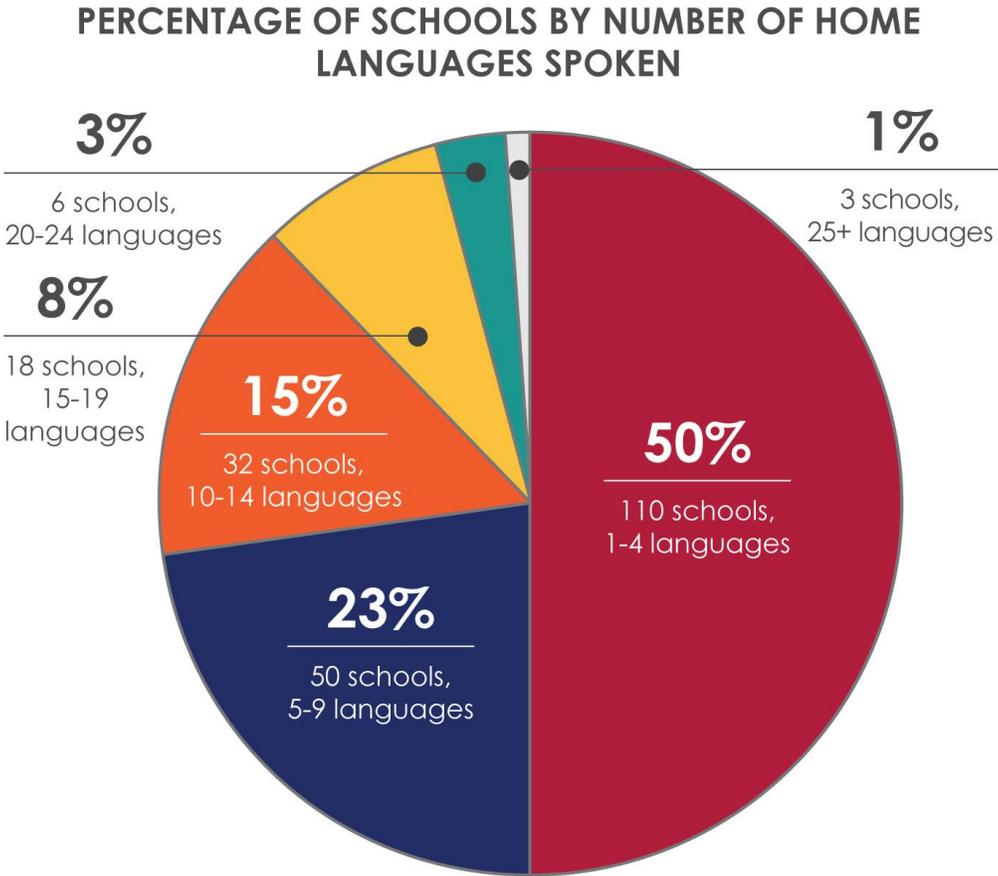
<sup>5</sup> Other includes 82 other languages:

*African:* Adangme, Afrikaans, Akan, Amharic, Bambara, Coptic, Ewe, Fon, Fulah, Ga, Ganda, Grebo, Hausa, Igbo, Kabyle, Kinyarwanda, Luba-Katanga, Mandingo, Mende, Soninke, Swahili, Tigrinya, Wolof, Yoruba. *Asian:* Assamese, Burmese, Gujarati, Hindi, Hmong, Japanese, Kashmiri, Korean, Kyrgyz, Lao, Minnan Fukiene, Punjabi, Tajik, Telugu, Thai, Urdu, Uzbek. *European:* Armenian, Azerbaijani, Bashkir, Bulgarian, Church Slavic, Croatian, Dutch, Flemish, Georgian, German, Greek, Inari Sami, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian, Serbian, Swiss German, Yiddish. *Middle Eastern:* Baluchi, Farsi, Hebrew, Turkish. *Oceanic:* Balinese, Cebuano, Filipino, Iloko, Indonesian, Karen, Mandar, Papuan, Philippine (Other), Sundanese, Tagalog. *South American:* Arawak, Quechua.

## Linguistic Diversity by School

At the school level, the number of languages spoken by ELLs ranged from one to 37. At half of the schools that served ELLs (109 schools), the ELLs spoke over five unique home languages. Figure 3 shows the proportion of schools with various levels of linguistic diversity.

Figure 3. Percentage and Number of Schools by Number of Home Languages Spoken



## Does English Language Proficiency Vary Across the District?

Academic English proficiency is key to student achievement. On average, ELLs take four to seven years to become proficient in academic English—the kind of language used in textbooks and educational settings.<sup>v</sup> Students with lower levels of proficiency in English struggle to learn grade-level content, take longer to graduate, and graduate at rates much lower than their English-proficient peers.<sup>vi</sup>

## What is English Language Proficiency?

Each year, students identified as ELLs complete the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for ELLs (ACCESS for ELLs). ACCESS for ELLs is a large-scale English language proficiency assessment administered to Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. It is given annually to monitor students' progress in acquiring English. Students receive scores that place them into an overall language proficiency level ranging from 1 to 6 representing various levels of English language proficiency appropriate for the student's grade level.

## ACCESS ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY LEVELS:

- **Level 1 (Entering).** Knows and uses minimal social language and minimal academic language with visual and graphic support.
- **Level 2 (Emerging).** Knows and uses some social English and general academic language with visual and graphic support.
- **Level 3 (Developing).** Knows and uses social English and some specific academic language with visual and graphic support.
- **Level 4 (Expanding).** Knows and uses social English and some technical academic language.
- **Level 5 (Reaching).** Knows and uses social and academic language working with grade level material.
- **Level 6 (Bridging).** Knows and uses social and academic language at the highest level measured by this test.

Source: Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, on behalf of WIDA (2016).

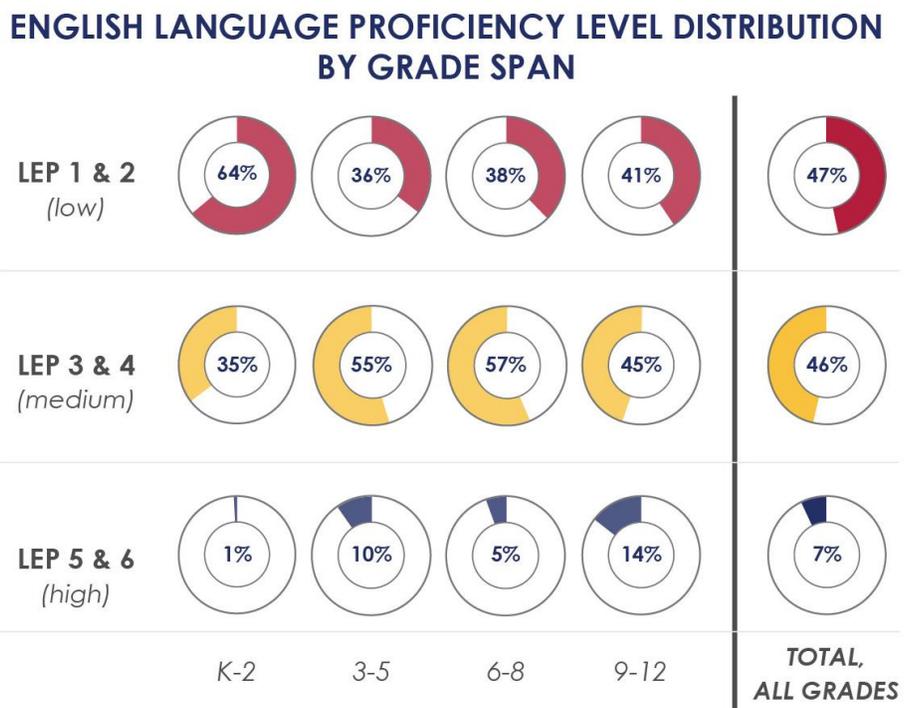
## English Language Proficiency across the District

Figure 4 shows the distribution of English language proficiency levels at the district level, as well as by grade span. **Almost half (47%) of Philadelphia’s ELLs in 2014-15 were reported as Level 1 or 2.** These students require the most intensive level of services and more intensive grade-level curriculum adaptations. For example, the Pennsylvania Department of Education recommends students with English proficiency levels at Level 1 or 2 receive up to two hours of direct language instruction per day.

**Forty-six percent (46%) of ELLs across the district were Level 3 or 4; 7% were Level 5 or 6.**<sup>6</sup>

The small percentage of Level 5 and 6 ELLs is to be expected. In Pennsylvania, students are eligible to exit ELL programs once they achieve an English language proficiency level of 5 or above (in addition to minimum PSSA, Keystone, and GPA requirements).<sup>vii</sup> Those who did not exit are likely ELLs who did not meet one or more of the other criteria and, thus, remain in ELL programs.

Figure 4. Percentage of ELLs by English Language Proficiency Levels



<sup>6</sup> The totals do not add up to 100% because 1% did not have reported ACCESS scores.

## English Language Proficiency by Grade Span

The majority of students in K-2 were Level 1 or 2 and the majority of students in grades 3-5 were Levels 3 or 4. This was expected given the assumption that ELLs who enter school in K-2 had little prior English language instruction and would therefore demonstrate lower levels of English proficiency. The majority of ELLs in grades 3-5 were expected to have entered school in Kindergarten, and after a few years of English language instruction, would demonstrate English language proficiency levels at Level 3 or 4.

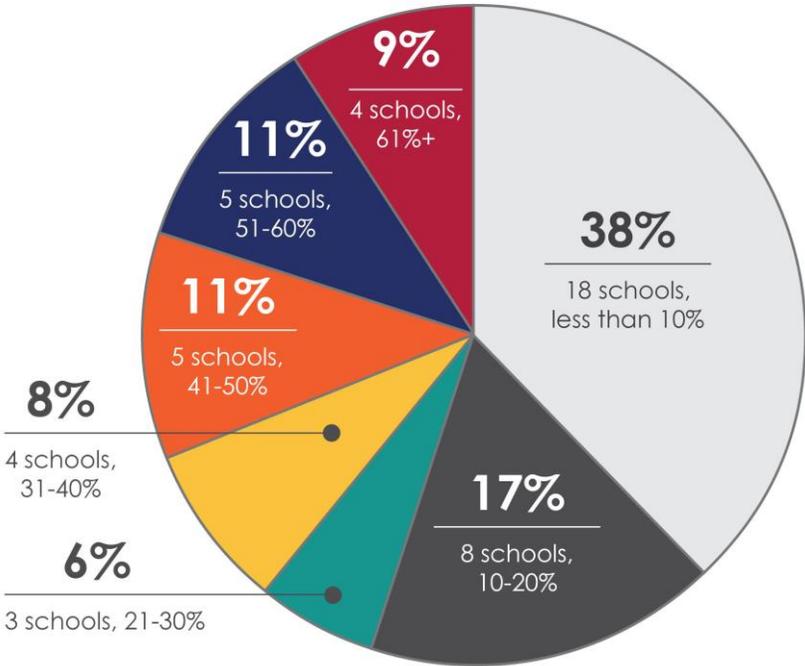
The distribution of English language proficiency levels in grades 6-8 and 9-12 suggest a notable number of new immigrants entered district schools in middle and high school grades in 2014-15. **Nearly two in five ELLs in grades 6-8, and two in five ELLs in grades 9-12 were at the two lowest levels of English language proficiency.** Students at these levels require intense support in language development, scaffolded instruction, and curricular modifications and adaptations to access grade-level content. The fact that such a high percentage of students in middle and high school exhibit low levels of English language proficiency points to a pressing need for researchers and practitioners to further examine the relationship between lower levels of English language proficiency and student outcomes.

## English Language Proficiency by School

At 14 high schools, the percentage of ELLs with English language proficiency levels at Level 1 or 2 was above average (more than 40%). In four of these schools, more than 60% of ELLs were identified as Level 1 or 2. See Figure 5 for a complete breakdown of the distribution of ELLs at the two lowest English language proficiency levels across high schools.

Figure 5. Distribution of ELLs at Level 1 or 2 across High Schools

### PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOLS BY CONCENTRATION OF ELLS WITH ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY LEVELS 1 OR 2



## What's Next?

While the information contained within this brief is not exhaustive, it is designed to be used as a platform to begin more intentional conversations about important characteristics to consider when designing ESOL programs. We encourage school communities to discuss the extent to which current programs align with student needs, as well as other data schools need to make better-informed decisions. PERC is interested in expanding the current research activities to more deeply and broadly examine the ways in which schools across the city are using student-level data to shape policy and inform practice.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> Gwynne, J, Stitzel Pareja, A., Ehrlich, S., & Allensworth, E. (2012). *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools: A Focus on English Language Learners*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research. Retrieved from [https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/ELL%20Report\\_0.pdf](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/ELL%20Report_0.pdf)
- Kena, G., Aud, S., Johnson, F., Wang, X., Zhang, J., Rathbun, A., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., & Kristapovich, P. (2014). *The condition of education 2014* (NCES 2014-083). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>
- <sup>ii</sup> Greenberg Motamedi, J., Singh, M., & Thompson, K.D. (2016). *English learner student characteristics and time to reclassification: An example from Washington State* (REL 2016-128). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>
- Parker, C.E., O'Dwyer, L.M., & Irwin, C.W. (2014). *The correlates of academic performance for English language learner students in a New England district* (REL 2014-020). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>
- <sup>iii</sup> 22 Pa. Code § 4.26 Retrieved from [http://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Codes%20and%20Regulations/Basic%20Education%20Circulars/PA%20Code/Educating%20Students%20with%20Limited%20English%20Proficiency%20\(LEP\)%20and%20English%20Language%20Learners%20\(ELL\).pdf](http://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Codes%20and%20Regulations/Basic%20Education%20Circulars/PA%20Code/Educating%20Students%20with%20Limited%20English%20Proficiency%20(LEP)%20and%20English%20Language%20Learners%20(ELL).pdf)
- <sup>iv</sup> Wainer, A. (2004). The new Latino south and the challenge to public education: Strategies for educators and policymakers in emerging immigrant communities. Los Angeles: Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, University of Southern California.
- <sup>v</sup> Collier, V. P. (1987). Age and rate of acquisition of second language for academic purposes. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(4), 617–641. <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ364940>
- Francis, D.J., Rivera, M., Lesaux, N., Keiffer, M., & Rivera, H. (2006). Practical guidelines for the education of English language learners: Research-based recommendations for instruction and academic interventions. Houston, TX: Texas Institute for Measurement, Evaluation, and Statistics at the University of Houston. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/lep-partnership/interventions.pdf>
- Genesee, F., Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W., & Christian, D. (2005). *English language learners in U.S. schools: An overview of research findings*. *Journal of Students Placed at Risk*, 10(4), 363-385. Retrieved from <http://www.seisd.net/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=2066951>
- Hakuta, K., Butler, Y., & Witt, D. (2000). How long does it take English language learners to attain proficiency? The University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute Policy Report 2000-1. Retrieved from [http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/FullText/Hakuta\\_HOW\\_LONG\\_DOES\\_IT\\_TAKE.pdf](http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/FullText/Hakuta_HOW_LONG_DOES_IT_TAKE.pdf)
- <sup>vi</sup> Callahan, R.M. (2013). *The English learner dropout dilemma: Multiple risks and multiple resources* (Report No. 19). Santa Barbara, CA: University of California Santa Barbara, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, California Dropout Research Project. Retrieved from <http://www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/researchreport19.pdf>
- Gwynne, J., Pareja, A. S., Ehrlich, S. B., & Allensworth, E. (2012). What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago public schools: A focus on English language learners. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research. <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED532513>
- Kim, J. (2011). Relationships among and between ELL status, demographic characteristics, enrollment history, and school persistence (CRESST Report No. 810). Los Angeles, CA: University of California Los Angeles, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, & Student Testing. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED527529>
- <sup>vii</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education. (October 2015), *State Required Exit Criteria for Pennsylvania's English Language Instructional Programs for English Language Learners*. Retrieved from <https://www.wida.us/membership/states/PA/State%20Required%20Exit%20Criteria%20for%20PA's%20LIEP%20September%202015.pdf>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

The authors gratefully acknowledge the many people who contributed to this brief.

The leadership and commitment of PERC's inaugural Governance Committee served as the catalyst for launching our ELL research agenda:

- **Tonya Wolford**, Deputy Chief of Research and Evaluation, School District of Philadelphia
- **Melanie Harris**, Chief Information Officer, School District of Philadelphia,
- **Naomi Johnson-Booker**, Chief Executive Officer, Global Leadership Academy
- **Cynthia Figueroa**, President and Chief Executive Officer, Congreso
- **Kathleen Shaw**, Executive Director, Research for Action

---

PERC's Research Advisory Committee supported this project by encouraging faculty members to lend their expertise and experience to inform the research design, data collection tools, and analysis.

- **Nancy Butler Songer**, Dean, Drexel University School of Education
- **Pam Grossman**, Dean, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania
- **Gregory Anderson**, Dean, College of Education, Temple University

---

We are also grateful for the technical support and data expertise provided by the School District of Philadelphia—**Tonya Wolford**, Deputy Chief of Research and Evaluation, **Allison Still**, Deputy Chief of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs, **Adrienne Reitano**, Senior Research Associate, and **Kelsey Weir**, Program Coordinator— and **Marvin Barnes**, Research Assistant from Research for Action.

Valuable feedback provided by RFA's Executive Director, **Kathleen Shaw** further strengthened the accessibility and utility of this brief.

This brief was produced through the leadership and support of Research for Action's communications team: **Alison Murawski**, Director of Communications, and **Rachel Greene**, Graphic Designer/Communications Assistant.

We are grateful for the continued support of our Program Director at the William Penn Foundation, **Elliot Weinbaum**.

Although PERC's Governance and Research Advisory Committees provided technical advice and the William Penn Foundation provided the funding to support PERC, this brief reflects the interpretations of the authors only.

---

## WHAT IS PERC?

PERC is an innovative, cross-sector partnership designed to provide robust analysis on some of Philadelphia's most pressing education issues. Housed at Research for Action (RFA), an independent non-profit education research organization, PERC's research agenda is set by the School District of Philadelphia and representatives of the city's charter school sector. PERC draws on the rich research expertise in the city—both within RFA and from Philadelphia's three major research universities—to produce rigorous, timely, and actionable research aligned to the information needs of the city's public schools.

### Contact Us

 **Web:** [www.phillyeducationresearch.org](http://www.phillyeducationresearch.org)

 **Phone:** 215-586-3816

 **Email:** [rhughes@researchforaction.org](mailto:rhughes@researchforaction.org)

 **Twitter:** [twitter.com/PHLedResearch](https://twitter.com/PHLedResearch)

### Our Partners



Special thanks to the *William Penn Foundation* for its generous support of PERC. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the William Penn Foundation.



*Copyright © 2016 Research for Action*