Exploring the Diversity and Supports for School District of Philadelphia English Learners as they Prepare to Transition to High School

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Research for Action

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School District of Philadelphia

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Acknowledgments

About PERC

The Philadelphia Education Research Consortium is a partnership between the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Research and Evaluation and Research for Action, a nonprofit education research organization. Launched in August 2014, PERC conducts research that is community-informed, equity-focused, and based on a critical analysis of District needs. We engage in longer-term, sustained areas of investigation that can be leveraged at the right time by the right people for real change in Philadelphia. PERC is funded by the William Penn Foundation and is a member of the National Network of Education Research Practice Partnerships.

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Summary

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) serves a diverse population of English Learners with different ethnic backgrounds, cultural identities, and languages spoken. English Learners, or ELs, are students who take the WIDA English proficiency screener and receive a composite score that identifies them as ELs.[1] SDP's population of ELs has grown significantly, from about 12,000 in 2014-15 to nearly 20,000 in 2022-23, an increase of 66%. During this time period, between 106-118 home languages were spoken in each school year.[2,3]

This community-informed study focuses on English Learners in 7th and 8th grade, grade levels that are often overlooked in research but represent a critical juncture as students prepare to transition to high school. Since 2017, PERC has engaged in research to better understand the successes and challenges of District students before, during, and after high school. A successful transition to high school can bolster a student's likelihood of graduating and demonstrating readiness for college and careers. Complementing recent District-wide insights related to the diversity of ELs from PERC partner researchers in the Office of Research and Evaluation, [4] our study shines a spotlight on 7th and 8th-grade ELs who are about to make this important transition to high school.

By describing the diversity of 7th and 8th-grade English Learners' backgrounds and experiences, this study challenges the notion that the English Learner population is a monolith. As a foundation for further research on how to meaningfully study the experiences and environments of English Learners, this study describes the diversity of home languages spoken, countries and regions of birth, and duration of EL status across the population of English Learners in the years leading up to their transition to high school.

The findings of this study will be of primary interest to District leaders and central office staff, school leaders, and community organizations that support students in Philadelphia who are transitioning to high school, as they seek to more deeply understand the English Learner student population and provide services that improve their experiences and promote their success. In

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[1] Students who have a home language other than English when they register for SDP are recommended for the WIDA evaluation. For more information about WIDA, visit https://wida.wisc.edu/assess/screener

[2] Schlesinger, M. & E. Erdem. (2023). *English Learner (EL) Home Language and Enrollment Trends in the School District of Philadelphia: 2014-2015 to 2022-2023.* Office of Research and Evaluation, School District of Philadelphia. Accessed from: https://www.philasd.org/research/2023/08/25/english-learner-el-home-language-and-enrollment-trends-in-the-school-district-of-philadelphia-2014-15-to-2022-23/

[3] The home language and enrollment trends presented here do not include students in charter schools.

[4] This study builds on work by PERC partner researchers in the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE), which explored the diverse experiences and environments of English Learners in the District (Schlesinger & Erdem, 2023; Pylvainen, Lewis & Wills, 2022; Wills & Lewis, 2022; Schlesinger, Wills, & Lewis, 2022).

addition, findings should broadly interest education leaders and community members committed to improving the learning experiences and opportunities of ELs.

Key Findings

School District of Philadelphia English Learners in 7th and 8th grade are a linguistically diverse group, reflecting broader trends in the District. In the four years from 2017-18 to 2020-21, this group was comprised of students who spoke at least 85 different home languages.

Though Spanish is consistently predominant, significant shifts in the prevalence of less common home languages – like Portuguese – are worth noting. More than half of 7th and 8th grade English Learners spoke Spanish as their home language, though Portuguese is increasingly common among this group of students. Over the four years we examined in this study, the percent of Portuguese-speaking 7th and 8th grade ELs more than doubled from 4.4% to 9.1% and now represents the second most common home language, following Spanish and surpassing Arabic and Chinese (Mandarin). This growth in Portuguese-speaking English Learner students likely reflects a coinciding rapid increase in families immigrating from Brazil during this same time period.

Though nearly half of 7th and 8th-grade ELs in our study were born in the United States, a growing share of 7th and 8th-grade ELs were born in Central America. The most common country of birth among this group, ranging from 42% to 47% across sampled years, is the United States. The percentage of ELs born in Central America more than doubled from 3.9% to 8.4% during this time. Much of this increase can be attributed to a notable increase in ELs born in Guatemala and Honduras.

The share of 7th and 8th grade ELs enrolled within a school can rapidly change over a short period. The overall percent enrollment of 7th and 8th grade ELs increased across District schools from 10.9% to 13.2%, some schools experienced much larger increases. For example, the share of 7th and 8th grade ELs at Eliza B. Kirkbride increased from about a quarter to nearly half during the same four-year period.

While 7th and 8th-grade EL enrollment modestly increased in SDP schools over the course of the four years in our study, the share of ELs identified as long-term English Learners (LTELs) remained consistent at about 40%. The District classifies students as "Long-Term English Learners" if they remain administratively classified as English Learners for 6 or more years. Over the four years examined in this study, the percent of LTELs in 7th and 8th grade was consistently around 40%.

The pandemic interrupted the District's EL reclassification process. ELs who have developed English proficiency can "exit" EL status, as determined in part by their score on the ACCESS assessment. In 2021-22, the pandemic disrupted the screening and assessment process, which led to fewer students newly classified as ELs as well as fewer students reclassified as "Former ELs." which is used to inform the reclassification of students from EL to "exited EL," was administered to about 2,700 students, down significantly from over 16,000 tested students at the same time point in SY2019-20.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Tracking and periodically reassessing changes in the share and linguistic profile of ELs at each school over time can be helpful for meeting the evolving language support needs at schools serving these ELs. While the data in this report focuses on the linguistic diversity of EL students leading up to the transition to high school, the over-time shifts in the composition of the EL population is a broader dynamic across the District. Each year, based on October enrollment data, the District updates publicly-facing school profiles, which include the share of students at each District school who are classified as ELs as well as the languages represented within the school community. Community organizations could use this

information to guide their collaborations with the District in support of the growing number of students and families speaking languages other than English.

Prioritizing support from [Bilingual Counseling Assistants](#) (BCAs) for 7th and 8th-grade English Learners represents one way to meet the evolving needs of school communities as schools prepare their EL students to transition to high school. Based in the District's Multilingual Family Support Office, BCAs are linguistic and cultural brokers who work across multiple schools to provide a wide range of services to support ELs and their families, including translation and interpretation services. In addition, BCAs serve as a connection to the school and other District and community-based resources and help ELs and their families navigate District systems and processes. The number of BCA, schools receiving services from BCAs, and the level of services received have all increased substantially in the last five years. Several members of Philadelphia-based community organizations also shared in a focus group that communities and families appreciate the role BCA plays in welcoming and helping new ELs in the District.

Centrally-allocated ESL teachers and EL support personnel can support schools that experience rapid increases in EL enrollment. When school leaders are assessing needs and planning for the next year each spring, schools often do not know the full extent of the language needs of their middle school students for the following year. This is because many families with rising 7th and 8th-grade ELs enroll their students in District schools over the summer or after the beginning of the school year. Given the year-to-year changes in the share and linguistic profiles of middle school students within schools, centrally-allocated supports can more flexibly support students across District schools to ensure they are supported, for example, during the high school selection process.

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Why this study

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) is a large urban district that serves a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse English Learner (EL) population. Each year, SDP recommends registered students with a home language other than English take an English proficiency screener.[5] Their composite score can be used to identify them as ELs.[6] The District's EL population has grown by 66% since 2014-15, enrolling over 19,900 ELs in 2022-23. Over the same period, the number of home languages spoken by all EL students in the district increased by 29%.[7] As the number and diversity of ELs grows over time, it is critical to understand the extent to which the District is meeting their academic and social needs.

An increasingly larger share of EL students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a school requires more resources to provide effective instruction and other student support services, such as greater demands on preparation and professional development for teachers and administrators (Brisk et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Additionally, among EL students, long-term ELs experience more challenges to succeed or stay in school, such as having limited access to electives and full curriculum or being inadequately served in language support classes (Olsen, 2014).

This study focuses on the characteristics and experiences of English Learners right before one critical juncture in their academic trajectory: the transition to high school. The transition to high school is often accompanied by new challenges that come with less adult monitoring and greater student autonomy and which can result in higher rates of chronic absenteeism and reduced academic effort in 9th grade, particularly in urban school systems (Rosenkranz, de la Torre, Stevens & Allensworth, 2014). Students who struggle with these challenges are at a much greater risk of not completing high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). The District uses an early warning system to identify students who struggled with the transition -flagging students as either "on" or "off track" to graduate high school at the end of their 9th-grade year.[8]

In 2021-22, about a quarter of all students ended their 9th-grade year off track to graduation, suggesting they struggled with the transition from 8th to 9th grade.[9] Little is known about how experiences in middle grades shape resilience for English Learners, particularly Long-Term English Learners, in the transition to 9th grade (Crosnoe, 2009; Luczkowiak, 2020). What we do know is that the 9th-grade off-track rate among ELs has historically been slightly higher than that of their non-EL peers (Pileggi & Strouf, 2018). As the share of English Learners in the District increases, it is critical to understand the ways that schools can better prepare middle school English Learners for what lies ahead.

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[5] Students who have a home language other than English when they register for SDP are recommended for the WIDA evaluation. For more information about WIDA, visit https://wida.wisc.edu/assess/screener

[6] Many students in the District who speak languages other than English are not classified as ELs, some of whom are "Former ELs" meaning they entered the District with limited English proficiency, learned English while enrolled, and exited their EL status by demonstrating a specific level of proficiency. Others are Bilingual or Multilingual students who did not require supports to learn English and were not initially classified as ELs after being screened.

[7] Statistics retrieved in August 2023, from https://www.philasd.org/research/2023/08/25/english-learner-el-home-language-and-enrollment-trends-in-the-school-district-of-philadelphia-2014-15-to-2022-23/

[8] Specifically, 9th-grade students who earn at least one credit in each of four core areas (English, math, science, and social studies) plus one additional credit are considered on track to graduate on time (Wills, 2018).

[9] Statistics retrieved June 3, 2023 https://www.philasd.org/performance/programsservices/spree/district-scorecard/

Tackling the monolith myth

As a first step toward building an evidence base about the school environments and experiences that best support middle school English Learners' transition to high school, this study leverages a community-informed research approach to "tackle the monolith myth" and explore the diversity of English Learner linguistic backgrounds, countries and regions of birth, and school experiences (i.e., schools they attend and length of EL classification).

Current research and policy discussions tend to characterize English Learners as a monolith thus underappreciating the considerable variation in their experiences, linguistic assets, and academic needs (Ubansky & Santabanez, 2018). English Learners are distinct from one another in many important ways, including their cultural identities and the languages they speak at home. Yet, research is often constrained by conventional and narrow ways of describing the diversity of students (Viano & Baker, 2020), including those classified by school districts as English Learners, focusing instead on their academic outcomes in comparison to non-ELs (de la Torre et al., 2019; 2021). Our own work has been constrained in this way; documenting differences in academic outcomes of ELs and non-ELs as it relates, for instance, to 9th-grade off-track rates (Pileggi & Strouf, 2018), rates of high school graduation (Pileggi, Liu, & Turner, 2020), or eligibility to apply to special admission high schools (Wills et al., 2019).

Shifting the focus to the diversity of ELs and their educational experiences invites a more asset-driven analysis. While informative at a very high level, hyperfocus on gaps between ELs and non-ELs in academic outcomes ignores the extensive diversity within the EL population, including how ELs are supported in contributing the assets of their language and cultural backgrounds to their education. Treating English Learners as a monolith can also mask important within-group variation in their school experiences and access to resources that might explain unequal outcomes among them.

This study builds on work by PERC partner researchers in the Office of Research and Evaluation, which also serves to deepen the understanding of diverse experiences and environments of English Learners in the District (Schlesinger & Erdem, 2023; Wills & Lewis, 2022; Schlesinger, Wills, & Lewis, 2022). Their work explores the intersection of race/ethnicity and home language among K-12 SDP students. Additionally, ORE recently developed a school-level measure called the Linguistic Diversity Indicator to better describe the English Learner population within schools (as compared to % ELs, as is typical in District administrative data).

What the study examined

This study draws on a community-informed research approach and multiple sources of data to examine the diversity and experiences of School District of Philadelphia (SDP) 7th and 8th grade English Learners (ELs). Specifically, we use data from focus groups with community stakeholders as well as District and City of Philadelphia administrative data to inform our discussion on the assets and needs of 7th and 8th grade ELs in the District. We take a historical view, examining trends in the last four years, to unpack not just diversity within the middle school EL population but also how the composition of middle school ELs can change from year-to-year, sometimes quite drastically within a given school.

Box 1. Community-informed approach to defining the research questions

For this study, PERC researchers originally set out to examine variation in the 9th-grade transition within the English Learner (EL) population, following a 2018 study that showed slightly lower on-track rates for ELs compared to their non-EL peers (Pileggi & Strouf, 2018). However, as we engaged with community members deeply connected to ELs and their families across the city, PERC researchers adjusted the research aims to descriptively explore the how the diversity of middle school changes over time and the supports and services that are available to ELs and their families. We intend to use this research as a foundation upon which to build an evidence base about the 9th-grade transition, recognizing the need to "tackle the monolith myth" and better understand the assets and needs of middle school ELs in the District before examining their academic outcomes.

Original Questions

To what extent and in which schools do ELs need more support to successfully transition to 9th grade?

- Across SDP middle schools, what are the average 9th-grade outcomes associated with high school graduation or college readiness for ELs compared to non-ELs (e.g., meeting the requirements to apply to criterion-based schools for 9th grade; ending 9th grade on track and; and taking any AP, IB, or Dual Enrollment course in 9th grade)?

How can we better understand what drives variation in 9th grade transitions for ELs?

- How are student and school characteristics of middle school ELs associated with their 9th grade outcomes?

Revised Questions

How can we better understand the diversity of SDP middle school ELs and their educational experiences?

- What are the student and school characteristics of ELs as they prepare to transition to high school?a
- How does the linguistic diversity of middle school ELs change over time?
- What are some of the current services and supports available to ELs across SDP middle school grades to support successful high school transitions?

The findings from this research lay the foundation for future research examining the variation in the 9th-grade transition among English Learners to inform decision-making within the District about how to allocate resources to serve these students. The findings should broadly interest education leaders and community members committed to improving the learning experiences and opportunities of ELs. We describe our community-informed approach in Box 1 and specify the sample and key variables used in this report in Box 2.

Box 2. Sample and Key Variable Definitions

Study Sample

The sample for this study includes 9,587 records from 6,494 unique students in 7th and 8th grades each year between SY2017-18 and SY2020-21 (on average, 2,397 7th and 8th graders each year). We excluded students who did not have complete data on relevant key variables, who were enrolled fewer than 10 days in District schools and who did not have valid EL identification data (i.e., their EL status contradicts their current EL identification in different district data sets).

Key variables

- **English Learner:** The indicator specifying whether a student has been identified as an English Learner.

- **EL Duration:** The length of time in years a student has been classified as an English Learner in the District.

- **Home language:** The primary language spoken at the student's home. Note, when students are enrolled in SDP, there is an option to include one home language in the record other than English the parent and student individually speak most often. If a household speaks multiple language other than English, only one home language is included in the administrative record.

- **Foreign country of birth:** The self-reported country of birth of students; outside of the United States. This may be different from administrative records of the country of birth of students.

- **Region of birth:** The world region of birth of students, including North America. This is calculated based on the country of birth data provided by the District.

What the study found

To understand where the gaps in resources for 7th and 8th grade ELs might be during their transition to high school, this study describes their diversity and trends in EL and long-term EL enrollments across schools. Specifically, we examine the primary language ELs speak at home, their country of birth, and region of birth. In addition, we look at the concentration of EL enrollment in schools, how that changed in the study period, and the share of 7th and 8th grade ELs by the duration of time classified as an EL. Further, we also discuss the impact of COVID-19 on EL students, especially as it relates to the process of reclassifying ELs as "exited ELs." Lastly, this study highlights the existing resources the District provides to ELs and their families as they prepare to transition to high school.

The diversity of English Learner languages and countries and regions of birth in the School District of Philadelphia

In this section, we describe the diversity of K-12 English Learners' linguistic profiles across the District before turning more narrowly to the linguistic diversity of 7th and 8th grade English Learners' languages and countries and regions of birth.

The District served, on average, about 15,000 English Learners with over 100 home languages each year in the four years between 2017-18 and 2020-21.[10] We present the linguistic profile of K-12 ELs during this period in Figure 2 below, examining the top five common home languages within this group. See Appendix A, Table 2 for corresponding data tables.

Figure 2. Change in the share of the most common 5 home languages of K-12 English Learners in the School District of Philadelphia, 2017-18 to 2020-21
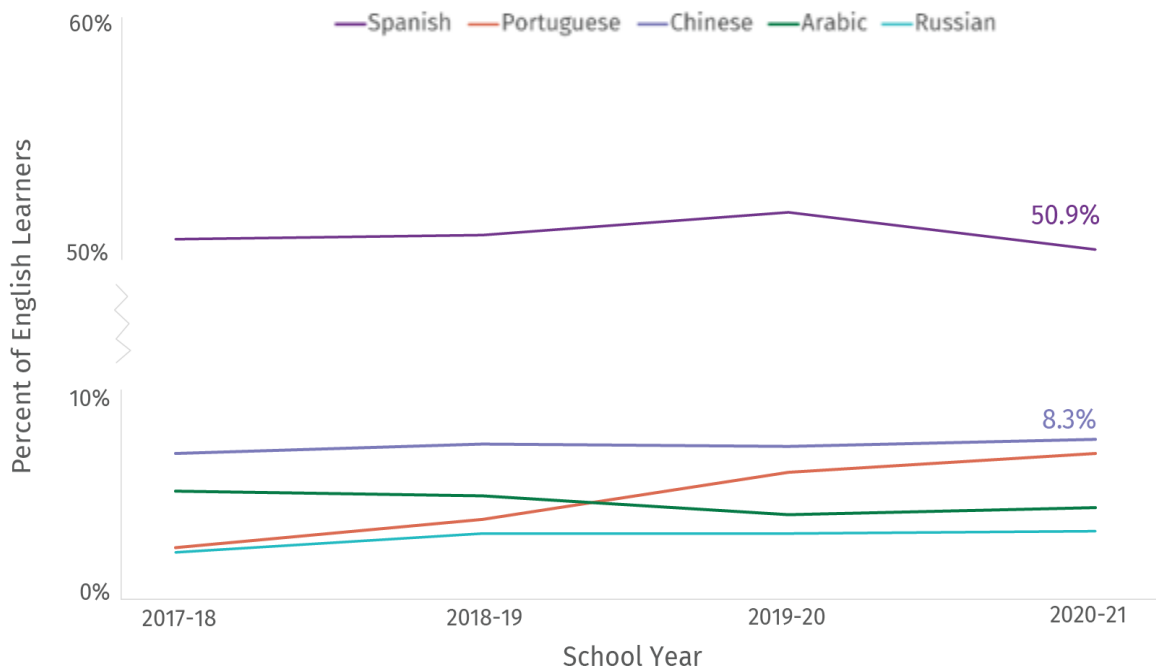
Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2017-18 - SY2020-21
Note: Across the four years, the District served from 13,879 to 16,014 ELs in grades K-12. For the number of EL students in the District each year, see Appendix A, Table A2.

Key findings:
- The percent of Spanish speakers fluctuated slightly over the sampled years, though remained the predominant home language, representing over 50% of K-12 ELs in each sampled year.
- Chinese was the second-most predominant language (around 8% each year).

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[10] Retrieved from: https://www.philasd.org/performance/programsservices/open-data/school-information/#district_enrollment

- While the share of Chinese and Russian speakers remained fairly stable during our study period, the share of Arabic speakers decreased slightly.
- Finally, the share of Portuguese-speaking ELs more than doubled over the four years (from 3.3% to 7.6%), surpassing Arabic as the third-most predominant language in 2019-20.

Trends in District schools reflect a growing need for Portuguese language services more broadly in Philadelphia.

In Philadelphia, individuals who do not speak English as their primary language and who have a limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English can request services from Language Access Philly, a City of Philadelphia service managed by the Office of Immigrant Affairs. The program aims to improve communication between City departments and Philadelphians with limited English proficiency. In addition to bilingual staff, language access services offered include interpretation over the phone or in person and document translation.

Since 2019, there has been a consistent rise in residents seeking translation and interpretation services through Language Access Philly, tripling from 2019 to 2022 (see Appendix B for more information). Table 1 abo displays the share of service requests by language to help us to understand shifts in language needs more broadly across the city, which should—and do—mirror District trends; while Spanish supports were the most commonly requested, the percent of requests for interpretation and translation services in Portuguese nearly tripled, from 2.9% to 8.6% of all requests, surpassing Chinese supports as the second-most requested in 2021.

Table 1. The top 5 service requests through the Language Access Philly program from 2019 to 2022

Language	Percent of Requested Interpretation & Translation Service			
	2019	2020	2021	2022
Spanish	77.7%	67.9%	68.7%	72.4%
Portuguese	2.9%	4.8%	5.8%	8.6%
Chinese	4.7%	5.1%	4.6%	3.5%
Haitian Creole	1.0%	1.8%	2.1%	2.2%
Arabic	1.4%	2.3%	2.1%	1.7%
Total number of requests	10,965	55,017	83,138	30,454

Note: Languages are sorted by most common in 2022.
Source: Office of Immigrant Affairs Service Request Data, 2019 – 2022 (January to March only)

### The changing linguistic profile of 7th and 8th grade reflects broader District trends.

Figure 3 focuses on the linguistic profile of EL students in grades 7 and 8 (on average, 2,397 students each year from SY2017-18 to SY2020-21), with 85 different home languages represented in total (see Appendix A, Table A1, for a list of all languages represented). First, the share of 7th and 8th grade EL's whose home

language is Spanish, though remaining the most common language spoken, consistently decreased over the years studied in this report, from 55.2% to 52.9%. The share of other common home languages—including Chinese (Mandarin), Arabic, Russian, Khmer, and Vietnamese—fluctuated between 2% to 5% across sampled years.

Figure 3. Change in the share of the most common 7 home languages of 7th and 8th grade English Learners in the School District of Philadelphia, 2017-18 to 2020-21
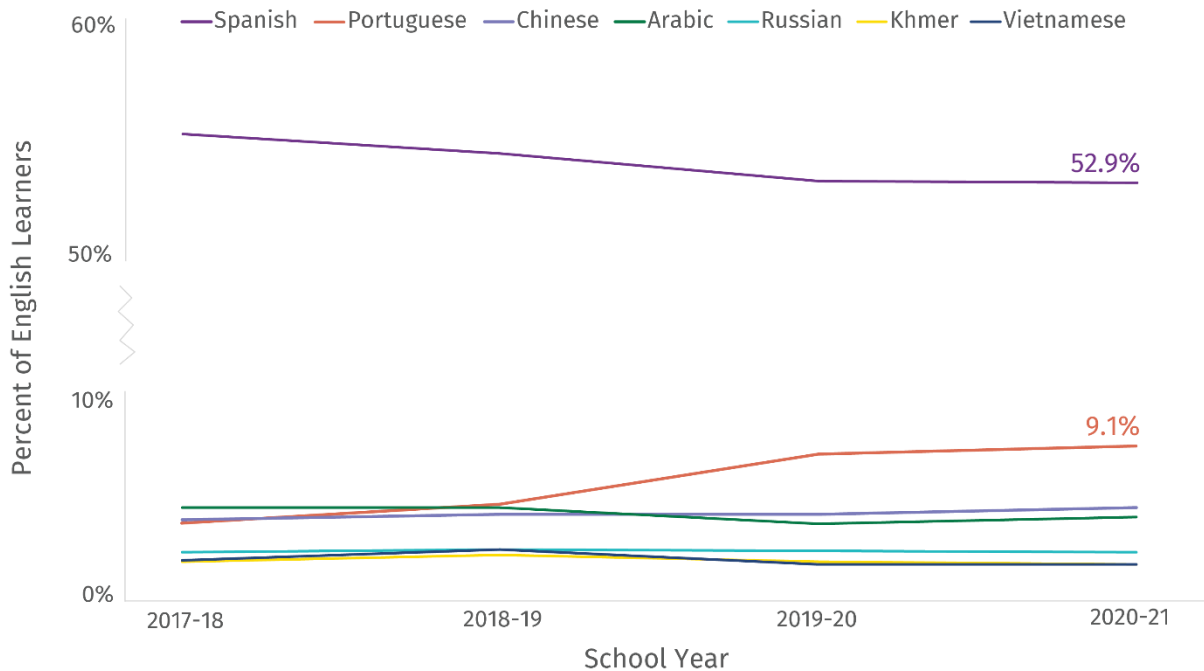
Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2017-18 – SY2020-21
Note: Across the four years, the District served from 2,113 to 2,566 ELs in grades 7-8. For the number of EL students in the 7th and 8th grades each year, see Table 2 below.

The percent of Portuguese-speaking 7th and 8th grade ELs doubled in recent years, becoming the second most common home language following Spanish.

Similar to patterns observed across all grades, the share of 7th and 8th grade ELs speaking Portuguese has seen a significant increase over time from 4.5% to 9.1% (Figure 3). Portuguese represents the second most common home language among middle school ELs following Spanish, surpassing Arabic and Chinese (Mandarin) in 2019-20. The increase in the share of Portuguese-speaking 7th and 8th grade ELs is associated with a large increase in the share of EL students born in Brazil (see Table 2 for more information).

Nearly half of 7th and 8th grade ELs were born in the United States.

While the 7th and 8th grade ELs in our study were born all over the world (see Figure 4), nearly half were born in the United States. In fact, the United States is the most common country of birth, ranging from 42% to 47% across sampled years. Approximately 10% to 15% of these US-born ELs were born in Puerto Rico (depending on which school year we examined).

Figure 4. Countries of birth of grades 7 and 8 English Learners in the School District of Philadelphia, 2017-18 through 2020-21
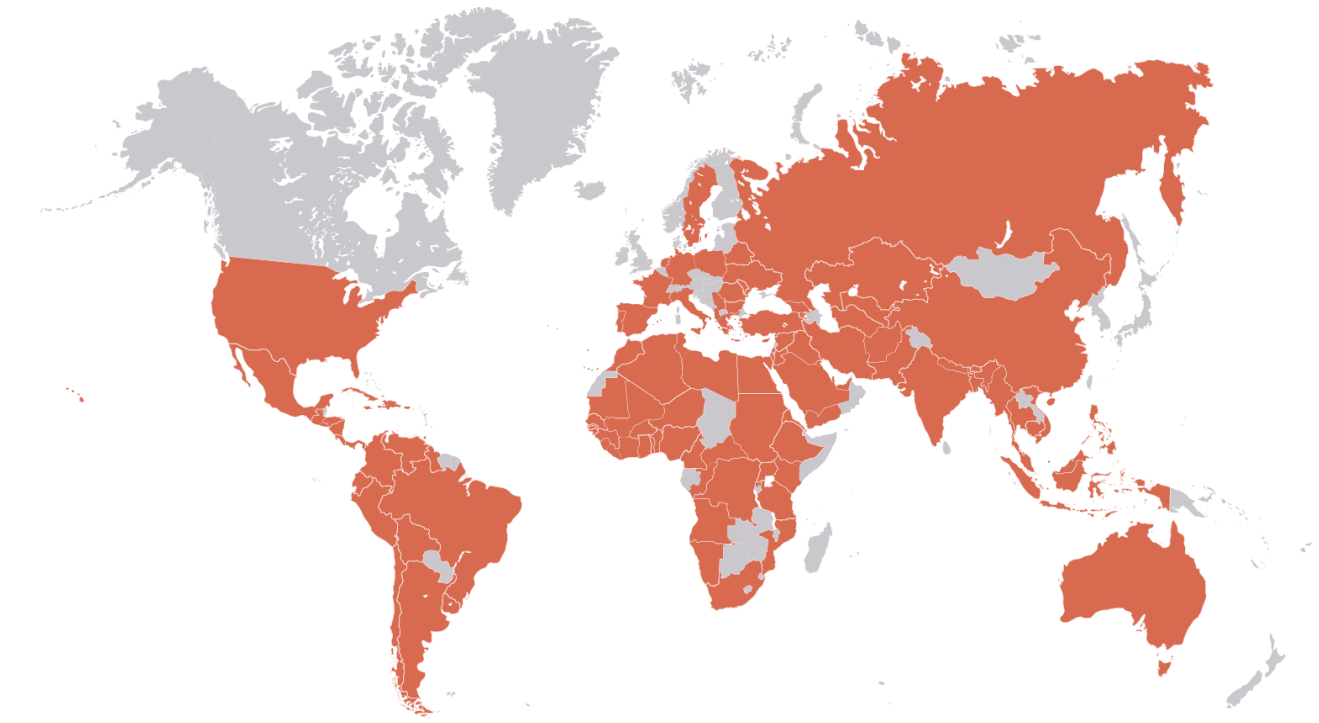
Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2017-18 - SY2020-21

Among 7th and 8th grade ELs who were born in foreign countries, students born in Dominican Republic represent the largest group, though ELs born in Brazil and Guatemala are the fastest-growing group among foreign-born ELs.

In Table 2 below, we present the top five most common foreign countries of birth among middle school ELs during each year of our study period. Though the top five countries each year changes slightly, countries of birth most represented include the Dominican Republic, China, Brazil, Haiti, Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Table 2. Share of ELs among the top 5 most common foreign countries of birth among grades 7 and 8 English Learners, SY2017-18 - SY2020-21

SY2017-18		SY2018-19		SY2019-20		SY2020-21	
Country	**%**	**Country**	**%**	**Country**	**%**	**Country**	**%**
Dominican Republic	9.2%	Dominican Republic	9.9%	Dominican Republic	10.3%	Dominican Republic	9.6%
China	3.5%	Brazil	3.8%	Brazil	6.4%	Brazil	6.3%
Brazil	3.3%	China	3.5%	Guatemala	4.8%	Guatemala	4.1%
Haiti	2.7%	Guatemala	2.9%	Honduras	3.7%	China	3.4%
Mexico	2.2%	Haiti	2.5%	China	3.3%	Honduras	3.2%
Total number of ELs in Grades 7 & 8	**2,113**	**Total number of ELs in Grades 7 & 8**	**2,372**	**Total number of ELs in Grades 7 & 8**	**2,566**	**Total number of ELs in Grades 7 & 8**	**2,536**

Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2017-18 - SY2020-21

Among foreign born ELs, students who were born in the Dominican Republic consistently represent the largest group across sampled years (between 9% to 10% of all 7th and 8th grade ELs, depending on the year). The percent of Brazil-born ELs grew from 3.3% to 6.3% across our study period, and the percent of Guatemala-born ELs increased from 1.5% to 4.1% during the same period.

The percent of 7th and 8th grade ELs who were born in Central America doubled in recent years, from about 4% to 8%.

Looking regionally (rather than by country), we found consistency across study years with the most common regions-of-birth among middle school ELs over time, ranging from about 44% to 50% born in North America and 12% to 13% born in the Caribbean, depending on the year. There was a relatively large increase in the share of ELs born in Central America within the same period, doubling from 3.9% to 8.4% across study years and surpassing South America as the third most common region of birth by 2018-19. Much of this increase can be attributed to the notable increases in the share of ELs born in Guatemala and Honduras, presented in Table 2.

Table 3. Share of grades 7 and 8 English Learners by top 5 most common regions of birth, 2017-18 to 2020-21

SY2017-18		SY2018-19		SY2019-20		SY2020-21	
Region	%	Region	%	Region	%	Region	%
North America	50.1%	North America	49.8%	North America	43.6%	North America	45.1%
Caribbean	12.3%	Caribbean	12.9%	Caribbean	13.4%	Caribbean	12.4%
South America	4.6%	Central America	5.7%	Central America	9.2%	Central America	8.4%
Middle East & North Africa	4.1%	South America	5.0%	South America	7.8%	South America	7.6%
Central America	3.9%	Middle East & North Africa	3.9%	South Asia	4.3%	South Asia	4.0%
Total number of ELs in Grades 7 & 8	**2,113**	**Total number of ELs in Grades 7 & 8**	**2,372**	**Total number of ELs in Grades 7 & 8**	**2,566**	**Total number of ELs in Grades 7 & 8**	**2,536**

Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2017-18 - SY2020-21

School Experiences and Resources for 7th and 8th grade English Learners

Researchers found that a high concentration of English Learners is often associated with school factors such as high levels of racial segregation and a lack of instructional resources (Gándara et al., 2003; Vang Yang, 2020; Quintero & Hansen, 2021). These factors further hinder English Learners' access to educational resources and opportunities. In addition, schools serving many Long-Term English Learners (LTELs) often face challenges in providing adequate instructional support to meet LTELs' unique needs (Olsen, 2014).

In this section, we look at two features that are associated with and can shape experiences during ELs' transition to high school – the concentration of ELs in a school and the share of ELs by the duration of EL identification (i.e., what percentages of LTELs among all ELs are served across schools). We end with a discussion of District resources for EL students and middle schoolers in particular (Box 4).

The share of 7th and 8th grade ELs enrolled within a school can rapidly increase over a short period.

Our analysis of school enrollment data indicates that while some schools experienced relatively consistent year-to-year middle school EL enrollment (e.g., Southwark School), other schools experienced rapid increases.

The overall share of grade 7 and 8 ELs increased across District schools from 10.9% to 13.2% during our study period, and some schools experienced much larger increases. The Eliza B. Kirkbride School, for instance, experienced a 21-percentage point increase in EL enrollment (25.4% to 46.4%), and the John H. Taggart School experienced almost a 15-percentage point increase. In contrast, Julia de Burgos was ranked 3rd in the top 10 schools with the largest share of 7th and 8th grade ELs in 2017-18 (30%), but was not in the top 10 by 2019-20.

Table 4. Share of grades 7 and 8 ELs in the 10 schools enrolling the largest share of grades 7 and 8 ELs, 2017-18 to 2020-21

Rank by percent	SY2017-18		SY2018-19		SY2019-20		SY2020-21	
	School	%	School	%	School	%	School	%
1	Southwark School[a]	45.1%	Southwark School[a]	53.1%	Southwark School[a]	45.5%	Eliza B. Kirkbride School	46.4%
2	Vare-Washington School	31.7%	John H. Taggart School	37.0%	John H. Taggart School	45.0%	Southwark School[a]	43.9%
3	Julia de Burgos School	30.6%	Potter-Thomas School	29.8%	Eliza B. Kirkbride School	38.7%	John H. Taggart School	39.8%
4	Potter-Thomas School	28.9%	Eliza B. Kirkbride School	28.8%	Woodrow Wilson School[b]	31.6%	Mayfair School	32.4%
5	Honorable Luis Munoz-Marin School[a]	28.9%	Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences	28.4%	Mayfair School	31.0%	Woodrow Wilson School[b]	31.9%
6	Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences	26.6%	Francis Hopkinson School	27.8%	Louis H. Farrell School	29.5%	Gilbert Spruance School	30.5%
7	Roberto Clemente School	26.3%	Woodrow Wilson School[b]	27.7%	Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences	28.9%	Louis H. Farrell School	30.0%
8	Francis Hopkinson School	26.0%	Mayfair School	26.6%	Olney School	28.5%	Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences	28.8%
9	John H. Taggart School	25.9%	Juniata Park Academy	26.3%	Juniata Park Academy	28.1%	Olney School	28.6%
10	Eliza B. Kirkbride School	25.4%	Julia de Burgos School	25.9%	Gilbert Spruance School	26.9%	Francis Hopkinson School	26.8%

Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2017-18 - SY2020-21
Notes:
    a.   Marin and Southwark are two of the seven bilingual/dual language schools in the District.
    b.   Woodrow Wilson School changed its name to Caster Gardens in SY2021-22.

The share in a particular grade level can change even while the share of EL students in the school are consistent over time. For example, for the Eliza B. Kirkbride School, the John H. Taggart School, and Julia de Burgos, the total percent of EL students within the school only fluctuated by 3 to 5 percentage points each year while the shares of ELs in 7th and 8th grades varied by 3 to 11 percentage points (data not shown).

Typically, about half of 7th and 8th grade ELs are considered "long-term ELs."

Many English Learners (ELs) in the District, including our sample, are "long-term English Learners" (LTELs), defined by the District as a student identified as an EL for 6 years or more.[11] In the School District of Philadelphia, long-term English Learner (LTEL) students are English Learners who have been identified as such for six or more years. Research has demonstrated that LTELs have distinct needs for academic success, such as needing more support in oral and literacy skills. Without sufficient support from teachers and their school, LTELs may become reluctant to participate in school activities, which further impedes their academic growth (Olson, n.d.).

The transition to high school is hard for everyone, but particularly for LTELs who also are experiencing changes in an established network of ESL teachers and supports based in their middle schools.

From SY2017-18 to SY2019-20, the percent of ELs meeting the definition of LTEL was consistently around 40%. In Table 5, we present the share of ELs by how long they had been classified as ELs in the School District of Philadelphia from SY2017-18 to SY2020-21. While largely consistent, the share of LTELs jumped to over 45% during 2020-21, which we further investigate in the next section.

Table 5. Share of grades 7 and 8 ELs by the duration of EL classification across school years, 2017-18 to 2020-21

Duration in years	Share of grades 7 and 8 ELs by the duration of EL identification across school years			
	SY2017-18	SY2018-19	SY2019-20	SY2020-21*
Up to 1 year	21.1%	18.1%	18.0%	5.2%
2 years	14.3%	13.8%	14.6%	16.0%
3 years	10.6%	11.3%	11.1%	13.8%
4 years	7.7%	8.3%	10.2%	10.0%
5 years	5.4%	6.0%	6.4%	9.4%
6 or more years (LTEL)	40.7%	42.4%	39.7%	45.7%
Total number of ELs in grades 7 and 8	**2,113**	**2,372**	**2,566**	**2,536**

Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2017-18 - SY2020-21
*Note: At the time of analysis, the identification of ELs in SY2020-21 was affected by delays in screening students for English language proficiency associated with pandemic-related interruptions.

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[11] There are different opinions in the research literature on how to define long-term English Learners (LTELS), though most definitions describe periods of 5-7 years for considering whether to classify an EL as an LTEL (Olson, 2014; Shin, 2019).

The pandemic interrupted the District's EL classification process, which had the effect of increasing the share of recent long-term ELs in grades 7 and 8.

The recent increase in LTELs is attributable to interruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Erdem & Fullam, 2022).[12] In 2020-21, the ACCESS test, which is used as a part of the process to inform the reclassification of ELs as exited ELs, was administered to just 2,753 students, down from 16,663 tested students the year prior, when ACCESS was administered under normal circumstances. Because fewer students took the ACCESS test during this school year, fewer ELs had the opportunity to be reclassified as exited English Learners. This finding is related to the sharp decrease in the share of students classified as first-time ELs in 2020-21, down to 5.2% from 18.0% in 2019-20.

Box 3. Resources and Services SDP Provides to EL Students and Families

There are several supports in place to ensure equitable access to institutionalized supports and services for EL students and families. Examples of these supports and services include:

- **Compliance with Policy 138 for Equal Opportunity:** To ensure compliant and effective programming for English Learners, SDP provides clear guidelines for implementing English language development (ELD), which includes rostering and scheduling of ELs in grade-appropriate classes. These requirements are based on PA Regulations, Chapters 4 and 11, federal laws, including the Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA), and SDP Board of Education's Policy 138: English Language Development and Bilingual Education. Specifically, across all grades, Policy 138 states that "ELs shall be identified, assessed, and provided an equal opportunity to participate in instructional programs with equal access to educational programs and extracurricular activities." This policy guides SDP to provide a culturally and linguistically appropriate planned instructional program for all EL students, to equitably identify and assess EL students, and to provide them opportunities to participate in instructional and extra-curricular programs. Specific guidelines can be found here.

- **Transition to High School:** For middle school EL students who are transitioning to high schools, students and families are provided with resources to help with the school selection process and help students adjust to the high school environment. For example, for incoming 9th graders, the LeGare Consent Decree ensures equal admission for EL students (as well as students with an IEP or a 504 Plan) at Criteria-Based schools or programs at City-Wide schools.

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12 According to Erdem and Fullam (2022), SY2019-20 ACCESS administration was completed before school closures due to Covid-19. The SY2020-21 ACCESS was, however, impacted. In SY2020-21, ACCESS was administered only to English Learners who were attending in-person during the hybrid phase.

- **EL Point Person:** English Learner Point Persons are designated by school principals and are responsible for EL identification, data management, and compliance related to Policy 138 and other state and federal mandates.

- **Professional Development:** SDP provides professional development for English Learner Point Persons and all teachers. Professional learning opportunities are provided to all teachers via different avenues, such as Quality Teaching for English Learners, Tune-Up Tuesdays, district-wide professional development in collaboration with other offices and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

- **Multilingual Managers:** For EL students who need additional support, the Multilingual Managers help them enroll in SDP high schools with programs that replicate their previous sheltered environment at middle schools for a more gradual transition into the general learning environment in high schools. Multilingual Managers also work in collaboration with other school and central office-based staff to support the academic acceleration of English Learners (ELs) in assigned networks.

Conclusions

Research has shown that students with a successful transition to high school are more likely to graduate and be ready for college and careers (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). By featuring the nuanced and diverse landscape of ELs in 7th and 8th grades who are in the critical transition phase, this report provides helpful context for the design and distribution of supports to center such diversity and meet the needs of these ELs.

Our study reveals several important contextual facts that help to advance a more nuanced understanding of EL students leading up to the high school transition. Notably, nearly half of all ELs were born in the U.S., dispelling the potential belief among some that English Learners are all immigrants. In addition, nearly half of 7th and 8th grade English Learners are LTELs, who may face unique academic challenges as they transition to high school.

This study also shows that the composition of 7th and 8th grade ELs in the District is dynamic. In recent years, for example, the percentage of Portuguese-speaking 7th and 8th grade ELs has sharply increased, doubling from 4 to 9% and surpassing Chinese (Mandarin) as the second most prevalent language spoken among this group of students. Further, the number of ELs enrolled in a school can rapidly change over a short period, indicating that supports and services for ELs need to be flexible and adaptable to quick changes.

These key takeaways can be used to inform future research on ELs as they prepare for the transition to high school, bringing SDP closer to its goal of equity in educational outcomes for all students. While previous research has focused on the gaps between EL and non-EL in academic outcomes associated with the successful transition to high school and the likelihood of being college and career ready, this research highlights the diversity of ELs in SDP middle grades and calls for future studies to investigate inequities among ELs in access to supports. By doing this, this study aims to provide data-driven implications for policy and practice and sets the stage to better describe how ELs leverage resources and supports to succeed during the difficult yet important transition to high school through a culturally responsive lens.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The District serves culturally and linguistically diverse English Learners (ELs) and its EL population has been steadily growing over time. To address the needs of the growing share and diversity of ELs across the District, Bilingual Counseling Assistant (BCA) services have increased 2.5 times in the last five years (Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs, 2022). In the focus groups we conducted, several members of Philadelphia-based CBOs supporting ELs discussed the need for more BCAs and reported that communities and families appreciate BCAs and their ability to welcome and support new students.

Findings from our analysis of administrative data, coupled with focus groups with district and community stakeholders, elucidate implications for policy and practice and inform the following recommendations:

- Our findings point out that there is a growing number of ELs across the District who were born in Brazil and speak Portuguese, suggesting a need to assess the extent to which current BCAs are equipped to meet this growing group of students and families.

- To complement existing resources and services provided by the Multilingual Family Support Office, the District has very recently proposed a significant increase to its budget devoted to staffing EL teachers and BCAs: Additional financial resources could lead to hiring more than 50 percent additional staff (SDP School Budgets, 2022-23). We recommend using the findings in this study to shape priorities in language and cultural backgrounds of to-be-hired BCAs and ESL teachers, and consider the specific needs of middle school ELs, nearly half of whom are LTELs as they prepare to transition to high school.

- Because the number of ELs enrolled in a school can rapidly change each fall, it could be worth exploring the prospect of strategically assigning newly centrally allocated ESL teachers to schools based on beginning-of-year enrollment.

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Appendix A. Home languages of EL students

Table A1. Home Languages Spoken by EL Students in grades 7 and 8, SY2017-18 – SY2020-21

Achinese	German	Persian (Farsi)
Akan	Greek	Polish
Albanian	Gujarati	Portuguese
Amharic	Haitian Creole	Punjabi
Arabic	Hausa	Quechua
Arawak	Hebrew	Romanian
Armenian	Hindi	Russian
Bambara	Hmong	Serbian
Belarusian	Iloko (Ilokano)	Soninke
Bengali	Indonesian	Spanish
Berber	Italian	Swahili
Bulgarian	Japanese	Tagalog
Burmese	Kabyle	Tajik
Cebuano	Karen	Telugu
Chinese (Mandarin)	Kazakh	Thai
Chinese (Minnan Fukiene)	Khmer	Tigrinya
Chinese (Yue/Cantonese)	Kinyarwanda	Tsonga
Coptic	Korean	Turkish
Creoles and Pidgins, English-Based (Other)	Kru	Turkmen
Creoles and Pidgins, Portuguese-Based (Other)	Kurdish	Twi
Dutch	Kyrgyz	Ukrainian
Esperanto	Lao	Upper Sorbian
Ewe	Malay	Urdu
Filipino	Malayalam	Uzbek
French	Mandar	Vietnamese
Fulah	Mandingo	Wolof
Ganda	Mayan Languages	Yoruba
Georgian	Nepali	
	Pashto/ Pushto	

Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2017-18 - SY2020-21

Exploring the Diversity and Needs of School District of Philadelphia English Learners as they Prepare to Transition to High School

Table A2. Five Most Common Home Languages Spoken by EL Students in Grades K through 12, SY2017-18 – SY2020-21

SY2017-18		SY2018-19		SY2019-20		SY2020-21	
Language	%	Language	%	Language	%	Language	%
Spanish	51.4%	Spanish	51.6%	Spanish	52.8%	Spanish	50.9%
Chinese (Mandarin)	7.5%	Chinese (Mandarin)	8.0%	Chinese (Mandarin)	7.9%	Chinese (Mandarin)	8.3%
Portuguese	3.3%	Portuguese	4.5%	Portuguese	6.7%	Portuguese	7.6%
Arabic	5.8%	Arabic	5.6%	Arabic	4.9%	Arabic	5.1%
Russian	3.1%	Russian	3.9%	Russian	3.9%	Russian	4.1%
Total number of ELs in grades K-12	13,879	Total number of ELs in grades K-12	15,387	Total number of ELs in grades K-12	16,368	Total number of ELs in grades K-12	16,014

Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2017-18 - SY2020-21

Table A3. Five Common Home Languages Spoken by EL Students in Grades 7 and 8, SY2017-18 – SY2020-21

| SY2017-18		SY2018-19		SY2019-20		SY2020-21	
Language	%	Language	%	Language	%	Language	%
Spanish	55.2%	Spanish	54.3%	Spanish	53.3%	Spanish	52.9%
Arabic	5.4%	Portuguese	5.6%	Portuguese	8.5%	Portuguese	9.1%
Chinese (Mandarin)	4.7%	Arabic	5.4%	Chinese (Mandarin)	5.0%	Chinese (Mandarin)	5.4%
Portuguese	4.5%	Chinese (Mandarin)	5.0%	Arabic	4.5%	Arabic	4.9%
Russian	2.8%	Russian	3.0%	Russian	2.9%	Russian	2.8%
Total number of ELs in 7th and 8th grades	2,113	Total number of ELs in 7th and 8th grades	2,372	Total number of ELs in 7th and 8th grades	2,566	Total number of ELs in 7th and 8th grades	2,536

Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2017-18 - SY2020-21

Appendix B. Analysis of data from the City of Philadelphia's Office of Immigrant Affairs

As discussed in the main body of the report, community engagement conversations inspired the analysis of data provided by the City of Philadelphia's Office of Immigrant Affairs (OIA) on resident use of Language Access Philly.[13] The data includes the type of interpretation and language services requested from July 2019 to March 2022. In this appendix, we provide a very high-level overview of select findings from our analysis.

From July 2019 to March 2022, Philadelphia residents have increasingly requested translation and interpretation services through the Office of Immigrant Affairs. Figure B1 shows the month-by-month frequency of requests, demonstrating a consistent rise in residents seeking translation and interpretation services through Language Access Philly. In each month of 2022, the number of requests exceeded the number in any month from 2019 to 2021. The language help requested by residents through Language Access Philly closely tracks with our main findings about the most common home languages of English Learner students in the District. Spanish is the most requested language (67%-77% of requests) and Portuguese has sharply risen from 2019 (2.9% of requests) to 2022 (8.6% of requests).

Figure B1. Interpretation and translation requests received by OIA by month, 2019-2022
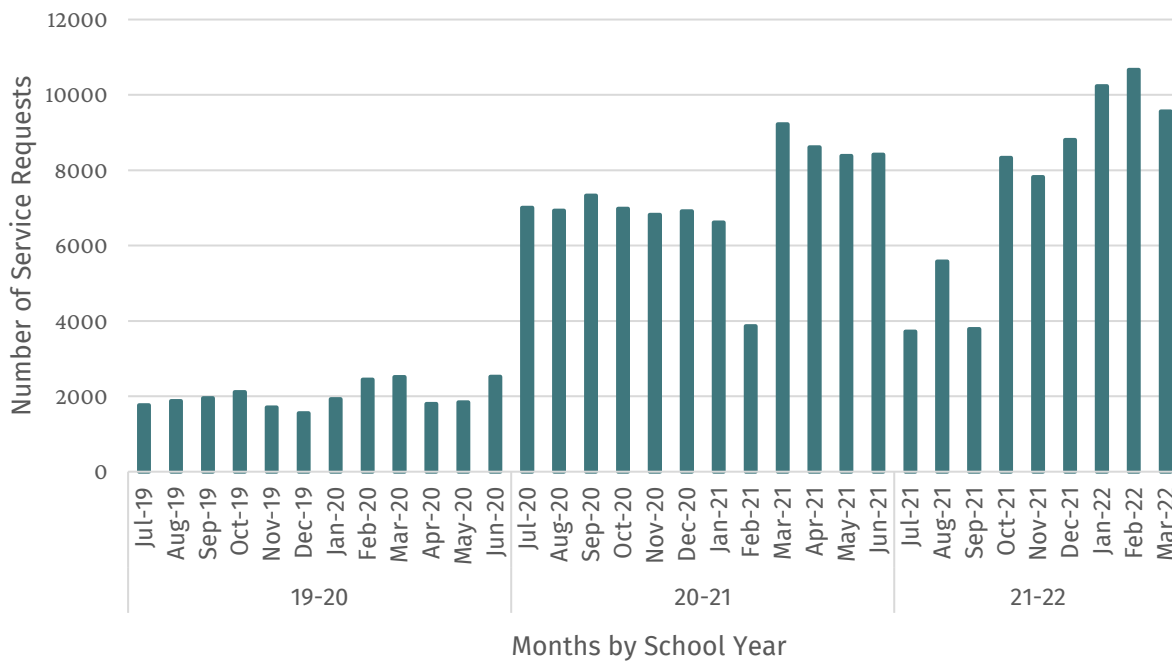
Source: Office of Immigrant Affairs Service Request Data, 2019 – 2022

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[13] Retrieved from: https://www.phila.gov/programs/language-access-philly/