Patterns of Student Mobility Among English Learner Students in Public High Schools in Philadelphia

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PERC
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Education
Research
Consortium**

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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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Why this study?

Student mobility is defined as students transferring, or changing, schools during the school year (within-year mobility) or summer (between-year mobility) and is pervasive in many large, urban school districts, including Philadelphia (Burdick-Will et al., 2020; Rumberger, 2015; Miller & Sadowski, 2017). [1] [2] In the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), rates of student mobility are high: one-third of high school students either experienced mobility or dropped out of school from SY2013-14 through SY2016-17 (Steinberg et al., 2019).

Student mobility can be challenging for both students and schools, and school districts, including in Philadelphia, have worked to reduce mobility and mitigate its negative impacts. While some forms of mobility can be beneficial for students, on average, it is negatively associated with grade promotion, on-time graduation, and standardized test scores (Rumberger, 2015; Herbers et al., 2012; Gasper et al., 2012; de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Xu et al., 2009; Engec, 2006; Hanushek et al., 2004). At the school level, high rates of student mobility are associated with weaker school performance, teacher instability, and low staff morale (Rumberger, 2015; South et al., 2007). As a result, district leaders, educators, and researchers have been exploring ways to reduce unnecessary mobility, mitigate its negative impact, and better support students who experience mobility (Rumberger, 2015). Within SDP, reducing unnecessary mobility is tied to the District's goal of supporting all students in their pathway towards graduation and increasing graduation rates.[3] As of SY2023-24, the 4-year high school graduation rate of all students was 74% across all SDP schools (81% when excluding alternative schools) while about 68% of EL students enrolled in all SDP schools graduated within four years (70% when excluding alternative schools) (The School District of Philadelphia, 2024a).

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[1] For example, in 2021-22, in Chicago, Baltimore City, and Atlanta, on average, about 10% to 18% of students experienced mobility. Data accessed from:
https://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/Graphs/#/Demographics/StudentMobility/3/99/1/6/03/XXXX/2022;
https://download.gosa.ga.gov/;
https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/district.aspx?source=studentcharacteristics&source2=mobility&Districtid=15016299025.

[2] In 2021, the School District of Philadelphia participated in a research project that aims to use machine learning algorithms to better predict incoming cohort size. Better predictions could help SDP better allocate resources to students, staff, and schools. More information about this study can be found here: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/midatlantic/pdf/REL_2022124.pdf

[3] See SDP's Strategic Plan, Priority Area 3: https://www.philasd.org/strategicplan/#1685534420338-dce2216e-9250

Research suggests that some student groups—including students who are English Learners—are more likely to experience mobility, an equity concern given the negative association with educational outcomes. Research indicates that students who are Black, English Learners, economically disadvantaged, in foster care, or enrolled in an Individualized Education Program are more likely to experience mobility (Steinberg et al., 2019; Colorado Department of Education, 2016; Fong et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2009). In SDP, the population of English Learner (EL) students is rapidly growing; the percent of all students classified as EL students rose from 9% in SY2014-15 to 17% in SY2022-23 (Schlesinger & Erdem, 2023). Given that research indicates that English Learners are more likely to experience mobility, there is a need to better understand how the growing population of SDP students who are English Learners experience mobility and ensure they receive adequate support.

It is also crucial to recognize that English Learner students are a diverse group, and more attention should be paid to the important variation within this group regarding how they experience mobility (Bamat et al., 2023).[4] Existing research tends to characterize English Learner students as a homogenous group (Umansky & Santibañez, 2018; Umansky et al., 2022). This includes research on student mobility, which often compares the mobility rates between students classified as EL and students who are not, rather than focusing on how mobility varies among EL students. Some research that addresses the diversity among EL students shows that *Long-Term English Learner* (LTEL) students—students who have been classified as an English Learner for six or more years—often experience more challenges in schools, which results in lower academic performance and drop out of school at higher rates compared to other EL students and non-EL students (Chen-Gaddini & Burr, 2016; Clark-Gareca et al., 2019; Olsen, 2014; Menken et al., 2012).[5]

To further our understanding of how EL students experience mobility in SDP, this study explores the mobility rates among students with a more nuanced approach that explores variation in experiences among EL students. It describes the mobility rates among students classified as English Learners and students not classified as English Learners and further analyzes mobility rates within each group. This study additionally focuses on distinguishing (1) EL students by their length of time as an EL, with groups of less than six years or more than six years (Long-Term English Learner), and (2) students who were never classified as ELs and those who were formerly classified as ELs (former English Learner students).

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[4] It is also important to note that the term "multilingual learner" is increasingly used in place of "English Learner" to take an asset-based approach to terminology by recognizing that the student knows multiple languages. The Pennsylvania Department of Education currently uses the term English Learner.

[5] Research identifies several factors contributing to students remaining classified as an English Learner for six or more years. LTELs may function socially in English while struggling with the oral and literacy skills needed for success in academics or performance on standardized measures of reading (Clark-Gareca et al., 2019; Brooks, 2015; Olsen, 2014), or they may have limited proficiency in their home language and are not receiving primary language instruction (Olsen, 2014; Meken & Kleyn, 2010). LTELs may have experienced gaps in needed programming for English Learners (Olsen, 2014).

Box 1. Key Definitions

- **Within-year mobility** refers to a student transferring to or from a school/district during a given school year (i.e., from October through May).
- **Between-year mobility** occurs when a student finishes a school year at one school and starts the next school year in a different school.
- **English Learner (EL)** students are students classified as having limited English proficiency according to the World-Class Instructional Design & Assessment (WIDA) English proficiency screener in a specific school year.
- **Long-Term English Learner (LTEL)** students are students who have been classified as an English Learner student for six or more years.
- **Former English Learner students** are students previously classified as EL students within SDP, now reclassified as non-EL students as of the school year being studied. In this analysis, Former EL students are analyzed as a group that is distinct from Never EL students, who have never been classified as EL students.
- **Non-English Learners Students (non-EL)** students include Former ELs (i.e., students who scored high enough on the ACCESS assessment and other language evaluations to switch their status from Current EL to Former EL), Multilingual students (i.e., students who speak multiple languages and have high enough English proficiency that they do not qualify as an EL), and students who were never categorized as English Learners.

What this study examined

This study builds on previous research on student mobility in public schools, aiming to generate new insights into how prevalent student mobility is among high school students in the School District of Philadelphia by their English Learner (EL) status and the length of EL classification from SY2021-22 to the start of SY2023-24. This study contextualizes patterns in mobility by compiling various reasons students might experience mobility, and it also emphasizes additional reasons that are specific to ELs. Understanding the prevalence of mobility among EL students may help inform district-level support strategies for high schools and their students.

This study addresses two research questions:

1. What are some of the reasons students transfer schools, particularly ELs?
2. How does within- and between-year mobility vary by EL status and length of EL classification?

What we learned

We found that there are a variety of reasons students might transfer schools, and some of those reasons are specific to English Learner students. In line with this finding, we learned that from SY2021-22 to SY2023-24, English Learner students experienced within-year and between-year mobility at higher rates than non-English Learner students. However, our analysis examining

mobility by length of EL status demonstrated more nuanced patterns, as Long-Term English Learner students were less mobile than other English Learner (non-LTEL) students.

What are some of the reasons students transfer schools, particularly ELs?

Understanding the reasons students transfer schools can help contextualize findings around student mobility across student English Learner status and may help inform strategies to reduce unnecessary mobility. In coordination with SDP's Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs (OMCP) and Office of Student Enrollment and Placement (OSEP), this study identified some of the reasons students may experience within-year or between-year mobility within the School District of Philadelphia:

- **Moving residences:** Any student that moves residences may transfer to their neighborhood or catchment school.
- **School selection:** Any student may use the school selection process to apply to attend any school or program with available space outside of their neighborhood or catchment school (i.e., a student's catchment school is based on the family's home address). A student who wants to attend a Dual Language program[6] may also go through this process.
- **Extenuating circumstances**: In very rare instances, a student may transfer because of safety reasons.
- **Disciplinary transfer:** A student may be transferred to another neighborhood school or an Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) Program.
- **Individualized Education Plan (IEP) transfer:** A student may be transferred to meet the needs in their IEP and/or 504 plan.
- **Overcrowding**: Any student may be enrolled in a school other than their catchment school if their catchment school or grade has reached the maximum allowed.

Moreover, the District provides program transfer options that are specific to English Learner students, facilitated by OMCP. Students and families have the choice to refuse or accept these transfers. Specifically, the District offers two types of program transfers:

- Transfer to the **Newcomer Learner Academy (NLA):** This is designed for students aged 14 – 20 (Grades 9-12) who recently arrived in the United States (i.e., less than a year) and demonstrate beginning levels of English language proficiency based on their WIDA screening assessment or ACCESS level.[7]
- Transfer to a school (cluster site) with **a full ESL teacher allocation and program**: this is offered to meet English Learner students' program needs.

This list demonstrates a variety of reasons a student might transfer schools. Two of these reasons are specific to English Learner students, which provides additional context for mobility trends among EL students.

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[6] Dual Language programs provide literacy and content instruction through two languages. Currently, our Dual Language programs provide Spanish/English bilingual education.

[7] WIDA Screener is an English language proficiency assessment given to new students to help identify whether that are English Learners. For more information, see: https://wida.wisc.edu/assess/screener ; ACCESS measures English Language learners' proficiency in English. For more information see: https://www.philasd.org/era/access-information/

How does within- and between-year mobility vary by EL status and length of EL classification?

The District served, on average, 39,183 high-school students each year in SY2021-22 and SY2022-23. Of these, about 14% were English Learner (EL) students – or about 5,500 – each year (The School District of Philadelphia, 2024b). In this section, we describe the mobility patterns among high school students by their EL status. Specifically, we look at within- and between-year mobility rates of four groups: Never EL, Formerly EL, LTEL, and Other EL (non-LTEL). In our research, student mobility is a result of both students entering the District and students moving from school to school within the District.

Within-Year Mobility: Students who have been English Learners for less than 6 years experience within-year mobility at significantly higher rates than their peers.

Figure 1 below illustrates the average proportion of high school students identified as mobile within SY2021-22 and SY2022-23, by English Learner status. These are students who change schools during the school year.

Figure 1. Average Proportion of Students Who Were Mobile in SY2021-22 and SY2022-23, by English Learner Status
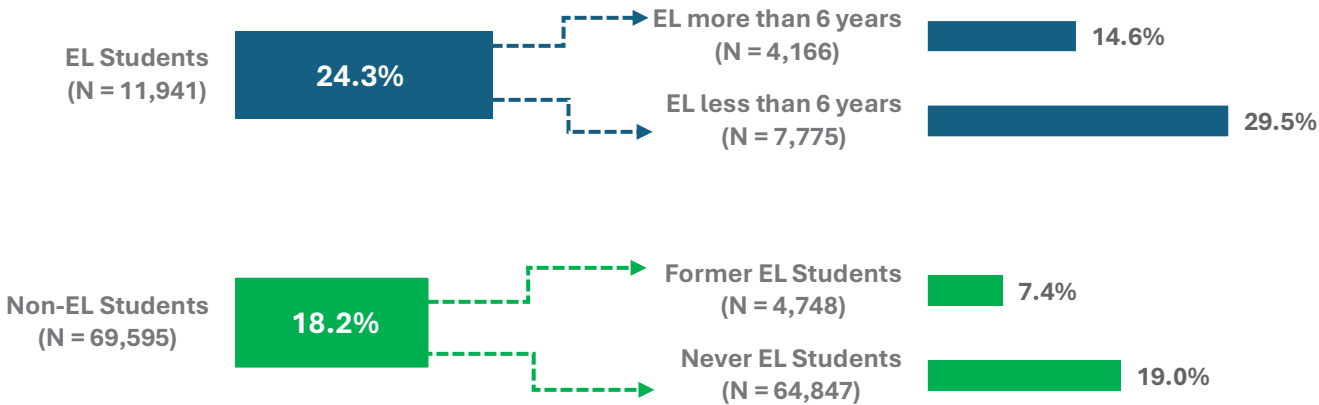
Note: This figure shows the proportion of English Learner students and non-English Learner students who were mobile in SY2021-22 and SY2022-23 (left side). It also shows the within year mobility rates among subgroups of English Learners (classified as an EL student for more or less than six years) and non-English Learners (Former and Never EL students) on the right side. For the number of students by EL status in the District each year, see Appendix A, Table A1. Students enrolled in SY2021-22 may appear again in the SY2022-23 data. Data includes students enrolled in SDP and alternate high schools in a given year for 10 or more days.
Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2021-22 - SY2023-24

Figure 1 shows that on average, EL students (i.e., LTEL and non-LTEL) were more mobile than non-EL students. Specifically, about 24% of EL students (i.e., LTEL and non-LTEL) were mobile, meaning they transferred schools at least once, during SY2021-22 or SY2022-23, compared to 18% of non-EL students (i.e., Never EL and Formerly EL). When we look at patterns within groups, we see that the share of ELs who are not LTEL students experienced within-year mobility at a high rate, about 30%, while the share of former EL students who experienced within-year mobility at a low rate, about 7%.[8] Previous research reports that Former EL students sometimes have strong academic outcomes and outperform Never EL students (Saunders and Marcelletti, 2013). This analysis suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of EL students not reclassified after six years of education as an English Learner.
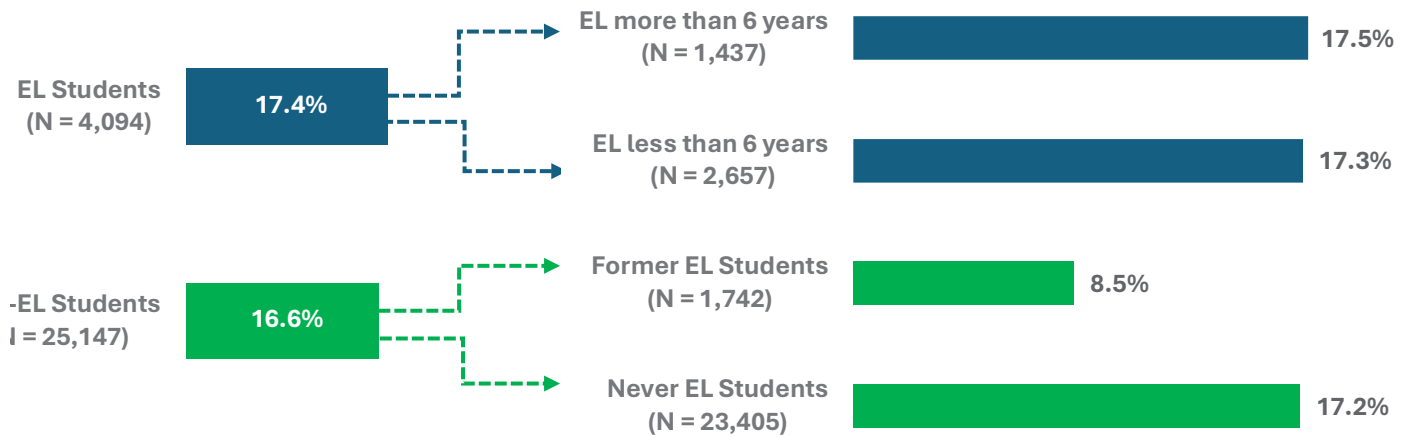
Between-Year Mobility: ELs and non-ELs have similar rates of between-year mobility (~16%), while former ELs have relatively low rates (~8%).

In the next section, we describe the between-year mobility among students, which occurs as students transfer from one school to another during summer. Figure 2 presents the percent of students who changed schools between school years by their English Learner status and school year. While transfers between school years are more intentional or strategic than transfers during a school year (Welsh, 2017), it is still important to understand how students experience such mobility in the middle of the high school years. In addition, we explore how between-year mobility among EL students differs from what is illustrated in Figure 1 regarding within-year mobility.
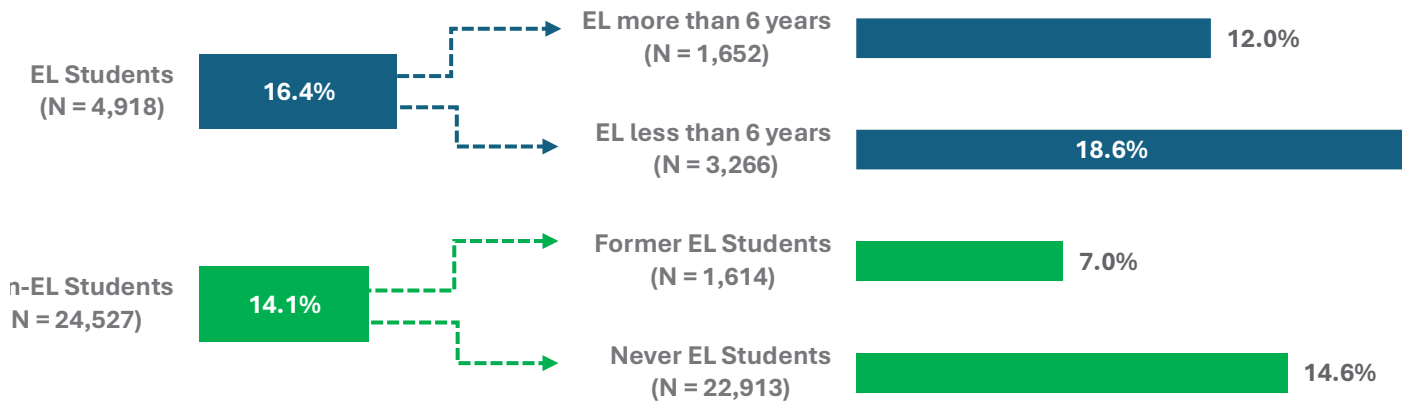
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[8] The within-group variations among non-EL and EL-students are stable between the two years being studied (see Table B1 in Appendix B).

Figure 2. Percent of Students Who Were Mobile Between School Years, by English Learner Status and School Year

Between SY2021-2022 and SY2022-2021 (N = 29,241)

EL Students
(N = 4,094) — 17.4%

EL more than 6 years
(N = 1,437) — 17.5%

EL less than 6 years
(N = 2,657) — 17.3%

-EL Students
(N = 25,147) — 16.6%

Former EL Students
(N = 1,742) — 8.5%

Never EL Students
(N = 23,405) — 17.2%

Between SY2022-2023 and SY2023-2024 (N = 29,445)

EL Students
(N = 4,918) — 16.4%

EL more than 6 years
(N = 1,652) — 12.0%

EL less than 6 years
(N = 3,266) — 18.6%

n-EL Students
(N = 24,527) — 14.1%

Former EL Students
(N = 1,614) — 7.0%

Never EL Students
(N = 22,913) — 14.6%

Note: Students who left SDP in the middle of the year are excluded from this sample because we do not have the data to indicate if they were mobile in between school years in another school district. Students with an exit reason that indicates "deceased" are also not included in the sample. Only grades 9-11 are included because we did not study the between-year mobility patterns of 12th grade considering a large portion of students graduate and would not attend an SDP school in the following year.
Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2021-22 - SY2023-24

Figure 2 shows that a slightly greater share of English Learner students experienced between-year mobility compared to non-EL students. For both school years studied, Other EL (non-LTEL) students had the highest rates of between-year mobility (about 17% and 19% respectively) and Former EL students demonstrated the lowest rates of between-year mobility (about 9% and 7% respectively). This finding aligns with the results from the within-year mobility analysis (see Figure 2).

Furthermore, it is important to note that between-year mobility rates among students may fluctuate over time. The results indicate that in SY2022-23, a smaller share of students (across all groups) transferred to a different school during summer, compared to those who enrolled in SY2021-22. This change, however, is not consistent across all groups. Specifically, the percent of LTEL students who made such transfers decreased by over 5 percentage points between SY2021-22 and SY2022-23; while the differences are less than 3 percentage points for Never EL, Former EL, and non-LTEL students. This variation indicates a need to further study the factors driving changes in between-year mobility patterns among English Learner students, especially LTEL students over time.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

While existing research finds that on average, English Learner (EL) students experienced more mobility compared to their non-EL peers (Fong et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2009), this study takes a more nuanced approach: it not only describes the overall mobility rates of EL and non-EL students, but also explores how mobility rates vary by the duration of EL classification and the mobility rates of Former EL students. Findings from this analysis could guide future data collection and research efforts to better understand mobility among EL students, and if students are moving for reasons of their choosing that support their academic and/or programmatic needs, supporting SDP to achieve its goal of equity in educational outcomes for all students.

Key takeaways from this study include:

- Within the School District of Philadelphia, students may transfer schools for several primary reasons, including but not limited to school selection, disciplinary transfer, or deflection. **For English Learners, in addition to these primary reasons, they may also transfer to attend schools with programs that better meet their needs**.

- **On average, a larger share of English Learners in SDP high schools experienced within-year and between-year mobility, compared to the share of non-English Learner students.** Specifically, about 17% to 24% of EL students in SDP high schools experienced some form of mobility in the years studied. This aligns with the existing research evidence on English Learner students' mobility rates. As the number of ELs served by SDP continues to grow, this finding further underscores the significance of district-level efforts, such as efforts led by the Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs (OMCP) to provide adequate supports to students and families.

- **Notably, there are within-group variations in mobility and its changes over school years among EL students.** For example, LTEL students experienced a lower level of within-year mobility, compared to other EL students who were not identified as LTELs.

Furthermore, in the between-year mobility analysis, a small change in the mobility rate of LTEL students over time was observed, while mobility rates of other students remained stable from SY2021-22 to SY2022-23. This study raises important questions about what support strategies are in place that may contribute to different mobility patterns among EL students.

- **Future research should explore the reasons and motivation for mobility among students to better support students who are disproportionately affected by unnecessary mobility.** Data collected on the reasons for school transfers and a mixed-methods approach may offer new insights and a comprehensive examination of this issue.

Limitations

This study has two limitations. First, students' full English Learner classification history was not available if they previously attended schools outside of SDP or Philadelphia charters and their administrative data from the other school districts they attended did not include their EL classification. As a result, some LTEL students may be classified as non-LTEL in the study sample due to the lack of data on their EL classification status from prior years in the administrative data used in this analysis. Second, this analysis did not explore the reasons behind student movements between schools and whether some of these movements were a choice made by the student and their caregivers, e.g., moving to a school that better meets their programmatic and/or academic needs.

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Appendix A. Data and Sample Sizes

Data and Sample

This study uses individual-level administrative data including the demographics and enrollment records of all grades 9-12 students who have been enrolled at a District school at any point for 10 or more days during SY2021-22, SY2022-23, and SY2023-24. The study sample includes 130,991 records from 66,620 unique students.

Detailed Variable Definition

- **Within-year mobility.** We identify a student as "mobile within a given school year" if they transfer to another SDP school, transfer in or out of SDP in the middle of a school year (from October to June), or drop out of a school.
- **Between-year mobility.** We identify a student as "mobile between school years" if they transfer from one SDP school to another between school years, transfer out of SDP between consecutive school years, or drop out before the start of the next school year. Between-year mobility is only calculated for students enrolled in SY2021-22 and SY2022-23, because this study was conducted before the conclusion of SY2023-24.
- **English Learners (ELs).** In this study, English Learner students are identified as any students classified as EL in the beginning of the school year being analyzed. "English Learners (non-LTELs)" in this analysis are students who have not been identified as Long-Term English Learners (LTELs) in that school year.
- **Long-Term English Learners (LTELs).** It should be noted that some Long-Term English Learners may be classified as English Learners but not LTEL students in our sample since a students' EL history outside of SDP is not available to us. In this study, Long-Term English Learner students were identified as any student who was classified as an English Learner for six or more years as of their earliest enrollment record in a specific school year, as indicated by enrollment entry date.

Table A1. Number and Percent of All Grades 9-12 Students with Enrollment Records by English Learner Status and Enrollment Year (SY2021-22 & SY2022-23)

English Learner Status	SY2021-22		SY2022-23		SY2023-24	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Never EL Students	32,863	80.6%	31,984	78.4%	30,457	77.5%
Former EL Students	2,434	6.0%	2,314	5.7%	2,142	5.4%
Other EL (non-LTEL) Students	3,514	8.6%	4,261	10.5%	4,345	11.1%
LTEL Students	1,955	4.8%	2,211	5.4%	2,372	6.0%
Total number of Grades 9-12 students	**40,766**	**100%**	**40,770**	**100%**	**39,316**	**100%**

Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2021-22 – SY2023-24

Appendix B. Additional Analysis

Table B1. Percent of Students Who Were Mobile in SY2021-22 and SY2022-23, by English Learner Status

English Learner Status	Percent of Students Who Were Mobile...	
	In SY2021-22 (N = 40,766)	In SY2022-23 (N = 40,770)
Between English Learner and non-English Learner Students		
Non-English Learner Students	18.8%	17.6%
English Learner Students	24.9%	23.8%
By EL Status and Length of EL Classification		
Never EL Students	19.6%	18.4%
Former EL Students	8.0%	6.8%
Other EL (non-LTEL) Students	30.0%	29.1%
LTEL Students	15.7%	13.5%

Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2021-22 – SY2023-24

Table B2. Number and Percent of Students Who Were Mobile in SY2021-22, by English Learner Status and Grade

English Learner Status	Number of 9th Graders (Percent)	Number of 10th Graders (Percent)	Number of 11th Graders (Percent)	Number of 12th Graders (Percent)
Never English Learner (N = 32,863)	1,912 (21.0%)	1,690 (20.7%)	1,470 (19.4%)	1,367 (17.0%)
Former English Learners (N = 2,434)	69 (11.4%)	41 (7.1%)	49 (8.0%)	35 (5.5%)
Other English Learners (N = 3,514)	511 (39.4%)	252 (29.3%)	181 (26.2%)	109 (16.4%)
Long-Term English Learner (N = 1,955)	104 (17.2%)	82 (16.4%)	60 (14.9%)	61 (13.6%)

Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2021-22 – SY2023-24

Table B3. Percent of Students Who Were Mobile in SY2022-23, by English Learner Status and Grade

English Learner Status	Percent of 9th Graders	Percent of 10th Graders	Percent of 11th Graders	Percent of 12th Graders
Never English Learner (N = 31,984)	1,819 (20.9%)	1,508 (18.1%)	1,291 (18.1%)	1,258 (16.1%)
Former English Learners (N = 2,314)	46 (10.5%)	38 (6.2%)	40 (6.7%)	33 (5.0%)
Other English Learners (N = 4,261)	598 (38.8%)	308 (25.1%)	193 (25.0%)	142 (19.7%)
Long-Term English Learner (N = 2,211)	91 (13.8%)	77 (13.2%)	69 (14.9%)	62 (12.4%)

Source: Administrative data from the School District of Philadelphia, SY2021-22 - SY2023-24