



ENGLISH LEARNERS' ACCESS TO CONTENT IN PENNSYLVANIA

ACADEMIC COURSE ENROLLMENT IN HIGH SCHOOL

Exploring English learner students' access to content

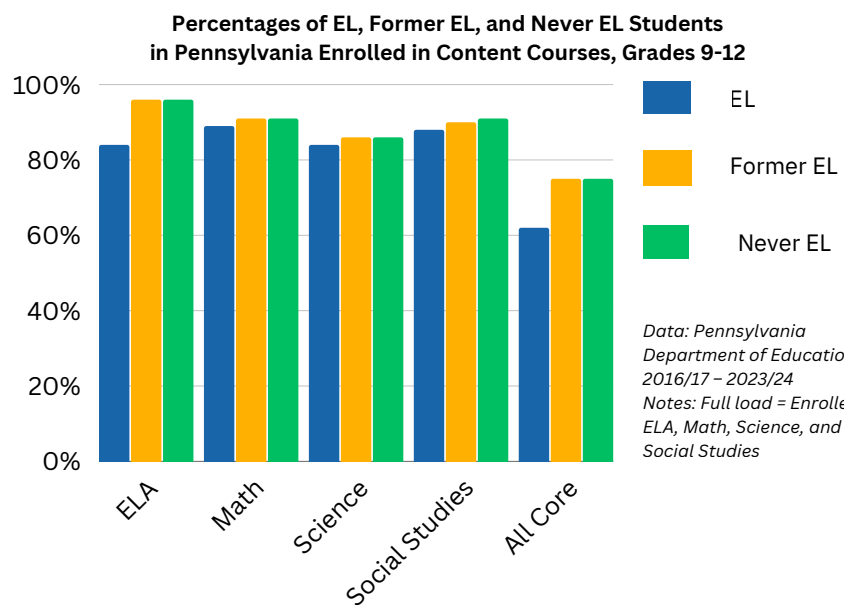
Despite the United States Supreme Court's *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) ruling fifty years ago, students classified as English learners (ELs) still face multiple and intersecting challenges to their opportunity to learn. One example is **exclusionary tracking** in which students classified as ELs are less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

EL exclusionary tracking potentially undermines one of EL-classified students' core rights under *Lau v. Nichols*, which asserts that ELs have the right to equitable, grade-level curricular content. Unequal access to content may also create barriers to graduation among EL students.

Using Pennsylvania statewide data (2016/17-2023/24), this brief explores the prevalence of ELs' exclusionary tracking in high school compared to former and never ELs and the factors associated with content course access. It also looks at who, among ELs, is most likely to experience exclusionary tracking and why.

This extends [prior analysis of ELs course access in Oregon and Michigan](#), which found evidence of exclusionary tracking for ELs in both states.

EL-classified high school students experienced exclusionary tracking in Pennsylvania, especially in English language arts



Over the period examined, ELs experienced exclusionary tracking in high school in Pennsylvania, meaning they had lower rates of content enrollment compared to former and never ELs. These gaps were particularly pronounced in English Language Arts (ELA), with 84% of ELs enrolled in any ELA class in a given year compared to 96% of former and never ELs. In other core content areas (math, science, and social studies), enrollment gaps between ELs and their former and never EL peers were much smaller, ranging from 2 to 3 percentage points. In total, in any given year, less than two-thirds of ELs were enrolled in courses in all four core content areas, compared to about three-fourths of former and never ELs. Former ELs' enrollment rates in core content courses were generally equal to never ELs', except in social studies and in all core courses combined, where their enrollment lagged by 1 percentage point.

The gap between ELs and their peers in ELA enrollment is notable because [Pennsylvania regulations](#) (22 Pa. Code §4.26) specify that English language development (ELD) should generally not replace ELA in a student's academic program. In addition, many Pennsylvania districts require four years of ELA for high school graduation. Prior analysis of Oregon and Michigan data also found that ELs experienced the highest rates of exclusionary tracking in ELA.

Structural, organizational, and demographic factors predicted exclusionary tracking patterns in Pennsylvania

To deepen our understanding of exclusionary tracking, we examined what factors predicted ELs' content course enrollment. We found:

Structural factors, such as grade, academic year, and district, predicted content course enrollment. For example, we found that exclusionary tracking was greatest in 12th grade and smallest in 9th.

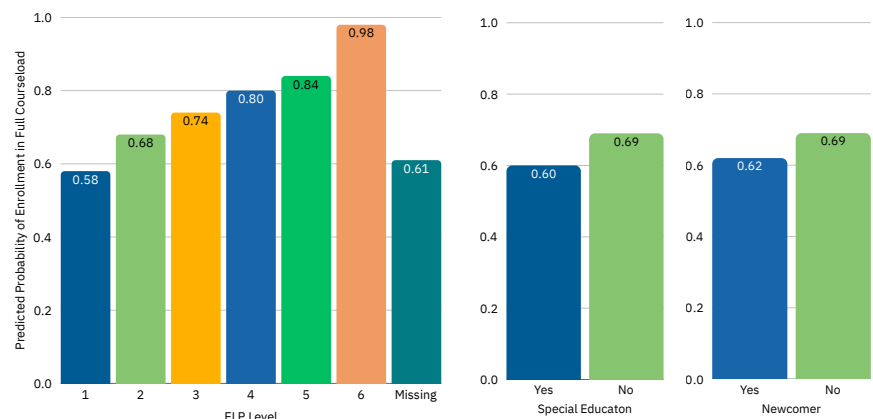
Organizational factors are factors that educators may use to make course placement decisions. Students with lower English proficiency levels (ELP), those with disabilities, and newcomer students all faced greater exclusion.

Demographic factors, including race, gender, and socioeconomic status, were significant predictors of exclusionary tracking. For example, Latinx students faced higher rates of exclusion than students with other racial/ethnic backgrounds.

These findings mirror [patterns in Oregon and Michigan](#).

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

Predicted Probability of EL Students' Enrollment in All Core Content Areas in Pennsylvania, by Organizational Factors



Data: Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016/17-2023/24

Exclusionary tracking among EL-classified students may be exacerbated by specific organizational structures, including practices or policies that determine course placement by ELP level, special education status, and newcomer status (fewer than three years in the U.S.). For example, a Pennsylvania EL student at English proficiency level 1 (as measured by the WIDA ACCESS assessment) had a 58% chance (i.e., predicted probability = 0.58), on average, of being enrolled in a full courseload, after controlling for other structural, organizational, and demographic factors. In contrast, an EL-classified student at English proficiency level 4 had an 80% chance of being enrolled in a full courseload. Students in special education and newcomer students were also significantly less likely to be enrolled in a full courseload. Again, these patterns mirror prior findings in Oregon and Michigan.

Key Takeaways

- In Pennsylvania, over the time examined, EL-classified students experienced exclusionary tracking, as they showed lower enrollment across content courses compared to former and never ELs. This exclusion may have had significant implications for EL students' high school graduation eligibility.
- [Pennsylvania regulations](#) (22 Pa. Code §4.26) specify, "ELD may not replace any other core content in a student's academic program unless it is for a limited time not to exceed one school year and the LEA has a plan for immediately mitigating any academic gaps that result (e.g. in the case of a newcomer program)." However, we find only 84% of EL-classified high school students are enrolled in an ELA class, including many non-newcomer students.
- EL students who had lower ELP levels, who participated in special education, and/or who were newcomers were more likely to experience exclusionary tracking. However, rates of exclusionary tracking varied across districts.
- These patterns are similar to prior analysis of exclusionary tracking in Oregon and Michigan and also mirror earlier findings from a large California district. This suggests an urgent need across states and districts to implement approaches to expand access to content courses for secondary EL-classified students.
- Other analyses from the [National Research & Development Center to Improve Education for Secondary English Learners](#) have identified policy levers that may expand EL-classified students' content course access, including extra instructional time, specialized teacher preparation, counselor availability, and bilingual program participation.