



# MICHIGAN ENGLISH LEARNERS' ACCESS TO ADVANCED COURSES

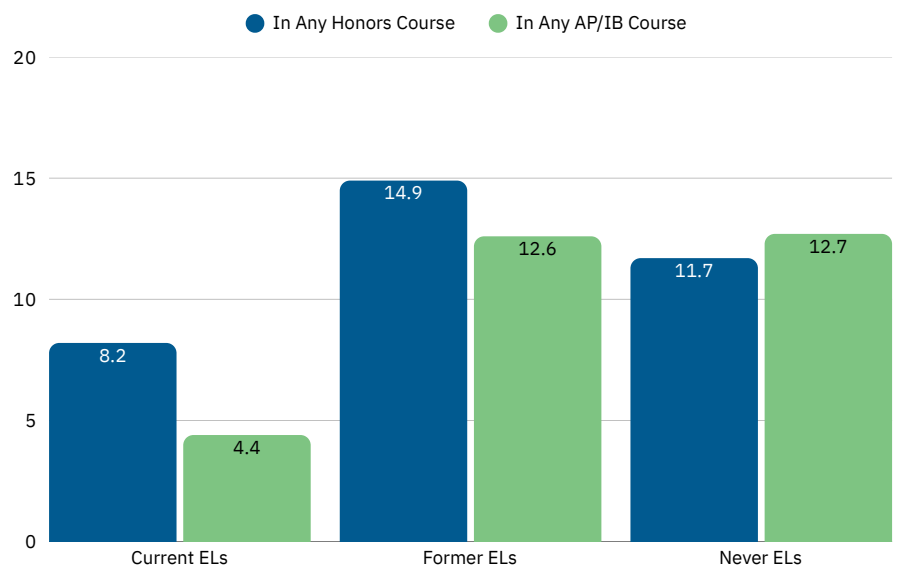
## ACADEMIC COURSE ENROLLMENT AND COMPLETION IN HIGH SCHOOL

### Exploring English learner students' access to advanced courses

Prior research has shown that access to advanced coursework impacts students' educational outcomes, including their high school graduation, college enrollment, and college completion. For example, students who take and pass Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses and exams may receive college credit, potentially shortening the duration of college and/or decreasing the cost of college. However, not all students have equal access to advanced courses. Research suggests that some historically marginalized student groups are underrepresented in advanced courses, but most research on English learner (EL)-classified students' access to advanced courses is limited in scope, and very little is known about their success in advanced courses.

Drawing on statewide data from Michigan (2011-2015), this research brief examines how often EL-classified students were enrolled in advanced coursework. We define advanced coursework as AP, IB, and honors courses. We look at how enrollment patterns for students classified as ELs during these years (current ELs) compared to students who were formerly classified as ELs but who exited EL status (former ELs) as well as students who were never classified as ELs (never ELs). We also look at who, among current ELs, had access to advanced coursework, and how likely ELs were to be successful in advanced coursework.

Percentage of High School Students in Advanced Courses by EL Status



Data: Michigan Department of Education – 2011/12 - 2014/15

### Current ELs were underrepresented in all types of advanced courses compared to never and former ELs

Across the years 2011-2015, fewer than one in ten current ELs in Michigan were enrolled in an honors class, and fewer than one in twenty were enrolled in an AP or IB class during their time in high school. These rates are considerably lower than the enrollment rates of both never and former ELs. For example, never ELs were about 3 times more likely to enroll in an AP or IB course and about 50% more likely to enroll in an honors course, compared to current ELs. It is worth noting, however, that former ELs were enrolled at rates equal to or higher than never ELs.

While there appears to have been more equitable access to honors courses for current ELs compared to AP/IB courses, honors courses tend to be less highly valued in college admissions and they do not result in college credit.

The reasons that EL students have more access to honors compared to AP/IB courses deserves more research. Honors courses have less regulation and oversight and may therefore be better positioned to responsively serve a wider range of students, including EL-classified students. On the other hand, AP/IB courses may have stricter requirements regarding what and how a teacher teaches since these classes are linked to organizations and exams governed by outside bodies. This may result in restricted access for current ELs.

This analysis was conducted by Dr. Nami Shin (University of Kansas), Jaclyn Bovee (Oregon State University [OSU]), Dr. Ilana Umansky (University of Oregon [UO]), and Dr. Karen D. Thompson (OSU). This research was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305C200008 to WestEd. The authors thank the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) for providing the data used in this analysis. Opinions reflect those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute, the U.S. Department of Education, or MDE. Data source for all analyses: Michigan Department of Education, 2011/12 – 2014/15.

## Not all ELs had equal access to advanced coursework

Among current ELs, students who were:

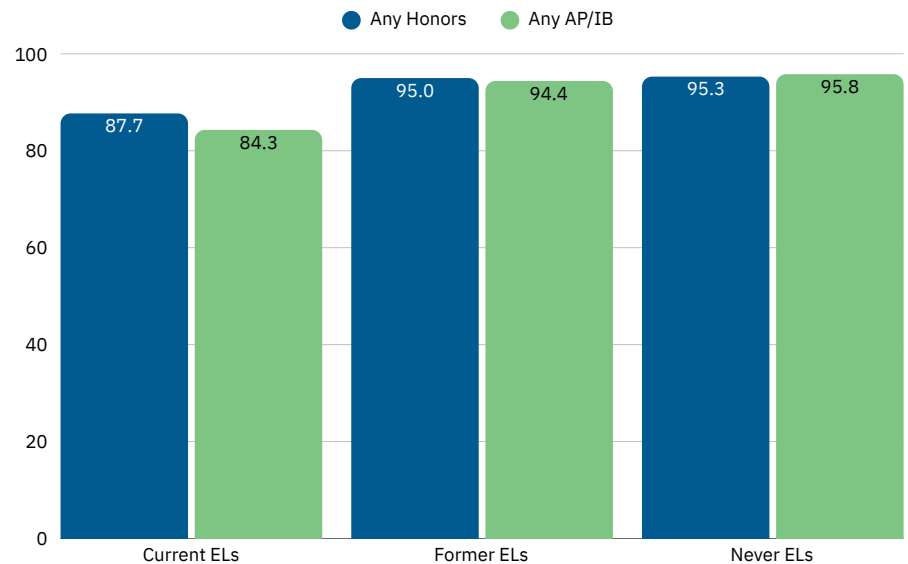
- Latinx
- male
- receiving special education services
- lower-performing on state tests in middle school
- economically disadvantaged
- recently arrived to the U.S.

were far less likely to enroll in advanced coursework. Further, when enrolled, they were less likely to pass advanced classes.

In addition to student-level differences, school-level factors also shaped EL students' access to and success in advanced courses. For example, across multiple subject areas, ELs who attended schools with lower student-teacher ratios were significantly more likely to be enrolled in advanced courses.

## When ELs had access to advanced coursework, they tended to succeed

Passage Rates for Students Enrolled in Advanced Courses



Data: Michigan Department of Education – 2011/12 - 2014/15

Regardless of EL status, the majority of students enrolled in an advanced class successfully passed their coursework. Overall, the gap in student success rates between current ELs and their former and never EL peers was much smaller than the gap observed in enrollment.

Furthermore, there was only a very small difference between ELs' likelihood of passing their honors class and their likelihood of passing their AP or IB class. This suggests that current ELs were highly successful in their advanced courses, although more research is needed to understand the extent to which this has to do with which EL students were able to enroll in these classes.

### Key Takeaways

- In Michigan in school years 2011 through 2015, current ELs were enrolled in advanced courses at significantly lower rates than both their former and never EL peers. The access gap was particularly pronounced in AP/IB courses.
- Not all current ELs had equal access to or success in advanced courses. ELs with historically marginalized characteristics had more limited opportunities and lower success rates, and school-level factors further shaped their access and outcomes.
- When ELs did have access to advanced coursework, they tended to succeed. This was true for honors and for AP/IB courses.
- Based on these findings, it is important to look at mechanisms to expand ELs' access and respond to their needs, including considering what unnecessary barriers may be in place that prevent current EL students from enrolling in advanced courses.