



# ENGLISH LEARNERS' PEER COMPOSITION IN OREGON

## EXAMINING POLICY LEVERS FOR ENGLISH LEARNER COURSE ACCESS

### Exploring English learner students' peer composition

Students' learning experiences are shaped not just by their teachers but also by the other students in their classes (i.e., their peers). For English learner (EL)-classified students, interactions with peers may impact both language learning and content learning.

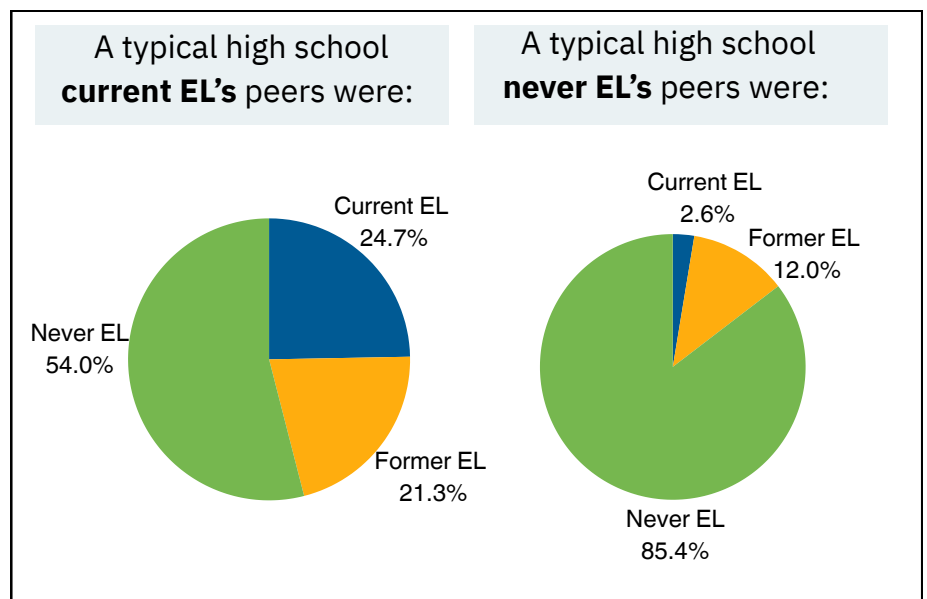
Peers can influence learning in various ways. In class discussions and activities, students learn from each other. Further, students who are surrounded by motivated and successful learners can develop high aspirations for themselves, while students whose classmates tend to be labeled as academically less capable may lose self-confidence.

As a first step to understanding peer effects for EL-classified students, this brief explores how EL status is associated with peer composition, which we define as the demographic characteristics of a student's classmates. This brief answers the following questions: Are ELs' peers different from the peers of non-ELs? If so, how and why?

We draw on statewide data from Oregon in the 2018-19 school year. When it comes to EL status, we categorize each student according to the following definitions:

- Current EL: Student classified as an EL during time of data collection
- Former EL: Student who was formerly classified as an EL, but was no longer classified as an EL during time of data collection
- Never EL: Student who had no record of ever having been classified as an EL

### Average Peer Composition for Current and Never ELs



Data: Oregon Department of Education – 2018/19

### Current ELs tended to be in classes with high proportions of other current ELs

Based on social network analysis that examined the average characteristics of a student's classmates, we found that a typical current EL in high school was in classes where 24.7% of their classmates were also current ELs. By contrast, a typical never EL in high school was in classes where only 2.6% of their classmates were current ELs. In other words, current ELs tended to be surrounded by nearly 10 times the number of other current ELs compared to their never EL peers.

This analysis used averages from across the state, so the results partially reflect the fact that current ELs tended to be in schools with higher EL populations. That said, in a supplementary analysis, we found similar enrollment patterns within schools. In other words, even within a school, current ELs were placed in classes with far more ELs compared to their never EL peers. Additionally, we observed similar peer composition disparities at the middle school level.

## Classmates of current ELs tended to have marginalized identities

EL students' peers in Oregon did not differ just in terms of language status. Compared to their non-EL peers, ELs in secondary school tended to also be in classes with more students who:

- did not speak English as a home language
- spoke Spanish as a home language
- were not White
- were Hispanic/Latino
- were male
- were free- and reduced-price lunch eligible
- participated in special education
- had low academic assessment scores.

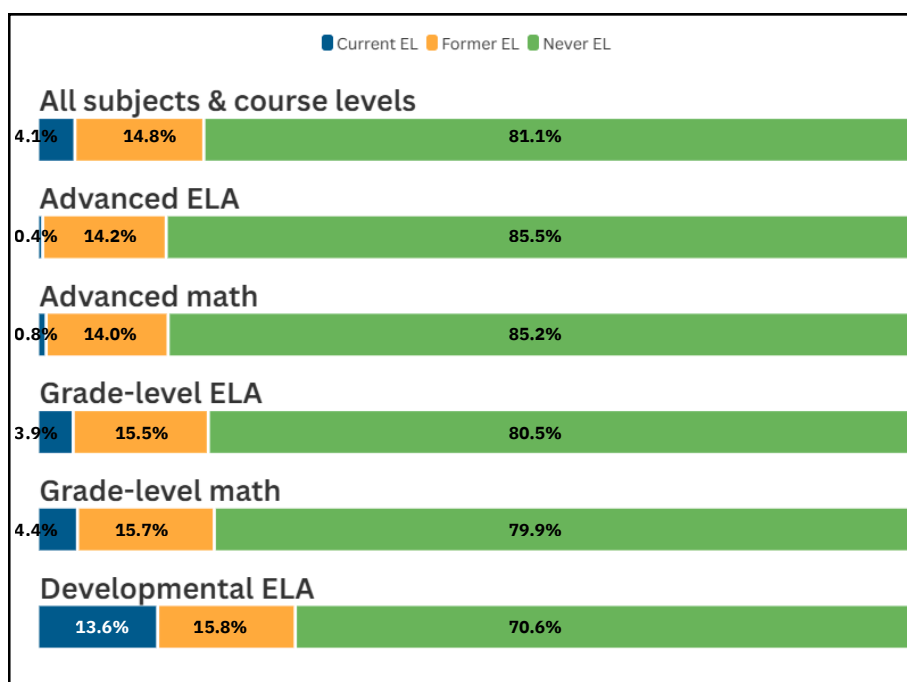
These enrollment patterns were present both between and within schools.

These findings suggest that EL students were clustered into classes with other groups of students who faced educational marginalization.

## Current ELs were overrepresented in developmental content courses

One major reason that current ELs tended to be in classes with relatively more EL peers is leveled tracking—a practice of placing EL-classified students in lower-level content courses. Looking at different levels of high school English language arts (ELA) and math courses, we found that current ELs were overrepresented in lower level classes. For example, while current ELs made up 4.0% of all course enrollment, they represented 13.6% of students in developmental ELA classes (ELA classes designated as supplemental, laboratory, strategic, assisted, or corrective). Conversely, current ELs were underrepresented in advanced content courses compared to all course enrollment, composing only 0.4% of enrollment in advanced ELA courses (AP/IB) and 0.8% of enrollment in advanced math courses (pre-calculus, calculus, statistics, AP/IB, or other advanced topics).

Average Class Composition in High School Courses



Data: Oregon Department of Education – 2018/19

### Key Takeaways

- In Oregon in the 2018-2019 school year, a typical current EL was in classes where over a quarter of their peers were other ELs. By contrast, a typical never EL was in classes with only 2.6% current ELs.
- Compared to never ELs, current ELs took classes alongside more peers with marginalized identities in terms of race, socioeconomic status, disability status, achievement level, and more.
- Secondary EL-classified students were disproportionately placed in lower-level content courses in both math and English language arts.
- Based on these findings, schools should examine the mechanisms that are driving the clustering of ELs into lower-level content courses and work to increase access to a greater diversity of classes and peers.