

## **ELLs on the Cusp: Should We Reclassify?**

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## ELLs on the Cusp: Should We Reclassify?

Juan and Abel are students in Ms. Taylor's 5<sup>th</sup> grade class.

Juan was born in the United States. He was classified as an English language learner, or "ELL" (the term used to identify students who are in the process of developing English proficiency) when he started kindergarten. Every year he's made adequate progress on his state's English proficiency test, and most recently he scored right on the cusp, just passing the threshold for being English proficient. His standardized reading and math scores are not terrible, but not great either. He communicates easily in English with his teachers and classmates. Without looking at his school file, you wouldn't necessarily know that he is an ELL. Like many boys his age, Juan is energetic and sometimes distracted. Once in a while he forgets his homework or arrives a few minutes late to class.

Abel moved to the US with his parents two and a half years ago. He spoke hardly any English and easily qualified for ELL services. He has made very good progress in a short amount of time, but not enough to be deemed English proficient. At school he is quiet. His work is always neat and completed on time, and he has one of the highest math averages in the class. He often borrows books to read from the class library, so Ms. Taylor knows he is motivated. But his reading comprehension sometimes falters, which is reflected in reading test scores that are below grade level. This past fall he was very close to the English proficient threshold, but the writing section held him back.

As the school year draws to a close, the principal invites Ms. Taylor and other teachers to meet and discuss the progress of ELL students in their classes. Ms. Taylor knows she will be asked if she thinks Juan and Abel should stay ELLs or be reclassified as English-proficient (FEP) and put in regular classes next year in middle school. Both their test scores are within a few points of the state's English proficient threshold, so they are "on the cusp" and could "go either way." What should a teacher do in this situation?

Ms. Taylor's concern is that if they enter middle school as ELLs, they will be put into classes that don't challenge them and end up limiting their learning opportunities. Ms. Taylor has also heard that teachers sometimes underestimate the academic abilities of ELLs, particularly in middle or high school where students are often placed in tracks at different academic levels. On the other hand, they might fail to get the support they need if their English and academics are not strong enough. In Juan's case, reading and math are challenges; in Abel's, writing is holding him back, and his reading is not as strong as it should be. Ms. Taylor is somewhat more confident about their English, but she's not quite sure how to respond. Going to the regular class would probably challenge the boys more and open new doors in terms of courses and classmates. But are they ready?

At the end of every school year, particularly as students move on to middle or high school, educators throughout the nation face the same question as Ms. Taylor: To reclassify or not to reclassify? We want students to receive the support they need *and also* have access to all the academic opportunities available. Can we have both? The reclassification decision is tricky because it sometimes feels as if there is an inevitable tradeoff between specialized support, on the one hand, and full academic access on the other.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we explore the complexities in the reclassification decision. We specifically focus on important recent research findings to

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<sup>1</sup> Umansky, I. M. (2018). According to Plan? Examining the Intended and Unintended Treatment Effects of EL Classification in Early Elementary and the Transition to Middle School. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 11(4), 588-621.

help guide the decision-making process for ELLs whose English language proficiency (ELP) scores are right on the cusp between qualifying and not qualifying for reclassification. Students on the cusp could possibly be reclassified and placed in mainstream classes with mainstream students, but they might have some needs that would interfere with their ability to succeed in mainstream classrooms. Hence the dilemma faced by Ms. Taylor and many other teachers of ELLs.

### **Initial Classification and Later Reclassification**

The process of initially classifying a student as ELL is relatively simple compared to reclassification. Initial classification involves a home language survey and an English language proficiency (ELP) assessment.<sup>2</sup> When a student enters school, her family answers a set of questions about languages spoken at home. The home language surveys used throughout the country vary from state to state, but all include a few questions about the child's first language, primary language, and any other languages used at home. Generally, students take an ELP test (sometimes called a "screener") if their parents report a home language other than English. If the test shows that a student is not proficient in English, she or he is then classified as an ELL.

ELL classification entitles a student to an array of services, most prominently, English Language Development (ELD) classes and linguistically accessible core content instruction (often referred to as "sheltered content instruction"). ELD is designed to help ELLs become proficient in English. Accessible, or "sheltered," content instruction is intended to help ELLs learn core academic content while supporting their English development, particularly in the content areas. An annual ELP assessment monitors students' progress in developing English proficiency.

In addition to monitoring, the annual ELP test also determines whether ELLs can be considered for reclassification from ELL to English-proficient, that is, whether their English proficiency is adequate to permit succeeding in an English-only classroom without additional supports. In most states, ELLs are reclassified as English-proficient if the ELP test shows sufficient English proficiency. In other states they become *eligible* for reclassification, pending additional factors such as basic academic skills and teacher evaluations.<sup>3</sup> Because ELLs are not evenly distributed across the country—most are in a relatively small number of states—the majority of ELLs attend schools in this latter group of states.<sup>4,5</sup> They become eligible for reclassification based on a ELP test's proficiency rating, but the reclassification decision is made based on additional factors such as academic achievement tests and/or teacher recommendations.

The reclassification process varies substantially by state and even by district within states (as we discuss in more detail below), but the basic idea is that students maintain ELL status for as long, and only as long, as they need additional support due to developing English proficiency. Once they gain English proficiency according to their state's criteria, they are reclassified as English-proficient, exit the ELL program, and except for a four-year monitoring period, are

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<sup>2</sup> Linqianti, R., Cook, H. G., Bailey, A. L., & MacDonald, R. (2016). *Moving toward a More Common Definition of English Learner: Collected Guidance for States and Multi-State Assessment Consortia*. Washington DC: Council of Chief State School Officers.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Migration Policy Institute (2015). NCIP: English Learners and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/nciip-english-learners-and-every-student-succeeds-act-essa>

<sup>5</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (2015-2016). Digest of Education Statistics, 2017, Table 204.20. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgf.asp#info](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp#info)

treated the same as peers who were never classified as ELLs. After this point, there is no distinction between the programs, courses, monitoring, and expectations for former ELLs (now reclassified as English-proficient) and students who were never ELLs.

Reclassification has long been regarded as a key milestone in an ELL's academic experience. In schools we have observed or worked in, and confirmed in the research literature,<sup>6</sup> teachers often refer to “graduation from ELD” as a goal students should strive for; teachers look forward to celebrating this accomplishment and encourage students and parent to do the same. Much policy research has focused on schools' reclassification rates and students' time to reclassification as measures of program success.<sup>7,8</sup> However, scholars are warning against a rush to reclassify, as research shows that certain groups of students who reclassify later actually end up with better academic outcomes down the road.<sup>9,10</sup> Federal regulations require districts to monitor ELLs for four years after they reclassify, but this time window may not be long enough. A large fraction of ELLs are reclassified during elementary school, which means they might no longer be monitored after middle school. But certain language and literacy issues may not arise until later.<sup>11</sup>

Reclassification in and of itself, however, might not necessarily be beneficial. If this is the case, it should not be treated as a milestone with intrinsic value. Recent research is suggesting that what might actually matter is the quality of instruction and services students receive before and after reclassification. We return to this point after discussing the complexity and consequences of reclassification.

### **What Makes Reclassification So Complex—and Why Does It Matter?**

As should be apparent, the reclassification process is even more complicated than initial ELL classification. Moreover, reclassification criteria vary greatly among states and even among districts within states. As of 2016, thirty states used scores from their annual state ELP test as the sole criterion for reclassification—but not necessarily in the same way. Some states consider only the overall composite score; others add a requirement that students reach a threshold in each language domain. As we noted previously, other states use academic achievement and other criteria, such as teacher judgment, in addition to ELP test scores.<sup>12</sup>

Decisions regarding attaining the threshold for reclassification are often not clear-cut, and particularly when factors in addition to ELP test scores are part of the decision-making process, they are prone to human judgment and therefore human error. Test scores are prone to error as well. None is perfectly accurate, and each ELP assessment measures somewhat different things.

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<sup>6</sup> Estrada, P. Wang, H., & Farkas, T. (in press). Elementary English learner classroom composition and academic achievement: The role of classroom-level segregation, number of English proficiency levels, and opportunity to learn. *American Educational Research Journal*.

<sup>7</sup> Kieffer, M. J. & Parker, C. E. (2016). *Patterns of English learner student reclassification in New York City public schools* (REL 2017–200). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

<sup>8</sup> Umansky, I. M. & Reardon, S. F. (2014). Reclassification patterns among Latino English Learner students in bilingual, dual immersion, and English immersion classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(5), 879-912.

<sup>9</sup> Gándara, P. & Merino, B. (1993). Measuring the outcomes of LEP programs: Test scores, exit rates, and other mythological data. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 15(3), 320-338.

<sup>10</sup> Umansky & Reardon (2014).

<sup>11</sup> Linqunti et al, (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Linqunti et al, (2016).

What constitutes “English proficiency,” and therefore the threshold for reclassification, can depend on what test is used. Across the country at least nine different ELP tests are used, each measuring ELP somewhat differently.<sup>13</sup> A student who qualifies for reclassification in one state or district might remain an ELL in another state or district that uses different tests and considers different factors.<sup>14</sup>

Layering additional requirements such as teacher evaluation in particular makes reclassification decisions more complex and reclassification even harder to attain.<sup>15,16</sup> It is no surprise that researchers have observed that while entering ELL status is easy, exiting can be extremely difficult. In some districts where students must meet multiple criteria for reclassification, fewer than 40% of students who score above the state ELP test threshold are reclassified.<sup>17,18</sup>

The problem with complex reclassification criteria and procedures is that reclassification can be delayed unnecessarily, that is, past the point when students actually need the additional supports. Delaying reclassification can be detrimental to students’ subsequent academic experiences by limiting course options, access to core academic curriculum, and interaction with mainstream peers. Students who remain in ELL status may be placed in low tracks in middle and high school, segregated with little access to peers with fluent English proficiency, subjected to stigma associated with the ELL label, and confronted with diminished self and teacher expectations.<sup>19,20,21</sup> However, simply reclassifying students does not present a quick and easy solution. Exiting ELL status means losing language support and academic supports. For students who are not prepared to learn in an English-only environment, reclassification may do more harm than good, particularly if they are placed in low-track classes.

States set, and districts must follow, a specific threshold ELLs must attain on the annual ELP assessment in order to qualify for reclassification. If the threshold is too high, students who no longer need ELL services continue receiving them but possibly at the cost of access to mainstream curriculum and non-ELL classmates. If the threshold is too low, students who still need ELL services don’t receive them and are likely to have difficulties in mainstream classes.

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<sup>13</sup> New America. (2019). English language proficiency (ELP) assessments. Retrieved from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/topics/english-learners/dual-language-learners/dll-assessment/english-language-proficiency-assessments/non-consortia-states/>

<sup>14</sup> National Academy of Sciences (2011). *Allocating Federal Funds for State Programs for English Language Learners*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/13090>.

<sup>15</sup> Mavrogordato, M. & White, R. S. (2017). Reclassification variation: How policy implementation guides the process of exiting students from English Learner status. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39 (2), 281-310.

<sup>16</sup> Mavrogordato, M., & White, R. S. (2019). Leveraging Policy Implementation for Social Justice: How School Leaders Shape Educational Opportunity When Implementing Policy for English Learners. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 0013161X18821364.

<sup>17</sup> Estrada, P. & Wang, H. (2018). Making English Learner reclassification to fluent English Proficient attainable or elusive: When meeting criteria is and is not enough. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(2), 207-242. DOI: 10.3102/0002831217733543

<sup>18</sup> Pope, N. G. (2016). The marginal effect of K-12 English language development programs: Evidence from Los Angeles schools. *Economics of Education Review*, 53, 311-328.

<sup>19</sup> Kanno, Y., & Kangas, S. E. N. (2014). “I’m Not Going to Be, Like, for the AP”: English Language Learners’ limited access to advanced college-preparatory courses in high school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(5), 848–878. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831214544716>

<sup>20</sup> Umansky, I. M. (2016a). To be or not to be EL: An examination of the impact of classifying students as English learners. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38(4), 714–737. <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1119741>

<sup>21</sup> Umansky (2018).

The heart of the matter is not solely whether the reclassification bar is set too high or too low, but rather where the reclassification bar is set *in relation to* the support ELLs might need and *combined with* adequate access to mainstream curriculum and peers.<sup>22</sup>

This is admittedly a lot to bear in mind. At the end of this article we make some recommendations we hope will provide concrete guidance. The balance between adequate access to the mainstream and necessary support is key. This is obviously an important educational issue. It is also a legal and civil rights issue: ELLs who are exited too soon are denied access to EL services while ELLs who are exited too late may be denied access to parts of the general curriculum.<sup>23</sup>

### **Research on Reclassification and Its Effects**

When we simply look at the average outcomes of ELLs and reclassified (i.e., former) ELLs, we see that ELLs reclassified to English-proficient are more likely to take rigorous content classes, more likely to take a full load of core content classes, have higher achievement and better behavior, and graduate from high school at higher rates.<sup>24,25,26,27</sup>

However, direct comparisons are misleading. ELLs reclassified to English-proficient and students who remain ELLs differ in many ways, not least of which is that by definition, reclassified students have higher levels of English proficiency and, in states with academic requirements for reclassification, higher academic achievement. They can also differ in terms of family socioeconomic background, parent education level, initial English proficiency level, and other factors. Since these factors are associated with academic outcomes down the road, simply comparing the academic performance of ELLs who are reclassified to those who remain ELL will lead to inaccurate conclusions about reclassification's effects.

Instead, we must compare reclassified and not reclassified students who resemble each other as much as possible in all respects other than reclassification. But randomly assigning similar students to reclassification or remaining ELL is obviously not an option.

Researchers have developed techniques that allow us to make these comparisons without using random assignment.<sup>28</sup> They do this by taking advantage of the randomness that is part of every educational measurement. These studies involve using the scores of students who took the annual ELP test and scored very close to the reclassification threshold—at, slightly above, or slightly below.

Here is the logic underlying this research design: A student's test score comprises two components. The first represents what the student actually knows and can do, that is, her or his *true* level (proficiency, knowledge, skill—whatever is being measured). The second component comprises everything else that can influence a student's test score but is irrelevant to his or her

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<sup>22</sup> Robinson, J. P. (2011). Evaluating Criteria for English Learner Reclassification: A Causal-Effects Approach Using a Binding-Score Regression Discontinuity Design with Instrumental Variables. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 33(3), 267–292. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373711407912>

<sup>23</sup> US Dept of Education (2016). English Learner Tool Kit, Chapter 8: Tools and resources for monitoring and exiting English Learners from EL programs and services. Washington, DC: Us Dept of Education, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Reyes, M., & Hwang, N. (2019). Middle School Language Classification Effects on High School Achievement and Behavioral Outcomes. *Educational Policy*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818823747>

<sup>25</sup> Umansky, I. M (2016b). Leveled and exclusionary tracking: English Learners' access to academic content in middle school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(6), 1792-1833.

<sup>26</sup> Umansky (2018).

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, A. (2019). The effects of English Learner classification on high school graduation and college attendance. *AERA Open*, 5(2), 1-23. DOI: 10.1177/2332858419850801

<sup>28</sup> These are called “regression discontinuity”, or RD, designs.

true ability. These include, e.g., weather, traffic on the way to school, the quality of sleep the student got the night before, lighting or conditions in the testing situation. These factors are random and have nothing to do with the student's *true* ELP level. Yet they can influence test performance.

These random occurrences will cause students whose true ELP is at or close to the state-mandated score to fall on or on either side of the proficiency threshold. Even though their *scores* differ, for all intents and purposes these students have essentially the same *true* ELP level. Whether they were reclassified or remain ELL is therefore due to random occurrences, almost as if it were a random assignment.

To illustrate these “random occurrences,” imagine two students, Charlie and Sammy, with the same *true* English proficiency level. Both are scheduled to take their test during first period. Charlie arrived at school on time and was ready to take the test. Sammy's bus came late. After getting off the bus, she ran all the way to her classroom, not having time to catch her breath before starting the test. Charlie gets exactly the minimum score for Proficient; Sammy, having felt rushed and stressed during the test, gets one point lower and is therefore below Proficient. Based on these test scores, Charlie is reclassified and enters the regular classroom the following year; Sammy stays an ELL.

Every year, thousands of students in each state, like Charlie and Sammy, score within a few points of the threshold for English Proficient. Their ELP levels—their *true* scores—are essentially the same, yet for random reasons, some score at or just above and end up reclassified, while the rest score just below and stay in ELL status. Based on the two groups' essentially identical ELP levels, we would expect their future academic outcomes to be very similar—but for reclassification. If, as a group, their outcomes differ, it would very likely be because one group was reclassified and therefore experienced changes in curriculum and services, while the other group was not reclassified and therefore did not experience those changes.

A handful of recent studies have taken this approach to determine whether reclassification in and of itself has any effect on subsequent academic trajectories for students with ELP levels right around the threshold for reclassification. (See sidebar on regression discontinuity studies of reclassification.) An important caveat is that the findings from these studies are only generalizable to students at the cusp, at or very near the cutoff for reclassification. This research does not apply to students who are far below the reclassification threshold.<sup>29</sup>

These studies, which look at one state or district, have found that the effects of reclassification can be positive, zero, or negative—meaning that students at or near the reclassification threshold who reclassify have better, the same, or worse outcomes in subsequent years compared to students with equivalent ELP levels who do not reclassify. Why the wide variation?

Whether reclassification has an effect on ELLs' subsequent achievement appears to depend not so much on reclassification per se, but rather on students' experiences before and after reclassification. Where un-reclassified ELLs remain or are placed in lower academic tracks with little chance of moving to a higher track, reclassification had a positive effect, probably because reclassified ELLs are more likely to be placed in a higher track, in classes with non-ELLs, free from whatever stigma the ELL label might carry, and they subsequently do better

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<sup>29</sup> Callahan, R., Figlio, D., Mavrogordato, M., & Özek, U. (2019). Don't be too quick to retain English-Language Learners. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/03/01/dont-be-too-quick-to-retain-english-language.html>

academically.<sup>30, 31</sup> Moreover, where ELLs are required to take ELD and sheltered classes instead of mainstream content classes, the effects of reclassification were stronger.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, in districts where ELLs are integrated with non-ELLs in math and English courses, even if they had not yet reclassified, no clear reclassification effect was found.<sup>33</sup>

These studies suggest that continued segregation into ELD and sheltered classes for ELLs who do not reclassify but are at or near the threshold for reclassification might explain the positive effect of reclassification for students who do reclassify. We cannot know for sure, since the research did not look deeply into within-school factors that could explain the findings. But it is distinctly possible that it is not reclassification per se that has an effect on ELLs' achievement trajectory, but rather the instructional, curricular, and social consequences of what happens as a result of being, or not being, reclassified.

The studies also raise an important question: What *should* be the effect of reclassification? Or should there be an effect at all?<sup>34, 35, 36</sup> Generally, we expect educational practices and procedures to have positive effects. But think about it: Reclassification, while signaling that students have reached a certain level of English and academic proficiency, involves *removing* practices and procedures designed to help students not yet adequately proficient in English. If the effect of removing these services is negative, that means they were necessary, since student performance suffered following their removal. On the other hand, if the effect of reclassification is positive, that means ELLs were not served as well as their reclassified counterparts, whose performance improved when they exited ELL status.

Readers should keep in mind that we need to be cautious before making across-the-board recommendations based on a very small sampling of U.S. schools. If the studies we reviewed here were replicated across the country, we might see differences based on district size, region, composition, urbanicity, or other factors.

In any case, the evidence we do have—which comprises the only data to our knowledge that adequately addresses the specific issue of ELLs at the cusp of reclassification—suggests that the effect of reclassification should be *zero*.<sup>37</sup> That is, students' progress in developing ELP and academic skills and competence should be a steady progression whether they remain ELL or are reclassified to English-proficient. Reclassification should not be an event or a practice that disrupts that progress, either positively or negatively. Instead, ELL classification should provide the support needed for as long as—but only as long as—it is needed. Easier said than done, we know. So, how do we determine which students to reclassify?

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<sup>30</sup> Carlson, D., & Knowles, J. (2016). The effect of English language learner reclassification on student ACT scores, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment: Regression discontinuity evidence from Wisconsin. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 35(3), 559–586.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson (2019).

<sup>32</sup> Cimpian, J. R., Thompson, K. D., & Makowski, M. B. (2017). Evaluating English learner reclassification policy effects across districts. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1\_suppl), 255S-278S.

<sup>33</sup> Reyes & Hwang (2019).

<sup>34</sup> Cimpian, Thompson, & Makowski (2017).

<sup>35</sup> Robinson (2011).

<sup>36</sup> Robinson-Cimpian, J. P. & Thompson, K. D. (2016). The effects of changing test-based policies for reclassifying English Learners. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 35(2), 279-305.

<sup>37</sup> Robinson (2011).



## What Can State Policy Makers and District Leaders Do?

Our first recommendation to state and district leaders is to *not layer on requirements for reclassification in addition to federally-mandated ELP testing*. The federal government only requires “using a valid and reliable ELP assessment that tests all four language domains.”<sup>38</sup> We understand the importance of multiple indicators, but it is not known whether additional requirements such as other academic criteria or teacher judgements make reclassification decisions more valid.<sup>39</sup> Tests certainly have margins of error; they are known to be imperfect. But we have no idea of the margin of error for other criteria such as teacher judgments and standardized academic achievement test scores for making reclassification decisions.

What we do know is that when factors in addition to ELP scores are used to determine reclassification, rates go down.<sup>40</sup> But we don’t know if the use of additional factors is affecting students similarly across the board, or if certain subgroups of students are remaining in ELL status longer than others as a result. In general, we don’t know how consistently these additional factors are measured and weighted by teachers and schools. It is possible, and likely, that the same student would be deemed ready for reclassification by one school but unready by another school in the same district. Additional criteria inconsistently implemented across contexts increases the likelihood of inequitable treatment of ELLs even in the same state or district.

If you are a policy maker in a state that requires criteria in addition to a reliable and valid ELP test, you should work to have the additional requirements removed. If you are a district policy maker, you must of course comply with state policies if they require additional reclassification criteria. But we urge that these criteria be no more stringent than the ELP proficiency criteria. There should be no criterion that overturns a reclassification decision made based on ELP test performance. Other criteria might be used to confirm what the ELP test results indicate, but an ELP test result should be overturned only when there is very clear evidence that it significantly overstates or understates a student’s ELP level. And even in this case, re-testing is probably the preferable alternative.

In some circumstances, it might impossible to eliminate additional criteria. In these cases, we urge you to *make certain that ELLs who are “on the cusp” and not reclassified are exposed to as much mainstream curriculum and as many non-ELL peers as possible*.

Our other recommendations are aimed primarily at district policy makers. In brief:

- be very clear on what the reclassification criteria are in your state;
- look into your own data to see what effect current reclassification criteria are having;
- determine what changes, if any, are needed.

As a first step, *determine your state’s reclassification criteria and procedures*. As per above, ideally the criteria involve only using a reliable and valid ELP measure that tests English listening, speaking, reading, and writing. By law, states must have these and other procedures to protect the educational rights of ELLs.<sup>41</sup> If they do not, they can be sued. Make sure your district’s criteria fully align with the state’s. Criteria should be very explicit, well-operationalized, written, and easily accessible on the district website and at school sites. Be sure all district faculty and staff who are involved in reclassification decisions are well-versed in the criteria and how they should be applied.

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<sup>38</sup> US Dept of Education (2016), p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Cimpian, Thompson, & Makowski (2017).

<sup>40</sup> Estrada & Wang (2018).

<sup>41</sup> ACLU of Southern California (2019). *DJ v. State of California*. Retrieved from <https://www.aclusocal.org/en/cases/dj-v-state-california>

Once district reclassification criteria and procedures are in place, they should be followed consistently by schools. Similarly, all districts in a state should follow the state's reclassification criteria and procedures, even if a state permits individual districts to set their own policies.<sup>42</sup>

It can be hard to take ELP test scores at face value, especially for students just a point or two above or below the threshold. We understand the temptation to override these scores with your own beliefs and expectations. For example, you might believe that a student's true level is actually higher than her score and that she, like Sammy, just had a bad day on test day. Similarly, you might believe that a student's true level is lower and she, like Charlie, just had a good day. The challenge is that our beliefs and expectations can be shaped by various biases and end up being even less accurate than tests of known reliability and validity. In order to ensure that all ELLs within the state are evaluated using equitable criteria, we need to rely on the state's test score threshold instead of individual judgment.

*Next, use data based on reclassification thresholds to help you evaluate how well the reclassification threshold is working in your district.*

Identify two groups of ELLs: (a) those who score at, or just above, the threshold and get reclassified and (b) those who score just below and remain ELL. Since tests, test scores, and student populations vary across contexts, what range of test scores (and thereby how many students) around the threshold to consider must be determined locally by individual school districts. Monitor the performance of those two groups over the next year and for as many years as possible. Note that it is already a federal requirement to monitor English-proficient students for four years post-reclassification; we suggest you also monitor those students who just missed the cutoff. You will not know whether your cutoff is set too high or too low until you compare the downstream performance of ELLs who were reclassified to those with practically identical English proficiency levels who were not. As you do for all students, make sure everyone gets high quality academic language and content, regardless of whether she or he reclassifies.

*Finally, compare the performance of these two groups in order to help inform you about whether changes are needed in your reclassification threshold, curricular opportunities for ELLs on the cusp who are not reclassified, or both.*

If you see students who barely reached the reclassification criteria performing much better after reclassification than those who barely missed the threshold and stayed ELLs, that's a sign that something is not quite right. One possibility is that the threshold for reclassification is set too high and that more ELLs could benefit from reclassification than are actually being reclassified. The other is that students who do not reclassify remain in ELD and sheltered classes, which keeps them from accessing the full, rigorous core curriculum and being sufficiently challenged by the content of courses they take. Both factors could be at play. The district should follow up by determining whether the un-reclassified ELLs are in classes that prevent access to core curriculum and non-ELL peers. If so, that needs to be changed. If for some reason that is not possible, the reclassification threshold probably should be lowered.

If, on the other hand, students who barely reached the reclassification criteria perform much worse after reclassification than those who barely missed the cutoff and stayed ELLs, that's a sign that the threshold for reclassification might be set too low or students who are reclassified need better support in the mainstream classrooms.

However, if you see that reclassified students who just made the cutoff and students who just missed it and remained ELL perform at about the same level, this is a pretty good indication that your reclassification criteria are set just about right. It does not necessarily mean ELLs' and

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<sup>42</sup> Estrada & Wang (2018).

former ELLs' academic performance is satisfactory. It simply means that reclassification neither improves achievement for those who reclassify nor does it depress the achievement of ELLs who do not.

Tailoring the reclassification policy to fit your own student population takes time and requires calibration. Start with your state's common definition and policy so that you have a steady baseline for comparison. Track your students' performance over time, and adjust local policies and services as necessary until you see students who just barely meet and students who just miss ELP threshold perform the same. This will mean that reclassification has no effect, ELLs are transitioning smoothly to English-proficient, and the ELL curriculum is serving students in a way that is equivalent to the mainstream classes.

### **What's a Teacher to Do When an ELL Can "Go Either Way"?**

No matter the reclassification policies determined at state and district levels, classroom and building educators are the ones who must implement them. Every decision in this decision chain matters.

In the school described at the beginning of this article, the teacher's input is considered in reclassification decisions. Whether Juan and Abel get reclassified is partly up to Ms. Taylor. Although Juan scored above the state's ELP test threshold, the school might not reclassify him if Ms. Taylor doesn't think he's ready. Abel missed the writing threshold, but the school might reclassify him if Ms. Taylor thinks he will succeed without further ELL services.<sup>43</sup>

If your state allows reclassification decisions to be made by the district or school, you might be asked to give your recommendation for students like Juan and Abel. If you live in a state that does not consider teacher recommendation, you can still help improve the chances that students' transition to the mainstream classroom will be successful. Whether or not teacher recommendation is factored into the reclassification decision, you can help ELLs receive the academic opportunities they need to succeed. Based on research, here are the answers to questions teachers might ask:

Q1. My state lets districts decide whether to reclassify ELLs. Should I recommend reclassifying students like Juan, who barely reached the proficiency score? How do I know that they are truly ready? I'm not sure the test is the best gauge of his English proficiency.

*A. Reclassify students who have reached the state ELP threshold, so yes, reclassify students like Juan.* Students like Juan who have demonstrated a level of English proficiency required by the state need to be reclassified. Other factors, such as turning in homework late and being tardy to class are irrelevant to the reclassification decision because they have nothing to do with English proficiency. Students like Juan should be reclassified and carefully monitored following reclassification. Reclassification would not harm them if they receive good quality instruction and curriculum, as all students are expected to receive. Impeding reclassification, especially just before ELLs transition to middle school, can result in restrictions to academic access. If ELLs "on the cusp" who are going into middle school remain in ELL status for another year, they could get stuck in low-track classes. This could restrict their academic progress.

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<sup>43</sup> By law, no student scoring below the state threshold should even be considered for reclassification. But in reality, some students are reclassified without the required test scores (see Robinson 2011 and Johnson 2019).

Q2. What about Abel? Should I recommend that he be reclassified? He's smart, motivated, and well-behaved. I think he'll be fine.

A. *Use your state's reclassification test score threshold, so do not reclassify students like Abel.* We understand the temptation to reclassify students who scored just below the threshold. But you should observe your state's ELP threshold. Following the state's test score threshold policy has two advantages. First, you and your district must comply with federal law requiring that ELLs be provided with necessary support services until they reach adequate English language proficiency. Basing the decision on the results of a valid and reliable ELP assessment, as required by federal law, protects you and the district. Second, following your state's test score threshold will increase equitable treatment of ELLs across the district and the state, making it more likely that ELLs who need services will receive them and those who don't will have full access to core curriculum and appropriate learning opportunities.<sup>44</sup> Teacher recommendation is valuable, but the difficult part is that teachers use different considerations (e.g., class grades, attendance, and what they determine to be indications of motivation) to arrive at their recommendation, and we really don't know how valid and reliable those considerations are.<sup>45</sup>

As we previously discussed, we know that tests are imperfect, but we also know their margins of error. In contrast, we have no idea what the margin of error is for teacher reclassification judgements. What we do know is that additional requirements mean fewer students reclassify who are in fact eligible for reclassification. Many if not most of these students would benefit from reclassification. Until we have a better understanding of whether teacher judgements and other factors lead to better reclassification decisions, a well-developed and normed ELP measure—imperfect as it might be—is likely to be the most fair and objective criterion available.

Q3. My state and district reclassify all ELLs who have reached the state-mandated ELP threshold. Since my opinion isn't factored into the reclassification decision, is there anything I can do to help my ELL students be successful before and after they reclassify?

A. *Yes, provide as much access as possible to mainstream curriculum and non-ELL peers.* Research shows that reclassification has no effect in contexts where ELLs at or very near the reclassification threshold shared curriculum and classroom space with non-ELLs.<sup>46,47</sup> Integration gives ELLs more exposure to higher level English language, academic discourse, content materials, and English-proficient peers. The rule of thumb ought to be to provide ELLs with the opportunity to learn the same skills and academic content as their English proficient peers.<sup>48</sup> Exposing ELLs to mainstream curriculum and peers is likely to help accomplish this. And of course, as we have already said, make sure all students get high quality academic language and content regardless of whether they reclassify.

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<sup>44</sup> Estrada & Wang (2018).

<sup>45</sup> Some states (e.g., [Pennsylvania](#)) require teachers to use a common rubric to make reclassification decisions, but teachers might not have a shared understanding of the rubric. Again, the implementation on the ground has not been researched.

<sup>46</sup> Pope (2016).

<sup>47</sup> Reyes & Hwang (2019).

<sup>48</sup> August, D. (2018). Educating English Language Learners: A review of the latest research. *American Educator*, Fall 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.aft.org/ac/fall2018/august>.