

Who is a Multilingual Learner?

The definition of a multilingual learner — also commonly referred to as an English Learner student or English Language Learner — varies depending on the state, but there is a federal definition from which states derive their local definitions. The federal definition of a multilingual learner is an individual aged 3 to 21 enrolled in an elementary or secondary school who:

- Was not born in the U.S. or whose native language is one other than English;
- Is a Native American or Alaskan Native or a native resident of the outlying areas who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had significant impact on the student's level of English language proficiency;
- Is migratory and whose native language is anything other than English; and
- Has difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language, which will heavily impact the student's ability to do the following:
 - Meet state academic standards;
 - Successfully achieve in the classroom where instruction is in English; or
 - Have the opportunity to participate fully in society.¹

How are Multilingual Learners Identified in Connecticut?

In order to receive necessary supports, students must first be identified as multilingual learner. In Connecticut there is a four-step process to identifying a student as a multilingual learner.² The steps are as follows:

1. A Home Language Survey (HLS)^A is administered by a designated HLS staff person;^{3,B}
2. The HLS is then reviewed by HLS administrators at the district level;⁴
3. Any student identified by the HLS as having a primary or home language other than English is given an English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessment; and

^A An HLS is a short survey consisting of questions intended to gauge the languages spoken in a student's home. The HLS must be administered to every new student entering a school as required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. This survey may differ from state to state but is required to be consistent within each state. In Connecticut, the HLS consists of the following three questions:

1. What is the primary language used in the home, regardless of the language spoken by the student?
2. What is the language most often spoken by the student?
3. What is the language that the student first acquired?

Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). *English Learners (ELs): General Information* [PowerPoint]. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/English-Learners/EL_General_Information_Slides.pdf?la=en.

^B The HLS staff person is determined by central office and is known as the English Learner Assessment Coordinator.

Connecticut State Department of Education and RESC Alliance. (n.d.). *English Learners in Connecticut's Schools: Guidelines for Administrators*. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/English-Learners/EL_AdminGuidelines.pdf.

4. If a student is identified as a multilingual learner on their ELP assessment, parents must then be notified.⁵

Connecticut's Multilingual Learners

Connecticut's nearly 50,000 multilingual learners make up almost 10 percent of the state's public school student population.⁶ Over the last 10 years, the number of multilingual learners in Connecticut has increased by 57.6 percent, growing from roughly 31,600 students during the 2013-14 school year to over 49,800 students from the 2022-23 school year. This increase has occurred even as the state's total public student enrollment has decreased by over 36,000 students (6.6 percent).⁷

During the 2019-20 school year, there were 145 different native languages spoken by multilingual learners in Connecticut. Table 1 below details the five most commonly spoken languages by Connecticut multilingual learners. With 72 percent speaking it, Spanish was by far the most spoken language.⁸

Table 1: Five Most Commonly Spoken Languages by Connecticut Multilingual Learners, 2019-20 School Year⁹

Native Language	# of Multilingual Learners	% of Multilingual Learners	% of All Students
Spanish	31,303	72%	5.9%
Portuguese	2,410	6%	0.5%
Arabic	1,270	3%	0.2%
Creole-Haitian	831	2%	0.2%
Mandarin	728	2%	0.1%

The majority of Connecticut's multilingual learners are educated in just 16 of Connecticut's districts — 14 of which are classified as Alliance Districts.^{10,C} These communities are historically among the state's most underfunded and under-resourced districts with some of the highest-need student populations. Forty-three percent of Connecticut multilingual learners also live in one of the state's eight largest school districts, which are among the 10 lowest-performing districts in the state based on the District Performance Index.^{11,D}

There is also significant overlap between students identified as multilingual learners and other learning needs. For example, a majority (73 percent) of Connecticut multilingual learners are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL).¹² In comparison, 41 percent of non-multilingual learners are eligible for FRPL.¹³

^C Alliance Districts are 36 of the lowest-performing school districts in Connecticut. Alliance Districts are identified through a four-step process and are eligible for additional programmatic supports to help improve them increase student outcomes and close the opportunity gap.

^D District Performance Index (DPI) is calculated by averaging all of a district's students' achievement scores on standardized exams. A lower DPI is equal to lower student achievement.

Connecticut multilingual learners are also identified as requiring special education services at a higher rate than their English fluent peers. Twenty-one percent of the state's multilingual learners require some form of special education services compared to 16 percent of non-multilingual learners.¹⁴

Growth of Connecticut's Multilingual Learner Population

Since the 2013-14 school year, 155 Connecticut school districts have reported an increase to their multilingual learner population, 14 districts have experienced a decrease in their multilingual learner population, and 26 districts have experienced approximately no change to their multilingual learner populations.

Table 2 below details which Connecticut school districts experienced the largest increases in their multilingual learner populations over the last 10 years. Districts such as Bridgeport Public Schools, Danbury Public Schools, Suffield Public Schools, and the Odyssey Community School (a charter school in Manchester, Connecticut) have seen some of the state's largest increases in the number and percentage of multilingual learners they serve. Danbury Public Schools, for example, has not only seen the second largest increase in the number of multilingual learners they serve, but the district has also experienced the largest proportional increase to its multilingual learner population.

Table 2: Districts with the Highest Multilingual Learner Student Growth in the Last 10 Years¹⁵

Largest Multilingual Learner Increase (#)		Largest Multilingual Learner Increase (%)		Largest Increase as a % of Total Student Population	
<i>District</i>	<i>Increase</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Increase</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Increase</i>
Bridgeport Public Schools	2,387	Suffield Public Schools	763%	Danbury Public Schools	14.1%
Danbury Public Schools	1,975	Old Saybrook Public Schools	521%	Bridgeport Public Schools	13.4%
Waterbury Public Schools	1,272	Plymouth Public Schools	414%	Odyssey Community School	11.2%
New Haven Public Schools	1,189	Easton Public Schools	333%	Side By Side Charter School	10.1%
Norwalk Public Schools	969	Monroe Public Schools	327%	Westbrook Public Schools	9.7%

Connecticut has also seen an increase in the number of multilingual learners who are immigrants. While the number of immigrant students who are not multilingual learners has also grown by 21 percent since 2017 when the State started collecting immigration status, the percentage of immigrant students who are multilingual learners has increased 30 percent.¹⁶

Endnotes

¹ Education Commission of the States (2020, May). 50-State Comparison: English Learner Policies. Retrieved from <https://internal-search.ecs.org/comparisons/50-state-comparison-english-learner-policies-05>.

² Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). *English Learners (ELs): General Information* [PowerPoint]. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/English-Learners/EL_General_Information_Slides.pdf?la=en.

³ Connecticut State Department of Education. (2017). *Home Language Survey Guidance*. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/English-Learners/home_language_survey_guidelines.pdf?la=en.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). *English Learners (ELs): General Information* [PowerPoint]. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/English-Learners/EL_General_Information_Slides.pdf?la=en.

⁶ Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d). EdSight: Enrollment Dashboard. Available from https://public-edsight.ct.gov/students/enrollment-dashboard?language=en_US.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Connecticut State Department of Education. (2020). *Demographic Trends of Connecticut's English Learners (SYs 2015-16 through 2019-20)*. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Performance/Research-Library/EL-DEMOGRAPHICS-10012020.pdf>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d). EdSight: Enrollment Dashboard. Available from https://public-edsight.ct.gov/students/enrollment-dashboard?language=en_US.

¹⁶ Connecticut State Department of Education. (2020). *Demographic Trends of Connecticut's English Learners (SYs 2015-16 through 2019-20)*. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Performance/Research-Library/EL-DEMOGRAPHICS-10012020.pdf>.