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English Language Learner Students in U.S. Public Schools: 1994 and 2000

In the United States, many languages other than English have always been spoken, and in recent years this is increasingly the case. In 1990, 32 million people over the age of five in the United States spoke a language other than English in their home, comprising 14 percent of the total U.S. population. By 2000, that number had risen by 47 percent to nearly 47 million, comprising nearly 18 percent of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau 2002). This growth is reflected in the elementary and secondary school population in the form of growth in the population of students defined as English Language Learners (ELL).¹ This is affecting geographic regions differently in terms of the relative size of their ELL student populations. In particular, previous research found that elementary and secondary school-aged ELL students were especially prevalent in the West and Northeast (McCandless, Rossi, and Daugherty 1997). However, that research did not look at how concentrations of ELL students in schools differed within the geographic regions.

This Issue Brief uses data from the 1993–94 and 1999–2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) to examine recent growth in the population of ELL students in public schools in the United States. In addition to an estimate of the national growth in the ELL population between the 1993–94 and 1999–2000 school years, the Issue Brief reports growth at the regional level.² Moreover, the Issue Brief describes regional differences in the concentration of ELL students within schools, reporting the percentage of schools within regions with varying distributions of ELL students.

Population Trends in ELL Students

Nationally, the number of ELL students in public schools increased from approximately two million students in 1993–94 to three million students in 1999–2000 (table 1). ELL students represented approximately 7 percent of the national public school population in 1999–2000, up from 5 percent in 1993–94.

This growth in the ELL student population was not evenly distributed across geographic regions. The West had the largest number of ELL students in public schools in 1993–94 and 1999–2000. Schools in the West identified 1.7 million of their students as ELL in 1999–2000, compared with 1.1 million students in 1993–94. In 1999–2000, 16 percent of public school students (or one in every six) in the West were identified as ELL, compared to 12 percent in 1993–94. The West's public school population also includes over half of the national total of ELL students.

The Northeast experienced a reduction in its share of all U.S. ELL students—from 15 percent of all ELL students in 1993–94 to 10 percent in 1999–2000. The number of ELL students in public schools in the Midwest and South increased between 1993–94 and 1999–2000. In the Midwest and South this translated into an increase in percentage of the public school population who were ELL, from 1.4 to 2.6 percent in the Midwest and from 3.5 to 4.5 percent in the South. In 1999–2000, the Midwest still had the lowest percentage of its public school population designated ELL of any region. As of 1999–2000 the South had a higher percentage of students who were ELL than did the Northeast.

Table 1. Number and percentage of public school students in the United States who were identified as English Language Learners (ELL), by region: 1993–94 and 1999–2000

Region	1993–94			1999–2000		
	Number ELL	Percent of all students	Percent of all ELL students	Number ELL	Percent of all students	Percent of all ELL students
United States	2,121,000	5.1	100.0	3,042,000	6.7	100.0
Northeast	323,000	4.4	15.2	304,000	3.8	10.0
Midwest	136,000	1.4	6.4	276,000	2.6	9.1
South	521,000	3.5	24.6	723,000	4.5	23.8
West	1,142,000	12.3	53.8	1,738,000	16.3	57.2

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Not all apparent differences in this table are statistically significant. Standard errors are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2004035>

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), 1993–94 and 1999–2000 "Public School Questionnaire" and 1999–2000 "Charter School Questionnaire."

Concentrations of ELL Students

The national or regionwide prevalence of ELL students does not provide a complete picture of the distribution of ELL students. For example, knowing that 16 percent of public school students in the West were ELL students does not tell us whether all schools in the region had ELL populations of 16 percent or whether the ELL students were concentrated more in some schools than others. The 1999–2000 SASS data allow examination of the distribution of ELL students at the school level.

Nation-wide, over one-half of ELL students in public schools were in schools with less than 1 percent of their students designated ELL; this pattern was repeated in the Northeast, Midwest, and South (table 2). At the other end of the distribution, 7 percent of public schools had at least one-quarter of their students designated ELL; this percent was lower in the Northeast, Midwest, and South. In contrast, in the West, 37 percent of public schools reported ELL populations under 1 percent and 19 percent reported ELL populations of at least 25 percent.

Conclusion

The number of ELL students in the United States grew by about 900,000 students between 1993–94 and 1999–2000, but growth was not equal across regions. The Midwest, South, and West all showed an increase in the size of the ELL student population both in total and as a percentage of the total public school population. At the same time, the West had the largest population of public school students designated ELL, with more than half of the national total of ELL students in the 1999–2000 school year. Regional differences were apparent, as well, in terms of the concentration of ELL students in public schools, with ELL concentration most prevalent in the West.

This Issue Brief provides a profile of the location and concentration of public school ELL students. The Schools and Staffing Survey can be used to address other questions regarding

the education of ELL students, including the characteristics of the schools with high concentrations of ELL students. The SASS also contains information on techniques used to teach ELL students, as well as the programs schools offer to ELL students. A closer examination of this topic could reveal whether regional differences in the concentration of ELL students in public schools translate into differences in educational services provided for ELL students.

Footnotes

¹The SASS school questionnaires use the term “Limited-English proficient (LEP)” to describe students whose native or dominant language is other than English and whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language are sufficient to deny them the opportunity to learn successfully in an English-speaking-only classroom. The U.S. Department of Education is currently using the term “English Language Learners” (ELL). This Issue Brief uses ELL to be consistent with current usage.

²The regions used in the Issue Brief are those used by the U.S. Census Bureau: West (Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming); Northeast (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont); Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin); and South (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia).

References

- McCandless, E., Rossi, R., and Daugherty, S. (1997). Are Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Students Being Taught by Teachers with LEP Training? (NCES 97–907). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2002). American Fact Finder. Available at http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet?_lang=en

Table 2. Percentage distribution of public schools in the United States by concentration of English Language Learners (ELL) students, by region: 1999–2000

Region	Less than 1 percent ELL	1–5 percent ELL	5–15 percent ELL	15–25 percent ELL	25–50 percent ELL	50 percent or more ELL
United States	61.7	17.0	10.4	4.1	4.3	2.4
Northeast	66.0	16.3	11.8	3.6	1.5	0.7
Midwest	78.5	11.6	5.7	1.3	1.6	1.3
South	62.0	19.9	10.2	4.1	2.8	1.0
West	36.5	20.3	15.8	8.0	12.0	7.0

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Not all apparent differences in this table are statistically significant. Standard errors are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2004035>

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), 1993–94 and 1999–2000 “Public School Questionnaire” and 1999–2000 “Charter School Questionnaire.”

The *Issue Brief* series presents information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences are statistically significant at the 0.05 level. In the design, conduct, and data processing of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error. For more information on the Schools and Staffing Survey, visit <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass>.

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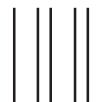
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