

Rethinking English Learner Reclassification in California

What Research Says About the State's Criteria

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Based on: Faulkner-Bond, M. (2026).

Finding the sweet spot for English Learner reclassification:

A study of California's criteria. WestEd.

[A study focused on California's policy for exiting students from English Learner \(EL\) status](#) found that the state's main standard for exiting is appropriate and has remained consistent over time. Use of additional test scores, however, may be unnecessary or even unfair.

California is the only state in the nation requiring four distinct criteria for exiting EL status: an objective English proficiency assessment (Criterion 1), teacher evaluation (Criterion 2), parent consultation (Criterion 3), and comparison of basic skills against non-EL peers (Criterion 4). A 2024 study by WestEd and the



California Department of Education (CDE) evaluated the state's current standards for Criterion 1 and generated findings that also have implications for Criterion 4.

The study included comparing students' overall performance level on the test used for Criterion 1 (the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California, or ELPAC) against their performance on the state's English language arts achievement test (the Smarter Balanced Assessment, or SBAC) in grades 3 through 8 and 11, drawing on data from more than 3 million students.

Key Findings

- **ELPAC overall Performance Level (PL) 4 is the “sweet spot”:** Across multiple statistical methods and all grade levels, scoring at PL 4 on the ELPAC remains the most robust indicator that language is no longer the primary driver of academic achievement differences.
- **Criterion 4 is often a barrier to reclassification:** Educators and field leaders identified the basic skills requirement (Criterion 4) as a significant obstacle. Research indicates that many English-only students would fail to meet the locally determined cutoff scores often applied to EL students for this criterion.
- **EL students at PL 4 perform comparably to peers:** When matched by socioeconomic status, parental education level, and disability status, EL students who score at ELPAC overall PL 4 perform as well as, or better than, English-only peers on the state's English language arts achievement test.
- **Students who meet Criterion 1 appear to achieve at the same level regardless of whether they remain in EL status or exit:** This suggests that retaining students in EL status after they reach English proficiency provides no clear academic benefit, a finding consistent with other research that has shown that EL status may constrain access to grade-level instruction and rigorous core content.



Major Recommendations

1. **Maintain ELPAC overall PL 4 as the statewide standard for Criterion 1** because it is a rigorous and validated threshold.
2. **Consider removing Criterion 4 as a reclassification requirement.** Most other states do not use a similar measure, and it appears to be redundant or unfair.
3. **Engage the field regarding Criteria 2 and 3** to ensure they do not become unnecessary barriers if Criterion 4 is removed.
4. **Consider using additional criteria only for specific circumstances,** such as for students at ELPAC PL 3 who are already demonstrating strong academic achievement.
5. **Help schools reduce opportunity differences between EL students and other students** by improving instructional quality and access for EL students before they exit EL status.
6. **Integrate post-reclassification monitoring** more meaningfully, ensuring that students who exit EL status continue to receive integrated support that helps them thrive in the general curriculum.
7. **Continue monitoring EL student achievement,** specifically focusing on ensuring that students at ELPAC overall PL 4 have equitable access to advanced coursework.

The evidence suggests that California's current system may be retaining students in EL services longer than necessary. Removing Criterion 4 would likely increase reclassification rates for ready students—particularly those with disabilities or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—granting them better access to grade-level programs without harming their academic performance.



This brief summarizes the main takeaways of the full research report:

Faulkner-Bond, M. (2026). *Finding the sweet spot for English Learner reclassification: A study of California's criteria*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resource/finding-the-sweet-spot-for-english-learner-reclassification/>

The full report includes detailed methods, data, and additional recommendations. WestEd's Region 15 Comprehensive Center and the California Department of Education conducted all analyses collaboratively using student-level data from more than 3 million students in SBAC-tested grades.

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