



English Language Learners in Alaska

May 30, 2023

POLICY BRIEF

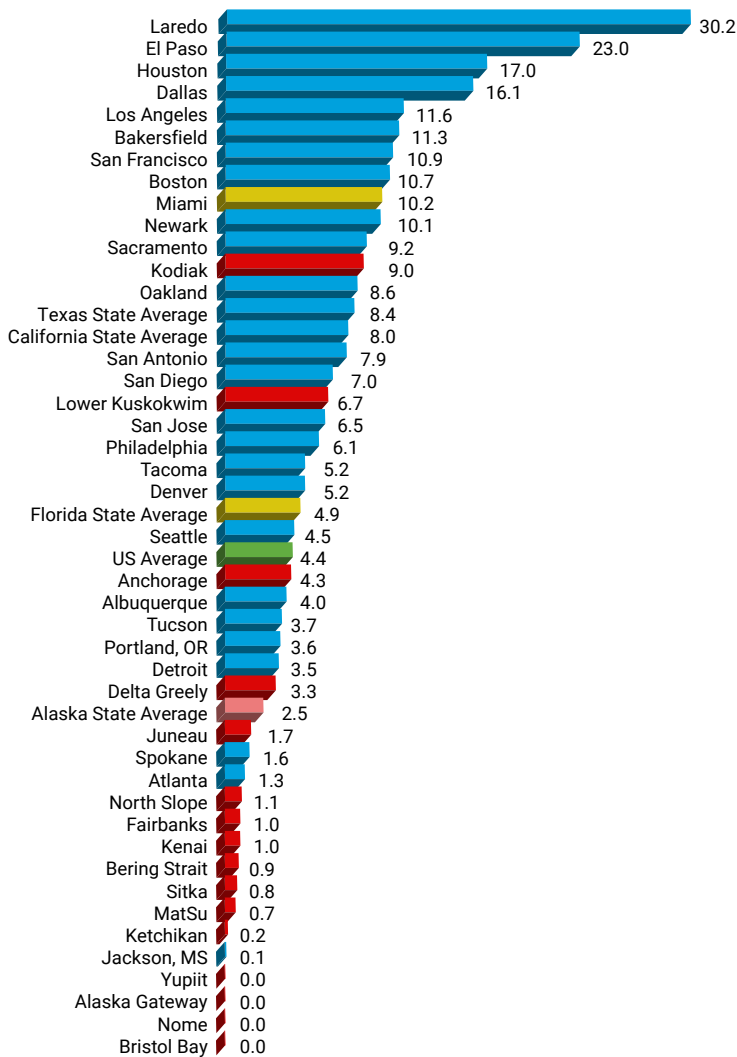


ALASKA
POLICY FORUM

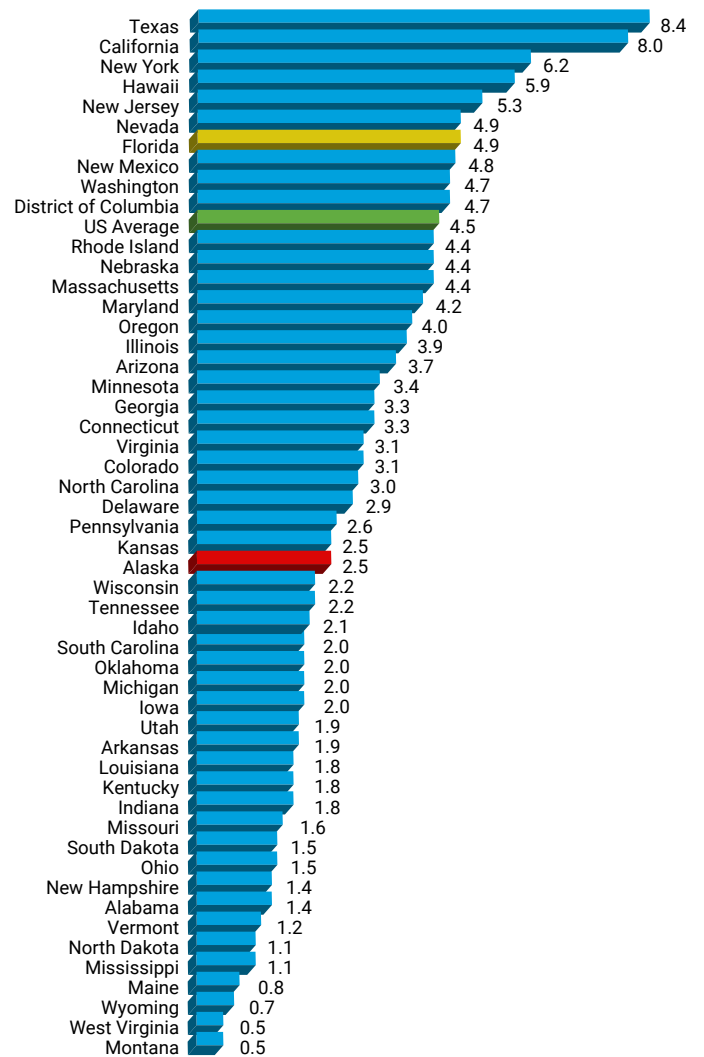
Following a presentation to a House and Senate Education Joint Committee Session in March, an investigation into English Language Learner (ELL) rates in Anchorage and Alaska produced an interesting discovery. Alaskans' impression of ELL education in our state – and classroom instruction more broadly – may deserve some adjustment.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics' American Community Survey Education tabulation (NCES ACS-ED) suggest Anchorage and Alaska should have significantly lower ELL burdens than most large cities and states, respectively. Nationally, 4.4% of K–12 students speak English less than “very well,” according to the NCES. Alaska's percentage of 2.5% ranks 28th among the 50 states and D.C. – right between Kansas and Wisconsin and significantly below all other West Coast states. Yet, 12.1% of students receive ELL services in Alaska, compared to a national average of 10.4%. Something must account for this disconnect.

Percentage of K-12 Students Who Speak English Less Than “Very Well” by District



Percentage of K-12 Students Who Speak English Less Than “Very Well” by State



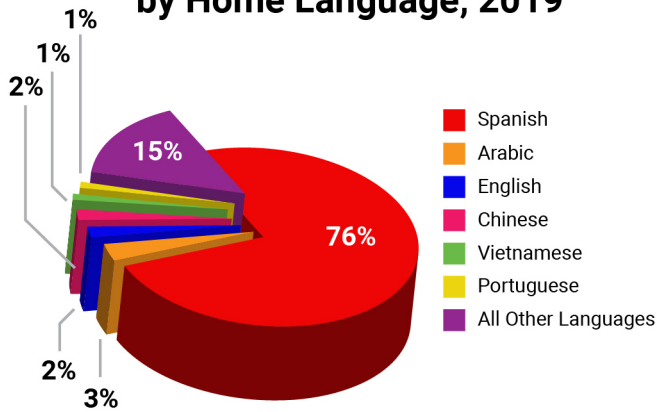
■ Alaska
 ■ US Average
 ■ Florida
 ■ Other Districts & States

Data source: ACS School District Profile 2016-20 (ed.gov)

An exceptionally large number of students in Alaska are classified as ELL despite recording English as their home language. Nationally, the NCES puts the percentage of students in this category at 2.1%. In the Anchorage School District (ASD), it’s about 57%, according to data from the ASD ELL Department.

Roughly 3,800 ASD ELL students have declared English to be their home language, compared to only 690 in the entire state of Oregon. Correspondingly, Oregon’s rate of students who speak English less than “very well” is 56% higher than Alaska’s. ELL students who speak English in the home in Anchorage made up about 27% of the approximately 14,000 ELL students statewide in fiscal year 2023. How is this possible?

U.S. English Language Learners by Home Language, 2019

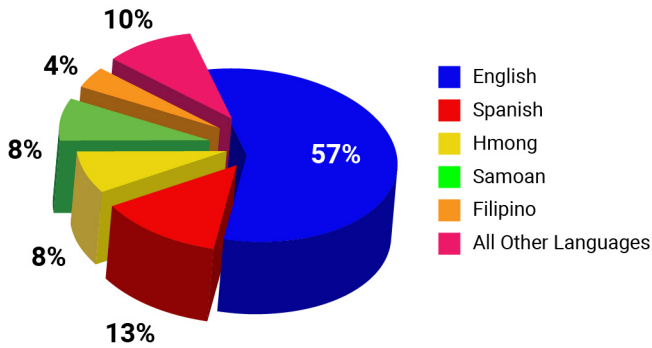


Data source: COE - English Learners in Public Schools (ed.gov)

school districts then label as ELL candidates. For perspective, consider Miami-Dade in Florida. Despite having fewer than half of its students identifying English as their home language (compared to 96% in Anchorage), Miami-Dade public schools' 4th grade English reading scores on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were about half a school year ahead of even Alaskan 4th graders too affluent to qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Anchorage School District English Language Learners by Home Language, 2023

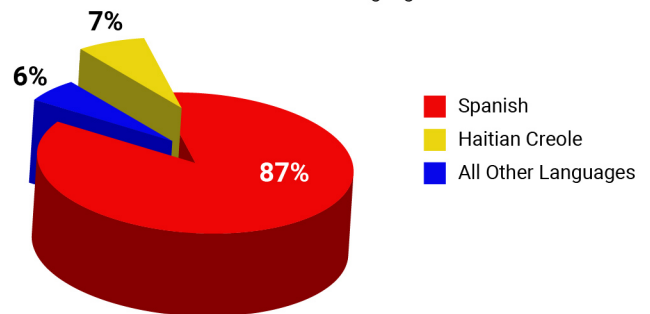
107 Different Languages



Data source: Anchorage School District ELL Department

Miami-Dade Public Schools English Language Learners by Home Language, 2019

151 Different Languages



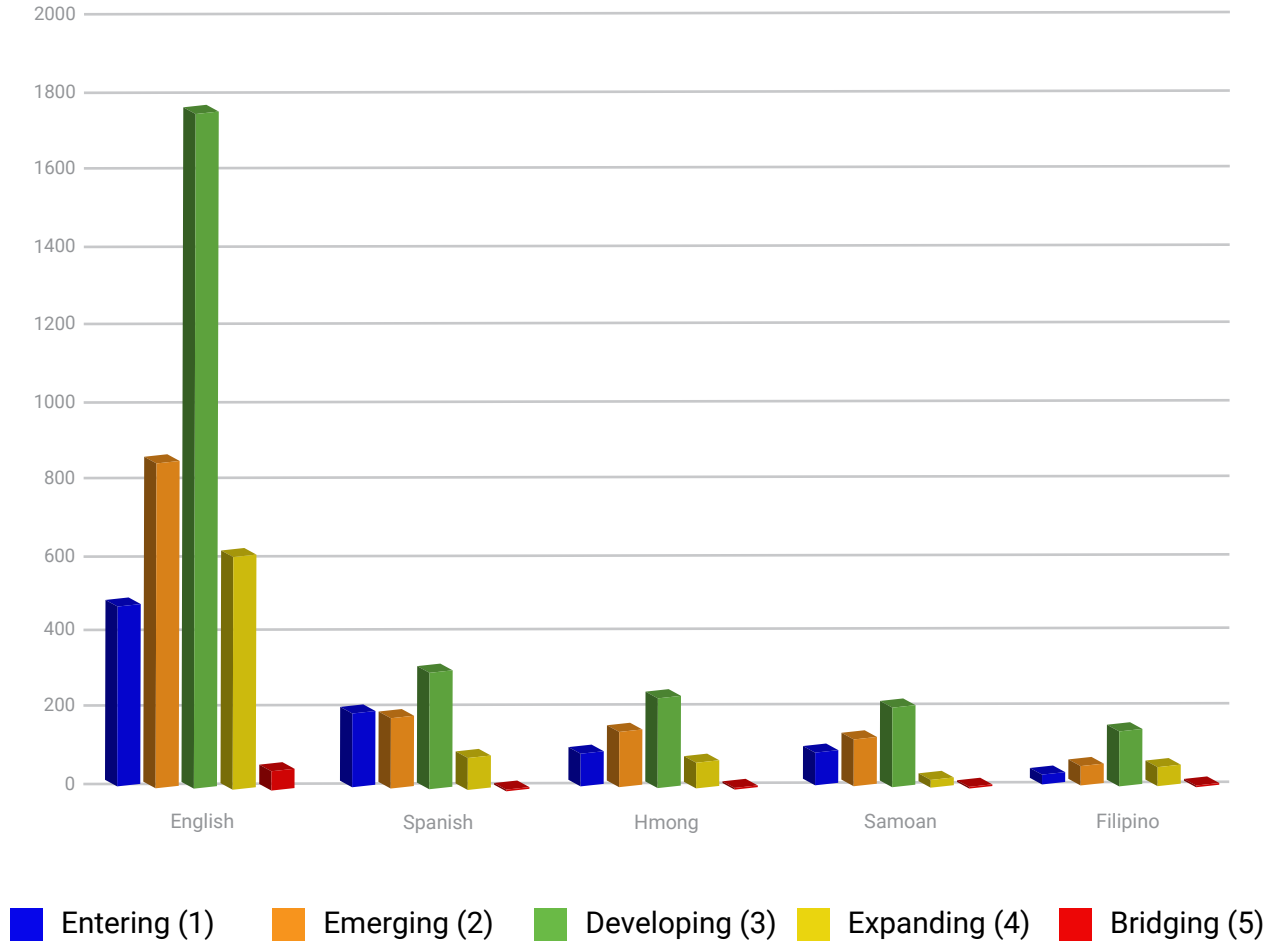
Data sources: M203 - ATTACHMENT - 2018-2019 ELL Report. pdf, Miami-Dade County Public Schools (dadeschools.net)

The higher rate of ELL students with English as their home language across Alaska seems to be driven by an unusually aggressive interpretation of the definition of the term, "English Language Learner," under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Section 8101[20] and ESEA section 3113(b)(2), Entry and Exit Procedures.

It follows that Alaska's high ELL rate is not the result of extended exposure to and reliance on other languages, but rather an indicator of overall poor English skills for students, whom

The references Alaskans hear frequently to the high rate of ELL students in our state seem to imply the public should lower expectations because many students are having to learn English as a second language while they tackle every other subject, too. In reality, 97.5% of Alaskan K-12 students speak English "very well" or better, according to federal government surveys. They just aren't being taught to apply that natural experience to their studies.

Top 5 Home Languages for English Language Learners in Anchorage School District



Data source: ASD ELL Department Other References:
English Learners in Oregon 2019-20 report, English Language Learners in Public Schools (ed.gov)

Contact Alaska Policy Forum to Learn More

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