



Heritage Academy, San Antonio

English Language Learners Fly Higher in Texas Public Charter Schools

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In 1974, the U.S. Congress passed the Equal Educational Opportunity Act (EEOA) requiring public schools to provide equal educational opportunities to children with English language barriers. Since then, the U.S. Department of Education has provided guidance for providing services to English language learners (ELLs). Schools must identify, assess, and create programs to help ELLs become fluent in English as soon as possible.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) reports that as of 2019, one third of ELLs in the state graduate without being proficient in the English language. As a result, these students — along with an additional 33% of ELLs in Texas — graduate below grade level in reading and writing as measured by State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exams. This severely limits their career opportunities and creates a significant barrier to their success.

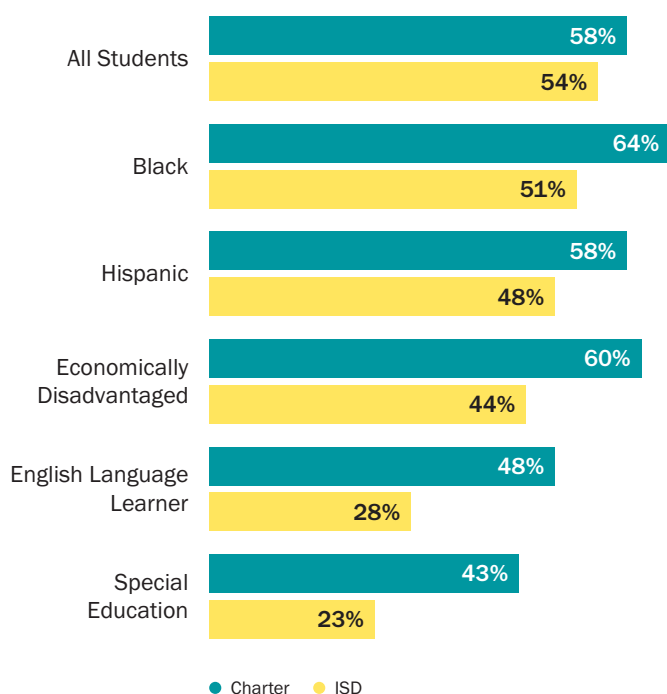
According to a 2016 study by the Brookings Institution, U.S. adults with limited English proficiency earn 25 to 40 percent less than their English-proficient counterparts. Therefore, two thirds of Texas ELL graduates in 2019 (or 14,000 students) had significantly less earning potential than their English-proficient peers.

Overall, Texas public charter schools not only serve disproportionately more ELLs than traditional districts, but they also deliver stronger outcomes. ELLs at charter schools meet grade-level standards at higher rates, according to their 2019 STAAR scores. **Six percent more public charter school ELLs were on grade level in English Language Arts (ELA) (23% vs. 17%) and 7% more in Social Studies (17% vs. 10%),** compared with traditional public schools. ELA and Social Studies both require strong reading and writing skills.

Even public charter school ELLs receiving no English-language services performed better on STAAR than in traditional public schools. For instance, in 2019, **20% of public charter school ELLs receiving no English language services were on grade level in ELA**, versus 13% in traditional public schools.

According to TEA, when ELLs “Meet Grade Level” on their STAAR assessments, they are more college-ready. Furthermore, Texas Public Charter Schools Association’s (TPCSA) 2019 study on post-secondary outcomes shows that college readiness is highly correlated in Texas with college enrollment. By **helping more ELLs improve their English proficiency, and better preparing them for college, public charter schools are ensuring that higher rates of ELLs will get to and through college.** Charter schools also prepare them to secure great jobs and maximize their earnings.

Enrollment in Texas Colleges



Texas Public Charter Schools Identify, Assess, & Provide Services to ELLs, Just Like All Other Public Schools

HOME LANGUAGE SURVEY Public charter schools, like traditional public schools, administer a home language survey to parents of new students during enrollment. This survey asks parents which language students use at home most of the time. If a parent indicates the home language is not English, the charter school identifies the student as a potential ELL. Public charter schools administer this survey only once to new students, most often in Pre-K or Kindergarten. However, they also administer the survey to transfer students not previously identified as ELL.

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE Public charter schools, like traditional public schools, appoint campus and/or district staff members to serve on Language Proficiency Assessment Committees (LPACs). These committees coordinate administration of the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) for all potential ELLs. LPAC members receive special TELPAS training from their Regional Education Service Center (ESC). TELPAS assesses annually the following areas of English language proficiency: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Potential ELLs then receive one of the following ratings for the four proficiency areas: beginner, intermediate, advanced, or advanced-high. When ELLs earn a composite TELPAS score of advanced-high, ELLs may exit English language programs.

ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) PROGRAM Section 29.053 of the Texas Education Code requires all public school districts (traditional and charter) with 20 or more ELLs to establish special programs for improving ELLs' English proficiency. ESL is one of these programs. TEA requires all ESL program teachers — in both traditional public and public charter schools — to earn an ESL teaching certification. TEA also provides a comprehensive and lengthy rubric describing the school structures and teacher practices required to implement an exemplary ESL program. See the "Author Note" of this research brief for a link to this rubric.

For many years, schools administered ESL programs to ELL students in separate classrooms or in "pull-outs" where specialists work with ELLs one-on-one. Many schools still conduct ESL programs in this manner using ESL-certified teachers to ensure best practices. However, most Texas public schools now immerse their ELL students in the general education classroom as soon as possible. This enables ELLs to use their language skills with native English speakers in all academic content areas.



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BILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

Bilingual Education is another program school districts can offer, in addition to or instead of ESL, to satisfy the state requirement to help ELL students improve their English language proficiency. TEA requires all Bilingual program teachers — in both traditional public and public charter schools — to earn a Bilingual teaching certification. Like ESL, the main objective of Bilingual Education is to improve ELLs' English language proficiency. However, unlike ESL, Bilingual education seeks to preserve ELLs' first language proficiency by grouping students with the same first language and transitioning them to English rather than immersing them in it. TEA provides another comprehensive rubric describing structures and practices required to implement an exemplary Bilingual Education program. See the "Author Note" of this research brief for a link to this rubric.

OTHER ENGLISH LANGUAGE SERVICES

Many Texas public charter schools, like traditional public schools, now have so many ELLs that standalone ESL and Bilingual Education programs are simply not enough to help ELLs achieve full English proficiency. Some of these districts train all teachers, regardless of content area, to provide English language instruction. For instance, teachers learn to create language learning objectives and classroom activities. They also learn to create text-rich classrooms using word walls. These initiatives, while not part of districts' official ESL or Bilingual Education programs, are helpful for ELL English language development.

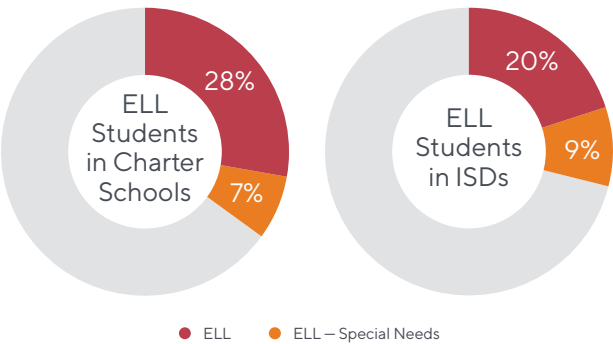
Texas Public Charter Schools Have Higher Rates of ELLs

Children who speak only English at home have a background in the language. As a result, they spend Kindergarten, first grade, and second grade learning basic reading and writing skills, which are critical for studying math, science, ELA and social studies from the 3rd grade onward. By contrast, ELLs must develop in school the speaking and comprehension skills that native English speakers learn at home. Therefore, public schools provide ELL programs and services to compensate. Building ELLs’ English foundation is no easy task, because it must occur at an accelerated rate so that ELLs do not miss out on critical academic content. This task becomes even more difficult as the percentage of ELLs in a school district increases.

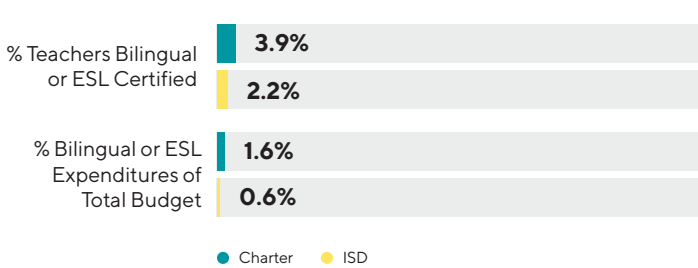
Texas **public charter schools enroll one third more ELL**

students than traditional public schools. As a result, public charter schools must work even harder to make sure all ELLs have strong enough English skills to ensure they learn their grade-level academic content. In response, public charter schools have school operations that meet the challenge.

Studies show that becoming certified generally does not help a teacher improve student outcomes. However, the specialized training leading to Bilingual and ESL certification *does* make an impact. State data shows that Texas public charter schools **employ almost double the percentage of teachers who have these certifications**, compared to traditional district schools. **Public charters also spend 3 times as much of their total operating revenue on Bilingual and ESL programs**, compared with traditional district schools.



School Operations Metrics Related to ELL Students



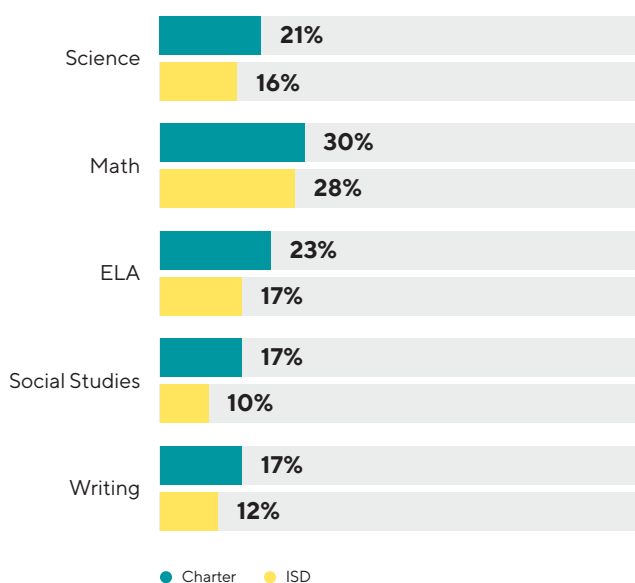
ELLs in Texas Public Charter Schools are On Grade Level, With or Without Specific English Language Services

Texas educators teach all subjects in English. Therefore, ELLs must have strong English language skills to unlock complex concepts in these subjects and ultimately demonstrate content mastery. ELLs in Texas public charter schools are using their English skills to earn higher rates of content mastery (measured on STAAR assessment results), compared with ELLs in traditional public schools.

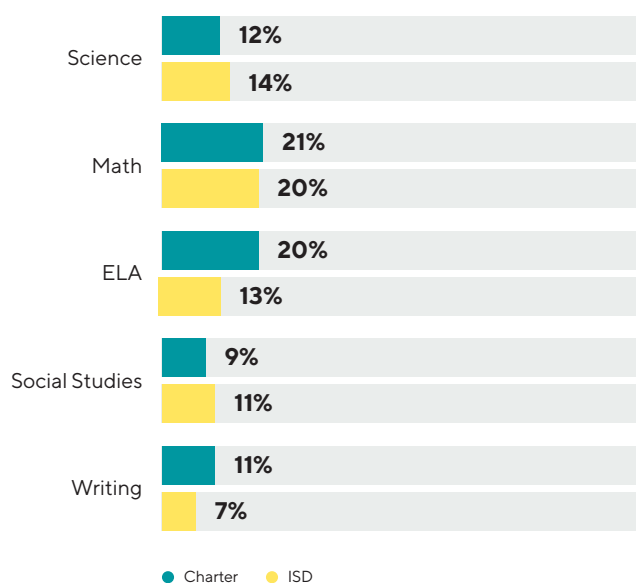
Texas public charter schools have percentages of ELLs on grade level for all subjects that are up to 7% higher when these students receive specific English language services.

Texas public charter schools have 7% higher rates of ELLs on grade level for ELA even when these students are not enrolled in any specific English language programs.

Percent of ELLs Receiving ELL Services & On Grade Level



Percent of ELLs **Not** Receiving ELL Services & On Grade Level





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ESL Students in Texas Public Charter Schools are On Grade Level, With or Without Pull-Out Services

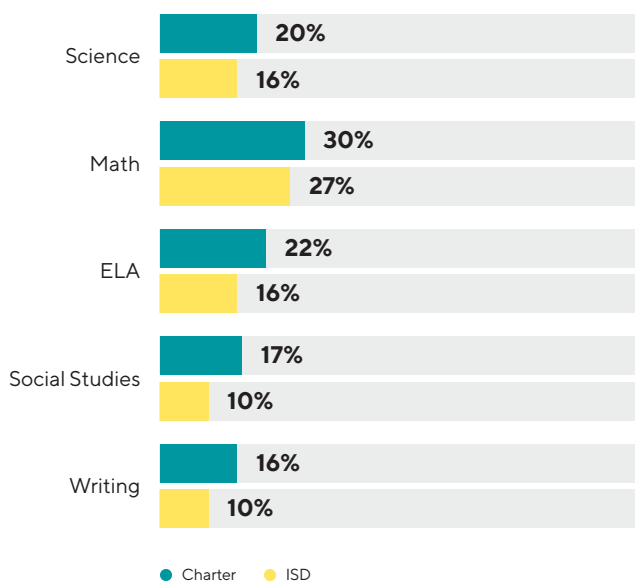
The STAAR results of ESL program students in public charter schools mirror results of charter school ELLs in general, indicating that the results are not totally dependent on ELL language programs.

Texas public charter schools have up to 7% higher percentages of ESL students on grade level for all subjects,

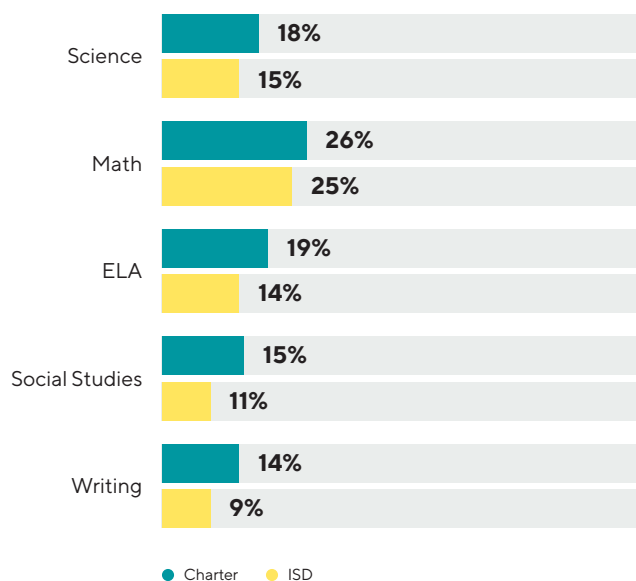
compared with traditional public schools.

Texas public charter schools have up to 6% more ESL students on grade level for all subjects when they receive ESL pull-out services. This indicates that in-class ESL services are sufficient for most ELLs.

Percent of ESL Students On Grade Level



Percent of ESL Students On Grade Level, With Pull-Outs



Case Study: Beta Academy

English learners at Beta Academy in Houston are among the highest-performing in the entire state. Their elementary-level scholars, for example, meet grade-level reading standards at the 15th highest rate out of nearly 550 school districts in Texas.

They're thriving in large part thanks in large part to a literacy program that embraces and responds daily to their needs.

"When we wrote the charter application, we chose a research-based curriculum that was proven to benefit English learners," said Helen Abernathy, the school's Executive Director of Research & Development. "When I taught those students in a large district, the experience just wasn't designed for them."

At Beta Academy, an A-rated public charter school, 22% of students are English learners. Most come from Spanish-speaking families, although other home languages, particularly Vietnamese, are also represented.

One key to their success: Students who are still learning English don't feel isolated or singled out. They use cooperative learning and read with partners and in groups alongside native English speakers. Everyone receives explicit direction to talk about words that challenge them, form a team consensus, and report back to the class together.

"It's amazing how even our youngest scholars have rich conversations with their teams about strategy and how they arrived at their own conclusions," Abernathy says.

This spirit of collective learning also means students can easily apply the concepts and strategies they learn while

reading to other subjects, such as social studies and science.

"Kids learn really well from other kids," Abernathy says.

Similarly, all educators at Beta Academy weave techniques to support English learners into their instruction. ESL-certified teachers and aides "push in" to classrooms, rather than pulling English learners out of class. That prevents anyone from losing instructional time and builds a culture of high expectations — a belief that all students can, and will, learn at a high level.

Beta Academy's approach also incorporates flexibility and nimbleness. The school organizes in-class reading groups based on students' reading level, as tracked by reg-

ular assessments, and moves students based on their progress. In this format, it's easier for teachers to tailor their guidance to specific students. That's especially helpful with such a large population of English learners.

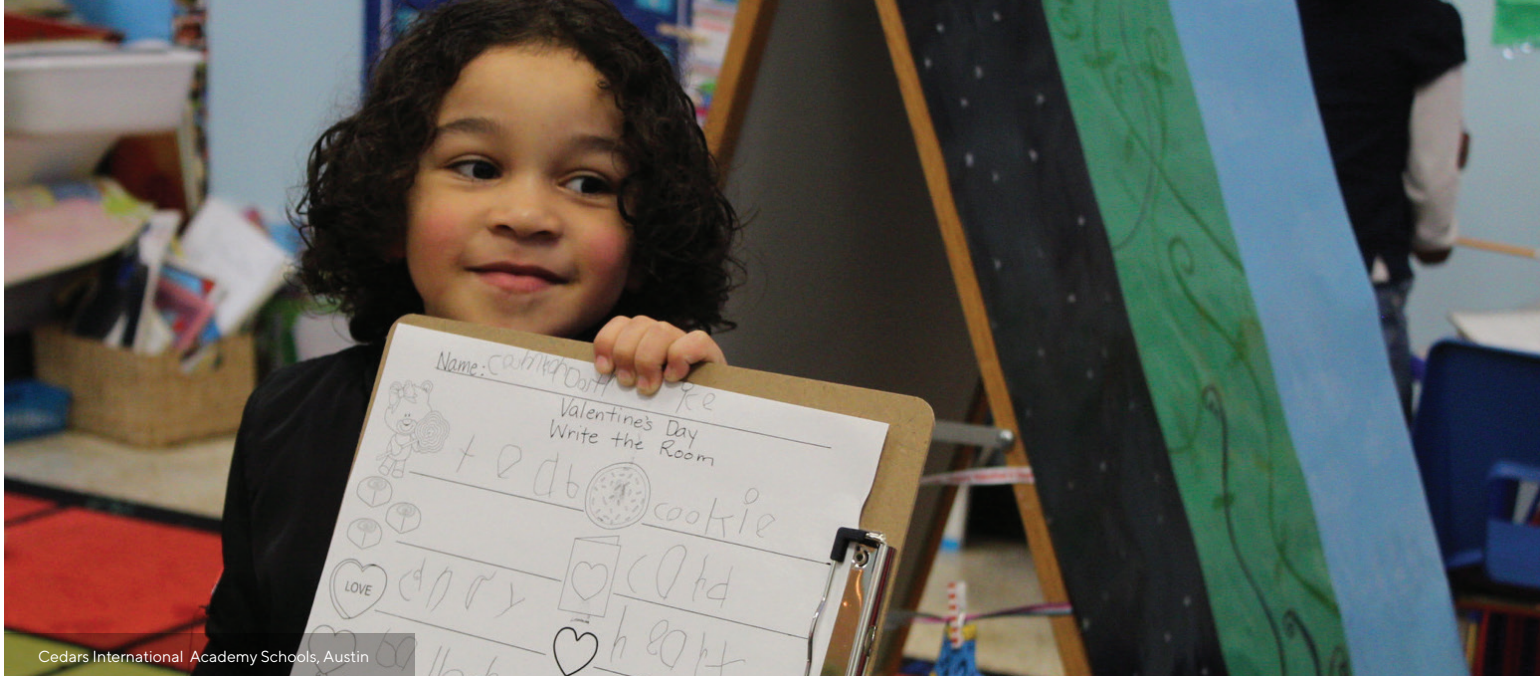
School leaders also place a premium on fostering close relationships between teachers and students. English learners feel connected to the community in a deeply personal way. Esther Marin, the school's ESL director, recalls one eleventh grader who didn't feel completely confident with her language skills. But her teacher worked so closely with her, and inspired her so much, that she scored at the "advanced high" level in writing.

That kind of success isn't uncommon. In 2019, all of Beta Academy's middle school English learners (fifth through eighth grade) were at least "approaching grade level" on the Reading STAAR exam. So were 91% of fourth graders and 83% of third graders.

"It's all about how much our teachers care," Marin says.

Students who are still learning English don't feel isolated or singled out. They use cooperative learning and read with partners and in groups alongside native English speakers.





Cedars International Academy Schools, Austin

HIGHER STARR SCORES

English Language Growth for ELLs in Public Charter Schools Translates to Higher STAAR Scores, But Not in ISDs

One strong explanation for higher rates of on-grade-level ELL students in public charter schools is growth in English language skills measured in the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS).

Texas public schools measure ELL students' English language growth through the TELPAS, which tests for English speaking, reading, comprehension, and writing skills. Students develop these English skills from specialized services they receive in class and during pull-outs by ESL and Bilingual certified teachers.

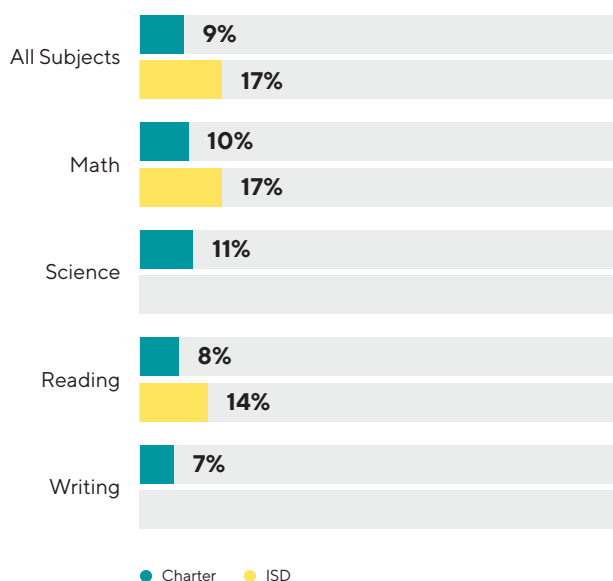
Public charter and traditional public schools have similar rates of English language growth on TELPAS: 44% of ELL students in public charter schools grew at least one year in their English language skills at the end of each academic year from 2016 to 2019, compared with 46% in ISDs.

However, **ELL students in public charter schools translate their English language growth on TELPAS to academic performance improvements on the STAAR far more than those in traditional public schools.** The following table reports the increases required in TELPAS growth rates (public charter school vs. ISD) to climb by 1% the rate of students earning "Meets Grade Level" on STAAR.

When public charter schools increase the percentage of students growing one grade level on TELPAS by 7 to 11%, 1% more of their students earn "Meets Grade Level" on STAAR—no matter the subject. By contrast, ISDs have to

raise the percentage of students growing 1 grade level on TELPAS by 14 to 17% to see a 1% increase of students earning "Meets Grade Level" on STAAR Math and Reading. English growth on TELPAS is not associated with growth in STAAR Science or Writing scores.

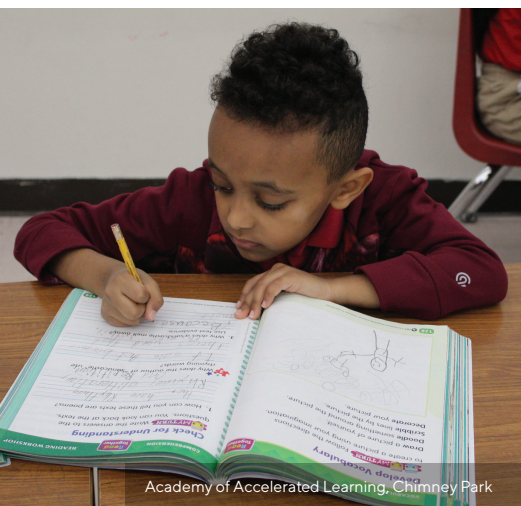
Percent Increase of Students Needed to Grow 1 Grade Level on TELPAS for 1% More Students Earning "Meets Grade Level" on STAAR



There was no statistically significant relationship between TELPAS growth and STAAR scores in ISDs for Science and Writing.



School of Science and Technology Northwest, San Antonio



Academy of Accelerated Learning, Chimney Park



Richard Milburn Academy Schools, Pasadena

Public Charter Schools Show that Improvement to ELL Student Achievement Is Possible in All Public Schools

Texas public charter schools follow the same process for identifying and providing services to ELL students as any other public school. However, ELL students in public charter schools do better academically than those in traditional ISDs, even though charter schools serve 8% more of them.

One strong explanation for this is the relationship in public charter schools between STAAR scores and English language growth on TELPAS. The weaker relationship in ISDs between STAAR scores and English language growth on TELPAS suggests room for improvement in the alignment between ELL services and instruction in grade-level content. ISDs could implement the following reforms to create this alignment, which already exists in public charter schools:

1. **Hire more ESL and Bilingual-certified educators and ensure they are collaborating with their colleagues on planning lessons. Unlike other kinds of certification for teachers, this training helps lead to stronger outcomes for students.**
2. **Spend more operating revenue on Bilingual and ESL programs to ensure that:**
 - **All ELL students receive English learner services, regardless of whether these students participate in ESL or Bilingual programs.**
 - **The district curriculum, professional development and teacher resources address state standards not only for academic content, but also for English language learners.**

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

English language proficiency statistics appearing in this research brief are based on 2015–2019 data from the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS). English language learner demographic, achievement and school operations statistics in this brief are based on data from the Texas Education Agency’s (TEA’s) 2019 Texas Academic Performance Reports (TAPR). TPCSA obtained TELPAS data through a public information request in October 2020. TPCSA obtained TAPR data from the following website in October 2020: <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/2019/xplore/DownloadSelData.html>.

TPCSA used the school district as the unit of analysis to avoid problems with masked data at the school level. TEA masks data at the school level to protect student privacy. Therefore, the dataset that TPCSA used for statistics in this brief included all 1,200 Texas public school districts. Each statistic in this research brief is an average rate of Texas public school districts.

To calculate the increases required in TELPAS growth rates (public charter vs. ISD) to climb by 1% the rate of students earning “Meets Grade Level” on STAAR, TPCSA conducted multiple regression analysis. The regression model included the percentage of students growing at least one year on TELPAS as the independent variable. The model used STAAR “Meets Grade Level” rates (all grade levels) as the dependent variable. Finally, the model included all relevant control variables for school and student-level characteristics.

TEA outlines the school structures and teacher practices required to implement an exemplary ESL program in a rubric at the following website: <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/ESL%20Implementation%20Rubric%20Revised%20for%202019-2020.pdf>.

In addition, TEA outlines the school structures and teacher practices required to implement an exemplary Bilingual Education program in a rubric at the following website: <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/TBE%20Implementation%20Rubric%20FINAL.pdf>.

If readers have any questions about the statistics or statements in this brief they may contact Dr. Timothy Mattison at tmattison@txcharterschools.org. Dr. Mattison is TPCSA’s Director of Policy and Research.

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