

Learning in Every Language

Guaranteeing Access and Opportunity
for Virginia's English Learners



Executive Summary

Multilingual students are one of Virginia's public schools' greatest assets, and yet our school systems continue to underinvest in English Learner (EL) students. The ability of multilingual learners to think and communicate in more than one language strengthens cognitive flexibility and problem solving skills. Multilingual learners also contribute diverse cultural backgrounds and lived experiences to the classroom, bringing different traditions, ways of storytelling, and perspectives on community, cooperation, and learning. When teachers incorporate students' home languages and cultures into the classroom, it improves the learning experience for all learners.

Despite the wealth of skills, abilities, and diversity that EL students bring to the classroom, Virginia public schools have provided inadequate support to these students for far too long. Significant investment is needed to rectify these longstanding failures.

Key Facts About English Learners In Virginia's K-12 Schools

- In the fall semester of the 2024-2025 school year, 145,929 EL students were enrolled in Virginia's K-12 public schools, making up 12% of the total student population.
- Since the 2021-2022 school year, the EL student population in Virginia has grown by 24%.
- During the 2024-2025 school year, 71% of EL students in Virginia were identified as Hispanic. 45% of all Hispanic students were identified as EL students.
- During the 2024-2025 school year, roughly 18% of EL students were also considered students with disabilities. Typically, students with disabilities comprise roughly 13% of the total K-12 student population in Virginia.
- During the 2024-2025 school year, while comprising only 12% of the total student population, EL students received approximately 21% of all referrals for exclusionary discipline.
- EL students score anywhere between 30% to 50% lower than their non-EL peers on Virginia's SOL statewide assessments, depending on subject.
- EL students are 15% less likely to graduate on time (or within 4 years) than their non-EL peers, particularly their white peers.

Findings on Language Access in Virginia's Schools

Beginning in the 2024–2025 school year, the Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) reviewed internal case data and hosted community meetings with LEP parents and caregivers, older EL and bilingual students, and recent graduates and community advocates. In collaboration with YJP, law students from Georgetown Law's Racial Equity in Education Law and Policy Clinic surveyed Virginia school districts with high EL enrollment to assess the availability and quality of language assistance services.

The findings by LAJC and Georgetown's REEL Policy Clinic students show wide disparities in how school divisions provide language access services. Overall, the data reflects inconsistent and frequently inadequate language access services for LEP families across the Commonwealth. This lack of access to consistent oral interpretation and translated documents presents a barrier not only to the ability of students to engage with curriculum and course material, but also to parent engagement, which can be key element of student success.

Conclusion

Virginia has long underfunded educational services for EL students. This underinvestment not only presents a significant barrier to the academic outcomes of EL students, but also disadvantages all Virginia public school students, who greatly benefit from a diverse, multi-cultural, and linguistically rich classroom experience. All of Virginia's students, regardless of their home language, deserve the high-quality education to which they are entitled under the Virginia Constitution.

In 2026, Virginia's General Assembly can address these mounting problems and safeguard the rights of EL students to fair, effective, and accessible K-12 public education by enacting legislation that—

- Codifies the right of all EL students and their LEP parents and caregivers to language assistance services, including translations of vital educational records and native language interpreters.
- Requires data collection specific to the needs of Virginia's growing EL student population and accountability from local school divisions about the use of increased EL education funding.
- Mandates that SOLs be made available in languages other than English.
- Increases EL student funding, structured as a flexible add-on, allowing school divisions across the Commonwealth to tailor services to the diverse needs of the EL students in their communities while being held accountable through robust data collection and the provision of meaningful language assistance services.