



# Post-Pandemic Onset Trends for Public School English Learners in Virginia

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## Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the educational experiences of diverse student populations throughout the country and among Virginia public schools. English Learners (ELs) had a unique set of needs and services prior to the pandemic, and potentially were more vulnerable to pandemic-related disruptions in typical school operations than other student groups. We analyze statewide, student-level administrative data on the composition of the EL population, the identification for and reclassification out of EL services, and the exit of ELs from public school enrollment in kindergarten through grade twelve between the 2010-11 and 2020-21 school years to examine changes between the pre-pandemic period and first post-pandemic onset year (2020-21). Our key findings include the following:

- Following the onset of the pandemic, the number of students classified as EL decreased for the first time in a decade. Specifically, whereas the number of students classified as EL increased by 26.0% (25,171 more students) between 2010-11 and 2019-20, the number of students classified as EL decreased by 3.2% (3,852 fewer students) between 2019-20 and the first post-pandemic onset year (2020-21).
- There was a 21.6% decline (6,223 fewer students) in the number of Virginia K-12 public

school students newly identified for EL services in 2020-21 as compared to 2019-20. The drop in new EL identification occurred across student groups, but was largest among Hispanic students, economically disadvantaged students, and ninth graders.

- The number of EL students reclassified as fully English proficient decreased by 57.3% (8,169 fewer students) in 2020-21 as compared to the pre-pandemic period. This decline is nearly three times the size of the previous largest year-to-year change. The drops in reclassification among ELs occurred across student groups and were somewhat larger among Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students.
- EL students' exits from Virginia public schools in the post-pandemic onset were a continuation of pre-pandemic trends and did not meaningfully vary by race/ethnicity, economically disadvantaged status, or disability status.

## A Focus on English Learners

English Learners faced additional educational challenges beyond those of non-ELs even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, having to attain both academic content and English language mastery concurrently. In the post-pandemic onset period

evidence suggests that ELs and their families faced disproportionately greater struggles with accessing educational technology and translation services for remote instruction, balancing larger financial and caregiving responsibilities, and were more often among populations that experienced higher rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths. [1] At the same time, the closure of school buildings across Virginia and the shift to remote instruction in fall 2020 forced school divisions to change their typical [2], in-person approaches to identify and reclassify ELs for services. We begin to empirically examine the impact of these changes on English Learners.

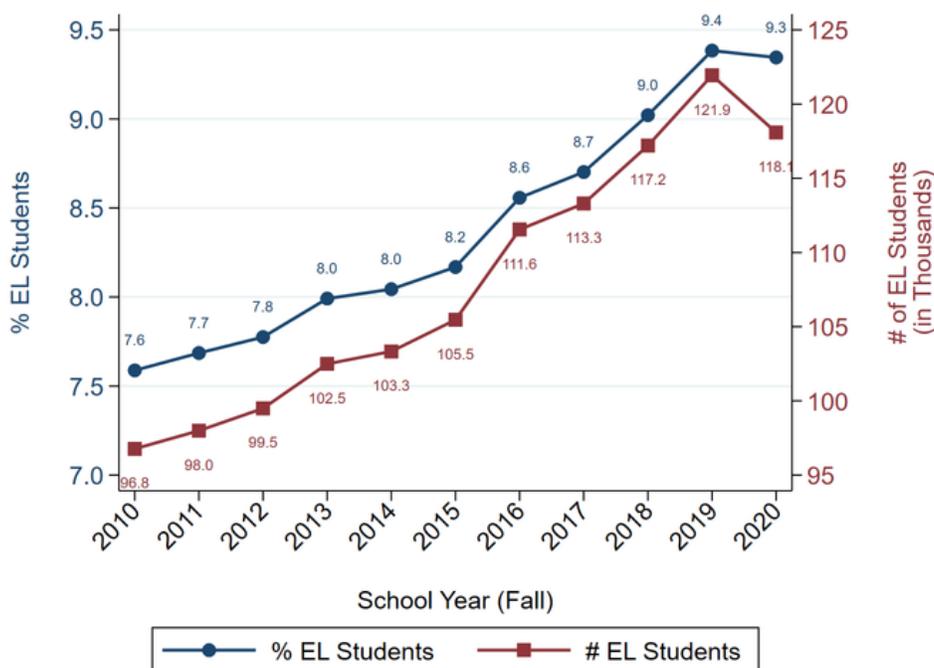
We focus on EL students enrolled in grades kindergarten through 12 [3] in Virginia public schools and their initial identification for EL services, reclassification as former EL, and exits from enrollment in Virginia public schools. Our analyses answer four research questions. How has the composition of ELs in Virginia public schools changed over time? How did the initial identification of EL students change after the onset of the pandemic? How did the reclassification of existing EL

students as former EL/fully English proficient change with the pandemic? How did the number of ELs who exited Virginia public schools and the types of those exits compare before and after the start of the pandemic? In partnership with the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), we answer these questions with an analysis of statewide administrative data provided by the VDOE. These data allow us to track individual students over time throughout Virginia between school year 2010-11 and 2020-21 (the first full post-pandemic onset school year).

### English Learners in Virginia K-12 Public Schools

The number and share of public school students who are ELs has been increasing across the United States from fall 2010 to fall 2019 [4], and Virginia was no exception to this trend. (Throughout this brief, we refer to school years by the fall year of the academic year; for example, 2010 refers to the 2010-11 school year).

Between 2010 through 2019, the number of ELs in Virginia's public schools grew every year for a total increase of more than 25,000 students such that almost 10 percent of Virginia's public school students were eligible for EL services, as shown in **Figure 1**. The number of EL students dropped by 3.2% (3,852 fewer ELs) between 2019 and 2020 for the first time since 2010, following the 26.0% increase (25,171 more ELs) in the number of students who were ELs between 2010 and 2019. We attribute this departure from previous steady growth in the population of ELs to a combination of overall declines in enrollment in public schools observed in the post-pandemic onset year [5] and



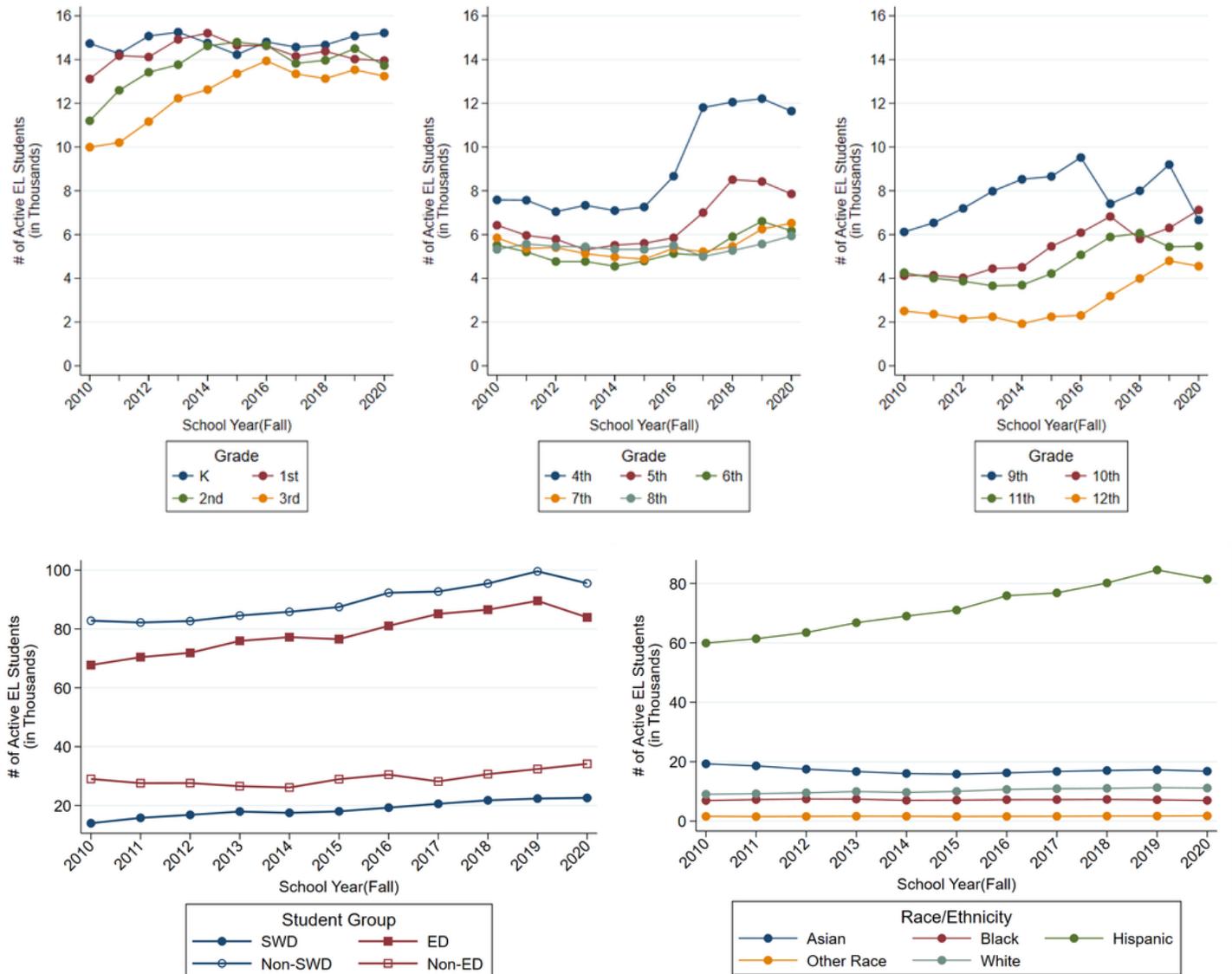
**Figure 1.** Percent and number of English Learners by school year, 2010 through 2020

changes in the identification, reclassification, and exits from public schools of ELs. ELs are concentrated in the elementary grades, as shown in the three top panels of **Figure 2**. More ELs are enrolled in kindergarten than any other grade. The share of ELs enrolled in each subsequent grade generally decreases through grade 12, except for a bump up in grade 9. For example, in 2019, 16.0% of Virginia kindergarteners were ELs but just 5.0% of Virginia twelfth graders were ELs. These proportions are a function of when ELs are initially identified to receive services, when they reclassified as former

EL, and the types of exits we observe for ELs. Though the population of ELs is concentrated in kindergarten through grade 4, the number of high-school-aged ELs has risen over time, particularly amongst ninth graders. Across years, a majority of EL students in Virginia are economically disadvantaged, without disabilities, and Hispanic, as shown in the two bottom panels of **Figure 2**.

### Initial Identification of English Learners

Virginia EL students are typically identified for

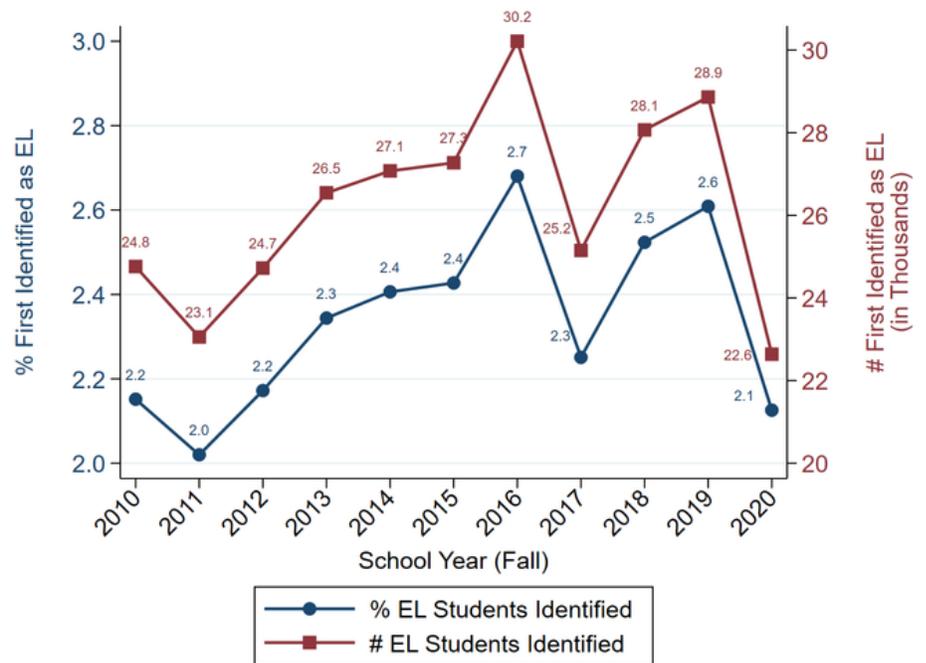


**Figure 2.** Number of English Learners by grade level, economically disadvantaged status, disability status, and race/ethnicity, 2010 to 2020

Note: ED = economically disadvantaged; SWD = students with disabilities

services based on a set of entrance requirements set forth in the federal statutes. [6] Families, when registering their child in a public school, must respond to a set of three questions and/or complete a separate home language survey. Upon review of these items, students are identified as eligible for English Learner services based on either their score on an approved WIDA Consortium screening assessment or their performance on the previous year's English proficiency assessment. [7] In fall 2020 some school divisions could not utilize the normal EL screening assessments, which must be administered in person, for all students due to continued school building closures and remote instruction. VDOE authorized a temporary EL identification process for these students that required the use of the school registration questions and an informational interview with families for presumptive EL identification. [8] These presumptively-identified EL students would be required to be formally screened upon reopening of school buildings. We include these presumptively-identified ELs in our count of initially-identified ELs.

We found that fewer students were initially identified as ELs in the first full post-pandemic onset year compared to 2019. There were 6,223 fewer students initially identified EL students in 2020 compared to 2019 (a 21.6% reduction), as seen in **Figure 3**. These initially-identified ELs were 2.1% of the 2020 non-active EL population which was a decline from 2.6% in 2019 and the lowest share since 2011. This decline is likely explained by multiple factors, including the overall decline in students who enrolled in Virginia K-12 public schools for the first time, barriers to using standard in-person EL identification assessments for many



**Figure 3.** Percent and number of K-12 public school students identified as an English Learner by school year, 2010 through 2020

schools and divisions, and other factors. Of those initially identified in 2020, 24.9% (5,644 students) were presumptively identified using temporary screening procedures. Divisions varied in the share of initially-identified ELs that were presumptively identified. A group of eight divisions accounted for 90.0% of all presumptively-identified ELs in Virginia, while another 73 divisions had no presumptively-identified ELs among their initially identified ELs in 2020.

Decreases in the number of ELs initially identified were not uniformly distributed across all student groups and grade levels. In the panels in **Figure 4** on the next page we show the change and percent change in the number of students initially identified as EL between 2019 and 2020 (the red bars) as compared to the changes in the pre-pandemic period (2010 to 2019, the blue bars). While the number of initially-identified ELs decreased between 2019 and 2020, the decline was most pronounced among Hispanic students (30.8% decline, 5,887 fewer students), economically disadvantaged students (35.0% decline, 6,748 fewer students), and

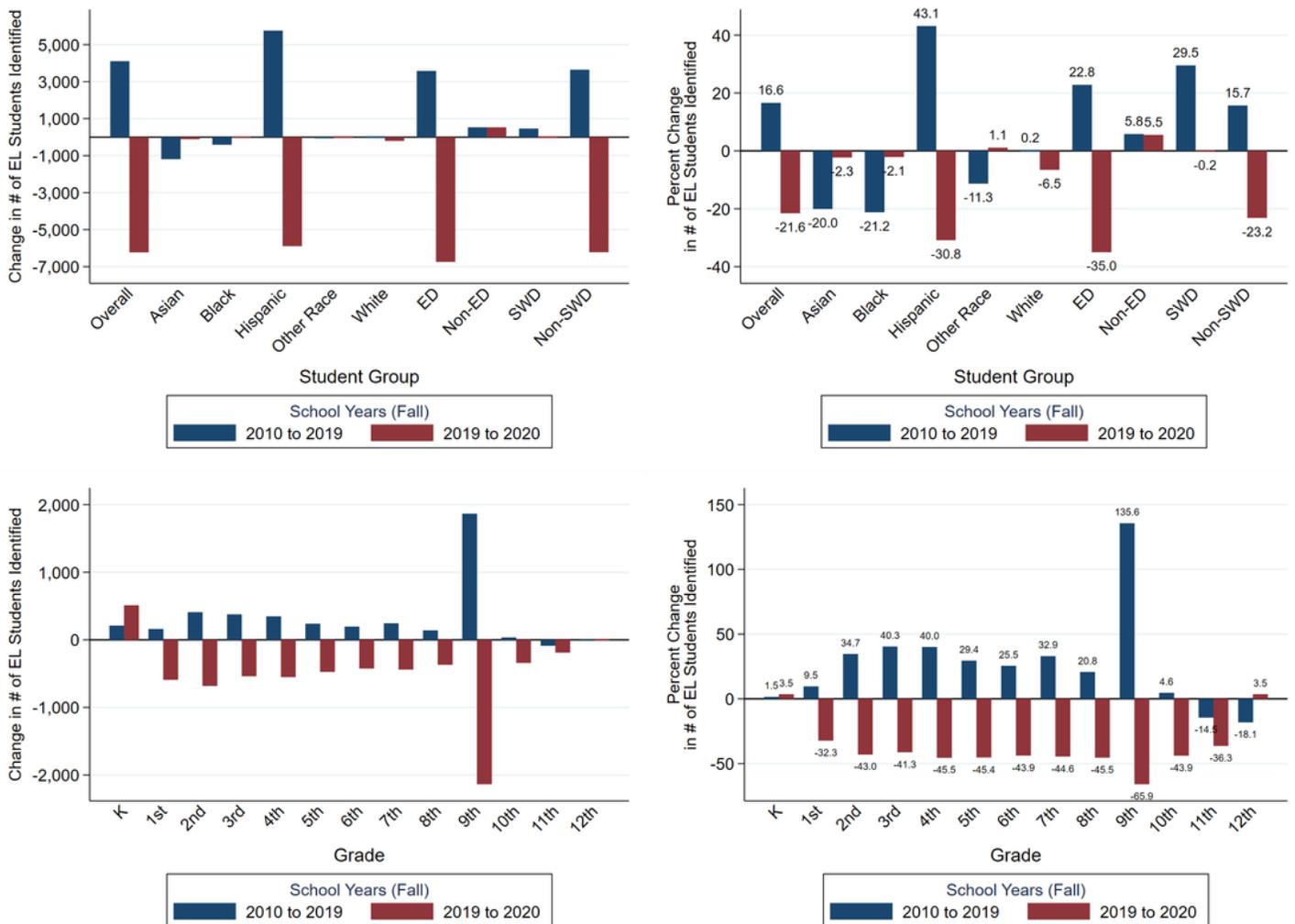
students without disabilities (23.2% decline, 6,219 fewer students).

The magnitude of the 2019-to-2020 change in initial EL identification also varied across grade level. Most students who are initially identified for EL services are identified when they are enrolled in kindergarten, and we know that the largest statewide drops in enrollment were concentrated in kindergarten, which declined by 13 percent. [10] Despite this fact, there was very little change in the number kindergarteners initially identified as EL, unlike most other grade levels. In fact, the number of kindergarteners initially identified as EL in 2020 was 3.5 percent greater than the number initially

identified in 2019 (see right bottom panel in **Figure 4**). The number of initially-identified ELs decreased among students in grades 1 through 11. The largest decline was among 9th graders—a 65.9% decrease.

### Reclassification of English Learners

Reclassification as former EL is a critical educational juncture for English Learners. In Virginia, ELs are reclassified based on their scores on the WIDA Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs®) which assesses English proficiency across multiple domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). [11] Version 2.0 of



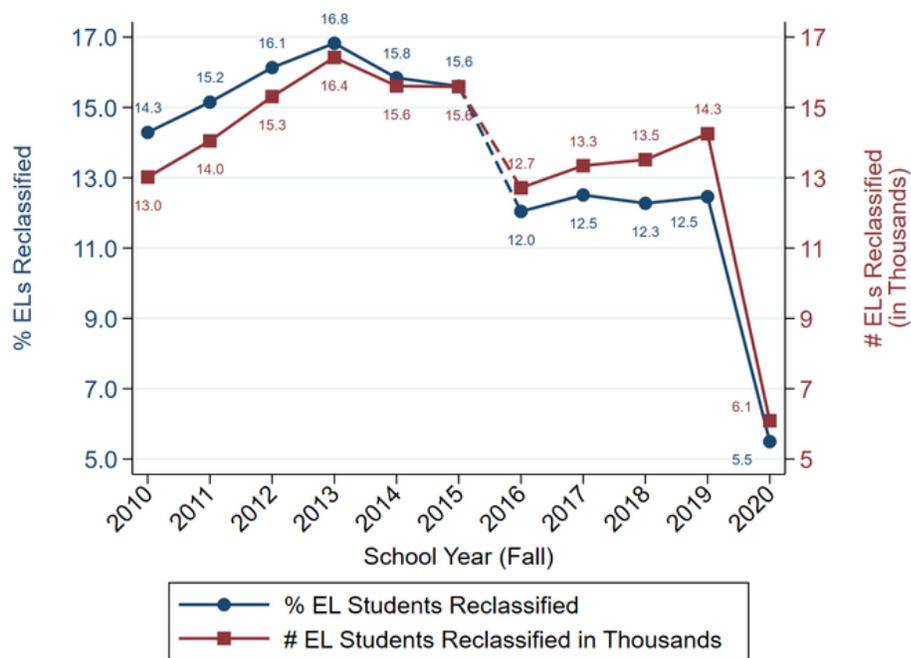
**Figure 4.** Change and percent change in number of initially-identified ELs by race/ethnicity, economically disadvantaged status, disability status, and grade level, 2010 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020  
 Note: ED = economically disadvantaged; SWD = students with disabilities

this test was first administered in spring 2016, resulting in higher English proficiency expectations across domains to attain reclassification. [12]

The proficiency testing window for ELs occurs in the spring of each school year and determines the EL status for students the following fall. Therefore, to identify which ELs are reclassified, we must observe their EL status the following fall (i.e., for ELs during the 2018-19 school year, we look at their EL status in fall 2019). EL students in 2020 are the first cohort of ELs whose likelihood of being reclassified could have been impacted by the pandemic. [13]

As shown in **Figure 5**, the onset of the pandemic coincides with a precipitous drop in the number of EL students reclassified. The number of ELs in 2020 who were reclassified declined 57.3% (8,169 fewer students) relative to 2019. While this decline surely reflects lower English proficiency gains among ELs, it also reflects the overall reduction in the number of ELs discussed earlier as well as a decline in EL proficiency testing participation in the spring of 2021 (2020 school year). The WIDA tests are only administered in person in school buildings. In spring 2021, parents could notify schools if they would not allow their students to return to school buildings for proficiency testing due to pandemic related concerns. While we do not currently have the data necessary to calculate the WIDA test participation rate, we have calculated the SOL test participation rate where the same allowance was granted to parents. The SOL participation rate among ELs in grades 3 through 8 dropped 23.7% in math and 18.2% in reading. [14]

The decline in reclassification in 2020 relative to

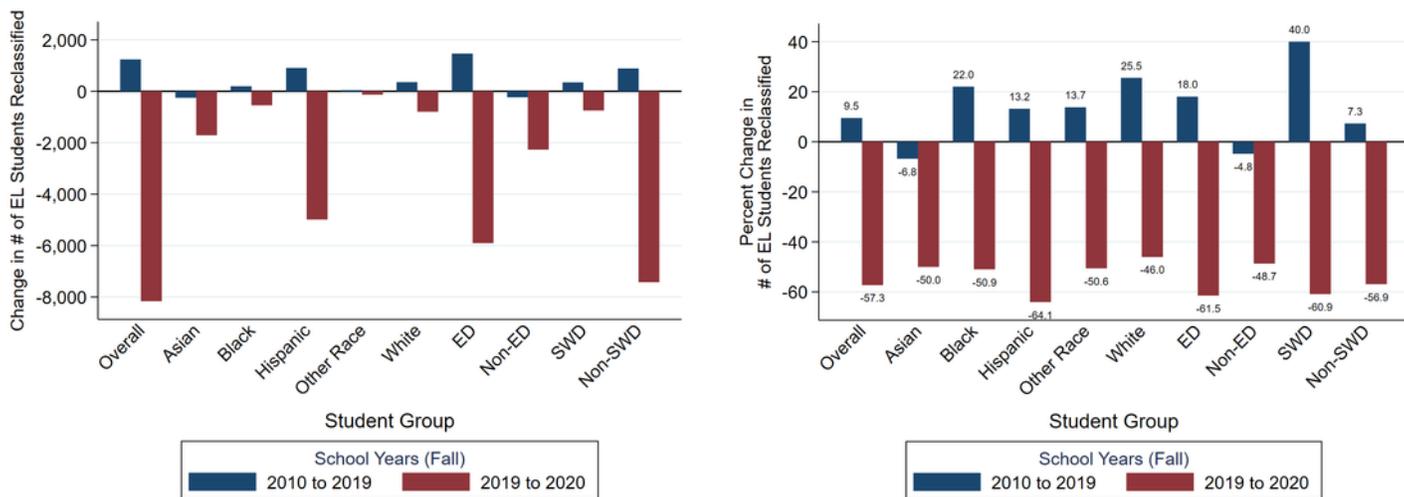


**Figure 5.** Percent of active EL students in each school year who were reclassified in the following fall, 2010 through 2020

*Note:* Dashed line indicates the shift to the new WIDA ACCESS for ELLS® 2.0.

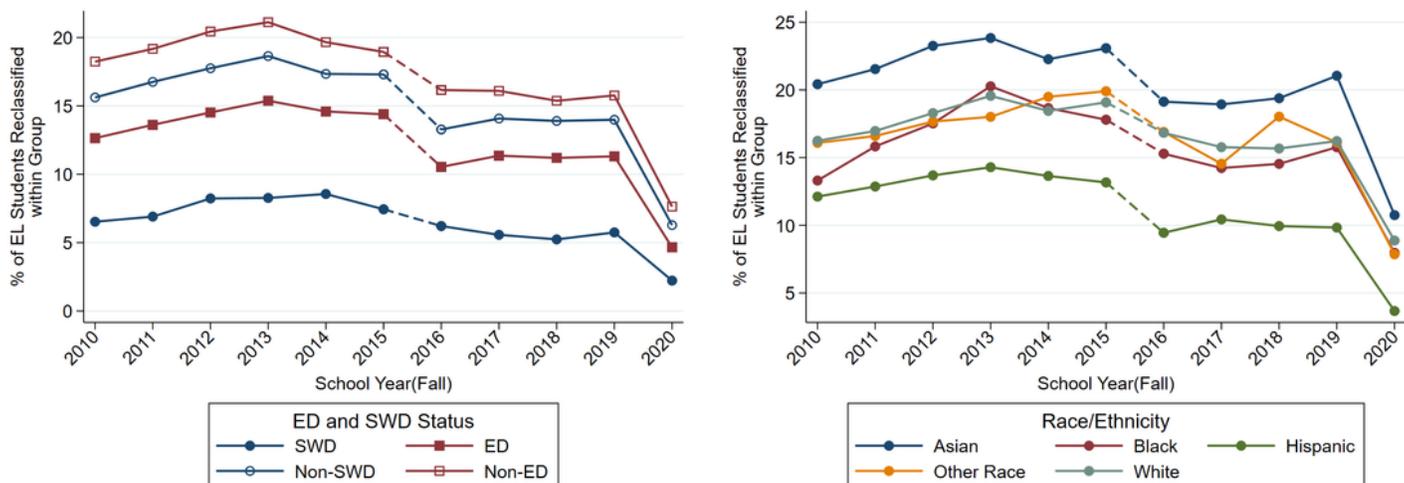
2019 occurred across all student groups and grade levels, as shown in **Figure 6** on the following page. Somewhat larger declines occurred in the percent change in number of EL students that were reclassified among Hispanic students (64.1% decline), economically disadvantaged students (61.5% decline), and students with disabilities (60.9% decline) between 2019 and 2020 as compared to other student subgroups. The percent change in number of EL students reclassified between 2019 and 2020 was more evenly distributed across grade levels and is not shown here.

Reclassification rates declined for students of all racial/ethnic backgrounds and regardless of economically disadvantaged or disability status, as shown in **Figure 7** on the following page. The size of the drop in reclassification rate between 2019 and 2020 was generally similar across student groups, ranging from a 6.2 to 8.3 percentage points lower. The exceptions to this were a slightly lower decline in reclassification among ELs with disabilities (3.5



**Figure 6.** Change and percent change in number of ELs reclassified by race/ethnicity, economic disadvantage status, and disability status (SWD), 2010 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020

Note: ED = economically disadvantaged; SWD = students with disabilities



**Figure 7.** Percent of active EL students within subgroups in each school year who were reclassified in the following fall, 2010 through 2020

Note: Dashed line indicates the shift to the new WIDA ACCESS for ELLS® 2.0.

percentage points lower) and slightly higher decline in reclassification among Asian ELs (10.3 percentage points lower). The pandemic did not change the disparities in reclassification rates across student groups, however. Economically disadvantaged EL students and EL students with disabilities continued to be reclassified at rates that are consistently lower than those of their non-economically disadvantaged and non-disabled EL peers. Similarly, Hispanic EL students continue to be reclassified at a lower rate than EL students of other racial and ethnic

backgrounds – finding consistent with studies of EL students’ reclassification in other states. [15]

### Exits from Virginia Public Schools

Students identified as EL can only receive services to improve their English proficiency if they are enrolled in school. We, therefore, examine trends in EL students exiting the Virginia public school system. An EL student is identified as exiting if they are not enrolled the following year. For exiting students, we

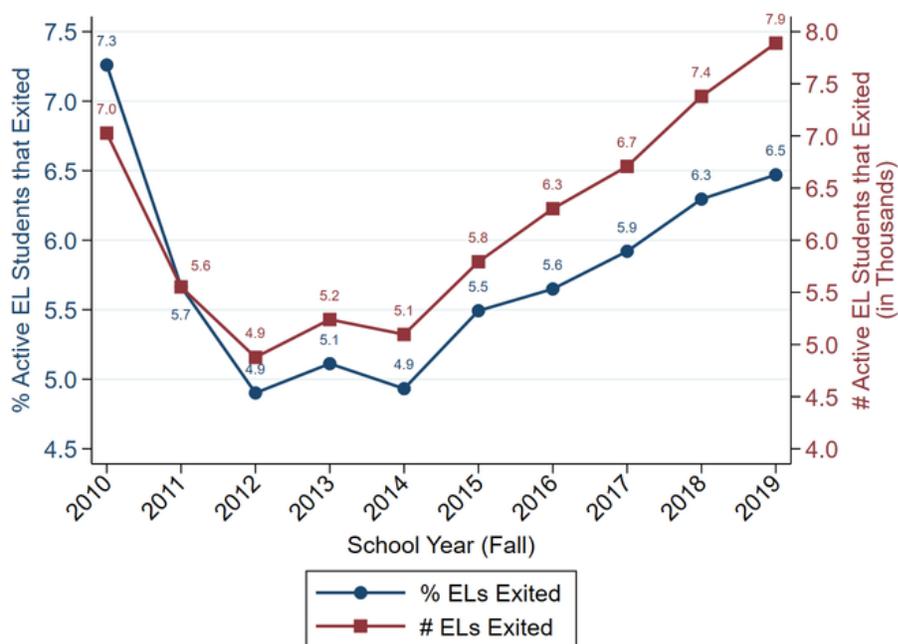
observe the reason for their exiting. EL students enrolled in 2019 are the first cohort whose exits from public school enrollment may have been impacted by the pandemic since their reenrollment behavior in 2020 occurs after the pandemic onset.

As shown in **Figure 8**, the number and percent of EL students who exited Virginia public schools has been steadily increasing since 2014, and we do not observe any deviation from that pre-pandemic trend between 2018 and 2019. When we examined these trends by race/ethnicity, economically disadvantaged status, or disability status, we also find no deviations from the pre-pandemic trends (results not shown).

There was also no post-pandemic onset change in the reasons for why EL students exit the Virginia public school system (results not shown). These exit types include transferring out of state, graduation or completion, dropping out, transferring to private school, and transferring to home school as well as a number of infrequently cited reasons [16]. Changes in EL exits by type between 2018 and 2019 reflected continuations of pre-pandemic onset trends.

## Closing

The first full post-pandemic school year ushered in a host of changes that influenced the EL population. This brief begins to examine the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for the initial identification of ELs, reclassification as former EL, and ELs exiting the public school system through the 2020-21 school year. We find that the number of students who were ELs dropped for the first time after a decade of steady increase, resulting from a marked decline in the number and percentage of students who were



**Figure 8.** Percent and number of ELs who exited Virginia public schools by school year, 2010 through 2019

initially identified as EL. We also find that there was a dramatic decline in the number and percentage of EL students who were reclassified. Our subgroup analyses revealed that some groups of EL students experienced greater impacts than others, particularly Hispanic and economically disadvantaged ELs. But we also found that despite the potential vulnerability of ELs in public schools, there was no deviation in EL exits from pre-pandemic trends. We offer descriptions of these patterns in this brief; however, identifying the causes of these changes is beyond the scope of this brief. While we are unable, in this brief, to speak directly to how ELs' gains in English proficiency changed after the pandemic's onset, we intend to explore this in future analyses of ELs' performance on the WIDA assessments. We will continue to track these patterns and extend this work in order to inform pandemic recovery efforts targeted towards supporting Virginia's English Learners.

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[1] *Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America's Students* (p. 61). (2021). Office for Civil Rights, US Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf>

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[2] Padhi, E., Miller, L. C., & Chandler, T. E. (2022). *School Division Operations During SY 2020-21: Use of Remote Instruction*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia. <https://bit.ly/3BqLYAG>

[3] EL students are not identified prior to kindergarten based on the US Department of Education Title III program funding and because there is no adopted EL screening assessment for pre-kindergarten students.

[4] <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf/english-learners>

[5] Schueler, B. E., & Miller, L. C. (2022). *Post-Pandemic Onset Public School Student Enrollment and Mobility in Virginia*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3BqLYAG>

[6] [https://doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents\\_memos/2021/149-21.pdf](https://doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents_memos/2021/149-21.pdf)

[7] Virginia has been a member state of the WIDA Consortium since 2008. The WIDA Consortium develops EL proficiency standards and assessments for EL screening and proficiency and includes 41

member states, territories, and federal agencies. <https://wida.wisc.edu/memberships/consortium/va>

[8] [https://web.archive.org/web/20201121200018/https://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health\\_medical/office/covid-19-faq-reopening.shtml](https://web.archive.org/web/20201121200018/https://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/office/covid-19-faq-reopening.shtml)

[9] We exclude students who are already active ELs from the analyses for EL identification as they could not be initially identified as ELs.

[10] Schueler, B. E., & Miller, L. C. (2022). *Post-Pandemic Onset Public School Student Enrollment and Mobility in Virginia*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3BqLYAG>

[11] [https://doe.virginia.gov/testing/english\\_language\\_proficiency\\_assessments/index.shtml](https://doe.virginia.gov/testing/english_language_proficiency_assessments/index.shtml)

[12] [https://doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents\\_memos/2017/168-17.shtml](https://doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents_memos/2017/168-17.shtml)

[13] At the time of school closures in Spring 2020, 96.3% of scheduled EL testing using WIDA ACCESS had been completed (from VDOE testing progress as of 3/13/20). In Spring of 2020, the testing window closed on March 20th, about one week after school building closures. This suggests that few EL tests would not yet have been scheduled as of the testing progress update shared with us from 3/13/20. However, some schools were unable to complete WIDA testing during this window, and a second window in Fall 2020 was opened.

[14] Miller, L. C., & Schueler, B. E. (2022). *Post-Pandemic Onset Public School Student Test-based Performance in Virginia*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3BqLYAG>

[15] Umansky, I. M., Callahan, R. M., & Lee, J. C. (2020). Making the Invisible Visible: Identifying and Interrogating Ethnic Differences in English Learner Reclassification. *American Journal of Education*, 126(3), 335–388. <https://doi.org/10.1086/708250>

[16] These include, for example, transfers to other educational programs within state (e.g., charter schools outside the local education agency, hospital education program, program operated by the Department of Juvenile Justice), absences or suspensions exceeding 15 days, and student death.