

**Research Brief:**  
**Establishing a Default Auto-Exit Procedure for K-2 English Learners in Michigan**

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Literature review conducted in collaboration with the following members of the Michigan Department of Education’s EL Advisory Committee:

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**Guiding Question**

Should the Michigan Department of Education make it the default to automatically exit English learner (EL) students who meet criteria for reclassification in grades K-2?

**Defining “Auto-Exit”**

“Auto-exit” is the process used to make it the default to exit a student from EL status if a student meets specific reclassification criteria.

- In Michigan, an EL student will be auto-exited in the Michigan Student Data System if the student reaches a WIDA ACCESS Overall Score of 4.8 or higher or reaches a WIDA Alternate ACCESS Overall Score of P2.
- Auto-exit is completed by the state (CEPI) over the summer
- LEAs have the option to override the auto-exit process and keep students classified as ELs
- Auto-exit was implemented in summer 2020 for EL students in grades 3-12. Current auto-exit practice does not include students in grades K-2.

**Background**

Early literature on reclassification focused largely on concerns regarding prematurely exiting students, that is to say, reclassifying students before they had attained sufficient levels of English proficiency, often in early grade levels. For example, Cummins (1980) warned that a premature exit from English language development (ELD) services (bilingual or ESL program model) may negatively impact ELs’ academic outcomes in the mainstream classroom. As summarized by De Jong (2004), “A lack of comprehensible input, limited access to academically engaging instruction, and few opportunities for second language development can make mainstream classrooms ineffective learning environments for ELLs” who are prematurely exited (p. 4).

However, more recent literature on reclassification that has emerged over the past fifteen years has raised important questions not only about premature reclassification but also the potential risks of keeping students classified as ELs for too long. These studies examine the impact of reclassification on various student outcomes. Researchers have shown that reclassifying an EL

student too late may have deleterious effects such as restricted access to honors and college preparatory coursework, higher dropout rates, decreased rates of college enrollment, and a greater likelihood of needing remedial coursework in college (e.g., Callahan, Wilkinson & Muller, 2010; Estrada, 2014; Flores & Drake, 2014; Kanno & Kangas, 2014).

Historically, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) has discouraged exiting EL students in grades K-2 due to concerns surfaced in the early reclassification literature about withdrawing ELD services too early. It was for this reason that K-2 students were not included in a recent policy change to make it the default to automatically exit EL students who met reclassification criteria in grades 3-12. However, given the more recent literature that has surfaced equally alarming concerns about the negative impact of reclassifying students with high levels of English proficiency too late has prompted MDE to consider whether K-2 EL students who meet Michigan's reclassification criteria should also be default auto-exited. This research brief informs this decision.

### **Review Approach**

We conducted a systematic review of the rigorous research literature. We began by reviewing the scholarly research literature on topics related to the question of making it the default to auto-exit EL students who have met reclassification criteria. While there is little, if any, literature on the practice of automatically exiting EL students, there is literature on related topics that can arguably be used to inform the question at hand. In particular, we reviewed literature on topics such as reclassifying students in early elementary, criteria that should be used to make decisions about reclassifying EL students as English proficient, the ramifications of the EL label, long-term ELs, and aligning support services for EL students to individual student needs.

#### **1) EL Reclassification Benefits K-2 Students with Relatively Advanced English Proficiency**

EL students are a diverse group with varying levels of English proficiency. Some ELs enter Kindergarten with quite advanced English proficiency, while others may require more intensive English supports. Researchers have shown that a) a student's initial level of English language proficiency is an important predictor of how long the student will remain classified as an EL student, and b) K-2 students with high levels of English proficiency do not benefit from receiving ELD services.

- Students' level of English proficiency upon entering school is important in determining the time it takes to acquire fluent English proficiency. For example, Slama and colleagues (2014) found that a number of factors impact students' time to proficiency, including beginning level of English proficiency, special education status, retention, and socioeconomic status. Ultimately, the team concluded that differentiated expectations for timelines to reach English proficiency are necessary; students' initial English proficiency and their time in U.S. schools are particularly important predictors of the time it will take them to acquire English proficiency.
- Umansky (2016a) compared kindergarten EL students who scored just above and just below the English language proficiency assessment cut point for EL identification, two groups that are considered statistically equivalent due to measurement error on the assessment. Umansky found that EL classification resulted in long-term negative impacts

on achievement for Kindergarteners with relatively high English proficiency. For these students, the negative impact of EL classification on achievement grew as they progressed through middle school. These negative effects were concentrated among students in English Immersion programs; ELs enrolled in dual language or transitional bilingual programs were not adversely impacted by EL classification.

## **2) EL Reclassification Should Be Based Primarily on Objective ELP Assessment Criteria**

Like the auto-exit criteria in grades 3-12, auto-exit in grades K-2 would be determined based on English language proficiency (ELP) as measured by the WIDA ACCESS 2.0. Using objective assessment ELP data to drive reclassification decisions is well aligned with the research literature across all grades, including grades K-2.

- A working group of EL experts determined that ELP assessments should be the primary factor in reclassification decisions (Linquanti & Cook, 2015).
- Uniform reclassification criteria can lead to less variability in classification and reclassification criteria across districts (Thompson, 2017). Subjectivity of some measures used to reclassify EL students can lead to a lack of consistency among school districts' reclassification patterns; shift to a uniform standard for auto-exit would mitigate this problem (Estrada & Wang, 2018; Okhremtchouk, Levine-Smith, & Clark, 2018)
- Even when there are a standard set of objective reclassification criteria set by the state, subjective criteria (e.g., classroom teachers' recommendations) can lead to different reclassification outcomes for students with the same scores on objective assessments, resulting in varying reclassification rates and thereby differential definitions of what it means to be an EL across schools/districts (Cimpian, Thompson & Makowski, 2017; Mavrogordato & White, 2017).
- When classroom teachers' recommendations are permitted to factor into reclassification decisions, they are all too often utilized to discourage reclassification for students who would have otherwise qualified for exit according to objective measures. For example, in a study of reclassification in Texas Mavrogordato and White (2017) found that teachers who recommended against reclassifying students who had met objective assessment criteria often did so for various reasons that have nothing to do with English proficiency such as the student possessing an introverted personality, lack of leadership skills, or disciplinary infractions. Teachers' recommendations against exiting a student who had met objective reclassification criteria was not meant to harm EL students—it was often well-meaning and an attempt to provide students with additional services. Unfortunately, it resulted in capable students who no longer required and arguably would no longer benefit from ELD support remaining classified as EL students.
- Educational leaders have considerable influence over reclassification, and they can use this influence to enable or obstruct social justice leadership when making reclassification decisions (knowingly or unknowingly) (Mavrogordato & White, 2020). A uniform auto-exit policy could mitigate some of these subjective decisions and level the playing field (Estrada & Wang, 2018).

## **3) The EL Label as a Double-Edged Sword**

EL students are initially identified in order to know which students should have access to language support services in order to meaningfully access core academic content. However,

researchers have shown that the EL label can negatively impact students. This suggests it makes sense to reclassify students who have demonstrated English proficiency so that they no longer carry the EL label, which aligns with expanding auto-exit to grades K-2.

- EL classification can limit ELs' access to core academic content, particularly English language arts (Umansky, 2016a). In a study of ELs' access to academic content in middle school, Umansky (2016a) found that ELs were excluded from core academic content area classes. Among other factors, their access to core academic courses was primarily limited by their prior academic achievement and EL classification (Umansky, 2016a). If students demonstrate English proficiency early in their academic career, automatic reclassification can afford them access to core academic content earlier.
- EL classification can restrict ELs' opportunities to learn with English-speaking classmates in early elementary school (Umansky, 2018). Auto-exiting English proficient students in early elementary school would increase their opportunities to interact with English-speaking peers and potentially prevent segregation.
- A study of sheltered instruction, in which EL students are placed in separate classes to target their English acquisition needs, found that sheltered courses were stigmatizing and left students with the impression that they lacked intelligence because of their placement (Dabach, 2014). Auto-exit could mitigate some of the negative effects of labeling for young ELs who have demonstrated English proficiency.

#### **4) Preventing Long-Term ELs**

Given growing concerns about long-term ELs (LTELs), research suggests that it does not make sense to delay reclassification for students who have demonstrated English proficiency in early grades.

- Multiple studies have documented that LTELs, those students who have been classified as ELs for more than 5 years, face multiple educational barriers and adverse educational outcomes. For example, retaining EL classification in the transition from elementary to middle school is associated with reduced access to academic coursework (Umansky, 2018).
- While ELs in grades K-2 are certainly not LTELs, the LTEL literature suggests that it is important to not delay EL reclassification if students demonstrate English language proficiency because it has the potential to limit their access to important learning opportunities (Thompson, 2015). For example, students who are pulled out of the general education classroom to receive ESL services but no longer need them may miss valuable academic content. In short, students kept in EL status for too long risk being excluded from rigorous academic content courses (Okhremtchouk, Levine-Smith, & Clark, 2018)

#### **5) Avoiding Misalignment of Services & Inefficient Use of Resources**

Providing ELD support services that do not align with EL students' needs is likely not only a waste of resources, but potentially also detrimental to students.

- A study of students with near English proficiency in kindergarten found that EL classification leads to large, significant, and growing adverse effects as measured by math and ELA standardized tests (Umansky, 2016b)
- EL students enter kindergarten with varying levels of English proficiency—those who begin with higher levels of English proficiency generally reclassify more quickly than

students entering kindergarten with lower levels of proficiency (Slama et al., 2014). Precluding students from exiting EL status could lead to students with high initial levels of English proficiency remaining classified as ELs for too long. Expanding auto-exit to K-2 will allow students with appropriate levels of English proficiency to reclassify at the optimal time.

- There are resource constraints with regard to funding allocated to services for EL students (Jiménez-Castellanos, 2017; Jiménez-Castellanos & Rodríguez, 2014). Districts are federally obligated to serve all EL students, regardless of ELP score, which indicates that already tight earmarked EL resources could be diverted away from the students who need those services the most in order to meet federal requirements. Moreover, some funding resources do not provide support for EL students who are at advanced levels of English proficiency. For example, in Michigan, Section 41 funding does not include support for students with WIDA ACCESS scores above 3.9.

## **6) Evaluating the Appropriateness of the EL Exit Criteria**

It is important to evaluate reclassification criteria to ensure that criteria are appropriate. In other words, states must ensure that the bar for reclassification isn't too high or too low. This is very challenging to do when many students who meet reclassification criteria are not exited from EL status.

- There is evidence that students fare well academically upon reclassification when the test-score criteria for reclassification is high; students experience negative effects of reclassification when the criteria are too low, but when those criteria are raised, students no longer experience those negative effects (Robinson-Cimpian & Thompson, 2015).
- Robinson (2011) introduced a methodological approach for states to use that will ensure their reclassification standards are at the right level (not too high, but not too low either)
- The process of automatically exiting EL students who meet reclassification criteria could facilitate the evaluation of the WIDA ACCESS 4.8 score reclassification threshold because it makes experiencing the “treatment” of reclassification much less fuzzy.

## **7) Exiting English Proficient K-2 Students as the Default**

Default options are the choices an education professional receives if they do not clearly choose an alternative option. Default options matter: A large body of research finds that individuals are more likely to choose the default option than others and think more favorably of defaults. Currently, the default option for K-2 students receiving a WIDA score of 4.8 or higher is to remain classified as EL rather than to reclassify.

- There is evidence that people perceive default policy options as the recommended choice, and therefore are more likely to select the default (McKenzie, Liersch, & Finkelstein, 2006). Implementing an auto-exit policy for grades 3-12 but excluding grades K-2 sends an implicit message to educators that students should remain EL in the early grades, regardless of their proficiency level.
- A large body of research finds that when presented with a default option, individuals align their perceptions to favor the default; they see the default as the favorable option and view forgoing the default as a loss (Brown & Krishna, 2004). A K-2 auto-exit policy

would signal to educators that students with demonstrated English proficiency should be reclassified.

- Research has examined whether individuals choose default policy options (in this case, regarding automatic voter registration) because they perceive the default option to be the best choice, or because the default option is the most easily available choice (Rakitch, 2019). This research found that changing the default voting option to automatic voter registration resulted in increased political participation (Rakitch, 2019). These findings can translate to K-2 auto-exit policies; automatically exiting students with demonstrated English proficiency would lead to greater reclassification than in the absence of such a default.

## 8) Important Caveats

While the research literature overwhelmingly suggests that there is not a reason to delay reclassification for EL students in grades K-2, there are a few important clarifications to make.

- **Bilingual & Dual Language Programs:** If students are enrolled in a bilingual or dual language education program, students should remain in the program beyond early elementary school in order to maximize their long-term benefits. That said, students can remain in such a program after exiting from EL status. As an example, in two-way dual language programs, many students are often native English speakers and were never classified as ELs to begin with. In sum, practitioners should not equate exiting EL status with exiting bilingual programming. It is important to note that funding earmarked for EL students (e.g., Title III, Section 41) cannot be used to support non-EL students in bilingual or dual language programs.
- **Districts remain in control:** Districts have the power to override the default of automatically exiting qualified students. If there are concerns that a student who meets reclassification criteria still requires EL support services, districts can override the default of automatically exiting the student and keep the student classified.

### Recommendation

Based on our review of the current rigorous research literature, there is strong support for making it the default to automatically exit EL students in grades K-2 who meet the MDE's reclassification criteria (currently this is an overall WIDA ACCESS score of 4.8). Literature did not surface during our review suggesting K-2 EL students who meet reclassification would benefit from remaining classified as ELs.

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