



BARRIERS TO EQUITABLE COURSE ACCESS FOR HIGH SCHOOL MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS:

A PARTNERSHIP FOR
LOS ANGELES SCHOOLS
CASE STUDY



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Multilingual Learner's/English Learner's (MLL) access to a wide array of college preparatory courses has historically lagged behind that of their non-MLL counterparts.¹ In this brief, we examine MLL course enrollment at four Los Angeles Unified School District (LA Unified, District) high schools that the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools directly serves, and discuss how current policy and practice impact students' experience. Overall we find that MLL students have less access to higher-level college preparatory courses and electives than their non-MLL counterparts. Our analysis suggests that MLLs' class schedules are driven by the need to complete necessary English-language development support requirements as part of reclassification, and an increased need for credit recovery, which inhibits their access to a full range of courses in high school. We also share insights and recommendations to address these challenges, including revisiting the current English Language Development (ELD) curriculum, prioritizing MLL enrollment with qualified teachers equipped to support students with language development, and offering priority enrollment in extended learning opportunities for MLL students. Our conversations with school personnel also suggested MLL students would greatly benefit from greater access to socioemotional and mental health supports.

INTRODUCTION

In spring 2021, we partnered with Los Angeles Unified School District (LA Unified, District) staff in the Jefferson-South Central Community of Schools to survey families of Multilingual Learner/English Learner (MLL) students in South LA. One of the key findings from the [Listening to Learn: Understanding the Experiences of English Learner Families](#) survey was that parents of MLLs believed their students did not have access to the full range of courses, including electives such as music and the arts. Further conversations with school staff supporting MLLs also surfaced the multifaceted barriers that students encounter in accessing course options, including reclassification requirements and particular challenges for newly arrived international students.

To honor the experiences and voices of our MLL families, and in recognition that course access plays a key role in student success,² we set out to learn about the policies and practices surrounding MLL student course enrollment in our schools. As an in-district partner to LA Unified directly supporting 20 traditional public schools in Watts, South LA and Boyle Heights, the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools (Partnership) is committed to ensuring that all students, including Multilingual Learners,



YOU DON'T KNOW HOW MANY STUDENTS COME TO ME SAYING, "MISS, I'M ONLY HERE 'TIL I'M 18, AND THEN I'M OUT." IT'S MY JOB TO MAKE SURE I CAN GET THEM TO COMPLETE AS MANY REQUIREMENTS TO GRADUATION THAT I CAN TO MAKE THEM FEEL ENCOURAGED TO STAY A LITTLE LONGER.

— Title III Coach

have the opportunity to graduate from high school college and career ready. In this brief, we examine MLL course enrollment at four Partnership schools and discuss how current policy and practice impact the experiences of these students. Overall we find that MLL students have less access to higher-level college preparatory courses and electives than their non-MLL counterparts. Our analysis suggests that MLLs' class schedules are driven by the need to complete necessary English-language development support requirements as part of reclassification, and an increased need for credit recovery, which inhibits their access to a full range of courses in high school.



WE HAVE KIDS WHO COME AND WHEN YOU ASK THEM WHO THEY'RE HERE WITH, IT'S ALWAYS A TÍA, TÍO, DISTANT COUSIN, OR A MOM THEY HAVEN'T SEEN IN 10 YEARS. IT'S A TOUGH SITUATION THEY'RE FACING.

— Counselor working with MLLs

ALMOST HALF OF LA UNIFIED STUDENTS ARE EVER-MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

While MLLs are often considered a small minority group within districts, the reality in LA Unified is quite different. According to the LA Unified Open Data Enrollment dashboard, during the 2021-2022 school year, Ever-Multilingual Learners (students who have at some point in their K-12 educational trajectory been Multilingual Learners) made up over 44% of the entire LA Unified student population. Multilingual Learners who have yet to reclassify made up over 21% of the entire student population. These numbers are even higher for the schools served by the Partnership, where Ever-MLLs make up 60% of students, and current Multilingual Learners make up over a quarter of the student population. While most MLLs reclassify before they arrive in high school, this brief addresses high school MLLs who have not yet reclassified or are newly arrived international students.

Key Terms

There is an active conversation in the English Learner advocacy and practice communities around the terminology that the field uses to describe students in the process of learning English in the United States. "English Learner" is a legal and civil rights term that describes the government's obligation to these students, and it is still a technical classification commonly used in districts and schools across the country. In recent years, advocates and districts, including LA Unified, have moved to adopt umbrella terms that emphasize the assets these students hold and minimize the politicized negative connotations that have become associated with the term "English Learners."

In this brief, we use the term Multilingual Learner (MLL) as the umbrella term to refer to students who have been formally identified for additional English language learning supports³ and have yet to reclassify. There are a few instances where we use Multilingual Learner and English Learner interchangeably for simplicity.

Additional terms used in this brief, include:

- International Newcomers - foreign born MLL students who have been enrolled in a U.S.-based school for three years or less⁴;
- Long-Term English Learners (LTELs) - students in grades 6-12 enrolled in U.S.-based schools for 6 or more years as MLLs;
- Non-Multilingual Learner - in this paper, we define students who are not currently designated Multilingual Learners as non-MLLs. This includes students designated as Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP), Initially Fluent English Proficient (IFEP), or English Only (EO);
- Ever-Multilingual Learners - students who at some point in their educational trajectory were Multilingual Learners, including reclassified MLLs and current MLLs. and current MLLs.

EVER-MLLS MAKE UP OVER 40% OF THE ENTIRE STUDENT POPULATION IN LA UNIFIED.

2021-22 Partnership for LA Schools High School Enrollment by MLL Typology

Classification	Partnership Network Schools
Multilingual Learner	16%
<i>Subset of Multilingual Learners</i>	
International Newcomer	29%
Potential Long-Term English Learner (PLTEL)	7%
Long-Term English Learner (LTEL)	64%
Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP)	54%
English Only (EO)	23%
Initially Fluent English Proficient (IFEP)	7%

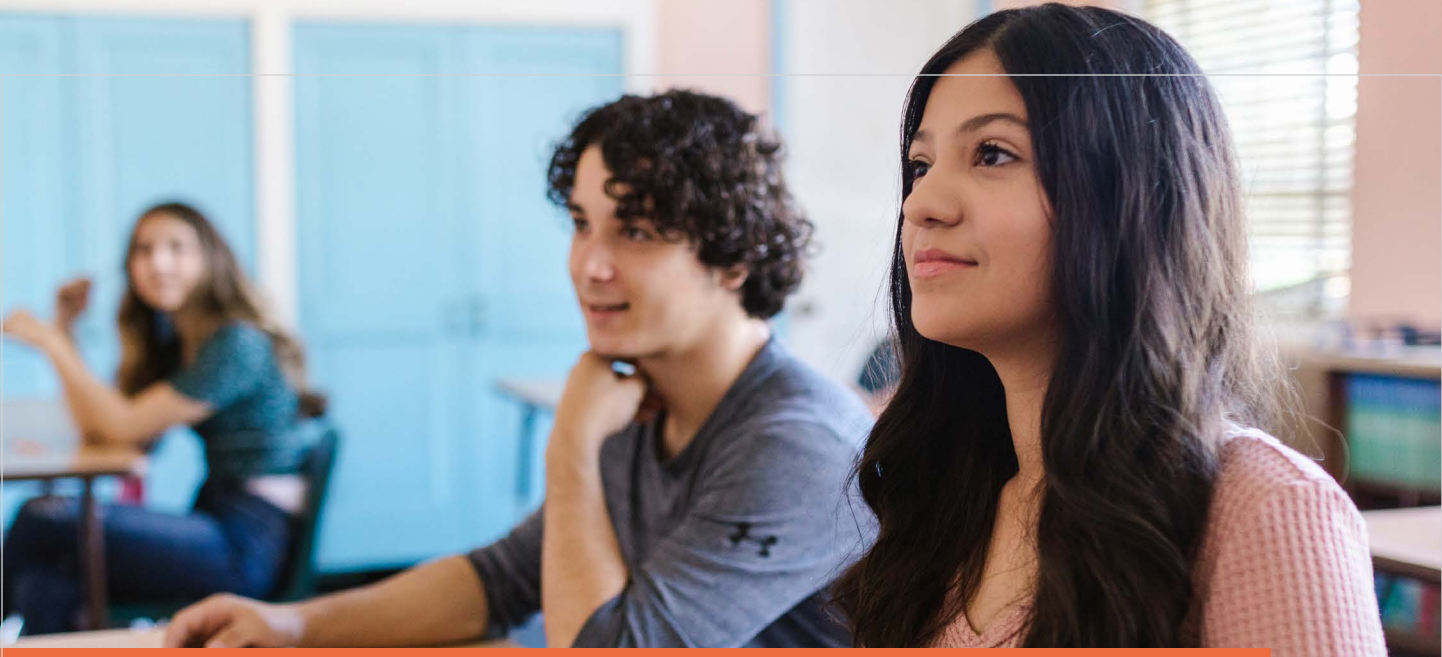
Source: California Department of Education

METHODOLOGY

To understand the course enrollment landscape for MLL students in LA Unified, we utilized student-level enrollment schedules at four LA Unified high schools that are supported by the Partnership. We compared course enrollment schedules of students currently designated Multilingual Learners against students not labeled MLL by examining yearly transcripts for students who, upon entering high school, had an expected graduation date of 2021 and had not reclassified during the given high school year. We also disaggregated the MLL classification, examining the course enrollment and grades of Long-

term English Learners and International Newcomer students. In addition, we conducted interviews with individuals working directly with MLL students at each high school. While MLL students are allowed to remain in school until the age of 21 to complete their requirements, we focused on a 4-year graduation timetable to compare timelines with non-MLL students' trajectories, and because the school personnel we spoke with noted MLL students often do not stay enrolled beyond the age of 18.





FINDINGS: MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS HAD LESS ACCESS TO A-G COURSES THAN NON-MLLS

Our analysis showed a clear difference between the courses that non-MLL high school students typically took compared to MLL students. Multilingual Learners were enrolled in fewer upper-level courses than their non-MLL counterparts and had fewer opportunities to take elective courses.

Finding 1: MLLs have less access to higher-level math courses

For 12th grade students, less than 60% of Multilingual Learner students were enrolled in a fourth-year math course in contrast to the 70% of non-MLL students enrolled. From these enrolled students, there were three times as many non-MLL students enrolled in an Advanced Placement (AP) math course. Further details on enrollment can be found in the appendix of this brief.

Finding #2: MLLs have less access to visual and performing arts courses

Course enrollment disparity is also seen in Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA), where approximately half (49%) of non-MLL students were enrolled in VAPA courses in their first year of high school. In contrast, slightly more than a quarter (26%) of Multilingual Learner students were enrolled in the same year. At least half of non-MLL students were enrolled in a VAPA course during 11th and 12th grade years, while most MLL did not access VAPA courses until their senior year.

Enrollment in a 4th-year math course & AP math course

	Students Enrolled in a 4th-year Math Course	Students Enrolled in an AP Math Course
Non-MLL	69%	14%
Multilingual Learners	59%	4%
Long-Term English Learners	54%	2%
International Newcomers	57%	9%

Student enrollment in an A-G approved Visual and Performing Course by Grade-level

	2017-2018 (9th Grade)	2018-2019 (10th Grade)	2019-2020 (11th Grade)	2020-2021 (12th Grade)
Non-MLLs	50%	13%	53%	66%
Multilingual Learners	26%	16%	39%	59%



Finding #3: International newcomer students are not enrolled in grade-level English courses

An even greater disparity was observed for Newcomers' access to grade-level English courses. Only about a fifth of Newcomer students enrolled in an approved A-G English course during 9th grade and only about a third in the 10th grade. In contrast, 100% of non-Multilingual Learner students enrolled in an approved A-G English language course in both 9th and 10th grade. Newcomer students were also found to be enrolled in English language courses below their grade level, with 58% of these students taking a 9th or 10th-grade English course during their 11th-grade year.

Students taking an approved A-G English course (%)

	9th Grade	10th Grade
Non-MLLs	100%	100%
International Newcomers	22%	34%

ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT COURSES CAN COMPLICATE COURSE OFFERINGS FOR MLLS

Multilingual Learner students' typology influences the courses that students are required to take. MLL students are required by federal and state legal requirements, as outlined in the [California Department of Education English Learner 2022–23 Program Instrument](#), to take additional courses to develop their English Language skills. These critical targeted language development courses can complicate a school's ability to provide a variety of courses for Newcomer students since it requires a double blocked period in a student's schedule. LTELs similarly face this scheduling constraint since they have to take a targeted English language development course until they reclassify.

While taking these crucial language development courses can restrict the number of available periods in MLL schedules, theoretically there is still enough room for a 9th grade-incoming Newcomer student to graduate on time with all of their A-G requirements completed in four years. However, our analysis showed



WE DO HAVE TO DEAL WITH THE DOUBLE BLOCK OF ELD FOR NEWCOMERS, AND THEY OFTEN HAVE TO MAKE UP COURSES IN THEIR JUNIOR AND SENIOR YEARS... THEY ALSO DO SUMMER COURSES TO MAKE UP FOR WHAT THEY'RE MISSING.

— Title III Coach

schools face significant challenges in finding alternative times for students to take their courses, given the smaller margin of open periods for MLL students compared to their non-MLL counterparts.



CHALLENGE OF PASSING GRADES FURTHER LIMITS COURSE ACCESS

In addition to having fewer available periods in their schedules, our analysis showed students' grades directly influenced the courses they took. High rates of grades below a "C" are unfortunately more common for Newcomers and LTELs than other students and indicate the need for greater support and stronger instruction. Our analysis showed that a significant percentage of

Newcomer students and LTELs receive a "D" or "F" for a final grade. While these year-long intensive language development courses are meant to provide targeted English language support, the majority of students do not receive a passing grade, pointing to a gap in the support these courses provide.

MLL Group Enrolled in Bilingual/ELD Courses	Course Name	Students with "D" or "F" End Grade (% of students enrolled)
Long-Term English Learners	Advanced ELD 1	36%
	Advanced ELD 2	52%
	Literacy & Language	53%
	Literacy & Language 2	47%
International Newcomers	ELD 1	46%
	ELD 2	18%
	ELD 3	38%
	ELD 4	75%

Low course grades for MLLs were not reserved to just language development courses, but were also seen in other subject areas including math. This points to a greater need for support for MLLs more broadly, given that getting low course grades in core subject areas, and

therefore having to retake these courses, diminishes a student's ability to have flexibility in their schedules but also impacts their ability to take advanced placement courses down the line.

Multilingual Learner Typology	Students with "D" or "F" End Grade in Algebra 1
Long-Term English Learners	55%
International Newcomers	58%



THRIVING STUDENT EXAMPLES: PASSING GRADES AND EXTRA OPPORTUNITIES

For MLLs to complete their reclassification and A-G requirements, our analysis and conversations with schools showed that it's imperative that they pass their classes the first time and take advantage of summer school and credit recovery to access the full range of courses and graduate on time. We showcase two student transcripts of MLL students who passed their classes on time and resorted to looking for out-of-school opportunities to graduate on time.

While it's commendable that these students were able to do well by passing their classes on time and taking advantage of other opportunities available to them, we know from our analysis that this is not typical for most MLL students. Their success should not solely rely on students' advocacy and extraordinary effort but also depend on a host of resources available to them in the first place. It is imperative that we create systems and policies that enable school conditions for all students to have the same results as the ones exemplified here.

Student 1: International Newcomer – Appendix B

Student 1, a newly arrived Newcomer student, successfully passed all their courses, including their ELD series and their grade-level courses, with a grade of "C" or better which ensured that they would not have to make additional space in their schedule to retake courses. This student also took courses at the local community college to fulfill requirements that would have proved difficult to schedule due to constraints made in their schedule by ELD support courses. As a result, the student was able to skip a grade level while fulfilling their requirements, and graduating with a UC GPA above a 3.0.

Student 2: Long-Term English Learner - Appendix C

Student 2, a Long-Term English Learner student, successfully passed most of their courses with a grade of "C" or above. The student was required to retake very few courses and attended summer school immediately following the semester to complete these requirements. The student graduated on time within four years.

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL EFFORTS TO MITIGATE COURSE ENROLLMENT CHALLENGES

LA Unified policy is that all students have access to the full range of college preparatory curricula. In 2005 the District adopted an A-G resolution (reaffirmed in 2015) which aligns course requirements for high school graduation with admission requirements for CSUs and UCs. This commitment by the District means that *all* students, including MLL students, should have access to take necessary college preparatory courses and electives needed for student development and college readiness.

In recognizing the complexity surrounding the support for MLL students, LA Unified also revamped its Master Plan for English Learners and Standard English Learners in 2018. This Master Plan provides guidelines, implementation, and recommendations for schools to support MLL students, including providing detailed information about course enrollment and scheduling in service of MLLs. Included recommendations encompass the active enrollment of MLL students in arts, music, and electives alongside non-MLL students, and hiring more dually certified teachers with content area certifications and full MLL authorizations (Chapter 4, Master Plan).

[LA Unified's 2022-26 Strategic Plan](#) includes a clear focus on eliminating opportunity gaps for specific student groups, including multilingual learners (Pillar 1C). This spring, the District is planning to launch a new policy addressing equitable course placement for MLLs. This revamped policy is intended to improve MLL course access and support high academic achievement.

Schools across LA Unified are also working to support MLLs with equitable course enrollment. Schools are

SPOTLIGHT

The team supporting MLLs at Santee Education Complex collaborates to identify and work with Newcomer students who would benefit from an accelerated program to have access to A-G courses earlier than anticipated. The team works with the District to implement a waiver to hold their yearly Literacy & Language Early Acceleration Program (L2EAP) in which students have nearly all their instruction in English but with a curriculum designed for students still learning the language⁵ under a rationale that students exposed to the English language sooner than under traditional Newcomer programs more quickly gain the language skills they need to be placed into mainstream courses. This program also allows students to take mainstream English courses alongside their introductory ELD courses, beginning with English 9 in 9th grade instead of waiting until their 11th grade year to take it, bypassing some of the scheduling constraints.



utilizing targeted tactics to support their students in accessing and passing the courses necessary for college eligibility and preparation.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

The current state of MLL course access requires that the educational community take immediate action to ensure that MLL students have access to, enroll in, and thrive in A-G courses necessary for college preparation and success. As an organization serving Multilingual Learner students in 20 LA Unified schools, we recognize the need to improve our own practice and are working to strengthen support for MLLs in our schools. In the spirit of continuous improvement, we offer four actionable recommendations that we can take together with LA Unified to better support MLL students, not just in our network of schools, but across LAUSD.



We need to improve the effectiveness of English Language Development courses.

High rates of course failure indicate that these classes are too often not meeting the needs of students. Considering that ELD courses make up a significant portion of student schedules, and can be a barrier to access for a full broader range of coursework, we need to ensure ELD courses serve to rapidly accelerate language skills and set students up for success in the full range of coursework. Toward this end, we need to revisit the structure and curricula of ELD courses and support teachers with the planning time, professional development and coaching needed for strong instruction.



We must assess how curricula in non-ELD courses can support MLL students and encourage schools to proactively enroll them in courses with teachers best equipped to support their development in respective subject areas.

Failing non-ELD courses can become a potential roadblock for students looking to have schedule flexibility in coming years, as it also affects a student's ability to complete necessary prerequisites to take advanced courses during later years in their high school journey. Failing grades in non-ELD fields suggests that students require additional academic support in other subject areas as well, and therefore it is critical that we review master scheduling and grading practices, particularly for MLL student populations, to leverage teachers best equipped to teach MLL students. We must also review the curriculum in non-ELD courses to find innovative ways to incorporate support for MLL students. -



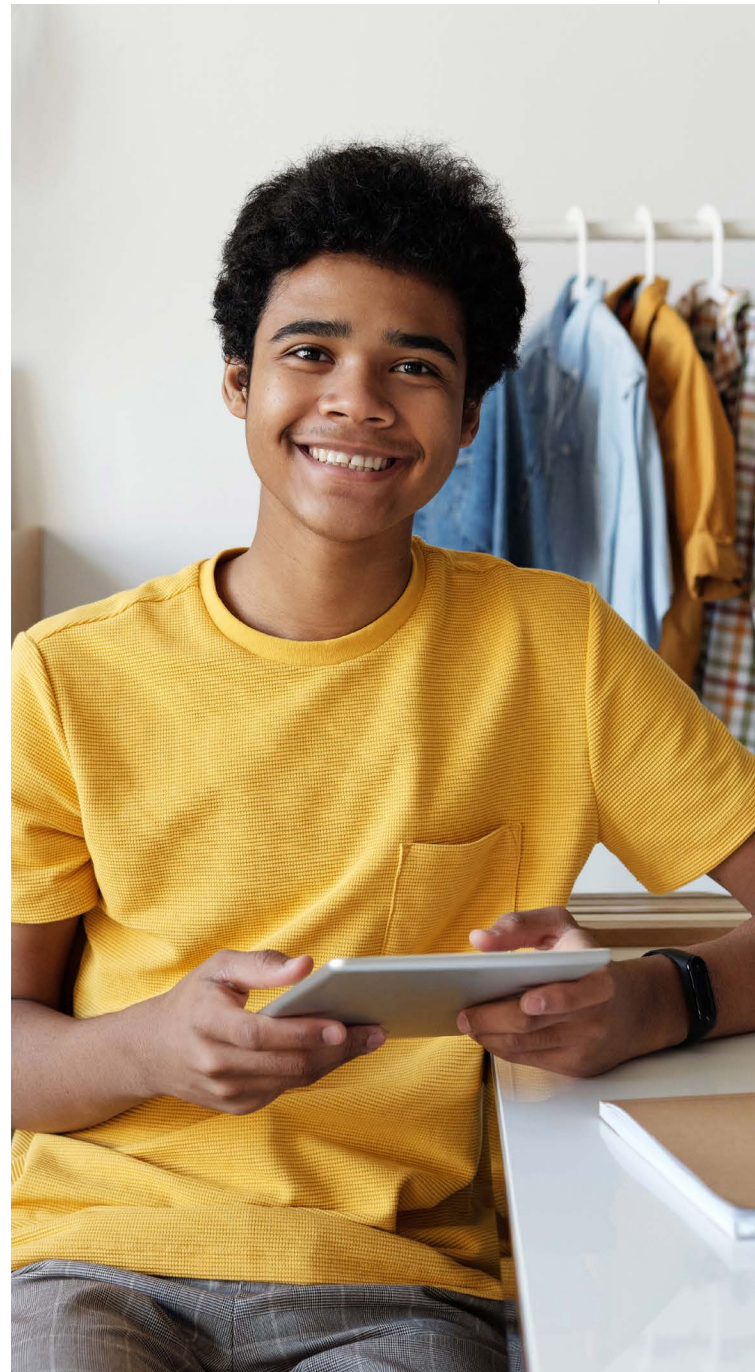
We need to provide greater socioemotional and mental health support for MLL students, particularly newly arrived Newcomer students.

The pandemic has exacerbated the difficulties Newcomer students face. School personnel we interviewed lifted up the challenges students face with adjusting to a new culture, navigating a new school and compensating for previous interrupted schooling, learning another language, and in some cases learning how to utilize technology that is now considered a standard norm in the classroom. In order for students to be able to focus on their academics, it's crucial that we provide them the necessary support to feel well and safe in and out of school. We need to make sure there are strong systems of support in place that allow schools to get to know their students on an individual basis and are equipped to provide necessary supports.



Multilingual Learners should have priority enrollment in extended learning opportunities.

We need to find creative solutions to ensure that MLL students have equitable access to academic coursework. Extended learning opportunities that happen before school, after school, or during school breaks could make a huge difference in a student's course enrollment trajectory by providing additional spaces to both receive academic assistance and provide them with more time to make up missing or failed courses.



CONCLUSION

Every student should have access to a wide array of courses that not only serve to complete their graduation and college eligibility requirements, but also engage their individualized interests and learning goals. Evidence suggests that MLL students are often unable to take advantage of this experience, and our study shows that this is primarily due to constraints with the mandated scheduling of ELD support courses and the trend of failing courses requiring a re-take. The myriad requirements MLL students are expected to meet should be paired with adequate support and resources so that students complete their requirements and pass their courses the first time they take them. Multilingual Learner students should not have to take extraordinary measures to ensure they are eligible and prepared for college. Together we must ensure that MLL students have access to the courses and support they need.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Multilingual Learner & Non-MLL A-G Enrollment and Advanced Placement Enrollment (% of student group)

A-G Requirement	MLL Classification & AP Enrollment	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
History	MLL %	11%	87%	92%	8%
	Non-MLL %	8%	98%	99%	5%
English	MLL %	64%	69%	94%	99%
	Non-MLL %	100%	100%	100%	100%
Math	MLL %	100%	99%	96%	58%
	Non-MLL %	100%	99%	97%	69%
Science	MLL %	78%	85%	52%	37%
	Non-MLL %	95%	98%	83%	57%
Language Other than English	MLL %	42%	17%	62%	29%
	Non-MLL %	47%	78%	67%	33%
Visual and Performing Arts	MLL %	26%	16%	39%	59%
	Non-MLL %	50%	13%	53%	66%
College Preparatory Elective	MLL %	29%	5%	4%	98%
	Non-MLL %	36%	4%	10%	99%

Appendix B:

International Newcomer Student – [Student #1.pdf](#)

Appendix C:

Long-term English Learner Student – [Student #2.pdf](#)

Appendix D:

[REF-123303](#) - High School Placement, Curriculum, Scheduling and Staffing for English Learners for 2021-2024

This document details the reclassification requirements for high school Multilingual Learners in LA Unified.

Endnotes

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- <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sg/englishlearner.asp#:~:text=English%20Learner%20E2%80%93%20A%20student%20who,indicates%20programs%20and%20services%20are>
- [REF-123303 High School Placement Curriculum Scheduling and Staffing for English Learners for 2021-2024 .pdf](#)
- https://www.santeefalcons.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=522366&type=d



This brief is brought to you by The Len Hill Civil Rights Project at the Partnership for LA Schools — working to advance policy to ensure that all students access their civil right to a high-quality education.

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