

The Impact of At-Risk and English Learner Status in Nevada Schools

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As part of ongoing support to the Commission on School Funding and the Nevada Department of Education, WestEd analyzed the impact of the two demographic categories, which together are responsible for a lion's share of the Pupil-Centered Funding Plan's (PCFP) weighted allocations to districts and schools, on six measures of academic success and attainment. Using data from the 2021–22 through 2024–25 school years, we find a substantial and statistically significant effect of English Learner status on early literacy performance that is concentrated in schools serving larger proportions of English Learners, but we find no effect on performance in later grades or on additional indicators such as chronic absenteeism. Additionally, we find no impact of At-Risk status on six indicators of academic success and attainment (standardized tests in multiple subjects, chronic absenteeism, and graduation rate). These results suggest that the resources provided by the PCFP are being used to target the early literacy skill of English Learners but are not yet being used to successfully provide distinct, effective support to At-Risk students in ways that are detectable in the outcomes we analyze in this report.

Introduction

This analysis evaluates the impact of being designated as an English Learner (EL) or At-Risk on subsequent test scores, chronic absenteeism, and graduation rate. These two groups of students generate a substantial amount of funding for the schools and districts that serve them, both because the weights applied to those students are large (.45 and .35, respectively) and because of the number of designated as an EL or At-Risk in Nevada public schools (each group is between 50,000 and 60,000 students annually in recent years). A third student group, Gifted and Talented Education (GATE),

also generates additional funding via the PCFP, but both the weight (.12) and population (less than 9,000 students annually in recent years) are smaller, leading to considerably less funding being allocated on the basis of GATE. Consequently, we focus on At-Risk and EL students.

In our analysis, we evaluate the impact of being labeled an EL or At-Risk student, which includes additional funding and the entire basket of services paid for with that funding. This approach has the benefit of revealing how resources overall are enhancing the education of EL and At-Risk students rather than a particular set of services like after-school tutoring, family engagement, or professional development. The limitation of this approach is that we are unable to determine precisely which service models are having the greatest impact on EL and At-Risk students.

We evaluate the impact of being designated as EL or At-Risk at the beginning of the school year on subsequent measures of student performance, most often tests taken the following spring. We use data from the 2021–22 through 2024–25 school years. The WIDA is given in the spring, which determines status in the upcoming fall; as a result, the 2021–22 data is used to determine EL status for 2022–23, 2022–23 data is used to determine EL status for 2023–24, and 2023–24 data is used to determine EL status for 2024–25. For At-Risk students, status is first observed in our data in fall 2023–24 and 2024–25 school years. A prior year of data exists for At-Risk status (2022–23) but does not include the underlying Graduation Related Analytic Data (GRAD) score upon which this evaluation relies.

The research design separates the impact of the student designation (EL or At-Risk) from all of the other factors that influence student achievement by focusing on the students that are close to the eligibility threshold. For EL students, that means observing students who take the WIDA the preceding spring and whose scores fall into a narrow band around the cutoff score that determines whether a student remains an English Learner or is reclassified as English proficient. For At-Risk students, we observe students within a narrow band on the GRAD score around the cutoff that determines whether a student is labeled as At-Risk for the coming school year or not. This research strategy (a regression discontinuity design) is able to reveal the causal impact of receiving the label of EL or At-Risk, net of all other determinants of student achievement, for students in those narrow bands. That substantial benefit comes at the cost of being unable to determine the impact of EL or At-Risk labels on students with the lowest WIDA and GRAD score values. The results provided here should be

understood as applying the students who are “barely” eligible for EL and At-Risk status, along with all of the additional resources that comes with those labels.

Descriptive Statistics

At-Risk and EL students have lower test scores and attend higher-need schools than do their not-At-Risk and not-EL peers. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, At-Risk and EL students are more likely to attend Title I schools and schools that have been given lower ratings in the Nevada School Performance Framework (NSPF). Among elementary students, 87% of At-Risk students attend Title I schools, compared to 53% of not-At-Risk elementary students. Where only 19% of not-At-Risk students attend schools with a one-star rating (the lowest rating in the NSPF system), 43% of At-Risk students attend such schools. Similarly, where 46% of not-At-Risk elementary students attend schools with a one- or two-star rating, 78% of At-Risk students attend such schools. The differences are similar across EL and not-EL students, though the magnitudes are slightly smaller.

Table 1: School Setting for At-Risk and Not-At-Risk Students

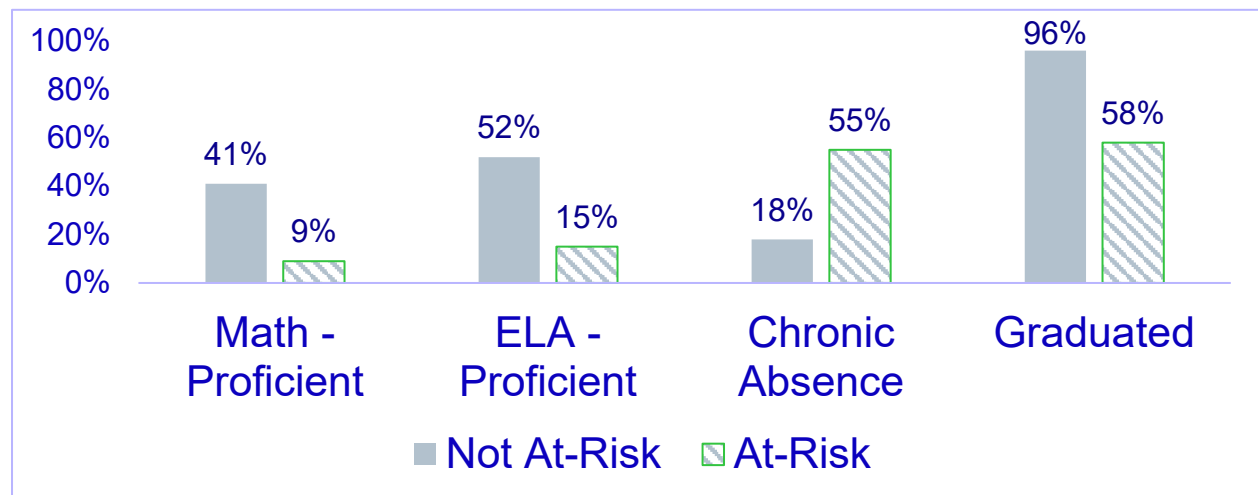
Among Elementary Students	% of Not-At-Risk Students	% of At-Risk Students
Title I School	53%	87%
One-Star School	19%	43%
One- or Two-Star School	46%	78%

Table 2: School Setting for EL and Not-EL Students

Among Elementary Students	% of Not-EL Students	% of EL Students
Title I School	57%	85%
One-Star School	23%	36%
One- or Two-Star School	50%	71%

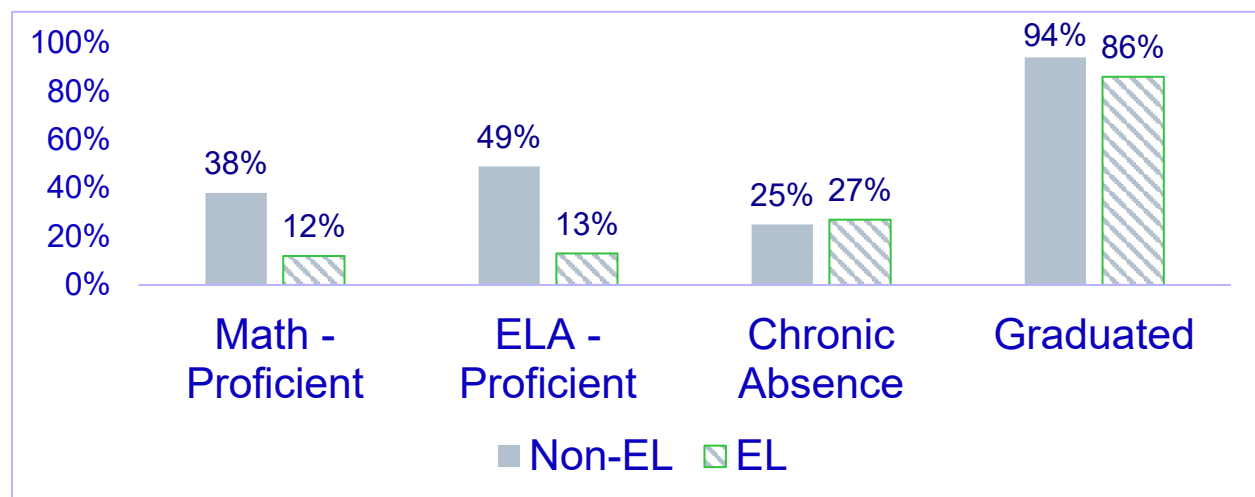
Looking at measures of student performance, At-Risk and EL students have lower-average test scores than their not-At-Risk and not-EL peers. Figure 1 contains the comparison by risk status. At-Risk students have proficiency rates that are markedly below their not-At-Risk peers in both math and ELA: 9% versus 41% and 15% versus 52%, respectively. At-Risk students also have a higher rate of chronic absenteeism and a lower graduation rate than their peers. Where 18% of not-At-Risk students are chronically absent, 55% of At-Risk students are. Though nearly all (96%) of not-At-Risk students graduate with their cohort, only 58% of At-Risk students do so. These patterns should not be surprising, given that At-Risk status is partially based on measures of academic success.

Figure 1: Performance of At-Risk and Not-At-Risk Students



These differences across EL status mirror the differences across risk status for test scores but not absences and graduation. EL students have lower rates of proficiency in math and ELA than their peers: 12% versus 38% and 13% versus 49%, respectively. However, rates of chronic absenteeism do not markedly differ across EL status. About 27% of EL students are chronically absent, and 25% of not-EL students are chronically absent. At 86%, EL students have a lower graduation rate than their non-EL peers, 94% of whom graduate with their cohort. While that difference is substantively important, it is not as extreme as the difference across risk status. Overall, the data provides a picture of EL and At-Risk students who are struggling academically and attending higher-need schools. This is the very basis on which the state provides additional resources for these students.

Figure 2: Performance of EL and Not-EL Students



Outcomes

We use six outcomes for this evaluation: standardized tests of math, ELA, science, and early literacy, along with chronic absenteeism and graduation status. Math and ELA data are from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) given in the spring of each year to 3rd through 8th graders. Science is given to 5th and 8th graders and once in high school, though we use only the 5th and 8th grade tests to ensure the same grade-at-test composition across At-Risk and EL statuses. Early literacy data come from Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress's (MAP) RIT scores and are available for 1st through 3rd grades. Absences are measured by a chronic absenteeism flag at the student level, which is available for all grades. Graduation status comes from a student-level flag indicating whether a student graduated with their cohort. In all cases except graduation, we observe the impact of being designated as At-Risk or EL in the fall on outcomes measured at the end of the same academic year. For graduation, we observe the impact of being labeled At-Risk at the beginning of 11th grade on the probability of graduating with one's cohort at the end of 12th grade.

We use these six outcomes because they are readily available and provide a multifaceted view of student academic success. However, some of the outcomes are clearly more relevant to EL and At-Risk status than others. Because EL status is a designation based upon tests of English language acquisition, early literacy and ELA

tests are likely more aligned to the services EL students receive than are tests of science or chronic absenteeism. Similarly, because At-Risk status is determined based on students' probability of graduating with their cohort, graduation status is a plausibly better indicator of success than standardized test scores.

Impacts

We find a substantial and statistically significant effect of English Learner status on early literacy performance but not on performance in later grades or on additional indicators such as chronic absenteeism. We find no impact of At-Risk status on any of the outcome measures. For the sake of concision, we focus on the positive effect of EL status on early literacy and the null result for At-Risk status on graduation rate.

Figure 3 provides the impact of EL status on early literacy (i.e., RIT scores), both overall and by school EL proportion. The green diamond indicates the statewide effect of EL status, which is a .33 standard deviation increase in RIT score. While the overall statewide effect estimate is not quite statistically significant ($p = .12$), the effects across school type (the blue boxes) clearly indicate a larger effect of EL status in schools serving a medium and high proportion of EL students. These effects are large and statistically significant. No such effect is present in schools serving the lowest proportion of English Learners.

Figure 3: The Effect of EL Status on Early Literacy (RIT) Scores

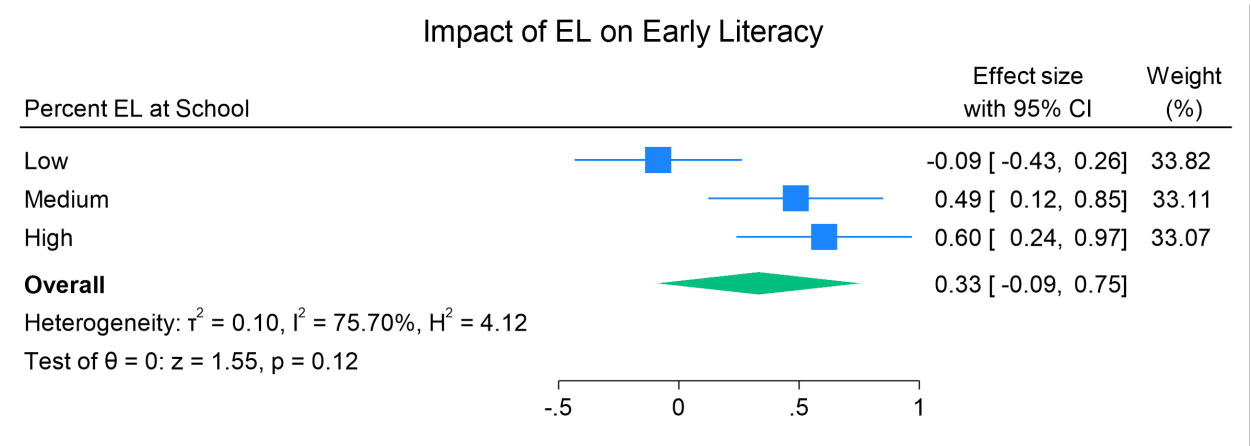
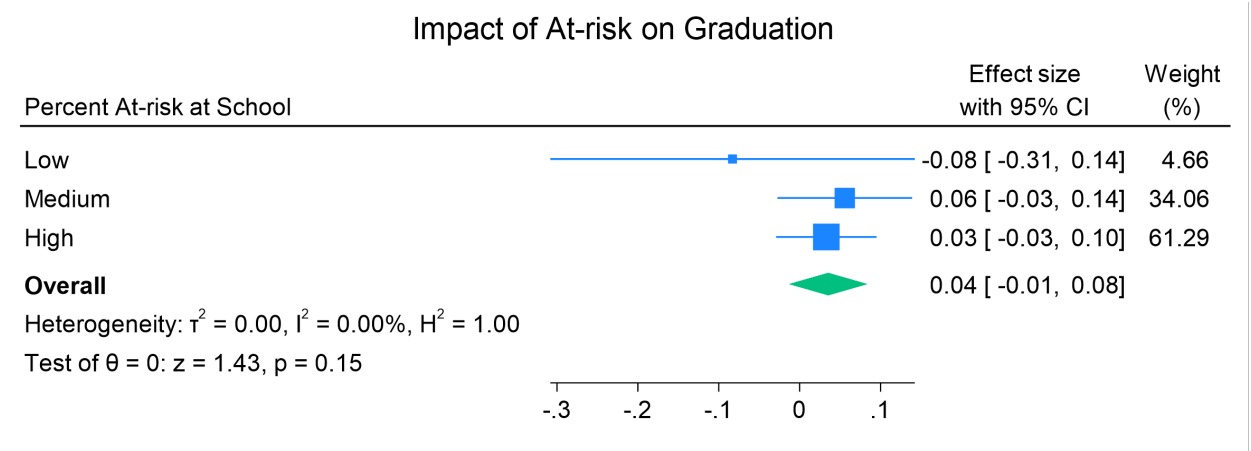


Figure 4 provides the impact of At-Risk status on graduation, both overall and by school At-Risk proportion. The green diamond indicates the statewide effect of 4 percentage

points is too small to be statistically distinguished from zero. When analyzing the effect across schools that serve different proportions of At-Risk students, there isn't a clear pattern—the effect is statistically indistinguishable from zero in all three school types and is particularly imprecise in schools that serve a small share of At-Risk students.

Figure 4: The Effect of At-Risk Status on Graduation Rate



Implications

These results provide distinct implications for the state’s efforts to boost the achievement of students targeted for additional resources by the PCFP. First, the fact that resources for English Learners appear to be having a large effect on early literacy, especially in schools with higher concentrations of EL students, suggests that PCFP resources are being effectively employed to benefit younger EL students. In addition to maintaining such efforts, the state may want to explore options to prolong the effectiveness of EL resources into later grades.

For At-Risk students, the lack of measurable impacts suggests a need for additional coaching for districts and schools. While systems to identify and serve EL students have been in place for decades, the At-Risk indicator is a relatively recent innovation in the state. Consequently, there is not a large body of research and expertise on which indicator to rely on when deciding how to best serve At-Risk students. Also, unlike EL status, the At-Risk indicator is based on nearly 70 measures of student need and performance, which could lead to confusion over exactly which interventions would be most beneficial to At-Risk students. It is also possible that the overlap between At-Risk

status and other student categories that generate funding (disability status and EL status), is leading to inadequate funding levels for the schools that serve students with multiple categories of need. As the state continues to discover how best to target and serve At-Risk students, it will be important to remain attentive to both coaching and funding adequacy.