

# HOW HAVE STATES SET GOALS FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS IN ESSA PLANS?

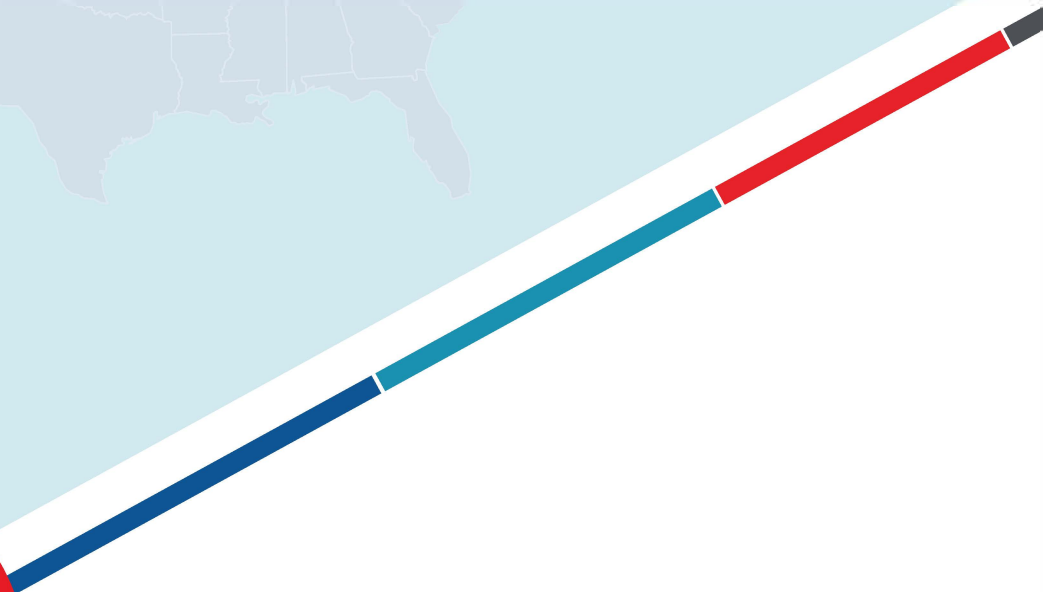
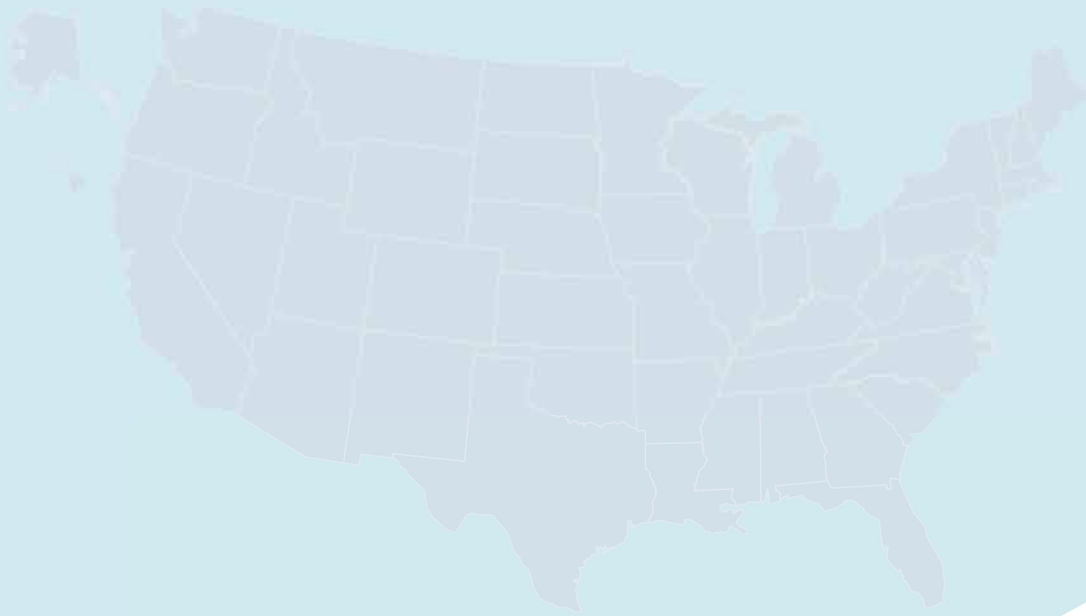
*An analysis of states' academic and English language proficiency goals.*



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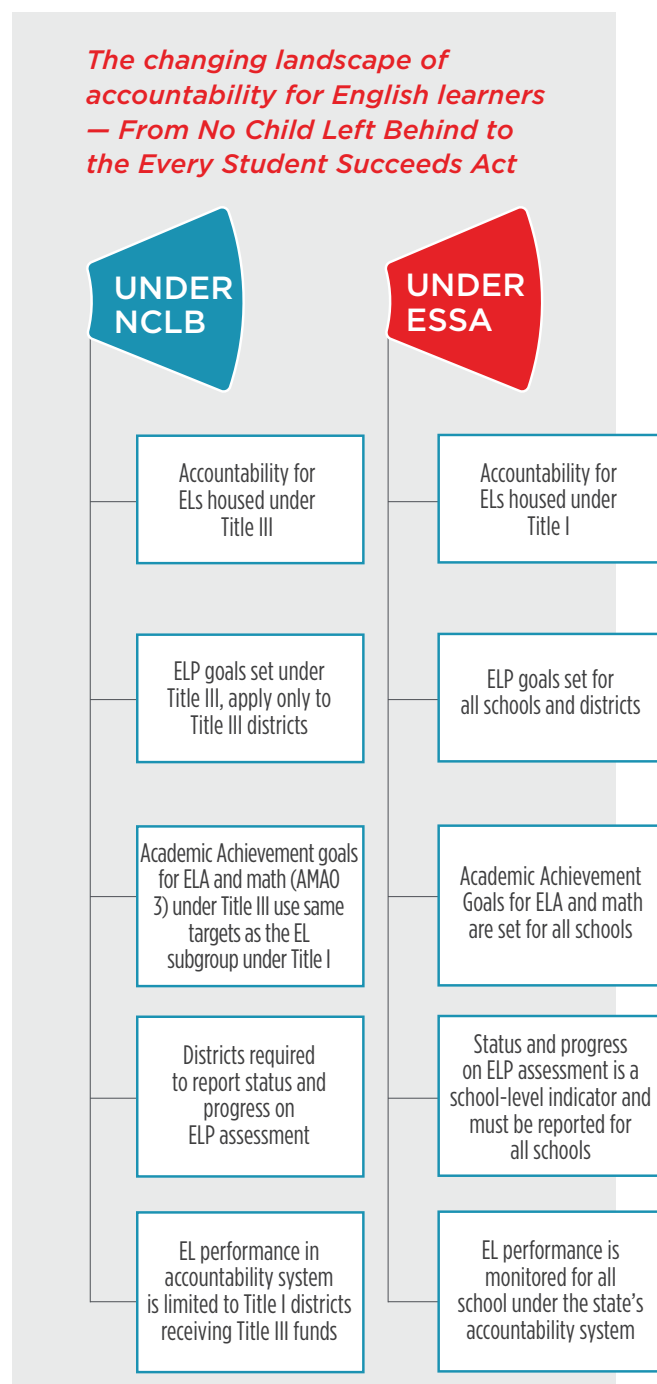



# HOW HAVE STATES SET GOALS FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS IN ESSA PLANS?

*An analysis of states' academic and English language proficiency goals.*

There are nearly five million English learners (ELs) in our K-12 public schools, and ELs continue to be one of the fastest growing student subgroups. As such, it is imperative that state and local systems deploy appropriate strategies and resources to ensure that educational outcomes for ELs are in step with all student groups, and that all ELs exit the K-12 system ready to succeed in college and careers. To this end, states must be intentional about setting ambitious yet achievable goals for ELs for academic achievement in all core content areas. States must also ensure that ELs are making gains in English proficiency at a steady clip and set rigorous statewide targets for the same.

In 2015, Congress reauthorized the federal law that governs K-12 education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), by passing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In a bid to reestablish states' authority to determine the targets and the timeline for improving student outcomes, ESSA did away with Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) targets, allowing states to set their own goals for academic achievement, graduation rate, and English language proficiency (ELP). At the same time, ESSA now requires that states include an indicator for progress toward ELP as a part of their state accountability system. In doing so, states must build in tangible weights for the performance of English learners in the accountability formula, such that each school must focus on how they serve their English learner students, as this now has immediate bearing on the school's accountability rating.





This closer lens on the achievement of ELs in schools is a welcome shift — if the accountability system points to challenges a school is facing in serving the EL students, the state accountability structure could trigger additional district- and state-level supports and interventions for those students.

States can and must leverage this opportunity to set both academic achievement and ELP targets that are appropriate per their state context, while utilizing the ELP indicator within their accountability system to monitor progress toward these targets. To this point, each state's local context, demographic makeup of the student body, geographic distribution of English learners, and many other factors often drive the state's decisionmaking about the goals, and some degree of variation in states' approaches to goal-setting is to be expected. However, as in any goal-setting exercise, it is important to ensure that states' goals for ELs are challenging, grounded in historical data and the state's unique context, and that progress toward them is assessed using consistent and rigorous assessment measures.

ESSA requires states to outline their academic and ELP goals and provide a detailed proposal for the statewide accountability system in an ESSA plan that would be submitted to the U.S. Department of Education (USED) for review. In 2017, every state submitted an ESSA plan to USED, and as of the publication of this brief, 42 states and the District of Columbia have received approvals for their proposed plans, and 8 state plans are under review.

This brief provides a two-part analysis of states' goals for English learners in ESSA plans. First, it examines states' academic achievement goals for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics for ELs, and how those relate to the rigor of targets states are setting for other student groups. Next, it presents an analysis of the EL proficiency goals proposed in ESSA plans, and provides a closer look at how states are proposing to assess strides in English language proficiency for ELs.

## Academic Achievement Goals

English learners in the K-12 system must acquire content knowledge alongside their peers (e.g. in mathematics, reading, and science), while simultaneously working toward mastering English. ELs historically have lower proficiency rates in both ELA and mathematics, as compared to their never-EL learner peers. Policymakers in states and districts are charged with ensuring ELs are well-supported in becoming English proficient, and, at the same time, are acquiring grade-level content knowledge on pace to achieve proficiency and be prepared for college and career. To this end, it is important that states are intentional about setting challenging academic achievement goals for all students, including ELs.

Under NCLB, academic achievement goals for ELs were monitored under Title III. States were required to set achievement targets known as Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs) for all subgroups, including ELs, under Title I. However, since accountability for ELs under NCLB was housed under Title III, the monitoring of English learners' progress on these AMAOs was limited only to districts receiving Title III funding. This meant consequences for not meeting AMAOs for English learners were not applicable to schools not receiving Title

III funding.<sup>1</sup> Under ESSA, this dual system was eliminated, and states are now required to set long-term goals for ELA and mathematics performance of ELs, alongside those set for all other subgroups. States must monitor and prioritize EL performance for all schools as a part of their state accountability system [ESEA sections 1111(c)(2), 1111(c)(4)(A), and 1111(c)(4)(A)(i)(I)(aa)].

This section of the brief examines how English learners are assessed and the long-term academic goals the states have presented for ELs in their ESSA state plans. The following analyses focus on several key questions: How do the EL goals compare to the goals for all students? How much do ELs need to progress each year to reach their long-term goals? What factors must states consider when setting goals (assessments, accommodations, definitions)? Achieve and UnidosUS reviewed the academic achievement goals states have proposed in their ESSA plans to answer these questions.

## How are English learners being assessed in ELA and mathematics?

Statewide summative assessments are a crucial lever in measuring the progress of English learners in academic content areas. States use summative data to establish baselines for EL academic proficiency goals, and trace the trajectory of EL progress on these assessments over time. These assessments vary widely from state to state: state developed, or those developed by an assessment consortium; comprehensive or end-of-course assessments in high school; and, in many cases, college-entrance exams such as ACT or SAT for high schools. There is also wide variation in how states define and set the standard for proficiency on their summative assessment. These differences mean that what is considered “proficient” in ELA and mathematics in one state can be very different from how proficiency is defined in another state.

## What assessments and accommodations are states providing to English learners?

Assessing students in their native language, when appropriate, can help better assess content knowledge by removing some language barriers. Native language assessments are a valuable measure of students’ content mastery and their progress toward proficiency. If states are able to ensure that native language


<sup>1</sup> Goldschmidt, P. & Hakuta, K. (2017). Incorporating English Learner Progress into State Accountability Systems. Washington DC: Council of Chief State School Officers. [https://www.ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/Incorporating%20English%20Learner%20Progress%20into%20State%20Accountability%20Systems\\_Final%2001%2012%202017\\_0.pdf](https://www.ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/Incorporating%20English%20Learner%20Progress%20into%20State%20Accountability%20Systems_Final%2001%2012%202017_0.pdf)

### Native Language Assessments

A native language assessment is one that is a standalone assessment of content knowledge. The assessment should be developed independently or concurrently with an English version of the assessment, meaning that the content and specifications of the native language assessment consider the nuances of the native language and culture and are not dependent on the English version of the assessment. Other subtypes of assessments offered in a native language are translated or transadapted assessments. Translated tests simply exchange the English words for their counterparts in the native language. A transadapted test is a more substantial change that considers phrasing in the context of language structure and culture.

Some states also offer assessment accommodations that provide additional supports to ELs during test administration where a native language assessment is unavailable or inappropriate. They serve as a measure to assist ELs on content assessments. The form of accommodations varies state by state and from one content assessment to another. Examples of accommodations include oral translations of the test instructions, a mouse-over glossary of terms in the test, and additional time.





assessments are clear, rigorous, and aligned with the standards on the state’s summative assessment, they could be used to establish baseline proficiency levels and measure the progress of ELs toward states’ long-term achievement goals. It is important to note that a native language assessment may not be appropriate in every content area or for every student who is an English learner. However, for some populations of ELs, such as older ELs who received formal academic instruction in another language prior to enrolling in U.S. schools, these assessments provide valuable academic achievement results for students.

ESSA requires states to define and identify languages other than English that are present to a significant extent, and to report the state’s existing native language assessments or any plans to develop additional native language assessments.<sup>2</sup> The decision to provide or develop these assessments was left at the discretion of the states. Most of the state plans that indicated that they were providing a native language assessment or accommodation were not specific. Achieve and UnidosUS provide an analysis based on the states’ plans and recommend stakeholders and policymakers contact a state’s education agency directly for more information on how they have interpreted this.

Our review of states’ ESSA plans shows that 28 states have developed some assessments in another language, usually Spanish. Most of these states offered a native language assessment for mathematics and many others have committed to developing an assessment. Nearly as many states (27) provide accommodations to their students. There is much overlap in the states that provide native language assessments and accommodations, and most native language assessments are limited to one content area.

However, seven states (AZ, FL, GA, MS, MT, SC, and TN) have no assessment or accommodations offered for their ELs in any content area. For example, Florida does not offer any such supports for their students because their state constitution establishes English as the state language and prohibits the use of another language in public school instruction. Florida’s Department of Education ignores the fact that nearly 10 percent of their student population are ELs and does not identify the need for a native language assessment, or at the very least, accommodations for this large population of students. In contrast, other “English-only”<sup>3</sup> states have begun work to support their ELs. Kentucky still provides accommodations for their EL population, which represents just over 3 percent of their student population, as they have seen a rapid increase in the numbers of ELs in their schools. Two other “English-only” states—Arkansas and Mississippi—have committed to developing native language assessments should they see a language other than English present to a “significant extent.”

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<sup>2</sup> States have varying definitions of what qualifies as a native language assessment. While some states only include independently-developed native language assessments, translations, and transadaptions in this category, other states report accommodations as native language assessments. For purposes of this section, “native language assessments” refers to what was reported by states in their ESSA plans.

<sup>3</sup> For purposes of this brief, English-only means that the state has indicated in some way that they only provide instruction and assessment in English. Depending on the state, this can be a result of state statutory language, the adoption of an official state language, or as outlined in the state constitution.

**Table 1: Native Language Assessment Availability and English Learner Population by State**

Based on fall 2015 National Center for Education Statistics Data

*States with less than 3.0 percent EL population (9)*

State	EL Population	Assessment(s) Available	Developing Assessment(s)	Accommodations Available
Alabama	2.7%		✓	
Maine	2.8%	✓	✓	
Mississippi	2.0%			
Montana	2.2%			
New Hampshire	2.3%			✓
North Dakota	3.0%	✓		
Ohio	3.0%	✓	✓	✓
Vermont	1.6%			✓
West Virginia	1.0%			✓

*States with 3.0 percent to 6.0 percent EL population (14)*

State	EL Population	Assessment(s) Available	Developing Assessment(s)	Accommodations Available
Idaho	4.6%	✓		
Indiana	4.8%	✓	*	✓
Iowa	5.4%	✓	✓	*
Kentucky	3.2%			✓
Louisiana	3.3%	✓		✓
Michigan	5.8%	✓	*	✓
Missouri	3.2%		*	
New Jersey	4.9%	✓	✓	
Pennsylvania	3.1%	✓		✓
South Carolina	5.6%			
South Dakota	3.4%	✓		
Tennessee	4.1%			
Wisconsin	5.3%	✓		
Wyoming	3.1%			✓

\* These states are not currently developing an assessment/providing accommodations but will do so if their EL population reaches the state-defined threshold for a language present to a significant extent.



States with 6.0 percent to 10.0 percent EL population (20)

State	EL Population	Assessment(s) Available	Developing Assessment(s)	Accommodations Available
Arizona	6.1%			
Arkansas	7.8%		*	
Connecticut	6.5%			✓
Delaware	7.2%	✓	✓	✓
District of Columbia	7.4%	✓		✓
Florida	9.6%			
Georgia	6.4%			
Hawaii	7.5%		*	
Illinois	9.5%	✓	*	✓
Maryland	7.2%	✓		✓
Massachusetts	8.6%	✓		
Minnesota	8.2%	✓	*	✓
Nebraska	6.6%	✓		
New York	8.0%	✓	✓	✓
North Carolina	6.6%			✓
Oklahoma	6.8%			✓
Oregon	9.2%	✓		
Rhode Island	7.4%	✓		✓
Utah	6.6%		*	✓
Virginia	8.5%			✓

States with 10.0 percent or higher EL population (8)

State	EL Population	Assessment(s) Available	Developing Assessment(s)	Accommodations Available
Alaska	11.5%		*	
California	21.0%	✓	✓	✓
Colorado	11.6%	✓		✓
Kansas	10.6%			
Nevada	16.8%	✓		
New Mexico	15.7%	✓	✓	✓
Texas	16.8%	✓		
Washington	10.4%	✓		

\* These states are not currently developing an assessment/providing accommodations but will do so if their EL population reaches the state-defined threshold for a language present to a significant extent.





## How are states setting academic achievement baselines for ELs?

States use a wide variety of summative assessments to assess academic achievement in ELA and mathematics, set proficiency cut scores at varying levels, and provide varying levels of support to ELs in taking these assessments. All these factors impact states' baseline achievement numbers for ELs, and those baselines in turn impact states' goals.

In examining states' long-term goals for academic achievement, Achieve and UnidosUS reviewed states' baseline scores for achievement in ELA and mathematics for ELs. Our review found that states' baseline proficiency levels on their assessments vary widely, and these differences are significantly more pronounced for the EL subgroup. This is not surprising given the variances in EL populations from state to state, the differences in states' summative assessment systems, and potential differences in how states define the EL subgroup.

Researchers in this field have long cautioned policymakers that considering historical data and each state's unique context is of utmost importance when developing goals and accountability systems around a state's EL strategy.<sup>4</sup> A recent analysis of states' long-term goals by Achieve notes that these baselines are generally not comparable. The authors further note: *"Differences in the assessments administered among states — particularly differences in the rigor of the achievement standards used to determine whether students are proficient — should be taken into account when trying to understand the great variation in students' 'starting point'."*<sup>5</sup> This issue with comparability is further compounded for ELs because ELs are often assessed for ELA and mathematics in English before they have reached English language proficiency. As such, the states' assessments could potentially be an inaccurate measure of their content knowledge because of complications with understanding English.

While significant variances in baseline scores are to be expected, state leaders must acknowledge that ELs are a historically underserved group and remain circumspect about the multiple factors that impact the proficiency baselines and the long-term goals for ELs. One of the key things that can impact both states' baselines and their achievement outcomes is how they have defined the EL subgroup — states must be mindful about how long they continue including former and/or reclassified ELs in this subgroup for reporting and accountability purposes. Including reclassified ELs may create an inaccurate representation of the academic achievement of students who are currently classified as English learners and are actively receiving supports to acquire English language proficiency. ESSA limits the inclusion of reclassified EL students at a maximum of four years after they have exited EL status, states should not only consider this statutory cap, but also examine the data to see how the inclusion of reclassified ELs may, or may not, skew the performance data of the current EL subgroup. States also have the option of examining reclassified ELs as a separate subgroup to measure how they are performing once they are no longer receiving additional supports and services to attain ELP.

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<sup>4</sup> Hakuta, K. and Pompa D. (2017). Including English learners in Your State Title I Accountability Plan. Washington DC: Council of Chief State School Officers. [http://www.ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/ESSA%20EL\\_State%20Action%20Paper-Final%2001%2012%202017\\_0.pdf](http://www.ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/ESSA%20EL_State%20Action%20Paper-Final%2001%2012%202017_0.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Thinking Long Term: State Academic Achievement Goals Under ESSA; <https://www.achieve.org/files/sites/default/files/ThinkingLongTerm-StateAcademicAchievementGoalsUnderESSA.pdf>

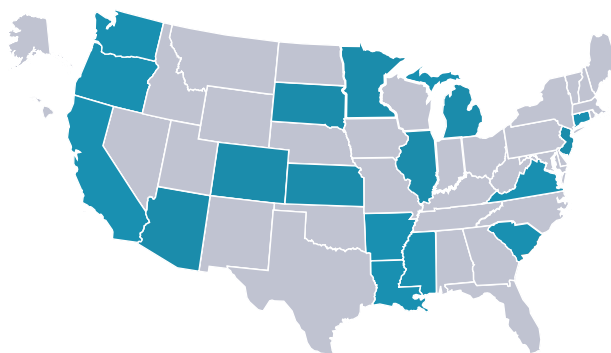
## How do the English learner goals compare to the goals for all students?

The academic success of ELs should be at the forefront of states' college and career readiness strategy, and states must ensure that they prioritize grade-level content mastery for EL students in their system. State's academic achievement goals send a powerful signal to schools, communities, and stakeholders alike about the state's priorities and its commitment to all students. To avoid sending the signal that states expect lower achievement for student subgroups that start out further behind, states should set the same goal for all schools and for all groups of students.<sup>6</sup> As such, long-term academic achievement goals for ELs must be set at the same level as all other student groups.

Our review found that states' ELA and mathematics goals for ELs often differ from the overall goals for all students within a state. Many states chose to differentiate academic goals by student subgroups, rather than setting one high standard and offering the necessary supports to the individual subgroups to all reach that goal. Researchers and civil rights groups alike have noted that such approaches fail to require more progress for schools and for groups that are further behind, and only perpetuate disparities for historically underserved students, including ELs.

Seventeen states and the District of Columbia have set the same long-term goal for all student subgroups, while 29 states have set lower targets for their EL subgroups. One state, Oklahoma, did not specify academic achievement goals in its ESSA plan. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 below demonstrate the pronounced gaps between the goals states have set for all students for ELA and mathematics, and those they have set for ELs in the same content areas. Of the 29 states that have differentiated goals by subgroup, 21 states have set proficiency targets that are at least 15 percentage points lower for ELs in ELA, and 12 states have set proficiency targets that are at least 15 percentage points lower for ELs than they are for all students in mathematics.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 1:** *Which States Set the Same Long-Term Mathematics and ELA Goals for All Subgroups?*



Achieve and UnidosUS found that this trend of lower expectations for ELs is not only pervasive, but also severe in many states. Iowa tops the list of states setting drastically lower expectations for their ELs — while they expect 80 percent of all students to achieve proficiency on the grade 11 ELA assessment, only 26 percent of ELs in the state are expected to demonstrate proficiency — a goal that is 54 percentage points lower for ELs. Likewise, for grade 11 mathematics, while 84 percent of students statewide are expected to be proficient, the state has an expectation of proficiency from only 43 percent of ELs — a bar that is lower by 41 percentage points.

<sup>6</sup> Students Can't Wait – Setting Goals for Accountability. Washington DC: Education Trust. <https://edtrust.org/students-cant-wait/setting-goals-accountability/>

<sup>7</sup> Florida did not identify their EL goal but did indicate that the subgroup would have a different goal which could potentially fall into this category of states.

**Figure 2.1:** Gap Between Goal for English Learners and Goals for All Students, ELA  
(For States that Differentiated Goals)

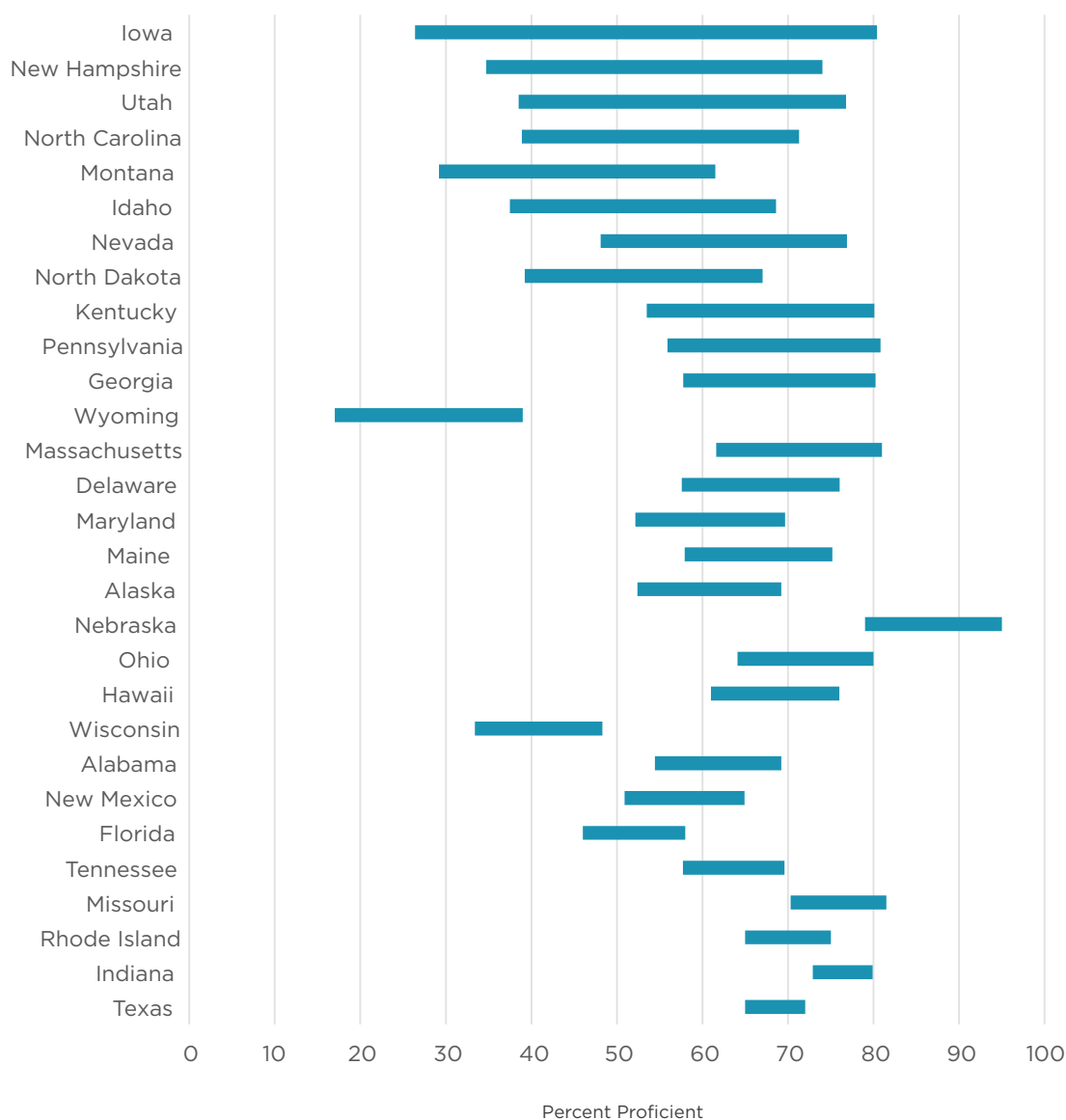


Table reads: Indiana’s goal for ELs is 73 percent and its All Student goal is 80 percent.

\*New York uses a performance index score (110 for ELs, 182 for All Students). Vermont uses a scale score (2515 for ELs, 2617 for All Students). Oklahoma’s plan does not specify its goals. All other states set the same goal for the EL students as for their All Students group. West Virginia does differentiate goals by subgroup; the gap for mathematics goals between All Students and ELs is 0.2 percent.





**Figure 2.2:** Gap Between Goal for English Learners and Goal for All Students, Mathematics (For States that Differentiated Goals)

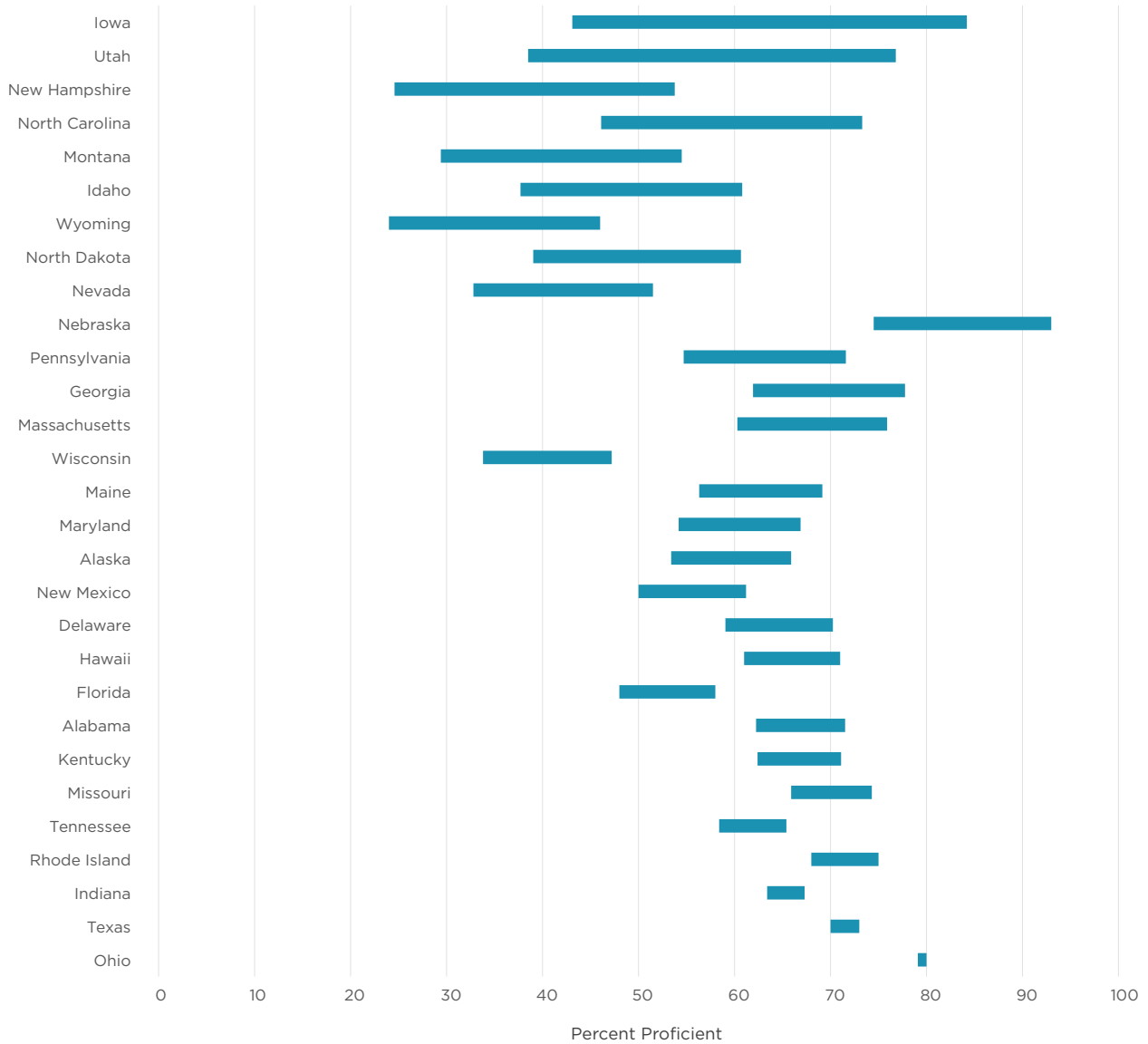


Table reads: Ohio's goal for ELs is 79 percent and its All Student goal is 80 percent.

\*New York uses a performance index score (118 for ELs, 161 for All Students). Vermont uses a scale score (2582 for ELs, 2617 for All Students). Oklahoma's plan does not specify its goals. All other states set the same goal for the EL students as for their All Students group. West Virginia does differentiate goals by subgroup; the gap for mathematics goals between All Students and ELs is 0.2 percent.

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## How much do English learners need to progress each year to reach their long-term goals?

**Forty-three states and the District of Columbia** set percent proficient long-term goals for their EL students. The remaining seven states take different approaches; Colorado, New York, and Vermont set score or percentile level goals, California sets a school-level goal, and Florida, Oklahoma, and Virginia do not specify their approach. States' measures of interim progress—their intermediary goals that define increases in the percentage of ELs meeting academic achievement goals for ELA and mathematics—and the timeline to meet these goals varied widely. On average, **states' ELA achievement goals would require an increase of 3.45 percentage points per year**, ranging from 0.83 percentage points in Iowa to 7.45 percentage points in Minnesota (Figure 3.1). Similarly, for mathematics, **states' goals would require an average change of 3.35 percentage points per year**, ranging from Iowa's 0.83 percentage points to New Mexico's 7.2 percentage points (Figure 3.2).

### English Language Proficiency Goals

In an effort to refocus states' attention on improving outcomes for ELs, ESSA requires that states fully incorporate ELs into general requirements for school-level accountability under Title I. To accomplish this, states must include an indicator for Progress in Achieving English Language Proficiency (ELP) as a part of their multi-measure accountability system for all schools. States must also include long-term goals and measurements of interim progress related to ELP progress in their ESSA plans [ESEA, as amended by ESSA, sections 1111(c)(4)(A)(ii) and 1111(c)(4)(B)(iv); 34 C.F.R. §§ 200.13(c) and 200.14(b)(4)].

This section of the brief examines the long-term goals states have set for English language proficiency in their ESSA plans. As with the academic achievement goals, ESSA requires that states set clear and ambitious goals for ELP that could serve as a central driver for improving statewide outcomes. ESSA provides states with complete autonomy over what these goals are. However, states are faced with a complex and shifting landscape of ELP standards and assessments even as they are gearing up to implement their ESSA plans.

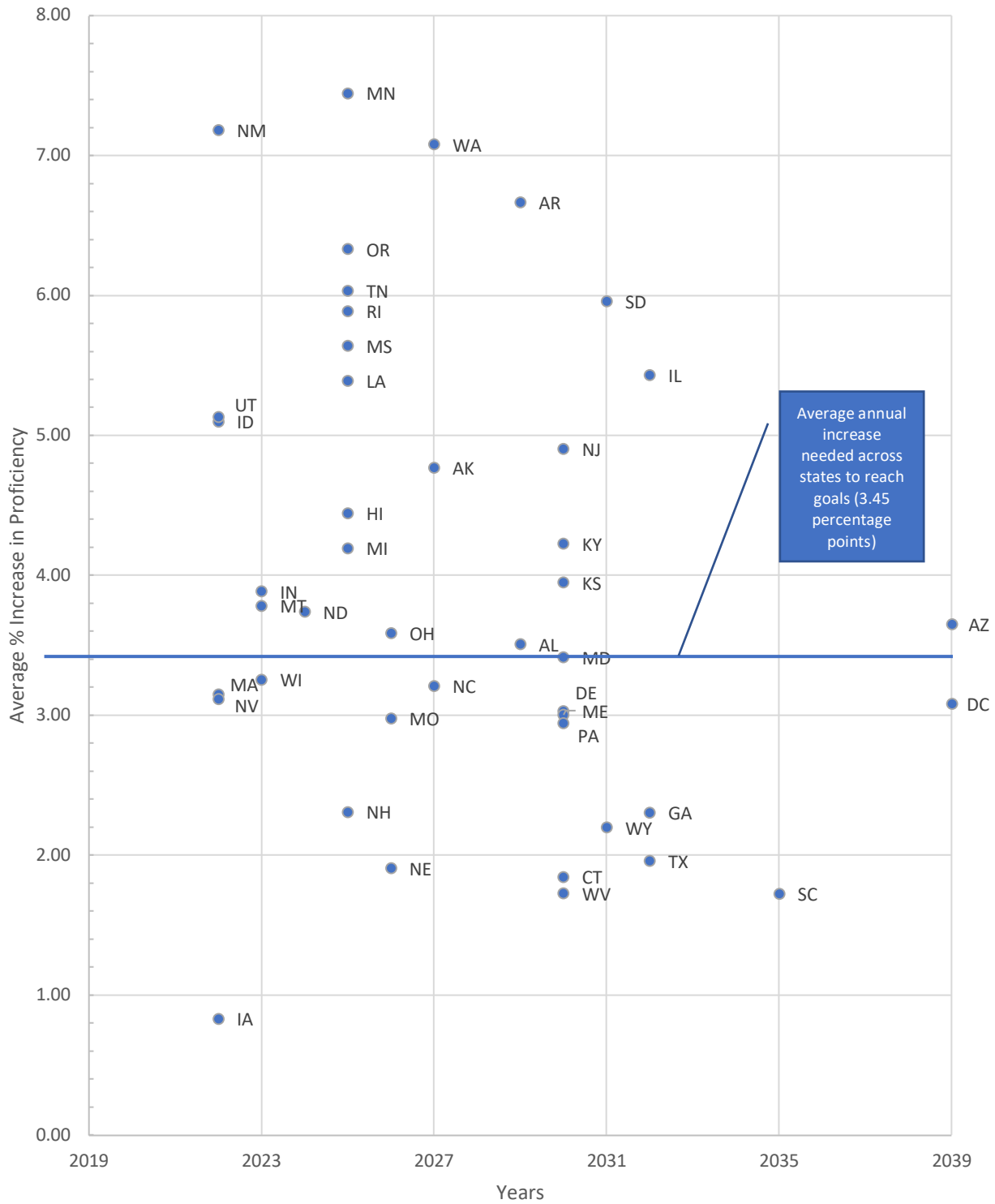
### A Shifting Landscape of ELP Standards and Assessments

In recent years, with the adoption of the college- and career-ready (CCR) standards, almost every state has had to revisit its ELP standards to ensure that they align with the rigor of the state's content standards.<sup>8</sup> Without this alignment, states are at risk of exiting students from EL status before students are able to demonstrate content knowledge in ELA and mathematics against the state's content standards. Prior to the passage of ESSA, USED instituted a Title III requirement that states' ELP standards be aligned with the state's CCR standards. As such, most states undertook the task of revising their ELP standards and the assessments aligned to those standards.

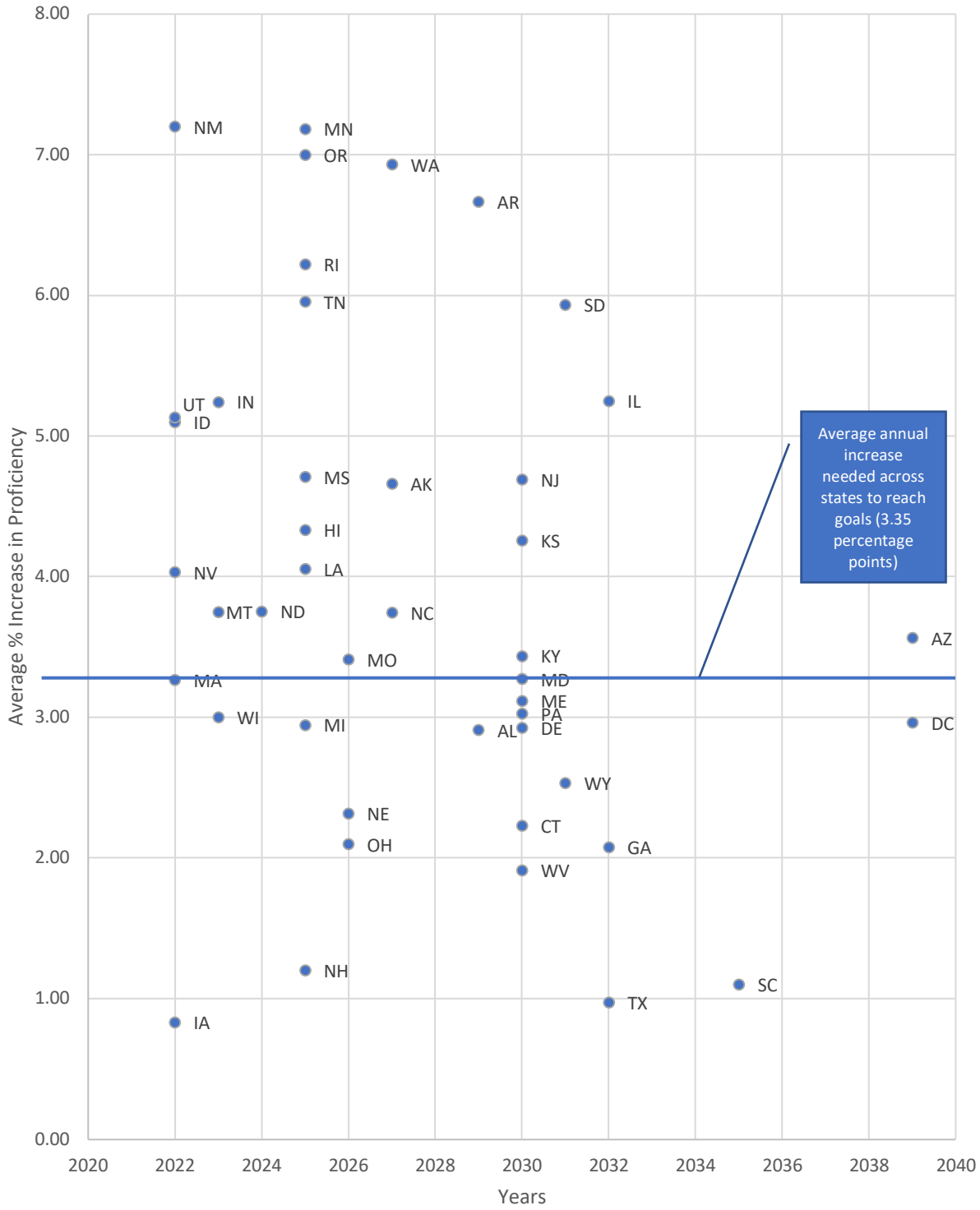
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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.achieve.org/files/Considerations\\_Assessing\\_ELLs.pdf](https://www.achieve.org/files/Considerations_Assessing_ELLs.pdf)

**Figure 3.1:** Measures of Interim Progress for English Learners, ELA (From 2019-2039)



**Figure 3.2:** Measures of Interim Progress for English Learners, Mathematics (From 2019-2039)



The ELP assessment that states administer is a critical component in gauging and improving the English proficiency of students. States assess incoming ELs when they first enter the state’s system using the statewide ELP assessment to measure the students’ initial level of English proficiency. Students are assessed at multiple points in time (usually annually) using the same statewide assessment with the expectation that they will make incremental gains in proficiency and exit when they demonstrate English proficiency at a state-defined cut point on the ELP assessment.<sup>9</sup>

Given the centrality of the assessment measure to this process of identifying English proficiency, assessing interim progress, and exiting EL status, selecting the right rigorous assessment is crucial. First, the assessment must measure a clear and accepted set of standards of English language proficiency. Next, the assessment must allow states to measure incremental growth in English proficiency at multiple points in time. Finally, states must set a consistent and rigorous bar for proficiency that students must reach in order to exit EL status.

### What ELP assessments are states using and how they impact states’ baselines for ELP goals?

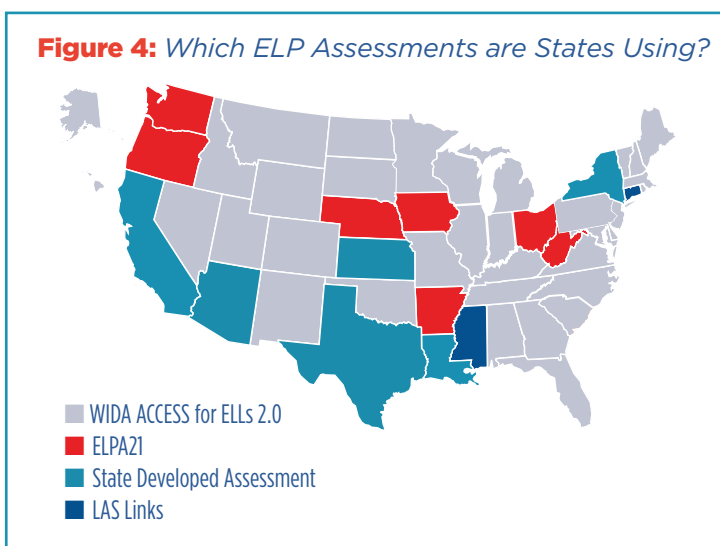
Achieve and UnidosUS found that the majority of states participate in one of two major ELP consortia in the country:

*The WIDA consortium represents 36 states* that have adopted a common set of English Language Development (ELD) standards and administer a K-12 assessment to assess proficiency in those standards. WIDA assessments measure social and instructional language, and the languages of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

#### *The English Language Proficiency*

*Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21)* is a consortium of seven states. ELPA21 English Language Proficiency Standards were developed by WestEd, CCSSO, the Understanding Language initiative of Stanford University, and member states. The assessments assess English language proficiency in English language arts, mathematics, and science.

Over two-thirds of the states are members of the WIDA consortium and administer the ACCESS for ELLs 2.0 as their statewide ELP assessment. The ACCESS for ELLs 2.0 is the revised version of the WIDA assessment that was developed in alignment with the member states’ revised ELP standards. The seven member states of the ELPA21 consortium administer the ELPA21 assessment. Two states—Connecticut and Mississippi—administer LAS Links. Five states (AZ, KS, LA, NY, and TX) are using a state-developed assessment.



<sup>9</sup> Liguanti, R. Cook, H.G. (2013). Toward a “Common Definition of English Learner”. The Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington D.C.: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED542705.pdf>





Given states' recent work on developing aligned ELP assessments, a majority of states are administering fairly new tests. This has posed challenges for states as they have tried to set baselines for the ELP goals required by ESSA. For the 36 WIDA states, the ACCESS 2.0 assessment became operational in 2016. States therefore had either one or two years of data to set baselines. Most WIDA member states have either used their 2016 results or their 2017 results as the baseline for their goals.

### **How are states defining proficiency on the statewide ELP assessments?**

When a state identifies a student as an EL, they must also provide requisite supports and accommodations to that student to ensure that they are able to continue learning and growing academically on par with their peers. When a student scores proficient on the state's ELP assessment, they should exit the EL status with the assurance that their English proficiency allows them to learn course content and demonstrate mastery on assessments on par with their never-EL peers. As such, students usually stop receiving additional supports and accommodations upon exiting EL status. It is, therefore, crucial that states do not prematurely exit students or inappropriately keep students in EL services for long periods of time. The standard they are establishing for proficiency on their statewide ELP assessment must be an accurate representation of students' readiness to receive course content in English without additional supports.

While the vast majority of states are using the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs 2.0 as their measure for English language proficiency, states are not consistent in defining the bar for success on this assessment. Our review of states' plans showed that 18 of the 36 states in the WIDA consortium are setting a proficiency cut-score of 5.0, while the remaining 18 states have set scores ranging anywhere between 4.0-5.0. A similar review of the ELPA21 member states shows that Nebraska and West Virginia are the only two states that have identified proficiency cut-scores in their ESSA plans. Both states are setting proficiency at levels 4 or above.

As many states have noted in their ESSA plans, the process for setting the proficiency standard for exiting ELs is not as simple as setting a cut point. There is a complex set of technical and policy considerations that states must weigh. In their ESSA plans, several states have reserved the right to return to their proficiency standards once more historical data becomes available.

### **States' Long-Term Goals for English Proficiency**

ESSA affords states complete autonomy in setting long-term goals for progress toward English language proficiency. A review of states' plans shows immense variation in how states have utilized this opportunity. Most states have provided a baseline measure of how many of the state's EL students are currently making adequate progress toward proficiency, and set a target for improving this baseline figure by a certain goal year. For example, Arizona's long-term goal for English language proficiency is as follows:

*By 2028, 60 percent of English learners will make progress toward achieving proficiency. This represents a growth of 3 percentage points annually over 10 years. In 2016, 30 percent of English learners were making progress toward English language proficiency.*

The majority of states' goals follow some variation of this framework, but vary significantly in terms of the time window to proficiency, how they have defined the baseline measure, where they have set the ultimate target, and where they have set interim measures. For instance, states' target years for long-term goals range from two years in Florida to 30 years in DC. There is also significant variation in how long states believe students need to become proficient in English.<sup>10</sup> States' timelines range from five to eight years, which is consistent with research that shows it can take around four to seven years to be classified as proficient in academic

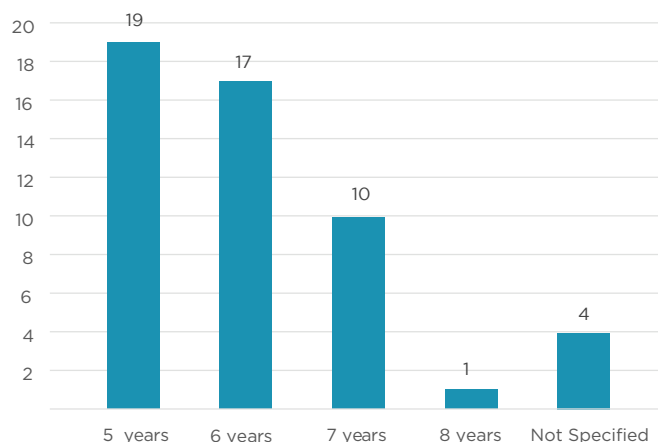
English. Nineteen states expect students to become English proficient in five years, 17 provide a window of six years, 10 states provide a window of seven years, and one state, Wisconsin, provides an eight-year time-to-proficiency window.

Likewise, the baseline to target trajectory of states' goals also varies widely. Colorado, for example, has set a goal for increasing the number of ELs making progress toward proficiency from 12 percent to 15 percent by 2024; while Vermont has set a goal for increasing the number of ELs making sufficient progress from 10 percent to 100 percent by 2025. Figure 6 below demonstrates this variance in baseline to target trajectory in states' ELP goals.

While this kind of variation in states' goals could point to how ambitious states are being in setting their ELP goals, it is important to consider the state's local context and demographics when analyzing their ELP goals. Vermont, for instance, has noted in its ESSA plan that the state has a small EL population, and a significant number of schools in the state do not serve EL students. Only a small percentage of the state's schools are charged with providing specialized supports and interventions to ELs. Many other states, such as New York, California, Texas, and Nevada have much larger EL populations and are charged with supporting a much more diverse student body.

While two states may have nearly identical end goals, they a) are starting from starkly different baselines, b) have allowed themselves significantly different time-windows to reach their goals, and c) are expecting very different annual rates of improvement to reach their goals. Other factors, such as the state's target year and their annual expected growth rate, may also have significant bearing on the variance in state's end goals for ELP. For example,

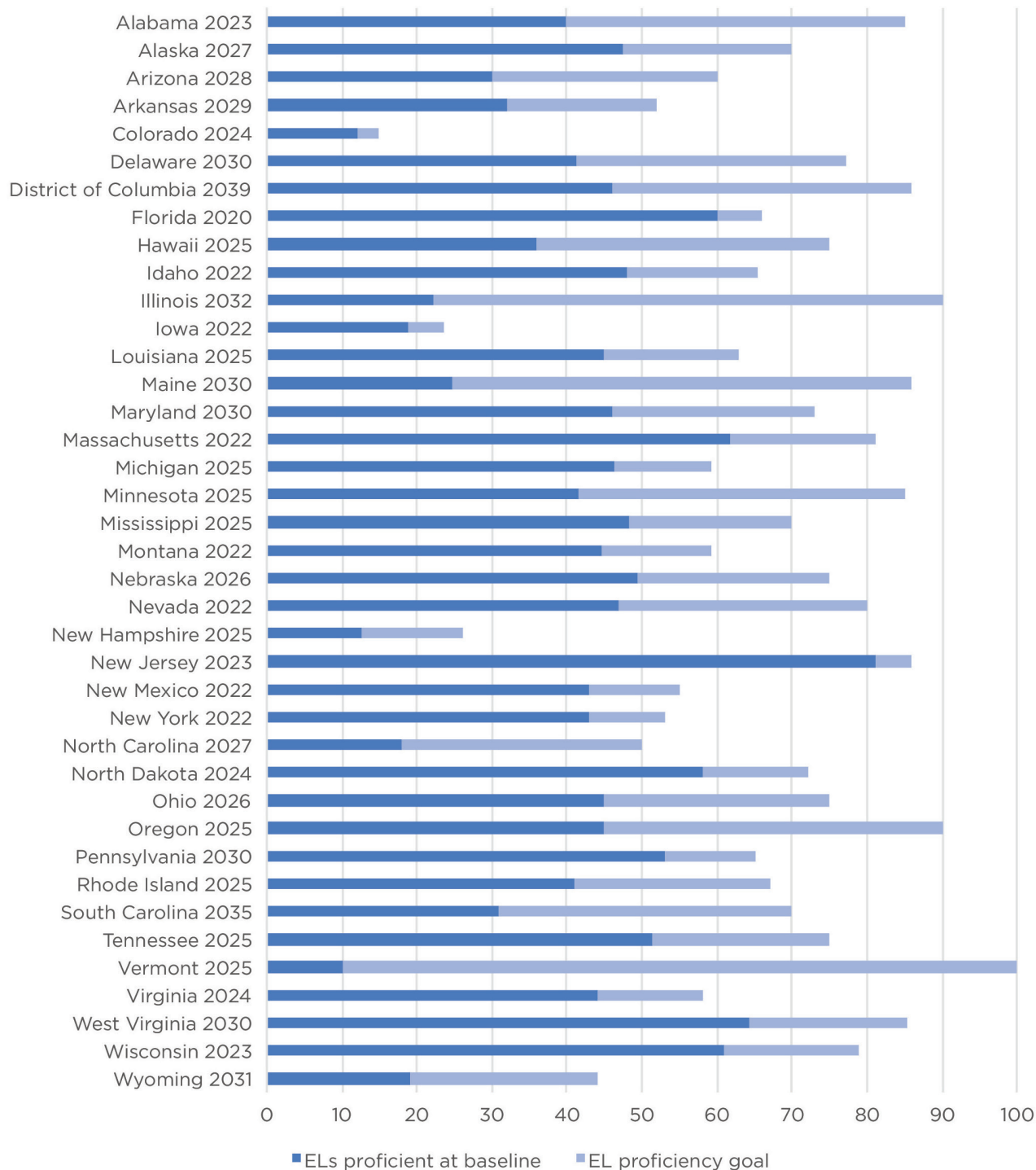
**Figure 5:** *Where are states setting timelines to English proficiency?*



<sup>10</sup> Hakuta, K., Butler, Y.G., & Witt, D. "How long does it take English learners to attain proficiency?" Berkeley, CA: University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/13w7m06g> (Accessed March 9, 2018).

Maine's goal states that by 2030, 85.9 percent of English learners in the state will show progress toward proficiency. In 2017, 24.7 percent of English learners met growth targets, so the state's goal represents an average of 4.7 percentage point annual increase over the next 13 years. Contrast that with New Jersey, where by 2023, 86 percent of English learners in each school will make expected annual progress toward attaining English proficiency. In 2016, 81 percent of English learners were making progress toward English proficiency; this goal represents a growth of one percentage point annually over seven years.

**Figure 6:** *Percent of ELs Proficient at Baseline vs. Goal*





## Promising Practices in ELP Goal-Setting

Recognizing that states must consider multiple factors in setting ELP goals given the changing assessment landscape and lack of historical data on current assessments, some states still put forth clear and thoughtful goals. Some ESSA plans have shown evidence of the promising practices for English learners.

### *Differentiating goals by grade level or grade band:*

Setting goals that are differentiated by grade level or grade band allows states to closely monitor which grade levels across the state are most challenging for ELs when it comes to acquiring proficiency in English, ensuring that gains in one grade level or grade band do not mask deficiencies in another.<sup>11</sup> States taking such an approach must also set differentiated measures of interim progress to ensure maximum impact. One example of this kind of goal-setting can be found in Kentucky's ESSA plan:

*By 2030, the state will reduce the percentage of English learners who score lower than the level necessary to be declared English language proficient or who make progress less than being on track to be proficient by 50 percent. This represents an annual increase of 1.8 percentage points for elementary and 2.9 percentage points for middle and high schools.*

*The estimated baseline for elementary is 61.1 percent, middle 35.2 percent, and high school 35.6 percent, long term goal for elementary is 80.6 percent, middle 67.6 percent, and high school 67.8 percent.*

### *Setting meaningful measures of interim progress:*

Measures of interim progress or interim goals are the short-term or annual goals states must set in order to reach their long-term ELP goal. States should think of these interim goals as stepping stones that will lead them to successfully meeting their end goals. As such, few other elements in states' ELP strategy are as important as well thought through and strategic measures of interim progress. States must ensure that their interim goals are aligned to their long-term goal, developed in consultation with stakeholders and technical experts, and supported by data from the state's ELP assessment.

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<sup>11</sup> Thinking Long Term: State Academic Achievement Goals Under ESSA; <https://www.achieve.org/files/sites/default/files/ThinkingLongTermStateAcademicAchievementGoalsUnderESSA.pdf>

Illinois, for example, plans to use three-year interim goals. The state currently has 22.1 percent of ELs making progress toward proficiency, and plans to increase this number to 90 percent over the next 15 years. In order to do so, the state will use a three-year composite average of data from the WIDA ACCESS 2.0 assessment as it becomes available. Since longitudinal ACCESS 2.0 data was unavailable at the time of goal-setting, the state has reserved the right to revise these interim measures as more data becomes available.

The key strength in Illinois' approach to goal-setting lies in that the state's process to interim goal-setting was both transparent and cognizant of the needs of key constituencies. The state's timeline and framework for interim goals was developed through accountability stakeholder workgroups and the state consulted WIDA and statewide stakeholders to establish the interim goals as they would best fit the English learner population and be most understandable to parents.

### 3-Year Measures of Interim Progress in the Illinois ESSA Plan

*Percent of EL Students Making On-Target Annual Progress toward Proficiency*


ELP Assessment	All-EL
2016	63.0
2017	22.1
2020	35.7
2023	49.3
2026	62.9
2029	76.5
2032	90.0

## Considerations and Recommendations

Equity for a historically underserved student group begins with states' own expectations for their success. States' goals for English learners not only send a powerful signal to students, parents, and communities about how the state is prioritizing the success of ELs, but also provide a window into the state's long-term strategy for how they aim to serve this group of students. As states are set to operationalize the goals they have proposed in ESSA plans, we advance the following set of key considerations for implementing their EL goals:

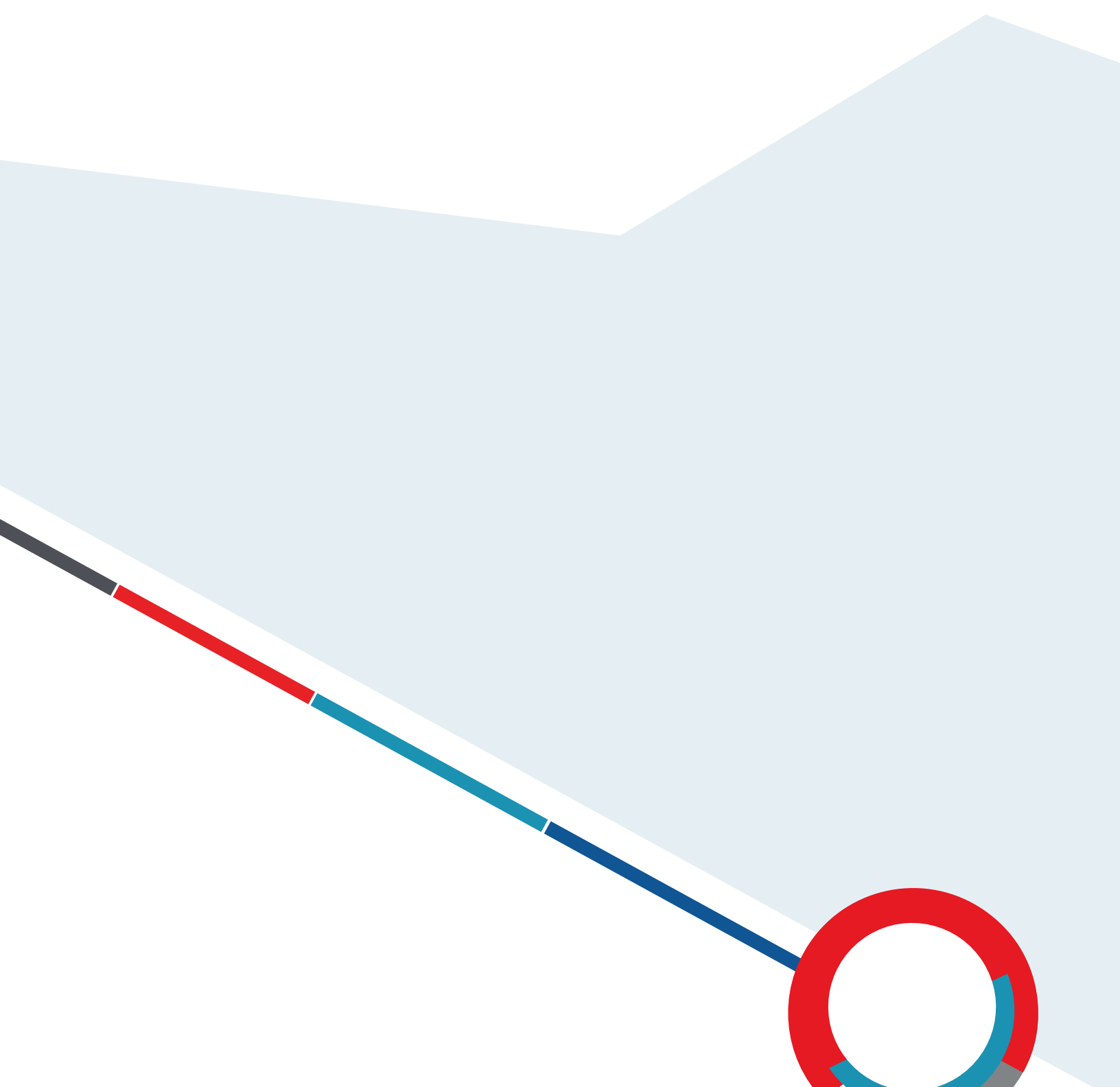
- **Goals should be the same for all students.** In setting long-term goals for academic achievement, states' goals for ELs should be the same as those for all students. By doing so, states will signal that they have the same expectation of success for all subgroups, and students who are further behind will be provided the supports to perform as well as their peers.
- **Measures of interim progress should ensure ELs are on track to meet the state's long-term goal.** States should set meaningful measures of interim progress for academic achievement that ensure that ELs are on track to meet the state's long-term goals for academic achievement in ELA and mathematics.



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- **States should not have overly permissive definitions of EL categories.** States should be intentional about how they define the EL subgroup; overly permissive definitions that allow more proficient students to remain in the EL subgroup can mask the needs of students who need continued support. ESSA sets a limit for including formerly identified EL students for up to four years after they exit EL status. States should consider data on how formerly identified students are performing and include them in the EL definition in a manner that does not mask the performance of current English learners.
  - **ELP goals should be rooted in performance data.** States should set meaningful and ambitious goals for English language proficiency. This requires a review of the appropriate data to guarantee that goals are achievable, based on historical data, and aligned with evidence-based methods of attaining English language proficiency. As statewide assessment systems stabilize and more assessment data becomes available, states must commit to reviewing the data to ensure that long-term and interim goals for English language proficiency are rooted in performance data from within the state.
  - **ELP goals should be differentiated by grade level.** States must ensure that in practice, long-term and interim goals for both academic achievement and English language proficiency are differentiated by grade level so that progress in one grade level does not mask deficiency in another grade level.
  - **States' goals for ELs must be developed within a framework that factors in the diverse characteristics of ELs.** Status should include data such as initial ELP and prior years of formal instruction, and report data in a way that does not skew data as students move from one grade level to the next.
  - **States should make sure that data will help identify and provide resources and supports to teachers and students when they most need it.** States should include English learners in their system of annual meaningful differentiation. A state's accountability system should provide an accurate reflection of how ELs are, or are not, meeting academic achievement and English language proficiency goals. When the accountability system meaningfully includes the performance of all subgroups of students, systems of identification for comprehensive, targeted support and improvement can better identify and provide resources and supports to teachers and students when they most need it.

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