*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**A closer look at English learners in Wisconsin**

After four straight years of growth, the enrollment of students labeled as English Learners (ELs) in Wisconsin public schools has fallen for the second year in a row. This decrease is noteworthy because of the particular needs of this population and the potential impact on funding for EL education under the state formula.

In addition, state data shows EL students from many language groups lack access to bilingual programs. Together, these findings offer important considerations for policymakers as they debate the next state budget.

For two decades, students identified as ELs in Wisconsin schools increased sharply. Between 2001 and 2019, Wisconsin’s EL population grew 78.6%, from about 30,000 to 51,825 students. In the two years since, however, it has seen a modest reversal.

After Wisconsin saw a slight decrease in its EL population in the 2019-20 school year to 51,706 students, the state experienced a sharper 2.1% decline to 50,630 students in 2020. Though the decrease in EL students was likely influenced by the pandemic and was not as great as the 3% drop in English-proficient students, it represents a shift for now at least from the previous expansion and one that is not well understood.

Some random variation in enrollments is normal and impacts from the pandemic in particular might be later reversed. However, the fact that the drop has been most pronounced among students at lower grades suggests it might continue. This decrease could carry important implications, especially if it does reflect the beginning of a long-term trend.

Under the current state formula, EL enrollment determines a district’s eligibility for state aid and impacts how much funding a district might receive, which can inform the types of language and literacy support that a district offers.

Funding for students labeled as ELs is important to consider because of ongoing questions about Wisconsin’s unusual approach to distributing aid as well as the state’s responsibility in ensuring these students have adequate and equitable resources. EL students consistently and significantly test below their English-proficient peers in reading and math, which speaks to the need to address language barriers and potentially provide other supports.

A report from the Migration Policy Institute also suggests the COVID-19 pandemic have pronounced negative effects for the academic achievement of the nation’s EL population. This is due to disrupted schooling, disparities in access to remote learning, and pandemic-caused health and economic distress, which has disproportionately affected marginalized groups like immigrant and migrant communities.

*This information is provided to Wisconsin Newspaper Association members as a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at wispolicyforum.org.*