



# Some Progress on a Long Climb: Virginia Must Boost Its Support for English Learner Students

Every child should have access to an excellent education. In Virginia, it is written into the state constitution that the legislature will seek to ensure “an educational program of high quality.” Yet despite some progress in recent years, the state still underfunds students who are learning English (EL) compared to national benchmarks, resulting in lower achievement in testing and graduation rates. This not only harms the individual students who don’t learn as much as they could; it also undermines Virginia’s reputation for great schools and the competitive advantage of a well-educated workforce.

A collection of policies can support EL students holistically. State leaders should build on recent progress to meet the promise of providing a high-quality education to all students.

## English Learner (EL) Students

EL students are officially designated within schools as students who are not fully proficient in English and need additional services. Students can place out of the EL designation once they demonstrate proficiency.



Around 12% of Virginia students are learning English. These students come from a variety of backgrounds and are more likely to speak a language other than Spanish compared to EL students nationally.



Virginia has made progress recently for English learner students, yet the state's support still falls short of national benchmarks



SOL tests are not currently offered in any language other than English, and EL students now have just three semesters before their scores count toward their school's results



Inadequate state funding limits specialized instructors, resources, and trained general education teachers to support EL students in schools

## Historically Inadequate State Support for English Learner Students Has Shaped Outcomes

Comprehensive research shows increased funding, along with factors such as state support services provided for immigrant families, school structures and available courses, and strength of community-based organizations, makes a significant difference over time by improving achievement, graduation rates, and education enrollment.

Virginia's supplemental funding for EL students, which is based on varying student-teacher ratios depending on the students' level of English proficiency, provides additional funding that averages just 24% above baseline levels,<sup>1</sup> well below the amount that JLARC identified as the midpoint

of what studies conducted in other states said was needed (40%) and dramatically lower than our neighbors in Maryland (98%). And funding used to be more deficient: As recently as the 2021-2022 school year, Virginia's SOQ funding formula provided just a 16.6% supplement.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, Virginia has fared particularly poorly compared to other states when it comes to academic achievement. While this is beginning to change, for too many years the majority of EL students have not received the support they need to overcome unique barriers to education, and even now support is below national benchmarks.

**33%** Pass rate of Virginia EL students on 2025 state reading tests; lowest scores of all Virginia student subgroups

**45%** Pass rate of Virginia EL students on 2025 state math tests; tied with students with disabilities for the lowest scores

**6th worst** Virginia's 2024 rank for 8th grade NEAP reading scores for EL students out of 41 states with measurable data

**74%** Six-year graduation rate of EL students, compared to 94% for non-EL students

# Policymakers Have Tools to Uphold Constitutional Commitment to a High-Quality Education for All Students

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How we choose to spend shared resources in a state budget is often seen as a reflection of what and who the state values.

More funding is not the singular solution to meet EL students' needs, yet it is an essential part of the equation.

Virginia's current EL funding falls far below what most cost adequacy studies in other states suggest is needed.

Adequate and flexible funding will help schools train general education teachers to better work with EL students, purchase EL-specific learning resources, sufficiently staff EL teachers, and more. The state could advance a number of other policies to identify and nourish

<sup>1</sup>Base funding is calculated using total required State+Local SOQ, Incentive, Categorical, and Lottery funding less add-ons for students with disabilities, students in high-poverty communities, and English language learners, similarly to how cost studies calculate base funding per pupil, and is different from Virginia's "basic aid per pupil"

**1** Provide **adequate support** for EL students. Applying 40% from JLARC's review of adequacy studies, the state of Virginia should provide an additional \$140 million in FY27 and \$152m in FY28 for EL students. Providing an additional \$70 million in FY27 and FY28 would make meaningful progress toward this goal

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**2** **Invest in and scale services** provided by community-based organizations that serve EL students and immigrant families

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**3** Provide state funding to **support community schools** to offer holistic models for providing essential services to students and families

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**4** **Automatically enroll qualified students** in advanced courses with an opt-out option, to give more EL students the opportunity to engage in challenging coursework. Virginia began making this change in 2025 with legislation specific to math courses

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**5** **Diversify Virginia's teaching workforce** and increase training for all educators working with EL students (e.g. increase state investment in "Grow Your Own" teaching programs)

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**6** Make sure Virginia law and regulations **maintain existing protections** for English language learners despite the current chaos in federal policy



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