

Promising Practices and Programs to Prevent English Learner Dropout in Massachusetts — Four District Case Studies

A Report to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Natalie Lacireno-Paquet

Haiwen Chu

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# Introduction

Concerned with the trend in dropout rates among English Learners (ELs) in the Commonwealth, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) sought to learn more about potential causes of and efforts to prevent ELs dropping out of school in Massachusetts. DESE contracted WestEd, an independent, nonprofit educational research and service organization, to conduct independent research to learn about these potential causes and efforts. The research included a survey of districts about dropout prevention efforts; longitudinal analyses of state data on dropout among ELs; and case studies of district programs and practices that serve high school ELs.[[1]](#footnote-2) The case studies, conducted in four districts with high concentrations of ELs, are the focus of this report. The goal of the case studies was to learn about the range of existing programs and practices that serve ELs with a focus on the high school level and to describe some promising practices.

After an overview of the methods used to develop the case studies, a review of dropout trends in Massachusetts, and an overview of DESE’s [*Blueprint for English Learner Success*](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/blueprint/blueprint.docx)(DESE, 2019), this report presents a cross-case summary of EL dropout prevention efforts across the four case study districts. The cross-case summary is organized around two research questions that address different nested layers of education systems:

* What are the school and district ***programs*** to engage English Learners and reduce dropout?
* What are the school and district ***practices*** to support the success of English Learner students and prevent dropout?

# Methods

Leaders from DESE’s Office of Language Acquisition (OLA) identified the following four districts for the case studies: Brockton Public Schools, Framingham Public Schools, Somerville Public Schools, and Worcester Public Schools. DESE selected the districts to represent different geographic regions, district sizes, types of EL populations, and types of English Learner Education (ELE) programs. OLA staff conducted initial outreach to secure district cooperation.

To develop the case studies, WestEd researchers collected data through individual interviews and group interviews with education leaders and stakeholders in each of the districts. In each district, researchers interviewed the director of the ELE department. The directors identified additional knowledgeable individuals in their districts who could speak about programs and practices to support EL student success and prevent EL student dropout. Each district case study lists the roles of interviewees in that district, which included associate directors of ELE, counselors, other administrators or program directors, and teachers. In one district, two group interviews — one in Spanish and one in Portuguese — engaged parents. In another district, researchers engaged students in a group interview. Interviewers asked about district policies, programs, and practices for serving ELs at the secondary level and for dropout prevention.

WestEd researchers conducted the interviews between May 2020 and January 2021, by telephone or using videoconference technology. District leaders sometimes provided additional clarity or information in writing. WestEd researchers developed the case studies iteratively, by analyzing multiple data sources, focusing on data to help answer the two overarching questions and to describe the programs and practices. The researchers then read across the four case studies to identify the themes that are the focus of the cross-case summary. District leaders had opportunities to review their districts’ case studies prior to the studies’ inclusion in this report, to ensure accuracy and confidentiality. The original research plan included more extensive data collection and in-person visits to each district. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which began at about the same time as this project, data collection was more limited, and extended over a longer period, than originally planned. These case studies are not generalizable but present snapshots of EL dropout prevention programs and practices during an unprecedented time.

# Dropout Trends

Although, overall, dropout rates have declined in Massachusetts since 2009, ELs have not benefited from this trend, compared to their non-EL peers. As illustrated in Figure 1, EL dropout rates have been consistently higher than the dropout rates for all students in Massachusetts, and the EL dropout rate has not decreased as consistently as that of all students. While Massachusetts had relatively low overall dropout rates of 1.8% in 2018/19 and 1.6% in 2019/20 (see Figure 1), compared to the national average dropout rates of 5.3% in 2018/19 and 5.1% in 2019/20 (DESE, 2021a; NCES, n.d.), the relatively higher dropout rates of ELs have endured.

## Figure 1: Trends in Massachusetts Dropout Rates, 2009 through 2020

Note. Dropout rates are for students in all grades. Dropout rates in 2019/20 may have been influenced by the temporary changes in graduation requirements due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 school years.

*Source. DESE, 2021a.*

# Massachusetts’s Blueprint for English Learner Success

The researchers use Pillar 4 of DESE’s *Blueprint for English Learner Success* (DESE, 2019)to frame this cross-case summary. The blueprint is organized around four pillars, each of which consists of building blocks for implementation at the state, district, school, and classroom levels. The programs and practices described in this report to support EL success in high school and prevent dropping out can be connected to “Pillar 4: A Plan for Success” in the blueprint. As shown in Table 1, Pillar 4 identifies three building blocks, which are the actions that educators can take at the district and school levels:

* Thriving in high school
* Graduating college/career ready
* Graduating ready to contribute to civic life

## Table 1. District and School Actions to Support Pillar 4: A Plan for Success

|  | Pillar 4: A Plan for Success |
| --- | --- |
| Thriving in High School | Graduating College/Career Ready | Graduating Ready to Contribute to Civic Life |
| District | * Create a plan for EL inclusion in school life
* Remove barriers to EL participation in academic and nonacademic school life
 | * Regularly review EL academic attainment and postsecondary options
* Provide EL dropout prevention strategies
* Create opportunities for career development
 | * Develop clear plans to address inequities in EL access to civic opportunities
* Support educators to ensure opportunities for ELs’ civic engagement
 |
| School | * Prioritize participation in school life for EL
* Remove barriers to EL participation in academic and nonacademic school life
 | * Provide meaningful access to appropriate coursework for EL
* Celebrate successful educators of EL
* Provide high-quality counseling and postsecondary support for ELs
 | * Provide a range of civic learning opportunities for ELs
* Promote EL engagement and participation in civic learning
 |

This cross-case summary frames the findings in terms of how they align with the building blocks of Pillar 4, with particular attention to meeting the specific needs of groups of ELs who may need targeted interventions and supports. These are illustrated through snapshots that are further discussed in the individual case studies.

# Programs

Across the case study districts, as in most Massachusetts districts, the core instructional program for high school ELs is Sheltered English Immersion (SEI). In addition to SEI, the four case study districts offer a variety of general and targeted instructional programs for ELs. One of the case study districts currently offers a Spanish dual language program in its high school, in grades 9–12. As of when this research was conducted, another district offered a Spanish dual language program in grade 9; this district is in the process of expanding its Spanish dual language programming to all high school grades. Two case study districts offer Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) programming, in commonly spoken languages, to new students, as a way of transitioning them into SEI and general academic coursework. Table 2 provides a summary of programs offered to ELs by the case study districts.

None of the case study districts offer specific dropout prevention programs for ELs, but some case study districts have inclusive dropout prevention programs in which ELs participate, such as Framingham’s Resiliency for Life. Each case study district has targeted supports or programs designed to meet the academic needs of specific groups of ELs, including students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) and students who are over-age for their grade. District leaders and staff believe that these supports or programs help to prevent dropout among ELs.

## Table 2. Programs Offered to English Learners by Case Study Districts

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Brockton | Framingham | Somerville | Worcester |
| Sheltered English Immersion | ü | ü | ü | ü |
| Transitional Bilingual Education | ü | ü |  |  |
| Dual Language at the High School Level |  | ü |  | ü |
| Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education |  | ü | ü | ü |
| English Learners Who Are Over-Age | ü |  | ü | ü |

The following snapshots describe examples of selected programs listed in Table 2. More information about each program and district is available in the individual case studies in Appendix A. Each of these programs primarily addresses the Pillar 4 building block of ensuring that ELs are “thriving in high school” by providing inclusive programming, targeted supports, and opportunities for these students to participate fully in school life. For example, some case study districts have programs to address the needs of specific groups of students, such as students with limited or interrupted formal education. One such program is Worcester’s New Citizens Center, which works toward integrating students with limited or interrupted formal education into the academic mainstream. The New Citizens Center addresses the needs of students through intensive, all-day SEI.

|  |
| --- |
| Snapshot: Programs for Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education |
| What: | New Citizens Center |
| Where: | Worcester Public Schools |
| Populations Served: | Newly arrived students with two or more years of limited or interrupted formal education |
| How: | Full school day of SEI and intensive English language development in separate programs for elementary, secondary, and over-age youth. |
| Why: | Goals of the program are for participants to:1. Reach an intermediate level of English proficiency
2. Access traditional instruction and make progress toward high school graduation
3. Transition to their elementary school, their neighborhood middle or comprehensive high school, or the Gerald Center for adult learners
 |
| Blueprint Building Block:  | **Thriving in high school** through language development that enables full academic inclusion |

For students who are over-age, Somerville offers a tailored program that connects with the community’s adult education programs. This program enables students to initially participate with their same-age peers in the academic mainstream of general education classes before enrolling in more flexible adult education options that enable them to balance work with graduation requirements and ultimately earn an adult education diploma.

|  |
| --- |
| Snapshot: Program for English Learners who are Over-Age |
| What: | GOAL Program |
| Where: | Somerville Public Schools |
| Populations Served: | Over-age students who initially enroll at ages 17 through 20 and who are 3+ credit years behind |
| How: | First, students spendtwo years at the high school in an SEI model, supported by a GOAL Seminar, additional social and emotional supports, flexible scheduling, and expanded summer opportunities. Then, they enroll in the Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experiences. |
| Why: | Goals of the program are for participants to:1. Participate in the general academic program and classes
2. Support preparation for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)
3. Accelerate progress within the district’s Adult Diploma Program
4. Balance demands of work with demands of academics
 |
| Blueprint Building Block:  | **Thriving in high school** through full inclusion and targeted programs |

The Resiliency for Life program in Framingham is a voluntary dropout prevention program that assists students with low grade-point averages. This program is not exclusively for ELs, but it primarily enrolls these students. The program integrates academic supports with social and emotional supports and service learning.

|  |
| --- |
| Snapshot: Dropout Prevention Program |
| What: | Resiliency for Life |
| Where: | Framingham Public Schools |
| Populations Served: | Students with low grade-point averages, including English learners |
| How: | After-school supports, tutoring, retreats, and service-learning projects |
| Why: | Goals of the program are for participants to:1. Grow academically
2. Feel supported socioemotionally
3. Remain enrolled in and graduate from high school
 |
| Blueprint Building Block:  | **Thriving in high school** through full inclusion and targeted supports |

Beyond programming specific to ELs, most case study districts have career, vocational, and technical education (CVTE) programs; dual enrollment; and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. ELs’ access to these types of programs and courses is limited by policies and procedures that often vary at both the district and school levels. Those policies include academic prerequisites for course participation (e.g., to enroll in AP courses), course schedules (e.g., requirement for back-to-back English and English as a Second Language [ESL] courses), and student work schedules (e.g., for those who work during the school day). Application to high school CVTE programs is often required while students are in middle school, and students who are not enrolled in the district in middle school do not have the opportunity to apply to these programs. Similarly, enrollment in dual language programs often begins at the elementary level, thus restricting opportunities for students who arrive in districts in later grades. Leaders in the four case study districts were aware of these limitations, and two of the districts reported efforts to broaden ELs’ access to these programs and classes and to support ELs to enroll in them. For example, Worcester has developed agreements with local colleges for dual enrollment courses specifically targeted to ELs.

# Practices

Beyond formal academic programs, interviewees in the case study research identified other promising practices that might contribute to the reduction of dropout among high school ELs. Examples of these practices include a professional learning community (PLC) that monitors student progress and engages in professional learning, orientation programs to introduce newcomers to U.S. high schools, and partnerships between districts and community-based organizations to engage newly arrived immigrant students in leadership development activities. The following snapshots provide summaries of examples of each of these promising practices.

The Newcomer Education Success Team PLC in Somerville works toward the Pillar 4 building block of students “graduating college/career ready” by monitoring ELs’ course access and progress toward graduation. District leaders credit the PLC with building educators’ skills in teaching ELs, building a sense that ELs are the responsibility of all educators, and successfully advocating for increased support services for ELs. These PLC activities focus on a recommendation that has been cited in the literature about dropout prevention for general education students: having a team of adults responsible for monitoring the progress of a group of students toward graduation and intervening as necessary (Rumberger et al., 2017).

|  |
| --- |
| Snapshot: **English Learner Education Professional Learning Community** |
| What: | Newcomer Education Success Team (PLC) |
| Where: | Somerville Public Schools |
| Populations Served: | Content and ESL teachers, along with support staff who serve English learners, in a PLC focused on English learners |
| How: | Twice weekly PLC meetings, alternating between student monitoring and adult learning |
| Why: | Goals of the PLC are to:1. Monitor student progress and intervene as necessary
2. Engage teachers in collaborative professional learning and the development of shared actions
3. Empower teachers to enhance instruction and programs for English learners
 |
| Blueprint Building Block:  | Progress monitoring to ensure that English learners are **graduating college/career ready** |

At Brockton High School, a targeted program called Success@BHS provides newcomers to the district with an orientation to the U.S. education system. By connecting newcomer students with peer mentors who are also ELs and who are on track to graduate, the program benefits both the newly arrived students, who receive relevant peer advice, and the on-track ELs, who participate in leadership development. District leaders believe that the program smooths newcomers’ transitions to high school, and that, by providing formal and informal supports, it will help more ELs to be successful in high school.

|  |
| --- |
| Snapshot: **Newcomer Orientation** |
| What: | Success@BHS |
| Where: | Brockton High School, Brockton Public Schools |
| Populations Served: | High school newcomers to the district  |
| How: | Orientation to the U.S. educational system, and peer mentors |
| Why: | Goals of the practice are to:1. Connect EL newcomers with an EL peer who is on track to graduate
2. Offer leadership opportunities to on-track English learners
3. Increase EL students’ awareness of school resources and requirements
 |
| Blueprint Building Block:  | **Thriving in high school** through inclusion and peer support |

Community-based programs, such as Enroot in Somerville, can further contribute to the success of immigrant students “graduating ready to contribute to civic life.” This can be done, for example, through after-school programming, tutoring, internships, and ongoing leadership development activities. District leaders and interviewees see Enroot as an important contributor to ELs’ academic success and college and career readiness.

|  |
| --- |
| Snapshot: **Community-Based Leadership Development** |
| What: | Enroot |
| Where: | Somerville Public Schools |
| Populations Served: | Immigrant high school students |
| How: | Tutoring and mentoring from trained volunteers three times a week at local community sites |
| Why: | Goals of Enroot are to:1. Offer academic supports such as tutoring to immigrant students
2. Connect immigrant students with internships
3. Foster immigrant students’ leadership development
 |
| Blueprint Building Block:  | Supporting English learners **graduating ready** **to contribute to civic life** through community involvement and leadership development |

The snapshots in this report and the case studies point to some promising programs and practices that are aligned with the building blocks of the *Blueprint for English Learner Success* andthat districts may want to consider as they reflect on ways to continuously improve services to ELs that promote success and prevent dropout.

# Moving Forward to Support English Learner Success

Following are some recommendations, based on research literature and on the case studies, that schools and districts throughout Massachusetts can consider implementing to strengthen the success of ELs and prevent dropout (Chu et al., 2020; Rumberger et al, 2017). The recommendations are aligned with the building blocks from Pillar 4 of the *Blueprint for English Learner Success.*

## Thriving in High School

* Ensure that content-area instruction is culturally responsive and age appropriate, drawing upon ELs’ assets and potential
* Offer a variety of specialized programs tailored to the specific needs of different groups of ELs
* Monitor EL student progress on a variety of indicators and data points, including social and emotional indicators, and support and intervene as necessary

Learning experiences in the classroom should reflect the rich experiences that students bring to the school and classroom, while offering students challenging grade-level work that is well supported. The design of instruction can also consider students’ experiences and assets to engage them as full participants in rigorous learning. At the same time, the life circumstances and experiences of ELs will vary, so programs may need to be specialized to target their particular needs and conditions. There is some evidence of positive associations between specialized programs — such as programs for SLIFE and programs for newcomer students — and academic experiences and outcomes (see for example, Tuchman, 2010; MAEC, 2019). Indeed, interviewees for the case studies were particularly proud of the targeted programs their districts offered to meet the needs of specific groups of students, such as the Building Boxers program in Brockton for newcomers to high school or the New Citizens Center in Worcester. The dual language program at Framingham High School builds on ELs assets while providing rigorous academic coursework.

School staff who learn about their school’s ELs will be better able to keep these students engaged in school as they make progress toward graduation. Monitoring of student progress — for example, tracking absenteeism, grades, and social and emotional factors — is a promising practice for identifying students who are struggling academically and socially (see for example, Faria et al., 2018; Garcia-Perez et al, 2017; Santos et al, 2018). For these reasons, continual monitoring of students’ progress should be both proactive and responsive, while also considering students’ social and emotional health.

## Graduating College/Career Ready

* Rethink schedules to support ELs to enroll more easily in CVTE, AP, and other courses
* Consider professional learning for guidance counselors to more effectively support ELs with planning for college and career
* Support all teachers and staff in effective practices for teaching ELs
* Intensify outreach and information for newcomers and their families, to ensure that they are knowledgeable about what is needed to engage in postsecondary education

Interviewees from multiple case study districts pointed out that they had well-developed offerings to support students’ postsecondary trajectories in career or college. Some of these, such as CVTE, have prerequisites that more newly arrived immigrant students (such as newcomer 9th graders) could not meet. Districts can explore alternative ways to expand newcomers’ access to these programs. Research suggests that when ELs have access to career and technical courses, as well as advanced courses, and those that connect to the real world, ELs are more engaged and more likely to stay in school (for example, Olsen, 2012). The dual enrollment program for ELs in Worcester is an example of a program that supports ELs in being college ready by allowing them to take college classes while in high school. Such efforts can also include developing systems to ensure that ELs have full access to guidance counselors and, conversely, that guidance counselors participate in professional learning that will assist them in guiding ELs to college and career success. For example, professional learning to help counselors better understand ELs’ specific life circumstances, challenges, and their needs regarding college application, could support readiness for college. Efforts improve counseling could be integrated with outreach efforts to ELs and their families to ensure they can make informed choices around college and career, by sharing key information about financial aid and the U.S. postsecondary system (Suárez-Orozco et al, 2010).

## Graduating Ready to Contribute to Civic Life

* Facilitate connections between schools with community-based organizations and local civic organizations to support ELs
* Recognize contributions of immigrant communities to school and surrounding communities
* Develop student leadership opportunities

Some districts offer community engagement and leadership development programs for ELs at the high school level. An example of such a program is the partnership with Enroot in Somerville, that supports newcomer students to be successful in school and to be active participants in their communities. Districts can examine the extent to which such programs are available in general for students and ensure that ELs and newcomers have full access to participate in programs or services offered by community-based organizations. Districts will also need to reach out to the multiple immigrant and ethnic communities from which their students come to connect students with opportunities, and engage in continuous efforts to meet students’ social, emotional, and academic needs. Recent studies have emphasized the immense potential of immigrant youth for meaningful civic engagement (Russell et al., 2021).

# Appendix A: District Case Studies[[2]](#footnote-3)

# Brockton Public Schools

## Overview

Concerned with the trend in dropout rates among English learners (ELs) in the Commonwealth, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) sought to learn more about potential causes of and prevention efforts for EL dropout. DESE contracted with WestEd, an independent, not-for-profit educational research and service organization, to learn about the causes of and efforts to prevent ELs from dropping out of school in Massachusetts. The goal of the research was to use district case studies to learn about the range of existing programs and practices for ELs. Two questions guided the case studies:

* What are the school and district ***programs*** to engage English Learners and reduce dropout?
* What are the school and district ***practices*** to support the success of English Learner students and prevent dropout?

 This case study report is one of four case studies conducted with districts from around the Commonwealth.

To gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of programs and practices that contribute to or mitigate the dropout rates among ELs, researchers conducted background research on district and DESE websites and collected the following data through virtual individual or group interviews and written responses to the interview questions with the following district stakeholders in the spring of 2020 through January 2021:

* District director of bilingual education
* Four high school–based staff and administrators (classroom teacher, counselor, program director, and administrator)
* Student group interview with five ELs in grades 9–12

The original research plan included more extensive data collection and in-person visits to each district. The full set of data collection activities was not possible giving the limitations imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study is not generalizable, but a snapshot during an unprecedented time — of EL programs and practices in the district. Throughout the case study, we highlight programs and practices that are aligned with MA DESE’s *Blueprint for English Learner Success,* and in particular Pillar 4: “A Plan for Success” with attention to the pillar’s three building blocks:

* Thriving in high school
* Graduating college/career ready
* Graduating ready to contribute to civic life

## About Brockton Public Schools

Brockton is a small city of approximately 95,000 people in southeastern Massachusetts. In school year 2020/21, the district enrolled 15,384 students in 22 schools and one early childhood center (DESE, 2021b). The district serves a diverse student population, with about 61% of students identifying as African American, 17% as Hispanic, and 15.5% as white. Almost half of the students (44.3%) have a first language other than English, and 25.8% are classified as ELs. More than half (65.5%) of the students are economically disadvantaged, and 17.3% receive special education services. In the 2018/19 school year, the dropout rate among ELs in Brockton was 8% compared to 3.9% for the district overall (DESE, 2021c).[[3]](#footnote-4)

In the 2019/20 school year, Brockton High School enrolled:

* 4,077 students
* 977 ELs served in four programs
	+ 306 ELs in Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) or the literacy cluster for SLIFE
	+ 371 ELs in Sheltered English Immersion (SEI)
	+ 274 ELs in Integrated SEI (ISEI) and
	+ 46 students classified as ELs who opted out of EL services

## Programs

### Schools and Their Programs for EL Students

EL programs are offered at all K–12 schools in Brockton except for one. The district has had a two-way English/Spanish immersion program since 2003 at the George School, an elementary school. The school became a global studies school in 2018 and includes a growing two-way Portuguese/English program and a two-way French/English program.

Brockton High School (BHS) is a large comprehensive high school with over 4,000 students, of which about 25% are English learners. Students are grouped into four “houses,” each with its own dean, other administrators, and support staff. At the high school, ELs are placed into one of three programs for learning English:

* Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE)
* Sheltered English Immersion (SEI)
* Integrated SEI (ISEI)

The BHS Program of Studies (Brockton, 2019) documents 20 ESL courses. Additional courses designed for ELs offer inclusive access to academic content in mathematics, science, social studies, literacy, and computer literacy courses. For example, students can take math, science, and social sciences in their native language depending on their level of English proficiency.

### Transitional Bilingual Education

TBE is a program for students who are new to the United States and who have very limited English proficiency. TBE classes are for students who need more support in their native language to learn English. These courses have instructors who speak the students' native languages and may supplement curriculum materials with native language materials to support student learning in both English language and content areas. Within the TBE program at the high school, there is a literacy cluster specifically for students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE).

### Sheltered English Immersion

The SEI program at the high school is for those students with a higher level of English proficiency than those in TBE. Students are in immersion classes where English is the language of instruction and where students’ native language may be used to help clarify concepts and skills when necessary.

### Integrated SEI

The Integrated SEI program is where ELs with the highest levels of English proficiency are integrated into general education for all their classes except for one ESL class.

###  Other High School Courses and Programs

The high school also offers a slate of Advanced Placement (AP) classes; the International Baccalaureate (IB) program (junior and senior years); and career, vocational, and technical education (CVTE) classes and programs. The high school also runs a bilingual resource center where teachers provide tutoring during students’ free periods. The center is generally open every day for four periods out of six.

Administrators and students alike noted that EL student participation in advanced classes, those above the basic college prep level, was uncommon. Indeed, in a focus group, one student noted that no one even told her there were options to take more challenging courses, or that these were important for preparing for college. She noted:

*“I think they should give us more information. We’re second language students, we aren’t from here, we don’t know about these things. They have to give us more information, so we can be prepared [for college].”*

Administrators and other educators reported relatively low levels of EL participation in CVTE programming. Students’ fluency in English acts as a gatekeeper to high-level and CVTE programming, except for the Bilingual Medical Translation pathway, because students must have high enough English proficiency to work independently in advanced and CVTE classes.

In addition to the courses and programs offered at the high school, several other programs exist that may not directly target ELs but in which they can participate and benefit. One of these is the district’s Seal of Biliteracy, a certification that a student scores proficient or higher in reading, writing, and speaking in two or more languages. Administrators describe the program as evidence that the district values multilingualism and sees it as an asset worth recognizing.

### Alternative High Schools and Alternative Programs

In addition to the large comprehensive high school, the district operates two alternative high schools and programs.

### Champion Alternative High School

Champion is an alternative high school for students who have been previously out of school or who have not been successful in the traditional high school setting (BPS, n.d.a). As a small school, with 176 students in 2018 and 103 in 2020, it does not provide extensive services to ELs. According to administrators, the school enrolls a lower percentage of ELs compared to the district overall (about 10–13% compared to 26%), as students must be fairly fluent in English to be able to participate.

### The Edison Academy

The Edison Academy is an alternative high school recommended for those students who, based on credits, are not likely to earn their diploma by age 19, and is targeted to students who are over-age (17+) and under credited for their grade level, at risk of dropping out, or re-engaging after having dropped out of school (BPS, n.d.b). The school enrolls about 250 students, of which about 50% are ELs (MA DESE, 2021d). Students range in age from older teens to adults in their 50s or older working on their high school diploma. The flexible pacing and evening hours of 5–8 p.m. make this school an option for those students who have other responsibilities during the day, such as work or child care. The graduation rate for ELs at Edison is lower than the district and state overall, with about 19% of ELs earning their diploma at Edison within 4–5 years, compared to 57% for the district and 64% for the state.

**The Edison Academy offers alternatives for over-age English Learners to “thrive in high school,” a Blueprint building block, through inclusive supports and flexible scheduling.**

**The Edison Academy offer alternatives for over-age English Learners to “thrive in high school”, a Blueprint Building Block, through inclusive supports and flexible scheduling.**

### Staffing for Programs

In addition to the director of the district’s Department of Bilingual/ESL Services, the district has several staff to support ELs and their families across the district, including two department heads in the Department of Bilingual/ESL Services, EL coaches, community facilitators, and parent advocates, as well as bilingual guidance and bilingual adjustment counselors. There are five EL acquisition coaches at the K–8 level. The district also has 14 bilingual community facilitators who speak the district’s predominant second languages: Cape Verdean, Haitian Creole, and others. These facilitators are responsible for communication between home and school. There are also three full-time parent advocates who speak Cape Verdean, Haitian Creole, and other languages and help families with issues such as federal programs (e.g., SNAP), housing, and internet access. At the high school there is a part-time coordinator of career, vocational, and technical education for ELs. The high school has bilingual adjustment counselors and also has bilingual guidance counselors who speak the four most common languages among ELs: Spanish, Haitian, Portuguese, and Cape Verdean. These staff help ELs to fully participate and thrive in school, as well as support students academically.

## Practices

Students at risk of failing and dropping out are identified in various formal and informal ways. Brockton Public Schools does not have any formal dropout prevention programs specifically for ELs. The Annual Language Assessment Team meets to review student progress in learning English and ESL placement decisions. Staff might raise concerns about specific students during these meetings. Administrators and guidance counselors discussed that progress reports are used to monitor student progress and that students have the option to collect weekly teacher feedback, but that few students take advantage of this. Both administrators and students shared that guidance counselors reach out when students are doing poorly and seem to be at risk for failing a class. Counselors will send postcards written in native languages to the homes of students who have been absent three times in a term and call parents to inform them of the automatic failure policy, which is triggered by four unexcused absences in a term. Parents of students with excessive absences are contacted by guidance counselors and invited to meet with the Dean to discuss the student’s interest in continuing at the high school or exploring other programmatic options. For students 15 and younger, if they are absent more than 10 times and do not respond to counselor outreach, the attendance officer will conduct outreach, including home visits, and may also include the judicial system.

BHS provides several programs targeted to supporting specific groups of ELs. For example, the school has an orientation program for all newcomer students called Success@BHS. The program focuses on explaining the American educational system and provides student mentors to newly arrived ELs. The program is operated by the bilingual counselors. Current ELs who are on track to graduate serve as peer-mentors to the new students. Students described this program as being helpful in building a community of fellow ELs and caring adults in a big school.

**Both the Success@BHS newcomer orientation and the Building Boxers programs offers specific groups of English Learners with inclusive opportunities to “thrive in high school”, a Blueprint building block, by ensuring that students have smooth transitions, whether for new students or students who are transitioning from middle to high school.**

Another targeted academic support program for ELs is the Building Boxers program, which district leaders describe as a successful dropout prevention effort. The program started in 2018 and is funded by DESE’s Gateways Cities English Learner Enrichment Academies Grant. The program is designed to engage and support 8th grade ELs who are in their first two years of school in the United States in a successful transition to high school. This program, which supported 85 transitioning 8th graders in 2019/20, provides two weeks of summer instructional programming at Brockton High School in English, technology, science, and civics. The program introduces students to expectations, layout, and academic programming at Brockton High. The program is described by district leaders as helping to increase competency attainment, increase English language skills, and reduce dropout, as well as to support the long-term economic and social development of the youth in Brockton. The district is seeking to expand the program for the summer of 2021 to provide support not just to those transitioning 8th graders, but to 9th graders who were new to BHS in the fall of 2020 but did not have the benefit of more intensive programming due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions. Courses and activities will occur over the summer with a total of 120 hours of programmatic instruction.

Other targeted academic supports for EL success at the high school include the Bilingual Resource Room, which is staffed with bilingual teachers in different subjects to support students individually or in small groups. The school also offers credit recovery and MCAS preparation classes to help students meet graduation requirements.

## Reasons Why EL Students Drop Out

All interviewees (adults and students) were asked to share their understanding about why ELs drop out of school. The administrators and other educators cited multiple common reasons. These include the financial pressures of needing to help support their families, being over-age and under credited, lack of self-motivation, lack of social supports and a peer group for newly arrived students, the failure to accumulate credits due to the automatic failure based on the absence policy, the challenge of passing the MCAS exams, and high suspension rates. Administrators cited the time pressure that ELs who arrive at an older age (e.g., 16 and 17) face in passing the MCAS as a reason why some older ELs drop out or need to transition to other programs, such as Edison.

ELs shared their belief that most students drop out because of lack of success in their classes. Students also mentioned that it was difficult to stay engaged in their classes with remote instruction, and that teacher interest and efforts to make the classes interesting and engaging can make a difference to student engagement and success.

## COVID Challenges and Dropout

Brockton as a community was hard hit in the first wave of the pandemic, experiencing higher rates of infection and mortality than most other communities in Massachusetts. Like all schools across the Commonwealth, the district went fully remote in March 2020 and quickly realized that many students and families did not have the necessary equipment to engage in school remotely. The district worked throughout the spring to provide access to computers and the internet to students. One administrator noted that the district distributed over 6,000 laptops in the spring of 2020. The district also worked to get families signed up for the Comcast Internet Essentials programs, which provides internet for $10 per month. The district learned that during the initial pandemic period many families could not afford the expense, so the district prepaid the fees for over 500 families.

As it became clear that the district would return to school in the fall of 2020 as a fully remote operation, the district worked over the summer to ensure that it was better prepared to support families and students, and that students had access to the equipment needed. For example, the district purchased additional laptops so that not just every family, but every student had a computer. The district also pre-paid internet through June 2021 for more than 500 families. In the fall of 2020, the district purchased over 3,000 “MiFi” internet access devices for those families hesitant to register with Comcast’s Internet Essentials program. The district and partner community organizations provided workshops and supports to non-English-speaking families to orient them to the online learning platforms. The district held these at different days and times, including during food pickup time, for example, to accommodate all families.

The district adapted to provide expanded and targeted family supports for the return to school. For example, cell phones were provided to the district’s community facilitators and family advocates, the school, adjustment counselors, social workers, and other support staff who are multilingual speakers. The district trained these staff to address different types of questions, such as accessing the remote learning platforms and public health. These cell phone numbers were widely publicized by the district, and the support staff reported receiving many calls.

The ongoing pandemic and remote learning continued to challenge the district and high school students through the spring of 2021. ELs shared that they find it hard to engage in remote learning. They also shared feeling like many teachers themselves were not engaged in teaching remotely. Administrators noted that chronic absences and the complete disengagement with school has been notable among many ELs. The district is planning for intensive engagement and social-emotional supports for students over the summer, such as through the Building Boxers program discussed above.

## Discussion

Education for secondary ELs at Brockton Public Schools has some bright spots. The high school addresses several evidence-based recommendations from the Institute of Education Sciences’ practice guide, *Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools* (Rumberger et al., 2017)*,* though not all of these are specific to ELs. These bright spots include the extensive course offerings for ELs, the staff and resources available to support students and families in their native languages, and the Seal of Biliteracy program. The school’s targeted programs, such as Building Boxers that are designed to specifically support ELs to thrive in school as they transition to 9th grade, is another bright spot. District leaders expect that the Building Boxers program will lead to reductions in dropout among ELs with its increased supports for students early in high school to provide a strong foundation for college and career readiness.

District administrators shared that they had recently begun to examine their dropout data, looking more closely at who is dropping out and when, and trying to identify the reasons and warning signs. The district has developed an early warning system, though it is not systematically used throughout the district. Administrators and staff believe that students are dropping out due to financial pressures and the need to work, but current ELs describe additional reasons. Understanding ELs’ school experiences would be helpful to create or improve appropriate and effective programming that is available and accessible to ELs.

The IES practice guide recommends that schools “Engage students by offering curricula and programs that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students’ capacity to manage challenges in and out of school” (p. 5). While Brockton Public Schools has a part-time ESL coordinator for their extensive CVTE program, the program is not particularly accessible to ELs compared to non-ELs. ELs also enroll in lower numbers in CVTE and advanced coursework, with their English proficiency levels cited as a barrier by one interviewee.

# Framingham Public Schools

## Overview

Concerned with the trend in dropout rates among English learners (ELs) in the Commonwealth, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) sought to learn more about potential causes and prevention efforts. DESE contracted with WestEd, an independent, not-for-profit educational research and service organization, to learn about the causes of dropout and the efforts to prevent ELs from dropping out of school in Massachusetts. The goal of the research was to use district case studies to learn about the range of existing programs and practices for ELs. Two questions guided the case studies:

* What are the school and district ***programs*** to engage English Learners and reduce dropout?
* What are the school and district ***practices*** to support the success of English Learner students and prevent dropout?

This case study report is one of four case studies conducted about districts from around the Commonwealth.

To gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of programs and practices that contribute to or mitigate the dropout rates among ELs, researchers conducted background research on district and DESE websites, and collected the following data through virtual individual or group interviews with the following district stakeholders in the spring of 2020 through fall of 2020:

* District director and assistant director of multilingual education
* Assistant superintendent
* Seven administrators, staff, and teachers from the high school who attended a focus group, including both general education and teachers of English as a Second Language
* Six parents who attended two focus groups conducted in Spanish and Portuguese

The original research plan included more extensive data collection and in-person visits to each district. The full set of data collection activities was not possible giving the limitations imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study is not generalizable, but a snapshot during an unprecedented time — of EL programs and practices in the district. Throughout the case study, we highlight programs and practices that are aligned with MA DESE’s *Blueprint for English Learner Success,* and in particular Pillar 4: “A Plan for Success” with attention to the pillar’s three building blocks:

* Thriving in high school
* Graduating college/career ready
* Graduating ready to contribute to civic life

## About Framingham Public Schools

Framingham is a city in the Metro West area of the Greater Boston region in which about 70,000 individuals reside. Framingham Public Schools (FPS) serves about 10,000 students. Approximately 25% of these are classified as ELs, representing a large increase compared to a decade ago when ELs comprised 10% of the student population. More than 40% of all students speak a language other than English, with over 72 home languages spoken. Portuguese (45%) and Spanish (40%) are the most frequently spoken home languages. The district serves a diverse student population, with about 48% of students identifying as white, 36% as Hispanic, and 7% as African American (MA DESE, 2021e). Slightly less than half of all students are economically disadvantaged (45%), and about one fifth (22%) of all students receive special education services. In the 2018/19 school year, the dropout rate for ELs (3.7%) was slightly higher than for all students (3.3%).

## Programs

At the high school level, the English as a Second Language (ESL)/Bilingual and Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) programs in FPS provide a full range of academic classes for ELs. In addition to the SEI program, FPS offers programs of study that are targeted to meet the needs of specific groups of ELs, including newly arrived speakers of Spanish and Portuguese, over-age students, and students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). It also offers an inclusive programming option, the dual language program, in English and Spanish.

Enrollment as of March 1, 2020, at the high school level included:

* Sheltered English Immersion — 221 students
* Transitional Bilingual Education — 172 students
* Dual Language — 98 students
* Students with Limited or Interrupted Formula Education (SLIFE) — 33 students

### Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) Program

The purpose of the program is to prepare ELs for high school graduation and opportunities for postsecondary study. Content area courses are taught in English using sheltered techniques. Six levels of ESL, ranging from beginning to advanced, are also offered, allowing students to study the high school–level curriculum while developing their English language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Within the SEI program, there are two courses per level (labeled A and B) to enable students to take more time as necessary to develop their English language skills before moving to the next level as determined by their WIDA ACCESS scores. A comprehensive language and literature program is also offered in Spanish and Portuguese, as are MCAS preparation classes in English, math, and biology.

### Transitional Bilingual Education Program

Most newly arrived ELs at the high school level who speak Spanish or Portuguese enroll in the transitional bilingual education (TBE) program, in which students take two ESL courses each semester. Placement is based on students’ WIDA ACCESS scores. A typical schedule would include two ESL courses and a range of core content courses (e.g., history, math, science) taught in either Spanish or Portuguese. There are also two bilingual assistant teachers who support students in SEI or general education classes.

The district also provides specialized programs for SLIFE students at the middle and high schools. These programs were developed after realizing that SLIFE students were not succeeding in the traditional TBE program for newcomers. SLIFE students at the high school tend to be older (e.g., 18–19 years old) with few or no high school credits. The program provides individualized attention and support for students.

With the adoption of the LOOK Act (MA DESE, 2018), ELs are becoming integrated into general education academic classes earlier than before. Consequently, instructional coaches reported that some content teachers may need support with their ELs if they had not yet participated in training specific to working with ELs. FPS offers the services of a full-time English Language Development coach whose sole purpose is to support teachers with differentiated instruction for ELs.

### Two-way Dual Language Program in Spanish and English

One of the district’s priorities was to expand and strengthen the dual language programming to the high school level. The Two-way Dual Language curriculum promotes students’ development of bilingual, biliterate, and multicultural competencies. The three goals of the Two-way program are:

* Bilingualism and biliteracy: As students learn content via two languages, they must be able to speak, write, read, listen, and use each of the two languages as supports for the other. Beyond what they might achieve in a traditional world languages course, students work toward both bilingualism *and* biliteracy.
* High academic achievement: The second goal of dual language programs is to ensure high academic achievement in the content areas and specialist areas such as physical education, music, and art for every student, in both the Spanish and English languages.
* Sociocultural competency: Students in dual language programs should be able to see the similarities and differences in each other, but rather than identifying the differences as obstacles to overcome, they should be viewed as opportunities to connect. Such sociocultural competence contributes to efforts to develop equity and social justice.

For students who enter the Two-way program in elementary school, a letter of commitment is given to parents at the time of enrollment. The letter of commitment explains the goals of the program and the program model at each of the elementary schools. Upon entering in grade 6, there is a secondary commitment letter for grades 6–12 that follows a similar format.

The high school program is designed for students who have participated in the Two-way program at FPS’s Walsh Middle School and apply to continue at the high school level. Any student requesting entrance or re-entry into the Framingham High School (FHS) Two-way program must take placement tests that assess thestudent’s listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills in both English and Spanish. The assessments used are the WIDA Screener for English and the LAS (Language Assessment Scale) for Spanish. The WIDA screener is a requirement from the state, and the LAS is a standardized test that has been used in the district to determine proficiency in reading and writing in the native language.

Depending on the results of the placement assessments, the educational experience of the student (e.g., whether or not the student was in a dual language program in a previous school or district), and consultation with the family, the student will be referred to the high school Dual Language department chair who will work with the student’s counselor to create a dual language schedule for the student.

Students within the Two-way program at the high school level take Spanish language, literature, and culture courses in three strands: Advanced College Prep, Honors, and Heritage Speakers, with well-articulated course choices at each grade level. Coursework in all three levels is completed in Spanish. In the 2020/21 school year, a total of 98 students participated in the Two-way Dual Language program across all four grades at the high school.

### The Differentiated Rigorous English & Academic Achievement Modules (DREAM) Program

The DREAM program is for students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) at FHS. DREAM focuses on reinforcing students’ literacy and numeracy skills through instruction led by trained teachers with the aim of learning English and making progress toward learning grade-level content. The DREAM program is a two-year program, after which students are placed into the TBE or SEI program that best meets their needs.

**The DREAM program offers students with limited or interrupted formal education with inclusive opportunities to “thrive in high school”, a Blueprint building block, by offering them a course sequence that enables them to eventually join in mainstream instructional programs.**

The following quote from a district staff member illustrates how DREAM assists SLIFE students:

*“Students in the program have two years to take classes with other students like themselves. They can be comfortable being a student in the U.S. We offer native literacy classes because studies show when you have more knowledge in your first language then it’s easier to learn English. [After DREAM], students enter TBE programs and start to flourish more in terms of mainstream ESL to mainstream classes. All students from this program graduated last year, so there has been much success in this program.”*

### Career and Technical Education Programs

The district collaborates with five other districts to enroll students in a technical institute at the regional vocational high school. The application process is rigorous and begins in middle school. Therefore, newcomers who arrive after the start of freshman year or later are not able to participate in this program.

The Career, Vocational, and Technical Education programs offered by Framingham address the Blueprint building block of “graduating college/career ready” by connecting English Learners to practical work experiences that broaden their horizons and prepare them to explore multiple career choices after graduation.

High school staff have begun collaborating with a Home Builders Association program to create vocational offerings targeted for SLIFE students. These include opportunities to take carpentry classes in school and to get some internship experience toward being licensed in the profession. The SLIFE coordinator participated in the design of the carpentry course and reviewed the curriculum to ensure that activities were accessible to ELs. This collaboration meets a need because while there are some CVTE classes at the high school, most students who are interested in carpentry attend the technical institute. Of the 10 students currently in the carpentry program, eight are ELs.

MassHire is a program that places students in paid internships and is coordinated by the dean of students at the high school. There is a full-time representative at FHS, but staff reported that ELs do not know about or use this program to the full extent possible.

## Practices

In addition to the formal academic programs offered above, the district engages in several practices that support ELs toward graduation. These practices include student counseling, a dropout prevention program, college and career partnerships, and parent and family engagement.

### Student Counseling

Bilingual guidance counselors work to support students in SEI classes who are not yet taking any academic classes with other general education students. FHS also has a multilingual social worker who works with families to connect them with agencies to meet their needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and health insurance. Counseling staff do home visits and bridge relationships with teachers in ESL programs. These new counseling supports aim to provide students with additional personal connections to support their academic success.

*“Most impressive is the commitment the district makes to supporting new students. I know everyone wants to be able to do more, but hearing all that we do is quite a bit more than other districts. [The district] has a commitment. More students enroll than anticipated so even without the budget allotment, the district is willing to hire more staff to accommodate. Six to eight new students a week last year and growing. Team is reacting and changing to meet the needs. I know we wish it could be quicker, but this team is providing excellent support. Some students re-enroll if they drop-out.”*

### Dropout Prevention

The Resiliency for Life program is housed at the high school and staffed by the district. The program is designed for students with low GPAs and addresses academics, social and emotional growth, community, and parent involvement. It is a voluntary program in which students work to accelerate their progress toward graduation. The program integrates after-school supports and tutoring with individualized planning and special events such as retreats and service-learning projects. The program provides a supportive community where students are held to high academic standards. The program also engages families in comprehensive supports to address social and emotional needs and adolescent issues such as substance abuse, sexual health, postsecondary planning, and financial literacy. ELs have begun recently to participate in this program, with seven former EL and two current ELs presently participating in the program.

In the spring of 2021, the district launched a pilot program, the Evening Academy, to serve an immediate need for 20–30 ELs who were not attending day school and have two or more risk factors for dropping out of high school, such as low attendance, poor grades, suspension, and credits needed for graduation. Priority was given to students who could have potentially graduated in spring 2021 and those with the most urgent needs as reflected by reasons why these students may not have been attending school, including the need to work during the day to help financially at home, taking care of younger siblings because family members are working, or having children themselves. Interested students attended an information session at the end of January and completed an online application, and the planning committee finalized the list.

In the Evening Academy students have the opportunity to take credit-bearing classes that meet the requirements for graduation. Students may also receive additional individualized supports, such as counseling, parenting classes, MCAS tutoring, and/or other services that they require to be successful.

The first cohort of the program, offered in collaboration with the district’s Office of Multilingual Education, was piloted with ELs in spring of 2021, after receiving DESE approval in December 2020. Twenty-five at-risk ELs participated in the program in spring 2021. The district intends to continue the program in the 2021/22 school year and will include a larger cohort of students, including non-ELs.

### College and Community Partnerships

The district has created partnerships with local colleges to create or widen access to postsecondary pathways for diverse groups of students. The district has started a program that enables first-generation students to take college classes at Framingham State University for credits while in high school that can be transferred.

### Parent, Family, and Caregiver Engagement

Interconnected offices in FPS coordinate the engagement of ELs’ families, parents, and caregivers. These includes a bilingual family engagement office, an office that handles requests for translation and interpretation, and two parent advisory councils. According to the FPS website, the Bilingual Family Engagement Office is committed to supporting parents of ELs in matters pertaining to their children’s education and providing access to school-related events and activities. Their goal is to ensure that bilingual families are informed, involved, and empowered to advocate for their children. The Bilingual Parent Advisory Council and the Dual Language Parent Advisory Council and their members reach out to families monthly to provide information in the form of informational meetings.

## Reasons Why EL Students Drop Out

All interviewees were asked to share their understanding of what are some common factors for dropping out among ELs. District staff shared that having highly engaged families was correlated with a lower likelihood of students dropping out. They noted that SLIFE were more likely to drop out than other groups of ELs. Students who come into the district as ninth graders who are over-age, such as ages 16 and 17, face particular challenges in completing requirements such as accumulating credits and passing the MCAS. Interviewees further reported that many of these students have also experienced trauma through their migration, or they may be refugees. Other challenges identified by staff includedstudents’ need to be employed and that they might not have close familial support networks if they are newcomers.

### COVID Challenges and Dropout

A district staff member pointed out that during the pandemic, translation services, especially in languages other than Spanish and Portuguese, had become more important than ever to ensure communication with EL families. Given the heightened role of parents in teaching in the remote learning environment, the school and district staff have noted inequities in terms of families’ abilities to communicate with schools. Lack of access to technology and the internet can affect EL families. Additionally, many essential workers are immigrants, which not only puts them at higher risk for COVID but also means they cannot stay at home to assist their children with schoolwork (ACLU, 2020).

In focus groups, participating parents expressed appreciation for the multiple and varied communication from the school and district throughout the pandemic, including emails, text messages, and phone calls. They noted that there was variation in terms of the quantity and rigor of the work that their children were being asked to do in their classes. Parents reiterated repeatedly the importance of having school staff — in all roles — who speak their home languages. Many parents’ concerns have been around remote learning and the need to sustain student interest and participation while developing greater English language proficiency.

During COVID relief efforts, the district drew upon partnerships with faith-based organizations for community outreach and to meet the basic needs of families. An interfaith clergy group coordinates efforts around food access, donation drives, and other infrastructure with the district. Partnerships ensure that key issues identified by the district are fast-tracked for community discussion and collaboration.

## Discussion

The educational program for secondary ELs in FPS has some bright spots. The district programs at the high school address some of the evidence-based recommendations from the Institute of Education Sciences’ practice guide, *Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools* (Rumberger et al., 2017), though not all of these recommendations are specific to ELs. The primary practices for ELs in FPS are centered on intensive interventions targeted to support specific groups of students.

SLIFE students are a particular focus for intensive interventions in the district. The DREAM program offers students two years of intensive supports with the aim of integrating them into the educational mainstream. The new evening program, which was piloted with ELs in the spring of 2021, has the potential to meet the needs of a specific population of ELs. The program provides individualized and flexible opportunities for students to engage in academic content and receive supports to help be able to stay in school, reducing the likelihood of dropping out.

While it was evident from discussion with district staff that several initiatives are in place in the district to reduce dropout and increase high school student success, it was not clear that all ELs have full access to participating in these programs. For instance, for some groups of ELs, such as those who attended middle school in the district, the district offers full access to a variety of programs, including a CVTE program, whereas ELs new to the district in high school may be excluded from these programs. The CVTE program is in line with the IES practice guide’s dropout prevention recommendation to connect to college and career. In this area, efforts might focus on broadening access and pathways for more recently arrived students. Some efforts are already underway to expand vocational opportunities for SLIFE students.

District staff associated with programs serving ELs also shared that there was a continuing need to shift mindsets among some of the general education faculty and staff. Ongoing efforts are addressing how to have all teachers view ELs as their collective responsibility while fully valuing the immense potential for students to become bilingual and biliterate participants in society.

# Somerville Public Schools

## Overview

Concerned with the trend in dropout rates among English learners (ELs) in the Commonwealth, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) sought to learn more about potential causes of and prevention efforts for EL dropouts. DESE contracted with WestEd, an independent, not-for-profit educational research and service organization, to learn about the causes of and efforts to prevent ELs from dropping out of school in Massachusetts.

The goal of the research was to use district case studies to learn about the range of existing programs and practices for ELs. Two questions guided the case studies:

* What are the school and district ***programs*** to engage English Learners and reduce dropout?
* What are the school and district ***practices*** to support the success of English Learner students and prevent dropout?

This case study report is one of four case studies conducted with districts from around the Commonwealth.

To gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of programs and practices that contribute to or mitigate the dropout rates among ELs, researchers conducted reviews of district and DESE websites and collected the following data through virtual individual or group interviews and written responses to the questions with the following district stakeholders in the spring of 2020 through the fall of 2020:

* District Administrator of Programs for Multilingual Learner Education and Family and Community Partnerships, and Department Chair for Multilingual Learner Education at Somerville High School (SHS) (interviewed together)
* Student support staff, including a family liaison and special program staff

The original research plan included more extensive data collection and in-person visits to each district. The full set of data collection activities was not possible giving the limitations imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study is not generalizable, but a snapshot during an unprecedented time — of EL programs and practices in the district. Throughout the case study, we highlight programs and practices that are aligned with MA DESE’s *Blueprint for English Learner Success,* and in particular Pillar 4: “A Plan for Success” with attention to the pillar’s three building blocks:

* Thriving in high school
* Graduating college/career ready
* Graduating ready to contribute to civic life

## About Somerville Public Schools

Somerville is a small, densely populated city northwest of Boston in which approximately 80,000 individuals reside. Somerville Public Schools (SPS) serve about 5,000 students, approximately 20% of whom are classified as ELs. The three most spoken home languages among Somerville’s ELs are Spanish, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole. The district serves a diverse student population, with about 41% of students identifying as Hispanic, 40% as white, and 9% as African American (MA DESE, 2021f). Slightly less than half (45%) of the students are economically disadvantaged, and about one fifth of students (20%) receive special education services. In the 2018/19 school year, the dropout rate among ELs in Somerville was 3.3% compared to 1.1% for the district overall, both lower than the statewide averages.

## Programs

A variety of programming is offered in Somerville, including targeted programs and supports, to address the needs of their diverse EL population. These include:

* UNIDOS Dual Language Program
* Sheltered English Immersion for grades K–12
* GOAL Program — an alternative diploma pathway
* English Learner Intensive
* Students Accessing Formal Education (SAFE) program for SIFE[[4]](#footnote-5)
* Summer Program for English Language Learners (SPELL)

Each program is described in greater depth below.

### UNIDOS Dual Language Program

The district offers a dual language program in grades K–8 that is “dedicated to educating bilingual, bi-literate thinking individuals with a profound respect for their culture and the culture of others” (Somerville, 2021). As a limited enrollment program, admission by lottery is used for new students. Students are taught by two teachers for each grade, with one teacher a native Spanish speaker and the other a native English speaker. Students are taught half of the time in Spanish and half in English, though the schedule varies by grade. For example, kindergarten students spend time in each language classroom every day, whereas students in first grade switch language classrooms every half week, weekly in grades 2–5, and daily in grades 6–8. Special afterschool clubs and enrichment activities are offered to students in UNIDOS, and students are integrated into the wider school community as well.

### Sheltered English Immersion Program (SEI)

For most students who speak languages other than English, SEI is the core instructional program for most ELs at all levels, including the high school level. The SEI program includes English as a Second Language (ESL) and content instruction (math, science, social studies) aligned to grade-level standards. Teachers use sheltered instruction techniques, such as primary language support, visual displays, and leveled materials and texts, to make lessons understandable. Classroom teachers modify their instruction to ELs in both general and special education classes and are supported by ESL instructional specialists.

### GOAL Program

The GOAL program offers students an alternative pathway toward their high school diploma. This program is targeted to ELs who enroll in high school when they are 17 to 20 years old and are 3 or 4 credit years behind their traditional high school peers. GOAL students begin their high school careers at SHS, where they benefit from beginner ESL instruction as well as foundational math and science courses. GOAL students are integrated with SHS students and take courses from the SHS program of studies in every department. They also participate in the GOAL program seminars with targeted academic and social-emotional supports, as well as community building and transition planning. GOAL students at SHS receive additional support through flexible scheduling, an expanded school year with a summer component, and wraparound support services.

**The GOAL program offers over-age English Learners inclusive supports that begin in mainstream instruction and then proceed with courses and flexible scheduling toward an adult diploma, addressing the Blueprint building block of “thriving in high school.”**

Students in GOAL tend to spend one or two years at the high school before advancing to the Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experiences (SCALE), where students continue their academic preparation in English language arts, mathematics, and biology to pass the three MCAS exams required for a high school diploma. The coursework in SCALE is all in English; thus, there is a need to have students have some proficiency, which is the focus of their time in high school. The coursework includes traditional classes but is primarily independent work. Students move through their work at SCALE at their own pace, with flexibility to move quickly or slowly, as their life circumstances permit. Finally, students complete the five tasks required for the Adult Diploma Program (ADP) to receive their high school diploma. GOAL students at SHS and SCALE benefit from the opportunities and resources available to all SHS students. The program philosophy is that young adult students can achieve their goals through Goal Setting, Open Dialogue, Academic Preparation, and Language Practice.

Staff describe the personalized approach of GOAL as a strength of the program. The program, which is an alternative to credit-based graduation, gives nontraditional students the flexibility in their school schedules to allow them to manage their nonschool responsibilities, such as child care and work, while making progress toward their academic goals and high school diploma. Another strength that staff described was the personal relationships between instructors, staff, and students. Given the small size of the program, instructors and staff feel they really get to know their students and support them to stay motivated at an individual level. Approximately 20 students participate in the GOAL program annually, with about 5–10 students advancing to SCALE each year. Since the GOAL program was founded in 2016, five GOAL students have graduated from high school with an adult diploma.

### English Learner Intensive

Another targeted program offered by Somerville, the English Learner Intensive program is designed to meet the needs of students who have a limited ability to participate in a full school schedule due to personal or family circumstances. These circumstances may include working full time to support themselves or their family, or to care for their child or a family member. Students in their junior or senior year who are on pace to graduate can enroll in an approved reduced course load to stay on track for graduation. There is flexibility in both start times (as late as 9:00 a.m.) and end times (as early as 1:30 p.m.). Students who would benefit from this pathway are encouraged to accumulate graduation credits early, whether by taking regular courses, studying during an extended school day, participating in blended learning, or enrolling in summer credit-bearing courses. They benefit from daily check-ins with the English Learner Pathways teacher and coordinator, as well as access to tutors and homework help as needed.

### Students Accessing Formal Education (SAFE) Program

Students with Interrupted Formal Education are offered a cluster of courses to prepare them academically for full engagement in Somerville High School. Because the needs and academic history of each student with limited or interrupted formal education are unique, the EL counselor reviews the student’s educational history to create a SIFE student’s course of study. All SIFE students are enrolled in the “SAFE Daily Seminar,” which offers the development of independent skills for school success, social-emotional systems of support, and learning opportunities in context. SAFE students are also encouraged to take advantage of extended learning time after school and/or academic tutoring before and after school at the SHS EL Welcome Center. Participating students may also enroll in the Summer EL Newcomer Program to receive intensive English language development and instruction in mathematics. SAFE program teachers and the Multilingual Learner Support Team staff communicate regularly to monitor students’ academic progress and identify any needs for additional social supports or community resources.

### Summer Program for English Language Learners (SPELL)

The district offers a summer enrichment program for students in grades 1–12. At the secondary level, the program is focused on language development and academic support for ELs to complement and support students to access the content in the next school year.

### Additional Supports and Programs for High School EL Students

In addition to the core academic programs listed above, there are supplementary supports and programs that meet the needs of ELs, including vocational programs and a partnership with a local youth leadership development program.

### Somerville High School Center for Career and Technical Education

SHS offers a comprehensive vocational program that is formally inclusive of all students. Staff described many SHS students have some involvement in vocational programming; however, schedule constraints may make it difficult for ELs to participate in vocational programming. For example, the ESL double-block period, MCAS prep classes, and core course requirements can be barriers to participation in vocational programs.

### Enroot

Enroot is a local nonprofit serving immigrant high school students from SPS and other neighboring communities with a goal of helping immigrant students be successful in the U.S. educational system (Enroot, n.d.). They began working in Somerville High School in the fall of 2016 with a pilot program that has since expanded. For high school students, Enroot provides up to 15 extended learning opportunity hours per week, including:

**Enroot offers immigrant high school students with opportunities to develop leadership and community connections, addressing the Blueprint building block of “graduating ready to contribute to civic life.”**

* Leadership development
* Academic tutoring
* Student internships
* 1-1 mentoring

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Enroot volunteers offered tutoring and mentoring three times a week at local community sites. Volunteer mentors are trained before being paired with students, matched by language. While Enroot moved to remote programming during the pandemic, SHS staff report that students remain engaged in the program.

## Practices

In addition to the formal academic or extracurricular programs described above, the district engages in several practices intended to directly support ELs. These practices include organizing teacher work around professional learning communities (PLCs), guidance counseling and social work, targeted intervention in mathematics, and parent and family engagement.

### Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Several PLCs exist at SHS, such as cross-discipline grade-level teams. After several years of effort and advocacy by teachers, the EL team at SHS was able to assemble all high school teachers who serve ELs as a regular PLC (called “NEST” for Newcomer Education Success Team) focused on ELs. This is a required PLC for any teacher and support staff who serve ELs that is built into the schedule of teachers, including core content and EL teachers, as well as academic support staff. The structure includes two meetings a week. One meeting is data focused: monitoring student progress, including identifying areas of concern; reviewing gradebook and attendance data; and coordinating plans for student check-ins and consultations. The other meeting is focused on adult professional learning. Educators have looked at shared behavior, including curriculum implementation and teaching practices, or have focused on specific topics, such as trauma-informed practices and educator self-care. These professional learning meetings have sometimes included formal trainings as well as time for teams to collaborate across departments to improve consistency and alignment of procedures and policies.

The PLC also aims to empower teachers to take collective action to advance learning opportunities for ELs. They have also reviewed data on ELs with disabilities, long-term ELs, and rising 9th grade students to inform placement decisions and processes. Leaders at the high school credit the increased collaboration with building awareness and advocacy for continuous improvement of service to ELs. For example, the collaboration and advocacy led the school to recently reorganize the student support model for students with immigrant and refugee backgrounds. They also credit this increased collaboration and teacher empowerment with the creation of the new position of ESL literacy specialist, who will be an interventionist at the high school beginning in the fall of 2021.

### Targeted Intervention in Mathematics

To better understand factors associated with dropout, a Math Policy Group conducted a root cause analysis for math course failures. This analysis considered course offerings and how well they match ELs’ needs. In particular, the group identified that ELs, particularly SIFE, were more likely to struggle in math than were non-ELs. Over the summer of 2020, the team developed plans to strengthen teacher preparation, student time spent on learning, and systems for tracking progress. The team’s planning work has continued throughout the 2020/21 school year.

### Counseling and Social Work

Prior to the 2020/21 school year, the city of Somerville employed a wraparound coordinator based at the high school. As of the 2020/21 school year, that position was converted to a school-based bilingual adjustment counselor who works primarily with newcomers and SIFE. In addition, there is a school counselor who is dedicated to supporting approximately 200 ELs. The SHS Multilingual Support Team, including these counselors and several other multilingual support staff, offers services such as health referrals, which include teen pregnancy prevention, mental health, and crisis response in coordination with local health services organizations and alliances.

Staff described complex needs among the ELs served in the district. For example, staff described that many students do not live with a parent who can advocate for them. They described students who experienced trauma or violence in their home countries or on their journey to the United States. They described resilient students who, while juggling other responsibilities such as work, are motivated to learn English and get their high school education. The city and school district continue to work to understand and meet the complex needs of their students to help support more of them to stay in school. Some examples of the supports provided include support in finding housing, addressing food insecurity, and working with local organizations such as Enroot to find mentors for students.

### Parent, Family, and Caregiver Engagement

The district has interconnected offices that coordinate the engagement of the students’ families, parents, and caregivers. The first point of contact for many families is the high school welcome center. In addition to helping new students and families with school enrollment and orientation to EL programs, multilingual staff at the Welcome Center provide ongoing support for students and their families, including before- and after-school tutoring and community resources.

Three dedicated family liaisons who speak common home languages like Spanish and Portuguese provide targeted supports to students new to SPS. Family liaisons reported that many students have only one guardian or parent, who may not be familiar with the system, educational options, or how to advocate for their child. There are also cultural and linguistic barriers to families being comfortable at school, and therefore, family involvement varies. Despite the SHS’s best efforts to engage families in making program and schedule decisions, sometimes the schools make those decisions for students.

In a student’s first three months of school, a family liaison will monitor students closely to check that they have resources such as clothing, books, and tutoring, as needed. This monitoring is aimed to prevent students from dropping out early on. Staff shared that in some ways, the pandemic has increased school contact with parents, since Zoom meetings can take place when parents are not able to come to campus during the day. District staff intend to continue using Zoom even after the pandemic.

## Reasons Why EL Students Drop Out

All interviewees were asked to share their understanding of why ELs drop out of SPS. Interviewees described their ELs as resilient young adults who are resourceful, creative, and eager to learn. District support staff identified students’ need to work and earn money to support their families or to repay debt for immigration as the primary reason for dropout. Staff also noted that over-age students face multiple challenges in completing graduation requirements, often needing to manage significant family responsibilities as well as school. In addition, staff noted that many students who drop out have experienced trauma, such as domestic, community, or political violence.

### COVID Challenges and Dropout

District leaders shared that while COVID has brought many challenges, it has not all been negative. They noted that remote school was always negative for the students who experience stress, social anxiety, or lack of connection at school. But for other students who like socialization and can benefit from in-person instruction, virtual learning was difficult and isolating.

District staff shared that the pandemic exposed equity gaps, such as access to technology and to a quiet space to learn. Wi-Fi and equipment access remain challenges. Staff reported that teachers needed to directly teach ELs how to use technology to access instruction, as not all had used laptops, videoconferencing tools, and Wi-Fi before.

## Discussion

The educational program for secondary ELs in SPS has some bright spots. The high school’s programs for ELs addresses two of the evidence-based recommendations from the Institute of Education Sciences’ practice guide, *Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools* (Rumberger et al., 2017)*.* While these recommendations are not specific to ELs, they identify evidence-based practices to reduce dropout. The NEST cross-grade and -discipline professional learning community of teachers and support staff who serve ELs monitors the progress of ELs and proactively intervenes when concerns are observed. This relatively new structure provides a systematic approach to early intervention and progress monitoring for ELs on track to graduation, and is aligned with the practice guide. It also serves to expand the understanding, skills, and strategies that can help teachers more effectively support ELs. It makes the responsibility for success for ELs the responsibility of all teachers and staff.

Additionally, the district also offers targeted support programs to meet the needs of specific groups of ELs. For example, the GOAL program for over-age and under-credited students provides intensive supports that are targeted to the needs of over-age students. GOAL is integrated with the adult learning programs offered by the district and enables students to balance participation in the mainstream curriculum in their first two years of high school with the demands of completing graduation requirements. This flexibility acknowledges the complex needs and responsibilities that many older ELs manage. The district also offers targeted supports to students with limited or interrupted formal education through the SAFE program, which over two years prepares students to fully participate in the mainstream high school. These programs align with the practice guide recommendation of providing “intensive, individualized support to students who have fallen off track and face significant challenges to success” (p. 2).

One of the recommendations of the IES dropout prevention practice guide is to make connections to college and career. While the district has a vocational program that is technically available to all students, district staff have identified some of the challenges for ELs to participate due to scheduling and course requirements. Further efforts could address ELs’ full access to career programs and college access.

*“Our kids are fun and creative and learning. We’re connecting. The tech challenges are mostly behind us. We learn a lot from them. We need to really listen to them. They are resourceful and creative. They are resilient. They amaze me every day.”*

  – District staff member

# Worcester Public Schools

## Overview

Concerned with the trend in dropout rates among English learners (ELs) in the Commonwealth, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) sought to learn more about potential causes of and prevention efforts for EL dropouts. DESE contracted with WestEd, an independent, not-for-profit educational research and service organization, to learn about the causes of and efforts to prevent ELs from dropping out of school in Massachusetts. The goal of the research was to use district case studies to learn about the range of existing programs and practices for ELs. Two questions guided the case studies:

* What are the school and district ***programs*** to engage English Learners and reduce dropout?
* What are the school and district ***practices*** to support the success of English Learner students and prevent dropout?

This case study report is one of four case studies conducted about districts from around the Commonwealth.

To gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of programs and practices that contribute to or mitigate the dropout rates among ELs, researchers conducted reviews of district and DESE websites and collected the following data through virtual individual or group interviews and written responses to the interview questions with the following district stakeholders in the spring of 2020 through the fall of 2020:

* Manager and assistant director of EL programs, the director of Research and Accountability, and a researcher from that office (group interview)
* EL department head at one of the high schools
* A college and career liaison at one of the high schools

The original research plan included more extensive data collection and in-person visits to each district. The full set of data collection activities was not possible giving the limitations imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study is not generalizable, but a snapshot during an unprecedented time — of EL programs and practices in the district. Throughout the case study, we highlight programs and practices that are aligned with MA DESE’s *Blueprint for English Learner Success,* and in particular Pillar 4: “A Plan for Success” with attention to the pillar’s three building blocks:

* Thriving in high school
* Graduating college/career ready
* Graduating ready to contribute to civic life

## About Worcester Public Schools

Worcester Public Schools (WPS) is a large and diverse district with almost 24,000 students and 44 schools in which 74 different languages are spoken. The district serves a high proportion of high-need students (81%) and students receiving free- and reduced-price lunch (64%). Overall, 21% of students receive special education services and 30% are ELs (MA DESE 2021g). The dropout rate for ELs is 5.7%, which is higher than the district overall rate of 2.6%, but lower than the EL dropout rate for the state (7.6%) and other urban Massachusetts districts, including Boston (7.8%), Brockton (9.8%), Lowell (8.5%), and Springfield (6.6%) (WPS, 2021a).

The district operates four comprehensive high schools and one technical high school, as well as additional evening and alternative programs. In the 2020/21 school year, the percentage of ELs ranged from 6% (93 students) in Worcester Technical High School to 29% (381 students) in North High School. The district serves recent arrivals and ELs with limited or interrupted formal education in New Citizen Center programs, including one for elementary students, one for secondary students who arrive before the age of 18, and one for young adults who are 18 or older and have significantly limited and interrupted formal education (SLIFE) when they arrive.

EL services are offered in all of the schools and are overseen by a manager and assistant director at the district level.

## Programs

WPS offers a variety of educational programs for ELs through both targeted support programs and inclusive programs for all learners.

### Sheltered English Immersion (SEI)

SEI is the main program for ELs in the district. ELs receive daily English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction at their ELP level by an ESL teacher. In addition, ELs receive their content instruction from teachers with SEI endorsements. The number of ESL classes a student takes each day is dependent upon their ELP level. Students in Level 1 or 2 receive two full periods of English language instruction per day, and students in Levels 3, 4, or 5 receive one period per day.

### Spanish-English Dual Language Programs

The district has two different types of dual language programs (one- and two-way programs[[5]](#footnote-6)) for students in preschool through high school. The two-way Spanish-English program at the high school level is at Burncoat High School and it began offering grade 9 for the 2020/21 school year with 28 students. The district will be expanding the program by one grade per year until it serves grades 9–12. Most students enroll in the dual language program in the elementary grades and continue to middle school, and now the high school. New students who speak Spanish, bilingual students, and world language students may be able to enroll in the program in later grades.

The high school program currently enrolls two ELs, as well as seven former ELs and nine students who are fully exited from EL status. The goals of the program are academic achievement, bilingualism and biliteracy, and cultural competence for all. At the high school, students in the dual language program take two courses in Spanish each year, with world history, Spanish language and literacy courses in the 9th grade and human anatomy and AP Spanish language in the 10th grade. The district is also collaborating with local postsecondary institutions to provide students with access to additional Spanish dual enrollment courses.

### Programs for Students with Limited and/or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE)/New Citizens Center

The New Citizens Center programs are for ELs who are new to the United States and have either a three-year gap in their education or little or no formal education. There are three New Citizens programs, one offered at the elementary level, one at the secondary, and one for young adults who are 18 or older. In addition to the school-year program, the district offers extensive summer programming, taught by ESL-certified teachers, specifically for newcomers.

The secondary and young adult programs enroll about 30 students annually. The elementary program is in an elementary school and students eventually transfer to their neighborhood school. The secondary programs are offered in a separate location. High school students younger than 18 generally spend about two years in the program before they transition to one of the district’s comprehensive high schools. Students receive instruction in a full-day sheltered English immersion model from teachers who are dual certified in both their content and ESL. The goal of the program is to transition students to their regularly assigned school upon achieving an intermediate level of English proficiency and being prepared to access traditional instruction and work toward their diplomas.

The Young Adult program at the New Citizens Center is for students who are 18 or older and have significantly limited and interrupted formal education. Because the academic background and needs of the students vary greatly, students follow individualized educational paths at the center. All students receive SEI instruction for the full school day, with intensive instruction in English language development and literacy acquisition. Students receive instruction from dual certified teachers in ESL and content areas. The class sizes are small, with five classroom teachers: one ESL, one Math/ESL, one Science/ESL, one English/ESL, and one History/ESL. Other student supports include a dedicated guidance counselor and an adjustment counselor, as well as itinerant staff who teach elective courses. Students can also take additional periods of ESL instruction outside of the required school day. Instruction at the Newcomer Center is culturally relevant, with thematic and project-based units. Students also have the opportunity to engage in community-based learning opportunities. Collaboration with community agencies supports students and their families, for example, with food, housing, clothing, counseling, and legal services.

**The Young Adult program at the New Citizens Center addresses the needs of older students who have limited or interrupted formal education combining inclusive supports with personalized planning and intensive instruction, addressing the Blueprint building block of “thriving in high school.”**

Students at the Young Adult program transition to the Gerald Center, another WPS program for over-age, under-credited students, where students can earn credits at an accelerated pace. Students at the Gerald Center receive either a certificate of completion or their high school diploma.

### Seal of Biliteracy Program

While not specifically for ELs, the district offers a Seal of Biliteracy diploma credential. First implemented in the 2018/19 school year, the program recognizes graduates who are proficient in two or more languages and meet certain academic criteria, in addition to being in good standing for graduation. The program is for all students, not just ELs; however, administrators see it as a formal recognition of the language assets that many ELs possess.

## Practices

As a large district, WPS’s EL services and practices are not necessarily uniform throughout the district. In addition to the formal programs described above, Worcester engages in additional practices intended to provide targeted support ELs or indirectly through support for helping educators serve ELs more effectively. The practices, for example, include professional learning for educators, student progress monitoring, expanding access to programs, family engagement, and summer learning.

### Professional Learning

Over the past two years or so, the district office of EL programs has been working to ensure that all school staff and leaders see the success of ELs as a collective responsibility, not just the responsibility of the office of EL programs. To foster this approach, the office of EL programs initiated a book study on *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (Hammond, 2015) with several principals in 2018/19*.* Additional training on culturally responsive practices began in 2019/20 with assistant principals to support improved teaching and learning, as well as to increase student engagement and to reduce dropout for ELs and other students. The district has continued professional learning on cultural responsiveness with administrators, including an additional book study on *Breaking Down the Walls: Essentials Shifts for English Learners’ Success* (Espino Calderon et al., 2019) and facilitated training with consultants who lead conversations with principals, which includes a focus on biases and equity. Three years ago, the district began providing professional development for co-teaching ELs. The office of EL programs started outreach directly to schools and the guidance counselors at the high schools. For example, the manager of EL programs developed a document for guidance counselors on best practices for supporting ELs and their families. The district also increased the number of high school counselors in 2019/20 to reduce student caseloads in order to provide more individualized supports to students when needed.

### Progress Monitoring

The LOOK Act of 2017 (MA DESE, 2018), which granted districts increased flexibility for programming for ELs, also requires increased data collection and reporting on the progress of ELs by district. The purpose of the LOOK Act monitoring is not focused on dropout, though it will help schools to identify students struggling to learn English. To implement the requirements of the LOOK Act, the office of EL programs began a school-level monitoring program. This involves the collection of monitoring forms that are reviewed and signed by the school principal and the EL department heads. A school-based team examines each monitoring form to identify students who are struggling academically or with learning English. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the district has worked to move monitoring into an online platform called Ellevation. While the district administrators described the monitoring process as a large undertaking, given the large number of ELs who are not meeting their ACCESS targets, they also expressed that it was a necessary step to ensure ELs make progress. Administrators appreciated that the move to the electronic monitoring system reduced the paperwork burden, which allows more time for educators to respond to the data. The new data system provides educators easy access to data to support instruction and monitoring. In addition to monitoring current ELs, the district also monitors the academic progress of ELs who opted out of services and former ELs for four years.

In terms of monitoring students who are at risk of dropping out or not graduating, the district has universal processes, not specific processes for ELs. School counselors are responsible for monitoring to make sure that all students are staying on track for graduation. Counselors may, for example, make use of credit recovery services at each school when a student is off track for graduation. Some administrators expressed concern that the caseloads of guidance counselors make it difficult for them to provide the individualized supports that at-risk students need. A school leader shared that at his school, there was a team that included the principal or vice-principal, as well as counselors who intervene when ELs are failing 9th grade. Concerned about students’ mental health during the pandemic, the district has invested in the Panorama Education dashboard that combines student survey data with other data on individual students to identify students at risk and needing intervention. Classroom teachers, guidance counselors, and school leaders have access to data on their students and can use the information to intervene and support students.

### Expanding Access to Educational Opportunities Through Inclusive Programming

District staff noted that some ELs participate in career or technical education (CVTE), dual enrollment programs, and/or advanced coursework. However, the extent of their participation is low, and there are disparities in enrollment compared to non-ELs. A barrier that staff identified is that ELs at English Language Proficiency levels 1 and 2 must take two back-to-back ESL classes, making it practically impossible for them to enroll and fit CVTE courses into their schedule. In addition, many of the CVTE courses must be taken in sequence and there may not be multiple sections, so if ELs cannot get into the classes in the right sequence, these courses are effectively not accessible to them. The guidance department at the high school has been having internal discussions about how to both reach out and also attract ELs to do advanced coursework. For example, in the 2019/20 school year, the district changed the scheduling of some of the ESL classes to make it easier for ELs to participate in the Chapter 74 (vocational and technical) programs. Also, in 2019/20, the district introduced a new Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) class for ELs at one of the high schools.

**Efforts to expand English Learners’ access to career, vocational, and technical education as well as dual enrollment with local community colleges address the Blueprint building block of “graduating college/career ready.”**

The district recently expanded dual enrollment opportunities for ELs to further support opportunities for college and career readiness. In 2018/19, the district partnered with Quinsigamond Community College to offer a dual enrollment course for ELs and other students. In 2019/20, the dual enrollment offerings for ELs were further expanded to include courses in computer science, statistics, and math. Due to the challenges with COVID-19, the dual enrollment courses did not continue in 2020/21; however, the district expects to resume them next year.

### Parent Engagement

The district is also working with the relatively new English Learner Parent Advisory Council (ELPAC) to disseminate information to families about programs and options for ELs. For example, the principal from the district’s competitive, application-based Technical High School spoke to the ELPAC and shared information about admission to the school. The office of EL programs also shared information such as extended learning opportunities and other Chapter 74 programs available across the different comprehensive high schools. The district undertook additional family and community engagement efforts during the 2020/21 school year. For example, the district is meeting monthly with community partners to engage around family support and information sharing. The district is conducting virtual family forums in Spanish, and the district is hosting virtual information sessions on its different EL programming options.

### Summer Learning

During the summer of 2019/20, the district continued serving ELs through a number of three-week Multilingual Accelerated Summer Academies at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. These were remote programs. At the secondary level, these programs included English as a Second Language Support and Math Support in Spanish at South High School. The focus of these program was to provide Spanish language learning opportunities to support students’ knowledge of grade-level math. The New Citizens Center for Young Adults also offered a 15-day online summer program offering synchronous teacher-led and remote activities focused on reading, math, and technology skills. Additionally, the center offered credit recovery options for high school students during the summer.

## Reasons Why EL Students Drop Out

To learn more about the issue of EL dropout in the district, the WPS Office of Research and Accountability conducted a four-year historical analysis of dropout activity in the district, noting trend differences between EL and non-EL populations. A districtwide EL dropout workgroup, including the EL directors, the superintendent, principals, guidance counselors, and research staff, has been meeting regularly over the past three years on the topic. Members reported noticing some trends in their data about the characteristics of EL dropouts, including:

* Older and under-credited ELs are more likely to drop out, and they tend to do so in the 9th or 10th grade
* Newcomers, SLIFE, and ELs who did not pass the MCAS drop out at higher levels than other EL and non-ELs
* Poor attendance, but not behavior, is a risk factor for EL dropout

In addition to looking at data trends, the group is working to understand district structures and to brainstorm interventions that could change the trajectory for ELs who are at risk of dropping out.

Administrators shared that some of the reasons students give for dropping out include employment and enrollment in the federal Job Corps program. The reasons for dropping out are only captured when self-reported by students to teachers or staff. Consequently, reasons for dropping out are not consistently captured for all students who drop out. A high school administrator shared that for many ELs, in addition to the need and/or desire for employment, other reasons for dropping out include the unfamiliarity of the U.S. system and the testing requirements which can be overwhelming to newcomers, as well as individual factors such as motivation and unaddressed trauma that many students, especially the SLIFE and unaccompanied minors, have endured.

## COVID Challenges and Dropout

WPS, like all districts in the Commonwealth, moved to remote learning in March of 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2020/21 school year remained fully remote until March 2021. During the period of remote learning, the district worked to ensure that all students had the technology and tools needed to fully access remote learning, including computers and the internet, by providing devices and hotspots to students who needed these. The district provided additional supports for multilingual families and students to use technology, including family academies, multilingual videos, office hours, and district contacts. They also provided a trilingual coach focused on working with ELs, their families, and educators.

During the pandemic, the district provided additional academic supports to ELs. For example, each school offered remote after-school help or office hours for students to seek support. At some schools, ESL teachers were available for support every day after school. For the February 2021 and the April 2021 school vacation weeks, the district provided a 4-day intensive program for secondary ELs in need of support in English and math. District administrators reported that many students, including ELs, struggled with engagement and routines of remote learning. They expressed concern about the impact of the pandemic and long-term remote schooling on ELs’ engagement in school.

## Discussion

As a large and diverse district, WPS has several bright spots in its programs and practices to support ELs. The district engages in a number of evidence-based practices to support ELs. The office of EL programs actively and regularly monitors the progress for ELs on the ACCESS, which also occurs at the school level with more intensive monitoring, including monitoring for dropout prevention. The systematic monitoring of student performance progress is one of the evidenced-based practices from the IES practice guide, *Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools* (Rumberger et al., 2017). In addition to academic monitoring, the district monitors student social and emotional learning and health through Panorama Education surveys for students in 7th through 12th grade.

Like many districts, WPS continues to work to provide secondary ELs with equitable access to inclusive programming, such as advanced and career-oriented programs and courses due to requirements for ESL courses. The district has undertaken efforts to inform ELs and families about career and technical options. District leaders are particularly excited about the growing dual enrollment opportunities for ELs that expands their access to and supports for preparation for college. They have seen ELs thrive in these programs. Efforts to rework the high school schedule and offer additional programs outside of the regular school day to offer more opportunities for access to inclusive programming were underway when the pandemic hit. Looking ahead, the district hopes to implement a program for ELs focused on college and career development that was delayed due to COVID. The district also plans to work with a local university-based researcher to understand more about the root causes of dropout among ELs. Given the efforts of the office of EL programs to closely examine their data and use them to guide decisions, there is a commitment on the part of the office of EL program leaders to understand and reduce EL dropouts in the district.

# Appendix B: Survey Results

# High School English Learners and COVID-19 in Massachusetts

This appendix summarizes responses to survey questions about English Learners and COVID-19 from a survey of district EL directors in medium and high incidence EL learner districts across Massachusetts. This survey was part of a broader study of best practices in dropout prevention for English Learners WestEd is conducting under contract to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The survey was conducted from mid-May through early July 2020. A total of 52 districts responded to the survey though not every district responded to every question. The survey response rate was 65%.

## Extent of District Responses

Districts were asked about various actions they took in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the responses in figure 1, we see that districts focused their efforts on communication with the parents of their high school English learners in a language they could understand, with 65% reporting they did this to a great extent. Forty-two percent of the responding districts also reported that to “a great extent” they made targeted outreach to high school English learners at risk of dropping out, and 42% also reported offering quality resources to meet the needs of high school English learners. Least frequently selected as “to a great extent” was meeting the social emotional needs of high school English learners. This is notable, because social emotional needs and concerns was the second most commonly reported response to an open-ended question about concerns for high school English learners upon the return to school.

**Figure 1: Extent to which the district took various actions in response to the COVID-19 situation, percentage, n=43**

## Open-Ended Responses

Responses to three open-ended questions about concerns for the return to school, whether remote or in-person indicated great concern for academic, social, and technology issues. Researchers coded the responses by theme. A summary of responses for each of the questions is provided below, and full text of the responses to the open-ended questions are provided in Appendix A.

Thirty-five districts responded to the question: what needs for serving high school English learners do you anticipate if remote learning continues into the fall? The responses, summarized in figure 2, included:

* Technology, including equitable access to technology, effective use of technology by teachers and students (15 responses),
* Access to the internet or hot spots (9 responses),
* Student engagement (9 responses),
* Effective instruction for English learners (9 responses),
* Financial concerns including food and housing security (9 responses),
* Family engagement (8 responses),
* Social-emotional learning (8 responses),
* Professional development (5 responses), and
* Flexible scheduling for classes (2 responses).

**Figure 2: Anticipated needs for serving high school English learners in a remote learning environment**



Note: There were a total of 35 district responses, with most districts reporting multiple needs.

Thirty-six responses were received to the question of anticipated needs for high school English learners in the transition back to school-based-instruction (figure 3). Three topics that appeared most frequently in the responses were:

* Academic and language supports, and addressing learning loss (26 responses),
* Social emotional support and guidance for students (11 responses), and
* Managing home responsibilities and work (5 responses).

**Figure 3: Anticipated needs for serving high school English learners in-person**



Note: There were 36 district responses provided, with most districts reporting multiple needs.

A total of 37 responses were received to the final open-ended question asking about what was most worrisome for high school English learners in light of COVID-19 and remote schooling. The concerns reported are summarized in figure 4 and included:

* Learning and language loss (19 responses),
* Social-emotional needs (17 responses),
* English Learners dropping out or not returning to school (12 responses),
* All of the sample concerns listed “e.g., learning loss, dropping out or specific academic, social emotional, behavioral concerns” (12 responses),
* Finances and student work obligations (11 responses),
* Health & safety (5 responses), and
* Engagement (4 responses).

**Figure 4: Concerns for English learners in light of COVID-19 and remote schooling**



Note: There were 37 district responses, with most districts reporting multiple concerns.

# Open-ended Survey Responses

**Table A1: What needs for serving high school English Learners do you anticipate if remote learning continues into the fall?**

|  |
| --- |
| What needs for serving high school English Learners do you anticipate if remote learning continues into the fall? |
| SEL |
| Social emotional assistance for students focus on differentiating assignments |
| Lack of engagement in classes/work completion; loss of language skills; lack of/limited access to devices or internet services, lack of communication with families; social emotional issues; financial/health issues; teaching concerns, such as how to how to assess students remotely to drive instruction |
| Social/emotional needs, academic, food and housing insecurity |
| I anticipate students will require flexibility in Graduation Requirements. |
| Flexible scheduling for classes. |
| Flexible Schedules, Training on how to... technology supports, engagement |
| Additional resources to assist both students and families in regard to tech, internet hot spots, translation services, teacher PD |
| Technology literacy, access to internet |
| Equitable access to technology |
| Tech and effective usage for both students and teachers. |
| Access to all technology (devices) and access to Internet. Two way communication with families and students so that they stay engaged. Home visits from district interventionists. |
| The district distributed devices to all students who needed them for remote learning and worked with as many families as possible to provide internet access. However, some families were not able to get access and paper packets were provided. If remote learning continues in the fall, the district is seeking to provide internet access at a cost which will be funded by the district. |
| Accountability and access to technology. If we are to go remotely again, EL students will need one to one access and well as a synchronous model. |
| Lack of technology; Many HS ELs part of the workforce; Limited resources for reaching out in home language. |
| Providing sufficient technology/internet access. Providing quality remote learning program and ensuring that all students participate actively and regularly. |
| Accessibility (content and tech) -Support with balancing home responsibilities with school responsibilities Access to trauma support in English and possibly the home language -PD for teachers about using SEI best practice strategies for remote learning |
| The need for additional chrome books, hotspots, and SEL supports that include food, clothing and shelter. Also, free tools to communicate with students and families in their native language |
| We need more parent workshops in multiple languages to help support learning at home. Also, we need to figure out how to be more engaging online in order to keep students motivated to participate. |
| Tools designed specifically for English-learners quality resources to meet the language and academic learning More support (liaisons) to communicative with families in the language they understand best More hours of professional development for English Learners educators with digital learning resources |
| Greater outreach to ELs, meeting them at where they are academically, socially-emotionally. Further outreach to families, supporting their needs (food, internet, etc.). Immigrant undocumented families often live in fear and thus prefer not to engage with school personnel. Many families have also left the district and have not notified us. |
| Engaging those students who didn't actively or regularly participate in remote learning. We had bilingual support for outreach, and quality programming for them, but not all students chose to engage. |
| Training for teachers in how to design and implement remote learning, support for students who are working to support families and need flexible hours, better family support and outreach in multiple languages |
| Parent communication and engagement to support learning. |
| Engagement strategies. Many students are working and too tired to engage with online education. |
| Many high school students have taken jobs to support their families, and they may not wish to give them up to return to a traditional school in the fall. |
| Ability to connect remotely. Needs to work and take care of siblings. |
| Face to face virtual meetings times for explicit instruction to take place for students where that they are not working or taking care of siblings have been tough for us. |
| Figuring a way to teach them the technology and ways for teachers to engage them more effectively in a remote setting. We also have students who are working, have motivation and/or have mental health issues that have made it challenging to engage them. |
| We will lose the connection of school for the students. IT is hard for the students to see the high school as a place they belong and when they are not going into the building every day I believe this limited connection will disappear. |
| A way for students to get more speaking and listening practice specifically |
| Professional development, guidance, expectations for counselors and for high school teachers in general. A focus on drop out reduction..... guidance for district leaders with exemplars from small/ medium and large districts. Remote learning options for ELS.... a lot of the credit recovery are not differentiated and require high literacy in Spanish and English. |
| More professional development for teachers |
| Lack of consistent face to face schooling. Programs in multiple languages. Access to materials to assist in learning. |
| We need public access to Wi-Fi hotspots. We need collaboration with community partners, including wraparound services. We hope to start the Youth Opportunity Institute. We had a death by suicide of one of our EL students this spring. Her whole family and the school was impacted. We need mental health services. |

**Table A2: What needs do you anticipate for high school English Learners in the transition back to school-based instruction?**

|  |
| --- |
| What needs do you anticipate for high school English Learners in the transition back to school-based instruction? |
| SEL |
| Additional social-emotional/guidance/mentoring support. |
| SEL and academic supports for ELs and their families. Many students are working, and not doing a lot of schoolwork. |
| Social emotional assistance with back to school transition process. Working and managing school at the same time |
| A strong social emotional program to help them make the transition. Intensive academic support to help them recuperate the skills and knowledge of face to face instruction and interactions. |
| Social emotional support to rejoin communities, academic approaches to address learning loss |
| Students will need both social/emotional and academic support due to learning loss as a result of being at home during the pandemic. |
| Plans for moving forward in high school and after high school, social emotional support, building family partnerships to ensure there is a positive connection with the high school |
| Support balancing home responsibilities with school responsibilities. Access to trauma support in English and possibly the home language |
| We will need social and emotional support first and foremost. Then we will need to assess language and content knowledge in order to adjust instructional practices to meet their needs. Extended day and additional learning opportunities will need to be implemented if we are to close the gap. |
| We are in process of hiring an additional ESL teacher, but we need to do more work with the general education teachers and build stronger SEI strategies/skills. Also, we are implementing a stronger co-teaching model for math and science classes to support better support and professional development. |
| Language support |
| Language acquisition loss, trauma and SEL for losing family members. |
| Great regression in academic English language acquisition |
| Support and remediation in English with regards to speaking and listening specifically |
| Targeted support with learning loss |
| Learning loss |
| Recovery of learning loss. |
| Additional ESL instruction and other core academic support to help with learning loss. |
| Assessing where students are, providing supports for students who are behind. |
| Determining how to make up for what they've lost and close the gap as quickly as possible. |
| Addressing learning and information gaps, readjusting to this structure/SEL considerations |
| Assessment (academic and social-emotional needs); target instruction to meet needs; concerns about addressing learning loss |
| Resources for students and families in specific areas to address learning loss and to aid in motivation, additional non-school time supports and staff training |
| We will need reading and math interventionists to be able to meet the individual needs of the students. |
| Sleep schedules, work schedules, learning loss, English speaking skills loss, interacting with peers in an academic capacity. |
| Loss of money from working--push/pull of basic needs (money, home, food) and being in school. Also, major linguistic and academic gaps for students who are already overage/under-credited. |
| Back to school based instruction will require additional ESL intervention blocks to be in place for students whom have not engaged in remote learning. We also have to make sure that all students return to back to school traditional instruction. Outreach to families in a language they understand is also key. Holding bilingual meetings, whether virtual or face to face to outline reentry plan is needed to ensure successful EL reentry. Students will require more support in their SEI classes and hopefully participate in after school academic programming. |
| Communication the importance of coming back! |
| Extended day programming for language development & Academic tutoring to pass state MCAS. |
| More supports in the classroom |
| We need support for the MCAS. It is already unfair and too hard for recently arrived ELS as far as graduation requirements go. We have many teachers who do not SEI in brick and mortar, who are doing even less for ELS now. And even with good teachers who are trying their best -- many ELS are not having success. Many live in shared households with one family per room. The young men work -- and went back to work as landscapers and builders 6 weeks ago. They have to contribute to the family earnings. Young ladies often take care of the young siblings in their family-- and in their shared homes. That said--- when they have a connection with their teachers-- they try extra hard. We know they are strong and have endured far more than most American teachers have..... They are resilient. We have young men who call in to classes from landscaping job sites.... if they see the slightest glimmer of hope that they can pass. |
| Engagement |
| A complete reteach (if not a new teach) of how to do physical school with social distancing measures in place will be very difficult. |
| PPE, Wi-Fi, and a way to keep on track with English. What online language learning programs are most effective? |

**Table A3: What are you most worried about (e.g. learning loss, dropping out or specific academic, social emotional, behavioral concerns, etc.) for your high school English Learners in light of COVID-19 and remote schooling?**

|  |
| --- |
| What are you most worried about (e.g. learning loss, dropping out or specific academic, social emotional, behavioral concerns, etc.) for your high school English Learners in light of COVID-19 and remote schooling? |
| SEL |
| Learning loss |
| I'm worried about it all - learning loss, language acquisition loss, social emotional concerns, trauma, not returning to school - everything! |
| Learning loss, motivation and the social-emotional impact, disengagement |
| Biggest concern for entire school is learning loss but specifically for ELs because they seem to have housing/ living quarters issues such as too many family members with no quiet space to concentrate. |
| Learning loss, dropping out or specific academic, social emotional, behavioral concerns (all) |
| I am very concerned about learning loss for our ELs, risk of further dropping out especially for our older students who were not making progress while we were in session in the fall and winter of 2019-2020. I am also concerned about students returning and having added SEL needs, given individual situations in their home lives. I am concerned at the lack of highly qualified support staff in order to meet their needs. This was also a concern pre COVID-19. |
| Learning loss |
| Learning loss and general health and welfare. Many high school students have been working high-risk jobs to help their families. |
| Learning loss, dropouts, social emotional needs, health needs, and financial needs |
| learning loss, child & domestic abuse, mental health, socioeconomics, dropout rate, grade level academics |
| Language and content learning loss (which, in turn, impacts student confidence, S-E, behavior, graduation, etc.) |
| Social emotional support -Learning loss |
| Learning loss and social emotional concerns |
| Learning loss and social/emotional supports |
| Social emotional |
| I am most concerned about our students’ social emotional health. Each day that passes with remote learning, I worry about the worry that many of our students are facing financially, emotionally, and academically. |
| Because our teachers have done a great deal to engage ELs and reach out to families, in conjunction with working with our ELPAC, we have done a lot in regard to social emotional needs. We have done home visits, had lunch pick up, offered food assistance during school closure. What I am most worried about is the time off learning and the make-up period come fall. I am also worried about the safety and well-being of our students and staff if safety measures are not properly carried out. Although I would be just as worried if in person instructional was not allowed because students will continue to have gaps. |
| 1. A lot of students have jobs now to support their families and coming back might be difficult. 2. Each student having a Chromebook and internet services to take part in the remote lessons that are taking place. |
| Dropping out due to working and needing to supply $ to the family |
| Dropping out. If they were able to increase their work hours during this time, they may not be motivated to come back to school. |
| Students will not come back to school |
| Dropping out - work schedule/family needs have changed; learning loss |
| I have found most of our students are working and education is taking a backseat. I am most worried about the benefits our students get for themselves and their families (immediate) and that they will lose out on their education (Long term) |
| I am concerned about their health and that of their families. Covid hits the poor communities the hardest. Then-- I worry about students giving up on schooling if they feel they will be even further behind. I worry about teachers not connecting with kids. many don't in Brick and Mortar. How will they know? I worry about the SEL needs of students being met. How can they access counseling? I worry about what may be happening in their homes??? Getting out and into school is a safety for some of our kids. I fear many of our kids will fall further behind due to remote learning. |
| All of the above, actually. Mostly, I fear students will disengage and eventually drop out. |
| Everything- learning loss, budget cuts disproportionately affecting EL staffing and support, social emotional support, economic and family support |
| Everything! We are particularly concerned for the SLIFE students, especially the older ones who have stopped participating in order to work. I think the social-emotional needs will be so high in the fall, it will be challenging to jump right into academics. |
| Most all of these are of great concern in a district like [redacted]. |
| All of the above. |
| All of the above! |
| All of these. |
| YES! ALL of these. |
| All of the above! |
| All of the above. |
| All of those, to be honest. |
| All of it! |

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EL Dropout Survey Results

Natalie Lacireno-Paquet

Haiwen Chu

Emily Vislosky

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# Introduction

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) contracted with WestEd to conduct a study to better understand the causes of English learner (EL) dropout and to identify promising solutions to prevent EL dropout and increase EL graduation rates across the Commonwealth. In collaboration with DESE, WestEd developed a district level survey for EL directors (or equivalent) in districts with more than 10 English learners in their 2019 graduating cohort.[[6]](#footnote-7) The survey was guided by the study’s research questions:

* What are programs and practices for English learners?
	+ What English learner instruction programs are offered?
	+ How do district programs support different groups of English learners?
	+ How consistent are placement and exit practices for English learners?
* What dropout prevention programs are in place across the Commonwealth?
	+ How do these programs address the needs of English learners?
	+ What types of additional opportunities are available to increase EL graduation rates?
* What challenges do districts face in reducing English learner dropout?
* What data and variables are used to identify English learners who may drop out?

This report summarizes the key findings from the survey.

## Selected Highlights

The following are some highlights from the survey findings:

* Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) is the most common instructional program at all grade levels, with dual language education more common at the elementary level than in middle and high school. Forty-seven districts reported SEI programs at the high school level compared to two districts with dual language programs and four with transitional bilingual education programs.
* A majority of districts reported high levels of consistency in the process of initial identification and exit of English learners across their schools, with 85% of districts reporting that identification was “very consistent” and 72% for exit decisions. Parent input was less consistently used in identification and exit decisions, with only 19% of districts reporting it to be “very consistent.”
* The most common programs related to dropout prevention for all student groups (not just ELs) that districts reported having are alternative schools or programs (29 districts), summer school to prevent grade retention (26 districts), and academic/linguistic supports (21 districts).
* The most common programs or supports specifically for high school English learners in the districts surveyed are summer school to prevent grade retention (25 districts), academic/linguistic supports (23 districts), and academic after-school programs (23 districts).
* Top challenges identified by districts regarding English learner dropout are student responsibilities outside of school, lack of appropriate and/or effective instructional programs, and funding for supplemental academic programs or interventions.
* Credit recovery courses/programs were the most commonly reported intervention specifically targeting English learners at risk of dropping out, with 76% of districts reporting such programs.
* Attendance, course failures, and state test scores were reported as the most commonly used factors to identify English learners at risk of dropping out.
* Three-fourths of the responding districts reported using EL Benchmarks to a “fair” or “great extent” to monitor the progress of English learners and prevent dropout.

## Sample and Response Rate

The Office of Language Acquisition (OLA) provided a list of districts that have a medium or high number/percentage of English learner students, which excluded those with 10 or fewer students in their 2019 graduating cohort. The list includes 82 districts and public charter school local education agencies (LEAs). Emails to invalid addresses were returned from three districts/charter school LEAs. Additional research allowed us to resend the survey request to one of these schools.

On May 19, 2020, the first survey request was sent to the 82 districts/charter school LEAs via SurveyMonkey. Reminders to non-respondents were sent weekly through the end of June. In mid-June, WestEd staff called each of the non-responding districts with a request to respond to the survey. Few districts were reachable during this time, most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but WestEd left telephone messages when possible. The OLA staff also sent targeted emails to non-responding districts. The survey was closed the first week of July.

WestEd received responses from 52 different districts and charter school LEAs, a response rate of 65% (when excluding the two districts/charter school LEAs for which we did not have valid email addresses). There was some item nonresponse; therefore, response counts in some of the tables and figures may not amount to 52.

# Survey Findings

The first questions gathered information about the characteristics of the EL population served by the districts surveyed. The survey also contained questions about programming for EL students, resources, and risk factors for EL dropouts. Since the survey was conducted during the pandemic, it also included questions about concerns for EL students returning to school, whether in person or remote, as well as concerns for EL students, in general, as a result of the pandemic. This report summarizes the findings from the survey.

## District Characteristics and Programs of Instruction

As noted above, 52 districts responded to the survey. They ranged in size from large urban districts to small districts and single charter school districts. Districts with 10 or fewer English learners in their 2019 graduating cohort were excluded from the survey. Almost all the responding districts (47) indicated that they have a Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) program at the high school level, two offer a dual language program at the high school level, and four offer a transitional bilingual program (see table 1). Twelve districts offer more than one of these EL programs.

**Table 1. Number of districts offering different types of instructional programming for EL students, by level\***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Instructional Programs | ElementaryN | MiddleN | HighN |
| Sheltered English Immersion | 42 | 43 | 47 |
| Dual-Language Education | 11 | 6 | 2 |
| Transitional Bilingual Education | 3 | 2 | 4 |

\* Districts could select more than one program per grade level. Not all districts responded to the question.

Districts were asked about the extent to which they have adequate resources to support different groups of high school English learners (see Figure 1). A majority of districts reported having adequate resources for serving English learners who have been in the program for five or more years (63%), English learners who are recently arrived immigrants (71%), and English learners with disabilities (58%). Districts most frequently reported not having, or having limited, adequate resources to support English learners who are gifted and talented students (65%), overage students (64%), and students with limited or interrupted formal education (60%).

**Figure 1. Extent of adequacy of district resources to support high school English learners, percentage**

Respondents were also asked about the extent to which the input of different stakeholders influences ELE program placement and exit for high school English learners in their districts (see Figure 2). Teachers have the greatest input on placement and exit decisions; students have the least input. Specifically, 36% of districts reported that teachers have input to a “great extent” on placement decisions and 64% on exit decisions. This compares to 11% of districts reporting that students have input to a “great extent” on placement decisions and 9% on exit decisions. Districts reported using parent input to a “great extent” more at placement (23%) than at exit (11%).

**Figure 2. Extent to which input from different stakeholders influences ELE program placement and exit for high school English learners, percentage**

Respondents were asked whether identification, exit, and course placement practices for English learners are consistent across the middle schools and high schools in their district (see Figure 3). Initial identification and exit decisions were reported to be the most consistent, with 85% of districts reporting that identification is “very consistent” and 72% reporting that same level of consistency for exit decisions. Districts reported that EL enrollment in vocational and Advanced Placement courses is the least consistent, with only 21% of districts reporting that enrollment of English learners in vocational classes and programs is “very consistent.” Only 12% reported EL enrollment in Advanced Placement is “very consistent.”

**Figure 3. Extent of consistent practices for English learners across all middle schools and high schools in the district, percentage**

Districts were asked about the different support programs offered to students at the middle and high school levels, inquiring about support programs for all students and those support programs specific to English learners. Districts could select all applicable programs. Districts reported that English learners have less access to alternative programs and schools, defined as those programs and schools for students who have not been successful in traditional schools. Twenty-nine districts reported that alternative programs and schools are available to all high school students, including English learners, while only 19 districts reported the availability of such programs specifically for high school English learners (see Table 2). Notable also is that more districts (13) offered professional tutoring for high school English learners compared to all high school students in general (9). The most commonly reported supports for high school English learners include:

* Summer school specifically designed to prevent grade retention (25 districts)
* Academic/linguistic supports during the school day (23 districts)
* Academic after school programs (23 districts)

**Table 2. Availability of different programs for students, all students and English learners, at the middle and high school level, number**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Middle School | High School |
| **All Students** | **English Learners** | **All Students** | **English Learners** |
| Tutoring from adult volunteers | 10 | 7 | 10 | 8 |
| Tutoring from professional tutors | 9 | 12 | 9 | 13 |
| Peer tutoring | 4 | 5 | 13 | 13 |
| Summer school specifically designed to prevent grade retention | 15 | 16 | 26 | 25 |
| Academic/linguistic support (e.g., intervention block/Title I reading support — excluding special education courses) | 23 | 26 | 21 | 23 |
| Alternative schools or programs for students who have not been successful in traditional schools | 15 | 9 | 29 | 19 |
| Alternative programs for students with addiction issues | 8 | 4 | 10 | 7 |
| Academic after-school programs | 18 | 19 | 18 | 23 |
| Adult mentoring | 8 | 8 | 9 | 12 |
| Student study/support teams | 14 | 8 | 14 | 13 |

Respondents were asked to select the top three challenges they identified in serving high school English learners at risk of dropping out (see Table 3). In the 45 districts that responded, the most common challenge that was identified is student responsibilities outside of school, such as work or childcare, with 31 districts identifying this as one their top three challenges. The two next most commonly identified challenges are:

* Lack of appropriate and/or effective instructional programs (19 districts)
* Funding for supplemental academic programs or interventions (17 districts)

**Table 3. Top challenges districts identified in serving English learners at risk of dropping out**

|  |
| --- |
| Percentage of districts identifying each challenge |
| Student responsibilities outside of school (e.g., work or childcare) | 69% |
| Lack of appropriate and/or effective instructional programs | 42% |
| Funding for supplemental academic programs or interventions | 38% |
| Funding for programs to learn English | 22% |
| Lack of communication with families | 22% |
| Not having enough qualified teachers for English learners | 20% |
| Not having staff to provide home language support | 20% |
| Lack of community resources or partners to support students | 20% |
| Not having enough qualified staff for general education | 11% |

Districts were also asked whether they offer specific services or programs designed to address the needs of high school English learners at risk of dropping out (see Table 4). Few of the 38 districts that responded to this question offered such services or programs besides credit recovery. The most commonly offered service or program was credit recovery, with 29 of the 38 districts (76%) offering it. The next two most commonly offered programs or services to address the needs of English learners at risk of dropping out are vocational courses/programs at the comprehensive high school (9 districts) and decelerated curriculum (7 districts).

**Table 4. High school services and programs offered in districts to address the needs of English learners at risk of dropping out**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Number and percentage of districts offering each program or service |  |
| Credit recovery courses/programs | 29 | 76% |
| Vocational courses/programs at the Comprehensive high school | 9 | 24% |
| Decelerated curriculum for any course (e.g., algebra 1 extended over 2 years) | 7 | 18% |
| Flexible school day (e.g., shortened school day, evening classes, or Saturday classes) | 6 | 16% |
| Support to transition ELs to CVTE schools | 5 | 13% |
| District-administered General Education Development (GED) preparation courses | 5 | 13% |
| Systems to serve students who work (e.g., distance or online learning) | 4 | 10% |
| Early graduation options for earning a regular diploma | 2 | 5% |
| Competency-based high school programs | 3 | 7% |
| Dual enrollment | 1 | 3% |
| STEM certification or enrichment (including Computer Science) | 1 | 3% |
| Seal of biliteracy | 1 | 3% |

Districts were asked to describe the extent of EL student participation in various high school programs (see Table 5). Responses show that in only a few districts do most or all of the high school English learners participate in specialized academic programs. For example, only one of thirty-four responding districts (3%) reported that most or all their high school English learners participate in the dual enrollment programs.

**Table 5. English learner participation in various high school programs, number and percentage**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | None | Some | Most/All | Total |
| Career/technical/vocational high school (including regional career/technical high schools) | 12(31%) | 22(56%) | 5(13%) | 39 |
| Career/technical courses at a regular high school | 10(29%) | 21(60%) | 4(11%) | 35 |
| Dual enrollment in post-secondary courses with a career/technical focus | 23(70%) | 9(27%) | 1(3%) | 33 |
| Dual enrollment in post-secondary courses with an academic focus (e.g., English, math, world languages) | 16(47%) | 17(50%) | 1(3%) | 34 |
| Work-based learning (e.g., internships/apprenticeships) | 16(44%) | 19(53%) | 1(3%) | 36 |

Respondents were also asked what factors they use as early warning indicators or for intervention to identify students at risk of dropping out. The two most commonly noted factors were academic failure and truancy/absences, which was the case for both students, in general (see Figure 4), and English learners, in particular (see Figure 5). With regard to identifying any student at risk, 60% of districts reported using truancy or excessive absences to a “great extent,” and 56% of districts reported using academic failure to a “great extent.”

**Figure 4. Extent to which various factors are used as part of early warning and intervention to identify students at risk for dropout, percentage**

With regard to the factors districts use as early warning indicators or for intervention to identify English learners at risk of dropping out, as noted above, the two most commonly noted factors were academic failure and truancy/absences. Sixty-two percent of districts reported using truancy or excessive absences to identify English learners at risk of dropping out to a “great extent,” and 60% of districts reporting using academic failure to a “great extent.”

**Figure 5. Extent to which various factors are used as part of early warning and intervention to identify English learner students at risk for dropping out, percentage**

Districts were asked to identify their extent of use of different DESE data tools. A large majority of districts (75%) reported using EL Benchmarks to a “fair” or “great extent” to monitor the progress of English learners (see Figure 6). About half of the districts also reported using DESE’s Early Warning Indicator Systems (51%) and the English learner District Analysis and Review Tool (51%).

**Figure 6. Extent of use of various DESE data tools, percentage**

As a follow-up to the question about the extent of use of various DESE data tools, respondents were asked an open-ended question about other factors or tools they use to identify English learners for dropout prevention. The responses are provided in Table 6, as written with minor editing for spelling corrections. Various responses were shared, including ACCESS for ELs. A few responses indicated that other data were not looked at or that the district was just beginning conversations about data.

**Table 6. Other factors or tools not mentioned above that you use to identify English learners for dropout prevention efforts**

|  |
| --- |
| ACCESS for ELs |
| ELLevation data system- looking at students’ growth in language development - what areas need additional support and why. |
| There are inconsistencies between district and school level teams to look at data that identifies EL risk factors. |
| I saw not at all. Alone as EL director I look. A high school TA who is bilingual, and the district interpreter have alerted me to issues and things they do: they look at transcripts and prompt counselors and students to action, they call students. |
| District's X2 Aspen Student Data |
| We just started the discussion about the importance of looking at factors such as the ones listed! |
| Education history, acculturation stages/process ACCESS |
| Informal and formal conversations with teachers, guidance, building administrators, social workers |
| Dropout exit interview and clinical meetings (admin, counselor, nurse, psychologist, SRO) to identify high risk/high needs students |
| SLIFE pre-screener and interview. LAT meetings with short-term interventions and progress monitoring. |
| The district uses local benchmark assessments. |
| We just started the discussion about the importance of looking at factors such as the ones listed! |
| Not that I am currently aware of. |

\* Note this table includes the text of the responses as written by the survey respondent, with minor spelling corrections by the authors.

Respondents were asked to describe any exemplary or promising dropout prevention or reengagement efforts for English learners that they practice (see Table 7). Various responses were provided, including “no,” but a few districts also provided examples of alternative programs or services for EL students at risk of dropping out, such as specialized programs, an evening academy, and intensive counseling.

**Table 7. Exemplary district dropout prevention practices to prevent dropout or to reengage EL students**

|  |
| --- |
| Dropout exit interview, home visits, donations for food and clothing for students in need, food pantry, SEL supports at HS level in students' native language |
| The district has an alternative high school campus; ELs and other students are referred to the alternative program, however there are inconsistencies with referral process in who gets to attend. There are very few ELs at the Alternative High School campus. |
| We have a diploma granting evening academy, GED offerings at the Adult Learning Center, a Pathways program where students can design a program for their needs - all programs offer ESL services. |
| GOAL program for overage/under credited high school ELs (begin studies at high school, complete in adult diploma program) |
| We have started groups hosted during intervention period for student who are high risk for dropping out to get support and to support each other. Our alternative program has also been a great option for kids who are thinking of dropping out. |
| Constant counseling with social worker and interactive Student Support Team |
| no not yet... We just hired a transitions/family engagement coordinator to work one on one with high school ELs and Fels to develop their individual plans for high school and beyond. This coordinator will be planning and facilitating many family events and a mentor program next school year |
| We are trying to start a Youth Opportunity Institute for overage/under credit students. |
| No or none that I am aware of |
| No |
| Not that I am aware of. |
| Yes. |

\* Note this table includes the text of the responses as written by the survey respondent, with minor spelling corrections by the authors

# Appendix C: Longitudinal Analysis

English Learner Dropout in Massachusetts

This appendix summarizes a descriptive analysis of extant administrative data regarding English Learner dropout in the three school years 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19. The descriptive analysis addresses the following research questions:

1. How do dropout rates vary by district characteristics:
	* incidence of English Learners, and
	* membership in Urban Superintendent’s Network (USN)
2. How do dropout rates vary by English Learner student groups:
	* immigrants, and
	* students with limited or interrupted formal education?

# Dropout by District Characteristics

* There is little variation in terms of mean and median dropout rates for English Learners across the different districts who are considered low-, mid-, and high-incidence in terms of English Learner population.
* Some low- and mid-incidence districts, however, have quite high event dropout rates among English learners, 43.2% for the low-incidence district with the highest rate and 30.0% for the corresponding mid-incidence district, compared to high-incidence districts (a maximum of 16.4%).
* Among the 26 districts that are members of the USN, where all but one district is high-incidence, there did not appear to be large differences in event dropout rates when compared to the other 17 high-incidence districts who are not in the USN.

# Dropout by Student Characteristics

* Approximately half of all English Learner dropouts are immigrants in their first three years of schooling in the United States.
* Approximately 10 percent of all English Learner dropouts are Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE).

# Dropout by District Characteristics

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has organized districts into three networks based upon the incidence of English Learners as low, mid, or high. Districts meet in these networks to collaborate and advance solutions to better serve English Learners. In addition, there are a total of 26 districts who are members of the USN, in which districts with large concentrations of Title I students collaborate to address challenges jointly. Among the USN districts, all but one district is in the high-incidence network, with Pittsfield belonging to the mid-incidence network.

**Table 1. English Learner Event Dropout Rates in the 2018-19 School Year for Districts by Incidence and USN.**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   |   | Incidence Network |   |  |
|  | All | Low | Mid | High |  | USN Member | Other High  |
| N | 148 | 68 | 38 | 42 |  | 26 | 17 |
| Average | 7.2% | 5.4% | 6.3% | 7.5% |  | 7.5% | 7.7% |
| Median | 2.5% | 0.0% | 3.6% | 6.1% |  | 6.2% | 4.8% |
| Q1 | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 3.2% |  | 3.7% | 2.3% |
| Q3 | 7.0% | 4.3% | 7.5% | 8.4% |  | 8.0% | 8.8% |
| Max | 43.2% | 43.2% | 30.0% | 16.4% |   | 16.4% | 15.7% |

# Dropout by Student Characteristics

Among English Learners who have dropped out, approximately half are immigrant students, meaning they have attended Massachusetts schools for three years or less. SLIFE students account for approximately 10% of all English Learner dropouts.

**Table 2. Groups of English Learners within Total Dropouts.**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| SY | SLIFE Students | Immigrant Students | Total |
|  | N | Pct | N | Pct |  |
| 2016-17 | 137 | 9.2% | 815 | 54.8% | 1486 |
| 2017-18 | 155 | 8.2% | 911 | 48.4% | 1881 |
| 2018-19 | 209 | 12.0% | 849 | 48.7% | 1742 |

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1. The case studies are found in Appendix A. The survey results and longitudinal analyses are found in Appendices B and C, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Note that the introductions to the case studies are identical, as the case studies may be individually shared or read. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The most recent dropout data provided by DESE is for the 2018/2019 school year. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Note that Somerville uses the term Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE), whereas other districts in this report use the term Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE). We use Somerville’s terminology, as its program description specifically uses the term SIFE: <https://somerville.k12.ma.us/schools/somerville-high-school/departments-academics/english-learner-education> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The one-way immersion program is for students whose home language is Spanish. The two-way program includes students who speak only Spanish at home, only English at home, or both Spanish and English at home. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. MA DESE considers districts with 10 or fewer English learners to be “low incidence” English learner districts and they were excluded from this survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)