

How English Learners Are Screened for Risk of Reading Difficulty

Use of English- and Spanish-Language Screeners in the 2023/24 School Year

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For 4 years, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has collected and analyzed early literacy screening assessment data from schools and districts that participated in certain state grants and programs. This brief examines patterns in language-of-assessment practices for English learners (ELs) and highlights the implications for policy and instruction as the state prepares to formally approve screeners in languages other than English for use in the 2026/27 school years.

Currently, most early literacy screening assessments offer companion Spanish-language assessments that schools and districts can use to gather additional information about students' literacy skills. DESE's [Early Literacy Screening Guidance](#) (2023) and [Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines](#) (2020) provide several recommendations for screening multilingual students and English learners. These recommendations include screening students in their home

languages and English when appropriate tools are available, supplementing assessments with observational data, and comparing results with more closely matched peers rather than with the full population of primarily monolingual English speakers. Overall, these recommendations emphasize gathering additional information on the literacy development of English learners and interpreting results with greater nuance and context.

Key Findings

- English-only screening for English learners is the norm across the state.
- Ninety percent of English learners were assessed only in English, 8 percent were screened in English and Spanish at each time period, and 2 percent were either screened alternately between English and Spanish or consistently screened in one language—either Spanish or English—with occasional assessments in the other.
- Screening practices are likely related to types of English language education (ELE) programs.
- English learners in structured English immersion (SEI) programs were mostly screened in English, sometimes with additional screening in Spanish.
- English learners in dual language bilingual education (DLBE) programs were more often screened in Spanish and/or were assessed alternately between languages over the course of the year (e.g., Spanish to English to Spanish).

Data from the 2023/24 school year show that the vast majority of English learners were assessed only in English, although some students also took Spanish-language assessments. Examining the instructional programs and other background characteristics of students offers some insight into why particular language screening patterns may occur. However, we cannot draw definitive conclusions about the reasons behind observed screening patterns given that the analysis is based solely on available administrative and screening assessment data. Nonetheless, understanding what is happening may point to potential areas for future investigation and to a need for more specific guidance on when, for which students, and how often to use screeners in languages other than English.

Data: English Learner Backgrounds

This brief is based on an analytic sample of 23,955 English learners with beginning-, middle-, and end-of-the-year (BOY, MOY, and EOY, respectively) screening assessment scores in the 2023/24 school year. This analytic sample represents 71 percent of all English learners in the available screening assessment data for 2023/24 (33,688 English learners overall) and approximately half of all English learners in grades K through 3 in the state.

Most students (92%) in the analytic sample were enrolled in SEI programs (Table 1), and most (53%) spoke Spanish as their native language (Table 2), similar to the English learner population overall.

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Among students assessed in Spanish, nearly all (99%, $n = 2,738$) were screened using either Star Early Literacy Spanish or Star Reading Spanish.¹ A small number of students assessed in Spanish did not report Spanish as a native language. Nearly all the data for students assessed in Spanish (98%) came from a few districts that included DLBE programs

with Spanish as the partner language. In these programs, which are designed to foster bilingualism and biliteracy in English and another language, the proportion of English-language instruction increases gradually until the instructional time is balanced equally between the two languages.

Table 1. English Learner Program Enrollment in Analytic Sample

English language education program	Analytic EL sample <i>N</i> (%)	ELs in full screening assessment data sample <i>N</i> (%)	State <i>N</i> (%)
Structured English immersion	22,030 (92.0%)	30,810 (91.5%)	48,869 (92.9%)
Dual language bilingual education program	1,520 (6.4%)	2,365 (7.0%)	2,883 (5.5%)
Other bilingual programs	Sup data	22 (0.1%)	29 (0.1%)
Parent/guardian opted out of all ELE programs	401 (1.7%)	466 (1.4%)	773 (1.5%)
Transitional bilingual education	Sup data	24 (0.1%)	25 (0.05%)

Note. The analytic English learner sample includes only English learners who had scores at all time periods (regardless of language of assessment). For example, students might have scores for BOY, MOY, and EOY in English; BOY in English and MOY and EOY in Spanish; or other patterns. The full screening assessment data sample includes additional English learners who did not have scores in each time

¹ Note that although Spanish-language screener data were requested if Spanish-language screening was taking place in districts, it is possible that not all districts submitted data.

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period. The number of students in the state is determined by using the June SIMS collection data. “Sup data” means that data for student groups with fewer than 10 students are not shown in order to protect student privacy. *Source:* Early literacy screening assessment data and October and June SIMS collection data.

Table 2. English Learner Native Languages in Analytic Sample

Native language	Analytic EL sample N (%)	ELs in full screening assessment data sample N (%)	State N (%)
Spanish	12,697 (53%)	17,693 (55%)	25,895 (49%)
Portuguese	3,943 (16%)	5,815 (17%)	9,809 (19%)
Creole (Haitian)	1,234 (5%)	2,030 (6%)	2,940 (6%)
Chinese	881 (4%)	1,060 (3%)	1,812 (3%)
Crioulo	871 (4%)	1,051 (3%)	1,206 (2%)

Note. The analytic English learner sample includes only English learners who had scores at all time periods (regardless of language of assessment). For example, students might have scores for BOY, MOY, and EOY in English; BOY English and MOY and EOY Spanish; or other patterns. The full screening assessment data sample includes additional English learners who did not have scores in each time period. The number of students in the state is determined by using the June SIMS collection data. *Source:* Early literacy screening assessment data and October and June SIMS collection data.

Screening Practices for English Learners

To more closely examine screening practices for English learners, WestEd used an approach called k-modes clustering to sort English learners in the analytic sample into largely homogeneous clusters based on the language of the assessments they took at each time of year. K-modes clustering is a data analysis technique designed to identify natural groups or patterns within categorical data, such as yes/no responses about whether students took specific assessments. Using this method, WestEd analyzed students' assessment-taking patterns and grouped students by language of assessment and the test period in which the assessment was administered. For example, students who consistently took assessments only in

English were grouped together, whereas those who took assessments in both English and Spanish formed different groups. This approach's algorithm identifies the most common pattern within each group (called the "mode") and assigns students to the cluster whose pattern most closely matches their assessment history.

The cluster solution that best reflected the analytic sample² showed five primary practices in the screening of English learners (Table 3). The largest cluster and most dominant screening practice involved screening in English only. All other clusters included some Spanish-language screening, but the groups varied in when these screeners were used. The sections that follow describe the screening practices and characteristics of each cluster.

² WestEd tested solutions with as few as two and as many as six distinct clusters. To select a final solution, the team sought one that had the greatest number of clusters that could be meaningfully distinguished from one another (either statistically or in terms of screening practices or student characteristics). Solutions with more than five clusters generally had clusters that were redundant or indistinguishable from one another, and solutions with fewer than five clusters generally revealed new meaningful groups if new clusters were added. Every cluster analysis in the solution described here included the patterns seen in clusters 1 and 2.

Table 3. Descriptions of English Learner Test-Taking Clusters

Cluster	English learners N (%)	Description
1	21,582 (90%)	English learners screened only in English at all three time periods
2	1,855 (8%)	English learners screened in both English and Spanish at all three time periods
3	254 (1%)	English learners screened in English at all three time periods and in Spanish only at MOY and EOY
4	185 (<1%)	English learners screened in alternating languages over the course of the year from Spanish at BOY to English at MOY to Spanish at EOY
5	79 (<1%)	English learners screened in Spanish at all three time periods and in English only at EOY

Note. Some students do not fit perfectly within a given cluster; that is, the description of a cluster may not fully capture the screening practices of each individual student. Students were assigned to the cluster that most closely aligned with their screening practices. *Source:* Early literacy screening assessment data and October and June SIMS collection data.

English-Only Screening (Cluster 1)

Cluster 1 Description

Screening pattern

- English: BOY, MOY, EOY
- Spanish: None

Key characteristics

- 92% SEI enrollment; 6% DLBE enrollment
- Fewest native Spanish-language speakers (48%) relative to other clusters
- Fewest students in 1st year in U.S. schools (22%) relative to other clusters
- Highest average ACCESS performance relative to other clusters

The largest cluster (cluster 1) represented students screened only in English and included 90 percent of all English learners in the sample (Table 3). This cluster generally mirrored the full sample and the full EL population. Of note, this cluster had the smallest proportions of native Spanish-language speakers and students in their 1st year in U.S. schools relative to other clusters, both of which may relate to decisions to screen students only in English. This group also had the highest ACCESS performance levels in 2023/24 relative to other clusters and slightly higher growth in ACCESS performance levels from the previous year than all clusters except cluster 5.³

The size of this cluster suggests that English-only screening for English learners is the norm across the state and likely represents the experience of the vast majority of students classified as English learners. Many districts' decisions to screen only in English may reflect the fact that most students receive instruction exclusively in English. This decision may also relate to the lack of screener availability in languages other than Spanish (and lack of formal approval of Spanish-language assessments by the state) in the 2023/24 school year. However, this practice does not necessarily align with guidance to screen students in their home languages and English where possible.

³ About 31 percent of students ($n = 7,520$) did not have an ACCESS score from the 2022/23 or 2023/24 school year. About 70 percent of these students were in kindergarten in 2023/24, and ACCESS is not administered prior to kindergarten.

Full-Year Screening in Both English and Spanish (Cluster 2) and Full-Year English Screening With Spanish Later in the Year (Cluster 3)

Cluster 2 Description

Screening pattern

- English: BOY, MOY, EOY
- Spanish: BOY, MOY, EOY

Key characteristics

- Highest SEI enrollment (98%); lowest DLBE enrollment (2%)
- Highest percentage of native Spanish-language speakers (99%)
- 31% of students in 1st year in U.S. schools
- Slightly lower average ACCESS performance and growth than in cluster 1

Cluster 2 represented 8 percent of the analytic sample (1,855 students) and included students who were screened in both Spanish and English in all three time periods during the school year. This cluster had several notable similarities to and differences with cluster 1 and the analytic sample overall. In this cluster,

Spanish dominated as a native language, representing 99 percent of the students in the cluster. Cluster 2 also had the lowest proportion of students in DLBE programs (2%) relative to any other, despite students being screened in both English and Spanish throughout the year.

Cluster 3 Description

Screening pattern

- English: BOY, MOY, EOY
- Spanish: MOY, EOY (no BOY)

Key characteristics

- 93% SEI enrollment; 7% DLBE enrollment
- 94% native Spanish-language speakers
- 35% of students in 1st year in U.S. schools
- Slightly lower average ACCESS performance and growth than in clusters 1 and 2

Cluster 3 represented 1 percent of the analytic sample (254 students) and, like clusters 1 and 2, included students who were screened in English in all three time periods during the school year. Cluster 3 was also similar to cluster 2 in that Spanish was the dominant native language, most students were in SEI programs, and students were screened in Spanish multiple times during the school year. However, in contrast to cluster 2, cluster 3 students were only screened in Spanish at MOY and EOY. This pattern may reflect a decision by a school or district to begin screening in Spanish as a check—or for additional context or information—based on the results of English language screeners at BOY. The lack of Spanish testing at BOY could also be partially due to the fact that a slightly lower percentage of students in cluster 3 had a native language of Spanish compared with students in cluster 2.

In both clusters 2 and 3, most students (96%) were enrolled in a district with DLBE programming. However, over 93 percent of students in each cluster were enrolled in SEI instruction. This predominance of English instruction likely accounts for why students were assessed in English in all three screening periods. However, the fact that the same students who were enrolled in SEI instruction were also assessed in Spanish at least twice per year suggests broader district-level practices or interest. Specifically, this type of practice may reflect an effort to monitor the maintenance or development of Spanish-language skills among native Spanish speakers even though they are being instructed only in English. Or it may indicate that SEI programs within districts that house DLBE programs are more likely to adopt multilingual screening practices for all students—a kind of spillover effect of the DLBE programs in the districts.

Alternating Language Screening (Cluster 4) and Full-Year Spanish Screening With English Later in the Year (Cluster 5)

Clusters 4 and 5 Description

Screening pattern (cluster 4)

- English: MOY (no BOY or EOY)
- Spanish: BOY, EOY (no MOY)

Screening pattern (cluster 5)

- English: EOY (no BOY or MOY)
- Spanish: BOY, MOY, EOY

Key characteristics

- 93% DLBE enrollment in cluster 4; 51% DLBE enrollment in cluster 5
- More than 95% native Spanish-language speakers in both clusters
- Most students in 1st year in U.S. schools (44% in cluster 4; 43% in cluster 5)
- Most students from a low income background (88% in cluster 4; 92% in cluster 5)
- Lowest average ACCESS performance

In clusters 4 and 5, students were screened in Spanish more frequently than in English, and, in contrast to the three largest clusters, neither of these clusters included English screening at all three time periods. Indeed, these students' schools appear to be out of compliance with Massachusetts's regulation that requires screening with an approved assessment (currently available only in English) at least twice per year. As with the other clusters that included

Spanish-language screening (clusters 2 and 3), clusters 4 and 5 were also overwhelmingly populated by native Spanish speakers. These clusters were more similar demographically to each other than to the other three clusters, with the highest percentages of students from low income backgrounds, the lowest average ACCESS scores, and higher proportions of students in their 1st year in U.S. schools than clusters 1, 2, and 3.

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Most notably, the majority of students in these clusters were enrolled in DLBE programs (93% in cluster 4 and 51% in cluster 5). This is in contrast to the high rates of SEI enrollment observed in the three largest clusters, in which students were assessed in English in all three time periods. In addition, cluster 4 had the lowest average grade level, with 63 percent of students enrolled in kindergarten or grade 1, whereas cluster 5 had the highest average grade level, with only 4 percent of students enrolled in kindergarten. In these clusters, the instructional programs, ages, and years of experience in U.S. schools all may have played a role in decisions to screen in Spanish or English at different times. For example, in cluster 5, the aim of testing students in English at EOY may have been to help inform planning for the following year. Since cluster 5 included relatively greater numbers of older students, testing could also have been used as an indicator of MCAS readiness—particularly for grade 3 students—or may have reflected the transition toward more English instruction in later grade levels.

The testing practices used with students who received DLBE instruction in cluster 4 were very different from those used with the students who received SEI instruction in the same district in clusters 2 and 3 even though both sets of students had similar language backgrounds. In cluster 4, students were screened in Spanish at BOY, English at MOY, and Spanish at

EOY, whereas in clusters 2 and 3, SEI students were more frequently assessed in both Spanish and English. This pattern may reflect the DLBE program design wherein students receive more instruction in Spanish in early grades before transitioning to a balance that is more even in later grades.

In addition to this structure, teachers also may sometimes alternate instructional units or subjects across languages such that students may be receiving instruction in different languages at different points during the year. Therefore, the screening practices used for these students may be a result of the instructional patterns in these programs. For example, if students are being instructed primarily in Spanish, it may make more sense to test more frequently in Spanish throughout the year, particularly at BOY and EOY, so as to inform instruction in Spanish. Screening practices could also reflect different points in the year when instruction is primarily in English or Spanish.

Students in cluster 5 were more similar to students in cluster 4 than to students in clusters 1 through 3. As in cluster 4, most students (51% in this case) were receiving DLBE instruction, although a majority of them attended a different district than did the students in cluster 4. As in cluster 4, instruction in the DLBE programs in this district shifts over time from primarily Spanish to a more even balance of English and Spanish over time. This instructional approach may be

guiding the testing practices observed for these students. For students in grades K–2 who are taught primarily in Spanish, Spanish-language screeners may produce the most valid information about student literacy even as the program shifts to a more even balance of English and Spanish instruction by grade 3.

District-level guidelines and policies may also influence testing practices. Although students in clusters 4 and 5 both attended DLBE programs with similar Spanish-to-English instructional ratios and had comparable demographic profiles, students in cluster 5 were tested more often in both languages. This pattern suggests that the districts that serve students in clusters 4 and 5 follow different assessment approaches.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As DESE prepares to approve screeners in languages other than English for use in 2026/27 and beyond, the findings from the 2023/24 data offer several points of consideration for guidance.

- Given that the vast majority of English learners were screened only in English, reinforcement of recommendations to screen multilingual students in multiple languages where possible may be needed, particularly in the earliest grades.
- Results show that small numbers of students whose native language is not Spanish were screened in Spanish. Students should be screened only in languages that make sense for their context (i.e., if they use the language at home or at school in a DLBE program). State data do not identify all languages students use at home, but, again, reinforcement of recommendations regarding use of screeners in Spanish (and later, in other languages) may be helpful.
- Choices about screener languages and when and how often to screen in multiple languages should be informed by students' instructional contexts. Although, for the most part, screening practices appear to be a result of the instructional patterns in different programs and student backgrounds, a significant number of students in SEI programs (about 9% of students in clusters 2 and 3) are being assessed in English and Spanish two or three times during the year. For students in these programs, the relevance and validity of non-English screeners may change over time. Although screening in multiple languages likely provides useful information in the earliest grades, when students are just entering school, it may be less helpful to screen grades 2 or 3 students in their native language if they have not been instructed in or are not developing this language for use in school.

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- Choices about screening in multiple languages should also take into account testing time. Although consistent screening in multiple languages over the course of the year may be the best option for getting complete information (as seen in cluster 2), this approach also entails significantly more testing for English learners compared with that for monolingual English-speaking students. In contrast, the patterns in the DLBE programs found in clusters 4 and 5 suggest that the schools may have been screening students strategically based on which language was likely to produce the most meaningful information about student development at different points during the year. Although we do not have information about decision-making processes used in these programs, such practices may offer opportunities to highlight strong examples of screening practices. Districts may also benefit from additional tools or guidance in helping them make sense of screening results. These could include stories of how other educators determined specifically when to assess in different languages and how to interpret those results for purposes of identifying student supports.
- Given DESE's requirement that students be screened with an approved assessment at least twice per year, it is important that decision-makers in DLBE programs understand which screeners are currently approved in which languages to ensure that their screening practices align with the state's requirements. The approval of screeners in languages other than English for the 2026/27 school year will offer districts more options, but ultimately decision-makers in DLBE programs should consider both regulations and multilingual screening guidelines when determining screening practices.



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