

# School Supports for English Learners During the Pandemic

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It has been well established that English learners (ELs), for whom English is not their first or best language, tend to score lower than native English speakers on standardized assessments (Abedi et al., 2003). Improved education is key to developing ELs' English language skills and academic knowledge, improving their performance, and narrowing achievement gaps (Genesee et al., 2005). To support ELs, schools across the US have been providing programs and services to ELs, such as English language development instructions and bilingual education (Umansky & Porter, 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to education, including the abrupt transition to online learning. Several studies have found declines in ELs' academic performance and English language proficiency performance, and, in some cases, these declines were disproportionately larger compared to other students (Lazarin, 2022). To understand why their performance declined, it is important to first find out whether the pandemic disrupted the programs and services that ELs received in school.

In April 2022, we surveyed EL students who took the ACT<sup>®</sup> test in February or April 2022 to learn about their experiences and perceptions of instruction and testing supports at school. The full report will be available at <https://www.act.org/content/act/en/research/reports/act-publications/testing-supports-for-english-learners-taking-the-act.html>. This data byte focuses on survey responses to questions about the programs and services they received at school during the pandemic. Of the total 1,256 EL respondents, 65% were female, 34% were male, and 1% of respondents reported another gender or did not report their gender. The respondents were from various race/ethnicity backgrounds. They were 19% Black/African American; 28% Latinx; 35% White; 10% Asian; 0.5% American Indian, Hawaiian Native, Alaska Native; 3% two or more races/ethnicities; and 3% did not report their race/ethnicity. In addition, 14% of respondents were in Grade 10, 46% in Grade 11, 34% in Grade 12, and 6% were in other grade levels or did not report their grade level.

Table 1 contains the percentages of students receiving EL programs at school. The three major EL programs available at school were EL instruction in an EL classroom (often referred to as pull-out), EL instruction in a regular classroom (often referred to as push-in), and bilingual instruction in content classes. More than half of ELs currently receive or previously received EL instruction in an EL classroom (56%) or in a regular classroom (59%). About 44% of ELs currently receive or previously received bilingual instruction in content classes. During the pandemic, among those ELs who indicated that they received each of the three programs (Table 2), more than half continued to receive these services since the pandemic started (ranging from 56% to 64% for the three programs). However, disruptions were reported by other ELs (ranging from 36% to 44% for the three programs). The programs they attended were either stopped for a while (16%–18%) or totally stopped (20%–26%). Additionally, most ELs experienced a transition to online learning during the pandemic (Tables 3 and 4). More than half

of the surveyed ELs (52%) learned only or mostly online. EL supports were not prevalent during online learning. Only 39% of ELs who experienced at least some portion of online learning indicated that they received EL supports during online learning. A series of non-parametric tests found no significant differences in disruptions in EL supports by race/ethnicity, family income, or parent education level.

This study found that while more than half of EL students continued to receive EL or bilingual instructions during the pandemic, nearly one in four indicated that the supports had stopped and not resumed as of April 2022 when this survey was administered. Given the importance of targeted supports for developing language skills and increasing the academic performance of ELs, these findings are troubling, particularly given recent research showing that ELs may have had greater pandemic-related performance declines than their peers (Lazarin, 2022). It is vital that students and educators have the resources they need to ensure that ELs are successful in becoming proficient in English and in achieving college and career readiness.

**Table 1.** EL Students Receiving Supporting Programs at School (Percent)

Program	N of responses	Yes, currently (%)	Yes, but not currently (%)	Never (%)
English Language Learner instruction in an EL classroom	751	29	27	44
English Language Learner instruction in a regular classroom	755	33	26	40
Bilingual instruction in content classes (e.g., math, science)	779	22	22	55

**Table 2.** EL Students Receiving Supporting Programs at School During the Pandemic (Percent)

Program	N of responses	Continued (%)	Stopped (%)	Stopped for a while and then resumed (%)
English Language Learner instruction in an EL classroom	360	64	20	16
English Language Learner instruction in a regular classroom	391	60	24	16
Bilingual instruction in content classes (e.g., math, science)	304	56	26	18

**Table 3.** EL Students' Learning Modes During the Pandemic (Percent)

Survey Question	Only online	Mostly online	About the same online and in person	Mostly in person	Only in person
During the pandemic, did you learn online, in person or both? (n = 668)	31	21	26	15	7

**Table 4.** EL Students Receiving Language Supports During Online Learning (Percent)

Survey Question	Yes	No
Did you receive English language supports during online learning? (n = 602)	39	61

## References

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