

UEN 2026 Legislative Priority: English Language Learner Supports

Background

ELL Enrollment Growth: The number of Iowa students who are English Learners (ELs) continues to increase. In 2023-24, 7.4% of public-school students were ELs, as reported in the DE's [Annual Condition of Education Report: 2024](#) (April 2025). The [DE Education Statistics](#) webpage indicates EL enrollments by district for 2025-26, showing 8.0% of enrolled students receiving EL services (a total of 37,314 students). Des Moines Public Schools is serving 7,393 EL students in 2025-26 (over 27% of enrollment). Postville and Storm Lake have the highest concentration, at 48% and 40% ELs, respectively. The 24 UEN districts, serving 40% of the state's public school students, are educating 26,326 ELs this school year, or 71% of the English-Learner population.

Table 4-13: Iowa Public School K-12 Weighted English Learners by Enrollment Size 2000-01, 2022-23 and 2023-24

Enrollment Category	2000-01		2022-23		2023-24	
	K-12 Enrollment	# Weighted EL	K-12 Enrollment	# Weighted EL	K-12 Enrollment	# Weighted EL
Under 300	8,176	23	8,172	103	8,120	101
300-599	52,162	237	49,544	449	48,798	544
600-999	78,916	530	53,996	1,289	55,360	1,664
1,000-2,499	126,118	1,848	110,946	3,729	108,317	4,091
2,500-7,499	96,410	1,348	102,008	5,263	101,558	5,682
7,500+	132,509	4,165	161,811	13,894	161,547	14,793
Independent Charter Schools	-	-	0	0	0	0
State	494,291	8,151	486,476	24,727	483,699	26,875

Source: Iowa Department of Education, Bureau of Information and Analysis Services, Certified Enrollment and Student Reporting in Iowa.
 Note: Figures may not total due to rounding.

Funding History: [ELL Task Force Report](#), Nov. 2013, tells the history of the formula support for ELL services: "Prior to the 2013 legislative session, students served in an ELL program counted for an additional 0.22 weighting, including state contribution in the formula, for programming for up to four years. During the 2013 legislative session, state contribution was extended to a fifth year beginning with the 2014-15 budget." Legislation, [HF 605](#), enacted in 2021, set two weightings to generate funding for students served in limited-English proficient programs based on need, providing tiered weighting based on students' skills: 1) An intermediate level with a weighting of .21, and 2) An intensive level of .25 (both based on student ELPA test scores). The Task Force recommendation included need-based tiered weighting at a higher level to match the costs of providing supports and instruction.

Current Shortfall: In the [fall of 2025](#), the School Budget Review Committee approved \$14.5 million of modified supplemental amount (spending authority) to reimburse school districts for providing 2024-25 instructional services to ELL students being served beyond five years. On [Dec. 16, 2025](#), the SBRC approved another \$30.3 million of modified supplemental amount (spending authority) for reimbursement of services provided to EL's in their first five years of programming, in excess of the two weightings generated by the formula to the 170 school districts making requests.

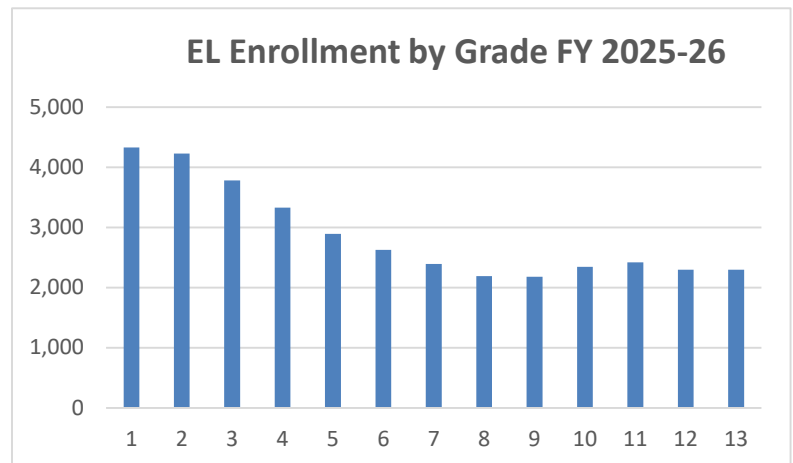
Educational Requirements: The Task Force Report also described the responsibility of schools to provide services: Iowa has educational requirements for EL students as defined in Iowa Code,

Chapter 280.4, Uniform School Requirement: When a student is limited English proficient, both public and nonpublic schools shall provide special instruction, which shall include, but need not be limited to, either instruction in English as a second language or transitional bilingual instruction. Such instruction will continue until the student is fully proficient in English or demonstrates a functional ability to speak, read, write, and understand the English language.

Funding Recommendations: The Task Force recommended, and the UEN supports, EL-weighted funding closer to the national average by increasing it to .39 through a phase-in formula over three years. The .39 national average weighting was shown in the Nevada study, Study of a New Method of Funding for Public Schools in Nevada, American Institutes for Research, 2012. The Task Force also recommended extending eligibility for EL state weighting from five years to seven years: “The extension of years is critical to provide enough time for all students to reach academic language proficiency through ELL educational programming to ensure they don’t fall into a subsequent designation of special education requiring an Individualized Education Program (IEP).”

How long does it take for ELs to reach proficiency? The National Literacy Panel, as reported in [A review conducted for the Center for Public Education](#) by researchers at Edvantia, concluded that “considerable future research is needed to develop valid and reliable measures” of academic language proficiency (August & Shanahan, 2006). Several studies cite empirical evidence that indicates it takes 4 to 7 years for ELs to become proficient in academic English.”

Success: this chart shows that Iowa’s EL students served early in elementary years reach proficiency and exit the program, as the numbers by grade level decrease dramatically through 6th grade. Older students arriving in Iowa may take longer, as the content for high school coursework is more advanced.



Preschool Policy Impact: Iowa’s PK students are not assigned an EL status or program support until they attend kindergarten. An EL weighting applied to PK would provide additional resources, especially for translation and communication services to support parents, who play a vital role in student success. In combination with this change, there should be an extension of state contribution to support the costs of educating Iowa’s English learners for at least another year.

English-Learner (EL) Programs and Services

Increased weighting commensurate with the costs of programs and support for students is needed to provide services for Iowa’s English Learners. EL investments support the employment of appropriately credentialed staff, who are in short supply today. Many students begin their educational journey with EL services and eventually test as proficient, which is to be celebrated. They may still need support, however, as the content of textbooks becomes more difficult and assignments become more complicated. Ultimately, EL services build successful, engaged citizens, strong communities, and a strong workforce.