

# Alaska Native Students as English Learner Students: Examining Patterns in Identification, Classification, Service Provision, and Reclassification

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# Alaska Native Students as English Learner Students: Examining Patterns in Identification, Classification, Service Provision, and Reclassification

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This report examines the population of Alaska Native students who are classified as English learner (EL) students and how EL policies function for these students, focusing on EL identification, classification, service provision, and reclassification as fluent English proficient. Alaska is one of several states where Indigenous students make up a large segment of the EL population. Drawing on Alaska state data from 2011/12 to 2018/19, this study found that roughly a quarter of Alaska Native kindergarten students statewide were classified as EL students. Alaska Native EL students are a diverse group. The Alaska Native EL students in the study spoke 24 different home languages and had varied demographic and education characteristics. Compared with non-Alaska Native EL kindergarten students, Alaska Native EL students had lower English proficiency levels and higher rates of economic disadvantage in a cash-based economy (defined in box 1). The percentage of kindergarten students who were Alaska Native EL students was highest in schools that were rural, schools that had higher rates of economic disadvantage, and schools that employed fewer English as a second language teachers. In interviews, four district leaders shared that identification, classification, service provision, and reclassification practices were the same for Alaska Native EL students as for other Alaska EL students. These interviewees shared that limited financial and human resources compromised the quality and availability of EL supports. However, a review of 26 district EL Plans of Service revealed that less than a third of districts described policies and services directed specifically toward Alaska Native EL students, including heritage language programs, community outreach, and collaboration between Alaska Native education programs and EL programs. Statewide, EL reclassification rates were low for all EL students but especially low among Alaska Native EL students. By the end of grade 7, only 11 percent of Alaska Native EL students had been reclassified compared with 30 percent of non-Alaska Native EL students. This report identifies implications for Alaska, and for other states serving Indigenous EL students, for ensuring that EL education policy, funding, and service provision support Alaska Native and other Indigenous EL students equitably and with excellence.

## Why this study?

Strengthening supports for Alaska Native students who are classified as English learner (EL) students is a key priority for Alaska's education leaders. Although an important body of research exists on Alaska Native students (Barnhardt, 2001; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Demmert et al., 2006), little of it examines Alaska Native EL students or EL students of other Indigenous<sup>1</sup> U.S. backgrounds (for exceptions, see August et al., 2006; Bilagody, 2014; Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2016; Combs & Nicholas, 2012; Villegas, 2020). Instead, research on EL education has emphasized first- and second-generation immigrant students (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2016). To fill this gap, this study examined characteristics of Alaska Native EL students and explored their identification, classification, service provision, and reclassification as English proficient.

For additional information, including background on the study, technical methods, and supporting analyses, access the report appendixes at <https://go.usa.gov/xHEJu>.

1. This study uses the term "Indigenous" to refer to students who are indigenous to the 50 states in the United States, specifically American Indian students in the continental United States, Native Hawaiian students in Hawaii, and Alaska Native students in Alaska.



Although federal law sets the framework for EL policy, states have considerable autonomy in determining EL policies. EL classification affords students the right to linguistic supports and services to meaningfully access educational content (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015; Lau v. Nichols, 1974). Although EL policies and processes vary, all schools have processes to evaluate incoming students for EL eligibility, provide specialized services, and evaluate EL students' linguistic growth for reclassification as fluent English proficient students (Linguanti & Cook, 2013).

Students are evaluated for EL eligibility when they first enter school, which is in kindergarten for most students (see box 1 for definitions of key terms). Federal law differentiates eligibility for EL classification for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Specifically, non-Indigenous students must have a non-English language as their primary language, whereas Indigenous students are eligible if they “come from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact” on their English proficiency (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Although neither federal legislation nor guidance has defined “significant impact,” this criterion suggests that Indigenous students whose primary language is English and who speak a nonstandard English variety influenced by their community's heritage language (Leap, 2012) would be eligible for EL classification if they met their state's other EL identification criteria (Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest, 2019). (See appendix A for more information on EL policies and Alaska Native students.) To date, differences in states' definitions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous EL students have not been studied, nor have differences in the characteristics of Indigenous EL students and non-Indigenous EL students that are due, at least in part, to differing eligibility laws.

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## Box 1. Key terms

**Bilingual programs.** School programs that provide instruction in both English and a non-English language, typically with the goal of developing students' skills in both languages. Common models include two-way dual immersion, developmental bilingual, transitional bilingual, and heritage language programs (Baker, 2011).

**Compliance.** The degree to which classification and reclassification of English learner (EL) students aligns with state-specified thresholds. Noncompliance occurs when a student meets EL classification or reclassification criteria but is not appropriately classified or reclassified or when a student is classified as an EL student or reclassified as fluent English proficient but does not meet EL classification or reclassification criteria.

**English learner (EL) Plan of Service.** In Alaska, districts with at least one school serving eight or more EL students must submit an EL Plan of Service to the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED) that reports on their EL-related goals, services, programs, staffing, professional development, monitoring, and family and community engagement activities. Plans are valid for up to five years; the majority of plans over the study period of 2011/12–2018/19 were from 2018 and are in place until 2023, although some plans were from an earlier year, and one plan was from 2019.

**English learner (EL) student.** A formal, federally required classification for K–12 students who are determined to have the right to supplemental language and academic supports due to their state-measured English proficiency level and other eligibility criteria (see appendix A).

**English proficiency.** Competence or fluency in the English language. The concept is understood in different ways by different communities and measured in different ways by different assessments (National Research Council, 2011). By law all EL students must take a state-determined English proficiency assessment annually that measures their proficiency in Standard American English (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Smith, 2016). Alaska uses the WIDA Consortium's English proficiency assessments, which classify standard English reading, writing, speaking, and listening proficiency levels. Eligible students are assessed when they first enter an Alaska school using a state-approved screener assessment and then again each spring using the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS) assessment. ACCESS is scored from 1.0 (entering) to 6.0 (reaching); the number before the decimal point refers to the proficiency level, and the number after the decimal point refers to progress toward the next level. Students receive five scores, one for each domain, and a composite (overall) score.

**Ever economically disadvantaged.** Students who were ever eligible for the national school lunch program during the study period, as defined in a cash-based economy. This might not align with economic well-being as understood from a subsistence economy perspective (see appendix A), where families might draw on natural or collective resources, such as fish, game, and berries, for their livelihood (Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, 1980).

**Heritage language programs.** A type of bilingual education program designed to support heritage language development and other education interests of members of a community with a cultural connection to a non-English heritage language (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, n.d.).

**Kindergarten readiness.** Students' readiness for kindergarten as assessed by the Alaska Developmental Profile (Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, 2020), which has five domains and 13 goals. This study considered students to be kindergarten ready who consistently met at least 11 of the 13 goals, following terminology from DEED.

**Odds ratio.** For ease of interpretation, the results of the hazard analyses are presented as odds ratios: the odds that an event (in this study, reclassification) will occur for one group in relation to another group. An odds ratio of less than 1 shows lower odds of occurring in relation to another group, and an odds ratio greater than 1 shows higher odds.

**Reclassified fluent English proficient students.** Former EL students who have transitioned from EL status to "fluent English proficient" status. As of 2018/19 students in Alaska were eligible to be reclassified when they earned a composite ACCESS score of 4.5 or higher out of 6.0 and a minimum of 4.0 on the reading, speaking, and listening subtests and 3.8 on the writing subtest (WIDA, 2019).

**School locale.** Schools are categorized as being in one of four locales based on Alaska's unique geography (Vazquez Cano et al., 2019): urban (in one of the state's larger cities), urban fringe (in a community near a large city or with commercial air access to the city), rural hub/fringe (in a nonurban community that is on or off the road network), and rural remote (in a small, off-road community accessible only by small plane or boat).

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Classification as an EL student puts into motion support services, such as English language development instruction, accessible core content instruction, and academic instruction in a student's home language. To enable these services, districts typically receive annual supplemental funding from their state department of education for each EL student (Millard, 2015). The level of supplemental funding varies by state (Imazeki, 2018); in Alaska this funding is 20 percent higher than per-pupil base funding (Millard, 2015). However, there is little research or federal guidance on whether, when, or how services for Indigenous EL students should or can be differentiated from services for non-Indigenous EL students (Holbrook, 2011).

All EL students participate in a yearly evaluation to determine whether they have gained sufficient English proficiency to be reclassified as fluent English proficient, at which point supplemental funding and services generally cease (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Reclassification is an important steppingstone for EL students (Takani-shi & Le Menestrel, 2017), often resulting in access to wider academic content and greater interaction with peers (Umansky, 2018). However, little is known about reclassification among Indigenous EL students.

Although American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students make up less than 1.5 percent of EL students nationally (Snyder et al., 2019), 8 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students are EL students (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Alaska is one of nine states with an Indigenous language among the top five most common home languages spoken by EL students<sup>2</sup> (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Over 40 percent of the state's EL students are Alaska Native (about 6,600 of 16,000 EL students in 2018/19). Alaska has the highest percentage of EL students with an Indigenous home language and is the only state in which an Indigenous language,

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2. Four additional Northeast Region states list "Creole and Pidgin" as a top language group of EL students. This language group typically refers to nonstandard English varieties spoken among Indigenous communities (Migration Policy Institute, 2015), although many languages and language varieties spoken by non-Indigenous communities are also considered Creole or Pidgin (Holm, 2000).

Yupik,<sup>3</sup> is the most common language among EL students (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). As allowed under the federal EL definition, many Alaska Native EL students are predominantly or exclusively English speakers and might speak a nonstandard English influenced by their heritage language (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2016).

Rooted in a historical pattern of imposed government schooling, heritage language deprivation, and forced cultural assimilation, Alaska Native, American Indian, and Native Hawaiian communities have faced, and continue to face, critical barriers in access to culturally and linguistically sustaining, adequately resourced, and equitable schooling (Barnhardt, 2001; Davis, 2001; McCarty & Zepeda, 1995; Spring, 2016). One result has been a dramatic decline in the number of Indigenous languages spoken and in the proportion of students who speak those heritage languages (McCarty & Zepeda, 1995). Key elements of contemporary federal law encourage Indigenous language revitalization. For example, the Native American Languages Act (1990) states that the United States “declares to preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American Languages.” More recently, ESSA allows the use of Title VI (Indian Education) grant funding for heritage language immersion programs, requires “meaningful tribal consultation” in the development of state ESSA plans, and stresses the importance of culturally responsive instruction (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

Because policy and research have focused on the needs and experiences of immigrant-origin EL students, there are critical gaps in understanding how EL policies function for Indigenous students. In Alaska it is an open question whether and how EL policies and services meet the unique needs of Indigenous EL students. Examining the characteristics of Alaska Native EL students and their schooling can support the development of more responsive policies. In addition, a clearer understanding of how Alaska Native EL students experience EL identification, classification, service provision, and reclassification can guide policy and research efforts to ensure that these students receive appropriate supports for heritage language, English language, and academic development without replicating patterns of forced linguistic and cultural assimilation (Spring, 2016). This study, conducted through the Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest in partnership with education leaders in Alaska, offers state stakeholders—including state department of education leaders, EL and Title III (federal program to support EL students) directors and staff members, district superintendents, district EL and Title III teams, families, and communities—information about patterns in Alaska Native EL identification, classification, service provision, and reclassification.

## Research questions

This study explores the student, school, and district characteristics and reclassification timing for kindergarten cohorts of Alaska Native EL students in the state between 2011/12 and 2018/19. The focus on kindergarten cohorts allows for analysis of Alaska Native students when they first enter school and are evaluated for EL classification. The study also draws on interview data, district EL Plans of Service, and test scores to understand EL identification, classification, service provision, and reclassification in select districts. Specifically, the study asks:

1. What percentage of Alaska Native kindergarten students are classified as EL students, and how does this classification relate to school and student characteristics?
2. In four school districts with a large Alaska Native or EL student population, what processes are used to classify EL students, and how, if at all, do processes vary for Alaska Native and non-Alaska Native students?

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3. Yupik refers to a language family that includes Central Yup'ik (Yugtun), Cup'ik (Cu'pig), Supiaq (Alutiiq), and Siberian Yupik (Krauss, 1974). The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development clusters the Yupik language family slightly differently in its data, including Central Yup'ik, Siberian Yupik, and Cup'ik; Supiaq is included in the Aleut language family in the data. The analyses in this report reflect the state's classification of the language group, as data were only available on the language family as a whole.

3. Across the 26 districts with EL Plans of Service, what are the key services provided to EL students, and what services, if any, are targeted to the education experiences and needs of Alaska Native EL students?
4. What are the reclassification outcomes of Alaska Native EL students, and how do reclassification patterns differ between Alaska Native and non–Alaska Native EL students and among Alaska Native EL students with different characteristics?

The data sources, sample, and analytic methods are summarized in box 2 and detailed in appendix B.

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## Box 2. Data sources, sample, and methods

**Data sources.** The study relied on data from five sources:

- *Student-level administrative records for 2011/12 to 2018/19.* Provided by the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED), these records were the primary data source for the study. The data include information on enrollment, student demographic characteristics, kindergarten readiness scores, English learner (EL) status, and English language proficiency scores for 2016/17–2018/19.
- *School and district characteristics.* The study team collected publicly available data on school and district characteristics (for example, locale and presence of special programs) to provide contextual information and linked the data to the statewide master dataset.
- *English proficiency screener scores.* Four districts shared the results of student-level initial English language proficiency assessments (referred to as “screeners”), which the study team linked to the statewide master dataset. DEED does not collect screener scores. Districts were selected for their large Alaska Native or EL student populations.
- *Interviews with district EL directors.* In 2019 and 2020 the study team conducted interviews on policy and services for Alaska Native EL students with EL directors from the four districts that provided screener data.
- *District EL Plans of Service.* Twenty-six districts met the EL population requirements to have plans on file with DEED. All plans were current through 2020/21. The study team coded the plans for information on district EL services and linked them to the master dataset.

**Sample.** The primary data source included records for 85,044 students from all 54 Alaska school districts. This sample encompassed all eight cohorts of students (ranging from 10,113 to 10,979 students) who entered kindergarten between 2011/12 and 2018/19. The 2011/12 cohort was observed for eight years, while the 2018/19 cohort was observed only in its kindergarten year. Of these 85,044 students 24 percent had ever been identified as Alaska Native, and 15 percent had ever been classified as EL students.

The secondary data sources included student screener data for EL classification and interviews with EL directors of four districts. Although the four districts were not representative of Alaska as a whole, they reflected a diversity of district characteristics, including schools in all four locale types. From 2012/13 to 2018/19 these four districts accounted for 13,331 kindergarten students, 2,277 of whom had been screened for EL classification. The percentage of Alaska Native students ranged from 10 percent to more than 75 percent in the four districts. The 26 districts whose EL Plans of Service were analyzed represented nearly half of Alaska’s 54 school districts but included 92 percent of the state’s K–12 population and 99 percent of both non–Alaska Native EL students and Alaska Native EL students.

**Methodology.** The study analyses included descriptive statistics, qualitative coding, and discrete-time survival analyses to estimate students’ probability and timing of reclassification over time. The study team considered a group difference of 10 percentage points or more as large, 6–9 percentage points as moderate, 2–5 percentage points as small, and less than 2 percentage points as not meaningful.

To answer research question 1, the study used the statewide dataset to calculate the proportion of kindergarten students with varying characteristics over time and by school locale.

To answer research question 2, the study drew on students’ kindergarten English proficiency screener scores from four districts and interviews with each district’s EL director. While not representative of Alaska overall, these data yield important insights into district-level practices. (See appendix B for more information on district participation.) Qualitative coding and analyses of

interviews (Creswell, 2013) provided information on EL identification and classification practices, and descriptive analyses of quantitative screener data yielded additional findings on classification and compliance.

To answer research question 3, the study drew on the 26 district EL Plans of Service, as well as the four district EL director interviews. The EL Plans of Service were coded for key elements of EL service provision, including type of English language instruction, content area instruction, bilingual programs, and supports for Alaska Native EL students. Coded interviews provided information on EL services and how they varied for Alaska Native and non–Alaska Native EL students.

To answer research question 4, the study drew on the statewide dataset from 2011/12 to 2018/19 and used survival analyses, which estimate the probability that an individual experiences an event in a given time frame, in this case, the probability that a student was reclassified as fluent English proficient in a given academic year, contingent on not having been reclassified earlier (Reardon et al., 2002; Singer & Willett, 2003). Results from these analyses describe patterns of reclassification among Alaska Native and non–Alaska Native EL students and illustrate the relationship of student and school characteristics to reclassification outcomes.

**Limitations.** Some analyses were limited by lack of data. Specifically, DEED does not collect statewide data on home language survey responses or screener scores, nor do administrative data include service provision information. Although the EL Plans of Service that were analyzed represent most (99 percent) of the state’s EL students and Alaska Native EL students, very small districts and those with very few EL students were not included. Student screener scores were obtained from only four districts and are not fully representative.

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## Findings

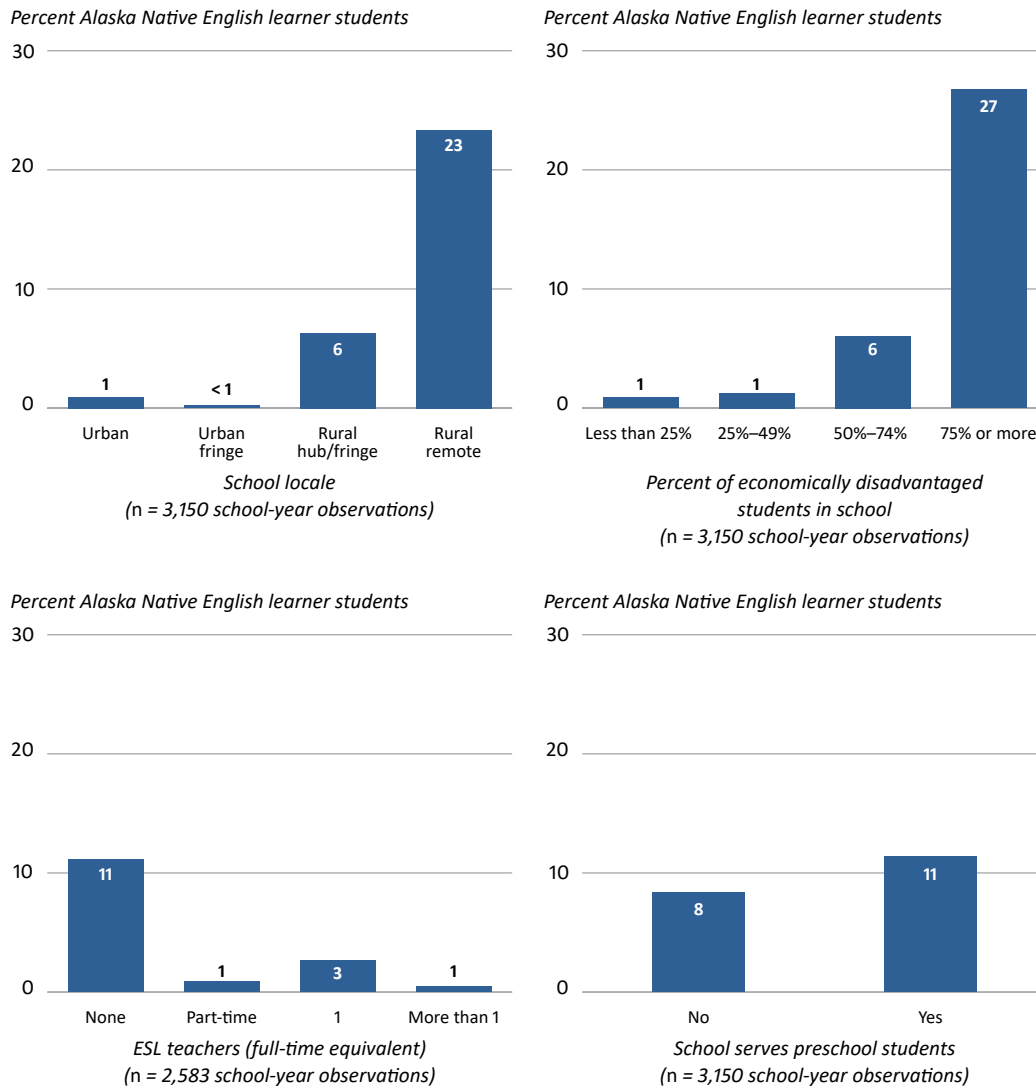
This section presents findings on the characteristics of Alaska Native and non–Alaska Native EL students statewide, the classification of Alaska Native students as EL students in four districts, service provision for Alaska Native EL students in the 26 districts with an EL Plan of Service, and reclassification of Alaska Native EL students statewide.

### ***From 2011/12 to 2018/19, 24 percent of Alaska Native kindergarten students were English learner (EL) students; Alaska Native EL students were clustered in rural remote schools and had lower English proficiency levels and higher rates of economic disadvantage than non–Alaska Native EL students***

From 2011/12 to 2018/19, 15 percent of Alaska kindergarten students were initially classified as EL students. Roughly twice as many Alaska Native kindergarten students were classified as EL students (24 percent) as non–Alaska Native kindergarten students (12 percent). The percentage of Alaska Native kindergarten students classified as EL students declined over time, however, from 33 percent in 2012/13 to 14 percent in 2018/19, a decline not mirrored in non–Alaska Native kindergarten students (see figure C1 in appendix C). The decline might reflect a shift in district practices, as the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED) has worked with districts to correct a perceived overclassification of Alaska Native students as EL students.

*The percentage of kindergarten students who were Alaska Native EL students was highest in rural schools, schools with a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students, and schools without an English as a second language teacher.* On average 23 percent of kindergarten students in rural-remote schools were Alaska Native EL students, which was 17 percentage points higher than in rural hub/fringe schools, the next-highest locale (figure 1; see also tables C1 and C2 in appendix C). In schools with 75 percent or more economically disadvantaged students, an average of 27 percent of kindergarten students were Alaska Native EL students compared with 6 percent or less in schools with lower percentages of economically disadvantaged students. In schools without an English as a second language teacher over 2012/13–2018/19, an average of 11 percent of kindergarten students were Alaska Native EL students compared with 3 percent or less at schools with an English as a second language teacher. These school characteristics—rural, economically disadvantaged, and without an English as a second language teacher—are highly correlated and reflect the concentration of Alaska Native EL students in remote school settings. Although the percentage of kindergarten students who were Alaska Native EL students tended to be higher in remote schools with fewer resources, there was an exception in that Alaska Native EL students were more concentrated in schools that offered the key resource of preschool (11 percent) than in schools that did not (8 percent).

**Figure 1. Schools with higher percentages of Alaska Native English learner kindergarten students tended to be rural, have a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students, have fewer English as a second language teachers, and serve preschool students, 2011/12–2018/19**



ESL is English as a second language.

a. Teacher data are for 2012/13–2018/19.

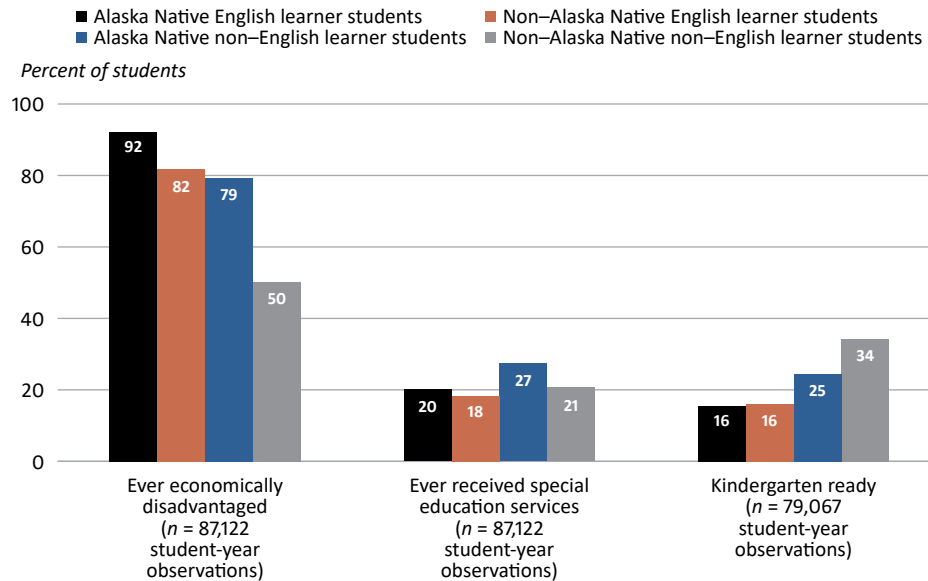
Note: School-year observation means that *n* represents the total number of data points—one for each school in each year of the data.

Source: Authors' analysis of Alaska state enrollment data for 2011/12–2018/19.

*Alaska Native EL students had higher rates of cash-based economic disadvantage and lower measured English proficiency, but similar rates of special education services and kindergarten readiness compared with non-Alaska Native EL students.* In kindergarten 92 percent of Alaska Native EL students were ever economically disadvantaged in a cash-based economy compared with 82 percent of non-Alaska Native EL students (figure 2; see also table C3 in appendix C). Alaska Native EL students had similar rates of ever receiving special education services (based on having an individualized education program) and kindergarten readiness (as measured by meeting at least 11 of 13 goals on the Alaska Developmental Profile assessment) as non-Alaska Native EL students. However, differences appeared between EL and non-EL students. The proportion of Alaska Native EL students (20 percent) and of non-Alaska Native EL students (18 percent) who received special education services was similar and much lower than the proportion of Alaska Native non-EL students who did (27 percent). About 16 percent of both Alaska



**Figure 2. Alaska Native English learner students were more likely to be economically disadvantaged in a cash-based economy than non-Alaska Native English learner students were, 2011/12–2018/19**



Note: Student-year observations means that *n* represents the total number of data points—one for each student in each year of the data.

Source: Authors' analysis of Alaska state enrollment data for 2011/12–2018/19.

Native and non-Alaska Native EL students were considered kindergarten ready, which was lower than the kindergarten readiness rates of their non-EL peers (25 percent and 34 percent).

On average, Alaska Native EL students had lower measured English proficiency levels on the ACCESS assessment in spring of kindergarten than non-Alaska Native EL students did, both overall and in each of the four domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (see figure C2 in appendix C). Gaps were largest in speaking and listening. While non-Alaska Native EL students scored, on average, at a level considered proficient in Alaska on the speaking and listening domains (4.0 or above), Alaska Native EL students' scores were roughly a proficiency level lower (2.75 on speaking and 3.44 on listening). In kindergarten Alaska Native EL students had an average overall English proficiency level of 1.75 (entering) while non-Alaska Native EL students had an average of 2.37 (beginning).

*Alaska Native EL students predominantly reported a language in the Yupik family as their home language, and Spanish was the most common home language for non-Alaska Native EL students.* Although Alaska Native EL students reported 24 distinct home languages from 2011/12 to 2018/19, the vast majority (80 percent) reported Yupik (see table C4 in appendix C), while the second-most frequently reported language was Inupiaq (9 percent). Among non-Alaska Native EL students, reported home languages were more evenly distributed (see table C5). Spanish was the most frequently reported home language (24 percent), followed by Filipino or Tagalog (17 percent), Hmong (14 percent), Samoan (14 percent), and Russian (8 percent).

***In four districts the English learner (EL) student identification and classification processes did not vary between Alaska Native and non-Alaska Native students; an observational tool enabled districts to identify potential EL students not identified through the home language survey***

In interviews in four districts, EL directors described EL classification processes that did not vary by whether a student was Alaska Native or not. All four districts used the state-developed home language survey as the first step in EL identification. The survey asks guardians of all incoming students questions designed to identify those with a non-English home language. Directors in all four districts said teachers also had the option of using a

state-provided language observation checklist, aligned with the differentiated definition of Indigenous EL students in federal law, if they believed that a non-English language had a “significant impact” on a student’s English proficiency (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). The checklist enabled teachers to compare students’ speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills with those of “standard English-speaking students of the same age” (Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, 2013 p. 1). One EL director described the checklist as a “backup” for identifying potential EL students. Although directors did not state that this observation process was used only for Indigenous students, that is the only group of students legally eligible for EL classification without a non-English home language (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

Directors stated that a majority of Alaska Native EL students were classified as EL students because of the impact of a heritage language on their English language proficiency and that relatively few spoke a language other than English as their primary home language. However, EL directors also acknowledged variation in Indigenous students’ linguistic backgrounds. As one example, a director conjectured: “Maybe it’s [the Indigenous language] spoken quite a bit in the home and it’s an influence on their language. Or in some cases...parents or grandparents were taken away from their families and...they don’t have strong...Tlingit language. But also, maybe the English language wasn’t strongly developed because they were living in a variety of boarding schools or foster care situations.”<sup>4</sup>

*District EL directors expressed concern that the EL identification and classification processes did not appropriately identify Alaska Native students for EL screening.* Two EL directors worried about appropriate identification and classification, perceiving that the home language survey underidentified students. Specifically, they said that the home language survey might indicate that some Alaska Native students were not eligible for classification because they do not speak a heritage language at home, even though their heritage language could have influenced their language development in ways that affected their English proficiency. One director described how “a lot of [Alaska Native students] come with a language of influence,” but “sometimes the parents do not necessarily indicate the other language influence” on the home language survey. One of the two directors believed that the language observation checklist, if used more frequently, could reduce underclassification of Alaska Native students as EL students in the district.

*The percentage of kindergarten students screened and classified as EL students varied by district and Alaska Native identification; however, compliance with EL screener thresholds was high and did not vary by whether students were Alaska Native.* Across the four districts, patterns of administration of a kindergarten English language proficiency screener varied by district and by whether a student was Alaska Native (see table C6 in appendix C). The percentages of both Alaska Native and non-Alaska Native kindergarten students screened were much higher in District 1 than in the other three districts, with a large gap between Alaska Native (82 percent) and non-Alaska Native (26 percent) students. In Districts 2 and 3 the percentage of kindergarten students screened did not vary meaningfully by whether students were Alaska Native, whereas in District 4 a higher percentage of non-Alaska Native students (8 percent) than of Alaska Native students (3 percent) was screened. These variations in the percentage of students screened likely reflected demographic differences across the four districts.

The percentage of kindergarten students who scored in the EL range and were subsequently classified as EL students was high across districts, indicating that most students who took the screener had scores that did not exceed the EL range. This could reflect accurate procedures for identifying potential EL students. It could also reflect the difficulty of the screener or a high bar for avoiding EL classification. District compliance (the degree to

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4. This quotation exemplifies how varieties of the English language other than Standard American English are often perceived to be language deficiencies rather than whole, valid English varieties that differ from Standard American English. See appendix A for more detail on this distinction.

which districts classified students according to state rules regarding the EL score range) was at least 86 percent in all four districts, for both Alaska Native and non–Alaska Native students (see table C6 in appendix C).

***In district English learner (EL) Plans of Service in place through at least 2020/21, only 8 of 26 districts described policies and services directed specifically toward Alaska Native EL students***

Analysis of district EL Plans of Service in the 26 districts that had such plans revealed that districts used a variety of core content and English language development models as key features of EL services (see table C7 in appendix C for a full summary). Regarding core content delivery, a majority of districts reported using sheltered English instruction, with instruction in English but adapted to students' English proficiency levels through instructional modifications (for example, visual aids). For English language development the most common model was structured English immersion (cited by 35 percent of districts), in which English is taught through core content instruction. Heritage language programs were the most frequent bilingual instructional model, although only 15 percent of districts reported having them. EL Plans of Service for 8 of the 26 districts reported providing services targeted to support Alaska Native EL students, such as Alaska Native heritage language programs, community outreach, and collaboration between Alaska Native education programs and EL programs.

*Six of the 26 districts offered at least one Alaska Native bilingual or heritage language program (with two districts offering more than one program).* Of these six, self-reported languages of instruction included Yupik (specific language within the language family was unspecified; three districts), Inupiaq (one), Yugtun (also referred to as Central Yup'ik; one), and Cup'ik (one). Program model definitions are broad, and the EL Plans of Service had no information on program quality, which is a limitation of this study. (A detailed description of EL program models is in appendix C.)

*In addition, 6 of the 26 districts reported in their EL Plans of Service that they conduct outreach to Alaska Native communities and families to support EL students.* For example, one plan described how a district administrator and a Yupik instructional coach conducted community and family meetings in villages to promote the use of two languages at home and encourage family involvement in children's education. In another district Alaska Native community elders were invited to spend time with students during school meals and teach Alaska Native culture classes. Another district described an annual celebration spotlighting students' cultural heritage.

*Although some districts provided Alaska Native education and EL services separately, other districts offered joint services through collaboration between the district's Alaska Native education program and its EL program.* More broadly, the inclusion of services specifically for Alaska Native students in eight districts' EL Plans of Service signals a recognition that Alaska Native and EL education services can overlap to support Alaska Native EL students' heritage and English language development, as well as cultural connections and academic growth. In an interview one EL director whose district served predominantly Alaska Native students described the district's EL services as tightly woven with the district's Alaska Native cultural education offerings. In this district, staff approached EL classification as an opportunity to develop both heritage and English language fluency rather than as an indication of language deficit. The district director reported not being concerned about overclassification or reclassification challenges and focusing instead on EL classification as an opportunity to support students' bilingual development.

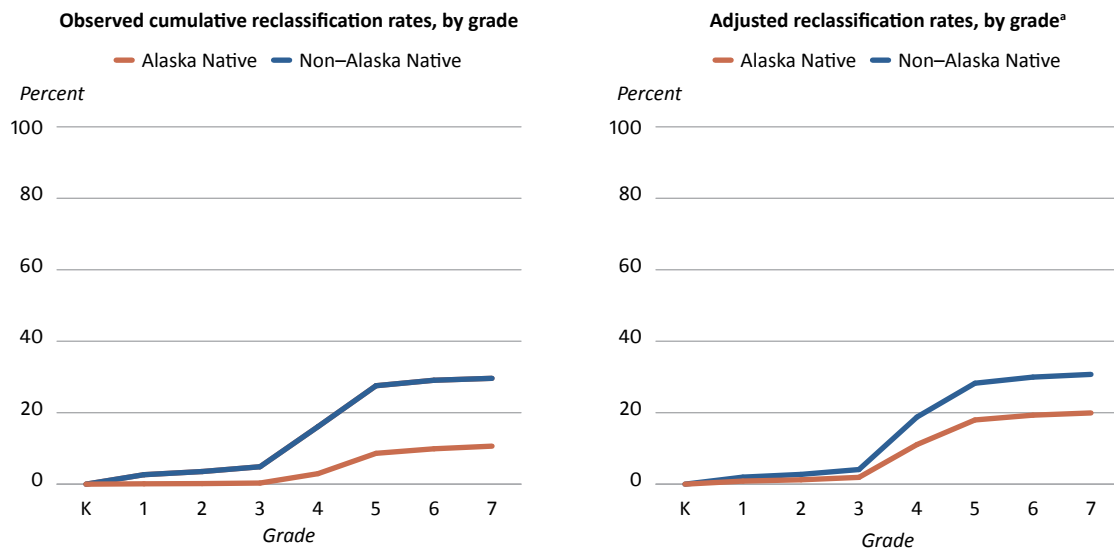
*In interviews three of four district EL directors said that EL supports were insufficient, specifically noting a need for financial, staffing, and professional development resources.* Two EL directors said that limited resources resulted in EL resources being concentrated on students who needed the most intensive supports, with students who had less acute language needs or were in schools with fewer EL students receiving limited, if any, EL supports. Directors also identified staffing and professional development challenges that included recruiting and retaining enough EL and bilingual teachers, as well as providing sufficient professional development for both EL specialists and general education teachers. For example, one director believed that the lack of state-level training requirements for teachers of EL students was a barrier to stronger EL services.

**From 2011/12 to 2018/19 smaller percentages of Alaska Native English learner (EL) students (11 percent) than of non–Alaska Native EL students (30 percent) were reclassified as fluent English proficient by the end of grade 7 statewide**

Across grades, for the full statewide population of EL students, reclassification rates were consistently lower for Alaska Native EL students than for non–Alaska Native EL students. By the end of grade 5, only 9 percent of Alaska Native EL students had been reclassified compared with 28 percent of non–Alaska Native EL students (left panel of figure 3; see also table C8 in appendix C). By the end of grade 7 cumulative reclassification rates were almost three times higher for non–Alaska Native EL students (30 percent) than for Alaska Native EL students (11 percent).<sup>5</sup>

Time to reclassification for Alaska Native and non–Alaska Native EL students was longer in Alaska than in other states, where five to seven years is typical (Takanishi & Le Menestrel, 2017). In Alaska, districts reclassified nearly all students who met thresholds (from 2016/17 to 2018/19, more than 99 percent of students’ language classifications complied with state-established thresholds; see tables C9 and C10 in appendix C), so the longer time to

**Figure 3. A large reclassification rate gap between Alaska Native and non–Alaska Native English learner students emerged between kindergarten and grade 7 and was only partially explained by student, school, and district characteristics, 2011/12–2018/19**



Note:  $n = 42,704$  ever English learner students. The observed rates are based on a model that contains variables for each academic year, an indicator variable for Alaska Native identification, and an interaction term between Alaska Native identification and a continuous time variable. The estimated rates are based on a model that contains all variables in the base model plus student variables (modal gender, ever received special education services, ever identified as economically disadvantaged, continuous measure of kindergarten readiness); school variables (locale indicators, enrollment, proportion of English learner students, proportion of economically disadvantaged students); and district variables (enrollment, proportion of English learner students, proportion of American Indian or Alaska Native students, proportion of Hispanic/Latino students, proportion of White students, proportion of other race/ethnicity students, proportion of economically disadvantaged students, non–Alaska Native bilingual program offering, Alaska Native bilingual program offering, and interactions of the last two variables with a continuous time variable measured in academic years). (See table C11 in appendix C for details.)

a. Adjusted for student, school, and district characteristics.

Source: Authors’ analysis of Alaska state enrollment data for 2011/12–2018/19.

5. It was not possible to calculate mean time to reclassification because some EL students are never reclassified. Although studies often calculate the median time to reclassification (the number of years it takes for half the EL population to be reclassified), this study could not because half the EL students had not been reclassified after the eight years examined. Median time to reclassification in Alaska is more than eight years—and likely far longer for Alaska Native EL students, as only 11 percent were reclassified after eight years.



reclassification in Alaska results from students not meeting the state’s reclassification thresholds. Although the composite English proficiency threshold in Alaska is aligned with that in other states and with WIDA guidance (Porter, 2018), unlike most states Alaska requires students to also meet thresholds for all four language domains (reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

*Student, school, and district characteristics accounted for roughly half the difference in reclassification rates between Alaska Native and non–Alaska Native EL students.* Numerous student, school, and district characteristics were related to EL student reclassification outcomes (see table C11 in appendix C). Male students, economically disadvantaged students in a cash-based economy, and students who had ever received special education services, all had lower probabilities of reclassification than their peers without these characteristics. For example, the odds of being reclassified were about 50 percent lower for an economically disadvantaged student than for a non–economically disadvantaged student. Students in schools with more economically disadvantaged students also had a lower probability of reclassification than students in schools with fewer such students. Students who entered kindergarten with higher kindergarten readiness skills had a higher probability of reclassification than students who entered with lower kindergarten readiness skills. After these student, school, and district characteristics were accounted for, students in districts with higher EL concentrations had a higher probability of reclassification than students in districts with lower EL concentrations.

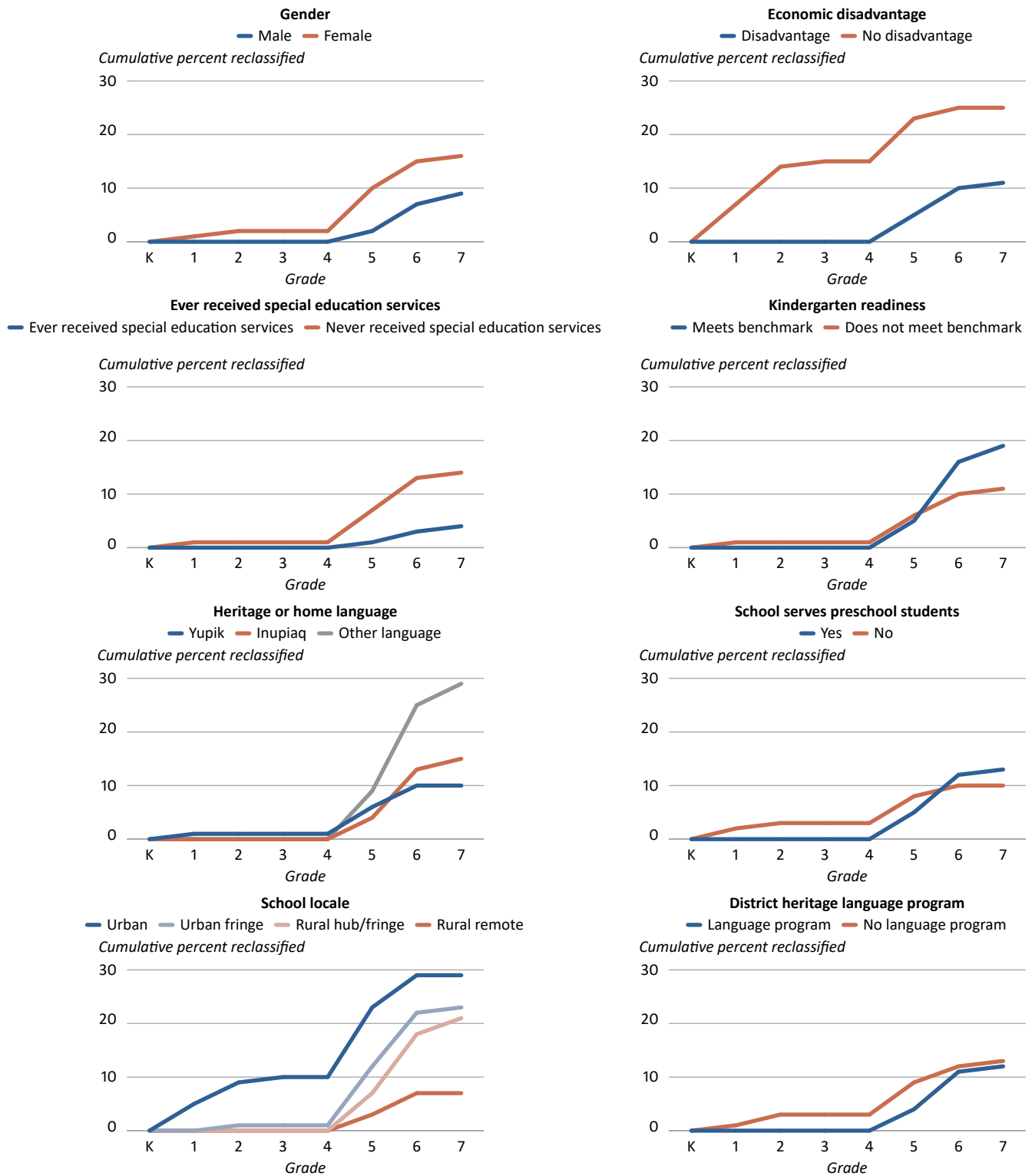
Student, school, and district characteristics accounted for about half the reclassification gap between Alaska Native and non–Alaska Native EL students (see right panel of figure 3 and table C8 in appendix C). However, the gap was still large, with an estimated reclassification rate of 20 percent for Alaska Native EL students and 31 percent for non–Alaska Native EL students. Differences in reclassification outcomes between Alaska Native and non–Alaska Native EL students were driven by differences in the probability of students meeting reclassification criteria. After the model accounted for whether a student met all required criteria, there were no significant differences in the probability of reclassification between Alaska Native and non–Alaska Native EL students (see table C12 in the appendix).

*There was considerable variation in reclassification rates among Alaska Native EL students.* Many of the characteristics that were associated with reclassification rates across all EL students explained variation in reclassification outcomes among Alaska Native EL students. Figure 4 plots the estimated probability and timing of reclassification among Alaska Native EL students by student, school, and district characteristics (see also table C13 in appendix C; these findings reflect observed patterns and do not account for other characteristics).

Male students, students from economically disadvantaged households in a cash-based economy, and students who had ever received special education services were all less likely than students without these characteristics to be reclassified over time (see figure 4). Students who met kindergarten readiness benchmarks were more likely to be reclassified over time. Gaps were particularly large between economically disadvantaged and non–economically disadvantaged Alaska Native EL students, with reclassification differences emerging by grade 1 and remaining relatively stable across grades at about 15 percentage points beginning in grade 2.

Alaska Native EL students with a heritage or home language other than Yupik or Inupiaq had the highest probability of reclassification over time, while those with a heritage or home language in the Yupik language family had the lowest probability, with large differences emerging by grade 6 (see figure 4). By grade 7 estimated cumulative reclassification rates for students with a non-Inupiaq, non-Yupik heritage or home language were more than 10 percentage points higher than those for their peers in the other language groups. Differences in observed patterns by language group are likely driven by other factors. For example, students in the Yupik language group are more likely to attend schools in rural remote settings, which, as described below, is also associated with slower reclassification.

**Figure 4. Among student, school, and district characteristics, economic disadvantage, heritage or home language, and school locale are strong predictors of the timing and probability of reclassification of Alaska Native English learner students, by grade, 2011/12–2018/19**



Note:  $n = 18,280$  ever Alaska Native English learner students. The figure shows estimated cumulative reclassification rates for select student, school, and district characteristics. Models include indicator variables for each grade, the characteristic of interest, and an interaction of the characteristic of interest with a continuous time variable. The models account for changes in student numbers in each grade across time. The findings reflect observed patterns and do not account for other characteristics.

Source: Authors' analysis of Alaska state enrollment data for 2011/12–2018/19.

The probability of Alaska Native EL students being reclassified also varied by school characteristics. Alaska Native EL students in schools with a preschool program had lower initial reclassification rates, yet they caught up with and surpassed their Alaska Native EL peers in schools without these programs by grade 6 (although differences were small; see figure 4). Students attending schools in rural remote areas had lower cumulative reclassification rates than students in less rural areas. Reclassification gaps emerged by grade 1 and grew over time, especially between schools in urban and those in rural remote areas, where gaps in estimated cumulative reclassification rates were 22 percentage points by grade 7.

Finally, the probability of Alaska Native EL students being reclassified varied based on whether the district offered a heritage language program. Reclassification rates were initially slightly lower in districts that offered these programs, but by grade 7 both groups of students were equally likely to have been reclassified.

## Implications

The findings from this study have implications for EL education policy, funding, and service provision decisions in Alaska. In addition, this study might be useful to other states working to better serve Indigenous students, including those whose English is influenced by an Indigenous heritage language. Finally, this study adds to the research base on EL policy as it relates to diverse ethno-cultural-linguistic EL populations. Although the Alaska Native population (itself very diverse) is distinct from American Indian and Native Hawaiian populations, these communities face shared challenges regarding linguistic and cultural survival, as well as education and social service resources, and they are underrepresented in EL research (Barnhardt, 2001; Takanishi & Le Menestrel, 2017; Villegas, 2020).

### ***Important differences between Alaska Native English learner (EL) students and non-Alaska Native EL students point to a need to collect and analyze data on EL policy and services for Indigenous students***

Alaska Native EL students differ from non-Alaska Native EL students in various ways. For example, this study found differences related to measured English proficiency (on the ACCESS assessment) and school locale. As described by district leaders, many Alaska Native EL students speak a nonstandard English variety—rather than a non-English language—as their home language (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2016; Leap, 2012). DEED might want to collect more information on EL students and examine that information by student race/ethnicity, home language, and school locale, among other characteristics. Alaska’s home language survey asks about students’ dominant language, including English, yet DEED does not collect survey responses. With this information, DEED could assess Alaska Native students’ patterns in English proficiency—differentiating between those whose predominant language is an Indigenous language and those whose predominant language is a nonstandard English variety—and provide differentiated guidance and supports to districts for these groups. These data would also allow DEED to conduct or facilitate research on the effectiveness of specific EL supports for Alaska Native EL students who speak a nonstandard English variety.

DEED also does not collect students’ English proficiency screener scores. Collecting this information would allow DEED to better evaluate compliance with state procedures and the appropriateness of state EL classification thresholds. For example, DEED could evaluate the trajectories of students near the current EL classification thresholds to see whether EL services are beneficial or harmful to students near the threshold.

### ***State and federal input is needed on what defines a non-English language “impact” for Indigenous students and how to identify these students***

Alaska state policy does not differentiate its EL identification and classification policies according to the different federal EL eligibility requirements for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The findings from four districts suggest that districts do not have different EL identification and classification policies and practices for Alaska

Native and non-Alaska Native students. Because state and district EL identification and classification policies focus on the definition for non-Indigenous EL students, many English-dominant Alaska Native students whose English language proficiency has been affected by a non-English language—who are eligible for EL screening based on the federal definition—might not be appropriately identified as potential EL students. The state-mandated home language survey triggers EL screening only for students with non-English dominant languages. Guidance is needed on what is meant by a significant impact of a non-English language on English language development, along with clarification of how to assess this impact among Indigenous students. A promising definition might encompass Indigenous students who speak a non-English language or an English variety that has been shaped by a heritage language.

With such guidance DEED could develop differentiated identification and classification processes (for instance, by including a question for Indigenous students on the home language survey related to community heritage language) and support districts in using these processes. Stronger state guidance could also address concerns about potential overidentification or underidentification of Alaska Native EL students. Washington state offers an example of how to differentiate EL identification and classification policies for Indigenous students (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2017). Washington administers the state English proficiency screener to students identified as American Indian and who are considered academically at risk (not meeting standards on state assessments). The Alaska teacher language observation checklist, though not mandated by the state as part of Alaska Native EL identification and classification policy (Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, 2018), is an additional possible method of differentiation. In line with ESSA requirements that states use standardized statewide EL entrance and exit procedures (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015), Alaska policy should ensure consistency in identification and classification across schools and districts while outlining differentiated policies for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Federal guidance to clarify the EL definition for Indigenous students, along with how to operationalize this definition, might be desirable and could be developed through an advisory group of key tribal, district, and state education leaders.

### ***The resources and services that come with English learner student classification are important for districts serving Alaska Native students, but they might not be sufficient***

Alaska Native EL students have lower reclassification rates than non-Alaska Native EL students, and district EL directors stated that the available EL staffing and financial resources are insufficient. On average, states apportion an additional 40 percent above per-pupil funding allocations for EL students (Verstegen, 2015); by contrast, Alaska currently apportions half that average—20 percent above per-pupil funding. Increasing per-pupil EL funding allocation in Alaska could provide needed resources and benefit Alaska Native EL student outcomes.

The findings from this study also demonstrate that schools facing greater financial, staffing, and community resource needs serve larger proportions of Alaska Native EL students. Alaska Native EL students in such schools also experience slower progress toward reclassification than their peers. Alaska could consider tiering EL funding, as some other states do (Sugarman, 2016). For example, Alaska could provide higher per-pupil supplemental funds for EL students attending rural remote schools or for those from cash-based economically disadvantaged households because these characteristics are associated with slower progress toward reclassification. Both measures could provide additional resources to support Alaska Native EL students.

In addition to greater and tiered funding, this study's findings on the unique characteristics of Alaska Native EL students, combined with evidence of their comparatively low reclassification rates, suggest a need to ensure that services for Indigenous EL students are responsive to their unique contexts. Supports for Alaska Native EL students should be rooted in an understanding of the linguistic, social, and economic profiles of Alaska Native EL students (Leap, 2012) and should aid students' acquisition of standard English while recognizing students' English varieties as valued and legitimate. This study's findings suggest that few districts currently provide EL services



specific to Alaska Native EL students. This might be problematic because the language development needs of students acquiring English for the first time differ from those of students who are proficient speakers of an English variety and are learning Standard American English (Smith, 2016). Likewise, DEED does not require that preservice teacher preparation include training in working with EL students or specifically with Alaska Native EL students (Education Commission of the States, 2020). The lack of differentiated services and adequately trained teachers limits Alaska Native EL students' opportunities, according to interviewees. There is opportunity for growth in building collaboration and communication between districts' Alaska Native education and EL staff and programs and in ensuring that Alaska Native EL students receive appropriate and skilled instruction. There is also an opportunity for DEED to provide guidance on how EL services can be differentiated for Alaska Native EL students, particularly those with English as their dominant language. Holbrook (2011), for example, proposes three-way immersion programs for Indigenous EL students that recognize their nonstandard English varieties and teach both Standard American English and students' heritage languages.

Robust heritage language programs for Alaska Native EL students are a key service to consider. These programs can support the development of multilingual and multicultural students and communities, as language is an integral component of cultural survival and well-being among Indigenous communities (Ortiz et al., 2020; Wyman, 2012). Heritage language programs should consider that many Alaska Native EL students will not enter the program speaking the heritage language but will instead learn it through the program (Ahler, 2007). Such programs support federal and Alaskan priorities to preserve and revitalize Indigenous language use, and a robust body of research has found that primary language development benefits students' English proficiency (Takanishi & Le Menestrel, 2017). Alaska Native students in general—not just Alaska Native EL students—likely benefit linguistically and academically from heritage language programs (Bibler, 2020; Steele et al., 2017). As such, Alaska could consider funding key resources for heritage language programs independent of, or in addition to, EL funding, as California, Oregon, and Utah do.

### ***Reclassification rates are low across Alaska and acutely low among Alaska Native English learner students, indicating a need to evaluate supports and resources, as well as criteria for reclassification***

Very few EL students, Alaska Native and non-Alaska Native alike, met the reclassification criteria each year. Reclassification rates were especially low for Alaska Native EL students, underscoring prior research that identifies racial/ethnic differences in reclassification outcomes among EL students (Umansky et al., 2020). With only 11 percent of Alaska Native EL students reclassified after eight years in school, reclassification rates for this population might be lower than for any other documented group of EL students nationally (Burke et al., 2016; Greenberg Motamedi et al., 2016; Kieffer & Parker, 2016). Slower reclassification progress among Alaska Native EL students might reflect cultural or linguistic biases in the assessment of Indigenous students and nonstandard English speakers (Jones & Ongtooguk, 2002; Nelson-Barber & Trumbull, 2007; Seymour, 2004). The current study's findings suggest that slower reclassification among Alaska Native EL students might also reflect differences between school settings, such as resource access in more remote settings, where Alaska Native EL students are clustered. Slower reclassification suggests a need to evaluate the appropriateness and quality of EL services and language assessments provided to Alaska Native EL students, as well as state reclassification criteria and thresholds. DEED might consider reducing the number of reclassification criteria, as prior research suggests that having multiple criteria (such as the four domains and composite score criteria required in Alaska) inhibits reclassification eligibility (Estrada & Wang, 2018).

Reclassification is typically only one of several goals for EL students, along with access to quality academic programs and connection to home language, identity, and culture, and it can involve both benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, reclassification indicates that students have reached English proficiency benchmarks that open doors to new opportunities (Umansky, 2016). In some circumstances, reclassification leads to higher graduation and college enrollment rates (Johnson, 2019). On the other hand, student outcomes could suffer if reclassification

leads to the premature withdrawal of EL supports (Johnson & Goldenberg, 2020; Robinson-Cimpian & Thompson, 2016). The resources that come with EL classification benefit students by providing education supports, including specialized teachers, targeted instruction, and bilingual education. These resources are typically removed once a student is reclassified (Takanishi & Le Menestrel, 2017). Thus, while reclassification is often positioned as a key goal for EL students, it is critical that stakeholders ensure that providing high-quality, culturally sustaining education is the central priority for Alaska Native EL students.

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