



How Did Missouri Support English Language Learners During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

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KEY POINTS

Like other vulnerable student populations, English Language Learners (ELLs) have faced increased challenges at home and at school throughout the pandemic.¹ These disproportionate impacts may have a sustained adverse effect on ELLs' well-being and ability to learn.² In fact, some preliminary evidence suggests that the learning gap is already growing between non-native English-speaking students and their English-speaking counterparts.³ Moreover, virtual education might be detrimental to the development of ELL students.⁴ School districts have struggled to adapt and accommodate ELLs.⁵

To address these concerns, the Policy Research in Missouri Education (PRiME) Center analyzed school district reopening plans in fall 2020 to understand how Missouri districts responded to English Language Learners. We find:

- **Across the state, Missouri's ELLs were often forgotten in district reopening plans.** Of the 115 districts serving ELLs, only 45 districts had any plan for ELLs. Of those 45 districts, only 10 had detailed plans prioritizing the continued delivery of supports and services to ELLs.
- **Nearly half (47%) of ELLs in Missouri began the year in fully distanced education, compared to only 28% of the state's student body.** ELLs are concentrated in urban and suburban areas, which were much more likely to be fully distanced at the start of the year.

ELLs in Missouri

English Language Learners (ELLs) are a small but growing portion of the Missouri student body. Over the past two decades, the statewide ELL enrollment more than tripled from just over 11,000 students to just shy of 40,000.⁶

To receive ELL services, students must demonstrate English language proficiency levels insufficient to achieve classroom success and meet the state standards.⁷ The state is legally required to support ELLs who meet these criteria with annual English language proficiency assessments, English language services, and appropriate language accommodations in core classes and on state assessments.⁸

ELLs are primarily located in urban and suburban districts. Of the 115 ELL serving districts in Missouri, only 55 are in suburban or city areas, yet these districts serve nearly 78% of Missouri's total ELL student population. In contrast, although 60 districts in rural and town areas serve ELLs, they only serve around 22% of the total Missouri ELL population. Across the state, the bulk of ELLs are concentrated within the St. Louis and Kansas City regions, which alone serve 67% of the state's total ELL population.^{9,10}

Challenges to ELLs During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected ELLs and their communities in many ways. Over the past year, ELLs have faced significant challenges in receiving equitable access to:

- **Learning** – The shift to distanced learning due to COVID-19 posed additional challenges to ELLs. They were less likely to receive consistent levels of language exposure and support in distanced learning.¹¹ Interruptions to the language acquisition process may increase ELLs' risk of learning loss in their language classes and other core classes taught in English.¹² More so, urban districts with a higher percentage of students of color and ELLs were more likely to start the year online, which may have exacerbated the risk of learning loss.^{13, 14}

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- **Health** - ELLs also faced challenges to physical and social-emotional well-being that could have impacted their education. Almost 94% of ELLs belong to communities of color,¹⁵ who experienced a disproportionately large share of confirmed COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations during the pandemic.¹⁶ This physical risk can exacerbate the social-emotional challenges already facing ELLs, including those due to the widespread lack of language accommodations for non-English speakers in health care, housing, and social services.¹⁷
- **Other Social Services** - Exclusion from public assistance and resources due to family immigration and employment statuses could have further harmed ELLs. Immigrants constitute a substantial part of the 4.35 million people who use an Individual Tax Identification Number and were thereby initially excluded from CARES Act relief (though this has since been changed).¹⁸ Immigrants also experienced a greater increase in unemployment rates during the first few months of the pandemic than U.S.-born workers.¹⁹

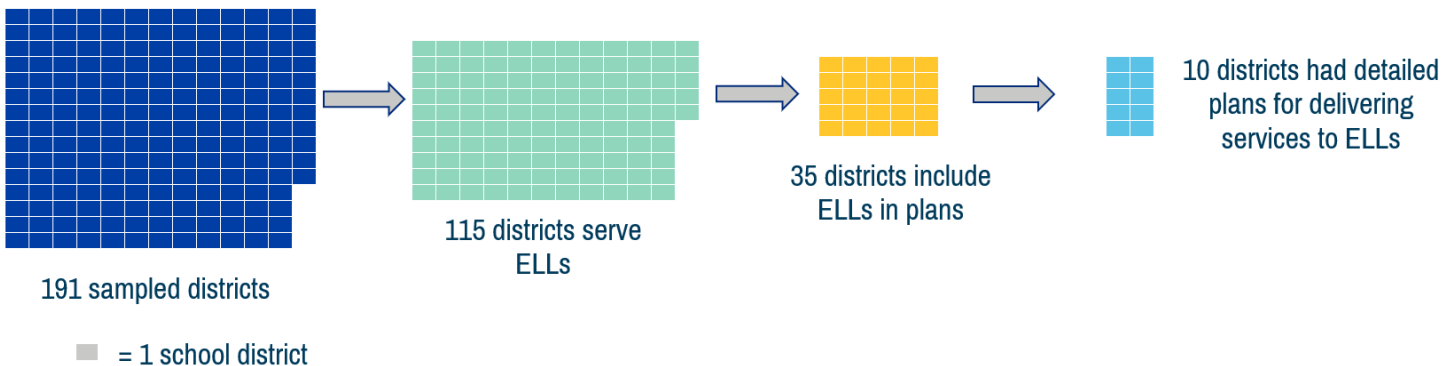
In summary, ELLs continue to face several increased challenges caused by the pandemic and resultant recession. These challenges can exacerbate the social-emotional well-being of ELLs already strained by difficult learning conditions and, ultimately, negatively impact learning.

How Did Missouri Districts Support ELLs in Fall 2020?

To determine how districts supported students in fall 2020, the PRiME Center analyzed reopening plans from a representative sample of 191 districts in Missouri. We found the following:

ELLs were often forgotten in Fall 2020-21 district reopening plans. Of the 191 sampled districts, 115 served ELL students.¹ Of these 115 districts, only 35 mentioned ELLs, and of these 35, only 10 districts provided detailed plans for ELLs. We characterize plans as being detailed if they include information regarding the specific delivery of services, separate from other student subgroups.

Figure 1: Inclusion of ELL Students in Reopening Plans



Common themes among detailed district plans include precise information on how services will be delivered (regardless of the method of instruction) and specific directions on how families could continue to receive support. For example, Guadalupe Centers Schools planned to build ELL support teams to meet students and families regularly. These teams provided step-by-step technological instruction, video tutorials, vocabulary support, and other assistance. Missouri districts could look to plans like this in the future to aid their ELL communities. This communication is crucial as it has also been linked to aiding the mental well-being of vulnerable students during the pandemic (which in turn is linked with better performance in school).²⁰

What Type of Instruction Did ELLs Receive?

Nearly half of Missouri's ELLs began the year in fully distanced education. Figure 2 compares the instructional mode for districts serving ELLs with the overall state average, and Figure 3 shows the same comparison but at the student level. ELL-serving districts were more likely than the overall state average to use distanced education for their students (30 opposed to 21%). However, the district averages mask large student-level districts. Student level comparisons show that ELLs were substantially more likely to receive fully distanced education (47 opposed to 28%). Large districts were more likely to opt for fully distanced education, and ELLs cluster in large districts.

¹Note: For more information on our study, methods, and representative sample of Missouri School Districts, see our Content Analysis of Fall 2020 Reopening Plans here: <https://www.sluprime.org/content-analysis>

Figure 2: Fall 2020 Instructional Type by ELL District

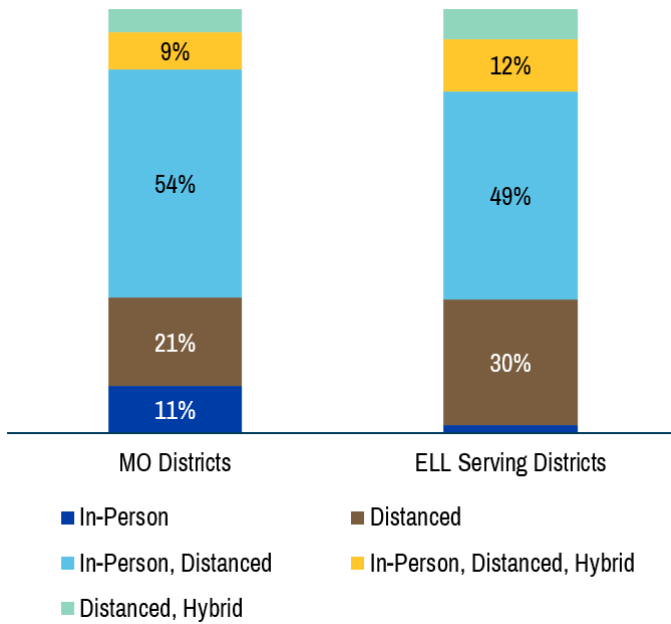
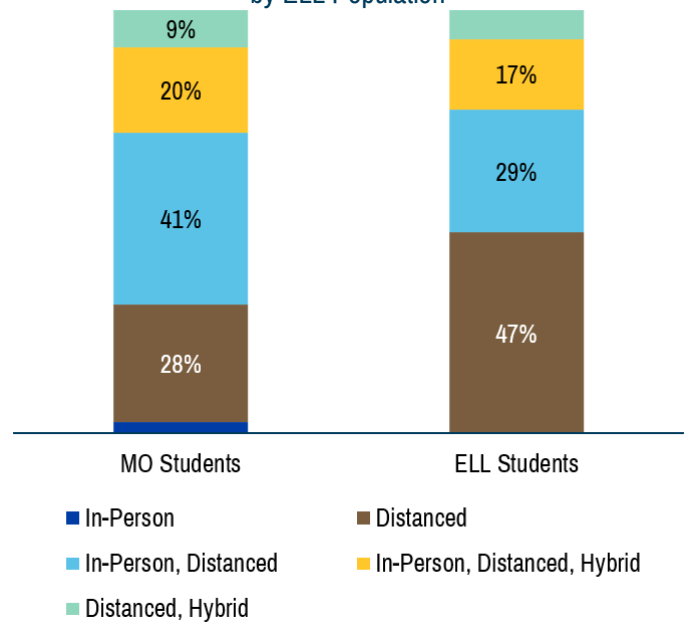


Figure 3: Fall 2020 Instructional Type by ELL Population



Some researchers think that distanced learning reduces structured language acquisition by separating ELLs from critical in-person interactions necessary for them to grow and thrive in school.²¹ Often, ELLs depend on their school for interaction with the English language. Research has shown that the early development of language is essential for ELLs' success later in school.²² Given these concerns, districts worried about learning loss for ELL might consider assessing student learning and providing extra support for students adjusted to their level. Of the 115 ELL-serving districts, we found only 23% had explicit plans to assess and address learning loss in the 2020-21 school year.

Prioritizing continuous language exposure is vital to the development of ELLs. Some districts assured students that they would continue that exposure. For example, the St. Louis Language Immersion School tracked student language growth throughout the year to ensure student progression. Bolivar R-1 tested their ELLs to assess the level of intervention necessary and how to deliver it in the coming year. Though districts have returned to in-person learning, strategies like these may enable ELLs to stay on track with their peers.

Conclusions

ELLs have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and, as a result, these students are at increased risk of falling behind in school. Despite the increased risks, we find that many ELL serving districts throughout the state overlooked ELLs as a part of their reopening plans. Moreover, a large portion of ELLs began the school year in distanced education, which has been thought to be especially detrimental to ELLs' educational progress.²³

Our team analyzed fall 2020 district reopening plans from a representative sample of districts across Missouri and found that the majority of districts did not share written plans for ELLs to receive services during the pandemic. Districts spent months preparing their reopening plans, and often, these plans were the first and primary line of communication between districts and the community on how the district would conduct operations during the pandemic school year. Providing instructional and language supports for ELLs may be pivotal in reducing the learning loss expected from the interruption to in-person learning. Districts that provided detailed plans, such as Guadalupe Centers Schools, can provide a roadmap for districts of how to accommodate ELLs.

Prioritizing the delivery of supports and resources to ELLs can help to alleviate some of the increased challenges these students face and allow them to be successful in their learning. Without that attention, ELLs may be set back for years to come.

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