

Spanish Language Bilingual/ESL Education Technical Assistance Center



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New York State Education Department
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-NYC ELL ENROLLMENTS- A BIT OF HISTORY

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"...I recall the frantic call from a distressed Brooklyn district ...basically alerting us to the fact that 'the Russians are coming.'"

Italian ranked 4th, Greek 7th and Vietnamese 8th among about 85,100 general education English Language Learners (ELLs) in New York City public schools. That was in school year 1980-1981, nearly twenty-five years ago. Today, Italian, Greek, and Vietnamese have been replaced by **Urdu, Bengali, Arabic, Punjabi, Albanian, and French** as members of the "one percent or more club," of ELLs in the city who speak 140-plus different home languages. And, yes, **Spanish** has remained the predominant language of ELLs but has declined from 74% of all ELLs in 1980 to 64% in 2000. **Chinese** has remained the second most common language spoken by ELLs over these past two decades, while **Russian, Haitian Creole, and Korean** also continue to be among the "top 10" languages of ELLs.

PREDOMINANT ELL HOME LANGUAGES

[One Percent or More of All ELLs]

NYC- General Education

1980 vs. 2000

1980		2000	
Language	%	Language	%
Spanish	74.0	Spanish	64.0
Chinese	5.9	Chinese	10.8
Haitian Creole	3.2	Russian	3.2
Italian	2.0	Haitian Creole	3.1
Korean	1.5	Urdu	2.7
Russian	1.4	Bengali	2.6
Greek	1.3	Korean	1.8
Vietnamese	1.3	Arabic	1.8
*		Punjabi	1.2
*		Albanian	1.2
*		French	1.1







NOTE: NYC ELL enrollment data by home language were not available for school years subsequent to 2000-01.

I recall, in a previous professional life about ten or so years ago, the frantic call from a distressed Brooklyn district, to the then Office of Bilingual Education, basically alerting us to the fact that “the Russians are coming.” The unexpected and dramatic influx of Russian speakers left schools unable to form bilingual classes to be in compliance. We watched the Russian-speaking ELL numbers increase over the subsequent years to where Russian ranked 3rd among all languages and, as I vividly recall, was eventually to achieve the distinction as the ELL language group with the greatest growth. Unfortunately, much of the detailed, historical ELL enrollment data may be buried in the recesses of the central ELL database, or still resting in peace among the file archives in the basement of 131 Livingston Street, Brooklyn.

As illustrated above, over these past 20 years we have seen some dramatic shifts in ELL language group representation due to demographic changes, particularly as they related to the growth in diversity of the immigrant population in the city. However, total ELL enrollments too have gone through some very significant and interesting shifts since the 1980s as the “ups and downs” are summarized for selected school years below:

ELL ENROLLMENT CHANGES

**NYC – General Education
(Selected School Years)**

▶ 1980	85,100		
▶ 1988	94,000*		+9.5%
▶ 1989	110,245		+14.7%
▶ 1995	167,602		+34.2%
▶ 1996	162,154		-3.3%
▶ 2000	131,129		-19.1%
▶ 2003	134,670		+2.7%

[*Rounded off to the best recollection of the writer]

An under-acknowledged major initiative that began in 1980, by the then NYC Office of Bilingual Education, had a profound effect on data collection and reporting of ELL enrollments in New York City: The development of the **Bilingual Education Student Information Survey (BESIS)**. After

several years of “growing pains” in the early 1980s, the BESIS enabled the city to get the most accurate statistics possible using this first-time-ever computerized ELL database which replaced the heretofore “count them by hand” and paper reports upon which we relied for ELL enrollment and program participation data.

How many ELLs are enrolled in New York City public schools? What are their home languages, where were they born and in which grades are they enrolled? How many are in bilingual and ESL programs? With the BESIS answers to these questions could now be answered with greater accuracy than ever before and the numbers could be disaggregated and reported not only citywide but for each district and school. Not only that, but now other questions could be answered: What is the academic performance of ELLs? How does their performance compare to that of English proficient students? How long does it take ELLs to “test-out” of entitlement to bilingual and ESL programs? Without the BESIS it would not have been possible to conduct longitudinal research studies about the education of ELLs in the city’s public schools. Furthermore, having the BESIS data facilitated program planning, conducting compliance reviews and allocating funding for ELLs on a per-capita basis.

A Daily News article* referred to ELLs participating in a bilingual or ESL program as follows:

“The ranks of English-only classes for foreign-born students exploded by 25% last year, while classes taught in the native language mixed with English shrunk, according to the newly released Mayor’s Management Report.” “In the 2002-03 school year, the number of kids taking English-only classes grew to 81,263 while the number of kids in bilingual classes dropped to 45,164. The split was traditionally about half and half between the two options, although the gap has been growing wider.”

* “Mayor working to erase bilingual ed, critics say,” Daily News, (9/17/04).

This article referred to the percentages of general education ELLs participating in an ESL program (64%) as opposed to a bilingual program (36%). The “widening gap” between ELL participation in the two mandated programs is further illustrated as follows:

Percentage of General Education ELLs Enrolled*		
School Year	Bilingual Program	ESL Program
2002-03	36%	64%
2001-02	44%	56%
2000-01	48%	52%
1999-00	49%	51%

*These statistics are based on ELLs who participated in a bilingual or ESL program. They do not include other ELLs who were reported as not receiving a program or for whom a survey may not have been completed.

NOTE: ELL program participation data were not available for school year 2003-04. However, the Mayor’s Management Report, FY’05 reported that for school year 2004-05 of 140,920 ELLs “receiving ELL services” 33% received bilingual services while 67% received only ESL services (these figures were apparently based on general and special education ELL enrollments).

The shift in ELL participation from a bilingual to an ESL program can be attributed at least in part to the overall ELL enrollment declines and greater language diversity which resulted in fewer students within individual schools being eligible for a bilingual program (based on their enrollment patterns by language and grade). However, as illustrated above, in recent years this “widening gap” also coincides with a change in policy in 2000-01 which permitted parents of ELLs to choose the mandated program for their children (Transitional Bilingual, Dual Language, or ESL program). Also, contrary to city and state regulations/policies, schools may not have formed bilingual classes when required. Finally, there appears to be a need to disaggregate ELL program participation data by general and special education in order to determine any meaningful differences.

All of these historical total ELL enrollment, home language, and program participation data are made possible due to the BESIS which was developed nearly twenty-five years ago.

While demographic changes related to immigrants, birth rates etc, over the years have certainly affected total ELL enrollments, the specifics are generally a matter of speculation. However, perhaps more so, policy changes have clearly also had major implications on the total enrollment of ELLs since 1980. So, here’s a 23-year overview in a nutshell:

ELL ENROLLMENTS: SELECTED SCHOOL YEARS

① **1980-81** ELL enrollment statistics continued to be compiled from district and high school data reports until the development of the city’s **Bilingual Education Student Information Survey (BESIS)** during the early 1980s. For school year 1980-81, schools reported **85,100** general education ELLs. Subsequent ELL enrollment statistics were considered much more accurate and reliable due to the BESIS computerized database with uniform rules and procedures for identifying and reporting ELLs.

② **1988-89** was the last year (school year 1988-89) that the English Language Assessment Battery (LAB) cut-off score was the 20th percentile for student classification as “LEP” (ELL). The **BESIS**-reported ELL enrollment of approximately **94,000** that year was nearly 10% higher than in 1980.

③ **1989-90** was the first year the city increased the LAB entitlement cut-off score to the **40th percentile** in anticipation of such a change in **Commissioner’s Regulations/CR Part 154** to increase the “LEP cut-off score” the following school year. Attributed primarily to this change in requirement, the general education ELL enrollment increased by 14.7% in only one year to **110,245**. Steady increases resulted for the next 6 consecutive years culminating in “peak ELL enrollment” school year 1995-96.

④ **1995-96** was the “**peak ELL enrollment year**” with **167,602** ELLs counted by the BESIS and reflecting a 34.2% increase since 6 years earlier in 1989. However, the 1995 ELL enrollment was nearly twice the 1980 enrollment with a 97% cumulative 15-year increase.

⑤ **1996-97** was the first year that the city introduced its new **Home Language Identification Survey (HLIS)** and LAB eligibility criteria which required a greater use of an other-than-English language in the home before students were eligible for LAB testing. This policy change was considered primarily responsible for the first ever ELL enrollment decline of 3.3% bringing it down to **162,154** and which set the pattern for further continuous declines through the 2002-03 school year.

Ⓒ **2000-01** represented the 5th year of the new HLIS and reflected a 19.1% ELL enrollment decline since 1996 to bring the total down further to **131,129**, and only 54% higher than 20 years prior. By school year 2000-01, the average annual decline was 4.4% for the 5 years after the “peak enrollment” in 1995.

Ⓓ **2001-02** general education ELL enrollment continues to decline, by 3.1% to **127,061**.

Ⓔ **2002-03** reflected a further, but smaller than average, decline of 1.1% to **125,700** ELLs. This was also the first year of the revised fall **English Language Assessment Battery (LAB-R)** used for the initial identification of newly enrolled ELLs.

Ⓕ **2003-04** reflected the first increase (7.1%) in ELL enrollment, to **134,670**, since the 1995 peak enrollment year. This was also the first school year for which the **New York State ESL Achievement Test (NYSESLAT)** determined the continued entitlement of ELLs enrolled from the previous school year (NYSESLAT was first administered in spring 2003).



NOTE: For school year **2004-05**, the Mayor’s Management Report, FY’05 reported a total of 143,575 ELLs apparently including general and special education ELLs. Therefore, comparisons of only general education ELL enrollments cannot be made with the prior years’ statistics above.

Thus far, ELL enrollment data above refer to students on general education registers (some of whom received special education related services). In school year **2000-01**, in addition to the 131,129 general education ELLs there were **20,401** ELLs eligible for **self-contained special education** programs who accounted for 13.5% of all ELLs. Therefore, the 2000-01 total general and special education ELL enrollment of **151,530** accounted for **13.7%** of the 1.1 million NYC public school students. (This percentage was considerably lower than the approximately 17% in the mid-90s.)

It’s important to note that special education ELL enrollments were not “officially” reported using the BESIS until school year 1994-95 and estimates averaged about 20,000 through 2000-01. In school year **2001-02**, NYC’s “self contained program” special education ELL enrollment dropped to **17,881**, a decline of about 12% over the average enrollment during the prior 6 years. Due to not having more historical special education ELL enrollment data, it was not possible to analyze patterns and trends for a longer period of time.

NOTE: The NYCDOE reported a total of 144,545 ELLs in school year 2003-04. Of these, 134,670 were reported as general education ELLs leaving a balance of 9,875 ELLs, presumably in special education self-contained programs. Therefore, total ELLs accounted for 13.3% of the city’s nearly 1.1 million students.

In addition, it was not possible to determine the impact on special education ELL enrollments of a policy change in April 1999 which permitted special education students to no longer be classified “LEP”, despite their LAB scores, if their IEP recommendation was for monolingual services without ESL instruction. The following enrollment data, however, seem to suggest that this policy change was one factor in the, albeit delayed, decline in the special education ELL enrollment from school years 2000-01 to 2001-02. As seen below, the special education decrease was four times the decline in general education:

ELLs	2000	2001		
✦General Education	131,129	127,061		- 3.1%
✦Special Education	20,401	17,881*		-12.3%

*Special Education (self-contained programs) ELL enrollment data not available after school year 2001-02.

Bringing readers up to speed with regard to the most recent major policy change is the spring 2003 introduction of the newly developed **New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT)** as the required annual assessment, under an amendment to Commissioner’s Regulations/CR Part 154. This test replaced the spring English Language Assessment Battery (LAB) used to identify ELLs who continue to be entitled to bilingual or ESL programs the following school year. In addition, the NYSED permitted “local options for exiting LEP students from Part 154 programs” by using scores from the grades 4 and 8 ELA tests and the Regents examination in English. However, the percentage of ELLs who were able to “test-out-of/exit” a mandated bilingual or ESL program was significantly lower using the NYSESLAT in the spring 2003. Therefore, it appears to be more than coincidence that the 2003-04 general education ELL enrollment increased for the first time since 1995 (a 7.1% increase over the 2002-03 school year).

With the availability of ELL enrollment data for future school years, it will be possible to extend/expand this analysis of enrollment patterns and trends as well as to hopefully continue stimulating dialogue regarding the implications of demographics and policy changes on ELL enrollments and the programs in which they participate. Such analyses would be more meaningful if total ELL enrollment and program participation data etc. were disaggregated for general and special education.

What the future holds regarding total ELL enrollments and the languages they speak will again largely depend upon demographics such as immigration patterns and trends, birth rates etc. But, how many ELLs are enrolled will also depend upon policies that govern how we define, identify, and report ELLs.

As one who was intimately involved in the city’s ELL data “numbers crunching,” I originally developed and then prepared for many years, the document “**Facts & Figures: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions about ELLs and Bilingual/ESL Programs.**”

So now, before my “institutional memory” fades into oblivion, I welcomed the opportunity to write this article and “for the record,” if not posterity, offer some historical New York City ELL enrollment information and data before they too become “lost” in the abyss of the computerized database or with archived paper files that end up in a basement somewhere, if not discarded for lack of use.

Sources:

- Facts & Figures: 1999-2000, 2000-01 and 2001-02* editions, Division of English Language Learners, NYCDOE, which contain BESIS ELL enrollment data.
- Mayor’s Management Report, FY’04, FY’05.*
- Other information/data came from the writer’s personal archive of documents as well as his still vivid recollections.