



# Instructing English Learners

| In 10 Charts

*This study produced with  
support from:*

WALTON FAMILY  
FOUNDATION

EdWeek®  
Research Center®

# About Editorial Projects in Education

Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization based in Bethesda, Md. Its primary mission is to help raise the level of awareness and understanding among professionals and the public of important issues in American education. EPE covers local, state, national, and international news, and issues from preschool through the 12th grade. Editorial Projects in Education publishes *Education Week*, America's newspaper of record for precollegiate education, *EdWeek Market Brief*, and the *Top School Jobs* employment resource. It also produces periodic special reports on issues ranging from technology to textbooks, as well as books of special interest to educators.

The EdWeek Research Center conducts surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in *Education Week* and *EdWeek Market Brief*. The center also conducts independent research studies for external clients including for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

## About The Walton Family Foundation

[The Walton Family Foundation](#) supports *Education Week*'s coverage of strategies for advancing the opportunities for students most in need. The Foundation promotes initiatives to expand parental choice and equal opportunity in education to help spur the bold transformation of the national K-12 system of public education.

WALTON FAMILY  
FOUNDA TION

## Key Contributors | REPORT

Holly Kurtz, *Director, EdWeek Research Center*  
Sterling Lloyd, *Assistant Director*  
Alex Harwin, *Research Analyst*  
Elle Butler, *Research Analyst*

## EdWeek Research Center™

6935 Arlington Road  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
[www.edweek.org/rc](http://www.edweek.org/rc) | [rcinfo@educationweek.org](mailto:rcinfo@educationweek.org)

Copyright © 2025 by Editorial Projects in Education Inc. | Cover image: iStock/Getty

## Introduction

**E**nglish learners are a substantial and growing population in the nation's public schools. According to the [most recent](#) federal data, which was collected in 2021, they now comprise 11% of the public school population, or roughly 5.3 million students. That's a 15% increase over 2011, when 9% of public school students (4.6 million) were learning English.

The share of English learners varies widely by state, ranging from a high of 20% in Texas to less than 1% in West Virginia. English learners are also more prevalent in grades K-2 (15%) than in high school (less than 9%). Spanish is by far the most common home language (76%) followed by Arabic (2.5%).

Two landmark Supreme Court cases have played a major role in guiding the education of students from immigrant families who learn English at school. *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) established the right of English learners to receive language instruction at school. Eight years later, the Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that states cannot deny students a free public education on the basis of their immigration status. That law impacts the 23% of English learners born outside the United States.

The principles established by both decisions have faced legal and political scrutiny throughout the years, including currently under the second Trump administration, where immigration enforcement has been a priority.

The Republican Trump administration's approach to immigration and immigrant students stands in stark contrast to that of the prior Democratic administration, which saw [more than half a million](#) immigrant students enroll in American public schools between 2022 and 2024.

Before and during this time of flux, the EdWeek Research Center has kept a finger on the pulse of practices and attitudes related to English learners and immigrant students by repeatedly surveying teachers, school leaders, and district leaders about this topic. This report summarizes the highlights of these findings in a series of ten charts that address topics ranging from professional development and instructional resources to educators' views of the principles underlying *Plyler and Lau*.

English learners are more prevalent in grades K-2 (15%) than in high school (less than 9%). Spanish is by far the most common home language (76%) followed by Arabic (2.5%).

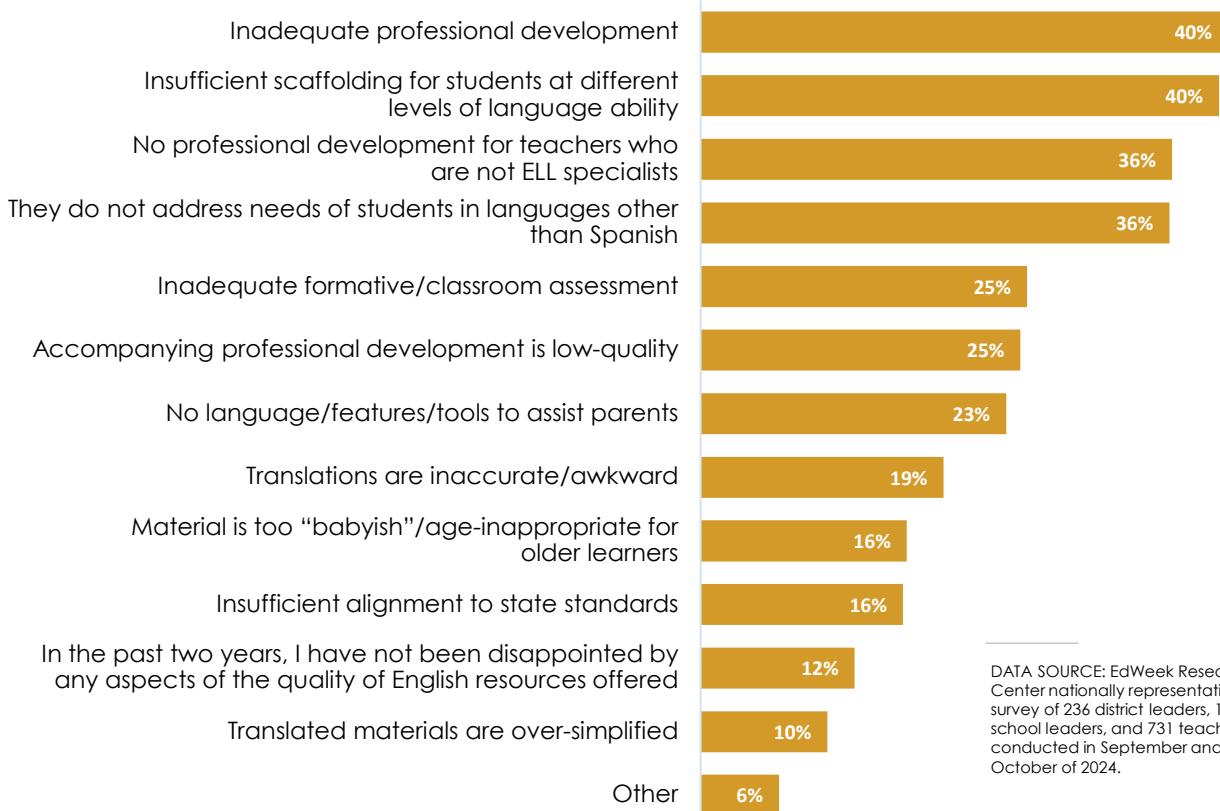
## 1. Instructional Resource Quality

Unlike most other wealthy nations, the United States does not have a national educational system.

Although the majority of English learners (83%) neither receive instruction in their home language nor learn to read and write in it, our decentralized governance model means that approaches used to educate English learners do vary by state, district, classroom, and school. So too does the curriculum.

In the fall of 2024, teachers, principals, and district leaders weighed in on their perspectives about the curriculum and instructional materials they use to help students learn English. Chief among them were concerns about inadequate professional development and insufficient scaffolding for students at different levels of language ability. Nearly 1 in 4 high school teachers and principals (24%) complained that materials were too babyish for their students. (Ten percent of middle school educators and 11% of elementary educators said the same.) Concerns about alignment to state standards were more common among Southern (21%) and Midwestern (19%) educators than among their Northeastern (12%) or Western (8%) peers.

**In the past two years, what—if anything—has disappointed you about the quality of resources offered by vendors for English learners/emerging bilinguals? Select all that apply.**



DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative survey of 236 district leaders, 168 school leaders, and 731 teachers conducted in September and October of 2024.

## 2. PD Needs

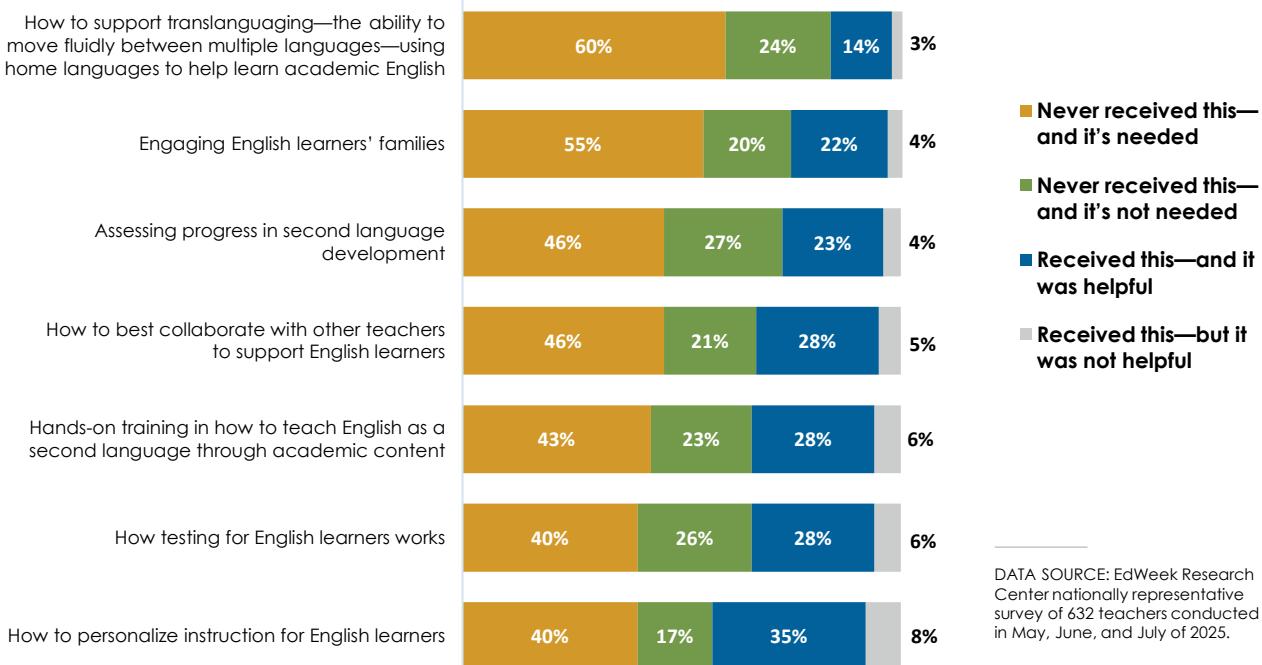
Past EdWeek Research Center studies indicate that many teachers are burnt out on professional development (PD). For example, a fall 2024 survey of more than 2,500 teachers found that 44% of respondents said they had received too much PD in the past year as compared to 24% who said they'd received too little. (The remainder described the amount of PD they received as perfect.) Forty-one percent said the PD they had received in the past year was irrelevant. Asked what kind of PD they needed most, the most common response from the teachers was "I do not need any."

PD related to teaching English learners may be an exception.

Most of the teachers who responded to a July 2025 EdWeek Research Center survey (56%) said they had either received no PD on teaching English learners—or that the quality and quantity of the PD they had received was insufficient. Sixty percent said the same of the English learner-related instruction they received in their teacher-preparation programs.

On that same survey, teachers identified PD on translanguaging (the ability to move fluidly between multiple languages, using home languages to learn academic English) and engaging English learners' families as their top needs. Sixty percent said they had never received training on supporting translanguaging and that they wanted it. More than half indicated they needed, but had not received, PD on engaging English learners' families. Among teachers who had received PD in this area, only 22% said they had received more than four hours of instruction on the topic.

**Tell us about the following types of professional development for yourself or—if you are an administrator—for the teachers in your district/school.**

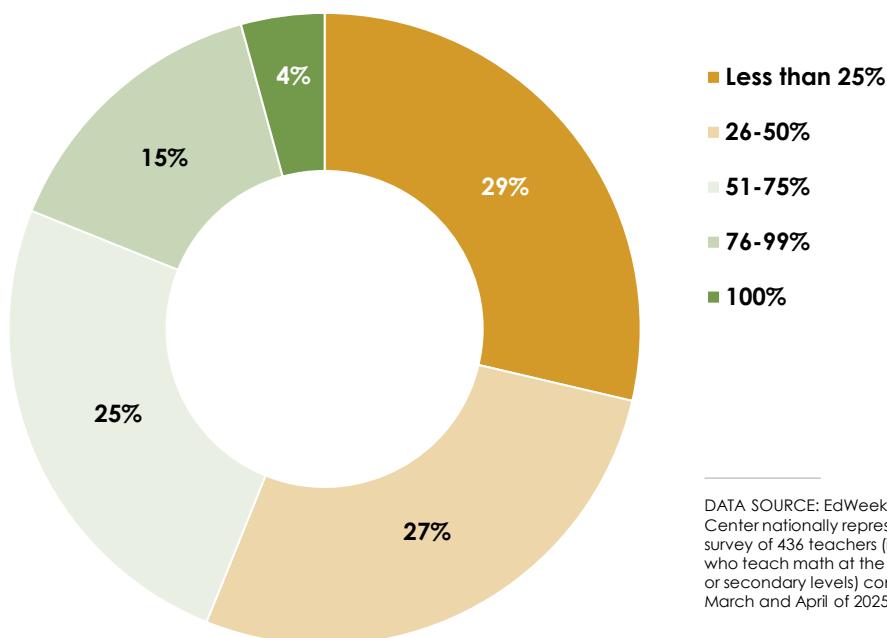


### 3. Math

One reason why so many teachers want PD on translanguaging is that English learners are required to learn all academic subjects—not just English. Almost always this instruction is in English. This can pose a challenge even in number-oriented subjects such as math, because exams and assignments so often include word problems.

Most of the math teachers who responded to a spring 2025 survey (56%) said the majority of their English-learner students could not solve word problems on their own. Respondents included both instructors who focus only on math and those who teach all the subjects at the elementary level. Results did not vary by grade levels taught.

**What percentage of your English-learner students can solve math word problems on their own?**

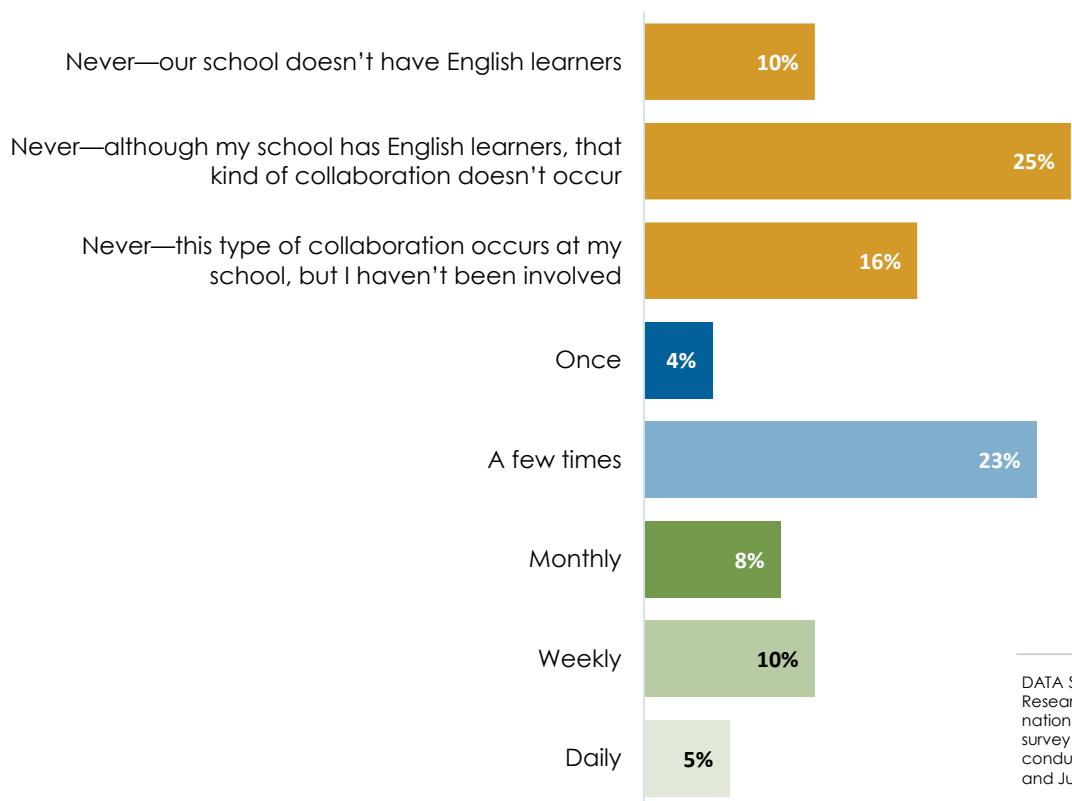


DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative survey of 436 teachers (including 233 who teach math at the elementary or secondary levels) conducted in March and April of 2025.

## 4. Collaboration Between Teachers

At the school level, collaboration is an important aspect of instructing English learners because most spend some or all of their time in mainstream classrooms with native speakers and/or general education teachers. However, just 23% of teachers surveyed in the spring and summer of 2025 said they participated at least once a month in collaborations in which general education teachers and bilingual education/English as a second language teachers worked together to plan lessons, curricula, and/or strategies for teaching English learners. (An additional 10% said their schools did not enroll any English learners.) Forty-one percent said that this type of collaboration never occurred at their schools—or that it occurred—but they had never participated in it.

**In the past year, how often have you been involved in collaborations in which general education teachers and bilingual education/English as a second language teachers work together to plan lessons, curricula, and/or strategies for teaching English learner**

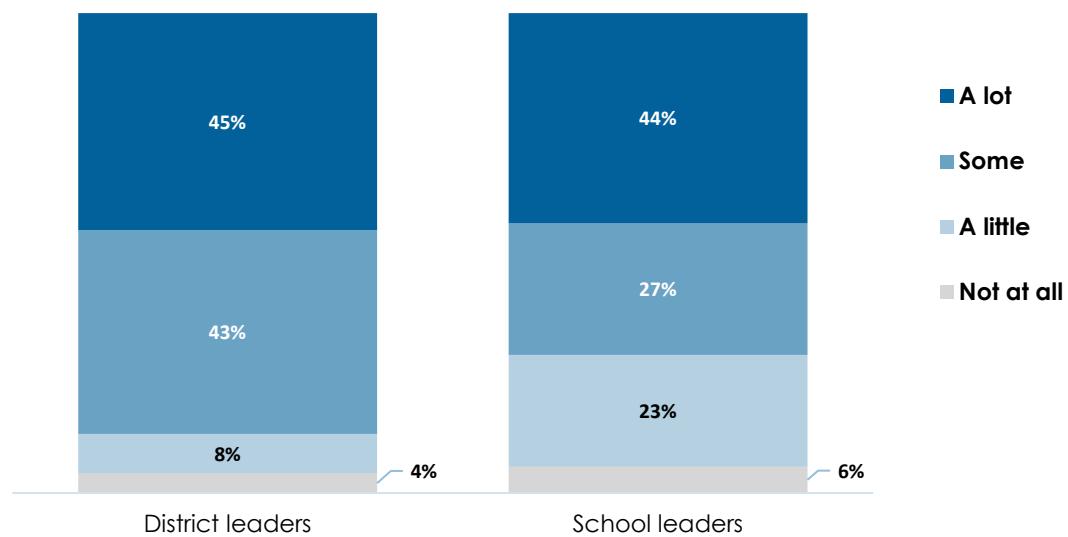


DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative survey of 632 teachers conducted in May, June, and July of 2025.

## 5. Collaboration Among District Leaders

At the district level, English learners may be impacted by collaboration between staff who focus on English learners and staff responsible for making curriculum decisions that impact all students. Such collaboration can increase the odds that curriculum in subjects such as math and social studies is accessible or appropriate for English learners so that they learn this content at the same time that they work toward language proficiency. More than 90% of the principals and district leaders the EdWeek Research Center surveyed in the spring and summer of 2025 said this collaboration did occur in their districts. More than 40% of the administrators said this occurred a lot. An additional 43% of district leaders and 27% of principals said it occurred some of the time.

**How much do district staff responsible for overseeing curricula/instruction for English learners collaborate with district staff responsible for overseeing curricula and instruction for all students?**



DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative survey of 122 district leaders and 120 principals conducted in May, June, and July of 2025.

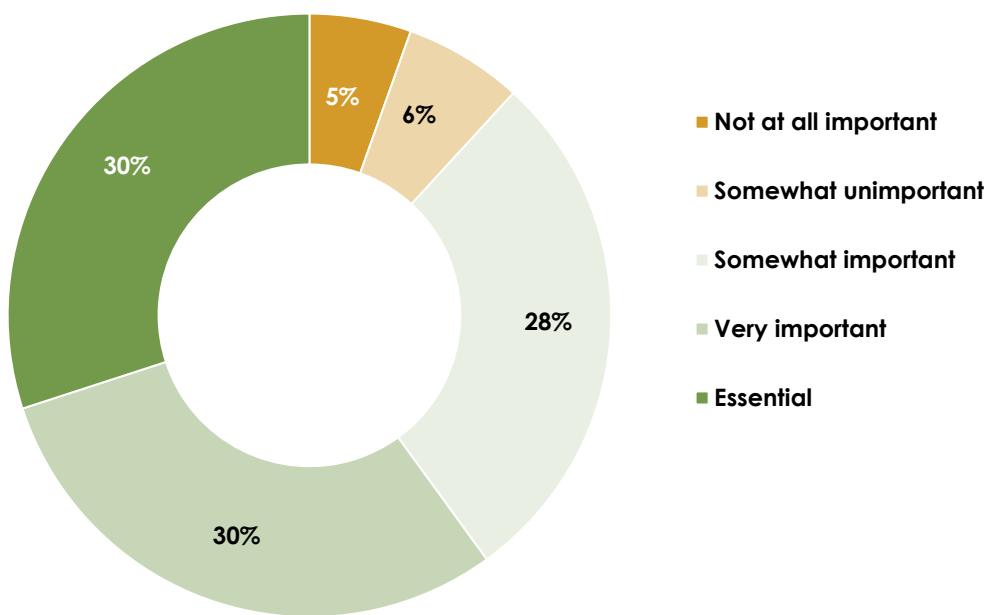
## 6. Title III Federal Funding

Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968 is the main source of federal funding for instructing English learners. In 2024 and 2025, it totaled \$890 million.

The Trump administration has proposed eliminating this funding stream in 2026-27. Congress has not yet acted on the proposal. In the meantime, the administration has been withholding, delaying, and canceling current funding associated with the law, which has been used for such expenses as tutoring, teacher professional development, family engagement programming, and instructional materials.

In the summer of 2025, school and district leaders were asked to rate the level of importance of this funding stream to their district's operations. Eighty-eight percent said the money was at least somewhat important. Thirty percent said it was essential.

**How important is federal Title III funding programs for your school district's operations?**



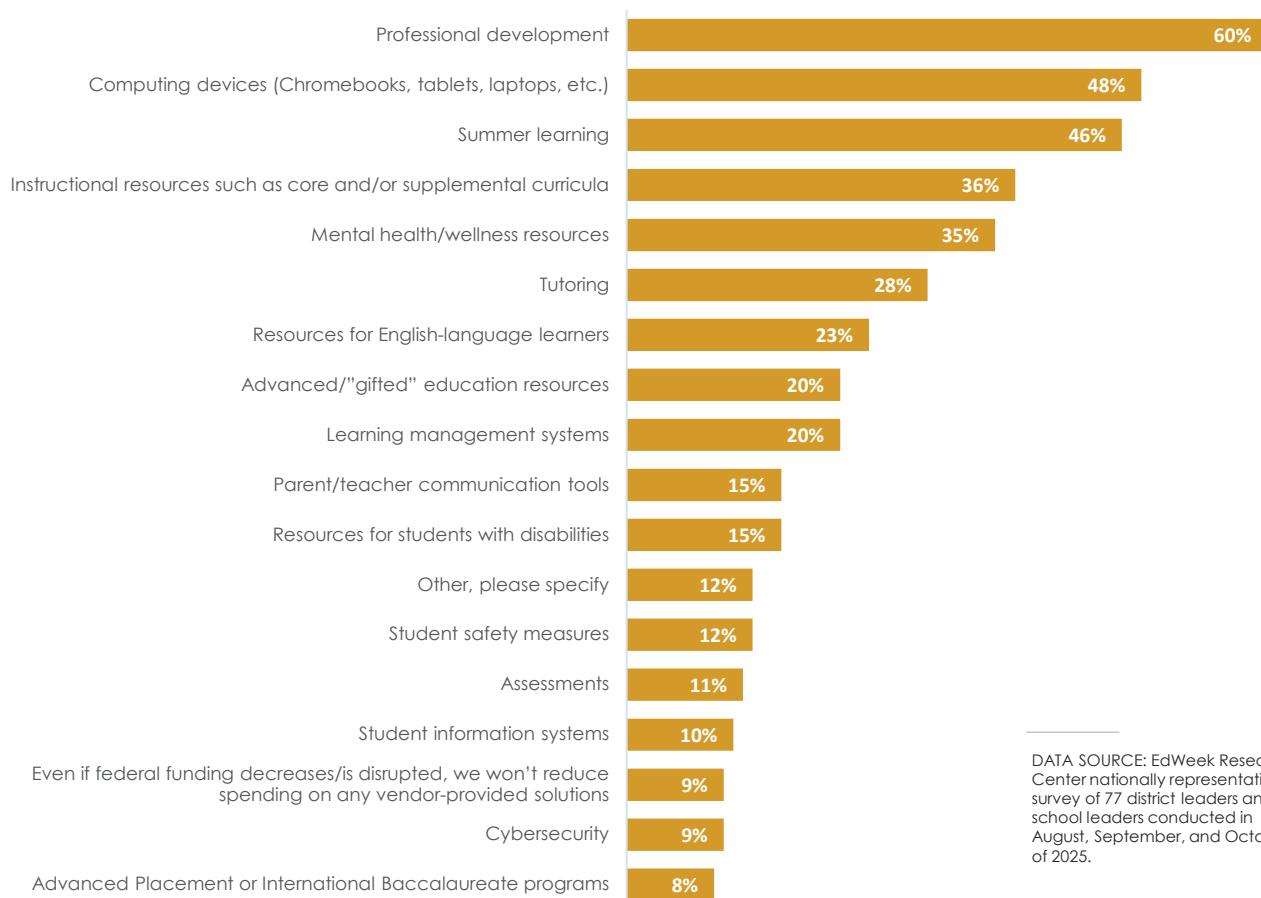
DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative survey of 90 district leaders and 133 school leaders conducted in June of 2025.

## 7. Potential Spending Cuts for ELL Resources

The Trump administration's proposed elimination of Title III is part of a package that would reduce overall K-12 federal funding by 16% in 2026-27. As stated above, the U.S. Department of Education has also eliminated or delayed some federal funding that had already been approved.

Federal funding is often used for products and services provided to districts and schools by external vendors. In the summer of 2025, school and district leaders were asked which areas of vendor spending they would reduce substantially if they experienced federal education cuts or delays over the next year. Professional development was the top category, with 60% of administrators saying they would reduce this type of spending. A total of 23% said they would reduce spending on resources for English learners. Of 17 categories included on the survey, this type of spending was the seventh most likely to be targeted for cuts.

**Select all that apply. If our federal education funding is cut or delayed over the next year, we would substantially reduce spending on the following types of products/services provided by external vendors:**



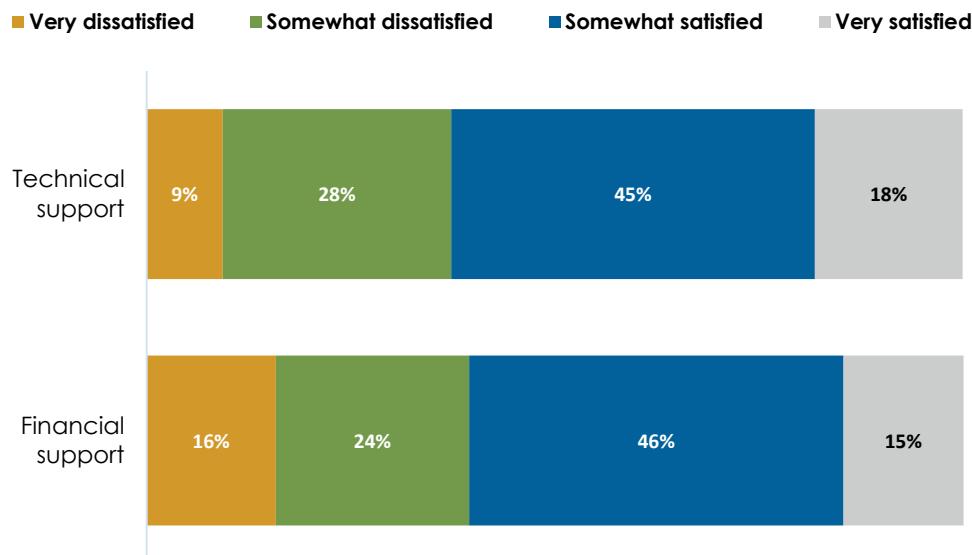
DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative survey of 77 district leaders and 70 school leaders conducted in August, September, and October of 2025.

## 8. Support From State Agencies

Federal funding has never provided more than a small share of the funding for educating English learners. As with nearly all expenses related to K-12 public education, the lion's share of the cost is supported by state and local funds. That said, with federal support for English learners in question, support from state education agencies may become even more important than it already is in the year to come.

In the spring of 2025, principals and district leaders were surveyed about their level of satisfaction with the technical and financial support their state education agency provides to help them educate English learners. More than 60% of the administrators said they were at least somewhat satisfied with both aspects of this support. However, less than 1 in 5 indicated that they were very satisfied.

**What is your level of satisfaction with the financial and technical support you receive from your state education agency when it comes to serving the needs of your English-learner students?**



DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative survey of 122 district leaders and 120 principals conducted in May, June, and July of 2025.

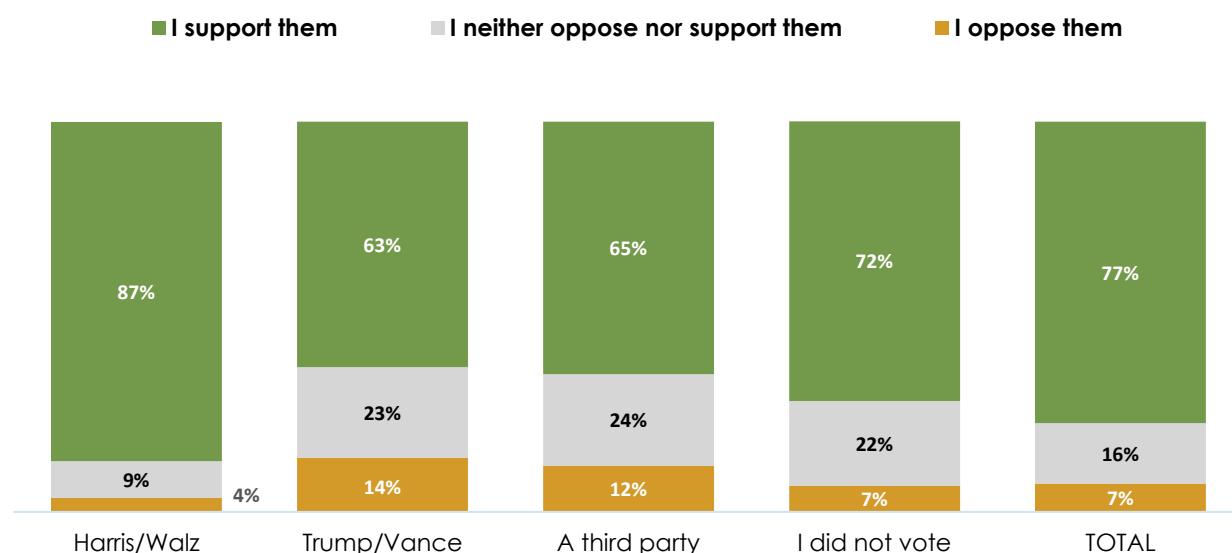
## 9. Educators' Views of Lau v. Nichols

In *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that denying English-language supports to students who need them constitutes discrimination under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Since January, the current Trump administration has [laid off](#) more than half the staff of the Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education, which is responsible for enforcing complaints related to violations of that Act. The remaining staff has been charged with prioritizing the administration's [priorities](#), which do not include such enforcement. The administration also rescinded [2015 guidance](#) on educating English learners and laid off almost all of the staff of the U.S. Department of Education's office of English language acquisition. All of this represents a major shift in policy.

In the winter of 2025, soon after Trump's second inauguration, the EdWeek Research Center aimed to get a sense of how teachers, principals, and district leaders view the direction of these shifts by asking them whether they believe schools should still be required to teach students English (as current law requires)—if failing do so would prevent them from effectively participating in learning.

Perhaps predictably, results varied by partisan affiliation. Support for *Lau*'s tenets was more common among educators who reported voting for Democratic party candidate, Kamala Harris, in the 2024 presidential election than among those who indicated they had voted for Trump. However, a majority of Trump and Harris voters continue to support the principle underlying the ruling—as did the majority of third-party voters and non-voters.

**If the inability to speak and understand the English language excludes K-12 students from effective participation in learning, federal laws require public schools to teach students English. What is your view of these laws?**



DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative survey of 206 district leaders, 104 principals, and 958 teachers conducted in January and February of 2025.

## 10. Educators' Views of Plyler v. Doe

Most English learners (72%) are U.S. citizens. However, especially in grades 6-12, a substantial minority (about 1 in 3) was born outside the United States.

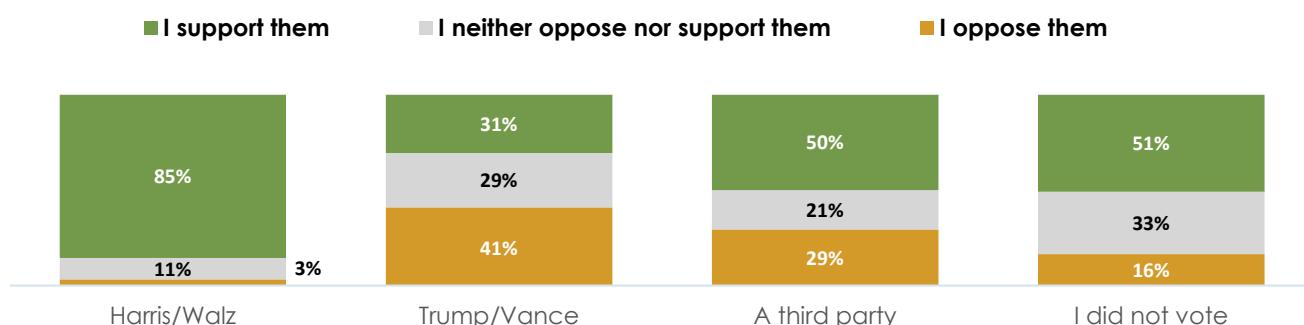
In *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a Texas law that prevented state funds from being used to educate undocumented immigrants violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The result was that children were guaranteed the right to a free, public education—regardless of their immigration status.

The principles underlying the ruling have been challenged throughout the years and are facing organized opposition right now. [Current challenges](#) include a proposed New Jersey law that would require non-U.S. citizens to pay tuition to attend public schools in that state and Tennessee legislation (currently paused) that would require schools to verify students' citizenship status and allow them to charge tuition to students who are undocumented. In the past year, lawmakers in Idaho, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Texas have tried—and failed—to pass similar laws. The state of Illinois, by contrast, approved a law that guarantees

students' rights to a free, public education, regardless of immigration status, and limits immigration enforcement activities on school sites.

In January of 2025, the EdWeek Research Center asked teachers, principals, and district leaders if they believe students should still have the right to a free, public education—regardless of their own immigration status or the status of their parents. The results broke down along starkly partisan lines, with 85% of Harris voters—but just 31% of Trump voters—supporting that right. Support for Lau's tenets was weaker among Trump voters who said their classrooms, districts, or schools did not enroll any immigrant students or English learners (24%) than among those whose districts or schools included both populations (35%). Partisan divides were even stronger when respondents were subsequently asked whether immigration officials should be permitted to make arrests or carry out raids in K-12 district offices or schools—with 42% of Trump voters—but just 1% of Harris voters—saying yes. Under the prior of administration of Joseph Biden, such raids were off limits. Trump [reinstated](#) them soon after his inauguration in 2025.

**Federal laws require public schools to educate immigrant students, regardless of whether the students or their parents are legally permitted to reside in the United States. What is your view of these laws?**



DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative survey of 206 district leaders, 104 principals, and 958 teachers conducted in January and February of 2025.

## Conclusion

**A**s the population of English learners continues to grow in the nation as a whole, educators face challenges on multiple fronts. Collectively, survey results indicate that professional development is a major need, especially when it comes to family engagement and support for translanguaging. In math, a subject that English learners might reasonably be expected to excel in since numbers are a universal language, the prevalence of word problems is a challenge, with most teachers reporting that the majority of their English learners cannot solve such problems on their own.

Because most English learners spend at least some time in mainstream classes that are not taught by language specialists, there is often a need for collaboration between classroom educators and those certified to teach English as a second language/bilingual education. Yet less than 1 in 4 teachers whose students include English learners say that they participate in such collaboration at least once a month.

Administrators present a rosier view, with most saying that such collaboration happens some or a lot at the district level when it comes to curriculum specialists who focus on instructing English learners and those who focus on more general areas—such as math, social studies, or elementary education. Administrators are also largely satisfied with the technical and financial support their state education agencies provide for English learners.

This level of support may become increasingly important in coming years as the current presidential administration has proposed eliminating federal funding allotted for instructing English learners and laid off much of the U.S. Department of Education staff responsible for providing support in this area. The administration has also proposed reductions to other types of federal funding for K-12 education that districts sometimes use for instructing English learners. If these reductions occur, more than 1 in 5 administrators expect to compensate by reducing overall spending on instruction for English learners.

Despite these developments, federal law still requires public schools to teach students English.

Because most English learners spend at least some time in mainstream classes that are not taught by language specialists, there is often **a need for collaboration between classroom educators** and those certified to teach English as a second language/bilingual education.

Regardless of partisan affiliation, most teachers, principals, and district leaders support this approach. However, educators' perspectives break down starkly along partisan lines when asked if schools should be required to continue to adhere to another legal precedent that guarantees students the right to a free public education—regardless of immigration status. A vast majority of educators who voted for the Democratic party candidate in the 2024 presidential election support this principle as compared to less than 1 in 3 who voted for the Republican. Such developments suggest that the education of English learners and immigrant students may look very different in the years to come.

## Key Contributors



**Holly Kurtz** directs the EdWeek Research Center, which produces standalone studies as well as analyses for Education Week and special reports. Holly began working at Education Week in 2014 after earning a Ph.D. in 2013 from the University of Colorado at Boulder's School of Education and completing a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Colorado at Denver's School of Public Affairs. Prior to attending graduate school, she spent 11 years covering education and other topics for newspapers in Florida, Alabama, and Colorado.



**Sterling Lloyd** is the assistant director of the EdWeek Research Center. In this capacity, he manages data analyses and the development of surveys for data-driven journalism. Since joining the research center in 2005, he has authored articles on college- and work-readiness, school finance, student achievement, and other prominent topics in K-12 education.



**Alex Harwin** is a quantitative research analyst for the EdWeek Research Center. They work on a wide variety of projects, from marquee annual reports to data-driven reporting in collaboration with the Education Week newsroom. Alex received an education at Stanford and UT, earning degrees in Sociology and policy analysis.



**Elle Butler** is a research analyst for the EdWeek Research Center. She is also a doctoral student in developmental psychology with a neuropsychology concentration at Howard University. Her research interests include the psychosocial development of Black youth and public policy interventions on youth recreational activities.