



Getting Down to **FACTS**



Multilingual Learners of English with Disabilities in California: Patterns in Enrollment, Opportunities, Outcomes, and County-Level Variation

Alfredo J. Artiles
Stanford University

João M. Souto-Maior
Stanford University

May 2026



Stanford | SCALE Initiative
Accelerator for Learning

Multilingual Learners of English with Disabilities in California: Patterns in Enrollment, Opportunities, Outcomes, and County-Level Variation

Alfredo J. Artiles and João M. Souto-Maior
Stanford University

Abstract

This report examines multilingual learners of English (MLEs) with disabilities—dually identified students—in California public schools, representing approximately 3% of K-12 enrollment. Using publicly available aggregate data from the California Department of Education (2014-15 through 2024-25), we analyze grade-level patterns, educational opportunities, and outcomes. Our findings reveal changes over time and substantial disparities. Dually identified students have shifted from concentration in middle school to increasing representation in early elementary grades. By grade 12, only 60% are reclassified as English proficient versus 75% of MLEs without disabilities, with one-third becoming long-term English learners. They experience elevated suspension rates and lower educational outcomes: 75% complete high school with regular diplomas versus 91% of students with neither classification; 44% enroll in college versus 66%. Yet they are placed in inclusive special education settings at comparable rates to students with disabilities only. Notably, dually identified students achieve better outcomes in counties where they comprise larger enrollment shares, suggesting scale enables specialized supports warranting investigation and replication. These patterns underscore the need for coordinated services addressing both language development and disability needs, improved reclassification systems, and attention to early identification practices.

Suggested Citation: Artiles, A.J., & Souto-Maior, J.M. (2026). Multilingual Learners of English with Disabilities in California: Patterns in Enrollment, Opportunities, Outcomes, and County-Level Variation. Retrieved from [gettingdowntofacts.com: https://doi.org/10.26300/91xt-7b81](https://doi.org/10.26300/91xt-7b81)

Introduction

Multilingual learners of English with disabilities—or dually identified students—represent a substantial and policy-relevant segment of California's student population. Multilingual learners of English (MLEs), designated as English Learners (ELs) in federal and state policy, comprise approximately one in five students statewide, with California serving the largest number of MLEs in the United States at more than one million students annually (California Department of Education [CDE], 2023a). At the same time, approximately 13 percent of California students receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). State and national data indicate that a meaningful proportion of students receiving special education services are also classified as MLEs, underscoring the importance of understanding how language and disability services are coordinated—or fail to be coordinated—in practice (Slama et al., 2017).

Despite their significant presence, research reveals that MLEs with disabilities face compounding challenges in accessing coherent educational services. Studies document how institutional structures force false choices between language and disability services for MLEs with disabilities: material and ideological conditions restrict these students' access to both bilingual development and special education support (Kangas, 2019), while in mainstream settings, disability services systematically take precedence over English as a Second Language services due to scheduling constraints, expertise gaps, and rigid program structures (Kangas, 2020). Researchers have documented under-identification rates in early elementary grades, perhaps associated with staff's hesitancy to label due to the common binary framing “are learner difficulties linked to English acquisition or learning disabilities?” (Samson & Lesaux, 2009; Tefera et al., 2017) and over-identification in secondary grades (Artiles et al., 2005). Separate policy frameworks for language and disability create an intersectional gap that excludes these students from inclusion programs (Cioè-Peña, 2017; González et al., 2024), while legal protections such as *Lau v. Nichols* employ a unitary lens that fails to account for students with intersectional identities (González et al., 2024).

Students with intersecting language and disability needs are served under two major federal policy frameworks: IDEA (2004) and Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as reauthorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). IDEA guarantees students a free appropriate public education (FAPE) through individualized education programs (IEPs), while ESSA

requires states to identify “English Learners” (MLEs) and support their development of English proficiency and access to grade-level academic content. Although both statutes emphasize equitable access, they operate through distinct funding streams, accountability systems, and administrative structures. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2024) recently reported that while most states provide guidance to districts on distinguishing between language acquisition needs and disability-related needs, fewer than half systematically monitor how effectively districts make those distinctions in practice.

In California, the English Learner Roadmap Policy (CDE, 2017) provides a state framework emphasizing asset-oriented approaches, meaningful access to grade-level content, and alignment across educational systems. Yet despite policy commitments to coherence, language development and special education services often remain administratively and programmatically distinct. While the California Department of Education offers guidance specific to MLEs with disabilities (CDE, 2023b), including assessment participation procedures, guidance alone does not guarantee integrated service delivery or coherent instructional approaches that address both language development and disability-related needs simultaneously.

This report provides a systematic descriptive analysis of dually identified students in California. We document how this population has evolved over the past decade, who these students are, what educational opportunities they access, and how their experiences unfold across the K-12 grade span and vary across county contexts. By examining enrollment patterns, reclassification trajectories, and educational outcomes, the report seeks to move beyond questions of identification and representation to understand the educational experiences dually identified students encounter once classified.

Background

This report offers a descriptive profile of this population and contributes to addressing two critical gaps in research on dually identified students. First, existing research focuses predominantly on identification and disproportionality rather than on educational opportunities and outcomes once students are identified. Second, most studies examine this population at aggregate levels, obscuring how experiences unfold across the K-12 grade span.

Federal regulations require states to monitor significant disproportionality in identification, placement, and discipline (34 C.F.R. § 300.646, 2016), and this monitoring has been essential for detecting misclassification and potential bias in referral processes. However, scholars argue that proportional representation alone is insufficient for evaluating equity (Artiles et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2011). The disproportionality framework reveals little about service quality, instructional experiences, or outcomes for students who receive services. This limitation is particularly consequential because emerging evidence suggests that MLEs with disabilities face substantial challenges in navigating dual classification systems. Research consistently finds that MLEs with disabilities are significantly less likely than their peers without disabilities to be reclassified as Fluent English Proficient (Kangas & Schissel, 2021; Slama et al., 2017; Umansky et al., 2017), resulting in disproportionate representation among long-term MLEs (Kieffer & Parker, 2016). Prolonged EL classification has been associated with reduced access to grade-level curriculum and advanced coursework (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Thompson, 2015). Because ESSA (2015) requires uniform reclassification criteria often reliant on standardized assessments, students whose disabilities affect language processing may face structural barriers in meeting exit thresholds. Institutional fragmentation and limited district capacity for data-based decision-making further complicate reclassification processes for dually identified students (Kangas & Ruiz, 2025; Umansky et al., 2017). These documented challenges raise critical questions: Do MLEs with disabilities receive instruction addressing both language development and disability-related needs? Are they placed in settings providing meaningful access to grade-level content and peers? Understanding students' actual experiences requires detailed information about educational opportunities beyond identification rates.

Even when research examines educational experiences, most studies analyze dually identified students at aggregate levels, comparing overall rates of identification, placement, or reclassification across student groups (NASEM, 2017). Such aggregate analyses provide essential documentation of disparities but obscure how students' experiences unfold across the K-12 trajectory. This gap is partly a function of data availability. Major national datasets such as the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) provide aggregate measures of disability and language classification but do not disaggregate by grade, limiting examination of developmental patterns. Yet educational contexts, expectations, and services shift substantially as students progress from elementary to middle to high school, and understanding

how dually identified students' experiences evolve across these transitions is essential for policy and practice. Do dually identified students follow similar enrollment trajectories as MLEs without disabilities, or do patterns diverge at particular grade levels? When do gaps in reclassification emerge most sharply? How does the composition of the dually identified population change as students progress through the system via reclassification, dropout, or new identification?

Understanding these grade-specific patterns has direct implications for policy and practice for two reasons. First, examining variation across grades helps us understand within-school processes: while students enter schools with different characteristics, grade-level variation more likely reflects inequalities produced during schooling—through evaluation procedures, reclassification decisions, and support service delivery—allowing us to reflect on how institutional mechanisms shape the educational trajectories of dually identified students.

Second, grade-level analysis is critical for identifying when and where interventions might be most effective and how system barriers compound over time. A gap observed in high school may reflect accumulated disadvantages from earlier grades or may indicate particular challenges at secondary transitions, and distinguishing between these patterns has direct implications for policy design and resource allocation. Moreover, federal requirements under IDEA and ESSA mandate that states monitor educational outcomes and provide appropriate services to students with disabilities and multilingual learners, yet implementation of these requirements varies substantially across grade levels as instructional contexts, assessment practices, and service delivery models shift from elementary to secondary settings. Addressing critical questions about educational opportunities—whether MLEs with disabilities receive integrated instruction, are placed in inclusive settings, and experience outcomes comparable to peers—requires shifting from aggregate snapshots to developmental trajectories that reveal how opportunities accumulate or constrain across students' educational careers.

Research Questions

Using publicly available data from the California Department of Education, this report provides a descriptive analysis of dually identified students—MLEs with disabilities—in California. We examine four groups of students based on their MLE and special education (SWD) classification status: dually identified students (MLE+SWD), MLEs not receiving special education services (MLE only), non-MLEs

receiving special education services (SWD only), and non-MLEs not receiving special education services (neither). These group labels are used throughout the report for brevity. By comparing dually identified students (MLE+SWD) to these three reference groups, we document both the distinct characteristics of students navigating intersecting classification systems and how their educational opportunities differ from peers with single classifications or no classifications.

We begin by documenting enrollment trends and demographic composition over the past decade (2014-15 through 2024-25), examining how the dually identified population has evolved across academic years and grade levels. Then, given that the focus of this report is to provide actionable insights to current policy initiatives and educational leadership, we zoom in on data from the 2024-25 academic year, describing current patterns in demographic composition and educational opportunities in more detail. Our analyses are guided by five research questions:

1. **Enrollment trends and grade-level distribution.** *How has the enrollment and representation of dually identified students in California changed over time?* We examine enrollment of all groups of interest across academic years (2014-15 through 2024-25), revealing the extent to which the dually identified student population is growing or declining (relative to other groups) over the past decade. We also examine the grade-by-grade distribution (K-12) for each of these groups and how it has changed over time, documenting whether subgroups are concentrated in particular grades and how this pattern has shifted over time.
2. **Demographic characteristics of dually identified students.** *What are the sociodemographic characteristics of dually identified students, and how do these characteristics shift as students progress through K-12?* We analyze race and gender composition of the four groups of interest across grades, examining how such demographic composition shifts over the school years. By documenting these grade-level patterns, we reveal whether certain demographic subgroups are overrepresented or underrepresented within the dually identified population and how this representation evolves as students progress from kindergarten through high school.
3. **Educational opportunities of dually identified students.** *How do educational opportunities for dually identified students compare to those of other groups?* We define educational opportunities as students' access to educational resources—including curriculum, instruction,

and learning environments—that shape learning and academic progression. We examine three dimensions:

- a. **MLE reclassification rates.** The proportion of students who successfully exit MLE status and are reclassified as fluent English proficient, indicating successful language acquisition and access to mainstream academic content;
 - b. **Special education placement in inclusive settings.** The extent to which students receive special education services in general education classrooms rather than restrictive separate settings, reflecting access to the general curriculum alongside non-disabled peers; and
 - c. **Suspension rates.** The frequency of exclusionary discipline that removes students from learning environments.
4. **Educational outcomes of dually identified students.** *How do educational outcomes of dually identified students compare to those of other groups?* We define educational outcomes as the academic achievements and credentials that result from students' K-12 experiences and mark key educational transitions. We examine two indicators:
- a. **High school completion rates.** The proportion of students who graduate with a regular high school diploma; and
 - b. **College enrollment rates.** The proportion of high school completers who enroll in postsecondary institutions (including two-year and four-year colleges) within one year of graduation. These outcomes reveal whether dually identified students achieve key educational milestones at rates comparable to their peers or whether the intersection of MLE and disability identification creates barriers to academic success and postsecondary access.
5. **County-level predictors of educational opportunities and outcomes.** *How do county-level characteristics correlate with educational opportunities and outcomes for dually identified students?* We examine which county demographic, enrollment, and teacher experience characteristics are associated with key outcomes including reclassification rates, graduation, and college enrollment. Understanding this geographic variation is essential for identifying *where*

dually identified students face compounded barriers and where targeted interventions may be most needed.

Data and Methods

This study uses publicly available data from the California Department of Education (CDE) data system, which provides comprehensive aggregate-level information on all California public schools.¹ The standard downloadable data files provide detailed county-, district-, and school-level information disaggregated by student subgroups, including MLEs and Students with Disabilities (SWD). However, these downloadable files only disaggregate data for one subgroup at a time—either MLE or SWD, never both simultaneously. CDE's interactive DataQuest platform, however, allows users to generate custom queries that examine the intersection of these subgroups for selected statistics. We leverage this capability to contrast outcomes and characteristics for our four groups of interest: MLE+SWD, MLE only, SWD only, and neither. Given the aggregate nature of these publicly available data, our analysis is purely descriptive. We detail our analytical approach and measures below.

To address research questions 1 and 2, we examine enrollment patterns across demographic subgroups. Gender is reported as male and female. Race/ethnicity is reported in nine categories: African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Filipino, Hispanic or Latino, Pacific Islander, White, Two or More Races, and Not Reported. For analytical purposes, we combine five smaller categories (American Indian or Alaska Native, Filipino, Pacific Islander, Two or More Races, and Not Reported) into a single "Other" category, resulting in five final racial/ethnic groups: African American, Asian, Hispanic or Latino, White, and Other.

To examine research questions 3-4, we focus on the measures detailed below to capture both students' educational opportunities during K-12 experiences and their longer-term outcomes. For special education placement settings, suspension rates, and high school completion outcomes, we analyze data from the 2024-25 academic year to provide the most current snapshot of educational

¹ Our research team has been in ongoing dialogue with CDE to obtain restricted individual-level data that would enable more fine-grained analysis. Unfortunately, we have not been able to finalize the bureaucratic details of this data-sharing partnership within the timeline of this report. Our future work will leverage restricted data for longitudinal analysis and more sophisticated modeling of educational trajectories and outcomes for this population. In addition, we anticipate supplementing these analyses with individual-level data from three districts to generate additional insights about this student population at a local level.

opportunities. For college enrollment, we use data from 2022-23, as 2024-25 postsecondary enrollment data are not yet available.

- **MLE reclassification rates.** We examine reclassification patterns using the California Department of Education's annual English Learner reclassification data, which tracks MLEs who have exited MLE status and been reclassified as Fluent English Proficient (RFEP). The reclassification rate is calculated as the proportion of students currently or previously classified as MLEs who have been reclassified, providing a measure of successful language acquisition and transition out of language support services. Given the longitudinal nature of this indicator, we supplement our state-level analyses with an in-depth examination of a school district. For this district, we obtained individual-level student data, which enables us to observe a cohort of students who were enrolled in kindergarten during the 2014-15 academic year and track their reclassification patterns through high school (2024-25, grade 10).
- **Special education placement by educational setting.** We examine placement using California's Special Education Enrollment by Program Setting data, collected annually for students with active IEPs. These data report the educational settings where students receive the majority of their special education services, reflecting federal and state least restrictive environment (LRE) requirements. We consider four categories of placement settings, defined by CDE based on time spent in general education classrooms (classrooms where at least 50 percent of students are not classified with a disability): regular class 80 percent or more of the day (most inclusive); regular class 40-79 percent of the day; regular class 39 percent or less of the day; and separate schools and other settings (including residential facilities, homebound/hospital, correctional facilities, or private school placements).
- **Suspension rates.** We examine disciplinary actions using California's annual suspension rate data, which captures both total suspension incidents and an unduplicated count of individual students suspended during the academic year. The suspension rate divides the unduplicated count of students suspended by cumulative enrollment (total enrollment at any point during the academic year), measuring the proportion of students who experienced at least one suspension.

- **High school completion rates.** We examine completion using California's four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate data, which tracks students who entered grade 9 for the first time in 2021-22 through their expected graduation in 2024-25, with adjustments for students who transfer in or out of the cohort, emigrate, enter correctional facilities, or die during this period. California reports eight outcome categories for this cohort, including regular diplomas and various alternative completions. For RQ4, we present the full distribution of outcomes to document how dually identified students exit high school. For RQ5 county-level analyses, we create a combined "high school completion" measure that includes both students who received a regular high school diploma and those who completed through alternative pathways: California High School Proficiency Examination (CHSPE), adult education diplomas, special education certificates of completion, and General Educational Development (GED) credentials. Students who remain enrolled, drop out, or transfer out of the system are not counted as completers in this measure.
- **College enrollment rates.** We examine college-going rates using CDE data tracking high school completers from the 2022-23 cohort (students who entered grade 9 in 2019-20) who enrolled in postsecondary institutions within 16 months of completion. High school completion data come from California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) submissions; postsecondary enrollment data come from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), which collects enrollment information from institutions nationwide through student-level data matches. Students with multiple enrollments are counted at the institution where they had the longest enrollment during the tracking period. For RQ4, we disaggregate enrollment by institution location (in-state vs. out-of-state) to document college-going patterns. For RQ5 county-level analyses, we use overall college enrollment rates (any postsecondary enrollment) as the outcome measure.

To examine research question 5, we estimate associations between county-level characteristics and educational outcomes for dually identified students across California's 58 counties. We focus on the county level rather than districts or schools because dually identified students represent a small population frequently suppressed in more granular geographic reports due to CDE's privacy protections

for small cell sizes. County-level aggregation provides the optimal balance between data availability and meaningful geographic variation, eliminating suppressions across our key indicators while preserving sufficient variation for analysis. Still, due to CDE privacy protections that suppress data for small cell sizes, our chosen outcomes (college enrollment and high school completion rates) were unavailable for 19 and 13 counties, respectively. That said, because suppression occurs when fewer than 10 students are in a group, excluded counties have negligible populations of dually identified students in the relevant cohorts and therefore contribute minimally to statewide patterns.

In this analysis, we focus on the educational outcomes considered above. We examine outcome measures exclusively (rather than also including opportunity measures) for two main reasons. These outcomes synthesize the cumulative effects of opportunities students experience throughout K-12 schooling. Additionally, this focused approach maintains analytic parsimony while examining substantively critical milestones.

Our analytic approach proceeds in two stages. First, we document the bivariate relationship between the percentage of students who are dually identified in each county and educational outcomes for dually identified students. This initial analysis reveals a strong association between the compositional concentration of dually identified students and their outcomes, indicating that counties serving larger proportions of dually identified students achieve different results. Informed by these results, we assess the robustness of this compositional association by controlling for county-level demographic composition, enrollment characteristics, and teacher experience. Specifically, we control for the overall county educational climate (outcomes for students without MLE or disability classifications), socioeconomic disadvantage, racial/ethnic composition (percentage Hispanic and percentage White), total enrollment, and teacher experience. This approach helps isolate whether the concentration of dually identified students correlated with their outcomes independent of broader county contexts that might affect all students.

While analyses of aggregate data bring several limitations (including inability to control for student-level characteristics that may influence observed patterns), descriptive analysis of this understudied population provides important foundational knowledge. Understanding enrollment and outcome patterns for students at the intersection of MLE and disability status is a crucial first step for

informing future research and policy discussions regarding educational equity with respect to this population.

Findings

1. Changes in enrollment and grade-level distribution of dually identified students in CA

We begin by documenting the enrollment patterns and representation of this population in California schools over time. Figure 1 presents total enrollment numbers for each of the four student groups across academic years from 2014-15 through 2024-25, while Figure 2 shows each group's percentage of the total student population over the same period.

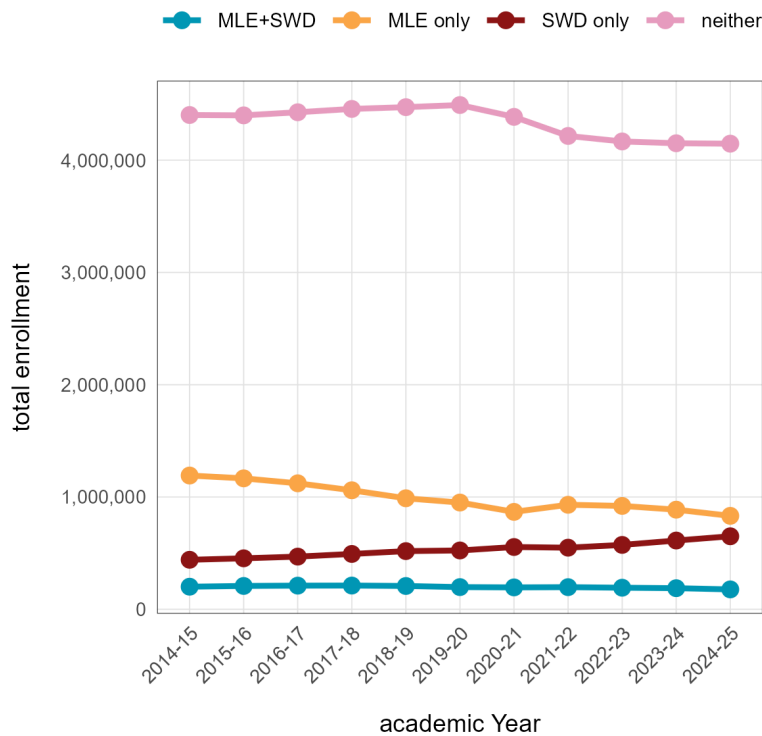


Figure 1. Evolution of total enrollment by student classification group in California public schools, 2014-15 through 2024-25. MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification.

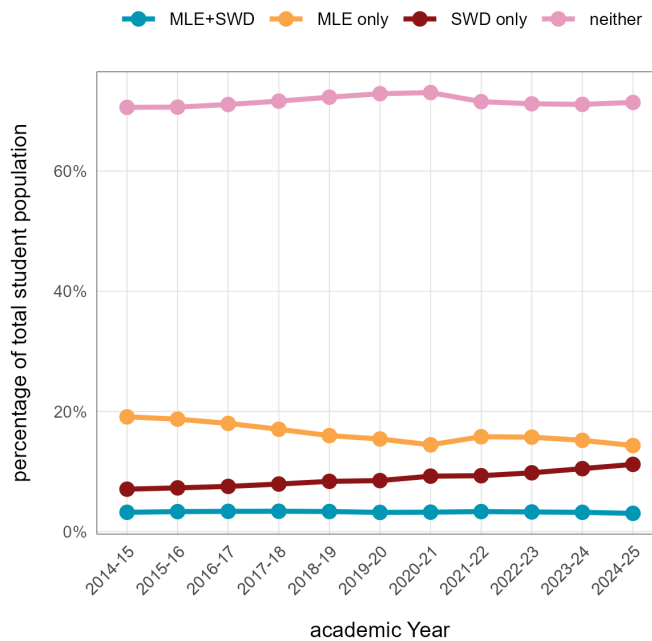


Figure 2. Percentage of total enrollment by student classification group in California public schools, 2014-15 through 2024-25. MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification.

A first notable pattern is the substantial drop in enrollment in 2020-21 for students in neither classification, reflecting the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on California schools. Students in the neither category dropped from 4.5 million in 2019-20 to 4.2 million in 2021-22. Interestingly, this sharp decline was not observed for students in specific program categories, whose enrollment patterns remained largely consistent with pre-pandemic trends. For MLE-only and dually identified students, declining enrollment trends were already observable prior to this period and continued uninterrupted. In contrast, SWD-only students showed an increasing enrollment trend both before and after the pandemic disruption, suggesting that students receiving special education services were more likely to remain enrolled during this period.

Overall, dually identified students (MLE+SWD) show relatively stable representation at approximately 3% of total enrollment despite some fluctuation. In absolute numbers, this group peaked at 211,000 students in 2016-17, though as a percentage of total enrollment the peak occurred in 2017-18 at 3.4% due to concurrent declines in overall enrollment. By 2024-25, dually identified

students had declined to approximately 177,000, representing a decrease of about 16% over the decade.

MLEs without disabilities experienced the most dramatic change, declining from 19% of total enrollment (1.2 million students) in 2014-15 to 14% (850,000 students) in 2024-25—a 30% decrease in absolute numbers. This pattern is consistent with reclassification of existing students as English proficient and/or demographic shifts in newly enrolling students, though disentangling these mechanisms is beyond the scope of available data.

In contrast, students with disabilities who are not MLEs grew consistently throughout the period, increasing from 7% (440,000 students) to 11% (655,000 students) of total enrollment—nearly a 50% increase in absolute numbers. The factors underlying this growth—which may include changes in identification practices, service retention rates, or population composition—cannot be determined from these enrollment data alone.

Currently (in the 2024-25 academic year), dually identified students represent approximately 3 percent (176,914) of all public school students in California. By comparison, MLEs without disabilities comprise 14.3 percent (831,923) of total enrollment, while students with disabilities who are not MLEs represent 11.2 percent (649,127). Viewed from within each classification system, dually identified students constitute a meaningful share of both the MLE and special education populations. Among all MLEs statewide, approximately 17.5 percent are also receiving special education services. Among all students with disabilities, approximately 21.4 percent are also classified as MLEs. These proportions underscore that while the intersection of language and disability status represents a relatively small share of total enrollment, it constitutes a substantial population navigating both support systems simultaneously.

Having examined overall enrollment trends and the intersection between MLE and SWD classifications, we now turn to how students are distributed across grade levels within the educational system. Figure 3 shifts the unit of analysis from total enrollment to grade-level composition, revealing how classification patterns vary as students progress from kindergarten through high school.

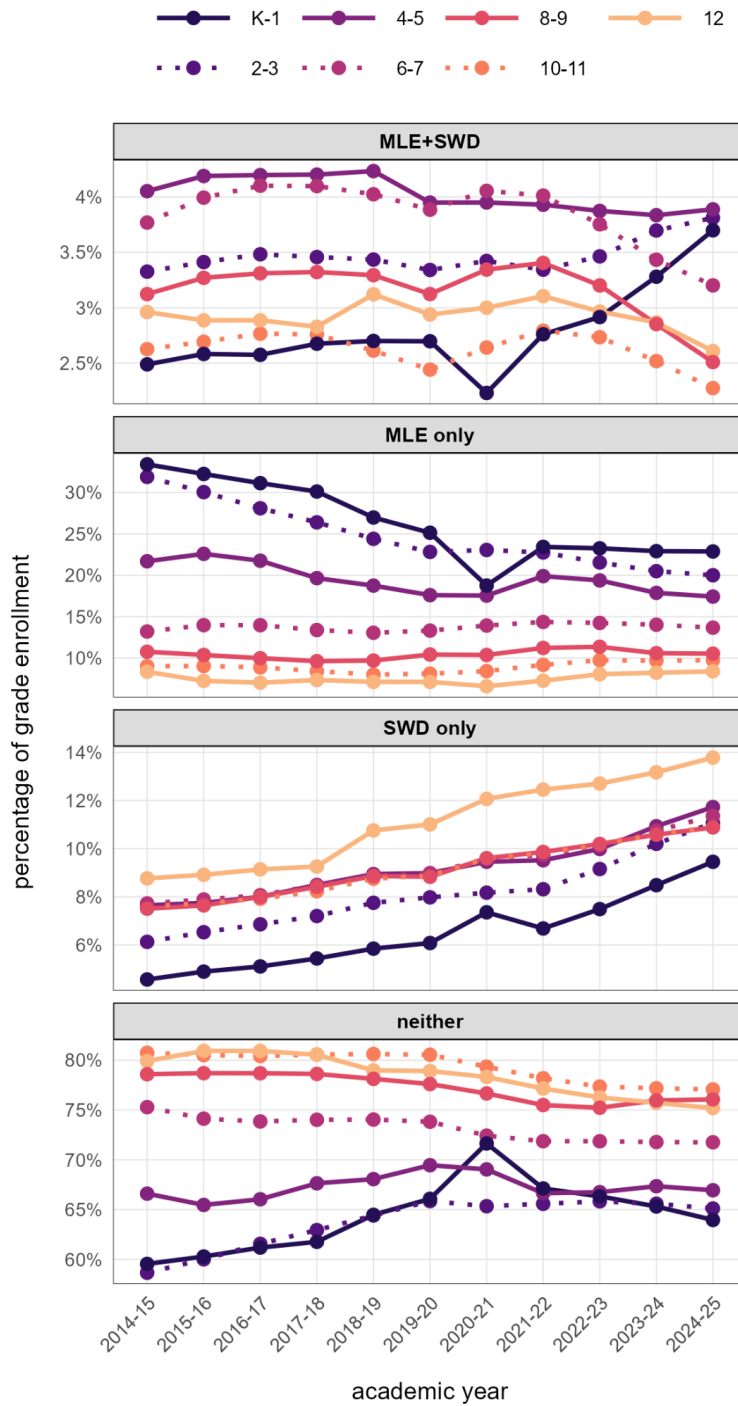


Figure 3. Percentage of total enrollment by student classification group and grade, California public schools, 2014-15 through 2024-25. MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification. Grade bands combine two consecutive grades to reduce the number of lines (K-1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9, 10-11, 12). To aid visualization, y-axis scales are independent across panels and alternating line types (solid/dotted) further distinguish grade bands.

The figure considers the following question: among all students enrolled in each grade band in California, what percentage belongs to each of the four student groups (MLE+SWD, MLE only, SWD only, Neither), and how has this grade-level composition changed over time from 2014-15 to 2024-25

Dually identified students (MLE+SWD) represent a small share of enrollment across all grades, ranging from approximately 2.5% in kindergarten-first grade to just over 4% in upper elementary and middle school grades. However, the distribution of this population across grade levels has shifted notably over the decade. Ten years ago in 2014-15, dually identified students were largely concentrated in middle school, with grades 4-5 and 6-7 showing the highest representation. Over time, this pattern has changed. Today, we see a larger concentration in earlier grades, with K-1, 2-3, and 4-5 showing roughly equal representation, all exceeding that of grades 6-7. Most grades showed stable or slight declines in representation of dually identified students over the decade, while grades 2-3 experienced a slight increase and K-1 grades showed a substantial increase from approximately 2.5% to nearly 4%. This has resulted in a redistribution of where dually identified students are concentrated within the K-12 system, with earlier grades now showing higher rates of dual identification than was observed a decade ago.

In contrast, MLEs without disabilities have the opposite pattern. While early grades have demonstrated substantial decline in the composition of MLEs, upper grade bands have very consistent representation, indicating that MLE-only students are becoming more concentrated in later grades over time. This pattern is consistent with fewer students entering California schools classified as MLEs in early grades (whether due to demographic shifts, changes in incoming student language profiles, or shifts in identification practices) while students classified as MLEs in secondary grades remain in that status, resulting in a more top-heavy grade distribution of the MLE-only population over time.

Students with disabilities who are not MLEs display the most consistent pattern, showing steady growth over time in every grade band, with particularly striking increases in grade 12 (rising from approximately 9% to 14%). This pattern is consistent with either broadening identification practices, increased awareness and referral, changes in student needs, or improved service retention over the decade. The consistently higher representation of students with disabilities in later grades suggests a cumulative identification process where students enter special education at various points throughout

their schooling careers, resulting in progressively higher disability representation in upper grades and peak concentration among high school seniors. This monotonic pattern further suggests limited exit or declassification rates.

These grade-level patterns reveal that classification changes occur differently across the K-12 span, with early grades showing the highest MLE concentration and upper grades showing the greatest SWD representation, while dually identified students remain present at modest levels throughout the K-12 span, with representation relatively stable across grades in recent years compared to the middle-school concentration observed a decade ago.

2. Demographic characteristics of dually identified students in CA (2024-25)

We now document the prevalence and demographic composition of dually identified students and how patterns evolve across grades in the current educational landscape (2024-25 academic year). Figure 4 examines gender patterns, addressing the question: of all students of a given gender, what percentage are enrolled in each student category?

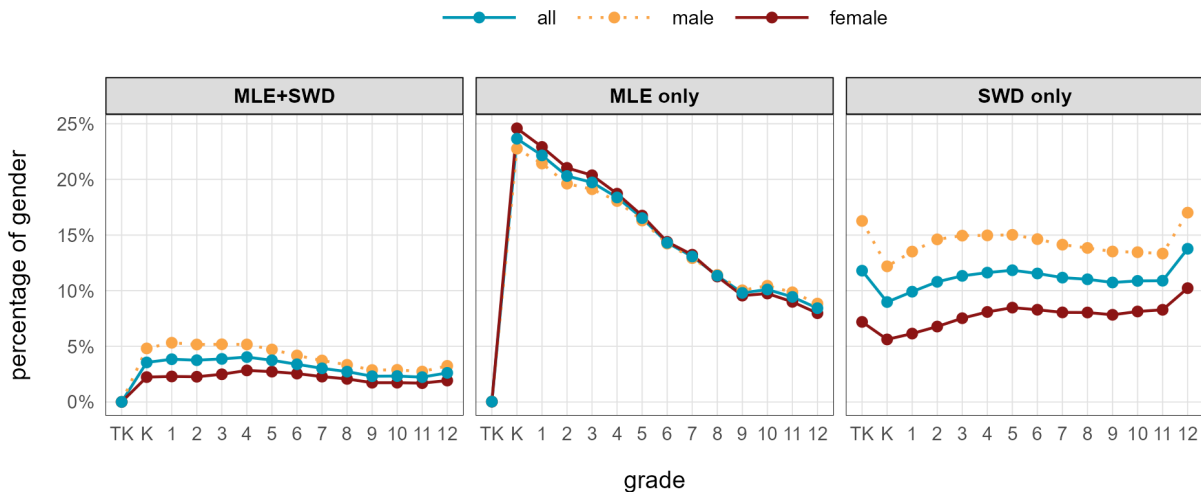


Figure 4. Distribution of group representation by grade (and disaggregated by gender), California public schools, 2024-25. MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification.

First, let us concentrate on the overall patterns (blue line). The figure shows that the three student groups show different enrollment trajectories across grades. MLEs without disabilities decline

steadily from approximately 25 percent in early years of school (transitional kindergarten and kindergarten) to less than 10 percent by grade 12, reflecting reclassification to Fluent English Proficient status. Students with disabilities who are not MLEs show the opposite pattern, increasing from approximately 9 percent in early years to 17 percent by grade 12 as students are identified for special education services throughout their educational careers. Dually identified students demonstrate a trajectory that differs from both comparison groups. Their representation peaks in middle elementary grades at approximately 4 percent (grades 3-5) before declining to approximately 2.5 percent by grade 12. This pattern suggests that dually identified students are neither reclassifying at rates comparable to MLEs without disabilities nor being newly identified at rates comparable to students with disabilities only. The middle-grade peak followed by decline indicates that dual classification creates unique dynamics not captured by examining either MLE or special education patterns alone.

Gender composition shows substantial male overrepresentation in both special education groups (MLE+SWD and SWD only), while the MLE-only group demonstrates approximate gender parity. These trends remain consistent across most grades. However, dually identified students show a distinct gender dynamic: while both males and females decline in representation across grades, males show a much steeper decline than females as students progress from elementary to secondary grades. This may reflect differential rates of reclassification, new identification, retention, or other factors that affect the gender composition across grades.

We now consider racial/ethnic patterns. Figure 5 addresses the question: of all students in a given racial/ethnic group, what percentage are enrolled in each student category?

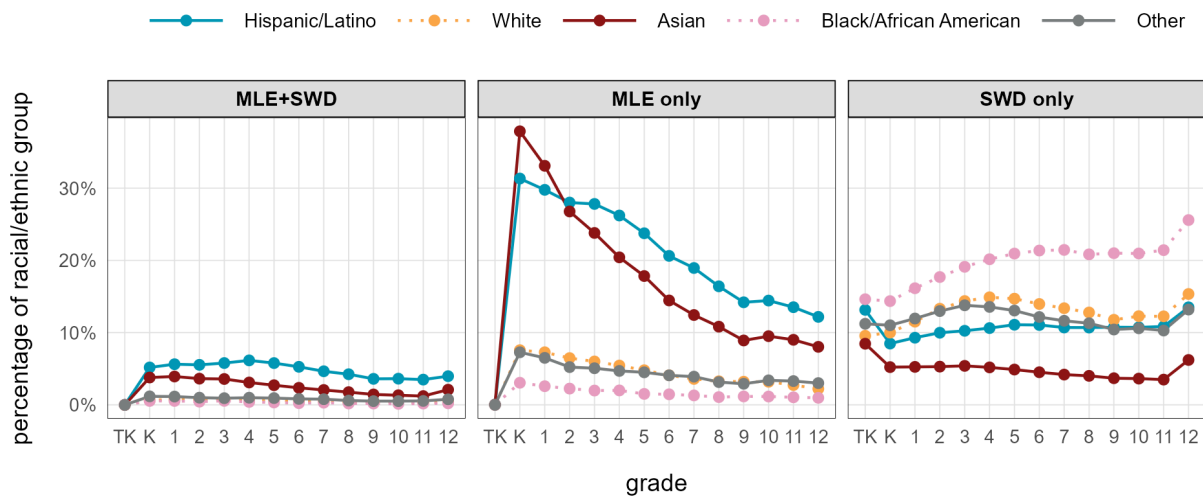


Figure 5. Distribution of group representation by grade (and disaggregated by race), California public schools, 2024-25. MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification. To aid visualization, y-axis scales are independent across panels and alternating line types (solid/dotted) further distinguish groups.

Dually identified students represent markedly different shares of each racial/ethnic group. Among Hispanic/Latino students, dually identified students comprise more than 6 percent in early elementary grades, declining gradually to approximately 4 percent by grade 12. In contrast, dually identified students represent less than 1 percent of both Black/African American and White students across all grades, with minimal variation over time.

In contrast to the limited dual classification among Black and White students, MLE classification—both with and without disabilities—is concentrated among Hispanic/Latino and Asian students. For Hispanic/Latino students, the MLE-only category declines from approximately 30 percent in kindergarten to approximately 15 percent by grade 12, reflecting reclassification over time. Asian students show an even steeper decline, dropping from approximately 35 percent in kindergarten to less than 10 percent by grade 12. Asian students' faster reclassification trajectory reflects either differential rates of English language proficiency development or differential application of reclassification criteria across racial/ethnic groups.

Students with disabilities who are not MLEs show distinct patterns by race/ethnicity.

Black/African American students are overrepresented in this category relative to their share of total

enrollment and show increasing identification rates as they progress through school, rising from approximately 13 percent in transitional kindergarten to over 25 percent by grade 12. This pattern of escalating identification stands in contrast to other racial/ethnic groups, where SWD-only rates remain relatively stable across grades. White students maintain steady representation at approximately 12-15 percent across all grades, while Hispanic/Latino students show modest increases from approximately 10 percent to 12 percent.

3. Educational opportunities of dually identified students in CA (2024-25)

The preceding analysis documented enrollment patterns, demographic characteristics, and MLE reclassification trajectories for California’s public school students. While these descriptive patterns reveal important differences in the composition and classification of student groups, they do not address how educational opportunities are structured for students once they are identified. This section shifts focus from who students are to what educational experiences they receive. We examine three dimensions of educational opportunity for dually identified students and their peers: MLE reclassification rates, special education placement settings during K-12 schooling, and suspension rates.

Reclassification of MLEs

Figure 6 addresses the question: what percentage of students who have ever been classified as MLEs have been reclassified to Fluent English Proficient status?

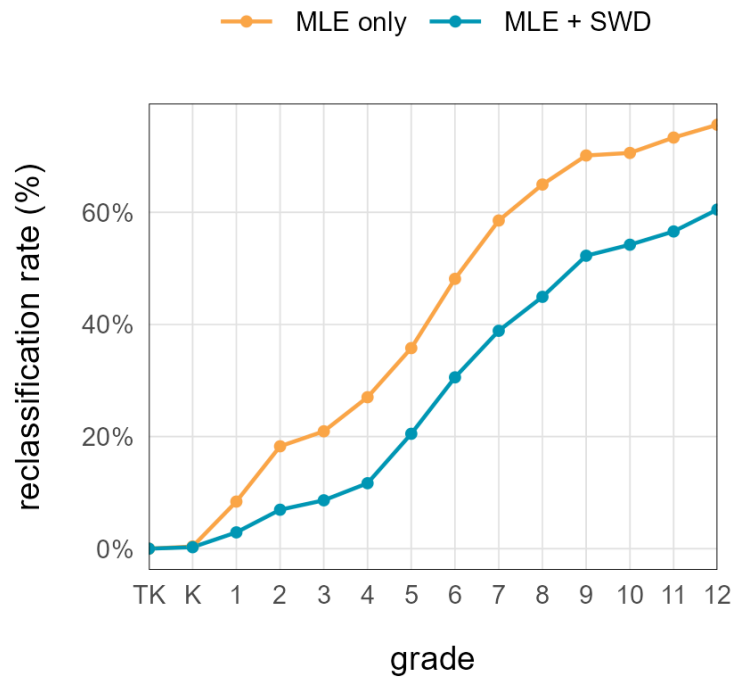


Figure 6. Reclassification of ever-MLE students by grade (disaggregated by disability status), California public schools, 2024-25. MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification.

The percentage of students who have been reclassified as Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) increases steadily across grades for both groups, but substantial disparities emerge between MLEs with and without disabilities. Among MLEs without disabilities, the RFEP percentage rises from less than 1 percent in transitional kindergarten to approximately 75 percent by grade 12, meaning that three-quarters of students who were ever classified as MLEs have exited that status by their senior year. In contrast, MLEs with disabilities show significantly lower RFEP percentages at every grade level, reaching only approximately 60 percent by grade 12—a gap of 15 percentage points. The gap between groups widens considerably during elementary and middle school years, growing from approximately 5 percentage points in kindergarten to 15-20 percentage points by grades 5-8, before stabilizing in high school. These patterns are consistent with prior research documenting structural barriers to reclassification for MLEs with disabilities (Kangas & Ruiz, 2025; Kangas & Schissel, 2021). Importantly, this grade-by-grade analysis reveals that the gap widens most sharply during specific transitional

periods—particularly grades 1-2 and grades 6-7—suggesting these may be critical junctures where barriers to language reclassification become most pronounced for students with disabilities.

Figure 7 extends this analysis by providing a comprehensive view of MLE status categories (indexed by length of time) across students with and without disabilities. The figure addresses the question: among students who have ever been classified as MLEs, what percentage are in each status category by grade?

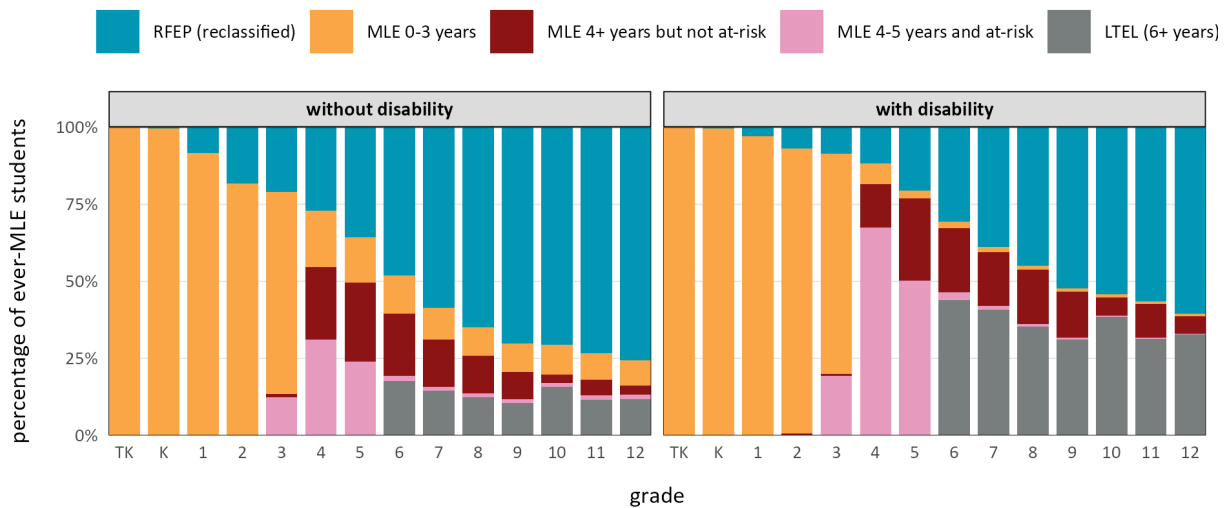


Figure 7. MLE status composition by disability status and grade, California public schools, 2024-25. RFEP = Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (former MLEs who have met reclassification criteria); MLE 0-3 = student has been classified as MLE for 0-3 years; MLE 4-5 years and at-risk = student has been classified as MLE 4-5 years and is "at-risk" of becoming a long-term MLE (LTEL) — i.e., enrolled in U.S. schools 4-5 years, scored intermediate or below on prior year ELPAC, and did not meet standards on prior year academic assessments; MLE 4+ years but not at risk = student has been classified as MLE for 4+ years but is not at-risk of long-term classification (LTEL); LTEL = student has been classified as MLE for 6 or more years (long-term EL in CDE’s language). With/without disability = student with/without disability classification.

The figure reveals meaningful differences in MLE trajectories between students with and without disabilities. Among MLEs without disabilities (left panel), the RFEP (reclassified) category expands rapidly across grades, comprising less than 5 percent in grade 1 but growing to about 75 percent by grade 12. Correspondingly, the MLE for 0-3 years category—representing students in the early stages of English language development—shrinks from nearly 100 percent in early grades to

roughly 25 percent by grade 12. The MLE 4-5 (and at risk) and LTEL (6+ years) categories remain relatively small, each comprising less than 15 percent of students even in upper grades.

MLEs with disabilities (right panel) show substantially different patterns. The RFEP category grows much more slowly, reaching only about 55 percent by grade 12—a 20 percentage point gap compared to students without disabilities. More significantly, the LTEL category emerges as a substantial and growing segment: while nearly absent in early elementary grades, LTEL students comprise approximately 35 percent of all MLEs with disabilities by grade 12. The at-risk category² also shows elevated representation, peaking at roughly 20-25 percent in middle school grades (5-7) before some students either reclassify or transition into LTEL status. The MLE 4+ years but not at-risk category—representing students who have been MLEs for four or more years but are not classified as at-risk or LTEL—maintains consistent presence across grades, comprising about 10-15 percent.

These divergent patterns indicate that disability status fundamentally alters MLEs' trajectories. While most MLEs without disabilities exit MLE status through reclassification by high school, MLEs with disabilities are substantially more likely to remain classified as MLEs for extended periods. By grade 12, more than one-third of MLEs with disabilities meet the LTEL definition, compared to approximately 12 percent of those without disabilities. These patterns are concerning as concentration in LTEL status has important implications for educational access and opportunity, as prolonged MLE classification has been associated with reduced access to grade-level curriculum and advanced coursework (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Thompson, 2015).

Reclassification of MLEs: Longitudinal individual-level district data

The analyses above provide valuable cross-sectional snapshots of reclassification patterns by grade level across California. However, because these state-level data represent different students at each grade level rather than following the same students over time, they cannot reveal how individual students' reclassification trajectories unfold or distinguish between cohort effects and within-student progression. For example, the lower reclassification rates observed among older students with

² We recognize that the "at-risk" designation is shaped both by state definitional criteria and by institutional practices governing student identification and classification. Future research should critically examine how these definitions are constructed and how school-level practices influence which students are categorized as at-risk.

disabilities could reflect either delayed reclassification for the same students or differences in the composition of cohorts entering school in different years.

To address this limitation, we supplement our statewide analysis with longitudinal individual-level data from a school district, examining MLE reclassification patterns for the 2014-15 kindergarten cohort. The school district was selected due to an ongoing data partnership that provides access to longitudinal student-level records. As a large, diverse urban district where approximately 40% of kindergarteners are multilingual learners of English (2014-15 data), this selected district offers a valuable context for examining reclassification trajectories, though we acknowledge that patterns may differ in other settings. This cohort provides the longest observation window available in our data, allowing us to follow students from kindergarten through grade 10—spanning elementary, middle, and early high school. It includes 4,772 students, of whom 1,950 (40.9%) were MLEs at entry.

To ensure we observe genuine within-student progression rather than selection effects from student mobility or grade retention, we restrict our analysis to students who maintained continuous grade progression throughout their enrollment. For this cohort, 1,757 students (90.1% of baseline MLE students) met the grade-progression criterion and could be tracked through grade 10. Within this group, 350 students (19.9%) received special education services at some point during the observation period, creating our dually identified (MLE+SWD) population. By following the same students across multiple grades, we can observe how reclassification trajectories unfold over time and examine whether the disability-based disparities observed in cross-sectional state data reflect persistent inequities in individual students' educational experiences.

When comparing kindergarten patterns for this selected district in 2014-15 with state-wide patterns (Figure 3), we observe that this is a district with above-average representation of our population of interest: 40.9% MLEs versus about 35% state-wide, and 5.9% dually identified versus about 2.5% state-wide. This district thus represents a high-prevalence context where the coordination of language and disability services affects substantial numbers of students, making the patterns observed here particularly consequential for educational practice and student outcomes statewide.

We analyze whether students have been reclassified to Fluent English Proficient status by each grade level—a cumulative measure that increases over time as more students are reclassified. For each grade (kindergarten through grade 10), we estimate a separate logistic regression model comparing

reclassification rates for dually identified students (MLE+SWD) versus multilingual learners without disabilities (MLE only), while controlling for student race/ethnicity and sex. This grade-by-grade approach allows us to capture how the disability-based reclassification gap evolves as students progress through school. Figure 8 displays the results.

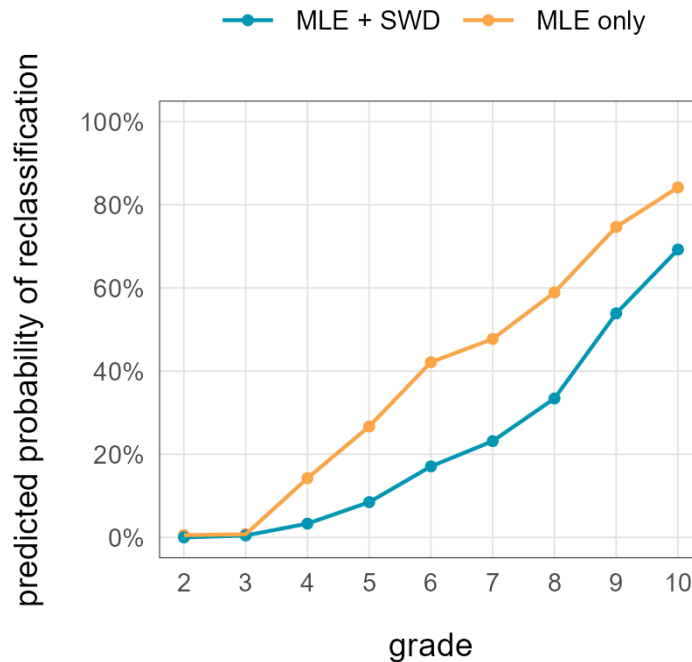


Figure 8. Predicted probability of MLE reclassification by grade (disaggregated by disability status), School District kindergarten cohort (2014-15). Points represent predicted probabilities from grade-specific logistic regression models controlling for student race/ethnicity and sex. The figure compares cumulative reclassification trajectories for dually identified students (MLE+SWD: multilingual learners receiving special education services) and multilingual learners without disabilities (MLE only). Analysis includes all 1,757 students classified as MLE at kindergarten entry who maintained continuous grade progression through grade 10. Grades K-1 not shown due to insufficient reclassification events for model estimation.

Observed patterns closely mirror the statewide California trends shown in Figure 6. Both dually identified students and MLE without disabilities begin with minimal reclassification in early elementary grades (K-2), but their trajectories diverge beginning in third grade and continue widening through middle and high school. By grade 10, 84% of MLE-only students have been reclassified compared to 69% of dually identified students, a 15 percentage point gap that parallels the statewide disparity. This supplemental longitudinal analysis provides evidence suggesting that the cross-sectional patterns observed statewide reflect genuine within-student trajectories rather than cohort composition effects.

Notably, both the statewide and district-level data show similar inflection points: modest reclassification through grade 3, accelerated divergence during grades 4-7, and continued but slower growth through high school. While based on a single district and cohort, the district's findings suggest that disability status may contribute to persistent disparities in access to English proficiency reclassification, a pattern warranting further investigation across multiple contexts.

Special education placement setting

Figure 9 shows how county-level special education placement rates compare between MLEs with disabilities and students with disabilities only across four different educational settings in separate panels. Each panel shows placement rates for one setting, with each point representing a county. The dashed 45-degree line represents parity—counties on this line place both groups at equal rates. Counties above the line place SWD only students at higher rates in that setting, while counties below place MLE+SWD students at higher rates.

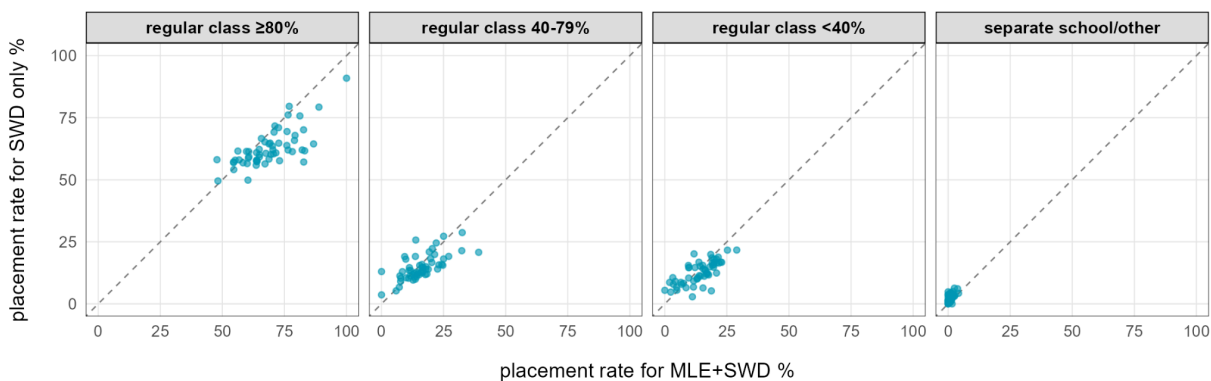


Figure 9. County-level special education placement by setting: comparison of MLE+SWD and SWD only students by setting, California 2024-25. MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification. Regular classrooms are defined as those with at least 50 percent peers not classified with a disability (see methods section for additional details).

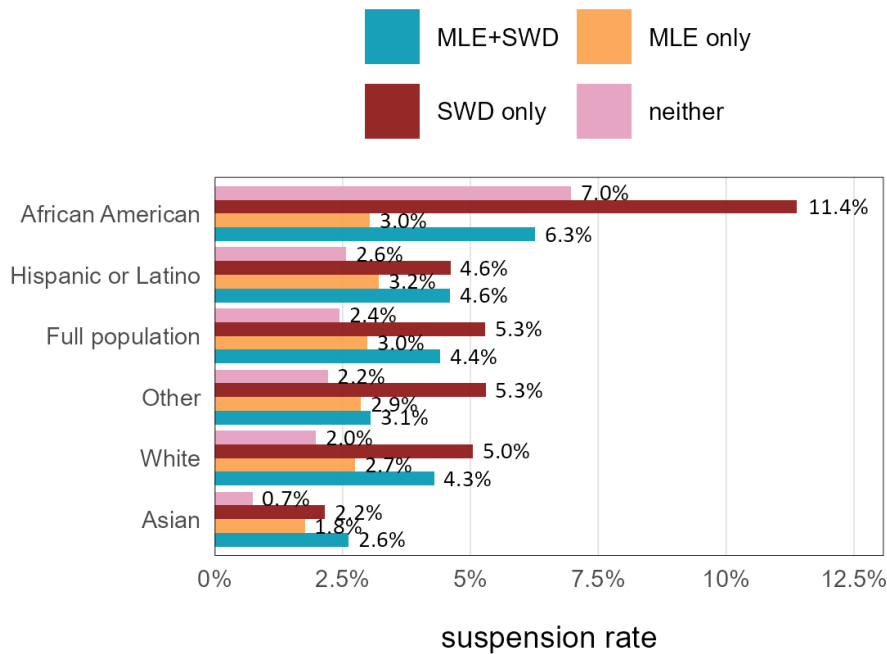
In the most inclusive setting (regular class $\geq 80\%$), most counties fall below the parity line, indicating that a higher percentage of dually identified students are placed in the most inclusive settings compared to students with disabilities only. However, notable variation exists: some counties

place both groups at high rates (upper right), while others show substantially lower inclusion rates for both groups (lower left). The moderate inclusion settings (regular class 40-79% and <40%) show a similar pattern, with most counties falling slightly below the parity line, indicating that dually identified students experience modestly higher placement rates in these settings as well. Considerable variation exists across counties in overall placement rates for both settings. The separate school/other setting shows the lowest placement rates overall (0-7 percent), with most counties placing very few students from either group in these most restrictive settings. Almost all counties fall above the parity line, indicating that when separate placements are used, students with disabilities only are placed at higher rates than dually identified students.

These patterns suggest dually identified students are less likely to be placed in the most restrictive settings compared to students with disabilities only, suggesting that county placement decisions may be driven primarily by disability-related factors rather than compounded by MLE status. However, it is important to note that this measure reflects only the percentage of peers without disabilities in the educational setting, not the nature of instruction, academic rigor, or language support services provided. Students placed in regular settings for 80 percent or more of the day may still experience segregation from grade-level curriculum, tracking into lower-level courses, or isolation from English-proficient peers and native language instruction. Therefore, while these data indicate comparable rates of physical co-location with non-disabled peers in general education classrooms, they cannot assess whether dually identified students receive integrated instruction addressing both language development and disability-related needs, nor whether regular settings provide meaningful access to linguistically and academically heterogeneous learning environments.

Suspension rates

Figure 10 presents analyses of suspension rates for 2024-25. We disaggregate by race/ethnicity because prior research has documented substantial disparities by race and disability status in school discipline (Losen et al., 2021), and understanding whether these disparities persist within or across classification groups is essential for identifying intersectional disadvantages.



The

Figure 10. Annual suspension rates by student group and race/ethnicity, California public school students, 2024-25. MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification.

figure documents that, across all racial/ethnic groups, students with disabilities (both MLE+SWD and SWD only) experience higher suspension rates than their peers without disabilities (MLE only and Neither). African American students face the highest suspension rates across all classification groups, with African American students with disabilities who are not MLEs experiencing a suspension rate of 11.4%—nearly five times higher than the overall statewide suspension rate of 2.4%. Among dually identified students specifically, African American students face suspension rates of 6.3%, more than double the rate for Hispanic/Latino dually identified students (4.6%) and nearly 2.5 times the rate for Asian dually identified students (2.6%). White dually identified students show suspension rates of 4.3%, while students in the "Other" category experience rates of 3.1%. Notably, the suspension rate gap between disability and non-disability groups is largest for African American students: African American students in the SWD only group have suspension rates 4.4 percentage points higher than African American students in the Neither group (11.4% vs. 7.0%), compared to a 2.7 percentage point gap for Hispanic/Latino students. These patterns reveal that racial disparities in discipline persist within every classification group, and that the compounding effect of disability status on suspension rates varies by

race/ethnicity, with African American students experiencing the most pronounced disadvantage at the intersection of race and disability status.

4. Educational outcomes of dually identified students in CA (2024-25)

This section shifts focus from the educational experiences students receive to the outcomes they attain. We examine high school completion and college enrollment outcomes for dually identified students and their peers.

High school completion outcomes

Figure 11 shows the distribution of high school completion outcomes for students in each group.

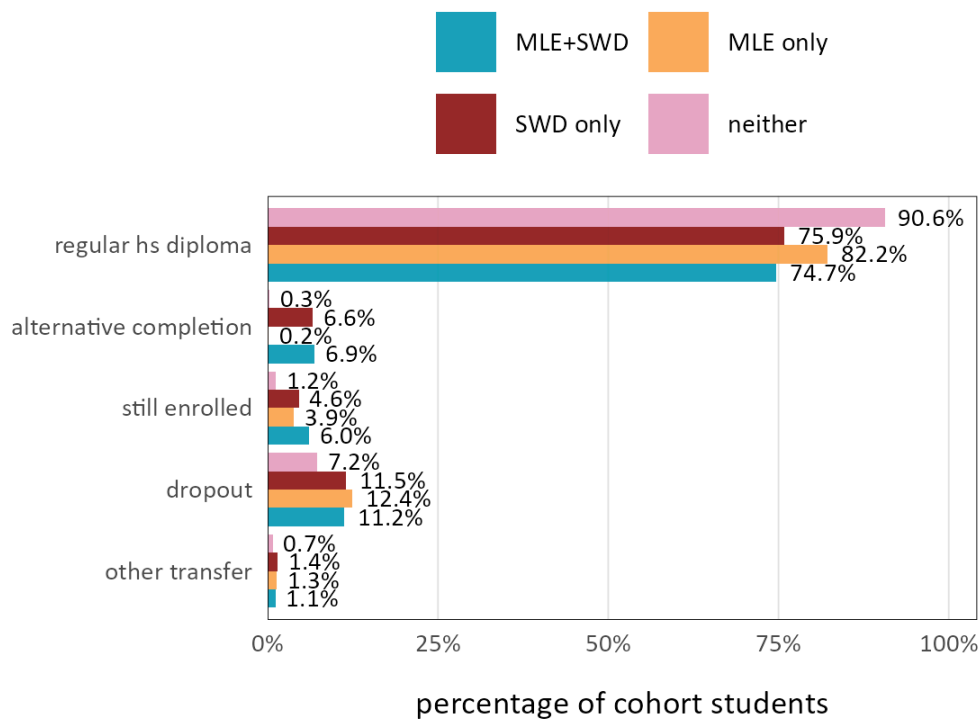


Figure 11. High school completion outcomes by student group, California 2024-25 four-year adjusted cohort (students who entered grade 9 in 2021-22). Categories show the distribution of outcomes for each student group: regular high school diploma, alternative completion (CHSPE, adult education diploma, special education certificate, GED), still enrolled, dropout, and other transfer. MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification. See methods section for full cohort definition and outcome category details.

The figure reveals important disparities in high school completion patterns across student groups. Students in the neither category show the highest regular diploma completion rate at approximately 91 percent, with relatively low rates of alternative completion (less than 1 percent), dropout (7 percent), and students still enrolled (1 percent). Students with disabilities only show substantially lower regular diploma completion rates at approximately 76 percent, with elevated rates of alternative completion (7 percent) and dropout (12 percent). MLEs without disabilities demonstrate high regular diploma completion at approximately 82 percent, but show the highest rate of students still enrolled (4 percent), likely reflecting delayed progression through high school.

Dually identified students show the lowest regular diploma completion rate at approximately 75 percent, with notable rates across all other categories: alternative completion (7 percent), still enrolled (6 percent), and dropout (11 percent). The elevated "still enrolled" rate for dually identified students suggests extended time to completion. When combining all non-regular-diploma outcomes—alternative completion, dropout, and still enrolled—approximately 24 percent of dually identified students have not completed a regular high school diploma, with 18 percent having exited high school through dropout or alternative credentials. Across all groups, students who transfer out of the cohort tracking system (other transfer) remain minimal (1-2 percent). These patterns indicate that disability status is strongly associated with reduced regular diploma completion, with dually identified students showing outcomes similar to students with disabilities only.

Having examined high school completion, we now turn to postsecondary enrollment patterns for students who complete high school.

College enrollment rates

Figure 12 shows college enrollment outcomes for high school completers by student group, revealing disparities in college-going patterns. Students in the neither category demonstrate the highest overall college enrollment rate, with approximately 66 percent enrolling in college (59 percent in-state, 8 percent out-of-state) and 34 percent not enrolling in college within 16 months of high school completion. In contrast, students with MLE or disability classifications exhibit distinctly lower college enrollment rates. MLEs without disabilities have the lowest college-going rate at approximately 43 percent (42 percent in-state, 1 percent out-of-state), with 57 percent not enrolling in college. Dually

identified students and students with disabilities only show nearly identical patterns, with approximately 44-46 percent enrolling in college (41-42 percent in-state, 2-3 percent out-of-state) and 54-56 percent not enrolling. A notable pattern across all groups is the predominance of in-state college enrollment: across all four groups, in-state enrollment comprises 90-95 percent of all college enrollment, with out-of-state enrollment remaining minimal. These patterns indicate that MLE classification, disability classification, or dual identification are all associated with similarly reduced college enrollment rates—ranging from 43 to 46 percent—substantially lower than the 66 percent enrollment rate for students with neither classification.

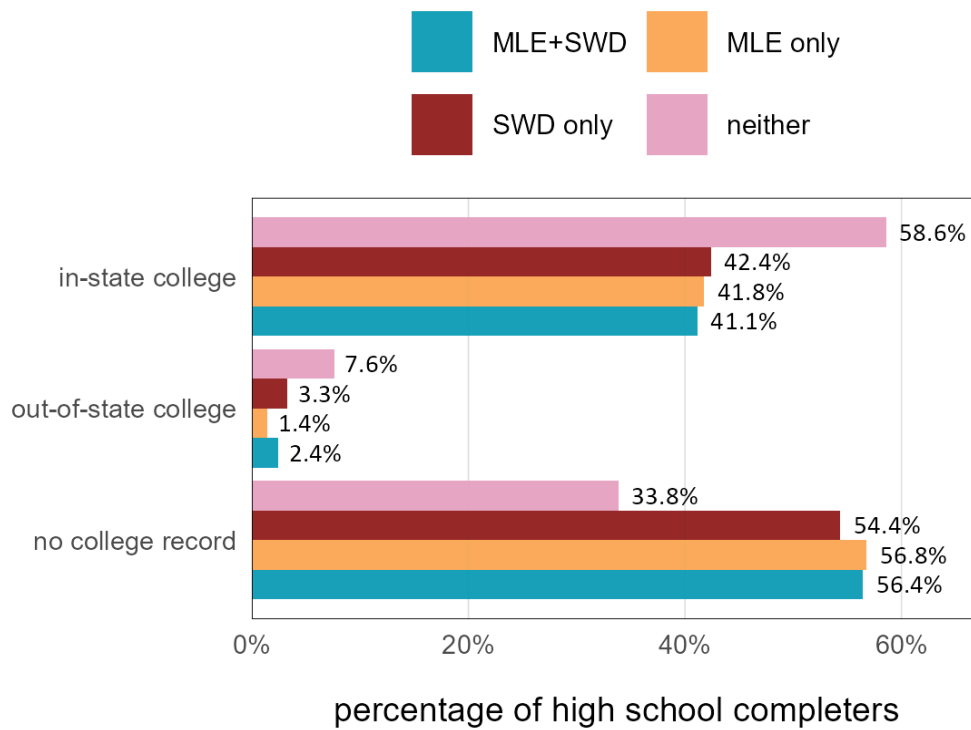


Figure 12. College enrollment outcomes by student group, California high school completers from the 2022-23 cohort (students who entered grade 9 in 2019-20). Categories show the distribution of enrollment outcomes: in-state college, out-of-state college, and no college enrollment record within 16 months of high school completion. MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification.

5. County-level predictors of educational outcomes of dually identified students in CA

Thus far we have documented substantial disparities in educational outcomes between dually identified students and their peers, including lower reclassification rates, higher concentration in long-term MLE status, reduced college enrollment, and lower regular diploma completion. However, these statewide patterns can mask considerable variation across California's counties. Understanding which county characteristics predict more favorable outcomes can serve two critical policy purposes: first, identifying counties where dually identified students face the greatest barriers and may require additional support or intervention; and second, highlighting counties that achieve better-than-expected outcomes, whose practices and policies may offer lessons for improving services statewide.

In this section, we examine how county-level characteristics correlate with educational outcomes (high school completion and college enrollment) for dually identified students. Our analytic approach proceeds in two stages. We first conduct exploratory bivariate analyses to identify which county characteristics are most strongly associated with outcomes for dually identified students. Informed by these results, we then examine whether the concentration of dually identified students—which emerges as a key predictor—remains significant after controlling for demographic, socioeconomic, and resource factors.

Exploratory analyses

To identify which county-level characteristics are most associated with educational outcomes for dually identified students, we conducted a series of bivariate regression analyses. We standardized all predictor variables (mean = 0, standard deviation = 1) to enable comparison of effect sizes across variables measured on different scales. Outcome variables (college enrollment rates and high school completion rates for dually identified students) were retained in their original percentage point scale for interpretability. Table A1 in the Appendix displays descriptive statistics for all variables considered in these analyses. Note that public data suppress values for groups with fewer than 10 students, which generates some minor missing data for outcomes in counties with small numbers of dually identified students.

For each outcome (college enrollment rate and high school completion rate for dually identified students), we estimated separate bivariate linear regression models, with each model including only one predictor variable. High school completion rates reflect the 2024-25 four-year adjusted cohort (students entering grade 9 in 2021-22); college enrollment rates reflect high school completers from the 2022-23 cohort (students entering grade 9 in 2019-20, the most recent postsecondary enrollment data available). This approach allows us to assess the unadjusted association between each county characteristic and outcomes for dually identified students. Importantly, in each of these models, we included one control variable: the corresponding outcome rate for students with neither MLE nor disability classification (e.g., when predicting college enrollment for dually identified students, we controlled for college enrollment rates for students in the "neither" group). This control variable serves as a benchmark for overall county educational climate, effectively adjusting for countywide factors that affect all students and allowing us to assess whether other predictors explain variation in outcomes specific to dually identified students beyond general county performance.

Beyond the outcome benchmark control, we examined 11 county-level predictors across three domains: student composition (percentage of students who are MLEs, students with disabilities, dually identified, socioeconomically disadvantaged, Hispanic/Latino, White, and African American), scale (total MLE enrollment, total county enrollment), and teacher experience (average years of teaching experience and percentage of experienced teachers). For each predictor, we report the unstandardized regression coefficient (in percentage points) and R^2 (the proportion of variance in the outcome explained by that predictor alone). Because predictors are standardized, coefficients represent the change in the outcome associated with moving from the average county to a county one standard deviation above average on that characteristic. This allows for direct comparison of effect sizes across predictors measured on different scales.

Because we analyze the population of California counties (rather than a random sample), we focus on effect sizes and variance explained rather than statistical significance testing, as there is no sampling error to quantify when examining the full population. Table 1 displays results from these exploratory analyses. The baseline benchmark control—outcomes for students with neither classification—explained 18.3% of variance in college enrollment rates and 40.9% of variance in high school completion rates for dually identified students. Beyond this baseline, the percentage of dually

identified students in a county emerged as the strongest predictor of outcomes for this population, explaining an additional 16.2% of variance in college enrollment rates and 5.9% of variance in high school completion rates, exceeding all demographic, enrollment, and teacher experience variables in explanatory power.

Table 1. Bivariate associations between county characteristics and outcomes for dually identified students, California counties. Coefficients represent the change in outcome (in percentage points) associated with a one-standard-deviation increase in the predictor. R² indicates the proportion of variance explained by each predictor alone.

Predictor	<u>College enrollment</u> (2022-23 HS graduates, 16-month outcome)		<u>4-year high school completion</u> (2021-22 9th grades)	
	β	R ²	β	R ²
Control variable				
College-going rate (neither group)	6.03	0.183		
High school completion rate (neither group)			7.83	0.409
Student composition				
% MLE	5.48	0.097	3.92	0.064
% SWD	0.38	0.001	3.19	0.033
% dually identified	6.46	0.162	3.56	0.059
% socioeconomically disadvantaged	-1.5	0.016	2.27	0.032
% Hispanic/Latino	0.16	0	2.1	0.021
% White	-3.3	0.035	-1.4	0.008
% African American	-1.07	0.009	-2.03	0.027
Scale				
total EL enrollment	-0.09	0	0.63	0.003
total enrollment	-0.48	0.002	0.48	0.002
Teacher experience				
average years teaching experience	3.67	0.074	-1.13	0.007
% experienced teachers	1.99	0.013	-2.62	0.029

Robustness of the compositional association

The exploratory analyses revealed a strong association between compositional concentration and outcomes for dually identified students, even accounting for overall county educational climate

(outcome rates for students with neither classification). However, counties with higher percentages of dually identified students may also differ systematically in demographics, resources, or overall educational quality—factors that could explain the observed relationship. To assess whether compositional concentration is associated with outcomes independent of these potential confounders, we estimated multivariate regression models that control simultaneously for county educational climate, demographic composition, enrollment scale, and teacher experience.

Figure 13 displays the results of multivariate regression models predicting college enrollment (left panel) and high school completion (right panel) rates for dually identified students—Table A2 in the Appendix displays the model coefficients. The percentage of dually identified students in a county remains a meaningful predictor of outcomes in these multivariate models. Specifically, each additional percentage point of dually identified students is associated with 3.53 percentage points higher college enrollment and 4.19 percentage points higher high school completion, holding all other factors constant at their means.

The magnitude of this compositional effect is substantial. Moving from a county at the 25th percentile of dual identification (approximately 1.5%) to the 75th percentile (approximately 3.5%)—a 2 percentage point increase—is associated with roughly 7-8 percentage point increases in both outcomes (7.1 points for college enrollment; 8.4 points for high school completion), comparable to or exceeding the effects of demographic and resource variables. While overall county educational quality (captured by the "neither" group outcomes) remains the strongest predictor, compositional concentration explains additional variation beyond general county performance.

While the mechanisms behind the compositional relationship remain unclear and cannot be determined from these data, the pattern is consistent with several possibilities: counties with higher concentrations of dually identified students may develop more appropriate infrastructure, specialized personnel, and targeted supports; students may benefit from peer networks that provide academic and social resources, reducing the isolation that can accompany dual identification in settings where few students share similar needs; or other unmeasured county characteristics may drive both higher dual identification rates and better outcomes. Additional research on potential explanations is warranted.

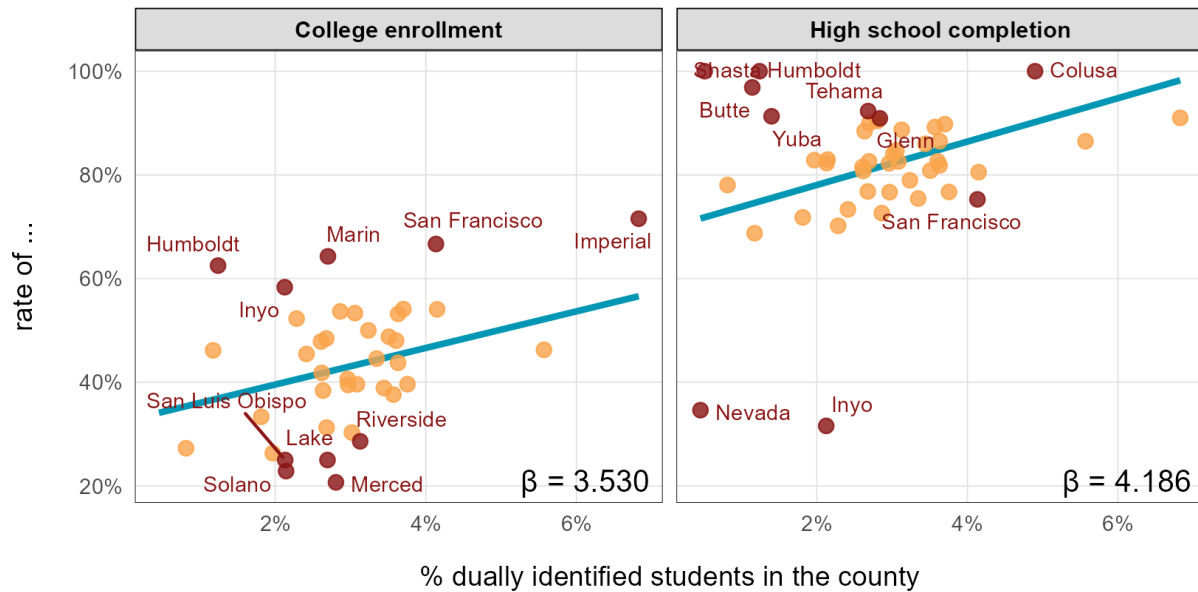


Figure 13. Predicted relationship between percentage of dually identified students and educational outcomes for dually identified students, California counties. Left panel shows college enrollment (2022-23 HS graduates, 16-month outcome); right panel shows 4-year high school completion (2021-22 9th graders). The blue line shows the predicted linear relationship (β) from multivariate regression models controlling for the corresponding outcome rate for students with neither MLE nor disability classification, county demographics (% socioeconomically disadvantaged, % Hispanic, % White), total enrollment, and percentage of experienced teachers, with all control variables held at their means. Each point represents a county. Red points indicate the 10 counties with the largest residuals (greatest deviation from the predicted pattern). Full model coefficients displayed in Appendix Table A2.

Discussion

This report examined enrollment patterns, educational opportunities, and county-level variation for multilingual learners of English with disabilities in California. Our findings document substantial and persistent disparities across multiple dimensions of educational access and outcomes. Dually identified students—those classified as both MLEs and students with disabilities—represent approximately 3 percent of California's total enrollment but face compounded barriers throughout their educational trajectories. These students show markedly lower reclassification rates from MLE status compared to their peers without disabilities, with only 60 percent reclassified by grade 12 compared to 75 percent of MLEs without disabilities. By high school, more than one-third of dually identified students meet the definition of long-term MLE, compared to approximately 12 percent of MLEs without disabilities. This

prolonged classification has important implications for educational access, as extended MLE status has been associated with reduced access to grade-level curriculum and advanced coursework (Umansky, 2017).

The shift toward earlier dual identification—from middle school concentration in 2014-15 to peak representation in early elementary grades today—raises important questions about identification practices that merit investigation. While earlier identification could enable timely intervention for students with disabilities, it might also reflect persistent challenges in distinguishing language acquisition from learning disabilities in early grades (Samson & Lesaux, 2008), suggesting the need for careful examination of assessment protocols and decision-making processes. Similarly, the finding that reclassification gaps widen most sharply at grades 1-2 and 6-7 points to specific transitional moments where the coordination between language development and special education systems may require strengthened guidance, professional development, and monitoring.

Beyond language reclassification, dually identified students experience lower rates of college enrollment and regular high school diploma completion compared to all other student groups. Approximately 44 percent of dually identified high school completers enroll in college, compared to 66 percent of students with neither classification. Similarly, 75 percent of dually identified students complete high school with a regular diploma, compared to 91 percent of students without MLE or disability designations. These gaps persist even when comparing dually identified students to those with single classifications: college-going and completion rates for MLE+SWD students are lower than for either MLEs without disabilities or students with disabilities who are not MLEs, both of whom show nearly identical outcomes to each other. This pattern suggests that the intersection of language and disability status creates challenges beyond those associated with either classification alone.

A key finding from our county-level analyses is that dually identified students achieve substantially better outcomes in counties where they represent a larger share of enrollment. Even after controlling for overall county educational quality, demographic composition, enrollment size, and teacher experience, each additional percentage point in the concentration of dually identified students is associated with approximately 3.5 percentage points higher college enrollment and 4 percentage points higher high school completion. Counties at the 75th percentile of dual identification concentration (approximately 3.5 percent of enrollment) show outcomes for dually identified students

that are 7-8 percentage points higher than counties at the 25th percentile (approximately 1.5 percent), holding other factors constant. This compositional effect exceeds the predictive power of demographic variables, enrollment scale, and teacher experience measures.

While we cannot establish the mechanisms underlying this relationship with certainty, several explanations warrant consideration. Counties serving larger proportions of dually identified students may develop specialized infrastructure that benefits this population—dedicated coordinators who bridge MLE and special education services, assessment protocols adapted for students with disabilities, or professional learning communities focused on intersecting needs. Concentration may also enable economies of scale: specialized personnel (such as bilingual school psychologists or speech-language pathologists with expertise in second language acquisition) become viable when serving sufficient numbers of students. Additionally, higher concentrations may reduce the isolation that dually identified students experience in settings where few peers share similar support needs, potentially creating peer networks that provide academic and social resources. Visibility may matter as well: in counties where dually identified students constitute a more substantial group, their outcomes may receive greater attention in accountability systems and resource allocation decisions, prompting targeted interventions that would not emerge when this population remains statistically marginal.

The substantial variation in outcomes across counties—even after accounting for demographics and resources—suggests that organizational and programmatic factors, rather than student composition alone, drive much of the difference in how well dually identified students fare. This interpretation is reinforced by the modest association between county-level socioeconomic disadvantage and outcomes specifically for dually identified students, despite socioeconomic status being a strong predictor of outcomes for the general population. If economic constraints were the primary barrier, we would expect to see stronger relationships between disadvantage and outcomes. Instead, the patterns point toward how systems are organized: how language development and special education supports are coordinated, how transition planning addresses intersecting needs, and how educators are prepared to work with students navigating both classification systems. Counties achieving better-than-expected outcomes likely have developed more effective approaches in these programmatic domains—approaches that deserve systematic investigation and potential replication.

These findings have several implications for policy and practice. First, the concentration of dually identified students in long-term MLE status indicates that current reclassification systems may not adequately account for how disabilities affect language assessment and development. Recent research has documented district-level skepticism about the validity of English language proficiency assessments for students with disabilities and variation in capacity for data-based reclassification decisions (Kangas & Ruiz, 2025). Improving reclassification outcomes for dually identified students may require better integration of services, adapted assessments, and professional development that addresses intersecting needs.

Second, the finding that compositional concentration is associated with better outcomes suggests that fragmented, small-scale approaches may be insufficient. Counties and districts with few dually identified students may need regional collaboratives, shared specialists, or external partnerships to develop the infrastructure and expertise that naturally emerges in settings serving larger concentrations. State policy could facilitate such collaborations, provide specialized technical assistance to counties with small populations of dually identified students, or develop statewide resources (assessment guidance, curriculum materials, professional development modules) that individual counties cannot efficiently produce independently.

Third, the lower college-going and completion rates for dually identified students suggest opportunities to strengthen postsecondary transitions for students with intersecting needs. Both the Every Student Succeeds Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act emphasize college and career readiness, providing a foundation for this work. The modest role of socioeconomic disadvantage in predicting outcomes for dually identified students suggests that programmatic improvements—service coordination, transition planning that addresses both language and disability, educator preparation—may be particularly important levers for expanding postsecondary access.

Our analysis has limitations inherent to its descriptive purpose. We document patterns and identify where disparities exist but cannot establish causal mechanisms or prescribe specific solutions. The county-level data do not capture within-county variation, and ecological associations cannot determine whether disparities stem from identification processes, service delivery, resources, or student characteristics. The compositional concentration finding, while robust to demographic and resource controls, could reflect unmeasured factors correlated with concentration rather than

concentration itself. Future research employing finer-grained data, causal inference methods, and qualitative investigation of how high-performing counties organize services is needed to move from pattern documentation to actionable recommendations.

Despite these limitations, our findings bring systematic attention to an understudied population that represents a meaningful segment of California's students. The finding that outcomes improve where dually identified students are more visible suggests that marginalization—being too few to warrant specialized attention—may itself constitute a barrier to educational opportunity. By providing comprehensive descriptive evidence of these patterns, we hope to draw the attention of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to the need for better understanding and supporting students navigating intersecting classification systems.

California serves more MLEs and more students with disabilities than any other state. Students at this intersection deserve coordinated services that address both language development and disability-related needs, professional preparation that equips educators to support intersecting identities, and monitoring systems that make their outcomes visible rather than obscured within broader categories. The compositional concentration finding suggests that ensuring sufficient scale—through regional collaboration, state resources, or other mechanisms—may be essential for developing the infrastructure these students need. Improving opportunities for dually identified students will require collaborative work across MLE and special education systems—work that builds on California's policy commitment to coherence and equity for all students.

References

- Artiles, A. J., Rueda, R., Salazar, J. J., & Higareda, I. (2005). Within-group diversity in minority disproportionate representation: English language learners in urban school districts. *Exceptional Children*, 71(3), 283–300.
- California Department of Education. (2017). *California English Learner Roadmap*.
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/rm/>
- California Department of Education. (2023a). *English learners in California public schools*.
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sg/englishlearner.asp>
- California Department of Education. (2023b). *English learner students with disabilities: Guidelines for practitioners*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/sr/elpracguideswd.asp>
- Callahan, R. M., & Shifrer, D. (2016). Equitable access for secondary English learner students: Course taking as evidence of EL program effectiveness. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 52(3), 463–496.
- Cioè-Peña, M. (2017). The intersectional gap: How bilingual students in the United States are excluded from inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(9), 906–919.
- Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015).
- González, T., Artiles, A. J., Martínez-Álvarez, P., & Salinas, S. M. (2024). Towards the full potential of Lau: Interrogating the intersectional nuances of language, disability, & race. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 47(4), 421–437.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Regulations on Significant Disproportionality, 34 C.F.R. § 300.646 (2016).
- Kangas, S. E. N. (2019). English learners with disabilities: Linguistic development and educational equity in jeopardy. In X. Gao (Ed.), *Second handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 919–937). Springer International Publishing.
- Kangas, S. E. N. (2020). Counternarratives of English learners with disabilities. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 43(3), 267–285.
- Kangas, S. E. N., & Ruiz, M. (2025). Data skepticism and capacity for data-based decisions: The case of reclassifying English learners with disabilities. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 1–22.
- Kangas, S. E. N., & Schissel, J. L. (2021). Holding them back or pushing them out? Reclassification policies for English learners with disabilities. *Linguistics and Education*, 63, 100927.
- Kieffer, M. J., & Parker, C. E. (2016). The "long-term English learner" construct: A critical examination of definitions, classification, and outcomes. *Educational Researcher*, 45(3), 152–161.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures*. The National Academies Press.

- Samson, J.F., & Lesaux, N.K. (2008). Language minority learners in special education: Rates and predictors of identification for services. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 42*(2), 148–162.
- Slama, R. B., Molefe, A., Gerdeman, R. D., Herrera, A., Brodziak de los Reyes, I., August, D., & Cavazos, L. (2017). *English learners with disabilities: Shining a light on dual-identified students* (REL 2017–286). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.
- Sullivan, A. L. (2011). Disproportionality in special education identification and placement of English language learners. *Exceptional Children, 77*(3), 317–334.
- Tefera, A., Gonzalez, T., & Artiles, A. J. (2017). Challenges to policy as a tool for educational equity: The case of language and ability difference intersections. In S. Salas & P. Portes (Eds.), *Latinization and K-12 communities: National perspectives on regional change* (pp. 205-226). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Thompson, K. D. (2015). English learners' time to reclassification: An analysis. *Educational Policy, 29*(5), 734–763.
- Umansky, I. M., Thompson, K. D., & Díaz, G. (2017). Using an ever-English learner framework to examine disproportionality in special education. *Educational Researcher, 46*(2), 100–112.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2023). *43rd annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Office of Special Education Programs. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/43rd-arc-for-idea.pdf>
- U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2024). *K–12 education: How states identify English learners, including those with disabilities* (GAO-24-107376). <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-107376>

Appendix

Table A1. Summary statistics.

Description	Mean	sd.	Min.	Max.	% missing
College Enrollment Rate (MLE+SWD)	43.59	12.63	20.69	71.54	32.76
High School Completion Rate (MLE+SWD)	81.58	13.07	31.58	100	22.41
% Dually Identified	2.47	1.38	0.24	6.83	1.72
% African American	2.55	2.69	0.4	11.7	1.72
% Experienced Teachers	86.25	4.96	74.14	100	0
% Hispanic/Latino	46.25	21.22	9.43	94.04	0
% MLE	15.19	8.09	2.16	36.97	1.72
% SES Disadvantaged	61.77	13.21	32.52	81.5	0
% SWD	14.43	1.92	10.52	19.16	0
% White	34.54	19.56	3.48	71.74	0
Average Years Teaching Experience	12.69	1.47	9.4	15.7	0
College Enrollment Rate (neither group)	66.15	12.38	37.45	88.88	1.72
High School Completion Rate (neither group)	90.86	10.16	51.25	100	1.72
Total Enrollment	100107.3	195516.3	61	1275769	0
Total MLE Enrollment	17702.91	32772.41	21	209529	1.72

Table A2. Model coefficients.

Predictor	College enrollment (2022-23 HS graduates, 16-month outcome)		4-year high school completion (2021-22 9th grades)	
	β	SE	β	SE
Intercept	32.49	8.18	69.67	5.14
% Dually Identified	3.53	2.77	4.19	1.75
Avg Completion Rate (neither group, std)			10.38	1.46
Avg College Rate (neither group, std)	5.8	3.47		
% SES Disadvantaged (std)	5.66	4.4	5.4	2.52
% Hispanic (std)	-7.08	4.57	-7.65	3.26
% White (std)	-3.19	3.82	0.55	2.63
Total Enrollment (std)	-2.37	2.08	1.17	1.52
% Experienced Teachers (std)	2.32	3.05	-3.54	1.74