



Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the following project funded by The Bell Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy: *English as an Additional Language (EAL) and educational achievement in England in 2023*, Dr Ariel Lindorff & Professor Steve Strand OBE

Specified Audience: Policy | Educators, practitioners and leaders

What do we know about the educational attainment of English as an Additional Language learners in England?

What is this research about and why is it important?

In England, pupils who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) are a diverse group. In fact, being recorded as an EAL learner means that a child has been “exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English” in the early years, even if they are proficient in English (according to the Department for Education's definition). This definition includes children and young people who have little or no exposure to English and have just arrived in England. However, it also includes a much larger number of pupils who have a language other than English as part of their cultural heritage, but are fluent users of English as the everyday language in school. With this in mind, headline statistics based on all pupils identified as EAL learners are often misleading in understanding the drivers of educational achievement in this group, and the EAL status flag in Department for Education data is limited in its ability to meaningfully inform policy.

Our project built on a decade of research on the relationship between EAL and educational achievement, funded by The Bell Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy. In a recent report released in November 2025, we analysed individual-pupil-level data from the National Pupil Database in England to look at how the population of EAL learners has changed since a report 10 years ago based on corresponding data from 2013, and at whether and how any achievement gaps between EAL learners and their Monolingual English (MLE)-speaking peers have changed over this period.

We found that the number and proportion of EAL learners has grown and continues to do so, and that over the last decade this population has shifted outwards somewhat from major urban centres to surrounding areas. More schools and local authorities have at least some EAL learners than was previously true, which suggests that some schools and teachers may need training and support to understand and meet the needs of EAL pupils.

What did we do?

- Our research involved statistical analysis of secondary data from the National Pupil Database in England, which contains demographic information as well as key stage assessment outcomes for each child in every maintained school in England.
- We built up our analysis from basic descriptive statistics to more advanced statistical approaches, so that we could look at simple overall “raw” patterns as well as results accounting for a variety of pupil background characteristics and differences between schools.

What did we find?

- The number and proportion of EAL pupils in England has grown and continues to grow, from 7.6 percent of the compulsory school-aged population in 1997, to 16.2% in 2013, to over 20% in 2023.
- Attainment gaps between EAL learners and MLE-speaking peers seem to be present only in Foundation Stage (age 5) and Key Stage 1 reading (age 7) when we look at aggregate data nationally, but when we account for other pupil background characteristics using individual-pupil-level data, we find some risk factors are more pronounced within the EAL-speaking group.
- In particular, late arrival into the English school system is related to lower educational attainment.
 - EAL pupils who arrive after Reception have significantly lower educational attainment by the end of primary school than those who joined in Reception.
 - EAL pupils who arrive after year 5 have significantly lower educational attainment by the end of secondary school (age 16) than those who joined in or before year 5.
 - These patterns are specific to EAL pupils, and do not extend to their MLE-speaking peers.
 - As we found previously, and as other researchers have found internationally, it takes 6 years on average to move in proficiency from 'New to English' to MLE-equivalent fluency.
- Some other aspects of pupil background tended to have similar relationships to educational attainment regardless of EAL status, but some differed between EAL and MLE-speaking pupils, for example:
 - Free School Meal eligibility was a more pronounced risk factor for low attainment amongst MLE-speaking pupils than EAL pupils.
 - Belonging to an ethnic minority group tended to be associated with either more pronounced *underachievement* or more pronounced *overachievement* amongst EAL pupils compared to MLE-speaking pupils – this may reflect the effect of later entry into the school system.
 - Having Special Educational Needs was more of a pronounced risk factor for low attainment amongst EAL pupils than their MLE-speaking peers in later key stages (ages 11 and 16).
- Attainment gaps between EAL learners and MLE-speaking peers were smallest in London and largest in northern regions of England in general. These gaps narrow in later age groups, suggesting that differences may reflect something about underlying demographic patterns and proportions of later-arriving pupils rather than structural barriers to learning.
- The effect of being recorded as an EAL learner on attainment at key stage 2 (age 11) and key stage 4 (age 16) differed across schools, so that this relationship could be positive in some schools and negative in others. The overall effect was small, though, compared to other background factors like pupil gender and Free School Meal eligibility.

What does it all mean anyway?

- Our study is limited to an analysis of pupil-level data; we could not look directly at practice in schools or Local Authority variations in policy.
- Our findings do suggest, however, that given the increasing dispersion of EAL learners across urban and surrounding areas, teachers should have access to effective training and continuing professional development to support them in assessing pupils' English language proficiency and providing targeted, effective support.
- Our findings, as well as the preceding 10 years of research on which our project built, also underscore the importance of re-introducing statutory assessment of proficiency in English (already in place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) to facilitate effective and targeted support for EAL learners.
- Funding should be targeted to support the EAL learners who need it most, which, in the absence of a measure of proficiency in English, is those who join the school system later. This translates to up to 6 years of funding for pupils who join after Reception to support them through the time needed to gain English-language proficiency.

Report: Lindorff, A., Strand, S., & Ma, Y. (2025). *English as an additional language (EAL) and educational achievement in England in 2023: An analysis of the National Pupil Database*. The Bell Foundation. <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/app/uploads/2025/11/EAL-attainment-2025-Oxford-report.pdf>.

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