

Strengthening State Funding Approaches for Multilingual Learners

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Agenda

1. Overview of State EL Funding, Rebecca Bergey
2. Aligning EL Funding with Instructional Need, Tammy Kolbe
3. Panelist discussion
4. Closing remarks

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Overview of State EL Funding

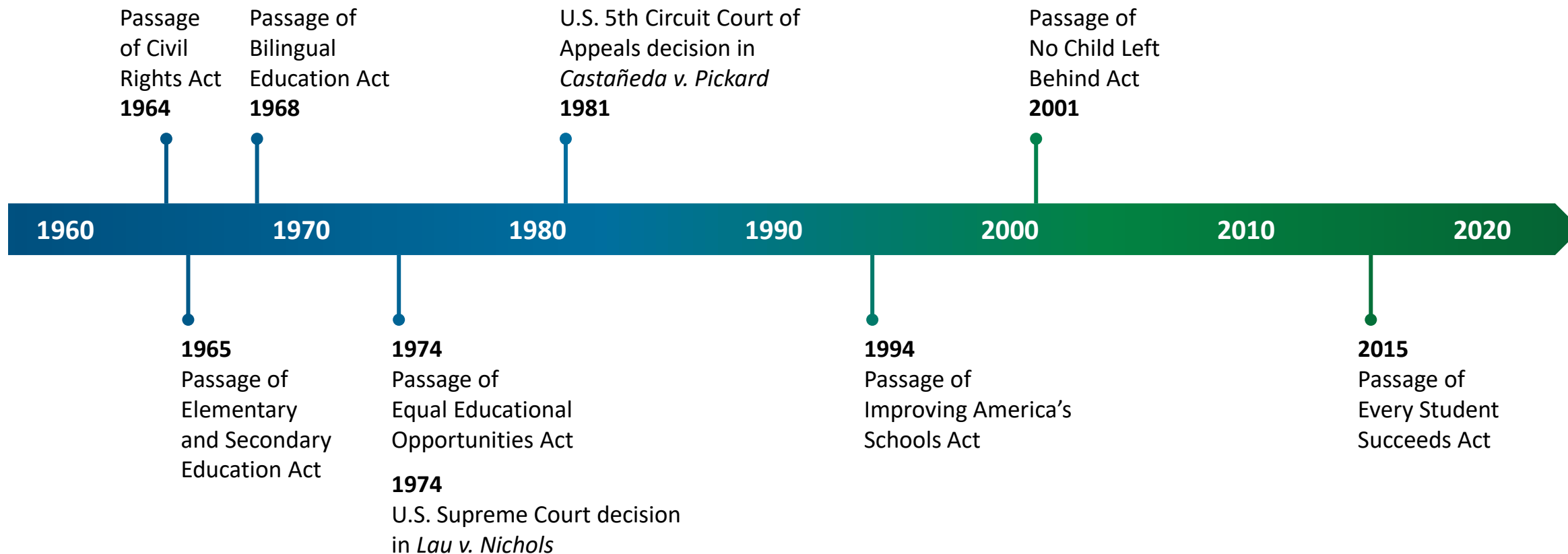
ELs Across the United States

- English learners are a substantial share of the K–12 population nationally (around 10%).



Source: AIR. (2026). *English learners*. <https://www.air.org/our-work/education/english-learners>

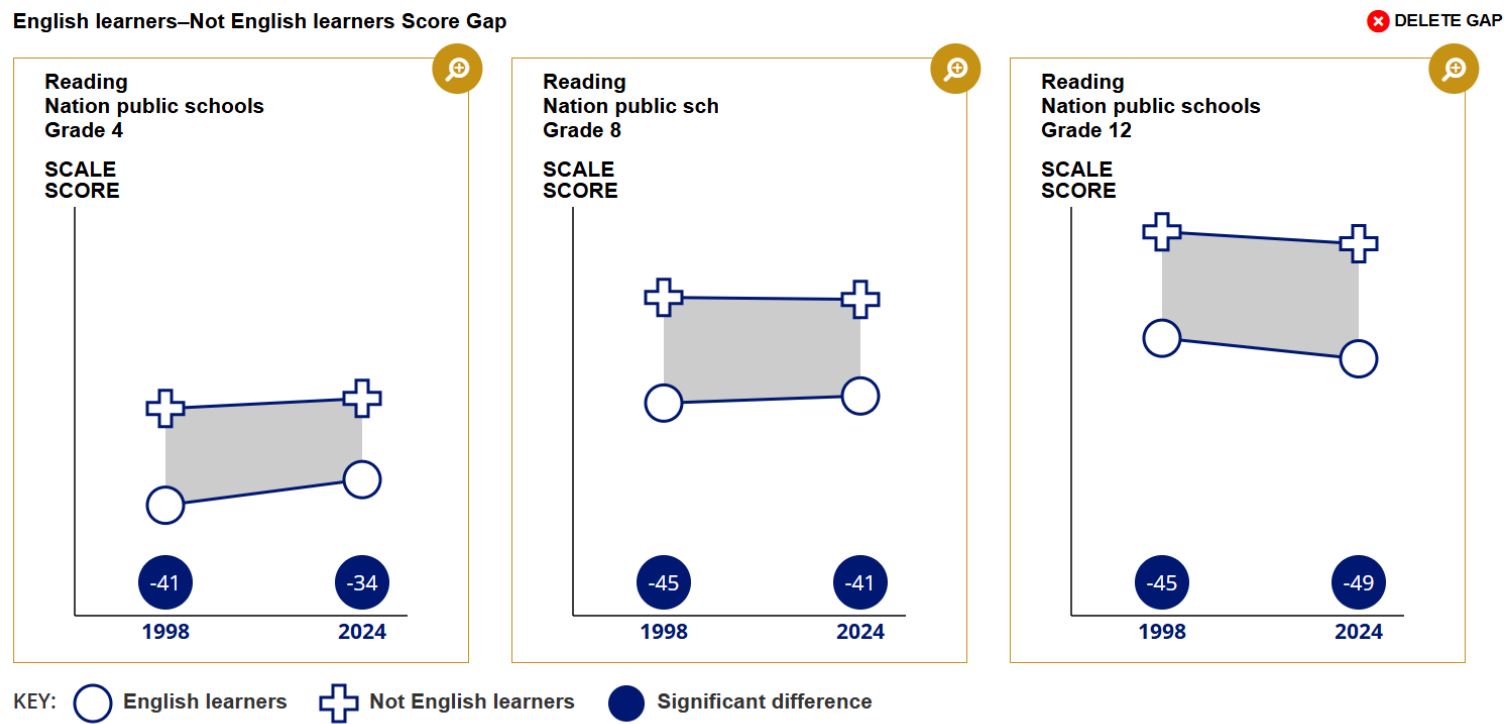
Supporting English Learners: A Legislative Timeline



Source: AIR. (2026). *English learners*. <https://www.air.org/our-work/education/english-learners>

EL Academic Performance

Although there have been some improvements in the last decade, standardized tests demonstrate continued opportunity to better support ELs.



Source. National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Achievement gaps dashboard*. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/dashboards/achievement_gaps.aspx

EL Funding At a Glance



Federal: Title III



State: formula/categorical



Local: implementation

Why is it important to discuss state EL funding now?

- Demonstrated need for funding to support EL programs
- Limitations with federal Title III funding
- Variation in state funding models

Image by [Tra Chor](#) from [Pixabay](#)



References and Resources

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Aligning EL Funding With Instructional Need

Tammy Kolbe

Overview

Why alignment matters

- *Understanding variation in EL instructional need*

How states currently fund EL students

- *The dominant models and where differentiation exists*

What research suggests about cost drivers

- *Why proficiency level matters*

Vermont as a case example

- *Cost-informed recalibration*

Design considerations for state funding policy

- *Emerging directions for EL funding*

ELs Are Not a Homogenous Group

- EL students vary significantly in language proficiency and as a result, require different levels of instructional services.
- Because service levels differ, costs differ.
 - Typical requirements for lower proficiency students:
 - » Most instructional time
 - » Smaller group instruction
 - » Specialized staffing
 - » Expanded family communication supports
 - Typical requirements for higher proficiency students:
 - » Targeted language development support
 - » Integrated academic language support
 - » Transitional monitoring



EL students require more and fewer services, depending on language proficiency, and state funding should reflect the differences in the cost of the services students need to progress to English proficiency.

Image by [Thế Anh Trần](#) from [Pixabay](#)

How States Currently Fund EL Students

- 49 states provide additional EL funding.
- Dominant models:
 - States apply a **single-weight** or **flat per-student** amount to all EL students.
 - Others allocate staffing positions once EL thresholds are met.
 - » Neither approach differentiates funding according to language proficiency.

Key reality: In most states, all EL students generate the same amount of funding regardless of proficiency level.

Where States Do Differentiate by Proficiency

A smaller group of states differentiates EL funding based on English proficiency or instructional intensity.

Examples of Proficiency-Based Differentiation

State	How funding varies by proficiency	Structure type
Michigan	Funding varies by WIDA ACCESS composite score (higher funding for Levels 1–2; reduced for higher levels)	Tiered by proficiency
Indiana	Tiered per-pupil funding based on WIDA levels (Levels 1–2 generate more than Levels 3–4)	Tiered by proficiency
Tennessee	Tiered weights tied to EL service level (e.g., 20%, 60%, 70%, based on instructional intensity)	Tiered by service intensity
Hawaii	Different weights for fully proficient, limited-proficient, and nonproficient students	Three-tier proficiency model

Even where differentiation exists, it is often limited to two to three tiers and not explicitly calibrated to instructional costs.

The Structural Tension

If

- Funding is largely flat or only lightly tiered

and

- Instructional cost varies significantly by proficiency,

Then

- Funding and cost may not be fully aligned.

Why This Matters:

- Lower proficiency students may be underfunded.
- Districts may face internal cross-subsidization pressures.
- Resource allocation becomes less transparent.
- Instructional models may be shaped by formula constraints rather than student need.

When funding does not reflect cost variation, states risk inefficiency and reduced transparency in EL service delivery.

What drives EL cost?

- Costing-out studies and research on adequate education funding consistently shows these findings.
- Language proficiency level is the primary driver of cost variation:
 - Lower proficiency → Higher staffing intensity
 - Higher proficiency → Lighter touch supports
- Scale effects matter:
 - Small districts/schools face higher per-student costs.

EL costs are not binary—they are graduated.

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Vermont: Asking the Cost Question

- Vermont examined these factors:
 - Cost by proficiency level
 - District size effects
 - Service intensity required to meet standards
 - Newcomer cost differences

Explicitly asked: What is the additional cost of educating EL students at different proficiency levels to meet state proficiency standards?

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What Vermont Demonstrated

Student Grade Level	Language Proficiency				Newcomer/ SLIFE
	Level 1	Levels 2/3	Level 4	Levels 5/6	
Elementary Grade Student (K-5)	\$29,664	\$19,622	\$17,593	\$1,724	\$6,075
Middle Grade Student (6-8)	\$30,762	\$20,720	\$19,776	\$1,724	\$6,075
Secondary Grade Student (9-12)	\$31,310	\$21,077	\$15,003	\$1,755	\$6,190
Average Cost by Proficiency Level	\$30,579	\$20,473	\$17,457	\$1,734	\$6,113
Weighted Average Student-level Cost for SY2023	\$19,845*				

Key Takeaways:

- EL funding can be proficiency sensitive; costs vary by instructional intensity and age/grade.
- Cost modeling can inform formula design.
- Economies of scale need to be considered.

Policy Consideration: These analyses resulted in a recalibration in how additional funding for EL students was allocated to districts—not just a funding increase.

Emerging Policy Design Consideration: Differentiated EL Funding by Proficiency Levels

Illustrative Model:

- WIDA Level 1 → Highest weight
- WIDA Level 2 → Moderate weight
- WIDA Level 3 → Reduced weight
- WIDA Level 4 → Transitional weight
- Exit phase-down
- Newcomer/SLIFE



Core Design Principle:

Align funding with
differences in
instructional intensity
and resource costs.

Strategic Consideration for State Leaders



State funding should reflect the actual cost of delivering instructional services to EL students who have differing levels of language proficiency.

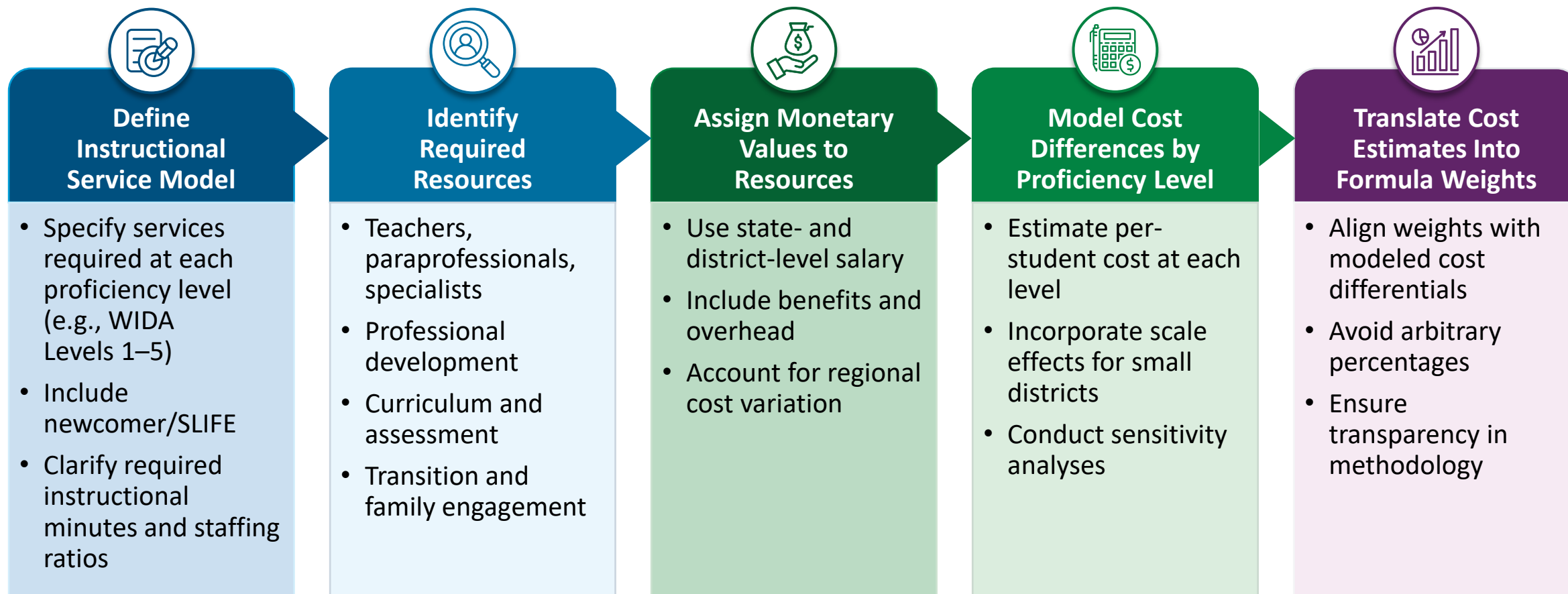
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Cost-Based Design

- States that refine EL funding structures should ground adjustments in the value of the resources required to deliver services.
- Cost adjustments should reflect the monetary value of the staff, time, and services required at each proficiency level, including the following:
 - Required staffing ratios
 - Additional instructional minutes
 - Specialized instructional personnel
 - Professional development
 - Curriculum, assessments, and language access supports

Funding adjustments should be based on the actual value of the resources needed to provide instructional services—not on arbitrary percentages or historical precedent.

How States Can Conduct a Cost Study to Inform EL Funding



Goal: Produce cost estimates that policymakers can use to calibrate funding formula adjustments.

Reflection and Discussion

Consider these questions as you think about your own state:

- Does your current EL funding model differentiate by proficiency level?
- To what extent are formula weights grounded in the value of required instructional resources?
- Where might funding and instructional cost be misaligned?
- What data or analysis would policymakers need to recalibrate EL funding?
- How might a cost study support your state's policy priorities?



<https://pixabay.com/photos/meeting-adults-business-people-4784909/>

For More Information

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Panelist Discussion

Questions and Answers



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Reach out if you would like to learn more about funding formulas for English learners in your state.

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