

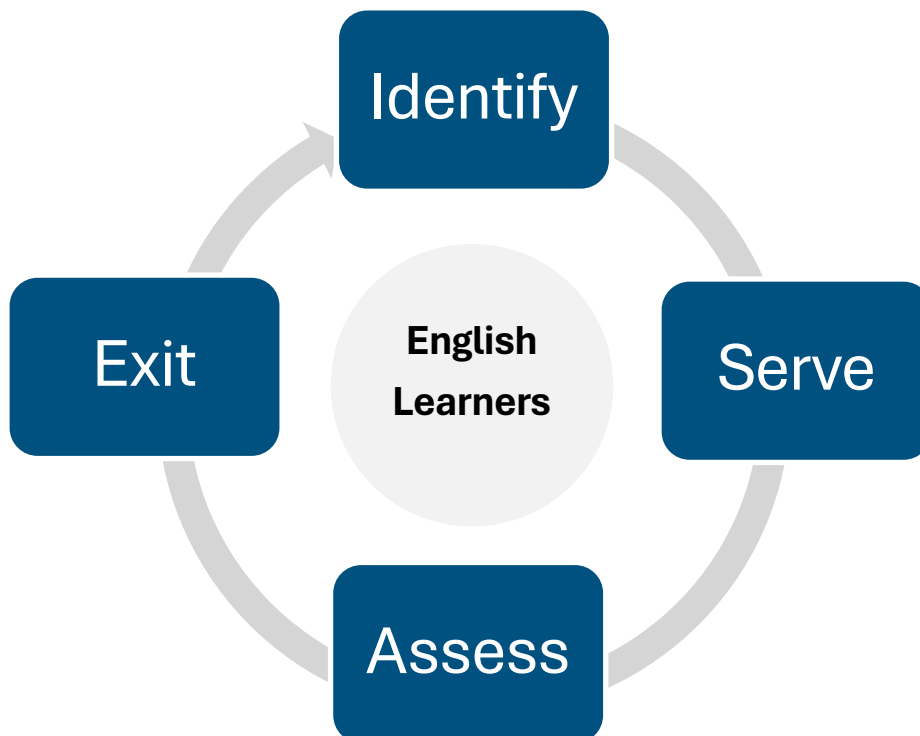


MONTANA

OFFICE OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

ENGLISH LEARNER GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Effective August 1, 2022
Revised/Updated September 2025



The “Montana English Learner Guidance for School Districts” describes the Office of Public Instruction’s (OPI) policies and procedures required to serve English Learner (EL) students in the state of Montana. These requirements fall under the authority of both state and federal laws and regulations, which are defined further throughout this manual.

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INTRODUCTION

This manual is designed to provide guidance to school districts and to define the state policies for serving English Learner students (ELs) in Montana’s accredited schools. The state Board of Public Education establishes and maintains standards for all public schools in Montana and those private schools seeking accreditation ([§20-2-121, MCA](#)).

English Learners (ELs) are school-aged children whose academic English proficiency, or lack thereof, affects their academic achievement and ability to participate equally in academic programs such as mathematics, reading/language arts, science, and social studies. Proficiency in a language is a measure of a person’s ability to understand and communicate in that language or in a person’s preferred mode of communication. The objective of this document is to outline the requirements for determining the identification of ELs and their respective English proficiency. This document further provides guidance to school districts to offer support for ELs in both social and instructional situations so they may succeed in school settings ([ARM 10.53.301–311](#)).

The landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015. ESSA requires that all children have fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging academic content standards. With this vision, emphasis on educational services, assessment, and accountability have been heightened to serve ELs and close achievement gaps under the authority of Title I and Title III ([ESEA Section 1111\(b\)\(2\)\(B\)\(vii\)\(III\)](#)). A key purpose of Title I under ESSA is to promote educational excellence and equity so that all students master the knowledge and skills required for college and career readiness by the time they graduate high school. Further requirements for ELs are defined under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI), Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA), Montana Code Annotated (MCA), and Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM). These laws, regulations, and state policies require the OPI and school districts to ensure that all students have equal access to education and educators take the appropriate action(s) to help ELs overcome language barriers that impede equal participation in instructional programs.

The following statewide assessments are used to satisfy the state and federal requirements for the annual assessment of the English language proficiency of ELs:

- WIDA ACCESS, an online assessment for Grades 1–12;
- WIDA Kindergarten ACCESS, a paper-based assessment for Kindergarten; and
- WIDA Alternate ACCESS, a paper-based assessment for ELLs in Grades 1–12 who have significant cognitive disabilities.

This guidance document paves a path for school districts to create a positive, whole-school environment that welcomes the student, his or her family and culture, provides appropriate learning experiences, and conveys high expectations that will open the door to quality education. School districts are encouraged to use this guidance to understand the state’s policies and procedures for identifying and serving ELs. There are also options available for further training and technical assistance to serve ELs.

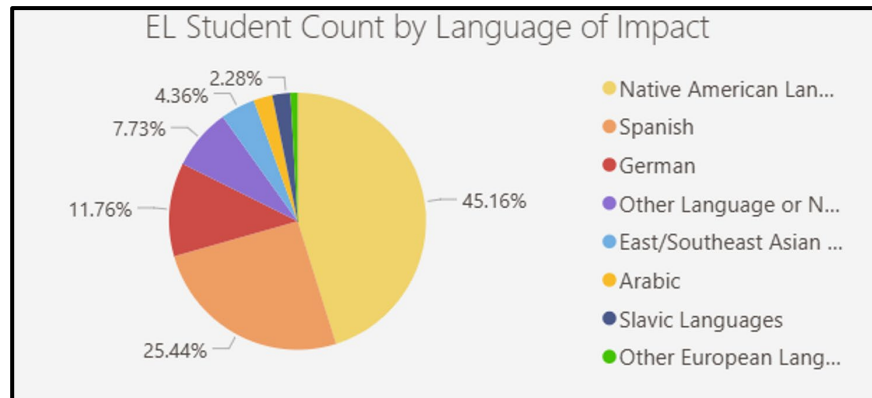
STATE CONTEXT

Montana is a geographically large, rural state with distinct and unique regional and cultural differences that are reflected in its diverse English learner population. With these vast differences in community composition, it is vitally important for educators to employ differentiated and culturally responsive teaching practices that are attuned to the unique needs of their local English learners. **Figure 1** shown below illustrates the composition of Montana’s English learner population by “language of impact,” (i.e. the language that plays a significant role in their home or community and family heritage). The “language of impact” information reported in **Figure 1** is collected through Montana’s state-specific data collection, which is used to study “heritage languages” more deeply (see [ACRONYM GLOSSARY: Table 5](#)). Under the federal reporting categories, the “home primary



language" indicates the specific language normally used by the student or normally used by the parents of the student other than English in their home. If having a "home primary language" other than English were the sole criteria, American Indian students who are primarily English-speaking would not be appropriately represented in this reporting, but the law recognizes that students don't need to be active speakers of the native language to be affected by the language in their communities. The "language of impact" is the language other than English that influences the student's English language development. For more information on this collection, visit the [EDUCATE \(IC\) Data Dictionary Website](#).

Figure 1. Languages of Impact for Montana EL Students, SY23/24 Data



It is difficult to define ELs as a group, other than to say that they are students who currently lack the academic English necessary to be successful in school. ELs speak dialects of English as well as languages other than English. They come from every socioeconomic class in American society. They may or may not be literate in their home primary language (the specific language spoken by the student or their parents/guardians at home) and may or may not have received any formal schooling in their home language upon enrollment in a Montana school district. ELs may be born in the United States or internationally and could be impacted by a language other than English that influences the student's English language development.

ELs in Montana include:

- American Indian children who are impacted by the heritage language of their family and/or community, such as Piikani (Blackfeet) or Apsáalooke (Crow).
- Hutterite children who learn German as their first language.
- American-born children of immigrants who learn their native language in the home from their parents or guardians.
- Children who come to the United States with their parents or alone (as immigrants, as children of international professors and students at the university level, as migrant workers, as international exchange students and as refugees).
- Children who are adopted internationally by American parents.

Montana observes the following federal definition to describe ELs, as an individual:

- (A) who is aged 3 through 21;
- (B) who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary or secondary school; **AND**
- (C) (i) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English; or (ii) who is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native of the outlying areas; and who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency; or

- (iii) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant **AND**
- (D) Whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual
 - (i) the ability to meet the challenging State academic standards
 - (ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or
 - (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society (see ESEA Section 8101(20)).

CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFICATION OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

Figure 2. Criteria for the Identification of ELs



These guidelines are the result of discussions with representatives of school districts in Montana with significant populations of ELs. School districts need to have a process for identifying ELs in their schools that is clearly understood by all administrative, instructional, and counseling staff. As of spring 2001, statewide assessment results must be disaggregated by academic English language proficiency and other student subgroup categories. This data is collected for reporting purposes and to provide appropriate support to ELs so that they are served in a standardized and equitable fashion consistent with their individual needs.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Under **state and federal law**, all public and accredited non-public school districts are required to identify students who are eligible for language assistance, to provide a sound program of instruction, to assess their English proficiency annually, and to notify parents of their initial placement in, progress within, and exit from the language program.

The Office for Civil Rights designates that the following procedures should be used by school districts to ensure that their programs are serving ELs effectively. **School districts must:**

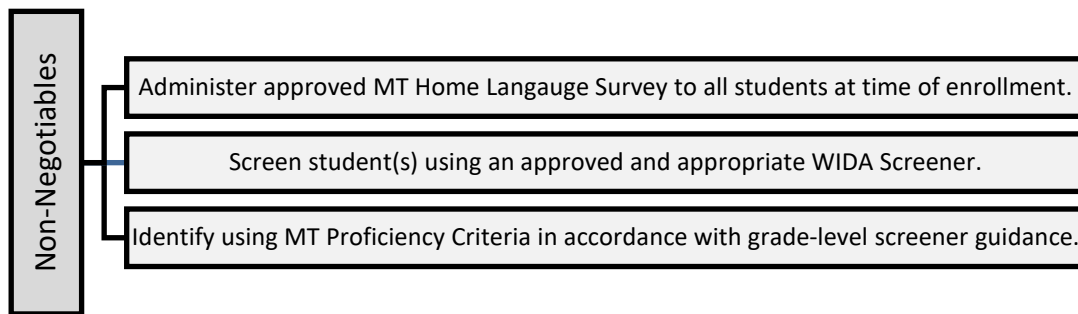
- identify students who need assistance;
- develop a program which, according to experts, has a reasonable chance for success;
- ensure that necessary staff, curricular materials, and facilities are in place and used properly;
- develop appropriate evaluation standards, including program exit criteria, for measuring the progress of students; and
- assess the success of the program and modify it where needed.

Additionally, federal law affords children a legal right to education regardless of their immigration status. Eligibility for school enrolment in Montana is based on residency in the school district, not national origin. Children who do not speak English cannot be required to present documents that are not required by any other student while enrolling in school. As schools are not agents of immigration, it is not incumbent upon them to determine a student's immigration status. **Figure 3** below shows non-negotiables for school districts and overall responsibilities to the individual students.

(See Figure 3 on the next page)

Figure 3. Non-Negotiables for School Districts





Consistent with the Office for Civil Rights, students are entitled to:

- be placed in a classroom appropriate to their age and grade level;
- receive English language instruction regardless of the number of ELs in the school and for as long as it is needed;
- be given tests free of cultural bias and to be tested in their primary language, if possible, for assessment purposes or special education evaluation;
- be placed in special education classrooms only if there is a disability and not because of English language proficiency;
- attend regular classes in art, music, and physical education as well as extracurricular activities, vocational training, and gifted and talented programs; and
- full participation in mainstream classrooms when the student is proficient in English.

PARTICIPATION OF NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Non-public schools are encouraged to serve their English learner students in the same manner as public schools in the spirit of the Civil Rights Act and ESSA. Non-public schools may opt to partner with a public school district or consortium of districts receiving a Title III subgrant for additional EL support materials. However, schools are only eligible for Title III subgrants after providing evidence that they are fulfilling their basic responsibilities to their EL students under Title I (**ESSA 1111(b)(2)**), including standardized identification and annual assessment of EL proficiency. Students at non-public schools may not be included in a public district’s assessment roster for legal privacy reasons; these schools must independently manage their own administration of ELP assessments. Non-public schools interested in such a partnership should arrange a consultation with the public district’s leadership during the spring and contact the **OPI’s Private School Ombudsman** for more information.

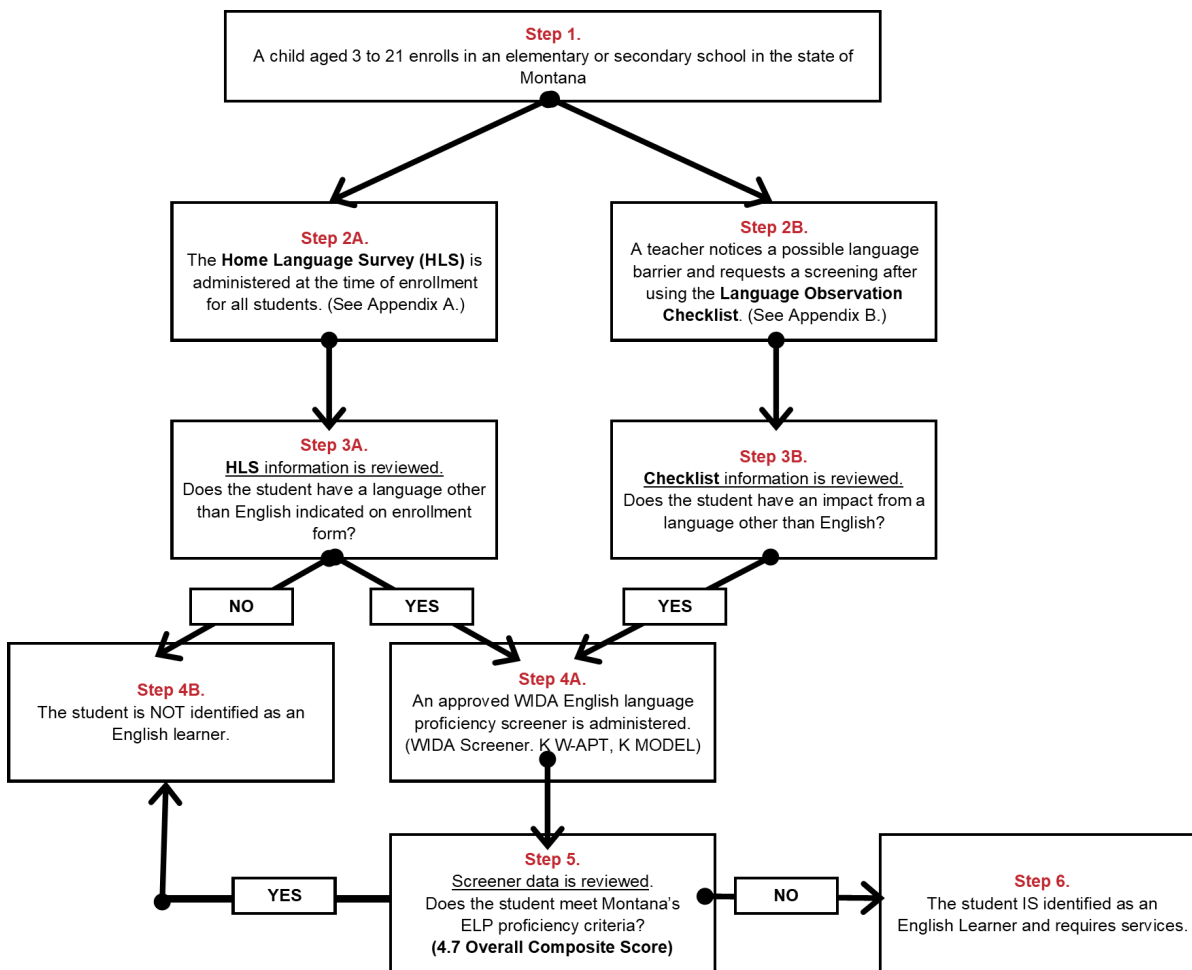
IDENTIFICATION OF ELs

Montana school districts and the OPI work in partnership to ensure that all data are collaboratively collected, maintained, and reported. See the **EDUCATE (IC) Data Collection Schedule** for specific dates and specific data points. This dual responsibility to maintain accurate records of EL status, home language, and language of impact ensures a clear picture of the child. This understanding is imperative to inform our systems, resources, and outreach efforts so we can better work with families and our local communities across Montana. Without these timely, accurate, and consistent data collections, we cannot paint a quality picture of Montana’s linguistic diversity. Reporting these data with fidelity ultimately allows us to deliver high-quality EL resources based on local need, increase the distribution of and access to EL resources for schools, and support any required EL program or policy decisions.

Under federal law, all school districts are required to identify students who are eligible for language assistance (**Figure 4**). School districts must use the guidance from the OPI to identify ELs and annually monitor individual progress in acquiring academic English consistent with all state and federal laws and regulations (ARM 10.56.104). Additionally, the district clerk must request an EL record transfer in EDUCATE (IC) for all students transferring into the school district using the steps outlined in the EL Tool Guide and provide continuity of services

for those students identified in another district.

Figure 4: Identification Process



PRE-SCREENING STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

Special care should be taken in the screening of students with significant cognitive disabilities who are potential ELs. ELs with significant cognitive disabilities are individuals who have one or more disabilities that significantly impact their intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as documented on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and are progressing toward English language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Beginning in 2026, WIDA released the WIDA Alternate Screener which is designed for this student population for equality in screening and identification.

Additionally, Montana continues to recommend that educators conference with parents/guardians and make EL placement decisions based on a combination of survey and observational data. Educators responsible for identifying English Learners (ELs) should collaborate closely with the students' special education teachers. Along with administering the [Home Language Survey](#), it is advised that special education teachers collect additional details about the student's first-language communication abilities to support accurate identification. Use of the WIDA Alternate Screener would be an appropriate tool for students who obtain the qualifications of an alternate identification or demonstrate the need for a more significant and robustly supported screener/screening process. More insight into ELs with significant cognitive disabilities can be found in the WIDA and ALTELLA report, [Characteristics of English Learners with Significant Cognitive Disabilities: Findings from the Individual](#)

ADMINISTERING ENGLISH LANGUAGE SCREENER(S)

All potential ELs must be screened for placement using the OPI's approved ELP (WIDA) screeners so that identification decisions can be based on standardized and objective criteria. The screeners are available to all school districts at no cost. **Figure 5** and **Table 1** below outline the screening tools that are available in Montana. The screeners are required to identify ELs because of the test's alignment with Montana's WIDA English Language Development Standards, WIDA Proficiency Level Definitions, and Montana's English language proficiency criteria (see [ARM 10.53.301–10.53.311](#)).

Beginning in the 2025-2026 school year, the OPI has adopted the new WIDA Alternate Screener in addition to the screeners that have been in use, including the WIDA Kindergarten Screener, and WIDA Screener. Please note that with these screening tools, there are caveats in grade-level administration, as well as approved screeners and tools, outlined in **Figure 5** shown below. Students in the first semester of kindergarten are only to be screened for their listening and speaking skills, since it is not reasonable to expect them to have already begun formal education in reading and writing.

Figure 5: OPI Approved Screening Tools

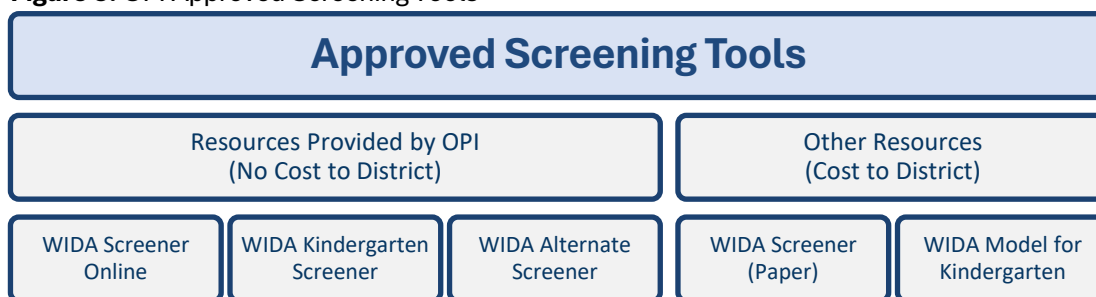


Table 1: Montana's Screener Criteria

Kindergarten First Semester	Kindergarten Second Semester
Test Name: WIDA Screener for Kindergarten Domains Administered: Speaking and Listening Criteria: K Screener: 5.0+ on Speaking and Listening* K MODEL: 4.7+ on Speaking and Listening	Test Name: WIDA Screener for Kindergarten Domains Administered: Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing Criteria: K Screener: 5.0+ higher overall composite score* K MODEL: 4.7+ overall composite score
Grade 1 – First Semester	Grade 1 - Second Semester Grades 2 – 12
Test Name: WIDA Screener for Kindergarten Domains Administered: Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing Criteria: K Screener: 5.0+ overall composite score* K MODEL: 4.7+ overall composite score	Test Administered: WIDA Screener (online or paper (with accommodations)) Domains Administered: Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing Criteria: 5.0+ overall composite score*

Note: The WIDA Screener is different from the WIDA ACCESS and uses smaller data sets to determine domain and composite scores. **Montana's proficiency criteria for the WIDA ACCESS assessment is an overall composite score of 4.7 or higher.** However, the **WIDA Screener score calculator only rounds scores down to the nearest 0.5 given its limited scope.** The purpose of the screener is to identify EL students and to support the creation of EL plans to help these

students reach academic English proficiency.

Program decisions should be grounded in evidence so each educator can confidently infer what students know and "can do" according to the [WIDA Can-Do Descriptors and WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework](#), which are specific to an entire proficiency level. With this tool, decisions for ELs can be made with confidence so that students have the supports in place to develop strong academic English skills. It is in the best interest of students and their language development not to overestimate what they "can do" and instead to set realistic expectations that encourage growth. The screener is directly related to a student's access to an equitable education, and it has long-term implications for program placement, so **students must achieve a composite score of 5.0 or higher to have confidence in their linguistic development and success in and beyond school.**

SCREENING TOOLS FOR STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

Students with mild or moderate disabilities fall under the same criteria as those without disabilities where school districts are required to administer statewide assessments with or without accommodation(s) based on individual student needs consistent with all state and federal laws and regulations. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) team for a student shall determine if the student meets the eligibility criteria for the statewide alternate assessment based on the alternate achievement standards ([ARM 10.56.104](#)). It is recommended to consult with [the OPI's Special Education Division](#) if you have a student with a significant cognitive disability and need assistance identifying a screening process. As previously discussed, beginning in the school year 2025-2026, the OPI adopted the newly released WIDA Alternate Screener to be available for students with significant cognitive disabilities. You can also utilize the [WIDA Alternate Screener Decision Tree](#) to help guide in whether or not this tool is appropriate for individualized student needs.

ALTERNATE CRITERIA FOR STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) requires that the "state has established goals for the performance of children with disabilities in the state that are consistent, to the maximum extent appropriate, with other goals and standards for children established by the state." IDEA further requires that all students be included in the state's accountability systems.

Students eligible to participate in alternate assessments make up **approximately 1% of the total student population**. *It is imperative to consider the decision to move a special education student to an alternate assessment has significant implications for the path that a student will take in their K–12 school career. It means the student is not able to participate in the general education curriculum even when provided with accommodations.* A student who participates in alternate assessment requires a modified curriculum (See [Appendix A: Alternate Assessment Eligibility Criteria Worksheet](#)).

This "Alternate Assessment Eligibility Criteria Worksheet" ([Appendix A](#)) is intended to assist IEP teams in determining whether the student should participate in the general or alternate assessments and to address documentation requirements under IDEA. The IEP team must decide which MontCAS assessments (general or alternate) the student will participate in. For students who are eligible for the alternate assessment, educators are asked to complete the Individual Characteristics Questionnaire (ICQ). The purpose of the ICQ is to learn more about the characteristics of ELs with the most significant cognitive disabilities. These questions have been adapted from questions from the First Contact Survey (Nash, Clark, & Karvonen, 2015) and Learner Characteristics Inventory (Kearns, Kleinert, Kleinert, & Towles-Reeves, 2006).

If you have a student who is eligible to take the alternate assessments, mark the Alternate Assessment checkbox under the Statewide Assessments editor in your EDUCATE (IC) system. **For students who are eligible to take alternate assessments and are designated as EL, indicate LEP in EDUCATE (IC) and mark the Alternate Assessment checkbox.** Questions can be directed to the EDUCATE (IC) Help Desk at 1-877-424-6681, 406-444-3800, or opiainhelp@mt.gov. You may reach out to EDUCATION (IC) for additional information about



completing the statewide assessment editor in EDUCATIE (IC).

SUPPORTING IDENTIFICATION DECISIONS WITH ADDITIONAL ACADEMIC DATA

In addition to using an approved screening tool, school districts are encouraged to support the identification of ELs with data from state, district, and classroom content assessments which may include:

- Writing assessments
- Reading comprehension assessments
- Observation scales
- Oral interview
- Running records
- Developmental reading assessments
- Checklist of reading proficiency carried out in conjunction with district reading program

ACCESSING WIDA SCREENER TEST MATERIALS

The ELP screeners are available in paper and in online formats. The WIDA Screener for Kindergarten is a paper-based test administered one-to-one. The WIDA Screener Online for grades 1–12 is a computer-based test with paper options for grades 1-3 in the writing content area. Test forms and administration manuals are available to all WIDA Consortium member states at no additional cost. Please contact your System Test Coordinator (STC) to gain access to screening materials and test administration training. Questions about accessing screening materials or the WIDA website can be directed to the OPI Assessment Help Desk at 1-844-867-2569 or by email at OPIAssessmentHelpDesk@mt.gov.

UPDATING STUDENT EL INFORMATION IN EDUCATE (IC)

All students identified as ELs must be enrolled in the EL program in EDUCATE (IC). See the [EDUCATE \(IC\) Data Collection Schedule](#) for more information. The EL EDUCATE (IC) module is used to collect, monitor, and report out on students identified as ELs by the reporting school district. The OPI uses this data for assessment registration and to calculate student participation in state and federal programs, including the annual ELP assessment. The [EL Tool Guide](#) provides step by step directions for entering EL program participation in EDUCATE (IC).

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT EL IDENTIFICATION

Which school districts are required to identify ELs?

All districts must identify those students who qualify for language support as English learners and provide them with language support as required by state and federal law.

Do EL determinations follow the student if they transfer?

If an EL transfers from a Montana district or other WIDA consortium state school district, the district receiving the student must request the EL records transfer in EDUCATE (IC). Then the student's EL status, WIDA ACCESS assessment results, and other records related to their EL status will follow the student to the new district.

When must an EL be identified?

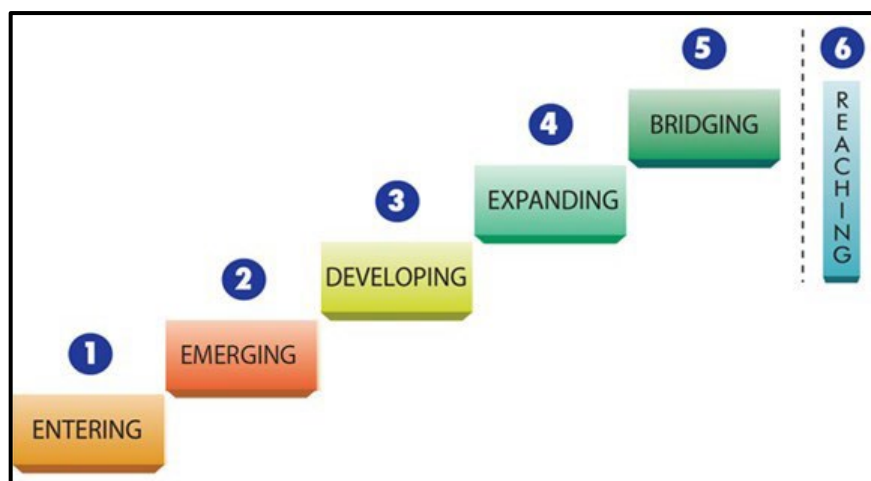
An EL must be identified as soon as possible, preferably before the start of the school year, but no later than 30 days after the start of the year. A student who enrolls after the start of the school year should be identified **within 30 days of enrollment**. If an EL transfers from another district, EL records must be requested and transferred from the former district with the student.

What will the ELP screeners tell me about the student?

The results of the screeners will indicate the level of the student's proficiency in each domain (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and will guide the appropriate program placement and level of service needed. These scores also serve as a starting point for differentiation and scaffolding in content instruction.



Figure 6: Levels of English Language Proficiency



What are the English Language Proficiency levels?

The WIDA standards and assessments include six proficiency levels. According to WIDA, a student reaching “Level 6: Bridging” shows no language characteristics that would distinguish them as needing additional English language services. Such a student would be capable enough in all language domains: speaking, listening, writing, and reading, to be able to benefit fully from mainstream classroom instruction. See [Appendix D: WIDA’s Performance Definitions](#) for WIDA’s performance definitions describing what students can do at each proficiency level. They can also be found at the [WIDA Montana State](#) page.

ACCESSIBILITY

Decisions about supports for ELs for the classroom and for assessments are made on an individual basis. EL teams should consider the student’s proficiency skills in English (WIDA Screener and WIDA ACCESS scores), the student’s proficiency in their home language, and the student’s instructional history.

Table 2 provides an example of a template to gather information about a student that can be used to help determine EL supports for instruction and assessment.

Table 2: Example Data Gathering Tool

Data to be gathered:	Example
Student Name, WIDAACCESS Overall Composite Score	Name: Justin, 3.0
Where was the student born?	Born: in US
What is the home primary language or language of impact?	Home language: English and Blackfeet
What are the student’s language skills in the home language/language of impact?	Home Language skills: Justin attended a language immersion preschool and has informal speaking and listening skills in Blackfeet. Justin speaks a combination of English and Blackfeet at home with his parents.
When was the child first enrolled in US schools?	Enrolled in US schools: in kindergarten
What is the student’s educational background?	Educational background: 2 years in immersions pre-school, enrolled in kindergarten.
What is the student’s background with English?	Lifelong exposure outside of school; 1.5 years in the academic setting
Screener Scores/WIDA ACCESS Test Scores: Listening Level: Speaking Level: Reading Level: Writing Level:	WIDA Screener Scores: Listening: 4.0 Speaking: 2.0 Reading: 2.0 Writing: 1.0

There are two categories of general supports for ELs: home language supports and English supports. The former are supports provided to ELs that involve the use of the student's home language. These types of supports are most effective for students whose primary form of communication is not English. English supports are those things provided that do not involve use of home language resources or translations. Home language supports are only effective when the student has had instruction in the content that is being assessed or taught in their home language.

For students with special needs (e.g., disabilities, Section 504/IEP, or EL plans), accommodation ensures access to the general curriculum. These supports should be used consistently during instruction and assessments, starting at least three months before statewide assessment(s). Any accommodations used in assessments must be familiar to the student and reflect what is used in the classroom. Parents should be informed about their child's supports. The goal is to remove barriers so students can show what they know, with all students working toward grade-level standards using appropriate supports.

In most cases, the EL supports that are provided to students in the classroom should be the same as those provided for statewide assessments. In some cases, a support that is allowable in the classroom is not appropriate for use on statewide assessments. For instance, a student would not use a word-for-word dictionary on the WIDA ACCESS assessment because the test is an assessment of a student's English language skills. It is important for educators to become familiar with [the usability, accessibility, and accommodation OPI guidelines for each state assessment](#) and understand the allowable supports and context for each accessibility feature. These manuals provide guidance on allowable supports for ELs and detail the standardized procedures for administering the state test to ELs. Test administrators who will work with EL assessments must receive test administration, test security, and test accessibility training prior to administration of any statewide assessments to ensure accurate, valid, and reliable results of student achievement.

PROVIDING ACCOMMODATIONS TO ELs WITH DISABILITIES

Montana has in place procedures to ensure the inclusion of all accredited and public elementary and secondary school students with disabilities in the Montana Comprehensive Assessment System (MontCAS) statewide testing program.

Under IDEA, the determination of which students are English learners with disabilities and the type of accommodations they receive should be made by the student's IEP team and, if necessary, a 504 Plan should be developed that includes the student's parents or guardians, teachers, school counselors, and others. Some of these identified students may not be able to take one or more of the four domains (Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing) of the WIDA ACCESS assessment due to their disabilities. For more information please go to [OPI Statewide Testing Page on Accessibility Resources](#).

ASSESSMENT

Under state and federal law, all districts are required to assess the English proficiency of English language learners annually ([ARM 10.56.102](#) and [ESSA Section 1111\(b\)\(2\)\(B\)\(vii\)\(III\)](#)).

DATA COLLECTION REQUIREMENTS

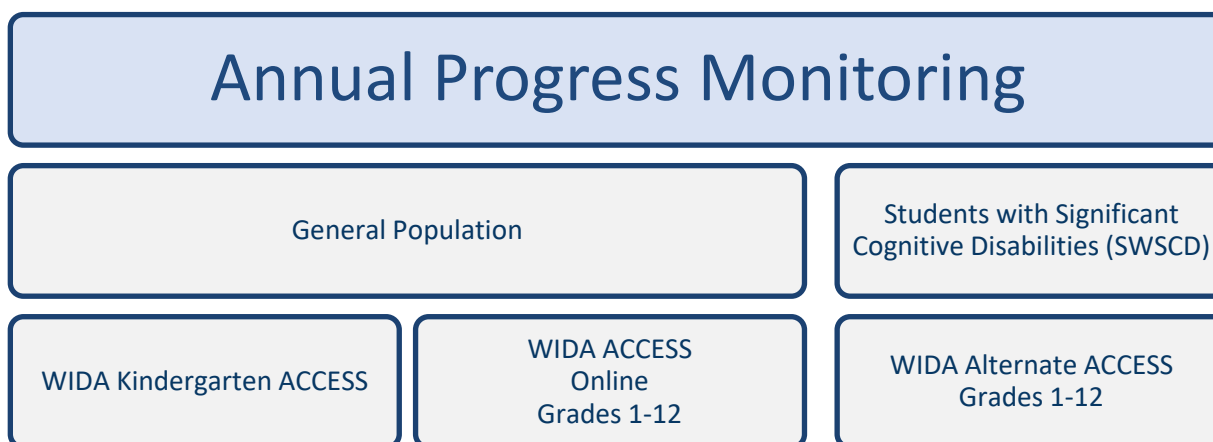
School districts must enter and maintain accurate data for ELs in the Achievement in Montana Student Information System/EDUCATE (IC) database. Title III of ESSA requires school districts to disaggregate EL data by the number and percentage of ELs with disabilities, in reporting on (1) the number and percentage of ELs making progress towards ELP; and (2) the number and percentage of former ELs meeting State academic standards for four years after exit. [ESEA Section 3121(a)].



The EDUCATE (IC) data elements are:

1. Home Primary Language (HPL)
2. Language of Impact (LOI)
3. EL identification (**within 30 days**)
4. Date identified as EL
5. Misidentification (New in 2026 **under rare circumstances**)
6. Supports for Math/ELA/Science assessments
7. Date exited from EL status (if/where applicable)
8. Two years of monitoring **after** exiting EL status

According to the [EDUCATE \(IC\) Data Collection Schedule](#), EL data must be entered into EDUCATE (IC) by the October count date in order for students to be registered to participate in the assessment. Students who are identified on the October count date as EL are registered for the annual ELP assessment. Preparation for the WIDA ACCESS assessments can be conducted using the [WIDA Montana State](#) page. The chart below shows what annual progress monitoring may look like for the EL populations within your district and assessments that they may qualify for/participate in:



WIDA ACCESS ASSESSMENT

In addition to an initial assessment for identification and program placement, **all identified ELs must be assessed annually in grades K-12 for ELP in the four domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.** This includes all ELs who receive special education services no matter what their disability or level of service. All students, including ELs and students with IEPs, identified at the time of statewide testing must be accounted for when the assessment results are reported to the U.S. Department of Education (ED). The SY25/26 testing window is 9 weeks long and will run January through the beginning of March. More information is available on the [WIDA Montana State](#) page as well as the [OPI Assessment Testing Windows](#).

The OPI has utilized the WIDA ACCESS (online) assessment to measure English proficiency for ELs. The WIDA ACCESS is a large-scale English language proficiency assessment aligned to the WIDA English language development standards (2011). Subtests include the domains of listening, speaking, writing, and reading. There is an alternate assessment available, the WIDA Alternate ACCESS for EL students who have significant cognitive disabilities. It is important that registration information within the OPI's (EDUCATE (IC) student information system be as accurate and complete as possible for the appropriate identification of students eligible for this assessment. **An EL must achieve an overall composite score of 4.7 or higher to be considered proficient in academic English and to exit EL status.** Montana defines proficiency for the WIDA Alternate ACCESS test as an overall composite score of P2 for ELs with the most significant cognitive disabilities.



REQUIRED TRAINING FOR TEST ADMINISTRATORS

Annually, all WIDA accounts are reset and refreshed by the OPI. Test administrators are required to be certified **every two years for renewal purposes, and first-time certification is mandatory** for any new test administrators to be eligible to administer WIDA ACCESS and the WIDA screeners. Training for school district personnel is available online through the [WIDA Secure Portal](#). If you do not have an account setup, please either reach out to your district STC or your district AR.

To complete the certification process, test administrators **must score a minimum of 80%** on each of the WIDA ACCESS training quizzes (Group, Speaking, Kindergarten, and WIDA Alternate ACCESS) for the assessment components that they will administer. The OPI also provides other forms of training, however, test administrators must still complete the required quizzes online. Periodic training events hosted by the OPI can be found on the [OPI's Learning Opportunities Portal](#). The WIDA website training courses are password protected and must be accessed through [WIDA Secure Portal](#). Test administrators can contact their STC to obtain a personal password. For questions about WIDA accounts/account setup, please contact your STC. If further assistance is needed, please contact the OPI Assessment Help Desk at 1-844-867-2569 or email at OPIAssessmentHelpDesk@mt.gov.

SCORE REPORTS AND MAKING DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS

All kindergarten domains and the speaking portion of the paper version of grades 1–12 WIDA ACCESS are rated by test administrators during the test administration. If students take the online WIDA ACCESS, which is Montana's preferred method, the speaking portion of the test is also on the computer, and the test delivery contractor rates the responses for grades 1–12. Printed copies of the following results reports are mailed to schools the in each spring. These reports include each of the following:

Table 3: Score Report Types and Intended Audiences

WIDA ACCESS Score Report	Audience or Stakeholder	Types of Information
Individual Student Report	• Students • Parents / Guardians • Teachers • School Teams	Individual student's scale scores and levels of English language proficiency for language domains (Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing) and four composites (Oral Language, Literacy, Comprehension, and Overall Score).
Student Roster Report	• Teachers • Program Coordinators / Directors • Administrators	Scale scores and proficiency levels for each language domain and four composites by school, grade, student, and grade-level cluster.
School Frequency Report	• Program Coordinators / Directors • Administrators	The number of students and percentage of total tested at each proficiency level for each language domain and four composites within a school.
District Frequency Report (In Montana, District refers to a School System)	• Program Coordinators / Directors • Administrators • School Boards	Number of students and percentage of total tested at each proficiency level for each language domain and four composites by proficiency levels for grades within a district.

It is required by law that results be shared with parents/guardians, but School Systems may decide how to do this. It is recommended that a copy of the Individual Student Report be kept in the student's cumulative file and that another copy be sent home to the parent/guardian for discussions about setting goals and checking progress. The reason behind best practice of maintaining Individual Score Reports (ISRs) in the student's cumulative file is to ensure that should that student transfer out of district, those results will follow them. Additionally, they can be used for EL monitoring and progress for EL Plans and development of what may work



best to continue support in and out of the classroom for individual students.

Each school district's student data file is available on the [WIDA AMS/DRC](#) portal and guidance on how to access these resources can be found in the DRC WIDA Reporting Services Guide which can be accessed through the **Reporting Services Home → select the question mark in upper right-hand corner for the guide**. Further guidance on navigating the application is found on the landing page of the Reporting Services Homepage as well.

INTERPRETIVE GUIDES FOR WIDA ACCESS SCORE REPORTS

WIDA provides this [WIDA ACCESS Interpretive Guide for Score Reports](#) to help educators and families understand what a student's domain and composite scores mean for their English language development and proficiency in different areas. WIDA also provides the [WIDA Alternate ACCESS Interpretive Guide](#) for students with disabilities who take the alternate assessment.

USING ACHIEVEMENT DATA

The OPI recommends using the data from the WIDA ACCESS as a part of a feedback loop and to inform the continuous improvement process (see [ARM 10.55.601](#)). The state Board of Public Education established the requirement for a continuous school improvement plan where each school district and each of its schools must develop, implement, and evaluate continuous school improvement plans and make the plans available to the public. Individual student score reports should also be used by teachers to craft instructional plans and set meaningful goals for students.

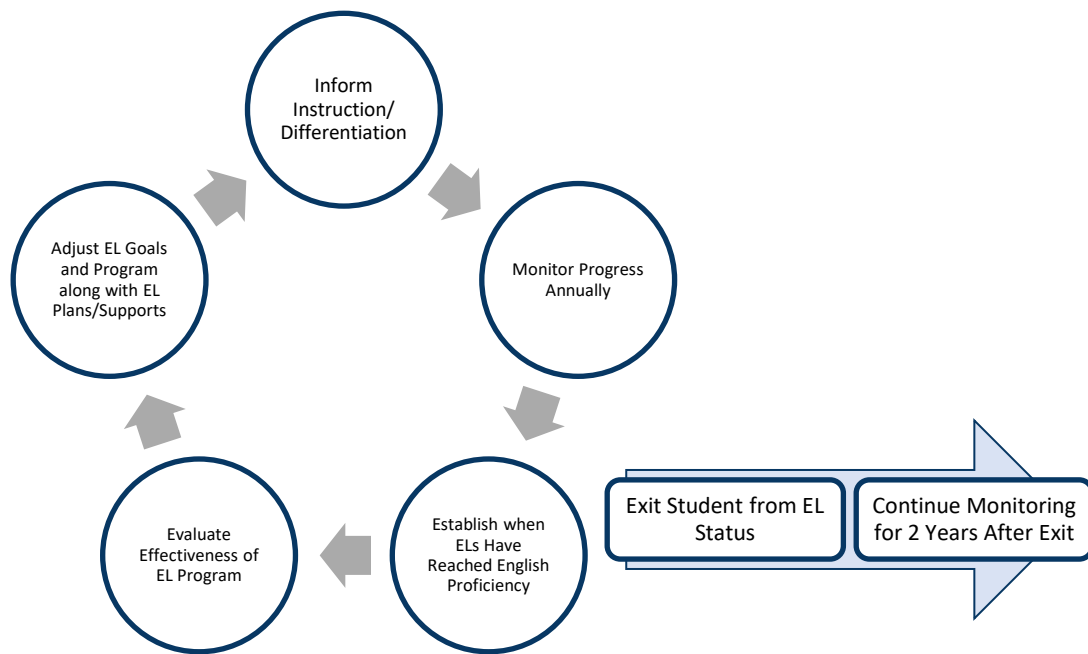
It is required, both by state and federal law, that families be provided with transparency on statewide testing including participation requirements, time requirements, and information available from the assessments in a timely manner (see [ESSA 1112](#), [ARM 10.56.102\(6\)](#), and [ARM 10.55.603\(3\)-\(4\)](#)). In addition to this requirement, school districts are required to provide timely individual student reports to families, teachers, and principals and include the results on local report cards ([ESSA 1111](#)).

When reports are delivered, the scores are used to monitor annual progress by showing how much a student has grown or when the student meets Montana's proficiency criteria and is ready to exit the EL program. School districts also use the data to evaluate the effectiveness of the EL program that is in place to serve the needs of their students. Based on the data, a school district may continue to use the same program or may need to make a change if a student is not progressing. School districts can also use achievement data to track progress towards the previous year's goals and to set new goals for the next academic year.

Finally, EL achievement and progress data are used by educators to determine the instructional support and differentiation in content lessons based on the student proficiency levels in each assessment domain (see **Figure 7**).



Figure 7: How to use WIDA ACCESS Data



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT ASSESSMENT

Why does the OPI administer the WIDA screeners and WIDA ACCESS assessments?

The WIDA screeners are used to provide an objective measure to help districts determine when a student should be identified as an EL. Once a student is identified as an EL, they are registered for the appropriate WIDA ACCESS test (WIDA Kindergarten ACCESS, WIDA Online ACCESS, or WIDA Alternate ACCESS) to help monitor their academic language progress in grades K-12 according to Montana's proficiency criteria on an annual basis. Student participation is important for both federal and state compliance ESSA (**1111(b)**) and **ARM 10.56**).

What other statewide assessments must an EL take?

All ELs must participate in the MontCAS academic content assessments in grades 3–8 and 11 for reading/language arts and mathematics and in grades 5, 8 and 11 for science. ELs who have been enrolled in a US school for less than twelve months qualify for a *one-time* exemption from the statewide ELA assessments and may take the WIDA ACCESS test in place of it. The students must still take the math and science tests for their grade level but may do so with language supports and accommodations.

How should students with disabilities and English learners meaningfully participate in state tests?

All students with disabilities and ELs **must** be included in statewide assessments. This has prompted the creation of a range of test participation options, making it possible for students with the most significant disabilities even to have the opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do on a test aligned with general education content standards. There are three options for ELs to participate in state tests:

1. Participate in general population assessments without accommodations.
2. Participate in general population assessments with accommodations ([see Accessibility Resources](#)).
3. Participate in alternate assessments when the [participation criteria](#) are met.

What accommodations may be made for ELs on statewide assessments?

All EL students are required to participate in state academic assessments and must be provided with language supports and accommodations that reflect their classroom instruction. Common supports include read-aloud, extended time, and use of illustrated glossaries or bilingual dictionaries. Students with IEPs or 504 plans may use their regular

accommodations. Details on approved accommodations are in the [WIDA Accessibility and Accommodations Manual](#), with additional guidance available in [Montana's Three Tiers of Accessibility](#) and [ACT Test Accommodations and EL Supports](#).

What about ELs with diagnosed disabilities?

ELs with disabilities may use approved accommodations on the WIDA ACCESS and other statewide assessments or take the WIDA Alternate ACCESS, depending on their IEP. The IEP or 504 team must choose accommodations based on the student's needs, document them in the plan, and ensure they are also used during instruction. It's essential to check the test administrator's manual before testing, as some accommodations could invalidate test results.

Why is it important to include all students?

Federal laws like ESSA, IDEA, and the Civil Rights Act require fair and equal treatment of all students. ESSA mandates that all students—including those with disabilities and ELs—must participate in statewide assessments. These assessments are census-based and designed to measure learning across all public-school students and private accredited schools, so full participation and inclusion are required.

How will this data be used for accountability?

Student participation is mandatory for both federal and state compliance. Montana's accountability system uses results from this assessment for all schools with ten or more ELs to calculate the [ESSA EL Progress](#). ELs take this assessment until they reach proficiency according to Montana's proficiency criteria. For accountability purposes, school districts must annually assess all students and in instances of special circumstance may not fall below the 95 percent threshold for the total population or student subgroups (100% participation is expected for WIDA ACCESS/EL Testing). School districts must also adhere to the 1% of the total population student cap for students identified as eligible to participate in the alternate assessment(s).

When are the WIDA ACCESS/WIDA Screener assessments administered in Montana?

A WIDA screener is given at the beginning of the school year or after a student transfers into the district (whichever occurs first), and the [Home Language Survey](#) has indicated a language of impact. The WIDA ACCESS is administered annually and beginning in SY25/26, will be available beginning in January and ending at the beginning of March, with a 9-week window.

Who is included in Montana's accountability system?

The MontCAS statewide testing program is designed to ensure that all students participate and are included to the fullest extent possible. *Specifically, the OPI's policy is designed to reduce variation in achievement reporting and to ensure maximum student participation in these required assessments. There are extremely rare (low incident) circumstances, such as a major medical event, that may preclude a student from participating in the required statewide test.* However, it is **never allowable to exclude students based on expected performance, difficulty in administering the test, disability, or EL status**. ELs must be evaluated using an approved OPI ELP screener to determine their identification as an EL and consequent participation in the required statewide ELP assessment consistent with state and federal policies. All EL students enrolled in grades K–12 are required to participate in one of the WIDA ACCESS assessments except the following:

- Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who meet the criteria for participation in an alternate assessment (**approximately one percent or fewer of the entire student population**). These students will participate in the WIDA Alternate ACCESS assessment.
- If the student has been enrolled in a US School for less than twelve months, they have a one-time exemption from taking the required statewide ELA assessment.
- Foreign Exchange Students are expected to participate if the student is enrolled in the EDUCATE (IC) and included into MAEFAIRS for purposes of determining the Average Number Belonging (ANB) but are not included for accountability.



PROFICIENCY CRITERIA AND EXIT PROCESS

In general, English Learners are no longer classified as ELs once they have attained the language skills necessary to learn in age and grade appropriate settings in all areas of language development without the use of adapted or modified English materials.

MONTANA'S DEFINITION OF PROFICIENCY

According to Montana's definition of proficiency, a student must achieve an overall composite score of 4.7 or higher on WIDA ACCESS to be considered proficient in academic English. It was established during the 2019 Montana WIDA Standards Validation Workshop that students at this level of academic English proficiency are statistically just as likely as their non-EL peers to achieve proficiency in other statewide math, science, and language arts assessments.

PROFICIENCY CRITERIA FOR ELs WITH SIGNIFICANT COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

During the 2019 Montana WIDA Standards Validation Workshop, the stakeholders established a minimum requirement to exit EL services for ELs with the most significant cognitive disabilities as an overall composite score of P2 on the WIDA Alternate ACCESS.

EL EXIT PROCESS

STEP 1: Has the student achieved English language proficiency according to Montana's definition of proficiency? Consider ELP data from the WIDA ACCESS assessment as provided on the score reports that are delivered to districts in spring (online and on paper) and are stored in students' cumulative files.

STEP 2: Is the student meeting academic achievement expectations for their grade level? Consider additional measures of reading, writing, and language development. Acceptable sources of data can include:

- The reading Science scores (Did the student score proficient or above?)
- Classroom or school assessments of reading comprehension and writing (Is the student meeting grade level expectations in the area of reading comprehension?)
- Input from general education and content teachers.

STEP 3: Is the student's English proficiency sufficient to ensure full participation in society? Consider evidence of receptive and productive language uses to accomplish social and occupational goals within and beyond school (Linquanti and Cook 2013). Types of data to consider:

- Language impact on social pragmatics
- Impact of language on successful use of interpersonal skills to achieve social goals
- Impact of language on behavior

STEP 4: Exit. If the student meets the criteria for proficiency in English language proficiency, academic achievement, and full participation in society within and beyond school, then they may be exited and re-designated as formerly EL in EDUCATE (IC). Parents should be informed of the decision to exit the student from EL status. The student will continue to be monitored for the two years following re-designation.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT PROFICIENCY CRITERIA AND EXIT PROCESS

What support should be provided to an EL after he/she is considered proficient?

A student continues to acquire English long after testing proficient on the WIDA ACCESS. Targeted content area language support may be necessary to support the student's continued success in the mainstream classroom. Performance measures in all content areas should also be considered. In EDUCATE (IC), once a student's Program Exit Date is input, it will show the student as Formerly EL for the two following years while s/he is in monitoring status.



When should exit decisions be made?

Exit decisions should be made **within 60 days of receiving the results reports** from the WIDA ACCESS assessments. If it is determined that a student will be re-designated as former EL, **the re-designation in EDUCATE (IC) must occur by June 30th each year.**

Who should make exit decisions?

Ideally, exit decisions are made by a team that may consist of ESL/Bilingual teachers, counselors or administrators, test coordinators, and the general or content area teachers of the student. Once a student demonstrates proficiency using Montana's exit criteria, they must be exited in the student information system (e.g., EDUCATE (IC), Power School, etc.) and then monitored for two years to make sure they are continuing to demonstrate English proficiency.

FAMILY NOTIFICATION

Under federal law, all school districts are required to notify parents/guardians of the instructional placements of all EL students in their schools. **Families must be notified within 30 days of the start of the school year that their student has been identified as EL.** If a student enrolls after the start of the school year, the **notification must be within two weeks after placement in an EL program.**

The notification must include:

1. the reasons for the identification of their child as an EL and in need of placement in a language instruction educational program.
2. the child's level of English proficiency, how such level was assessed, and the status of the child's academic achievement.
3. the method of instruction used in the program in which their child is or will be participating, and the methods of instruction used in other available programs, including how such programs differ in content, instructional goals, and the use of English and a native language in instruction.
4. how the program in which their child is or will be participating will meet the educational strengths and needs of the child.
5. how such program will specifically help their child learn academic English and meet age-appropriate academic achievement standards for grade promotion and graduation.
6. the specific exit requirements for such program, the expected rate of transition from such program into classrooms that are not tailored for EL students, and the expected rate of graduation from secondary school for such program if funds under this title are used for students in secondary schools.
7. in the case of a child with a disability, how such program meets the objectives of the individualized education program of the child; and
8. information pertaining to parental rights that includes written guidance
 - a. detailing—
 - i. the right of parents/guardians to have their child immediately removed from such program upon their request; and
 - ii. the options that families have to decline to enroll their child in such program or to choose another program or method of instruction, if available; and
 - b. assistance for parents in selecting among various programs and methods of instruction, if more than one program or method is offered by the eligible entity.

To access free letters and resources, visit transact.com. Districts can login with a school email address and send questions to the Transact support team at 1-425-977-2100 or support@transact.com.

Additionally, the Office for Civil Rights states that **“school districts have a responsibility to adequately notify national-origin minority parents of school activities that are called to the attention of other parents. Notification must be sufficient so that parents can make well-informed decisions about the participation of**



their children in a district's programs and services. Districts may be required to provide notification in the parents' home language.” WIDA provides translations of the Parent Report and a sample parent cover letter in many languages in the [WIDA Resource Library](#).

TITLE INFORMATION

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the federal law that allows the U.S. Government to support both national and local education goals with grants and other resources. Passed in 2015, it replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB). and became the latest iteration, or extension, of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This act established the supplementary school support programs for special student populations commonly known as the Title programs. Each year, the State of Montana receives an allocation for each program based upon the number of identified eligible students. The allocation is then distributed to all eligible districts using the applicable formula(s). Formulas and the application process vary somewhat across programs. Of the programs listed below, Title I Part C, Title I Part D, and Title IX are administered through separate applications. The other programs are all administered through a common application known as the ESEA Consolidated Application. For Title information and guidance, you can access further information in the [OPI Title Program Guide](#), or by reaching out to one of the contacts found on the [OPI Federal Programs](#) page.

CONCLUSION

Guidance provided in this document is intended to assist school districts in appropriately identifying and serving English learners within the broad and varied scope of their enrollment in Montana schools. Each district meets the needs of its students in multiple ways, giving careful consideration to the linguistic and cultural resources and experiences they bring to the school community.

OPI CONTACTS

EL Classroom Support & Instructional Resource Specialist	OPI Special Populations Assessment Specialist	Special Education Contact
Serena Wright	Dylan Conway	John Gorton
Phone: 406-410-4098	Phone: 406-444-4420	Phone: 406-459-4281
serena.wright@mt.gov	dylan.conway2@mt.gov	john.gorton@mt.gov

OTHER CONTACT INFORMATION:

1. OPI Assessment Help Desk at 1-844-867-2569 or email at OPIAssessmentHelpDesk@mt.gov.
2. OPI EDUCATE (IC) Help Desk 1-877-424-6681 or 406-444-3800 or opiaimhelp@mt.gov.
3. [WIDA Secure Portal](#) Client Services Center at 1-866-276-7735 or email at help@wida.us.
4. [WIDA AMS \(DRC\)](#) at 1-855-787-9615 or email at WIDA@datarecognitioncorp.com.



ACRONYM GLOSSARY

Table 4: List of Common Acronyms, Terms, and Definitions

Acronym	Term	Definition
EDUCATE (IC)	Achievement in Montana	The OPI's student information system.
EL	English Learner	See the federal definition on page 3.
ELD	English Language Development	Standards that guide teachers in instruction that will assist ELs in gaining proficiency in English.
ELP	English Language Proficiency	An assessment required by federal and state law to measure an EL's ability to use the English language for communication and academic work.
ESL	English as a Second Language	The use of English by speakers with different native languages.
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act	The US law passed in December 2015 that governs the United States K–12 public education policy. The law replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).
HL	Heritage Language	Languages other than the dominant language (or languages) in a given social context.
HPL	Home Primary Language	The specific language that is used normally by the student and their family. The state list of languages comes from the Federal code set ISO-639.2 and was updated and approved by the OPI Data Governance committee in June 2018. (See EDUCATE (IC) Data Dictionary Website, page 34.)
HLS	Home Language Survey	A questionnaire given to parents/guardians that helps schools identify potential ELs.
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act	A four-part piece of American legislation that ensures students with a disability are provided with Free Appropriate Public Education that is tailored to their individual needs.
IEP	Individualized Education Plan	A document that is developed by a team for a student that needs special education services.
WIDA ACCESS	Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners	Montana's English Language Proficiency assessment for English Learners that is given annually from kindergarten through 12th grade.

APPENDICES

[Appendix A: Montana Home Language Survey](#)

[Appendix B: Language Observation Checklist](#)

[Appendix C: Criteria for Identification of English Learners](#)

[Appendix D: WIDA Descriptions of Performance](#)

[Appendix E: EL Program Placement Letter](#)

[Appendix F: Alternate Eligibility Criteria](#)

[English Learner Checklist](#)

[OPI Title Program Guide](#)



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[Serving English Learners who Opt-Out of EL Programs](#)
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