

Aligning English Language Proficiency and Academic ELA Benchmarks in Illinois



About this Data Brief

The Illinois Consortium to Advance English Learner Program Effectiveness (Consortium) is excited to offer this analysis to the educator and policy community to help guide the process to evaluate current state policy for reclassification of English Learner (EL) students. While the Consortium stands behind the results contained in this document, we recognize the analysis is based on a sample of Consortium member school districts and does not necessarily represent the population of EL students across the state.

The analysis presented serves as a demonstration and a starting point for robust dialogue for how to best meet the needs of EL students. We urge the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and its partners to replicate this analysis with data from every district in the state so that policymakers can evaluate the 4.8 reclassification benchmark with complete statewide evidence. The Consortium intends to update this analysis as more data becomes available.

Executive Summary

More English learners meet the state ELA proficiency benchmark than the ACCESS reclassification benchmark in every grade examined

In a matched sample of 20,802 English learners (EL) in Grades 3–11 who received a score on both ACCESS and a statewide assessment of English language arts (ELA) in the spring of 2026, a larger percentage of EL students met the Illinois academic English language arts (ELA) proficiency benchmark than met the ACCESS 4.8 exit benchmark in every grade examined. The report also equates grade-specific ACCESS scores to statewide ELA proficiency benchmarks, giving policymakers and local practitioners an additional set of ACCESS benchmarks to contextualize EL performance.

Key Findings

- 01 The pattern holds in all nine grades.** Within every grade from 3 through 11, a higher percentage of EL students met the state ELA proficiency benchmark than met ACCESS 4.8.
- 02 Grade 6 shows the largest ratio.** 20% of EL students met the state ELA benchmark, but only 3% met the ACCESS reclassification benchmark of 4.8. In Grade 6 an EL student is almost seven times more likely to pass IAR than to pass ACCESS.
- 03 ELA Proficient equates to ACCESS 4.0 to 4.7.** Equipercentile equating places the state ELA Proficient benchmark below the 4.8 exit criterion in every grade.

The Policy Question

Is it coherent state policy for an EL student to continue to be labeled EL despite demonstrating academic ELA proficiency equivalent to native English speakers?

Background and Purpose

The EL Consortium previously reported that the ACCESS 4.8 exit criterion may be overly stringent and that difficulty differs by grade. Subsequent comparisons indicate that EL students meet ELA proficiency standards on the Illinois Assessment of Readiness (IAR) and ACT assessments at higher rates than they meet the ACCESS 4.8 proficiency benchmark for reclassification. This report further examines that pattern using spring 2026 assessment data.

Data and Methods

The Consortium analyzed a matched sample of **20,802 EL students** who participated in both the spring 2026 ACCESS assessment and a spring 2026 statewide ELA assessment (IAR or ACT). Comparisons were reported separately for Grades 3–11 using two complementary analyses.

Analysis 1 · Proficiency Rates

Percent meeting ACCESS 4.8 compared with percent meeting the state ELA proficiency benchmark

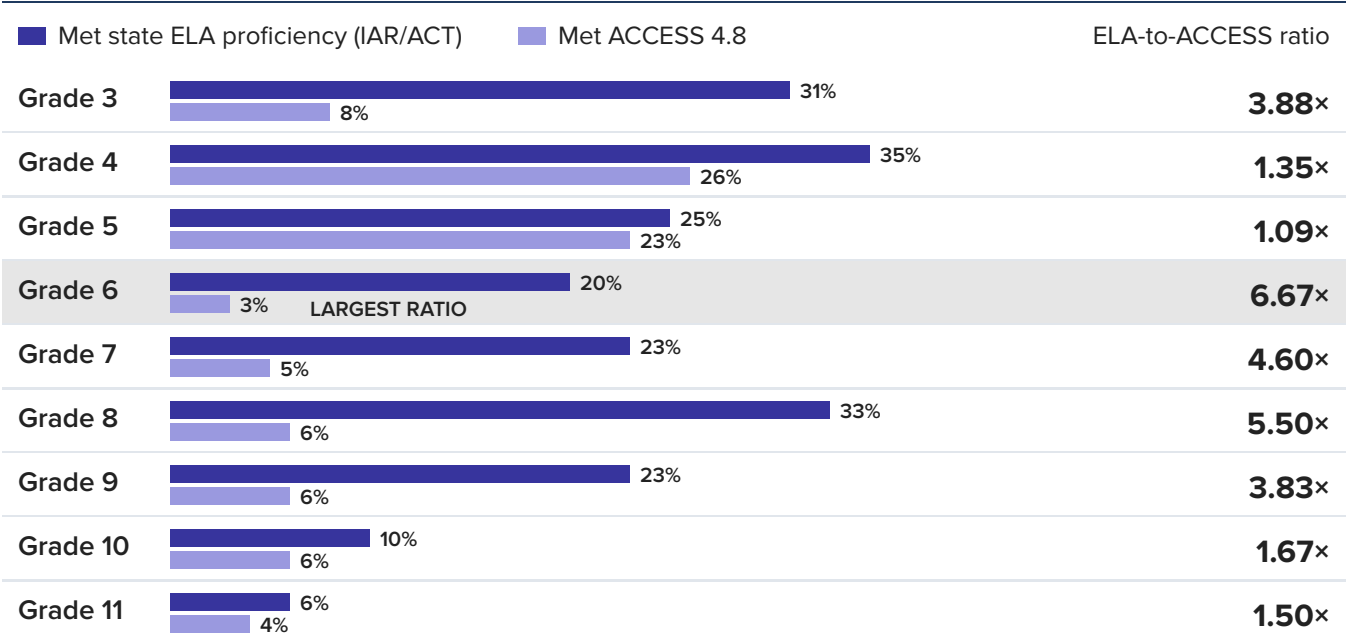
Analysis 2 · Equipercentile Equating

ACCESS scores corresponding to Approaching Proficient, Proficient, and Above Proficient on IAR/ACT

Results

EL students reach state ELA proficiency far more often than they reach ACCESS 4.8

Figure 1. Percent of matched-sample EL students meeting each benchmark, spring 2026



The ratio shows how many times more likely an EL student is to be deemed proficient on IAR/ACT than on ACCESS.

Across Grades 3 through 11, the percent of EL students meeting state ELA proficiency exceeded the percent meeting ACCESS 4.8. In Grade 6 an EL student is almost seven times more likely to pass IAR than to pass ACCESS. Grade 5 is the closest, at a ratio of 1.09.

Equating ACCESS to State ELA Benchmarks

The state ELA Proficient benchmark equates to an ACCESS performance level below 4.8 in every grade

Given the large gap in proficiency rates shown in Figure 1, equipercentile equating identifies the ACCESS scores that correspond to Approaching Proficient, Proficient, and Above Proficient on IAR/ACT. The Proficient equivalent ranges from 4.0 in Grade 3 to 4.7 in Grade 5.

Figure 2. ACCESS proficiency level equivalent to ELA Proficient, compared with the 4.8 exit benchmark

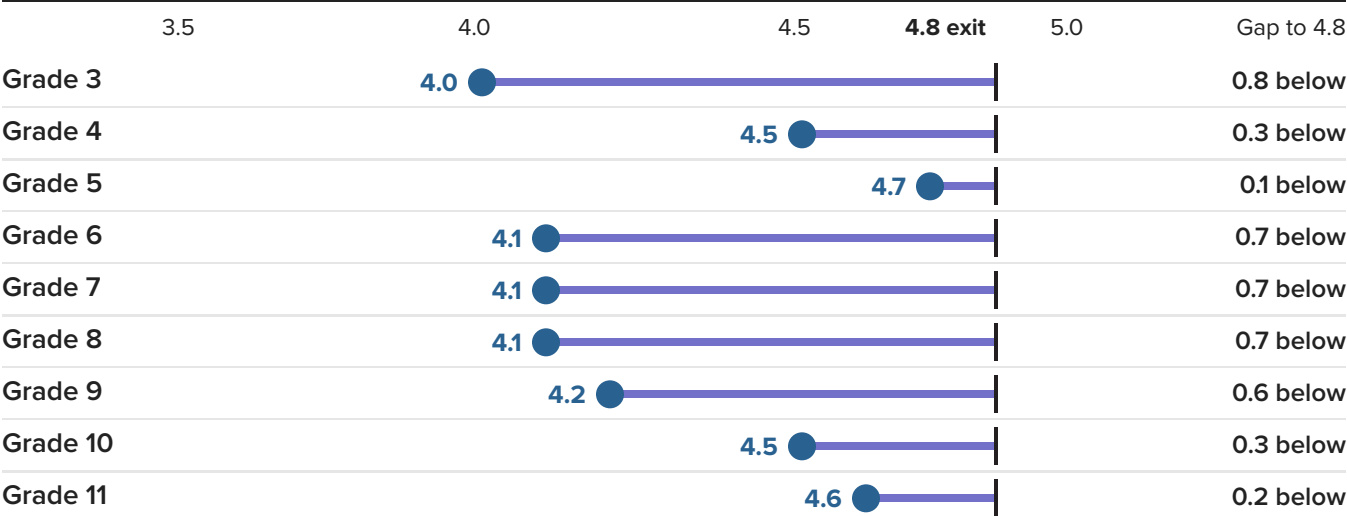


Table 1. ACCESS scale score and (proficiency level) equivalents of IAR/ACT ELA benchmarks, spring 2026

Grade	ELA Approaching Proficient	ELA Proficient	ELA Above Proficient	ACCESS 4.8 Exit
3	317 (2.9)	374 (4.0)	414 (4.9)	406 (4.8)
4	329 (3.4)	385 (4.5)	432 (5.9)	394 (4.8)
5	351 (3.6)	403 (4.7)	444 (5.9)	404 (4.8)
6	360 (3.1)	413 (4.1)	456 (5.0)	445 (4.8)
7	368 (3.1)	425 (4.1)	477 (5.4)	455 (4.8)
8	375 (3.0)	431 (4.1)	485 (5.5)	464 (4.8)
9	372 (2.9)	444 (4.2)	512 (5.9)	470 (4.8)
10	418 (3.5)	467 (4.5)	522 (6.0)	477 (4.8)
11	415 (3.3)	477 (4.6)	533 (6.0)	484 (4.8)

Policy Considerations

The central policy issue is how Illinois should interpret English language proficiency for reclassification relative to demonstrated academic performance in ELA. In the matched sample, many EL students met the state ELA proficiency benchmark but failed to reach the ACCESS 4.8 reclassification benchmark. This result warrants examination of whether the existing exit threshold is appropriately aligned with its intended function of identifying students who can participate in instruction and the broader school community without continued language support.

When an English learner demonstrates proficiency on the same grade-level English language arts assessment administered to native English-speaking students, that achievement provides compelling evidence that the student possesses sufficient English language skills to access and succeed in the general education curriculum without additional language supports.

Continuing to classify such a student as an English learner should therefore require evidence that remaining language limitations materially interfere with academic success or participation in school.

The Evidence

More EL students met state ELA proficiency than ACCESS 4.8 in grades 3-11.

The Benchmark

ELA Proficient equates to ACCESS 4.0 to 4.7, below the 4.8 exit criterion.

The Question

Whether the 4.8 exit threshold fits its intended purpose for reclassification.