English as an Additional Language (EAL) and educational achievement in England in 2023: An analysis of the National Pupil Database

Main report

November 2025

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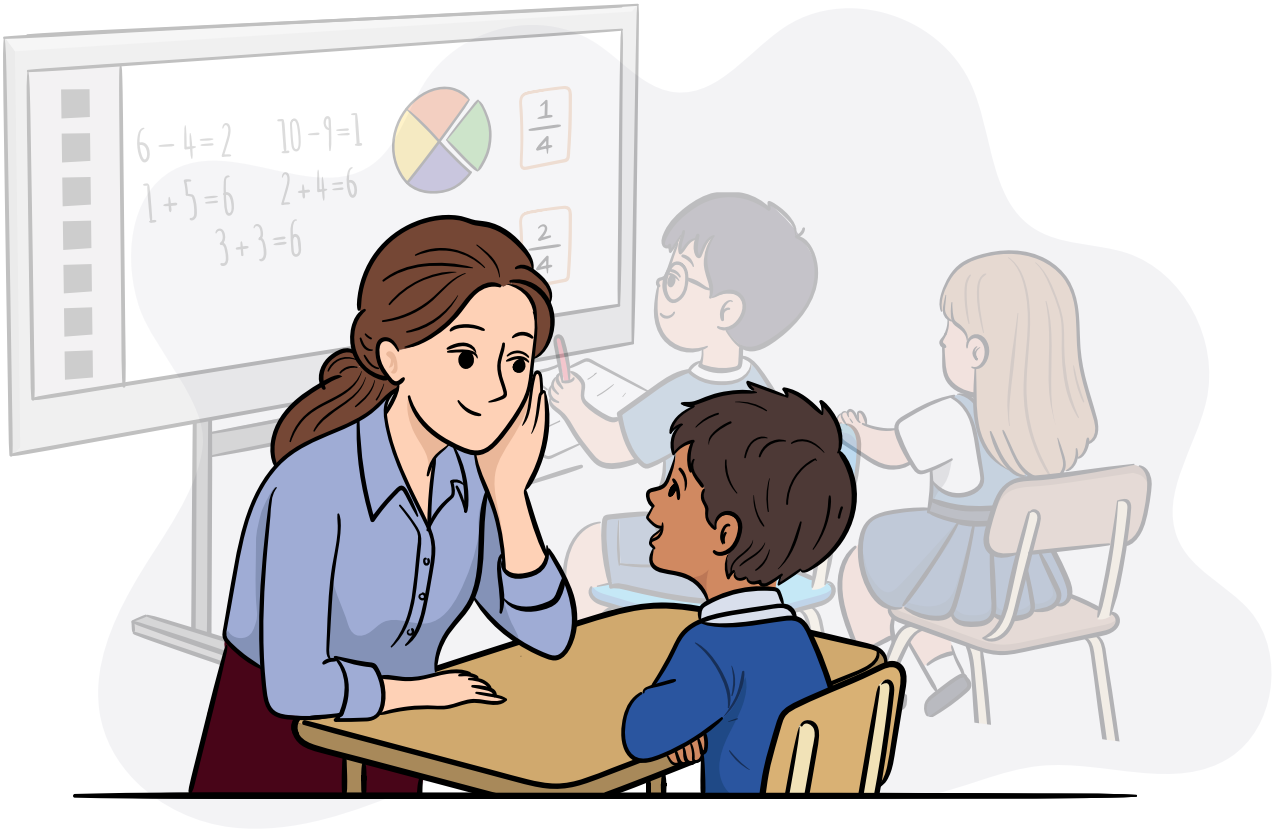

About The Bell Foundation

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We work on practical interventions, research, public policy, training, and innovation.

By generating and applying evidence, we aim to change practice, policy, and systems for multilingual children, adults and communities who experience social exclusion.

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Please cite as:

Lindorff, A., Strand, S. & Ma, Y. (2025). *English as an Additional Language and Achievement in England in 2023: An analysis of the National Pupil Database [Summary Report]*. The Bell Foundation, Unbound Philanthropy, University of Oxford.

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Acronyms and initialisms

DfE	Department for Education
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EBacc	English Baccalaureate
EHCP	Education, health, and care plan
EYFS	Early years foundation stage
FSM	Free school meals
GLD	Good level of development
GPS	Grammar, punctuation, and spelling
IDACI	Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index
LA	Local authority
MLE	Monolingual English
NFF	National funding formula
NPD	National Pupil Database
OR	Odds ratio
SD	Standard deviation
SEN	Special educational needs

Executive summary

Background to this report

In the context of schools in England, children who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) are defined as those who have been "exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English" (DfE, 2020). Over the past decade, a series of five related reports funded by The Bell Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy have investigated the relationship between EAL status, English-language proficiency, and educational outcomes (Strand, Malmberg & Hall, 2015; Strand & Hessel, 2018; Strand & Lindorff, 2020; Strand & Lindorff, 2021; Lindorff, Strand & Au, 2024; key findings from these previous studies are outlined on pages 14 to 17 of this report).

This body of work highlights the heterogeneity of the group recorded as EAL pupils, and the limitations of relying on the EAL flag in data and in policy. It consistently points to the need for a direct measure of English-language proficiency in order to understand and meet the needs of EAL pupils effectively. Notably, the Department for Education (DfE) did introduce such a measure in 2017 – based on one used in schools in Wales since 2009 – and started collecting proficiency-in-English data for all pupils in England. However, this measure remained in place only for the 2017 and 2018 school censuses, after which it was discontinued.

The present document provides a summary of results from the sixth and latest in this series of reports. Based on an analysis of 2023 data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) in England, it focuses on the following questions:

- How large are the gaps in attainment between EAL-speaking pupils and their monolingual-English-(MLE-) speaking peers at key stages of compulsory education (ages 5, 7, 11, and 16)? How have these changed over time, if at all?
- How is the size of any EAL attainment gap moderated by other pupil demographics (e.g. ethnicity, free school meals [FSM], gender)?
- Can these gaps be accounted for by socioeconomic factors, such as FSM eligibility?
- What (if any) school-level factors are correlated with large achievement gaps (particularly looking at school-level concentrations of FSM-eligible and EAL learners as respective measures of poverty and language needs)?
- Are there particular regions or local authorities (LAs) where the gaps are wider than others? Do the data suggest any reasons for this?

A technical report containing the full results from this project is available at www.bell-foundation.org.uk/resources/eal-attainment-2025-technical.

Key findings

The number and proportion of EAL pupils in England is growing. In 1997, pupils who use EAL made up 7.6% of the compulsory school-age population; by 2013 this had increased to 16.2%, and by 2023 to over 20%.

Aggregate data on the educational attainment of EAL learners can be misleading. While attainment gaps associated with EAL status on average – without taking other pupil background characteristics into account – are only particularly apparent in the early years of primary schooling, this masks the fact that some risk factors for low attainment are more pronounced within the EAL-speaking group than for their MLE-speaking peers.

Later arrival into the school system has a significant negative impact on educational attainment. In line with previous research, pupils need up to six years on average to attain proficiency in English, allowing them to fully access the curriculum and "catch up" with their MLE-speaking peers.

Taken together, these findings echo previous research in demonstrating that EAL status alone is a poor indicator of English-language proficiency and of language support needs.

Changes in prevalence and composition of EAL learners over time

The proportion of the compulsory school-age population in England (ages 5–16) using EAL has grown markedly over time, from 7.6% in 1997, to 16.2% in 2013, to over 20% – or more than 1-in-5 pupils – in 2023.

The gap between the proportion of EAL pupils recorded in primary versus secondary school has also changed. In 1997, 7.8% of primary school children were recorded as using EAL, compared to a similar 7.3% of the secondary school population. By 2013, 18.1% of primary school children were recorded as EAL learners compared to only 13.6% in secondary school; figures have remained fairly stable since then. As noted by Strand, Malmberg, and Hall (2015), this gap may reflect issues with recording practices; for example, some secondary schools may be changing pupils' EAL status from that on their historical primary school records.

The demographic composition of the EAL pupil population has shifted somewhat as well. While Black African and most Asian groups[1] made up an increasing share of the school-age population in England between 2013 and 2023, the proportion of EAL pupils within these ethnic groups decreased substantially. This may reflect the settled status of these groups, with a decreasing proportion of pupils being exposed to a heritage language at home. In contrast, while Chinese pupils comprised a fairly stable share of the school-age population and the share of White Other pupils increased substantially, the proportion of EAL learners among both these ethnic groups remained very high – possibly due to continued inward migration.

1 Ethnic groups in the NPD data are defined according to the same categories used in government surveys/censuses in England.

We see considerable regional variation in the prevalence of EAL pupils, from 8.3% in the North-East to 44% in Greater London in 2023. In most regions, proportions of EAL pupils increased by around 4–5% between 2013 and 2023, but Inner London is significant as the only area to have recorded a decrease (of about 6%) over this time period.

Looking across local authorities (LAs), the highest percentages of EAL pupils are found in urban areas, such as London, the West Midlands, and the North-West. However, there has been some outward spread to LAs surrounding urban areas, indicating that language support needs are more widely distributed than was the case a decade ago.

In 2013, just under half of all schools in England recorded at least 5% of their pupils as EAL learners; by 2023 this was true of two-thirds of all schools. However, the percentage of all schools with over 50% EAL pupils did not change dramatically; about half of these schools were in Greater London in 2023, but there were also large numbers of schools with high concentrations of EAL learners in the West Midlands, the North-West, and Yorkshire & the Humber. This shows EAL learners can be concentrated in small areas, even where they appear less prevalent across a broader geographic area.

EAL attainment gaps over time: Results from aggregate data

The following results are all based on publicly available data in which the EAL-speaking group is necessarily taken as a whole, and cannot be broken down according to other demographic characteristics or background factors. While these results can therefore only provide insight into patterns and trends on average and without further contextualisation, these factors are addressed via analysis of individual-pupil-level data in later sections.

Early years foundation stage (EYFS; age 5)

In 2023, EAL pupils were about 7 percentage points less likely than their MLE-speaking peers to attain the expected standard or above in literacy and in mathematics, and to fall within the overall category of “good level of development” (GLD) at age 5. The average number of early learning goals achieved was 14.4 for MLE speakers and 13.2 for EAL speakers. These gaps had narrowed by about 2–3% (for threshold measures comparable over time) since 2013.

Key stage 1 (age 7)

In 2023, EAL learners were less likely to achieve the expected standard in reading than their MLE-speaking peers by about 5 percentage points. EAL attainment gaps in writing and mathematics were negligible at around 2 percentage points. Over the period 2013 to 2023 there was a significant improvement in the relative performance of EAL learners in this age group.

In the year 1 phonics screening check, completed at age 6, there were negligible gaps between MLE-speaking pupils and EAL learners in the proportion achieving the expected standard. This was consistently the case in each of the years analysed here.

Key stage 2 (age 11)

From 2013 through to 2023, a lower proportion of EAL learners achieved the expected standard or above in reading compared to their MLE-speaking peers, but the difference was small in 2023 – much smaller than in previous years. Looking at mean reading scores, the EAL gap would be described as small in 2013 and 2017 but very small in 2023 (d=-0.12).[2]

In mathematics, in 2023, EAL learners were more likely to attain the expected standard or above compared to MLE learners, and they achieved a higher mean test score (d=0.22 in 2023). EAL learners also had a small advantage in performance in grammar, punctuation, and spelling (GPS) (*d*=0.17) in 2023. The average EAL advantage in both domains had increased over time.

Key stage 4 (age 16)

The data at key stage 4 show some change over time in EAL achievement gaps. In English, a lower percentage of EAL pupils achieved threshold attainment measures compared to their MLE-speaking peers in 2013 (4.2% fewer achieving GCSE grades of A*–C) and 2017 (3% fewer attaining a GCSE 9–5 pass), but by 2023 there was a small difference in favour of the EAL group (1% more attaining a GCSE 9–5 pass). In mathematics there was little substantial gap based on EAL status across years and threshold attainment measures, although the proportion achieving a grade 9–5 pass in maths in 2023 was 5% higher for EAL learners.

EAL pupils had slightly higher mean Attainment 8 scores than their MLE-speaking peers (d=0.13 in 2023), and were also more likely than MLE learners to achieve the English Baccalaureate with GCSE 9–4 or 9–5 passes. For both measures, the data indicate an increase in the relative success of EAL learners on average between 2013 and 2023.

Contextualising the relationship(s) between EAL status and attainment: Analysis of pupil-level data

As noted above, aggregate data cannot provide insight into variations in educational attainment among EAL learners – a group that previous research has established to be both heterogeneous in its demographic composition and varied in terms of pupils' proficiency in English.

2 For continuous measures, such as test or performance scores, we report Cohen's d. This compares the size of any gap between the mean scores of the two language groups (MLE and EAL). The size of Cohen's d is conventionally interpreted using the following thresholds: values of +/-0.20 = small; +/-0.50 = medium; and +/-0.80 = large (Cohen, 1988).

However, separate analyses of attainment in the EAL- and MLE-speaking groups using individual-pupil-level data from 2023 in the NPD have provided further insight into risk factors for low attainment (accounting for gender, ethnic group, birth season, FSM eligibility, neighbourhood deprivation – measured via the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index [IDACI] – and special educational needs [SEN] provision) and their differential impact according to EAL status. Importantly, these analyses also accounted for pupils' year of entry to the NPD as a proxy for their year of entry into the English school system.

While some pupil background factors tended to have fairly consistent impacts on educational attainment across both EAL and MLE pupil groups, those with the greatest differential impacts were:

- Year of entry:
  - EAL learners who joined in Reception showed no difference in average reading scores at the end of primary school (i.e. at key stage 2) compared to their MLE-speaking peers. EAL learners who joined after Reception scored substantially lower than MLE pupils.
  - EAL pupils who entered after year 5 achieved significantly lower than their MLE-speaking peers by the end of secondary school (i.e. at key stage 4).
  - As many of these later joiners may have been newcomers to England, these results represent the effect of their having had less time to acquire English-language proficiency.
- Being eligible for FSM was less of a pronounced risk among EAL pupils compared to MLE-speaking pupils across age groups.
- Belonging to an ethnic minority group tended to be associated with either a more pronounced underachievement (in the case of White Other pupils) or a less pronounced overachievement (in the case of Indian pupils), relative to White British peers, within the EAL group compared to the MLE group. This may reflect, to some extent, the effect of later entry into the school system in England.
- The presence of SEN was more of a pronounced risk among EAL pupils than among their MLE-speaking peers at later key stages (ages 11 and 16).

Differential impacts within each age group are summarised below.

EYFS (age 5)

- The attainment gap associated with FSM eligibility was much smaller for EAL pupils – mainly because for FSM-eligible pupils, EAL status made little difference to attainment.
- The substantially lower odds of attaining a GLD for the White Other, Black Caribbean/Mixed White and Black Caribbean, and Any Other ethnic groups were unique to EAL

pupils, as were the higher odds of attaining a GLD in the Indian group. We advise caution in interpreting these results, however, as the White British reference group was small among EAL learners.

Key stage 1 (age 7)

- FSM-related attainment gaps in reading and maths were again smaller for EAL pupils than for their MLE-speaking peers.
- The substantial higher attainment of most Asian groups in both reading and maths, relative to their White British peers, was less pronounced in the EAL group than in the MLE group.
- Joining a given school later was associated with lower odds of achieving the expected standard in both reading and maths, particularly for EAL pupils. This may – at least in part – reflect newcomers to England having had less time to develop their English-language proficiency.

Key stage 2 (age 11)

- As was the case in younger age groups, FSM-related attainment gaps in reading and maths were again smaller for EAL pupils.
- Having any level of SEN (i.e. with or without an education, health, and care plan) had a stronger negative association for EAL pupils than for MLE learners, as did belonging to most ethnic minority groups. This was particularly the case for the White Other group, within which EAL learners scored 1.4 points lower and MLE speakers scored about 1.6 points higher than their White British peers.
- First appearing in the NPD – as a proxy for entering into the English education system – in any year later than Reception, was distinctively associated with lower attainment for EAL pupils in reading and to some extent maths.

Key stage 4 (age 16)

- Being a boy, being in an ethnic minority group, or having any level of SEN provision were more negatively associated with attainment for EAL pupils than for their MLE-speaking peers.
- The FSM-related attainment gap was again smaller for EAL pupils than for their MLE-speaking peers.
- As at key stage 2, there was again clear evidence that later entry to the English school system (in this case after year 5) was associated with a negative impact on attainment for EAL learners.

School- and regional-level variation

We used multilevel models to account for the grouping (or "clustering") of pupils in schools, and to assess whether EAL attainment gaps at key stage 2 and key stage 4 varied by school or region.

EAL status varied in its relationship to reading attainment at key stage 2 and Attainment 8 scores at key stage 4, to the extent that this was positive in some schools and negative in others. School composition (i.e. the percentage of EAL learners and FSM-eligible pupils in a given school) and interactions between school-composition and individual-background factors (i.e. pupil-level EAL status/school-level EAL status [%]; and pupil-level FSM-eligible/school-level FSM-eligible [%]) did not explain this variation. There were some significant differences by region, though these explained little variation in any key stage 2 or key stage 4 outcome.

Regionally, attainment gaps for EAL learners at age 5 were smallest in London and largest in northern regions. These gaps narrowed for later age groups, so regional differences may reflect underlying demographics and proportions of late-arriving pupils rather than structural barriers.

Policy implications

Late arrival to the English school system is a key risk factor for underachievement among EAL learners. EAL status is one of the factors taken into account in the national funding formula (NFF), but is only funded for three years. Results from this research show that while this may be sufficient for pupils who join the English school system in Reception, it is insufficient to close EAL attainment gaps for those who join later.

Three key recommendations emerge on the basis of these results:

1. Funding should be targeted to support the EAL learners who need it the most (i.e., late joiners). In practice, this would mean up to six years of funding for later joiners, to support them for the full time needed to achieve English-language proficiency.
2. A statutory assessment of proficiency in English should be (re)instated in England – as is already the case in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – to facilitate the delivery of effective and targeted support for EAL learners.
3. Given the increasing dispersion of EAL learners geographically, teachers should receive effective training and continuing professional development, enabling them to assess pupils' proficiency in English and provide targeted and effective support.

1 Background

In England, pupils are classified as using English as an Additional Language (EAL) if they have been exposed to a language other than English during early childhood and continue to use it at home or in their community.

Crucially, however, this classification does not reflect the child's English-language proficiency. Based purely on first-language data from the national school census, the EAL category captures a highly heterogeneous group – from fluent bilingual children who are fully able to access the English-medium curriculum, to recent arrivals who are new to English and require extensive language support. This makes EAL status an imprecise proxy for language needs, and has significant implications for both assessment and support.

Research on EAL and pupil achievement in England

Somewhat unsurprisingly, because EAL status is not an indicator of proficiency in English, previous research on the relationship between EAL status and educational achievement has reflected the complexity and diversity of the EAL group itself.

This is the sixth in a related series of reports published over the last decade investigating the relationships between EAL status and educational achievement, funded by The Bell Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy. These previous publications are summarised below.

Strand, Malmberg & Hall (2015)

Analysis of individual pupil data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) in England for the year 2013 showed that:

- At age 5, 44% of pupils who use EAL had achieved a good level of development, compared to 54% of their monolingual-English-(MLE-) speaking peers. By age 16, on average, EAL learners had caught up with MLE learners.
- There was substantial variation in educational achievement within the group of pupils who use EAL. Indicators that can be seen as proxies for international arrival from abroad – such as certain first languages (especially within the "White Other" and "Black African" ethnic groups), absence of a prior attainment score from the beginning of a previous key stage, and mobility between schools – were all risk factors for lower achievement.

The main conclusion of this research was that the NPD's EAL-status indicator did not provide any information about pupils' proficiency in English – which was likely to be the major factor influencing educational achievement. The report therefore recommended

that the Department for Education (DfE) introduce a new "proficiency in English" measure, to allow schools in England to better assess and respond to pupils' needs. The DfE did introduce this measure in 2017, based on one used in Welsh schools since 2009.[1] However, it was only used for two years before being discontinued in 2019, and the data collected in the 2017 and 2018 school censuses were not made available for research.

Strand & Hessel (2018)

This study collected proficiency-in-English data from a nationally representative sample of over 140,000 pupils in 1,569 schools across six local authorities (LAs), with data matched to pupils' national assessment results at ages 5, 7, 11, and 16. Key findings included:

- Proficiency in English varied widely across the group of pupils who used EAL.
- Age was the most important factor related to these pupils' English-language proficiency. Language support was especially important in the early years of primary education, but remained crucial for pupils still acquiring proficiency in later years of schooling.
- Proficiency in English was a powerful predictor of educational achievement, explaining 22% of the variation within the EAL group.
- Low proficiency in English was associated with achievement below national averages. However, pupils who were classed as "developing competence" on the English-language proficiency scale reached close to the national average for educational achievement, and those who were "competent" or "fluent" scored significantly higher than their MLE-speaking peers.

This report recommended reinstatement of the proficiency-in-English measure within the school census in England; inclusion of the resulting data in the NPD for research purposes; and assessment of proficiency in English by teachers and schools to allow them to understand and meet their pupils' language needs.

Strand & Lindorff (2020)

This report used national administrative data from Wales to explore the time taken for pupils to reach English-language proficiency. Key findings included:

- The majority of pupils starting primary education as "new to English" took more than six years to be rated as "competent" or "fluent" in English.
- "New to English" pupils who joined schools in later years could be expected to make about the same rate of progress as those who entered in Reception.
- There were some inconsistencies in how a pupil's "competent" and "fluent" proficiency levels were being recorded over time.

1 Proficiency in English was measured on a five-point scale: A = new to English; B = early acquisition; C = developing competence; D = competent; and E = fluent.

The government in England has historically provided ringfenced funding and now provides funding mainstreamed into the national funding formula (NFF) for pupils using EAL. However, this funding is only available for three years after the EAL learner joins the school system; this report suggested that this is not enough time to gain language proficiency in order to fully access the curriculum.

Strand & Lindorff (2021)

This report analysed the same dataset from Wales, using multilevel statistical models to consider variation across schools and LAs. Key findings included:

- Schools and LAs varied substantially in both their assessments of proficiency in English and in the average time taken to progress between levels – more so than other teacher-assessed educational outcomes.
- EAL learners in the "White Other" ethnic group took significantly longer to acquire proficiency and had lower achievement than those in other ethnic minority groups.
- After accounting for the clustering of pupils in schools, and controlling for pupil background factors, the proportion of pupils acquiring proficiency in English (i.e. needing language support) in a school was not associated with its average level of achievement across all pupils, nor with school-average levels of achievement specifically for non-EAL pupils.
- Attending a school with a high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) was associated with lower educational achievement, over and above the effects of individual deprivation (proxied via FSM eligibility).
- EAL pupils with high levels of proficiency in English (particularly those rated as "fluent"), appear to have been re-coded as monolingual (i.e. non-EAL) in some schools.

This report highlighted the importance of robust moderation procedures and clear and consistent definitions and criteria to underpin assessments of English-language proficiency.

Lindorff, Strand & Au (2025)

This interim report for the present project analysed publicly available aggregate data while the research team awaited the processing of our application for individual-pupil-level data. We have included an edited version of the main content of the interim report within the present publication (pp. 18–36) to allow the reader to access findings from the project in one comprehensive document.

The present research

This report summarises results from the analyses of individual-pupil-level data from the NPD for the year 2023. Building on the interim report findings from aggregate data (Lindorff, Strand & Au, 2025), the additional individual-level data now provide more nuanced insight into the educational achievement of EAL pupils in England.

Additionally, we consider throughout how these results compare to the findings from the Strand, Malmberg, and Hall (2015) report, which used NPD data from exactly 10 years earlier (2013).

Key research questions answered in this report are:

- How is the size of any EAL attainment gap moderated by other pupil demographics (e.g. ethnic group, FSM eligibility, neighbourhood deprivation, gender, special educational needs)?
- Can these gaps be accounted for by socioeconomic factors, such as eligibility for FSM or neighbourhood deprivation?
- Do any school-level factors, such as concentrations of poverty and language needs (measured by the proportion of FSM-eligible and EAL-using pupils, respectively), explain further variability in pupil achievement, over and above pupil-level variables?
- Are there particular regions where the gaps are wider than others? Do the data suggest any reasons for this?

2 Changes in prevalence and composition of EAL learners over time: Summary of aggregate data analysis

Prevalence of EAL pupils

In January 1997, the earliest date at which consistent national figures could be found, just under 500,000 pupils were recorded as EAL users – about 7.6% of the English compulsory school-age population (ages 5–16). By 2013, this had increased to over 1 million pupils (16.2% of the school population). In 2023, almost 1.75 million EAL pupils were recorded,[2] representing more than 1 in 5 (over 20%) of all pupils aged 5–16. While the rate of increase in the proportion of pupils recorded as EAL users then levelled off slightly between 2018 and 2022, the last two years have seen a return to further increases.

In addition to the overall increase in the proportion of the pupil population recorded as EAL users from 1997 to 2023, the gap between the proportion of EAL pupils recorded in primary versus secondary school also changed (see Figure 1). In 1997, 7.8% of primary school children were recorded as EAL users, compared to a similar 7.3% of the secondary school population; by 2013, 18.1% of primary school children were recorded as EAL learners, compared to only 13.6% of secondary school pupils. Since 2013, however, this gap has remained fairly stable, with only small fluctuations. As noted by Strand, Malmberg, and Hall (2015), this gap may reflect issues with recording practices – for example, some secondary schools may be changing pupils' EAL status from that on their primary school records, possibly due to learners having acquired English-language fluency by the time they start secondary school.

2 This figure is different to the 2024 school census, which states that there are 1.77m EAL learners in England. That dataset also includes pupils in nursery schools, maintained special schools, non-maintained special schools, pupil referral units, and alternative provision, which have only been included since 2010. This report includes weighted averages of the primary and secondary school totals only (97.5% of all EAL pupils) in order to accurately identify trends over time.

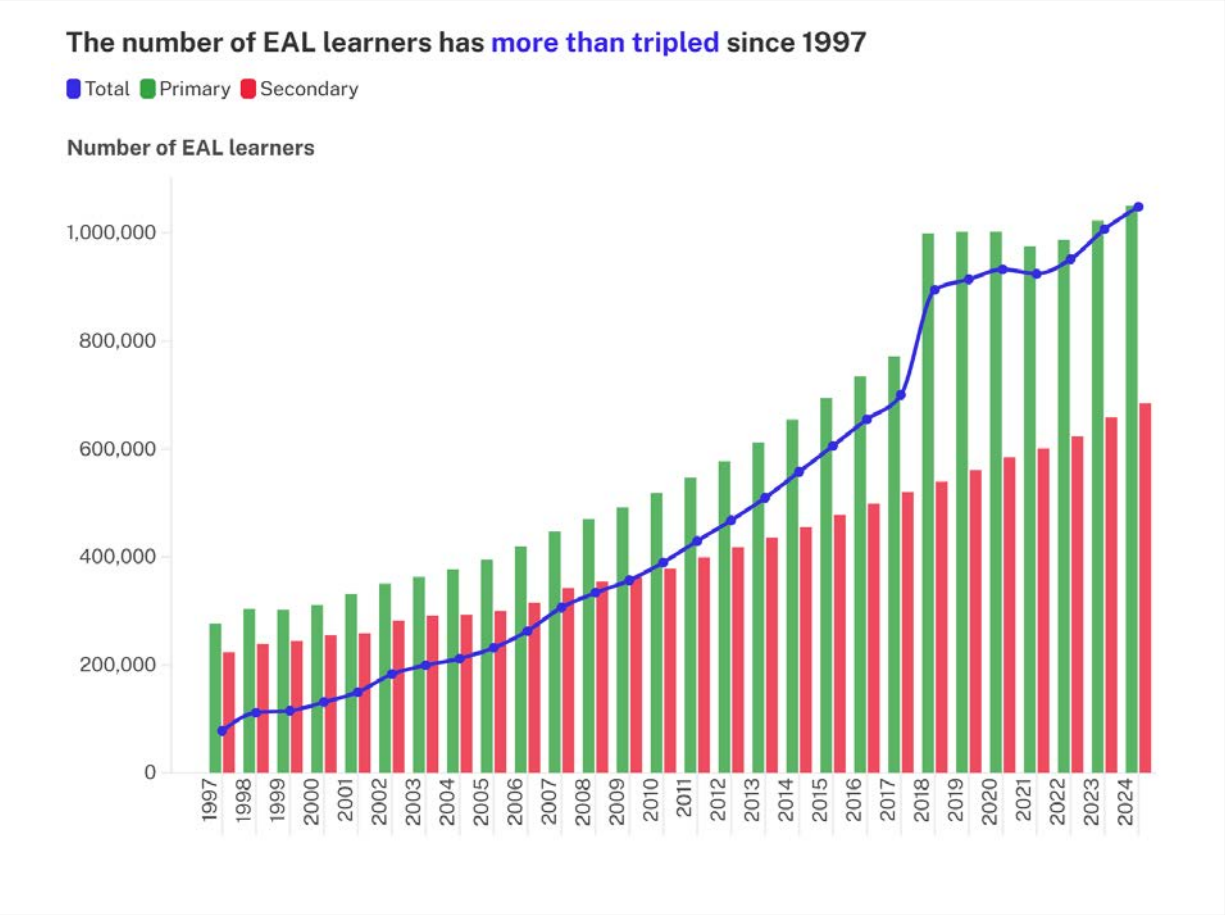

Figure 1: Number of pupils recorded as EAL learners in England (all phases), 1997–2024

Note: EAL pupil numbers are different from those in the 2024 school census, which states that there are 1.77m EAL learners in England. That dataset also includes pupils in nursery schools, maintained special schools, non-maintained special schools, pupil referral units, and alternative provision, which have only been included since 2010. This report includes weighted averages of the primary and secondary school totals only (97.5% of all EAL pupils) in order to accurately identify trends over time.

Composition of EAL pupil group

The composition of the group of pupils using EAL has also changed (see Table 1 and Figure 2). While the total proportion of EAL pupils increased from 16.3% in 2013 to 20.3% in 2023, there were notable decreases within some ethnic groups – for example, the data show a marked drop in the proportion of EAL learners among all Asian groups (Indian [73% to 62%], Pakistani [82% to 62%], Bangladeshi [91% to 71%], and Other Asian [75% to 67%]), and in the Black African group (65% to 47%). This may reflect the settled status of these groups, with decreasing proportions of pupils being exposed to a heritage language at home. In contrast, the proportion of EAL learners among pupils of Chinese (78% to 79%) and White Other (73% to 76%) ethnicity remained high as of 2023, perhaps due to continued inward migration of young people among these groups.

Over 20 years (2003–2023), the ethnic-minority population in the whole school-age population in England grew from 16.8% to 37.7%, with the greatest increases occurring in the White Other (from 2.1% to 7.3%) and Black African (from 1.7% to 4.9%) groups.

Further, Table 2 shows that while for the most part EAL pupils reflect the general population in terms of gender, birth season, and FSM eligibility, they are more likely to live in areas of higher neighbourhood deprivation than their MLE-speaking peers, and somewhat less likely to be identified as having any level of special educational need. There may be many reasons underlying this (see Strand & Lindorff, 2021).

Table 1. Proportion of EAL learners within ethnic groups in England, 2013 & 2023

	2013		2023		
Ethnic group	**Total roll**	**% EAL**	**Total roll**	**% EAL**	**% Change**
White British	4,917,779	0.5%	5,298,642	1.1%	0.6%
White Irish	21,163	1.3%	21,061	2.5%	1.2%
Traveller Irish	4,890	2.3%	6,862	1.4%	-1.0%
Traveller Gypsy/Roma	17,716	44.4%	28,217	52.7%	8.3%
White Other groups	302,924	73.2%	606,065	75.7%	2.5%
Mixed White & African	39,224	22.5%	78,067	20.4%	-2.1%
Mixed White & Caribbean	95,522	2.0%	134,035	2.8%	0.8%
Mixed White & Asian	71,748	16.1%	139,231	17.9%	1.8%
Any other mixed	113,131	23.2%	224,825	27.4%	4.2%
Indian	173,989	73.2%	309,773	62.1%	-11.1%
Pakistani	269,359	81.9%	381,764	61.9%	-20.1%
Bangladeshi	108,616	91.3%	151,131	71.0%	-20.3%
Any Other Asian	109,772	75.1%	178,132	67.2%	-7.8%
Black African	224,417	64.8%	360,100	47.0%	-17.8%
Black Caribbean	89,360	3.7%	79,984	3.8%	0.1%
Black Other groups	43,570	33.9%	65,469	31.4%	-2.5%
Chinese	25,113	78.3%	58,385	79.0%	0.8%
Any other ethnic group	102,347	82.5%	195,083	77.7%	-4.9%
Unclassified/Refused	57,899	15.6%	126,671	25.8%	10.2%
Total	**6,788,539**	**16.3%**	**8,443,497**	**20.3%**	**4.0%**

Note: Based on pupils aged 5–16 (Reception to year 11 inclusive).

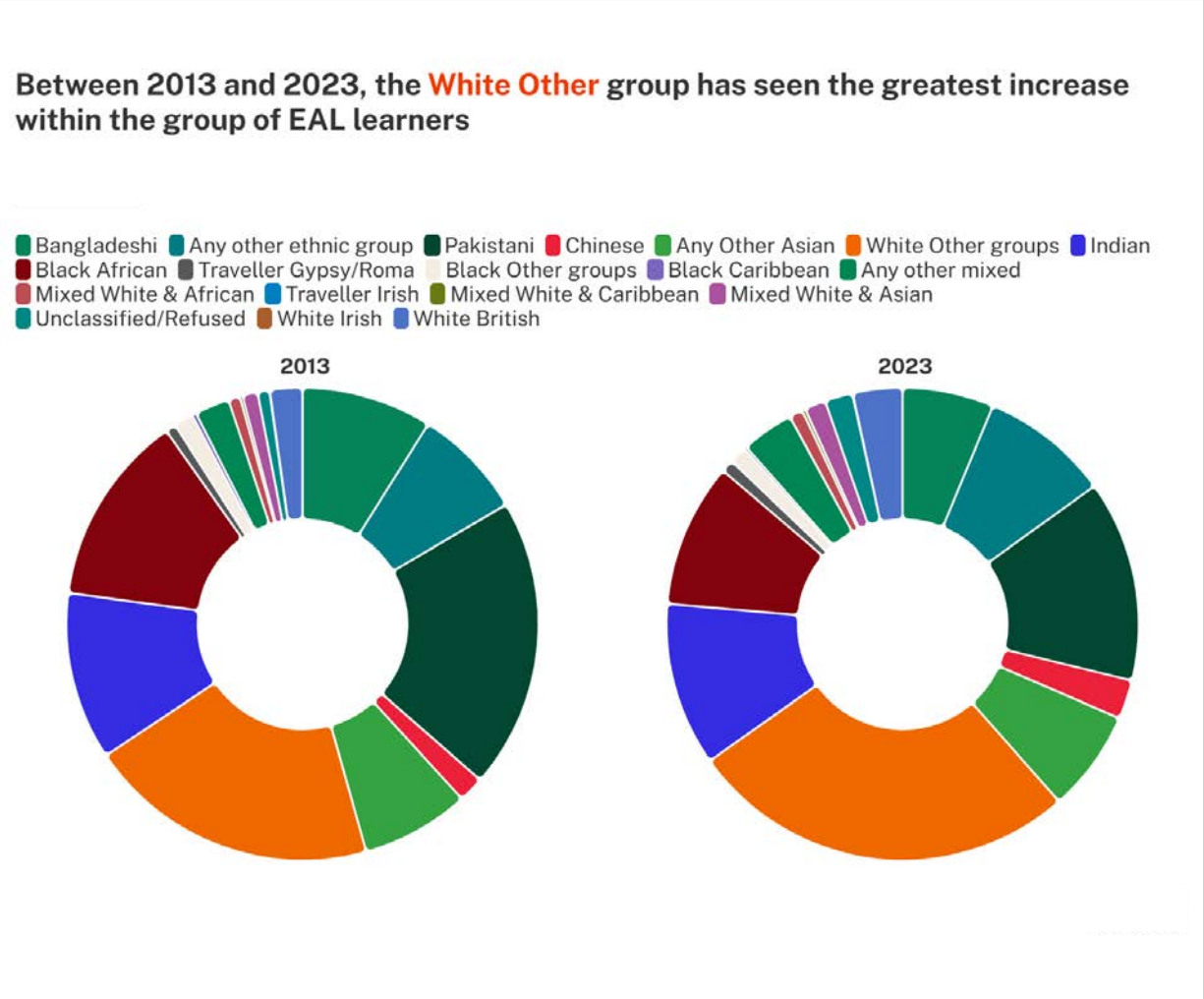

Figure 2: EAL learners in England by ethnic group, 2013 & 2023

Table 2. Proportion of EAL speakers within other pupil groups, 2023

		EAL		MLE		All
Variable	Value	N	%	N	%	N
Gender	Female	839,849	48.9%	3,290,733	48.9%	4,130,582
	Male	876,058	51.1%	3,436,806	51.1%	4,312,864
Season of birth	Autumn	584,581	34.1%	2,307,153	34.3%	2,891,734
	Spring	547,919	31.9%	2,155,174	32.0%	2,703,093
	Summer	583,408	34.0%	2,265,262	33.7%	2,848,670
Ever eligible for FSM	Yes	426,872	24.9%	1,637,191	24.3%	2,064,063
	No	1,117,489	65.1%	4,502,331	66.9%	5,619,820
IDACI deprivation quintile	Very low	162,797	9.5%	1,525,599	22.7%	1,688,396
	Low	231,532	13.5%	1,448,541	21.5%	1,680,073
	Average	375,946	21.9%	1,312,135	19.5%	1,688,081
	High	480,621	28.0%	1,208,826	18.0%	1,689,447
	Very high	463,010	27.0%	1,222,302	18.2%	1,685,312
SEN provision	EHCP	55,048	3.2%	303,804	4.5%	358,852
	SEN support	167,436	9.8%	921,836	13.7%	1,089,272
	No SEN	1,493,424	87.0%	5,501,949	81.8%	6,995,373
Grand total	All pupils	1,715,908	100.0%	6,727,589	100.0%	8,443,497

Notes: SEN = special educational needs; EHCP = education, health & care plan; IDACI = Index of Deprivation Affecting Children; FSM = free school meals.

Regional-, local authority- (LA), and school-level distribution of EAL pupils

Regional-level distribution of EAL pupils

The data show considerable variation in the proportions of pupils using EAL across the nine regions of England (see Table 3). As of 2023, the lowest proportion was in the North-East (8.3%) and the highest was in Greater London (44.0%). While in most regions, the proportion of pupils recorded as using EAL increased by around 4 to 5 percentage points between 2013 and 2023, in Greater London it remained largely static. However, this masks average growth of 4.3 percentage points in Outer London, while Inner London is highly significant as the only area to have recorded a decrease (of about 6%) in the proportion of students using EAL over this time period (see Figure 3).

Table 3. Number and percentage of EAL pupils recorded by region

	2013			2023			
Region	EAL Pri %	EAL Sec %	Average EAL %	EAL N	EAL %	Total roll	% Change
North-East	6.1	4.4	**5.3**	33,193	**8.3**	398,425	3.1
South-West	5.9	4.3	**5.1**	72,562	**9.4**	773,802	4.3
South-East	11.6	9.1	**10.4**	210,084	**15.7**	1,343,746	5.3
East of England	12.2	8.9	**10.6**	152,291	**15.9**	963,220	5.3
East Midlands	12.0	9.3	**10.7**	122,848	**16.9**	732,319	6.2
North-West	13.2	9.2	**11.2**	192,681	**16.8**	1,150,005	5.6
Yorkshire & the Humber	15.8	11.3	**13.6**	145,170	**17.1**	852,629	3.5
West Midlands	19.9	14.9	**17.4**	210,450	**22.1**	956,029	4.6
Outer London	43.1	34.4	**38.9**	160,051	**43.2**	377,717	4.3
Inner London	54.9	48.1	**51.9**	255,592	**46.1**	474,581	-5.7
London (all)	47.5	39.1	**43.6**	578,833	**44.3**	1,311,112	0.7
England	18.1	13.6	**15.9**	1,715,912	**20.3**	8,481,287	4.4

Notes: Pri = primary school; sec = secondary school.

The 2013 data were only available for pupils of compulsory school age and separately for primary and secondary schools. The simple arithmetic average of the two has been taken here to give an overall EAL figure.

For consistency between the 2013 and 2023 data, "Inner London" is defined here as the following 15 boroughs: Camden, City of London, Greenwich, Hackney, Hammersmith & Fulham, Haringey, Islington, Kensington & Chelsea, Lambeth, Lewisham, Newham, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Wandsworth, and Westminster.

EAL proportions calculated excluding the small fraction of students recorded as "unclassified".

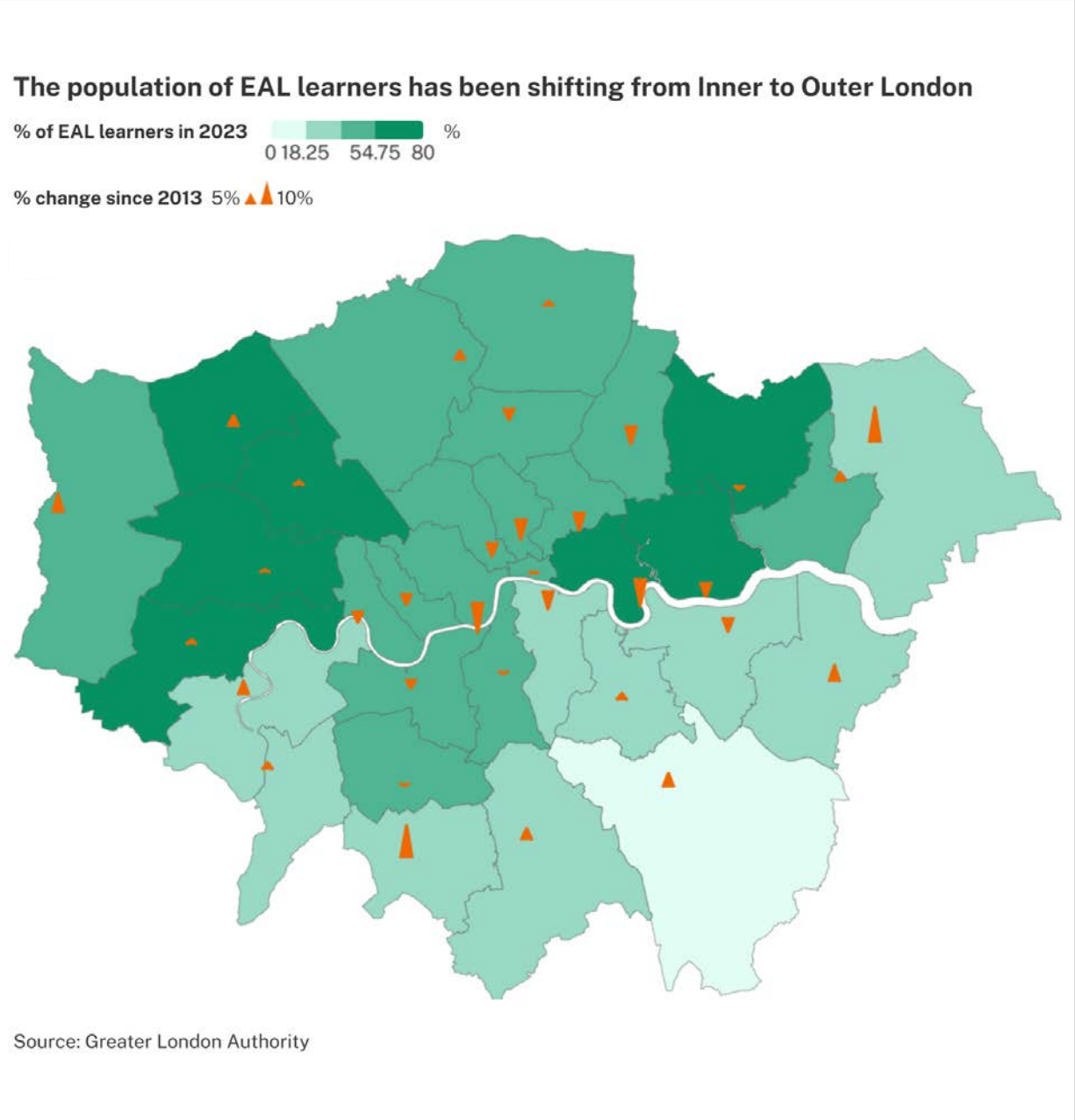

Figure 3. Concentration of EAL learners by London borough (2023)

One salient question is whether the decline in Inner London represented a gradual trend, or whether there were any marked discontinuities. Figure 4 presents the year-on-year percentage of EAL pupils, using data from 2011 through to 2024 for both Inner and Outer London.[3] This shows a gradual decline in the proportion of EAL learners in Inner London starting in 2018, rather than a sudden change corresponding to Covid-19 in 2021/22.

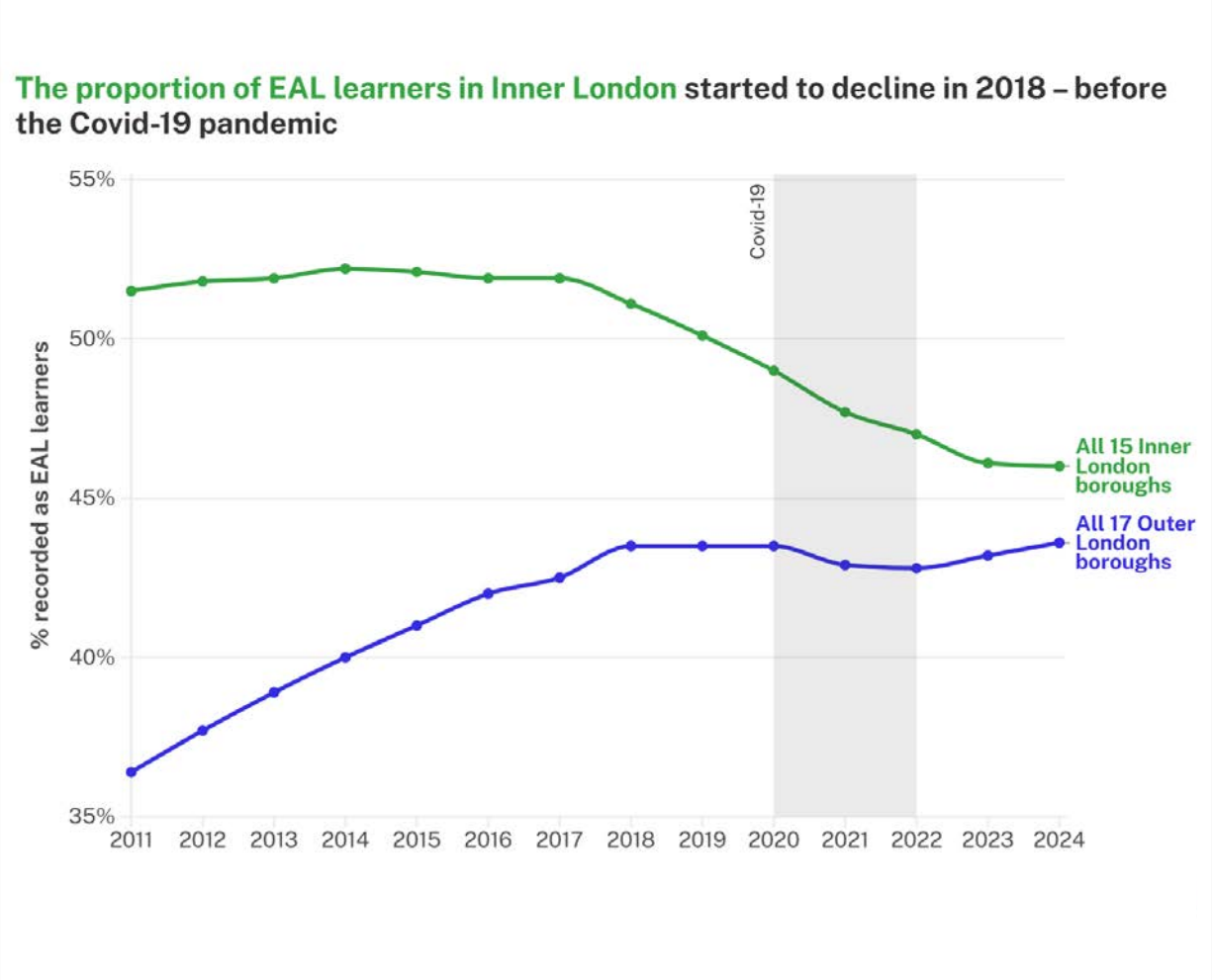

Figure 4. Proportion of EAL learners in Inner & Outer London, 2011–2024

Figure 5 presents the data for 2011–2024 for each Inner London borough. This shows that Lewisham saw an increase in EAL learners from a low baseline, while the biggest declines – those in Tower Hamlets and Westminster – were in boroughs that had the highest proportions of EAL learners to start with. Notably, Newham had a similar starting point but a much smaller decline over time and, with 67%, had the highest percentage of EAL learners of all the London boroughs by 2024.

3 For consistency between the 2013 and 2023 data, the same 15 local authorities are included in the figures for Inner London in both years, despite some changes made to the boundaries over that time.

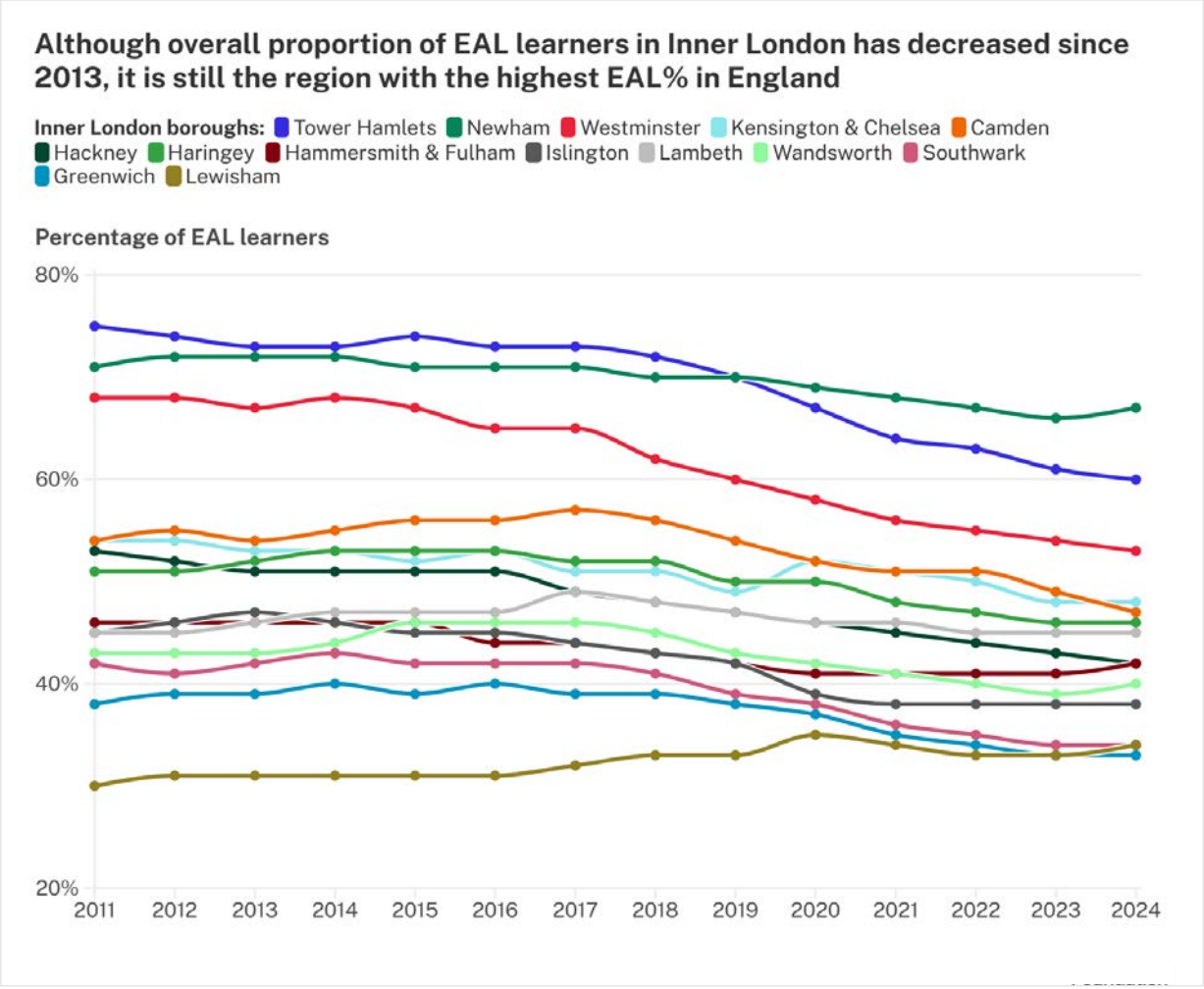

Figure 5. Proportion of EAL learners in each Inner London borough, 2011–2024

Despite this overall decrease in the proportion of EAL learners in Inner London, it is important to note that as of 2024 Inner London remained the region with the highest proportion of EAL pupils (46%) of all the regions of England, and still accounted for eight of the 10 LAs in England with the highest proportion of EAL learners.

LA-level distribution of EAL pupils

Figures 6a and 6b show the percentage of pupils, banded into five groups ranging from 0–12.5% up to over-50%, that were recorded as EAL learners in LAs across England, as at 2013 and 2023 respectively.[4] The highest percentages can be seen in urban areas, e.g. London, the West Midlands, and the North-West.

Comparing these figures shows there appears to have been some outward spread from these urban areas; i.e., by 2023 more of the LAs that surround them were in the 25% and above categories than was previously the case. This suggests that language support needs may be more widely distributed across schools and LAs than was the case a decade ago.

4 This analysis includes all LAs in England (as of 2013/2023) except for the Isles of Scilly, due to its low number of EAL learners (<10 pupils).

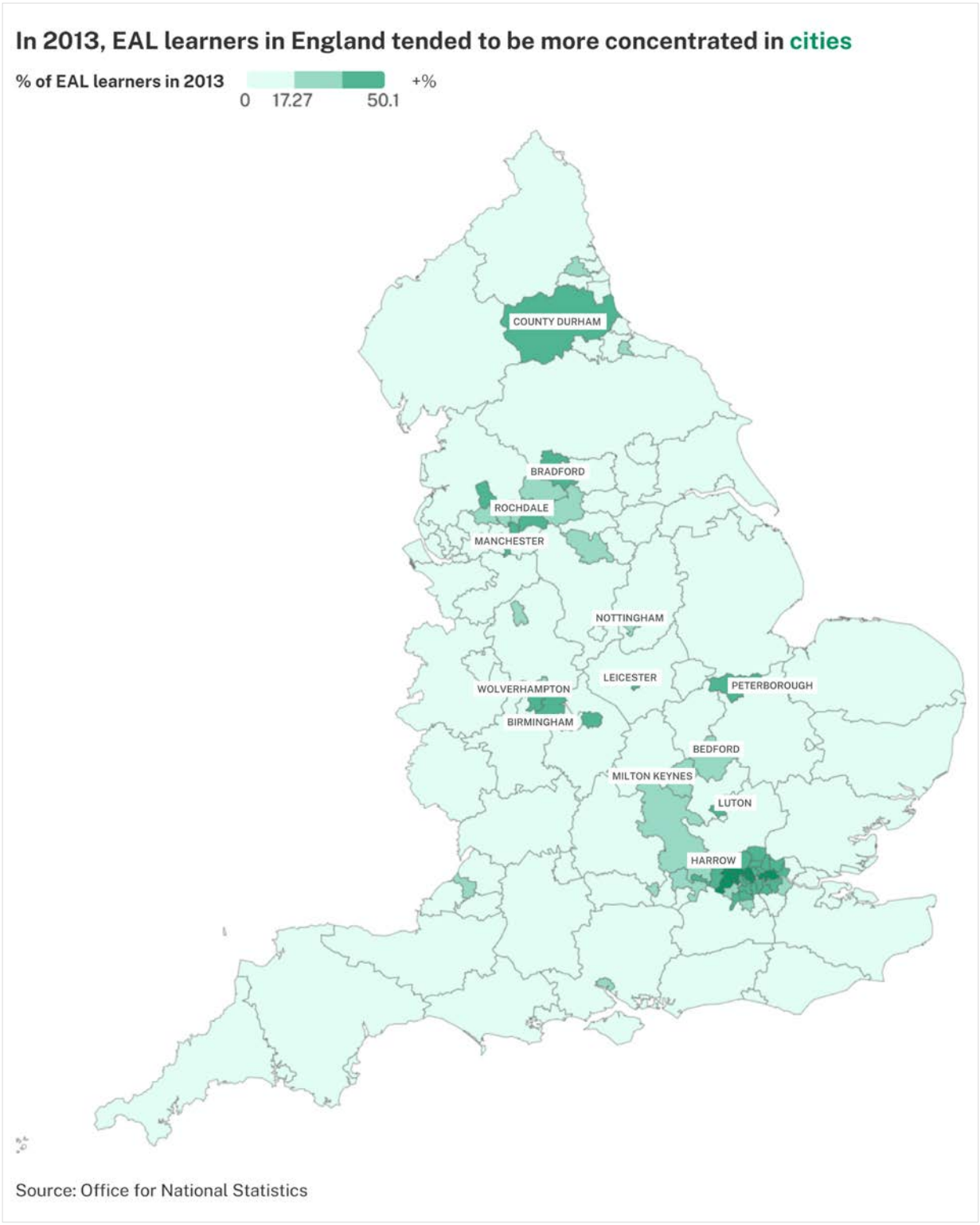

Figure 6a. Percentage of EAL learners by local authority in England, 2013

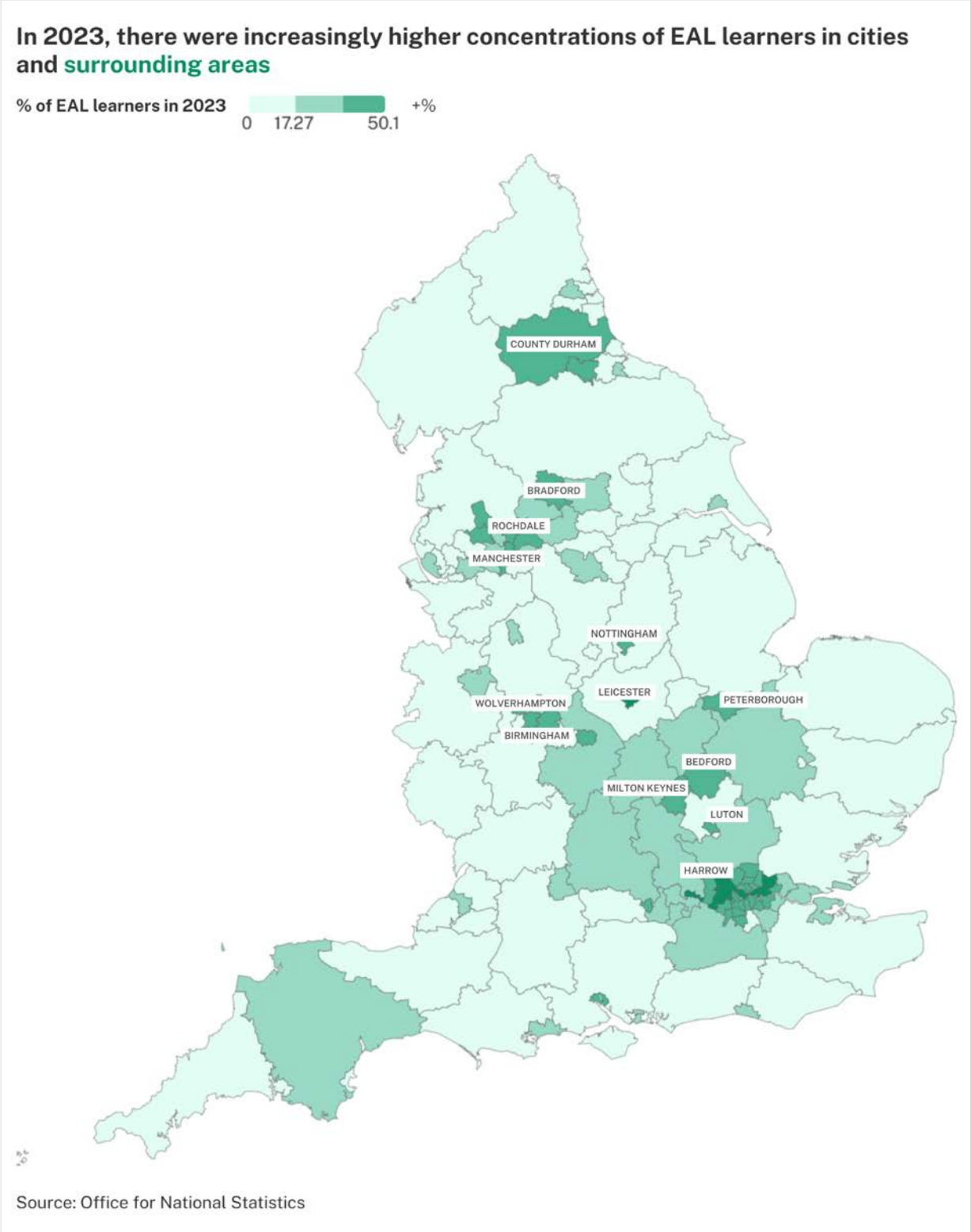

Figure 6b. Percentage of EAL learners by local authority in England, 2023

School-level distribution of EAL pupils

In two in three schools in England – both primary and secondary – EAL learners made up at least 5% of the school roll in 2023 (see Figure 7), while over 50% of pupils were EAL learners in nearly 10% of primary schools and just over 8% of secondary schools. This was somewhat different to the distribution of EAL pupils across schools in 2013 (see Strand, Malmberg & Hall, 2015), at which point just under half of all schools had at least 5% of pupils recorded as EAL learners. However, the percentage of all schools with over 50% EAL pupils did not change dramatically, rising only very slightly from 8.4% in 2013 to 9.2% in 2023. Further details of this distribution can be found in the full technical report (Lindorff & Strand, 2025).

Table 4 shows the numbers, percentages, and locations of the 1,854 schools in which a majority (over 50%) of pupils were recorded as EAL learners in 2023. Of these 1,854 schools, 888 were located in the Greater London area. However, there were also fairly large numbers of schools with high concentrations of EAL pupils in the West Midlands, the North-West, and Yorkshire & the Humber. This scenario – similar to that noted by Strand, Malmberg, and Hall (2015) based on corresponding 2013 data – shows that high concentrations of EAL pupils can be present in small local areas, even where they appear lower across a broader geographic area.

Table 4. Number and location of schools with a majority (>50%) of EAL pupils recorded, 2023

	Primary schools		Secondary schools		All schools	
Region	N	%	N	%	N	%
North-East	19.0	**1.2**	1.0	**0.4**	20.0	
North-West	187.0	**11.9**	28.0	**10.1**	215.0	**11.6**
Yorkshire & the Humber	152.0	**9.6**	22.0	**7.9**	174.0	**9.4**
East Midlands	100.0	**6.3**	15.0	**5.4**	115.0	**6.2**
West Midlands	200.0	**12.7**	44.0	**15.8**	244.0	**13.2**
East of England	68.0	**4.3**	8.0	**2.9**	76.0	**4.1**
Greater London	738.0	**46.8**	150.0	**54.0**	888.0	**47.9**
South-East	80.0	**5.1**	10.0	**3.6**	90.0	**4.9**
South-West	32.0	**2.0**	0.0	**0.0**	32.0	**1.7**
Total	**1,576**		**278**		**1,854**	

Figure 7. State-funded schools in England with EAL learner concentration over and under 5% in 2023

EAL attainment gaps over time (2013 to 2023)

In this section, we look at the relationship between educational achievement and EAL status across early years foundation stage (age 5), key stage 1 (age 7), key stage 2 (age 11), and key stage 4 (age 16), using data from the summers of 2013, 2017, and 2023. Here, we focus purely on a descriptive analysis of the percentages of monolingual English (MLE) speakers and EAL pupils, respectively, who achieved key outcomes at the end of each key stage. We contextualise the relationship between EAL status and achievement using individual-pupil-level data in later sections of this report.

Because the precise nature of the various educational achievement measures has changed over time, a direct comparison of figures across time points is problematic. We address this by reporting effect-size measures that can be compared over time.

For threshold measures (e.g. attainment based on meeting an expected standard or above), we report odds ratios (ORs); these show the success of pupils using EAL and their MLE-speaking peers *relative to each other*, and as such are comparable over time even if the specific measures have changed. We use a rule of thumb that odds of success for a focal group that are one-third lower or one-third higher than those for the reference group (3:4 or OR<0.75; 4:3 or OR>1.33, respectively) constitute a meaningful difference. To make it easy to see trends in the tables that follow, ORs <0.75 are shown in red and ORs >1.33 in blue.

For continuous measures, such as test or performance scores, we report Cohen's d. This compares the size of any gap between the mean scores of the two language groups to the typical variation in scores between different pupils, as indicated by the pooled standard deviation. The size of Cohen's d is conventionally interpreted using the following thresholds: values of +/-0.20 = small; +/-0.50 = medium; and +/-0.80 = large (Cohen, 1988). To highlight trends, values of *d* <-0.20 are shown in red and values of *d* >0.20 in blue.

Early years foundation stage (age 5)

In 2023, EAL pupils were less likely than their MLE-speaking peers to attain the expected standard or above in literacy and mathematics, or to fall within the overall category of "good level of development" (GLD) at age 5 (see Table 5). The gap was around 7 percentage points in each of the three areas (ranging from OR=0.65 in mathematics to OR=0.74 for achieving a GLD). The average number of early learning goals (ELGs) achieved was 14.4 for MLE speakers and 13.2 for EAL speakers (d=-0.24).

These gaps had narrowed since 2013. For example, in 2013, the odds of EAL learners attaining a GLD were about two-thirds (OR=0.67) that of MLE-speaking pupils. In 2023. the odds were closer to three-quarters (OR=0.74),[5] indicating relative improver time in the performance of EAL learners. The number of ELGs achieved tells a similar story: the gap between the two groups had narrowed over time since 2013, but remained non-negligible in 2023.

5 Regrettably, since publication of the interim report in February 2025, it has come to light that it contained some minor errors in the ORs reported. This included the OR cited here. Readers should treat the figures in the previous publication with caution and rely on the present report for accuracy. The authors apologise for this oversight.

Table 5. Achievement of EAL and monolingual-English-speaking pupils at the end of the early years foundation stage (EYFS) phase (age 5) in 2013, 2017, and 2023

Indicator	Pupil group	2013	2017	2023
Percentage of pupils with a good level of development	Monolingual	53.6	73.0	69.3
	EAL	43.5	65.0	62.4
	Odds ratio	*0.67*	*0.69*	*0.74*
Percentage of pupils at expected level across all early learning goals in literacy	Monolingual	73.0	77.0	71.8
	EAL	63.0	70.0	64.5
	Odds ratio	*0.63*	*0.70*	*0.71*
Percentage of pupils at expected level across all early learning goals in mathematics	Monolingual	71.0	83.0	79.3
	EAL	62.0	74.0	71.5
	Odds ratio	*0.67*	*0.58*	*0.65*
Average points score	Monolingual	33.3 (7.3)	34.9 (7.4)	14.4 (5.8)
	EAL	30.9 (7.7)	32.8 (7.8)	13.2 (4.8)
	Cohen's d	*-0.32*	*-0.29*	*-0.24*

Notes: The EYFS was reformed in 2013 and again in 2021, with changes affecting both the educational goals themselves and the ways in which they were assessed – although the focus remained on broadly similar domains. These changes will affect the percentages in the data, but the ORs provide a consistent relative comparison.

To achieve a GLD, pupils must be learning at expected level or above in 12 (out of 17) early learning goals, covering five areas of learning: communication and language; personal, social, and emotional development; physical development; literacy; and mathematics.

Data were rounded to whole numbers in 2017.

The average point score is reported in 2013 and 2017 (range 0–51) and the average number of ELGs achieved in 2023 (range 0–17). Figures in brackets are the standard deviations.

Key stage 1 (age 7)

Table 6 shows that, in 2023, a slightly lower proportion of EAL learners achieved the expected standard in reading compared to their MLE-speaking peers, with a difference of about 5 percentage points (OR=0.79). The gaps in writing and mathematics were negligible, each at around 2 percentage points (OR=0.91 and OR=0.90, respectively).

Over the period 2013 to 2023 there was a significant improvement in the relative performance of EAL learners across the board: in reading from OR=0.69 to OR=0.79; in writing from OR=0.80 to OR=0.91; and in mathematics from OR=0.76 to OR=0.90.

In the year 1 phonics screening check, completed at age 6, there were only negligible gaps between MLE-speaking pupils and EAL learners in the proportion achieving the expected standard in all three of the years analysed here.

Table 6. Achievement of EAL and monolingual-English-speaking pupils at the end of key stage 1 (age 7) in 2013, 2017, and 2023

		2013	2017	2023
Subject	**Pupil group**	Expected or above	Expected or above	Expected or above
Reading	% Monolingual	57.3	76.8	69.9
	% EAL	48.1	72.2	64.7
	Odds ratio	***0.69***	***0.78***	***0.79***
Writing	% Monolingual	38.4	68.9	61.0
	% EAL	33.3	67.1	58.7
	Odds ratio	***0.80***	***0.92***	***0.91***
Mathematics	% Monolingual	52.5	75.6	71.4
	% EAL	45.7	74.5	69.2
	Odds ratio	***0.76***	***0.94***	***0.90***
Phonics (age 6)	% Monolingual	74.8	81.7	80.0
	% EAL	74.4	81.2	78.6
	Odds ratio	***0.98***	***0.97***	***0.92***

Notes: The key stage 1 descriptors "working towards the expected standard", "working at the expected standard", or "working at greater depth" were not in use in 2013. Therefore, for the 2013 data, we have equated achievement of level 2A or above (under the prior system) to "expected or above".

The phonics test is administered in Y1 (at age 6) and repeated in Y2 if the pupil did not achieve the expected standard in Y1. Only Y1 results are reported here. As there was no phonics test in 2012/13, the results here are from 2013/14, when the test was first introduced.

Because a larger proportion of EAL pupils are recorded as "Disapplied" compared to monolingual English-speakers (2.1% EAL vs 1.3% MLE in 2023), pupils recorded as "Disapplied" are counted in the calculation as not achieving the expected standard.

Key stage 2 (age 11)

Table 7 shows results of national assessments at key stage 2 across the subject areas of reading; mathematics; and grammar, punctuation, and spelling (GPS) for EAL learners and MLE-speakers. In general, from 2013 through to 2023, a lower proportion of EAL learners achieved the expected standard or above in reading compared to MLE speakers, but the difference was small in 2023 (OR=0.82), and much smaller than in previous years. Looking at the mean reading score, the EAL gap would be described as small in 2013 (d=-0.25) and 2017 (d=-0.22), but very small in 2023 (d=-0.12).

In 2023, in mathematics, EAL learners were more likely to attain the expected standard or above compared to MLE learners (OR=1.30), and they achieved a higher mean test score (d=0.22). EAL learners also had a small advantage in performance in GPS, being more likely to achieve the expected standard or above (OR=1.30) and to have a higher mean test score (d=0.17). The average EAL advantage in both these domains had increased over time.

Table 7. Achievement of EAL and monolingual-English-speaking pupils at key stage 2 (age 11) in 2013, 2017, and 2023

		Threshold measures			Mean test score					
		2013	2017	2023	2013		2017		2023	
Subject	Pupil group	% 4B+	% expected or above	% expected or above	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
Reading	Monolingual	76.9	73	74	28.6	(4.8)	104.5	(8.3)	105.3	(7.9)
	EAL	68.5	65	70	27.3	(5.4)	102.7	(8.5)	104.4	(8.1)
	Odds ratio/ Cohen's d	***0.65***	***0.69***	***0.82***	***-0.25***		***-0.22***		***-0.12***	
Maths	Monolingual	74.2	75	72	28.9	(5.1)	104.0	(7.4)	103.9	(7.6)
	EAL	72.4	76	77	28.7	(5.7)	104.9	(7.6)	105.5	(7.8)
	Odds ratio/ Cohen's d	***0.91***	***1.06***	***1.30***	***-0.03***		***0.12***		***0.22***	
GPS	Monolingual	65.1	77	72	28.2	(5.6)	105.7	(7.6)	104.6	(8.1)
	EAL	66.2	78	75	28.2	(6.0)	106.9	(8.0)	106.0	(8.5)
	Odds ratio/ Cohen's d	***1.05***	***1.06***	***1.17***	***0.01***		***0.16***		***0.17***	

Notes: GPS = grammar, punctuation, and spelling; SD = standard deviation.

Fine-grained points scores were reported for the tests completed in 2013.[6] In 2016, new national tests were introduced, initially standardised to a mean score of 100, and 2017 and 2023 scores were reported on this scale.

Cohen's d thresholds for small, medium, and large effects = 0.20, 0.50, and 0.80, respectively.

Odds ratios are calculated for threshold measures, while Cohen's d is reported for test scores.

6 Prior to 2016, attainment was reported using National Curriculum levels and sub-levels. Fine-grained point scores are numerical values assigned to pupils' attained levels/sub-levels, converting them to a continuous scale to enable comparison with post-2016 scaled scores. As continuous measures of attainment, both fine-grained points scores and scaled scores support more detailed statistical analysis of pupil progress compared to simple threshold measures.

Key stage 4 (age 16)

At key stage 4, the data show some apparent changes over time in the achievement gaps between MLE and EAL learners (see Table 8). In English, a slightly lower proportion of EAL students achieved the expected level or above compared to their MLE-speaking peers in 2013 and 2017, but by 2023 there was a small difference in favour of the EAL group. For mathematics, there were generally no substantial differences in the proportion of EAL and MLE learners achieving the expected level at each of the three time points, although the proportion achieving a grade 9–5 pass in maths in 2023 was higher for EAL learners (OR=1.22).

Looking at overall outcomes, EAL students had a slightly higher mean Attainment 8 score than their MLE-speaking peers (d=0.13) in 2023. They were also more likely to achieve the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) with GCSE grade 9–4 or 9–5 passes than their MLE-speaking peers (ORs=1.48 and 1.47 in 2023, respectively). This tends to be associated particularly with their greater success in the language component of the EBacc (see Strand et al., 2015). For both measures, the data indicate an increase in the relative success of EAL learners between 2013 and 2023.

Table 8. Achievement of EAL and monolingual-English-speaking pupils at key stage 4 (age 16) in 2013, 2017, and 2023

		2013	2017		2023	
Outcome	Pupil group	GCSE grade A*–C	GCSE 9–4 pass	GCSE 9–5 pass	GCSE 9–4 pass	GCSE 9–5 pass
English	% Monolingual	68.8	68	52	71	54
	% EAL	64.6	66	49	72	55
	Odds ratio	***0.83***	***0.91***	***0.89***	***1.05***	***1.04***
Maths	% Monolingual	71.2	69	52	72	51
	% EAL	71.8	68	49	73	56
	Odds ratio	***1.03***	***0.95***	***1.13***	***1.05***	***1.22***
EBacc	% Monolingual	22.5	23.0	21.0	22.9	16.0
	% EAL	22.4	28.0	24.0	30.6	21.9
	Odds ratio	***0.99***	***1.30***	***1.19***	***1.48***	***1.47***
Average points score	% Monolingual	347.7 (77.5)	45.7 (19.8)		45.5 (21.4)	
	% EAL	346.9 (73.5)	46.5 (20.4)		48.4 (21.8)	
	Cohen's d	***-0.01***	***0.04***		***0.13***	

Notes: EBacc scores have been calculated differently over time: in 2013, the scoring system recorded A–C passes in all constituent subjects; in 2017 it included GCSE grades 9–5 in English and mathematics and 9–4 in the other subjects; in 2023, both grade 9–4 pass and grade 9–5 pass versions were calculated. The subjects constituting an EBacc qualification are: English literature and language; mathematics; combined science or three separate sciences (from among biology, physics, chemistry, and computer science); history or geography; and a foreign language (ancient or modern). See www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc for more information.*

For 2013, the average points score is the "Best 8" points score, which is the average score of students' eight highest GCSE or equivalent qualifications. For 2017 and 2023, it is the "Attainment 8" score, which is calculated from students' total grades over eight subjects with English and mathematics double weighted, to give an average based on 10 scores.

Bearing in mind that these are results based on aggregate data and may mask more nuanced differences, an analysis of short-run changes in attainment gaps at key stage 2 between 2019 and 2024 (see technical report) showed no indication that the Covid-19 pandemic was associated with any substantial long-term impact for this EAL cohort. Meanwhile, an analysis of key stage 4 attainment over the same period of time indicated improved performance of EAL learners relative to their MLE-speaking peers. As previous research has shown (e.g. Strand & Demie, 2006; Strand, Malmberg & Hall, 2016), EAL learners achieve, on average, a much higher Progress 8 score than their MLE-speaking peers,[7] reflecting the fact that a substantial proportion of EAL learners start from a low base of attainment at age 11, but make rapid progress as they acquire English-language proficiency.

7 Progress 8 score is based on the difference between a pupil's actual Attainment 8 score and their "expected" score. The latter is derived from the national average Attainment 8 score for pupils with similar prior attainment.

3 Contextualising the relationship(s) between EAL status and attainment: Analysis of pupil-level data

Early years foundation stage (age 5)

Using 2023 data, we calculated the respective odds of attaining a GLD for both EAL- and MLE-speaking pupils, while accounting for pupils' gender, ethnic group, birth season, FSM eligibility, neighbourhood deprivation (measured via the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index [IDACI]), and SEN provision.

As Table 9 shows, most pupil background factors tended to have fairly consistent impacts on GLD attainment, for both EAL pupils and their MLE-speaking peers. The variables with the greatest differential impacts were:

- The attainment gap associated with FSM eligibility was much smaller for EAL pupils. FSM-eligible MLE-speaking pupils had substantially lower odds (OR=0.44) of attaining a GLD relative to their MLE-speaking peers who were not eligible for FSM, compared to the corresponding odds ratio among EAL pupils (OR=0.67). This is mainly because, for FSM-eligible pupils, EAL status made little difference to attainment.
- Ethnic group – it is apparent that the substantially lower odds of attaining a GLD, relative to their White British peers, for the White Other, Black Caribbean/Mixed White and Black Caribbean, and Any Other groups were unique to EAL pupils, as were the higher odds of attaining a GLD in the Indian group. These results may reflect the effect of being new(er) to arrive in England with less time to acquire proficiency. We advise caution in interpreting these results, however, as the White British reference group was small among EAL learners.

Table 9. Contextualised variation in the odds of achieving a good level of development, EAL and MLE learners at EYFS (age 5), 2023

Comparing the odds ratios for EAL and MLE learners across the different variables, the closer the odds ratio is to 1 (lighter cells), the less likely that variable is to make a substantive difference to that group of learners. For example, the data show that at EYFS, being eligible for free school meals was far less significant to the achievement outcomes of EAL learners (OR=0.67) than it was for their monolingual-English-speaking peers (OR=0.44).

Variable	Value	Odds ratios* (MLE)	Odds ratios* (EAL)
	Intercept**	8.05	6.11
Gender	Boy (vs girl)	0.58	0.63
Birth season	Spring (vs autumn)	0.62	0.64
	Summer (vs autumn)	0.37	0.40
Ethnicity	White Other (vs White British)	1.09	0.73
	Black African/MWBA (vs White British)	1.06	0.95
	Black Caribbean/MWBC (vs White British)	0.96	0.75
	Indian (vs White British)	1.47	0.94
	Pakistani (vs White British)	0.92	0.78
	Bangladeshi (vs White British)	1.16	0.96
	Asian Other/Chinese/MWAS (vs White British)	1.23	0.89
	Any Other (vs White British)	0.93	0.65
FSM	Eligible (vs not eligible)	0.44	0.67
IDACI	IDACI (1SD)	0.87	0.93
SEN provision	SEN support (vs none)	0.13	0.12
	EHCP (vs none)	0.01	0.01

Notes:

* *Odds ratios* compare the odds of an event occurring in one group to the odds of it occurring in another group.

** The *intercept* represents the odds of attaining a good level of development when all other variables are set to zero, or to their reference category (shown in the Value column as 'vs ...' next to each value). Here, this means a girl, born in autumn, who is White British, not eligible for free school meals, living in a neighbourhood with an average level of income deprivation, and with no identified special educational needs.

FSM = free school meals; SEN = special educational needs; IDACI = Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index; EHCP = education, health & care plan; MWBA = Mixed White & Black African; MWBC = Mixed White & Black Caribbean; MWAS = Mixed White & Asian.

Key stage 1 (age 7)

Table 10 shows the odds of meeting the expected standards at key stage 1 in reading and maths, accounting for the same pupil background variables as for EYFS, computed separately for EAL- and MLE-speaking pupils. As at EYFS, most pupil background factors tended to have a fairly consistent impact on key stage 1 attainment, regardless of EAL status.

In key stage 1 reading, and to some extent maths, notable differences include:

- The substantially higher attainment of Asian groups, relative to their White British peers, was less pronounced in the EAL group than in the MLE group.
- The negative impacts of FSM eligibility on attainment were more pronounced in the MLE-speaking group. This was due to the lower attainment among the EAL group at baseline (regardless of FSM eligibility).
- Importantly, the impact of joining a given school later (OR=0.39 for year 1 and 0.24 for year 2 in reading; 0.49 for year 1 and 0.31 for year 2 in maths) was considerably greater for EAL learners, potentially reflecting – at least in part – newcomers to England having had less time to develop their English-language proficiency.
- In maths, the gender attainment gap in favour of boys was more substantial among MLE-speaking pupils than among EAL pupils. In fact, we found that there were significant interactions between gender and attainment in both subjects at key stage 1, but these differences were small in absolute terms so must not be over-interpreted (see technical report for details).

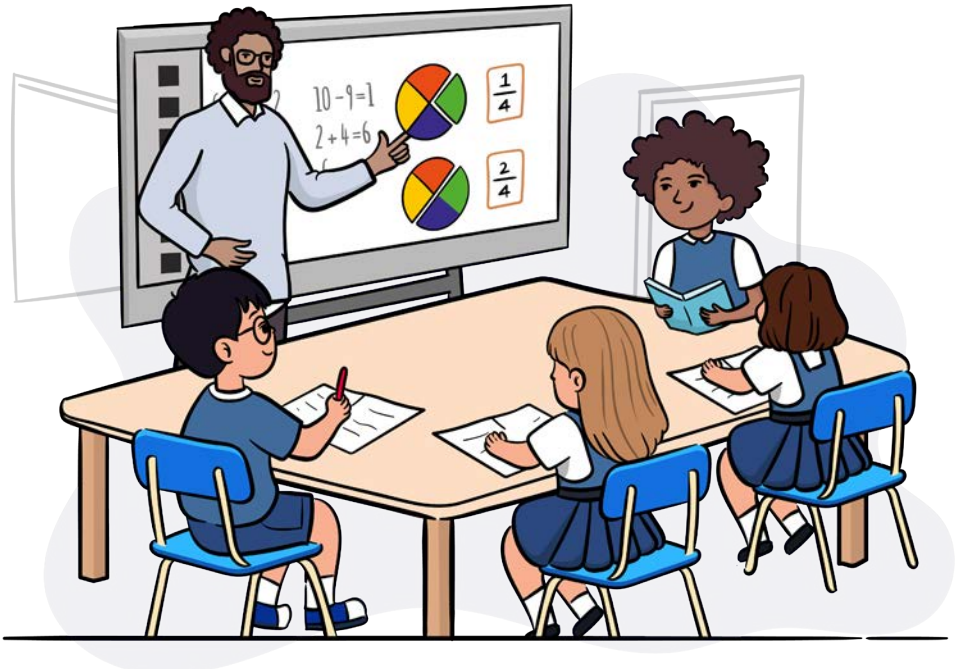

Table 10. Contextualised variation in attainment, EAL and MLE learners at key stage 1 (age 7), 2023

Comparing the odds ratios for EAL and MLE learners across the different variables, the closer the odds ratio is to 1 (lighter cells), the less likely that variable is to make a substantive difference to that group of learners. For example, in the key stage 1 data shown here, the substantially higher attainment among some of the ethnic groups, relative to their White British peers, was less pronounced in the EAL group than in the MLE group.

Variable	Value	Odds ratios* | Reading (MLE)	Odds ratios* | Reading (EAL)	Odds ratios* | Maths (MLE)	Odds ratios* | Maths (EAL)
	Intercept**	6.41	6.17	6.00	6.60
Gender	Boy (vs girl)	0.92	0.87	1.46	1.25
Birth season	Spring (vs autumn)	0.71	0.74	0.68	0.71
	Summer (vs autumn)	0.51	0.55	0.47	0.51
Ethnicity	White Other (vs White British)	1.26	0.75	1.32	0.82
	Black African/MWBA (vs White British)	1.51	1.39	1.28	1.08
	Black Caribbean/MWBC (vs White British)	1.00	0.94	0.84	0.82
	Indian (vs White British)	1.65	1.26	1.59	1.20
	Pakistani (vs White British)	1.12	0.92	0.99	0.78
	Bangladeshi (vs White British)	1.62	1.29	1.58	1.10
	Asian Other/Chinese/MWAS (vs White British)	1.52	1.23	1.49	1.33
	Any Other (vs White British)	1.10	0.78	1.00	0.76
FSM	Eligible (vs not eligible)	0.49	0.68	0.48	0.66
IDACI	IDACI (1SD)	0.89	0.87	0.90	0.87
SEN provision	EHCP (vs none)	0.15	0.15	0.16	0.16
	SEN support (vs none)	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04
Year of entry to school	Year 1 (vs Reception)	0.77	0.39	0.74	0.49
	Year 2 (vs Reception)	0.62	0.24	0.59	0.31

Notes:

* *Odds ratios* compare the odds of an event occurring in one group to the odds of it occurring in another group.

** The *intercept* represents the odds of attaining the expected standard when all other variables are set to zero, or to their reference category (shown in the Value column as 'vs ...' next to each value). Here, this means a girl, born in autumn, who is White British, not eligible for free school meals, living in a neighbourhood with an average level of income deprivation, and with no identified special educational needs.

FSM = free school meals; SEN = special educational needs; IDACI = Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index; EHCP = education, health & care plan; MWBA = Mixed White & Black African; MWBC = Mixed White & Black Caribbean; MWAS = Mixed White & Asian.

Key stage 2 (age 11)

Results from regression models run separately for the EAL and MLE groups at key stage 2 (Table 11) show a negative association between attainment in reading – and to some extent maths – and later entry to the NPD (as a proxy for entry into the English education system). This resonates with the similar finding at key stage 1, where later entry was associated with lower attainment particularly for EAL learners.

We can also see that the effect of having any level of SEN was stronger, but the effect of being FSM-eligible was weaker, for EAL pupils compared to MLE speakers. On average, pupils in ethnic minority groups mostly had lower attainment if they were EAL users (particularly in the White Other group, where EAL learners scored 1.40 lower and MLE-speakers scored 1.58 higher than their White British peers).

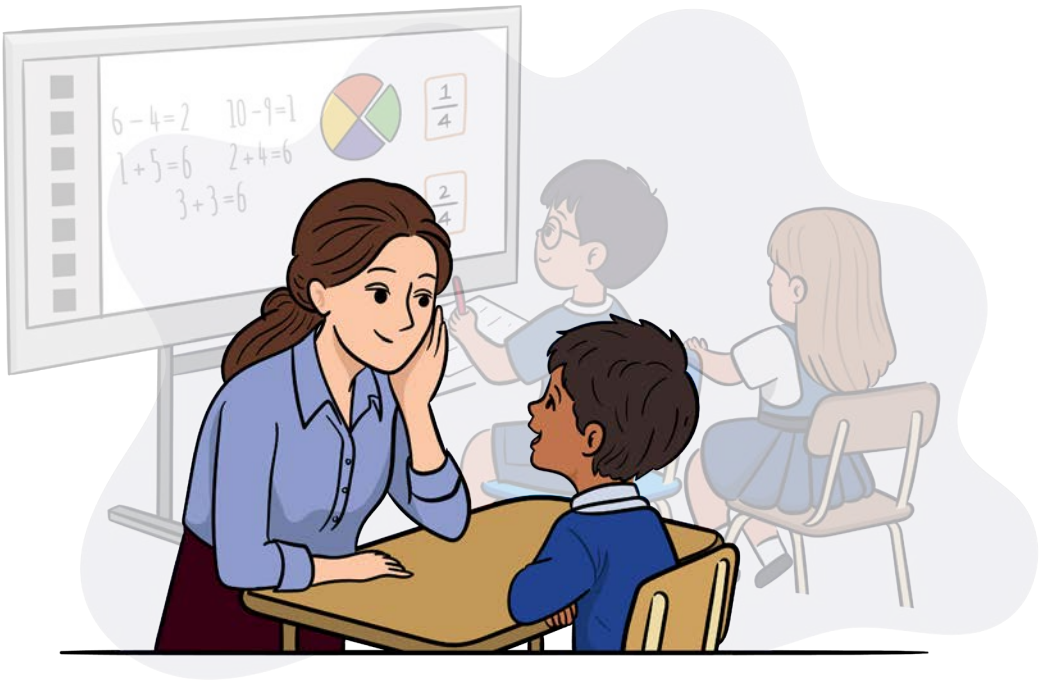

Table 11. Contextualised variation in attainment, EAL and MLE learners at key stage 2 (age 11), 2023

Comparing the variables for each group of learners, the key stage 2 data show that later entry into the school system was more strongly associated with lower attainment in reading (and to some extent in maths) for EAL learners when compared to their monolingual English-speaking peers.

Variable	Value	Unstandardised coefficients* | Reading (MLE)	Unstandardised coefficients* | Reading (EAL)	Unstandardised coefficients* | Maths (MLE)	Unstandardised coefficients* | Maths (EAL)
	Intercept**	108.04	108.77	105.48	107.55
Gender	Boy (vs girl)	-0.36	-0.56	1.87	1.58
Birth season	Spring (vs autumn)	-0.77	-0.72	-0.70	-0.71
	Summer (vs autumn)	-1.47	-1.30	-1.21	-1.17
Ethnicity	White Other (vs White British)	1.58	-1.40	1.73	-0.61
	Black African/MWBA (vs White British)	0.85	0.58	1.42	0.23
	Black Caribbean/MWBC (vs White British)	0.01	-0.05	-0.41	-0.85
	Indian (vs White British)	0.97	0.68	3.58	2.34
	Pakistani (vs White British)	-0.44	-1.53	1.15	-0.57
	Bangladeshi (vs White British)	1.09	0.39	3.02	1.33
	Asian Other/Chinese/MWAS (vs White British)	1.56	0.96	2.57	3.20
	Any Other (vs White British)	0.44	-1.45	0.59	-0.58
FSM	Eligible (vs not eligible)	-2.78	-2.15	-2.96	-2.24
IDACI	IDACI (1SD)	-0.83	-1.00	-0.64	-1.00

Variable	Value	Unstandardised coefficients* | Reading (MLE)	Unstandardised coefficients* | Reading (EAL)	Unstandardised coefficients* | Maths (MLE)	Unstandardised coefficients* | Maths (EAL)
	SEN support (vs none)	-8.66	-7.32	-8.96	-7.64
Year of entry to school	Year 1 (vs Reception)	-1.28	-1.89	-1.49	-1.96
	Year 2 (vs Reception)	0.13	-1.54	-0.02	-1.15
	Year 3 (vs Reception)	0.07	-1.58	-0.07	-1.05
	Year 4 (vs Reception)	-0.08	-1.65	-0.12	-1.08
	Year 5 (vs Reception)	-0.35	-1.80	-0.27	-1.04
	Year 6 (vs Reception)	-0.65	-2.23	-0.58	-1.33

Notes:

* *Unstandardised coefficients* are numbers expressed in the same units as the actual key stage 2 assessment score. They show the average raw score changes associated with each variable when compared to the reference category.

** The *intercept* represents the average score changes when all other variables are set to zero, or to their reference category (shown in the Value column as 'vs ...' next to each value). Here, this means a girl, born in autumn, who is White British, not eligible for free school meals, living in a neighbourhood with an average level of income deprivation, and with no identified special educational needs.

FSM = free school meals; SEN = special educational needs; IDACI = Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index; EHCP = education, health & care plan; MWBA = Mixed White & Black African; MWBC = Mixed White & Black Caribbean; MWAS = Mixed White & Asian.

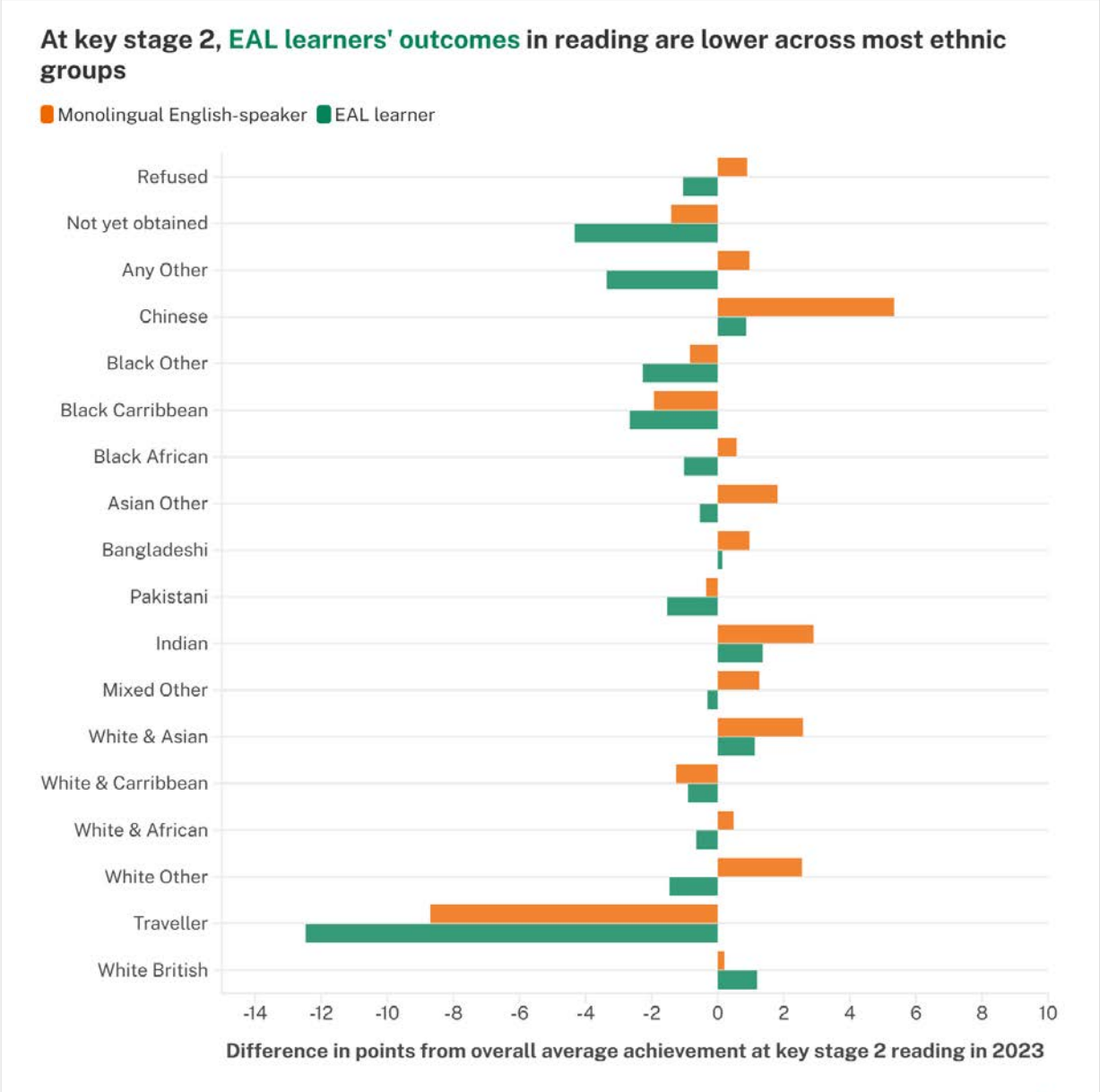

Figure 8a. EAL and MLE achievement at key stage 2 reading, by ethnicity (2023)

Across most ethnic groups, EAL learners tended to have lower attainment than their MLE peers (and the national average) at key stage 2 reading, though the size of this difference varied greatly by ethnic group (see Figure 8a). By contrast, at key stage 2 maths, EAL learners achieved outcomes that were closer to those of their MLE-speaking peers across many ethnic groups, and above the national average for many ethnic groups as well (see Figure 8b).

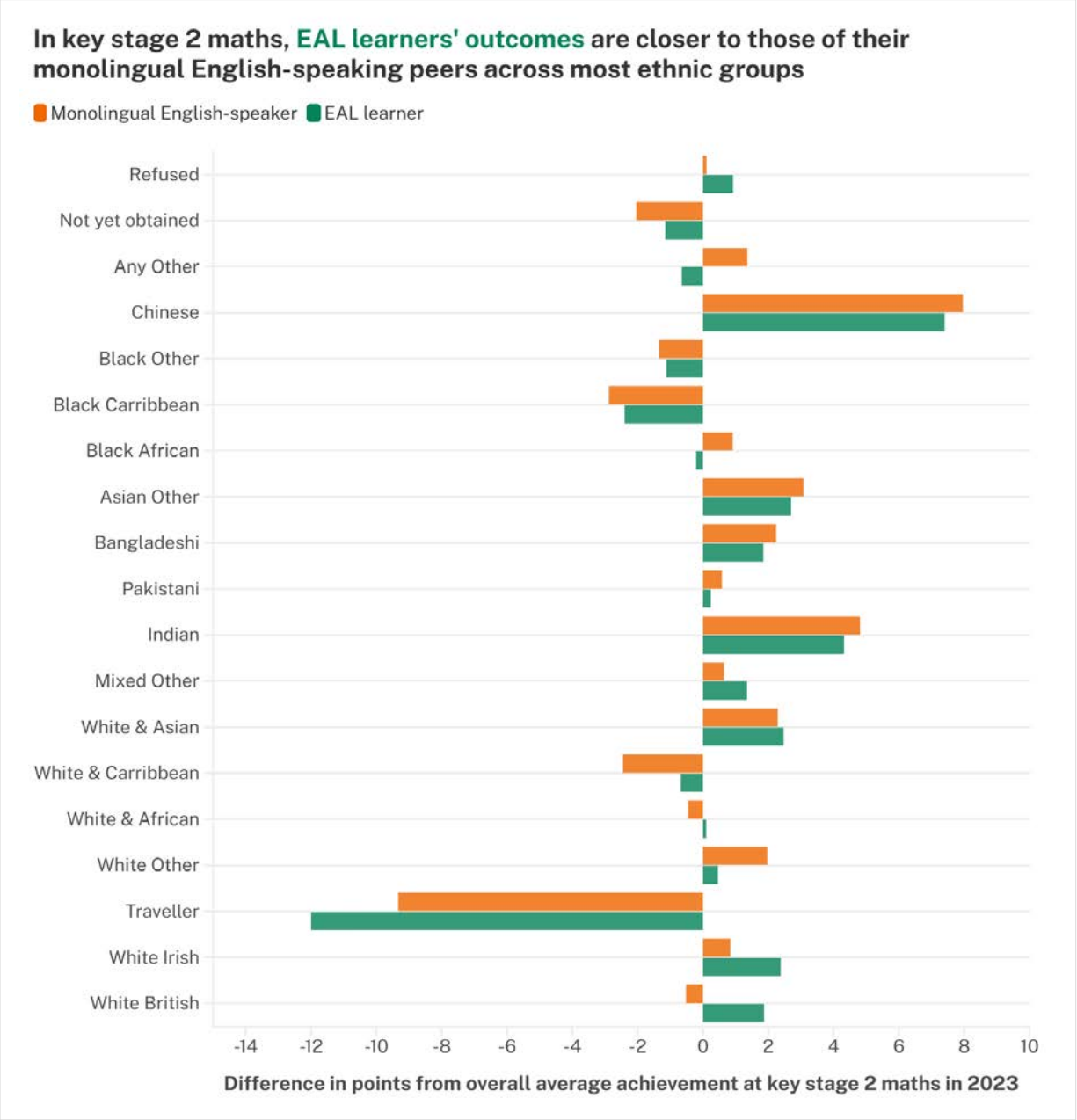

Figure. 8b. EAL and MLE achievement at KS2 maths, by ethnicity (2023)

The effect of year of entry is particularly important: EAL pupils who have been in the NPD since Reception showed no difference in average reading scores at age 11 compared to MLE speakers, but – in line with research by Hutchinson (2018) – EAL learners joining after Reception scored substantially below the national average in reading (and to some extent maths). There was no such trend among MLE speakers (see Figure 9).

Notably, where pupils had been entitled to three years of EAL funding as part of the national funding formula (NFF), this has not been sufficient to "close the gap" – bearing in mind that previous research shows six years are needed on average (Strand & Lindorff, 2020).

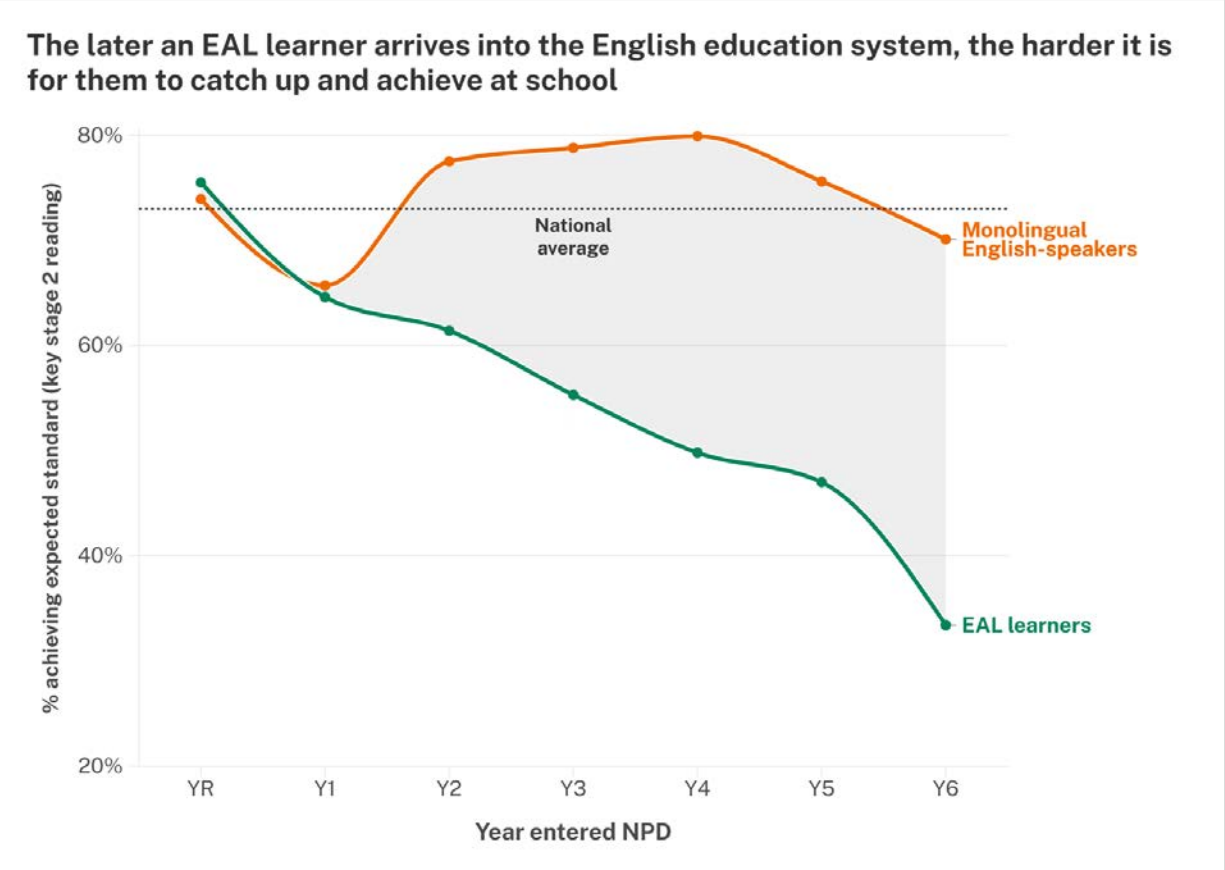

Figure 9. Percentage achieving expected standard or above in reading at key stage 2 (age 11), by EAL status and year of entry to NPD, 2023

Key stage 4 (age 16)

At key stage 4, there is again clear evidence of a negative impact on attainment associated with a later year of entry that is particular to pupils who use EAL (see Table 12). It also appears from the results of this 2023 data that being a boy, being in an ethnic minority group, or having any level of SEN all had more negative relationships to attainment for EAL pupils, while MLE-speaking pupils had a larger attainment gap associated with being FSM-eligible compared to their EAL-speaking peers.

Table 12. Contextualised variation in Attainment 8 scores, EAL and MLE learners at key stage 4 (age 16), 2023

Comparing the variables for each group of learners, the 2023 key stage 4 data provide further evidence that arrival into the English school system at any point later than year 2 had a more negative relationship to attainment for EAL learners when compared to their monolingual English-speaking peers. The same was true of having any level of SEN.

Variable	Value	Unstandardised coefficients* (MLE)	Unstandardised coefficients* (EAL)
	Intercept**	52.39	59.38
Gender	Boy (vs girl)	-2.82	-4.09
Birth season	Spring (vs autumn)	-0.89	-1.20
	Summer (vs autumn)	-1.72	-1.51
Ethnicity	White Other (vs White British)	6.87	-2.13
	Black African/MWBA (vs White British)	7.52	0.45
	Black Caribbean/MWBC (vs White British)	-0.29	-3.19
	Indian (vs White British)	12.44	6.14
	Pakistani (vs White British)	5.10	-2.50
	Bangladeshi (vs White British)	11.41	2.96
	Asian Other/Chinese/MWAS (vs White British)	8.96	5.63
	Any Other (vs White British)	4.06	-1.70
FSM	Eligible (vs not eligible)	-10.99	-5.97
IDACI	IDACI (1SD)	-3.75	-3.15

Variable	Value	Unstandardised coefficients* (MLE)	Unstandardised coefficients* (EAL)
	SEN support (vs none)	-14.27	-16.63
Year of entry to school	Year 3 (vs Year 2)	0.63	-0.71
	Year 4 (vs Year 2)	0.56	-0.69
	Year 5 (vs Year 2)	0.43	-0.72
	Year 6 (vs Year 2)	0.30	-0.96
	Year 7 (vs Year 2)	1.18	-0.91
	Year 8 (vs Year 2)	-0.22	-1.30
	Year 9 (vs Year 2)	-0.01	-1.25
	Year 10 (vs Year 2)	-0.25	-1.25
	Year 11 (vs Year 2)	-1.08	-2.31

Notes:

* *Unstandardised coefficients* are numbers expressed in the same units as the actual Attainment 8 score. They show the average raw score changes associated with each variable when compared to the reference category.

** The *intercept* represents the average score changes when all other variables are set to zero, or to their reference category (shown in the Value column as 'vs ...' next to each value). Here, this means a girl, born in autumn, who is White British, not eligible for free school meals, living in a neighbourhood with an average level of income deprivation, and with no identified special educational needs.

FSM = free school meals; SEN = special educational needs; IDACI = Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index; EHCP = education, health & care plan; MWBA = Mixed White & Black African; MWBC = Mixed White & Black Caribbean; MWAS = Mixed White & Asian.

As was true at key stage 2, year of entry was an important risk factor in relation to attainment at key stage 4 in 2023. EAL pupils who joined in year 2 or earlier generally achieved slightly better in year 11 than MLE-speaking pupils, while EAL learners joining from year 3 onwards had lower outcomes on average by year 11 than the comparable MLE group. There was no such trend among MLE speakers. Entry after year 5 was significantly associated with lower attainment in year 11 for EAL pupils (see Figure 10); again, three years of funding for these pupils did not enable schools to close the gap.

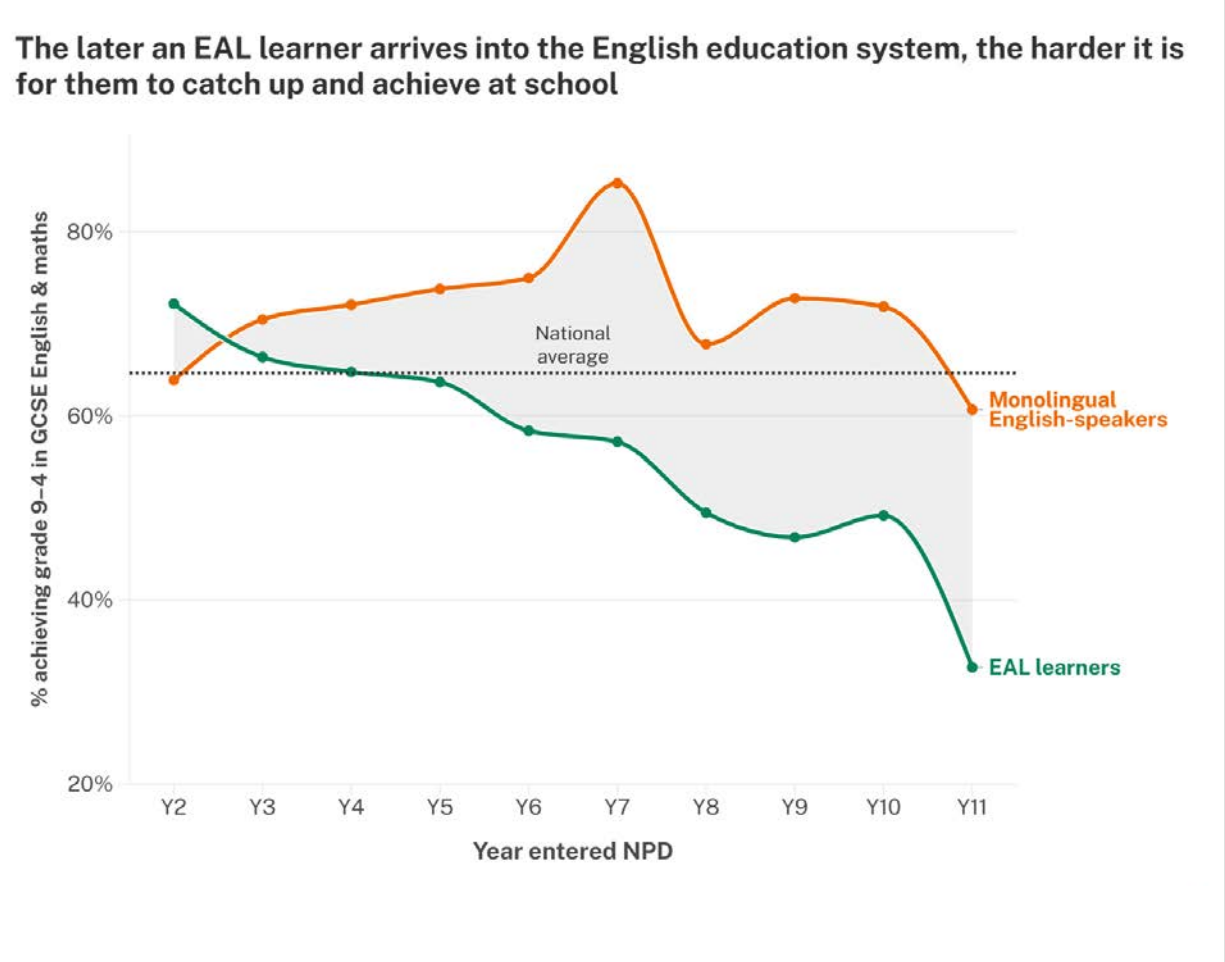

Figure 10. Percentage achieving grade 9–4 in GCSE English and mathematics at key stage 4 (age 16), by EAL status and year of entry to NPD, 2023

4 School- and regional-level variation

Results from multilevel models

We used multilevel regression models, which take into account that pupils are grouped within schools, to see whether and by how much any attainment gap based on EAL status varied across schools (as well as across regions). We also looked at the extent to which the composition of the student body – in terms of the proportions of EAL pupils and FSM-eligible pupils on the roll – was associated with attainment, as well as whether these school-level composition factors may explain any variation in the EAL attainment gap. We summarise some key findings of this analysis here, while the full results can be found in the technical report.

We focused this analysis on continuous key stage 2 (reading and maths scaled scores) and key stage 4 (Attainment 8) outcomes, as modelling the threshold measures for EYFS and key stage 1 introduces substantial complications (e.g. we could not examine explained variation in a traditional sense, nor compare coefficients in the same way as for models with continuous outcomes). We only included schools with records for at least 10 pupils and at least three EAL learners in the NPD for 2023, to avoid biasing estimates, for example, with results based on a single student within a school. This means the analytic samples for key stage 2 and key stage 4 in this chapter are not directly comparable to those in the previous chapter, where we included all available pupil records with complete information for the relevant variables and attainment measures.

We built up a series of different models, starting with a baseline scenario that did not include any of the predictors and then adding more variables at each step:

- Model 0: At key stage 2, based on empty models without any predictors (just the outcome and two levels with pupils within schools), 8.4% of variation in reading scores and 10% of variation in maths scores lay between schools. At key stage 4, 20% of variation in Attainment 8 scores lay between schools.
- Model 1: Including EAL status as a predictor explained very little (<1%) of the variation in any outcome at key stage 2 or key stage 4.
- Model 2: Including other pupil background factors (as in the previous regression models: FSM eligibility in the last six years, gender, birth season, ethnic group, IDACI, and SEN provision) explained another 23.5% of the variation in key stage 2 reading and another 27.1% in maths, as well as an additional 17.6% in key stage 4 Attainment 8 scores, beyond EAL status alone.

- Model 3: Including year of entry to the NPD explained an additional 3.8% and 1.6% of the variation in key stage 2 reading and maths, respectively, and 1.1% in Attainment 8 scores at key stage 4.
- Model 4: "Random slopes" for EAL status, FSM eligibility, SEN, and gender (tested separately because these are computationally demanding) were all significant. This means that all of these pupil background characteristics had different impacts across schools, but these effects were small. They also did not explain much variation.

Perhaps more interestingly, we can calculate 95% ranges for the variation in effects of these individual pupil variables across the schools included in this analysis. What this means practically is that the EAL status effect was small, but varied across schools to the extent that it was positive in some and negative in others. On average there was a small negative effect across schools in key stage 2 reading and very little average effect at all in key stage 2 maths.

Gender had a very minimal overall effect, also varying in direction across schools in key stage 2 reading. FSM eligibility and SEN tended to have larger overall effects than either gender or EAL status, and the effects of FSM eligibility and SEN provision with or without an EHCP varied considerably across schools but maintained consistent negative direction.

At key stage 4, only the EAL status effect varied to the extent that it could be positive or negative in different schools, with little average effect on attainment – much less than gender, FSM eligibility, or SEN, which were all consistently negative across schools in their associations with Attainment 8 score (see Table 13 and Figure 11).

Table 13. Ranges of effects across schools for EAL status, FSM eligibility, SEN, and gender in key stage 2 and key stage 4 (2023)

Variable	Level 1 (pupil) fixed coefficient	Level 2 (school) variance	Level 2 (school) SD	Range	
				95% Lower bound	95% Upper bound
KS2 reading					
EAL	-1.43	1.09	1.04	-3.47	0.61
FSM	-2.59	0.76	0.87	-4.3	-0.88
SEN (EHCP)	-16.91	7.11	2.67	-22.14	-11.69
SEN (SEN support)	-7.77	2.06	1.43	-10.58	-4.96
Gender	-0.4	0.25	0.5	-1.37	0.57
KS2 maths					
EAL	0.18	1.17	1.08	-1.94	2.3
FSM	-2.7	0.72	0.85	-4.37	-1.03
SEN (EHCP)	-16.45	8.74	2.96	-22.24	-10.65
SEN (SEN support)	-8.09	2.14	1.46	-10.96	-5.22
Gender	1.82	0.26	0.51	0.82	2.83

Variable	Level 1 (pupil) fixed coefficient	Level 2 (school) variance	Level 2 (school) SD	Range	
				95% Lower bound	95% Upper bound
KS4 Attainment 8					
EAL	0.36	5.04	2.25	-4.04	4.76
FSM	-9.15	4.67	2.16	-13.39	-4.91
SEN (EHCP)	-21.92	14.7	3.83	-29.43	-14.4
SEN (SEN support)	-13.98	6.02	2.45	-18.79	-9.17
Gender	-2.92	1.43	1.19	-5.26	-0.58

Notes: SEN = special educational needs; EHCP = education, health & care plan; FSM = free school meals.

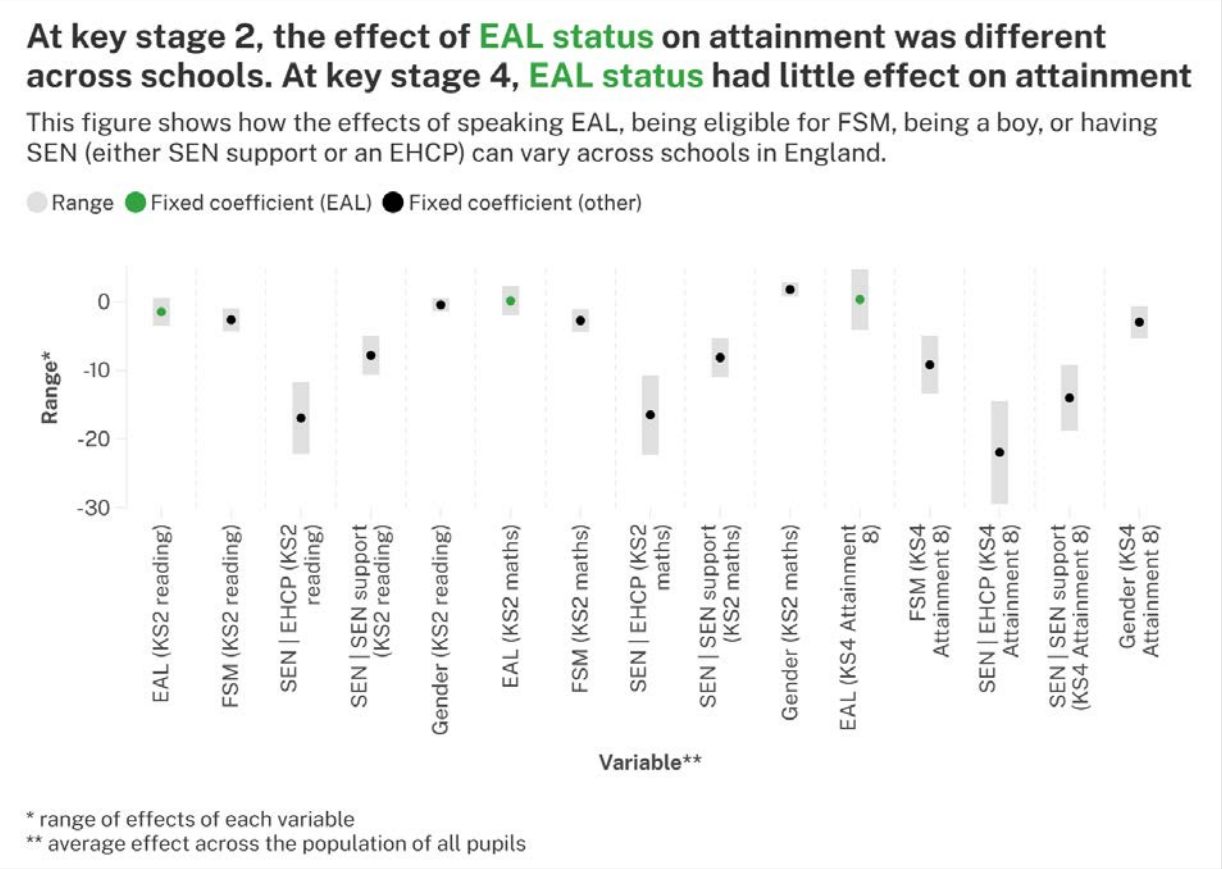

Figure 11: Range of effects of EAL status, FSM eligibility, SEN, and gender at key stage 2 and key stage 4, across all England schools (2023)

- Model 5: School-level concentrations of EAL and FSM-eligible pupils were significantly associated with attainment at key stage 2 (maths and reading), but their effects were very small and explained less than 1% of the total variation. At key stage 4, these variables had significant and slightly greater effects, explaining 6.2% of the total variation in Attainment 8 scores.
- Model 6: All interactions between school composition and pupil background factors (i.e. pupil-level EAL status/school-level EAL status [%]; and pupil-level FSM-eligible/ school-level FSM-eligible [%]) were also significant but small at key stage 2 and key stage 4.
- Models 7 and 8: In these models we included regional indicators, comparing all to the South-East (which had the largest number of pupils), both with and without the school variables and interactions from Models 5 and 6. There were some significant differences between regions, although, as a predictor, region explained very little variation in key stage 2 reading or maths or in key stage 4 Attainment 8 scores.

Differences by region

Descriptive results showed some general patterns in variation in the EAL attainment gaps by region across ages 5, 7, 11, and 16:

- At age 5 (EYFS) the MLE–EAL gap was smaller in London (*d*=-0.19) than elsewhere, and largest in the North-West (*d*=-0.33), Yorkshire & the Humber (*d*=-0.34), and the South-West (*d*=-0.32).
- At age 7 (key stage 1), EAL attainment gaps in reading were smaller than those of attainment at age 5. The smallest (*d*=-0.12, -0.13, and -0.14) were in the South-East, the East of England, and London, respectively, while the largest (*d*=-0.28) was in Yorkshire & the Humber. In maths, EAL attainment gaps by region were even smaller than those in reading, but there was still variation. The smallest gaps were in the South-East (*d*=-0.02), the East of England (*d*=-0.05), and London (*d*=-0.05).
- At age 11 (key stage 2), the size of EAL attainment gaps by region were roughly comparable to those at key stage 1, with smaller effects in the South-East and East of England (*d*=-0.09), and London (*d*=-0.14) and the West Midlands (*d*=-0.12) close behind. Yorkshire & the Humber and the South-West had the largest EAL attainment gaps of any region (*d*=-0.25 and d=-0.24, respectively). EAL status attainment gaps by region in maths at key stage 2 tended to be smaller in size than those for reading, and, contrastingly, were in favour of pupils using EAL. For key stage 2 maths the smallest gaps were evident in Yorkshire & the Humber (*d*=-0.03), the North-East (*d*=0.07), the North-West (*d*=0.08), and the East Midlands (*d*=0.09).
- At age 16 (key stage 4), attainment gaps mostly favoured EAL pupils across regions. Their effect sizes were very small, with the smallest being in Yorkshire & the Humber (*d*=-0.05) and London (*d*=0.04).

5 Implications for policy and practice

Our aim in this research was to update the evidence on the relationship(s) between EAL status and educational attainment in England, building on the previous research summarised in the background section of this report.

From the available data, we know that the EAL-learner population in England is large and growing. In 1997, when the first reliable national data were collected, pupils using EAL accounted for around 7% of the English school population aged 5–16. This had increased threefold to over 21%, or more than 1-in-5, of all pupils by 2024. However, the composition and distribution of the EAL population have also changed significantly over time. The distribution of pupils who use EAL is becoming more widely spread outside of urban areas, with a greater proportion of schools containing high concentrations of EAL learners. We might therefore expect language support needs to be more widely distributed than they were 10 years ago.

Many pupils recorded as EAL users in the 1960s–1980s had arrived in England directly from overseas, often with limited proficiency in English. As of 2023, the majority of pupils recorded as using EAL may have been born in the UK and/or have experienced all of their formal education in England. This speaks to the heterogeneity of the group recorded as EAL pupils, which might include:

- Children born in the UK and brought up with another language, as well as English, as part of their cultural heritage, but mostly using English at home and school;
- Children from other countries educated in English-medium or bilingual schools abroad, who can read and write fluently in two or more languages;
- Children from abroad who speak, read, or write little or no English upon arrival.

The only instances where the *aggregate data* for 2023 showed substantial underachievement by EAL pupils were in Reception at age 5, where the proportion achieving a good level of development was lower than that of MLE-speakers, and in attainment in reading at age 7. After age 7, average differences in attainment between pupils using EAL and MLE speakers were either small or in favour of the EAL group.

This does not mean, however, that language learning needs no longer exist.

Rather, just as Strand, Malmberg, and Hall (2015) found 10 years ago, our results suggest that the EAL flag used in the school census is not a sound basis for targeting support, because the flag in itself does not provide any information about a pupil's proficiency in English. Indeed, this also limits what we have been able to show in our analysis, as we do not have access to what would really be needed to understand the relationships between EAL and attainment: proficiency-in-English data.

In the absence of that information, we have shown that while most risk factors for low attainment (such as FSM eligibility) apply regardless of EAL status, looking at pupils' year of entry to the English school system can provide a useful insight into which learners may need language support and when:

- In 2023, there was no EAL attainment gap at key stage 2 for pupils entering in Reception, or at key stage 4 for pupils entering before year 6. Indeed, many of these pupils know a heritage language in addition to English, which can be an asset to attainment (Hessel & Strand, 2023).
- Later entry was negatively associated with attainment for EAL pupils but not for MLE speakers. This likely reflects the language learning needs of the recently entered EAL cohort.
- Current policy allows for discounting pupils from performance tables if they arrived at the school within two years prior to assessment, but this does not fully account for the time required to acquire proficiency in English and access the curriculum, estimated to take around six years. Our results show a reduction in attainment for those arriving more than two years earlier, e.g. pupils in years 1–3 for key stage 2 and years 7–9 for key stage 4.
- These pupils (in years 1–3 for key stage 2 or years 7–9 for key stage 4) will have had the entitlement to three years of EAL funding specified in the NFF – but still achieved below the national average at end of the relevant key stage. Three years of funding is not enough to close the gap.

A fairer and more equitable targeting of EAL funding resources within the NFF could be achieved even without an overall increase in the level of funding. For example:

1. If mandatory reporting on proficiency in English (based on bands of proficiency in English used in Wales) were to be reintroduced in England, funding could be targeted directly to pupils with language learning needs, and the duration or level of funding could be proportionate to the extent of that need (for example by applying weights for those at the first four stages [A= new to English; B = early acquisition; C = developing competence; and D = competent] compared to those at band E [fluent]).
2. The current system of funding EAL pupils for three years after they arrive in Reception could be maintained, but the approximately 20% of pupils speaking EAL who arrive in year 1 or later in primary school, or year 7 or later in secondary school, could be funded for twice as long, i.e. for a full six years to support them in acquiring proficiency in English.
3. Given the increasingly wide geographical distribution of EAL pupils in England, schools and teachers need appropriate training to understand English-language proficiency, assess it accurately, and provide effective and targeted support to the pupils who require it.

The implications arising from this research, and the studies that preceded it, are therefore:

1. A measure of proficiency in English, or at least a better proxy for it than the current EAL flag, is needed to facilitate better targeting of support.
2. Appropriate training is needed for teachers and schools to facilitate assessment of and support for pupils' proficiency in English.
3. The funding provided for schools should reflect actual language support needs. A decade's worth of research underscores the need to consider proficiency in English rather than EAL status (as currently defined) as an indicator of language support needs, as well as the importance of sustaining that support – for those who need it – for long enough to facilitate full proficiency in the language of instruction.

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