

UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' IDENTITIES

Who are “students with disabilities”?

Too often, students with disabilities are separated into categories. They are identified as having physical, mental, intellectual, learning, or behavioral disabilities – and their full identities are ignored. Labeling and categorizing are tools that some people use to feel more comfortable or to make sense of the world around them. Yet, students with disabilities do not fit neatly into categories. They do not all have one distinct experience or the same needs. Each student has diverse identities, experiences, strengths, challenges, and needs.



Data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education show that in 2020, 13.7 percent of students in Missouri's public school districts and charter schools were identified as students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and have Individualized Education Programs (IEP) or Service Plans.

With that in mind, this toolkit is focused on serving students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, recognizing that these students hold a variety of other identities as well. Intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs) are conditions that have an impact on a person’s physical, intellectual, and/or emotional development. According to the CDC, “Developmental disabilities are a group of conditions due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas.



These conditions begin during the developmental period, may impact day-to-day functioning, and usually last throughout a person’s lifetime.” The category of “developmental disabilities” encompasses intellectual and other disabilities.

Developmental disabilities include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and other behavior disorders, autism spectrum disorder, brain injury, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, hearing loss, intellectual disability, learning disability, spina bifida, vision impairment, and other developmental delays.

Intellectual disabilities are characterized by challenges with intellectual functioning (including reasoning, problem-solving, and learning processes) and adaptive behaviors (including life and social skills).

Reflective questions:

- What do you know about the experiences of students with disabilities in your school or program?
- What are these students' strengths, challenges, and needs?

Students with disabilities are too often deemed “different” or determined to have “excessive” needs. All students have needs, contexts in which they feel most safe, and ways they learn best. All students benefit from building relationships with their educators or youth-serving professionals. All students deserve to feel included, valued, and cared for, not isolated or othered.

Resources:

Missouri organizations:

- [Missouri Developmental Disabilities Council \(MODDC\)](#)
- [Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Office of Special Education](#)
- [State of Missouri Disability Portal](#)
- [Starkloff Disability Institute](#)
- [Paraquad](#)
- [Arc of Missouri](#)
- [Down Syndrome Association of Greater St. Louis](#)

Learn more about the experiences of individuals with disabilities:

- [Understood](#)
- [Special Books by Special Kids](#)
- [Disability Scoop](#)
- [Crip Camp film](#)
- [Disability Rights Washington](#)





Who are “English learners”?

As of fall 2016, 3.4 percent of Missouri students enrolled in public school were English learners (ELs). Data from 2018 show that 7 percent of children ages 5 to 17 in Missouri speak a language other than English at home.

According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), an English Learner (EL) is an individual:

1. who is age 3 through 21;
2. who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school;
3. (A) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English;
(B) who is Native American or Alaska Native or a native resident of the outlying areas; who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual’s level of English language proficiency;
(C) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant;
4. whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual:
(A) the ability to meet the challenging State academic standards;
(B) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or
(C) the opportunity to participate fully in society.

English learners do not fit into one simple category either. English learners hold more identities than simply English learner; there are English learners from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, English learners who practice different religions, and English learners who have and do not have disabilities. An English learner student is not necessarily an immigrant or a refugee; English learners can be born in the U.S. or out of the country. The top 10 English Learner home languages in Missouri in 2019 were Spanish, Arabic, Somali, Bosnian, Swahili, Vietnamese, Chinese, Russian, Chuukese, and Burmese.

Resources:

Supporting English learners:

- [Colorín Colorado](#)
 - [Serving English Learners: Laws, Policies, and Regulations](#)
- [SELspace English Language Learner \(ELL\) Supports](#)
- [Cambio de Colores](#)
- [TESOL International Association – Supporting English Learners with Exceptional Needs](#)

Reflective questions:

- What do you know about the experiences of English learners in your school or program?
- What are these students' strengths, challenges, and needs?

Missouri organizations:

- [Colorín Colorado – Missouri: ELL Resources](#)
- [Heart of Missouri Regional Professional Development Center Migrant English Language Learners \(MELL\) program](#)

Missouri immigrant services:

- [National Immigration Legal Services Directory – Missouri organizations](#)
- [International Institute St. Louis](#)
- [ALAS \(Alliance for Leadership, Advancement and Success\)](#), based in Springfield
- [Casa de Salud](#), based in St. Louis
- [InformedImmigrant.com](#)
- [St. Louis Area Resource Directory – Immigrant Service](#)
- [St. Louis Mosaic](#)
- [Bilingual International Assistant Services \(BIAS\)](#), based in St. Louis
- [Refugee & Immigrant Services & Empowerment \(RISE\)](#), based in Kansas City
- [City of Refuge](#), based in Columbia
- [Refugee And Immigrant Services & Education \(RAISE\)](#), based in Noel
- [Central Missouri Community Action Area Resource Guide - Immigration and Refugee Services](#)

Who are “English learners with disabilities”?

As with students with disabilities and English learners generally, each English learner student with a disability has unique identities, experiences, and needs. English learners with disabilities are students who are eligible for both special education services and English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual education services. English learners with disabilities are often called “dual identified students.”

Nationwide, ELs made up 10 percent of students with disabilities in 2014-15. Data show that in 2014-15, 14 percent of all ELs were students with disabilities, a larger percentage than the 13 percent of students with disabilities in the overall student population.



Federal legislation requires schools to assess English learners with suspected disabilities in both their native language and English. This helps evaluate challenges with learning and determine if learning challenges are only the result of learning the second language. Research reveals that English learners are both over-identified and under-identified for special education services. English learners who fall behind their peers in academic achievement may be wrongly identified as having a disability – and English learners with disabilities may be missed in evaluations for special education services if their challenges are solely attributed to learning a new language.

This context is important to remember when working to support English learners. When students have had their needs misunderstood or overlooked, it may contribute to mistrust of the education system among students and families.

Resources:

- [Missouri DESE – Identifying, Supporting and Reclassifying English Learners with Disabilities](#)
- [Missouri DESE – Contrasting Possible Explanations for Typical Academic Difficulties Encountered by ELL](#)
- [Missouri DESE - English Learners \(EL\) SPED FAQ](#)
- [Council of Chief State School Officers \(CCSSO\) – English Learners with Disabilities Guide](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education – Tools and Resources for Addressing English Learners with Disabilities](#)
- [Colorín Colorado – Serving English Learners with Disabilities: How ESL/Bilingual Specialists Can Collaborate for Student Success](#)
- [Alabama State Department of Education – English Learners and the Special Education Process](#)

- Colorín Colorado videos:
 - [ELLs with special education needs are entitled to both ELL and special education services](#)
 - [The relationship between special education and ESL](#)
 - [Under- and over-identification of ELLs in special education](#)
 - [Over-identification: Why ELLs may be referred to special education too soon](#)
 - [Under-identification: Why ELLs may not get the special education services they need](#)



Reflective questions:

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