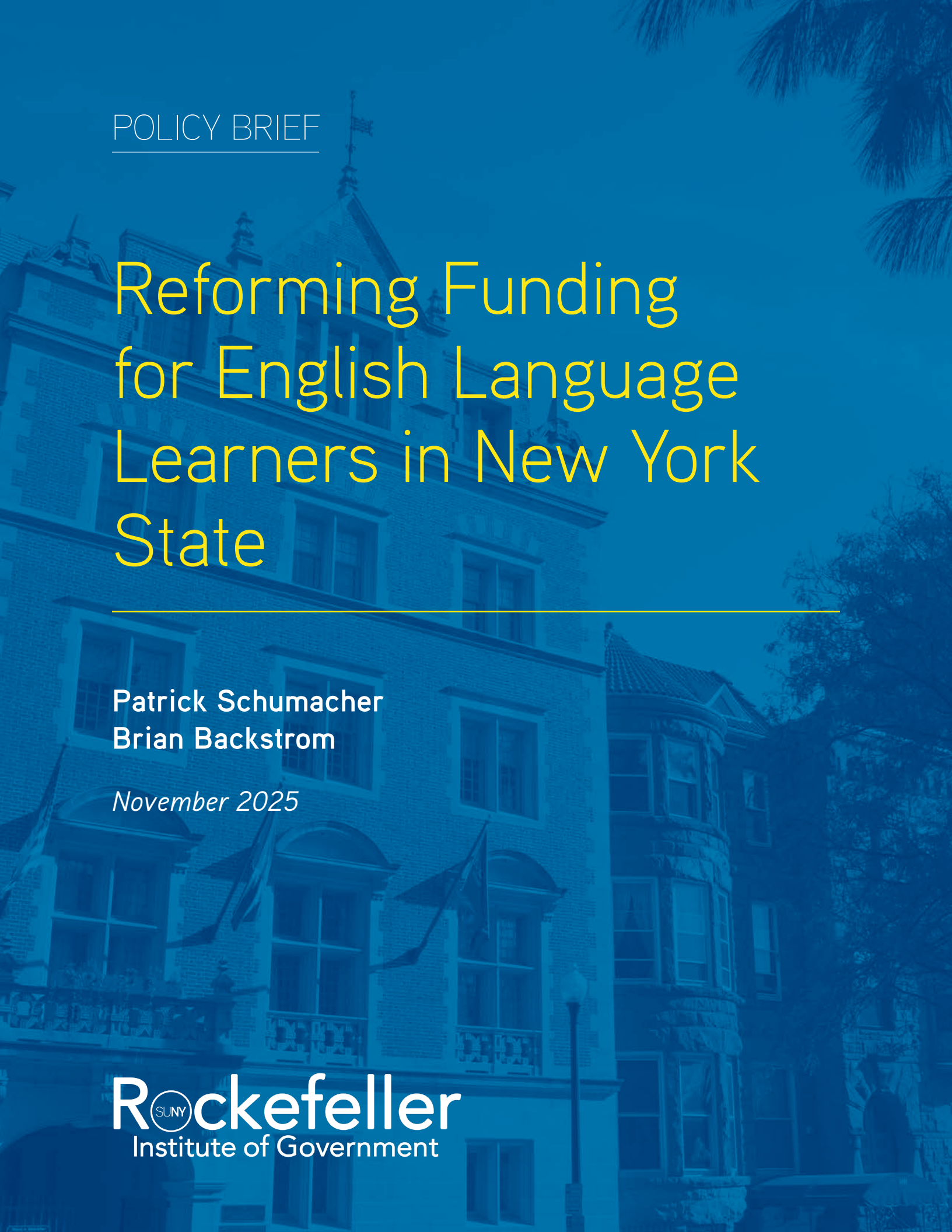




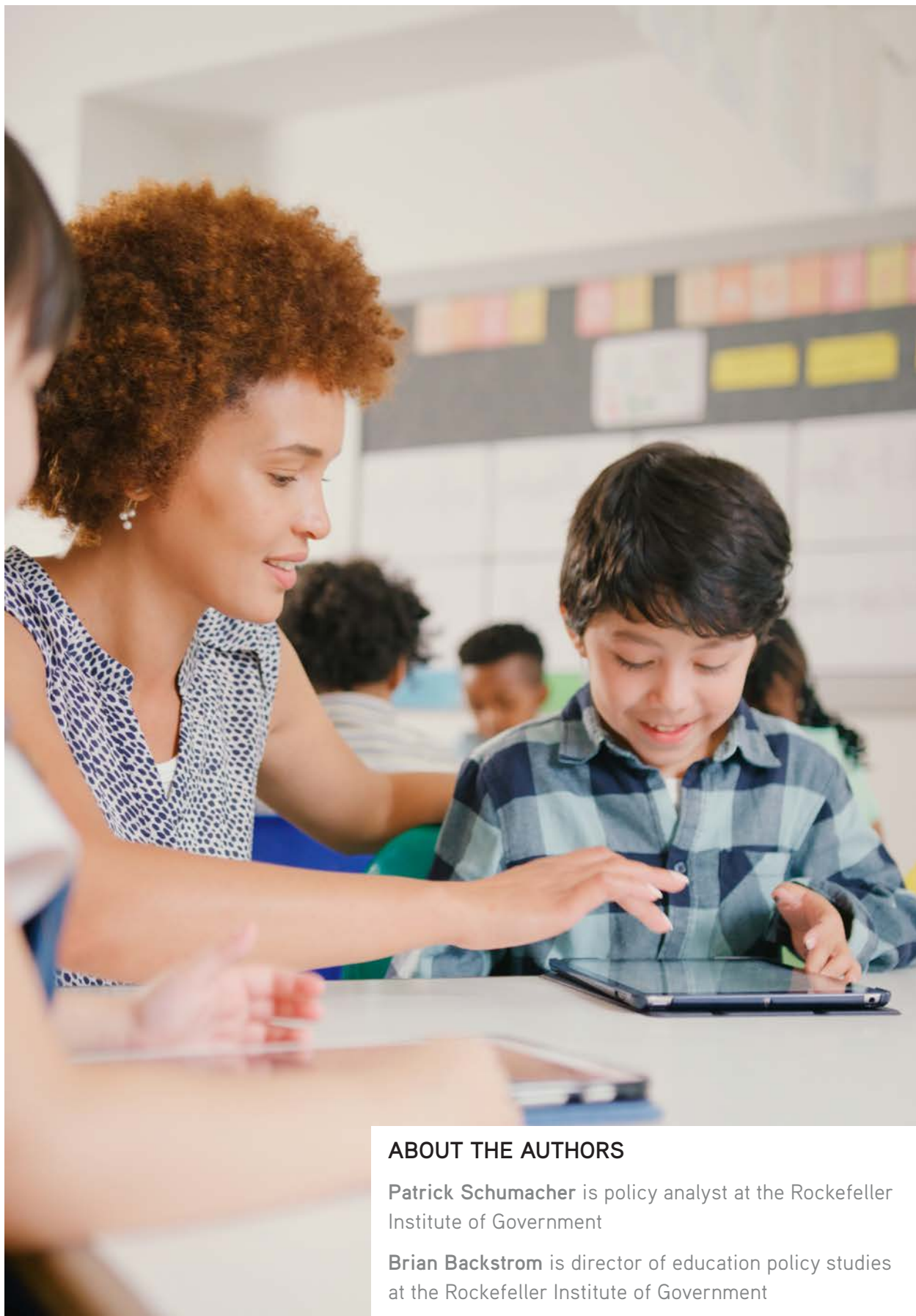
POLICY BRIEF

Reforming Funding for English Language Learners in New York State

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November 2025

Rockefeller
Institute of Government



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A photograph of two young students sitting at a wooden desk, focused on writing. The student on the left, wearing a blue jacket, holds a silver pen. The student on the right, wearing a red and blue plaid shirt, holds a green pen. They are both looking down at papers on the desk. In the background, there are colorful highlighters and a yellow folder. The text 'Reforming Funding for English Language Learners in New York State' is overlaid in white on the lower half of the image.

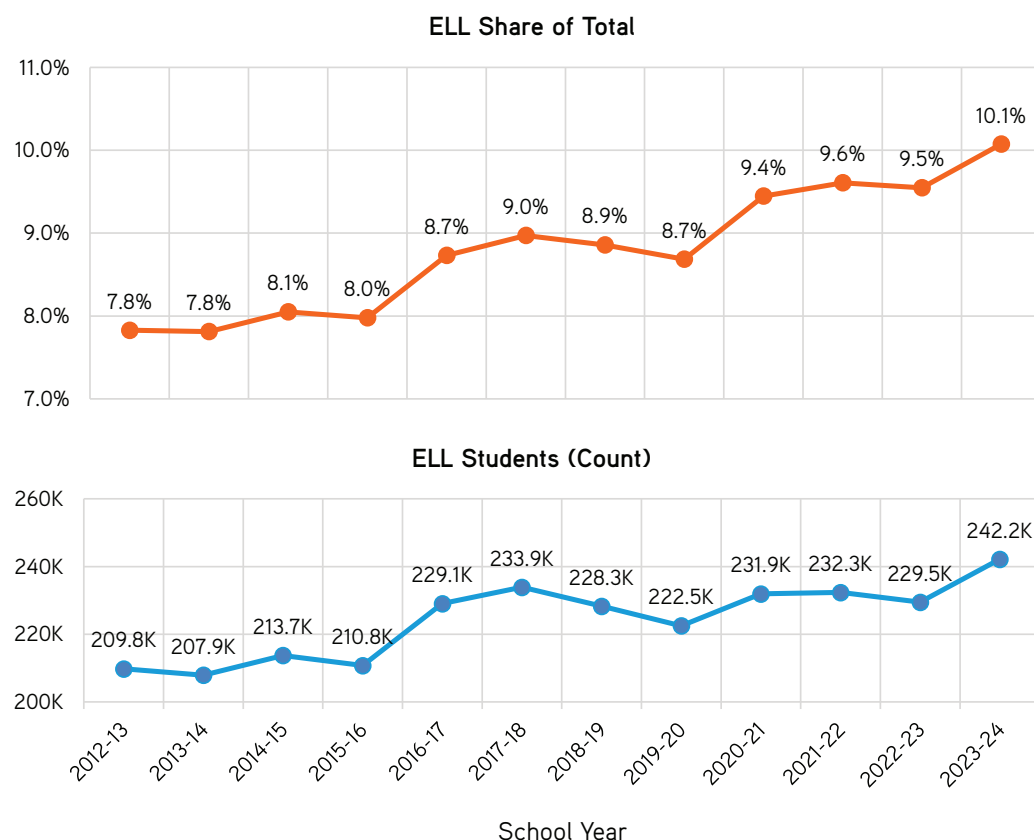
Reforming Funding for English Language Learners in New York State

English Language Learners (ELLs) make up one of the fastest-growing demographic groups of students in New York State's public schools.¹ As of school year (SY) 2023–24, the state identified 10.1 percent of students as ELLs, up from 7.8 percent in SY 2012–13 ([Figure 1](#)).²

For comparison, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that 10.6 percent of US public school students in fall 2021 were English Language Learners, with concentrations in states ranging from a low of 0.8 percent in West Virginia to a high of 20.2 percent in Texas; New York's 9.7 percent ranks it fifteenth among all 50 states.³ Within New York State, the New York City School District enrolls not only the highest number of ELL students among all districts in the state (137,015; 17.2 percent in SY 2023–24) but also serves one of the largest populations of ELL students of any district in the nation.^{4, 5}

A variety of students fall into the ELL category, including those with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), recent immigrants, and children from refugee families. Spanish is the most common language spoken at home among ELLs in New York State, ranking first in almost every school district. Yet, the state's ELL population is remarkably diverse: students collectively speak more than 100 different home languages. Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Ukrainian appear frequently among districts' top five languages by ELL enrollment.⁶

FIGURE 1 | Trend in Enrollment for English Language Learners, SY 2012-13 to 2023-24



SOURCE: Enrollment Data Archive maintained by the New York State Education Department, <https://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/enroll-n-staff/ArchiveEnrollmentData.html>.

Each school district is responsible for providing English Language Learners with access to services that help them gain proficiency in English while learning subject matter at the same academic level as their peers. The Regulations of the Commissioner of Education obligate districts to provide qualified staff and a bilingual education to any student who needs it.⁷ Recognizing that the provision of these services presents a financial cost to districts, the state allocates supplemental per-pupil education funding to districts for ELL students under its Foundation Aid formula. This formula uses a “one-size-fits-all” approach to funding, however; it assigns the same weight to all ELL students when determining supplemental aid. That is, the formula does not differentiate the cost of instructional resources for a student at the beginning stage of English proficiency compared to the cost associated with a student at a more advanced stage. As highlighted in the Rockefeller Institute’s December 2024 comprehensive analysis of the state’s Foundation Aid formula, this structure risks inequitably underfunding districts with higher concentrations of high-need students.⁸

This policy brief explores funding reforms New York policymakers could consider to better account for the differing instructional needs of the state’s kaleidoscope of English Language Learner students. Specifically, the state’s Foundation Aid formula

could employ a tiered-weighting structure to vary supplemental per-pupil aid available to school districts for each enrolled ELL student based on the level of instructional services needed. Several states already do precisely that. Under such an approach, students at the beginning stages of learning English could be assigned a higher weight—and thus be allocated more supplemental aid—than students much closer to mastering English and needing fewer instructional services. This brief outlines the rationale for this potential policy change in detail, examines funding approaches in other states from which insights can be drawn, and highlights important implementation issues reformers and policymakers should consider.

ELL Students and New York’s Foundation Aid Formula

School districts in New York State receive revenue from a mix of local (57 percent), state (36 percent), and federal (7 percent) funds.⁹ Most of the State’s share of school funding is allocated to districts based on the state’s Foundation Aid formula. Under this formula, each district begins with a base amount of funds per pupil (\$7,821 for SY 2023–24).¹⁰ On top of this base amount, districts receive additional funding based on the characteristics of their student populations as determined by the Pupil Needs Index. The Pupil Needs Index assigns weights for students who are economically disadvantaged, participate in the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program, are English Language Learners, or attend schools in sparsely populated districts. These weights function as multipliers that increase the base amount of per-pupil Foundation Aid each district receives.

Identifying, Classifying, and Assessing ELL Students

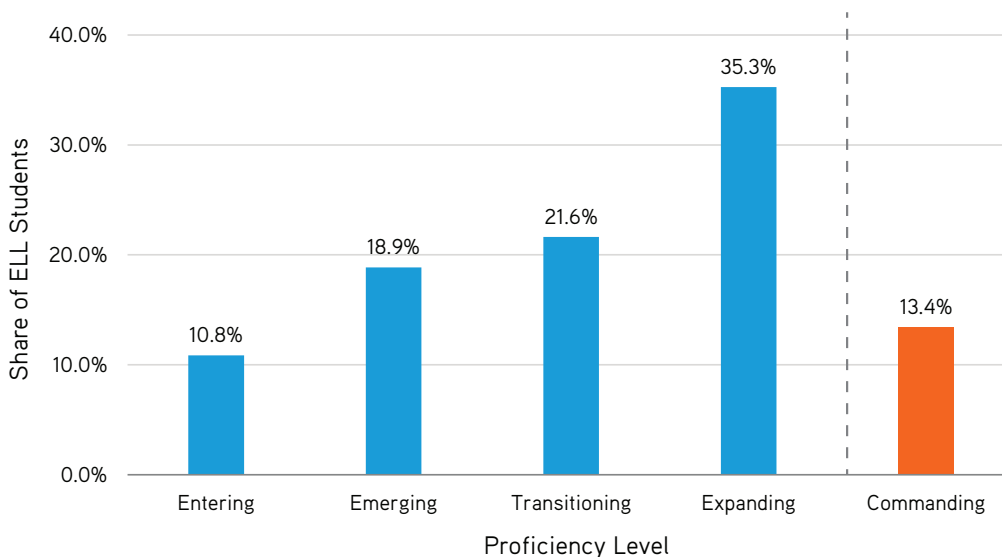
The first step school districts take to identify students who may require additional instructional intervention due to limited English proficiency is to provide families an assessment called the Home Language Questionnaire (HLQ).¹¹ Based on the results of the HQL, the State Identification Test for English Language Learners (NYSITELL) may be administered. The NYSITELL classifies students into one of five categories based on their assessed level of proficiency in English: Entering, Emerging, Transitioning, Expanding, or Commanding. Districts must provide students who fall into every category except the highest, Commanding, with instructional time in English as a New Language (ENL) services.¹² These categories, and the ENL instructional time requirements associated with them, are described further below:

- **Entering:** A student at this level still relies heavily on a variety of support (e.g., visuals, translated language, or simplified English). They do not yet have enough facility in the English language to work independently. They require 540 minutes per week of English as a New Language instruction in grades 9–12, or 360 minutes per week in other grades.

- **Emerging:** A student at this level can understand and use some English independently. However, they continue to rely on support from teachers while developing a basic facility in English. They require 360 minutes per week of English as a New Language instruction.
- **Transitioning:** A student at this level exhibits increasing independence in using English. They can participate in academic discussions and complete assignments with few supports. They may still need some support, though, to handle complex tasks. They require 180 minutes per week of English as a New Language instruction.
- **Expanding:** A student at this level can effectively communicate in English with little support. They are approaching full proficiency and can generally meet the linguistic demands of grade-level work. Teachers may still need to provide occasional assistance. They require 180 minutes per week of English as a New Language instruction.

Once designated as a student needing ENL instruction, ELL students must annually take an assessment of their progress toward proficiency: the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT). [Figure 2](#) shows the statewide distribution of ELL students in each category based on the NYSESLAT. Most students scored as Expanding (35.3 percent), the most proficient level and needing the fewest hours of ENL instruction, followed by Transitioning (21.6 percent), Emerging (18.9 percent), and then Entering (10.8 percent), representing those students needing the most intensive ENL instruction. Approximately 13.4 percent of ELL students tested Commanding, demonstrating proficiency, and no longer needing ENL instruction.

FIGURE 2 | Distribution of ELL Students by NYSESLAT Proficiency Level, SY 2023-24



SOURCE: “Downloads: Report Card Database,” New York State Education Department, accessed October 17, 2025, <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>. Note: Only the first four categories are included in the count for supplemental ELL funding; students testing at the Commanding level are not.

Despite this variance, under the state’s Foundation Aid Formula, all ELLs receive the same extra weight of 0.5 in the Pupil Needs Index, regardless of their scores on the NYSITELL or NYSESLAT. This flat weighting system fails to consider the higher instructional costs of students at lower levels of proficiency, potentially underfunding districts with high concentrations of ‘Entering’ and ‘Emerging’ ELLs.

Other State Approaches to Funding for English Language Learners

There is little consistency among states in the way they structure funding for ELL students, in part reflecting the substantial variation among states in immigrant, migrant, and newcomer student populations (see the analysis in the Rockefeller Institute’s report on New York State’s Foundation Aid funding formula for a comprehensive discussion of state approaches to ELL funding).¹³ Many states set state per pupil funding to measure levels of competency in English, and others incentivize effective instruction by limiting the number of years that a student may qualify for supplemental funding.

[Table 1](#), below, provides a comparison of how some states provide funding to school districts for ELL students. Three primary models are shown: 1) competency-level funding, which adjusts support based on students’ English proficiency; 2) time-limited funding, which caps the duration of students’ eligibility for ELL funding; and 3) concentration-based funding, which provides more resources to districts serving higher shares of ELL students. The table also shows other innovative approaches, such as Texas’s approach of giving more funding to districts that do immersion language programming.

TABLE 1 | ELL Funding in Selected States

Funding Approach	State	Description
Competency-Level Funding	Hawaii	Hawaii stratifies its supplemental funding based on student proficiency, using a higher multiplier for students scoring “non-English proficient” and a lower multiplier for students testing as “limited proficient.”
	Indiana	Indiana uses a nationally standardized English competency assessment administered each year to provide a higher flat-grant aid supplement for students scoring in the bottom two tiers than those scoring in the top two tiers.
	Iowa	Iowa provides a higher state aid multiplier for “intensive/emerging” ELL students and a lower multiplier for “intermediate/progressing” ELL students.
	Michigan	Michigan uses a statewide English proficiency assessment to determine the level of supplemental aid districts receive for each ELL student, stratified into three tiers based on the students’ level of competency.
	North Dakota	North Dakota uses proficiency standards on a state assessment to group students into six categories of English competency, providing a varying level of supplemental state funding for the lowest three levels.

TABLE 1 | ELL Funding in Selected States, *continued*

Funding Approach	State	Description
Time-Limited Funding	Colorado	Colorado uses an annual English proficiency assessment and limits eligibility for supplemental state aid to five years.
	Florida	Florida requires an assessment of each ELL student after three years of eligibility to qualify for continuing supplemental state aid.
	North Dakota	In North Dakota, students remain eligible for funding in the state’s most proficient category for a maximum of three years
	Tennessee	Tennessee reduces its supplemental state aid for ELL students the longer the student receives English language services.
Concentration-Based Funding	Alabama, Maine, Maryland, Missouri	Several states provide supplemental state aid based on a district’s concentration of ELL students; districts that have above a certain threshold in the percentage of their student populations that are ELLs receive higher funding.
Other Innovative Approaches	Ohio	Ohio continues a state aid supplement for ELL students for two years after they achieve a score of “proficient” on the state’s English competency assessment.
	Texas	To encourage districts’ use of immersion language learning programming, Texas provides a 50 percent greater multiplier for supplemental state aid for ELL students enrolled in a bilingual immersion model.

Modifying the Funding Formula to Match ENL Instructional Needs

In its December 2024 analysis of the Foundation Aid formula, the Rockefeller Institute provided dozens of options for New York’s policymakers to consider that would update the formula with more current data, provide local school districts with greater flexibility to reflect their unique fiscal conditions, and build more equity into the funding formula.¹⁴ Among the policy considerations offered in that report was an option to replace the uniform weight assigned to ELL students with tiered weights corresponding to students’ English proficiency. Building on that idea, [Table 2](#) shows proposed weights for each of the three English proficiency tiers, as measured by the NYSITELL and NYSESLAT, that could be used to help determine additional state funding for local districts for ELL students needing greater levels of instructional support.

The use of a tiered funding approach offers several advantages. First, it would make funding across school districts more equitable, as districts vary widely in the intensity of services that are required for their enrolled ELL students. For example, in Peekskill City School District, about 40 percent of ELL students score at the Entering or Emerging levels on the NYSESLAT, needing the most ENL instructional time. In the Greece Central School District, by comparison, only about 13 percent of tested ELL

students fall into those two categories. Under the current funding scheme, Peekskill and Greece receive funding based on a uniform weight attached to a count of their ELL students. Under the reform offered for consideration, districts such as Peekskill that serve more beginner ELL students would receive more per-pupil funding.

TABLE 2 | Potential Differentiated Funding Weights for English-Language Learners

Tier	Weight	Description
Tier 1 Entering; Emerging; SLIFE <i>(Highest Need)</i>	0.65	This tier includes students at the Entering and Emerging proficiency levels and Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE). These students require the most intensive support at two full units (360 minutes) of English instruction per week. Higher funding would better align with high-intensity interventions, such as smaller class sizes and more specialized staff.
Tier 2 Transitioning <i>(Moderate Need)</i>	0.50	This tier serves Transitioning students who show some independence in English, while still needing substantial academic support. These students receive one full unit (180 minutes) of English instruction per week. The 0.50 weight maintains the current funding level for this category of students.
Tier 3 Expanding <i>(Lower Ongoing Need)</i>	0.40	This tier covers Expanding students, meaning those on the cusp of independence in English. The reduced weight of 0.40 reflects that these students, while entitled to the same number of minutes of ENL instruction, should be practicing substantially more independent work and need less instructional intervention.

NOTE: This proposed tiered structure is a more refined approach—and a more generous one—than the reform proposed for consideration in the Rockefeller Institute’s Foundation Aid report. The earlier proposal applied the highest weight (0.65) only to Entering students in grades 9–12 and to Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE), while assigning the formula’s current weight (0.50) to Entering and Emerging students in grades K–8. In contrast, this proposal extends the 0.65 weight to all Entering and Emerging students, regardless of grade level. Additionally, this structure applies a 0.40 weight only to the count of students in the Expanding proficiency level, while the original Foundation Aid report proposed for consideration including both Transitioning and Expanding at the lower level.

Some may, understandably, question whether a tiered system adds unnecessary complexity to the funding formula. Since school districts already classify students’ proficiency using the NYSILTT and NYSESLAT, however, there would be no additional administrative effort in that respect. The only change would be in how these existing classifications translate into the allocation of state funds. Districts would continue to administer the NYSITELL and NYSESLAT as they currently do and would report ELL student numbers to the State Education Department as they currently do. Different weights would simply be applied to the student totals in the different proficiency categories when running Foundation Aid formula calculations. From a transparency perspective, the tiered system would likely be more understandable—and more equitable—than the current single-weight approach because it makes explicit the relationship between state funding levels and students’ instructional needs.

Considerations for Implementation

Implementation of a tiered ELL funding reform, such as the one outlined above, would provide more Foundation Aid for districts serving high concentrations of Entering and Emerging English Language Learners, and slightly less per pupil aid would be provided for ELL students nearing English proficiency. Policymakers could choose to introduce the new tiered weights over two years to allow time for districts and the state to adjust their budgeting, staffing, and reporting systems, if desired. A staged implementation could proceed as follows:

- **Year 1:** Introduce Tier 1 (highest need) at the 0.65 weight while maintaining 0.50 for the other tiers.
- **Year 2:** Add the reduced-aid tier at the 0.40 weight.

In addition, the state could require that districts document how increases in state funding for services to ELL students are being used to improve their capacity to effectively help these students achieve proficiency. A report from the State Comptroller, published in 2024, found that many school districts do not have sufficient qualified staffing or programs in place to serve the needs of the number of ELL students currently enrolled.¹⁵ Given these concerns, implementation of reform could, if desired, be accompanied by:

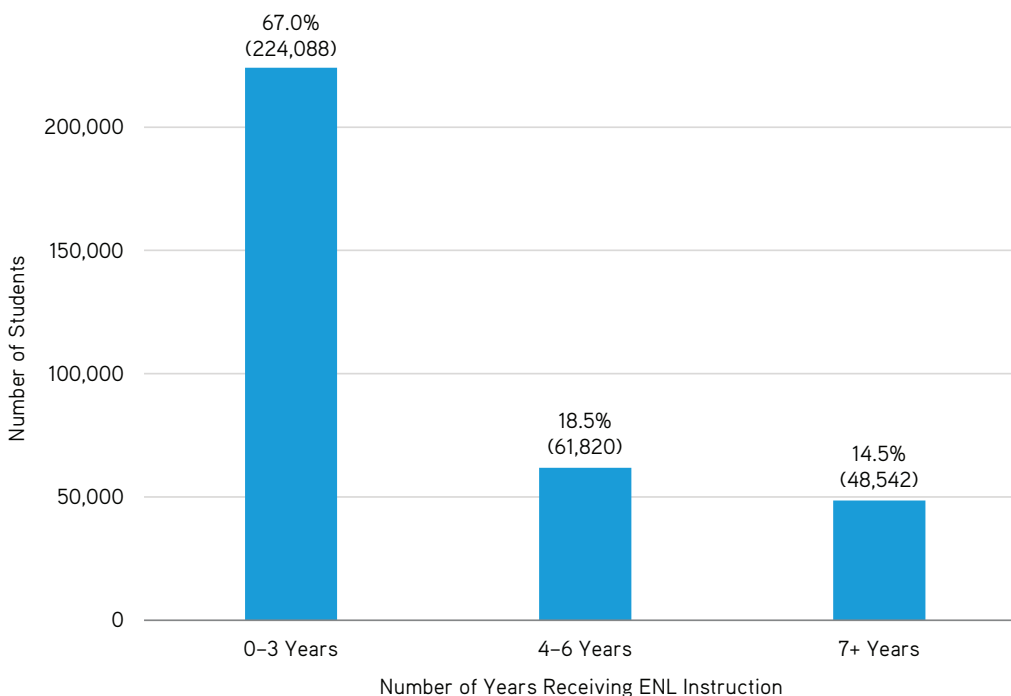
- Funded professional development for teachers and administrators on effective strategies for teaching ELLs.
- Funded technical assistance for districts.
- Incentives and additional support for districts to recruit and retain certified ESL and bilingual teachers.
- Sharing of best practices across districts, particularly for those developing or expanding their programs.

Duration of Supplemental Funding

Another important consideration for policymakers is the duration that students' classification as ELL students qualifies them to be counted for supplemental Foundation Aid funding. Districts, of course, should aim to achieve English proficiency with ELL students as quickly as possible and within a reasonable amount of time, and then exit them from ENL instructional services. Indeed, state regulations stipulate that supplemental funding for ELL students under the Foundation Aid is available for a maximum of up to three years, or until student scores on the NYSESLAT show sufficient proficiency to participate in English-only classes, or to the twelfth grade, whichever occurs first.¹⁶ This regulation is intended to make sure that aid for ENL instructional services is targeted and effectively used by districts.

Analysis of NYSESLT data reveals that the three-year benchmark is not consistently met by many of New York's local school districts, however; approximately one-third of all ELL students statewide receive services for more than three years ([Figure 3](#)).¹⁷

FIGURE 3 | Number of Years New York State English Language Learners Receive ENL Instruction, 2023-24



SOURCE: “Downloads: English Language Learners Database,” New York State Education Department, 2024, <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>.

Moreover, roughly 15 percent of students have been enrolled in ELL programs for seven or more years. The State could consider more consistently enforcing its existing three-year timeframe for ENL instruction to achieve proficiency for students.

Policymakers also might consider an accommodation that recognizes that older students often need more instructional time to acquire English language proficiency.¹⁸ Students in grades 9–12, for example, could be eligible for up to four years of supplemental funding, while maintaining the three-year limit for students in grades K–8. Students would still progress through the proficiency tiers; for instance, a ninth grader entering at the Emerging level and advancing to Expanding by eleventh grade would receive the lower 0.40 weight in years three and four. A four-year allowance for high school students would provide districts with sufficient resources to support ELLs through a complete high school program. This position aligns with testimony offered to the Rockefeller Institute at public hearings during its review of the Foundation Aid formula, where stakeholders pointed to the greater instructional challenges associated with educating ELL students at high school age. Districts could continue offering services beyond these timeframes using funding sources other than Foundation Aid, but a more consistently enforced structure of time-limited aid would establish clearer expectations for consistent and measurable progress toward English proficiency.

Another option for policymakers to consider that would help accelerate proficiency among ELL students is to incentivize districts’ adoption of quality, research-based language immersion programs. In these programs, students are surrounded by

English language experiences in both social and academic environments. Research shows that these types of models, when well-implemented, can substantially improve long-term outcomes for ELLs. One study, for example, found that minority-language students in two-way immersion programs outperformed their peers in transitional bilingual programs.¹⁹ Texas, which incentivizes the use of English immersion programs by providing more state aid to them than traditional ENL programs (see Table 1), is conducting a longitudinal study to track ELL students who enrolled in dual-language programs to evaluate gains in high school completion and labor market outcomes.²⁰

Conclusion

The large, diverse, and growing number of English Language Learners across New York State presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge, of course, revolves around providing local school districts sufficient resources—including funds, teachers, and facilities—to effectively help students achieve English proficiency in a reasonable amount of time. The opportunity, though, is immense: like their peers, ELL students contribute to schools through their diverse backgrounds, promoting cross-cultural understanding that enriches schools. Providing excellent support for ELL students to achieve proficiency is also an investment in strengthening New York’s future workforce.

Introducing a tiered weighting structure for supplemental school aid funding for ELL students could represent a substantial but achievable step toward more equitable and common-sense funding. Two different ELL students can have vastly different needs, from the student who is just beginning to learn English to the student who is close to proficiency. A tiered approach would align funding with those needs. Such an approach would also be pragmatic: it builds on the existing system already used for classifying students’ English proficiency, the NYSITELL, meaning that the data needed to support a tiered-funding structure would not impose new bureaucratic requirements.

Of course, any reform in the approach to ELL funding would necessitate thorough planning, additional input from local school districts and other key stakeholders, and continual monitoring once implemented. The alternative, however, is to keep a system that treats all ELL students the same when determining funding, even if their needs clearly differ.

Endnotes

- 1 “Downloads: English Language Learners Database,” New York State Education Department, accessed September 30, 2025, <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>.
- 2 Rockefeller Institute analysis of data in the enrollment archive maintained by NYSED.
- 3 *English Learners in Public Schools*, Annual Reports and Information Staff (Annual Reports) (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, May 2024), <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf/english-learners-in-public-schools>.
- 4 “Enrollment Data 2024: New York City School District (Inst ID 800000048663),” New York State Education Department, accessed November 3, 2025, <https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2024&instid=800000048663>.
- 5 Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Sarah Hooker, and Jeanne Batalova, *States and Districts with the Highest Number and Share of English Language Learners* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2015).
- 6 “Download: English Language Learners Database,” New York State Education Department, accessed September 30, 2025. <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>.
- 7 “English Language Learner and Multilingual Learner Regulations and Compliance (Commissioner’s Regulations Part 154),” New York State Education Department, accessed October 23, 2025, <https://www.nysed.gov/bilingual-ed/english-language-learner-and-multilingual-learner-regulations-compliance>. Note: The state defines a student as an English Language Learner (ELL) if a language other than English is spoken at home and the student either speaks or understands very little English or scores below the state’s proficiency level on an English language test (the NYSITELL for new students or the NYSESLAT for continuing students).
- 8 *A Review of New York State’s Foundation Aid Education Funding Formula with Recommendations for Improvement* (Albany, NY: Rockefeller Institute of Government, December 2024), <https://rockinst.org/issue-area/a-review-of-new-york-states-foundation-aid-education-funding-formula-with-recommendations-for-improvement/>.
- 9 Stephen Q. Cornman, et al., *Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2021–22 (Fiscal Year 2022): First Look*, NCES 2024-301, (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2024/2024301.pdf>.
- 10 *2024-25 State Aid Handbook* (Albany, NY: Office of State Aid. New York State Education Department, 2024), 8, https://stateaid.nysed.gov/publications/handbooks/handbook_2425.pdf.
- 11 “English Language Learner and Multilingual Learner Assessment & Testing Accommodations,” New York State Education Department, accessed October 23, 2025, <https://www.nysed.gov/bilingual-ed/english-language-learner-and-multilingual-learner-assessment-testing-accommodations>.
- 12 “NYSITELL Parent Information Brochure,” Office of Bilingual Education and World Languages, New York State Education Department, 2024, <https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/bilingual-ed/nysitellparentinformationbrochureenglish.pdf>.
- 13 *A Review of New York State’s Foundation Aid Education Funding Formula with Recommendations for Improvement*.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 “English Language Learners Programs,” Office of the New York State Comptroller, issued September 18, 2024, <https://www.osc.ny.gov/state-agencies/audits/2024/09/18/english-language-learners-programs>.
- 16 Regulations of the Commissioner of Education, §154-2.2(f).
- 17 Reacting to similar ELL funding reforms outlined in the Rockefeller Institute’s December 2025 report on the state’s Foundation Aid formula, the New York City Independent Budget Office “found that approximately 30% of New York City’s ELL students are beyond their third year of service,” accounting for a sizable portion of a projected \$117 million reduction in state aid from these ELL funding changes. *Impact of Foundation Aid Proposals on New York City Revenue* (New York City Independent Budget Office, February 2025), <https://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/impact-of-foundation-aid-proposals-on-new-york-city-revenue-february-2025.pdf>.

- 18 For example, New York State provides an additional unit of English language instruction for students in grades 9-12 who test in the “Entering” level of proficiency. *Commissioner’s Regulation Part 154: English Language Learners (ELLs) Screening, Identification, Placement, Review, and Exit Criteria* (Albany, NY: New York State Education Department, July 1, 2015), <https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/bilingual/ellidchartguidance7.1.15.pdf>. Additionally, several states, including Massachusetts, Washington, and Wisconsin, along with the District of Columbia, provide heavier weighting for older students.
- 19 Viorica Marian, Anthony Shook, and Scott R. Schroeder, “Bilingual Two-Way Immersion Programs Benefit Academic Achievement,” *Bilingual Research Journal* 36, no. 2 (2013):10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2013.818075>.
- 20 “Long-Term Outcomes Associated with Participation in Dual Language Education,” Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education, accessed October 30, 2025, <https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/awards/long-term-outcomes-associated-participation-dual-language-education>.



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