

# Language Difference or Disability? Considerations for Students who are English-Learners

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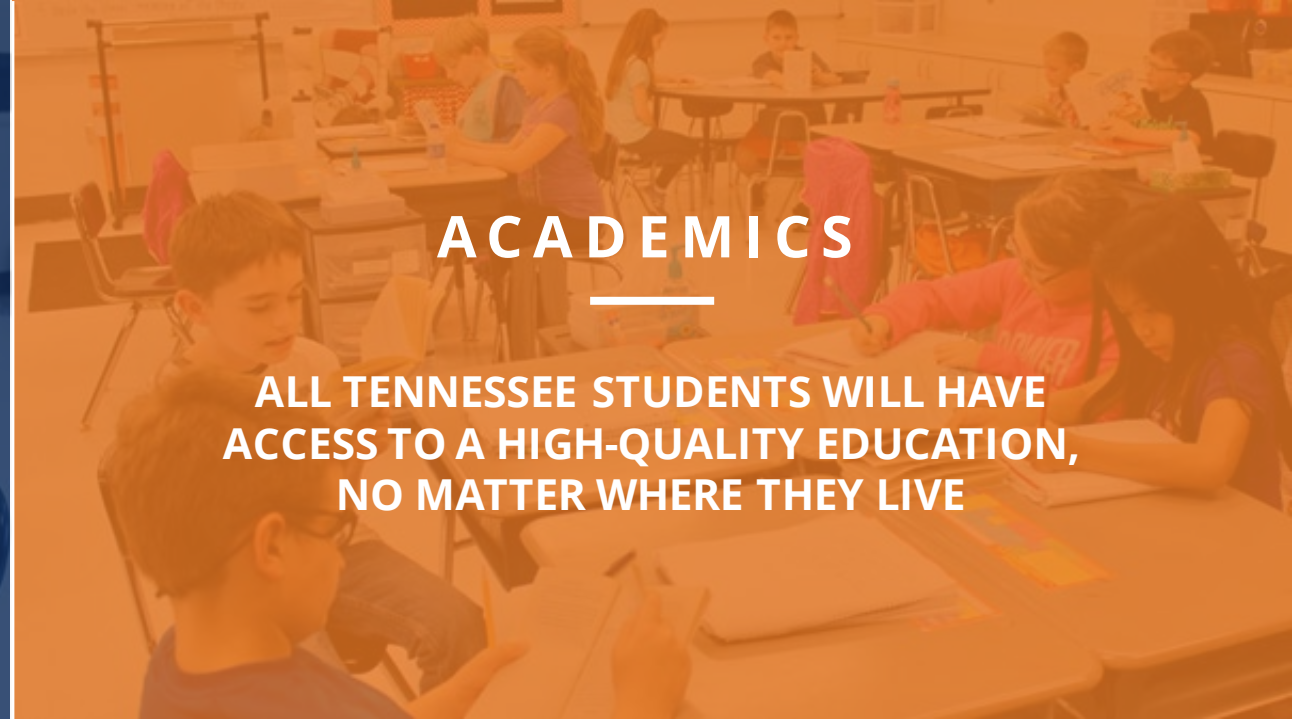






**BEST** FOR  
**ALL**

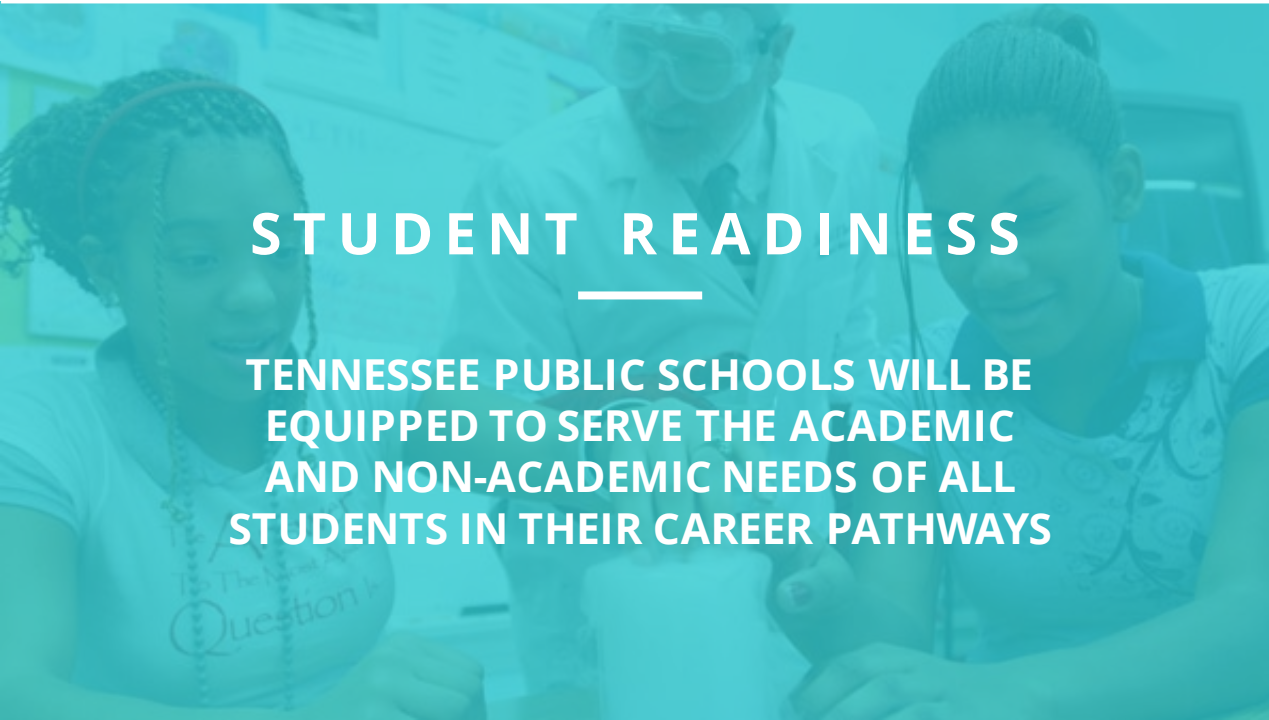
We will set all students on a path to success.



## ACADEMICS

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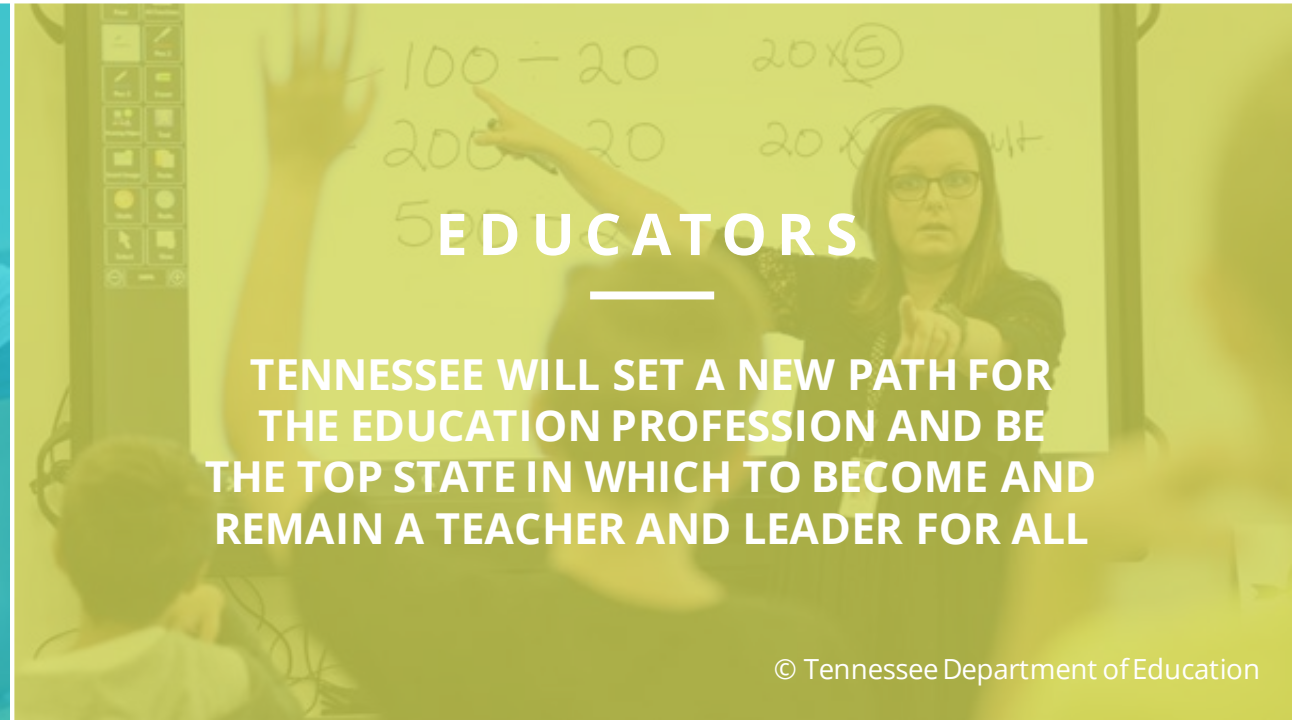
**ALL TENNESSEE STUDENTS WILL HAVE  
ACCESS TO A HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION,  
NO MATTER WHERE THEY LIVE**



## STUDENT READINESS

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**TENNESSEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS WILL BE  
EQUIPPED TO SERVE THE ACADEMIC  
AND NON-ACADEMIC NEEDS OF ALL  
STUDENTS IN THEIR CAREER PATHWAYS**



## EDUCATORS

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**TENNESSEE WILL SET A NEW PATH FOR  
THE EDUCATION PROFESSION AND BE  
THE TOP STATE IN WHICH TO BECOME AND  
REMAIN A TEACHER AND LEADER FOR ALL**



# Agenda

- Dually Identified Statistics
- Considerations for EL Students
- Language Development and Acquisition
- Referral and Assessment
- Resources





# Session Goals

Participants will be able to:

- Examine the factors impacting the educational performance of English Learners.
- Consider language development and acquisition stages to assist in differentiating between a difference and a disability.
- Identify the resources to assist with decision making and student supports.
- Apply knowledge to avoid disproportionate representation in special education.



# Data and Statistics

# Tennessee School Data 2021-2022



Total Number of Students Enrolled



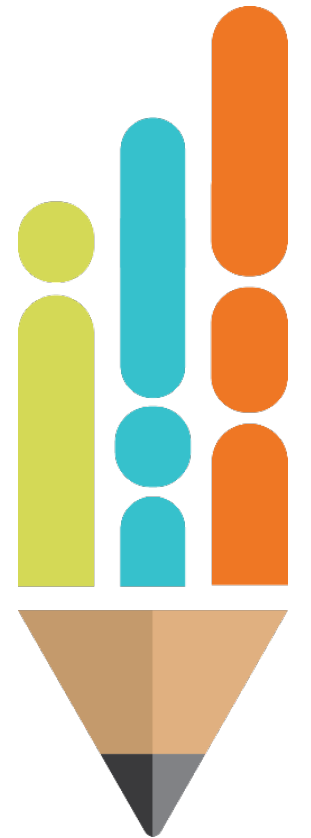
Students with Disabilities



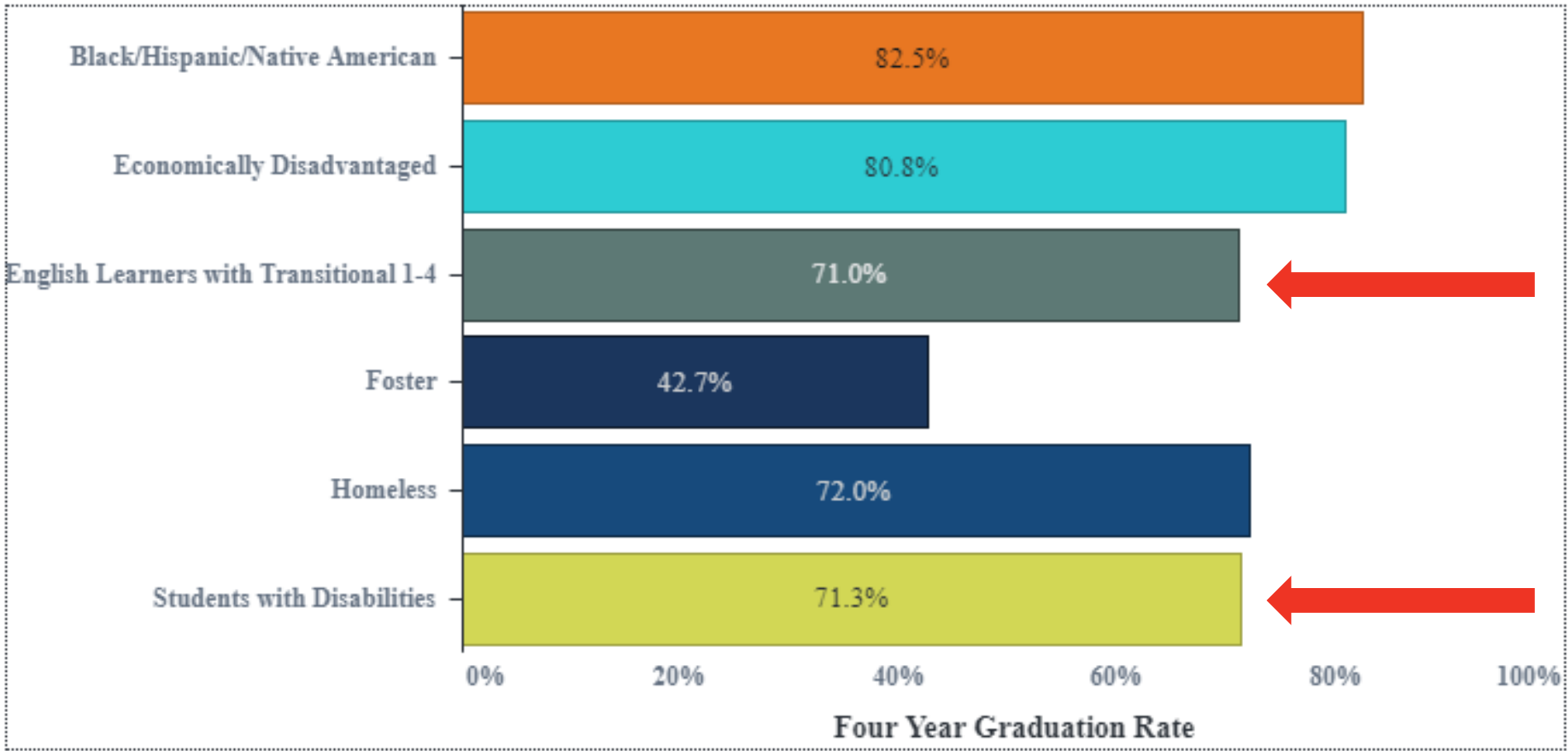
English Learners



Percentage of English Learners with a Disabilities



# 4 Year Graduation Rate by Student Group



2021 Graduating Cohort

# Top Five Languages of Students Whose First Language is not English

Language
Spanish (74.4%)
Arabic (6.4%)
Vietnamese (1.2%)
Chinese (1.2%)
Gujarti (1.2%)

**School Year 2022-2023**

Source: EIS Discover June 16, 2023





# Tennessee Children in Poverty

In 2020 an estimated **278,000** Tennessee children lived in households with income below the poverty level.

Highest rates of poverty were found among:

- black, Hispanic, and multiracial children and those identified as some other race;
- children with one or more disabilities;
- primarily Spanish-speaking households; and
- homes with at least one foreign-born parent.



# Language and Poverty Statistics

- In 2019, about 23% of school-age children spoke a language other than English at home, and 4% of school-age children both spoke a language other than English at home and had difficulty speaking English.
- In 2019, 14.4% of all children ages 0–17 were in poverty\*. The poverty rate was higher for Black, non-Hispanic and Hispanic children than for White, non-Hispanic children.

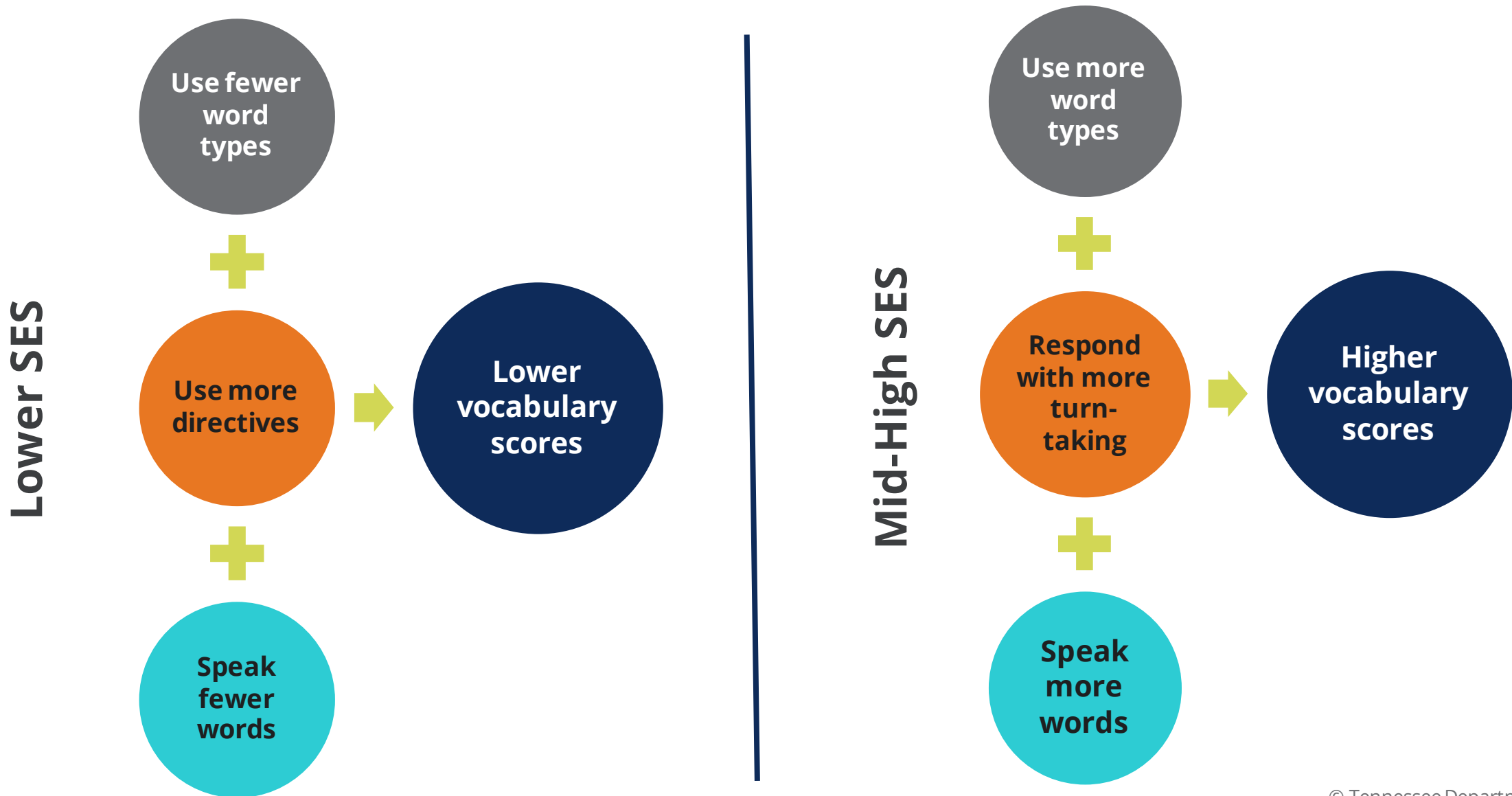
*\*The poverty threshold was a two-parent, two-child family making at or below \$25,926 annually.*



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, [American Community Survey](#)

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# Correlation Between Socioeconomic Status (SES), Parent Language Input, and Child's Vocabulary



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# Language Development, Acquisition & Students with Cultural and Linguistic Diversity



# Why Knowledge of Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CLD) Matters

- Students from CLD backgrounds may experience both **over- and under-identification when being evaluated for special education** and related services.
- Over-identification leads to increased special educator caseloads and missed instructional time for students.
- Under-identification leads to students lacking the needed interventions and services to address an underlying disability.



(Rhodes, Ochoa, Ortiz. 2005)



“

*...an English Learner’s linguistic and educational experiences should be carefully considered in designing **appropriate instruction and interventions**, and it should not be assumed that slower growth must be due to a learning disability.”*

- Esparza Brown & Sanford (2011, p. 13)

# A Shift in Our Thinking

- Dialect and bi/multilingualism are not risk factors for a disability.
- It is not an educator's job to extinguish a home language or a student's oral language dialect.
- Acknowledge that dialectal patterns are acceptable and often representative of an individual's social identity and culture.
- Dialects are not errors, but rule-governed patterns.
- Communication is universal, but rules of language and language use vary greatly.



# Typical Language Development

Cooing,  
babbling,  
vocal play

Single  
words  
used for  
many  
functions

Meaning  
over  
grammar  
"Doggy  
bite."  
"Me milk."

Utterances  
lack  
grammatical  
and functional  
morphemes  
"I no like."  
"Where  
kitty?"

Use of  
grammatical  
elements, but  
some errors  
still present  
"She goed  
home now."  
"I watching  
the dog."

Difficulty  
interpreting  
non-literal  
and  
figurative  
language

Language  
proficiency



# Second Language Acquisition

## Preproduction

Lasts: 0-6 months

Minimal comprehension

Gestures

No verbalization

## Early Production

Lasts: 6 mo.-1 year

Limited Comprehension

One-to-two-word phrases

Uses familiar phrases

## Speech Emergence

Lasts: 1-3 years

Good comprehension

Produces simple sentences

Grammatical errors present

## Intermediate Fluency

Lasts: 3-5 years

Excellent comprehension

Few grammatical errors

## Advanced Fluency

Lasts: 5-7 years

Near native level of language

# Areas of Language

Expressive Language



## FORM

Structure and Rules  
Phonology  
Morphology  
Syntax



## CONTENT

Meaning  
Vocabulary  
Flexibility



## USE

Communication  
Conventions & Social  
Norms  
Pragmatics

Receptive Language

# Comparing Language Structures

	English	Arabic
<b>Use of articles</b>	Definite (the) and indefinite articles (a, an) precede the noun	Only definite articles; Articles are marked with a prefix attached to the noun
<b>Question forms</b>	Word order inversion, or use of "do" <i>When can I see you?</i>	Marked with a question; no word order change <i>When I can see you?</i>
<b>Adjectives</b>	Adjective precedes noun <i>The blue ball.</i>	Noun precedes adjective <i>The ball blue.</i>
<b>Phonology &amp; Phonotactics</b>	15 vowel sounds including vocalic Rs and diphthongs English has 26 initial consonant clusters and 19 word-final	6 vowel sounds (3 short and 3 long) and 2 diphthongs No consonant clusters



# Not all language is the same.

- Everyday
- Conversational
- Highly contextual
- Does not include literacy

Basic Interpersonal  
Communication  
Skills



- Academic
- Content-specific
- Reduced context
- High level of literacy

Cognitive Academic  
Language  
Proficiency







# Consider Exposure and Background Knowledge

- Items or references which may not be familiar to a child who has limited exposure to western culture
  - Foods
  - Holidays
  - Cultural events
  - Transportation
  - Idiomatic expressions
  - Colloquialisms
- Roles which may not be conventional on other cultures (roles of women vs. men; adults vs. children; etc.)



# Is it a dialect, a disorder, or both?

- Many dialectal patterns include variations in verb tenses.
- Dialects include phonemic variations.
- Subject-verb tense agreement is a hallmark trait of a language impairment (LI).
- Many students with LI also have difficulty with phonological and phonemic awareness.

# Characteristics of EL Students that May Be Misinterpreted

Inattentive, distractible, forgetful or disorganized



Slow to begin or finish tasks at school, slow to respond to requests



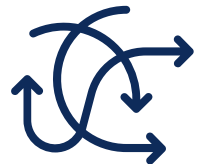
Lack of eye contact



Lack of class participation



Switching between native language and English; confusing word order in English



# Considerations for a Referral for Special Education



# Make decisions based on information, not presumptions.

Linguistic variations and differences should not be presumed to be a disability, but they are also not exclusionary factors for a disability.





# Consult Your Language Experts



# Factors Influencing Language Development & Acquisition



**Health**



**Environment**



**Experience &  
Background  
Knowledge**



**Cognition**

# Preparing for a Referral

## Access

- Provide information in the family's language
- Secure a qualified interpreter in needed
- Connect families with community resources
- Explain the referral process and purpose

## Culture

- Be aware of sociocultural and linguistic differences
- Consider the family and child's experiences and background knowledge



# At-Risk Factors for Bilingual Children

Poor comprehension in native language

Lack of communicative efforts or poor pragmatic skills when interacting with family or peers of similar background

Family history of language/learning disabilities

Parental concerns of native speech or language development

Slower development as compared to siblings

# **At-Risk Factors for Bilingual Children, cont.**

**Language is less complex than that of peers from similar backgrounds.**

**Difficulties in other areas (e.g., self-direction, self-help) reported at home.**

**The need for a more intensive instruction than similar peers.**

**Difficulty learning language at a normal rate, even with special assistance in both languages.**

**Difficulty analyzing, synthesizing, acquiring concepts.**



# Request a meeting to consider a referral if...

Remember: If at any time, the team suspects a disability, the team should convene to discuss next steps, ensuring the parent is afforded an opportunity to participate and contribute to any decisions.

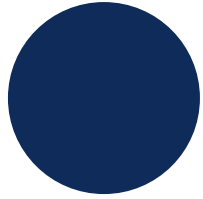
**The student received special education or other intensive services in home country**

**Parent provides medical diagnoses (per parent report or written documentation)**

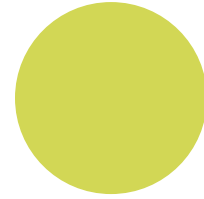
**Teacher or parent reports unusual behaviors or severe deficits in adaptive skills**

**Teacher or parent reports atypical student-to-student or student-to-adult interactions**

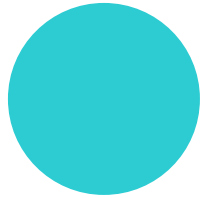
# Sources of Data to Consider



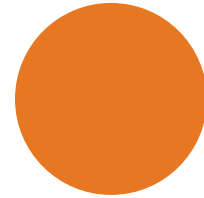
**Prior exposure to English**



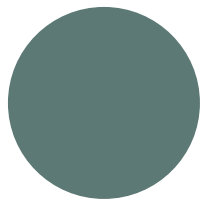
**Home language survey**



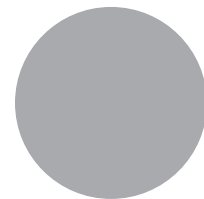
**Type and quality of English models**



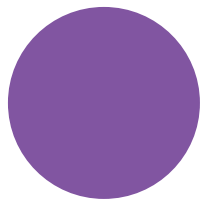
**Universal academic screeners**



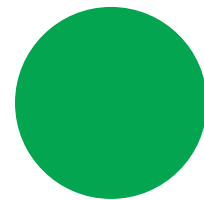
**Time in the U.S. and number of years in school**



**Exposure to literacy**

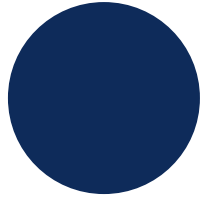


**Student's EL status – Long-term English learner (LTEL; student with Interrupted Formal education (STFL))**

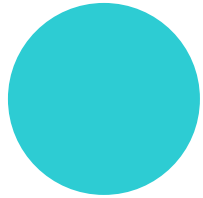


**Parent or caregiver interviews**

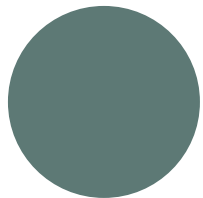
# Sources of Data to Consider, cont.



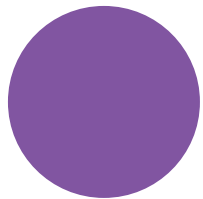
**Performance in non-academic areas**



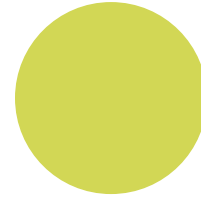
**English proficiency data (WIDA or screener)**



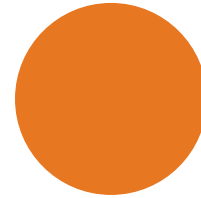
**Teacher observations (ESL and Classroom)**



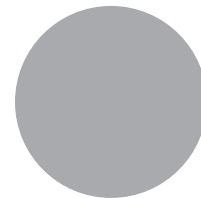
**Strategies and Interventions attempted**



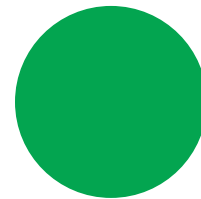
**Attendance data**



**Formal and informal assessment data**



**Developmental history**



**Criterion-referenced tests & dynamic assessments**

# Is it language acquisition or a disability?





Ortiz (1997)  
*Journal of  
Learning  
Disabilities*

“

*If student failure can be attributed to the teacher's lack of understanding of diversity, the use of inappropriate curriculum or materials, or ineffective instructional practices, then referrals to special education are unwarranted.”*



# Resources

# Limited English Proficiency



**U.S. Department of Justice**  
*Civil Rights Division*

**U.S. Department of Education**  
*Office for Civil Rights*



## Information for Limited English Proficient (LEP) Parents and Guardians and for Schools and School Districts that Communicate with Them

This fact sheet answers common questions about the rights of parents and guardians who do not speak, listen, read, or write English proficiently because it is not their primary language.

### *Must my child's school provide information to me in a language I can understand?*

Yes. Schools must communicate information to limited English proficient parents in a language they can understand about any program, service, or activity that is called to the attention of parents who are proficient in English. This includes, but is not limited to, information related to:

- registration and enrollment in school and school programs
- language assistance programs
- report cards
- student discipline policies and procedures
- special education and related services, and meetings to discuss special education
- parent-teacher conferences
- grievance procedures and notices of nondiscrimination
- parent handbooks
- gifted and talented programs
- magnet and charter schools
- requests for parent permission for student participation in school activities

# Ethnographic Interview

## Ethnographic Interview for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

### Purpose

The purpose of this interview is to gather 1) information regarding a student's developmental milestones and language acquisition to help determine the level of exposure to the English language as well as 2) parent/guardian concerns prior to providing ESL services or referring an English learner (EL) for special education services. This interview can be given when more information is needed about the student beyond the Home Language Survey.

### Language Development

10. Which language did the child first learn to speak? How many years has the child heard his or her first native language?
  
11. How old was the child when he or she began to speak?
  
12. Since the child started attending school, what changes in the child's native language or use of English have you noticed?
  
13. Were parents concerned with language development prior to the introduction of English?

# References and Resources

- Assessing Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students. Rhodes, Ochoa, and Ortiz (2005).
- Difference or Disorder? Understanding Speech and Language Patterns in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students. Bilingualistics, (2014).
- Handbook of Language and Literacy: Development and Disorders, Second Edition. Stone, Silliman, Ehren, and Wallach (2014).
- [Teaching Literacy in Tennessee: English Learner Companion: Practical guidance for teaching English Learners. K-3.](#)
- [Ethnographic Interview for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students](#)
- [Considerations for Ruling Out Lack of Instruction for Specific Learning Disability Evaluation and Identification](#)

# Resources

- Classroom Instruction That Works with English Language Learning: Facilitator's Guide. Jane D. Hill and Cynthia L. Bjork. ASCD (2008)
- English Language Learners: An Introductory Guide for Educators  
<http://www.nasponline.org/>
- Handbook for Educators of Students Who Are English Language Learners with Suspected Disabilities  
[http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/esl/resources/handbook\\_educators.pdf](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/esl/resources/handbook_educators.pdf)
- Universal Design for Learning  
<http://www.cast.org/>  
<http://www.udlcenter.org/>



# Resources

- [TN Special Education Framework: Component 2.4- Important Cultural Considerations for English Learners](#)
- Bilingualistics. (2014). *Difference or Disorder? Understanding Speech and Language Patterns in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* . Austin, Texas: Bilingualistics Inc.
- Tools for Understanding Language vs. Disability: [Using data and progress monitoring in a tiered intervention framework to provide high-quality individualized instruction to English learners who are struggling](#)
- Office of English Learner Acquisition (OELA) [Chapter 6 Tools and Resources for Addressing English Learners With Disabilities \(ed.gov\)](#)
- English Language Learners: An Introductory Guide for Educators



# Thank You!

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# Title III and English Learners Day Please Share Your Feedback:

You may access the PD by navigating here:

[https://stateoftennessee.formstack.com/forms/2023fpi\\_pd\\_survey\\_titleiiiday](https://stateoftennessee.formstack.com/forms/2023fpi_pd_survey_titleiiiday)

