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RISING NUMBERS UNMET NEEDS

Immigrant Newcomers in
Massachusetts High Schools

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ABOUT EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY IN MASSACHUSETTS

Educational Opportunity in Massachusetts is a long-standing research-practice partnership between researchers at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University and the Massachusetts Departments of Elementary and Secondary Education and Higher Education. Our work analyzes how students progress through the state's K-16 education system and into the workforce, with a specific focus on providing evidence to inform policy and practice in the Commonwealth. We use rich longitudinal data to explore students' backgrounds in nuanced ways, including by race/ethnicity, first language spoken at home, immigrant status, and country of origin. Recent and ongoing lines of inquiry include the equity consequences of high-stakes exit exams, the impact of state policies and the pandemic on students' educational outcomes, how schools affect economic opportunity for students living in poverty, and the experiences of immigrant newcomers in Massachusetts.

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On the Cover Depicted on the front cover are seven of the school districts in Massachusetts with large numbers of newcomers entering high school in 2022. The three concentric circles for each district reflect its number of newcomers in 2008, 2019, and 2022.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Massachusetts is widely lauded as a national model for K-12 education, given its consistently high levels of academic achievement and educational attainments. In our 2020 report, *Lifting All Boats?*, we detailed the substantial progress the state's educational system has made since the Education Reform Act of 1993, as well as the ways in which

“The first thing is ‘You’re welcome here, you’re not alone.’ We want to explain how school works here. It’s very different from other countries. The calendar is different, uniform, lunches, transportation—everything is different. For them it’s like a whole new world.

IVETTE MARTINEZ

Welcome Center Director,
Lynn Public Schools

focusing on average improvements concealed substantial inequalities throughout the system, with a particular focus on disparities by family income.

Here, we turn our attention to a critical but understudied group, immigrant newcomers to Massachusetts public schools. We define newcomers as English learners (ELs) in their first 12 months of schooling in the United States. In this report, we focus on newcomers who arrive in grades 9-12, bringing linguistic and cultural diversity to the Commonwealth's high schools. These students, many of whom are overage and with interrupted formal educational experiences, have limited time to become proficient in English and fulfill all the requirements for a high-school diploma, including achieving the minimum

required score on each of the Commonwealth's three Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests. They face the dual challenges of learning a new language and mastering high-school content standards in that new language, in many cases on a very abbreviated timeline.

High-school newcomers are a large and growing group—in the 2021-22 school year (hereafter, 2022), nearly 6,000 entered a Massachusetts public high school, representing 7% of all new high-school students in the Commonwealth. One in six entering high-school students in urban districts is a newcomer.

They are also a group of critical concern—fewer than one-third meet English proficiency targets each year, and newcomers represent 32% of students who never pass one or more of the 10th grade MCAS tests. Only 54% of newcomers graduate from high school, and their rates of four-year college enrollment are also quite low. Sustaining educational progress in the Commonwealth over the coming decades will require school systems to do more to address these students' needs.

Here, we report on the demographic characteristics and educational outcomes of high-school newcomers over time, using longitudinal data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). A second report will examine differences in outcomes for high-school newcomers by school district.

WE HIGHLIGHT SIX KEY FINDINGS:

1. Over the past 15 years, the number of newcomers has nearly tripled, and the population has changed dramatically.

The number of high-school newcomers has nearly tripled since 2008, with a historic high of 5,600 students entering in 2022. Newcomers are arriving with lower average levels of English language proficiency than 15 years ago, and more of them are male. They also have become less heterogeneous in terms of their first languages. In 2008, 48% of newcomers spoke either Spanish or Portuguese. By 2022, this figure had climbed to 84%. Spanish speakers from the Northern Triangle region of Central America, which includes the nations of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, made up 32% of all high-school newcomers that year, while Portuguese speakers from Brazil comprised 25%.

2. More districts are serving newcomers, but newcomers are concentrated in relatively few schools.

Across the Commonwealth, 95 districts served at least five newcomers in 2022 (up from 59 in 2008), so more schools than ever before need to be prepared to support newcomers' learning needs. That said, more than half of all high-school newcomers in 2022 were concentrated in ten urban districts (with the most in Boston, Lynn, and Worcester) and only 14 high schools. The dramatic increase in newcomers in several urban districts has substantially strained available resources, but also represents an opportunity to target services and supports efficiently.

3. The profiles of newcomers differ dramatically across districts.

Districts serve quite different populations of high-school newcomers. For example, more than 95% of newcomers in Lawrence and Lynn speak Spanish, while more than two-thirds of newcomers in Framingham and Malden speak Portuguese. This heterogeneity underlines the importance of a customized approach in meeting the specific needs of newcomers in each locale.

4. Most newcomers are not meeting growth targets for English language proficiency.

Each year, the state sets annual improvement targets for each English learner on the ACCESS test, a standardized assessment of academic English proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing. Fewer than 30% of newcomers meet their initial targets. In fact, a quarter of newcomers who take the ACCESS test twice show no increase in their overall level after a full year in a Massachusetts high school, and only 21% ever score at or above the level required to exit the EL program.

5. The state's competency determination (CD) policy disproportionately affects newcomers.

Newcomers represent 5% of those who attempt at least one of the high-school MCAS tests but 32% of those who never pass. A recent revision of the competency determination policy increased the minimum score required to earn a high-school diploma, beginning with the graduating class of 2026. About 27% of newcomers testing in 2022 attained the required ELA score but would have fallen below the new, higher threshold, had it been in effect. This is a much higher percentage than for non-newcomer ELs, low-income students, and students with disabilities.

6. High-school completion and college enrollment rates for newcomers are relatively low.

Prior to the pandemic, about 54% of newcomers graduated within a year of their expected date; another 20% dropped out, while the rest transferred, earned a Certificate of Attainment, or were still enrolled. Slightly more than a third of newcomers went on to enroll in college, compared to 72% of other Massachusetts high-school students. State requirements were modified for the pandemic-impacted graduating classes of 2020-2023. The high-school graduation rate for newcomers rose sharply to 63% for the 2021 cohort, while their dropout rate fell slightly.

IMPLICATIONS

Massachusetts has a reputation as one of the leading K-12 public education systems in the nation. The extent to which that reputation will be maintained in the decades ahead will depend on the state's progress in serving vulnerable, high-needs students like those profiled here. Improving upon current rates of English language acquisition, high-school graduation, and college completion is imperative. Keeping newcomers enrolled in school may necessitate the creation of more flexible, alternative programs that accommodate their work obligations and target older students. The delivery of rigorous, high-quality instruction designed to address learning gaps from interrupted or limited prior schooling also seems key. Ensuring that newcomers are academically prepared for higher education and skilled careers is critical to increasing their labor market opportunities and ensuring a diverse and skilled labor force in the Commonwealth in the coming years.

INTRODUCTION

Each year, thousands of students enter Massachusetts public schools as recently arrived immigrants who are not proficient in English. The number of newcomers, defined here as English Learners (ELs) in their first 12 months of schooling in the U.S., has grown rapidly over the past 15 years. In the 2021-22 academic year (hereafter, 2022), newcomers with varied prior school experiences and academic skill levels arrived from 92 countries all over the world, speaking more than 60 languages. They bring with them important linguistic skills and personal traits, such as resilience and self-reliance, that enrich their new schools and communities.¹

While immigrant newcomers come to Massachusetts public schools at all grade levels, we focus this report on students who arrive in high school, a group that has been described as “overlooked and underserved.”² These high-school newcomers have limited time to become proficient in English and fulfill all the requirements for a high-school diploma, which is key to unlocking future college and career opportunities. They face the dual challenges of learning a new language and mastering high-school content standards in that new language, in many cases on a very abbreviated timeline. Moreover, many high-school newcomers arrive with additional burdens, such as needing to work outside of school to support their families or pay debts incurred on their journeys to the U.S.

Given demographic and policy changes, understanding the newcomer population is tremendously important. In this report, we first explore the demographics of high-school newcomers in Massachusetts over time. Along virtually every dimension, including gender,

race/ethnicity, age, language, country/region of origin, initial English proficiency, and geographic location, we find both enormous heterogeneity within the newcomer population and changes in the distribution of that population over the last 10-15 years. For example, we divide newcomers into six main language/country groups that are distributed quite differently throughout the Commonwealth and whose prevalence has changed substantially over time. From 2008 to 2022, the rise in newcomers has been concentrated among just two: Spanish speakers from the Northern Triangle region of Central America, which includes El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, and Portuguese speakers from Brazil.

In the next section, we use state longitudinal data to report on the educational outcomes of high-school newcomers, both prior to and during the pandemic. Outcomes of interest include school attendance, reenrollment, promotion to the next grade, progress towards English proficiency, MCAS performance, high-school graduation, and college enrollment. We detail these outcomes for newcomers overall and describe how they differ by language/country group and gender.

Our analysis documents slow progress in English language acquisition, large numbers of high-school dropouts and transfers (particularly for males and certain language/country groups), and a steadily declining rate of college enrollment. However, despite the steep challenges they face, over half of newcomers do

graduate from high school within a year of their expected date, and this share has increased for newcomers in pandemic-impacted cohorts. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our main findings.

“One of the questions we ask them on the Needs Assessment Form is ‘Why do you want to go to school?’ Most of them say, ‘I want to learn English. I want to participate in sports. I want to go to college. I have never been able to go to school. I am really excited.’ They believe they are going to school to learn English.”

IVETTE MARTINEZ

Welcome Center Director,
Lynn Public Schools

POLICY CONTEXT

Two sets of policies are particularly relevant to the state's efforts to serve the needs of high-school newcomers and ELs more broadly – those that govern language education in the state, and those related to high-school graduation requirements.

Language of Instruction

How to best instruct English learners has been a source of contentious policy debate in Massachusetts. In 2002, voters overwhelmingly passed a statewide ballot question effectively banning bilingual education programs, such as dual language immersion and transitional bilingual education, in Massachusetts public schools. ELs, regardless of their level of English proficiency, were required to be in general education or Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) classes. DESE defines SEI as “an English language acquisition process for young children in which nearly all classroom instruction is in English but with the curriculum and presentation designed for children who are learning the language. Books and instruction materials are in English and all reading, writing, and subject matter are taught in English. Although teachers may use a minimal amount of the child's native language when necessary, no subject matter shall be taught in any language other than English, and children in this program learn to read and write solely in English.”

In subsequent years, some individual school districts and the Commonwealth were the subject of federal investigations into services for ELs. In 2010, the U.S.

Department of Education Office for Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Civil Rights Division found that the Boston Public Schools had violated both Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) by failing to adequately identify and serve ELs. In 2011, the DOJ notified the Commonwealth that it believed that the Commonwealth's voluntary approach to SEI training for teachers statewide fell short of what the EEOA required. More recently, the New Bedford school district entered into a settlement agreement with DOJ after a two-year investigation into the services provided to K'iche'-speaking students and their families.

In response, the Commonwealth has shifted its approach to educational programs for ELs. Beginning in 2012, the Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners (RETELL) initiative made SEI training mandatory for all core content teachers of ELs. In 2017, the Language Opportunities for Our Kids (LOOK) Act, which is still in effect, provided districts greater flexibility in creating language acquisition programs. Under this law, districts are no longer restricted to the SEI model and can use alternative instructional models, such as dual language immersion and transitional bilingual education, so long as they meet the requirements set by the law. The primary components of the LOOK Act also include increased parent communication, stricter requirements for verifying educator qualifications, and an expansion of district reporting requirements.

DATA NOTE: IDENTIFYING NEWCOMERS

We identify newcomers using data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) Student Information Management System (SIMS). We define newcomers as recent immigrants in their first 12 months in a U.S. school who do not speak English proficiently. We include as high-school newcomers students who completed less than one year in a U.S. public school prior to entering high school. For example, newcomers who enroll after October 1 of 8th grade and continue to high school the following year are included.

We use two approaches to identify high-school newcomers. The SIMS dataset includes an “arrival” data element identifying ELs in their first year of U.S. schooling. This includes ELs coming from a U.S. territory such as Puerto Rico, even though these students are not considered immigrants under the federal definition. We also classify as newcomers those students not flagged by the “arrival” indicator but who first appeared in SIMS as high schoolers and were coded as immigrants and as ELs at some point during their high school career (93% of whom were ELs at high-school entry, and 91% immigrants at entry). Students in this category comprise 11% of the newcomers in our sample. This group may include some students who briefly attended school in another U.S. state or territory before arriving in Massachusetts, but DESE staff advised that this number is likely small.

State High-School Graduation Requirements

In addition to local graduation requirements, Massachusetts requires students to demonstrate some level of competency in high school mathematics, English language arts (ELA), and science in order to earn a high-school diploma. All students must take the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests in these subjects. Tests are targeted to 10th grade standards, and students typically take the ELA and mathematics assessments in 10th grade. Students can take a subject-specific science exam in either 9th or 10th grade, tied to the course in which they are enrolled. Students must reach a minimum score threshold in all three subjects to receive a high-school diploma under the competency determination (CD) policy.

Students who do not pass on their first attempt are afforded multiple retest opportunities. Most eligible students do retest, and students who do not pass on retest can file one of several types of appeals to satisfy the CD requirement.

A student whose score meets or exceeds the passing threshold but falls below a different, higher cut score in a given subject also must complete an [Educational Proficiency Plan \(EPP\)](#). EPPs are developed at the school level to identify courses and assessments that will promote continued progress towards proficiency. Students who fall into the EPP range do not need to retake the test.

Newcomers must take the mathematics test in 10th grade and a science exam no later than 10th grade; those who are initially placed in 11th or 12th grades must take both tests at the first available opportunity. Translations of the math and science tests are available in Spanish, but no additional languages. Newcomers are allowed to delay taking the ELA assessment if they are still in their first 12 months of schooling in the U.S. Those students have an MCAS test status of “Not Tested–LEP” in state data.

School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the suspension of MCAS testing, and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) approved modified CD requirements beginning in the spring of 2020. Under this [modification](#), passing the MCAS was not required to graduate from high school for the classes of 2020–2022, and the MCAS requirement in science was also waived for the class of 2023. Instead, students in these cohorts were required to pass a relevant high-school course in each subject.

In the summer of 2022, BESE approved changes to the CD policy that are in effect for the graduating class of 2026 and beyond. In particular, the revised policy increased the minimum scores required to pass the MCAS tests, especially the ELA test. The policy change also added new requirements for EPPs.

DATA NOTE: SLIFE

DESE has collected an indicator for Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) since 2017. The definition includes ELs at least two years below grade level in both literacy and numeracy who have had no formal schooling or whose prior schooling was severely limited or interrupted. While such students likely comprise a substantial proportion of the newcomers we analyze, inconsistencies in how districts identify these students lead to some challenges with this indicator, and we do not use it in our analyses. DESE is currently engaged in a multi-year research project on SLIFE, with the objective of better identifying and serving these students.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF MASSACHUSETTS NEWCOMERS

We look at the shifting demographics of newcomers, focusing on first language spoken, country of origin, gender, race/ethnicity, and initial English proficiency. We also explore the districts and high schools in which newcomers first enroll and the changes within these districts over time. Finally, we turn to newcomers' age at high-school entry and their initial grade placement.

Newcomer Enrollment over Time

Today, more than one in every 15 students entering a Massachusetts public high school is a newcomer in their first year in a U.S. school (and 1 in 6 in urban schools). Between 2008 and 2016, the number of newcomers in the Commonwealth’s high schools roughly doubled. After a spike in 2017, the number stayed fairly consistent at about 4,000 a year until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Immigration and travel restrictions during the pandemic led to a sharp decline in newcomers in 2021. However, in 2022, the state’s public high schools saw more newcomers than ever before. The nearly 5,600 newcomers that year made up about 7 percent of all students who enrolled in Massachusetts high schools for the first time (first-time ninth graders and the much smaller number of new students in grades 10-12).

Newcomers are concentrated in urban districts, where they accounted for 16% of all high-school entrants in 2022. **FIGURE 1** depicts the change over time in the number of newcomers entering high school in Boston, other urban districts, and non-urban school districts. While all three categories have seen large increases, the newcomer populations in urban districts outside of Boston and in non-urban districts have increased the most, more than tripling since 2008.

Obviously transportation was very much halted during COVID. That significantly impacted the flow of students who were coming up to us. We [also] had students who were not registering when they had initially arrived during COVID, causing that major surge in 2022.

RANIA CALDWELL

Former Executive Director of Multilingual Education, Lynn Public Schools

The number of newcomers in Massachusetts has nearly tripled since 2008

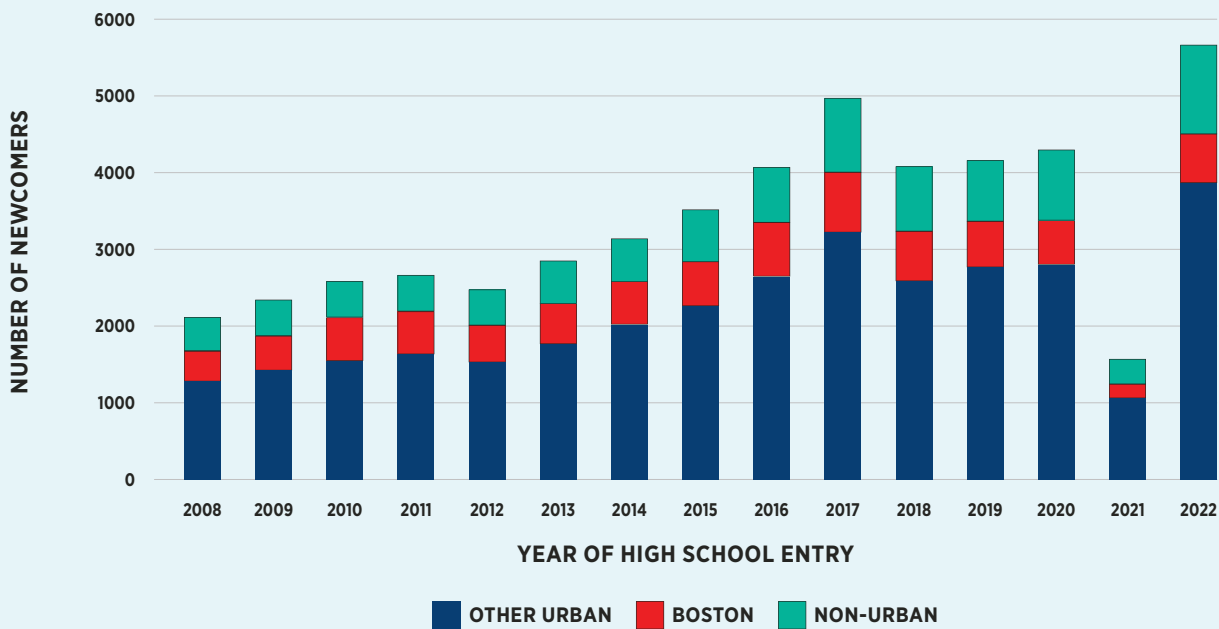


FIGURE 1

Total Number of Newcomers, Overall and by District Type of First High School Enrollment, 2008 to 2022

NOTE Urban districts are those included in the Commonwealth’s Urban Superintendents Network.

DATA WE USE

This report grows out of our long-standing research-practice partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). To conduct the analyses presented here, we use SIMS, Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), and National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) datasets, merged on unique state-assigned student identifiers (SASIDs). Schools and districts report SIMS data in three collections during each academic year: early October, March, and June. All SIMS collections occurred as scheduled throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.


Because newcomers arrive throughout the school year, we generally use demographic data from each student's first high-school SIMS appearance. However, for certain data elements, school/district reporting can change over time as more information is gathered and initial errors are corrected. Therefore, we classify students as English Learners (ELs) or as immigrants if they were ever coded as such during their high-school careers. Students' first language is recorded from the Home Language Survey distributed by school districts to parents; it asks what language the student first understood and spoke. For students for whom different first languages other than English are listed in different years, we use the modal language. The language codes in SIMS are being updated to include more indigenous languages spoken in regions like the Northern Triangle, but the first language of many newcomers in prior years may have been incorrectly entered because the list of codes was incomplete.

We limit our sample of newcomers to those who were less than 19 years of age in September of their arrival year. Students older than 18 do not typically enroll in comprehensive high schools, and districts differ widely in the educational options they offer for this population. In our subsequent report on district variation, we will analyze 19- and 20-year-old newcomers, including the supports available to them and how their high-school progress compares to the younger students studied here.

In addition to our analysis of state data, we also conducted interviews with several district and school administrators, selected based on the number and profile of newcomers in their jurisdiction. These interviews provided important context for our findings and are the source of quotes featured in the report.

Across the Commonwealth, 95 districts served at least five newcomers in 2022 (up from 59 in 2008). However, 54% were concentrated in just 10 districts. **FIGURE 2** shows how the distribution of newcomers has changed over time in these districts. While all of these districts have seen increases, the change has been most dramatic in Framingham, Lowell, Lynn, and New Bedford. Each of these districts served more than 5 times as many newcomers in 2022 than in 2008. The number of newcomers in Lynn is now close to the number in Boston, although Lynn's overall enrollment is one-third the size of the Boston Public Schools. While Boston accounted for nearly 20% of newcomers in 2008, it served just over 10% of the state's newcomers in 2022.

Pandemic-era shifts have differed widely across districts. In 2022, Boston had only 39 more newcomers arrive than it had in 2019, and in many other districts, the number of entering newcomers was quite stable. By contrast, numbers in Lynn increased by 219 (or nearly 60%), in Framingham by 158 (250%), and in Worcester by 75 (30%). Given the rise in migrant families entering the Commonwealth during the summer of 2023, patterns of newcomer enrollment are likely to remain dynamic for some time.



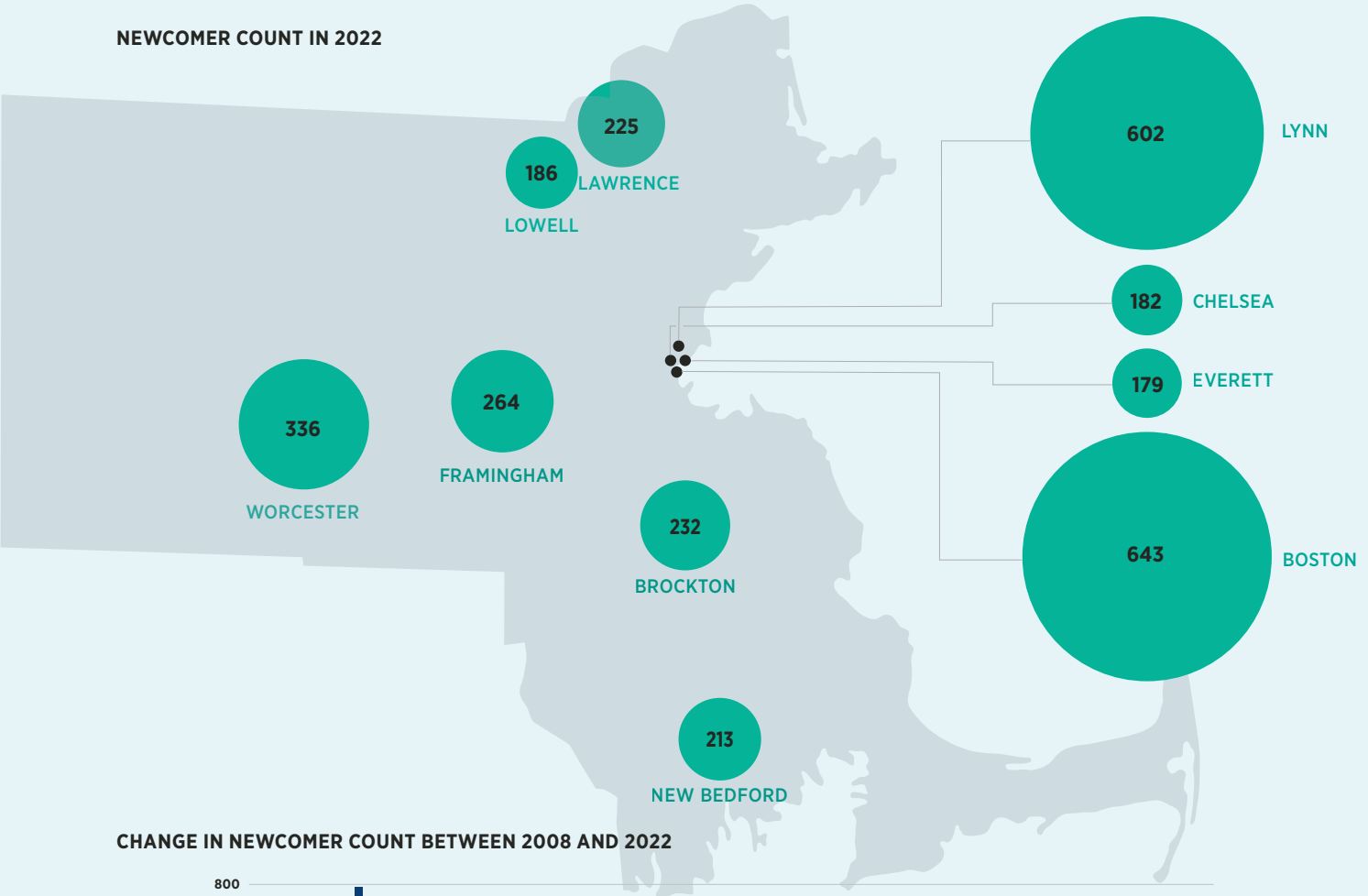
[In April 2023] we enrolled 45 newcomers, including new arrivals and unaccompanied minors. That's what we see every day here. And, depending on their country, they may be students with interrupted education... Everything from transcripts to basic needs to placement to outcomes is very challenging for the district.

IVETTE MARTINEZ

Welcome Center Director, Lynn Public Schools

The distribution of newcomers across districts has shifted substantially

NEWCOMER COUNT IN 2022



CHANGE IN NEWCOMER COUNT BETWEEN 2008 AND 2022

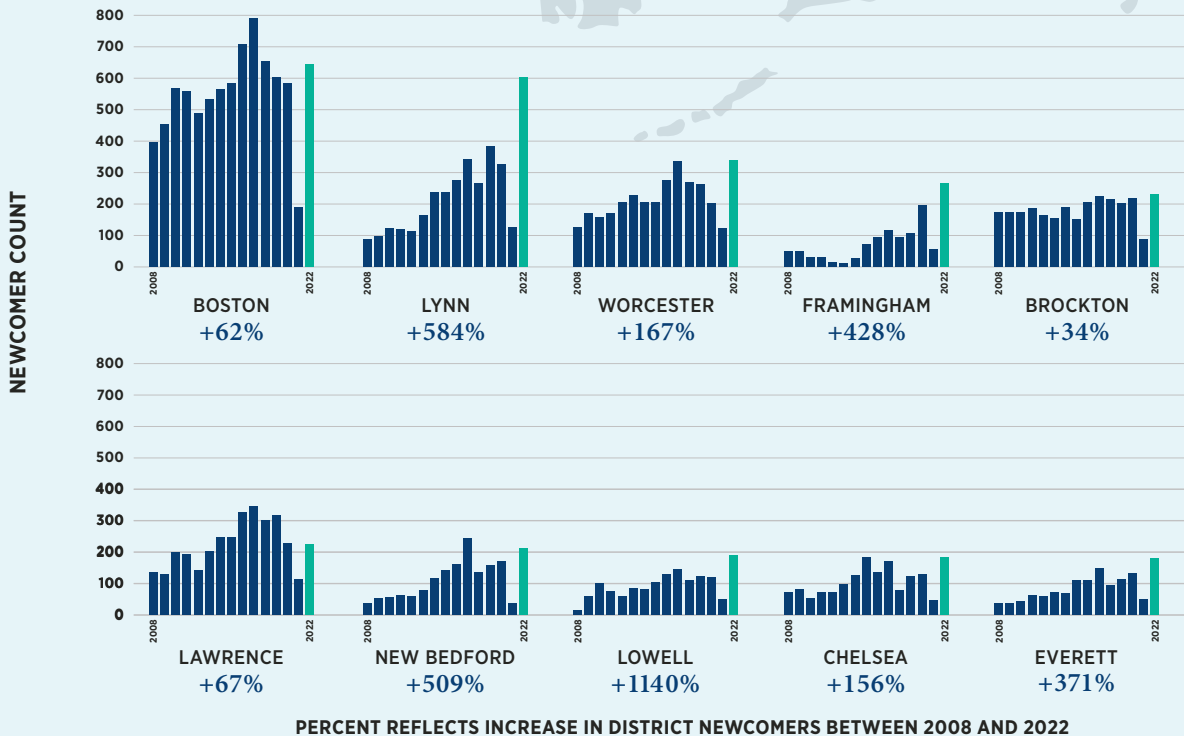


FIGURE 2
Change in Counts & Percentages of Newcomers Over Time, Top 10 Districts

Newcomers are also quite concentrated in a small number of the state’s public high schools. In 2022, for example, half of newcomers enrolled in only 14 high schools, as shown in **TABLE 1**. In seven of these high schools, including the two in Lynn, newcomers made up 10% or more of the school’s total enrollment. Because of application timelines for charter schools, exam schools, and career/technical education (CTE) schools, newcomers face a limited set of high-school options in their districts, at least initially.

**DATA NOTE:
MEASURES OF FAMILY INCOME**

While family income is an element commonly found in demographic analyses, we do not include family income in any of the analyses in this report due to concerns about identifying low-income students within the newcomer population. Our analysis suggests that family income variables in SIMS may not be accurate for many newcomers. For example, we find that among newcomers in the 2011-2020 cohorts, those coded as low-income at any point in high school had a higher five-year high-school graduation rate (57%) than those who were not (45%). This is the opposite of the pattern for non-newcomer ELs and for non-ELs, and suggests that this indicator does not capture actual household income for the newcomer group. This difference exists regardless of whether the low-income measure is participation in Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL, for earlier cohorts) or economically disadvantaged (for later cohorts).

At least one possible explanation is that higher-income students might be more likely to move out of state (e.g., return to their country of origin) before reaching high-school graduation, than low-income students. But looking particularly within the Spanish/Northern Triangle group, for which we might expect low levels of family income and of migration back to their original countries, the high-school graduation rate is 40% for newcomers designated as low-income and 24% for those not designated as low-income. Thus, a potentially more plausible explanation is that newcomers from disadvantaged households might be less likely to complete the paperwork for FRPL or to register for the state and federal programs included in the “economically disadvantaged” determination, perhaps due to concerns over their legal status. If so, many newcomers would be incorrectly placed in the higher-income category based on our data, so we do not explore patterns by family income in this report.

Half of newcomers attend one of 14 Massachusetts high schools

High School	Count	Percent of State’s Newcomers	Percent of School’s Total Enrollment
Lynn English High	328	6%	15%
Lynn Classical High	273	5%	15%
Framingham High	264	5%	10%
Lawrence High	223	4%	7%
New Bedford High	213	4%	7%
Brockton High	208	4%	6%
Boston International High & Newcomers Academy	196	3%	47%
Lowell High	186	3%	6%
Chelsea High	181	3%	11%
Everett High	179	3%	8%
Waltham Sr. High	166	3%	9%
Marlborough High	152	3%	14%
East Boston High	135	2%	11%
Revere High	133	2%	6%

**TABLE 1
Counts & Percentages of Entering Newcomers within Top 14 Schools in 2022**

Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Newcomers

In addition to overall growth, the population of Massachusetts high-school newcomers has changed in other ways over time. For instance, more new arrivals are now male. Males made up 57% of the total in 2022, compared to 51% of new high-school students who were not newcomers. As we show in Section 3, this gender imbalance, which has been growing slowly over time, is concentrated within specific groups of newcomers and may contribute to differences in their later educational outcomes.

The racial/ethnic composition of newcomers has also changed dramatically. The number of Asian and Black newcomers has fallen slightly, while the number of Hispanic/Latino newcomers has increased five-fold. As a result, the shares of Black and Asian newcomers have both dropped dramatically over the past 15 years; these groups each accounted for less than 10% of all newcomers in 2022. In that year, over three-quarters of newcomers identified as Hispanic/Latino, compared to just 41% in 2008. In comparison, only 23% of new high-school students in Massachusetts who are not newcomers are Hispanic/Latino.

First Languages of Newcomers

Over the past 15 years, newcomers have become much less diverse in their first language, as reported by parents/caregivers on the Home Language Survey. Spanish has consistently been the most common first language among newcomers, dating back to 2008. However, **FIGURE 3** depicts dramatic shifts over time, particularly in the share of Portuguese speakers. In 2008, 48% of newcomers spoke either Spanish or Portuguese. By 2022, this figure had climbed to 84%.

However, because the language codes in SIMS do not include some commonly spoken indigenous languages in the Northern Triangle region (e.g., K'iche', Kaqchikel, Mam), Spanish is almost certainly the second language for some students classified here as Spanish speakers. In these cases, newcomers must learn English as their third or even fourth language, and supports in their native language are virtually unavailable.

Most newcomers now speak Spanish or Portuguese

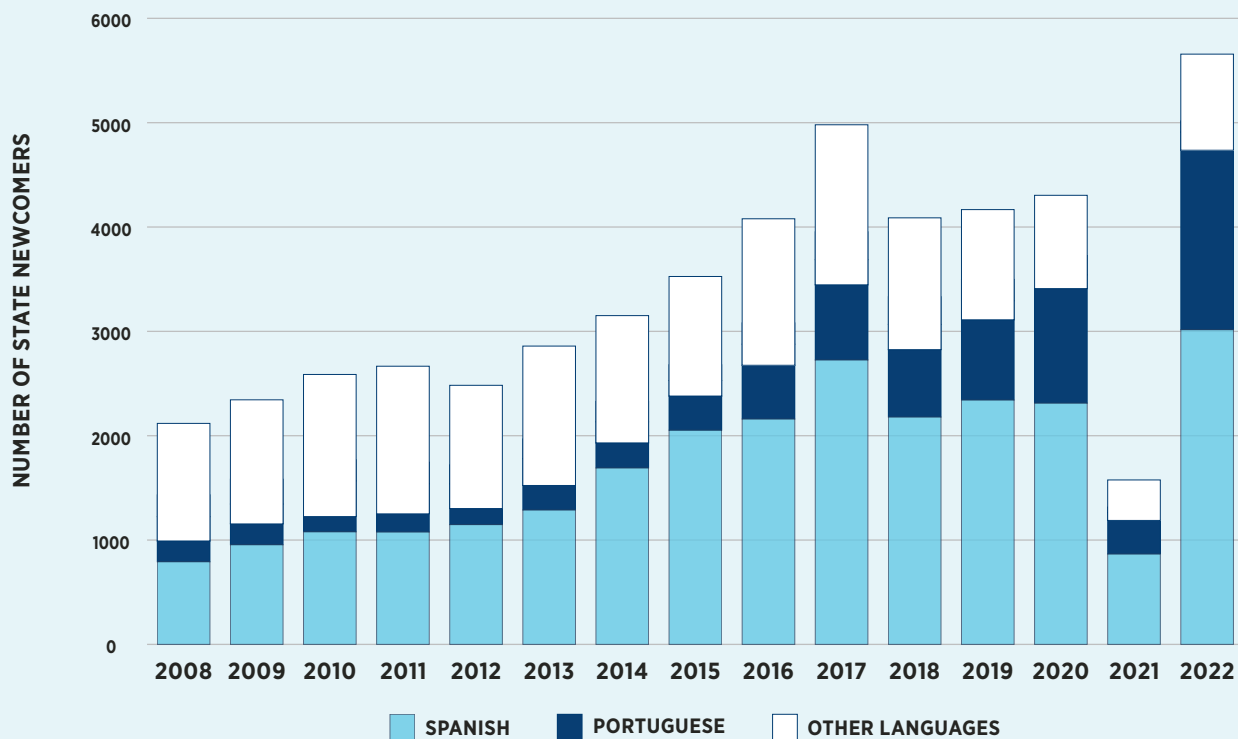


FIGURE 3
First Languages of Newcomers Over Time

The other most common languages include those spoken in Cape Verde, as well as Haitian Creole. However, put together, these account for only 5% of newcomers in 2022. Another 10% of newcomers speak one of 61 other languages, but none that accounts for more than 1.5% of newcomers statewide.

The language patterns are quite different across districts, however. In **FIGURE 4**, we show the first languages spoken by newcomers in selected districts, each of which enrolled 90 or more newcomers in 2022.

We can group these districts into at least three potential categories:

1. Districts where Spanish speakers are the large majority of newcomers (Lynn, Lawrence, Springfield, Boston)
2. Districts in which at least half of newcomers speak Portuguese (Framingham, Malden, Everett)
3. Districts serving newcomers speaking many different languages (Brockton, Quincy, and Worcester)

The figure highlights the substantial differences in newcomer populations across districts. For example, Lawrence serves nearly all Spanish-speaking newcomers, while Quincy newcomers speak a quite diverse set of languages. Similarly, Brockton, Malden, Everett, and Boston serve modest shares of Haitian Creole speakers, while Lawrence and Springfield serve nearly none.

This variation speaks to the different opportunities and challenges faced by large urban districts as they welcome more and more newcomers into their high schools. It also argues for a customized approach to supporting the educators working with newcomers within each district.

Newcomer profiles are very different across districts

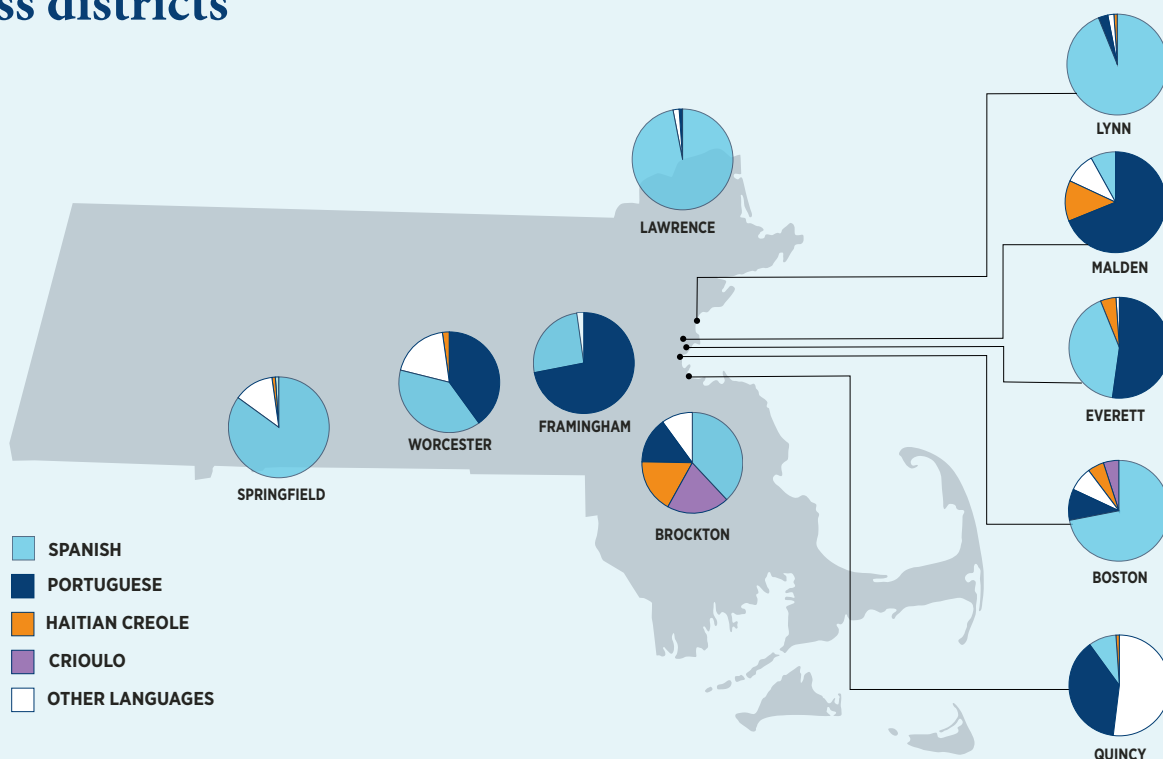


FIGURE 4
Percent of First Languages Spoken Within Districts
(of Newcomers Entering High School in 2022)

Newcomers by Language/Country Group

Gender, racial/ethnic, and linguistic diversity are only a few salient features of newcomers' identities; their country/region of origin is another. We identify six distinct groups based on language and country/region of origin that have accounted for the largest shares of newcomers over time. The six groups together made up about three-quarters of all high-school newcomers in 2022. Almost half were in three Spanish-speaking groups: those from the Northern Triangle region of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras), those from the Dominican Republic, and those coded as non-immigrants (labeled here as Spanish/U.S.), many of whom are likely from Puerto Rico (*see sidebar*). Other prominent groups include Portuguese-speakers from Brazil, students who speak either Portuguese or Crioulo/Cape Verdean from Cape Verde, and Creole-speakers from Haiti. **FIGURE 5** shows the distribution of these newcomer groups over time.

Over the past 15 years, the distribution of newcomers from these countries has shifted dramatically. Much of the growth has been concentrated in two groups: Spanish speakers from the Northern Triangle region and Portuguese speakers from Brazil. In 2022, nearly 60% of newcomers came from one of these two groups, compared to just 17% in 2008. Other groups grew much more modestly or even decreased in number over the same period. For example, the number of Portuguese and Crioulo speakers from Cape Verde has fallen dramatically, especially during the pandemic.

Not all newcomers are captured in the six primary language-country combinations. In 2022, the largest groups within the "other" category were Portuguese-speakers coded as non-immigrants (5% of all newcomers), Spanish speakers from Ecuador (4%), and non-English speakers from countries in Asia (3%).

Again, there is tremendous variation across districts by both language and country/region of origin. In **FIGURE 6**, we show the 2022 counts for each group and the five districts enrolling the largest percentages of newcomers from that group. For example, 28% of the state's Spanish/Northern Triangle newcomers enroll in Lynn, while 55% of Cape Verdean newcomers enroll in Brockton. Interestingly, we see no overlap in the district lists for the two largest groups; most Spanish/Northern Triangle newcomers are enrolling in different locations than the Portuguese-speaking newcomers from Brazil.

SPANISH/U.S. GROUP

The decision to include the "Spanish/U.S." group as newcomers comes from guidance from DESE, as well as from results of our own exploratory data analysis. Students in this group are Spanish-speakers classified as newcomers under the SIMS "arrival" data element (the indicator for students in their first year of U.S. schooling) but not as immigrants, so their country of origin appears in the data as the United States. Newcomers from Puerto Rico are in this category, since U.S. territories are excluded from the federal definition of "immigrant."

Other students included in this group are those born in the U.S. who then moved and attended school in another country. Yet others might reflect data entry errors. To explore whether these students are actually newcomers, we conducted two checks. First, students in the Spanish/U.S. group enter a Massachusetts public high school after October 1st at a similar rate as other newcomers (44%, compared to 48% for other newcomers) and a much higher rate than non-newcomers (2%). Second, the vast majority of Spanish/U.S. students who enter high school in 10th grade and took the MCAS have the test status assigned to first-year ELs (63%, compared to 58% of other newcomers).

Based on this evidence, we classify these students as newcomers and include the Spanish/U.S. category in many tables and figures. However, due to uncertainty in the data over their backgrounds and countries of origin, we do not focus on this group's trends and outcomes here.

Students from the Northern Triangle and Brazil now account for the majority of Massachusetts newcomers

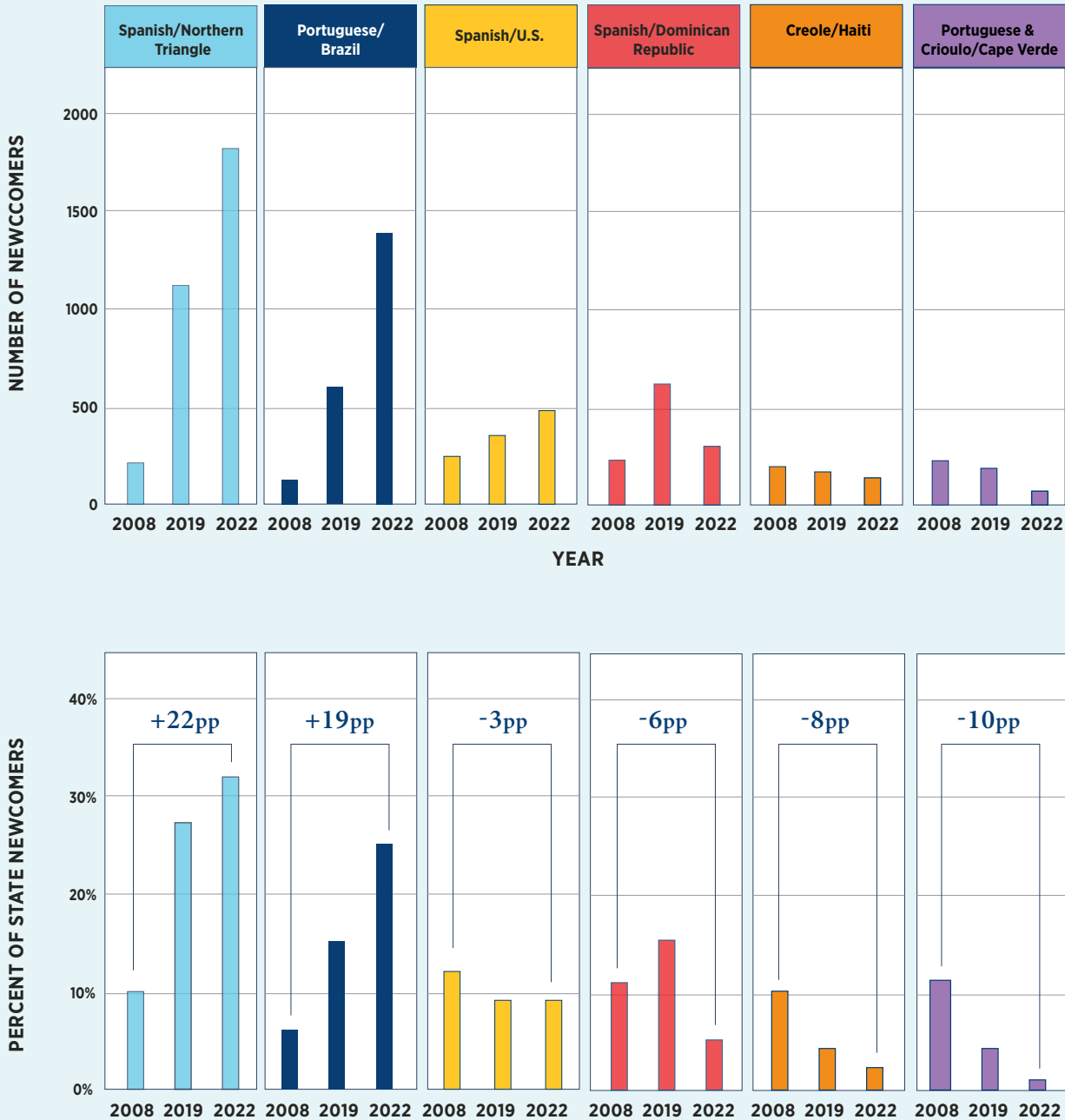


FIGURE 5
Language/Country Group of Newcomers over Time

NOTE Newcomers from other regions comprised 41% of newcomers entering high school in 2008, 26% in 2019, and 25% in 2022.

Language/country groups are largely concentrated in different areas of the Commonwealth

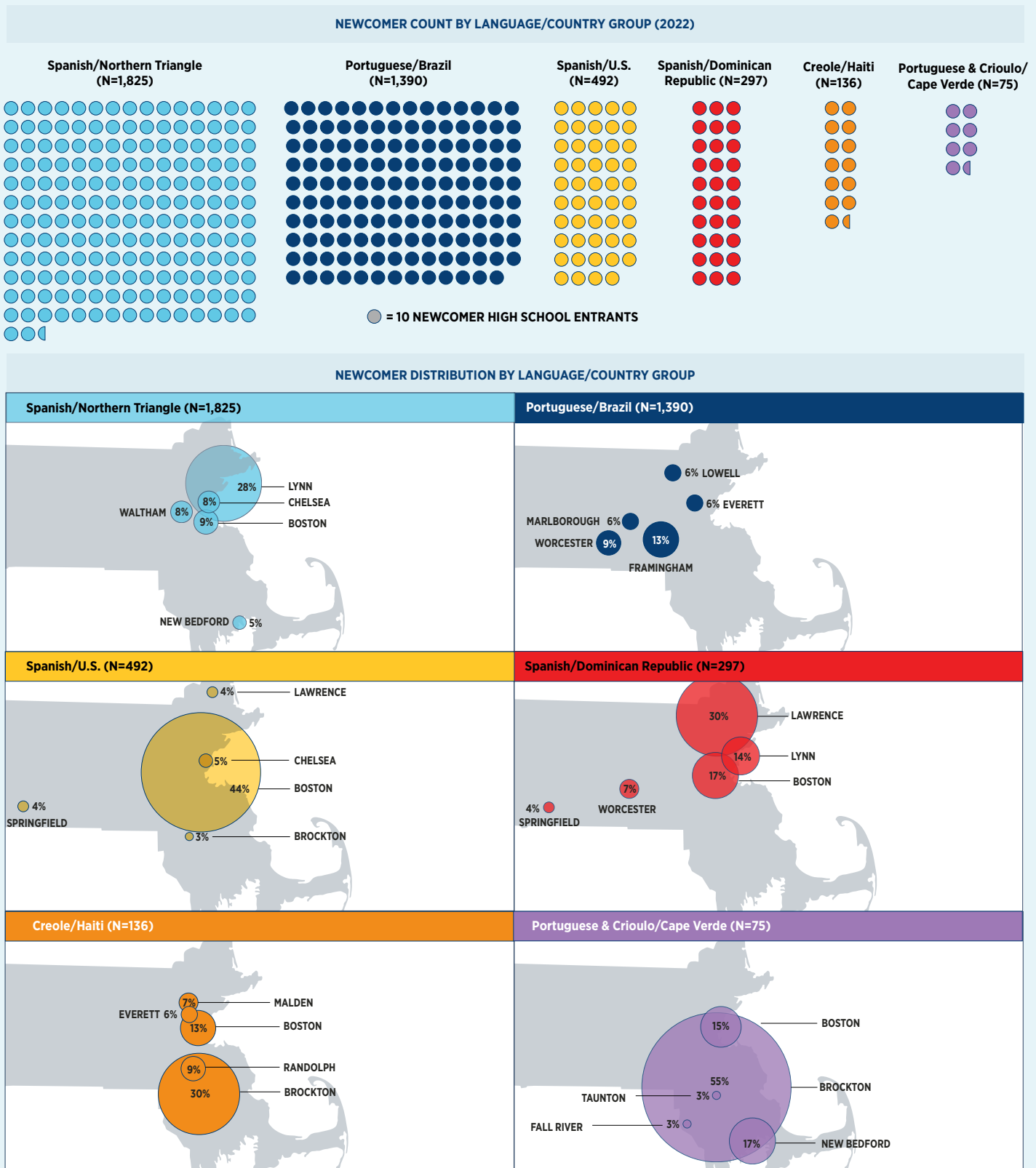


FIGURE 6
Top District Enrollments of 2022 Newcomer High School Entrants by Language/Country Group

NOTE Each percentage indicates the district's share of the state's total newcomers from that language/country group.

Initial English Proficiency

Another important dimension in analyzing newcomer trends over time is their English language skills on arrival. In Massachusetts, new ELs are given the [WIDA screener](#) immediately on registering for school in order to obtain a preliminary measure of English proficiency and make initial grade/program placements. Scores from this screener are not collected by DESE and are not available for analysis.

Instead, our measure of initial English proficiency is the ACCESS test, which is administered each year between mid-January and early February. Newcomers who arrive after the ACCESS administration do not test until the following year, after they have been in school for many months. Therefore, in our analyses of ACCESS scores, we limit the sample to the 71% of newcomers who were tested in the same academic year they entered a Massachusetts school – in other words, students who entered school from September until the testing window. However, even for these students, their initial ACCESS score reflects their English proficiency after a brief period of education in Massachusetts, not their proficiency on arrival.

In Massachusetts, an overall ACCESS level of 1.0 to 2.4 is considered “Foundational.” DESE recommends that students in this range receive at least two 45-minute periods per day of direct English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, delivered by an ESL teacher. Students scoring 4.2 or above are generally deemed sufficiently proficient in English to exit EL services (*see Data Note for more detail*).

In **FIGURE 7** we present the share of newcomers scoring in the Foundational range of initial ACCESS proficiency. The share of newcomers scoring in this range has increased over time, with the exception of 2021, when the number of newcomers fell drastically due to the pandemic. Three-quarters of newcomers testing in 2022 scored in the Foundational range, the highest percentage of any recent year.

The share of newcomers with very low initial English language proficiency has risen in recent years

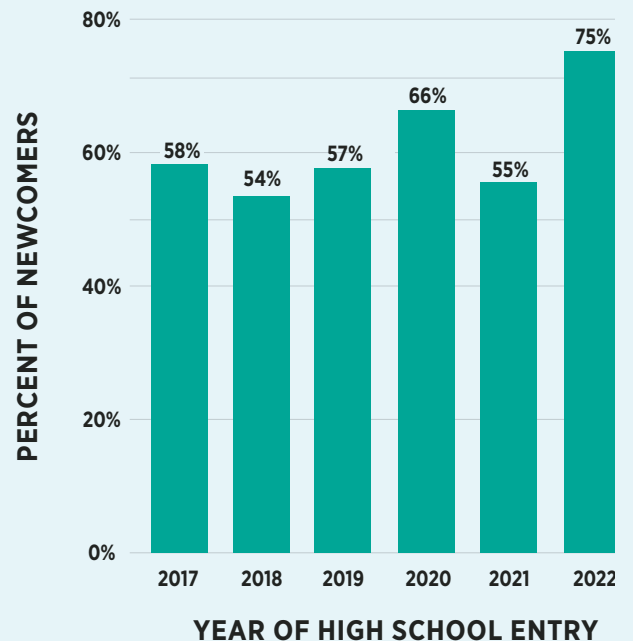


FIGURE 7
Percent of Newcomers Initially Scoring within Foundational Range

NOTE Figure includes newcomers who took ACCESS 2.0 in year of high school entry.

DATA NOTE: ACCESS

ACCESS for ELLs (“Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners”) is a yearly standardized assessment administered in January/February to all ELs enrolled in public schools in Massachusetts. ACCESS includes four subtests (Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing), which are averaged to create composite scores. For the purpose of our analyses, we primarily use the student’s overall level, which ranges from 1.0 to 6.0, and the Literacy level (Reading and Writing combined), which has the same range. For descriptors of what students who score at different ACCESS levels know and can do, see pp. 12-15 of the [WIDA Interpretive Guide](#). In Massachusetts, an overall level of 4.2 is part of the EL exit criteria. Students who attain or exceed this level and score at least 3.9 on the Literacy component are considered able to handle grade-level coursework in English and are therefore eligible to exit EL services.

In 2017, the state shifted from using ACCESS 1.0 to ACCESS 2.0. Because the tests are scaled differently, we limit our analyses to include students who tested for the first time in 2017 or later. About 10% of newcomers before the pandemic did not have overall ACCESS levels, either because they did not complete all sections of the test or because they left the state’s public schools before the ACCESS testing window.

Age & Initial Grade Placement

We see two important patterns related to age. First, newcomers tend to be relatively older than most incoming high-schoolers. Just over half of high-school newcomers arriving between 2017 and 2022 were 16 to 18 years old, which is the typical age range of students in grades 11 and 12.³

Second, older newcomers are disproportionately placed in 9th grade upon arrival, likely because of their limited English skills and/or limited prior schooling. In **FIGURE 8**, we show the relationship between newcomer age, initial language proficiency, and grade placement. Even among 18-year-old newcomers, who are far older than most 9th graders, more than a third who initially tested in the Foundational range were placed in 9th grade. Percentages were even higher for 16- and 17-year-olds. As expected, the 9th grade placement rates are substantially lower among newcomers whose initial English proficiency was above the Foundational range.

In interviews with administrators from districts and schools serving large numbers of newcomers, two themes related to student placement emerged. First, placing newcomers who arrive without high-school transcripts is a substantial challenge. While bilingual staff can try to help in securing copies of transcripts from newcomers' prior schools, this

is an arduous process, and missing transcripts may explain why some older students are placed in 9th grade.

Second, many older newcomers have never actually attended high school, and in some cases have been out of school for many years. At the Boston International High School and Newcomers Academy, for example, students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) are all placed as 9th graders regardless of age because they arrive with no high-school credits.

Grade placements differ strikingly by gender. Over the past several years in particular, male newcomers ages 16-18 were much more likely to be placed in 9th grade than their female peers. Even among students with the same initial language proficiency, language/country group, and district, males aged 16-18 were 9 percentage points more likely to begin high school in 9th grade than their female peers.

Many of these placement decisions happen at the district level, and districts approach grade placement for older newcomers in quite different ways. We will explore this in our follow-up report that focuses on differences across districts in newcomer experiences and outcomes.

Newcomers' age and English proficiency affect their grade placement

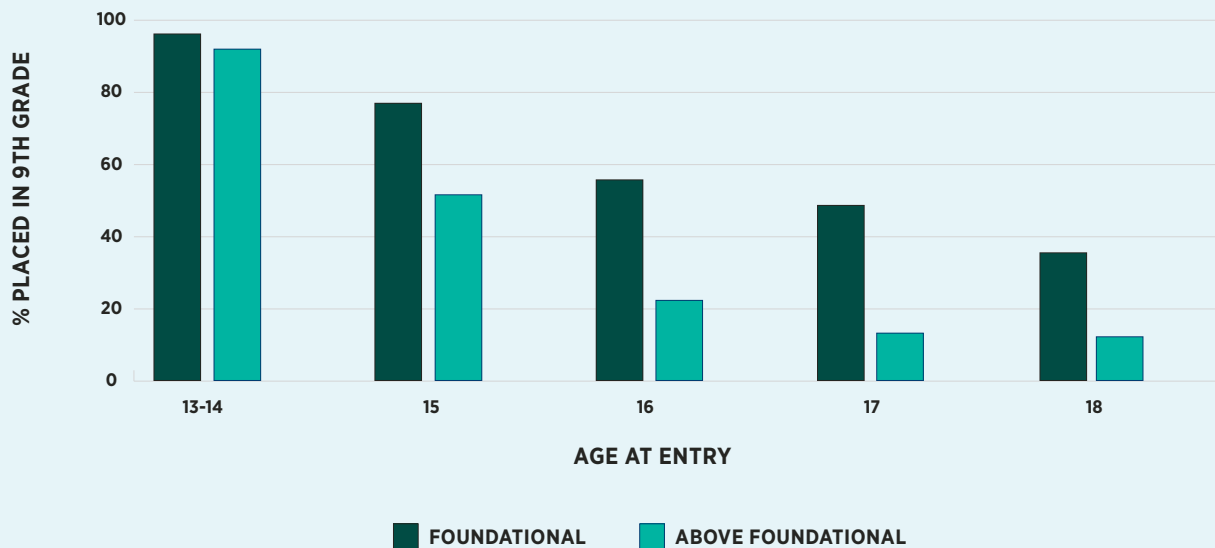


FIGURE 8
Newcomer Grade Placement in 2017-2022 by Age and Initial Language Proficiency

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF MASSACHUSETTS NEWCOMERS

We examine key educational outcomes for newcomers, including their attendance, progression through the high school grades, dropout and transfer rates, and eventually their high-school graduation and college enrollment rates. We also look at their academic achievement using two measures: the ACCESS test, which assesses English language proficiency each year, and the high-school MCAS exams that students must pass in order to receive a high-school diploma. We first describe the outcomes of newcomers as a whole and then turn to variation by language/country group and gender.

1. OVERALL OUTCOMES FOR NEWCOMERS

Attendance and Persistence

In their first year in their new high schools, newcomers' average attendance rate was 92% for entrants in 2018 and 2019. This was about three percentage points lower than the rate for other first-year high-school students. The pandemic has led to substantial drops in attendance across the country and in Massachusetts for all students. In 2022, the first-year newcomer attendance rate had fallen to 88%, a decline similar in magnitude to other high-school students in the Commonwealth.

District administrators cited work obligations as the most important barrier to school attendance for newcomers. As one noted, "In reality, many of them have to work. They are working very late into the evening.... They are responsible for paying rent and, if we're talking about unaccompanied minors, they have to send money [to their home countries]..."

[In our district] we have three advocates who work with external needs that may impact their ability to be ready to learn. For example, you're living in a shelter, you're living in a car... Food insecurity —that's going to impact your readiness to learn. Health issues... Kids are dealing with a lot.

KELLIE JONES

Director of Bilingual Education,
Brockton Public Schools

Administrators reported that housing and food insecurity were also critical barriers preventing some newcomers from attending school. Another obstacle was lower levels of engagement in school due to inadequate services for ELs and policies that restrict their options after graduation. One said, "There's also this doom, from many of them, that feel that they are in school to learn English only, because they are undocumented and, as a result, their high school diploma does not mean anything."

Despite these challenges, almost 92% of newcomers re-enroll in high school for a second year. Among those who return, however, some have not accumulated enough credits to be promoted to the next grade. This is understandably the case for many newcomers who arrive later in the school year, who have a same-grade retention rate of 38%, while those who arrive earlier have a retention rate of 14%.

Among 2018 newcomers who persisted to a second year of high school, average attendance dropped from 92% to 89%, compared to an average second-year attendance rate of 94% for all students. This five percentage-point difference amounts to nine days of school in a 180-day academic year.

English Proficiency

Another short-term measure of how newcomers fare in their first years of high school is their progress on the ACCESS test. In **FIGURE 9**, we show the total score range on this assessment and note that the average initial score for newcomers in 2019 was 2.4, right at the upper bound of the "Foundational" category.

In accordance with the LOOK Act, DESE develops annual progress targets for ELs to attain English proficiency within six years of entering Massachusetts public schools (one baseline year, plus five years of progress).⁴ While meeting these ACCESS targets is not a requirement for high-school graduation, newcomers' progress towards them indicates whether they are "on track" to reach proficiency during the expected time frame. For newcomers in grades 9-11, their initial targets are calculated as if the student were in grade 8, in order to set the expected progress level using the same timeline accorded to younger students.

Even so, the average second-year ACCESS target of 3.3 appears quite ambitious. DESE calculates a difficulty index, ranging from 1 to 99, that signals how challenging the target will be to attain given the student's current level of proficiency. While a difficulty index of 60 is considered high, the average indices for newcomers are in the range of 75 to 90.⁵ This may help to explain why only 28% of newcomers who took the ACCESS twice met their second-year targets.

Of even more concern, nearly the same share (25%) of newcomers testing twice showed no improvement, or even declines, in their overall ACCESS levels on the second-year test. After a full year in Massachusetts high schools, nearly a quarter of newcomers who remain enrolled have not progressed towards the exit criteria.⁶ This finding is of serious concern, given the research finding that newcomers improve their English language proficiency most rapidly in their first year in the U.S.⁷

While this difference might reflect variation in school engagement, we do not see evidence in the data consistent with this hypothesis. Newcomers whose ACCESS levels improved have only slightly higher attendance rates than those who do not (94% compared to 93%). This difference seems insufficient to explain the lack of progress for so many students.

District EL administrators offered several potential explanations for this pattern. First, EL instruction is simply not adequate to achieve substantial gains in many districts. Administrators noted the difficulty of recruiting qualified staff and training content-area teachers in how to develop students' academic language. They also mentioned the low expectations that many teachers have of newcomers. Additionally, administrators pointed to testing fatigue and testing conditions, particularly for the speaking test. They suggested that the emphasis on MCAS testing, given the CD policy, may reduce students' motivation to do well on the ACCESS.

Regardless, only 21% of 2019 newcomers who tested at least once ever reached an overall level of 4.2 on the ACCESS, the minimum required to exit from the EL program. Most newcomers leave high school without meeting state-defined criteria for English language proficiency, which has implications for their career options and, for those who enroll in college, their post-secondary success.

MCAS

High-school MCAS tests in ELA, mathematics, and science are another measure of newcomers' academic achievement. Students must reach a minimum score on all three (hereafter, "pass") to earn a diploma from a public high school in Massachusetts. If needed, students can retake the tests multiple times and can also satisfy the competency determination (CD) requirement via the appeals process.

Most high-school newcomers fall well short of their annual ACCESS targets

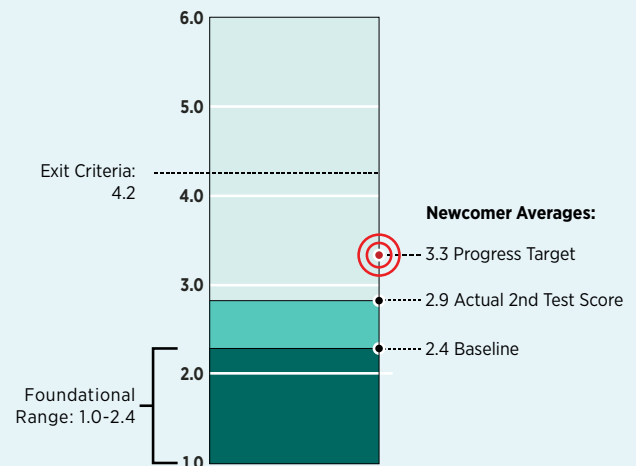


FIGURE 9
ACCESS Levels for 2019 Newcomers Who Tested at Least Twice (N=1,852)

The CD policy is particularly salient for newcomers, who represent 4% of students in the 2018 cohort who attempted all three MCAS tests but 32% of those who never passed at least one.

To explore this further, we analyzed the MCAS score histories of almost 4,000 newcomers who entered 9th-11th grades in 2016; pandemic modifications to the CD policy (see Policy Context on Page 4) have affected more recent cohorts. About 37% of newcomers who took the MCAS in these years passed all three subjects on their first attempt, compared to 91% of all students statewide.

In **FIGURE 10**, we illustrate the ultimate outcomes for newcomers on their initial test and any retests. Most newcomers fell in one of two categories: they eventually passed all three assessments (54%), or they never attempted to take all three (24%). Newcomers in the latter category did not stay in Massachusetts public schools long enough to take the tests, which are generally administered in the spring of 10th grade. Another 5% took all three, but never passed any of them. The remaining students eventually passed one or two MCAS tests, but not all three.

Interestingly, given their developing language proficiency, newcomers were much more likely to fall below the score thresholds in math and science than ELA. This probably reflects the historical threshold of the ELA assessment, which fell much lower in the performance distribution than the other two thresholds, as well as the substantial language demands of the math and science tests (for students who take the English versions).

“There’s unfortunately a lot of low expectations in terms of...using academic vocabulary, which they need to have for that ACCESS assessment. If we’re saying, “Fold your paper like a hot dog” instead of “vertically,” that’s language that kids need. Sometimes we lower the linguistic demands of vocabulary because we think that kids can’t do it, which is not true.

RANIA CALDWELL

Former Executive Director of Multilingual Education,
Lynn Public Schools

Only half of newcomers eventually exceed the minimum required score on all three high-school MCAS tests

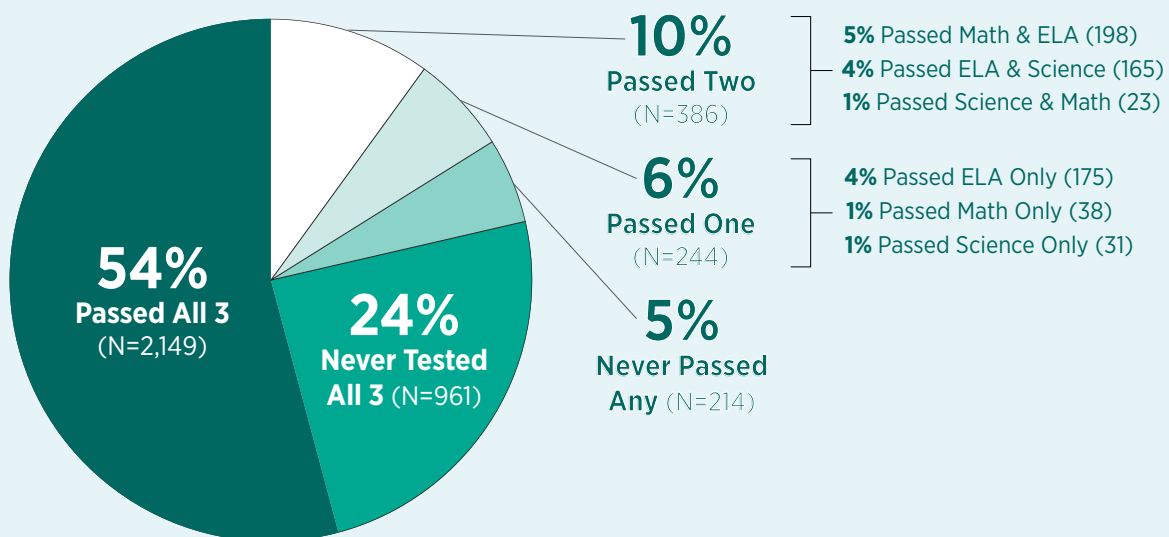


FIGURE 10
Number and Percent of Newcomers Entering in 2016 Who Passed Each MCAS Test (N=3,954)

Students who do not pass all three tests, either initially or on retest, cannot graduate from high school without filing and being granted an appeal. Of the 844 newcomers entering in 2016 who tested but never passed at least one MCAS test, 533 remained in high school through 12th grade and 172 of these satisfied their CD requirement via the appeals process.

The district EL administrators we interviewed had strong reactions about the impact of the CD policy on high-school newcomers. One described the “daunting challenge to pass MCAS even for ELs who have had high-quality uninterrupted instruction.” She pointed out that in her district, former English Learners perform better on the MCAS than the district average. But she contended that for newcomers in their first year or two of learning English, the MCAS provides “no indicator of their capacity to achieve.” In her opinion, falling below the score threshold again and again sends a damaging message that has a “limiting effect” on newcomers’ aspirations for college and career.

Several administrators stressed the lasting negative consequences of newcomers being denied high-school diplomas because of the CD policy. They explained that admission to post-secondary education is “effectively foreclosed” unless students earn their high-school equivalency, usually after bearing the cost of a preparation program and GED or HiSET examination fees. One interviewee noted that if Massachusetts newcomers had instead immigrated to a different state and fulfilled local graduation requirements, they would likely have received their diplomas.

The effects of the CD policy for newcomers are of even more interest given recent policy changes. In the summer of 2022, BESE voted to increase the minimum MCAS scores required to pass and to avoid completing an Educational Proficiency Plan (EPP), beginning with the class of 2026. We focus only on ELA in our analysis of this change, because the passing and EPP thresholds in math remain virtually unchanged under the new policy.

We highlight two points. First, newcomers who score at the new ELA passing threshold are, on average, still scoring below the ACCESS Literacy level that indicates sufficient English proficiency to exit EL services. Second, changes in the CD policy will disproportionately affect newcomers, almost three-quarters of whom have historically not met the new passing standard.

“Staffing is a challenge. We have a critical shortage throughout the state of ESL teachers who are highly qualified and have gone through an applied linguistics program or a teaching ESL program... It’s not only [for] their academic content that we want staff who speak their language. We want guidance counselors who speak their language. We want school adjustment counselors who speak their language. We want to address not only the academic but the social emotional needs of students who are going through the immigration process.”

KELLIE JONES

Director of Bilingual Education,
Brockton Public Schools

In **FIGURE 11**, we show the relationship between ELA MCAS scaled scores and ACCESS literacy levels for newcomers who took the ACCESS in the year they first took the ELA MCAS test. The ACCESS literacy level is a composite of scores on the Reading and Writing tests, which correspond to the domains assessed by the MCAS. A literacy level of 3.9, shown as a dotted horizontal line, is one component of the Commonwealth’s exit criteria. We also include vertical lines marking the original MCAS passing threshold of 455 and the new threshold of 470.

On average, newcomers whose MCAS scores fell at the original ELA cutoff had an average ACCESS literacy level of 2.4, still in the Foundational range. At the new cutoff of 470, the mean ACCESS level of students is 3.4, substantially higher but still below 3.9, which is considered the level of full proficiency in grade-level reading and writing using academic English.

The original and new MCAS passing standards in ELA are below the ACCESS literacy criteria for English proficiency

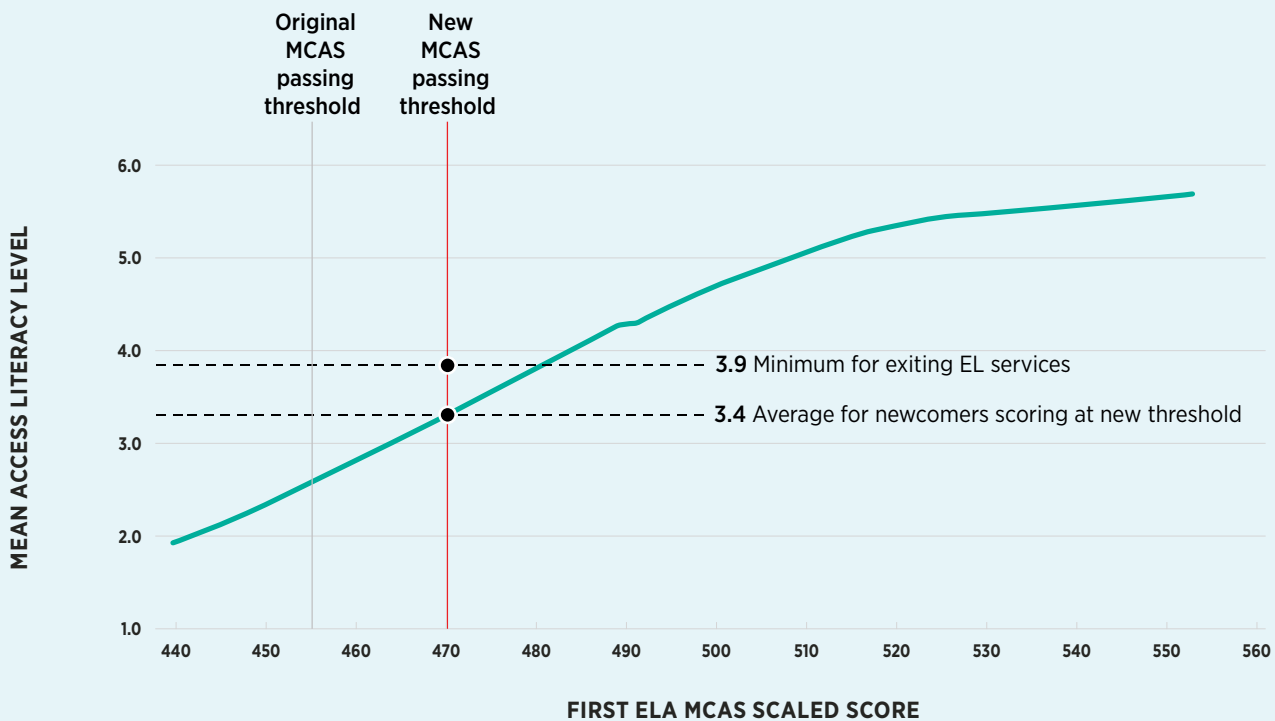


FIGURE 11
Mean ACCESS Literacy Level by ELA MCAS Scaled Score of Newcomers First Testing Between 2019 and 2022

NOTE Sample includes newcomers who first took the ELA MCAS test between 2019-22 and who took the ACCESS test in the same year. The ACCESS literacy level is a composite of scores on the Reading and Writing tests.

That said, increasing the threshold will likely have substantial implications for newcomers in the state. In **FIGURE 12**, we display the percentages of newcomers testing for the first time in 2022 who fell into four ELA score ranges.⁸

BELOW (BELOW 455): not passing under the existing CD policy

NEWLY BELOW (455-469): passed the minimum threshold on the state tests required to earn a high school diploma with an EPP under the existing policy, but but would not have passed under new policy

NEWLY EPP (470-485): no EPP under the existing policy, but EPP required under the new policy

HIGH (486 AND ABOVE): no EPP under either policy

We contrast the performance of newcomers to students from other groups of interest.

Figure 12 reveals that, had the new policy been in effect in 2022, 72% of newcomers would not have passed the ELA exam the first time they took it: 45% who scored under the original scaled-score threshold of 455, and 27% who passed (and had to complete an EPP) but were below the new threshold of 470. Smaller percentages of other key student groups were in the Newly Below category: 22% of non-newcomer ELs, 10% of low-income students, 14% of students with disabilities, and 11% of urban students.⁹ Newcomers made up 17% of the students in this Newly Below category statewide, although they were only 3% of all first-time ELA test-takers.

72% of newcomers in 2022 would not have passed their first ELA test under the new passing threshold

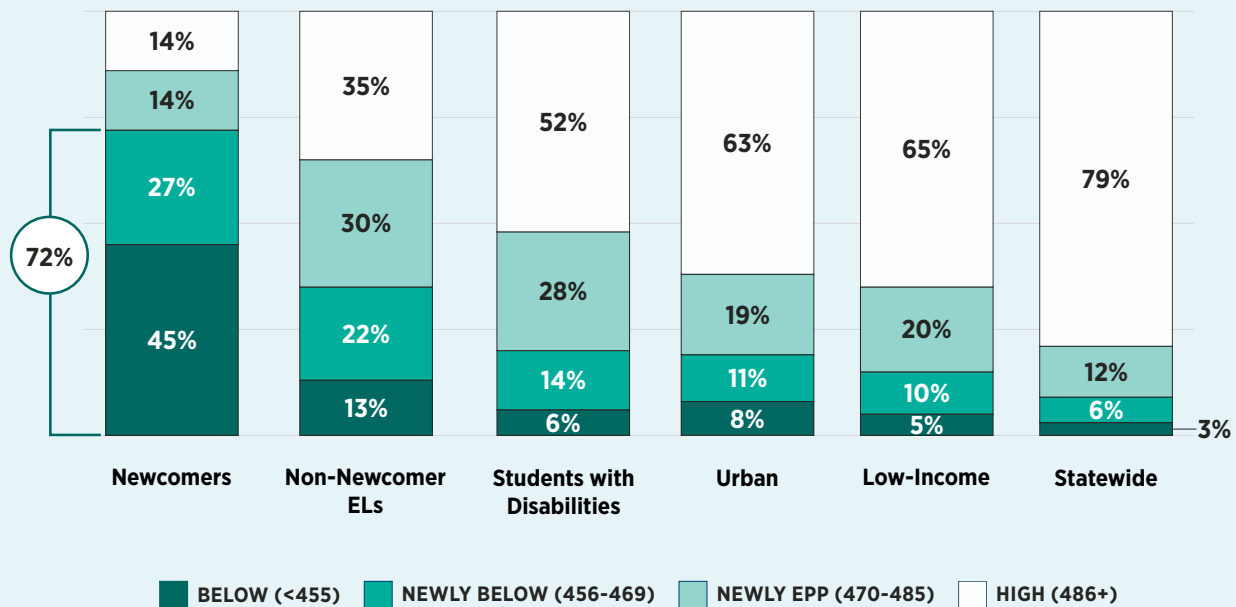


FIGURE 12
2022 MCAS ELA Score Distributions for Newcomers and Other Key Student Groups

NOTE This figure includes ELs with the Not Tested - LEP (NT-LEP) designation who took the ELA MCAS but did not receive scaled scores. We used their raw scores to impute what their scaled scores would have been.

Importantly, newcomers who first enrolled in U.S. schools after March 1 of the year before the test are exempt from taking the ELA test, although many do take it. Students in this category receive the Not Tested–Limited English Proficient (NT-LEP) designation. While their scores are not included in the state’s performance aggregations, we include them in the table above. One potential response to the higher passing threshold is that many more NT-LEP students will take advantage of the exemption and not sit for the test right away. However, the majority (53%) of Newly Below newcomers in 2022 were ineligible for an exemption because they were not designated as NT-LEP.

It seems clear that without substantially improved learning outcomes, the revised CD policy will disproportionately affect newcomers. We return to this point in the report’s conclusion.

High-School Completion

Finally, we turn to the longer-term outcomes of high-school completion and college enrollment. High-school graduation rates are of critical importance, but can be tricky to interpret because some students who transfer out of state end up graduating elsewhere, while others drop out.¹⁰ If a particular group has a high rate of student mobility, with many exiting to attend either a private school or a school in another state or return to their home countries, a lower graduation rate would not necessarily reflect low attainments.

As shown in **FIGURE 13**, the high-school completion trend over time looks very different for newcomers than for non-newcomer ELs, a group that includes middle-school newcomers as well as students enrolled in U.S. schools for many years without passing out of EL status. While the five-year high-school graduation rates for the two groups were basically identical at 54% in 2011, the steady increase in the five-year high-school graduation among non-newcomer ELs is not mirrored in the newcomers’ trend. Instead, the dropout rate among high-school newcomers increased to 20%, particularly from 2015 to 2017.

“**Indicators of whether or not kids are successful are definitely the kids that are in school more...are you able to attend that MCAS program after school, or do you have to make sure your siblings are off the bus or go to an afternoon job? ...We have very comprehensive summer programming, programs that are designed for newcomers, specific high-school English learner programs that are super small and great for 8th graders going into 9th grade. The students that are able to attend these have better outcomes.**

BRITTANY BAGGETT

Former Director of English Learners,
Everett Public Schools

For the 2018 graduation cohort, whose high-school careers were unaffected by the pandemic, about half of newcomers had not graduated by the end of the 2019 school year. About 7% had received a certificate of attainment (COA), implying they were unable to meet the CD requirement but did meet all local graduation requirements. An additional 20% had dropped out, compared to only 5.5% of the entire statewide 2018 cohort and 10% of low-income students. Another 17% of newcomers had transferred out of the state's public schools before graduating, and the final 3% were still enrolled in high school at the end of the year following their cohort's anticipated graduation.

[The lack of effective ESL strategies] causes the high dropout rates because students get discouraged. 'I'm not learning English. I don't feel like I'm doing anything here. I could be paying rent. I could be saving money.' That's how we lose a lot of them.

IVETTE MARTINEZ

Welcome Center Director, Lynn Public Schools

Newcomers' high-school graduation rate remained under 60% until MCAS requirements were waived during the pandemic

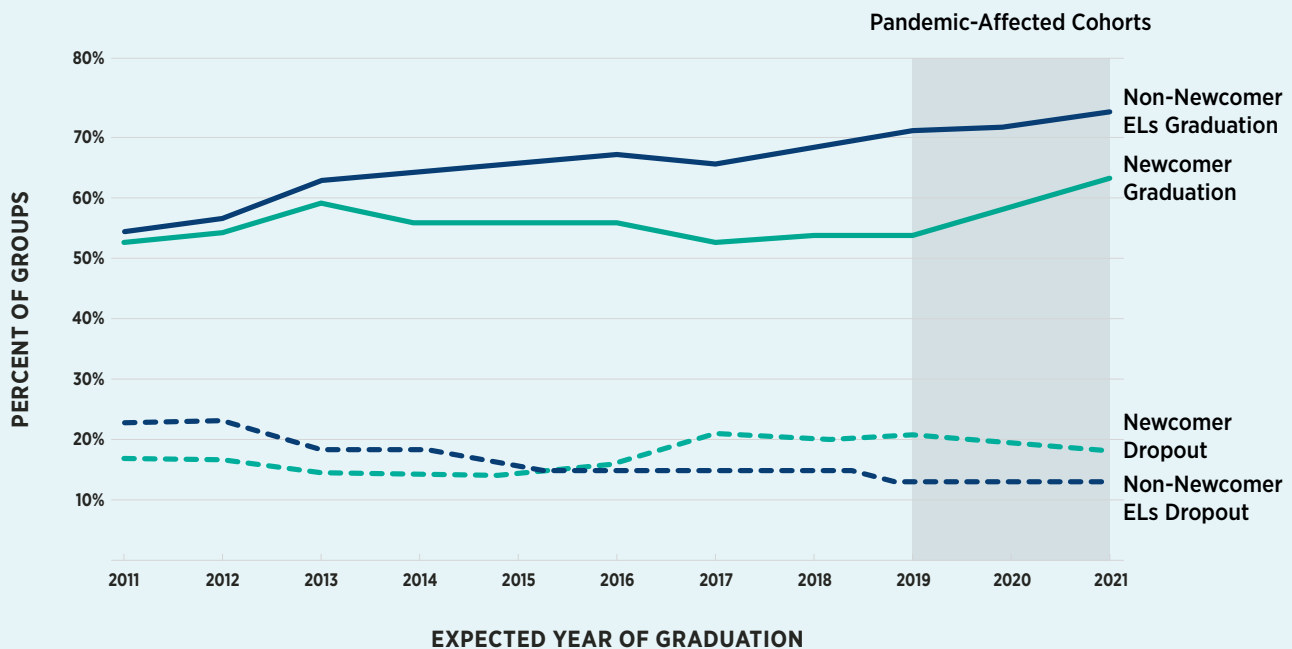


FIGURE 13
High-School Outcomes of English Learners One Year After Their Expected Graduation

NOTE Newcomers expected to graduate in 2019 were only impacted by the pandemic if they remained enrolled through the spring of 2020, therefore becoming eligible for the waiver of the testing requirement.

The 2020 and 2021 cohorts were affected by pandemic-era modifications of high-school graduation requirements, as were students from the 2019 cohort who had not graduated by the spring of 2020. Massachusetts did not experience a spike in the overall high-school dropout rate during the pandemic, and as shown in Figure 13, the dropout rate for newcomers in these cohorts actually fell slightly. Rates of high-school graduation, however, rose dramatically compared to pre-pandemic levels, with a steeper increase among newcomers than among non-newcomer ELs. This is suggestive evidence about how much the CD policy matters for this group of students. A larger share (63%) of the newcomers who remained in high school during the pandemic were able to earn diplomas, despite the difficulties experienced by immigrant populations due to COVID-19.

One important note regarding newcomer high-school completion relates to the time horizon used in reporting graduation rates. The difference between the four-year graduation rate, which counts only “on-time” graduations, and the five-year rate reported here is sizeable for newcomers—usually 9-10 percentage points, depending on the cohort. In contrast, the difference in the two rates is only around 3 points statewide and 5-6 percentage points for low-income students. Given that so many newcomers arrive with low levels of English proficiency, often in the middle of the academic year, it makes sense that they often need more time to complete high school.¹¹

I will never prioritize four-year graduation rate over getting a kid to stay for another year, which I would prefer every time. We’ve had students for six years, and not because they’ve repeated grades and are failing, but because where they started in their journey requires more time. We do everything we can to create that time.

TONY KING

Principal, Boston International High School & Newcomers Academy

College Enrollment

In **FIGURE 14**, we show trends in newcomers' college enrollment over time. While college-going among non-newcomer ELs and non-ELs has declined slightly for recent cohorts, this decline started earlier and has been much steeper for newcomers. For the 2018 cohort, 36% of newcomers enrolled in college within the next three years, down from 47% in 2011. While enrollment rates for newcomers and non-newcomer ELs were virtually identical in 2013, a difference of 14 percentage points had emerged by the onset of the pandemic. While one explanation might be increasing out-of-state transfers by newcomers, we see a strikingly similar pattern when we look only at those who remained in Massachusetts through high-school graduation.

There are at least two explanations for the lack of improvement in high-school graduation rates and the substantial decline in college-going for newcomers. First, as described above, there have been substantial shifts in

the number of newcomers from the Northern Triangle and Portuguese speakers from Brazil. We show below that these groups have historically had the lowest average outcomes of any newcomer group, so the increasing share of students from these areas has lowered outcomes on average. However, we also see that, even within group, college enrollment rates are declining. This is particularly true for Spanish speakers from the Northern Triangle and the Dominican Republic, as well as Cape Verdean newcomers. We explore differences among groups in more detail in the next section.

We observe drops in both two-year and four-year college enrollments for newcomers over time. For two-year institutions, enrollment rates were declining among non-newcomer ELs and non-ELs over the same period, though the decline among newcomers was a bit steeper. Enrollments at 4-year colleges and universities were steady or rising in the other groups, however, while the newcomer rate was dropping.

College enrollments of newcomers have declined steeply, both before and during the pandemic

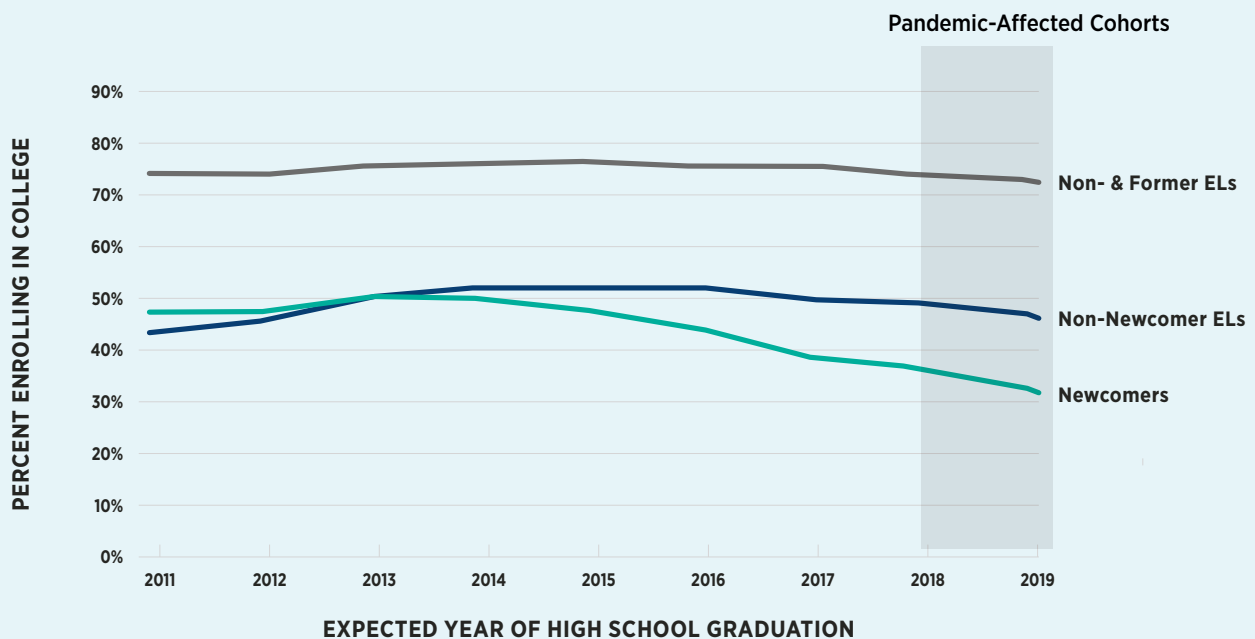


FIGURE 14
College Enrollment of High-School Students Within 3 Years After Expected Graduation

60% of newcomers who enroll in higher education are in one of 13 institutions

College	Count	Percent
Bunker Hill Community College	233	16%
University of Massachusetts Boston	104	7%
Northern Essex Community College	92	6%
Quinsigamond Community College	78	5%
Massasoit Community College	72	5%
Middlesex Community College	63	4%
North Shore Community College	59	4%
Massachusetts Bay Community College	35	2%
Springfield Technical Community College	35	2%
Bristol Community College	31	2%
Quincy College	31	2%
Holyoke Community College	26	2%
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth	26	2%
Total	885	60%

TABLE 2
Selected Colleges Attended by Massachusetts High-School Newcomers, 2018 Graduation Cohort

Those newcomers who do matriculate to higher education are concentrated in a small number of public colleges and universities. As seen in **TABLE 2**, 60% of the newcomers who were in the 2018 cohort and enrolled in higher education chose one of 13 colleges or universities, most of which are two-year public colleges in Massachusetts.

The steady decline in college-going among newcomers has troubling implications for their labor-market opportunities. District EL administrators we interviewed pointed to the prohibitive cost of out-of-state tuition and the urgency around maximizing earnings to meet family and legal obligations as potential explanations for this trend. For both undocumented students and those pursuing asylum cases, the possibility of forced removal may loom large in newcomers' planning for their futures.

2. NEWCOMER OUTCOMES BY LANGUAGE/COUNTRY GROUP

The home language and country/region of origin for newcomers are associated with large differences in their English skills at entry and in their later outcomes. In **FIGURE 15**, we present the share of each group scoring in the lowest category on their first ACCESS test, which ranges from 43% of Creole speakers from Haiti group all the way up to 93% for Spanish-speaking newcomers from the Northern Triangle. Another example of variation within the newcomer population is school attendance. The two largest groups of newcomers in 2022, Spanish/Northern Triangle and Portuguese/Brazil, had the lowest first-year attendance rates (86%). By comparison, Creole speakers from Haiti had the highest rate at 92%. This difference is equivalent to over two weeks of instructional time.

In **FIGURE 16**, we present profiles for three of these groups: Spanish/Northern Triangle and Portuguese/Brazil, which together accounted for 57% of all high-school newcomers in 2022, and Creole/Haiti, a much smaller group with substantially better outcomes. According to recent news reports, the Commonwealth has seen growing numbers of migrant families from Haiti beginning in the summer of

2023, suggesting that this group of newcomers may increase. The first two groups arrive with much lower levels of English proficiency and attend school less often than do the Creole speakers from Haiti, on average.

The profiles in Figure 16 convey the variation within the state's newcomer population and the importance of accounting for it in educational service delivery and outcome reporting. The Spanish/Northern Triangle group, which accounted for the largest number of students in 2022, has very low rates of high-school graduation and college enrollment. Nearly a third of these newcomers do not take all three MCAS tests, meaning they have exited the state's public schools before the spring of their 10th grade year.

In addition to their low baseline level of English proficiency, district administrators reported that members of the Spanish/Northern Triangle group are far more likely to have experienced trauma, interruptions to their schooling (often due to lengthy overland journeys to the U.S.), and limited formal education than other newcomers.¹² In Guatemala, for example, schooling is compulsory only through the sixth grade.

There are large differences in initial English proficiency by newcomer language/country group

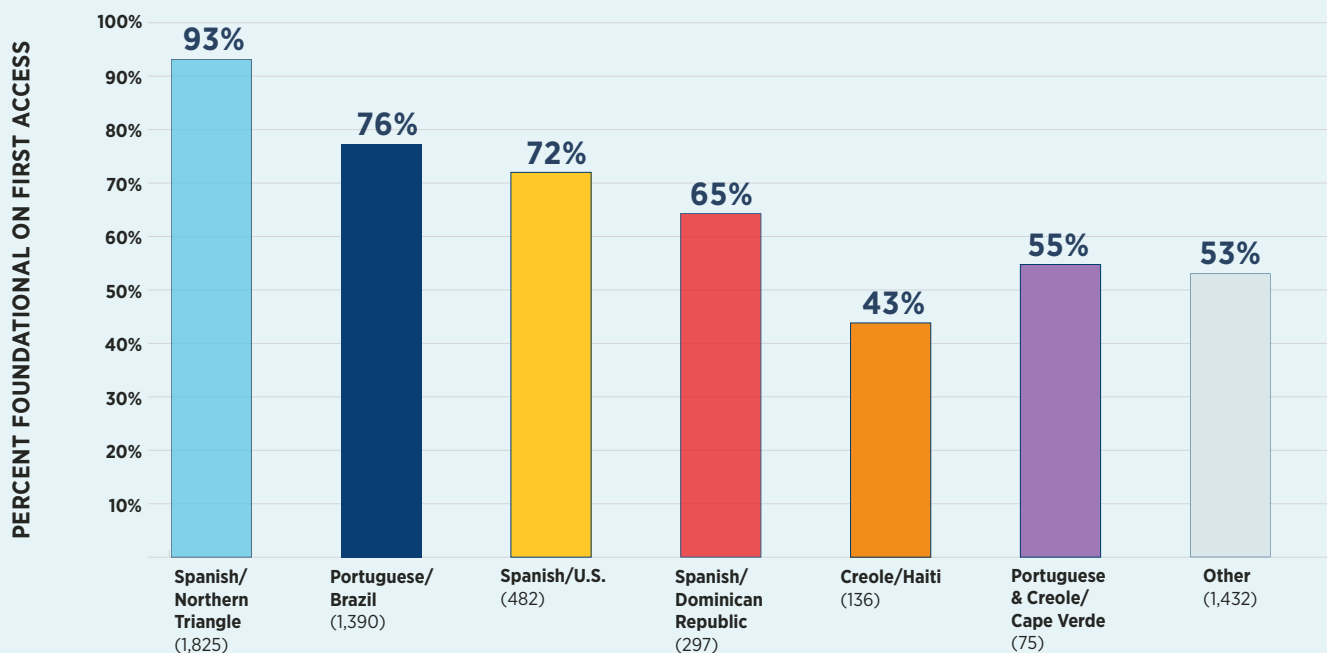
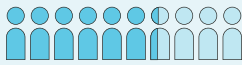


FIGURE 15
Percent of 2022 Newcomers Initially Scoring within Foundational Range of ACCESS

Large differences by language/country group underline the need for customized supports and interventions

DEMOGRAPHICS & LOCATION

Spanish/Northern Triangle



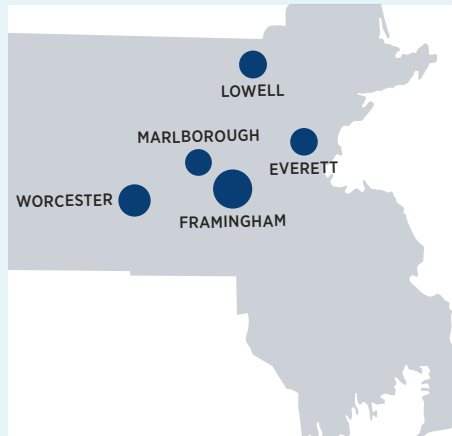
64% MALE



Portuguese/Brazil



50% MALE



Creole/Haiti

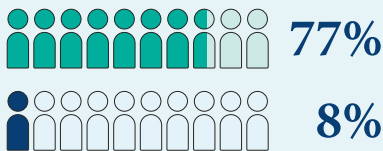


55% MALE



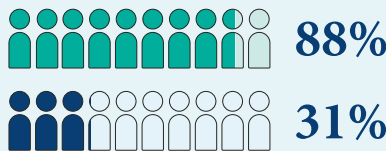
ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

- PROMOTION TO THE NEXT GRADE
- MET ACCESS EXIT CRITERIA



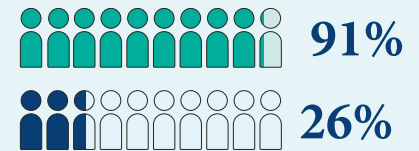
77%

8%



88%

31%



91%

26%

STUDENT STATUS

- TRANSFERRED
- DROPPED OUT
- GRADUATED
- ENROLLED IN COLLEGE

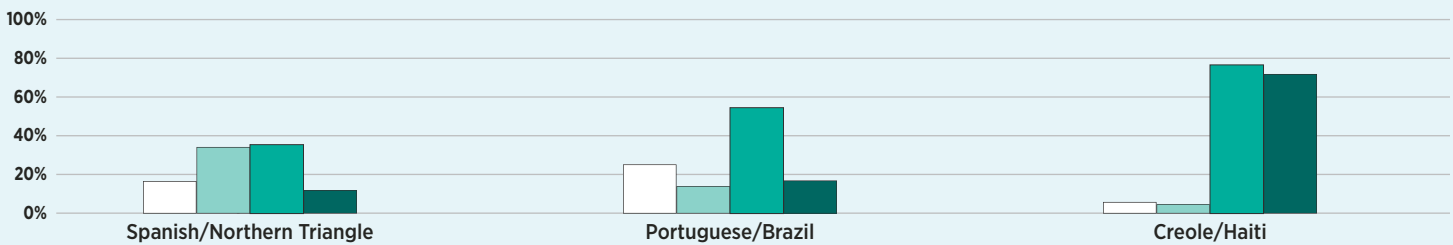


FIGURE 16
Profiles for Selected Language/Country Groups



We see more of our Spanish-speaking students being several grade levels behind as compared to their Brazilian peers. Several of them maybe have lived in more remote places where access to consistent regular schooling isn't as easy to come by.

BRITTANY BAGGETT

Former Director of English Learners, Everett Public Schools

Brazilian newcomers also have quite low baseline ACCESS scores. However, the rate of promotion to the next grade is twice that of Spanish/Northern Triangle group, and nearly three-quarters of them pass all the MCAS tests. The attrition rate for Brazilian students, however, is quite high: 21% do not take all three MCAS exams, and fewer than 60% graduate from high school within a year of their graduation cohort.

By contrast, Creole speakers from Haiti arrive with relatively high ACCESS scores, persist in school, and fare very well in high-school, on average. Nearly all Haitian newcomers take the MCAS, and almost 80% graduate from high school. Of the students who graduate, more than 80% enroll in college within 2-3 years, the same rate as for all high school graduates in Massachusetts. While the Creole/Haiti group made up fewer than 3% of the state's newcomers in 2022, their outcomes offer a useful frame of reference in considering the performance of other groups.

These striking differences by language/country group and the changes in the distribution of newcomers from these different groups over time help to explain the trends in high-school completion and college enrollment described in the previous section. Over three-quarters of the decline in college enrollment from the 2011 to the 2018 cohort, for example, is due to the compositional shift in the newcomer population during that period. The main explanation for the decline is the rising share of newcomers from language/country groups with lower rates of college-going.

A key question is whether these differences in outcomes by language/country group are due to differences between the groups in their demographic characteristics. For example, the Spanish/Northern Triangle group is disproportionately male (64%) compared to the others. Since males of nearly

all demographic groups are less likely to graduate from high school and attend college than females, this might explain the lower educational attainments of Spanish/Northern Triangle newcomers, at least in part.

However, when we account for gender, initial ACCESS level, and age and year of entry into Massachusetts high schools, we still see outcomes for the Spanish/Northern Triangle group that are significantly below the averages for newcomers statewide. As seen in **FIGURE 17**, Spanish/Northern Triangle newcomers are 7 percentage points less likely to pass all three MCAS exams, 8 percentage points less likely to graduate from high school, and 15 percentage points less likely to enroll in college, compared to the average for all newcomers of similar age, gender, and levels of English proficiency arriving in the same year.

At the opposite end of the figure, Creole-speaking newcomers from Haiti have much better outcomes than average, even after adjusting for differences in initial English proficiency and other demographic characteristics. Their college enrollment rate is a remarkable 34 percentage points above the average for all similar newcomers in the state.

One of the most striking findings above is the overall decline in college enrollments for newcomers over the last decade. A contributing factor appears to be lower-than-expected enrollments for Brazilian newcomers, who account for a steadily growing share of newcomers statewide. These students perform a bit above the average for similar newcomers in terms of passing the MCAS and a bit below on high-school graduation, but their college enrollment rate is 25 percentage points lower.

Even adjusting for initial English proficiency and gender, there are very large differences in outcomes by language/country group

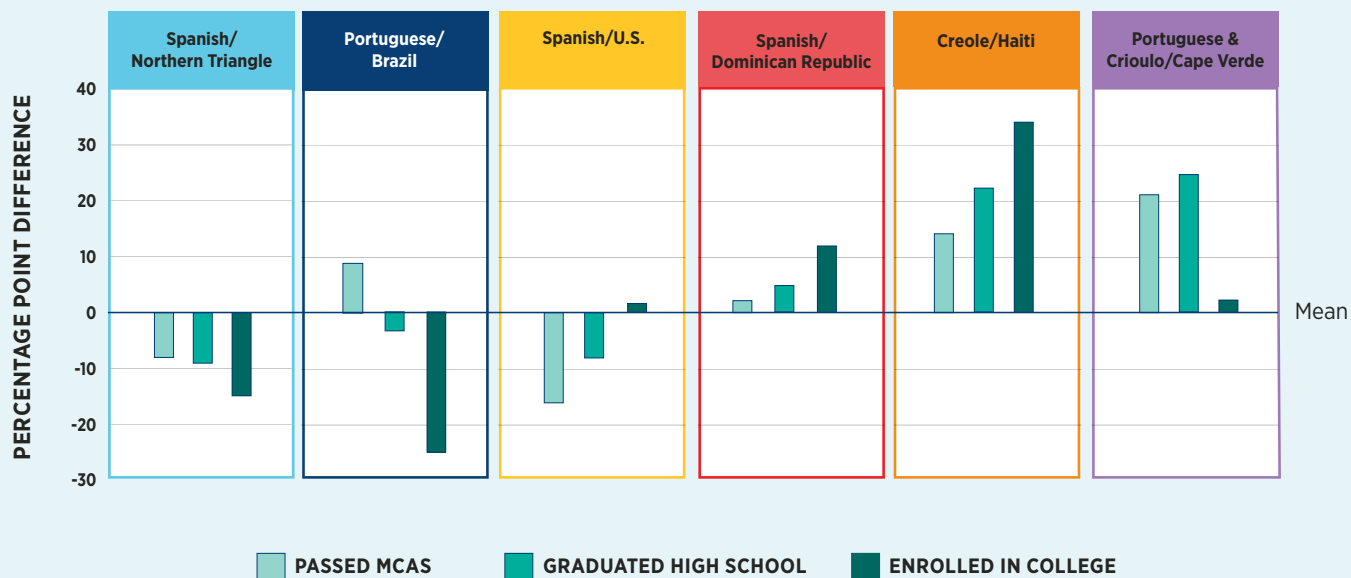


FIGURE 17
Language/Country Group Outcomes for Newcomers Entering in 2016

NOTE A positive percentage indicates the group is performing better than the average for all newcomers, after adjusting for gender, age group, year of entry, and initial ACCESS level.

Of course, newcomers from these language/country groups differ on many dimensions beyond those captured in state data. One example is each group’s size, cohesiveness, and length of time in Massachusetts, which can affect individuals’ access to information about school and community resources, scholarship programs, and employment opportunities. The Haitian community in Brockton is quite established, for example, offering a potential network of support and information to newcomers that may not be readily available in other areas.

Another example concerns differences in pandemic impacts across different regions of the world. For instance, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean had among the longest school closures due to COVID-19, which resulted in lengthier interruptions in newcomers’ education prior to their arrival in the U.S.¹³

Also, language/country groups differ in the distances and resources required to make the journey to the U.S.

Research on immigrant selectivity shows that those from countries farther from the U.S. are more likely to have higher educational attainments and greater financial resources than migrants from nearer nations.¹⁴ These differences likely factor into the outcomes of high-school newcomers from different language/country groups.

Finally, differences in outcomes by language/country group might reflect differences in their educational experiences in the Commonwealth. Earlier in this report, we showed that newcomers from each language/country are concentrated in certain districts, usually with little overlap. For example, the five districts enrolling the most newcomers from the Spanish/Northern Triangle group are completely different from the five serving the most Portuguese-speaking newcomers from Brazil. Therefore, differences in the quality of education provided to multilingual learners at the local level could certainly contribute to differences in newcomers’ later outcomes. We will explore this variation in depth in our follow-up report.

3. GENDER

Our analyses highlight a particularly vulnerable group of newcomers – male students. As noted in Section 2, 57% of all newcomers are male, but the gender balance differs quite a bit by language/country group. Their share of males, for example, is 64% for newcomers in the Spanish/Northern Triangle group, 50% for the Portuguese/Brazil group, and 40% for the small group from Cape Verde.

While females across the state have higher average educational outcomes than males, these patterns are particularly pronounced for newcomers.

In **FIGURE 18**, we compare the raw differences on attendance, promotion to the next grade, MCAS performance, and educational attainments by gender. As newcomers progress through high school and beyond, the average differences between males and females become more and more pronounced. By the end of high school, the gender difference in graduation is 11 percentage points among newcomers but 4 points for all other students. For college enrollment, gender differences are even more substantial—13 percentage points for newcomers and 15 points for non-newcomers.

Female newcomers are much more likely to graduate from high school and go to college than their male peers

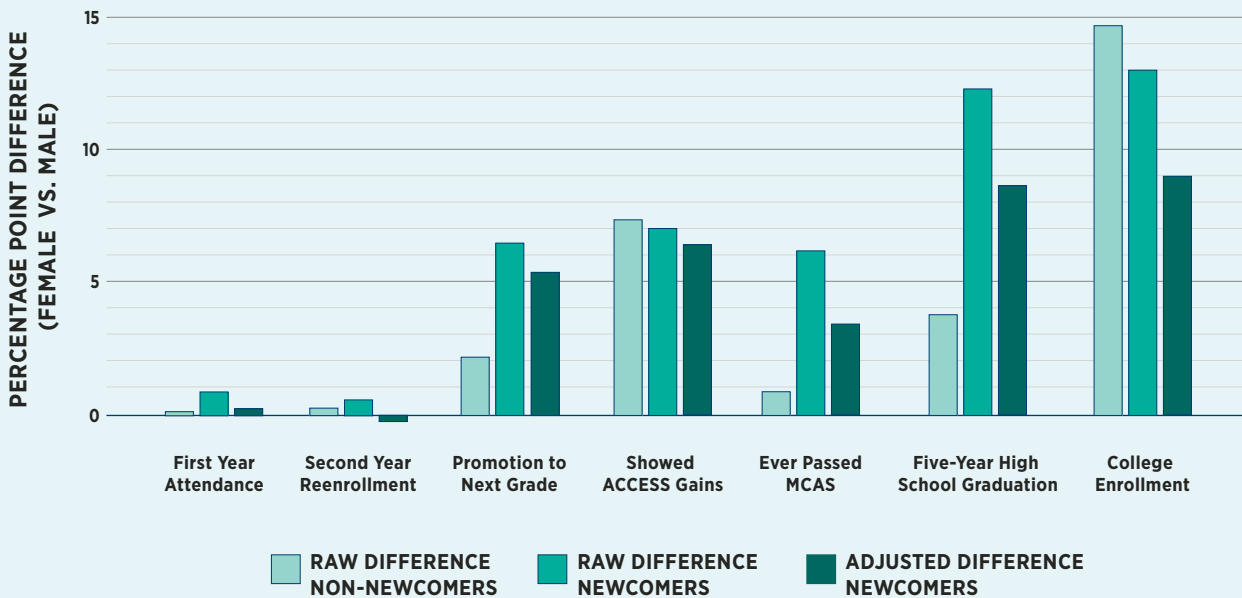


FIGURE 18
Raw and Adjusted Gender Differences (Female vs. Male) in High-School Outcomes for Newcomers and All Other Entering High Schoolers

NOTE Positive differences favor female newcomers. The final column reports results from models that control for age at entry, language/country group, and initial ACCESS level.

However, we know that female newcomers are slightly more proficient in English when they arrive, and that language/country groups differ in their gender balance. These differences could be driving the pattern in later outcomes.

But even when we compare students from the same language/country group, with similar initial English proficiency and age at entry, female newcomers do much better than males, on average. These results appear as dark green bars in Figure 18. Adjusting for these factors, we find no substantial differences in school attendance and in reenrollment for a second year of high school. Males are coming to school each day and persisting past their first high-school enrollment at the same adjusted rates as females. But they are less likely to be promoted to the next grade, less likely to show improvement in their English skills on the ACCESS test, and less likely to pass all three sections of the MCAS.

Most important, male newcomers are 9 percentage points less likely to graduate from high school and go to college than are females of the same age, language/country group, and initial English proficiency. This sizeable difference has emerged by 12th grade, with relatively fewer males persisting in high school long enough to reach their senior year.

Thus, the educational experiences of males do not appear to be as effective, and it is not clear why. Potential explanations include both in-school and out-of-school factors. Cultural expectations and norms around masculinity may discourage older males, who are disproportionately placed in 9th grade, from staying in school. Also, males may be working outside of school for longer hours or in more physically demanding jobs that impact their academic performance. Our own data shed little light on what might explain these patterns, but they seem worthy of attention from educators, researchers, and policymakers who are working to improve newcomer outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Newcomers represent a growing and dynamic share of public high-school students in Massachusetts. As multilingual learners from all over the world, they bring tremendous diversity to the Commonwealth's schools. Administrators in districts with large numbers of newcomers report that these students are eager to attend school to learn English, build their academic skills, and launch their new lives in the U.S. However, many newcomers arrive in the country with limited financial resources, sometimes without immediate family, with limited or interrupted formal educational experiences, keep and/or together with a history of trauma. By definition, newcomers are not proficient in English and, as a result, require additional support to engage with high-school academic content. Our report describes this population, and their educational experiences, in some detail. It highlights several key indicators of lagging high-school progress and educational attainment that warrant focused attention from the state's educators and policymakers.

At the time of this report's publication, evidence is continuing to accumulate about the dramatic impact of the pandemic on students' academic achievement and socio-emotional well-being, with immigrant students particularly affected.¹⁵ Early indications suggest that the most recent high-school newcomers are arriving in larger numbers and with lower English proficiency than before the pandemic. Their early outcomes, including first-year high-school attendance and first MCAS scores, are substantially lower. This means that the imperative to serve these students well, already a matter of urgency in the Commonwealth, is now especially critical.

WE HIGHLIGHT HERE THE IMPLICATIONS OF SEVERAL MAIN FINDINGS.

FIRST, newcomers have quite low rates of high school completion, with 20% dropping out and another 17% transferring without receiving a diploma prior to the pandemic. Boys are almost 10 percentage points less likely to graduate than girls from the same language/country group and initial English proficiency. Keeping more newcomers in school may necessitate the creation of more flexible, alternative programs that accommodate their work obligations, target older students (perhaps including a modified age-out policy), and grant extended time and supports to earn course credits. The delivery of rigorous high-quality instruction designed to address learning gaps from interrupted or limited prior schooling also seems key.

“Teachers do not know how to teach this group of students. Maybe your ESL teachers do, but your regular biology teacher—we need to invest more in supporting teachers in teaching this population. One SEI course is absolutely not enough.”

BRITTANY BAGGETT

Former Director of English Learners,
Everett Public Schools

SECOND, newcomers' rates of English language acquisition are generally not rapid enough to reach proficiency before they leave high school. In fact, a quarter of newcomers show no progress towards the EL exit criteria after their first full year of schooling. Engaging newcomers in quickly learning conversational and academic English is critical to facilitate their access to mainstream high-school courses and to unlock future opportunities. The diversity of EL program offerings at the high-school level, the number of qualified bilingual and multilingual staff available to work with newcomers and liaise with their families, and the quality of preparation and professional development for teachers are all important areas of potential focus.

THIRD, the Commonwealth's CD policy and its recent revision disproportionately affect newcomers. 27% of newcomers testing in 2022 passed the ELA test but scored below the new passing threshold of 470; had the new threshold been in effect, 72% of newcomers would have fallen below it. However, in *Lifting All Boats?*, we showed

that students who are English learners in high school have higher long-term earnings than their initial test scores would predict, likely reflecting their improving English proficiency over time. An assessment of the CD policy for high-school newcomers in particular appears to be warranted. For example, some states offer alternative diplomas for newcomers who meet local requirements but not state testing thresholds. Thinking carefully about the academic skills and competencies that newcomers need to succeed in college and careers, while also ensuring that they have sufficient time and opportunity to develop these skills, should be a critical component of these discussions.

It seems clear that without substantially improved learning outcomes, the revised CD policy will affect many newcomers. What behavioral responses Massachusetts educators should take to accelerate English language acquisition and student learning is beyond the purview of this report. Interviewees identified several approaches, including increased

funding for evening and summer education programs, expanding EL program models beyond SEI, and recruiting, training, and retaining qualified staff. Others described potential policy changes, including a different passing threshold on the ELA test for

“**Not providing the opportunity for multilingual learners – newcomers – at the earliest proficiency levels to get their diploma has real long-term political, economic, and social implications.**

KELLIE JONES,

Director of Bilingual Education,
Brockton Public Schools

newcomers (as in the state of New York) and school-based efforts to delay newcomers’ first attempt at the MCAS for as long as state regulations will permit to avoid repeated failure.

FOURTH, the declining college enrollment rates of newcomers overall—and for newcomers from specific groups—are cause for concern. The Commonwealth’s FY24 General Appropriations Act will make undocumented students eligible for in-state college tuition for the first time. This is an important step already taken by 17 other states and the District of Columbia. Early college programs, which allow students to accumulate college credits while in high school, can also help ease the financial burden for those newcomers who are academically ready to participate. But engaging in college-level courses during high school is a tall task for students who enter with limited English skills. Exploring other strategies to promote college access for newcomers, including family outreach and support with the application process and scholarship

opportunities, may encourage more of these students to pursue higher education and obtain credentials that are valuable in the labor market.

FINALLY, the challenges districts face in adequately serving newcomers are both broadly universal and substantially distinct. In 2022, 95 of the Commonwealth’s approximately 300 districts enrolled at least 5 newcomer students. Attending to the particular needs of this population is thus a statewide imperative, including for districts with very low concentrations of newcomers. At the same time, newcomers disproportionately enroll in districts already serving historically marginalized students and students living in poverty. The types of newcomers who arrive in different districts are quite distinct—some districts serve primarily students whose home language is Spanish, others Portuguese, and yet others serve newcomers from a strikingly diverse set of language backgrounds. The educational needs of these students are quite varied, and the policies and practices that districts employ are likewise disparate. Our follow-up report will explore these patterns across districts in more detail.

In short, the extent to which Massachusetts will be able to maintain its reputation as a leading K-12 public education system will depend on the state’s progress in serving vulnerable and high-needs students like those profiled here. High-school newcomers arrive needing intensive supports to learn English, complete high-school coursework and pass the MCAS exams, and, in many cases, overcome challenges of separation from their families, trauma and disrupted schooling in their home countries, and housing and food insecurity once they settle in Massachusetts. These students bring with them a wealth of lived experiences that contribute to the rich and growing diversity of the Commonwealth, and the public education system’s success in equipping them with language proficiency and academic and social-emotional skills is crucial to their opportunities in the labor force in the coming years.

NOTES

¹ Gándara, P. (2015). “The Implications of Deeper Learning for Adolescent Immigrants and English Language Learners.” *Students at the Center: Deeper Learning Research Series*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

² Ruiz-de-Velasco, J., & Fix, M. (2000). *Overlooked and Underserved: Immigrant Students in U.S. Secondary Schools*. Urban Institute.

³ We calculate each student’s age as of September 1st of the school year in which they entered. For example, a newcomer with a November birthday who arrived as a 16-year-old in the spring would be classified as a 15-year-old in our analyses.

⁴ Massachusetts DESE (2018). *Guidelines for the Use of Benchmarks Toward Attaining English Proficiency*. According to one widely cited study, English learners typically need four to seven years of consistent high-quality instruction to develop academic English language proficiency; see Hakuta, K., Butler, Y. G., & Witt, D. (2000). *How Long Does It Take English Learners to Attain Proficiency?* The University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute Policy Report 2000-1.

⁵ Massachusetts DESE (2021). *ACCESS for ELLs 2020 Statewide Results*.

⁶ Scale scores on the ACCESS test are [typically used](#) to measure growth because proficiency levels are grade-specific. A student scoring at exactly the same ACCESS level from one grade to the next has demonstrated more command of English language knowledge and skills. However, our focus here is on whether newcomers are making progress towards the exit criteria by meeting the state’s annual performance targets, so we report overall levels.

⁷ Umansky, I. M., Thompson, K. D., Soland, J., & Kibler, A. K. (2022). “Understanding newcomer English learner students’ English language development: Comparisons and predictors.” *Bilingual Research Journal*, 45:2, 180-204.

⁸ These ranges and their associated labels were created for the purposes of this analysis and are not in use by the Commonwealth.

⁹ Of the 11% of urban students scoring in this range in 2022, about 20% of them are newcomers.

¹⁰ Following DESE’s policy, we recode as dropouts those students who are listed as transferring to an in-state public school and then do not appear in SIMS again.

¹¹ The Commonwealth’s [accountability](#) indicators include both the four-year cohort graduation rate and the “extended engagement” rate, which is the five-year rate plus the percentage of the cohort that remains enrolled at the end of the fifth year.

¹² For more on this, see Keller, A., Joscelyne, A., Granski, M., & Rosenfeld, B. (2017). “Pre-Migration Trauma Exposure and Mental Health Functioning among Central American Migrants Arriving at the U.S. Border.” *PLoS ONE*, 12(1), e0168692

¹³ McKinsey & Company (2022). [“How Covid-19 Caused a Global Learning Crisis.”](#)

¹⁴ Feliciano, C. (2005). “Educational Selectivity in U.S. Immigration: How Do Immigrants Compare to Those Left Behind?” *Demography*, 42(1), 131–152.

¹⁵ Oliveira, G., & Segel, M. (2022). “Immigrant Children’s Education Experiences and Families’ Sacrifices in a Global Pandemic.” *AERA Open*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584221092305>

