

A stylized map of the state of Massachusetts is shown in a dark blue silhouette. Overlaid on the map are several concentric circles in shades of teal and yellow, some of which are semi-transparent, creating a layered effect. The background of the entire page is a light blue with a subtle, textured pattern.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RISING NUMBERS UNMET NEEDS

Immigrant Newcomers in
Massachusetts High Schools

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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 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.

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,
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READ THE FULL REPORT: [HTTPS://ANNENBERG.BROWN.EDU/EDOPPORTUNITY](https://annenberg.brown.edu/edopportunity)

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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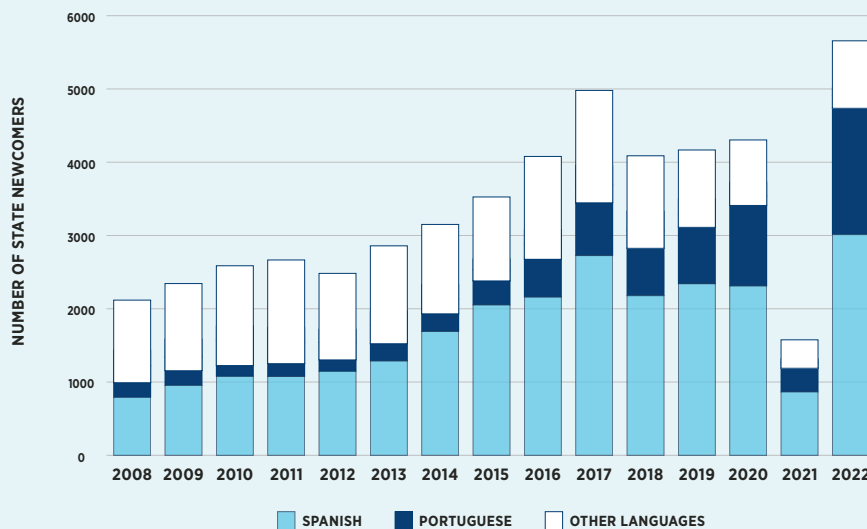
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WE HIGHLIGHT SIX KEY FINDINGS:

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%.

First Languages of Newcomers Over Time



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.

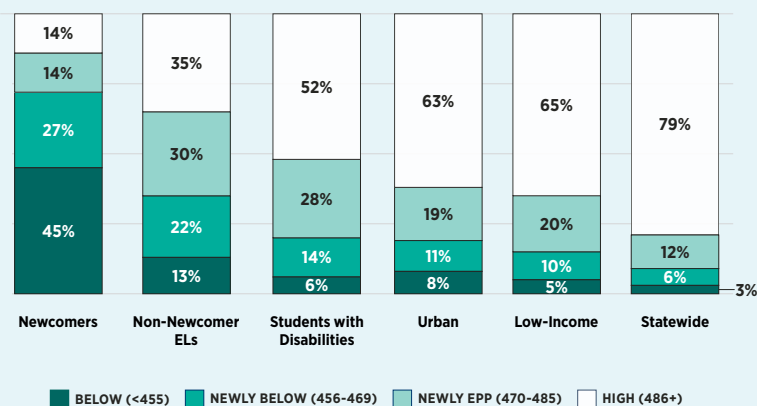
4. Most newcomers are not meeting growth targets for English language proficiency.

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.

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

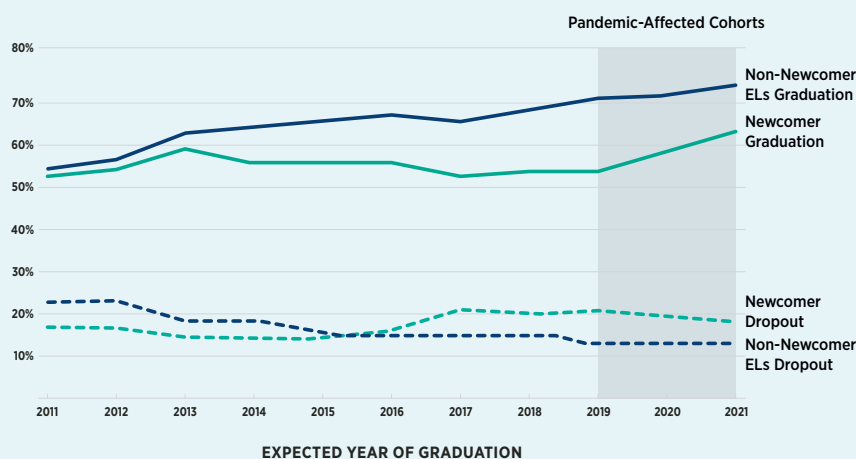


NOTE This figure includes ELs with the Not Tested – LEP (NT-LEP) designation who took the ELA MCAS but did not receive scaled scores. We used their raw scores to impute what their scaled scores would have been.

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.

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



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.