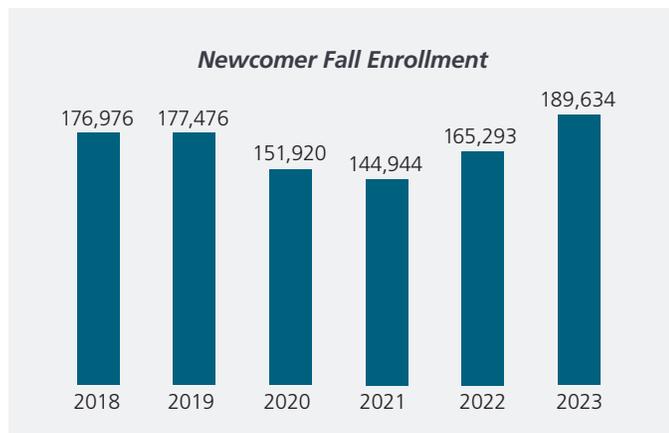


# Newcomers in California schools

By Sam Finn, Executive Director, California Newcomer Network

## Who are newcomers?

Newcomers are immigrant students who are in their first three years of U.S. schooling. According to the most recent data from the California Department of Education (fall 2023), there were 189,634 newcomer students in California schools — more than the combined enrollment of 26 California counties.<sup>1</sup> Between 2018 and 2023, approximately one in 36 California students were newcomers. Newcomer enrollment is expected to decline in coming years, but history suggests it is likely to rebound in the future.



Newcomers are a diverse group of students, varying by home language, prior education, and immigration status. More than 90 percent are English learners, with roughly half speaking Spanish as their first language and two-thirds qualifying for free or reduced-price school meals.<sup>2</sup> A significant but unknown minority are students with limited or interrupted formal education. Others come to the country with a strong educational background and basic English proficiency.

Certain groups of newcomer students are particularly vulnerable. **Refugees** and **asylum seekers** are people who have fled persecution in their home countries. Refugees receive approval and support to immigrate in advance, while asylum seekers request entry at the border and stay in the country while their case is evaluated in

federal immigration court. **Unaccompanied minors** are children without lawful immigration status who do not have a parent or legal guardian available in the U.S. to provide support.

## Educational requirements and approaches

State and federal law require LEAs to support education for students with limited English proficiency. LEAs are responsible for providing a language acquisition program that:<sup>3</sup>

- ▶ Includes both designated and integrated English language development (ELD) instruction. **Designated ELD** is direct, focused instruction on English language skills and knowledge, while **integrated ELD** is language instruction infused into other content-area lessons such as history or math.
- ▶ Allocates sufficient resources for implementation including staffing, instructional materials, training, and parental engagement; and
- ▶ Leads to grade-level English proficiency and achievement of academic content standards.

Newcomers tend to have different academic needs than the average student classified as an English learner (EL). The majority of students classified as ELs in California are U.S.-born children who speak English and require additional support in developing advanced academic language and grammar. Most EL curricula and classes focus on this majority group.

By contrast, most newcomers do not speak sufficient English upon arrival to participate easily in mainstream classes and may not be well served by standard EL programs. They require targeted instruction in basic interpersonal communication skills, vocabulary, and foundational reading. Other newcomers arrive with strong enough academic backgrounds and English skills to join mainstream classes with less support.

Many successful newcomer programs offer a combination of designated ELD coursework and early immersion in other mainstream classes, such as physical education. Research suggests that welcoming and leveraging ELs' home language in the classroom leads to improved academic outcomes and English language acquisition.<sup>4</sup>

The state's Local Control Funding Formula provides support to LEAs based on the numbers of English learners enrolled, as does the Expanded Learning Opportunity Program. The federal Title III grant provides further funding to supplement (not supplant) core instructional services for ELs. While Title III has been essential for providing support to LEAs in providing services for English learners, it is also one of the grants the current federal administration has proposed eliminating. Select districts receive newcomer student-specific grants from the state CalNEW Program and the federal Refugee School Impact Program.

## Safe and welcoming schools

State law requires that LEAs adopt California Attorney General model policies or equivalent policies that limit assistance with immigration enforcement, protect student privacy, and ensure that public schools remain safe and accessible to all children regardless of immigration status.<sup>5</sup>

All relevant LEA staff should be trained in the following areas described within the [California Attorney General's guidance document](#):

- ▶ **Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) protocols:** School staff need a clear understanding of the steps to take in the possible event that federal immigration agents visit a school site.
- ▶ **Enrollment:** Staff may not ask about immigration status or solicit Social Security numbers during enrollment. Multiple documents may be used to prove student residency and age.
- ▶ **Information Privacy:** Policies and procedures for handling sensitive student and family information should be set out in writing.

Beyond privacy and security, schools can make newcomers feel welcome by fostering a culture of belonging that values their languages and identities. Practices like multilingual signage, newcomer orientations, peer mentors, and family engagement can help students feel included.

## Guiding questions for board members

- ▶ How many newcomers do we have in our LEA, and what are their characteristics?
- ▶ What is our academic program for newcomers, and how is it serving them?
- ▶ What protocols do we have for keeping schools safe for immigrant students?

## Resources

### Education

- ▶ [Newcomers page](#), *California Department of Education*
- ▶ [Resource site](#), *California Newcomer Network*
- ▶ [Newcomer Toolkit](#), *U.S. Department of Education*

- ▶ [Ensuring English Learner Students Can Participate Meaningfully and Equally in Educational Programs](#), *U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Justice*
- ▶ [Newcomer Education in California](#), *Policy Analysis for California Education*

### Immigration Enforcement

- ▶ [Promoting a Safe and Secure Learning Environment for All](#), *California Attorney General*
- ▶ [Quick Reference for School Officials](#), *California Attorney General*
- ▶ [Immigration Enforcement Actions at California Schools: Guide for Students and Families](#), *California Attorney General*
- ▶ [ICE Protocol for Families and Community](#), *Oakland Unified School District*

## Relevant CSBA sample board policies

- ▶ Board Policy/Administrative Regulation 0450 – Comprehensive Safety Plan
- ▶ BP/AR 1340 – Access to District Records
- ▶ BP/AR 5125 – Student Records
- ▶ BP/AR/E 5125.1 – Release of Directory Information
- ▶ BP/AR 1445 – Response to Immigration Enforcement
- ▶ BP 6146.1 – High School Graduation Requirements
- ▶ BP 6146.3 – Reciprocity of Academic Credit

## Endnotes

- 1 California Department of Education. (n.d.). *T3 – Immigrant Students demographics*. Retrieved July 22, 2025, from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/t3imm demographics.asp>; Data from the California Department of Education
- 2 Finn, S. (2023, May). Newcomer education in California. Policy Analysis for California Education. [edpolicyinca.org/publications/newcomer-education-california](https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/newcomer-education-california)
- 3 Cal. Code Regs. Tit. 5, § 11309 - Language Acquisition Programs
- 4 Short, D. J., & Boyson, B. A. (2012). Helping newcomer students succeed in secondary schools and beyond. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. [https://media.carnegie.org/filer\\_public/ff/ff/ffda48e-4211-44c5-b4ef-86e8b50929d6/ccny\\_report\\_2012\\_helping.pdf](https://media.carnegie.org/filer_public/ff/ff/ffda48e-4211-44c5-b4ef-86e8b50929d6/ccny_report_2012_helping.pdf)
- 5 *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982), California Ed. Code § 220 Education Code