

OUR TAKE

As district budgets rise but ESOL funding remains stagnant, hundreds of Athens-area English Learners face steep academic barriers and disproportionately low graduation rates.

English for Speakers of Other Languages is not a luxury in public education, it is a lifeline.

In Athens-Clarke County, nearly 16% of students in the Clarke County School District are English Learners (ELs), meaning 2,000 students rely on ESOL programs to access the same education as their peers. Despite these numbers, ESOL funding remains an afterthought, with only a fraction of high school ELs receiving the support they need to stay on track for graduation.

The district has made efforts to implement this support. In 2024-25, the CCSD launched the Center for Readiness in English and Career Education, a half-day program for newcomer students at Clarke Central and Cedar Shoals High Schools. The program provides targeted language and cultural support, helping students transition more smoothly into mainstream classrooms.

But CRECE's reach underscores the scale of the challenge. Only about 50 students are enrolled each semester. Which is a fraction of the 2,000 ELs districtwide, and far short of the hundreds of high school students who could benefit from more aid.

Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act provides federal money for EL programs and the CCSD participates. But when spread across all students, Title III supports only amount to a few hundred dollars per student. By comparison, overall per-pupil spending in CCSD exceeds \$15,000 annually, according to U.S. News & World Report. The imbalance leaves ESOL programs dependent on piecemeal funding or pilot initiatives rather than stable, long-term investment.

Meanwhile, the district's budget continues to grow. For fiscal year 2024-25, CCSD approved a \$240.6 million budget, an increase of \$26.5 million over the previous year. Yet within this figure, there are no clear earmarks for expanding high school ESOL services beyond existing staffing and CRECE.

Without specific protections, ESOL funding risks being absorbed into broader budget priorities.

The consequences are measurable. According to the Migration Policy Institute, EL's graduate rates are nearly 20 percentage points lower than their peers

nationwide. In the CCSD, where the percentage of EL students is higher than the national average of 10.6%, underinvestment in high school ESOL is a direct threat to equity.

"If we lost funding and we lost ESOL-endorsed teachers then that would affect our graduation rate. It would affect our students' comfort (at CCHS), just knowing that there's

a hostile world out there waiting for them," ESOL department chair Jodi Bolgla said.

High school ESOL students are not asking for special treatment. They are asking for the same chance at success as their peers. That chance requires more than determination, it requires real investment. **O**

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Left: LACKING RESOURCES: An illustration showing below par school resources is shown. English for Speakers of Other Languages programming is at risk of being incorporated into other priorities. "In the CCSD, where the percentage of EL students is higher than the national average of 10.6%, underinvestment in high school ESOL is a direct threat to equity," Illustration by Sylvia Robinson