

English Language Learners Face Unique Challenges

English language learners are the fastest-growing student population group in our schools. Providing them with high-quality services and programs is an important investment in America's future.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing segment of the public school population. Over the past 15 years, the number of ELL students has nearly doubled—to about 5 million. By 2015, ELL enrollment in U.S. schools will reach 10 million and, by 2025, nearly one out of every four public school students will be an English Language Learner.¹



Where do these students come from? Despite common assumptions to the contrary, native-born U.S. citizens predominate in the

ELL student population: 76 percent of elementary school and 56 percent of secondary school English Language Learners are native-born, and more than half of the ELLs in public secondary schools are second- or third-generation U.S. citizens.²

What else do we know about them? Two-thirds come from low-income families and three out of four ELLs are Spanish-speaking.³ But what is most significant—and troubling—is that these students' academic performance is well below that of their peers and that ELLs have excessively high dropout rates. NEA believes that closing the achievement gap for ELLs must be a priority.

ESEA/NCLB: The law's effect on ELL students

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is drawing some much-needed attention to the achievement gap of ELL students, but the way the law treats

these students is not helping anyone. Under the law, each district and school must show that the student body as a whole, as well as each subgroup of students such as ELLs, must meet the same academic standards in reading and math. (A subgroup is made up of students who share certain characteristics—students who are economically disadvantaged, students of color, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency, for example. These groups are not mutually exclusive, so the test results for a student who is economically disadvantaged, Hispanic, and has limited English proficiency could be counted in all three sub-groups.)

To make adequate yearly progress (AYP), each district and school must generally show that each subgroup has met the state proficiency goal in reading and math. Accurately assessing these students in English—required by the law—is challenging. ELLs are expected to master content in English before they have reached a certain level of English proficiency. Accommodations provided during the testing are often of limited value and questionable validity. On top of the math and reading tests, ELLs also must meet certain English proficiency benchmarks.

What are the issues facing teachers of English Language Learners?

ELL students come from very different backgrounds and often face multiple challenges in the classroom. To complicate matters further, teachers

lack practical, research-based information, resources, and strategies needed to teach, evaluate, and nurture ELL students, whether those students were born in this country or elsewhere, or whether they are the first, second, or third generation to attend an American public school. In too many cases, ELL students are being given reading and math tests in English before they are proficient in the language.

The issue of communication looms large for teachers of ELL students. A 2004 survey of California teachers found “poor communication among students, teachers, parents, and the community” to be a huge issue. Other challenges included the lack of tools to teach ELL students as well as appropriate assessments to diagnose student needs and measure student learning. Teachers also expressed frustration over the wide range of English language and academic levels and the fact that they received little professional development or in-service training on how to teach ELLs.⁴ As the number of ELLs grows, for example, more educators will be faced with the challenge of effective second language literacy instruction.⁵

Meeting the learning needs of English Language Learners is a big job, one that requires the coordination and collaboration throughout the educational system. That means everyone must support the learning of ELLs, starting with schools of education that must better prepare all teachers to work effectively with ELLs. And teachers themselves say that good professional development is among their top needs.

What does the research say about the achievement levels of ELLs?

Recent testimony⁶ presented to Congress revealed that ELLs’ academic performance levels are significantly below those of their peers in nearly every measure of achievement. In the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, only 29 percent of ELLs scored at or above the basic level in reading, compared with 75 percent of non-ELLs.⁷ There also are significant achievement gaps between ELL students and their white and African-American counterparts.

Assessing English Language Learners for ELP

A new report from the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) at UCLA notes that as states continue their quest to meet the testing provisions of NCLB, their policies and procedures on assessing the English language proficiency levels of ELL students continue to vary greatly.

When NCLB was implemented, some states did not even have a statewide assessment system in place, much less a high-quality method for testing their rapidly growing ELL populations. Testing and accommodations guidance for districts and schools was often unclear and inconsistent, and many different tests measuring English language proficiency (ELP) emerged, creating a complex national testing picture. States with large ELL populations (such as California, New Mexico, Texas and New York) developed their own ELP tests, but none of them were comparable to the other states’ tests. Many states simply did not have the expertise, time, or resources to develop valid and reliable assessments that meet the needs for accuracy and fairness.

A key ELL testing inconsistency included a major disconnect between state ELP standards and tests. In general, states provide very little public evidence to show that assessments are accurately measuring their state standards, and this was the case regarding ELP. The problem is especially acute in states that select a commercial test to measure ELP because commercial tests simply can’t measure the range of standards that different states have adopted. Evaluation experts recommend that assessments should always be developed after the standards have been adopted and that the tests measure just a single group of standards.

The CRESST study also found mismatches in achievement levels between a state’s ELP standards and its tests. For example, one state’s ELP standards had three achievement levels: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. But their ELP tests had five levels that even used mostly different terms: basic beginner,

beginner, and low intermediate, high intermediate, and advanced. The CRESST researchers found many differences in the number of achievement levels between states, with some states using as few as three levels and others as many as six.

The researchers also found that accommodations policies differ substantially between states. Most states (43 states), for example, allow students to use bilingual dictionaries, while far fewer (18 states) provide only simplified directions. In addition, most states do not have procedures to monitor accommodations at either the school district or school level, and they often provide little guidance on the use of test accommodations, such as when ELL students may use a bilingual dictionary or when they may have test directions read aloud to them. Furthermore, a substantial number of states provide so much flexibility to school districts, that schools in the same state could easily have different accommodations policies, resulting in major validity and reliability issues.

Even with all of these inconsistencies, however, there is good news on the horizon. Efforts are underway to have states collaborate in order to address many of the ELL assessment and accommodations issues. In fact, already more than 25 states belong to one of four ELL collaborative programs, with the largest number (18 states) actively participating in the World-Class Instruction Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium. WIDA has developed English language proficiency standards and a matched English language proficiency test called ACCESS for ELLs⁸.

A call to action

NEA, long committed to improving the education of English Language Learners, is collaborating with many communities and many organizations on strategies to close the gaps in student achievement, reduce the dropout rate, and increase the number of high school graduates who go to and graduate from college.

ELLs are present and accounted for in a flawed NCLB accountability system, and NEA is concerned that if

changes are not made in the law, we may be setting these students up for more failure. In particular, here are the changes that NEA believes must be made in the reauthorization of NCLB:

1. extend from one year to a maximum of three years the time for an English Language Learner to master English before being tested in English in core content areas;
2. improve the quality of assessments for ELL students (including the provision of additional native language tests);
3. ensure that all ELL students receive the full range of services they need—both to bring them to English proficiency as well as to improve their performance on academic content areas;
4. improve teacher training opportunities so teachers can better meet the needs of such students.

NEA is concerned that the accountability system in NCLB, called adequate yearly progress (AYP) fails to test and count tests scores from ELL students in a valid and reliable manner.

NEA believes the federal government needs to do much more to assist states and school districts in improving the quality of assessments for ELL students, providing native language assessments and improving the quality and validity of accommodations. NEA also believes that it is appropriate to extend the current one-year exemption for newly arrived immigrant students' tests scores counting for AYP purposes to three years. Another option might be to link the English language proficiency tests and the academic content tests and give each one proportional weighting in determining whether this group of students makes AYP.⁹

Finally, NEA believes states must offer accommodations to try to increase the validity and reliability of assessment results for students with limited English proficiency. These accommodations are intended to permit students to demonstrate their academic knowledge, despite limited language ability.

References

- ¹ The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA), 2007, www.ncela.gwu.edu/expert/fastfaq/4.html.
- ² Capps, R., M. Fix, J. Murray, J. Ost, J. Passel, & S. Herwanto, *The New Demography of America's Schools: Immigration and the No Child Left Behind Act* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2005), 18.
- ³ The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA), 2007, www.ncela.gwu.edu/expert/faq/08leps.html.
- ⁴ Gandara, P., J. Maxwell-Jolly, & A. Driscoll, *Listening to Teachers of English Language Learners. A Survey of California Teachers' Challenges, Experiences, and Professional Development Needs* (Santa Cruz, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education, The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, and U.C. Linguistic Minority Research Center, 2005).
- ⁵ Short, D., & S. Fitzsimmons, *Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners*, 2006, www.all4ed.org/files/doublework.pdf.
- ⁶ Testimony of Peter Zamora, Co-Chair, Hispanic Education Coalition to House Education and Labor Committee, Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee, Impact of NCLB on English Language Learners, March 23, 2007.
- ⁷ National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP): Reading and Mathematics (Washington, D.C.), http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2005.
- ⁸ The full report, *Recommendations for Assessing English Language Learners: English Language Proficiency Measures and Accommodation Uses* (Tech. Rep. No. 737) is available on the CRESST web site at www.CRESST.org. Two companion reports; *English Language Proficiency Measures and Accommodation Uses—Literature and Practice Reviews* (Tech. Rep. Nos. 731 & 732) are also available for download. Parts of this summary were taken from the companion reports.
- ⁹ August, D., *Assessment and Accountability Provisions of No Child Left Behind for English Language Learners and related Issues*, 2007.

Resources

Report on the Status of Hispanics in Education: Overcoming a History of Neglect. The report finds that Hispanic students often face unique challenges in student achievement, influenced by the fact that Hispanics have poverty rates that are two to nearly three times higher than whites. March 2007.

www.nea.org/achievement/images/hispaniced.pdf

C.A.R.E.: Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gaps. This publication offers concrete ways to improve curriculum and classroom practices. Its research-based strategies address the C.A.R.E. themes of cultural, economic, and language differences; unrecognized and undeveloped abilities; resilience; and effort and motivation. March 2006.

www.nea.org/teachexperience/careguide.html

A Report on the Status of Asian Americans in Education. The first of a series of reports on the status of eight underserved groups in education. May 2005.

www.nea.org/teachexperience/images/aapireport.pdf

The 2004–2005 Focus On series examines the achievement gaps for six groups: American Indian and Alaska Native students; Asian and Pacific Islander students; Black students; Hispanic students; women and girls; and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. Each publication highlights barriers to learning faced by students as well as concrete strategies to address these barriers.

www.nea.org/teachexperience/achievegafocus0405.html

