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## **“How Assessment Can Promote Equity for English Learners: Policy Considerations”**

Lead Authors: Rebecca Vonderlack-Navarro, PhD and Karen Garibay-Mulattieri  
Summer 2016

### **Executive Summary:**

Given the vast growth of children entering school who are English Learners (ELs), the Early Childhood-12 educational community across the country is currently faced with critical questions:

- What are the opportunities and challenges college and career readiness standards and their aligned assessments pose for them?
- How can the recently legislated Seal of Biliteracy awarded to high school seniors for being college ready in English and a second language be more widely promoted within the present assessment system?

After providing an overview of the standards and assessment system, this brief explores particular challenges the system poses for students who are being instructed and learning content in their home language along with building English language proficiency. The paper concludes with a consideration for how new state flexibility within the Every Student Succeeds Act 2015 provides opportunities for states and districts to assess ELs more equitably. While the brief draws insights from working with diverse families in Illinois, the recommendations for building a linguistically and culturally responsive assessment system are relevant to policymakers and practitioners across the country.

\*This policy brief was generously supported by the High Quality Assessment Project through Education First. The views expressed in this paper are those only of the Latino Policy Forum. We would like to express gratitude to Barbara Buell and Dr. Margo Gottlieb for reviewing the brief.

\*\*The Latino Policy Forum is the only organization in the Chicago area that facilitates the involvement of Latinos at all levels of public decision-making. The Latino Policy Forum conducts analysis to inform, influence, and lead. Its goals are to improve education outcomes, advocate for affordable housing, promote just immigration policies, and engage diverse sectors of the community, with an understanding that advancing Latinos advances a shared future.

## **“How Assessment Can Promote Equity For English Learners: Policy Considerations”**

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The college and career readiness standards and their aligned assessment system have raised important questions for students on their way to learning the English language. Current projections claim the number of U.S. school-age children from immigrant families will account for all the growth in the student population, booming from 12.3 million in 2005 to 17.9 million by 2020.<sup>i</sup> The number of linguistically and culturally diverse students continues to increase, with classified English Learners (ELs) now accounting for one in every ten students (nearly three of every four classrooms have an EL). In most states, they are concentrated within early childhood (PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade) and are Spanish speaking.<sup>ii</sup> This is the case in Illinois, where 65 percent are within the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade span and 81 percent are Spanish speaking.<sup>iii</sup>

The Latino Policy Forum, among its many initiatives, strives to improve the educational outcomes of ELs. While the Forum concentrates its efforts in Illinois, whose student demographics reflect national trends, the implications for quality assessments for ELs resonates nationally. One of its critical educational goals is to promote an assessment and accountability system that is fair, valid, and reliable in gauging the progress of students in English and the home language. The High Quality Assessment Project generously funded this policy paper to explore key questions:

- *Given the vast growth of children entering school who are classified as English Learners, what are the opportunities and challenges the college and career readiness standards and assessments pose for them?*
- *How can the recently legislated Seal of Biliteracy awarded to high school seniors for being college ready in English and a second language be more widely promoted within the present assessment system?*

The paper begins with an overview of the revised standards and assessment system. It then explores the particular challenges for students who are being instructed and learning content in their home language along with building English language proficiency. The paper concludes with a consideration for how new state flexibility allowed under Every Student Succeeds Act 2015 provides opportunities for states to fairly assess ELs and to value bilingualism. This section includes recommendations for assessments and data collection for multilingual learners.

### **Section 1—College and Career Readiness Standards and Assessments: Background**

The college and career readiness standards are educational standards for English language arts/literacy and mathematics in grades K-12. (In most states, including Illinois, the Next Generation Science Standards have been adopted and are at various stages of implementation). The standards are benchmarks for learning content and stipulate what students should accomplish at each grade level. Education standards are distinct from curriculum. In states where they have been adopted, local communities and educators select or develop their own curriculum. In other words, localities still determine their own strategies for daily teaching.

The Common Core State Standards, in particular, were developed through a convening of education chiefs and governors in 48 states. Currently, 42 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the standards and are at various stages of implementation.

Consortia were created to develop new assessments aligned to the standards, namely the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). (Illinois, where the Forum is based, is part of the PARCC consortium.)

The Forum became a critical agent informing immigrant parents about the new Illinois standards and assessment system. It conducted workshops with more than 1,500 immigrant parents during SY14-15 (and another 1,600 during SY15-16). Presentations were largely conducted in Spanish.<sup>1</sup>

The Forum's interactive workshop provided an overview of the new standards and why states like Illinois decided to adopt them. Motivation included efforts to create a common set so all students could be held to the same high educational standards. The hope is that this would help them have access to high-quality education content, avoid the high-cost of remedial coursework later in college, provide a way to compare student achievement across states, and develop better assessments to measure how they are progressing. (For more information: <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/frequently-asked-questions/>.)

The workshop then walked parents through changes in the assessment system. Various vignettes were provided to demonstrate how children from diverse backgrounds and capabilities might experience the standards and assessments. The workshop concluded with breakout discussions for parents to discuss how they might support their child in meeting the standards.

The review of the new sample test questions aligned to the standards had the greatest impact on parents. As discussed in a subsequent section, they saw for themselves three significant changes: heightened language and literacy demands; deeper reasoning and problem-solving tasks; and new computer literacy demands.

## **Section 2—Case Study: A Closer Look at Standards and Assessments for ELs in Illinois**

*Manuel is a four year old English Learner entering early childhood education programming. His parents indicate Spanish as the home language at registration. Manuel is scheduled for a screening of his English proficiency to determine if he qualifies for bilingual education. In Illinois, attendance centers with 20 or more speakers of the same language must offer support in the home language along with developing English language proficiency beginning in early*

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<sup>1</sup> Funded by the National Council of La Raza and with additional support from the High Quality Assessment Project, the Forum reached a vast array of immigrant parents throughout metro Chicago. These trainings were provided through a partnership with the Chicago Public Schools' Office of Language and Cultural Education that oversees bilingual, dual language, and English as a Second Language programming throughout the city. The Forum also worked with a state-wide parent mentor program coordinated by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association.

*childhood. Manuel does qualify for these services and is classified at level A, i.e. considered a non-English speaker.*

*All the instruction Manuel receives in early childhood through the primary grades is delivered in his home language with English as a second language supports. This method of instruction aligns with research and best practice, so Manuel can develop subject matter knowledge as he develops his English. This approach is found to facilitate stronger academic outcomes in the long term.<sup>iv</sup> Manuel progresses through the primary grades and is assessed annually for his English language development in four domains: listening, speaking, reading and writing. His progress is reported to his school and to his parents. Beginning in third grade he continues to take the language proficiency exams along with the state content assessments that are required of all students in grades 3-12 for accountability purposes. Because of federal law, ELs like Manuel are the only student group that are assessed twice—for both English development and subject matter learning.*

*At third grade, Manuel experiences his first state assessment—the PARCC. The mathematics assessment is available in Spanish, which aligns to his instruction and therefore truly measures what he knows about math. The literacy exam, however, is only available in English, the language in which he cannot fully demonstrate his ability to read and comprehend texts. When the assessment results are sent to Manuel's parents they wonder why his score in mathematics is significantly better than his literacy score. His parents see his ability to read at home in Spanish and wonder how his skills could be better measured. Manuel's story highlights the challenges of appropriately assessing his content knowledge.*

### **Section 3—Challenges the Standards and Assessments Pose for ELs**

For decades, the educational assessment and accountability system has failed to incorporate the learning trajectory of ELs and how it differs from monolingual students. While English language development is assessed separately from subject matter exams, in reality both language and content learning are intertwined. Until a student is fully proficient in English, content assessments in the home language will better capture performance. Even though home language assessments have been allowed under federal law on accountability, states have lagged in providing fair and valid state exams for their ELs. For example, the current system in Illinois for assessing English language arts/literacy is conducted in the language in which ELs are not proficient. High stake decisions are then based on test data that does not assess what was intended. Parents of ELs are often well aware of this predicament and its negative effect on school ratings.

Illinois, like most states, has an established English language standards and assessment system. As part of the World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortia this means that entry and exit criteria for EL status is well defined and progress toward transition out of services is annually measured. The current accountability system has been focused on the speed with which children transition from services and EL status at the expense of long term achievement outcomes.<sup>v</sup> Best practice would monitor the achievement of former ELs long after they have been reclassified. Following these students long term would provide important data on benchmarks for college and career readiness such as freshman on track, participation in advanced

and dual credit courses, and high school completion. At the same time, a growing number of parents are becoming aware of the benefits of dual language education, where students are taught in both the home language and English, throughout their elementary years.

Feedback from the Forum's work with families indicates that-parents like the idea of raising expectations for what their children ought to know. Heightened standards can help ensure that they are college and career ready. For these parents, the potential cost of remediation later in college is a clear threat. While, in general, they are not against intensified expectations for their child, the standards do evoke concerns.

Some of the concerns that were expressed at parent workshops resonate with many of those discussed in popular media:

- The standards are being implemented at great speed and it is not clear how much time, support, and resources will be available to teachers.
- Schools with fewer resources could face greater challenges in supporting teachers, informing parents, and providing the new technological resources necessary to take the exam.
- Children with special needs may not be appropriately supported.
- Funding to support the standards implementation has not increased.
- The amount of time students spend testing is an especially daunting reality for children who do not yet fully understand the language of the exam. Moreover, ELs are not just tested for content knowledge. Parents worry about a long and difficult content assessment on top of already required English language proficiency assessments.
- Parents who were considering opting out of exams did not want their children to be overwhelmed by the process. In their opinion, when students perceive that they are failing at an activity, this can negatively affect their motivation for school.

Of utmost concern to many immigrant parents—and also the Forum's conclusion—is that the education of ELs has not been a sufficient priority in the creation of the new standards and assessments. Many ELs are receiving content instruction in their home language and yet are often being assessed only in English.<sup>vi</sup>

Questions remain about PARCC modifications for ELs and the validity and reliability of the assessments if they are normed for native English speakers. The English Language Arts/Literacy assessment is *only* available in English.<sup>2</sup> ELs, who are likely to not fully comprehend the academic language of the test, may be unable to demonstrate what they have learned. As literacy is a critical foundation for learning in other subject areas, this English-only summative assessment tends to influence classroom instruction to change to all-English, despite what best practice research makes clear about building the home language along with English language development.<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On a more positive note, the math assessment was trans-adapted into Spanish, although this version was not field tested. In contrast to what could be an awkward literal word by word translation, trans-adaptation means the translation process is adjusted to meet the cultural and linguistic requirements of the Spanish language.

Longitudinal research contends that support of a child's home language development over time not only builds English proficiency, but also provides enduring positive effects on their academic achievement.<sup>viii</sup> Those who receive supports in their home language are likely to demonstrate long-term cognitive flexibility, exhibit higher high school graduation rates, and show a greater likelihood of enrolling in a post-secondary institution.<sup>ix</sup> Dual language immersion programs more specifically, where both the home language and English are nurtured over the long-term, are gaining significant popularity across the country due to their strong academic outcomes and the marketable benefit of being bilingual and biliterate in a diversifying global economy.<sup>x</sup>

The college and career readiness standards and assessment system which drives instructional planning, fails to make pathways to bilingualism and biliteracy a part of its definition. While this critique might seem radical, nurturing multilingualism resonates with most global education standards—all European countries, Canada, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Thailand and China—where students are routinely required to demonstrate basic proficiency in two languages in order to graduate high school.<sup>xi</sup> It is currently estimated that half of the world's population speaks at least two or more languages.<sup>xii</sup> Achieving high levels of bilingualism and biliteracy is the new norm.

Efforts to cultivate bilingualism are also growing in the U.S. An increasing number of states, at this point more than twenty states, promote the Seal of Biliteracy for their graduating seniors. The Seal recognizes high school seniors who graduate with college ready skills in English and another language. The bestowed honor benefits both native English speakers who learn another language and ELs who maintain their home language while acquiring English.<sup>xiii</sup>

Despite the academic and labor market benefits for students who participate in programs that build the home language, many have been unfairly held accountable to English-only testing requirements that work against their language development and academic goals. When accountability systems are solely reliant on measures in English, they place primacy on quick acquisition rather than on a long-standing commitment to high levels of academic English and achievement best reached through native language supports. As expert, Patricia Gandara (2015) contends:

“NCLB’s heavy emphasis on accountability through testing (in English) . . . importantly called attention to the needs of ELs, it also stigmatized them and their schools. Unable to perform adequately on tests given in a language they do not understand, ELs have been blamed for putting their schools at risk for sanctions” (p.14).

The greatest risk for ELs and immigrant students is maintaining the *status quo* assessment system.

If students do not yet have enough English to understand the test, they may be unable to demonstrate their content knowledge. On the other hand, as English Learner assessment expert Jamal Abedi (2009) claims, “If students are proficient in their native academic language and have been instructed in their native language, then native language assessments would be productive.” Of critical importance: the provision of native language content assessments would align the language of instruction with the language of the assessment.<sup>xiv</sup>

Ultimately, to strive for high quality assessments without adequate consideration for linguistic diversity will result in a system that is not valid or reliable for the fastest growing subset of the student population. The nation can do better. With enough public will, the advent of the Every Student Succeeds Act 2015 (ESSA) could provide the necessary window of opportunity to accurately assess the knowledge and skills of children from diverse language and cultural backgrounds.

## **Section 4—The Every Student Succeeds Act: Promoting Bilingualism and Biliteracy**

ESSA is a tremendous federal overhaul to the long-standing No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The new law represents a great devolution of autonomy back to the states. For the education of ELs, the law is significant as it shifts accountability for ELs' development in English language proficiency into Title I accountability. This means English language proficiency will be reported at the school and district level. The law also encourages states to "make every effort to provide students with tests in languages a significant number of students speak."<sup>xv</sup> Illinois has a Spanish speaking population which comprises more than 80% of the ELs enrolled Pre-K-12,<sup>xvi</sup> thus exceeding the 30% threshold mentioned in the ESSA statute. The current PARCC assessment offers a trans-adapted version of the mathematics assessment in Spanish, however the literacy and language arts assessments are only in English.

To ensure validity and reliability of content assessments for ELs, a continuum of measures inclusive of English and home language options must be developed for the ELs in Illinois. This system will promote the investment in home language as students acquire high levels of academic English. Establishing longitudinal data is best to capture the achievement gains of this population.<sup>xvii</sup>

The Latino Policy Forum provides the following recommendations for creating a standards and assessment system that is both aligned to college and career readiness standards and attends to the needs of ELs (an adaptation of recommendations provided by EL standards and assessment expert Dr. Margo Gottlieb 2016, *used with permission*). These recommendations are specifically for the Illinois State Board of Education and involves the Divisions of Assessment and Accountability, Data Quality, Innovation and Improvement, and English Language Learners:

- 1. For achievement in the content areas: Adopt the Common Core State Standards in español or revise the Spanish Language Arts Standards.**

*Rationale:* While there is a tremendous diversity of languages spoken throughout the U.S., the majority of ELs (more than 80 percent) are Spanish speaking.<sup>xviii</sup> The provision of a Spanish language standards and assessment system is essential for aligning instructional goals with assessment in contexts where Spanish is the medium of instruction.

- 2. For language proficiency: Adopt WIDA's Spanish Language Development Standards and Early-Spanish Language Development Standards.**

*Rationale:* The trajectory of academic progress should begin in early childhood. As such, it is vital to consider native language screening and assessment in early childhood settings. Teachers

will not capture a full understanding of a student's knowledge and skills if they only assess children in the language in which they are least proficient. In addition, there should be a thoughtful continuum of native language and English skills that are assessed and supported as students transition into K-2. In addition, as Gottlieb (2016) contends, the construct of biliteracy is to be grounded in complementary sets of standards:

- Early Learning Standards and Early Spanish Language Development Standards
- CCSS Learning Standards (including Science) and Spanish Language Arts Standards
- English Language Development Standards and Spanish Language Development Standards

**3. Ensure that assessment is aligned with standards and curriculum.**

*Rationale:* Alignment ensures a cohesive learning and assessment system in the home language and English language.

**4. Promote the collaboration of many states to secure funding to design, develop, and implement a statewide literacy assessment in Spanish for grades 3-8 to be used in accountability systems.**

*Rationale:* A growing number of states, at this point more than twenty states, promote the Seal of Biliteracy for their graduating seniors.<sup>xix</sup> Other states such as California are adopting Common Core en Espanol and contracting with test developers to design an aligned high quality assessment system, inclusive of literacy in the Spanish language. These states, and local districts invested in dual language programs, are likely to be invested in gauging the progress of their students on pathways towards bilingualism and biliteracy.

**5. Allow for local education agencies to have flexibility to choose the Spanish language literacy assessment if it with student needs and program goals.**

*Rationale:* Districts must have access to home language assessments which match their language instruction models and goals. This option would align to school code regarding native language instruction requisites. The flexibility, ultimately, would allow districts to choose assessments that best meet the needs of their local student population.

**6. Establish a longitudinal data system to follow the progress of active ELs and former ELs long-term, from early childhood to post-secondary. Current and former ELs are to be analyzed separately so as to not mask the achievement of current ELs.**

*Rationale:* Title I within ESSA stipulates that formerly reclassified ELs are to be included in the English Learner subgroup for reporting and accountability purposes for a period of up to four years after being reclassified as proficient in English. A longitudinal data system would facilitate the monitoring of former English Learner progress from the moment they leave services until graduation. Longitudinal data would serve as a vital indicator of a school district's effectiveness in minimizing achievement gaps for ELs—achievement gains that are likely to occur after the four-year tracking stipulation. This approach is supported by research that states that it takes ELs between 5 to 7 years to be on par with their English speaking colleagues.<sup>xx</sup>

**Conclusion:**

Across the country many states have adopted academic standards and assessments in English Language Arts, mathematics, and science. Questions remain regarding their implications for ELs on their way to learning English. By making bilingualism and biliteracy a central priority within ESSA for these deserving students, a more equitable, valid, and reliable assessment system can be created for the future. By doing this, all students in early childhood through grade 12, especially ELs, will have access to quality educational opportunities. Following these recommendations would reassure immigrant parents that schools are not only fair for their children, but also interested in preserving their linguistic and cultural assets into the future. Even more, multilingualism will be upheld as an asset for *all* students as part of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century educational goal, an effort to ensure U.S. competitiveness into the future.

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