

English Learners and the “Every Student Succeeds Act” Highlights of the Illinois Plan

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is a pivotal time in this nation’s history to support the quality education of students on their way to learning English. With the replacement of No Child Left Behind, states across the country have unprecedented flexibility in devising accountability systems and it is critical that language and cultural diversity are championed as assets within such systems. Just as under NCLB, English Learners remain the only subgroup tested twice: (1) progress in achieving English language proficiency and (2) performance on content assessments. For decades, the educational assessment and accountability system has failed to incorporate the learning trajectory of English Learners and how it differs from monolingual students.

Per Illinois census data, close to one-in-four public school children speak a language other than English in their homes. The number who identify as English Learners—close to one-in-10 students—has grown an astonishing 83 percent over the last 15 years and these students now reside in 85 of Illinois’ 102 counties. The State Seal of Biliteracy, enacted in more than 20 states including Illinois, offers yet another legislated opportunity to meet the cultural and linguistic educational needs of today’s children.

By making bilingualism and biliteracy a central priority within ESSA, a more equitable, valid, and reliable assessment system must be created for the future. By doing this, all students in early childhood through grade 12, especially English Learners, will have access to quality educational opportunities. Even more, multilingualism will be upheld as an asset for all students as part of a 21st Century educational goal, an effort to ensure U.S. competitiveness into the future.

The Illinois ESSA Plan and English Learners:

- ✓ **Reduces the number of students necessary to form a subgroup from 30 to 20 students in a school, K-12.**

The reduction in number to constitute a subgroup implies that now 53% of schools will have an English Learner subgroup and be held accountable for their academic progress, compared to previously 44% under NCLB.

- ✓ **Sets a long-term goal for all English Learners reaching English proficiency within 5 years, beginning with enrollment in first grade.**

A large change within ESSA is the inclusion of English Learner progress in achieving English language proficiency within Title I accountability. This means progress in achieving English language proficiency will be reported at the school and district level. English language proficiency will be reported as an indicator worth 5% of a district’s total score.

- ✓ **Identifies a growth to proficiency model which captures the number of English Learners on track to reach full English Proficiency within the 5-year timeline.**

Analysis of English language proficiency data from multiple states suggests that growth toward English proficiency is non-linear. As such, the Growth to Proficiency model includes three important variables: grade level of the student within K-12, starting level of English proficiency, and the time it will take to reach the scale score necessary for exit (this is a 4.8 overall composite on the ACCESS assessment).

- ✓ **Requires students who are in their first year within the United States to take state content assessments to serve as baseline data towards growth in subsequent years. The data from the first year will not be factored in to the school's accountability**
Practitioners feel strongly that the assessment should be discontinued when students demonstrate signs of stress. The Forum encourages newly arrived English Learners at grade 11 to attempt SAT, and be offered the opportunity to retake the exam in grade 12.
- ✓ **Establishes a longitudinal data system to follow the progress of active English Learners and former English Learners long-term, from K-12.**
Title I within ESSA stipulates that formerly reclassified English Learners 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. Data suggests achievement gains are likely to occur after the four-year tracking stipulation. This approach is supported by research that states that it takes ELs between five to seven years to be on par with their English speaking colleagues.ⁱ
- ✓ **Greater weight placed on growth versus proficiency within content exams.**
Measuring growth on content assessments is a better indicator of school effectiveness where the English Learner population is concerned.
- ✓ **If funding is made available, the Illinois state plan allows for the use of native language content exams in Spanish for language arts and science as part of a suite of state of approved assessments for accountability under ESSA.**
The law encourages states to “make every effort to provide students with tests in languages a significant number of students speak.”ⁱⁱ Illinois has a Spanish speaking population which comprises more than 78 percent of the ELs enrolled Pre-K-12,ⁱⁱⁱ thus exceeding the 30 percent 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.

Implications of ESSA for Schools

For the first time schools will be incentivized to look at longitudinal cohorts of English Learners when designing their programs. Previously, success was defined very narrowly as the percent of children meeting state standards. Under ESSA, schools have the opportunity to take a more holistic approach to ensuring equity. Are former ELs performing commensurate to their English-speaking peers? Are English Learners taking advantage of advanced curriculum and enrichment opportunities commensurate with other students? These questions can help schools bridge the opportunity gap that has perpetually existed across the country.

ⁱ Cummins, Jim (2003) “Bilingual Children’s Mother Tongue: Why Is It Important for Education?” *Rethinking Schools: On-line Urban Educational Journal*. Accessed on June 10, 2013: <http://iteachilear.org/cummins/mother.htm>

ⁱⁱ Gottlieb, M. (2016) “How can assessment and accountability decisions within ESSA Title I support pathways to bilingualism?” Presentation sponsored by the Latino Policy Forum. Chicago, IL

ⁱⁱⁱ Vonderlack-Navarro (2015). “Preparing All Teachers to Educate Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students,” Latino Policy Forum Brief Series. Accessed July 26, 2016:
http://www.latinpolicyforum.org/resources/briefs/document/lpf-briefseries-brief1_FINAL.pdf