



Participation of ELLs with Disabilities in ELP Assessments

English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities are a unique group of students in our schools today. The numbers of these students vary by state, but in some states ELLs represent a significant number of students (up to 31% of the total population of students with Individualized Education Programs—IEPs), with the result being a significant number of ELLs with disabilities (up to 9% of the total student population).¹ It is important that schools address both the disability and language needs of these students.

Too often, students who are ELLs with disabilities may be denied English language development services. Sometimes this is due to identification issues, but it also may be due to non-transparent information about this group of students. Exploring data on the participation of ELLs with disabilities in English language proficiency (ELP) assessments can provide states with important information on the extent to which, and the ways in which, ELLs with disabilities are participating in state ELP assessments.

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) has examined evidence about the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments. Several existing sources of data² provide information that can be used to address questions about the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments.

¹ IDEA Data Center. (2014). 2012 IDEA Part B Child Count and Educational Environments [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://ideadata.org/tools-and-products>.

² Data sources used for this Brief include (a) surveys of states in 2012-13; (b) state participation policies for 2011-12; (c) analyses of publicly reported data on participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments in 2010-11; (d) three years of in-depth data from five states; (e) Delphi study results on recommended assessment practices from special education, ELL, and assessment experts; and (f) data from teacher and administrator focus groups in 2012.

About this Brief

This Brief presents information on what we know about the participation of English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities in state English language proficiency (ELP) assessments. It highlights information collected by NCEO as well as information from other sources. Topics addressed in the Brief include: (a) state policies on participation, (b) use and reporting of data on participation in ELP assessments, (c) experts' recommendations about assessment participation, and (d) the understanding of practitioners about the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments. Conclusions focus on four recommendations for consideration.

This and other NCEO Briefs address the opportunities, resources, and challenges that states and cross-state collaboratives face as they include students with disabilities, ELLs, and ELLs with disabilities in their assessment systems. Topics focused on ELLs with disabilities are intended to support a dialogue grounded in research-based evidence on building inclusive assessment systems that meet the needs of these students. Each Brief on ELLs with disabilities provides a set of questions that it intends to inform through available data and other considerations.

The purpose of this Brief is to use existing evidence to address the following questions:

- To what extent do states' policies address the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments?
- To what extent are states examining data or reporting publicly on the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments?
- To what extent are ELLs with disabilities participating in part or all of state ELP assessments?
- What do experts recommend about the participation of ELLs with disabilities in assessment systems?
- What do practitioners understand about the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments?

To what extent do states' policies address the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments?

Analyses of states' participation policies³ available online for 2011-12 indicated that 49 states addressed participation criteria for ELLs with disabilities in their ELP assessments. Of these states, 36 allowed for selective participation of ELLs with disabilities on the state ELP assessment, meaning that the student could participate in some domains but not others. Most often ELLs who were deaf/hard of hearing or who were blind/visually impaired were considered for selective participation.

States rarely addressed what happened to the students' scores when the students were not able to participate in all domains of the ELP assessment. When states did indicate what happened to scores, it was generally to indicate either that a student's non-

participation in some domains did not count against school participation rates or that, if an alternative means of assessing the student was used, the score was considered invalid. Policies in some states also suggested that ELLs with disabilities could be exempted from all ELL services.

To what extent are states examining data or reporting publicly on the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments?

In 2012, 11 states reported⁴ that they disaggregated ELP assessment results of ELLs with disabilities, a smaller number than disaggregated results of ELLs with disabilities for the general assessment (see Figure 1).

These numbers are similar to, or higher than, the numbers of states disaggregating data for other assessments in which ELLs with disabilities participate. Ten states indicated that they disaggregated the results of ELLs with disabilities for the alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) and five states indicated that they disaggregated the results of ELLs with disabilities for the alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS). An additional five states indicated that they would disaggregate results in response to a request to do so.

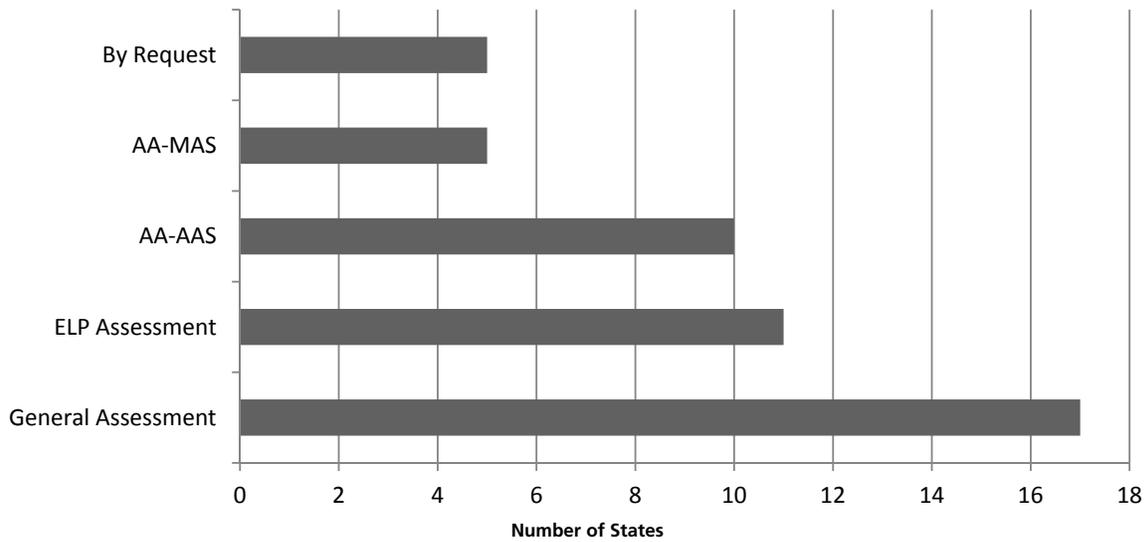
Many fewer states reported data **publicly** on the participation of ELLs with disabilities.⁵ Analyses of state publicly reported data for the year 2010-11 indicated that only six states reported on the participation of ELLs with disabilities for the ELP assessment (see Table 1). Notably, more states (n = 21) publicly reported data on the participation of ELLs with disabilities for the AA-AAS.

³ Christensen, Albus, Liu, Thurlow, & Kincaid (2013).

⁴ Rieke, Lazarus, Thurlow, & Dominguez (2012).

⁵ Albus & Thurlow (2013).

Figure 1. Assessments for Which Scores of ELLs Disaggregated



Note: This figure is an adaptation of Figure 22 in *2012 Survey of States: Successes and Challenges During a Time of Change* (p. 30).

To what extent are ELLs with disabilities participating in part or all of state ELP assessments?

States that do report on the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments do not do so in ways that are comparable. Many states simply present a number of students without the data needed to determine a participation rate.

Data from five states collaborating on an Enhanced Assessment Initiative⁶ indicated that for those ELLs with disabilities who had participated in an ELP assessment, an average of about 2% did not participate in

all components of the assessment (range = 0-3%). In these same states, similar numbers of ELLs without disabilities did not participate in all components of the assessment.

The two components of the ELP assessment that were the most frequent ones in which ELLs with disabilities did not participate across states were reading and writing. In one state, listening was the area that most frequently had lower participation rates, followed by writing. In another state, speaking was the area that most frequently had lower participation rates, followed by writing and reading.

⁶ Improving the Validity of Assessment Results for English Language Learners with Disabilities (IVARED) data analyses shared with states.

Table 1. States Reporting Participation Data for ELLs with Disabilities for AA-AAS and ELP Assessment

AA-AAS			ELP Assessment
Alabama	Maryland	Pennsylvania	Alaska
Alaska	Michigan	South Carolina	California
California	Minnesota	Texas	Michigan
Colorado	New Hampshire	Vermont	Minnesota
Delaware	New Jersey	Washington	New York
Georgia	North Carolina	West Virginia	Texas
Maine	Ohio	Wisconsin	

What do experts recommend about the participation of ELLs with disabilities in assessment systems?

Experts from special education, English language acquisition, and assessment who participated in a consensus-building process to generate principles and guidelines for the assessment of ELLs with disabilities⁷ identified the following principle on the participation of these students in state assessments:

Assessment participation decisions are made on an individual student basis by an informed IEP team.

This principle and the guidelines that support it (see sidebar) indicate the need for ELLs with disabilities to be included in assessments in general. ELP assessments are a critical part of the assessment context for ELLs with disabilities.

What do practitioners understand about the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments?

Focus groups with educators in five states⁸ indicated that the understanding of the need for participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments was sometimes lacking. Often, focus group participants indicated that if an ELL had a disability, the requirements for English language proficiency either allowed for exemption from the assessment because of a disability or should be changed (to allow exemption). For example, educators commented:

“Regarding the [state ELP assessment], I would like for there to be a simpler opt out process for ELLs with disabilities who either have not made progress and/or are not currently in ELD classes.”

“Students can be exempt from taking the English Language Proficiency Test if it is decided

⁷ Thurlow, Liu, Ward, & Christensen (2013).

⁸ Liu, Goldstone, Thurlow, Ward, Hatten, & Christensen (2013).

Principle 3

Special education, English language acquisition, and assessment experts who participated in a consensus-building process to generate principles and guidelines for assessing ELLs with disabilities identified this principle and guidelines related to participation in assessments:

Principle 3: Assessment participation decisions are made on an individual student basis by an informed IEP team.

Guideline 3A. Make participation decisions for individual students rather than for groups of students.

Guideline 3B. Make assessment participation decisions by an informed IEP team representing all instructional experiences of the student, as well as parents and students, when appropriate.

Guideline 3C. Provide the IEP team with training on assessment decision making for ELLs with disabilities.

Guideline 3D. Use written policies that specifically address the assessment of ELLs with disabilities to guide the decision-making process.

that the student’s disability outweighs the language needs. Meaning that the student will never show a true reflection of progress on a language assessment due to the student’s disability.”

Other educators understood that all students took the ELP assessment:

“As it stands right now, our district doesn’t have a process or policy to decide which state assessments our ELs with disabilities take. They take all of the state assessments with the accommodations that are allowed.”

Who made the decision about participation varied. In some states and districts, educators indicated that the ELL staff made the decision. In other states and districts, the decision was made by the IEP team.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This Brief addressed several issues related to the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments that can be informed by existing data. It summarized evidence from states' policies and databases, as well as input from experts and educators. This evidence contributes to identifying next steps for developing answers.

It is clear from the evidence that states have taken a variety of approaches to addressing the participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments. These approaches have varied from outright exclusion (exemption) to participation in some ELP components but not others, to full participation regardless of the potential challenges of the speaking and listening components for some students.

It is less clear what is done by states as a result of the partial exclusion of ELLs with disabilities from assessments due to disability-related limitations on full participation. For example, some states seem to include the scores from alternate measures, while others do not because they are considered to produce invalid results. How results are handled for Title III accountability and for determinations about students' exit from ELL services is even less clear.

Based on the available evidence, NCEO makes the following recommendations:

- States should clarify their current selective participation policies for the state's ELP assessment, with an indication of the specific characteristics of those students who are "exempted" from an assessment component.
- States should consider developing either an alternative method of assessing a component (e.g., listening) or a replacement component (e.g., responding

to closed captioning)⁹ for those students whose disability precludes their ability to demonstrate the skills in a specific component.

- States should identify ways to include the scores of students whose disabilities preclude their participation in a component of the ELP assessment in the same way as other students.
- States should determine an appropriate approach for making decisions about exiting ELL services for students who are unable to participate in all domains of an ELP assessment in the same way as other students.

These recommendations should be subjected to further discussion and informed by research.

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