



State Assessment Decision-making Processes for ELLs with Disabilities

Appropriately including English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities in state accountability assessments can be challenging for many state departments of education. Making informed and appropriate assessment decisions has the potential to improve the validity of state assessment results for this population of students.¹

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) has compiled information and evidence about recommended practices for assessment decision making that meets the specific needs of ELLs with disabilities. Several sources of data² provide information that can be used to strengthen decision-making processes at the state, district, and school levels. In addition, information is included about supports that educators have requested to make the best possible decisions for these students.

The purpose of this Brief is to describe existing evidence that addresses the following questions related to assessment decision making:

- Are there any required assessment decision-making processes for ELLs with disabilities?
- What do experts recommend about assessment decision making for ELLs with disabilities?
- What resources should be available to guide assessment decision making?

¹ Albus & Thurlow (2007); Altman, Lazarus, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Cuthbert, & Cormier (2008).

² Data sources for this Brief include: (a) Delphi study results on recommended assessment practices from special education, ELL, and assessment experts; (b) data from teacher and administrator focus groups conducted in 2012; and (c) surveys of states in 2006-07.

About this Brief

This Brief presents information on what we know about assessment decision-making processes for English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities. It highlights information that has been collected by NCEO as well as information from other sources. Topics addressed in the Brief include: (a) required assessment decision-making processes, (b) experts' recommendations about assessment decision making for ELLs with disabilities, (c) resources available to guide assessment decision making, (d) standards-based IEPs, and (e) recommended participants on the decision-making team. Conclusions focus on the six key areas in which policymakers should provide guidance for educators.

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.

- How can the creation of standards-based IEPs improve decision making?
- Who should be included in the decision-making team?

Are there any required assessment decision-making processes for ELLs with disabilities?

Federal laws require that any student served in special education have an individualized education program (IEP). The IEP must indicate how the student will participate in assessments and accommodations to be used. In the development of an IEP for an ELL, the IEP team must consider the child's language needs.³

ELLs do not have the same kind of mandate at the federal level, but some individual states and districts do require schools to create an individualized plan for ELLs. These plans, sometimes referred to as Individualized Language Learner Plans (ILLPs), describe how the school will support the student's language development.⁴ If both types of plans are created for an individual student, it is important to make sure they intersect.

What do experts recommend about assessment decision making for ELLs with disabilities?

Assessment decision making encompasses both decisions about which tests students will take and what accommodations they will use. Special education, English language development (ELD), and assessment experts who participated in a consensus-building process to generate principles and guidelines for assessing ELLs with disabilities identified two principles, with guidelines, on effective assessment decisions (see Sidebar).⁵ The two principles and their guidelines highlight the importance of having a diverse decision-making team that represents all of an individual student's educational experiences, and making sure the team is well-

³ Karger, J. (2013).

⁴ Individual states and school districts may post templates for such plans online. For example, see the following links from the Education Service Center, Region 20 in Texas and the DeKalb County Schools in Georgia: <http://portal.esc20.net/portal/page/portal/esc20public/biles/LPACFramework> <http://www.dekalbk12.org/ellenglishfiles/ELLEnglish.pdf>

⁵ Thurlow, Liu, Ward, & Christensen (2013).

Principles and Guidelines

Special education, English language development, and assessment experts generated two principles that address decision making for ELLs with disabilities:

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 in 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.

Principle 4. Accommodations for both English language proficiency (ELP) and content assessments are assigned by an IEP team knowledgeable about the individual student's needs.

Guideline 4A: Provide accommodations for ELLs with disabilities that support their current levels of English proficiency, native language proficiency, and disability-related characteristics.

Guideline 4B: Collect and examine individual student data to determine appropriate accommodations for ELLs with disabilities taking English language proficiency [ELP] and content assessments.

Guideline 4C: Develop assessment accommodations policies for ELLs with disabilities that account for the needs for language-related and disability-related accommodations.

Guideline 4D: Provide decision makers with training on assessment accommodations for ELLs with disabilities.

informed about the testing options that are available to the student.

What resources should be available to guide assessment decision making?

The Improving the Validity of Assessment Results for English Language Learners with Disabilities (IVARED) project invited educators in five states to participate in focus groups about assessment decision making for ELLs with disabilities.⁶ Focus group participants identified the importance of well-written IEPs and clear state policy documents (e.g., test participation guidelines, lists of allowable accommodations) in making informed assessment decisions for these students.

Still, many focus group participants indicated that they wanted specific policy guidance on testing ELLs with disabilities.

“Honestly we don’t have any policies or procedures in place specifically relating to ELLs with disabilities and testing. Thus far...it has simply been a case-by-case looking at the student, ability level and deciding on testing.”

The case-by-case approach, combined with a lack of clarity about how existing policies should be interpreted for ELLs with disabilities, may contribute to decision-maker confusion. For example, one teacher described a policy on exiting ELLs and ELLs with disabilities from language support programming based on their state test scores and then added:

“This is not common knowledge among teachers. We have not had a handbook in 10 years that clearly articulates policy or what is mandated by law.”

The educators in the focus groups indicated that another important resource on which they relied for assessment decision making was a well-written IEP with specific information on a student’s assessment needs. Focus group participants noted that, for a variety of reasons, IEPs sometimes did not reflect specific, up-to-date information on the student’s actual assessment needs. They also indicated that

some IEPs may be based primarily on assessment policies for special education students in general, and as a result, they may not adequately reflect students’ language learning needs.

How can the creation of standards-based IEPs improve assessment decision making?

Ten years ago a national survey of districts serving ELLs found that instructional programs for ELLs with disabilities were not aligned with state content or performance standards to the same degree as programs for special education students overall.⁷ The results of the IVARED focus groups indicated that this may still be an issue. The creation of standards-based IEPs is an important way to link an individual student’s needs to the standards-based, grade-level curriculum. By specifying the ways in which a student with a disability is expected to make progress in the general curriculum, standards-based IEPs can raise teacher expectations and ensure that the student has the opportunity to learn material that will be found on accountability assessments.⁸

Standards-based IEPs also specify ways that educators will monitor whether a student is making progress in the curriculum.⁹ Furthermore, creation of a standards-based IEP can enhance the collaboration of a multi-disciplinary IEP team by promoting a common way of communicating about a student’s needs and strengthening the assessment decisions that team makes. For these reasons, standards-based IEPs are increasingly referenced as best practice in state department of education trainings and research literature.¹⁰

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education recommends a seven-step process for developing standards-based IEPs (see Footnote 9). For ELLs with disabilities, that list has been modified to incorporate attention to a student’s second language development needs:¹¹

⁷ Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Pendzick, & Stephenson, (2003).

⁸ Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone (2001).

⁹ Holbrook (2007).

¹⁰ Rudebusch (2012).

¹¹ Liu & Barrera (2013); Ortiz & Wilkinson (1989).

⁶ Liu, Goldstone, Thurlow, Ward, Hatten, & Christensen (2013).

1. Examine grade-level content standards and English language development standards to get an understanding of what students should know and be able to do.
2. Use classroom and individual student data to determine a student's performance on grade-level standards.
3. Determine the student's current performance level in content and academic English proficiency.
4. Create annual measurable goals aligned with content and English language proficiency standards.
5. Assess, monitor, and report progress using a variety of types of information collected by all of the student's teachers and including state assessment scores.
6. Identify special instructional accommodations and modifications needed to support the student in meaningful participation in the grade-level general education curriculum.
7. Determine the most appropriate assessment options for content and English proficiency assessments. Consider the available options for participating in tests as well as the available accommodations on those tests.

Examples of standards-based IEPs for fluent-English speaking students with disabilities can be found on state department of education websites. For ELLs with disabilities, it is important to address English proficiency when determining appropriate accommodations and planning goals for both content areas and English language development.

Who should be included in the assessment decision-making team?

IVARED focus groups showed that in some schools and districts, the ELD and special education departments have separate assessment decision-making processes for English proficiency and content assessments. However, most assessment decisions for ELLs with disabilities appear to be made as part of a

student's IEP process (see Footnote 6). The IEP team, therefore, may become the assessment decision-making team. Federal law requires that an IEP team include a number of professional roles, but ESL or bilingual education teachers are not specifically listed.¹²

It is extremely difficult to create an IEP that addresses all of the needs of ELLs with disabilities if the people who can best address their language learning processes are not in attendance.¹³ During IVARED focus groups (see Footnote 6), one participant came to the realization that his or her school had not been addressing students' language needs on the IEP because ESL teachers had not been included in writing it:

"If a student is required to take the [state English proficiency assessment], we often will neglect to put accommodations in the IEP for this, because the representative from the ELL department is usually not part of that student's IEP team. Now that I am writing this, I feel that this is the wrong way of going about doing what is best for providing for my students, who are also ELL!"

A finding of the focus groups was that on the most effective teams, language development teachers were either invited to attend IEP meetings or they provided written or oral input that contributed to the discussion. Other individuals who were important to include on an IEP team for an ELL with a disability were native language interpreters to support communication with parents.¹⁴

Educators in the focus groups often discussed the topic of unequal participation in IEP teams, particularly when making assessment decisions, because some members knew less about the students' needs than others. Focus group participants also stressed that it is equally important to provide parents or guardians with information about state assessments and the available assessment options so they feel empowered to make informed choices for their child. To effectively include parents on the IEP team, teachers must be trained in working with

¹² Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004).

¹³ Liu & Barrera (2013); Mueller, Singer, & Carranza (2006); Ortiz & Wilkinson (1989).

¹⁴ Liu & Barrera (2013).

linguistically and culturally diverse parents and must understand how the cultural background of the parents or guardians relates to their academic goals for the child.¹⁵ Including parents in decision making may also mean explaining about the IEP process as well as about aspects of instruction and assessment relevant to the decision-making process.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is still a great deal of confusion in the field about interpreting existing policies for ELLs with disabilities. It is challenging to create an effective assessment decision-making team that represents educators who know all the needs of an ELL with a disability. Educators report that they are using the policies and materials available, but those policies may not be specific to ELLs with disabilities.

NCEO recommends that policymakers provide educators with guidance and support in six key areas:

1. Unifying separate decision-making teams in ELD and special education so that they share information about content and English language proficiency testing with each other.
2. Creating collaborative multi-disciplinary IEP teams that include ELD teachers and parents as equal partners in assessment decision making.
3. Educating parents of ELLs with disabilities about the IEP process generally, and about state assessment decision making in particular.
4. Supporting special educators in writing and updating standards-based IEPs that clearly link content and language instruction to grade-level standards that are assessed.
5. Providing regular professional development to all teachers on topics such as working with ELLs with disabilities and their parents, and choosing appropriate assessment accommodations.

6. Creating written assessment policy documents that specifically address ELLs with disabilities.

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¹⁵ Barrera (2013); Lo (2013).

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