



## Exploring Alternate ELP Assessments for ELLs with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

### Introduction

English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities are a diverse group of students. Most of them have learning disabilities; a very small number have significant cognitive disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Those ELLs who have significant cognitive disabilities are most appropriately assessed on their content knowledge and skills through an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS).

Despite the acknowledgment that ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities should participate in alternate assessments, too often insufficient thought has been given to an alternate assessment of English language proficiency (ELP) for these students. This may be because of an assumption that it is too difficult to identify ways to assess their English skills, given the severity of their disabilities.

Considerations about participation in alternate ELP assessments for some ELLs with disabilities may be complicated by a perceived lack of receptive or expressive communication skills. Ignoring the critical need for communication systems for these students likely will relegate them to lack of access to either functional or academic skills that they will need as they move through school and face post-school options.

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) has examined evidence about the existence of alternate ELP assessments, and the participation of ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities in these assessments. Several existing sources of data<sup>2</sup> provide evidence with

<sup>1</sup> Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Pendzick, & Stephenson (2003). See also, Office of Civil Rights (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Data sources used for this Brief include (a) data from the Learner Characteristics Inventory (LCI) collected by the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC); (b) surveys of states in 2012; (c) state participation policies for 2011-12; (d) publicly reported data on participation of ELLs with disabilities in ELP assessments in 2010-11; (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 ELLs with disabilities in state alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS). It highlights information collected by NCEO that informs what we know about the participation of ELLs with disabilities in alternate ELP assessments. Topics addressed in the Brief include: (a) the size of the population of ELLs with disabilities; (b) what states say about the inclusion of ELLs with disabilities in alternate ELP assessments, and the participation of ELLs with disabilities in alternate ELP assessments; and (c) experts' recommendations about alternate ELP assessments for ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities. 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, English language learners, 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 policy questions that it intends to inform through available data and other considerations.

which to address questions about alternate ELP assessments for ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities.

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

- How many ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities are there in the U.S.?
- To what extent do states say they include ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities in alternate ELP assessments?
- To what extent are ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities participating in ELP assessments?
- What do experts recommend about alternate ELP assessments for ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities?

### How many ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities are there in the U.S.?

There are few sources of data on ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities. Information that is available has come from subsets of states participating in projects focused on ELLs with disabilities.

The National Center and State Collaborative used the Learner Characteristics Inventory (LCI) to

gather information on a number of characteristics of students with significant cognitive disabilities.<sup>3</sup> One characteristic on which data were gathered was whether the student was an ELL (defined in the LCI as a student who primarily speaks a language other than English). Across 17 states, 13% of students who participated in their states' AA-AAS were considered to be ELLs. The percentages ranged from 3% to 36% of a state's population of students with significant cognitive disabilities (see Figure 1).

### To what extent do states say they include ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities in alternate ELP assessments?

NCEO's survey of states<sup>4</sup> found that 70 percent of states indicated that their ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities participated in either some or all of an ELP assessment, with about 32 percent indicating participation in an alternate ELP assessment (see Figure 2). About 20 percent of states indicated that ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities did not participate in any form of ELP assessment.

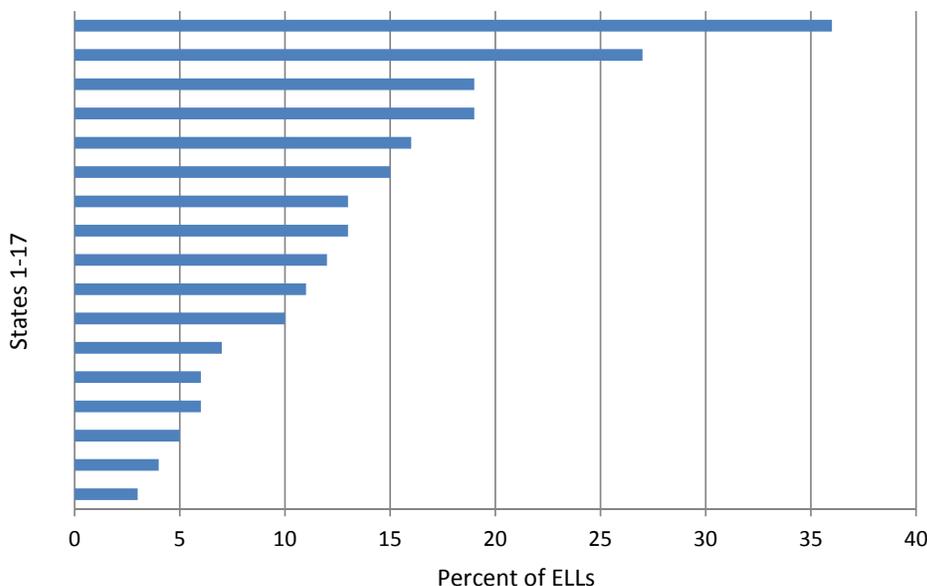
The data reflected in Figure 2 are quite different from data collected just five years earlier,<sup>5</sup> when

<sup>3</sup> Towles-Reeves et al. (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Rieke, Lazarus, Thurlow, & Dominguez (2012).

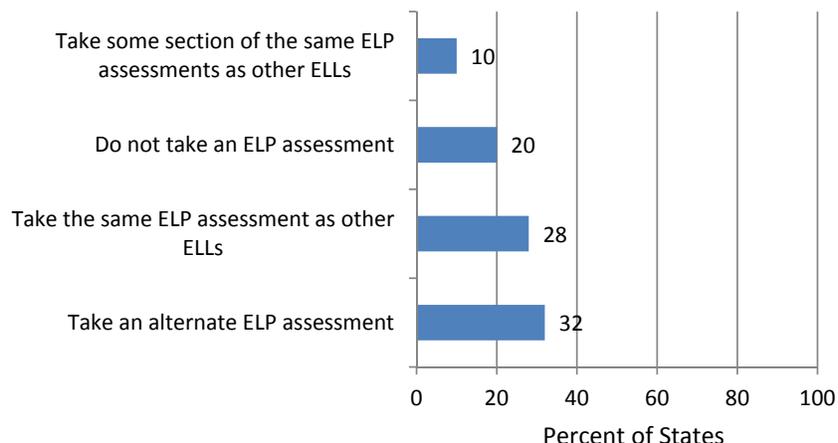
<sup>5</sup> Albus & Thurlow (2007).

**Figure 1. Percentages of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities in States' AA-AAS Who Are ELLs**



Based on data presented by Towles-Reeves et al. (2012).

**Figure 2. Percentages of States Indicating Ways in Which ELLs with Significant Cognitive Disabilities Participated in ELP Assessments**



Based on data from Rieke et al. (2013).

most states (92%) indicated that they had no specific policy about alternate assessment options for the ELP assessment. At that time, with limited information available, only three states (6%) indicated in their state policies that they recommended an alternate ELP assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Two states (4%) required that students with significant cognitive disabilities participate in the regular ELP assessment.

### To what extent are ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities participating in ELP assessments?

Publicly reported data on participation of ELLs with disabilities in alternate ELP assessments were not available in any of the state public reports of assessment data. As a result, we do not know how many ELLs with disabilities currently participate in states' alternate ELP assessments.

### What do experts recommend about alternate ELP assessments for ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities?

Experts from special education, English language acquisition, and assessment who participated in a Delphi process to generate principles and guidelines for the assessment of ELLs with disabilities<sup>6</sup> commented on the need for an

assessment of English proficiency for students with significant cognitive disabilities:

*"Schools must address the language development needs of ELs with significant cognitive disabilities. This is a fundamental civil rights issue....they must have high quality information about these students' language skills and needs."*

The experts did not have an opportunity to address how this was to be accomplished, but did note that consortia either were or should be working on this. Experts did emphasize the importance of a diverse Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to make decisions about the appropriate ways to include students in ELP assessments.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This Brief summarized the available evidence from states' policies and databases, as well as input from experts. It showed that there are students with significant cognitive disabilities who are English language learners. Based on the available evidence, NCEO makes the following recommendations:

- ELP assessment data on ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities should be collected by states, and information on their participation and performance in assessments should be disaggregated.

<sup>6</sup> Thurlow, Liu, Ward, & Christensen (2013).

- States and consortia that do not have an alternate ELP assessment should consider developing one.
- ELL, special education, and general education personnel, along with the child's parents/guardians should collaborate in making informed decisions about the assessment of the English language proficiency of students with significant cognitive disabilities.
- An effort should be made by educators to identify ways to address the assessment and language learning needs of ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities.

## References

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