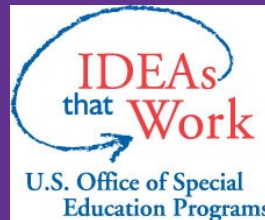# Meeting the Educational Needs of ELs with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

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IDEAs that Work
U.S. Office of Special Education Programs

Topics

- Federal policy (plus)
- Identifying ELs with significant cognitive disabilities
- Providing English language development services
- Inclusion in alternate ELP assessments
- Exit from EL services

Federal Policy (Plus)

Slowly evolved, not through a concern about instruction but rather through an issue of low "inclusion" in assessment

- U.S. Department of Education Q&A
- NCEO Brief 10 (Exploring Alternate ELP assessments for ELLs with Significant Cognitive Disabilities)
- ELPA21 White Paper (White Paper on English Language Learners with Significant Cognitive Disabilities)

Federal Policy (Plus)

Every Student Succeeds Act

- Requires state alternate ELP assessments for ELs who are students with the most significant cognitive disabilities
- Requires that all students receive appropriate instruction based on grade-level academic content standards
- Has separate requirements for alternate assessments of reading/language arts, math, and science

Federal Policy (Plus)

Alternate assessment of reading/language arts, math, and science requirements include:

- 1% cap on participation in the alternate assessment (which does not apply to alternate ELP assessment)
- Participation guidelines that include a definition of "students with the most significant cognitive disabilities"

These requirements raise many issues – not just for assessment but for instruction!

Identifying ELs with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

State definitions for alternate content assessments are fairly similar:

- Student's disability or multiple disabilities significantly affect intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior
- Student requires extensive, direct, and individualized instruction and supports that are not temporary or transient in nature
- Student uses substantially adapted materials and individualized methods of accessing materials

Identifying ELs with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Percent of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities (in States' Alternate Assessments) Who are ELs
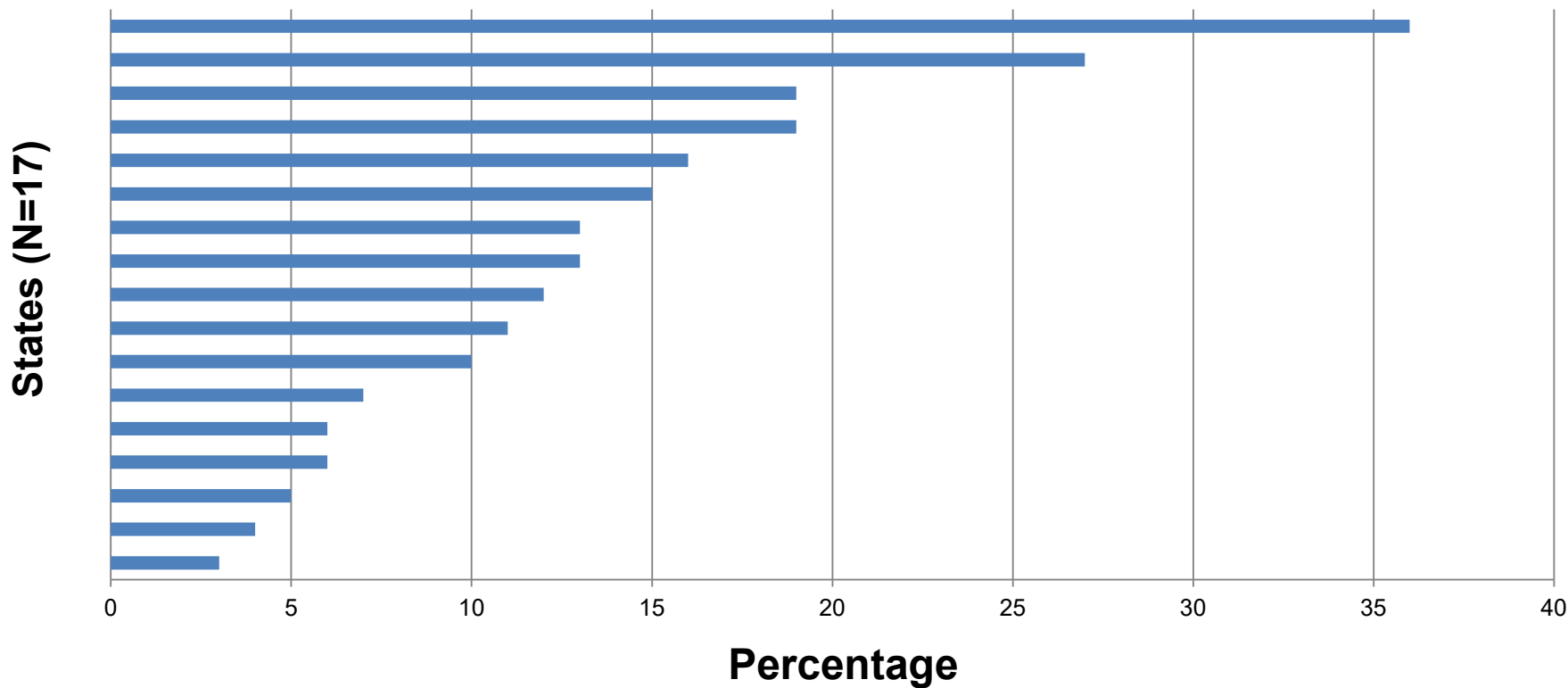
Identifying ELs with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Literature addresses how to identify ELs with disabilities

- It does **not** address ELs with significant cognitive disabilities, instead focusing on how to identify learning disabilities and speech-language disabilities in ELs
- Recent work with CCSSO on appropriate ELP standards for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities raised awareness of the importance of having some guidelines

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Identifying ELs with Significant Cognitive Disabilities - MYTHS

There are many **myths** about ELs with significant cognitive disabilities. They include:

- They belong to specific IDEA disability categories
- They are all non-verbal (or have no communication system)
- They do not read, write, do math, or do science
- They respond to only one language despite being exposed to more than one language.

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Identifying ELs with Significant Cognitive Disabilities - HINTS

Knowledge about students with significant cognitive disabilities suggests:

- Three most likely disability categories are: intellectual disabilities, autism, multiple disabilities
- Most have some communication system (verbal, gestural, or aided by AT), but a small but important percentage do not
- Most of these students, but not all, are identified prior to entering kindergarten

Identifying ELs with Significant Cognitive Disabilities - Assessments

State ELP assessments must define who is eligible, but are they off track?

- WIDA ACCESS and ELPA21 have as a first requirement that the student be an English learner – is a different home-language enough? Can we always tell whether a student with a significant cognitive disability has another language and is learning English?

What are your experiences with these students? How would you identify them?

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Providing English Language Development (ELD) Services

Research has shown that educators are challenged by ELs with disabilities in general

- They want more guidance from leaders, more training on how to instruct and provide accommodations...
- They want to strengthen collaborative, multi-disciplinary teams so that all relevant staff are working together on all aspects of the students' education

They are even more challenged by ELs with significant cognitive disabilities

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Providing ELD Services – What the Literature Says

2016 literature review (covering 2000-2015)
- Found 8 studies on ELs with significant cognitive disabilities
- Summarized what they said about:
  - How students were identified as ELs
  - Linguistic support provided for ELs
  - Intervention strategies studied
  - Findings
- One study from 2002; all others from 2009 and later

Providing ELD Services – What the Literature Says

Identification of ELs in students with significant cognitive disabilities

- Researchers used the fact that the family used a language other than English at home
- Generally, schools did not have these students take an EL screener test
- Little to no data from schools were available on the students' proficiency in their home language or in English

Providing ELD Services – What the Literature Says

Linguistic Support provided to ELs with significant cognitive disabilities

- In most studies, some support in the home language was provided, even though in only two had the students had any instruction in the home language
- Studies did not describe the exact nature and extent of the instruction in the home language

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Providing ELD Services – What the Literature Says

Intervention Strategies provided to ELs with significant cognitive disabilities

- Two basic types:
  - 1) Applied behavior analysis
  - 2) Direct/explicit instruction
- Specific strategies included: constant time delay (CTD) – 4 studies; discrete trial training (DTT) – 1 study; forward chaining of skills (task analysis) – 1 study; model-lead-test – 1 study; shared stories – 4 studies

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Providing ELD Services – What the Literature Says

Study Findings – Big Limitation

- Focus of most studies was on whether use of English or another language (Spanish) produced better results
- Studies did not evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention strategy used
- Researchers were using strategies commonly recommended for students with moderate-severe disabilities who were not ELs; tried to embed home language and culture into those

Providing ELD Services – What the Literature Says

Adjustments to strategies researchers used may be informative:

- Used bilingual teaching staff
- Chose home language or bilingual books that reflected student's culture
- Used the student's home language during instruction
- Chose sight words or vocabulary words from the student's community

Still, students' regular instruction was primarily in English

Providing ELD Services – What the Literature Says

Researchers' conclusions:

- Instruction in home language produced better results for **some** students, but not for others
- Factors that influenced effectiveness:
  - Whether student had a form communication system used at home prior to intervention
  - Student's proficiency in both languages
  - Teacher's (or researcher's) proficiency in the home language
  - School's access to home language resources
  - Student's reading skills in both languages

Providing ELD Services – What the Literature Says

Researchers' recommendations:
- Close collaboration between school and parents so teacher knows how the student typically communicates with the family.
- No single decision about which language to use during instruction will fit the needs of every student – individualization is critical!

Inclusion in ELP Assessments

ELs with disabilities are required to participate in regular ELP assessments and have been since IDEA 1997

- **This was not happening in most states**

ESSA clarified that ELs with disabilities that precluded their participation in an ELP domain (e.g., listening) still had to be given a proficiency level

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Inclusion in ELP Assessments

In 2014 and 2015, the U.S. Department of Education released "significant guidance" that clarified that all ELs with disabilities are to be included in assessments of English language proficiency (ELP) – either regular ELP assessment or an alternate ELP assessment, and held to the **same standards for performance**

This changed in ESSA, which clarified that ELs taking alternate ELP assessments could be held to alternate achievement standards

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Alternate ELP Assessments

Flurry of activities underway -

- Development of ELP standards of reading, writing, speaking, and listening for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities
- Creation of performance level descriptors for each standard
- Formation of participation criteria and guidelines (issue – same or different from criteria for alternate assessment of content)

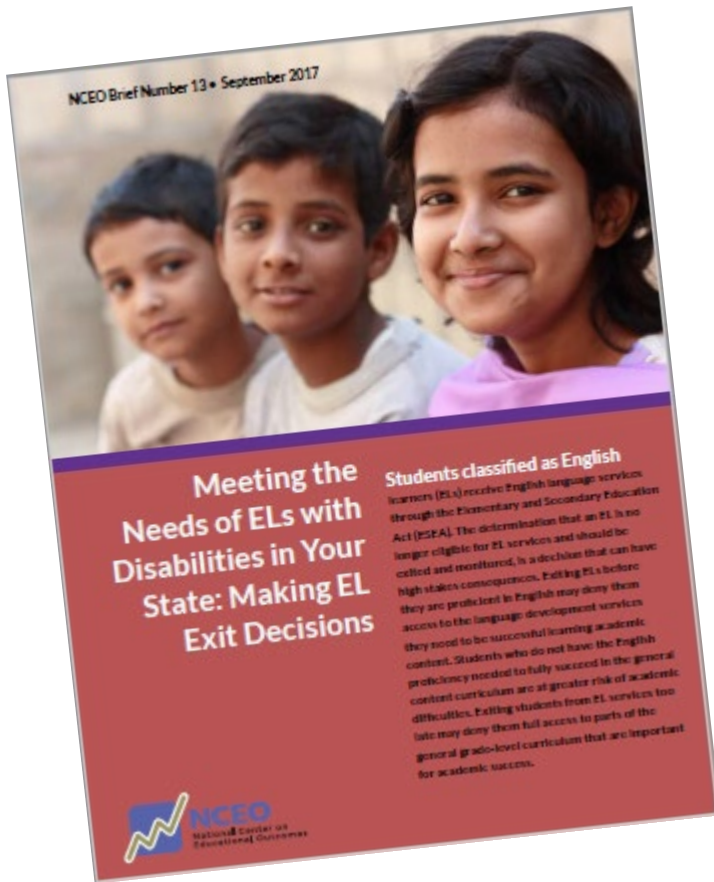NCEO
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Exit from ELs Services

Challenging even for ELs taking regular ELP assessment

- Research shows that ELs who are exited generally perform higher on content assessments than non-ELs
- Exiting too early and exiting too late both can have negative consequences for the EL with disabilities

Exit from ELs Services

NCEO Brief – *Meeting the Needs of ELs with Disabilities in Your State: Making EL Exit Decisions – recommends several approaches*

Exit from ELs Services - Recommendations

➢ Develop policies and procedures that address exit criteria specifically for ELs with disabilities

➢ Incorporate ELP development goals in IEPs of ELs with disabilities

➢ Monitor English development of ELs with disabilities before exit

Exit from ELs Services - Recommendations

➢ Collect multiple sources of information to document progress in learning English (and supplement ELP test scores)

➢ Collaborate in all decision making

➢ Disaggregate data on exited ELs with disabilities

➢ Collect data on all ELs with disabilities

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