

English Language Learners and Standardized Tests

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Introduction

A surge in limited English proficiency (LEP) enrollment became a nationwide phenomenon between 1995 and 2005, as virtually all regions of the country experienced a rapid growth in immigrant population. A new study by the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), “Limited English Proficiency Enrollment and Rapidly Rising Costs”, finds that in that time, the number of children in our nation’s public schools listed as LEP increased by some 1.2 million. However, six states still accounted for 69% of the LEP student population in 2005, with California leading the way and New York following right behind.¹ (LEP students are also known as English Language Learners or ELL students).²

In Buffalo, the increase in ELL students stemmed largely from the active resettlement of refugees from around the world in Buffalo.³ In 2004-2005, Buffalo had 2,539 LEP students who collectively spoke 46 different languages. In 2009-2010, that enrollment number shot up to 3,481 students, who spoke 67 languages.⁴ In Buffalo, as in many locales, the rise in ELL learners has coincided with a dramatic increase in high stakes standardized testing; unfortunately, the tests

and testing policies being employed have often failed to reflect the realities of English language learning.

In addition to the standardized tests required of all students, English Language Learners take tests upon admission and then subsequent tests to measure their progress as ELL learners, . We will describe each type of test briefly in turn.

Tests for Incoming ELL Students

The Language Assessment Battery-Revised (LAB-R) was developed by The New York City Department of Education and adopted by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) to identify those incoming students who may be eligible for bilingual education or ESL services. All incoming students who live in a home where a language other than English is spoken, as confirmed by the Home Language Survey, are tested with the LAB-R upon admission to a public school. A score below the designated cut score for the child determines eligibility for ESL or bilingual services. The LAB-R is administered only once to each incoming student. After placement into either a bilingual or ESL classroom, achievement in the English language is measured annually with the achievement tests described below.⁵

English as a Second Language Achievement Tests

In New York State, the Education Department has developed the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) to measure the English language arts (ELA) proficiency of LEP/ELLs in grades K through 12. Administered each spring, the NYSESLAT is designed to measure the growth in English language ability of LEP/ELLs from year to year. The NYSESLAT identifies the English proficiency level of LEP/ELLs as either Beginning, Intermediate, or Advanced. The NYSESLAT also identifies those LEP/ELLs who have achieved a Proficient level of English and no longer require ESL and/or bilingual services.

Common Core Testing

New York State implemented new Federal standards called the Common Core in 2010, with the understanding that the state could add an additional 15% of New York-specific standards in ELA and Mathematics.⁶ The standards are supposed to “clearly communicate what is expected of students at each grade level” from kindergarten through high school. The Common Core assessments are meant to “allow teachers to be better equipped to know exactly what they need to help students learn and establish individualized benchmarks for them. According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative website, Math and English are currently being tested,



while Social Studies and Science are expected to be tested in 2014-2015.⁷

English language learners are required to take the same assessment tests in the Common Core and NYS assessments as their non-ELL counterparts. These students used to be permitted to wait three years before taking exams; that exemption has recently been rescinded, and now ELL students take the math exams immediately and can delay the English Language Arts exam by at most one year.



Realities of ELL education

The realities of ELL education are more complicated and difficult than the idealized standards and methods that New York State seeks to administer. One of the key problems with ELL education stems from illogical, annual testing of students who are not as prepared to take grade-level math and English assessment tests as their non-ELL

counterparts because their English skills are so poor.⁸ Further, depending on their nation of origin, students' pre-American educations are often more rudimentary compared to other students, so they come to American schools without certain basic understandings that non-ELL students have been taught at a younger age.⁹

An ESL teacher in Buffalo interviewed for this policy brief thinks that the key problem is that ELL students are immediately required to take assessment tests upon enrollment in the school, but lack the basic educational foundations to come close to exam proficiency.¹⁰ For example, forty-five percent of the students at School 45 in Buffalo are ELL. Therefore, since enough of these students (and some non-ELL students) fail the exams, School 45 is listed as a "priority" school.

One particular story seems to epitomize the fundamental disconnect between these students' educational level and that of the test. A recent refugee from the Congo was placed in a 3rd grade ESL class. She was illiterate when she entered the class in September, but is a very bright child and was able to read at a 2nd grade level by April. This is a fantastic feat in such a short time period and she and her teacher should have been applauded for their efforts. However, she was expected to take the 3rd grade ELA in April, and needless to say, failed the exam.

There are huge school consequences resulting from uniform testing, because so much time has been lost teaching to the test. The ESL teacher interviewed noted that sixth through eighth graders at School 45 recently lost ten to twelve weeks of Social Studies and Science, with the class time being devoted instead to preparation for English language arts and math tests.¹¹

Overemphasis on testing can also lead to a pattern of distrust among teachers, resulting in poor morale and burn out.¹² It has also brought about systematic cheating scandals throughout the nation in recent years.¹³ It is time for Buffalo and New York State to re-think how it uses standardized tests – particularly for English language learners.

¹ <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-report-finds-that-limited-english-proficient-student-enrollment-is-surging-nationwide-58289547.html>, August 17,2012

² In New York State, learners of English as a second language are students classified as “limited English proficient” because they come from a home where a language other than English is spoken and score at below “Proficiency” on the Language Assessment Battery-Revised (LAB-R) or score at the Beginning, Intermediate, or Advanced level of English as measured on the NYSESLAT.

³ http://www.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/language-9_11.pdf, Refugees, Immigrants, and Languages Spoken, September 20, 2010.

⁴ Id.

⁵ <http://p1232.nysed.gov/biling/resource/ESL/01Intro.pdf>, Limited English Proficient English Language Learners

⁶ <http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/CommonCoreLibrary/About/Standards/default.htm>

⁷ <http://corestandards.org/the-standards>

⁸ Personal Communication, Buffalo Public Schools ESL teacher, March 4,2013.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Personal Communication, Buffalo Public Schools ESL teacher, March 4,2013..

¹¹ Personal Communication, Buffalo Public Schools ESL teacher, March 4,2013..

¹² <http://teachinginnyc.blogspot.com/2006/01/day-in-life-of-esl-teacher.html>, January 4, 2006.

¹³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/06/education/06atlanta.html>, June 7, 2011.

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