



Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Meeting on Reauthorization of NCLB

Interventions and Supports to Ensure Success for English Language Learners

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At the HELP committee meeting Senator Kennedy raised the following questions: “What are the two most important issues in NCLB impacting English Language Learners (ELLs)? How might we best address them in the upcoming reauthorization?”

The issues of accountability and teacher quality are key areas needed to continue to be supported by a reauthorized ESEA/NCLB. Ideas for addressing each of these areas are discussed.

Accountability is sometimes perceived as unfair to ELLs, but it is unfair only if students are not taught grade level content and if their progress is not monitored. Therefore, it is critical to maintain an accountability system and to ensure ELLs are accounted for in the reauthorized NCLB/ESEA. In order to ensure equity, it is critical that states be required to ensure ELLs are being taught and expected to reach high standards like all other students.

To improve the current accountability system, states should be required to monitor and track the academic progress of all students, including ELLs. In a reauthorized ESEA, resources should be allotted to districts from Title I and III funds to allow districts to update and improve current data collection systems to track student progress. States should be responsible for collecting, analyzing, reporting the results of assessments, and using these data to make decisions about how to better support districts to ensure ELLs are reaching high academic standards. States also should be responsible for sharing the overall findings with districts so professional development can be designed to address needs identified through the data.

States should also be encouraged to disaggregate ELL content assessment data for middle and high school students who are considered “low literacy” and who have been in school two years or less. Tracking of these students’ progress should continue throughout the student’s career in school and the data used to tailor instruction to student needs.

With regard to assessment of ELLs, states should be encouraged to ensure that state assessments are accessible to ELLs using accommodations, including plain language and translated assessments.

Funds should be made available, possibly through the LEP Partnership, to study the effect of using different types of accommodations. Currently only 7 accommodation types (plain English, English dictionary, English glossary Spanish/English glossaries, dual language tests, Spanish language test, extra time), have been studied; however, states offer in their policies over 75 accommodation types, many of which are not ELL responsive -- i.e., accommodations that support ELLs to access the language of the test (Rivera, Collum Shafer Wilner, & Sia, 2006). The concept of ELL-responsive accommodations is important because, too often, decision makers are either not providing accommodations to ELLs or are selecting accommodations for ELLs using criteria that are intended for students with disabilities -- i.e., for students who have an IEP (Shafer Willner, Rivera, & Acosta, 2007).

Rather than using accommodations categories intended for students with disabilities, state policies should provide for accommodations that address the *linguistic* needs of ELLs. Accommodations for ELLs should be framed in relation to the direct linguistic and indirect linguistic support they provide. Direct linguistic support accommodations involve adjustments to the *language of the test*. Indirect linguistic support accommodations involve adjustments to the *conditions* under which ELLs take an assessment (Rivera et al., 2006, p. 48). As shown in Table 1, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) now uses this form of categorization in their accommodations guidelines.

Table 1. Frequently Provided Accommodations for ELLs for the 2005 NAEP

	Reading NAEP	Mathematics NAEP
Direct Linguistic Support	• [none]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directions read aloud in English or presented by audiotape* • Bilingual dictionary without definitions** • Passages, other stimulus materials, or test questions read aloud in English or presented by audiotape • Bilingual version of test (Spanish/English)
Indirect Linguistic Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group • One-on-one (tested individually) • Extended time • Preferential seating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group • One-on-one (tested individually) • Extended time • Preferential seating

*Standard NAEP practice, not considered an accommodation.

** Not provided by NAEP, but school, district, or state may provide after fulfilling NAEP security requirements.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2006a, 2006b)

States should be required to track students taking tests with specific accommodations. These data should be made available to researchers to study the effects of different accommodations. ED's existing LEP Partnership is commendable and could be used as a vehicle to support this effort.

States should be encouraged to be innovative in assessing ELLs. The reauthorized law should encourage states to design high quality innovations to content assessments with the intent of more fully allowing ELLs access to the content of state assessments.

In addition to refining state assessments so these are appropriate for ELLs, it is time to support states in the development of periodic assessments linked to content standards and that can provide diagnostic information to teachers and students about strengths and weaknesses. Teachers should be encouraged to use the information from these assessments to make

adjustments to instruction. The reauthorized law should build in funding streams to support states in the development of such assessments.

The administration of English Language Arts (ELA) assessments to ELLs, while appropriate, is a source of controversy. Options for allaying the controversy include allowing states to create alternate assessments of ELA for ELLs, linked to grade level content standards, and computer adaptive versions of ELA tests. In the case of the latter, the computer quickly determines the student's overall level of mastery, and tailors the test questions to that level. The law could encourage states to explore such options.

Teacher quality is also of high importance. Ensuring ELLs have content teachers who know not only the subject matter but also how to unpack the language of the content is greatly needed.

A two-pronged approach to teacher quality should be taken: ensure new teachers, particularly content teachers, are prepared to teach ELLs at varying levels of English language proficiency and ensure content teachers already employed have the opportunity to learn how to teach ELLs.

For aspiring teachers, state licensure systems are a lynchpin to improving the quality of the teaching force. If state licensure requirements are rigorous and demand that general education teachers (particularly middle and high school teachers) receive courses that help them to understand how the content as well as the language of the subject must be taught to ELLs, the number of content teachers prepared to teach ELLs will increase.

For veteran teachers, funding should be made available through Titles I and III to provide on-going job-embedded professional development that will help them develop basic language teaching skills so that they can better meet the needs of ELLs while teaching grade level content in math, science and language arts.

In sum, accountability and teacher quality are key areas that should be addressed in a reauthorized ESEA. The accountability requirements currently in the law should be maintained. However, these should be carefully examined and refined as needed to give states stronger supports. With regard to teacher quality, more thought needs to go into how to prepare all teachers to be good teachers of ELLs. In particular, the focus should be to increase the ability of content area teachers to be better prepared to teach ELLs so they like all other students are challenged, stay in school, and succeed academically.

References

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