



Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.
Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
From: Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner
Date: September 16, 2011
Subject: English Language Learners: Educator Preparation and Training Required for Sheltered English Immersion

This month I am updating the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education on our ongoing work to strengthen programs for English language learners (ELLs), including our review of the preparation and training for teachers who teach academic content to ELLs in the Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) program contemplated by state law. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has identified shortcomings in the Massachusetts ELL program, specifically, the lack of clear mandates for the preparation and training of SEI academic content teachers. I am asking the Board to vote this month to adopt a timeline directing me to continue to review the needs and options and then present to the Board, by February 2012, proposed regulations that will define the preparation and training required for teachers of academic content in the SEI program, along with a plan for implementing the new requirements. My goal is that preparation and training requirements benefit ELLs by strengthening their instructional programs.

Sheltered English Immersion (also called Structured English Immersion or “SEI”)

For about 30 years leading up to 2002, Massachusetts students who did not speak English or whose native language was not English and who could not participate in class work in English, generally participated in transitional bilingual education (TBE) programs as provided in G.L. c. 71A. In these programs, students were taught academic content in their native languages until they became proficient in English. This instructional approach changed after Massachusetts voters approved Question 2, a 2002 initiative petition that amended chapter 71A to require that, in the absence of a waiver requested by a parent, or participation in a two-way bilingual program¹, all English Language Learners (ELLs) shall receive nearly all academic classroom instruction in English, with the curriculum and instruction designed for students who are learning the language. This instructional approach is called Sheltered English Immersion (SEI).

¹ A two-way bilingual program is “a bilingual program in which students develop language proficiency in two languages by receiving instruction in English and another language in a classroom that is usually comprised of half native English speakers and half native speakers of the other language.” (Definition used by the federal Office for Civil Rights.)

Components of SEI include English Language Instruction (English as a Second Language, or ESL) and Sheltered Content Instruction. ESL provides explicit, direct instruction that facilitates English language acquisition. ESL is taught by licensed ESL teachers. It focuses on oral language development (academic and social), vocabulary, language structures, culture and literacy. Sheltered Content Instruction is designed to make content more comprehensible and is to be taught either by a dually certified teacher (one who has the appropriate content license, for example in mathematics, plus the ESL license), or by a teacher who has the appropriate content license as well as additional skills and knowledge to teach ELLs effectively. The premise is that a teacher who teaches mathematics or English language arts or other academic content to students who are English language learners should be prepared to deliver the content effectively to those students as well as to students who are proficient in English.

Following enactment of the new G.L. c. 71A via the Question 2 referendum, the Department developed SEI Category Training, (named for the four content areas or “categories” of training), a program through which academic teachers can obtain the skills and qualifications to provide instruction to ELLs. Because research, methodology, and practice in Sheltered English Immersion have been evolving, the training has been voluntary rather than mandated through licensure standards. In addition, by keeping the training voluntary, school districts and the Department may use federal funds under Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act to support the cost; the U.S. Department of Education could rule that these federal funds may not be used for training that is mandated by state law. The Department has used a train-the-trainer model to deliver the training to teachers across the state, and has strongly recommended that all academic content teachers of ELLs participate in the training that is offered. Participation, however, has not reached ideal levels, and less than half of the eligible teachers statewide have gone through some or all of the voluntary SEI Category Training.

Initiatives to Improve ELL Programs

The Department has several initiatives underway designed to benefit ELL students by strengthening their instructional programs. Two key initiatives involve the review of training for teachers who deliver academic content in SEI settings and review of English language proficiency benchmarks and assessments.

Review of SEI Category Training

At my request, Esta Montano, Director of our Office of English Language Acquisition and Academic Achievement (OELAAA), initiated a review of the seven-year-old Category Training program in 2010, shortly after she joined the Department. We have been interested in examining the efficacy of both the training model and the content of the training, recognizing that it should be updated and redesigned to reflect additional research, feedback from the field, and advances in effective practices for teaching ELLs. In 2011, the Department procured the assistance of WestEd, a research, development, and service agency, in conducting a review and needs assessment. WestEd recently completed its study and issued its report. Among other things,

WestEd concluded that although the SEI Category Training offers a good start in terms of awareness of the issues faced by ELLs in content classrooms, it could be improved in depth and breadth. Further, the model used for the training was found to be outdated and not in keeping with recent research in the field.

Upgrading English Proficiency Benchmarks and Assessments

Both federal and state law require the assessment and annual reporting of English language proficiency for all ELL students, benchmarked to English language proficiency standards. In 2003, the Department developed the *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and Outcomes for English Language Learners* (ELPBOs), in consultation with Massachusetts educators. The ELPBOs were released as a supplement to the *English Language Arts Curriculum Framework* and were intended to be used in support of ELL students.

The Department developed the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA) to be aligned with the ELPBOs and assess ELL students' levels of proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English. MEPA was first administered to ELL students in the fall of 2004 and has continued to be administered to all ELLs each year since. In December 2010, the Board adopted new Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics, incorporating the Common Core State Standards. The new frameworks necessitate a revision to our current English proficiency standards and the MEPA assessment to ensure they are properly aligned with these new curriculum expectations. For example, the new ELA curriculum standards expand expectations for students' ability to read and write in other disciplines, i.e., mathematics, science, and history/social science.

Based on staff research and consultation with ELL directors, educators from across the Commonwealth, and a number of other states, I have concluded that Massachusetts ELLs will be best served by our joining the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) consortium, which consists of 27 states. WIDA English language development standards are aligned with the Common Core State Standards and, therefore, are a good fit for the new Massachusetts curriculum frameworks. These standards, which can be used by both ESL and SEI content teachers, address social and academic language development across the four language domains (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in the major content disciplines. WIDA standards are assessed using the ACCESS (Assessing Comprehension and Communication to English State-to-State for English Language Learners) test that monitors students' progress in acquiring the English language. The ACCESS assessment, an appropriate and strong replacement for MEPA, will begin in the 2012-2013 school year.

U.S. Department of Justice Activities and Notice to the Department

The U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division (DOJ) entered into settlement agreements with the school districts of Boston (2010), Somerville (2008), and Worcester (2008) concerning alleged deficiencies identified in each of their ELL programs. Among other things, each

settlement agreement addresses the need to provide adequate training to teachers who provide SEI instruction. Although our Department has been monitoring and providing technical assistance to local school district ELL programs, we were not involved in negotiating these agreements and we are not a party to the agreements between the districts and DOJ.

In connection with its review of those districts, DOJ asked the Department to provide statewide data and information. The Department cooperated with DOJ and had multiple conversations with DOJ representatives over the past several months. In July 2011, DOJ notified the Department that it believes the Department “has failed to take appropriate action to overcome ELL students’ language barriers by not requiring SEI teachers to receive category or other SEI training” and that the current category training “falls short of what the EEOA [the federal Equal Education Opportunities Act, 20 USC §1703(f)] requires.” Using teacher data that the Department has published in various reports, DOJ estimates that as many as 50,000 teachers in Massachusetts may need SEI training. A copy of the DOJ letter, redacted slightly by DOJ, is attached.

Proposed Course of Action

Even before DOJ’s recent contact with our Department, we had already initiated a review of SEI Category Training in order to revise it based on new research, new technologies, and feedback from the field. Strengthening skills and knowledge for teachers of ELLs makes sense in light of the increasing number and percentage of ELLs in Massachusetts schools, our work with school and district turnaround, and our mission to close proficiency gaps. Improving the performance of ELLs was an important focus of the Board’s Proficiency Gap Task Force, and the Board has identified in its annual budget requests the need to support training and professional development for teachers of ELLs. It is indeed the state’s role to define the basic preparation and training that teachers and other educators must have to be licensed. DOJ’s notification and focused involvement are accelerating our movement in this direction and making it imperative.

Any new requirements that we adopt for teachers of academic content in the SEI program must benefit students, be based on sound research, and be feasible to implement. To that end, I am asking the Board to vote this month to adopt a timeline directing me to study this issue further and then present to the Board, by February 2012, proposed regulations that will define the preparation and training required for teachers of academic content to ELLs, along with a plan for implementing the new requirements. Specifically, with the Board’s approval, the Department would:

- seek input from stakeholders and experts to develop a package that both will benefit students and be feasible to implement;
- assess resource needs and consider them in relation to the FY13 budget request this fall;
- proceed with joining the multi-state WIDA consortium and determine how best to integrate it with this teacher initiative;
- return to the Board by February 2012 with proposed amendments to the regulations on educator preparation and licensure and the regulations on license renewal, including

content of training, method of delivery, educators who require training, and timing of implementation;

- with Board approval, send out the proposed regulations for public comment; and
- following the period for public comment and necessary revision, bring the regulations back to the Board in or about June 2012 for a final vote and a review of the plan for implementation.

Conclusion

I recommend that the Board vote on this matter at the September meeting, to launch the next phase of our work on ELL programs. I intend to proceed expeditiously while seeking input from stakeholders and experts. The standards for preparation and training of SEI teachers must be feasible to implement on a large scale and must be grounded in sound research on educational practice. My primary focus is and will continue to be on benefiting ELL students by strengthening their instructional programs.

Attachments:

1. DOJ letter
2. Motion