



LEARNING POINT

How do English learners participate in state assessment?

An English learner (EL) is defined as a student whose home language is other than English. ELs are required to participate in state assessments mandated by federal law. Their participation is covered in both Title I and Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the latest re-authorization (in 2015) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The way ELs are required to participate is important for educators to understand.

Assessment can provide useful information about students' acquisition of English as well as their academic achievement. However, assessing English learners can be challenging for both the students and their general education and language development teachers.

Assessment participation

English learners participate in state assessments in two different ways: English language proficiency assessments and academic achievement assessments.

English language proficiency assessments—These assessments are required by ESSA Title III. ELs enrolled in kindergarten through grade 12 must participate in annual assessments of their English proficiency (reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English):

- while they are eligible for services in English language development, and
- for two additional years after they are determined to be English proficient and can exit the language development program.

The assessments typically assess different levels of English proficiency and are developed such that student growth in acquiring English proficiency can be measured. Each assessment program is required to set scores for students who are eligible to exit the language development program.

ment assessment consortiums: WIDA or ELPA-21.

Academic achievement assessments—ELs must participate in statewide student tests that measure student learning on state-adopted content standards in English language arts, mathematics, and



Separate scores are reported in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English, as well as an overall comprehension score. These assessments help to determine when the EL student may be able to succeed independently in classes taught in English. Nationwide, most states belong to one of two language develop-

ment assessment consortiums: WIDA or ELPA-21.

- ELs may be excluded from the English language arts/reading assessment for the first year in which they were enrolled in a school anywhere in the United States

- ELs do participate in the mathematics assessment in their initial enrollment year (again, anywhere in the U.S.), and their scores count for school accountability purposes.

Universal tools, designated supports, and assessment accommodations

To make it a bit easier for ELs to participate in state assessments, a variety of universal tools, designated supports, and assessment accommodations are usually made available to them. These could include:

Universal tools

- Writing tools
- Calculator
- Mark for review
- Frequent breaks
- English dictionary
- English glossary
- Oral presentation of directions
- Oral presentation of questions in content areas other than Reading

Designated supports

- Text-to-speech
- Translations (Glossary)
- Translations (Stacked)
- Highlighter
- Color overlays
- Color contrast

Assessment accommodations

- Braille
- Large-print tests
- Extended time on timed tests
- Use of a translated version of the assessment in content areas such as mathematics and science. These can be presented in print or orally, in both English and EL native language, or presented in English on screen or in print, with the translated version presented orally
- Use of scribes to verbally present test items
- Use of scribes to record verbal responses to constructed written response items

The universal tools, designated supports, and assessment accommodations available to ELs vary by state, so it is important for teachers to be aware of what sorts of accommodations are permitted in your location.

Reporting the achievement of EL performance

The EL sub-group is one of the accountability reporting categories required by ESSA. Thus, states must report (for each school, district, and the state) the assessment participation and assessment performance of ELs. Schools are held accountable for the performance of ELs on both academic achievement and language proficiency assessments. Thus,

it is important for educators to monitor the achievement of these students in the academic areas in order to assure that these students are learning academics even as they are learning English.

Why assess English learners?

Participation of ELs in assessment is required by federal law primarily to assure that the EL students participate in regular classroom instruction of grade-level content to the fullest extent possible, even while their English proficiency is being developed (with educator support). The goal is to help students learn academic content on par with their peers, without the interference of lower English proficiency.

The manner in which ELs are taught affects how much they learn. If educators believe that English must be acquired before rigorous content can be learned in English, mathematics, science, and social studies, the result may be that ELs languish in English language development programs for six or more years without learning more than basic academic content. Such approaches to acquiring English are likely to lead to academic failure and increased likelihood of dropping out, leaving EL students with a limited means of making a living.

Information provided by English language proficiency and academic assessments assist educators in helping EL students learn English as quickly as possible and succeed in classes taught in English. The faster these students acquire proficiency in English, the sooner they will become independent learners able to succeed in school—a gain for them and for educators who are held accountable for helping them learn.

Conclusion

The purpose of including all English learners in district-wide and statewide assessments is to afford each student the greatest opportunity possible to learn and then to demonstrate their learning in the most accessible manner possible, in order to move them closer and closer to being college- and career-ready. We do not know, in advance, what any student is capable of learning; but if educators maintain the positive presupposition that all students are quite capable of learning, we won't fail in our responsibilities to move student learning forward.

TO LEARN MORE

English Learners and ESSA: What Educators Need to Know

(TESOL, 2016).

This resource kit contains information about essential components of ESSA, including the assessment and accountability provisions in the law.

<https://tinyurl.com/tnm5tgz>

EL Assessment Consortia

WIDA – made up of 40 U.S. states, territories and federal agencies

(including Michigan)

<https://wida.wisc.edu>

ELPA-12 – a member-supported project housed at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) at the University of California, Los Angeles.

www.elpa21.org

Michigan WIDA information

www.michigan.gov/WIDA

Michigan's State Assessment System: What It Is, What It Means, and What It Offers

<http://bit.ly/MIAssessmentFlyer>

The Michigan Assessment Consortium's Assessment Learning Network (ALN) is a professional learning community consisting of members from MI's professional education organizations; the goal of the ALN is to increase the assessment literacy of all of Michigan's professional educators.