

ESEA Reauthorization: Standards and Assessment
Abstract of Testimony for the
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee
Dr. Charlene Rivera
April 28, 2010

It is imperative that the needs of English language learners (ELLs) are addressed in the reauthorization of ESEA. ELLs are not a homogenous group and attention to their different characteristics is essential to meaningfully instructing and assessing them.

Although English language proficiency (ELP) and English language arts (ELA) are related and even list the same skills (listening, reading, and writing), presumptions about students' background and basic competencies in English differ. For ELLs at low levels of ELP it is worth considering substituting the ELP reading and writing standards and assessments as measures of their reading and writing achievement.

A crucial factor for ELLs to meet standards is being able to understand and use the academic language or academic English of different disciplines. While a mastery of academic language is demanding for all students, it can be especially difficult for students who already struggle with other linguistic challenges, such as ELLs and former ELLs. In a reauthorized ESEA, resources should be allotted to states to work toward the development of a broad national framework that captures the many dimensions of academic English.

States should consider the needs of ELLs in the new standards and assessment system. Policies must address how ELLs are defined, and address procedures for including and accommodating them in summative, benchmark, and classroom assessments. There is great need to clearly distinguish the linguistic needs of ELLs from cognitive, processing, or physical needs of students with disabilities. The delineation of policy at the state and consortium levels is important and should guide practice for the new assessment system which must be valid and reliable for all students including ELLs.

At the federal level, ED must improve the review and monitoring of the standards and assessment systems. It is crucial that the review processes explicitly address ELLs and that the reviewers have the appropriate expertise and knowledge.

In conclusion, the design of assessment and accountability systems and their implementation must consider the linguistic diversity and other characteristics of ELLs. To be successful, the system must ensure that the standards and assessment processes address academic language as well as English language proficiency. Teacher preparation and in-service professional development programs must build the capacity of content and ESL teachers to differentiate instruction and assessment for ELLs, as well as teach ELLs the academic language required to successfully access the academic content. ELL experts must be involved at every level of design and implementation. I have great expectations for the ESEA reauthorization and look forward to an interconnected system that works for English language learners.



ESEA Reauthorization: Standards and Assessment

Testimony for the
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee

Dr. Charlene Rivera
Research Professor and Executive Director
The George Washington University
Center for Equity and Excellence in Education

April 28, 2010

Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and members of the HELP committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today and offer my perspective on how the common core standards and assessments should address and measure academic outcomes for English language learners, or ELLs. I also will address the special challenges faced in developing assessments which provide information that can support teaching and learning for ELLs.

Initially, however, it is important that we clearly define and have a shared understanding of ELLs. Also while constructing a coherent system of standards, instruction, and assessment that can address all students including ELLs, it is important to take into account:

- the need for the Common Core Standards and new assessment system(s) to recognize and address the linguistic needs of ELLs;
- that ELLs need academic language to acquire subject matter proficiency; and
- that English language proficiency (ELP) standards and assessments are distinct from English language arts (ELA) standards and assessments.

U.S. schools serve over five million ELLs. These learners are scattered across the U.S. and are highly mobile. About ten to 12 percent of students in public schools are ELLs. While the number of ELLs continues to increase in Northeast and Western states that traditionally have had large numbers of ELLs, more recently, the Southeast and Midwest have seen dramatic increases. The impact of these demographic changes on schools makes it imperative that the needs of the ELL population are addressed in the Blueprint and supporting proposals guiding the reauthorization of ESEA.

ELLs are a not a homogenous group and attention to their different characteristics is essential to meaningfully instructing and assessing them. One important example is level of English language proficiency, but ELLs also differ in ethnic background, socioeconomic status, quality of prior schooling, and first or native language, including literacy in their first language. Many ELLs are

economically and educationally disadvantaged and attend high-poverty schools. All too often the schools ELLs attend lack the educational resources and personnel knowledgeable about how to teach them the academic English or academic language needed to acquire the content knowledge and skills needed to reach high academic standards, graduate from high school, and be college ready.

As Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) argue, ELLs must “perform *double the work* of native English speakers in the country’s middle and high schools” (p. 1) because they are studying content area subjects through a language in which they are not yet fully proficient. In order to understand and apply academic concepts, students must be able to interpret and produce complex oral and written language.

Effectively educating these students requires adjusting or differentiating instructional approaches, content instruction, and assessment in ways that take into consideration their differences. However, practices for identifying who is an ELL are not systematic across or sometimes even within states. Therefore, one of the basic issues to address in a reauthorized ESEA is clearly defining the ELL subgroup by requiring all schools and districts within a state to apply comparable screening, entry, and exit criteria.

As recommended by the Working Group on ELL Policy, a reauthorized ESEA should require states to establish stable ELL subgroup membership for accountability purposes (see Working Group on ELL Policy Recommendations at <http://ellpolicy.com>). Currently, new ELLs with lower levels of ELP enter the subgroup, while students who attain proficiency in English no longer belong to the subgroup. It is the only subgroup whose composition changes in this way.

Additionally, I recommend that the new iteration of ESEA use the term English language learner or ELL rather than the term limited English proficient students. Just as we do not label first year physics students limited physics students we should not call students in the process of learning English limited-English speakers (LaCelle Peterson & Rivera, 1994).

Now I will discuss **how the common core standards and assessments should address and measure academic outcomes for English language learners**. The new common core standards were developed to provide a “clear and consistent framework to prepare ... (students) for college and the workforce” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). While the standards are intended to address all students, ELL experts were not invited to be part of the initial development process. Nonetheless, members of the Working Group on ELL policy and others have since examined the standards and made recommendations regarding how they should be refined to better address the needs of ELLs. These recommendations should be considered and incorporated, as appropriate, into revisions of the common core standards.

With regard to the ELA standards, special attention needs to be given to how and at what point ELLs will be expected to acquire and be assessed in the standards. Because the new common core ELA standards were developed with native English speaking students in mind, it is important to consider the role and use of ELP standards and assessments. Although ELP and ELA are related and even list the same skills (listening, reading, and writing), presumptions about students’ background and basic competencies in English differ. Thus, it will be important

to articulate the relationship between the two sets of standards and to clearly delineate expectations for when instruction in ELA versus ELP is appropriate for ELLs. This specification should be established in every state or consortium of states by a working committee of ELL and ELA experts using data from current studies of ELA and ELP, as appropriate and available. This committee will need to examine a state's ELP standards and determine at what point along the continuum of learning to speak, read, and write English ELLs at low levels of ELP should be held accountable for ELA standards. This clarification is exceedingly important if states, districts, and schools are to implement and assess the ELA standards in a meaningful way for ELLs as well as for all other students. For ELLs at low levels of ELP, since the ELA continuum starts with the assumption that it is addressing native speakers of English, then it is worth considering substituting the ELP reading and writing standards and assessments as measures of reading and writing achievement for these students.

With regard to mathematics standards, it is important to consider whether these standards need to be addressed only in English or if they can also be addressed in students' native languages. The underlying competencies reflected in the common core standards are benchmarked to international standards and, thus, are based on knowledge and skills that transcend English language proficiency.

Implicit in the national mathematics standards, for example, is the expectation that students can explain methods for solving problems as well as describe, classify, and understand relationships. A crucial factor in meeting these expectations is being able to understand and use the academic language or academic English of different disciplines. While a mastery of academic language is demanding for all students, it can be especially difficult for students who already struggle with other linguistic challenges, such as ELLs and former ELLs.

In a reauthorized ESEA, resources should also be allotted to states to work toward the development of a broad national framework that captures the many dimensions of academic English (Anstrom, DiCerbo, Butler, Katz, Millet, & Rivera, 2010). Currently, the connection between grade-level content goals and the language needed to attain these goals is not made explicit in national or state content standards. Few educators at either the district or school level have the resources, time or training to perform the kind of linguistic analysis needed to reveal the academic language that creates the most difficulty for ELLs. To this end, The George Washington University Center for Equity & Excellence in Education (GW-CEEE), developed a process to identify the academic language used in assessments, textbooks, and other instructional materials (Anstrom & DiCerbo, in press).

Until a new assessment system is established, it is important for states to continue to work with their existing academic assessments to ensure validity and reliability as well as accessibility to ELLs at different levels of ELP. While many states use accommodations as an approach to make assessments accessible to ELLs, accommodations in the different content areas need to be studied and refined to ensure that they address the linguistic needs of ELLs at basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of levels of ELP. For example, ELLs with basic ELP may benefit more from oral forms of linguistic support and native language support (Pennock-Roman & Rivera, 2010). More research needs to be carried out to determine the most appropriate accommodations, including in ELLs' native languages.

In the interim, states should continue to refine their state assessment policies and communication of those policies to district and school staff responsible for administering state assessments. In the policies, there is great need to clearly distinguish the linguistic needs of ELLs from cognitive, processing, or physical needs of students with disabilities (Shafer Willner, Rivera, & Acosta, 2008). In addition, states need to refine their communication of the policy to district and school staff responsible for administering content assessments so the criteria for administering the assessment and determining appropriate accommodations for individual students are consistent across a state. States should be encouraged to establish and/or improve their systems for monitoring the progress of their ELLs and former ELLs to understand better the relationship of their English language and content knowledge proficiency throughout schooling. Finally, it is important to encourage states to report academic achievement by ELP status and to use these data to make instructional adjustments.

Next I will address **the special challenges faced in developing and implementing assessments which provide information that can support teaching and learning**. The five design principles proposed by NGO/CCSSO in the Common Core Standards hold great promise. It is essential, however, for the learning needs of ELLs, students with disabilities and other special populations to be taken into consideration while the system is being designed, implemented, and evaluated. To address the needs of ELLs, individuals need to be involved who are knowledgeable about second language acquisition, academic English, second language testing, and best practices for instructing second language learners in subject matter content. Equally important, assessments will need to be designed and implemented so ELLs at different levels of English language proficiency are able to access the content of summative, benchmark, and classroom assessments in English.

Development of an integrated learning system implies that, while the goals remain the same, the learning needs of different groups of students must be distinguished and teachers of academic content and teachers of language must be prepared to instruct and assess ELLs at different levels of English language proficiency. A successful system will require retooling of teacher preparation and in-service professional development programs to build the capacity of content and ESL teachers to differentiate instruction and assessment for ELLs, as well as to teach ELLs the academic language they need to access the academic content.

For students in bilingual and dual language situations, it will require teaching and assessing students in the native language as well as in English. For these programs, it is necessary to ensure the content standards and assessments are parallel to the new Common Core Standards.

Every state and consortium should establish an assessment Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) that includes second language testing experts and second language acquisition specialists. The TAC should be responsible for reviewing and commenting on policies, recommending research to be carried out, and providing advice on implementation and refinement of the assessment system.

The delineation of policy at the state and consortium levels is important and should guide practice for the new assessment system. Policies must be developed that clearly define when

ELLs are to be included in an assessment, what accommodations are available in English and in the native language for each content area assessed in summative, benchmark, and classroom assessments, and what implementation procedures are to be followed when assessing ELLs at different levels of ELP.

Finally, as part of improving the design of assessments, it is necessary to consider what processes the Department of Education (ED) or other external reviewers will use to evaluate the new assessment systems. Currently two processes are in place to assess the adequacy of assessments, standards and assessment peer review and Title I monitoring, however the processes are not aligned. Whatever review procedures are put in place for the new assessment systems, it is important to ensure the alignment of these processes and that one or more of the individuals involved in a review have knowledge of second language acquisition, language testing, and instruction of ELLs (Shafer Willner, Rivera, & Acosta, 2010).

In conclusion, the design of assessment and accountability systems and their implementation must consider the linguistic diversity and other characteristics of ELLs. To be successful, the system must ensure that the standards and assessment processes addresses academic language as well as English language proficiency. Teacher preparation and in-service professional development programs must build the capacity of content and ESL teachers to differentiate instruction and assessment for ELLs, as well as teach ELLs the academic language required to successfully access the academic content. ELL experts must be involved at every level of design and implementation. States should consider the needs of ELLs in the new standards and assessment system. Policies must address how ELLs are defined, and address procedures for including and accommodating ELLs in summative, benchmark, and classroom assessments. Most importantly the new assessment system must be valid and reliable for all students including ELLs. At the federal level, ED must improve the review and monitoring of the standards and assessment systems. It is crucial that the review processes explicitly address ELLs and that the reviewers have the necessary expertise and knowledge.

I have great expectations for the ESEA reauthorization and look forward to an interconnected system that works for English language learners.

References

- Anstrom, K., DiCerbo, P., Butler, F., Katz, A., Millet, J., & Rivera, C. (2010). *A Review of the literature on Academic English: Implications for K-12 English Language Learners*. Arlington, VA: The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education.
- Anstrom, K. & DiCerbo, P. (in press). *Final Report: Linking Academic Language to Academic Standards*. Arlington, VA: The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education.
- LaCelle Peterson, M. & Rivera, C. (1994). Is it real for all kids? A framework for equitable assessment policies for English language learners. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64(1) 55-75.
- NGA & CCSSO. (2010) Common Core Standards Initiative. <http://www.corestandards.org/>
- Working Group on ELL Policy. (2010). Recommendations for ESEA Reauthorization. <http://www.corestandards.org/>
- Pennock-Roman, M. & Rivera, C. (2010). Mean Effects of Test Accommodations for ELLs and Non-ELLs: A Meta-Analysis. Denver: Colorado: Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association.
- Shafer Willner, L., Rivera, C., and Acosta, B. (2010). *Examination of Peer Review and Title I Monitoring Feedback Regarding the Inclusion and Accommodation of English Language Learners in State Content Assessments*. Arlington, VA: The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education.
- Shafer Willner, L., Rivera, C., & Acosta, B. (2008). Descriptive analysis of state 2006-2007 content area accommodations policies for English language learners (2008). Prepared for the LEP Partnership, U.S. Department of Education. Arlington, VA: The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education. Available: <http://ells.ceee.gwu.edu>.
- Short, D. & Fitzsimmons, S. 2007. Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners. A report commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education. <http://www.all4ed.org/files/DoubleWork.pdf>