

Statement on Assessment and Accountability of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Students

In the era of standards-based reform, assessments are commonly used to measure student achievement. For a student population that is increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse, a number of issues related to educational accountability arise in gathering, analyzing, and reporting information used in decision-making. Of major concern is the over-reliance on the results of a single test when assessment standards require that teachers, school districts, and states use multiple measures. The following outlines other assessment issues that come to bear on English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) students, their teachers, and the services students receive.

The first major issue is that most U.S. school systems do not have adequate procedures, resources, and staffing to identify, develop, and implement multiple measures of assessment for ESOL students. In addition, schools generally are unaware of best practices in assessing ESOL students and have inadequate or inappropriate tools to measure their progress. Also, insufficient professional development is provided on the appropriate use and interpretation of assessment results for ESOL students. TESOL (2000) has published several documents that would assist school districts, pre-K-12, and teachers in designing sound assessments for measuring the ESL standards, ESOL students' language proficiency, and their academic achievement.

A second issue is that outcomes for ESOL students often have not been adequately integrated into the overall accountability systems adopted at the local, state, and national levels. Many ESOL students move through two separate systems of accountability: one that measures their progress in language development, the other in academic achievement in the content areas (mathematics, science, social science, and language arts). Too often these measures are neither related nor anchored in content standards. This lack of connection between progress in language acquisition and academic achievement results in less than full accountability for ESOL students.

A third issue is that assessments used in many English as a second language (ESL) programs often do not reflect current research findings and best classroom practices. Many assessments are not based on the principles delineated in the *ESL Standards for Pre-K – 12 Students* (TESOL, 1997) and *Scenarios for ESL Standards-Based Assessment (2001)* that show a clear alignment among standards, instruction, and assessment for ESOL students. For example, research, practice, and standards in ESL indicate the importance of developing academic language, content knowledge, and learning strategies for success in grade-level classrooms. However, existing language proficiency assessments often do not measure how ESOL students perform on these diverse skills in mainstream and age appropriate settings—which is what teachers and principals need to know.

A fourth issue is that ESOL students face many obstacles in state assessments used for accountability for all students. These obstacles include unfamiliarity with testing language, content, and vocabulary, testing formats, test-taking skills necessary to perform well on these standardized tests and the cultural orientation of the tests. In addition, very few accommodations

have been researched that allow ESOL students with substantial levels of English language proficiency to fairly demonstrate their abilities. Also, very few states have developed alternate assessment systems that capture the linguistic range of ESOL students and are built on what these students can do. Linguistic, content, and cultural factors affect the validity of assessment; when there are consequences for ESOL students, such as the denial of a high school diploma, the assessment must be equitable and yield meaningful results.

Recommendations

- The purposes for assessment need to be identified. In an accountability system, a primary purpose should be the documentation of student learning to improve and inform teaching.
- There is a need for a comprehensive battery of developmentally appropriate assessments that are integrated into the accountability system. These should provide information on the academic preparation of ESOL students, including pre-academic skills, literacy, and numeracy.
- Exit criteria for ESL/bilingual programs and services should be aligned to the academic skills required for success in mainstream classes.
- The *ESL Standards for Pre-K - 12 Students* should be used as a key resource to develop accountability measures, including progress indicators and descriptors, which are aligned to the state and local academic standards.
- The entire school faculty needs to be knowledgeable about the challenges ESOL students face on standardized tests. Using this knowledge as a foundation, the staff should prepare ESOL students for success by helping them with language, content, vocabulary, formats, test-taking skills, and cultural orientation of the tests.
- In assessing linguistically and culturally diverse students, there should be a broad range of accommodations that match best instructional practices and the students' language proficiency. In this way, ESOL students can participate more meaningfully in standardized state and local assessments, when they are ready to do so.
- Ultimately, accountability for student outcomes is at the local level, and lies in the attainment of standards. Adequate progress needs to be defined, and when students are not progressing on target, additional intervention is required. The school should convene an accountability team that includes teachers, counselors, social workers, and parents to address individual student profiles and develop a plan for improvement.
- Professional development of teacher and administrators must address issues directly related to the academic and assessment performance of ESOL students.