Access to a High Quality Education for English Language Learners

Research on teaching and learning indicates that all students should be provided with programs, services, and teachers that engage them in rigorous academic work and promote deep disciplinary knowledge and higher order thinking skills (Walqui, 2006; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Despite research findings on the importance of high quality teachers and programs, English Language Learners (ELL) are often taught by under-qualified teachers and excluded from rigorous academic programs (Birch, 2002; Honig, 1996). ELLs are typically enrolled in high poverty schools that offer remedial programs with limited access to grade-level curriculum and instruction (De Cohen, et al., 2005).

This exclusion from a rigorous curriculum is reflected in ELL achievement. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that many ELLs are performing poorly. On the NAEP eighth grade reading assessment, only 4% of ELLs and 20% of students classified as formerly ELL scored at the proficient or advanced levels; 71% of ELLs scored "below basic" (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). Likewise, only 6% of ELLs scored at a proficient level on the NAEP eighth grade mathematics assessment (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007). A survey of pass rates on high school graduation tests indicates that 50% of ELLs fail these tests, compared with only 24% of native English speakers (Hopstock & Stephenson, 2003).

Policies and practices that segregate and track ELLs into fragmented, remedial programming fail to provide a coherent continuum of services focused on both academic English language development and content learning. For example, ELLs are often enrolled in multiple periods of English as a second language, courses that do not address grade-level content, (Harklau, 1994; Olsen, 1997). Students are also tracked into low-level content courses that lack challenging content (Callahan, 2003, 2005; Oakes, 1990). Nonetheless, research-based high quality approaches for educating ELLs exist and have been effectively implemented around the country.

The assessment of the academic content proficiency of ELLs is often obfuscated by their language proficiency. Because every assessment is also an assessment of language skills (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1985), assessing the content proficiency of students who are still learning the language of the test may not be valid unless the effects of the language deficiency can be disentangled from content. As a consequence, the validity of the results of these assessments for ELLs is an equity issue since decisions about programming and placement are often based on the results of these assessments (Cronbach, 1989; Messick, 1989). Though the inclusion of ELLs in large-scale content assessments has led to increased accountability for ELLs, it has not necessarily led to improved academic programming for this population of students. In many cases it has increased the placement of ELLs into remedial programs and low curriculum tracks, led to a disproportionate number of referrals to special education, and contributed to students dropping out of school. (Artiles, 1998; Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Cummins, 1984).

Providing test accommodations is an important approach for addressing the inequities in the assessment of ELLs. Appropriate accommodations for ELLs include changes to testing procedures, testing materials, or the testing situation in ways that allow ELLs to participate meaningfully in the assessments. Effective accommodations also address the unique linguistic and socio-cultural needs of students without altering the test construct. Effective accommodations, when implemented in a systematic manner, can improve the validity of assessment results for ELLS (Acosta, B. et al, 2008; Shafer Willner, L., et al, 2008).

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