



Improving the validity of assessment results  
for English language learners with disabilities

## Voices from the field: State assessments for ELLs with disabilities

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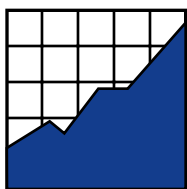
# **Voices from the field: Making state assessment decisions for English language learners with disabilities**

Kristi K. Liu • Linda S. Goldstone • Martha L. Thurlow • Jenna M. Ward • Jim Hatten • Laurene L. Christensen

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## Executive Summary

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English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities are an increasing presence in schools in the United States. Title I and Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act require that these students meet the same academic grade-level standards and participate in content assessments as their fluent-English speaking peers without disabilities. Nevertheless, ELLs with disabilities are among the lowest achieving students. In addition to taking content assessments, they must also meet English proficiency standards and participate in English proficiency assessments. Still, many states do not have established assessment participation criteria and accommodation policies for ELLs with disabilities in their accountability systems in spite of this growing student population in schools across the states.

The Improving the Validity of Assessment Results for ELLs with Disabilities (IVARED) project is a consortium of the five states of Arizona, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota and Washington, led by Minnesota. In collaboration with the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), these states sought to understand ways to make state accountability assessments more valid and reliable for ELLs with disabilities. This report describes one of the project's activities undertaken to better understand the current assessment and accommodation decision-making process, test score use practices, and issues and challenges educators face in making appropriate decisions for ELLs with disabilities. Online focus groups of 232 school and district practitioners were conducted in each of the five states.

Four major themes from the study's findings are highlighted in this report. These were common in the responses of participants from all five states: assessment validity, assessment participation decision making, accommodations decision making, and leadership:

1. Participants questioned the validity of standardized tests, particularly state academic content assessments. This was especially true because the educators believed that the cultural and linguistic complexity of the test items and test format were not designed for ELLs with disabilities.
2. Participants expressed confusion about federal assessment policies and their states' exemption practices for assessment participation requirements. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) was the primary process used for assessment participation decision making. Although, the IEP was typically idealized as collaborative and multi-disciplinary, this was not consistently realized in practice according to focus group participants.
3. Participants stated that the IEP process served primarily to make decisions about accommodations on content assessments, but less so for state English language proficiency assessments and accommodations.
4. Participants described needs specific to ELLs with disabilities for support and guidance from school and state education leaders on assessment and accommodations. The needs were for additional qualified staff and training, clear and consistent written assessment policies, and appropriate uses of state accountability test scores.

Based on the focus group findings, several recommendations emerged for state departments of education:

1. Provide leadership to teachers on how to support access to grade-level content based on state content assessments for ELLs with disabilities.
2. Clarify and disseminate to *all* the educators federal and state participation requirements for both state content and state English proficiency assessments.
3. Create written assessment and accommodation policies specifically for ELLs with disabilities to support both their disability and developing English proficiency.
4. Provide logistical support and training to districts and schools to enable coordination and implementation of accommodations for these students and cross-departmental decision-making.
5. Examine ways to reinforce collaborative multi-disciplinary state assessments and accommodations decision-making by IEP teams.
6. Support district and school leaders in understanding the purposes of accountability assessments and appropriate use of the test scores.
7. Furnish staff development on ELLs with disabilities to all educators, including general educators. Training should include the purpose of accountability assessments, participation requirements, alignment of instructional supports with allowable assessment accommodations for both content and English proficiency tests, and IEP team participation and collaboration.

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## Introduction

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The inclusion of students with disabilities (Spicuzza, Erickson, Thurlow, Liu, & Ruhland, 1996a; Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Silverstein, 1995) and English language learners (ELLs) (August & Hakuta, 1997; Koenig, 2002; Kopriva, 2000; Spicuzza, Erickson, Thurlow, Liu, & Ruhland, 1996b) in large-scale assessment systems became a concern in the mid- to late 1990s. Some of these students had not been included in large-scale assessments before and were sometimes targeted for exclusion. A consequence of exclusion was that these students tended to not receive needed instruction because they were not participating in state assessments.

Only within the past decade or so has the importance of this issue been recognized for those students who are learning English and who also have an identified disability (Thurlow & Liu, 2001; Thurlow, Liu, Ward, & Christensen, 2013). These students are referred to here as ELLs with disabilities. With the increasing numbers of ELLs with disabilities across the nation, addressing their needs, and ensuring that the approaches used to include them in large-scale assessment and accountability systems is critical.

Title I and Title III legislation require that ELLs, including those with disabilities, be taught the same challenging content standards as their fluent-English speaking peers. Results from state-level content assessments show that ELLs with disabilities are among the lowest achieving students (cf. Liu, Barrera, Thurlow, Guven, & Shyyan, 2005; Liu, Thurlow, Barrera, Guven, & Shyyan, 2005). It seems straightforward to attribute poor student outcomes to the learning difficulties that ELLs with disabilities face. Yet evidence from educators, schools, and districts (Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Stephenson, Pendzick, & Sapru, 2003) suggests that instruction for these students is less closely aligned to state standards than instruction for fluent-English speaking students with disabilities or ELLs without disabilities.

States have developed state assessment participation criteria and accommodation policies for ELLs and for students with disabilities. However, for the most part they have done little to address students who fit into both groups: ELLs with disabilities (Albus & Thurlow, 2007; Thurlow, Bremer, & Albus, 2011). Addressing the needs of these students in large-scale assessment and accountability systems is important because nationwide the population of ELLs with disabilities is growing (see [www.ideadata.org](http://www.ideadata.org), Table 1-9). They can be found not only in urban school districts, but also in suburban and rural districts (Casey, 2006) in nearly every state. Recognizing the importance of including these students in statewide assessments, the Improving the Validity of Assessment Results for ELLs with Disabilities project (IVARED) created a consortium of states (Arizona, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, and Washington), together with staff from the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO). Consortium activities address the validity of assessment results for ELLs with disabilities in statewide accountability assessments.

The aim of the federally-funded project is to support state departments of education in making existing state accountability assessments, particularly in the content areas of reading, math and science, as valid and reliable as possible for ELLs with disabilities. Project activities include: (a) the creation of data-based descriptions of the population of ELLs with disabilities in each state and students' performance on state content and English proficiency assessments, (b) the analysis of state assessment policy documents to determine assessment accommodations policies for ELLs with disabilities, (c) the creation of a set of expert-developed principles for assessing ELLs with disabilities (Thurlow et al., 2013), (d) the completion of school and district practitioner focus groups in each of the partner states to better understand assessment decision-making and test score use practices for ELLs with disabilities, and (e) the creation of teacher-training modules on best practices in assessment decision making for these students.

Two of IVARED's goals are to strengthen the knowledge base of assessment decision makers to improve the quality of those decisions for ELLs with disabilities and to identify promising assessment decision-making practices. To that end, this report describes the results of focus groups conducted with practitioners with first-hand knowledge of assessment decision-making for ELLs with disabilities in each of the five states. The focus groups were designed to elicit discussions about what schools and districts are already doing to make assessment participation decisions for this group of students, what types of policies and procedures support good decision making, and what issues and challenges these educators face in making appropriate decisions. In the sections that follow, we first describe the focus group participants and the methods that were used to collect the information. We then highlight three major themes that were common in the responses of participants from all five states. The comments used to illustrate these themes represent all of the partner states as well as educators from a variety of positions. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for improving assessment decision-making practices for ELLs with disabilities, thus increasing the validity of state content assessments.

## **Participants**

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During the winter and spring of 2012, staff at the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) conducted a series of internet focus groups in each of the collaborating states (7 groups per state; n= 232 educators). An asynchronous online text format for the focus groups allowed the flexibility to include geographically dispersed educators in rural areas and smaller school districts where a large number of ELLs, and presumably ELLs with disabilities, may be located. It also allowed NCEO staff and participants to engage in an important form of community building with educators who often feel isolated because of the unique population they serve.

NCEO sent out participation invitations through state department of education networks inviting English as a second language or bilingual education teachers and program coordinators, special

education teachers and program coordinators, speech-language pathologists, paraprofessionals, and district assessment coordinators. The only requirements were that they have knowledge of ELLs with disabilities and that they were willing to talk about state assessment issues. The first 50 volunteers per state were placed into groups of approximately 5-8 individuals with similar job titles. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants.

**Table 1. Focus Group Participants' Demographic Characteristics**

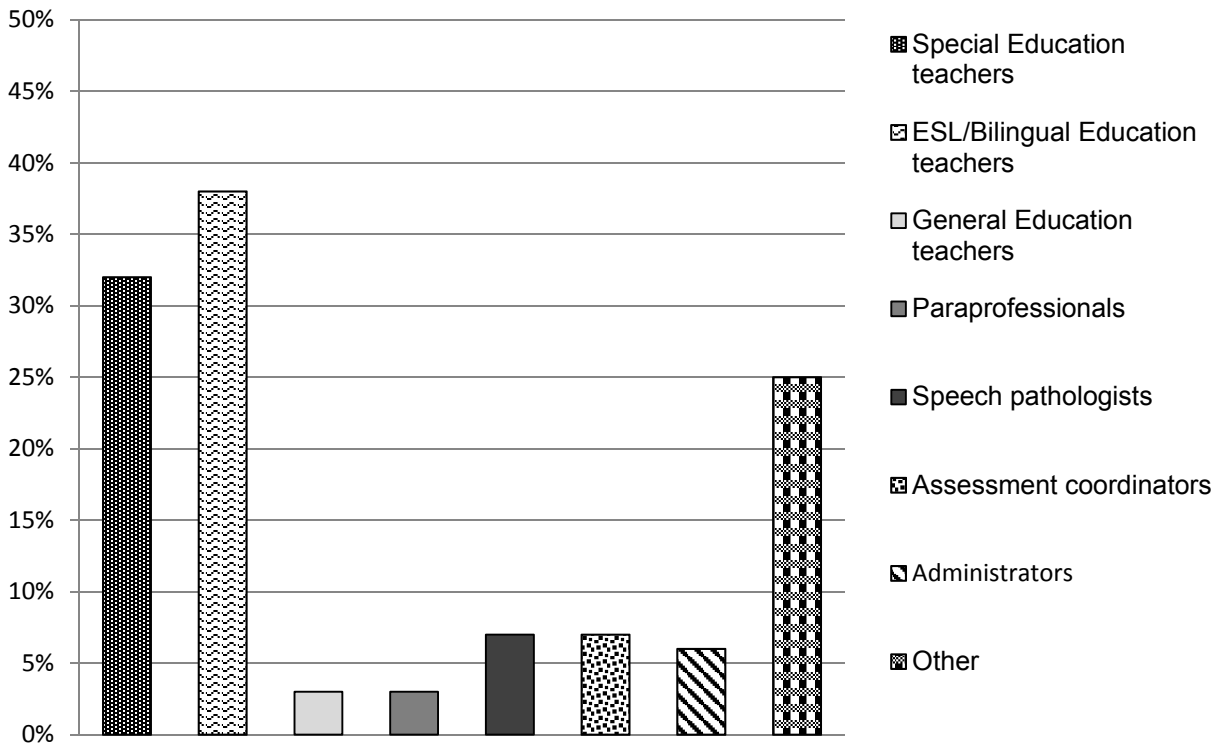
Total Participants	Gender	Racial/ Ethnic Back- ground	School Locale	School Type	School Size (Number of students)
232	Male 18% Female 92%	White 84% Latino 7% Asian 3% Black 2% Other 3%	Urban 29% Suburban 34% Rural 32% Other 4%	Public 90% Private <1% Charter 7% Other 3%	Under 100 7% 100-299 10% 300-499 28% 500-699 21% 700-999 16% 1000-1999 12% 2000-2999 2% 3000+ 3%

Most participants were white, female teachers from public schools. Even in states with a high degree of student diversity, the educators tended to fit this overall profile. School locale (e.g., urban, suburban, rural) and school size varied. Slightly more participants were from suburban and rural schools with total enrollments of 300-499 students in comparison to other locations and school sizes, but there were participants from a variety of school backgrounds.

As shown in Figure 1, the individuals who volunteered for this study were more varied in their professional backgrounds than the initial participation criteria. Volunteers from any positions were accepted if they were familiar with the topic of assessment for ELLs with disabilities. They included general education teachers, school psychologists, school principals, and a school superintendent.

Special education and English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual education teachers represented approximately equal proportions of our participants (32% and 38%, respectively). Together they made up more than half of our focus group members. The remaining percentage was split across a variety of job titles. Of our 232 total respondents, 34% (n=79) reported that they spoke more than one language, including English, and 66% (n=153) spoke only English.

**Figure 1. Focus Group Participants' Job Titles**



## Methods

### Procedures

NCEO research staff created separate focus groups for: (a) individuals with classroom or small-group instructional experience and service providers, and (b) individuals with test coordinator or program/school/district administration experiences. Participants from each state were placed into groups by their job titles, with attempts to balance group membership according to participant backgrounds (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, type of position, location), and dates that they were available to take part in the study.

Focus group literature (cf. Kruger & Casey, 2008) recommends developing a series of 10-14 questions, beginning with a broad focus to encourage participation and gradually narrowing over time. The NCEO team created eight questions (two per day for four days) to encourage in-depth discussion and interaction between participants. Questions were slightly different for assessment coordinators and administrators than for educators (see Appendix A for a list of focus group questions). Our first questions for all groups related broadly to participants' experiences working with ELLs with disabilities. Over time the questions became narrower and focused specifically on making state assessment decisions for ELLs with disabilities.

Focus groups were conducted online using a password protected Moodle-based platform that was modified for usability purposes. Each group took place over a one-week time period, with two to three groups per week for a period of several months. All participants were assigned names of trees from their state as pseudonyms. The use of pseudonyms promoted interaction, while maintaining participants' anonymity. The pseudonyms developed for each state were used multiple times across different groups, but with a number included to make individual participants unique (e.g., Sycamore 1). The moderator posted each day's question in the morning, and then read and commented on participants' postings throughout the day in order to encourage discussion. The moderator's postings frequently asked participants to define terms or acronyms they had used, or to provide more detail. The Moodle-based program saved all of the participants' interactions, and these transcripts (approximately 2500 pages of text) were used as the basis of the analysis.

## Analysis

Transcripts of the focus groups were analyzed qualitatively using a semi-structured, small group analysis process recommended by Krueger and Casey (personal communication, November 1, 2012) and Krueger (1998). This process was used because it was an efficient, yet systematic method of reliably coding a large amount of data. The small group was composed of five research team members, including the focus group administrator. All of these small group members had backgrounds in education and knowledge of ELLs with disabilities. These individuals were able to challenge each other's assumptions about the interpretation of the focus group data and arrive at a group consensus on coding major themes.

Each member of the small group reviewed all of the data from the same randomly selected test coordinator/administrator group and educator group in each of the five states. The following questions were used to guide their individual review of the data as well as the semi-structured group discussion:

1. What are the groups talking a lot about?
2. What are these educators feeling about state assessments?
3. What are the most important themes related to state assessment for ELLs with disabilities?
4. What resources do these educators say they use? What do they need to improve their decision making?
5. Are there any quotes that stand out, even if they were only said once? Anything that encapsulates a lot of important ideas?

6. What assumptions are these educators making that influence their assessment decision-making?

From the review of the selected transcripts the research team developed a list of themes that either occurred frequently in the data or that encapsulated important ideas, even if the themes were mentioned infrequently. Group discussion focused on differentiating between themes mentioned in only one state or one group within a state, compared to themes mentioned across states. The lead researcher, who had also been the focus group administrator, then reviewed all of the remaining transcripts to verify the list of themes and add to the list any new themes that appeared.

## Focus Group Themes

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### Assessment Validity

A number of research participants had strong feelings on the topic of the validity of state assessments for ELLs with disabilities. Their concerns addressed issues relating to perceived assessment bias and the difficulty of the test content compared to students' instructional level. A sampling of participants' comments on each of these themes is presented below.

### Bias

Four types of bias were the most commonly mentioned by focus group participants: linguistic bias, cultural bias, educational background bias, and grade-level bias.

*Linguistic bias.* One type of bias mentioned was linguistic bias. Many participants across all five states believed that any standardized assessment that an ELL with a disability was required to take would be biased because it tested students in a language in which they were not proficient.

*“Why are ELLs, who lack English proficiency at the level of their native speaking peers, included in tests that do not take second language acquisition into the development of the test questions? Are these tests language & reading tests or content area tests or both? I am not that familiar with all the state assessment tests but I believe the complexity of the language makes it difficult to understand the questions even if the ELLs might know the content being covered. Literal, denotative, language can be understood by intermediate and advanced ELLs. Any figurative, connotative, idiomatic complex language cannot be easily understood by intermediate and advanced level ELLs in my experience.”*

*“...The State and Federal assessments are biased because no matter how you cut it, the language is still primarily tested and learning another language while simultaneously learning the content is a very long stretch!! If you think about it, Americans learn English from birth or even earlier, and by the time they enter Kindergarten they have their oral skills to connect to print to enable them to write a reproduction of their speech. Some ELLs, at times, arrive with little or no English at all...and for those with disabilities: physically, emotionally, and/or intellectually, learning English is and can be extremely challenging...to say the least!!”*

*“I don’t feel it’s a meaningful assessment for most of my students. It makes them feel awful about themselves and their learning. Even on the math section, when I can read it to them, they struggle to understand what the question is asking and then how to respond. Many of the questions ask for a written response which, even if I scribe for them, often does not answer the question presented.”*

An additional concern about the relationship between low socioeconomic status, limited English skills, and academic performance complicated some teachers’ beliefs about the validity of state assessments for ELLs with disabilities. These focus group members tended to talk about students from low income backgrounds as if certain aspects of their language ability and educational performance were a given. They expressed the opinion that expectations were too high for ELLs with disabilities.

*“The test is designed for students who are proficient in English. I believe that any student, whether ELL or an English speaker who has been struggling to survive the challenges of living in poverty and has non-standard English proficiency skills would face challenges on standardized state tests in the content areas. The terminology, distinct syntax, comparative structures, passive voice; the general and technical academic vocabulary specific to content areas as well as the differing topic specific uses for everyday vocabulary across the content areas of science, literature and math (i.e., the different meanings for ‘table’, ‘set’, ‘times’, etc.) present challenges that many overlook.”*

*“Combined with their language and disability needs, a large amount of this population in my district also falls into the low SES range and is highly mobile due to lack of income or work-related reasons. These complex issues often result in not always assessing the ‘big idea’ in ways our students can easily access or show their understanding.”*

For at least a few participants there was awareness that test items may be constructed to measure different constructs and that language might be one of those constructs.



*“In any assessment, classroom or state, it must be clear that language skill is not being assessed when subject matter should be.”*

However, educators were not always sure whether a test item assessed content, language, or both content and language. One participant gave an example of a problematic item similar to those found on state math tests.

*“Take a question like the one I read today in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade math text, ‘Find the difference in the most recent measurement and the earliest measurement on the chart for the Olympic gold medal winners in the javelin throw.’ That question can confound many an ELL student due to the linguistic load and grammatical construct of the sentence alone. Is the ELL student’s math truly being assessed? Or, are his skills in academic vocabulary and literacy being assessed?”*

Another participant suggested that native language assessment would be more valid for ELLs with disabilities. This individual did not acknowledge concerns that a student may have, little if any, instruction in the native language and may not be literate in it.

*“Validity comes into question whenever an ELL is tested, if the test is not administered in the student’s native language. When this situation is compounded by a disability, it is highly unlikely that a large scale standardized test would be considered valid.”*

*Cultural bias.* Focus group participants also strongly believed that standardized assessments, particularly state content assessments, are biased against ELLs with disabilities because the test items reference objects and activities that are common in U.S. culture, but uncommon in the cultures from which students come. Including culturally-specific material in the test items led to the use of unfamiliar vocabulary. Educators shared a number of specific experiences with tests containing unfamiliar concepts that may not have been part of the state standard, but that may have been incorporated to provide an interesting context or a practical application component to the material tested.

*“I will never forget a [state content test] ‘prep’ day. I was working with primarily Hmong students. We worked through a whole passage; focusing on vocabulary and test taking strategies. Working through the sample questions one by one. At the end of the session one student raised their hand and asked me ‘Teacher what is baseball?’ One of the test questions was: ‘Describe how you would feel if you won the championship baseball game.’ This would be quite hard to answer if you had never played baseball; but what if you had never even heard of the game?”*

*“A child from India (where ovens are not common in the home) doesn’t have the same background knowledge of oven cooking times and temperatures – do they need to have that as the topic for a math problem that is really just wanting someone to see that 2x as much of something needs 2x as much cooking? Isn’t there a better way to measure the mathematical function of that type of problem?”*

In some cases the objects or activities referred to in test items were not only unfamiliar, they also required an understanding of how those objects or activities had been different in the past. For example, one participant was concerned that ELLs with disabilities might have become unwilling to finish a test because they were unfamiliar with an outdated object such as a rotary telephone.

*“I still think all the time about the blouses and rotary telephones shown on one reading test my students had to take – they didn’t know what either was! For students with disabilities I find that not being able to understand a question is especially frustrating and can sometimes even lead to them shutting down and refusing to finish the test.”*

In an era of touch-screen cell phones such a concern could perhaps apply equally to many young students who are not ELLs and who do not have a disability. It is unclear whether ELLs with disabilities were at any greater disadvantage than other students on this particular test item. The respondent did not provide information about whether the test question was actually difficult for students or whether the respondent simply had strong feelings about the use of dated objects in test items.

In some cases, participants reported that test items appeared to assume students had familiarity with culturally-specific texts and sayings included in reading passages.

*“In the lower grades nursery rhymes and common tall tales are often used on reading comprehension tests, but ELL students are at a great disadvantage because they didn’t grow up with these stories in their homes. The reading assessment in the upper elementary and middle school grades also includes numerous idioms, sayings and analogies that need to be explicitly taught within the classroom settings/curriculum in order for students to be successful on the assessments.”*

Participants shared a few strategies to compensate for culturally unfamiliar content in assessment items. One participant recommended that the questions should be based on U.S. school culture, which could be a more commonly shared experience for ELLs with disabilities from different backgrounds.

*“Not all have had the same life experiences that most average students have. Test questions should account for this and center around simple scenarios that may have occurred at school rather than outside the classroom.”*

Another focus group member suggested that modifications to reduce the cognitive load of the test might make it easier for students to deal with material that was less culturally familiar.

*“The primary challenges for ELLs with disabilities in participating on the [state content test] and [state English proficiency test] are the vocabulary and background knowledge given in the question scenarios. I think the [English proficiency test] does a better job of trying to keep this in mind with less overwhelming questions, but modifications similar to the [state alternate assessment] would be helpful. Simple modifications can include simplifying the test question language, perhaps tests aimed at the language proficiency of the student. Others would be more visuals and reducing the number of questions.”*

*Educational background bias.* Another type of bias mentioned by focus group participants was that they believed standardized assessment items are biased against students who lack previous U.S. school experiences. Participants believed that ELLs with disabilities did not have previous experiences that would help them be prepared to do well on state content and English language proficiency assessments. A lack of in-depth assessment knowledge was one issue cited in focus groups. Participants thought that ELLs, including those with disabilities, who did not understand how standardized assessments were constructed, and how they should prepare for those assessments, were at a disadvantage.

*“Another major assessment issue for all ELs (but especially those with special needs) is, in my opinion, the formatting of the exams. Students who come from various backgrounds usually have little to no experience with the high stakes testing format used in our schools. It seems unfair to place students into these settings (silent room, stressful test, unfamiliar format) and then expect them to do their best.”*

However, some members understood that educators could play a role in trying to address students’ lack of prior assessment experience.

*“Many of our ELL students come from low income homes, are absent more often and do not have a parent who can help them do homework or prepare for the state assessments when compared to their peers. They also do not have access to all of the test prep materials such as [customized database of standards-based test prep materials for individual students] at home due to their lack of internet access. We provide printed worksheets and time after school to use the*

*computer labs to prepare for the [state content assessments] to make up for this disadvantage. We do our best, but cannot make up for all the disadvantages our ELL students with disabilities face.”*

*Grade-level bias.* Another educational disadvantage that focus group members linked to assessment bias was the difficulty level of the state content assessments. Focus group members generally believed that the tests did not measure skills at levels low enough for most ELLs with disabilities. One participant spoke about the perceived ineffectiveness of most accommodations on difficult assessments, which he or she mistakenly believed were intended to make the test easier.

*“The biggest problem isn’t assigning accommodations to ELLs with disabilities but that the tests are hard for my students... so accommodations don’t really make the test any easier. I really think that the basic accommodations of small group, quiet area, and taking as much time as they need, are enough, if the test was not so complex for them. Most of the time, their struggle isn’t due to the lack of accommodations, but the lack of the validity of the test for them.”*

Participants reported that ELLs with disabilities were often instructed at their skill level, which often was below grade level, creating a mismatch between student knowledge and test content.

*“I...use the core curriculum standards for teaching which are on the state assessments. Unfortunately, I am using the standards that are below my student’s grade levels and they don’t match the grade level assessments given.”*

Some focus group participants appeared to have difficulty understanding the value of having students participate in grade-level accountability assessments. Others questioned why students with limited reading skills could not be given a below-grade-level reading assessment to measure their progress in reading instead of their achievement level. Both of these viewpoints reflected relatively low academic expectations for ELLs with disabilities. The participants often related their validity concerns about the content assessments back to wanting to use the test results for instructional decision-making, reflecting a potential misunderstanding of the purpose of the assessments.

*“I think it is unfair that SPED students who are not yet performing at grade level have to take a grade level test. We know they are not performing at grade level that is one of the reasons they qualified for SPED.”*

*“The state assessments are not reasonable assessments for students who are two years or more below grade level in reading. They look at the test and know they*

*can't read any of the passages. I've had students cry and tell me how stupid they must be if the test is that difficult for them."*

English proficiency assessment results may be used for instructional decision-making. However, some participants still believed that the skills measured by the test form developed for a specific grade band were too difficult, and thus produced results that were not useful for instructional purposes.

*"Taking the [state English proficiency test] reading test for a child who cannot read was very difficult. Even though the tests are tiered it is still frustrating when a child is taking a grade 3-5 reading test and they can't read beyond a first grade level."*

*"For the EL testing, the listening and speaking parts give good info we can work with about his abilities and how to help him reach the next level. However, the reading and writing components give us nothing to work with because of [student name] struggles with literacy. Because of his grade level, the assessments are just too difficult for him to produce what he knows."*

Concerns about the difficulty of the tests were particularly acute for students with significant cognitive disabilities. One participant described the high level of support that ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities, as well as ELLs with some other types of disabilities, in his or her district required in order to participate in state assessments. Providing this type of support created significant demands on school staff and the participant questioned the value of the resulting test scores.

*"Several of the ELL students I have worked with in the last three years have multiple impairments...and/or low cognitive functioning and high behavior needs (students with autism). The [state English proficiency test] and [state alternate content test]...have been given with maximum assistance and often requiring hand-over-hand for responses. Due to the level of cognitive functioning of the students vs. the assessments not matching, the assessments have not provided valid scores. Staff are struggling with taking the time to complete assessments knowing they are not appropriate, but needing to fulfill a requirement."*

Others who worked with students with significant cognitive disabilities appeared to be focused more on teaching them functional and independent living skills rather than academic content. These participants believed that academically-oriented assessments were not valuable because the tests took time away from instruction and did not relate to what participants perceived of as learning opportunities for students in a functional curriculum.

*“...Assessments should be meaningful for the individual being tested. In my current placement, it takes months and years to learn new skills that will help my students live as independently as possible. Current assessments are not at an appropriate functioning level and are taking away precious time we have to provide meaningful opportunities for learning.”*

### **Summary of Bias Comments**

In summary, focus group participants of all types generally tended to view standardized state content and English language proficiency assessments as having validity issues for ELLs with disabilities. This was true no matter how the tests were formatted or structured, because the participants believed any standardized test in English was invalid for students learning English. However, at the same time, participants did suggest changes to the state assessments. Participants called for modifications to tests so that they would reflect a student’s current level of development rather than attainment of grade-level standards. Participants also wanted linguistically-simplified items so that language proficiency was not a barrier to students’ displaying content knowledge and skills. In addition, participants also desired test item contexts that were less specific to American cultural experiences not shared by students so that a student’s lack of background knowledge was not a barrier to demonstrating content skills (e.g., not having familiarity with the oven used in a math problem).

Participants did not frequently express the viewpoint that educators could play a role in making state assessments more valid measures of student learning. They ascribed low levels of student assessment performance to the characteristics of the tests (e.g., too difficult, too biased), and the characteristics of the students (e.g., low-income, limited formal schooling, disability), rather than to the nature of students’ academic preparation.

### **Assessment Participation Decision Making for ELLs with Disabilities**

Focus group participants had a great deal to say on the subject of state assessment participation decision making for ELLs with disabilities. These comments fell into three major sub-themes: (a) the participants’ understanding of federal assessment participation requirements and guidelines, (b) the participation decision-making process; and (c) the individuals who are, or who should be, involved in making state assessment participation decisions for these students.

### **Understanding of Federal Test Participation Requirements**

When asked about assessment decision-making processes in their school or district, the focus group members expressed a wide range of understandings of federal content and English language proficiency assessment participation requirements. Some educators could accurately

state that ELLs with disabilities are required to take the same state content tests as their peers without disabilities, unless they have significant cognitive disabilities that qualify them to take an alternate assessment.

*“...Each student must take the state tests. We have two options for the state assessment: (1) The paper/computer based tests that the majority of students take, and (2) the portfolio assessment for some (not all) students with intellectual disabilities.”*

Some could also accurately describe the temporary one-year reading test exemption for ELLs, including ELLs with disabilities, who are new to the country. One participant described the decision his or her district made to include newly arrived ELLs with disabilities in the content assessment despite the possibility of exemption.

*“Our district (and all buildings) follow the state assessments that ELLs with disabilities take although as someone else mentioned, students who have been in the country for less than a year are exempt [from taking the] reading assessment, we encourage all students in this category to take it anyway, to get practice taking the test.”*

Assessment exemptions were, however, the most frequently mentioned source of confusion about state assessment participation. In some cases, focus group members indicated they were unsure what the participation requirements were for ELLs with disabilities. In other cases, members described practices that appeared to be common knowledge to their state department of education staff, even though these practices are not mentioned in federal testing legislation and regulations. Some participants thought there was a group of ELLs with disabilities who could be exempt from all assessments.

*“The State has an allowable 2% or less of students who are exempt from any testing (could be even less). The students with the most profound disabilities and medically fragile are usually exempt.”*

*“We follow the state criteria for exempting a student. The one ELL student we have exempted has significant cognitive delays and a very significant seizure disorder. Even the [alternate assessment] would not be valid or reliable.”*

A few participants were unclear that, according to federal law, ELLs, including ELLs with disabilities, could be exempted from the reading portion of the content assessment for their first year in the country. Common misconceptions included the length of the exemption period or the sub-tests from which students could be temporarily exempted.

*“I believe we only allow ELL students a three-year grace period before they are required to participate in the state assessment. Not sure this is a valid or reliable indication of their performance or mastery of the standards.”*

*“For just ELL students they don’t have alternative methods, modifications, or accommodations but, there is a statement about ‘being new to the country’ for the first 2 years a student is in the country that may help some.”*

The following individual appeared to describe a state policy of allowing exempted students to substitute the English proficiency test for at least some of the content tests, a practice that is not currently supported in federal assessment legislation.

*“The students that are born in the USA take the [regular state content assessment] or [alternate assessment] even native born if their parents are Spanish speakers and Spanish is primarily spoken in the home. If the student has been in the USA less than 2 years (I will double check on this tomorrow just to make sure, but I believe it’s 2 years) then the child has to take the [state English proficiency test] instead.”*

Another focus group member indicated that he or she was unaware that the temporary exemption could apply to ELLs with disabilities.

*“To my knowledge, the ELL students with disabilities take the same state assessments (reading, math and science), and the [state test] to measure State Standards other students are required to take...It is my understanding ELL students with disabilities new to the U.S. are required to take [state content test] and other standardized protocols.”*

Finally, another participant described the practice of exempting students from content assessments based on their English proficiency test scores instead of their arrival date in the U.S.

*“It’s my understanding that EL student performance on [state English language proficiency test and related screening test] are used to evaluate which EL students would benefit from taking or being exempt from other standardized group administered assessments such as the [state content test].”*

Several participants described a common practice of exempting ELLs with specific types of disabilities from participation in the state English proficiency test. In some cases requesting such an exemption involved the state education agency. Typically, the exempted students were those with some type of cognitive disability or those whose disability made it difficult for them to display their English skills in the manner required by the test.



*“For some of our students with severe disabilities we can apply for test exemptions and we have done this with just a few cases such as a student with brain injury and another with existing brain tumors and undergoing chemo treatments. To apply for this exemption on the [state English language proficiency test] we had to send in the student’s IEP to the state.”*

*“The ELLs that are in the MOCI [moderate cognitive impairment] and MICI [mild cognitive impairment] classrooms all take the [state alternate assessment]. If we have ELLs in the MOCI classrooms, I write exemptions for them from the [state English proficiency test]. The MICI students all take the [English proficiency test]. Other exemptions are made if a student’s disability prevents them from participating in an assessment. For example a SIFE [Student with Interrupted Formal Education] student with limited use of his arms and who cannot read or write is exempted from the reading and writing portions of the [English proficiency assessment], but still takes the speaking and listening sections.”*

*“The [English proficiency test] does have specific guidelines related to students with hearing loss in that they can be exempt from the listening and speaking portions of the test if they are students who do not use oral communication as their primary mode of communication.”*

## **Participation Decision-making Process**

According to focus group members, the assessment participation decision-making process that school staff followed for ELLs with disabilities centered around the IEP process.

*“The process in our district is to follow state directives. Assessment participation for students with IEPs is determined by state guidelines communicated to each district assessment coordinator. Per state recommendations, staffs are to meet in the fall of every year, with ELL personnel as a member of the group, to determine what the specific needs and plans are...”*

*“The process for determining assessment participation for ELL students with disabilities is the same for all students with disabilities – the IEP team meets to determine the child’s functioning levels and needs for accommodations...The type of state assessment is also determined by the IEP team and is based on the child’s functional abilities.”*

Some IVARED states have specific assessment participation guidelines that educators had successfully used as part of IEP team meetings.

*“I really like the [state] Department of Education’s online tools to assist educators in identifying students for whom [state alternate assessment] would be appropriate for. The checklist and resources has really helped us in making the most appropriate decisions.”*

As part of the decision-making process, some participants described considering the child’s instructional services and setting as factors in determining whether ELLs with disabilities should take a particular assessment.

*“In essence, the ‘process’ in which we decide which test a student takes lies in the process it takes to determine the best placement for the student. That placement then determines the assessment, but we also look at each student individually...”*

*Individuals involved in making participation decisions.* According to focus group members, assessment participation decisions are sometimes, but not always, made by a collaborative group of educators that represents both the special education and second language acquisition experiences of the student. Typically, participants described the IEP team as the centralized location for decisions to be made. There is a variety of individuals that participants believed would be valuable additions to the IEP team, but who either did not regularly take part in team meetings or were not required to be part of the IEP team.

*“It is extremely helpful to have a person on an IEP team that is also a testing coordinator, as he/she has the latest and greatest information as to what tests are offered with what possible accommodations to try and make the best fit based on individual student needs. It seems as if every year the [state tests] change.”*

*“EL teacher SHOULD be invited [to the IEP meeting] but often I am not.”*

*“Although our ELL Facilitator is invited...she is often not available to come and may not have experience with each student.”*

One notable exception that was not often discussed was the involvement of general education teachers in the IEP team’s assessment participation decisions. Focus group members tended to refer to general educators when talking about instructional accommodations.

Parents of ELLs with disabilities are, by law, part of the IEP team, but focus group participants generally believed that parents either lacked sufficient information on testing or that they were not interested in being part of the decisions.

*“If the parents are migrant workers, there is very little response because most of them are not aware of what these tests are nor are they interested because they are to put it simply...trying to survive. On the other hand, those other parents*

*from affluent backgrounds that strive for their children to seek college degrees, are very aware of state and district exams...”*

*“Once their child is identified and the IEP is presented and gone through, the parents are not questioning the state testing. I have had ELL parents be very strong advocates for special ed. placement, but once the IEP meeting takes place, there is very little opposition to anything on that document. When we get to the testing accommodations page, we go through it without too much comment. ”*

Some focus group members appeared to describe test decision-making processes that were not a part of IEP team meetings. One participant mentioned that for elementary school students the ESL teachers handled the decision-making, perhaps because students are not typically identified for special education until the upper grades.

*“For special ed students who are also EL students at the elementary level the tests they take are primarily decided by the EL teachers based on their EL level.*

Others talked about a disjointed test decision-making process that involved separate processes, made by separate decision makers, for the state content assessment and for the English proficiency tests.

*“We do not use an IEP team process for the [English proficiency test]. All ELs are required to take the test, regardless of [Special Education] label.”*

### **Summary of Participation Decision-making Comments**

In summary, when it came to national and state accountability test participation requirements for ELLs with Disabilities, focus group participants expressed confusion. Many were aware that some test exemptions were allowed, but were confused about which students could have exemptions, the criteria to apply in determining whether exemptions were appropriate, which tests had possible exemptions, and for how long the exemptions could be used. Often, the participants’ descriptions of practices around test exemptions for ELLs with disabilities reflected that educators were either misinformed about federal assessment policies or that states had their own set of test exemption practices for ELLs with disabilities, particularly on state English proficiency assessments.

For most participants, the IEP development and annual evaluation processes played a central role in supporting assessment participation decisions. Ideally, but not always in actual practice, a collaborative, multi-disciplinary IEP team that included parents or guardians made test participation decisions for ELLs with disabilities. When the ideal was not achieved it appeared to be due to issues such as ESL or bilingual education staff not being part of the IEP team and

making separate testing decisions about English proficiency assessments. A second reason that participants often cited was that some IEP team members lacked the background required to be active participants in the participation decisions. Notably, general educator involvement in making participation decisions was rarely mentioned.

## Accommodations Decision Making for ELLs with Disabilities

### Individuals Involved in Accommodations Decisions

*IEP team members.* Typically, focus group participants named the IEP team as being the key assessment and instructional accommodations decision-makers, at least for the state content assessments.

Under the best circumstances, educators described an IEP team that is made up of educators from a variety of disciplines, including ESL or bilingual teachers as well as parents and students. This type of team could determine content test accommodations, and possibly language test accommodations, that represented both the disability-related and the language learning needs of the child. One participant listed the many individuals who are part of IEP teams in his or her district.

*“The Individual Educational Team composition depends upon the personnel providing student services or involved in evaluation (every 3 years). Traditionally, a regular education teacher(s), special education teacher, department head/District designee/administrator, speech pathologist/school psychologist...ELL professional, either teacher/district level employee, parent, and student. Case workers are involved if a student receives Department of Developmental Disabilities services. This expansive team does decide accommodations for testing.”*

However, it appeared to be relatively common for ESL or Bilingual educators to have a separate decision-making process to determine accommodations for ELLs, including ELLs with disabilities, on the state English proficiency assessment.

*“As for the [state English proficiency test] accommodations, I am uncertain as to how the ELL coordinator determines which will be utilized or not. There is limited collaboration between special education and ELL services.”*

*Challenges in Creating Collaborative Cross-Disciplinary Teams.* It appeared to be difficult for many of the schools and districts represented in focus groups to put together a truly collaborative, multi-disciplinary IEP team where each member contributed to the accommodations decisions. ESL or bilingual education teachers were frequently not a part of IEP meeting discussions about content assessment accommodations. Focus group participants described three main reasons why ESL or bilingual educators were not included on IEP teams that made assessment accommoda-

tions decisions. First, exclusion sometimes occurred because ESL and Special Education had their own separate systems for working with students and the two systems rarely intersected, which in some cases led to inadequate accommodations recommendations for ELLs with disabilities.

*“If a student is required to take the [state English proficiency assessment], we often will neglect to put accommodations in the IEP for this, because the representative from the ELL department is usually not part of that student’s IEP team. Now that I am writing this, I feel that this is the wrong way of going about doing what is best for providing for my students, who are also ELL!”*

A difficulty that some ELL educators and other IEP team members had was lacking the knowledge of accommodations to be full participants in the decision making for a specific child.

*“I think that the school ELL Facilitator needs to have more input in determining accommodations for a student. Most ELL Facilitators know very little about the IEP writing process and only run into accommodations needed when it is time to take the [state English proficiency test] and [state content test].”*

*“All IEP team members are a part of determining accommodations & assessment needs, however in reality most members are quiet and the sped teacher does everything. I’m not sure others know enough to chime in.”*

When there were separate Special Education and ESL systems, there may have been a Special Education representative with second language acquisition knowledge on the IEP team to represent the child’s language learning and language assessment needs.

*“The ESL teachers do not take part in the IEPs but the case manager/Special Education teacher is familiar with the students and their accommodations as ELL students also have an ILLP – a plan that is individualized based on their level of language proficiency with goals selected based on level of need.”*

*“Those present at the [IEP] meeting would be but not limited to the LEA representative, an ESL endorsed SPED teacher, parent(s), Speech, and general ed. teacher...Accommodations are based on disability...”*

A second reason ESL or bilingual educators were not on IEP teams was perhaps by choice. When this happened, focus group participants who were IEP team members expressed the desire for greater collaboration between Special Education and ESL or Bilingual Education.

*“I think it should be mandated that regardless if an ELL teacher is full time on a campus or not, that they participate in the IEP process to provide input-feedback*

*on accommodations for students and provide information to teachers on how to better support them. Our ELL person never communicates with us.”*

*“I think it would be helpful to have some collaboration with the ELL coordinator when working on IEP/testing accommodations for these students, but typically there is no collaboration.”*

*“I think having the ELL department be part of the IEP team would be a good start in increasing collaboration. I would also like to have more collaborative conversations with the ELL department about effective strategies for supporting students who are both ELL and Special Education.”*

The third reason for exclusion of the ESL or Bilingual Education teacher from the IEP team was particularly common if an ELL with a disability had been exited from ESL or bilingual services. Some schools and districts allowed ELLs with disabilities to be served entirely within special education even though they were eligible for language support services.

*“Most ELD teachers are not part of the IEP team unless the student is being served in an ELD designated classroom. This often occurs when a student is ELL and being served gen. ed. and at a later date is evaluated and determined eligible for special ed services. For students needing special education services for a great deal of their day, they often are not served in ELD programs as the teams determine that special ed needs trump ELL needs.”*

*“Ideally, everyone who is involved in the education of a student should attend the IEP meeting. ELL teacher/coordinator, in fact, should attend because the kid is involved in ELL program. They [ESL teachers] find/enroll ELL students and test them but do not follow their progress in the program.”*

In a few cases, the ESL or Bilingual Education teacher would have been excluded from the IEP team and from accommodations decision-making for the content assessment, but the teacher requested to be involved in IEP team meetings so that he or she could ensure accommodations decisions represented the language learning needs of the child.

*“Historically where I work, the [Special Education] teacher would just make these decisions, but now I [ESL] am a loud voice requesting that people invite me to meetings and share information with me.”*

Other important individuals that focus group members mentioned as part of the IEP team included parents and principals.

## Accommodations Decision-making Process

*Occurrence during IEP team meetings.* As previously mentioned, accommodations decisions were typically made at a student’s annual IEP meeting, but may also have been made at regular IEP goal evaluation meetings.

*“When an ELL student with disabilities is identified as having disabilities, determination for assessments and accommodations is held at their initial IEP meeting.”*

*“In two of the three buildings [I have worked at] we sat together at each eval or each IEP or at the beginning of each year to review accommodations outlined in the IEPs by our team or previous teams. We discuss current needs, adjustments, etc.”*

These processes may vary depending on whether decisions are in reference to content assessment or English proficiency assessment. Decisions about accommodations for state English proficiency tests may be made separately by the ELL team.

*“We as teachers determine the accommodations for our ELL students.”*

In other cases, the decisions may be made in conjunction with the Special Education staff outside of the IEP team meeting. Sometimes this input is incorporated into the IEP team’s discussion and other times it is not. For example,

*“A few months ago I was handed a sheet and asked to write down which accommodations I wanted for each EL student...Many are not necessary.”*

*“Our ELL and special education staff meet to try to review the accommodations or modifications needed by each child and how they might best be met.”*

*“We also look at each student to determine which accommodations they will need for the English proficiency assessments. I work closely with the ELL Teacher prior to any assessments.”*

Some participants reported that there was variation across buildings in how decisions are made, depending on school and departmental leadership.

*“Since I’ve now worked in three different buildings in our district my response is, it unfortunately varies, even within the same district. However, this can be totally dependent on the leadership of the ELL staff and the leadership of an as-*

*essment team that knows what they are doing. This has been a point of concern of mine for a while since they are ALL our students.”*

A few individuals reported that there was no uniform accommodations decision- making process for ELLs with disabilities because their school served a relatively small number of these students.

*“We usually have 5 or less EL/[Special Education] students in a given year. This year there are only two so no formal process has been created.”*

*Individualized decision-making.* Generally, focus group participants mentioned that accommodations were selected on an individual student basis, depending on the accommodations that students needed to show their knowledge and skills in a content area.

*“The accommodations that are decided at my school are based on the individual. We do not just group all our ELLs together and give them all the same accommodations. We talk with and observe the student to understand what accommodations would help him or her succeed.”*

*“The psych that I work with does a great job of recommending which accommodations a student should have according to what was found during testing and observation of the student. From year to year we check to see if a particular accommodation is needed or if we need to add a new one.”*

*“All students are required to take the state assessments so the decisions focus on what testing accommodations are needed. We do this by first looking at the needs of the student and the Testing Accommodations Guidelines provided to us by the State. Then we choose the accommodations that will be best for the student.”*

*Exceptions to individualized decision-making.* Focus group participants discussed some exceptions to the general practice of individualized decision-making. First, students’ IEPs sometimes stayed the same over time and accommodations information was not be updated. As a result, students may have received accommodations which no longer fit their learning needs.

*“Accommodations already listed in previous IEP are carried over to the new IEP. I hope your teams do a better job of really making sure they are still needed. I’m afraid that many of our teachers pass over that section as it is ‘already filled out from last year’ and don’t give it any additional consideration.”*

*“The IEP program has a drop down option with several listed accommodations that are generally needed for students with disabilities. Sadly, what was meant as a way to make things a little easier for teachers also makes it so that less thought really goes into this area and teachers click away on the list placing a laundry*



*list of accommodations into the IEP with little regard to whether they are really needed or not, but that they would be helpful if used. We are continually training teachers to consider this area more carefully.”*

A second exception mentioned was that there often some accommodations that were assigned to every student with a disability or to every ELL. Typically these commonly assigned accommodations were the provision of extra time or small group test administration with a familiar examiner such as the ELL teacher. Students appeared to be assigned to test with a particular teacher who taught them, regardless of whether they needed a small group testing situation as an accommodation. In some cases, educators felt that only these commonly assigned accommodations were truly beneficial.

*“The school I am at currently, ELs and [Special Education] students always take the state test within a small group.”*

*“In our building, ELLs are tested together for state content and language proficiency tests. Since we have a large group of 7<sup>th</sup> graders, but few 8<sup>th</sup> graders, only 7<sup>th</sup> graders will test as a group with me (the only ELL teacher) during the [state content assessment] while I consult with content teachers for 8<sup>th</sup> grade on ELL accommodations for the few 8<sup>th</sup> graders on our ELL roster. I will have native language dictionaries, language CDs for the...languages provided, as well as simplified Thesaurus student editions for the editing during the writing test (given to 8<sup>th</sup> graders). Long-term ELLs with a disability who are served by Learning Support, will also test with learning support teachers...”*

*“Our decision to test ELLs together resulted from the pressure many [students] feel during state tests and their hesitation to ask for help they are entitled to when most students in the room are not ELL. No middle schooler wants to stand out.”*

### **Specific Considerations in Determining Appropriate Accommodations**

The focus group participants listed three specific issues to consider when making accommodations decisions for an ELL who has a disability.

*Access versus unfair advantage.* Some participants mentioned needing to consider whether providing a particular accommodation allows an individual student to have equal access to the content that is assessed or whether it gives the student unfair advantage over other students.

*“Again, the whole idea behind the accommodations despite their multitude of needs is to create access not advantage. You always have to ask yourself, am I offering advantage to an ELL student with disabilities that would not be offered*

*to a non ELL disabled student or an ELL student without a disability? If your answer is yes, it might be a useful accommodation during instruction but not appropriate during assessment.”*

*“In selecting the most appropriate assessment for a student who is an English Language Learner, teachers must determine what, if any, accommodations are needed for the student to access the selected assessment.”*

*Regular use during instruction.* Several participants discussed what seemed to be a common state requirement, that large-scale assessment accommodations be regularly used in instruction.

*“If an accommodation (such as a scribe) is written into a student’s IEP but is not an accommodation regularly provided on classroom assessments, then this student cannot use a scribe on [state content and English proficiency assessments]. Our district assessment coordinator made it clear that a student should not be offered a scribe for the first time...on the state assessments.”*

*Availability on state assessments.* Another consideration for accommodations decision makers to address was whether the desired accommodation that educators would like to recommend for a specific student is allowable on the state assessment. Educators often used state assessment guidelines that contained lists of accommodations as they were thinking about this consideration.

*“The state provides a list of accommodations that may be provided and that won’t invalidate the assessment.”*

*“To determine if a student will need testing accommodations to participate in state assessments, answer the following questions:*

*Does the student use accommodations during daily instruction?*

*If the student uses accommodations during daily instruction, does the student need accommodations in order to participate in the state assessment?*

*If so, which testing accommodations are necessary and appropriate for the student?*

*Then we can look at the state provided lists of standard accommodations for ELL students and for students with IEPs.”*

There appeared to be some confusion among focus group participants as to whether any accommodation mentioned in a student’s IEP had to be allowed for state assessments or whether

IEP team members had to adhere to the state assessment guidelines in recommending student accommodations.

*“If accommodations are noted in an IEP they must be provided...If a student is familiar with an accommodation it may be used.”*

*“Accommodations can be used on any of the state tests for Special Ed. kids with IEPs if it states so on their IEP. That includes the state English Proficiency test for ELL kids...If that team decides that an impacted Special Ed. (and ELL) student should be able to have a scribe then that person can also have one for the ELL language proficiency test.”*

### **Information Used to Make Accommodations Decisions**

Focus group participants named a number of different pieces of information that they used to help make assessment accommodations decisions for ELLs with disabilities. There was little consistency across participants as to which pieces of information they used, other than the IEP itself.

*“In terms of deciding which accommodations ELLs with disabilities will receive, we refer to the accommodations listed in the student’s IEP. These accommodations are written into the IEP by the person writing the IEP, with input from the ELL Facilitator at each school.”*

*“Accommodations are decided based on IEP goals and when state assessments are taking place the DFAs [Directions for Administration] are reviewed to ensure the accommodations are allowable.”*

Other types of information used included previous state assessment scores, recent evaluation recommendations, state policy documents, and input from individual educators, parents, and students. It was not always clear that input from individuals took place during an IEP team meeting.

*“The state assessment scores are used to help develop ILLP’s [Individual Language Learner Plans], IEP’s and interventions and accommodations in both special education and general education.”*

*“The state provides a list of accommodations that may be provided and that won’t invalidate the assessment. These accommodations are reviewed at the IEP meeting and the team determines which of these accommodations will be provided based on the most recent evaluation recommendations, teacher input, parent and student input if available.”*

*“We do work closely with the EL staff. I always invite the EL teacher to attend IEP meetings and evaluation planning and results meetings. Since there are multiple schedules it is not always possible for them to attend. When that happens I ask for written information that can be shared at the meeting. In this way we hope that the plan for accommodations is appropriate for the student.”*

## **Challenges in Implementing Assessment Accommodations**

Focus group members mentioned a number of logistical issues and challenges that affected the ability of schools to implement state assessment accommodations for ELLs with disabilities. These logistical issues generally fell into six categories: (a) quality of accommodations information contained in the IEP, (b) effect of group test administration, (c) timing of decisions versus testing, (d) staffing and resource availability issues, (e) communication issues, and (f) need for alignment between assessment and instructional accommodations.

*Quality of accommodations information in IEPs.* The first accommodations implementation issue that was frequently discussed was the quality of the information contained in students’ IEPs. As previously mentioned, participants stated that IEPs were generic and not well written, perhaps in part because educators used standardized software packages to create IEPs. The software contained lists of possible accommodations, but it was unclear whether the accommodations listed corresponded to those that were allowable on state assessments. Teachers tended to copy the information from one year, or one student’s IEP, to the next. Use of these types of software packages sometimes resulted in too many accommodations being offered to a particular student, rather than only those that supported the student’s specific needs.

There were several additional reasons why educators tended not to individualize students’ IEPs, and thus did not individualize assessment accommodations. These reasons included limited budgets, large student caseloads, and lack of time.

*“Due to state cuts and tight budgets, I have seen that caseloads for special educators are very high. In these situations, educators must rush or have IEP’s due at all the same time. I realize that the IEP systems offer a convenient way of creating the IEP’s, but I have read so many that look and sound exactly the same. I thought they were supposed to be individualized.”*

*“I think teachers get too overwhelmed with things to do. Not only do we have to teach and write IEP’s, but they make resource special education teachers take on recess duty, we attend so many meetings, and then you are pulled in many other directions throughout the day. With all this combined, teachers get cramped to write IEP’s and rely on what they have written before or what’s in the IEP bank.”*

Some participants believed that teachers' lack of skill in writing IEPs was an issue that should be addressed through training.

*“Some educators do not know how to write IEP’s...I know some educators that have been teaching for several years and when I receive one of their IEP’s you’d think a first year teacher wrote it. On the other hand, I know first year teachers that write IEP’s like a pro.”*

*“There should be more support systems in place for educators. In addition, maybe there should be more trainings on how to actually write an IEP, to make it individualized not a copy.”*

*Group test administration.* The second accommodations implementation issue discussed was the effect of group test administration on the way accommodations were provided. As previously mentioned, some accommodations were assigned to every student with a disability or to every ELL. Typically these commonly assigned accommodations were the provision of extra time or small group test administration with a familiar examiner such as the ELL teacher. Students appeared to be assigned to test with a particular teacher who taught them, regardless of whether they needed a small group testing situation as an accommodation. In some cases, educators believed that only these commonly assigned accommodations were truly beneficial.

*“Because we test our students in small groups anyway and give them time to take it, we do not have to make many more accommodations.”*

*Timing of accommodations decisions.* The timing of test accommodations decisions was another issue described in focus groups. Some accommodations that require special formatting of a test booklet or provision of a special test administrator need to be requested early in order to make the necessary arrangements. However, some school staff reported that they tend to make accommodations decisions close to the time of the state assessment. Sometimes the timing of those decisions affected the availability of desired accommodations.

*“...In my district, due to the volume of tests, student numbers, team members schedules and the ongoing volume of other tasks, identifying the needs and plans for any accommodations per the state’s menu and a student’s IEP, are typically made closer to the window of the state test.”*

*“With all the changes happening in testing this year (computerized [state content assessment]), the switch to the [English proficiency assessment], etc. we felt a little broadsided. So far we’ve learned a lot about changes that should be made in accommodations for next year. One thing we will definitely do is order our large-print and modified versions early!”*

Another participant mentioned that accommodations decisions were made much earlier in the year than lists of currently allowed state assessment accommodations were publicized, making it difficult for the IEP team to determine appropriate accommodations.

*“We never know what [the state] will allow or won’t until right before testing starts each year, so when we write the IEP we are just guessing that what we put as an accommodation will actually be allowed to be used for standardized testing.”*

*Availability of staff and resources required for implementation.* A fourth issue that participants mentioned was the availability of staff and resources, including building space, to provide the accommodations during state testing time. In the following examples, the lack of ESL or Bilingual Education staff to provide accommodations to large numbers of ELLs, limited the availability and type of accommodations for ELLs with disabilities.

*“It would be up to ELL staff to provide the accommodation, and since I cannot be in 5 places at once, it is usually limited to students that need it most, who have lower language levels, and those that I work with and provide accommodations to during the school day. MANY do not receive the accommodations that they could technically receive based on assessment guidelines.”*

*“We are understaffed in the ELL department (all of us doubling or tripling up on schools & only work part time). Our hours were all cut as well. We do what we can & just use the ‘general’ assessment accommodations put out by the [state department of education].”*

In one case, it appeared that ESL or bilingual educators were required to administer all of the accommodations to ELLs with disabilities, including those that would support the child’s disability. Due to the limited number of ESL staff, the participant thought that individuals other than ESL teachers should be allowed to give the accommodations.

Another participant echoed the idea of limited staffing to provide particular accommodations, especially those that must be administered one-on-one, and added limited physical resources as an additional challenge.

*“During state content tests, students have accommodations concerning comprehension of instructions as well as time and space needs. Because of the variety of accommodations (CDs, reading prompts aloud, dictionaries, etc.) testing is more individualized and an organizational challenge – do we have hardware to provide the CDs; are the classes small enough so the teacher can read prompts to each student if necessary.”*

Other resource issues that were mentioned included lack of space for small group test administrations, limited supplies (e.g., dictionaries), and lack of computers for computer-based testing.

*“Teachers often do not have computers available to provide the translations (technology now sent out to classrooms does not allow for CD drives), nor do we have enough dictionaries to send to all classrooms with ELLs.”*

In some cases, accommodations were potentially available but the cost of providing them was prohibitive to school districts.

*“There is an option to have a translator for the test but in a small district such as mine where there are 50 students speaking 13 different languages, the cost of translators makes that option nonviable.”*

In other cases, the test developer did not make a particular form of an accommodation available in the way students with disabilities required it. For example, one participant spoke of the need for uncontracted braille, a basic form of braille where each letter of the alphabet is represented, without abbreviations that are commonly found in literary or contracted braille.

*“The concerns we have as TVIs (Teachers of the Visually Impaired) is that some students need their test in uncontracted braille and the testing companies do not allow for this adjustment. In addition, we continue to work with the [state department of education] and the testing company that enlarges the test to make them in an appropriate size even though print is enlarged.”*

*Cross-departmental communication.* The fifth issue mentioned by participants was the difficulty of cross-departmental communication in order to coordinate both ELL accommodations and special education accommodations for an ELL with a disability. Typically, participants described a system set up so that special educators were in charge of providing accommodations for a student’s disability and ESL or bilingual teachers were in charge of providing linguistic support accommodations for ELLs. One ESL educator described his or her responsibilities this way:

*“The special ed team addresses the learning support guidelines, while I focus on the accommodations that help with language – CDs, reading items, LI dictionaries, etc.”*

This division of responsibility required ongoing communication between departments. As students’ IEPs changed over time, special education staff needed to update the ESL or bilingual Education staff on changes to the accommodations for individual ELLs with disabilities. The continual need for communication proved to be challenging.

*“We make sure each student needing accommodations is identified by their primary advocate (ELL teacher or SPED teacher). When they fall in both categories for state testing, it is a special challenge to keep everyone communicating with changes on IEPs...”*

*“Sometimes there isn’t enough communication between departments to ensure that ELLs with disabilities are getting appropriate accommodations.”*

*Alignment between assessment and instructional accommodations.* A final accommodations issue discussed was that ELLs with disabilities needed regular and consistent accommodations use in both instruction and large-scale assessment. Using similar accommodations in both contexts allowed students to be familiar with accommodations offered on the state assessment and provided them with access to the content that would be assessed.

*“The accommodations provided to a student on any state assessment must be ones with which the student is familiar and already uses in the classroom. While students may not be using the exact accommodations in the classroom, as on the state assessment, students should be utilizing a comparable accommodation on a regular basis.”*

*“[A top issue is...] Also making sure that the testing accommodations are being used in the classroom on a regular basis, to eliminate novelty.”*

In some cases, participants reported that IEP teams understood the importance of choosing related instructional and assessment accommodations that would support a student on the state assessments. In the following example, the analysis of instructional data appeared to play a key role in choosing assessment accommodations.

*“When an Individual Educational Plan meeting occurs, all parties bring data and knowledge of the student to the table. This data is used to support the student in his participation on state tests. These accommodations may not be as extensive as the accommodations the student uses for his/her classwork, but they are very similar.”*

Even though in some cases appropriate decisions did appear to be made regarding the links between instructional and assessment accommodations, focus group participants frequently reported that ELLs with disabilities were not receiving consistent and related instructional accommodations for three primary reasons.

First, general educators may have been unfamiliar, or uncomfortable, with the concept of an accommodation. Thus they tended to not implement accommodations in classroom instruction.



*“I struggle with having regular ed teachers actually use the accommodations during the year so the students are ready to have the accommodations during the [state content test].”*

*“Making sure the [general education] teachers understand the accommodations a student has in their IEP are one thing, but actually getting them to understand that the accommodation needs to be delivered every day, by everyone and then making sure they are implemented are another thing.”*

One reason participants gave for general educators being less likely to offer accommodations was that they struggled with balancing the idea of access to the curriculum with the idea of fairness for all students.

*“...Many teachers feel that the differentiated instruction that ELLs need, and we all know as good teaching, is watering down their instruction.”*

It appeared to be especially challenging for general educators to understand the difference between accommodations that supported students with significant cognitive disabilities in accessing the curriculum and modifications that altered student expectations unfairly, making fair grading difficult.

*“Gen. Ed. teachers just don’t feel it fair to grade students the same if they are receiving accommodations – even though it doesn’t significantly affect the standards they are learning. It is even more challenging if a student with significant disabilities is receiving modifications or utilizing a modified curriculum within the gen ed classroom... We want to train teachers (both gen ed and special ed) the difference between modifications & accommodations and how IEP team members can work together to determine appropriate accommodations in grading or how to determine a modified grade.”*

Some participants believed greater administrative support was needed to ensure that accommodations were used consistently during instruction. Administrators may have been equally unsure about the link between instructional accommodations and assessment accommodations for this population of students.

*“We don’t have a specific process to ensure that all of the teachers are implementing accommodations consistently and appropriately. Our principal is very involved and committed to making sure students get what they need, so he may be doing this without all of us knowing.”*

*“It has to be an accommodation that is used throughout the school year. Last year my principal wanted to get the Korean translated CD for the science 8<sup>th</sup> grade [state content test], but the student was functioning all year in science without a translator, so I had to point out that just because it is available, doesn’t mean it is appropriate.”*

A second reason that consistent instructional accommodations, linked to assessment accommodations, were not used was that the IEP was not comprehensive or well written. Classroom teachers rely on the directives in students’ IEPs. However, in some schools and districts disability-related accommodations for content assessments were listed on the IEPs while ELL accommodations to support language learning and language assessment were not. This created a situation in which students rarely received instructional accommodations for second language learning when these accommodations were available on the assessment. It also led to fragmented decision-making across special education and ESL departments.

*“While IEPs specify accommodations, ELL accommodations are often not clear or followed. These begin at the instruction level, not just when assessments are administered.”*

*“Most issues with accommodations for students with disabilities have more to do with their disability and not that they may be ELL. It is almost an after thought when a student has an IEP. Not for all but for many.”*

Some participants wished for a written learning plan for ELLs that would contain accommodations for all students, but for ELLs with disabilities the relationship of this plan to an IEP was not described in detail.

*“In my experience the biggest challenge is that in my district special ed has IEPs and 504s to support, and in essence require, accommodations/modifications for student testing...There has been discussion about creating [learning] plans for ELLs over the years but the actual design and implementation have not taken place and that is one of the biggest challenges I have faced.”*

A related idea mentioned by one other participant was having a yearly special education accommodations plan developed from the IEP to ensure that related instructional accommodations were provided.

*“I think that the most important way to help ELLs with disabilities participate fully on state assessments is to create accommodation plans at the beginning of the school year based on their IEPs, so that they are consistently receiving*

*accommodations leading up to the state assessments so that they can use these accommodations on the state assessments as well.”*

A third reason that educators may have had difficulty implementing consistent instructional accommodations for ELLs with disabilities that were similar to what was offered on the test is that instructional expectations did not match assessment expectations. Participants spoke of wanting to use familiar classroom accommodations on the state assessment and being told that those accommodations were nonstandard and could not be used.

*“I think one of the greatest challenges is that the accommodations we provide for classroom and state level assessments sometimes do not match those that we provide to students in their daily programs. We shorten assignments, spread out due dates, provide more scaffolding, etc..., but these are not entirely apparent in the accommodations for testing at state level.”*

*“[Assessment accommodations] should also be those used routinely in the classroom which presents challenges, as the assessment asks more than students routinely are asked to do.”*

Some educators responded to this mismatch with frustration while others were able to determine that there needed to be some kind of a transition away from instructional accommodations that were “nonstandard” as testing time approached.

*“Accommodations in daily practice doesn’t always match up with accommodations on the test. That can be frustrating.”*

Using the example of reading students’ classroom assignments aloud, an accommodation typically not allowed on state reading tests, one participant expressed the belief that use of non-standard accommodations in instruction could build skills needed for assessments.

*“It is the hope that using these non-standard accommodations can help build skills as they are taught so that when assessments occur, that even though those accommodations are not allowed, their skill level is now higher and those accommodations won’t be needed.”*

Another participant spoke about his or her school’s in-depth discussion surrounding the matching of instructional and assessment accommodations.

*“If there isn’t a match initially with what accommodations the state allows, we talk about ways we can continue using the accommodation but lead to wean them off it by state assessment time. If worse comes to worse, and a student really*

*needs a particular accommodations, we can always run the exception through the [SEA name].”*

## **Summary of Accommodations Comments**

Focus group participants raised many issues regarding the provision of assessment accommodations for ELLs with disabilities. The IEP process was, again, the center of most discussion regarding disability-related accommodations for content tests. Under the best circumstances, accommodations to address students’ second language-learning needs and accommodations on state English proficiency assessments were also discussed at IEP meetings. In schools where accommodations decisions were centralized in this way, the IEP team appeared to be diverse and to represent all of a student’s instructional experiences. In such cases, English language development teachers were included on the team and all members were involved in the decision-making process at the same time. However, focus group participants reported that achieving this type of multi-disciplinary collaborative team could be challenging for a variety of reasons. Often, IEP team members had unequal levels of knowledge of, and experience with, assessment accommodations. Lacking the necessary background appeared to create a situation in which some team members, including ESL or bilingual education teachers, general education teachers, and parents, did not participate equally in the decision-making. The relationship between the special education and ESL or bilingual education departments, as well as staff responsibilities and workloads, complicated the issue of IEP team participation by ESL and bilingual teachers. When the two departments had separate processes for making assessment decisions, when program structure allowed ELLs with disabilities to be excluded from English language development instruction, and when ESL or bilingual teachers had large case loads and schedules that prevented consistent IEP team participation, accommodations decisions frequently appeared to be fragmented and may not have been clearly communicated to all the relevant parties.

IEP team members typically reported that they made individualized assessment accommodations decisions for ELLs with disabilities. However, at times it appeared that the large student caseloads for special educators, the existence of computerized IEP development software, and the separate procedures for administering ELL assessment accommodations in small groups, may have led to accommodations that were not truly individualized and up-to-date. At times, it appeared that although individualized accommodations were determined during IEP team meetings, at testing time there were a number of logistical factors (e.g., school budgets to pay for expensive accommodations, availability of staff, availability of resources, availability of enough rooms) that prevented some students from actually receiving those accommodations.

An additional factor that made the provision of appropriate accommodations on state assessments difficult was educators’ beliefs about, and provision of, instructional accommodations. According to the participants, some ELLs with disabilities may have had limited familiarity with

assessment accommodations that could have been offered to them because they did not receive those accommodations in the classroom. Teachers mentioned most frequently as not providing accommodations during instruction were those who believed that allowing instructional accommodations for some students and not others created unfair treatment, and teachers who lacked knowledge about accommodations. Other students may have received adaptations to instruction that were more like assessment modifications (e.g., reading the reading assignment aloud to a student) in that the adaptations altered the skills being taught and measured by classroom assessments. When such adaptations were made in classroom instruction and were not available on the state assessment, educators sometimes felt frustrated. Some IEP team members expressed the belief that any assessment accommodation written into a student's IEP had to be provided on a state assessment, even if the state did not allow the use of it.

The rich discussion of assessment accommodations clearly indicated that focus group participants could benefit from additional training and support on this important topic.

## Leadership

A repeated theme throughout focus group participants' comments was the important role that school, district, and state education leadership played in assessment and accountability efforts, and more broadly, in the academic success of students and their teachers. These comments typically related to five sub-themes: (a) the importance of staff hiring and retention to ensure sufficient numbers of qualified staff to attend to the needs of ELLs with disabilities, (b) the need for clear and consistent policies on the education and assessment of ELLs with disabilities, (c) the importance of providing training and staff development on assessment and instruction of ELLs with disabilities, (d) the varying levels of understanding that school staff had regarding appropriate use of state assessment scores for ELLs with disabilities, and (e) the variation in score use dependent on who used them and for what purpose.

## Staff Hiring and Retention

Special educators and ESL or bilingual teachers described key issues in the hiring and retention of staff somewhat differently. Some special educators had comments about how standards, testing, and accountability contributed to an atmosphere of intense stress for teachers of students with disabilities that was resulting in a sizeable number of teachers leaving the profession.

*"I've never seen so many teachers retire from Special Ed. as I did last year! This year we had several retire mid-year! Something they NEVER did as they usually felt so tied to their students they never thought of leaving until the end of the school year. They are so stressed with pay on performance, new teacher evaluation system based on progress - and unclear communication on what will*

*count towards progress. Their fear is that [state content assessment and state alternate assessment] type tests will be part of that evaluation and when you mix in ELL with disabilities it is just an extra whammy.”*

Resignations and retirements, particularly those that occurred mid-year, were challenging for school and district leaders because groups of younger teachers entering a school or district at the same time needed extra support in their first job placement. One participant described how the numbers of staff that were leaving positions in his or her building led to an influx of new teachers with potentially better skills for teaching diverse learners. However, these new teachers were also new to the profession and required significant guidance and training.

*“There are pro’s and con’s to all issues. The con’s is that we lose teachers that have been very dedicated to their students that just can’t handle all the changes in education (new teacher evaluations, new standards, ELL issues, and state auditing).*

*“Of course, the word education has always been synonymous with change. Still all this at the same time is really stressful! The pro I guess is that it seems the younger group, if well trained, are better prepared to work with diverse learners. They have more instruction in ELLs and disabilities and their student teaching from many universities includes cross categorical experience. Still, new teachers are a strain on administration and district support staff as we try to get them up to speed on how to be great teachers! This year we had nearly 4X the number of new teachers. In a District our size, it is more than some Districts have in their entire Special Education staff list.”*

In contrast, the challenge for ESL and bilingual programs appeared to be having the ability to hire a sufficient number of teachers to serve the increasing number of students.

*“Our district...shares one ELL person and we are a pretty large district. Even at my previous location there was only one person. While a much smaller district, our ELL population was much higher statistically. How can one person adequately do the job? They cannot and the funding to do the job adequately should be paramount. Rather than fine districts in the state for not doing their job, come along side and help them do it.”*

One participant added that he or she did not simply want to see more ESL or bilingual teachers hired, but rather qualified ESL or bilingual teachers added to an already well-designed and well-functioning language development program.

*“My last thought on needing to hire more EL personnel...this is a catch 22 because I believe that there needs to be quality EL teachers placed in a school to support ELs. However, hiring additional EL staff to a faulty EL [class] or a dysfunctional EL system makes no difference at all.”*

A shortage of qualified bilingual classroom aides and school interpreters was perhaps the most frequently mentioned staffing situation across focus groups. Aides could not only assist teachers in communication with students and families, but also could contextualize students' behavior challenges and explain what was typical child behavior for the student's home culture or typical native language.

*“I...had a few opportunities over my years of teaching to have a bilingual aide. The help is immeasurable! Not only are they able to help with student comprehension but also helped me learn as well. I can't tell you how many times the aide would tell me stuff like 'that's not jargon, that really poorly spoken Spanish' or that a child's behavior may be related to cultural factors I was unaware of or forgotten about. They also helped a great deal in translating written and spoken communications with parents!! It is a lucky draw when you are able to hire an individual that can speak another language - especially Spanish ...”*

Interpreters played a key role in conducting inclusive IEP meetings where parents were present and in translating district communications that were written in English. Although state assessments were not specifically tied into a need for interpreters, the lack of interpreters could have a negative effect on parents' understanding of the content of the IEP, and presumably, any test participation or accommodations contained within it.

*“It is sometimes to collect information from parents because of the language barrier and the lack of people qualified to translate. I had to hold an IEP in Spanish (and I only speak Spanglish) because (at the last minute) there was NO translator available. We had to go on because we had scheduled the Physical Therapist, Speech Therapist, and teacher consultant to be there as well. It was terrible. I will go over the IEP with [her] again when our parent liaison comes back to school (thank goodness she trusts me). I think our special ed department/ bilingual department or ISD should provide a translator and materials in the home languages of our students. It should NOT be up to the school to stretch our thin resources to provide this sort of service to our parents. Although the parental rights and responsibilities and IEP form is translated and posted on our ISD website ... all other communications from the district ARE NOT (and when we bring it to their attention, they always ask, 'can someone at your school translate it?').”*

## Policies

School, district, and state leaders also played a key role in determining policies on assessment, instruction, and policies for special programs like ESL or bilingual education classes.

The greatest number of policy-related comments was made about assessment participation and accommodations decisions and typically reflected participants' understanding of test decision-making requirements implemented at the school or district level, as well as state participation and accommodations policies. As mentioned previously, in some schools there was confusion about the interpretation of these policies. One reason for the confusion may have been that school staff were getting policy-related information by word of mouth, rather than actually having a written policy to consult. A few focus group members commented generally about the lack of policy guidance on assessing ELLs with disabilities. The following participant described an ongoing practice of making ad hoc assessment decisions without guidance from written policies.

*“Honestly we don’t have any policies or procedures in place specifically relating to ELLs with disabilities and testing. Thus far (in my three years teaching here) it has simply been a case-by-case looking at the student, ability level and deciding on testing.”*

Another participant stated that, because of a lack of a written policy handbook, teachers were typically unaware that students could exit ESL services if they passed the state English proficiency assessment and that ELLs with disabilities could receive both Special Education and ESL or Bilingual Education.

*“In theory, no, they [ELLs] don’t remain in the ESL program [if they pass the state English proficiency test] and [ELLs with disabilities] are eligible for both services. I say in theory because this is not common knowledge among teachers. We have not had a handbook in 10 years that clearly articulates policy or what is mandated by law. I also say in theory because our district does a piecemeal job of providing ESL service. Some schools do a better job of it than others. ESL service varies from building to building and there is NOT an adequate number of qualified staff to provide services. “*

These types of direct comments about the lack of policy were relatively infrequent, however.

As a striking contrast, many schools and districts did appear to have clearly communicated policies on the use of co-teaching and school-wide instructional planning or problem-solving teams. These teams often supported cross-disciplinary collaboration in interpreting assessment data on ELLs with disabilities and planning standards-based instruction that was accessible to students. Although perhaps not written down, educators could articulate the details of these team



approaches and the rationale behind them in ways they could not explain assessment policies. One special educator with extensive experience with a co-teaching model described her collaboration with general education teachers that she believed supported both special education students and ELLs in the mainstream classroom.

*“I am co-teaching in grades 1-5 with a current case load of 19...my partnership (roles and responsibilities) look different in different rooms and at different times of the year, depending on the subject, number of hours of specialized service determined per the IEP, number of students on my caseload, the personality of the general education teacher, and the very very complicated windows of opportunities created by having to create a schedule that involves so many different teachers...We try to group my students in rooms together, along with other students who are targeted as needing interventions. In this way, I can support children without IEPs vicariously or consciously at the same time as I am supporting children on my caseload. I know that this is not considered best practice (to group children by skill level) but it is the ONLY way that I can realistically be compliant in terms of hours of service. I am usually paired up with the classrooms with high numbers of children with low English language proficiency. This comes as a benefit if we end up taking them (or the at-risk English only students) to our child study team. I have already provided research-based intense interventions and have data about how they have responded to it. When co-teaching really works I can provide expertise in “process” and insight on how students learn and about what gets in the way of learning (language difference and disability) and how we can build on-ramps to the curriculum for students while the general education teacher provides expertise in scope and sequence and content. In my ten years providing services in this way, I have watched general education teachers change their instructional strategies (better understanding diverse learning and language needs) and have established a few very meaningful partnerships...”*

Another participant described at length the school principal’s role in promoting collaboration between general education and special education teachers to plan grade-level standards-based instruction that included ELLs with disabilities.

*“PLCs are Professional Learning Communities. They are designed for grade level teams getting together to design common formative assessments that all teachers at that grade level will use to assess lessons, units, etc. They then join together to analyze the data and determine why some students did well and others did poorly and to see if there are any commonalities. They also are to analyze if one teacher seemed to have more success teaching the lesson or unit, according to the scores, and talk amongst each other to determine if that teacher could either*

*explain how she may have taught differently than the others or determine if that teacher can teach those that didn't do well in assessment the lesson again – her way – so that students don't simply fail the assessment but actually are given all the opportunity to learn the material and pass. It requires a lot of dedicated planning time to collaborate. Principals were all provided training through an outside company specializing in PLCs. They help the special education teacher because we require that they are part of the gen. ed. At grade level PLCs...Often times those that may struggle in lessons are the ELL students. PLCs provide the time needed for teachers to act as professionals and work together to problem solve and come up with better ideas to instruct these students...It is difficult to tell right now how the implementation of PLCs will aide in state assessments and school outcomes as we are new to this concept and still struggle in how to find collaboration time and how to make sure teachers are following the PLC guidelines and not just using the time to talk, or lesson plan on their own.”*

Other forms of collaborative teams included a multi-disciplinary Building Instructional Team (BIT) that generated plans for student interventions, and regular data-use teams that might involve a more experienced educator or the principal meeting with less experienced educators to discuss data on student achievement. These types of team-based approaches appeared to play an important role in some teachers' work and could provide a potential avenue for promoting greater staff and family collaboration to address the multi-faceted needs of ELLs with disabilities.

### **Training and Staff Development**

A few participants expressed the belief that the staff development and training in which they had been able to participate met their needs on issues relating to instructing and assessing ELLs with disabilities. When it occurred, such targeted training appeared to be limited in scope. One participant described a one-time building-level meeting specific to the intersection of ESL and Special Education services.

*“Teacher development is great in the district I am in...The head of the ESL Dept and a seasoned ESL teacher also had a meeting for Special Education members to help them understand the process of ESL and discuss that communication between the two departments is very important.”*

However, some participants appeared to be offered staff development opportunities that only related to instruction of ELLs for English language proficiency or instructional strategies to support students in content classrooms. The ELL trainings described did not address the specific needs of ELLs with disabilities, particularly those students whose language learning might be affected by their disability.

*“Our ELL department provides professional development, offering effective strategies for working with ELLs. We aren’t to the point of using SIOP [Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol] as a district-wide initiative, but many of our teachers have received training, and are trying to incorporate these principles into their teaching.”*

*“The new initiative...is thinking maps specific to ELLs. All schools were trained in thinking maps even secondary but this year we are training folks in a specific training for ELLs. We are using a train the trainer model and believe thinking maps help students greatly with their writing and their thinking improves.”*

*“I always push for PD [professional development] for our school that will address the ELL and IEP students: co-teaching, SIOP [Sheltered Observation Instruction Protocol], differentiated learning, RtI [Response to Intervention], thinking maps, robust vocabulary development, English Language Development, Group Projects and Cooperative Learning, Think Pair Share (and other Kagen strategies), Leveled Readers (CAFÉ and the Daily Five).”*

A few participants were not aware of any available training opportunities that addressed the needs of this particular population of students.

*“There have not been programs or services at my school for student support or training that I know of...”*

*“I am not aware of special in-services or training specifically for EL staff working with EL students or those EL students with disabilities.”*

There were some calls for professional development opportunities targeted to the assessment and instruction needs of this population of students. Suggested training topics included choosing appropriate accommodations, and how to write IEPs for ELLs with disabilities that included meaningful accommodations information.

*“I think more state-directed, or at least co-op directed, hands-on support and learning about how to correctly identify and assign accommodations. Something yearly or every other year where we get together across the state to discuss and learn more about testing procedures and accommodations.”*

*“I would...like to see more staff development on accommodations that are available and how they relate to EL students with disabilities- our special education teachers typically have that information, but if we truly want every teacher responsible for every child, then we all should be informed.”*

*“I would love to see the district provide better PD for teacher teams on how to write IEP goals/objectives and accommodations for [ELLs with disabilities]. Sometimes students transfer to our school just before the test window which does not allow us time to amend the IEP.”*

When the focus group members learned that there would be an online training module created as an outcome of the IVARED project, some were openly enthusiastic about the availability of one common training with consistent information that would be offered to a variety of educators within the same building or district.

*“I’m excited to hear there will be an on-line training. There should be more of that as it seems that when different teachers or administrators attend different conferences or trainings from the state, we all come back with conflicting information. Maybe it is the way we interpret what is being said, but that in itself means the state is not very clear. Last summer I attended a conference and they spoke specifically about ELL & disabilities. The information I came back with was not the same information that a colleague heard not...6 months earlier. Something on-line where we all hear the same thing would be great!”*

## **Score Use**

A final leadership issue raised by focus group members related to school and district use of state assessment scores. While most of the comments on this topic did not explicitly link school leaders to test data use, the range and depth of data use practices often suggested significant involvement from individuals at levels higher than classroom educators. Score use comments had three sub-themes: (a) educators were unaware of how scores were used in their building or district, or they chose not to use the scores; (b) educators whose schools or districts used state test data to make group-level decisions about programming, scheduling, and curriculum; and (c) educators whose schools or districts used state test scores to make at least some decisions about daily instruction or classroom placement for individual students.

*Lack of familiarity or no score use.* When asked how test scores were used to make decisions about programming and services for ELLs with disabilities, those educators who did not work with students who took part in the testing, and those who were related-service providers, appeared to be less aware of how test scores were used in the school and district.

*“As far as I know, we do not use state assessment scores in this way. I know building principals report out to staff on the scores, but other than that I do not think programs are put in place to serve our ELLs with disabilities.”*

*“I’m not as familiar with the details of what the whole district does with state assessment scores, since I’m only in one building and we don’t give state assessments at this grade level.”*

Others, such as this high school special education teacher, knew the scores were potentially useable but did not believe the scores had a practical application.

*“As a special education teacher at the high school level, I use a student’s [state content assessment] scores very little for determining instructional placement ... by the time a student reaches high school, improvement in their disability level as far as reading and math is probably not going to happen ... at this point, we just try to teach them the curriculum for their grade level ...although at a slower pace in department classes...”*

*Group-level decisions about classes and teacher training.* Some participants described how their school or district used state assessment scores to create new classes and plan staff development so that students received better instruction in content areas in which aggregated student scores indicated a deficit. This type of score use seemed well-suited to the purpose of a large-scale accountability test that would only have a limited number of test items on any given concept in a particular content area.

*“Our district has looked at the gaps and created support classes for those students that are not proficient, and, not surprisingly, many of our students qualify for these classes...(we have them for language arts and math). We also offer after school and summer enrichment programs.”*

*“...The district noticed that middle school and high school level state assessment scores were low for the ELL population. Overall instruction of content to ESL students needed to be addressed. The district sent staff to be SIOP [Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol] trained and some became SIOP trainers. Those trainers then continuously provide local SIOP training to improve overall delivery of content in the classroom. SIOP also is beneficial to non ESL students as well.”*

*“Literacy is a common issue in the U.S. In this vein, our schools have noticed dips in reading and science. More, with [state] changing their cut scores, there was general fear over how our school would be represented by recent statistics. Understanding that literacy promotes success in ELA [English Language Arts] and Science, they invested deeply in AARI [Adolescent Accelerated Reading Initiative] training. AARI training provides reading support and training for students through organization and direct practice. This has become a district wide initiative and is of course represented in our ESL departments training.*

*Therefore, AARI occurs in our curriculum and may even become a class that our struggling students take.”*

These types of school-wide efforts presumably required substantial involvement of school and district leadership to promote such large-scale changes.

*Use of scores for individual student decisions.* Despite the fact that state content and English proficiency tests are generally not intended to be used to plan an individual student’s instruction or remediation, many focus group participants provided anecdotes that suggested school leaders were supporting the use of test scores for just this purpose. In some cases, the state test scores were just one of many data sources educators considered in planning a student’s instruction.

*“[State content test] scores are one of the pieces of data considered when determining what services students qualify for. Examples of the services are: Title One Services, [state content test] preparation in small groups, summer school, after school tutoring and possible referral to the [Response to Intervention] RtI or special education teams.”*

In other cases the state scores appeared to be the primary source relied on to make decisions for a particular student. In one case, the scores were used to indicate which student might require a Special Education evaluation.

*“I don’t believe my district uses state assessment scores to make decisions for kinds of programs or services. State assessment scores are used to say, ‘He hasn’t passed, he must be LD’ or If An ELL student is level 2, it is used to justify LD, for otherwise they would have learned English by now.”*

Use of English language proficiency test scores often determined placement into a particular instructional group.

*“Our district will use the [English language proficiency test] scores to place students in appropriate pull out/push in groups. For example, if a student scores B for Beginner, we will place that student in a Beginning English group. If they scored a HI for High Intermediate, they will be placed in a group that speaks English at a higher level. If they scored a P for Proficient or AP for Advanced Proficient they will be monitored in their classroom. In order to graduate from the ELL program, students must pass the [English proficiency test]... and also pass the [state content test]...After graduating students will be monitored for 2 years and could reenter the program if they still need assistance.”*

Another participant echoed the same belief that it was a state mandate to use state content assessment scores for ELLs (and ELLs with disabilities) to determine which students would be exited from ESL programming.

*“To my current understanding (as the rules are changing for when an ELL can exit the program) in our state an ELL must have passing scores on the [state content test] or they cannot exit the ESL program. That includes the math score on the [state content test]!”*

Another participant from the same state quickly corrected this viewpoint and explained that using the scores in this way had to be a district decision because it was not state policy.

*“So, where you work ... ELLs must have passing scores on the [state content test] (including math scores) or they cannot exit the ESL program! How interesting! I don’t think that is a state mandate, I had never heard it and I just tried googling it. It must be your district’s policy.”*

Exchanges such as these revealed the extent to which district and school administrators may have influenced the way in which assessment data were used and the degree to which those uses were appropriate for the intended purposes of state content and English proficiency tests.

### **Summary of Leadership Comments**

Comments related to the theme of leadership highlighted a variety of areas in which focus group participants either directly described a need for support from school and state education leaders, or described existing practices that appeared to require additional guidance from those leaders. Focus group members called for sufficient numbers of ESL or Bilingual Education and Special Education staff to be hired and retained long-term so that there would be an established group of experts on instructing and assessing ELLs with disabilities. Additional training for all staff regarding the instruction and assessment of ELLs with disabilities was also a need. Focus group members also desired clear and consistent written assessment policies on assessing ELLs with disabilities that would convey the same information to all educators in the same way. Finally, the data analysis team noted that, while many participants could describe in detail the way state assessment scores were used to make individual student’s instructional decisions, some of the practices described signaled a need for increased guidance on appropriate uses of state accountability test scores.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

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The rich focus group discussions highlighted in this report identified some key areas for IVARED state departments of education to address in order to increase the validity of existing content and English proficiency assessments for ELLs with disabilities. Consideration of these issues could improve the validity of assessments in other states as well, since all states serve this population of students.

State education agencies can do the following:

- Ensure that educators are providing ELLs with disabilities access to the grade-level content on which state content assessments are based. Teachers need leadership in determining how best to teach grade-level content to students who may have limited or interrupted schooling, who may not have learned concepts from previous grades, and whose learning is affected by limited proficiency in the language instruction as well as by a disability.
- Clarify federal and state participation requirements for both state content assessments and state English proficiency assessments. Do so in ways that reach all educators involved in making assessment decisions, rather than relying on assessment coordinators to pass on information to school staff.
- Create more written guidance specifically about assessment policies for ELLs with disabilities. Include in this document a discussion of the full range of accommodations available to these students, to support both their disability and their developing English proficiency. Consider making a version of this policy document available in formats that districts can share with educators.
- Examine ways that the State Education Agency might support districts and schools in addressing logistics issues that prevent ELLs with disabilities from receiving needed accommodations. These issues include the availability of trained staff who can administer both linguistic and disability-related accommodations, the timing of accommodations decisions prior to testing, and the coordination of cross-departmental communication between ESL or Bilingual Education, General Education, and Special Education staff regarding assessment decisions.
- Work to strengthen the collaborative, multi-disciplinary nature of IEP teams so that the full range of a student's assessment needs are discussed by all the relevant staff, parents or guardians, and the student. According to focus group participants, disjointed accommodations decisions often result from disjointed decision-making processes divided between the Special Education and ESL or Bilingual Education departments. It appeared that general educators may frequently not have been included in the decision-making processes.



- Support district and school leaders in understanding the appropriate use of state accountability test scores for educational planning and instructional decision-making. An essential part of making decisions about the interpretation and use of scores is to understand the purposes of accountability assessments and the types of decisions such tests are intended to inform.
- Provide additional staff development relating specifically to the assessment of ELLs with disabilities, and make the training available to all educators who serve these students, including general educators. Topics to include in the training are: (a) the purposes of accountability assessments; (b) the reasons why it is important to include ELLs with disabilities in these tests; (c) the participation requirements for ELLs with disabilities; (d) the alignment of instructional supports and assessment accommodations, especially how to choose assessment accommodations that do not invalidate the assessment; (e) the availability of specific accommodations for state content and language proficiency tests; (f) the central role of the IEP in documenting assessment participation and accommodations for both content and English proficiency assessments; (g) the writing IEPs that contain individualized accommodations that meet the current needs of an ELL with a disability; and (h) the importance of including educators with a variety of backgrounds and perspectives on the IEP team.

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**Appendix A: Focus Group Questions**

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## **FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM AND SMALL GROUP EDUCATORS**

### **Day 1**

- (1) Tell us about your experience working with English language learners with disabilities.
- (2) What do you think are the top three issues educators should know about to include English language learners with disabilities in classroom assessments and state (reading, math, science) assessments?

### **Day 2**

- (3) Describe the process your building uses to decide which state assessments (reading, math, science) ELLs with disabilities should take.
- (4) Tell us how it is decided which accommodations should be used for ELLs with disabilities for state content (reading, math, science) and English proficiency assessments.

### **Day 3**

- (5) Give us an example of how your building has used state assessment scores to make decisions about the kinds of programs and services ELLs with disabilities receive.
- (6) Your state department of education is participating in developing an online training module to help educators make state assessment decisions for ELLs with disabilities. We would like to include examples of ELLs with disabilities for this. Please give an example of an English language learner with a disability you have worked with in the last three years, without using their real name, to highlight for the online training. In addition to the student's background, this may also include what kind of state assessments the student took; which instructional accommodations the student used in the classroom; assessment accommodations used; the accuracy of the student's test scores reflecting their knowledge and skills; and, any other pertinent information.

### **Day 4**

- (7) What changes would you like to see made in your school about how ELLs with disabilities participate in state assessments?
- (8) Do you have any other comments about the topic of making assessment decisions for ELLs with disabilities?

## **FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR TEST COORDINATORS AND PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS**

### **Day 1**

- (1) Tell us about your experience in assessing English language learners with disabilities.
- (2) What do you think are the top three issues educators should know about to include English language learners with disabilities in classroom assessments and state (reading, math, science) assessments?

### **Day 2**

- (3) How do you differentiate the assessment needs of ELLs with disabilities from other ELLs or other students with disabilities?
- (4) Describe the process used by the staff in your building to make assessment participation decisions for ELLs with disabilities taking the state content (reading, math, science) and English proficiency tests in grades 3-12.

### **Day 3**

- (5) Tell us about how accommodations are decided for state content (reading, math, science) assessments.
- (6) Give us an example of how your building or district has used state assessment scores to make decisions about the kinds of programs and services ELLs with disabilities receive.

### **Day 4**

- (7) Your state department of education is participating in developing an online training module to help educators make state assessment decisions for ELLs with disabilities. We would like to include examples of ELLs with disabilities for this. Please give an example of an ELL with a disability you have worked with in the last three years, without using their real name, to highlight for the online training. In addition to the student's background, this may also include, e.g., how it was decided which state content and English proficiency tests they took and which accommodations (were they the same for all the tests?) were used; whether the test scores accurately reflected their knowledge and skills; what language they took the tests; how their needs were different from students who are not ELLs with disabilities, and other information you feel is relevant.

(8) Is there anything else you would like to add to this discussion about how to support educators in making more accurate assessment participating decisions for ELLs with disabilities?

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