

UNFAIR CHANGE IN TESTING THREATENS ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND THEIR SCHOOLS

By the Institute for Language and Education Policy, Chicago Area Chapter

A new policy for testing English language learners (ELLs) – adopted on October 31 by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) under pressure from the Bush Administration – is likely to do more harm than good for these students and for the schools that serve them. By requiring ELLs to take tests designed for fluent speakers of English, the policy will set children up for failure, unfairly stigmatize their teachers, and undermine parents' confidence in their schools.

What's at stake here? Picture yourself, as a beginning student of Spanish or Chinese, being required to pass a bar exam, a computer science quiz, or even a driver's test in that language. Not knowing the language well – even if you know the subject well – you would have trouble demonstrating your subject-matter knowledge. In all likelihood, you would fail. Most people would agree that such a policy would be absurd and unfair, not to mention demeaning to those forced to take an incomprehensible test. Yet this is precisely what's being imposed on ELL students in Illinois.

Why now? Because the ISBE has chosen to cave in – without public discussion and without resistance – to an unreasonable mandate by the U.S. Department of Education.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, schools are required to demonstrate "adequate yearly progress" in reading and math. Student achievement is gauged by standardized assessments in grades 3-12. In 2008, 63% of all Illinois children must meet or exceed state standards on these tests – not just overall, but by various "subgroups," including racial minorities, children in poverty, ELLs, and students with disabilities. If any subgroup falls short of the target, their schools will be labeled "failing" and that could trigger severe sanctions.

At first glance, this approach appears simple and reasonable. Yet there are numerous issues related to the validity and appropriateness of standardized tests that raise questions about the fairness of No Child Left Behind.

For ELLs in particular, the challenge is how to devise meaningful ways to assess academic learning when children have not yet mastered the language of the test. Assessments designed for fluent speakers of English – like the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) – are not considered "valid" or "reliable" for these students. According to experts in educational assessment (including those employed by the test publishers themselves), English-language assessments like the ISAT cannot accurately measure what ELLs have learned. Thus their results should never be used for "high stakes" purposes, such as judging the quality of schools or making decisions about instructional programs.

Recognizing this reality, since 1999 the ISBE has allowed English learners to take an alternative to the ISAT known as the Illinois Measurement of Academic Achievement (IMAGE). This test was designed to provide students who are not yet fluent in English a more effective opportunity to demonstrate learning gains in reading and math. Although not perfect, the IMAGE included

features such as visual aids and simplified language, which somewhat leveled the playing fields between ELLs and native English speakers.

This was a reasonable approach. The IMAGE generated information for educators about student progress and suggested ways in which instruction could be improved. Shouldn't these be the most important goals of testing?

But ISBE has now abandoned the IMAGE. Instead, beginning next spring, ELLs will be required to take the ISAT and the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE), along with unspecified "accommodations" until a new assessment for ELLs that is acceptable to the U.S. Department of Education can be developed.

This decision was made with little or no involvement by the teachers or parents of English language learners. Behind closed doors, state and federal officials have been debating whether to use the IMAGE for at least two years. On June 29, 2007, the ISBE received notice from the U.S. Department of Education – for the fourth time – that the test was inadequate because it had not been proven to measure the same level of knowledge and skills as the ISAT. Although the state scrambled to submit research to address this and other concerns, in late September the federal government once again denied its request to use the IMAGE. At that point, the ISBE quietly surrendered.

The Illinois Advisory Council on Bilingual Education, a group of respected parents, practitioners, administrators, and researchers charged with advising the state superintendent of education on issues affecting ELL students, did not receive notice of the concerns with IMAGE until October 31, when the general public was notified. Why were they kept in the dark? Isn't it time for a thorough public discussion of a policy that will have sweeping ramifications?

Undoubtedly, the change to the Illinois assessment system will affect individual districts, schools, teachers, parents and students in a myriad of ways. Students who are not fluent in English must now take a test that most of them cannot possibly pass. Schools that were previously making adequate yearly progress will now experience a dramatic reduction in the number of students meeting state standards. Parents and communities will now be told that many schools are "failing" based on invalid and unreliable test scores. Teachers of ELLs who already understand that high stakes tests do not represent true academic achievement must ignore authentic learning gains in lieu of test preparation and teaching depreciation. The ISBE itself will eventually feel the implications of its actions as more schools are placed on the state warning list. Schools and teachers will be tempted to abandon best practices for ELLs and instead teach to the test. They will come under even more pressure to accelerate the process of academic English development, even though research indicates this process normally takes many years.

Meanwhile, the ISBE plans to address the inadequacies of the ISAT and the PSAE by providing "accommodations" for English learners. These include measures such as extra time, bilingual dictionaries, reading questions aloud, and taking tests in a special quiet place. In some cases, accommodations have been shown to raise ELLs' test scores. But research has never shown that they make tests designed for fluent English speakers appropriate for ELLs – that is, able to measure what they truly know. Another problem is that the personnel providing the

accommodations – typically mainstream teachers pulled out of their regular classes – are seldom qualified to administer them effectively.

In short, accommodations don't solve the problems of assessing ELLs in a language they have yet to master when the tests are used for high-stakes purposes. It is doubtful that any expert in assessment would argue that they do. Furthermore, relying on such invalid assessments can only serve to undermine the educational programs designed specifically to provide an equitable education for ELLs.

This current discussion is headed in the wrong direction. Rather than focusing on accommodations for the ISAT or PSAE, the real issue is why Illinois officials have failed to resist a misguided federal policy, one that threatens to do serious harm to students and schools, as officials in other states have done. Discussion must be refocused on the more important issue of providing quality educational opportunities that can be measured in valid and reliable ways within appropriate timeframes.