

SHIFTING LANDSCAPE:

Immigration Transforms Communities

Jim D. Rollins had been superintendent of the Springdale public schools in northwest Arkansas for almost a decade when the mostly white community began its dramatic transformation into a booming gateway for immigrant families and their non-English-speaking children.

In 1990, the district, with just under 8,000 students, had virtually no English-language learners, or ELLs. By last fall, its English-learner population alone stood at 7,000 children—roughly 40 percent of the total enrollment of 17,400 students. A thriving economy in and around Springdale over the past 15 years, driven mostly by job growth at Tyson Foods, the world's largest poultry producer, and Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the world's largest retailer, had attracted thousands of immigrants from Mexico, as well as a significant number of families from the Marshall Islands in the South Pacific.

"We had to be learners ourselves, and we had to start from scratch," says Rollins, who has been the schools chief in Springdale since 1982. "We started out by trying to train 100 or so teachers a year who would volunteer to go through language-acquisition programs in the summer, but it wasn't enough. With the growth we were experiencing, we needed to be much more comprehensive."

Springdale's is the story of hundreds of school districts around the nation that have seen explosive growth in immigrant populations over the past 10 to 15 years that has brought non-English-speaking children into their classrooms.

Surging employment through the 1990s in industries such as housing construction, agribusiness, and the services sector drew immigrants—both legal and illegal—and their families to states like Arkansas, Georgia, Nebraska, Nevada, and North Carolina that had little recent experience with new immigrants and their social and educational needs.

That sweeping shift in demographic patterns has strained the capacity of school districts, and even state departments of education, to develop and pay for instructional programs to teach children who are still learning English. In many cases, educators in such communities have relied on a piecemeal, ad hoc approach.

Now, as a result of declining economic opportunities and heightened law-enforcement efforts around illegal immigration, demographers are seeing a slowdown in immigration rates, particularly those of undocumented immigrants. A continuation of that trend would likely affect those states and school districts that have experienced the most growth.

"I don't think we yet know how the impact of immigration raids and other policies around immigration are playing out in terms of migratory movements," says Michael Fix, the senior vice president

and director of studies at the Washington-based Migration Policy Institute. "But we are definitely seeing a pattern when you look at English-language learners that shows those states that were rising like a steep ramp are now beginning to plateau."

While the flow may be slowing, a population of immigrant families is now dispersed widely throughout the country and continues to pose challenges for states still learning how best to provide for their needs, including English-language instruction.

By
Lesli A. Maxwell

Immigration Patterns

The growth of the ELL population was a direct result of robust immigration through the 1990s and into the early years of the new century. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of foreign-born people living in the U.S. in 1995 was 24.5 million. By 2005, that population stood at 35.7 million. In that same decade, the English-language-learner student population nationwide grew by about 57 percent to 5.1 million students, from 3.2 million, according to data from the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, based in Washington.

As the English-language-learner population was rapidly increasing, the overall K-12 population remained essentially flat, says Fix, who is an expert on immigration patterns in the United States. "It's that discrepancy between the two that has helped bring this issue so much to the forefront," he says.

And certain states were the main drivers of that growth. For example, Fix said the ELL population in North Carolina grew by 350 percent between 1995 and 2005.

Joanne Marino, an English-as-a-second-language consultant for the North Carolina education department, says English-learners numbered just more than 60,000 statewide in 2002. By 2007, that number had nearly doubled, to 112,500.

"We are constantly trying to keep up with the growth, but it's difficult to have enough teachers," Marino says. One challenge has been creating enough university-based programs to train North Carolina teachers who wanted to become certified as English-as-a-second-language, or ESL, instructors. Twenty years ago, there were three institutions that offered such programs; now there are 14, Marino notes.

In the 310,000-student Clark County, Nev., school district, which includes Las Vegas, a surge in the English-learner population started in 2000, says Norberta M. Anderson, the director of ELL programs there. The district was already home to about 19,000 ELLs in 2000, but southern Nevada's thriving casino and hotel industry, and a housing boom, sparked a new wave of growth that has raised the ELL student population there by roughly 8 percent every year since then, she says.

Teaching and Research

DELVING DEEP:

Research Hones Focus on ELLs

Five years ago, researchers from the University of California, Davis, took a look at reading-exam scores across the K-12 grade span for students growing up in non-English-speaking homes.

Predictably, the researchers found that the students who struggled the most with learning English lagged well behind their English-speaking peers at all levels of schooling, never really catching up at any point along the spectrum.

A more curious pattern emerged among students with stronger English skills. During the first few years of school, this group's achievement levels were almost on par with those of English-speaking students. But the more skilled English-learners began to drop back after 4th grade. By middle and high school, the gap separating them from the higher-achieving English-speaking students stretched into a chasm.

"We don't know what that's due to," notes Kenji Hakuta, an education professor at Stanford University who has long studied this population of students. "Yet, these are the most successful of our English-language learners in schools."

To Hakuta and others, the pattern suggests much about what scholars know—and what they have yet to learn—about teaching the estimated 5.1 million English-language learners in the nation's schools.

Researchers have learned a lot, for instance, about how to teach basic reading skills in the early grades to English-language learners. What they have yet to nail down is how to help this vulnerable and challenging population of students over the learning hump that comes later in elementary school; how to teach higher-order reading skills, such as comprehension; how to teach adolescents who are new to English; and how to boost achievement in academic subjects other than English.

"The bad news is that we're not where we're supposed to be. There's a lot we don't know," says Claude Goldenberg, who is also a professor of education at Stanford. "The good news is that the research is growing."

More Study Needed

That answers are urgently needed now, as the nation's ranks of non-English speakers grow to historic levels, goes without saying. Goldenberg has noted, for instance, that on the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in reading, 4th grade English-language learners scored an average of 36 points behind non-ELLs in reading and trailed by 25 points in math on a scale of 500.

Yet the pool of credible studies on how best to teach these students is far shallower than it is for other much-debated areas of education,

such as general reading. Goldenberg says, for instance, that when the National Reading Panel met to synthesize the research in that subject, it found 400 studies that met its methodological criteria. In comparison, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth, focusing on English-language learners, turned up just 17 in its own review of the research.

Making matters worse, the existing research on the topic has been dominated by a single, politically explosive question: Should English-language learners be taught, either initially or for an extended period of time, in their native languages?

Goldenberg and other experts say that five independent research reviews addressing that question over the last 25 years conclude that teaching students in bilingual settings is more effective—at least modestly so—than teaching them only in English.

"I think the evidence is there," says Diane August, a senior research scientist at the Center for Applied Linguistics, a private research center in Washington. "There's a lot of transfer that occurs from the first language to the second language."

Still, some experts remain skeptical of that research. One is Russell Gersten, a professor emeritus and co-founder of the Instructional Research Group, a private research firm based in Los Alamitos, Calif., who describes studies on that question as "inconclusive."

By
Debra Viadero

Even as new research turns up promising insights on how best to teach English-language learners, the pool of high-quality studies is still shallow, scholars say.

Teaching and Research

“Even those studies that are considered the ‘gold standard’ have major problems, such as having just one teacher per [experimental] condition, so you don’t know if it’s the teacher or the method that’s making the difference,” he says.

Scholarly views diverge even more over how long it should take for students to master English, with estimates ranging from three to eight years.

One hope is that the small boom in studies under way now, much of it fueled by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, will yield more definitive outcomes.

For instance, Johns Hopkins University researcher Robert E. Slavin and his research partners are tracking 661 Spanish-speaking students from across the nation who, upon entering kindergarten, were randomly assigned to either English-only classes or to one form or another of a transitional bilingual education classroom. In the latter settings, students are taught in Spanish for some part of the school day in kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grades.

The final results from that experiment are not due until next year, after the students complete 3rd grade. However, Slavin, like a growing number of other experts, contends that the language-of-instruction issue may turn out to be of limited value to policymakers grappling with whether to implement—or steer clear of—bilingual education.

“My guess is we’re not going to find much difference between kids taught in Spanish and kids taught in English all along,” Slavin says.

Doing Something Well

Even if experts agreed that teachers should incorporate students’ native languages in lessons for English-learners, many districts don’t provide such instruction.

Urban districts with large and growing immigrant populations may have a hard time finding teachers conversant in Haitian Creole, Urdu, or the dozens of other languages their students speak. And seven states—Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin—either ban or restrict the use of native-language instruction with English-learners, according to a survey by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center.

“You can have bilingual instruction and do it poorly, and you can have English-only instruction and do it poorly,” says David J. Francis, a psychology professor at the University of Houston and the director of the federally funded National Center for Research on the Educational Achievement and Teaching of English Language Learners, which is based at the university. “My argument has been to figure out what it is you can do best, do it well, and worry less about the language of instruction.”

On the other hand, researchers widely agree on the idea that teaching basic English-reading skills to young English-language

learners is not very different from teaching young English-speakers how to read.

When teachers teach students how to decode words, how to spell, and how to recognize phonemes, which are the basic sounds that make up words, ELLs nearly catch up to English-speaking classmates in the early grades, according to the research. That’s the point illustrated in the statistical patterns that turned up in the University of California, Davis, study, which was conducted by researchers Patricia Gándara, Russell Rumberger, Julie Maxwell-Jolly, and Rebecca Callahan.

Beyond Decoding

Teaching students to comprehend what they read, particularly when it comes to more academically oriented text, is another matter.

“We’ve done a good job of building up reading skills to the point where students can decode words and read them, but they don’t necessarily have the language abilities that would allow them to construct a representation of the text at a very high level,” says Maria S. Carlo, an associate professor of teaching and learning at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Fla.

In an effort to build a bridge to higher literacy levels, Carlo, August of the Center for Applied Linguistics, and their colleague Isabel Beck developed a curriculum for teaching 4th and 5th graders

in mainstream classes vocabulary words that are commonly found in print, but rarely used in conversational English or on the playground—words such as “predict,” or “therefore,” or “incremental.”

The target words are embedded in weekly English-language reading assignments that the minority-language students “preview” on Mondays in their native language. On Tuesdays, the teacher defines the words for the whole class and leads a discussion on the reading, which the ELL newcomers then read in English. Throughout the rest of the week, working in small groups with English-speaking classmates, students learn synonyms and antonyms for the targeted words, pick out their root structures, and discuss any multiple meanings for the words, among other activities.

In a 2004 experiment on the program, researchers documented reading and English-language-development gains for both the English-learners and their classmates after 15 weeks of lessons. The gains paralleled one another, so the gap in achievement between the two groups didn’t budge initially, according to Carlo. A subsequent study showed, however, that the learning differences narrowed when students stayed in the program for two years.

Such studies come amid growing interest in finding ways to help English-language learners cultivate “academic English,” the language they need to succeed in subjects beyond English literacy.

“The bad news is that we aren’t where we’re supposed to be. There’s a lot we don’t know. The good news is that the research is growing.”

CLAUDE GOLDENBERG

Education professor
Stanford University

Teaching and Research

“Mastery of academic language is arguably the single most important determinant of academic success for individual students,” Francis and his colleagues write in a research-based guide for educators of ELLs, adding that its importance “cannot be overstated.”

Research has yet to identify a proven strategy for imparting those skills to ELLs, although a flurry of studies are under way in Francis’ lab and elsewhere.

Such methods will need to do more than teach vocabulary words if they are going to make a difference in students’ overall learning, according to August. They have to teach content, too.

“Take ‘photosynthesis,’ ” she says. “It’s not like you can give kids the definition and they get it if they don’t understand the science behind the word.”

Talking the Talk

Researchers are also zeroing in on oral-language skills in helping English-learners overcome academic roadblocks.

“Lots of ELLs are very shy,” says Slavin of Johns Hopkins. “They don’t want to use English in class because they’re afraid they’ll be laughed at or they don’t feel confident.”

To prod students to talk more, especially in the academic arena, many experts recommend setting up structured cooperative-learning groups so that students can practice speaking under less-threatening circumstances. In fact, a research-based practice guide published last year by the Institute of Education Sciences calls for English-learners to spend at least 90 minutes a week working one-on-one on carefully designed activities with students of different ability and English-proficiency levels.

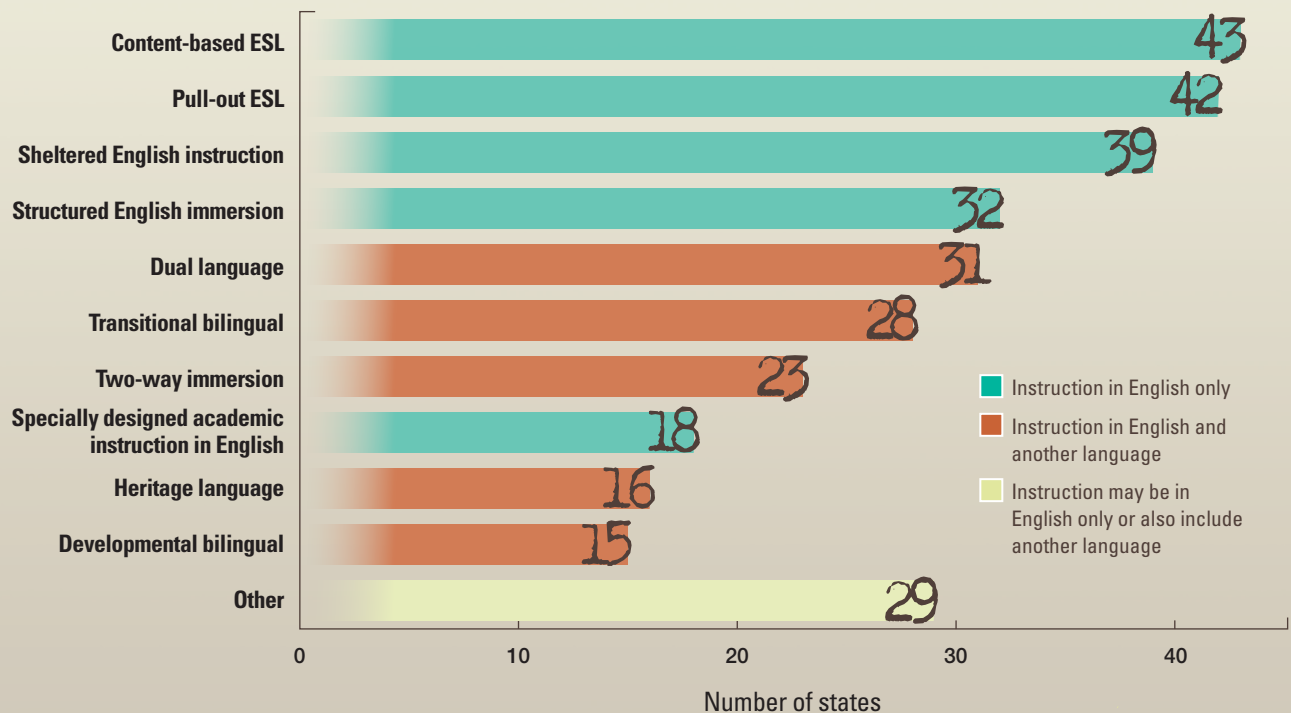
To Goldenberg and others, however, the bottom line is that the research suggests that English-learners need some sort of classroom support if they are ever going to succeed in American classrooms. “You cannot do sink or swim,” he says.

Yet he estimates that 10 percent to 50 percent of ELLs are in classrooms where few, if any, modifications are made to help them overcome their language difficulties. And their numbers are growing, he adds, even as pressure builds in some states to enact policies that block teachers from using students’ primary language in classes or limit instructional modifications for English-learners.

Such practices, he concludes in an essay published in the Summer 2008 issue of the American Federation of Teachers’ *American Educator* magazine, “are simply not based on the best scientific evidence available.” ■

Providing Language Instruction

As part of federal reporting requirements, states document the types of language-instruction programs funded under Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act. All but two of the 48 reporting states supported English-only instructional programs. The majority of states (36) also provide programs taught dually in English and another language. The specific Title III programs most commonly reported are content-based English-as-a-second-language (ESL) and ESL pull-out instruction, used in 43 and 42 states respectively. Only 15 states offer developmental bilingual programs.



NOTE: Data not available for California, Michigan, and Virginia.

SOURCE: EPE Research Center, 2009. Analysis of data from Consolidated State Performance Reports, 2006-07.

TESTING TENSION:

Weigh Proficiency, Assess Content

Susan B. Martin, who directs the English-Language Learning Program for Lewiston, Maine's school district, thinks the federal No Child Left Behind Act is a good idea. Its application, however—especially when it comes to the testing requirements for English-learners—is another matter, she says.

"The original idea behind NCLB is that we should treat all kids the same—all kids are entitled to the same set of standards," says Martin, whose district of 5,000 students includes hundreds of African refugees. "Where it's gone astray is assuming that all kids, including ELL kids, can meet those standards in the same amount of time."

By
Scott J. Cech

The challenge for Lewiston, and for thousands of districts nationwide, is to satisfy two very different mandates of the federal law: assessing how well non-English-speakers are learning the language,

while holding them to the same reading and math proficiency targets required of native English-speakers.

For Lewiston, a city of about 35,000 some 45 minutes north of Portland, that means working with refugees from Somalia and other African countries whose families began settling there in early 2001. About 17 percent of the district's students are now English-learners, and many of them, Martin says, had no experience with formal schooling in any language.

And yet, under NCLB, English-language learners must be included in regular state mathematics and reading tests designed for native English-speakers. English-learners must also be tested annually on an English-proficiency assessment.

"Our [limited-English-proficient] kids who have been in school less than three years may have made great progress, but they aren't going to be at grade level," Martin says. "We're having 20-year-olds walking into high school and wanting to go to school, and we welcomed them, but they're not going to graduate with a high school diploma."

““ *You can't wait for them to master the language before you teach content.* **”**

Students who are still working to master the English language are being held to the same reading and math proficiency targets as native English-speakers.

Contradiction Seen

Largely because of how their English-learners perform, schools in Lewiston with large immigrant populations have been labeled as unable to meet achievement goals under NCLB, says Martin.

"If I went to Africa and studied for two years and I had to take the SAT [in an African language]," she noted, "I probably wouldn't do very well, and it wouldn't be because the school was failing or because I wasn't very smart."

Over the seven years since NCLB was signed into law, a growing chorus of educators and researchers has been pointing out what they see as a sometimes-glaring contradiction: requiring students still learning the basics of English to demonstrate their mastery of content on tests usually written in English.

Jamal Abedi, an education professor at the University of California, Davis, and an expert on the testing of English-learners, calls the tension between demonstrating English-language proficiency and demonstrating proficiency in reading, math, and science "one of the most fundamental issues for English-language learners."

"If they're not at the level of proficiency to understand assessment questions, how would you expect [the assessments] to give valid outcomes for those kids?" he asks.

Under the U.S. Department of Education's interpretation of the law, recently arrived students whose English-proficiency tests

JESSICA LOOSE

North Carolina ESL teacher

grant them ELL status may be exempt from one administration of their state's annual reading/language arts assessment, and their math scores do not need to be included for adequate-yearly-progress purposes for one year. But many educators see that grace period as woefully inadequate.

"You can't wait for them to master language before you teach content," says Jessica Loose, the lead English-as-a-second-language teacher for the Dare County school district in North Carolina, which has about 300 students identified as English-learners among its 4,700 students. "NCLB is said to be research-based, but research shows it takes five to seven years for someone to learn a language. We're in the unfortunate position of doing the best we can."

Not that there aren't good tools, Loose says, citing the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol model that her district uses to simultaneously teach ELL students academic content and English. That model was developed by California State University-Long Beach researchers Jana Echevarria and Mary Ellen Vogt with Deborah J. Short, a researcher at the Washington-based Center for Applied Linguistics.

Loose, who has taught in the district for seven years, has added some inventive instruction of her own. In addition to the 5th grade math and 1st grade language arts classes she co-teaches at Manteo Elementary School in Manteo, N.C., she leads a one-hour pullout class for 1st graders that she calls ESL Math Literacy

"I take it as a given that the [ELL] objective of NCLB—100 percent proficiency—is close to impossible to meet, and then I put all my energy and all my work into mastering content and language objectives as best we can," she says.

Materials Limited

Part of the problem, Abedi says, lies in the test materials typically available.

"These assessments are mostly field-tested for mainstream students," he notes. And some accommodations—special conditions or allowances permitted in an effort to level the assessment playing field for ELL students—"don't really help," he adds, because they were developed for students with disabilities, not for English-learners.

The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education examined state assessment policies for accommodating English-language learners in content-area tests. Its study, released last fall, found that "all states have more distance to go in having ELL assessments that are responsive," says Charlene Rivera, the executive director of the Arlington, Va.-based center.

That also goes for the English-proficiency side of the ELL-assessment equation, says H. Gary Cook, a researcher at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, part of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"We, the research community, haven't focused on the needs of these students as well as we could have or possibly should have," says Cook, a former director of Wisconsin's office of educational accountability and a former official at Harcourt Educational Measurement, now part of Pearson Education. "Academic language proficiency ... is a very ill-defined domain."

That ambiguity is reflected in the hodgepodge of proficiency definitions. There are four main groupings of states, each with its own English-language-proficiency assessment.

The World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment consortium, known as WIDA, is the largest of the bunch, comprising 19 states mostly in the East and Midwest, including Illinois, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Virginia.

Several states in the South and Midwest, including Louisiana and Iowa, use versions of the English Language Development Assessment, which was developed by the American Institutes for Research for the Council of Chief State School Officers.

A handful of scattered states use Language Assessment Scales Links, which was developed by Monterey, Calif.-based test-maker CTB/McGraw-Hill. A different handful of states use some version of the Stanford English Language Proficiency Test, which was developed by Harcourt Assessment Inc., now part of Pearson.

And some states—including California and New York, which have large ELL populations—have developed their own, entirely separate assessments.

Tremendous Diversity

The picture is made even more complex by variations within any given school's or state's ELL population. Tennessee isn't known as a hotbed of linguistic diversity, but Jan Lanier, the state's ESL coordinator, says that in a typical year, between 115 and 130 native languages are represented there.

The challenges inherent in trying to assess these students' content mastery are made even more difficult by the fact that a Tennessee does not have native-language-instruction programs.

"They're required to take the math and science test the first year they're here, and that [science test] is ... very language-intensive," Lanier says of her state's ELL students. "It puts them at a disadvantage."

Even within each native language, there can be a wide range of literacy skills.

"Many of our students come from excellent educational backgrounds, but they're tested in English, so that the [Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test] becomes a measurement not of their mastery of the material, but of their ability to express it in English," says Ann Jackman, the president of the Sunshine State TESOL of Florida association. Florida does not provide native-language assessments for ELLs.

"That's our biggest frustration," adds Jackman, who's also an instructional specialist for the 173,000-student Palm Beach County school district, 14 percent of whose pupils are ELL students, representing 142 native languages or dialects.

At the other end of the native-language-proficiency spectrum are those students collected under the umbrella term "students with interrupted formal education," or SIFE.

"We have a lot of children who fall under that acronym," says Lanier of Tennessee, referring to refugee students who have seldom attended classes. "They're having to learn school culture and test-taking culture at the same time."

She says some of her teachers worry about the effect the assessments are having on students.

“Teachers are very concerned that we may be causing test anxiety by forcing these kids to take these tests when we know they’re not quite ready for [them], but we have no choice—we’re mandated to do that by federal law.”

Some Federal Leeway

Elissa Leonard, a U.S. Department of Education spokeswoman, says that the NCLB law allows the use of native-language assessments of content if a state has one. Thirteen states—California, Colorado, Delaware, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Texas—offer native-language assessments in some grades or subjects, according to the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center.

Still, Leonard says, the department is constrained by the law.

“The amount of flexibility the Department of Education has in implementing the NCLB core content assessment requirements for ELLs is determined by the wording of the federal statute,” she says. The law requires that all student subgroups, including ELLs, be assessed in the core content areas of reading or language arts, mathematics, and science.

Leonard adds that the department pushed for expanded assessment options for ELL students in its NCLB reauthorization proposal, but notes that reauthorization did not happen in 2008.

Edynn Sato, the director of research and English-language-learner assessment for WestEd, a San Francisco-based research group, says that accommodations—and the educators who use them—have to strike a delicate balance.

“What are we really trying to get the student to engage with—the English language of the test ... or the language of the content?” she asks. “What kind of supports are we able to provide ELLs without misrepresenting the content to the students or simplifying the content below grade level? We don’t want to dumb down the content.”

Cook, of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, is not a fan of everything that’s in the NCLB law, but he does credit it with throwing a light on the specific assessment needs of ELL students.

“Before NCLB, very few states had their own ELL assessments,” he says. “Now the assessments are associated with the state standards, and they’re designed for ELLs. That’s a good thing.” ■

To see the complete report, go to <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2009/01/08/index.html>

Reprinted with permission from Education Week, Vol. XXVIII, Issue 17, January 8, 2009, by The Reprint Dept., 800-259-0470. (11430-0209). For web posting only. Bulk printing prohibited.

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Education Week is published 45 times per year by Editorial Projects in Education Inc. Subscriptions: U.S.: \$79.94 for 45 issues. Subscriptions: Canada: \$135.94 for 45 issues.

Accommodations to Assess Content Knowledge

A recent study finds that all 50 states and the District of Columbia are providing assessment accommodations to English-language learners. Such accommodations, which are intended to reduce language-based barriers to demonstrating content knowledge, include direct linguistic support in English or a student’s native language, as well as indirect linguistic support in the form of extra time to complete a test. The majority of states offer all three forms of accommodations to ELL students.

DIRECT LINGUISTIC SUPPORT IN NATIVE LANGUAGE

Examples: translated test, dual-language dictionary or other reference materials, test directions or items read aloud in native language, student responds orally in native language

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DIRECT LINGUISTIC SUPPORT IN ENGLISH

Examples: plain English version of test, English dictionary or other reference materials, test directions or items read aloud in English, student responds orally in English

47

INDIRECT LINGUISTIC SUPPORT

Example: allow extra time to complete test

40

SOURCE: The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education, 2008

Number of states