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**English Language Learners and High-Stakes Tests: An Overview of the Issues**

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Recen t legislat io n an d edu cat io n in it iat ives in t h e Un it ed St at es h ave em p h asized t h e ro le o f h igh -st akes t est in g in refo rm m o vem en t s d esign ed to in crease acco u n t abilit y fo r sch oo ls an d im p ro ve st ud en t ach ievem en t . Becau se En glish lan gu age learn ers (ELLs) rep resen t an in creasin g p ercen t age o f st ud en t s en ro lled in U.S. pu b lic sch oo ls (Kin d ler, 2002), t h is gro up o f learn ers m u st be co n sid ered wh en su ch in it iat ives are im p lem en t ed . Edu cato rs m u st m ake crit ical d ecisio n s co n cern in g h o w to in clud e ELLs in h igh -st akes t est s in ways t h at are fair an d t h at add ress t h eir n eed s. Facto rs to co n sid er in clud e t h e se- lect io n o f app ro p riat e t est in g acco mm o d at io n s an d t h e accu rat e in - t erp ret at io n o f t est resu lt s.

# The Role of High-St akes Test s

Losch ert (2000) d escribes h igh -stakes tests as assessm en ts in wh ich “st ud en t s, t each ers, ad m in ist rato rs, an d en t ire sch oo l syst em s m u st acco u n t fo r st ud en t p erfo rm an ce” (p . 1). Test s t h at are u sed to m ake h igh -st akes d ecisio n s are frequ en t ly st an d ard ized assessm en t s, su ch as t h e St an fo rd 9 o r t h e Io wa Test o f Basic Skills, alt h o u gh so m e st at es h ave d esign ed t h eir o wn t est s. St ud en t s’ sco res o n t h ese t est s m ay be u sed to d et erm in e p ro m ot io n to t h e n ext grad e level, wh ich cu rricu - lar t rack st ud en t s will fo llo w in sch oo l, o r wh et h er o r n ot t h ey will gradu at e.

Wit h t h e p assage o f t h e No Ch ild Left Beh in d Act (2001), h igh - st akes t est s are bein g u sed m o re wid ely t h an ever befo re. Th is legisla- t io n requ ires t h at all st ud en t s in Grad es 3-8 be t est ed every year in read in g an d m at h . If sch oo ls an d d ist rict s are u n able to d em o n st rat e ad equ at e yearly p ro gress, wh ich is t yp ically m easu red as a p ercen t - age o f st ud en t s wh o p ass st an d ard ized t est s, co rrect ive act io n s m ay be im p o sed . Th ese m ay in clud e sch oo l-wid e rest ru ct u rin g o r requ ir- in g sch oo ls to p ro vid e st ud en t s t h e o p t io n o f t ran sferrin g to an ot h er sch oo l.

Bot h p o sit ive an d n egat ive effect s fo r ELLs m ay resu lt fro m t h is h eigh ten ed em p h asis on h igh -stakes testin g. Becau se h igh -stakes tests are m ean t to raise st an d ard s fo r st ud en t learn in g, ELLs—alo n g wit h all ot h er st ud en t s wh o are t est ed —m ay be ch allen ged to m eet h igh er levels o f acad em ic ach ievem en t t h an befo re. O n t h e ot h er h an d , t h e vast m ajo rit y o f h igh -st akes t est s are writt en an d ad m in ist ered o n ly in En glish , o ft en leavin g ELLs at a d isad van t age an d raisin g qu es- t io n s as to h o w t h e t est resu lt s sh o u ld be in t erp ret ed . Wit h issu es su ch as sch oo l fu n d in g, grad e-level p ro m ot io n , an d gradu at io n at st ake, u sin g st an d ard ized t est sco res as a basis fo r m ajo r d ecisio n s co u ld p ot en t ially be d et rim en t al to ELLs an d to t h e sch oo ls t h at serve t h em .

# W hy Include ELLs in High-St akes Test s?

Histo rically, ELLs h ave n ot been in clud ed in h igh -st akes st an d ard - ized t est s (Lara & Au gu st , 1996). Th is p ract ice h as resu lt ed in a lack o f acco u n t abilit y fo r t h e acad em ic p ro gress o f ELLs, wit h ELLs n ot be- in g h eld to t h e sam e h igh acad em ic st an d ard s as t h eir p eers. Co n se- qu en t ly, ELLs h ave n ot ben efit ed fro m t h e edu cat io n al refo rm s t h at fo llo wed t h e im p lem en t at io n o f h igh -st akes assessm en t s (Au gu st & Haku t a, 1997). W h ile No Ch ild Left Beh in d n o w m an d at es t h e in clu - sio n o f ELLs in h igh -st akes t est s, in t h e p ast m o st st at es h ave t yp i- cally exem p t ed st ud en t s wh o h ave been in t h e Un it ed St at es o r in an ESL/ bilin gu al p ro gram fo r less t h an 3 years o r wh o h ave n ot att ain ed a cert ain level o f En glish p ro ficien cy (Ho lm es, Hed lu n d , & Nickerso n , 2000). W h ere ELLs h ave n ot been in clud ed in h igh -st akes t est s, t h eir

n eed s h ave o ft en been o verloo ked in p ro gram d esign an d in st ru c- t io n . Th u s, t h ey h ave n ot reap ed t h e ben efit s o f edu cat io n al in it ia- t ives an d refo rm s in t en d ed to raise acad em ic st an d ard s an d p ro m ot e st ud en t learn in g.

# Pot ent ial Problem s of Including ELLs in High- St akes Test s

As b en eficial as it m ay b e to in clud e ELLs in h igh -st akes t est s, so m e co m p licat io n s arise co n cern in g t h e valid it y an d reliabilit y o f su ch t est s fo r t h is gro up o f learn ers. Edu cato rs m u st co n sid er wh at is act u ally bein g assessed by an y given t est : Is t h e t est m easu rin g ELLs’ acad em ic kn o wled ge an d skills, o r is it p rim arily a t est o f t h eir lan - gu age skills? W h en ELLs t ake st an d ard ized t est s, t h e resu lt s t en d to reflect t h eir En glish lan gu age p ro ficien cy an d m ay n ot accu rat ely assess t h eir co n t en t kn o wled ge o r skills (Men ken , 2000), t h erefo re weaken in g t h e t est ’s valid it y fo r t h em . If ELLs are n ot able to d em o n - st rat e t h eir kn o wled ge du e to t h e lin gu ist ic d ifficu lt y o f a t est , t h e t est resu lt s will n ot be a valid reflect io n o f wh at t h e st ud en t s kn o w an d can d o .

In so m e cases, t est in g ELLs in t h eir n at ive lan gu age m ay be m o re app ro p riat e t h an u sin g t est s t h at are so lely in En glish . Man y ELLs are en ro lled in bilin gu al edu cat io n classes an d receive so m e o f t h eir co n - t en t -area in st ru ct io n in t h eir n at ive lan gu age. Th ese learn ers m ay be able to d em o n st rat e t h eir su bject -area kn o wled ge m o re effect ively in t h eir n at ive lan gu age. Ho wever, t est s in lan gu ages ot h er t h an En - glish are rarely p ro vid ed . In fact , t est in g acco mm o d at io n s t h at in - vo lve t ra n sla t io n o f a t est in to a st ud en t ’s n a t ive la n gu a ge a re frequ en t ly p ro h ib it ed b y st at es (Rivera, St an sfield , Sciald o n e, & Sh arkey, 2000).

Ot h er p ot en t ial p roblem s st emm in g fro m t h e in clu sio n o f ELLs in h igh -st akes t est s co n cern t h e cu lt u ral fam iliarit y an d kn o wled ge as- su m ed in so m e t est it em s. Test it em s m ay co n t ain referen ces to id eas o r even t s t h at are u n fam iliar to ELLs becau se t h ey h ave n ot been exp o sed to sim ilar co n cep t s in t h eir n at ive cu lt u re an d h ave n ot lived in t h e Un it ed St at es fo r a lo n g p erio d o f t im e. Fo r exam p le, a writ in g p rom p t th at asks stud en ts to p rodu ce a p ersu asive essay abou t wh eth er o r n ot t h e U.S. go vern m en t sh o u ld supp o rt n ew sp ace exp ed it io n s by NASA m ay be qu it e d ifficu lt fo r ELLs, wh o se kn o wled ge o f t h e co n cep t s an d exp ect at io n s assu m ed by t h is t est it em , su ch as fam il- iarit y wit h t h e U.S. sp ace p ro gram an d t h e co st s in vo lved , co u ld be ext rem ely lim it ed . An ELL wh o m igh t ot h erwise h ave been able to writ e a p ro ficien t p ersu asive essay wo u ld be at a d ist in ct d isad van - t age du e to t h e cu lt u ral bias inh eren t in t h e writ in g p ro m p t .

# Accomm odat ions f or ELLs

In o rd er to add ress so m e o f t h e co m p licat io n s t h at arise wit h t h e in clu sio n o f ELLs in h igh -st akes t est s, vario u s t yp es o f acco mm o d a- t io n s m ay be allo wed wh en t h e t est is ad m in ist ered . Th ese are t h e m o st co mm o n t yp es o f acco mm o d at io n s:

* *Tim ing/scheduling*: ELLs are given add it io n al t im e to t ake t h e t est o r are given add it io n al t im e fo r breaks du rin g t h e t est .
* *Setting*: Th e t est is ad m in ist ered to ELLs in a sm all gro up o r in an alt ern at e lo cat io n , su ch as an ESL t each er’s classroo m , to en su re t h at ELLs are in a fam iliar, co m fo rt able en viro n m en t wh en t h ey t ake t h e t est .

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* *Presentation*: Th e t est ad m in ist rato r is allo wed to rep eat o r exp lain t est it em s an d d irect io n s fo r ELLs, o r t h e t est m ay be t ran slat ed in to t h e st ud en t s’ n at ive lan gu age an d ad m in ist ered by an ESL/ bilin - gu al edu cato r.
* *Response*: ELLs m ay resp o n d to t est it em s in t h eir n at ive lan gu age, o r t h ey m ay d ict at e t h eir resp o n ses to a t est ad m in ist rato r.

Acco rd in g to Rivera et al. (2000), t h e acco mm o d at io n s m o st fre- qu en t ly u sed fo r ELLs are t im in g/ sch edu lin g an d sett in g. W h ile al- lo win g an ELL m o re t im e to co m p let e a t est o r ad m in ist erin g t h e t est in a sm aller gro up in fam iliar su rro u n d in gs m ay be h elp fu l in so m e co n t ext s, su ch acco mm o d at io n s d o n ot en su re t h at learn ers’ lin gu is- t ic n eed s are bein g acco u n t ed fo r. O n t h e ot h er h an d , add it io n al ex- p lan at io n s o f t est it em s, t ran slat io n , an d alt ern at e ways by wh ich st ud en t s are allo wed to resp o n d to it em s all d irect ly add ress ELLs’ lan gu age n eed s an d m ay in crease t h e ch an ces t h at learn ers will be able to d em o n st rat e t h eir kn o wled ge. Acco mm o d at io n s sh o u ld be select ed carefu lly in o rd er to en su re t h at ELLs are given app ro p riat e supp o rt , in clud in g lin gu ist ic supp o rt , o n st an d ard ized t est s—esp e- cially wh en t h o se t est s are u sed as a basis fo r h igh -st akes d ecisio n s.

# W hat Educat ors Can Do

W h en d ecisio n s are m ad e regard in g ELLs an d h igh -st akes t est s, several facto rs m u st be co n sid ered .

## *Ensure that the test reflects the curriculum*

Edu cato rs wh o are resp o n sible fo r select in g t h e t est s t h at will be u sed fo r h igh -st akes assessm en t m u st exam in e h o w clo sely a t est re- flect s t h e cu rricu lu m an d st an d ard s bein g u sed in t h eir st at e o r d is- t rict . As Men ken (2000) p o in t s o u t , “in o rd er fo r assessm en t s to be effect ive an d u sefu l fo r edu cato rs in in st ru ct io n al p ract ice, t h ey m u st be d eep ly en t win ed wit h t h e classroo m t each in g an d learn in g d riven by t h e st an d ard s” (p . 4). If t est s are align ed wit h st an d ard s an d cu r- ricu la, st ud en t s will h ave an in creased ch an ce o f d em o n st rat in g wh at t h ey kn o w an d are able to d o . Teach ers o f ELLs n eed to be in vo lved in t h e d ecisio n -m akin g p ro cess regard in g wh ich t est s will be u sed . Fo r exam p le, t est in g co mm itt ees at t h e sch oo l, d ist rict , an d st at e lev- els t h at are resp o n sible fo r select in g app ro p riat e t est s sh o u ld in clud e t each ers wh o wo rk wit h ELLs to en su re t h at t h e t est s select ed fo r u se are app ro p riat e fo r t h ese learn ers.

## *Select appropriate accommodations and modifications*

Edu cato rs m u st co n sid er wh ich t est in g acco mm o d at io n s m ay be m o st app ro p riat e fo r an in d ividu al st ud en t o r gro up o f st ud en t s. Fo r exam p le, t ran slat io n o f a t est in to a st ud en t ’s n at ive lan gu age m ay be h elp fu l fo r ELLs wit h a h igh level o f co gn it ive-acad em ic p ro ficien cy in t h eir n at ive lan gu age, bu t n ot fo r st ud en t s wh o se n at ive lan gu age skills are weak. Dep en d in g o n a learn er’s lan gu age p ro ficien cy level, it m ay be ben eficial to allo w acco mm o d at io n s t h at affect h o w t h e t est is p resen t ed an d h o w st ud en t s m ay resp o n d to it (e.g., rep et it io n an d exp lan ation of test item s, or allowin g stud en ts to d ictate resp on ses to a t est ad m in ist rato r), in add it io n to t est in g m o d ificat io n s relat ed to tim in g/ sch edu lin g an d settin g. With app rop riate accomm od ation s, ELLs are m o re likely to be able to d em o n st rat e t h eir kn o wled ge o n t h e t est .

## *Teach the discourse of tests and test-taking skills*

It is also ben eficial to raise ELLs’ awaren ess o f t h e t yp ical d isco u rse an d fo rm at s o f st an d ard ized t est s. ELLs m ay n ot be fam iliar wit h t h e kin d o f lan gu age t h at is u sed in t est s, in clud in g m an y p red ict able p att ern s an d p h rases. It m ay also be ben eficial to t each t est -t akin g skills (e.g., h o w to app ro ach a m u lt ip le-ch o ice qu est io n , h o w to lo - cat e t h e m ain id ea in a read in g p assage) to h elp p rep are ELLs fo r sp ecific t yp es o f t est it em s t h ey m ay en co u n t er. Arm ed wit h a variet y o f t est -t akin g skills an d st rat egies, ELLs m ay be em p o wered to d em - o n st rat e t h eir kn o wled ge o n a t est , rat h er t h an bein g in t im id at ed by u n fam iliar t erm s an d fo rm at s.

## *Use test data carefully*

Perh ap s m o st im p o rt an t ly, edu cato rs m u st be cau t io u s wh en in - t erp ret in g t h e t est resu lt s o f ELLs. As wit h all learn ers, it is cru cial to rem em ber t h at o n e t est cann ot accu rat ely reflect everyt h in g t h at a p erso n kn o ws an d is able to d o . Th is p o in t is p art icu larly im p o rt an t if t h e valid it y an d reliabilit y o f t h e t est are qu est io n able fo r ELLs, o r if t h e st ud en t s were n ot given app ro p riat e t est in g acco mm o d at io n s. In an y case, im p o rt an t d ecisio n s abo u t ELLs sh o u ld n ot be based o n a sin gle test score. Low scores on a stan d ard ized test m ay m ean n oth - in g m o re t h an t h at a learn er h as n ot yet m ast ered en o u gh En glish to d em o n st rat e h is o r h er co n t en t kn o wled ge an d skills o n a t est . Mu lt ip le assessm en t s, in clud in g so m e p erfo rm an ce-based o r alt er- n at ive assessm en t s t h at m irro r wh at st ud en t s are learn in g in class, will p ain t a m u ch m o re accu rat e p ict u re o f st ud en t s’ kn o wled ge, skills, an d p ro gress t h an an y sin gle t est sco re can in d icat e. Sim i- larly, h igh -stakes d ecision s sh ou ld n ot be m ad e regard in g a p rogram , sch oo l, o r d ist rict wit h h igh n u m bers o f ELLs based so lely o n t est d at a. Su ch d at a m ay m erely in d icat e t h at a sch oo l o r d ist rict h as a h igh p ercen t age o f ELLs, an d n ot be reflect ive o f in st ru ct io n al qu al- it y o r p ro gram effect iven ess.

As st at es m o ve to ward wid esp read u se o f st an d ard ized t est s to en su re h igh st an d ard s an d acco u n t abilit y in edu cat io n , m an y add i- t io n al issu es m ay arise wit h regard to h o w ELLs fit in to t h is m o ve- m en t . It is im p o rt an t to in clud e ELLs in h igh -st akes t est s so t h at we m ay set h igh st an d ard s fo r every st ud en t an d en su re t h at all learn - ers’ n eed s are co n sid ered in edu cat io n al refo rm effo rt s. Ho wever, edu cato rs m u st also seek a balan ced app ro ach to in t erp ret in g an d u sin g t est d at a so t h at carefu l, in fo rm ed d ecisio n s are m ad e, p ar- t icu larly wh en t h ese d ecisio n s carry h igh st akes fo r ELLs an d t h e sch oo ls t h at serve t h em .

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