

A National Imperative: Helping English Learners

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Princeton, NJ - For a long time, I have wanted to offer my perspective on the needs of the nearly six million English learners (ELs) in our public schools. My interest is both professional and personal – I was an English learner myself. My parents came from Puerto Rico in search of opportunity, and I was born in New York City, growing up with Spanish as my first language.

My parents did not finish high school, but they understood the importance of education and made sure that my sisters and I completed high school and went on to college while retaining the Spanish language. Today, all four of us have advanced degrees. Being able to navigate easily between mainstream society and the Latino world has been a plus for all of us.

My concerns about ELs assumed new importance in 2011 when I was asked to lead an Educational Testing Service initiative on EL needs. I realized that while ETS had decades of experience in international English proficiency assessments, our domestic experience was limited. So we set out to listen to experts across the country.

The unsettling conclusion: Large numbers of students lack sufficient opportunities to learn, to master English and other subjects, to get postsecondary degrees and go on to productive careers. It amounts to disregard of our moral and civic obligations. Assuring more productive lives for ELs, in my view, is both a moral and an economic imperative.

ELs need us, and the nation needs them. Given their growing numbers, serving them well can improve educational attainment and help assure productivity and competitiveness in coming decades.

Given these imperatives, in 2012, ETS created a new research center for English Language Learning and Assessment (ELLA) in its Research & Development division. I am pleased that it has elevated the profile of EL research in general and is investing more in serving ELs in the United States.

Now with 15 scientists, this unique center has attracted talent – and interest – from around the world. Meanwhile, ETS has added a substantial number of assessment design and development specialists and psychometric experts to support research and development in this growing area.

Our research emphasis is in three major areas:

- 1) Assessing English-language proficiency by reviewing current practices, identifying the skills needed to meet the Common Core State Standards and developing improved assessments of English-language proficiency
- 2) Improving assessments of content knowledge for ELs by investigating the validity and fairness of content assessments for ELs — for example, developing guidelines to make test questions in math and science tests appropriate for ELs in terms of linguistic complexity and cultural references
- 3) For teachers of ELs, identifying the required content and pedagogical knowledge and developing

technology-enhanced professional development materials

I am delighted that ETS is now working with a coalition of 11 states, known as ELPA 21 (English-Language Proficiency for the 21st Century) to design and develop a pool of test items to support the development of a screener and a summative EL proficiency assessment for ELs in grades K–12.

The 11 states, led by Oregon, offer ETS an opportunity to help improve English-language assessments for nearly 600,000 ELs. We are designing new item types, including a range of innovative item types, many of them technology-enhanced, to make assessments more engaging for students and to provide more meaningful information to teachers about student abilities. The effective use of digitally delivered assessments is the subject of ongoing research.

Helping ELs is a challenge; and we do not profess to have all the answers. But we do profess to be searching for the answers and are fully committed to helping bring about improvements. Our mission to advance quality and equity in education compels us to do so.

(The first of a series of ETS white papers on our vision for next-generation English- language proficiency assessment systems to support K–12 English learners in the United States can be accessed at:

http://www.ets.org/s/research/pdf/24473_K12_EL_Paper.pdf).

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