

***Technical Advisory Panel on Uniform National Rules
for NAEP Testing of English Language Learners***

Report to the National Assessment Governing Board

July 22, 2009

Chair: Sharif Shakrani

***Members: Jamal Abedi, Diane August,
Robert Linqanti, Phil Morse, Charlene Rivera,
Maria Santos, and Josefina Tinajero***

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Executive Summary of Report to NAGB-July 2009

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The panel believes the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is an important tool for understanding student achievement among students who are English language learners (ELL). To assure that NAEP samples are fully representative, to maintain the comparability of state and district NAEP results, and to maximize student access and meaningful participation, the panel recommends that:

- 1) ELLs in all states and districts selected for the NAEP sample who have been in United States schools for one year or more be included in the National Assessment. This policy should be implemented with the disaggregated reporting of ELL test results by detailed information on students' English language proficiency and the availability of accommodations that maximize meaningful participation.
- 2) Students should be offered ELL-responsive accommodations that maintain the constructs in the NAEP framework, including items and directions in plain language, side-by-side bilingual Spanish-English test booklets, word-to-word bilingual glossaries without definitions, as well as other accommodations currently allowed by NAEP. The accommodations for each student should be selected at the local level by school personnel who are qualified to make judgments regarding the inclusion of the ELL in NAEP, including knowledge of his or her level of English language proficiency.
- 3) NAEP results for ELL students should be disaggregated and reported by the best available standardized assessment data on the level of English language proficiency.
- 4) To attain comparable participation rates across states and districts, special efforts should be made to inform and solicit the cooperation of state and local officials who decide upon the participation of individual students, including joint planning sessions and targeted information sharing. A high common goal for 95 percent or more of ELL students sampled to participate should be established.
- 5) NAEP should adopt an aggressive timeline for innovation and research, including (a) the development of test items written in plain language; (b) a short test of English language proficiency; (c) targeted testing with blocks of items at low and high levels of difficulty; and (d) computerized administration of the assessment when feasible.

Although the National Assessment can establish rules for students to be tested in the same way, individual students participate in NAEP on a voluntary basis, and it is their schools that normally make the decision about whether a student drawn for the NAEP sample participates or not. Therefore, the cooperation of schools and parents is essential to ensure that NAEP samples in every jurisdiction are fully representative and that test results are comparable among the states and districts assessed. The recommendations in this report are intended to be of practical use in determining NAEP testing procedures and in working with states and districts to continue the assessment's tradition of producing comparable results and useful information.

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Report to the National Assessment Governing Board

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was established in 1969 to measure the academic achievement of a nationally representative sample of elementary and secondary students in the United States. It is sometimes called the Nation's Report Card. Subsequently, the assessment was expanded to provide representative-sample results for states and large urban school districts.

NAEP is designed to produce valid, comparable data on large groups of students. It is prohibited by law from providing results for individual children or schools. Because no student takes the entire test, scores cannot be calculated for individual students. Because NAEP measures change over time, it can provide participating states and districts with reliable, independent information about the success of their efforts to improve education. It is an important common measure of student performance.

Recently, concern has arisen about the wide variation among states and districts in the rates at which students who are English language learners (ELL) participate in NAEP. Confusion can arise when in some states almost all English language learners who are selected for the NAEP sample take the test, and in others many do not. Some advocates for ELL students maintain that having good information on the achievement of a fully representative sample of ELL students is a critical tool in improving services for them. The purpose of this report is to recommend ways both to increase the uniformity of NAEP participation rates among states and districts and to make participation rates high and administration procedures uniform.

Specifically, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) has convened a technical advisory panel to recommend a uniform set of rules for testing students who are English language learners on NAEP. The eight-member group held an all-day meeting in Washington, DC, on May 1 for initial briefings and discussion, and conducted five conference calls between May and July to develop recommendations.

The Governing Board charged the panel to make recommendations which:

- provide that students with similar levels of English proficiency be tested on NAEP the same way, regardless of where they live;
- maximize student access and meaningful participation;
- ensure that the constructs on NAEP frameworks are measured and that all students may be placed on the same scale;

- permit only accommodations that maintain the validity, reliability, and comparability of NAEP results; and
- are feasible, logistically and financially, and without detrimental consequences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel recommends that all English language learners who have been in United States schools for one year or more be included in the NAEP assessments. In addition, information should be collected and reported on students' English language proficiency, and accommodations made available that maximize meaningful participation. The panel further recommends that students who are ELL be offered ELL-responsive accommodations that are permitted by NAEP and selected at the local level by a qualified person who knows the student. Students who are ELL and in the U.S. less than one year may participate in the NAEP assessment if appropriate accommodations, such as a bilingual version of the test in the student's primary language, are available, or if the school or district deems their participation appropriate.

WHICH ELL STUDENTS ARE TO BE TESTED?

1) The panel recommends that all English language learners who have been in U.S. schools one year or more be included in NAEP assessments. This inclusion strategy should be implemented with the collection of and disaggregated reporting of ELL test results by standardized assessment information on a student's level of English language proficiency, and the availability of accommodations that maximize meaningful participation. To ensure that samples are fully representative, the panel recommends that NAEP set a goal of 95 percent participation among the ELL students selected for testing. The goal should be clearly communicated to state, district, and school personnel. A uniform participation rate of at least 95 percent would provide fairer comparisons among jurisdictions and better information on the progress of English language learners over time.

HOW ARE ELL STUDENTS TO BE TESTED?

2) The panel recommends that qualified staff at each sampled school should select from among ELL-responsive accommodations allowed by NAEP those that best meet the linguistic needs of each ELL student taking the assessment. ELL-responsive accommodations address the linguistic needs of students who are in the process of learning English. The panel defines an ELL-responsive accommodation as one which involves changes to testing procedures, testing materials, or the testing situation in order to allow meaningful participation in an assessment. Effective accommodations for ELLs address the unique linguistic and socio-cultural needs of the student without altering the test construct.

The decision to accommodate should be made by a qualified professional familiar with the student and using objective indicators of his or her English language proficiency. NAEP should provide explicit guidance about the knowledge and skills this local professional will need to make decisions about including ELLs in NAEP and in selecting appropriate accommodations. The panel recommends that NAEP allow only accommodations for which there is evidence that the construct being measured is not altered.

As part of the assessment, the accommodations offered and provided to each student should be documented so research may be conducted about what accommodations are used and the impact they may have.

3) The panel recommends that the prompts, directions and items in all NAEP assessments be written in plain language. Such material would be free of unnecessary linguistic complexity irrelevant to the construct being tested. However, the level of difficulty of the items themselves should remain unchanged. The panel recommends all NAEP assessments undergo a plain language review, and revisions be made to items if needed. The plain language review will require the convening of content specialists, second language acquisition specialists, and language testing experts as a central part of the item development process, from specifying a rubric for item design to reviewing and revising items that have been prepared. This means of preparing NAEP items, prompts, and directions should ultimately be used for all assessment booklets, but could initially be developed and field tested for booklets used as an accommodation for English language learners. The panel understands that items in plain language are being prepared for the 2011 NAEP assessments.

Reading

The NAEP reading assessment is a measure of reading in English and consists of authentic reading passages with approximately ten test items for each passage. The panel recommends that the reading passages should **not** be modified, but the process be accelerated by which items and directions relating to the passages are expressed in plain language, without unnecessary linguistic and cultural complexities that are unrelated to the constructs being measured.

Writing

NAEP assesses writing by using prompts to elicit student writing in English. The panel recommends that these prompts be written in plain language.

Mathematics and Science

To assess mathematics and science, the panel recommends that NAEP accelerate the development and use of blocks of items which are expressed in plain language.

All content area assessments except Reading and Writing

The ELL-responsive accommodations made available by NAEP should include the following:

- (a) Extra time in all subjects.
- (b) Bilingual version of the test in Spanish and English in math, science, history, civics and subjects other than reading and writing, to the extent deemed feasible by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The bilingual version, which may use the plain language version as the base for the Spanish translation, would be of benefit to the approximately 70 percent of ELLs that are Spanish-speaking.
- (c) A word-to-word bilingual glossary (without definitions) provided in English and Spanish. This would include high frequency general academic words as well as discipline-specific words used in each NAEP assessment.
- (d) A list of the words in this glossary in English should be provided to every jurisdiction participating in NAEP, so that states or local districts could prepare a similar glossary for the languages other than Spanish used widely by their students.
- (e) A plain English version of every assessment except the authentic passages or quotations used in reading and other assessments.

In addition the panel recommends that students who are ELL and also have disabilities identified on an IEP should be offered whatever additional special education accommodations are permitted by NAEP. These accommodations should be selected for them at the local level by qualified staff who know the student.

4) The panel recommends that NAEP build on existing efforts to develop assessment blocks with high concentrations of items on the existing NAEP scale at both the low and high ends of difficulty that are comparable with other blocks in terms of content and construct. Currently each NAEP assessment includes two 25-minute blocks of items, distributed over a broad spectrum of difficulty appropriate for the subject and grade level. The panel recommends that students who are ELL who would otherwise be excluded from NAEP be tested in reading on one of the current blocks of items, and a second block of items clustered at the low end of the continuum of difficulty. With such targeted testing, standard errors would be reduced at the low end of the continuum and better information would be available about student performance and improvements over time. This would be useful both in getting more detailed information about the achievement of ELL students and in reassuring local decision makers that ELLs can meaningfully participate in the assessment. If needed, additional items should be developed that test NAEP constructs at the low end of the existing NAEP scale.

WHAT CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION SHOULD BE PROVIDED IN REPORTING ELL RESULTS?

5) The panel fully recognizes the difficulty of distinguishing the extent to which students who are ELL know the subject matter from the extent to which they know English. It therefore urges NAEP to exert leadership by reporting test results for ELLs by their level of English language proficiency as advanced, intermediate, or beginner/low.

Although existing English language proficiency assessments (ELPAs) are not fully comparable across states, the panel recommends collecting the student's most recent results on the state's NCLB Title III-required ELPA for research and analysis purposes. Despite their limitations, using data from these exams may allow greater consistency in reporting ELL students' English language proficiency within each jurisdiction. As soon as possible, NAEP should develop its own brief test of English language proficiency to bring consistency to its reporting nationwide.

6) The panel recommends that NAEP collect background information on ELL test takers that includes the number of years a student has lived in the United States (or the year of entry into the U.S.), the number of years a student has attended schools in the United States, the number of years the student has received instruction primarily in English, and when applicable, the number of years since the student has exited ELL services or was reclassified.

7) The panel recommends that as soon as NCES considers it feasible, NAEP results should be collected, disaggregated, and reported for former ELLs who have been reclassified as fluent and English proficient and exited from the ELL category. Specifically, the panel recommends that NAEP collect information on the number of years since former-ELL students exited ELL services or were reclassified. NAEP officials should encourage states to maintain such data for this important group, thus providing a more complete picture of the long-term success of ELL students in U.S. schools.

INTERIM GUIDANCE TO STATE AND LOCAL OFFICIALS

8) Uniform national rules for administering NAEP will not, taken alone, result in more uniform decisions by local decision-makers about whether and when ELLs are to be included or excluded from taking NAEP. Therefore, special efforts are needed to communicate clear guidelines and expectations to include ELL students in NAEP. Clarity is especially important when NAEP does not allow accommodations provided in state or district assessments. Specifically the panel recommends:

- i) clearly indicating that NAEP expects that 95 percent of all students who are ELL who have been in U.S. schools one year or more and are selected as part of the NAEP sample should participate in the assessment. Decision makers should know that state and district exclusion rates for ELLs will be indicated and highlighted in NAEP reports.

- ii) identifying and addressing the concerns that have led some state and district decision makers to exclude students who are ELL from taking NAEP; specifically informing them of the availability of ELL-responsive accommodations (extra time, bilingual booklets, the availability of a word-to-word glossary, booklets with concentrations of items at the low end of difficulty in reading, items written in plain language) and how these accommodations enable ELL students at various levels of English language proficiency to participate in the assessment.
- iii) meeting with testing directors and policy makers from states and participating urban districts in the year before each assessment to explain the inclusion rules used by NAEP and to encourage them to work with their participating schools to apply the inclusion criteria uniformly. The goal would be to keep the NAEP-approved criteria fresh in the minds of state, district, and school gatekeepers who make the decision about ELL participation in NAEP. This biennial meeting could be convened in conjunction with NCES' regularly scheduled meeting with state and district staff.
- iv) reminding state and district educators of the value of the information that NAEP provides for educational policy-making and programs without producing test scores or possible harm for individual students or schools.

INCENTIVES FOR INCLUSION

The panel recommends

- i) new guidance to state and local decision makers urging high participation rates, and informing them of the steps being taken to make NAEP more accessible to ELLs.
- ii) an explicit contract requirement that NAEP items be written in plain language through a systematic process of item development and review. Content specialists, second language acquisition specialists, and second language testing experts should be involved in preparing a rubric for item design as well as in the review of new test questions to ensure that all NAEP prompts, items, and directions are written without unnecessary or construct-irrelevant linguistic complexity.
- iii) states and districts that do not attain the policy goal of 95 percent participation rate among eligible ELLs selected for the sample should be designated in NAEP reports as jurisdictions falling below the desired participation rate.

- iv) focus groups of state and local decision makers should be convened to ask what incentives would be effective in attaining high and consistent participation rates for ELL students across states and urban districts.

RECOMMENDED FUTURE INNOVATIONS AND RESEARCH

Panel members agree that an optimal system for administering NAEP would include an interlocking set of innovations not now available: adaptive computer administration; a short test of English language proficiency with proficiency levels for advanced, intermediate, and beginner/low levels; targeted blocks of items concentrated at the low and high ends of the continuum of difficulty; and a pop-up glossary of terms for students in their primary language for tests other than reading. In addition the panel recommends that prompts, items and directions routinely be expressed in plain language.

The panel understands that important technical issues need to be resolved before i) NAEP can be administered on computers; ii) a short but reliable test of English language proficiency can be developed that can be incorporated within the time limits of the NAEP assessment; and iii) a large number of plain language NAEP items and blocks of items can be developed that test the NAEP constructs.

In light of the new research and development work that will be needed, the panel recommends that an aggressive timeline be established to accelerate the development of innovations in testing English language learners which includes:

- i) Long Term: Development of a computerized administration of NAEP;
- ii) Short Term: An immediate study of existing NAEP student background questionnaire data on how a teacher rates an ELL's speaking, listening, reading and writing in English as advanced, intermediate or beginner/low, and the relationship of these ratings to the student's achievement. Information regarding the performance of students who may have been in U.S. schools many years and are still performing at very low levels will be of special interest.

Long Term: Development of a brief, easily-administered test of English language proficiency, with associated cut scores which identify the test-taker as advanced, intermediate or beginner/low English proficient. These cut scores could be used to determine targeting with a booklet of items at the high or low end of the existing continuum of difficulty on the NAEP scale.

- ii) Short Term: Studies on the feasibility of targeting ELLs for blocks of items with plain language in some subjects, including blocks of reading items appropriate for ELLs at low or intermediate levels of English language proficiency.

Long Term: Development of items, writing prompts and directions in plain English in all subjects and ultimately for all students.

- iii) Short term: Development of a word-to-word bilingual glossary in English and Spanish (without definitions), composed of high frequency general academic words and discipline-specific words used in each NAEP assessment. A list of these words in English should be made available to all jurisdictions participating in NAEP so they may prepare a similar glossary for languages other than Spanish used by many of their students.
- iv) Long term: Special studies to examine the comparability of plain language test versions with the regular NAEP assessment items. Also a series of randomized field trial studies to experimentally examine the validity of NAEP assessment outcomes under this and other accommodations for which there may not be enough validity evidence and the effectiveness of various accommodations in providing accessible assessments for ELL students.
- v) Long term: Targeting students with low or high English language literacy in reading and writing with special blocks containing a high concentration of items at the low or high end of the existing NAEP scale;
- vi) Short term: A study of high participation states (such as California and Colorado) and high exclusion states (such as Texas and New Mexico) to identify characteristics of state assessment policies, the approach of decision makers, and other criteria associated with different levels of participation.

In addition, some panel members recommend that the Governing Board consider establishing a new framework in Spanish language literacy to assess the reading skills of ELLs and other students instructed in Spanish. This would enhance participation in states such as Texas and New Mexico where bilingualism is a policy goal.

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