

**Testimony of Christine Rowland,
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New York, N.Y.,
On Behalf of the American Federation of Teachers,
To the National Assessment Governing Board
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Members of the board, I am Christine Rowland, and I teach English language learners (ELLs) at Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx, N.Y. I am also on staff with the United Federation of Teachers' Teacher Center, and serve on the American Federation of Teachers' nationwide advisory committee on ELLs. I have been a teacher for more than 17 years, and working with English language learners and watching them succeed is my passion. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to testify in favor of the proposed recommendations to improve the National Assessment of Educational Progress for English language learners.

I would like to tell you about my school. There are 268 English language learners at Christopher Columbus High School. Many of these ELL students have a "double-designation": 71 (26 percent) are also special education students, and 31 (11.6 percent) are also students with interrupted formal education (SIFE). They come from more than 26 countries and speak 13 different languages.¹ Of these students, 149 (56 percent) are newcomers to the United States (in their first three years in the country), another 48 students (18 percent) are in years 3-6, and the remaining 71 student (26 percent) are long-term ELLs. Of the students who are long-term ELLs, half (36) are also receiving special education services.

When students arrive at our school, their literacy levels in their native languages vary from never having held a pen or pencil before, to being highly literate. They also arrive at varying points on the high school continuum: For a student arriving in his or her sophomore year of high school with no English, graduation (which requires passing five New York State Regents examinations) in three years will represent a major challenge. It is a challenge that is too great for some, who will need an extra year or even two. So as you can see, I welcome the opportunity

¹ Albanian, Arabic, Bambara, Bengali, French, Khmer, Macedonian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Urdu, Vietnamese and Wolof

to share my thoughts on what will improve the educational experience of students like mine.

More and more students like mine can be found all over the country. From 1990 until now, the overall K-12 student population has increased 12-14 percent. Meanwhile, the ELL population has experienced astronomical growth—over 100 percent. In 1990, there were 2.5 million ELLs; now, there are more than 5 million, and the Pew Hispanic Center estimates this number will rise to 18 million students by 2025.

In light of these current demographics and the changing face of our public schools, we must address the growing challenges—from inadequate instructional resources to exorbitant dropout rates—faced by this population of students and the educators who teach them every day. What's most disturbing is that the achievement gap between ELLs and other groups has not dramatically narrowed in decades. NAEP has been our most reliable source of nationwide academic achievement data, and the information that NAEP provides is critical to school reform efforts. This is why we commend the board's commissioning of the Technical Advisory Panel on Uniform National Rules for NAEP Testing of English Language Learners, and we support its recommendations for appropriate inclusion of ELLs in NAEP.

We know assessment of and accountability for ELLs are necessary to ensure these students receive sound instructional attention, yet current testing practices that assess ELLs' content knowledge in English are often not fair, valid, reliable or appropriate, and make it difficult to distinguish between lack of linguistic abilities in English and learning disabilities.

Improvements on how NAEP is administered to ELLs will have a marked impact on tracking progress and identifying gaps in instruction. The call to encourage a uniform participation rate among ELLs is valuable; it could well lead to more ELL-focused reforms around the country. However, if NAEP were to be used in high-stakes decisions, the results of ELLs who have only been in U.S. schools for one year will not be valid as a basis for such decisions—unless a translated test is available. Even with a "plain English" version, their scores would be at least as much a product of their language level as their content knowledge. I know all too well the toll and far-reaching consequences that a rigorous exam can take on ELLs who have not had enough time to learn the language.

My students must pass at least five New York State Regents exams in order to graduate from high school.² The examinations are given in January, June and August. They are spread out through high school and are intended to be taken in a specific order so as not to overwhelm students.

The challenge for ELLs is that their arrival in the United States at varying times across the four years of high school, and the time it takes to develop the language and content skills required for success on these exams, mean that ELLs frequently need to take a given exam several times before being able to pass it. This, combined with the fact that the Comprehensive English examination is given across two days, often forces an ELL student to face multiple exams during the same administration period. The combination of exams given across several days has, at times, left some ELLs with nine hours of testing a day for three days straight, as happened in June 2008. Occasionally, it can be even worse: If a student needs to take two exams in a content area—he or she may need to sit in what is known as a “conflict room,” where he or she may have to take up to three exams in a day, one at a time for four and a half hours each. To see the faces of students at the end of the day is a sobering experience. They are tired, hungry and often incoherent. It is far from an ideal scenario. Just knowing that they will face these schedules is daunting.

While I am aware that the NAEP testing structure is very different and the schedule is not nearly as taxing, New York is one of the states with the highest number of ELLs, and it is important to understand the testing realities ELLs face in their home states. For this reason, I recommend that students who take the NAEP be told that the exam is being administered nationwide to get an overall snapshot of how students are performing. ELL students are so besieged by tests, lack of enough instructional time, and lack of access to specialized instructors that performing poorly on yet another exam could have detrimental consequences.

If NAEP pilots a plain English version in 2011, then we suggest you also disaggregate data based on whether a translated version of the test and/or a glossary were made available (or neither, which is frequently the case for low-incidence languages).

² At least one math exam, one science exam, World History and Geography, U.S. History and Government, and the Comprehensive English Examination.

I particularly like the idea of the plain English version—we don't have this in our New York assessments, and it would greatly help our students because they would be more likely to understand what they are being asked. I'll give an illustration of this from the New York State Comprehensive English Regents Exam. There is a section of the exam known as the "Critical Lens," where students are given a quotation about literature that they must interpret in their own words, agree with or disagree with, and then support their opinion using two works of literature. The Critical Lens in June 2008, for example, was "... *it is the human lot to try and fail ...*" by David Mamet. English language learners taking the exam were unfamiliar with this use of the word "lot," and the vast majority misinterpreted the quotation as a result, turning in an essay that was worth little or nothing under the scoring rubric.

In the recommendations, the Panel suggests that extra time be allowed for ELLs in each NAEP-tested subject. The amount of extra time must be specified in the recommendations so that test-taking conditions are standardized. The list of the words in the glossary also must be made available to districts very early in the process, so they have adequate time to translate it to other languages if they need to. I would add that, in my experience, bilingual glossaries, while helpful, are not nearly as effective as a translated test, especially for students with low levels of English proficiency.

It would be useful to examine the impact of interrupted formal schooling on achievement, which I assume also affects NAEP scores. You should consider disaggregating scores for students based on a two-tier system. Tier one would include students who have missed six months to two years of schooling, and tier two would include those students who have missed more than two years. Students who have missed substantial periods of time in school can be far behind educationally. At the high school level, there is a big difference between a student who has missed a year of school and a student who has missed much more. Many of the students identified as SIFE have missed six months to a year of school. These students will not have nearly the same kind of challenge in catching up that a student with a much longer period will have. If all students with interrupted formal schooling are put in the same category, then researchers looking at outcomes for that category may draw false conclusions about the difficulties faced by all students with SIFE status. That's what happened in New York City, where the Department of Education's Division of Assessment and Accountability determined that SIFE status has no impact on outcomes for any Regents exam except English. This

finding is very troubling; without taking SIFE status into account, the outcomes for this population are unclear. At the school level, I have found the issue further complicated by the fact that some students, when they enter a new school, are afraid to admit to time periods without schooling and thus are not officially identified as SIFE.

In order to create incentives for school officials and staff to implement the new rules and participate widely in NAEP, NAEP results could be tied to increased federal funding for professional development for teachers and staff to help narrow the achievement gap. This approach would be proactive, moving away from sanctions, and would help make a meaningful connection between assessment, instruction and professional development. Funds for professional development are especially important at the high school level since Title I funds for high school are scarce.

Professional development must include not just those teachers and staff who are specifically prepared or credentialed to work with ELLs, but also mainstream content-area teachers, since they need to understand how to teach content to students who are just beginning to learn English. At my school, while the core group of teachers who serve ELLs in content-area classes receive ongoing support in sheltered instruction practices, it is not always possible to place ELLs in these classes due to the complexity of graduation requirements and the needs of individual students. It is not uncommon for a mainstream teacher to tell me that he or she thinks an English language learner is illiterate or has a learning disability. Whenever I know the student personally, I'm able to explain the student's background and share strategies for working effectively with the student (including providing a plain English text), but if I don't know the student well, I offer to have the teacher send the student to me. I almost always find that the student has been in the country for a relatively short period, and that he or she is a beginning or beginning-intermediate English learner and is merely struggling with the text and with the pace and complexity of the teacher's speech.

When I conduct professional development workshops, I prefer to present with a general education teacher who already uses sheltered instruction approaches, and with at least one student who has benefited from such approaches. Articulate students who are ready for graduation are a powerful way to convince teachers that it is worth some effort to adjust their classroom practices. Ideally, teachers would be able to receive professional development on sheltered instruction embedded in their weekly schedule.

Another incentive to consider that could increase participation of ELLs in NAEP is tying NAEP results to increased federal funding for class size reduction. Our class size limit in New York City is 34 students, which is much too large for more individualized instruction to take place. In a district where money is tight, this would be a big incentive.

These improved practices for NAEP must have the power to inform state-level assessment systems, because our students' future academic success depends mostly on these other high-stakes assessments—not on NAEP. Well-crafted recommendations like these should be taken into consideration for state-specific, high-stakes assessments such as the Regents exams in New York.

If NAEP does develop its own test of English language proficiency, which is crucial to standardize test-takers' fluency levels, we also urge you to conduct an alignment study between this test and the tests states currently use to determine English language proficiency. If the tests are similar, school systems should have the option of choosing to use only one English language proficiency test.

It is critical that each of these recommendations not be implemented or piloted in isolation. All the panel's recommendations complement and depend on each other; if they are not used together, NAEP will not be administered properly and the data collected will be fragmented.

The panel's recommendation to establish a new framework in Spanish language literacy to assess the reading skills of both ELLs and students who are receiving instruction in Spanish would greatly benefit the status of bilingualism and biliteracy.

In closing, we urge you to implement these recommendations. They will make a difference in meeting the instructional needs of students like those I know who come through the doors of Christopher Columbus High School seeking an education.