

Maryland Teachers of English as a Second or Other Language

(MD TESOL)

Position Paper on the

Impact of High Stakes Testing on Secondary English Language Learners

English language learners (ELLs) comprise a rapidly growing number of students in Maryland schools. Students in this special population share many common characteristics which need to be taken into account when crafting state and district educational policy. As a result of Maryland's high-stakes testing model, English language learners in Maryland's high schools face greater obstacles to obtaining a diploma today than ever before. Consequently, the secondary ELL needs special considerations in order to acquire English language skills and to gain academic content knowledge. It is the position of Maryland TESOL that current assessment practices and graduation requirements based on state assessments are not responsive to ELL students' individual educational needs, and therefore, present educational inequalities which must be remedied.

Adolescent ELLs enter the United States with little or no academic English skills. Many have completed some secondary education in their home countries, but do not have enough English proficiency or appropriate transfer credits to enter at any grade level beyond 9th grade.

In reality, a disproportionate number of ELLs are 16-19 years old when they enter the 9th grade in the U.S. Research consistently shows that it takes ELL students between seven and ten years to attain Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which is the language proficiency level necessary for successful academic performance in secondary schools (Cummins 1984). Students who do not have sufficient time to develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) are unlikely to be successful on the Maryland High School Assessments. The conflict between the established length of time necessary to attain CALP, the advanced age

of newcomer students, and the state testing requirements place adolescent ELLs who enter American schools at the secondary level at a severe disadvantage in meeting graduation requirements. Many jurisdictions approach the issue of English language instruction and core academic content differently because the size and impact of the ELL population varies greatly across school systems.

School systems struggle with the decision to delay access to core academic content in favor of building English language proficiency, whether or not to award English credit for ESOL classes, and when and how to transition from sheltered ESOL instruction to mainstream content only. Recently, school systems, such as Prince George's County and Anne Arundel County, have been encouraged to have all students take the High School Assessments and the related coursework by grade 11. This leaves only two years to develop cognitive academic language proficiency in English (a process requiring 7-10 years) before attempting HSA coursework.

Formalized assessments such as the HSA's pose a unique challenge to ELL's because their ability to demonstrate content mastery often depends on their language skills. This scenario is most significant on the Algebra/Data Analysis HSA in which many questions consist of word problems requiring the student to be proficient in English in order to demonstrate mathematical knowledge. This issue could be remedied through a modified HSA for ELLs. Several states (Delaware, Texas, Illinois, Wisconsin) have attempted to remove language as a barrier to assessing content knowledge by offering students a modified assessment that uses simplified language.

Secondary ELLs enter the United States with vastly different educational experiences. For instance, in addition to traumatic emotional experiences that some students faced at home, many students have limited formal schooling or interrupted education. When these factors are considered along with the advanced age common to 9th grade ELLs, it becomes clear that many of these students will

need alternative support programs in order to more successfully meet state graduation requirements.

Cummins, J. (1984). *Language Proficiency, Bilingualism, and academic achievement*. Bilingualism and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy. San Diego, CA: College-Hill.