



NJTESOL/NJBE, Inc.

NJ Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages/NJ Bilingual Educators

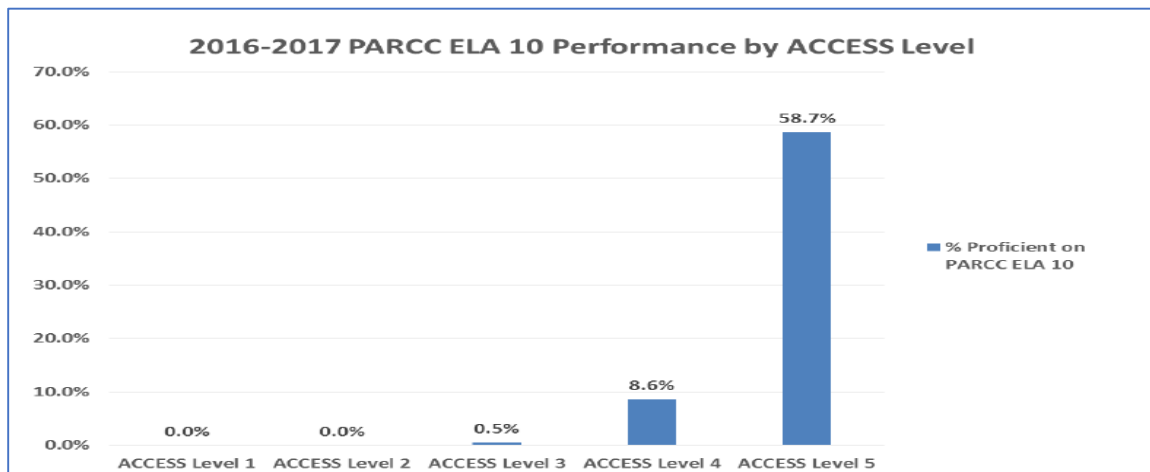
TO: Members of the New Jersey State Board of Education
FROM: NJ Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages/ NJ Bilingual Educators (NJTESOL/NJBE)
RE: Concerns for English Learners
RE: May 1, 2019

On behalf of NJTESOL/NJBE, a professional organization for those concerned with the teaching of English as a Second Language, and Bilingual Education, I am here to testify on several issues which impact the vulnerable subgroup of English Learners. Our membership is comprised of educators and administrators dedicated to the instruction of English learners (ELs) at all levels of public and private education. Our interests include classroom practices, research, curriculum development, funding, employment and socio-political concerns.

Since it is an Open Topics session, I would like to address several issues which concern our membership in relation to English Learners.

1. Graduation exit testing

ELs have the highest dropout rate and lowest graduation rate of all subgroups in NJ. ELs are students who are in the process of acquiring a new language, a process that takes time. Data illustrate that these students cannot pass standardized tests until they reach a high intermediate or advanced level of English which usually takes four to five years, depending on their first language abilities.



While students are in this process of acquiring the academic language needed, teachers adapt instruction and provide scaffolds so that the students learn the content standards. In this way, high school students demonstrate the knowledge of the standards and gain high school credits. Requiring students to pass an exit test that does not accommodate for the needs of these students forecloses ELs from a meaningful opportunity to graduate from high school. Historically, ELs have had the highest rate of graduating through the portfolio process and the lowest rate of graduating by passing standardized assessments, which is not surprising based on the nature of the second language acquisition process.

	Total	Students with Disability	Economically Disadvantaged Students	English Language Learners
Total number of NJ students who graduated 2017	98,338	13,161	28,991	2,342
Students graduated by passing PARCC assessments (ELA & Math)	27% (26,213)	7% (936)	21% (6,205)	3% (70)
Students graduated by passing designated alternative tests (ELA & Math)	33% (32,349)	21% (2,737)	26% (7,574)	19% (456)
Students graduated through Portfolio Appeals process (ELA & Math)	4% (4,280)	2% (313)	10% (2,799)	43% (1,014)
Students graduated through alternate requirements specified in their IEP's (ELA & Math)	7% (6,987)	49% (6,456)	11% (3,083)	3% (66)
Students graduated through combination of pathways (E LA & Math)	29% (28,600)	21% (2,719)	32% (9,331)	31% (736)

Source: New Jersey Department of Education Graduation Pathway Data Collection, 2017

Since many ELs must complete the portfolio process, they spend a good deal of their senior year working on the tasks and miss other opportunities to enrich their skills. Graduating from high school is a critical achievement for these students. The difference in salaries between a high school graduate and a high school dropout has been well documented. If these students can demonstrate their knowledge by passing their classes and obtaining the requisite credits, they should receive a high school diploma. Passing a test that is not a valid or reliable assessment of their skills and which was not created with their particular profile in mind, should not preclude this vulnerable population from obtaining a high school diploma.

- Overall, standardized assessment in English is a major concern of our constituency. In addition to exit testing we would encourage the NJ Department of Education to pursue creating valid and reliable assessments at all levels. Our members were gratified for the opportunity to participate in the Department's robust stakeholder engagement process developing the latest ESSA plan. NJTESOL/NJBE members were able to share both their in-depth policy expertise and their practical, in-classroom knowledge of issues affecting English learners. Our concerns were heard, and many key issues were included in the plan as crafted through the stakeholder process. However, looking ahead to the implementation process, NJTESOL/NJBE members would like to reiterate the need to include native language versions of the state assessment in Language Arts. This was a bedrock recommendation of our engagement in the stakeholder process. This vulnerable subgroup must be afforded all available opportunities to demonstrate what they know. New Jersey has a strong bilingual education law which protects the civil rights of these students to receive an appropriate, meaningful education. Since many districts

implement a bilingual program, it is vital that the assessment portion of the educational cycle align with the instructional model. The current NJ ESSA plan clearly found that Spanish is the most common language other than English spoken by the tested English learner population in New Jersey. No additional languages are present “to a significant extent.” At all grade levels three through 12, the NJDOE administers the state mathematics assessment in both English and Spanish. At the middle and high school levels, this includes Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II. In addition, the current science assessments in grades five, eight and eleven are available in Spanish. However, assessments are not available in Spanish for LA. As stated in the *Dear Colleague* letter issued jointly by the US Department of Justice and Education Department’s Office of Civil Rights: “If EL students are receiving instruction in a core content subject in their primary language, the school’s assessments of their knowledge of that content area must include testing in the primary language.” It is common practice that bilingual classes follow the NJ Student Learning Standards in language arts but use Spanish as the language of delivery. Therefore, it is only appropriate for ELs in bilingual programs be assessed in the language of instruction in grades three through 12.

3. In addition to creating Spanish versions for the Language Arts, NJTESOL/NJBE also recommends implementing more accommodations in the English versions for the other represented language groups. When considering a new vendor for assessment, we encourage the NJDOE to request appropriate accommodations for these students: (e.g., more visuals, translation tools, reduced linguistic complexity).
4. The expansion of universal Pre-K also affects this population. Preschool programs are critical for English learners. Many districts enroll significant numbers of ELs. High quality preschool programs have proven to be effective in closing the achievement gap. Once the expansion occurs, it is also incumbent on the New Jersey Department of Education to revisit the Preschool guidelines. Bilingual education is mandated from K-12, but not in preschool, which results in a huge disconnection between preschool programs and services for ELs and the mandated programs in kindergarten. If districts are mandated to have bilingual programs in kindergarten then those districts should also provide native language support in the preschool program.
5. Due to a lack of certified bilingual teachers across all grade levels, we must do more to recruit and train bilingual teacher candidates to staff bilingual preschool classes, bilingual K-12 programs as well as the growing dual language initiatives. New Jersey should provide funding and/or grant programs for teacher training to address this critical shortage. Bi-partisan legislation for such a bill passed the Senate 36-0 in June 2018. This bill now awaits action in the Assembly Education Committee. This bill establishes grant program for school districts and charter schools to develop dual language immersion programs.
6. NJ offers a Seal of Biliteracy to graduating seniors which has been growing in popularity since its inception. This year over 5,000 seniors have demonstrated proficiency in two or more languages. We are asking the NJDOE to support legislation which will mandate that

New Jersey State Colleges and Universities establish criteria to translate the New Jersey Seal of Biliteracy into college credits. Granting college credits for this achievement will encourage more students to seek the Seal of Biliteracy, accelerate the acquisition of their college degree and save money for students attending New Jersey colleges.

7. A growing population of Students with Interrupted Education (SIFE) has become a concern for many districts throughout the state. Over 11,000 unaccompanied minors have been placed in NJ schools over the last six years. These students arrive with specialized needs due to educational gaps and lack of literacy in their own languages. Districts need support in developing programs and obtaining resources to address their needs, especially at the high school level.
8. Last, but not certainly not least, we are asking that the NJDOE develop clear guidelines for identifying and servicing ELs who may also have special needs. Unfortunately, the application of the laws surrounding this specialized population is not consistent throughout the state. Clear statements on the process to be followed and examples of compliance are needed.

On behalf of NJTESOL/NJBE, and our members across New Jersey, we offer our assistance, time, and expertise on the issue of bilingual education policy. We hope you will consider our recommendations and will call on us anytime if a question may arise regarding English learners.