



ALTERNATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
LEARNING ASSESSMENT PROJECT

# Talking Points for State Leaders: Alternate English Language Proficiency Standards and Assessments

ALTELLA Brief No. 8

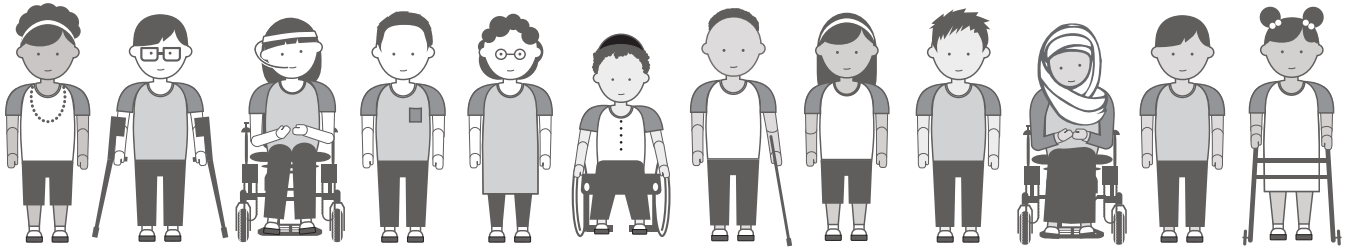
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## Project Background

The ALTELLA project researches instructional practices, accessibility features and accommodations, and assessment of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities to develop an evidence-centered design approach that informs our understanding of alternate English language proficiency assessment for these students.

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States have an exciting opportunity to support a population of students who may not have been fully included or served in English language development and English language proficiency assessments: English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. This brief provides an overview of alternate English language proficiency standards and assessments and policy and assessment development the implications for state leaders. This brief also includes a number of resources for state leaders to consider, no matter what stage in the development process they are at.

The U.S. Every Student Succeeds Act, a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, included a new provision that English language proficiency is now included as an indicator in accountability plans and growth measures outline in the 2015 act's Title I. The addition of English language proficiency indicators to Title I accountability metrics signaled that the U.S. Department of Education (2018, p. 8) considers English learners and their ongoing progress toward proficiency to be a critical component of school accountability and success. The move of the English learner indicator to Title I also signaled that the department will require English language proficiency assessments to undergo peer review.

Subsequent communications from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of School Support (2017) clarified that this requirement extends to all English learners, even to students with significant cognitive disabilities. Until now, districts and states had often entirely exempted these students from assessment of their English language proficiency. The office also clarified that states could develop, adopt, and base assessments of these students on alternate English language proficiency standards and alternate expectations for their progress toward proficiency. English learners with significant cognitive disabilities must be identified; supported in their English

To best support English learners with significant cognitive disabilities in their progress toward proficiency in the English language, educators must

- (1) accurately identify these students,
- (2) support their growth with alternate achievement expectations that reflect a focus on the most critical aspects of receptive, productive, and interactive communication, and
- (3) measure that growth annually by administering an inclusive assessment that is fair, valid, and reliable.

language development; and assessed annually with a valid, aligned instrument to measure their progress toward English language proficiency. These standards and assessment must pass peer review scrutiny.

As state and local education agencies prepare to meet this challenge, state leaders are strongly advised to assemble teams of experts to address the need for new policies, best practices, training, and communication around the identification, instruction, and assessment of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. Some states will need to plan for adoption and implementation of new alternate English language proficiency standards and assessments. This brief provides states and local education agency leaders with background, talking points, and next steps for identifying and focusing on English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, adopting alternate English language proficiency standards and expectations for achievement, and implementing alternate English language proficiency assessments.



## Who are English Learners with the Significant Cognitive Disabilities?

English Learners with the significant cognitive disabilities are a diverse group. Prior to work by ALTELLA, research and data on this sub-population were scarce. ALTELLA reviewed state and federal terminology and devised this definition:

*English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are individuals who have one or more disabilities that significantly limit their intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as documented in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and who are progressing toward English language proficiency in speaking, reading, writing, and understanding. (Christensen, Gholson, & Shyyan, 2018, p. 2)*

The English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (Thurlow, Liu, Goldstone, Albus, & Rogers, 2018c, p. 5) articulated the following

core beliefs about English learners with significant cognitive disabilities:

- 1) *ELs [English learners] with significant cognitive disabilities are a heterogeneous group, with physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive differences, representing diverse social, educational, and cultural backgrounds. They also vary in their communication levels, from those with no obvious communication system to those with oral or other symbolic communication systems. While they learn language at varying rates, all ELs with significant cognitive disabilities have the same potential as non-ELs with significant cognitive disabilities to learn language, and their diverse backgrounds are valuable resources for learning.*
- 2) *All ELs with significant cognitive disabilities are capable of making and demonstrating*

*progress toward English language proficiency based on alternate achievement standards, and benefit from scaffolded instruction and language development services.*

- 3) *ELs with significant cognitive disabilities must acquire discipline-specific practices that enable them to produce, interpret, and effectively collaborate on content-related, grade-appropriate tasks based on alternate achievement standards. ELs with significant cognitive disabilities benefit from technology, manipulatives, and with the appropriate supports and accommodations, can make and demonstrate continual progress in the use of language.*

- *The most common primary disabilities include intellectual disabilities, autism, multiple disabilities, and developmental delay. Two-fifths of these students had secondary disabilities.*
- *Over half of these students are in self-contained special education classrooms.*
- *Almost a quarter of students do not receive English language development instruction.*

A deeper and more detailed understanding of this population, as supported by ALTELLA's work, will support states and districts as they examine their policies and practices for identifying English learners with significant cognitive disabilities.

Methods for identification of students who are English learners with significant cognitive disabilities typically differ by grade. In Grade 3 and higher, students are typically identified for alternate content assessments as part of the annual Individualized Education Programs (IEP) process. The decision to administer an alternate assessment is typically made based on an IEP team's assessment of whether the student:

- *has significant cognitive disabilities or low intellectual and adaptive functioning*
- *needs extensive, intensive, individualized instruction and support*
- *receives instruction that the use of a modified curriculum*  
(Thurlow, Liu, Goldstone, Albus, & Rogers, 2018a, p. 11)

Additionally, the consortia that developed alternate content assessments, the National Center and State Collaborative, shared participation guidelines for its assessments, defining students with significant cognitive disabilities as students whose records that "indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. Adaptive behavior is defined as actions essential for an individual to live independently and to function safely in daily life. Having a significant cognitive disability is not determined by an IQ test score, but rather a holistic

## Identification of English Learners with Significant Cognitive Disabilities in Grades 3–12

As state and local education agencies adopt alternate English language proficiency standards and implement alternate English language proficiency assessments, staff will converse about who English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are and how to best identify them and the supports they need. The number of such students in each state will vary, but ALTELLA expects them to comprise 1% or 2% of each state's English learner population. Therefore some school districts may not have any English learners with significant cognitive disabilities or may have only one. In other states, these students may number in the thousands.

Although this population is small its diversity makes identification challenging. ALTELLA (Christensen, Mitchell, Shyyan, and Ryan, 2018, p. iii) conducted in-depth research into the characteristics of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities via The Individual Characteristics Questionnaire; the findings of this research include the following:

- *Students have 71 primary home languages; the most common include Spanish, English, and Arabic. Students use all languages in a variety of settings: in the home, at school, and in the community.*

understanding of a student” (National Center and State Collaborative, 2014, p. 4).

For students in Grade 3 and up, the determination whether students have significant cognitive disabilities is typically made in conjunction with content assessments and the annual IEP process. In Grade 3 and up, the majority of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are those who are (a) English learners and (b) qualify for alternate content assessments. If a student meets both criteria, that student should be considered eligible to take an alternate English language proficiency assessment.

While they learn language at varying rates, all English learners with significant cognitive disabilities have the same potential as non-English learners with significant cognitive disabilities to learn language, and their diverse backgrounds are valuable resources for learning.

## Identification of English Learners With Significant Cognitive Disabilities in Grades K-2

Identification of English learners who have significant cognitive disabilities in Grades K–2 may require states and school districts to develop new approaches. Since students in these grades do not participate in content area assessments, the school-based IEP teams for those grades may lack members who are versed in identification of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. In fact, distinguishing whether a very young student’s perceived lack of English language proficiency is based on a delayed development of English or a significant cognitive impairment can be complicated by the student’s emerging literacy. In other words, if a first-grader does not read at grade level, or does not communicate at all, is the delay a cognitive or linguistic challenge?

Accurate identification of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities in early grades is challenging and especially critical. Often, students such as these are placed into special education or given additional support without being provided with English learner services, thus compounding the challenges they face by failing to support their English language development. The lack of a valid and reliable English language screener designed for this population exacerbates the challenge – English learners may go unidentified if only their cognitive abilities are assessed.

If a young student enters the school system with a Child Find record indicting a significant cognitive disability, or a comparable medical history, the school may determine that the student has significant cognitive disabilities, based on the state’s criteria for making such a determination. The student’s family should still receive a home language survey, and the student should still be evaluated for English learner services. In these cases, it will be particularly important to gather input from caregivers and families to understand how students are using language, both English and other languages, as part of the identification procedures. In all cases, IEP teams are encouraged to include an EL specialist and a specialist in the student’s home language in consultations and decision-making.

All English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are capable of making and demonstrating progress toward English language proficiency based on alternate achievement standards, and benefit from scaffolded instruction and language development services.



## Not All English Learners With Disabilities

States may need to set or revise their policies with respect to identification, support, and assessment of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. Each state needs to decide, for example, whether an EL must be eligible for an alternate content assessment in order to be eligible for an alternate English language proficiency assessment. ALTELLA recommends that states that share standards and assessments use the same guidelines for inclusion in the English learners with significant cognitive disabilities population, their participation in alternate English language proficiency assessments, and their eligibility for exit from English learner services.

Decisions to include students in the population taking alternate assessments are not to be made lightly and should not be made by a single educator or

administrator acting alone. Furthermore, the decision to administer alternate English language proficiency assessments should not be made solely on the basis of the following:

- *Time of arrival in U.S. schools*
- *History of limited or interrupted formal schooling*
- *Low English language proficiency or literacy level*
- *Student's ability / inability to exit from English learner services*
- *Excessive absenteeism*
- *Poor performance or impact on accountability system*
- *Disability category label*
- *Special education placement or service* (Thurlow et al, 2018a, p. 1)

These factors may exist and may indeed contribute to the student's overall achievement; while these factors have an impact, they should not be considered the basis for determining an English learner needs to take the alternate English language proficiency assessment. Ultimately, the decision to participate in an alternate English language proficiency assessment should be an IEP team decision.

## Alternate English Language Proficiency Achievement Standards

English learners with significant cognitive disabilities have the same potential as their non-English learner peers to learn and use language in academic and social settings. English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are not separate from other English learners in their need for English language proficiency. The expectations for that progress toward proficiency, however, are necessarily different. This understanding is central to the notion of alternate achievement standards and expectations for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, and alternate English language proficiency assessment.

### Background on Alternate Achievement Standards

Alternate achievement standards have been permissible and, in fact, encouraged for most of the 21st century. In a December 9, 2003, communication in the Federal Register, the U.S. Department of Education noted that states are allowed to develop, instruct, and assess based on alternate achievement standards to evaluate the performance of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged, 2003). Previously, and perhaps to this day, the term "alternate achievement standards" was widely misunderstood—educators and policymakers assumed it referred to a separate, independent set of standards, and in the case of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, assumed to be a separate set of standards for English language development. This is not accurate (Quenemoen & Thurlow, 2015, p. 1); rather "alternate achievement standards" reflect standards used to evaluate the

performance of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities may not achieve the same level of content knowledge as their peers who lack significant cognitive disabilities. These students are held to alternate performance expectations—which may be less complex or demanding—in content areas such as English language arts and mathematics, expectations that reflect what students with significant cognitive disabilities need to know and do to be college- and career-ready.

Alternate achievement standards set grade-appropriate expectations in content-area subjects for students who are significantly cognitively disabled. They "define how well students need to perform on the content to be considered proficient" (Quenemoen & Thurlow, 2015, p. 1). Alternate achievement standards are typically written in a format similar to the general content standards on which they are based, to underscore the correspondence between the expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities and their grade-level peers who do not have significant cognitive disabilities.

It is neither fair nor rational to expect English learners with significant cognitive disabilities to achieve English language proficiency on a trajectory similar to that of English learners who do not have significant cognitive disabilities. English learners with significant cognitive disabilities must be held to expectations for growth in English language proficiency that reflect the same grade-level expectations as non-English learners who have significant cognitive disabilities. In other words, we expect English learners with significant cognitive disabilities to acquire and apply their English language development comparably to their peers who have significant cognitive disabilities and are not learning English. Therefore, we set alternate achievement expectations for these students in their journey toward English language proficiency.

In the context of English learners, then, alternate English language proficiency achievement standards indicate what English learners with significant cognitive disabilities need to know and be able to

do to use English at a level comparable to their peers. This last phrase, “comparable to their peers,” is the key. The peer group for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities is other students with significant cognitive disabilities, and not other English learners.

### How Do States Develop Alternate English Language Proficiency Standards?

Several options exist for states that have not yet adopted alternate achievement standards for English language proficiency.

- 1) ALTELLA has developed a consensus-building process with state representatives and technical advisory committee members to decide which English language proficiency standards should be used for item template development. States could follow the template approach to develop alternate English language proficiency standards based on the state’s English language proficiency standards, [ALTELLA Standards Prioritization Process](#)
- 2) The Council of Chief State School Officers developed alternate English language proficiency standards based on the council’s open-source English language proficiency standards that focus on the most essential components of communication for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. These standards are expected to become available in 2019. States can plan for the adoption and use these standards by relying on the guidance of [CCSSO’s Tools and Resources for Standards Implementation](#).
- 3) States could develop their own process and standards by following the guidance in [Developing an Alternate ELPA21 for English Learners with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities](#), an English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century white paper (Thurlow, Liu, Godstone, Albus, & Rogers., 2018b).

Regardless of whether states already have or need to adopt alternate English language proficiency standards and performance expectations for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, the standards must correspond to grade level expectations in the state’s content standards, which are, ideally, alternate content standards.

### Requirements for Alternate Achievement Standards

The goal of alternate English language proficiency standards is to support of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities’ attainment of English language proficiency sufficient “to remove language as a barrier to college and career readiness” (Thurlow et al., 2018c, p. 9). These standards must be “aligned with a State’s academic content standards, promote access to the general curriculum, and reflect professional judgment of the highest standards possible (State responsibilities for developing challenging academic standards, 2009).

According to Title I regulations, as well as industry best practices, alternate achievement standards

- should align with the state’s rigorous college- and career-ready content standards
- may reflect prerequisite skills rather than grade-level skills
- must describe a low, mid, and high level of achievement,
- must describe each level (achievement level descriptors) and provide a clear differentiator between levels (cut score), as well as the rationale and procedures used to determine each level.

States are urged to consult Title I and peer review critical elements to ensure their adoption and implementation of alternate English language proficiency standards meets federal requirements.





## Developing and Implementing Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessments

An alternate English language proficiency assessment that can fairly, validly, and reliably assess English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, and is aligned to next generation standards that allow for the ways English learners with significant cognitive disabilities communicate, should be built from the ground up. It will rest on a foundation of alternate English language proficiency standards, performance expectations, and a strong validity framework. Items must be fully accessible and informative, and must not carry a higher cognitive load than items on the regular English language proficiency assessment. Ideally, these items will have their own item scoring parameters based upon the performance of the

population taking the alternate English language proficiency, rather than the non-English learner with significant cognitive disabilities population.

The assessment system for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities needs a screening instrument and supportive identification procedures, including systematic and thoughtful data collection, to correctly identify English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. And as with any new English language proficiency assessment system, policies and guidance on identification, placement, instruction, and exit criteria may need to be developed or augmented, depending on states' previous practices. Best practices in assessment development and delivery, as well as a robust research agenda, should guide and inform the development of an alternate English language proficiency assessment system.

## Assessment System Elements

Key elements for a valid, fair, and reliable alternate English language proficiency assessment system, and related policies and practices, include:

- A theory of action that explicates the purpose of assessing English learners with significant cognitive disabilities and that identifies intended uses of the results, including how those results will inform learning opportunities for students.
- Alternate English language proficiency standards aligned to academic standards and focused on the essentials of communication at grade-level.
- Performance expectations that are demonstrably comparable to those of grade-level peers who are students with cognitive disabilities and are not English learners.
- Innovative technical approaches to cognitive labs, universal design, test delivery, and measurement.
- Incorporation of additional supports, such as assistive technology devices and testing platform tools and accommodations, as well as guidance for augmented interaction by the test administrator.
- Input from educators and researchers who know English learners with significant cognitive disabilities best, and their ongoing involvement in development and delivery of the assessments.

ALTELLA provides critical foundational elements and understanding that educators can leverage to create a valid and appropriate alternate English language proficiency assessment, including ground-breaking research on the composition and characteristics of the diverse English learners with significant cognitive disabilities population, an understanding that can drive item development and a student-centered design of the assessment. ALTELLA's work on standards prioritization gives states pathways to identifying those skills most critical to English language development and thus providing focus for school-based instruction and assessment item development.

The Council of Chief State School Officers has engaged states in a process to develop English language proficiency standards for English learners with the most significant cognitive disabilities. These standards were developed in collaboration with state education agency personnel representing assessment, English language development programs, and special education. The resulting standards were reviewed by educators who have experience working with this population of students. This document is being finalized and is expected to be available through the council in fall 2018. (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2018).

English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century, in collaboration with the National Center for Educational Outcomes has authored a series of publications (available at <http://www.elpa21.org/assessment-system/accessibility-and-accommodations>) that serve as a roadmap for assessment development and comprise the initial elements in an assessment framework. These combined publications propose steps that a collaborative group of states could take to develop and implement a valid and appropriate alternate assessment for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. One of these publications, *Developing an Alternate ELPA21 for English Learners with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities* (Thurlow, et al., 2018b), explicates 11 steps to develop, pilot, and field test an alternate English language proficiency assessment system.

Emerging federal funding opportunities for the development of alternate English language proficiency assessments and research on this population will be leveraged by collaborative groups of states, often called consortia, to meet this challenge. States are encouraged to embrace this opportunity to better identify, assess, and support English learners with significant cognitive disabilities.



## In Conclusion

States without English language proficiency standards and assessments—or states whose current alternate English language proficiency standards and assessments do not meet peer review requirements—can undertake a thoughtful, coordinated effort that involves state and local administrators, content area, English language development and special educators, as well as

parents and advocacy groups. Numerous resources are available to support states as they develop and implement their plans and reach a better understanding of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, their unique and diverse needs and contributions, and how to best support them as they progress toward the English language proficiency that will help ready them for college and career paths at a level commensurate with their non-EL peers.

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