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Policy and Practice Brief 7: Special Considerations for ACCESS Testing During COVID-19



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Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), all students identified as English learners (ELs) in U.S. K-12 public schools have been required to take an annual assessment of English language proficiency (ELP).¹ In Virginia, about 8.4% of public school students were classified as ELs in the 2020-2021 school year.² The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) along with 39 other State Education Agencies (SEAs) have adopted the WIDA Consortium's Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs© or ACCESS) test to comply with federal accountability mandates,³ as well as to inform a variety of high-stakes decisions. WIDA asserts that ACCESS scores have many potential uses for decision-making, including determining when multilingual learners have reached proficiency in English, deciding about Language Instruction Educational Program (LIEP) entry and exit, informing classroom instruction, monitoring year-to-year student progress, suggesting how teachers might scaffold instruction, and deciding on staffing levels.⁴ However, research suggests there may be potential threats to the validity of high-stakes decisions based on ACCESS scores, including inadequate testing conditions in some schools, the extended period of time between test administration and the delivery of scores which results in decisions based on tests taken six or more months earlier, and the possibility that the test may be measuring characteristics other than proficiency in English (including cultural and academic background knowledge, test-taking effort, shyness, and typing speed).⁵ It is recommended that multiple indicators be considered when making important decisions for ELs, not just a single ELP test score.⁶

Special Considerations for ACCESS Testing during COVID-19

ACCESS testing during the COVID-19 pandemic presents particular challenges, not only for test administration but also for validity, especially for students participating in distance learning (virtual or hybrid). In Virginia, in-person instruction was suspended on March 16, 2020,⁷ and schools remained closed for the remainder of the academic year.⁸ Because of these

¹ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/1>

² https://p1pe.doe.virginia.gov/apex_captcha/

³ <https://wida.wisc.edu/memberships/consortium>

⁴ <https://wida.wisc.edu/assess/access/scores-reports>

⁵ <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/6188/>

⁶ Ibid; American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. (2014). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education.;

https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/ELP_Report.pdf; <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170408501015>;

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X14556072>; <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308317845>

⁷ <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/all-releases/2020/march/headline-854442-en.html>

⁸ <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/all-releases/2020/march/headline-855292-en.html>

closures, some schools were unable to complete ACCESS testing and received partial scores, and all schools received scores later than usual, complicating scheduling and staffing decisions for the following school year. In 2020-2021, Virginia school divisions were permitted to phase in face-to-face learning options,⁹ and a range of in-person, hybrid, and virtual instructional models were implemented. Noting significant learning losses over the previous year, the Governor urged all K-12 school divisions in the Commonwealth to provide in-person learning options by March 15, 2021,¹⁰ in the face of high risk for disease transmission throughout the state.¹¹ Thus, Virginia ELs and all students endured a variety of significant instructional changes, interruptions, and challenges due to COVID-19.

Despite school closings during the pandemic, federal testing requirements, including the mandate that all states administer an annual ELP assessment, were not waived for 2020-2021.¹² While remote ELP tests were made available in several non-WIDA Consortium member states,¹³ WIDA decided not to offer an assessment option that could be administered outside of school buildings during the pandemic, citing concerns for test validity, security, and costs.¹⁴ In December 2020, several civil rights organizations along with the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages International Association (TESOL) and the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) issued joint letters to Virginia and other WIDA states outlining safety and civil rights legal concerns for requiring ELs in remote learning environments to return to school buildings solely for testing during the pandemic without options to opt out, and urging states to extend their upcoming ACCESS testing windows. They argued that during remote learning, the ACCESS test is likely to yield invalid and unreliable results, because of the stresses of the pandemic and of online instruction, which could be exacerbated by requiring students to return to schools that have been closed due to health risks during the pandemic just to take the test. In addition, they pointed out that since ACCESS is a norm-referenced standardized test, and individual students' scores are based on a comparison with the performance of a norm group of peers who previously took the test, administering the test under far-from-normal pandemic-year conditions could further compromise test validity.¹⁵

In late December 2020, the Virginia announced that the ACCESS testing window would be extended to January 4 through June 25, 2021 (instead of mid-January through March), allowing local school divisions more flexibility in their testing timelines, and requiring schools to inform parents of how they could make known their intention to remain in virtual instruction and not return to school buildings to test if they had concerns related to the pandemic.¹⁶ In January 2021, the same civil rights and professional organizations urged the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) to issue guidance to SEAs stating they would not seek sanctions or otherwise enforce federal testing requirements if a state or local agency failed to administer

⁹ <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/all-releases/2020/june/headline-857292-en.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/all-releases/2021/february/headline-892131-en.html>

¹¹ <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/key-measures/pandemic-metrics/school-metrics/>

¹² <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/01/English-Learner-Fact-Sheet-Addendum-01-18-2021.pdf>;
https://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/covid-19/covid-19-state-policy-waivers.shtml

¹³ <https://ca-toms-help.ets.org/fall-admins/admin-options/>; <https://laslinks.com/>

¹⁴ <https://wida.wisc.edu/about/news/faq-access-ells-testing-2020-21-school-year>

¹⁵ https://www.washlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Ltr-to-VA-Superintendent-re-EL-Testing_2020.12.29.pdf

¹⁶ https://www.doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents_memos/2020/index.shtml

ELP tests to EL students who could not take the tests safely.¹⁷ In a February 2021 letter to state school officials, the USDOE reasserted its commitment to assessment, including ELP testing, as a means toward advancing educational equity, but invited states to request a waiver for reporting accountability results for the 2020–2021 school year.¹⁸ Thus, many questions remain about ACCESS test administration, reliability, validity, and score uses during the pandemic.

Recommendations for ACCESS Testing During COVID-19

- **Comply with public health guidance during test administration.** Follow CDC,¹⁹ VDH,²⁰ and WIDA²¹ safety guidelines with fidelity, making provisions for additional space, time, personal protective equipment (PPE), and cleaning as needed.
- **Ensure that families understand their right to remain in remote instruction and not return to schools to take the test.** Provide this information in multiple formats and languages that parents can understand.²²
- **Recognize that planning for test administration may be difficult.** There may be students in virtual learning environments whose families do not receive or understand communication about testing, and who do not inform schools of their intention to forego testing, but whose students do not come in to take the test.
- **Be mindful that ELP growth rates may differ from previous years.** Differences in the opportunity to learn, levels of student stress, testing conditions, and other factors caused by the pandemic could impact ACCESS scores.²³ Virginia accountability targets published on ELP growth tables are based on normal, pre-pandemic student scores.²⁴ While the WIDA Consortium asserts that 2021 ACCESS scores are still a valid measure of ELs' current ELP abilities if tests are administered correctly, they also acknowledge that while communities have adopted social distancing protocols and schools have adjusted instructional practices to include virtual learning, ELP testing will be completed in person.²⁵ In Virginia, many ELs learning virtually will be brought into school buildings for the first time in a year or more in order to take the test. Research suggests that negative student affect (such as stress, anxiety, and shyness) may result in ACCESS scores that are lower than the student's true proficiency level.²⁶ Because of changes in test administration protocols for the pandemic, including mask-wearing

¹⁷ https://www.ies.ed.gov/DefaultSource/Advocacy/Ltr-to-USDE-re-EL-testing-guidance_2020-12-29.pdf;
<https://lawyerscommittee.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021.1.11-National-Ltr-to-Biden-Edu-Transition-Team-re-Proficiency-Testing-of-English-Learners.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/01/English-Learner-Fact-Sheet-Addendum-01-18-2021.pdf>;
<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/stateletters/dcl-assessments-and-acct-022221.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/indicators.html>

²⁰ <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/content/uploads/sites/182/2021/01/Interim-Guidance-to-K-12-School-Reopening.pdf>

²¹ <https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/Website/News/2020/Dec/AssessmentBestPracticesDuringCOVID-19WIDAMODEL.pdf>

²² https://www.doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents_memos/2020/index.shtml;
<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-el-201501.pdf>

²³ <https://wida.wisc.edu/about/news/understanding-access-ells-2021-scores>

²⁴ http://www.doe.virginia.gov/federal_programs/esea/title3/compliance/virginia-compliance-with-title-iii-requirements.docx

²⁵ <https://wida.wisc.edu/about/news/understanding-access-ells-2021-scores>

²⁶ <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/6188/>

during the speaking test as WIDA recommends,²⁷ the reliability of the scores is likely to be compromised, and scores may not accurately reflect what ELs can do in English.

- **Do not make strong accountability claims based on ACCESS.** The WIDA consortium points out that in 2021, it may be extremely difficult or impossible to isolate and evaluate specific factors contributing to the progress and performance of many ELs.²⁸ In addition, WIDA recommends against using ACCESS scores for teacher evaluation, even in normal testing years.²⁹
- **Allow flexibility and consider multiple indicators when making high-stakes decisions for ELs,** not just a single ACCESS test score,³⁰ particularly given the challenges of the pandemic.

²⁷ <https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/Website/News/2020/Dec/AssessmentBestPracticesDuringCOVID-19WIDAMODEL.pdf>

²⁸ <https://wida.wisc.edu/about/news/understanding-access-ells-2021-scores>

²⁹ <https://wida.wisc.edu/resources/evaluating-teacher-effectiveness-using-access-ells>

³⁰ https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/ELP_Report.pdf; <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170408501015>; <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/6188/>