

# Understanding Subgroups in Common State Assessments: Special Education Students and ELLs

Although most assessment developers have a sense of the nature of the general student population, they often lack an understanding of the characteristics of special education students and English Language Learners (ELLs) who will participate in the assessment. The Race-to-the-Top Assessment Consortia have the rare opportunity to know who these students are and to apply that knowledge as they design and develop their common assessment systems.

This Brief presents information on the characteristics of special education students and ELLs in the Consortia states. It provides recommendations for the Consortia about steps to take as they design their assessment systems.

## Special Education Students

Special education students comprise 13% of the population of all public school students.<sup>1</sup> Yet, individual states vary in their percentages of special education students. Figure 1 shows the percentages of students receiving special

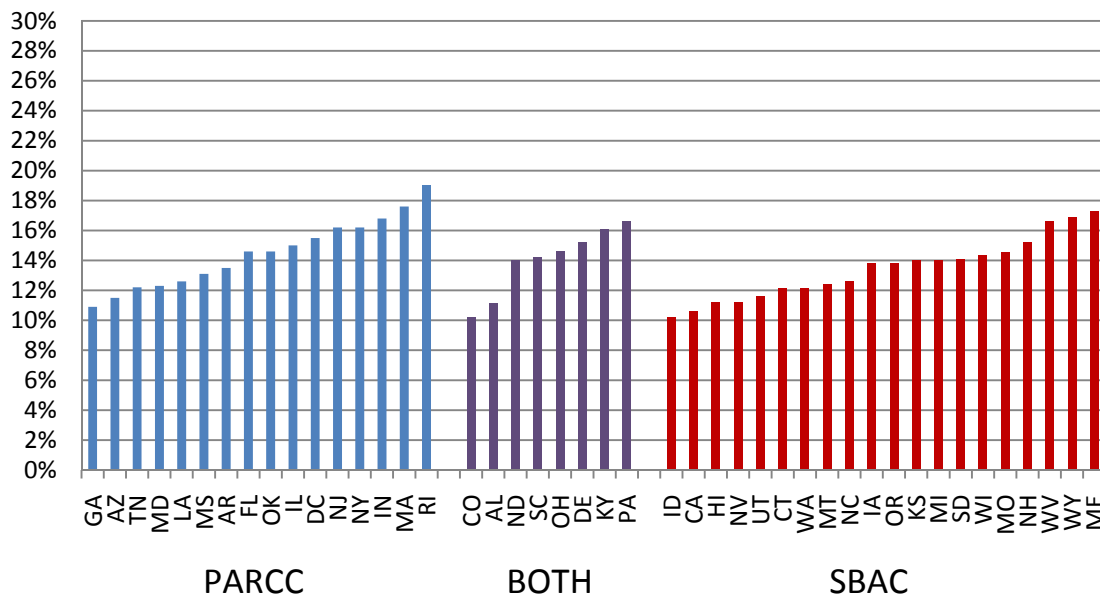
<sup>1</sup> This and other general percentages in this Brief are based on children ages 3-21. This age range is the most common one for which data are available across data sets used to describe students with disabilities and English language learners.

### About this Brief

This Brief presents information on the characteristics of special education students, English Language Learners (ELLs), and ELLs with disabilities. It highlights the variability in these populations, variability that is multiplied when states are grouped in the Consortia. The Brief provides several recommendations for the Consortia to help ensure that they understand the characteristics and variability that exist in their member states. These characteristics and variability should influence their assessment design choices, which in turn will support the validity of the assessment system for all subgroups.

This and other Briefs in this series address the opportunities, resources, and challenges that cross-state collaborative assessment efforts face as they include students with disabilities and English language learners. Topics in this series (e.g., accommodations, participation) are intended to support a dialogue grounded in research-based evidence on building inclusive assessment systems. Each Brief provides an overview and discussion of issues, as well as insights into potential next steps and additional data needs for Race-to-the-Top Assessment Consortia decision making.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Students Receiving Special Education Services in Consortia States in 2008-09**



Data were adapted from National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “State Non-fiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education,” 2008-09 representing children ages 3-21 via <http://nces.ed.gov/transfer.asp?location=www.ideadata.org/PartBdata.asp>. Data from Vermont (a member of SBAC) were not included in the CCD data set. The information on state membership in this figure was accurate as of June, 2011.

education services in Consortia states in 2008–09.

In the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Consortium, the population of public school students in special education ranged from 10% to 19%. In the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), the special education population ranged from 10% to just under 18%.

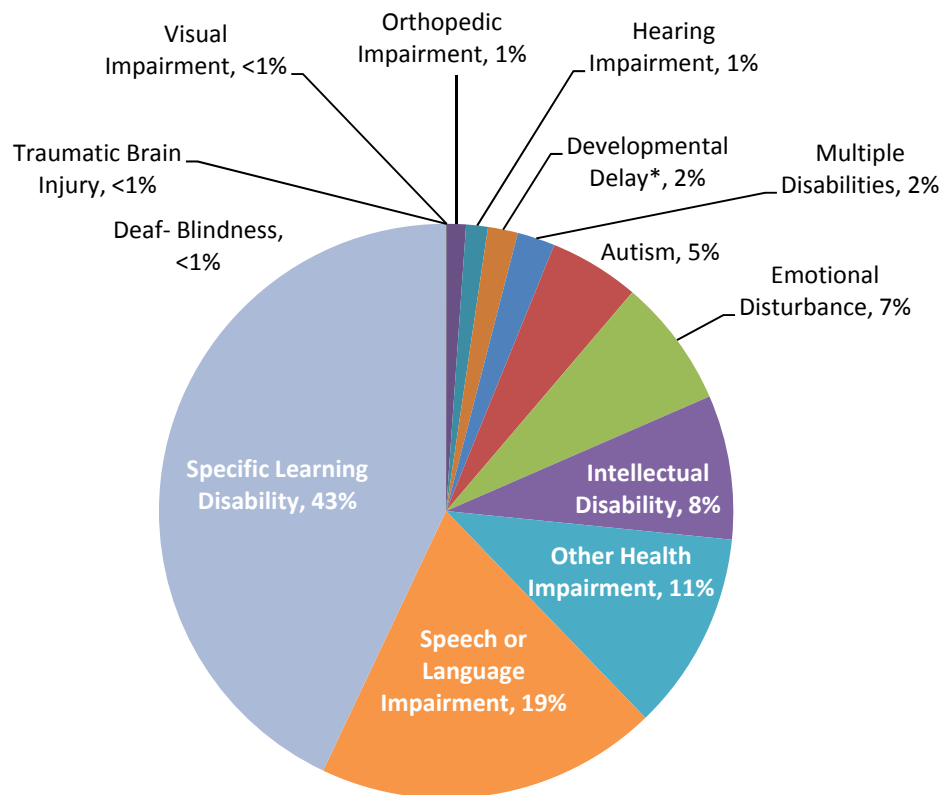
One way to describe the characteristics of special education students is by their disability category. Yet, students within a single category have diverse needs. And, most of the 6.5 million special education students (except for a portion with the most significant cognitive disabilities who may fall in such categories as intellectual disabilities,

autism, and multiple disabilities) participate in the general state assessment. They do not participate in an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards.

Nationally, there are 13 special education disability categories. Figure 2 shows these categories, along with their prevalence nationally.

The percentages of students in each category vary tremendously across states. For example, the percentages of special education students with specific learning disabilities (LD) varied from 15% of the special education population in one state to 60% in another. The LD range for PARCC was from 15% to 54% of special education students. For SBAC, the range was from 15% to 60%. The percentage of students

**Figure 2. Percentage of Students in Special Education Disability Categories Nationally in Fall 2008**



Data were adapted from Table 1-3 (Students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, by disability category and state: Fall 2008) via [www.IDEAdata.org](http://www.IDEAdata.org) for the 50 states.

\*Developmental delay is applicable to children ages 3 through 9.

with intellectual disabilities varied from 3% to 19% in both the PARCC states and the SBAC states.

These variations in size and composition imply that special education populations may differ in specific ways across the member states in each Consortium.

## English Language Learners

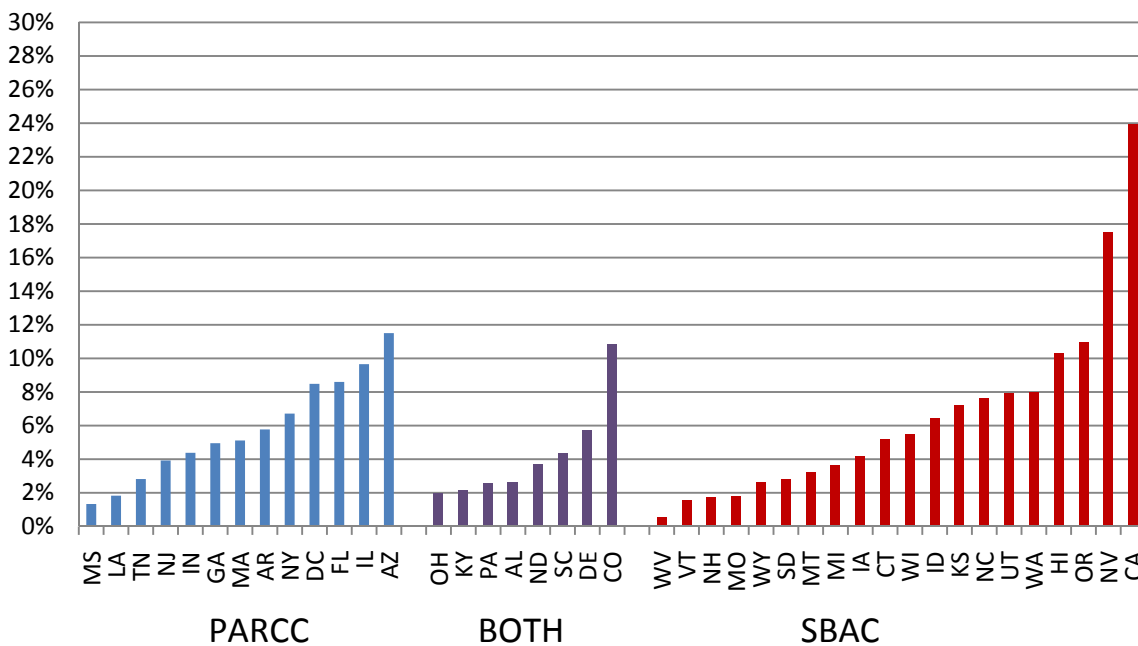
**English language learners** are defined here as those students receiving services for their limited English proficiency. In the 50 states, approximately 9% of the population of public school children is considered to be ELLs. Figure 3 shows the percentages of

students who received ELL services in the Consortia states in 2008–09.

In PARCC states, the percentages of ELLs ranged from 1% to nearly 12% of the public school population. In SBAC states, the percentages of ELLs ranged from just under 1% to 24%. These state-level percentages can conceal some large degrees of variability in the size of the ELL population between and within school districts in a state. States with a small overall population of ELLs may still have school districts with large percentages of ELLs.

ELLs come from a variety of home language backgrounds. Across the nation

**Figure 3. Percentage of Students Receiving ELL Services in Consortia States in 2008-09**



Data were adapted from NCES Common Core Data (2008-2009) “Local Education Agency Universe Survey” representing children ages 3-21 via <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd>. Data from Maine (a member of SBAC), Maryland, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island (members of PARCC) were not included in the CCD data set. The information on state membership in this figure was accurate as of June, 2011.

in 2008, the five home languages that states most frequently report for ELLs are: Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, and Russian. Still, states differ in the top five home languages found in their own ELL populations. Figure 4 shows the extent to which Consortia states share one or more of the nation’s top five home languages.

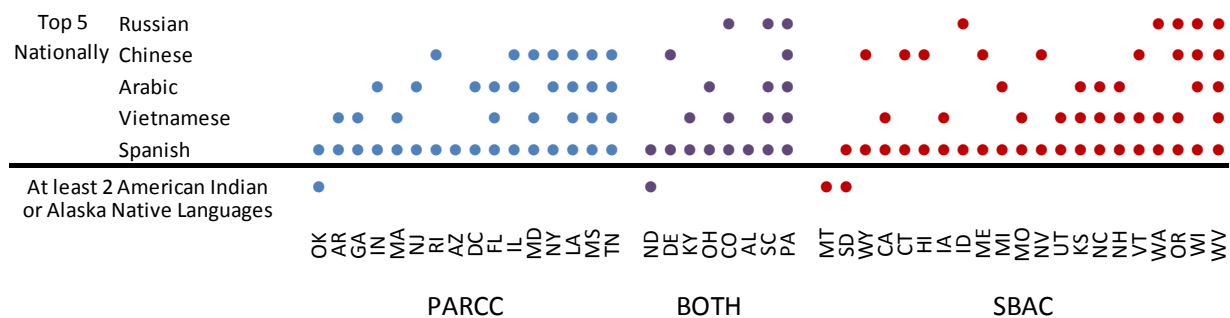
States in both Consortia vary with regard to sharing one or more of the nation’s five most common home languages (Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, and Russian) as one of their top five language groups for ELLs. In PARCC, two states report only one of those common languages in their top five while one state reports all five of them. In SBAC, one state reports none of the nation’s most common languages are among its

top five language groups while two other SBAC states report that all five languages are among its top five language groups. It is important to note that Consortia states with one or fewer of the nation’s most common home languages also had at least two American Indian and Alaska Native languages included among their state’s top five home languages.

Spanish is a top five home language in almost all of the states in both Consortia, but there are more than 60 other languages that comprise the top five home languages<sup>2</sup> across the 50 states. More than 10 of

<sup>2</sup> The number of home languages in individual states often is reported as much higher than this number; often these counts include variations of one language (e.g., Mandarin and Chinese may be counted as two languages in some states).

**Figure 4. Appearance of the Nation’s Five Most Common Home Languages in Consortia States’ Top 5 Languages**



Data were adapted from State Consolidated Performance Reports available on the federal government Department of Education website via <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/sy07-08part1/index.html#ak>. The information on state membership in this figure was accurate as of June, 2011.

these languages are American Indian and Alaska Native languages, even though the percentage of these students nationally who are ELLs may be relatively small. Both Consortia have member states that report two or more American Indian and Alaska Native languages among the top five home languages.

### ELLs with Disabilities

ELLs with disabilities also are an important part of the assessment population. Like other special education students or other ELLs, most of these students will participate in the general state assessment rather than an alternate assessment.

Nationally, ELLs with disabilities comprise almost 8% of the population of public school students with disabilities. Yet, the percentages in individual states vary. Figure 5 shows the percentages of ELLs with disabilities in Consortia states in 2008–09.

In PARCC states, the percentages of ELLs with disabilities ranged from just over 0% to

12% of the special education population. In SBAC states, the percentages ranged from nearly 0% to 28%.

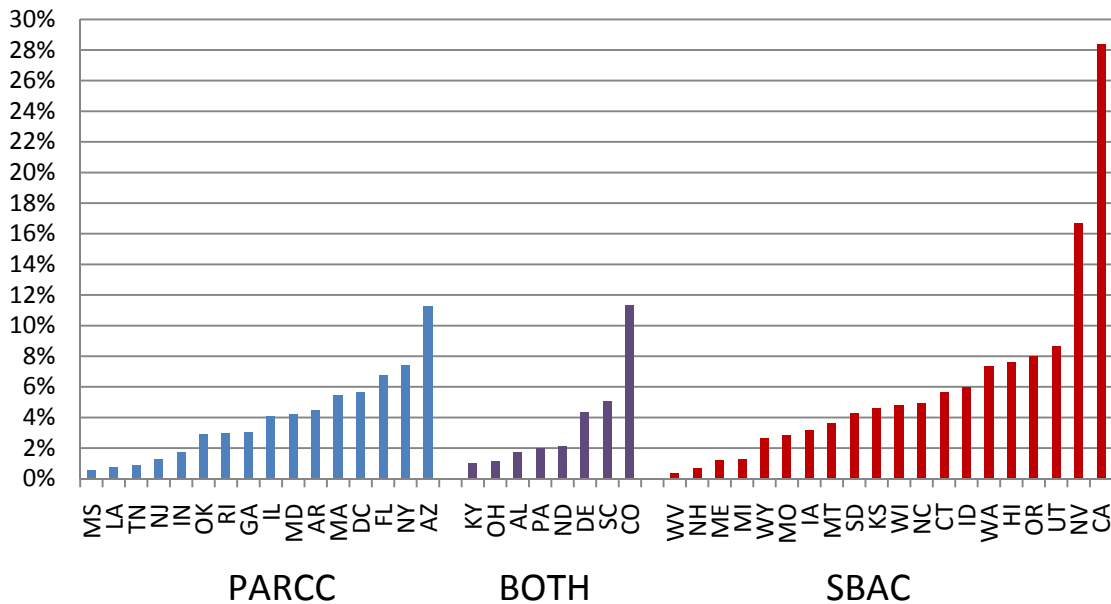
### Recommendations

The student characteristics data presented in this Brief demonstrate the diversity of special education students, ELLs, and ELLs with disabilities. They also show the variability in these student populations across states within Consortia. The Consortia should ensure that they understand both the characteristics of these students and the variability that exists across their member states.

Several recommendations are provided here for Consortia to consider as they develop assessment systems that include all students, including special education students, ELLs, and ELLs with disabilities.

1. Do not assume that the labels of groups adequately describe the characteristics of the students. There

**Figure 5. Percentage of Special Education Students Receiving ELL Services in Consortia States in Fall 2008**



Data were adapted from 2008 Part B Educational Environments Tables 2-2, 2-3, 2-5a, 2-6a representing children ages 3-21 via [www.IDEAdata.org](http://www.IDEAdata.org). Data from Vermont (a member of SBAC) were not included in the IDEAdata.org data set. The information on state membership in this figure was accurate as of June, 2011.

is considerable variability within each of the groups described here, and that variability is multiplied when states are grouped together in the Consortia. It is essential to look beyond the group names of *special education students*, *ELLs*, and *ELLs with disabilities*, and to develop appropriate mechanisms to accurately understand the characteristics of each of them in greater depth (see Resources).

2. **Recognize that populations of special education students, ELLs, and ELLs with disabilities vary across the states in the Consortia.** Each state is unique in the size and composition of the special education population, the prevalence of various home languages for ELLs, and

other factors relevant to its assessment system. The Consortia should consider the implications of this variation across states as they develop assessment systems that can be used by all of their states.

3. **Recognize that almost all special education students, ELLs, and ELLs with disabilities will be participants in the assessment systems that the Consortia are developing.** Misperceptions about the severity of disability or lack of English language skills are rampant. Most special education students do not have the significant cognitive disabilities that might result in their participation in an alternate assessment based on

alternate achievement standards. Most ELLs are not fluent in a language other than English, but rather are limited in both their English and home language proficiency. Taking time to truly understand the characteristics of students who will be participants in the assessments is an important step in making assessment design choices that support the validity of the assessment system for all subgroups.

4. **Address the needs of special education students, ELLs, and ELLs with disabilities throughout the design, development, and testing of assessments.** These needs may require that assessments have embedded accessibility features and include accommodations for some students. These groups should also have experiences with formative and interim assessments, and they must be included in all piloting and field testing items with embedded accessibility features and accommodations available.
5. **Form work groups to develop participation and accommodations policies.** These groups should develop summaries of the characteristics and needs of special education students, ELLs, and ELLs with disabilities who may participate in the assessment system. These work groups should explore the accessibility principles that will guide the assessment development process, from the initial development and review of items, to the development of policies,

## NCEO Brief Series

Several Briefs in this series provide context for understanding how student characteristics may influence the development of new assessment systems.

**Brief #1** highlights the ways in which embedded technological features for all students are similar or different from features needed for students with disabilities or ELLs.

**Brief #2** describes the relation of student characteristics such as special education or ELL status to the development of common Consortia accommodation policies.

**Brief #3** portrays the varying rates of participation of special education students in current assessments and the need to identify decision-making processes for reaching common participation criteria across Consortia member states.

and to the approaches for reporting and using assessment results.

## Resources

*Allocating Federal Funds for State Programs for English Language Learners.* (2011). National Research Council. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

***Developing Common Accommodations Policies: Discussion Points for Consortia.*** (2011). NCEO. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

***Disabilities and Reading: Understanding the Effects of Disabilities and Their Relationship to Reading Instruction and Assessment.*** (2009). Thurlow, M. L., Moen, R. E., Liu, K. K., Scullin, S., Hausmann, K. E., & Shyyan, V. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Partnership for Accessible Reading Assessment.

***Don't Forget Accommodations! Five Questions to Ask When Moving to Technology-based Assessments.*** (2011). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

***English Language Learners with Disabilities: Promising Practices.*** (2009, Spring). *AccELLerate! (Special Issue)*, 1(3).

***Meeting the Needs of Special Education Students: Recommendations for the Race-to-the-Top Consortia and States*** (2011). Thurlow, M. L., Quenemoen, R. F., & Lazarus, S. S. Washington, DC: Arabella Advisors.

***Participation Guidelines for New Assessments: Thinking Through Their Development.*** (2011). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

***Shifting Trends in Special Education.*** (2011). Scull, J., & Winkler, A. M. Washington, DC: Thomas E. Fordham Institute.

***The State of Learning Disabilities.*** (2011). Cortiella, C. New York, NY: National Center for Learning Disabilities.

***Universal Design and Multi-method Approaches to Item Review.*** (2008). Johnstone, C. J., Thompson, S. J., Miller, N. A., & Thurlow, M. L. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 27(1), 25-36.

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This Brief reflects many years of work by all NCEO staff. Contributors to the writing of this Brief were, listed alphabetically, Kamarrie Davis, Kristi Liu, Sheryl Lazarus, and Martha Thurlow. NCEO Co-Principal Investigators are Martha Thurlow, Sheryl Lazarus, and Rachel Quenemoen.

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National Center on Educational Outcomes  
University of Minnesota • 207 Pattee Hall  
150 Pillsbury Dr. SE • Minneapolis, MN 55455  
Phone 612/626-1530 • Fax 612/624-0879

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