English Language Learners with Disabilities in Massachusetts: Current Status and Next Steps for Identification and Instruction

A Report to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Introduction

While the overall student population in Massachusetts has dropped slightly in the last 10 years (from 974,015 students in 2002 to 953,369 students in 2012), the number of English language learners (ELLs) has increased by more than 50 percent, from 45,779 in 2002 to 69,586 in 2012. ELLs have gone from 4.7 percent of the student population in 2002 to 7.3 percent in 2012 (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012c). At the same time, the percentage of ELLs with identified disabilities has increased from 9.8 percent of ELLs in 2001–2002 to 14.8 percent of ELLs in 2010–2011 (Serpa, 2011). In April 2012, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) contracted with researchers at Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), to study current practices in identifying disabilities among ELLs and in meeting their instructional needs in schools and districts across the state. The study included an online survey sent to all directors of special education and directors and coordinators of English learner education programs in districts with ELLs, as well as in-depth qualitative interviews of district directors from five school districts and principals and teachers from four schools. The survey was completed by special education and bilingual education leaders from 64 percent of Massachusetts' districts, which serve 94 percent of ELLs across the state. At the school level, administrators and teachers met with researchers despite their crowded end-of-year schedules. While everyone interviewed described facing many challenges in both identifying disabilities among ELLs and in meeting the instructional needs of ELLs with disabilities, almost all individuals also described concrete ways in which they are addressing the challenges, including both systems solutions and teaching strategies. The overall findings suggest that, although Massachusetts schools and districts face challenges in meeting the instructional needs of ELLs with disabilities—challenges that include articulating the role and fidelity of implementation of a tiered system of support for ELLs and improving the integration of ELL teachers and administrators in school and district collaborative structures—there are also many practices and processes led by highly committed individuals with extensive expertise, and they are using that expertise to meet the needs of these students.

Background

Research indicates that ELLs are disproportionately (both over- and under-) represented in special education (e.g., MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006)—especially within "subjective" categories (e.g., learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbance). The field of education has not yet succeeded in accurately distinguishing between language-based disabilities and the typical trajectory of second-language acquisition (Klingner & Artiles, 2006). Among the impediments to accurate identification of ELLs with disabilities is the lack of valid and reliable individualized assessments, and limited understanding of the options for special education assessment processes for ELLs. Native language assessments (e.g., LAS-Español or IPT-Spanish or the Bateria-III Woodcock Muñoz) are often used to try to address the challenges of validly assessing students who are still learning English, but there is evidence that they are not always valid measures of a student's ability (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006). The special education evaluation process for ELLs lacks standard procedures and representative norm samples; in some cases there is a "waiting period" to see if the ELL student needs extra time to learn English (Sanchez, Parker, Akbayin, & McTigue, 2010).

Complicating matters further, ELLs who *are* accurately found eligible for special education present particular challenges in instruction due to their "dual status" (Sanchez et al., 2010). Many schools and districts lack personnel with expertise in both special education and language acquisition (Klingner & Artiles, 2006), and even when well-trained special educators and ELL personnel are available, the two categories of services are often delivered without collaboration, as teachers from different departments rarely share planning time (Delgado, 2010). ELL students with disabilities are as diverse as their unique instructional needs, which vary based on their level of English proficiency and educational background, as well as on the severity of their disability (Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson-Courtney, & Kushner, 2006). Research suggests that Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-tiered System of Supports models may be instrumental both in facilitating effective individualized instruction for struggling ELLs (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater, & Cirino, 2006; Ortiz et al., 2011), and in improving the process of identifying disabilities among ELLs.

The MA DESE has established an office for the implementation of the Massachusetts Tiered System of Support (MTSS). Although the state's model is based on research-based models of RTI and tiered support models in the literature, the MA DESE's MTSS office has provided a unique and responsive "blueprint for school improvement that focuses on system level change across the classroom, school, and district to meet the academic and non-academic needs of all students" within the conditions for school effectiveness and district standards and indicators (MA DESE, 2012b). According to MTSS documents, "The academic and non-academic core components of MTSS are:

- high-quality core curriculum and instruction implemented with fidelity;
- research-based academic interventions and assessment practices;
- research-based behavioral interventions and supports;
- universal screening and progress-monitoring; and
- collaboration and communication between educators and parents" (MA DESE, 2012b).

The state's MTSS initiative builds on Response to Intervention (RTI), which refers to the practice of providing high-quality instruction and intervention matched to students' needs, monitoring student progress frequently to make decisions about instructional strategies, and adjusting those strategies to meet student needs based on progress monitoring (e.g., Batsche, et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). In addition to individualizing instructional practices, MTSS can also play a critical role in the special education referral and identification process, particularly in the area of learning disabilities and communication disorders. The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act, 2007) explicitly encouraged the use of evidence from tiered systems of support in identifying students with disabilities (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012). More information and blueprint documents are available at http://www.doe.mass.edu/mtss/leadership.html.

Research Questions and Methods

In order to learn more about practices in identifying disabilities among ELLs and in meeting the needs of struggling ELLs and ELLs with disabilities in Massachusetts, the MA DESE commissioned researchers from EDC to explore three research questions:

1. What school or district systems are in place to ***identify disabilities*** among ELLs?
2. What ***instructional practices*** are in place to ensure the academic success of ELLs with disabilities?
3. What ***challenges*** do schools and districts face in assessing and meeting the special needs of ELL students?

Sample and Data Collection

The EDC team used surveys and qualitative research methods to address these descriptive research questions. Research was conducted between April and June 2012. The study included an online survey of district leaders of special education and ELLs, in-person interviews with principals and teachers, and phone interviews with a subset of the district leaders (see Appendices A and B for interview protocols and survey instrument). For the online survey component of the study, the names of all district directors of special education, and all ELL directors, were obtained from the MA DESE website (MA DESE, 2012a). Districts with no ELLs reported were removed, and then e-mails were sent to the special education and ELL directors in all others. Returned e-mails (i.e., incorrect addresses) were double-checked by going to the district websites, and resent. Two hundred and sixty-nine people completed the survey from 207 districts across the state (64 percent of all districts with ELLs), serving 94 percent of all ELLs in the Commonwealth. More directors of special education responded than did directors of English language learners; a smaller number of people holding other positions also responded. Table 1 shows the breakdown of respondents by position.

Table 1. Number of Survey Respondents by Job Title

Position	Number of respondents
Director of special education	119
Director of ELLs	86
Director of student services	22
Superintendent	11
School-level representative	9
Director of both ELL and special education	8
Other	14
Total respondents	269

Table 2 shows the survey completion patterns broken down by the percentage of ELLs in the district. Completion rates were higher in districts with a higher percentage of ELLs. The three districts with 20 percent or more ELLs that did not complete the survey are all charter schools.

Table 2. Survey Completion by Percentage of ELLs in District

	All districts with ELLs	All districts with ELLs and completed surveys	Percentage of districts completed
Less than or up to 1% ELLs	129	79	61
Between 1.01% and 5% ELLs	125	73	58
Between 5.01% and 10% ELLs	38	27	71
Between 10.01% and 15% ELLs	14	12	86
Between 15.01% and 20% ELLs	6	6	100
20% or more ELLs	13	10	77
Total	325	207	64

The schools for the study were identified using stratified random sampling at the district level. Districts with at least 5 percent ELLs were identified and then categorized by number of students into small (5,000–9,999), medium (10,000–20,000) and large (more than 20,000). One district was randomly chosen from each of the groups, and invited to participate in the study. Of the three districts, one was unable to participate because of time constraints. Given the short timeframe of the study, researchers decided not to contact other districts for participation. Two schools were chosen from each of the participating districts, prioritizing those schools with the highest number of ELLs in attendance, and making sure that at least one elementary, one middle, and one high school participated in the study. The final sample consisted of four schools from two districts (Table 3). Two researchers spent one day at each school, conducting interviews with the principal and four teachers. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed (except in instances where interviewees preferred not to be recorded, and researcher notes were used).

Table 3. Enrollment at Schools Participating in Interviews, 2011–2012*

	Grade span	2011–2012 October enrollment			
		Total enrollment	Low income %	Special education %	ELL %
School 1a	07–08	700–800	> 75%	> 25%	> 25%
School 1b	PK–06	400–500	> 75%	15%–20%	50%–75%
School 2a	PK–08	550–650	> 75%	5%–10%	20%–25%
School 2b	09–12	1,600–1,900	50%–75%	10%–15%	< 25%

*Ranges have been provided to protect school and district confidentiality.

Because only four schools were able to participate in the study, researchers decided to conduct phone interviews with an additional number of district-level special education and ELL directors. Although the views of district-level administrators are likely to differ from those of school-level staff, the time constraints (i.e., conducting the study in the last three weeks of the school year) made it impossible to obtain more schools for the study. Administrators from five districts agreed to participate; all were invited through their membership in EDC's Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative or its affiliate, the Massachusetts Urban Project, and all were urban districts with at least 5 percent ELLs (Table 4).

Table 4. Enrollment at Districts Participating in Interviews, 2011-2012*

	Grade span	2011–2012 October enrollment			
		Total enrollment	Low income %	Special education %	ELL %
State	PK–12	953,369	35.2%	17.0%	7.3%
District 1	PK–12	5,000–10,000	> 75%	20%–25%	5%–10%
District 2	PK–12	< 5,000	50%–75%	20%–25%	15%–20%
District 3	PK–12	5,000–10,000	50%–75%	10%–15%	15%–20%
District 4	PK–12	5,000–10,000	25%–%0%	20%–25%	10%–15%
District 5	PK–12	10,000–15,000	>75%	20%–25%	20%–25%

*Ranges have been provided to protect school and district confidentiality.

Table 5. Job Position of Those Interviewed

Position	Number of people interviewed
District special education directors*	4
District ELL directors	3
Principals	4
ELL teachers	4
Special education teachers	6
Bilingual special education teachers	3
General education teachers	3
Total interviews	27

*One special education director is also the acting ELL director.

Analysis

Analysis was done in stages. The online survey was analyzed by first producing descriptive results for each of the questions, then disaggregating the results by the role of the respondent and by the percentage of ELLs in the district. Statistical significance was tested using chi-squares. The interviews were analyzed by the research team, which included the six researchers who conducted the interviews, as well as two additional researchers. The analysis took place in two stages using a combination of grounded theory and hypothesis testing (Glasner & Straus, 1967). In the first stage, potential codes were developed in three broad categories based on the research questions and building from previous research: identification practices, instructional practices, and challenges. Within each broad category, a list of potential subcategories was also developed. The coders first coded one interview and compared the codes for inter-rater reliability; results were compared and adjustments made. Each interview was coded using this list, and additional codes were added as they emerged. In the second stage, quotations for each of the codes were examined; the most pertinent subcategories were chosen using both code counts and content analysis (i.e., the number of times a subcategory was mentioned, and the relative importance placed on the subcategory by the respondent). The codes were then consolidated into the subcategories described in the findings in this paper. Finally, the results from the online survey and the interviews were combined and the key discussion points were identified.

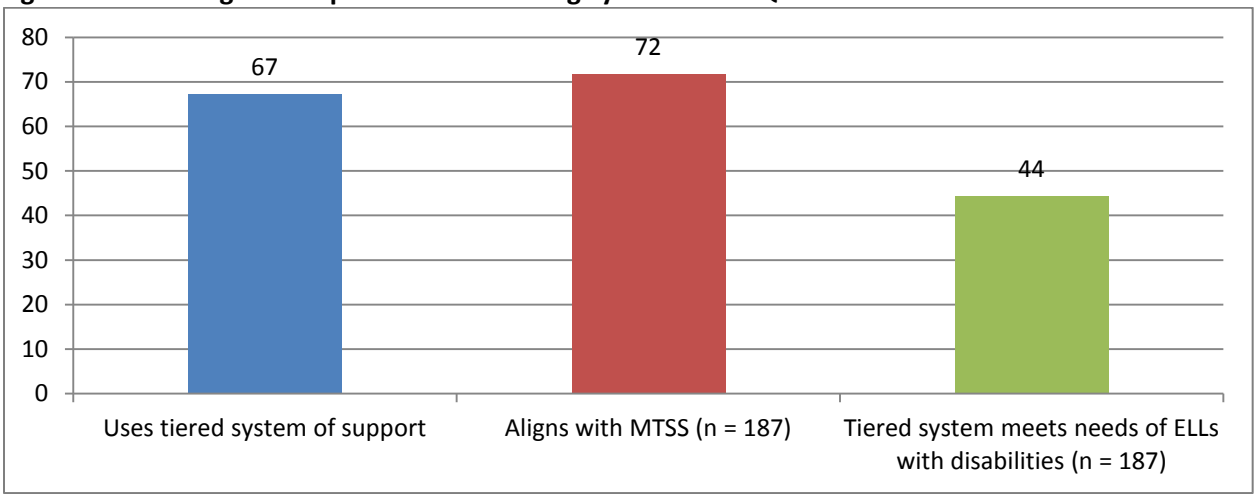
District Perspectives on ELLs with Disabilities: Survey Results

Survey results were analyzed by looking at differences by district size, by percentages of ELLs in the district, and by respondent position (ELL director, special education director, and other). In general, there were very few differences in responses by district size, but more differences by the percentage of ELLs in the district and by respondent position. The findings from the survey are divided into four sections: the use of a tiered system of support and instruction with ELLs with disabilities, professional development gaps to meet the needs of ELLs with disabilities, challenges in the identification of disabilities among ELLs, and challenges in meeting the instructional needs of ELLs with disabilities. Findings are presented for all respondents, and are disaggregated when there were statistically significant differences by either percentage of ELLs in the district or by respondent position.

Tiered System of Supports and ELLs with Disabilities

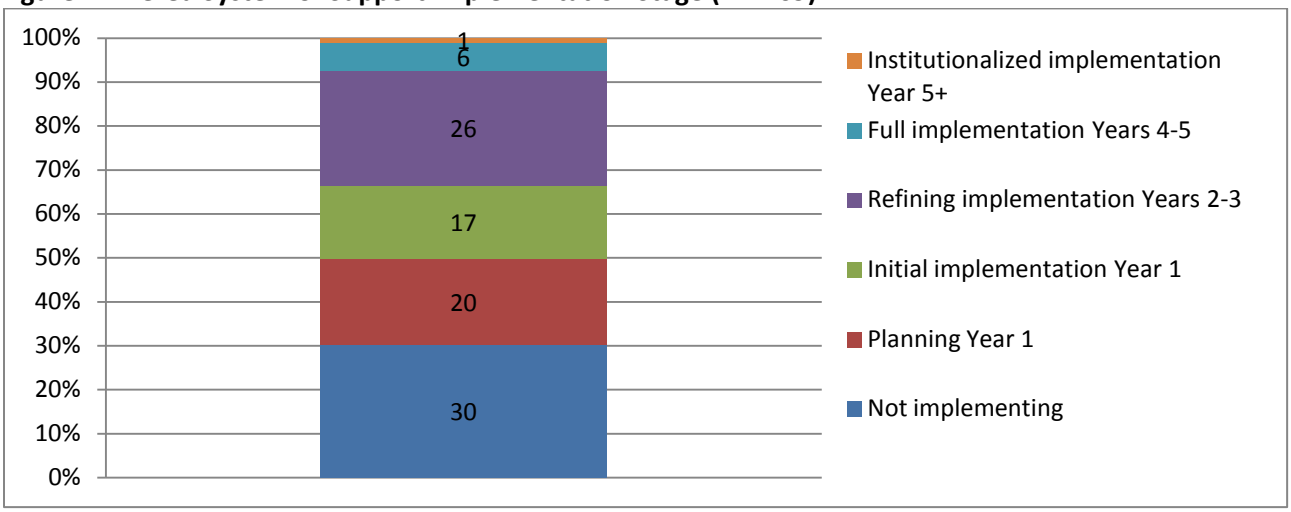
Sixty-seven percent of respondents said that their district is using some form of a tiered system of support. Of those, 72 percent self-reported that their system is aligned with the state's MTSS, but only 44 percent said that the current system is meeting the needs of ELLs with disabilities (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents Answering "yes" to Each Question



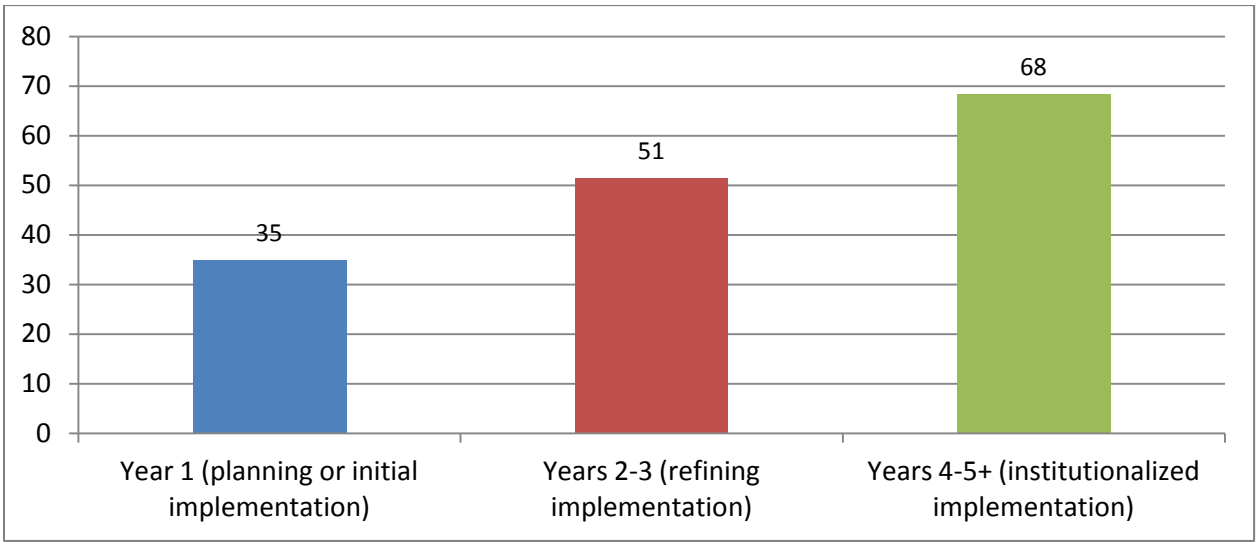
Respondents were also asked to identify their current stage of implementation of a tiered system of support. As shown in Figure 2, 30 percent are not implementing MTSS at all, 37 percent of respondents are in the planning stages or the first year of implementation, and fewer than 10 percent have been implementing for four or more years.

Figure 2. Tiered System of Support Implementation Stage (*n* = 269)



When the results are disaggregated by number of years of implementation, 68 percent of respondents who indicated their system was in Year 4 or more of implementation said they thought that the a tiered system of support framework meets ELLs' needs, while only 35 percent of those in their first year think a tiered system of support framework meets ELLs' needs (Figure 3). This tendency toward more positive views of the effectiveness of a tiered system of support for ELLs among those who have been using a tiered system of support for a longer period is encouraging, but it is still of concern that 32 percent of those who have been using a framework for four or more years responded that the model does not meet ELLs' needs.

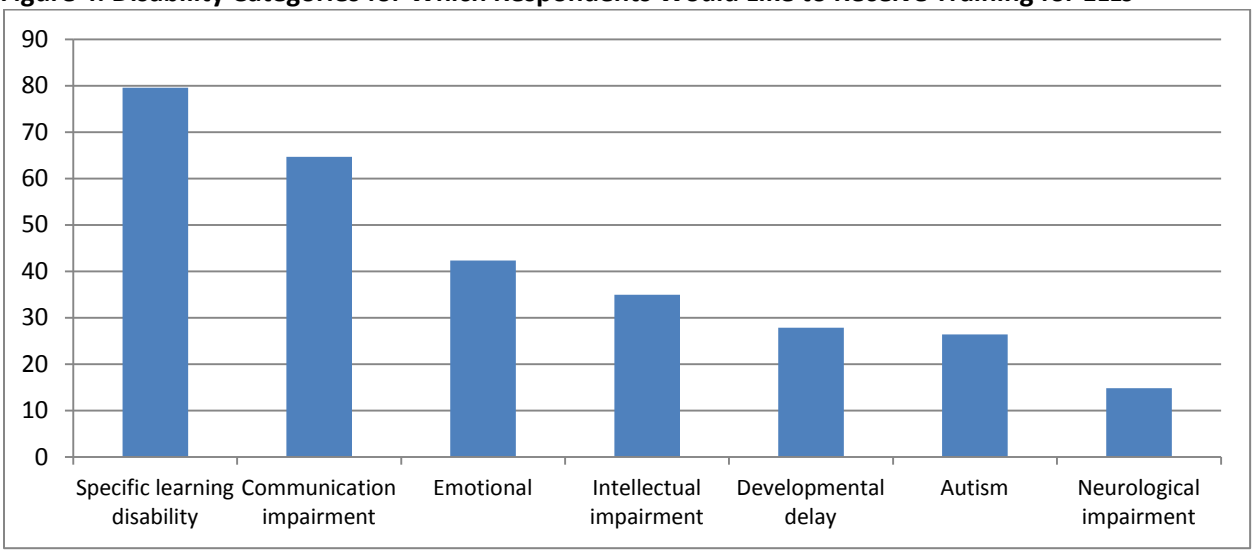
Figure 3. Percentage of Respondents Affirming that Their District's Tiered System of Support Framework Meets the Needs of ELLs with Disabilities



Professional Development to Meet the Needs of ELLs with Disabilities

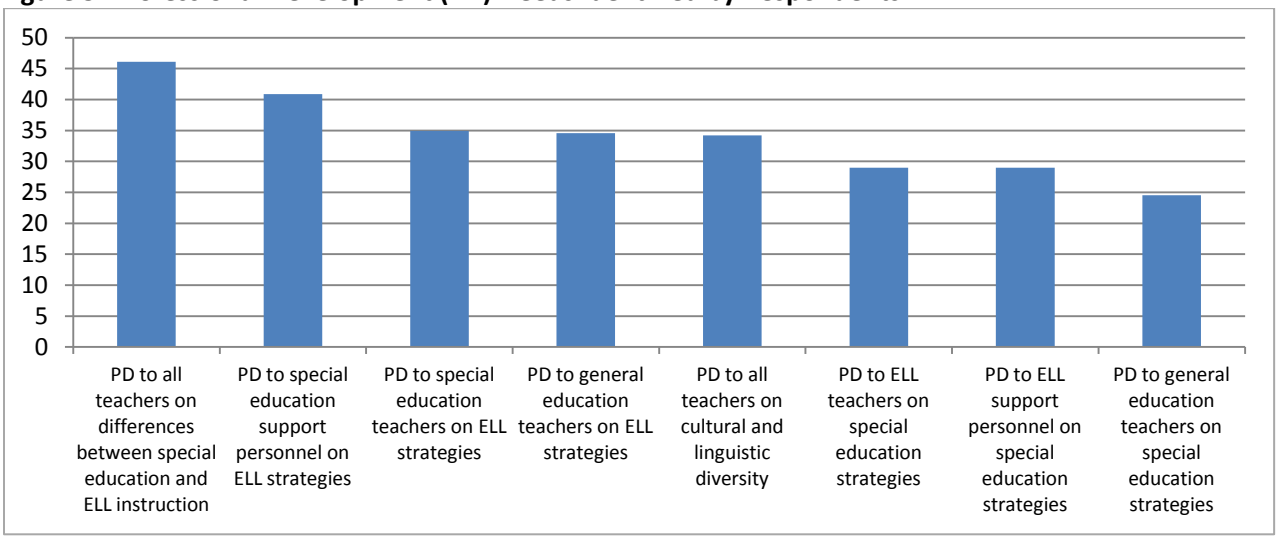
The survey asked respondents two questions about professional development. Figure 4 shows their response to a question asking them about the disability categories for which they would like to receive training. The two most commonly chosen categories were specific learning disabilities and communication impairments, with 80 percent and 65 percent, respectively (each respondent was allowed to identify three disability categories). Fewer than 50 percent of respondents identified the other disability categories as areas in which they would like to receive training regarding the disability and ELLs.

Figure 4. Disability Categories for Which Respondents Would Like to Receive Training for ELLs



In a separate question, the most commonly identified professional development need was the need for understanding the differences between specially designed instruction for special education and ELL instruction (Figure 5). More respondents identified a need for ELL strategies (the second, third, and fourth bars from the left) than for special education strategies (the last three bars on the right).

Figure 5. Professional Development (PD) Needs Identified by Respondents

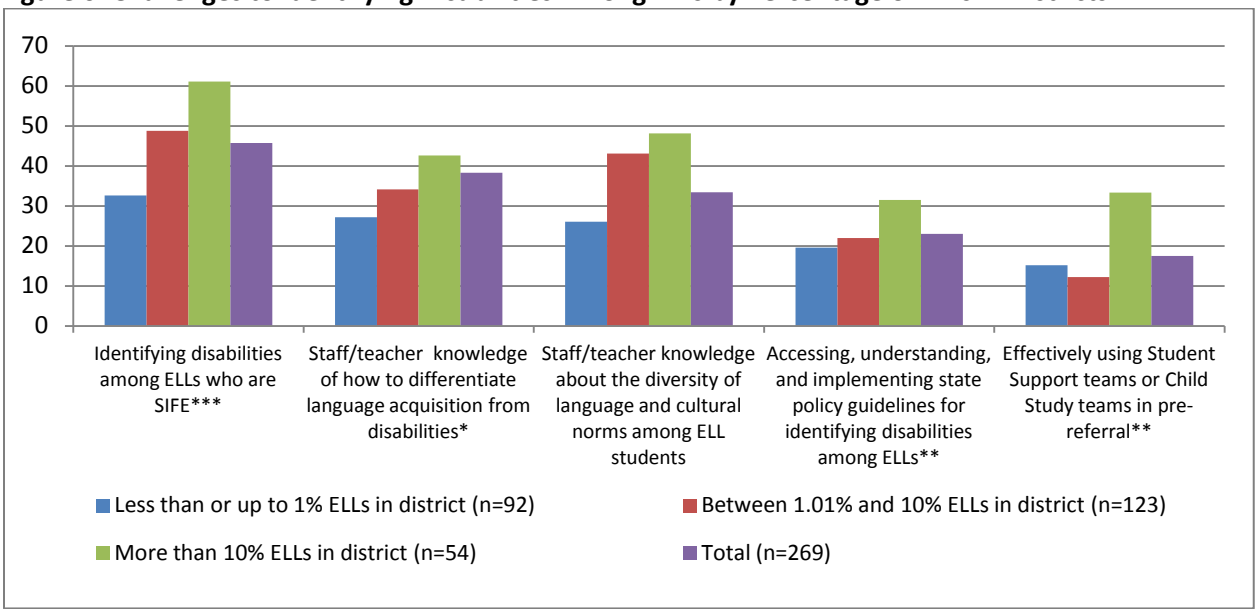


Challenges in Identification of Disabilities Among ELLs

The next two sections are presented in disaggregated form, as the responses varied both by the position of the respondent as well as by the percentage of ELLs in the district. It is noted when differences reach statistical significance.

When asked which areas of identifying disabilities among ELLs were most challenging, the three most commonly named areas were: identification among students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), differentiation of language acquisition from learning disabilities; and knowledge about the diversity of language and cultural norms among ELL students. For each of the areas, a greater percentage of respondents from districts with a high concentration of ELLs (more than 10 percent) affirmed that each area was a challenge (Figure 6). More than 60 percent of respondents in districts with more than 10 percent ELLs said it was a challenge to identify disabilities among SIFE students, compared to 33 percent of respondents from districts with a low concentration of ELLs (less than 1 percent). Patterns were similar for each of the areas, with statistically significant differences between districts for four of the five challenges: identifying disabilities among students who are SIFE; staff/teacher knowledge of how to differentiate language acquisition from disabilities; accessing, understanding, and implementing state policy guidelines for identifying disabilities among ELLs; and effectively using student support teams in the special education referral process.

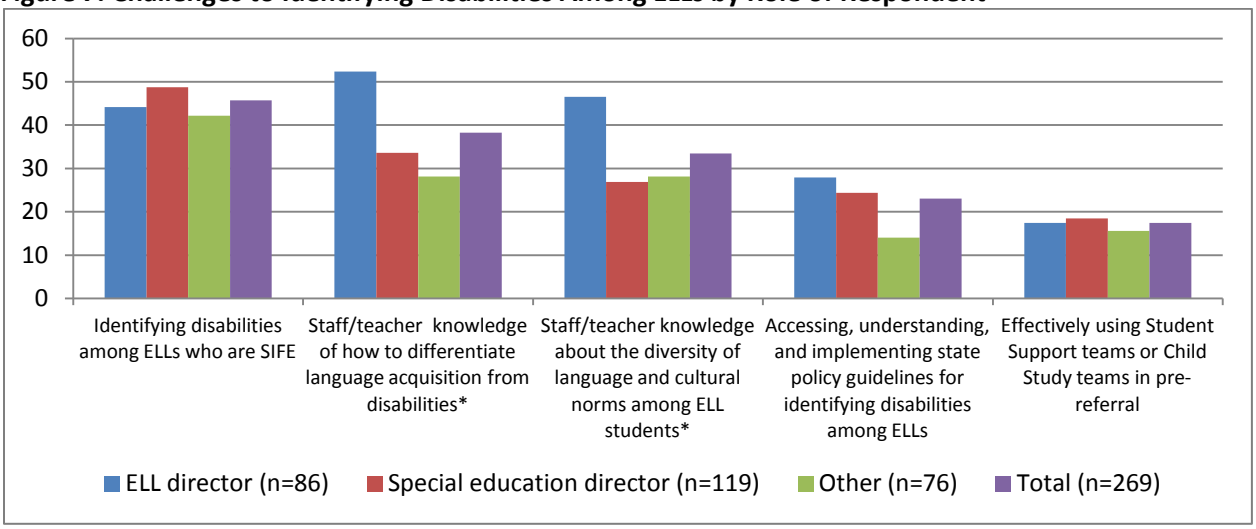
Figure 6. Challenges to Identifying Disabilities Among ELLs by Percentage of ELLs in Districts



*p < .05, **p <. 01, ***p < .001.

When the results are disaggregated by the administrator role, a higher percentage of ELL directors tended to identify challenges in the identification of disabilities among ELLs than did other respondents. There was a statistically significant difference in the percentage of ELL directors who identified as challenges differentiating language acquisition from disabilities and the need for understanding student diversity (Figure 7).

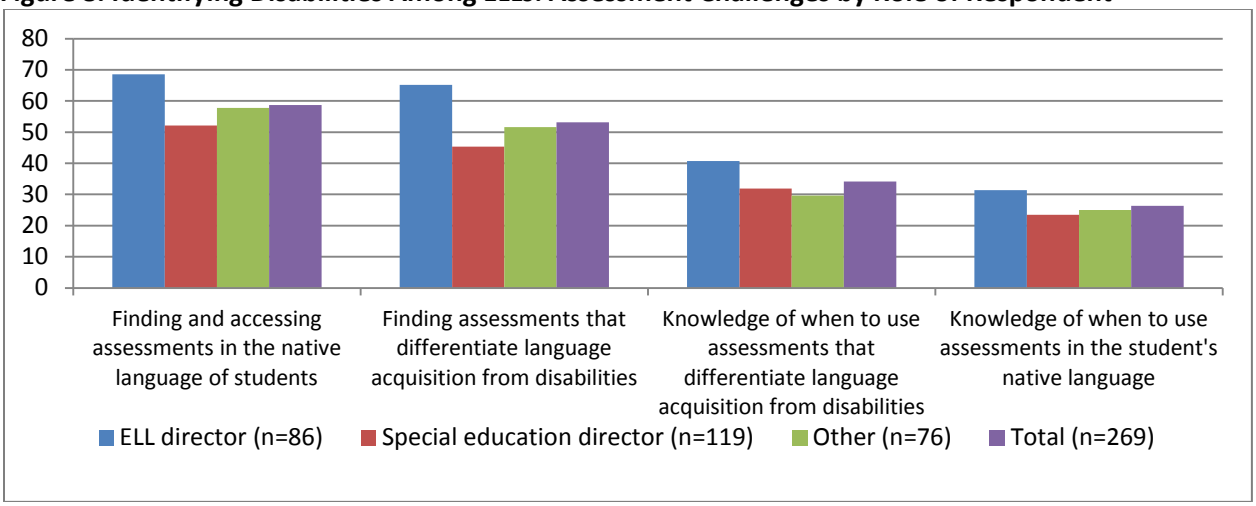
Figure 7. Challenges to Identifying Disabilities Among ELLs by Role of Respondent



*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

As shown in Figure 8, a greater percentage of ELL directors than other respondents see challenges around assessments, but these differences did not reach statistical significance. More respondents found finding and accessing assessments to be a greater challenge than knowledge of how and when to use those assessments. There was also no statistically significant difference in responses to the assessment questions by the percentage of ELLs in the district.

Figure 8. Identifying Disabilities Among ELLs: Assessment Challenges by Role of Respondent

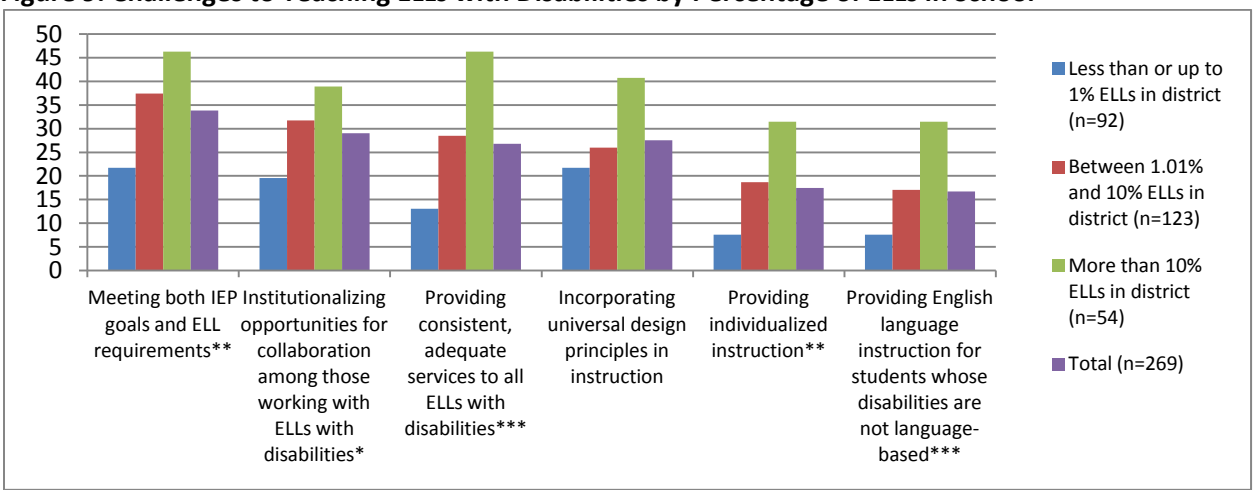


Challenges in Instruction

Directors from districts with more than 10 percent ELLs were more likely to identify challenges to providing adequate instruction to ELLs with disabilities than were directors from other districts (see Figure 9 for statistical significance). More than 40 percent of directors from districts with more than 10 percent ELLs identified three areas as great challenges: meeting both Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and ELL requirements; providing consistent, adequate services to all ELLs with disabilities; and incorporating universal design principles in instruction. Other areas were identified as challenges by a

much smaller percentage of respondents and are not presented in the figure: use of differentiation in instruction; implementation of strategies provided by the state; knowledge of cultural and linguistic diversity of ELLs; and implementation of culturally responsive principles. These are critical areas in the field and it is of note that lower percentages of respondents found them challenging.

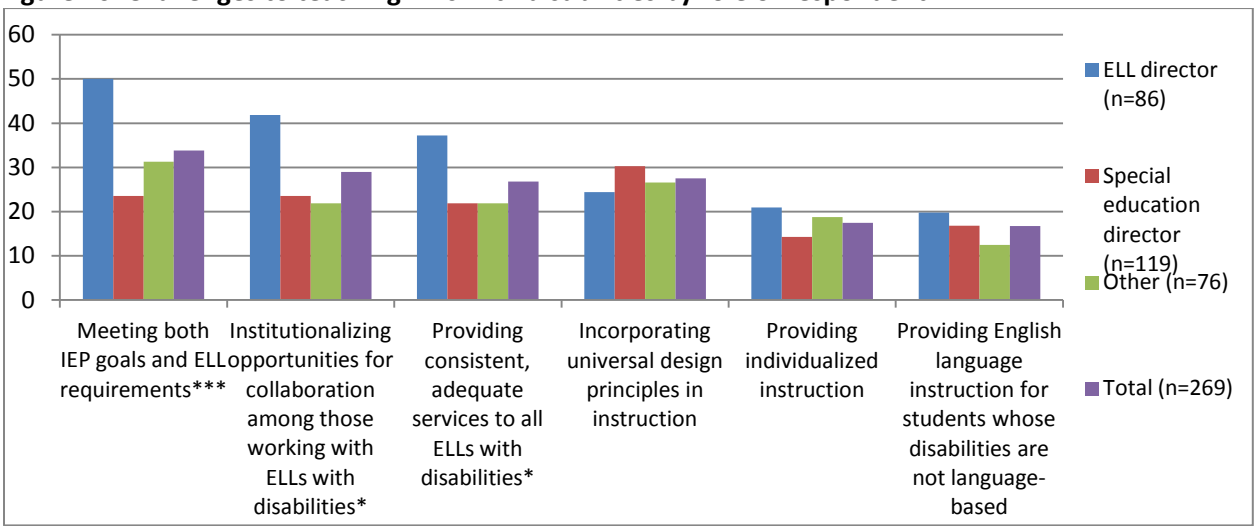
Figure 9. Challenges to Teaching ELLs with Disabilities by Percentage of ELLs in School



*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

When the same question is disaggregated by administrator role, a higher percentage of ELL directors consistently identified each of the areas for effectively teaching ELLs with disabilities to be a challenge (Figure 10). While only 34 percent of all respondents identified meeting both IEP goals and ELL requirements as a challenge, 50 percent of ELL directors did so. The responses of ELL directors were statistically significantly higher than those of other respondents in three out of the six categories: meeting both IEP goals and ELL requirements; institutionalizing opportunities for collaboration among those working with ELLs with disabilities; and providing adequate, consistent services to all ELLs with disabilities. These findings indicate that there are different perceptions of how well the needs of ELLs with disabilities are being met; ELL directors have different views from all other respondents.

Figure 10. Challenges to teaching ELLs with disabilities by role of respondent



*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

ELLs with Disabilities in Schools and Districts: A Closer Look

As noted above, administrators and teachers from four schools and five districts were interviewed for this study. The small number of interviews in each school and district precludes us from developing in-depth case studies, so we present here a short summary of each, highlighting the ways in which the respondents described identification practices, instructional practices, and challenges, all focused on ELLs with disabilities. We then provide a summary of the overall findings from the school and district interviews around identification practices, instructional practices, and challenges.

School 1a

Respondents. Principal, general education teacher, ELL teacher, special education teacher, and bilingual special education teacher (works with ELLs with intellectual impairments).

School Description. School 1a serves grades 7 and 8 in a large urban district. Among its student body, more than 25 percent are ELL students, and more than 25 percent are students with disabilities. The majority of the ELL students are Spanish-speaking. As shown in Table 6, the percentage of students scoring proficient or higher on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is below the state average for all students and for both special education and ELL students, with the exception of ELL students in English Language Arts (ELA). A much smaller percentage of special education students scored proficient or above compared to ELL students in both ELA and mathematics.

Identification Practices. Most students at this middle school come from district elementary schools where they have already been identified as ELLs and/or requiring special education services. As a result, only one teacher described having direct experiences with identifying disabilities among ELLs.

Instructional Practices. The school has a large number of substantially separate classrooms, and traditionally had one bilingual special education classroom for about 14 Spanish-speaking ELL students with intellectual disabilities. Noting that these students had almost no exposure to English in the substantially separate classroom, the principal is shifting the students to more inclusive settings (in some cases a general education classroom, in others a substantially separate classroom but with English-speaking students), with the bilingual special education teacher developing co-teaching skills.

Challenges. The move to inclusion (for all special education students, not just ELL students with special education needs) may face challenges; as described by a special education inclusion teacher, many classroom teachers still tend to see the special education teacher as an aide rather than as a co-teacher.

School 1b

Respondents. Principal, ELL teacher, two special education teachers, and a bilingual special education teacher.

School Description. School 1b serves students in pre-kindergarten (pre-K) through sixth grade in a large urban district. More than 15 percent of the students receive special education services, and almost 75 percent are ELL students. The majority of ELL students are Spanish-speaking. In 2011, the percentage

of special education students scoring proficient or above on the ELA and mathematics MCAS was 8 percent and 2 percent, respectively, while the school percentage was 22 percent and 15 percent—far lower than the state percentages of 69 percent and 58 percent (Table 6).

Identification Practices. ELL teachers are included throughout the special education evaluation process for students who are ELLs; because 74 percent of the students at the school are ELLs, special education evaluations are often for ELL students. Different staff members, including ELL staff, are included at meetings and are encouraged to use their expertise and offer their opinions. Scheduling has even been altered in order to include itinerant specialists (e.g., specialists who work in more than one school in the district). A variety of assessments are used with students, and the results are openly discussed with room for negotiation, as teachers are aware of the potential for both over- and under-identification of disabilities among ELLs.

Instructional Practices. School 1b includes dual-language bilingual classrooms (at the early grades), transitional bilingual, and English as a Second Language (ESL) (push-in or pull-out model). All ELLs with disabilities in the district are placed in the school's transitional bilingual program unless the parents opt out. The principal described a dynamic system for determining which teachers work with students; for example, in a first/second grade transitional bilingual classroom with almost 50 percent ELL students with disabilities, three teachers (general education, special education, and ELL) work together for a portion of the day, each taking a small group of students and working with them on literacy. This system can be extended to other classes with similar percentages of students with disabilities, as needs dictate. There are three special education teachers who are bilingual in English and Spanish, and the principal distributes these three across all the grades. In addition, all school-level professional development focuses on instruction for ELLs, and so the general education teachers learn strategies for ELL students.

Challenges. The principal noted the need for more staff to be trained in ELL strategies (such as sheltered instruction) so that all teachers can teach all students. The principal also described the challenge presented by students who come from Puerto Rico with an IEP that calls for a substantially separate classroom, which the bilingual program at the school does not have. Instead, Spanish-speaking paraprofessionals work with the students in order to provide language support, but this does not necessarily meet their academic needs, as paraprofessionals do not have the same training as certified teachers. A special education teacher also described space constraints. Historically, there were designated rooms where special educators could work with students in small groups. These rooms are now needed as classrooms, and so teachers have to be more creative in thinking about how to work with students with specific needs.

School 2a

Respondents. Principal, general education teacher, two special education teachers, and an ELL teacher.

School Description. School 2a is in a small urban area and serves more than 550 students in pre-K through eighth grade. Of these students, between 5 percent and 10 percent are special education students and more than 20 percent are ELL students. The majority of ELL students speak Spanish. Like Schools 1a and 1b, special education students scored significantly lower on both the ELA and mathematics MCAS compared to other students in the school, both ELL and non-ELL (Table 6).

Identification Practices. At School 2a, those interviewed described waiting longer before referring ELLs for special education evaluation than they did for students who are not ELLs, in order to allow them to be immersed in English, particularly if they come to the school without having participated in preschool or kindergarten. Staff at the school interchanged traditional pre-referral and referral terminology with RTI terminology, indicating that although the idea of using tiered systems of support and progress monitoring has been introduced, the systems have not changed. The school prioritizes parent involvement in the referral process, and looks to parent expertise to help it understand the broader context of each student. Teachers described using an informal process of consulting with special education or ELL teachers for support in strategies for struggling students before or during a formal pre-referral process.

Instructional Practices. School 2a offers the only Sheltered English Instruction (SEI) model in the district for grades 1–5, and so most ELL students in the district attend that school. Parents can opt out and stay in their neighborhood schools, which offer ESL support to a lesser degree. The principal has prioritized having all teachers (general education and special education) receive category training in order to build their skills in teaching ELLs, and to emphasize the commitment that ELL students belong to everyone, not just the ELL teacher. Special education teachers use an inclusion model in both the general education and ELL classrooms, according to each student's IEP.

Challenges. The teachers told researchers that there are not enough formal collaboration systems, though teachers take advantage of informal opportunities. They also said that the existing assessments do not help them to distinguish a learning disability from language acquisition. Results from individualized assessments always need to be interpreted carefully and the results are not clear-cut.

School 2b

Respondents. Principal, general education teacher, special education teacher, ELL teacher, and a bilingual special education teacher.

School Description. School 2b is a large high school in a small urban area, serving more than 1,600 students in grades 9 through 12. Of the total student body, between 10 percent and 15 percent are special education students and ELL students make up just over 10 percent of the student population. The majority of ELL students speak Spanish. Of the four schools in the study, School 2b is the only school at which the percentage of students scoring proficient or higher met or exceeded the state average. ELL students and special education students also almost as well as, or better than, their peers statewide (Table 6).

Identification Practices. At this high school, there are currently 19 students who are ELLs and identified with disabilities. All of them receive some level of services from the bilingual special education teacher, whether in separate classrooms, in a resource room, or through consultations of other teachers with the bilingual special education teacher. Students are moved into different classroom settings as their needs change; for example, the bilingual special education teacher described a process whereby students exit her substantially separate classroom and move into general education.

Instructional Practices. The ninth-grade teachers have a formal collaboration system that includes the special education teacher but not the ELL teacher. At higher grades, collaboration is more informal and occurs when teachers find one another to discuss certain students. The principal says he makes

decisions based on student needs, not on policies or rules; for example, he ignores what he described as an "unwritten rule" that ELL students should be in school for at least six months before being referred for evaluation. No teachers mentioned RTI or MTSS, or even seemed familiar with the process.

Challenges. The bilingual special education teacher described a unique challenge: Because of how the K–8 system is designed, there are a number of parents of ELLs who choose to waive their child's right to ESL classes in order to keep the child in a neighborhood school through eighth grade. This has meant on some occasions that students go to the high school with an IEP, but they have not received ELL services and could benefit from them. In these cases, the students are offered ESL services in the high school (and generally accept them, as they no longer need to change schools to get the services). Both special education teachers talked about the need for assessments in native languages, within the context of noting the challenges in identifying disabilities among ELLs.

Table 6. MCAS Proficiency Rates for Participating Schools by Subgroups

	2011 MCAS percentage of proficient or higher **All students**		2011 MCAS percentage of proficient or higher **Special education**		2011 MCAS percentage of proficient or higher **ELL**	
	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math
School 1a	54	32	11	3	29	13
School 1b	22	15	8	2	15	11
School 2a	55	38	5	5	15	19
School 2b	75	58	41	20	27	27
State	69	58	31	22	23	25

District 1

Respondent. Director of Special Education and Acting ELL Director (one person with both roles).

District Description. District 1 serves just under 10,000 students in grades pre-K through 12. More than 20 percent of those students are special education students and just over 5 percent are ELL students. Important documents for this district, including the student handbook, are translated in English, Portuguese, Spanish, and Khmer for elementary and middle schools, but the high school handbook is only available in English. Overall district proficiency rates in ELA and mathematics were lower than state rates, and both special education and ELL students also had lower proficiency rates than did their peers across the state (Table 7).

Identification Practices. The director from District 1 noted that the district still uses a discrepancy model to identify disabilities, and expressed hope that this would change as a tiered system of supports is implemented. She also noted two aspects of identification in the district: First, many students arrive from Puerto Rico with IEPs, although they are not always complete and do not necessarily provide all the information the district wants. Second, she noted that often preschoolers are flagged with communication challenges that she feels are more likely developmental English language acquisition patterns.

Instructional Practices. The district recently received funding from the state to implement MTSS, but it is still in the planning stages. Instruction for ELLs with disabilities varies based on the English

proficiency level and the disability severity. Students are first placed in a classroom based on their IEP, and then the ELL teachers determine how to best meet their English language acquisition needs.

Challenges. In District 1, 6 percent of students are ELLs, and of them, 20 percent have been identified with disabilities. The ELL director faces challenges of having sufficient personnel with ELL expertise for both identification and instruction. She noted that, previously, some ELL students would go through the full evaluation process with no one addressing their language issues at all; now lines of communication are more clear and ELL students involved in pre-referral or referral are flagged, and an ELL staff person is included in the evaluation. The district still struggles to find appropriate assessments for all students.

District 2

Respondent. Director of Special Education.

District Description. Approximately 5,000 students in grades pre-K through 12 attend school in District 2; just over 20 percent of those students are in special education, and more than 15 percent of students are ELLs. Twenty percent of the ELL students also have identified disabilities. The primary languages spoken are Spanish, Portuguese, and Hindi. As with District 1, overall student proficiency rates as well as proficiency rates for special education and ELL students were lower than the state average (Table 7).

Identification Practices. The director noted that the district recommends that each school have an ELL specialist attend the initial evaluation of every ELL student (to address a previous problem of having students go through the evaluation process without considering their English language acquisition needs). She also noted, however, that identifying "subjective" disabilities is challenging for all students, and even more so for ELLs. She commented that the increased emphasis on MTSS provides teachers with greater tools for instruction, but she expressed concern that the MTSS process was being used inappropriately for identifying disabilities. She worries that students are labeled with disabilities just because no intervention has worked with them, not because of actual evidence of a disability. When possible, individualized assessments are given in both the students' native language and in English, but those assessments are not always valid or definitive.

Instructional Practices. District 2 is currently training more teachers in MTSS, with a focus on providing interventions in reading, math, and behavior. ELL students with identified disabilities are served, whenever possible, in the general education setting and continue to receive ESL services. However, the district needs more staff with dual expertise in order to meet student needs.

Challenges. The director of special education noted that some parents opt out of ELL services in order to keep their child in a particular school that does not provide ELL services, and this results in many of these students being referred for special education evaluation. During the evaluation, they are found not to be eligible because their lack of progress is due to their need to acquire English and not due to a disability. To address this issue, the district has put ELL specialists in every school to provide ESL push-in or pull-out support for the students.

District 3

Respondents. Director of Special Education and ELL Director

District Description. District 3 serves almost 7,000 students in grades pre-K through 12, almost 15 percent of whom are special education students, and more than 15 percent are ELL students, speaking more than 50 languages. The ELL director said that, while currently about 5 percent of ELLs are identified with disabilities, that number is shifting because three years ago the district ended a policy of reclassifying students out of ELL if they had a disability (i.e., up to three years ago, students usually had one designation or the other, not both). Overall district proficiency rates were lower than the state average on the ELA and mathematics MCAS exams, but 32 percent of ELL students scored proficient or higher on the mathematics MCAS, compared to 25 percent of ELL students statewide (Table 7).

Identification Practices. For the last three years the district has been leading ongoing professional development focused on building skills in distinguishing language-based disabilities from English language acquisition. Child study team chairs and school psychologists participate in the meetings, and this year the work has expanded to a two-day professional development for school staff. Closely related to this work is the district's use of MTSS. The district has been using MTSS for more than four years, and one of the key changes has been that all students who are struggling are evaluated based on "mini ecological assessments," recognizing that no single assessment will provide enough information for disability identification.

Instructional Practices. Benchmark assessments are administered three times a year to identify struggling students, and then ongoing progress monitoring is used to determine and evaluate instructional strategies for each student. ELL students are served using an SEI model for beginning students, and ESL support for more advanced students. For struggling ELL students, the interventions are determined based on the progress monitoring and often are implemented by the ELL teacher with support from a special education teacher. For ELL students with identified disabilities, their English instruction needs are not written into their IEP, but ESL instruction is considered part of general education and students with disabilities continue to receive ESL services.

Challenges. The district directors talked about challenges they face because of limited time in the day to provide special education services, ESL services, and content instruction. They also described a need for more specialized personnel, both to increase the skills and expertise of existing staff as well as to have access to evaluators for low-incidence disabilities and/or students who speak low-incidence languages. Scheduling challenges affect both services for students and opportunities for collaboration.

District 4

Respondents. Director of Special Education and ELL Director.

District Description. District 4 is composed of just under 10,000 students in grades pre-K through 12. More than 20 percent of students are special education students and almost 15 percent of students are ELLs. Overall, the district proficiency rates are close to the state average on both the ELA and mathematics MCAS exams (Table 7). In 2011, a higher percentage of ELL students in District 4 reached proficient or above on both the ELA and mathematics MCAS exams, outperforming the state by 6 percentage points in ELA and 2 percentage points in mathematics.

Identification Practices. The district takes a multi-dimensional approach in evaluating students. For example, it is aware that ELLs have experiences outside of school that might be affecting their acculturation process and are manifested in their behavior and academic performance that might look like a disability. For this reason, the evaluation process considers out-of-school interventions, such as counseling or pediatric checkups, in addition to in-school interventions. It also uses a variety of assessments and teams at both the classroom and district levels. Many different personnel may be involved, depending on the student's situation, including a guidance counselor, speech therapist, and psychologist. Parents are also involved.

Instructional Practices. The district directors noted that teachers collaborate at the school level, but less collaboration happens at the district level. Collaboration often takes the form of discussing data results for particular students and determining instructional strategies based on those data, which demonstrates a larger trend of individualizing services for students. The director of special education talked about the importance of bilingual aides and staff members for students who have no English skills.

Challenges. Services for students who need substantially separate classrooms and services for students in inclusion settings are not entirely equitable. Oftentimes, a child assigned to these classrooms will receive an aide and that aide will end up doing most of the instruction.

District 5

Respondents. Director of Special Education and ELL Director.

District Description. District 5 has more than 10,000 students in grades pre-K through 12. ELL students make up nearly one fourth of that student population, and special education students comprise just over 20 percent. About 18 percent of ELLs have an identified disability. More than 90 percent of ELL students are Spanish-speaking. District 5 had the lowest proficiency rates of the districts in the study, for all students as well as for special education students (Table 7). However, while the district had the lowest proficiency rates, it also had the smallest gap in achievement between special education students and the overall district proficiency rate, and an even smaller gap between ELL students and the overall district proficiency rate.

Identification Practices. Struggling ELLs in District 5 are evaluated in the same way as monolingual students, with the difference being that the district prefers to wait for at least a year before making a special education referral for an ELL student. The district uses a discrepancy model to determine disabilities. For pre-referrals, teachers who work most closely with students first raise concerns if they suspect a disability. At the initial meeting, a special education specialist may or may not attend. Families are also involved in the process. After talking to the parents and teachers, the members of the child study team decide if further steps need to be taken or more data need to be collected to determine appropriate supports. Four schools in the district have been using what the special education director called "a more stringent RTI process," and this has led to a decrease in referrals by as much as 50 percent.

Instructional Practices. In District 5, the ELL director clarified that the IEP supersedes any ESL instruction. Thus, if a student is a beginning English learner and receiving direct instruction in English

acquisition, this would be superseded by any IEP requirements and ESL instruction must work around it. Instruction is provided to ELLs using both push-in and pull-out models. An English-only instructional model is used across the district and Spanish is used only on rare occasions for the purpose of clarifying information.

Challenges. The interviewees talked about the importance of having staff who are bilingual and can provide native language support, but they noted that often the bilingual staff in their district are paraprofessionals; while knowing the students' native language is very helpful, in general the paraprofessionals in the district who speak Spanish have weak English skills and less training than teachers do. Most of the special education teachers are not bilingual, and there are only 58 ELL teachers for the district's 28 schools. The special education director said that current classroom setups make it difficult to meet the needs of ELLs with disabilities who do not need to be in substantially separate classrooms but need more support than just a resource room. Finally, the two directors face a challenge in collaborating, because their positions are in two different departments and they report to different district leaders.

Table 7. MCAS Proficiency Rates for Participating Districts by Subgroups

	2011 MCAS percentage of proficient or higher					
	All students		**Special education**		**ELL**	
	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math
District 1	49	38	15	9	5	10
District 2	52	41	17	11	8	15
District 3	59	51	16	10	20	32
District 4	64	54	30	22	29	27
District 5	41	29	12	7	11	15
State	69	58	31	22	23	25

School and District Systems in place to Identify Disabilities Among ELLs

A tiered system of support is being used to identify disabilities among ELLs, although not always in the ways intended. Throughout the interviews in this study, teachers and administrators described using tiered systems of support; however, while some understood that a tiered system of support is an instructional model or framework that may lead to the identification of a disability, others appeared to equate tiered systems with the more traditional pre-referral and referral process. Interview responses indicated significant variability across districts in terms of the robustness of tiered models and the degree to which these models are used in the special education identification process. For instance, one district with more than four years of implementing a tiered system of support described using "mini ecological assessments for each student" rather than relying on the traditional battery of assessments. On the other hand, districts that had adopted the model more recently tended to use MTSS terminology even though the processes they described reflected a traditional orientation to identifying disabilities.

Interviewees shared an uncertainty about standardized timeframes for referring ELLs for evaluation. Regardless of the extent to which a district relies on a tiered system to identify students with disabilities, uncertainty exists in terms of how much time should elapse before a special education referral is appropriate. The ELL teacher in School 2a summarized the sentiment, saying the school doesn't want to do an assessment "too early or too late." Across districts, teachers and administrators

alike made reference to an "unwritten rule" that schools should wait a certain amount of time (either six months or a year) before referring a newly arrived student for a special education evaluation regardless of the needs of the student or the teacher's observation and data on the student. In spite of this implicit rule, teachers and administrators said they ignore it in order to meet the needs of individual students. The principal in School 2b, for example, emphasized the importance of professional discretion rather than following policies strictly. Sometimes "I break my own rules," he concluded.

Individualized assessments are used to identify disabilities, but their validity with ELLs is questioned, and other forms of "ecological" or "dynamic" assessment are not used frequently. The nature of assessments used to evaluate ELLs for special education was an important topic across districts. All of the district-level administrators except one (District 5) emphasized the importance of finding ways to assess students in their native language. The special education director in District 2 explained, "We always try to use first language assessments, but that's easier in Spanish than Hindi." Two of the district-level administrators expressed concerns about the validity and reliability limitations of traditional assessment tools—even if they are specific to the student's native language. In contrast, teachers and principals focused on the particular assessments used in their districts (e.g., Woodcock Johnson, DIBELS), implying that assessments are the primary means of identifying disabilities. Only the District 5 director talked about incorporating other methods of evaluation, such as dynamic assessment, but did not mention teach and reteach methods. Interviewees at all four schools and two of the districts discussed the importance of intuition or "a gut feeling" in distinguishing between disability and language acquisition. The administrators interviewed in Districts 6 and 7 explained that the personnel in their districts are so experienced in working with ELLs that they can tell the difference between those students who have disabilities and those who do not. The administrator in District 4 summed it up: "There are so many newcomers that people sort of have an internal norm." In other schools there was a sense that particular staff members—usually bilingual—had the ability to distinguish between a student who was simply acquiring English and one who had a disability.

Instructional Practices in Place to Ensure the Academic Success of ELLs with Disabilities

In some schools and districts, a tiered system of support is used appropriately as a framework for instructional delivery. While some interviewees in both the schools and districts talked about using tiered systems in the process of identifying disabilities, others understood that a tiered system is actually designed primarily as an intervention strategy, *not* an identification process. The different perceptions of the role of tiered systems appear to align with the number of years of implementation; the district director of a district in its fifth year of implementation described how their tiered system has changed instruction for all struggling students, and has led to a drop in the proportion of students referred to special education. In other districts, however, very few administrators or teachers talked about how tiered systems can improve instruction; even fewer talked about the role of progress monitoring as an integral part of teaching practice. Three teachers and five administrators mentioned tiered systems in relation to language acquisition needs, and the way language instruction can be tiered, providing more intensive language interventions for ELLs who are struggling more.

Programs and services for ELLs with disabilities vary across schools and districts. Across the interviews, there was a diversity of descriptions of programs and services for ELLs with disabilities. In some schools, the principal talked about having to prioritize IEP requirements over ELL needs; thus indicating that the IEPs do not always address the English language acquisition needs of students, whether in delivery of services or in the summary of a student's present level of performance. In other

schools and districts, leaders talked about designing individualized programs for students, within budget limitations. Some teachers described inclusive classrooms dynamically designed to shift as student needs shift, with ELL and special education teachers moving in and out of classrooms as needed. In other schools, special education teachers described the challenges of working in inclusive classrooms where classroom teachers view them as aides, or only there to work with "their" students. Two schools in the study have bilingual special education classrooms—substantially separate classrooms where all the students speak the same first language (in both of these cases Spanish). In one school, the bilingual special education classroom provided an opportunity for the teacher to work individually with students on their English and academic needs and get them ready for a general education classroom. In the other school, the principal found that the students were not getting sufficient exposure to English, and he initiated a shift to a more inclusive setting for the students. Across the schools and districts, ELL students with disabilities are provided with services in diverse settings, including dual language programs, push-in, pull-out, substantially separate, and with and without native language support, but there was little clarity around ELL services being provided with high fidelity and in congruence with special education services.

Formal collaboration opportunities to discuss student needs are in place in most schools and districts, but usually include only classroom and special education teachers, not ELL teachers. At each of the four schools in the study, there is some level of formal collaboration time for at least some teachers. In the best situations, following research-based recommendations (Movit, Petrykowsak, & Woodruff, 2010), a team of teachers includes the special education teacher and they meet daily to plan and discuss student needs; more typically, grade-level teachers meet weekly or biweekly. None of the schools in this study, nor the districts, described formal collaboration processes that included ELL teachers with grade-level teachers or teams. At the same time, all teachers described a commitment to finding informal avenues for collaboration, whether in the morning before the start of school, during lunch, or via e-mail. During these informal opportunities, teachers speak with one another about student needs and how to best serve them. Teachers who work in inclusive classrooms described varied levels of collaboration with their co-teachers, ranging from those pairs who co-plan each lesson and share all tasks, to the special education teacher who has found that shifting from resource room to inclusive classroom has meant that she feels treated more like an aide rather than as a teacher.

Opportunities for Growth for Schools and Districts Identifying and Meeting the Special Needs of ELL Students

At both the school and district levels, teachers and administrators identified four major challenges in the process of ***identification of disabilities*** among ELLs referred for special education services: personnel who understand how to distinguish learning disabilities from language acquisition; the validity of individualized assessments in the primary language or in English; the role of MTSS in the way that the identification process is conceptualized; and previous student experiences.

Schools and districts interviewed stressed the importance of having personnel with ELL expertise involved in the special education referral process. Interviewees identified a number of challenges to obtaining the necessary expertise: In some districts, ELL teachers are itinerant and are not in schools every day; ELL teachers' schedules tend to be less flexible; there are not always enough ELL teachers to meet the need. Furthermore, in some districts, there continues to be a culture that does not include ELL teachers in the special education process. Finally, not all ELL teachers have the expertise to distinguish

language acquisition from a learning disability; their inclusion in the pre-referral and referral process is necessary, but not always sufficient, to meet the needs of students.

Individualized assessments are not valid for all ELL students, even when available in other languages. Every person who talked about identification of disabilities talked about the use of assessments, and the challenges of using them. One district said it only administers assessments in English, but all the other districts and schools talked about the challenges of finding valid assessments in students' home languages. Assessments are available in Spanish, but even these assessments are not valid for all Spanish-speaking students. For example, students do not always have sufficient literacy skills in their home languages to make assessments in those languages valid. In some cases, these are students who were born in the United States and have not had formal academic exposure to their native language; in other cases, students come to U.S. schools without a history of stable schooling in their own language (known as students with interrupted formal education or SIFE). Furthermore, assessments are not available in many low-incidence languages, making it difficult to assess a student's ability in either language. The debate about whether and when to use assessments in a student's native language as opposed to English was noted by almost all the schools and districts. However, one school and one district talked about moving away from a dependence on individualized assessments, and moving toward a more ecological approach to identifying disabilities, following the framework of MTSS.

The role of tiered systems of support in identification of disabilities is not always well articulated, particularly for ELLs. As noted previously, those districts that have focused on tiered system implementation for more years describe their challenges differently. Respondents in schools with more tiered system experience talked about the need to focus more on finding an intervention that successfully meets the students' needs rather than an assessment that will assign a particular label, while others saw a tiered system of support within the traditional paradigm of pre-referral and referral.

Students have a diverse history of interactions with both special education and ELL programs, and require individualized responses. Both School 2b and District 2 talked about parents opting out of ELL services for their children, and the students subsequently being referred for special education evaluation. In some situations the students may have been appropriately identified with a disability but could also have benefited from ESL services, while in others the referral may actually indicate a need for more intense English instruction rather than a disability. Two districts described students who enter the system with IEPs from Puerto Rico; in some cases the IEPs are incomplete, and in other cases they may call for a classroom setting not available at the new school. In all of these situations, teachers and administrators need to be able to respond to the individual need.

Two challenges emerged around providing ***appropriate instruction*** to ELLs with disabilities: addressing their diverse needs and improving formal collaboration opportunities.

Schools and districts find challenges in successfully meeting the diverse instructional needs of ELLs with disabilities, including diverse English proficiency levels, different disability severities, and the interaction between the two. Almost all of those interviewed, both ELL and special education specialists, and teachers and administrators, emphasized that the ELL students with disabilities who they serve are not homogeneous, and one of the challenges they face is meeting these students' diverse instructional needs. Some schools and districts found that meeting the needs of students with low-incidence disabilities presented a challenge; in other situations, administrators described existing classroom setups that do not meet the needs of specific students (and did not talk about options for shifting these

classroom setups). Other challenges included figuring out scheduling to provide both ELL and special education services, and identifying the appropriate use of native language supports to teach content.

There are not enough formal collaboration opportunities, especially for ELL teachers to collaborate with general or special education teachers. All teachers would like to have more time to collaborate with others, whether to discuss needs of specific students or for common planning. At all schools and districts, ELL teachers were most often left out of formal collaborative scheduling, and in one district, the administrator noted that principal autonomy limited the policies that the district can impose on schools. In schools with inclusion classrooms, a diversity of implementation practices were found, with some examples of co-teaching (including ELL teachers as well), and other examples where the special education teacher felt that she was not being treated as an equal by her general education colleague, and the collaboration was not successful.

Three challenges were identified that are relevant for both ***identification*** and ***instruction***.

There is a need for adequate and appropriate staffing that includes individuals with both ELL and special education expertise, as well as bilingual teachers. Not surprisingly, all schools and districts talked about the need for more expertise among their staff and for more staff who have skills in both special education and English language teaching. The need for highly qualified staff was discussed in terms of both identification and instruction. The process of identifying "subjective" disabilities (specific learning disabilities, communication, emotional disabilities) is challenging even when students only speak one language; when students are in the process of learning a second language, the subjectivity of diagnosis has even more variables and demands more expertise. Teachers and those involved in the identification process need more skills in understanding the language acquisition process, and ELL teachers need to be more integrally involved in pre-referrals and progress monitoring. Almost every person interviewed said that his or her school or district does not have sufficient highly trained staff to meet the instructional needs of ELLs with disabilities. Two districts talked about having to use bilingual paraprofessionals in some situations, and finding that the quality of education received by the students varied greatly depending on the quality of the paraprofessional. In some situations, paraprofessionals who speak students' native languages play a critical and positive role in providing language support for students as they learn English, but at least three people talked about the risk of having students with the highest needs being taught by adults with the least expertise; that is, some paraprofessionals are highly talented teachers, but others are not, and some even have very weak English skills. The variability creates a risk for students who have high academic needs.

Whose students are they? In some schools, there is a bilingual special education teacher who is seen as the one in charge of ELLs with disabilities, although the students themselves may be served in many different settings. In almost all the schools and districts, teachers and administrators described all adults taking ownership of all students; although in one school and one district, teachers and administrators said that students are still placed in discrete categories, with special education students the responsibility of special education teachers, and ELL students the responsibility of ELL teachers. This is particularly challenging when administrators advocate for inclusion, as classroom teachers need to shift their perspectives on both students and fellow teachers.

Schools and districts struggle to promote effective parent participation. The school and district administrators who described their work with parents generally felt that they had addressed the challenge of providing sufficient translation and interpretation, whether for IEP meetings, informal phone calls, or other meetings with parents. However, they also recognized that providing language

translation is just one step in fostering effective parent participation, and all of them felt that they were not as successful as they want to be in helping parents fully understand the referral and IEP process and in being culturally competent.

Discussion and Recommendations

Using the survey and interview results described above, we have identified a number of key discussion points, together with recommendations for possible action steps to either take advantage of positive practices already in place, or to address challenges elicited during the study. Recommendations are primarily targeted at the state level, although some can be implemented by districts or schools, and are so identified.

ELL teachers and administrators tend to identify more challenges in meeting the needs of ELLs with disabilities than other teachers and administrators do. In the survey, district ELL directors were consistently more likely than special education directors or others to identify challenges in identifying disabilities among ELLs and in meeting their instructional needs, particularly in the ability to distinguish between disabilities and language acquisition, and in meeting both IEP goals and ELL requirements. Although formal collaboration opportunities exist in almost all the schools and districts interviewed, ELL teachers were rarely included in professional learning communities or collaboration, and when they were included it was usually informally, during lunch breaks or before or after school. District directors and principals described positive changes regarding the inclusion of ELL teachers or specialists in child study teams during the pre-referral and referral process, but there continue to be differences in perceptions between ELL teachers and all others interviewed and surveyed, both in terms of their integration into formal collaborative structures, and in their views on the needs and challenges facing ELL students with disabilities. The different perspectives of ELL staff and special education staff also reflect the myriad initiatives currently present in the state, and any work towards improving collaborative efforts should focus on identifying the connections between the different initiatives as a way to create synergy that leads toward greater student achievement.

Recommendations

- *State: Develop a formal synergistic document or website that makes explicit connections between the many different MA DESE initiatives, and identifies specific ways in which different stakeholders (special education, ELL, general education) can make connections in their practice. This should include (but not be limited to):*
    - Common Core State Standards: http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/commoncore/
    - MA Tiered System of Support (MTSS): http://www.doe.mass.edu/mtss/
    - English Proficiency Assessment (WIDA/ACCESS for ELLs): http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/access/
    - Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners (RETELL): http://www.doe.mass.edu/retell/
    - Federal Accountability Waiver: http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/general/
    - Personnel evaluation: http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/
- *State: Consider incorporating English language proficiency information (e.g. in student present level of performance) into student IEPs.*
- *District and School: Promote greater integration of ELL teachers, specialists, and administrators in formal professional learning communities and other collaborative structures/opportunities, as well as in special education evaluation teams as appropriate, in order to obtain their perspectives on meeting student needs.*

- *District and School: Identify specific steps by which parents can increase their collaborative participation in meeting student needs. Create opportunities for parents to learn about multiple initiatives rolled out by the state and how these relate to action planning by the district and school.*

***MTSS is being interpreted and implemented in different ways in different schools and districts; these ways range from a simple shift in vocabulary to a significant move* toward using progress monitoring as a tool to improve instruction for struggling ELLs and to provide more information for determination of disabilities**. Among those surveyed who said they are currently using some form of tiered instruction model, those who have been implementing MTSS for more years were more likely to say that the system is meeting the needs of ELLs with disabilities, but those who are new to MTSS were less likely to say that it is meeting those students' needs. The survey was not able to determine the level of fidelity of the state's MTSS implementation, but the interviews indicated that there is a wide range of interpretations as to how to implement MTSS. In some districts, the MTSS vocabulary has been pasted on to existing pre-referral practices with almost no changes to instructional practice. In a few districts, generally those with more years of implementation, MTSS is seen as a new way of teaching, of providing tiered interventions and consistent progress monitoring, and of understanding what is working and not working for individual students—providing them with alternative ways to learn without waiting for them to fail. A small number of individuals spoke about the potential of using an MTSS model with English instruction as well as content, which would include tiered interventions to help ELLs learn English, but no one interviewed mentioned the state-developed MTSS Self-Assessment tool as part of their implementation process.[1]

Recommendation

- *State and District: Promote the use, at the district and school levels, of the state-developed MTSS Self-Assessment tool (http://www.doe.mass.edu/mtss/sa/) to monitor MTSS integrity and fidelity of implementation, with a particular focus on MTSS for English language instruction for struggling ELLs.*
- *State: Identify research-based web-based sources that provide guidance on interventions and other components of the model (for example: The National Center for Response to Intervention at www.rti4success.org or the National Center on Intensive Interventions at http://www.intensiveintervention.org/).*

The common concern of finding appropriate and valid individualized assessments is being addressed by some interviewees by using multiple sources of data for disability identification. *There is a common concern with the validity of individualized assessments employed with ELLs. Interestingly, the survey results sho*w that more district-level directors (both ELL and special education) are concerned about identifying the appropriate individualized assessments, and fewer are concerned with knowing when to use them; that is, they felt that if they could access reliable and valid assessments, they would know how to use them effectively. Two interviewees said they try to use an ecological approach to evaluation practices (e.g., Ortiz et al., 2011), and that standardized individualized assessments (i.e. Woodcock-Johnson Test of Achievement) are just one tool among many. At the same time, some

[1] The MTSS Self-Assessment tool has been developed by the state to be used by schools and districts to self-assess their current status in each of the core components in academic and non-academic domains of the model. The tool can help schools and districts establish priorities and can be used to develop a coherent action plan tailored to meet the individual needs of each school or district. The tool is flexible enough so that it can be used repeatedly to monitor growth and adjust action plans. The MTSS Self-Assessment tool is available for use at the district and school levels and supports fidelity of implementation as recommended by the state as part of the Conditions for School Effectiveness (http://www.doe.mass.edu/mtss/sa/).

interviewees with many years of experience described using their intuition to differentiate disabilities from language acquisition. Although these individuals may well be using their experience with many students to identify language acquisition patterns as opposed to disability, it is of concern that they articulate this as "intuition" rather than a set of tools or processes that they could pass on to others.

Recommendation

- *State: Continue to promote implementation of MTSS and encourage the use of MTSS progress monitoring as a way to obtain many sources of data on student progress, thus lessening dependence on both standardized individualized assessments or on "intuition."*
- *State and districts: Provide a glossary of terms that defines the multiple types of assessment tools and their uses (i.e. standards-based assessments, state standardized assessment, benchmark assessments, individual tests of achievements, tests of intelligence, curriculum-based measurements, curriculum-based assessment, criterion-based assessment, universal screeners, progress monitoring tools, reading diagnostic assessments for core instruction, etc.). One example of such a glossary is presented in Appendix C.*

The interviews also indicated positive processes: In a number of districts and schools, the needs of ELLs with disabilities are being met by identifying the specific need of each student and tailoring instruction (and teacher allocation) based on student needs. In these schools instructional groupings are dynamic and can shift throughout the school year as student needs shift, including changing classrooms and teachers. There was an overwhelming recognition among all those interviewed that ELLs with disabilities are diverse: They have diverse language backgrounds, diverse levels of English acquisition, and diverse disabilities, and thus meeting their needs demands a diversity of solutions.

Recommendations

- *State: Build on the positive trend toward individualizing instruction by providing districts and schools with the tools to quickly disaggregate their data, to be able to see disability categories as well as trajectories of growth, language levels, and assessment scores of ELLs with disabilities. This descriptive information can be a starting point for using data in individualizing instruction and as part of each district's adoption and implementation of MTSS.*
- *State: Explicitly link the use of the state's Conditions for School Effectiveness to the MTSS model (http://www.doe.mass.edu/mtss/blueprint/ch2.pdf).*

Parent engagement was noted by many as a critical part of any successful program but, almost universally, those interviewed said that they have not found a successful way to engage parents of ELLs. In the survey, 38 percent of all respondents said that having teachers know about the diversity of language and cultural norms among ELL students was a challenge; however, 47 percent of ELL directors felt this way, a statistically significant difference. Among principals and district directors, there was an acknowledgement that while efforts have been made to engage parents of ELLs, these efforts have by and large not been successful.

Recommendations

- *State: Investigate promising practices for ELL parent participation identified in the literature, including different types of parent/family engagement.*
- *State: Link the use of the state's Conditions for School Effectiveness to the MTSS model, explicitly highlighting the use of the Collaborative School/Family Problem-Solving process in Chapter 3D: Core Components blueprint (http://www.doe.mass.edu/mtss/blueprint/ch3d.pdf)*

At both the school and district level, there is a desire for more staff trained in both special education and ESL. Among those surveyed, more respondents said that there is a need for training in effective ELL instructional strategies, in understanding the differences between special education and ESL instruction, and in understanding cultural and linguistic diversity. Fewer respondents said there was a need for professional development on special education strategies. Principals who were interviewed want more teachers with dual training in both special education and ESL strategies.

Recommendations

- *State, District, and School: Embed professional development on meeting the needs of ELLs with disabilities into the overall vision for the state, district, and school, and present it in ways that support delivery of services (e.g. tiered teaching) and connections to ongoing initiatives (e.g. WIDA/ACCESS for ELLs http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/access/ and RETELL).*
- *State: Provide a pool of resources to meet school and district needs that full-time staff may not be able to meet (e.g., access to personnel with expertise in low-incidence languages, options for evaluation practices for students for whom individualized assessments are not valid).*
- *State: Initiate formal relationships with pre-service institutions to align pre-service ELL training with identified needs.*

Further research can contribute to identifying those areas of strength that can be shared across the state as well as areas for improvement. EDC researchers have identified four areas that appear to be particularly promising in Massachusetts, with a focus on MTSS, data-driven instruction, and professional development, all areas that fall under the state's Conditions for School Effectiveness (http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/general/).

Research Recommendations (State)

- *Explore how districts are using the state-developed self-assessment tool for evaluating implementation of MTSS and how the tool use is impacting their MTSS implementation.*
- *Conduct in-depth case studies of those schools and districts that have been implementing MTSS for more than four years, focusing on the impact of MTSS on struggling ELLs.*
- *Conduct in-depth interviews with experienced teachers who are considered to have "intuition" about disability referral and identification, in order to articulate and systematize the expertise that is encompassed in their "intuition."*
- *Using student-level data, assess the academic performance of Former English language learners (FLEPs). There are a number of critical research areas: Are there differences in FLEP performance by district exit criteria? Do FLEP students get referred to special education at a higher rate than their ELL or native English-speaking peers? Does FLEP student performance vary by years in ELL program? By grade at which they are "flepped"?*
- *Investigate how schools use data-driven instruction planning and supports to address the needs of ELLs and ELLs with disabilities.*

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Protocols

Principals

Characteristics of ELL students in school

What are the demographic, English acquisition, and disability characteristics of ELLs in your school?

Processes and programs

What are the processes for identifying disabilities among ELLs?

Instruction of ELL students and ELLs with disabilities

What are the service delivery methods (programs) for serving all ELLs and ELLs with disabilities?

Systems

Are there systems of collaboration across general education, special education, ELL services? If so, please describe.

Parent Participation

How does your school encourage parent attendance and active participation in the IEP process for families of ELL students?

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix A (Continued): Interview Protocols

General Education, Special Education, ELL Teachers

ELL Students you work with:

Please describe your work with ELL students and with ELL students with disabilities – how many students, what range of English proficiency levels, in what settings, using what type of provision of services, for those with disabilities, the categories and severity.

What is your role in the instruction of ELL students with disabilities? (co-teaching, support in general education classroom, pull-out services, etc.)

Working with ELL Students and Identification of Disabilities among ELL Students

What are the processes for identifying disabilities among ELLs?

Can you describe an example of a time when the process (of identifying and meeting the needs for a struggling ELL student) worked well? When the process did not work well?

Instruction of ELL Students with disabilities

What are the service delivery methods (programs or supports) for serving all ELLs and ELLs with disabilities?

Can you describe an example of a time when the instructional strategies you chose for an ELL with disabilities were successful? When they were not?

Parents/Families

When and how do you communicate with families of ELL students?

Systems

Are there systems of collaboration across general education, special education, ELL services?

Is there anything else you would like us to know about ELLs with disabilities in your school, whether identification issues, instructional issues, or anything else?

Appendix A (Continued): Interview Protocols

District Directors

Characteristics of ELL students in district
What are the demographic, English acquisition, and disability characteristics of ELLs in the district?

Processes and programs
What are the formal and informal processes and programs in place at the district level for identifying disabilities among ELLs?

Instructional practices for ELL Students with Disabilities
What are the service delivery methods (programs) for serving all ELLs and ELLs with disabilities across the district?

Systems
What are the formal and informal structures in place at the district and school levels for collaboration between general education, special education, and ELL administrators and or teachers?

Professional Development
How does the district provide professional development to its teachers who work with ELLs with disabilities?

Parents
How does the district work with parents of ELL students with disabilities?

Other
Are there any challenges in the identification of disabilities among ELLs, or the provision of services to ELLs with disabilities, that we haven't covered here?

Appendix B: Online Survey

ELL with Disabilities

Hello:
This questionnaire is part of a study being funded by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) on district-level practices around meeting the needs of English learners (ELLs) with disabilities. The study is being implemented by researchers at Education Development Center, Inc. in Waltham, MA.

You have been invited to complete this short questionnaire because you have been identified (via the MA DESE website) as either a Director of Special Education or a Director of English language learners in your Massachusetts school district. The purpose of the questionnaire is two-fold: first, to identify the current district-level practices for the identification of disabilities among ELLs, and second, to describe the provision of supports and services in place to meet the needs of ELL students with disabilities. This questionnaire is part of a larger study that will include in-depth case studies of three school districts in Massachusetts, which will help us to reflect the diversity of educational experiences of ELLs with disabilities.

Your responses to the questionnaire will be anonymous. Results will only be reported in the aggregate (we ask that you identify your district only so that we will be able to disaggregate results by district types). Only the researchers at Education Development Center, Inc., will have access to individual responses. The final report will be available to the public. Any questions you have can be directed to the study director, Carrie Parker (cparker@edc.org; 617-618-2740).

By clicking yes below, you will be directed to the questionnaire. If you choose not to participate, please click on No, and you will be exited. Thank you very much!

*** 1. I agree to participate in this study.**

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

*** 2. What is your position?**

- ○ Director of Special Education
- ○ Director of English Language Learners
- ○ Other (please specify)

*** 3. What district do you work in?**

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Appendix B (Continued): Online Survey

ELL with Disabilities

***4. On a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 being 'Not a challenge in my district' and 3 being 'A significant challenge in my district,' please rate the following issues around IDENTIFYING disabilities among ELLs.**

	(1) Not a challenge	(2) Somewhat of a challenge	(3) A significant challenge
Accessing, understanding and implementing state policy guidelines for identifying disabilities among ELLs	○	○	○
Assuring t at district/school personnel involved in identification processes have sufficient knowledge about how to differentiate language acquisition issues from disabilities	○	○	○
Assuring t at district/school personnel involved in identification processes have sufficient knowledge about the diversity of language and cultural norms among ELL students	○	○	○
Effectively using Student Support team or Child Study Teams in prereferral	○	○	○
Finding and accessing assessments that differentiate between second language development and learning disabilities	○	○	○
Knowledge of when to use assessments that differentiate between second language development and learning disabilities	○	○	○
Finding and accessing assessments in the native language of students	○	○	○
Knowledge of when to use assessments in the student's native language	○	○	○
Identifying disabilities among ELLs who are students with interrupted formal education (SIFE)*	○	○	○

*SIFE (Student with Interrupted Formal Education) refers to an English language learner (ELL) who is typically a newcomer** between the ages of 8 and 22. The student has experienced an interrupted education or has had little to no schooling experience resulting in an inadequate chance to have made educational gains. Interruptions in academic history may be caused by any factors that would limit the student's ability to perform and achieve in a Massachusetts classroom with students of a comparable age group. These factors may include: unavailability of schooling, civil unrest, immigration, transiency, trauma, refugee camp experiences, family constraints, gender restrictions, other environmental or socioemotional factors. Moreover, a SIFE may have experienced limited schooling, characterized by a non-rigorous quality of education in the home country. This may include a shorter school day and/or school year, and a curriculum that is not comparable to that of Massachusetts. Also, students may have been educated by teachers who were not high school or college graduates. Based on assessments, (in native language, if available), the student's academic level is a minimum of two years below grade level in literacy and/or numeracy. Furthermore, the student may lack the general knowledge and/or practical life skills required in a typical Massachusetts classroom.

**A newcomer is an English language learner who is typically: A recent immigrant to the US (having arrived within the last two calendar years) and/or;; Is new to the American school system and/or;; Has little or no English proficiency, performing at the beginner or advanced beginner level.

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Appendix B (Continued): Online Survey

ELL with Disabilities

***5. On a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 being 'Not a challenge in my district' and 3 being 'A significant challenge in my district,' please rate the following issues around MEETING THE NEEDS of ELLs with disabilities.**

	(1) Not a challenge	(2) Somewhat of a challenge	(3) A significant challenge
Accessing, understanding and implementing state policy guidelines for providing services to ELLs with disabilities	○	○	○
Providing consistent, adequate services to ELLs with disabilities	○	○	○
Developing and using collaborative structures between ELL, special education, and mainstream educators	○	○	○
Consistently monitoring ELLs (with and without disabilities)	○	○	○
Providing appropriate supports to ELLs	○	○	○

***6. Have teachers in your district been formally involved in strategizing to meet the needs and challenges in teaching ELLs with disabilities?**

○ Yes

○ No

If yes, please describe their involvement.

***7. Does your district have district-level staff position(s) dedicated to supporting ELLs with disabilities?**

○ Yes

○ No

If yes, please describe their position and qualifications.

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Appendix B (Continued): Online Survey

ELL with Disabilities

***8. What kinds of data about ELLs with disabilities do you have access to?**

	No access	Partial access	Full access	I don't know
Same data as for all students, disaggregated by student status as ELLs with disabilities	○	○	○	○
The numbers of ELLs with disabilities	○	○	○	○
The range of disability categories in the district ELL population and the numbers in each category	○	○	○	○
The interventions being used and services being provided to individual ELLs with disabilities	○	○	○	○
Academic and schooling history of recent ELL arrivals (e.g. schooling level in home language)	○	○	○	○
Current academic levels of ELLs with disabilities	○	○	○	○
English Language proficiency levels of ELLs with disabilities	○	○	○	○
Data disaggregated by language proficiency level and type of disability	○	○	○	○
Ongoing formative assessments of ELLs with disabilities	○	○	○	○

***9. On a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 being 'Not a challenge in my district' and 3 being 'A significant challenge in my district,' please rate the following issues around TEACHING ELLs with disabilities.**

	(1) Not a challenge	(2) Somewhat of a challenge	(3) A significant challenge
Incorporation of universal design principles in instruction	○	○	○
Use of differentiation in instruction	○	○	○
Implementation of strategies for teaching ELLs provided by the state	○	○	○
Knowledge of cultural and linguistic diversity of ELLs	○	○	○
Implementation of culturally responsive principles	○	○	○
Meeting both IEP goals and ELL requirements (e.g. minutes of service)	○	○	○
Providing individualized instruction	○	○	○
Providing English language instruction for students whose disabilities are not language-based	○	○	○
Institutionalizing opportunities for collaboration among those working with ELLs with disabilities	○	○	○
Providing consistent, adequate services to all students who are English language learners with disabilities	○	○	○

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Appendix B (Continued): Online Survey

ELL with Disabilities

***10. On a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 being 'Not a challenge in my district' and 3 being 'A significant challenge in my district,' please rate the following issues around PROVIDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (PD) for teaching ELLs with disabilities.**

	(1) Not a challenge	(2) Somewhat of a challenge	(3) A significant challenge
PD to Special education teachers on ELL STRATEGIES	○	○	○
PD to Special education administrators on ELL STRATEGIES	○	○	○
PD to Special education support personnel on ELL STRATEGIES	○	○	○
PD to General education teachers on ELL STRATEGIES	○	○	○
PD to ESL, ELL, and/or Bilingual teachers on SPECIAL EDUCATION STRATEGIES	○	○	○
PD to ESL, ELL, and/or Bilingual administrators on SPECIAL EDUCATION STRATEGIES	○	○	○
PD to ESL, ELL, and/or Bilingual support personnel on SPECIAL EDUCATION STRATEGIES	○	○	○
PD to General education teachers on SPECIAL EDUCATION STRATEGIES	○	○	○
PD to all teachers and administrators on CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC D VERSITY	○	○	○
PD to all teachers and administrators on DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ESL INSTRUCTION	○	○	○

***11. Does your district use a tiered system of support framework?**

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

***12. If you are using a tiered system of support framework, is it aligned with the Massachusetts Tiered System of Support (MTSS)?**

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Notpapl icabl e (ft ui rg yat ieredfsst emuo spport)

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Appendix B (Continued): Online Survey

ELL with Disabilities

***13. If your district is implementing a tiered system of support framework, at what level of implementation is the district currently? Choose the closest level to your experience.**

- ○ Not implementing
- ○ Planning Year 1
- ○ Initial implementation Year 1
- ○ Refining implementation Years 2-3
- ○ Full implementation Year 4-5
- ○ Institutionalized implementation Year 5+

***14. In your opinion, is your district's current implementation of a tiered system of support framework meeting the needs of ELLs?**

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Not applicable (not using a tiered system of support)

Please explain.

***15. Of the following disability categories, please identify up to three for which you would like to receive more training for meeting the needs of ELLs with disabilities (please limit yourself to THREE):**

- ☐ Autism
- ☐ Developmental Delay
- ☐ Intellectual Impairment
- ☐ Sensory Impairment: Hearing Impairment or Deaf
- ☐ Sensory Impairment: Vision Impairment or Blind
- ☐ Sensory Impairment: Deafblind
- ☐ Neurological Impairment
- ☐ Emotional
- ☐ Communication Impairment
- ☐ Physical Impairment
- ☐ Health Impairment
- ☐ Specific Learning Disability

16. Where do you currently go to find resources for your teachers who request support in teaching ELL students with disabilities? (This can include specific websites, experts, books, journals, colleagues, etc.)

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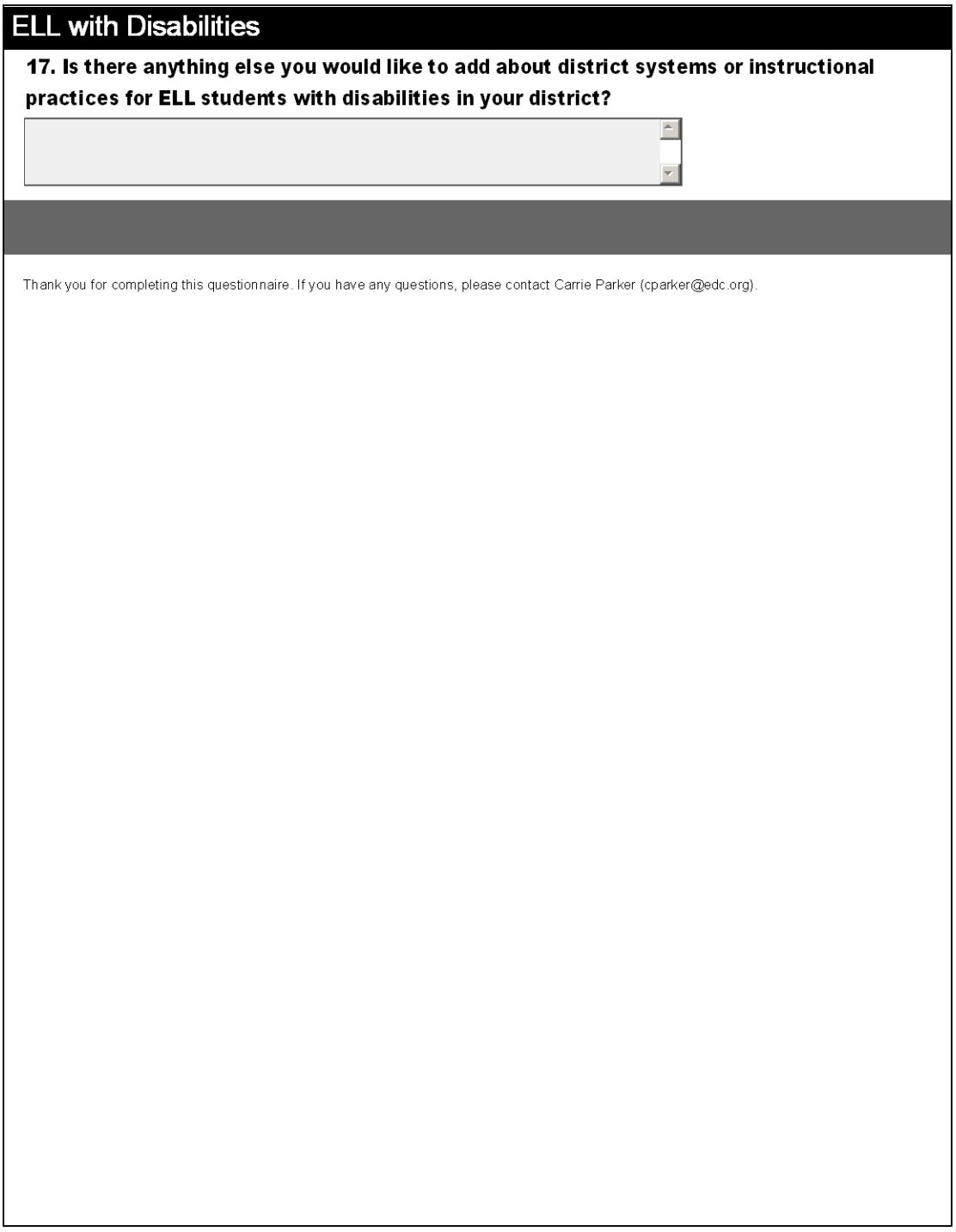
Appendix B (Continued): Online Survey



ELL with Disabilities

17. Is there anything else you would like to add about district systems or instructional practices for ELL students with disabilities in your district?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. If you have any questions, please contact Carrie Parker (cparker@edc.org).

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Appendix C. Glossary of Assessment Terms

Assessment: refers to the process of collecting data for the purpose of (1) specifying and verifying problems, and (2) making decisions about students.

Benchmark Assessments: Administered multiple times (e.g., typically three times per year) each year to all students as a system-wide indicator of student progress within the Tier 1 Core Instructional Program (ELA and Math).

Common Core State Standards: Proposed by the National Association of Governors as the means to nationalize learning standards, Massachusetts adopted and disseminated the Common Core State Standards in 2010. These standards were developed at the national level by a cross-representative group of educators, reviewing and revising previously adopted state standards developed over the past 10 years. These Common Core Standards have been incorporated into the newly adopted 2011 Massachusetts Framework for English Languages Art and Literacy and the 2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for Mathematics, Grades Pre-Kindergarten to 12. The goal is for all 50 states to adopt the Common Core State Standards, and state adoption was a requirement for all Race to the Top grants by the US Department of Education. Currently, 44 states have adopted the Common Core Standards.

Curriculum-Based Measure: Formal measure used by schools to screen and progress monitor student performance. CBMs are sensitive to small incremental changes in student performance, either in relation to specific skills or across multiple skills.

Diagnostic Assessment Systems: are designed to provide a comprehensive testing instrument to link students' learning abilities to their school achievement in one continuous system of measurement. Diagnostic tests are used primarily to improve two educational decisions:

1. They are administered to children who are experiencing difficulty in learning to read, and to identify strengths and weaknesses so that educators can plan appropriate interventions;
2. They are given to ascertain a student's initial or continuing eligibility for special services.

Formative evaluation: Ongoing assessments closely aligned with instructional practices. They are actively used to adjust teaching and learning while it is occurring (Consortium on Reading Excellence, 2008). These Tier 1 assessments may or may not provide information on whether or not a child has the basic skills to access the curriculum, e.g. ATI, ANet.

Individualized Tests of Achievement measure what students have been taught and learned, usually compared to a normed-sample population (e.g. Woodcock-Johnson).

Standardized assessments are tests that are administered and scored in a consistent, or "standard," manner. Standardized tests are designed in such a way that the questions, conditions for administering, scoring procedures, and interpretations are consistent and are administered and scored in a predetermined, standard manner (e.g. MCAS, WIDA).

Screening: An initial stage of assessment in which those who may evidence a particular problem, disorder, disability, or disease are discriminated from the general population. It is often used as part of individual assessment plan for special education referral teams.

Universal Screening: Assessment tools used to identify levels of proficiency in essential academics for the Tier 1 core instructional program. The results allow for review and analysis of both group and individual performance on specific skills. Curriculum-Based Measurements (CBM) are an example of Universal Screening.