ELP Screening for Students with (Potential) Disabilities

Introduction

To help districts meet our federal requirement of consistent state-wide English Learner (EL) Entry and Exit procedures, DPI released an EL Policy Handbook[1]. Standardized EL Entry and Exit procedures help us ensure the rights of ELs and prevent discrimination.

The first three chapters of the EL Policy Handbook describe the process for making an initial EL Identification. For most students, including most students with disabilities, these processes should be sufficient to make an accurate EL identification. However, some disabilities can be challenging to accommodate on ELP screeners. This document provides some guidance for how EL and Special Education staff can collaborate to support students with challenging needs.

The WIDA Suite of assessments have extensive accommodations available. These are described in the Accessibility and Accommodations Manual, available on the WIDA website[2]. While these tools provide a lot of supports for students with disabilities, they must be used thoughtfully and carefully to ensure that students have the greatest ability to access the assessment content.

As EL Identification happens upon enrollment, students are often being identified for both language services and Special Education services at the same time. To streamline these processes, it is incredibly helpful to have EL and Special Education staff jointly working to determine students' needs. This collaborative approach to serving students can be critical in determining if a student is struggling with English due to a lack of proficiency or a disability.

Students with Multiple Needs

Students with disabilities and students who are ELs have very well defined legal rights to access an education equal to that of their peers. ELs with disabilities retain all rights from membership in both protected groups, and this includes all of the services and supports each classification allows the student. It is not legal to deny services to a student under the assumption that the other program will fill that need. Students with disabilities who are ELs must be enrolled in a language

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[1] https://dpi.wi.gov/english-learners/el-identification-and-placement
[2] https://wida.wisc.edu/assess/accessibility

instruction education program, and ELs with disabilities must have an IEP or 504 Plan and appropriate Special Education services to meet their needs[3].

Language plans and IEP/504 Plans are not legally interchangeable, but they shouldn't be viewed as separate pieces of information about the student. An EL does not walk into a Special Education classroom and stop being an EL, nor does a student with disabilities suddenly lose those when they walk into an ESL classroom. Both the Language Instruction Education Plan (LIEP) and the IEP/504 Plan should describe the umbrella of services the student requires, while being reflective of the legal requirements of each document.

The requirements and eligibility criteria for both Special Education and EL status remain the same if a student has both needs. This includes the timing of identification and providing the required services and supports. One can't be delayed while the other is being implemented, as students have a civil right to equitable educational access; the needs of a student are intertwined, and not separate.

Identifying an EL with Disabilities

The designation of EL status indicates a student lacks proficiency in English to the extent that they are unable to access educational content and services at the same level as their never-EL peers. For students with disabilities, this identification may be tricky, especially if their disability has not been fully identified or accommodated.

Care must be taken to parse a student's struggle with language to understand if this is due to them fundamentally not being proficient in the language, or if it is because they have a disability which prevents them from receiving the information about what they should do, or which prevents them from being able to communicate that knowledge.

Ideally, a student with disabilities will have an IEP which indicates the appropriate accommodations for ELP assessments. In this case, the ELP screener should be administered in accordance with the accommodations listed in the student's IEP. In practice however, as EL Identification happens upon enrollment and has a short deadline, most students with disabilities won't have an IEP with ELP assessment supports listed in it.

Signs of a potential disability during the EL Identification process might require a Special Education referral, and should be an immediate trigger for existing multi-level systems of support (MLSS) within the district. Within the MLSS framework, accommodations and supports can be identified and provided to the student on the ELP Screener, while the Special Education referral takes place.

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[3] https://dpi.wi.gov/sped/program/english-learners

Use of Standard Accommodations

The standard WIDA accommodations listed in the Accessibility and Accommodations Manual can be chosen for a student, should their placement within a MLSS tier warrant it. <u>As there is a 30 day limit to make an EL Identification and provide services, a proper ELP screening with appropriate accommodations can't wait just because a student is within a Special Education referral process.</u>

Use of Non-Standard Accommodations

WIDA validates its assessments to ensure that appropriate use of accommodations produces a valid and reliable measure of a student's ELP. Non-standard accommodations may or may not impact the validity and reliability of the WIDA assessments. This can make assessing students with some disabilities challenging, as their needs may not be fully met with the official accommodations.

The first question staff should ask is whether or not the proposed accommodation impacts what is being tested. Often this may not - for example, a student with significant visual impairments may use a form of magnification that's not listed, but this may not impact what's being tested. Reading the Reading domain aloud for a student, on the other hand, changes it from a Reading test to a Listening test.

When experimenting with a non-standard accommodation to meet a unique student need, a plan to assess the functionality of the accommodation must be in place. Is it meeting the student's needs? Does it seem to be impacting the construct of what's being tested? Do you trust that the test is still measuring what the student knows and can do in English, or has the accommodation helped hide the student's true proficiency in English?

A second concern is whether the test content is exposed to students or staff not involved in testing. Projecting content onto a white board for a student with visual impairments may be fine if the student is alone in the classroom with a TA, but it would not be ok in a room with other students or staff in it. The WIDA assessments are secure test instruments containing copyrighted intellectual property. The need to keep test content secure must be considered when coming up with creative accommodations for students with unique needs.

Please reach out to experts on ELs and accommodations in the district and at DPI if you need help getting students the supports they need to fully access test content.

Frequent Breaks/Multiple Day Testing

WIDA allows for frequent breaks and multi-day testing. For students with disabilities, these can be used as needed.

Within the 30 day window to identify ELs, time can be taken to let them adjust to the new school and environment, and determine the supports needed to ensure an accurate measure of the student's English proficiency. The ELP assessment does not need to be administered in one day, and it is permissible to pause it for students who may need more breaks or time between domains.

Early Domain Termination

Our federal requirements are to assess ELs in the four domains of Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking. These scores are combined to produce an overall composite ELP score, which is used as the measure of a student's English proficiency.

We are also required to use valid and reliable test instruments. For a test instrument to be valid and reliable, enough questions must be answered to produce a baseline score. All standardized assessments have what is called "attemptedness criteria", which specifies the number of questions that must be answered before it can be considered a valid test. For the WIDA Screeners and ACCESS, this is one folder of items in each of the Listening and Reading domains, (after the first folder of intro items, which aren't scored) and an utterance or a visible mark for Speaking and Writing.

If a student makes it this far in any domain, they qualify for the lowest score in that domain. If they reach that in all four domains, they receive a minimal overall composite score.

The WIDA ELP assessments are technically untimed, but we recommend ending a domain once a student has met the attemptedness criteria and is unable to continue to produce scorable work. Students need to be given the opportunity to show what they know and can do, but extending test times too long past that point can result in frustration and disengagement.

EL staff should understand that students are not required to complete the whole domain, and should have a process for identifying students who are no longer able to produce scorable content. Once a student reaches the limit of what they can do, the domain can be terminated and the student can move on. Prior to this, however, it must be determined that the student has full access to the test, and is not in need of any other accommodations.

For paper testing, domains can be terminated and the test scored at any point. For Online testing, testing coordinators will need to contact DRC to have them close a domain and move the test to the next one. (See the WIDA Screener Manual for more information.) Districts should have a process to identify students who need a domain terminated, and a way to efficiently move them on to the next domain to ensure that testing can be completed within 30 days.

Waiving a Domain

In rare occasions, a student may have a disability which precludes them from being assessed in a domain. A student who is profoundly deaf, e.g., will not be able to meaningfully participate in the Listening domain.

We have a federal requirement to assess in all four domains, but also a requirement to identify students precluded from being assessed in a domain, waive that domain, and calculate a composite score which accounts for the missing domain. This is only for students with disabilities which preclude assessment in a domain. It is not for students who miss domains for other reasons.

To be clear, there is no provision for exempting a student from an ELP assessment, should they be identified as needing screening. Even students with the most significant disabilities must be assessed, should they be identified as needing ELP screening. At the present time this remains a challenge, but WIDA is working on an Alternate ELP Screener, with a planned release date in 2023-24.

Students for whom a domain is waived can have the remaining domains averaged to produce a composite score. Please reach out to staff at DPI if you have questions about this, or would like to explore more accurate ways to calculate overall composites with missing domains.

If a domain is waived for a student on a paper ELP Screener, you may simply move on to the next section. If a domain is to be waived while administering the WIDA Screener Online, you will need to reach out to DRC and request that the student be moved on to the next domain.

Final Decisions

A final EL determination should be made as described in Chapter 3 of the EL Policy Handbook. We're required to have a uniform process for all students, regardless of disability status. This determination is based on ELP screener information, but may include other measures of student proficiency.

For students with disabilities, these other measures can be important to fully understand how they engage with English. Even if a student does not score in the borderline range, administration of a Multiple Indicator Protocol (MIP - see Chapter 15) can be informative for both EL and Special Education staff. DPI recommends using this tool in the case that a domain was waived, to provide secondary information to improve the understanding of that student's strengths and challenges.

Addressing Placement Concerns

Identifying ELs can be challenging, regardless of students' disability status. This is particularly true when assessing very young children. For this reason, DPI created a procedure for correcting misidentifications (see Chapter 4 in our EL Policy Handbook). We need to carefully balance students' civil rights with the need to ensure that identifications are made timely and correctly.

If proper identification procedures haven't been followed, the first step is to rectify those issues. These can include things like students not receiving appropriate accommodations and supports on ELP assessments, or identification steps not being followed in order.

If the proper identification procedure was followed but there are still concerns about the student's placement, most paths in Chapter 4 start with administration of a MIP to assess how the student is using English in the classroom. Please note that the MIP only requires students demonstrate proficiency in three of the four domains, which makes it ideal for accommodating many disabilities. This provides a structure to focus on the student's use of English, accommodated or not, separate from their mastery of content.

Civil rights obligations require that students be properly identified when in need of services. This identification can change at a later date due to improved information about the student. Districts should ensure that they have a process to rectify improper placement, and this is particularly important for students who have disabilities which might have impacted their initial screening and placement.