

August 2008
English Language Learning – Talking Points – Q & A for School Districts

Q. Why were English Language Learners (ELLs) required to take a new test in 2008?

A. Illinois was informed by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) during the fall of 2007 that IMAGE, the alternative test that ELLs previously had taken, did not meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Illinois had to change from having our ELL students take IMAGE to having them take ISAT/PSAE with accommodations. If that change had not been made in order to bring the testing system into compliance with NCLB, our schools faced possible federal sanctions.

Q. What would federal sanctions have involved?

A. Federal sanctions could have resulted in a loss of federal funds and/or loss of flexibility for schools. For instance, Illinois would not have been eligible for the Differentiated Accountability pilot project.

Q. What were the 2008 testing options for ELL students?

A. For 2008, ELL students took the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) in grades 3-8 or the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) in grade 11. Accommodations were provided to ELL students if their teachers and test administrators believed they were appropriate.

Q. Why couldn't ELL students be excused from testing in 2008?

A. Under NCLB all students must be assessed annually in reading, mathematics and science in the appropriate grades. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) made several requests to the federal government for flexibility in testing the ELL students in 2008, but all of these requests were rejected.

Q. Why was the change in testing made mid-school year when there was little opportunity for teachers and students to prepare for a new ELL test?

A. ISBE had been working with the USDE to make adjustments that would bring the IMAGE test into alignment as required by NCLB. However, in the fall of 2007 the federal government informed ISBE that these adjustments were not acceptable, and in order to avoid federal sanctions we would instead have to test our ELL students with the ISAT/PSAE with accommodations.

Q. Will the change to a new test affect 2008 performance for ELL students?

A. Because ELL students were required to take a test that was unfamiliar, it would be difficult for us to compare this year's performance with past years. We may see a difference in performance when compared with previous years. Any such drop in the performance of ELL students should not be viewed as a reflection on these students or their teachers.

Q. If there is a decline in scores for the ELL subgroup, will this cause our school or district to not make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)?

A. If the ELL subgroup does not make AYP in performance, there are several flexibilities that can be applied such as confidence intervals and safe harbor. If neither of those result in the subgroup making AYP, then it would impact the school and district AYP status.

Q. What is being done to prepare for the 2009 test cycle and beyond?

A. In consultation with national experts, ISBE is developing a Five-Year Assessment Plan for ELL students. Accommodations will continue next year, based on what worked best for students. In addition, ISBE will continue efforts to modify ISAT and PSAE for our ELL students, which includes translations and modifications to eliminate unnecessary complex language, as well as additional visual and graphic support.