

Gifted and Talented English Language Learners (ELLs)

217<sup>th</sup> Legislature, Assembly No. 4175



STATE OF NEW JERSEY  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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#### Introduction

On June 20, 2017, the State of New Jersey 217<sup>th</sup> Legislature passed legislation that requires the Commissioner of Education to develop guidance on identifying English Language Learners (ELLs) for gifted and talented (G&T) programs. The legislation was introduced in order to ensure that ELLs are appropriately identified and have access to participate in gifted and talented programs.

#### What Policy Supports Gifted ELLs?

New Jersey regulations (N.J.A.C. 6A:8-1.1) define gifted and talented students as: *students who possess or demonstrate high levels of ability in one or more content areas when compared to their chronological peers in the local school district and who require modifications of their educational program if they are to achieve in accordance with their capabilities.* This definition includes students in grades K-12.

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, in its January 7, 2015 [Dear Colleague Letter](#) clearly states that ELLs cannot be excluded from gifted programs due to their lack of English proficiency (p. 21).

#### How Should ELLs Be Identified for Gifted and Talented Programs?

Research suggests that qualitative and quantitative measures should be used for identification of ELLs who are gifted and talented (Garcia, 1994), as well as multiple criteria which may include: ethnographic assessment procedures, dynamic assessments (the student is given the opportunity to transfer newly acquired skills to novel situations), portfolios, test scores in native language and English, English language proficiency tests, teacher observation, behavioral checklists, previous school performance, parent interviews, writing samples, rating scales, samples of creativity, and input from the cultural group of which the student identifies (Castellano, 1994; Garcia, 1994; Bernal & Reyna, 1974). The assessments must be valid and reliable for this population.

Additionally, all assessments and checklists used to evaluate giftedness of an ELL must consider cultural and linguistic competencies. Using multiple sources of data including: authentic assessment, observing students, in addition to intelligence tests are recommended (Castellano;

Johnsen, 1999; Sarouphim, 2002). All students should be screened for giftedness to ensure equal opportunity.

Both qualitative and quantitative measures should be used and the results triangulated in the identification of G&T students. Academic grades should not be the only measure.

Student profiles that consider language needs work well. However, if a school district is already using a matrix to identify giftedness, it can enhance the matrix to include language as well.

Tests to consider for identifying gifted ELLs:

- DISCOVER (Discovering Strengths and Capabilities while Observing Varied Ethnic Responses)
- Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT)-3
- Cognitive Abilities Test (CoGAT)
- Iowa
- Raven's Progressive Matrices
- Otis-Lennon School Ability Test
- Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)
- Renzulli Scale
- Torrence Test
- Teacher rating scales
- Parent rating scales

ELL and gifted teachers need to work collaboratively to determine how best to match the ELL needs to the gifted program. The gifted services are advanced learning opportunities that are provided on student data.

### What Are Some Potential Challenges of Identifying Gifted ELLs?

The following are some challenges or obstacles that may be faced when attempting to identify gifted ELLs:

**Tests selected for identification of gifted students may not be appropriate for ELLs given the specific set of circumstances. Criteria for selecting gifted students may include an over-reliance on objective versus subjective measures.** IQ and performance on standardized tests should not be the only factor in determining giftedness. When selecting identification instruments/procedures, districts must consider cultural and linguistic competencies. Many minority language children have special talents that are valued within their own cultures.

Unfortunately, these students are often not recognized as gifted and talented. No single trait identifies giftedness.

For some school districts in New Jersey, the identification process for gifted services some NJ is still heavily weighted in favor of vocabulary-laden tests, including IQ and other standardized tests. Additionally, standardized tests that are used for identification purposes are often administered in English, and there may be a disconnect between the students' English verbal skills and his/her native language. A student's native language should not deny him or her access to gifted programs. If test scores are the primary method of identifying students for gifted services, English learners are at a serious disadvantage.

Many of these standardized tests have not been normed on English learners, thus comparisons are not valid nor reliable. In addition, lack of fluency in English is often mistakenly equated with lack of ability in higher order and critical thinking skills. If standardized tests are used, an item analysis should be completed in order to identify questions that are culturally and linguistically biased. Another practice sometimes used in identification for special education services is to assess the child in English first but then restate the questions missed in the child's first language. Although the norms cannot be used to interpret the test, the examiner will have a better idea of what the child knows in both languages, not just English. This process has been used with the Bilingual Verbal Abilities Tests (BVAT).

Whenever possible and appropriate, it is desirable to include both achievement and cognitive ability measures when identifying gifted students. However, achievement assessments will be difficult without accommodations for ELL students.

**There may be a lack of clarity on how to address the needs of gifted ELL students.** ELLs are a subset of the gifted population that is often overlooked and/or underserved; research indicates that the process of second language acquisition is long, complex and developmental. Under the current Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a newly arrived student with little English has five years to achieve a passing score on the English Proficiency test. One of the traits of a gifted English learner could be the rate of second language acquisition. Oftentimes, gifted ELs acquire a second (or third) language at a faster rate than their home language peers. However, it is critical to realize that even though they may pass the English Language Proficiency, there may still be gaps in academic vocabulary and advanced linguistic constructions. These gaps may continue to impact their performance on standardized tests customarily used and developed for English speakers to identify giftedness. Therefore, multiple sources of data should continue to be used.

**Parents may not understand the information provided to them about such programs.**

Parents should be notified about opportunities to participate gifted and talented programs in their native language. Parents may believe gifted programs are a “label” and not understand the full benefit of the programs. Gaining support from parents of ELL students and ensuring parents are well-informed about the responsibilities of the district to facilitate the needs of gifted students is critical.

Other challenges may include untrained teachers who are not aware of how to identify gifted ELLs, language and cultural biases that staff members may have, trauma of relocation or immigration, and economic status.

For these reasons, multiple criteria must be established in order to identify English learners who may also be gifted learners.

**What Professional Development and Collaboration Among Teachers Is Needed?**

- All teachers and administrators should receive professional development in second language acquisition, characteristics of gifted ELLs, and identification of gifted ELLs regardless of first language or second language ability. School administrators are critical in accessing this training for their staff.
- Teachers and school staff should gather information from parents that might indicate giftedness.
- All G&T staff (including guidance counselors and school support personnel)) should be trained in working with ELLs.

Multiple measures should be used in identifying gifted ELLs in order to appropriately select this student group to participate in gifted programs. In addition, all school district staff involved in the selection and identification of multiple measures for identifying gifted and talented ELLs, including assessments that are appropriate for ELLs. Staff should also review accommodations for standardized tests for ELLs to be sure language issues are considered in scoring. Staff administering these measures with language accommodations for the assessment and implement these where appropriate. Staff should be provided with professional development in this area so as to not to overlook any potential gifted ELLs.

**(An example from a local district)**

When English only assessments had been used, bilingual students had been under-served and/or excluded from G & T services. To correct this inequity, the G & T Coordinator and

Bilingual/ESL World Language Supervisor collaborated to determine methods to appropriately assess the abilities of possible candidates.

Following current theory in identification of gifted and talented English Language Learners, multiple criteria screening procedures were established. Initially, an item analysis of current assessment tools was conducted to determine bias items. After reviewing the test scores of the bilingual candidates, these bias items were not factored into the total battery. These scores were then compared to the district standard for eligibility. After consultation with the bilingual psychologist, available resources of valid cognitive measurements for bilingual students were researched and field-tested. Students were tested in both languages, verbally and non-verbally. A checklist of student behavior associated with giftedness was developed and distributed to all teachers (including bilingual and ESL teachers) for completion. Using the checklist and scores on the adapted assessments a local standard to identify possible gifted and talented candidates was established. As a result, a diversified bilingual assessment protocol was developed to identify gifted & talented bilingual students.

## References

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