



Massachusetts Association of Teachers of Speakers of Other Languages

October 17, 2011

Mitchell D. Chester
Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

Dear Commissioner Chester:

The Massachusetts Association of Teachers of Speakers of Other Languages (MATSOL) supports the submission of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s (DESE) ESEA Flexibility Application for the benefit of all students in the Commonwealth and most specifically for the benefit of English language learners (ELLs), the fastest growing and most vulnerable population of students in the Massachusetts Public Schools. MATSOL represents nearly a thousand educators throughout the Commonwealth who are employed in K-12 schools, Institutes of Higher Education, Adult Learning Centers, the workplace, and non-profit organizations, as well as the families of ELLs. Our primary mission is to advocate for the educational achievement and opportunities of ELLs and to provide professional development and support for all educators who serve ELLs.

OVERVIEW

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has held the nation’s schools and school districts accountable for the content-area achievement of all students. The implementation of standardized assessment revealed a large achievement gap between ELLs and fully English proficient students. Although ELLs in Massachusetts schools score higher than ELLs in most states on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) show large gaps between the achievement of ELLs and the achievement of fully English proficient students. Differences in achievement as measured by MCAS combined with the enormous discrepancy in rates of high school graduation (81% fully English proficient students as compared to 53% of ELLs) (English Language Learners Sub-Committee of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Committee on the Proficiency Gap, 2009) have resulted in focused attention to improve instruction and educational opportunities for ELLs in Massachusetts schools. Thus, MCAS has been instrumental in bringing attention to the needs of ELLs in Massachusetts schools. The high-stakes nature of the MCAS for students, however, has resulted in narrowed curricula for ELLs and has placed undue burden on ELLs who are in the process of learning English and content to demonstrate proficiency on an assessment that was designed for fully English proficient students and therefore lacks reliability for ELLs.

With the goal of ensuring educational rigor and accountability that will improve educational opportunities for ELLs in Massachusetts, MATSOL respectfully submits the following recommendations for the ESEA Flexibility application. These recommendations are consistent with the recommendations of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), a global education association, and our affiliate.

1. USE OF APPROPRIATE, VALID, AND RELIABLE ASSESSMENTS FOR ELLS

MCAS results have been valuable in bringing attention to the achievement gap between ELLs and fully English proficient students, and districts, schools, educational leaders and classroom teachers must be held accountable for ensuring steady progress of ELLs in content-area understanding and English



Massachusetts Association of Teachers of Speakers of Other Languages

language proficiency. However, the MCAS is an unreliable measure for measuring this progress. Massachusetts' accountability system must be appropriate, valid and reliable for assessing ELLs.

a. Incorporate English Language Proficiency Assessment with Academic Assessments for Accountability Purposes.

The MEPA provides a more reliable measure of growth in English language proficiency. WIDA offers ACCESS (an assessment of academic content-area language for ELLs), which eventually could replace MEPA. Massachusetts should have the flexibility to "incorporate English language proficiency level as a weighted factor into ESEA accountability provisions for content-area achievement for ELLs. For accountability purposes, both the language proficiency assessment and academic assessments should be taken into consideration and weighed according to each *ELL's+ level of language proficiency" (TESOL, 2011, p. 2). More weight should be given to language proficiency assessment results for ELLs with beginning levels of proficiency, and gradually as an ELL develops English language proficiency, the weighting can shift to content-area assessments (p. 2).

b. Support the Use of Multiple Assessment Measures

In addition to standardized testing that multiple measures be used "to assess and report the progress of ELLs, such as curriculum-based, performance-based and holistic assessments using scoring guides, checklists and rubrics" (TESOL, 2011, p. 3). c. Assess Content-Area Achievement in Two Languages Where Appropriate

Districts that provide bilingual education (two-way or transitional) should be allowed to assess content-area achievement of ELLs in both languages.

2. USE A GROWTH MODEL TO MEASURE THE PROGRESS OF ELLS

a. Code Reclassified ELLs as Formerly Limited English Proficient (FLEP) in SIMS data

ELLs should also be accurately labeled as FLEP throughout their academic years so that districts can more accurately measure the long-term growth of ELLs. It is critical to know how well former ELLs, who have been reclassified as fully English proficient fare on standardized measures of achievement, such as the MCAS.

b. Measure Growth of Individual ELLs Over Time

"Incorporate individual ELL's growth over time towards proficiency on state content assessments as a factor in accountability provisions (e.g., a growth model)" (TESOL, 2011, p. 2).

3. ENSURE THAT ELLS ARE TAUGHT BY TEACHERS WHO ARE PREPARED

a. ELL Licensure Must Depend on the Completion of An Approved Program

Passing the ELL MTEL, alone, is insufficient. English as a second language (ESL) should be considered a core academic subject and "the same standards should apply the same requirements to ESL educators as to other teachers of core academic content areas" (TESOL, 2011, p. 3).

b. All Content-Area Teachers Who Provide Instruction to ELLs Must Be Prepared

All content-area teachers who provide instruction to ELLs at varying proficiency levels must complete rigorous pre- and in-service preparation that prepares them to effectively teach ELLs, including second language acquisition, cultural influences on learning, making content accessible, appropriate assessment (content and language), developing academic language, teaching reading and writing.



Massachusetts Association of Teachers of Speakers of Other Languages

4. STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATION TO ELL PARENTS

Parental communication is a critical component in any plan to improve equity for ELL populations. Meaningful communication with families of ELLs necessitates culturally response outreach to and communication with families in their first languages.

5. PROVIDE FLEXIBILITY WITH REGARD TO PROGRAM MODELS

One size does not fit all students. Program choice, along with monitoring to ensure program quality and effectiveness is central to providing an equitable education to ELLs.

6. ENSURE APPROPRIATE FUNDING FOR ELL PROGRAMS

There are discussions related to reauthorization of ESEA that include bills related to flexibility with use of different educational funding streams. ELL programs have historically and continue to suffer from lack adequate funding for all program components. The Department of Justice has cited several areas where even basic programmatic components are not in place in Massachusetts. Any funding allocated for English language learner programs must be specifically earmarked for them, and not be included in any flexibility exception related to the use of ESEA funding lines outside their intended purpose. The language regarding the use of Title I and Title II funds should specifically target ELL programming, so that necessary funding is available at every level of ELL education.

In order to accomplish these goals, and thus ensure educational rigor and appropriate accountability, the Massachusetts Office of English Language Acquisition and Academic Achievement must have sufficient resources to work with districts throughout the Commonwealth.

MATSOL will submit more feedback to the DESE as we continue to receive and process input from our membership.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of MATSOL,

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President

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