Introduction

In recent years, Massachusetts has experienced a steady increase in the number and diversity of students identified as English Language Learners (ELLs), especially in Boston and Gateway Cities. While some ELLs thrive academically, this student group has, on average, chronically underperformed against grade level benchmarks, even falling behind the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s designation of “high needs students” (see Table I). State efforts to close the proficiency gap, through new standards and aligned assessments, and educator preparation and professional development, will undoubtedly lead to changes in school- and district-level practice. This issue brief examines recent policy developments and discusses the implications for the growing populations of ELLs.

Table I. Percentage of students, in all tested grade levels, scoring proficient or higher on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), 2011-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>ELLs</th>
<th>High needs students</th>
<th>All students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td></td>
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<td>English Language Arts</td>
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<td>Science /Tech/Engineering</td>
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Policy Developments

Standards and assessments

To be academically successful, ELLs must accomplish two goals: 1) language proficiency in English; and 2) achievement in grade-level subject matter across the curriculum. A student’s ability to learn necessary content may be compromised by an underdeveloped sense of English academic language, however. Students with limited English proficiency may consequently underperform on assessments and achieve at levels that are more reflective of fluency than content knowledge. Recent research has shown that students “not sufficiently proficient in English to be able to benefit adequately from regular classroom instruction and demonstrate their knowledge and abilities using English” are one of the fastest-growing student groups. It has become imperative that assessments establish access and accommodation strategies to address these students’ specific linguistic capacities and needs.

A recent technical review by the U.S. Department of Education of the two assessment consortia, Smarter Balanced and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), determined that both consortia should focus more on the unique needs of ELLs. PARCC has released draft policies on accessibility and accommodations, which seek to ensure that assessments provide valid results for all participating students, including ELLs, in mathematics and ELA/literacy. In regards to the English language proficiency assessment, Massachusetts has now formally joined the World-

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1 Defined as: “a student whose first language is a language other than English who is unable to perform ordinary classroom work in English,” by Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2012). Profiles Help- About the Data.
2 Defined as: “midsize urban centers that anchor regional economies around the state” by MassINC. (2013). About Gateway Cities.
3 Defined as: an unduplicated count of all students in a school or district belonging to at least one of the following individual subgroups: students with disabilities, ELL and Former ELL students, low income students (eligible for free/reduced price school lunch),” by Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2012). Profiles Help- About the Data.
Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) consortium, which provides a common set of English language development standards and assessments supporting academic language development for ELL students. Through doing so, Massachusetts has adopted new standards and a new assessment for ELLs called ACCESS, implemented for the first time during the 2012-13 school year.\footnote{Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2012). 2012 MCAS Results by Subgroup by Grade and Subject. Retrieved from: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mcas/subgroups2.aspx?linkid=25&orgcode=00000000&code=2012&orgtypecode=0&.} Moving forward, best practice dictates aligning the new English language proficiency assessment with the new assessments that Massachusetts will ultimately adopt.

**Educator preparation and professional development**

Effective educators should be trained in how to work with an increasingly diverse student body, including English Language Learners. However, a Rennie Center report on ELLs noted that the current dearth of teachers trained in Sheltered English Immersion (SEI), instructional approaches designed to make academic content accessible to ELLs, will be an ongoing problem unless all teaching candidates participate in SEI training as a step toward certification.\footnote{Ibid, p. 13.} In 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) launched Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners (RETELL), an initiative aimed at ensuring that every core academic teacher completes SEI training, and thus acquires the knowledge and skills to support English language development and make classroom content accessible to ELLs.\footnote{U.S. Department of Education. (2012). Race to the Top Technical Review. Retrieved from: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-assessment/performance.html.} Between 2012 and 2016, approximately 26,000 core academic teachers, and the administrators who evaluate them, will be required to complete SEI training leading to an SEI Endorsement. The Endorsement will be required in order to renew, extend, or advance their licenses. After July 1, 2016, all core academic teachers instructing ELLs and their administrators will be required to possess the SEI Endorsement within one year of assignment to a classroom with an ELL. This new requirement aligns with research which cites the need for both classroom teachers and school leaders to be trained in SEI, to cultivate a pipeline of leaders for ELL programs who can work across classrooms as coaches, specialists, and coordinators.\footnote{Policy Analysis for California Education, Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (May 2011). The Road Ahead for State Assessments. MA. P. 23.}

### To obtain an SEI endorsement, educators and administrators must:

- Complete an SEI course (the length of the course taken will depend upon the educator’s prior SEI training); or
- Pass an ESE approved SEI Massachusetts Test Educator Licensure (MTEL) test; or
- Hold a bachelor's degree in a major approved by ESE; or
- Have other ESE approved graduate level training that meets required standards; or
- Hold an English as a Second Language or English Language Learners educator license.

### Educator preparation programs must:

- Ensure that all of their programs leading to licensure for core academic teachers, and for principal/assistant principal or supervisor/director licensure, include training leading to an SEI Endorsement.\footnote{Par合伙 for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). (2013). PARCC Accessibility Features and Accommodations Manual. Retrieved from: http://www.parcconline.org/parcc-accessibility-features-and-accommodations-manual.}

**Conclusion**

Recognizing the close relationship between content knowledge and language proficiency, educators should be provided with the tools and knowledge to support students’ development in each of these areas. Furthermore, any accommodations for new assessments must take into account the diverse backgrounds and languages of ELLs, and be aligned with tests of language proficiency.\footnote{Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2012). Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners (RETELL). Retrieved from: http://www.doe.mass.edu/retell/.} As new policies drive school- and district-level changes to teaching and learning, districts and the state must be attentive to the impact on ELLs if we hope to close the proficiency gap for these students.

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