



NJTESOL/NJBE



New Jersey Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages/New Jersey Bilingual Educators, Incorporated

A professional organization for those concerned with the teaching of English as a Second Language,
Bilingual Education, and Standard English as a Second Dialect

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June 5, 2010

Dear Commissioner Schundler:

As an organization representing over 1200 ESL and bilingual teachers and 64,000 English Language Learners (ELLs) in New Jersey, NJTESOL-NJBE is writing to request your immediate attention to the urgent issue associated with the results of the Alternate High School Assessment (AHSA) as it relates to the Grade 12 ELLs. We are asking for the disaggregation of the data to know how many of the 4,500 students who have not passed the AHSA or HSPA are in the ELL subgroup.

Although some have defined the past SRA as a “back door” to a high school diploma, we have seen the administration of this process as a legitimate alternate assessment for students who are learning English as a Second (or third) Language. The majority of these students have just entered our schools within the last three years. They may not have perfected their English; however, they are capable and knowledgeable young men and women. Many of these students continue their education and English language development at our numerous Community Colleges which have outstanding ESL programs. For those who do not continue on in college, having a high school diploma is the difference between a higher paying job and working at the minimum wage. The majority of these students have met all of the other graduation requirements. Therefore, this assessment puts the possibility of a high school diploma for these students in jeopardy. Many of their ESL teachers have expressed great surprise, tremendous frustration and heartbreak for these students. Hopefully, all districts will appeal the results for these students and the readers of the appeals will have an understanding of the second language acquisition process.

In the meantime, we strongly urge the NJ Department of Education to revisit the whole process for this specialized population since the majority of ELLs have fallen into the AHSA pool. As another targeted subgroup, many students with special needs do not have to complete the AHSA process as they are exempt from passing the HSPA according to their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Therefore, ELLs are the only subgroup who must go through this process without appropriate accommodations. Using a bilingual dictionary is hardly the only appropriate accommodation needed when faced with rigorous academic language. This also raises the question of the appropriateness of the computer tutorial for ELLs.

Research has indicated that ELLs improve their comprehension when they have received direct instruction of vocabulary, have the requisite background knowledge (cultural and linguistic) and have an opportunity to orally practice using academic language. In order to succeed on the Performance Assessment Tasks (PATs), ELLs need this targeted instruction from teachers who are able to scaffold the information and build the requisite knowledge. Several of the administered PATs were culturally and linguistically biased against ELLs as noted in one student’s testimony at the Assembly Education Committee hearing.

As an organization who advocates for ELLs, NJTESOL-NJBE requests the following actions:

- 1) **Allow for this year to be a pilot year for English Language Learners**, so that the NJDOE can collect data to determine the impact of the new scoring criteria and administration process on the ELL population.
- 2) If this does not happen, then **teachers with expertise in second language acquisition and experience in working with high school ELLs should be included in creating and planning the tutorial**. In all honesty, these students need interaction with real people and not a computer in order to acquire the needed vocabulary and skills.
- 3) Reconvene the SRA Advisory group to review the problems with this year's process and make recommendations for a revised process for 2010-11. Members of the group must **include educators with expertise and experience in second language acquisition and administration of the AHSA**.

NJTESOL-NJBE is available to assist in addressing this critical situation. Please do not hesitate to contact me personally, if you have any further questions or concerns, 732-841-7225.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Franks
Past-president
NJTESOL-NJBE

CC: Dr. Willa Spicer, Deputy Commissioner
Josephine Hernandez, State Board of Education, President
Mary Jane Kurabinski, Director, Language Arts Literacy
Sandra Alberti, Director, Math and Science
Honorable Patrick Diegnan, Chair of the Assembly Education Committee
Honorable M. Teresa Ruiz, Chair of the Senate Education Committee