

Chapter 3:

Summary of Findings

This study's goal has been to provide information that will enable sound judgments to be made about how best to expand or modify the current assessment system for limited English proficient students. The findings of the study, offered in response to the two main questions that guided the research, are given below.

Study Question 1:

Should Spanish versions of TAAS be added at Grades 7 and 8?

Finding:

The addition of TAAS tests in Spanish at Grades 7 and 8 is not advisable at this time.

Study Question 2:

Should any other changes to the assessment system be made for Spanish-speaking LEP students or LEP students with a primary language other than Spanish?

Findings:

Limiting TAAS exemptions to the first year in U.S. schools is not advisable. The exemption policy should be expanded to allow LEP students for whom a primary language assessment is unavailable or inappropriate more time to acquire the language proficiency needed to demonstrate their academic skills in a valid, reliable, and equitable manner on TAAS.

The RPTE provides an appropriate way to include all LEP students in the assessment system who are not yet taking TAAS in English.

Addition of TAAS in Spanish at Grades 7 and 8

The activities undertaken in this study—from seeking the advice of national experts and obtaining input from Texas professionals to

examining the literature that addresses the role of native language assessments in state assessment systems — suggest that assessments in Spanish are inadequate accountability measures for students whose academic instruction is delivered in English. Assessments in Spanish require students to read at grade level in Spanish and know the Spanish academic terminology associated with that grade's knowledge and skills, as well as the rules of Spanish grammar and usage if a writing test is administered. If ESL students, whose instruction is in English rather than Spanish, are required to take TAAS in Spanish, they will be required to know certain material that they were not required to learn. Because Spanish TAAS results are used in the accountability rating system, ESL teachers will be held accountable for teaching content that requires knowledge of a language they may not know.

On the other hand, Spanish-version assessments can be quite useful tools for measuring the learning of students who receive academic instruction in Spanish, as is the case in bilingual education programs. During the time these students cannot be assessed appropriately in English, Spanish-version tests allow their academic progress in reading, writing, and mathematics to be measured and included in state assessment data. The decision, then, of whether to add Spanish-version tests in Grades 7 and 8 depends largely on determining how many students are in bilingual education programs at those grades and whether the numbers of students are sufficient to justify the cost of test development. Based on data from the spring 2000 TAAS administration, 445 Spanish-speaking students in Grade 7 and 235 Spanish-speaking students in Grade 8 were in bilingual programs. Statewide, 127 of these 7th graders and 72 of these 8th graders received a LEP exemption from TAAS. These figures indicate that currently there are few students for whom Spanish-version tests would be appropriate.

Equity across language groups is another factor that was weighed in examining whether it was advisable to add Spanish-version tests at Grades 7 and 8. Although more than 90 percent of the state's LEP students are Spanish-speaking, many other language groups are also represented.

Because the number of Spanish-speaking students in bilingual programs is so small at these grades, there was need to examine whether there were similar numbers of bilingual program participants in any other language groups who would also benefit from primary language assessments. According to spring 2000 TAAS data, the bilingual participation in Grades 3 through 8 of students whose primary language was other than Spanish, as indicated by ethnicity codes other than Hispanic, did not exceed 150 students statewide in any grade. Further, statewide, fewer than 30 non-Spanish-speaking students identified as participating in a bilingual program received a LEP exemption in any grade. These numbers, which represent all the non-Spanish language groups combined, are very small. However, given the diversity of languages spoken by LEP students in Texas and the potential for change in demographics, proposals to add tests in other languages must always take into careful account the issue of equity.

Besides the fact that there are few students in bilingual education programs in Grades 7 and 8 who would currently benefit from Spanish versions of TAAS, bilingual educators have mixed views about whether adding Spanish versions at these grades would have a positive or a negative impact on instruction. Some bilingual educators believe that having TAAS in Spanish would lead to more academic instruction in Spanish, which would make academic content more comprehensible to students who are still struggling to understand English. Other bilingual educators support a strong Spanish-language component in the elementary grades but advocate an ESL approach at the higher grades to ensure that Spanish-speaking LEP students are afforded the educational experiences to develop the strong academic skills in English needed in high school. With these differing views and the need for students to be fluent in English to meet high school course and testing requirements, a clear case cannot be made at this time that assessment in Spanish at Grades 7 and 8 will better prepare students to meet graduation requirements. In addition, if Spanish TAAS tests are added at Grades 7 and 8, the fact that Spanish versions are not available at Grades 9 and 10 will need to be

addressed because TAAS II will introduce annual assessments at these grades.

TAAS Exemptions

During the course of this study, much concern was expressed about limiting TAAS exemptions to one year. No support from the field could be found to suggest that if quality instruction is delivered, LEP students who start a school year knowing no English can end the year understanding enough English to demonstrate their academic skills reliably on a test written for mainstream English speakers. In order for the Texas assessment system to fulfill its purpose, the assessment results must be meaningful to schools and meet the standards of validity and reliability required for educational testing. According to the statewide survey administered for this study, most respondents believe that it takes at least three years for most LEP students to become proficient enough in English to demonstrate their academic progress meaningfully on a standardized test like TAAS.

Suitability of the RPTE

During this study educators have echoed the need to include all students in appropriate assessments. The solution that they have offered repeatedly is to use the RPTE to measure LEP students' academic progress in reading until they are ready to be assessed with TAAS in English. From an instructional standpoint, the RPTE will provide information, both at the local and state levels, about the progress LEP students are making in acquiring the reading skills they will need for academic success when they transition to mainstream instructional settings. From an assessment standpoint, the RPTE will provide information to help determine when LEP students can read English well enough to participate meaningfully in TAAS in English.

The RPTE and TAAS reading tests form a sequential and cohesive system of measurement. The RPTE measures three levels of proficiency: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. These levels precede the level of proficiency needed to

read and understand TAAS in English. The RPTE provides information about both how much English students can understand and how well they are developing the reading skills that the TEKS require Texas students to be taught annually.

Performance at the advanced level on the RPTE indicates that the effect of the acquisition of English on a LEP student's ability to read and understand grade-level texts in English is now minimal. A rating of advanced on the RPTE is not intended to predict a passing score on TAAS. It is intended, however, to indicate to schools that with another year of instruction students should be ready for the level of reading required for TAAS. In the spring 2000 RPTE administration, between half and two-thirds of the LEP students who had been in U.S. schools for three or more years achieved a rating of advanced on the RPTE.

The use of the RPTE in the Texas assessment system will allow all LEP students to participate in a valid and reliable assessment of their progress until TAAS in English is deemed appropriate. LEP students in Texas, as summarized below, all stand to benefit from this assessment.

LEP students in Grades 3 through 6 who take TAAS in Spanish. In spring 2000, this number totaled almost 40,000. Approximately 95 percent of these students were identified as participating in a bilingual program.

Other Spanish-speaking LEP students in Grades 3 through 8. In spring 2000, almost 13,000 students in Grades 3 through 6 and 8,000 additional students in Grades 7 and 8 received LEP exemptions from TAAS. Of these students almost 15,000 were reported as participating in an ESL program.

LEP students in Grades 3 through 8 whose primary language is other than Spanish. In spring 2000, the number of these students who received a LEP exemption was about 4,000. About 70 of these students were identified as participating in a bilingual program. The others were in an ESL program.

LEP students at the exit level. These students are not eligible for a LEP exemption but may receive a one-time postponement from the first administration of the test if they have been in U.S. schools for less than 12 months. The number of LEP students who received a postponement in spring 2000 was 952. The total number of LEP students in Grades 10, 11, and 12 as reported in PEIMS for 1999–2000 was approximately 40,000. The RPTE will allow the educational community to monitor the English acquisition and reading skills of these students as they strive to meet the exit level testing requirements.

During this study, a number of stakeholders expressed the desire for the state to develop tests in addition to the RPTE that would measure mathematics, science, etc., in a manner that takes second language acquisition into account. Such tests would allow them to monitor the progress that LEP students make in other content areas until TAAS in English is deemed appropriate. At the time of this study, however, there are several reasons why such test development would be problematic. First, the desire to add tests seems counterbalanced with a concern that LEP students already take many tests each year for purposes of statewide assessment and program placement and exit. Additionally, testing in other content areas would require a separate assessment system for LEP students, which may not be cost-effective given that (1) the number of LEP students not taking TAAS in Spanish who are also not ready for TAAS in English is relatively small and (2) the temporary nature of limited English proficiency results in most eligible students acquiring the proficiency necessary for TAAS within a few years. Such tests could also result in a lowering of the standards of achievement for LEP students, and limited English proficiency would still confound the achievement measure for some students despite attempts to keep the English on the test as simple as possible. The RPTE, while it does not assess all the academic areas, does assess reading, which is critical to long-term academic success in all subject areas. In view of the problems associated with assessing mathematics and other academic content using standardized measures, monitoring progress in these areas until students

are ready for TAAS is best handled through local assessment procedures.

The national call to include all students in appropriate assessment and accountability measures has brought the educational needs of LEP students into full focus. Texas has responded to this call by adding Spanish versions of TAAS for students receiving instruction in Spanish and implementing the RPTE, which allows for the appropriate inclusion of all LEP students in the state testing program until they are ready to take TAAS in English. What Texas learns from the use of these assessments will no doubt contribute greatly to future initiatives concerning the instruction and assessment of its LEP students.