Determining Who is an English Learner
Quick Guide to the Common Definition of English Learner Guidance

The Students

English Learners (ELs)—language-minority students whose English proficiency affects their ability to meaningfully participate and succeed in school—are expected to reach 25% of the total U.S. K-12 public school population by the year 2025. Yet how states and school districts define this population varies widely, creating inconsistent and possibly inequitable services for students who move across state or even district boundaries.

The States

States participating in any of four federally-funded assessment consortia (i.e., PARCC, Smarter Balanced, WIDA, and ELPA21) have agreed to a U.S. Department of Education stipulation to establish a “common definition of English Learner” within their consortia. Fulfilling this common definition requirement is neither simple nor straightforward because individual states vary in their policies, tools, and practices for determining which students are ELs, what specialized services they receive, and what criteria and processes are used to exit them from this status. Additionally, federal and state statutes, case law, and regulations influence requirements for K-12 public school educators. These requirements call for a carefully coordinated, multiyear effort within and across consortia member states. Such an effort needs to proceed in stages and encompass several critical decisions informed by student performance outcomes on new assessments.

The Project

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), under the sponsorship of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and in conjunction with the Understanding Language Initiative of Stanford University and the WIDA Consortium, established a cross-consortium English Language Learner Assessment Advisory Task Force in 2012 to address challenges presented by new college- and career-ready standards and assessments. The Advisory Task Force—with technical staff and leadership from the above-mentioned consortia, EL researchers and technical assistance experts, and policy advisers and other stakeholders—identified the common EL definition as a key issue.

The goal of this project is to define the key issues involved, and provide actionable guidance that consortium member states can use to move toward establishing a common EL definition in ways that are theoretically-sound, evidence-based, empirically-informed, and pragmatic to the many policy, technical, and legal issues. This includes 1) developing policy guidance and technical assistance activities to enhance state and district knowledge of critical issues; 2) identifying effective practices that can be utilized to establish a more consistent definition of ELs within and across states; and 3) disseminating research, guidance, and resources to states, school districts, assessment consortia, researchers, and advocacy associations.
The Approach

From 2012–2015, Advisory Task Force members held meetings, facilitated three national working sessions with a broad representation of national, state, and local stakeholders, and produced a series of working papers that provide guidance on key policy and technical issues in defining ELs. Two members of the Advisory Task Force, Robert Linquanti of WestEd and Gary Cook of Wisconsin Center for Education Research, produced initial guidance featuring a 4-stage framework to assist states in analyzing issues and strengthening policies and practices for defining ELs:

1) Identify a student as a potential EL;
2) Classify (confirm/disconfirm) a student as an EL;
3) Establish an “English proficient” performance standard on the state/consortium English language proficiency (ELP) test against which to assess ELs’ English language proficiency; and
4) Reclassify a student to former-EL status through the use of multiple exit criteria.

These four stages describe the basic trajectory of how a student enters, moves through, and exits EL status, and served as the basis for subsequent work. Specifically, this framework was used to organize a series of national working sessions involving states and consortia, non-consortia “stand-alone” states, and several school districts, and to produce detailed guidance documents. As such, this collaborative effort lays out a roadmap of processes, options, and recommendations for moving toward a common definition, so that efforts can be coordinated within states, as well as within and across consortia. All phases and criteria—including initial identification as potential EL, EL classification, determination of English-proficient status, and reclassification—need to be addressed, using states’ ELP and academic content assessments. To that end, CCSSO has published the following reports and guidance:

- Overview: Introductory guidance (Sept 2013) Toward a "Common Definition of English Learner": Guidance for States and State Assessment Consortia in Defining and Addressing Policy and Technical Issues and Options

In Closing

The challenge of moving toward a more consistent definition of English learner requires a multi-staged, multiyear, deliberative process. As teachers implement new, higher standards; new assessments debut; and educational leaders align systems to the expectations of college- and career-readiness, a refined understanding of English language proficiency is emerging. States and consortia are actively engaging in this process, and CCSSO is actively collaborating with them to develop guidance and supportive tools to assist them in more clearly defining an English learner.