

Evaluating and Improving Online Asynchronous Focus Groups

Conducted via Learning Management Systems

James Hatten
Linda Goldstone
Kristi Liu

National Center on Educational Outcomes
University of Minnesota, USA

This paper describes the way in which mixed-method evaluation results, collected as part of a staggered series of asynchronous online focus groups with educators in multiple states, influenced the design and implementation of subsequent focus groups. The focus groups were conducted as part of a federally funded Enhanced Assessment Grant known as the “Improving the Validity of Assessment Results for English Language Learners with Disabilities” project, or IVARED¹. The IVARED consortium was made up of five state education agencies (MN, AZ, ME, MI, WA) plus the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO).

In order to understand the information that focus groups were designed to elicit, the way in which the online format suited the characteristics of this research and technical assistance project, and the way in which it increased engagement and promoted much needed collaboration among focus group participants, it is first of all important to understand the aims of the project.

Context of the IVARED Project

To accurately portray an educational system's strengths and weaknesses, state and local education agencies need to determine how all students, including English language learners (ELLs) with, and without, disabilities are learning important content along with the academic English needed to be successful in school. Typically, such determinations are at least partly made through an examination of students' statewide standards-based assessment scores.

For a variety of reasons, ELLs with disabilities may be excluded from state assessments or included in ways that do not allow students to show the content skills they have. For example, ELLs with learning disabilities may have difficulty reading text in English and may have difficulty participating in state assessments without the use of assistive technology that reads test content aloud to the student. On some assessments such as the English Language Arts and

¹ #EAG S368A100011 awarded by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education to the Minnesota Department of Education on behalf of the five state consortium. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Education or the offices within it.

English Language Proficiency tests that require reading to be assessed as a skill, assistive technology may not be an allowable accommodation. As a result, ELLs with learning disabilities may be excluded from these subtests or assessed without the use of an important accommodation. When these students are excluded from such measurements they are excluded from school improvement plans based on the results and students' access to school improvement resources may be limited. Exclusion, or participation in ways that do not produce meaningful results, may also limit students' access to the general education curriculum, thereby reducing their opportunity to learn standards-based content.

State departments of education are making some efforts to appropriately include ELLs and students with disabilities in statewide accountability tests (Albus & Thurlow, 2007; Altman, Lazarus, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Cuthbert, & Cormier, 2008). However, they still struggle with accurate identification of ELLs with disabilities, accessibility of the tests for these students, appropriate state assessment participation and accommodations decision making, and meaningful score interpretation for this group of students.

The IVARED consortium has undertaken a variety of research and technical assistance activities to address the validity of state accountability assessment results for ELLs with disabilities. These activities include examining the characteristics of the students in each state and their performance on state tests, improving the process for making decisions about participation and accommodations via expert panel input and studies of decision making, and developing principles to guide the assessment of ELLs with disabilities. As a result of these activities, state departments of education will be able to enhance the quality of their assessment systems for measuring the achievement of ELLs with disabilities.

A key IVARED research activity conducted early in the project was a series of focus groups with school practitioners (e.g., teachers, state assessment coordinators, and others involved in the education of ELLs with disabilities) in each of the five states. The intent of these focus groups was to determine how the practitioners made state assessment participation decisions for these students. Having a better understanding of the way test participation decisions are made in each state, and how processes might be affected by state-specific contexts, would assist the IVARED team in developing a web-based training module on appropriate assessment decision-making for ELLs with disabilities. This training module will be made available to educators by the participating state departments of education as a form of professional development. Therefore collecting high quality focus group data was vital to ensuring that the training modules are relevant to educators' experiences.

Originally, the IVARED data collection team from the National Center on Educational Outcomes planned and budgeted for only 20 face-to-face focus groups, four per state. Each group would have up to seven participants (total n across states=140). The budget allowed for hiring on-site data collectors, such as retired teachers, to minimize travel for the research staff located in Minneapolis. However, once the grant project was underway, we realized that our staff possessed a unique skill set that could allow us to conduct online focus groups with a greater number of participants per state at a cost that was significantly less than the cost of the face-to-face groups. An asynchronous online format was particularly desirable because of the flexibility it allowed for including geographically dispersed educators in rural areas and smaller school districts where a large number of ELLs, and presumably ELLs with disabilities, were located.

Need for Evaluation Data

Online focus groups such as those conducted by the IVARED project are a relatively recent research method that emerged in the late 1990s. They hold great promise for evaluators working with distant clients or limited budgets. However, to date the field lacks a substantive body of research-based data on best practices in online focus group design and implementation.

Data are needed that elicit participants' beliefs about the online format and their experiences using it. Such data can be used to plan successful online focus groups as well as to modify focus groups in real-time in order to improve the results and make them more relevant for stakeholders. The purpose of this paper is to share how the IVARED project collected mixed-method evaluation results from early participants and used them to inform the design and implementation of subsequent focus groups in other states.

Design, Development, and Decision-Making Process

The initial proposal for IVARED was to conduct numerous focus groups with educators in its five different partner states. In the traditional sense of focus groups, this could be accomplished in one of three approaches: 1) send a team of researchers from NCEO to set up and moderate focus groups at numerous sites throughout the United States; 2) hire local sub-contractors to conduct focus groups in each state; or, 3) a combination of the NCEO researchers and sub-contractors conducting the interviews. For reasons of logistics and time and budgetary constraints, conducting 20 face-to-face focus groups as originally planned was no longer viable. If a team of researchers were sent to participating states, budgets would bulge. Additionally, the amount of time required to conduct 20 focus groups would set the project back in its timeframe. The advantage to having the NCEO team conduct the interviews would have been for consistency with the moderator and co-moderator, thus reducing variability in data gathering.

Hiring local sub-contractors to moderate face-to-face would eliminate timeline issues and lessen budget allocation, but would introduce variance in the data collection, particularly with respect to moderating. Finally, a combination of the two approaches to face-to-face focus groups (i.e. using a mixture of NCEO researchers and contracted moderators) would again introduce variance that the project managers found troublesome.

The research team discussed possible alternate approaches to conducting focus group interviews for IVARED. A conventional -- and fiscally subdued -- approach to conducting focus groups over great distances is to use telephone conference call technologies (Krueger & Casey, 2009). IVARED researchers concluded conference calls were the viable alternative for the project's focus groups and a moderator was hired and logistics discussed. Telephone focus groups would eliminate the excessive travel expenses and/or those of hiring outside contractors and would allow data gathering to be done with a consistent set of moderators. Preparations began for the telephone focus groups. In the same timeframe that the focus group decision was being made, IVARED's primary investigators (those in charge of the grant as well as project managers) hired an instructional designer to build the websites and online training modules for dissemination of information gathered throughout the IVARED project. The instructional designer is a Ph.D. candidate in a Learning Technologies (Educational Technology) program and had insight and experience conducting alternative online qualitative data gathering for purposes of educational research. He suggested an alternative plan for conducting IVARED's focus group interviews which could possibly be even more cost-effective: online asynchronous focus group discussions held within a password-protected Learning Management System (LMS). See Table 1.

Four factors figuring into using an LMS for the IVARED online focus group discussions. First, cost. Moodle is a free LMS available for download. It must be placed on a hosted server, but modifying Moodle's structure is free. Secondly, LMS typically feature secure, encrypted logins. This allows for the site to be password protected. Third, the discussion boards built into Moodle "thread," or indent in a manner similar to outlining, wherein responses are "nested" beneath posts they refer to. The responses are indented and responses to another response are again indented further. In this fashion, users can see what response goes to which post in a discussion. This was a very desirable trait in the discussion board IVARED was to choose. Lastly, users needed to be anonymous or carry pseudonyms with researchers being able to identify the user on the platform's "back end" in case technological issues arose and resetting passwords or investigating when someone logged in was necessary.

The instructional designer began designing a Moodle site, housed on a commercial server with a unique Uniform Resource Locator (URL) and one which was password protected. Design was approached from a combination of frameworks set forth by Kirschner, Strijbos, Kreijns, & Beers (2004) and Donald H. Norman (2003) wherein the Moodle would have to be altered for the online focus group methodology. As an LMS, Moodle contains a plethora of management and pedagogical tools, including blogs, document uploaders, grading systems, and audio-video capabilities. While these capabilities are dynamic and helpful to an online teacher, they may become cumbersome to quality data-gathering. The designer stripped down the Moodle environment, removing components deemed unnecessary for users (research subjects) and moderator in focus group discussions. What was left was a login screen which led to a single focus group and only discussion threads. See Figure 1.

The minimized Moodle also was minimal in aesthetic design. This approach followed the Kirschner, et al. (2004) principle of designing for usability, utility, and aesthetic. Usability and utility are combined into one area called “usefulness.” The usefulness – or purpose – of what the environment was built for is data gathering. It was to foster discussion and to minimize any roadblock a user might have in getting into a discussion, reading a discussion, posting a response and logging out.

Process

Corresponding state departments of education sent out emails asking for participants in a study of ELLs with disabilities. The email was disseminated through public and private school systems and it promised a \$100 gift card from Target Stores for participating. Interested subjects were asked to email the IVARED moderator.

Given the sparse amount of literature devoted to online asynchronous focus group discussions, IVARED researchers decided to increase the number of focus groups to 35 (from the original 20 F2F planned), but hoped to diminish the amount of participants for each individual focus group. Focus groups were set up with the first respondents from each state and put into discussions of 5-6 participants each. Response was overwhelming. Over 250 people were put on waitlists while 232 participants were placed into focus groups. Subjects were notified via email that they were selected and asked to fill out a Google form for demographic information and gift card incentive mailing information. They were informed how the focus groups would work and approximately when they would begin.

Focus groups were pieced together in the environment and each participant was given a unique username and password. Additionally, they were assigned a pseudonym (a tree native to their state) as well as an avatar. Once focus groups began, they logged in, changed their

password to one of their choosing, and practiced a post to indicate they had navigated into the system successfully at least once prior to the discussion.

Focus groups began on Mondays and ran for four days each. Participants were asked to login and post responses to two questions per day. They had 24 hours to respond to questions and to respond to other participant responses (i.e. have a discussion) before the next set of questions would be released. There were eight questions total, two each day. The moderator responded and interacted with participants throughout the day and evening.

Once completed, focus group participants were sent an email thanking them for their time and given information regarding receipt of their incentive gift card. Participants were also asked to click on a link to a short online survey regarding their online focus group experience.

Results

According to Krueger & Casey (2009), the purpose of focus groups, as more commonly described for traditional face-to-face discussions, is to listen, gather information; to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, product, or service; and, to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest. The discussions can also engage participants to influence one another by responding to what other participants have commented and ask one another questions. The moderator facilitates so that discussions occur in an open, safe environment to encourage interactive engagement among participants. Hopefully, as a result the participants will have enjoyed sharing their thoughts, have been listened to, and have had their voices heard.

The results from this study using a less traditional format of an asynchronous online platform indicate that the purpose and characteristics of focus groups defined by Krueger have been fulfilled, as well as providing advantages beyond the traditional

format in face-to-face focus groups. Different types of interaction occurred between participant to participant; participant to non-participant; and moderator to participant. Examples of excerpts from participants in the study shown in Table “X” illustrate these various interactions such as community sharing of information and experiences; equal opportunity for all participants to voice their views and feelings; and, interpersonal engagement. The safe and anonymous environment provided space for these various interactions to encompass a range of views.

The asynchronous online format also provided flexibility in multiple ways. For example in Table 2 participants were able to participate conducive to their work and personal schedule. This meant they could start a comment and return to complete their comment at a later time to accommodate around their obligations. The electronic format also provided the opportunity to share information by uploading attachments, which they may not otherwise have had on hand immediately in a face-to-face focus group. Furthermore, the online format allowed unlimited space for participants to type their comments with as much detail as they wished to provide. This obviated the need for the researcher to transcribe the data for analysis.

The results of the data are not only evidenced by the voluminous quantity but also by the quality of content as expressed by participants’ engagement in building collaborative discussions through the various interactions. Additionally, as shown in **Table 2** , the examples from the data of the different types of interactions between participant to participant; participant to non-participant; and participant to moderator illustrate the flexibility of the asynchronous online format in utility and functionality for both the participants and the researcher.

Conclusions

Based on participant feedback and data gathered, IVARED's online LMS asynchronous focus groups were largely successful. Attrition rate of participants was extremely low (97 percent of those who signed up to participate did so successfully; 232 of 239 participants placed in focus groups participated and completed). Almost 60 percent of participants responded to the online survey. Survey respondents said overwhelmingly that they would participate in another online focus group discussion similar to the one in IVARED (134 responded yes, 1 responded no).

Positive feedback comments centered on the ease of use of the LMS as well as an appreciation for the pacing of questions and compatibility of the online asynchronous format with the educators' busy work schedules. Survey respondents also said the peer interaction was a positive experience and that they hoped their efforts would result in having their voices heard with policy makers. Finally, respondents reported another effect of the asynchronous focus group discussion that had not previously been anticipated the IVARED team: subjects reported taking information from the focus group discussion and applying it to their daily work lives.

The data was information-rich as well. The IVARED team gathered over 3,000 single-spaced pages of transcripts from the focus groups: each and every one of them already transcribed by the participants themselves.

The data continue to be coded and disseminated for the purpose of informing a training module of best-practices for educators as well as provide recommendations for policy makers.

Figure 1: Screenshot of IVARED’s online asynchronous focus group discussion in Moodle LMS

IVARED
Improving the Validity of Assessment Results for E.L.L.s with Disabilities

Maine 2

Home > My courses > ME2 > General > Maine 2 Focus Group Discussion > Day 4

Re: Day 4
by [Pagoda Dogwood](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 07:01 PM

7. I am not sure what the school can or cannot do, considering the way the state "penalizes" schools if they don't have enough kids participate, never mind make the cut off score. It was disappointing that Maine did not receive a waiver from No Child Left Behind...but considering I am north (nothing we applied... I guess.) I think that the state assessments are not feasible enough for many kids...with disabilities, without disabilities, ELL, etc. Being in a school where lots of teachers do their own thing, I do wish that there was more consistency in assessing students and evaluating those assessments in general. On the other hand, I wish that there was the flexibility for teachers who know those kids the best, to allow them to make appropriate accommodations. I know, I know, "we" don't want that because "we" will have too many people changing the tests and the scores will go up and there goes education as we know it.... My 5th grader, A, who I spoke of yesterday knows that he does well in math. He also knows that he needs lots of help with reading (he reads on a 1st grade level). His frustration grows everytime he has to take either the MECA or which our district has opted out of allowing us to read it to him. His attitude and his score is much better on the MECA, where we can read the math part to him. I hate to see him get so frustrated and feel bad about himself in the one area that is his academic strength.

8. As for other assessment decisions regarding ELL students with disabilities, I just wish it was easier to identify them for services. Yes, I know, we don't want to over identify based on cultural norms or residency, but some times I can't get the kids the help they need as we can't get through the first loop.

Re: Day 4
by [Pagoda Dogwood](#) - Friday, 17 February 2012, 06:58 AM

Pagoda Dogwood, are there any current discussions I

Re: Day 4
by [Pagoda Dogwood](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 06:58 AM

The only discussions are between the ELL teach

Re: Day 4
by [Rock Maple](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 06:58 AM

State assessments in my opinion are too bi

Re: Day 4
by [Pagoda Dogwood](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 11:00 AM

It is a big tskny to get some students identified an

Re: Day 4
by [Pagoda Dogwood](#) - Friday, 17 February 2012, 06:58 AM

Yes, I find that it is true whether the kids are ELL their behaviors are such that the teachers just i

Re: Day 2
by [Pagoda Dogwood](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 06:44 PM

I guess I would like to know what district assessments other people are involved in. We used to have a district wide writing prompt, but no longer. We also used to have to complete DMA and/or PE Benchmarks for all kids at the elementary level (including life skills or severe behavior) but no longer. Our district wide testing is solely the MECA at this point, and different schools require different school wide assessments, but with lots of accommodations...

Re: Day 2
by [Rock Maple](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 06:44 PM

Again, just wondering.

Re: Day 2
by [Pagoda Dogwood](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 06:44 PM

We have the MECA's and a district wide writing prompt. At the end of the year of the first trimester we have the ACCESS for ELLs only.

Re: Day 2
by [Pagoda Dogwood](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 06:44 PM

Pagoda Dogwood, could you spell out DMA and PE Benchmark and describe what the are? Were reasons provided why these and the writing prompt were discontinued? You mention lots of accommodations, is the a source available that teachers can refer to for guidance? If so, what is it?

Re: Day 2
by [Pagoda Dogwood](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 06:44 PM

Yes, DMA is the Developmental Reading Assessment and PE Benchmark is a Rigby assessment. Both are methods of assessing reading using a running record, noting errors and self corrections while students are reading, as well as a quick comprehension check on the short stories the students have read.

In my opinion the reason why these reading assessments were discontinued (and you, certain schools in the district still require them, but it is no longer a district requirement) were these kids. One, they can be very time consuming and require classroom management skills - to administer the tests at a younger age while the rest of the class works on other activities independently. Two, it was thought that there was too much teacher discretion in scoring - what one would consider an error, another would consider as a student and not an error. And, finally, it was thought that the MECA (Measurement Evaluation Association - MEA's) Measure of Academic Progress) was more standardized and would provide the necessary data in a reliable and valid method. Please note, although the MECA allow for students to be read the math portion, our district has taken the stance that no child will be read the test, no matter how poorly the student reads.

As for the writing prompt, I am not sure why it was discontinued. I think, in part, it was because our status in No Child Left Behind was based on reading and math, not writing, so the district opted to spend their time and money elsewhere.

With regards to accommodations, I pull from different sources depending on what the evaluation is. Again, just because the test allows it (like with the MECA) doesn't mean I am free to use it....

Re: Day 2
by [Rock Maple](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 06:52 PM

Describe the process your building uses to decide which state assessments (reading, math, science) ELLs with disabilities should take.

In my observation there really isn't a process for which assessments students in my building take. It is more a question of which accommodations they need to have with each assessment. At the elementary level where we have the MECA's, and the ACCESS (Ella only) students take reading and math, embedded in reading on the science content.

As well as how it is decided which accommodations should be used for ELLs with disabilities for state content (reading, math, science) and English proficiency assessments.

In general, all the ELLs are automatically given extra time for each assessment if they are part of a "pull-out" program or if they get reading, math or science with an ELL teacher and not the regular classroom teacher. For math, the questions can be read for those students mentioned above but not numbers state rules, and the reading component of the test cannot be read at all to ELLs.

Re: Day 2
by [Rock Maple](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 06:58 PM

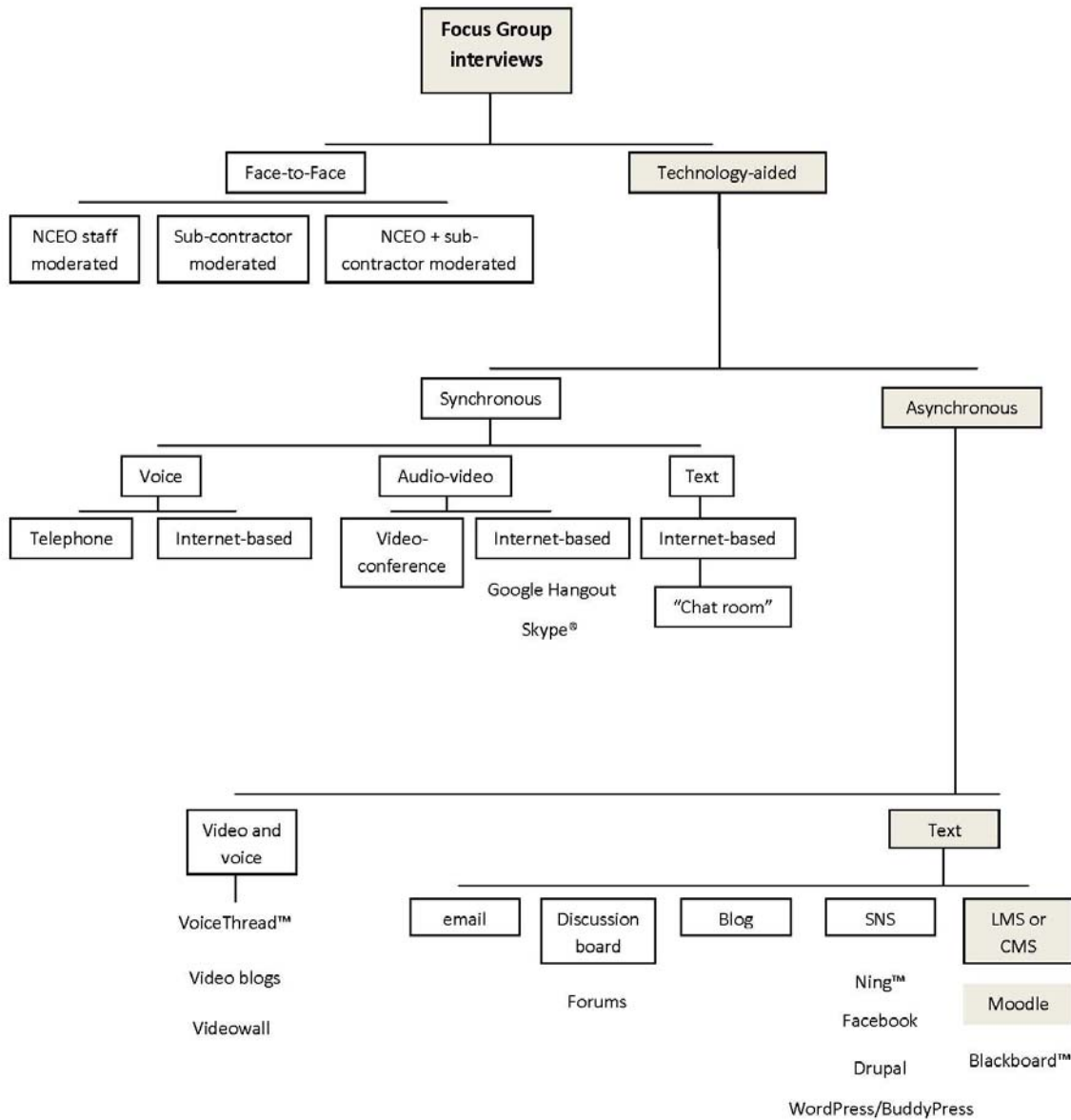
Rock Maple, for question 3: Could you spell out MECA as our data analysts may not be familiar with all these tests and acronyms? Do you feel there is a need for a process on deciding which state assessments students should take? Could you elaborate what you mean "embedded in reading can be science content?"

Re: question 4: please clarify, don't the questions have numbers in them? Does this mean questions are parked into fragments leaving out the numbers? How is it decided which accommodations to use for state assessments versus English proficiency tests? Are there other accommodations available, if so how is it decided which ones are used?

NCEO

Table1: Decision-making to arrive at online asynchronous focus group discussions in an LMS

IVARED Focus Group Decision-Making Process



Note: These are not all the technologies discussed or all the viable alternatives available. It is a good sampling of the major technological entities and structures discussed by IVARED researchers.

Table 2: Excerpts from participants across focus groups illustrating types of interactions and the flexibility of the asynchronous online format

TYPES OF INTERACTIONS
Participant to Participant Interaction
<p>Sharing information:</p> <p>Re: Day 3</p> <p>by Hackberry 26 - Wednesday, 4 April 2012, 11:03 PM</p> <p>“I was reminded by your posting that some of the accommodations promoted/permitted by the state and most used by administration are not even truly effective for ELLs. So, I found this interesting article (http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/RR-08-48.pdf) and have copied a snippet here: Rivera et al. (2006) conducted an extensive analysis of states’ assessment policies and accommodations... “</p>
<p>Sharing information:</p> <p>Re: Day 3</p> <p>by Balsam 24 - Thursday, 29 March 2012, 05:47 AM</p> <p>“Our intermediate school district was asked to develop an ELL handbook for our local districts, they are in draft form currently but once they are completed I can share it. It will lay out the program design. The use of the ELPA was highly recommended by the state Title III office because they wanted us to use the data to drive our program. We compromised and said that we'd use it but along with other assessments, teacher input, and administration input.</p> <p>Global Scholar is the publisher for Pinnacle Insight. I'm not sure how this particular analytical</p>

program was chosen but I believe that a consortium of area school purchased it for a discount. The district has uploaded tons of data over the past two years and this year it has been shown to teachers during team meetings and professional development times. The goal is for teachers to be able to use this data during the school year to drive instruction and meet the needs of students who are having difficulty. It is also used to help develop the RTI groups in the district.

<http://www.globalscholar.com/Products/Pinnacle-Insight.html>”

Sharing information:

Re: Day 3

by [Blue Beech1](#) - Wednesday, 15 February 2012, 08:28 AM

“We use the accommodations guidelines that are provided by the state in the 40 page New England Common Assessment Program Guide.

http://www.maine.gov/education/necap/1011materials/accommodations_guide_final.pdf

This document is very thorough and prescriptive in nature, not leaving any flexibility. When there are changes from year to year and the forms change, it is a bit of a pain to make sure that you have the correct numbers and letters. When meeting and discussing the individual needs of students, it often feels like we have to force them into the letters and numbers that are provided. Everybody does take this process very seriously; yet given some of the discussion we have been having the last few days, it seems that often we are putting our students in very uncomfortable and unfair testing situations.”

Equal opportunity with turn-taking among multiple participants without prompts from the moderator:

Re: Day 2 questions 3 and 4

by [Hawthorn 24](#) - Tuesday, 27 March 2012, 11:16 AM

“We haven't tried the online version of ELPA specifically for the reason of the writing portion,

fearing the keyboarding would be too difficult for many of our students. Do you know if it is possible to take the other parts on-line, but do the writing as traditional paper-pencil test?"

Re: Day 2 questions 3 and 4

by [Hackberry 24](#) - Tuesday, 27 March 2012, 04:19 PM

"As far as I know, you have to choose either the paper or the online version. You cannot mix the two."

Re: Day 2 questions 3 and 4

by [Oak 24](#) - Wednesday, 28 March 2012, 09:17 AM

"Yes that is my understanding as well."

Re: Day 2 questions 3 and 4

by [Oak 24](#) - Wednesday, 28 March 2012, 09:23 AM

"Good idea! We have not tried that but I will bring that up For next year."

Re: Day 2 questions 3 and 4

by [Oak 24](#) - Wednesday, 28 March 2012, 09:25 AM

"Hawthorn suggested we go back to paper/ pencil if a student struggles with computer test so I thought that idea was a good one."

Equal opportunity with turn-taking among multiple participants emphasizing feelings with punctuation, emoticon, and descriptors:

Re: Day 3

by [Spruce 32](#) - Wednesday, 18 April 2012, 03:02 PM

"To jump in...students do not get credit for showing their work on state tests, but that is the main way they are taught...to show their work. On classroom assessments students do often get points for showing their work and it also lets the teacher better know where/what the problem may be in their calculations - was it simply a mistake or is there something that needs to be retaught..."

Re: Day 3

by [Maple 32](#) - Thursday, 19 April 2012, 08:44 AM

"Exactly!!!! :)"

Re: Day 3

by [Butternut 32](#) - Thursday, 19 April 2012, 10:09 AM

"I agree fully!"

Range of feelings: frustration

by [Ironwood 24](#) - Monday, 26 March 2012, 07:55 PM

"Hi Oak24,

Sometimes these issues are very frustrating, and I have had a very frustrating week dealing with assessment issues. I have a student that has a written IEP that states that the student will be exempt from ELPA due to his disability which is severe Asperger's Disorder, which affects him not only academically, but socially. I am now at the end of my testing period and have been told by the state that this student must be tested, regardless of what was written in the IEP. I went as far as faxing copies of his IEP that contained his goals and objectives, along with his academic profile and was told that I must still attempt to give him the ELPA. To me this is

extremely frustrating, not only is this child going to be put through the stress of a testing environment with a stranger, he will never be able to pass the test and I will have to perform this test on him until he goes on to high school and he is only in second grade. When are we as the educators going to be valued for our relationships with our students and the knowledge we have about what is best for our students. These cases are not black and white and should not be treated as such.”

Range of feelings: definitive with capital letters and punctuation

Re: Day 2

by [Hackberry 24](#) - Wednesday, 28 March 2012, 08:01 AM

“I absolutely think that ELLs with severe disabilities should NOT be required to take the state assessments! How are they ever going to get a valid score???”

Range of feelings: agreement: FIND RESPONSES

Re: Day 1

by [Eastern Hemlock1](#) - Monday, 13 February 2012, 09:46 AM

“Paper Birch,

I agree with you that it is patently unfair to make students that are known to be functioning below grade level take such assessments. I finally dug through the ACCESS manual and discovered that I could have portions of the test not scored for students with IEPS. But, stupidly, this information wasn't anywhere to be found in the accommodations section of the manual. It was listed under directions for filling in the boxes on the back of the test. I realize that there is value in assessing ELP but for students with disabilities the test can't do that.”

Re: Day 1

by [Paper Birch1](#) - Monday, 13 February 2012, 12:43 PM

"I agree with you - I have heard this so many times . It's in unfortunate for those students and it doesn't seem like a fair method of assessing what they know." Paper Birch 1

Range of feelings: agreement

Re: Day 3

by [Northern Oak1](#) - Thursday, 16 February 2012, 08:19 AM

"Blue Beech: I agree that I learn more about my students from the ACCESS test than from other assessments. I find that we learn a lot more about the content language areas and the student's knowledge in these tests, than the state ones that are not developed for ELL... "

Range of feelings: disagreement in a safe environment

Re: Day 1

by [Sycamore 16](#) - Monday, 12 March 2012, 10:20 PM

"I'm not sure we need to assess English proficiency vs. communication needs. some of our profoundly disabled students dont' speak in any language.

I like the AIMS - A and use it for these students. It is visual enough that language does not seem to be a barrier."

Re: Day 1

by [Cactus 16](#) - Monday, 12 March 2012, 11:29 PM

"Sycamore: I disagree. Although the AIMS-A is very visual, there is no way to determine how much the lack of English language knowledge affects the ability for moderate to severely disabled students are impacted. So much of administering the AIMS-A relies on the teachers verbal explanations, and prompting. All of which rely on language..."

Questions: Asking directly to all participants

Re: Day 1

by [Blue Beech1](#) - Monday, 13 February 2012, 09:28 AM

“Eastern Hemlock1, you bring up three very important issues.

Having educators who know the students is, *I agree*, a crucial issue. The affective factor, too, is a biggie. What happens with an ELL student who, year after year, is given the ACCESS ...

Question for all you trees out there:

What types of disabilities have you encountered with students? Should all of the disabilities be grouped together as one?”

Questions: Asking indirectly to a specific participant

Re: Day 1

by [Northern Oak1](#) - Monday, 13 February 2012, 12:45 PM

“Rock Maple - I wonder if the ELL placed in your class really belong there? I went to a conference on Special Ed and ELL last fall. One of the points that I took home was that ELL with a disability need to be exposed to an English-rich environment, but in a self-contained classroom, this exposure is much more limited because the other children also have trouble with the language.”

Re: Day 1

by [Rock Maple1](#) - Tuesday, 14 February 2012, 12:18 PM

“Thanks for the input Northern Oak1! Actually though, our room is a pretty Language rich environment. We have people who use sign, people who use pictures and people who use verbal language. ...”

Interpersonal: Addressing one another by 'name' (pseudonym); establishing rapport in connecting the pseudonym with personal; emphasizing feelings with punctuation and emoticons

Re: Day 1

by [Hackberry 26](#) - Tuesday, 3 April 2012, 07:34 AM

"Tuliptree (my husband wants one of these for our house!), it is interesting that you mentioned high anxiety and proctoring. My students, especially as the HS level, become anxious about state testing b/c they are ...I often know my kids the best, but sometimes wonder if that blurs my outlook."

Re: Day 1

by [Tuliptree 26](#) - Tuesday, 3 April 2012, 07:39 AM

"Hackberry,

I have also seen the apathy side- especially at the middle and high school levels. The ELPA and MEAP do not seem so have a purpose at all to them or for them...but they feel that the school does not understand them and they easily give up. (I hope you get your Tuliptree! :)"

Interpersonal: Addressing one another by 'name' (pseudonym) and sharing; emphasizing feelings with punctuation and emoticon:

Re: Day 3

by [Tuliptree 26](#) - Wednesday, 4 April 2012, 04:59 PM

"Hawthorn,

Your after school tutoring program sounds wonderful. Who runs it? Do you have teachers or volunteers? Does your district pay for that or do you use Title III funding? One thing you might consider is having the parents join you for the tutoring after school, since you mentioned many

of them don't speak English. They might be curious to learn what their students are learning. If you are using Title III funding, you could easily add a parent element with that funding. It's just a thought-- I did do this in a previous district and it worked well. I'd love to share more if you'd be interested."

Re: Day 3

by [Basswood 26](#) - Wednesday, 4 April 2012, 05:24 PM

"Tuliptree, I'm interested in hearing about this! For what age group did you do this? One concern I have with after school tutoring for elementary age students is that they are so tired at the end of the day, asking them to do one more hour might be too much. With parents there, does that help?"

Re: Day 3

by [Tuliptree 26](#) - Wednesday, 4 April 2012, 08:52 PM

"Hi Basswood,

I'll try to explain this concisely. :) Otherwise, if it's possible, maybe we can exchange contact information through Linda [moderator].

The program was geared for elementary age, but we had all ages come. We found that if we allowed the middle and high schoolers in, they could help mom/dad take care of the younger students (especially if there were several elementary aged students in one family)...I hope this helps. Let me know if you want more information still."

Interpersonal: Addressing one another by 'name' (pseudonym) and respectfully; emphasizing feelings with punctuation

Re: Day 2

by [Basswood 26](#) - Tuesday, 3 April 2012, 09:12 AM

"I will have to look into this flow chart. I'm not aware of it--I always understood that participation on state assessments was required, period. Yes, there are some exemptions for ELPA, but I tried applying for that last year and no one was granted exemption.

Oak, where can I find this flow chart? Thanks!"

Re: Day 2

by [Tuliptree 26](#) - Tuesday, 3 April 2012, 09:49 AM

"Basswood-- I think the flow chart is on the BAA website and it called something like "Accommodations Chart" under the MEAP section. As to your comment on trying to exempt students from the ELPA, I can agree with that as well! It is almost impossible to exempt students from it. Many teachers/administrators I know have given up on trying to exempt students."

Re: Day 2

by [Oak 26](#) - Tuesday, 3 April 2012, 11:27 AM



[Assessment Decision Flowchart 353342 7.pdf](#)

"OK, I think I figured out how to add an attachment. Here is the decision making flow chart I referenced earlier."

Re: Day 2

by [Basswood 26](#) - Tuesday, 3 April 2012, 07:43 PM

"Thank you!"

Interpersonal: Addressing one another by 'name' (pseudonym); emphasizing feelings with punctuation, capital letters, and descriptors

Re: Day 1

by [Eastern Hemlock1](#) - Tuesday, 14 February 2012, 11:03 AM

“Pagoda Dogwood, (I wish I could be a Pagoda Dogwood....)You are right, increasingly teachers will need a working knowledge of second language acquisition as our schools reflect an increasingly diverse society..”.

Re: Day 1

by [Blue Beech1](#) - Tuesday, 14 February 2012, 11:34 AM

“Ah, yes...the many hats that teachers of English Language Learners wear. during the day! I have... “

Re: Day 1

by [Eastern Hemlock1](#) - Wednesday, 15 February 2012, 05:55 AM

“I absolutely agree that they SHOULD be speaking their native language at home and I know that supports their growth in English. However, they are hearing English and expanding that vocabulary while they are in school, whereas native English speakers might be exposed to words like "boiling" or "forgetful" at home. They have more than one front where they are being exposed to English. It's in this sense that ELLs are "disadvantaged".

Re: Day 1

by [Pagoda Dogwood1](#) - Tuesday, 14 February 2012, 08:13 PM

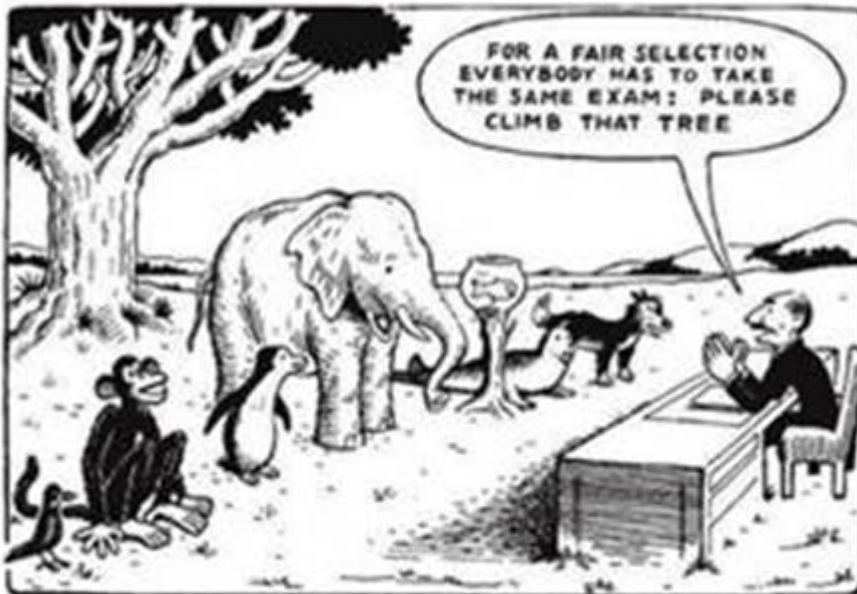
“Yes, well said. "...we can't begin to know how far they can go unless we address the language issues." I also know that...”

Interpersonal: Establishing rapport with humor; appreciativeness and emphasizing feelings with punctuation and emoticon:

Re: Day 4

by [Maple 34](#) - Thursday, 19 April 2012, 11:02 PM

“ I just want to make sure that all possible IEP accommodations are considered, from small group to extended time, etc. My bigger issue, as I've mentioned in previous posts, is holding ELs and ELs with disabilities to the same standards as native speakers on state tests. I actually received a cartoon today that really represents the unfairness of this practice quite well... “



Re: Day 4

by [Oak 34](#) - Friday, 20 April 2012, 09:52 AM

“Lol! What a wonderful cartoon! Thanks for sharing. :)”

Re: Day 4

by [Spruce 34](#) - Friday, 20 April 2012, 01:47 PM

“Thanks for the cartoon, we can always use a little levity when it comes to testing!!!”

Community: Acknowledging one another by 'name' (pseudonym) and sharing common views and challenges across geography

Re: Day 1

by [Ironwood 24](#) - Monday, 26 March 2012, 08:05 PM

"Hi Hackberry,

As I read your statement about students with disabilities who have been unable to exit the program, I began to wonder how many of these students if they were not ESL students would be able to pass the ELPA with their primary disability..."

Re: Day 1

by [Hackberry 24](#) - Tuesday, 27 March 2012, 05:42 AM

"Hi Ironwood,

I agree. For many of these students their issues with language are no longer directly related to them being English Language Learners ..."

Re: Day 1

by [Balsam 24](#) - Tuesday, 27 March 2012, 06:56 AM

"I thought we were alone in feeling this way. Our participation numbers for ELPA are becoming a special education list because this test was not designed to assess their ability levels."

-Balsam 24

Community: Sharing common experiences, inclusion, positive participation

Re: Day 4

by [juniper 16](#) - Friday, 16 March 2012, 09:47 AM

"Thank you for including me in this forum. It is nice to be able to share with others experiencing the same things happening with their ELLs/SPEDS.

As I have stated previously, our most severely disabled ELLs are serviced directly by the Special Education teachers"

Community: Sharing thoughts, positive participation

Re: Day 4

by [Cactus 16](#) - Friday, 16 March 2012, 11:59 AM

"It was wonderful hearing all your thoughts. I agree that ELLs with disabilities learn just very slowly. However I do think that more attention needs to be given to how language develops differently in ELLs vs. just those with disabilities...."

Community: Educational; positive participation

Re: Day 4

by [Fir 9](#) - Friday, 2 March 2012, 02:01 AM

" The Big Picture/Long-View of things also needs to be considered. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) has a report on their website about the state of learning disabilities. I highly recommend it...I really enjoyed getting to read everyone's responses and learned very much from this experience. Best wishes to all."

Community: Sharing experiences; positive participation

Re: Day 4

by [Spruce 12](#) - Thursday, 8 March 2012, 06:27 PM

"It has been wonderful to read other people's responses to the prompts. I appreciate the opportunity to see what others are doing and share my experiences. I feel a great responsibility as a part of a team that makes decisions about accommodations..."

Community: Educational; positive participation

Re: Day 4

by [Ash 35](#) - Thursday, 19 April 2012, 05:06 PM

"...I'm glad I had the opportunity to participate in this group. I enjoyed everyone's insightful comments, and gained some ideas to bring back to my school. Thanks!"

Participant to Non-Participant Interaction

Interaction extended: Participant's colleagues at workplace:

Re: Day 4

by [Larch 9](#) - Thursday, 1 March 2012, 04:18 PM

"...I am going to address the issue of first language proficiency with my fellow bilingual staff member. Perhaps he can take it a step further than I could, being an administrator, and trained in English language learning. I can't believe that it's a coincidence that our special ed ELLs are

the same ones whose first language proficiency is weak compared to siblings. We need to find out if first language proficiency should be addressed before considering special education placement.”

Interaction extended: Influencing the initiation of collaboration at participant’s workplace:

Re: Day 4

by [Elm 31](#) - Friday, 13 April 2012, 10:00 AM

“... Being part of this study has struck up a good conversation in our building and we may be starting up our own little SPEDEL team. ...”

Interaction extended: Returning and sharing comments from colleagues at the participant’s workplace:

Re: Day 4

by [Butternut 33](#) - Thursday, 19 April 2012, 12:09 PM

“I thought it helpful to include some comments from our SpEd teachers:

The assessments attempt to be inclusive with cultural names and even languages, but often these name are too complicated or unfamiliar that they hinder the very students they hope to respect. Once a student with a disability fails at complicated words several times in a passage they often give up. Including confusing names seems cruel instead of multi-culturally respectful.”

Moderator to Participant

Moderator directly asks for clarification—the safe environment allowed another participant to interject:

Re: Day 2

by [Linda Goldstone](#) [moderator] - Tuesday, 3 April 2012, 03:21 PM

“Basswood, Could you clarify, you administer the ELPA first before the MEAP? If so, what is the rationale for this?”

by [Hackberry 27](#) - Tuesday, 3 April 2012, 11:34 PM

“I can answer about the timing. The MEAP is given once per year, in October. Students are tested on ...”

Moderator redirects the discussion to the question with a specific prompt and the open safe space elicits another participant to add to the discussion:

Re: Day 2

by [Linda Goldstone](#) [moderator]- Tuesday, 21 February 2012, 07:35 PM

“*Birch*, are there any discussions happening in your district to find assessment tools that would help you identify the needs of ELLs with disabilities?”

Re: Day 2

by [Birch 5](#) - Wednesday, 22 February 2012, 10:04 AM

“*Linda* [moderator],

The ESOL teachers are usually the ones to bring ideas for anything to do with ELLs to the table. The ESOL team in my district is aware of this gap in tools for identifying and differentiating the needs for ELLs w/disabilities. We have not yet found anything appropriate in that regard, except for the Alternate-ACCESS which is targeted more toward ELLs with developmental delays.”

Re: Day 2

by [Balsam 5](#) - Tuesday, 21 February 2012, 02:44 PM

“As Birch said - this is a student by student decision - all students must take all assessments BUT how the assessment is administered almost always varies.... “

Moderator acknowledges participant's unique which prompts elaboration from the participant:

Re: Day 4

by [Linda Goldstone](#) [moderator]- Thursday, 12 April 2012, 05:18 PM

“Thanks Ash, we can say we heard it hear first--"Spedel"--a new acronym added to our lexicon! Kudos to your administration.”

Re: Day 4

by [Ash 31](#) - Friday, 13 April 2012, 11:09 AM

“You are very welcome! I coined the term which is unusual because I am not overly creative. Kudos go to the staff. Unfortunately administration didn't jump on board until we started making noise by asking for training, changes to be made in intake, etc.”

Moderator encourages community sharing; confirming understanding of participant's comment:

Re: Day 2

by [Linda Goldstone](#) [moderator]- Tuesday, 3 April 2012, 10:14 PM

"Can you provide the link to what the state describes what can and cannot be done? It sounds like you have active collaboration from staff, including the principal ,in the assessment decisions for ELLs with disabilities. For others in this forum who may want to know for their worksite, can you share with us what is key for you to having collaboration among the different staff and departments?"

Re: Day 2

by [Tuliptree 26](#) - Tuesday, 3 April 2012, 07:22 PM

"Regarding number 4, I am attaching the documents. I hope everyone finds them useful."



[Assessment Decision Flowchart 353342 7.pdf](#)



[Updated Revised Accommodation Summary Table 080211 359704 7.pdf](#)

Re: Day 2

by [Linda Goldstone](#) [moderator]- Thursday, 5 April 2012, 03:39 PM [moderator]

"Thanks Tuliptree for the attachments. The accommodation table format is surprisingly reader-friendly."

Re: Day 2

by [Tuliptree 26](#) - Thursday, 5 April 2012, 05:05 PM

"I agree. That is one nice thing. As a team, we all go through and highlight what we can do for each student. It takes up a lot of paper, but at least we can go through it pretty easily."

Moderator confirms understanding, which prompts further elaboration:

Re: Day 1

by [Linda Goldstone](#) - Monday, 13 February 2012, 08:28 PM

“...It sounds like your suggesting that regardless whether class or state assessments are used, it may not be so much the content subject but rather the specific language domain that could be more useful?”

Re: Day 1

by [Pagoda Dogwood1](#) - Tuesday, 14 February 2012, 08:09 PM

“Yes, I think considering the language tasks you are asking the student to perform is the most important consideration. The content requirements are...”

Direct inquiry from participant to moderator; positive participation:

Re: Day 4

by [Oak 26](#) - Thursday, 5 April 2012, 03:54 PM

“...Linda [moderator], will we get any kind of feedback on how this information is used, what the MDE is actually doing, who's involved, conclusion? I'd be very interested in this. Thank you for the opportunity to have participated in this project!”

Direct appreciation from participant to moderator; positive participation:

by [Butternut 31](#) - Thursday, 12 April 2012, 03:42 PM

“By the way, Ms. Goldstone [moderator], thanks for taking the time to listen to our points of view

and ask clarifying questions. I have enjoyed this process!"

Direct thanks from participation to moderator; passionate participation:

Re: Day 4

by [Basswood 25](#) - Thursday, 5 April 2012, 04:34 PM

"Thank you for providing this forum. All of us have had much to say, and with insight and true passion and compassion for our students first and foremost. I believe that most educators would agree with me that anything we can do that will serve the best interests of our students, we will do willingly and with good grace, taking extra time and care..."

FORMAT

Flexibility with unlimited space to expound with details:

Re: Day 1

by [Basswood 25](#) - Monday, 2 April 2012, 10:21 AM

"I have participated not only in assessing ELLs with disabilities on state/federal mandated protocols, but also in IEPs - both helping in psych & soc evals and attending IEPs for the past 30 or so years. a) State and federally mandated testing: Until the state allowed exemptions, I was obligated to test all students who qualified as bilingual due to a home language survey. Fortunately, we did not have to test kinder, first or second graders as they automatically qualified for bilingual funding. We did test them at the end of the second grade using the BVAT (Bilingual Verbal Ability Test). For students with a severe cognitive impairment, the BVAT scores reflected little of value about their ability in English and were, to my mind, invalid. For students with a learning disability in reading, I could often garner very high scores, particularly on the subtest in verbal analogies. Thus, I could determine that a student had indeed high ability in English. Unfortunately with the newer state ELPA which includes reading and writing subtests,

LD students are not often able to score at proficient levels. LD students who were scoring in the verbal analogies subtest at levels significantly higher than their grade level are now appearing to be significantly below grade level in their English ability. LD students are penalized because of their disability and receive a second label, that of being deficient in English acquisition. CI students are being punished by being forced to participate in an assessment that is beyond their capacity and yields no valid information as to their ability. For example, this year I have a CI student who scored a 0 on DIBELS and reads at a pre-primer level in the 2nd grade. The state would not grant him an exemption. On the writing portion of the ELPA, he attempted to write one word, erased it, and then made not one more mark in the ensuing response fields. Another student, the first I have ever witnessed who made not a single mark, bubbled not a single item on a response sheet last year, did not receive an exemption this year. Last year his label was CI; this year it is Autism Spectrum Disorder. This year, the child, placed in 3rd grade, has learned how to bubble, and did so in neat geometric diagonal patterns. As for the writing, he wrote a string of random letters with no spaces, followed by a question mark. If the rule of medicine is, "First do no harm," should not that also be our first rule with these troubled students? Let me say that I did all I could to make the testing situation safe by allowing the latter student to test with his special education resource room teacher. By mistake he was sent to the group testing room, immediately retrieved; yet it took him 30 minutes to stop trembling from even being in the room where the group assessment was to take place. So I am passionate that we need another solution for assessment for these students. If there is any valid information we can gather, I am anxious to help. When there is none, I believe we should be granted exemptions."

Flexibility to upload documents at anytime:

Re: Day 3 the ELL handbook for GRPS, Grand Rapids

by [Oak 24](#) - Thursday, 29 March 2012, 03:03 PM



[handbook for parents.pdf](#)



[ell handbook for staff.pdf](#)

Attached our handbook for parents and staff

Re: Day 3 the ELL handbook for GRPS, Grand Rapids

by [Oak 24](#) - Thursday, 29 March 2012, 03:07 PM



[Grand Rapids Public Schools Handbook for parents final for MD.pdf](#)

“In English for parents attached here

ELL handbook for staff should be attached to my first posting.”

Anonymity: safe environment in admission to not knowing

Re: Day 1

by [Paper Birch1](#) - Monday, 13 February 2012, 10:07 AM

“I wasn't aware of the ACCESS manual or that portions of the test not be scored for students with IEPs.... “

Anonymity: safe environment to express difficult feelings

Re: Day 4

by [Fir 8](#) - Thursday, 1 March 2012, 03:15 PM

“This discussion has been hard for me because I feel like I have no choice about assessment participating decisions for ELLs with or without disabilities when it comes to state tests. There are state mandated guidelines for all students, regardless of disability or language proficiency...”

Re: Day 4

by [Pine 8](#) - Thursday, 1 March 2012, 03:21 PM

“I very much agree with your sentiment of 'have no choice about assessment participating decisions for ELLs with or without disabilities when it comes to state tests...”

Re: Day 4

by [Fir 8](#) - Thursday, 1 March 2012, 04:50 PM

“Exactly! The poor students who must take the math and science state assessments no matter when they arrived in the U.S. are the ones I really feel sorry for. These particular MSP tests are not optional because a certain percentage of a district’s students must take them.”

Anonymity: safe environment to express strong feelings

Re: Day 3

by [Sycamore 16](#) - Wednesday, 14 March 2012, 11:02 AM

“...I am writing this with respect. I'm just getting ready to drive to the.. Department of Education to listen to a committee talk about how schools in our state are given letter grades. I will not be allowed to speak, nor will they listen to any practitioner in the field. A few of us seasoned (aka older) teachers and sped directors have started doing this just to remind the folks there that practitioners in the field need a say in state decisions because we work with kids and know kids. There are almost NO educators on staff...especially not at the higher levels. Our state does have some committees where teachers are allowed to give input, including into how state accommodations are decided, but have no voice and no vote! To be honest, I think [state] would rather do what other conservative states do than create a policy that works for [state] students. If you examine [state] politics, we are a racist state. .. Now I'm GLAD we are anonymous posters to this forum. I'm sure (actually I HOPE) some of you disagree and are having other, more positive experiences regarding this. I'll respond more fully and to question 6 this afternoon.”

Flexibility to complete posting comments at a later time:

Re: Day 3

by [Sycamore 16](#) - Wednesday, 14 March 2012, 11:02 AM

“I am going to dash off a quick answer to question 5 now, and come back later with a more

thoughtful answer to 5 and the reply to 6.”

Flexibility in return later to complete posting comments:

Re: Day 3

by [Yew 7](#) - Wednesday, 29 February 2012, 09:06 PM

“Back now. Here is my post for question 6. There is a lot of data available and used for placement of students and helping track students to see what their progress is like. ...”

Flexibility to complete posting around unexpected occurrence of personal events:

by [Elm 31](#) - Friday, 13 April 2012, 07:36 AM

“I have had sick kids the last 2 days so my post may be a little late....I guess just in general, I’d like to see all assessments leveled and differentiated based on what students are able to do—similar to how the ACCESS has different tiers...Thank you all participants for this experience to collaborate! I too enjoyed this experience and this opportunity!”
