



## PARTNERSHIP FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

This policy brief was drafted by Bridget Murphy, a 2017 graduate of the University at Buffalo School of Law.

It examines education for English language learners in Buffalo. After setting out the language diversity in Buffalo Public Schools and the challenges for English language learners, the brief explores the benefits of performance-based assessment. Rather than insist on memorization, this approach uses critical-thinking, research skills, and problem-solving to help students break through the language barrier.

In fact, in performance-based high schools, the graduation rate for English language learners is nearly 20% higher than in schools that use standardized testing. The brief argues that Buffalo Public School leaders should advocate for broader use of performance-based assessment in New York State education standards.

This publication builds on Partnership for the Public Good's work to improve language access in the Buffalo-Niagara region, including calling for a Limited English Proficiency plan in the Buffalo Public Schools, created and implemented in partnership with the community.

## Policy Brief

# Performance-Based Assessment for English Language Learners

NOVEMBER 2017

## English Language Learners in Buffalo

English language learners (ELLs) are students who are not yet proficient in English because it is not their native language.<sup>1</sup> In the 2016 to 2017 school year, 14 percent of Buffalo Public School (BPS) students were ELLs, for a total 5,690 students.<sup>2</sup> These students speak 102 different languages, the most common being Spanish, Karen, Arabic, Nepali, Burmese, Somali, and Bengali.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the vast diversity of languages spoken by the ELL population in BPS, there is also diversity in their education levels. An ELL student is often also a student with interrupted formal education (SIFE). This interruption means that either due to a lower standard in the student's native country, or due to a gap in education, ELL/SIFE students are not prepared for the coursework in their corresponding grade in an American classroom.<sup>4</sup>



## Challenges for English Language Learners

While there is great diversity among ELL students, there are some common challenges that these students face in the classroom. Besides the obvious language barrier, the diversity in languages means that there may be no common

language, and certainly not one that the instructor is proficient in. In addition to the diversity of languages, the unpredictable pattern of refugee migration makes it difficult for schools to find and hire multilingual instructors even for some of the most common languages spoken at the school.<sup>5</sup> Another challenge is the range in education and skill levels that can be found in a single classroom. As a result, school districts often struggle with where to place SIFE teenagers.<sup>6</sup>



*Students at Lafayette International High School in Buffalo, where 70% of students speak languages other than English at home.*

If an ELL/SIFE student moves to the United States as a refugee, there is most likely another set of cultural and emotional challenges she will face in school. Refugee, immigrant and Latino residents often suffer from post-traumatic stress, and if culturally and linguistically appropriate counseling is not available or utilized, the stress can affect a child's learning.<sup>7</sup> Refugee children are also more likely to be living in poverty. These children can struggle with hunger, unstable and unsafe housing, lack of materials, and many other issues. Poverty may lead a student's family to prioritize immediate employment over education.

## ELLs and Standardized Testing

These challenges are compounded during standardized testing. Despite their different backgrounds and educational experience, ELL students are assessed on the same scale as native English speakers. This is in large part why Buffalo's on-time graduation rate for ELLs was only 34.3 percent in 2012.<sup>8</sup> Latino students in the bilingual high school program in the Buffalo Public schools had a 7 percent graduation rate in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the language accommodations provided are not adequate for many ELL students. For example, New York State requires that Regents exams be translated into the top six languages spoken in the state, but only two of those six are predominant in Buffalo.<sup>10</sup> For the other languages, if twenty students in the district speak it, the district is responsible for finding a competent oral interpreter to read the test questions and answer choices aloud for the students.<sup>11</sup> This is not the same testing environment afforded to English speakers who are placed in a silent room and able to focus and work at their own pace.

This high-stakes testing environment affects both students and faculty. Schools are assessed based on how well the students perform on the standardized tests. Teachers are given "module" lesson plan guidelines to prepare students for tests. The amount of material that must be covered does not leave much room for teachers to customize their instruction. While this uniformity may seem like a good idea, no two students are alike. Because the teacher must prepare students for the test, she cannot use teaching methods for

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SIFE students that lead to actual comprehension.<sup>12</sup> The data shows that this style of teaching is not working for ELLs.<sup>13</sup> ELLs are not learning effectively, and thus there is little incentive for them to show up to class regularly. Poor attendance leads directly to low graduation rates.<sup>14</sup>

For schools with high ELL populations, high-stakes testing acts as a catalyst for failure. If a school's students do not perform well on standardized tests, the school gets a failing grade. This puts the teachers and the administration in jeopardy, and often leads to abrupt restructuring of personnel. While the faculty may change, the tests remain the same, and the ELLs continue to "fail." Many experts believe that the problem is not a failure of teachers or students, but a failure in assessment.<sup>15</sup> Standardized tests do not give ELL students a fair chance to demonstrate what they have learned because language barriers prevent ELLs from comprehending the substance of the questions.

### Performance-Based Assessment: An Alternative to Standardized Tests

<p><b>Traditional testing:</b></p> <p><i>Do you know it?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Recall</li> <li>● Identify</li> <li>● List</li> <li>● Match</li> </ul>	<p><b>Performance assessment:</b></p> <p><i>Can you use it?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Classify</li> <li>● Compare</li> <li>● Analyze</li> <li>● Evaluate</li> </ul>
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Performance-based assessment is a philosophy of education that is centered on

student-focused assessment tasks and inquiry-based learning. This style of teaching is based around final projects for each of the core subjects: math, science, history and English. Students work collaboratively on researching and developing a broad topic, then present their findings to a panel of teachers and scholastic experts. They are graded based on this presentation, holistically, from a rubric.

For example, if a student is particularly interested in women's rights, she could tailor her learning to that. The English project could be a critique on a classic feminist novel compared to a modern feminist novel. In history, the student could research the suffragette movement. The science portion could be a study on gender identity and the brain, or a psychological experiment on beauty standards. For math, the student could study the statistical disparity in women's pay in different cities or industries. All of these topics are interrelated, yet they still teach distinct skills. If a student has many different interests, they could choose to complete four completely distinct projects.

This is the strength of performance-based assessment. Students learn how to research and study a specific topic, and can then apply those skills to other topics when necessary.<sup>16</sup> This is in direct contrast to the memorization and regurgitation of answers that standardized testing requires.

Performance-based assessment has benefits for any student. First, it prepares students for university-style learning with collaborative, seminar-style classes, research, and public presentations. Another benefit is that students have more

freedom to choose topics they are passionate about, which can spark their interest in learning. Performance-based learning also prepares the students better for the modern workplace, which typically does not require memorization, but rather critical thinking and problem-solving skills. For example, a student may never need to know the parts of a cell, but she should be able to research and find that information (or any other information) if she is asked about it. Giving students the tools to think and research on their own is a much more efficient way to teach than giving them all of the information and expecting them to remember it all.

### **Types of Performance-Based Assessment:**

- Portfolios
- Letters
- Interviews
- Art Works
- Journals
- Oral Reports
- Original Stories
- Skits

There are some aspects of performance-based learning that are particularly helpful for ELLs and other groups who are “failing” standardized testing. First, the performance-based style of teaching is especially helpful for ELL classrooms with a broad range of skill levels and languages.<sup>17</sup> Because the work is done in groups, students who speak the same language can work together, even (and especially) if they have varying skill-levels of English. By working together, the more-proficient student “teaches” and internalizes the subject matter, the less-proficient student is not left behind, and both students improve their English skills. Another reason this style works for the

wide range of students in an ELL classroom is its use of individualized assessment. A student is graded on how well she presents his work, not how well she can remember the facts. In addition, the option of interrelated topics is important for ELLs because they are able to study fewer topics in greater depth while they are still gaining language skills.

Perhaps the most important benefit for ELL and other lower-achieving students is the empowerment and engagement that results from this type of learning. If a student is constantly being told he is a failure, he will have no desire or confidence to really learn. Performance-based assessment gives the students more of a voice in their education. Students discuss the topics collaboratively in groups with the teacher as a facilitator of the conversation. Students choose topics of their interest, and by the end of the project, their hard work culminates in a tangible product.

This sort of empowerment is vital for ELL students, particularly if formal education has not been directly experienced by their parents or caregivers. Schools with performance-based learning send a message that education is important and that it can change the world you live in. Performance-based assessment asks the students why a subject is important, instead of telling them that it is. This can change how they view education as a whole.

These benefits have been quantified by researchers who compare student achievement in performance-based high schools with that of students at high schools with traditional assessment systems. The New York Performance

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Standards Consortium (NYPSC) consists of 28 public schools across the state that subscribe to a performance-based evaluation system. These schools do not require criteria-based admission, so researchers can reliably compare them to typical public schools in the state. In one review of the data, ELLs who were in performance-based schools had a 69.5 percent graduation rate, nearly 20 points higher than the 39.7 percent average for schools that use standardized testing.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, students in performance-based high schools had higher college acceptance rates, enrollment rates, and graduation rates than their standardized test peers.<sup>19</sup>

Some schools in the NYPSC have received a variance from the state that allows them to fully replace the standardized tests with performance-based assessments. Other schools carry out performance-based assessments in addition to the standardized tests, while others have a partial variance.

While a portfolio presentation is the best way to assess what a student has learned through project-based learning, students in a portfolio program do better on

standardized tests than students whose curriculum teaches to the test. In fact, ELLs within the NYPSC system scored higher on the English Language Arts Regents exam than those who did not attend NYPSC schools.<sup>20</sup> Ideally, students doing performance-based learning would be evaluated solely by performance-based assessment, but it is striking that they do better on standardized tests than students who have been “taught to the test.”

Reform is needed when it comes to the education of Buffalo’s ELL students. Performance-based learning and assessment is a proven tool for the Buffalo Public Schools to employ. BPS leaders should advocate with the state for broader use of performance-based learning and assessment as well as variances that allow for portfolio presentations instead of Regents exams. However, even if the goal is to have more students pass the Regents exams, the evidence suggests that performance-based learning will be more effective, as well as far more engaging and empowering, for students and teachers alike.



*Students using art kits in their classroom at the Buffalo Elementary School of Technology #6.*

- <sup>1</sup> “Glossary of Terms – Enrollment Data,” *NYSED Data Site*, accessed September 22, 2016, <http://data.nysed.gov/glossary.php?report=enrollment>.
- <sup>2</sup> “Buffalo City School District Enrollment (2014-15),” *NYSED Data Site*, accessed September 22, 2016, <http://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2015&instid=800000052968>.
- <sup>3</sup> Deandra Fike, Subin Chung, and Emily Riordan, “Immigrants, Refugees, and Languages Spoken in Buffalo,” (Buffalo Brief, Partnership for the Public Good, 2015), 2. Available from: Partnership for the Public Good: <http://archives.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Immigrants-Refugees-and-Languages-Spoken-in-Buffalo.pdf>.
- <sup>4</sup> Debbie Truong, “Language Barriers Complicate Life at ‘Failing’ Buffalo High School,” *Buffalo News*, 9 September 2013, <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/buffalo-public-schools/language-barriers-complicate-life-at-failing-buffalo-high-school-20130909>.
- <sup>5</sup> Principal John Starkey, interview by Bridget Murphy, March 7, 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Truong, “Language Barriers.”
- <sup>8</sup> Fike, Chung, and Riordan, 2.
- <sup>9</sup> Eileen Buckley, “Phase-in Leader for Lafayette International Explains Future Plans,” *WBFO News*, 10 February 2016, <http://news.wbfo.org/post/phase-leader-lafayette-international-explains-future-plans#stream/0>.
- <sup>10</sup> Principal John Starkey, interview.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Adam Faeth, “English Language Learners and Standardized Tests,” (Policy Brief, Partnership for the Public Good, 2013), 3. Available from: Partnership for the Public Good: <http://archives.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/english-language-learner-testing.pdf>.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Rachel Stern and Tina Meyers, “Getting There: Improving Attendance in the Buffalo Public Schools,” (Report, Partnership for the Public Good, 2015), 3. Available from: Partnership for the Public Good: <http://archives.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Attendance-in-the-BPS-Report.pdf>.
- <sup>15</sup> Principal John Starkey, interview.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Peter D. Hoffman and Stuary R. Kahl, “The Promise of Performance Assessment... And the Challenges,” *Source*, Fall 2013, <http://www.advanc-ed.org/source/promise-performance-assessment-and-challenges>.
- <sup>18</sup> “Educating for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Data Report on the New York Performance Standards Curriculum,” (Report, Performance Assessment, n.d.), 3. Available from: Performance Assessment: [http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport\\_NY\\_PSC.pdf](http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport_NY_PSC.pdf).
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, 3-5.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 3.

