



Maine's Changing Definition of English Language Proficiency: A Guide for Students and Families

Recently the Maine Department of Education announced that students who score a composite proficiency level of 4.5 or higher on ACCESS for ELLs will no longer be English learners (ELs). This is a change* from previous years, and the Department would like to let students and their families know why this decision was made.

Under federal law, every state decides how it will define English language proficiency. In other words, the Maine Department of Education decides the score on ACCESS for ELLs that ELs must reach to exit an English as a Second Language (ESL) program. This score should be at the right level to ensure that the student has enough academic English skills to succeed in school without ESL support.

In the past, Maine was the only state where ELs needed to score a composite proficiency level of 6.0 (the test's maximum score) to exit the ESL program. Then in 2017, the scoring system of ACCESS for ELLs changed, and it became more difficult to reach 6.0. At that time, Maine lowered its definition of English language proficiency to 5.0, which was roughly similar in difficulty to what 6.0 had been.

This year the Department took a close look at how ELs performed on our State-required academic assessments (eMPowerME and SAT) with different scores on ACCESS. A little more than half of students who scored 4.5 on ACCESS met or exceeded state expectations for English Language Arts on State-required academic assessments, which is about the same as how non-EL students performed. That suggests that when a student reaches 4.5 on ACCESS, the student's level of English is no longer a barrier to learning.

After an EL exits an ESL program, the student's teachers keep a close eye on his/her academic performance for two years, and if the student still seems to need ESL support, it must be provided. (Note that in such cases the student would not take ACCESS again.) Also, some former ELs may continue to need academic support to reach their full potential, and they should be supported academically through the same programs and services that all students may be eligible for (such as RtI, Title I, and Special Education).

If your student was recently identified as an EL with a score of 4.5 on the WIDA Screener Online, your student will no longer be an EL. (However, if the student has already taken ACCESS and has not scored at least 4.5, the student will remain an EL until reaching 4.5 or higher on ACCESS.)

Regardless of a student's score on ACCESS, all students should be given the opportunity to learn appropriate material for their grade and to take challenging classes that will prepare them to graduate from high school ready to go to college or begin a career. Being an EL is not a barrier to full participation in the school's academic or extracurricular programs.

If you have any questions about the information in this letter, please feel free to call or email me.

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