

Rights of English language learners in Pennsylvania public schools





Defining terms

- “ELLs” are English language learners. Nearly all PA school districts now serve some ELLs.
- Don’t confuse “ELL” with “ESL,” which stands for “English as a Second Language.” *ESL* is one of several services that *ELLs* need in school.



A convenient reference

- PDE's April 2009 Basic Education Circular on Educating Students of Limited English Proficiency and English Language Learners provides:
 - legal interpretations
 - guidelines, and
 - links to resources.



Enrollment

- Rules on residency/enrollment for ELLs are *the same* as for other students.
- Schools must provide translation/interpretation if needed as part of enrollment process.
- Immigration status is irrelevant, and schools may not ask about it.



Home language survey

- Required for all students at the time of first enrollment.
- Essential information, because schools must then communicate with parents in their preferred language as indicated on survey.



Learning English

- School must assess the child's English language proficiency using a state-prescribed test.
- *Every* ELL has a legal right to *daily* planned instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL).



More on ESL

- ESL teachers need a special certificate, but need not be bilingual.
- More detail, including recommended numbers of hours of ESL per day, the BEC.



Learning academic content

- *Every* ELL has a legal right to *comprehensible* instruction in all content areas (social studies, science, math, etc.)
- One option: bilingual instruction. Rare in PA.
- More common: instruction in English. In this situation, teachers must *adapt* content and instructional methods to needs of ELLs – a challenge for many teachers and districts.
- More detail in BEC.



Ongoing assessment

- ELLs must be periodically assessed to determine English language proficiency.
- Assessments in content areas must be adapted, where necessary, to needs of ELLs.
- PSSA: Most ELLs must participate; accommodations are available (permissible accommodations are on PDE website).



ELLs and special education

- Being an English language learner is not a disability – but some ELLs do have disabilities.
- IDEA's "child-find" requirements apply to ELLs.
- Evaluations must generally be in native language.
- Child's program must generally include ESL.



Equal access

- ELLs have a right of equal access to all services offered to other students – such as specialized programs, school counseling, gifted education, vocational-technical programs, extracurricular activities.
- Schools must provide supports (such as professional development for teachers, ESL instruction, translation/interpretation, etc.) where needed.



Communication with families

- Must be in family's preferred language.
- Oral (*e.g.*, when parent visits school, school conferences, meetings) and written (notices, forms).
- Family cannot be required to provide their own translator, or to use child in that role.



Cultural sensitivity

- Schools must learn about, and be respectful of, child's and family's background, culture, and customs.
- Schools must ensure that child and family do not face discrimination or mistreatment – from staff or other students – based on their background and culture.



Useful websites

- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, www.ncela.gwu.edu.
- National Association for Bilingual Education, www.nabe.org.
- Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, www.tesol.org.
- ... and many more!



For more information

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