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# Accountability and Immigrant English Learners

In the United States, immigrant English learners (ELs) are a growing population in schools. Recent school accountability systems often rely heavily on standardized test scores to make

determinations about student learning, teacher effectiveness, and school success, yet neglect to consider other important variables (O'Neil, 2016). Those critical of these accountability systems argue that an unbalanced reliance on standardized tests has unintended consequences. For example, when teachers feel pressure to

## Introduction

Immigrant students have been linguistically and culturally disadvantaged by recent accountability systems (Jaffe-Walter, 2008). Recent school accountability systems often rely heavily on standardized test scores to make

determinations about student learning, teacher effectiveness, and school success, yet neglect to consider other important variables (O'Neil, 2016). Those critical of these accountability systems argue that an unbalanced reliance on standardized tests has unintended consequences. For example, when teachers feel pressure to adapt or adapt their teaching practices so their students can perform well on high-stakes assessments, they have less time to teach other content areas not explicitly tested (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Anness, & Falk, 1995). This type of accountability system has a disproportionately negative impact on immigrant students and English learners (ELs) (Amrein & Berliner,

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2002; Dabach, 2014; Jaffe-Walter, 2016; Valenzuela, 1999).

Under the most recent policy of school accountability, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), schools can incorporate assessments other than standardized tests in their accountabil-

of earning a diploma because of an increased  
reliance on high-stakes exit exams nationwide

teacher and the student mentee. The logic behind this rigor is to help guide IHS students in their written language development and oral presentation skills. Each adult in the school mentors 3 to 6 students weekly. The relationship between mentor and mentee can last from a year, depending on when the student begins working on PBATs and when he or she graduates. The mentorship begins when a content teacher identifies a student's high-quality class project that can be refined and made a *big* work for students. Then the mentor and mentee work through up to six additional drafts of the article and teacher provides the rubric outcomes. Teachers and IHS standardsize the rubrics at the school level and provide a representative teacher to work with teachers from 15 other schools in the international network to continue the process. To graduate, students must write essays of 6 to 15 pages in four content areas and orally defend each of them. They must also write personal statements of 1 to 3 pages, complete a semester-long internship, and create a native language project.

In contrast to the time and effort spent at IHS to prepare students for the PBAT, teachers spend much less time preparing students for an English language arts (ELA) exit exam. The exam includes a multiple-choice section based on readings and two essays: one that asks students to make an argument on an issue and one that asks them to identify and explain literary elements from readings. At IHS, the perception is that the PBAT preparation process more than prepares students for the exit exam.

Students often fail the test several times, but this does not concern teachers and administrators. One teacher explained that the it is not test preparation that is credited for higher pass rates later in the year, but that students are “

tion, and what we do in class.

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their teaching, unlike in other schools  
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The teachers at IHS spend more time on the PBAT and limit time dedica

because I did it all on the computer. They asked

me, “Now do it on your own, without the computer.” I got to the graphing part and got lost. So, I failed the presentation part. I had to present again to show that I knew how to do the calculations.

The oral presentation of a PBAT can result in a passing grade or a delineation of *skills* on either the written or oral component of the assessment. When this occurs, the student and mentor go back to work to incorporate feedback from a panel of three teachers. This cycle of revision and feedback helps students develop both their content knowledge and written and oral language skills. Needing to make revisions on a PBAT does not feel punitive or confusing to students, like a failing grade on the exit exam might. Instead, it is an indicator of their mastery of a topic at a particular moment in time.

### **Teaching Content and Language Simultaneously: “Trying to Find that Balance in My Teaching”**

Given the PBAT assessment’s content and language requirements, every teacher at IHS is both a language and content teacher. The approaches teachers take to teaching English include scaffolding strategies such as delivering short, simple instructions multiple times and projecting instructions on the classroom wall. Students with more advanced English skills are asked to translate instructions for other students. In the 9th- and 10th-grade, the process is like “watching paint dry,” remarked one teacher, “but it works.” The teacher went on to say that:

I used to be like, how are they ever going to learn this stuff if we don’t teach them English first. In my first few years, I really pushed to teach them more grammar, but after 6 years of watching the process, I am a believer. They actually do learn the content and the language at the same time. IfTDr,



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### Additional Resources

1. Barlowe, A. & Cook, A. (2016) **Putting the focus on student engagement.** *American Educator*, 4-12. Retrieved from <https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2016/barlowe-and-cook>

This article examines how parents in some schools are opting out of standardized tests and calling for more responsive assessments for their children. The authors provide evidence of how one network of schools has been developing performance assessments in response to this perceived need and provides examples of the types of rubrics used to grade performance assessments.

2. Hauser, B. (2011). *The new kids: Big dreams and brave journeys at a high school for immigrants*. New York, NY: Atria Books.

This book provides a rich description of a school very similar to the one described in this article. It provides insight into the lives of immigrant teenagers and the

Yoshikawa, H. (2011). *Understanding the responsive nature of the school*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

This narrative demonstrates how a school can be responsive to both students' social emotional and academic needs. When these responsive components are in place, responsive assessment is a natural next step.

3. Snow, C. (2004). **The four spokes of the second language learning wheel.** In O. Santa Anna (Ed.), *Tongue-tied: The lives of multilingual children in public education* (pp. 214-220). Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

This chapter, written for educators, provides evidence and rationale for using for



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