

Equitable Assessment for Elementary-Aged Dual Language Learners

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A LETTER TO MAYOR ERIC ADAMS: AN INTRODUCTION

Dear Mayor Eric Adams and Chancellor David Banks,

I am writing to you on behalf of dual language teachers in NYCDOE schools, urging you to reconsider the way that students enrolled in bilingual elementary schools are assessed on an annual basis. I am a graduate student enrolled in the Master's in Liberal Studies program concentrating in Urban Education at the CUNY Graduate Center, and I am also a fourth year teacher at a dual language elementary school in the Bronx. Throughout the education field, there has been consensus that the manner in which students' abilities are tested currently through NY state exams does not reflect students' actual abilities. However, there has not been agreement as to how we can improve our assessment system and continue to track student achievement throughout the city and state.

Mayor Adams, I have read your platform and policy ideas, and I know that you believe in a "whole-child approach" which includes "de-emphasizing testing culture" in schools.¹ Your platform states that you will not get rid of state testing, but you believe that "the DOE should go above and beyond to celebrate innovative approaches to education that create informed young adults prepared to succeed in college and/or career."² You mention that your administration will adjust graduation requirements, but that is for high school students. What about where testing culture begins? How will you address these issues at their root in elementary schools? I would like to propose that elementary-aged students who are enrolled in dual language programs throughout the NYCDOE are assessed via performance-based assessment tasks that would

¹Eric Adams 2021. (2021). Eric's education plan. Retrieved December 1, 2021, from <https://ericadams2021.net/erics-education-plan/#education-for-all>

²Eric Adams 2021. (2021).

mirror the performance-based assessment tasks (PBAT) administered to the group of high schools that are a part of the New York Performance Standards Consortium. In the document below, I have outlined a plan for how that would be possible and why it is important to consider. Thank you in advance for your consideration of this pressing problem and my proposal.

MY “WHY?”

My first year teaching was in the 2018-2019 school year, and I taught fourth-grade in a dual-language classroom in the middle of the Bronx. My school was new and still expanding, and I was working with the founding class of students who were the first set of fourth graders at our school. The following year, they would be fifth graders looking to secure their futures as they applied to well-ranked middle schools. A few months after I began teaching, I was informed how important my students' state test scores were going to be this year. After all, middle schools look at state test scores when they accept or deny students. From there, high schools would consider the quality of the student's middle school education as they selected their student body. Finally, a student's high school ranking and their GPA would combine to form their prospects for college and a career. *So, I thought to myself, does that mean that this child's whole educational future rests on this one state exam score? Does this exam truly have the ability to measure my student's potential and capabilities?*

For as long as public education has existed, every person who has come into contact with the system knows that it is a work in progress. Many educators and policymakers can attest to the fact that there are many issues that need to be addressed; so much so that it always feels impossibly difficult to know where to start. Since I have become a teacher, I have quickly joined

the ranks in finding these problems. However, the more I dug into the problems, the more hopeless I became. But, we need to reach for that light at the end of the tunnel with little steps along the way. This is my little step.

THE PROBLEM

Within the NYCDOE, there are 161 elementary dual language programs servicing thousands of students across the five boroughs.³ The goal of all dual language programs is for students to become bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural. With that being said, NY state tests only assess students enrolled in dual language programs on their math skills in their home language, while their language abilities are based on their competency in English only. Inherently, this shows a contradiction between the model of the school and the model of the assessment. Therefore, students are receiving a clear message that the goal of bilingual education does not matter much outside of the school building. The English-only state assessments show the clear hegemony of English within our educational system, despite the fact that the United States does not even have an official national language.

Furthermore, dual language students are being compared to their monolingual age peers on their reading and writing abilities in English. Many of the students at dual language schools are learning English as their second language, and even those whose first language is English but enrolled at dual language schools are at a disadvantage when compared to monolingual peers. For students who are in elementary school, language proficiency and abilities are still developing. Clearly, this is taken into account as standards change from grade to grade. With that being said, it goes beyond this for students who are learning multiple languages. Children who

³NYC Open Data (2021). Retrieved on December 15, 2021 from <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/d/rrd7-vuyp/visualization>.

are learning more than one language still develop their vocabulary, syntax, and other parts of language development at the same rate as other children, but spread over two languages. For example, if a child at 4 years old is expected to know about 2,000 words, a child who speaks another language knows some proportion of these 2,000 words in English and some in the other language. Therefore, when their language abilities are judged in just one language, it appears that they know less or have less developed language abilities than they do in reality. This is a trend that will continue through childhood and adolescence, until the child's language abilities are fully developed. Further, many students who are recognized as English language learners and given the option to take a test in their home language are still not being served equitably. Students frequently begin taking the test in their L1 and decide that they would like to see the test in English. This is because in order to access their full language capabilities, they need to work in both languages. I say this because I see it everyday. Students need to translanguage, or use both languages simultaneously, to fully express themselves when they are bilingual. As a result, particularly in the early testing grades of elementary school, measuring bilingual children's abilities in one language compared to monolingual peers will result in data that looks like a larger language gap than the one that truly exists. I can attest to seeing this phenomenon on a day-to-day basis as a dual-language educator.

Another large part of the problem is the fact that current standardized assessments require testing skills that need to be taught apart from the actual material being measured through the test. The phrase "teach to the test" has been used by educators for decades. In order for students to be successful when taking standardized tests, teaching to the test has become a necessary evil. Every year, teachers devote valuable instructional time to teaching students how to complete multiple choice questions, short answer questions, and craft essays in a specific way. While the

hope is throughout the school year that teachers have been equipping students with the broader skills they need to succeed on these assessments, the reality is that many teachers end up “item-teaching.” Reznick and Zurawsky, two published educators, describe this phenomenon: “When teachers match their teaching to what they expect to appear on state tests of this sort,” they write, “students are likely to experience far more facts and routines than conceptual understanding and problem-solving in their curriculum.... Narrow tests...can become the de facto curriculum.”⁴ As a result, the curriculum frequently tends to shift away from teaching the skills that students truly need and it moves towards focusing on shortcuts that will help students score higher on standardized tests. This will hurt our students, not help them. Students who are in dual language programs are already learning in English less frequently than their monolingual counterparts, and their instruction should not be further short-changed by teaching to the test.

Finally, the demands of taking a standardized test and then basing a students’ future options on their score do not match the realities of the workplace. This is due to the neoliberal thought that the purpose of education should be to prepare for careers. In New York, there is an Office of College and Career Readiness, and this is exactly why. Mira and Morrell make a strong argument that using standardized tests to measure these career-applicable skills is actually counterintuitive: “Despite the calls by advocates for 21st-century skills for collaborative projects, students are largely assessed individually on high-stakes tests.”⁵ Currently, students take standardized tests in isolation from peers or supports, and the work that they do in a single timespan is judged. They cannot consult, revise, edit, or collaborate. These are all critical skills

⁴ Resnick, L., & Zurawsky, C. (2005, spring). Getting back on course: Standards-based reform and accountability. *American Educator*. Retrieved November 15, 2021 from

http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring05/resnick.htm

⁵ Nicole Mirra and Ernest Morrell, “Teachers as Civic Agents: Toward a Critical Democratic Theory of Urban Teacher Development,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 62, no. 4 (2011): p. 410, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487111409417>.

that are a more accurate depiction of what will be needed in the workplace. Therefore, standardized tests are really not a good measure for any students of their full potential. However, they cannot be done away with quickly. Therefore, I believe that focusing on why they are particularly detrimental for students in dual-language elementary schools is the first step in battling this messy issue.

THE SOLUTION

The issues with standardized testing have been brought up time and time again since the passage of No Child Left Behind created this culture. However, the real conversation lies in the possible solutions. The solution will certainly be intricate with many layers of logistics, as are all policies. With that being said, I aim to address the questions below in the subsequent sections of this paper:

- ❖ What would this type of assessment look like?
- ❖ What would be the time commitment for teachers and students?
- ❖ How could this be justified as an alternative NY state test for dual language students?
- ❖ How would this be a more holistic approach to assessment?
- ❖ How would this affect the budget for the NYCDOE?
- ❖ What is the anticipated pushback from stakeholders and how can it be mitigated?
- ❖ What would be the implementation process of this recommendation?

What would this type of assessment look like?

This assessment would be fully comprehensive of a student's growth throughout the school year, and it would work hand-in-hand with project based learning. You may be wondering what a performance-based assessment task is and how it differs from a portfolio assessment.

Performance-based assessment tasks are currently being used in the high schools who are a part of the NY Performance Standards Consortium to serve as a substitute for Regents state exams. I am proposing an elementary school version of these assessments. The model would be quite similar.

Elementary teachers would work together to design the task questions to be high-level, engaging tasks that require deep inquiry and investigation on the part of the student. The tasks will typically not have one answer, and they will require the student to use skills from multiple disciplines to complete them. From there, individual teachers will differentiate the tasks to their curriculum to make them relevant to the students' learning. Therefore, the projects to be completed can be student-directed and based on their personal interests. The student choice and voice that is built in through this format will heighten both student engagement and motivation throughout the process.

Next, students will take several weeks, or even months, to complete each task. Since in the elementary grades, students will typically take an ELA test and a math test, these would be the focus of the two tasks. In order to complete the tasks, students will need to conduct research, write a full explanation of their work, and they can create a visual representation of their project, too. Each student will have specific time to have mentoring from a teacher with a small group throughout the project. This will allow students to revise and edit their work, which is more authentic to project processes in the workplace. Additionally, this will enable students to work through their ideas and research in their home language and English in order to process the information. Then, they can write and publish their ideas fully in English afterwards. This mentoring and revision would specifically be helpful to students enrolled in bilingual programs

because they could still complete their projects in English but their learning would uphold the integrity of their dual language programs.

How would this be a more genuine approach to assessment?

As stated early in this paper, standardized tests do not fully measure bilingual students' capabilities, especially because they are given in only one language at a time. This approach to assessment would allow students to use their full language capabilities throughout the project.

While students are responding to a performance assessment task, they need to conduct research and write about their findings. This approach will allow students to research in both languages that they are learning in to more fully understand the topic that they are investigating.

Additionally, students can write in both languages leading up to reach their final writing piece for students to consolidate their knowledge. The final writing piece would need to be in English for grading purposes, but students are able to use their full language abilities during the process leading up to the final piece. Throughout this project, students will still see that their bilingualism and biliteracy are important and useful. Therefore, this assessment would be more aligned with the true goals of dual language education of fostering bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy.

Additionally, I mentioned earlier that current standardized tests that are taken in one sitting in isolation do not reflect current workplace skill demands. Students' final products will more accurately reflect their abilities in relation to if they were given performance based assessment tasks. They will be working on a project for an extended period of time and collaborating with mentors and peers to enhance the quality of their work. This is what truly happens in most fields in the twenty-first century. Therefore, completing this sort of assessment

would both prepare students for the realities of the workplace today as well as more accurately depict their capabilities.

What would the time commitment be for teachers and students?

In the elementary grades, students in New York are tested annually in mathematics and in English language arts (reading and writing). In fourth grade, students also need to take a science exam in addition to the two other subjects. Therefore, third graders and fifth graders would need to complete two performance based assessments tasks and fourth graders would need to complete three. The complexity of each task would determine how long they would take, but it would be about a couple of months for each task. What may be more effective would be for one task to encompass all of the subjects, especially for young learners. Regardless, this would be a time-consuming process. However, the time requirements for the performance based assessment tasks would be deeply embedded into the curriculum in order for students to learn content, research, and create their projects. Therefore, teachers would need to plan their curriculums accordingly to encompass these tasks.

Additionally, students would need to meet with teacher mentors for small group conferences and guidance. This could be built into school schedules, or it may require time before or after school for meetings. If these meetings were to be scheduled for before or after school, it would require extra commitment on the part of these students, their families, and the teachers. However, elementary schedules are relatively flexible and I believe that dual language schools could make these time commitments work.

How could this be justified as an alternative NY state test for dual language students?

In order for this to be considered an alternative state assessment, the dual language schools who would adopt this assessment model would need to obtain waivers. The schools would require a waiver from ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds Act, in order to state that the school is still being held accountable for holding students to high standards but through a different measurement than the state test. In the text of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, all public schools are required to show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) through tests. Schools that do not school adequate yearly progress will be penalized through diversion of funds. Specifically, this targets schools that receive Title I funding; the majority of dual language schools are funded through this federal grant.⁶ As a result, a waiver from this rule would most definitely be necessary for this alternative assessment to come to fruition.

The number of students enrolled in elementary dual language programs is so minimal compared to the overall number of elementary school students in the New York City Department of Education. As mentioned earlier, there are only 161 dual language programs (most of which are only parts of schools, not entire schools) while there are over 700 elementary schools. This is just within NYC. Therefore, the number of students in these programs compared to the number of elementary students in the state is nil. These are the numbers that the Department of Education is really looking at on a national level. If a waiver was given to the elementary aged students enrolled in dual language programs in order to participate in alternative assessment, the statewide and national data would not be affected on a statistically significant level.

How would this affect the budget for the NYCDOE?

⁶Strauss, V. (2015, April 2). Will schools lose federal funds if kids don't take mandated tests? Fact vs. threat. Retrieved December 19, 2021.

Implementing performance-based assessment tasks for dual language students would minimally affect the city's education budget, yet there would be great benefits for the students and their teachers. According to a report written in 2012, New York's reported budget for standardized testing was about \$3.3 million in 2011 alone but New York is one of the only states that delegates the scoring of tests to local districts.⁷ (All of this money is coming directly from taxpayers' pockets into the pockets of privatized companies that create the tests, but that is an issue for a different time.) Some of the costs that the state may have had to deal with are pushed down to the city level.

The NYCDOE is required to train and pay teachers within the system to grade the tests. This means that the city is already paying for state assessments to be scored. The main money that would be required for this proposal to be put into place would be needed to pay teachers per session (overtime) if they need to confer with students before or after school in order to meet the time requirements of mentoring.

Additionally, professional development would be needed for teachers as schools begin to implement performance based assessment tasks. In order for professional development to happen, staff need to be hired to facilitate workshops and work with teachers and administrators. A maximum of about 10 staff members would need to be hired by the NYCDOE to make this happen. Each staff member costs roughly \$100,000 in gross pay including benefits. As a result, about \$1 million would be required to scale performance based assessments tasks to all of the dual language elementary students in the city. According to the NYCDOE website, the budget for the 2022 FY budget is \$38 billion dollars. One million dollars in comparison to the

⁷Chingos, M. M. (November 2012). State spending on K-12 assessment systems. *Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings*, p. 18.

NYCDOE's enormous budget is so small compared to the positive impact that would come from investing in alternative assessment.

What is the anticipated pushback from stakeholders and how could it be mitigated?

While many people would be excited by the prospect of alternative assessment for elementary-aged multilingual learners, there are certainly others who would not be receptive to this change. Specifically, I would expect there to be some form of pushback from both teachers and parents.

First of all, many parents want their children to practice taking standardized tests at a young age in order to prepare them for other high-stakes standardized tests, such as the SAT or the ACT. Some jobs, including teaching ironically, require tests in order to be qualified for the profession. According to Education Post, many parents actually believe that standardized tests are important for their children: "Parents agree testing is important to show student progress and identify areas of improvement, but disagree over whether it accurately measures achievement...Very low-income parents, those making less than \$25,000 per year, are more accepting of tests as a means to show progress and ways to improve."⁸ Many students who attend dual-language schools are from immigrant families, some of which fall into this category. Immigrant parents who have come to the United States seeking opportunity frequently see high test scores as a means of helping their children to rise up into better schools (middle school, high school, college) which can lead to more career opportunities. In this case, fourth grade test scores are actually used to make admission decisions to middle schools. Therefore, it is possible that

⁸Bermudez, C. (2016, April 12). Here's what parents actually want from standardized tests. Retrieved December 1, 2021.

parents would want their children to be taking traditional standardized tests and be opposed to performance-based assessment tasks.

However, if students were to partake in alternative assessments, they would still be taking low-stakes tests throughout the school year. Additionally, passing performance-based assessment tasks will be no easy feat. Completing this type of assessment could be considered by many middle schools to add to a student's admission profile and actually give them a leg up. Plus, the experience of completing a challenging project from start to finish from a young age would give students a competitive edge and a taste of the real world.

Teachers may also be resistant to implementing performance based assessment tasks in their elementary classrooms because of the time-consuming nature of the process. Teachers are already asked to do so much every year with responsibilities stacked one on top of the other. As a teacher myself, I would argue that the time in which teachers typically devote to test prep instruction can be devoted to mentoring students, and project workshopping. Additionally, I believe that teachers will feel genuinely more satisfied when they see the results of their students' hard work more accurately reflecting the teaching and learning that is happening in the classroom. Finally, administrators can help their teachers to get on board with the alternative assessment process by giving them time in their daily schedule to mentor students, and pay them per session (over time) for related work outside of regular school hours. Everyone is resistant to change at first, but it is about time that we try to fix a broken system that teachers have been complaining about for decades now.

What would be the implementation process of this recommendation?

In order to implement this proposal, I believe that a four-phase implementation process would be necessary. The first phase would be the Development Phase. During the Development Phase, teachers from several dual language elementary schools will work together to develop task requirements and protocols. Professionals from the NY Performance Standards Consortium can work together with elementary dual language teachers in order to ensure that the performance based tasks have the integrity of the high school version but at a developmentally appropriate level for younger students.

It will then be these teachers who lead the charge during the second phase, the Trial Period Phase. As the name indicates, this would be a trial period for the guidelines laid out by the cohort of educators during the Development Phase. This small group of teachers would test out the developed tasks and protocols with their own students. They would record their observations and experiences throughout the process, in order to tweak the protocol as necessary. These teachers and their students would fully participate in the process from task introduction to round-table presentations. During the Trial Period, the students who are a part of the trial would also take the state tests, too, in order for their scores to be compared to the work of their final projects. By doing so, students, teachers, administrators, and parents would see whether or not the alternative assessments fully benefited the students and the school overall.

If all goes well during the Trial Period Phase, implementation will move into Phase 3: Adoption. At this point, educators will have the necessary evidence to prove that an ESSA waiver would be helpful and appropriate for their students, and these waivers could be obtained. The performance based assessment tasks will fully take the place of state testing at the participating schools during the Adoption Phase.

Finally, the last phase would be the Expansion Phase. This will likely be two to three years down the road from the initial Development Phase. At this stage, teachers who have been a part of the early phases will be able to share their knowledge and experiences with other teachers. These teachers will host professional development for other teachers at dual language elementary schools, with the goal of spreading this form of assessment. During the Expansion Phase, a team of educators may need to be formed to specifically staff the professional development necessary for this project to be scaled up. A team of experts will form to assist schools who are looking to switch to performance based assessment tasks, and it will be at this point that the city will need to create more positions in the NYCDOE in order for this professional development to happen.

This is the vision that I have, but of course there will be bumps along the way. It is likely that educators participating in the early stages of the project will need to go back to the drawing board and gather several times to discuss what is working and what is not working. Hopefully, summers will be a good time for teachers to meet and reflect on their practices. We are frequently telling students that we learn from mistakes, don't give up, and try again. This will definitely be an important mindset to have throughout the process of implementation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I strongly believe that creating an elementary school version of performance based assessment tasks would benefit multilingual students who are enrolled in dual language programs. Obtaining a waiver from ESSA in order for this assessment to be considered valid annual assessment for a subset of NYCDOE students would be necessary to achieve more equitable assessment outcomes. Testing and data collection is not going away, but it has been

changing over the years. More and more educators, policymakers, families, and students themselves have fought against the tide of state testing. Therefore, this is a vision that seems realistic and viable. As the education system rises out of the COVID pandemic slowly but surely, there has never been a better time to push for change.

Works Cited

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