Reacting to Reviews, States Cut Portfolio Assessments for ELL Students

By Mary Ann Zehr

Arkansas and Wisconsin have dropped portfolio assessments for English-language learners after receiving letters from the U.S. Department of Education saying the states had to prove those tests were valid or their large-scale assessment systems would be rejected under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Arkansas officials were told to show the comparability of the state’s portfolio assessment with its regular mathematics and reading tests by the end of this school year, but state officials doubted they could overcome the technical issues required to do so, said Gayle Potter, the associate director of curriculum, assessment, and research for the Arkansas education department.

“If it would have been possible in the time frame to address it, we would have,” she said last week. “It was impossible for us to do so. We really had no choice.”

After getting a letter citing issues with the technical quality of Wisconsin’s portfolio assessment for English-language learners, state officials stopped using it for accountability.

Indiana also halted the use of its alternative test for English-language learners, which is based on portfolios and teacher observation.

At the same time, the federal Education Department has approved an alternative test for English-language learners in North Carolina, called a “checklist,” that has a portfolio component.

Trading Problems?

Implementing a valid portfolio test is difficult, said Jamal Abedi, an education professor at the University of California, Davis, and a specialist in the assessment of English-language learners. “One of the major issues is comparability,” he said. “A portfolio assessment isn’t as objective as other tests.”

If states can’t administer portfolio tests properly, such as by establishing an objective set of criteria for scoring and proving comparability with regular tests, it’s better they not use them at all, Mr. Abedi said.

Timothy J. Boals, the director of the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment, worries that the Education Department is putting states in a position in which some are suddenly having to give up alternative tests for English-learners. “You’re trading one problem for another.

“If you throw out your test and have nothing else in your arsenal, you’re going to put beginning English-language learners into the regular test,” said Mr. Boals, whose consortium of 14 states plus the District of Columbia, housed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, develops large-scale assessments for English-language learners.
“Most of us feel that’s not appropriate,” he said, because such exams are inadequate measures of what those children have learned since they lack proficiency in English.

“What I wish,” he added, “is that the U.S. Department of Education had let the states know a couple of years earlier that there were fears these systems weren’t up to speed and to give them some time to fix the problem before shutting them down.”

But Kathleen Leos, the director of the department’s office of English-language acquisition, said: “It wasn’t until there was a formal peer review of the content assessments that the department had a better understanding of the technical quality of the assessments.”

She added, “To say anything prior would not have been an informed discussion.”

LEP Partnership

Mike Thompson, the executive assistant to Wisconsin’s schools chief, said that while the state isn’t using its portfolio test for accountability purposes under the No Child Left Behind law this school year, officials hope to find a way to do so in subsequent years.

“We’re very interested in getting clarity on what it would take to bring our portfolio assessment into compliance or make it a viable alternative for English-language learners,” he said. He’s seeking that clarity through Wisconsin’s participation in the LEP Partnership, an effort between state and federal officials to examine assessment for students with limited English proficiency.

Ms. Leos confirmed that portfolio assessment is one of five options being explored. The others are native-language tests, simplified-English tests, accommodations with a regular test, and the overlapping of testing for English-language proficiency and reading.

North Carolina, meanwhile, obtained approval for its unusual checklist assessment only after providing “a lot of information” to federal officials during the peer review, said Lou Fabrizio, the director of accountability services for that state’s education department.

Mr. Fabrizio said the checklist that test administrators turn in to the state is based on teacher observation and a portfolio of student work, which state officials spot-check in a sample of schools.
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