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Adult Education and Literacy

Assessment Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Purpose

The purpose of this Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document is to provide responses to commonly asked questions about assessments used in Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) programs.

Background Information on Assessment Use

Historically, the National Reporting System (NRS), created in the 1990s to demonstrate program impact, became mandated in 1993 through the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). The GPRA required all Federal agencies to develop strategic plans to ensure that services were delivered efficiently and in a manner that best suited client needs and to develop indicators of performance to demonstrate their agency's impact.

In 2015, in response to the joint accountability requirements of Section 116 of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the NRS was significantly revised to include the new indicators specified in WIOA and the resulting new timelines for participant follow-up and data reporting. Section 116 establishes primary indicators of performance and reporting requirements to assess the effectiveness of States and local areas in achieving positive outcomes for individuals served by the workforce development system's six core programs. The Measurable Skill Gain (MSG) is a key indicator in the NRS and provides a measure of a participant's interim progress towards a credential or employment. Using standardized tests, pre- and post-testing, is used as one way to determine MSGs. Standardized assessments were developed for and implemented by AEL programs, with the purpose of effectively assessing the skills and knowledge of adult learners. Additionally, standardized assessments provide the evidence used to measure program, provider, and State efficacy. The standardized assessments used in AEL programs are peer reviewed, federally approved, and specifically built to reflect the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education. Assessments described above must be peer reviewed and federally-approved for validity and reliability.

Fairness and Equity

The American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Council on



Contact: Linda Moreno, Student Pathways Division, Linda.Moreno@vermont.gov.

Measurement in Education (NCME) have established and revised, over many years, the [Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing](#) (AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014). These recommended standards for test development have introduced heavy emphasis on validity and fairness with a focus on eliminating bias. For an assessment to have sufficient evidence for validity, test developers must investigate properties of the test that may vary across students, explore rival hypotheses related to score interpretation, and investigate social consequences – positive, negative, intended, and unintended—that may result from proper use and interpretation of the assessment (AERA, APA, NCME, 2014, pg. 11-22). With respect to fairness, standardized assessments are developed and evaluated with consideration of accessibility and universal design to increase the accessibility of assessments for students who might otherwise be disadvantaged by score interpretation (AERA, APA, NCME, 2014, pg. 49-62). Assessments used for reporting in the NRS have gone through an extensive peer review process and have been approved for use as a standard and equitable measure to be used for all students enrolled in AEL Programs across the nation. Please read the Vermont Agency of Education’s publication, [“Why We Assess: Vermont’s Focus on Equity in Educational Assessment”](#), for an extended response to fairness and equity in testing.

General Questions

Q1. Why do we have to use federally approved assessments?

A1. For performance accountability, states are required to use only federally approved assessments for AEL, which are aligned with the College and Career Readiness Standards (part of the Common Core adopted by Vermont’s Education Quality Standards) and Educational Functioning Level (EFL) Descriptors and have been peer reviewed by national experts in the field of assessment development and psychometrics. Only when this process is complete, and the state and/or the assessment publisher have proven that the assessment is reliable, can the assessment results be used in the National Reporting System (NRS) and set a valid EFL. All students across the nation must be held accountable to the same criteria.

Q2. What is wrong with the assessments I create and use in class? I feel the assessments I design are better suited to show my student’s progress.

A2. Assessments created for use during instruction or to measure knowledge of skills recently taught are often referred to as “formative assessments”. These assessments are critical in giving immediate feedback to students as well as immediate feedback on lessons. However, these assessments are not standardized, have not been peer reviewed, nor could they produce a reportable score in the NRS. They do have a clear and important purpose, just not for reporting.

Q3. Why do we have to use standardized assessments in Adult Education and Literacy programs?

A3. Assessments for federal accountability came into practice during the 1990s when the NRS was created. Educational Functioning Levels were established, and the nation needed a standardized way to measure performance across states and within socio-economic, racial, and geographical subgroups. Standardized assessments became one of a few measures with which all states and local programs were held to the same level of rigor.

Q4. What is the significance of 12 hours of instruction and mandatory assessments?

A4. It is a federal requirement that all AEL students who have received at least 12 hours of instruction are assessed to determine skill levels at entry and to document progress. Keep in mind that you can assess at any point up to the 12-hour mandate. But you must assess once 12 hours of instruction have been given.

Q5. Per assessment policy, we are supposed to assess all ABE students, in all three areas, even NRS 1-2 students. For ESL students the assessment manual specifies: "An individual who does not speak English, and therefore cannot be assessed with a standardized assessment, should be assigned to the NRS level 'Low Beginning', and formally assessed when English language acquisition warrants." Can we follow a similar procedure for native English speakers who test at NRS 1 in reading and assign NRS 1 for math (since the lowest level math TABE assessment is all word problems) and language?

A5. No. CASAS and TABE CLAS-E are English Language Proficiency tests. They are built for different purposes and the ability to assign a Lowest Obtainable Scale Score (LOSS), or highest obtainable scale score (HOSS) is done within the design of the test for validity and reliability purposes. One cannot make assertions about a score on one test because of a score achieved on an unrelated test *in another* content area.

English Language Proficiency Questions

Q1. If a student starts to work on their TABE 11/12 assessments while still engaging with their English as a Second Language (ESL) skills, which is the primary EFL subject?

A1. There are three intersecting issues at hand in this question: classification of student/federal reporting, instructional practice, and assessments. The lowest score in all three content areas on the TABE sets EFL. The first ESL assessment entered in LACES sets the EFL for English Learners.

Important note: A student is an ESL student if an English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessment is used as the first assessment given during that *fiscal/program* year. The student will be considered an ESL student for the remainder of that fiscal year. If the intention is to transition the student into the Adult Basic Education/Adult Secondary Education (ABE/ASE) population, then you will transition the student after the start of the next fiscal year. However, if the student is going to remain in the ESL program and the TABE is only being given for instructional purposes, then the student will remain in the ESL population in the next fiscal year. This will be determined by which assessments get brought forward FIRST in LACES at the beginning of the new fiscal year.

The important piece of information in deciding whether a student remains in the ESL population or transitions to the ABE/ASE population will be determined by the goals in the personalized learning plan and progress in content courses. Decisions on moving a learner from one program to another for federal reporting should include multiple data points, such as but not limited to, the student's educational goals, progress (not necessarily 'exit') on the English Language Proficiency assessment, teacher observations (formative assessments), and a student's ability to engage and have meaningful experiences in academic courses.

The other part of this question pertains to instructional practices and working on English language skills. The student's categorization in federal reports does not dictate appropriate instructional practices. An ESL student can be enrolled in the ABE/ASE population and continue to receive ESL instruction. It is at this juncture that the ABE/ASE teacher may start to integrate English Language Proficiency Standards with the Content Standards to ensure the student's needs are being addressed.

Q2. How do I know when I should start using the TABE tests, instead of the English Language Proficiency Tests?

A2. Knowing whether to test your student on the ELP assessment or transition to the TABE assessment(s) is unique to each student. To site specific situations would infer that the agency is developing policy that may or may not block students from gaining access to programs based on test scores. ELP assessments chart growth in four domains: speaking, listening, reading, writing. This is a linguistic assessment for measuring growth in a language and are normed using non-native English speakers with varying degrees of language proficiency. The TABE tests measure growth in rigorous academic standards and are normed using many English-speaking students from all over the country, including those who at one time may have been considered an English Language Learner (ELL). Once a student starts to speak, listen, read, and write in English, the student should have access to content courses and the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adults. Fundamentally, ELLs who transition to regular ABE classes, can and should, still receive ESL instruction. However, this is driven by

your student's wishes, assessments, and teacher observations on a case-by-case basis.

Q3. Does an English Language Learner need to achieve NRS 6 in all three ESL assessments in the same fiscal year to achieve Complete ESL Advanced Level?

A3. A student does not need to achieve an NRS 6 in all three ELL assessments in the same fiscal year, or at all. In Vermont, we use the Best Plus 2.0 for Speaking and Listening, CASAS Life & Work Reading, and TABE CLAS-E (no longer used for EFL beginning July 1, 2024). Each of these assessments measures a different linguistic characteristic of language. It is natural to be at different stages of proficiency for each domain. It is important to note that the idea of "exit" may or may not exist in each assessment, and a student must be exposed to rigorous academic content well before they reach an "exit" status.

Q4. What are suggested accommodations available for ESL students as they begin their TABE 11/12 journey?

Note: One needs to be careful not to confuse language barriers with disabilities. Because the TABE test uses the word "accommodations" to describe any deviation from the standardized testing process, including accessibility supports for ELLs, the response to this TABE related question will use the same terminology.

A4. First, every assessment has allowable accommodations that provide access to the testing material, and one needs to familiarize themselves with the allowable accommodations for each construct being measured. For this reason, there will be accommodations that are allowed or not allowed either by construct or by section of the test (ex. calculators).

Second, a student should never be given an allowable accommodation on a test that is not being used on a frequent basis in class. Accommodations provide access to test content, not an advantage on tested content. To summarize, testing accommodations must meet two criteria: a) be allowed on the assessment per construct being measured, and b) must be frequently used by the student in daily instruction.

Please consult the [TABE Guidelines to Inclusive Testing](#) for specific questions related to testing accommodations or accessibility supports.