

## **PREPARING YOUNG LATINO CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS: BEST PRACTICES IN ASSESSMENTS**

By Erika Beltrán

### **Summary**

Student assessments are a critical component of any early learning program. Assessments are used to inform student instruction and to ensure that children are making significant learning gains based on age-appropriate expectations. For Hispanic\* English language learner (ELL) children, assessments must be structured in a manner that accurately measures children’s progress in both content knowledge and English language development. Additionally, assessments should provide information about how programs are serving young children with diverse learning needs. This policy brief highlights the importance of developing effective assessments for young ELLs, highlights a best practice in the field, and concludes with policy recommendations which highlight how to bring effective practices to scale.†

### **Introduction**

Research shows that ongoing systemic student assessments are essential to high-quality early learning programs.<sup>1</sup> Effective early learning programs boost the quality of services by using assessments to support learning and instruction, identify children with special needs, and to evaluate the overall effectiveness of programs. As more attention has been focused on early learning services, state and federal policy proposals have placed more emphasis on the importance of assessments in directing resources and services to young children.

\* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

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## **Inside**

Summary .....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background .....	2
Best Practice: The Latin American Montessori Bilingual Public Charter School .....	3
Policy Recommendations .....	5
Endnotes .....	7

At the same time as the role of early childhood assessments has expanded, the Latino child population has grown substantially. From 2000 to 2010, the Latino child population grew by 39%—the highest in the country.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the number of English language learners (ELLs) enrolled in U.S. public schools increased 150% since 1990, while the overall student population has grown only 20%.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, ELLs comprise 40% of children between the ages of three and eight, the vast majority (75%) of whom speak Spanish at home.<sup>4</sup>

These recent demographic changes have implications for the types of assessments used by early childhood education systems and individual programs. Only by using appropriate measures will early childhood educators be able to implement instructional strategies that help children enter school ready for success and, ultimately, close the academic achievement gap that exists between students from different income, racial, and language groups.

## Background

Over the past decade, state and federal policymakers have made significant investments in early childhood education programs, including state-funded preschool, Head Start, and Early Head Start. Along with these investments have also come new mandates for data collection and student assessments. Despite debates around how to best assess young children, assessments have become an important element of publicly funded early childhood education programs. Researchers and advocates agree on general principles that should guide both policies and programs in the assessment of young children.<sup>5</sup> Yet there continues to be a lack of good tools and practices for assessing

ELLs. For this reason, it is often the case that ELL children are under- or over-identified as needing special services, or simply inaccurately assessed due to a lack of effective practices for children acquiring English as a second language. As a result, children are frequently placed in classroom settings that do not meet their needs and miss out on opportunities to receive appropriate services.

Research has shown that the rate at which young children learn a new language depends on a wide range of factors including the child's personality, aptitude for languages, interest and motivation, and the quantity and quality of language inputs.<sup>6</sup> Frequently ELL children will demonstrate dominance in one language before they progress toward bilingualism and may not perform well as native speakers in either language.<sup>7</sup> However, bilingualism has many cognitive benefits,<sup>8</sup> and becoming proficient in a language is a complex process that can take many years for children of all ages.

Given ELLs' distinct path toward language and literacy development, assessments must reflect this complex learning process. Experts in early childhood assessment have urged policymakers and programs to ensure that all screenings and assessments are culturally and linguistically appropriate and responsive and that states develop early learning guidelines that help providers track progress both in the native language and in English-language acquisition. One example of a program employing a very strong assessment regimen for ELLs is The Latin American Montessori Bilingual Public Charter School, an NCLR Affiliate based in Washington, DC.

## Best Practice: The Latin American Montessori Bilingual Public Charter School

The Latin American Montessori Bilingual (LAMB) Public Charter School offers a dual-language\* (Spanish/English) Montessori program for prekindergarten through fifth grade students. Classrooms at LAMB are multi aged, a hallmark of Montessori education that emphasizes peer-to-peer learning. LAMB currently has four primary classrooms (prekindergarten and kindergarten), three lower elementary classrooms (first through third grade) and one upper elementary classroom (fourth and fifth grade). Each classroom has two Montessori-trained instructors who teach in English and Spanish, using Montessori curricula for core academic subject matter.

LAMB boasts a comprehensive dual-language model<sup>†</sup> that promotes high levels of bilingualism, biliteracy, and academic achievement through continuous monitoring of student progress. Classrooms are structured so as to combine monolingual English speakers with children whose primary language is Spanish. LAMB's dual-language model provides an ideal environment<sup>9</sup> for conducting assessments in a setting that embraces diversity and esteem for a child's home culture (see Box 1).

LAMB has developed a comprehensive culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment regimen and employs staff who

### Box 1. LAMB Student Population

The LAMB Public Charter School has 171 students from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Nearly 22% are African American (non-Hispanic), 57.3% are Hispanic, and 21% are White (non-Hispanic). Almost one third (29.8%) of LAMB students are low-income and qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch, and just over half (51.4%) of students are identified as limited English proficient.

are trained bilingual professionals and are knowledgeable about cultural differences and norms. Additionally, LAMB's staff use both formal and informal assessments (see Tables 1 and 2) to most accurately capture the progress of young ELLs. Staff rely heavily on systematic observational assessments such as rating scales, checklists, analyses of samples of children's work, and portfolios. All of these tools and strategies are research-based.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, LAMB has an intentional approach in using language to assess children's progress. Depending on the goal of the measure and the child's level of proficiency, LAMB employs three strategies for appropriate assessment: 1) assess only in the home language, 2) assess in a language in which the child is proficient, even if it is not the child's home language, or 3) assess in both English and the child's first language.

\* The term dual-language program refers to an instructional strategy in which students are taught literacy and content in two languages and use the partner language for at least half of the instructional day, and fostering bilingualism, biliteracy, enhanced awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, and high levels of academic achievement through instruction in two languages.

<sup>†</sup> For more information about LAMB's curriculum and dual-language model, please visit [www.lambpcs.org](http://www.lambpcs.org).

**Table 1. Formal Assessments Used at LAMB**

FORMAL ASSESSMENTS
<p><b>Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS):</b> Standardized individual assessment that measures early literacy development for children in K–3</p>
<p><b>Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) in English/en español:</b> Reading comprehension test used to assess students’ reading levels, track students’ reading growth over time, and guide instruction according to students’ needs</p>
<p><b>Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA2)/Evaluación del desarrollo de la lectura 2 (EDL2):</b> Helps educators in dual-language, bilingual, and immersion classrooms identify each student’s reading ability, document progress, and implement effective reading instruction</p>
<p><b>Group Mathematics Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GMADE):</b> Standardized diagnostic tool to see what mathematical skills students have and what skills need to be taught</p>
<p><b>WIDA: Access for ELLs:</b> Large-scale test that addresses the academic English language proficiency (ELP) standards at the core of the WIDA Consortium’s approach to instructing and evaluating the English proficiency of English language learners in K–12</p>
<p><b>D.C. Comprehensive Assessment System (DC-CAS):</b> Measures the academic proficiency of students in reading, writing, and math in grades 3–12</p>

**Table 2. Informal Assessments Used at LAMB**

PRIMARY INFORMAL ASSESSMENTS
<p><b>Initial Family Conference:</b> New parents meet with teachers to share relevant information about their children and develop a plan that includes recommendations for the home</p>
<p><b>Student Portfolios:</b> Consists of student journals and work and writing samples</p>
<p><b>Weekly Individual Plans (WIP):</b> Kindergarten students develop a weekly plan with teachers focused on basic skills and age-appropriate assignments</p>

LAMB has developed various student supports that are based on assessments. Staff employ the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, a strategy that integrates assessment and intervention to maximize student achievement.<sup>11</sup> With RTI, LAMB uses data to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, and to provide evidence-based interventions.

LAMB has rigorous expectations of teachers, requiring tracking observational and formal assessments daily, which an administrator reviews weekly. Teachers use a web-based program to plan individual and group lessons, to record observations of student work, and to reflect student mastery of skills and content knowledge. This web-based data is used by teachers and administrators to assess ongoing student progress, to modify instruction, and to plan professional development activities.

## Policy Recommendations

LAMB's expertise in assessing its diverse student body provides important evidence for the use of formal and informal assessments to accurately assess ELL students. State and federal policymakers play a key role in developing systems that can support high-quality early learning programs for Hispanic and ELL children and families. Below are federal and state policy recommendations that would strengthen the use of culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments.

### Federal Policymakers

**Require the development of a comprehensive professional development plan to ensure that assessments are carried out in the most reliable manner possible.** To ensure the accuracy of assessing young ELLs, educators must have the appropriate training and skills. Policymakers should require that states provide ongoing training and professional development to help providers better understand how to adapt assessments for culturally and linguistically diverse children. Without this understanding, providers could potentially collect inaccurate information about young children's learning progress.

**Create a clearinghouse of effective assessment strategies and provide funding to disseminate best practices.** The Department of Health and Human Services should partner with the Department of Education in developing a clearinghouse of effective assessment strategies for young ELLs to help guide early learning programs. Moreover, federal agencies should work with programs like Head Start to collect and disseminate best practices.

**Incentivize states to develop quality instruction for ELLs.** Good assessments in tandem with quality instruction are more likely to improve student learning. ECE programs

across the country have developed innovative and effective strategies for working with ELLs. Congress must encourage states to improve the quality of their zero-to-five programs by replicating research-based, successful approaches to teaching and assessing young ELLs—particularly in dual-language instructional programs—through competitive funding streams.

### State Policymakers

**Ensure that student progress and program assessments are valid and reliable for ELLs.** In spite of the tremendous growth in the Latino population, many states and programs use student assessments that are not valid and reliable for assessing ELLs. State policymakers should require all publicly funded early learning programs to use assessment tools that meet these basic assessment criteria. Additionally, state agencies should monitor the use of assessments so that they measure what they are designed to assess. For example, assessments of language proficiency should rely only on instruments and procedures designed to assess language proficiency, not those designed to assess content knowledge.

**Facilitate data collection efforts to ensure that data is comparable and cohesive.** State agencies should promote comprehensive data collection efforts that are aligned from preschool through K–12. In addition, agencies should ensure that the data collected on student progress, particularly for ELLs, is pulled from a valid and reliable source, so as to ensure comparability.

**Develop early learning guidelines that establish benchmarks for English-language development.** To help ECE programs meet the needs of ELL children and families, states should put in place a system of standards and expectations, such as early learning guidelines, that delineate outcomes for children acquiring

English as a second language. These standards must provide benchmarks for making progress in both English and their native language. This is critical, as strong early learning standards serve as a guide for professional development and drive the creation of instructional strategies and assessments.

**Align assessments to PreK–3rd grade to provide a continuum of expected outcomes.** State policymakers have several opportunities to ensure that the K–12 system aligns its outcomes and expectation with early learning programs, including the implementation of the Common Core State Standards Initiative and the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge Fund. By focusing on PreK–3rd grade alignment, school systems can better ensure that children are on a direct path toward reading proficiency by third grade, a key determinant of future school success.<sup>13</sup>

## Endnotes

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