

Rhode Island Teachers of English Language Learners
Follow-Up Commentary on S-0968

June 6, 2013

Members of the Senate Committee On Education
State of Rhode Island General Assembly
82 Smith Street
Providence Rhode Island 02903

Dear Members of the Senate Committee on Education

Rhode Island Teachers of English Language Learners (RITELL) appreciates the opportunity afforded to interested educational partners to comment on S-0968 as introduced by Senators Gallo, McCaffrey, Goodwin, Ruggerio, and Jabour.

In order to respond to some of the excellent questions asked at the hearing about English Language Learners and how to craft a policy that would both hold districts accountable while creating equitable testing conditions for students, we would like to make several points, as well as correct some misimpressions created at the hearing about our position.

First, it is not the position of RITELL that all ELLs are deficient in mathematics and that adapting tests will make no difference to their performance as was asserted last night at the close of the hearing. On the contrary, many ELLs would be able to perform if given the assessment in a language they could understand. Therefore, we agree with the provision in Senate Bill 0968 to offer tests in other languages and recommend that Rhode Island offer the test to the three highest incidence language groups in Rhode Island. These language groups are Spanish (75%), Creole, Patois or Portuguese (10%), and Asian Languages (8%), according to RI Kids Count in their *2013 RI Kids Count Factbook*. Of course such assessments can only be administered to students who are literate in their native languages. But when it comes to the secondary grades, if ELLs are arriving to Rhode Island schools at later ages, most would have been educated in their home languages and would meet this criteria. We also urge that Rhode Island offer a *Plain English* version of the assessment to all other ELLs. *Plain English* is a form of test wording in which all phrasing is made as simple and understandable as possible to aid ELLs in interpreting the questions; it does not influence the test results. The focus is on comprehending the task at hand. So contrary to the final speaker's position, it does not reduce the cognitive demand of the questions, it just expresses prompts and questions in "plain English" to give ELLs a chance to understand what is being asked of them.

Second, the Department of Education conducts an annual ELL Census and knows very well who the ELL students are in terms of their home languages and in terms of their English proficiency levels as measured per RIDE's own ELL Assessment System; the *ACCESS for ELLs Assessment*. Therefore, it was somewhat disingenuous to state that the Department of Education doesn't have exact data on what languages are spoken for students at each grade level. We could be using this information to determine who can sit for exams in English (Expanding, Bridging, Proficient ELL Students) and who does not have the requisite English proficiency to sit for tests in English (Entering, Beginning, Developing Proficiency ELL Students) in order to determine which students need native language or Plain English versions of state assessments. There are close to 9,000 ELLs in Rhode Island (8,855 as per RI Kids Count 2013 *Factbook*). But in addition to all the documented ELLs, there are

additional ELLs who have been waived from services by their parents or who have recently exited ESL services. So significant numbers of Rhode Island students are affected by annual testing conducted exclusively in English; a language ELLs are still learning.

Third, we want to reiterate our support for annual assessment, if conducted in an equitable manner, to make districts accountable for the achievement of their ELLs. But we oppose use of the NECAP assessment for determining graduation from high school because standardized tests conducted in English or even given through translated versions have been documented to have many threats to their reliability and validity when it comes to language minority students. For this reason, we urge a true multiple-measure system in which ELLs are given every opportunity to show what they know through multiple measures of their performance and in which the NECAP results do not dominate in decision making. We further urge greater use of the native language in the supports offered to recently arrived students so they can learn as much as possible, as quickly as possible to meet our rigorous educational requirements, while they are in the process of learning English.

Therefore, for all these reasons, we urge the Committee to continue to work on these issues blending the best elements of S-0968 and S-0117, specifically continuing annual assessments administered in the fairest possible way (i.e. native language and Plain English version) while not tying performance on the NECAP assessment with graduation from high school. Instead, we urge that annual accountability assessments be used for the originally intended purposes: to improve the quality of the education provided to Rhode Island students.

Respectfully, Nancy Cloud
On Behalf of Rhode Island Teachers
of English Language Learners (RITELL)
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