

ORAL Testimony presented to the Honorable Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education by Dr. J. Andrés Ramírez on behalf of RITELL (Jan 25th 2011):

I am speaking on behalf of Rhode Island Teachers of English Language Learners (RITELL), an official affiliate of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). While we applaud the Board of Regent's initiatives that are designed to ensure high school graduation for all Rhode Island students, we have some serious reservations about the proposed regulations as they apply to English Language Learners. This is because, according to data reported by Rhode Island Kids Count, 99% of ELLs in RI would be at risk of either not getting a diploma at all or would only get a third tier diploma which announces to everybody that these youth were not proficient on NECAPs. Certainly, this system cannot be viewed as working for Rhode Island's English Language Learners.

Out of courtesy with the audience and abiding to the constraints imposed at this hearing, I will only highlight our three major concerns. We urge the Regents to read our short written document as it is more complete and gives more useful details for your consideration.

## Concern #1 Appropriate Assessment of ELLs

In Rhode Island, Students with Limited English Proficiency are identified by RIDE so they can receive special programs and support. Yet, the same agency that certifies that the students are not proficient in English, then administers NECAP tests in English to the students it knows are not proficient in that language and reports the scores; scores that are neither valid nor reliable measures of achievement because they have been

administered in a language the students are still learning. Currently, a high percentage of ELLs (80-100%) are failing the NECAPs, largely because it is administered in a language they do not know. These failure rates point not to the inadequacy of our students, but rather to the ineffectiveness of the testing procedures for ELLs. We just aren't learning what they know and don't know. We are only learning they don't know English.

Fair assessments must be constructed; assessments whose results can be trusted. RITELL recommends RIDE not to assess content in English until students have sufficient proficiency to test fairly on the measure. RITELL also proposes viable alternatives in our written testimony.

## Concern #2 Appropriate Instruction for ELLs.

Research consistently shows that it takes from 5-7 years to acquire Academic English; the kind of English needed to demonstrate competence on academic assessments administered in English (Collier, Cummins, Hakuta). This may mean allowing students who enter late in high school and have appropriate content area literacy levels in their home language to graduate with a special Regents Diploma certifying that they are proficient learners with high levels of achievement in their native language, and that the only thing they are lacking is time to learn English. With multiple pathways, they could participate in English language development programs after they complete high school.

Use what the research shows works with ELLs. Native language instruction, coupled with gradual introduction of the second language has produced a consistent pattern of greater achievement in the second language at the end of 4-7 years of schooling. The International Charter School in Pawtucket and

Alfred Lima school in Providence have met all AYP measures using half the English instructional time of English Only Schools (they are using half of their instructional time in the students' native language and half in English). Programs that make active use of children's native languages and aim to develop them fully prove that, in an era of global competitiveness and instead of seeing children's languages as a barrier to learning, we can use it as a resource to support children's success.

In low incidence districts, or for languages for which native language content area classes are not possible, promote well-implemented Sheltered Content Area instruction by well-prepared teachers. Data shows that when quality sheltered content and ESL instruction is delivered to ELLs they succeed.

**Concern #3: Make sure all Rhode Island teachers are prepared to serve ELLs, particularly secondary teachers who must be effective if more secondary ELLs are to succeed and graduate.**

So our message is three-fold: test students fairly and accurately; do not test students who do not know English in English.

Provide research-based quality programming to ELLs: programming that combines native language support and well-designed and delivered sheltered instruction. Ensure that all RI teachers are fully qualified and prepared to serve ELLs effectively.