

Setting national standards for English learners a formidable task

May 2 2013

Arriving at a national definition of "English language learner" is a formidable task, best undertaken in a years-long process, a University of California, Davis, expert argued Tuesday at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Francisco.

According to Jamal Abedi, a professor of education at UC Davis who focuses on educational and psychological assessments, states use such a wide variety of criteria to evaluate [English learners](#) that devising common standards is complex.

He presented his paper, "Toward a Common Definition of [English Language Learners](#): Issues and Options," at the conference.

Federal law requires states to annually assess English learners in four areas—reading, writing, listening and speaking. States are also required to monitor these students' progress in attaining [language proficiency](#).

"However, an English language learner student who is classified as 'basic,' 'intermediate,' 'advanced,' or 'English proficient' in one state may not be similarly classified in another state," Abedi said.

Standards even vary from district to district, he said.

As a key policy motivation, the U.S. Department of Education is encouraging states participating in either of the two "Race to the Top" assessment consortia to establish a common definition of English

learner.

"Race to the Top" is a federal program that began three years ago and offers grants to schools that undertake significant educational reforms.

Abedi said one reason for variation among districts and states is that listening and speaking skills, for example, usually come faster than writing and [reading skills](#). If states weigh or score these skills differently, definitions of "proficient" will also vary.

"The complex policy and technical issues involved in developing a common English learner definition are going to require a well-defined [roadmap](#) of processes and decisions for all consortia members to enact over time," Abedi said.

"[States](#) and the consortia to which they belong should plan now for this process."

More information: www.aera.net/EventsMeetings/Announcements/10208/Default.aspx

Provided by UC Davis

Citation: Setting national standards for English learners a formidable task (2013, May 2) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-05-national-standards-english-learners-formidable.html>

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