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for English Language Learners a Decade after  
the No Child Left Behind Act**

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# **District Readiness to Implement Standards-based Reform for English Language Learners a Decade after the No Child Left Behind Act**

**Naomi Lee**

With the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), states receiving federal funds were, for the first time, required to report the educational progress of their English Language Learner (ELL) students. In the decade since, states have had to 1) adopt English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards that correspond with state content standards and are designed to raise proficiency in academic content and academic English, and 2) report annual progress and attainment of both English proficiency and academic achievement by ELLs. While some states followed ELP standards and carried out assessments prior to NCLB, the new legislation required all states to do so. For better or worse, these requirements formally endorse standards-based educational reform for ELLs. The present paper reports on district engagement with such reform in the decade since NCLB was enacted.

## **ELP standards and assessments**

Standards and assessments for ELP are both similar to and different from those for content. The notion of alignment (Cook, 2006; Cook, Lee, & Alt, in preparation), applies to both. Just as content standards and assessments should be aligned to each other and to instruction, alignment among ELP standards, ELP assessments, and instruction is recommended (Assessment and Accountability Comprehensive Center, 2009). A fundamental difference between ELP standards and content standards is that the former can represent target trajectories for English *language development over time*, whereas the latter represent expectations for *subject matter mastery at a point in time*. ELP assessment scores locate students' English proficiencies in listening, speaking, reading, and writing domains along the developmental continuum represented in ELP standards. In contrast, content assessment scores typically do not indicate students' developmental level with respect to content knowledge. In a well-aligned system, students' ELP scores are used with both ELP standards and state content standards to design curriculum and instruction that provide ELLs access to grade-level content while also supporting their language development along the trajectory specified in the ELP standards.

Because differences in the design and intended uses of ELP versus content standards and assessments are complex, and their use requires knowledge of second language development, educators and administrators need significant preparation to implement an aligned, standards-based system for ELLs. Such preparation should cover second language acquisition, curriculum and instruction for ELLs, testing accommodations, and the roles of culture, school, and home communities in ELL education (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008).

## **A shortage of teachers trained in serving ELLs**

The United States is ill prepared to provide well-trained teachers who can serve a rapidly growing and geographically dispersed ELL student population. NCLB mandates high-quality

## Standards-based reform for ELLS

teachers in all core academic classrooms but does not require that teachers serving ELL students receive specialized preparation. Perhaps not surprisingly, fewer than 13% of teachers nationwide have been trained in serving culturally and linguistically diverse students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). At the same time, increasing numbers of immigrants are settling in rural areas (Kandel & Cromartie, 2004). The growing geographic dispersal of immigrants is reflected in the proportion of teachers who have taught at least one ELL, which rose from 15% in 1991 to 43% in 2001 (Zehler et al., 2003).

### **The crucial role of content teachers**

Content teachers play a crucial role in ELL students' academic opportunities. Particularly beyond primary school, content teachers have subject matter expertise that English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers cannot be expected to impart, not least because ESL teachers usually support ELLs across several core subject areas. Since the trend is for ELL students to be placed into general education classrooms (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005), content teachers bear increasing responsibility for providing ELLs with language support. With adequate preparation, general education teachers can do much to improve ELL opportunities: research shows that ELLs can develop literacy better during content classroom instruction than in isolation (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Meltzer & Hamann, 2005).

### **Do standards-based approaches to ELL education work?**

Can a standards-based approach to ELL education improve ELL outcomes, including not only their achievement scores but also graduation and college completion rates, lifetime earnings, civic engagement, and other measures of "success" that society values? Some educational researchers criticize NCLB for not ensuring equitable education and raising ELL achievement (Bielenberg & Fillmore, 2004; Cummins, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010), while others credit NCLB for making the education system more accountable to ELLs (Laguardia & Goldman, 2007; Liu, Spicuzza, & Erickson, 1999).

While NCLB has not eliminated the achievement gap and is unlikely to do so by 2014, states might be in the early stages of implementation and may yet transform in ways that benefit ELLs. Concrete ways of effectively implementing ELL accountability systems have been proposed (e.g., Assessment and Accountability Comprehensive Center, 2009; Short, 2000; WestEd, 2000), but no national evaluations of the implementation or effectiveness of NCLB on ELLs have been conducted. I agree with a basic tenet of evaluation research: "[I]nterventions should be evaluated for impact only when they have been in place long enough to have ironed out implementation problems" (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). In this spirit, this study asked: **How engaged are administrators and educators in ELP standards-based reform for ELL students in their districts?**

Research began at the district level, since districts have substantial influence over students' opportunities to succeed in the era of NCLB. Districts largely determine the priority of initiatives, control the selection of curricular materials, make key staffing decisions, and are gatekeepers of the professional development budget (Spillane, 2004).

## Standards-based reform for ELLS

In terms of promoting ELL growth in ELP and literacy, several characteristics appear to distinguish higher from lower performing districts. According to the Council of Great City Schools study of large, urban districts, those that were successful in developing ELL proficiency were more able than unsuccessful districts to do the following: communicate a vision for improving ELL instruction, design and monitor instructional programming for ELLs, advocate for ELLs, support ELL reform implementation, staff districts and schools with ELL professionals, provide professional development for all who impact ELLs, create shared accountability for ELL success, and use and disseminate student data to determine ELL needs, target instruction, and support teacher/administrator professional development (Horwitz et al., 2009).

One limitation of Horwitz et al. (2009) is that the districts sampled had ELL populations of 10,000 or greater. While many ELLs reside in large urban areas, the practices of districts with smaller numbers of ELLs are also important to understand, especially given the immigration trends mentioned earlier. Students in small districts are at great risk of “falling through the cracks,” since those districts may not have the resources to fund ELL specialists, ELL-focused professional development, or school-wide initiatives targeting ELLs. Our study was motivated in large part by a desire to understand the unique learning context of ELLs in districts with small ELL populations, in particular those districts with fewer than 500 ELLs. Our specific research questions were:

1. How prepared are district-level ELL staff to serve the needs of ELLs?
2. To what extent are teachers trained in and using ELP standards and assessments?

## Method

### Sampling plan and participant selection

This study was commissioned by the WIDA Consortium.<sup>1</sup> Of the 22 member states that participated in the 2009-2010 testing cycle, over 75% of districts had fewer than 100 ELL students (see Figure 1, next page). Using WIDA Consortium data, a stratified, random sample of 150 districts was drawn from among the 2,017 districts in the 16 states whose 2008-2009 ACCESS for ELLs® data was available at the time of the study. Stratification variables were district ELL enrollment (four levels) and years the district had administered ACCESS for ELLs® (three levels), since, among those data available, these variables were thought to most affect our research questions. Districts with fewer than 10 ELL students were not included in the sample.

***Participant recruitment.*** Contact information for the district-level person most responsible for ELL matters (hereafter referred to as the “district ELL lead”) in the 150 randomly selected districts was obtained through state education agencies. An electronic survey was

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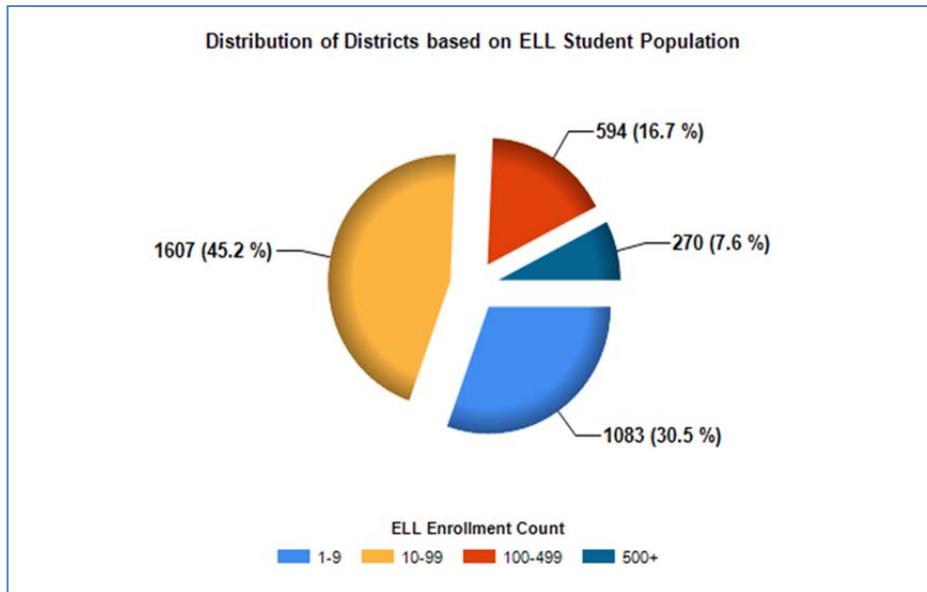
<sup>1</sup> World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) is a consortium of 28 states that use a common set of English language proficiency standards and/or a common English language proficiency assessment (ACCESS for ELLs). See [www.wida.us](http://www.wida.us) for more information.

## Standards-based reform for ELLS

distributed via email to the district ELL leads in spring 2010. Participants received a \$10 gift certificate upon completion of the survey.

**Instrument.** The electronic survey was developed in collaboration with WIDA Consortium staff using an online survey (Qualtrics Labs, Inc., 2002). All states surveyed were WIDA Consortium members that had adopted WIDA ELP standards and the WIDA ELP assessment, ACCESS for ELLs®. District ELL leads were asked about 1) their knowledge of their state’s current ELP standards and assessment, 2) the awareness of, training in, and use of the WIDA standards and assessment reports by teachers in their district, and 3) district professional development plans.

**Figure 1. District ELL enrollment in WIDA Consortium states, 2009-10**



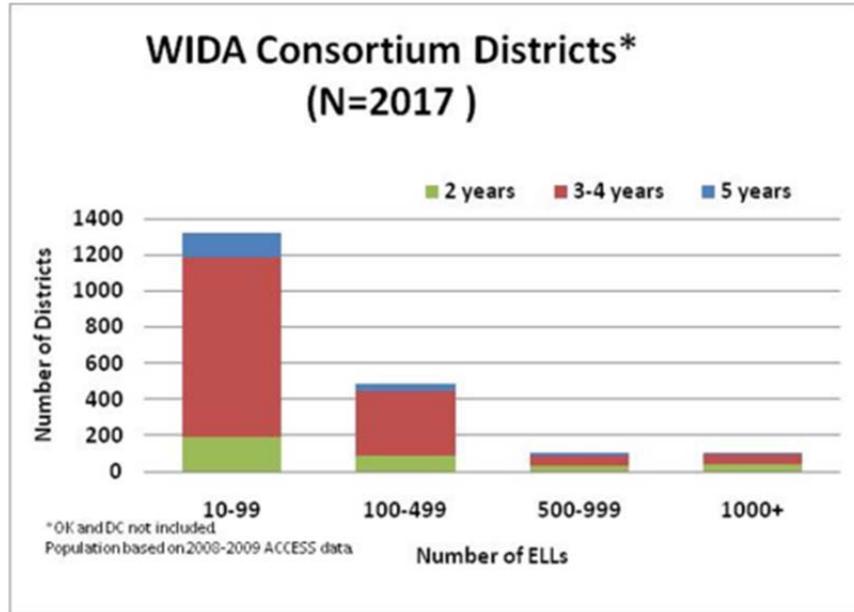
## Analysis and Results

### Sample

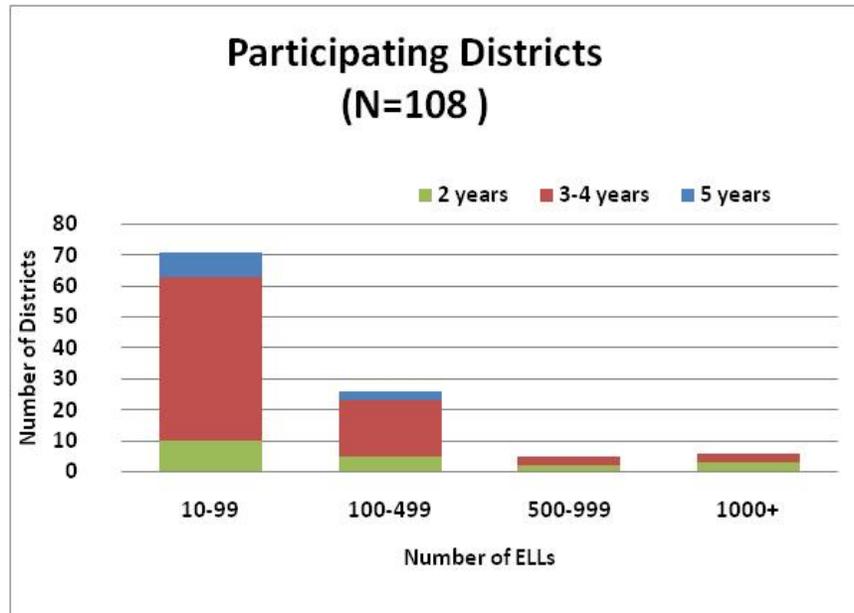
The survey response rate was 72% (108 of 150 districts), which corresponds to a confidence interval of 6%. Hence, the survey results are highly generalizable to the WIDA Consortium. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, next page, the distribution of districts participating in the survey corresponded well with the distribution of districts in the WIDA Consortium. Only 11 districts in the sample had ELL populations of 500 or greater. While we analyzed subpopulations of districts based on our stratification variables (years administering ACCESS for ELLs® and ELL population size for 2008-2009), these sample sizes were too small to be representative and thus were excluded from the analysis.

**Who is responsible for ELL matters at the district level?** While we asked state education agencies to identify the “district ELL coordinator or equivalent,” we anticipated that the person

**Figure 2. Population of WIDA Consortium districts in the 2008-2009 testing cycle**

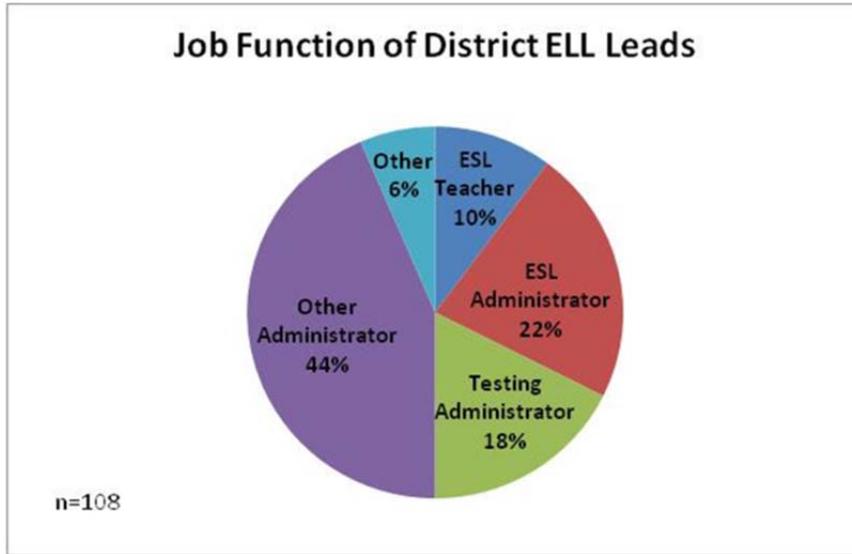


**Figure 3. Distribution of districts participating in the 2010 survey**



most responsible for ELL matters would also have non-ELL responsibilities. Indeed, district ELL leads held a variety of job functions (see Figure 4, next page). While 22% held job titles suggesting they were primarily responsible for ELL administrative matters, such as “ESL Coordinator” or “ELL Program Director,” and 10% were ESL/ELL teachers, the remaining 68% held titles indicating their primary responsibility was not ELL-focused. For instance, 44% of our sample included non-ELL related administrators with titles such as “Director of Curriculum and Instruction” and “Assistant Superintendent,” 18% were testing administrators, and 6% held non-administrative

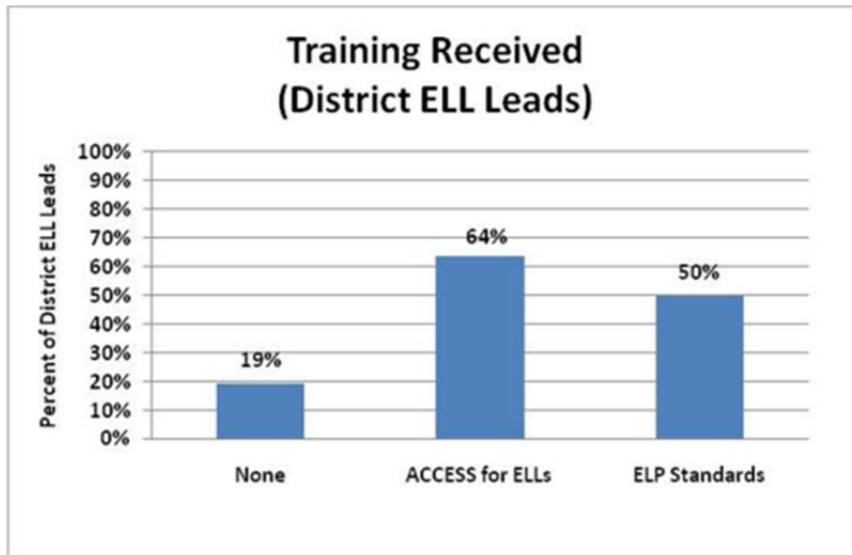
**Figure 4. Job functions of survey participants**



and non-ELL related titles such as “Counselor” or “Reading Specialist.” These results indicate that, in most districts, there is no single staff person focused exclusively on ELL matters.

*How prepared are district-level ELL staff to implement NCLB requirements for ELP standards and assessments?* We had no specific hypotheses about the educational preparation of district ELL leads. Our survey indicated that slightly more than one-quarter (28%) hold a degree in ESL/Bilingual Education/TESOL or have an ESL/Bilingual certification or endorsement. We asked participants whether they had training in two major components of an ELL accountability system: ELP standards and the aligned ELP assessments. Approximately 50% and 64% of all district ELL leads reported receiving training in WIDA ELP standards and the WIDA ELP assessment (ACCESS for ELLs®), respectively (see Figure 5).

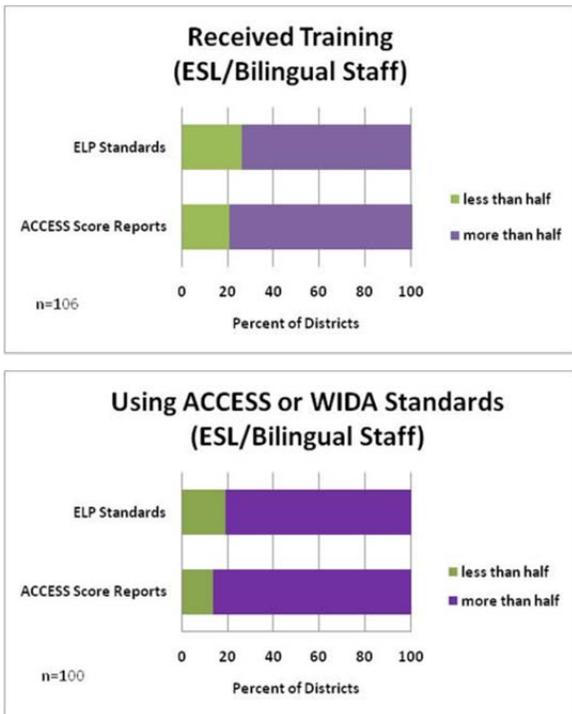
**Figure 5. Percent of district ELL leads who have been trained in WIDA ELP standards and assessment (ACCESS for ELLs®)**



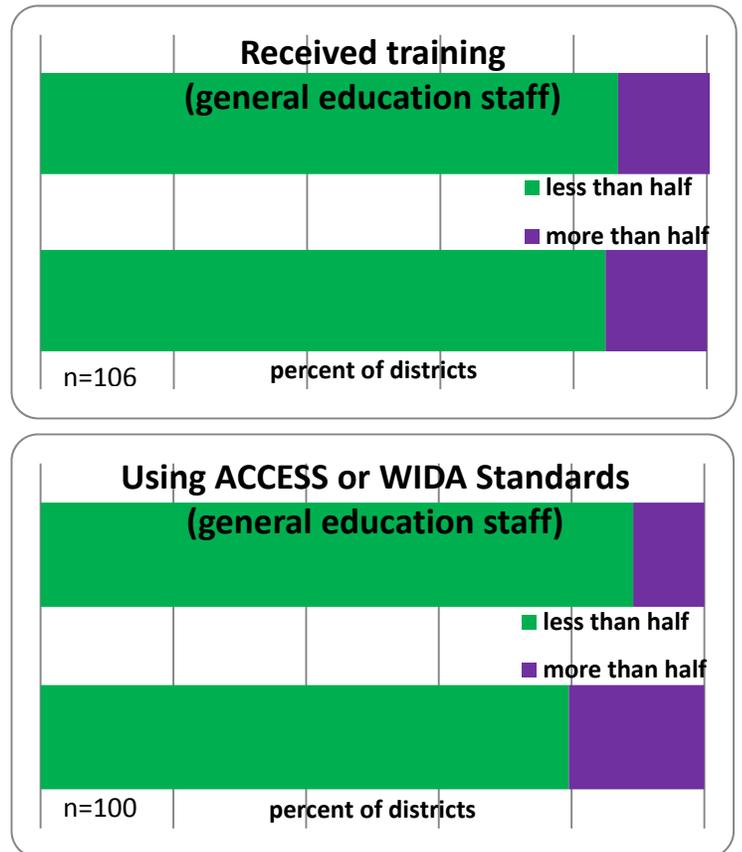
Standards-based reform for ELLS

*To what extent are teachers trained in and using ELP standards and assessments?* We asked participants to estimate the percent of teachers in their district who had received training in and were using the WIDA ELP standards and ELP assessment score reports. Approximately 80% of district leads reported that the majority of their ESL/Bilingual staff had been trained in and were using both (see Figure 6). Estimates for general education staff were the inverse: a majority of district leads (80%) estimated that fewer than half of their general education staff had been trained in and were using the standards or assessment reports (see Figure 7).

**Figure 6. Estimated portion of district ESL/Bilingual staff that has received training on and are using WIDA ELP standards and score reports**

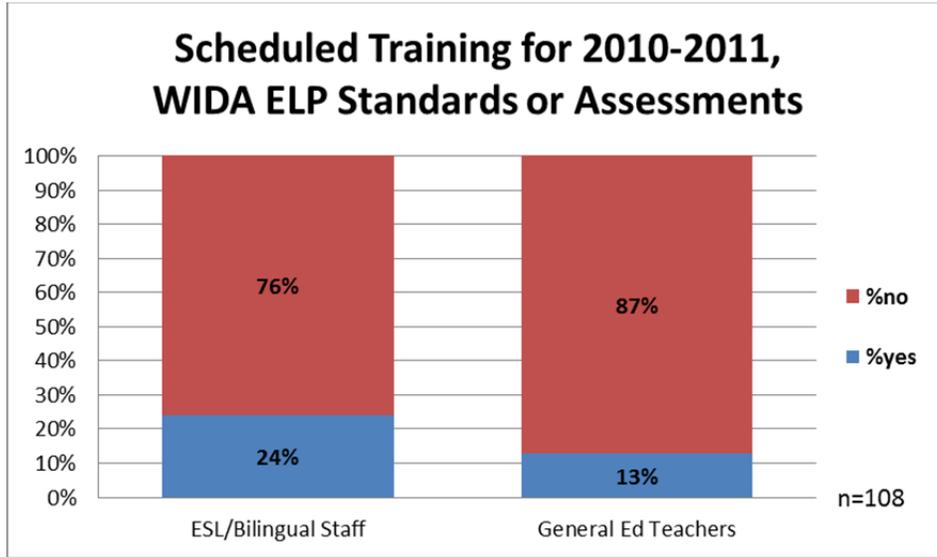


**Figure 7. Estimated portion of district general education staff that has received training on and are using WIDA ELP standards and score reports**



We also asked district ELL leads about their professional development plans (see Figure 8, next page). Results show that 24% of districts had scheduled WIDA ELP standards or assessment training for their ESL/Bilingual staff at the time of the survey, and 13% had scheduled such training for the general education staff. Because the survey was conducted in May-June 2010, not all districts may have completed their professional development planning for the 2010-2011 school year, which would negatively bias the reported results.

**Figure 8. District training on WIDA ELP standards or assessments scheduled for 2010-2011**



### Discussion

We used survey data from a representative sample of WIDA Consortium districts to examine district engagement—from administrators to educators—in ELP standards-based reform for ELLs. The following is a discussion of our findings.

#### District engagement

Our findings that 72% of district ELL leads have no formal education in either ESL or bilingual education, and 68% have non-ELL job titles, is deeply unsettling. It raises the question of whether districts can be expected to effectively design and implement ELL initiatives. We found that district preparation in state ELP standards and assessments is more substantial (see Figure 5, on page 6), though half of the district ELL leads have never been trained in ELP standards. Implementing ELP standards minimally entails aligning standards, assessments, curriculum, and instruction such that ELP assessment data are used to develop curricular improvements informed by ELP standards. Our results suggest that the districts surveyed would likely need significant external support to implement ELP standards.

#### Teacher engagement

The disparity between ESL/Bilingual and general education staff engagement in ELL accountability is striking but not surprising in light of national trends mentioned earlier (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). If the estimates of teacher training in and use of ELP standards and assessments are accurate, then few general education teachers are prepared to implement a standards-based curriculum that addresses ELL students’ language needs. There is little reason to believe that this situation would have changed during the 2010-2011 academic

## Standards-based reform for ELLS

year; teacher professional development plans indicated that very few districts (13%) planned to train general education teachers to implement ELP standards in their classrooms (Figure 8).

While most districts (80%) reported that over half of their ESL/Bilingual staff has been trained in their state's ELP standards and assessments, as discussed earlier, ESL/Bilingual staff cannot be relied upon to meet all the language development needs of ELLs.

### Conclusion

Overall, it appears that districts with small numbers of ELLs (fewer than 500) are not prepared to implement a standard-based approach to ELL education. The disproportionate allocation of professional development given to ELP assessments over standards at both the district and school-levels suggests that meeting federal reporting requirements may take priority over implementing a system that aligns assessments, standards, curriculum and instruction. NCLB accountability requirements may promote such misalignment: while NCLB requires states to establish ELP standards that promote content achievement, states are not required to report whether or how such standards are implemented. Instead, states report Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs) (NCLB, 2002, §3122), which requires no knowledge of ELP standards. AMAOs should indicate the level of alignment between curriculum and instruction and a state's content and ELP standards, as well as the effectiveness of classroom instruction. According to the logic of the standards-based reform movement, a lack of progress in ELP development (AMAO 1), English proficiency attainment (AMAO 2), or reading and math proficiency attainment (AMAO 3) should trigger adjustments to curriculum and instruction. In light of the results reported in this study showing low engagement with standards-based approaches to ELL education, it is unlikely that NCLB requirements have driven such transformations. Research in the ELL context on NCLB "washback" (Alderson & Wall, 1993), the influence of testing on teaching and learning, is needed.

The present study adds to the literature by highlighting the situation of districts with fewer than 500 ELLs, which are understudied and face unique constraints in serving ELLs. Such districts likely need additional funds to secure a highly qualified, ELL-focused district ELL lead, staff schools with sufficient ESL/Bilingual specialists, and provide general education teachers with ELL-relevant training. Districts with small numbers of ELLs that succeed with their ELL students should be closely studied; they may have quite different characteristics than those identified by Horwitz et al. (2009) in their study of large urban districts.

The aim of this study was to understand the extent of district engagement in standards-based reform for ELL students. Yet, a larger question warrants investigation: What is the potential of standards-based approaches to improve ELL outcomes? We hope this study stimulates further research into the possibilities and limits of NCLB-era educational approaches for ELL students.

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