

**Core  
Function**

**Process for Identify-  
ing and Monitoring**

**Effective  
Practice**

**The process for identification of ELs is  
standardized.**

### **Success Indicator PR03: School staff administers a home language survey to parents/guardians of ALL students. (5896)**

**Overview:** The home language survey must include questions used for identifying potential English learners who then should be tested.

Translated versions of surveys and/or assistance in completing the surveys are provided to families and the availability of translated versions and assistance is overtly communicated to families. This assistance is confidential and school staff clearly communicates this to the parents.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no specific federal requirement for standardized home language surveys (HLS) to be administered to identify ELs. As a result, states and districts have widely varying practices for identifying ELs within a 30-day window. A valid HLS is crucial to ensuring that the number of students needing EL services is accurate. Poor practices, such as having only one question or failing to compare HLS to proficiency test results, can result in both over- and under-identification of ELs.

**Questions:** What are the laws related to initially identifying ELs? What are the best questions to include on a three-question HLS? What are the best questions to include on a longer HLS? What are some challenges and best practices with administering a HLS?

#### **What are the laws related to initially identifying ELs with a HLS?**

Title III legislation under the federal Every Student Succeeds Acts requires that states offer a “timely and meaningful consultation with local educational agencies” and create and implement “standardized, statewide entrance and exit procedures” for ELs, “including an assurance that all students who may be [ELs] are assessed for such status within 30 days of enrollment in a school in the State” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 2). It does not, however, require states to administer a HLS, though this is the most common tool used (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In virtually all states, the identification of ELs occurs first with a HLS, followed by a proficiency test (Lopez, Pooler & Linqanti, 2016).

Since a HLS is not technically mandatory in many places, there are wide variations in these surveys (Bailey, 2010). The available research suggests that there is little need for these differences, as common formats and questions are effective at identifying ELs when comparing HLS results to proficiency test results (Goldenberg & Rutherford-Quach, 2010). Yet many states lack a standardized procedure, which jeopardizes the validity and reliability of the HLS (Lopez, Pooler & Linqanti, 2016; Bailey & Kailey, 2013).



### What are the best questions to include on a three-question HLS?

Most commonly, a school will send home a home language survey or have parents fill one out when registering their children. Sample home language survey questions typically include:

1. Which language did your child first learn when he or she began to talk?
2. Which language(s) are spoken at home?
3. Was your child ever placed in a bilingual/ESL program in a U.S. school? (Bailey & Kelley, 2013)

The Office of Civil Rights has also approved the following questions:

1. What is the primary language used in the home, regardless of the language spoken by the student?
2. What is the language most often spoken by the student?
3. What is the language that the student first acquired? (U.S. Department of Education, 2016)

Small variations such as these have little effect on the validity of the surveys. However, an attempt by Arizona to reduce the number of questions down to one resulted in under-identification of students who needed services (Goldenberg & Rutherford-Quach, 2010; Zehr, 2010). Reducing a HLS below three questions is not recommended.

### What are the best questions to include on a longer HLS?

More recent research suggests that the typical three-question survey may be oversimplifying student backgrounds. A comparison of a three-question versus a fourteen-question HLS in California identified more students as potential English learners. The longer survey also identified 40% of students as fluent in both English and another language, whereas the former survey identified only 6% of those students. However, both surveys had a 90% success rate at identifying English learners based on their proficiency scores (Haas, Tran, Linqunti & Bailey, 2015). While longer surveys may not change the baseline and increase EL service costs, they can provide more nuanced information about student abilities, which teachers can better use to tailor instruction.

The longer survey used the following questions:

#### *Current Language Use*

- 1.a. Which language or languages does your child currently understand?
- 1.b. Which language or languages does your child currently speak?
- 1.c. Which language or languages does your child currently read?
- 1.d. Which language or languages does your child currently write?

#### *Frequency of Language Use*

- 2.a. Which language does your child most frequently use at home with parent(s)/guardian(s)?
- 2.b. Which language does your child most frequently use at home with brothers and sisters?
- 2.c. Which language does your child most frequently use at home with other family members/caregivers?
- 2.d. Which language does your child most frequently use in school or preschool?
- 2.e. Which language does your child most frequently use outside of home and school with friends and others?

#### *Frequency of Language Exposure*

- 3.a. Which language does your child most frequently hear at home with parent(s)/guardians?
- 3.b. Which language does your child most frequently hear at home with brothers and sisters? (Not applicable)
- 3.c. Which language does your child most frequently hear at home with other family members/ caregivers? (Not applicable)
- 3.d. Which language does your child most frequently hear in school or preschool? (Not applicable)
- 3.e. Which language does your child most frequently hear outside of home and school with friends and others? (Haas et al., 2015).

Such a survey gives more information to educators without creating issues of misidentification.

### What are some challenges and best practices with administering a HLS?

Providing translated surveys in multiple languages is a common challenge for districts. Some may also worry that adding too many languages to surveys will increase the length of the survey and decrease the likelihood



that households will respond. However, no evidence has been found that adding languages to surveys delivered through the mail decreased response rates (Brick, Montaquila, Han, & Williams, 2012). The U.S. Department of Education (2016) also provides a HLS in multiple languages for districts to use in case translation services are not available in-house.

States typically adopt one of four approaches to HLS: mandating a specific form, providing a sample form, allowing districts to develop their own HLS, or not mandating a HLS at all (Bailey & Kelley, 2013). The Department of Education (2016) provides concrete recommendations on how to effectively develop, implement, and intercept HLS regardless of the state regulations (Lopez, Pooler & Linqunti, 2014). Ideally states as a whole should do the following, but districts and school should be prepared to implement the following principles wherever the state does not provide them.

1. Provide clear guidance to schools on HLS use, including where and how a HLS should be given (i.e. during an in-school registration process, orally, mailed, or digitally).
2. Establish clear rules for how to interpret HLS results, particularly if using longer surveys.
3. HLS questions should focus on the language(s) the student currently speaks and understands, the student's degree of current English language use, and the students' degree of current English language exposure.
4. The HLS should be given in multiple home languages in written and oral modes for parents with varying levels of literacy.
5. The state, district, or school should evaluate whether the results of the HLS match later proficiency tests to see if the HLS is valid and reliable (Lopez, Pooler & Linqunti, 2014).

There is no need to re-invent the wheel when deciding on a HLS with so many resources available. Consider the complexity and diversity of your community's ELs when deciding on which questions to include, as well as standard rules for administration.

## References

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