Examination of Identification and Placement Decisions Made for K–12 English Learners

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Executive Summary

High-stakes decisions are often made for English learners in the K–12 context based on their performance on English language proficiency assessments. Although states and districts provide guidelines for making such decisions, little is known regarding how educators actually make decisions at the district and school levels. Understanding these decisions is important as they often have significant consequences. In addition, evidence regarding the decisions is necessary to support validity claims made regarding the use of the assessments.

This study examines how K–12 educators identify and place English learners in language instruction educational programs. These educators serve ELs in different capacities, including district coordinators, instructional coaches, administrators, teachers, and counselors. Participants were sampled from 35 U.S. states, using stratified random sampling. A total of 476 educators (207 district-level and 269 school-level educators) completed an online survey on EL identification and placement.

Findings reveal information regarding (1) educators who make decisions about English learner identification and placement, (2) instruments and information sources used for decision making, and (3) educators' perceived appropriateness of the decisions. Results provide practical implications for improving the English learner identification and placement decision at the district and school levels.

Keywords: K–12 English learners, identification of English learners, placement of English learners, decisions for English learners, Assessment Use Argument

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Students in kindergarten through Grade 12 (K–12) designated as English learners (ELs) made up 9.4% of U.S. public school students in 2014-15, and this proportion will continue to grow over the next several decades (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Legal requirements dictate that ELs have the right to receive appropriate language support as they learn academic content (see Lau v. Nichols, 1974; Castaneda v. Pickard, 1981). To this end, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, enacted as the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, requires state and local education agencies to annually and appropriately assess, place, and monitor ELs. Additionally, state education agencies use assessment information to examine language instruction educational program (LIEP) effectiveness.

Identification is the first step in determining if a student is an EL. Each student identified as an EL is then placed in an LIEP. Identification and placement of ELs who have recently arrived in a school district happens throughout the year. Placement decisions about continuing ELs are typically made prior to or at the beginning of a school year, although educators sometimes review placement decisions at other times. This paper uses the term "educators" to refer to staff serving EL students in different capacities, including district coordinators, instructional coaches, administrators, teachers, and counselors. Identification and placement decisions have important implications for ELs' educational experiences and outcomes, and for the allocation of school and district resources. For these reasons, both processes are of great significance to ELs, families of ELs, and educators.

In most schools and districts, EL identification and placement decisions are based largely on a student's English language proficiency (ELP) assessment scores (when such scores are available). A widely used assessment is the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners 2.0 (ACCESS for ELLs 2.0; hereafter ACCESS). ACCESS, which was developed in collaboration between WIDA and the Center for Applied Linguistics, is a standardized test that measures student ELP in the four language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Approximately 2 million K–12 ELs take it annually in the 39 states and territories that make up the WIDA Consortium. For initial identification and placement, state and district guidelines often require educators use a home language survey and an ELP screener. An example of such a screener is the online WIDA Screener, a shorter version of ACCESS, which is used for initially identifying whether a recently arrived student meets the federal definition of limited English proficiency (see Every Student Succeeds Act section 3113(b)(2)). For ongoing placement decisions, educators often refer to ACCESS scores. Although states and districts provide guidelines for making EL identification and placement decisions, there is little empirical evidence on how educators actually make decisions on EL identification and placement at the district and school levels.

From a validation perspective, it is essential to understand and collect evidence on EL identification and placement decision making procedures. This evidence is crucial for supporting the validity claims made about the use of the assessments in the decision making. In discussing the evidence, this study incorporates the Assessment Use Argument by Bachman and Palmer (2010). Recent research shows an emerging trend to validate assessments based on these types of argument-based frameworks (Chapelle, Cotos, & Lee, 2015; Doe, 2015). The sections below describe the validation framework used in this study and previous research on EL identification and placement.

Decisions for English Learners within the Assessment Use Argument Framework

The validation framework for ACCESS presents a series of claims and warrants to guide the collection of evidence that supports the validation of a language assessment from its development to use. This framework, developed by Center for Applied Linguistics, is a seven-layer diagram that couples Bachman and Palmer's (2010) Assessment Use Argument with Mislevy, Almond, and Lukas' (2004) Evidence-Centered Design (Figure 1). The Assessment Use Argument is the core of the ACCESS validation framework. The argument links the test taker's performance to the test developers' intended consequences and decisions. The Assessment Use Argument is based on Toulmin's (2003) argumentative logic, which consists of identifying claims and warrants, and providing evidence to support them on five main steps: Student performance (Step 5) is used to create assessment records (Step 4), which are then used to formulate interpretations (Step 3). Interpretations then inform decisions (Step 2), which lead to consequences (Step 1).

Figure 1. **ACCESS for ELLs Validation Framework**
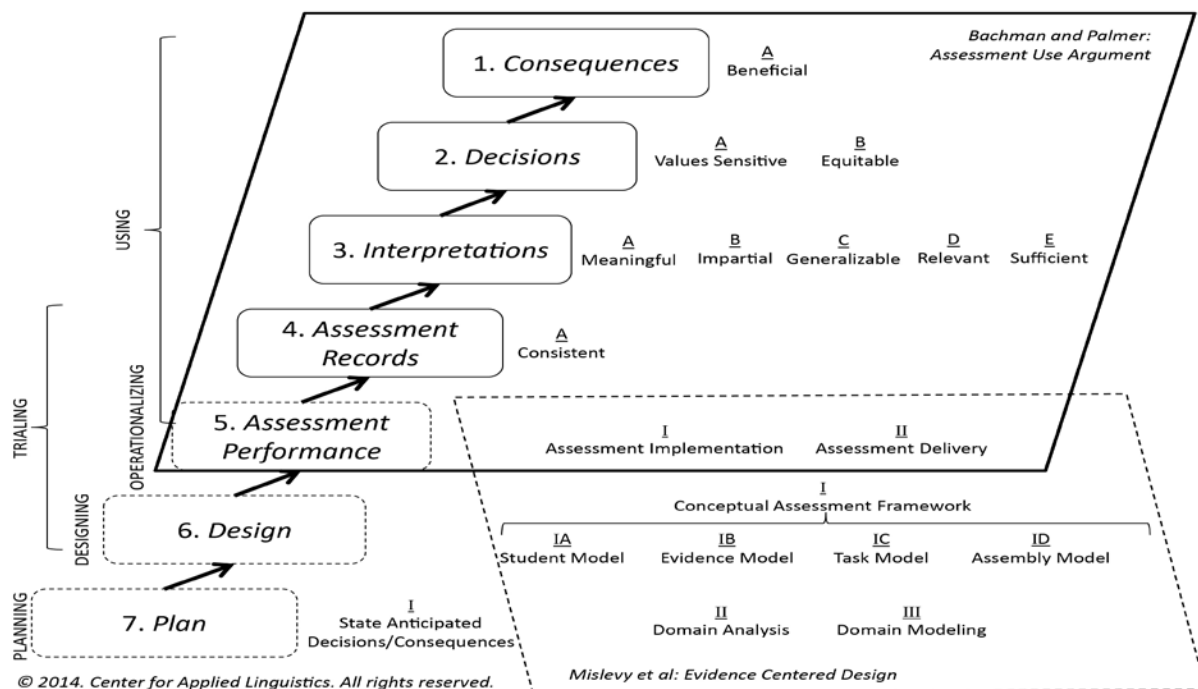
This study focuses on the second step of the Assessment Use Argument: decisions. Decisions about ELs that educators base on their interpretations of test scores and relevant materials from the interpretations step should be *values sensitive* and *equitable*. In the context of ACCESS results, these decisions should consider educational and societal values, and relevant laws, rules, and regulations. These decisions should be equitable for the intended stakeholders. This demand for sensitivity and equity comprises the main claim that educators must make regarding the decisions related to students' ELP scores from ACCESS. A claim by definition refers to "statements about the inferences to be made on the basis of data and the qualities of those inferences" (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 99). Various warrants elaborate on the qualities of the main claim in the decisions step in the context of ACCESS. Table 1 summarizes the validity claim and its warrants for the decisions step. Evidence is needed to support each claim and warrant.

Table 1. Assessment Use Argument for ACCESS—Claims Regarding Decisions Step

Claim 2: The decisions based on ACCESS/Screener results are made by individuals, at a time when needed, and will affect the stakeholders. The decisions take into consideration educational and societal **values,** and relevant laws, rules, and regulations, and they are **equitable** for the intended stakeholders.

A. Warrants about the **values sensitivity** of the decisions that are made (backed by the design and development procedures and by evidence that is collected as part of the justification process):

Warrant A1: The federal Every Student Succeeds Act , and each state's and district's guidelines are adhered to in the EL classification and programming decisions that are to be made.

Warrant A2: Federal law, and each state's laws, and district's guidelines for EL classification and programming decisions are adhered to in determining the relative seriousness of false positive and false negative classification errors.

B. Warrants about the **equitability** of the classification and programming decisions that are made (backed by the design and development procedures and by evidence that is collected as part of the justification process):

Warrant B1: ELs are placed in LIEPs or are reclassified as proficient primarily on the basis of pre-specified cut scores and decision rules.

Warrant B2: EL placement decisions are made in a timely manner throughout the year, as appropriate for K–12 ELs, families of ELs, and K–12 school-level administrators and educators. (EL programming decisions are made prior to or at the beginning of the fall semester, which is appropriate for K–12 ELs, families of ELs, and K–12 school-level administrators and educators.)

Warrant B3: Students and other stakeholders are fully informed about how the placement decisions are made and whether decisions are actually made in the way described to them.

This study focuses on decisions involving the initial *identification* of new incoming ELs, and *placement* (also referred to as classification) of incoming ELs and continuing ELs into LIEPs. Table 2 summarizes the identification and placement decisions that are made, decision makers, timing of the decisions, and stakeholders affected by the decisions.

Table 2. Identification and Placement Decisions Made using ACCESS

Decisions to be made	Individuals who make the decisions	When the decisions will be made	Stakeholders who will (or might be) affected by the decision
Students are initially identified as ELs and placed into appropriate LIEPs. This decision is high-stakes.	K–12 school- or district-level educators, families of ELs	When potential ELs enter the school district	• K–12 ELs • Families of ELs • K–12 educators
ELs are continuously reclassified and placed into different LIEPs as appropriate. This decision is medium- to high-stakes.	K–12 school- or district-level educators	Throughout the academic year	• K–12 ELs • Families of ELs • K–12 educators

EL Identification and Placement in K–12 Settings

A review of the research related to the identification of ELs and their placement into LIEPs highlights several trends in the U.S. (Abedi, 2008; Carroll & Bailey, 2016; Jimenez-Silva, Gomez, & Cisneros, 2014; Linquanti, 2001; Mahoney & MacSwan, 2005). First, schools and districts use home language surveys to identify potential ELs. Second, ELP tests are often used for identification and placement. Finally, some schools and districts use students' scores on standardized content assessments in placement decisions.

Home language surveys are often the initial resource used to identify ELs in schools and districts across the U.S. (Ragan & Lesaux, 2006). Despite their utility as an identification tool, home language surveys have a number of weaknesses. First, there is great variation across states and districts in survey questions (Cook & Linquanti, 2015). Second, the implications of parent responses vary across states: The identification of a home language other than English can automatically qualify a student for English language support services, or it can lead to further assessment of the student's language proficiency (Jimenez-Silva et al., 2014; Linquanti, 2001). Third, researchers have questioned the capacity of home language surveys to accurately capture students' language backgrounds (e.g., Abedi, 2008), and they have shown that the surveys do not always distinguish between simultaneous and sequential language acquisition (Bailey & Kelly, 2011). Finally, the home language survey may foster deficit views of a student when educators and administrators interpret a student's use of and/or exposure to languages other than English as a hindrance to English language development (Bailey & Kelly, 2011). Depending on their quality, home language surveys can thus contribute to over- and underidentification of ELs.

After the home language survey, the next step in the identification of ELs tends to be an assessment (Mahoney & MacSwan, 2005; Ragan & Lesaux, 2006) that measures ELP in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. ELP tests combine scores from two or more of these four domains to provide composite scores. The mechanisms states use to set EL identification and placement criteria vary in terms of the actual performance standard each state chooses and the importance each gives to individual domains (Carroll & Bailey, 2016). Some states, for instance, may set specific performance standards for one or more of the language domains along with a

performance standard for the composite score of all or some domains. In addition to variation by state in the use of ELP assessment in identification and placement is that administration processes may be inconsistent within a single school district (King & Bigelow, 2016). Researchers have documented that adjustments to the administration of language screening tools (such as using a language other than English during test administration and going off script) lead to students with varied language competencies receiving the same ELP score (King & Bigelow, 2016). Such findings support the use of multiple data sources in identification and placement decisions.

Some states use students' content achievement scores as part of EL placement. Since content assessments are not designed with reference to language ability, they cannot be used as measures of ELP (Mahoney & MacSwan, 2005). Scholars discourage the practice of using content assessment scores because it conflates language development with content knowledge, and may thus deny students the opportunity to enroll in LIEPs (e.g., Abedi, 2008; Linquanti, 2001).

Overall, the literature on the identification and placement of ELs is limited. The present study aims to expand understanding of the topic and provide information useful to stakeholders in evaluating and supporting appropriate EL identification and placement decisions.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how district- and school-level educators make K–12 EL identification and placement decisions. To this end, district- and school-level educators who participate directly in the placement and identification of ELs were surveyed. Study findings are presented in relation to the validity claim they support within the Assessment Use Argument for ACCESS. These findings provide practical implications for test developers, and state and district education agencies to better support districts and schools in making appropriate EL identification and placement decisions. This study defines appropriate decisions as decisions that (a) accurately differentiate between ELs and non-ELs, and (b) support ELs in developing language at or above the expected rate given their age and language proficiency level (Cook & Linquanti, 2015). The analysis of the survey data was guided by the following research questions:

1. Which educators make decisions regarding EL identification and placement?
2. Which instruments and sources of information do educators use to identify and place EL students?
3. To what extent do educators perceive EL identification and placement decisions to be appropriate?

Methods

Sampling

The sampling process involved the selection of districts for the distribution of the survey—up to 30 districts from each of the 35 participating WIDA Consortium member states via stratified random sampling. Stratified random sampling is a method that involves the division of a population (in this case, WIDA districts) into subgroups based on specific criteria. The total number of ELs enrolled in a district was the main criteria for determining subgroups as previous research suggest differentiating between large (often urban) and small (often rural) districts (e.g., Graham & Provost, 2012; Lee & Hawkins, 2015; McCoy, Morris, Connors, Gomez, & Yoshikawa, 2016). Some states had fewer than 30 districts with ELs; for these states, fewer districts were sampled. Of the total number of districts selected for each state, approximately one third had fewer than 30 ELs; a third had 30 to 100; and a third had more than 100.

This sampling method enabled this study to (a) account for the varying number of districts across states and (b) sample districts with different EL enrollments within each state. In total, 724 districts were sampled. The EL coordinators in these districts were requested to (a) complete the survey, and (b) email the survey to up to two elementary and two secondary schools in the district, totaling approximately 2,900 schools. From a solicited sample of 724 districts and 2,900 schools, 207 district-level and 269 school-level educators completed the survey, indicating 29% and 9% response rates respectively.

Participants

The 476 respondents include district- and school-level educators who make identification and placement decisions for K–12 ELs (see Table 3). At the district-level, 45% of the survey participants were ESL or Title III coordinators, whereas English as a second language (ESL)/ bilingual educators accounted for 71% of participants at the school level. The Findings and Discussion section provides more information regarding educator background.

Table 3. Participants' Roles within Districts and Schools (district n = 207; school n = 269)

Participants	Percentage*	Count
District-level participants		
ESL/Title III coordinator	45%	93
Test coordinator	14%	30
ESL/bilingual program director	14%	28
Support/resource teacher	12%	25
Other program director	7%	14
District/school administrator	6%	13
Other	2%	4
School-level participants		
ESL/bilingual teacher	71%	190
Counselor/school psychologist	9%	25
Principal/assistant principal	6%	16

Content-area teacher	4%	11
Other	4%	10
Instructional coach	4%	10
Test coordinator	3%	7

*Numbers may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Instrument

In preparation for developing the online survey, the research team interviewed district- and school-level educators from an urban and a rural district to better understand how EL identification and placement decisions are made in specific locations. These interviews informed the survey items created. Once the survey was drafted, the research team shared it with four educators and revised it based on their feedback. Then the survey was piloted in a district with approximately 40 schools. The survey was further refined based on the pilot findings.

The resulting survey had two similar versions—one for district-level educators (with 28 items) and the other for school-level educators (with 38 items). The survey items consisted of the following main categories: (1) educator background information; (2) EL identification; and (3) EL placement. The surveys included multiple-choice items and several open-ended items.

Procedures

The survey was distributed in May 2017 using an online survey (www.qualtrics.com) and was kept open for one month. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive techniques. An important feature of the analysis was to explore the relationships between school and district EL enrollment and educators' responses to particular survey items. The survey provided district participants with the following options for describing the total number of ELs enrolled in a district: fewer than 30 ELs, 30 to 99 ELs, 100 to 499 ELs, and 500 and more ELs. The survey provided school-level educators with slightly different options for describing total EL enrollment: fewer than 10 ELs, 10 to 49 ELs, 50 to 99 ELs, and 100 or more ELs. Research on ELs often treats large (often urban) and small (often rural) districts as discrete contexts (e.g., Graham & Provost, 2012; Lee & Hawkins, 2015; McCoy et al., 2016). The overall trends in educator responses were analyzed according to school and district size based on total EL enrollment. In addition, open-ended responses were analyzed based on emerging themes. Due to the nature of the survey, in which respondents had the option to skip responding to certain items, the total number of respondents for each item may vary.

Findings and Discussion

Findings serve as evidence to support the claims made in the Assessment Use Argument for ACCESS; specifically, Claim 2 and its warrants in the argument's decisions step (Table 4):

(1) Study findings on decision makers support Claim 2 (main claim for Assessment Use Argument decisions step), which describes the individuals who make decisions.

(2) Findings on instruments and sources of information used for decision making provide evidence for Warrants A1 and B1, which relate to guidelines for making decisions.

(3) Results on educators' perceived appropriateness of decisions support Warrant B2, which relates to the appropriateness of the decisions.

**Table 4. Assessment Use Argument for ACCESS Claim Supported by Study Findings**

Claim and Warrants	Research Questions
Claim 2: The decisions based on ACCESS/Screener results are made by **individuals**, at a time when needed, and will affect the stakeholders. The decisions take into consideration educational and societal values, and relevant laws, rules, and regulations, and they are equitable for the intended stakeholders.	1. Which educators make decisions regarding EL identification and placement?
Warrant A1: The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) law, and **each state's and district's guidelines are adhered to** in the EL classification and programming decisions that are to be made. Warrant B1: ELs are placed in LIEPs or are reclassified as proficient primarily on the basis of pre-specified cut scores and **decision rules.**	2. Which instruments and sources of information do educators use to identify and place EL students?
Warrant B2: EL placement decisions are made in a timely manner throughout the year, as **appropriate** for K–12 ELs, families of ELs, and K–12 school-level administrators and educators. (EL programming decisions are made prior to or at the beginning of the fall semester, which is appropriate for K–12 ELs, families of ELs, and K–12 school-level administrators and educators.)	3. To what extent do educators perceive EL identification and placement decisions as appropriate?

Findings on Research Question 1: Which educators make decisions regarding EL identification and placement?

In relation to this research question, participants selected the job position that best fit the description of decision makers for EL identification and placement. Participants frequently indicated that multiple educators could be involved in decision making. For EL identification and placement, a single educator was more likely to make decisions at the school level, whereas multiple educators made decisions at the district level (Figure 2). At the district level, ESL/Title III coordinators and district-based ESL teachers were involved most often in identification and placement decisions, followed by principals (Figures 3 and 4). At the school level, the educator involved most frequently in identification and placement decisions was the ESL teacher, followed by the principal (Figures 3 and 4). These findings suggest that if states plan to improve the appropriateness of identification and placement decisions, they may consider providing professional learning opportunities first for district EL/Title III coordinators and ESL/bilingual teachers, and principals second.
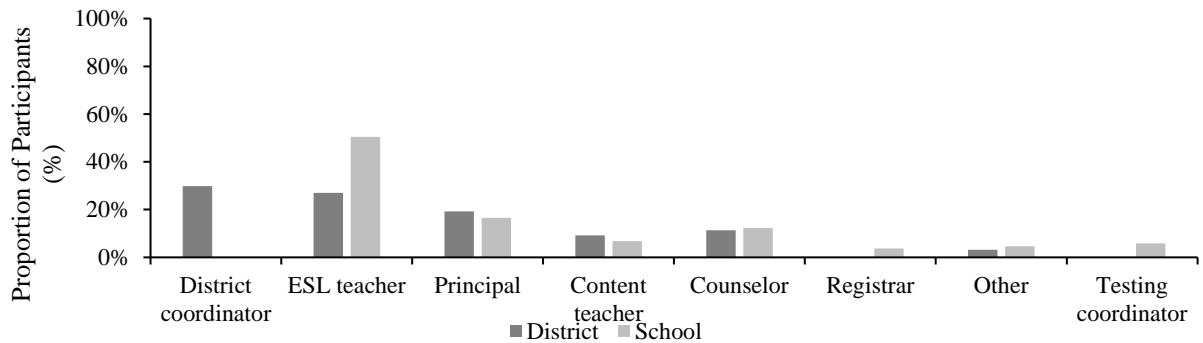
Figure 2. **Single vs. Multiple Decision Makers for EL Identification and Placement in Districts and Schools**
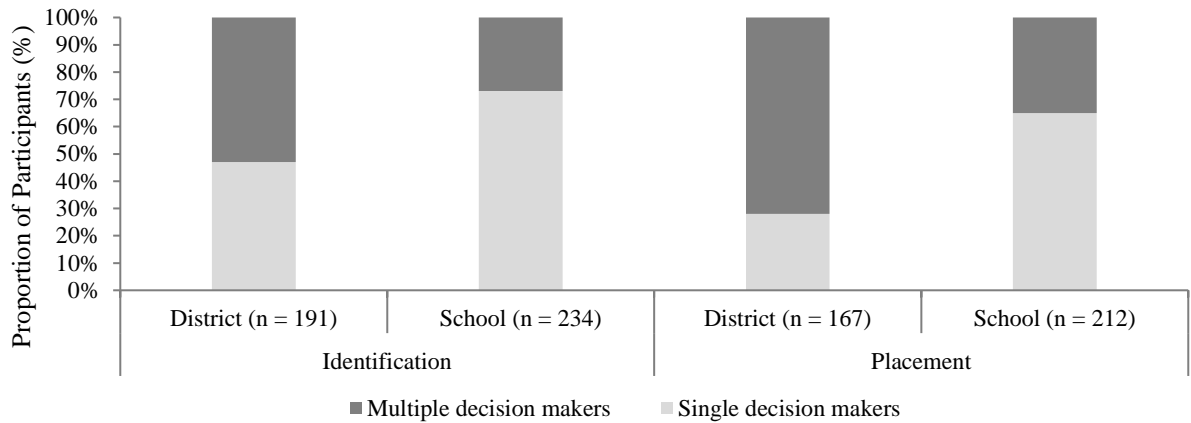
*Figure 3*. **Decision Makers for EL Identification in Districts and Schools**
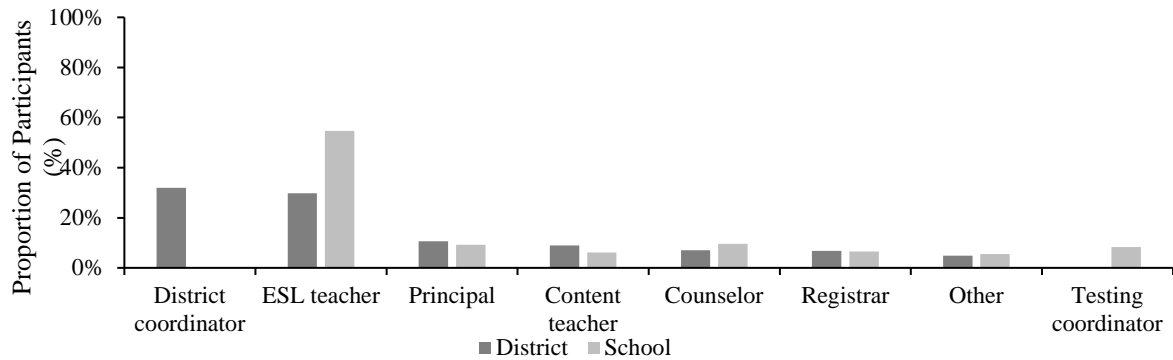
Figure 4. **Decision Makers for EL Placement in Districts and Schools**

The length of time during which respondents had worked with ELs was similar at the district and school levels, with approximately 60% of educators having more than 5 years of experience (Figure 5).

Figure 5. **District-level and School-level Participants' Years of Experience Serving ELs (district *n* = 204; school *n* = 268)**
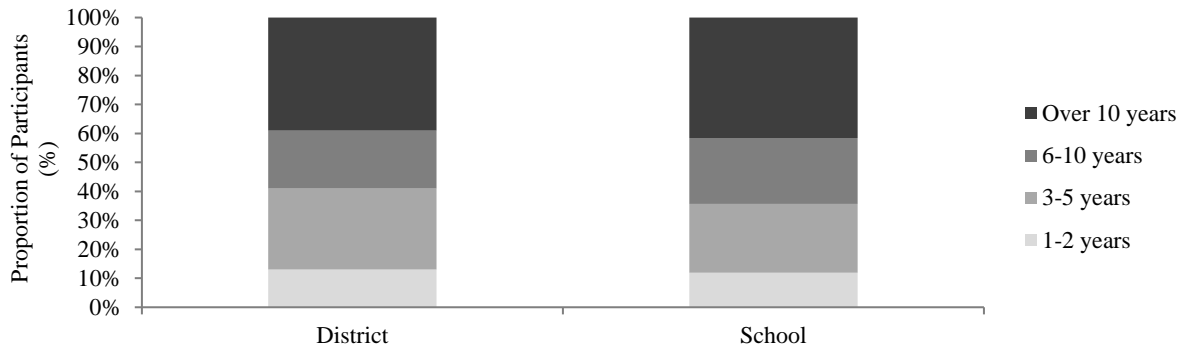
Educator experience varied depending on the total EL enrollment in each district or school. Districts with 100 or more ELs had more experienced educators (Figure 6): 40% of respondents had 5 or more had years of EL experience in districts with fewer than 100 ELs, whereas 80% of educators have 5 or more years of EL experience in districts with 100 or more ELs. The pattern was similar at the school level.

Figure 6. **Participants' Years of Experience in Relation to Number of ELs in Districts and Schools (district *n* = 191; school *n* = 252)**
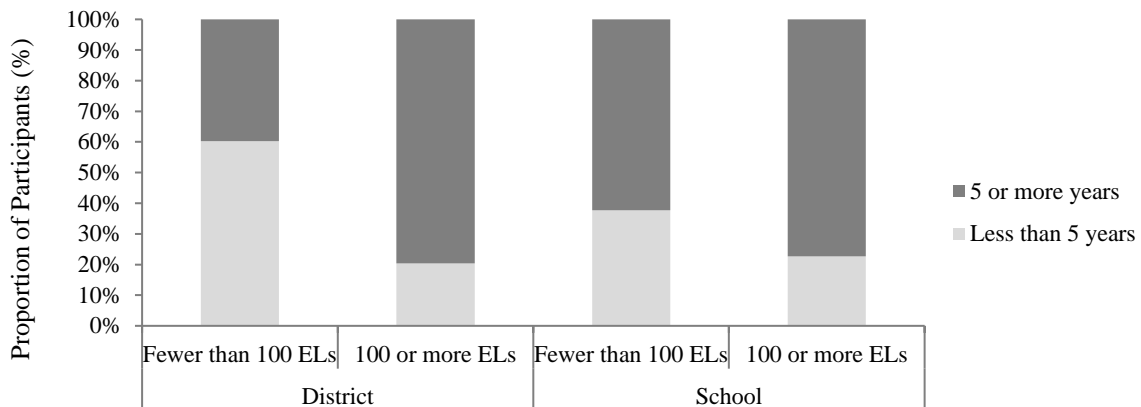

Regarding the training educators received, approximately three quarters of respondents at the school and district levels had master's degrees (Figure 7). In addition, twice as many school-level as district-level respondents reported having ESL/bilingual certification or licenses (Figure 8).

Figure 7. Participants' Highest Level of Education (district *n* = 206; school *n* = 264)

- High school degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctoral degree
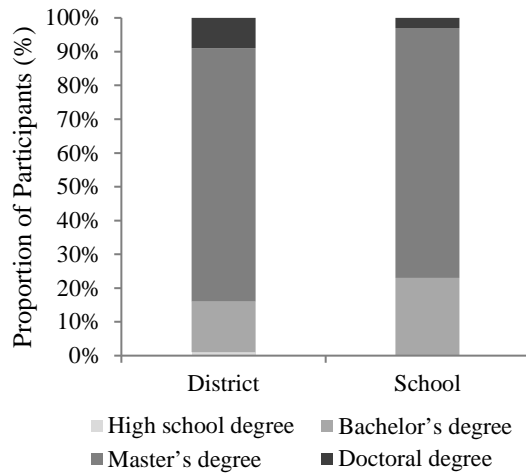
Figure 8. Participants with EL Certification or Licenses (district *n* = 205; school *n* = 261)

- ESL/bilingual licensing
- ESL/bilingual certification
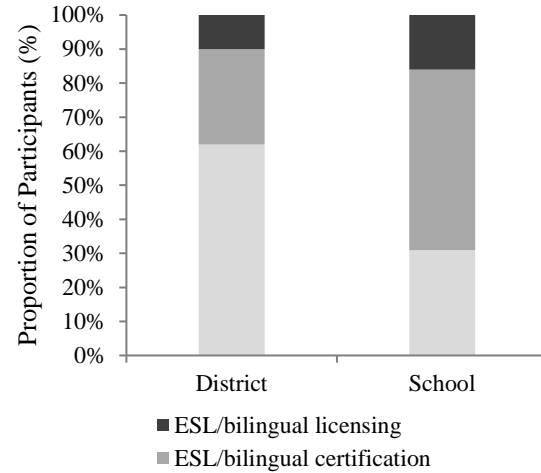
The qualifications of educators making EL identification and placement decisions varied by total EL enrollment in districts or schools. In districts with fewer than 100 ELs, approximately 25% of respondents had ESL/bilingual certification or licenses (Figure 9). The percentage of educators with ESL/bilingual certification or licenses was higher in districts with larger EL enrollment. At the school level, 45% of respondents at schools with fewer than 10 ELs had ESL/bilingual certification or licenses, and this percentage was higher in schools with larger EL enrollment (Figure 10). Since ESL/bilingual certification or licenses have been tied to better educator performance (e.g., Samson & Collins, 2012), state educational agencies may want to allocate additional resources toward the professional education of decision makers in districts with fewer than 100 ELs and schools with fewer than 10 ELs.

Figure 9. District-level Participants with ESL/bilingual Certification or Licenses in Relation to Districts' Number of ELs (*n* = 191)

- With certification/licensing
- Without certification/licensing
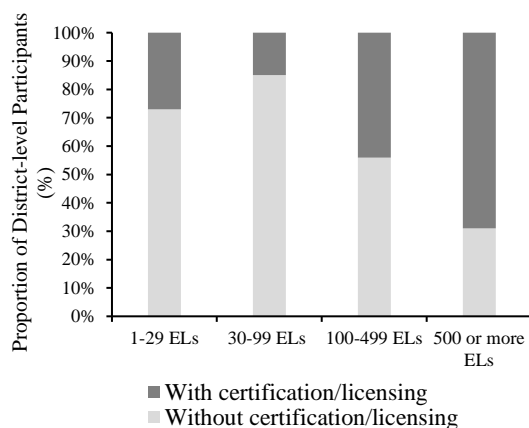
Figure 10. School-level Participants with ESL/bilingual Certification or Licenses in Relation to Schools' Number of ELs (*n* = 250)

- With certification/licensing
- Without certification/licensing
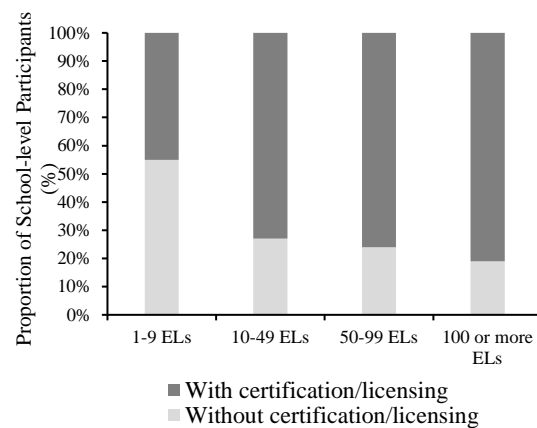
Overall, findings on Research Question 1 describe the decision makers for EL identification and placement, thereby supporting Claim 2 (The decisions based on ACCESS/Screener results

are made by individuals, at a time when needed, and will affect the stakeholders. The decisions take into consideration educational and societal values, and relevant laws, rules, and regulations, and they are equitable for the intended stakeholders) in the decisions step of the Assessment Use Argument for ACCESS. Results indicate that district coordinators, ESL/bilingual teachers, and principals are the main decision makers when it comes to the identification and placement of ELs. Most identification and placement decisions were made by multiple educators at the district level and by an individual educator at the school level. Twice as many school-level respondents as district-level respondents reported having ESL/bilingual certification or licenses.

The percentage of educators with ESL/bilingual license or certification was higher in districts or schools with larger EL size, indicating more training and support is needed for educators in districts or schools with low numbers of ELs. This variation in educators' training across districts is concerning and may weaken validity claims made regarding the decisions made using ACCESS. The conclusion discusses further ways to strengthen this claim via educator training.

Findings on Research Question 2: Which instruments and sources of information do educators use to identify and place EL students?

Both district-level and school-level educators indicated the home language survey and ELP screener were the two primary tools used to identify ELs (see Table 5). In May 2017, when this study was conducted, most WIDA Consortium members were using the WIDA-ACCESS Placement Test (W-APT) or Measure of Developing English Language (MODEL) as a screener; a small number of states had transitioned from those to the new WIDA Screener. The home language survey was used in combination with an ELP screener approximately 90% of the time at the district and school levels (this finding is not presented in a table). In addition, parent interviews were conducted along with the home language survey 98% of the time. (This finding is not presented in a table.)

Table 5. Instruments for EL Identification (district $n = 193$, school $n = 239$)

	District-level		School-level	
Instruments	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count
Home language survey	97%	187	94%	224
ELP screener	88%	170	88%	210
Parent interview	34%	66	21%	51
Other	9%	18	6%	14
Home language proficiency screener	7%	14	5%	13

Regarding the types of tools and resources used for EL placement decisions, respondents rated the importance of four sources of information: students' ELP scores, students' academic achievement, teacher input, and parent input (Figure 11). At both the district and school levels, more than 85% of respondents indicated that students' ELP scores were "very important" in making placement decisions, and over 70% considered all four sources of information to be at least moderately important.

Figure 11. **Importance of Sources of Information for EL Placement (district *n* = 155; school *n* = 215)**
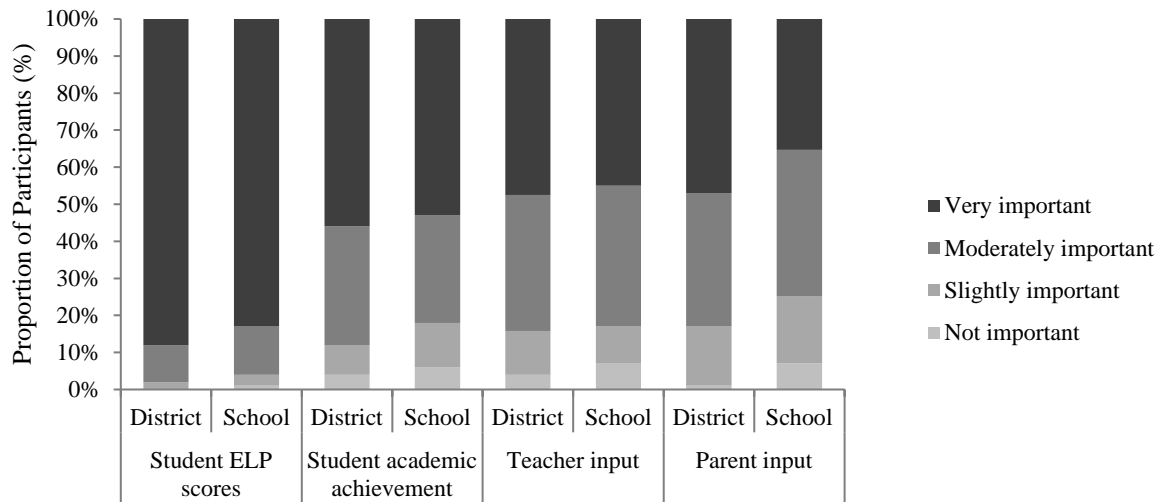
Among the four sources of information for EL placement, student factors and teacher factors were further investigated. When determining the importance of various student factors in EL placement decisions, including their home language proficiency and content assessment scores, educators rated ELP scores as most important (Figure 12). The reported importance of ELP (i.e., ACCESS) and screener scores is similar. Judging by participants' selection of "very important" and "moderately important," they considered students' in-class performance as the second most important factor when making placement decisions.

*Figure 12*. **Importance of Student Factors in Placement Decisions (school *n* = 190)**
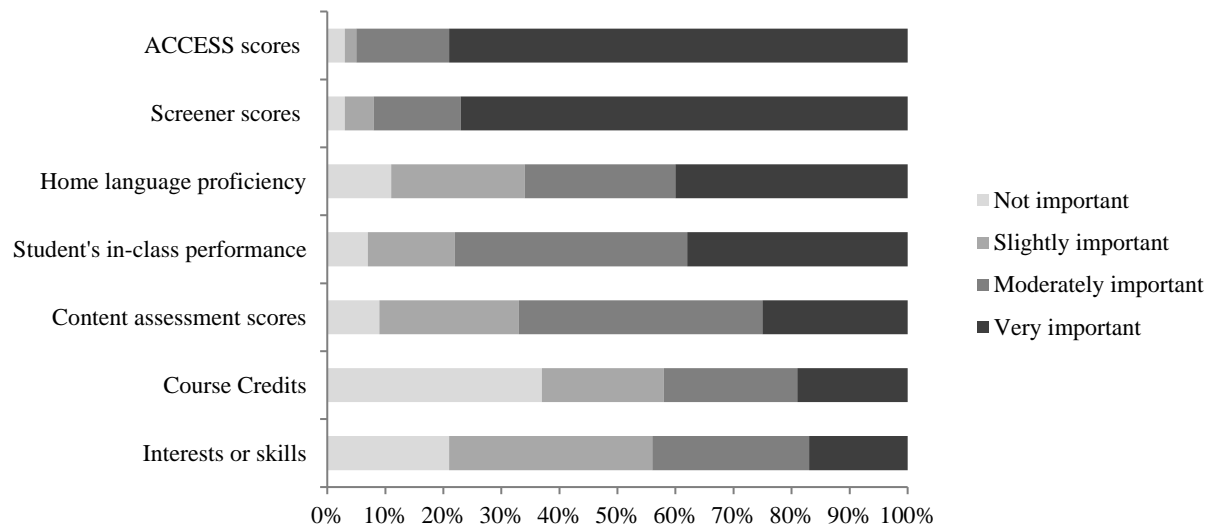
Note: Only school-level data were collected for this survey item.

In terms of the importance of various teacher factors when making EL placement decisions, more than 80% of survey participants considered teacher experience with ELs and teacher qualification to be "very important" or "moderately important" when placing ELs (Figure 13).

They rated these two factors as more important than teacher linguistic background or classroom composition of the teacher's class (e.g., number of special education or advanced learning students in class).

Figure 13. **Importance of Teacher Factors in Placement Decisions (school *n* = 203)**
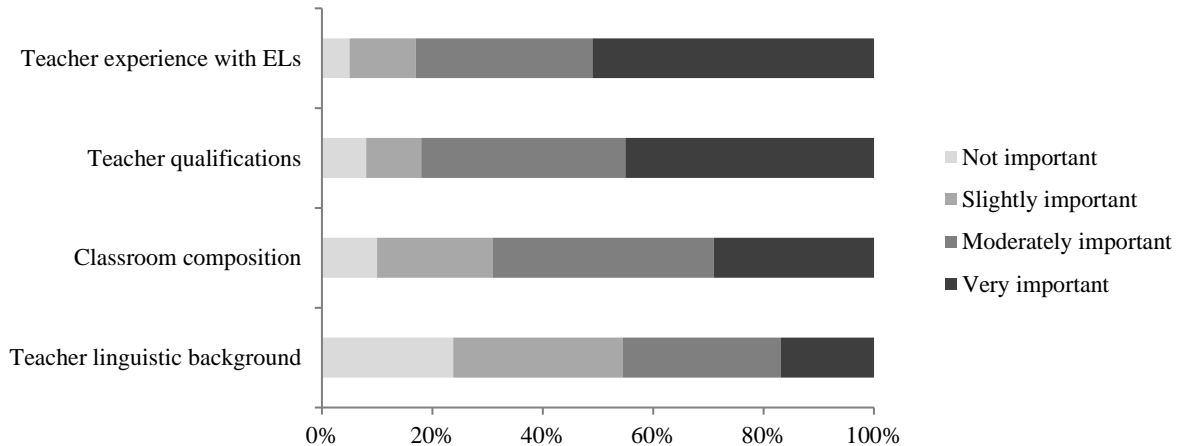
Note: Only school-level data was collected for this survey item.

In sum, results from Research Question 2 explicate the tools educators use and the factors they consider in the decision-making process. These findings serve as evidence to support the claim and warrants made in the Assessment Use Argument for ACCESS decisions step, specifically Warrant A1 (The federal Every Student Succeeds Act law, and each state's and district's guidelines are adhered to in the EL classification and programming decisions that are to be made) and Warrant B1 (ELs are placed in LIEPs or are reclassified as proficient primarily on the basis of pre-specified cut scores and decision rules). Study findings reflect the state and district guidelines and the decisions rules for EL identification and placement. For EL identification, the home language survey and ELP screener were the two primary tools used for decision making. For EL placement, educators viewed ELP scores as the most important student factor when making decisions.

Findings on Research Question 3: To what extent do educators perceive EL identification and placement decisions to be appropriate?

To determine the appropriateness of EL identification and placement decisions, educators were asked to rate the effectiveness of the tools they use for decision making. For EL identification, tools include the home language survey and the ELP screener. Most participants indicated the home language survey was an effective tool for EL identification (Figure 14); over 80% of participants at the district and school levels report that it "often" or "very often" meaningfully distinguishes between ELs and non-ELs. This finding supports using the home language survey as part of the identification process for ELs.

Figure 14. Perceived Effectiveness of Home Language Survey for EL Identification (district *n* = 182; school *n* = 216)
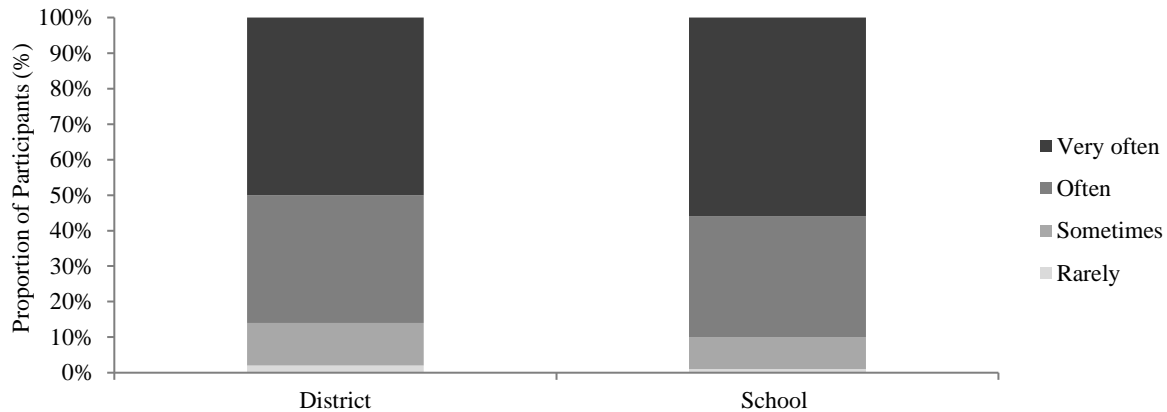
Educators also rated the effectiveness of MODEL, the new WIDA Screener, and W-APT to screen for ELP. The low percentage of "not effective" (0% to 5%) indicates that the majority of district- and school-level respondents considered the screeners effective for identifying ELs (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Perceived Effectiveness of English Language Proficiency Screeners for EL Identification
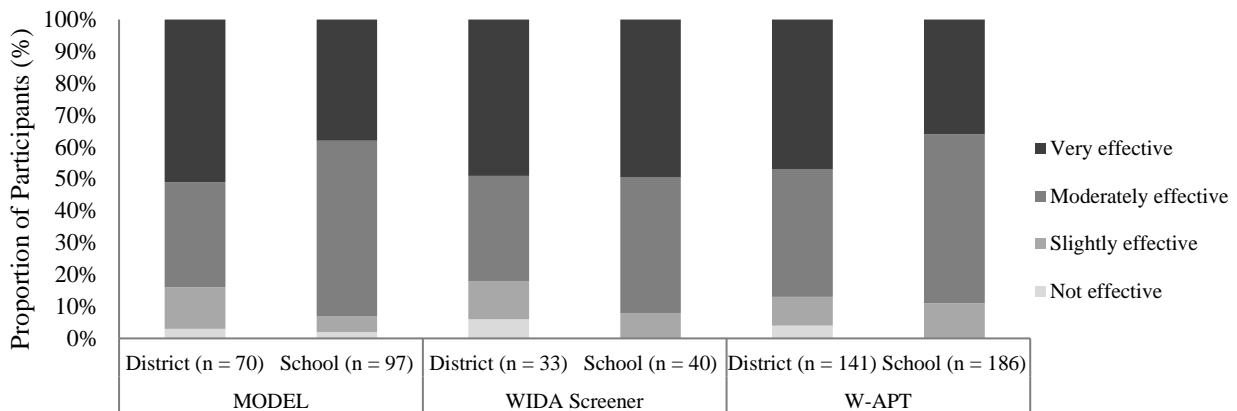
For EL placement, participants indicated the importance of different factors in determining whether the placement of ELs is appropriate. Approximately 95% of educators considered ACCESS scores to be "very important" or "moderately important" in evaluating placement decisions. Over 80% of respondents rated content assessment scores, student in-class performance, and teacher feedback as "very important" or "moderately important." Compared to the other factors, students' attendance data was considered least important by the survey participants (Figure 16).

Figure 16. **Importance of Data Used to Determine the Appropriateness of Placement Decisions (district *n* = 151; school *n* = 212)**
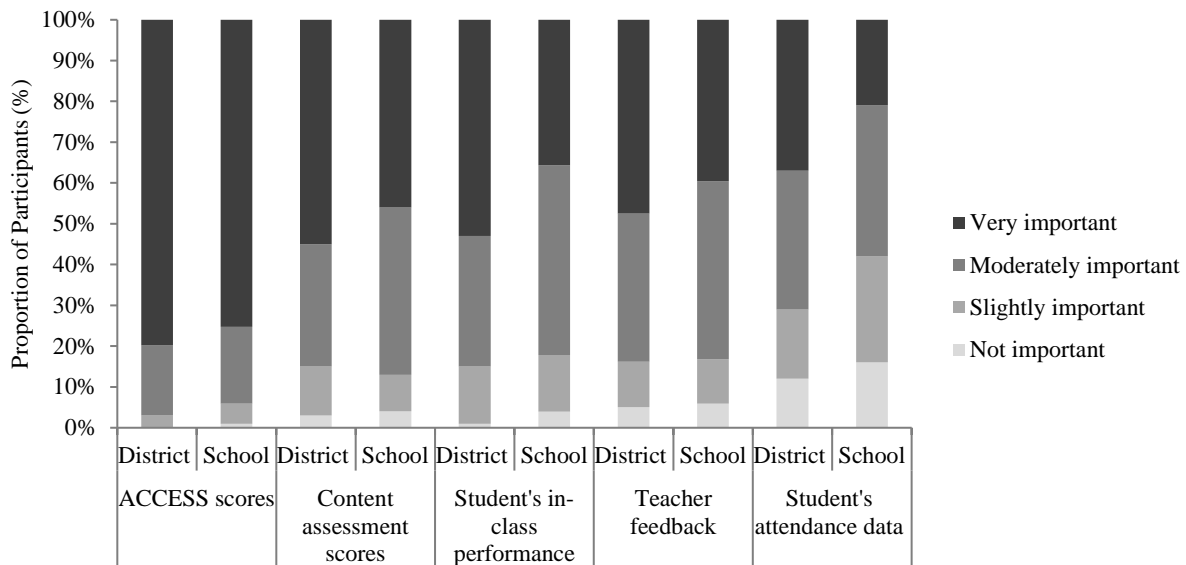

The findings reported in Figure 16 reflect the same trends as the data in Figure 11, which summarizes the importance of different sources of information educators use to make placement decisions. Findings from Figures 11 and 16 show that the same hierarchical order holds for both making and evaluating placement decisions; participants attributed the greatest importance to annual ELP scores, and they gave similar ratings to the importance of teacher input and students' academic achievement (as demonstrated in their content assessment scores and in-class performance).

To further examine the appropriateness of EL identification and placement decisions, the study investigated the extent of EL misidentification and misplacement. The results indicate that EL misidentification is perceived to occur infrequently (Figure 17). About 80% of district- and school-level respondents indicated that EL students were "rarely" misidentified as non-ELs, and over 60% of respondents reported that non-ELs were "rarely" misidentified as ELs. The findings on EL misidentification show that district- and school-level respondents reported slightly higher perceived rates of non-ELs being misidentified as ELs compared to ELs being misidentified as non-ELs, suggesting slight overidentification of ELs. Specifically, up to 5% of non-EL students were "often" or "very often" perceived to be misidentified as ELs.

Figure 17. **Perceived Frequency of EL Misidentification (district *n* = 185; school *n* = 226)**
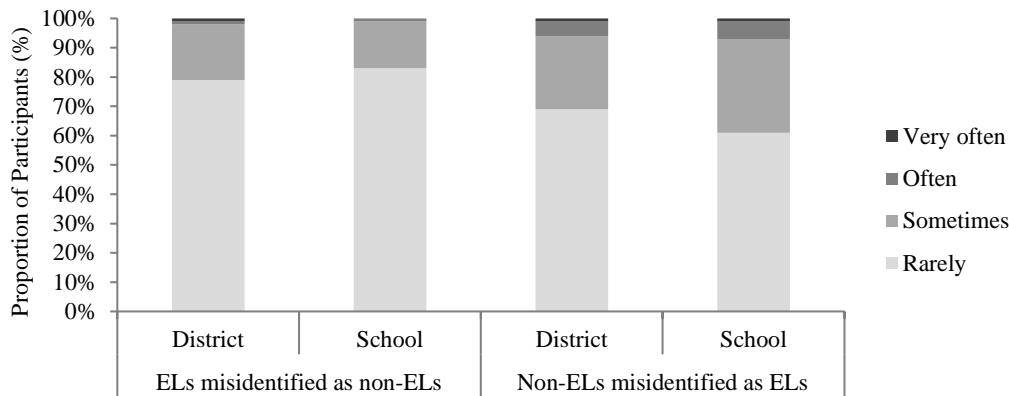
Regarding EL misplacement, over 60% of district- and school-level respondents reported such misplacement was rare (Figure 18). School-level participants reported slightly higher instances of misplacement across grades than district-level respondents. This result may be due to the greater familiarity of school-level educators with students' academic performance and well-being in the classrooms where they are placed.

Figure 18. **Perceived Frequency of Misplacement of ELs by Grade Level (district *n* = 142; school *n* = 130)**
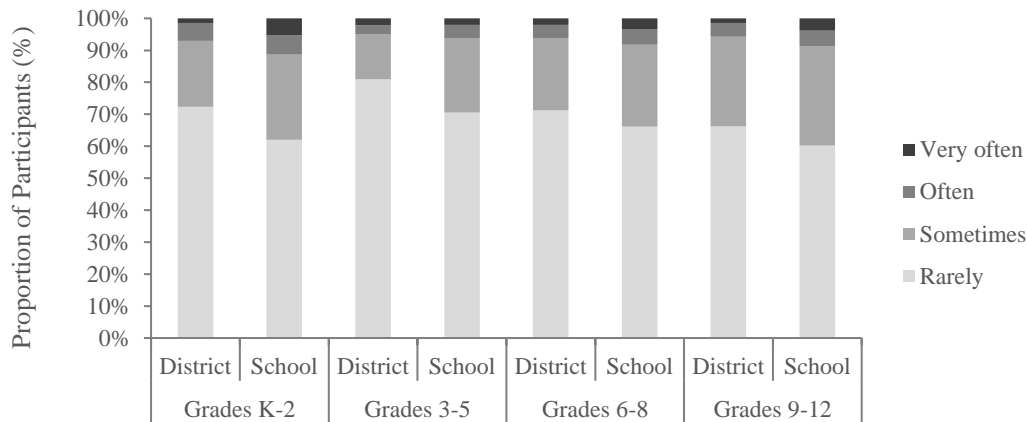
Although the overall reported frequency of EL misidentification or misplacement was rare, it is important to understand why misidentification and misplacement may occur. For EL misidentification, inaccurate parent responses on the home language survey and lack of information on students' academic histories were perceived to contribute the most (Figure 19). These factors contributed to EL misidentification "sometimes," "often," or "very often" over 60% of the time across districts and schools.

Figure 19. **Frequency of EL Misidentification by Information Sources (district *n* = 152; school *n* = 189)**
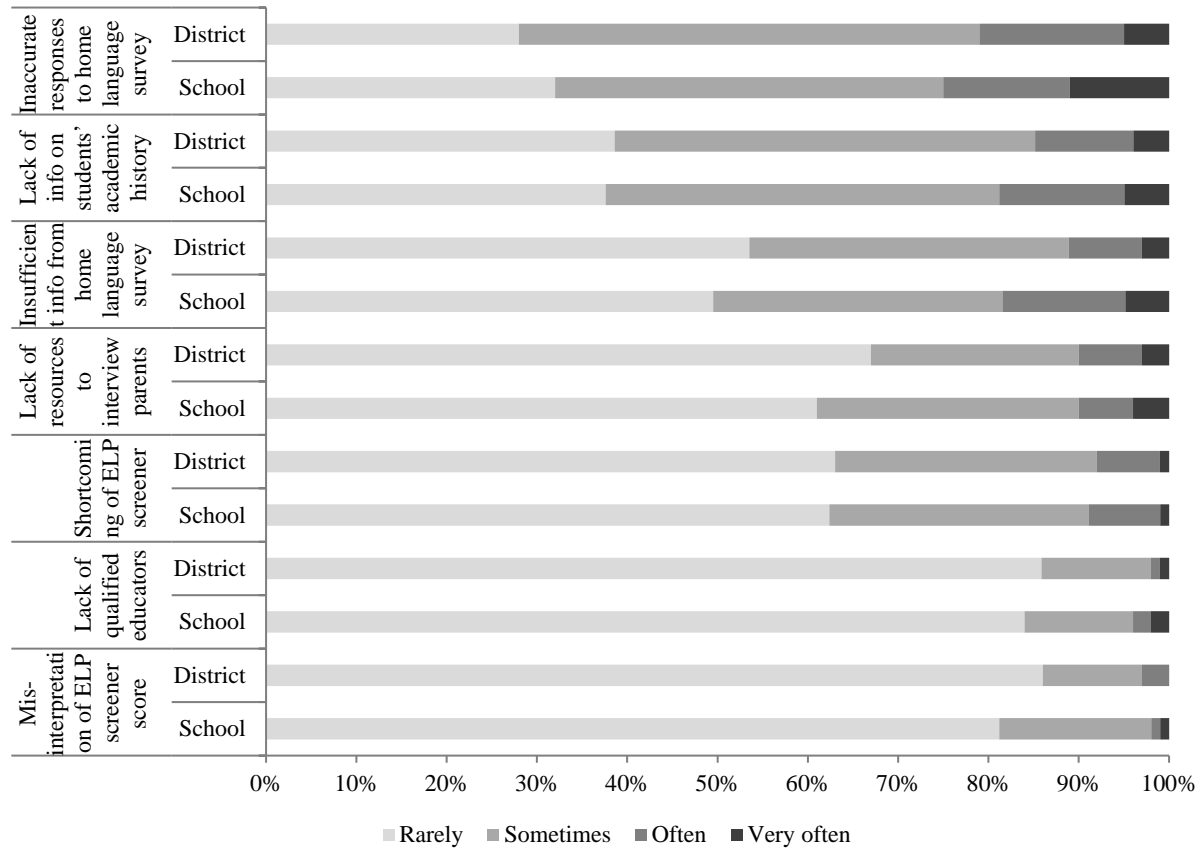
Regarding EL misplacement, educators perceived the four information sources—teacher input, parent input, students' academic achievement, and ELP scores—contributed to EL misplacement with similar frequency, but the findings reveal differences between district- and school-level educator responses. School-level participants generally reported with somewhat higher frequency than district-level respondents that the four sources contribute to the misplacement of EL students. Specifically, while 30–40% of district-level participants indicated the factors contribute to misplacement "sometimes," "often," or "very often," the frequency among school-level participants is 40–50% (Figure 20).

Figure 20. **Frequency of EL Misplacement by Sources (district *n* = 132; school *n* = 186)**
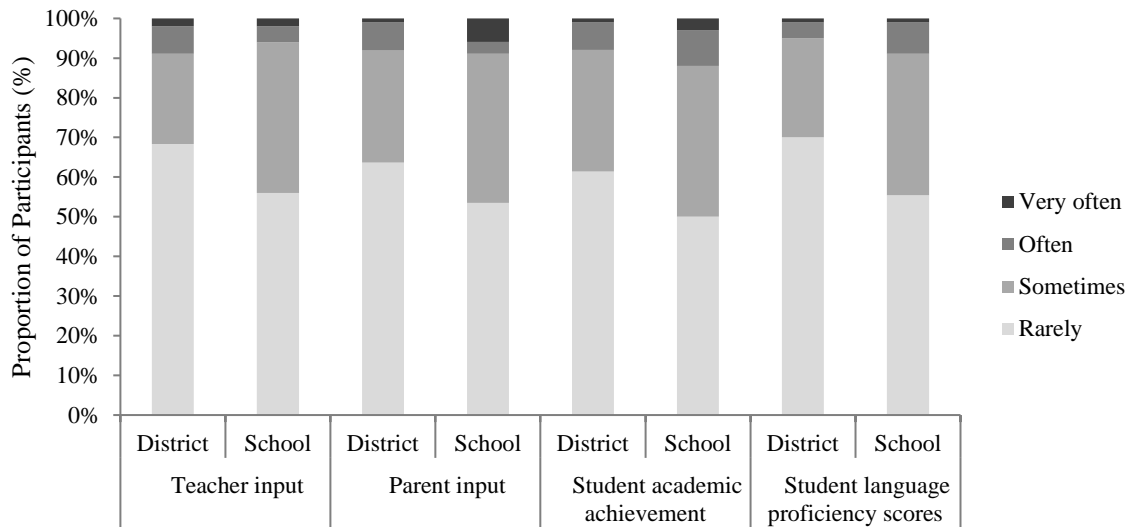
Findings from Research Questions 3 described educators' perceived appropriateness of EL identification and placement decisions. Such evidence supports Warrant B2 in the Assessment Use Argument for ACCESS (EL placement decisions are made in a timely manner throughout the year, as appropriate for K–12 ELs, families of ELs, and K–12 school-level administrators and educators). Most participants considered the ELP screeners to be effective tools for EL identification. While instances of EL misidentification seem rare, district- and school-level respondents reported slightly higher instances of non-ELs being misidentified as ELs compared to ELs being misidentified as non-ELs, indicating slight overidentification of ELs. The two factors that contributed most often to the EL misidentification were inaccurate parent responses on the home language survey and schools' lack of knowledge about students' prior academic history. The conclusion explores ways to improve EL identification by addressing factors for misidentification.

When making and evaluating placement decisions, educators attributed the greatest importance to annual ELP scores, and gave comparable ratings to teacher input and student content achievement. Similar to EL misidentification, the reported frequency of EL misplacement was rare, and school-level participants reported higher instances of misplacement across grades than district-level respondents.

Conclusion

This study examines K–12 EL identification and placement decisions, using an Assessment Use Argument framework, and demonstrates how the findings could be used as evidence to support the claim and warrants in the decisions step of the Assessment Use Argument for ACCESS. Results first indicate that the main decision makers for EL identification and placement are district coordinators, ESL/bilingual teachers, and principals. These decisions were usually made by multiple educators at the district level and by an individual educator at the school level. Second, regarding the home language survey and ELP screener were the two

primary tools used for EL identification; educators viewed ELP scores as the most important student factor when making EL placement decisions. These findings reflect the state and district guidelines and the decision rules for EL identification and placement. Third, regarding educators' perceived appropriateness of the decisions, findings indicate low EL misidentification and misplacement rates. Notably, educators noticed slight overidentification of ELs; the two main contributing factors were inaccurate parent responses on the home language survey and schools' lack of knowledge about students' prior academic history. Regarding placement, school-level participants reported higher instances of EL misplacement across grades than district-level respondents.

Study Limitations and Suggestions for the Future

Findings lead to several implications for the WIDA Consortium and its member states. Patterns uncovered here, in relation to the number of ELs within schools or districts, may inform decisions states make about supporting schools and districts with varying numbers of ELs. Twice as many school-level respondents as district-level respondents reported having ESL/bilingual certification or licenses; also, more educators in larger districts or schools had ESL/bilingual certification or licenses than those in smaller districts. These findings are concerning and may weaken the validity claims in relation to the decisions made using ACCESS. To strengthen Claim 2, which relates to decisions about identification and placement, states and districts should consider providing more support to educators in the district level and rural areas. In addition, the high percentage of more qualified decision makers in districts and schools with larger EL enrollment suggests that WIDA and its member states may consider providing additional, and perhaps differentiated, assessment materials and support to districts and schools with smaller EL enrollments. The finding that a single decision maker, rather than multiple educators, makes most identification and placement decisions at the school level underscores the importance of support for educators in smaller schools.

In addition, findings have implications for the use of student data in EL identification and placement decisions. District- and school-level participants considered students' ELP scores to be the most important factor when placing students in LIEPs and determining the appropriateness of placement. At the same time, educators report they value other factors as well, such as students' content achievement and in-class performance, and teacher input. These findings suggest that districts and schools have heeded the message to use ELP scores as only one data point among others when placing students. The privileging of ELP scores over other factors may, however, constrain the educational opportunities of students at lower proficiency levels. Therefore, educators may need more guidance to increase the validity and reliability of student data other than ELP scores, such as evaluations of student in-class performance, teacher feedback, home language proficiency, and so on. In addition, educators may need resources on how ELP scores should be interpreted in conjunction with other data sources.

Moreover, findings provide recommendations to prevent EL misidentification and misplacement. These instances were rare, but for identification, educators reported that they perceived a slightly higher ratio of non-ELs being misidentified as ELs compared to ELs being

misidentified as non-ELs, indicating slight overidentification of ELs. They attributed misidentification mostly to inaccurate responses on the home language survey, suggesting a need for a more refined instrument and more effective communication with parents about its purpose and use. Regarding placement, results indicate slightly higher instances of misplacement at the school level than at the district level, suggesting the need to examine what contributes to variability in misplacement across districts and schools.

Future research may need to examine the amount of background knowledge of language teaching and learning that is required for implementing appropriate EL identification and placement. Findings show that close to two thirds of district-level educators involved in identification and placement do not have ESL/bilingual certification or licenses. Therefore, most district-level decision makers cannot be assumed to have adequate knowledge about English language teaching and learning. District-level educators may need more professional learning opportunities to build language assessment literacy, which will assist in making appropriate EL identification and placement decisions.

However, the study findings are limited in the sense that they were based on survey data. Actual decision making process may differ from what educators report. In addition, the ratio of EL misidentification or misplacement may differ from educators' perceptions. To strengthen the validity claims made on ELP scores, particular districts and schools would have to be selected for close examination as to how they make EL identification and placement decisions. Such a study may require collection of various data used for decision making, including students' ELP scores and false positive or false negative classification rates.

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