

*Getting with Program: An ACCESS Success Story*

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An urban middle school with a large English language learner population (n=222) grapples with the complexity of the transition from the familiar LAS Links testing administration to the new WIDA ACCESS assessment for the first time in 2015. Here one of the lead ENL teachers outlines the organizational approaches developed to streamline the process and to minimize time out of mainstream classrooms for ELLs for ACCESS testing which is administered during a portion of the academic year already burdened by state-mandated ACUITY and ISTEP testing rounds.

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in Indiana

The transition from LAS Links to ACCESS might not have been a grand paradigm shift for most schools in Indiana. In fact in 2014, only 13 school districts statewide broke the 1,000 ELL student enrollment marker<sup>1</sup>. However, for a middle school with an ELL population of 222 (nearly 18% of the overall school population), the news of ACCESS came with a bit more anxiety. How could our department administer 222 tests, on three different levels, with 4 sections each? And, how could we accomplish this feat in a tight testing window without students losing significant class time, as we were also anticipating and preparing for the third round of ACUITY and the first round of ISTEP testing? The task seemed Herculean.

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<sup>1</sup> "Find School and Corporation Data Reports | IDOE." 2013. 12 May. 2015  
<<http://www.doe.in.gov/accountability/find-school-and-corporation-data-reports>>

Thankfully, our worries were somewhat eased by the Indiana Department of Education decision to exempt all who achieved level 5s<sup>2</sup> on the 2014 LAS Links and to immediately exit them from the program, rather than subjecting them to a completely different testing system. As a result, our 222 were filed down to 172. While 172 was a smaller number for our building to test, it still represented an ELL enrollment larger than the entire district enrollment of more than 80% of Indiana's corporations.

To test so many students quickly and efficiently, we needed to start from scratch and write off the old ways of doing things. Better to wipe the slate clean rather than shove a square peg into a round hole, as the clichés go. Simply put: new test, new approach.

### **Step One: Get Organized.**

As anyone who has ever dealt with organizing a giant mess (say, sorting out recyclable materials) will tell you, start by separating everything into piles. So that is what we did; we “piled” our kids. With a high stakes test such as this, we wanted to keep the testing environments small and intimate, but we could not chop up the population too finely or testing would drag on forever. We also wanted to limit the amount of outside help (test administrators from outside our department) that we accepted. These were “our” kids; their scores would affect our evaluations. Therefore, it seemed best to keep them in a familiar environment with hands on the reins that we trusted, namely our own. In the end our department divided the 172 students into nine groups.

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<sup>2</sup> "WIDA Assessment and Accountability Guidance - Indiana ..." 2014. 12 May. 2015 <<http://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/elme/wida-assessment-and-accountability-guidance.pdf>>

Our level one students and our low ability level 2's were placed into a testing group together. These students would take ACCESS's Tier A (the lowest ability level test). Next, the rest of our level 2's and our low to mid-level 3's were assigned the Tier B (mid-level). We gathered and divided them into two different testing groups, as their numbers were nearly twice as great. The rest of the ELL population, high ability 3's and level 4's, were given the most difficult assessment, Tier C. This test is the only one that offers students the ability to test out of the LAP program, and we wanted to give as many students the opportunity to do that as we could. As a result, there were enough student taking Tier C to warrant six testing groups.

Once the students were chosen for each group, their materials were organized into boxes; each box contained testing booklets, answer sheets, CDs, scripts, pencils, etc. Boxes were labeled with the group names and a roster taped to the outside of the lid, so that absent students might be easily identified for make-up testing. We stored the boxes in a controlled area where they remained locked up, ready to distribute as needed before each testing session.

**Step Two: Get with the Times.**

Over the years, like many other districts, our school district has made a bigger a bigger push for technology in the classroom. One resource that has been highly utilized is Google Drive. We decided to make Google Sheets our platform for organizing our student groups, for storing information on individual students (class schedule, attendance, etc.), and for communicating with our teachers, administrators, and our districts education center. This was by far and away the best decision that our department made during this entire experience. It brought clarity to the whole process and allowed us to collaborate without necessarily having to be in the same room. One of our seasoned paraprofessionals took over this task as his full time responsibility leading up to and during the ACCESS testing window. Spreadsheets were constantly updated, absent

students were immediately identified and reassigned, and time lost to updating each other and our administrators was minimized.

**Step Three: Get Students on Board.**

In the weeks leading up ACCESS, we started prepping the students. We worked with those in our classes on ACCESS practice material, and we created similar exercises ourselves and shared them with students throughout the building with the help of My Big Campus and Google Drive. We tried to build excitement about the test itself; encouraging our lower level kids to prove to their peers, teachers, and parents how far they have come in a short time, and cheering on our higher level students to put the program behind them by scoring a 5 this year (an automatic exit for the 2015-2016 school year). By the time of the test, there was almost a competitive vibe in the classrooms and hallways as students bragged about how well they were going to do. In some cases, the discourse rose to the level of playful “trash talking” as students psyched up themselves and each other.

**Step Four: Get a Plan.**

The infrastructure was finally prepared upon which we could build our testing schedule. As ISTEP was fast approaching, we tried not to infringe on the language arts or math time of our students in their mainstream classes. The realities of testing such a large population of students, however, made that impossible, though we did make a conscious effort to create a schedule in which students would not miss any one class more than one period. We established a morning testing session and afternoon testing session. The shorter morning session was used to administer the portion of the test that could be given to the largest groups: writing. For the afternoon session, we paired the listening and reading portions of the ACCESS because it was

significantly longer. Dividing the day into two sessions and locking in what test would be administered in each session ensured that the students would not miss the same class twice.

The fourth test, speaking, had to be administered to the students individually. The test is designed to be completed quickly by lower level speakers; however, the more proficient a student is orally, the longer the test. Of the 172 students that we tested, 132 were level 4's; most of them were orally adept and required a longer testing time. So it was no surprise that though the speaking test was the shortest of the four portions, it took the longest amount of time to administer by far.

Between the morning and afternoon testing sessions, every free moment was dedicated to chipping away at this block of testing students one at a time on speaking. It was a long, slow process that often felt like trying to file down a boulder into sand. Had we been able to call down entire groups of students to a quiet room and then call them out one at a time in rapid sequence, the logistics would have been relatively simple. But with students needing every minute of class time leading up to ISTEP, having students out of class for long periods would have been counterproductive for our school. Instead, we developed a system that mirrored a baseball batting order: one at bat, one on deck, one in the hole. Using this strategy, we would always have one student taking the speaking test (the player at bat), another student in a nearby room waiting his/her turn (the player on deck), and a hall pass with the name and classroom number of a third student (the player in the hole). Once the student taking the test was finished, he/she was given the pass to retrieve the third student before heading back to his/her own class. A new pass was then written, and the student waiting outside was called in. Thus we moved "up the order" and rotation kept things fluid and constant. With the exception of a few minor

hiccups, this system worked smoothly and minimized time out of class and time spent locating students.

**Step Five: Get a Move on.**

We rolled out our plan to the students and staff well ahead of time, but in recognition that everyone had more on their plates than just ACCESS, we decided to be much more proactive at the start of each day. Using the group lists created on Google Sheets, we sent mass emails each morning to the entire staff letting them know which students would be testing in the morning and afternoon testing sessions. We then created notes to remind students of the testing schedule each day and delivered the reminders during homeroom.

It required getting to school extra early to write emails, staying late to write reminders, and a lot of leg work to deliver materials. In the end, the extra work paid off. Seldom did we have to put out APBs on missing students, teachers got back to us quickly with notice of missing students when they were unable to deliver the passes, and the added attention to detail inspired the students to take test more seriously.

**Step Six: Get along.**

This entire experience would have been much more difficult without the trust and easy going nature of The Lynhurst staff and administration. Everyone involved remained calm and flexible to accommodate the process. Administrators allowed us the freedom to design our own system without micro-management and lent a hand or guidance when needed. Teachers were understanding about students being out of their classrooms (sometimes large chunks of their classes) and brought students up to speed on what they had missed while they were testing. Teachers also were instrumental in communicating the schedule to those level 4 students not enrolled in an ELD (English language development) course. Paraprofessionals helped to create

spreadsheets, organize materials, seek out missing students and maintain running records. They also supported substitute teachers in for our own ELD classes on a consistent basis to ensure learning continued while we tested students.

My partner, Mrs. Marina Veprinski, worked in tandem with me to brainstorm aspects of the process, create materials, communicate with staff, run departmental meetings and administer the tests. We worked hard to make sure that we applied the same structure to our testing environments and to ensure adherence to the predetermined approach to add a sense of uniformity to the entire experience.

**Step Seven: Get It Wrapped up.**

Once we finished the last of the speaking tests and made up those students that missed sessions, it was time to dot i's and cross t's. We meticulously went through each box and flipped through each book to make sure that all portions of the test were completed. Books were divided, first by grade level, then again by tier. All spreadsheets were double checked and updated; all box top rosters were examined and then removed. The materials left the building for delivery nearly two days before the third round of ACUITY, our schools self-imposed deadline.

A transition that initially felt problematic and intimidating was accomplished rather seamlessly. We are aware, however, that the ultimate determiner as to whether or not our efforts were "successful" will be in the scores that return to the district and not the manner in which the tests were packaged and delivered. I hope that whatever equivalency committee (LAS Links to ACCESS) that the Indiana Department of Education puts together will take into account the painstaking effort that goes into making such a large transition, especially for schools like Lynhurst housing a large population of ELLs. In the end, we are all here for the same singular purpose: to help ELLs. I am of the opinion that no matter what the data points suggest or the

matrixes imply, we should sing of our victories when we get the chance. Thank you for allowing me to sing our song.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nicholas Fine is a middle school ENL teacher at The Lynhurst 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Center, a Wayne Township school in Indianapolis, Indiana. He received his undergraduate in English education from Fort Lewis College in Durago, CO. He taught high school literature and composition for three years before moving to Spain. There, he operated a language laboratory at San Luis de Gonzaga, a private institution outside of Madrid (Majadahonda). While overseas, he received his master's degree in TEFL from UNED (Universidad Nacional de Educacion de Distancia). Since his return to Indiana, he has served on Wayne Township's Language Arts Taskforce and participated in developing the district's ENL/ELD curriculum.

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