



English Language Proficiency Assessment  
for the 21st Century

# Theory of Action

## August 2014

*"The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal government."*

The *English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (ELPA21<sup>1</sup>) is a consortium comprised of 11 states — Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Nebraska, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, Washington, and West Virginia — developing an assessment system designed to measure the performance of English language learners (ELLs) as they progress through their K-12 education and achieve college and career readiness.

Through the use of a screener and summative assessment, ELPA21 will support ELLs by determining initial proficiency and placement; identifying the need for reclassification or continued placement; providing information that can help guide instruction, nurture student growth, determine reclassification/exit status; and documenting accountability for the overall system and member states.

ELPA21 is unique in that it is designed to assess new English Language Proficiency Standards<sup>2</sup> describing the how language is used by the rigorous content demands in each grade. As students practice language, they simultaneously interact with grade-level academic content. Increasing the expectations for the academic content that students must master in high school requires a parallel increase in expectations for English language acquisition. The ELP Standards describe these higher expectations by integrating language development with appropriate mathematics, language arts, and science subject matter. As ELs learn the academic uses of the English language, they are also exposed to the content knowledge necessary to be on track for college and career readiness.

### **Purpose of This Document**

A Theory of Action (ToA) describes how ELPA21 will facilitate the move from current English language (EL) expectations and instructional practice to those necessary for ELLs to gain proficiency in the academic language used within math, science and ELA, and to ultimately become college- and career-ready. The ToA describes how our mission will be carried out, aligning intended assumptions with the organizational context of ELPA21. It connects strategy to action and identifies the multiple dependencies required for the successful implementation of our vision.

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<sup>1</sup>See [ELPA21.org](http://ELPA21.org) for additional information.

<sup>2</sup>English Language Proficiency Standards with Correspondences to K–12 English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, and Science Practices, K–12 ELA Standards, and 6-12 Literacy Standards, CCSSO, 2013. Available at [http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/Final%204\\_30%20ELPA21%20Standards\(1\).pdf](http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/Final%204_30%20ELPA21%20Standards(1).pdf).

**Mission:** Acknowledging the diverse and rich language experiences ELLs bring to school, we recognize their English language proficiency is constantly growing. ELPA21 measures that growth based on the new ELP Standards and provides valuable information that informs instruction and facilitates academic English proficiency so that all ELLs leave high school prepared for college and career success.

**Vision:** To provide assessments that best measure English language learners' mastery of the communication demands of states' rigorous academic standards.

The ToA is grounded in research and evidence-based practice and describes what the consortium intends to achieve. It also connects strategy and actions to objectives and desired outcomes to fulfill the mission and vision of the organization and to address the following questions:

- How do we get from the current state to where we want to be?
- What steps need to be taken to improve EL teaching and learning?
- What evidence exists that the identified steps and strategies will be successful in the context of ELPA21?
- As a result of our actions, what can we expect to happen?
- How will these actions impact students, educators and schools?
- What results do we expect to see, and how will we measure them?
- What are indicators of success?

### **Theory of Action**

The ELPA21 Theory of Action is based on a set of *core beliefs* and *foundational assumptions*. These distinguish ELPA21 from other ELP assessments. The *assessment system* reflects the synthesis and application of these core beliefs and foundational assumptions to specific goals that address emerging ELL needs and challenges and will result in the intended impact. *Planned actions* are the many complex steps and tasks that once complete, are expected to contribute to the impact of ELPA21. To evaluate the extent to which assessment objectives are met, *criteria for success* describe milestones and metrics that provide evidence of success throughout development and identify areas for additional refinement. Figure 1 describes the elements of the theory of action.

Figure 1. Elements of the Theory of Action.

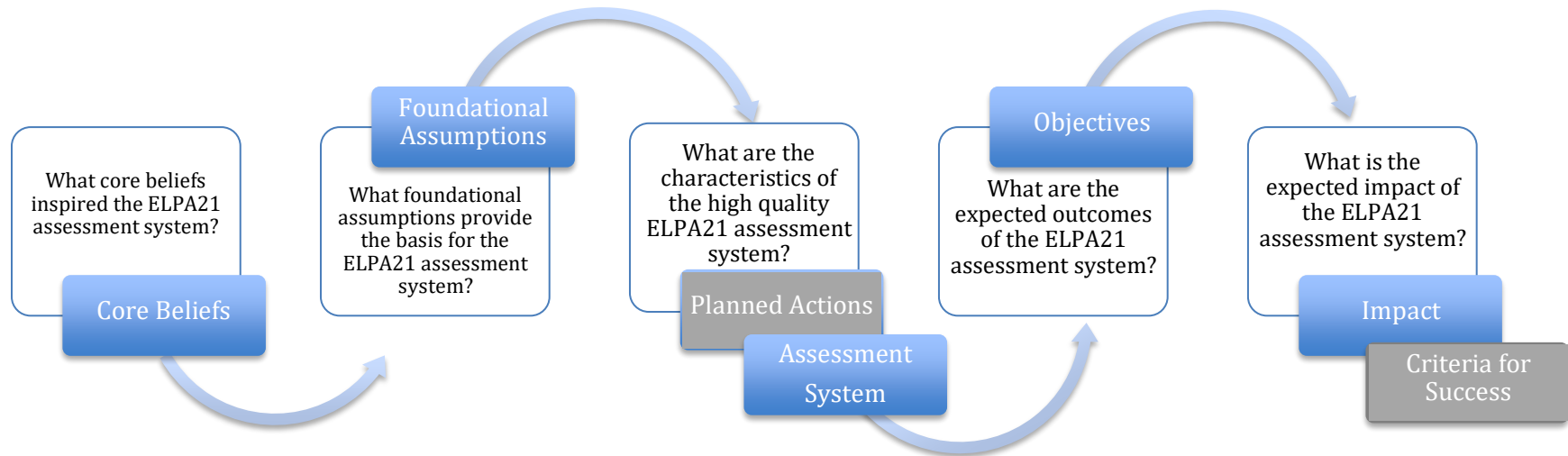
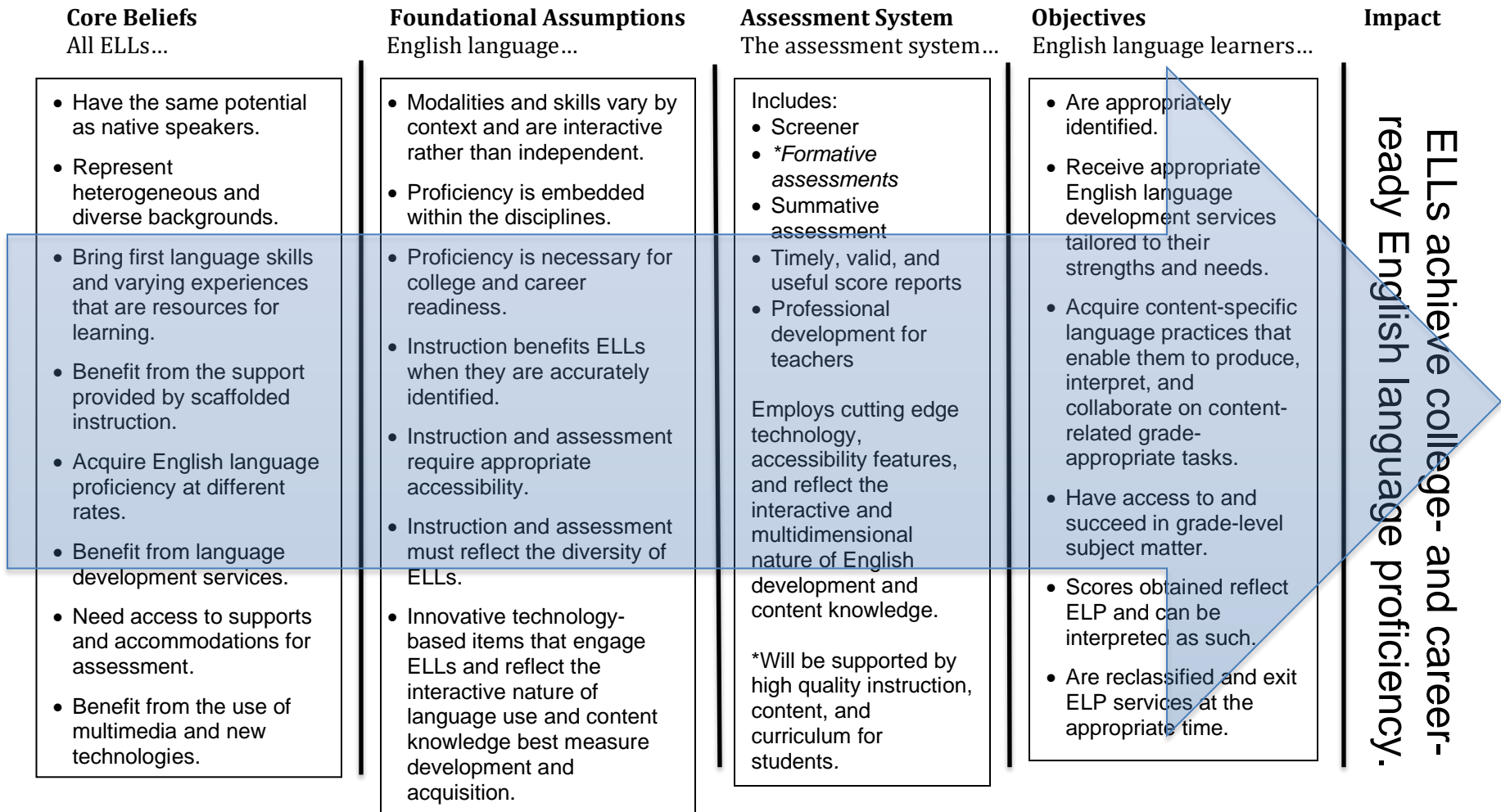


Figure 2 identifies each of these elements for the ELPA21 assessment system, and text following Figure 2 describes each.

Figure 2. ELPA21 Theory of Action.



### Core Beliefs

At the heart of ELPA21 is a set of core beliefs. These beliefs drive the mission and vision, guide design and development, prioritize tasks and resources, and establish a new way of thinking about English language learning, instruction and assessment. Core beliefs also reflect the guiding principles of the ELP standards<sup>3</sup>:

1. ELLs are a heterogeneous group, with physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive differences, representing diverse social, educational, and cultural backgrounds. While they learn language at varying rates, all ELLs have the same potential as non-ELLs, and their diverse backgrounds are valuable resources for learning.
2. All ELLs are capable of making and demonstrating progress toward English language proficiency, and benefit from scaffolded instruction and language development services.
3. ELLs must acquire discipline-specific language practices that enable them to produce, interpret, and effectively collaborate on content-related grade-appropriate tasks. ELLs benefit from new technology and with the appropriate supports and accommodations, can make and demonstrate continual progress in the use of language.

### Foundational Assumptions

The assessment design is guided by the three foundational assumptions concerning the nature of the English language. First, English language modalities (receptive, productive, and interactive) and domains (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) vary by context, and are interactive, rather than independent. Skills in each domain are developed interactively with, rather than in isolation from the other domains. The four domains are undeniably related to each other, and the standards and assessments reflect this.

Second, English language proficiency is not attained independently of the specific language processes that are embedded within each discipline. ELPA21 instruction and assessments are designed to align to the new English Language Proficiency

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<sup>3</sup> English Language Proficiency Standards with Correspondences to K–12 English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, and Science Practices, K–12 ELA Standards, and 6–12 Literacy Standards, CCSSO, 201, page 1-2.

Standards that correspond to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in ELA and mathematics<sup>4</sup> and the Next Generation Science Standards<sup>5</sup>. As a result, ELPA21 facilitates acquisition of the communication skills necessary for mastery of content standards.

Finally, English language proficiency, as described by the ELP Standards, corresponds to rigorous college- and career-ready standards. Accurate identification of ELL status is critical for students to receive the support necessary to become ready for postsecondary pursuits. Effective EL instruction and measures of progress towards mastery of the language must be accessible to, and reflective of, the diverse ELL population. Once proficient, ELLs are able to leave high school as prepared for college and career as their non-ELL peers.

#### Assessment System

Like the standards, the assessments focus on the critical discipline-specific language skills necessary for ELLs to become successful in school. This approach reframes language proficiency from “*What language does the student have?*” to “*What is the student able to do with language in the content areas?*” Comparing what students can do with what they need to be able to do provides more actionable and instructionally relevant information than does identifying a discrete set of knowledge and skills at a given point in time.

The assessment supports grade-level instruction and EL development that reflects the same change in thinking as the standards because ELLs can and should be supported in ways that allow them to become college- and career-ready at the same level as non-ELLs.

A new type of EL screener identifies potential ELLs by the ways they can use the language and not by the words and conventions they know. These students will benefit from a standards-based curriculum and formative assessment system that are not funded under the current assessment grant. This will include learning progressions and the interpretation of the current status of students based on the new expectations. Grade-band summative tests measure progress towards mastery of

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<sup>4</sup> National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers (2010). Common core state standards. Retrieved October 10, 2013 from <http://www.corestandards.org>.

<sup>5</sup> ACHIEVE (2014). Next Generation Science Standards. Retrieved May 2, 2014 from <http://www.nextgenscience.org/next-generation-science-standards>.

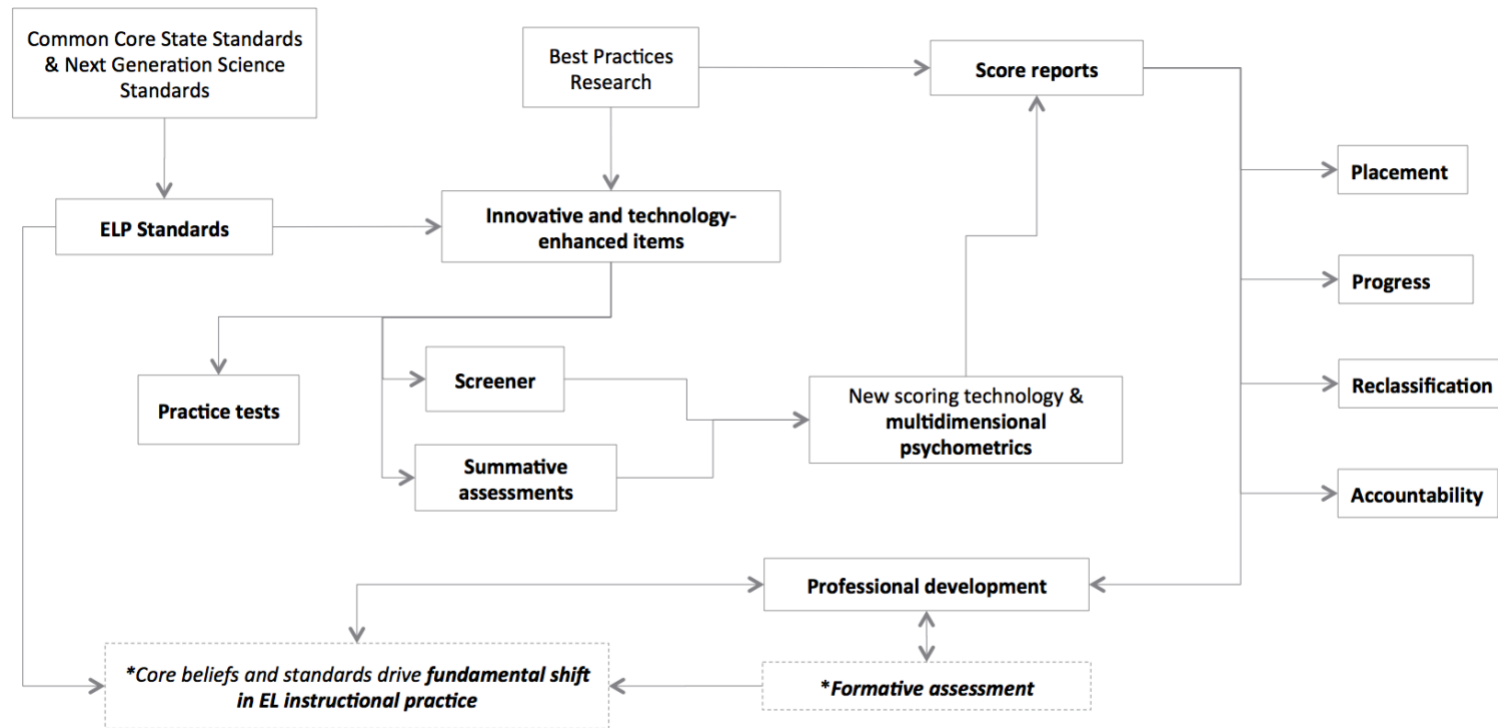
communication skills necessary for learning grade-level appropriate academic subjects. Measuring language acquisition regularly and with precision provides teachers and policy makers with information to make better instructional decisions for ELLs. Teachers can and should receive the support and student data necessary to provide appropriate and effective education to instruct students to more rigorous college and career readiness expectations.

Assessment results will reflect English language proficiency and can be interpreted as such. ELPA21 score reports are timely, and provide educators with useful results that inform individualized instruction.

Figure 3 describes the fully integrated ELPA21 system, including elements that are not a part of the assessment grant, such as formative assessment and standards based curriculum development and implementation.



Figure 3. ELPA21 Assessment System



*\*Key ELPA21 components that are not funded under the assessment grant.*

Appendix B provides a more detailed diagram of the ELPA21 assessment system

### Objectives

The purpose of ELPA21 assessments is described by four main objectives:

1. **PLACEMENT:** To determine the identification, current proficiency level, and appropriate placement of potential ELLs relative to grade appropriate performance standards.
2. **PROGRESS:** To monitor progress towards English proficiency for ELLs, describing individual and group strengths by domain and over time. Progress monitoring should meet multiple needs such as student placement and program exit, determining instructional needs of students and support needs of teachers, evaluating program effectiveness for subgroups of students, and adjusting educational programming and resources as needed.
3. **RECLASSIFICATION:** To determine proficiency relative to grade appropriate performance standards for reclassification purposes. Once proficient, students will have acquired the content-specific language practices that enable them to produce, interpret, collaborate on, and succeed in content-related grade-appropriate tasks.
4. **ACCOUNTABILITY:** To determine which districts are meeting accountability targets and identify schools in need of assistance.

In pursuit of these objectives, ELPA21 draws upon emerging technologies and innovative psychometric methods necessary to measure progress towards and mastery of the communication demands of rigorous academic standards.

### Impact

The ultimate goal of ELPA21 is to remove language as a barrier to college and career readiness for ELLs. ELLs have the same potential as non-ELLs and must have the same expectation to leave high school proficient in the language necessary for college and career.

### Planned Activities

The theory of action requires assessment design and development activities. Table A1 in the Appendix identifies the specific tasks necessary to complete the assessment system. Activities are designed and led by experts in computer-adaptive and fixed-form assessment, psychometrics, accessibility, item and task development, English language acquisition and development, standard setting, score reporting, and data use.

### Criteria for Success

Numerous metrics throughout assessment development, implementation, and sustainability will determine the extent to which ELPA21 assessments meet stated objectives. The *ELPA21 Validity Plan* describes comprehensive plans to establish and document the reliability and validity of ELPA21 assessments throughout development, implementation, and sustainability. The ELPA21 Technical Report will describe the technical quality and rigor inherent in assessment design and development. The ELPA21 Sustainability Plan will describe the framework of organizational domains within the context of ELPA21. These domains will help define the parameters necessary to build the capacity for maintaining and enhancing the system leading to longevity and success. Table A1 in the Appendix describes criteria that will measure and establish project success.

### Conclusion

ELPA21 has a unique opportunity to improve the way ELLs are prepared for entrance into college and careers. The ELP standards describe language proficiency as interactive in nature and embedded in grade-appropriate rigorous content knowledge. The ELPA21 instructional supports will guide educators teaching to these new standards, and ELPA21 formative assessments will reflect and inform enhanced instruction. The new ELPA21 assessments incorporate recent technological advances to measure, with precision, how students use language within academic contexts. All ELPA21 elements, when implemented, will make ELP more rigorous, more closely related to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and rigorous content knowledge, and will redefine English language proficiency expectations, instruction, measurement, and outcomes.

### **Appendix A**

Table A1 describes major tasks necessary for the development of an assessment system that will meet the four stated objectives. The *planned activities* for each objective are expected to result in the *anticipated outcomes*. The extent to which the anticipated outcomes are met can be determined by the *criteria for success*.

Table A1.Planned Activities, Outcomes, and Criteria for Success by Objective

<b>Objective #1:</b>	<b>PLACEMENT: To determine the identification, current proficiency level, and appropriate placement of potential ELLs relative to grade appropriate performance standards</b>
Planned activities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Compile evidence base and bring together national experts to identify and implement best practices in language learning, instruction, measurement, policy, accessibility, and assessment</li> <li>*Define grade-appropriate performance</li> <li>*Integrate standards into current classroom instructional practice</li> <li>*Applying Evidence Centered Design (ECD), develop innovative and technology enhanced test items that assess the interactive and content dependent nature of the standards</li> <li>*Identify and understand current diverse populations of actual and potential ELLs across all member states</li> <li>*Design items and delivery system to be accessible to increasingly diverse ELLs</li> <li>*Design, develop, and field test screener</li> <li>*Provide a valid and reliable screening measure that differentiates ELLs from non-ELLs</li> <li>*Implement scoring processes</li> <li>*Document data processing and psychometrics processes</li> <li>*Develop and deliver screener reports</li> </ul>
Anticipated outcome:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Potential ELLs participate in an efficient and effective screening process that is accessible to all students.</li> <li>*Results differentiate between ELLs and non-ELLs by measuring proficiency relative to grade-level performance standards.</li> <li>*Screener results determine program eligibility and identify instructional needs.</li> </ul>
Criteria for success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Evidence that classroom practice reflects new ELL expectations and practices</li> <li>*Evidence of balance between screener administration burden, technical quality, and useful information</li> <li>*Evidence of consistent administration, scoring, and classification processes</li> <li>*Evidence of classification accuracy</li> <li>*Evidence of correspondence between classroom observation and evidence and screener classification</li> <li>*Evidence of performance level validity, as established through standard setting</li> <li>*Evidence of scoring reliability</li> <li>*Evidence of accessibility to all students</li> </ul>

Table A1.Planned Activities, Outcomes, and Criteria for Success by Objective, Continued

<b>Objective #2:</b>	<b>Progress: To measure progress towards English proficiency for ELLs, describing individual and group strengths by domain and over time. Progress monitoring should meet multiple needs such as student placement and program exit, determining instructional needs of students and support needs of teachers, evaluating program effectiveness for subgroups of students, and adjusting educational programming and resources as needed.</b>
Planned activities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Integrate emerging technology, best practice, and ECD</li> <li>*Establish technology specifications that are compatible with other assessments administered in member states</li> <li>*Design, develop, and validate summative assessment</li> <li>*Develop user support and guidance materials to ensure implementation with fidelity across member states</li> <li>*Report ELPA21 scores in ways that are useful and easily interpreted by intended audiences</li> <li>*Detect and report domain-level strengths and weaknesses to inform classroom instruction</li> <li>*Detect and report individual and aggregate proficiency</li> <li>*Develop and provide ongoing professional development to support educators in planning, implementation and improving standards-based curriculum and instructional plans</li> <li>*Measure and report growth in proficiency attainment over time</li> </ul>
Anticipated outcome:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*A secure, logistically feasible platform that is interoperable, technically sophisticated, and that reliably delivers a summative assessment that is consistently implemented across member states.</li> <li>*It is accessible to all students and measures progress and proficiency with accuracy and precision.</li> <li>*Reports help teachers facilitate ELP in individual and groups of ELLs and help schools, districts and SEAs support teachers.</li> </ul>
Criteria for success	<p>Evidence listed for assessment objective #1, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Evidence of implementation consistency within and across state</li> <li>*Score consistency with teacher observations of domain-level strengths and weaknesses</li> <li>*Evidence of validity and reliability</li> <li>*Evidence of scoring accuracy and reliability</li> <li>*Low-misclassification error</li> <li>*Minimal to no gaps in ELP attainment between subgroups</li> <li>*Plans for reliability and sustainability over time</li> <li>*Teachers indicate that assessment results are instructionally relevant and useful</li> <li>*Administrators affirm assessment results support resource allocation decisions and maximize accountability</li> </ul>

Table A1.Planned Activities, Outcomes, and Criteria for Success by Objective, Continued

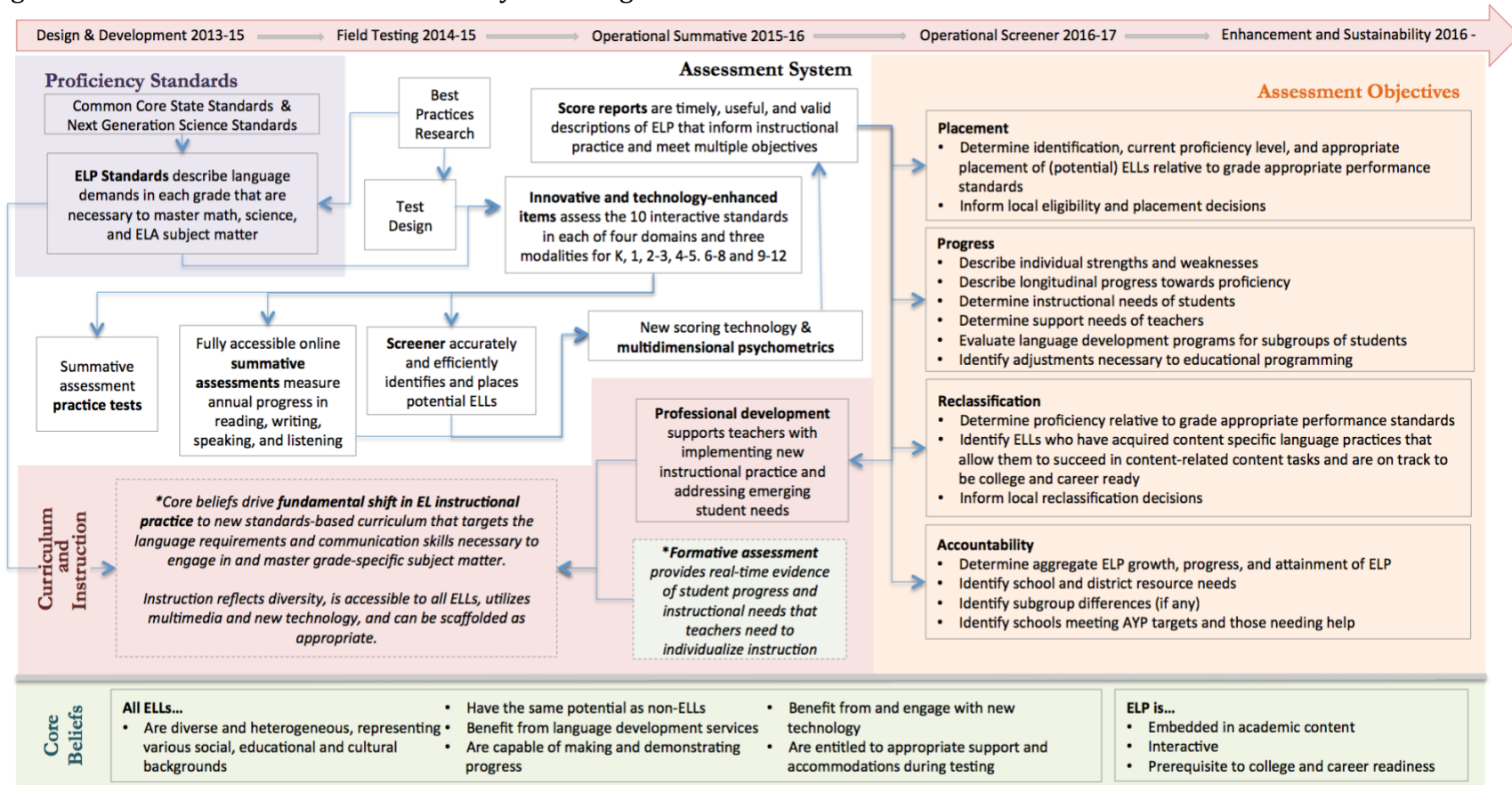
<b>Objective #3:</b>	<b>RECLASSIFICATION: To determine proficiency relative to grade appropriate performance standards for reclassification purposes. Once proficient, students will have acquired the content-specific language practices that enable them to produce, interpret, collaborate with others, and succeed in content-related grade-appropriate tasks.</b>
Planned activities:	*Correctly reclassify ELL students who have become proficient in English at the level necessary to perform at grade-level
Anticipated outcome:	*Improved educator effectiveness and student achievement
Criteria for success:	*Evidence of score precision and reliability. *Low-misclassification error *Evidence of equivalence between screener and summative “proficient” scores

<b>Objective 4:</b>	<b>ACCOUNTABILITY: To determine which schools are meeting accountability targets and identify school in need of assistance.</b>
Planned activities:	*Aggregate scores at school, district, and state levels *Identify schools, ELL subgroups, or instructional areas needing additional resources or support *Provide policy-makers with the information necessary for high-level, high-stakes decisions
Anticipated outcome:	*Provide and model best practices for emerging bilinguals *Improved instruction for ELLs *Reallocated resources that address areas in need
Criteria for success:	*Increased percentage of schools meeting Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs)

## Appendix B

Figure B1. Detailed ELPA21 Assessment System Diagram



*\*Key ELPA21 components that are not funded under the assessment grant.*

The Theory of Action was developed with input from multiple levels of ELPA21 stakeholders and leaders.

### **Principal Investigator**

- Kenji Hakuta with Martha Castellon of the Understanding Language Initiative of Stanford University

### **ELPA21 Executive Board**

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- Phyllis Farrar, World Languages Consultant, Careers, Standards, and Assessment Services, Kansas
- Terri Schuster, Title III Director/ELL Assessment, Nebraska
- Paula Mahaley, Assistant Director, Office of Curriculum and Assessment, Ohio
- Doug Kosty, Assistant Superintendent, Office of Learning, Oregon
- Kara Todd, Science Assessment Specialist, Washington

### **ELPA21 Consortium Council**

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- Chane Eplin, Bureau Chief, Florida
- Colleen Anderson, Student Assessment Consultant, Iowa
- Lee Jones, Education Program Consultant, Assessment, Kansas
- Kristina Bradford, Assessment Administration, Louisiana
- Terri Schuster, Director, Title III, Nebraska
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### **ELPA21 Task Management Teams**

- Accessibility and Accommodations: Martha Thurlow, National Center on Educational Outcomes
- Assessment Design and Scaling: Bill Auty, Measurement Consulting
- Field Test and Technology Readiness: Wes Bruce, Technology Consultant
- Item Acquisition and Development: Phoebe Winter, Assessment Research and Development Consultant
- Performance Standard Setting, Data, and Reporting: Mary Seburn, Quantiful
- Communications and Outreach, Kara Schlosser

### **ELPA21 Validity Partner**

- Mark Hanson and Li Cai at CRESST