Theory of Action: Alternate Assessment of English Language Proficiency for ELs with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities

By the National Center on Educational Outcomes

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cognitive disabilites. Los Angeles: University of California.

For this document, *college and career* ready is defined as being ready for an array of postsecondary training opportunities, careers, and community participation, as well as college participation.[1] College and career readiness may be realized in alternate ways for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities.[2] Throughout this document, the term "college and career ready" refers to this broader, alternate conceptualization.

Through the use of a screener and summative assessment, Alt-ELPA21 will support states as they set policies on ELs with significant cognitive disabilities 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 was designed to assess new English Language Proficiency Standards[3] describing how language is used in the rigorous content demands of each grade. As students practice language, they simultaneously interact with grade-level academic content. Increasing the expectations for the academic content that ELs with significant cognitive disabilities 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 with significant cognitive disabilities 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 ELs with significant cognitive disabilities to gain proficiency in the language used for these students 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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[1] See Kearns, Kleinert. Harrison, Sheppard-Jones, Hall, & Jones, 2011, *What Does "College and Career Ready" Mean for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities?* Available at http://www.naacpartners.org/publications/CareerCollegeReadiness.pdf). Throughout this document, the term "college and career ready" refers to this broader, alternate conceptualization.
[2] Think College programs exist throughout the country (see Think College National Coordinating Center, https://thinkcollege.net/about/what-is-think-college/think-college-national-coordinating-center)
[3] 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.

Mission: Acknowledging the diverse language experiences ELs with significant cognitive disabilities bring to school, we recognize their English language proficiency is constantly growing. Alt-ELPA21 measures that growth based on the new ELP Standards, focused[4] to respect their significant cognitive disabilities, and provides valuable information that informs instruction and facilitates academic English proficiency so that all ELs with significant cognitive disabilities leave high school prepared for college and career success.

Vision: To provide assessments that best measure mastery of the English language demands placed on ELs with significant cognitive disabilities represented in states' rigorous academic standards and reflecting alternate achievement 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 for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities?
- What evidence exists that the identified steps and strategies will be successful in the context of Alt-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 Alt-ELPA21 Theory of Action is based on a set of *core beliefs* and *foundational assumptions*. These distinguish ELPA21's alternate ELP assessment from other alternate ELP assessments. The *assessment system* reflects the synthesis and application of these core beliefs and foundational assumptions to specific goals that address emerging needs and challenges of ELs with significant cognitive disabilities, 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 the Alt-ELPA21 for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities. To evaluate the extent to which assessment objectives are met, *criteria for success* describe milestones and metrics that provide evidence of success

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[4] The term "focused" standards is used in the theory of action to indicate the adjusted ELP standards that will be the addressed by ELPA21's alternate assessment of English language proficiency. The adjustments will maintain the essence of the CCSSO open source standards of English language proficiency that ELPA21 uses, but will reflect reduced depth, breadth, and complexity, as is appropriate for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

throughout development and identify areas for additional refinement. Figure 1 describes the elements of the theory of action for the Alt-ELPA21 assessment system.

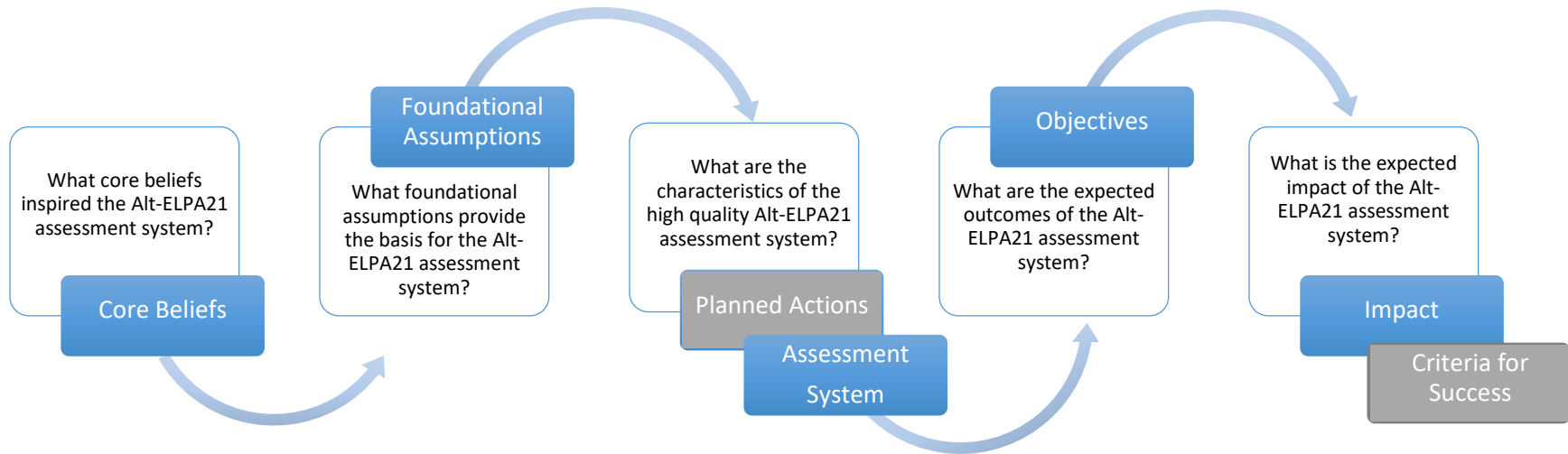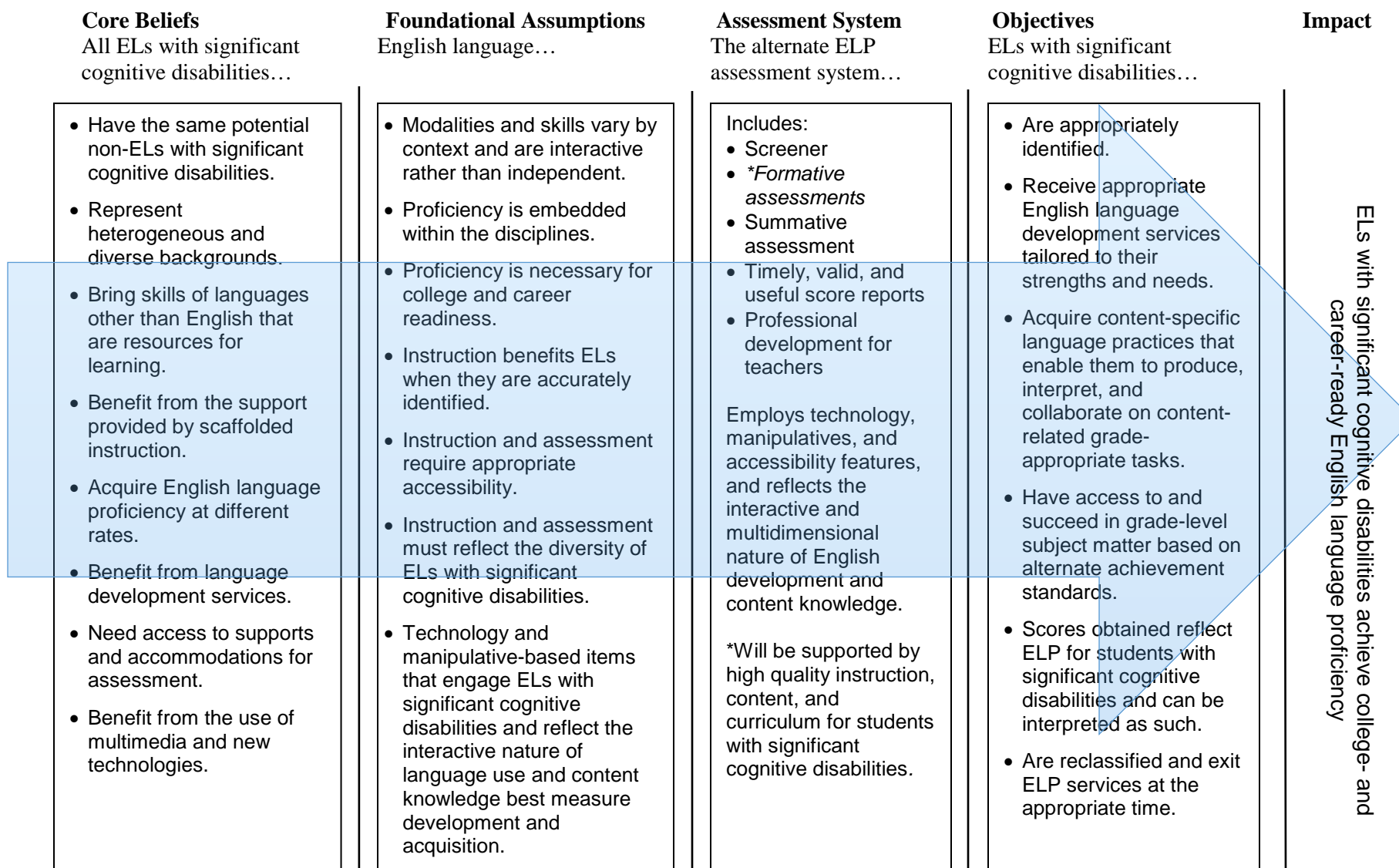Figure 1. Elements of the Theory of Action for Alt-ELPA21

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

Figure 2. ELPA21 Theory of Action for Alt-ELPA21

Core Beliefs All ELs with significant cognitive disabilities…	Foundational Assumptions English language…	Assessment System The alternate ELP assessment system…	Objectives ELs with significant cognitive disabilities…	Impact
• Have the same potential non-ELs with significant cognitive disabilities. • Represent heterogeneous and diverse backgrounds. • Bring skills of languages other than English that are resources for learning. • Benefit from the support provided by scaffolded instruction. • Acquire English language proficiency at different rates. • Benefit from language development services. • Need access to supports and accommodations for assessment. • Benefit from the use of multimedia and new technologies.	• Modalities and skills vary by context and are interactive rather than independent. • Proficiency is embedded within the disciplines. • Proficiency is necessary for college and career readiness. • Instruction benefits ELs when they are accurately identified. • Instruction and assessment require appropriate accessibility. • Instruction and assessment must reflect the diversity of ELs with significant cognitive disabilities. • Technology and manipulative-based items that engage ELs with significant cognitive disabilities and reflect the interactive nature of language use and content knowledge best measure development and acquisition.	Includes: • Screener • *Formative assessments* • Summative assessment • Timely, valid, and useful score reports • Professional development for teachers Employs technology, manipulatives, and accessibility features, and reflects the interactive and multidimensional nature of English development and content knowledge. *Will be supported by high quality instruction, content, and curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities.	• Are appropriately identified. • Receive appropriate English language development services tailored to their strengths and needs. • Acquire content-specific language practices that enable them to produce, interpret, and collaborate on content-related grade-appropriate tasks. • Have access to and succeed in grade-level subject matter based on alternate achievement standards. • Scores obtained reflect ELP for students with significant cognitive disabilities and can be interpreted as such. • Are reclassified and exit ELP services at the appropriate time.	ELs with significant cognitive disabilities achieve college- and career-ready English language proficiency

At the heart of Alt-ELPA21 for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities 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 for these students. Core beliefs also reflect the guiding principles of the ELP Focused Standards for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities:[5]

1. ELs with significant cognitive disabilities are a heterogeneous group, with physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive differences, representing diverse social, educational, and cultural backgrounds. They also vary in their communication levels, from those with no obvious communication system to those with oral or other symbolic communication systems. While they learn language at varying rates, all ELs with significant cognitive disabilities have the same potential as non-ELs with significant cognitive disabilities to learn language, and their diverse backgrounds are valuable resources for learning.

2. All ELs with significant cognitive disabilities are capable of making and demonstrating progress toward English language proficiency based on alternate achievement standards, and benefit from scaffolded instruction and language development services.

3. ELs with significant cognitive disabilities must acquire discipline-specific language practices that enable them to produce, interpret, and effectively collaborate on content-related grade-appropriate tasks based on alternate achievement standards. ELs with significant cognitive disabilities benefit from technology, manipulatives, 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 based on alternate achievement standards is not attained independently of the specific language processes that are embedded within each discipline. Alt-ELPA21 is designed to align to the new English Language Proficiency

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[5] Focused Standards for ELPA21's alternate assessment are being developed. These are based on the CCSSO (2011) open-source 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.

Standards that correspond to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in ELA and mathematics[6] and the Next Generation Science Standards.[7] As a result, Alt-ELPA21 facilitates acquisition of language skills necessary for mastery of content standards based on alternate achievement standards.

Finally, English language proficiency, as described by ELP Standards based on alternate achievement standards, corresponds to rigorous college- and career-ready standards. Accurate identification of EL status is critical for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities to receive the support necessary to become ready for postsecondary pursuits. Effective EL instruction and measures of progress toward mastery of the language must be accessible to, and reflective of, the diverse population of ELs with significant cognitive disabilities. Once proficient, ELs with significant cognitive disabilities are able to leave high school with English language skills as prepared for college and career as their non-EL peers with significant cognitive disabilities.

Assessment System
Like the standards, the alternate ELP assessments focus on the critical discipline-specific language skills necessary for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities 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*?" For this population of students, language use may involve non-verbal communication, the use of assistive communication devices, etc. 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 content instruction and EL development based on alternate achievement standards. This approach reflects the same change in thinking as did the development of focused ELP standards. ELs with significant cognitive disabilities can and should be supported in ways that allow them to become college- and career-ready in their English language skills at the same level as non-ELs with significant cognitive disabilities.

A new type of EL screener for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities identifies potential ELs by the ways they can use the English language and not by the words and conventions[8] 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 toward mastery of communication skills necessary for learning grade-level appropriate academic subjects based on alternate achievement

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[6] 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.

[7] ACHIEVE (2014). Next Generation Science Standards. Retrieved May 2, 2014 from http://www.nextgenscience.org/next-generation-science-standards.

[8] Conventions generally refer to spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

standards. Measuring language acquisition regularly and with precision provides teachers and policy makers with information to make better instructional decisions for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities. Teachers can and should receive the support and student data necessary to provide appropriate and effective education to instruct ELs with significant cognitive disabilities to more rigorous college and career readiness expectations.

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

Figure 3 describes the fully integrated Alt-ELPA21 system.

Figure 3. Alt-ELPA21 Assessment System
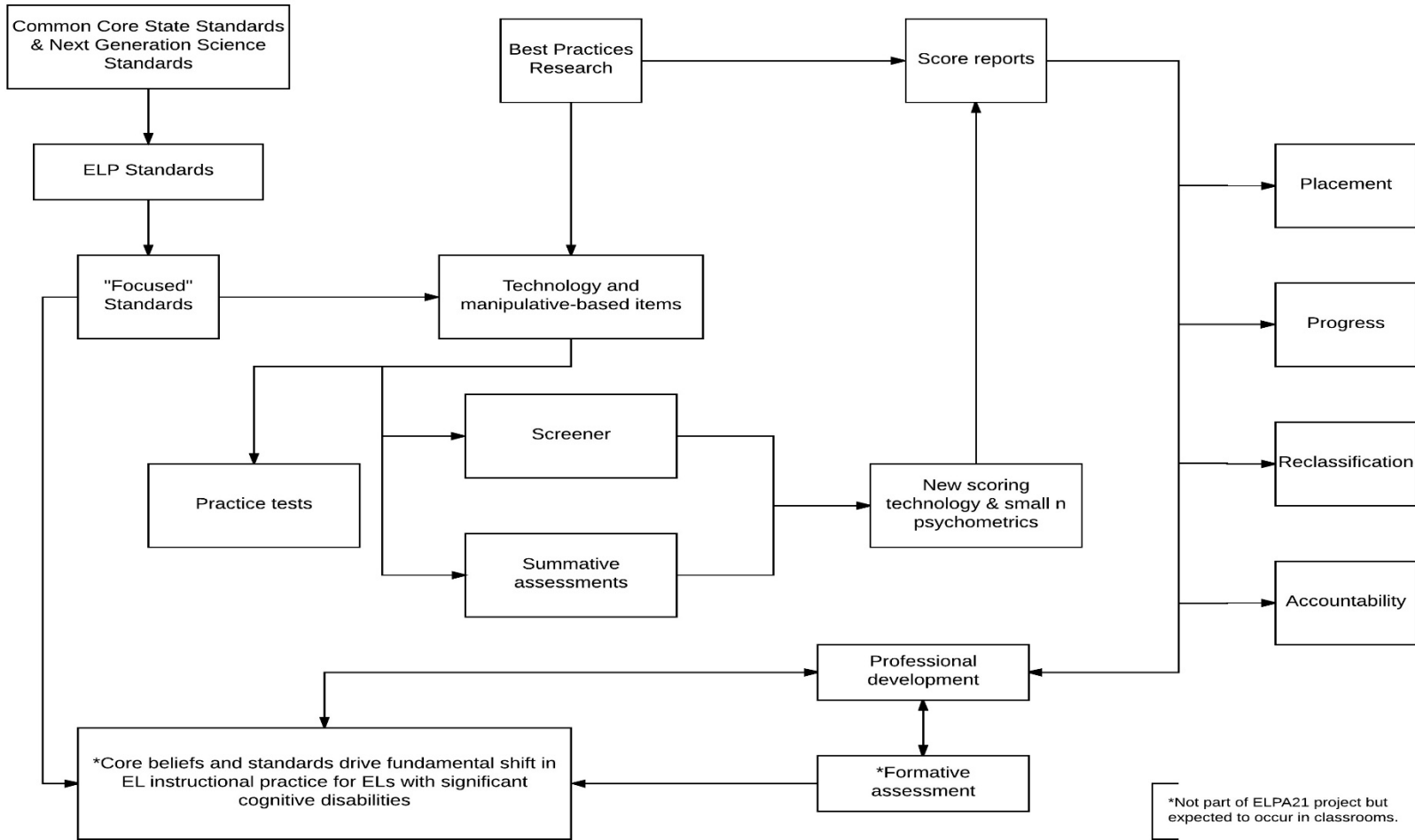
Appendix B provides a more detailed diagram of the Alt-ELPA21 assessment system.

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

1. PLACEMENT: To determine the identification, current proficiency level, and appropriate placement of potential ELs with significant cognitive disabilities relative to alternate achievement standards.
2. PROGRESS: To monitor progress toward English proficiency for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities, 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 and adjusting educational programming and resources as needed.
3. RECLASSIFICATION: To determine proficiency relative to alternate achievement 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 based on alternate achievement standards.
4. ACCOUNTABILITY: To determine which districts are meeting accountability targets and identify schools in need of assistance.

In pursuit of these objectives, Alt-ELPA21 draws on technology, use of manipulatives, and innovative psychometric methods for small numbers that are necessary to measure progress toward and mastery of the communication demands of rigorous academic standards based on alternate achievement standards.

Impact
The ultimate goal of Alt-ELPA21 for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities is to remove language as a barrier to college and career readiness for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities. ELs with significant cognitive disabilities have the same language-learning potential as non-ELs with significant cognitive disabilities, and must have the same expectation to leave high school proficient in the English 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 assessment of ELs with significant cognitive disabilities, including 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 Alt-ELPA21 assessments based on alternate achievement standards meet stated objectives. The *Alt-ELPA21 Validity Plan* describes comprehensive plans to establish and document the reliability and validity of Alt-ELPA21 assessments throughout development, implementation, and sustainability. The Alt-ELPA21 Technical Report will describe the technical quality and rigor inherent in assessment design and development. The Alt-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.

Conclusion
ELPA21 has a unique opportunity to improve the way ELs with significant cognitive disabilities are prepared for entrance into college and careers. The ELP Focused Standards describe language proficiency for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities as interactive in nature and embedded in grade-appropriate rigorous content knowledge based on alternate achievement standards. The ELPA21 instructional supports will guide educators teaching to these new standards, and ELPA21 formative assessments will reflect and inform enhanced instruction. The new Alt-ELPA21 assessments incorporate technology and manipulatives to measure, with precision, how students use academic English language within academic contexts. All ELPA21 elements, when implemented, will make ELP more rigorous, more closely related to 21st century skills and rigorous content knowledge based on alternate achievement standards, and will redefine English language proficiency expectations, instruction, measurement, and outcomes for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities.

Appendix A

Table A1 describes major tasks necessary for the development of an Alt-ELPA21 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

Objective #1:	PLACEMENT: To determine the identification, current proficiency level, and appropriate placement of potential ELs with significant cognitive disabilities relative to alternate achievement standards
Planned activities:	*Use work of national experts and organizations to identify and implement best practices in language learning, instruction, measurement, policy, accessibility, and assessment *Define grade-appropriate language skills based on alternate achievement standards *Integrate Focused Standards into current classroom instructional practice *Apply Evidence Centered Design (ECD) to develop technology and manipulative-based test items that assess the interactive and content dependent nature of the standards *Identify and understand current diverse populations of actual and potential ELs with significant cognitive disabilities *Design items and delivery system to be accessible to ELs with significant cognitive disabilities *Design, develop, and field test screener *Provide a valid and reliable screening measure that differentiates ELs with significant cognitive disabilities from non-ELs with significant cognitive disabilities *Implement scoring processes *Document data processing and psychometrics processes *Develop and deliver screener reports
Anticipated outcomes:	*Potential ELs with significant cognitive disabilities participate in an efficient and effective screening process that is accessible to all students with significant cognitive disabilities. *Results differentiate between ELs and non-ELs with significant cognitive disabilities by measuring proficiency relative to alternate achievement standards. *Screener results determine program eligibility and identify instructional needs.
Criteria for success	*Evidence that classroom practice reflects new EL expectations and practices for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities *Evidence of balance between screener administration burden, technical quality, and useful information *Evidence of consistent administration, scoring, and classification processes *Evidence of classification accuracy *Evidence of correspondence between classroom observation and evidence and screener classification *Evidence of achievement level validity, as established through standard setting *Evidence of scoring reliability *Evidence of accessibility to all students with significant cognitive disabilities

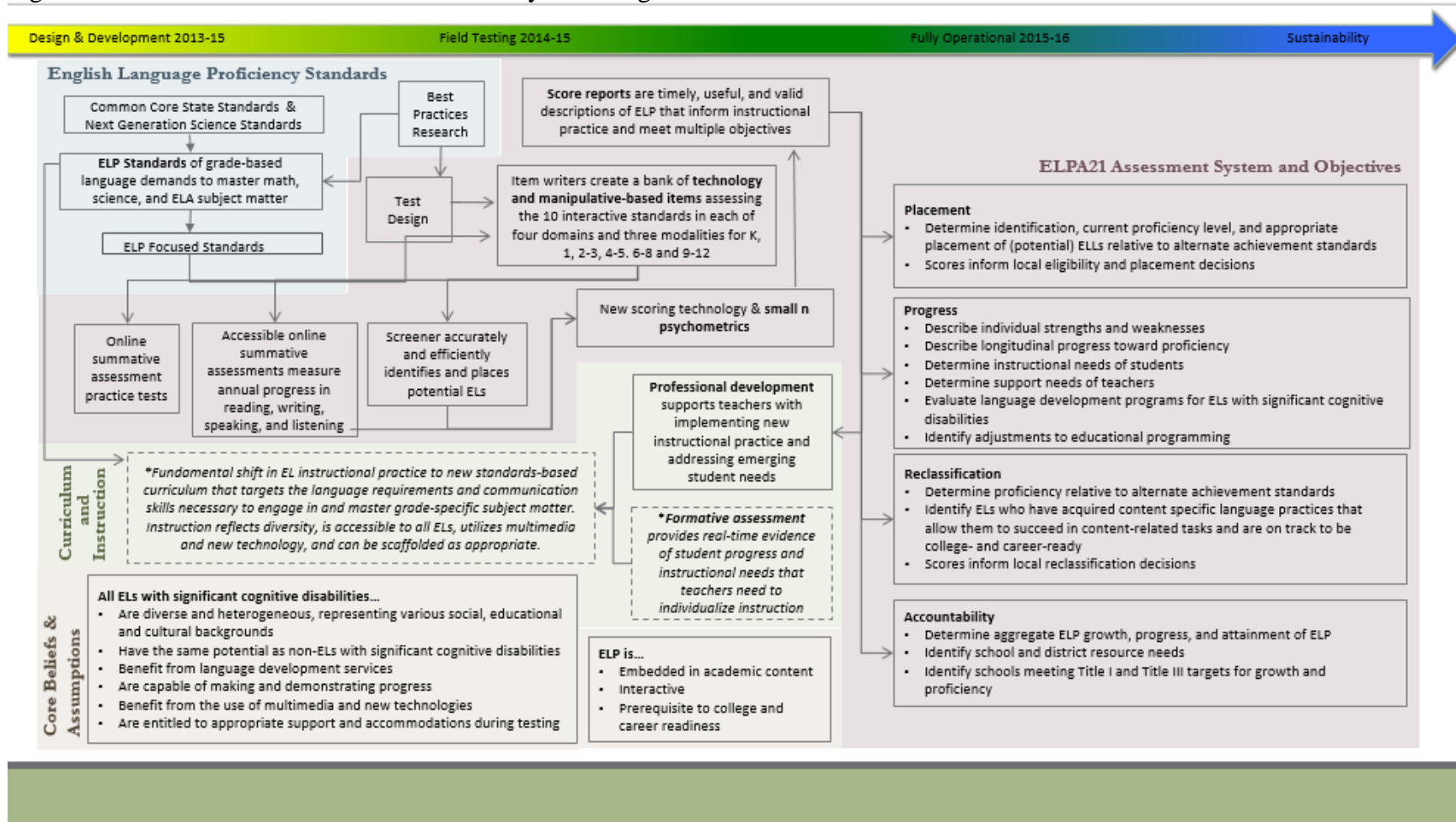Table A1. Planned Activities, Outcomes, and Criteria for Success by Objective, Continued

Objective #2:	Progress: To measure progress toward English proficiency for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities, describing individual and group strengths by domain and over time. Progress monitoring should meet multiple needs such as determining student placement and program exit, determining instructional needs of students and support needs of teachers, evaluating program effectiveness and adjusting educational programming and resources as needed
Planned activities:	*Integrate emerging technology, best practice, and evidence-centered design (ECD) *Establish technology specifications that are compatible with ELPA21 and assistive technology appropriate for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities *Design, develop, and validate summative assessment *Develop user support and guidance materials to ensure implementation with fidelity across users *Report Alt-ELPA21 scores in ways that are useful and easily interpreted by intended audiences *Detect and report domain-level strengths and weaknesses to inform classroom instruction *Detect and report individual and aggregate proficiency *Develop and provide ongoing professional development to support educators in planning, implementation and improving standards-based curriculum and instructional plans *Measure and report growth in proficiency attainment over time
Anticipated outcomes:	*A secure, logistically feasible platform that is interoperable, technically sophisticated, and that reliably delivers a summative assessment that is consistently implemented across users. *Alt-ELPA21 assessment is accessible to all students with significant cognitive disabilities and measures progress and proficiency with accuracy and precision. *Reports help teachers facilitate ELP in individual and groups of ELs with significant cognitive disabilities and help schools, districts and SEAs support teachers.
Criteria for success	Evidence listed for assessment objective #1, plus: *Evidence of implementation consistency within and across states *Score consistency with teacher observations of domain-level strengths and weaknesses *Evidence of validity and reliability *Evidence of scoring accuracy and reliability *Low-misclassification error *Plans for reliability and sustainability over time *Teachers indicate that assessment results are instructionally relevant and useful *Administrators affirm assessment results support resource allocation decisions and maximize accountability

Objective #3:	RECLASSIFICATION: To determine proficiency relative to alternate achievement 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 based on alternate achievement standards
Planned activities:	*Correctly reclassify ELs with significant cognitive disabilities who have become proficient in English based on alternate achievement standards.
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

Objective 4:	ACCOUNTABILITY: To determine which schools are meeting accountability targets and identify school in need of assistance
Planned activities:	*Aggregate scores at school, district, and state levels *Identify schools or instructional areas needing additional resources or support *Provide policymakers with the information necessary for high-level, high-stakes decisions
Anticipated outcomes:	*Provide and model best practices for emerging bilinguals with significant cognitive disabilities *Improved instruction for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities *Reallocated resources that address areas in need
Criteria for success:	*Increased percentage of schools meeting Title I and Title III targets for ELP growth and proficiency

Appendix B

Figure B1. Detailed ELPA21-Alt Assessment System Diagram

Acknowledgments