

Research Brief

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- [*The Use and Validity of Home Language Surveys in State English Language Proficiency Assessment Systems: A Review and Issues Perspective*](#)
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Summary of Recommendations for the Home Language Survey

Why is understanding the history of the Home Language Survey important?

The Home Language Survey (HLS) has been a foundational tool in assessing the linguistic backgrounds of students for nearly eight decades. Originating with the Hoffman Schedule of Bilingual Background in 1934, this instrument was initially validated with children of Eastern-European descent to determine bilingual dominance through interviews that assessed family and school bilingual exposure. Despite its longevity and widespread use, the HLS has rarely undergone rigorous validity testing to ensure its accuracy and reliability in measuring students' home language environments.

Over the years, the HLS adapted to legislative and societal changes, notably after the 1974 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Lau vs. Nichols*, which emphasized the necessity of providing equal educational opportunities to students from language minority backgrounds. This led to enhanced scrutiny of educational tools and practices affecting English learners, including the HLS, to ensure they met evolving legal and educational standards. Despite these developments, the HLS has often been critiqued for its potential biases and inaccuracies, such as its reliance on self-reporting by parents, which could be influenced by pressures to conform to the English language or a lack of self-awareness in language use at home.

What are the current challenges and considerations in validating the Home Language Survey?

In educational measurement, validating an HLS means ensuring the tool accurately identifies students needing English language support services, directly affecting their academic pathways. The shifting

demographics in education and the complexities of language acquisition demand ongoing refinement of the HLS, as it is essential to keep pace with diverse student populations whose linguistic backgrounds are continuously evolving. As we address these dynamics, it becomes imperative to develop and implement validation plans that not only assess but also enhance the efficacy of the HLS.

Design Considerations for Future Validation Plans:

Efficacy and Accuracy:

- States must assess the 'hit rate' of their HLS—the effectiveness of the tool in correctly identifying students needing language services. This involves calculating 'false positives' (over-identification) and 'false negatives' (under-identification) by analyzing discrepancies between HLS predictions and students' actual performance in English Language Proficiency Assessments (ELPA).

Comparative Analysis Across Districts:

- By examining HLS variations across districts, especially those that allow custom HLS forms, states can identify which elements most accurately predict students' language support needs. This comparative approach helps refine HLS questions to focus on relevant linguistic factors such as exposure to English versus dominance in the language.

Enhancements to the HLS:

- Proposals for an "Enhanced" HLS include integrating questions about out-of-school English language exposure and testing oral language versions to accommodate non-literate communities or recent refugees, thus broadening the tool's applicability and inclusiveness.

Alternative Measures:

- Introducing multiple measures for language background assessment, such as observations from preschool staff or additional questionnaires, could provide a richer, more accurate profile of students' language skills and needs.

How can state-level recommendations improve the HLS's effectiveness and fairness?

State-level actions can significantly influence the HLS's effectiveness by enhancing transparency, consistency, and the scientific basis of the survey. By standardizing HLS questions and implementing comprehensive training for educators on its administration and interpretation, states can improve the reliability of initial student assessments. Additionally, ongoing validation studies are crucial for adapting the HLS to changing educational landscapes and demographics.

Overall, the HLS's development reflects broader trends in educational equity and language policy, being a cornerstone in identifying language support needs among K-12 students. As demographics and educational policies evolve, so too must the tools we use to assess and support our students. By adopting a more rigorous approach to HLS validation and by considering innovative assessment strategies, educational leaders can better ensure that all students receive the language support they need to succeed academically. This commitment to continuous improvement and adaptation reflects a broader obligation to uphold educational equity and excellence for every student, regardless of language background. As school districts increasingly encounter diverse student populations, the HLS must evolve through rigorous validation and thoughtful design adjustments to remain a relevant and fair tool in assessing the language needs of students. With this in mind, this project not only informs educational leaders about the historical context and current challenges associated with the HLS but also hopes to guide future improvements to support multilingual learners more effectively.