## The Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy and Its Implications for Higher Education

The Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy was signed into law by Governor Charlie Baker in the LOOK Act of 2017 (M.G.L. c. 69 § 1Q). The purposes of the Seal of Biliteracy are to:

* Encourage students to study and master languages;
* Certify attainment of biliteracy skills;
* Recognize the value of language diversity;
* **Provide universities with a method of identifying people with language and biliteracy skills;**
* Prepare students with skills that will benefit them in the labor market and the global society; and
* Strengthen intergroup communication and honor the multiple cultures and languages in a community.

Two classes of students have already graduated high school in Massachusetts since this law was enacted, and thousands of Massachusetts graduates now hold the Seal. As they matriculate into college programs across the state it is incumbent on public colleges and institutions in the Commonwealth to understand and accommodate this award.

### Criteria for students to earn the State Seal of Biliteracy

In order to qualify for the State Seal of Biliteracy, M.G.L. c. 69 § 1Q requires that students demonstrate a high level of proficiency in English and at least one other language (henceforth known as world language). In accordance with the term “high level of proficiency” in the law, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) established the criteria for the Seal at the proficiency level of Intermediate-High on the proficiency scale of the American Council on the teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). BESE further established a Seal of Biliteracy with Distinction, which requires a greater mastery of English and an ACTFL proficiency level of Advanced-Low or higher.

### ACTFL proficiency levels

ACTFL measures proficiency based on what students are able to do with the language. BESE chose the level Intermediate-High, because the skills that students can perform at intermediate high correspond to the ability to participate in a real career in the language other than English. Students who possess proficiency at the Intermediate-High level can usually navigate situations with an unexpected turn of events. They can express their own thoughts and opinions and question others in paragraph-length discourse. They can understand the main idea and details and often infer implicit meaning when reading, listening, or viewing (American Sign Language). This is the lowest proficiency level at which meaningful participation in a job or a college course is feasible.

### ACTFL Proficiency Levels and AP Scores

While admissions offices in post-secondary institutions across the Commonwealth are still somewhat unfamiliar with the State Seal of Biliteracy, they are very accustomed to awarding incoming students credit based on their performance on the Advanced Placement exam. While there are important differences between earning an AP score and qualifying for the Seal of Biliteracy, the ability for AP students to earn prior learning credits provides a pathway to provide credit for those students who have earned the Seal. Massachusetts accepts the College Board’s Advanced Placement exams as evidence of proficiency in World Languages. Based on ACTFL’s research[[1]](#footnote-1), students who earn a 4 on a world language AP exam qualify for the Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy, and students who earn a 5 qualify for the Seal with Distinction. By this correlation, the Seal of Biliteracy is a more rigorous measure than the AP exam, as most universities nationwide award credit for an AP score of 3.

### Increasing Equity with the Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy

The Massachusetts Seal sets a high bar for language proficiency, and it also restores equity to speakers of less commonly-taught languages in two key ways:

* The Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy is available in all languages. While AP currently offers students college credit for success in Spanish, French, German, Mandarin, Japanese, Italian, and Latin, students who are proficient in any language may qualify for the Seal of Biliteracy. This provides greater representation and recognition of the many diverse languages and cultures in Massachusetts’ communities.
* Since the Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy is not associated with a particular high school course, districts cannot track students away from it. Some students encounter many obstacles enrolling in or completing an AP class, such as schedule conflicts, lack of prerequisites, or even a personality clash with an instructor whose approval is required. The Seal of Biliteracy removes those barriers and provides equitable access to recognition in language proficiency.

### Credits for Prior Learning

There is a direct relationship between AP scores and the Seal of Biliteracy. Institutions wishing to provide credit for prior learning to students who have earned the MA State Seal of Biliteracy may consider the following formula:

* Number of credits for Seal of Biliteracy = number of credits for AP score of 4
* Number of credits for Seal of Biliteracy with Distinction = number of credits for AP score of 5

### Further Reading

* [Guidance for Implementing the Massachusetts State Seal of Biliteracy](http://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/guidance/)
* [ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines](https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/guidelines/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines2012.pdf)
* [Oral Proficiency Levels in the Workplace](https://www.languagetesting.com/pub/media/wysiwyg/oral-prof-in-workplace.pdf)
* [Massachusetts World Languages Curriculum Framework](https://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/world-languages/2021.pdf)

**Appendix A: Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy – Corresponding Skills[[2]](#footnote-2) and AP Scores**

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|  |  | **Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy[[3]](#footnote-3)** | **Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy with Distinction** |
| ACTFL | Intermediate-Mid | Intermediate-High | Advanced-Low |
| AP Score | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| IB Score |  | 6 (Standard-Level Exam) or 5 (Higher-Level Exam) | 6 (Higher-Level Exam) |
| Interpretive Reading, Listening, and Viewing (ASL) | * Comprehend main idea and some supporting details * Some ability to make inferences by identifying key details from the texts | * Comprehends the main idea and supporting details of longer, cohesive texts (narrative, descriptive, and straightforward persuasive) * Strong but inconsistent evidence of the ability to make inferences and derive meaning from context and linguistic features | * Comprehends the main idea and supporting details of narrative, descriptive, and straightforward persuasive texts * Makes inferences and derives meaning from context and linguistic features |
| Interpersonal Writing, Speaking, and Signing | * Communicate by understanding and creating personal meaning * Understand, ask, and answer a variety of questions * Initiate, maintain, and end a conversation to satisfy basic needs and/or handle a basic transaction * Some ability to communicate about more than the “here and now.” * Produces strings of connected sentences and infrequent organized paragraphs | * Strong but inconsistent evidence of understanding and producing narrations and descriptions in all major time frames and ability to deal with a situation with an unexpected turn of events * Communicates about more than the here and now * Mostly communicates in paragraphs, but sometimes reverts to less organized strings of sentences | * Communicate with ease and confidence by understanding and producing narrations and descriptions in all major time frames and deal efficiently with a situation with an unexpected turn of events * Communicates in organized paragraphs |
| Presentational Writing, Speaking, and Signing | * Expresses own thoughts and presents information on familiar topics by creating with language primarily in the present tense * Some ability to tell or retell a story * Produces strings of connected sentences and infrequent organized paragraphs | * Strong but inconsistent evidence of narrating and describing across major time frames on familiar and some unfamiliar topics * Mostly communicates in paragraphs, but sometimes reverts to less organized strings of sentences | * Produces narrations and descriptions in all major time frames on familiar and some unfamiliar topics * Communicates in organized paragraphs |

1. <https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/advocacy/resources/SealofBiliteracy-ComparisonofScales-TalkingPointsv3.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sandrock, P. (2015). *The keys to assessing language performance: A teacher's manual for measuring student progress*. Alexandria, VA: ACTFL. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Scores for the Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy and Seal of Biliteracy with Distinction established by Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education [↑](#footnote-ref-3)