

Successful Strategies for English Language Learners



In the Dallas Independent School District, students in a dual language class read aloud to one another to increase fluency and literacy. Dallas was named among the top districts nationwide that have successful ELL programs, according to the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents. Most ELL students in Dallas are in dual language classes in which they become proficient in two languages, making them more competitive.

BY ANGELA PASCOPELLA

Districts employ a variety of programs to address surging ELL enrollment—and dropout rate.

AS THE INCOMING NEW York City schools chancellor was gearing up to take office, a state senator suggested in December that Chancellor Cathie Black consider establishing an immigrant school in Queens to solve overcrowding in nearby Newtown High School, which is also on the state's persistently lowest-achieving school list.

“With immigrant English-language learners who would otherwise attend Newtown receiving the intensive lan-

guage-development help they need in a different setting, Newtown could provide more individualized and direct services to students,” Sen. Jose Peralta stated in a letter to the Chancellor.

While Black did not immediately respond, the plea shines light on the current situation many school district leaders are facing: a growing number of ELLs and how to ensure they succeed and graduate. Between 1979 and 2008, the number of school-age children (ages 5-17) in the United States who spoke a language ►

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other than English at home increased from 3.8 to 10.9 million, or from 9 to 21 percent of the population in this age range, according to the latest figures from the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES).

The NCES also reveals that the Hispanic dropout rate is almost twice that of black students and three times that of white students. In 2008, 18 percent of dropouts were Hispanic, while 10 percent were black and 5 percent were white. “We’re not geared to educate every child, but to educate the best and the brightest,” says Dan Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators and a Cuban-American.

Perhaps one of the greatest examples of inequity lies in a joint investigation of the Department of Justice and the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights that revealed last October that Boston Public Schools had failed to properly identify and adequately serve thousands of ELLs since 2003 as required by the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. A settlement agreement will ensure that ELLs in Boston schools will no longer be denied language support services, and more than 4,000 students who were inappropriately characterized as having “opted out” of ELL services will have ELL services made available to them. In addition, 4,300 students who

were improperly identified as non-ELL students will be offered ELL services.

As a result, the federal government is pushing for more reform. Last September, the Department of Education

ate from high school and have a bright future. Garcia and Augie Orci, ALAS executive director, point to several school districts, including Dallas (Texas) Independent School District, Kent (Wash.)

The Education Department released a new video produced especially for Spanish-speaking families that shows how college is more attainable than ever.

released a new video produced especially for Spanish-speaking families that shows how going to college is more attainable and more affordable than ever. And last October, President Obama signed an order renewing the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. It renewed the government’s strong financial support for the critical role Hispanics play in the overall prosperity of the nation and highlights the administration’s commitment to expanding education opportunities and improving education outcomes for all students.

Carlos Garcia, past president of the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS) and superintendent of the San Francisco Unified School District, adds that the future of ELLs’ success depends on strong district and community leaders who are willing to push for the best programs to ensure ELLs gradu-

School District, Tucson (Ariz.) Unified School District, San Francisco Unified School District and Washington County (Md.) Public Schools, that have successful ELL programs, some of which have developed over time. “These may not be the only school districts that are doing well with ELL students, but they are districts that have strategically planned to address the needs of ELL students,” says Garcia. “It is critical that districts lay out a plan specifically for these students, or nothing happens [for the better].”

Each of the districts has its own approach, and some use a combination of programs. In some cases, as in Arizona, districts must abide by state laws and mandates. These districts use the following types of ELL programs:

Dual Language. Assists students in developing language proficiency in two languages by receiving instruction in ►



From left to right: U.S. Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis; Jose Rico, deputy director for the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics; Rosalinda Barrera, assistant deputy secretary for English language acquisition at the U.S. Department of Education; and Eduardo Ochoa, assistant secretary for the Office of Postsecondary Education, were panel speakers at the 2010 State of Latinos in Education Summit last fall. The two-day summit focused on identifying the best practices, policies and programs to boost the academic achievement of Latino students. The American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and the U.S. Hispanic Leadership Institute hosted it.

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English and another language in a classroom that has native English speakers and native speakers of another language.

Newcomer. Uses separate, relatively self-contained educational interventions designed to meet the academic and transitional needs of newly arrived immigrants. Typically, students attend these programs before they enter more traditional interventions such as English language development programs.

Sheltered English. Makes academic instruction in English understandable to ELL students. In the sheltered classroom, teachers use physical activities, visual aids and the environment to teach vocabulary for concept development in mathematics, science, social studies and other subjects. Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is a popular, research-based and validated model of sheltered instruction that many districts use.

Structured English Immersion. All instruction is in English. The goal of this program is acquiring English language skills so that an ELL student can succeed in an English-only mainstream classroom. Teachers undergo specialized training in meeting the needs of all ELL students, possessing either a bilingual education or ESL teaching credential and/or training, and possess strong receptive skills in the students' primary language.

Kent's Sheltered Instruction

IN THE KENT (WASH.) SCHOOL District, sheltered instruction, and specifically the SIOP model, is used for the roughly 4,265 ELLs out of 22,000 students districtwide, comprising 13 percent of the district population.

In the SIOP model, teachers use one language to scaffold on the other, depending on the literacy level of speakers, according to Israel Vela, Kent's executive director of student and family support services. It starts with lesson plans that include a language objective and a content objective for every lesson. If a middle school student is studying algebra, for example, the lesson should always have a content objective and language objective. "You don't assume the child already has academic language and understands math terminology such as 'variables,'" Vela says. In this model, the student receives explicit academic content-vocabulary instruction in variables in English, or if possible, in his or her native language. The district can use paraprofessionals or instructional assistants who speak the native language. It helps a student who speaks Russian as a first language, for example, to better understand the English words' content vocabulary.

The instructional delivery model also uses a tiered intervention framework, or Response to Intervention, often previously used as a special education tool, which allows student data to determine specific skill gaps of identified struggling students. The targeted interventions help students in whatever lessons they struggle with. For example, a student might need 30 additional minutes



In the Kent (Wash.) School District, students at the Refugee Transition Center receive after school homework support. It is part of the Extended Learning Program that the district offers.

of literacy instruction and interventions to reinforce a core classroom lesson.

At the secondary level, ELL newcomers are classified as beginners or advanced beginners and are put in appropriate language acquisition classes. If newcomers with no English skills and/or formal education attend the secondary level, they receive three periods of intense language acquisition classes daily, Vela says.

Success

Under NCLB, districts are required to notify parents of ELLs the Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs) for the district. This is just one measure of achievement the Kent district uses.

The 2008-2009 results show the Kent

district met all three AMAOs, which include annual increases in the percentage of students making progress in learning English; annual increases in the percentage of students attaining English proficiency; and meeting annual yearly progress targets in reading and math on the state's Measurements of Student Progress and the High School Proficiency Exam tests.

The 2009-2010 school year results show the district met two of the three AMAOs, missing attaining English proficiency by less than 1 percent. "Our intent is to show that the strategic plan is to measure the progress of ELL students against state standards," Vela adds, "without letting a student's label of ELL or special education lower expectations for learning at high levels."

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Dallas' Dual Language

THE DALLAS (TEXAS) Independent School District, where 37 percent of the students are ELLs, uses a dual-language program. “That has helped us move the needle in performance, helping us in staffing, and has added some stability,” says Superintendent Michael Hinojosa. The district serves students who speak 60 different languages, with 96 percent of the ELLs Spanish-speaking.

The dual-language program uses one-way and two-way systems. In the one-way system, which is used in most of the 225 schools in the district, Spanish speakers must become bilingual and biliterate in English and Spanish. “We want them to gain the Spanish language academically,” Hinojosa says. In the two-way language program, Spanish-speaking ELLs and native English speakers, which may include third-generation Hispanic students, work together to learn content in English and Spanish. The objective is to provide all students the opportunity to maintain and develop their first language while simultaneously acquiring proficiency in a second language. It helps both groups achieve academic performance at or above grade level and obtain positive cross-cultural attitudes and behaviors. The district has set up various days of the week when only one language will be spoken, such as Spanish Wednesdays or English Thursdays, when all instruction and lessons are in that language, Hinojosa says.

Any teacher struggling with ELLs can access Curriculum Central, which houses sample and model lesson plans. Instructional coaches, based in the central office, support teachers in the district's schools to improve their practice and work with them to build capacity. The district's 25 bilingual and ESL coaches can visit various school sites, depending on need, Hinojosa says. And the district invests in professional development for ESL teachers, roughly from 18 to 21 hours per year, mostly in classroom management, delivery instruction

and teaching techniques.

The district has 2,125 bilingual teachers, some of whom have come from Spain, Puerto Rico or Mexico. Dallas embraces a dual-language program because “the chance for students to graduate bilingual and biliterate makes them competitive in this ever-widening global society,” Hinojosa says. If students start the program in kindergarten, they should be literate in two languages by fifth grade, he adds.

Success

After five years, students in the dual-language program outperformed native English speakers on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test in the spring

of 2010 in reading and math. For example, in English, their second language, 79 percent of the dual-language third-graders met standards on the state's math assessment compared to native English speakers' 78 percent. In fourth-grade math, 88 percent of ELLs were proficient compared to 82 percent for native English speakers.

Hinojosa adds that much research touts the long-term benefits of dual-language programs. “You are literate in two languages. It helps students think better and have better academic results and learn how to think,” he says. “If they learn a second language, they have a competitive advantage in the world of work. That, to me, is success.” ▶



Above, students in the Dallas ISD in a one-way dual-language class practice writing. Below, a grade-level collaborative team, including the academic coordinator and principal, meets at Onesimo Hernandez Elementary School in Dallas to discuss recent increased test results.



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At the Washington County (Md.) Public Schools, South Hagerstown High School ELL teacher Gary Karstens works with students from the Dominican Republic. These students are in the pullout program, wherein they are excused from grade-level classes for specialized English instruction.

Washington County's Best Practices

THE WASHINGTON COUNTY (Md.) Public Schools ELL program serves 500 ELL students, roughly 2 percent of the total student enrollment, who speak 35 different languages and represent more than 40 nationalities. The program uses several methods, depending on a student's proficiency level, including these four:

- Structured English immersion: Students receive specialized English language support within the grade-level classroom.
- Sheltered English instruction: Students receive content-based English language instruction.
- Content-based program: Instruction is provided in English only and adapted to a particular student's level. Students spend much of the school day in classes with other ELLs.
- Pullout program: Students are excused from grade-level classes for specialized English instruction several times a week.

The elementary program is a balanced program of instruction for students

using specific strategies and best practices, according to Paula Moore, the district's supervisor for ELL and world languages. Teachers use guided reading, which incorporates higher-order questioning, vocabulary building and problem solving, for students who are reading below grade level. ELL teachers or paraprofessionals work with small groups or individual students for intensive instructional support and also give individual attention to ELLs who score below proficiency on math, English language arts, and/or science benchmarks. Classroom or push-in support, which is when ELL teachers come into a regular classroom to help an ELL student on focused English instruction, requires ongoing communication between ELL staff members and regular education teachers to target specific skills or concepts in which students need help. The middle school program focuses on those with very limited English proficiency and students who are struggling academically. Push-in and pullout programs constitute most of

the ELL instruction. And some scheduled ELL classes do take place.

Donna Hanlin, assistant superintendent for curriculum, school administration and improvement, says the ELL program evolved over the years as the population grew and student needs shifted. "We became better and better in understanding the different needs of these students," Hanlin says. "As educators, we became more knowledgeable, deployed more resources, and fine-tuned the program."

ELLs are expected to fully transition into mainstream classes, meet academic achievement standards for grade promotion, and graduate from high school at the same rate as mainstream students, she says.

Also part of the ELL program, two years ago Moore launched dual-enrollment programs in two of the district's high schools with nearby Hagerstown Community College so that high school ELLs could take college-level courses in high school, learning how to speak and listen and understand grammar. Students

enrolled in these classes are intermediate to advanced level in ELL or have recently exited the ELL program. Students receive both college and high school credit. In addition, they gain confidence, realizing they can attend college, Hanlin says.

Washington County schools have weekly meetings when staff members and teachers discuss ELL's strengths and weaknesses and evaluate student data. Grade-level teams write lessons plans for the next week, which also involves ELL teachers so they know in advance what new vocabulary, for example, will be used in each lesson. They can pre-teach, re-teach or provide enrichment to ELLs, Moore says.

Getting parents involved in Washington County schools is paramount to success. For example, the district uses Language Line—a telephone interpretation service accessible 24/7 to any WCPS staff member, including secretaries, school nurses, bus drivers, food service personnel, teachers and administrators—to increase parent communication and promote parent involvement. The school district also contracted with International Corporate Training and Marketing (ICTM), which provides certified and credentialed interpreters and translators for parent-teacher conferences, open houses or document translation, Moore says.

Parents are involved via the Hispanic Parent Academy (HPA) and adult ESL classes. The HPA meets monthly to discuss topics such as bus transportation, report cards, the inclement weather policy and instructional strategies so that parents have the information they need to support and help their children succeed.

Success

Washington County schools have been successful in surpassing Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives. The AMAO target in the spring of 2010 was to have 16 percent of the students exit the ELL program, and they instead had 21 percent exit, Moore says. And 76 percent of ELLs grew 15 points or more in proficiency in English, when the state Department of Education's AMAO target for the district was only 56 percent. ►



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Tucson's English Immersion Program

THE TUCSON (ARIZ.) UNIFIED School District uses three options for ELLs, based on a state mandate, who comprise 10 percent of the district's population and speak 85 different languages: English language development (ELD), which is a four-hour segregated structured English immersion program; a dual-language program; and the individual language learners plan (ILLP).

The ELD Program

State law requires that ELLs cannot be mixed in the same classroom as mainstream students for four hours daily, and

different levels of students," Molina says.

Elementary classes also use math and science aids. In science, for example, teachers use the science curriculum kits online that provide visual and hands-on projects that still incorporate the ELL proficiency standards. In math, teachers can use blocks and count them one by one to show ELLs how to add or subtract, Molina says.

The Dual-Language Program

Under the dual-language option, which is also a form of bilingual education and is used in only 12 of the district's 110 schools, Spanish-speaking ELLs and

terms. The same goes for Spanish-speaking kids if it's an all-English class.

The ILLP Program

The ILLP program is used in schools that have 20 or fewer ELLs in a band of grades. ELLs are put in a mainstream class with mostly English-speaking children, and the teacher must devise individualized education plans for each child to ensure the child is getting the proper English language development. The SIOP model, in which all the ELL teachers in the district are trained, is used. The SIOP model at Tucson schools gives students differentiated instruction based on their individual strengths and weaknesses. Some students might need extra vocabulary lessons in the mainstream science class. Teachers will also use real items, like fruit, in class to teach words.

Arizona law mandates that ELLs cannot be mixed in the same class as mainstream students for four hours daily.

must be "segregated," according to Linda Molina, interim coordinator for the language acquisition department in Tucson.

Elementary teachers use a standards-based language and literacy program for K5 as well as for middle and high school classes. It works on listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, Molina says. The K5 program includes an online lesson planner that helps elementary teachers plan different standards-based lessons for each group of kids based on their various English-comprehension levels. "The online planner will differentiate that lesson for

English-speaking mainstream students who want to learn Spanish take classes in English and in Spanish. A day or week of instruction may be in English, but the next day or week will be in Spanish. The students learn content and learn a second language in English and Spanish. "We don't want them [ELLs] to lose their Spanish," Molina explains. "It's beneficial for them to learn both languages."

If a class is taught in Spanish one day, the teacher will pull aside the English-speaking children to preview what they will be learning, including vocabulary

Success

ELLs improved by at least 20 percent in reading in the 2009-2010 year, according to one assessment. In language proficiency that year, at least 30 percent of ELLs rose two proficiency levels. "That's huge," says Mark Alvarez, former ELL director and now Manzo Elementary School principal. Having students advance, especially to the intermediate and advanced levels, "that's where you want them." DA

Angela Pascopella is senior editor.

Tips to Create Successful ELL Programs

Some advice from ELL leaders in the Kent (Wash.) School District and Washington County (Md.) Public Schools:

Monitor and use balanced assessments. District leaders must understand assessing and monitoring student progress using formative assessments in reading and math, according to Israel Vela, the executive director of student and family engagement at the Kent (Wash.) School District. "How are you monitoring your students' progress against state, local and national standards? If you're just monitoring them based on one assessment or an assessment that is not aligned to standards, you will make a decision that is not aligned with the goal of having each student meet the standards regardless of their label [as ELL]," Vela adds.

Collaborate. Work with and exchange ideas with other states and districts, and share what you know that has worked based on data, Vela says. "What are the kind of gains you are expecting versus what you are getting?" he asks.

Make ELLs everyone's responsibility. "Teaching English language skills to ELLs is the responsibility of all school staff, and we work hard to give all staff the tools they need to be even more successful with diverse learners," says Paula Moore, supervisor for ELL and world languages in the Washington County (Md.) Public Schools.

Practice parent outreach. "Parent outreach and the importance of making parents feel very much a part of their students' educational process is key," Moore says. Vela recommends implementing a literacy program to help families with limited English proficiency to navigate the system so they can push their own children to excel.

Take risks and use innovation. Under Moore's leadership in Washington County, working with the community college and giving students a chance to get college credit in high school has helped them believe they can go to college.

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