

Building Support for English Language Learners

Strategies for Creating a School Culture of Academic Success

Research Brief 8

Center for Schools and Communities

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School districts across the United States are experiencing unprecedented increases in numbers of English language learners (ELLs). Three-quarters of all public schools have ELLs enrolled.¹ During the 2011-12 school year, ELLs made up 9 percent of the total K-12 student populations. These numbers are expected to continue to rise, with ELLs projected to comprise 25 percent of the total K-12 population by 2025.² In 2012, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania identified an ELL population of 2.7 percent in its schools; lower than the national average, but still having a significant impact.^{3,4} While the overall percentage of ELLs appears small, enrollments from 1997-2007 increased by 114.5 percent compared with an overall student population decrease of -1.1 percent.⁵ The 47,355 ELLs in Pennsylvania are concentrated in the large urban centers; however, many rural districts are serving small numbers of ELLs as well.⁶ The highest numbers of ELLs in Pennsylvania are in the school districts listed in Table 1.^{7,8} These districts are considered “high incidence,” which is based on the number of ELLs enrolled in comparison to other districts in that state.

Academic achievement remains problematic among this population of K-12 students. National assessments in 2013 showed that reading scores of ELLs were significantly lower than non-ELLs, a trend that has changed little since 2005. These numbers are more alarming when observing the increasing gap between scores of ELLs and non-ELLs as they progress into secondary schools. The same declines are seen in mathematics.^{9,10} In Pennsylvania similar achievement scores and gaps are present.¹¹

District and School Responsibilities to ELLs

Federal law requires school districts to provide English language support services and assessments on an annual basis for all ELLs. Following the obligations of Title VI of the

Table 1: High Incidence School Districts in Pennsylvania

School District	% of ELLs in K-12 Population
Allentown	11.8
Bethlehem	7.7
City of Erie	6.8
Hazleton	9.8
Lancaster	18.0
Philadelphia	7.4
Pocono Mountain	4.3
Reading	19.7
Upper Darby	6.0
York City	20.8

Adapted from District focus: Pennsylvania, school year 2009-2010. Available at: <http://www.ncela.us/t3sis/state/pennsylvania>. Accessed August 3, 2015.

Civil Rights Act and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1964, Pennsylvania instituted in 2001 the 22 Pa. Code §4.26, Educating Students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and ELLs. This law mandates the education of ELLs and provides guidelines for: identification of ELLs, staffing, program planning, assessment criteria, modification of content instruction, and program exit and required monitoring. Under these regulations, new students are assessed if a home language survey indicates a language other than English is spoken at home, unless grades and PSSA or equivalent state scores indicate basic or above proficiency in reading, writing and math. Additionally, each district must develop a written plan for ELLs, including implemented instructional models, the process for identifying ELLs, exit criteria and monitoring plans after exiting the program.

ESL Program Models and Teacher Skills

It is not unusual for school districts to begin a new academic year with a few ELLs when none were enrolled previously. Based on the number of ELLs in a district, Pennsylvania schools provide a range of programs: bilingual

or dual immersion programs, sheltered instruction or the more common push-in/pull-out program. In determining the programs offered to ELLs, school districts have flexibility but should ensure qualified teachers are providing services based on the student's:

- Level of English proficiency
- Grade level
- Educational background
- Language background
- Native language literacy
- Acculturation into society and the U.S. school system
- Age upon entry to the U.S.^{9,10}

Most Pennsylvania school districts utilize a combination of the push-in/pull-out and sheltered models for instruction. In these cases, ELLs spend the majority of the day in the mainstream classroom, ideally benefiting from modified or adapted content instruction provided by the mainstream teacher. Lower level English proficiency students require more direct English instruction from English as a second language (ESL) program specialists, while those at the higher levels require less. This direct language instruction must take place during the regular school hours but not during content classes. Therefore, the ESL program specialist should not pull out ELLs for direct language instruction during math, reading, writing, social studies or science. Additional details on program models, required number of hours and instruction can be found at [Pennsylvania Department of Education's website](http://www.pennsylvania.gov).

In the mainstream classrooms, districts are required to provide ELLs with “meaningful, comprehensible access to instruction in all content areas required by Pennsylvania academic standards.”¹² This law requires content teachers to provide an overlay of the Pennsylvania English Language Proficiency Standards with the academic standards.¹³

Mainstream teachers then need to be skilled in these areas: supporting language development in the four domains of language learning (reading, listening, speaking and writing), explicitly teaching academic language and valuing cultural diversity in order to meet the needs of the ELLs.¹⁴ In 2011, the Pennsylvania Department of Education mandated that pre-service teacher certification candidates complete three university credits on the topic of educating ELLs. Nevertheless, teachers who completed the requirement may still find themselves unprepared to teach both subject content and the English language effectively given inconsistent preparation standards across the states.¹⁵ What is clear from the academic literature is that all teachers of ELLs need to have an understanding of the second language acquisition process,¹⁵⁻¹⁷ and the completion of three university credits is not sufficient training. In addition, intense scaffolding of content is necessary for ELLs to learn the content using language at or just above their language development level.^{18,19} This point illustrates the need for collaboration among school faculty, administrators, staff, families and ESL program specialists.

Districts, however, should not limit their collection of knowledge about ELLs to the teaching faculty. ESL specialists, as experts in English language acquisition and in collaborating with mainstream teachers, play a key role in the learning process of ELLs.²⁰ School staff who are comfortable with and who understand the needs of ELLs are essential, particularly in interactions with them and their families. The local community can also act as a resource for knowledge and increasing the interaction between the schools and families.

Principal Strategies to Support Collaboration

A critical factor in the success of a school's education programs is the principal's support to create a culture in which all students are encouraged to reach for academic success. This support is based on the recognition of these important elements: time, culture, context, collaboration and professional development.

Provide Time for Collaboration

Principals must create time for ESL teachers and mainstream teachers to discuss curriculum as well as individual student needs. A successful way to create this environment is through "contrived collegiality."²¹ Principals can contrive collegiality by providing mutual time and place during the month (ideally every other week) for the teachers to meet.

Werner^{21(p.110)} found that administrators are the guardians of objective or rational time. By making these meetings part of their schedule, teachers realize the importance of the program and the need for shared decision making. The goal is to have this forced or contrived collegiality lead to authentic collaboration as both sets of teachers recognize the success of working together to raise student achievement. Research shows that it takes ELLs two to three years to become proficient in communication skills and four to ten years to approach grade level competence.²² Thus, the intent to move teachers from contrived to true collaboration throughout an entire school district is paramount to the academic success of ELLs. This type of collaboration supports four specific behaviors in adults:

- They talk about practice
- They observe each other engaged in the practice of teaching
- They work together planning, designing, researching and evaluating curriculum
- They share craft knowledge²³

Create a Culture and Context of Collaboration

Fullan²⁴ notes the uniqueness of an individual setting is a critical factor in implementing curriculum successfully. Because teachers can function independently, it is the principal's responsibility to closely link teachers to all initiatives. Strong school cultures are built deliberately around tightly structured beliefs, values and norms that have a highly specific professional focus.²⁵ The following indicators demonstrate coupling success:

- A high percentage of teachers can articulate the goals of the school
- Teachers spend time in department and grade level meetings, discussing issues that lead to a shared understanding and implementation of a joint plan of instruction
- High vertical bonds exist between formal policies and individual behavior that indicates staff members comply with policies that are enforced consistently

Co-teaching and collaboration can provide a powerful support system for mainstream classroom and ESL teachers who otherwise might feel isolated or frustrated about the challenges they face with diverse learners. The goal is to create a true partnership in which the mainstream teacher and ESL teacher work with the students to foster a sense of self-efficacy and ownership of learning.²⁶ At-risk students who remain in mainstream classrooms with instructional

support achieve at higher levels than peers who receive instruction in a pullout model.²⁷ Also, motivation increases in mainstream classrooms when students are engaged in meaningful learning.²⁸ Communication with native English speakers allows the authentic use of language, including exposure to and practice with more complex vocabulary and linguistic structures. ELLs can become full participants and receive more opportunities as members of the school community. ELLs are also exposed to a wider range of instructional alternatives than they would be in a pullout program. Furthermore, students see the connections between English instruction and mainstream academic content.²⁶

Utilize Professional Development to Inspire Collaboration

Professional development is key to creating a culture of better teaching and improved learning. In order for professional development to become a basic component of the professional lives of teachers, schools must become places where teachers learn formally and informally on a daily basis. These sites of learning promote risk taking and provide teachers with the knowledge and skills that will increase their ability to provide opportunities for ELLs. Programs such as:

- Peer coaching and co-teaching allow teachers to practice and take risks with each other
- Building a community of teachers who engage continuously in the study of their craft
- Develop a shared language and common understanding
- Provide a structure for follow-up training that is requisite for acquiring new teaching skills and strategies²⁹

Avoid Common Pitfalls

One of the pitfalls in the collaboration between ESL specialists and mainstream teachers is the tendency of teachers to work independently, as noted previously. Mainstream teachers might also think that English instruction should occur in another location with the ESL specialist only, leading to the loss of the language learning potential of the content classroom. This approach also ignores the Pennsylvania code dictating that content instruction be adapted for ELLs.¹² The ESL specialist could be reduced in stature to that of a classroom aide, rather than a colleague with equivalent expertise who has the potential to contribute essential information to the learning process of ELLs.

The potential for positive outcomes in an ELL's academic success is greatly enhanced with collaborative work between these two critical components—the ESL specialist and the mainstream content teacher. Over time and with consistent enforcement by the building principals for the allocation of this shared planning time, true collaboration, including shared understanding and joint implementation of planning among faculty, evolves organically. Adapted from Baecher and Bell's³⁰ continuum model of collaboration for ESL specialists, the model below (Figure 1) incorporates both the perspectives of the ESL specialist and the mainstream teacher with the preferred approach being full collaboration for ELL academic achievement. The full potential of collaboration can be reached only when the principal starts the process by contriving collegiality and continually supports its growth, as previously discussed.

Principals' Strategies to Create Culture of Academic Success

Principals and school districts can show support for the culture of achieving academic success for all ELLs by overtly leading, developing and continually supporting the types of activities listed.

Faculty and staff need principals to:

- Encourage and enable staff and faculty to participate in professional development
- Include ESL program faculty in department and schoolwide meeting agendas
- Participate in staff and faculty development themselves
- Demonstrate and facilitate multicultural interaction and understanding in the school
- Work with district ESL staff to design school curriculum
- Allow ESL specialists and mainstream teachers time to plan curriculum collaboratively to meet the needs of ELLs

ELLs and their families/caregivers need principals to:

- Hire bilingual faculty and staff members from students' cultures
- Demonstrate and facilitate multicultural interaction and understanding with the families and in the community beginning on day of ELLs arrival
- Research and disseminate community and district resource information to staff, faculty and ELL families
- Promote programs and services for ELLs in district and community meetings
- Encourage parents and caregivers of ELLs to participate in school and community activities^{21,31}

English Learner Tool Kit

The Office of English Language Acquisition has provided an English Learner Tool Kit to help state and local education agencies meet their obligations to ELLs. This toolkit contains guidelines for implementing effective professional development for both ESL and general education teachers and includes a framework for supporting ELLs using the Danielson Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument.

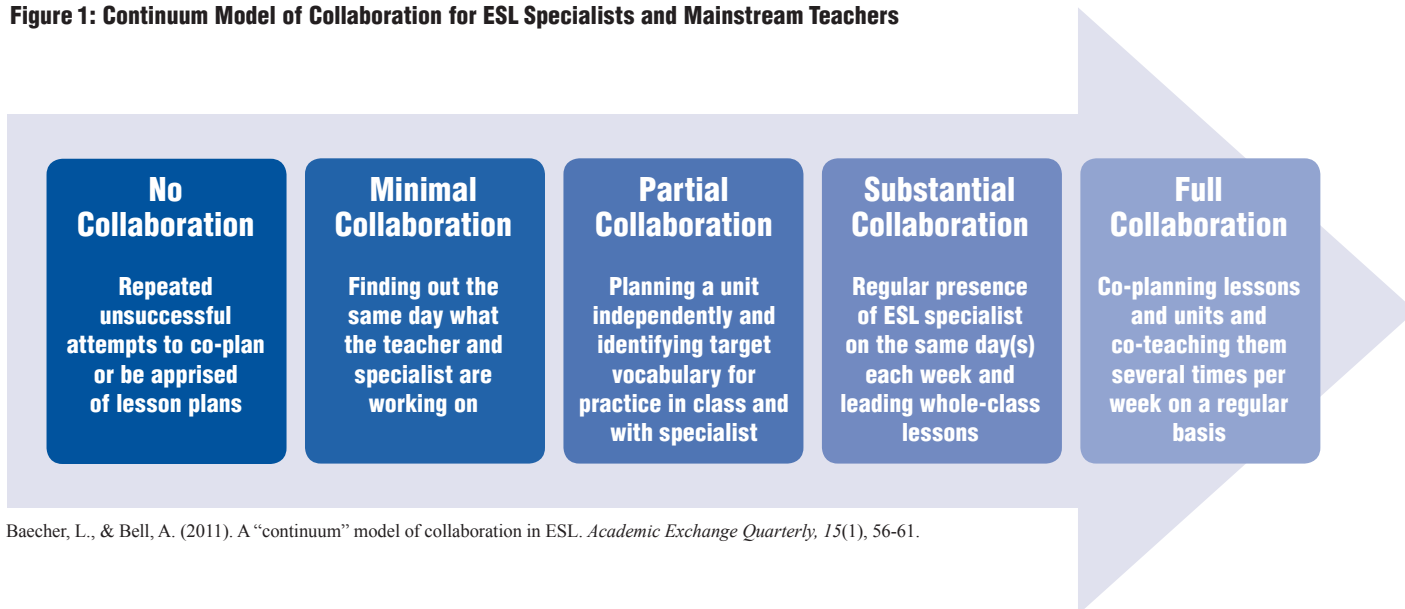
The Pennsylvania Department of Education provides a similar resource with information specific to Pennsylvania. Their ESL website includes a toolkit for program development and evaluation, family and community involvement, information about professional development opportunities, as well as contact information for expert individuals at the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the Center for Schools and Communities. ■

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Figure 1: Continuum Model of Collaboration for ESL Specialists and Mainstream Teachers



Baecher, L., & Bell, A. (2011). A "continuum" model of collaboration in ESL. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 15(1), 56-61.

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