



Linking Research and Resources for Better High Schools

Educating English Language Learners at the High School Level: A Coherent Approach to District- and School-Level Support

Prepared by the National High School Center¹

As more English language learners (ELLs) enter schools across the country, it has become increasingly important for states to provide the appropriate guidance and support to local educational agencies (LEAs) so that ELLs are able to graduate and succeed after high school.

The pass rates of ELLs on mathematics high school exit exams are 30–40% lower compared to those of mainstream students (Xiong & Zhou, 2006). In 2005, 36.5% of Hispanic 16- to 24-year-olds born outside the United States, most of whom spoke English as a second language, were high school dropouts.² Hispanic youth are almost four times more likely than White students and twice as likely as African American students to drop out of school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). These statistics illustrate some of the significant challenges facing educators who are responsible for the achievement of high school ELLs, especially in the current context of high standards and high-stakes testing.

The development of state policy to promote academic achievement for ELLs is critical to improving educational outcomes and consistent with the goals of increasing high school graduation rates and meeting Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Recent research indicates that states have multiple opportunities to take the initiative in supporting school systems and schools in their efforts to keep ELLs on track to meet postsecondary success.

¹ This brief was adapted from a longer summary that highlights a 5-year study conducted by AIR and WestEd. The summary provides recommendations and approaches to supporting and instructing ELLs in California. The summary (<http://www.air.org/news/documents/PROP227.pdf>) and full report (<http://www.air.org/news/documents/227Report.pdf>)—led by Tom Parrish, Principal Investigator (AIR)—are available on AIR’s Web site.

² This dropout statistic refers to “status” dropouts, meaning 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in high school and have not completed a high school program.

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) and WestEd have completed a 5-year evaluation of the educational environment for ELLs in California under contract to the California Department of Education. The study results identify an array of factors that make a positive difference for ELL achievement, not only in California but potentially across the country. The evaluation consisted of a mixed-methods approach—including case studies, phone and written surveys, statistical analyses of extant student performance data (statewide and from the Los Angeles Unified School District), stakeholder interviews, and document reviews—to address the research questions posed by the study.

The study found that there is no single path to ensuring high ELL achievement. However, the following practices appear to be more important contributors to success with ELLs than using a specific instructional model:

- Implementing a well-defined, rigorously structured plan of instruction for ELLs;
- Ensuring that teachers are skilled in addressing the needs of ELLs;
- Systematically using data to assess teaching and learning; and
- Regularly adjusting instructional planning based on student performance.

Based on the AIR–WestEd study, successful approaches that may be useful in high schools across the country are highlighted in more detail in the sections that follow.

THE URGENCY TO EFFECTIVELY EDUCATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN HIGH SCHOOL

As the enrollment of ELLs continues to grow, the issues schools face in providing an education to these students become increasingly important. According to federal statistics, an estimated 5 million ELLs were enrolled in U.S. public schools during the 2004–05 school year, an increase of more than 65% from the 1993–94 school year (Parrish et al., 2006). Spanish is the most common primary language spoken by ELLs, and about 70% percent of ELLs are native Spanish speakers (Capps et al., 2005).

Schools face diverse circumstances in their ELL populations. Some schools serve populations in which one primary language is spoken by the majority of ELLs. In other cases, dozens of language groups may be represented on a single campus. Adding to the complexity is variation in the length of residence in the United States—some are newly arrived, while others are U.S.-born children of immigrants—as well as wide-ranging levels of literacy skills and previous schooling (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). A range of factors, including local contextual factors, must be considered when determining what works best for ELL student learning (Parrish et al., 2006).

States throughout the country have set high academic standards for ELLs, who face the extraordinary challenge of learning academic English and mastering the same core content standards (in English) that are expected of all students. A major concern in the education of ELLs that surfaced throughout the study is that in some cases, language status hampers access to grade-level instruction in the core curriculum and may impede attainment of the academic English language and grade-level performance standards. At the study's high schools, some ELLs and their parents raised concerns that they were “stuck in the ELL track” and that this track of courses was not preparing them for college.

The study found that the federal and state accountability measures have resulted in a substantial increase in the percentage of ELLs participating in statewide assessments, while the native English speaker test-taking population has remained fairly constant. Despite the fact that the additional ELLs participating in statewide testing are more often to be those with the lowest English proficiency, ELLs as a group have improved in their academic performance in California—though the performance gap between ELLs and native English speakers had remained virtually constant in most subject areas for most grades during the study.

Although these performance trends are somewhat encouraging, findings also include sobering information regarding ELLs' progress toward English proficiency. After 10 years in the California school system, the likelihood that an ELL will be reclassified as “fluent English proficient” is estimated to be less than 40%.

STRATEGIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

What improvement strategies make the most difference when it comes to educating ELLs? The study gathered information from 66 schools with high ELL performance relative to other schools with similar demographics. Some schools in the sample offered bilingual instruction; some offered immersion; and several offered multiple options for ELL instruction. Schools were selected from across the state and had a broad range of demographics. However, all had significant ELL populations, and all had high levels of poverty.

The findings from studying these schools suggest that there is no one path to academic excellence for ELLs. However, administrators tended to pinpoint a few key features upon which ELLs' success hinges. School principals identified the following as most critical:

- Staff capacity to address the needs of ELLs;
- Schoolwide focus on English language development (ELD) and standards-based instruction;
- Shared priorities and expectations in regard to educating ELLs; and
- Systematic, ongoing assessment and data-driven decisionmaking.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be derived for state-level policymakers and administrators and for schools and districts.

For State-Level Policymakers and Administrators

- **Continue to identify high schools and districts demonstrating high levels of success in educating ELLs, and increase opportunities for others to learn from them.** The state should develop criteria for identifying districts and schools that have especially strong ELL linguistic and academic performance, publicly acknowledge them, and develop mechanisms for encouraging the transfer of knowledge regarding effective methods from these successful sites to others statewide.

- **Focus monitoring efforts to ensure that students' ELL status does not impede their full access to the core curriculum.** The state should hold districts responsible for ensuring that ELLs are not inappropriately tracked and encourage districts to be vigilant about preventing and reversing these practices in their schools.
- **While maintaining reclassification as a locally determined milestone, specify clear performance standards for key statewide measures of ELL progress and achievement.** Because local context varies significantly, the state should continue to allow local districts to make their own redesignation decisions. However, the state also should set explicit, empirically based expectations for ELLs' steady progress toward and attainment of statewide academic achievement performance standards.
- **Support ELLs by allocating additional resources.** Additional challenges, and therefore costs, are associated with teaching English to ELLs and ensuring that they are learning the core curriculum expected of all students. When base funding in schools with a high percentage of ELLs is substantially lower than that found statewide, additional supplemental funds (beyond those already provided by the state) may be necessary to put the districts educating high numbers of ELLs on an even footing with their counterparts.
- **Foster development of ELD curriculum and instructional plans aligned with the state's ELD standards.** An ELD curriculum framework based on the state's ELD standards should be developed, so that standards-based curriculum materials are produced and adopted in every district that serves ELLs. In addition, the state should ensure that adequate teacher professional development, resources, and support are in place to foster careful planning and coordination of appropriate strategies for ELLs who have varying levels of English proficiency.
- **Foster data use to guide ELL policy and instruction.** States and districts should use data continually to guide ELL policy. They also should use data to provide information about instructional methods and targeted instructional interventions that have the potential to ensure continuous improvement for ELLs and ELLs who have been reclassified.
- **Support the professional development necessary to help teachers promote ELLs' English language development and academic achievement, and ensure appropriate deployment of skilled teachers to schools in which they are needed most.** Often schools enrolling the largest percentages of ELLs have significantly lower percentages of certified teachers than state averages (Menken & Holmes, 2000).

For Districts and Their Schools

- **Districts should articulate ELL policies across classes, grades, and schools.** A coherent set of performance expectations for ELLs and a carefully designed plan to guide their progress through the grades and create coherent instructional transitions across schools are essential to the success of ELLs.
- **Districts should use data to guide policy and instruction.** The use of data to guide ELL policy and to measure the results of instructional practices was prevalent among the successful schools and districts in the study.
- **Except under very limited circumstances, schools and districts should offer ELLs the same range of challenging coursework that is offered to English-speaking students.** The study found instructional programs in place that were ostensibly designed to improve the English language acquisition and academic achievement of ELLs, but which resulted in offering ELLs a narrower range of less challenging coursework than was available to English-speaking students, often characterized by low expectations. Although the separation of ELLs for targeted support is sometimes justified, this approach should be used strategically and limited to cases justified by specific instructional purposes and demonstrated success.

- **Districts should support the ongoing, job-embedded professional development necessary to promote ELLs' ELD and academic achievement and ensure appropriate deployment of skilled teachers to schools in which they are needed most.**
- **Schools should emphasize literacy, personalized learning communities, distributed leadership, and teacher collaboration.** For schools in the study, the importance of teaching literacy across the curriculum in the high school grades was identified as a priority in schools that had better-than-average performance among ELLs. The development of personalized learning communities and teacher teams were some effective strategies used for teaching literacy. Empowering members of a school community, such as those teacher teams and other staff, to contribute to shaping the direction of student learning positively influenced student achievement outcomes and increased the cohesiveness of the school community.

Ten Tips From the Successful Principals Interviewed for This Study

- 1. Establish consistent standards around high expectations and strategies:** “I think the key to our success is consistency. That’s the key. The expectations—the standards have to be set, and the expectations are high for all children. The support that we give them has to be there. But the standards—or the expectations—are never lowered. You cannot do that without consistency. So, it doesn’t really matter necessarily what the curriculum is, as long as the strategies that are used to deliver that instruction are consistent across the grade levels, in every strand.”
- 2. Don’t underestimate ELLs:** “Remember that these students are highly motivated and want to learn English. It’s important to provide them with a good support group and to ensure that their first experiences help them to keep their goals high. This is critical.”
- 3. Make ELLs a whole-school priority:** “All teachers must take responsibility for ELL kids—it can’t just be the ELL department. We only have 40 kids in our ELD classes, but we have one third of our school classified as ELL. So they are sitting in regular classes, and we need to get them to a fluent level. All teachers have to know who they are, what level they are, in order to bring them up to the fluent level, and that involves the whole staff.”*
- 4. Motivate, train, and involve teachers:** “Developing highly efficient and effective teachers is the first challenge as a principal. Start by sharing research and demographics with them. Teach them how to read and analyze test scores. Teach them step-by-step all the issues with ELLs . . . what the typical life experience of an ELL in the school is like, etc. Work as a team to solve the problems. Build in time for lots of dialogue and reflection. Work collaboratively as an entire school through vertical and grade-level meetings. Include teachers in decisionmaking.”
- 5. Focus on the needs of individuals:** “It’s hard to do that. Teachers can’t look at 30-plus students and say, ‘I’m going to meet all of your needs every day.’ It’s overwhelming, and you can’t do it. But you must identify needs and find commonalities to group. Where groupings don’t work, address it as an individual need. You can’t approach it as a ‘one-size-fits-all.’ ”
- 6. Be an active participant in instruction:** “As principals, we really need to be instructional leaders—to be in the classroom and speaking with kids. . . . What do they understand and what do they struggle with? . . . I try to get in as often as I can, set aside time during the day. Sometimes there are barriers. That’s where we are as instructional leaders across the nation: how do we delegate, give up, let go of the various administrative things that we have throughout the day to really get in and look at classrooms and come out as instructional leaders? Coming back into staff meetings or professional development and teachers taking you as someone who’s credible, saying, ‘That principal came into my classroom and sat through a guided reading lesson and found the same obstacles as I found.’ Then we can talk about those [issues] and how do we overcome them.”
- 7. Emphasize literacy:** “In our school, everything is based on language. Schools are language places. If kids are going to do well in schools, they have to be good at language. Everything is based on language. You have to work on language composition. We have put most of our eggs on reading and comprehension. The library here is a hoppin’ place, and it is well used.”
- 8. Encourage collaboration:** “Make sure to allow opportunities for cross-dialogue among teachers within and across grade levels to make sure there is coordination and information-sharing about what various teachers have been focusing on and how kids are doing.”
- 9. Seek staff input about training needs:** “Offer staff opportunities for development, and conduct an inventory of staff development needs to see if they are fully prepared. Ask them what they feel would help them best serve these students, and they will be candid.”
- 10. Have a dedicated classroom for late-entry newcomers:** “Keep the class size small. In our school, these students get ELD all morning and then are mainstreamed with native English speakers in the afternoon. I find that the students speak a lot more in this special classroom. Then they get role models with the English speakers in the afternoon. After 1 year, they are transitioned into another class. Sometimes they can move out sooner than 1 year.”

* ELD refers to English language development.

Snapshot: Valley High School Promotes ELL Student Achievement

The following snapshot features an exemplar school making strides in keeping English language learners in school and engaged in learning at high levels.

School: Valley High School

District: Elk Grove Unified School District, CA

Part of what makes Valley High School unique is the combination of its systematic use of data and personalized attention that starts the moment students enter its doors.

“Students do not fall through the cracks,” reported Linda Gonzalez, ELL Coordinator, when asked what makes Valley High School successful. Because Valley High School, an urban high school in Sacramento, CA, boasts such a diverse ELL population, it employs bilingual Spanish, Hmong, Chinese, Punjabi, and Hindi paraprofessionals to assist students with content area comprehension. This dedication to meeting the needs of each student has contributed to an extremely low overall dropout rate (3%)—a noteworthy accomplishment, considering that 62% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 26% are designated as ELLs. Valley High School is dedicated to combining data use and personalization to help reach students, respond to the needs of students, and keep students from disengaging and leaving school altogether.

Through careful consideration of test scores and feedback from teachers and feeder middle schools, each ELL is individually placed in an instructional program that best meets his or her needs.

Valley High School offers a tiered ELL Partnership program with three levels of instruction: one for newcomer students; another with “transitional” core courses for those ELLs who have not yet attained the level of English fluency necessary to access college-level textbooks; and Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) core classes, all of which are approved by the University of California system as meeting college entrance requirements.

According to Chris Evans, Vice Principal of Valley High School, teacher participation in a year-round professional learning program is critical to ensuring the quality of instruction offered at the school. The program ensures that teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to (a) teach at any of the three levels of instruction and (b) meet the needs of ELLs.

Evans further emphasized that ELLs at Valley High School would not be able to attain the results they have without Principal Roger Stock’s concerted effort to allocate the fiscal and human resources necessary to make sure that the ELL Partnership classes are funded and that the administration makes serving ELLs a priority.

In addition, the entire staff is extremely dedicated to giving credit where it is due, and “any student who comes to Valley High School immediately sees a counselor [and] has a parent meeting,” said Evans, to determine what state standards they have already met so that students’ schedules can be tailored to meet graduation requirements. Often, this is easier said than done, but staff members report going so far as to regularly communicate across continents to track down students’ prior transcripts in order to place them in the appropriate classes. “I’ve called Japan, I’ve called China, and I’ve called Mexico to have a relative go to the school [and] get a transcript,” said Gonzalez. Ultimately, students are provided with a schedule that minimizes repetitiveness and aids in English acquisition—ELLs who have relatively low English fluency trade one elective for a second hour of the ELD class.*

Once students are placed, teachers are given the freedom and support to implement curricula to meet the needs of the diverse student population. Recently, a task force was formed to look at data and research on materials and textbooks related to ELL instruction. Eventually, these materials—including Shining Star and Globe textbooks, as well as software programs—were adopted to help students reach the overall goal of proficiency in both English and core academic content. Continual tracking by the bilingual paraprofessionals, teachers, and administration of student data ensures that the progress of all students is carefully monitored. This tracking and support for ELLs is what makes Valley High School, according to the three administrators interviewed, “a model program.”

Finally, like most exemplary schools, the students and staff at Valley High School hold themselves to extremely high expectations and are dedicated to student achievement. As Principal Stock states, “You’ve got to start with commitment and believe that all students can learn. And that commitment can help them meet that goal.” This belief, along with strategic placement and relevant curricula, are what promotes high student achievement at Valley High School.

* ELD refers to English language development.

DEFINITIONS

English language learner (ELL): Student whose first language is not English and who is in the process of learning English.

Bilingual programs: Programs that use the students' native language, in addition to English, for instruction. Students are grouped according to their home language, and teachers are proficient in both English and the students' language. (Bilingual programs also are known as early-exit bilingual programs, late-exit bilingual programs, and two-way (or developmental) bilingual programs.)

Structured (or sheltered) English immersion: Programs that use English adapted to the students' levels of comprehension, along with gestures and visual aids, to provide content area instruction. This approach is often used for a class of students from a variety of native language backgrounds. In the law, "sheltered English immersion" and "structured English immersion" are used interchangeably.

METHODOLOGY

The research team used a mixed-methods approach—including case studies, phone and written surveys, statistical analyses of extant student performance data (statewide and from Los Angeles Unified School District), stakeholder interviews, and document reviews. For more information about the study's findings and methodology, see the Year 5 report. This culminating report, which synthesizes the findings from research performed across all 5 years of the study, is available online at <http://www.air.org/news/documents/227Report.pdf>.

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