



Empowering ELLs through Strong Community–School District Partnerships for Enrichment

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A collaboration in Worcester, Massachusetts, between the district, higher education institutions, and community organizations, including a Spanish-language television program, provided culturally responsive out-of-school enrichment programs for English learners.

The English Language Learner (ELL) Summer Camp in Worcester, Massachusetts – an intensive six-week program that served middle school and high school students from Worcester Public Schools (WPS) – was the product of a five-way partnership that included the school district, higher education institutions (Latino Education Institute [LEI] at Worcester State University and Quinsigamond Community College), and

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community organizations (African Community Education [ACE] and the Spanish-language television program *Esperanza y Su Éxito*). The ELL Summer Camp aimed to promote literacy skills, linguistic competence, and self-efficacy by integrating academics and community-based enrichment and, ultimately, to maximize students' potential for high school graduation and their preparedness for college and career pathways.

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP: VISION, PLANNING, PROCESS

The partnership was formed through the leadership and vision of key stakeholders: WPS Manager of English Language Learners and Supplemental Support Services Bertha-Elena Rojas, LEI Executive Director Mary Jo Marion, and LEI Assistant Executive Director Hilda Ramirez. Rojas invited key community partners to the table to discuss the framework for this program: CEO of *Esperanza y Su Éxito*, Esperanza Donovan-Pendzic; Quinsigamond Community College faculty member Deborah Gonzalez; and ACE Executive Director Kaska Yawo. Through these discussions, we agreed that the best and most comprehensive approach was to bring together community-based organizations serving immigrants and refugees, higher education institutions with proven extension programs designed for immigrant communities, and the units of the WPS charged with serving ELL students. After five months of collaborative planning, WPS applied for and received a competitive state

1 Through the Massachusetts Educational Opportunity Office's Gateway Cities Education Agenda, \$3 million in grants were awarded in 2013 and 2014 to address the English language development of immigrant and newcomer students in the Gateway Cities Summer English Language Enrichment Academies, held across twenty districts in Massachusetts.

grant as part of the Gateway Cities Education Agenda to fund the partnership for one year.¹

WHAT MADE THE PARTNERSHIP WORK?

Mary Jo Marion, Executive Director, Latino Education Institute

The process really matters. To be able to implement something of this scale and quality meant that the partners and the schools had to have a relationship and the time to plan and to think together. For me, here at our Institute, where we're part of Worcester State University and our work is centered around K–12 partnerships, this experience is a rare opportunity to think deeply with the district about how to improve academic and social-emotional outcomes for ELL students and families. This singular focus is something unique and valuable to this experience.

It became pretty clear that there are a lot of partners in Worcester that can contribute greatly to the outcomes for ELL students, but it's really hard for the schools to harness those partnerships in a coherent way. They really don't have the staffing or resources. So one of the early roles I took on was to organize the community partners so that there was an umbrella for the Worcester schools to deal with. That makes it a lot easier for everybody.

In large districts, it's messy work to organize and take advantage of the strengths of the external partners, but it really helps the quality of the work. Not only were we able to unite under a single community umbrella for the delivery of services, but the collaboration went deeper, and we were able to develop a framework and curriculum that leverages the strengths of each partner and engages students and families. This framework is still used by the partners.

For more information on the Latino Education Institute, see <http://www.worcester.edu/Latino-Education-Institute/>.

As the LEI program coordinator, I (Jessica Rivera) joined the team in the conceptualization stages of the program. In these initial meetings, all the community partners and WPS leadership discussed outreach and recruitment strategy, program structure, data-sharing protocol, and accountability. As the lead LEI program coordinator for the ELL Summer Camp program, I worked closely with all community partners in identifying strengths and areas best suited for each to contribute towards creating a quality program. During this planning stage, the ELL Summer Camp program greatly benefited from the honest and frank insights of each partner.

As the partnership grew, it became evident how to best cultivate these strengths to recruit families, students, and community support. At LEI we believe our strength is in working with English language learners and connecting with Latino families, which is why we took the lead supporting the organizing of Family Academy recruitment sessions. ACE has expertise in working with the refugee community and youth of African descent. They did a great job of connecting with families in the community with whom they had a year-round relationship. *Esperanza y Su Éxito* has the technical skills needed to create a dynamic, enriching offering for ELL camp participants. During the recruitment stage, *Esperanza y Su Éxito* presented various social justice videos they had produced with youth to show families some of the opportunities their child was going to have in the summer camp.

RESOURCES AND EXPERTISE

Since LEI and ACE both have more than ten years of experience in community building and support in Latino and African communities in Worcester, both organizations had culturally competent staff to work with the

diverse population of ELL students. LEI also has a successful track record in implementing relevant enrichment programs in Worcester Public Schools. This expertise in curriculum development aided the collaboration with Quinsigamond Community College and ACE in the creation of the ELL Summer Camp enrichment curriculum. Furthermore, LEI's incorporation in the Worcester State University campus provided collaborative partners access to world-class facilities ideal for instructional learning, equipped with projectors, round sound systems, smart boards, and other technology.

Our partnership with the district brought about additional resources and expertise that we normally do not have in other areas of our programs, such as a full-time nurse, an adjustment counselor, and teaching expertise in the areas of language acquisition. These elements were all essential to the program's success. Throughout the duration of the summer program, it became evident that the adjustment counselor was an invaluable asset in supporting our families and providing the emotional and psychological support for many of our students. The adjustment counselor aided students by conducting daily, scheduled, one-on-one check-in meetings with numerous students and by reaching out to parents to inform them of their child's progress. This additional support proved effective in helping to establish a safe and positive environment for both our students and parents to succeed in the program.

CURRICULUM

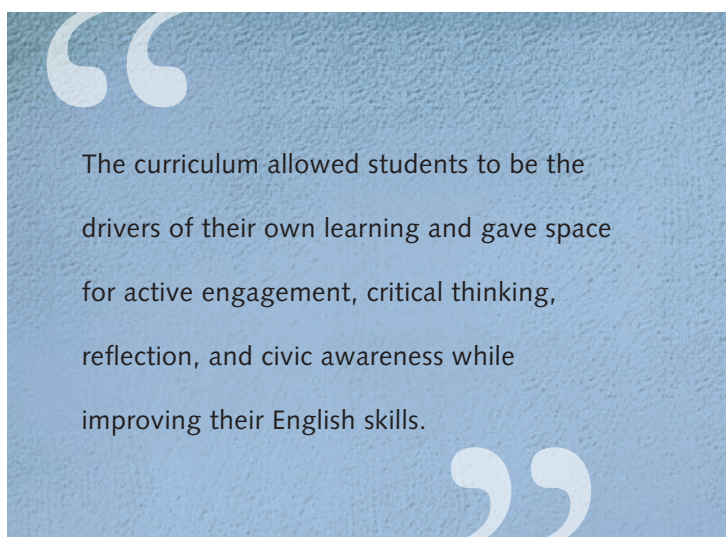
One of my favorite parts of the ELL Summer Camp program process was assisting in the development of the enrichment curriculum – My Voice, My Community, Our World. This three-module curriculum, each module running for two weeks, was designed

to empower youth as they work together in applying academic knowledge and skills to address real community issues. The curriculum allowed for students to be the drivers of their own learning process and gave space for active engagement, critical thinking, reflection, and civic awareness while using key literacy elements to improve their English skills.

Another key aspect of the curriculum focused on encouraging student interactions. During the beginning days of the program, many of the young people were shy; they were hesitant to participate in activities and unwilling to push their comfort zones to try new things. By the third week, students were more vocal and were able to fully express opinions and identify as a collective community issues they wanted to address. Students in the program began to learn to view themselves as assets in their community and agents of change. This process in turn increased students' self-esteem, self-perception, and levels of civic engagement.

This student empowerment was achievable by the safe space that staff was able to create throughout the six weeks; a nurturing approach was emphasized throughout the program. Staff made it a point to show youth they cared for them and respected youth voices, addressing any of their questions and concerns and encouraging them to share their life experience and points of view on sensitive issues. Staff demonstrated patience when young people were having a hard time grasping activity goals, created a judgment-free zone where bullying and teasing of any kind was not allowed, and celebrated each student's efforts through words of encouragement and praise at the end of every workshop. Relationship building between staff and students was essential to the success of the program.

By the end of the program students identified poverty, homelessness, and cultural diversity as the community issues they cared most about addressing. Their final community projects consisted of a food and clothes drive donated to local Worcester community organizations that serve homeless youth; educational posters placed in various community spaces; a student's wall-sized mural representing the various cultures that made up the summer camp community; and three documentary videos screened at the end of the program during a Community Expo event.



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Student responses to the community project:

To me, community means everybody works together to help each other. This is why one day I would like to work as a doctor so I can give back to my community and help sick people get better.

I try to help people by volunteering in the community in places people need help. And when people ask me why I do it even though I don't get paid, I tell them that I do it because I like to help people.

I have helped my community by working with my class on a homelessness project. We collected extra food and extra clothes to give to the poor. It feels good to help others.

Youth homelessness is a problem. My friend goes to school and in the afternoon she is staying in a friend's home. This is a problem in Worcester. We need to work together to help others in this situation and lend them a hand.

These outcomes represent the power of youth. When youth are given a nurturing, supportive, and engaging environment, they can learn the value of self and be better equipped to contribute to the greater society.

LEADERSHIP AND STAFF COHESION

As the LEI program coordinator, my many responsibilities included ensuring clear and constant communication, coordinating students' lunch, briefing everyone on emergency protocol for field trips, and other day-to-day logistics. I also provided a supportive structure for all staff who were new to our organizational culture.

My leadership style with enrichment staff focused on mentoring and coaching. Our enrichment staff was composed of ten individuals from three different community organizations and was reflective of the ethnic and racial composition of our students. Each staff member had an array of experiences and expertise needed for the success of the program. One way of cultivating these strengths was through implementing a series of trainings with community partners prior to the start of camp that introduced staff to the program goals, objectives, curriculum design, and expected teaching culture of positive youth development.

Furthermore, staff received training on cultural competencies, emergency protocol, stages of group development, facilitation skills, and classroom management. Throughout these sessions, staff were able to share areas they felt more comfortable in and areas in which they would need more support from the team. Once the program started, one strategy that was very effective and made the intensity of the summer program manageable was meeting with instructional enrichment staff once a week to review successes, challenges, weekly plans, and progress. These meetings were essential in maintaining leadership cohesion, uniformity of program goals, and a positive working culture.

One very important outcome from staff trainings and ongoing check-ins was learning the value of staff autonomy. Though staff were highly encouraged to follow the curriculum design, they were also encouraged to implement activities they felt were more relevant and would better serve their specific group of students. Some staff chose to exercise their creative freedom and implement different sessions while still maintaining the focus and goals for the modules. This level of flexibility in respect to program sessions enabled staff to have more buy-in in the program process and created more passionate instructors.

Some enrichment staff used poetry, music, video, painting, or photography as the medium to engage students in community projects and the exploration process. For example, one of our enrichment staff has a B.A. in English and really enjoyed poetry as the medium to introduce the daily goal. For the first fifteen minutes of workshop sessions, students read various poems and/or watched slam poetry videos. Students would have group discussion on deciphering the meaning of the poems and shared personal connections to the stories.

During the planning stages of their community action project, students identified cultural awareness as the community issues they wanted to address. Some students decided to write “self-poems” on their identity to share with others. In addition, the group also put together an all-inclusive holiday calendar representative of all ELL Summer Camp participants’ family holidays and traditions. See the sidebar on pages 43–45 for a description of one workshop, run by Esperanza Donovan-Pendzic.

These kinds of activities in turn allowed students to gain exposure to different art mediums as well as develop technical skills for self-expression that were not originally incorporated into the enrichment curriculum. I attribute much of the enrichment success to the passionate staff and the level of commitment in the curriculum design.

PROGRAM SUCCESSES

The strength of our partnerships led to a successful ELL Summer Camp program that served more than fifty ELL students. Students were able to attend five field trips to educational and culturally relevant institutions such as the Worcester Historical Museum, Ellis Island, and the Statue of Liberty. These trips were made possible because all community partners agreed it was important to provide an opportunity for students to learn and experience different places that have greatly shaped the communities to which we all belong.

These decisions were also influenced by the consciousness of our community partners. The majority of the students in the program come from low-income households and do not ordinarily have the opportunity to visit such places, so providing these opportunities was a very important goal for the leadership group.

At the end of the program we had an ELL Summer Camp Expo Celebration, with approximately 175 people in attendance, including Worcester State University staff, community members, media representatives, and, most importantly, family and friends of our students. Students planned and organized the end of the Expo and Celebration program, where several students welcomed parents and explained their artwork to guests. Students shared their experiences and built community awareness on the issues they identified throughout the program cycle and introduced community projects during the celebratory dinner.

This event truly marked and magnified the success of the program. The culminating speeches and presentations given by the students in front of such a large audience demonstrated the shift in confidence, both in language and self, that will help propel these students through high school and beyond.

At the end of the program, students and parents commented on how important this summer program was for them. The top four changes that students noticed in themselves since they joined the program were: improved English skills, improved social life, increased self-confidence, and improved writing skills. As students reported:

The changes I have noticed about me since the day I came here is that I am less shy with people and it is easier for me to spell things.

I am proud of myself.

I have made new friends and learn cool things about art.

I have more friends and I have learned more English.

The top four changes that parents identified in their child were: improved English, more communicative, happier, and more responsible. Parents commented that what they liked most

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about the ELL Summer Camp program were their child’s exposure to new places, child’s improved English, and the supportive staff who were always available if they had questions. This feedback is a testimony to the great work of this partnership and the positive relationship that program staff built with families, integral to increasing family engagement.

LESSONS LEARNED

Having a clear outline of partnership roles and responsibilities is essential in maintaining positive relationships and effective collaborations. Throughout the ELL Summer Camp program cycle, power dynamics and responsibilities between program coordinators began to shift, and roles became unclear. This made team dynamics difficult moving forward because some coordinators were taking on more responsibilities outside of their scope. Fortunately, this did not affect the students’ experience or classroom instruction.

Strong leadership is necessary when working in this level of collaboration. As coordinators, it is our role to bring people together, create frameworks that highlight each other’s strengths, and provide supports in areas of improvement. Just as important, leaders should allow opportunities for partners to

incorporate their passion and add value to the program. This requires a leader to be flexible to changes. It is also important to take time throughout the program to celebrate the process and the small successes. This ensures that student and staff morale stays high and commitment does not falter.

The ELL Summer Camp program was a great success because of the passion and commitment of all the collaborative partners. All individuals were able to have a hand in shaping and molding the process, and in doing so, created an educational and enriching program that was better than any ELL program any of us could have done alone. The high level of success is attributable to the team’s ability to bring complementary levels of expertise and competencies that aided in providing a comprehensive program.

When designing a program for ELL students, I recommend a program that creates platforms for students to exercise their creativity, civic awareness, critical thinking, reflection, and active engagement in the planning and implementation of the process. This type of framework builds students’ sense of self-efficacy and resiliency, which are soft skills needed for ELL students living and learning in a new country.

“MY VOICE, MY COMMUNITY, MY WORLD”: A YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

Esperanza Donovan-Pendzic

From Ms. Esperanza's class I learned how to use the camera and not be shy in front of the camera. I learned many good things in the classroom.

—ELL Student

As program creator and host of the Spanish language television show, *Esperanza Y Su Éxito* (EYSE), I have spent the last nine years developing a news magazine format that serves the Latino community in the city of Worcester, Massachusetts. EYSE is used as a vehicle for disseminating important information to this underserved community.

The 2010 U.S. Census showed that about 21 percent of the population in the city of Worcester is Latino, compared to 9.6 percent in the state of Massachusetts.² The Latino community is substantially growing. However, Latinos keep struggling for the use of resources and information to improve their lives in the city of Worcester. There is a lack of programming that focuses on local and regional issues affecting the Latino community. EYSE uses the medium of television to empower the Latino community.

EYSE's staff consists of the following community professionals: Anthony Ortiz, Program Director; Elis Ortiz, Assistant Director/Video Technician; Lydia Fortune, Advising Consultant; and me. We served as coordinators and as trainers last summer for a special academic training workshop for WPS's ELL students. EYSE's training team also functioned as technical directors and editors, using video cameras to enhance the learning environment.

The EYSE television program has always maintained the objective of identifying the most effective way to communicate important information to minority – and specifically, Latino – communities. Relying on written literature was not effective due

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2. See <http://censusviewer.com/city/MA/Worcester>.

to cultural communication styles and language barriers.

Although EYSE was unable to find or collect hard data on the value of the Latino community viewing information rather than reading it, my professional experience has led me to several conclusions. First, while collecting data for my doctoral dissertation on EYSE's impact on Worcester's Latino community, it was clear that a level of frustration exists between Latinos and members of the dominant community in trying to communicate with each other. My having spent years explaining school notices and materials to families informed me that Latinos and other minority and ethnic groups prefer face-to-face or visual information, rather than written.

Although many legal documents and other booklets are published in the Spanish language, the information is not getting to the Latino community in Worcester in a usable way. This is not a problem of intelligence, competence, or ability to comprehend. The problem is identifying the most effective way to connect with Latino people and using media to create a face-to-face, verbal interaction instead of reading alone in silence (Davila 2001; Gudykunst 2004).

The main purpose of EYSE is to empower the Latino and other minority communities in the city of Worcester. EYSE provides segments ranging from those based on a culturally sensitive approach to information with attention paid to cultural values and appropriate presentation style.

Using my brainchild, EYSE, Bertha-Elena Rojas from WPS visualized and recognized the unique opportunity to use the video concept as a learning tool for our ELL students. Rojas, as well as LEI Assistant Director Hilda Ramirez, envisioned a concrete way in which our ELL students could overcome their hurdles by seeing themselves conquering their fears and also as successful transformational leaders in

the community. Most of our ELL students are affected by language barriers and poverty. Empowering and televising them was a remarkable way to teach the students that their voices mattered. EYSE's training team used the cameras, lights, and different processes of listening, interviewing, writing, and role-playing to help the ELL students to be involved in their own learning practices.

EYSE programming was structured to become a catalyst for change. The entire project was founded on the basic belief that communities need to be informed and educated in order to expect social justice and exhort social change. With this knowledge in mind, WPS and LEI approached EYSE in the summer of 2014, with a vision and profound idea of empowering WPS's ELL students. WPS professionals and LEI staff members teamed up with EYSE to create a six-week summer academic workshop that would help ELL students visualize their success.

The video cameras were instrumental in helping to promote a way in which the students could critically process information for and about themselves. This process helped the students visualize themselves as successful, empowered beings. The students' voices were finally being heard and televised to cultivate a sense of leadership. This practice assisted the students in improving their language skills and their perceptions about themselves.

EYSE's purpose was to link the academic program with the classroom curriculum. In this way the teachers, as well as community partners, worked together to create a synergy for the ELL students in the summer program. The training team first introduced the students to the skill of interviewing one another and learning to write down questions that they wanted to ask. Each student had five to seven minutes to take turns interviewing one another. Next, the students were encouraged to decide what group topics they would focus on for the rest of the summer sessions.

Once the students had chosen two topics

and had broken into two respective groups, each day was spent with the students working on their interviewing skills. Additionally, the students learned to write questions and research their topics at home. EYSE's training team modeled and helped the students learn to use techniques such as: (a) respectful listening; (b) how to skillfully set a collective agenda that sharpened the student perceptions of what a leader should be like within his or her environment; and (c) how to use education for civic and social justice, and social change. The students decided to focus on two main social issues as topics: global warming and world littering, and bullying in school.

One of the most exciting parts of the workshop was when EYSE trainers presented basic demonstrations to the students on how to operate the video cameras and also a brief overview about recording and capturing important events. Next, the students were able to individually experience handling the cameras and filming each other. Another highlight of the workshop involved the activities and games that they got to participate in often.

The ELL summer program provided a way for the community to build cultural and social capital. WPS, LEI, WSU, and EYSE cultivated, created, and empowered a cohort of ELL students, opening up the possibility for them to become strong leaders who could impact their community in the future.

At the end of the summer, EYSE's advising consultant, Lydia Fortune, edited and produced a DVD for each student, as well as the community partners. This step was crucial because the ELL students had a chance to see their abilities and skills improving while also sharing this particular process with their family members. Once all the video files were completed, EYSE presented the DVDs to WCCA Channel 13 Community Television for community viewing. The ELL students were thrilled and committed to developing their skills further. They felt that the

city of Worcester – and their parents – were going to be watching and supporting them in their endeavor. These students felt a great sense of pride. The summer experience gave the students a glimpse of how they can learn to take themselves more seriously and make better decisions about themselves and their future.

ELL students can capture the message of becoming leaders and can act on the message of empowerment because they can understand the visualization more easily without feeling discouraged by the language barrier. Television is a unique conveyer of visual information, since it combines the two senses of vision and hearing. While teaching this class, the crew of EYSE was focused on the message that becoming bilingual or multilingual is a strength, not a hurdle. As a facilitator, I observed how the students labeled as ELL moved slowly from detached boredom to full and active participation, growing more comfortable with speaking into the camera. They began to see the possibility of being catalysts for social change. This, in my opinion, will impact the future in the way teachers conduct the art of education. I have been so fortunate to see how one student improved his behavior and completed the course as a model student. I saw how this young man conveyed his feelings without acting out, with the possibility of being a catalyst for social change. I could see that he was able to communicate in an easier way, as well as develop an interest in cameras.

EYSE believes that empowering our ELL students is another way to create strong leaders and a stronger community. Educating our underprivileged students on civic and human rights is the essential tool in changing a whole structural system (Horton & Freire 1991). The concept of this youth empowerment project goes beyond educating young minds in the classroom to developing culturally sensitive leaders.

One of our students said, "I thought that my African accent sounds well in the

camera," as he smiled and realized that what mattered in this class were his ideas about saving the earth from being trashed by human beings. He took pride in becoming a part of the solution, not a part of the problem. Another young Latino student said, "I hope that other Latinos like me understand the importance of going to college. They can help their family and our community too." An Iraqi student shared, "I want other girls like me to go to college so we can help stop wars from killing and hurting our family members at home." These students were given the opportunity to overcome the negative perception about themselves and strive toward becoming leaders in their own communities.

This sense of leadership was made possible by offering ELL students an opportunity to participate in a civic process within an interesting classroom curriculum that fostered a sense of empowerment and commitment for the betterment of our diverse community.

For more information on Esperanza y Su Éxito, see <http://esperanzaysuexito.webs.com>.

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