Limited-English-proficient (LEP) students and their parents need a network of support to familiarize themselves with school routines, so they may understand and comply with school rules and regulations, take advantage of many school-related services, and successfully follow their course of study. Administrators can help by ensuring that information about new LEP students is available to school personnel, parents, and students. This includes having names of interpreters who can be called on and making available to teachers a list of LEP students and their backgrounds. The most important and challenging task for staff is finding ways to integrate LEP students into academic activities. This requires time and resources, and could include assessing students' level of academic skills in their native language, assessing English proficiency, scheduling intensive English instruction, and conducting regular discussion sessions with school staff and resource people about the students' languages, cultures, and school systems. Students can help by participating in a buddy system pairing an LEP student with either a native English-speaking peer or a student who speaks his own native language. Administrators and teachers should also encourage LEP students and their parents to participate in social and academic activities, particularly to teach about or celebrate their native cultures. (MSE)
LIMITED-ENGLISH-PROFICIENT STUDENTS
IN THE SCHOOLS: HELPING THE NEWCOMER

Terry Corasaniti Dale
Limited-English-Proficient Students in The Schools: Helping the Newcomer

At The Beginning: Helping The Newcomer

In the 1980’s, there is hardly a school in the United States which has not enrolled some number of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students. Administrators and teachers throughout the country are striving to meet the challenge of integrating these students from the beginning into the social and academic life of their schools.

LEP students and their parents need a network of support to familiarize them with school routines, to help them understand and comply with school rules and regulations, to help them take advantage of many school-related services and, ultimately, to successfully follow their designated course of study. There are a number of ways in which schools can provide such a network to make the transition to schooling in the United States easier.

What Administrators Can Do

One of the most important things administrators can do is to ensure that information about new LEP students is available to all school personnel, parents and students. As the “hub” of the information network, principals, counselors and office personnel should:

1. Have available names of interpreters who can be called on to help register students; to work with counselors and teachers in explaining school rules, grading systems and report cards; and to help when students are called in for any kind of problem or in case of an emergency. Many school systems have a list of such interpreters which is kept in the central office. A school can augment this list or start its own with local business people, senior citizens, college professors, students, and parents who are bilingual and who are available before, during or after school hours. Responsible students who are bilingual can also serve as interpreters when appropriate.

2. Have available for all teachers a list of LEP students that includes information on country of origin and native language, age, the last grade attended in the home country, current class assignments and any and all information available about the students’ academic background. Since new LEP students are enrolled in school throughout the year, updated lists should be disseminated periodically. School staff who are kept aware of the arrival of new LEP students can prepare themselves and their students to welcome children from different language and cultural backgrounds.

How The School Staff Can Help

The most important and challenging task facing schools with LEP students is finding expedient ways to integrate new LEP students into the academic activities of the school. In most cases, it is nearly impossible for schools to know in advance how many LEP students will enroll from year to year or to foresee what level of academic skills students will bring with them. Nevertheless, school staff need to have a set of well-planned procedures for placing students in the appropriate classroom, as well as procedures for developing instructional plans, many of which must be developed on an individual student basis. School administrators should provide staff with the time and resources to accomplish this. The following activities are suggested:

1. Assess students’ level of skills (including reading and mathematics) in their native language.

2. Assess students’ English language proficiency, including listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. (It should be noted here that many school systems with large numbers of LEP students often have a center where all initial assessment is done and from where the information may be sent on to the receiving school. Schools in systems which do not have such “in-take” centers must complete student evaluation themselves.)

3. When class schedules are devised (particularly in intermediate and secondary school), schedule slots for classes where LEP students can be grouped for intensive, special classes in English as a second language and mathematics. LEP students should not be isolated for the entire school day; however, at least in the very beginning, the grouping of students according to English language proficiency or academic skills levels is essential. This is...
particularly true for schools with small numbers of LEP
students scattered throughout grade levels. Planning ahead
for such special groupings avoids disrupting schedules
during the school year. The participation of school
principals and counselors in this process is essential.

4. Conduct regular information discussion sessions with
the school staff and resource people who know something
about the students' languages, cultures, and school systems
in the various countries of origin. Many schools schedule
monthly information sessions where staff who are working in
the classroom with the same LEP students may meet and
compare notes. Such discussions usually focus on
appropriate instructional approaches to be used with LEP
students, or how to interpret student behaviors or customs
that are unfamiliar to the teacher. These sessions can be
invaluable since they may constitute the only time that
staff have the opportunity to consult one another, in
addition to outside sources, on issues that are vitally
important to classroom success.

What Students Can Do

A support network for LEP students is complete only
when all students are included and allowed to help in some
way. One way to involve the student body is to set up a
"buddy system" which pairs new students with students
not new to the system. Where possible, LEP students may
be paired with responsible students who speak their native
language. These student teams go through the school day
together so that the newcomers may learn school routines
from experienced peers who have gone through the
adjustment period themselves.

New LEP students may also be paired with native
English-speaking peers. In this way, LEP students begin
to learn survival English at the same time that they are
getting to know other students in the school. As tutors,
student "buddies" may help newcomers with academic work,
especially in classes where extra teacher help is not
consistently available.

Teachers should initially establish buddy systems in
their own classrooms, but student organizations, such as
the student council, foreign language clubs, or intercultural
student groups can help maintain the systems.

A Final Note: Working Together

Administrators and teachers should encourage LEP
students and their parents to participate in social and
academic activities. A good way to get them started is to
invite them to talk about the history, geography, literature
and customs of their home countries in class. Such
presentations should be a planned part of the curriculum
throughout the year.

Many schools also plan special school assemblies (or
even an entire day) to celebrate the cultural diversity of
the student body or to spotlight outstanding work done by LEP
students. Many other activities may be initiated which give
LEP students and their English-speaking peers
opportunities to interact and work together.

Schools which see LEP students and their families as
rich sources of first-hand information about life in other
countries and cultures are very often the most successful in
helping LEP students to become productive, contributing
members of the school community.

Resources

The National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education is a
federally-funded center which provides information on
programs, instructional materials, research and other
resources related to the education of LEP students. The
Clearinghouse can also provide information on additional
networks of federally-funded centers that serve school
districts with LEP students. Eligibility for free technical
assistance from these centers varies according to funding
priorities. For information, write or call:

National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education
11501 Georgia Avenue, Suite 102
Wheaton, MD 20902
(301)933-9448, or 800-647-0123

For Further Reading

Educating the minority student: classroom and
Golub, L.S. (1984). The design, implementation and
evaluation of a bilingual placement and monitoring
schools design and develop bilingual education programs. Milwaukee, WI: Midwest National Origin Desegregation Center, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.
different countries. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
Ovando, D.J. (1985). Bilingual and ESL classrooms:
teaching in multicultural contexts. New York, NY:
McGraw-Hill, Inc.