

# Lessons Learned

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## Creating Schools That Support Success for English Language Learners

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**THE PAST TWO DECADES HAVE BROUGHT THE SECOND LARGEST WAVE OF IMMIGRATION** in U.S. history. This has led to a rapid and unprecedented influx of immigrants to the Pacific Northwest as well as a rise in the number of English language learners (ELLs) in schools. Between 2002–2003 and 2007–2008, the Northwest’s annual growth in ELL enrollment was nearly five times faster than the national average. By 2007–2008, ELLs represented 8.6 percent of total public school enrollment in the Northwest.

To address these changes, many district leaders in the Northwest are taking a direct role in supporting the education of ELLs. These leaders are looking for programs, strategies, and practices to help this growing population of students develop English proficiency while simultaneously mastering academic content. The following lessons are derived from Education Northwest’s research, evaluation, and technical

assistance experiences. They are intended to address questions that administrators may have about how to mitigate barriers to the linguistic and academic achievement of ELLs. They will also help leaders provide better support to teachers as they learn and implement evidence-based instructional practices for ELLs.

**Lesson # 1 Make success for ELLs a central issue**  
Ensuring the success of ELL students requires the commitment of everyone in the school community. In our work with districts and schools, we have found that developing and communicating a unified vision for improving instruction and services for ELLs is essential.

To create this vision, principals and district leaders serve as advocates for ELLs and inspire and sustain a comprehensive commitment to the education of these students.

Leaders communicate an overt and specific message about the shared responsibility for ensuring success for all students, including ELLs.

To put this vision into practice, accountability must be clear and concrete. All staff members should understand the actions and practices for which they are responsible, as well as how their performance will be supported and monitored. For example, it is important for principals to be knowledgeable about the research on effective instructional practices for ELLs in order to support teachers in implementing those practices. In one district, the administrators attended all ELL-related professional development sessions with teachers. As a result, they understood the ELL-responsive strategies that teachers had learned and could monitor their implementation in the classroom. In one school, the principal highlighted a particular ELL-responsive strategy in each monthly bulletin.

Another way to make success for ELLs a central issue is to create opportunities for regular communication among all the adults at a school. In ELL technical assistance, Education Northwest staff members have found that such collaboration develops both confidence and capacity across the building to meet the needs of ELLs. Strong connections among classroom instruction, curriculum, assessment, and

### Lessons Learned for Administrator’s Roles in Supporting Success for ELLS

1. Make success for ELLs a central issue
2. Choose an appropriate ELL program model and ensure that it is well understood by all staff members
3. Use consistent and reliable procedures to identify and place ELL students
4. Implement strategies that are supported by research
5. Build a bridge to families and community members

## ELL Program Models

- Dual language—students receive instruction in two languages with the purpose of developing proficiency in both
- Transitional bilingual—initial instruction is provided in a student’s first language, which is phased out as the student acquires the English language skills necessary to succeed in the mainstream classroom
- Sheltered instruction—all instruction is in English but teachers use strategies to help meet students’ linguistic needs, such as the explicit teaching of vocabulary and the use of visual representations
- Push-in—specialists or aides work with ELLs within the mainstream classroom
- Pull-out—ELLs are placed in mainstream classrooms but spend a portion of the day developing their English language skills with specialists, either one-on-one or in small groups

specialized instruction or services for ELLs are essential. Teachers and specialists should regularly work together as a matter of standard practice. One way to support collaboration is to provide common planning times for teachers and ELL specialists and aides.

## Lesson # **2** Choose an appropriate ELL program model and ensure that it is well understood by all staff members

Schools have a variety of models to choose from in order to provide instruction and support for ELLs. Some of the most widely used models are described in the sidebar at

left. When selecting a model, school leaders often ask for evidence on the most effective program model. In fact, different models may be appropriate to different settings and sufficient evidence is not always available. For example, research does not definitively support bilingual or English-only instruction.

Bilingual programs offer students the opportunity to develop their literacy skills in two languages, and research suggests that in the longer run, students who are taught in bilingual programs are not disadvantaged in their English skills, as people sometimes fear. In practice, however, relatively few ELLs actually receive bilingual instruction, often because of difficulty obtaining primary language instructional materials or finding teachers who are appropriately trained and have academic fluency in the students’ primary language. Furthermore, in schools that serve students from many different language backgrounds, it may not even be an option. Sheltered instruction is commonly used in districts that provide instruction in English or serve ELLs who speak many different home languages. Push-in strategies may be more practical in schools that have small numbers of ELLs, as well as in other conditions.

Regardless of the model adopted, district leaders can take steps to ensure that all stakeholders understand the program model or models and how they work. This includes clearly defining and communicating everyone’s role in the model. In our evaluations, we have observed that difficulties arise when district leaders, principals, and teachers have different ideas about the program model. A related problem is a lack of common understanding about the role of ELL specialists. In several schools that we have worked with, mainstream teachers felt that they did not need to address language

development for ELLs and saw this task as the sole responsibility of the specialists.

## Lesson # **3** Use consistent and reliable procedures to identify and place ELL students

Most districts are guided by state policies and procedures in the identification, placement, and exit of eligible ELL students. Districts will want to follow these policies and practices consistently. When state policies and procedures do not exist, districts will want to advocate for them, because uniform and standardized criteria contribute to positive outcomes from services and programs.

In Education Northwest’s technical assistance activities a frequent finding has been that identification and reclassification procedures are often based on the subjective judgments of the staff involved. In some cases, students who were eligible for services were not identified because the procedures varied by school and were not centralized at the district office. Some of the problematic practices included lack of training on the use of home language surveys, inconsistent procedures in administering the surveys, and lack of language translation for parents.

To prevent these problems, the identification, placement, and exit procedures must be well known by the school staff and administered equitably. It is also important to have communication systems in place so that all stakeholders (including parents, classroom teachers, and ELL specialists) are aware of the ELL program procedures. One way to address this is to develop and disseminate an ELL program handbook that includes information about how students are identified and placed, as well as what knowledge and skills students

must develop in order to exit the ELL program. Conducting annual reviews of the procedures can help ensure that they are understood by all staff members.

Both formal and informal classroom assessment tools and practices can also contribute to successful language acquisition for ELL students. Teachers can use the results of formative assessments to monitor the progress that students are making, rather than waiting for the results of annual English language proficiency tests. Routine classroom assessments can also inform instruction and help teachers make adjustment in the programs that serve ELLs.

## Lesson # **4** Implement strategies that are supported by research

Although there is an emerging body of research evidence on teaching ELLs, many teachers are not aware of the findings. Most preservice teacher preparation programs do little to help future teachers work effectively with this population. As a result, new teachers may hold misconceptions about how ELLs learn, including the belief that most ELLs should be able to acquire English proficiency within two years and that ELLs should avoid using their native language while acquiring English. Veteran teachers also report that they have had little or no professional development on how to instruct ELLs effectively.

Because many teachers receive minimal training, it falls on districts to provide professional development and information about how ELLs learn. An important step is to develop among all teachers a thorough understanding of the ELL program model being implemented at the school, as discussed above. Additionally, school districts can focus on supporting teachers' understand-

ing of the key principles about how ELLs learn and the academic challenges they face.

Based on a review of the research literature, Education Northwest has identified five key principles of effective ELL instruction (see sidebar below). These principles apply to all teachers, regardless of the grade levels or subject areas they teach. Without this knowledge, teachers may inadvertently hinder their ELL students' progress. For example, in ELL program reviews conducted by Education Northwest, reviewers observed that some teachers tend to be overly sensitive to making ELLs uncomfortable by calling on them during class. This actually puts ELLs at a disadvantage because they don't have opportunities to practice English.

This example underscores the need for districts to do more than

simply disseminate research findings to the school staff. Teachers need opportunities to make sense of the strategies, incorporate new practices into their teaching, and get feedback on the results. In our program reviews, we repeatedly hear from teachers about the need for ongoing professional learning and support rather than stand-alone trainings, and research on effective professional development supports these preferences.

Lesson # **5** Build a bridge to families and community members  
ELL students learn best when the home, school, and community are all linked. The school climate should reinforce the belief that students' languages and cultures are resources for further learn-

### Five Principles and Their Instructional Implications for ELLs

1. ELLs require comprehensible input as they move through different stages of language acquisition and acquire English proficiency. Therefore, teachers should scaffold their instruction; use multiple methods for conveying information, particularly nonlinguistic methods; and promote student interaction that is structured and supported.
2. Academic language—the more formal, complex English needed to learn advanced academic content—is distinct from conversational language. Teachers should provide explicit instruction in academic language, as well as multifaceted and intensive vocabulary instruction.
3. ELLs need instruction that will allow them to meet state content standards. Teachers should become comfortable implementing the school's ELL program model to convey course content to ELLs. They should also incorporate primary language supports to help students understand the content, when appropriate.
4. ELLs have background knowledge and home cultures that differ from the U.S. mainstream. Teachers should use culturally compatible instruction to build a bridge between home and school. They should make the norms and expectations of the classroom clear and explicit.
5. Assessments measure English language proficiency as well as content knowledge. Teachers should use testing accommodations when appropriate.

ing. Displays of student work, multicultural and multilingual school activities, and the inclusion of adults from students' communities all provide such evidence. Schools with a welcoming and inclusive climate intentionally build culturally relevant topics into the curriculum.

In focus groups conducted by Education Northwest, parents consistently call for opportunities to provide input and to receive more information from the school in a language and format they understand. This suggests that some districts are not taking full advantage of the crucial support that parents and communities can provide. Opportunities for two-way communication with families must be created by school leaders and classroom teachers. Supporting this dialogue requires that schools and districts communicate with parents in their primary language. The cost of community liaisons and interpreters can sometimes be shared by two or more schools. Another strategy that schools sometimes use is to recruit bilingual volunteers to serve in these roles. Parents in focus groups said that the most helpful resource was to have multilingual staff available to help them interact with teachers and administrators.

Outreach activities that bring parents and community members together at the school make family members feel like they belong. Some strategies that districts have used to create successful events include accommodating parents' work schedules, providing child care and transportation, and including extended family members. Offering educational opportunities such as family literacy programs and English as a Second Language classes for adults are also good ways to bring adults to the school. Adult education provides other benefits: It promotes parents' education, makes parents feel more comfortable in schools, and may support parents in

becoming more engaged with their children's schoolwork.

## Summary

Continuing immigration trends suggest that the importance of improving education for ELLs will not diminish in future years. Even the most highly qualified and dedicated teachers cannot provide appropriate educational opportunities for ELL students without the support of district and school leaders. Ensuring that ELLs receive research-based instruction and support will help thousands of current and future students succeed in school. Experts at Education Northwest note that once educators commit to meeting the needs of ELL students, they discover that working collectively on broad efforts, rather than attempting small-scale change in a piecemeal fashion, produces the best results.

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*Education Northwest conducts customized reviews of schools' and districts' existing ELL program models and provides recommendations and technical assistance as needed; for more information on these reviews, contact Lynette Thompson at [Lynette.Thompson@educationnorthwest.org](mailto:Lynette.Thompson@educationnorthwest.org), 503.275.9482. Education Northwest also conducts research and evaluation on the implementation and impact of new initiatives and programs designed to strengthen student learning; for more information about evaluation services, contact Theresa Deussen at [Theresa.Deussen@educationnorthwest.org](mailto:Theresa.Deussen@educationnorthwest.org), 503.275.9631.*

Founded in 1966 as Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Education Northwest works with schools, districts, and communities on comprehensive, research-based solutions to the challenges they face. Four priorities frame our work: supporting educators; strengthening schools and districts; engaging families and communities; and conducting research, evaluation, and assessment. Watch for additional issues of *Lessons Learned*, a series that distills our experience and research, in the Resources section of [educationnorthwest.org](http://educationnorthwest.org).

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