



English Language Learners

Rural Areas

Education Commission of the States

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Learning English in rural America

By Carol Kreck

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Meat packers and poultry processors began settling into America's most rural areas in the 1990s, followed by immigrants willing to do the hard work. With mixed reactions, formerly all-white communities across the country began hearing the voices of Mexicans, Somalis and others in their streets, markets and school hallways.

Today, English language learners (ELLs) — students whose primary language is other than English — are the fastest-growing major school population in the United States. Between 2000-01 and 2010-11, the number of these students, whose level of English proficiency isn't sufficient to support learning in a regular English language classroom, rose 18 percent nationwide.

Some states saw increases that were even more breathtaking, including South Carolina at 610 percent, Kentucky at 306 percent and Nevada at 255 percent.¹

Suddenly, rural communities had to rethink the best ways to teach English as a second language and figure out how to comply with Titles I and III of the No Child Left Behind Act, which apply to ELLs. They had to simultaneously teach English and the new, more rigorous Common Core State Standards. Many of them had to do all this without the resources that are more available in urban centers.

As newcomers arrived in waves, many schools and districts quickly went from low-incidence to high-incidence levels of ELLs. The federal research center, REL-Appalachia, identified four stages in district responses to emerging ELL communities: ad hoc services, consistent services, developed program of services and expanded or integrated services.²

Now states look to each other for a more consistent approach. A recent set of recommendations from the Council of Chief State School Officers on identifying ELLs and identifying when they're proficient will help that process along.³

Once, teaching ELLs was the responsibility of the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, if there was one. Circuit-riding ESL teachers would often go from school to school in a district, pulling out students for special instruction. But as the number of English learners grew, that practice unraveled. Even if an ESL teacher had one school, she was stretched and the students suffered from being pulled from their mainstream classes.

Chatham County, N.C., had 15 English learners in 1987 and 1,640 in 2011, according to civil rights data from the U.S. Department of Education. Mostly children of poultry processing workers (some ELL parents are in construction and manufacturing), these students tend to be Latino and the majority qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. "The principals realized it would be impossible for ELLs to

achieve academically in the academic mainstream unless mainstream teachers learned to differentiate instruction. ESL teachers simply could not do the job alone,” according to an article in *School Administrator*.⁴

Chatham County Superintendent Robert Logan eventually required professional development in sheltered instruction for every teacher in the district, mandating at least 10 hours a year for three years.

Professional development doesn't come cheap, nor do the resources required to make academic instruction comprehensible for ELLs, a source of frustration for rural teachers.

Home Language Survey

Federal law requires that states have a method for identifying students who need language-support services, but no method is mandated. Most states mandate some form of state- or district-created home language survey as the first step for identifying students who need further assessment. There is no standard home language survey in the United States; survey practices vary widely across states and may or may not provide valid and reliable information, raising issues of equity.

For both rural and urban districts, the following recommendations could be helpful in better serving ELL students.

State-level recommendations from Home Language Survey Practices in the Initial Identification of English Learners in the United States, a study published in the May 2012 journal, *Education Policy: State-Level Recommendations*.

- 1. Ensure transparency in initial identification practices.** States need a transparent system for initial identification practices in the areas of home language survey content, administration, interpretation/ramifications for students' further screening or assessment, and possible alternatives to the use of the home language survey, including:
 - Clarity on whether a state-created instrument is mandatory or a sample for districts to use as they create their own.
 - Statements about the kinds of information the instrument is expected to yield and why the survey is meaningful.
 - Clear guidelines for administrators and teachers on implementing the home language survey
 - Clear rules for educators and families about how to act on the information gathered from the instrument.

- 2. Validate survey instruments or require validation.**
 - Collect basic data about the efficacy of the home language survey for accurately identifying English learner students to determine if it is under-identifying or over-identifying potential students (i.e., number of "false positives" and "false negatives").
 - Compare efficacy of different instruments across districts, particularly in states without a statewide home language survey (where districts are allowed to construct their own instrument).
 - Enhance the survey by asking questions about the students' degree of English-language exposure.
 - If applicable, could suggest additional alternatives or measures rather than reliance on the home language survey alone.

“Right now the biggest challenge we have is funding/money,” said Melissa Jelinek, ELL coordinator for Columbus Public Schools in Nebraska, where Cargill meats is a major employer. “Our current population is large enough that we are needing to make some changes (staffing, programming, materials, etc.) to close the achievement gap, but we are not large enough to receive the type of funding districts that are larger than us do. We are stuck somewhere in the middle! It’s hard knowing we need to make some big changes for our students and not being able to make those big changes.”⁵

Rural ESL teachers are isolated geographically but also professionally — they have few opportunities to meet with each other, which makes recruitment more difficult, according to writers who were involved in a two-year professional development project and who describe teaching ELLs in a rural Minnesota town called Hansen.⁶

And if a district pays teachers for performance, that too “seems likely to threaten the motivation of qualified teachers to work in rural areas since it may take at least five years for English learners to reach academic language proficiency,” wrote Claudia Peralta, author of *Education for English Language Learners in Rural Idaho*. Peralta is an associate professor in the Department of Literacy at Boise State University.⁷

Finally, rural teachers’ students tend to be poor. In 2012, 15 percent of the nation’s population lived in poverty and poverty rates were higher in rural than in urban areas, both among the overall population (17.8 percent) and among children (26.7 percent). As with overall poverty, deep poverty — a subsistence level of less than \$1,000 a month for a family of four — among children is more acute in rural areas (12.2 percent) than in urban areas (9.2 percent). While the South is still home to much of the nation’s most severe poverty, impoverishment has grown across the Midwest and the Northeast.⁸

There are advantages to being in the country. The Hansen staff pointed out that small schools are safer with lower levels of violent crime and discipline problems. Extracurricular participation is greater. Teachers have greater autonomy and, being more connected to the community, rural teachers are in a better position to help immigrant families connect.

Connection is everything. In a list of best practices, Montana’s district guide for ELLs suggests “as much as possible, include linguistically diverse students in all classroom activities.” Further, “as these students should have access to curriculum, they also should have access to counseling, extracurricular activities, supplemental programs such as Title I and Title III, gifted education, etc.”⁹

Hispanic non-metro population growth

- Between April 2000 and 2010, while the overall non-metro population grew 4.5 percent in the 2000s, the non-metro Hispanic population increased 45 percent.
- On a percentage basis, Hispanic population growth was significantly higher throughout much of the Southeast, Midwest and Northwest.
- Population dispersion was much more prevalent among non-metro Hispanics. Their population grew by 42 percent in the 433 completely rural, nonadjacent counties.
- Hispanic populations more than doubled in most non-metro counties in the South and in many otherwise slow-growing or declining sections of the nation’s heartland.
- In 228 non-metro counties, overall population loss was avoided because Hispanic population growth more than offset non-Hispanic population decline.
- In many of these otherwise-declining non-metro counties, Hispanic population growth was fueled by the demand for low-skilled food-processing and manufacturing workers in the 2000s.
- Expanding service-sector jobs also attracted Hispanics into scenic areas in the West and elsewhere.

Montana’s guide also suggests pairing language-minority students with English-speaking students as class companions, bus, playground and/or cafeteria helpers.

The guide warns against assigning ELLs to special education classes because of their lack of English proficiency. It recommends a process developed by a rural district in Anchorage, Alaska, “Screening, Interventions, and Pre-Referral Procedures for Limited English Proficient (LEP) Students.”¹⁰

The guide recommends against advising English-only at home. “Students who have a strong background in language and literacy in their first language acquire academic language proficiency in a second language more easily than students without academic language or literacy skills in their first language. As part of the school’s overall effort to promote cultural pluralism and confidence in the student’s ability to learn, the student’s knowledge of another language and culture should be honored.”

Cultural diversity isn’t always embraced. The Hansen writers said Midwesterners’ definition of diversity often is having both a Lutheran and a Catholic church in the same town.

When the Hansen team began its ELL project, the elementary school’s service model was to pull students out of class, usually math, science and social studies. Though the ELL population was increasing quickly, veteran mainstream teachers still looked to ESL teachers to “fix the problem” by removing ELLs from the classroom until they spoke English fluently.

Among their successes was to cluster ELL students in mainstream classrooms rather than having them distributed equally across a grade. With fewer classrooms to cover, the ESL teacher could stay in a class longer, thus establishing a better relationship with the mainstream teacher. They streamlined paperwork and increased parent involvement with an ELL family night and by having interpreters on hand for parent-teacher conferences. They opened each faculty meeting with a five-minute “information blast” with a suggested technique or cultural fact, made binders for each staff member that contained ESL-related articles and maintained an ESL bulletin board in the staff lounge.

School staff also rallied in Noel, Mo., which has fewer than 2,000 residents, most of whom — 1,600 — work at the Tyson Foods Inc., chicken processing plant. Beginning in the 1990s, Latinos came, then Pacific Islanders, followed by refugees from Myanmar and Africa. Somalis have had a particularly hard time of it; there was a tire-slashing incident in Noel, and there was a similar incident March 2014 in Fort Morgan, Colo., where most are employed by Cargill, another meat processor. Noel Mayor John Lafley told a journalist that Tyson wanted more housing units built, but he’s concerned about the town’s infrastructure — the sewage plant now is at 80 percent capacity.¹¹

Lafley said poverty looms large for the meatpackers — 90 percent of Noel’s students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. But, he said, the town can’t afford to provide social services.

Rural poverty

- In 2012, 15 percent of the nation’s population lived in poverty, and poverty rates were higher in rural than in urban areas both among the overall population and among children.
- In 2012, both overall rural poverty (15.7 percent) and rural child poverty (26.7 percent) were near their previous 1986 peaks.
- Deep poverty — having cash income below half of one’s poverty threshold — among children is more acute in rural areas (12.2 percent) than in urban areas (9.2 percent).
- A factor in rural poverty was rapid growth in Hispanic populations, which tend to be poorer, particularly in California, Nevada, Arizona, Colorado and Georgia.

“We are the government agency in town,” said Noel Elementary School Principal Angie Brewer. “People come here if they need shoes, if they need clothes, if they’re hungry. We send 37 backpacks home every weekend with kids that just don’t have enough food.”

In Columbus Junction, Iowa, a Tyson pork processing plant employs a high number of Latinos and now, Burmese. A quarter of the students in that community are ELLs who have had an impact on Columbus Community Schools, according to Superintendent Rich Bridenstine. He said the students are behind linguistically and academically.¹²

But immigrants also have a positive influence, he said. “The immediate benefit is financial. Without our Hispanics and coming Burmese, we would be a school district probably around 300 or 400, looking at consolidation.” Columbus is currently the largest district in its county.

Besides the per-pupil money each child brings to the district, “We are blessed with a tapestry of diversity,” Bridenstine said. “There are a lot of people in the community that treasure that.”

Garden City, Kan., is a community that made the conscious decision to embrace foreign newcomers with a social services safety net: food banks, shelters and English classes. Since the first slaughterhouse was built in 1980, immigrants have doubled the population to about 30,000 and they now are the majority.¹³ Tyson’s Garden City plant pays \$13.50 an hour to start and three-quarters of the students get free or reduced-price lunches. But Garden City is seeing the results of that original embrace. While their parents still work on the kill floors, students have — and some take — the option of high school graduation in three years, heading straight for Garden City Community College.

Mexican-Americans were in the first wave, then Southeast Asians and South Americans. Current refugees are from Somalia and Myanmar. Many children start out at an elementary school where they are briefly separated until they assimilate a bit. Some were born in refugee camps and even basic plumbing is a shock.

Fort Morgan in Colorado also has a center for incoming refugee students, MENA: Migrant Education Newcomer Academy.¹⁴ Mark Rangel, its first director, said that besides migrant workers, the influx of

Recommendations from ‘What Works’

- Teach a set of academic vocabulary words intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities.
- Integrate oral and written English language instruction into content-area teaching.
- Provide regular, structured opportunities to develop written language skills.
- Provide small-group instructional intervention to students struggling in areas of literacy and English language development.

National Statistics

- Since the first biennial report for school year 2002-03, there has been just a 7 percent increase in the number of kindergarten through high school (K-12) LEP student identified in the United States, remaining fairly steady at about 4.65 million in school year 2009-10.
- In both school years 2008-09 and 2009-10, the native language of about 80 percent of ELL students was Spanish.
- In school year 2008-09, 1,940,279 students served under Title III nationwide made progress in learning English and 908,604 students attained proficiency.
- In school year 2008-09, the most common native languages were Spanish (3,544,713), Vietnamese (85,252), Chinese (68,743), Arabic (51,585) and Hmong (46,311).

immigrants really began in 2006 with a few families and has grown to 10 percent of the student population. “The impact on schools was not having bilingual staff in a number of different languages that could assist students and families. “MENA opened in the fall of 2011. Student service delivery is dependent on how fast they become more proficient in English so they can transfer to an ELL class in their home school. This depends so much on each student’s native language literacy.”

Rangel said Fort Morgan’s reaction to the immigrants varies. “Being in such a small community, it does pose a different set of challenges than a larger community. The school district has been very proactive in serving the increased immigrant and refugee population.”

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Endnotes

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