High School Reform and English Language Learner Students:

Perspectives from the Field

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HIGH SCHOOL REFORM AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER STUDENTS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

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FOREWORD

There could hardly be a population group that could benefit more from high school reform than English language learners (ELLs). Their burgeoning presence, almost overnight in some areas, and the multitude of their needs as they strive to reach literacy in English, make them a prime target audience for any new high school reform that is gaining public attention.

Why is high school reform so exquisitely needed by ELLs? The press for services or reforms in curriculum, structure, and assessment is paramount as ELLs struggle—in increasing numbers—to meld into the U.S. workplace of tomorrow and/or college life.

This challenge can seem insurmountable when weighed against the ELL's raw needs. Many arrive from war-torn countries and suffer from the ravages of poverty and war. Others may have been relatively well-schooled in the native countries, but there is no mechanism to weigh their transcripts against U.S. coursework to see what they know and have achieved. And if they cannot speak English, they may feel—and be—doomed before they begin, consigned to low tracks, low expectations, and a belief that reform is for "someone else's kids."

In this document, we will look at current high school reform efforts and how they do or do not interface with ELLs. We begin by noting the past.

The history of high school reform in the United States has been marked by fits and starts: a decade (such as the 1980s) charged with a spate of multiple initiatives followed by another decade in which those initiatives existed but seemed to fall dormant as other reforms became preeminent.

A thorough and exemplary review of selected high school reform strategies, written by Jennifer Husbands and Stacy Beese for the Aspen Program on Education, guides much of the discussion that follows. Husbands and Beese point to five current main approaches to high school reform. All are imaginative, all have different goals, and all are critiqued for different strengths and weaknesses.

Small schools

One reform that has enjoyed considerable attention, as well as the heady support of generous funders, has been the small schools movement. The optimum size of a small school has been debated, with some researchers advocating a few hundred students, the National Association of Secondary School Principals recommending no more than 600 students, and other reformers believing that high schools should be no larger than five hundred students (Fine, 1998, p. 3; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996, p. 46; Meier, 1995, p. 117). In general, a number between 600 and 900 seems agreeable.

Small schools, in this reform wave, can be categorized in three ways: freestanding, schools-within-a building, or schools-within-a-school. Freestanding small schools may or may not have charter status; schools-within-a-building are marked by their thematic focus; and schools-within-schools are more dependent on the host school in a type of

symbiotic relationship. Of the three, freestanding small schools have the most autonomy and schools-within-schools have the least.

Many of the characteristics of small schools are exactly the same as those of charter schools. According to Husbands and Beese, they share certain features, all of which are intended to raise student achievement:

- Students and teachers who remain together for more than one year;
- A group of teachers that collaborate and discuss the needs of their students;
- A focus for their efforts that is agreed upon and shared;
- Family involvement of families in the school community;
- Teachers and students who choose to attend the school.

One important theme about small schools that has been brought to the fore in this review is the point that the reduction in school size although necessary, may not be sufficient to bring about school improvement. In fact, other variables may need to be present to improve a school.

Small schools use as their mission the following watchwords:

- Personalization and shared accountability;
- Improved academic performance, particularly for low-income and minority populations;
- Better conditions for teachers.

While the research on small schools is mixed, it appears the small schools have the ability to increase achievement, particularly among low-income, minority youth; and they also can reduce the achievement gaps between students of different socioeconomic or racial backgrounds.

Applied learning

Another approach to high school reform is applied learning, which fell out of favor for a while and is picking up followers at the current time. The federal government gave applied learning a boost in 1990 when, as Husbands and Beese write, "[they] mandated that vocational and academic programs be combined (p. 11). Applied learning is built around four key concepts:

- Richer, better sequenced curricula;
- Facilitative instruction;
- Increased collaboration and coordination among academic and vocational teachers;
- More attention to the skills and knowledge students need to transition effectively from school to work and college.

The schema that guides applied learning has to do with skills: schools must prepare students to succeed in the contemporary economy, schools must provide experience learning in context, and schools must address equity gaps between college-bound and vocational students (Husbands and Beese, p. 12).

Applied learning is heavily vocational, with job site visits, job shadowing, internships, and part-time employment as part of the educative experience.

Previously, these efforts have been criticized as divorced from the school's larger reform efforts (Husbands and Beese, p. 12).

Overall, studies about applied learning have been quite positive, with some showing that school-to-work programs improve students' attendance, grades, and graduation rates (Husbands and Beese, p. 15).

Professional development

The third major high school reform strategy has revolved around professional development/curriculum and instruction. This approach is geared for teachers and is based on the belief that with greater amounts of professional development, a greater rise in student achievement will result (Husbands and Beese, p. 20).

The professional development approach does not come unaccompanied by difficulties. Some teachers and principals consider it too much work (Husbands and Beese, p. 24).

Examples of the professional development approach can be found in the work of the San Diego City Schools, implementation of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) standards at the mathmatics classroom level, the International Baccalaureate Program, and K-16 "Building Strategies," a state program intended to increase articulation between high school and college curricula.

Youth development

The fourth approach to high school reform has a long history. Youth development had its wellsprings several decades ago, but regained some of its luster in the late 1980s. In the past decade, youth development has reached a new prominence because of high-profile youth tragedies that have brought about a collective urge for positive, preventive action.

While youth development is a fairly high-profile type of high school reform, it does not have a uniform definition. Instead, as Husbands and Beese point out (2001), the term has become a "catch-all" for all sorts of actions.

Ironically, youth development is based on the failure of earlier prevention programs. While earlier efforts produced an intervention tailored to achieve a particular result, those efforts were largely unsuccessful. Now, something new is on the table: a model called *building assets in youth.* As a result, building assets is a model that is highly preventive, stresses mental and physical well-being, builds self-esteem in adolescents, and lacks much of an academic component.

A huge panoply of reform efforts can fall under youth development, including: restructuring, school-to-work, student voice, and community youth development.

The body of research surrounding this area is, not surprisingly, weak in nature. Researchers are at a loss to ascertain the success of a movement when it doesn't even have a clear definition (Husband and Beese, 2001). The research that has been conducted describes more ephemeral measures than typical scientific research; variables such as:

- Improved self-esteem;
- Improved life skills;

- Increased communication with family;
- Decreased involvement in negative, high risk behaviors;
- Increased academic achievement;
- Decreased psychosocial illnesses such as shyness.

Comprehensive school reform model

Finally, the comprehensive or whole school reform model has become popular recently. This model takes the entire school into its purview, applies a model to it, demands faithful implementation of the model with "experts" from the model developers guiding and controlling the process, and insists on a comprehensive approach that ranges from everything from social services to academics. There are a multitude of research-based models that fall under this rubric.

The problem with comprehensive school reform is that the research is muddy. It falls into two areas: outcome research and implementation research. Since the programs are relatively new, implementation research is dominant. Since much comprehensive school reform is done in K-8 settings, high schools are excluded.

The biggest criticism of comprehensive school reform is that the models, which are said to be "research-based," have in fact a base that is not sturdy enough to maintain their claims of effectiveness.

These five high school reform strategies bear one thing in common: All have strategies that could exert positive effects on the English language learner (ELL) student, but Husbands and Beese do not mention the ELL as a target population for these reforms. Considering the exponentially growing numbers of ELLs (4,000,000 in one recent approximation), current reforms may let an opportunity—and a needy population—slip away. Or they may opt to generously open their doors in an inclusive movement that nets success for everyone.

A cautionary note prior to considering the new high school reforms and the ELL: Some problems already seem pernicious and long-standing. First, as the English language learner (ELL) population continues to burgeon, staff anxiety can grow in turn as they confront work for which they are ill prepared. Research on high schools shows that little room exists in the comprehensive high school for those students who do not fit into a prescribed curriculum and who are not accomplished test-takers.

Nowhere is this more pronounced than with ELLs consigned to large comprehensive high schools. Their entry point into high schools may occur early in the high school experience or months from the graduation point. They may have attended fine schools in their native countries, or be war refugees with significant physical problems that are the result of war, poverty, and malnutrition.

These students often enter schools that are not prepared for their needs. Most high schools are large and their structure does not allow a sufficient number of carefully constructed classes earmarked for the ELL who enters at different learning points. While they may need lower-level skills quite desperately (learning to write their addresses in English is one example), they also need to begin to gain some understanding of decoding content so that

they can consider themselves on the path to literacy. Most American high schools, to date, have lacked the resources and the know-how to see these students through to the kind of success that ends in high school graduation.

Everyone involved with the education of an ELL functions under pressure: the student, the parents who want school success for their child, and the classroom teachers who struggle with expanding their basic literacy tasks to the content covered in the ELL's other classes—because other content-area teachers lack linguistic backgrounds and need strong professional development to work with ELLs.

These concerns were addressed by the Council of Chief State School Officers when it commissioned a set of four papers for their CCSSO English Language Learners and High School Reform Forum in July, 2003. Each author addressed the problem of the ELL in high school and how the ELL might fit into high school reform efforts through a different lens: the perspective of a classroom teacher, school professional development coordinator, a district representative, and a former director of ESL/bilingual programs at the state level.

The Council of Chief State School Officers hopes that this packet of papers will be useful to the senior policymakers who will use them and disseminate them to their staff. □

SUMMARY OF FOUR PRACTITIONER PAPERS

To gain different perspectives on the issue of high school reform and English language learners, the Council of Chief State School Officers commissioned four papers: each author bringing a different lens to bear on the topic. The authors provided the perspectives of a classroom teacher, school professional development coordinator, a district representative, and a former director of ESL/bilingual programs at the state level.

Peter Martin begins his paper, "Supporting English Language Learners with Low Literacy Skills in the High School Classroom," by introducing the reader to two students, Diego and Roberto. The reader follows the two youngsters throughout the paper—a device that makes their dilemma as ELLs vivid and poignantly real—as they try different strategies their teachers present to them, all for the purpose of learning English within the prescribed period of time they have during high school.

Diego and Roberto's peers— and the high school that Martin describes—are not ideal by any means. In fact, they reflect a view of English language learners (ELLs) at the high school level that emphasizes how teachers struggle to meet the multifaceted needs of ELLs with varying degrees of success. Martin points out problems that seem insoluble: the student who may be relatively unschooled who suddenly confronts a high school curriculum that is based on the assumption that high school students have approximately 9 years of study in American public schools. ELLs who have recently arrived in this country must have teachers who have a repertoire of strategies to help them attain sufficient literacy to graduate from high school.

Lower-level and higher-level literacy skills, Martin points out, dictate these strategies. It may be, for example, that Diego and Roberto need to work on word separation and letter formation, not on writing stories in English, which might frustrate them too much. But Martin observes that this is a controversial area of literacy; some believe that language should not be separated into individual skill areas but taught as an inseparable whole.

Martin discusses storytelling and higher order thinking as processes that help students decode, an important part of their literacy development and integral to their ability to analyze stories or complex information. He emphasizes that lower-level literacy skills are essential, but he argues for analytical skills that "certain students may have acquired without script."

Storytelling has a long history, both formal and informal. It is wrapped in tradition and has been a method wherein a family member can transmit information to the next generation or the one after that. It is also a construct within which individuals can construct their own meaning, using an unfamiliar language or their native language.

Martin points out the inadequacy of current practices with ELLs in the high school setting—and how essential it is to

have the goal of students bridge the literacy gap between the native language and English. He criticizes high schools for not having to provide the context "in which to meet the needs of those students who are far from being able to access the curriculum." High schools, in actuality, have the ability to work with ELLs in a perfunctory manner and not allow them to graduate. It is difficult indeed, as all four authors of these papers point out, to learn English within the circumscribed period of time that constitutes high school, particularly when students might enter at any point.

If a combination of lower-order skills and higher-order skills are used so that students master basic skill areas, and yet are on their way to mastery of "meaning-making" in English, a great deal has been accomplished in terms of the students' literacy. They have been taught two sets of fundamentals that with further work can convey them into becoming fully literate and participating citizens.

Bobbi Houtchens takes a different view, that of a classroom teacher. Her paper, "English Learners and High School Reform: A Classroom Teacher's Perspective," offers a classroom teacher's view of what a high school could be—a school propelled by "what if" rather than "we can't." In the exemplary, inner-city school painted by Houtchens, a dying neighborhood receives an injection of contemporary life through the sheer presence and vitality of the ideal high school. And it is worth mentioning that the campus itself blends into the neighborhood but in an attractive fashion, signaling the positive activity that occurs within its walls.

Although the high school that Houtchens describes is a huge comprehensive high school with pronounced diversity and poverty among its student population of 3100 (79% Latino, 12% Black, 9% White, and 1% Asian, South Pacific Islander, and Native American, with 90% qualifying for free or reduced lunch), staff find imaginative ways to collaborate, using a middle-school team model to propel their work. One class for English language learners spills over to another class with different methods and strategies in an almost seamless way.

Reform, in Houtchen's view, is accomplished through strong collaboration and teamwork, along with maintaining a focus on language and literacy. Language and literacy could be considered the currency of the school, as each period of the school day is suffused with language-related activities that are directly responsive to the varied needs of the ELLs who make up the majority of the school's population. Since they come to school with a variety of needs and at a variety of levels in their ability to speak English as well as their acumen in their native languages, they are a challenging population for their teachers.

The pressure is on, as Houtchens notes, since these students have three to four years (or less) to learn English before graduating from high school. Learning English becomes a high-stakes endeavor for students, and staff at the ideal high school feel their mission quite keenly. Graduation from high school is the prize that not everyone typically attains in similar high schools, but it is the bedrock for students' futures.

Teachers, no matter what their teaching strategies, put the politics of teaching English language learners aside to concentrate on the immediate and far-reaching needs of their students. They take their students from the place where they were when they entered the classroom and move forward from there. This means that teachers must be mindful of students' health problems brought on by disease, poverty, or war in their native countries, and teachers must work with health and social service personnel to help their students become as fit as possible to accept their daunting learning challenges.

Teachers, in Houtchens' ideal school, never run out of strategies. Every class is sensibly and well planned. The high school's administration is on board and backs the language approach that suffuses the school. A whole host of teaching methods—from writing and performing skits to oral storytelling—are part of the teacher's repertoire, ready to be used in the right circumstances with students.

There are classes for new arrivals, classes for students who have been in the United States for three to six years, and classes for mainstreamed college preparatory junior English students. The challenges presented by these three groups are immense, demanding that teachers function as a team to solve problems as they emerge, not letting them fester, take root, and flourish in a burst of negative energy. Most important, teachers realize that while their students may look alike in the classroom, their needs are very different. In the ideal high school postulated by Houtchens, their needs are met and staff are successful.

Mary Ramirez takes on the role of the district in encouraging ELL success through a distinct set of enabling policies that allow high schools to reconfigure themselves. In her paper, "ELLs In Small High Schools: Leveraging District Resources," she points out that without strong and supportive district policies, English language learners (ELLs) are left to a haphazard patchwork of individual schools and classroom teachers. These schools and teachers each are trying their best to deal with an unprecedented number of ELLs in U.S. classrooms as well as a dizzying array of languages, all at different levels of proficiency (one approximation places the number of ELLs at 4,000,000).

Ramirez points to the power of an enlightened superintendent and school board. She observes that teachers and building principals look to the central office and hope for progressive policies that will ease their difficult work.

Ramirez also observes that nowhere is this reform more necessary than at the high school level. In her paper, she uses the metaphor of the formation of an ideal small high school to carry out her ideas about program planning, collaboration with the community, teacher/team collaboration, and a cooperative administration that all work together to enable a new school. This new school, Ramirez writes, is much more suitable to the needs of ELLs (although admission is governed by lottery, a significant portion of students seeking admission are ELLs).

It is more conducive to ELLs because it is small, offering the opportunity for personalized instruction and small group instruction. It allows a wide variety of

classes, each tailored to meet the ELLs' varying needs. Finally, it recognizes the tremendous pressure under which ELLs must work, making up in a few (or less) years whatever they do not know in English to become literate enough to graduate from high school. This is a tall order, but Ramirez believes it can be accomplished with the right mix of ingredients: supportive, cooperative staff; a savvy blend of public relations and involvement of central office at the appropriate time; a clear articulation of standards and coursework that responds to those standards; culturally relevant assessments (the assessment department agrees to advocate with the state for a variety of assessments, including portfolios, and to examine the cultural content of each test item).

Finally, although it is a practical gesture, it is also symbolic that the new small school has its own entrance, its own classrooms that are specially configured for the new way of teaching, and its own principal. It shares larger facilities, such as the cafeteria, gym, and library, with the large high school with which it used to be an integral part.

The metaphor that Ramirez suggests indicates that through resourceful, clever planning, and nimble, proactive movement, high school reform indeed can happen, but it must happen in a cooperative setting and through intensive collaboration.

Maria Medina Seidner tackles the role of the state in her paper, "Restructuring the American High School Leaving No ELL Behind: The Role of the State."

She discusses the state's role in ensuring that every ELL receives the best and most appropriate services possible. She points to elementary schools, where the achievement gap is still present but narrowing, and to middle schools, where structural changes as well as the implementation of standards are netting positive results.

But high schools, Seidner says, are the high stakes environments for ELLs. The recent reform movement has done little to change high schools, which in fact have proven themselves remarkably resistant to change. The current differences at the high school level of today versus high schools of previous decades are mostly state-imposed, she observes, resulting in higher standards for all required core subjects, an increase in the number and level of academic courses needed for graduation, and the rigor of state assessments which must be passed. Currently, in one-third of the states, students must pass an exit examination to graduate from high school.

Seidner points out that these initiatives have not increased graduation rates. She makes a case for approaching the dilemma of high schools in a manner that does not increase the rigor of courses and the requirements to graduate (this works only for the same students who have been successful in the past).

While states should exert a leadership role in high school reform, she reports that an informal phone survey revealed one in 15 states did so. Instead, large urban districts were the initiators of reform as well as aggressive fund-seekers, but state departments of education (who agreed they should take a leadership role on high school reform)

said they could not do so because of budget and personnel reductions. However, in four states—California, Rhode Island, Maine, and Vermont—reform strategies have been remarkably consistent. This consistency and the way five themes emerge across states, is a truly amazing consequence of five states independently engaged in high school reform with a particular emphasis on ELLs. All of these states understood that reform is a long-term process.

These states also understood the pressure under which ELLs must function in order to graduate from high school. Regardless of their prior level of schooling, they need to learn English in a brief period of time as they also undergo a familiarization process with American culture. And they confront high schools not prepared to deliver academic instruction to them.

Curriculum materials in most content areas are woefully lacking for ELLs. Content-area teachers themselves lack linguistic skills to match the needs of ELLs and need intensive professional development. Yet high schools are expected to graduate high numbers of ELLs without state intervention, including passing exit assessments on academic subjects in English.

States have many roles and responsibilities to assume with high schools to ensure that the education of ELLs meets as many of the needs of staff and students alike. The good news that Seidner delivers is that it is well within states' power to establish some best practices that can have both short-term and long-term benefits for students.

SUPPORTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS WITH LOW LITERACY SKILLS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

PETER MARTIN

INTRODUCTION

Diego and Roberto

Diego is sixteen years old and recently immigrated to the United States from a small village in El Salvador. He has not yet learned to speak much English, struggles when asked to copy information in Spanish from the blackboard, and generally makes few attempts to decode what he sees. He has great difficulty writing words in a straight line, due in part to the hardship of maintaining consistent letter size. When he has to write his last name, he hesitates at a certain spot, unsure whether to write a 'v' or a 'b'. When he mistakenly opts for the 'b,' he sometimes uses the upper, and sometimes the lower-case form. When asked, he readily admits that he really doesn't know how to read and write. Before arriving in the U.S. he had a total of two years of schooling. He now finds himself in the 9th grade, and is bound to be retained. So far he has failed all of his classes.

Roberto is a bit older, although his exact age is unclear. Depending on the occasion, he cites his age as anywhere from seventeen to twenty-one. Like Diego, he has only recently arrived, from a different Salvadoran village. Also like Diego, he speaks no English; he reads and writes little in Spanish. When asked to copy from the board, he does try to sound out the letters. The process is ultimately successful, but so laborious that he cannot make much sense of what he reads. When writing, he has difficulties separating one word from another. In El Salvador, he was in school for various stretches of time over a total of four years. He, too, has been placed in the 9th grade, and he, too, does not have much of a chance to progress to 10th grade anytime soon.

Attempting to meet their needs: A Spanish literacy class

Both Diego and Roberto were placed in a newly formed experimental Spanish literacy class in an urban high school that has a large majority of English language learners (ELLs) from low-income homes. The class was created at the initiative of a group of ESL teachers and support staff to help address a problem that has consistently plagued the school: English language learners with little prior schooling are placed in the 9th grade facing a five-year high school plan due to their age. These students are then generally expected to be able to access the curriculum with the support of a grade-appropriate ESL program that assumes some level of native language literacy. As a consequence of these practices, they fail their classes and repeat the 9th grade until one day they simply do not return to school and are for the most part not heard from again.

In response, teachers started a Spanish literacy class to address some of the most pressing needs of Hispanic ELLs who are failing in part due to insufficient prior schooling. The students who were struggling the most were assessed individually for their Spanish literacy skills. Those who were determined to be reading and writing below a third grade level were placed into this class. While this group of students still presented a considerable heterogeneity of needs, they all shared what was effectively a common exclusion from the curriculum—ESL included—that seemed to guarantee their educational failure. While students such as Roberto were able to decode and encode more easily than Diego, none of them ultimately was able to use reading and writing in any language as tools for meaning-making.

Given that high school programs are intended for students who have been using literacy as a tool for thinking and understanding increasingly complex information for at least five or six years, the degree of discrepancy between relatively unschooled ESL students and the demands of the curriculum is indeed staggering. One issue emerges as critical: defining what we mean when we talk about literacy in high school. A consequence of that discussion will become a consideration of the skills that students like Diego and Roberto already have and those they will need to acquire.

I begin by briefly reviewing some of the pertinent literature for an understanding of some of the issues and practices relevant to the literacy education of Diego, Roberto, and their classmates, and I examine their literacy class with these concepts in mind. This literature review then serves as a basis for suggested approaches that may provide a beginning for helping ELLs with low literacy skills increase their chances of effectively engaging in a school education.

RESEARCH: LITERACY ISSUES

Low literacy and educational failure

While there is considerable evidence of shortcomings in the education of English language learners in U.S. schools (Chamot, A. U., Keatley, C., Mazur, A., Anstrom, K., Marquez, X., and Adonis, M., 2000; Lockwood, 2000; Watts-Taffe and Truscott, 2000), the problem is greatly exacerbated when students have a low literacy level in their first language. It has been found that these students are tremendously disadvantaged by the sheer number of challenges they confront when they arrive in this country. These range from the need to acquire basic reading, writing, and English skills and learn unfamiliar content, to negotiating the myriad economic, cultural, social, and emotional issues that they suddenly face (Short, 1998).

Consequently, it has been found that a lack of literacy skills has a significant impact on attendance, motivation, and generally the ability to succeed academically (Padron, Waxman, Brown, and Powers, 2000). Some authors have found that the degree of first language literacy as well as the extent and kind of previous schooling greatly affects second language acquisition (Burt and Keenan, 1998; Collier, 1995). Consequently, it appears that the area where students' needs are the most glaringly obvious—namely learning to function in English—is itself especially affected by an inability to read and write in the first language.

Defining literacy: Lower and higher level skills

One reason for the centrality of literacy in the negotiation of other skill areas is that literacy itself covers a particularly vast array of cognitive sub-skills. Indeed, the difficulties of defining literacy in terms of the needs of Diego and Roberto are mirrored by disagreements over the definition of the term in the professional literature (Roberts, 1994). In some cases, authors have defined it in terms of the lower-level, mechanical aspects of reading and writing, viewing literacy as mostly confined to the negotiation of print (Jimenez, 1994).

In Diego and Roberto's school, this equation of illiteracy with a lack of decoding and encoding skills combined with insufficient familiarity with the basic conventions of print initially led the

teachers of their literacy class to define their needs exclusively in these basic terms. Getting them more acquainted with print, it appeared, would ultimately provide them with the key to read, write, and understand texts. In this view, Diego needed to work first on his letter formation and Roberto first on word separation for them to become competent writers.

It has been pointed out, however, that this process of dissecting literacy into individual pieces or skill areas does not allow us to address the process of writing and reading as a whole (Mehan, 1997). Learning how to distinguish upper and lower-case letters and place them in a straight line on a piece of paper is not on its own what will turn Diego into a proficient writer.

Other authors have in turn emphasized the sociocultural and meaning-making dimensions of literacy, presenting reading and writing as irreducible processes that combine lower-level mechanical and higher order thinking skills (Masgoret and Gardner, 1999; Calderon et al., 1997). Any attempt at helping functionally illiterate high school students catch up as much as possible with their grade-level peers therefore has to address both the act of formulating and deciphering text as well as the process of organizing and interpreting complex thoughts.

Building on existing skills: Storytelling and higher order thinking

One area that appears to have been largely overlooked in the research literature concerns the development of those story comprehension and interpretive skills that are not connected inherently to script. Indeed, it can be argued that a common mistake may be to assume that students who cannot decode also cannot analyze stories or complex information. While the definition of literacy is understood increasingly as inherently complex, illiteracy seems still to be largely defined as the inability to work with script. While a lack of lower-level mechanical skills is certainly crucial in keeping students from learning in our schools, it may be that we overlook analytical skills that certain students may have acquired without script and that already give them a foundation from which to further develop higher level skills once script becomes more accessible.

Here some authors have argued that familiarity with storytelling—whether oral or written—allows the individual to establish schema that can guide subsequent processing of information in other contexts (Bassan-Diamond et al., 1995; Hudelson, 1994). The very universality of storytelling as a pedagogical tool across cultures and historical eras suggests something innate that establishes narrative as a vehicle for the internalization and presentation of information (Hudelson, 1994). One may infer that an individual who has grown up hearing, telling, and discussing oral stories possesses higher order literacy skills than a student without such experience.

Determining the literacy needs and skills of Diego and Roberto should not end with a simple inventory of their abilities to decode and encode words and sentences. Neglecting to investigate the individual student's repertoire of oral stories, his ability to identify the moral of a tale, and his ability to model certain narrative structures represents a failure on our part to build on what the students may already know.

Literacy and language transfer

As was the case in Diego and Roberto's school, high school programs for recent immigrants tend to begin with ESL classes, assuming that any future learning in the school language must by definition be prepared for in that same language. Traditionally, Diego would have faced the prospect of rapidly acquiring the skills necessary to encode, decode, paragraph, introduce, conclude, infer, and support in a language he does not know. Ironically perhaps, fairly exhaustive research has affirmed and reaffirmed that all literacy skills—whether lower-or higher-order—are not language-specific. Instead, they are transferred from one language to another, providing a common cognitive base (Krashen, 2000; Cummins, 1999; Collier, 1995).

Research has indicated that given this common foundation, high school students in particular may ultimately develop stronger higher-order skills in both languages if they receive relevant instruction in their first language (Chamot et al., 2000). In a study of 9th grade ESL students, it was found that students' ability to read beyond the decoding level and interpret texts presupposed previous exposure to similar activities in their first language (Langer, 1997).

It follows, then, that Diego, Roberto and their classmates—with so much to catch up on in terms of knowledge of print and understanding of text—will have a greater chance to approach grade-level skills if they are taught in Spanish than if they receive instruction in English only. However, it should be noted that subsequent transfer of these skills from Spanish into their emergent English is by no means inevitable (Jimenez, 1994). The bridges between the languages need to be provided through explicit instruction.

Inadequacy of current practices

It seems that the focus on common curricula and universal standards has to a large extent meant that high schools do not provide for themselves the context in which to meet the needs of those students who simply cannot access the curriculum. It can be argued that by expecting students to bring a certain skill level and educational background to high school, educators prepare themselves for a prototypical student body that may not take into account the particular needs of the actual student (Thomas and Bainbridge, 2001).

Given that the prototypical student entering high school has had nine years of schooling—although perhaps in another language—lower-level literacy skills are generally not the focus of instruction (Jimenez, 1994). Much academic content and problem solving therefore remains inaccessible to students whose skills do not match those of the prototype. For teachers, a consequence appears to be that they frequently do not feel personally responsible for the education of these students because of the excessive discrepancy in levels.

A number of researchers have concluded that much of the problem in the instruction of English language learners with low-level skills rests in the fact that high school teachers are not adequately prepared to meet their particular needs (Padron et al., 2000; Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., and Clark, L. A., 1999). Not fitting the curriculum in terms of the skills they bring with them upon entering high school, and taught by teachers who do not know how to teach the skills

they need most urgently, students like Diego and Roberto are not given a chance to succeed academically.

IN PRACTICE: DESIGNING A FIRST LANGUAGE LITERACY CLASS

Spanish literacy class: General description

The new Spanish literacy class for these students faced the challenge of addressing these multiple issues within the context of a heterogeneous group of students whose literacy levels ranged from having hardly any sense of print or narrative structure at all (as in the case of Diego) to having a very basic sense of the written medium and oral narrative knowledge that had never been explicitly connected to reading and writing (as was the case for Roberto).

Through a process of trial and error, the teachers of the class put together a Spanish language curriculum that focused on the gradual introduction of basic skills (including spelling, sentence structure, and paragraphing) and journal writing in the context of a larger project where students had to produce a collection of narratives about their own childhood memories. These stories varied greatly in length between students and between the beginning and the end of the semester. While some students ended up developing narratives that were fairly complex and ultimately legible, others never quite managed to move past a very basic level. Over the course of the class, Roberto's stories reached several pages in length and contained clear introductions, conclusions, and main ideas; whereas Diego's final narratives remained short and hard to decipher. Yet even he ended up managing to establish a minimal structure and narrative coherence.

Given the range of initial skills, success was measured ultimately on this level of narrative structure. While students differed in the encoding skills they possessed when entering the class, they shared a common inability to write texts that were constructed with an end-result in mind. By the end of the class all students were able to plan a narrative, identifying its various structural elements, and all could produce final drafts that had clearly recognizable introductions, bodies, and conclusions; featured definite settings and characters; and contained at the very least attempts at conflict definitions, climaxes, and resolutions. Progress was assessed by measuring each completed story against a rubric outlining the various elements that had been defined school-wide as standards for personal narratives. While expectations in terms of the complexity of the students' writing had to be calibrated relative to their beginning level, students' ultimate understanding of what constitutes a narrative and what approach is necessary for the production of successful texts was expected to be at a high school level, so as to ensure that they would be better prepared to complete high school-level work.

Throughout the project students were presented with model narratives, ranging from published autobiographical vignettes to folk tales to student work. While the folk tales originated from different sources and traditions—in order to present both familiar and unfamiliar stories—the personal vignettes came from a collection of childhood memories by Carmen Lomas Garza entitled En Mi Familia. The collection consists of a variety of illustrated descriptions of settings and episodes taken from the author's childhood in Mexico. These were especially useful as models since they dealt with subjects that were often familiar to the students, were short and easily accessible, and were accompanied by pictures that were both highly eloquent and easily

imitated. What was important was that the various texts that were used were authentic and written in simple language at a cognitive level appropriate for a teenage audience.

For the most part, these texts were read aloud by the teacher to ensure comprehension, although students were encouraged to read along and at times read independently. These stories were discussed at length for meaning as well as for structure. Success in reading comprehension was measured by the complexity of the discussions and the fact that they began to deal increasingly with structural and thematic aspects of the literature. Teacher-made assessments were modeled after English-language equivalents given to non-ESL students in their English classes.

Literacy for accessing the curriculum: Content standards, higher and lower skills

Throughout the course a major difficulty for the teachers was to identify, in detail, a realistic set of goals. An overarching purpose was to help students have a greater chance to access the high school curriculum, so teachers had to focus on the standards that had been put in place school-wide. A challenge, of course, lay in the fact that these standards had not been designed with these particular students in mind.

In particular, two of the school's content standards concern the ability to use written language. Both outline skill areas that students are expected to master throughout the high school curriculum. Both standards are presented below:

1. Regarding basic literacy skills: the ability to understand and follow "the rules of the language in written and oral work" and to choose "the structures of the language appropriate to the purpose, audience, and context of the work." Specifically, this standard mandates that students be proficient in their use of "grammar, paragraph structure, punctuation, sentence construction, spelling, and usage."
2. Regarding higher-level writing: the ability to write narratives that are successful in "establishing a context, creating a point of view, and otherwise developing students' interest." Furthermore, students are, among other items, to establish a plot, setting, and conflict, to create an organizing structure, develop complex characters, select appropriate details, and include various literary devices and strategies.

These standards match what the literature proposes as lower-level and higher-level literacy skills. If the standards are to be emphasized in the design of a high school literacy class, then reading and writing need to be identified as consisting of both basic mechanical skills and more complex analytical and rhetorical abilities. A class that focuses only on decoding and encoding skills would remain disconnected from the wider high school program.

In the case of the Spanish literacy class, using the story-writing project as a context for work on various sub-skills meant that both standards were ultimately targeted. Written language was considered, as much of the literature recommends, as an irreducible whole and teachers centered on its meaning-making functions. Coincidentally, the fact that the class targets the standards gives the class more legitimacy within the school program and may help keep it from being eliminated during the next budget cut.

This focus on the standards and on higher-level skills has allowed most of these students to follow the high school ESL course sequence as it was intended. While it is clear that a semester of remedial instruction does not make up for a possible six-or seven-year lag in formal education, for a number of the students it did mean that they ended up being able to access the ESL curriculum at the level of instruction—keeping them from having to uselessly repeat the same beginning classes over and over again.

Literacy for motivation: Providing for instant gratification and empowerment

Perhaps the most spectacular success of the Spanish literacy class concerned attendance. For much of the first half of the course the teachers saw attendance as the principal measuring stick. While Diego, for example, had been coming to school only sporadically, he attended school regularly soon after the beginning of the course. Whereas it would have been difficult to argue for the usefulness of his spending the days in the back of the class painstakingly copying meaningless sequences of letters in his different classes, the literacy course gave him a chance to be successful at what was demanded of him. The curriculum made it clear that he was the focus.

Furthermore, it became crucial that students were able to engage in meaningful tasks with every new item they learned. When students learned to place periods at the end of their sentences, it was important to point out how this new device would help them express more clearly what they wanted to say. It was important to immediately put into practice the new skill and use it in a new story that was clearer and better than the one that preceded it. It became increasingly clear that while all the students expressed the desire to learn to 'read and write,' their motivation was propelled most of all by a desire to tell their stories—stories that they had for the most part never been asked and never given an opportunity to share. By getting an opportunity to tell their stories, many of the students also gained the realization that some of the experiences they had lived were indeed unique and valuable, thus giving them further encouragement to express themselves effectively. Eventually, the search for meaning and the desire to share created their own motivational dynamic.

Literacy for connecting with one's oral tradition

Throughout the course, as students became increasingly able to write down their stories, it became apparent that some had a sense of organizational structure and rhetorical devices that others did not. Roberto, for instance, relied on certain highly patterned formulas to introduce his stories and recap the main idea upon closing. When approached on this topic, he explained that when he was a child his grandfather would entertain him with stories that they would subsequently speak about. As they did so, Roberto learned the moral of the story as well as the plot and other story features that he did not comprehend in school. When asked to construct his own narratives, Roberto already knew how to establish a plot, setting, and conflict, and how to create an organizing structure—all areas targeted by the standards of his high school. By making him explicitly aware of this connection to his past, and perhaps even by analyzing with him the patterns of his grandfather's stories, we could tap into those literacy skills that this supposedly illiterate student already had.

Diego, on the contrary, continued to struggle with the elaboration of a story as more than a mere sequence of events. When asked, he explained that since his grandmother was alone in raising him and was herself in very poor health, he was not told stories on a regular basis. The course thus had to target giving him through oral narrative those higher-level skills that Roberto had already partly mastered.

Literacy acquisition as an individualized process

Increasingly, as the course proceeded, the instructors came to realize that they were developing not one but, in fact, a variety of curricula and class goals. While superficially all students in the class were deemed functionally illiterate in their first language, they in fact offered a great variety of different literacy sub-skills that presented the teachers with a variety of lower and higher-order literacy needs. The particularities of each student's situation in turn affected the rate of his progress. The fact that skills were worked on in the context of the students' individual narratives allowed teachers to work differently and focus on different areas with Diego than with Roberto. It was important not to design the class around a new type of "prototypical student," but instead to assess carefully each student's individual needs and each student's individual progress relative to the standards and the overall goals of the class.

Literacy across languages and subjects: Making transfer explicit

As far as the purposes of a U.S. high school education are concerned, the goal must be that ELL students become literate and increasingly proficient academically in English. While the empowerment granted to students as they learn to read and write in their first language is unquestionably positive, a literacy class for English language learners realistically cannot end with the first language. Indeed, much of the rationale for providing such native language support is the notion that cognitive skills acquired in the language the student knows best can later be more effectively transferred into the second language as it is being learned. In this case, Spanish literacy acquisition has to lead ultimately to learning to read and write in English.

This is arguably the area where the Spanish literacy class was the least successful. While teachers frequently introduced new concepts using examples in English as well as Spanish—topic sentences, for example, were illustrated with a level-appropriate English passage after having been first introduced in Spanish—such transfer was limited by the boundaries of this one class. Indeed, it would seem that transfer across languages and subject areas could be more effectively approached in the context of a program rather than of a single class. The mistake in this case was to assume that a single, isolated literacy class could provide a foundation that would somehow, magically, extend into other content areas. Consequently, a conscious targeting of literacy skills did not become a focus in the students' other subject areas. Whereas the Spanish literacy class took into account students' lack of prior schooling, their math class, for example, was taught with the assumption that they were literate and had had years of previous academic instruction.

Here, literacy instruction needs to be approached programmatically, with first language literacy instructors, ESL teachers, and other content-area teachers collaborating on the curriculum sufficiently to allow the same concepts to be picked up and reinforced in the student's various

classes. Ultimately, literacy is not a discipline such as history or mathematics, but a set of skills underlying the totality of academic subject areas.

Literacy Teachers: Need for adequate training

This breadth in terms of skills and content area applications calls for a degree of training that was not available to the teachers of the literacy class. While they came from professional and personal backgrounds that prepared them in many pertinent ways, neither was trained specifically for the wide array of tasks at hand. The class brought together two instructors. The principal instructor was an ESL teacher who had previously worked with students with comparable challenges at the school. She was a native speaker of Spanish, and was herself from a rural setting in El Salvador similar to the students. She had come to the United States when she was in middle school, and had a clear understanding of much of what the students were going through. She was also trained in language acquisition and had a good understanding of the school's standards and of the ESL curriculum. She was assisted by a graduate student at a local university who was also bilingual and had an academic and professional background in special education and TESOL. This graduate student had previously taught in a two-way bilingual elementary school. He brought expertise in individualizing instruction and assessing students diagnostically, as well as an understanding of basic literacy development and bilingual enrichment. As a team, the two instructors thus brought qualities and areas of expertise that proved helpful in targeting where the students were personally and academically; viewing their progress within the totality of the high school curriculum; determining and monitoring students' individual needs; and identifying the various building blocks necessary for students' literacy development.

While the teachers were prepared to teach Spanish literacy as a subject, they did not have the expertise or authority to approach literacy programmatically as a set of skill areas that ultimately needed to be applied not in a separate class but in the existing high school-level subject areas. In the end, the lack of training of these teachers as well as other staff limited the impact of the class and kept wider change from occurring.

Literacy Instruction: A collaborative process

Given this need to view literacy instruction on a program level rather than merely on the scope of a single course, collaboration between staff becomes a central issue. Schools where collaboration is part of the established culture can tackle the meaning-making process that is literacy most effectively. It is important for teachers to collaborate for first language literacy instruction to meet its goal of allowing undereducated students to access the high school curriculum.

Literacy Program: Structural Issues

Establishing a coherent literacy program that includes training of all pertinent staff and on-going collaboration to ensure transfer and instructional overlaps presupposes a structural approach not taken in the case of the Spanish literacy class. In some ways, it may be that the very mechanism that allowed the class to be established also guaranteed its structural isolation and limitation of

resources. Indeed, the class was the product of a teacher initiative. It was conceived as an initial experiment to respond to a glaring area of need. In this way, the class reflected strengths and weaknesses general to the school as a whole. The principal of the school has consistently encouraged individual teacher initiatives, in the belief that this will both generate ideas and maintain dynamism among the staff. Furthermore, given the large percentage of students who are considered to have limited proficiency in English in the great majority of classes, English language development is considered the school's entire program. ESL resources and TitleI funds are distributed throughout the school without being earmarked for an identifiable sub-population. On one hand, this means that initiatives geared toward the ELL population are greatly encouraged and supported within established frameworks. Resources are flexible and new classes and projects can be easily started. On the other hand, this flexible whole-school approach also means that the establishment of new programmatic structures for the support of a particular initiative is more difficult to finance and put in place. While the limited resources initially requested made it easier for the administration to give its approval despite the uncertain nature of the endeavor, they also kept the class from expanding to its full potential. As the Spanish literacy class grows from a pilot-level course to an established program in the future, issues of training and collaboration will need to be identified and addressed.

Specifically, training and joint planning opportunities will need to be set aside for the entirety of the targeted students' group of teachers, as well as for guidance counselors and social workers. While middle school collaborative teams are often difficult to establish successfully on the high school level due to structural issues, they seem imperative in the case of students whose needs radically differ from the norm. Possibly, the school needs to establish a distinct program with its own set of teachers whose purpose it is to prepare ESL students with low literacy skills to acquire the abilities necessary to access the mainstream curriculum. For the sake of teamwork and training, the program may need to be set up as separate. Yet for the sake of students' successful high school education, the standards and routines of the school as a whole need to remain clearly targeted.

CONCLUSION

Targeting the individual student

It can be argued that many of the particular instructional strategies that are recommended are in effect the natural by-products of an effort to target the student where her or his needs are truly the most severe. Teaching skills that allow the student not only to take dictation and read aloud, but also organize thoughts and comprehend complex stories and arguments meets the students' needs because her or his high school program will ultimately demand that she or he be able to do so. Ensuring that what is taught can be used immediately and that literacy can be a true tool for self-expression and meaning-making in turn guarantees that learning itself is meaningful. Literacy needs to be approached for each student differently because each one has a different set of existing skills. Teaching to read and write in the first language rather than immediately in the second language is best practice because it entails addressing a weakness in a cognitive context where the student is strongest rather than weakest. Viewing literacy instruction as a collaborative effort is ultimately necessary because reading, writing, and thinking underlie all learning in all subjects and in all languages.

SUGGESTED BEST PRACTICES

- Let the students demonstrate what they know and that they have valuable stories to tell.
- Reading and writing should be presented as meaningful.
- There should be a balance between higher and lower-order skills. They should not be introduced sequentially.
- The curriculum should be devised with the school's content standards in mind.
- High-content text should be presented and discussed orally.
- Students should work on stories and story situations they know.
- Inevitably, the class is highly heterogeneous and instruction should therefore be highly individualized.
- Talk about the process as a class—share impressions, realizations.
- Transfer between content areas and languages should be made explicit.
- Literacy, ESL, and other subject teachers should plan together.
- First-language literacy should be focused upon programmatically. Resources ought to be set aside for purposes of training and collaboration, and appropriate administrative support structures established.

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ENGLISH LEARNERS AND HIGH SCHOOL REFORM: A CLASSROOM TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

BOBBI CIRIZA HOUTCHENS

Introduction

In this paper we will visit a visionary high school, one that is only two years old. This school is visionary because the administration and staff came here dedicated to start a school the way it should be done: to see the potential in students and to work hard to remediate student deficits to ensure their academic success. Many in the community believe that this is a waste of time, that the students need to go back to basics, and that these powerful programs should not be wasted on "those kids." The school is located in an impoverished urban city on the west side of town, the traditionally minority side, which has not seen a new school in 35 years. In fact, there are no new "anythings" on this side of town-- no large chain grocery stores or drug stores, not one bank, only two gas stations, and only one franchised fast food restaurant. Most of the existing businesses are small enterprises, businesses that have survived here since the town was booming with a regional railroad maintenance yard and an air force base, both of which abandoned the area fifteen years ago. But the families have remained for generations. This town was the hope for the future of the great-grandparents who immigrated here looking for a better life.

Demographics

The demographics of the high school help explain the challenges. The 3100 students are 78% Latino, 12% Black, 9% White, and 1% Asian, South Pacific Islander, and Native American. 90% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. 75% of the students read 2 or more quintiles below the national average, and 83% score below the national average in math. Ten percent of the students are in special education classes, another 10% are in the gifted and talented program, and 34% are identified as ELLs. Latino, Black, and KKK gang turfs intersect or encompass the school, and violence in the area is a way of life.

Faculty

Counselors, teachers, administrators, and office staff reflect the diversity of the student body and speak many languages. Many of the staff are from the area and some have lived here for decades, products of the local school system. The school is a magnet for the visual and performing arts whose teachers are professional musical, theatrical, and performance artists with a passion for teaching. The academic staff is just as strong and dedicated. All of the teachers chosen to teach here have special talents and agree to do "whatever it takes" to help their students. They volunteer to teach an extra 15 minutes a day so that seven periods can be offered in the schedule. They agree to teach in a modified block schedule, to attend four all-day Saturday in-services to become experts in reading strategies and English Language Development (ELD) strategies across content areas, and to attend departmental workshops every Monday morning to share successes, learn strategies, and work on identified areas of weakness. The staff agreed that reading instruction would be the focus of every teacher, even physical education (P.E.) and the arts. Everyone knew that starting a school would require extra work, but starting a school that would find the success envisioned would require even more. New teachers find themselves surrounded and supported by experienced teachers who are recognized leaders in their content areas. Not everyone made it through the first two years, but there are always teachers waiting for an opportunity to teach at this exciting school.

School-wide programs

Programs include a rigorous academic schedule with all core classes at the college preparatory or honors level, a CISCO Academy, staffed and funded by CISCO Computers, a Teacher Education Academy with a dual language immersion program, an Army ROTC Academy, many AP classes, and ROP classes in the culinary arts and infant care, with an infant care nursery on campus for its lab. The local community college offers classes on campus daily, enabling students to receive their high school diploma and an A.A. degree in four years. Academic support includes academic tutoring in English as well as in the students' primary languages. This tutoring occurs at many times and places: before and after school and at both lunches, in reading and math support classes, during a free Sylvan Learning Program on campus, and during one-on-one tutoring after school. Social work interns from a local university provide family, group, and individual counseling free of charge, and ministers from local churches roam the lunch area on a weekly basis, visiting and chatting with the students.

A special teaching day
Student life

The first period bell rings and a cacophony of languages fills this ESL classroom. Thirty-eight newly arrived immigrants, four arriving last week, the rest having arrived since September, enter, unload their backpacks and get ready for the start of class. These students are in ninth through eleventh grades and speak five different languages. Some have strong academic backgrounds, while others have been to school only a few months in their lives. Most are survival-level poor, with parents who might be illiterate in their own languages, parents who make grand sacrifices in order to ensure their children lead better lives than they. Some of these students are delighted to be in the U.S.; some were forced to come here because of war, politics, or family issues. Most work hard to learn English and to adapt to American school culture while still honoring the cultural values of their homes. Many live in fear of being found by immigration agents, by abusive family members, by gangs, by the police. Nearly all feel the extremes of isolation and homesickness. Many arrive with rotting teeth, intestinal illnesses, tuberculosis, poor eyesight, and other physical impediments. And, as if that were not enough, they all are struggling with adolescence and the need to learn enough English in just three or four years to graduate from high school. For this they are hungry.

First period: Context and instructional methods

Since today is Monday, their focus during first period will be to learn more parts of the body, to explain their health needs to a doctor or school nurse, and to write and perform a small skit using what they have learned. Their learning is contextualized through the teacher's use of visuals, gestures, pantomime, and simplified language. The students often work in cooperative groups, pairs or triads, providing each other with primary language support. Their assessments are performance-based. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, bilingual adult and peer tutors work with them to ensure that they understand the concepts being taught in their other academic classes. Their core classes are sheltered, while their elective class and P.E. are mainstreamed, with primary language aides and peer tutors available to help wherever needed.

Second Period: Context and instructional methods

Second period finds the same students with the same teacher, but the focus of instruction is different. During this period, the students study literary concepts, increase academic vocabulary, gain the cultural background necessary for understanding American literature, read and analyze literature, and learn to write a structured essay in accordance with the state standards for English/language arts. Concepts are scaffolded to ensure they are presented in a comprehensible manner in accordance with the students' English proficiency. Scaffolding requires extensive use of graphic organizers, skeletal outlines, visuals, hands-on demonstrations, and other techniques to make abstract concepts more visual and less dependent upon linguistic explanations. The use of higher- level thinking skills, including analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and applications to real-life situations ensures that the learning is rigorous. A variety of modes of presenting literature is used, including picture books, easy-to-read texts, video representations of core literature, oral stories, and retellings of stories. Self-selected reading of easy texts is part of their nightly homework.

Third Period: Context and instructional methods

Third period, immediately before lunch, is an entirely different class. Comprised of sophomores and juniors, these students are transitioning out of ESL and are nearly ready to move into college preparatory junior and senior English classes. The class is smaller. They speak a variety of languages and have been in the U.S. for three to six years. They are mainstreamed in all their other classes; this is their only sheltered class, a college preparatory class in American literature, unfamiliar territory to most. Some are in Spanish for native speakers classes and are therefore familiar with reading strategies for understanding difficult texts, as well as appropriate styles and forms for academic writing in Spanish. It is up to their teacher to help them see the bridges between their skills in Spanish and what they need in English. Their teacher must ensure that they see the transfer of their primary language knowledge and skills to their studies in English. The core literature is presented in a scaffolded manner, often in literature circles carefully structured to enable students to practice effective reading comprehension strategies. Students use a variety of languages in these groups, with the emphasis on working cooperatively to efficiently understand complex literature. Analytical essays are written about the literature after guided discussions regarding styles, genres, themes and motifs, characterization, plot analysis, figurative language, and other literary elements, including how the themes found in literature apply to real life. These students are all aiming to meet or exceed the eleventh-grade English language arts standards, as well as the intermediate to early-advanced English Language Development standards.

Fourth Period: Context and instructional methods

Fourth period in this same classroom finds 39 mainstreamed college preparatory junior English students. They enter confidently, more seriously, joining their literature groups. Some tuck their gang colors, do-rags, and CD players away before being asked. They, too, converse in a variety of languages: most in English and Spanish, others in Samoan, or Cambodian. Unlike the ESL

class, most of these students were born in this city and have attended U.S. schools since kindergarten. Despite this seeming advantage, most read far below their grade level, have not had much success in school, and write poorly. The majority are identified as English learners, even though their English skills are stronger than their primary language skills. In class, these students are struggling with literature that is beyond their independent reading levels, and like the previous period, they are learning strategies to help them decipher difficult texts. Literature circles, structured paired reading, and scaffolds for organizing literary concepts are used on a regular basis. Vocabulary study includes the most frequently used words on the S.A.T. exam. Each student is writing extensively, revising drafts time and time again to perfect their writing. They know the stakes are high. They need to pass the high school exit exam in order to graduate, but they also know that they will not enter college without taking remedial courses unless they get it right now.

Ensuring English learners find success

At this school, as in most of this state, three distinct groups of English learners exist: recent immigrants (here for less than four years), transitioning immigrants (here from 4-7 years), and native-born English speakers. They share many commonalities, but their needs in the classroom are very different.

Recent immigrants

For the recent immigrants, the smallest group, about 150 of the 1200 identified English learners at this school, they need basic language acquisition, access to state curriculum standards, primary language support in academic classes, cultural acquisition assistance, and help learning to manage the American systems of education and life.

Transitioning immigrants

For the transitioning immigrants, about 80 students at this school, they need more advanced reading, vocabulary, writing, and study strategies, some primary language support in difficult conceptual academic areas, and interventions when cultural beliefs clash with the system.

Long-term English language learners

The majority of the English learners, about 900 of the 1200, have been in American schools most of their lives. Many were born here. Most perform far below average, try hard, but have been taught well by the schools that they do not have what it takes to succeed academically. Many of these students are respectfully quiet in class, nearly invisible to their teachers, are easy to forget once they leave the classroom, and are ashamed to admit when they do not understand. Others are so obviously present that their behavior makes it a relief when they finally leave the classroom, and they would rather be oppositional than admit that they do not understand. They often find themselves caught in a cultural crossfire between their parents' home country values and their own more American values. This large group is the group that needs the most from their teachers; these are the survivors in the system, and need the most intervention if they are to continue to survive academically.

ELLs and high school reform

There is much that large high schools can do as part of the reform movement to ensure that the needs of English learners are met. Immediate and on-going professional development must take place to inform all teachers about best practices, to assist teachers to address and adjust their own invisible cultural attitudes which have a negative impact on student performance, to develop focal school experts in student monitoring and relations, to build a school-wide team effort and knowledge about assisting students, and to involve parents. The entire school must take responsibility for the success of English language learners.

Educators as bridge builders

Professional development about language acquisition theory, and the history of and explanations of laws regarding the education of English learners must take place schoolwide. This knowledge is valuable for classroom teachers, as well as paraprofessionals, administrators, counselors, nurses, psychologists, outreach workers, and all support staff, including secretaries, security, and custodians. When the entire staff understands the whys and wherefores, the school is better able to function as a unit. Compliance with the law is everyone's responsibility. Knowledge of national or state English Language Development standards is critical for every classroom teacher, counselor, administrator, and paraprofessional. Application of the standards should be demonstrated as an integral part of every teacher's lesson planning and yearly evaluation, and integrated into every special education teacher's I.E.P.s. Professional development in the areas of Specially-Designed-Academic-Instruction in English (SDAIE) or sheltering academic content, reading fluency and comprehension strategies, writing strategies, and study skills, should be on-going with proof of application provided by all classroom teachers on a regular basis. Cooperative learning strategies should be practiced in every classroom, and project-based learning should be the norm. Assessment should be used to inform instruction and home languages should be valued and developed.

Attitudinal obstacles

Teacher, counselor, and administrator attitudes determine how English learners are treated and shape what programs are available to them. Often these attitudes are invisible, especially negative attitudes that are the norm in society and are difficult to see as the cause of educational problems. Therefore, professional development to make these attitudes visible must take place school-wide. Many educators see speaking another language as an obstacle, rather than an asset. They do not value students as the solutions to educational problems, but rather as the problems themselves.

Positive influences

Many times, subtle changes in the classroom can overcome the negative unspoken messages traditionally sent to English learners and their parents. Visible changes include recruitment of English learners to function as peer tutors and translators, offering Spanish for native speakers' classes that value heritage languages and prepare English learners for AP examinations. Using

Spanish cognates in vocabulary studies, studying authors that represent the backgrounds and voices of the students, accepting writing that incorporates code switching to enhance student voice and cultural understanding, and calling upon student linguistic knowledge to inform learning are additional ways to demonstrate a valuing of English learner abilities. Traditionally, gatekeepers do not place English learners in academically challenging classes and programs or do not see learning English as an on-going process that continues to improve as challenges are met under the appropriate conditions. Schools must closely monitor the demographics of students in special education, gifted and talented classes, AP classes, and other special programs to ensure that all gates are open and that student traffic flows fairly in both directions.

Parent/community outreach

To demonstrate a sincere desire to include and value the parents of English learners, all school-to-home communications must be done in the languages of the students' homes. Classes held on campus for the parents help them feel part of the school community. Parent and community meetings held in the parents' languages and conducted by the parents also demonstrate confidence in parent abilities. Simultaneous translations can take place through wireless headsets. Meetings could alternate between being conducted in English one month and in Spanish the next month, giving value to both languages. When educators see the potentials in English learners, their families, languages, and cultures, rather than their deficits, everyone benefits.

Schoolwide bridges

In the small school environment, as in elementary schools and many middle schools, teachers work in teams and communication about students is open with problem-solving taking place in a collaborative manner. In the large high school, this is not usually the case. Most teachers enter school in the morning, and it is possible to avoid interaction with any other adult on campus for days at a time. Unless time is structured for teachers, counselors, and administrators to meet to solve individual student issues, it will not happen. In a large high school, this situation makes it easy for the needs of English language learners to be overlooked and demonstrates the need for a core of ELL experts to serve as a center point.

ELL teams

This ELL team should also exist in every school. The ELL team should consist of administration, counseling, and ELD/sheltered academic teacher experts. The team is responsible for monitoring student achievement and promotion, identifying professional development needs, and monitoring interactions between parents and the community.

While monitoring student achievement and promotion, the ELL team looks at student grades on a quarterly basis, counseling students and recommending interventions for those who are not achieving. Interventions begin with student/parent counseling, student/teacher conferences, and continue with arranging appropriate interventions and conducting follow-ups. Possible interventions include weekly monitoring of attendance and/or grades, tutoring, parental involvement, recommending adaptation of instruction and assessment by classroom teachers,

changing to more appropriate classes or more skilled teachers, and changes in programs or school-wide scheduling. The team also examines how individual ELLs are promoted, ensuring that each one is in the most appropriate, academically challenging class. The team ensures that ELLs are not cocooned, or kept in ELL classes longer than necessary, and those students who experience difficulty learning English are given a closer look to ensure that other problems are not interfering with their acquisition of English and to look for remedies. The team also ensures that mainstreamed ELLs are provided with appropriate support, whether in the student's primary language or in English. School-wide, the team monitors programs to ensure successful inclusion of ELLs and to ensure that ELLs have full and actual access to the school's programs, and are not segregated into areas that limit their access to higher levels of academic achievement or the development of their talents and interests.

The team also directs and supervises bilingual paraprofessionals at the school. They ensure that paraprofessionals are qualified and competent at providing high level academic primary language support. The paraprofessionals in our visionary high school are university students who are themselves former ELL students. As bilingual aides, they serve as role models for the ELLs in their classes, are sensitive to the sociocultural and academic issues facing the students, receive tuition reimbursements from the district office in addition to their salary, and are the first to be hired by the district as classroom teachers after they receive their credentials. They inform the ELL team about individual, cultural, educational, and community issues they observe during their work.

In the area of professional development, the ELL team identifies individuals, departments or school-wide areas of need. They serve as a professional resource to their colleagues, identifying professional development opportunities and work with administration to find ways to finance teachers' participation in these opportunities. They also identify professional developers who might lead the school or departments in strengthening skills, teams, and attitudes.

The ELL team is also the bridge between the parents and community and the school. They assist teachers in culturally appropriate ways of interacting with parents. At our visionary high school, teachers are encouraged to call students' homes often, even during class time, when warranted. The team coaches teachers who feel uncomfortable working with parents from different languages and cultures, providing translations and even scripts the teachers might try. The team also accompanies teachers on home visits. Phone calls and home visits are facilitated at our visionary high school because phone numbers are printed on every teacher's roll sheet and home addresses along with parents' names are available in their computerized grade books. The team monitors that written school-home communications are in the home languages. The team is also present at school-wide parent meetings and contacts the parents of ELLs prior to these meetings to encourage their attendance. In addition, the team holds special meetings with parents for information sharing and celebrations of student achievement. The team is in touch with local churches, community centers and organizations. They seek out newspapers and periodicals to ensure that the community is aware of activities and opportunities that are available at the school.

School within a school

In the national move to create smaller learning environments to better meet the needs of high school students, we must be cautious not to create a system that isolates English language learners from English-only students, or a system that denies English language learners access to all the opportunities available to English-only students. We must differentiate between resources needed to help newcomers and the resources needed to help those English language learners who have been here for life. We must not ignore the value of bilingualism for all students. Research demonstrates that bilingualism increases one's cognitive abilities, as well as one's marketability in our global economy, not providing opportunities for all students to become fluently bilingual and biliterate indicates that schools are not actualizing the full range of student abilities.

Duel language immersion teacher academy

Recognizing that the solutions to many of our educational problems are sitting in front of them every day, our visionary high school has started a dual language immersion teacher academy within the school. This academy projects that at full potential, it will house 240 students, grades nine through twelve. One third of the students will be English-only, one third will be recently immigrated English language learners from Spanish-speaking countries, and one third will be native-born English language learners, who have strong oral skills in English and Spanish, but might lack literacy in Spanish and be low-level readers in English. These are students who have an interest in becoming teachers. All their classes qualify them for entry to a four-year university. The team of academy teachers is skilled in scaffolding or sheltering content. They teach in their native languages, even though most are bilingual. They are also passionate about their careers and are eager to share their passion with their students.

Coursework

Ninth and tenth-grade students take grade-level English, social studies, and P.E. in English, and algebra or geometry, Spanish, and grade level science in Spanish. Students in these two grades may choose from a wide range of electives for their seventh class. Eleventh and twelfth-grade students take grade-level English, social studies, and teacher preparation classes in English, and algebra II or calculus, Spanish, and grade level science in Spanish. They may choose from a wide range of electives. All students participate in cross-age tutoring or peer-tutoring with guidance and supervision from academy teachers. They also make field trips to universities and other culturally important venues. The goal of this academy is to create bilingual and biliterate students who value education and bilingualism. An additional positive outcome is that this school is growing its own bilingual teachers.

Does It Work?

Although this paper focused on the needs of Spanish-speaking English language learners, the needs of all English language learners must be addressed in any high school reform movement. Just a few of the recommendations helped Manuel, who immigrated from Mexico without documentation and spoke no English in the tenth grade. Manuel's parents had little formal schooling, but were willing to do whatever it took to provide their children with a good education. Manuel's older brothers worked at low-paying jobs to ensure that their younger siblings could study without having to work. Manuel was placed in ELD and sheltered college preparatory classes for two years, as well as in Spanish for native speakers' classes. During his senior year, he was mainstreamed in most of his classes and still received primary language support. His parents took ELD classes at school in the evenings and became integral voices in the English Learners Advisory Council. Manuel studied hard, was accepted to several local four-year universities, and became a high school math teacher. He provides well for his parents and siblings, raising the entire family's socioeconomic status. In addition, he is an important member of the EL team at our visionary high school.

To see if these recommendations work for the majority of English language learners, not the recent immigrants, but those who have been in the United States most of their lives, those who the system has repeatedly failed to serve, we need only look at Nacho. Nacho was born and raised in the city of our visionary high school. He entered ninth grade hating school, with low reading and math abilities, on the verge of joining a gang, and annoyingly oppositional in class. Nacho was placed in college preparatory classes, Spanish for native speakers' classes, provided with primary language support, and participated in the beginnings of the teacher education academy. As an academy student, Nacho tutored bilingual kindergarten children at his old elementary school. He read to them, supervised games, and emphasized the importance of being a good student. After finding himself in trouble with the law, Nacho was assigned to the kindergarten class as a condition of his probation. Nacho not only finished high school, much to his own amazement, but continued at the local community college. It took him five years to complete the two-year course of study, but he eventually transferred to a four-year university and is now teaching kindergarten in the district where he attended school.

There is also no doubt that the needs of all English language learners must be considered at the basis of any high school reform, that their needs must be met in a team effort, that all staff must be culturally aware and sensitive, and that all teachers must be knowledgeable about language acquisition theory and methodology, sheltered techniques to present challenging concepts, and the use of multiple methods of assessment to inform instruction and measure student achievement.

ELLS IN SMALL HIGH SCHOOLS: LEVERAGING DISTRICT RESOURCES

MARY I. RAMÍREZ

Introduction

Across the nation, school districts face ongoing challenges as they educate the nation's children: finding qualified staff, responding to new policies and increased accountability, accessing sufficient funding, and addressing the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Much of the recent focus has occurred at the early childhood years as early literacy achievement becomes a district's benchmark of success. Another challenge confronting educators is the reform of high schools in order to increase their success in graduating students. This issue is especially important in large urban districts, where dropout rates may exceed 50%.

A special group of students who are often underserved are those who do not speak English as a first language. English language learners (ELLs) make up an increasingly larger percentage of students in the United States, and now number approximately 4 million. Schools with newly arriving populations are seeking expertise, resources, and support so that they will be better able to educate the students. English language learners who are in their high school years face the many challenges of trying to master more complex content area material, attain English proficiency, and adapt to a new cultural educational experience.

It is critical for school districts to view the needs of the ELL through the many lenses of school services. In this way the child will have an increased opportunity for success. The vignette that follows presents the experience of an ideal district in which the school and the community collaborated with central office to achieve success.

The ideal district: Meeting ELL needs through school services

Rosa Rodriguez, Principal of Nueva Vista High School, the new "small" high school, sat down at her office desk to contemplate the evening that had just passed. It had been a marvelous experience to have such a productive open house. The numbers of parents arriving with questions and interests had been amazing, and the number of ELL families was unquestionably superior compared to the open houses at her old large high school.

Past struggles with high school reform implementation

Her mind flashed back to a little over a year ago when she had first embarked upon the adventure of implementing a small high school that would serve approximately 350 students, 40% of which were ELLs.

She had been in her third year as an assistant principal in one of the district's large, diverse high schools. There were a total of 2000 students in her school, and she and the one other assistant principal had been overwhelmed with discipline and staff issues. The principal was supportive, but had been called to so many meetings this past year from the central office to discuss new policies related to the No Child Left Behind Act that he was not always available. The school had a poor showing for both discipline and test results, particularly the state tests in reading and math, and many of the veteran teachers blamed the changing student population. There was very little extra funding to support new ideas or add staff, which added to the frustration for students, staff, administration and community members. Some of the other schools in the district had been

given funds to buy whole school models such as Talent Development High Schools, but this school had not.

Diverse student population

Because she was bilingual, and a former English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher, Ms. Rodriguez was also in charge of diversity issues at the school, which was 40% African American, 35% Latino, 20% Caucasian, and 5% Asian. Over 25 different languages were spoken by the students at the high school and approximately 35% of the students were ELLs who arrived at the school with little or no literacy in English. Many of the staff believed that it was the increase in number of the ESOL students that had caused the school's performance to decrease. Ms. Rodriguez wished that they could get more support than their one-period-daily ESOL class. One of the challenges for ELLs in high schools is the amount of new vocabulary and the requirements of academic language in content areas such as science, social studies, and the language arts classes. Students were required to show proficiency in meeting the standards although they had to learn to process large amounts of vocabulary and concepts. The new testing requirements were often seen as unfair.

School community committee

During the past three years, Ms. Rodriguez had worked hard to establish a school community committee. She remembered how difficult it had been as an ESOL teacher to get communication to the homes of her students, so she made sure that the information about the committee was translated by the central office to Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, and Haitian. She was a part of a committee of approximately fifteen members who came together every two months in the late afternoons to talk about how to improve and support the school. The other members included six parents (two with ELL children), two ministers, three local businessmen, a professor from the local community college, the teacher's union representative, three students (one who was a former ELL), the principal, and occasionally one of the ESOL supervisors from the central office. The ESOL supervisor was a former teaching colleague and Ms. Rodriguez often turned to her when she needed some central office support. The committee also forwarded all of their meeting minutes to their local political representatives. Ms. Rodriguez was very proud of the committee because they were willing to contact the local press, talk about positive things that were happening at the school, and advocate for financial and in-kind resources, such as donations of computers.

However, in August they were still struggling with many of the same issues they faced every fall: weak student attendance, violence and discipline issues, lack of teacher substitutes, limited resources for new books or student activities, poor achievement and low graduation rates. Some of the parents mentioned that perhaps they would look into the new charter schools because they were getting tired of the same discussion. One of the ELL parents spoke in Spanish about how her son felt especially uncomfortable because the high school was not as strict as his old school in his country, and here he was made fun of frequently for not speaking English.

Autonomous small high schools

The professor from the community college spoke about how research was showing that smaller size was better for high schools, and there was a new model being implemented in some large school districts: the small high school. He explained that the small high school was not just a separate component of the larger high school like the small learning communities that the school had in place for the past five years; it was an autonomous entity that had control over budget, curriculum and other decisions. Intrigued, the group decided to explore the concept and began to do some research by contacting districts, educational organizations, and doing research on the Internet. Information that was especially interesting included the Oakland Unified School District New Small Autonomous Schools Policy and the New York City studies. They were surprised to discover that foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates and Carnegie Corporation of New York were helping to fund these ideas. At the October meeting the committee members informed Ms. Rodriguez and the principal that they wanted to make the concept a reality. One of the concerns shared by many administrators was the stronger emphasis on accountability for performance and the consequences for staff, including removal, if improvement was not forthcoming. In many districts, this focus had resulted in more central-based control with standardization in pedagogy and curriculum. Yet at the same time, the charter school movement and the language of school choice was also encouraging innovation and multiple models. The school community committee felt frustrated enough that they were willing to take a risk and ask for a change from central administration. However, this local-level advocacy would require mustering lots of community supports and using research-based best practices so that the central administration would feel comfortable in permitting something so different. Although they were learning how to be politically strategic, another issue the group members would have to face would be funding.

Strategic planning

Ms. Rodriguez and four other members of the larger committee formed a subcommittee that would meet almost weekly. The smaller group laid out a timeline and brainstormed some strategies. The ESOL supervisor joined the first several meetings and mentioned how downtown was also looking for ways to improve high schools because there was pressure from the state. It was possible that schools that were not doing well would face changes in staffing. The supervisor advised that the ideas be presented to the superintendent and/or the school board.

Board presentation

The board presentation, although very brief, went very well because the professor shared convincing research and the parents spoke very passionately about how they wanted their children to have more opportunities, but not necessarily leave the public school system. The board members were very pleased with the committee's presentation and announced that they would have the superintendent "look into the idea."

Communicating and building consensus for reform plans

Because Ms. Rodriguez wanted the communication to be clear about the process, she worked with the teacher's union representative to draft a preliminary letter of explanation to distribute to all the teachers and staff at the school. She also worked with the parent committee members to draft a letter to send home to all the parents. Again, she asked the ESOL supervisor to have the letter translated into different languages. Before the meeting with the superintendent, she and the subcommittee members scheduled an open town hall meeting to hear about the concerns and recommendations for the proposal. They were pleased that about half the staff was in attendance and well over 100 parents. The committee explained that they were in an exploration stage and that everything was voluntary. Ms. Rodriguez also made sure that support staff and bilingual parents were available to translate to the parents who did not speak English. The student committee members also put together several assemblies to explain the concept and solicit suggestions. They also established some student committees and made student surveys. The students spoke about wanting increased discipline enforcement, more interesting classroom activities, more cultural diversity integration in instruction and more after school activities.

Two weeks later when the subcommittee members went to the meeting with the superintendent, they were shocked to walk in and see almost ten central office administrators at the meeting. "We have decided to support your idea and will assist you in exploring this model," announced the superintendent, and Ms. Rodriguez and the subcommittee immediately began work on the new project.

Implementation strands

In order to start the work on the small schools effort, the group has focused on:

- Diverse community buy-in, ownership;
- Research/literature and data review;
- Outreach and advocacy meetings;
- Communication efforts featuring translations; and
- Gaining administrative support.

As the subcommittee team found itself working with the different central offices, a barrage of questions faced them:

- What was the vision for the small school structure?
- What would be the possible financial needs?
- What students would attend and how would they be served?
- How would the school follow the district policies and practices and how would these policies and practices be different?
- What about staff responsibilities and union contracts?

Site visits

The committee was pleased to see that there would be some additional funding attached to their proposal as mandated by the superintendent. Because there was money that the district central offices had in Title I and Title III budgets, several of the subcommittee members worked with central office members to make a visit to New York City to see the small high school implemented there as well as the International School. The ESOL office gave them information about Newcomer Centers, special small schools or programs for ELLs, which was published by the Center for Applied Linguistics. A few other members also emailed principals of small high schools for information.

Sharing responsibilities

In January and the topic of high school reform was spreading throughout the community. Ms. Rodriguez found herself setting up a meeting for almost a hundred people. She also found that she had so many additional duties that she was in need of some assistance. A "special assignment assistant principal" was needed to relieve her of some of her duties. "The superintendent now considers this effort a model for the district," she was told. "Success is very important." She was also informed that she would be appointed the first principal, so it would be her responsibility to make the dream a reality. The personnel director also told her that she would be arranging a meeting with the president of the teacher's union to discuss how teachers would be selected and how every component of the contract might not be enforced. Teachers would be able to apply to the school as a special assignment posting for the first two years. Each teacher would have mentoring responsibilities for a small number of students and be required to have "office hours" before and after the school day. Ms. Rodriguez requested that at least three of the teaching positions be staffed by bilingual personnel representing the languages of the students, which would also make the staff more diverse and more able to communicate with families. She also hoped to add a bilingual counselor, who could work with the students on making more meaningful and timely post-secondary decisions.

Logistics

As the small school concept began to move ahead more quickly, the questions started to find answers. The small school would be assigned to a different wing of the regular high school. It would have its own entrance, schedule, administration, and teaching staff. However, it would share the facilities of the gym, library, and the cafeteria of the regular high school. The facilities office came and did a walk-through tour with her about how the small school would look and how to reconfigure classroom and office space. Already a small learning community had been assigned there for classrooms but there were no administrative or support offices. Ms. Rodriguez also wanted a few community spaces, such as a Parent Council office. The students would number between three and four hundred. Signs and brochures would be multilingual.

Expansion of ESOL program

Although the small school would be open to any child from the larger school that applied under a lottery system, Ms. Rodriguez found that a great interest was being generated by the ELL

parents. She realized that she would probably have at least 1/3 of the student applicants as ELLs, if not more. Although she thought that it would be great to be able to offer a bilingual program to the students, because of the language diversity, and in consultation with the community committee and the ESOL office, she decided to continue with an ESOL program but expand the world language classes to also add heritage language instruction. Ms. Rodriguez also decided to offer an extra daily ESOL period of instruction for all the ELLs at the beginning levels. The school was provided with some additional Title III funding to support those efforts and to add some full time bilingual classroom assistants/tutors. The future principal also asked that one of the English teachers have a Reading certification, so that the individual could provide special reading strategies to students in need and offer assistance to colleagues. The group also suggested exploring how to support ELL students transitioning from the elementary/middle schools by incorporating Newcomer Center strategies. Students and families could tour the school prior to the school year and meet the staff. Qualified staff would provide interpretation, and all materials possible would be translated.

Focus on students

The vision that the community members had of the ideal high school included a small and personalized setting which would be welcoming of diversity and culturally rich. Students would have a leadership role and be trained in peer mediation and conflict resolution. This high school would promote high-quality instruction with teacher collaboration and family involvement. The expectations would be high, but there would be many supports in place. Each teacher would act as an advisor to a small group of students and mentors would also be solicited from the community. Students would be able to have access to services to address their medical, emotional and health needs, and there would be guidance counselor support for post-secondary decisions from the beginning of the ninth grade.

The goal would be to have students aim toward graduation and successful yearly promotion by integrating student needs and student interests to academic requirements. The school leadership group would also look at state policies and make sure they contacted state education department officials to have their efforts reviewed for compliance and possibly become a recommended program model.

Assessments

The assessment office reviewed the state test performance data with the team and the committee and pointed out to the school major areas of challenge, such as problem solving and writing. Ms. Rodriguez wanted to look at how students in different language groups performed by ESOL proficiency level, and the office promised to start tracking that data for her. They also promised to advocate with the state for testing options, such as native language tests or portfolios, and review the cultural accessibility of each test item, as well as scoring processes, such as those recommended by CCSSO. Although subgroups were part of the new NCLB accountability requirements, Ms. Rodriguez wanted to ensure that the students were getting equitable access to the supports they needed in order to be successful. She also wanted the office to help teachers teach students about test taking skills, and review rubrics in advance to familiarize students with

the structure of performance levels, perhaps by using some anchor paper and item model examples.

Curriculum

The group also met with the curriculum supervisors who recommended some supplementary materials for additional instruction and support in content areas. The committee asked for more culturally enriched materials, such as the influence of African American, Latino and Asian groups in social studies, sciences, math and literature. They also requested that the library expand its collection of diverse cultural materials and add native language materials.

Professional development

Ms. Rodriguez requested additional funds for professional development to include differentiated instruction with special populations as well as learning how to teach sheltered content area classes for ELLs. Her goal was to increase the knowledge and capacity level of all constituents. She wanted every teacher to have and be familiar with the TESOL Standards. She was also very interested in exploring training on the CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach) model as well as the new SIOP model, content support initiatives which were successful for ELLs and could probably be applied to all students.

The administrator wanted to make sure that the challenges of large amounts of new academic language were addressed through strategies such as vocabulary pre-teaching or concepts explained in the native language with support by native language tutors. She also reviewed the opportunity of having ESOL teachers plug into the content area classrooms to co-teach and provide additional support.

Quality instruction would have a critical impact on student success. Ms. Rodriguez was committed to being an academic leader as well as the building manager. She planned on being a regular visitor to every teacher's classroom so that observations would never seem to be a surprise. She wanted to review lesson plans with staff and have them work together to connect across curriculum areas. She also wanted all parents to be familiar with what students were learning, and hoped to send home regular updates. Due to the number of ELL students, the future principal knew that the school staff would have to develop a strong understanding of first and second language acquisition, and build in extra instructional emphases on grammar, pronunciation, literacy and cross-cultural learning. Teachers would have to use more visuals, authentic props, drama and graphic organizers to present and review concepts. Writing would be integrated into all content areas and students would keep journals to monitor their progress.

Gifted and talented

Ms. Rodriguez also requested some additional funding from the Gifted and Talented department to enable her to start one or two new advanced placement (AP) classes. She was also concerned that the gifted numbers were so low at the school and recommended that there be additional testing done, perhaps with bilingual personnel. She also decided to hold monthly assemblies for

students and staff on diversity and cultural issues, to bring in speakers, to distribute informational material, and to have students and parents make cultural presentations.

Best-practice research

Ms. Rodriguez was also interested in using research to implement best-practice policies. As the idea became more of a reality, the community group found themselves discussing issues with different district offices: Were certain cultural groups over or underrepresented in the *special education* programs, and if so, why? Did all teachers know how to appropriately respond to the Individual Education Plan (IEP) for students with disabilities, especially those who were ELL? Did the nurse have a special understanding or training regarding the health needs of immigrant students, which could be misinterpreted? How would the central office support the school and connect with the various health service agencies? How can teachers teach students with behavioral challenges to channel their energies in a more productive fashion? Would the disciplinarian make clear the code of conduct across all the diverse cultures and languages?

Ms. Rodriguez decided to continue and expand the concept of her community group for the new small school. She wanted to have more central office personnel be invited to meetings as appropriate. She also felt it was important to have a leadership team composed of teachers at the school, which would interact with the community group. Important issues to focus on would be parent involvement regarding student attendance, discipline issues, and student achievement. It was now March, and the format was taking place. Teachers would be applying for the jobs in May, would be notified in June, and would participate in small school planning meetings over the summer. A letter was sent to all parents from the large high school for application by April, and students would be informed in May if they were selected.

The committee realized that they were undertaking a major initiative that could not be completely put in place in one year. They would need to sit down and put together a multi-year timeline. The members were pleased that they were able to access more funding because they were a model project, but they decided that they needed to become more fiscally knowledgeable and also seek out grants that could support their ideas. They also discussed setting up a better system of contacting businesses for donations.

Another committee member recommended that a plan be established for getting and using more technology in the school and classrooms and even at homes of the students. They also wanted to review multilingual software programs. Every student and teacher should have an email account, it was decided, and the school webpage would be established immediately. The central office also recommended that they begin a public relations committee to respond to the media to publish information.

They felt it was also important to work with the native language newspapers and radio stations. The community college professor also spoke about seeking out support from the education department staff of several of the other local universities. He would also ask professors of linguistics and TESOL if they would be willing to provide professional development to the staff and parents, and come regularly to the school to help train new teachers. He would also try to follow up by seeking support from national professional organizations, such as TESOL, NABE,

La Raza, and others. The assessment director mentioned that perhaps a research organization could fund a study on the success of their efforts and provide a no-cost evaluation.

The personnel director mentioned that if the small school chose to add some teachers who were certified in career and technical education programs, they could then access that special funding and provide students the opportunity to acquire career training as well as academic preparation. The federal programs office informed them that they would be able to access funds for extended day and summer programs that would help support their efforts. Ms. Rodriguez thought about offering extra English classes and perhaps even adding a family literacy component with younger brothers and sisters and parents. She also wanted to hire some native language tutors who could assist with the academic concepts and extensive vocabulary.

The small school would also need to explore how to offer extracurricular activities and allow students to participate in sports. Finally, they would be held to the same levels of performance on standards by the district and state, so they had to be sure that they were in compliance and be ready for any monitoring.

Although they were still part of the public school system, in many ways the excitement generated was probably similar to that which was happening in the charter schools, thought Ms. Rodriguez. The school was seen as unique, special and more responsive to meeting student and community needs because of its smaller size and its more focused mission. The advantage that this school would have is that it would continue to have all the support mechanisms of a large system, such as access to ESOL and curriculum and special education supervisors. The disadvantage would also be that they would continue to be part of the large system, and they would have to make sure that they did not get swallowed back up a year or so down the road once the emphasis was no longer there or if they were not performing to expectation. Also, she was sure that there would be some conflicts about sharing space with the rest of the students in the "regular" high school, and those issues would have to be addressed.

And so it was September of the following year and the Nueva Vista High School Open House had just finished. Ms. Rodriguez was extremely grateful for the opportunity to have become part of such an exciting adventure. She also realized that her experience as a former ESOL teacher had served her well with the focus on advocacy issues. Her final thought was that they would not be where they were today without the support of the families, students, central offices, community members, superintendent and school board.

Conclusion

The formation of a small school high school can be a challenging and daunting task if there is a lack of administrative support or leadership, no matter how much the community supports it. There may not be a clear understanding of the concept, since so many high schools have tried the schools-within-a-school model with mixed results. The new focus on results-driven education encourages innovation as long as there are strong connections with policy and data-driven effective practices are presented in a financially feasible model. Integrating ELLs in a meaningful and productive manner requires a degree of expertise that may not be present in many current administrators. Political angles must also be explored to leverage the extra support

needed. In most large districts it is not necessarily common for central offices to sit down and plan with each other regarding district initiatives, so the model is that the school administrator often has ongoing contact with many of the offices and must decide how to coherently and competently integrate the services and seek out the supports. Having a central office colleague, such as the ESOL supervisor, was especially helpful for this future principal. Establishing leadership at the community level can be the most powerful lever for change. Although this seemed like a quick turn-around by putting a model into place within a year, in many cases large urban districts do not have the luxury of extended planning time. The school took the initiative and must now make sure that the follow-through continues. Small high schools could be a very positive alternative model for all students, especially ELLs, if the commitment to quality exists and is carefully implemented.

SUGGESTED BEST PRACTICES

- Review the research on small schools and visit diverse programs and models;
- Include leadership from those with ELL expertise;
- Seek support from administrative leadership;
- Use political networking including media;
- Integrate diverse central office services and funds to support the school vision;
- Establish diverse and representational committees including parents
- Request and implement high quality professional development on issues of language, culture and differentiated instruction;
- Use disaggregated data to monitor progress;
- Be willing to challenge establish district practices and procedures such as personnel contract responsibilities.

RESTRUCTURING THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL
LEAVING NO ELL BEHIND: THE ROLE OF THE STATE

MARÍA MEDINA SEIDNER

Introduction

The educational reform movement so evident during the past two decades throughout this nation has established, raised, and elevated once more the academic standards to which public schools must hold students in order to meet local, state, and federal accountability requirements. Certainly, the current world demands that citizens attain knowledge and skills at higher and more complex levels in multiple, changing, and developing academic and technical areas. To meet this challenge, states and school districts have developed more rigorous curricula, implemented high stakes assessments, established accountability measures, increased graduation requirements and made changes in the ways in which schools provide instruction.

Elementary schools have had to make significant adjustments in curriculum and educational approaches in order to implement strategies that increasingly allow students to meet the higher standards. Some districts have reorganized and restructured schools to improve curriculum alignment across grade levels. In some schools, teachers teach the same group of students throughout a span of grades to increase their own knowledge of their students' educational development. This length of time spent teaching the same cohort allows them to tailor instruction accordingly. In other schools, different grade level teachers meet regularly to insure that their instruction is coordinated and that students are developing the required knowledge and skills as they progress through the grades. State-sponsored initiatives for improving academic achievement in reading, mathematics and science have provided funds for extensive and sustained teacher and administrator training. Federal funds have also supported similar initiatives across the states.

Special strategies designed for English language learners are often included in reform efforts at the elementary level, especially in those areas with large enrollments or those experiencing dramatic increases in the number of students entering U. S. schools with little or no knowledge of the English language.

Achievement gaps still exist between white students and students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds, limited English proficient students, and students of low socio-economic status. These gaps, however, are beginning to close in districts that have implemented effective reforms and instructional strategies in their elementary schools.

High stakes assessments and rising academic standards are also challenging middle schools. However, substantial reforms at this level during the past decade have addressed structural changes as well as academic standards. The traditional middle school schedule with teachers moving from classroom to classroom is no longer the norm. Middle school faculties are divided into various teams of teachers who work together in teaching all core subjects to various groups of students—thus providing coordinated and more personalized instruction. Many of these teams also include an ESL teacher to insure that English language learners receive appropriate instruction in English as well as in other content areas. As a result, student achievement in the middle school has risen steadily for all student groups. Unfortunately, the achievement gap between white students and minorities persists, and it is at this level that many of these low-performing students decide to abandon schooling and drop out.

Nowhere are the stakes higher for students than at the high school level. Yet, most reform efforts during the past decade have not done much to change the way in which high schools provide instruction. The major restructuring activity has been to change the instructional day from one in which all subjects are taught daily in standard 50-55 minutes class periods to a variety of block schedules with longer class periods and fewer subjects taught each day. Of course, higher standards for all required core subjects have been established in every state, the number and level of academic courses needed for graduation have increased, and more rigorous state assessments have to be passed. In more than one third of the states, students are required to pass an exit examination in order to graduate from high school. Unfortunately, these initiatives have not increased graduation rates. Almost one half (24) of all the states have graduation rates of 75% or lower (McNeill, 2003). Furthermore, high dropout rates among racial/ethnic minorities are the rule—rather than the exception—in too many urban high schools across the nation. These reform efforts have not improved the knowledge and skills of high school graduates. Far too many students who graduate are ill-prepared for postsecondary education or the current workplace.

According to Cohen (2001), the American high school is in crisis and in need of a complete overhaul. Increasing the rigor of courses and the requirements to graduate is not the answer. That only works for the students who are successful under the present system. What is needed is "a system that presumes students will learn a set of commonly agreed-upon standards but through different pedagogies, institutional arrangements and amounts of time." This system must take into account the reality of student diversity and the difficult situations that are present in most high schools today. There must also be recognition that there are different paths to academic achievement. It should also create an environment that promotes features of effective high schools, which include: high standards and expectations for all students, well-prepared teachers who know how to engage students, caring and personalized environments which support and motivate students, community connections for student support and opportunities, strong leadership and a sense of mission.

The state role in reform efforts

States have the constitutional responsibility for public education. These responsibilities include implementing state and federal statutes affecting public education systems, providing funds to school districts for educational facilities and programs, establishing academic standards, setting graduation requirements, adopting state assessments, developing accountability systems, collecting data, building the capacity of school districts to improve instruction of all students, establishing teacher education and certification requirements, and providing, developing, and implementing support programs necessary to ensure that all students achieve the state's public education goals.

Clearly, the state should have a major role in restructuring high schools. Although comprehensive reform efforts must involve many stakeholders, including teachers, students, counselors, administrators, parents and community members, the state must provide the leadership to bring in all of the necessary resources, including long-term financial support. Yet, when contacted during an informal telephone survey, only one out of fifteen state education agencies had established a state high school reform initiative. All others could identify one or

more high schools in their state that were undergoing substantial reform, but the initiative had not come from the state department of education. In some cases, the funding for these initiatives had come from grants awarded by the state agency but the state involvement was minimal. Large urban districts were named as the initiators of many of the reform efforts and were credited with seeking fiscal support from both public and private sectors. All of the SEAs contacted agreed that high school reform needed to be a state priority but that it was not the case given the present climate of budget and personnel reductions.

McNeil (2003) examined four states—California, Maine, Rhode Island and Vermont—that have initiated reform efforts and found many similarities in their experiences and strategies. California began its high school reform effort in the 1980s and expanded it into a K-12 systemic initiative in the 1990s. Maine, Rhode Island, and Vermont began their high school reform in the mid-1990s. From the lessons that were gleaned, five steps are suggested for states to follow in undertaking efforts to reform and improve high schools:

1. Conduct a thorough review of high schools in the state that results in developing a vision, goals, and principles to guide reform. Associated activities should include highly visible task forces, public hearings, policy statements, all geared to raise public awareness.

2. Review state policies and regulations, including standards and graduation requirements, and align them with the new vision and goals.

3. Identify resources to promote reform, such as federal programs and funds, and money from state and local foundations.

4. Create a center or high-profile office within the state to support reform through research, policy development, technical assistance, and networking.

5. Allow time for reforms to develop (at least 3 to 5 years) and monitor results.

Obviously, these steps underscore the fact that reform is a long-term process involving multiple entities across many levels. Cohen (2001) recommends that states begin by providing immediate, intensive help to the lowest performing high schools because these schools lack the capacity to respond to new testing and accountability requirements, the leadership to organize school improvement activities, and the internal accountability to insure that teachers work together to improve instruction. He suggests that reform efforts concentrate first on students and schools with the greatest needs, and that the intervention should be matched to the school's situation. Large, low-performing high schools should be broken into smaller learning communities with design-based assistance from the state, as well as financial support for its implementation. Community support and resources, such as libraries and after-school tutoring services, should be available for low-performing students. States must also provide the lowest-performing students and schools with the resources and tools to meet the new standards.

ELL students in secondary school—A growing challenge

As states and schools undertake high school reform, the needs of English language learners (ELLs) in high schools must be considered and included throughout the entire process.
English language learners in secondary schools are generally immigrant students who first enter U. S. schools in middle school or high school. These students are limited English proficient and represent diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Most of these students have attended schools in their native country. Some have had excellent schooling, and may have even studied certain academic subjects at higher levels than the typical high school course. Others may have had gaps in education due to war, disaster, poverty, and other deprivations. Some may be highly literate in their native language while others may lack basic literacy due to lack of schooling.

English language learner students have one common characteristic: a limited amount of time in which to learn academic English and accrue academic credit for high school graduation. Although high schools generally provide instruction in English as a second language, the required credit-bearing courses required for graduation are not accessible to ELLs in a timely manner. Most high schools are not prepared to provide academic instruction to students who are not proficient in English. Curriculum materials in most subject areas are not appropriate for instruction of English learners. Content area teachers lack professional preparation or training in addressing the linguistic and academic needs of second language learners. Yet, high schools are expected—with little or no guidance or assistance from the state—to prepare these students to meet state academic standards and graduation requirements, including passing exit assessments on academic subjects in English.

Among English language learners there is another group that is equally needy but for different reasons. These are long-term ELLs who are fluent in conversational English but whose academic language proficiency has not been sufficiently developed throughout their educational experience in U.S. schools to be able to read, write, and perform academically on grade level.

These students continually fall behind as the cognitive demands of academic English increase. Frequently these students are erroneously placed in English as a second language classes designed for immigrant limited English proficient students. Furthermore, their lack of academic success is blamed on the fact that they are second language learners. What these students need is explicit instruction to help them understand academic texts. This may include teaching vocabulary, teaching specific language structures, and scaffolding strategies to comprehend texts.

School districts across the nation have implemented many strategies to address the needs of English language learners. Many have established newcomer centers, providing accelerated language, cultural, and academic instruction to immigrant students when they first enter U. S. schools. Others have developed special classes combining academic subjects with language instruction, learning strategies and test-taking skills. Some high schools provide alternate paths to graduation so that older immigrant students can continue their studies after they are no longer eligible to enroll in high school. Yet, even these successful schools face obstacles posed by inflexible state requirements.

What can states do to insure that high school reform initiatives include successful strategies that address the needs of limited English proficient students? The following are suggested best practices.

1. Establish policies that require that all reform efforts be evaluated by measuring academic improvement in assessments of racial/ethnic groups including limited English proficient students. This is already beginning to happen due to the requirements of No Child Left Behind.

2. Develop and provide funding for statewide initiatives to provide systematic and sustained training for all high school teachers on improving academic instruction in all content areas and in implementing sheltered instructional approaches for English language learners. These initiatives can receive legislative support to insure that they are implemented.

3. Provide guidance in instructional practice and flexible scheduling to insure that ELLs have an opportunity to learn the knowledge and skills of the required curriculum. Successful program designs for comprehensive instruction of English language learners in middle school and high schools can be compiled and made available to school districts either as publications or web resources.

4. Increase public awareness of the need for creating smaller learning communities that address the needs of ELLs. Although breaking up large high schools into small learning communities is gaining popularity across the country and has been deemed quite successful in improving student achievement and attitudes towards school, it is important to insure that ELLs are not denied the same choice that mainstream students have in selecting the learning environment. Smaller learning communities should represent the diversity of the school population and not become another tracking system.

5. Support the development of creative instructional models that would allow immigrant students to demonstrate their academic knowledge in content areas and to obtain graduation credit. State laws often allow multiple subjects to be combined in one class allowing students to receive multiple credits. Several states have done away with Carnegie units and promote many paths to graduation, including internships and school/work partnerships.

6. Insure that teacher-training institutions require all teacher candidates to learn instructional strategies for specific diverse populations, including English language learners. Several states have instituted requirements for the preparation of all teachers that include teaching culturally diverse students and English language learners.

7. Establish statewide institutes to train secondary content area teachers in ELL teaching strategies, including sheltered instructional approaches and academic English language instruction. Teachers completing these training sessions would receive a special

endorsement to teach second language learners without having to obtain full ESL certification.

8. Provide incentives for community organizations and businesses to provide work-study programs that would offer students an opportunity to gain work experience in a variety of contexts, while learning English and academic subjects.

9. Promote programs that would allow high school students, including immigrant students who are English language learners, to enroll in community colleges and obtain dual credit. Several states have initiatives that encourage high school students to be concurrently enrolled in community colleges or universities and receive both high school and college credit for these courses.

10. Collaborate with partners and stakeholders to jointly develop web-based courses in U. S. History and U. S. Government in a variety of languages that immigrant students in different states could access to gain credit for these graduation requirements. This could lead to the development of other content area courses using sheltered instructional approaches in English and native language explanations in certain critical languages. Eventually, accredited high school courses could become available nationally to schools with immigrant English language learners.

11. Collaborate with partners and stakeholders to jointly support national accreditation services that would provide states with transcripts and equivalencies of courses taken in other countries. At present, many immigrant students cannot get credit for courses taken in their home countries because their particular school district is unable to translate foreign transcripts or is not knowledgeable of agencies that provide such services. By receiving graduation credit for subjects already taken, students can devote more time to developing English language skills and other required courses.

Conclusion

Demographic studies have predicted that American schools will continue to experience significant increases in the enrollment of language minorities who are English language learners throughout the next decades. There is no question that the academic success of these students is linked to the future success of the nation. At the federal level, the No Child Left Behind Act has placed stringent requirements on states to insure that English language learners acquire English in a timely manner. These ELL students must also attain the same high academic standards as all other student groups. States cannot expect schools to meet these requirements without clear state leadership and guidance in providing the kind of instructional programs and interventions necessary for ELL students in high school to attain the level of academic English proficiency necessary to complete the required content courses, pass high school exit assessments, graduate and succeed in post-secondary education or employment.

Other problems pose barriers in implementing the preceding recommendations. At the national level, there is an urgency for consistency in the definition and classification of limited English proficient students. Paralleling this need is an unrealistic approach to determining the adequate

yearly progress of LEP students, since those who are successful are eliminated from the classification. Until these and other issues are resolved within the framework of realities that face districts and campuses, comprehensive school reform efforts will exclude the very same population that has been targeted for help. English language learners, among other fragile populations facing similar issues, may indeed be "left behind."

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