

Designing Better High Schools for ELLs

RESEARCH SUMMARY, SPRING 2008

OFFICE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Introduction

MORE than 41,000 English Language Learners (ELLs) make up a little more than 12.3% of New York City's public high school student population. More than half (66.2% or 27,169 students) are in the ninth or tenth grades. Most high school ELLs (74.3%) are foreign born, entering the public school system at different ages, with disparate levels of language proficiency, both in English and their native languages. Also, approximately one out of four high school ELLs has received ELL services for more than six years, making them long-term ELLs. Adolescent newcomers and long-term ELLs face many of the same academic and social challenges, like varying levels of schooling and language proficiency, diverse family and work situations, and immigrant status. Their common challenge, however, is that they must accelerate language development while acquiring the content needed to meet State graduation requirements.

High school principals must engage these students as quickly and deeply as possible and for as long as possible to address these challenges. As the number of adolescent ELL newcomers grows in New York City and high schools nationwide, more attention is being paid to effective ways of accelerating learning, especially in literacy, so that these students can succeed in language and content areas.

Recently, several well-documented organizational and instructional elements have emerged in research on programs and practices that serve adolescent ELLs. These elements, when effectively incorporated into the instructional day, accelerate English and native language development as well as academic language and content learning. They are presented in this report as ways for school leaders to bolster, expand, and enhance current ELL program models. This is a summary of some existing models that principals, administrators, and teachers can consider as part of school improvement efforts.

Basic ELL Program Models

IN New York City schools, we provide bilingual programs (Transitional Bilingual Education and Dual Language) that strengthen students' native language development and subject matter mastery while they transition to English. We also provide English as a Second Language (ESL) programs that use strategies to help students develop new language skills and learn subject matter through English. These programs provide students with support tailored to their English proficiency levels. Program models, highlighted in the following descriptions, differ in the amount of instructional time spent in English and the native or target language.

- *Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE)* programs include language arts and subject matter instruction in students' native languages and English



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Check the Office of ELLs Web site for tools, resources, publications and professional development that can assist you with serving the needs of your ELLs.

www.nyc.gov/schools/academics/ELL

as well as intensive instruction in ESL. As a student develops English proficiency using the strengthened knowledge and academic skills acquired in the native language, instruction in English increases and native language instruction decreases. Supported by State funding, State and City rules mandate that high schools offer a TBE class when there are 20 or more ELLs of the same native language and grade. Creating TBE classes is contingent on sufficient numbers of ELLs and parental choice—not on whether bilingual classes already exist.

- *Dual Language* programs provide half of the instruction in English and half in the target language of the ELLs in the program (e.g., Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Russian). Students of the target language are taught alongside English-speaking students so that all students become fluent in both languages.
- *Freestanding English as a Second Language (ESL)* programs provide classes that are taught in English using ESL methodologies and native language support, when possible, for a specific amount of time as determined by their New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) scores.

Useful Organizational Elements

Appropriate placement and assessment: Students who are assessed, placed, and monitored based on their knowledge and skills are more likely to receive instruction that meets their needs. This is important in providing high school students with high quality—as opposed to remedial—instruction. For instance, one school district pools its resources to provide a centralized, all-day screening process for its ELLs, administering a battery of assessments to determine native language and content knowledge (Francis et al., 2006). Based on assessments, ELLs are placed in newcomer programs, programs with added language supports, or mainstream classes according to local and State rules. Once placed, effective programs measure student progress in ways that allow modifications to improve student performance. Diagnostic assessments—including formal assessments in the native language and with necessary accommodations, as well as portfolios and formative classroom assessments—help schools ascertain the diverse language and academic strengths of ELLs. Multiple means of assessment allow appropriate instruction without “over-testing.” Finally, schools that effectively serve ELLs establish multiple measures for examining student gains and instructional improvements among teachers and the school community. Regular quality review cycles (every six weeks), during which data is gathered and analyzed to track the development of students and teachers over time, allow appropriate program refinement. Currently, the Office of ELLs is finalizing a quality review process with accompanying resources (rubrics, walkthrough protocols) so that all high schools can participate, formally or informally, in program reviews.



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Dedicate planning or professional development time to discuss ELL assessment results, using them for instructional planning and student placement.

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Flexible program models: School-based programs and classes that appropriately address the needs of specialized groups must be flexible in terms of scheduling and grouping during the school day. This can mean building additional time into the schedule so ELLs stay in school longer. It could also mean allowing for programs, such as half-day internships, to keep students engaged, or building classes and programs into the school day or year that are specialized for certain groups. For instance, one school has five- and six-year individualized graduation plans for ELLs (Short and Fitzsimmons, 2006). Another is exploring ways to group cohorts of ELLs into theme-based small learning communities for three or more courses (Short and Fitzsimmons, 2006). Other effective programs allow special blocks of classes for newcomers, providing extra native language and literacy supports (Francis et al., 2006). Transitional programs that focus on academic literacy skills in the native language, content instruction with native language support, and intensive ESL support for those students below grade level (SIFE, newcomers, long-term ELLs) are strongly recommended. Principals should ask themselves critical questions, such as: Are course offerings designed to meet ELLs' diverse needs? How would ELLs benefit from being programmed first?

Extended programs: Because many high school ELLs must do double the work of English proficient students—developing basic and academic language while also learning new content—most promising programs extend the school year and/or the learning day. Making the official day longer allows ELLs to accelerate or recover courses or credits needed for graduation. Some schools have intensive summer programs that are aligned with the regular school year (a practice that our school system has promoted for the last two years). In addition, many schools use added time before and after school and on weekends to provide accelerated learning, tutoring, and test preparation.

Small class size: The research on the effect of small class size on student learning is well-documented. However, for ELLs, it is even more critical for teachers to build relationships with their students so that they can serve as models for appropriate language use. Also, small class sizes allow teachers, like those at Bronx International High School, to create supportive environments for academic discussions among students (Spaulding, et al., 2004). Programs that effectively target adolescent ELLs for accelerated learning—either during the school day or during extended hours—typically include some opportunities for small group or one-on-one learning. Several City schools that serve Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) provide small literacy classes for up to 12 students. These classes are co-taught by an ESL or Native Language Arts teacher and a reading specialist.

Newcomer programs or academies: Newcomer academies offer targeted social and academic supports for adolescent immigrants with limited English and different levels of formal education. In New York City, several schools for



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Like colleges that help manage a student's journey to graduation, commit to make graduation in four years the goal for ELLs.



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Schedule your school day from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. This not only gives students multiple opportunities for course credit accumulation, but it provides flexible schedules for teachers.

newcomers not only provide students with accelerated learning through a focus on literacy, native language supports, and intensive ESL and content area learning, but also acculturate them to their new city and country. A newcomer academy within a district or school can help accelerate students' transition with an intensive support structure; facilitate assessment and placement with a dedicated staff; build background knowledge; and advise students about life in the City.

Professional development: As needs grow more diverse among adolescent learners, all qualified high school teachers must know the basic principles of second language literacy instruction, understand second language acquisition and cross-cultural contexts, and provide ELLs with content-based instruction through academic language. This requires an administrative commitment to provide deep and sustained opportunities for professional development in the schools. In the City, professional development institutes are provided and organized by central staff, school support organizations (SSOs), and schools. Administrators should meet with ELL staff members regularly to analyze and strengthen instructional strategies such as scaffolding (a teaching method that helps students access difficult content), use of appropriate materials, and connections to student experiences.

Resources, collaborations, and school guidance: Successful schools effectively target resources, position themselves with key constituencies, and provide strong school-based guidance so that ELLs receive high-quality instruction in an environment that is safe, supportive, and connected to the broader school community. A school culture mindful of the contribution that students from diverse cultures and experiences make to the school as a whole fosters learning and achievement (Faltis and Coulter, 2007). A strong school-based leadership team must build structures and schedules within the school for a comprehensive service model for students. They must also engage guidance professionals and teachers of ELLs in planning and professional development that addresses cultural sensitivity as well as instructional goals. The school must provide ELLs with frequent access to guidance staff, which includes grade advisors, college office counselors, school social workers, Academic Intervention Services teachers, librarians, and mentors, and welcome strong parent and community involvement. City principals address planning and resources for ELLs through regular accountability plans and quality reviews, including student and parent surveys. However, building the school community by engaging families and using neighborhood resources can strengthen ELL services and opportunities for college and career guidance.

Effective Instructional Elements

Native language support and program development: An effective way to support adolescent ELLs is to offer both language development and support for content instruction in the native language. Native language arts



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Consider offering your own newcomer program and/or classes, provided for a discrete amount of time (e.g., semester, two years), to meet ELLs' educational and acculturation needs.



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Consider activities or clubs for ELLs that address study and test-taking skills, college and career planning, peer relationships, communication, problem-solving, decision-making conflict resolution, and /or multicultural awareness to raise achievement and create a sense of belonging.

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development accelerates the literacy gains in both the native language and English, validates the prior knowledge students bring, and bolsters self-esteem. Bilingual programs are preferred for high school ELLs, as they provide the most native language support. Dual Language programs are especially effective for bilingual students who perform at grade level, as they are able to transfer skills easily between languages. However, if a full bilingual program is not offered, home language classes for native speakers can provide powerful language development gains in the native language and English. For instance, one City high school prepared Hispanic/Latino students for the English Regents exam by accompanying regular ESL/ELA requirements with a series of Spanish Native Language Arts courses beginning in the ninth grade. These courses also prepared them for the Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish Language and Literature exam. This strategy was doubly beneficial for ELLs since they did well on the English Regents and gained college credits for AP courses (Menken, 2006).

ESL through content: High schools receive students with varied levels of content background knowledge, literacy skills, and English language development. In order to maximize instructional time, ESL instruction should focus on developing English skills and building background knowledge in content areas. Language instruction using content and theme-based instruction, especially related to the experiences of ELLs, motivates students to be more engaged and draws on what they already know (Short and Fitzsimmons, 2007).

Academic language: While many high school ELLs may demonstrate everyday linguistic abilities in their native language and/or English, they often lack specialized language, literacy and reasoning skills necessary to perform at grade level. Strategies for boosting academic language include engaging ELLs in relevant topics; integrating themes across classes so that language is reinforced; and providing small-group learning to facilitate academic discussions. Also, students should have literacy-rich environments with appropriate texts (Spaulding et al., 2004). City educators can increase their effectiveness in academic language instruction by learning and using strategies from the Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) professional development series.

Reading and Writing: Adolescent ELLs, especially SIFE and long-term ELLs, often lack the basic reading and writing skills necessary to graduate or meet the demands of college-level coursework. Rather than providing remedial programs that focus on basic skills, effective programs anchor reading and writing strategies in content areas. Teachers use strategies to strengthen the components of reading (e.g., phonological development, fluency, and comprehension) and writing (grammar, spelling, writing mechanics, and composition) within and across content areas.

Vocabulary development: It is estimated that high school students need to command some 50,000 words to master high school coursework. Without



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Learn about QTEL professional development and SIFE Initiative grants from the Office of ELLs. Lead a team from your school to focus on these areas.

specific vocabulary-building interventions, beginner ELLs typically acquire 3,000 new words a year, leaving them far behind their English-proficient peers (Short and Fitzsimmons, 2007). Successful programs focus on deep vocabulary development, teaching the meaning of words using a variety of methods (visuals, graphic organizers, demonstration), and providing effective word-learning strategies (word deconstruction, cognates, contextual clues, using reference materials).

Technology: Learning to use technology is a necessity in today's marketplace. Also, scaffolded instruction that integrates technology can provide effective opportunities for ELLs to enhance reading and writing skills. Typically, use of multimedia to support instruction raises student motivation and provides multiple access points to content. Effective programs that use technology often highlight electronic student portfolios, as they allow students to save and share their work, tracking their own progress over time.

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