



EDUCATING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS:

Instructional Approaches and Teacher Collaboration in Philadelphia Public Schools

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Districts, charter management organizations, and individual schools can learn a great deal from each other about strategies for creating robust and supportive learning environments for English Language Learners (ELLs). This brief highlights key findings about how Philadelphia public schools were crafting instructional approaches to serve their ELLs and creating possibilities for teachers to collaborate to strengthen teaching and learning.

Overview

In Philadelphia, a growing and increasingly diverse population of English Language Learners (ELLs) is intensifying demands on the city's public schools as they work to meet the educational needs of these students. As in many cities across the country, educators in Philadelphia are searching for ways to more efficiently and effectively meet the needs of ELLs and close long-standing achievement gaps¹ between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers.ⁱ

Several instructional program types exist for the education of English language learners (e.g., bilingual programs, English for Speakers of Other Languages [ESOL], Sheltered Instruction). The types of programs that are implemented in schools vary widely and are usually the result of school-based decisions, guided by available resources and personnel. More research is needed to determine which instructional programs work best for ELLs and under what conditions.ⁱⁱ While some researchers and educators continue to debate bilingual versus ESOL approaches, some now focus across approaches on the quality of instruction and identifying effective strategies to help ELLs succeed, regardless of program type.ⁱⁱⁱ Meanwhile, on the ground, teachers and administrators have to make decisions about how best to serve the ELLs in their schools. While the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania mandates that local education agencies (LEAs) provide a program for students whose dominant language is not English, the Department of Education (PDE) does not direct LEAs to use specific instructional approaches. As a PDE staff person noted, "Instructional delivery models and program, whether [districts] implement ESL or bilingual—those are local decisions based on their resources and student demographics."

Districts, charter management organizations, and individual schools can learn a great deal from each other about strategies for creating robust and supportive learning environments for ELLs. This brief highlights key findings about how Philadelphia public schools were crafting instructional approaches to serve their ELLs and creating possibilities for teachers to collaborate to strengthen teaching and learning.

This brief is part of a larger project focused on better understanding the characteristics and needs of ELLs in Philadelphia's public K-12 schools as well as how schools are serving these students. Leaders in district and charter schools commissioned the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium (PERC) to work with them on a series of studies to determine how best to meet the needs of ELLs. A qualitative study launched in November 2015, followed by a quantitative study in April 2016.

Schools with strong ELL student achievement, and whose approaches to serving them reflected an array of programmatic models, were selected to participate in the qualitative study. Specifically, we examined student growth on the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS) for ELLs² to identify schools whose ACCESS growth scores were categorized as 'Reinforce' or 'Model' (the two highest tiers on the district's school performance framework). We then consulted with leadership from the Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs in the School District of Philadelphia to ensure the sample included adequate coverage of the various programmatic models employed throughout the district.

This brief is built on input from a wide variety of stakeholders:

- two interviews with Deputy Chief of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs in the School District of Philadelphia,

¹ Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress have consistently shown **large gaps in achievement** among ELLs compared to their native English-speaking peers **for some 40 years**. In high school, ELLs tend to have **lower GPAs and earn fewer course credits** and are **more likely to drop out** compared to their native English-speaking peers.

² We utilized ACCESS growth indicators reported in the School District of Philadelphia School Progress Reports in 2013-2014 and 2014-2015.

- two focus groups with Multilingual Managers and one Curriculum Specialist in the Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs in the School District of Philadelphia,
- interviews with administrators and/or ELL program leads at five district and four charter schools exhibiting success while serving a broad range of English Language Learners,
- focus groups with ESL teachers and general education teachers in two district and three³ charter schools, and
- one interview with the Bilingual Education Advisor in the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

A full report describing the methodology and overall findings of the larger project, including an analysis of students' paths to language proficiency and exit from ESL programs, will be disseminated in August 2016.

KEY TERMS TO KNOW:

Dual Language or Bilingual — This educational program develops children's literacy in two languages. Children are taught for some portion of the day or week in one-language and the other portion in a second language. As of the 2015-16 school year, all Philadelphia bilingual programs were English-Spanish. Most bilingual models aim to help students develop proficiency in both languages, though some transitional bilingual programs use bilingual instruction with the goal of transitioning children to English only instruction. ESOL teachers may provide additional support for some ELLs in dual language programs. This is a less common model in Philadelphia, with a small number of district and charter schools implementing this approach.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) — The predominant ESOL instructional approach across district and charter schools utilizes certified ESOL teachers to provide support for English Language Learners. ESOL instruction is usually in English with little use of home language. ESOL teachers may teach in any content area, but their work often focuses on the literacy block in elementary schools and on English classes in high school. For students demonstrating lower levels of English proficiency, ESOL teachers may be the literacy or English teacher of record. In other cases, they often work with ELLs assigned to a general education class using one or more of the following approaches:

- ***Push-in:*** The ESOL teacher supports ELLs in the general education classroom.
- ***Pull-out:*** The ESOL teacher pulls students out of the general education classroom to work with them individually or in small groups.
- ***Co-teaching:*** The ESOL and general teacher plan together and share classroom leadership and teaching responsibilities.

Sheltered Instruction (SI) — SI designates content classes (e.g., science, social studies, math) composed solely of ELLs and combines the teaching of subject content and language skills. It does not imply a particular pedagogical approach. Either ESOL teachers or general education teachers may teach these classes. **ESOL-friendly classes** include a mix of ELLs and non-ELLs and may include some SI techniques.

³ At one charter school and one district school, only ESL teachers participated in a focus group.

About this Brief

While the information contained within this brief is not exhaustive, the key findings below present a starting place for sharing strategies, discussion, and problem-solving across schools. Researchers reviewed the most salient findings that emerged across sectors and stakeholders, looking for natural relationships across findings. The individual findings fell into one of two categories: (1) strategies schools use to strengthen teaching and learning for ELLs and (2) how schools build teacher capacity to serve ELLs; the brief is organized accordingly.

What Strategies do Schools Use to Strengthen Teaching and Learning for ELLs?

PDE endorses a best practice of adaptations/modifications in the delivery of content instruction by all teachers. Recommendations are based on the student’s language proficiency level and the Pennsylvania English Language Proficiency Standards (PA ELPS) for ELLs, as well as the Pennsylvania academic standards.^{iv} PDE positions the PA ELPS and the WIDA Standards Framework as central resources for teachers and districts in this task.

Giving ELLs access to the content and skills being taught in general education classes was a priority for both charter and district schools. Schools sought to do this as much as possible, but it was especially common – and easier to do – in classes with students with higher levels of English language proficiency. For example, one elementary principal noted that the school used the core curriculum, rather than a curriculum designed for ELLs (e.g., *National Geographic Reach*). “That is where the ESOL teacher should be the specialist [in terms of] modifying the language” so that students can access the core curriculum.

A high school ESOL coordinator described infusing classes for high level ELLs with more components of the school’s core curricula: “The higher up you go in terms of [ELLs’] language and literacy [skills], the closer you get to the [general education] literacy classes...in the 9th, 10th, 11th grade. We have components of that infused in, in terms of the novels that they read, projects that they do.”

Across grade levels, sectors, and content areas, teachers were committed to adapting or creating curricula to better meet ELLs’ needs. Many teachers found that off-the-shelf textbooks and curricula did not fully meet their students’ needs; while some teachers relied primarily on textbook series (e.g., *National Geographic’s Reach* or *Edge* or the *Vision* series) and brought in supplementary materials, others created most of their materials themselves.

Teachers often drew on *WIDA’s Can Do Descriptors* to shape instruction. When elementary teachers focused instructional time on guided reading, they drew on the same leveled readers that general education students used. A few schools had access to online tools, such as *Reading A-Z*, *Read Works*, and *Achieve 3000*, from which they could pull readings focused on the content or skills they wanted to teach and at the levels students needed.

Some teachers struggled with lack of access to resources and the demands of adapting materials for wide-ranging student needs. As a result, they

We are pretty much on our own with resources. There are no texts or workbooks, etc...Every piece of material that we get, we need to change and adapt.

- General Education Teacher

needed to create most or all of their materials. This was especially true for high school and content (e.g., science, social studies) teachers.

Educators described needing additional ELL resources, including more materials in students' first language, both for ESOL and dual language students, as well as materials which high school content teachers could use to teach grade-level content.

Across schools, ESOL staff and/or administrators described a continuous improvement mindset.

These schools periodically adjusted and tweaked some aspects of their program, based on assessments of how well they were serving students. For example, a district and a charter elementary school both decided to move from primary reliance on a textbook to using the textbook as a resource and focusing ESOL instruction on guided reading. Another elementary principal moved her school to a co-teaching model to enhance instruction for ELLs. One high school has the goal of creating specialized content classes for ELLs with the lowest level of English language proficiency; currently content classes span all levels, which makes it challenging for teachers to address all students' needs.

Schools developed a range of strategies to provide additional instruction and support for ELLs outside of traditional class time.

Many of these strategies focused on the high school level and on creating additional class time for ELLs. This may reflect the fact that when ELLs arrive later or still have ELL status in high school, the academic language they need to master is much more complex. Approaches included:

- **Support class.** A high school rostered ELLs to an every other day language lab class, during which an ESOL teacher provided homework help and support in developing language skills.
- **Electives.** Another high school rostered 9th-11th grade ELLs to an elective focused on reading, writing, speaking and/or listening.
- **ELLs integrated into support for all students.** In a seminar class at a third high school, all students received daily support, alternating between math and English. Level 1 and 2 ELLs participated in an ELL only class; higher levels were integrated into general classes.
- **Homework help.** The third high school also offered after-school homework help from teachers and/or para-professionals.
- **Volunteers.** An elementary school engaged college students and other volunteers who spoke the same first language as the majority of their ELLs. These volunteers served as both role models and tutors.
- **Community connections.** One elementary school tried to help students connect to community organizations where they could develop their language and literacy skills in their home language. This was both a way of supporting students and families and because stronger language and literacy skills in their home language enhance ELLs' learning of English.

How do Schools Build Teacher Capacity to Serve ELLs?

Collaboration between ESOL and general education teachers is central to creating a strong ESOL program. As stated in the School District of Philadelphia's [English Language Learner Programming Handbook](#), "In order to effectively teach language through academic content, it is necessary for content area and ESOL staff to work and plan together. Collaboration between ESOL and classroom teachers is one of the best ways to serve English Language Learners." Below, we identify both challenges to and promising practices for creating the capacity to serve ELL students.

Many general education teachers lacked training in how to teach ELLs. General education teachers working with ELLs do not need to be certified in ESOL instruction.

One high school ELL coordinator noted that when

new content teachers are assigned to classes with ELLs, they may not have common planning time with other teachers who work with ELLs or with the coordinator. The coordinator would like the state to require that content teachers working with ELLs be ESOL-certified.

That's a huge problem...so there isn't much that I can do except hand them the can-do descriptors, and then they will bounce things off of me and sometimes I'll go into classrooms.

- ELL Coordinator

Turnover among general education teachers can strain limited resources for professional development. Two schools provided training on educating ELLs to all general education teachers; however, even at those schools, teacher turnover sometimes introduced a need to replicate this multiple times throughout the year, creating additional professional development needs in a context with limited professional learning opportunities.

Collaboration between ESOL teachers and general education teachers strengthened general education teachers' capacity to serve ELLs. One teacher in a co-teaching model described what she learned by collaborating with her ESOL partner:

One of the biggest things I've learned is a heightened awareness of what my ELL students are going through. [My partner] pointed out to me things like, 'When you said this in that lesson, you needed to stop and define it.' She made me much more aware of my teaching practices, that vocabulary is huge. I made way too many assumptions about how much I was saying. Could the students really understand?...I really changed the way I delivered instruction with a lens towards even what I consider to be simple, basic words; there could be students in the room that don't know what I'm talking about...I needed to be much more intentional and proactive about being clearer in my language. So, that was really helpful. The truth is, that once I became more aware of that, and I would talk to children individually in conferences, she was absolutely right. They didn't know what I was talking about. So, it was a real eye-opener.

Yet across schools, many teachers and ELL coordinators reported a lack of dedicated time for collaboration. Though schools may have common planning time scheduled for grade groups or content areas, few have dedicated common planning time for general education and ESOL teachers to collaborate. As one bilingual teacher highlighted, "It [collaboration] wasn't something that is necessarily built into our planning time, which is difficult because my [free] times may not work out with the times that those [ESOL] teachers have. Although I will say that if I needed to collaborate I could definitely reach out, but it's just sort-of difficult...it would be nice to have a common time to plan." A high school ESOL coordinator noted that while some teachers collaborated together easily, the school could not rely on collaboration just happening and also needed structures to support it, "A lot of [collaboration] is organic, but we can't always rely on it being organic."

Despite challenges finding time to collaborate, schools and teachers used a range of strategies to facilitate collaboration to support instruction for ELLs. Table 1 provides a brief description of opportunities for collaboration between teachers that emerged in this study.

Table 1. Examples of Opportunities for Teacher Collaboration

OPPORTUNITY	EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD
Time in the daily or weekly schedule	<p>One school with a co-teaching model designated a weekly meeting time for general education - ESOL teacher collaboration during the school day. Another gave part-time para-professionals a daily planning period in order to facilitate collaboration.</p> <p>Another school scheduled weekly early dismissal for professional development that allowed time for teachers to collaborate with and learn from each other.</p> <p>Another school added a period at the end of the day that both enabled students to get help from teachers and teachers to work together if needed.</p>
Sharing lesson plans	<p>Often this sharing took place on-line (e.g., general education and ESOL teachers accessed the same Google doc, which the ESOL teacher could use to guide lesson plans).</p> <p>One teacher emailed the ESOL teacher her lesson plans for feedback about adaptations and modifications aligned to ELLs' needs.</p>
Monitoring students' grades	<p>Some teachers had the ability to monitor student grades on-line, which enabled them to identify where students were struggling and prioritize follow up and collaboration with those teachers.</p>
Informal in-person meetings using whatever time was available	<p>Teachers voluntarily met during prep, lunch, and before or after school.</p> <p>Teachers in a co-teaching situation described daily, informal communication in addition to their weekly meetings.</p>
Joining grade group and other meetings	<p>ESOL teachers sometimes were able to attend grade group or team meetings. Even if those meetings were not themselves a forum for collaboration, they were able to learn about teachers' current classroom activities and draw on this information to guide their teaching.</p>
Sharing an office	<p>In one school, special education and ESOL teachers shared an office, which greatly facilitated their collaboration.</p>
Cross-disciplinary collaboration among general education teachers working with ELLs	<p>At one high school, teachers said they found it helpful when their ELL coordinator supplied teachers from multiple content areas with a list of common words important in academic language to focus on for a week. They also highlighted a process of examining and providing feedback on each other's lesson plans, with a focus on how best to serve ELLs.</p>

What's Next?

The information contained within this brief highlights a few key issues within the broader landscape of instructional approaches for English Language Learners in Philadelphia. This brief is designed to provide a starting point for a broader conversation about strengthening instruction and outcomes for ELLs. This project serves as a platform to support this dialogue; practitioners across sectors have wisdom and practical experience to share as part of this effort, as well as important questions and challenges to raise to inform both practice and research. PERC is interested in using research to identify areas of success that speak directly to these questions and challenges.

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WHAT IS PERC?

PERC is an innovative, cross-sector partnership designed to provide robust analysis on some of Philadelphia's most pressing education issues. Housed at Research for Action (RFA), an independent non-profit education research organization, PERC's research agenda is set by the School District of Philadelphia and representatives of the city's charter school sector. PERC draws on the rich research expertise in the city—both within RFA and from Philadelphia's three major research universities—to produce rigorous, timely, and actionable research aligned to the information needs of the city's public schools.

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