

Committing to ALL means ALL:

Designing a Systemwide Approach in Support of English Learners



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RIGOROUS LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

Committing to *ALL means ALL*: Designing a Systemwide Approach in Support of English Learners

How many mission and vision statements in America's schools and districts include the words "ALL means ALL?" Throughout the years, I have wondered if we truly understand the significance of these words and are fully committed to doing the difficult work to manifest them in our schools.

My journey toward understanding what it means to educate ALL students began during my first teaching experience, which brought me to a bilingual, third grade classroom in the fall of 1994. My class roster in this urban elementary school in Southern New England included 32 Hispanic students who spoke mostly Spanish. They represented five countries in the Caribbean and Latin America and were at varying levels of English and native language proficiency. Initially, I was overwhelmed by the challenge that this class presented. Nonetheless, almost immediately, I felt comforted by the fact that there was a strong bond connecting all of us: language and culture. However, this comfort quickly faded when I realized that the significant academic language and content area needs of my bilingual students were not equally matched with a significant level of teacher support and resources. From that point on, it became clear to me that our schools and districts were not equipped to create a system that fosters achievement for ALL students.

Throughout my trajectory as an urban educator—from elementary and secondary teacher, to middle school assistant principal, elementary principal, and then K-12 English Learners (EL) Programs Director—my passion and interest in ensuring that ALL students have a fair chance at succeeding in school and beyond has been my personal call-to-action. Although our current education system has made progress toward the goal of rigorous and relevant learning for ALL students, we still have work to do, especially if we want every student to be successful in college, career, and life.

Lessons Learned Along the Way

ALL means ALL demands that we are diligent about subgroup achievement gaps and the many variables impacting this gap. The deep-rooted idea of "these kids" and "those kids" needs to be eradicated and replaced with "our students"—systemwide. In order to create an education system where ALL students are encouraged to reach their academic achievement potential, everyone in the system must begin by adopting a growth mindset. Everyone—from teachers, to building leaders, to those in the district office, the Board of Education and parents—must orient and commit him or herself toward building the system's capacity to teach ALL students with equity and access.

Several years ago while teaching at a large public high school, a non-English speaking student who had recently emigrated from the Caribbean was assigned to my homeroom. When I asked him in his native language how he was progressing in his classes, he commented that all classes were difficult with the exception of remedial math. As it turned out, he had been taking pre-calculus prior to coming to America. Because he could not communicate with his teacher, the registrar explained to me, he was expected to fail. Thus, he was placed in remedial math despite the fact that his transcript showed success in pre-calculus. Needless to say, I fought the battle all the way up to the principal, and he was eventually registered in the class he deserved and earned a B+.

English Learners need to accelerate, not slow down, their linguistic and academic achievement. Yet, many high schools continue to track them into remedial literacy and math courses. This is contrary to the body of research that highlights the damaging and lasting effects of this subtle bigotry of lowered expectations (Koelsch, 2006).

To fully integrate English Learners (EL) into our education system with equity and high expectations, it is essential that the work goes beyond effective teaching practices and strategies (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008). Sustainable improvement for ALL EL students requires systemwide cultural competence. In a positive sign, according to Hanover Research (2014), school districts are increasingly implementing institutional, strategic approaches to build cultural competence capacity. These approaches address the following:

- school/district culture
- school policy
- professional development
- family and community involvement.

One example of how such an effort can manifest is depicted by the Boulder Valley School District in Colorado, which adopted a school policy that includes cultural competence as one of the five standards for teacher evaluation. This bold step represents their commitment to valuing and promoting understanding of student diversity and all its implications.

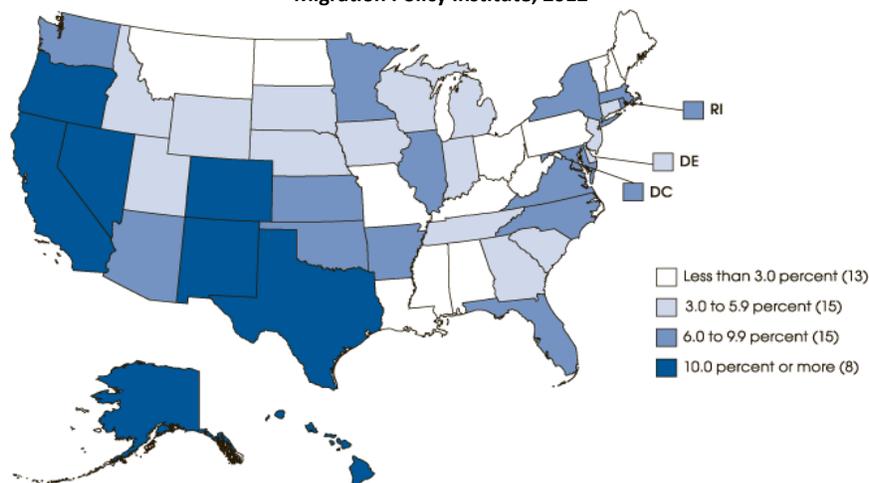
Changing Student Demographics

According to the 2010 EL report from the National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, there are approximately 49.9 million students in PK-12 public schools. Of these, approximately 5.3 million, or 10.7 percent, were identified as EL. The report emphasized that while the total number of PK-12 students increased by 8.5 percent from the 1997-98 school year to the 2007-08 school year, the number of EL students increased by 53.2 percent in the same period. In the State of California, EL enrollment is greater than the combined total of EL students in Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois, and Arizona. Other states that experienced rapid growth in EL enrollment over the same 10-year period from 1998 to 2008 were South Carolina and Indiana, with a percentage growth of 800 and 400, respectively (Batalova & McHugh, 2010).

Hispanics represent the fastest growing segment of the United States population. According to Colby & Ortman (2015), this segment is projected to increase from 115 million in 2014 to 119 million in 2060, representing an increase of 115 percent. It is projected that by 2044, more than half of the total US population will belong to a minority group. Considering that 79 percent of English Learners have Spanish language backgrounds, should these population projections come to fruition, then we can expect to have EL students represented in every classroom in America. The following is a graphical breakdown illustrating the percentages of EL public school students by state for the 2011-12 school year.

Percentage of Public School EL Students by State: School Year 2011–12

Migration Policy Institute, 2012



The growing achievement gap between ELs and their English monolingual counterparts is startling. The 2013 NAEP data showed that the achievement gap between EL and non-EL students in the NAEP reading assessment was 38 points at the fourth grade level and 45 points at the eighth grade level (NCES, 2013). In mathematics, the achievement gap was 25 points at the fourth grade level and 41 points at the eighth grade level.

Moving the Needle in EL Achievement: It Takes Everyone

Our district's EL population represented approximately 12 percent of the overall student population. This segment significantly affected our district and state's achievement data. The achievement gap between our district's EL and non-EL students was alarming, particularly in reading, with only 19 percent of EL students in grades 3 through 8 and 12 percent in grades 9 through 12 achieving proficiency or higher in the state assessments.

To say it is a challenge to rally a school system and its many stakeholders under a common language and a common vision is an understatement. But during my four-year tenure as the district's EL Programs Director, I had an opportunity to collaborate with a team of educators who understood what ALL means ALL meant. We learned that once a systemwide commitment to this belief is established, everyone—from the classroom to the district office—was primed and motivated for the difficult work of transforming and preparing the system for rigorous and relevant learning for ALL students.

The EL department, in full collaboration with our district's *organizational leaders, instructional leaders and teachers*, began designing a systemwide, step-by-step process meant to increase teacher and leader capacity to support EL students and, ultimately, see meaningful improvement in their performance. That process, which was developed and refined over four years, had the following student achievement outcomes:

- Increased the share of EL students making English progress from approximately 55 percent to **100 percent**, as defined by our state’s benchmark for measuring English progress in EL
- Increased reading proficiency by **18 percent** for eighth grade ELs in the state standardized test
- Increased EL proficiency in grade ten by **13 percent** in reading and **23 percent** in writing according to the state’s standardized test.

Through a similar approach, Broad Ripple Middle High School in Indiana also recorded significant achievements for EL students. During the 2011-12 school year, the International Center for Leadership in Education partnered with the state of Indiana to devise and implement a systemwide process targeted at improving academic achievement for ALL students. At Broad Ripple specifically, its diverse tenth graders saw 20 percent and 17 percent gains in end-of-year test pass rates in English 10 and Algebra I, respectively.

When undertaking any initiative to promote high expectations and improve student achievement for ALL students, the entire system must be aligned around a shared vision and objective. As Bill Daggett has observed, it is only through a well-designed, systemwide approach that achievement gains can be sustained (Daggett, 2014).

A Best Practice for Designing and Implementing Systemwide, ALL Means ALL Learning

The following steps summarize the process we used to create and deliver on a systemwide commitment to achievement for ALL students. As a function of winning buy-in and participation at every level of the system, each of these steps is purposeful and essential.

STEP 1: Analyzing Data: Mapping English Learners’ Characteristics—It is important to have a firsthand understanding of and subsequently map the characteristics that define each state, district and school’s EL population. It was through this process that we came to understand that not all of our EL students were the same. If we were going to make good on our ALL means ALL commitment, we needed to have an in-depth analysis of each EL subgroup. We looked at a variety of demographic, programmatic and achievement variables, including:

- Linguistic, race and cultural backgrounds
- Family/community make up and transiency patterns of EL population
- EL program enrolled and EL programs available
- EL classification
- Social and academic language proficiency in English and native language when possible
- Performance in formative and statewide assessments
- Achievement between EL and non-EL student groups, plus gaps within the EL group.

By culling through this data, we were able to ascertain areas that posed challenges to the entire process, while at the same time identifying possible opportunities. For additional insight, our school district engaged in a series of meetings with focus groups targeting key stakeholders, with the aim of developing hypotheses as to why the achievement gap existed. With a clear picture of the forces driving our district’s achievement gap and opportunities for change taking shape, our next step was to determine if our district systematically and successfully supported teachers and ELs toward improvement.

STEP 2: Assess Systemwide Readiness in Support of English Learners—To assess our district’s ability to support EL achievement, the district-wide leadership team (composed of the Superintendent and his Cabinet, Program Directors, Content Area Supervisors) engaged in a series of evidence-based conversations aimed at validating or discarding the possible achievement gap hypotheses. The result was consensus around one hypothesis that explained our EL achievement gap: the lack of instructional and leadership capacity systemwide in support of EL achievement. It was evident to every key stakeholder in the system that a strategic and actionable plan needed to be put in place immediately if the EL and all achievement gaps were to be eradicated.

Armed with robust data and observations, our district’s leadership team continued to collaborate in the development of a strategic, overarching plan to close achievement gaps. Our objective was to set SMART goals (specific, measureable, attainable, realistic and timely), determine strategic implementation of each, identify appropriate success metrics, and devise a protocol to closely monitor the impact of adult actions on EL achievement. Our systemwide priorities aligned to our systemwide goals focused on two key areas in support of EL teaching and learning:

1. increasing internal capacity with our organizational and instructional leaders
2. increasing instructional capacity with ALL teachers—not only EL teachers.

That these became the priorities and goals of the whole school system, not only those of the EL department, indicated a significant, game-changing, and promising shift in mindset for our entire district.

The departments of human resources, operations, finance, curriculum and professional learning, with full support of the Superintendent, Cabinet and Board of Education, all aligned and rallied behind the goals we had adopted as a school system where ALL means ALL. This broad support presented us with the freedom to implement new initiatives and programs that would aid and expedite closing the achievement gap. To that end, we then built a multi-year, comprehensive professional learning plan targeting leader and teacher development in key EL areas.

STEP 3: Build Systemwide EL Capacity through Comprehensive and Ongoing Professional Learning—As we set out to build a comprehensive professional learning program, prior experience told us we needed first to define the specific skills and knowledge staff would need to gain to be equipped to teach ALL students effectively or support teachers to that end. We determined these priority areas by engaging organizational leaders, instructional leaders, teachers, parents and community members in a series of data driven work sessions to identify what had the most significant impact on student achievement. The EL team organized and analyzed the resulting qualitative and quantitative data and named three key priorities of professional learning:

1. second language acquisition
2. academic language development
3. cultural competency.

Importantly, we knew that for systemwide changes to be possible, we had to provide professional development for ALL teachers and leaders, regardless of the students and/or communities they served.

To best serve a diverse staff, we devised a custom professional learning plan that included high-quality anchor trainings in our priority areas and ongoing job-embedded coaching for teachers and leaders.

Upon successfully rolling out the professional development program, we saw remarkable improvements in the leading indicators we established to monitor improvements in EL learning. One of those indicators was changes in leader and teacher mindsets and their capacity to support ELs. Qualitative implementation data showed that principals and other site leaders were successfully applying newly acquired instructional leadership skills in support of EL teaching and learning. For example, some school administrators started to use EL course placement and achievement data to ensure that the school was providing access and equal opportunity for EL students to participate in rigorous content area classes, not just basic or remedial classes. Similarly, several principals and site leaders shared that prior to the implementation of the systemwide EL professional learning plan, they struggled in the observation and evaluation of EL classrooms due to a lack of basic knowledge of EL teaching and learning. They eventually understood that in order to assess and support effective EL instruction, they had to make learning more relevant to ALL students.

Another leading indicator that demonstrated remarkable improvement was the number of highly effective core area teachers requesting classes with high EL density. So pervasive was the systemwide shift in mindset that several department chairs and highly effective teachers volunteered to trade some of their senior AP classes for sheltered content EL classes. In many instances, the EL and content area teacher worked collaboratively to co-teach a sheltered content EL class. The goals of these classes were to:

- engage students in rigorous content learning while supporting their EL needs
- build reciprocal instructional capacity in both content teaching and EL strategies.

Today more than ever, the instructional shifts and academic demands inherent in the Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Assessments call for a shift in the role of EL teachers (TESOL International Association, 2013). If we are to build internal EL instructional capacity systemwide, especially with content area teachers, job-embedded coaching can prove particularly powerful to that end.

STEP 4: Monitor Progress Frequently and Purposefully—A well-designed progress monitoring and evaluation plan was required to track goal attainment, expose issues, indicate that the proper support parameters were in place, and identify where more support was needed. Also, the plan took into consideration the frequency and purpose of data team meetings and other collaboration structures, such as professional learning communities (PLC), in order to ensure swift and strategic corrections as needed.

We held regular site and district level data team meetings to discuss the most recent data, draw understanding, and use insights to inform each step of the process in meeting the needs of ALL students.

Final Thoughts

As depicted by available demographic data, it is a fact that we will continue to enroll EL students in each of our schools and our classrooms. The question is: will we embrace and challenge them or relegate them to lowered expectations by default? ALL means ALL demands that district and school leaders and teachers rally behind the common belief that ALL students can achieve and excel—in school, careers and life.

If it has not yet been addressed, “ALL means ALL” should be the first item on the next school board, superintendent’s cabinet, principal or teacher meeting agenda.

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