

A Comprehensive Approach to Teaching English Language Learners

One district strives to meet a range of academic and emotional needs

BY SERGIO PÁEZ



Last June, a father and his four children arrived at the Dr. James A. Caradonio New Citizens Center in Worcester, Mass. They were refugees from Iraq, where they had been persecuted for their religious beliefs. They escaped their native land in the middle of the night, leaving behind 271 books, that the father, an electrical engineer, had, hoped to pass on to his children. They fled first to Syria and then entered the United States as part of a resettlement program. When they first arrived, the father told us that his 13-year-old son used to count bombs as they exploded in their homeland.

These children are among many refugees who arrive in the Worcester Public Schools. In a district with more than 23,000 students, about 32 percent of them (7,300 students) are English language learners (ELLs), including about 8 percent whose education has been significantly inter-

A Complete Overhaul

In the last few years, the Worcester Public Schools has overhauled the organization and restructured all language acquisition programs. As a result, in 2008 we had 2,002 students classified as beginning English as a second language (ESL) learners, and by 2011 that number was down to 308. We saw similar success with learners at the intermediate

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Meanwhile, Massachusetts' school districts have been struggling with a controversial law enacted in 2002 that requires ELLs to learn English in English-only environments rather than bilingual classrooms and for "ideally one year" even though the federal guideline, the district examined every aspect of program implementation and developed an action plan to correct its Sc-

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In Memphis, a participating district in the MET Project, teachers wanted to do further study of their footage to look closer at how they were coming across in the classroom. Then they started sharing the film clips with trusted colleagues to get feedback about their classroom presentations. "The teachers discovered that the video footage was a great tool for helping to transform their practice," says Monica Jordan, the Memphis City Schools' coordinator of reflective practice. "They went above and beyond and took it to the next level."

That process has now been incorporated into the district's professional development program. The district has cameras in 113 of the district's 200 schools, and teachers are given the opportunity to film themselves. The cameras provide a 360-degree view, capturing both the teacher's presentation and the engagement level of the students. The videos are uploaded into the district's password-protected server and serve two purposes: Teachers can invite a colleague to access their videos to discuss how they've done, and they can also alert their principals that the lesson they taped can be used as one of the observations required under the evaluation system.

The evaluator and teacher can then sit down and review the video, which can provide telling insights into teaching practice. "They can put a particular vignette on pause and really unpack the practice in a way an administrator couldn't do before," says Jordan. "This way it's not a battle of memories. They can focus on the nuance of what happened. And teacher and administrator can craft a plan together on how to improve."

The new professional development is tied directly to the rubrics. Memphis' observation rubric comprises 11 indicators known as Teacher Moves. One such "move" is asking higher-order questions of students, which encourages students to think more deeply. The district has held workshops on the manifold ways teachers carry this out. There are videos of the workshops and video clips of teachers asking higher-order questions. The clips also include a PowerPoint presentation and scripting. "The rubric provides a common language, and opportunities to have these conversations," says Jordan. "The videos provide a guide to how teachers can engage in continuous improvement."

Similar alignment is under development in the Hillsborough County Public Schools in Tampa, Fla. Under the new evaluation system launched there in 2010–2011, teachers are observed annually with the district's Empowering Effective Teachers system, which was developed with a \$100 million grant from the Gates Foundation. By 2013 those scores will be used to determine teacher pay based on three years of data.

District spokesman Steve Hegarty says professional development this year will be more prescriptive and based on an educator's scores. Teacher scores, Hegarty says, in general showed that teachers knew their material and that their classrooms were orderly.

But teachers' engagement with students lagged. So the district developed a day-long training session with several of the techniques linked to specific criteria in the district's rubric.

Jamalya Jackson, Hillsborough's director of professional development, says the district is moving toward a new, automated system that will set up formal links between educator evaluations and the targeted development individual teachers need to improve in such areas as student engagement and questioning that encourages higher-order thinking. "It's an area that we've found through our observations that many veteran teachers aren't excelling in," says Jackson. "Linking them up with the next steps they need to take is critically important so they can improve." ■

David McKay Wilson, a columnist at The Journal News in White Plains, N.Y., is a regular contributor to the Harvard Education Letter.

English Language Learners

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Training Principals

Since leadership is the key to success, we instituted professional development training for school leaders on implementing high-quality language acquisition programs. The content of this training was developed by a partnership with the state department of education and some of its largest urban districts. The overall goal is to help administrators support, mentor, and coach classroom teachers. Among other things, this training covers examples of successful practices, strategies for data analysis, and a review of the current laws guiding language programs in the United States. All principals and assistant principals in the district have completed this training successfully.

Creating ESL "Labs"

In order to create the best possible learning environment for students, the district developed ESL Laboratories. We started with 14 labs and currently have more than 40 of them among the district's 44 schools. Laboratory teachers are required to have two licenses: one in ESL and the other in either elementary education or a specific content area so they can teach both language and content at the same time.

The labs provide the home base for students to start developing the language skills necessary to succeed in regular classrooms. These classrooms provide the resources necessary to develop language, including listening centers, SMART Boards, a speaker system to enhance oral language exposure, and a rigorous ESL curriculum. All students in the labs are placed based on grade level and language proficiency, which allows them to understand that they are not the only ones with limited English language skills. They are taught

in an environment where language and culture are perceived as gifts.

Providing PD for Paras

A key component of our plan was to develop a program to produce candidates for future teaching positions by providing professional development for paraprofessionals and tutors. These staff members hold a bachelor's degree and/or a content license, and they work throughout the year with a coach and trainers to earn an ESL license. They receive professional development one day a month to learn the skills necessary to provide the best support to students in both regular education classrooms and self-contained environments. Over the last few years, 45 of these professionals became licensed in ESL, and 16 of them were hired as ESL teachers, creating a great, progressive way to recruit fully qualified and experienced teachers.

Coaching for Teachers

High-quality professional development is a central component of teacher effectiveness in educating ELLs. It must be sustained, ongoing, intensive, and supported by modeling, coaching, and a collaborative approach to improving practice. In Worcester we are committed to providing comprehensive training to help educators teach ESL during the "ideally one year" in self-contained environments and throughout the continuum of services offered for ELLs. Unlike training programs that last for a day or two, our program provides mentoring and coaching on an ongoing basis.

Supporting Dual Licensing

In 2010 we established the Dual License Project, an intensive program to help content teachers become licensed in ESL. The project guarantees that students gain full access to content and that they earn the credits they need for high school graduation. Initially, the focus was primarily at the high school level (in mathematics, English language arts, and science) and consisted of cohorts of approximately 15 to 20 teachers. Subsequently, we opened this opportunity to underperforming schools and elementary schools. After completing an intensive training program, candidates have a final evaluative observation and receive valuable feedback. Over the last three years, we have trained more than 60 content teachers to become licensed in ESL. These content teachers all work outside the language acquisition department.

Opening the New Citizens Center

In the last few years, more than 900 students have entered the Worcester Public Schools as refugees from war-torn countries. Usually these students have missed three or more years of schooling, often due to migration, lack of continued access to education in their home country, or civil disruptions.

In the past we served these students in different schools across the district. But in 2009 we opened the New Citizens Center, which concentrates all services

for about 120 refugee students in grades 3 to 12. Students at the Center are often physically or emotionally unwell because of their traumatic pasts. It is essential to address their trauma in order for them to be able to learn. Their parents are often new to the United States, and they sometimes lack the knowledge of how to navigate the American education and health care systems. The Center serves as an oasis of support and a reference point for other services to help the students make the transition successfully.

The teachers at the New Citizens Center strive to be especially sensitive to the needs of these students and often serve as advocates. They foster students' confidence in their own abilities and work to create an atmosphere of acceptance and safety for students who may have known little of either in earlier phases of their lives. It is a unique venture, and educators from across the state frequently visit the Center, which is seen as a model for serving this population.

A Beacon of Hope

Despite all of these efforts, the education of ELLs remains a great challenge in our district. We continuously look for ways to prepare these new citizens. We value every success story, big and small.

The family from Iraq has been in Worcester for close to a year now and has started to settle into our society. They smile more often and are beginning to communicate more effectively in English. Recently, the father told us that now, instead of counting bombs exploding in his neighborhood, his son counts the colorful fish in the tank and the flowers in the garden. ■

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