

English Learners: A Principal's Handbook

How are schools currently meeting the needs of English-language learners? Let's take a look at the numbers. From 2003 to 2011, 600,000 new English learners entered schools across the country, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The gap on the NAEP reading assessment between fourth-grade English learners and their peers is 36 points, also according to NCES. Plus, in a 2013 study, the California Dropout Research Project found that English learners are twice as likely to drop out of school than those with English proficiency. Given these concerning statistics, many educators across the country are anxious to find comprehensive ways to support English learners. These five suggestions are a starting point for schools looking to make a difference in the lives of students who are just beginning to master the English language.

1. Focus on developing academic language. No student is a native speaker of academic language, the vocabulary and grammar we use in school to talk about academic content. For more and more students—not just English learners—there is an increasing gap between the language that students use socially and the language of school. Even though students may be highly intelligent and capable, they may still struggle in a school setting if they have not yet mastered certain terms and concepts. Schools need to assist students with understanding the differences between “formal and informal language and how to express themselves and their ideas in expected ways,” according to The Great Schools Partnership. Principals can:

- Work with staff to identify the academic language requirements of their curriculum and provide not only content objectives, but also academic language objectives in their lesson planning. Encourage teachers to focus on all three levels of WIDA (World-class Instructional Design and Assessment) features of academic language: vocabulary usage, language forms and conventions, and linguistic complexity. Teachers can provide sentence frames to teach students the target

language and to scaffold their use of academic language.

- Provide opportunities for interactive speaking activities that support student-to-student practice with structure and vocabulary, since oral language development is the precursor to literacy.
- Make academic language development a schoolwide focus. Encourage authentic and meaningful opportunities that simulate real-life learning via project-based learning, communication for a purpose, and the immediate application of academic language skills. Teachers can and should model academic language daily.

2. Offer comprehensive professional development. “Drive-by” professional development—those one-time sessions of sharing tips and strategies—are not effective for building a lasting culture of language development. Ongoing, job-embedded programs and planning builds staff buy-in and gives teachers the time and space to improve their efforts. Principals can:

- Encourage teachers to participate in PD about English learners that combines face-to-face sessions, coaching, modeling (live and video), team planning, and professional learning communities, as well as online for-

mat for book studies or discussion between sessions.

- Give teachers the freedom to choose from a variety of resources and strategies according to their personal background and skills as opposed to a “one-size-fits-all” approach.
- Provide professional development on English-language development for both content teachers and English teachers. English-language learners spend most of their day in mainstream classrooms.
- Use teacher planning time to jumpstart collaboration by having teams work together on classroom plans and projects.

3. Provide structures for ongoing collaboration and job-embedded professional development. Your English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) teacher is not just a valuable resource for students, but also a language development expert with much to share. Make it clear that you support the role of language experts. Principals can:

- Showcase the knowledge of the ESOL teacher at staff meetings by having him or her be part of grade-level teams and take a collaborative planning role.
- Provide opportunities for co-teaching and co-planning as a professional development tool. Content and language teachers can share their knowledge through planning and delivery.

4. Foster a culture that values relationships, equity, and diversity. Schools should see diversity as an asset and home language skills as an enrichment. Encourage your staff to be self-aware of the way their own background, relationships, and assumptions may interfere with relationships and learning in a diverse classroom. Principals can:

- Use videos and/or book studies to generate conversations with the

school community. Some options are: *The Distance Between Us*, by Reyna Grande; *La Bestia*, a film about a child's journey from Central America to the United States; and *Kids Like Me: Voices of the Immigrant Experience*, by Judith Blohm.

- Conduct bus tours of school neighborhoods to allow teachers the opportunity to identify available resources (churches, recreation centers, clinics, library, athletic fields). This may prompt valuable discussions on the impact of the community on student attendance and achievement.

5. Promote parent involvement.


Research shows that one of the most accurate predictors of a student's achievement in school, regardless of income or social status, is how a child's family fosters learning in the home and how much they are involved in their child's education. In their 2011 book, *Home-School Relations: Working Successfully with Parents and Families*, Glenn Olsen and Mary Lou Fuller found that the dilemma for many schools is how to involve parents in their children's schooling amid language barriers, immigration status, and work schedules. Principals can:

- Knock down the barriers to parents of English learners attending school functions by providing interpretation and translation at all parent meetings and events. Arrange child care, provide food, and offer events at different hours of the day to attract parents who work different hours or perhaps several jobs. Offer transportation to school meetings or take the meeting to the community at recreation centers or churches.
- Create focus groups of parents to hear their concerns or needs. For schools with one large English-learner community, schools can provide targeted community sessions, such as a Hispanic Parents Group, which would give ownership to parents to set their own agenda

around school issues. Schools can make sure that all parents are connected to the school communications via email and phone access.

- Encourage parents of English learners to volunteer. Consider each parent's strengths and how each can contribute in his or her own way. Many parents of English learners feel uncomfortable in classrooms but are willing to help during lunch or monitor students at recess. Principals should make it clear to parents that it is natural to feel uncomfortable at first, but to stay involved. Provide a contact person that parents of English learners can go to for questions and concerns.

Closing the achievement gap and lowering the dropout rate must be

a priority for school districts across the country. School leaders should recognize that the best strategies for English learners are also highly effective strategies for all students. Schools that are strategic in their planning will find that the more they address the academic language needs of their English learners, the more successful all students will be. This is the essence of leading for language and the starting point to a rewarding journey. 

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