English-language learners’ success in school is dependent on educators who are both committed to and well informed about planning for their success. The following brief case studies illustrate how two well-informed urban elementary school principals, supported by their committed staffs, moved ELLs from the periphery to the center of the schools, resulting in both academic and social success for these students.

**Co-Teaching Approach**

During the past two decades, the population at Green Tree Elementary School, a K-5 public school located in a mid-sized urban area in the Midwest, has shifted from primarily white and middle class to more than 50 percent comprising both students of color and students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Approximately 18 percent of students are ELLs. More than 12 different languages are spoken in their homes, the most common of which are Spanish and Hmong.

Tracy Falkner,* Green Tree’s former principal, is certified in both general elementary and ESL teaching. In examining the poor academic and social outcomes for his students—especially ELLs—he realized his school needed to rethink its instructional delivery to better and more equitably serve all learners’ needs. The local and state assessment data revealed that only 50 percent of students were reading English at grade level and a mere 17 percent of ELLs were reading English at grade level.
ELLs were being pulled out of general education classrooms for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction for about an hour each day. An additional area of concern the principal identified was the lack of communication with ELLs’ families and the apparent disconnect from the school.

To address these concerns, the staff agreed to adopt a co-teaching approach. To facilitate teachers’ transition to a co-teaching model, Falkner worked with the district office and garnered a state grant to bring in a part-time collaboration facilitator for three years. Both ESL and classroom teachers worked with the facilitator to develop skills in collaborative teaching.

Professional development opportunities on topics such as literacy and math, which previously had been offered exclusively to classroom teachers, were now extended to ESL teachers. In addition, all staff engaged in ongoing professional study and dialogue about issues of culture, language, and race in education to better understand ELLs and their families.

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The foundational principle of the co-teaching approach was inclusion: the inclusion of ELLs with their English-speaking peers and the inclusion of ESL teachers and their expertise in the planning and delivery of all instruction for ELLs. ELLs were slightly clustered into one or two classrooms at each grade level. Attention was paid to place students with a common home language in the same class and to maintain the percentage of ELLs close to the overall natural proportion of ELLs in the school. Teachers used ongoing community-building activities to help students value and understand one another.

The team-teaching approaches mirrored those found in inclusive practices for learners with special educational needs, such as station teaching, tag-team teaching, and parallel teaching where both teachers shared responsibility for determining goals, instruction, and assessment to address children’s needs.

Working with the principal, the bilingual paraprofessionals developed a plan for enhancing communication with Spanish- and Hmong-speaking families. The three-part plan called for school information to be translated and relayed to families; student progress conferences to be scheduled with families quarterly; and an automated phone system to deliver recorded messages to Spanish- and Hmong-speaking families.

As a result of this transformed approach to serving ELLs and their families, Green Tree saw considerable improvement in student achievement and parent relations. The students reading English at grade level increased from 50 percent to 86 percent. ELLs who could read English at grade level catapulted from 17 percent to 100 percent. Spanish- and Hmong-speaking families reported feeling more knowledgeable about, more connected to, and more respected by the school.

Dual Certification Approach
Bay Creek Elementary School is a K-2 public school in the same mid-sized urban area as Green Tree. In response to increasing segregation by income and race during the 1980s, the school district paired Bay Creek and Vilas Elementary schools to unite the white, middle-class Vilas neighborhood with the racially diverse, economically challenged Bay Creek neighborhood into a single school attendance area. The K-2 students from both neighborhoods attend Bay Creek, and students in grades 3-5 attend Vilas. The school population—64 percent white, 11 percent Latino, 15 percent Asian, 10 percent black—has remained fairly stable since the pairing. Sixteen percent of the students at Bay Creek are ELLs, predominantly speaking Hmong and Spanish.

Meg Jordan,* the former principal of Bay Creek, led a needs assessment with teachers and parents to identify the most pressing needs at the school. Both teachers and parents indicated the need for reduced class sizes. Teachers also suggested that, if they had smaller classes, they would like to be able to take full responsibility for meeting the needs of all the learners in their classrooms, including ELLs. With this feedback in hand, Jordan began working with local, state, and federal officials to reallocate Title I and ESL funds to reduce class sizes and develop an alternative approach to the existing pullout instructional programs.

While Jordan did not have a background in teaching ELLs, she was a regular participant in professional development on the topic. She recognized that the ESL curriculum at her school was not aligned with the general education curriculum. She also saw that ELLs were not assessed systematically on either local or state
assessments, and she discovered that this failure was due to doubts about ELLs’ abilities. She heard concerns from classroom teachers that ELLs, who were removed from their classrooms an hour a day, had become marginalized members of the classroom community despite teachers’ efforts in community-building.

Jordan took a twofold approach to address these concerns. By reallocating funding, she reduced class size by one-third, from an average of 24 students to 16 per class. She also arranged for a local university ESL professor to teach classes at Bay Creek that would allow the elementary educators to add an ESL certification to their elementary certificate. Most staff members, including the principal, paraprofessionals, secretaries, and the custodian, participated in the professional development. Ultimately, 10 teachers earned dual certification. Jordan committed to subsequently hiring only teachers who held or would commit to attaining dual certification.

With a sufficient number of dually certified teachers, Bay Creek was able to eliminate its pullout model of instruction for ELLs. ELLs would receive uninterrupted, meaningful, and targeted instruction alongside their English-speaking peers in general classrooms with small class sizes. Teachers embraced community-building and integrated it throughout the school day. Bilingual paraprofessionals also provided home language support in the classroom for the Spanish- and Hmong-speaking learners.

In response to parent interest, Jordan and Bay Creek teachers set up monthly meetings for Latino, Hmong, and black parents. The Latino and Hmong parent meetings were conducted in the families’ home languages, with a translator for the principal and staff. The principal, bilingual paraprofessionals, and several teachers attended each parent meeting. By participating in these meetings, parents came to understand the ways they could become more involved with the school and their children’s education. More than 80 parents of color, many of them ELL parents, now regularly engage with the school.

After the school adopted this inclusive dual certification approach, more than 90 percent of Latino students were reading at grade level on state and local assessments, and Hmong students performed the same or better than their Hmong peers across the district and state.

Keys to Effective Elementary ELL Services

Evidence from the approaches adopted by Green Tree and Bay Creek schools is promising for ELLs and their families. From their reform efforts, we can glean key lessons for designing effective instructional models for ELLs.

Principal Leadership. Both principals had or gained substantial knowledge of ELLs, one through ESL certification and the other through professional development. These leaders’ knowledge, collaboration, and vision contributed to their becoming strong advocates for ELLs and their families. Both principals believed in inclusive practices, convinced that, with appropriate support, the general classroom was the best place for all students to thrive academically and socially.

Professional Learning. As is the case with most successful school reform efforts, professional learning played a major role. While one school focused on collaboration and the other on ESL strategies, both valued the education of ELLs as an asset.

Family Connections. Both schools built intentional systems to communicate with ELL families in their home language. Leaders and school staff found ways to effectively reach out to ELL families whose voices had previously been silent in the school.

Inclusive Services. These schools’ restructured approaches brought the needs of ELLs front and center in the school and in the classroom. ELLs in both schools benefited socially and academically from having their linguistic needs met in the general classroom. While the two schools’ approaches varied greatly, both were designed to—and succeeded in—making ELLs’ achievement a priority.

Green Tree and Bay Creek Elementary schools teach us that ELLs succeed when educators accept responsibility, plan for their success, and engage in practices that address their needs. Guided by informed vision and professional development, educators at these schools collaborated to provide ELLs with appropriate instruction in an inclusive learning environment. Guided by moral vision, they removed barriers to provide families with access to and information about their children’s education. These promising practices not only enriched the educational experiences of the ELLs and their families, but also those of the entire school community.

*Pseudonyms have been used.

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George Theoharis is an associate professor in educational leadership and inclusive elementary education at Syracuse University.

Joanne E. O’Toole is an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at the State University of New York at Oswego.