Create a successful ESL model by matching the program to the language needs of the students.
As the population of English-language learners grows exponentially across the nation, districts not traditionally considered immigration magnets suddenly find themselves with a need to come up to speed on implementing the most effective English as a Second Language (ESL) program model. As a principal in one of these districts, you may find yourself with the sobering task of developing an action plan to raise the achievement of second-language learners. Fortunately, the library of information and resources on educating English-language learners has grown along with the population, readily answering the obvious first question: What knowledge do we need to help these students be successful? Once our knowledge base of approaches and best practices for serving English-language learners has been established, the question then becomes: Where do we go from here?

Experiences at a variety of elementary schools have shown us that the key to implementing a successful ESL model is to match the program to the language needs of the students—not to the needs of a stand-alone ESL curriculum. The process of matching student needs begins with conversations about student data, conversations that are informed by a schoolwide team comprising classroom and ESL teachers, content specialists, and administrators. Each subsequent step leads to an informed decision about the best delivery model to select.

**Five-Step Process**

*Look at data on language acquisition,* not just at conventional standardized reading/language arts and math assessment...
Use traditional ESL assessments of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, as well as teacher observations about mainstream performance. Step outside the box of grouping students by ESL level and make decisions based on what language objectives are needed to succeed in the regular classroom. The heart of effective ESL instruction should be on acquiring the language focus that will help students to access regular classroom instruction, not on covering an independent timeline of discrete English proficiency skills. ESL instruction is about building the whole student and making the student’s transition from ESL to mainstream classes as seamless as possible. Today’s climate of accountability simply doesn’t give us the luxury of building two separate educational pathways—ESL and mainstream—one at a time.

Look at the resources already available in the building to support second-language learners. How is ESL teacher time traditionally being used? Are ESL teachers valued as language acquisition specialists or do they lose valuable time moving students between classrooms or plugging into traditional classrooms as glorified teacher’s aides?

Consider the ESL instructional schedule. Is it an integrated part of the school’s master schedule or is ESL an afterthought, a patchwork of times and places that has more to do with fitting into an existing master schedule than with targeting students’ academic language needs?

Commit to regular ESL and classroom teacher planning time that focuses on integrating ESL language outcomes with mainstream content outcomes. For effective English-language learner instruction, the master schedule must include joint planning time between ESL and grade-level teams. ESL teachers should collaborate with classroom teachers to create a short-term ESL planner that supports mainstream curriculum with vocabulary development, content-specific language structures, and the linguistic skills that support balanced literacy. Mainstream teachers must support the ESL instructional focus as well. A classroom teacher can integrate an ESL language objective into his or her guided reading instruction, while the ESL teacher uses the same mainstream text but with a different focus.

Select the delivery model. Only now, after grouping your students according to their needs, can you select the most effective instructional delivery model. ESL students spend only a small percent-

“An effective ESL program model is never going to be one-size-fits-all.”
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age of the day with the ESL teacher, but are classroom teachers equipped to integrate language acquisition into their daily instruction? It may be that an influx of newcomers requires the expertise of a skilled ESL teacher to build basic communicative English. Or it could be that a small group of third graders, both native and second-language speakers, needs English-language learner strategies—building background information and vocabulary, extensive modeling, and oral practice—before they can master the concept of making inferences from a literary passage. Could they be grouped with a talented reading/arts instructor or team-taught by the classroom and ESL teacher? Consider everything that gets to the needs of the student beyond the question: ESL—Yes or No? Frame the discussion around a shared understanding that every adult is responsible for the success of every child.

An effective ESL program model is never going to be one-size-fits-all. It should always be a flexible, mixed model resulting in ESL students being taught by teachers with demonstrated excellence in teaching second-language learners. Further, an effective ESL program model is never static. ESL instructional groupings in September will look very different in January and again in June. Language develops at different rates in different individuals. The key is to stay the course on addressing students’ ever-evolving language focus, and not just on getting through a prescribed scope and sequence of language development skills.

Yes, it’s a challenge to periodically juggle students, teachers, and groups; even the most strategically designed master schedule has limited flexibility. This is why, before selecting a successful ESL model, principals must include as many staff as possible in conversations about the needs of English-language learners and how to address them. Our experience in working with schools has underscored the importance of schoolwide collaboration. When every person who has a stake in the academic performance of second-language students participates, then the efficient implementation of any program model improves. The message we learned from our experiences in developing effective ESL program models was this: The more of a schoolwide effort it becomes, the more successful it will be. And, thus, the answer to the difficult question, “Where do we go from here?” becomes, simply, “We all will go wherever the students need us to.”

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