narrowing the achievement gap between students who are native English speakers and those learning English as a second language is one of the biggest challenges facing U.S. educators.

Even as the number of English language learners (ELL) increases exponentially, the No Child Left Behind Act requires schools to make sure those students meet the same achievement standards as their English-speaking peers.

And for good reason, says a school official whose district is succeeding at boosting achievement for ELL students. “Students today need a high level of education to function well in society,” says Valeria Silva, director of the English Language Learners department of the Saint Paul (Minn.) Public Schools. “And they need academic English to get a good education.”

A GROWING POPULATION

Schools have long had to respond to the needs of non-English speaking students, but never before on such a large scale. In 2003, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 19% of all school-age children were English language learners. But even that figure pales in comparison with U.S. census projections putting the number of non-English speakers enrolling in school by 2030 at 40%.

For Saint Paul Public Schools, however, the future is now. Roughly
45% of the district’s kindergarten students come to school speaking a language other than English. The city of St. Paul has the largest population of both Somalis and Hmong in the U.S., and, along with neighboring Minneapolis, is home to the largest Tibetan population in the world outside of Tibet. The Twin Cities are also experiencing the most rapid increase in Hispanic/Latino immigration of any urban area in the nation.

“It’s a huge challenge,” says Silva, noting that eight years ago when she joined the ELL department, there were programs for non-English speaking students in one-third of the district’s 68 schools. Now, 97% of Saint Paul Public Schools offer ELL services.

“We’ve had to ask ourselves, ‘How are we going to make this work?’ ” says Silva, whose district, according to the Council of Great City Schools, has made some of the best progress in the country when it comes to closing the achievement gap between English and non-English speakers. “And we decided,” she continued, “we needed to look at a completely different way of providing instruction.”

With a few exceptions, that’s meant abandoning traditional pullout programs in which non-English speaking students are removed from their classrooms several times a week to work in small groups with specially trained ELL teachers. Instead, ELL services are delivered through a collaborative model in which ELL and mainstream teachers team teach. The goal: to teach language through — not prior to — content. As a result, ELL instruction is closely aligned with and integrated into the district’s standards-based curriculum.

“Everyone gets the same curriculum and works toward the same standards,” says Silva. As a result, everyone also benefits from districtwide reform initiatives, such as the Project for Academic Excellence, a comprehensive reform model designed to transform the way the core skills of reading, writing, mathematics, and science are taught.

Key to the district’s success at improving the achievement of non-English speaking students is a professional development program, run largely by the ELL department, that is site-based, authentic, and targeted to individual school needs.

**NARROWING THE GAP**

By all accounts, their approach is working. Between 2003 and 2005, the gap in reading achievement between the district’s ELL and non-ELL students fell from 13 to 6 percentage points, as measured by the percent of students showing proficiency on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment. In math, the gap fell from 6.7 to 2.7 percentage points.

The district’s ELL students also did well when compared with their peers statewide, outscoring them in each of the last three years in reading and math as measured by the Test of Emerging Academic English.

Michael D. Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, says that according to the council’s 2006 city-by-city analysis of student performance and achievement gaps, Saint Paul Public Schools is making substantial progress with ELL students. “Their improvements are among the best in the country,” he added.

Casserly says it is difficult to quantify the district’s success vis-a-vis...
ELL student achievement

From 2003 to 2005, ELL students in Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) made steady gains in both math and reading on all standardized tests, including the MCA, TEAE, BST, and SAT10.

In the Council of the Great City Schools Beating the Odds VI report (2006), SPPS stands out as having made the most progress of any large school district in the U.S. in closing the achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students.

MCA (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment), math and reading

The achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students in Saint Paul Public Schools is narrowing, especially in math.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of students showing proficiency</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MCA Math – ELL students</td>
<td>63.97%</td>
<td>64.40%</td>
<td>73.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCA Math – non-ELL students</td>
<td>70.67%</td>
<td>68.76%</td>
<td>75.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCA Reading – ELL students</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
<td>58.87%</td>
<td>67.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCA Reading – non-ELL students</td>
<td>69.67%</td>
<td>67.44%</td>
<td>73.61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TEAE (Test of Emerging Academic English)

SPPS ELL students in every grade level have outperformed the rest of the state’s ELL students for each of the last three years. The TEAE is Minnesota’s exam to measure the ability of children in grades 3-12 to read and write in English. These raw scores estimate the amount of English a student has learned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of students who earned passing scores</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEAE Reading – SPPS ELL</td>
<td>228.24</td>
<td>233.76</td>
<td>225.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEAE Reading – State ELL</td>
<td>226.08</td>
<td>224.68</td>
<td>219.805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEAE Writing – SPPS ELL</td>
<td>20.57</td>
<td>22.36</td>
<td>21.294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEAE Writing – State ELL</td>
<td>20.02</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>20.586</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BST (Basic Standards Test), Grade 8

In 2004-05, SPPS ELL students almost closed the gap with non-ELL students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of students who earned passing scores</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BST Math – ELL students</td>
<td>36.56%</td>
<td>30.38%</td>
<td>47.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BST Math – non-ELL students</td>
<td>50.65%</td>
<td>50.08%</td>
<td>49.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BST Reading – ELL students</td>
<td>40.97%</td>
<td>42.09%</td>
<td>64.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BST Reading – non-ELL students</td>
<td>65.25%</td>
<td>66.09%</td>
<td>65.96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Saint Paul Public Schools

districts in other states because the study, “Beating the Odds VI,” (Casserly, 2006) compared changes in the percentage of ELL students scoring at or above proficiency on state tests. “And those proficiency levels will be defined differently from state to state,” he says. However, he notes that while the gap in 3rd-grade reading achievement between ELL and non-ELL students decreased by 20 percentage points in the district between 2000 and 2005, it increased by 0.5 percentage points in Minneapolis. In 3rd-grade math, the district’s gap decreased by 19 percentage points while Minneapolis’ increased by 9.8 percentage points.

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Silva and her staff say those results are largely due to Saint Paul Public Schools’ widespread use of collaboration between mainstream and ELL teachers, a model they say capitalizes on the strengths of each. “The classroom teacher drives the curriculum,” says Karen Duke, a former ELL teacher currently on special assignment as one of the ELL department’s eight resource teachers. “He or she knows the math and how to pace it.” The ELL teacher’s role, says Duke, is to take note of any “red flags that indicate a student needs extra language support.”

For example, during a lesson on fractions, the ELL teacher makes sure that the ELL students in the classroom don’t confuse the two English homonyms “whole” and “hole.” Explains Duke, “It’s a matter of teach-
ing not only the concept of fractions, but also the language you need to learn the concept. In the past we taught concepts and language separately, but we don’t have enough time to do that if we want ELL students to meet district and state standards.”

Heidi Bernal, assistant director of the ELL department, says such instruction could be provided one-on-one by the ELL teacher as he or she circulated throughout the classroom during the lesson. Another option: a small-group, preteaching session designed to prepare ELL students ahead of time to learn a new concept or skill. “Teachers try to anticipate the problems ELL students might have,” Bernal says. (She says that, depending on the students’ ages, the information also could be presented ahead of time to the entire group.) In other cases, the ELL teacher might reteach the lesson the next day for any students who did not grasp it the first time, “trying to figure out what pieces [the students] might have missed.” In all cases, though, Bernal says, the instruction would take place in the regular classroom.

The ELL and mainstream teacher also work together to differentiate instruction for the non-English speaking students. That could mean using guided reading activities that provide students with the relevant background information and vocabulary they need to comprehend the written and spoken English being used in the classroom. It also could mean helping ELL students make connections between what they already know and what they are trying to learn. Particular care is taken, says Duke, to “notice any deeply embedded cultural assumptions” that teachers might inadvertently make or that appear in textbooks and other teaching materials.

To help make teachers aware of and steer clear of such assumptions, Bernal says efforts are made to expose them to people from different cultures. She says that includes not only parents and teachers with a variety of cultural backgrounds, but also experts hired by the district to present workshops on cultural differences. “As ELL teachers, we’re naturally curious about different cultures,” says Bernal, adding that the more teachers learn about their students’ cultures, the better support they can provide.

Typically, ELL teachers work with one or two grade levels and in two to five classrooms a day.

### SAT10 (Stanford Achievement Test), by student group

#### SAT10 Reading

Percent of students in average or above-average range

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELL students</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>3-year gain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-income</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• In 2005, 68% of ELL students scored in the average or above-average range on the SAT10 Reading — up 6% from 2004 (62%), and up 10% from 2003 (58%).
• Test results also indicate that ELL students performed better after they’d been enrolled in the district for more than one year. 71% of ELL students who had been enrolled in SPPS for three years scored in the average or above-average range on the SAT10 Reading — that’s 11% more than students who’d been enrolled for two years (60%), and 18% higher than students who’d been enrolled for one year (53%).

#### SAT10 Math

• In 2005, 81% of ELL students scored in the average or above-average range on the SAT10 Math — 4% higher than the national average of 77%.
• It also reflects a 7% improvement from 2004 (74%), and a 12% improvement from 2003 (69%).
• ELL students who had been enrolled in SPPS for three years performed the best — 83% of these students scored in the average or above-average range on the SAT10 Math (compared to 78% of students who’d been enrolled for two years, and 75% who’d been enrolled for one year).
Initially, not all teachers were comfortable with the idea of collaborating so closely with a peer.

Initially, not all teachers were comfortable with the idea of collaborating so closely with a peer. However, six years ago, those who were most interested began attending monthly workshops — on released time — to talk about the concept and how to put it into practice. “As the word got out that we were hoping more and more people would begin collaborating, principals started sending us teams of teachers, including some who were not so wild about it,” Bernal says. Those teachers were encouraged to give it a chance. “We tried not to shove it down their throats,” Bernal says, “but to show them the benefits.”

Today, Bernal says, “For the most part, people are on board, and it’s a success.”

Silva says that collaborating with ELL teachers has helped regular classroom teachers better understand the challenges facing their non-English speaking students and made them more willing to share the responsibilities of educating such students. She says working more closely with ELL students has also made mainstream teachers and English-speaking students more “sensitive, respectful, and less likely to stereotype” the ELL students than in the past. They are also more likely to celebrate cultural differences. “Now they say, ‘This kid is going to be bilingual — what a gift,’” says Silva.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CRITICAL

As Saint Paul Public Schools’ ELL program has evolved, so has the ELL department’s approach to professional development. In the past, training programs were centralized, and in the form of workshops, classes, and large-group presentations on subjects such as vocabulary building and language acquisition strategies, collaborative teaching, and cultural awareness and sensitivity. ELL teachers still participate, along with mainstream teachers, in a series of five one-day workshops on improving literacy instruction sponsored by the Project for Academic Excellence.

But for the most part, professional development aimed at helping teachers boost achievement for ELL students is the responsibility of the district’s eight ELL resource teachers, each of whom is responsible for between eight and 10 schools.

Resource teachers, commonly called coaches, visit each of their schools at least once a month, and considerably more often if warranted. “Each year, a couple of schools emerge as high-needs schools,” says Duke. “That’s either because they’re very busy working on various projects, or because they’re having problems.”

Bernal says coaches are chosen from among the ranks of the district’s best ELL teachers. In weekly meetings, they receive ongoing training designed to help them respond to the specific issues raised and questions posed by the teachers and administrators in their schools. Because each coach develops an area of expertise — such as staff development, teaching reading or writing, or knowledge of cultural differences — they can act as resources for each other. She says coaches also learn about federal and state statutes regulating ELL services. “They are responsible for making sure people are following the law.”

Duke says a big part of her job involves supporting each school’s collaboration efforts. “It’s a matter of helping the principal and teachers figure out how well collaboration is going and what steps are needed to make it better,” she says.

That could mean spending a day observing a team of teachers and then talking with them about how they might more efficiently divide up duties and responsibilities to improve instruction for all students. Or demonstrating to another team how to work together to quickly develop a week’s worth of lesson plans. Or helping two members of yet another team come to an agreement on how best to handle classroom management.

Resource teachers also help meet broader needs by working with school leadership teams and staff development committees. They often help administrators with scheduling in an effort to ensure that teachers working at the same grade level get common planning time. They also respond to requests from faculty members for workshops on topics of wide interest, such as oral language development. It’s a matter, says Duke, of “giving schools more of what they need and less of what they don’t.”

This year, resource teachers administered and analyzed the results of the School Collaboration

theme CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

were comfortable with the idea of collaborating so closely with a peer.
Assessment Rubric, developed by the ELL department in consultation with Jennifer York-Barr, an associate professor in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota. Duke says the assessment has proved to be a source of valuable information. The rubric measures how well schools are doing in areas such as planning time, professional development, student placement, team teaching, assessment, and reflection. Its purpose: to assess individual school collaboration efforts, set goals for continued improvement, and guide professional development plans.

The process, says Duke, has helped everyone focus on questions such as, “What does good collaboration look like?” The next step, “To figure out the kind of support they need to get there.”

The kind of authentic, site-based professional development Saint Paul Public Schools’ ELL department provides is invaluable, says Duke. “I can say to the teachers, ‘This is what I observed. Now, let’s plan how you’re going to do it differently tomorrow.’ I can get at big ideas and strategies, but in a way that’s really applicable to what they’re doing every day.”

reference