



Photo by VALERIE VON FRANK

Sahn Alhaj assembles English words in the Newcomer's Center at Dearborn Public Schools.

SCHOOL DISTRICT IS ELOQUENT IN THE LANGUAGE OF CULTURAL RESPECT

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

His parents named him Youssef. His teachers called him Joe. But when Youssef Mosallam returned to the Dearborn (Mich.) Public Schools years later — as an employee — he reclaimed his name and his heritage. Colleagues now introduce him to newcomers as Youssef.

Mosallam's story exemplifies the cultural shift that has made the Dearborn district a model of how to successfully educate English language learners.

The respect for cultural differences is clear in this urban system outside Detroit, demonstrated in schools where young girls and their teachers are free

to wear hijabs — head scarves. The district makes community liaisons available to answer new immigrants' questions in their native tongues. Posters throughout the district administrative building declare "Embrace the spirit of community" in multicolored letters, show "The Golden Rule" interpreted through more than a dozen religions, and advocate "Kindness, pass it on."

In an area with one of the largest concentrations of Arabic people outside of Arab countries, the district has learned to teach students whose native language is not even based on the Roman alphabet. Fifteen of its 33 schools have student populations of at least 50% ELLs.

Working with non-English speaking immigrants from around the world is not a new challenge for Dearborn. Immigrants have arrived in waves for more than a century, recruited to work in the Ford Motor Co. factories. About four in 10 students across the district currently have limited English skills. Now, however, the hurdle is more than language. Many of the district's newest students are arriving as refugees, often from war-torn countries, and many lack any formal education in their native lands.

Yet Dearborn is succeeding, as well and perhaps better than any district in the country. Immigrants are acquiring English and achieving academic proficiency more quickly than the five to seven years studies indicate is common — an average of three to four years to reach a 40% proficiency rate on the Terra Nova English reading test, an achievement that boosts them out of Dearborn's bilingual program.

In addition, every elementary and middle school in the system has made Adequate Yearly Progress since 2002 and had an A or B on the state report card. Of the three high schools, all but one can make the same claim, with that one missing AYP in 2006.

The district's success has been



Youssef Mosallam

Put the emphasis on professional learning

Youssef Mosallam, coordinator of bilingual and compensatory education, advises districts struggling with the best ways to help language learners achieve is to emphasize teachers' professional learning.

"Train staff members in a single building," he said. "Have them get endorsements or certification training. Work with English language learner students in heterogeneous classrooms where all students participate.

"Send the teachers to a (successful) district for strategies. ... If students are spread out (among many buildings), localize them and train the teachers. Tutors and translators don't work. Start with Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol. And realize if you have a population (of ELL students), it's only going to grow."

thoughtfully planned, carefully monitored, and created from experiences of what didn't work, at least as much as what does. And continuous professional learning underlies all the effort.

"We tried everything," said former Associate Superintendent Cheryl Kreger. "We have made mistakes. It's come a long way since the early 1970s. We're talking about 30 years of constant work."

FINDING RESOURCES

The district was focusing on immigrants when the federal program was still titled English for the Foreign Born, Kreger recalled. Until 1993, little changed until the associate superintendent at that time decided to combine the bilingual and Title I programs, have one person oversee both, and place teams of resource people at each building. That effort led to a new approach as administrators looked for ways to blend program funding to better serve students.

Children with limited English had been pulled out of the classroom to work on language skills. Yet many also faced issues of poverty. With teams of

resource teachers in bilingual and at-risk education working together as on-site professional developers — coaching, mentoring, modeling lessons, co-teaching — the approach was different.

"We made a symbolic change," said Maura Sedgeman, a district resource teacher leader in bilingual and English language arts. "We bought materials, leveled books, and in the beginning we put them on carts and pushed those carts, with paraprofessionals, into the classrooms. (Teachers' attitudes) had been, 'Take (the kids) out, fix them, bring them back.' Now we said, 'You teachers take the highest-need kids, and the paraprofessionals will work with the kids with the least needs in, for example, a guided reading situation.'" That push-in approach was the structure around which all other work is framed.

The district supported the work with Saturday professional learning experiences to which all staff were invited, not only those considered bilingual teachers. Teachers attended monthly sessions on content-based lit-

The district's success has been thoughtfully planned, carefully monitored, and created from experiences of what didn't work, at least as much as what does.

VALERIE VON FRANK is NSDC's book editor and writes feature articles for NSDC publications. You can contact her at 1995 Cimarron Drive, Okemos, MI 48864, 517-347-3066, e-mail: valerie.vonfrank@nsdc.org.

eracy, watching videotapes of the most effective instructors demonstrating strategies. Sometimes the demonstrating instructors were paraprofessionals. “The message was, ‘It doesn’t matter what your title is,’” Sedgeman said. What mattered were results, and data showed students were beginning to accelerate.

The district increased its focus on using data to drive instruction, partly to fulfill an agreement with the Office of Civil Rights that the district, rather than the federal government, could monitor its effectiveness in educating ELLs. While individual schools had been responsible, now the district took on the centralized task of ensuring students would be tested, would have appropriate interventions, and would progress.

“The message from the superintendent’s office down is that we are going to educate all students,” said Mosallam, coordinator of bilingual and compensatory education.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS

The district increased its focus on using data to drive instruction, partly to fulfill an agreement with the Office of Civil Rights that the district, rather than the federal government, could monitor its effectiveness in educating ELLs.

The district’s efforts form a web of support, beginning from the time a student registers.

- **Students are carefully evaluated at the outset.**

New students entering the Dearborn system are asked the first language they learned and the language spoken in their homes. If the answer to either question is a language other than English, their language skills are assessed and they may be eligible for

bilingual/English language learner (ELL) services. The child’s parents are notified in a letter written

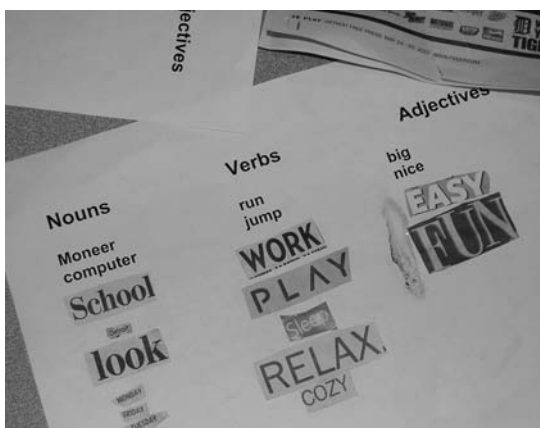


Photo by VALERIE VON FRANK

At the Newcomer’s Center, students sort words into categories.

both in English and their native language.

- **Students are clustered.**

The percentages of students with limited English skills in Dearborn school buildings range from 4% to 93%. “We’ve tried to break down barriers and not isolate kids,” Kreger said. So, for example, if a building with lower numbers of ELLs had three or four 2nd graders with limited proficiency, those children would be placed in one classroom and supported by a paraprofessional or a resource teacher. In higher population schools, at least one classroom at each grade is designated bilingual so that a certified teacher can lead. At the high school level, students in the bilingual program need intensive focus to be able to graduate in a few years, so groups of 20 to 25 students work with a team of four bilingual or ESL-certified teachers until they can be mainstreamed.

- **Students’ progress is continually monitored at both the school and district level.**

Mosallam and Sedgeman, along with an administrator in charge of assessment, look at students’ Terra Nova and state assessment scores, and may also request formative assessments. Teachers and building leaders carefully map students’ progress and can ask for additional assistance. The

district will work with teachers having difficulty raising student achievement. “You can’t deny the data when it shows the reading scores or the writing scores are going down,” Mosallam said. “If the data state that the techniques you used five or 10 years ago are no longer working, then we must adjust those techniques now. ... More than three years in the bilingual program is a flag.” Students are monitored for two years after they leave the program.

“Our programs are not remedial,” Kreger said. “We found out a long time ago that a year’s growth in a year’s time is not enough. We really have to get these kids accelerated, double-timing it where we can. We’ve learned over the years not to isolate these students. They always take part in mainstream curriculum with added support.”

DEEP PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The 4th graders in Paula Brancheau’s class at Geer Park Elementary School are clustered around the perimeter of the library. As an adult reaches each group, the pupils launch into a presentation, often with multimedia support, of a cumulative project about some aspect of state flora, fauna, or historical import that struck their fancy. Although half the students in this school are designated as ELLs, they are difficult to pick out.

Brancheau is a teacher leader in this building, modeling instructional techniques during collaborative learning days for the other dozen teachers or in the monthly staff meeting devoted solely to professional learning. In addition, the principal arranges released time for teachers to observe in Brancheau’s room, using roving substitutes to cover their classes.

Brancheau bases her instruction on Sheltered Instruction Observation

Protocol (SIOP), a framework particularly used in English language instruction. She says every teacher needs sheltered instruction tools, not just ELL teachers.

“I went to professional development, and it made so much sense — all these strategies,” she said. “And not just for bilingual. It makes sense for all the children. It slows you down as an educator, and you have to thoughtfully plan. I have to be sure any vocabulary I use or introduce, I am providing an introductory lesson for before I start teaching the lessons.”

Kreger received a professional development grant that enabled district teachers to work on learning SIOP methods. She said whenever the district has professional development days, SIOP is part of the learning offered to both ESL and bilingual teachers and to general education teachers, more of whom are availing themselves of the opportunity.

“As students become proficient in English, they transition out of the ELL program, and general education teachers now understand they need techniques to help students,” said Mosallam. “When they’re given the opportunity for professional development, they take it.”

Kreger said that additional, job-embedded professional learning also is benefiting student achievement.

“We offer collegial time for teachers to get together to discuss student work,” Kreger said. “We are entitled to have staff meetings every Monday for an hour and 15 minutes that can be dedicated to this. Additionally, some buildings have an agreement with our union that teachers come in early in the morning to add extra time to the day, and then they release students an afternoon a week, and they can also use that time for these con-

Dearborn Public Schools
Dearborn, Mich.

Schools: 19 K-5; four 6-8; two K-8; one Pre-K-3; one 4-8; three 9-12; two career centers

Enrollment: 17,728

Staff: 1,240

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	92%
Black:	4%
Hispanic:	2%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	>1%
Native American:	>1%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: 43%

Languages spoken: 33, with 95% of non-English speakers speaking Arabic

Free/reduced lunch: 55%

Special education: 12%

Contact: Youssef Mosallam, coordinator of bilingual and compensatory education
18700 Audette
Dearborn, MI 48124

Phone: 313-827-3007

Fax: 313-827-3138

E-mail: mosally@dearborn.k12.mi.us

versations. In addition, principals are making an effort at every level to have common planning times with job-alike groups. Grade-level teams or subject-area teams meet to discuss strategies. We’ve worked hard on that.”

Kreger said Dearborn’s professional learning plans are based on NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development.

“A lot of it’s embedded,” she said. “I just believe in those standards, and a number of us have hammered away at it over the years, and we’re starting to finally see it come together on all levels.”

“We know added professional development works,” Mosallam said.

SUPPORTING STAFF

The district has put considerable effort into supporting that belief.

- **Dearborn has helped teachers gain ESL or bilingual certification.**

Administrators have worked with nearby community colleges and universities offering advanced degrees,

and have received grants to pay employees’ tuition. The district has even arranged on-site courses toward master’s degrees. Kreger said about 10% of teachers have received ESL or bilingual certifications, with many more in the process.

- **The district “grows its own.”**

By hiring paraprofessionals and helping them gain teaching credentials, the system has benefited greatly. “We get excellent teachers that way, as opposed to hiring sight unseen,” Kreger said. In fact, several current principals began as paraprofessionals. One was hired as a security guard, became a paraprofessional, then a teacher, and is now a principal. Two principals have been bilingual coordinators. “We built capacity,” Kreger said.

- **Resource teachers support classroom teachers.**

Although budget cuts caused by Michigan’s economy in recent years have led to a reduction in district-level resource teachers from 13 to three, the team continues to support classroom teachers who may not be ESL-endorsed by coaching, mentoring, co-teaching, and modeling. And some schools have additional teacher leaders as resources. In Salina Intermediate, for example, Principal Glenn Maleyko said resource teachers co-teach language arts and math in regular classrooms, model lessons, and sometimes help with lesson planning. The school, where one in five children is a refugee and 82% have limited English skills, also has a bilingual literacy coach.

- **Summer school offers another significant opportunity for professional learning.**

Teachers who want to teach ELLs attend several days of professional learning before the summer session and two days afterward. They can gain college credit toward ESL certification, learn SIOP methods, or may be focused on a cutting-edge reading

New teachers first hear about cultural awareness when they’re asked about it in the hiring interview.

practice, for example. Teachers work in teams, bilingual with general education or special education.

New teachers' orientation includes cultural awareness. New teachers first hear about cultural awareness when they're asked about it in the hiring interview, according to Kreger. Then all teachers take part in an orientation that includes understanding basic concepts of religion, culture, and customs.

SENSITIVITY REQUIRED

Kreger learned firsthand about cultural awareness. When a principal's mother died, Kreger had to make a personal decision: If she attended the Muslim funeral, would she honor her own customs or respect the family's religious heritage? The principal who tells the story says Kreger called Arab community leaders to find out what

she needed to know. She then decided to attend wearing a traditional head covering, a significant gesture of support for the bereaved daughter.

District administrators have facilitated many other changes. Dearborn opened a Newcomer's Center in 2005-06 for students coming from very different cultures; these students often have no formal education and may need time to adjust to American life. The district opened a school for students in grades 4-8 next to an elementary building in an area of town with many new immigrants to allow students a longer transition time if they need it to gain additional literacy skills before heading to high school.

"When it's Ramadan and students need to fast, we accommodate students," Kreger said. "We don't make them go to the cafeteria. We provide

rooms where if someone wants to pray, they can. In the beginning, there was controversy over whether we had to accommodate these differences. ... We had to make the comparison, 'Well, you get your week and a half, two weeks off at Christmas; it's only fair that other people can celebrate their holidays.' "

That kind of care has transformed the district. Shereen Arraf, the district's coordinator of assessment, program planning, and evaluation, explained the difference.

"I feel and know that we have all the teachers looking at kids and saying, 'These are our kids.' They no longer say, 'Take these kids and fix them,' " she said. "They're not saying, 'This is general education and this is bilingual.' Teachers are taking ownership of all the kids." ■