



Photos by LINDA WALSLBEN
The band saw in Dan Treinis' classroom is labeled, along with almost everything else.

SIGNS OF SUCCESS

District gets specific about the needs of English language learners and their teachers

BY LINDA WALSLBEN

When students walk into Dan Treinis' technology education classroom, they are greeted by a visually rich environment. Posters with positive slogans cover the walls. Machines, closets, and tools are labeled. Computers line one wall where students can view a video in which Treinis demonstrates the class safety rules: Roll up your sleeves, tie back your hair, and take off any necklaces. These visual supports help all students learn, but they are especially important for helping English language learners (ELLs) participate meaningfully in his class.

Treinis created the labels and safe-

ty video as a result of his participation in QUEST, a professional development program of the Burlington, Vt., schools designed to help classroom teachers better educate ELLs. Just as Treinis has done, all teachers learn how they can adapt their instructional practice to afford ELLs access to the curriculum.

A CUSTOMIZED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY

The Burlington School District has experienced a sharp increase in the number of ELLs in its schools over the past several years, as have many schools across the country. With the resettlement of refugees by the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program, a local agency working in

partnership with the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, the Burlington schools experienced a 400% increase in ELLs between 1990 and 2000.

As is typical in U.S. schools, Burlington offered newly arriving students pullout instruction to meet their linguistic and academic needs. Yet even with such English language instruction, students still spent the majority of their school day in mainstream classes with little linguistic support. Like teachers in many schools in the U.S., more than two-thirds of teacher respondents to a 2000 district survey stated that they felt unprepared to teach these English language learners (Burlington School District & Saint Michael's College, n.d.).

Thus, to address the needs of mainstream teachers and their ELLs, the district developed its own professional development model to help all teachers meet the linguistic and academic needs of English learners. The district sought a partner in the School of International Studies at Saint Michael's College, and in 2001 won a federal Title VII Training All Teachers grant to implement the QUEST program. QUEST (Quality Utilization of Education, Support, and Training) is a professional development initiative aimed at helping teachers like Dan Treinis learn how to teach ELLs in their classrooms.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR ALL STAFF

The QUEST program was designed to help all district staff learn how to meet the linguistic and academic needs of English learners. Program participants include teachers, guidance counselors, paraeducators, administrators, and librarians such as Carole Renca, a middle school librarian. After participating in the QUEST program, Renca conducted library orientations for small groups of ELLs. She found that students

Burlington School District Burlington, Vt.

Number of schools: 10 (six elementary, two middle, one high, one technical center)

Enrollment: 3,554

Staff: 405

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 77%

Black: 11%

Hispanic: 1.5%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 6%

Native American: 0.45%

Other: 3.4%

Limited English proficient: 13.5%

Number of languages spoken: 44

Free/reduced lunch: 43%

Special education: 12.4%

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became more comfortable in the library and more knowledgeable about accessing the library's resources. She also helped students get cards at the local library in order to connect them to this free public resource.

The QUEST program consists of an institute, which is a graduate-credit course taught for one week in the summer or over one semester during the school year, and ongoing individualized support to participants by three ESL content specialists funded by the grant. The institute and the follow-up are key supports to all staff who participate.

THE QUEST INSTITUTE

The QUEST Institute was first delivered as a week-long intensive course to teachers in summer 2002. More than 30 teachers convened at Saint Michael's College in the week following the end of school to learn

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about the experiences of ELLs in Burlington schools and to discuss what strategies would best help them learn.

Two faculty members from the School for International Studies at Saint Michael's College, Susan Jenkins and Elizabeth O'Dowd, collaborated with three newly hired Burlington School District ESL content specialists, Mark Nigolian, Mary Kay O'Brien, and me, to design and deliver the institute. Course segments included an overview of the cultural background of ELLs in Burlington schools, the impact of culture on learning, the process of second-language acquisition, the challenges of language learning, and specific instructional strategies to help ELLs learn. Course activities included a simulated immersion experience, individual teachers researching and demonstrating a strategy they would use to teach ELLs in their classes, and school teams developing action steps to increase ELL family involvement in their schools. As projects for the course, teachers adapted instructional units to use in their classes in the upcoming school year.

Since 2002, the institute has been offered five more times and has changed significantly as a result of participant feedback and increased understanding of the needs of students and staff. We used the CLIF model (Nigolian, 2003), as a conceptual framework to organize the institute around these core concepts: culture, language, instruction, and family involvement. We also paid more attention to exploring the conceptual underpinnings of academic language and examining the language demands of content areas. Classroom teachers



Signs on Treinis' tool cabinet.

needed more opportunities to understand how to support the language of the classroom so ELLs could access lesson content. Lastly, since the needs of ELLs differ from primary to middle and secondary levels, institute participants were organized into grade-level groups to study appropriate instructional strategies.

What has not changed is the institute's focus on culture. Participant feedback indicated that this segment of the institute was the highlight. We invited members of various refugee and immigrant communities to tell course participants about the experiences of their cultural groups. An Albanian woman described her family's harrowing and exhausting escape from Kosovo. A Somali Bantu man detailed life in a refugee camp. A Vietnamese woman recounted how members of her family have adjusted

to life in the U.S.

Participants later cite how these stories compelled them to consider English learners' prior experience and cultural backgrounds in their instructional planning. For example, knowing more about students' backgrounds helped

Renca avoid miscommunications and provide a meaningful learning experience for English learners. The stories of the refugee and immigrant communities helped secure the commitment of QUEST Institute participants to better serve ELLs in their classes.

ONGOING INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT

Learning how to teach English language learners did not end when the QUEST Institute was over. The second component of the QUEST program was ongoing individualized support for teachers from ESL content specialists. The district hired

three teachers to fill positions created by the grant. Our responsibilities were to offer support, ongoing learning opportunities, and resources to course participants as they returned to their classrooms and experimented with new instructional strategies.

The ESL content specialists served as coaches and teacher leaders. Each content specialist worked with approximately 10 institute participants at three different schools each year. Depending on each teacher's needs, the content specialists conferred, coached, advised, empathized, and encouraged teachers in their implementation of new strategies. The content specialists also adapted texts and textbooks, located graphics, ordered books and materials, observed instruction, and taught alongside teachers. This kind of ongoing professional development extended the impact of the institute by providing further support within the context of the classroom.

For example, I would meet with a teacher to adapt an upcoming unit. The teacher and I would discuss the goals of the unit and the standards it addressed. We'd look over the readings or handouts and analyze the language demand of the text and background knowledge students needed in order to participate fully in the unit. Then I might draft some sample handouts adapted for the ELLs in that class or I might suggest some alternate readings. I would highlight areas of the unit plan that might be problematic for ELLs and suggest ways in which he might support students by creating new handouts, including more demonstrations, or adding more opportunities for group work.

In another instance, I might come into the classroom when a unit of study was already under way. I would observe the teacher, listening for the language of instruction and analyzing the language demand of the lesson. After class we would consult with

each other, discussing what I observed and how the students performed.

Working with ESL content specialists was optional for those who chose to access it. Most teachers voluntarily took advantage of this opportunity, including some who didn't attend the institute. At the beginning of the program, the district made attempts to quantify instructional change through the use of an implementation measurement tool; since this put content specialists in the position of evaluators instead of coaches, we dropped the use of the tool. Instead, the program measured implementation of strategies or practices presented in the institute through teacher self-reports, content specialist notes, and interviews conducted by the grant evaluator.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS

Teachers and staff who participated in QUEST came to the program with a range of prior experiences with English learners. Some had had ELLs in their classrooms for a number of years already, and others were just getting their first students. What did teachers and staff learn from the institute and the subsequent support from the content specialists? Language arts teacher Laurie Hickey reports that she now has a "glimpse of the complexity of teaching ELLs."

Hickey says, "QUEST helped me ask questions. It helped me understand the process of learning English." She reported using scaffolds like writing frames to support the English learners in her class. Last year she recommended two English learners for honors-level English class at the high school. Even though the students still needed to improve their English skills, she felt that they were ready intellectually for the challenging class. Before participating in QUEST, she wouldn't have considered recommending such students for the high-level classes. Now, she

Learn more...

Find more information about the QUEST program at bsdweb.bsdrv.org/~lwalsleb/Quest/index.html.

finds, “it’s a privilege to teach them.”

Both Treinis and Nolan have taken a hard look at the documents and texts they use in their classes. Treinis stated that his “aha moment” came when he realized that “students were learning language and content at the same time.” He has since modified the language in a lot of his classroom documents to improve readability for all students. The new texts help all students understand the material better. Now he doesn’t have to give alternate texts to his English learners, and they are more fully integrated in the class.

Nolan also created new documents for her music classes. As a result of participating in the QUEST program, she reports that she checks in more often with ELLs one-on-one and has included more foreign language texts and world music in her curriculum.

In 2006-07, she had five times more English learners in her chorus than she did in the previous year.

ESL content specialist Mark Nigolian reports a marked change at the school level in the middle school where he works.

“More and more people

have more ownership,” he states. While the QUEST program focused primarily on the classroom-level actions of teachers working with English learners, Nigolian finds that there is a more vested interest in ELLs by more teachers in the school as a whole. Teachers who participated in the QUEST program are putting ELLs on the schoolwide agenda instead of immediately sending them to the ELL teacher.

LESSONS LEARNED

Any new professional development initiative will have its growing pains, and the QUEST program was no exception. As an ESL content spe-

cialist, I struggled to make the transition from classroom ELL teacher to content specialist. Becoming a collaborative partner to teachers and staff required knowledge of adult learning principles, collaboration protocols, and change models.

The program component of individualized follow-up support by an ESL content specialist was an important part of the program’s overall success, and the program did not initially provide for the training of the new specialists. To address this need, the district hired a former principal as consultant to meet with content specialists and other newly hired coaches on a regular basis. With the consultant, we learned about the CBAM model on responses to change. We also discussed Danielson’s supervision model, even though we were not responsible for evaluating teachers. While the group met for only a little over a year, the time to meet with other coaches under the guidance of an experienced facilitator was critical to our success.

Settling on a format for providing professional development that fit teachers’ busy schedules and ensured the best learning situation for teachers was tricky. For the first three years of the grant, the institute was offered as a week-long course right after the school year ended. For some teachers, this was the best time to participate in the course, while for others it was the worst.

In the last two years of the grant, we offered the institute during the semester with eight face-to-face meetings after school and eight online learning sessions. From my perspective as an ESL content specialist, the semester format was more conducive to participant learning because teachers and staff were able to return to their schools and immediately apply the concepts or strategies that we discussed in class.

In terms of content, program

leaders placed a greater emphasis on teaching academic language in later institutes. We understood that this topic was the hardest for participants to grasp. While we knew that not every teacher was going to become an ELL teacher, we realized that understanding the language of the content area was a key concept for participants to comprehend if they really wanted to help English learners succeed in the classroom. We are still learning how best to conceptualize academic language to teach it to teachers and staff.

As with all grant-funded programs, the grant eventually ends. This five-year program has become an invaluable element of the ELL program and a much-requested professional development opportunity in the district. Finding ways to sustain the program and continue producing results will be a challenge for the district. One ESL content specialist position will be funded with local money for the 2007-08 school year.

The QUEST program has focused the Burlington School District on the needs of teachers teaching English learners. With more and more ELLs arriving each year, this is no longer a low-incidence population. Through this program, teachers and staff members are more knowledgeable about the needs of English learners and ready to meet those needs.

REFERENCES

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