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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

# Teaching English language learners



MAINSTREAM TEACHERS MAKE  
A STELLAR JOURNEY AS A TEAM  
TO TRANSFORM CLASSROOM  
PRACTICES

By Elsa M. Anderson, Niki Fisher, Olivia Perez, Ruth Schackmann, and Julie Shelton

Imagine a learning community where secondary teachers from core content areas engage in ongoing professional development focused on research-based strategies to effectively teach English Language Learners (ELLs). Thanks to their collaborative work supported by the district under the leadership of an ESL coordinator and ESL instructional specialist, these teachers transformed their classroom practices. The results are increased teacher awareness of the needs of ELL students, the development of a common language of practice, and the effective implementation of ELL strategies.

A group of eight middle and high school teachers

representing the core subject areas of English, mathematics, science and social studies, met with a district-level ESL coordinator and ESL instructional specialist in the fall of 2007 as the first cohort of a pilot professional learning community in the Carrollton-Farmers Branch School District (Carrollton, Texas). The district developed the program in response to their growing ELL population. Traditional workshops on ELL instruction hadn't produced the results the district desired; they knew they needed a new approach. Known as STELLAR (Strategies for Teachers of English Language Learners Achieving Results), the

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pilot program's goal was to engage teachers in intensive professional development to develop ELL-supportive classrooms that could serve as models for other teachers in the district.

### BUILDING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

During the first session, participants talked about successes and challenges in teaching ELLs. The teachers needed new strategies to reach all students, so they approached the topic with candor and a willingness to try new things.

Throughout that first year, the eight pilot teachers

participated in professional development workshops, observed each other, and provided open and objective feedback after the observations. Additionally, the ESL specialist and coordinator observed participating teachers throughout the year. Following each visit, the two met with each teacher. The dialogue in these meetings included a self-reflection about the lesson and feedback specific to ELL instruction. The teachers embraced opportunities to observe other teachers, study demonstration lessons, and participate in coaching sessions.

From the beginning, it became clear that earning teacher trust was of utmost importance. Facilitators focused on listening to teachers' concerns, validating what teachers were already doing, and providing additional options for instructing ELLs. Teachers' perspective changed from seeing ESL staff as evaluators to appreciating their support as coaches and members of the emerging professional learning community. Providing immediate feedback to teachers after observations allowed for more specific feedback (everyone remembered the lesson clearly) and for effective goal setting. ESL staff also earned trust and gained credibility with their willingness to go out on a limb by teaching demonstration lessons, a practice that sometimes proved difficult as they worked with students in subject areas outside their area of expertise.

An additional challenge emerged concerning the time that teachers were pulled out of the classroom to attend professional development sessions. During the first two years of the intervention, teachers attended five to six days of sessions outside the classroom. Administrators had to decide whether the time away from the classroom was justified by the benefits gained in learning new instructional strategies. Through much dialogue, teachers, campus administrators, and central office reached the consensus that the learning was important enough to be continued. During the third year, however, program leaders reduced the number of days outside the classroom by adding summer learning and expanding coaching in the classrooms.

Since its inception three years ago, the program has grown to include 106 teachers on four campuses, and the number continues to increase. Campus administrators have seen the need for the program, and in two of the campuses, all the core subject teachers are now participating in the program.

A vibrant professional learning community has emerged, with teachers planning together across content areas, grade levels, and even across campuses. Teachers began contacting each other for support via e-mail. In one example, a history teacher from one of the middle schools contacted a history teacher at one of the high schools. By knowing exactly what that high school teacher wanted

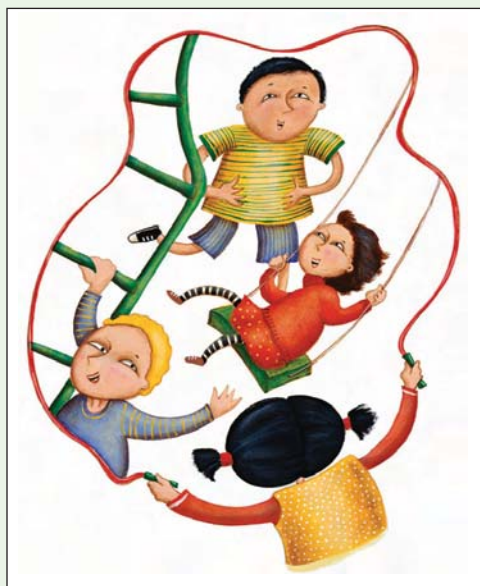
### THE LANGUAGE OF ELL STRATEGIES

**BICS:** Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (Cummins, 1979). This is the social language that students use daily, also referred to as playground language. According to Cummins, it takes one to two years to acquire BICS in a second language.

**CALP:** Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins, 1979). This is the academic language of schools, textbooks, and tests. Cummins suggests that it takes about seven years with effective instruction for ELLs to be proficient in academic language.

**Interaction:** ELLs need opportunities for student-to-student interaction, both academically and socially. In order to acquire language, students require ample time for listening, speaking, reading, and writing across the content areas (Gibbons, 2002).

**Language objectives:** (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). Just as learning objectives inform the learners about what they will learn during the lesson, language goals outline how language will be used to achieve the learning goal. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are part of most language goals.



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students to know on day one of school, the middle school teacher was better able to plan for her second semester. Within the group, STELLAR mentors supported other participants. Veteran STELLAR teachers served as table leaders at learning sessions and would encourage other teachers to contact them as they needed.

A number of the participating teachers have reached the original goal of developing model classrooms of effective ELL instruction. Teachers are increasingly open to sharing their practice and to have others observe in their classrooms as a new strategy is implemented.

Teacher leadership has increased. A number of participating teachers have served as presenters on ELL instruction both in district trainings and at state conferences. During team planning time, STELLAR teachers are often seen sharing strategies and resources with other teachers. They are considered the experts in ELL instruction at their schools.

### DEVELOPING A COMMON LANGUAGE

Increasingly, participating teachers are able to debrief a lesson they've observed together using a common language of research-based ELL instruction. For example, during a debriefing session after a visit to a model classroom, the teacher visited noted that when her ELLs work in small groups their affective filter is lowered. This reference to the theory by Krashen & Terrell (1983) illustrated how her students felt safe in the classroom environment to use English. The low-anxiety setting that the teacher established through the use of small groups, allowed the ELLs to participate and to be successful without the need to raise a wall (high affective filter) to cover up limited English proficiency.

Additionally, teachers increasingly use terms such as BICS — Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and CALP — Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins, 1979) as part of their common language. They discuss language objectives (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004), explain the importance of interaction for ELLs (Tikunoff, 1988), and the need to incorporate opportunities for listening, speaking, reading, and writing throughout the content (Gibbons, 2002). (See box on p. 2 for an explanation of relevant terms.)

### SEEING THE RESULTS

Classroom participation is on the rise for ELLs. In most of the STELLAR classrooms, ELLs have opportunities to work in small groups, use their first language to seek clarification from peers, and comprehend the lesson because of the teacher's use of effective strategies. As a result, students who were once withdrawn have become active

participants in the learning.

The positive results for student learning mean that the district has long-term plans to expand the intervention to include more campuses and teachers and support teachers as leaders.

As the program developed, the teachers saw the ELLs as their students, no longer the ESL teacher's "problem." Through learning opportunities and coaching they understood not only language acquisition but also the students' affective and cognitive needs.

The teachers have used this pilot program to create ELL-friendly classrooms across the district. They've reached out to students — not to a demographic, a race, or a gender, but to individuals. And they've made all the difference to those students. While content teachers used to turn to the ESL teacher, they now have other options — the STELLAR teachers. In content-level planning times, teachers make conscious decisions to include not only the four language skills in every lesson (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), but also to achieve comprehensibility and engagement while keeping the expectations high. The push is always for student success.

### Learning Forward BELIEF

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

#### Julie Shelton — language arts

Effective instruction for English Language Learners is best practice for all students. This affirmation, which we often heard during trainings, resounded within me during my first STELLAR training, and the truth of that statement manifested in my classroom through the implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR), an ELL strategy combining gestures with recited definitions (Asher, 1969).

Adding TPR to vocabulary instruction invited a new level of effectiveness and increased students' retention rates of new vocabulary. When studying the word "fortitude," students first created a definition using the word's Spanish cognate (a word that looks and sounds similar and shares the same meaning), *fortaleza*, and then acted out the definition of fortitude by pointing to their mind with one hand, flexing their arm muscles with the other arm, and reciting, "Fortitude: mental strength!" A meaningful physical movement offered more tangibility to the definition, and students retained fortitude's definition throughout the year.

Comparing vocabulary instruction with and without the implementation of TPR revealed how important the strategy is for all students. For example, within their

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literature circles, complete with student-chosen books, role sheets, and heterogeneous groupings, students sought out new vocabulary words, defined them, and created visuals representing the words' definitions. However, something was not working. As I analyzed what went wrong, I realized that the literature circle vocabulary instruction lacked TPR. Students needed an opportunity to create and share TPR for chosen vocabulary words. By allowing them to do so, we eliminated what I found to be a recurring problem within literature circles: students define words and create visuals, yet the words remain foreign to students. TPR

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— Ruth Schackmann

benefits vocabulary instruction for all students by adding a level of concreteness to new vocabulary. Students create gestures, putting their handprint on the definitions and thus increasing retention. One of the gifts of STELLAR training has been the ability to reflect on instruction, analyze challenges, and implement change without ever feeling criticized as a professional. The STELLAR

program increased my awareness that ELL strategies benefit the education of every student and has increased student achievement.

#### **Ruth Schackmann — language arts**

I observed that other language arts teachers in my team who were part of STELLAR were successful with students I had taught the year before. I wanted that success too. I started slowly, but built speed after our ESL coordinator came to observe me. Her encouragement helped ease some of last year's difficulties. The intensive training sessions were worthwhile experiences. When my team collaborated with another STELLAR school, we implemented their proven lessons in our classes. That was an instant hit. The students were successful, and we were hungry for more.

#### **Niki Fisher — science**

When I went to my first STELLAR training, I was quickly overwhelmed. I came to STELLAR to learn new strategies and ways to teach my ELL students. Instead, I was greeted with trainings on pedagogy of teaching and language acquisition. I thought, I'm a science teacher. I felt feeling overwhelmed and inadequate. I had thought that if I did my best job teaching my content, I would be able to reach all students. In reality that was not true. The next day I returned less enthusiastic and somewhat on guard. Questions were tumbling in my head. I've gone from being a teacher of content to one of both content and language, I thought. Are different lesson plans required? If so, how

am I going to have time to teach both the content and the language needed to understand the content? The reality changed how I taught. Our ESL specialist and coordinator supported and confirmed that I was the expert as far as science knowledge and that I had been doing a good job. Their goal was to teach and encourage me as I learned a second skill set: being mindful of how ELLs learn and what I can do to ensure they are successful in my class. Feeling affirmed and supported changed my outlook and openness in regards to STELLAR and how I teach. My lessons are no longer only about teaching science; they are about the best way to acquire and understand science language and concepts.

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**“A COLLABORATION BETWEEN ESL AND REGULAR CLASSROOM TEACHERS FOR ELL STUDENTS’ LITERACY DEVELOPMENT”**

*Changing English: Studies in Culture & Education, December 2007*

Read how an English as a second language (ESL) teacher and a fourth-grade classroom teacher collaborated to improve the writing skills of ELL students.

**“ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS: TEACHERS CAN BUILD STUDENTS’ LANGUAGE SKILLS”**

*JSD, Winter 2008*

Learn how teachers can increase their skills in targeting classroom questions to students by using an action research strategy. This is just one article in a JSD issue focused on English Language Learners.

[www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=1590](http://www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=1590)

**“COLLABORATIVE TEACHING TO INCREASE ELL STUDENT LEARNING: A THREE-YEAR URBAN ELEMENTARY CASE STUDY”**

*Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, July 2007*

This article explores collaborative teaching models for ESL and general education teachers and the benefits for ELL students.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Find additional resources about learning communities and teaching English language learners.

**COLORÍN COLORADO**

Find teaching resources, professional development information and research summaries on this bilingual site for both families and educators.

[www.colorincolorado.org/index.php?langswitch=en](http://www.colorincolorado.org/index.php?langswitch=en)

**“LESSONS SCOOPED FROM THE MELTING POT: CALIFORNIA DISTRICT INCREASES ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT”**

*JSD, October 2010*

Read about a gradual release of responsibility model of instructional improvement that helped the district improve academic language development.

[www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=2145](http://www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=2145)

**NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

A program of the U.S. Department of Education, this web site includes various learning resources from research to webinars on ELLs. Categories include standards, professional development, and publications.

[www.ncela.gwu.edu](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu)

**“PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: EDUCATORS WORK TOGETHER TOWARD A SHARED PURPOSE”**

*JSD, Winter 2009*

Shirley Hord examines the critical elements of professional learning communities, their relationship to constructivism, and the conditions required for success.

[www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=1789](http://www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=1789)

**TEAM TO TEACH: A FACILITATOR’S GUIDE TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TEAMS**

*NSDC, 2008*

This step-by-step book includes all the necessary guidelines for facilitators to help educators build a successful professional learning team. Written in plain, easy-to-read language, this comprehensive set of tools will enable facilitators and learning team leaders to take the necessary actions that will lead to high-performing teams.

[www.learningforwardstore.org](http://www.learningforwardstore.org)