

DELIA POMPA'S distinguished career in education policy has focused on the needs of immigrant students and English learners. She is a senior fellow for education policy at the Migration Policy Institute and was previously senior vice president for programs at the National Council of La Raza (now UnidosUS) and director of education for the Children's Defense Fund.

Pompa has had a long-standing influence on education policy through positions as the director of the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs in the U.S. Department of Education, executive director of the National Association for Bilingual Education, and assistant commissioner at the Texas Education Agency.

She began her education career as a bilingual teacher in Texas, later becoming executive director for bilingual and migrant education in the Houston Independent School District.



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WE NEED TO DO MORE FOR ENGLISH LEARNER STUDENTS

Q&A with DELIA POMPA

BY SUZANNE BOUFFARD

Q: What do we know today about the needs of English learners that we have not historically addressed in teaching and learning?

A: A lot of what we know today we have known for a long time. It's been more a question of will and resources to do what needs to be done. We know that language and content skills are intertwined and that you support English learners' academic development by supporting their language development. Researchers have been

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saying for a long time that you can't separate the two.

That means that content teachers need to understand how to develop language and language teachers need to know how to integrate and support the content. Districts have long recognized this. When I was a bilingual director in Houston in the 1980s, we started doing cross-training between content teachers and English learner teachers.

But these efforts have been implemented in spurts, and we have not approached this systemically. Part of the problem is that the structure of schooling encourages teachers to become specialists, especially at the secondary level. This has impeded implementation of the research and knowledge about best practice.

Some districts are doing an excellent job, but nationally, it's not consistent. It's really a question of scale. Districts that are [working effectively with English learners] tend to be districts with a large population of English learners. It's harder for districts that have a small number of English learners, or districts where those students are dispersed widely across schools.

Nationally, we are not doing well enough for English learner students, and we need to do more. That includes providing the time, coaching,

structure, and support for teachers and administrators.

Q: How do you build the infrastructure for that professional learning?

A: First of all, the mindset in the district overall is important. English learners should be treated not as an afterthought, but as an integral part of decision-making at all levels — for example, in materials, curriculum, and professional learning needs. The ideal is not to plan what you're going to do for the district as a whole and then come back and say, "Now, what do we do about the English learners?"

Considering their needs should be part of looking holistically at who your learners are and making all decisions, including but not limited to professional learning. For example, as districts are adopting a new curriculum, they should determine how the needs of English learners are addressed through the curriculum. That would include the suitability of curriculum materials for English learners and the professional development needed for teachers of English learners to implement the curriculum.

Next, it's important to think through staff members' specific

professional learning needs. There are unique needs English learners have that aren't met by just good teaching. They do need good teaching, but after a certain point, you have to look at what you do that builds the structure of their language.

It's not enough for all staff to have knowledge about English learners and how they learn. Everyone also needs to know their individual role in supporting these students. Teachers and other staff will have different professional learning needs based on their roles. Teachers will, of course, need support to implement appropriate instruction for English learners, but they may also need support to understand and respond to their unique socioemotional needs.

Counselors may also need information and particular skills to respond to student needs arising from migration-related trauma and family circumstances.

There is a level of professional learning necessary for administrators as well. If principals and assistant superintendents and others don't understand the language development processes that need to occur, it's hard for them to understand the budget needs, time constraints, and other conditions that enable or inhibit staff growth and student learning.

Of course, professional learning efforts should follow what we know about best practices, including the need for sufficient time and ongoing learning, opportunities for practice, and supportive, reflective experiences like coaching.

Q: For many districts, assessing English learners' content knowledge is a challenge, in part because of limited knowledge among teachers and administrators about best practices. How do you recommend they build their understanding and capacity for appropriate assessment methods?

A: A first step is for teachers to understand the unique role of assessment in determining English learners' language abilities in both the native language and English. English learners are a protected class under civil rights laws, and they have a right to be assessed to determine their language status and instructional needs.

Ideally, understanding this will lead to a desire on the part of teachers to learn how assessment can be used to strengthen instruction. The district's role is key to providing teachers an overall understanding of the role of assessment in the instructional process and the specific skills needed to link assessment outcomes to instruction.

Q: Effective professional learning requires resources, as we outline in the Standards for Professional Learning. What resources are available to help schools and districts build capacity for serving English learners?

A: Often states and districts look to the federal level instead of integrating this need into their own budgets. In addition to federal funds, we should be looking to leverage state funds and state policies around teacher pay scales, performance incentives, and other

efforts to improve teaching quality.

At the higher education level, there is also an overreliance on federal funds. Teacher and administrator training programs need to find additional sustainable ways to finance efforts to prepare educators to work with English learners. Advocating for schools of education to embed these skills, especially in geographic areas where there are lots of English learners in local schools, is an important step. We should also be looking to see if accreditation standards for these programs need to be improved.

Q: You mentioned advocacy. What other advocacy efforts could be beneficial?

A: I recommend that we all have English learners top of mind when advocating for professional learning as a whole, rather than thinking of them as a separate population or separate issue.

For example, when you are advocating for increased professional learning time, consider the needs of English learners, including the need for collaboration time among language and content teachers. As another example, when you advocate for teacher salaries, suggest extra funding for teachers who build their skills in working with English learners.

Loan forgiveness is another important benefit to advocate for overall but especially for the benefit of English learners. If we want teachers who are reflective of the populations they serve and therefore well-positioned to connect with them, we need to recognize the barriers to higher education and the teaching profession faced by English learners.

Q: How have recent political and racial tensions affected the needs of English learners or the teachers who work with them?

A: Before you even get to instruction, [the political environment] affects children's lives in ways that can impede learning. For example, in places where there is increased immigration enforcement, kids are feeling the burden of [hostile] rhetoric. Some of them are also experiencing trauma because of their own perilous journeys to this country and the difficult living circumstances they often encounter here [in the U.S.].

It's important to recognize that, in many cases, teachers are the people who are helping these kids the most. We have to give a lot of credit to teachers of English learners because they are attending to children's psychological needs, helping them access health care, ensuring they are getting enough to eat, and more.

Some of these teachers are the most dedicated teachers I've ever seen. That's a good thing that turns into a danger because teachers can't be everything. Sometimes they are the only ones outside the family who understand the kids and their needs, but it's a lot to take on in addition to instructional needs.

Q: Despite these challenges, what are some of the positive trends you are seeing in teaching and learning for English learners?

A: Despite the challenges for both teachers and students, there is growing recognition that English learners come with many strengths, including knowledge of a language other than English and a unique resiliency borne of the many challenges they have already met and conquered.

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Suzanne Bouffard (suzanne.bouffard@learningforward.org) is editor of *The Learning Professional*. ■