

Excellence for Connecticut's English Language Learners: A National Professional Development grant project

Excellence for Connecticut's English Language Learners is a departure from programs that work with a limited number of teachers and result in ESL -endorsement or certification. The project, currently in its' third year, is funded under OELA's National Professional Development program, and represents a collaborative effort between the UCLA School Management Program and the Connecticut public school districts of Montville, New London, Norwich and Stratford.

Low achievement and a persistent achievement gap have been widely documented for ELLs – there are few who would disagree that students learning English in our schools are not achieving at the levels we would hope to see. We do not know if low ELL test scores are due to poor English abilities or poor grasp of academic content, or what the relative contribution of each is. But we do know that thoughtfully applying instructional strategies in the mainstream classroom can help ELLs access and make sense of academic content knowledge, particularly when it is delivered in English.

Late in 2006, administrators from four Connecticut public school districts approached us at UCLA's School Management Program (SMP), to explore ways they might be more effective with a rapidly growing and diversifying ELL populations. This conversation was spurred, in part, by the realization that *all* district classroom teachers would work with students with limited English proficiency in the coming years. The outgrowth of this collaboration was a five-year professional development plan for mainstream classroom teachers across all levels and subjects.

ELL students in these districts spend the majority of their school day in the mainstream classroom. This is sometimes by design and intended to complement high-quality ESL services offered on a pullout basis. At other times this is by default, acknowledging the very real shortage of personnel qualified to offer intensive ESL instruction in school districts.

Our project planning began with a survey of teachers and administrators across the four districts to identify gaps and weaknesses in services, infrastructure and opportunity. The survey was administered early in 2007, and we gathered nearly 500 responses. 86% of all respondents indicated they were interested in participating in workshops and collaborative, on-site work groups to help them increase their skill in working with ELL students.

Of the 356 *classroom teachers working with ELL students in a mainstream classroom* that responded:

- 72% did NOT feel adequately prepared to work with ELLs;
- 64% had not received any special training (only one percent reported receiving more than 22 hours of training); and
- 81% felt a strong need to increase their knowledge and skill with ELL students.

The 100 administrators and instructional support personnel responding also indicated an urgent need for training and support:

- 73% do NOT feel prepared for their responsibility to support teachers of ELLs;
- 82% have received fewer than five hours of professional development designed to build their capacity to support teachers of ELLs; and
- 85% felt a strong need to increase their knowledge and skills in this area.

Our formal survey and informal conversations clearly established a need and a desire for professional development across the districts. We knew a few hours or days of workshop events was not going to do the trick – there was a need for an intensive and ongoing system of support that would allow teachers to develop the level of expertise needed to work with their new students. All this information helped us design a well-crafted program of professional development for mainstream classroom teachers, based on three interwoven strands:

The first strand is the design and delivery of a workshop focused on building knowledge of effective classroom instructional strategies for ELLs. Classroom teachers receive comprehensive training in techniques to *scaffold* the delivery of academic content for ELLs. *Scaffolding* helps ELLs move toward new skills, concepts or levels of understanding by providing temporary assistance for learners in a way that allows them to eventually complete a similar task independently. Scaffolding makes it possible for students to understand and work with age appropriate content *while* they are developing language fluency and literacy in English.

The second strand is the establishment and facilitation of school site collaborative learning communities (CLCs) focused on building the skills of participating teachers. Classroom teachers who have completed the training (as a team) work together at their school site over the course of one year, focusing on implementation and building their own skills. Teachers choose one or two strategies to implement in their classroom, guided by the current needs of their school and students. Teachers are required to complete reflective journals capturing the details of how and when the strategy was implemented, as well as the outcomes (supported by student work). All these materials serve as jumping off discussion points for CLC meetings, where instructional choices and outcomes are shared in a manner that elicits useful feedback designed to improve future instruction.

The third process strand is the design and delivery of workshops for administrators focused on coaching classroom teachers towards improving instructional practices with ELLs. Administrators receive the comprehensive training needed to develop their capacity to support classroom teachers of ELLs, including the ability to recognize and evaluate quality instruction in the classroom.

Almost all participants have rated the training and school CLC meetings as highly practical and worthwhile. Classroom implementation of strategies addressed during professional development continues to improve. While it was very helpful (and necessary) to have formal training in the use of the strategies, the real learning occurred during the school year as teachers tried things out in classrooms, compared notes, and tweaked the processes.

We've measured success by the increasing number of teachers who volunteer for participation, and by the numerous examples of individual student growth and achievement that have been documented. As we embark on our third year in this project, district administrators are crediting this work with improvements in state academic scores among the ELL population. In the words of Mohegan Elementary School principal Lori Caron, "All our schools made AYP for the first time in many years. Our ELL students at Mohegan *actually helped to bring the scores UP.*" One project school in Stratford (Whitney) has moved out of identified status. Students in Norwich have demonstrated impressive progress on the statewide assessment (CMT), with more than half of the ELLs achieving proficiency in *both* reading and math at EXCELL sites. Overall, an impressive 64% of ELL students impacted by Project EXCELL have demonstrated more than the expected one year's growth on statewide tests in reading, writing and mathematics.

But our best measure of success is seen in the 'stickiness' of the work. Participants plan is to continue meeting and working together, sharing knowledge with colleagues in their own buildings, after the grant year is complete.