Understanding Language | Language, Literacy, and Learning in the Content Areas

The Review of Services for English-Language Learners in the Oakland Unified School District

Conducted by Understanding Language,
Stanford University Graduate School of Education

February 19, 2015

Executive Summary

The faces of the students of Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) are changing, just as our nation's demographics are changing. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of K-12 English language learners (ELLs) grew 60% in the first decade of this century, compared to 7% growth of overall student population. By 2020, it is estimated that half of all U.S. public school students will have a non-English speaking background.

For the school year 2013-2014, 30% of OUSD students are ELLs and 49% speak a language other than English at home. OUSD's shifting demographics now reflect a student population that is 38.1% Hispanic and Latino, 30.6% African-American, 14.1% Asian, and 11.8% White. This is a very different ethnic representation of a community historically perceived as exclusively African American and White.

There have been federal, state, and district-level policy and process adjustments made to better support ELLs. For example, ELLs were designated as a "subgroup" in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, not only identifying this specific type of student, but highlighting the achievement inequities between ELLs and non-ELL students.

The urgency to provide better support to ELLs is clear. Unfortunately, the majority of initiatives implemented and applied to this subgroup are embedded in strategies specific to closing the achievement gaps for low-income students and students of color (Grantmakers for Education, 2014). OUSD recognizes the necessary urgency and specificity needed to better support the ELL population.

An example of OUSD's commitment to ELL success is the establishment of the Office of English Language Learner and Multilingual Achievement (ELLMA) in 2013. This office works collaboratively with all stakeholders to provide ELLs with equity and access to an excellent education, and to ensure all ELLs achieve at high standards in one or more language and ultimately graduate from OUSD schools as college, career, and community ready. ELLMA was established within the Leadership, Curriculum, and Instruction (LCI) Department with the express purpose of collaborating with math, science, and ELA departments to integrate language and content development in tandem for ELLs.

This report was commissioned by then Deputy Superintendent, Maria Santos and ELLMA Executive Director, Nicole Knight. Specifically, ELLMA consulted with the Understanding Language Initiative of Stanford University's Graduate School of Education (UL) to research the district, and combine the findings and best practices to develop recommendations for the district. The goal of this study and its instruments is to support OUSD and ELLMA's momentum beyond compliance and into higher standards and quality of instruction and supports for ELLs.

This study and its instruments were co-developed by UL; Nicole Knight, Executive Director of ELLMA; and Anne Okahara, Research Director of OUSD's Quality, Accountability, and Analytics Office. The report summarizes findings from UL's 2014 review of district policies, practices, and programs for ELLs and presents specific recommendations and next steps to best support ELLs in OUSD and their public education success. UL's recommendations for OUSD are outlined below and are discussed at length within the report. The report and recommendations fall into five key categories of service for ELLs: Policy and Leadership, Teaching and Learning, Social and Emotional Learning, Family Engagement, and Staffing and Resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Policy and Leadership

Clarification on district policy and procedures for ELL identification and reclassification should be developed and made available to teachers and administrators. District personnel and school staff agree that better data management systems and procedures for tracking ELL progress would greatly benefit identification and reclassification processes.

Additionally, ELLMA supports an integrated English Language Development (ELD) model. This model, still in the early stages of implementation in the district, promotes the integration of English Language Development and academic content instruction in addition to having a separate block for ELD. Research findings identified a great need for a thorough, district-wide system and structure for ELD, complete with more professional development, coaching, monitoring, and accountability.

Recommendations for OUSD and Supporting Research

- Establish a clear vision for ELL success which includes high expectations for academic achievement (Donato, 1994; van Lier & Walqui, 2012) and social-emotional development (Zins et al., 2004; Elias & Arnold, 2006). Support this vision with a purposeful plan that provides students with diverse trajectories to college, career, and community readiness.

- Engage the community in the review and refinement of the draft policy paper developed by ELLMA, *Essential Practices for ELL and Multilingual Achievement*, to develop and adopt a Blueprint for ELL Success.

- Develop a comprehensive infrastructure in the district's data management system that enables school communities ease of access and use of ELLs and the subgroups (e.g., Newcomers, Developing, Long Term ELLs, Unaccompanied Minors, SPED) (Abedi & Linquanti, 2012; Saunders & Marcelletti, 2012).

- Recognize that bilingualism and bi-literacy are assets and adopt research-informed policies that support the use of the home language in bilingual or Dual Language programs.
  - Offer coherent and continuous pre-K-12 bilingual programming.
  - Offer core secondary courses for newcomers in high-incidence home languages (Goldenberg, 2008; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006).

- Establish identification and reclassification regulations and procedures, disseminate them to all educators and parents, and hold schools accountable for timely implementation (Flores et al., 2009; Hopkins et al., 2013; Linquanti, 2001).

2. Teaching and Learning

To best meet the needs of their ELLs, teachers would welcome support with scaffolding for designing curricula and assessments for ELLs, especially newcomers. Also recommended is continued and enhanced integration of high-level academic discussion and explicit instruction on language practices in classrooms. Additional resources that would be helpful for teachers and other school staff include an on-site coaching model, dedicated time for teacher collaboration, and more cultural, ethnic, and community education.

Integrating home language meaningfully into the school and classroom is important not only as an instructional tool, but also as a way for teachers to show appreciation for students' cultures and to build students' confidence by recognizing bilingualism as an asset. Educator guidance and instruction is needed to support classroom teachers in using students' home languages to transfer content knowledge between languages in addition to developing strong bilingual/bi-literacy programs.

Recommendations for OUSD and Supporting Research
• Develop a framework for the integration of content and language development aligned to the CCSS, NGSS, and new English Language Proficiency Standards (Lee, Quinn & Valdés, 2013; Schleppegrell, 2004; van Lier & Walqui, 2012).
• Provide extensive professional development to all educators on how the new standards work together and the importance of using both language and content standards to guide instruction (Lee, Quinn & Valdés, 2013; Schleppegrell, 2004; van Lier & Walqui, 2012).
• Employ an Integrated and Designated English Language Development program and finance professional development, curriculum development, assessments, and instructional materials to support implementation (Lee, Quinn & Valdés, 2013; Schleppegrell, 2004; van Lier & Walqui, 2012).
• Build a comprehensive professional learning program to help *all* educators deliver instruction that integrates language development and content (Gándara et al., 2005; Santos et al., 2012).
• Design and finance differentiated supports for Long Term ELLs, Newcomers, Unaccompanied Minors, SPED-ELLs and Bilingual Programs (Valdés et al., 2005; Walqui & Heritage, 2012).
• Provide professional development on how to differentiate instruction and supports for Long Term ELLs, Newcomers, Unaccompanied Minors, SPED-ELLs, and Bilingual Programs (Valdés et al., 2005; Walqui & Heritage, 2012).
• Invest in materials and professional development to build strong and coherent pre-k-12 bilingual programs and supports. (Goldenberg, 2008; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006).
• Increase collaboration between ELLMA and the Program for Exceptional Children (PEC).

3. Social and Emotional Learning

OUSD and its schools can create a better learning environment for ELLs by strengthening cultural competence at all levels of instruction, administration, and community. UL's research found that bullying occurs at roughly half of the elementary and secondary schools in the study, and is experienced particularly by newcomers to the district. Recommendations for improvement include increasing educator preparation on bullying prevention and support services such as counseling for ELLs, preferably in their home language and with a counselor of their home culture, particularly when ELLs have suffered trauma. UL also recommends providing more support to teachers around classroom management since disruption in classrooms is an obvious barrier to learning. Also, parent communication from the district, preferably in their home language, about the social and emotional well-being of ELLs is essential to helping ELLs feel comfortable engaging in their education.

Recommendations for OUSD and Supporting Research
• Engage staff in understanding how diverse ELLs are experiencing classroom instruction, school culture, and support services thereby building a stronger awareness as to their needs.
• Provide professional development on how to develop safe and inclusive learning environments that recognize and respect the languages and cultures of students (Banks, 2001; McAllister & Irvine, 2000).
• Require strategic actions and plans for continuous improvement to create cultures of high expectations and respect for ELLs with significant attention to bullying (Donato, 1994; van Lier & Walqui, 2012).
• Align fiscal and human resources to support the complex and diverse needs of current and former ELLs.
• Establish structure for collaboration with school personnel and community based organizations to address the needs of ELLs (Bryan, 2005; Warren, 2005).

4. Family Engagement

Engaging families in order to foster academic achievement has been a main theme in the research and practice of educational reform for decades. Active parental involvement can narrow the achievement gap and increase English acquisition

by ELLs. This idea is reinforced by many educators in OUSD and the parents that participated in this study. There exists an almost unanimous concern about building bridges between home and school, rooted in a vision of educational pragmatism and social justice.

Recommendations for OUSD and Supporting Research

- Create multiple resources and family learning opportunities to increase parents' capacity to support their students and make informed decisions about program placement (Epstein, 2001; Weiss et al., 2010).

- Create structures and opportunities for parents to be active participants in district and school decisions (Epstein, 2001; Weiss et al, 2010), and educate and prepare those with extraordinary commitment to be cultural liaisons to their communities.

- Ensure that schools hire staff that can bridge cultures and support communication in home languages (Batt, 2008; Tinkler, 2002).

---

5. Staffing and Resources

The impact of the classroom environment on ELLs is powerful, and through its establishment of ELLMA, OUSD has acknowledged the need for staffing and resources. Teachers and administrators have made a clear call for development and implementation of staffing supports. Continuous learning through high quality, consistent professional development is recommended for all educators and administrators.

Recommendations for OUSD and Supporting Research

- Recruit and hire bilingual and bicultural teachers, leaders, and support staff and monitor levels of representation and support (Goldenberg, 2008; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006).

- Establish the quality of educational and support services ELLs receive as the responsibility of all teachers and leaders (Hopkins et al., 2013; Olsen, 2010).

- Establish site-based ELL specialist positions with expertise in the integration of language, literacy, and content.

- Engage all educators in continuous learning and planning to improve the quality of services for ELLs (Gándara et al., 2005; Santos et al., 2012).

- Establish measurable and ambitious language development and academic achievement targets. Design continuous improvement structures and supports that help students achieve these targets (Donato, 1994; van Lier & Walqui, 2012).

- Include in the Teacher Effectiveness Framework and the Leadership Dimensions specific practices to support ELL success such as: integrated language development and content learning (Lee, Quinn & Valdés, 2013; Schleppegrell, 2004; van Lier & Walqui, 2012); differentiation of instruction according to students' needs (Donato, 1994; van Lier & Walqui 2012); development of active and appropriate uses of academic language; and regular student communication and collaboration (Lee, Quinn & Valdés, 2013; Schleppegrell, 2004; van Lier & Walqui, 2012).

- Provide comprehensive resources and supports for SPED teachers of ELLs (Klingner et al., 2008; Ortiz & Yates, 2001).