

Best Practice for English Language Learners

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English Language Learners enter school with varied educational backgrounds. In our school district many students, for whom English is not a first language, have parents who work in the field of agriculture and some lead transient lifestyles. As a result, the education process can be disjointed and stressful.

In order to mitigate these circumstances our school community has put many systems into place to support student learning; recognizing that in order to have a successful school experience we must address social-emotional needs as well as academic concerns. Many of these programs benefit the entire school community and could be considered best practice for all students who lead transient lifestyles in which poverty is a key factor.

Peer mentoring: English Language Learners are paired with older students, one-on-one, to do buddy reading, word study and to engage in positive communication opportunities. Mentors involved in this program have demonstrated strengths in ELA and social-emotional skills and offer English Language Learners a safe space to work on these skills. Mentors model appropriate fluency in reading, pronunciation and phonics skills that may be new to English Language Learners. They also model pro-social behavior, reinforcing school rules, cultural norms and expectations. The mentor program is informal and frequency is based on student need. Most mentoring takes place at the beginning or end of the day for ten to fifteen minutes in a quiet environment.

Community building: For many English Language Learners, not knowing the language spoken at school can be very isolating. When there is the possibility of connect students with a common home language it provides parents the opportunity to link up and support each other, as well as the students. Connections can be made between students within the building, as well as with teachers who may be fluent in the English Language Learner's native language. Utilizing resources, such as teachers who speak Spanish or have served as ESL teachers help bridge the gap for some students and parents who might have questions about school programming or resources that might be available in the community. Additionally, using online or technology-based tools to translate key information that goes home is beneficial for families as well.

Continuity of educators and providers: Due to the transient nature of many students' lives in our demographic, particularly the English Language Learners, students have demonstrated increased

academic success and social-emotional gains when provided the opportunity to remain with the same teachers and service providers for more than one school year. This structure decreases the stressors in the educational environment because the groundwork has already been established in terms classroom structure, rules and expectations. As educators, it provides us the space to form a strong bond with my students and their families and to celebrate their accomplishments over a longer period of time. Having the same teacher for siblings who come through the building may be beneficial as well.

Educators and service providers should collaborate to ensure a clear understanding of student goals, areas of opportunity and strategies that are most successful for the student. Having regular meetings to address these areas provides continuity of care for the students and enables the classroom teacher the ability to interface with other members of the team as they support ELLs to reach their highest potential.

Best practice should always be student focused and data driven. Each English Language Learner should be considered on an individual basis and all factors should be evaluated when determining the least restrictive environment in which the students could gain the most ground. English Language Learners' progress should be evaluated regularly with consistent measurement techniques, that are both formal and informal. Small group instruction with a focus on vowel and letter sounds, vocabulary, and high-frequency words will help to bridge the language barrier. Discussions about text with other similarly-leveled peers will help to strengthen comprehension and fluency, and allow for more interactions with language and speech.

Early Intervention is critical and providing language learning resources to the parents will support instruction in the classroom. Invite the parents into the classroom to be volunteers. Exposure to the language will provide them key skills and will send a positive message that they are welcome and invited to participate in their child's education.