

The United Federation of Teachers

City to ELL teachers: Sink or swim

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A special set of skills is required to teach English Language Learners (ELLs). The problem is these skills are not widely taught, they aren't easy to apply and, in far too many instances, the Department of Education's hands-off approach to instruction leaves teachers of ELLs to learn them by trial and error.

Most teachers in the New York City school system teach students who have limited English skills. With 148,000 ELLs in the city school system, they are 14 percent of all city pupils. "I would say there must be ELLs in every classroom now," says Catalina Fortino, an ELL specialist with the UFT Teacher Center.

Teachers with specialized licenses — about 4,000 English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and several thousand with bilingual extensions — of course have expertise in secondary language instruction.

But regular classroom teachers receive virtually no training in how to integrate these students into their classes and help them succeed. The state requires no training in ELL education for most classroom teachers. Adding to the problem, No Child Left Behind, in its wisdom, now requires ELL students to pass the state's standardized math and ELA tests in English after just one year in U.S. schools. When many don't, their teachers are somehow to blame.

What we know and don't know

If you are unsure about the most effective strategies for teaching ELLs, especially in upper elementary, middle and high school grades, you are hardly alone.

"The pool of credible studies on how best to teach these students is far shallower than it is for other much-debated areas of education, such as general reading," according to Claude Goldenberg, a professor at Stanford University, who was quoted in a recent Education Week special report.

"Researchers have learned a lot about how to teach basic reading skills in the early grades to English Language learners," the report's author continued. "What they have yet to nail down is how to help this vulnerable and challenging population of

students over the learning hump that comes later in elementary school; how to teach higher-order reading skills, such as comprehension; how to teach adolescents who are new to English; and how to boost achievement in academic subjects other than English.”

Indeed, in New York City just 5 percent of 8th-grade ELLs met ELA learning standards in 2008. Only 24 percent of city ELLs graduated on time in 2007, according to the latest data, and this is down from 27 percent in 2005.

Turning around these dismal results will require a huge effort. The data reflect the extraordinary challenge of teaching a population that ranges from U.S.-born to refugees, highly literate in one language to illiterate in all languages, coming from hundreds of countries speaking hundreds of languages. They are newcomers to the culture, who must do double work — learn English as well as academic subjects, often as pioneers in their own families as well.

Experience from the field

Claire Sylvan, who taught for many years at International HS in Long Island City, a school for recent immigrants, says one key to ELL instruction is to give students extensive opportunities to use the language in class.

“Nobody learns to ride a bicycle by watching someone else do it,” she says. Yet in a 45-minute class with 30 students, even if a teacher called on every child, no one would have more than a minute to speak. Instead, she found the best approach was to create small groups of students and assign activities designed to have students talking with each other throughout the class. “Language is getting developed as they are talking about content,” she says. “ELL kids need to be using academic language all the time to gain the dexterity with it, to be able to tackle more advanced cognition tasks.”

Sylvan, who now runs the Internationals Network for Public Schools, believes this model is really one that all educators should use. But administrators and trainers must support teachers in doing this. “It’s very hard to do this on our own. It’s best to have a group of three or four teachers doing it with the same group of students, say the math, science, English/ESL and social studies teachers working with 75 kids,” she says. “So they can talk about what’s working and what isn’t, and try out strategies together for their classes.”

In fact, learning from each other may be the way most teachers of ELL students figure out the best instructional strategies. “The best training I got was by observing other teachers in my building,” says Katie Kurjakovic, an ESL teacher at PS 11, a K-6 school in Queens where students speak 20 different languages. She now helps

the other teachers. For example, she says, if a social studies teacher tells her the ELL students don't seem to be getting a unit she will develop lessons to give those students background knowledge, build specific vocabulary, and supply visuals like maps or pictures to help them grasp it.

"I think everyone should take responsibility," she says. "Right now, there is a lot of responsibility on teachers' shoulders but not at the DOE level."

[For more ideas and information on teaching ELLs, check the resources box below.]

'Getting it right'

While there's no one best model, Stanford's Goldenberg says the bottom line is that ELLs and their teachers need some sort of classroom support if they are going to succeed in American classrooms. "You cannot do sink or swim," he told Education Week.

The New York Immigration Coalition, in advocating for more help for teachers of ELL students, calls for school-based ESL coaches, available to all faculty, to help plan and coordinate instruction. In "Getting it Right: Ensuring a Quality Education for English Language Learners in New York," the coalition also calls for reduced class sizes systemwide, and thousands of new ESL and bilingual teachers to alleviate the load on current teachers.

The State Education Department has added "model programs for Limited English Proficient/ELLs to its allowable programs for new districts spending this year. It published a detailed list of such programs that support students and teachers in literacy development, subject matter instruction and social and cultural orientations.

But at the school level, what teachers need right now is a sense that someone is overseeing their work, giving feedback, ensuring services and helping them coordinate instruction with other teachers. There is precious little of any of this from the DOE, according to Teacher Center's Fortino and to other teachers in the field.

Kurjakovic at PS 11 reports that while her school does provide ESL training, "no one has ever checked to see if we're doing it." Nor has her attendance data ever been reviewed. Even when she's had to cancel a service day for a special ed ELL student, "no one has followed up from central." Meanwhile, she says, "because of all the testing, we're missing more and more instruction."

ELL students and their teachers represent an area where the DOE's hands-off model falls short of the need. It's not that she wants teachers to fill in more forms,

Kurjakovic says. But “kids are losing out on mandated ESL time and nobody is looking to see if they are getting their daily requirements.”

“Sink or swim” has not ensured that the needs of ELL students or their teachers get met.

Help for teachers of ELLs

Colorín Colorado, a partnership of Public TV WETA’s Reading Rockets and the AFT: bilingual Spanish/English site is www.colorincolorado.org.

Claude Goldenberg, “Teaching English Language Learners: What the Research Does — and Does Not — Say,” American Educator, Summer 2008:
www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/summer08/goldenberg.pdf.

“Centering on English Language Learners,” UFT Teacher Center, Volume 1. Issue 1 2008 (available by calling the Teacher Center at 1-212-475-3737).

NYC Department of Education Office of English Language Learners, 1-212-374-6072 or on the Web at <http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/ELL/default.htm>.

Internationals Network for Public Schools: 1-212-868-5180 or www.internationalsnps.org.