Philadelphia Education Research Consortium

# EDUCATING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS:

## Opportunities for Improved Infrastructure

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**Academic success for ELLs depends on high quality instruction and the infrastructure needed to support it (e.g., staff, curricular materials, collaboration, professional development). This brief examines the challenges schools face in these areas and the strategies they use to mediate them. The purpose of this brief is to share these strategies across schools and with the larger Philadelphia community, in order to help schools continue to improve ELL programming.**

# Overview

In Philadelphia, a growing and increasingly diverse population of English Language Learners (ELLs) is intensifying demands on the city's public schools as they work to meet the educational needs of these students. As in many cities across the country, educators in Philadelphia are searching for ways to more efficiently and effectively meet the needs of ELLs and close long-standing achievement gaps[1] between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers.[i]

As a group, ELLs are diverse, coming from a variety of native languages, cultures, and educational backgrounds, posing unique opportunities and challenges for schools. In their efforts to serve the needs of ELLs, schools grapple with many complex issues; within the City of Philadelphia, many district and charter schools navigate similar issues in coordinating robust ELL programs. Stakeholders across sectors identified the following opportunities for growth in their ELL programs: (1) Curricular Resources, (2) ESOL Staffing, (3) Scheduling, (4) Professional Development, (5) Academic Language Development, (6) Special Education Identification, and (7) Exit Criteria.

This brief examines these opportunities for growth and the strategies schools used to mediate them. The purpose of this brief is to share these strategies across schools and with the larger Philadelphia community in order to help schools continue to improve ELL programming.

This brief is part of a larger project focused on better understanding the characteristics and needs of ELLs in Philadelphia's public K-12 schools as well as how schools are serving these students. Leaders in district and charter schools commissioned the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium (PERC) to work with them on a series of studies to determine how best to meet the needs of ELLs. A qualitative study launched in November 2015, followed by a quantitative study in April 2016.

Schools with strong ELL student achievement and whose approaches to serving them reflected an array of programmatic models were selected to participate in the qualitative study. Specifically, we examined student growth on the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS) for ELLs[2] to identify schools whose ACCESS growth scores were categorized as 'Reinforce' or 'Model' (the two highest tiers on the district's school performance framework). We then consulted with leadership from the Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs in the School District of Philadelphia to ensure the sample included adequate coverage of the various programmatic models employed throughout the district.

This brief is built on input from a wide variety of stakeholders:

- two interviews with Deputy Chief of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs in the School District of Philadelphia,
- two focus groups with Multilingual Managers and one Curriculum Specialist in the Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs in the School District of Philadelphia,
- interviews with administrators and/or ELL program leads at five district and four charter schools exhibiting success while serving a broad range of English Language Learners,
- focus groups with ESL teachers and general education teachers in two district and three charter schools, [3] and
- an interview with the Bilingual Education Advisor in the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

[1] Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress have consistently shown **large gaps in achievement** among ELLs compared to their native English-speaking peers **for some 40 years**. In high school, ELLs tend to have **lower GPAs and earn fewer course credits** and are **more likely to drop out** compared to their native English-speaking peers.
[2] We utilized ACCESS growth indicators reported in the School District of Philadelphia School Progress Reports in 2013-2014 and 2014-2015.
[3] At one charter school and one district school, only ESL teachers participated in a focus group.

A full report describing the methodology and overall findings of the larger project, including an analysis of students' paths to language proficiency and exit from ESL programs, will be disseminated in August 2016.

## Infrastructure is Important

Academic success for ELLs depends on high quality instruction and the infrastructure needed to support it.[ii] In a study focused on district capacity-building efforts in response to increasing ELL populations, the Regional Educational Laboratory serving the Appalachia region (REL Appalachia) organized 15 infrastructure components into five categories, as displayed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Infrastructure Needed to Support ELL Instruction[4]**

| CATEGORY | COMPONENT |
|---|---|
| **Personnel** | • Leadership Structures<br>• Staffing<br>• Professional Development |
| **Instructional Resources and Supports** | • Curricular Resources<br>• Additional Supports for Particularly High Needs ELLs<br>• Materials |
| **Assessment** | • Identification of Needs<br>• Assessing Language Proficiency/Academic Achievement |
| **Administration** | • Rostering<br>• Funding Mechanisms<br>• Data/Data Management |
| **Outreach** | • Students<br>• Parents<br>• Community<br>• Social Service |

This brief focuses on the most salient issues related to ELL program infrastructure that emerged across schools in this study, using REL Appalachia's categories as an organizing framework. A more comprehensive summary of all issues schools identified will be provided in the larger report.

## Personnel

Teachers have a stronger foundation for working with ELLs when they understand the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the students, patterns in second language acquisition, students' specific education needs (such as level of prior schooling and first language literacy skills), and strategies for involving their ELLs in meaningful ways in instructional activities. Issues such as ESOL certification status and experience of teachers, adequacy of staffing structures, and availability of professional development for ESOL and general education teachers contribute to an ESOL program's infrastructure.

### ESOL Staffing

**Stakeholders from both district and charter schools highlighted the difficulty of finding qualified bilingual and/or ESOL-certified staff.** Identifying teachers with the appropriate training and certification

[4] The outreach category and some components from the other four categories were excluded from this brief. Only the components that resonated in our study are addressed in the sections that follow.

for working with ELLs is essential. As one ELL coordinator described, "They are having a very difficult time getting bilingual teachers, and getting certified bilingual teachers, and so because of that…I'm not so sure that we will have the best success…because of the challenges of having teachers in those bilingual programs who are able to do the things that the program requires."

**Teachers and staff across sectors highlighted the need for more ESOL staff in their buildings.** Many educators reported that their ESOL teachers had to serve large caseloads of students (e.g., 43 active ELLs plus 62 ELLs needing monitoring assigned to one ESOL teacher), which made it difficult to give each student the level of support they needed. In some schools, ELLs kept arriving during the school year, so the number of ESOL teachers assigned at leveling became inadequate later in the year.

> In October, they took [a teacher away] based on the numbers not realizing [that more students would come]…It's very difficult to lose a teacher like that… You have to also remember that level one kids require more instructional time by ESOL teachers and content teachers.
>
> *- High School ESOL Coordinator*

## Professional Development

**Additional professional development for both general education and ESOL teachers was requested across schools.** Staff at several schools emphasized the need for additional support to help general education and ESOL teachers, as well as teachers in the new dual language programs, understand how to better support their ELLs. One elementary bilingual teacher noted, "[it] would be great for a bilingual teacher, an ESOL teacher, or a regular classroom teacher [to] have more strategies on how to handle...situations in any one of those content areas," while an ELL coordinator at a different school noted, "[We] need to support content teachers more."

**Across sectors, teachers and administrators reported that a "deficit perspective" of ELLs sometimes created challenges for serving and integrating ELLs into the school community.** This suggested the need for more professional development to create greater understanding of ELLs' needs and assets. One elementary teacher noted this challenge, saying, "One of the challenges is reminding everyone what these kids bring to the table, and not just the deficit." An administrator at another school echoed this sentiment, stating, "number one [is creating] some general knowledge around what it means, or how do you become an ESOL student… [General education teachers] have to understand who these kids are...a lot of those misunderstandings exist."

In some cases, ESOL teachers asserted that school staff viewed students as ELLs even after they exited the program. This tendency meant that it was even more challenging for students to become truly integrated in the larger school community. One elementary teacher noted, "I almost feel like even though they are [exited]…they are still considered [ELLs], especially with a staff that has been here throughout that child's process. I almost feel like they still hold that ESOL status in a sense. They are still seen that way."

**MEDIATING STRATEGY:**

Schools can create a culture that both values ELLs' contributions to the classroom and treats them as students like any other with their own individual needs. Leadership in one school tried to create a strong school community for ELLs by training many of its content teachers on strategies for supporting ELLs. For example, a general education teacher said, ***"We [teachers] are really trying to be a community to these students…we want them to be academically strong, but we want them to have a sense of themselves because after we give them the skills, we want them to be able to advocate for themselves…valuing language is so important."***

Staff at another school encouraged students to take leadership roles to share their cultural heritage with the rest of the student population. An elementary ESL teacher at this school emphasized, ***"giving [ELLs] a chance to teach the school is really great…having them at a school assembly doing a dance, or a song, and teaching some of the words in their language empowers them, validates the love they have for their culture."***

## Instructional Resources and Supports

Curricular resources for ELLs provide a foundation for academic success when they are designed to ensure adequate progress toward both academic proficiency in English and achievement of content standards. Because ELLs have not yet achieved full academic language proficiency in English, their teachers require access to a range of resources and supports to meet their needs. Teachers also need to become skilled in applying instructional methods that make standard content and materials more accessible to ELLs. This is particularly critical for ELLs in high school who have not yet achieved academic language proficiency in English.

### Curricular Resources

Across sectors and grade levels, educators reported a lack of appropriate, adequate, and engaging curricular resources for ELLs. General education teachers expressed a desire to have access to more resources with content and language that was geared to and more appropriate for their ELLs. One high school content teacher remarked, "every piece of material that we get we need to change and adapt…if you search for ELL specific material [for] American History…there's not a whole lot out there."

In some schools, it was difficult to find adequate resources in both Spanish and English. This was true for both bilingual programs and ESOL programs. As one elementary bilingual teacher noted "I am finding myself with a very [hard] situation because I'm doing close reading, but I'm doing that only in English because I don't have the articles; I am on my own. I'm trying to look to different websites…but they don't have articles to do close reading in Spanish so I'm using what I can find."

**MEDIATING STRATEGY:**

Some schools identified particular online resources to support their ELLs. One school was using Lexia (an online adaptive program that focuses on development of oral language, reading vocabulary, and academic language) to support the needs of ELLs performing at the lowest English language proficiency levels. As one ELL coordinator highlighted, ***"The way I see it now, the solution for students who are stuck in ESOL are the interventions of Lexia, which is based on multi-sensory reading intervention. It's a computer program, and I've seen more growth with that than I've seen with other interventions."***

## Additional Supports for Particularly High Needs ELLs

**Supporting students in mastering academic language was particularly challenging at the high school level, suggesting a need for additional supports or resources to help teachers accelerate academic language development.** Academic language, the kind of language used in textbooks and educational settings, is the language necessary for success in school. It is related to a standards-based curriculum, including the content areas of math, science, social studies, and English language arts. Social language is the language of everyday communication in oral and written forms. Academic language is more complex and demanding than social language and takes more time to achieve proficiency.

According to the educators included in our study, ELLs often display strong social language but still struggle with their academic language, particularly grammar and vocabulary. This was especially true for ELLs in the upper grades (or ELLS who entered after the early elementary years).

> *We will get a new student in and their English Language will be almost non-existent and we'll get a, "Hey mister good to see you, it's been great," so they are able to speak and hold a conversation…Academically, it's more difficult. – General Education Teacher*

An administrator emphasized that academic language became even more challenging in the higher grades, and students often struggled to keep up.

> *As you get into higher grades, the language demands are very high…It's frustrating for students when they can do it in their first language and then they can't have the success they were used to having in school. They understand the science experiment, but can't write the lab report.*

**Meeting the needs of students with little or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) was challenging, as these students often require supports beyond literacy and language instruction.** SLIFE usually are new to the U.S. school system and have had interrupted or limited schooling opportunities in their home country. They have limited backgrounds in reading and writing in their home language(s) and are below grade level in most academic skills. SLIFE present unique language, literacy, academic, socio-emotional, and cultural needs. These students need learning programs that:

- Address their acculturation to the U.S. school system.
- Attend to their socio-emotional needs (poverty, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), family separation or reunification, etc.).
- Provide focused initial literacy instruction appropriate for adolescents.

- Provide focused academic skill instruction to bridge gaps in knowledge.
- Provide integration of content and language instruction.

> *With a lot of the students it's just holding the pencil correctly. They are gripping it like it's a weapon and so getting them to do little things like that. – General Education Teacher*

# Assessment

Assessment is centrally important to the education of ELLs. Districts and schools need to master complex federal and state requirements for assessing English proficiency. Teachers benefit from the use of assessment data to track the progress of English language learners in developing proficiency in English, and to inform instruction. And because assessment data determines how ELLs progress through and exit ELL programming, districts and schools must establish consistent procedures and administer assessments. This is particularly important with regard to identifying ELLs who may have learning disabilities.

## Assessing Language Proficiency/Academic Achievement

**Teachers and Coordinators across sectors articulated a number of issues related to the ACCESS for ELLs.** First, some felt frustrated because it took so long to receive the most recent scores, which impeded their planning and preparation for the next school year. Other teachers felt that the test did not accurately gauge their students' levels. A high school ESOL teacher noted:

> *I have some kids who don't progress from one year to the next, and I know that they have advanced a lot more than is demonstrated on that test, which is very frustrating…I think their actual levels are much higher." Finally, some schools reported that there were challenges with the administration of the test, namely that it took a lot of time to administer, which detracted from instructional time.*

**Some educators highlighted the difficulty of meeting complex and extensive exit criteria.** Assessments like the PSSA do not have adequate accommodations for ELLs, which may be one reason why ELLs struggle to meet the threshold for exit. At the high school level, teachers felt it was unreasonable to expect students to pass Keystone Exams and the ACCESS for ELLs during the same year, and were frustrated by the amount of instructional time lost each year due to the extensive testing requirements for exit in high school. An ESOL teacher voiced concerns about the Keystone Exams:

> *They were administered Keystone Math last year, but they have to pass the test within the same calendar year. That to me seems kind-of just...That's one of those things that I think is really unfortunate for our students…between the Keystone exams, which is twice a year and then we have the ACCESS exams…to require that they have to take all of these exams.*

Additionally, they reported student fatigue in response to having to take the assessments multiple times year after year (even the assessments on which they already achieved the minimum required score) until they meet the required performance level on the Keystone Exams and ACCESS for ELLs in the same academic year; as a result, students stop trying on the ACCESS for ELLs and underperform in subsequent years. High school staff expressed a need to revisit the exit policies at the high school level and develop a policy that is better aligned with the realities of the assessment structure and sequence in grades 9 through 12.

## Identification of Needs

**Across sectors, educators reported that it was sometimes challenging to determine if ELL students require special education.** Teachers and coordinators find it challenging to determine whether students who struggle more than expected do so because of linguistic or other cultural issues, or because they are also experiencing issues that require special education interventions. As an ESOL teacher reported, "My biggest challenge too is figuring out not only which one of my kids actually does need an IEP, and just hasn't gotten one because we couldn't tell whether it was language or not…but also the challenge is…discerning the language versus the disability."

**MEDIATING STRATEGY:**

Close collaboration between ESOL and Special Education teachers was one successful strategy to mediate issues related to dual classification. An elementary teacher noted, ***"I work very closely with the special education teacher because we kind-of modify things together because what can be used for ESL can also be used for special education and vice-versa, and again we just talk all the time."***

# Administration

ELLs need time set aside to learn how academic English really works. They also require specifically designated time for English language development, as time when they learn sentence structure, vocabulary, and how English is used in academic settings. Schedules for ESOL should be created first in the rostering process, to ensure that students are grouped by level and can receive appropriate mandated ESOL services.[iii]

## Scheduling

**Teachers and Coordinators at high schools reported that ELLs are often rostered last, resulting in challenges accessing appropriate classes for ELLs.** It was challenging to roster by proficiency level. In addition, within the limited number of periods available during the school day, there were competing priorities, such as AP classes, which further complicated scheduling. One ESOL teacher stated, "We have challenges as far as rostering goes. Instead of rostering us first, they roster us last…it is a struggle to get our students into schedules."

**MEDIATING STRATEGY:**

One high school addressed ELL scheduling issues by rostering ESOL first. This helped the school ensure that they were meeting the language development needs of ELLs, as well as making sure ELLs were rostered appropriately and had access to the kinds of classes they need (*e.g.*, rostered by proficiency level). A roster chair said, ***"I do ESOL first. My schedule is propelled on meeting the needs of all these kids."***

**Teachers and Coordinators at high schools also articulated that ELLs are rostered incorrectly if rosters are shaped by grade level, rather than English proficiency level.** An administrator at a high school pointed out the fact that ELL's academic needs are determined by their ESOL level, not grade level. "It's trying to convince people that these kids are propelled by ESOL level. A ninth grade level one, looks different than a ninth grade level two and three and four. It's very difficult to get people to realize that grade doesn't mean anything. It's level that propels your schedule."

## What's Next?

While the information contained within this brief is not exhaustive, it is designed to be used as a platform to begin more intentional conversations about strategies currently in place that are helping policymakers, teachers, and administrators navigate challenging circumstances in their ELL programs. We encourage school communities (including boards, district or charter management central offices, schools, families, communities, etc.) to work together to discuss strategic ways that teachers, and administrators across sectors can work more closely to address challenging situations, identify additional strategies to mitigate issues, and augment their ELL programs.

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## WHAT IS PERC?

PERC is an innovative, cross-sector partnership designed to provide robust analysis on some of Philadelphia's most pressing education issues. Housed at Research for Action (RFA), an independent non-profit education research organization, PERC's research agenda is set by the School District of Philadelphia and representatives of the city's charter school sector. PERC draws on the rich research expertise in the city—both within RFA and from Philadelphia's three major research universities—to produce rigorous, timely, and actionable research aligned to the information needs of the city's public schools.


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