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Improving Instruction for English Language Learners through Systemic Reform: The Community School District Ten Model

Ruth Lopez

Community School District Ten

Nancy Dubetz

Lehman College, City University of New York

Overview of Community School District Ten

Community School District Ten, located in the Northwest Bronx, is the largest of New York City's 32 school districts. It includes 47 elementary and middle schools that serve approximately 43,000 students from a range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Twenty-four percent of the children in the district are English language learners (ELLs). Eighty-seven percent of the families are below the poverty line. The schools serve children representing 108 countries of origin and 75 languages. Sixty-six percent of the student population is Latino, 21% is African American, 7% is white, and 4% is Asian.

The instructional mission of District Ten embodies the desire to move toward systemic reform and provide an educational environment supportive of all students, parents, staff and community members, as is reflected in its mission statement:

We believe that all children can learn and need to be provided with nurturing, safe, risk-free environments where they are challenged to the maximum of their potential. This includes an acceptance, understanding, and incorporation into the curriculum of who they are, their personal history, their language and culture and their contributions.

In 1995, under the leadership of Superintendent Irma Zardoya, District Ten received a five-year Title VII Systemwide Improvement Grant that would address two major goals: (1) to undertake a systematic review of policies and practices related to ELLs in District Ten, and (2) to implement and improve the district's bilingual education programs. To achieve these goals, district staff first conducted a review of existing policies and practices related to ELLs, and developed an extensive database of information collected from surveys and interviews with all stakeholder groups. This initial inquiry pointed out the need for :

- A clear language policy;
- A written description of program models that would provide continuity from grade to grade and school to school;
- Identification of new qualified bilingual and ESL staff;
- Consistent identification, assessment, and placement of ELLs;
- Improvement in student performance;
- Appropriate and equitable distribution of classroom resources;
- Professional development that helped teachers understand curriculum and

learning standards; and

- Professional development that focused on second language acquisition, teaching English as a second language, teaching reading and writing in Spanish, and authentic assessment.

The Change Process for Undertaking Systemic Reform

Establishing a Districtwide Policy for ELLs

As a first step in addressing the needs that had been identified, the district developed a written guide establishing a standard policy for the education of their ELL population. The document was designed to help administrators, teachers and parents select and implement an effective program of education for ELLs - one that recognizes the value and contribution of the native language and culture, as well as the need to provide students with sufficient English skills to succeed. District Ten's guide includes descriptions of effective bilingual and ESL program models that are based on the research demonstrating a strong relationship between first and second language learning. Six models are described according to the purposes each serves, the conditions that are needed to successfully implement the model, and the target population. The six models are:

1. Bilingual maintenance
2. Transitional bilingual
3. Dual language
4. English as a second language (push in)
5. English as a second language (pull out)
6. English as a second language (self-contained)

The guide also provides sample schedules of instruction to illustrate to administrators and teachers first and second language teaching in the language arts, math, science and social studies. In the bilingual models, a sample schedule is provided for students who score below the 20th percentile on the Language Assessment Battery (LAB) and for those who score between the 20th and 40th percentiles. (The LAB is the test used in the state of New York to determine a student's level of English proficiency.)

Addressing Staffing Needs

At the same time, the district implemented a set of strategies for identifying qualified candidates for bilingual/ESL (English as a second language) positions. First, a series of job fairs throughout the city and within the district were organized to recruit qualified staff. The district also developed a screening process for determining bilingual proficiency, and an interview guide to elicit information about prospective teachers' pedagogical knowledge and experience. The interview contains oral and written sections in Spanish and English, with questions designed to assess a candidate's teaching philosophy and how s/he puts that philosophy into practice to support ELLs. For newly hired teachers, the district implemented a mentoring program and professional development conferences designed specifically to address their needs and interests. Because a large number of new teachers had not yet taken the full series of state certification exams, the district collaborated with the New York State Education Department to offer test preparation courses. Tuition reimbursement programs were created for those teachers who had to complete education coursework.

Professional Development

A variety of professional development activities were organized to better prepare teachers in the areas of second language acquisition, teaching ESL, native language instruction, and authentic assessment. For example, the district held summer and weekend institutes for bilingual/ESL staff to offer them an opportunity for intensive study of a particular topic. Institutes topics included:

- dual language/two-way bilingual immersion programs,
- effective classroom practices for English language learners,
- literacy development and the bilingual special education student,
- literacy in the bilingual/ESL classroom, and
- authentic assessment of literacy development.

The professional development institutes were conducted using the combined efforts of nationally recognized outside consultants (see Appendix), district staff developers, and teachers.

Along with institutes on targeted topics, monthly meetings with district personnel helped school bilingual/ESL coordinators in understanding program regulations and mandates. Staff who attended could then support other school personnel in the identification, assessment and placement of ELLs, and in designing curricula and resources to meet program goals.

Curriculum and Instruction

Another set of initiatives was designed to improve student performance in meeting state learning standards, particularly for literacy and math. A series of *Bilingual/ESL Staff Academies for Raising Standards* (BESARS) focused on improving academic standards in the middle schools through teacher training in instruction and assessment. Special issues related to standards and ELLs were addressed in a conference of District Ten principals, and at teacher institutes cosponsored by the New York State Association for Bilingual Education (NYSABE) and the New York City Office of Bilingual Education. The district also provided training specifically on the newly-developed math and literacy standards frameworks, and hired a bilingual math and technology staff developer at the district level to coordinate efforts to improve math and technology instruction.

As part of its efforts toward standards-based learning for ELLs, District Ten made a commitment to improve its literacy education program. In 1996, the district created a literacy framework based on the work of Brian Cambourne (1988) that ensures that all students in the district engage in a daily 90-minute sustained period of high quality literacy instruction, i.e., instruction which is designed to meet individual needs through activities such as read alouds, shared readings, guided reading, independent reading, and writing workshop.

Providing effective literature-based instruction for ELLs meant identifying appropriate classroom resources and assessment instruments that would help these children develop strong literacy skills. To achieve this, bilingual teachers met in focus groups to select quality native language and English language materials, reviewing them for authenticity, developmental levels, and age appropriateness. In addition, large quantities of reading material in Spanish and English were distributed to teachers participating in the professional institutes and workshops.

The following school year (1997-98), the district's Office of Bilingual and Multicultural Education (OBME)

began to prepare teachers to use reading assessments that were valid for two-language children. They selected parts of the *Instrumento de Observación de los Logros de la Lecto-Escritura Inicial* (Escamilla, Anrade, Basurto, Ruiz, & Clay, 1996) that paralleled the *Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System* (ECLAS)-a literacy assessment instrument in English designed for New York City Public Schools-and the *Developmental Reading Assessment*, which is a commercially designed test developed for children throughout the United States (Beaver, 1997). OBME also placed bilingual staff developers at priority schools, hired a teacher trainer to train bilingual Reading Recovery teachers for the district, and opened extended day programs to all students, including ELLs from Project Read (grades 1-3), Project Success (grade 6), and BESARS (grades 6-8). In addition, all schools were supported by guided reading teachers, some of whom were bilingual.

Beginning in the spring of 1998, the first bilingual programs in languages other than English began to emerge, including a Bengali/English kindergarten and an Albanian/English Saturday Academy.

Parent Involvement

A critical component of the district's plan for improving student performance was inviting parents to participate in the work of educating their children. Several district-sponsored parent activities have been held in addition to a wide range of school-level activities. District activities include: (1) the BESARS Parent Academy, (2) Title VII ESL/Technology Family Summer Program, (3) a parent conference at Hostos Community College called "All About Standards," (4) Building Bridges Bilingual/Multicultural Institute, (5) NYSABE Parent Institute, held each year in conjunction with the NYSABE conference, (6) a Bilingual/ESL School Board Committee which includes parents, and meets monthly to address issues related to the education of ELLs, and (7) a parents' club to foster understanding of the standards and ways to support literacy at home.

Impact of the Title VII Systemwide on District Ten

Ongoing evaluation of the new initiatives discussed above has been an integral part of implementing the Title VII Systemwide project over the last three years. Outside consultants have been working closely with district staff to gather information on the impact of the professional development initiatives on ELLs in the district, while a study by Dubetz and Lopez (1999) has been looking at the effects of the professional development model on bilingual/ ESL teachers. In addition, the Title VII evaluator has been collecting extensive data on students and schools each year from parents, teachers, and administrators. The information collected is being used to make decisions about the future directions of the district's professional development and program initiatives, which are summarized at the end of this paper.

Findings from these evaluation reports regarding professional development suggest: (1) school personnel recognized a close connection between the district's new Literacy Initiative and improving instruction in general for ELLs; (2) increasing numbers of bilingual teachers were participating in the professional development activities being offered by OBME; (3) opportunities for intensive professional development for teachers of ELLs had increased dramatically; (4) while teachers had become much more skilled at using assessment to guide literacy instruction, there was still a need for teachers of ELLs to receive additional professional development in using literacy assessment tools in the native language; and (5) those who had participated in professional development were satisfied with the training they received and cited a variety of ways that it was informing practice, e.g., teachers are making better use of small group instruction.

Because it is important to share with others both the challenges and the success stories emerging from the work supported by the Title VII Systemwide program, OBME has made a commitment to disseminating the information it collects. For example, findings from the ongoing evaluation of professional development have been presented at the New York TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) and NYSABE conferences, local symposia such as the Bengali Symposium in New York City, and national conferences such as NABE (National Association for Bilingual Education). Findings have also been published in district newsletters and the New York State TESOL's *Idiom*, and in a book on bilingual education currently in press entitled *Dual language instruction: A handbook for enriched education* (Cloud, Genesse, & Hamayan, in press).

Classrooms across the district reflect the impact of the systemic initiatives undertaken over the last four years. Implementing the Literacy Framework, for example, has resulted in classrooms more print rich than before, with more students engaged in literature and writing. Teachers, including bilingual and ESL teachers, are using a variety of effective literacy practices learned through their training. Every classroom now has a classroom library, and every school has a library and a librarian. More native language resources are available. More bilingual teachers are valuing native language instruction and maintaining a clear separation of the two languages during instruction. There has been a significant increase in the number of bilingual staff and administrators attending institutes and workshops on topics related to ELLs, and the district is attracting increasing numbers of certified teachers. All teachers are better skilled in working with ELLs.

Although ELLs' test scores in English reading and in math have not yet shown statistically significant gains, some individual sites that serve a large population of ELLs have shown a marked improvement. For example, PS 159, which is a dual language school, was identified as one of the most improved schools in the city on standardized reading and math tests last year. Moreover, the potential for academic learning and success has been increased across the district through improved staffing, curricula, and resources.

Conclusion

The Title VII Systemwide project in District Ten has made a clear difference for the ELL population. Schools districtwide have higher expectations for their ELLs, and students and teachers are more engaged in the learning process. In addition, the district's OBME is developing new initiatives that build on what has already been accomplished and what has been learned. The latest summer institute, for example, focused on extending the Literacy Framework into the area of mathematics instruction by helping bilingual and ESL teachers make connections between the two. In the coming year, bilingual teachers will receive additional training in assessment techniques for native language literacy, including the *Instrumento de Observación de los Logros de la Lecto-Escritura Inicial* and a new, Spanish version of the *Developmental Reading Assessment (Evaluación del Desarrollo de la Lectura)*. To ensure that teachers receive ongoing support in implementing effective bilingual programs, bilingual school coordinators will be meeting regularly with district staff to discuss state and district language policy issues and procedures. All of these efforts are expected to complement each other and support further success for the English language learners in District Ten.

Final Note

If you would like more information about any aspect of the work described in this document, please contact the District Ten bilingual coordinator, Maribelle Pardo-Nuñez at: (718) 329-8042.

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Appendix A. Consultants

Dr. Alfredo Schifini, California State University
Dr. Nancy Cloud, Hofstra University
Dr. Nancy Dubetz, Lehman College, CUNY
Dr. Elaine Ruiz, Dual Language Consultant, New York, NY
Dr. Maritza MacDonald, American Museum of Natural History
Jorge Lujan, Mexico City
Miriam Pedraja, Bank Street College of Education
Dr. Olivia Ruiz, Arizona State University
Dr. Ana Uhl Chamot, George Washington University
Dr. Helena Curtain, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Rita Gullickson, Dual Language Consultant, Milwaukee, WI
Dr. Migdalia Romero, Hunter College, CUNY
Dr. Mari Hass, Teachers College, Columbia University
Dr. Maria Valverde, New York State Education Department

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