

## OELA Podcast: EL Teacher Preparation: Zooming in on Maryland's Eastern Shore

### **Part 1**

Host:

Welcome to this two-part podcast hosted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA). We are here with Jessica Swan, an Education Program Specialist at OELA. Joining Jessica for this discussion on teacher preparation is Dr. Anjali Pandey, the principal investigator of the National Professional Development Grant: TARGET Training and Retraining Grades K–12 Eastern Shore Teachers.

As many of us are aware, a challenge identified from the literature on teacher preparation is the recruitment, preparation, induction, and retainment of teachers to provide high-quality instruction for English learners or ELs. Compounding this challenge, is the varied educational and geographic landscape that teachers of ELs work in which necessitates attracting teacher candidates with specialized pedagogical and linguistic skill sets. As of 2018, Learning Policy Institute reported that 10 states had grow your own, or GYO, programs and more states are exploring the development such programs. Accordingly, state and local educational agencies are looking for guidance on how to develop, implement, and grow your own teacher preparation programs.

During the first part of our conversation, Dr. Pandey will share the impetus for the TARGET program, the steps taken for its implementation, and its outcomes. In the second part of our podcast, we will discuss challenges and successes of the program. We will conclude with lessons learned and next steps for those interested in developing their own teacher preparation program.

Let's get the conversation started....

Jessica:

Hello to our listeners. I'm Jessica Swan, and it's my pleasure to welcome our panelist, Dr. Anjali Pandey. Welcome to the podcast, Dr. Pandey and thank you for talking with us today about this important topic. In a nutshell, what is the TARGET program?

Anjali:

Thank you for having me. I am glad to be here.

Jessica:

Can you please describe the TARGET program for our listeners?

Anjali:

TARGET stands for Training and Retaining Grades K–12 Eastern Shore Teaching Professionals. It is credential bearing, high-incentive, and, most importantly, a long-term, research-based program. As a needs-based program, our Professional Development (or PD) program offers educators several career-ladder choices. Some of our teachers have opted for single course training, some have chosen to pursue post-baccalaureate certificates, while many have gone on to enroll in two cohorts of training and eventually obtain an M.A. in TESOL.

Jessica:

Wow! So, three programs? Tell us a little more about their objectives.

Anjali:

TARGET aims to accommodate three needs. For educators who can potentially obtain a post-baccalaureate certificate in TESOL, we developed a spring session called Academic Career Choices Ensuring Student Success or ACCESS. ACCESS is a concentration of six graduate courses designed to ensure expedient access to a state-approved certificate program. For educators desiring targeted academic skills training embedding culturally relevant, family-centric learning, we designed a summer program called Enhancing Newcomer Competencies On Required Education or ENCORE. ENCORE is a compendium of five graduate courses focused on enhancing EL performance in productive skills such as speaking and writing, and receptive skills such as reading and listening. The program includes courses on empowering educators with the knowledge and expertise to build family and community-partnerships. With so much of EL performance premised on solid oral/aural skills, this program is especially popular among our teachers. Finally, and more specifically, for administrators and support staff we developed a third program called Comprehensive Community-building Opportunities Maximizing Parental Knowledge and Administrator Skills for School-wide Success or COMPASS.

For all three programs, our PD model incorporates 12 essential traits, all of which span the *how*, *when*, *what*, *why* and *where* of training. Too often, the latter two features, namely, the **why** and the **where** are missing in PD conceptualizations.

Jessica:

Thank you for providing that overview of TARGET's three pathways for teacher preparation. We know that challenges exist to delivering high-quality and relevant PD to educators of ELs. Let's talk about some challenges facing PD programs in general and how TARGET emerged to bridge that research-practice gap.

Anjali:

I have delivered PD programs for close to two decades now. I embarked on developing PD programs as a consequence of a memorable experience I had. Many years ago, I was invited to give a workshop in a remote rural school-district for approximately 25 elementary school teachers. The workshop was scheduled for 3:30 p.m. I clearly remember how tired some of the teachers were when they walked into the venue where the workshop had been scheduled. Some teachers, I later found out, had been in school since 6.30 a.m.—a typical schedule for most elementary-school teachers. The workshop was not going to provide any professional educational credits. All these teachers had shown up for the workshop because they cared about their students. After the workshop, one of the teachers approached me and asked if she could enroll in any graduate classes at the university the following semester. She had been inspired by the content we had covered in the workshop, and wanted, for the sake of her students, to dig deeper into the content. We looked at the schedule together and all the classes offered the following semester were at times when teachers were teaching.

This experience revealed to me the imperative to offer PD which is customized to local educator needs. It was then and there that I decided that any future, formalized PD I would design would have to be linked to professional capital. I am the daughter of a geography teacher. My father taught for 30 years in various countries in the continent of Africa. I can say with certainty that you can judge the content of a nation by how it treats its teachers. In Nigeria, a country where he taught for many years, teachers and doctors were on the same pay-scale. Teachers are the bedrock of a democracy. They need to be prioritized. If this global pandemic has taught us anything, it is that teachers are essential to the lifeblood of a democracy.

In a nutshell, our model of PD is premised on democratizing access—providing PD to and for teachers. Our model is also premised on locally elicited data. In a survey of 950 teachers conducted by our project, 93% preferred the delivery of institute-style PD over traditional, university-based/semester-long delivered models of training.

Jessica:

Your approach really considers the realities of a teacher's day.. I'm looking forward to learning more about each program and what your research is showing, as well as the benefits and challenges of growing your own teacher education program. First, please tell us a bit more about the setting of your program so we can get a better sense of the area and educators that you serve.

Anjali:

We serve 10 independent school districts — a region spanning over 250 public schools all of which combined employ over 10,000 teachers. Our partners are all within what the Maryland Staffing Report in 2018 called “geographic areas of projected shortage of certified teachers.” To give you further context, in 2014–2015, there were only 96 new ESOL hires that occurred statewide in Maryland but in the past decade, Maryland's EL student population has approximately doubled. Stated differently, in the past decade alone, the EL population in the state of Maryland has increased from 47,896 to 93,250 EL students statewide—a whopping 95% increase. By contrast, in 2020 there were only about 2,113 trained ESOL teachers statewide. This amounts to approximately one trained teacher for every 44 EL students. In rural areas, our ratios on average are double this.

From a practical, day-to day standpoint, for EL teachers, this often means having caseloads of students of varying proficiency levels — sometimes newcomers or students with interrupted formal education, which in rural districts is increasingly common. In some districts, ratios have been reported to be as high as 1:93 for some teachers. These facts point to one key conclusion, namely that the onus of responsibility for EL teaching is falling more and more on the shoulders of content-area teachers who are in dire need of training. Some other facts to ponder: Over 30 states in the nation do not require EL training for mainstream content teachers; only 20 states explicitly require EL teachers to have specialist certifications; and just 2% of teachers nationwide are EL-specialists. We have to move towards a model that aims to re-professionalize 98% of the workforce!

Jessica:

I am sure our listeners can relate to these demographic shifts and new teacher preparation needs that result from such changes. We discussed earlier the need for research-based PD to ensure that teachers are well-prepared to teach ELs. As such, it would be wonderful to hear about what prior research and frameworks undergird TARGET's aims and to learn about the impetus of the program.

Anjali:

We know that well-designed PD programs should be locally-situated and accessible to stakeholders. They should also be incentive-based and incorporate active learning and support. More strategically, PD has to offer the recipients multiple opportunities for modeling effective praxis and provide coaching and expert support that includes continuous opportunities for reflection and feedback on performance. Most crucially, PD has to be intensive and of sustained duration. PD, above all, has to be content-focused and provide comprehensive and in-depth knowledge while fostering expertise in educators.

When we first proposed the TARGET program, we initially identified several reasons: to address the acute PD needs of teachers, to account for teacher shortages in English learner education, to be responsive to local needs and the context, and to improve student achievement.

Jessica:

I think many of our listeners can relate to these reasons behind TARGET. Can you give us some more details about these reasons in the context of the Eastern Shore of Maryland?

Anjali:

Sure. Our project strategically targeted over a third of Maryland's schools. For a state that is the 6<sup>th</sup> most populous in the nation in terms of numbers of English learners, these high-need school districts were also identified as critical shortage areas for certified teachers as per the Maryland Teacher Staffing Report. Additionally given our peninsular location with proximal access to Delaware and Virginia, we were experiencing tremendous teacher attrition. In post-alumni surveys disbursed to 154 trained teachers, 27% reported moving to school districts outside our target area. ESOL remains listed as Maryland's top critical shortage area as per the Maryland Teacher Staffing Report for 2014–2016 years.,

Also, at risk student data had to inform our design. Math scores from PARCC showed that ELs in the later grades performed worse than ELs in lower grades, with 66% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELs performing in the lowest category. In reading, the outcomes were worse where ELs remained in the lowest performing group from Grades 4 through 8. Most troublingly, a whopping 72% of 10<sup>th</sup> grade ELs fell in the lowest performing group, or below proficient of any subgroup including special education. It is no surprise then that our needs-assessment data reflected teachers requesting intensive, in-depth training in multiple domains.

Jessica:

Thanks so much for giving us an in-depth look at how and why TARGET emerged. These types of complex PD initiatives sometimes encounter bumps in the road as they are launched. As you were planning the program, what limitations did you face and how did you address those?

Anjali:

One of the biggest challenges of developing NPD programs is time. Most district supervisors, especially in rural districts, wear “many hats”— ESOL is one of many areas they manage. Being able to pin down times to garner data is especially challenging and requires endless hours of effort and coordination. Additionally, personnel changes are the norm rather than the exception. Planning targeted PD for the needs of specific school-districts requires a lot of time in networking. In districts with multiple levels of leadership, getting “permission” to be a partner is a long bureaucratic process which often has its own timetable. We had a number of nail-biting instances of partners delivering promised letters of support at the last hour. Being able to garner appropriate needs-based data can also be a logistical nightmare as it often requires already established networks of known stakeholders.

Another challenge is related to structural barriers in the form of high caseloads for our EL teachers. In high-population schools, EL professionals are increasingly being asked to do more than merely teach. In Year 1 of our project, we reported on a complex and assorted list of EL teacher responsibilities that one of our trained EL teachers filed. In this specific case, an EL teacher reported a caseload as high as 93 EL learners spread across three different schools. In Years 2 3 and 4 we reported on teachers with caseloads as high as 1:70 to 1:80. In the four years of program implementation we have witnessed a reduction in approximately 25% of teacher-student ratios as more trained content-area teachers are poised and ready to take on the “burden” of EL instruction. We are especially proud of the project’s aim to more equitably share the burden of EL teaching in schools. More crucially, such an approach has instigated a move away from a prior conceived peripheral positionality to a crucially needed, “centering of” EL education in schools. EL students are now seen to be not just the responsibility of the EL teacher per se, but rather are viewed as everyone’s responsibility—a change in professional dispositions which has occurred as a consequence of training received.

Jessica:

Earlier you outlined the characteristics of well-designed PD programs to prepare teacher. Can you take a moment to describe the overall design of your program?

Anjali:

Our program is designed for teachers by teachers to teachers. Courses are offered at times when teachers can be trained – on weekends and in summer months. Program design is perhaps one of our most innovative features. Our courses are offered via a uniquely designed consecutive programmatic design in which trainees take one course at a time. This is very different from the traditional parallel-delivery format of university-based training where students enroll in multiple courses at a time. Our programmatic design ensures that our PD outcomes are cumulative in scope — one course builds upon the next. Through this module-building strategy, we are able to eliminate undue redundancy while maximizing content outcomes in the timeframes we have available to us.

Jessica:

Got it! Thank you. So once the program was designed, what about recruitment? I think our listeners would love to learn more about the implementation of the program as it relates to finding potential teachers.

Anjali:

To implement needs-based training in all three programs that I described earlier, ACCESS, ENCORE, and COMPASS, recruitment and admission is linked to school-relevant EL data. Priority admission is given to trainees with the highest EL enrollments. In other words, recruitment is prioritized to high-need schools, and is keyed to continuously monitored data. So to give you an example, if most of the EL students are in the primary grades (as opposed to secondary grades) in a particular district or even specific, high-need school, we prioritize applicants who have primary backgrounds.

To identify successful trainees, we engage in a rigorous two step-admission procedure which requires the submission of extensive written dossiers followed up by oral interviews with a selection board made up of the Project Director, the Graduate Director, and a Faculty member. Interviewees are ranked on a number of uniformly assessed questions. Trainees selected into the program are provided with a detailed full-day formally delivered program orientation. The efficacy of all of these processes have been consistently evaluated each project year.

Jessica:

That's great. It sounds like you all have really thought through how to use data to find and retain educators. So once admitted to the program, what does a day in the life of a teacher candidate look like?

Anjali:

To say that our training program is “intense” is an understatement. In our spring program, teachers arrive at our institutes at 8.30 a.m. They have an hour for lunch usually at noon and institutes end at 5.00 p.m. Institute content is divided for the most part as theoretical content in the mornings with more pragmatic applications occurring in the afternoon. As this is a “Saturday” program, assignments are usually job-embedded so that trainees can “try out” best practices in their actual classrooms during the week. In the summer program, training runs in weekly cycles where trainees get weekends off. To give you an example of an activity in one of the first training courses, trainees were asked to do a linguistic landscape analysis of their school—basically a walk-around of all physical areas of their school including the cafeteria. They were to examine all the signage in the school, including the school's website, and evaluate how an EL student might feel in the school. After evaluating the school's linguistic landscape they could choose to perfect any area they saw fit—say the website's information for parents as an example, or the signage in the principal's office or the food choices in the cafeteria—the possibilities were endless. They were to then, conduct a needs-assessment (for example, polling ELs), make changes, and then assess the efficacy of the new augmentation.

Many of our candidates have orchestrated amazing, long-term changes in their schools as a consequence of this activity. For example, one trainee developed an EL student-led “Multilingual Announcements” closed-circuit TV program at his high-school—for service credits! It might be underscored that these students, prior to this program, were given little opportunity to share their multilingual wealth with peers. This activity additionally embedded best practices in task-based language learning, community-based learning, cooperative learning, autonomous learning, and a

host of other crucial language learning methodologies while also instigating long-term change in his school.

Another trainee engaged in a term-long “framing” of bilingual “words of the day.” Every Monday she would change the picture frame on her desk for her first graders. She reported that each Monday, all of her ELs would excitedly come to the desk to “see” what the word of the day was and, more importantly, came to share in the pride of “seeing” their language framed on the teacher’s desk. With close to 308 languages entering our nation, such small but innovative educational acts add to the inclusive climate of schools. This particular teacher had instigated this small but simple change as a consequence of a word etymology project she had embarked upon in her “Principles of Linguistics” course.

Jessica:

The training does sound intense, but very productive! Can you tell us about the types of support teacher candidates get throughout the life of the program?

Anjali:

While we have the usual university library research support capabilities, perhaps the best support comes from the community of practice created among the trainees. In each cohort, we try to have educator-representation from all 10 of our partner districts. Eighty percent of our districts are rurally situated and 20% can safely be characterized as “suburban.” This mix of geo-spaces allows for exciting cross-pollination among trainees who relish the exchange of ideas and practices across districts. We have had productive cross-district collaboration because of such encounters. What has been especially useful has been the “sharing” of best practices/resources between resource-rich suburban schools and rural schools. Knowing what is possible has inspired a number of our trainees in rural districts to aspire towards similar services in their schools. An example of this was the adoption of a systematic translation service in one district after cross-talks with other school districts. This cross-pollination has reduced some of the silo-thinking underpinning school districts in different geo-spaces— who rarely get a chance to collaborate with each other. However, one unforeseen outcome has been mobility. Some of our trainees are moving to other districts as a consequence of networks of professional alliance they create during their participation in the program.

Jessica:

Got it- so there is a downside to successfully preparing teachers! Given these examples of support elements embedded in the program that you just described, which support elements do you think are the most crucial for teacher candidates’ completion of the program?

Anjali:

The most useful support that our data demonstrate is administrative! Our Program Coordinator handles all of the course admission, tuition remissions, ordering, and delivery of books. This saves so much valuable time for our trainees as it allows them to focus on their training. We have also discovered that having face-to-face-interviews with candidates prior to the selection process bears long-term dividends. As a consequence of this, trainees are aware of the intensive nature of the program and are not caught by surprise. For the investment that the government is according

in each trainee, we require a one-year commitment to serve in their rural districts. Also, it is crucial to have training conducted by faculty who themselves are experienced educators. While some faculty are experts in linguistics, second language theory, and a host of sub-areas, not all are as successfully able to translate abstract theoretical content into forms that are useful, relevant, and practical for educators. Our faculty all have to meet benchmarks on a uniformly administered measure. We have had to re-assign faculty on a number of occasions due to the feedback received. The information that we receive based on these benchmark measures is an important component in the program and how we measure the efficacy of what we are doing.

Jessica:

Thank you for mentioning the importance of measuring outcomes when beginning a Grow Your Own teacher preparation program. I look forward to learning more - as do our listeners!

### **Closing**

Host:

Yes - thank you Anjali for sharing information about the development and implementation of the TARGET program. You have given us many useful ideas to think about as we continue to explore the recruitment and training of teachers of English learners. Stay tuned for the second part of this podcast where we will learn more about the research outcomes of the program. In the meantime, we also encourage all of you to visit the NCELA website at [www.ncela.ed.gov](http://www.ncela.ed.gov) and check out the many educator resources available there.