

Molly Hegwood: We learn a lot about teaching strategies as teachers, but oftentimes we don't learn how to best engage with students and families. So I think this toolkit is a way that we can start that conversation with our teachers.

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Host: Welcome back to this two-part podcast hosted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, OELA. We're here with Jessica Swan, Education Program Specialist from OELA, and today we will continue to discuss the English Learner Family Toolkit, and the ways in which educators use this resource.

I'm happy to welcome back our panel of educators. With us today are Molly Hegwood, Executive Director of the Office of English Learners, and Jenna Davis, District English Learners Coach in Metro Nashville Public Schools, Diana Castano, Bilingual Programs Instructional Coach in Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools, and Sarah Elia, English as a New Language Teacher at Saugerties Senior High School in Saugerties Central School District in New York State.

In Part 1 of the podcast, the panel discussed how they use the English Learner Family Toolkit and the Toolkit app in their educational contexts. They also reflected on the components of this resource that they find the most useful and beneficial. If you have not yet listened to this episode, please access it on the NCELA website, at www.NCELA.ed.gov.

In this episode, the same panel will talk about using this resource for professional development purposes, and discuss other ways in which the EL Family Toolkit and the EL Family Toolkit app can be utilized.

Please note that in this podcast, the terms "English learners" or "ELs," and "multilingual learners" are used interchangeably, and refer to the population of students defined as English learners in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act.

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Let's get the conversation started.

Jessica Swan: Let's think now about the English Learner Family Toolkit as a means of professional development. And I want to start with Diana. How do you use, or plan to use the toolkit as a professional development tool?

Diana Castano: Well, I think when we're looking through the resource, I think we're using it as a measure, right? It's building that capacity with all of the stakeholders that are working with all of our students, right? So we want to make sure that, one, that we're providing access to that curriculum, we're making sure that families and staff members also understand what their rights are as a possible newcomer or ML in our district, but also making sure that we're using strategies that are up-to-date, that are resource-based, and that are accessible to all of the people that are in our community.

Jessica Swan: That's a terrific point, about the accessibility piece.

Molly, what would you add to that, about using the EL Family Toolkit as a professional development tool?

Molly Hegwood: So we have over 21,000 students in Nashville, and we have a lot of teachers that are working with students every day that have different backgrounds, that may or may not have the tools necessary to meet the needs of English learners and their families. So I think this is a great starting point for both teachers of English learners in the content setting, and then also those that are EL teachers. We learn a lot about teaching strategies as teachers, but oftentimes we don't learn how to best engage with students and families. So I think this toolkit is a way that we can start that conversation with our teachers.

Jessica Swan: Excellent. Jenna, would you like to add to that, from your perspective, about how the toolkit is being used as a professional development tool?

Jenna Davis: Yes. So as I previously stated, we started out with pushing it out through our virtual professional development series, and then as I'm thinking about how one of my roles as a coach is supporting district-level professional development, one of mine is about engaging families. And so that toolkit and app was pushed out after I had those offerings this year, but thinking about

ways that it can be embedded into the PD as an additional resource, because as a part of that PD, schools create a family communication framework, so they really reflect on their successes and challenges with engaging families, and then they decide what's our smart goal based upon what we have reflected on here? And so they're taking it different ways, with creating multilingual family nights, or having newcomer ambassadors in their schools, for example. And so I'm thinking of ways to show them that this is an additional resource that you could use, if you choose, for your family communication framework.

And then, I think just thinking about just the organic PD, and having those coaching conversations with teachers, and sharing it when I can with them, or administrators, and like Molly said, across different departments. We're a really large district, and thinking about how we can share this across departments so that it can also funnel down to the school level.

Jessica Swan: It sounds like you're really doing work to integrate the EL Family Toolkit into the system. And I think I've heard, throughout this conversation, this notion of being embedded in all that we do, and those principles and practices, and how they benefit not just English learners, but as we've alluded to earlier, all students and families.

I'm wondering, from your perspective, Sarah, what other resources complement or expand upon the information presented in the EL Family Toolkit?

Sarah Elia: Well, this is not another resource, but like I mentioned earlier, I'll pull sections of the toolkit out, and put them onto Google Translate, and translate them to other languages, print those sections so it's kind of like an easier, small, bite-sized bit of information that I'll share out with families a little bit at a time, and sort of highlight this section is really important. So that's kind of like, you know, a resource of sorts, not another one, but within that, that I've found is very helpful. Because I'm just giving them this little bit to read today I'll send home, or something, another section another day to send home, and I think that's an easy way to get that, and remind families about this information, about their rights, and about ways that they can communicate with us. And also, it just encourages the communication and the interaction.

And another thing that's not really a resource, but just like, thoughts that I had about moving forward with the content of the Family Toolkit, sometimes I collaborate with other departments in the school to make projects that are to benefit the whole school community in support of multilingual students. So one thought I had is connecting with the Video Department, and having students, or possibly the school translators collaborate to make a video to summarize the contents of the toolkit in English, in Spanish, most of our students are Spanish-speakers, that can teach the audience what is in the toolkit, and also how to navigate the toolkit. I think of this especially for families who have limited literacy skills, and use this to send out to guardians, post on our website and social media so they can view it on their own, and be reminded of the content of the toolkit, and also educated about their rights. Maybe it can be like a bridge to use the toolkit. Or if they're not really tech-savvy or they're not literate, at least it's a means to share that really valuable information that is in the toolkit.

I think it's helpful also for secondary-level students, as I mentioned earlier, some of whom have, like, a first or second-grade reading level in their native language. They really probably wouldn't access the toolkit, but maybe they don't have a guardian that's really engaged, but having this in a video format can be really helpful.

Jessica Swan: You've spoken beautifully, Sarah, to the versatility of both the toolkit in print, and the app itself. And I commend you for thinking creatively about how we break apart the toolkit, and share with others in such a way that's comprehensible and easily accessible.

Diana, I want to also pose that question to you. Are there other resources that you have found that complement or expand upon the information presented in the EL Family Toolkit?

Diana Castano: Well, I think one of the things that our ML team does in the district is that we have our own Facebook group meeting, we do live videos, and we disseminate information in the majority language, that is Spanish in our district. And the fact that we have almost 9,000 students that are MLs in our population, understanding that we've got to be more creative in ways that we engage our families, and being able to disseminate information in their own

language, so we've had a translating team that can translate or interpret in many languages. And looking through the resource and the toolkit is, you know, helping us to continue to prioritize where we are using our staff members in order to be able to achieve that goal of making sure that we're maximizing the time that we can spend with families in our buildings, and inviting them in, and having opportunities to share things like this will be great.

You know, we use the Remind app, or we use different apps, communication apps so we can make sure that everyone that walks through the door, we may not have someone that speaks the language that the family does, but we make sure that we are looking for ways to be able to effectively communicate, whether that be like having pictures with all of our words, so families can come in and kind of visually see where they belong, you know, if we've got our immersion programs, making sure that the building reflects the community. So we're doing lots of things like that, and looking at the resource through beginning of looking at all the opportunities that has us going through like a checklist, you know, hey, have we considered this? Or hey, what can we do to make sure that we are looking to make sure that our program is being effective? Are we using all of the resources?

But just making sure that we're being intentional in communicating information, that we don't feel important maybe as a monolingual, we might not have that experience. And kind of really thinking about what does it feel like, or having that empathy, and making sure that, you know, that equity is there first, and that the families understand that regardless of anything, there are students, and we want them to be successful, and we want them to be prepared to be better citizens for our community. Because that's ultimately the goal, right? And using this toolkit is going to help us, one, to build capacity in our buildings, with the teachers, right? Because they might have English as a second language services, but in their classrooms, you know, the main classroom teacher, or the core teacher is the one that's going to have to be able to supplement, or make sure that they are able to scaffold for that access on a daily basis, while the students are there.

So we've got to be able to recognize the population of students that we have, their needs, and then be able to be mindful of that. Especially when we might

not be speaking...may not be a bilingual ourselves, or a multilingual, just making sure that we can look at this, and make sure that we are understanding that human aspect of our students, right? We want them to be successful, we want them to, you know, to shine, and we want them to be able to know, you know, hey, you can qualify for gifted services. You are smart, you know? And it doesn't... You know, we've got to find a way to make sure that we are measuring where you are, and helping you to continue to grow on a daily basis.

So I feel like this is where that toolkit is going to help us. It's just to really make sure that we're in that balance, and we're making sure that we're checking off, and making sure that we have really thought about that holistic approach to education.

Jessica Swan: It sounds like, Diana, that the toolkit is shaping the entire ecosystem, so to speak, of the school, the culture, and the climate, and how teachers interact with families and students, and vice versa. So I think it just shows the tremendous power of this resource that we have at our fingertips.

I want to open the floor now to any thoughts that you all have that you haven't shared about the toolkit, the ways you're using it, recommendations perhaps even for other districts about the toolkit, or anything that you feel that you have not shared, that you would like to share. And if we could, let's start with Sarah.

Sarah Elia: I would like in the future, possibly, to offer an evening workshop to the community that's open to all, not just families of multilingual learners, to introduce the toolkit, empowering the community to advocate for EL families. This would include engaging activities like small group discussions on the text, led by multilingual staff, and you know, friends of EL families, church members, you know, anybody, co-workers, whatever, that might feel like they want to help their neighbor, you know? So I think it's just important for everybody to be aware of these resources and these services. Like I said, the toolkit is so rich with information that is helpful not only for multilingual families, but for everybody. And I think there are definitely people in the community who have a neighbor who would like to help a newcomer family, and this would be a place for them to learn about this resource.

And then also, at a district-wide conference day, I hope in the future to offer a PD for teachers and TAs to introduce them to the toolkit. Because again, it is helpful for everybody, not just teachers who are specifically assigned to support multilingual students, but classroom teachers, all staff to be aware of what the services that are offered, what is available in the content of the toolkit. It just gives everyone more power to support our population.

Jessica Swan: Brilliantly stated, Sarah. There are so many different layers to how we work with and interact with families, and the community certainly is one component of that interaction. I appreciate the idea of evening workshops that would further spread the message, and then really taking it into all layers of the district, whether or not someone is an official English learner, multilingual teacher, or program staff, to get the information out there in such a way that supports all students and their families. Thank you for sharing.

Diana, how do you think that this particular toolkit...you know, what are your thoughts about how you might further use it, or expand its use?

Diana Castano: Well, like I said, I'm really proud of what Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools has been doing. We have had an increase to our ML team, we've got a family engagement manager who makes sure that we're disseminating information. And then, I think also one of the takeaways from using the toolkit is the importance of the community, and all stakeholders within our ecosystem, right? So reaching out to local universities, business people, partners, and kind of sharing what it is that we're doing, and how we're reaching our families.

And one of the things that we are lucky is we are working with the University of North Carolina at Greensboro through a grant project called IGNITE, and their focus is mostly on authentic family engagement, most especially with our language learners, right? So I think using this toolkit, in addition to that resource, and creating those professional learning communities that we're able to do, and then being able to create more resources of things that have worked in our districts, and we're able to share through the state as far as things that we're doing that works, that engages family, and like, really thinking about that authentic piece, right? Because we can have families come into the building,

and we can have families, you know, come for open houses, but are we really engaging them? Are we really looking at them as, you know, someone that we are serving?

You know, we're here to make sure that their families are getting their needs met, and making sure that we're sharing these resources out, and making sure that we're being intentional with our planning, and incorporating families of our ML population to help us come up with, you know, different kinds of lunch-and-learns, or PDs, weekend activities, evening activities, and kind of talking about making sure that they understand what their rights are, or what does it mean to have ESL services? What happens if you choose not to have your ESL services, what rights do you still have? And I think this toolkit helps you to be able to answer those questions that a lot of families may have. And having the app, as I've been looking through it, it's definitely much easier to navigate, and being able to reference that quickly on a tool that everyone would be able to have. Not everyone is going to be carrying around a binder with all of these pages, but they can open their phone, and they can look through, and they can see the reference that we're talking about, and like, you know, bookmark that for later.

Or just at the end of the day, making sure that everyone knows what they're entitled to, and what it is that we are here to do, and help their child succeed.

Jessica Swan: That's powerful, and you really have spoken to the beyond the bake sale type model of parent and family engagement, and really digging deep to ensure that parents and families feel seen, heard, and valued, and a part of their children's education.

Diana, is there anything else that you would like to share about the EL Family Toolkit, that you haven't already?

Diana Castano: Again, as being someone that's going through this new, I think that looking through this through chunks, you know, we've had, like, a couple of weeks to kind of understand what it is that we were getting, and having these questions to kind of help you guide what you were looking for through the toolkit, I think having someone, or having someone that has been exposed to an introduction to the toolkit, that then they can go and disseminate the important

parts that might be relevant to a PD, or to a parent meeting, or just when you're engaging your students, right?

Because you know, the world according to Castano, what's good for MLs is good for everybody, right? So if we treated everyone as if they were English language learners, I think we would be solving the world's problems. And looking at the toolkit, and looking at those strategies, and really looking at how are we engaging students, families, community stakeholders, like, right, it's the whole school, it's outside of school. And making sure that we're looking at our buildings, and we're reflecting on how is the school welcoming, and how are we making sure that, you know, bits and pieces of information that we're getting are not just sitting at teachers' labs, right, that it's getting out there.

And so I feel like the toolkit is a good resource to help you remember, or remind yourself of things that have been working, and really celebrate that in your districts. But at the same time, you know, it's always about what more can you do? What more can you learn? What more is out there and available? And then, learning from others going through the process.

Like I said, I've been really engaged in listening, and taking down notes as far as how others have been using this, and I can't wait to hear about how others may have launched their introduction to their district with the toolkit. So at the end of the day, it's what more can we do to fill our buckets so we can fill others' buckets, too.

Jessica Swan: We are definitely learning together, as we have throughout this podcast, and will continue to do so. And I would say that I would sign up for the world according to Castano for sure, what's good for a multilingual learner is good for every learner. Brilliantly stated there.

Let's go over now to Molly and Jenna from Nashville Public Schools. Is there anything that you would like to share about the EL Family Toolkit, that you haven't already shared? And we'll start with Molly.

Molly Hegwood: So one thing I'd like to share would be about our future plans for the next couple years. As part of our strategic plan, we are really working to keep families informed and engaged, and one piece that we're working towards

is ensuring that we have two-way communication with families, and that families are well-equipped for these conversations, and that they're able to have these meaningful conversations.

So over the next year, we...so that would be the 24-25 school year, we're going to start off the year by having our parent outreach translators, and we have 70 parent outreach translators across the district that work in the schools with families, bring our families together to talk about what their rights are as a family, and how they can access communication, and also how they can access interpretation and translation services, and we are going to embed the Family Toolkit when it comes to that presentation. So I think it's really important for them to both understand how they get those services, but the why behind those services.

A second piece would be how we can embed the Family Toolkit into our New Teacher Academy that we have every year. Oftentimes we are getting teachers from all across the country, or some that have taught for a very long time, or some that are coming right out of an educator prep program, and they may not have these pieces yet. So I think this would be a great strategy for us to layer in with our new teachers coming on board. And then, the piece I was thinking about would be the educator prep programs, and kind of continuing to think about how we can get this information to our educator prep programs. As our new teachers are going through these programs, how they could potentially embed this information to better prepare the teachers that are coming to us in our district.

So those are three things I was thinking about in the next one to two years when it comes to embedding the toolkit.

Jessica Swan: Superb vision. Thank you so much for sharing, Molly.

It has been a real pleasure to be seated at the table with these individuals. You've got Diana Castano from Winston-Salem Forsyth Public Schools over in North Carolina, Molly Hegwood and Jenna Davis from Nashville Public Schools, and Sarah Elia from Saugerties Central School District in Upstate New York. Thank you so much for your time, and sharing how you have used both the English Learner Family Toolkit, and the app in your work, its impact in

empowering our families and schools, and entire communities as we work to support the nation's English learners and multilingual learners.

Please stay tuned for future episodes of this podcast.

Host: A big thank you to our panelists for discussing the ways in which they are using the English Learner Family Toolkit in their work. The information, reflections, and experiences that you shared today will certainly help educators support English and multilingual learners, and their families.

We encourage you to visit the NCELA website at www.NCELA.ed.gov to download the English Learner Family Toolkit, and check out the many educator resources available there.

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