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**E**valuation

**Best Practices for Teaching English Learners**

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Identifying and Placing English Learners.....	3
ELs and Special Education .....	6
Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education .....	8
Assessing and Monitoring English Learners .....	8
Teaching English Learners.....	10
Culturally Responsive Teaching .....	12
Types of English Learner Programs.....	13
Shelter English Immersion.....	14
Two-Way Immersion.....	16
Transitional Bilingual Education .....	17
Findings in Research.....	17
Professional Development .....	18
Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol .....	19
Supporting English Learners.....	19
Administrators.....	19
English Learner Teachers.....	20
Mentors .....	21
Paraprofessionals .....	21
Translators/Interpreters .....	21
Family Liaisons.....	22
Literacy Tutors .....	22
Librarians .....	22
Guidance Counselors .....	23
ELs’ Peers .....	23
Parents.....	24
Community Members and Organizations .....	26
Action Team for Partnerships .....	27
Conclusion .....	28
References.....	29

## Executive Summary

This report provides a literature review on best practices for EL programs.

### Literature Review Findings

- **Identifying and Placing English Learners:** Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education (MA DESE) provides resources and guidance on how to identify, assess, place, and reclassify ELs.
  - MA DESE suggests districts take six steps when identifying and placing ELs (see p. 5).
  - Educators need to guard against over-identifying or under-identifying ELs with special needs. Cummings (1984) advocates that special education assessments not be done for at least three years.
  - Tiered support models, such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Massachusetts Tiered System of Support (MTSS), can be useful in identifying ELs with potential disabilities and facilitating individualized instruction for ELs.
  - In addition to determining whether students are ELs, districts also need to determine if students have limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). MA DESE provides another resource that outlines an 11-step procedure to identifying SLIFE students (See p. 8).
- **Assessing and Monitoring ELs:** ELs perform well on assessments that have undergone linguistic modifications to eliminate elements that are unnecessarily challenging and not essential to assessing competencies (Abedi, 2013). Schools districts should have staff trained on how to effectively use diagnostic, formative, interim, and summative assessments so they can screen, track, and evaluate ELs' growth in both English proficiency and academic content.
- **Teaching English Learners:** Some general best practices for teaching ELs include: clear and organized instruction that uses differentiation, multiple modalities, techniques for vocabulary development, and culturally responsive teaching practices. However, teachers cannot assume that strategies that work for other diverse native English speaking students will automatically work for ELs (Harper & de Jong, 2004).
  - **Types of English Learner Programs:** Massachusetts districts must place ELs in either a Structured English Immersion program or a Two-Way Immersion program. However, a program waiver can be sought for another program model such as Transitional Bilingual Education. Currently, the majority of ELs in MA are in mainstream classrooms which is not atypical (Adams & Jones, 2005); the majority of schools in the US use SEI programs or other integrated programs where ELs are taught together with other students (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000). Meta-analyses of various EL programs have generated mixed results. Because of the mixed results, Baker and de Kanter (1981) conclude that the only appropriate Federal policy is one that is flexible enough to allow schools to develop instructional programs that suit the unique needs and circumstances of their students.
  - **Professional Development:** Teacher quality has a significant effect on student learning (Carrell & West, 2010); therefore, administrators should make

professional development opportunities available to educators of ELs. Teachers should be trained in the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model (Chen, Kyle, & McIntyre, 2008).

- **Supporting English Learners:** In order to meet ELs' individual needs, a network of support that involves a diverse group of individuals and institutions is needed. The literature outlines the best ways individuals, such as administrators, EL teachers, mentors, paraprofessionals, translators/interpreters, family liaisons, literacy tutors, librarians, guidance counselors, and ELs' peers, can help provide support for ELs. In addition to school-based individuals, parents and community members/organizations also need to be actively involved in the network of support for ELs. Collaboration between schools and community organizations – universities, community colleges, libraries, local businesses, churches, radio programs, youth organizations, cultural centers, and non-profits – can lead to schools obtaining more funding and resources which leads to greater efficiency, positive gains in academic achievement, and students who are better prepared for the workforce (Sanders, 2003; Taylor & Adelman, 2000; Tellez & Waxman, 2010).
  - **Action team for partnerships:** Schools should establish an action team for partnerships (ATP). This group should develop an actionable plan by assessing present partnership practices, organizing options for new partnerships, implementing selected activities, evaluating actions taken, figuring out next steps, and continuously improving upon implemented practices.

## **Conclusion**

School districts need to continue adapting to the varying needs and cultural backgrounds of the students (Khong & Saito, 2014). As the old adage “*It takes a village to raise a child*” suggests, ELs are not the sole responsibility of EL teachers or coordinators. Instead, various individuals from the school, family, and community should play a role in improving student learning, especially for ELs. This report outlines some of the best practices that individuals in a “village” can utilize to support ELs.

## **Best Practices for Teaching English Learners**

This report provides an overview of the best practices found in the literature for identifying, placing, assessing, monitoring, teaching, and supporting English Learners (ELs), including ELs who might need special education services.

### **Identifying and Placing English Learners**

Provision of effective supports heavily depends on proper identification of ELs. Every school district in Massachusetts is responsible for determining which students enrolling in their districts are ELs. Therefore, whenever a new student enrolls, a district must follow appropriate identifying procedures so they may determine which instructional programs and supports are appropriate (Chester, 2016). The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) provides resources for educators of ELs on their website. In particular, they provide a document prepared by Chester (2016) that offers guidance on how to identify, assess, place, and reclassify ELs. **Most importantly, “each district should have policies and procedures in place for accurately identifying ELLs in a timely, valid, and reliable manner” (p. 8).** MA DESE suggests districts take the following six steps to identify whether new students are ELs (See Figure 1).

Step 1: Establish procedures in accordance with Department of Elementary and Secondary Education guidelines to identify students who may be ELs.

Step 2: Administer a home language survey (HLS) to all newly enrolling students.

Step 3: Screen the English proficiency of a student when the answer to any of the questions on the HLS is a language other than English. A screening test is not necessary for students who come from another Massachusetts district or another WIDA state if the district is able to obtain ACCESS results from the test that was administered within the last calendar year.

Step 4: Determine whether the student is an EL using screening test results and make initial placement decisions.

Step 5: Notify parent and/or legal guardian of language screening assessment results and initial placement. Inform parent of the right to “opt out” or to secure an SEI program waiver in a language the parent can understand, to the maximum extent practicable.

Step 6: Code the student determined to be an EL in all future SIMS reports submitted to the Department.

*Figure 1.* Steps for determining whether a newly enrolled student is an EL

Once a student is identified as an EL, the district must place the EL in either a Structured English Immersion program or a Two-Way Immersion program (See section entitled Types of EL Programs for more details). However, a program waiver can be sought for another program model such as Transitional Bilingual Education. The type of program selected must be determined based on a student’s needs (Chester, 2016).

### **ELs and Special Education**

It is important to note that some ELs may have a specific learning disability that qualifies them for special education services in addition to their English learner program. Educators need to guard against the possibility of over-identifying or under-identifying ELs with special needs (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006). **Cummings (1984) advocates that special education assessments not be done for at least three years because prior to that, one would not be able**

**to tell whether the student is still undergoing the process of acculturation<sup>1</sup> or whether they, in fact, have a learning disability.**

Research has identified Response to Intervention (RTI) and other multi-tiered system of supports models to be useful ways of identifying ELs with potential disabilities and in facilitating effective individualized instruction for struggling ELs (Ferlis & Xu, 2016; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater, & Cirino, 2006; Ortiz et al., 2011;). RTI uses a tiered intervention for identification and provision of services for students placed at risk. One of the defining features of RTI is monitoring a student's progress over time by using multiple assessment tools. According to Ferlis and Xu (2016), pre-referral stages include: Tier 1 where students are monitored in the classroom, Tier 2 where students' progress is monitored within a small group receiving differentiated instruction, and Tier 3 where students receive individualized support. Then, if necessary, students are referred for a comprehensive special education evaluation followed by special education placement (Ferlis & Xu, 2016). **Educators would be well advised to use RTI interventions or at least adopt and adapt strategies used in the RTI to students' specific circumstances.**

Indeed, the MA DESE has established an office for the implementation of the Massachusetts Tiered System of Support (MTSS) (EDC, 2012). The state's model is aligned with research-based models of RTI and tiered support models. There is an emphasis on research-based practices, such as monitoring students' progress and matching interventions with students' needs. According to MA DESE (2012), the academic and non-academic components of MTSS are: "high-quality core curriculum and instruction implemented with fidelity; research-based academic interventions and assessment practices; research-based behavioral interventions and

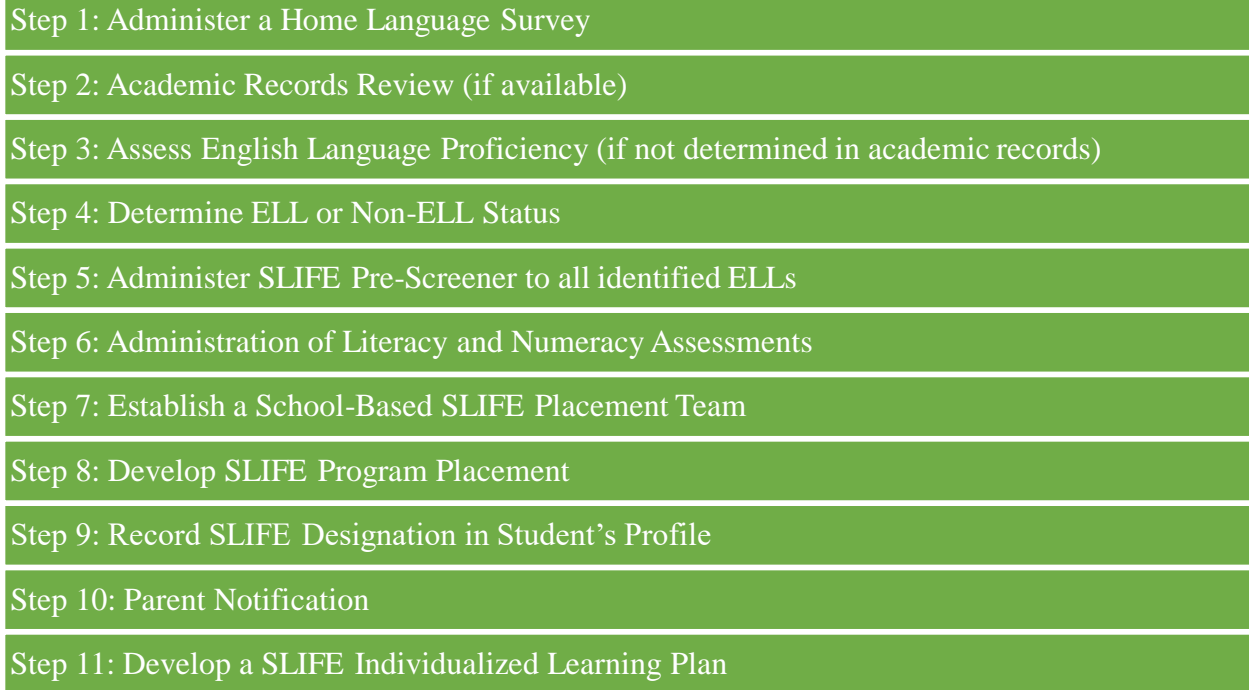
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<sup>1</sup> Acculturation is the process of acquiring a second language while maintaining one's primary language and culture (Collier, 2004; Cummings, 1984; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013).

supports; universal screening and progress-monitoring; and, collaboration and communication between educators and parents” (p. 2).

### **Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education**

In addition to determining whether students are ELs or in need of an IEP, districts must also determine which students have limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). MA DESE provides another resource prepared by Chester (2015) that outlines SLIFE identification procedures. MA DESE suggests districts take the following 11 steps to identify whether new students should be classified as SLIFE (See Figure 2).

- 
- Step 1: Administer a Home Language Survey
  - Step 2: Academic Records Review (if available)
  - Step 3: Assess English Language Proficiency (if not determined in academic records)
  - Step 4: Determine ELL or Non-ELL Status
  - Step 5: Administer SLIFE Pre-Screener to all identified ELLs
  - Step 6: Administration of Literacy and Numeracy Assessments
  - Step 7: Establish a School-Based SLIFE Placement Team
  - Step 8: Develop SLIFE Program Placement
  - Step 9: Record SLIFE Designation in Student’s Profile
  - Step 10: Parent Notification
  - Step 11: Develop a SLIFE Individualized Learning Plan

*Figure 2.* Steps for determining whether a newly enrolled student is a SLIFE

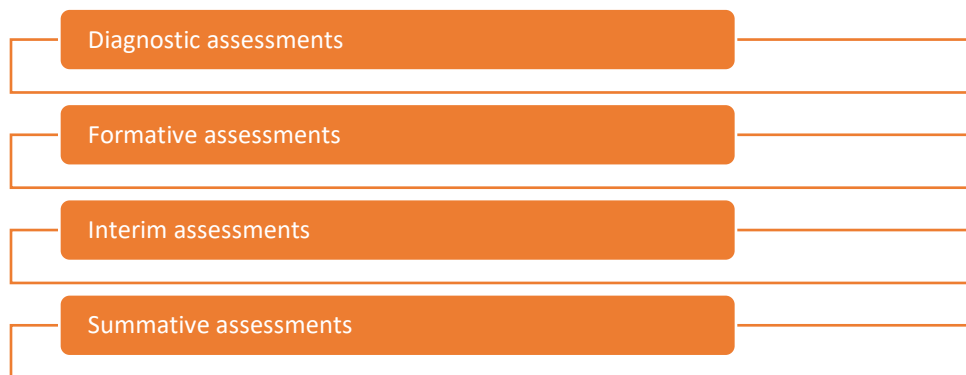
### **Assessing and Monitoring English Learners**

English Language Proficiency (ELP) tests assess reading, writing, speaking, and listening and are often administered before students take a single class. This procedure is done in order to assess students’ language proficiency so that educators can make informed decisions on the



specific kinds of supports students need. However, threats to the validity of assessments for both English language proficiency and content taught to ELs exist. Certain cultural and linguistic elements make it challenging for ELs to perform well on some assessments. **Nevertheless, research has shown that ELs perform well on assessments that have undergone linguistic modification to eliminate elements that are unnecessarily challenging and not essential to assessing competencies (Abedi, 2013).** As flawed as ELP tests might be, these early literacy assessments can be helpful in early identification of literacy activities that are challenging for specific students or groups of students. They can also be used to help educators better understand what students bring to their learning, so they can build on students' existing knowledge (Helman, 2005).

School districts in Massachusetts should have a system in place in which staff are trained to effectively use various types of assessments that screen, track, and evaluate ELs' growth in both English proficiency and academic content (See Figure 3).



*Figure 3. Types of EL assessments*

According to Chester (2016), annual summative assessments that measure proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking English should be administered. ACCESS for ELs, a WIDA based assessment that measures social and instructional English, should be administered in January-February once a year to all Massachusetts ELs. Interim assessments, such as the

WIDA MODEL, are not required but can be administered up to two times a year to monitor English language proficiency. MA DESE encourages schools to have a robust formative assessment system in place in the classrooms, so that the need for interim assessments is reduced. Lastly, MA DESE encourages districts to train teachers on how to employ formative assessments that allow them to consistently monitor the progress of ELs because such “assessments can provide teachers with data to drive planning and differentiation of teaching. Ongoing formative assessments accompanied by effective teacher feedback also give students a steady flow of information about their learning in relation to instructional goals” (p. 23).

### Teaching English Learners

The literature provides some general best practices for teachers working with ELs (see Figure 4). More specifically, teacher instruction needs to be clear, attainable, goal oriented, and

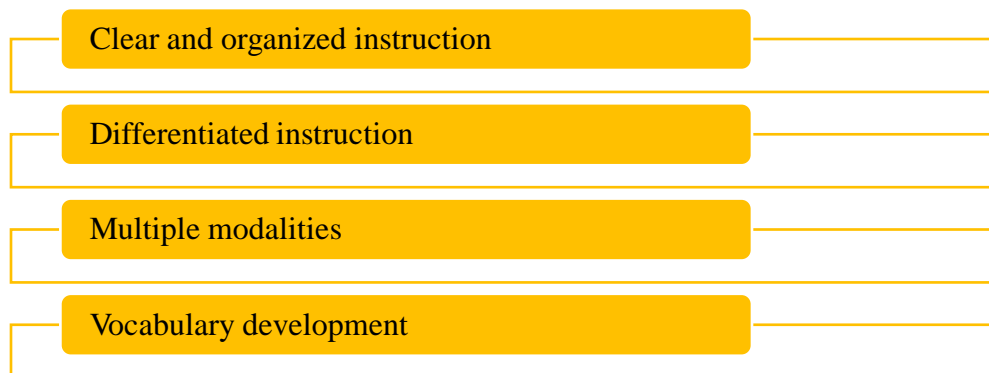


Figure 4. Some general best practices for teachers working with ELs

enriching. Teachers should also model appropriate language use and provide scaffolding using graphics or graphic organizers. Lessons should also be clearly organized and connected with students’ cultures (Olson, Scarcella, & Matuchniak, 2015). Teachers should provide differentiated instruction and adapt information to students’ learning levels (Kelly, Gomez-Bellene, Chen, & Schulz, 2008). Differentiated teaching for ELs, however, does not imply that

standards should be lowered for these students or that nonverbal support (e.g., graphic organizers and hands-on activities) should be emphasized to the point of sacrificing verbal support.

Teachers should use multiple modalities of instruction and culturally relevant hands-on activities to make the core curriculum comprehensible. They should also use multimedia, teacher modeling, visual representations, and explicit language instruction at a dedicated time each day (Echevarria, Frey, & Fisher, 2015). Teachers should also encourage vocabulary development by providing definitions and contextual meaning of words. They should also use words orally, compare words, provide multiple examples of usage, teach word analysis, share cognates, and use read-alouds (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005).

**However, it is important to note Harper and de Jong (2004) assert teachers cannot assume that strategies that work for other diverse native English speaking students will automatically work for ELs.** They further explain processes involved in first language acquisition, such as providing more opportunities for exposure to others using the English language or facilitating interactions that promote language learning, are not enough for ELs. All ELs are different and older learners such as high school students already have an educational foundation that can be capitalized to promote learning (Harper & de Jong, 2004). Therefore, it is important to understand students, their unique backgrounds, as well as their strengths and weaknesses.

Moreover, it is important to guard against focusing too much on English learning to the exclusion of academic content (Lee, 2012). Some teachers think that ELs cannot master academic content until they are fluent in English and therefore dedicate most their teaching to vocabulary drills and other strategies that help to develop language. While these efforts are important in teaching ELs, it is important to strike a balance. Teachers should have a basic

understanding of second language learning and how that process differs from first-language learning. They should also identify how language is used as a medium of instruction and make language development an explicit goal in their instruction (Harper & de Jong, 2004; Lee, 2012).

**Additionally, ELs should never be perceived as cognitively inferior and should be encouraged to use and develop their critical thinking skills (Chu, 2011).**

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is an important way of promoting the effective teaching of ELs. **CRT deliberately uses students' cultural experiences and perspectives as a means of teaching them more effectively.** According to the social constructivist framework theory, the learning process is impacted by one's language and culture (Ferlis & Xu, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, it is important to build on the backgrounds and experiences ELs bring to the classroom (Moll, Amanti, & Gonzalez, 1992) because this approach makes academic knowledge and skills more meaningful and appealing to these students which, in turn, helps them to comprehend the material more easily (Gay, 2000). CRT also promotes a positive school culture for ELs where students' diverse cultures and experiences are valued. **Individuals who teach and support ELs need to reflect on possible unconscious biases and reinforce high academic expectations (Cavazos, Cavazos, Hinojosa, & Silva, 2009).**

Gay (2000) highlights four CRT approaches educators can employ. First, educators should develop a cultural diversity knowledge base; in other words, they should strive to learn as much as they can about the diverse cultures of their students. Second, educators should design culturally relevant curricula. Gay also differentiates between three different types of curricula – formal, symbolic and societal – and encourages educators to ensure that CRT is evident in all three types. Formal curricula are approved by the governing educational systems. Symbolic

curricula include the visual images on the walls of classrooms, mottos, and artifacts that are used to teach. Such symbols guide what students perceive as being valuable so educators need to ensure that the symbolic curricula recognize and elevate diversity. Societal curricula are propagated mainly by mass media. Schools cannot do much to change societal curricula but they can counter the effects of social media by directly addressing the ethnic distortions that the media propagates by teaching students to be discerning consumers of media.

The third CRT approach, according to Gay (2000), has educators demonstrating cultural caring while building a learning community. In other words, educators should have high expectations of their students regardless of backgrounds. They should also provide cultural scaffolding by building on students' own experiences and cultures. Fourth, educators need to be aware of cross-cultural communication. For instance, some cultures use active participation where listeners expect speakers to engage them in dialogue. Other cultures are more passive and students are socialized to listen passively during instruction. In some cultures, topic-centered discourse is more common where students are expected to give a parsimonious response that is to the point. Other cultures use topic-chaining communication where speakers provide a lot of background information, use metaphors, and symbolism. Educators that are not mindful of these differences in communication might dismiss their ELs as being disruptive (if they are active participants), disinterested (if they are passive participants) or rambling (if they practice topic-chaining) (Gay, 2002).

### **Types of English Learner Programs**

In the 1970s and 80s, teaching policies and practices favored bilingual education. From the 1990s to the present, policy has shifted in favor of all-English programs and the emphasis is currently on getting ELs to learn English as quickly as possible. At the federal level, the

Bilingual Education Act which was passed in 1968 was repealed with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act and replaced with the English Acquisition Act (Rolstand, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005). Several states, including California (Proposition 227), Arizona (Proposition 203), and Massachusetts (Question 2), have passed ballot initiatives that have resulted in the dismantling of bilingual programs (Rolstand et al., 2005). In MA, bilingual education became law in 1971. However, Question 2 replaced the state law requiring Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) programs for schools with more than 20 ELs. Instead, Massachusetts districts must place ELs in either a Structured English Immersion program or a Two-Way Immersion program. Nevertheless, if a program waiver is sought another program model such as Transitional Bilingual Education may be employed.

Currently, the majority of ELs in MA are in mainstream classrooms which is not atypical (Adams & Jones, 2005); the majority of schools in the US use SEI programs or other integrated programs where ELs are taught together with other students (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000). Integrated methods are predominant for several reasons: in some cases, schools do not have enough resources (financial or human) to provide special programs for ELs. In other cases, parents prefer to have their children in a certain school due to proximity or because their other children attend a particular school. The following sections will provide an overview of three types of EL programs as well as aspects of each approach that have been found to be successful: Structured English Immersion, Two-Way Immersion, and Transitional Bilingual Education.

**Structured English immersion.** Structured English Immersion (SEI) is an approach whereby “nearly all classroom instruction is in English but with the curriculum and presentation designed for children who are learning the language” (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003, p. 7). These programs modify the regular curriculum to provide specialized supports for

English learners in order to enable them to learn English while at the same time mastering academic content. In most cases, SEI teachers are proficient in the children's home language and the students can communicate with the teacher in their native language but the teacher responds in the second language. Native language is used rarely or never in the classroom. Academic materials and assessments are in English. In some cases, students receive between 1-2.5 hours of English as a Second Language instruction per day depending on their proficiency level to provide further assistance with English language and vocabulary. SEI instruction is overwhelmingly in English (Baker & de Kanter, 1981; Smith, Coggins, & Cardoso, 2008). Teachers are recommended to scaffold instruction to make content comprehensible to English learners.

Some studies have found SEI programs to be effective in teaching ELs. An experimental study in Texas for an intervention that provided SEI in Social Science found that both EL and students who were not limited English proficient benefitted from the SEI strategies (Vaugh et al., 2010). Some of the strategies used in the intervention included: overview and vocabulary instruction, brief videos, purposeful discussions to build concepts, graphic organizers, other writing activities that build comprehension and vocabulary, and structured paired grouping. ELs outperformed their counterparts in the control group that had non-SEI classes. Another experimental study in SEI in Science also found similar results; student performance in both vocabulary and Science improved for all students regardless of their status as ELs or native English speakers (August, Branum-Martin, Cardenas-Hagan, & Francis, 2010). **This intervention used graphic organizers, explicit vocabulary instruction, pairing of ELs with students who were proficient in English, hands-on experimentation, and scaffolding**

**techniques which have been shown to foster EL understanding and language and literacy development (August & Shanahan, 2008).**

Some factors that promote success of students in SEI programs include: ensuring that teachers modify the curriculum to support EL learning (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005). However, many schools currently adopt the “sink” or “swim” submersion approach where teachers do not modify the curriculum at all (Adams & Jones, 2005). Failure to modify the curriculum can lead to disastrous results where ELs do not acquire content knowledge or improve their language skills (Iddings, 2005). Maintaining scaffolding until ELs have sufficient proficiency in English is a practice that has been found to be much more successful than the practice of removing supports after an arbitrarily determined amount of time (Adams & Jones, 2005). **Furthermore, schools should hire and retain teachers who are culturally rich or share a language and culture with the students (Pedroza & Mendez-Morse, 2016).**

**Two-way immersion.** Two-Way Immersion (TWI) programs instruct native English speakers and English learners in academic content using two languages in an integrated environment (Lindholm-Leary, 2001). Three features, according to Lindholm-Leary (2005), define TWI: 1) English native speakers and ELs being taught together for most content instruction, 2) target languages being used in balanced proportions in instruction and classwork, and 3) students and teachers are expected to use only one language without mixing for certain periods during the day. The goals of TWI are: bilingualism for all of the students involved, intercultural competence, reading and writing proficiency in target languages, academic achievement, and positive attitudes towards school (Lindholm-Leary, 2005).



Factors that lead to successful TWI programs include: creating a safe, warm, and caring school environment that supports and values bilingual education; implementing curricula and instruction that are culturally responsive, meaningful, and academically challenging; having a strong program planning process that conforms to developmentally appropriate practices and language proficiency levels in both languages; using bilingual assessments; hiring teachers who are well versed with bilingual education and ideally proficient in the target languages; having supports and resources available; and, encouraging family involvement in schools (Howard & Christian, 2002; Lindholm-Leary, 2005).

**Transitional bilingual education.** Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) is defined as a program in which a student is taught to read primarily or exclusively in their primary language until they become proficient enough in English to be able to participate in an all-English classroom, at which point the native language is completely phased out (Baker & de Kanter, 1981). The identifying feature of TBE is the use of native language to teach reading for a period of time (Slavin, Madden, Calderon, Chamberlain, & Hennesy, 2011); it is generally assumed that three years is enough for purposes of transition. TBE provides a “safe, nurturing, and respectful environment” for ELs (Ozimek, 2014).

### **Findings in Research**

Meta-analyses of various EL programs have generated mixed results. Strong evidence suggests that it is important to allow ELs to use their primary language to communicate their ideas (Choi, 2013; Chu, 2011; Lee, 2012). Several meta-analyses comparing EL programs have found evidence favoring bilingual approaches such as TWI as opposed to all-English programs such as SEI as a means of increasing students’ achievement in English and their native language (August & Shanahan, 2006; Greene, 1998; Rolstand et al., 2005; Slavin & Cheung, 2003;

Willing, 1985). Research has also found that two-way immersion students have positive perspectives of school and bilingualism (Bears & de Jong, 2008). In addition, Rolstand et al. (2005) found that TWI programs are superior to TBE programs. However, a review by Rossell and Baker (1996) concluded that bilingual education was no more effective than English-only programs. Some randomized longitudinal studies have also concluded that any additional benefits gained through a bilingual program faded with time; more specifically, kindergarteners in SEI and TBE conditions who were followed through fifth grade were found to speak and read English and Spanish with similar facility at the fourth grade (Slavin et al., 2011). According to August and Shanahan (2006), it is not the language of instruction that matters as much as the quality of instruction. Baker and de Kanter (1981) reviewed more than 28 studies comparing the different types of EL programs. Because of the mixed results, they conclude that the only appropriate Federal policy is one that is flexible enough to allow schools to develop instructional programs that suit the unique needs and circumstances of their students.

**Professional development for teachers.** Research has shown that teacher quality has a significant effect on student learning (Carrell & West, 2010). **School administrators, according to Karabenick and Noda (2004), need to make professional development available for educators of ELs (i.e., EL teachers, mainstream teachers, paraprofessionals).** Professional development (PD) programs for these teachers should be interactive, utilize feedback opportunities for pedagogical practices, and have reflective follow-up sessions (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). PD for teachers should also provide a theoretical foundation for understanding language, language development, and key concepts from current trends in literacy instruction, curriculum design, and assessment; in addition, PD should provide theory and research-based

approaches, strategies, and technologies that can be used to teach English and content subject areas to ELs (Smith, 2014; Wagner, 2015).

*Sheltered instruction observation protocol.* Teachers should be trained in the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model which makes “grade-level academic content accessible to English learners while ... [simultaneously] promoting their language and literacy development” (Chen, Kyle, & McIntyre, 2008, p. 9). This model includes the following components: preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice/application, lesson delivery, and review/assessment (Chen et al., 2008; Echevarria & Short, 2010). Research has shown that teachers trained in the SIOP model are more effective at teaching ELs than those who have not be trained in this model (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). Effective teachers have self-efficacy and believe that they can make a difference in the students’ lives. They also strive to provide a caring and nurturing classroom environment and form personal relationships with the students.

### **Supporting English Learners**

In order to effectively support ELs, individualized support is needed. Indeed, research on effective teaching of students placed at risk and highly mobile students emphasize the importance of paying attention to both the affective, academic, and technical needs of these students (Popp, Grant, & Stronge, 2011). In order to meet all these disparate needs, a network of support that involves a diverse group of individuals and institutions is needed. The following section provides an overview of some ways school districts can provide support for ELs.

#### **Administrators**

Administrators have a very important role to play in the teaching and support of ELs.

**They are responsible for building their own cultural competence as well as the cultural**

**competence of their staff in order to promote equitable learning opportunities for all learners in their schools** (Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). They need to understand the cultures and beliefs of ELs and their families and should make deliberate efforts to build a strong family and school connection (Boske & Becerril, 2016). Administrators should also be well-versed in the school and district policies and should model the behaviors and attitudes that they expect from their staff in order to create a positive school environment for ELs (Grady & O'Dwyer, 2014).

### **English Learner Teachers**

EL teachers are a crucial part of the equation. Districts need to ensure the workload of each EL teacher is manageable. Each EL teacher needs to establish a baseline for each EL (Wagner, 2015). According to Barr and Clark (2011), EL teachers are creating their own assessments tailored specifically to their students so they can figure out which aspects of the content students are grasping and what areas they still need to work towards. EL teachers should view a student's native language as an asset and if an ELL student does not understand a concept in English EL teachers should have students use their native language to ask questions (Smith et al., 2008). **Also, collaboration between EL teachers and general education teachers has been found to have great benefits for ELs (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2015). EL teachers should utilize technology in their classrooms to make lessons more interactive (Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2015; Liu, Navarrete, Maradiegue, & Wivagg, 2014).** These teachers should spend time going over the basics on how to use the devices with ELs before using them (Wagner, 2015). Lastly, EL teachers should be culturally knowledgeable and sensitive, and utilize culturally sensitive materials that help ELs learn the culture of their new environment (Lopez, 2014; Wong, 2008).

## **Mentors**

**ELs can benefit from having mentors that they can meet up with at school.** Frels et al. (2013) suggests individuals selected to be mentors be open-minded and have good communicating and listening skills. Sometimes just having someone to listen to can make all the difference to a student.

## **Paraprofessionals**

ELs can benefit from working with paraprofessionals that have positive and mutually supportive relationships with ELs' teachers (Law & Eckes, 2017). Law and Eckes suggest teachers and paraprofessionals should clarify roles and establish expectations. They describe an ideal aide as someone who is proficient in reading and writing and has a positive disposition, strong classroom management skills, cultural knowledge, and patience. EL best practices should be discussed with paraprofessionals. **Paraprofessionals' input should also be capitalized upon as they spend a lot of one-on-one time with students.** A paraprofessional who is bilingual can be called upon to translate or act as a bridge to the community (Law & Eckes, 2017).

## **Translators/Interpreters**

**A translator or interpreter should be well vetted and have cultural awareness in order to help build trust with ELs and their families (Hammond, 1992).** Being culturally aware, according to Lindberg, means that the translator or interpreter understands non-verbal cues, gestures, and body language that are culturally specific. Murray and Wynne (2002) assert that individuals serving in this capacity need to be professional and have a high standard of ethics. They further purport that translators or interpreters should be properly trained and have effective communication skills because often only their words are heard or recorded (Hammond, 1992).

## **Family Liaisons**

**Family liaisons help to establish effective home-school partnerships.** According to Lewis (2004), family liaisons should:

- “Keep confidences in their communications and interactions with staff and families;
- Are considered trustworthy by others;
- Have compassion for families, respect and appreciation of their role;
- Are engaging and accessible to staff and families;
- Approach each situation with an open mind; [and],
- Foster positive relations with staff, students, and families” (p. 1).

Ultimately, the family liaison is there to make school, family, and community connections that with support students who need assistance to meet academic goals (Lewis, 2004).

## **Literacy Tutors**

**Literacy tutoring programs can be beneficial for ELs because they give them opportunities to practice reading and writing (Cullen & Cobb, 2011).** Literacy tutors should be well vetted; more specifically, they should understand cultural differences (Al Otaiba & Pappamihel, 2005). Literacy tutoring programs can provide students with much needed one-on-one assistance that is specifically tailored to the student’s specific needs and current stage of language development (Cullen & Cobb, 2011). Literacy tutors should incorporate technology when they can because such practice has been found to be innovative and engaging (Al Otaiba & Pappamihel, 2005; Cullen & Cobb, 2011).

## **Librarians**

**Partnerships with librarians (both within the school and in local libraries) are an important way of extending learning opportunities to ELs and their families.** School

librarians can assist ELs in using technology and in accessing internet sources that would allow them to practice their listening, speaking, and writing skills in a self-paced way without fear of judgement for their mistakes (Ferlazzo, 2015). School librarians can also help students to practice interacting and working with peers to encourage mutual learning. **Librarians also need to develop a multicultural book collection with reading choices from various cultures** (Welch, 2011).

### **Guidance Counselors**

Guidance counsellors need to use culturally appropriate strategies. They also need to extend explicit invitations to EL parents and delineate parent roles. Flexible scheduling is advisable in order to make it easier for parents to attend meetings (Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba, & Henderson, 2013). Guidance counselors can also help to build social capital for ELs by supporting students in making post-secondary plans. For instance, guidance counselors or educators should engage ELs in weekly advisory periods or provide career development classes where ELs research colleges and different career paths. Students should also be connected to internship opportunities that expose them to a variety of career options (Lee, 2012). **Lastly, guidance counselors can promote social-emotional development and increase literacy instruction through small group counseling** (Cook, 2015).

### **ELs' Peers**

Peers can help ELs utilize their background knowledge, explain difficult concepts, and improve oral language skills. However, peer support is most effective when students are instructed on how and when to support peers (Vaughn, 2009). Often, a misconception exists that ELs need to first master the English language in order to be able to assist each other. As a result, many school policies tend toward hyper-segregation where ELs of similar levels are grouped

together to receive the appropriate EL services. Unfortunately, such hyper-segregation denies emergent bilinguals the opportunity to use academic English and to build relationships with peers who are in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). **Instead, schools should provide ample opportunities for ELs to interact with other bilinguals and monolinguals who can model English language use and encourage ELs to use academic English** (Carhill-Poza, 2017; Antilla-Garza & Cook-Gumperz, 2015). Peer learning is also an effective way to build ELs' social capital (Vaughn, 2000).

## **Parents**

Extensive research has shown a positive association exists between family involvement and an EL's academic success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sanders & Herting, 2000). More specifically, strong communication between teachers and parents contributes to overall improvements in students' attendance, behavior, and grades (Nagro & Stein, 2016). Schools should establish parent involvement programs that address parents' urgent needs; teach literacy in a natural context (e.g., using ideas and concepts that they encounter in their daily lives); address short-term family needs (e.g., assisting with taxes); equip parents with the skills they need to be an effective teacher and advocate for their child; and, provide parents with English language instruction and services that will help the to participate more actively in their communities and subsequently increase their social capital (Tellez & Waxman, 2010).

Epstein's (2001) seminal work on school, family, and community partnerships provides 14 techniques educators can employ to involve parents in learning activities at home. The 14 techniques can be divided into five categories (See Figure 5).



1. Techniques that involve reading and books.
2. Techniques that encourage discussions between parent and child.
3. Techniques that specify certain informal activities at home to stimulate learning.
4. Contracts between parents and teachers specifying parents' role in connection with their children's learning.
5. Techniques that develop parents' tutoring, helping, teaching, or evaluation skills.

*Figure 5.* Epstein's (2001) five categories for involving parents

Other researchers (Chen et al., 2008; Panferov, 2010) suggest implementing the abovementioned learning activities through the following types of activities:

- Have students interview their family members to develop a family tree;
- Have students share a meaningful picture about their background or history with the class (however, it is important to take into consider how such an activity would affect students who have trauma in their background);
- Have students keep a reading log. The teacher should share books with students. Students should read books with their parents, then together they should write a few comments on the text. The teacher should provide written feedback in the logs.
- Have students work with their family members to reflect on their lives prior to and after immigration.
- Have a "Share Fair" event put on by teachers, students, and their families to share some of the projects they have undertaken together.
- Offer workshops to parents to teach them different approaches they could use to support students at home.

It is important that educators consider challenges that may complicate their partnerships with parents. More specifically, parents may have difficulty accessing transportation or

experience language barriers. Both teachers and parents may have limited time or schedule conflicts. Also, unenlightened parents may place undue pressure on their children (Epstein, 2001; Panferov, 2010). Therefore, Panferov asserts educators should conduct interviews with parents (or even home visits) to get to know them and build their trust. The interviews could also discover what the best forms of communication would be for parents. They can also solicit suggestions from parents on how they would like to participate in the school and with what frequency. **Schools should have events for parents at familiar and welcoming locations within the community instead of at the school.** Communicating with parents using various modes (i.e., written or spoken) and in multiple languages is also important in ensuring that they understand the message. **Also, educators should also communicate positive information about the students instead of limiting communication to disciplinary cases, announcements, or school-related requests.**

### **Community Members and Organizations**

In addition to parents, schools can better support ELs if they establish community connections as well. Wide-ranging partnerships with individuals and institutions that have a vested interest in ELs' success are crucial (Clark-Kasimu, 2015; Epstein, 2001). **Communities are rich with organizations that schools can partner with to garner much needed resources; organizations such as universities, community colleges, libraries, local businesses, churches, radio programs, youth organizations, cultural centers, and non-profits could be essential partners in a service learning initiative (Orozco, 2008; Sanders, 2003).** Collaboration between schools and community organizations can lead to schools obtaining more funding and extra resources, which leads to greater efficiency, positive gains in academic achievement, and students who are better prepared for the workforce (Sanders, 2003; Taylor & Adelman, 2000;

Tellez & Waxman, 2010). According to Gross et al. (2015), “schools that develop strong community partnerships have a higher percentage of students performing on grade level, increased parental engagement, increased student test scores and attendance rates, and connections for students to learning opportunities outside of school” (p. 10).

Community programs, such as Boys and Girls’ clubs and after-school programs, have also been found to be effective at fostering the academic achievement of EL. For students whose families do not provide adequate support, these programs fill a critical gap (Tellez & Waxman, 2010). After-school programs are especially effective when they use the students’ primary language. However, this method is not always possible because finding qualified staff that are fluent in multiple languages can be challenging. ELs and their families are sometimes involved in churches because they provide them with a sense of community and help them to settle within the community (Chao & Mantero 2014). Churches can also provide opportunities for ELs to use different levels of language and literacy in a caring environment (Chao, 2014; Ek, 2008). Schools that are trying to build partnerships with communities should therefore consider conducting some activities with neighborhood churches that are frequented by ELs and their families.

### **Action Team for Partnerships**

Epstein (2001) asserts that an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) is an essential element of school, family, and community partnerships. **The action team should consist of teachers, students, parents, support staff, administrator(s), and community members.** It should assess present partnership practices, organize options for new partnerships, implement selected activities, evaluate actions taken, figure out next steps, and continuously improve upon implemented practices. In other words, **the action team should develop an actionable plan.**

Based on the standards outlined by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2011), we suggest actionable plans for partnership development ought to:

- Include ways in which families, community members, and relevant community organizations (e.g., business, religious, political, health, social services, etc.) will be involved to positively affect student learning.
- Consider the diverse perspectives and needs of students, families, and community members.
- Clearly map the ways in which community interests and needs will be met; in other words, benchmarks (i.e., immediate and long term) and outcomes should be clear.
- Identify specific community resources and clearly articulate how all relevant community resources can be mobilized. Specific outcomes and a timeline for benchmarks should be included.

### **Conclusion**

School districts need to continue adapting to the varying needs and cultural backgrounds of the students (Khong & Saito, 2014). **As the old adage “*It takes a village to raise a child*” suggests, ELs are not the sole responsibility of EL teachers or coordinators. Instead, various individuals from the school, family, and community should play a role in improving student learning, especially for ELs.** This report outlined some of the best practices that individuals in a “village” can utilize to support ELs.

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