

Quality Educational Programs for English Language Learners
Written Expert Testimony
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Background of Witness

Good morning. Thank you for this opportunity to share some thoughts and experiences that I have had regarding a quality educational program for English language learners. I must congratulate the sponsors of the various bills before this committee for having the foresight and the wisdom to address this most important educational issue that affects the future of thousands of students. I feel the responsibility to share with you my thoughts and experiences and hopefully shed some light on the issues surrounding the proposed bills.

I am Kristin Grayson, currently an ESL Education Specialist at the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA). As you probably know, the mission of IDRA is to work with schools and communities to create schools that work for all children. We work with hundred of school districts including school administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents primarily in a five state area, and have addressed issues associated with a quality educational program for ELLS.

I have a Bachelors Degree from St. Olaf College in Spanish, Sociology, and Social Studies Education. My Masters Degree is in Education with a specialization in the area of ESL, Bilingual, and Multicultural Education. I am currently midway through the PhD Leadership Studies program at Our Lady of the Lake University.

My professional education experience of over thirty years in public schools has always been in service to English language learners. I have been an ESL teacher to elementary and secondary students, a Dual Language teacher, a language program specialist, and a language program administrator. I taught ESL certification courses in the state of Kansas at Emporia State University. During the last ten years, I have worked with subject area teachers who teach English language learners in numerous districts in Texas and in other states. This work has included teacher training, mentoring, and coaching, as well as working with administrators of school districts to design and implement professional development for secondary teachers of English language learners.

As a professional development specialist with IDRA, I work with classroom subject area teachers (primarily at the secondary level), lead teacher workshops, observe classroom instruction, and act as a coach and mentor to teachers and administrators. Additionally, I serve as a member on evaluation teams when IDRA conducts district level ESL program evaluations. I also have a responsibility to stay up-to-date with current national research and trends in education of English language learners.

Overview

To set the context, let me first say that the group of secondary LEP students (ELLs) includes students with a diverse set of backgrounds and needs. This includes LEP students who are recent immigrants and students who are native born LEP students (students that are born in the U.S. but come from families where English is not the language of the home).

Recent immigrants only account for a percentage of secondary LEP students. It is important to note that, of those who are recent immigrants, there are notable variations – some have very little schooling, while others have gone through “primaria” or elementary grades in the home country and just need help learning English labels to concepts that they already have mastered. Other recent immigrants arrive with interrupted schooling. They have had some years of school but have missed some years of school before entering U.S. schools.

Of those LEP students who are not recent immigrants, there are also variations. There are LEP students that entered U.S. schools at the secondary level (post- 5th or 6th grade in U.S. schools); others are LEP due to discontinuous services (some years served in ESL or bilingual education and other years not served in any program); or are LEP because throughout their years of school they have been provided inadequate instructional services (weak ESL) and have never been exited from ESL programs.

Regardless of the reason for LEP status in high school, all require specialized instruction in order to expand their English language proficiency and to achieve state requirements in the subject areas (math, science and social studies). Recent achievement data demonstrate that ELLs continue to be the most educationally shortchanged of all students. How much longer can we continue to neglect and affect the future of these students? I share with you some thoughts to address some of the misconceptions that currently exist. I will do that by posing a question and providing some insights to answer that question.

Question #1: Why is reform needed in secondary level ELL programs?

Reform is needed because current programs are not meeting the educational needs of these students. This need is demonstrated by the large gap that exists between LEP academic achievement rates and Texas average student academic achievement rates. A large gap is also exhibited when comparing achievement rates of LEP students to other secondary student populations (as in LEP vs. White).

Question #2: What is sheltered instruction?

Sheltered instruction is a way of teaching that accomplishes two goals for teachers of subject areas: it makes the content itself understandable through the use of various teaching techniques while at the same time building the academic English proficiency of the ELL student in that specific content area.

Each subject has a unique academic language or a specific way that English is used in areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking within that subject. For example, in science and math there are unique ways to use English to express the concepts of each subject by using a specialized vocabulary in a complex way. Sheltered instruction provides access to the content of the subject and the unique way English is used in that subject area.

Question #3: What is the difference between teachers that are ESL certified and subject area teachers who are trained in adapting instruction for students of limited English proficiency (see 5A and 5B)?

ESL certification allows for teaching of English as a second language, and the content of the class is the English language. In high schools, ESL classes generally fulfill the course requirement for a student's English credit. ESL as an English course generally can only fulfill English I & II. Otherwise, ESL is counted as an elective. However, ESL students have many required courses to take in order to stay on track for graduation. They spend most of the school day with content area teachers (mathematics, science, history, government, etc.) who for the most part are not prepared to deliver instruction in a manner that is comprehensible for ELLs. School districts are recognizing that the need for training of content area teachers who have ELLs in their classes is great. If they are going to be successful with ELLs, content area teachers must possess specialized competencies to engage and reach ELLs. Among the key competencies that content area teachers must possess are:

1. Second language acquisition and corresponding instructional practices that facilitate second language learning,
2. The role of cultural and linguistic diversity in framing quality instruction,
3. Ensuring that the rigor of curriculum is sustained when differentiating instruction,
4. Strategies to engage all students in a classroom with diverse learners,
5. Adapting content teaching strategies to ensure that ELLs fully participate in the instructional process,
6. Instructional strategies that promote English language and literacy in secondary content areas,
7. Instructional strategies that promote content learning by ELLs within their content area, and
8. Planning and adapting content instruction for ELLs based on their levels of English proficiency.

Experience shows that developing these competencies require a structured and sustained program of professional development. A comprehensive professional development program is one that develops the necessary knowledge about teaching second language learners, adapting content area teaching strategies for use with ELLs, developing competency in making curriculum and instructional decisions to fully have an impact on ELLs, and the provision for supporting teachers gaining these competencies.

Mentoring and coaching programs are having great success in supporting teacher development of a feeling of teaching efficacy that is required of all teachers of ELLs.

In summary, the professional development for subject area teachers should be continuous training through a combination of workshop, coaching, and mentoring approaches that deepen teachers' knowledge and skill so that they teach using strategies that help make their subject understandable, while also improving the English proficiency of the student within the specific subject area. Teaching in this way is an acquired skill and is not something that can be learned overnight or in a one-shot workshop.

Question #3: What are supplemental instructional services?

Supplemental instructional services refer to specialized tutoring and other additional services and/or resources that are designed to improve student learning and achievement specifically for English language learners. It is important to note that these supplemental services are most successful when provided by teachers prepared to teach ELLs.

Question #4: What about required coursework? Could that coursework be credited with prior coursework that teachers have taken?

Most institutions require a minimum of nine courses to complete ESL training. It would be ideal to ask content area teachers to also go through an ESL certification program. I believe that what is feasible and cost effective is that teachers who have already been certified in a content area should at a minimum seek supplemental certification by taking enough courses or professional development training to prepare them for supplemental certification by taking the ExCet examination. This alternative method would require that these teachers receive mentoring and coaching services for at least a year after certification. Once certification is obtained, annual reviews (at least 12 clock hours per year) to update teachers' repertoire of teaching strategies are recommended. There has been a rapid growth in research in the area of ESL over the last several years. We would recommend that the six credit hours could include coursework only if it had been taken within the last five years (since 2004).

Question #5: How many professional development hours are bilingual teachers now required to take?

According to SBEC, the CPE requirements for classroom teachers are 150 clock hours every five years. The type of professional development is not specified by SBEC. Most of the training and preparation recommended could be accomplished by allocating funds and adapting existing professional development programs to ensure that teachers with ELLs receive the training needed to be effective in a classroom with diverse students. Much of the professional development needed for classroom subject teachers could be done within this framework and within their own subject area (such as math and ELLs) and with a serious review and reallocation of existing professional development and funding.

In closing, when analyzing student performance data, it is apparent that there is an urgent need for major improvements in secondary ESL programs. IDRA, through its extensive experience in providing staff development to hundreds/thousands of secondary level teachers serving ELLs, recognizes that there are many hard-working and committed individuals in secondary schools, but there are also many that need more extensive training to help them be better prepared to deliver effective instruction to ELLs.

Thank you again, for this opportunity, to provide testimony on the urgent issues surrounding secondary English language learners in Texas public schools.