

Research-Based Best Practice Principles to Boost EL Achievement

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A successful vision is not driven by compliance, but rather by research-based policies and best practices that yield high academic achievement.

So where should district and school leaders invest their time, staff and funding resources? Which programs best fit the population? The Latino Policy Forum has had the distinct honor of collaborating with national experts Patricia Gándara and Maria Estela Zarate (2014), who have established principles of best practice that draw from a wealth of comprehensive research: *Seizing the Opportunity to Narrow the Achievement Gap for English Learners*,⁵⁷ which is a manual for local school districts in California. When California adopted school funding reform, Gándara and Zarate realized that guidance was needed for local decision-making within the California context.



No one-size-fits-all approach works in serving ELs; however, Gándara and Zarate provide a number of research-based principles from which school leaders can draw to guide decision-making. Whether a district's approach is additive or subtractive, the principles articulated in this chapter are critical to ELs academic success. While there are no silver bullets to boosting EL achievement, research supports the options recommended below to provide the best odds of making a significant difference for the education of ELs.

To tailor their research for the Illinois context, this handbook has organized Gándara and Zarate's principles under three main themes:

- 1 **Instructional Programs**
- 2 **Assessment**
- 3 **Necessary Support Services**
- 4 **Family Engagement**

The Illinois context is different from California in that we have a 40-year history of mandating bilingual education and providing state funding for programs. Illinois also provides specific bilingual funding at the preschool level. While research-based practice is imperative to the school/district vision, federal and state requirements must also be considered. ELs are protected under Civil Rights Law along with federal law (*Lau v Nichols*), Illinois Article 14C and Administrative Rules Section 228. Bilingual education is mandated in Illinois when 20 or more students speaking the same native language enroll in a school. The students may be of different ages and grade levels, yet the Illinois School Code requires instruction be delivered in the native language and English in core subjects, as well as the culture and history of the

ELs' heritage. Hence, Illinois has always had legislative statutes, which uphold best practice for ELs. In Chapter 8, integrated charts are provided to illustrate the power of integrating best practice with what is mandated by law and funding options.

Research-Based Principles for Instructional Programs

A top priority for schools is to use their resources to attract fully credentialed, highly effective bilingual education teachers. A disproportionate number of ELs are taught by out-of-field teachers and teachers without standard licensure. The mantra that "good teaching is good teaching for all students" has been cited to suggest that good general education teachers should be able to meet the needs of ELs in their classroom with little orientation to cultural and linguistic diversity and knowledge of second language acquisition. Research suggests that this is not the case. It is clear that bilingual education teachers:

- Draw upon more pedagogical strategies and skills specific to teaching ELs⁵⁹
- Are more likely than their general education peers to seek out and communicate with parents of ELs, building home-to-school connections⁶⁰
- Are able to informally assess ELs' understanding and to modify instruction and instructional materials accordingly⁶¹
- Are better able to motivate ELs by fostering closer relationships with them than general education teachers can⁶²

Research-Based Best Practice for Instructional Programs

Use resources to attract and retain highly effective, fully credentialed bilingual teachers. **Access to a fully credentialed and highly qualified teacher is an essential basic service and having an effective teacher is the single most important in-school factor influencing student performance.** Highly qualified teachers have a strong understanding of the knowledge, background, learning style and first language characteristics of their ELs and believe that student native languages are a significant asset to their learning. These educators utilize theoretical knowledge and specific strategies to support ELs, but also receive opportunities to plan lessons, observe skilled educators utilizing these strategies, practice the strategies themselves, receive feedback and coaching and interact with colleagues in a supportive network to refine their practices.⁶³

Invest in quality early childhood opportunities for ELs. Provide full-day kindergarten where it does not exist and preschool to the extent possible. Research on the effects of early education for ELs and other low-income children is robust (see Chapter 5 of handbook). High-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten have long-term positive effects on both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes,⁶⁵ especially for ELs.⁶⁶

Assess ELs in their native language if valid instruments are available in that language. A fair, valid and reliable accountability system entails obtaining a full picture of what children know in their home language and English. A student may be able to demonstrate mastery of content when provided an opportunity in the home language.⁶⁷

Offer dual language programs along with a path towards the State Seal of Biliteracy. High-quality dual language programs, especially two-way programs that bring native English speakers together with native speakers of other languages in the same instructional program, appear to yield impressive academic and socio-emotional outcomes for ELs. These programs also appear to be the most successful at narrowing achievement gaps and often help ELs attain English language proficiency faster.⁶⁸

Integrate ELs with academically successful non-ELs for at least part of every day. ELs should not be confined to a special EL track that isolates them from the rest of the student body. Physical education, elective courses and extracurricular clubs are great ways to ensure that ELs have meaningful interactions with native English speakers.

Enroll each EL in an extracurricular activity. Schools should make every effort to integrate students in extracurricular activities: clubs, sports, service activities that foster civic engagement, music and arts programs, organized academic and non-academic activities and after-school programs. Such programming provides supportive peer groups and a sense of belonging at school. Ensure that cost is not a barrier to any of these activities for any student.

Promote EL participation in AP, IB and Dual Credit Programs. Only a very small proportion of ELs graduate having completed college preparatory requirements.⁶⁹ Rigorous academic content in high school, often designated as honors or AP, should not be withheld from ELs. ELs should be given access to these courses and continue to receive language development support while enrolled in such courses in order to excel in them. Linguistic supports should also be provided even after students have been reclassified from the EL status.⁷⁰

Ensure access to training in the use of computers and technologies for ELs. There is strong documented evidence that ELs have much less access to computers and the internet, as well as instruction in how to use technology for academic purposes. These gaps in use and training in technology exacerbate achievement gaps for ELs.

Provide career and college planning guidance geared to ELs' needs. Because many ELs are the first in their families to attend college, their families lack knowledge of the college and career-planning process. Lack of familiarity with U.S. higher education systems is then compounded by linguistic barriers.⁷³ Information regarding two- and four-year institutions, tuition and financing options must be made available to parents of ELs in a language they can understand.

Provide ongoing monitoring and support for reclassified ELs as they transition to mainstream classrooms. Administrators need to inform teachers which students have been reclassified so that they may be able to provide additional language supports. The quality of post-reclassification support should be such that it is present, accessible, consistent and embedded in instructional practice.

Research-Based Best Practice for EL Assessment

Often state and district accountability systems focus on student achievement data from large-scale assessments to evaluate school effectiveness. The majority of the assessment tools used are designed-based on learning standards and test items developed for an English-speaking population. For schools with a significant EL population, data from these assessments are not able to measure what students know and are able to do in the native language. In addition, English is a language ELs

are in the process of acquiring. Therefore, any content assessment administered will produce data based on the student's command of English at the time of test administration.

In Illinois, ELs are assessed annually to measure their progress in reaching English proficiency, and they must participate in statewide content assessments in English Language Arts, Mathematics and Science. Data from these sources only present part of the picture. To gain a broader perspective on the progress of ELs, collecting additional information is necessary.

Research-Based Best Practice for EL Assessment

Assess and report outcomes in both English and the native language if ELs are currently or have recently received instruction in the native language and whenever valid instruments are available in that language.

Demonstrate growth in academic achievement by using systems that may include grades in core subjects and qualitative measures (e.g. teacher reports and work products), in addition to test scores.

Analyze qualitative data on the former EL subgroup to determine if, after reclassification, they perform as well as English-speaking peers in grades, attendance, assessments and graduation rates.

Analyze EL English proficiency data to ensure that ELs reach full proficiency by eighth grade. Low scores on ACCESS 2.0 as early as first grade serve as an indicator of students who require additional language instruction in order to reach the eighth grade benchmark.

Research-Based Best Practice for Support Services

Seven decades ago, Abraham Maslow⁷⁴ asserted that certain basic human needs (e.g. food, shelter, health, security) had to be fulfilled before a person could focus on more abstract activities, such as classroom learning. Since that time evidence has accumulated to sustain this assertion. In every society, children who come from poverty fare worse than non-poor children in school, but those gaps are larger in the United States than in any other developed nation.⁷⁶ Given this reality, the basic conditions of learning must extend beyond the classroom, to the context of the school and the conditions that students experience before they enter the classroom.

In Illinois, not only are ELs likely to face economic adversity, but they are also young, concentrated in the preschool to third grades. Most ELs transition from services by fifth grade. Data from the Illinois State Board of Education suggests that recently transitioned ELs often do not perform commensurate with their English peers right away. Data from 2017 showed students performing on par with peers by the fifth year after transition. Below are research-based principles for what schools can do to assist ELs in poverty. The principles also address support for ELs after they leave language services and include recommendations for additional supports as they enter general education programs. They also explore what types of supports and conditions are most optimal to promote current and former EL academic success.

Research-Based Best Practice for Social Services

Increase the bilingual support staff, social workers, psychologists, nurses, etc. who can communicate with students and their families in their home language. Most ELs are also low-income and come from homes with significant economic needs. Moreover, many also need to be connected to social and mental health services as well as accessible health care, including dentists and eye doctors.

Provide additional time with bilingual support staff for low-income ELs. Unhealthy children, children lacking adequate nutrition, children in unstable home environments and children who are stressed are not ready to learn and no amount of good instruction can wholly overcome these challenges. Additional time with support staff can begin to provide a safe environment for children to thrive.

Ensure proper nutrition during school hours. Given that ELs have one of the highest poverty rates in the nation and nutrition is linked to school outcomes, schools should make every effort to ensure that these students are well-nourished while at school.⁷⁷

Conduct a needs assessment of teachers, administrators and instructional support staff to identify their critical professional development needs related to the classroom instruction of ELs. Professional development should be matched to the specific needs identified by instructional personnel. Many times, teachers do not know what they do not know, especially in an instructional area in which they have had little preparation. As a starting point, teachers want to be listened to about their needs.⁷⁸ Effective professional development addresses the actual needs of staff, rather than assumed needs.⁷⁹

Build strong infrastructure for the professional development of district teachers, administrators and school-based after-school program providers. Where human resources are limited, districts can partner with other districts or with recognized institutions/agencies that specialize in professional development for staff serving ELs.

District Highlight

West Chicago SD 33: An Overview of Comprehensive Support Services for ELs

Gloria Trejo, Principal of the Year

How are ELs supported after school and during the summer?

We are fortunate to be a district that has a set of partnerships that work closely with the community and schools to promote families and communities. We work with Breaking Free, which is a social service agency that provides education, prevention and counseling services. Breaking Free runs the DREAM After School Program. The DREAM program runs during the school year and five weeks during the summer. The DREAM program represents a collaboration between the school district and various social service organizations, such as Central DuPage Hospital, Northern Illinois Foodbank, DuPage County Health Department and others. The program addresses wraparound services for student well-being and academic success. Our ELs who participate in the DREAM program during the school year are automatically enrolled in the summer. During the summer, students take a field trip once a week, which helps enhance their background knowledge that they may not have at home.

How does the district support ELs with special education needs?

Our district is composed of over 80 percent Latinx students of which more than 53 percent are ELs. We recruit highly qualified teachers who have the knowledge and experience working with ELs. We have very strong Professional Learning Teams (PLT) that exist in each school, which consist of strong teachers who collaborate closely and analyze student data to ensure the best academic strategies for our students. The student resources that our district utilizes are good for all students, including our ELs. In addition to our general educators, our special education teachers consistently receive professional development to ensure that our ELs' needs are met.

Does the district provide extra learning time for ELs?

Our district comprises over 53 percent ELs who are present in both dual language and general education classrooms. All are given the same strong instructional strategies, as provided in the dual language classrooms. While extra learning time is provided for ELs, both after school and during the summer, guided instruction is highly emphasized in both literacy and math instruction. Small group instruction is differentiated based on specific skills that need to be targeted to strengthen abilities. These are encouraged through cooperative learning strategies.

Does the district provide full-day kindergarten for ELs?

Yes, we have offered full-day kindergarten to all of our students for the past seven years.

Our district has a long history of differentiating instruction and we have focused our professional development over the years on targeted approaches for the different learners we serve.

Research-Based Principles for Family Engagement

Parents and families are a critical learning resource for students, including ELs, yet relatively little is done to enlist the parents or guardians of ELs in their children's education at home or at school.⁸⁰ Research has shown that some forms of parent involvement are linked to better student outcomes.⁸¹ While the research on parent involvement tends to focus on traditional forms of participation in school-based activities, such as participating in parent associations, fundraising and classroom volunteering, these may not be optimal ways to enlist all parents' or guardians' support.⁸²

Linguistically diverse and immigrant families often have divergent experience and unclear expectations about how to communicate with teachers and other school staff. Ways to ease parents' uncertainty include having a clear schoolwide strategy to engage them; providing clear information about program options available to their children; and conveying the importance of home-based support. In addition, it is important to cultivate an environment where parents share in the decision-making on issues related to their children's education.

Research-Based Best Practice for Family Engagement

Provide a welcoming school environment with bilingual staff to greet parents. Research has shown that some schools serving high percentages of ELs tend to be less welcoming than other schools.⁸¹⁻⁸³ It is critically important to have welcoming staff in the front office who can communicate with parents. When school administrators, counselors and other school staff also speak the same language as the parents or guardians, they will make stronger and more engaging connections to the school. It is also important to translate materials in the top languages spoken by families enrolled in the school and to deploy communication strategies that are inclusive of different languages, even in terms of e-mail communications sent to the home.

Provide bilingual parent liaisons to develop links between the community and school. Because many linguistically diverse and immigrant parents may not feel comfortable initiating contact and pursuing communication with teachers and staff, especially those who do not speak their language, schools should enlist parent peers or community members to provide outreach to parents and guardians.⁸⁵ Having parent liaisons that are knowledgeable members of the community and can speak and write in the parents' and guardians' primary language is one method to augment communication and coordinate activities to increase parents' and guardians' participation in school and in decision-making processes. A parent liaison can be an important access point to school and community resources and information for parents and guardians, as well.⁸⁶

Provide extra textbooks and consumables in native language for use at home. At the elementary level, story books in the home language and other supplemental materials that parents can use with their children can foster this critical home support. Research shows that when books are made available to parents and students, they engage in more frequent reading with their children, which is predictive of better educational outcomes.⁸⁸

Increase EL parental empowerment and advocacy in schools serving ELs. It is critical that parents be given clear information about the types of instructional programs that may be available for ELs, including a description of the research on outcomes for these programs. Schools that provide this information help ensure that parents are able to advocate for their children and that their voices are valued in making decisions about their children's education. Research has shown that, when well implemented, these types of programs have an impact on parental behaviors that support their children's learning.⁸⁹

**This practice is outlined in the Illinois School Code as a requirement.*

Broaden the representation of EL parents and families in schools' decision-making processes. Schools need to seek innovative ways to include EL parents. For example, parent liaisons and parent advocacy program personnel can be used to reach out to a broader group of parents and seek their participation in decision-making.

Fully support a districtwide EL Advisory Committee and include parents in the committee structure. Districtwide committees, at a minimum, tend to have knowledgeable parents and community members that can form a base of parent involvement.

In teacher and administrator evaluations or reviews, include the ways in which they integrate, accommodate and seek ELs' parental participation. There is rarely a schoolwide or professional expectation that teachers and school personnel pursue parental participation and communication beyond annual or semi-annual parent-teacher conferences or conversations related to behavioral issues.⁹⁰ Making teachers responsible, in part, for integrating parents and families into their practice can further institutionalize the expectation that all teachers and school personnel need to seek respectful and welcoming interactions and communication with parents. This necessarily looks different at elementary and secondary schools; however, all teachers and administrators can increase outreach and communication with parents and guardians, *with adequate support* from bilingual personnel if the teacher or administrator does not speak the language of the parents.

District Highlight

Chicago School District 299: Optimal EL and Immigrant Parent Engagement

Hilda Calderon-Pena, Lead Citywide Community Relations Representative

Chicago Public Schools is the third largest district in the nation with 585 schools in 2019-20. There are traditional neighborhood schools as well as charter schools, all of which enroll ELs. Beginning in the 1980s, as a result of school reforms, the district instituted a school governance structure, which involved each school having to establish an elected Local School Council. Since then the Chicago Board of Education is appointed by the Mayor of Chicago. As such, there is a delicate balance between community involvement and mayoral oversight. In addition, each school enrolling ELs has its own Bilingual Advisory Council. The president of each Bilingual Advisory Council reports to the Local School Council, thereby forming a link between school initiatives and their effects on ELs.

Illinois requires every district with a bilingual program to also establish a Bilingual Parent Advisory Council. Chicago accomplishes this by inviting the 600 local council presidents to four annual meetings. These annual meetings typically have over 400 parent participants. In addition, Chicago wanted to ensure the inclusion of various ethnic identities and formed the Chicago Multilingual Parent Council that represents immigrant and refugee parents across the district.

Chicago makes a concerted effort to have parents themselves establish the agendas for their meetings. This process makes sure that the district addresses their concerns and questions regarding their children's education. Topics range from the bilingual education budget to early childhood and postsecondary opportunities. Topics presented at meetings are always determined by parents' interests.

What makes for a strong Bilingual Advisory Council?

The Councils have had strong parent support throughout the city. Their fortified role in advocacy for ELs has grown significantly over the past eight years. Support from school leaders is crucial for elevating parent concerns by providing spaces for them to have a voice at the table. Parents have become heavily involved in issues pertaining to the bilingual budget, leadership and other initiatives.

How does the Council support bilingual education?

Council leaders are in continued contact with the Chief of the Office of Language and Cultural Education at Chicago Public Schools. This ensures quality flow of information about services and information for ELs from the district level to the Councils. In turn, the leadership receives input from parents about how program implementation is affecting their children's education. They also provide opportunities for parents to advocate on behalf of local school needs. At times, parent leaders have advocated for their children at the school board level and with the help of Aldermen and other interested community members.

In what type of activities has the Council become involved?

The council approves the bilingual education budget for the district. A council generates topics for parent workshops and develops its own bilingual program presentations. Council members also become involved in supporting events hosted by other offices within Chicago Public Schools and state-sponsored events. They are strong supporters and advocates for the State Seal of Biliteracy. They also have organized college fairs for non-English speaking parents where they can interact directly with institutions of higher education. Council members embrace a comprehensive view of education from early childhood to college and career.

How does the Council choose the topics for their meetings?

Meeting topics are based on council member experiences at local and network levels along with concerns or interests that arise from the parent community. Each July, the Council holds an extensive organizational meeting laying out an action plan for the year.

What can other districts learn from Chicago Public Schools?

An organized and well-informed Bilingual Parent Council can be an important mechanism for nurturing parent involvement and supporting student achievement. The district employs staff to organize and foster parental engagement. The staff ensures that all presentations at quarterly meetings are interpreted and translated into various languages. They also facilitate parental workshops at the school level. It is extraordinarily helpful to have staff solely dedicated to parent and community involvement. This has fostered a long-standing trust and transparency where parents feel they are active participants.

LOCAL CONVERSATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Evaluate your current district practices in light of these principles. Are ELs being given the support necessary to succeed?

- ✔ If ELs are underperforming on state assessments, which of these principles might begin to ensure their success? How might you implement an initiative based on the principles?
- ✔ How does your school provide a welcoming environment?
- ✔ How are the parents of ELs involved at the district level?
- ✔ How are issues and concerns raised by parents addressed by school leaders?
- ✔ Who is responsible for creating the annual plan for parental involvement in the district? Are the parents of ELs included in this plan?