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# NEWSLETTER

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## Serving Recent Immigrant Students Through School-Community Partnerships

Immigration to the United States continues to rise steadily (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2007). Immigrants today—just as in the past—migrate to the United States for various reasons, including opportunities to receive a quality public education, obtain a relatively high-paying job, or flee from social upheaval. Of course, growth in immigrant populations directly corresponds with a growth in immigrant students—also known as and referred to in this newsletter as "newcomers." Unlike historical patterns of immigration that mostly affected large urban areas, newcomers are settling in parts of the country that until recently had remained relatively homogeneous.

Districts and schools across the country are looking for ways to adequately meet the needs of newcomers, many of whom are not proficient in English when they arrive in the United States. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) School and Staffing Survey reports that nearly 4 million, or 8 percent, of the nation's K–12 students were identified as limited English proficient in 2003–04 (Provasnik et al., 2007). According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA), there were more than 5 million English language learners (ELLs) by 2005, a figure that has grown by nearly 61 percent in the past decade, while overall K–12 enrollment has grown less than 3 percent (see Table 1) (NCELA, 2006). Not only must schools and districts determine how to effectively engage their ELL students in the academic and social life of the school, but they also are being held accountable to ensure that these students become proficient in reading and mathematics.

**Table 1. Comparative Growth in ELL Population Compared to Total K–12 Enrollment**

Year	Total K–12 Enrollment	K–12 Enrollment Growth Since 1994–95	Total ELL Enrollment	ELL Growth Since 1994–95
1994–95	47,745,835		3,184,696	
2004–05	48,982,898	2.6%	5,119,561	60.8%

Source: NCELA, 2006

This month's newsletter examines how district and school partnerships with community-based organizations can help schools better meet the needs of recent immigrant students. In particular, the newsletter provides some examples of promising strategies in which community-based organizations

and districts work together to address linguistic and cultural differences, help newcomers gain new language skills and catch up academically with their peers, and provide educational and social support to immigrant families.

Researchers Phelan, Davidson, and Yu (1998) argue that students' academic success reflect their ability to navigate the experiences and expectations of home, school, and peers. Linguistic and cultural differences often make this process more challenging for newcomers. In an article examining a district-community partnership in Florida, Schoorman and Jean-Jacques (2003) emphasize the "two-way response between the community and the immigrant that is necessary for successful integration" (p. 308).

To successfully support this integration, however, it is important to partner with organizations with leadership and staff who are knowledgeable of the culture, traditions, and values of these groups and who are well respected and trusted in the immigrant community. For example, Schoorman and Jean-Jacques describe how American teachers interpreted certain nonverbal behaviors of immigrant students, such as crossing one's arms, as disrespectful. The teachers did not realize that in the home country of the students this was a sign of respect. The community-based organization staff was able to explain these differences to the school staff as well as to the newcomers and their families. Not only are knowledgeable and respected community-based organizations able to facilitate cultural transactions, but they also may be in a position to gather important information about students' academic and familial backgrounds, as well as details about their personal lives that may affect their learning but not be known to school or district staff.

In places throughout the country, districts are using the services of community-based organizations to provide cultural and academic support to recent immigrant students and their families and to support the teachers and schools that serve these students. For example, community-based organizations are working with districts to transition immigrant students into their new environment in the following ways:

- Explaining how expectations, norms, and behaviors in U.S. schools are different from those in their home country.
- Providing afterschool programs, night classes, or summer programs that can lend linguistic, academic, and social support to children in a safe and supervised environment.
- Identifying differences in pedagogy or instruction that students may have learned differently in their home country.
- Translating into a native language critical information that the student or family must know.
- Providing classes or training for parents.
- Providing opportunities for students and families to network with other recent immigrants.
- Serving as a liaison between the community and the school or district.

As a complement to the services that a community-based organization may provide, districts and schools also can implement strategies to better serve newcomers by providing the following:

- Professional development for teachers and administrators about implementing research-based instructional strategies that work with ELLs including, but not limited to, differentiated instruction.
- Broader opportunities for ELLs and general education teachers to collaborate.
- Culturally relevant curricula or lessons in instruction.

### **Case Study 1: New England**

In recent years, one New England school district experienced a surge in its immigrant student population because the community was considered a safe haven for refugee families (personal communication, October 23, 2007). As the district realized that it was unable to adequately meet the

needs of these students, it established a partnership with a local center to help it better serve its newcomers who came to the United States as refugees. Because the center already was assisting refugee families with their transition to American culture and life, the district and the center were able to quickly design a program to serve middle and high school students.

A few years ago, the district set up newcomer classes at two elementary schools rather than enrolling immigrant students in more traditional structured-English-immersion (SEI) classrooms. The district determined that these students were not ready for SEI classes because they had not had any formal education; in fact, most of the students had not learned to read or write in their native language, and many had never even held a pencil. The newcomer classrooms were organized to meet the unique needs of older children who were attempting to develop basic literacy skills, and the teachers were given extensive professional development in providing sheltered instruction (see sidebar). According to the district's director of language support programs, the special newcomer classrooms were extremely successful. After two years of implementation, the students were able to transition to traditional SEI classrooms, and the special newcomer classrooms were no longer needed.

## Sheltered English Instruction

The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (n.d.) defines sheltered English instruction as follows:

Sheltered English instruction is an instructional approach that engages ELLs ... in developing grade-level content-area knowledge, academic skills, and increased English proficiency. In sheltered English classes, teachers use clear, direct, simple English and a wide range of scaffolding strategies to communicate meaningful input in the content area to students. Learning activities that connect new content to students' prior knowledge, that require collaboration among students, and that spiral through curriculum material offer ELLs the grade-level content instruction of their English-speaking peers, while adapting lesson delivery to suit their English proficiency level[s]. ... Research conducted in 1997–98 and again in 1998–99 showed that [ELLs] in classes with teachers who had been trained in sheltered instruction under the SIOP model outperformed similar students in control classes ([Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004](#)).

During afterschool and Saturday enrichment programs, the center provided tutoring services and academic assistance in mathematics and English. While the afterschool program focused on providing struggling newcomers with supplemental academic support, the Saturday program offered an array of enrichment activities, including drama, field trips to colleges, camping trips, and sports. The center also offered parents a range of services including, but not limited to, citizenship and ESL classes, job training, and child care. In addition, the district obtained grant funding for several school-based initiatives to support the newcomers and their parents. The partners worked together to encourage all parents to participate in parent-teacher organizations and attend school functions.

The school district has begun to review student assessment data and grades to assess the effectiveness of the initiative with the center. Although all of the evaluation results are not yet available, observational data show significant improvements in the students' oral language. The center reported to the district that students appear to be better adjusted and happier due to the intervention.

## Case Study 2: New York City

Researchers with The After-School Corporation (TASC) surveyed 100 federally funded afterschool programs in New York City. They found that English was not spoken in one quarter of the students' homes and that Spanish was spoken in the homes of 44 percent of students. The growing presence of ELL students in New York City public schools is one of the most compelling arguments for universal access to school-community partnerships that offer more learning time to those doubly challenged both

to master content and to do so in an unfamiliar language. In its report about ELL students in public schools, the nonprofit organization Advocates for Children recommended that the New York City Department of Education provide extended-day, weekend, and year-round programs for all, especially for those who arrive in this country late in their school careers.

According to TASC, one example of such a school-community partnership has been created in Manhattan. Many multilingual, African-born students go to the High School of Law, Advocacy and Community Justice at the Martin Luther King Jr. Educational Campus to participate in "Opening Doors and Building Bridges," the afterschool program run by the Lincoln Center Business Improvement District. The TASC *After-School Times* newsletter published a case study of two participants in the program:

"I learned English right there," Adel Mahamudi said, pointing to the table where she and an afterschool tutor worked through *Macbeth* word-by-word after she emigrated from the Congo. "I would say I learned 40 percent of my English in classes and 60 percent in this room," said Sory Coulibaly, a friend who came from the Ivory Coast the same year, at age 16, speaking only French and Mandingo. Sory practiced English vocabulary constantly with Unique Fraser, his afterschool college counselor, who also encouraged him to stretch his vocabulary by tutoring other students in mathematics. Now he drops "copacetic" in conversation, and describes himself as "garrulous." Both Adel and Sory, who are about to graduate, have been accepted to several colleges, with scholarship offers. (TASC, 2007, p. 4)

**Adel, the 16-year-old daughter of a political refugee, came to Manhattan from the Congo two winters ago speaking Swahili, Lingala, and French. But she could not speak the language she needed to get through her first assignment: to read *Macbeth*. She and her afterschool tutor worked through *Macbeth* word-by-word, using her fat French-English dictionary.**

Although many school and community-based organization partnerships take the form of afterschool or extended-day programs, there is a wide range of other partnership models that also can effectively serve newcomers, including community school and full-service school approaches. For instance, I.S. 218, James Peter Sinnott Magnet School, in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, is a full-service school operated as a partnership between the Children's Aid Society (CAS) and the New York City Department of Education. In 2003, more than 90 percent of the students at I.S. 218 were Dominican, and 15 percent had recently arrived in the United States. Recognizing that these students needed more than just language and academic support, CAS and I.S. 218 provided structured assistance through new arrival groups, which helped students face the emotional and psychological challenges of adapting to a new culture (Bloom, 2005). The new arrival groups program was designed to help students deal with separation anxiety and issues of loss, which are prevalent acculturation issues that can lead to problems "such as aggressive acting out or withdrawal from social activities, adjustment disorders, persistent anxiety, depression, and various other maladaptive behaviors" (Bloom, 2005, p. 103).

New arrival groups helped "to orient students to their new culture, to mitigate the negative effects of the transition on their education, to empower them through peer modeling and support, to build on their strengths and resiliency, and to identify supportive resources from families and cultures of origin. Work in the groups emphasize[d] acculturation, reintegration, and facilitation of the grieving process" (Bloom, 2005, p. 103). The program also included an extensive and ongoing focus on caregiver orientation "provided in collaboration with the school's parent coordinator. ... Such continuing participation by caregivers is an important component in reaching the groups' goals of decreasing maladaptive symptoms while increasing positive involvement in school" (Bloom, 2005, p. 103).

According to Scott Bloom, the director of school mental health services for the New York City

Department of Education:

These groups were vital and meaningful to the students and families that participated. Due to the loss of their country of origin, many of the students exhibited symptoms of depression, withdrawal, separation anxiety, and some adjustment disorders. Being in the groups worked on two levels: It helped those students acculturate into the school climate and culture, and it increased family engagement and connectedness to the school. Often these parents were themselves dealing with similar issues, but by seeing the progress their children were making, they began to feel more comfortable with the clinical staff and services. After a time, this trust transferred to the school itself. (personal communication)

## Conclusion

Neither school districts nor schools acting alone can comprehensively serve the needs of newcomer students who not only must learn English but also must master demanding academic content—all while adjusting to a new home and customs. As seen in the examples provided, creating a strong relationship between the school system and community-based organizations that provide an array of support services to students and their parents can help newcomers meet these challenges.

## Additional Resources

The following websites have additional information about this topic:

- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs ([www.ncela.gwu.edu](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu))
- The Children's Aid Society ([www.childrensaidsociety.org/communityschools/locations](http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/communityschools/locations))
- The After-School Corporation ([www.tascorp.org/content/document/detail/1763/](http://www.tascorp.org/content/document/detail/1763/))

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