

According to the MN school report card data my school has 0% EL students. Does that mean I need not invest any further thought into how best to meet the needs of EL students in my district? Our readings suggest the contrary. According to the Institute of Education Science (June 2008), recognizing the need for EL support structure *before* that first EL student walks through your doors is the best case scenario. Doing so might allow a district like mine to skip the type of “ad hoc” EL program most schools struggle with as they try to play catch up *after* they are faced with the needs of an EL population for which they never planned.

How then, starting with my blank canvas, would I paint the perfect picture of a school organized to best support English Learners? I start by accepting the fact that “an effective ESL program model is never going to be one-size fits all” (Reider & Zimmerman, 2009). As I continue to examine the readings set forth in this unit. Rivera, Francis, Fernandez, Moughamian, and Jergensen (2010) list the following key components of a solid EL program:

- Research-driven instruction modeled by research-based practices
- High-quality teacher professional development
- The importance of both English and first-language (L1) support to help students master academic language

Those components emphasize the need for infrastructure to be in place BEFORE the needs of a large EL student population overwhelms an already resource strapped school district. Again the Institute of Education Sciences (June 2008) sheds light on some of the key categories that must be kept in mind when building the infrastructure that can support a successful EL program. They are:

- Personnel - leadership structures, staffing, and professional development
- Instruction - instructional services, curriculum, materials
- Administration - registration, funding mechanisms, data/data management
- Assessment – identification, language proficiency/academic achievement
- Outreach – students, parents, community, social services

The obvious barriers are administrators, staff, and community members that push back against funding these necessary changes and preparations for a population that doesn’t yet exist in the school. I would combat that with forward thinking, weaving the EL integration plan into the current strategic planning initiative, and focusing on how moving in the right direction to support a future EL population helps student achievement now across the current demographics.

The structures that are essential for a viable EL program are the same structures that are necessary to bridge the achievement gap between many of our marginalized student groups. Money, time, energy, research, and development spent toward the possible future needs of a possible EL student group will benefit all student currently enrolled in our school. And that’s something everyone should be able to get behind.

Preparing to serve English language learner students: school districts with emerging English language learner communities (June 2008). Institute of Education Sciences.

Reider, K & Zimmerman-Orozco, S. (2009). ESL as a Supplement to Learning. Principal, November/December.

Rivera, M.O., Francis, D.J., Fernandez, M., Moughamian, A.C., Jergensen, J., (2010). Effective practices for English language learners, Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.