Building Bridges to Student Success

How Texas Is Leading the Way for English Language Learners

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Introduction: The changing landscape of ELL education

The number of students who are non-native English speakers in the United States continues to grow, and the population of students who are English language learners (ELLs) is linguistically diverse. With this change in demographics comes a change in the quality and the quantity of need. Educators face both challenges and opportunities in supporting the learning needs of ELL students and helping them achieve success in school and, ultimately, in adult life.

According to the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics, which covers 2014–2015, 4.6 million public school students were English language learners. The District of Columbia and seven other states, most of which are in the West, have ELL populations greater than 10 percent: Alaska, California, Colorado, Illinois, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas. During 2014 and 2015, 35 of 50 states also saw an increase in the number of ELL students enrolled in public schools.

Of the 4.6 million ELL students, Spanish is the most common language reported in the United States, representing 77.1 percent of all ELL students and 7.6 percent of all K–12 students in public schools. Arabic, Chinese, and Vietnamese were the next most common home languages. In Texas, more than 800,000 students, representing 90.4 percent of ELL students, speak Spanish, followed by Vietnamese, Arabic, Urdu, and Mandarin Chinese.

Additionally, the data analysis shows a correlative overlap among ELLs and students with disabilities. In 2014–2015, ELL students with disabilities (some 665,000 students) represented 13.8 percent of the total ELL population enrolled in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools.

The constantly changing landscape of the ELL population presents educators with significant challenges that they must address to ensure that all students have equity of opportunity, regardless of their home language. Throughout the United States, school districts have implemented language-assistance programs to ensure that ELL students not only develop English proficiency but also meet the same academic content and achievement standards that native English-speaking students are expected to meet.

Texas—where ELL students made up 15.5 percent of the school population during the 2014–2015 school year and are one of the fastest-growing student groups—is in many ways leading the way with highly successful, innovative, and evidence-based programs that help ELL students become well equipped for a lifetime of academic, social, emotional, and professional success.

Obstacles to achievement for ELL students

The number and diversity of ELL students, as shown above, are significant, and for educators, these factors present an additional layer of complexity when preparing these students for academic achievement and success.

ELL students have to meet the same academic goals as their native English-speaking peers and face the additional challenge of having to learn, understand, recall, and manipulate increasingly complex concepts that are presented in a language that is not native to them. A new language adds an obstacle to mastery and progress that often puts ELL students at a severe disadvantage.
At the school and district level, educators have responded with increasingly sophisticated supports and interventions that help ELL students gain English proficiency and academic skills more easily and make them really ready for success in school, college, and life. However, many challenges—both perennial and new—remain.

- ELL students have a lower graduation rate than their peers, at 63 percent compared to the national average of 82 percent. Texas sits above the national average, with 71.5 percent of the state’s ELL students graduating.\(^2\)
- Only 1.4 percent of ELL high school graduates take college entrance exams such as the SAT or ACT.\(^2\)
- In 2016, 32 of 50 states reported that they did not have enough teachers for students as limited English proficient,\(^2\) and despite close to 90 percent of ELL students being enrolled in support programs, a recent study by UnidosUS (formerly the National Council of La Raza) declared many of these programs “suspect” in terms of effectiveness.\(^3\)
- Only 2 percent of ELL students are enrolled in gifted programs, compared to 7.3 percent of other students. Researchers at the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) contend that a gifted ELL student is likely to know much of the curriculum content on the very first day of school but is not likely to be identified as gifted by teachers due to English language limitations.\(^2\)

Former assistant education secretary Chester E. Finn Jr. warns that without proper support and intervention, the United States could waste significant capacity—both now and in the future—through “losing talented kids from immigrant families who don’t know their way around the American system.”\(^2\)

### Structures to ensure ELL students are Really Ready

What do English language learners need to succeed? Although there are different schools of thought (immersive versus dual-language instruction, for example), there are also some clear universals.

Many educational researchers have found that ELL students invariably need the following to succeed:

- Rigorous curriculum
- Scaffolded instruction
- Individualized support
- The ability to work at their own pace
- Access to personalized learning materials

While educators often know and understand the elements and prerequisites of a successful ELL program, certain factors—inadequate funding, poor-quality instructional materials, insufficient staff, and other barriers—can and do hamper even the most thoughtful ELL efforts.

For some schools and districts, the lack of high-quality educational material for ELL students is “particularly acute in middle and high school, when students have a wider range of abilities and less time to catch up,” leaving them stagnant—or, worse, far behind their peers—during a particularly formative time in their intellectual and social development.\(^2\)
How educators define and assess “proficiency” is significant, and some argue that proficiency is too poorly defined. iNACOL, the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, asserts that often the definition is far too narrow, stating that most current models for ELL students

“focus solely on the goal for students to achieve rapid transition from their primary language to English. The problem with this goal is that it narrowly defines achievement for these students from a deficit-based perspective. Students who enter educational programs with a primary language other than English are usually defined as lacking English language skills, resulting in students regarded as being deficient in the critical skills that are necessary for academic success in the traditional education system.”

Also, the way that ELL programs are funded varies significantly across states, adding yet another challenge for states that may get very limited funding but have enormous need.

Although the challenges of supporting ELL students are multifaceted and may seem daunting, high-quality ELL instruction is imperative to the future. This is not an understatement. It’s empiric reality. ELL students are the fastest-growing segment of the student population in the United States, having almost doubled in the past 15 years to close to 5 million students, and nearly three in four classrooms have at least one ELL student.

Texas: How the Lone Star State leads in ELL education

Texas, as mentioned, has the third-largest population of ELL students. Impressively, the state also has a higher-than-average ELL graduation rate (71.5 percent).

The state has made ELL a priority and leverages

• evidence-based instruction
• blended learning
• innovative dual-credit programs that grant college credit and expose students to and build their interest in college
• other strategies to support every ELL student during every step of academic life.

Here’s a brief look at some of the state’s most effective programs.

Brownsville Independent School District:
Building a bridge from disadvantage to opportunity

Located in south Texas on the border with Mexico, Brownsville Independent School District serves a mostly Hispanic (98 percent) and largely economically disadvantaged (95 percent) population. ELL students comprise 33 percent of the student body.

Many of Brownsville ISD’s students face enormous obstacles to lifelong achievement, as well as immediate challenges that may sometimes prevent them from attending school daily. For example, some students are from migrant families, who often work in the agricultural or fisheries industries. It is not uncommon for these students to work, and they may move across district and state lines several times within a one- to three-year period with their families.
To help close the achievement gap and better prepare students for lifelong success, Brownsville ISD has been designated an Early College District. It sets high standards for its students by preparing them rigorously for college through integrating actual college work into their high school education.

Brownsville ISD follows the Early College High School model, an initiative of the Texas Education Agency (TEA). This model gives students who are least likely to attend college an opportunity to earn a high school diploma and up to 60 college credit hours at the same time. The students receive dual credit, at no cost to them, and benefit from early and frequent academic, social, and emotional supports that help to prepare them for college.

Brownsville ISD begins grooming its students for success early, preparing eighth graders for the TSI (Texas Success Initiative) Assessment that determines if a student is ready for college-level work. By beginning the process early, the district hopes to increase greatly the number of students who are not only ready for college-level work but who will also go on to attend college, already armed with the foundational knowledge and discipline they will need to graduate and lead productive careers and lives. In addition, Brownsville ISD uses digital curriculum in the eleventh and twelfth grades to build content mastery through personalized learning and to further improve students’ readiness to sit for and pass college entrance exams.

Through its emphasis on early and rigorous education and intervention, Brownsville ISD is helping a student population faced with adversity—economic, academic, social, and cultural—find and traverse a clear bridge to prosperity.

Dallas Independent School District:

Building a bridge to success for a diverse ELL population

Several schools in Dallas Independent School District are showing significant progress and results with their ELL initiatives. The district has a Hispanic population of close to 72 percent, and close to 90 percent of all students in the district are economically disadvantaged.

Dallas ISD’s ESL program sets a high bar for its students, but it also sets them up for success by ensuring that all of its teachers are appropriately certified in ESL. The district employs “sheltered” instructional strategies that combine second language acquisition with content area instruction where appropriate.

In particular, Conrad High School stands out as an exemplar of ELL instruction. While Spanish is by far the most common language spoken at home for students in Texas, Conrad is unique in that it has a number of refugee students, adding more linguistic diversity—and complexity—into the mix. More than three dozen languages are represented at the school.

At Conrad, located in the immigrant-rich Vickery Meadows area of Dallas, educators use a variety of virtual and blended modalities integrated into a solid ELP (English Language Proficiency) model. Interactive notebooks, self-paced tutorials, and other enhancements help ELL students master both subject content and English language skills more quickly and effectively.

Perhaps one of the greatest testaments to Conrad’s successful program is the school’s recent valedictorian and salutatorian: both of whom are refugees. Valedictorian Eleni T-Giorgs, who came to the United States from Ethiopia as a child, plans to study medicine and become an obstetrician. Salutatorian Bae Shae, who came to the United States as a child after fleeing a Burmese refugee camp in Thailand, dreams of becoming an architect. Both young women are enrolled in college and are well on their way to achieving
their goals and making significant contributions to their communities due to their own determination and the support they received from the teachers and administrators at Conrad High School.

More information about how Dallas ISD supports refugee students and their families can be found on the Dallas ISD website.

**Houston Independent School District:**

*Building a bridge to educator success in supporting at-risk students*

Houston Independent School District is the seventh-largest school district in the United States, and within the district are 58 dual-language schools. Like Dallas and Brownsville, Houston has a significant ELL population—and like Dallas, Houston ISD’s ELL students represent several languages other than the most common, Spanish.

At Bellaire High School, ELL Department Chair Andrea Nguyen and her team make masterful use of digital learning technologies to help students develop both English and academic proficiency. Bellaire’s ELL Department uses a variety of digital resources to help ELL students who have Level I and II proficiency get up to speed before taking credit-bearing classes. Sheltered core classes are for students who are in credit-bearing classes but haven’t scored high enough on the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS), which assesses progress in learning English, or Woodcock-Munoz Language Survey, which measures proficiency, to be exited from the ELL/LEP program.

Bellaire uses blended learning in core classes twice a day and offers additional tutorial times before, during, and after school. Importantly, the school makes a conscious, deliberate effort to ensure that teachers in core classes have the supplemental resources they need to support their ELL students.

The district also uses the Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) approach to provide teachers with the training and tools they need to effectively support their students and has seen great success with it. Six principles guide QTEL’s work with teachers and students:

- Sustain academic rigor
- Hold high expectations
- Infuse metaprocesses in the education of English language learners
- Engage in quality teacher and student interactions
- Sustain a language focus
- Develop a quality curriculum

Through augmenting instruction with the high-quality digital curriculum, Bellaire has seen significantly higher passing rates and continual improvement in ELL metrics. The school also holds a College Readiness Day each year to get students excited about and prepared for college. It is mandatory that all students at Bellaire apply to college or community college, demonstrating the school’s and the district’s commitment to high achievement for all ELL students.
How Texas is making it all work

The examples above show how Texas is leading the way for ELL students and how best practices can be applied to any school district in any state.

- **Expertise matters.** All of the schools showcased take great care to ensure that their teachers are more than just subject matter experts. They also make sure that all teachers understand the nuances of teaching non-native English speakers. Continuing education is vital.

- **“Non-native” does not equal “Spanish-speaking.”** Although the majority of ELL students do speak Spanish, many do not. Again, this fact demonstrates why it is so important for educators to understand the mechanics of teaching to non-native speakers. Being bilingual in Spanish and English does not de facto equip an educator for success.

- **Digital curriculum, properly implemented, works.** Rigorous, standards-based digital curriculum that enables students to work at their own pace and receive individualized support greatly enhances the educational experience for all students but is especially helpful in teaching ELL students.

- **High-quality materials are crucial.** Especially during sixth through eighth grades, it is vital for ELL students to keep up with their peers. But without high-quality resources at any grade level, teachers simply cannot teach effectively. This lack of resources is especially an issue for those who teach ELL students. Investment in high-quality resources results in high-quality outcomes.

Although the challenge may seem daunting and ever-changing, Texas educators have a better understanding of the diverse learning needs of ELL students, the tools available to help support them, and the instructional approaches that most effectively build English language proficiency and content mastery.

The examples in this paper show how forethought and foresight can help build bridges to success for even the most disadvantaged students.

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About the author

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Jean has 25 years of leadership and management experience in the education and software publishing industries. Her expertise includes software design, project management, technology implementation, curriculum strategy and development, and instructional design. As Vice President, Content Development at Apex Learning, Jean oversees the teams responsible for creating original curriculum solutions.

Prior to joining Apex Learning, Jean served as Vice President of Curriculum and Instruction for AdvancePath Academics, where she was responsible for overseeing curriculum design, implementation, and efficacy. Previously, Jean was Vice President of Curriculum Development at PLATO Learning Inc. Among her credits are numerous award-winning educational software products published for both school and consumer markets.
About Apex Learning

Founded in 1997, Apex Learning is the leading provider of blended and virtual learning solutions to the nation’s schools. Our digital curriculum provides an active learning experience that engages all students in rigorous coursework to prepare them for college and career. The standards-based digital curriculum in math, science, English, social studies, world languages, electives, and Advanced Placement is widely used for original credit, credit recovery, remediation, intervention, acceleration, and exam preparation. Quality digital curriculum, excellent services, support, and program success management combined with robust reporting is our commitment to you. More learning happens with Apex Learning digital curriculum.

References


