



National Research & Development Center to Improve
EDUCATION FOR SECONDARY ENGLISH LEARNERS

WestEd 

WHO IS IN CHARGE OF ENGLISH LEARNER SERVICES?

Lessons Learned from a National Co-Teaching and Collaboration Study

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As most researchers know, there are times when one sets out to answer a particular research question and ends up learning more than anticipated. Such was the case in a study that our research team undertook in which we set out to investigate the prevalence of a relatively new model of English language development. The purpose of our survey research was to gain a national perspective on the prevalence of co-teaching and collaboration models that are implemented for the purpose of teaching content and related language to secondary English Learners. In this research brief, we explain unexpected yet practical insights that we gained by seeking district leaders' participation in our online survey. We also provide general advice to school districts so that they can clearly communicate with families of English Learners and various other stakeholders regarding the essential programs and services they provide.

It is imperative that parents of English Learners, as well as other student advocates, know who to contact if they feel that their children are not receiving adequate supports or if they simply want information on the progress their children are making. Having access to people who are qualified to answer these kinds of questions can help ensure English Learners have access to the high-quality education they deserve.

MARTHA PALACIOS
WESTED

AMANDA KIBLER
OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

JAMEY FARREN BURHO
WESTED

MARTHA GARRETT SANDSTEAD
OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

SARA WIGER
OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

KARRIE WOODRUFF
OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

Challenges of Locating District Leaders in Charge of English Learner Services

To learn about current co-teaching and collaboration practices in secondary school settings, our study team decided to conduct an online survey administered to district leaders in charge of English Learner programs and services throughout the country. Using the Common Core of Data, the Department of Education's primary database on public elementary and secondary education in the United States, we identified school districts that represented a cross-section of typical public school settings in which English Learners are likely to receive their education. After identifying 1,934 districts to include in our national sample, we began the task of determining which leaders in those districts would be knowledgeable about co-teaching and collaboration practices that are employed for the benefit of English Learners in secondary settings. Once identified, these individuals would receive an email introducing our study and inviting them to participate in a linked survey. To gather contact names and email addresses for district leaders who oversee English Learner programs and services, our research team followed an agreed-upon protocol:

1. Search the district website for contact information for the individual in charge of English Learner programs and services.
2. If that contact information is not found, contact a district receptionist by phone to ask for the name and contact information of the person.
3. If still not found, send an email to the district superintendent or other key personnel (e.g., Director of Curriculum and Instruction) to ask for contact information.

Many districts had websites that clearly identified the office responsible for English Learner programs and services and provided contact information for directors, coordinators, or teacher leaders in charge. In general, we had the easiest time finding contact information in districts with more than 12,000 students (which we labeled as "medium/large" districts) with sizeable English Learner populations (over 10 percent). Yet, across the country, we encountered multiple challenges in obtaining clear information on English Learner programs and services.

Challenge #1: Who Is in Charge of the District's English Learner Services?

Identifying the correct leader in charge of English Learner services within a district was a challenge for a variety of reasons:

- **District websites rarely specified which department or administrator oversaw services for English Learners.** In order to locate the relevant person in charge of English Learner services, we often had to look through the webpages of several different district departments. We ultimately found contact information for relevant individuals in departments such as Curriculum and Instruction, English as a Second Language, Federal Programs, and Multilingual Services, to name a few.

Moreover, although Title III (English Learner services) is one of several federal programs, district webpages labeled as Federal Programs often only included information about Title I (programs for districts and schools with high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families), Title IX (protection from discrimination based on sex in education programs that receive federal funding), or Title X (programs serving students struggling with stable housing).

- **English Learner programs and services were led by administrators with varied titles.**

While some of the administrators' titles had clear links to English Learners (e.g., ELL Coordinator, Director of ESL and Bilingual Programs, Director of Language and Cultural Services), others had no apparent links (e.g., Federal Programs Director, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Equity Director, Director of Assessment and Accountability, Director of Intervention Services).

- **In small districts, individual administrators often assumed many different roles, including the role of coordinating English Learner programs and services.** However, their English Learner-related roles were not always identified on the district websites.

- **Some of the largest districts had significant bureaucracies to navigate, which made it difficult to find the person we needed to contact.** Leaders' names were often not included on websites and district phone systems rarely included the option to speak to someone in person.

- **In a number of districts, different administrators oversaw English Learner programs and services at the elementary level and**

at the middle and high school levels. It was often easier to find the elementary contact.

- **Across the districts, there was no consistent way of referring to English Learner programs.** Offices in charge of English Learner programs and services were known by different names, such as Student/Pupil Services, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a New Language (ENL), Bilingual or Multilingual Programs, World Languages, and Title III.

Challenge #2: How Can the District Leader Be Contacted?

For our survey purposes, we only needed the name and contact email of the person in charge of English Learner programs and services at the secondary level. As straightforward as this seemed, information on websites was often incomplete. In many instances, we were able to locate the individual's name, title, and phone number, but not their email address. On other sites, we found organizational charts with names and positions only, but no contact information. Organizational charts were also often out of date. In some instances in which email addresses were not listed, we were able to send an email through a web form. However, fewer than half of these emails were answered. And, in the instances in which these emails were answered, not all of them responded by identifying the correct name and email address of the person in charge of English Learner programs and services.

Once we exhausted our efforts to locate the correct person on the district website, we called the main district number listed on the website

and used a script to request the needed information. Before reaching a receptionist, we often had to navigate phone trees, guessing which department would be most likely to house the person we were looking for. Once connected, we asked for “the person in charge of English Learner programs and services.” In some cases, the receptionist or administrative assistant who answered was unsure of the correct individual in charge and could not direct our call, but was willing to try to locate someone who could help us. Sometimes, receptionists guessed the appropriate department to which to route our call. Other times, they were able to refer us to an English Learner director or coordinator at

the elementary level, but not at the secondary level. If we reached voicemail after navigating the phone tree, we left messages, but only rarely received return calls. In such cases, we settled on sending our email survey invitation to the superintendent. In all of our email survey invitations, we suggested that if our addressee did not have information about English Learner programs and services in their district, our email should be forwarded to someone in the district who would be knowledgeable about the topic. Few superintendents responded, which suggests that they may not have had time to read our email.

Significance

As our difficulty in gathering contact information on individuals responsible for English Learner programs and services demonstrates, there needs to be a comprehensive overhaul of the titles that districts use to identify the leaders and departments in charge of English Learner services. Districts also need to make it clear how to access those leaders. Our process was laborious, time consuming, and, most importantly, it drew our attention to the inconsistencies across the nation as to how the public can access information about English Learner services in our public schools. In some ways, this variation is to be expected: terminology is shifting rapidly in the field of English Learner education, with scholars themselves often using and advocating for different terms. Further, the federal policies and legislation guiding the education of English Learners are broad and general, allowing for local interpretation and program development. These factors complicate issues of equity in terms of students,

parents, and other stakeholders being able to locate important information about English Learner programs and services that could be of benefit to students.

Suggestions for Improving Access to Information about English Learner Services

This section presents suggestions—informed by our experiences of trying to contact the district leaders in charge of English Learner services—for creating more consistent and equitable access to information about districts’ English Learner programs and services.

Websites and Other Communications Outlets

A variety of district staff—including communications directors, web developers, and those in charge of English Learner programs—can

address the following in order to clarify information on their websites and in other district communications outlets:

- Clearly articulate the leader or director of English Learner programs and services, and always include a name, title, direct phone number, and email contact information.
- Use consistent terms to describe the students (e.g., English Learners, Multilingual Learners, students who are learning English as a new language) and programs (e.g., English Learner Programs and Services, Multilingual Learner Programs and Services, Programs and Services for Students who are Learning English as a New Language).
- Provide a clear description of the English Learner programs and services and the federal and state policies the programs address.
- Provide website tools and options that allow accessible and high-quality translation of the site's content into multiple languages spoken by students and their families. The availability of this translated information should augment rather than replace robust interpretation services provided for events, written communications, and telephone conversations.

Training of District and School Employees

Employees who respond to phone calls, emails, and in-person visits are important gatekeepers to valuable information about English Learner programs and services. Individuals who are in charge of English Learner programs should work with these gatekeeper staff so that they understand the structure and nuances of current English Learner programs and services, and who the leaders and/or points of contact are for these programs and services. This depth of understanding is especially important given the variety of labels used across districts and schools.

Making these sorts of changes to improve access to information about English Learner services is critically important not just for educators, but for parents and caregivers of English Learners, many of whom are migrants and immigrants and are learning not only a new language, but also new cultural practices and bureaucratic systems. We hope that parents and caregivers who want more information about the English Learner programs and services their children receive can more easily locate information from district websites. Such issues are all too easily overlooked in the context of complex programs and organizational structures, but they play a vital role in providing equitable access to information for English Learners and their families.



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