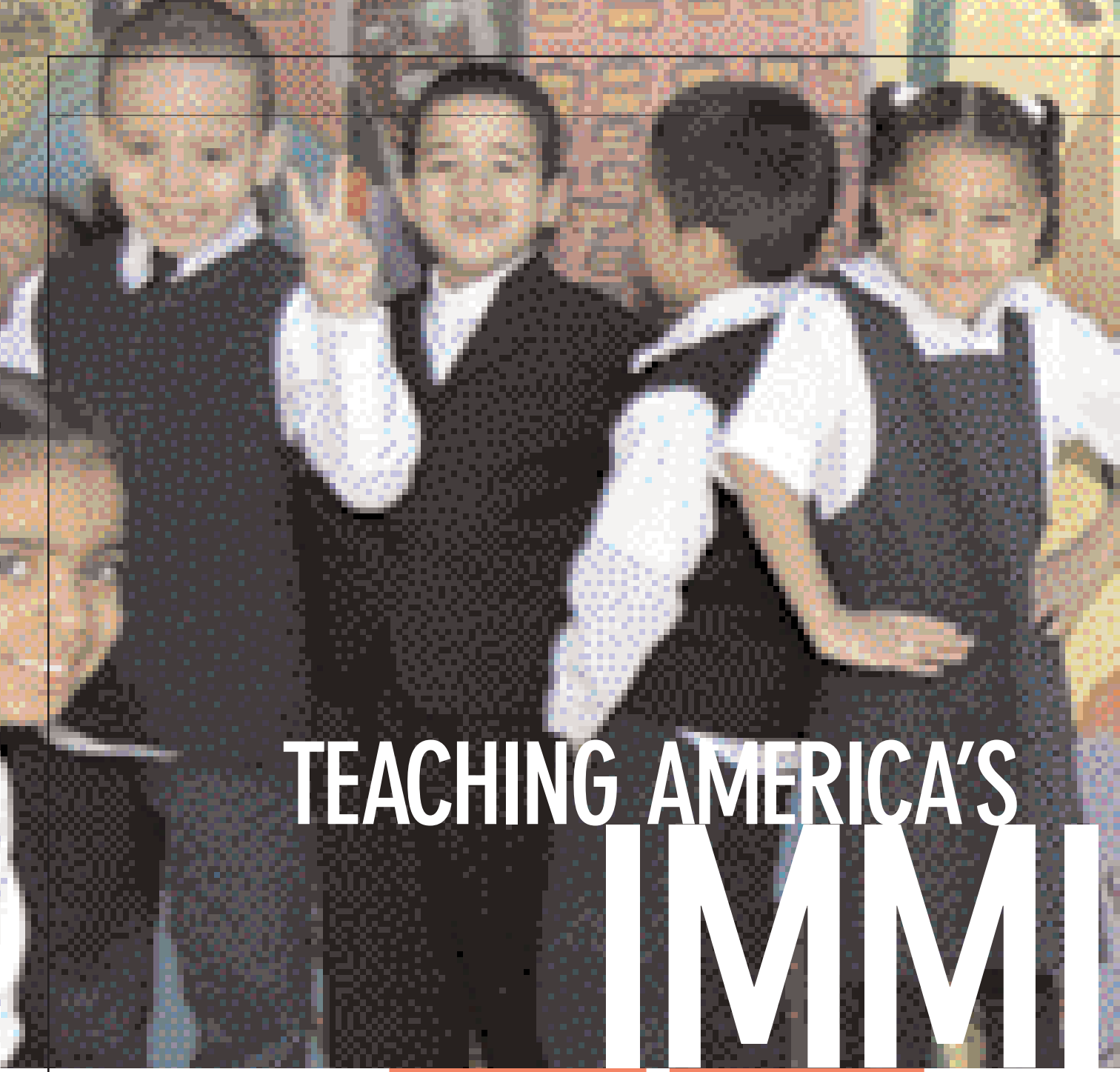

TEACHING AMERICA'S IMMI

What's the biggest challenge facing schools today? Many say it's helping the one in five students who are immigrants realize their potential.

By Pamela Wheaton Shorr

How do you spell relief for struggling English language learners?

"A-k-e-e-l-a-h." That's what Kimberly Tan recently discovered. The first-year ESL teacher from P.S. 161 in New York City took her fifth-grade students to a screening of Doug Atchison's 2006 film *Akeelah and the Bee*, about an 11-year-old African-American from South Los Angeles who dreams of winning the National Spelling Bee. The unusual field trip to the cineplex was particularly

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meaningful for Tan's students. "There were so many parallels! Akeelah had to learn to speak a whole new language because she spoke street slang, explained Tan. "Like our students, she struggled with the 'nerdiness issue'—with achievement being undervalued and even, sometimes, resented." Most of all, Tan's students saw someone who really had to work hard on her language skills—just as they do, and who was given strategies for improvement. "It gave them such hope," she says. "They were applauding at the end."

Whether through movies, stories of immigration, or a myriad of other out-of-the-box ideas, teachers like Tan are finding ways to help immigrant students create new futures in a new country.

"What's different for us now, as opposed to when I started teaching 25 years ago," Nevada teacher Janet Leopold told us, "is we *all* teach ESL." The numbers bear out Leopold's observation. In 2000, one out of five children in the U.S. was born abroad—more than ten million students. Another seven million children are U.S. born to foreign-born parents. Overall, the total foreign-born population has more than tripled since 1970, changing the composition of our classrooms, especially in what researchers call the "new-growth states," such as Nevada which, in Las Vegas, saw a jump of 214% in new immigrant students between 1993 and 2003.

Similarly, Nebraska saw a 125% increase, and South Dakota's immigrant student population doubled.

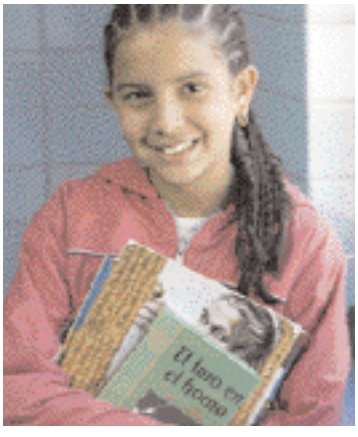
These are numbers none of us can afford to ignore. We looked at schools around the country to find truly creative strategies for teaching immigrant students that work for ESL specialists and regular classroom teachers alike.

STRATEGY: **GIVE KIDS FAST-PACED, HIGH-INTEREST TOPICS**
TEACHER: **TRINA GUNZEL**
SCHOOL: **PAYSON UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, ARIZONA**

On the very first day of school, ESL teacher Trina Gunzel sends her students on a hunt for an unusual treasure: watermelon. As the kids search the school, they internalize the layout and meet everybody from the janitors to the front office staff.

For Gunzel, the beginning of the year is all about team building, giving kids ownership, and getting them to understand their place in the classroom. Even their names are included on the class "word wall." Kids are asked what they want to be, their favorite color and foods—questions that tie them to the experience of learning new words. It's important to lower a child's "affective filter," says Gunzel, to build a safe, non-threatening environment in which a non-proficient English speaker feels safe enough to make mistakes. Still, some children will not speak for a long time. "There is a silent period some children will go through as they learn a second language," Gunzel notes, "however, I still encourage them to speak and provide hands-on activities that will include them."

Once the comfort level is established, Gunzel uses a whole language/phonics combination tied into high-interest-themes to teach her students English as quickly as possible. Speed is important, because the mandate in Arizona is that students must be mainstreamed after a year in a Structured English Immersion Program. Everything is included in these themes, Gunzel says: math, spelling,



Top: P.S. 161 in Harlem is a 2006 Intel and Scholastic Schools of Distinction Finalist (left to right: Assistant Principal for bilingual education Olga Gonzales, teachers Myra Latis and Ignacia Almonte, and their dual language kindergartners). **Above left:** Kindergartners at P.S. 161 split their time between English- and Spanish-speaking classrooms. **Above right:** Sixth-grader Marjorie Lozada was the winner of the national Spanish-language spelling bee. **Below:** Bilingual teacher Nazda Medina keeps her fifth graders on task.

reading, writing and speaking. She always uses non-fiction ideas because the kids are then learning real words and concepts from the curriculum. Take the watermelon treasure hunt: the children learn real names for different areas of the building, deconstruct the word watermelon to make new words, and the older kids in her program do a unit on fractions once the melon is cut up. What's more, part of the watermelon activity is sharing a special treat. "I find that eating together also helps to lower anxiety, Gunzel explains, "and it brings a class together as a community."

STRATEGY: **REACH STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE**
TEACHER: **OLGA GONZALEZ AND THE TEACHERS OF THE BILINGUAL ACADEMY**
SCHOOL: **P.S.161 IN HARLEM, NEW YORK CITY**

P.S. 161 is a Pre-K–6th grade school, in the heart of Harlem, with nearly 900 students, half of whom are ELL students. So every teacher needs some strategies for working with English language learners. Olga Gonzalez, Assistant Principal and head of the Bilingual Academy, says the school starts by making every effort to meet kids and parents where they are, with three separate learning 'tracks' for ELL kids: a dual language program, a bilingual program, and an ESL program. What's the difference? The ESL program is English only— the children are fully immersed in English. The bilingual classes offer core instruction in both English and Spanish. "Content learning starts early because there is no language barrier," Gonzalez explains, and parents concerned about children keeping up in math and science as they learn a complex new language seem to like this option. The third program, dual language, is the newest offering, and it provides monolingual English- and Spanish-speaking kids the opportunity to learn a second language together. Children in the dual language program move back and forth between two classrooms—one English-only and the other Spanish-only. Core curriculum is covered in both rooms—but in different languages and with two different teachers. The rooms look and feel different, too, with the walls of the Spanish-only classroom covered with flags and posters from a wide variety of Spanish-speaking countries that represent the native lands of many P.S. 161 students and their families.

No matter which track children are on, P.S. 161 teachers believe that differentiating instruction and offering multiple ways to grasp core concepts is critical. "We all focus on modeling and giving one example after another until the children understand," says teacher Amy Tan. She also recommends filling the classroom with visual learning opportunities—a big

world map, multicultural art and photographs, and number and word charts. Visual clues really help children pick up on words, says Tan.

STRATEGY: TEACH ENGLISH ON THE STAGE
TEACHERS: PRESCILLE BROISVERT, DAN KELIN
SCHOOLS: HAWAII PUBLIC SCHOOLS

When you're in a foreign country and don't know the language, what's the first thing *you* do? Act out what you want to say! That's the idea behind a wonderful drama program being used with immigrant students in West Hawaii.

While most Americans think *vacation* not *immigration* when they think of Hawaii, the nunber of immigrant families there is growing quickly. Incoming students are primarily Filipino, Marshallese (from the Marshall Islands), and Spanish-speaking students whose parents emigrated from Mexico and South America to work in agriculture. ESL Resource teacher Prescille Broisvert's program appeals to all of them.

> **"In Hawaii, new immigrant students act out skits and plays in English. Comprehension isn't a problem, because the kids are having so much fun."**

Working with the Honolulu Theatre for Youth (HTY), Broisvert and Director of Drama Education Dan Kelin are giving new immigrant students the chance to create their own theatrical pieces—while learning English!

"Dan insists on collaboration and group work," Broisvert explains, "which allows children with different levels of proficiency to gain confidence." The children suggest ideas that they would like to see developed—sometimes acting out what they can't say in English—and the group works together to develop characters and story arcs. The more fluent children take bigger speaking parts, but everyone gets a role. "Comprehension doesn't seem to be a problem," Broisvert believes, "because they think it's so much fun!" The collaborative process pairs kids with limited English with those who are more fluent, which also helps them develop their language skills.

Now in its fourth year, the theater program reaches students all over Hawaii—Kelin works with ESL students in three schools per day. Kelin makes sure the dramas use language from a variety of school subjects, linking content

vocabulary from social studies to a political drama, for instance. So, you say you don't have a local theater group to help your own budding thespians? You can get some creative ideas for including drama in your language program at: www.prel.org/eslstrategies

STRATEGY: MENTORS FOR ELL STUDENTS
SCHOOL: ROLLING TERRACE ELEMENTARY GREEN BAY, WISCONSIN

"Rolling Terrace is a mini-U.N.," says Elaine B. Lessenco. An International Magnet School, this Pre-K–5th grade Title I school serves about 700 students, with about one-quarter in the ESOL program. The school offers many programs to help students learn English, but one of the most effective is a simple mentoring program that pairs area senior citizens with young immigrant protégées. "It's fun!" Lessenco says enthusiastically.

Here's how it works: Children meet for one hour a week with their English-speaking mentors, playing Scrabble and other games or doing worksheets, learning about American culture, enjoying music, dance and other events. Mentors don't necessarily have to know another language to work with the kids. "They go through an initial training and have periodic in-service meetings," Lessenco explains, noting that they also confer with the ESOL teacher. "What the tutoring program does is offer students that hard-to-find one-to-one support."

The program helps build confidence and competence in the kids, and the relationships with mentors can last for many years. It's currently being used in two elementary schools and a middle school in the district. "One year, I worked with a young girl from the Dominican Republic, and we communicated solely with a Spanish/English dictionary," Lessenco shares. "But by the second year, she was fluent!"

Interested in starting your own tutoring program? Tap a local senior citizens center. All of Lessenco's volunteers are over 55 and love spending time with young students.

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5 WAYS TO REACH OUT TO ALL YOUR STUDENTS

Armed with simple strategies, you can make a crucial differerence in how immigrant students and their families relate to your school. Here are five strategies recommended by the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory. For more ideas, visit www.nwrel.org

1 PAY HOUSE CALLS

Even if you visit only once and briefly, seeing your students' homes benefits you and your students in two ways: You get invaluable insight into a child's family life and support system, and you make a dramatic demonstration of caring and interest. What better way to foster cooperation between you and parents?

2 VISIT ECUADOR!

Or Mexico or Ghana or Poland. Virtual travel, through in-class reading and discussion, will not only make your immigrant students feel they have something to share with classmates, but it will also familiarize you with the customs and culture the kids bring with them. Consider inviting children to bring books, games, and music from their native land to share with your class.

3 LOOK BOTH WAYS

It's important that your immigrant students master English, but it's also important that the entire class become more fluent in today's multicultural, multilingual world. Consider introducing a few words of Spanish (or Chinese, etc.) into a related social studies unit, or even during your lesson on fractions!

4 BE A RECRUITER

Get the word out—through your church, students' parents, community groups, and neighbors—that both paid and volunteer positions are available in your school. You may be able to recruit people from within the immigrant community to become certified staff and teachers' aides, thus providing your students with great role models and providing you with invaluable assistance.

5 INVITE OUTSIDERS IN

Do you know a Peruvian physician or a Dominican firefighter? Tap into expertise within the immigrant community when planning Career Day panels, for help in incorporating immigrant culture into your lesson plans, or as tutors and role models.

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STRATEGY: LET KIDS TELL THEIR OWN STORIES
TEACHER: BRIAN MARCHANT
SCHOOL: MARTIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, GREEN BAY, WI

Children want to read stories about people like them, and that's not always easy when you're dealing with immigrants from faraway lands. But necessity is the mother of invention. Just ask Brian Marchant, who has been an ESL teacher for the past 16 years, and who works with a relatively large population of Hmong refugees at Martin, a school of around 400. Marchant and his wife Heather took a trip to China and Thailand to visit a refugee camp in the 1990s, then wrote a storybook about a young Hmong boy who ended up fleeing his grandfather's home and going to school in America.

A Boy Named Chong is written in both English and Hmong and relates a moving tale that is all too familiar to many of his students. It is the first of six books that Marchant has created and self-published to celebrate his remarkable students while simultaneously teaching them to read, write, and speak the English language. All the books include translations into Hmong, Spanish, or both, and are based on stories or experiences that are familiar to the children. They are illustrated by local Hmong artists, including one first grader from the Martin school! Because the books are written mainly in rhyme, they are easy to memorize and dramatize in a 'reader's theater.'

Chants and songs, stories, and games help kids use the words they're learning in a fun way, says Marchant. His books are just the tip of the iceberg. "I like to use all kinds of paths to the brain," he notes. In addition to the rhyming books, Marchant also created a Candyland-type board game that includes high frequency sight words.

He also came up with a unique approach to teaching the English alphabet. He asked a friend fluent in Hmong to record a CD for him that teaches kids the phonetic sounds for each letter. Marchant uses the tape in conjunction with a picture chart to get kids familiar with the sounds of English letters before he introduces letter names. The sound-first approach is so powerful, says Martin Principal Karen DeJardin, that the school has begun using Marchant's method for all beginning readers. By making the effort to create his own learning tools, Marchant has seen his students blossom. "I'm so pleased," he says. "Some are now reading better than the English language kids!" □

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