

BUILDING BRIDGES

This article
is the fifth in a series
focused on supporting
English-language learners.

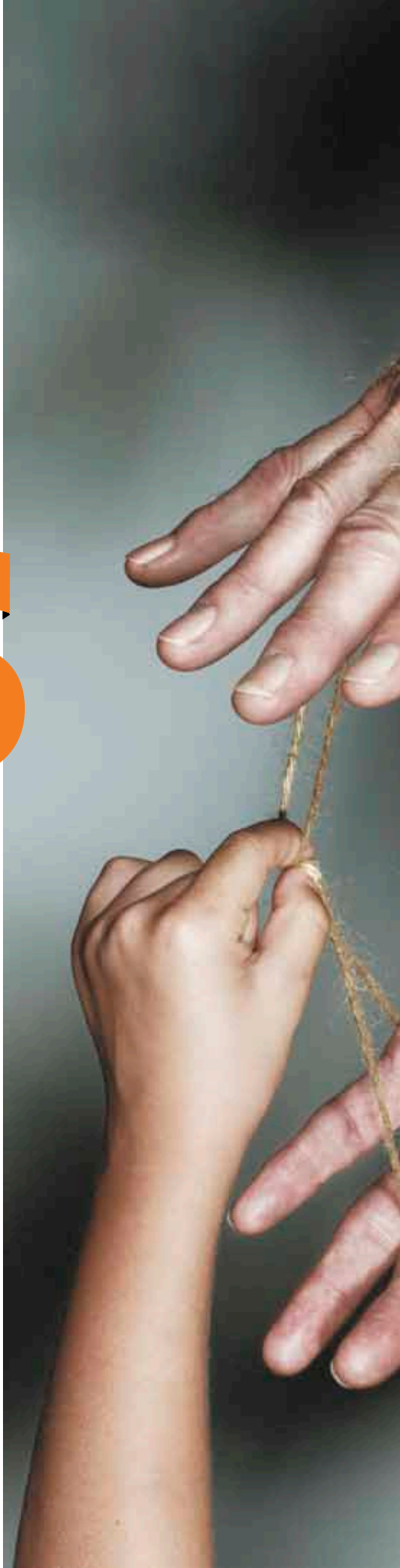
STRENGTHEN TIES

FOR ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Three practices to connect with stakeholders and enrich your program.

By Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

As a principal, you're accountable for crafting a strategy and guiding your school according to local and state policies. But policies are not static; research on English learners is always emerging. A quality program for English learners is improved and maintained only with the participation of stakeholders.





These stakeholders include the educators inside your school, your students' families, and the middle and high schools your students will attend in the future. Principals need to engage these stakeholders in order to enrich the discussion on what works and find practical solutions for implementation. Three practices to engage stakeholders and strengthen strategies for English learners are:

1. Invest in teacher development around issues of language and diversity at every phase of educators' careers;
2. Collaborate with families and the community to improve student learning; and
3. Engage with middle schools to more fully prepare English learners for the next phase of schooling.

Invest in Teacher Development

Consider teacher expertise through the lens of our knowledge base about English learners. What do the teachers at your school know and understand about language and diversity? A proficient teacher of mathematics may be only at the advanced beginner stage when it comes to understanding English learner issues. Induction, professional development, mentoring, and coaching each play an important role in increasing staff expertise.

As with other aspects of instruction and curriculum, knowledge about English learners needs to be purposefully cultivated. In too many cases, we have seen it added on as an afterthought, usually lumped in with special education issues, which also deserve more attention than they typically receive.

A way of considering the relative expertise of teachers at your school on the topic of language learners is to use David Berliner's stages of teacher expertise model, modified by us to describe teachers' knowledge bases and practices:

STAGE 1 Knowledge of the **context** for English learners.

Key Practices: Become familiar with students' cultural norms and traditions; develop achievement and proficiency profiles of students.

STAGE 2 Knowledge of the **pedagogy** of language development.

Key Practices: Integrate and accommodate language development in daily teaching;

build classroom community; foster connections between home and school.

STAGE 3 Knowledge of accurate and culturally sensitive **assessment** practices.

Key Practices: Use informative assessments in daily teaching; create testing conditions and accommodations based on language proficiency; collaborate with families on assessment decisions.

STAGE 4 Knowledge of specialized **interventions** for struggling English learners.

Key Practices: Use progress monitoring and diagnostic tools with students; understand the role of true peers in data interpretation; lead family numeracy and literacy programs.

STAGE 5 Knowledge of adult **collaboration and communication** across professional and family communities.

Key Practices: Coach and mentor other educators to boost their expertise; seek knowledge about current research on language development; lead efforts to create more “home-like” schools.

To help new teachers feel supported in their professional growth and foster expertise among more experienced staff, sophisticated professional development is key. Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers recommend a multidimensional approach to cultivating teacher

knowledge through professional development. Their model includes:

- Professional development events about curriculum, instruction, and the learning climate;
- Coaching and mentoring for application in the classroom;
- Ongoing evaluation of professional development, including data-driven decision-making based on student outcomes;
- Inquiry-based planning to identify next steps for focused professional development.

A multidimensional professional development system requires that teacher expertise be cultivated using all of these tools. A ninety-minute presentation about English learners in an after-school professional development session may spark conversation, but it is insufficient to influence classroom practice. The coaching and mentoring of teachers by administrators and teacher-leaders must be purposeful if change is to be seen. The principal’s commitment to ongoing professional development is paramount.

Collaborate With Families and the Community

While we have come a long way since the day in 1930 when the principal at Lemon Grove Grammar School barred the schoolhouse door to Mexican parents and their children, our schools are not always as welcoming as we would like to believe they are. Researchers have documented the ambivalent feelings of families who avoid the school campus due to differences in culture, language, communication, and values.

Fortunately, many of these barriers can be eliminated through thoughtful planning that keeps families’ needs at the center of the discussion. For example, many districts have parent educators and family involvement initiatives that can provide schools with assistance and resources for supporting families of English learners. Expand the scope of your school’s parent organization to become a full-fledged parent center

for the community. When sending home information to families, consult with your school’s parent center and the district’s English learner department to access translation services.

These are the minimal steps required to create a welcoming environment. In order to better serve students who are learning English, we must find more sophisticated ways to support them. If we acknowledge that learning happens first at home and continues throughout the child’s school years, then we must capitalize on this. We should be actively finding ways to make our schools more like home.

A truly collaborative partnership between families and the school would seek to create conditions of affection, appreciation for one another, and positive communication with the community. At a school where families are appreciated, students’ rich cultural diversity is celebrated. A sense of commitment toward goals comes from groups creating them together, instead of having one group simply inform the other. Positive communication in such a community means not only communicating in the family’s primary language, but also making sure that they hear about the wonderful things their child is doing. In too many cases, families don’t hear from the school until a problem arises.

Finally, time in each other’s company must be sought out. Although both teachers and families are busy, finding ways to enjoy each other’s company is an incredible investment. For example, we worked with an elementary school that began hosting monthly spaghetti dinners for all the kindergarten students. There wasn’t any agenda—people simply gathered to share a meal and get to know one another.

Prepare Students for Next Steps

One of the stakeholder groups, important for all students but critical to the success of English learners, is the middle school staff. As the leader, it’s part of your responsibility to develop and implement transition plans to

Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: www.naesp.org/MayJun14

Access all of the articles in the **Building Bridges series**, which focuses on supporting English-language learners. Topics covered include collaboration, cultural proficiency, and ELL shadowing.

Hands-On ELL Parenting Enrichment

Every school must overcome its own set of challenges for students to achieve academic success, and Arcadia Elementary School is no exception. Two of our community's greatest barriers are an increasingly high language gap and a 94 percent poverty rate. Arcadia has one of the highest Hispanic populations of any other school in South Carolina, with total enrollment reaching 65 percent. Our staff recognized our need to provide additional resources not only for our students, but for our parents as well.

With full support from our staff, administration, and school board, we began two programs to empower our parents and community. First, the H.O.P.E. (Hands-On Parenting Enrichment) Esperanza class meets Wednesday afternoons. There, parents work on English skills in our computer lab with Rosetta Stone. (They are also given login credentials to use on school computers to learn anytime.) Then, four trained teachers lead parents through strategically planned English lessons: a "parenting skill of the week" discussion and a Q&A session about how parents can help their children succeed. Dinner is provided for parents and students as part of our universal free dinner program, which already serves 300 students enrolled in our afterschool program. At the end of each year, we have a small "graduation" for successful parents, and we give them a bag of books to read with their children.

We also launched the Arcadia Adult Learning Center, a partnership with the Spartanburg Adult Learning Center. There, we offer free English classes and general education classes two nights a week for any community member, with free childcare from both paid staff and volunteers. We now have 188 adults enrolled, with a waiting list of 25, in eight classes, including a GED preparatory class. Among participants, eight different language groups are represented, including Spanish, Portuguese, French, Lao, Russian, Thai, Chinese, and Vietnamese. We particularly wanted to involve more fathers. The evening timeslot allowed more of them to attend, and now 30 percent of the participants are male.

Each of these programs is a win-win. They help our parents and community members learn English and computer skills. The home/school relationships that have been cultivated are tremendously meaningful. Our children see their parents and neighbors improving themselves by learning and serving as great role models for school success. Last, the parent programs help our community, because our residents have the identity of being a part of a "village."


Chuck Bagwell is principal of Arcadia Elementary School in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

development, as many teachers may not be aware that they are telegraphing negative messages about middle schools. As the principal, you should bring this to their attention and challenge assumptions teachers may have about middle school experiences.

It is vital that the receiving faculty have information about English learners who are making the transition from elementary school to middle school—specifically, information related to language proficiency and the types of support that have worked for that student in the past. In many school districts, teachers or an English learner program coordinator create a summary worksheet so that the middle school staff have information right away about the student, in case the student files take some time to arrive at the school.

Personal Growth

A final aspect of continuous improvement shouldn't be overlooked: your own. Principals are often expected to be providers of information, but it is essential for you to renew your own fund of knowledge, as well. *The School Leader's Guide to English Learners* (2012), our book, contains a self-study and reflection guide designed to prompt your thinking and encourage conversation with various stakeholders about the current status of your school.

Although the complexities of teaching English learners can be daunting, it is well worth the investment. So many of the children and families in our schools have endured hardships in order to make a better life. Education is essential. 

This article is adapted from *The School Leader's Guide to English Learners* by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey. Copyright 2012 by Solution Tree. Reprinted by Permission of Solution Tree.

Douglas Fisher is a professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University.

Nancy Frey is a professor of literacy at the School of Teacher Education at San Diego State University.

ensure that students are well prepared for their early adolescent learning experiences.

One of the easiest ways to alleviate the basic concerns that all students have about the transition to middle school (or high school, if you lead a middle school) is to organize a tour. Provide students with an opportunity to visit the school, find the bathroom and office, and see the classrooms and students. In addition, invite a diverse group of former elementary school students now in middle school to visit your school's classrooms and answer ques-

tions. In addition, hold parent informational sessions. Explain to parents that children are often afraid of middle school and that the family should discuss, with pride, the increasing responsibility that this transition entails.

Another powerful way to ensure that English learning students are prepared for middle school is for teachers to hold and communicate realistic expectations for those years. Teachers who say, "Just wait until you get to middle school to see how much work you have to do," make it sound scary and threatening. This is a great topic for faculty