“A Perfect Storm”: A Steadily Improving School for English Language Learners

David A. Ellis Elementary School Case Study

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This case study is a part of the report *Learning from Consistently High Performing and Improving Schools for English Language Learners in Boston Public Schools*. The report and its companion report, *Improving Educational Outcomes of English Language Learners in Schools and Programs in Boston Public School*, are part of a larger project, Identifying Success in Schools and Programs for English Language Learners in Boston Public Schools, commissioned by the Boston Public Schools as part of the process of change set in motion by the intervention of the state and the federal governments on behalf of Boston’s English language learners. This qualitative retrospective case study, based upon interviews, document review, and observations, shares key themes found in one school identified for its consistent, multi-year out-performance of like schools in ELL outcomes during SY2006-SY2009. The purpose of the case study is to share and illustrate key lessons that may be adapted and applied in other school contexts for the education of ELL students. For more information on the methods used in this case study, please see the full report, *Learning from Consistently High Performing and Improving Schools for English Language Learners in Boston Public Schools*; Chapter 1 includes an overview of the study and methods and the Detailed Methods Appendix provides a complete description, including the identification of the site using multiple regression analysis and the qualitative methods used to study the site once selected. The full reports are available at www.cce.org and www.umb.edu/gastoninstitute.

The Research and Evaluation Team at the Center for Collaborative Education located in Boston, Massachusetts was established in 2000. Its mission is to conduct research to inform and influence educational policy and practice to improve equity and student achievement. Therefore, the Team focuses on research studies and evaluations that are concerned with increasing educational access and opportunity for all students. To meet its goal of building the capacity of educational stakeholders to engage in the inquiry process, the Team works collaboratively with clients to identify goals, determine purpose, and select appropriate data collection strategies, as well as decide on products that fit the audience and users.

The Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy was established in 1989 at the University of Massachusetts Boston by the Massachusetts State Legislature at the behest of Latino community leaders and scholars in response to a need for improved understanding of the Latino experience in the Commonwealth. The mission of the Institute is to inform policy makers about issues vital to the state’s growing Latino community and to provide this community with information and analysis necessary for effective participation in public policy development.

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Page numbers do not start at 1 because this case study is excerpted from Chapter V of Learning from Consistently High Performing and Improving Schools for English Language Learners in Boston Public Schools
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“A PERFECT STORM”: A STEADILY IMPROVING SCHOOL FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS
School Context

The Ellis Elementary School is a K-5 elementary school located in the Roxbury section of Boston. During SY2009, the school served 328 students; 35% were native speakers of Spanish and 40% were students of limited English proficiency (LEPs). In the school as a whole, 55.5% of students were Latino, 40.5% were Black, 2% were White, and 2% were multi-racial, Asian, or Native American. Students are assigned to the school according to the BPS student assignment plan, and the school is one of 19 BPS elementary schools with a Spanish-specific SEI program for LEP students.

Of the 78 LEP students (81% of all LEPs) who took the MEPA in April 2009, 12.8% were at MEPA Level 1, 9% were at MEPA Level 2, 21.8% were at MEPA Level 3, 38.5% were at MEPA Level 4, and 17.9% were at MEPA Level 5. LEP students at each grade level spanned the range of MEPA levels.

During SY2009, there were 29.1 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members at the Ellis School for a student-teacher ratio of 10.9 to 1 (BPS ratio is 12.8 to 1). Five FTE teachers (17%) were teaching ELL-related assignments. One hundred percent of teachers were licensed in their assigned position and 100% of core classes were taught by highly qualified teachers; both figures are slightly higher than the district averages of 98% and 96%, respectively. In terms of the racial make-up of the teaching staff, 37% of teachers were White, 34% were Black, 24% were Latino, 3% were Native American, and 2% were Asian.

In SY2009, the percentage of students from low-income households was higher than BPS district rates for both students of limited English proficiency and those who are English proficient. For Ellis students of limited English proficiency, the rate was six percentage points higher while for English proficient students, it was more than 20 percentage points higher. The mobility rate at Ellis was higher for both LEP students (15.6%) and EP students (12.9%) compared to BPS LEP students (9.8%) and EP students (8.1%).

In terms of engagement outcomes, attendance rates at Ellis were slightly lower than BPS rates, and rates of suspension and grade retention at Ellis were lower for students of limited English proficiency, while higher for English proficient students. Academically, Ellis students performed well on

Table 5.1. Ellis Elementary School Enrollment Defined by Native Language, English Language Proficiency, and ELL Program Participation, SY2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>All Ellis (328)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native Language</td>
<td>Native English Speaker (NES) (197) (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Proficiency</td>
<td>English Proficient (EP) (232) (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Participation</td>
<td>Not in ELL Program (232) (71%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Native speakers of Spanish were 87% of NSOL. Other languages including Haitian Creole and Cape Verdean were 1% or less of NSOL.
b 84 (87.5% of LEPs) were native speakers of Spanish.

Table 5.2. Selected Student Indicators, SY2009*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ellis LEP %</th>
<th>Ellis EP %</th>
<th>BPS ES LEP %</th>
<th>BPS ES EP %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Income (% Eligible for free/reduced-price lunch)</td>
<td>97.9%</td>
<td>96.1%</td>
<td>91.6%</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility (% not in the same school for October and June)</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* LEP = Limited English Proficiency; EP = English Proficient; BPS ES = Boston Public Elementary Schools
During his tenure, the mission of the Ellis School was developed to read:

*The David A. Ellis community – students, staff, parents, neighborhoods, agencies, universities, and business partners – will provide an effective and enriched education in a safe and supportive environment focused on strong skill development and preparation for productive and responsible membership in society. (Ellis Elementary School, 2006)*

The Ellis School underwent a dramatic demographic change from the time the former Principal started, when the school was 81% African American, to now, when more than half of the students are Latino. The former Principal reports that there were historical tensions between Black and Latino groups at the school, and that while he always made ELL education a priority, it became easier to support the needs of bilingual students when there was a critical mass of native Spanish speakers at the school. This case study describes the “perfect storm” that developed when he brought in a human resource – the LAT facilitator – whose views for educating ELL students aligned with his, and with those of the math coach, as they would find out. This strong alignment of views about what would work with ELL students, coupled with teachers’ strong desire

### Table 5.3. Selected Student Outcomes, SY2009a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Ellis LEP Students with Data</th>
<th>Ellis LEP %</th>
<th>Ellis EP %</th>
<th>BPS ES LEP %</th>
<th>BPS ES EP %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median Attendance</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>94.4%</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>96.1%</td>
<td>95.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retained in Grade</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>5.8%b</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed ELA MCASc</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>84.4%</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient in ELA MCAS</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35.3%b</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed Math MCAS</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
<td>96.8%</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
<td>76.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient in Math MCAS</td>
<td>41.2%b</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed Science MCAS</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>90.0%</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>72.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient in Science MCAS</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*LEP = Limited English Proficiency; EP = English Proficient; BPS ES = Boston Public Elementary Schools*  
*b Data for this cell is n<10  
*c MCAS data includes grades 3-5 for ELA and mathematics and grade 5 for science. While case study site selection looked at MCAS proficiency in ELA and mathematics only for students at MEPA levels 3 and 4, here the purpose is to present outcomes for the school as a whole, thus we include all test takers as well as pass and proficiency rates.  
*d Data not reported for categories where n<10.
to improve their own ELL instruction, created the conditions for a transformation that, like a perfect storm, in a short period of time would change ELL education at the Ellis for the better.

The school has experienced two leadership changes since the former Principal left after SY2009. As a result of differing commitments and visions, some of the ELL-related practices that were implemented, as well as some of the key staff responsible for facilitating those practices during that period, are no longer evident at the school.

### Key Themes in Success with Educating English Language Learners

As a Language Specific SEI program school, Ellis Elementary uses student MEPA scores as well as classroom work to assess students’ English language proficiency levels. As an elementary school, the SEI teachers have self-contained classrooms where they teach all subjects except the specials. Currently at each grade level, there is one SEI classroom with students at MEPA Levels 1-3. The current BPS policy is that students who reach MEPA Levels 4 and 5 are to be transitioned to regular education classrooms. At the time of the study, the LAT facilitator, math coach, and classroom teachers carefully considered this transition through discussions that took into account all available data and socio-emotional needs of each specific student. They reported that if students were not deemed ready to move to regular education, they were kept in SEI classrooms, which were usually smaller in size and had extra academic support from the LAT facilitator two or three times a week.

In our case study of the Ellis, we found three themes from our interviews, observations, and document review which multiple stakeholders credited for the school’s improvement with ELL education. We found that the leadership for ELL education in the school included the Principal, LAT facilitator, and math coach, who built the capacity of both SEI and regular education teachers through coaching, modeling, and teaming. The major focus of data-based inquiry, professional development, and coaching was improving instruction, particularly in reading and writing. Finally, we found that through this focused work across the faculty, a culture of professional collaboration developed leading to a sense of collective efficacy. These key themes are described in more detail under the headings:

- The Principal Created Conditions for “a Perfect Storm”
- “What is the Small, High Leverage Thing that would give us the Biggest Bang for our Buck?”
- Collective Efficacy

### Theme 1: The Principal Created Conditions for “a Perfect Storm”

We use the term Perfect Storm to refer to the purposeful recruitment and deployment of resources for the benefit of ELL students. The Principal during SY2006-SY2009 had been an English language learner in the Boston Public Schools, and had many years of experience as a bilingual teacher before becoming a principal, all of which shaped his vision for the school. That vision was one of equity for English language learners, which he constructed as providing resources based on teachers’ needs, rather than through a mathematical formula. His views about equity were shaped when, as a teacher, he experienced that equality of resources was not enough to teach ELL students; he needed more resources than regular education teachers, and had to work extra time to provide them.

> I came in to the job with the perspective of trying to make sure that English language learners not only were represented in all aspects of the school, that in particular we were making sure that they were getting equal access to curriculum.
> 
> — former Principal

The Principal during the study period possessed two key leadership traits which supported the transformation of ELL education at the Ellis: vision and trust in his staff. His vision was that English language learners would achieve at the same level as native English speakers, which they were not doing at the time that he took over leadership of the school in SY1990. His vision for ELL students was that his staff would see the academic potential of ELL students and help them realize it. At the time, this vision required a change in attitudes and perceptions about ELL students among staff.
A mindset ... that when you look at a student, you don’t see [him/her] with a deficit, you see [him/her] with [his/her] potential, and you look at each individual in that way, that [he/she] can move forward.  
– LAT facilitator

Because the teaching staff did not have the knowledge, skills, or collaborative habit required for excellent ELL instruction, former Principal needed to create changes in attitudes and teaching practice. He brought resources to the school, in the forms of professional development and staffing that would address these needed changes.

I realized that we had a lot of English language learners in the regular ed classrooms, which made all classrooms English learning classrooms…. I needed to find a way to let them understand that dynamic, and what it is that’s required of them. And so, we did a significant part of our 18 hours [of professional development] just understanding SIOP. The teachers started to realize that they had a responsibility for those students, and as we learned that, we realized that it was not good instruction for English language learners, it was good instruction for everybody. So that was the foundation of it.  
– former Principal

Thus, the former Principal’s vision included integrating not only the English language learners but also their teachers with the regular education staff. For this purpose, he created structures that facilitated collaboration between teachers of ELL students and regular education teachers. For example, he changed the structure of the teacher teams. At the same time, he realized that all teachers in the building needed training to teach ELL students, not just for the sake of ELL students but for the sake of all students. He then created necessary opportunities for professional development of all teachers in the building.

It was important for me, when I did my alignment, that the teacher teams were comprised of not just regular ed but also bilingual ed teachers on the same team.  
– former Principal

He also had the vision to see that the teachers in his building needed to work on the four categories [SEI training].  
– LAT facilitator

In addition to the four-category SEI training, he understood the value of having a full-time math coach to support teachers. He creatively used his budget to fund that position at a time when the position was only funded to be part time.

The Principal also knew that some of the ELL teaching and learning expertise would need to come from outside the building. He was a leader who was not afraid to acknowledge the limits of his own ability to directly lead that change, encouraged applications to bring in additional resources, and identified strong teachers of ELL students who could become teacher leaders.

We had a principal at the time who was not necessarily satisfied, in my opinion, with some of the things that he was seeing, and needed the support. So he was open to, “We need something here.”  
– former Math coach

At the same time, the Principal recognized the need to delegate and empower teachers, and for that purpose he turned to two key staff: the LAT facilitator and the math coach.

Instructional Coaches Were Given Responsibility For Empowering Teachers

The LAT facilitator was hired in SY2007 as an ESL teacher, the only licensed ESL and 4-Category trained teacher in the building (some teachers had training in Categories 1, 2, and 3 but not in ESL). A trilingual English language learner herself, she had experience as an ESL teacher in a Two-Way Bilingual Immersion school with a majority of Spanish-speaking ELL students in California. The ESL teacher/LAT facilitator experienced a similar transition when a restrictive language policy passed in California a few years earlier. This experience made her an ideal
candidate for the Ellis School. She was knowledgeable about sheltering English for content lessons and had worked with a highly qualified Elementary ESL mentor teacher herself, as part of a teacher education program in California. When she came to the Ellis, she was not only a dedicated teacher, but also was willing to work with other teachers. She described her role as LAT facilitator at Ellis as “a little bit of everything,” including mentoring, coaching, collaborating with teachers, and compliance. One SEI teacher remembers that she introduced to her the concept of differentiating instruction based on students’ English proficiency levels.

From the outset of her tenure, the LAT facilitator worked with approximately half of ELL students in the building, specifically in SEI classrooms where the majority of students were at MEPA Levels 1-3, and also collaborated with SEI classroom teachers one hour a day. Instruction included both whole-group instruction and small differentiated groups based on English proficiency level. In the LAT facilitator’s first year at the school, she and the math coach serendipitously shared an office, which encouraged constant discussion, reflection, and planning. As coaches, they did not have their own classrooms and were not administrators, but they had each other.

The math coach, who had been at the school since 2004, supported teachers by working with individual struggling students, with small groups of students on specific skills, and co-teaching mini-lessons in classrooms. She had a general knowledge of all the students in the school, not just ELL students, as well as teachers’ strengths and weaknesses. The former Principal early on recognized her value to his leadership team and empowered her to take on ELL leadership.

In SY2007, Category 2 training was offered through Teach First, which the LAT facilitator led with two other in-house category-trained teachers. In SY2008, she was formally designated as LAT facilitator and began to convene regular meetings of the SEI teachers as the Language Acquisition Team. She continued to meet one-on-one with all teachers of ELL students, including regular education teachers, to review progress for every ELL student. During SY2008, the LAT facilitator was working one hour a day in K1 and K2 SEI classrooms and ten hours a week for Grades 1-5 SEI classrooms. Through their time and conversations together, the LAT facilitator and math coach developed awareness not only of teachers’ learning needs, but also of their own. In June 2007, they applied for training that would bring in an external facilitator of data-driven inquiry work (described below) based on a participatory model of school reform. Thus grew a cohesive approach between the LAT facilitator, the math coach, and teachers as critical partners. These two coaches became key leaders of a process of change for ELL students and their teachers at the school. They “broke the barrier into the classrooms” (SEI teacher) to start the conversations about improving ELL teaching and learning.

A key factor in the coaches’ ability to work closely with teachers and build leadership for ELL students was the Principal’s trust in their decisions. Because the math coach had been at the school for a number of years, there was already a trusting relationship between her and the Principal. He trusted her content knowledge and her skill as a professional developer.

It is not a very common experience to have a Principal who wants to be transparent about what they know, what they don’t know, and how they can be supportive.
– SAM team member

He convened regular meetings with the LAT facilitator and the math coach, where they had conversations that led to key decisions about policy and practice in the school. The former Principal trusted the two coaches to help him gather information about the instructional needs of students and professional development needs for the staff as a whole.

Having those eyes and ears for the Principal was very positive, and then using that information to do a little bit more purposeful planning around professional development, around how to deploy my time, about how to identify general school needs, but also grade level needs, [supported the Principal].
– Math coach

In time, the coaches made decisions each year on how to spend their time, whether in a classroom with a struggling teacher for ESL time, convening inquiry team meetings, providing mentoring or professional development, collecting and analyzing data, or meeting with families.
Coaches Were Catalysts For Improving SEI Teaching And Learning

Not only did the coaches have the former Principal’s trust and authority over key decisions about how they spent their time, they also built teachers’ trust in the benefits of peer collaboration around curriculum and instruction. One SEI teacher described the LAT facilitator’s role as coaching her through lesson planning and modeling instruction in the classroom until she adopted new practices and was ready to use them independently:

"I would credit [the LAT facilitator] as the one who taught me what to do…. So every day during my ESL time, my kids and I worked with her, and she would model lessons, and then we would break the kids up. So I would be learning from her, and then we would divide the children to differentiate the instruction. We would plan together, and over time, I would do more of the instruction, but we would still meet to plan. And I guess after a couple of months, I was more on my own with the kids and she was doing other things, but we would still meet to plan.

– SEI teacher

A major accomplishment for the school was its retention of highly qualified staff and their teaching assignments. While some teachers were more amenable than others to working with the LAT facilitator and math coach, with time most came to tap into their expertise for improving instruction. During the study period, most of the staff was trained in Categories 1, 2, and 3. As evidence of the mindset of ongoing learning at the school, several teachers discussed the professional development that they felt would be most helpful to them in improving their teaching of ELL students. Teachers whose training had been more heavily focused on ELA expressed an interest in a math focus. At the same time, one regular education teacher wanted exemplars of sheltered English instruction:

"I would love to see videotapes, like an exemplar classroom, [for example] a first grade classroom with 22 kids, and they have six ELL students. Just watching what that teacher does with the unit, and how she reaches the ELL students.

– Regular education teacher

The LAT facilitator suggested that while the district has focused on “wide instead of deep” professional development in the four categories of sheltered English instruction, a site-based mentoring program would ensure that professional development learning were translated into classroom practice.

The former Principal recognized that professional development, data-based inquiry, and instructional change would require extra time from teachers. To meet this need, he created incentives and ways of compensating teachers for their dedication and commitment, a process he called “a dance.” Perhaps one of his most powerful levers was to show success with ELL students and with all students at one grade level. When, in the second year of SAM, data showed that all third grade student outcomes had improved, fourth grade teachers jumped on board with reform efforts.

"We had some success to show them. The fact that none of our third graders, not even one, including the Special Ed students, was at a level one [Warning] in the previous year’s MCAS, gave the fourth grade teachers a little [pause]. So that even though they recognized that it was a lot more work, there was a payoff.

– former Principal

Thus, in the second year of SAM implementation, the team worked with the same cohort of students which included ELL students, now in the fourth grade.25
Theme 2: “What is the Small, High Leverage Thing That Would Give Us the Biggest Bang for Our Buck?”

The first theme established that, during the study years, the school had in place both a Principal and highly qualified coaches who were dedicated to training and empowering teachers to improve ELL education. In addition, in SY2008, the school gained access to external coaching and facilitation of data-based inquiry by applying and winning a grant by the Carnegie Corporation to work with a facilitator from the Scaffolded Apprenticeship Model (SAM), a program that originated at the City University of New York (CUNY) and was being implemented in several Boston Public Schools by staff at the Boston Plan for Excellence (BPE), an intermediary organization in Boston. The SAM model involved analysis of student-level data, including student work, by grade. SAM provided resources such as the inquiry framework, data spreadsheets, guiding questions, ways of identifying patterns in data, ways of focusing on specific groups of students, templates for intervention plans, and follow-up accountability processes to keep the SAM team at the school focused on their inquiry questions and “on the students moving forward” (SAM team member).

This model’s approach to school reform is based on changing the role of principals from school leaders to leaders of capacity development at the school. The SAM team of leaders thus created becomes responsible and accountable for the use of data-based inquiry cycles to lead school improvement. The former Principal acknowledges experiencing some discomfort at being a member of a collaborative team (rather than the leader making the decisions), but he trusted that the process that he brought in with SAM would result in improvement for ELL students.

It became, as I said, not just the coaches, but it became the SAM team plus the third grade teachers… It could not work for a principal that had a big ego. At first it was a little bit hard, but as I started to release more and more, it became easier to be just one member of a team… The more people trusted me in the process and I trusted them in the process, it was all of us putting everything on the table, and the sole focus was: how do we improve instruction for our students, and how do our students gain the skills that they need to be successful students?

– former Principal

With a consistent external SAM facilitator from BPE, the team systematically examined student literacy achievement at the third and fourth grade levels in SY2009, and began the process of looking at whole-school literacy data that year. Progress was reported quarterly in a newsletter to the Principal and Ellis Staff. The team looked at the district-based assessments, (Stanford Reading Inventory (SRI) and Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), and found that they were not predictive of MCAS performance. They also identified areas in which the current assessments did not give enough information about student skills; they then developed new assessments that were more valid indicators of those skills.

[The MCAS] didn’t necessarily tell us the clear picture of those students. We weren’t sure they could read the texts, so we had to do running records. How can you look at a multiple choice answer if you’re not even sure they’re reading the sentence?

– SAM team member

Through analysis of multiple data sources, SAM team members found that student performance on different assessments, the Formative Assessments of Student Thinking in Reading (FAST-R) and Open Responses, predicted proficiency on subtests of the MCAS.

Another finding of the SAM team was that ELL achievement in the early elementary grades (Grades K-2) was strong, but that in the late elementary grades (Grades 3-5), outcomes declined. Specifically, in SY2007 “the MCAS scores of every single ELL student had gone down from third to fourth grade and from fourth to fifth grade” (SAM team member). This observation gave the team a focus on the upper grade SEI classrooms. Specifically, they decided that they would focus on third grade and fourth grade students which included a group of ELL students for the two years of the grant:
So we focused on the third grade, and out of that work we began to identify what students needed, how the artifacts that were developing in the classrooms were actually showing us where their needs were.

— Math coach

Student achievement in the upper elementary grades at Ellis did improve during the SAM years as demonstrated by the school’s identification as a case study school for this project. The former Principal reflected on SAM and its results:

It was through the lens of looking at students, especially students that we were so concerned with, and as they started showing through our ongoing assessment that they were getting the skills, we started feeling a little bit better and a little bit better. And by the time that MCAS came out, that group had scored so well. They had outperformed regular ed students.

— former Principal

With the support of the LAT facilitator and math coach, school staff became more comfortable with discussing the needs of ELL students, the tools that work best with ELL students, and the instructional modifications that were needed in their classrooms.

You have to understand, at [each English proficiency] level, what writing looks like, what reading looks like.... And I think when you know that, you know how to create certain strategies and scaffold them, layer them bit by bit, to get ELL students to the next step. So, let’s say you have an ELL and a non-ELL. They both need to get to Point B. This non-ELL may be able to just take two steps. That ELL may need to take four or five steps to get to that Level B. That is the difference.

— LAT Facilitator

The coaches therefore supported teachers in differentiating and enhancing their literacy strategies for ELL students.

Reading

A common theme in the instructional strategies that the teachers incorporated throughout their lessons was repetition, in both reading and writing. For example, in order to foster students’ love of reading and their reading comprehension, teachers found that reading favorite stories aloud assisted the ELL students to engage with text, understand vocabulary, and access the information in the story.

I found that … [students] really wanted to repeat reading [favorite] stories.... They love to listen to stories.... When you’re reading aloud, you’re modeling fluency, you’re modeling how to figure out certain words, talking to them about the text, engaging in the text.... You can also do a read-aloud for a particular lesson, where you upload the vocabulary that the kids may find confusing first, and then do the picture walk, so that especially your [MEPA] Levels 1 and 2 can also follow. I’ve always found that once you have built that background for them, before reading the story, they’re able to access the information in the read-aloud and really enjoy it, and they learn a lot of vocabulary, as well. So, read-alouds have been very, very successful.

— LAT Facilitator

Vocabulary development supports ELL students in comprehending text just beyond their language ability level. During the study period, the coaches reported helping teachers become more aware of using cognates, or words that have a common etymology. Since Spanish and English have many cognates, students were taught to “successfully use metacognitive strategies to figure out the meanings of readings of harder literature by focusing in on cognates” (LAT facilitator). For words that teachers know are difficult or new for ELL students, teachers focused on the common vocabulary that all students needed to use, while acknowledging that “the ways that they are producing language and the depth that they are using vocabulary might change based on their English language development level” (SEI teacher).

During the study period, another instructional strategy that teachers began to employ repeatedly
to improve reading comprehension was for student to write “self-monitoring notes” in which they asked themselves after every paragraph what the paragraph’s main idea was.

**Writing**

In writing, repetition was also used to support students in their learning, specifically writing in response to literature. During the study period, students were encouraged to respond to Open Response prompts in complete sentences, because doing so reinforced academic language. By asking students to complete an open response writing task each time they read a piece of literature, “they’re only going to get better at it if they have more practice doing the same thing” (LAT facilitator).

> And without fail, every time we read something, they had to do an open response. They would get immediate feedback from me or their classroom teacher, saying, “Did you give an example? Did you elaborate on that?” And that helped them as they were reading to focus in on certain details.
>  
> – LAT facilitator

Beyond writing complete sentences in open responses, there was a focus on teaching students to write paragraphs. The third, fourth, and fifth grade SEI classrooms in the school used the hamburger model of paragraph writing, in which the buns represent the topic sentence or introduction and the conclusion. The burger, cheese, and lettuce represent the details of the topic. Students learned that they could stack the burger in various ways, but they always needed the two buns. As part of this model, teachers were encouraged to have their ELL students repeatedly provide the details, or evidence sections, as a way for students to practice writing using this structure.

The LAT facilitator noticed that ELL students had difficulty coming up with words to use in their writing. An instructional strategy that she used was shared writing, in which the students, the teacher, and the LAT facilitator wrote a whole piece together. In doing so, the LAT facilitator modeled identifying words for sentences.

Why were Cinderella’s stepsisters mean to her?

An instructional strategy that some SEI teachers at the Ellis ES used to support ELL students to write a strong paragraph with supporting details was to provide students with a sentence-by-sentence template, with the rationale that “If we can remove one layer of things that they have to think about, they are able to show more of what they really know” (LAT facilitator).

With a prompt such as “Why were Cinderella’s stepsisters mean to her?” the template gave sentence starters:

> I am writing about why Cinderella’s stepsisters were mean to her. One example of how Cinderella’s stepsisters were mean to her was __________________. I know this is the answer because I found on page __, it said “________________________.”
>  
> Another example of how Cinderella’s stepsisters were mean to her was on page __. It said, “________ __________________.”

While some teachers were initially resistant to using the template with sentence starters, the LAT facilitator explained that students would not, as skeptical teachers predicted, come to rely on the template in a formulaic way. Providing the structure of the paragraph for the students allowed students to focus on the content of their answers rather than the organization.
They could see how I came up with words. We came up with word banks, because they sometimes have a hard time figuring out which words to choose and how to create their sentences.

– LAT facilitator

In addition to modeling writing, the LAT facilitator also modeled the revision process with each of her students by thinking aloud and revising a paragraph from the student’s writing piece while the teacher and student watched. After the think-aloud, both teachers and students took responsibility for discussing the writing and continue to conference.

Assessment

After using several assessment tools, the LAT facilitator identified FAST-R (Formative Assessments of Student Thinking in Reading) to predict outcomes on the MCAS ELA subtest for ELL students. The SAM team trained teachers to use the FAST-R and gave teachers responsibility for developing instructional strategies relevant to the target skills. Teachers might then work with a coach on a CCL cycle to develop teaching strategies. One such strategy was “Stop and Think,” a step-by-step process of reading behaviors that helped build comprehension skills. In Grade 3, for example, this process was spelled out as the following steps: self-correct; pause to process meaning; re-read to consolidate meaning; adjust reading pace according to text difficulty; use word parts, prefixes, suffixes to pronounce longer words; stop/think – use context clues to figure out meaning of unknown words; and use high frequency words accurately to gain reading momentum. Teachers charted each student’s progress along this continuum of sub-skills, through a process on instruction – assessment – student feedback until students mastered the desired skill. Once the desired reading skills were attained, the scaffolding was removed. At the same time, the SAM team facilitator would work with teachers to help them reflect how their own assessments were working and to modify them in the future. This process enabled teachers and students to develop a sense of mastery as they moved along a continuum toward skill mastery.

In summary, the SAM team changed the way teachers thought about how to look at data and how to think about instructional change. This change might not have emerged organically. One team member articulated this training as helping her to re-frame her practice for ELL success:

What patterns do you see?… What’s the small thing that’s very high leverage that we can focus on, and that would really give us the biggest bang for our buck? It made us think in a different way, and look at patterns within the data, and focus in on a group of kids. That was different.

– SAM team member

Theme 3: Collective Efficacy

We were all on the same page, working to make sure that they all succeeded.

– SEI teacher

A Collaborative Culture Among Instructional Staff

Collective efficacy is the perception of teachers in a school that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on student learning (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000). At the Ellis, collective efficacy developed slowly, almost as a conversation, first among the two coaches, then with the SAM team, and always with teachers. The SAM team was trained to include teachers as partners in school reform, which contributed to the development of a sense of collective efficacy at the school.

The SAM team members were the spokes that were starting to turn the wheels, but as the teachers now started to see the usefulness of it, then they were able to move back and operate from a distance. Just as this worked, as Principal, I was able to move back and give support

– former Principal

The SAM team also was charged with the responsibility of sharing their learning with other staff members through grade level team meetings. The structure and regularity of the SAM team meetings brought a change to teachers’ practice, to focus on data, whereas in the past, data had never been systematically analyzed:
The two years of consistent thinking, meeting every week, more than once a week sometimes… I think one of the best things about SAM was that it gave one voice to a whole group of people, and that voice was coming in clear.

– SAM team member

Another team member reflected that instead of thinking about improving student learning by content area, she began to think of the school more holistically, as a system in which teaming and decision-making all affect student performance.

It’s not specifically about math or literacy, it’s really about the system in which those two fields have been developed for the students. We looked at our system very closely, how decisions were made, what impacted what.

– Math coach

Another role of the SAM team was to move adult conversations to a level of discomfort which signifies growth and change. A SAM team member acknowledged that sometimes the work with the rest of the staff was not easy.

We were making changes and stepping on people’s toes and pushing the envelope a little bit, and bringing the conversation to a point that made a lot of people uncomfortable.

– SAM team member

An important mechanism for expanding the conversation on school improvement was the Collaborative Coaching and Learning (CCL) model (Neufeld & Roper, 2002). CCL was a professional development program available throughout the district during the study period. CCL consisted of cycles of coaching, collaboration, and learning, facilitated by school-based coaches, or outside experts. At the Ellis, the coaches were the LAT facilitator and the math coach. Teachers found CCL extremely helpful to share and learn best practices from their colleagues. At the Ellis, the coaches were the LAT facilitator and the math coach. Teachers found CCL extremely helpful to share and learn best practices from their colleagues. CCL provided opportunities for coaches to conduct classroom observations, to mentor teachers one-on-one, to facilitate looking-at-student-work sessions, and to share best practices with ELL students. In-service professional development of this kind took time and effort to build. Teachers were not prepared to trust coaches immediately, or to let them into their classrooms at first. However, for those teachers who opened their classrooms, the conversation led to a sense of community and a climate of trust and collaboration at the school.

When asked to reflect on professional development that worked, teachers referred to one-on-one mentoring as a favored modality because it gave them opportunities to discuss their own practices, concretely, with a trained and trusted outsider. On their part, coaches remembered entering classrooms with an attitude of respect and inquiry. As described previously, the SAM program was predicated on the inclusion of teachers in the process of mapping student performance, setting learning goals, and following student progress, so coaching was an essential mechanism for creating teacher buy-in to SAM principles. In order to implement SAM, coaches refined the practice of asking “good” questions in order to produce the learning and change desired. This approach to training as inquiry, rather than judgment, was essential to gain teachers’ trust. Classroom observations were prefaced with statements that clarified the role of the coach as a mirror, and not as an evaluator whose purpose was telling teachers what to do. Indeed, teachers became key partners in the school’s improvement, given their privileged position to observe performance in the classroom and to identify learning issues as they emerged. Coaches, on the other hand, modeled collaboration through their work as members of the SAM team.

Coaches also supported teachers to use specific “habits of mind” or ways of approaching learning and instruction. In looking at student work during team meetings, for example, teachers were coached to ask questions such as, “What does this student know? What should this student learn next? How am I going to assess whether learning has occurred?” Once this approach to the design of instruction became normalized throughout the school, it was possible to have a common conversation, and to speak with one voice about instruction and assessment. The resulting sense of excitement and cohesion is conveyed in these teacher statements:

The level of the conversation in that room had shifted. It was just beautiful.

During that time, there was a collaborative effort between the Principal and the staff, with a common agenda.
When all teachers see eye-to-eye, it makes a big difference.
– SAM team members

The development of a shared way of thinking about instruction, and the resulting collaboration among like-minded practitioners, resulted in a sense of empowerment among teachers. The use of a participatory, rather than a more traditional top-down, model for in-service training and professional development gave teachers a sense of agency, buy-in and dedication to the job of educating ELL students. Math and ELA teachers shared information about the same students during common planning time for grade level teams, as well as during hallway and lunch room conversations. All of these discussions facilitated the emergence of “one voice” among teachers.

Teachers’ beliefs that they could elicit ELL students’ strengths and potential were essential in building teacher commitment and dedication.

The idea that if you don’t have language – or rather that you have a different language that your teacher cannot understand – you can’t think, was something that we had to challenge very early on…
– Math coach

At the same time, the understanding that ELL students could learn was tempered by a realization that it may take them more time and scaffolding than a native speaker to move from point A to point B. Teacher dedication to ELL students required the willingness to do “whatever it took” to succeed.

Collaboration Extending to Families

The sense of collective efficacy was not confined within the school building’s walls. A key aspect of the coaches’ effectiveness was the trust that they earned from families. Because of this trust, ELL students’ families were open to advice and feedback about their children’s classroom placement, academic progress, and additional suggested resources for their learning.

One example of the trust built between coaches, teachers and families was that families trusted coaches and teachers to make the decision about their ELL students’ program placement. The LAT facilitator reported explaining the difference between the general education and SEI classrooms to parents who spoke only Spanish or who originally felt that general education might be better for their children. They listened to her in part because they saw her working with teachers on behalf of their children and because she could communicate with them in their own language, Spanish. After these discussions, many trusted her advice about classroom placement.

So, even if I told them, “You know what? I think the SEI program for your child for the next few years would be the best thing,” they trusted my opinion with that…. I told them observable facts that are true. “This [SEI] class has 12 kids. This [general education] one has 25. This [SEI] teacher is licensed and has the four categories of training for English language learners. This [general education] teacher does not.” By law, all parents need to know that. I told them the exact truth…. I said, “What you are going to get in an SEI classroom is exactly what you’re going to get in the regular ed. But that teacher is going to practice different strategies to help your child move forward in their reading and writing and do better.”
– LAT facilitator

Through their intensive data-based inquiry work (described below), teachers and coaches became more familiar with the particular students and families whom they were following in the data. The coaches reported spending more out-of-school time mentoring, tutoring, and even walking these students home when families could not do so. For certain struggling students, that extra learning time was important to their success:

I called their parents and told them, “Can I keep [child’s name] after school every Friday?” Because I found that when I was working with them in reading, they were confused when it came to writing, especially the long composition, and how to organize their thoughts.
– LAT facilitator
Soon coaches and teachers had family cell phone numbers and freely gave their cell phone numbers out to facilitate communication. Families trusted that teachers and coaches had their students’ best interests at heart.

In brief, training that enabled teachers to develop a shared voice, shared tools and practices contributed to the development of a sense of collective efficacy that increased teacher commitment to the school (as reflected in low teacher turnover), to students, and to their families. In turn, students reaped the benefits not only of improved instruction, but of a positive school climate where adults worked cohesively and involved students’ families.

Fourth, category training does not mean that teachers have a repertoire of sheltering English for content instruction. Teachers of ELL students should have an understanding of language acquisition and knowledge of how to modify instruction so that ELL students reach the same content standards as non-ELL students. At the Ellis, coaching and mentoring of many SEI teachers was provided by the LAT facilitator.

Fifth, collaborative coaching that breaks down classroom boundaries can serve to develop trust among otherwise isolated teachers. This professional learning model can also improve the knowledge and skills of teachers to succeed with ELL students and lead to a sense of collective efficacy.

**Conclusions and Lessons for Other Schools**

The story of the Ellis is that of a school where a few capable individuals who were deeply committed to educating ELL students, and who believed in the potential of ELL students to succeed converged with teachers who wanted to improve instruction for the benefit of all their students, and for three years created a perfect storm leading to school-wide improvement. Many lessons can be learned from this school’s story during the study years. First, a principal with clear high expectations for all students can transform a school by working with strong coaches and giving them responsibility for empowering teachers, and building dedication.

Second, one or two highly qualified and experienced coaches at the school — the LAT facilitator being one of them — can turn around practices for ELL students at the school, especially when working collaboratively with teachers, recognizing their existing expertise and supplementing new practices that are known to work with ELL students.

Third, personal experience as an English language learner and as a teacher of ELL students are desirable qualifications for principals and instructional leaders in schools with a high population of ELL students, because these experiences give them an insider perspective on what it means to learn and to teach a second language, the material, linguistic, social, and cultural challenges along the way. At the same time, former successful ELL students and teachers of ELL students are most likely to develop a strong conviction that all ELL students can succeed.

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21 Under Boston’s student assignment plan, the city is divided into three geographic “zones” (East, West, and North) for elementary and middle schools. Students may apply for: schools in the zone in which they live; schools in other zones if the schools are within their “walk zone”; and K-8 schools citywide. The assignment algorithm prioritizes applicants within a one mile “walk zone” for elementary schools and for siblings of current students.

22 The data on teacher qualifications come from the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/teacherdata.aspx).

23 One Principal led the school for SY2010 and part of SY2011. A new Principal was appointed to lead the school in the latter half of SY2011.

24 The data collection focuses on the study period and includes interviews with ELL staff and document review from that time.

25 SAM focused on a small group of students that included regular ed, SPED, and ELL students. Although the monitoring of every ELL was not the focus of SAM, the SAM Team, LAT Facilitator and SEI teachers monitored ELL progress of every ELL in grades 3-5 nonetheless.

26 For more information, see: http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/spa/academics/certificateprograms/scaffoldedaprenticeship.php

27 After the leadership change in 2010, the SAM team was dismantled and no longer functions at the school.

28 The CCL model is no longer formally in practice in the district, although some schools still use it.
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