# Sarah B. Ottow

Take a schoolwide approach to supporting English learners

As a professional learning specialist focused on English learners, I often hear concerns like this one from Bridget, an English learner teacher: "My colleagues in general education classrooms say they care about our school's English learners, but when it comes to teaching them well, with high standards and the right kinds of supports, we fall short. Our school requires a lot of professional development workshops on supporting English learners, yet I just don't see effective strategies happening schoolwide. I know we need to do better for our kids. I just think we don't all know how to get there."

Many educators are underprepared to reach and teach English learners, despite the best of intentions. Far too often, the responsibility for supporting English learners falls into the lap of those already specialized and mobilized to meet these students' needs — the English learner department.

While there may be a wider sense of urgency to address English learners' underperformance issues, there may not be a shared sense of responsibility across the entire school. This attitude is reflected in the exclusive language many teachers use to talk about students. When educators use terms like "my kids" or "your kids" to describe English learners, language is used to divide instead of build shared responsibility and accountability.

To expect English learners' needs to be met solely through specialists is
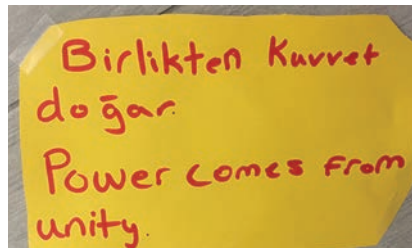
At Winchester High School in Massachusetts, teacher Laura Shanahan uses students' home languages on notes posted in the classroom. This one is in Turkish.

neither a comprehensive nor sustainable solution. English learners may, in fact, spend more of their time in general education classrooms, and therefore they benefit more from a shared model where *every* educator asks, "What am *I* doing to bridge the gap so that all of 'our kids', including English learner students, feel included at school and can perform to their potential?"

My team and I at Confianza support schools and districts through customized professional learning partnerships that take a needs-specific, systemwide learning approach to build knowledge and capacity among school leadership, coaches, and teacher teams. Because we know that professional development is not an event but a habit of mind, we encourage schools to focus on schoolwide practices for both instruction and educator collaboration with our support.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MINDSET

In our work consulting with schools, we help educators respond proactively and with an equity-based lens to the

English learners in their communities. All too often, what I see when I begin working with schools is a deficit-focused perspective that views English learners as problems to be solved.

This resembles the attitudes I faced as a general education teacher and an English learner specialist over a decade ago, suggesting that changes in teaching practice have not kept pace with the growth of knowledge about how best to teach English learners.

Rather than problems to be solved, English learners present opportunities to change school culture and systems to be more culturally and linguistically responsive to everyone. Rather than focusing on the fact that English learners are not fully proficient in English, we should see the rich assets our linguistically diverse students and families bring.

For example, when I was a teacher for a group of students from over 40 language groups, each taught me invaluable lessons about resilience. One 5th-grade student shared with me her journey from central Mexico to Wisconsin through an autobiography project.

Just two years before we met, she, her younger sister, and her mother were guided across the Rio Grande on a tire when they didn't know how to swim. In our language experience story project, she wrote, "I felt scared and happy at the same time. I was scared because people had died trying to pass to Texas. I was happy because I was

going to see my dad."

English learners are windows into the world while also being mirrors for schools to examine and change their own practices. The imperative to see the opportunity for changing not just the narrative of what school can be for linguistically diverse students but what the systems and conditions for professional learning can be — and should be — is not just critical, it's a moral responsibility.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CULTURE

When my team and I conduct a needs assessment with a school, we ask about the professional learning culture and systems like professional learning communities for teachers and leaders to continuously learn together and practice through inquiry-based cycles. When those conditions are not yet in place, we work together to build them because teachers need time, space, and tools to work together under conditions of ongoing practice and reflection on student outcomes.

In particular, we work to build communities of practice, which provide the most effective opportunity for schoolwide learning. Communities of practice give teachers and leaders practice in research-based instructional strategies along with time for reflection and feedback.

In these communities, we focus on these areas:

- **Family and student engagement,** including social and emotional learning and opportunities for deep learning that engages students' interests, cultures, and learning styles;

EQUITY FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

Equity for English learners should be the goal of every educator so that every leader, teacher, and support staff:

- **Models respect** for diverse groups and **exhibits curiosity** for ongoing improvement in his or her own development to meet all learners' needs.

- **Uses inclusive language** like "our students" and "What can we do?" so that there is more cohesion and more collaboration.

- **Reframes deficit language** like "those students don't know English" to "our English learners are learning English, which is a complex process that we can help accelerate."

- **Intentionally seeks ways to work together** to focus on schoolwide priority instructional practices that boost academic language development for English learners and all students.

- **Celebrates** growth in students and in teams, not just proficiency, so that the culture of the school recognizes risk-taking and incremental steps towards goals.

- **Curriculum and instruction** so that all teachers plan, teach, and assess with a language lens for college- and career-ready standards;
- **Data and assessment,** emphasizing multiple measures of growth and ownership of learning;

- **Collaboration,** including teacher leadership and co-teaching to build and sustain communities of practice;
- **Leadership and evaluation** focused on specific teacher actions that impact student efficacy and academic performance;
- **Dual language, biliteracy, and multilingual learning environments** that allow students to use their entire linguistic repertoire and that honor and celebrate diversity of language, culture, race, religion, and perspective; and
- **Anti-bias education,** because language education cannot be separated from inequities and social justice.

LEADERSHIP MATTERS

Leadership that has an eye on equity for all students is essential for enabling such professional learning and shifting school culture to meet English learners' needs. In schools that respond proactively and respectfully to a growing English learner population, I typically find a strong leader at the helm who promotes student-centered, teacher-driven professional learning that is embedded and aligned to a clear vision.

Strong leadership begins with a clear vision of what effective instruction looks, sounds, and feels like in the leader's school community. When I get to know a school, I interview the school leader and we conduct learning walks together so that I can understand the current vision of equitable instruction.

When that vision is lacking, one place to start is considering identified student needs and how they can be

integrated across classrooms to benefit all students. For instance, if the English learner student subgroup needs to accelerate writing development, all teachers can focus on common writing practices that bridge students' oracy to literacy. Leaders can encourage such schoolwide practices by supporting professional learning communities. (See an example here: **www. teachingchannel.org/video/writing-in-math-ells.**)

I also look for whether leaders have established a culture of inquiry within the school and whether leaders model risk-taking, in the form of actively asking questions, trying new practices, openly reflecting on learning, and continuously engaging in action cycles.

If we want collaborative, constructivist relationships between teachers and students to thrive, this has to begin with reciprocal power relations among all learners, including leaders, teachers, students, and families. Acknowledging that we don't have all the answers is an important place to start.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

With strong leadership and professional learning in place, teachers can focus on improving instruction tailored to their students. Effective instructional practices that are responsive to English learners include:

- **Moving away from a monolingual lens to a multilingual lens.** Leaders and teachers can honor students' diversity by acknowledging what they have in common and putting themselves in students' shoes. This is especially important when the diversity of our student populations doesn't match the staff in the school. For example, learning to speak greetings in the languages that students and their families represent models an asset-based, global perspective that all schools

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RESOURCES

- *The Language Lens for Content Classrooms: A Guide for K-12 Educators of Academic and English Language Learners*: **https://bit.ly/2S3mE9y.**

- Identifying our Circle of Influence as Change Agents of Equity, Language and Literacy: **https://bit.ly/2GrkNdB.**

- Strong Connections Built on Confianza Between Home & School for English Learners: **https://bit.ly/2TL8XOw.**

- We are Academic Language Learners (ALLs): **https://bit. ly/2ByAUlu.**

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should strive for.

- **Empowering students** by understanding language development and teaching with a language lens. This means that the deeper features of language in any content area are made explicit, interactive, and supported through language-rich scaffolds.
- **Becoming student-centered** by supporting students to assess their own growth and celebrate their own story of learning language and content.
- **Clearly stating the learning objectives** for units of study to guide all students but especially to demystify expectations for students whose language and culture are not matched to the school's.

MAINTAIN CONSISTENCY

For these practices to be effective, the whole school community must take shared responsibility for making them consistent across classrooms. Consider what happens when they are not.

Bridget, the teacher we met at the beginning of this article, has worked hard and thoughtfully to set clear,

student-centered learning targets that integrate academic language and content in her beginning English learner classroom. Students reflect on their purpose for learning daily and show their growth through their learning journals, projects, and digital portfolios.

To enable academic conversations among her diverse students, she provides structured protocols, along with visual and graphic scaffolds and opportunities to share personal experiences and make relevant connections. As a result, students actively engage in their own learning through plentiful reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

But when the students leave Bridget's classroom and spend the rest of the day in a general education classroom, these supports are inconsistent and checking for understanding isn't common practice. The English learner students who were so engaged in Bridget's classroom rarely speak or write, and they go from feeling empowered to disenfranchised.

Imagine what would happen if Bridget had the opportunity to work with the general education teacher to provide tips about what works well for their shared students. What if they were able to co-plan and co-teach? Even when such collaboration is not feasible, other strategies can help bridge the gap. An instructional coach could be the conduit for sharing practices across classrooms, like language scaffolds and authentic assessment.

When we break down the silos, it becomes clear that educators have more in common than not, and it is possible to work together in strategic ways to build a shared knowledge base and a shared set of strategies that works for our own diverse student populations.

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