

Information Brief:

Using School Leadership Teams to Meet the Needs of English Language Learners

M. Movit, I. Petrykowska, and D. Woodruff

May 2010

Leadership teams should meet regularly and include diverse representation across areas of *professional expertise and cultural experience*. Although most schools already have some form of a student support or problem-solving team in place, these teams are not always fully prepared—professionally and/or culturally—to address the needs of specific populations of students.

Introduction

To ensure that the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) strategies effectively addresses the needs of all students, the National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) recommends that schools and districts establish *leadership teams* that focus on issues affecting culturally and linguistically diverse students. New leadership teams can be added to what already exists, or current leadership teams can be refocused on these issues. Leadership teams should meet regularly and include diverse representation across areas of *professional expertise* (e.g., general education, bilingual education, and special education) and *cultural experience* (e.g., parents, community members, and others with rich relationships and knowledge of student backgrounds). Although most schools already have some form of student support or problem-solving teams in place, these teams are not always fully prepared—professionally and/or culturally—to address the needs of specific populations of students.

The Importance of Focusing the School Leadership Team on English Language Learners

A leadership team that is prepared to effectively address the needs of English language learners (ELLs) is an important ingredient in a successful RTI framework because, although many ELLs currently participate in bilingual education or English as a second language (ESL) programs, achievement outcomes for ELLs as a group are dismal. On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the average reading score for fourth-grade ELLs was 188 points out of a possible 500 (compared with 224 for non-ELL fourth graders). This 36-point discrepancy in achievement is larger than the 26-point gap in reading achievement between Hispanic students and white students, the 28-point gap between African American students and White students, the 27-point gap between students from low-income families and students from high-income families, and the 33-point gap between disabled students and nondisabled students (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007).



Factors Contributing to the Problem

Several factors contribute to the poor educational outcomes of ELLs:

- **Ineffective or poorly trained teachers.** ELLs are more likely than other groups to be taught by a teacher who lacks appropriate teaching credentials (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Rumberger, 2008). Fifty-six percent of public school teachers in the United States have at least one ELL in their class, but less than 20% of these teachers are certified to teach ELLs (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Waxman, Tellez, & Walberg, 2004).
- **Lack of access to appropriate instructional and assessment materials.** Most states use curricula and assessments that are developed specifically for English speakers and make no accommodation for ELLs who, by definition, are not proficient in English. Therefore, instructional and assessment materials may not be valid or reliable as indicators of what ELLs know and can do academically (Gándara et al., 2008).
- **Failure by schools to incorporate students' language and culture into instruction.** Recent reviews of research on language instruction indicate that (a) teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English and (b) using reading passages with themes from students' cultures improves comprehension (Goldenberg, 2008). Nevertheless, approximately 60% of ELLs are in essentially all-English instructional settings with little differentiation for language proficiency and cultural backgrounds (Zehler, Hopstock, & Fleischman, 2003).

A Growing Need

Nationally, ELL students come from more than 400 language backgrounds (Goldenberg, 2008). Eighty percent of ELLs are Spanish speakers, and the dropout rate for Hispanic students is 21% compared with 8.7% for all students nationally (National Center on Educational Statistics, 2007). With more than 5 million ELL students in the United States, up from 2 million in 1990 (National Center on Educational Statistics, 2004), the challenge of providing effective instruction to these students can no longer be ignored.

How Can a School Leadership Team Meet the Needs of ELLs?

To ensure the development and maintenance of an effective school environment for ELLs, the leadership team should review the quality of the learning environment for the school as a whole and within individual classrooms. The goal of this review process is to ensure that teaching and learning activities are well-structured and culturally and linguistically engaging and allow students to be active (rather than passive)



participants in their acquisition of the English language and academic content (Gay, 2000). In addition, relative to RTI, the leadership team should review screening and progress monitoring data for ELLs, along with any resulting instructional modifications, to ensure that the instructional supports used across the RTI tiers are culturally and linguistically appropriate and are leading to improved student outcomes (NCRTI, 2010). Ortiz and colleagues (2009) recommend that schools conduct the following practices:

- Accommodate instruction to best reflect the communication styles of students
- Incorporate and value the use of diverse community practices in the curriculum
- Adapt instruction to accommodate the acculturation needs of students
- Develop linguistic competence through functional and purposeful dialogue in the classroom
- Connect students' prior experiences with current skills being taught (i.e., experiential background)
- Contextualize learning by reflecting and placing value on students' native cultural values, norms, and languages when implementing the curriculum

Who Should Be on the School Leadership Team?

Within the leadership team, a diverse representation of members is important. Team members should acknowledge and utilize differences in expertise so that everyone can contribute toward the development of a culturally responsive learning environment. Team members should also operate on the premise of mutual accountability for achieving goals that have been established for student performance (Richards, Artiles, Klinger, & Brown, 2005).

An effective leadership team includes several individuals who have an impact on the ways that ELLs learn and represents a collective effort across school stakeholders.

School principals are responsible for engaging school personnel, parents, and the community in adopting a common philosophy and approach to culturally and linguistically responsive instruction. Principals ensure the proper implementation of RTI and support teachers and personnel for the program's success.

Bilingual education and ESL teachers can support the use of native languages in teaching the school curriculum and provide rigorous, systematic English language development (ELD) programs so students can improve their English proficiency. Bilingual education and ESL teachers also help general and special education teachers successfully integrate ELLs into their classrooms and adapt instruction.

Suggested Members of an ELL Leadership Team:

- School principals
- Bilingual education and ESL teachers
- General education teachers
- Skill and content specialists
- Special education teachers
- Parents



General education teachers integrate ELLs into their classrooms. They support the development of students' English language and literacy skills. General education teachers also have a primary responsibility to meet the language needs of students who:

- Do not receive bilingual education/ESL services because they are not considered ELLs but may require some language support. This includes students who speak only English, although English is not the native language of their parents and as a result the students have limited opportunities to hear and use standard English before school.
- Do not qualify for ESL programs but do not have native-like English skills.

Skill and content specialists support the development of ELLs' English conversational and academic language skills. They also teach and support English literacy and content area instruction. Skill and content specialists support general education teachers as they differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students. They also provide more intensive interventions for ELLs who are struggling academically.

Special education teachers can ideally provide instruction that addresses both language- and disability-related needs for ELL students who are found eligible for special education. They support:

- Native language development
- English as a second language acquisition
- Native and/or English literacy development
- Content area instruction

Special education teachers also consult with bilingual education, ESL, and general education teachers so that the disability-related needs of students are addressed in every setting (Ortiz et al., 2009).

Parents provide experiences upon which to build language acquisition and ensure that instruction is culturally responsive. To support their children's acquisition of language and literacy, parents should talk to their children in both their native language and English when possible, read with their children, and assist with homework.

Why Is Parent Participation on the School Leadership Team Important?

As both standing members and active participants on an as-needed-basis, parents can contribute to the leadership team in ways that no other team member can. Using the



knowledge they have about their children and culture, parents can provide the following types of information:

- Strengths and learning needs of their children
- Health, developmental milestones, and educational history of their children
- The family's use of language and/or cultural background
- Strategies (both successful and not) that have been used at home to help their children learn

Parents can also assist with the development of new learning strategies and interventions and reinforce instruction at home. Furthermore, parents have access to students beyond the hours of the school day. In this extra time, parents can help to bridge the gap between school and home by providing experiences upon which to build language acquisition. Parents can also support language and literacy acquisition through such activities as talking and reading to their children, listening to their children read, and helping their children with homework (Ortiz et al., 2009). (For more information about the involvement of parents in education, please see *Getting Involved* on the National Parent Teacher Association Web site: http://www.pta.org/topic_getting_involved.asp.)

How Can the School Leadership Team Be Culturally and Linguistically Responsive?

Although the majority of ELLs are Spanish-speakers (Goldenburg, 2008), the broad diversity of cultural and linguistic backgrounds represented across this population makes it crucial for teachers and administrators, with the support of the leadership team, to implement culturally and linguistically responsive practices throughout the school, for example:

- Connect with students by understanding their sociocultural environment
- Engage students strategically in ongoing instructional conversation to support their interchanges and expression of ideas
- Provide students with cognitively challenging curricula (i.e., emphasizing higher order thinking and scaffolding as appropriate)

To support teachers in their efforts to utilize culturally and linguistically responsive practices, administrators should provide and encourage teachers to take advantage of professional development opportunities that will help them to develop strategies to meet the needs of all students.



What Does Success Look Like for the School Leadership Team?

As the team moves forward, it is also important to determine how well the team is doing on three levels (Kovaleski, 2002):

1. Individual student outcomes, including overall student achievement and the results of specific interventions
2. Schoolwide indicators of effectiveness, including impact on teacher practices, involvement of parents and families, and impact on special education placements
3. Stakeholder satisfaction with the team, including that of teachers, parents, and students

While the assessment of team success depends greatly on the individual characteristics of the school and team, Bickel and colleagues (1999) share several factors that can help to contribute to the success of any leadership team:

- Obtain the support and involvement of administrators at the school and district levels
- Use a variety of student assessments (e.g., portfolios, multiple choice tests, presentations, etc.) to measure student progress
- Use progress monitoring data to inform instructional interventions
- Build a culturally and linguistically diverse leadership team
- Ensure highly skilled instructional support (e.g., qualified bilingual education teachers)
- Maintain ongoing collaboration between general, bilingual, and special education teachers
- Implement a problem-solving process that is built on trust and shared responsibility



How Can the School Leadership Team Be Supported to Ensure Success?

A school's leadership team is not alone in its efforts. With multiple levels of support (Exhibit 1), each of which is culturally and linguistically responsive, the leadership team can be very successful.

Exhibit 1. Multilevel Student Support System



Level	Who Is Supported?	How Is Support Provided?
State education agency (SEA) leadership team	LEA leadership teams across the state	Provides guidance, visibility, funding, and political support Provides coaching for LEA teams and technical assistance for building teams
Local education agency (LEA) leadership team	Multiple schools in a local or intermediate district	Provides guidance, visibility, funding, and political support
Building leadership team	All building staff	Provides guidance and manages implementation
Building staff	All students	Provides effective practices to support students

Source: Adapted from Michigan Department of Education, n.d.



Tips for a Successful School Leadership Team for ELLs

- Use what you know about the language proficiency of students to develop an intervention and carefully consider the language of instruction
- Consider student characteristics or environmental factors that may have caused other interventions to succeed or fail
- Base recommendations on individual students; do not generalize why students struggle as a whole
- Conduct followup meetings to discuss students who are referred to the leadership team and hold the meetings for as long as it takes to resolve the problem
- Ensure that all faculty and staff understand an intervention, how it differs from core instruction, and how to evaluate it
- If the majority of team members are bilingual in a parent's native language, conduct the meeting in that language; provide English interpretations for those who speak only English (Ortiz et al., 2009)
- If the majority of team members are not bilingual, always provide a trained interpreter for parents

Conclusions

By focusing on the academic, language, and cultural needs of ELL students, a school leadership team can be a driving force toward creating a schoolwide environment that supports effective teaching and successful student outcomes. A professionally and culturally diverse leadership team that is committed to this goal can use its collective skills and experience to ensure that (a) parents and students feel empowered and supported toward achieving at a high level and (b) teachers have the proper training, instructional materials, and support for providing engaging and appropriate instruction for ELLs. NCRTI encourages schools to use the information provided in this brief as part of an RTI framework that uses student screening, progress monitoring, and culturally and linguistically appropriate interventions to meet the needs of ELLs. NCRTI also encourages schools to keep the Center informed about successes and lessons learned when using an RTI framework to support improved outcomes for all students.



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Through funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, the American Institutes for Research and researchers from Vanderbilt University and the University of Kansas have established the National Center on Response to Intervention. The Center provides technical assistance to states and districts and builds the capacity of states to assist districts in implementing proven response to intervention frameworks.



National Center on Response to Intervention

<http://www.rti4success.org>

National Center on Response to Intervention

1000 Thomas Jefferson Street, NW

Washington, DC 20007

Phone: 877-784-4255

Fax: 202-403-6844

Web: <http://www.rti4success.org>

This document was produced under U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs Grant No. H326E070004 to the American Institutes for Research. Grace Zamora Durán and Tina Diamond served as the OSEP project officers. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service or enterprise mentioned in this publication is intended or should be inferred. This product is public domain. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted. While permission to reprint this publication is not necessary, the citation should be: National Center on Response to Intervention (May 2010). *Using School Leadership Teams to Meet the Needs of English Language Learners*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, National Center on Response to Intervention.



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