English language learner program at Irving Elementary: finding a life preserver for sink or swim education

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English language learner program at Irving Elementary: finding a life preserver for sink or swim education

Abstract
Each year the United States becomes more ethnically and linguistically diverse and as a result, so do our schools. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds represent the fastest growing subset of the K-12 student population. In the 2003-2004 school year, 5.5 million school-age children were English language learners (Leos, 2004). As school districts across the country are faced with initiating and implementing programs for these learners, they must factor in the high stakes of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the possible impact of a new group of test scores on their adequate yearly progress.

The purpose of this study is to clarify the plan for ELL instruction, the role of the ELL teachers, classroom teachers, and how to best bring about high academic achievement of the students enrolled in the ELL Program at Irving Elementary.
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER PROGRAM AT IRVING ELEMENTARY:
FINDING A LIFE PRESERVER FOR SINK OR SWIM EDUCATION

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION
- Purpose of the Study ................................................................. 3
- Significance of the Study .............................................................. 3
- Limitations of the Study ............................................................... 4

## LITERATURE REVIEW
- Introduction .................................................................................... 4
- Program Philosophy ........................................................................... 5
- Teacher Preparation for Teaching ELL Students ........................... 8
- Classroom Models of Instruction .................................................... 10
- Assessment ....................................................................................... 12

## METHODS
- Introduction ...................................................................................... 14
- Context ............................................................................................ 15
- Participants ....................................................................................... 15
- Measures .......................................................................................... 17
- Interview .......................................................................................... 17
- Staff Survey ...................................................................................... 18
- Student Achievement ....................................................................... 18
- Classroom Data ................................................................................ 19
- Procedures ....................................................................................... 20
- Interview .......................................................................................... 20
- Staff Survey ...................................................................................... 20
- Student Achievement ....................................................................... 20
- Classroom Assessments ................................................................... 21
- Teaching Methods ............................................................................ 22

## RESULTS
- Introduction ...................................................................................... 22
- Interview Findings .......................................................................... 22
- Staff Survey Data ............................................................................ 26
- Student Achievement Data ............................................................... 27
  - Table 1. Waterloo Schools ELL ITBS Participants .......................... 28
  - Table 2.0 Building Totals of Proficient and Non-Proficient Scores on ITBS Language Totals ................................................................. 29
  - Table 2.1 Building Totals of Proficient and Non-Proficient ELL Scores on ITBS Reading Totals ................................................................. 29
  - Table 3. ITBS Totals of One Group of ELL Students Over a Three-Year Period ................................................................. 30
- Classroom Assessment Data ............................................................. 30
  - Table 4. Student DRA Scores - Text Levels .................................... 31
  - Table 5. Student Bedrock Sight Words – Actual Number Known ........... 31

## DISCUSSION ................................................................................. 32

## REFERENCES ................................................................................. 39

## APPENDIX
- Appendix A. Interview Questions ....................................................... 42
INTRODUCTION

Purpose

Each year the United States becomes more ethnically and linguistically diverse and as a result, so do our schools. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds represent the fastest growing subset of the K-12 student population. In the 2003-2004 school year, 5.5 million school-age children were English language learners (Leos, 2004). As school districts across the country are faced with initiating and implementing programs for these learners, they must factor in the high stakes of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the possible impact of a new group of test scores on their adequate yearly progress.

Waterloo schools are no exception to the challenge of providing quality education for our English Language Learners (ELL). Increasing numbers, NCLB, and reconfigured attendance areas have created a need for a new ELL Program. An effective program must be aligned to the needs and resources of each specific district while meeting federal guidelines for ELL instruction and the civil rights of immigrants. Budget limits, availability of qualified teachers, models of instruction, and consideration of available resources are all variables in the planning and implementation of a program while keeping student achievement at the forefront of the discussion.

Program selection must be unique to the demographics of the ELL population of each district. Waterloo schools have adopted the inclusion model with ELL pullout support. As Irving Elementary establishes its own program within these guidelines, the questions to be asked are: What is the plan and how is it being implemented at Irving Elementary? What is working to increase student academic achievement? Are we doing
enough? The purpose of this study is to clarify the plan for ELL instruction, the role of the ELL teachers, classroom teachers, and how to best bring about high academic achievement of the students enrolled in the ELL Program at Irving Elementary.

Significance

The issue of ELL instruction has had a significant impact on the Irving Elementary learning community but more so on its teaching community. Clear identification of the plan for instruction and identification of the current level of teachers’ expertise guide the focus of future staff development. Examination of early trends in student achievement data, current research of effective teaching strategies, and implications of NCLB guidelines on assessment can all serve as an initial information base needed to establish a cohesive and effective ELL program.

Limitations

The conclusions that could be drawn in this study are limited by the small scale and short span of the data collection. Comparing the strategies implemented and assessment data of similar programs within and outside the district could provide a more accurate evaluation of the effectiveness of specific teaching strategies or models of implementation of ELL instruction. On-going collection of data will enhance the credibility of future studies in this area, but guarded conclusions must continue to be drawn from standardized tests that are not language appropriate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Finding the best practices for educating the growing population of English Language Learners (ELL) in our schools presents educators with an enormous challenge.
School systems planning to develop a more effective plan for the academic success of ELL students need to base their efforts on four preliminary components: data, research, successful models and goals for students (Farin, 2005). Reviewing research in critical areas of ELL instruction can help districts create programs best fit for the enormous diversity in terms of language and proficiency of each ELL student. Overall program philosophy, expertise and training of classroom teachers, classroom models and strategies, and assessment procedures and tools, are critical components of an English Language Learner program.

Program Philosophy

The best possible program for English Language Learners is one that recognizes and supports students' connections to their first language and culture, but also provides instruction and experiences in the English language and culture. The decision to adopt a specific model can be determined by needs of the specific group of students, resources available, and state or federal guidelines. California is a state where many changes in instruction for limited-English children are taking place. In June 1998, 61 percent of voters approved initiative 227, "English for the Children." Overnight the new law required that all limited-English children be provided an English-immersion program for one year or longer depending on each student's progress. The law allows schools to continue native-language instruction programs if enough parents request this option (Porter, 2000).

During the past 25 years, U. S. public schools have developed six different instructional approaches to support students learning English as a second language (Rossell, 2005). Structured Immersion or Sheltered English Immersion, ESL Pull-Out,
English Immersion or Sink or Swim Approach, Transitional Bilingual or Early-Exit and Late-Exit, Dual Language Immersion or Two-Way Immersion, and Bilingual Maintenance programs are the common names used to describe these ELL instructional approaches. The following reviews describe the methods of instruction unique to each approach.

Sheltered Immersion Instruction or Structured Immersion provides instruction almost entirely in English in a self-contained classroom consisting only of English language learners (Rossell, 2005). Teachers, however, are generally bilingual, and support their students’ use of the first language in order to negotiate meaning in English (Samway and McKeon, 1999). The goal of this kind of a program is strictly English proficiency, with no attempt to either maintain or develop the second language (Houk, 2005). Rossell (2005) supports this method of instruction as the most effective approach in terms of helping students become proficient at speaking, reading and writing in English, based on her own research and the research of others (see Rossell & Baker, 1996). The Rossell and Baker review has significantly influenced state policies, resulting in changes opposing bilingual education (Slavin & Cheung, 2004). Abadiano and Turner (2004) view the sheltered instruction model as an empowerment framework for ELL students, especially in content area instruction. For the English language learners (ELLs), the development of English language competence is fundamental for academic achievement in content academic area classrooms (Cummings, 1996).

The English as a Second Language (ESL) Pullout programs supplement regular, mainstream classroom instruction, with instruction in a small-group setting outside the mainstream classroom aimed at developing English language skills (Rossell, 2005). This
specialized instruction may or may not utilize the student’s first language. ESL (pullout) services also vary widely in the level to which they are connected to regular classroom instruction, and whether they are content-based or based purely in the acquisition of discrete literacy concepts (Houk, 2005). Thomas and Collier (2002) consider this approach a remedial service for ELL students and contend that, “students that transition out of these programs consistently demonstrate low levels of language proficiency and academic achievement.”

The English Immersion or “sink or swim” approach places students in a mainstream classroom with little or no special help or scaffolding. This is the regular classroom setting from which students are occasionally pulled out for ESL services. English language learners are expected to “fend for themselves” (Samway and McKeon 1999), and teachers generally make no special instructional modification to develop language or content proficiency beyond the regular instruction provided for all students (Houk, 2005). Rossell (2005) states that most immigrant children in the U.S. are in mainstream classrooms and that the academic harm caused by this approach is not significant enough to offset the practicality and ease of forming these classrooms. When implementation of California’s initiative 227 forced ELL education from bilingual to English immersion classrooms, there was much concern that student performance would drastically fall. After one year of implementing California’s new education policies and curriculum, the reading scores for Limited English Program (LEP) 2nd graders across the state rose from the 19th to the 23rd percentile, and all students increased from the 39th to the 43rd percentile (Hakuta, 1999). Porter (2000) acknowledges that one year’s results are
not proof positive and that there is room for improvement, but these predictions that bilingual children in English-language classrooms would fall behind have not come true.

In spite of California's change of instructional practices moving to English immersion programs, there is still much support for bilingual education. Transitional bilingual education programs aim to bring students to English proficiency as quickly as possible. These programs initially deliver instruction and develop students' literacy in the students' native language and put a priority on developing students' English skills (Rossell, 2005). Unlike transitional bilingual education, which views native language instruction as a means to learn English, dual language programs aim to produce students who are fluent in both languages (Wu, 2005). Researchers have found that the amount of formal schooling a student receives in the first language is the strongest predictor of how that student will perform academically in the second (Thomas & Collier, 2002) and the most successful English language learners are those who have maintained bilingualism and a strong connection with their family's culture (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001).

**Teacher Preparation for Teaching ELL Students**

In any school planning to improve instruction and achievement among its students, investments in human resources are the most critical. In schools serving English language learners, it is all the more essential that the staff of a school be specially tailored to meet the needs of students. Effective and relevant staff development is crucial for schools and teachers seeking to better serve English language learners (Houk, 2005). Recent statistics show that fewer than 13 percent of teachers in the United States have received any professional development designed to help them effectively teach this growing population of students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). New
awareness of the importance of specialized instruction for ELL students in the regular classroom has prompted initiation of programs for teacher training as well as journal articles discussing the issues involved in preparing all school personnel for interaction with the growing population of English language learners. Carla Meskill (2005) describes the federally funded Training All Teachers (TAT) project developed for pre-service and in-service educators across disciplines. The goal of the TAT project is to increase opportunities for all pre-/in-service teachers, pupil services personnel, administrators, and other education personnel to learn about issues specific to ELLs (Meskill, 2005). DeJong and Harper (2005) present a framework that identifies areas of expertise necessary for mainstream teachers to be prepared to teach in classrooms with native and non-native English speakers. A recent American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education survey of 417 institutes of higher education found that fewer than one in six required any preparation for mainstream elementary or secondary teachers regarding the education of ELLs (Menken & Antunez, 2001). DeJong and Harper (2005) show in their article that while good teaching practices for native English speakers are often relevant for ELLs, they are insufficient for meeting their linguistic and cultural needs.

Classroom teachers are not the only school personnel that need specific training to meet the needs of our ELL students. Layton and Lock (2002) address the increasingly common issue of differentiating ELLs and English language learners with learning disabilities. In their study, they examined in-service teachers' sensitivity to differences between typical second language acquisition issues and the presence of learning disabilities. They found significant differences between trained and untrained teachers in
their sensitivity to issues surrounding the identification of learning disabilities in students who are English language learners.

A comparison study was conducted to determine the need for inservice of speech-language pathologists in their knowledge and background for providing services to the ELL population. The 2001 study concluded that speech-language pathologists were in need of professional preparation education programs (Roseberry-McKibbin, Brice, O’Hanlon, 2005).

A study of characteristics of exemplary bilingual paraprofessionals supports the value of training all school personnel. Wegner, Lubbes, Lazo, Azcarraga, Sharp & Ernst-Slavit (2004) found that well trained bilingual paraprofessionals help students move through multiple, complex, unfamiliar school settings and make connections to life outside.

On a basic level, it is important for teachers and entire staffs to become familiar with the relationships between language, culture, identity, and cognition (Houk 2005). Weinstein, Curran, and Tomlinson-Clarke, (2003) specify characteristics of a culturally responsive classroom, stating that culturally responsive pedagogy and teaching address the need for teachers to develop the knowledge, skills, and predispositions to teach children from diverse racial, ethnic, language and social class backgrounds.

**Classroom Models of Instruction**

High quality bilingual programs introduce English and teach subject matter in English as soon as it can be made comprehensible, but these programs also develop literacy in students’ first language and teach subject matter in that language in the early stages (Krashen, 2005). Slavin and Cheung (2004) conducted reviews of research on
bilingual education using statistical tools far more precise and sensitive than those used in other reviews. The study found strong evidence in favor of teaching students to read in both their native language and in English at different times of the day. Slavin and Cheung’s (2004) research also found consistent positive effects of programs that use systematic phonics. Gersten and Geva (2003) support this in their study of teaching reading to early language learners. They concluded that awareness of speech sounds plays an important role in reading development and that the awareness of individual speech sounds in one’s native language correlates with the awareness of individual speech sounds in a second language.

Although the majority of ELL students in English immersion classrooms receive little or no help and are still showing minimal progress, research has established some clear strategies that educators can use to better meet the needs of English language learners. A review of instructional strategies for linguistically and culturally diverse students reveals that many of these strategies are simply extensions of approaches that work well with all students (Gray & Fleischman 2005).

Scaffolded reading experiences provide a practical, research based framework that teachers can use to support English language learners. The framework can be used in both reading and content-area lessons at all grade levels (Fitzgerald & Graves, 2004). Wynn & Laframboise (1996) identified several types of effective scaffolding in their study of ELL literacy acquisition. Shared concrete experiences, shared reading and singing, and shared writing of story innovations all provided scaffolding for literacy acquisition. Contextual supports of simplified language, teacher modeling, visuals and graphic organizers, and cooperative and hands-on learning are strategies used to increase
comprehension. In addition, many researchers support the use of scaffolding strategies to help ELL students organize their thoughts in English, develop study skills, and follow classroom procedures.

After researching interventions to improve literacy for poor culturally and linguistically diverse students, Greenwood and Arreaga-Mayer (2001) determined that class-wide peer tutoring was an effective intervention in increasing the academic learning of these students in the classroom. In addition to improved academic learning, use of the English language in the peer-tutoring interactions of students (discourse) is an expected benefit of classwide peer tutoring (Greenwood & Arreaga-Mayer Utley, 2001). Smith (2004), and Zwiers (2005) both encourage scaffolding the process of learning academic vocabulary in content areas. For English language learners, academic English is like a third language ...this third language is full of new words, figurative expressions, grammar structures, verb tenses, and communication strategies (Zwiers 2004). Smith (2004) identifies a framework to teach content vocabulary as well as the curricular content in subject area courses.

Assessment

Concerns about how to ensure the valid and equitable assessment of English-language learners (ELLs) and other students from culturally non-mainstream backgrounds are longstanding (Guillermo & Trumbull, 2003). Educators need to know as much information as possible about the language and literature development of English language learners in order to effectively plan for their instruction in all subject areas. Assessments that truly distinguish a student’s English language knowledge from their academic knowledge are very difficult to find. Assessments fall into two general
categories: commercially produced standardized tests and classroom-based assessments that are generated by classroom, school, or district goals for children (Houk, 2005).

The use of standardized tests to identify progress of ELLs' academic skills and trends in learning can be useful in program design and curricular choices. Discussion of the value of testing students who are not proficient in conversational or academic English has initiated investigation of assessment instruments modified to account for language differences. Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, high-stakes testing has come to exert an increasing influence on education practice in our schools. Schools across the United States have reported low performance levels on such tests for their linguistic and cultural minority students (Bielenberg & Fillmore, 2005). A report on test scores presented by Bielenberg & Fillmore (2005) finds that the average scores of ELLs on standardized math tests steadily decline over time. They find that as long as the tests stay close to the skills covered in basic skills instruction students perform reasonably well, but by the fourth grade a higher level of English proficiency is needed and the performance of ELL students begins to decline.

Mastering academic English - and thus surviving high-stakes tests - requires instructional activities that actively promote language development in the context of learning intellectually challenging content (Bielenberg & Fillmore, 2005). Classroom-based assessments allow for planning for more effective instruction and monitoring progress of students. To plan for ELLs, Houk (2005) affirms that we need to encourage the gathering of many sources of information. Oral language proficiency tests will give an idea of what language children can understand and what kind of language children can produce (Houk, 2005). These assessments measure proficiency in understanding and
manipulating discrete elements of language, without much of the surrounding context that is so important for English language learners (Saville-Troike, 1991). Houk 2005, supports authentic assessment of ELL students. This means that rather than relying on a single, one-time test, we need to encourage gathering of many sources of information in order to assess our students' progress, what many have called portfolio assessment (Clemmone, Laase, Cooper, 1993; Glazer and Brown, 1993). There are a number of effective ways to document children's performance and growth. Which assessments will be used depends on the needs of a program and the way the assessments will be used (Houk, 2005).

METHODS

Introduction

Students from non-English speaking backgrounds, represent the fastest growing subset of the K-12 population in the United States. As a result, educators face the daily challenge of teaching this large and growing student population. Irving Elementary in the Waterloo Community School District is no exception to the trend. As Irving examines its ELL site program, the questions to be asked are: What are the plan and expectations for English Language Instruction at Irving Elementary? Have they been effective in raising student achievement? Are we doing enough? To answer these questions, four investigations were conducted. District ELL personnel were interviewed to identify district guidelines influencing the building program. Next, a survey was conducted of the building certified staff to determine their level of awareness, expertise, and general beliefs about English Language Learner education. District wide ELL standardized test scores were gathered to identify any significant trends, which might highlight needs of the program. Finally, data was collected from action research conducted in a first grade
classroom at Irving Elementary, to identify the amount of growth made by ELL students when the district ELL program is implemented at the classroom level.

Context

Irving Elementary is an urban school with 500 students of diverse backgrounds. Recently, a change in district programming and new attendance area boundaries brought new English Language Learner (ELL) students to Irving. With these students came an ELL program. Although Irving had been home to a few ethnically and culturally diverse students in the past, this student population has increased and many are not proficient in English. Twenty students entered Irving’s ELL program last year as kindergarteners and are now in first grade. Currently, there are eighteen additional ELL students in kindergarten. The majority of the students enrolled in the ELL program are Bosnian and Hispanic.

Participants

There were four sets of participants in this study: Interview participants, Survey participants, District ELL ITBS participants, and Classroom ELL participants. Each person interviewed represented a perspective of the ELL program from the district, building and classroom levels of implementation. The first participant interviewed has been involved in the district ELL program for eight years and currently teaches the English Language Learners Kindergarten classroom at Irving Elementary. Experience in ELL programs in California, a degree in Early Childhood education and an ELL endorsement support the expertise this participant draws upon to mentor building staff members involved in the ELL program. The principal of the school was interviewed to clarify expectations of the program implementation at Irving Elementary. The third
participant in the interview is the facilitator of the English Language Learner programs for the Waterloo School District. For the past seven years this participant has worked with ELL teachers, principals, and with the district special needs program director communicating and implementing federal guidelines in the district programs.

Irving Elementary in the Waterloo School District recently became an English Language Learner (ELL) site school. As a result of increasing numbers of non-English speaking students, teachers are faced with the responsibility of monitoring the achievement of this group of learners in their classrooms. They often work with an ELL support teacher, but the homeroom teachers are ultimately responsible for the progress of any student in their classroom. The purpose of this survey is to identify the level of training that teachers at Irving Elementary have in teaching ELL students as well as their awareness of the needs of English Language Learner (ELL) students.

Thirty-three certified staff members from Irving Elementary participated in the survey used in this study. The survey participants included kindergarten through fifth grade classroom teachers, special needs self-contained and resource teachers, Title One reading teachers, the counselor, family support worker, speech and language clinician, and the ELL resource teacher.

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) scores of 2nd to 5th grade ELL students were analyzed. To be identified as ELL, students are assessed yearly by the Language Assessment Scales (LAS) administered by trained district personnel to determine their English language fluency and acquisition. Students must participate in the ITBS assessment by federal law after they have been in the United States for one year.
The final group of participants consists of English Language Learner students and their teachers involved in the ELL program intervention. The students in this study were identified for the ELL program in first grade based on their scores on the LAS, a battery used by the Waterloo Schools for placement purposes. The six students in this investigation are all from Bosnian families. All but one of the students is bi-lingual. The non-bilingual student understands Bosnian and comes from a bilingual home, but does not speak Bosnian. All of the participants attended kindergarten. One of the students was born in Bosnia and has been in this country for two years. Five of the six children come from non-English speaking homes. The students are six and seven years old.

These children work with two teachers, their classroom teacher and their ELL teacher. The classroom teacher has 26 years of experience in the regular classroom, but has never taught ELL students. The ELL teacher has an English as a Second Language endorsement. She has worked as a paraprofessional in the ELL program at the middle school level. She has no experience in teaching first grade children and does not have an elementary teaching degree.

Measures

Interview

Three Waterloo Schools staff members who are involved in the ELL program at Irving were interviewed. The purpose of the interview was to discover the philosophy and vision of the ELL program in the Waterloo School District and specifically at Irving Elementary. The interview was also designed to discover the expected roles of the teachers and level of preparation needed for the Irving Staff to accommodate the needs of these students.
Staff Survey

The survey questions were developed from responses to interviews with district and building ELL program leaders identifying the philosophy and expectations of the ELL program in the Waterloo Schools and more specifically, Irving Elementary. Irving Elementary is involved in a new ELL program with a large number of ELL students in the kindergarten and first grades. As these students move on to other grade levels, teachers will be affected. This survey is meant to clarify the staff’s training for and knowledge of teaching ELL students. This study is limited to the knowledge of the staff at Irving Elementary in the first year of implementation of the program.

Student Achievement

The purpose of this analysis is to examine the ITBS Reading and Language scores of the growing number of ELL students enrolled in the Waterloo schools from the fall of 2002 to the fall of 2004, and the impact that their achievement scores may have on the status of schools as required by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Currently all students are assessed by the same measures. Although ELL students are given an annual language assessment to determine their level of language fluency, they are assessed using the same tests and methods as English speaking students. All students in the Waterloo School District are given the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, which is the instrument used by the state to assess school effectiveness in relation to the federal guidelines of NCLB. Students in second through fifth grade are tested annually.
Classroom Data

The purpose of this classroom data collection is to measure the amount of growth shown in ELL students' reading scores to investigate the effectiveness of the current model of intervention for teaching ELL students in the first grade at Irving Elementary. All students in the first grade were given the same assessments in the area of reading, reading comprehension, and ability to read sight words. These are the assessments most closely aligned with the curriculum in the ELL program.

The Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA) was administered to assess reading and comprehension skills. The DRA consists of a series of leveled stories. The levels range from pre-primer (A1) to fourth grade reading levels (40-48). The levels are graduated in increases of 2 from A1 to 44. After the reading, the child answers scripted comprehension questions.

The Bedrock List of sight words was used to assess basic sight word recognition. The Bedrock sight-words list is a reading benchmark directed by the district that first and second grade students must learn to show proficiency in reading. There are 25 words in each list. Students are assessed by their ability to read these words in isolation. First grade students are expected to know 175 of these words by the end of first grade.

Presently, there are no assessments used specific to the evaluation of the objectives of the ELL Program. All ELL students are assessed by the same assessments as English speaking students. The measures of the study are also limited by the inconsistencies between the Observation Survey, the assessment instrument used in kindergarten, and the first grade DRA assessment, eliminating the opportunity to identify trends in achievement. The focus of the Observation Survey is on letter, sound, and word
recognition. First grade assessments include word recognition, reading and comprehension components.

**Procedures**

**Interview Data**

Interview data was collected in personal interviews conducted in the setting of the interviewee's choice, in one session without interruption.

**Survey Data**

The survey was distributed to all certified staff by the author. A cover letter to state the purpose of the survey was included. Verbal instructions were given to clarify the rating scale. Participants completed the survey and returned it to the author's mailbox anonymously, when completed. Although the survey was anonymous, it did ask for identification of the participant's general grade level and type of position at Irving Elementary. This data will not be used in this study, but will be recorded, in case it would be needed for planning further professional development. The survey (Appendix B) has four distinct sections for the purpose of collecting specific data identifying overall staff awareness of the building ELL program, specific educational training needs of the staff, their current expectations of ELL students' academic performance, and the staff's beliefs about cultural awareness.

**Student Achievement Data**

Student Achievement Data was collected from Swift Knowledge, the data base program used by the Waterloo School District to collect and analyze building and district assessments. The Fall 2002, 2003, and 2004 Iowa Tests of Basic Skills were used for this analysis. Three sets of data were gathered. First, the total number of ELL students
assessed was gathered and the scores of these students were grouped as non-proficient or proficient. Then the Reading Total and Language Total scores of ELL students enrolled at the five elementary ELL site schools were tracked from the 2002-2003 second grades to the current 2004-2005 fourth grades.

*Classroom Assessments*

The classroom teacher administered the DRA assessment in a one-to-one setting. The teacher introduced the story using a scripted format. The child read the story as the teacher took a running record of the child's reading. After the reading the child answered scripted comprehension questions. If the child was successful (90% in accuracy and 75% in reading the story), then the next text level was given until a level of frustration was reached. The Bedrock Sight-word list was administered in a one to one setting as well, by the classroom associate, the classroom teacher, or the student teacher.

Students are given the DRA three times during the year: within the first two weeks of first grade, at the end of the first semester and then at the end of the school year. The Bedrock List of sight words assessment is given five times during the year, once at the beginning of the year and then at the end of each quarter. These are the only district standard assessments in the area of reading and language. No standardized tests are given in first grade. There are no ELL language assessments given as a baseline or pre-test in first grade.

The classroom teacher administered the assessments individually in the classroom with the other class members working quietly at other activities. The tests were uninterrupted and of short duration in five to ten minute settings. If needed, a child came back at another time if the testing process was to last longer than ten minutes. The same
setting and time limit was used in administering the DRA and the Bedrock sight word assessments.

Teaching Methods

There were two sets of interventions assessed in this study, and both are part of the classroom data collection study. The first intervention was the initiation of the ELL pullout program as directed by the district guidelines and administered by the ELL resource teacher. The second intervention took place in the first grade classroom. The second set of interventions focused specifically on decreasing the ELL students independent work time by initiating more peer and teacher support, initiating the use of a repeated reading computer program, and increasing the vocabulary development activities presented by the teacher in the Guided Reading group setting.

RESULTS

Introduction

Results from the four areas of investigation provide distinctly different data that presents a partial picture of the present English Language Learner Program at Irving Elementary in the Waterloo School District. Interviews of ELL program leaders, indicated that they felt that the program is dependent on classroom teacher expertise and high expectations of ELL student achievement. The staff survey showed a low level of preparation of teachers to teach ELL students and an expectation of these students to achieve below grade level. District ITBS scores indicate progress in Language Totals over a three year period, but Reading scores fell. Classroom data showed more growth after the ELL program was supported by classroom teacher interventions.
Interview Findings

All three interviewees gave similar responses to the first question: “Please describe Waterloo School’s program and philosophy for teaching our ELL students.” They acknowledged that the program had recently changed from a “segregated” self-contained language program for students until they were proficient in English, to an inclusion with “ELL pull-out” model. They all reported that the change was a result of two different factors.

The first of the two factors was a result of a change in population. The first group of ELL students arrived in Waterloo in 1996, and there were not as many students as there are today. Now the number of students being served has made it necessary to serve them at their home schools. The other factor is that such a “segregated classroom” could become a problem with civil rights laws. All three interviewees stated that now we offered an inclusion program with a minimum of forty-five minutes of language instruction from an ELL certified teacher daily.

In response to my follow-up question of: What is the role of the ELL teacher? The ELL teacher and the principal both responded that the ELL teacher should give a minimum of forty-five minutes of direct instruction daily. They both responded that the ELL instruction should be a “pull-out” program. The principal also referred to the printed guidelines for the program. The ELL teacher said that the role of the regular classroom teacher should be to just teach and provide as many experiences as possible for language acquisition. The district facilitator responded that the classroom teachers’ role is bigger than anyone else’s. She felt that the classroom teacher must find a balance of needs and goals for the ELL students.
Responding to the same follow-up question, the district facilitator stated that the ELL teacher needed to connect with the classroom curriculum as much as possible with forty-five minutes of a language enrichment (development) program. She said that at the kindergarten level, the least proficient children would stay with their homeroom ELL/early childhood teacher all day with other English language-speaking children included in that classroom as well. Those ELL kindergarten children, who were more proficient, would spend much of the day in the ELL kindergarten and then be integrated into regular kindergarten classes the remainder of the day.

When asked if classroom teachers needed ELL training, all three interviewees responded with a "yes." The ELL teacher responded that the district facilitator could come to the building and provide some training and that a study group was currently meeting in the district to study about teaching ELL students. She also discussed the disadvantages of the states' support of the University of Northern Iowa's ELL certification program. She said that the program is not linked to the education department, so certified ELL teachers often have no expertise in teaching elementary children: instead they have a language or literature degree to teach at the high school level or above.

The principal and district facilitator both felt that best practices for teaching ELL students are often good for all students and should be used in the general classroom. The district facilitator suggested that eventually training for teaching students with language needs would become a pre-service requirement when obtaining a teaching degree. She also referred to her availability to provide professional development for classroom teachers and stated that it has been provided in the past. In reference to the value of
three-hour professional development sessions, she said that these needed to be offered more systematically, but that in-services make most sense when “you needed it yesterday.”

The principal and ELL teacher gave similar responses when asked: What academic expectations should we have of ELL students in general? They both responded, “the same as any other students.” The teacher stated that the expectations should be very high. The principal referred to the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) legislation, holding the same expectations for ELL students as for other students. She also suggested that a different report card for ELL students might be considered by the district. She felt that the academic needs of ELL students might be clarified by translating their tests into their own languages.

The district facilitator’s response to the same question also referred to the NCLB regulations. According to NCLB, children should be in ELL services until they are at grade level in reading, math and science. She wondered if this was realistic, because many English-speaking students were not at grade level in these areas. She said that although they must uphold the federal guidelines, that these were not the belief of the district. She discussed the law allowing new ELL students to be exempt from the reading section on (in Waterloo) the ITBS standardized test. After that, they must take the entire test. She had heard that there would be some piloting of alternative methods of testing in the near future.

When asked: “What role does cultural background play in teaching ELL students?” all three participants had similar responses. Both district facilitator and the teacher described some of the specific reasons that certain cultures represented at Irving
might respond in a certain way to a classroom teacher. The district facilitator felt that socio-economic factors were important to consider as well as cultural differences. The principal stated that understanding cultural differences was very important as well. She stated that the differences should be recognized and celebrated.

Staff Survey Data

Of the 33 surveys distributed 30 were returned for a 90% response rate. This percentage would support that the quality of the data appears to be high in that all except one of the surveys were returned within one day's time. The high and immediate response rate and the positive comments from the staff when accepting the survey support again the high quality of the data.

The participants recorded their responses to each statement on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being a high level of agreement or understanding and 1 being a low level of agreement or understanding. To clearly identify the needs of the staff the results will be reported using the median response score for each statement. These survey responses can be found in Appendix C.

Overall the data showed that the teachers at Irving Elementary are not aware of the plan for the instruction of ELL students. There was a very low level of awareness of specific instructional strategies to teach a second language, and the teachers felt that they had very few materials to do this as well. The level of staff members trained or receiving training for teaching ELL students in the regular classroom was very low. The data did show that most staff members at Irving Elementary were very interested in participating in professional development to learn strategies for teaching ELL students.
The data shows that teachers’ expectations of ELL students’ academic performance is low and that they believe the regular education program would not be enough for ELL students to make proficient progress. The data also indicates a belief that ELL student’s skills should not be evaluated by the same assessments as English proficient students. The data showed that the participants had a little stronger agreement that ELL students should be tested for learning problems by the same process as English speaking students. This agreement was still very low.

The data showed a very strong agreement that parents should be a part of the ELL program and that teachers needed to understand their students’ cultural customs; however, in both cases, the staff was unsure of how to involve parents and had just “some” understanding of the culture.

*Student Achievement Data*

The total number of ELL students enrolled at each of Waterloo Community School Districts’ five ELL sites over a period of three years (see Table 1) was somewhat consistent at four of the five sites. The latest year showed the smallest number of ELL students taking the ITBS. One of the sites had enough ELL students to constitute a subgroup by NCLB standards. Two of the sites were only three to five students short of having a subgroup. This is significant because if a subgroup is non-proficient, the entire school can be determined to be in need of assistance if the students’ scores do not improve.

A closer look at the ELL ITBS Reading Total and Language Total scores as a group shows us that over a three-year period, the students scored higher in the Language section than the Reading (see Tables 2.0 and 2.1). The number of students scoring below
the 41st percentile was high. At two of the schools, close to half of the students were non-proficient in the area of Language. The percentage of students scoring below the 41st percentile on the Reading assessment was much higher.

Table 1

Waterloo Schools ELL ITBS Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building Totals</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building 1</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building 2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building 3</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>59</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building 4</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>99</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building 5</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from the performance of a specific group of students from one year to the next gives a better view of how the results of the general analysis are distributed. Following the performance of a group of students in second grade in 2002-2003 until 2004-2005 when they are in fourth grade, gives us this data (see Table 3). This more specific data shows a marked decrease in the number of ELL students in the fourth grade compared to the fairly consistent numbers in second and third grade. The number of non-proficient scores in Language and Reading Totals decreases from second grade to third grade. This is especially noted in the Language Total score. The Reading Total scores stay constant from one year to the next showing almost no change in the number of students moving from non-proficient to proficient.

In fourth grade, the significant change is the decrease in the number of students in the group. The distribution of scores did not change significantly. The decrease in the
total number of ELL students by fourth grade is also significant in that this decrease is consistent among all of the schools in the study.

Table 2.0

Building Totals of Proficient and Non-Proficient ELL Scores on ITBS Language Totals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
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<td>N-P</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building 2</td>
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<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building 5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P = Proficient (or above the 41st percentile) N-P = Non-Proficient (or below the 41st percentile)

Table 2.1

Building Totals of Proficient and Non-Proficient ELL Scores on ITBS Reading Totals

<table>
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<td>P</td>
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<td>Building 5</td>
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<td>36</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P = Proficient (or above the 41st percentile) N-P = Non-Proficient (or below the 41st percentile)
Table 3

ITBS Reading Totals of One Group of ELL Students Over a Three-Year Period

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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building 3</td>
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<td>11</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building 5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P = Proficient (or above the 41st percentile) N-P = Non-Proficient (or below the 41st percentile)

Classroom Assessment Data

The ELL students in this assessment all scored at a pre-Primer level on their baseline Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA). This was not unlike many of their English-speaking classmates. They knew between zero and five words from the Bedrock list of sight-words. None of the testing instruments at this level assessed comprehension of reading or language.

After eighteen weeks of implementing the ELL pullout intervention, the DRA’s were again administered. The ELL students’ scores ranged from showing no growth to moving ahead three DRA levels. In the assessment, three students were able to recognize much of the text at a higher level but were not able to answer comprehension questions.

Twelve weeks later the students were again assessed. They had gained from four to nine levels on the DRA assessment of their reading skills (see Table 4). Segregation of the data found that most of the students were able to use strategies to decode words. Comprehension scores were much lower. The number of words they knew from the
Bedrock sight word list had increased (see Table 5) although many of the words that they had recognized at 18 weeks were no longer recognized as new lists were introduced.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>BOY</th>
<th>18 weeks</th>
<th>30 weeks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student D</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student E</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The lowest possible score is –1 and the highest possible score in First Grade is 34.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>BOY</th>
<th>18 weeks</th>
<th>30 weeks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A</td>
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<td>80</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student D</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The highest possible score in First Grade is 250.
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this investigation was to clarify the specific plan for educating the English language learners enrolled in the Waterloo Community School District. This investigation further examined how that plan is being implemented at the building level, specifically at Irving Elementary. District and building data was collected to evaluate the success of the implementation of the plan measured by standardized test scores and classroom assessments.

Data from the investigation indicates that the Waterloo School District has identified the English immersion approach with pullout support as the plan for educating English Language Learners enrolled in the district. Although the approach to education was identified, inconsistent responses to interview questions implied that the specifics of program expectations and implementation were not clear. Responses to the building level staff survey also indicated lack of understanding of the programs' expectations as well as lack of professional training of the staff to teach ELL students. Investigation of data collected from district-wide standardized test scores of ELL students showed a pattern of growth in early grades and then a clear decrease in the rate of growth in reading scores. However, at the classroom level, increased growth was noted when the classroom teacher implemented specific strategies aimed at the unique needs of ELL students.

Each piece of data collected in this investigation is related in a cause and effect relationship. This investigation is limited by data from just one elementary school and just one classroom. However, current research clearly supports that the data from this investigation is similar to the data from many districts working to define and improve
their ELL programs. Recognizing the implications of the data gathered in this investigation can help define priorities and the further development of the ELL program.

Data collected from the survey revealed the preparation and beliefs the Irving staff hold about their role, academic expectations, and understanding of cultural differences in teaching ELL students. It can be concluded that the staff at Irving Elementary is not well informed of the ELL program and does not feel prepared to teach ELL students. However, there is a strong willingness to participate in professional development opportunities to learn how to teach ELL students if the district provides the time and the training.

The teachers' low expectations for the achievement of the ELL students must be addressed. The teachers believe that the ELL students must have accommodations made for them in the regular classroom, yet the teachers have indicated having had almost no training for making them. These low expectations and lack of training can have very negative effects on the potential of a successful experience for the ELL students in the regular classroom. Comparing the expectations of the district and building program leaders with the expectations of the teachers would be an important next step in planning for immediate staff development programs.

The subject of assessing ELL students must also be addressed. The majority of the ELL students will be participating in the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) assessment, which is the instrument Iowa uses to comply with No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to determine the level of Annual Yearly Progress being made by the students at Irving Elementary. The teachers at Irving believe that ELL students should be given alternate assessments, yet these are not available at any level in this program format. The
opportunity for the Irving teachers to discuss accommodations to accurately assess English language learning students is important. Clarification of expectations and appropriate support for students in all assessments as well as standardized tests can help teachers raise their expectations for the achievement of the ELL students. Utilizing the cultural knowledge and ties to the ELL communities of the ELL interpreters and paraprofessionals should be a first step in the cultural awareness education of the staff. The result of valuing this awareness can have significant affects on the students’ achievement.

The District ITBS data brings to light many considerations important to the analysis of the ELL program at Irving Elementary. Examination of the total numbers of ELL students finds that one of the sites had enough ELL students to constitute a subgroup by NCLB standards. Two of the sites were only three to five students short of having a subgroup. This is significant because if a subgroup is non-proficient, the entire school can be determined to be in need of assistance if the students’ scores do not improve. Awareness of the existence of subgroups can help educators focus on skills specific to the weak areas.

A closer look at the English Language Learner ITBS Reading Total and Language Total scores as a group shows us that over a three-year period, the students scored higher in the Language section than the Reading. These scores do bring to question the appropriateness of this test for ELL students. The students being assessed have been in the ELL program from three to six years. The high level of non-proficient ELL scores indicates a problem with the assessment, the program, or the instruction being given.
From the analysis of this data it can be concluded that the ELL students in Waterloo are making slow progress as assessed by the Language Total scores on the ITBS. The consistent high numbers of ELL students scoring below the 41st percentile in the Reading Total certainly merits attention. The significant decrease in the numbers of ELL students could indicate an exit of ELL students from the District ELL support program. Although the students' progress is monitored after exiting the program, it must be concluded that the criteria for exit does not consider level of success on the standardized tests. Classroom assessment data is a better reflection of the progress of our ELL students' achievement. However, if those classroom assessments are also without accommodations for the language needs of these students, then we again are not accurately analyzing their progress or needs.

Discussions about the appropriateness of standardized tests in assessing ELL students' progress have been heard in districts throughout our country. NCLB demands have forced educators to provide quick-fix education for our ELL students in an attempt to help raise test scores. Waterloo must make accommodations for these students within the guidelines of the standardized testing procedures.

Of greatest concern is the slow rate of progress as students reach third and fourth grades. Unclear expectations of the students, teachers' role, and what the ELL program provides can lead to this lack of progress. ELL students should be gradually exiting the program with high levels of success according to the expectations of the administrators of the district program. Although the steps for entering and exiting the ELL program are clear, what happens in between is not clear. Specific assessment of how the ELL program
is supporting the academic needs of the students in the regular classroom can potentially clarify the role of both the ELL teacher and the classroom teacher.

Examination of the classroom assessment data brings us to specific conclusions about the importance of highly skilled classroom teacher intervention as well as appropriately educated ELL support teachers, in the effectiveness of the ELL program at Irving Elementary. Overall, the students' progress was less than expected in the first eighteen weeks. After classroom interventions were initiated, student scores improved by a much greater margin than the first 18 weeks. This would indicate that classroom intervention does have an important role in the academic progress of ELL students. It may also be concluded that the growth could have been a result of language experience the students gained from being in school since August.

The minimal progress made by the students when only receiving instruction in the pullout program could have been a result of the students' need to accumulate language background before reading skills could be developed. It could also be a result of the quality of instruction presented in the ELL pullout program. Although a language based reading program was selected as the district curriculum, it would only have a positive impact on the learning of the students if it was used and used properly. Specific data concerning the actual teaching strategies and activities conducted in the pullout program would help clarify the reason for the poor progress made in the first 18 weeks of the ELL intervention.

The assessment instrument itself is also a possible factor in the initial lower than expected scores of the ELL first graders. The DRA can provide a picture of the students' reading skills including comprehension. Although it provides important information
about all students, it may not be an appropriate tool to evaluate the language based ELL program nor the level of language acquisition of the students. The DRA assesses a student’s word recognition, comprehension, and decoding skills in the English language. First grade ELL students are still thinking and processing in their native language. The process of transferring vocabulary from their native language to English can impede decoding and other reading skills. A more specific assessment of language acquisition and understanding would be a more appropriate tool for evaluating the effectiveness of the ELL program.

The success of the last 12 weeks of classroom teacher intervention supports the importance of the impact of specific teacher knowledge in the achievement of ELL students. The strategies were implemented as a result of new information as to the needs of ELL students. The results show significant increases in student reading scores after the classroom teacher implemented classroom strategies. It can be concluded that educating classroom teachers may be the most effective intervention for increasing ELL student achievement at Irving Elementary.

The newly established ELL Program for first grade at Irving Elementary has the potential to provide ELL students support to be successful in the classroom. The curriculum of the ELL program needs to be more specific. All teachers involved in the ELL education program at Irving Elementary must receive training and education in the best practices and program models for effective ELL instruction. More time should be provided for teacher communication, allowing the ELL teacher to share strategies with the classroom teacher and for the ELL teacher to have a better understanding of the needs of the students. Data driven assessment models require frequent evaluation of student
progress and of the effectiveness of our teaching practices. Only through collaboration and time spent evaluating best practices and appropriate assessments can this be accomplished. With the pressures of NCLB requirements affecting all other areas of instruction, the ELL Program at Irving Elementary can be no exception to high standards of teaching, program design, and student achievement.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
Interview Questions

The interview consisted of four main topics of discussion or questions:

1. Please describe Waterloo School's program and philosophy for teaching our ELL students.

2. Do classroom teachers need specific training to teach ELL students?

3. What academic expectations should we have of ELL students in general?

4. What role does cultural background play in teaching ELL students?

Follow-up questions were utilized when the researcher needed clarification or if the interviewee did not address the specific concern.

1. What is the role of the ELL teacher?

2. What is the role of the classroom teacher?

3. What opportunities for professional development in ELL education the district has offered?

4. Are ELL students tested using the same assessments as non-ELL students?

5. Should ELL students be reported as "below grade level" on report cards in areas that are affected by language deficits?

6. Restating of the last question: What role does the teacher's understanding of cultural background play in teaching ELL students?

7. What resources are available to teachers for learning about their students' cultural background?
APPENDIX B
Survey Instrument

English Language Learners Education Survey

Teaching Assignment

Please circle the response that best represents your current teaching assignment.
Grades K-1 2-3 4-5 other

Type of classroom / assignment –
Reg. Education Specialist Special Needs (self-contained) Resource Title I
ELL ELP Support (Counselor, Family Support ) Administration

ELL Plan at Irving

Circle the number that best represents your level of understanding or agreement with each statement with 1 being low and 10 high.

I am aware of Irving’s plan for teaching ELL students
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I am aware of specific instructional strategies needed to support ELL students in my classroom.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I am familiar with how a second language is learned
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I have materials and resources to help support English Language Learners in my classroom
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Professional Development

I have participated in district or building professional development for teaching ELL students
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I have received ELL training from a source other than our district on my own
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I am now enrolled in the ELL class in the evenings at the Title One office
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
I am interested in receiving more professional development for teaching ELL students if the district provides the training and the time

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**Current Understanding of ELL Students' Academic Expectations**

ELL students will make proficient progress by “picking up” language in a regular classroom

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ELL students need accommodations in the regular classroom to make proficient progress

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ELL students should be working at grade level in reading skills

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Most ELL students should be working at grade level in writing skills

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Most ELL students should be working at grade level in Math skills

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ELL students’ skills should be evaluated by the same assessments as students who are not ELL

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ELL students who are not finding success in the classroom, should be evaluated by the same Problem Solving Process as students who are not ELL

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**Cultural Awareness**

Parent involvement plays an important role in the success of an ELL program

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I know of ways to involve my ELL parents in their child’s education

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Understanding a student’s cultural background is an important part of teaching ELL students

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I am familiar with my students' cultural background and customs

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<td><strong>ELL Plan at Irving</strong></td>
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<td>o Awareness of Irving’s ELL program</td>
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<td>o Awareness of specific instructional strategies of how a second language is</td>
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<td>o Teachers having materials and resources to support ELL learners</td>
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<td>o Past training or professional development or present enrollment in programs</td>
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<td>for teaching ELL students</td>
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<td>o Interest in professional development opportunities in teaching ELL students</td>
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<td><strong>Expectations of ELL Academic Achievement</strong></td>
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<td>o ELL students make proficient progress by “picking up” language</td>
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<td>o ELL students need accommodations in the classroom</td>
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<td>o ELL students should be working at grade level in reading</td>
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<td>o ELL students should be given same assessments as non-ELL students</td>
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<td>o If ELL students are not successful they should be evaluated by the same</td>
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<td>Problem Solving Process as students who are not ELL</td>
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<td>o Parents involvement plays an important part in an ELL program</td>
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<td>o Importance of a student’s cultural background in teaching ELL students</td>
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*The scores are based on the median responses on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being low agreement or understanding.*