



IGNITING EDUCATION FOR

# English Language Learners

---

By Kim M. Smithgall

There are 213,470 New York students (8.8 percent of the total student population) who are considered English language learners (ELLs) — an increase of 3.8 percent in the last five years alone. These culturally diverse pupils speak more than 190 languages, the most common being Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Nepali, Karen, Haitian Creole, Urdu, Bengali, and Russian.

The statistics enumerate the changing demographics in today's schools, but the hard data fails to tell the personal stories of these students and the challenges educators are tackling as they welcome ELLs into classrooms across the state and nation.

Try to imagine this: you're 17 years old and you've just arrived at a school in New York after spending the last six years in a refugee camp. Before that, you lived in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, which has the second-highest homicide rate in the world. You haven't been in a formal classroom since first grade; it was simply too dangerous to go to school. While you can converse in Spanish, the lack of formal education means you weren't able to develop the accompanying reading and writing skills. You speak no English.

On this sunny day in June, as your American classmates are lining up a row of pens and yellow pencils on their desks, the teacher hands out booklets and you encounter a list of questions in English, including this one: "Determine, to the nearest minute, the number of degrees in an angle whose measure is 2.5 radians." Answer the question...and be sure to show your work using "the appropriate formula substitutions, diagrams, graphs, charts, etc...all answers should be written in pen, except for graphs and drawings, which should be done in pencil."

It's the algebra 2/trigonometry Regents exam. How do you think you'll do?

**TURNING ON EDUCATION'S AFTERBURNERS**

With today's accountability measures, ELLs are required to take some state assessments (math, for example) during regularly scheduled testing periods and be included in district-wide achievement results, even if they've just arrived at their new school. For ELLs who enter school at a younger age, the transition to a new culture might be a bit easier, but the language barrier still presents significant challenges, as all of these students

must learn both a new language and rigorous academic content at the same time — all while meeting the same high standards as their English-speaking peers.

Brendan Gallivan, executive director of English language learners and Languages Other Than English in the Rochester City School District, borrows an analogy he once heard from a teacher to describe the challenges: "You and I are running a race and you get out of the gate and you have your jets on and you get out 20 yards faster than I do. So then I turn my afterburners on and I'm running as fast as you are. When do I catch you?" he asked. "I never catch you. At some point, I have to run faster. I have to learn more, learn faster and work harder. That's where our English language learners are. They're starting slightly behind us, so in order to catch up linguistically and academically, they're going to have to make strides at a higher rate of growth than their English-speaking peers."

This game of catch-up is among the most daunting in the long list of hurdles dotting the ELL pathway to educational success. New mandates/regulations focused on providing ELLs with appropriate and equitable educational opportunities and a shortage of appropriately certified staff also pose significant challenges, along with educators' understanding of student backgrounds and cultures.

**NEW REGULATIONS**

Recognizing the need to ensure ELLs receive appropriate and equitable educational opportunities, both the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) and the New York State Education Department (NYSED) recently clarified previous ELL regulations and enacted new ones. For school districts



in New York, these changes have resulted in substantial increases in responsibilities related to identifying and placing ELLs in appropriate educational settings, providing new ELL services, serving ELLs identified as students with disabilities, communicating with ELL families, and creating and providing ELL-specific staff training. Planning and reporting requirements have increased significantly, as well.

"I am a huge fan of the mandates...they make a lot of sense," Gallivan said. "I'm just not sure that multiple systems were ready for the impact."

Rochester City School District has more than 3,700 ELLs who speak 81 languages in addition to English and Spanish. The district has one of the oldest bilingual programs in the country, and the city itself — like Buffalo, Syracuse, Utica, and Albany — is a refugee resettlement community. Students attend a broad array of schools, including an international academy where 100 percent of enrollees are refugees, another school with 50 percent ELLs and 50 percent English-speaking students, and an international baccalaureate school that is about to name a former ELL valedictorian. Even with this kind of experience successfully serving ELLs, Gallivan and his fellow education professionals are faced with many obstacles.

"We are significantly challenged to staff ESOL [English to Speakers of Other Languages], bilingual and world languages programs, but those were also shortage areas prior to the new regulations," Gallivan commented. "Our university systems, our instructional pipelines weren't ready to meet the new demand. We have great partnerships with our local universities and we're well into their pipeline trying to hire traditional and nontraditional candidates... but there's a deficit of people with language capacities."

**EDUCATION FOR EDUCATORS**

In her role as coordinator of the Mid-West Regional Bilingual Edu-



cation Resource Network (RBE-RN), Lourdes Roa sees similar teacher shortage trends statewide, along with shortages of interpreters and translators. The need for these services is especially critical, as the new regulations require school districts to communicate with ELL families in their home language. “When you’ve got smaller language groups and schools need translators to help when parents come to school, it’s a tricky thing to get the right language and the right interpreter,” Roa said.

The Mid-West RBE-RN provides ELL-related instructional resources, professional development, and technical assistance to 67 school districts and two BOCES; it’s one of eight such groups in the state. “We’ve got lists of interpreters, but they may or may not always be available; we also provide some ideas for online resources for districts to use,” Roa commented, also indicating that she and her staff would like to develop some trainings for interpreters. At the moment, though, professional development sessions related to instructional strategies to help ELLs absorb academic content are among the most popular. Classroom teachers and content-area teachers (those who teach specific subjects) are especially interested in how to best collaborate and co-teach with ESOL teachers, as well as how to break down curriculum content into manageable pieces (often called “scaffolding”) for ELLs — all while still maintaining rigor.

“We need to make sure students are getting high expectations from well-prepared teachers and that there are equal opportunities,” Roa said. “It has always been a challenge to find bilingual teachers.”

Jacqueline LeRoy, director for Syracuse City School District’s Office of English as a New Language (ENL), World Languages and Bilingual Education, agrees. The district’s ELL population has doubled in the last eight years to 3,300. “Sometimes teachers feel the stress of being underprepared and they feel that they’re at a loss as to how best to meet the needs of their ELLs,” LeRoy said. “It’s an overwhelming response we

hear across the state. Our teachers welcome and embrace our ELL students, but they bring something unfamiliar to the table. Teachers and school leaders are trying to figure out the best mechanisms to put into place.”

To this end, Syracuse makes professional development a priority. “We try to think outside the box in how we provide professional development. We have activities in place beyond inviting teachers to workshops,” LeRoy explained. “We provide embedded support that might happen during the regular school day; so, individuals go to our buildings and support the teachers and attend their team meetings. We have after-school and Saturday professional development sessions and professional learning communities, as well.”

**CULTURAL INSIGHTS**

Syracuse City School District also employs former refugees as “nationality workers.” These individuals help provide further training and insights to educators. “Sometimes we have grade levels meeting as a team for an hour on a particular day and the nationality workers will share information with teachers, which really helps with understanding cultural differences. For example, different cultures sometimes have different expectations about education and what a parent’s role is in the educational process,” LeRoy said. “The nationality workers can also touch on students’ backgrounds.”

“They help bridge the cultural differences and language barriers that present themselves in a school,” LeRoy said, adding that they are also invaluable as ambassadors and liaisons in the community. “They outreach to parents in the community and help parents understand what is expected of them and how they can lend support to their children.”

Educators agree that the ability and willingness to embrace and understand new cultures is as vital as the ability to adjust instructional methods.

Total ELL Pupils in Selected School Districts	
NYS School District	Number of 2015-16 ELL Students
New York City	131,193
Brentwood (Suffolk County)	5,525
Buffalo	4,865
Rochester	3,759
Syracuse	2,968
Yonkers	2,713
East Ramapo (Rockland County)	2,372
Hempstead (Nassau County)	2,300
Utica	2,050
Other districts	55,725
<b>Statewide Total</b>	<b>213,470</b>

“We are a diverse school and this is a big positive. It provides us with an opportunity to grow,” said Johnson City School District Director of Academic Coaching Michelle Feyerabend. The district has seen a shift recently in its ELL population, with a more even mix of ages, rather than having a majority of younger ELLs, as was the case in the past. The students speak 18 different languages, from Spanish to Pashto, Urdu, and Vietnamese.

With the diversity also comes the chance for misinterpretations of interactions with families. “It’s often just because there are cultural differences,” Feyerabend said. “We just need to get to know the students’ stories and backgrounds.”

Feyerabend helps organize a culture night to celebrate and recognize the different traditions represented in the district. “We hold the event in the community so our families don’t have to worry about transportation,” she explained. “We invite all of our families to show different aspects of their culture through food, crafts, dance, whatever they want to demonstrate. It’s been a beautiful way for us to build relationships with all of our families.”

Feyerabend also stresses the need to empathize with students’ social-emotional needs. “In Johnson City, 86 percent of our ELLs are also economically disadvantaged, so families are struggling to meet basic needs,” she said. “Many students come to us with traumatic backgrounds and/or interrupted education.”

Similar trends are taking place in the Hampton Bays School District. While the district isn't large, 20 percent (425) of its students are ELLs. "It's daunting," said Michelle Marrone, English as a New Language (ENL) teacher and ENL/bilingual liaison at Hampton Bays High School. "Last year we received a significant number of SIFE [Students with Interrupted Formal Education] students. These are students missing two or more years of school. It may be that schools were too far away, or the streets were plagued with gangs and drugs, so it was too dangerous for kids to go to school. In other cases, children had to work to support their families."

For these students, caring and supportive staff and peers are vital. "Our new bilingual social worker has been such an asset for us because a lot of our students come with social and emotional needs," Marrone commented.

The district recently hired a bilingual guidance counselor and bilingual guidance office secretary, as well. For additional support, bilingual students help their newly arrived peers. "Students who have been in the district a good number of years give tours of the building so the new students are comfortable. It's nice because the ELLs know they're speaking with peers who experienced the same thing that they're going through," said Marrone.

### OTHER CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES...AND A WISH LIST

Ironically, the most common challenge identified by educators working with ELLs comes down to basics — the lack of high-quality instructional materials in ELLs' first languages. They additionally cite the need for assessments to be available in languages other than English; NYSED officials concur and continue to request state funding to expand the languages used in tests.

"When it comes to finding appropriate material for our students, it's not an easy task," LeRoy said. "We have a large population of Spanish-speaking students, for example, and

we struggle because there are not a lot of texts or digital materials and there aren't a lot of vendors that provide authentic literature for them."

Marrone agreed, saying, "We need instructional materials that are of high interest to high school and middle school students, but aren't watered down. Students don't want to feel that you're making things easier for them and you still need to hit the same goals with ELLs as you do with all students."

Johnson City and other districts are starting to address this challenge by providing ELLs with tablets so they can use apps as instant translators and also to conduct research. "It's empowering for students to have an instant connection with a learning aid without having an adult standing over them micromanaging their education," Feyerabend said.

Another strategy that's been successful in Johnson City is keeping students with the same ELL teacher for two years. This allows teachers to gain, and then pass on, deep knowledge about the students and their learning styles. The district also provides authentic learning experiences, including a summer program where teachers and students from multiple grade levels worked together to plan, plant, and harvest gardens on school property.

Those are the types of real-life learning experiences that could especially benefit ELLs who enter school as adolescents and teens. "We have kids arrive at 16, 17 years of age who are undercredited and they need something different," Gallivan said. "They need an alternate pathway — a vocational pathway and technical education that will prepare them for their next step after U.S. schooling."

Gallivan further suggests the need for more flexibility in how student achievement and districts' adequate yearly progress are measured. For example, a "growth matrix" would be ideal, using the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) results to chart the increase in students' abilities over time. These results could be used on their own or combined with proficiency results from other

state assessments to provide a more accurate picture of student achievement — rather than primarily determining student success by scores on exams that may not be in a student's home language and/or for which students may not have been prepared.

LeRoy recommends a differentiated type of accountability system. "It's important to maintain a level of accountability, but somehow we have to take into account where students are with language and what we can do to determine their content knowledge without putting a test in front of them that will frustrate them and won't actually test that knowledge," she suggested. "We could separate out students who have been here one or two years versus students who have been here five years. Or separate out students who enter with interrupted formal education. These students may have had little or no formal education and they're faced with assessments with no background knowledge in the content area. In addition, they may have no literacy in their native language. Taking those things into consideration would lend itself to more accurate use of data when we're developing our programs and then also provide for a more equitable accountability system for schools and educators."

### THE BIG PICTURE

On a broader level, LeRoy feels it's important to keep in mind educators' shared responsibilities. "This is a different era in education with the changing demographics. The vision has to be that all educators are educators of English language learners."

And for this, there are reasons to celebrate. Added Gallivan, "Statistics show that when our English language learners become former English language learners, they excel statistically. They graduate at or above their peers."

---

KIM M. SMITHGALL is an award-winning communications specialist and freelance writer, designer, and photographer.



# The Classrooms

As more ELLs enter U.S. schools, educators are implementing a variety of teaching strategies and approaches to meet these pupils' needs, including:

## CO-TEACHING:

A collaborative model in which two teachers — one content area or classroom teacher and one certified to teach English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) — team up to provide instruction. This is a powerful approach, as students benefit from an ESOL teacher's expertise in language development and acquisition combined with the classroom/content area teacher's deep knowledge of core academic subjects. This is a preferred approach in New York, though there are challenges with implementation, including logistics. The most effective co-teaching takes dedicated planning time, which doesn't always fit into school schedules. Additionally, co-teaching sometimes means hiring more staff — not always an option in today's fiscal environment and with a shortage of multilingual teachers. Educators who have traditionally worked alone in their classrooms also need professional development to prepare for co-teaching.

## SHELTERED INSTRUCTION:

An approach in which teachers modify their use of English to make instruction more easily understood by ELLs. For example, teachers may use visual aids, simplify vocabulary and grammar, use physical activities, modify their speech rate and tone, or relate instruction to a student's personal background. It makes grade-level content more accessible. The strategy is working well in Syracuse, according to LeRoy. "We have models of sheltered instruction where there is an entire classroom of English language learners," she said. "So, for example, global history instruction would be provided to a class of ELLs who are primarily at the entering or emerging levels, meaning they have lower levels of English proficiency. In

this class, we have the social studies teacher and the ENL teacher working together to provide instruction. Other models of sheltered instruction might have a single teacher who has had training in adapting instruction for ELLs.

## TRANSITIONAL BILINGUAL PROGRAM:

Sometimes referred to as "early-exit" bilingual education, this approach includes instruction in a student's first language, while also introducing and developing English language skills. The idea is to ensure ELLs receive high-quality instruction in academic areas and are able to transition quickly to all-English programs. Hampton Bays School District employs these types of programs for elementary students. "Students progress in language ability and are able to go into a mainstream program," said Michelle Marrone.

## DUAL LANGUAGE PROGRAMS:

These programs serve both ELLs and monolingual English-speaking students together so all participating students become proficient in a second language. In many dual language classrooms, one language is used for instruction for half the day and the second language is used for the other half of the school day. In most cases, the breakdown of students is 50-50 (50 percent ELLs and 50 percent students for whom English is their primary language). This approach is growing in popularity as the emerging global marketplace demands a multilingual workforce and employees who can embrace multiculturalism. Rochester City School District builds on this philosophy, with one of its schools deliberately keeping enrollments at 50 percent ELLs. "This is not a transitional school. Kids go there and stay there. It's become a popular choice among all the schools in Rochester because of its wonderful culture and feeling," said Brendan Gallivan.

## ELL RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

Links to the Regional Bilingual Education Resource Networks in the state, which provide ELL-related professional development, services and support: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/biling/bilinged/betac.html>

Syracuse City School District's Office of English as a New Language, World Languages and Bilingual Education's newsletters, which include a wealth of information for educators working with ELLs: <http://www.syracusecityschools.com/districtpage.cfm?pageid=557>

U.S. Department of Education English Learner Toolkit: information, sample tools and resources for identifying English Language Learners, providing ELL services and evaluating ELL programs: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/english-learner-toolkit/index.html?src=best-bet>

Blueprint for English Language Learners' Success: details the philosophy that all teachers are teachers of ELLs: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/biling/docs/>