

Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners



Introduction

Over the past 25 years, there has been an upsurge in the number of immigrants living in Boston. In 2000, the U.S. Census reported that 25.7% of Boston's population was foreign born, including 11% of its children under 18. The city has a long history of harboring newcomers from Europe and Canada; today most immigrants arrive here from Latin America and Asia.

In 1971, Massachusetts recognized the challenge that the growing number of children not proficient in English posed to the educational system and, in response, approved the first transitional bilingual education (TBE) law in the U.S. TBE programs were subsequently implemented in the Commonwealth. TBE provides academic instruction in the student's native language while the student is learning English, with the percentage of academic content given in English continuing to increase during the three years of the program, after which most students transition into all-English classrooms.

Boston's TBE program was never given the resources or implemented with the rigor that would have allowed it to reach its full potential, but it did provide a sheltered educational environment for newcomer children and their parents.

In 2002, in the midst of strong anti-immigrant sentiment across the U.S., Massachusetts voted in Question Two, a ballot initiative mandating that instruction for ELLs must be conducted primarily in English through a sheltered English instruction (SEI) program, normally limited to one school year, after which ELL students are mainstreamed. An SEI teacher can use native language for clarification and should employ strategies and techniques to make content areas comprehensible to all the students. Under the provisions of Question Two, parents can apply for waivers that exempt children from SEI and allow them to enroll in TBE, literacy programs, or two-way bilingual programs. Literacy programs are designed for ELLs over age 10 who have gaps in their formal education due to little or no schooling in their country of origin. Two-way bilingual programs integrate language instruction



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and academic instruction for native English speakers and native speakers of another language, resulting in fluency and literacy in both languages for all students (in 2003, these programs were exempted from Question Two by Massachusetts legislative amendment).

An immigrant child entering the BPS system is immediately assessed for verbal, and sometimes for literacy, proficiency in English and in the child's native language. A child who cannot do ordinary class work in English is designated an ELL, and SEI is strongly recommended. Parents have the right to choose mainstreaming for their child or to apply for an SEI waiver and request placement in a TBE program, a literacy program, or one of BPS's Spanish-language two-way bilingual education programs (at the Hurley, Hernandez, and Greenwood Schools).

Regardless of whether an immigrant child is enrolled in SEI, an alternative ELL program, or mainstreamed, the student is considered an ELL and is required to take a standardized English language proficiency test (in reading, writing, speaking, and listening) every year. If and when the student scores a four, the "transitioning" level of proficiency in all four categories, in addition to classroom performance consistent with the test results, that student is no longer counted as an ELL.

The Need for Change

Before Question 2 altered the delivery of education for ELLs, there were already significant concerns about the effectiveness and the quality of Boston's TBE programs. But since the passage of that law, concerns have only escalated. The number of students served has decreased markedly, due not to demographic changes, but to the way Boston has chosen to meet the requirements of Question 2. There are serious gaps in student assessment, program assignment, with the programs themselves, and with the training of mainstream teachers, who now have the added challenge of English language instruction in the classroom. There is a stark lack of accountability and transparency with regard to numbers, placements, and outcomes for ELLs. Perhaps the most crucial problem is the perception that, at its highest level, BPS leadership has failed to address the challenges posed by Question 2.

Of grave concern is the decrease in the number of students who are provided with appropriate language instruction. In 2002, about 9,800 ELLs were in bilingual programs in schools across the

district. Today, in spite of the documented growth in the immigrant population of the city, BPS reports a similar ELL enrollment. Of all students designated ELL, only 57% are enrolled in a program that pays attention to their language needs (53% in SEI and 4% in either TBE or a two-way bilingual program). Put another way, 43% of ELLs are not receiving any specialized language services at all.

The dramatic decrease in the percentage of ELL students receiving specialized language services is a result of the way BPS chose to comply with the legal requirements of Question 2. BPS designated some schools English Language Learner Centers (where TBE and native-language literacy programs can be offered for those granted waivers from SEI), created SEI programs at 38 schools, and retained its three two-way bilingual programs. But the compliance strategy that affected the largest number of ELLs was to move a large number of TBE students into mainstream classes before they reached level four on the English

proficiency test. According to BPS statistics, of the 9,800 students in bilingual programs, 3,054 (31%) were mainstreamed, almost half of whom were only at level 3 of English proficiency—that is, not yet able to do ordinary class work in English. As these students were integrated into mainstream classrooms, teachers were called upon to provide academic instruction comprehensible to all students, a significant number of whom required English language development. School districts were mandated to support the process of mainstreaming with a brisk process of professional development. The Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE) required a total of 70 hours of training in second language acquisition, sheltered English instruction, assessment, and teaching reading to ELLs. Due to insufficient funds, BPS was not able to provide the required training, leaving teachers in mainstream programs without the knowledge and skills necessary to work effectively with ELLs.

MCAS Scores, BPS Grade 10, 2000-2005

Figure 1: ELA

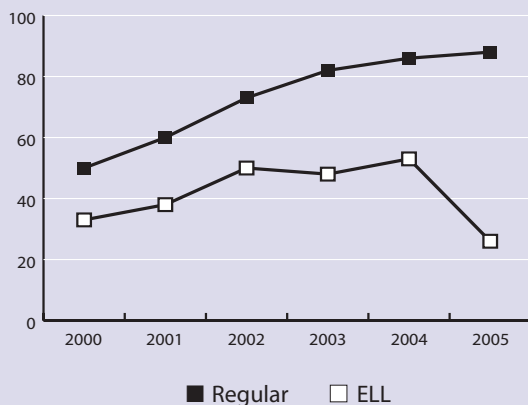
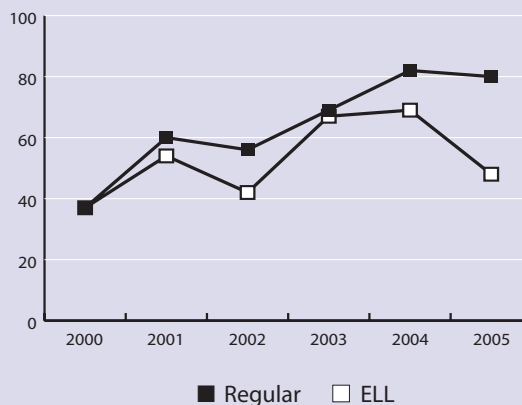


Figure 2: MATH



In 2005, the performance of Boston's ELL's on the Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives for English Language Learners was the fourth lowest in the state.

The mainstreaming of large number of students designated as ELLs continues, and training of school staff is still painfully slow and underfunded. In 2005, BPS was cited for noncompliance by the Massachusetts DOE for having an insufficient number of certified ESL teachers (66 in the entire district).

Educational Outcomes

The educational outcomes of Boston's ELLs are a major cause for alarm. In 2005, their performance in the Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives for English Language Learners was the fourth lowest in the state.¹ After three years in the system, only 34% of Boston's ELLs scored at level four (able to do ordinary class work in English) on the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment, again among the lowest percentages in the state.

The trends in MCAS scores are also worrisome. After improving gradually but steadily between 2001 to 2003, English language arts (ELA) scores for ELL 10th graders were at a plateau for three years, then declined sharply in 2005 (Figure 1). In math, scores improved from 2002 to 2004, then plunged in 2005 (Figure 2).

Areas of Deficiency

Poor assessment. The poor quality and accuracy of initial English proficiency assessments of immigrant children result in less-than-optimal student placements. Assessors are not all adequately trained. There is concern that students whose primary barrier is lack of English

proficiency are being mistakenly diagnosed as learning disabled. (The establishment of the Newcomer Assessment Center at Madison Park High has improved the assessment situation for new-to-Boston high school students.)

Poor teacher training. Because of inadequate professional development, many mainstream teachers who have ELLs in their classrooms and many teachers in literacy programs are not able to properly address the needs of their students. BPS's Collaborative Coaching and Learning professional-development program does not have a sufficient number of coaches trained in English language acquisition and literacy development strategies. A lack of training in cross-cultural competence has resulted in teachers and administrators who do not have the tools to deal effectively with racial/cultural content and/or conflict in the classroom, leading to tension and mistrust among students.

Inadequate preparation for high-stakes testing. In addition to English language instruction, ELLs should be receiving content instruction of high quality to allow them to pass the MCAS. There are significant gaps in the preparation of ELL students in both math and ELA, including, for example, lack of instruction in academic writing, a skill needed both to pass the MCAS and to do well in postsecondary education. These content-area deficits stem from inadequate training for mainstream teachers who work with ELLs.

Lack of support for literacy programs. BPS’s literacy programs are for ELLs who have had limited or no formal schooling in their home countries. Although these programs have proven to be highly successful in improving literacy and math skills, district support for them varies from year to year, staffing is often inadequate, and there is a shortage of appropriate materials. In addition, there is too often a “culture of low expectations” for these programs on the part of individual school administrators, despite the proven success of the model. The impression among respondents is that literacy programs exist only in response to legal mandates, leaving their success dependent on individual teachers committed to the model but often operating with neither school nor district support.

Lack of accountability. ELL programs have long been plagued by the lack of data on assessments, placements, and educational outcomes. Even data on MCAS results for ELLs (most of whom are now required to take the test) have been both highly unreliable and only sporadically available. Because of the reporting requirements of No Child Left Behind, more data is available, but not enough is provided by BPS to achieve transparency.

What are the criteria for mainstreaming and for placement in SEI and other programs? How do outcomes in English language acquisition and academic content compare between mainstreamed ELLs and those in ELL programs? These and other critical questions can be answered only by increased accountability.



Lack of support for parents. A strong parent voice for limited-English-speaking parents and ELL students essentially disappeared in 2002, when the School Committee cut off funding for the Master Parents Advisory Council, an elected group of parents representing the interests of BPS’s ELL students and families. Immigrant families are now asked to voice concerns regarding ELL programs through the general, English-speaking parent groups, a situation that deprives immigrant families of support, advocacy, opportunities for parental involvement, and the clout to influence ELL policy.

Inadequate waiver process. Parents are not given enough information about the waiver process, alternative programs, and their right to apply for a waiver. Parents who do apply and are granted waivers too often find that their children are placed in SEI anyway, rather than in the alternative ELL program to which they are entitled. This is an especially difficult situation for immigrant parents to resolve. The waiver process opens the door for school systems to expand and create alternative ELL programs to meet the diverse needs of ELL students, but Boston has not taken advantage of this opportunity.

Lack of high-level leadership.

One of the most urgent concerns is the lack of high-level leadership in addressing the challenges posed by Question 2. The perception is that ELL program policies are driven almost exclusively by compliance issues, with the needs of students taking second place. Apart from the office of language learning and support services, the needs of ELLs are not well understood and are not taken into account in program design and implementation. No strong, expert voice within BPS is afforded the opportunity to guide the district on ELL policy and programs. The experiences of other districts in the Commonwealth has shown that committed, effective, and expert leadership with the support of top level administration is critical if the requirements of Question 2 are to be successfully adapted.

Areas of Progress

Progress in meeting the needs of ELLs has been made in certain areas. These accomplishments include:

- The design and implementation of the International High School for ELLs in Jamaica Plain, modeled after a strong program in New York City.
- The continuation of the successful two-way bilingual programs at the Hernandez and Hurley Schools and the schoolwide Spanish enrichment program at the Sarah Greenwood School. BPS has initiated a study on two-way bilingual programs and is seeking funding to nurture and support their expansion.
- The continuation of the successful Haitian literacy program in Hyde Park High, the Somali literacy program in English High, and the Spanish literacy program in East Boston High (note, though, that these programs are neither consistently monitored nor given adequate resources from year to year).
- The establishment of the Newcomer Assessment Center, which offers high-school-age immigrants language testing in English and in the student's native language, education and career counseling, orientation to BPS, and information for parents and families.
- The hiring of 15 (17 as of fall 2006) full-time family and community outreach coordinators working in 17 schools. These coordinators, many of them with bilingual abilities, are responsible for facilitating the development of strong parent, community, and school connections that support and promote student achievement. Initial evaluations of the FCOC program have been positive. BPS has also approved three new bilingual outreach specialist positions.



Vision of Change

BPS will embrace the view that, in our global economy, immigrant children are an asset to Boston. They come to us culturally competent in another culture and sometimes (although not always) fluent and literate in another language. BPS will be committed to teaching these students English while valuing and fostering the language and other abilities they have when they arrive.

Those at the highest levels of district administration will have brought about a radical shift in vision, priorities, and accountability regarding the educational outcomes of ELLs. There will be a variety of flexible, student-centered programs that take into account the broad range of prior educational experience among ELLs, including the needs of those who have had limited formal education and those with disabilities. A system of monitoring and evaluation will ensure that ELLs are receiving the supports and services to which they are entitled. Accurate data will allow analysis of program effectiveness across different ELL populations, helping us learn what works well, what needs improvement, and what has yet to be done.

Each immigrant child will follow a seamless path from initial assessment through graduation, and each school will have a vibrant culture, with ELLs fully absorbed into their school's general life and activities. An ongoing comprehensive improvement plan will ensure that the needs and

assets of ELLs are incorporated into whole-school change and professional development, that parent engagement is actively fostered, and that immigrant students are guaranteed the supportive services essential to their success.

Recommendations for Change

BPS must transform its approach to educating ELLs. The narrow focus on minimal compliance with regulations must be replaced with a pervasive and lasting commitment to ensuring that ELLs—wherever they are in the system and whatever their needs—are educated to their fullest potential. Our belief that every child can achieve at a high level, given appropriate instruction and support, can become a reality if faculty, administrators, and staff take ownership of the academic and social development of *all* BPS students. To achieve that goal, we make the following recommendations:

- The needs of ELLs must be included in all policy and program decisions and their implementation. For this to happen, it is essential that administrators at every level of BPS have expertise in second language learning issues, programs, and curriculum.
- A link should be established between the departments of language learning and support and special education to ensure appropriate services for students who are both ELL and special education students.

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- The specialized language and academic needs of ELLs should be fully taken into account while developing and implementing any reform, and all reforms should reflect best practices in the field of ELL education. For example, a comprehensive, full-service program for ELLs must be included in high school restructuring. Programs for ELLs should not be eliminated or diluted in the effort to minimize school size and concentrate resources.
- Sufficient resources must be provided to ensure that every teacher whose classroom includes an ELL is trained in English language development and in delivering content instruction understandable to the ELL student.
- A comprehensive, districtwide system should be developed for identifying each and every ELL, for placing them in appropriate programs with all necessary services, and for assessing their progress in English in an accurate and timely manner.
- The Newcomer Assessment Center, currently serving only high school students and families, should be expanded to include all grade levels and moved to a larger, more central location.
- Full-time family and community outreach coordinators with bilingual skills should be placed in schools with large ELL populations, and bilingual outreach specialists should be placed in all schools with ELL programs.
- BPS should strengthen and expand its literacy programs, which have proven successful for students who have had little or no formal schooling in their native countries.
- Appropriate ELL materials and curriculum guidelines and standards, including differentiated benchmarks for grade progression, must be developed and put into practice. It must be recognized that mainstream educational curriculum materials (e.g., grade-level basal readers) may not be appropriate tools for building academic competence among ELLs. BPS must ensure that teachers in SEI classrooms are taking advantage of the policy that allows for native-language clarification of academic content.
- BPS must provide full information to parents about their right to apply for waivers from SEI for students who would be better served in other alternative ELL programs, including bilingual education. BPS also must create a streamlined system for processing and implementing waiver requests. Parents who are granted waivers from SEI often find that

their children are not actually placed in the alternative program they are entitled to, but simply remain in SEI. Other cities in Massachusetts, such as Framingham and Brockton, have creatively taken advantage of the waiver provision of the law to create new and alternative ELL programs where there is parent demand. Boston should follow suit.

- Successful two-way bilingual programs must continue to be supported and be expanded to more schools and languages.
- A parent group along the lines of the defunct Master Parents Advisory Council should be reestablished and funding restored.
- BPS should institute afterschool and weekend programs to assist ELLs who are substantially behind in their language or academic development.
- BPS should continue to support collaborations with schools of education, such as the TAG and ALERTA programs at UMass Boston, among others.²

¹ AMAO measures annual growth in English language development, reflecting the percent of ELLs in grades 3-12 whose performance increased two or more steps on the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment from fall to spring.

² The Project ALERTA and TAG (Talented and Gifted) Latino enrichment programs for BPS Latino students are based in the Institute for Learning and Teaching at UMass Boston and are supported by BPS, UMass, and private foundations. Project ALERTA prepares third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students for entry into Boston's competitive exam schools. TAG partners with several middle and high schools to provide holistic services for approximately 250 students during the school year and 320 during the summer.

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