Effectively Educating PreK-3rd English Language Learners (ELLs) in Montgomery County Public Schools

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Foundation for Child Development commissions case studies that offer a first-hand account of ground- breaking policy development and practice. They document the processes that translate ideas into concrete policies and practices, with attention to the political forces and critical relationships of trust that are required for genuine implementation.

FCD's case study series seeks to document efforts of a larger movement in states, school districts, schools, and in education and advocacy organizations across the United States to create a well-aligned and high-quality primary education for all our nation's children. We believe that site-specific learning should be broadly shared to deepen the implementation of PreK-3rd approaches in the United States.

Executive Summary

Despite skyrocketing growth in its English Language Learner (ELL) population, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has been remarkably effective in improving outcomes for ELL students across the district. Achievement has increased, and gaps between ELL students and their native English-speaking peers have decreased. This success is intentional. So, what can other districts learn from MCPS's work with ELL students?

MCPS starts with a clear, concise, and overarching district-wide goal to raise achievement: 80 percent of students will be college-ready by 2014. This powerful goal is for all students – ELL, low-income, wealthy, and gifted. The goal drives decision-making and problem-solving throughout the district, as staff and leadership do "whatever it takes" to make that goal a reality, regardless of student background or language proficiency.

Several points have emerged as key factors in moving toward the district's shared goal:

1. Social English is not sufficient to meet academic goals that prepare students for college and life success. ELL students need a comprehensive and aligned PreK-3rd Grade curriculum focused on developing academic English.

2. "Off the shelf" ELL assessments may not provide enough information to identify and support ELL students effectively. Language assessments aligned with academic content standards make it possible for teachers to meet the individualized needs of ELL students.

3. A variety of service models, including pull-out, push-in, and sheltered programs, make it possible to design individualized programs to meet the needs of ELL students.

4. Expecting all ELL instruction to be done by ELL teachers alone is insufficient. High-quality professional development in a range of formats builds the capacity of all staff and leaders to support PreK-3rd ELL students.

5. A culture of collaboration at all levels of the district is necessary to ensure that PreK-3rd ELL students are well-supported in every school.

6. A range of dedicated staff and services is required to support ELL families to be partners in their children's education.

Preparing for Success

The strength of America's next generation of leaders, scientists, doctors, teachers, and engineers is dependent on the success of the nation's English Language Learners (ELLs) today. Since 1990, the number of ELLs in American public schools has increased 150 percent, while the overall student population has grown only 20 percent.[i] This trend is expected to continue – ELLs are projected to make up 40 percent of the school-age population by 2030.[ii]

Addressing the needs of ELL students starts with a rigorous and aligned PreK-3rd program. Research shows that a coherent and sequenced set of learning experiences, beginning with PreK and continuing through Third Grade, is the foundation for their educational success. Yet, few districts have developed high-quality and aligned PreK-3rd systems for ELL students.[iii]
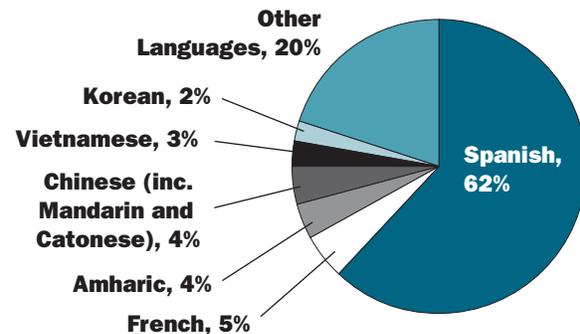
One exception is Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland. MCPS's success in preparing students for college, raising student achievement, and closing the achievement gap has been well-documented in books, case studies, and newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal*.[iv] Since 1998, the number of low-income students in MCPS has increased by nearly 45 percent; the number of ELLs has more than doubled. As of 2011, 129 different languages are spoken by MCPS students and their families (see **Figure 1**). ELL students in MCPS represent the full range of English language abilities, from almost no experience with English to near fluency. At the elementary school level, for example, according to the state's English language proficiency assessment, 27 percent of students who qualify for English language services are beginners, 41 percent are intermediate, and 32 percent are advanced English speakers.

At the same time, nearly 90 percent of Third Graders in MCPS are proficient readers, including

ELLs at a Glance

- ELLs make up just over 10 percent of students in the United States.[v]

- 40 percent of ELLs are between the ages of three and eight.[vi]

- 6 percent of ELL Fourth Graders were proficient in reading, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.[vii]

- ELL students have lower levels of high school completion and college enrollment than students from English-only backgrounds.[viii]

Figure 1: Home Languages of ELL Students in MCPS

Other Languages, 20%
Korean, 2%
Vietnamese, 3%
Chinese (inc. Mandarin and Catonese), 4%
Amharic, 4%
French, 5%
Spanish, 62%

almost three-quarters of students in the LEP sub-group (see **Figure 2**).[ix] More impressively, MCPS has narrowed the reading gap between the LEP sub-group and all Third Grade students by 36 percentage points since 2003 (see **Figure 3**).[x] In addition, student learning does not fade out in middle and high school: 86 percent of MCPS students go to college, including nearly 80 percent of African-American students and over 75 percent of Latino students.[xi] Nearly 50 percent of all former MCPS students earn a college degree within six years of graduation – a rate nearly double that of the nation as a whole.[xii]

What Defines an ELL?

Supporting ELL students in MCPS began with establishing clear definitions, which help to frame a shared understanding of their needs.

In the field, English Language Learners (ELLs) are generally defined as *students who do not understand enough English to learn without support* in mainstream classrooms.[xiii]

In MCPS, the term ELL refers to *all students whose first language is not English*. This group includes students receiving formal language acquisition services, as well as students who have exited services or scored too high on the state English language proficiency placement assessment to qualify for formal services. The rationale behind using such a broad definition is MCPS's view that educating ELL students is a district-wide, whole-school issue. To target resources to students who need them most, MCPS uses the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) designation for students who qualify for formal language services. Students who have officially exited language services are referred to as Reclassified ELL (R-ELL) students. Students who never received formal services or exited services more than two years ago are a part of the non-Limited English Proficient (non-LEP) subgroup, yet are still considered ELLs.

These distinctions may be confusing at first, but they are vitally important to making ELL instruction in MCPS everyone's responsibility. There are students who do not receive formal language services, but continue to have English language acquisition needs, especially around academic-level English. Without district- and school-wide attention to these students' needs, R-ELL and non-LEP students are especially likely to slip through the cracks.

Figure 2: Percentage of Third Grade Students Proficient or Advanced in Reading
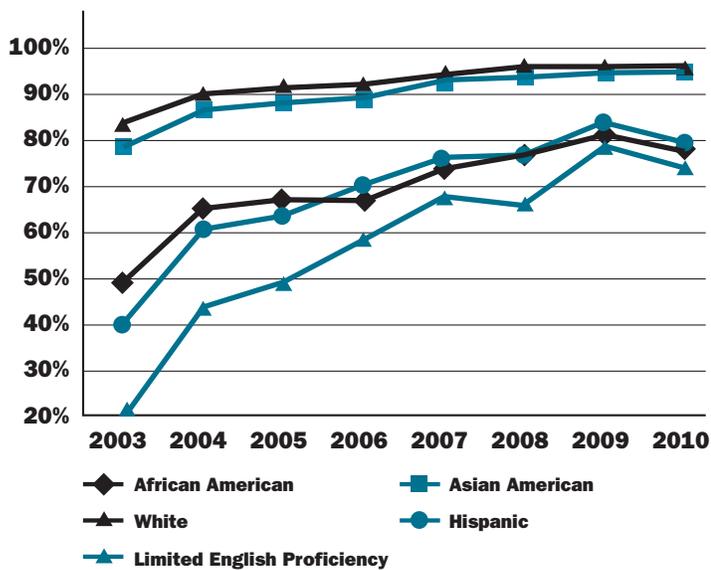
Source: Maryland State Department of Education, March 2011

Figure 3: Percentage of Third Grade Students Proficient or Advanced in Reading
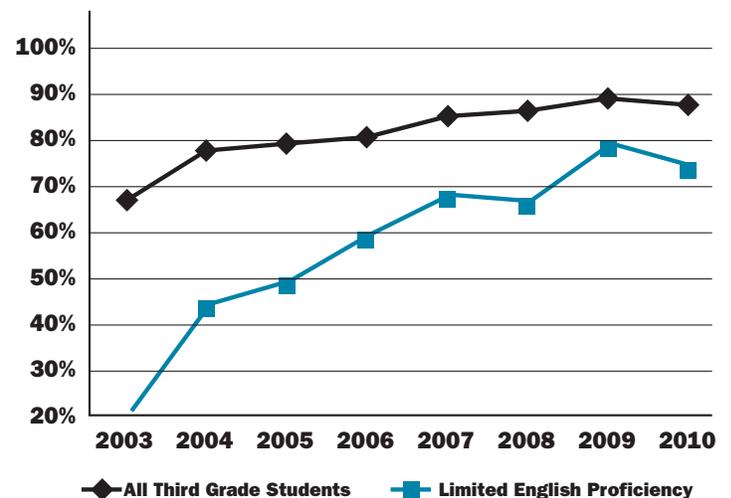
Source: Maryland State Department of Education, March 2011

Educating ELLs Effectively Is No Accident

The success of ELL students in MCPS is no accident. Led by Superintendent Jerry Weast, MCPS achieved these outcomes by developing a comprehensive strategic plan that anchored student learning and teacher actions on an ambitious and attainable goal of college readiness. The plan specifically includes ELL students, not through a distinct program or service, but by embedding their achievement in a district-wide goal of educating all students. As the district's strategic plan notes: "MCPS is committed to doing whatever it takes to ensure that every child, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language proficiency, or disability, learns and succeeds."[xiv]

What does it mean to learn and succeed? Weast and his leadership team first set a clear and compelling goal of having 80 percent of students college-ready by 2014, as demonstrated by scoring at or above 1650 on the SAT or 24 on the ACT. This goal was then backward-mapped to PreK; key benchmarks along the way formed what the district calls the Seven Keys to College Readiness. Resources were then targeted to ensure that all students, including ELLs, could meet the ambitious goals established for each Key.[xv] The result of this "value-chain" approach was an unprecedented focus on what the youngest learners were doing in classrooms across MCPS, including the launch of an Early Success Performance Plan in the 2001 – 2002 school year.[xvi]

In the MCPS Division of English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)/Bilingual Programs, Director Karen Woodson and her team of administrators and specialists participated in all phases of the strategic planning process, resulting in a thoroughly integrated district-wide strategy, developed from PreK on, for ELL students. Early on, the district committed to making sure that ELL students not only acquired basic English, but also mastered the academic language needed to be college-ready. At the core of MCPS's

work is a deep belief in equity for all students. Woodson emphasized: "Sophisticated academic English is the key to success. It is an equity issue. These students need a conscientious explicit focus on their language development in academic English as a new language."

Six Strategies for Success

Six major take-aways emerge from MCPS's success with young ELL students:

1) Design a comprehensive ELL PreK-3rd Grade curriculum that focuses on academic English and is aligned with rigorous content standards.

2) Use standards-based formative assessments, aligned with the ELL curriculum, to supplement the annual state-required English language assessments.

3) Implement the assessments and curriculum using a variety of individualized instructional models and integrated extended learning opportunities shaped around each student's unique needs.

4) Provide professional development at all levels of the district, giving all teachers and leaders the skills and knowledge they need to address language acquisition in ELL students.

5) Build a culture of collaboration in which staff from different departments work together to meet the needs of ELL students.

6) Offer targeted support services and strong partnerships that ensure families of ELL students are welcomed as full members of the educational community and that district decisions reflect the voices of ethnically and linguistically diverse parents.

The leader of MCPS for the last 12 years, Superintendent Weast, summarized the district's approach to teaching students whose first language is not English: "We do not think in terms of sorting structures, like ELL or special education. We think in terms of a simple question: Under what conditions can we get this child college-ready?" In MCPS, the answer to that question begins with a rigorous and aligned PreK-3rd curriculum.

A Comprehensive ELL PreK-3rd Grade Curriculum Must Be Aligned

Early in the strategic planning process, MCPS leadership determined that the Maryland state standards for identifying and working with ELL students would be a starting point, not a finish line. Direct instruction in academic English was needed if ELL students were going to be college-ready by graduation. It was not enough to move ELL students to a level of conversational English that simply allowed them to "get along" in school.

While Weast and his leadership team worked to map out the value chain for making students college-ready, Woodson and the instructional specialists from the Division of ESOL/Bilingual Programs identified what that map would mean for students who speak a language other than English at home. Over the course of three years, the team developed a rigorous research-based curriculum for ELL students. This curriculum, aligned with MCPS standards, provides the structure and resources to teach language objectives in the context of the general education curriculum. Through thematic units, students "develop, practice, and apply English as they explore the vocabulary and content of various academic subjects."[xvii] Because more than 80 percent of MCPS ELL students in the early grades are U.S.-born, the heart of this curriculum lies in PreK-3rd Grades, where the foundations for future success are laid.

Aligning each grade along the PreK-3rd continuum is central to the ELL curriculum's success. At the PreK and Kindergarten levels, oral language development is the primary focus, along with age-appropriate literacy skills. As students move into First and Second Grades, the curriculum provides guidance for meeting the needs of students at beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of English acquisition, and objectives target listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

Research has found that it takes roughly two years to develop proficiency in social English – that is, the language needed for basic conversation. The more complex language skills of academic English, however, require at least five to seven years of practice before students become fully proficient.[xviii] Therefore, in Third Grade through Fifth Grade, curriculum blueprints and instructional guides include two extended pathways of instruction for high-intermediate and advanced students. In this way, the upper elementary ELL curriculum is differentiated for the more complicated task of mastering academic English.

Taken together, the ELL curricula at each grade level form a tightly aligned scope and sequence of instruction for teachers working with ELL students (see **Appendix** for a more detailed description of the MCPS curriculum components). Though the primary focus is on language acquisition, students are also building skills and understanding in the content areas for each grade level. Additionally, language objectives for the curriculum extend beyond social language skills to ensure that students also develop English vocabulary and grammar at an academic level, setting the stage for ongoing success in MCPS and, ultimately, college readiness.

Students' Home Languages are Valued

Research increasingly supports dual language programs and instruction that value and support ELLs' home languages.[xix] The MCPS Division of ESOL/Bilingual Programs has directed its energy and resources toward developing an English-immersion-based ELL model for several reasons, the most important being the nearly 130 languages represented in the MCPS population. While it might be ideal to provide dual-language instruction for all students, staffing and support beyond the most widely represented languages is simply not feasible in such a language-diverse district.

Dual-language immersion programs are offered in French, Spanish, and Chinese at identified elementary schools, and are available to any MCPS student through a lottery process, regardless of their ELL status. Those programs are supported by the foreign language department, allowing the ESOL department to focus on ensuring that all ELL students, not just those with the most common home languages, are equitably served.

All ELL students are welcome and encouraged to apply to the dual-language immersion lottery process. Additionally, ESOL staff actively train and encourage teachers to recognize and value the home languages of students in their classrooms. Parents of ELL students are also encouraged to value and support development in the home language. Parents of younger ELL students, in particular, are encouraged to read to their children in their home language, in order to help the children develop and maintain advanced language skills in their home language.

Take-Away: Social English is not enough to meet academic goals that prepare students for college and life success. ELL students need a comprehensive and aligned PreK-3rd Grade curriculum focused on developing academic English.

Continuous Assessment is Linked to Rigorous Standards

Identifying ELL students in MCPS starts with a home language survey. Starting in PreK, students who speak or are spoken to in a non-English language at home are identified as possible candidates for ESOL services. Students then take the state-mandated placement assessment for English language proficiency, which measures age-appropriate listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and identifies student proficiency levels, ranging from low beginner to advanced (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4: Elementary ELL Levels for Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing

Description of MCPS ESOL Levels—Elementary				
This document describes expectations for student performance in each skill area **by the end of the ESOL level**. ELL teams use this document to determine appropriate level placement in the ESOL instructional program. This document is also used to determine strategies for differentiated instruction and to assign assessment accomodations that are appropriate for various levels of English language proficiency				

ESOL Level	ESOL Level 1		ESOL Level 2		ESOL Level 3
	Low Beginning	High Beginning	Low Intermediate	High Intermediate	Advanced
Speaking	Communicates using: • word, phrases and a few highly patterned sentences • some basic vocabulary • pronunciation and fluency with errors that frequently interfere with meaning	Communicates using: • simple sentences and questions, mostly in the present tense • limited description and detail • basic vocabulary • pronunciation and fluency with errors that often interfere with meaning	Communicates using: • ideas with some description and detail • a limited range of grade-level vocabulary and grammatical structures • pronunciation and fluency with errors that sometimes interfere with meaning	Communicates in most situations using: • adequate description and detail • a moderate range of grade-level vocabulary and grammatical strucures • pronunciation and fluency with errors that rarely interfere with meaning	Communicates with ease in a range of situations using: • relevant description and detail • a wide range of grade-level vocabulary and grammatical structures • near-native like pronunciation and fluency with few erors
Listening	Comprehends: • some basic vocabulary • phrases and some simple patterned sentences • short oral presentations or discussions presented in words and simple patterned sentences with repetition and strong visual and contextual support	Comprehends: • basic vocabulary • simple sentences • short oral presentations or discussions presented in simple language structures with repetition and strong visual and contextual support	Comprehends: • a limited range of grade-level vocabulary • simple or compound sentences • short oral presentations or discussions presented with repetition, rephrasing, and visual support	Comprehends: • a moderate range of grade-level vocabulary • simple, compound and complex sentences • oral presentations or discussions presented with some repetition and rephrasing	Comprehends: • a wide range of grade-level vocabulary • a range of complex sentences • oral presentations or discussions presented in grade-level language without difficulty
Reading	Comprehends short, leveled text with: • a few grade-level words • predictable, simple grammatical patterns • strong picture support	Comprehends short, leveled text with: • some grade-level words • simple gramatical structures • Strong picture support	Comprehends leveled text with: • a limited range of grade-level words and • grammatical structures • some figurative language • picture support	Comprehends leveled text with: • a moderate range of grade-level words and grammatical structures • a limited range of figurative language	Comprehends leveled text with: • a wide range of grade-level words and grammatical structures • a moderate range of figurative language
Writing	Composes text using: • phrases or simple, modeled sentence patterns • basic repetitive vocabulary • a few basic writing conventions	Composes text using: • a few details and basic vocabulary • simple sentences mostly in the present tense • some writing conventions	Composes text using: • a limited range of details, grade-level vocabulary, and grammatical structures • limited range of transitions • a limited range of writing conventions	Composes text using: • a moderate range of details, grade-level vocabulary, and grammatical structures • some use of transitions • appropriate format and most writing conventions	Composes text using: • a wide range of details, grade-level vocabulary, and grammatical structures • mostly effective transitions • appropriate format and writing conventions
Speaking, listening, reading and writing proficiency may develop at different rates and should be assessed and graded separately				

Source: Montgomery County Public Schools, March 2011

In the earliest grade levels, more than 80 percent of MCPS ELL students are U.S.-born, which means they start school with their English-only peers in PreK or Kindergarten. At the PreK level, home language information is gathered at the time of registration. The forms are available in several languages, and ELL counselors, interpreters, and other family service staff assist parents as needed in completing the application forms. Some parents with very low literacy levels in their native language rely on staff to ask the questions of them verbally, and fill in the answers for them, in order to complete the application process. Students who are identified as ELL students then take the age-appropriate English language proficiency assessment to determine their eligibility for ESOL services.

Woodson and her counterpart in the Division of Early Childhood Programs and Services, Janine Bacquie, realized that the district-wide Kindergarten orientation process presented an opportunity to improve services for ELL students by enhancing identification procedures at that level. Originally, MCPS ELL teachers spent the first several weeks of the school year identifying and assessing students. Now, families with Kindergarten-bound students complete a short and clear home language survey in the spring before their child starts Kindergarten.

If a family indicates that their child speaks a language other than or in addition to English, the child is immediately scheduled to take the state-mandated English proficiency test in the fall. Any student who may need ELL support is also encouraged to attend summer school before Kindergarten, where teachers get a better idea of each student's specific needs. When the school year starts, English proficiency testing and appropriate support can begin immediately.

The entire identification procedure is documented in meticulous detail in a MCPS process map (**Figure 5**). MCPS uses the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence throughout the organization and carefully maps its processes to achieve consistent strategy implementation. The Division of ESOL/Bilingual Programs continuously updates the process to reflect staff feedback and changes in district and state policies. The map plays an important role in building a consistent understanding across the Division of ESOL/Bilingual Programs, Division of Early Childhood, and the schools about how students are identified for formal ESOL services. It also helps staff members keep track of the numerous documents required by the federal and state governments when serving ELL students – each green box represents a required key document in the identification process.

Figure 5: ELL Identification Process Map

Identification & Placement of Students for ESOL Services
Division of ESOL/Bilingual Programs
Last Updated: DRAFT 3-28-2011

Key
ELPT: English Language Proficiecy Test
ESR: ESOL Student Record

Beginning of process

1 Does the student speak a language other than or in addition to American English?[1] — No — Do not administer the diagnostic ELPT and do not enroll in ESOL program.

1 Yes → **2** Does the student have any records on the ESOL Enrollment History page on OASIS ESOL Survey module? — No → **3** Does the student have previous enrollment history in MCPS of one school year or longer? — No → **4** Was the student tested at the ESOL Testing & Accountability Center (ETAC) prior to enrolling in your school? — No → **5** Did the student transfer from a public school in Maryland?

2 Yes → **7** Does the student's ESOL enrollment history show and official exit with the Exit Code 01, 04 or 10? — Yes → Do not administer the diagnostic ELPT and do not enroll in ESOL program.

3 Yes → Collect student's Initial Placement ESR. (Note: If the new student's Initial Placement ESR does not arrive within 3 days of student arrival, contact ETAC.)

4 Yes → Collect student's Initial Placement ESR.

5 Yes → Contact designated Testing Assessor at ETAC with student's name, ID, DOB and the name of public school system in Maryland to obtain the student's ESOL history/records, if any. (Note: The ETAC will e-mail the information to the school's ESOL team.)

5 No → **6** Is the student transferring from a private school or a school in another state? — Yes → Confirm that the student is entering school for the first time ever. — No → Contact designated Testing Assessor at ETAC...

8 Is there evidence of ESOL history in the student's record? — No → **9** Was the student exited from ESOL? — Yes → Enter ESOL Entry & Exit Dates on OASIS Non-MCPS Data Collection page. — No → Administer and score the diagnostic ELPT.

9 Yes → End of process

10 Is the student's poficiency level on the diagnostic ELPT +5? — Yes → Circle the "No Entry" box in Part III of Initial Placement ESR. → Make 1 copy of ESR file original in student's cumulative record and send the copy to ETAC. Do not enroll student in ESOL program. — No → ELL Team reviews student's entry test scores and/or cumulative record to determine student's ESOL placement/status/instructioinal level. (Note: students canot be on "consult" without pre-approval from the ESOL supervisor.)

Administer and score the diagnostic ELPT. → Complete every item in the part I & II of Initial Placement ESR and record the overall **test** level in Part III of ESR.

11 Was the student exited from ESOL? — Yes → Check the "No Entry" box in Part III of Initial Placement ESR. — No → ELL Team reviews...

12 Is there evidence of ESOL history? — Yes → **11** — No → Do not administer the diagnostic ELPT and do not enroll in ESOL program.

13 Does the ELL team agree that the student is eligible for ESOL services and should be enrolled in the program? — Yes → Complete aqppropriate ESR and create a new pending record for student on OASIS ESOLSurvey miodule.[3] — No → Make 3 copies of ESR...

Make 3 copies of ESR, file original in student's cumulative record, a copy in ESOL folder, and send a copy to ETAC. Enroll student in an appropriate level ESOL course or section. → Complete MSDE NCLB Parent Notification Letter according to "Distributing the NCLB Parent Notification Letter." → Make 1 copy of NCLB letter, file original in student's cumulative record and file the copy in the ESOL file.

End of process

1 As indicated on the RIA Intake and Referral Form, New Student Information Sheet, Yellow Emergency Card, or Pre-K/Kindergarten Orientation Home Language Survey
2 One school year is the recommended timeframe. However, if the ELL team has strong evidence and wants to appeal the one year guideline, please contact the ESOL achievement specialist via Outlook for further information.
3 All OASIS transactions are to be created within 5 school days of the "Action Date" and supporting documentation forwarded to ETAC within 5 school days after the transaction is created.

Source: Montgomery County Public Schools, March 2011

Standards-Linked Formative Assessments

Developing a rigorous district-wide curriculum for ELL students includes the development of assessments for that curriculum. The state-mandated assessment of English proficiency was an off-the-shelf ELL assessment, and so was only loosely aligned with Maryland's English language content standards. Based on the state assessment alone, students might in some cases meet state exit requirements from the ELL support programs without having a solid grounding in content-area skills and language, creating a barrier for students on the path toward college readiness.

Recognizing the gap between the state English language assessment and the MCPS college-readiness goal, the ELL instructional specialists included Common Tasks formative assessments throughout the PreK-3rd Grade curriculum. Each unit details two to four Common Tasks, which provides an authentic context for teachers to assess students' mastery of language objectives. Each Common Task is related to the unit theme, but the objectives are clearly language-centered. In First Grade, for example, students are expected to *draw and label a picture of an animal and write to describe the animal, using a writing template and other print resources*. Instructional guides and blueprints include resources to help teachers modify the Common Tasks for students working at different levels of English proficiency.

The instructional guides also include suggestions for ongoing informal assessment, as well as rubrics to help assess student progress over time. Though the state-mandated assessment provides a rough guide for ELL student identification and placement, it does not provide the full picture for MCPS staff working with ELL students. As one ELL instructional specialist explained: "Our local ELL assessments are the best predictor of when a student is really ready to exit ELL support."

> **Take-Away:** ELL "off the shelf" assessments may not provide enough information to identify and support ELL students effectively. Language assessments aligned with academic content standards make it possible for teachers to meet the individualized needs of ELL students.

A Spectrum of Individualized ELL Instruction Meets Students' Needs

Any curriculum is only as strong as its implementation. In MCPS, ELL teachers, who hold ESOL K-12 certification from the state of Maryland, work with classroom teachers to ensure that PreK-3rd Grade ELL students' needs are met using a spectrum of individualized service models. Models include *pull-out*, in which ELL students receive instruction from the ELL teacher for a discrete period of time in a separate classroom; *push-in*, in which the ELL teacher works with ELL students in the general education classroom; and the *sheltered* model, in which ELL students receive instruction in a separate classroom for an entire instructional block. But, as Woodson notes, the models do not dictate the services a student receives: "Less important is the model. More important is the quality of English language development instruction that the student is receiving. The goal is to push the student through proficiency levels."

Pull-out: Pull-out services are most often used with beginner students. ELL teachers provide instruction, using the ELL curriculum, in an ELL classroom or other separate area, often several days per week. Scheduling is carefully coordinated to ensure students receive the highest-quality instruction possible. Because the curriculum is tightly aligned with Reading and Language Arts standards, ELL students are pulled out during their literacy block, when they would otherwise be working in literacy centers or other independent activities. This way, rather than "missing" something in the regular classroom, they receive an enhanced, language-oriented version of the curriculum.

Push-in: Push-in instruction, also called *plug-in*, can take many forms. The only constant is that the ELL teacher works with ELL students in the general education classroom. This may mean working with students in groups, either by pulling them aside in the classroom or by establishing a center through which they rotate as a part of their independent work cycles. The ELL teacher might also work with half the class while the general education teacher works with the other half, each integrating content and language acquisition objectives. Splitting the class into groups ensures that more students get the opportunity for direct instruction and practice. Teachers report that flexible grouping is key to the success of this approach: sometimes students are randomly assigned, while other times specific students go with the ELL teacher for explicit instruction in listening, speaking, reading, or writing in English.

In schools with an especially high ratio of ELL students to teachers, many PreK-3rd Grade teachers co-teach with the ELL teacher, meaning the entire lesson is planned and taught collaboratively, and the lesson is delivered together. In co-teaching, there is no distinction between the ELL teacher and the general education teacher; both work with the entire class on mastery of content and language-acquisition objectives. Some grade level teams have arranged for the ELL teacher to teach a whole-class language-oriented lesson once a week to build the language skills of all students, regardless of their ELL status.

Many teachers confirm that the push-in model is an effective way to meet the needs of the whole child – to succeed academically, many ELL students need to build not just English language skills, but also background knowledge. In some cases, background knowledge is culturally based, such as nursery rhymes or stories that are unfamiliar outside the United States. Students need the opportunity to experience these literacy touchstones, which is more easily managed when there are two adults in the classroom.

In other cases, the challenges may run slightly deeper: teachers report that some students have limited vocabularies in their first language, which makes learning a new language all the more difficult. For example, they may not know color names in either language, meaning they have to learn the concept of color names rather than simply mapping English vocabulary onto an idea with which they are familiar. Helping students build underlying understanding alongside related language skills is more easily accomplished when two teachers collaborate to help students meet the objectives.

Co-teaching offers an advantage to teachers as well as to students: it serves as a particularly effective form of professional development. Several general education teachers who have adopted the co-teaching model report that they learn a great deal from planning with ELL teachers and watching them work with students and lead instruction. That said, teachers affirm that co-teaching is hard work and difficult to do well. The school's schedule needs to allow common planning time for the grade-level and ELL teachers. Teachers may also need training on how to co-teach effectively. Importantly, teachers point out that personalities matter in co-teaching. Teachers must have a choice about whether they will co-teach.

Sheltered: Sheltered instruction is a more intensive form of the pull-out model, and is used to support students with the highest level of need. In this model, ELL students work with the ELL teacher in a separate classroom for an entire instructional block. Sheltered instruction is most often used in MCPS's Multidisciplinary Education, Training, and Support (METS) Program. METS, which is available to MCPS students starting in 3rd Grade, is designed for ELL students who need intensive support – those who have limited or no previous schooling, or who have achievement levels well below grade level in their native language, may qualify. The METS program features small class sizes and includes a focus on developing basic academic and social school skills along with English language proficiency. On average, students spend two to three years in the METS program, with the goal being to shift them comfortably into general education classes as quickly as possible.

Coordination is an important part of scheduling an ELL student's support system. Teachers want to ensure that students get enough support, but at the same time, pulling students out of the classroom for too much small group or one-on-one work leads to mental fatigue and becomes counterproductive. To make sure students get the right amount and right kinds of support, ELL teachers actively collaborate with intervention teachers, classroom teachers, and other staff. Occasionally, an ELL student may need a number of services, such as extra support from a speech pathologist or other specialists. To make sure the student's day is not too fragmented, the team may decide to use a consult model, in which the ELL teacher steps back from providing direct services and instead provides curricular and resource supports to the other teachers who work with the student.

Value-added Extended Learning Opportunities

ELL students are strongly encouraged to participate in Extended Learning Opportunities that are aligned with MCPS's strategic plan and the Seven Keys. The Summer Adventures in Learning (SAIL) program is a free, four-week program available to students entering Grades K-5 in Title I schools. In the SAIL program, ELL students are supported by ELL teachers just as they are during the school year. Pull-out, push-in, sheltered, and consult models are all used in summer school, based on the needs of individual students.

Just as there are ELL instructional guides for teachers to use during the school year, there are ELL curriculum guides for summer school. The purpose of the ELLSAIL curriculum is to provide ELLs with a language foundation that prepares them for the school year, which includes helping students develop basic, interpersonal, and classroom language, as well as basic academic language. Broadly speaking, the curriculum is very similar in structure to the yearlong guides (see above), but for the summer school setting, each of the four thematic units is condensed into a week rather than an entire quarter.

It's Not About the Model. It's About What Is Best for the Student

MCPS offers recommendations about how different schools might choose to coordinate ESOL services. For example, the district provides recommendations on instructional models, resources, student distribution, and collaboration depending on the size of the school (**Figure 6**). MCPS also provides minimum guidelines for ELL student supports based on their state-assessed English proficiency levels – for example, beginners must receive a minimum of 50 minutes of ELL instruction from the ELL teacher using the ELL curriculum four to five days per week.

This is just a starting point, however. In the end, the decision about which model to use with a specific ELL student is driven by one question: "What is best for the student?" In the day-to-day work of schools, ELL teachers work with classroom teachers and other specialists to continually assess students, both formally and informally, and to use that data to decide how much time and which model (or combination of models) will best meet a particular student's needs. These models are dynamic, and the support a student needs may change at any time based on the content being covered or new student data. The goal is for the student to receive the highest-quality learning experience possible, and, as noted in the MCPS strategic plan, the staff will do "whatever it takes" to make that happen.

Figure 6: MCPS ELL Instructional Model Recommendations to Schools

	Small School 1-2 ESOL teachers	Medium School 3-5 ESOL teachers	Large School 6-10 ESOL teachers
Instructional Models	• Pull out most ESOL students (spread across classes and grade levels) • Group students by proficiency levels across grades	• Pull out Beginners and Low Intermediate • Provide a combination of Pull-out and Plug-in instruction	• Pull out Beginner and Low Intermediate students • Mostly Plug-in for High Intermediate and Advanced students
Instructional Resources	• ESOL Curriculum • ESOL Planners	• ESOL Curriculum • ESOL Planners	• ESOL Planners • ESOL Curriculum
Distribution of ESOL Students	Cluster ESOL in classes to minimize disruption	Cluster ESOL in classes to minimize disruption	Cluster ESOL in classes to minimize disruption and facilitate collaborative planning for plug-in teachers
Collaboration	Have content teachers post planners on the Teacher Shared Folder to facilitate collaboration	Have content teachers post planners on the Teacher Shared Folder to facilitate collaboration	Have content teachers post planners on the Teacher Shared Folder to facilitate collaboration

Source: Montgomery County Public Schools http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/curriculum/esol/elem/models.shtm

Take-Away: A variety of service models, including pull-out, push-in, and sheltered programs, make it possible to design individualized programs to meet the needs of ELL students effectively.

Intensive Professional Development is Vital

A common refrain throughout MCPS is, "We don't have an ELL program – we have an ELL school. We all need to be ELL teachers." In reality, of course, not every teacher enters the classroom with extensive ELL training, so Woodson and her team work strategically to build capacity at all levels of the district. Professional development is not an afterthought; it is seen as central to student success. Superintendent Weast explained, "If you've clearly defined the goal, and the employee knows what the job is, then it's a matter of giving them multiple ways to accomplish that job. We decided that whatever money we've got, we ought to spend it on building our capacity, because that capacity will give us results."

At the heart of this capacity-building are the ESOL Instructional Specialists. MCPS has seven ESOL Instructional Specialists (IS), each of whom works with a group of six to ten schools. In general, IS services are targeted to schools that have a high percentage of ELL students, a Title I program, or are failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress for ELL populations; however, any school can ask for assistance from the IS team as needed.

Instructional Specialists are carefully selected; not only are they ESOL-certified by the state, but they also hold advanced degrees in second language acquisition. In addition, all ISs have classroom experience, and most have leadership experience at the school level as lead teachers or department chairs. Their academic backgrounds provide them with expertise in the ELL field, while their experience as teachers helps them ground their work in the day-to-day realities of schools.

Each IS works closely with his or her assigned schools to provide targeted professional development for staff members. Just as student needs are met using whatever strategy will best help that student, teachers' growth is supported using a variety of approaches. ISs collaborate with the University of Maryland at Baltimore County to provide training in cultural awareness and academic strategies for ELL students; attend grade-level team meetings to help with lesson planning; provide professional development sessions at staff meetings; coach teachers on developing effective co-teaching models, and more. While the ELL curriculum and research-based best practices form a shared core of understanding, ISs are careful to recognize that teachers can and should vary in accommodations and teaching styles. The underlying constant, according to one IS, is to provide information to teachers about language learning, best practices, and high expectations, so that each teacher can implement a solid program.

Part of the MCPS professional development strategy is to ensure that school-level leaders are informed instructional leaders. To meet this need, ISs provide in-school training at least four times per year to ELL teachers, as well as a summer training session/program that is implemented and supported the following school year. Training focuses on the teachers' needs and may center around any topic, such as research-based best practices, the MCPS ELL curriculum, instructional models, benchmarks, supports, and assessments. The goal, explained one IS, is to empower ELL teachers to be leaders and experts in their schools. Two strategies that have proven effective with multiple levels of staff members include walk-throughs and data talks.

Webinars

One strategy that has proven increasingly popular in MCPS is the use of webinars, which allow for wider access to professional development. The ESOL for Leaders series, designed by the IS team, is interactive, not just a preprogrammed presentation. The IS team offered 12 webinars in the series over the course of the 2010-2011 school year, registering as many as 90 participants in a session, indicating a wide reach across the MCPS district.

Walk-throughs

Schools may invite an IS to help develop an action plan, which includes using walk-throughs to identify areas of strength and areas for growth for the staff as a whole. "The school runs the walk-through with Instructional Specialist support," said one IS. "The IS is not 'in charge.'" Working with school leadership teams, ISs help set up ELL observation protocols with clear "look-fors" for differentiation and ELL modifications in classrooms. Walk-throughs are generally conducted by the IS, the school's staff developer, ELL teachers, a handful of non-ELL teachers, and administrators, so working with an observation protocol gives a number of school-level leaders first-hand practice with looking for ELL-specific interventions.

After a first walk-through, the full staff reviews the findings, notes strengths to build on, and selects strategies to address challenges. The team will go through this cycle a number of times to review staff progress, but the goal is always to build capacity and look at school-wide trends, not to single out any one teacher. As one IS explained, "You are pulling data from a wide range of rooms. It is never about a teacher. It is about instructional practice across rooms."

Driven by Data

Using data well is an integral part of the MCPS strategic plan, and the ISs actively support their schools with that process. Each IS works with teams to look at ELL assessment data in purposeful ways. The IS may help ELL teachers review the state ELL assessment to ensure students are placed correctly, or may work with administrators to understand how the assessments factor into Adequate Yearly Progress. A grade-level team may work with an IS to identify students who are not making progress and then plan strategies to address the students' individual needs. In addition, all the ISs hold regular retreats to review data at the district level and look for trends there, as well.

Ultimately, the ISs play a major role in supporting ELL program accountability, but as one IS explained, accountability is not about "checking up on people." The job of the IS, she said, is to empower staff members at all levels to provide a high-quality ELL program to students – a goal best met by providing information and support. Superintendent Weast feels this approach has been successful: "Our teachers are so well-trained in the pedagogy, and so well-connected with each other, that they only ever ask, 'Under what conditions can this student succeed?' They don't even think about not getting it done."

Take-Away: Expecting all ELL instruction to be done by ELL teachers alone is insufficient. High-quality professional development in a range of formats builds the capacity of all staff and leaders to support PreK-3rd ELL students effectively.

Creating a Culture of Collaboration is Central to Success

Collaboration among all Teachers and Professionals in a School

In MCPS, the teacher as solo practitioner is not an option, especially when it comes to ELL students. ELL teachers are expected to be flexible, and a high level of collaboration is required of both specialists and grade-level teachers. At the PreK-3rd Grade level, many ELL teachers are members of grade-level teams rather than specialists working with entire schools. As one ELL teacher explained, she sees herself more as a Kindergarten teacher than an ELL teacher – her grade-level team meets every week. Though she is grounded in the district-wide vision for ELL students, and she is fully certified by the state in ESOL K-12, her day-to-day work is much more closely tied to the work of her grade level than to being a "specialist."

The ELL teacher attends all training session/programs with his or her grade level, and works with the team to plan instruction, review data, and teach students. Several teachers reported that this relationship is vital to meeting student needs. Having a common planning time is central to the success of the ELL program; at the grade-level meetings, teachers work through what one specialist called the "nitty-gritty details" of teaching. ELL teachers and grade-level teachers review language objectives and best practices, learning from one another as they work. In addition, teachers work together informally all day long – at recess, over lunch, and in the hallways.

For many ELL students, learning English is the easy part. Other barriers to learning may be much more difficult to overcome – and this is where ELL counselors come in. MCPS has 13 bilingual ELL counselors, targeted in high-need schools. These counselors augment regular school counselors, and they work closely with teachers and counselors to increase awareness of and handle concerns related to ELL students.

ELL students face a number of challenges. Acculturation can be difficult. Even if a student was born in the United States, differences between cultural expectations at home and at school can be confusing. Students who have immigrated to the United States may wrestle with social and emotional issues stemming from separated families. In many cases, parents relocate first, while children stay behind with relatives; children then travel to the United States alone, sometimes enduring abuse and isolation, and reunification can be very traumatic. Often, new immigrant families struggle to make ends meet, which can result in a stressful home life for students. ELL counselors work within school counseling guidelines to support ELL students with these and other personal challenges.

ELL counseling services include holding individual and group counseling sessions, handling crisis intervention, participating in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, and working with parents to connect them to additional services if necessary. Successful counseling interventions depend heavily on regular communication with ELL and grade-level teachers, who carry interventions across the school day and report back to counselors on student progress.

When ELL students struggle to make progress even with ELL support, MCPS teachers have a number of resources at their disposal to help the student overcome barriers. One approach is to bring the challenge to the school's Collaborative Problem-Solving team. Every school has a Collaborative Problem-Solving team that includes teachers at every grade level and several specialists, such as a Special Education teacher, an ELL teacher, and counselors. Pooling their expertise, these teams design plans to address student needs.

It can be particularly difficult to identify ELL students for services such as special education or gifted programs. Across the United States, ELL students are often misdiagnosed as having learning disabilities when, in fact, their struggles are due only to the challenge of understanding English; in early grades, however, schools often under-identify learning disabilities.[xx] Many assessments used to determine student placement are language-based, so staff members must be cautious to sort out whether student performance is due to English ability or to underlying learning differences. In MCPS, ELL teachers and counselors are on the front lines, helping to sort out students' needs. Schools can also seek assistance from the MCPS Bilingual Assessment Team, which is housed at the Department of Student Services and specializes in assessing students across languages.

Collaboration among District Departments and Leaders

Collaboration in MCPS is not limited to school staff members. At the district level, ELL supports are targeted to the schools with the highest need, but they can be requested by any school requiring assistance. When a request comes in, ELL staff coordinates a range of services to provide the appropriate support. In addition, the Division of ESOL collaborates with other departments on projects to ensure the strongest possible outcomes.

At the PreK-3rd level, collaboration is particularly strong between the Division of ESOL and the Early Childhood Leadership Team. In addition, the interaction among departments extends to all levels of the district and is woven through every task and project. For example, when Woodson noticed that it took several weeks to identify Kindergarten ELL students and start services for them, she and her team approached Janine Bacquie and the Early Childhood team to learn more about the Kindergarten orientation process. Together, the departments developed a strategy to embed the ELL identification process naturally into the Kindergarten orientation, making it possible to start ELL testing and services right away at the start of the school year. When Woodson needed feedback on the ELL PreK and Kindergarten curriculums, the Early Childhood team provided input and helped pilot the programs in schools.

Because a great deal of Special Education work focuses on early interventions, both the ESOL and Early Childhood divisions work closely with the Special Education Department. When changes in the MCPS core curriculum were proposed, the Special Education Department's Early Infant Assessment needed to be modified to reflect those changes. The working team to update the assessment included representation from all three departments to ensure that the resulting changes would meet the needs of all populations in MCPS.

Weast sees collaboration as central to the success of MCPS. As he explained, when individuals and teams work together, "They become more engaged, more productive, and more innovative. Teams are smarter than individuals – we're organized to do something together that we can't do individually."

Take-Away: A culture of collaboration at all levels of the district is necessary to ensure that PreK-3rd Grade ELL students are well-supported in every school.

Building Partnerships with Families is Crucial

MCPS staff shares the belief that family engagement is crucial to helping students meet the goal of college readiness. From the outset, parents and families are kept informed and are invited into schools as partners – regardless of what language they speak. But, with 129 different languages represented across the district, connecting with families is not a simple task.

To address the challenge, the Language Assistance Services Unit (LASU) and ELL Parent Community Coordinators play essential roles in strengthening partnerships with families, and a district-level ELL community advisory committee ensures that the needs of ELL students and their families are reflected in district policies and practices.

Language Assistance Services Unit (LASU)

The LASU employs five on-site translators to provide translations of all written district information, such as parent information packets and district policies, in the top five languages spoken (Spanish, Chinese, French, Vietnamese, and Korean), reaching the vast majority of families with ELL students. Any school with more than ten students who speak a particular language may request that school-wide documents be translated into that language as well. If it is not one of the top five languages, LASU locates a proficient translator in its database of translators.

LASU also employs four language service assistants to manage oral interpretation requests. These interpreters, who work as contractors, provide real-time, face-to-face translation for small meetings such as parent conferences and Individualized Education Plan meetings, and large gatherings such as orientations and PTA meetings. Any school staff member can request an interpreter to support communication with a family.

Bilingual MCPS employees are encouraged to take a test to qualify as interpreters or translators. These employees are then directly available to the school where they work, and can receive additional hourly pay for interpretation and translation work.

To round out the availability of information, the district's website provides extensive information in the top five languages spoken and airs a weekly television program regarding school issues in those languages.

Parent-Community Coordinators

Working in partnership with families requires building trust. Having someone at the school who understands the experiences and culture of a family is a vital part of the trust-building process, and for families with ELL students, the Parent-Community Coordinator (PCC) is that person. The district's 16 PCCs work closely with families by facilitating communication, informing them of their rights, assisting with acculturation, explaining how the American school system compares to others, and empowering parents to resolve concerns.

Like all MCPS employees, PCCs are guided by the core value of doing "whatever it takes." PCCs may attend parent conferences, make sure interpreters are available to help with registration forms, or provide in-service trainings to staff on how to work with families of ELL students. Many PCCs offer workshops for families on topics such as understanding MCPS policies, how grading works, or how to help with homework. In one school the PCC actively recruited parents to run for the PTA board, ensuring that the board composition reflected the demographics of the school, which was 70 percent Latino.

PCCs also work with families to address economic barriers that may put them at a disadvantage. They help families connect with community resources for food, clothing, health insurance, furniture, or family counseling. One PCC worked with the Montgomery County Department of Recreation to provide financial assistance for ELL students to attend summer camp.

Successful PCCs are highly collaborative, working with school ELL counselors, administrators, ELL teachers, other staff, and one another to make sure that students and families receive the support they need. Though the PCCs are assigned to the highest-need schools, any school can request a PCC's services.

ELL/Bilingual Advisory Committee (EBAC)

Like all families, those with ELL students are best served by active participation in district decision-making. In MCPS, a six-member ELL/Bilingual Advisory Committee (EBAC), made up of community members who speak languages other than English serves as an advocacy group in matters related to ELL students. The committee recommends program improvements, reviews materials, and facilitates and increases communication between MCPS and the diverse community of Montgomery County by identifying concerns and relating them to the Board of Education.

Like all MCPS programs, parent support services are data-driven. The ESOL Division compiles a monthly Parent Support Report, which documents how many and what kinds of services staff members provided. These services are then mapped back to the district strategic plan to help the staff identify strengths and areas for growth in ensuring success for ELL students.

Take-Away: A range of dedicated staff and services is required to support ELL families to be partners in their children's education.

Preparing the Next Generation of Well-Educated Students

The most important lesson is that the work of educating students effectively is never finished. Moving forward, MCPS is revising the district curriculum for ELL students, continuously refining the differentiation for each ELL proficiency level in each grade to prepare students to become 21st-Century learners. The district is also modifying its overall curriculum for all students to put greater emphasis on critical thinking skills, academic skills, creativity, and lifelong learning, and to make the curriculum individualized and available digitally.

As the district makes these improvements, ELL staff and leadership will be involved throughout the process to ensure that ELL students are held to the same standards as their peers, and that any barriers to their success are addressed. As Jerry Weast explained, ELL students are not seen as a liability: "We look at them as an asset. It isn't, 'Oh, they don't speak English.' It's, 'Oh my goodness, they speak another language! Their neural pathways will be even better than those of monolinguals.' We're trying to get the kids who *only* speak English to learn another language!"

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Appendix:
MCPS ELL Curriculum Components (PreK-3rd)

Units

The curriculum is organized into four thematic units per year, each aligned with Maryland state content standards as well as English Language Proficiency indicators and objectives. Themes are broad, making it possible to address several content areas while exploring language relevant to the theme. Examples include *Home Sweet Home* (First Grade) and *Connections* (Second Grade).

Enduring Understandings

Each unit includes two to three Enduring Understandings, meant to align the curriculum and to guide the unit's overall purpose. These understandings are "big picture" ideas, such as *People in my community help me* (PreK) and *Following directions is easier when we listen carefully and retell directions in a sequence* (First Grade).

Content Objectives

Each unit is divided into several lesson sequences that incorporate specific, content-oriented objectives. These objectives, aligned with the Enduring Understandings, build on one another with the goal of preparing students to meet each of the Seven Keys to College Readiness. Examples include such objectives as *Students will be able to… describe animal movements* (Kindergarten), *sequence the steps of a task* (First Grade), and *predict information before reading a text* (Second Grade).

English Language Proficiency Objectives

Along with content objectives, each lesson sequence includes language-focused objectives tailored specifically to helping ELL students master English grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, and pronunciation. These objectives help teachers keep a strong focus on language acquisition throughout the lessons and are differentiated by level to ensure that language skills continue to grow and expand over time. Examples of language proficiency objectives at Second Grade include:

- Make simple affirmative and negative present tense statements with *to be* and *to have*: *You are a teacher. I am a student* (Beginner);

- Use verb plus infinitive to express needs or wants: *I want to use a picture dictionary* (Intermediate);

- Make and respond to polite requests using modal verbs with *would*, *should*, and *could: I would like to use the markers, please* (Advanced).

Key Vocabulary
Each lesson sequence specifically identifies key vocabulary needed to support both content and language acquisition objectives. Identifying this vocabulary helps teachers focus explicit instruction on essential words. Examples include:

• Animal covering: *scales, fur, hair, feather, shells, quills* (Kindergarten)

• Task-related action words: *glue, fold, cut, fill, draw, color, write* (First Grade)

Assessment
Each unit details two to four Common Tasks, which provide an authentic context for teachers to assess students' mastery of language objectives. Each Common Task is related to the unit theme, but the objectives are clearly language-centered. In First Grade, for example, students are expected to *draw and label a picture of an animal and write to describe the animal, using a writing template and other print resources*. Instructional guides and blueprints include resources to help teachers modify the Common Tasks for students working at different levels of English proficiency.

The instructional guides also include suggestions for ongoing informal assessment, as well as rubrics to help formally assess student progress over time.
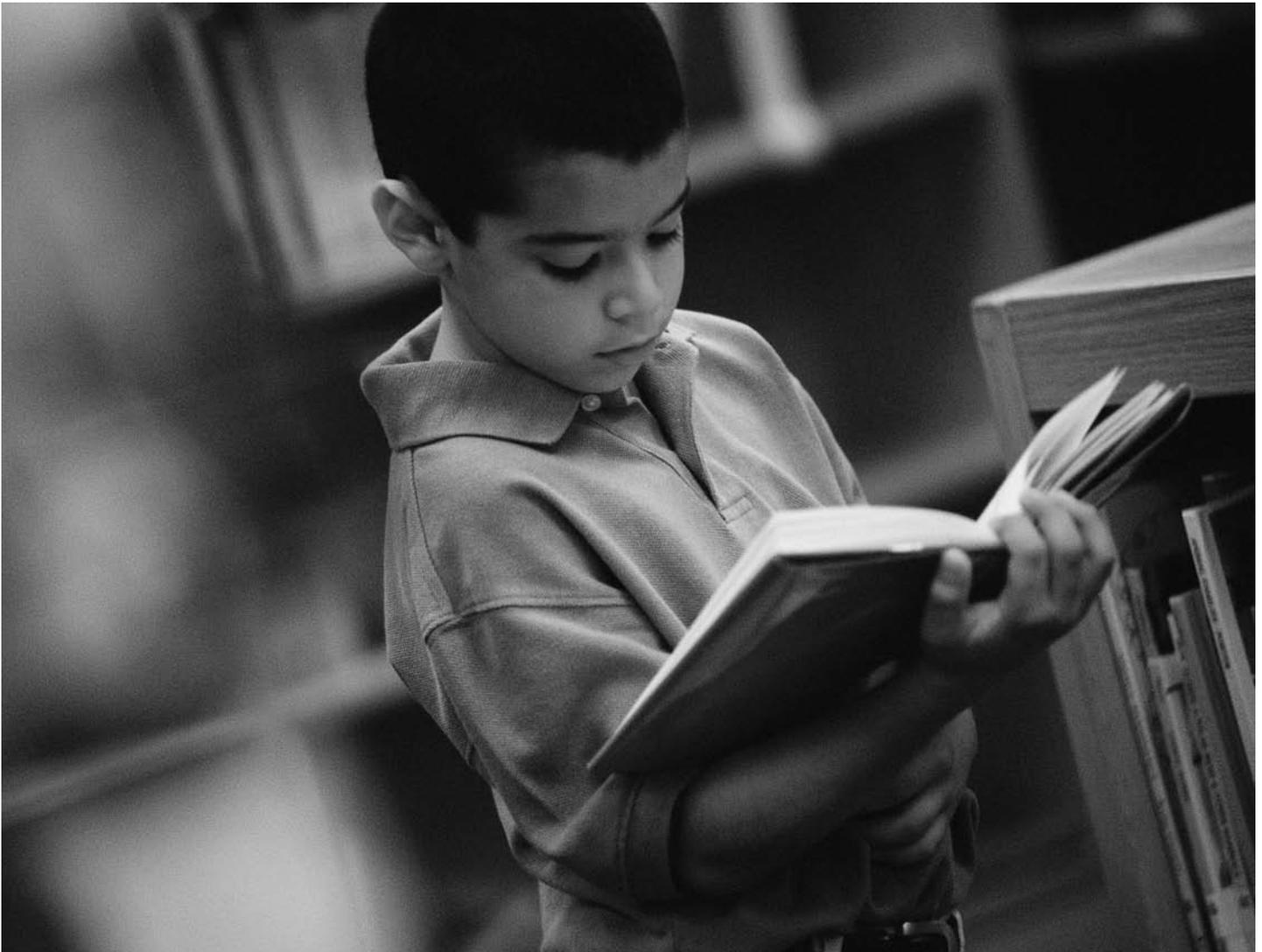
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