

Andrea Honigsfeld and Maria G. Dove

# Collaborative Practices to Support All Students

**Collaborative, inclusive, and integrated service-delivery practices are the best way to serve students who are English language learners.**

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elcome to the collaboration age! or so announced *Edutopia* lead author Grace Rubenstein (n.d.) in a recent article. She not only designated the current era to be recognized for its dire need for collaboration but also coined a new term to describe the students in the contemporary classrooms: the “collaboration generation.” She pondered how schools teach them, how they learn, and what resources are needed to support them and concluded that the future depends on people’s collaborative agility.

## **Why Collaboration?**

Principals face a tangled web of accountability for several reasons: NCLB shifted the focus of programs for English language learners (ELLs). Success is no longer viewed with the single lens of meeting English proficiency, but rather with a magnifying glass to ensure that students “will meet the same challenging state academic content and student academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet” (NCLB, 2001, §3102[2]). With the advent of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, see [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)), school leaders must not only guide their faculty and staff members to meet a new framework of standards-based instruction but must also interpret how to meet those standards with ELLs.



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More than a decade has passed since higher academic standards and additional test accountability have been in place, yet nearly one-fourth of schools in the United States report that their students are not meeting the standards as anticipated (Baker, 2006). The only way schools can successfully comply with the changing regulations is if the entire school community understands and lives by the legislative mandates and if all stakeholders join forces to support ELLs' language and literacy development and academic content attainment.

In addition, principals and other school leaders are members of a greater body of practice within their schools (Sergiovanni, 2006) and must create learning communities with their faculty and staff members to maintain high academic standards for all learners. It is particularly important for all teachers who have special knowledge of ELLs—and their unique linguistic, social-emotional, cross-cultural, and academic needs—to have a venue to act as advocates for their diverse learners who may be at a heightened risk of academic failure and to serve as cultural brokers as well as highly valued resources on second language acquisition and research-based best practices that support ELLs.

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## Key Collaborative Practices

Collaborative practices are new to some administrators and teachers, and adopting them can be complex and challenging. In our research and observation in numerous school districts, we have found that to successfully collaborate for the sake of ELLs, guidelines and procedures must be developed, implemented, and maintained that cultivate the transition from working in isolation to working in collaborative partnerships. The development of collaborative practices may have a more or less direct instructional or noninstructional focus.

### INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Instructional collaborative activities allow teachers to align teaching objectives, materials, learning strategies, and assessment so that ELLs can be supported academically in a cohesive manner. Such activities require an ongoing commitment as a part of shared beliefs and overall mission for ELLs.

**Joint planning.** ELLs need access to the mainstream curriculum and assistance through particular teaching and learning strategies that make academic material comprehensible. When ESL and content-area teachers plan together, they can ensure that ESL lessons contain pertinent academic subject matter and that content lessons are presented using strategies that help reach ELLs.

**Curriculum mapping and alignment.** To ensure that instructional content and practices for ELLs are consistent with content standards and learning outcomes for all students, ESL teachers can map and align the ESL and mainstream curricula. In addition, curriculum frameworks can



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guide mainstream teachers' efforts to differentiate instruction for ELLs according to their levels of language proficiency.

**Parallel teaching.** Although their instruction is conducted in separate classrooms, ESL and mainstream teachers can plan lessons that include similar content and language concepts to foster continuity and congruence with ELLs' teaching and learning.

**Codeveloping instructional materials.** This shared activity promotes the use of differentiated learning; it supports all teachers in their efforts to adapt content for ELLs and can lighten individual workloads.

**Collaborative assessment of student work.** Teachers examine student work together not only to determine areas of instruction that need further clarification and reinforcement but also to identify teaching practices that need improvement. Because they focus on different aspects of ELLs' academic growth and language devel-

opment, ESL and content-area teachers also may have different viewpoints on the progress of ELLs.

**Coteaching.** Within the context of a single classroom, the ESL teacher and the content-area teacher are equal instructional partners who combine their expertise and talents to make instruction comprehensible for ELLs. In addition, both teachers share the responsibility of planning, implementing, and assessing instruction for all students in the class.

### NONINSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Noninstructional activities are also an important aspect of collaborative practices and engagement that can have a great impact on student outcomes. These practices include creating opportunities for joint professional development; encouraging collaborative action research or teacher research to collect data on an intervention; preparing for and conducting joint parent-teacher conferences; and planning, facilitating, or participating in other extracurricular activities, such as family literacy programs, enrichment activities, and field trips.

Involving all faculty members when planning, participating in, and evaluating collaborative activities significantly contributes to their sense of ownership and successful leadership practices that serve ELLs. Without a doubt, cooperation among colleagues improves the quality of teacher learning and instructional delivery for students. Principals who promote key collaborative practices create school climates that foster critical conversations, enhance collaborative partnerships, develop overall trust and support among the faculty, and value teacher autonomy.

## Collaborative, Integrated ESL Service Delivery

When teachers continue to work in isolation from one another, services to support ELLs become fragmented and disjointed. On the other hand, collaboration allows teachers and administrators to build a learning community with coordinated instruction for ELLs and all learners, as shown in the following examples.

In Riverhead (NY) High School, ESL director Liz Scaduto established a collaborative approach to content-area classes and invited all the ESL teachers on staff to pair off with science, math, social studies, and English content-area specialists to offer content-based, cotaught courses that used the sheltered instruction approach (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008) as well as best practices in collaborative lesson planning, delivery, and assessment of instruction (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010).

As teachers move from isolation to collaboration, the isolation cycle is broken, allowing for “respecting, acknowledging, and capitalizing on differences in expertise” (Elmore, 2000, p. 25). Teachers with general education, content-specific expertise offer their knowledge of the subject-matter content; general education curricula; and local, state, and national content-related standards and assessments to all other teachers on staff. At the same time, ESL specialists have the opportunity to share their expertise in second language acquisition, cross-cultural understanding, bilingualism and biculturalism, and literacy development. As a result, all learners benefit.

As principal of Schreiber High

School in Port Washington, NY, Jay Lewis established a highly collaborative leadership approach. In his initiative, all members of the school leadership team, including ESL director Shirley Cepero and ESL teacher leaders, have engaged in shared decision making about what types of joint professional development the school should offer to support all teachers in learning effective strategies to help ELLs.

School leaders who share responsibilities and decision-making power in a democratic fashion are often said to be practicing “distributed leadership” (Spillane & Diamond, 2007), which suggests mutual interdependence among multiple members of the school: “Leadership for instruction typically involves principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, and classroom teachers who work independently as well as collaboratively to influence instruction” (Spillane & Diamond, 2007, p. 8). What collaborative leadership means for ELLs is that multiple school community members’ knowledge and expertise in curriculum, instruction, and leadership are used to make the school more effective and a more nurturing place to be. As a result, all learners benefit.

Under the leadership of principal Steven Siciliano, teachers and district leaders at Sagamore Middle School and in Sagem Central School District in Suffolk County, NY, as well as outside members of the school community, regularly collaborate to examine student data and make joint decisions about instructional selections and program improvement.

When the entire school community shares a collaborative culture,

members of that community work together effectively guided by shared norms, values, and principles. Diverse experiences, ideas, and points of view are respected, rather than negated, marginalized, or trivialized. Members of such successful schools participate in collegial discussions about how to continually improve instruction and enhance the learning environment for all students. Finally, the norm is to be critical consumers of educational information as well as to produce data and information on the basis of carefully examined student data and program evaluations. As a result, all learners benefit.

## Final Notes

Teacher collaboration and a team approach to serving ELLs are important for a number of reasons. Because of the demands on students, teachers, and administrators and the research base that supports teachers’ collaboration, shared knowledge, and collaborative inquiry, it is imperative that school leaders:

- Create an inclusive, welcoming school learning community with a shared vision of respect and acceptance of everyone’s cultural heritage and background
- Build a professional learning community that continually engages in collaborative inquiry on all students’ needs, including ELLs’ linguistic, academic, and cultural challenges
- Establish flexible teaming that allows for both horizontal (on grade level) and vertical (across grade levels) teacher teams, as well as cross-disciplinary teamwork to support ELLs’ curricular, instruc-

tional, and extracurricular needs.

When an inclusive, collaborative framework is in place, the ESL program does not exist in isolation; ELLs and their ESL and English language development specialists do not become marginalized, second-class citizens; and ELLs' education becomes everyone's priority. As an outcome, teachers consistently work together as teams, and ELLs' class participation, process of acculturation; sense of belonging; and above all, English language development and academic performance are often much improved. PL

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*Their book, Collaboration and Co-teaching: Strategies for English Learners, was published by Corwin in 2010.*