

# Winning Schools for ELLs



PHOTO COURTESY OF THOMAS EDISON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

*What does it take to produce academic excellence for English language learners? Four award-winning urban elementary schools show the way.*

## **Delfino Aleman, Joseph F. Johnson Jr., and Lynne Perez**

**S**chools with similar resources and challenges may produce dramatically different achievement for English language learners. In the past four years, the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) has given its Excellence in Urban Education awards to urban elementary, middle, and high schools that achieve impressive results. These schools do not have selective admission criteria, yet they produce high achievement for every demographic group of students they serve,

including ELLs (NCUST, 2008).

Four of these award-winning elementary schools are Southside Elementary Museums Magnet School in Miami, Florida; Pillow Elementary in Austin, Texas; and Edison Elementary and Signal Hill Elementary in Long Beach, California. In each school, at least 30 percent of the students are ELLs, and the percentage of ELLs demonstrating proficiency on state assessments is substantially higher than statewide averages for English language learners (see fig. 1, p. 69). In some cases, ELL proficiency rates exceed state averages for all students.

To explore what makes these schools more successful than most schools serving large percentages of English language learners, we interviewed principals, teachers, parents, and students. We also observed classrooms and reviewed various documents and data. Beyond test scores, we found many other indications that ELLs in these schools are enjoying school and succeeding academically.

### **High Expectations**

In these high-performing schools, ELLs learn more because they are given more

to learn. At Southside Elementary, the principal and teachers tell students they are “the smartest kids in Miami,” and prove it every day by providing lessons that require students to explain, analyze, compare, graph, dissect, and construct information. For example, 4th grade students dissected, weighed, and compared real pig hearts as they learned about the circulatory system and metric measurement.

All four schools use benchmark assessment systems to help ensure that students are meeting essential academic standards. ELLs are expected to master the same grade-level concepts and skills as other students. The benchmark assessment systems give teachers advance notice of the skills they need to teach as well as feedback on the effectiveness of their instruction. Most important, however, teachers exhibit a commitment to helping each student (regardless of English proficiency) meet the standards assessed.

Teacher collaboration fuels ongoing efforts to elevate the rigor of the curriculum and get high percentages of students to perform well on benchmark assessments. In contrast to schools in which “learning communities” devolve into stress-relief sessions that affirm low expectations, principals and teacher leaders in these high-performing schools structure and lead collaboration that builds teacher confidence that all students can meet high expectations.

Unlike some less effective schools, in which leaders share data in ways that reinforce a sense of despair, leaders in these effective schools share data in ways that celebrate improvement, reinforce small accomplishments, and build a sense of teacher efficacy. For example, teachers at Signal Hill use grade-level team meetings to examine data, acknowledge growth, and learn from one another’s best efforts. When benchmark assessment results indicate that students have not learned key concepts, teachers collaboratively plan intervention strategies that provide additional

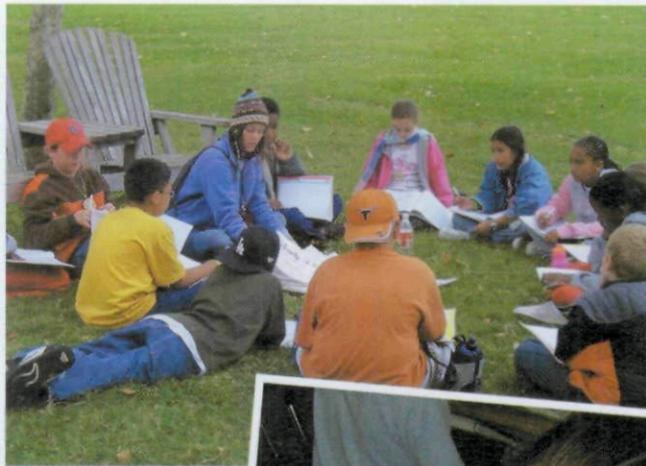


PHOTO COURTESY OF PILLLOW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

**Students at Edison (far left), Pillow (above), and Southside Elementary Schools celebrate and learn.**



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOUTHSIDE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

opportunities and resources—for example, tutoring (before school, after school, during school, or during inter- sessions).

### **Focus on Conceptual Understanding**

The four schools use different reading and mathematics curriculums, emphasize different professional development initiatives, and vary in the extent to which they provide instruction in Spanish, which most ELLs in these schools speak. (In some cases, instruction was designed to help students master academic content through both Spanish and English. In other cases, instruction was primarily in English, but teachers and aides used Spanish to help students understand difficult concepts.)

All four schools have one instructional approach in common, however: an emphasis on ensuring deep levels of understanding. For example, at Edison and Signal Hill, teachers use academic vocabulary strategies advanced by

Marzano and Pickering (2005). They identify vocabulary terms that are important for upcoming lessons and teach these terms in ways that require students to use the vocabulary and demonstrate their understanding. Because students have mastered the academic vocabulary associated with each lesson, they are better able to actively participate in content-rich discussions.

At Southside and Pillow, teachers use object-based learning (a pedagogy they learned from Smithsonian Institution trainers) to help make concepts real and understandable for every student. Teachers enrich lessons by bringing in real objects to illustrate key concepts, stimulate conversation, and deepen understanding. As students manipulate and talk about objects, they increase their understanding of a vast array of social, cultural, historic, and scientific concepts.

In all four schools, teachers require students to explain, discuss, and write to demonstrate their levels of under-

standing throughout the school day. As we observed classrooms, we heard student voices more often than teacher voices. Teachers give many students multiple opportunities to share, question, and describe. ELLs enjoy at least as many opportunities to contribute verbally as other students do.

As students articulate their ideas, teachers listen attentively and provide feedback that affirms or fine-tunes student understanding. When students do not seem to understand, teachers are often prepared with alternate examples, analogies, or hands-on materials. In several cases, we observed teachers using Spanish to explain a word or concept to ensure that students understood. These strategies were not merely the focus of random professional development events: They were evident to us in almost every classroom observation.

Teachers in these four schools focus more on ensuring deep levels of understanding than on covering the pages in a textbook. They pay more attention to student responses than they pay to the teachers' guide.

### A Culture of Appreciation

At all four schools, principals and teachers use the metaphor of *family* to describe the climate and culture of their schools. Students do not simply "attend"; they are family members. Educators demonstrate sincere concern for students and their well-being. Parents perceive that teachers and principals value their children, their children's cultural backgrounds, and themselves. A parent at Signal Hill reported, "I was impressed when teachers I didn't even know greeted me by name and said, 'Oh, you are Maria's father.'"

The atmosphere at each school is positive, even celebratory. Cultural and language diversity are celebrated through bulletin boards, banners, assem-

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A dad at Signal Hill Elementary School reads with students.

blies, and classroom assignments. Educators acknowledge students' excellent work, academic strengths, and character attributes frequently. Teachers and other staff members talk to students respectfully, even when they have misbehaved. Students perceive that their teachers like them and want them to succeed.

Principals lay the foundation for this positive culture by working to ensure that teachers feel respected, valued, and appreciated. As a Signal Hill teacher explained, "We use the Safe and Civil Schools program, but the concept applies for the teachers, too. We are free to share our honest opinions, to share our ideas, even to disagree."

As evidence of their principals' caring, teachers cited expressions of concern related to personal situations, support with challenging students, and the provision of training and materials. Teachers reported that they felt chal-

lenged, but supported. In general, teacher attendance rates are higher and turnover rates are lower than those in other schools serving similar communities. More than teachers in typical urban schools, teachers at these four schools feel that they are part of a team. They are less likely to feel that they are flying solo in a turbulent environment.

### Leadership

Improvements in teaching and learning at these schools have resulted from intelligent, persistent, caring leadership. Principals at each of the schools have focused on goals that resonate with their faculties and communities. Teachers and parents express enthusiasm for the goals and directions that the principals articulated—perhaps in part because principals help them see the connections between these goals and student success.

Goals are not merely an annual conversation, tacked onto a meeting agenda. Principals use data to bring the goals to life every day. Often, those data are disaggregated to ensure that English language learners are making substantial academic progress. Usually, teachers and support staff know specifically what they need to teach, and students know specifically what they need to learn. The schools acknowledge and celebrate progress toward goals. For example, at Signal Hill, teachers established class goals for academic growth. One teacher established the goal that 100 percent of her students would achieve at least one year of growth on district assessments. In her wrap-up meeting with the principal, she reported that only 93 percent achieved at least one year's growth, but 20 percent made at least one and one-half a year's growth.

Although the principal's leadership role is clear and ever present, these schools benefit from teams of leaders (made up of principals, assistant princi-

pals, teachers, and other professionals) who share responsibility for creating a high-performing school. Teachers share responsibility for making school-wide curriculum decisions, organizing and implementing pilots of new approaches, and assessing program effectiveness. At some of the schools, teachers participate in hiring new teachers or plan and lead professional development activities.

Teachers and support staff speak with pride about the responsibilities they have assumed. Principals take pride in the teachers from their schools who have been promoted to administrative positions in nearby schools or in district

offices. Principals are eager to create platforms to support the leadership of other staff members who want to contribute to the attainment of school goals.

Principals have not relinquished their responsibility to set the tone for the school, however. Although they are eager to engage teachers, other staff members, and parents in defining how important elements of the school culture will be enacted, they protect those elements tightly. One value they refuse to compromise is an appreciation for children, families, and staff members. For example, the former Pillow principal challenged staff members to discuss and examine any false assumptions they might unwittingly hold that students' socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds might limit their ability to achieve.

On the other hand, principals are willing to hold other issues loosely. They often give teachers a major role in

making decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and organization throughout the school.

### Complex Lessons

Curriculum, instruction, school culture, and leadership at these four high-achieving urban schools differ from what we typically see in schools that serve large percentages of English language learners. But observing these elements at work in successful schools does not tell us how to transplant them to struggling schools.

We suspect that these elements interrelate in complex ways. If teachers try to elevate curriculum expectations without changing instructional approaches, ELLs may simply experience greater frustration. If a school's culture remains dysfunctional, teachers are unlikely to engage in the difficult work necessary to improve curriculum or instruction. In the absence of focused, caring leadership, none of these elements are likely to change.

In many respects, this study of four schools has only scratched the surface of all that we need to learn about elementary schools that achieve high academic results for English language learners. Thus, we continue our efforts to engage, study, and learn. **EL**

### References

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**FIGURE 1. Four National Excellence in Urban Education Award-Winning Schools**

School	Enrollment	% ELL	% Low-Income	% of ELLs Proficient in Reading	% of ELLs Proficient in Math
Edison Elementary, Long Beach, California (2007 Winner)	923, K-5	64	100	37	83
Signal Hill Elementary, Long Beach, California (2008 Winner)	756, K-6	37	91	53	77
Data for Entire State of California		25	51	26	36
Pillow Elementary, Austin, Texas (2007 Winner)	523, PK-5	31	63	96	96
Data for Entire State of Texas		16	47	67	62
Southside Elementary, Miami, Florida (2008 Winner)	446, PK-5	56	64	71	78
Data for Entire State of Florida		11	46	37	47

Sources: State Department of Education Web sites and GreatSchools.Net. Proficiency in reading and math was measured by standardized achievement tests for each state.

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