

# BEST PRACTICES FOR SERVING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND THEIR FAMILIES



TEACHING  
TOLERANCE

A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER



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#### **ABOUT THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER**

The Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Alabama, is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) civil rights organization founded in 1971 and dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society. It neither endorses political candidates nor engages in electioneering activities.

#### **ABOUT TEACHING TOLERANCE**

Founded in 1991, Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, is dedicated to helping teachers and schools prepare children and youth to be active participants in a diverse democracy.

The program provides free educational materials including film kits, scripted lessons and a tool that allows educators to build their own learning plans. *Teaching Tolerance* magazine is sent to more than 400,000 educators, reaching nearly every school in the country. More than 7,000 schools participate in the annual Mix It Up at Lunch Day program.

Teaching Tolerance materials have won two Oscars®, an Emmy® and dozens of REVERE Awards from the Association of American Publishers, including three Golden Lamps, the industry's highest honor. The program's website and social media pages offer thought-provoking news, conversation and support for educators who care about diversity, equal opportunity and respect for differences in schools.

## Introduction

**FOR MANY EDUCATORS**, helping children learn English is a joy and a privilege. But classroom educators may not always know how their administration is advancing ELL students and vice versa. Reviewing a few key practices as a staff can help move the entire school toward a comprehensive and culturally responsive approach to serving English language learners and their families. This guide can help get the process started.

## About This Guide

**THE RECOMMENDATIONS** in this guide were largely adapted from Critical Practices for Anti-bias Education, a professional development publication from Teaching Tolerance. The guide also leans heavily on positive steps and strategies found on [tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org) and on material developed by our legal colleagues at the Southern Poverty Law Center.

In addition to best practices that can be applied throughout the school building, the guide includes at least one Teacher Leadership Spotlight in every section. These spotlights draw attention to ways in which teachers can take action outside the classroom to ensure ELL students and their families enjoy welcoming, equitable experiences at school.

## TEACHER LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

Model cultural competency outside the classroom by making sure the voices and concerns of ELL students and families are heard at the school leadership and district levels. Using the Social Justice Standards as a jumping off point, initiate courageous schoolwide conversations about the issues that face your students and how to best address those issues and serve each student equitably. Engage your school and community by starting a multicultural group or an ELL family advisory committee. If your school has a large immigrant population, bring in a counselor who specializes in immigration issues to address stress and anxiety from the newcomer perspective or host speakers from national and local agencies to address topics related to immigration. Encourage your administration to complete a policy check-up and gauge how well your school is serving ELL and immigrant families. (See page 13.)

TOLERANCE.ORG/SOCIAL-JUSTICE-STANDARDS



Zaretta Hammond is a writer and consultant who specializes in the science of teaching and learning. “Becoming culturally responsive starts with showing genuine caring that recognizes the unique gifts and talents of every child, particularly when that child doesn’t look [or sound] like you,” she says. “Imagine going through school without feeling affirmed for the way you speak, think or see the world? I can bet that doesn’t generate a lot of happy feelings.”

Bringing a culturally responsive lens to instruction benefits every student; for ELL students this approach can be the difference between engagement and alienation in the classroom. Regardless of whether families opt in or out of specialized ELL instruction, consider a review of how your classroom practice responds to the specific talents, interests and needs of your ELL students.

### Culturally Responsive ELL Instruction

Teachers who practice culturally responsive instruction recognize and respond to the gifts, talents, identities and needs of every child. For more on culturally responsive instruction, look for titles by Geneva Gay, James A. Banks, Christine E. Sleeter and Gloria Ladson-Billings.

➤ *Create a responsive room environment.* Classrooms and school libraries should reflect the identities of the children who learn there. Think about the posters, flags, images and people featured on your classroom walls. Do all your ELL students see themselves in the decor?

➤ *Make the curriculum relevant.* Embed stories, readings and perspectives that focus on history, immigration and community into the units you teach. This will create opportunities to bring personal stories to the classroom and show students that their lives are a part of the United States’ long history of changing borders and movements of people.

➤ *Use a variety of teaching modalities.* Movement, call-and-response, claps, stomps, chants and cheers are all ways to get—and keep—the attention of students who may not understand every word. These

approaches also offer opportunities to make memorable connections to the curriculum. Graphic organizers, sentence stems, Visual Thinking Strategies and journals are just a few instructional strategies educators can incorporate to make the curriculum more accessible and less intimidating to ELL students.

➤ *Familiarize yourself with cultural norms.* Respect looks different in different parts of the world. Don’t make assumptions about ELL students without seeking out some information about the messages their behavior may be sending.

➤ *Get to know your students’ contextual skills and educational backgrounds.* Educational structures and norms vary from country to country. Making assumptions (e.g., that students are used to interacting with printed materials) can impede your instructional relationship.

#### APPENDIX A

See Appendix A for a list of anti-bias teaching strategies idea for use with ELL students.

## TEACHER LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

Does your school or classroom library offer a variety of books written in every language spoken at your school? If not, organize a task force to diversify the bookshelves in your school. Reach out to families for title recommendations, and consider using *Reading Diversity*, a tool to help your taskforce select texts that support critical literacy, cultural responsiveness and complexity.

[TOLERANCE.ORG/READING-DIVERSITY](https://TOLERANCE.ORG/READING-DIVERSITY)

Similarly, informally assessing kids for skills such as using scissors, writing on lined paper, writing the date or using art supplies can save students from embarrassment in front of teachers and peers.

➔ *Distinguish between academic English and conversational/home English.* Some ELL students speak conversational English at home but are less familiar with academic English. Rather than seeing this as a deficit and continually correcting students' use of their home language, show them similarities and differences, creating bridges between home and academic English. As a general rule, it takes 5 to 7 years to become proficient in conversational English and 7 to 11 years to reach proficiency in academic English. It is also important to note that, although some students may speak conversational English well, they may still need ELL services to help them with academic English skills.

➔ *Honor your students' first languages.* If you know a student is literate in another language, find ways to bring it into the classroom and celebrate its use at home and at school. Word walls in multiple languages are one way to do this.





### TEACHER LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

Mix It Up at Lunch Day is one great way to foster interaction across groups and improve school climate. With the help of other adults in the building and—ideally—groups of students, set aside structured time when students can learn about each other over a meal or activity. Schools that participate in Mix It Up report fewer incidences of bullying and improved levels of student empathy.

[TOLERANCE.ORG/MIX-IT-UP/WHAT-IS-MIX](http://TOLERANCE.ORG/MIX-IT-UP/WHAT-IS-MIX)

If you notice students targeting English language learners, say something right away. Even if you're in a hurry or don't know what to say, stop and address the comment. ELL students can be among the most vulnerable kids in school. Ignoring bullying and bias sends the message that targeting them isn't a big deal. Speaking up, however, indicates that your classroom is a place where friendship is valued and harassment and put-downs are not welcome. Make sure your students and your colleagues have an opportunity to learn how to speak up too! For more information, see *Speak Up at School*.

[TOLERANCE.ORG/SPEAK-UP-AT-SCHOOL](http://TOLERANCE.ORG/SPEAK-UP-AT-SCHOOL)

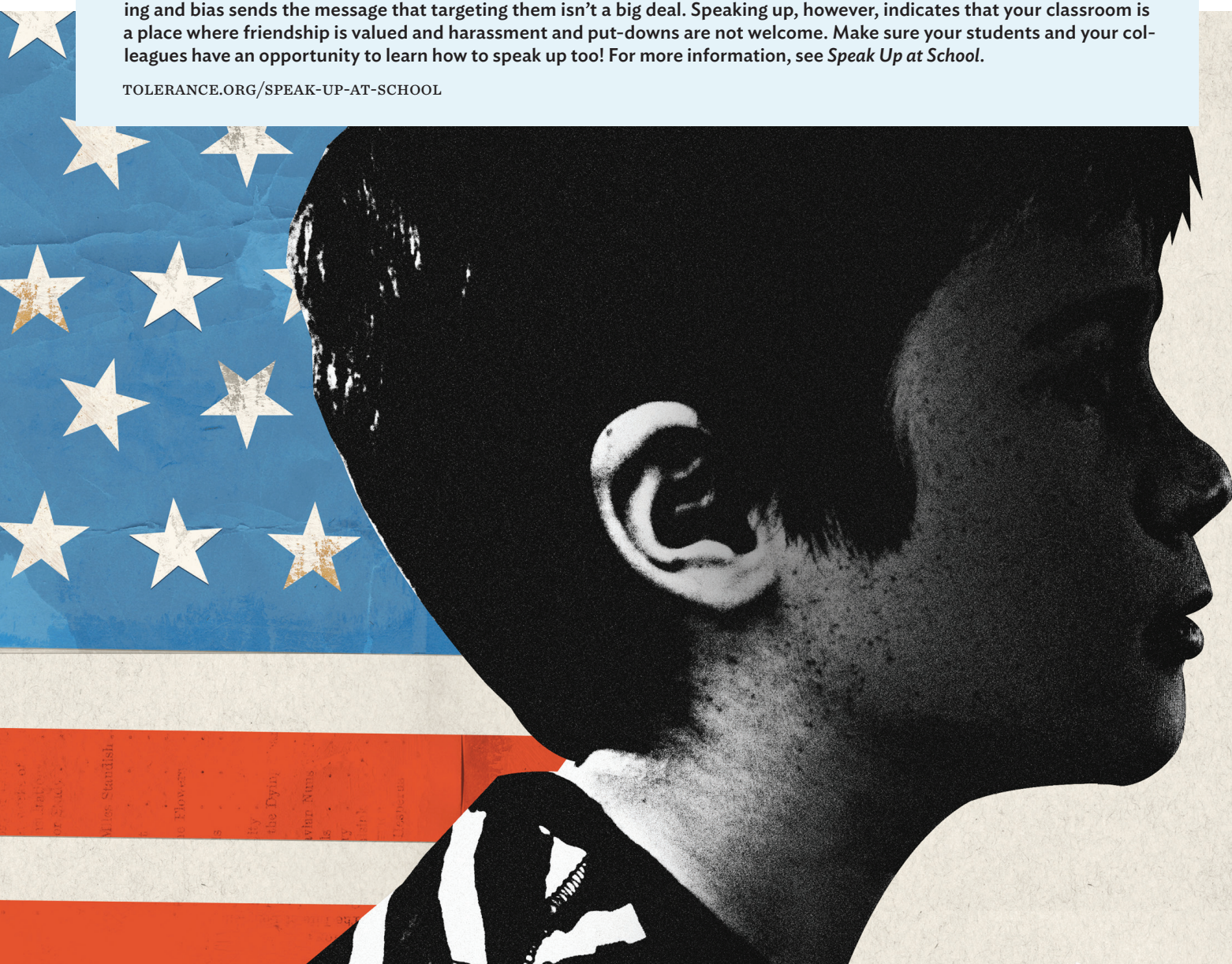


ILLUSTRATION BY LINCOLN AGNEW

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Social inclusion not only helps ELL students learn the culture of their new community, it exposes all students to new ways of thinking, problem solving and living in the world. Ultimately it's these social interactions that will provide the bridge from "otherness" to "togetherness."

### Social Inclusion Opportunities for ELL Students

➡ *Limit pull-out instruction time.* Pulling ELL students out of class for separate instruction limits contact time with peers. ELL students who spend a significant amount of time outside of the classroom are put at a disadvantage for forming new friendships and learning new skills.

➡ *Level the playing field.* Provide leveled reading material in a student's native language, and be sure to give ELL students the same curriculum that everyone else is using. ELL students may need additional scaffolding or alternative texts, but everyone should be given access to the same essential questions, learning targets and enduring understandings. Provide all students the opportunity to showcase their talents and cultures through assignments such as a community art showcase or a photo essay exhibit. Provide texts that serve as mirrors to your ELL students' lived experiences and cultures and as windows for their peers.

➡ *Model being a language learner.* Invite ELL students to teach you and other students about their languages and cultures. Apply for a grant that will fund language classes for school staff. Learn some phrases in your students' native languages and then use them.

➡ *Go beyond the classroom.* Provide opportunities for ELL and non-ELL students to interact and work together outside of the classroom. Working alongside their peers helps all students gain a sense of accomplishment and take pride in knowing that they have something to contribute.

### Celebrate Multilingualism

"In order for [immigrant youth] to develop appropriate psychological and social outcomes, they need to keep their bilingual and bicultural heritage," says Elena Makarova, a researcher who studies immigration. Unfortunately, sometimes ELL students get the message that the goal of school is to assimilate them into the dominant culture. Holding a student to this expectation not only denies their identity, it denies non-ELL students the opportunity to benefit from the diversity of a multilingual, multicultural school community.

How can educators take steps toward honoring multilingualism and multicultural heritage? Consider these best practices:

- Make sure everyone in the school knows which languages are spoken there.
- Weave multiple languages into school events and celebrations, not just administrative tasks like registration.
- Promote the value of multilingualism, even encouraging adults in the school to learn another language.
- Support the formation of language-based affinity groups that allow ELL students to communicate about important topics and add value to the school.
- Offer dual-language learning opportunities, either at the school or in partnership with other local institutions or organizations.



*"How long will students of any age continue to participate in educational settings that do not offer supportive social relationships?" —BARBARA HRUSKA, RESEARCHER AND EDUCATOR*

*"When students from different languages learn together, side by side, it helps the students feel valued. And when a student feels valued, it gives them a boost of acceptance, confidence and pride." —BESSIE ALEXOPOULOS, TEACHER AND FORMER ELL STUDENT*



## TEACHER LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

Build a strong relationship with the families in your school community. Make periodic home visits, and encourage your colleagues to do the same. Invite families to share their cultures, stories and experiences with students, either in the classroom or at a special after-school event. Involve families in events such as Mix It Up at Lunch Day to break down cultural barriers. Build strong partnerships with student services staff (counselors, social workers, nurses and psychologists) to help monitor students' needs and progress.

It is impossible to really see and understand students without understanding their lives outside of school. If handled with respect and cultural sensitivity, school-family relationships can deepen trust and positively influence students' school experiences.

Nurturing those relationships is not only good for students, it's good for teachers, says Soñia Galaviz, a fifth-grade teacher and TT Award winner. "An often-untapped resource ... are the parents and families of the kids we teach," she says. "This investment at the beginning of the year pays off all school year. Parents and families will see you as their partner and advocate for their child and will be there for you when you need them."

## Do's and Don'ts of Communicating with Families of ELL Students

Regardless of their English proficiency levels, parents, guardians and other adult caregivers depend on basic school communications to stay involved in their children's education. ELL students have the greatest opportunity to succeed when the lines of communication between family and school are nurtured at both the classroom and building levels.

### Do...

➤ *Be clear about the purpose of meetings.* Set goals and communicate them prior to every meeting or conversation so teachers and families have shared, realistic expectations.

➤ *Be mindful of the potential power differential between parents or guardians and teachers.* Negative past experiences (as either a student or a parent), immigration status, different cultural norms and expectations, and lack of English language fluency can cause discomfort and lead families to disengage from the school.

➤ *Provide a translator if you don't speak the parents' or guardians' primary language fluently.* The nuance and detail necessary to convey how adult family members might best engage in the student's education should be communicated in the family's primary language.

➤ *Start the meeting on a positive note.* Try to find an area where the student is doing well academically, socially, athletically, etc. Beginning the meeting with what is wrong or what needs improvement diminishes trust and can make parents feel defensive and anxious about their child's prospects at the school.

➤ *Use terms that everyone understands.* If there are some concepts or terms that need explanation, provide necessary detail and consider providing additional preparatory materials to families in advance of the scheduled meeting. Avoid acronyms and jargon.

➤ *Visit the family in their home.* The goal of this practice is to learn about how knowledge is transmitted in the student's home, to get to

know the family, to discover their expectations related to schools and teachers, and to understand the family's academic goals for their child.

➤ *Anticipate issues and needs related to childcare and work schedules.* For example, be flexible if parents have to bring young children with them to meetings.

### Don't...

➤ *Use the student as the translator.* Even if parent-teacher conferences are student led, they may well become misled if parents and teachers are unable to communicate independently. Using the student as the translator can put the student in an awkward position where loyalty and respect for their teachers and their family can feel contradictory.

➤ *Assume that any bilingual adult will be a successful translator.* Using families of other students, or other students themselves, compromises privacy. What is gained in increased clarity will be lost if families feel embarrassed or disrespected.



*Make sure every staff member knows how to access appropriate language services to communicate with families of ELL students.*

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## Language Access

Offering translation or interpretation services to families who do not speak or understand English fluently sends a welcoming message and supports successful home-school relationships. In public school settings, offering these services is also a legal obligation: Districts must ensure that all staff communicate with families in a language they can understand *and* notify families of any program, service or activity communicated to English-speaking families. For “major” languages (top languages spoken) in a district, a full array of language access should be provided. For “lower-incidence” languages (languages spoken less frequently), a district can offer interpretation only.

### Planning 101: District-wide Language Access Services

Administrators and staff can use best practices to create a comprehensive communication plan for families of ELL students.

- Identify the district’s “major” versus “lower-incidence” languages.
- Utilize appropriate staff; if necessary, reach out to the community to fill service gaps.
- Post signs in high-traffic areas of every school about interpretation services.
- Distribute written information on how to request translation or interpretation services to every parent or guardian during enrollment and registration.
- Have the bank of teacher report card comments translated.
- Prepare to address common scenarios or to host big events in multiple languages.
- Consider organizing a district-level bilingual parent advisory committee.

## What Gets Translated and Interpreted?

### Written & Translated

- Handbooks, policies and forms
- Discipline policies
- Disciplinary notices
- Report cards and other academic performance notes
- Parent/guardian permission forms
- Grievance procedures
- Bullying notices
- Notices about school choice
- Nondiscrimination notices
- Testing accommodations
- Registration documents and home language survey
- “Change of Address or Telephone” form
- “Student Not Riding Bus” form
- “Reason for Absence” form
- “Request for Conference” form
- “Early Dismissal” form

### Verbal & Interpreted

- Registration and enrollment process
- ELL program eligibility counseling
- Disciplinary hearings
- Orientation and back-to-school events
- Family-teacher conferences
- Medical emergencies and nurse calls
- Schoolwide announcements over the intercom
- Special education meetings
- Family-reported absences
- Testing accommodations



*Err on the side of caution and prepare to provide translation in every interaction.*



## Who Provides Language Access?

### *Appropriate*

- Staff who are certified interpreters in the designated language
- Contractors from a professional interpretation company
- Contractors from a language line

### *Inappropriate*

- Unofficial volunteers
- Uncertified parent volunteers or bilingual parent liaisons
- Bilingual friends and family of the ELL student or family member
- The students themselves
- Other students
- Free internet translation services
- Self-proclaimed bilingual staff or ELL teachers not certified in interpretation
- Speaking English but more slowly or loudly

## **Administrative Spotlight: Opt-outs**

In the context of ELL instruction, opting out means that the student will not be enrolled in language assistance programs. Opt-out laws differ from state to state. In states that allow them, opt-outs should be truly voluntary—the product of informed family decision-making.

What constitutes informed family decision-making? Consider these best practices:

- Require a meeting (that includes translators) to inform ELL students and families of students' eligibility for ELL programming.
- Ensure qualified staff members provide detailed information about the program.
- Include documentation of the meeting, a checklist of required discussion topics, and parent/guardian consent and acknowledgment forms (available in both English and home language) documenting that the family received the information.

Should an ELL student be opted out of services, they still retain their ELL status, and the district maintains its obligation (under Title VI) to provide them with access to educational programs.

- The district must continue to annually assess the student's English language proficiency. (This refers to federal law; state laws may differ.)
- The district should periodically monitor student progress. If opt-out students fail to demonstrate growth in English proficiency or struggle in class, then the district has an obligation to contact the family and offer the ELL program or some combination of ELL services again.
- The district should consider providing professional development to opt-out students' general education teachers on basic second-language acquisition and English language development.
- Once a student who has been opted out demonstrates English language proficiency, the district must continue to monitor their progress for two or more years (state laws differ), just as it would for any other ELL student who has exited the program.

## TEACHER LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

Be an advocate; make it known that a student's language acquisition level is unrelated to the possibility that they could benefit from specialized instruction like special education or advanced coursework. Many schools hesitate to test ELL students for special education services. As a general rule, a cognitive disability must be found in both English and in the student's home language for an ELL student to receive special education services. Schools may also default to using core competency data or test scores when offering students talented and gifted services. Encourage your district to expand gifted programs to include students who excel in the arts, social studies and world languages.

To ensure students feel welcome, valued and safe enough to learn, schools must actively cultivate a welcoming climate that values every member of its student body. This means that the spoken *and* unspoken messages students receive in every school interaction tell them that they are cared about and respected. Periodically reviewing administrative policies through the lens of ELL inclusion helps schools maintain a welcoming culture while also remaining compliant with some of the lesser-known laws related to ELL students.

**Enrolling ELL and Immigrant Students: Best Practices**

Enrollment is almost always a family's first contact with the school. What message does the enrollment process send at your school? Consider these best practices when reviewing enrollment policies:

- Plan for language access and make sure translated resources are visible in the office and on the website. (See the Language Access section under Family Engagement.)
- Train all employees who do registration and enrollment activities in proper procedures. Include front office staff, who are often the first people to interact with visitors and answer phone calls.
- Remove all requests for social security numbers from all forms communicating registration requirements.
- Offer an array of document types that families can show to prove a student's age and residency.
- Prepare a home language survey for families to fill out when enrolling. Allow families to tell you the language(s) they speak at home, their preference for language instruction at school and their language choice for communication from teachers and staff. If adult English language courses are available in your community, ask parents and guardians if they are interested in enrolling.

**Did You Know...?**

Brush up on these important reminders. What you learn could make the difference between a smooth, empowering enrollment experience and a rocky start—or even a legal complaint.

- Federal law states that public schools must enroll and register every child who resides in the school's geographic boundaries, regardless of the child's or parents' citizenship or immigration status.
- Enrollment cannot be denied based on a student's or family member's possession of a foreign birth certificate or lack of possession of a U.S. passport.
- A student's immigration or citizenship status is not relevant to establishing residency within the district.
- Public schools do not need a social security number for any legitimate reason. Student IDs can be issued and free or reduced lunch can be applied for without this number.
- A student cannot be denied enrollment because the student (or the student's parent or guardian) chooses not to provide a social security number.

**Monitoring the Language Program**

All schools want their ELL students to be successful. In a successful language program, ELL students will reach the following goals:

- meeting exit criteria within a reasonable period of time;
- participating meaningfully in classes without ELL services; and
- performing comparably to their never-ELL peers.

A language program is unsuccessful when ELL students are not making progress in the program and are not exiting by the anticipated time. Districts are required to periodically evaluate the program and modify the program when it is not successful. Monitoring between evaluation periods is a proactive way to make sure kids are on track and that the program isn't heading in the wrong direction. See Appendix C for a graphic organizer that can assist in monitoring the success of an ELL program. The organizer can be modified for use at the classroom or administrative level.



## ACCESS

Access these strategies at [tolerance.org/classroom-resources/teaching-strategies](https://tolerance.org/classroom-resources/teaching-strategies)

## Suggested Anti-bias Strategies for Use With ELL Students

ELL instructors can adapt almost any lesson or activity to meet the needs of their students. Use this list of sample ELL-friendly strategies to spark creativity. Implement them alone, combine them or integrate them into lessons you've already created.

### Anchor Charts (K–2)

Anchor charts remind students of prior learning built over multiple lessons. They help level the playing field by providing all students, regardless of prior knowledge or background, with visual reminders of the vocabulary they are responsible for.

### Realia (K–2)

Realia are real-life objects that enable students to make connections to their own lives as they try to make sense of new concepts and ideas. Realia also evoke physical responses that help students recall ideas and themes from the text in later discussions.

### Making Connections (K–2)

Students make connections to read-aloud texts by relating the text to themselves (lived experiences), to other texts (read in any setting) and to the world (current and historical events).

### Readers' Theater (3–5)

Readers' theater helps children gain reading fluency and engage fully with text. The strategy involves attention to pronunciation, unfamiliar vocabulary and interpretation.

### Think Aloud (3–5)

The think aloud strategy encourages conversations about reading for understanding, providing insight into how students are processing texts. This strategy fosters the metacognition skills necessary for students to become successful independent readers.

### Vocabulary Frames (3–5)

Students use this tool to identify a word's meaning, its parts and its opposite. Vocabulary frames combine several word-learning strategies in a single diagram, helping students retain the new word.

### Word Wall (3–5)

Word walls reinforce sight-word acquisition and build content literacy across grades and disciplines. They also help students see relationships between words and ideas.

### Personal Picture Dictionary (3–5)

A personal picture dictionary is an individual vocabulary and spelling resource students make themselves. This strategy allows students to take ownership of their learning.

### Shared Reading (3–5) (6–12)

During shared reading, learners observe experts reading with fluency and expression while following along or otherwise engaging with the text. This strategy improves targeted reading comprehension skills while promoting the joy of reading.

#### EDUCATORS SPEAK

*"It's our duty as educators to make our ELL students feel welcome and safe when they are in our schools. This can be as simple as a genuine smile and a hello in the morning, pairing them up with compassionate partners during class activities, and integrating languages or heritage permanently into murals or artwork to create a sense of belonging to the school environment."* —AMY MELIK, TT ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

# Monitoring the Language Program Graphic Organizer

Use this simple chart to monitor your school’s ELL program between evaluation periods.

Never ELL Students	Exited ELL Students	ELL Students (Including Those Who Have Been Opted Out)	
			Core Content Performance
			Participation Rates in Advanced Courses
			Graduation Rates
			Dropout Rates
			Retention Rates
			Measure with Longitudinal Data



## Additional Resources

Planning for Districtwide Language Access Services

### Identify Your District's "Major" and "Lower-Incidence" Languages

- Use your student information system to create a code for ELL students and families, indicating both ELL status and language spoken.
- Use a home language survey to identify every ELL parent and guardian in the district. Note how many languages are spoken and the size of each corresponding population. Enter ELL status into the student information system.
- "Major" refers to the top languages spoken in the district. School districts must provide the full array of language access for all major languages.
  - Prepare in advance by translating all essential district-level documents and school-level documents.
  - Have interpretation staff prepared in advance of teacher conferences and other school events to which families are invited.

- "Lower-Incidence" refers to less frequently used languages. Less than 5 percent of district population is a useful threshold.

- Districts can offer interpretation only for lower-incidence languages.
- Create a standard handout in all relevant languages advising parents of how they can request interpretation of written materials or an interpreter to help them communicate with staff. Distribute the handout to every ELL family during their enrollment and registration. Post signs in high-traffic areas (front doors and front office, for example) about the availability of interpretation and the process for requesting it.

### Utilize Appropriate Staff

Do rely on competent staff trained and certified in interpretation or obtain the services of a language line or professional interpretation company.

- Prepare a list of approved staff or outside contractors available for interpretation or translation, and circulate it to all schools.
- Ensure every principal and vice principal knows how to access these services.
- If your district contracts with a professional company, circulate its contact information and a list of languages the company can translate to all principals, assistant principals, and registrars.
- Check with local universities to see if they have a program that will certify bilingual people as interpreters.

Do not rely on:

- Bilingual staff or volunteers;
- the student themselves;
- other students;
- bilingual family members;
- hired interpreters that the family brings with them
- free internet translation services; or
- speaking English more slowly or loudly

### Common Scenarios and Big Events

Make sure you have protocols in place that make ELL families feel welcome for the following common school situations:

- Registration and enrollment
- Calls from non-English speakers to the main office
- Calls from the nurse to a family when a student gets sick
- Major orientation activities or teacher conferences

Consider organizing a district-level bilingual parent advisory committee that can provide feedback about the district's language-access capabilities.

### Report Cards

Have the bank of teacher comments translated so that parents can understand the report card.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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