Practical Guidelines for the Education of English Language Learners

How do teachers provide vocabulary instruction to English language learners (ELLs) that is intensive, systematic, complex, and frequent? Do ELLs acquire mathematical knowledge and concepts differently from native English speakers? Is it better to provide instruction to newcomers in heterogeneous or homogeneous groups? Which assessment accommodations have the most substantial effect on student performance? The answers to these questions and more are available in three newly available guides for English language learners.

The Center on Instruction, which is part of the Comprehensive Center network, has developed a set of three guides that provide timely and sound recommendations for school leaders and policymakers seeking solutions for English language learners.

The first guide—Research-Based Recommendations for Instruction and Academic Interventions—offers nine recommendations to strengthen and refine educational systems to better meet the needs of ELLs in reading and mathematics. The advice applies to class-wide instructional formats in addition to more individualized and targeted interventions.

The second guide—Research-Based Recommendations for Serving Adolescent Newcomers—is designed for those working with adolescent students who are new to the United States and must simultaneously master academic language skills and grade-level content within a relatively short period of time. This document offers both elements of effective instruction for adolescent newcomers and organizational elements of effective newcomer programs.

The final guide—Research-Based Recommendations for the Use of Accommodations in Large-Scale Assessments—is designed to

A Note from the Director

Meeting the goals of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is tough for everyone involved—schools, districts, and states. That’s why the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) is producing Texas Focus, a new quarterly newsletter.

Helping English language learners become strong readers so they can achieve in all subject areas is one of the greatest challenges Texas educators face. In this newsletter you’ll find information from the Center on Instruction that provides research-based information to assist these learners and their teachers.

Additionally, improving high school achievement and graduation rates is another critical goal of Texas educators. We’ve included information from the National High School Center that provides recommendations for many of the challenges faced by low-performing schools.

We also highlight the Region 10 Education Service Center’s efforts to provide assistance to schools in need in that region. We provide information about the vital issue of academic rigor and science labs. In addition, we offer a review of the TXCC’s recent events and activities as well as national news regarding NCLB.

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Director, TXCC
provide recommendations, based on research, for the use of accommodations to increase the valid participation of ELLs in large-scale assessments. The guide establishes a rationale for using accommodations for ELLs and outlines factors critical to selecting and evaluating those accommodations. In addition, a review of state policies regarding accommodations and their appropriateness related to ELLs is presented. Finally, typical accommodations are reviewed and advice is offered regarding which accommodations are currently known to be most effective.

These documents can be downloaded and printed from the Center on Instruction's Web site (www.centeroninstruction.org).

Academic Rigor and Science Labs

This Rapid Response (a service available to TEA staff through the Texas Comprehensive Center) addresses two timely and crucial issues for school systems across the nation as they prepare for the requirements regarding science assessments outlined in NCLB. NCLB requires states to implement science assessments at least once a year in grades 3–5, 6–9, and 10–12 by 2007–2008. This response addresses the definition of “academic rigor” as well as the definition of a “science lab” and the percentage of class time that should be devoted to laboratory work.

Academic Rigor

Many school systems are currently grappling with the issue of academic rigor as they refine their achievement standards to uphold high expectations for student achievement and strive for greater consistency in instruction and assessment among teaching staff.

Not since the mid-1950s has our nation faced a more serious shortage of skilled workers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. We can and must reinvigorate these professions if the United States is to maintain a strong position in the competitive global marketplace. The solution lies in education—inspiring our young people to enter these challenging fields and providing the rigorous education these disciplines demand. (ACT, 2006, p. 6)

The TXCC staff reviewed research and consulted state science supervisors and both national and international science organizations to formulate the following definition for academic rigor:

Rigor provides students with opportunities to
• analyze and understand complex, enigmatic concepts;
• develop critical thinking skills; and
• apply acquired content and process knowledge to novel situations encountered in the classroom and the real world at a level of sophistication and depth that is appropriate and challenging.

Science Labs

According to the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), “Laboratory experience is so integral to the nature of science that it must be included in every science program for every student. . . . Laboratory experience is of critical importance in the process of enhancing students’ cognitive and affective understanding of science.” (NSTA, 1990, p. 31–32)
Though the critical importance of laboratory experience is agreed upon by virtually all science educators, there is considerable discussion on the question of precisely what constitutes a “laboratory.” The following definition is summarized from that provided by the National Research Council (NRC) (2005) in its publication, America’s Lab Report:

A laboratory provides students with opportunities to interact with the physical world, either directly or through data taken from the physical world. It may take place in a traditional laboratory classroom or other suitable setting, and it may consist of activities such as

- manipulation of natural physical materials
- use of computerized simulation models,
- interaction with data derived from real-world phenomena, including databases of empirical data compiled by researchers, and
- remote manipulation of scientific instruments.

Laboratory experience does not include analysis or manipulation of data created by an instructor as a substitute for real-world interaction.

Science Labs: Percentage of Class Time
The NSTA recommends that a minimum of 40% of science class time be devoted to lab-related activities. This time may include pre-lab instruction and post-lab analysis, as well the actual lab time (NSTA, 1990). Of the states responding to our request to submit their requirements for lab time, most recommend 20–25% and nearly half do not specify a minimum. At least three states are currently addressing this issue.

To view and download the entire report, including the state science supervisors’ responses to the issues, go to http://txcc.sedl.org/orc/rr/txcc_rr_00025.pdf.

References


In August and November the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) offered workshops to engage education service center (ESC) staff in data-driven conversations on significant and difficult-to-address topics. These trainings, based on the book Data-Driven Dialogue: A Facilitator’s Guide to Collaborative Inquiry, are the first in a series of training-of-trainer events for the instructional leadership staff at the ESCs. In this interactive seminar, participants learned and applied a three-phase collaborative learning cycle that guides professional inquiry. Participants explored strategies that reduce defensiveness and create shared responsibility for student learning. Materials to replicate this training are available on the TXCC Web site at http://txcc.sedl.org/events/descriptions/110706.html.

In September and November the TXCC offered workshops to engage ESC staff members involved with both mathematics instruction and instruction for English language learners (ELLs). These training-of-trainer sessions for instructional staff provided an opportunity for mathematics and ELL staff to collaborate to design and deliver high-quality training on research-based strategies to improve mathematics learning for secondary ELLs. Materials to replicate this training are available at http://txcc.sedl.org/events/ellm1/index.html.

In October, the TXCC partnered with the Southeast Regional Resource Center (SERRC), the Mid-Continent Comprehensive Center (MC3), and the Southeast Comprehensive Center (SECC) to provide a forum to assist states as they develop plans to implement a Response to Intervention (RtI) model. Eleven state teams gathered to hear from experts in the field, collect resources, share their progress to date, and collaborate to formulate or refine their state implementation plans for RtI. Participants went away with a renewed sense of purpose, collaborative partners, and a foundation on which to build a successful plan for RtI implementation.
National NCLB News

Statewide Educational Accountability Under the No Child Left Behind Act—A Report on 2006 Amendments to State Plans

A report entitled Statewide Educational Accountability Under the No Child Left Behind Act—A Report on 2006 Amendments to State Plans commissioned by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) was recently released. This report summarizes state requests in 2005–2006 for amendments to their educational accountability systems under NCLB. All but two states submitted requests. Requests fell into such categories as Standards and Assessments, AYP Model, Inclusion of All Students, and AYP Consequences and Reporting. The 56-page report includes an executive summary, a timeline of significant events related to state accountability plans under NCLB, and a summary of amendment requests and decisions made by the U.S. Department of Education. To order or download a copy of the report, go to http://www.ccsso.org/publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=339.

Secretary Spellings Approves Growth Model Pilots for 2006–2007

Three states—Arkansas, Delaware, and Florida—have been approved to pilot growth models as an alternative to measuring student achievement and determine Adequate Yearly Progress. These models track individual student scores from one year to the next, giving schools credit for student growth over time. These states were deemed by a group of peer reviewers as having written strong growth model proposals that adhere to the core principles of No Child Left Behind. Tennessee and North Carolina have received provisional approval to pilot their models. An additional five states may also receive approval. Nine states—Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Utah—are vying for those five slots.

Emerging Evidence on Improving High School Student Achievement and Graduation Rates: The Effects of Four Popular Improvement Programs

The National High School Center, one of the five content comprehensive centers, has released a research brief that highlights methods to increase student achievement and promote high school graduation. The brief draws on findings from four studies, and the results indicate that instructional improvements and personalization are key factors for high school reform. Recommendations for low-performing schools include the following:

• Assisting students who enter high school with poor academic skills
• Improving instructional content and practice
• Creating a personalized and orderly learning environment
• Providing work-based learning opportunities and preparing students for the world beyond high school
• Stimulating change in overstressed high schools

To download and print a copy of the research brief, visit the National High School Center’s Web site at www.betterhighschools.org.

To read even more NCLB news, go to TEA’s Web site and sign up to receive NCLB News at http://list.tetn.net/archives/nclb.html.