

February 2017 – Volume 20, Number 4

Supporting School Responsiveness to Immigrant Families and Children: A University–School Partnership

February 2017 – Volume 20, Number 4

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Abstract

A partnership between a university program and an urban public school was created to help the school respond to the significant increase in the school's population of immigrant, English language learners. School staff and university faculty established an agenda to learn about local immigrant families, improve communications with the families, and provide responsive instruction to the children. Over a two-year period, a series of graduate courses were offered to teachers, focusing on culturally responsive curriculum, second language instruction, and Spanish language learning. In addition, the university faculty provided ongoing consultation with teachers in classrooms, as well as a series of parent workshops with the school families. Dedicated to embracing the immigrant community and children, more than twenty teachers and the school principal participated in the graduate courses and used the experience to change the school culture, promote school-community relationships, and improve classroom instruction for the English language learners.

Keywords: school partnerships, English language learners, immigrant learners, professional development

Introduction

For most of the twentieth century, Northeast Elementary Middle School (NEMS) served the children of parents who worked and thrived in Baltimore, Maryland's nearby Bethlehem Steel Mill and tertiary industries. Following the closing of the local steel mills, the surrounding community endured steadily increasing unemployment, housing stock falling into disrepair, families struggling to get by, and drug use all too visible from the school grounds. For years, the school persevered serving its mostly poor, lower working class white and African American families. In the middle of the 2000 decade, however, there was a significant increase in immigrant families settling in the neighborhood. From 2009-2013, the population of English language learners (ELLs) in the school nearly doubled with 27% of the elementary level and 22% of the middle level classified as "limited English proficient" (LEP) learners (Maryland Report Card, 2014). The NEMS school principal maintained that including the LEP students who required ongoing English language support following exit from official ESOL programming boosted the LEP population to above 40% school wide. To meet the ELL needs, the public school system provided two full-time and one part-time ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) specialists to work in the school, but the principal and teachers realized that a much greater effort was needed. Administrators were unfamiliar with serving immigrant families and few of the classroom teachers had any experience or coursework related to ESOL. In 2012, two M.Ed. graduates of nearby Towson University's Graduate Reading Education Program who were on the school staff reached out to the university program for support in the school's efforts. This article describes the partnership established between the university program and the school to provide outreach to the local immigrant community and support with teaching the English Language Learners (ELLs) in classrooms.

Over the past few decades, many states in the US that previously had few recent immigrants, like North Carolina, Georgia and Iowa, have seen significant increases in their immigration populations. Maryland, a mid-Atlantic state, is among these. Though Baltimore, Maryland was once the second most active port of entry in the nation for new immigrants (behind New York City), the number of foreign-born residents in the state of Maryland declined significantly and remained relatively low for most of the twentieth century. However, the new millennium brought a dramatic increase in the Maryland's immigrant population (Commission to Study the Impact of Immigration in Maryland, 2012). From 2000 to 2012, that population grew by 58%, accounting for 70% of the state's population increase during the first decade (Maryland Governor's Census Outreach Initiative, 2010).

Commensurate with the overall increase in the immigrant population, Maryland's public school system saw a nearly 300% increase in the population of students receiving services from ESOL programs, though compared to many states, the numbers of English language learners still remained relatively small at 6.5% in 2012 (MSDE Report Card, 2014). Because the increase in the population of linguistically diverse, ELLs has come rather recently, school systems across the state have struggled to catch up and allocate appropriate resources and professionals where needed. It has been common, though unfortunate, to find situations in which a single ESOL Specialist is assigned to several

schools to serve a few second language learners in each school. Many of the local colleges of education have only recently been adding second language learning courses to undergraduate teacher preparation programs. Finally, the only state requirement for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) certification is passing the Praxis II ESOL examination; ESOL coursework is encouraged but not required for a state TESOL endorsement. In too many of Maryland's school systems, classroom teachers and schools are often unprepared to serve second language learners and are left to their own devices.

Objectives and Critical Factors for the University-School Partnership

While Maryland school systems have taken gradual steps to meet the needs of the increasing population of ELLs, the NEMS principal and teachers pursued a more ambitious agenda. As mentioned, NEMS and the Towson University Graduate Reading Education Program formed a partnership. In a series of meetings, the university faculty and NEMS staff established the following objectives:

- Formalize a partnership between the university program and school.
- Expand school administrators' and teachers' understanding of the local immigrant families and communities.
- Promote outreach to immigrant families and parents.
- Support school-immigrant community communications.
- Provide school administrators and teachers with foundational knowledge of second language learning.
- Guide classroom teachers to promote ELL student learning through research guided instruction.

Two critical factors were essential to facilitate the partnership. First, was the Towson Learning Network (TLN), an administrative entity that helps to bring graduate level courses to schools and school systems. Through TLN, the partnership included a series of graduate courses offered to NEMS teachers that would support the partnership objectives (these courses would also prepare teachers for the Praxis II ESOL exam). The second factor was that local school system policy gave discretion over allocation of professional development funds to school principals. The NEMS principal dedicated the school's professional development funds to the reduced TLN tuition for four graduate level course for as many teachers as were willing to commit. As a testament to their commitment to the immigrant families and children, more than twenty teachers in the school took the graduate courses offered (more than a dozen taking at least three), despite most of them already possessing graduate degrees. Moreover, the principal participated in most of the courses learning alongside the teachers, demonstrating his leadership and commitment to the school effort. The graduate courses included:

- Social, Cultural and Curricular Contexts for Second Language Learning
- Instruction and Assessment for Second Language Learners
- Conversational Spanish for Teachers of English Language Learners
- Linguistics for Educators

The NEMS principal also dedicated funds to support consulting services from a university faculty member (one of the authors). The consultant spent time observing and providing guidance to classroom teachers to complement the efforts of existing TESOL specialists. University faculty provided parent workshops and helped to arrange adult education/adult ESOL courses for the parents in the local community. This article focuses on three of the courses and parent support offered to the school to support its goal of better serving the immigrant, second-language learning population.

Literature Review

The university-school partnership established cultural responsiveness as a foundation for its work. The project aimed to assist the school educators in building the dispositions, knowledge, and skills, necessary to teach English language learners in this particular community. Villegas and Lucas (2002) explain that in order to prepare culturally responsive educators, the curriculum must be framed around the following strands: “(1) gaining sociocultural consciousness; (2) developing an affirming attitude toward students of diverse backgrounds; (3) developing the commitment and skills to act as agents of change; (4) understanding the constructivist foundations of culturally responsive teaching; (5) learning about students and their communities; and (6) cultivating culturally responsive practices” (p. 26). The content of the courses and assignments were developed to provide educators the opportunity to support their path into becoming culturally responsive practitioners.

Throughout this project, the professors discussed the content of the courses to ensure there was a flow between them, in order for the teachers to continually build on what they had previously learned. The faculty also delivered meaningful and engaging content to build on the teacher’s knowledge, skills, and dispositions when working with immigrant families and English learners taking into consideration the six strands (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Technology and Universal Learning Design Principles (UDL) were infused in the courses and workshops in order to provide multiple pathways of representation, action and expression, and engagement. These culturally responsive practices were modeled by the faculty teaching these courses.

The project took place in the school community offering educators the opportunity to continue to learn and increase family-school connections in a meaningful and positive manner. Educators wanted to strengthen communication between families and school, in order to increase parent involvement and impact student achievement (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Durand, 2011; Lopez & Caspe, 2014). Therefore, in the courses and workshops, the native language and culture of children and families were emphasized to stress culturally and linguistically responsive practices (Gay, 2000). Research demonstrates that families are more involved in school when their home language and culture are valued by the school administration and educators (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Takanishi, 2009).

The first course in the university-school partnership engaged the teachers in “funds of knowledge” (Gonzales, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Moll and Diaz, 1987) inquiry. The premise behind funds of knowledge initiatives is that school policy, curriculum and instruction can

be greatly enhanced when teachers and administrators learn about students' participation in their families, homes, communities, and kinship networks. Funds of knowledge projects use ethnographic research methods and often position teachers as researchers conducting systematic, intentional inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) related to students and families in an effort to understand "historically developed and accumulated strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well-being (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, et al., 2005, pp. 91-92). In contrast to much of the deficit-oriented characterizations of poor, minority and immigrant families and their lack of social currency, the assumption is that "people are competent, they have knowledge and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005, p. x). That knowledge and experience should play a role in their children's education.

Teachers who participate in funds of knowledge initiatives are first introduced to the theory, activities, and outcomes of these inquiry projects and asked to participate only on a voluntary basis. Then study groups prepare observational protocols and interview questionnaires focusing on family histories, immigration stories, extended family relationships and kinship networks, working lives, talents and the social and cultural capital families possess (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 2005). Teachers then step out of their comfort zones as they visit students' homes to learn about these funds of knowledge. Anna Rivera, a teacher participating in a funds of knowledge project, explained: "I am choosing to place myself in situations where I have to listen, reflect, communicate, act, and write. I believe I am learning, developing and creating and that is what makes this research worthwhile" (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, et al., 2005, p. 103). The study groups play a continuing role as the teacher researchers share their findings and work through cultural and emotional baggage, fears, assumptions and misunderstandings that they brought to the inquiry and consider changes to school curriculum and practices (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 2005).

It is common for teachers to report that their outreach fostered trusting relationships with parents leading to more open communication and reciprocity. Martha Floyd Tenery shared: "I recognize the members of the families for who they are and for their talents and unique personalities. We now have a reciprocal relationship where we exchange goods, services, and information" (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, et al., 2005, p. 103). In addition to establishing these new relationships, research shows that funds of knowledge initiatives have promoted greater access to schools for parents (Hensley, 2009), leading to the creation of curriculum units based on the new-found awareness and knowledge of home and community practices (Sandoval-Taylor, 2005), and have transformed teachers (Messing, 2009) and their roles as school leaders (Buck & Skilton-Sylvester, 2005).

Epstein (1987, 1992, 1996, 2001) developed a prominent theory of overlapping spheres that identified the importance of involving home, school, and community members in assisting students to succeed. She outlined six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. For each of these she provided sample practices, challenges, redefinitions, and results for students/parents/teachers. The six spheres provided a framework for the

partnership since attention to only one of would not have been enough to make an impact. The partnership involved families learning about literacy activities at home, holding workshops, and reaching out through interviews to ensure that everyone was able to gain the information about children's academic success. Parents participated in workshops and interviews by teachers or liaisons in order for parents to feel comfortable. Overall, the partnership supported the development of strong and ongoing home-school-community relationships through incorporation of the overlapping spheres (Epstein, 1987, 1992, 1996, 2001).

The Partnership

Funds of Knowledge Inquiry

The first graduate course selected for the partnership and taken by more than twenty teachers and the school principal was Social, Cultural and Curricular Contexts of Second Language Learning. The course examines historical and contemporary immigration issues, national and state of Maryland immigration trends, social and cultural perspectives related to immigrant family settlement, and engages the students in funds of knowledge inquiry. The principal purchased the book, *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms* (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2009) for all of the teachers; several chapters were read and discussed in class. The teachers then identified immigrant families in their school community to interview along with dozens of questions for the following categories: family history, life history, kinship networks, family labor history, household routines, parents' education experiences, parental perspectives on their children's education. Some teachers worked in pairs; some worked alone. Most of the teachers visited families in their homes while a few arranged for interviews inside the school. In a few cases, the children or other school personnel served as translators between teachers and parents.

Thirteen families participated in the interviews. Six were from the Dominican Republic, four from El Salvador, two from Sri Lanka, and one from Ecuador. This information is notable because prior to the interviews, the teachers knew only that most of the ESOL kids were Latino and, many teachers assumed, from Mexico. The teachers report that they worked through language barriers with dedicated effort and necessary humor and, as the literature on funds of knowledge suggests, came away from the interviews with a richer and deeper understanding of family lives and feeling like they had established important relationships. Teachers shared interview information and impressions in class and an online discussion forum. The posting from one teacher in the forum captured frequently expressed sentiments from the teachers:

This was very moving to read about our parents' hopes for their children's futures, particularly since several of the children interviewed have been, or still are, my students, so I learned a lot about their backgrounds too.... I have been mulling over the delights, hard-work, pains, and sorrow of child bearing and rearing. The courage these ESOL parents have shown in leaving their countries, for doing crummy jobs uncomplainingly, and even with a smile, for a better life for their children takes my breath away.

Through the funds of knowledge interviews, teachers learned about the families' countries of origin and immigration stories, their employment in Baltimore, their family routines and community networks. Most poignantly for the teachers, they learned about the parents' hopes and aspirations for their children's education and futures in their adopted country. Following discussion of the interview findings, the teachers (again, including the principal) issued more than two dozen recommendations for school changes that would better serve the families and children. These were distilled into specific proposals:

- General recommendation: Continue exploring what it means to the Northeast Elementary Middle community that so many immigrant families bring their children to the US, Baltimore, and their school for a more promising future.
- Continued inquiry: Form study groups to learn more about the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and other countries of origin. Continue interviews and establish a school data base of funds of knowledge information.
- Adult education classes: Expand the adult education classes offered at the school to include more ESOL and GED classes for all parents (not just the immigrant parents).
- Homework help: Create after school mentoring/tutoring with improved outreach and second language communication for parents.
- Family services: Provide more networking opportunities for families to feel more closely connected to NEMS, and to learn about other school families and resources offered in Baltimore. In recognition that many father's work schedules prevented them from participating during school hours, host weekend family soccer games and father-daughter dances.
- Curriculum: Invite parents to the school to participate, share their life stories and cultures, and support teachers in classrooms. One specific proposal, given the many parents with experience in agriculture and food-service industries, was to create units of instruction to teach about farm to table processes of the food industry.

In the initial stages of the partnership, the funds of knowledge inquiry expanded the school's awareness of its immigrant families. It gave teachers much greater insight into the lives of the children in their classroom. As a first major assignment in the partnership, the funds of knowledge interviews also gave the message to the immigrant families that the teachers and school were sincere and committed to creating a more inclusive school community that would celebrate the many represented cultures.

ESOL Curriculum

Following the funds of knowledge inquiry, the partnership moved to the study of curriculum models (Garcia, 2003), a critique of existing practices in the school, and an examination of the existing relationship between the ESOL specialists and classroom teachers in the school. Maryland's education policy promotes ESOL, while allowing school systems the discretion to implement bilingual and dual immersion programs. By learning about different models, the teachers challenged their existing practices. For example, an unstated policy in the school that children should only speak English was the first among a number changes made. The classroom teachers began encouraging immigrant children

to use their heritage language with each other and in classroom environments while still focusing on English language development. Spanish was then heard in hallways and in classrooms. The Physical Education teacher began using Spanish as part of his field instruction with Spanish-heritage language students and found the native English speaking students adapting willingly. With greater understanding of second language development, the classroom teachers better understood—most were not aware—what the children were doing when pulled out of class by ESOL specialists. The classroom teachers and ESOL specialists established stronger collaborative relationships and schedules, while the classroom teachers embraced opportunities to further differentiate instruction to support the ELL students' growth and development.

Culturally Responsive Instruction for English Language Learners

A second graduate course offered in the partnership offered greater focus on classroom instruction supporting teachers in their inclusion and differentiation practices and research-guided pedagogy. They learned about varying instruction, using visuals, providing time for small groups, including culture, allowing students to use their native language, using multiple intelligences, including technology for motivation, and parent involvement. To address those areas, aside from the readings and class discussions, there were assignments that demonstrated how students could critically think about including those areas in their instruction. These included online interactions via blackboard, professional book study, examination of ELL websites and apps, Glogster, and case studies of ELL students.

Blackboard Posts. First, there were reflection posts to establish rapport, learn about each other's cultures, and later to respond to readings and videos interactively. The readings mainly came from the course text, *Reading, Writing, and Learning in ESL A Resource Book for K-12 English Learners* (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). Moreover, the professional development videos came from the Colorin Colorado website. Students learned about numerous strategies, activities, and assessments that they took back to their classrooms. In class, discussions about the implementation of these were very positive. For example, the importance of using visuals for comprehension was reinforced in many of the readings and videos. Therefore, teachers began consciously ensuring that their lessons had various visuals to help their students follow along in class. Teachers also shared how the readings/videos reinforced some of the work they were already doing.

Professional Book Study Roundtable. Students had the opportunity to read a self-selected reading in addition to the course text. After reading this book, they had to create a one-page handout and present it in a small group in a conference roundtable format. See Figure 1 for an example of a student's handout.

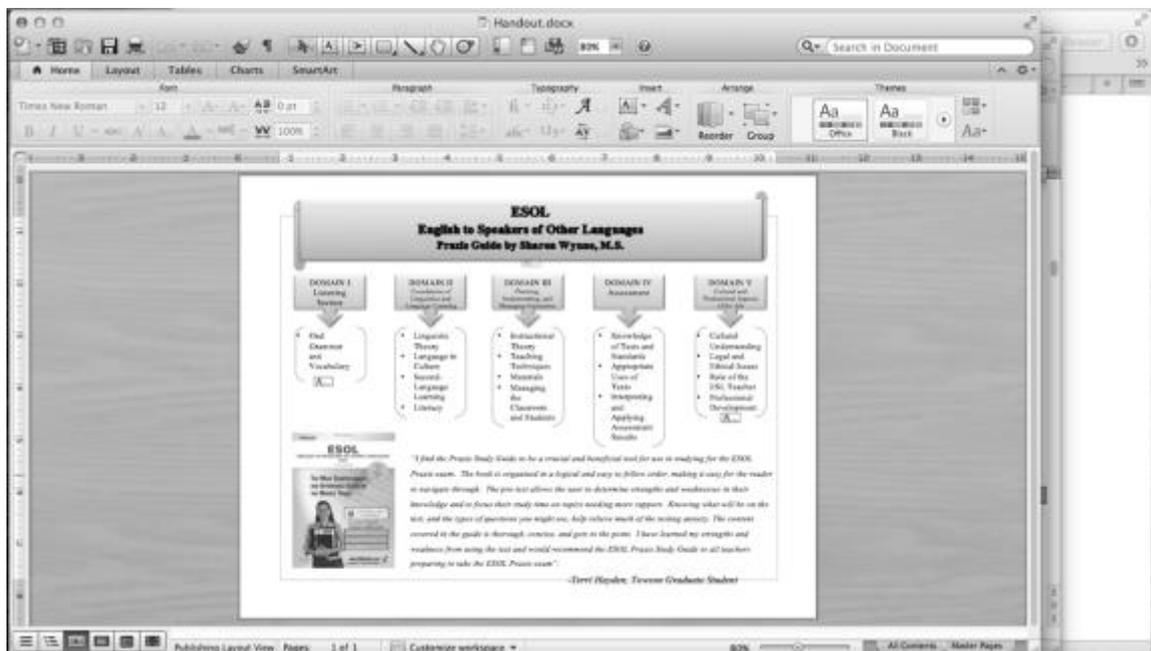


Figure 1. Professional Book Study Handout

EL Website and App Critique. Next, they evaluated English learner websites and iPad apps for use with their students and families. The following are a few examples of what the teachers considered noteworthy websites and apps:

Websites

- ESL Games World: <http://www.eslgamesworld.com>
- Learning Chocolate: <http://www.learningchocolate.com>

Apps

- Story Kit – allows students to create digital stories
- Toontastic – teaches story plot

The teachers reported using these with their students and discussed how they were motivating ways to get their students to read and write.

Glogster. The purpose of this online poster was to highlight a theme from their instruction, while including several visuals to aid English learners with comprehension while considering different multiple intelligences and learning styles. For example, one teacher included various videos about what students were learning for parents to get an idea about the science theme being covered in class. Other teachers decided to have their students make the Glogsters, with topics ranging from all about me to Harry Potter.

Case Study. The teachers also conducted case studies of ELL students in the school to assess their reading, writing, listening, and speaking using tests presented in the class. If students did not have access to an ELL student, they could instead use a hypothetical case study that was provided in the text. Once they tested the child, or the read hypothetical case study, they needed to provide appropriate recommendations from the course

readings. Last, they used their reports to apply this new knowledge to their classroom instruction. The teachers commented on the benefits of having used informal assessments to measure language proficiency, in particular they shared how they now realized that they were capable of learning more in-depth information about their students' language proficiency skills. They also noted their level of confidence in working with English learners increased as a result.

Spanish for Teachers of English Language Learners

A beginning conversational course was designed to assist educators to communicate informally with children and families who speak Spanish as their first language. The course introduced Spanish words and phrases useful for every day communication in a school setting. Family cultures were also explored as they learned the language. Teachers had the opportunity to practice their conversational skills and explore strategies and resources in Spanish to better communicate with Spanish speaking children and families.

To address these issues, teachers were given a variety of engaging and meaningful assignments to practice their Spanish and create projects targeting their English language learners and their families. The teachers practiced greetings, farewells, common expressions, how to ask questions and how to describe your day. The course also included reading and writing activities. Teachers read children's books, sang children's songs, wrote or modified basic letters of correspondence with parents, lists, labels, and created a Spanish language questionnaire for families. They used all these in their classrooms.

The culminating project for the course targeted children and families. The teachers developed a Spanish language oral presentation or activity for students and families. These included: (1) introduction, (2) content of presentation/activity using vocabulary and phrases learned in class, and (3) farewell and contact information. The presentations were videotaped and presented in class. Teachers considered the cultural background of the families in their presentation. These final projects were designed not only for class but also to meet the needs of their families. Some of the teachers created their projects to inform families, others used them as an educational tool for parent workshops, and still other teachers created demonstrations of how to complete school projects at home.

The assignments and activities in class provided teachers with opportunities to practice their Spanish in a relevant and responsive manner. Teachers began using more Spanish in their classroom by including materials, instructional procedures, and communicating with children. For example, they included Spanish songs for their routines, writing vocabulary words in Spanish for units, and learning phrases to include in their instruction such as "*vamos a leer/escribir/escuchar*" (we are going to read/write/listen). The teachers reported that children were excited about the fact of teachers learning Spanish, their language. They often helped the teachers pronounce words in the classroom and talked with teachers about Spanish words that hold different meanings in different Latin American countries. They created Spanish language projects to be used immediately in classrooms. Others created Spanish language videos for specific school events. For example, some teachers produced a video for the Spring Science Fair while others produced one for Back to School Night. The timing for these events provided them with more time to prepare for the presentation to families. Each of the educators entered the

course with a different level of Spanish proficiency and, by the end, all reported feeling more comfortable when approaching and talking with the Spanish-speaking families and children.

Parent Workshops

In addition to the graduate level coursework, the university faculty provided workshops for the parent community. There were eight workshops, four in English and four in Spanish. They were provided once a month for four months back to back. They were based on the web resource *Raising a Reader* (2014) and were intended to help parents understand the importance of sharing books regularly, to create reading motivation, and to establish connections to libraries. Parent workshop objectives included learning how to:

- ask questions,
- make predictions,
- make personal and text-to-text connections, and
- talk about the beginning, middle, and end of a story.

Hands-on activities were always a part of every workshop. Drawing, adding to an existing drawing, and making a pop-up book were some of the activities that were well received. It was a pleasure getting to work with the parents. They were enthusiastic about participating.

Moreover, at the beginning of each workshop the previous workshop(s) were briefly discussed making connections to what was previously learned. The parents openly shared how they tried the activities at home and talked about the reactions of their children. Overall, the parents reported that their children were receptive to working with them to develop literacy skills and they noticed their children also began to dialogue more with them because of these interactive ways of using books.

Discussion

The partnership with Northeast Elementary Middle to promote greater relationships between the school and immigrant community was a positive experience all around. The university faculty was excited to customize existing coursework for the specific needs of the school community. The teachers were free to apply the course content for curriculum revision, improved collaborations between ESOL and classroom teachers, and to establish closer relationships and better communication with children and families. In a follow-up interview, one of the school leaders explained that the school culture changed dramatically as the majority of teachers left their anxieties and feelings of helplessness behind and pushed forward with greater comfort and confidence working with ELL children. Explaining that many parents and families likewise overcame their fears and participated more in school events, she identified the following as just a few examples of many changes that reflected a new school culture:

- Implementation of monthly homework help nights for children accompanied by bilingual parent workshops.

- All school-wide community forums presented in English and Spanish.
- The school’s website incorporated tips and reading strategies information in English and Spanish.
- The School Family Council arranged with a local education provider to provide English classes for immigrant parents as well as GED classes for the entire parent community.
- Schedules were rearranged to allow classroom and resource teachers to work collaboratively with ESOL teachers in weekly team meetings.
- The school hired additional bilingual para educators to assist with translating during IEP meetings, parent conferences, School Family Council meetings, and other school wide family events.

Table 1 shows the significant increase in the LEP (Maryland uses the LEP term) population at NEMS from 2009 to 2013. As explained in the Introduction, the school principal reported that the data reflected those officially classified as LEP but the population of students who continued to receive some ESOL services was much greater, above 40%. By 2014, the Hispanic/Latino population had reached 49% of the schools’ total population (MD Report Card, 2014). The table also shows the performance of LEP students on the state’s annual state assessment for Reading during that period. Prior to 2012, when the schools’ new commitment to LEP students was launched, LEP performance on Reading was far below the total student population. However, by 2013 LEP performance had dramatically increased and contributed to the increase in the NEMS school-wide achievement.

Table 1: Northeast Elementary Middle LEP Population and State Assessment Scores, 2009-2013 (Data from 2014 Maryland Report Card)

Year	Elementary LEP Population as % of Total	Middle LEP Population as % of Total	MSA Reading Advanced + Proficient All Grades Total Population	MSA Reading Advanced + Proficient All Grades LEP
2009	15.3	7.5	81.8	43.8
2010	20.6	n/a	79.9	31.3
2011	21.2	n/a	78.8	34.8
2012	25.3	15.2	87.0	84.8
2013	27.0	21.5	81.6	73.0

To be clear, we do not claim that the university coursework, faculty consulting and parent workshops led directly to the increase in LEP student performance. Rather, we credit the NEMS principal, teachers, and staff for recognizing the needs of immigrant students and families and dedicating themselves to their well-being. The commitment and efforts of the school professionals preceded the university involvement and continued beyond the

partnership period. It is uncommon for a school to commit so much of its professional development budget to ELL efforts and immigrant families. It is rare for so many teachers, from such a variety of specialization areas, many of whom already had graduate degrees, to come together and commit to a series of graduate level courses over two years. We are proud to have supported these dedicated professionals. Our aim here has been to identify features of the university-school partnership that helped to establish stronger relationships between immigrant families and the NEMS school community.

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