



University of Colorado
Denver

DPS Exemplary Schools Case Study:

Merrill Middle School

WORKING DRAFT 2

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DPS UCD ELA EXEMPLARY SCHOOLS CASE STUDY OVERVIEW

The Denver Public Schools (DPS) University of Colorado Denver (UCD) English Language Acquisition (ELA) Exemplary Schools Case Studies investigated DPS schools with a high density of learners of English as a second or additional language and high levels of students who qualified for a free or reduced price lunch that were experiencing the most success with English language learners (ELL students). The study was conducted by the DPS UCD Research Collaborative between December 2010 and March 2011. The purpose of the study was to identify school-wide practices that have been successful in supporting the achievement of these students. Six schools (two elementary, two middle, and two high schools) were identified on the basis of five criteria: (1) an open enrollment policy, (2) at least 40% of total enrollment consisting of ELL students, and at least 100 English language learners enrolled, (3) a total School Performance Framework (SPF) rating greater than 49% for elementary schools, and greater than 45% for middle schools and high schools, (4) at least 50% of students in the school qualified for a free or reduced price lunch, and (5) high gains on the CSAP and CELA tests for the past three years relative to other schools serving the same grade levels. Two additional elementary schools, which did not meet all criteria, but have good reputations among area educators were also studied. The case studies involved three sources of data: 1) photographs providing environmental scans of the language resources and supports for ELL students in the schools; 2) documents and public information (e.g., websites) as well as student performance data; and 3) interviews with school leaders, teachers, and other support personnel. This report will detail the practices uncovered at Merrill Middle School.

NOTE: This case study of Merrill Middle is ongoing. These preliminary assertions and explanations are based on 6-12 interviews with staff members, photographic inventories, and archived data collected between December 2010 and March 2011 only. We anticipate that further study, e.g., observations in classrooms and additional interviews, will expand our understanding of the school's practices.

The following assertions emerged as key components contributing to the success of Merrill Middle in working with English language learners:

- **ASSERTION 1:** Merrill maintains a unique identity and stable presence as a school serving a diverse and international population.
- **ASSERTION 2:** Merrill's ELA Staff is characterized by its strong instructional expertise and leadership, and by the Staff's knowledge about, and advocacy for, English language learners.
- **ASSERTION 3:** Strong principal leadership and also distributed leadership among teachers help Merrill to leverage in-school and community resources to meet the needs of Merrill's English Language Learners and their families.
- **ASSERTION 4:** Data-informed placement, instruction and responsive scheduling and moving of ELL students throughout the school year, especially as informed by students' English language and literacy (reading and writing), central focuses of the ELA staff and school as a whole, permits fine-tuned matching of ELL students and instruction.
- **ASSERTION 5:** Professional development is pragmatic, data-informed, ELL-centered and largely informal.

The following sections of this report will include a more in-depth explanation of the study, a brief history and demographic description of the school, and a more detailed narrative of the case study assertions and how the described practices are facilitating academic growth for ELL students at Merrill (to be found beginning on page 9).

DPS Exemplary Schools Case Study: Context and Purpose of the study

As of October 1, 2010, there were 26,761 identified English language learners (non-exited ELL students in grades ECE-12) enrolled in Denver Public Schools. Of these students, 17,544 received ELA services at a designated ELA program school. Spanish was the primary language for 15,246 (87%) of these students, while other common languages included Vietnamese, Arabic, Somali, Nepali and Karen/Burmese <http://ela.dpsk12.org/>

Denver Public Schools and University of Colorado Denver are working in collaboration on the DPS ELA Exemplary Schools Study to examine practices within DPS schools in which learners of English as a second (or additional) language are outperforming their peers in similar schools. The purpose of the study is to provide guidance to DPS and other districts in improving the educational performance of English language learners by describing practices currently used in six DPS schools in which English language learners are experiencing the most academic success. The primary research question addressed by this study is:

- *What are the school-wide practices of schools that are successfully serving a high number of English language learners?*

This study was formulated in accordance with the Department of Justice Court Order, which provides guidance to and approval of the DPS English Acquisition program, and includes guidance regarding research on the effectiveness of DPS ELA programs. One goal of this study is to identify practices that have been successful across different school contexts. This report focuses on the practices at Merrill Middle School.

Study Design and School Selection Criteria

This study of school practices involved three sources of data: 1) observations/photographs of language resources in the school environment; 2) documents and public information (e.g., school websites, newsletters) as well as aggregate data on student performance; and 3) multiple interviews with school leaders, teachers, and other support personnel. In this preliminary phase, the study did *not* include students as participants.

A three-step process was used to select high performing schools for English language learners in DPS. For the purposes of this study, English language learners at DPS were defined as those students who were currently receiving ELA services, opted out of services, or exited from ELA services.

Step 1: In order to select the case study schools, schools were identified at the elementary, middle, and high school level, which met four criteria:

- 1) at least 40% of the school's total enrollment consisted of English language learners,
- 2) at least 100 ELL students were enrolled at the school,
- 3) at least 50% of students at the school qualified for a free or reduced price lunch, and

4) the school received a School Performance Framework (SPF) rating greater than 49 for elementary schools, and greater than 45 for middle schools and high schools.

For the SPF, every school in DPS that contains at least one grade that takes CSAP (grades 3-10) is assigned one of the following accreditation ratings every September using data collected during the previous three school years: Distinguished, Meets Expectations, Accredited on Watch, Accredited on Priority Watch (added in 2010) or Accredited on Probation. Ratings then relate to how much autonomy schools are given, the support needed, corrective action taken and compensation earned by principals, assistant principals and teachers. For this study, the SPF rating was used to ensure that the schools chosen were not on probation and were meeting expectations or nearly meeting expectations (for all students, not only ELL students).

Step 2: Performance data for English Language Learners on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) Reading, CSAP Writing, CSAP Math and the Colorado English Language Assessment (CELA) were analyzed for each school for the past three years. Schools from the initial list, which were making the largest gains were identified, weighting gains in 2010 the highest, 2009 second highest, and 2008 third. Data presented in Table 1 below show the three-year weighted averages of the CSAP median growth percentiles for each school and average gain (Z score) on CELA. Based on these criteria, three schools at each educational level, for a total of nine schools, were identified as candidates for the case study.

Step 3: The student recruitment and retention policies at the nine schools were investigated to determine whether the schools had policies for admittance or dismissal related to performance, special education needs, or behavioral problems. In narrowing the selected schools to six, researchers agreed that at least one school at each level should be a comprehensive neighborhood school, as opposed to a charter school or magnet school. The six schools included Bryant Webster Dual Language ECE-8 (study focused on the elementary grades), Force Elementary, Merrill Middle, West Denver Preparatory Charter – Federal Campus (a middle school), Abraham Lincoln High, and Bruce Randolph High.

Once the schools had been narrowed to six high performing schools, two additional elementary schools of interest were selected based on a combination of their relatively high performance and reputation among educators in the district. Both schools added additional characteristics to the pool of schools, including learners of English from diverse linguistic backgrounds and concentration on math and science. These two additional “reputational” schools were Goldrick Elementary and the Math and Science Leadership Academy (K-3).

History of Merrill Middle School

Merrill Middle School, located at South Monroe Street and East Florida Avenue in southeast Denver, serves students in grades six through eight. Stacy Miller is the current principal. This school year (2010-11) is Ms. Miller’s fourth year as principal at Merrill; prior to becoming principal, she was the assistant principal at the school for two years. Merrill is a neighborhood school and a Beacon school, meaning there is encouragement of innovation and reform initiated and developed by teachers and principals. Merrill is an ESL (English as a Second Language) school and includes a Newcomer Center, which provides services to students who are new to DPS, ELL students identified as having limited or interrupted education as well as minimal literacy in their native language *and* English, and/or students who have been enrolled in a U.S.

school for two or fewer semesters. ELA-E instructional services (ESL school) are provided such that students receive supported English content instruction and English language development.

As an ESL school with a Newcomer Center, Merrill is a very diverse school, representing over 30 languages and cultures. The Merrill Creed states, “At Merrill we strive to achieve exceptional academic success through hard work and responsible actions. We exhibit excellence in character through kindness, respect, and the courage to do what is right. Our differences enhance our humanity.” (<http://merrill.dpsk12.org/>)

Demographic Overview of Merrill Middle School

In the 2009-10 school year (the school year based on which schools were selected for the study), 525 students were enrolled in grades 6-8 at Merrill Middle School. Slightly over half (58%) of the students at Merrill in 2009-10 were designated as English language learners (including students currently receiving ELA services, students opted out of services, and students who have exited from ELA services). About one-third of the students at Merrill was Hispanic/Latino (34%), while 30% were white, 15% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 18% were African American, and 3% American Indian/Alaska Native. A variety of languages other than English are spoken at Merrill (see table below), including Spanish, Somali, Arabic, and Burmese. Among the student body, 80% qualified for a free and reduced price lunch. In the 2009-10 school year, Merrill Middle received an SPF rating of 47%, indicating that they were accredited on watch. Merrill is a NCLB sending school, meaning it did not meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) last year.

Of the 303 students who qualified for ELA at Merrill in 2009-10, 213 English language learners were designated as enrolled in program services, 24 as opted out of program services, and 66 as exited services. The majority of these students had a primary home language other than Spanish.

AMAO 1 (Annual Measurable Achievement Objective) is an indicator of English language acquisition. It represents the number of students who are making progress on the CELA exam. In 2010, 43% of ELL students at Merrill were making progress. Further, the three-year (2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10) weighted average gain (Z score) on the CELA for ELL students at Merrill was 0.15 standard deviations above the mean, meaning they were showing about average growth; this is compared to a state-wide gain of 0. Three year weighted averages are included here as these data are less subject to year-to-year fluctuations.

The three-year weighted averages of the CSAP median growth percentiles for English language learners (median growth percentiles indicate how well these students are growing in comparison with other students) were 56.6 in Reading, 56.6 in Writing, and 51.7 in Math, compared to the state average of 50. The median student growth percentile is the middle score if the individual student growth percentiles are ranked from highest to lowest. A “typical” school would have a median student growth percentile of 50.

The charts below display student demographics (including primary home languages students and ethnicities of students throughout the school), the CSAP and CELA growth scores of ELL students at the school, and the proficiency levels of Merrill students on the CELA and CSAP. All non-exited ELL students (who include students who are opted out of services) take the CELA exam, which test students on four domains – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Students in grades 3 through 10 take the CSAP exam. The option to take CSAP in Spanish is available in 3rd and 4th grades. The pie chart below shows the percentages of primary language speakers for all Merrill students, where English speakers represent 38%, Spanish speakers 21%, and combined speakers of other languages, 41%.

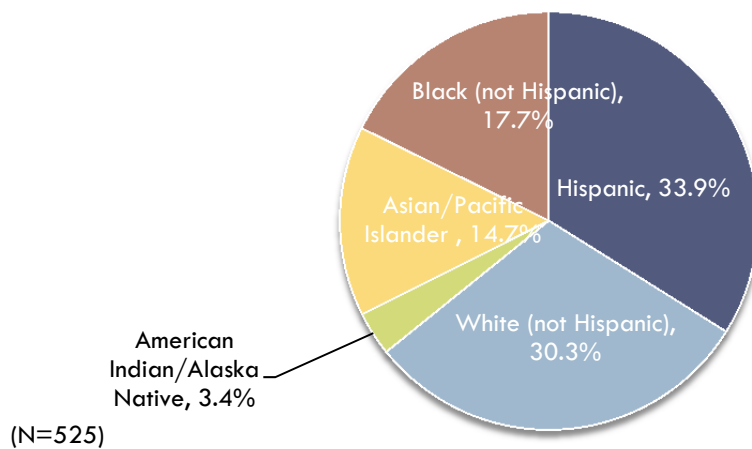
Primary Home Language Spoken by Merrill Students

LANGUAGE	
English	38.4%
Spanish	21.0%
Somali	6.4%
Arabic	6.2%
Burmese	5.3%
Karen	3.6%
Nepali	3.6%
Vietnamese	3.6%
Russian	2.1%
Tigrinya	1.2%
Other (represents 24 languages)	8.9%
Total (N=580)	100.0%

Source: Administrator Portal pulled February 22, 2011 (the Administrator Portal uses data from the 2010-11 DPS October Count, matched with current student enrollment).

Note: Data describe students throughout the entire school, not just ELL students.

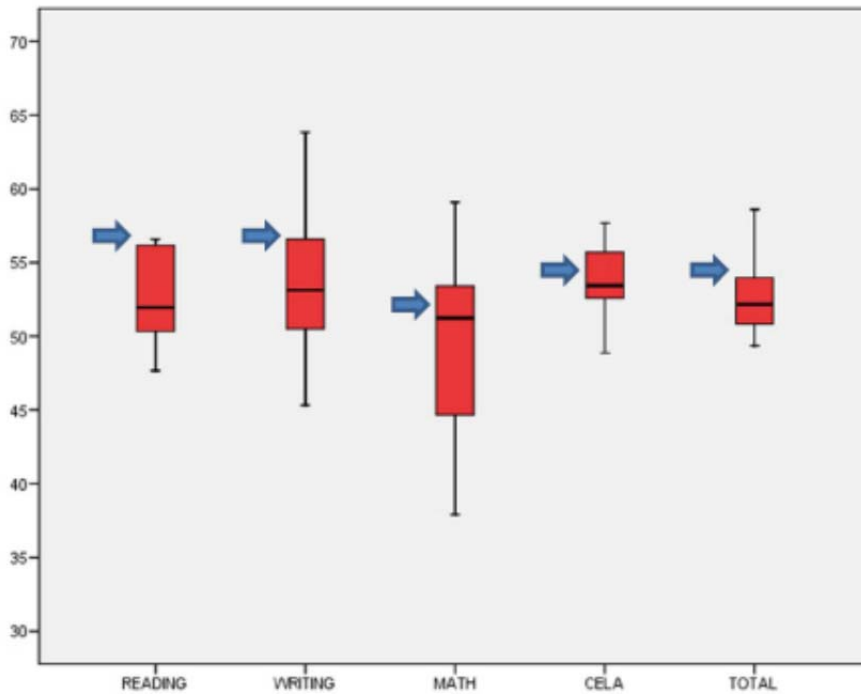
Ethnicity of Students at Merrill, 2009-10



Source: DPS Strategy Department, Count of Student Membership by Ethnicity by School, 2009-10 from October Count 2009.

Note: Data describe students throughout the entire school, not just ELL students.

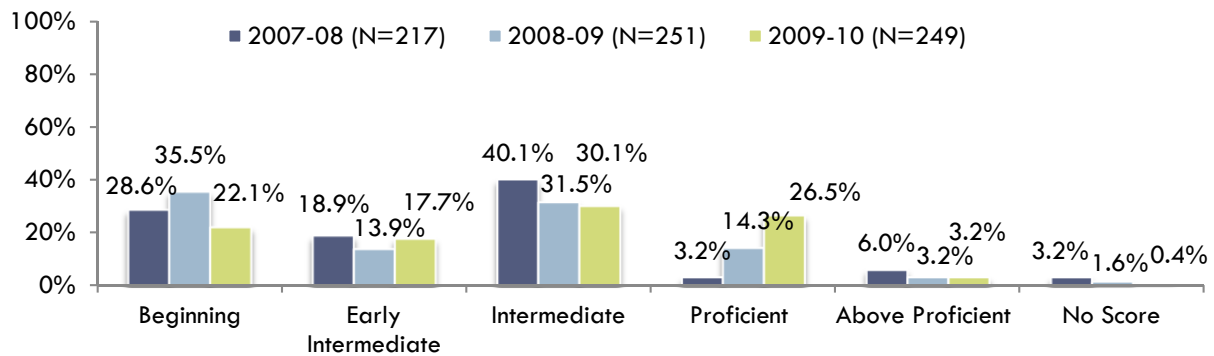
Achievement Growth of English Language Learners 2008, 2009, 2010 (arrows refer to Merrill)



Source: Developed using data from the DPS AllScores repository.

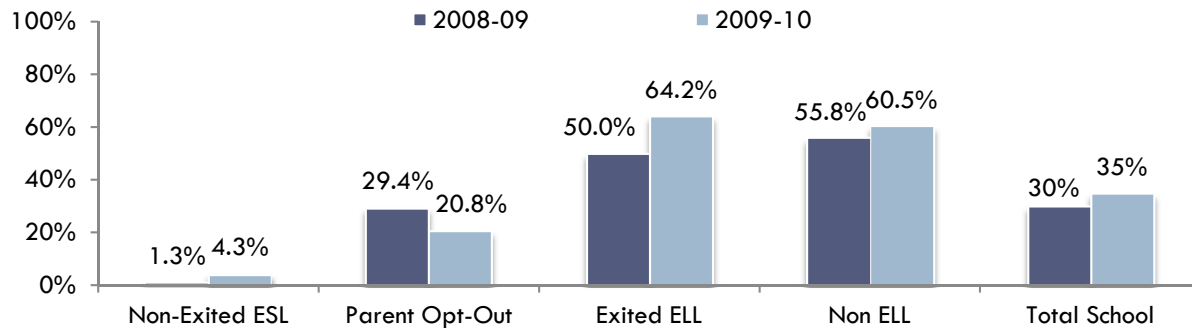
Note: Comparison includes all DPS middle schools with more than 120 English language learners with CSAP growth percentiles.

English Language Proficiency Level, CELA Overall



Source: DPS Department of Accountability, Research and Evaluation, CELA Report 2010.

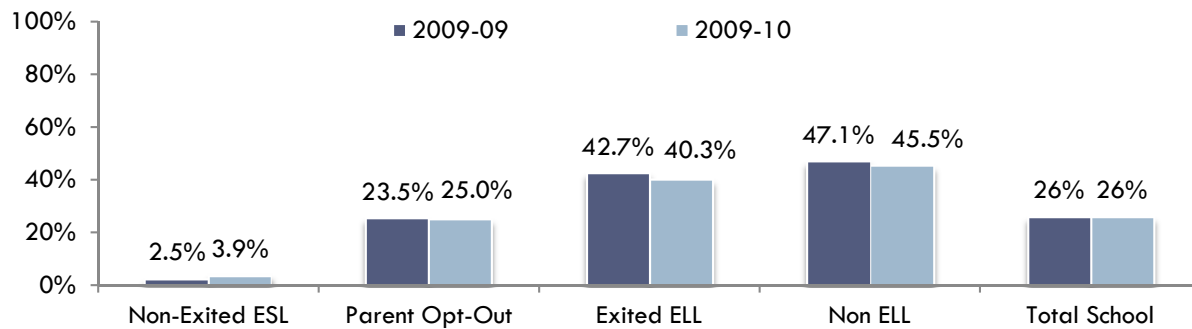
Percentage of ELL Students Who were Proficient or Above on CSAP Reading



Source: DPS Department of English Language Acquisition, November 2010.

Sample Sizes: 2009 – Non-Exited ESL N=239; Parent Opt-Out N=17; Exited ELL N=82; Non ELL N=208; 2010 – Non-Exited ESL N=231; Parent Opt-Out N=24; Exited ELL N=67; Non ELL N=220

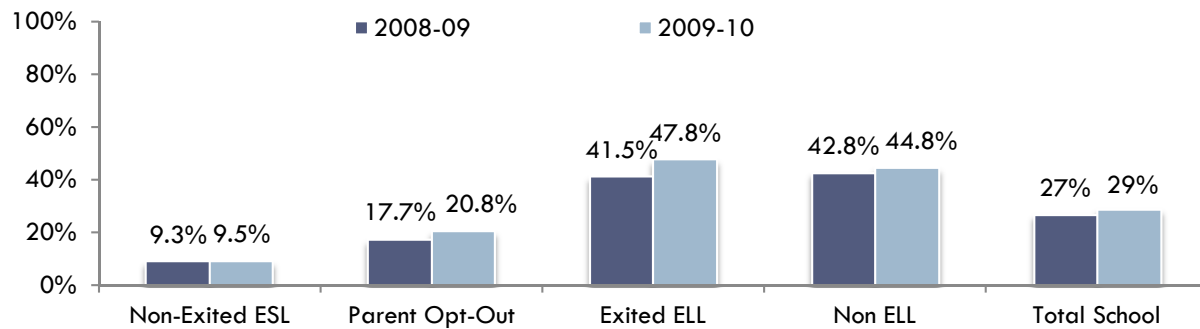
Percentage of ELL Students Who were Proficient or Above on CSAP Writing



Source: DPS Department of English Language Acquisition, November 2010.

Sample Sizes: 2009 – Non-Exited ESL N=239; Parent Opt-Out N=17; Exited ELL N=82; Non ELL N=208; 2010 – Non-Exited ESL N=231; Parent Opt-Out N=24; Exited ELL N=67; Non ELL N=220

Percentage of ELL Students Who were Proficient or Above on CSAP Math



Source: DPS Department of English Language Acquisition, November 2010.

Sample Sizes: 2009 – Non-Exited ESL N=237; Parent Opt-Out N=17; Exited ELL N=82; Non ELL N=208; 2010 – Non-Exited ESL N=231; Parent Opt-Out N=24; Exited ELL N=67; Non ELL N=219

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM CASE STUDY

Preliminary Findings/Assertions

After the fourth round of data collection at Merrill Middle School (counting two follow-up/clarification phone calls to ESL Teacher Ms. Vicki Allison, we offer the following key assertions regarding Merrill's documented success with multilingual learners.

Please note that this preliminary study gathered data primarily on the ELA-E component of the school and those school structures and practices that serve the 41 percent of the student body that are designated as currently enrolled English language learners. Thus while most of the observations and assertions offered in this report are primarily, though not exclusively, about the ELA component, we also are able to report on some practices consistent throughout the school. In the future we hope to be able to provide a fuller report on the school as a whole.

- **ASSERTION 1:** Merrill maintains a unique identity and stable presence as a school serving a diverse and international population.
- **ASSERTION 2:** Merrill's ELA Staff is characterized by its strong instructional expertise and leadership, and by the Staff's knowledge about, and advocacy for, English language learners.
- **ASSERTION 3:** Strong principal leadership and also distributed leadership among teachers help Merrill to leverage in-school and community resources to meet the needs of Merrill's English Language Learners and their families.
- **ASSERTION 4:** Data-informed placement, instruction and responsive scheduling and moving of ELL students throughout the school year, especially as informed by students' English language and literacy (reading and writing), central focuses of the ELA staff and school as a whole, permits fine-tuned matching of ELL students and instruction.
- **ASSERTION 5:** Professional development is pragmatic, data-informed, ELL-centered and largely informal.

Below we provide further data support and discussion of each assertion.

ASSERTION 1

Merrill maintains a unique identity as a school serving a diverse and International population.

The Administration and ELA staff recognize the uniqueness of their student body and affirm—as resources—students’ diversity, internationalism, *and strong desire to succeed*. As the middle school English Language Acquisition (ELA) magnet program for the district, a culture of academic excellence and high performance for all English learners is embraced not only by the Administration and staff, but also, it seems, *by the majority of Merrill’s diverse students and their families*, for whom school is understood as a place to learn and succeed—in English and all subjects. We acknowledge that there may be ambivalence in the adjacent neighborhood regarding Merrill’s special international population (which is largely bused-in).

Background and Data support for the above:

- School demographics, by percentages of home language speakers, is roughly 20% Spanish speakers, 40% English speakers, and 40% speakers of *other* home languages (not Spanish, not English). So a distinguishing feature of the school is the numbers of languages and cultures represented; no one group (ELL or non-ELL) is in a majority. Note: Not all of these 60% of speakers of home languages other than English are “designated.” (Number of designated ELL students is 213 total, with the majority having a home language other than Spanish.)
- The (relative) parity in numbers may have the effect of elevating the needs of *all* students (that is, English speakers are not “privileged” or the norm in terms of school practices; nor are ELL students in general, or any ELL group in particular, “problematized.” Rather, there are appropriate programs and curricula for both the “traditional” (including exited and mainstream students) program and the ELL students and ELA program.
- There is a sense of coherence, energy and pride in the school that we feel is linked at least in part to their relative unique identity as *the* ELA magnet middle school in the district. Within the program serving the ELA students that we were able to explore, a culture of openness allows teachers to seek support with students and in their classrooms through peer mentoring and support.
- Stability: Teachers at Merrill tend to stay at Merrill – not move on. The very low mobility is credited, in part, to the fact that teachers like the ESL structure and programming (which has not been available elsewhere, except, perhaps recently, at Place Bridge Middle School).
- There are clearly articulated English language practices in the school – for teachers, students, and parents. The school as a whole appears to be cognizant and embracing of, and articulate about, Merrill’s distinct population and correspondingly its distinct ELA program and approach. It was noted that English immersion experience does *not* mean an English-only experience. Uses of languages other than English for clarification, contextual cues, and other purposes are encouraged (e.g., for learning how to open lockers, take the buses). However, the program has a cohesive approach: all classroom language – academic as well as social language – is in English, with the rationale that in every class, all second language learners have rich linguistic exposure and practice in English. It is natural, given the mix of first languages represented in any given class, and in the school as a whole for students to use English as the common language for social communication. While Merrill teachers will all soon be ELA-certified,

currently the Merrill ELA Department teachers are not certain of the specific ELA strategies that the main-stream teachers are learning and using with the exited students whom they have in their (main-stream) classes.

Regarding the high motivation and academic expectations for, *and on the part of*, students and their parents:

- The teachers and staff know their students. Many of the children have come from other countries where they have had tough experiences. They are oriented towards wanting to please their teachers and parents and to do a good job. Thus these students' high motivation and expectations from their families and communities are seen as helping them to succeed in English, in school and in the US – “and we support them to get there” (Principal Stacy Miller). At the same time, these newcomer students' high motivation and expectations are seen as having a positive ‘rub off’ influence on their other school peers.
- Homework policies are laid out very clearly in the Student Handbook. These policies suggest all students are held to same high standards, and that there is parent cooperation for the school's policies.

ASSERTION 2:

Merrill's ELA Staff is characterized by its strong instructional expertise and leadership, and by the Staff's knowledge about, and advocacy for, students.

Merrill's strong ELA Department is central to Merrill's practices, functioning and documented success with ELL students. The Department is committed and well established and staffed. It includes ELA teachers in the language arts as well as math, science and social studies areas, and several senior teachers who have been at Merrill for ten plus years, and whose deep knowledge of language and literacy acquisition and strong experience and ‘track records’ working with second language learners are acknowledged by the administration. The principal referred to specific ELA teachers' outstanding outcomes in terms of student growth.

Background and Data support for the above:

- ELA staff are among the very highly effective and respected teachers and teacher-leaders in the school. A number of ELA teachers are veteran teachers with excellent records. As the Principal noted, “Fortunately for us, the ELA department has a ton of experience.”
- A number of ELA staff have many years of experience in working with linguistically diverse learners. *[Two senior ELL staff will be retiring at the end of this year.]*
- As Principal Miller pointed out, ESL teachers have among the highest growth of teachers in the school (e.g., Ms. Vicki Allison). Several of the ELA teachers have had experiences and goals with their own foreign and second language learning; and some have had experiences teaching in other countries. They bring those experiences to their own understanding and teaching of students at Merrill.
- ELA Program Leaders and the Principal exercise relative autonomy in decision-making (with PD, other) regarding serving their ELL students. Merrill's ELA program does not rely on the District ELA program for direction or support, or guidelines. At the time of the interview, there had been no correspondence in AY 2010-2011 between the district ELA office and Merrill.

ASSERTION 3:**Strong principal leadership and also distributed leadership among teachers help Merrill to leverage in-school and community resources to meet the needs of Merrill’s English Language Learners.**

A top priority on the part of the Administration and ELA Leadership is to have coherence and consistency across school practices to support students’ character development, high achievement and full participation—academically and otherwise. The Principal emphasizes her commitment to transparency and consistency with school-wide practices, starting with school rules and moving to “deeper” levels of consistency in instructional practices and learning goals. Consistency across the school is seen as particularly important given the diverse backgrounds of students and families and the many who are new to US school practices. The administration and ELA staff are strategic about their leveraging of human and other resources, including the following:

- paraprofessionals (who are bilingual and/or who have specific expertise, e.g., one is trained in in writing instruction)
- Newcomer Center with grant support for enrichment activities (e.g., field trips)
- bilingual parents who can contact other parents about Back-to-School night and other events
- strong electives teachers and classes in which ELL students and traditional students are mixed
- community organizations that provide additional support for students and their families, especially in the way of after-school activities. Among these providing after-school programming and other supports are RELAY, Asia Pacific Center, and Jewish Family Services.

Background and Data support for the above:

Principal leadership

This is Ms. Stacy Miller’s (SM) fourth year as principal at Merrill. She was the AP for the two years prior. She will be leaving Merrill to take on the principalship of Rachel B. Noel Community Arts School. Even though Merrill will be going through a leadership transition, SM notes that things should continue to run smoothly because of the strong programs that are in place.

- SM notes that all teachers “are knowledgeable” and “...know how to teach ELLs,” for whom there are high expectations. (All) teachers had to become experts in ELA; the entire faculty is ELA-E certified, or on their way to becoming certified. She voiced her commitment to have the building as a whole be “smarter about English language learners.”
- SM encourages teachers to take on leadership roles in the school (e.g., leading PD, other initiatives). Teachers are encouraged to take ownership of their own learning and development.
- SM supports and works directly with the ELA teachers as teacher leaders.
- SM has been committed to keeping all practices and policies consistent, and that rules (expectations, guidelines) are posted throughout the school and reiterated/revisited regularly.
- One prominent example of clear and consistent messages to students across classrooms is the presence/use of Content and Language objectives across classrooms that we observed in our photo data, where we observed a common color coding of these (pink indicates Content objectives; orange indicates Language objectives). We note that the use of these two types of objectives is evidence of a SIOP-informed approach.

- School practices in general are clearly articulated to/for all. For example, our archival and photo data indicate that the school's FOCUS (Fairness, Ownership, Community, Understanding, and Safety) theme is prominent in the Student Handbook and also on the walls. It appears to be an example of the consistent practices and clear expectations that Principal Miller expressed as being carried out and available visibly and through example throughout the school.
- Math classrooms all use the same lesson set ups and learning goals.

Parents and community

- The ELA staff recognizes the needs of the ELA population, which includes students and families who may have experienced trauma in coming to the United States. They assist and advocate for students and families so that they receive the emotional and other supports they may need, tapping school and community resources.
- With 60% of the student body being culturally and/or linguistically diverse (with both newcomer and long-term ELL families), the school makes a special effort to reach out to the parents. There was a great ELA parent turn-out at Back to School Night this past fall, due in great part to outreach efforts by ELA staff, paraprofessionals, and bilingual parent volunteers. Also, assistance with transportation is available: Bus tokens are provided to families to address any difficulty they may have in getting to the school.

ASSERTION 4:

Data-informed placement, instruction and responsive scheduling/moving of ELL students throughout the school year, especially as informed by students' English language and literacy (reading and writing), central focuses of the ELA staff and school as a whole, permits fine-tuned matching of ELL students and instruction.

A designated ELA staff member handles the intake and placement of new students. There is strong confidence in this staff member's expertise in placing students according to their English language levels, which by consensus were considered to be consistently "spot on." Once in classes, sensitive teacher assessments—formal and informal—are used to monitor carefully students' language and literacy levels and progress, and also to adjust and differentiate lesson plans and curriculum within their classes according to students' language and literacy levels. ELA teachers consult carefully with one to determine whether and when individual or groups of ELA students in any one of 5 levels (Newcomer 1, 2; and ELA 1, 2, 3) may be ready to move up (to a higher ELA level or to a mainstream class), based on readiness as demonstrated by teachers' authentic and ongoing assessments of their English language and literacy levels. However, one problem that can arise with moving students who are otherwise ready for mainstream classes is that classes are already full to capacity, and unable to take in new students.

Background and Data support for the above:

Careful placement and scheduling in Reading and Writing

- Literacy scheduling is strategic; there is one block for Reading and a separate block for Writing. There is careful assessment and placement of students in both Reading and in Writing: The *Shining Star* diagnostic for reading and an in-house developed Writing Component are used to carefully level students in each of these two areas.

- Analysis of CSAP test results are not considered particularly helpful or relevant for assessment, placement, or progress monitoring.
- In the Reading block, there is a current school-wide focus on vocabulary learning. All teachers within the school are working on the vocabulary focus. The *Write to Read* text is used in the Reading block.

Features of language and literacy instruction

- Instruction practice includes having students read and reread selected texts multiple times, helping students to become very familiar and comfortable with the texts—and allowing for them to outline, find details, and do comprehension tasks before going on to writing and discussion and working through wh-questions.
- Students' literacy performances are scaffolded: Teacher models, and students do the task/s in pairs or small group, then ultimately independently. Teachers know how to support students' learning throughout.

Progress monitoring and moving of students

- ELA staff are smart and very intentional about teaching and progress monitoring for ELL students, ***especially in (English) language, reading and writing***, which they see as the basis for all instruction and decision making for ELL students. Sensitive progress monitoring in literacy informs ongoing (re)scheduling and placements. The Principal reported that the week prior to our first interview, based on some students not demonstrating the expected progress, their schedules had been adjusted, “to get them to just the right spot.”
- The Principal with ELA leaders and all teachers build a body of evidence that includes teacher impressions and student samples over time. ELA teaching staff provide input for the scheduling decisions and consult with mainstream colleagues and the Administration regarding student placements.
- When high-level ELL students are in mainstream classes, their progress is monitored by ELA staff, in collaboration with mainstream teachers, to see if/how these students are moving through the content, and/or whether students' schedules need readjustment. Schedules are thus flexible to allow movement; Principal Miller noted, “We have to be fluid and flexible.”

ASSERTION 5:

Professional development is pragmatic, data-informed, ELL-centered and largely informal.

Professional development activities are organized around a whole school focus (e.g., this year the focus is backwards planning.) They are data-informed and focused on the needs of English learners. Most PD sessions appear to be teacher led.

Background and Data support for the above:

- There has been an intentional focus by Principal Miller during the past five years to leave behind the old culture and practices of isolated teachers and teaching in favor of collaboration and openness. While there is a strong value placed on instructional conversations and teachers being able to observe others and be observed, supported, and informally coached, ELA staff report that this is hard to accomplish.

- The school’s coaches and facilitators serve primarily the traditional staff and program. This is due primarily to their knowledge base and job descriptions. Several of the facilitators have ELA backgrounds and will work with ELA teachers; this is true for math and social studies particularly. Facilitators and coaches are also available to ELA staff as resources, providing “abundant” help when needed.
- We note that the particular ELA programming structure that has been devised for Merrill and that has been felt to be effective has two distinct disadvantages in terms of ELA teachers’ work days: 1) ELA staff do not share a common planning time, and 2) ELA teachers each have 5 distinct, ‘heavy’ preparations each day, with significant differentiation planning within each. ELA staff may experience some hardship and burnout as a result of this load, which is largely invisible to others within (and outside) the school.
- Technically PD is scheduled weekly, and is regularly teacher led. However, in reality, PD does not take place every week. Nonetheless, ELA staff find time and ways (in the halls, before school) to connect regarding students, curriculum and other matters.
- Some district experts (e.g., Rebecca Marques-Guerrero) have also been involved with Merrill staff with Learning Labs and other efforts.
- PD under Stacy Miller started with Instructional Rounds that later alternated with Data Teams. PD focuses have included Vocabulary Building, Content Level Backwards Design (the current 2010-11 focus), and other topics.
- There is a commitment on the part of ELA staff to providing immediate, informal, on-the-spot support for other teachers, with an emphasis on collaboration and professional discussion.

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