



## 9 Ways to Support ELs in 2021: Privileging Teachers' Voices

by [Marisa Ferraro](#)

Teachers play pivotal roles in educational reform. Change often begins at the ground level, in the classroom. It is imperative that leadership lend teachers the mic so educators can mutually invest in policies and pedagogies that support *all* students. In recent years, the focus of dual language learning has extended beyond classroom practices to identify ways school leadership can support, promote, and expand equitable and robust programs throughout the district. The growing cultural and linguistic diversity of students has raised important questions regarding how students succeed academically. Equally critical is the need for dual language bilingual education leadership to cultivate and sustain communities of linguistic diversity. School systems that have strong leadership are among the districts most likely to achieve school success, particularly in the area of superdiverse learners.

This article shares the journey of how one of the U.S. Northeast's largest school districts implemented a comprehensive professional development initiative. The initiative spanned 5 years and provided workshops to nearly 2,000 educators. The goal was simple—every teacher, paraprofessional, tutor, specialist, coordinator, and administrator would complete minimally 15 hours of workshops. A small cadre of educators completed 25 hours, which included an application to practice, coaching piece.

### Privileging Teachers' Voices

Following the initial 15-hour workshop, having engaged with sheltered pedagogies and practices (Echevarria & Graves, 2014), educators were asked two questions through the lens of Walqui's (2000) 10 priorities for designing instruction for emergent bilinguals:

1. What do you need to enact this principle in your classroom?
2. What do you need to enact this principle throughout your school?

The analysis of nearly 2,000 teachers' recommendations resulted in nine categories that call for a shift in how leadership plans for collaboration and allocates resources. By heeding the advice of teachers, leadership can optimize organizational shifts to yield effective pedagogies for dual language learners and empower educational communities. Sharing teachers' voices with leadership privileges teachers' experience and pedagogically sound advice. The nine areas of

recommendations, representing 40 specific and concrete actionable steps are intended to prompt a discussion of district resources.

### **1. Plan Curriculum (34%)**

In the area of curriculum adjustments and modifications for dual language learners, teachers weighed in heavily. The most frequent recommendation to leadership was a protection and allocation of time: time to teach, time to revise, and time to plan. Teachers articulated the need for time to communicate and collaborate with grade-level and discipline-level teams, EL teachers, and special education teachers. In doing so, teachers have problematized the dichotomy that persists between the mainstream curriculum—that is, the curriculum for all students—and the curriculum that is offered to dual language learners via specialized language support programs. Ultimately, teachers called for a consistency in the curriculum and a cohesion among the disciplines and contexts and proposed several ways to come together for a common goal of ensuring access to meaningful curriculum.

### **2. Allocate Resources (17%)**

The need for resources is imperative to make the recommendations possible. These recommendations represent a call to action that underscore instructional resources, material resources, human resources, technological resources, and monetary resources. Though that may seem overwhelming, I wish to ground the educators' recommendations by highlighting one, in particular: "create a central database for teacher made modified materials for ELs" to illustrate the feasibility of such requests.

### **3. Cultivate Communities (11%)**

It takes time to establish communities in the classroom, on the playground, and in the school. Teachers ask to be freed from the constraints of pacing guides that focus exclusively on instruction and timing while not attending to individual students' needs. The diversity and differences dual language learners bring to the community should be understood in its multilayered complexity; they should be appreciated and valued. In doing so, teachers can respond by making curriculum culturally relevant and can work to connect students to the greater community through out-of-classroom activities.

### **4. Support and Trust Teachers (9%)**

Teachers need support from administration to provide them release time to observe "master teachers," to work with peer mentors, to implement their newly learned sheltered instructional practices. Teachers request feedback from administrators via focused walks that observe engaged students. Educators express the need for administrators to take the lead in establishing explicit norms and expectations of how to do school. Teachers also ask that their input be solicited and that the quality of teachers is made a priority.

## **5. Reconsider Assessment (7%)**

In creating a classroom community and delivering high-quality sheltered instruction, teachers ask leadership to rethink the timing and administration of standardized assessments. In lieu of a standardized, one-size-fits all model of assessing dual language learners, educators suggest exploring authentic, linguistically differentiated assessments, compatible with a linguistically differentiated curriculum.

## **6. Rethink Instruction (6%)**

Following the sequence of interpretation of this teacher survey data, when dual language learners find their homes in the classrooms, teachers are the locus of instruction. The manner in which the curriculum is delivered to students matters. To that end, educators asked their leadership to attend to class size and space, daily schedules, and mode and approach of the delivery. Educators expressed a willingness to implement strategies specific to sheltered instruction.

## **7. Make Students Visible (5%)**

To help students thrive in school communities, they need to be seen as valuable, contributing members. Educators on all levels, from paras through administrators, are seeking information about students' backgrounds. They wish such data could be readily accessible. Once educators are provided with information about students' cultural backgrounds, native languages, previous education, and English language proficiency, they can begin to see these students. Only then can they respond with culturally sustaining practices.

## **8. Streamline Identification and Placement (5%)**

When children arrive to a new home in a new city, one of the first steps families take is to register children for school. If in the process of registration, school officials suspect the family has a dominant language other than English, subsequent steps ensue to identify that soon-to-be student as an English learner, usually based upon the home languages spoken. These questions play a key role in the placement into a language support program. Educators request the leadership to use a variety of assessments in this identification process, to consider the background of individual students and to diversify the kinds of language programs to support new dual language learners.

## **9. Partner With Families (3%)**

Educators expressed the reenactment of advisory groups so that educators can use a team model to support students "living in the fringe of school." Educators unanimously feel that in order to effectively support the dual language learners in the schools, they need to recognize the holistic needs of the family and respond thoughtfully. In doing so, teachers request that purposeful outreach be planned to connect families with teachers and classroom activities. Teachers also request that school leaders reach out to local business to create partnerships and possible real-world skill building opportunities to prepare them for life outside the classroom.

## Heeding the Call to Action

There remains much work to be done in helping administrators realize that preparing high-quality educators to equitably meet the needs of dual language learners extends beyond the confines of the classroom. Teachers highlight the need for instructional guidance, resources, and support from leadership to effect change in sustaining equitable pedagogies for dual language learners. The superdiversity of our student culture calls for a shift in our educational ethos, a reallocation of time and resources, and a closer look at what constitutes collaborative leadership to support dual language education in our public schools.

It is critical we create a roadmap for schools who struggle to design effective professional development. But before hastening to deliver and measure, or spray and pray, let us heed the recommendations of those closest to the students, and respond with care and compassion. The secret to what makes professional development stick may be more about the environments cocreated by leadership and teachers than the efficacy of professional development program design. The teachers' voices are essential to informing how leadership can collaborate within school communities to effectively serve the extraordinarily diverse needs throughout our country. As a nation of educators who undoubtedly realizes the implications of growing diversity among the students, we are obligated to change the course by addressing our current failures.

## References

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## For Further Reading

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