

*“A Haven for Vietnamese Newcomers”: A Steadily
Improving School for English Language Learners*

Excel High School Case Study

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This case study is a part of the report ***Learning from Consistently High Performing and Improving Schools for English Language Learners in Boston Public Schools***. The report and its companion report, ***Improving Educational Outcomes of English Language Learners in Schools and Programs in Boston Public School***, are part of a larger project, Identifying Success in Schools and Programs for English Language Learners in Boston Public Schools, commissioned by the Boston Public Schools as part of the process of change set in motion by the intervention of the state and the federal governments on behalf of Boston's English language learners. This qualitative retrospective case study, based upon interviews, document review, and observations, shares key themes found in one school identified for its consistent, multi-year out-performance of like schools in ELL outcomes during SY2006-SY2009. The purpose of the case study is to share and illustrate key lessons that may be adapted and applied in other school contexts for the education of ELL students. For more information on the methods used in this case study, please see the full report, ***Learning from Consistently High Performing and Improving Schools for English Language Learners in Boston Public Schools***; Chapter 1 includes an overview of the study and methods and the Detailed Methods Appendix provides a complete description, including the identification of the site using multiple regression analysis and the qualitative methods used to study the site once selected. The full reports are available at www.cce.org and www.umb.edu/gastoninstitute.

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Page numbers do not start at 1 because this case study is excerpted from Chapter VI of *Learning from Consistently High Performing and Improving Schools for English Language Learners in Boston Public Schools*

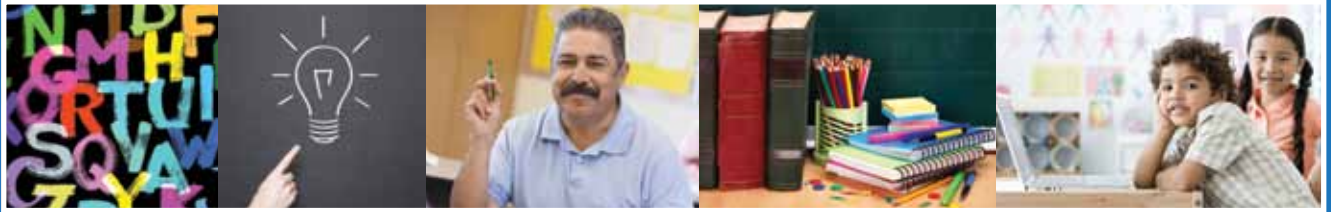
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CHAPTER

VI.

**“A HAVEN FOR VIETNAMESE NEWCOMERS”:
A STEADILY IMPROVING SCHOOL
FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

A School Context

Excel High School is one of three small high schools located in the South Boston Educational Complex, created in SY2004 from the former South Boston High School during the district-wide effort to create smaller, more personalized high schools within Boston as a strategy for improved student achievement. In SY2009, the school served 408 students, 26% of whom were native speakers of Vietnamese and 23% of whom were students of limited English proficiency. In the school as a whole, 34.6% of students were Black, 29.2% were Asian, 18.6% were Latino, and 16.7% were White. The school is the only high school with a Vietnamese SEI program, so many newcomer Vietnamese students learning English are automatically assigned to this school, especially if they have already learned some English.²⁹

During SY2009, there were 26 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members at Excel HS for a student-teacher ratio of 14.1 to one (BPS ratio is 12.8 to one). Four FTE teachers (15%) were teaching in ELL-related assignments. All teachers were licensed

in their assigned position and 94.3% of core classes were taught by highly qualified teachers. In terms of the racial make-up of the teaching staff, 62% of the teachers were White, 19% were Black, 15% were Asian, and 4% were Latino.³⁰

In comparison to the Boston high school population, the students at Excel HS report lower rates of eligibility for free or reduced price lunch, a proxy for family income. Excel's LEP students have higher rates of school mobility than the district average, although its English proficient students have lower rates of mobility than the district average.³¹

Given the slightly lower rates of eligibility for free or reduced price lunch compared to the district average, it is reasonable to wonder whether or not the improving MCAS outcomes of Excel HS are due to the student population being more advantaged. However, one advantage of multiple regression is that the equations controlled for the proportion of low-income students and the proportion of LEP students each year in each school. Thus, the finding that Excel HS had steadily improving outcomes for LEP students at MEPA Levels 3 and 4 included

Table 6.1. Excel High School Enrollment Defined by Native Language, English Language Proficiency, and ELL Program Participation, SY2009

| Total | All Excel (408) | | | |
|------------------------------|---|-----------------------|---|---|
| Native Language | Native English Speaker (NES) (215) (53%) | | Native Speakers of Other Languages (NSOL) (193) (47%) ^a | |
| Language Proficiency | English Proficient (EP) (316) (77%) | | | Limited English Proficient (LEP) (92) (23%) ^b |
| | NES | NSOL-EP (71) (17%) | FLEP (30) (7%) | |
| Program Participation | Not in ELL Program (316) (77%) | | | * ^c In ELL Prog (77) (19%) |

^a Native speakers of Vietnamese were 54% of NSOL and native speakers of other languages were: Spanish 22%, Cape Verdean 9%, Haitian Creole 6% and Chinese 3%.
^b 78 (84.8% of LEP students) were native speakers of Vietnamese.
^c 15 (4% of all students) were LEP students not in an ELL program.

Table 6.2. Selected Student Indicators, SY2009^a

| | Excel LEP % | Excel EP % | BPS HS LEP % | BPS HS EP % |
|--|-------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
| Low Income (% Eligible for free/reduced-price lunch) | 87.0% | 64.6% | 91.6% | 77.4% |
| Mobility (% not in the same school for October and June) | 21.7% | 3.2% | 9.8% | 8.1% |
| Students with Disabilities | 8.7% | 19.6% | 14.7% | 17.7% |

^a LEP = Limited English Proficiency; EP = English Proficient; BPS HS = Boston Public High Schools

Table 6.3. Selected Student Outcomes, SY2009

| | Number of Excel LEP Students with Data | Excel LEP % | Excel EP % | BPS HS LEP % | BPS HS EP % |
|------------------------------|--|--------------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
| Median Attendance Rate | 94 | 95.0% | 92.2% | 92.5% | 92.8% |
| Suspension Rate | 92 | 9.8% | 14.6% | 2.9% | 6.4% |
| Retained in Grade | 60 | 13.8% ^a | 9.2% | 20.9% | 10.3% |
| Dropout Rate | 94 | 1.1% ^a | 11.6% | 6.6% | 7.0% |
| Passed ELA MCAS ^b | 29 | 93.1% | 95.8% | 72.6% | 95.2% |
| Proficient in ELA MCAS | | 31.0% | 67.6% | 17.3% | 72.6% |
| Passed Math MCAS | 31 | 100% | 87.3% | 76.3% | 89.7% |
| Proficient in Math MCAS | | 93.5% | 60.6% | 49.0% | 65.6% |
| Passed Science MCAS | 29 | 93.1% | 89.2% | 59.2% | 82.4% |
| Proficient in Science MCAS | | 62.1% | 35.1% | 14.3% | 36.7% |

^a Data for this cell is n<10.
^b While case study site selection looked at MCAS proficiency in ELA and mathematics only for students at MEPA Levels 3 and 4, here the purpose is to present outcomes for the school as a whole, thus we include all test takers as well as pass and proficiency rates.

controlling for the student population; the school stood out among BPS schools taking into account its student population.

Excel EP and LEP student suspension rates were higher than the respective district high school averages. Academically, Excel LEP students posted SY2009 MCAS pass rates and proficiency rates in ELA, Math, and Science that were substantially higher than the district LEP average. Meanwhile, Excel English proficient students posed pass rates that were close to the district EP average and proficiency rates that were slightly lower than the district EP average for all subjects.

The mission of Excel HS, approved in 2007 (Rennie Center, 2008), is “to foster academic achievement and creative expression. Excel HS seeks to cultivate well-rounded students who are prepared for success in college and careers, and to be productive members of a culturally diverse society” (Excel High School, 2010). According to the former Principal, the mission statement “reflects the uncontested priorities of Excel HS ... getting their students ready for college and careers in a culturally diverse community.” The school also has a definition of rigor in the faculty and staff handbook (Excel High School, 2010) and on the hallway walls, developed under the former Principal’s leadership. Academic rigor at Excel HS is defined as “the goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is complex, ambiguous, thought-provoking, and

personal or emotionally challenging. Rigor must be found in three of the following areas: Content, instruction, and assessment. A complete rigorous experience must include: high expectations, high relevance, and appropriate support – higher student engagement and learning” (Excel High School, 2010). High expectations are characterized by standards aligned, challenging curriculum, engagement in higher order skills, and student independence and responsibility.

B Key Themes in Success with Educating English Language Learners

The data collected for Excel HS were analyzed to identify key practices that the stakeholders considered correlated with ELL improvement during the study years. While the practices and strategies that were identified are not considered causative, due to the multiple reports from multiple sources, they were considered informative to describe in detail in this case study. We found that within the school, clearly defined leadership and a vision for ELL students were prominent. Through this strong leadership and communication of the vision, curriculum and instruction were of high quality and incorporated evidence-based strategies associated with ELL success. Key staff at the school promoted and implemented out-of-school time opportunities, which provided ELL students with opportunities

to interact with English-fluent peers. Finally, the school culture embraced the Vietnamese students' culture, language, and perspectives on education. These four key practices are described in more detail below:

- Leadership for ELL Students
- Quality Curriculum and Instruction for ELL Students
- Out-of-School Time Enrichment for ELL Students
- School Culture a Safe Learning Haven for ELL Students

Theme 1: Leadership for ELL Students

Both the former Principal and the LAT facilitator played key roles in the improvement of ELL education at Excel HS. The former Principal had a vision and plan for developing school-wide responsibility for ELL students, and the LAT facilitator led its operationalization.

Principal Vision for the School

The Principal during the study period had a strong vision of all students reaching college readiness, regardless of subgroup such as ELL or SPED. She was unwavering in her high expectations of student achievement, according to staff interviewed.³² Largely due to her leadership in transforming the school from a chronically underperforming school into an achieving school within a period of a few years, the school was awarded the 2007 Thomas W. Payzant "School on the Move" Prize and \$80,000. The story of the school's turnaround is captured in a case study published the following year (Rennie Center, 2008).

When the former Principal arrived at the school in SY2005, teachers of ELL students worked and met separately from other teachers. After a period of "learning the school," in which she observed and listened to the staff and students (Rennie Center, 2008), she restructured the school so that all teachers were working together. Rather than have ELL teachers form their own department, they joined the subject departments, thus working more closely with regular education teachers of their subject. This organization helped to shift the responsibility for the education of ELL students to all teachers rather than just ELL teachers. The same reorganization happened for special education teachers at the school. As a result, teachers were less isolated and collaboration increased. The former Principal articu-

lates the advantages to instruction of her vision for teacher collaboration:

The interaction of SEI/ESL teachers, regular education teachers, and special education teachers made the entire faculty and staff aware of the different cultures, learning styles, and needs that the Excel community of learners had and the impact of the way teachers teach.
– former Principal

With this school organization, all teachers, not just SEI and ESL teachers, considered themselves responsible for ELL success. One way in which the school staff became unified in its vision of high expectations was the school structure of a representative Instructional Leadership Team (ILT)³³ and subject teams, which allowed for bi-directional decision-making and communication.

I think we've been fairly successful in terms of top-down, bottom-up communication ... from the administration to the ILT to our departments (who meet during common planning time) ... to the classroom. Those policies are communicated clearly, and then any concerns that we have from the teacher and classroom go back to the CPT meetings, ILT, administration ... and school site council. So our policies are established with everyone's ideas in mind.
– Instructional Leadership Team member

The former Principal organized the schedule so teachers would have department meetings weekly, where they "engaged purposefully with colleagues to enhance curriculum alignment and rigor, establish consistent expectations, and share ideas and strategies" (former Principal).

The former Principal also reported emphasizing data-based decision-making regarding Whole School Improvement. Collaboratively, she led staff to analyze formative and summative assessment data, prioritize areas of weakness, and set measurable annual goals. These goals were aligned with student learning objectives, which drove teacher curriculum and instruction decisions.

LAT Facilitator Operationalizing the Principal's Vision

The district has had a position called Language Assessment Team Leader since the beginning of the study period (Boston Teachers Union, 2006). The district's current job description for this position, now called Language Acquisition Team Facilitator (LAT facilitator), includes responsibilities such as support and facilitation of teacher instruction, collaboration, and professional development for ESL and SEI implementation since the study period (Office of English Language Learners, 2010). The LAT facilitator in each building is also responsible for the school's compliance with all BPS, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), and federal policies and administrative directions pertaining to ELL students. The LAT facilitator serves as a liaison between the district Office of English Language Learners and the school.

Excel HS's Language Acquisition Team (LAT) facilitator was an English as a Second-Language (ESL) teacher at the school starting in SY2008. She has been the LAT facilitator since SY2010, although she voluntarily performed many of the duties of the role prior to taking it on formally. During the study period, she worked collaboratively with the school's Student Development Counselor and other ESL teacher as a team during an eighteen-month period when the school did not have a designated LAT facilitator due to a retirement. At Excel HS, the LAT facilitator role is for a teacher, with a stipend and partial release from teaching. She still has teaching duties, including ESL for students at the intermediate level of English language development and French, and teaches afterschool credit recovery, art, and French courses, also for a stipend. According to the LAT facilitator, her role took much more time than was allotted through relief of preps and duties. The LAT facilitator was responsible for all aspects of English learner education from entry to exit, including student intake, assessment, ELD level assignment, course assignment and scheduling with the Student Development Counselor and Registrar, transition into mainstream, and monitoring of FLEP students. During the study period, she performed these LAT facilitator and teaching responsibilities simultaneously.

For every new LEP student who arrived at Excel, the LAT facilitator took the lead on the administrative paperwork, which included identification of an English language development (ELD) level, analysis of

data coming from the child's previous school (if any) and the newcomer assessment center, and letters for and meetings with parents. Much of this paperwork needed to be completed within 30 days of the student's entrance. The LAT facilitator was also responsible for representing the school at tri-annual meetings the BPS Office of English Language Learners to learn about new guidance and policies from the district and implement them.

ELL students were assigned English Language Development (ELD) levels based on the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA), Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral (MELAO), and teacher input using district guides. The Language Acquisition Team (LAT) facilitator worked with the Student Development Counselor to group ELL students according to the MEPA levels with the appropriately licensed teachers. Many ELL students at Excel HS are new arrivals to the United States and to Boston Public Schools. ELL students were grouped by MEPA level and received ESL instruction at least two hours per day. For the Spring 2009 MEPA administration, 44% of LEPs were at MEPA Level 3, 17% were at MEPA Level 4, and 31% were at MEPA Level 5. The remaining 8% were at MEPA Levels 1 and 2. Despite the fact that many ELL students at Excel HS are newcomers, there were so few students by Spring at MEPA Levels 1 and 2 because according to the LAT facilitator, it is rare for a student to spend a year at Level 1. They tend to move more quickly through the first two levels. At Level 3, students spent more time (hence, the greater proportion of students at Level 3), because academic, grammatically complex language emerges at that point.

During the study period, there were ESL classes at two levels. Students at the lowest MEPA levels met with their ESL teacher for three periods per day. Students at the intermediate MEPA levels met with their ESL teacher for two periods per day. The school has since added a third ESL teacher, so that students are grouped into MEPA Level 1, 2, and 3 with separate ESL teachers. During the study period, and at present, ESL-licensed teachers taught all of the ELL students through MEPA Level 3, and almost all of the other teachers in the building had completed 4-Category training.

ELL students were taught math and science by SEI teachers who are bilingual in English and Vietnamese and are veteran teachers at the school. Students at the higher MEPA levels took courses in

regular education. Thus, students at lower MEPA levels were separate from the rest of the school except during lunch, gym, and other specials. However, as they progressed in English proficiency to the higher MEPA levels (4 and 5), they rapidly entered regular classrooms, and in fact some moved directly to AP classes in eleventh and twelfth grades. While still learning English, these students were closely monitored in their regular and AP classes for progress in English proficiency.

As part of providing the appropriate services to each ELL student, the LAT facilitator convened meetings with school staff to adjust students' ELD levels based not only on the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA) scores but also on teacher feedback and reporting. She also scheduled meetings with ELL parents and guardians each year to share ELD levels and course placements after MEPA scores are released.

As an example of the level of detailed knowledge about the students and the individual attention required, the two-year FLEP monitoring process included the following for each student:

After each marking period, I get ... their report cards and [identify] any students who have a C-minus or less, in two or more classes, or in the same class for two consecutive terms. And then I interview the teachers, to see if it's a language issue or if it's another issue, to [determine] if they have to go back into the ESL program or have some extra supports.

– LAT facilitator

In addition to FLEP monitoring, for each marking period, the LAT facilitator also conducted a thorough monitoring of each ELL who was in a regular education class, which was most of the MEPA level 4 and 5 students. For any child who had received low grades in two or more classes, she interviewed the teachers to figure out why the student was not doing well. She also had the skills and knowledge to identify and make available the best resources and interventions for each transitioning and/or struggling child.

Clearly, one school leader knowing the academic needs of each ELL student, understanding how to change course schedules mid-term based on their needs, conducting curriculum reviews, and pulling together resources for students and teachers took

the Principal's vision to the next level, resulting in nimble and responsive school culture and instruction for each ELL student.

LAT Facilitator Providing Whole Staff Professional Development

According to the Acting Principal, one reason for the school's "story of success" is the LAT facilitator, who "knows more than you can possibly know about ELL students and is a trainer herself." As an in-house professional developer, she conducted full-staff professional development during the study period, which built the capacity of all teachers, not just the ELL teachers, to meet the needs of ELL students in their classrooms. Two examples of professional development offered during the study years were 4-Category and language objectives training.

4-Category Training. The former Principal had a long-term vision of building capacity among all of the school's adults, rather than a small group of teachers and administrators, to teach ELL students. Therefore, she ensured that each year all staff would receive ELL-related professional development. During the study period, the LAT facilitator provided training for the school staff to shelter content instruction for ELL students. This in-house Category training (Categories 1, 3, and 4) made it possible for the LAT facilitator to tailor the professional development offering based on what she knew about the student population and teachers' commitment.

The Category training was key for dealing with ELL students. The best training was with [the LAT facilitator], because she knows us and she knows the school. This school was ahead of the curve [relative to other BPS schools] because the old Principal pushed training the whole school. They all felt in it together.

– ELL teacher

The push for 4-Category training came from the former Principal. The whole staff felt "in it" together, and they were proud to be "ahead of the curve." According to the former Principal, almost 100% of the staff was 4-Category trained by the end of the study period.

Language Objectives Training. The impetus for a focus on language objectives in all classrooms came both from the district and from the school's

SIOPI Lesson Planning: Examples of Language Objectives

On the Wiki site, resources compiled from external sources were placed for teachers to access and use. This one page document, prepared by Professor Elke Schneider, adapted from a SIOPI handbook, and shortened here, was included (Schneider, 2007). Adapted from Echevarria, J, Short, D., & Vogt, M. (2008). *Implementing the SIOPI Model through effective professional development and coaching*. Columbus, OH: Pearson. (p. 148)

| LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES | Examples of appropriate LANGUAGE SUPPORT |
|--|---|
| <p>LISTENING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehend text content • Comprehend content vocabulary • Comprehend idiomatic expressions • Comprehend multiple step instructions • Use knowledge of base words • Express preferences, interests | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicitly identify strategies to model for ELL students to be successful in listening comprehension • Clearly identify what type of practice ELL students might get before being engaged in listening comprehension, use of knowledge base words, etc. |
| <p>SPEAKING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe ... using precise vocabulary • Identify the main/the antagonist • Orally defend a position • Predict • Summarize the findings • State the author's/your purpose • Practice agreeing/disagreeing • Compare • Give multiple-step instructions • Share personal experiences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preteach vocabulary using content providing actions, visuals, and graphics • Provide 2-3 sentence structures that are used frequently when predicting, defending a position, expression an opinion, comparisons, giving instructions, interrupting politely, summarizing: e.g.: <p style="margin-left: 40px;"><i>The author seems to tell us...</i> <i>Sorry, I disagree. I think... because</i> <i>Overall, the text made... points: first..., second..., third...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gradually increase the complexity of such language phrase grids after the student demonstrates comfort with the simpler expressions • Teach explicitly how to compose a summary (highlighting keywords) |
| <p>READING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read letter/text out loud/silently • Read abbreviations • Participate in choral reading • Recognize prefixes, roots, suffixes and their meaning • Understand/interpret graphic organizer and other visual cues • Relate with personal experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid read-aloud tasks, replace with choral reading • Teach abbreviations explicitly • Model how to interpret graphic organizers, let students demonstrate understanding of them by creating their own • Cultures differ in how they process information: a circular thinking culture will find it easier to understand circular graphics • Teach explicitly how to identify prefixes, roots, and suffixes in words • Teach frequent sentence and tense structures for different genre |
| <p>WRITING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share personal experiences • predict • Take notes • Complete graphic organizer • Express preferences, interests • Defend a position in writing • Paraphrase • Summarize • State the author's/your purpose • Record observations • Enter ideas in a journal • Create a list of • Ask/answer questions • Practice agreeing/disagreeing • Compare | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce expectations of complexity of sentence structures, focus on meaning first and then model the use of more complex sentences as ELL students' confidence with basic structures rises <p>CAUSAL STATEMENT: BEGINNER</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">....., because</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;"><i>There is a reason for this. The.....</i></p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;"><i>The Consequently,</i></p> <p>CAUSAL STATEMENT: ADVANCED</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;"><i>Due to.....,</i></p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;"><i>As a consequence/result of</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicitly model and practice note-taking with ELL students beginning with a simple, then a more complex process. • Explicitly teach/model compare and contrast statements • Teach frequent sentence and tense structures for different genre (e.g., math books/tasks, science book chapters) |

As a result of both the top-down mandate from the district and the buy-in from the staff, the LAT facilitator conducted professional development for each department team during one common planning time session on incorporating language objectives into each lesson in SY2009. This meeting included differentiating language objectives from content objectives, a brief description of Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model, and examples of content-specific language objectives. SIOP is a widely used resource for the SEI approach to educating ELL students (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). There was also a hands-on element of the session. During the meeting, each teacher revised an upcoming lesson plan to include language objectives, while the LAT facilitator provided assistance. A school-wide expectation that all teachers would post learning objectives on their whiteboards was made clear. The Principal and subsequently the Acting Principal provided feedback on whether the teachers' language objectives met expectations during regular observations.

The LAT facilitator has since supported this professional development by posting a Wiki site (website) for staff which includes resources such as sample language objectives, articles about teaching ELL students, and lesson plan examples. As a result of both the district and school mandates to incorporate language objectives and the teacher teams' investment in learning about language objectives, almost all classes had daily language objectives posted on whiteboards, and most teachers explicitly taught the language objectives during the observations. One member of the ILT noted that being able to decide how to address the directive from the district through in-house professional development was key to buy-in for the change. Now, "staff from each content area supports the ELL students. The content area teachers all focus on language, vocabulary, and speaking" (ELL teacher).

Theme 2: Quality Curriculum and Instruction for ELL Students

The ESL teaching is of high quality, incorporates multiple observable research-based strategies, and is aligned with the regular education ELA curriculum.

Alignment of ESL and ELA Curriculum

The former Principal initiated a curriculum review and renewal that involved the district and the school. The LAT facilitator, in collaboration with another ESL teacher and a staff person from the Office of English Language Learners at Boston Public Schools (BPS) central office started with the BPS ESL curriculum, the state's English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and Outcomes (ELPBO), and the BPS ninth grade ELA curriculum. As a result, according to the ESL teachers, students in the ESL classes at Excel HS were taught to integrate language, content, and higher order thinking skills through reading a variety of texts and writing complex essays, skills that are much more in line with expectations in the ELA curriculum.

In order to prepare students to transition to mainstream classes, and as a result of the curriculum alignment, the ESL 3 students read some of the same texts that the Grade 9 ELA students read, such as Farewell to Manzanar, Animal Farm, and Of Mice and Men. Modifications for ELL students included reading different versions of texts, such as shorter sections or graphic novels, and allowing more time to read one novel. While ESL student read original texts as well, these units provided ESL students with the opportunity to interact with their English proficient peers in meaningful ways focused on academic content.

The ELA and ESL departments worked together to align the curricula so that they feed into each other. There is less differentiation for the students as they move from ESL to ELA. Now, the ESL curriculum uses more literary texts, and has the students do more analysis and essay writing. For example, in ESL 1, they are reading a graphic novel version of Romeo and Juliet.

– ELL teacher

In ESL 3, the curriculum was clearly aligned to both the ELA standards and the state's English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and Outcomes (ELPBO) for students who are limited English proficient. For example, by the end of ESL 3, students write literary essays that compare and contrast two works of similar themes, essays that include an introduction, thesis statement, appropriate evidence, and a conclusion. The expectations for analysis, evidence, voice, and grammar were the same as those for students in ELA classes (ESL 3 Course Description).

The curriculum alignment between ESL and ELA meant that students were reading the same novels. Therefore, the ESL and ELA teachers were able to collaborate to have the students conduct final projects across classes. For example, in a *Lord of the Flies* unit, groups of students from ESL and ELA classes created an anti-bullying movie together. The ESL students wrote the script, the ELA students edited and performed the parts, and the ESL students edited the video. The LAT facilitator commented, "They can get to know their peers in the mainstream, because, after me, they'll be in the mainstream with them." Through this type of collaboration, the transition for students from ESL to ELA is smoother because of peer interactions and familiarity with content and skills standards.

The formal curriculum alignment was done between ESL 3 and ninth grade. According to the LAT facilitator, "since all ELL students at Excel move from ESL 1 to ESL 3 before being mainstreamed in the tenth, eleventh, or twelfth grade, exposing them to the ninth grade ELA curriculum would guarantee that they shared some academic/literary background with their eventual ELA classmates." In the ESL 1 and ESL 2 curricula, students read some texts from the ELA curriculum, such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Romeo and Juliet*. However, the formal curriculum alignment for those levels has not been done.

ESL Instructional Strategies

The former Principal also had "an unwavering focus on quality instruction" which she implemented through "frequent formal and informal classroom observations" (Rennie Center, 2008). Through our case study data collection, in which 16 classroom observations were conducted in Spring 2011, we noted that instructional strategies for ELL students were prominent in most classrooms, including SEI classrooms predominantly for ELL students and general education/special education classrooms

with very few ELL students.³⁴ While the instructional strategies varied depending on the subject and teacher, researchers observed some consistent practices, particularly among teachers of ELL students who had all been at the school during the study years (but not exclusive to these teachers). These practices, which were likely in place during the study period and were observed in SY2011, are described next.

One instructional strategy that facilitates acquisition of English fluency is the intentional construction of opportunities for students to communicate in English through working in pairs and small groups. We observed this practice both in classrooms with all ELL students and in non-SEI program classrooms. In an Advanced Placement ELA and composition class, taught by a veteran Excel HS teacher, which included several students who had recently earned a FLEP designation, students worked in consistent teams for a whole term. On the day of the observation, teams were preparing answers to a list of teacher-generated questions about several related texts. It was clear that each student had a role (facilitator, note-taker, reporter), although those roles seemed fluid enough that students could get the assignment done in a short amount of time. There was a culture of listening and patience with ELL students in these small groups, since they spoke more slowly and hesitantly than native English speakers, not necessarily about the content of the work but about expressing themselves. During the whole-class discussion of the team-generated responses, the teacher strategically called on FLEP students to share their thinking. Through this and other observations, it was clear that students at higher MEPA levels and FLEP students, who are in mainstream classes, are taught by teachers skilled at incorporating best practices to support language learning. Multiple teachers of ELL students discussed their strategic grouping of students as a way to address the learning needs of students at different English proficiency levels: "I always use heterogeneous grouping and have the students sit in mixed groups" (ELL teacher).

One strategy was discussed by teachers as having been practiced during the study period as well as observed during the site visit in SY2011. All teachers explicitly taught academic vocabulary, ELL teachers but also regular education teachers. For example, a science teacher, whose class was more than half ELL students and recent FLEP students, suggested that the content that he was teaching is

“almost [like learning] a new language, with a massive amount of vocabulary. So my classes with [ELL students] are the same” as for native English speakers. He acknowledged that native English speakers might have more familiarity with root words than ELL students, demonstrating an awareness of academic language development needs of ELL students. Using that awareness, he differentiated on an individual basis for his students. When this teacher heard students speaking Vietnamese in his class, he asked what they were talking about. If there was an explanation needed, he did so in English.

Theme 3: Out-of-School Time Enrichment Opportunities with English Practice

The ELL staff nurture partnerships for out-of-school time opportunities and encourage ELL students to take advantage of these opportunities, as participation in these programs forces students to speak English with native English speakers.

Afterschool Academic Clubs

During her tenure at Excel HS, the former Principal led the creation of seventeen afterschool clubs run by teachers who received a stipend for their work. Many of the ELL teachers interviewed remained in the school after the school day ended to run afterschool clubs and classes for ELL students. Some of the offerings included a homework club, MCAS preparation classes, and enrichment opportunities such as art, robotics, and debate. One of the ELL teachers ran the homework club, in which struggling students received extra help. He said that their problems were mostly about “understanding the context behind a problem, rather than the content.” He used the time to help explain the context to students.

The Principal during the study period deliberately focused on MCAS proficiency and started afterschool offerings devoted to MCAS preparation, which continue today. Afterschool MCAS classes were divided into those for English proficient students and students with high MEPA levels and those for ELL students at lower MEPA levels, allowing teachers to tailor instruction. They were offered two days a week for 90 minutes each from January to March. About one third of the students who chose to attend these classes were ELL students, which is a higher proportion than the overall student population. Some ELL students asked permission to attend both MCAS preparation classes. Teachers also offered afterschool credit

recovery programs so students would not have to go to summer school.

Summer Opportunities

Many adults in the building, including the Student Development Counselor, the career specialist from the Private Industry Council (PIC), and the LAT facilitator talked explicitly about the need for ELL students to “take advantage of out-of-school time opportunities because they force students to practice speaking English, whereas staying at home and in school does not.” The staff talked about the loss of English proficiency during the summer due to ELL students spending most of their time with Vietnamese speakers and the lack of exposure to native English speakers (PIC career specialist). The educators have seen the results of their aggressive attempts to immerse students in English speaking environments over the summer:

We generally don't let the kid leave in June without giving us proof of some kind of study. And we've seen them ... come back in September, start in one classroom, and [realize], "Oh, he really learned a lot of English over the summer." It's common.

– LAT facilitator

Through the PIC career specialist, the school has established partnerships with entities like the Federal Reserve, Bank of America, and Sovereign Bank, as well as local higher education programs such as Emerson Writers' Program, Tufts Medical Center internship program, SummerSearch, and Harvard Refugee Youth Summer Enrichment program. Two popular programs for Excel ELL students have been Urban Scholars and Outward Bound at UMass Boston. During the study period, the Student Development Counselor visited ESL classes and convened assemblies in the auditorium to announce these summer opportunities to students, strategically targeting ELL students. The PIC career specialist and LAT facilitator followed up with emails to students and family members for whom they had email addresses. The Student Development Counselor also counseled students and supported the application process. In addition, the LAT facilitator emailed students and parents about these opportunities as they arrived. These programs varied in their offerings. Some had an academic component, such as SAT, language, and tutoring support, while others focused on the work setting. A couple of programs

also brought in guest speakers and supported students with college essay writing. However, what all of these programs had in common was that they forced students to be with “just English speakers, to learn English better” (LAT facilitator).

Theme 4: School Culture a Safe Learning Haven for ELL Students

The Vietnamese ELL students, most of whom immigrated in their teens, feel comfort in having Vietnamese peers and teachers around them during their transition to this country, who have common experiences and language.

Students Able to Use First Language and Be Understood

Recent graduates of Excel HS described their experience as “late entry” ELL students, meaning they arrived in this country in their early teens. Most of the Vietnamese students at Excel HS are late entry ELL, and therefore they are placed in the Vietnamese SEI program at the school. These students received their elementary education in Vietnam, where alumni reported the math and science that they learned was typically at a higher level than what American students receive. However, they struggled with the culture and language shock, and with learning English rapidly enough to graduate from high school and go to college.

The graduates we interviewed appreciated the Excel HS experience, partly because they were around students who had gone through the same transition. They shared common experiences and language. The structure of the courses was that the early MEPA level students spent most of their school day together, where they could speak Vietnamese together between classes and for clarification in class. In addition, the school has two Vietnamese teachers who not only speak their language but also understand their home cultures.

When I first came here, I was ... so lost. I don't (sic) speak English and everyone keeps staring at me. And I think the program helps by [putting] us in an environment where we can still speak our own language, but learning (sic) English at the same time, too. So it's probably [making the transition] ... a little smoother... So I think ... we have the Vietnamese teachers over here and they understand how that feeling was, because they experienced that too. So they understand what we've been through.

– Alumnus

Like the LAT facilitator, the two Vietnamese teachers performed many roles in the school outside of their teaching responsibilities. They translated documents for Vietnamese families, they made calls home when the school needed to communicate with a family member in Vietnamese, and they even planned and facilitated professional development to build teachers' cultural competence in SY2008 (see below). The Vietnamese teachers knew the families well enough that “they know that they have to call [one family] at 10pm on the cell phone, or this one at work at 8am” (LAT facilitator). When Vietnamese students failed the MCAS, these teachers called home to explain the results and tell families about afterschool opportunities for preparation.

High Academic Expectations

Both the school and the families of ELL students have high academic expectations for their ELL students. In alignment with the mission and consistent message from leadership, the former Principal deliberately increased emphasis on providing more opportunities for students to take demanding courses, including Engineering, AP, and Honors classes. The goal was always to prepare students for college and career, and to position them to be eligible for scholarships to college.

In Vietnam, teachers have a high social status, higher than the parent. Education is revered, “something to take seriously, not take for granted” (LAT facilitator). Similarly, Vietnamese immigrant parents and family members expected Excel HS teachers to push and motivate students to do well. Therefore, parents reported an adjustment to the lower level and amount of school work that students must complete. Some ELL students come to the United States accustomed to school seven days a week and 12-13 subjects per year, so when they came here, “the work load is reduced by half” compared to Vietnam (Parent). The parents interviewed said that at first, when their students came to Excel HS, they thought the work was “too easy” and that their children “didn’t have to study as hard” as in Vietnam, which made them skeptical of the quality of the education. They said that their children spent more time relaxing, on the computer, and out with friends than possible in Vietnam. However, they said that they came to understand the opportunities and rigor of the Excel HS education over time.

One explanatory factor for the high ELL math achievement at Excel HS is that the material in US high school math is redundant to what Vietnamese students learned by the end of middle school in Vietnam. Therefore, as one alumna explained, “The difficulty level...of what twelfth graders have to study over here is only the same level as a ninth grader in Vietnam.” Without the need to learn more content in science and math, the students had more time and energy to spend on learning English.

Many Vietnamese ELL students absorbed their families’ high academic expectations. Teachers and guidance counselors described the ELL students as “hardworking, focused, and disciplined.” They said that the ELL students had great attendance and were “aggressive (in a good way) about moving up in their [ESL] classes” (Student Development Counselor).

Teachers’ Appreciation of ELL Students’ Background and Experiences

While only two staff members in the school are Vietnamese, the teaching staff at the school displays cultural competence in its respect for Vietnamese culture, students, and families. In addition, according to the former Principal, the majority were immigrants and spoke a language besides English. Teachers showed interest in and awareness of students’ culture, particularly their academic experiences. Many of the teachers interviewed described individual interactions with students, where they learned about ELL students’ backgrounds, like how much math they had learned before they came to the states, their religions, their families’ attitudes toward education, typical Vietnamese parent-child relationships, typical Vietnamese teacher-student relationships, the difference between rural and urban education in Vietnam, and views on the Vietnam War. One ILT teacher said, “The students are wonderful teachers about their culture.” Clearly, teachers demonstrated curiosity and appreciation for their students’ experiences and viewpoints.

Alumni students talked about how accessible and welcoming teachers were:

Teachers here, especially the ESL teachers, [are] really helpful, and they’re willing to stay after school.... If you have any questions, and it’s not really about schooling, but if you have a problem at home you can also talk to them. In Vietnam, the relationship between a teacher and a student is really strict.... We really don’t communicate at all. But here, they’re more like our friends instead of teachers, so it’s easier to talk to them if you have any questions.

– Alumna



**Excerpt from Cultural Competence Workshop:
Student Generated Teaching Tips for ELL Students
(Vache, 2008)**

What advice do you have for mainstream education teachers who have FLEPs in their classes?

- They should call on them more and check for understanding.
- They may not adapt to the new culture, so take time to explain it to them.
- Offer after school help.
- Encourage them to speak more. Tell them that the more they practice the better their English will be.
- Go easy on the first two semesters in terms of grammar because they are new. This will give them confidence that they can do it.
- Give them extra homework such as vocabulary worksheets.

Teachers understood that family engagement looks different in the Vietnamese culture. While American educators believe that family engagement includes attendance at school events, helping the student with homework, and communicating with teachers, Vietnamese culture and immigrant circumstances here in the US meant that family engagement looked very different. Many students do not necessarily live with their parents, and the adults in their lives typically work several jobs during all hours of the day. Many of these adults have limited English proficiency themselves. Both the LAT facilitator and the Vietnamese teachers knew details about each student, such as which family members spoke English, which used email, and the best times of day to call family members.

Besides knowing students' personal situations and something about the Vietnamese culture, the school also placed value on professional development that helped teachers learn more about the Vietnamese traditions and family expectations and understand the experiences of the Vietnamese students as teen immigrants and language learners. This two-part professional development workshop, which occurred during the study period, included presentations by the Vietnamese teachers themselves and then by the ELL teachers, led by the LAT facilitator. The staff experienced being taught in French and Mandarin, to put themselves in the position of hearing a lecture in a foreign language. They also learned about the theory of academic and social language acquisition, understood the school's ESL curriculum, and examined sample student work at different MEPA levels. The cultural competence professional development included student-generated tips for teachers about how to integrate ELL students with native English speakers, how to support ELL students and FLEP students in regular classes, common cultural assumptions and issues, and best ELL instructional strategies.



**Excerpt from Cultural Competence Workshop:
Common Grammar Mistakes (Vache, 2008)**

For one part of the workshop, teachers focused on learning about language acquisition. Teachers received written examples of common grammar mistakes that Vietnamese students make. They were encouraged to identify these mistakes when students made them. Researchers observed these corrections being made in ESL classes.

| GRAMMAR STRUCTURE | Language Transfer Issues for Native Speakers of Vietnamese | Sample Transfer Error |
|---|--|---|
| present and past perfect irregular past participles | Avoidance of present perfect where it should be used. | I live here for two years. |
| passive voice of past and present continuous | Omission of helping verb be in passive voice. | The food finished. |
| regular nouns: count, non-count and collective | No distinction between count and non-count nouns | I eat cereals for breakfast. |
| a few/few, a little/little, too much | Omission of plural marker -s. | I have a few book. |
| relative pronouns | No relative pronouns | Look at the backpack is on the floor. = Look at the backpack which is on the floor. |
| interrogative pronouns: who, what, when, which, how + clauses in object positions | Omission of relative pronouns | My grandfather was a generous man helped everyone. |

C Conclusions and Lessons for Other Schools

Case studies have the advantages of providing multiple perspectives on a context or organization, rich description of practice, and information for discussion and learning. The story of Excel HS is unique to Excel HS, not only because it is the only high school in the district with a Vietnamese SEI program, but also because of its history, players, and circumstances. This case study described the following practices that may be “tried on” by other schools through adaptation and refinement to their own contexts.

School leadership had both long-term vision and implementation capacity

The groundwork for the school’s success for ELL students took leadership with a clear mission and vision and the capacity to hire staff who are aligned with the mission and vision. The adult culture in the building is one of teamwork and collaboration. While the LAT facilitator herself exhibited responsibility for all ELL students in the building, she also led the school faculty in learning the practices necessary at the classroom level to ensure ELL success through professional development in category training, language objectives training, and learning about Vietnamese culture and language acquisition. Implications of these findings for school leaders include:

- The patience and planning it takes to build the buy-in for a culture of high academic expectations
- Staffing that can take on the multiple roles that an LAT facilitator plays, especially when she is also a teacher
- Qualified ESL and SEI teachers, not necessarily of the same cultural background as the students
- Commitment to professional development structures and time to build teacher capacity

There was a relentless focus on high-quality instructional practices and support for teachers to use them

The interviews provided a lens into ELL instruction, and the observations confirmed what the teachers said about the thought put into developing curriculum and the consistency of instruction across classrooms. Given the approximate three-year trajectory between their Vietnamese students’ entrance to American schools and mainstream classrooms, the staff paid close attention to a smooth transition by exposing ELL students to native English speakers and regular curriculum throughout their ELL careers. In addition, they used evidence-based classroom strategies such as variety of teaching modes, student groupings across English proficiency levels, materials, and assessments to ensure language acquisition. This school’s consistent implementation of high-quality curriculum and instructional practices for ELL students has implications for other schools:

- The need for ELA standards aligned ESL curriculum and the support and resources for teachers to use it
- The dedicated meeting time during the school day for teacher teams to work collaboratively on instructional improvement

Teachers provided multiple opportunities to acquire English proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening

In addition to teachers, school staff such as the guidance counselor and the career specialist paid close attention to the choices of ELL students in their out-of-school time. The Principal developed an array of opportunities after school that are still running, which provide academic support as well as opportunities to interact with English fluent peers beyond the school day. Teachers also ensure that students avail themselves of summer opportunities, since they are aware of the learning loss that takes place when ELL students stay in their own language isolated communities. Implications of these findings include:

- Resources for teachers to design and conduct afterschool clubs and activities as enrichment for ELL students

- The staff or networking capacity that identifies summer learning opportunities that are of interest to ELL students
- Recruitment strategies to ensure that more ELL and other students pursue out-of-school time learning opportunities

The school staff demonstrated respect for and understanding of ELL students' culture and language

The school staff, while almost exclusively non-Vietnamese, have prioritized and devoted a great deal of time to professional development that supports ELL learning. In addition, staff have the attitude of respect for and interest in their ELL students' culture. Not only do they engage students in conversations about their traditions and families' expectations, they also ask for their advice on how best to teach ELL students.

As an SEI Language Specific school, Excel HS has the advantage of being a haven for Vietnamese newcomers, who can translate for each other and share stories about their transitions. Their similar experiences in the Vietnamese education system include a reverence for teachers and the opportunities that education provides. Given the strong science and math background knowledge that most Vietnamese ELL students come to the US with, their focus in school is on the acquisition of English, which may explain some of their success. However, their rapid acquisition of English and their improved attainment of MCAS proficiency in ELA suggest that the school has created an excellent educational experience that bears out in the case study. The climate of embracing its newcomer students has implications for other schools:

- SEI Language Specific programs may have an advantage over SEI Multilingual programs because they focus more resources on understanding one culture and language
- An SEI Language Specific program, implemented with quality, allows students and teachers to use L1 strategically without hindering the acquisition of English
- In the case of Excel HS, it appeared that the staff's welcoming and learning attitude toward the ELL students and their culture and language mitigated the fact that the staff of the school did not reflect the major ELL ethnic group.

- Understanding the major language groups and their educational expectations, both from the families and of the schools, is important to tailoring SEI programs to student needs.
- More research should be conducted to understand the experiences of ELL students in an SEI Language Specific program school who are not from the dominant ELL language group.

In summary, this case study of Excel HS illustrates the key elements in one school's journey of improving the learning of its ELL students. The vision, commitment, and hard work, led by strong leaders who put structures in place that facilitated the improved culture and instruction in the school, resulted in the school being identified as the one of two high schools in Boston showing steady improvement with its ELL students.

²⁹ Other newcomers attend BPS's Newcomer Academy.

³⁰ The data on teacher qualifications come from the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/teacherdata.aspx).

³¹ Further research on the mobility of LEP students is necessary to determine the cause of this unusually high rate and was beyond the scope of this study.

³² The Principal during the study period was promoted in SY2011 to a central office role, and an interim Principal was placed at the school for one year. Since the data were collected for this case study, a new permanent Principal has begun her leadership there. This Principal will preside over a larger high school which combines Excel HS with Monument HS, which shares the building.

³³ An Instructional Leadership Team is a representative body of school staff that meets regularly during the school year to facilitate communication and decision-making school-wide.

³⁴ For an explanation of the timing of the case study (SY2011) compared to the study years (SY2006-SY2009), see the Appendix with Methods.

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