




PEER REVIEW SUMMARY

English Language Learners (ELL)

Since it was founded, Seattle has attracted people from all over the world. As a result, Seattle Public Schools has long served **English Language Learners (ELLs)** who speak a variety of different languages and have wide variations in skill.

During the 2005–2006 school year, for example, 23 percent of Seattle students were classified as ELLs, compared with 9 percent nationally. Of these students, approximately 25 percent spoke Spanish, followed by Vietnamese, Cantonese, Tagalog and Somali.

To serve these students and their families, Seattle offers ELL programs in 56 schools, operates a **Bilingual Family Center** for enrollment and provides one secondary and three elementary **Bilingual Orientation Centers** for students who are new to the United States or have very limited English.



Seattle Public Schools has completed a number of academic and operations **peer reviews**. These reviews, which have been performed by national experts, show us what we are doing well and point out how we can improve.

The recommendations from each peer review will inform the district's strategic planning process, so that changes and improvements to individual programs will advance our overall vision for the future.

THE REVIEWERS

The ELL study was conducted by a team from the **Council of the Great City Schools**. The Council, which was founded in 1956, is a coalition of 66 of the nation's largest urban public school systems. The Council supports member districts with research, communications, curriculum and management assistance and has conducted nearly 150 instructional, management and operational reviews over the last several years. For the ELL review, the Council assembled a team of curriculum and instruction leaders from other major urban school districts with diverse student populations.

SUMMARY

The review team commended SPS leaders on their willingness to improve and enhance services for ELL students and noted that Seattle has an unprecedented opportunity to develop world-class ELL services in line with Seattle's status as an international center. However, they expressed concern about a number of areas, including the fact that approximately 43 percent of ELL students do not currently receive bilingual services, instruction across the district is uneven and unequal, and achievement levels of ELL students have declined in recent years.

Following a detailed assessment, the review team made recommendations in 12 areas, ranging from program design to curriculum to compliance. Overarching all the recommendations in individual areas, however, was the team's suggestion that Seattle rethink and redesign its ELL services to:

- Develop an aligned districtwide curriculum that decreases the use of the English as a Second Language (ESL) pull-out model and

replaces it with a Sheltered English-plus (Content ESL) model, along with dual language immersion programs designed to improve students' academic achievement.

- Reconfigure Bilingual Orientation Centers to make programs more accessible to students and their families and to provide better transition and graduation opportunities for students.
- Develop a districtwide dual language program open to all students to reflect Seattle's status as an international gateway city.

STUDY METHODS

The review team visited Seattle twice during early 2008. They **observed** classes in 100 classrooms in 14 schools, **reviewed** documents and ELL curriculum materials and **met** with teachers, instructional assistants, principals and district leaders. The final report was presented in August 2008.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The review team studied 12 different areas of ELL programs. They made recommendations in each area:

LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGIC DIRECTION:

The team praised Seattle's leadership and board policy but expressed concern that Seattle has no clear vision or strategy for ELL programs and no clear mechanism for reporting progress to the school board. The team recommended that SPS leaders set a clear direction for ELL programs and incorporate that direction into implementation of the strategic plan.

Findings & Recommendations (cont'd)

GOALS AND ACCOUNTABILITY: The team noted that Seattle's achievement gap goals have historically been expressed in terms of race and income rather than language barriers. Team members recommended that SPS set clear academic achievement targets by language group and review schools regularly. This recommendation is consistent with the performance management strategies articulated in the strategic plan.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND DELIVERY SYSTEM: The team expressed concern about low achievement levels among ELL students and noted that the district's current ELL model does not focus on academic achievement. The team recommended that SPS develop a citywide, differentiated ELL program with clear goals. In particular, team members recommended that SPS decrease use of its current ESL pull-out model and move to a Sheltered English-plus (Content ESL) model in neighborhood schools, along with dual language magnet programs at select locations.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION: The team praised the interest of SPS leaders in ELL curriculum but noted that current curriculum materials are ad hoc and not well aligned with state standards. The team recommended that SPS establish a coherent and aligned districtwide curriculum and provide guidance to teachers and instructional assistants on how to supplement textbooks for ELL students. The team recommended that SPS focus first on ELL math and reading instruction due to the need to prepare students to perform on statewide assessment exams.

DATA AND ASSESSMENT: The team noted that data about ELL students is isolated from data on the rest of the student population, which makes it difficult to track student progress after they transition out of an ELL program. The team recommended that SPS develop a districtwide mechanism to store data on ELL

students, focusing on tracking test scores and students' time in ELL programs.

STUDENT PLACEMENT: The team expressed concern that Seattle's student assignment plan often results in long travel times and limited predictability for ELL students. They also noted that families of ELL students must complete forms at two different locations (including the Bilingual Family Center) to receive services. They suggested that ELL services be made more easily accessible and spread more widely through the district.

HUMAN CAPITAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: In this area, the team recommended that SPS examine ELL staffing ratios from other districts to consider increasing its own number of bilingual education teachers and that it provide more training and guidance to principals, teachers and instructional assistants.

INSTRUCTIONAL ASSISTANTS: Team members noted that instructional assistants can be a valuable part of an ELL program. They suggested that instructional assistant duties should be clearly divided between teaching and translating.

BILINGUAL ORIENTATION CENTERS: The team noted that Seattle's existing centers often result in long travel times for students and provide limited support for students transitioning from the center to other schools. The team recommended that the current structure be redesigned to provide elementary instruction within sample neighborhood schools, a grade six to eight bilingual program located at a middle school, and a secondary level international high school, from which students can accumulate credits and graduate. They recommended that the district develop a clear transition process to transition from the centers to other schools and focus on enhancing academics for ELL students.

Findings & Recommendations (cont'd)

PARENTS AND COMMUNITY: The team commended Seattle's efforts to reach out to families throughout Seattle. They noted, however, that many families have a limited understanding of the services that are available and recommended that SPS continue its efforts to reach out to diverse communities.

FUNDING AND ALLOCATION OF DOLLARS: The team recommended that SPS redouble its efforts to secure and coordinate available local, state and federal funding for ELL programs.

COMPLIANCE: In line with its overall recommendations, the team suggested that SPS develop a new staff handbook that would focus on enhanced academic rigor as well as full compliance with federal law and state standards.



NEXT STEPS

The English Language Learner peer review was carried out as part of the **Seattle Public Schools' strategic planning process**. The strategic plan, "Excellence for All," has been developed to help the school district strengthen academic achievement for all students by allowing us to assess where we are now, develop a list of priorities for improvement and then take action. The strategic plan was adopted by the school board in June 2008 and will be carried out over the next several years.

Photographs © 2008 Susie Fitzhugh.