

Common Core & ELLs

LESSONS FROM MIAMI

By Katherine Leal Unmuth

More than 70,000 English-language learners attended the Miami-Dade County Public Schools last year—making up one of the largest ELL student populations in the nation.

Additionally, more than half of the nearly 350,000 students enrolled in the district report speaking Spanish as their primary language at home, and more than 16,000 students say their primary language is Haitian Creole.

As the Common Core State Standards are phased in, the district must plan for how to modify instruction for its sizable population of students whose first language is not English.

Miami-Dade's language arts and bilingual education departments are working together closely to prepare for the ongoing shift to more rigorous standards for reading and writing. The new common core standards are more rigorous than Florida's existing standards, and the forthcoming exams are also expected to be more difficult than the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Last year, Miami-Dade rolled out the common core standards in kindergarten and first grade. This year, the phase-in expanded to the second and third grades. Pacing guides provided to teachers have portions highlighted in yellow describing how to adapt instruction for English learners.

"Whatever we're doing for English-language-speaking students, we adapt for ELLs," said Karen Spigler, who was the administrative director over reading/language arts, bilingual education and world languages last year. "We have a very strategic way in which we expose teachers and students to it."

The district also held professional development sessions over the summer that covered how the common core will impact English learners. The four-day sessions were attended by 200 elementary and secondary teachers from the English for Speakers of Other Languages program.

Challenges Ahead

Diane August, a senior research scientist at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C., is working on implementation of common core standards with a number of districts throughout the country.

"This is something new, and we're all trying to figure out how best to do this," she said. "It's going to require a lot of professional development."

August said districts should consider strategies such as having ESL specialists work closely with core content teachers, who may not be familiar with ELL strategies. In addition, she said that professional development involving modeled lessons are the most effective, as are professional learning communities.

Miami-Dade administrators are still working on determining what training events will be held during the school year to address the topic.

The staff development over the summer emphasized the importance of text complexity and close, analytical reading. Under the new standards, students will have to tie vocabulary they learn to the readings.

Training included sample questions that could be asked of ELLs about a text: Is this a fiction or nonfiction piece? Can you retell this story? Why are you reading this piece – for information or enjoyment?

"We are modeling for the teachers how to make the instruction very explicit and very concrete," said Beatriz Pereira, executive director of bilingual education and world languages. "The standards are extremely high."

Raising the Bar

In the past, after reading a story, very young children may have been asked to recall details like the color of a hat a character was wearing. Now they will be asked deeper questions that require them to go back to the text.

Curriculum support specialists such as Alina Plasencia will be visiting classrooms to help teachers with applying the new standards.

"You always have to have the ESOL support and that has a lot more hands-on activities and visuals," she said. "Not only are they learning to read – they're learning the language."

Plasencia expects that new tests tied to the common core will require students to compare and analyze texts, rather than answer multiple-choice questions and respond to simple writing prompts.

At the secondary level, Miami-Dade is providing language arts teachers examples of "exemplar" lessons, urging them to teach one per quarter.

Given the massive size of the Miami-Dade school system, other efforts are under way within smaller learning communities.

Christine Dahnke-Onwuemene, an instructional supervisor for ELLs, works in the district's Education Transformation Office. The office oversees 60 of the district's lowest-performing schools.

The office has held general common core trainings, in which ELL issues are addressed. ESOL teachers from all the campuses also are periodically brought together to work through sample lessons, so they're not working in isolation.

"They're noticing that the common core standards are not something scary," →

Dahnke-Onwuemene said.

The transformation office is emphasizing to teachers that they can still focus on vocabulary with English-language learners, despite an emphasis on having students grapple with texts on their own. At the 60 transformation schools, teachers are being encouraged to select texts that reflect students' cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the campuses are partnering with Discovery Education, which will provide live video streaming to enhance classroom instruction. The students will also work with a Discovery educator to create technology projects.

Moving Toward Mastery

In the nearby Broward County Public Schools, the district plans on holding monthly professional development events and webinars during the year addressing the common core.

Jenna Moniz, an ESOL education specialist in Broward, said the district is stressing that students closely read texts. Taking more time with reading is actually a strategy with which ESOL teachers are already familiar.

The common core requires mastering standards in reading, writing, speaking and listening – areas that ESOL teachers have always addressed to move students toward proficiency.

"ELL teachers have always had to slow down the pace, chunk the text, and take their time to make sure the language of the text is clear to students," Moniz said. "The idea of a close read in itself, one could make the argument, has always been a strategy."

Teachers will encourage students to search for similarities in root words and to ask themselves whether they know the words in their first language, for example. Teachers also will ask students to visualize what they are reading and to take notes while they are reading.

"We're making much more of a conscientious effort that planning for English-language learners is incorporated into all teachers' plans," Moniz said. "Our ELLs are everywhere, not just in sheltered ESOL classes."

Teachers are still learning what the standards will mean for them. Mari Corugedo, chair of the Hispanic Educators Committee of the United Teachers of Dade, attended Miami-Dade's professional development training during the summer prior to the start of the 2012-13 academic year. She teaches second graders at Jack D. Gordon Elementary School in Miami. Her students are a mix of English-language learners and students who are proficient in English.

Corugedo and the other teachers took part in

hands-on sessions, including creating response journals and developing activities.

"There's a need to provide more meaningful professional development," Corugedo said. "It has to be more modeling."

Corugedo likes that the standards have an approach that favors in-depth work with one text, rather than worksheets. But she's also worried that with budget cuts, students aren't getting enough language support and that recent changes to the state's accountability system could lead to a "sink or swim" approach.

The Florida Department of Education recently changed the state accountability system to grade ELLs by the same standards as English-proficient children and to include ELLs' performance in school ratings. The state also began counting the performance of English-language learners who have been in the country more than a year. Previously, districts were not required to count the performance of students until they had been in the country at least two years. The state's decision stirred protests from Miami-Dade officials.

"The common core is great because it allows students more different ways to get to that higher-order thinking," Corugedo said. "However, that language acquisition and transition has to be there."

Secondary Teachers Cautious

Secondary teachers in core subject areas also face challenges.

Gustavo Rivera, a U.S. history teacher at Miami Springs High School, teaches a course to other teachers after school about culture, equity and language. He believes more high school teachers need to be familiar with language acquisition theory to implement the common core's content area literacy standards.

"The common core standards for ELLs sound great," he said. "It's all very nice until you get to the area of application. How do you apply them? That, to me, is the most worrisome."

However, Miami-Dade district officials stress that they are gradually phasing changes in. Part of the ongoing challenge for educators is to predict how the common core standards will affect the ELL population, and how to best ready those students for the new expectations. And it's difficult to prepare for a test that no one has yet seen.

"We're in a transition period right now," said Plasencia, the curriculum support specialist. "Little by little, we're going to start exposing the students to this and supporting them along the way."

Further Resources

Color in Colorado

http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/common_core/

The Council of Great City Schools

<http://www.cgcs.org/domain/72>

Learning the Language/ Education Week blog

<http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/>

Miami-Dade Common Core Resources

<http://languageartsreading.dade-schools.net/commoncore.asp>

New Journalism on Latino Children

www.latinodbeat.org

Story Starters

www.storystarters.org

Understanding Language

<http://ell.stanford.edu/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherine Leal Unmuth

Dallas-based freelance education writer Katherine Leal Unmuth writes about education for both regional and national publications, and contributes to EWA's Latino Ed Beat blog. She was previously an education reporter for the Dallas Morning News.

COMMISSIONED BY:

NATIONAL
EWA
Education Writers Association

AS PART OF:

