



The Changing Face of Students: Meeting Language, Academic, and Social Needs of Recent Immigrant Youth

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Abstract

Relocation across national borders poses unique challenges and possibilities to newcomer immigrant students. As they enter new schools, newcomer students face a number of challenges in their adjustment. School districts across the country have developed special schools or programs designed to meet their language, academic, and social needs. This paper describes the efforts of one suburban district in the St. Louis area to meet the needs of newcomers by opening a new International Welcome Center.

Keywords: newcomers, school districts, immigrant students, education

Introduction

In 2015, the Ritenour School District located in St. Louis, Missouri opened the Ritenour International Welcome Center (IWC) to meet the needs of English Language learners (ELLs), particularly newcomer students. Based on the U.S. Department of Education (2016), a newcomer is defined as “any foreign-born students and their families who have recently arrived in the United States” (p. 1). Newcomers have unique needs and need more support with English language acquisition. In the regular program, ELLs would receive one to two classes with a certified ELL teacher, but at the IWC, the majority of the classes are with a certified ELL teacher. The focus of each class is language acquisition through content along with scaffolded support. The goal of IWC is to serve newcomer students who need intensive support with accelerated English language acquisition, an introduction to the U.S. culture and school system, and exposure to educational expectations and opportunities. In addition, IWC supports and helps parents, guardians, and families navigate the school district and community.

Prior to the start of the IWC, Ritenour School District had been experiencing increasing numbers of newcomers from Spanish-speaking countries, particularly Central America. Although the number of ELLs did not change, the type of ELL coming into the district changed. In addition to the changing population, the graduation rate for ELLs was less than 50%. In order to serve the needs of the changing population of students, the IWC was created. The IWC is comprised of teachers, counselors, social workers, administrators and parents all working together to address language, academic, and social needs (see Figure 1). A team of dedicated bilingual staff members, including an ELL lead teacher, math teacher, and bilingual teacher assistant, assist with academics and language development. Meanwhile, counselors and social workers assist with social needs as described later in this article.

In order to attend the IWC, the student must reside in the Ritenour School District. During

enrollment, families are asked about the child’s English level and a screener test is given to identify the student’s level in English in the domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. If a student scores in the lower range of the examination, he or she is placed at the IWC. Due to space restrictions at the high school, the IWC is located at one of the middle schools and students are bused to that location. After students reach a certain level of English as demonstrated on the state examination and through classroom assignments, he or she is then transferred to the high school to complete his or her studies. Prior to the transfer, a meeting is held with the family, student, counselor, principal, and teachers from both the IWC and the high school. This is to ensure a smooth and successful transition to the new school.

This paper describes the initial strategies used within the IWC to support students’ language, academic, and social needs. Because the IWC has been mostly comprised of Spanish-speaking immigrant students, instructors adapted dual-language strategies while teaching content to better provide for the educational needs of students with limited proficiency in English. In this case, dual-language strategies means that Spanish in addition to English is used in the instruction of grade-level content material. In addition to academics, students have participated in group and individual therapy, offered in Spanish and English, to assist with social/emotional needs. Finally, a parent liaison and social worker support students and families. Families have access to these resources and can call on them at any time when a need arises. Based on the work at the IWC, best practices were discovered to support specific language, academic, and social needs of recent immigrant students.

Language Needs

During the first year of its existence, the IWC was mostly comprised of Spanish-speaking immigrant students, so instructors adapted dual-language strategies while teaching content to better provide for the educational needs of students with limited profi-

ciency in English. It was determined that teaching in both the language used at home and the language of instruction best served newcomer students. Instructors integrated dual-language strategies, language, and literacy development with subject teaching to promote English. For example, in science and math classes, the content was taught in both English and Spanish simultaneously. The teacher would deliver the content in English, which the teacher's aide would translate during the lesson. Students are allowed to answer in class through Spanish or English. As students become more fluent, they are encouraged to speak in English. This was integrated with bilingual teaching aides, bilingual working groups, and individual translation devices. For many of the students, bilingualism opened up additional opportunities for their educational and civic development.

Throughout the summer program offered at the IWC, students had an opportunity to practice English through authentic experiences with teachers and peers. At the same time, they got to know the resources offered in the community. For example, once a week, students visited the local library to check out books (written in English) and participate in reading programs. Students also used public transportation in order to get to various places around the city. Students reported that the summer program allowed them to take risks in a controlled environment with their teachers next to them to help them through the new situations. This scaffolding can alleviate fears and allow students to take risks comfortably (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Academic Needs

Like any student, newcomers are responsible for meeting high academic standards; however, they face challenges with this. They are required to take all of the state assessments and perform to the standard before they have mastered the language. Not only are they learning the English language, but they are also learning academic content in a new language. IWC was designed with flexibility and differs from mainstream classrooms in class size, curriculum, and teaching style. Class sizes range

from 10-20 students with a teacher and teacher's aide in each class. The main teacher is ELL certified and has extensive experience in working with ELLs. The only exception to this is when students go to exploratory classes such as physical education, music, health, etc. These classes are with the mainstream population, so there are no ELL teachers and class sizes range from 20-30 students. Since a majority of the students at the IWC had interrupted or inadequate schooling, which created a gap in their academic knowledge, students at the IWC participate in extended time in literacy and math. Specifically, math lessons are taught each day using whole group, small group, and one-on-one activities, with extended time for monitored practice using books and technology. This allows the teachers to take time and explain the lesson fully with many examples and practice time to support a diverse group of students.

Meanwhile, literacy instruction is based around the individualized needs of each student in order to support the current literacy level (Short and Boyson, 2012). Literacy classes have 10 students or less so that the teachers can focus on specific needs of each student. This also provides time for students to share misunderstandings and participate in a smaller class discussion. Students enjoy the smaller classes because they feel less intimidated and more supported. During literacy time, students read, write, listen, and speak through cooperative learning experiences. Students typically read a novel or story, discuss it with their partner, and write responses. Partners are matched according to literacy levels with one partner slightly above the other. The partners take turns practicing leadership roles. Writing is adapted for the learner as well. Depending on the student, some may choose to show their response in a picture instead of through words.

In order to provide continued academic support outside of the classroom, students at the IWC are offered homework help after school in which teachers help students with their homework. This time is important because most of the family members do not speak English and many have not been to high school. This time is offered three times a week, free of charge, including transportation. Some students

are required to attend the additional program after school and some were given the option, depending on the level of need.

Social Needs

In addition to language and academic needs, newcomers have various social and emotional needs. Some newcomers have faced some sort of trauma or violence before arriving to the United States. Teachers and program staff need to be aware of the signs and symptoms of trauma in order to help support students (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2016). Even if students have not faced some trauma before their arrival, adjusting to new family members, a new culture, new language, new food, etc. takes a toll on the human psyche. In order to meet these needs, the IWC employs counseling agencies to offer individualized and group therapy. Services are offered in families' home languages and in a culturally sensitive and linguistically competent environment. Parents/guardians are able to access free counseling for their families as well as sign consent for their students to participate in group art therapy. Art therapy is offered once a week in a small group where students are guided through discussion while creating art. The discussions may range from fitting in with new family members to talking about their journeys to the United States.

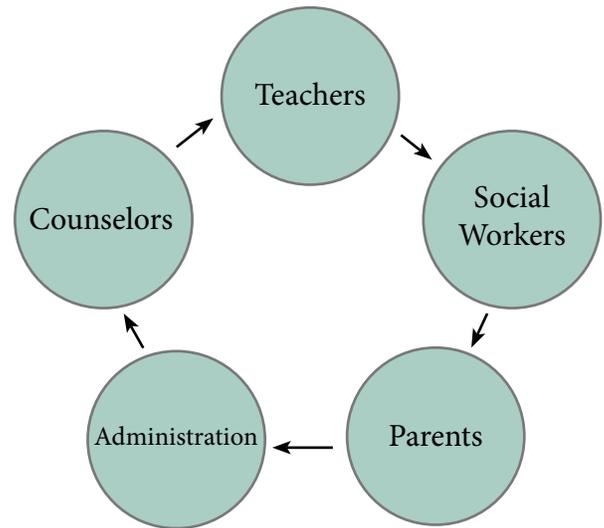
Conclusion

School districts are facing new challenges with increased numbers of newcomers. Students sometimes find themselves in settings that may be completely unfamiliar on multiple levels. It is often that the quality of schooling newcomers receive depends on the capacity of the community in which they reside. The Ritenour School District located in St. Louis, Missouri, opened the Ritenour International Welcome Center (IWC) in 2015 to meet the needs of English Language learners (ELLs), particularly newcomer students. Newcomer immigrant students need to be able to navigate high school strategically, so IWC was created to ensure they maxi-

mize their time effectively from the very first day. At IWC, attention is given to immediate language, academic, and social needs to holistically support newcomer immigrant students.

As newcomer enrollment rises and newcomer programs multiply, concrete steps must be taken to assure that school districts and communities, like Ritenour, safeguard the educational rights of immigrant students and meet their needs. Moving forward, school districts, educators, and communities must be vigilant in recognizing and meeting the changing needs of all students, particularly recent immigrant students, and to share the fruit of a solid education.

Figure 1: International Welcome Center (IWC) Framework



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