

Testimony

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Good Afternoon.

I am testifying this morning to give insight to the Legislative Pupil Weighting Task Force on the resources needed to provide evidence-based high quality instruction for students for whom English is not their home language. They are English Learners because their first or home language is not English, but given that the majority of the educational program is primarily offered in English, attaining language proficiency while fulfilling other educational expectations is key to their educational success in Vermont and the rest of the United States of America. At this point in time, we are not in a position to even consider first-language maintenance or enrichment because despite our best efforts, our resources are currently exhausted to provide the most critical services related to second language acquisition and general goal attainment. We continue to invest in these efforts because it is the right thing to do, but not everything is within our power.

I grew up in Danville, Vermont, and attended Danville Schools in first grade through graduation from high school. (I dropped out of private kindergarten.) I went on to the University of Vermont, receiving my Bachelor's Degree in Education in 1992, and then

in 2007 I was fortunate to earn my Master's Degree from Johnson State College. In 2016 I completed a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study (CAGS) in School Leadership from Saint Michael's College. Most recently, in 2020, I completed the Snelling Center for Government's Vermont School Leadership Project. I give you this information to share with you that, compared to my youth, Vermont is becoming even a more vibrant, exciting place to grow up. As a Vermonter, the key to my personal success has been an excellent grasp of the English language. The right to learn English is the key to academic and life success in America.

Fast forwarding through my 20 teaching years, I am now a Director of Teaching and Learning at the Milton Town School District. With our proximity to more linguistically diverse areas such as Winooski, a district receiving "primary migration" of immigrants, we are receiving some call "secondary migration": when I began my first year as Director of Teaching and Learning in 2015, there were only six designated English Learners in our district. Today there are 44 with the bulk of them being in the lower grades, which suggests a growing trend that will continue onto the upper grades over time. This may sound like a small number overall for now, but the growth has been quite exponential, and the implication for our district is immense. The number will only grow as families establish themselves and move outside of areas with robust public transportation.

I'd like to give you some context for the challenges facing schools with "Low Incidence" English As a Second Language (ESL). A Low Incidence school district is one in which the total percent of its English learners is less than 25% of all enrolled students (Honigsfeld, A., and Dove, M. 2017).

Milton Town School District is a Low Incidence school, and is also one of the most inclusive schools I know of. Inclusion can be defined as having all students in the “Least Restrictive Environment” as much as possible, and universalizing instruction and systems to ensure access to all students regardless of difference. We believe that all students have a right to be in a classroom with their grade level peers. At the same time Milton Elementary School is one of the largest elementary schools in the State of Vermont. We have six classrooms at each grade level. Picture six kindergarten classes, six first grade classes, and so on. We follow evidence-based practices for placement for both social emotional needs and for the academic needs of our students. This looks like placing students in small clusters so that they are not ELL singletons. At the same time, they are spread across six classrooms. You can imagine the logistical scheduling challenges. This continues through 11th grade, where we have a single ELL student receiving specialized services during a study hall, in addition to universal best practices in other courses. Whether we have students who are non-English monolingual or not (ie, only speak French), we do not believe it to be best practice to separate students out in an EL classroom for part of the day. In short, it is extremely difficult to maintain what is best for students, and to achieve any economy of scale.

In order to serve students, we feel that it is important to have the expertise of a consistent full-time teacher certified in TESOL, so we have worked toward that goal. In 2015, we had a .6 ELL teacher for an identified 12 students (up from 6). This position was made full-time in 2017 when we had approximately 22 ELL students. In 2020 we added an additional position due to numbers up to 54 ELL students. The growth in ELL students has been exponential in nature, and yet we still do not have the economy of scale that higher incidence schools have.

These teachers must not only work with students across 12 grade levels, but also provide ongoing training to other teachers on best practices within the general education classrooms, monitor registrations, coordinate scheduling, and coordinate and implement one-on-one WIDA testing each spring. In addition, they do extensive family outreach to ensure families are engaged in school in a meaningful way. This could include visiting places of work to bring forms and to help families fill them out. This means personal reminders for field trips. This also means working with our Child Nutrition Team to ensure that all of our students' varying religious freedoms are taken into account. COVID has exacerbated this outreach need as the confusing nature of immediate dismissals, mandatory absences, and testing protocols has created the need for more parent interaction.

These two full-time ELL teachers have a combined cost of \$161,098 for salaries and benefits, and then we spend an additional \$1000 for testing supplies. These costs do not include our overall efforts to purchase linguistically and culturally varied books and materials for all classrooms and the library. Additional costs include translation services, interpretation services, and other associated costs.

Please keep in mind that ONE family of Primary Migration would significantly impact our need for services, because this would entail providing support for both second language acquisition and ideally simultaneous first language maintenance. On any day of the school year, a new American family could move to Milton and influence the composition of our services immensely. We must have contingency plans in place. This means allowing for flexibility in the system. It means planning for growth and complexity beyond simple language acquisition, and taking it into consideration when budgeting in October

for the following school year. As in many situations, pupil weighting and the resulting funding is outdated the minute after it is calculated.

Given the complexity and continuously evolving nature of Vermonts' students' needs, my my recommendations for Low Incidence schools are to:

- Reconsider pupil weighting as a primary funding method, as the number of pupils can, and likely will in our changing world, vary widely. It is important to have a stable, flexible EL system in place to ensure that every school can serve all students well using best practices. Perhaps a base amount, to take into account the lack of economy of scale in some systems, should be considered.
- Either, require a basic TESOL class for every teacher in Vermont, or provide strong incentives for teachers to attain related certifications. For example, some states include a funding differential for districts based on the number of TESOL-endorsed teachers. This would decrease the economic pressure on individual systems and is an equitable way to ensure that every school is capable of serving EL students in a most basic way.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have, or to find the answers to your questions and get back to you.

Lynne Pekala Manley

Source:

Honigsfeld, A., and Dove, M., *Coteaching For English Learners: A Guide to collaborative planning instruction and assessment.*, Corwin., 2017.