

SREC: A New Tapestry of Collaboration in ELL Education

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This paper introduces a grassroots effort to harness the energies of community organizations, higher education, and k–12 to improve the education of English language learners in the Spokane region. The many catalysts leading to this collaboration are described. The Spokane Regional ESOL Consortium (SREC) takes a holistic approach to the education of the region's refugee and immigrant populations by organizational collaboration to advocate for English language learners (ELLs), bringing much-needed access and energy to all parties involved. This effort weaves the expertise of English language development (ELD) teachers in k–12 and adult classrooms, university teacher educators, and community organizations to create a new and empowered opportunity for education, advocacy, and research. Foundational work to date, methods for communication, and future steps are described. The paper provides an understanding of the importance of such collaboration and what it takes to bring together an educational community.

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SREC Mission Statement:

SREC is dedicated to collaborate through education, advocacy, and research to harness the energies of higher education, adult literacy, k–12 programs, and community organizations to improve the education of refugees and immigrants in the Spokane region.

Introducing SREC

The Spokane Regional ESOL Consortium (SREC) was established in May of 2015. This paper describes this new consortium in the Spokane community, which has formed in order to harness the energies of higher education, adult literacy, and k–12 programs, along with community organizations to improve the education of English language learners in the Spokane region. Located in Eastern Washington, about 20 miles from the Idaho border, the city of Spokane is the second largest city in the state, with a population of more than 210,000 people. While Spanish is the dominant language of English language learners (ELLs) in much of the state, the Spokane region's ELL population is highly diverse.

There has been a long tradition of refugee resettlement in the Spokane area going back to the 1970s with various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) taking the lead, including Washington Association of Churches, Catholic Charities, and, since 1992, World Relief, which resettles approximately 600 refugees each year in the Spokane area (M. Kadel, personal communication, September 24, 2015). From 2013 to April 2015, the Refugee Resettlement program at World Relief resettled 1,042 individuals in the Spokane area. Not drawing from just one area, the countries of origin for those resettled in Spokane closely parallels the countries of origin of refugees resettled throughout the United States.

Tables 1 and 2. *Comparison of Countries of Origin*

Country	Resettled in the United States in FY 2014	Country	Resettled by World Relief in Spokane 2013 – April 2015
Iraq	19,488	Burma	196
Burma	16,299	Iraq	144
Bhutan	9,134	DRC	116
Somalia	7,608	Sudan	97
Cuba	4,205	Afghanistan	96
DRC	2,563	Bhutan	55
Sudan	2,160	Cuba	48
Eritrea	1,824	Somalia	45
Afghanistan	661	Ukraine	33
Total	63,942	Other	212
		Total	1,042

Note: Adapted from M. Kadel, 2015.

Drawing heavily on first and second-generation refugees, the population of English language learners in the Spokane region's k–12 and adult literacy programs includes a wide range of home languages. In Spokane School District, more than 1,620 students representing more than 70 different home languages are qualified for English Language Development (ELD) support services, a 26% increase since 2010 (see Figure 1). Although not considered a refugee

group, the top language group in Spokane Schools, Marshallese, has experienced rapid increases over the past several years, recently replacing Russian as the top home language spoken by ELLs in the district.

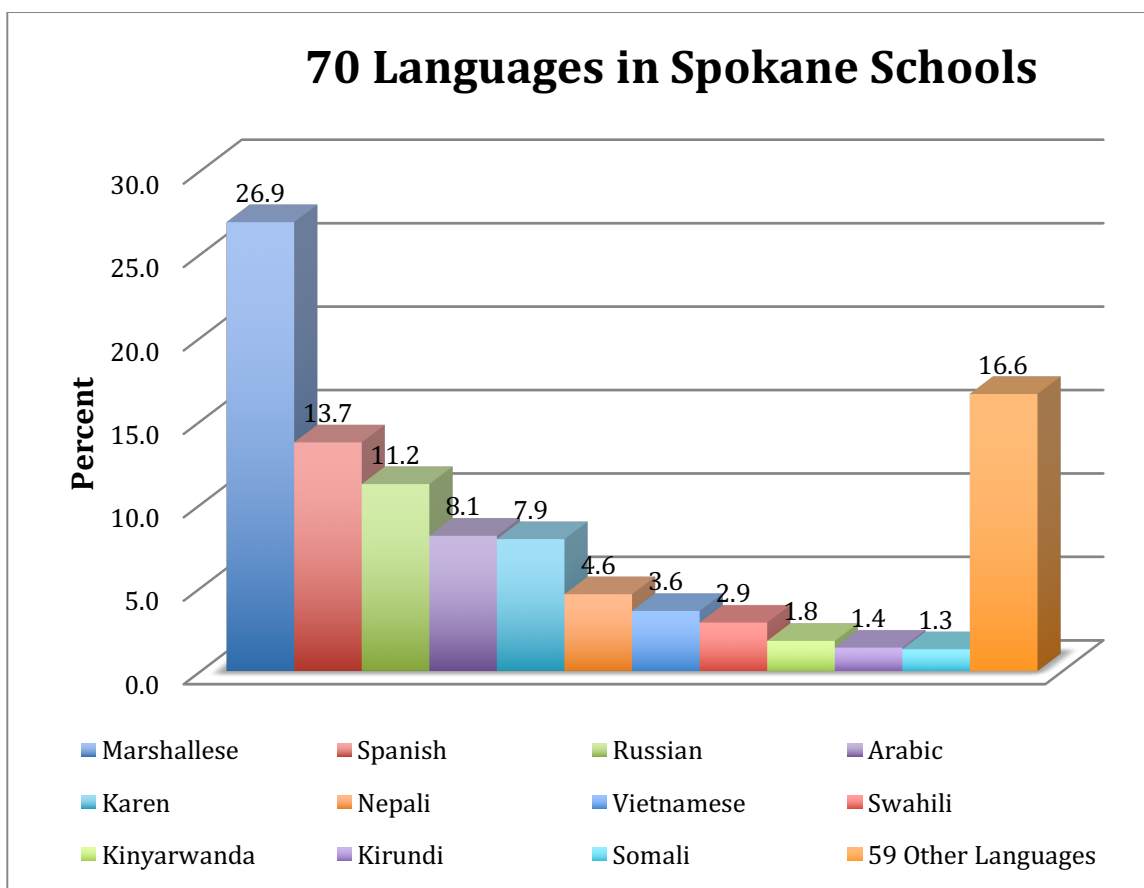
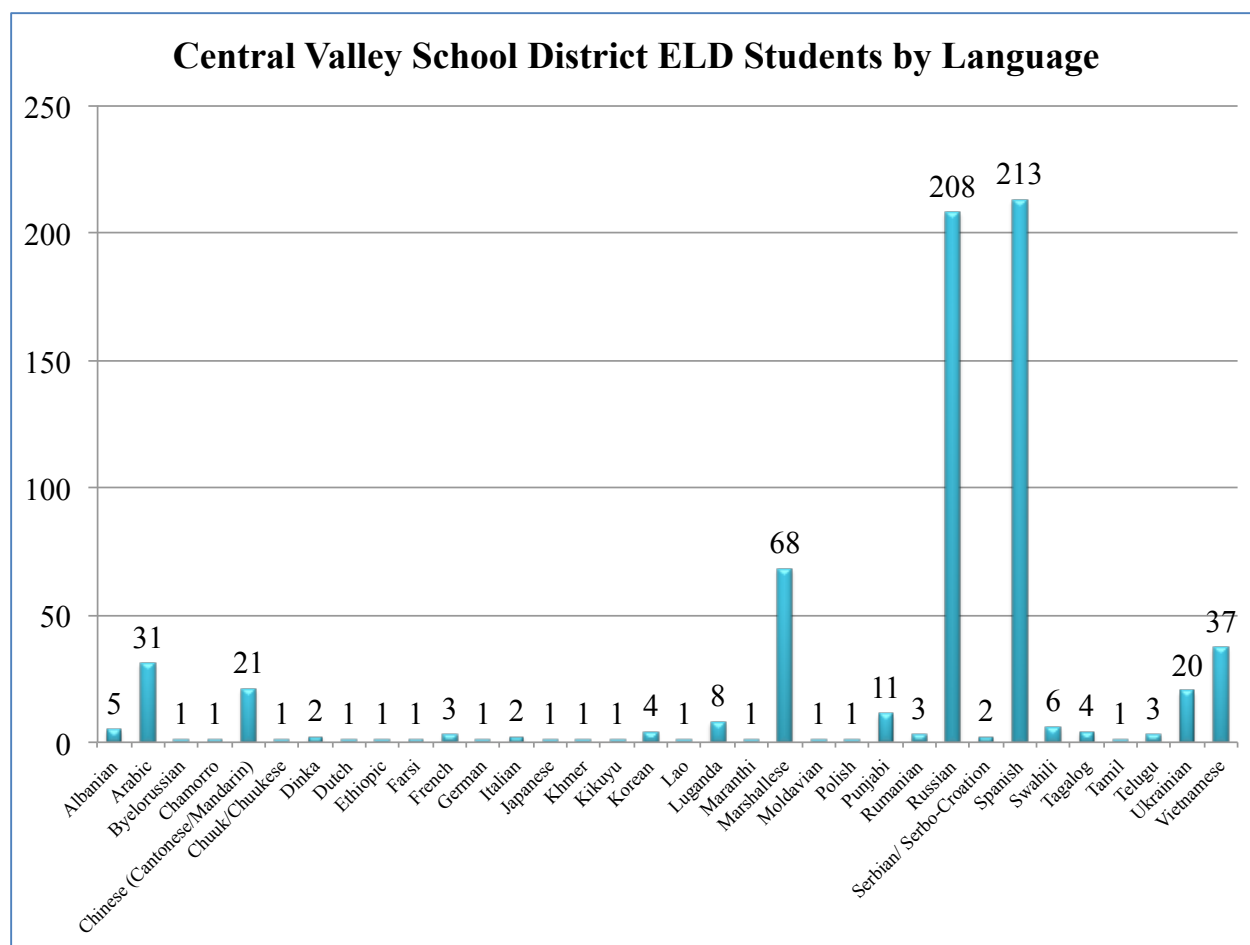


Figure 1. Languages of ELD students in Spokane schools as of January 2016. Adapted from Spokane Public Schools, 2016.

A neighboring school district in the Spokane Valley, Central Valley School District, has a similarly diverse population, counting 34 different languages among their 664 qualified ELLs in January of 2016 (see Figure 2). This is an 84% increase in the number of qualified ELLs since spring of 2014. As families become more established in the area, we often see languages shift away from the city of Spokane into the neighboring school districts. This is what is currently taking place with the Russian speaking population and is beginning to be observed with the growing number of Marshallese speakers in surrounding communities of the Spokane Valley. We see other examples of this shift in the small rural districts in the area, such as Reardan-Edwall, Freeman, and Deer Park, where there are growing communities of Russian and Ukrainian speakers.



*Figure 2. Languages of ELD students in Central Valley schools in January 2016.
Adapted from Central Valley School District, 2016.*

The adult basic education program at Spokane Community College provides English language instruction for the majority of adult refugee and immigrant community members in the region. In many cases, these are the parents and family members of the students in the k–12 programs. The countries of origin and range of languages of the ELLs in the Community Colleges of Spokane ESL program mirror those identified in the preceding discussion of Spokane and Central Valley school districts, with the additional languages of Dinka-Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, Dari, Amharic, Tigrinya, Karenni, Burmese, and Somali also identified in their top 25 languages. With referrals from the World Relief Spokane Refugee Resettlement program, many of the adult English language learners in the community college programs are refugees.

Over the past decade, there has been a strong increase in the number of students who do not possess literacy skills in their native language, often referred to as pre-literate or LFS (limited formal schooling) learners. Such a shift affects not only instruction of the adult and k–12 students themselves, but how communication is handled between the various instructional institutions and the families, as well as how support services are provided through state agencies and community organizations.

The Genesis of Our Collaboration

Perhaps other communities experience this phenomenon as well: each year at the regional conference in Spokane, ELL professionals, teachers, and administrators from across many institutions meet, see the potential for more collaborative work, state intentions to do so, and then return to their solo enterprises, only to repeat the ritual the following year. However, a culminating moment came for us in early 2015. Outside of the regional conference setting, stakeholders in higher education and k–12 began to wonder out loud if we could find a way to pool our energies and work in a unified way to improve the educational experiences of the ELLs in our community. We began to hear reports that others were expressing similar sentiments. At our first meeting, in May of 2015, Frank Newman, ELD instructor at Lewis and Clark High School, observed the synchronicity that became the catalyst for action (Spokane Regional ESOL Consortium, 2015).

With this catalyst, a couple of visionaries from k–12 and higher education sent out an invitation for a meeting to those like-minded leaders who they believed would both contribute to and benefit from such a collaboration. At the initial meeting, the following institutions were represented by either administrators, teachers, or community members: Spokane Public Schools, Central Valley School District, Eastern Washington University, Gonzaga University, Whitworth University, Community Colleges of Spokane, and World Relief. Throughout the meeting, energy built as people expressed needs that they could see in the community—and in their own institutions—that could be met through the efforts of a consortium.

Those consortium members involved in higher education pointed to a need for greater connection with current k–12 teachers and administrators in order to strengthen the instruction that they provide to pre-service teachers, noting that they wished to bring pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and learners together in ways that would truly benefit the ELL students. Anny Case, an education professor from Gonzaga University, suggested that the teacher preparation programs in the area work together, rather than in competition, when placing students in practicums and service learning assignments (Spokane Regional ESOL Consortium, 2015). By using the staggered semester and quarter schedules already inherent in the local institutions (along with adjustments to placement timelines), a smoother transition could take place for the teacher candidates. K–12 programming for ELLs would, likewise, benefit by eliminating inconsistent breaks in support provided by the pre-service programs.

As those in teacher preparation programs expressed their wishes for a closer connection to k–12, so did those teaching in the k–12 system. Julie Engeland, ELD teacher at Sacajawea Middle School, described the energizing and restorative effects that had resulted from the meaningful partnerships she had recently experienced between in-service and pre-service teachers and wished for more of these opportunities for herself and her colleagues (Spokane Regional ESOL Consortium, 2015). As we got a glimpse of the ways that the puzzle pieces fit together, it became clear that by forming a consortium we would be building a means by which various entities and individuals could come together to address the issues and concerns to improve the education of ELLs in the region.

Just as significantly, many in attendance at the May meeting expressed that the Spokane region seemed to lack a unified and consistent voice in the many policy decisions that impact the education of ELLs. Policy and planning at the state level often appear to be based on misperceptions of what our needs are thought to be. As described earlier, Spokane's ELL

population is somewhat unique to most of Washington State due to the region's large, highly diverse population of refugees and its increasingly large Marshallese population. Our particular challenges call for more focused advocacy to inform and communicate on behalf of those of us serving ELLs, as well as the learners themselves.

Our isolated discussions, which finally came together in that first meeting in 2015, led us to identify two key areas in which to focus our efforts: 1) to form enhanced, coherent, and sustainable connections between and within our educational communities, and 2) to voice Spokane regional needs in ELL-related public policy. Within these overarching categories, specific needs have emerged:

- Enhanced coherent and sustainable connections:
 - for resources and information for refugee/immigrant families.
 - between teacher preparation programs and the local k–12 systems.
 - between community organizations, k–12, adult literacy, and higher education.
- Voice Spokane regional needs in public policy:
 - to advocate for the unique student demographics of the region.
 - to support culturally and geographically diverse instructional needs.
 - to inform legislation and policy regarding ELL education.

Through discussion and deliberation, a clear consensus indicated our shared focus on education, advocacy, and research, resulting in the following mission statement:

SREC collaborates through education, advocacy, and research to harness the energies of higher education, adult literacy, k–12 programs, and community organizations to improve the education of refugees and immigrants in the Spokane region.

Meeting Our Unique Needs

As our mission statement makes clear, the primary goal for all of us involved in this newly formed consortium is to improve the education of English language learners in our community, particularly those who are choosing to make our community their home. Since many of the individuals at the table also teach in intensive English or international programs, it was important to the group that we specify the populations that we were seeking to serve through this effort; the consensus was clear that each of us was involved to focus on the education and support of the refugee and immigrant communities. We have identified the following five action teams to take advantage of the depth of expertise and the range of interests across the members of the consortium: 1) Pre-service Teacher Education, 2) In-service Professional Learning, 3) Community Engagement, 4) Policy and Advocacy, and 5) Transitions. The following sections feature an overview of each action team.

Pre-service Teacher Education and In-service Professional Learning. SREC members who work in pre-service teacher education identified some crucial needs in our community regarding how we are preparing future teachers of English language learners. Of utmost importance is the need for our teacher preparation programs to develop a tighter and more responsive connection between what teacher candidates are learning and experiencing in their coursework and the actual current and shifting needs of ELL students and teachers in our

area. In addition, a clear desire was voiced that our pre-service programs should take a far more active role in directly supporting ELLs in our community through service learning and experience beyond the requirements of their ELL practicum and student teaching. An example of such direct involvement includes the three teacher preparation programs involved in the consortium (Eastern Washington University, Gonzaga University, and Whitworth University) coming together to take advantage of their existing staggered schedules to place English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) teacher candidates. Merely by coordinating their efforts, an afterschool program for ELLs has been able to continue running an entire academic year rather than having to end when the pre-service teachers from one university finished their course requirements. Now, as one university course ends, another university is able to pick up the service. By coming together through SREC, the institutions have been able to provide authentic service learning to pre-service teachers and place the needs of ELLs firmly in the middle of the page, rather than on the margins.

Furthermore, there has been a call for closer relationships between in-service teachers and teacher educators that has led to academic service learning projects that truly impact and improve the teaching and learning of English language learners in the community. In this way, our abundant population of aspiring teachers in the community can fully take part in the rich process of planning for and carrying out instruction. A recent example came about when improved communication between an in-service ELD teacher and a pre-service teacher educator led to fulfillment of a need for original leveled texts in the classroom; for its final project, a university literacy course wrote and adapted leveled texts for high school ELLs. By expanding the focus beyond pre-service programs to include professional learning of in-service teachers, members of the consortium have noted that there is great—and untapped—potential for collaboration along these lines across the universities in the region. Expertise, resources, connections, information, guest speakers: all of these, as well as other ideas, suggest ways that teacher education in the region can be a site for innovative partnerships and synergy, rather than exhaustion.

Current consortium goals related to pre- and in-service professional learning include creating an electronic meeting place for enhanced communication between the different groups, and including an electronic bulletin board where we can become aware of each others' needs and meet them with resources within our community. In addition, grant funding is currently being sought through the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) and other sources for a project that would bring teacher education programs across three institutions together with in-service teachers in local school districts to improve ELL education in the Spokane region.

Community Engagement. Our work in the area of education cannot be accomplished apart from the community. For that reason, several of our consortium members are working to expand community engagement that crosses institutional boundaries with the primary goal of raising understanding between the refugee/immigrant communities and the established communities of the region. As community organizations such as Refugee Connections and World Relief Spokane join the consortium, opportunities to engage the community are being identified. The SREC provides an ideal opportunity for education and community organizations to connect on a regular basis and expand and extend support beyond what individual agencies can provide.

Spokane once enjoyed rich cultural exchanges on a regular basis through regular cultural nights at school locations. However, this practice has fallen by the wayside in recent years—as have the regular benefits those event had brought. One goal of the Community Engagement work group is to re-establish cultural nights in conjunction with the schools and community centers to kindle ties, connection, and understanding.

Policy and Advocacy. Since our primary purpose is to improve the education of ELLs in our community, a top priority of the consortium is to advocate for the educators and students of the Spokane region both within and beyond our own community. While there have been occasional opportunities to provide input to policy makers and programs at the state level, those opportunities are few and far between. As the consortium began to take stock of where and how members currently engage in affecting policy, it was clear that, while there are a few individuals voicing their concerns, the isolated voice on the occasional committee was not going to be enough to affect change and dispel the misconceptions that exist about Eastern Washington.

Joan Johnston Nelson, having recently worked as a Bilingual Program Supervisor at the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), shared with the consortium that many of the departments at the state’s educational agency were not aware of the highly diverse ELL demographic of the Spokane region (Spokane Regional ESOL Consortium, 2015). At the state level, the term “Eastern Washington” is frequently used to refer to the areas of Wenatchee, Yakima, or the Tri-Cities when considering the ELL population. More accurately labeled “Central Washington,” these areas predominantly serve Spanish speakers; whereas the Spokane region, in the northeastern part of the state, serves more than 70 different languages in the k–12 and adult education programs. Since our region has large numbers of first and second generation refugees from many different cultural backgrounds, the impact of state and federal policies, especially those related to education, are significantly different from the impact those policies may have on areas of the state that serve predominantly Spanish speaking migrant populations. With few advocating for our area’s unique needs, planning is all too often based on what our region’s needs are presumed to be, rather than what they actually are. Consortium members strongly agree that a powerful cohesive voice to represent the needs of the area and help inform policy makers is a high priority. By taking steps to inform legislators and policy makers on the unique demographics and needs of the Spokane region through letters, presentations at conferences, and meeting with local, state, and federal leaders, we hope to open up lines of communication that will facilitate ongoing influence for the ELLs and educators in the region. In light of the 2015 passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which will provide more authority to states for making decisions about English language learners, a goal of the consortium is to ensure that the needs of our region are known as state-wide policies are planned and implemented. By presenting a united voice on behalf of an organized consortium, we seek to have a greater and more sustained impact.

Transitions. The consortium has recently added a fifth action team labeled “Transitions.” As students move from one educational institution to another (often aging out of the k–12 system), or move from education to work, individuals often fall through the gaps. Consortium members shared stories such as that of discovering that a student new to one program had previous assessment and coursework in another program, either in the k–12 system, adult education, or in another agency. These anecdotal discoveries led to the realization that it would better serve the individuals to have a process in place for cross-institutional support for ELLs. Through the consortium, k–12, adult basic education, and

community college programs are working together to transition students from one program to another.

Another realization was that newly-arrived refugees are often unsure about their many educational options across Spokane area institutions. One related goal of the consortium is to create a way of effectively communicating educational options to individuals entering the educational system at 17 to 20 years old. By having the adult education programs and k–12 programs working together, students and their families can identify which option will best work for them. Steps such as these should lead to better planning for English language learners across institutions so that students do not fall through the gaps and are better equipped for their future success.

A Work in Progress

Although clearly a work in progress, our achievements thus far have been notable. Early leaders established a base list of potential participants—including those who had most recently voiced eagerness for such a consortium. We have established a monthly meeting schedule and place (an ELD room in centrally-located high school) and continue to reach out and invite potential members. We have created a name, The Spokane Regional ESOL Consortium, developed a mission statement, established five working committees, and identified future projects for each committee.

In May of 2015, we applied for and received a small grant from Eastern Washington University to support connections between university students and the community. This grant has enabled us to establish an online workspace for our group, which has proven a useful tool for our shared and developing discussions and documents. The funding has allowed us to purchase a domain name and establish a website to connect with the larger community, *eslspokane.org* (Spokane Regional ESOL Consortium, n.d.).

In the area of policy and advocacy, we have had members attend a meeting of the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee convened by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). We have carried our concerns to the congressional offices in Washington, DC to help legislators understand the issues and concerns related to ELL education for our region, and introduced SREC to districts in the region via emails to program directors. Finally, we have taken the first steps to introduce our initiative to the ELL community by presenting at the Tri-TESOL 2015 conference, as well as other regional and state conferences. Figure 3 illustrates the process of the formation of the SREC from inception to action.



Figure 3. Progression of establishing the consortium.

Yet to Come

In the near future, our next steps are to further connect with the community and establish our role with the many stakeholders in the area. We will further our discussion of forming a board of directors and applying for non-profit status, which will open up opportunities for further grant funding of our projects and enable access to research opportunities. Letters of introduction to policy makers at the state and local level and to area stakeholders are currently being drafted. A launch party is being planned in collaboration with local non-profit members of our consortium, which will also serve as a fundraiser for the most recent group of refugees in Spokane.

To broaden our reach and strengthen our network, we continue to seek out and add new members. We now include Spokane Public Schools, Central Valley School District, Mead School District, World Relief Spokane, Refugee Connections, Communities in Schools Spokane, Quiroga Law Office, Community Colleges of Spokane, Eastern Washington University, Gonzaga University, and Whitworth University. It is clear from our discussions thus far that there is much the consortium can accomplish in the Spokane region beyond what individual institutions can accomplish on their own. By forming this consortium, we have become empowered to share our resources and form bridges between our services. In this way, an entire network of institutions and dedicated individuals reflect the great value we see in the English language learners among us through strengthened and responsive education and service.

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