

# Focusing on English Learners (ELs) in Turnaround Schools

Findings from SIG Case Study Schools with a High Percentage of ELs

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## Study of School Turnaround

- Study purpose: To document the change process in a purposive sample of SIG case study schools
- Data collection concurrent with SIG implementation
- Conducted by AIR and Mathematica through a contract with the Institute of Education Sciences (NCEE)
- Five publications to date:
  - Two reports on the characteristics of SIG schools, Cohorts I and II
  - Report on the first year of SIG implementation (released May 2014)
  - Two research briefs on rural SIG schools and SIG schools with high percentages of ELs (both released April 2014)



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## SIG Case Studies Sample and Data Collection Activities

- Study samples:
  - Core sample of 25 schools in 6 states
  - Focus sample (for Year 3) of 12 schools in 5 states
  - Two special topics samples of roughly 10 schools each:
    - High concentration of ELs
    - Rural
- Year 1 data collection for EL sample:
  - Site visits to schools: fall 2011
    - Interviews and focus groups with district administrators, principals, classroom teachers, EL specialists, instructional coaches, and parents.
  - Teacher survey for EL brief: fall 2011



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## Overview of EL Sample

- 5 high schools and 6 elementary schools in varied locales
- Median EL enrollment of 45%
- Diverse language backgrounds: Spanish primary language spoken by ELs in 7 of 11 schools
- 90% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch
- 4 schools implementing SIG turnaround model, 7 schools implementing SIG transformation model



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## Supports for ELs

- Although approaches varied, all 11 schools provided some type of specialized instruction for ELs
  - In high schools, these included specialized ESL classes or sheltered English instruction
  - In elementary schools, ELs were in mainstream classrooms with their English-proficient peers, but with individualized support from ESL teachers, bilingual teachers, or tutors.
- All 11 schools engaged a parent-community liaison as part of their parent engagement efforts.
  - Supports included adult ESL classes, parenting classes and workshops to familiarize parents with the US educational system.



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## Addressing the unique needs of ELs

- ELs present a distinct set of cultural, linguistic, and academic needs:
  - English language development and access to the academic curriculum
  - Culture and socialization needs
  - Parent and family engagement
  - Issues of isolation and segregation
  - Interruptions in schooling or limited formal schooling
  - Exiting from EL status
  - High school completion



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## Attention to ELs in the school improvement process

- Six dimensions of a focus on ELs:
  - School improvement goals that explicitly target ELs
  - The use of disaggregated data for ELs or data on English proficiency to inform EL instruction
  - Extended learning time (ELT) targeted toward meeting ELs' needs
  - Instructional practices that open access to content or address socialization needs of ELs
  - Professional development for teachers on addressing EL needs
  - Targeted strategies for engaging EL parents
- For each dimension, ratings of "strategic attention," "moderate attention," "limited attention," or "no specific attention"



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## Attention to ELs in the school improvement process, continued

- Despite having high percentages of ELL students, the 11 schools appeared to pay only moderate or limited attention to ELs' unique needs in their approaches to improvement during the initial phase of SIG.
  - 3 schools paid "moderate attention" to the unique needs of ELs
  - 8 schools paid "limited attention"
- The level of attention paid to ELs did not appear related to the proportion of ELs in a school.



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## School Profile: Limited Attention to ELs

- Crimson Maple elementary was in a district in transition: new EL director, new ELP standards and assessment
  - *In all honesty, I'm not sure that it impacted our decision-making...I think the focus was so much on the core [curriculum] and so much on helping to have quality instruction in all of our classrooms. I'm not sure we pulled forward our ELL...students.*
- The principal planned to put more emphasis on ELL needs in the future but district administrators wanted to focus on more pressing challenges first



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## School Profile: Moderate focus on ELs' needs

- Blue Brook Elementary located in a district with a strong infrastructure to support SIG schools
- Blue Brook had launched the school turnaround process prior to SIG (2009-10) with limited focus on ELs
- In Year 2 of SIG (2011-12) the district provided an EL coach which fostered a focus on EL families, data related to ELs, and instructional strategies.

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## District Capacity and EL focus

- Schools with greater attention to ELs' unique needs were more likely to be located in districts with stronger perceived capacity to support ELs.
- District capacity included designated staff to address EL issues and the provision of EL supports through SIG, as well as perceptions of expertise and guidance from the district.
  - All 3 schools rated as having moderate attention to ELs in their improvement process were located in districts with both an EL coordinator and an EL department.

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## Concluding points

- Limited awareness and focus on the unique needs of ELs in the context of the school improvement process.
- District capacity to support ELs may be related to an increased focus on ELs
- Some schools may be in a position to focus on the needs of ELs after addressing pressing needs such as school climate and the quality of instruction.

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