

## Shifting the Focus to the Student: The *Exc-EL* Attitude

**Abstract:** Project Exc-EL is funded by the US Department of Education, as an Investing in Innovation (i3) development grant. Exc-EL is based on whole school reform models, but focused on the structures that impact English learners within the school and community. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as a framework, Exc-EL seeks a comprehensive approach, acknowledging the many factors inside and outside the classroom shape the experience of English learners. The program is a collaboration between two school districts (Tarrytown and Ossining in New York) and UCLA's Center X to implement a multi-year program aimed at creating expanded and personalized learning opportunities for students in middle and high school who do not speak English as their first language. Project Exc-EL combines evidence-based strategies for classroom teaching with support provided by community partners. The project employs a data-driven, tiered approach to instruction that builds on community partnerships to create personalized, expanded learning opportunities for students. The core philosophy is one of enriched activities and wrap around supports focused on success, college/career readiness and high school completion. Individualized, personalized learning plans and a tiered system of interventions ('RTI') are being used to track and adjust student activities.

*We established a newcomers program in the building and embedded it into the school day. Students now had the opportunity to interact with the 'American' students AND participate in electives and athletics – the things that make high school fun. What happened? Students started coming to school.*

English learners, particularly those in the middle and high school, represent the future of a population in search of a better life and opportunities, achieved through education. When we move from a deficit model (cataloguing the skills and understanding students *do not* possess) towards an asset model (recognizing and building on the strengths students bring with them) we quickly realize English learners are often among the most dedicated and hardest working students in school. In fact, recent studies indicate that first generation children are *less likely* to drop out of high school when compared to their same-race US-born or White native peers (Marks and Pieloch, 2015). English learners and their families often surmount difficult challenges and journeys to

arrive in the United States, and success in education is a primary goal.

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The number of English learners in schools in the United States continues to grow. Middle and high school-age English learners present particularly diverse and intensive challenges for educators - some students are recent arrivals with limited or formal interrupted schooling, others

were born in the United States but lack the academic language required for school success even after many years of ESL support. By the time they reach secondary school, many have complicated, interrelated difficulties with literacy in two (or more) languages.

By any measure, EL students are not achieving on par with their English-speaking peers. On the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 76% of eighth-grade English speaking students scored at or above basic in reading; 73% scored at or above basic in mathematics. However, EL students scored considerably lower, with 29% in reading and 29% in mathematics at or above the basic level. A study by the Center on Education Policy found gaps between ELs and their English-speaking peers on high school exit examinations as high as 30 to 40 percentage points (CEP, 2010).

Talking about *English Learners* as a population masks the tremendous diversity of students falling under this classification. This extremely heterogeneous group, includes immigrant, along with first, second, and even third, fourth, or fifth generation students. So it should come as no surprise that any single program or approach cannot be successful – no matter how carefully crafted. English Learner (EL) students require unique educational options – options that match their own interests, goals and purposes for school. This article will present some of the contextual and policy issues English Learners face, along with outlining a program being implemented in two districts in New York state to address some of these challenges.

## Context and Policy

These days, when the words ‘always’ or ‘never’ are used in a school policy context, it is a clear indicator that we are off-track. In many districts and schools, uninformed policy decisions have a negative affect on English Learners. Yet we frequently allow stringent policies and guidelines to determine the courses and services students receive, regardless of their individual needs and aspirations. A study by American Institutes for Research (2010) identified practices that fostered college readiness for EL students, finding that personalization and an environment where the unique needs of each student are known as keys to successful program. In addition, the authors noted the involvement of families, communities and postsecondary institutions as important components for coordinated progress.

Although English Learners often face segregation from their peers because of language ability, ethnicity, and poverty (Gándara and Aldana, 2014), the demonstrated commitment and value placed on education by immigrant students can enhance the school culture by providing positive models of student engagement.

Minority students are often “tracked” into lower classes that exclude them from acceleration, often requiring these students to receive remediation or intervention services. Placement in these lower ability classes adds to the stereotypes about ELLs while also affecting students’ own perception of their access, ability, participation, and sense of belonging in school (Walton and Cohen, 2007). Many schools do not afford faculty and staff with the needed support, including time and resources to examine their beliefs, values, and teaching practices necessary to combat these stereotypes. Additionally, bureaucratic elements that have existed in schools since their inception are contradictory to the values of collaboration and connectedness between teachers,

students, and families. Structures within districts and schools often limit the involvement and expertise of faculty, staff, students, and parents in making decisions that affect all of these stakeholders (Patterson, Hale, Stessman, 2008).

## Project Exc-EL

Creating an environment that fosters these attributes is at the core of Project Exc-EL, or Excellence for English Learners. The program is a collaboration between two school districts (Tarrytown and Ossining in New York) and UCLA's Center X<sup>1</sup> to implement a multi-year program aimed at creating expanded and personalized learning opportunities for students in middle and high school who do not speak English as their first language. Project Exc-EL combines evidence-based strategies for classroom teaching with support provided by community partners. The project employs a data-driven, tiered approach to instruction that builds on community partnerships to create personalized, expanded learning opportunities for students. The core philosophy is one of enriched activities and wrap around supports focused on success, college/career readiness and high school completion. Individualized, personalized learning plans and a tiered system of interventions ('RTI') are being used to track and adjust student activities. Elements of Exc-EL are being replicated in additional districts in New York this year.

Project Exc-EL is actively and intentionally shifting the focus to the student. Teams of teachers work together to discuss and tier EL students – proactively addressing urgent and immediate needs as well as improving pedagogical and other supports for all students. Through established collaborative partnerships, academic, social and emotional supports are available for students and their families as needed. Barriers to engagement and success are identified and addressed. Discussion at Exc-EL team meetings consistently revolves around the question, “What can we do to help THIS student succeed?”

A simple but fundamental shift underlies the developing success of the approach. Exc-EL is an *attitude* more than a *program*. Exc-EL is not a prescribed set of practices or strategies, but an approach that allows educators the time and structures to use their own expertise to address the individual challenges facing their students. A deep understanding of the strengths, needs and aspirations of each student are explored and flexible programming is designed to meet their needs.

For example, a teacher-led discussion on EL students in a comprehensive NYS high school surfaced the following information:

*Partway into the second marking period, the number of students assigned to 'English as a New Language Labs' was doubled by adding all English as a New Language (ENL) students (at any level of proficiency) to this class designed as a small, supportive workspace for entering and emerging students only. This was a reaction to a misunderstanding of the guidelines for EL*

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<sup>1</sup> Center X is a program of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, housed on the UCLA campus. Center X maintains a satellite office in Trumbull, Connecticut that provides technical assistance and coaching to public schools in New York and New England.

students, and done without teacher or student consultation.

Sound familiar? The teachers AND students know this is a mistake, yet feel powerless to correct it. The end result is students who require this intensive support will not receive it, and students who do not are unable to participate in grade level academics and electives.

To combat these ad hoc placements, Exc-EL team members meet every few weeks to discuss each student’s progress and needs (including students’ placement in the appropriate sequence of courses) and to collaboratively explore ways to improve their own pedagogy. Team meetings are one hour with the time being roughly divided into thirds – looking at students; professional development; and action planning. Strong facilitation and commitment from team members makes this approach work.

Students are monitored on a simple spreadsheet that is only for the team’s use and reference. Students are color-coded as part of the discussion, with notes included to help track background information and actions to be taken.

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Home language/ELD Level</i>	<i>Notes</i>
8	Spanish/Transitioning	Has a 504, receiving SPED services since K, needs a better ENL placement (not making progress)
6	Spanish/Expanding	On level in math, not on level in ELA. Needs to push herself; closer teacher monitoring to make sure she does homework. Parent conference?
6	Punjabi/Expanding	Not proficient on quarterlies in ELA or math, concern about progress across all curricular areas. She has poor work habits. Monitor.
7	Spanish/Expanding	Works very hard, very motivated. Doing great, continue to monitor and challenge.
7	Spanish/Emerging	Very low, struggles with work in English and Spanish. Not making progress. Refer to RTI team, see if can be scheduled into AIS services.

*Exc-EL* schools devote time and energy examining the school culture, and how structures and policies shape the experience of each learner. We have already cited examples of how difficult it may be for ELs to engage in age appropriate, enriching activities such as art, music, sports when their schedules are dominated by remedial and non-credit bearing courses. We have found the institution of personal learning plans a key factor in developing student agency as they work with advisors and families to develop personal, academic and career plans. *Exc-EL* schools are fortunate to partner with the Center for Secondary School Redesign (CSSR) in shaping policies and structures that positively impact English learners.

*Exc-EL* schools have options to secure support for struggling students and their families. In many cases, these are made possible by collaborations with local community partners. For example, Latino U College Access, the RSHM Life Center, and Westchester Community College partner with the schools and within the community to ensure success. Latino U provides tutoring and mentoring, RSHM provides immigration counseling, and Westchester Community College provides induction support for new college freshmen. A critical element of this success is the connection between the teacher conversations and these supports. *Exc-EL* teachers are

involved in afterschool tutoring and know how individual students will benefit. But they also know where to refer a family facing an imminent health, legal or immigration crisis to help stabilize the lives of their students.

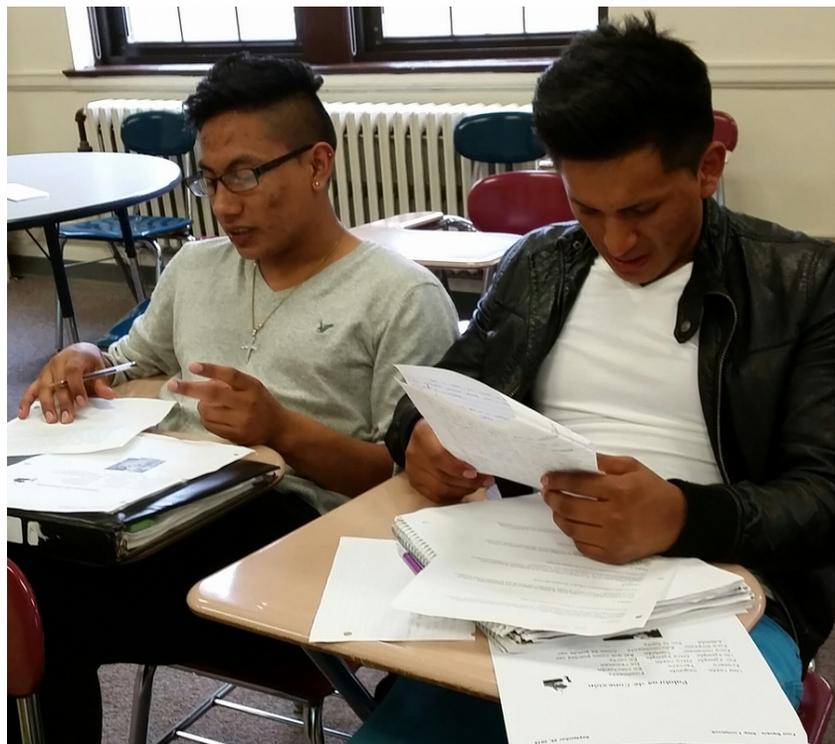
*Exc-EL* schools are developing flexible programming options that are working for students. Ossining High School is experiencing an influx of older immigrant students, many who have experienced significant trauma and interrupted schooling prior to their arrival. Based on a clear understanding of the needs of individual students *and* their personal goals for education, the school has added both an emergent literacy program designed to prepare students for success and full entry into the ‘mainstream’ and a Spanish language GED program. The seemingly simple act of asking older students what their personal goals for education are, and providing them appropriate pathways, is making a world of difference. Both programs are integrated into the school day, allowing students in either program to participate in the broader enrichment, athletic and social high school activities. But students who are on a fast track to employment are able to secure the credential needed within a reasonable time frame. The *Exc-EL* attitude continues to drive the creation of flexible, responsive programming approaches to meet the unique needs of each student.

In practice, Center X expert coaches work with the school-based teams several times each month. Professional development is offered during the summer, as well as embedded during team meeting times. The broader collaborative team gathers quarterly to learn together and design improved approaches to student and community support.

Plus Alpha Research and Consulting, located in Arlington, Virginia, provides an evaluation and research aspect for the work. PARC has created a five-year, quasi-experimental design, which will provide evidence of the impact of the program. The evaluation plan also offers valuable feedback on implementation, allowing the program managers to continually improve the structure.

Center X also provides management and administrative support, facilitating the many logistic items necessary for success in a project of this scope and complexity.

The *Exc-EL* attitude is making a difference. In the Ossining school district, 150 EL students





have been identified through the tiered, evidence based approach. Roughly half are being monitored in the classroom and are progressing. Only one-quarter have been identified as struggling, and they are receiving needed interventions. The Ossining team presented the evidence of their successful attitude at the NYSTESOL conference in November 2015 – you can access their enjoyable and informative presentation at this link:

[https://prezi.com/t3v\\_jgko3xxd/from-roots-to-results/](https://prezi.com/t3v_jgko3xxd/from-roots-to-results/).

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