Implementation of an Elementary Level Newcomer Program in a Mid-Sized K-12 School District

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ABSTRACT: This article provides recommendations for implementation of an elementary level newcomer program in a mid-sized K-12 school district, drawing upon my experience managing a pilot newcomer program in a suburb of Kansas City, Missouri. Due to a significant rise in the number of Spanish-speaking newcomers to the district, the pilot program was created to address the needs of a rapidly growing demographic of newcomer ELL students. The program not only served many students over the course of a school year but also helped families communicate about and be involved in their students' education. This article explores the challenges and successes of piloting a newcomer program amidst growing numbers of newcomer students during a school year and provides key steps in planning an effective newcomer program.

Keywords: newcomer program, English language learners, program implementation, pilot program, K-12 education, Spanish-speaking students, elementary education

1. Introduction

Newcomers are a defined group of ELs in Missouri schools. Missouri is a state that takes ELL standards from the WIDA Consortium, which defines "true newcomer students" as "...recently arrived immigrants, migrants, or refugees in first grade (second semester) through 12th grade, who have been in the country for less than four months, and who demonstrate compelling evidence that they have never been exposed to English" (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education). However, newcomer students may not be present in every school district, and some school districts experience a sudden and significant rise in newcomer students, necessitating the rapid creation of programs and resources tailored to their needs (Calderón & Slakk, 2019). While well-established newcomer programs may provide inspiration for long-term goal setting, the complexity of creating a pilot program in a different context under significant time restraints necessitates qualitative descriptions of the program implementation process of other districts facing similar challenges.

This article provides an account of a mid-sized school district piloting a newcomer program in elementary schools as well as recommendations for newcomer program design in hopes that districts learn from the successes and challenges. It also aims to make the newcomer program development process more straightforward for administrators in districts without previous high numbers of newcomers so that they can plan effective newcomer programs. First, the context of the district is described, as well as the rationale for creating a newcomer program. Next, the process of designing the program is explained in detail and challenges faced during implementation are identified. Finally, a list of recommendations for program design is provided.

2. Context

The pilot newcomer program was located in a midsize school district. During the 2023-2024 school year, the district served over 3,800 students at nine schools. Five of those schools were elementary schools served by the newcomer program, which enrolled around 42 students. EL teachers primarily used a pull-out model to serve EL students at elementary schools. Between May 2023 and May 2024, the number of ELs in the school district increased from 528 to 582, a 10% increase. Around 40 of those 54 new ELs were newcomers in grades K-5. During the 2022-2023 school year, there were only 14 newcomer elementary school students, but in the 2023-2024 school year, there was an increase of 10%. This rise in newcomer ELs was not evenly distributed among the elementary schools–in the 2023-2024 school year, one school had only five or six newcomer ELs in the entire school, while another school had as many as three in one classroom. Students enrolled in the newcomer program were from multiple countries in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. All were from Spanish-speaking countries, though the program was available to students of any language background. Many students had lived in another state such as California, Florida, or New York, before moving to Missouri.

3. Rationale

The rise of newcomers in the district necessitated a change in how EL services were provided to newcomers. Prior to the pilot newcomer program, elementary newcomer students were served in their home schools. Since there were few newcomer ELs in the district before the 2022-2023 school year, EL teachers simply adjusted their schedules to provide more intensive instruction to newcomer students than to more proficient students on their caseload. However, as the number of newcomer ELs increased, classroom teachers and EL teachers had more difficulty serving the needs of all students. The newcomer program was intended to provide focused language support so that these students could acquire the language skills to participate fully in their classrooms as soon as possible. Another goal of the program was to provide a safe, supportive, and welcoming environment for newcomers. While many classroom teachers took steps to welcome and include ELs in the classroom community, without focused and extended language learning opportunities, the academic needs of ELs may be difficult to meet alongside the needs of students whose home language (the language acquired first and normally spoken at home) is English and who can easily access the language of instruction to learn content. Also, students at times did not have any classmates or teachers who could speak to them in their home language. In the newcomer program, students would be surrounded by other English learners and receive support from other Spanish-speaking students as well as a Spanish-speaking paraprofessional.

The newcomer program also aimed to provide more access to qualified language teachers. Classroom teachers in the district typically did not have EL certification and had little to no experience teaching English as an additional language and so may not have been prepared to teach language to newcomer ELs. Conversely, the newcomer program teachers were EL certified and had provided hours of language instruction utilizing EL materials on a daily basis. In recognition that time spent learning a language limits time for learning content, the newcomer program was designed to incorporate content instruction (Calderón & Slakk, 2019). The district K-5 curriculum content standards guided vocabulary instruction in the newcomer program so that students could be familiar with the basic vocabulary being discussed in their classes. The goal was to provide basic and comprehensible content instruction to newcomer ELs so they could have some understanding of what was being discussed in their home classrooms.

4. Process

4.1 Program objectives

Colorín Colorado notes that newcomer programs often fail because of the complex issues involved with administrating them (WETA Public Broadcasting, 2016). To make the pilot newcomer program sustainable, we put significant effort into the planning and administration. While planning the district newcomer program, we considered advice from the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition on developing a clear vision and goals for newcomers (National Clearinghouse, n.d.). We wrote a handbook with objectives listing both academic and social goals. In regard to social goals, we wanted students to learn to interact successfully within the norms of a classroom and get their needs, such as using the bathroom, met.

4.2 Entry and exit criteria

In the handbook, we also clearly defined the entry and exit criteria for the newcomer program, and listed ways students would be automatically eligible and ways they could be recommended for enrollment. We divided newcomers into two groups–first to third grade, and fourth to fifth grade to accommodate schedules at elementary schools and place students with others at a similar stage of emotional development. We created exit assessments of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills that focused heavily on vocabulary acquisition. These steps ensured that all families had the same opportunities across the district to enroll their students in the program, and that students did not exit the program until they had reached a certain level of proficiency. These exit assessments were intended to hold students to a high standard of language learning; some newcomer students exited the program within a few weeks, while others spent most of the school year in the program. Regardless of students' language learning abilities, they all were expected to achieve the same level of proficiency at their own pace, in recognition that newcomers should be held to high standards coupled with high support (Calderón & Slakk, 2019). We provided the handbook to stakeholders across the district, including families of newcomer students, principals, EL teachers, classroom teachers of newcomer students, and the district administration. This ensured that everyone understood the vision, objectives, and entry/exit criteria.

4.3 Staffing and logistics

Planning the program also involved the logistics of hiring, transportation, and securing resources. A new newcomer teacher was hired and an EL teacher currently in the district agreed to co-teach. A Spanish-speaking paraprofessional was also hired. The program was located near the district administration building in the alternative school, where students were already being bussed from elementary schools to participate in the gifted program; this arrangement allowed for newcomer program students to be simply added to the existing bus schedules from each elementary school. It also provided a central location that families from across the district could reach easily. The newcomer program was in two joined classrooms that teachers could utilize as needed. The fourth to fifth grade class was in the morning hours, and the first to third grade class was in the afternoon. ESL staff were designated by principals to facilitate student movement onto the buses, and students ate lunch in their home schools. One elementary school started and ended their school day earlier than the others and was located the farthest away from the other schools, which necessitated adding a bus route to transport students directly home from the newcomer program; a bilingual staff member assisted the bus driver in communicating with students on the first day of the program. Another elementary school was within walking distance of the newcomer program, so EL staff were assigned to walk the students between the buildings. Funding was secured for academic resources in the classroom, including textbooks, laptops and manipulatives.

4.4 Family inclusion

According to Colorín Colorado, newcomer programs should recognize and build upon the primary languages of the students (WETA Public Broadcasting, 2016). To this end, we took steps to include families in the entry/exit process and to support families at their home schools, all the while communicating with them in Spanish. Intake interviews with students and families were conducted with parents in person in Spanish. Families were asked about the student's educational background, socioemotional needs, interests, and

struggles so we could get to know the student (Calderón & Slakk, 2019). Families were encouraged to ask additional questions, visit the classroom and meet the teachers before signing a permission form to enroll their child in the program; families were also given the option to decline participation in the program. Many participated in home visits along with educational materials for use in the home. During enrollment in the program, families often reached out to the English Language Facilitator managing the program to ask questions about their students' home classrooms and residency requirements, as well as medical and mental health community resources. Families were also invited to events for the newcomer program and for the district. When exiting the program, students called parents along with a staff member to celebrate their exit from the program.

5. Challenges

5.1 Transportation and logistics

While we put significant effort into the planning process, there were challenges that we experienced during implementation. One challenge was transportation. While many families visited the newcomer classroom location during the intake interview or at our suggestion, and all were informed in writing and orally of the location of the school and the hours the students would be there, there was still confusion for some families about the schedule. There were some families who arrived at their child's home elementary school to pick them up during the school day, only to then realize the student was at another school. Since the alternative school building was close to an elementary school and the district administration building, families often entered the incorrect building and required assistance coming to the correct building. Another transportation challenge was updating rosters of students on the bus routes. For students bused home directly from the newcomer program, the bus routes needed to change as students were admitted to or exited from the program, which at times meant several route adjustments per month. As a result, students' arrival times at their homes were somewhat less predictable.

5.2 Assessment

While we created an initial exit assessment and proficiency scales based on what we wanted students to be able to achieve, we did need to revise sections of them to ensure that students were being exited at an appropriate time in their language learning journey relative to the performance of their peers in the same grade. We added a separate first grade exit assessment that required a lower level of reading and writing after receiving input from first grade teachers and the newcomer teacher. Taking into account the rapid progress of first graders in their home classrooms (first graders on the standby list were often taken off the list because of their quick progress at their home elementary schools), their much slower progress in the newcomer program, the difficulties they had making daily transitions, and their being in a different stage of cognitive development, enrollment of first graders was ended during the following school year; second-semester first graders would still be allowed to enroll with a recommendation but would not be automatically eligible (MediLexicon International, 2024). The writing portion was also later simplified to better match the performance of their grade-level peers.

Another challenge with assessment was the time-consuming nature of administering individual assessments. Since students also had language input in their home classroom, and because the assessments were used for individuals needing to exit the program, the exit assessments were comprehensive and often contained content that had not yet been taught explicitly in the newcomer program. The assessments were also untimed so that students could demonstrate their abilities with less anxiety. This meant that over time, more staff members needed to be trained in exit assessment administration. Additionally, some students had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) highlighting language difficulties. As a result, students who were relatively proficient in English had significant difficulty exiting the program due to the reading and writing requirements. This necessitated the newcomer teacher being included in IEP meetings so that the team could set an appropriate newcomer program exiting benchmark. The altered exit requirements were also documented in the students' IEP documentation (National Clearinghouse, 2016).

5.3 Demand for services

In addition, the newcomer program presented additional challenges for newcomer program teachers that they had not previously encountered as EL teachers. The program was designed to serve about 20 students total, based on the 14 total newcomers in elementary schools the previous year. However, during the pilot year of the program, the number of newcomers enrolling in elementary schools soared. Since many families did not enroll at the beginning of the school year, it was difficult to anticipate the number of students that the program needed to serve. To address this issue, a standby list was created; families would sign paperwork enrolling their students once a space opened for them due to other students exiting. At times, the standby list was long because students did not exit the newcomer program at a uniform rate; however, by the end of the year, all students on the standby list had attended classes in the newcomer program.

5.4 Classroom management

One classroom management issue was the lack of diversity in students' home languages. Since all students spoke the same language, they could communicate with one another without the comprehension of the English-speaking teacher, which made behavior issues difficult to address. At times, a bilingual staff member in the EL department needed to assist with communication between students, families, the building principal, and the teacher. During the school year, a bilingual paraprofessional was hired, which significantly improved classroom management. Class sizes initially capped at around 20 students were also reduced to a maximum of 15 students.

5.5 Attendance

Student attendance varied between students, which affected their progress in the newcomer program. Some were absent for weeks at a time, which led to a revision of the exit policy—students who stopped attending for an extended period would no longer be enrolled in the newcomer program in order to serve the needs of students on the standby list. To avoid this consequence and to better serve our students, we asked the newcomer teacher to inform us if students did not attend class for an extended period. After brainstorming with parents, connecting them with community resources, helping them communicate, or explaining alternative options, all students were able to maintain enrollment in the program. Attendance at district events, as opposed to newcomer events, by families of students in the newcomer program was negligible. We felt it was important to include families of newcomer students in these larger events, but families gave feedback that they preferred to attend smaller events at familiar locations that were designed to address their needs specifically. We did provide transportation for newcomer program events, which presented other difficulties. Some families were either headed by one adult or only one adult was able to attend, which meant that as many as five people in one family needed to be transported together. Also, families lived in different locations, so transportation was difficult to arrange.

5.6 Communication with schools

Communication with home elementary schools was a complex issue. Because of the sudden rise in newcomer program students in the program, some classrooms had more newcomer students in them not being served by our program than they had had the year before, due to so many students being on the standby list. Some elementary schools were not affected at all, while others bore the brunt of serving newcomer students. As a result, we began to provide updates directly to the administration at the schools about the standby list as students were admitted or exited and explained under what criteria they were admitted or exited. We also moved an additional EL teacher to the elementary school most affected and decided to create an additional newcomer program housed in that school the following year. Since each elementary school had a different schedule, and we wanted newcomer students to be able to participate in classroom and school-wide events at their home schools, it was difficult to keep track of which students were absent and for which reasons. Therefore, we created a shared calendar with the elementary school building secretaries so that elementary schools could post dates that students would not attend the newcomer program.

5.7 Scheduling with schools

In addition, students with Student Success Teams (SSTs) plans were more difficult for elementary schools to serve, since newcomer students were not present in the elementary schools for half the day. It was more difficult for schools to observe the students or assess their ability because of the language barrier and the fact that students may have been missing instruction in core subjects while at the newcomer program. Due to differences in scheduling between the elementary schools, some students were missing specials classes such as physical education, music, or art due to the newcomer program, while others were missing core content classes. To address this issue, the newcomer teacher began to contribute statements to SST meetings on the skills of those students in core subjects and implement suggestions from the meetings. State and WIDA assessments presented a challenge as well, as test materials are assigned by school. In the end, it was decided that newcomer students would perform better on the assessments with their newcomer teachers in a supportive environment.

5.8 Holistic needs

We strove to address students' holistic needs, recognizing that a child's environment, health, and safety affect their ability to learn (Calderón & Slakk, 2019). As a result, we expended more time than anticipated on issues that families sought our help with, as may happen in districts with large numbers of newcomers (Sugarman, 2016). While most of our students 2nd grade and up had previous schooling, we did have some students with limited or interrupted formal education, and some had experienced recent homelessness, so we wanted to make sure they could benefit from district resources (National Clearinghouse, 2016). We provided lists of community resources to parents, but they often needed our help accessing those resources, filling out applications, and communicating. With the help of social workers in the district, we tirelessly helped families apply for medical, mental health, and food assistance programs, sometimes at multiple locations if services were not available. We also connected students with mental health services provided by the school, if needed. In some cases, reaching out to families after a prolonged absence from the newcomer program shed light on the family's needs, such as resources for a life-saving operation.

We also felt it was important to address students' socioemotional needs, aware that such factors would affect our students' experiences in our newcomer program (Calderón & Slakk, 2019). We limited the newcomer program to a half-day program so that students could make connections with students in their home classroom, thereby easing their transition after exiting the newcomer program, providing opportunities for incidental language learning through language modeled by peers. Avoiding any unnecessary or complete segregation of students was important in creating inclusive environments in students' home schools (National Clearinghouse, 2016).When students exited, they were often quite sad to leave their safe and supportive community of EL teachers and Spanish-speaking students, so we added small prizes for exiting the program, along with celebratory calls to parents and small celebrations in class. We also began to allow students to stay a few days in the newcomer program after exiting to smooth their transition if the newcomer teacher and home classroom teacher felt it would be helpful.

5.9 Responding to challenges

The above-mentioned challenges led to the creation of new positions, events, and programs. Difficulties in communication led the district to implement a plan for helping district teachers and staff learn Spanish with support from the Spanish-speaking community. A district position was added for a bilingual staff member to help families communicate with the school district. Also, an enrollment event was created in partnership with a local library to help parents of speakers of other languages enroll in school on time, with translators for a variety of languages on hand. Professional development was provided to teachers on how to include newcomers in the general classroom and begin to address their language learning needs (Yzquierdo, 2017). Finally, a newcomer program was planned for the following year at the elementary school sending the most newcomer ELs.

6. Conclusion

The implementation of a pilot elementary newcomer program in response to a sudden rise in newcomer enrollment in a mid-sized Midwestern school district provided many insights regarding program design and sustainability. The district responded to several challenges that arose in the areas of transportation, staffing, assessment, and logistics. Considering the needs of various stakeholders in regard to culture, communication, holistic needs, and resources was key to the success of the program. Also, the flexibility to revise policies and continuously improve the program contributed to sustainability. As a result, the pilot newcomer program facilitated language acquisition not only by directly addressing linguistic needs, but also by serving socioeconomic needs. As other districts respond to demographic change, the process described in this article and the recommendations below can aid in transforming the educational services provided to a linguistically diverse student population.

7. Recommendations

In the event a school district experiences a significant rise in newcomers and opts to design a newcomer program, the following steps are recommended.

- Conduct a needs assessment in regard to newcomers.
- Plan the logistics including:
    - transportation
    - staff
    - location
    - schedule
    - grade clusters
    - funding
    - academic resources
- Write and translate a handbook for families and staff which includes your program's:
    - mission and vision
    - clear entry and exit guidelines
    - eligibility guidelines
    - a parent permission form
- Communicate clearly with all stakeholders about logistics and guidelines.
- Decide if/how to adjust guidelines for newcomers with IEPs and SSTs.
- Decide on program caps and how to respond if demand exceeds supply.
- Provide professional development on newcomer instruction for teachers.
- Create and consistently implement a classroom management plan with building administrators.
- Secure translation services for teachers, parents, and administrators.
- Create a team to support families holistically.
- Conduct a needs assessment in regard to students enrolled in the newcomer program.
- Create and revise a curriculum.
- Create and maintain proficiency scales.
- Create a way for schools and teachers to communicate about building and class events.
- Plan events and provide transportation to them, if possible.
- Continue to monitor staffing, entry and exit guidelines, classroom management, and resources. Adjust as necessary.
- Gather data on student performance.
- Celebrate successes with students, parents, and teachers!

The Author

Farrah Littlepage has been joyfully serving and learning from multilingual learners of English for 16 years and has worked in education for 22 years. She currently teaches ESL at Metropolitan Community College, in addition to teaching English and Spanish in virtual reality at Immerse. She is currently a chairperson of the MidTESOL Adult Education and Community College Interest Section. Farrah has worked in a variety of settings, from a school district ELL program supervisor to an Intensive English Program instructor at the University of Missouri. As an English Language Fellow in Laos from 2018-2020, Farrah was involved in teacher training at universities, teacher training colleges, and secondary schools, and she later served as an Alumni Ambassador for English Language Programs. She has presented at international and regional conferences in seven countries. Her primary areas of interest are teacher training, pronunciation, and intercultural competence. Farrah's bilingualism and enthusiasm for connecting across cultures moves her to promote positive cultural identity in students. In her free time, she enjoys literature, language learning, and meditation."

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