

# Facing change: A framework for administrator support of English language learner programs

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*School administrators can effectively support English Language Learner programs and teachers through the CRAFT framework that emphasizes collaboration, responsiveness, advocacy, framing, and trust.*

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The role of school leadership, specifically administrators, is critical in the effective education of students designated as English language learners (ELLs) (Reyes, 2006) or emergent bilinguals (EBs). Specifically, a building principal can have an impact on issues of equity, social justice, and the success of an ELL program over time (Scanlan & López, 2012; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). (The term “emergent bilingual” has emerged in scholarship as an asset-based description of the students and their abilities, rather than focusing solely on their status as learners of English (e.g., García, 2009). In this article, I use “EB” to refer to the students, and the term “ELL” to refer to teachers, programs, policy labels, and instruction as it is more widely used and familiar in public education policy and settings. However, districts are increasingly opting for more inclusive terminology, including “EB,” “multilingual,” or “multilingual language learner.”) It is now well understood that EB students have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the educational disparities between these students and their native English-speaking peers continue to grow (Lazarín, 2020). School administrators are in a position to address and remedy these disparities through their approach to ELL instruction. This article presents a framework for administrator support of ELL teachers and programs called *CRAFT: Collaboration, Responsiveness, Awareness, Framing, and Trust*. CRAFT provides guidance for administrators to address the changing policies regarding ELL education, and the needs of the ever-changing population of ELL students, in a way that promotes the integration, rather than isolation, of ELL students, teachers, and departments. Below is a brief description of these issues, followed by examples from two administrators who were exceptional in their leadership of ELL programs.

## ELL education: Changing populations and changing policies

As noted often (e.g., Migration Policy Institute, 2019), this population of students in the United States is rapidly increasing and diversifying. At the same time, federal accountability policy is also changing, and the recent implementation of policies such as the Every Student Succeeds Act have presented both greater inclusion of ELL education in the policy and greater challenges vis-à-vis academic standards and measures of accountability (Hopkins et al., 2013). However, what these federal policies mean at the district and building level for EB students and teachers is open to interpretation and subject to local capacity and available resources. This is where building administrators come in: principals and assistant principals who work with ELL departments are important agents and advocates for their ELL teachers and EB students.

## **Improving the integration of ELL departments and opportunities for students**

The integration of EB students into the mainstream school environment (including their placement in courses) is visible in the way that ELL departments and teachers are recognized and positioned in the building. ELL programs, teachers, and students tend to be marginalized within schools (Harklau, 1994; Olsen, 1997; Valdés, 2004), and segregated through enrollment practices, curricular tracks, access to extracurricular activities, and social and physical segregation (i.e., separate physical classrooms and spaces in the school). This isolation of EBs from monolingual, native-English speaking peers increases the potential that the segregation will lead to labeling, as well as disparate outcomes and opportunities (Callahan, 2005; Dabach & Callahan, 2011).

One proposed alternative framing of ELL programs and students within schools is the idea of a “new mainstream” (Enright, 2011; Thompson, 2013) that more adequately describes the presence of non-native English speaking and multilingual students in today’s schools. This vision of new mainstream classrooms is accurate, given the realities of the ethnic and linguistic composition of today’s schools, and the students that comprise the new mainstream bring with them a “wealth of unexpected talents, perspectives, and unique experiences” (Scanlan & López, 2014, p. 113). However, simply acknowledging the presence of different demographics in schools is not sufficient; Thompson (2013) notes that once we have acknowledged this new mainstream, it is incumbent upon educators to be responsive with their instructional practices.

The framework for addressing these issues emerged from the practices of two skilled secondary administrators and their work with ELL teachers and programs. This data came from a qualitative study that examined the roles and experiences of high school ELL teachers and the implementation of district ELL program policy at two large, urban, and linguistically diverse high schools within the same district (at the time of the study, there were around 30,000 students in the district, 20% of whom were identified as ELLs, who represented over 120 languages). One aspect of this study was to interview district and building administrators who worked closely with the ELL department in each building. I interviewed these administrators twice over the course of the school year, once in the fall and once in the spring. I also observed district, building, and department level meetings related to the ELL program throughout the school year. In this research, I asked, “How do school leaders support high school ELL departments and teachers, especially as related to the integration of ELL departments into the school building and the learning outcomes of ELL students?”

## **Collaboration, responsiveness, awareness, framing, and trust (CRAFT)**

This framework identifies five aspects of school leaders’ interactions with ELL teachers in order to promote more meaningful and equitable education of high school EB students. Each aspect has its own merit, but there is potential for positive change when all aspects are integrated. Certainly, these are not the only components of effective leadership for ELL programs, but these stood out and were even more salient given the vast differences between the two schools and their administrators. (All names of people and places are pseudonyms.)

## Collaboration

*“[My] interaction with [the] ELL department has been constant . . . as needed, whenever needed. Earlier this year, it was many times a week.” (Ms. Harper)*

At Fields High, the ELL department was supervised by Ms. Harper, an assistant principal and a former high school science teacher. During the study, Ms. Harper was in her first year as an assistant principal and her first year in the district. As a vice principal, Ms. Harper interacted frequently with the ELL department. Her work included supervising and observing the ELL teachers in addition to the placement and scheduling of the EB students, a task that involved an overhaul of the classes that were offered to EB students, which classes EB students were placed in, and who taught these classes. Ms. Harper and the ELL department head worked during the months prior to the school year to reevaluate the identification and placement of every single EB student and to create courses that would better meet their needs. In addition to supervision and organizational collaboration, Ms. Harper also sought resources for the ELL department and facilitated their interaction with other departments, creating opportunities for collaboration during professional development days and prioritizing communication between departments. In short, she provided support in a way that an administrator less familiar with the needs of an ELL program would potentially be able to do.

School leaders need to collaborate with ELL teachers in a meaningful, consistent, and timely manner. Collaboration is facilitated by a clear set of topics and issues to discuss, and clear designation of roles (i.e., who will facilitate the meeting, take notes, follow-up with action items). While unconventional, at both Fields and Metro high schools, the school leader frequently attended the department’s professional learning community (PLC) meeting, and met frequently with the ELL department heads. In some instances, the presence of an administrator could have a chilling or inhibiting effect, but in conversation and interviews with ELL teachers, as well as my observation at PLC meetings, the administrator’s presence was viewed as supportive and collaborative. The presence and participation of a school leader in these meetings demonstrated the importance of ELL instruction and the work of ELL teachers, and helped to promote the integration of the ELL department and teachers.

## Responsiveness

*“One big point has been our older ELL students who are aging out. For instance, we sat down with one of the counselors and the ELL teachers and myself and we went through our list of any students that was 17 and older and looked at their credits, their state assessments, whether they are really on track for graduation... How close were these students to actually being able to graduate or whether they might time out. And so we organized a trip to [local community college] to look at the program.” (Ms. Harper)*

Closely connected to collaboration is the importance of school leaders’ responsiveness to the needs of the ELL department. Given the frequent changes in policies and initiatives surrounding ELL instruction, as well as the frequent changes in EB student populations, responsiveness was imperative to the functioning of an ELL program. In the example above, Ms. Harper recognized a need for resources for older EB students, and she responded by coordinating with a local community college. Other ways that school leaders demonstrated responsiveness include working with the counselor to change course offerings based on needs and strengths of EB

students, implementing a co-teaching model to assist beginner students in content area courses, and providing professional development opportunities tailored to the needs of teachers.

## **Awareness**

*“You’ve got kids that are coming in from all over the world with a lot, or little to no formal education, and trying not only to teach them the English language, but just survival and life skills... and our program has grown immensely. I mean, my first year here we were probably 150 ELL kids, and now we’re at 350.” (Mr. Aaron)*

At Metro High School, the administrator responsible for supervision of the ELL department was the principal, Mr. Aaron, an experienced administrator who had been at Metro for over a decade and had worked closely with the ELL department for that entire time. His responsibilities ranged from the formal observation and evaluation of the ELL teachers, to frequent attendance at the ELL departments’ PLC meetings, to advocacy at the district level on behalf of ELL students and teachers. He regularly collaborated with the ELL department head and was knowledgeable about the issues related to ELL education and the experiences of the students.

Foundational to all aspects of this framework is the awareness of school leaders about the issues germane to ELL instruction, from knowledge about students’ backgrounds and skills to systems-level understanding of the experiences of high school EB students related to academic achievement. The educational experiences of high school EB students are vastly different from their younger EB peers: many are recently-arrived students with varying levels of English proficiency and educational experience; and given their age, there is less time for them to develop English proficiency, demonstrate competence in content areas, and obtain sufficient credits to graduate.

## **Framing**

*“The ELL teachers are constantly after school with their kids, not only working with kids, but also trying to communicate with parents. [The department head] delivers professional development every other staff meeting for us around... ELL best practices, and he is highly regarded amongst our entire staff, so when he talks, everyone listens.” (Mr. Aaron)*

The framing of the ELL department, teachers, and EB students by the administrator is crucial for the integration of ELL in the building, as well as how ELL teachers and EB students are positioned. In both schools, the administrators positioned the ELL teachers as experts. One way they did this was to provide structured time where ELL teachers or the ELL department head could present information to staff at meetings and other professional development workshops. In terms of how students were positioned, both administrators were inclusive in the way they described EB students, referring to EB students as “our” students, and referencing individual students by name, demonstrating familiarity despite both schools being quite large. They also used the collective pronouns of “we” when talking about the work that they did in collaboration with ELL departments, communicating an alignment and shared responsibility with the work of the ELL teachers.

## Trust

*“I really trust my specialists, my teachers that are ELL teachers or special ed [sic] teachers... and so when they say, this is what they need, or this is what’s going on, then you know, I sit down and really go to bat for them... it’s important that I advocate for my teachers and my kids and my community.” (Mr. Aaron)*

Finally, a theme that emerged during this research was the trust that school leaders placed in the ELL teachers, both at Metro where the ELL teachers were very experienced, and Fields where the ELL teachers were novices. These administrators trusted their ELL teachers with important decision-making and sought their input for decisions ranging from curriculum adoption to the responsibilities of the ELL paraprofessionals. English language learner teachers are ultimately responsible for so many aspects of EB students’ education that the trust of their administrator is necessary for them to not only feel supported, but also empowered to make decisions in the interest of their students (Fones, 2018).

## Considerations and recommendations for ELL leadership

In this research, I was able to observe the ways that building administrators interacted with the ELL department and what their roles were in supporting the ELL program and teachers. These distinct and exceptional cases offered two approaches to the implementation of district ELL program policy through their program model and services, which demonstrated the importance of local decision-making in order to best work with existing resources to meet the needs of specific student populations.

How can administrators support high school ELL departments and teachers, and how can administrators support the integration of ELL departments, teachers, and students into the school? Calling attention to the CRAFT framework, administrators can (and should) intentionally structure their interactions with ELL teachers and departments, paying attention to the CRAFT framework (collaboration, responsiveness, advocacy, framing, and trust) and the way that these components are present in their leadership practices. School leaders can identify and facilitate opportunities for collaboration between ELL and content area/grade level departments. And when schools experience growth and changes of the ELL population, administrators can be proactive and set the tone for how the rest of the building can respond. In their role as decision-makers, administrators are also poised to advocate for their ELL teachers and EB students in matters related to policy and curriculum. In addition, school leaders are in a position to frame ELL departments, teachers, and EB students in a way that promotes their inclusion in the mainstream school setting via their messaging and opportunities for ELL teachers’ participation in the school community. Finally, trusting ELL teachers as the experts they are will model interactions for other staff in the building. All of these aspects of leadership can contribute to the opportunities and outcomes for EB students, and provide steps towards a more equitable education during a critical time.

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