



Building a Bilingual Bridge to Community

Learning Literacy program brings school and family together **BY DENÉE CRUMRINE**

AT BLADES ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, you will find a diverse population, with nearly 30 percent of students considered English Language Learners (ELL). While this makes for a culturally rich environment, it also means a language barrier that makes for unique challenges in both learning and teaching.

Educators at Blades Elementary realized that gaining communication proficiency, as well as academic proficiency in a new language, was a

daunting task. “In Delaware, the English language learner (ELL) subgroup consistently falls behind other students in academic achievement,” said Lyndsey Gerstle, English Language Learning teacher at Blades Elementary. She shared in their program application that research shows only 18 percent of ELLs demonstrate proficiency of the common core state standards; a 37 percent gap between the performance of all students and those who have been identified as ELLs; and that ELLs gradu-

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ate at a rate 15 percent lower than the state's average.¹

To address these learning gaps, Blades Elementary used principles of culturally responsible teaching, a technique aimed at improving the performance of ethnically and racially diverse students,² to create the Latino Family Literacy Project (LFLP). LFLP focuses on three components: literacy, connections, and community. The program runs for ten weeks each spring, staffed by ELL teachers, reading specialists, Spanish immersion teachers, instructional paraeducators and paras and school administrators.

Families are provided bilingual materials each week through a lending library system. Educators then work with each family to teach reading strategies that can be replicated at home. Family activities, such as scrapbooking, making family trees and letter writing, are implemented to help instill lessons. This shared experience helps both parents and K-2 students learn English together as a family, without neglecting their native language and culture. Relationship building among families and educators each week and the sessions close with a community meal.

LFLP also incorporates additive bilingualism, the dual use and teaching of languages, and connects school to home. This results in a strong community that encourages cultural awareness and acceptance, as well as the desired outcomes in learning. After four years, ELLs began outperforming other subgroups on district common assessments and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment saw improvements directly related to LFLP, with ELL students meeting bench-



mark end-of-year scores at an increase of nearly 20 percent. The 2017-2018 Annual ACCESS Test showed that approximately 74 percent of ELL students met or exceeded target scores determined by the state.

Beyond numbers, however, LFLP has created an environment in which all students, regardless of language or culture can thrive. ELL student attendance has increased, and educators have sought out professional development opportunities to better serve the ELL population. Moreover, trust and communication have been built between ELL families and the school, leading to all participants' bilingual success. ■

¹ As measured by the English language arts Smarter Balanced assessment

² Gay, G. (2013). Teaching To and Through Cultural Diversity. Curriculum Inquiry, 43(1), 48-70. doi:10.1111/curi.12002

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