

## **EDUCATING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN A RURAL DISTRICT: A CASE IN POINT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the challenges faced by rural school districts in general, and one in particular, in providing 'best practices' for their English language learners. It begins with numeric data reflecting the large increase of immigrant families in rural communities in the past decade. A review of the literature offers insights into the realities and strengths of rural districts from an ESL perspective. The case in point is a six-member rural elementary school team who chose to participate in a two-year professional development project and created a school action plan to address the needs of their English language learners. The process they underwent and the small but significant successes they have had serve as an example for other rural districts interested in making site-based changes.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As we continued driving, all visual remnants of the Twin Cities slowly diminished from view. Within a couple of hours, we had entered a town where the pace seemed mellow, the landscape bucolic, and the downtown reminiscent of a National Geographic piece on the grace and charm of small-town life in America. Founded originally by German, Irish, and Scandinavian farming families over more than a century ago, the town today finds itself once again a magnet for newcomers bringing similar hopes and dreams for a better life for their families. This image became even more complete for us as we entered the elementary school building awash in the daily chatter of the town's children, reflecting its current ethnic and cultural make-up, 79% Caucasian and 21% Hispanic, most recently arrived from Mexico and parts of south Texas. Where the home languages had once been German, Norwegian, and Swedish, it was now Spanish. Where lutefisk and dumplings had once framed the cultural landscape, it was now "apple pie and enchiladas."<sup>1</sup>

Why would six staff members at a rural elementary school, hours away from the Twin Cities, be willing to make an intense two-year commitment of enormous time, energy, and effort to participate in a professional development program at the University of Minnesota? The answer can ostensibly be explained by numbers: demographics, statistics, and standardized scores. But a richer and more complex response moves beyond the numbers and allows us to understand the realities, the challenges, and the strengths of a rural district seeking to improve the way it serves its language minority students.

With 44% of America's English language learners (ELLs) residing in rural communities (Berube, 2002), it is not surprising that many of Minnesota's rural school districts would reflect this new reality. From 1999–2005, there was a 29.57% increase in the national enrollment growth of ELLs in rural districts (communities of less than 25,000) as compared to 4.45% in non-rural districts (ELL Student Enrollment, 2006). Though traditionally based in large urban centers, ELLs and their families have begun settling in rural communities unprepared for these changing demographics. The Hispanic population itself increased from

1.5 to 3.2 million residents in small-town America over the last twenty years (Kandel & Cromartie, 2004). According to Geller (2001), the 2000 Census data for one southern region in Minnesota showed an increase of 6,469 new residents, with 77% self-identified as Hispanic/Latino; 7% as white, and the remaining 16% Black/Somali. The Minnesota Rural Education Association, representing 150 school districts within the state, now includes many schools serving students for whom English is a second language. For those rural schools whose ELLs have finally become not only visible but a 'critical mass,' due in large part to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability measures, the need for these students to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is no longer the personal hope and expectation of a handful of ESL teachers in the district, but the concern and responsibility of an entire school staff.

It was for this reason that a rural elementary school staff of six, with their principal's support, from a town we will refer to as 'Hansen' found the invitation to participate in sustained professional development of interest. A grant through the University of Minnesota's TEAM UP (Teaching English Language Learners Action Model to Unite Professionals) project offered them the opportunity to participate in a two-year teacher professional development program to address issues of curriculum, instruction, and assessment of second language learners. With funding to cover release days for substitutes, materials and resources, stipends, graduate course credit, and even travel expenses, this rural elementary school team could now tackle the unique challenges it faced with 21% of its K-5 students designated as English language learners. Composed of two classroom teachers, one ESL teacher, one reading specialist, one speech-language clinician, and one paraprofessional, the team's members reflected a wide range of expertise and many years of teaching experience. Their journey towards sounder policies and procedures to address 'best practices' for their new learners will be described in this 'case in point' against the backdrop of the realities and strengths of rural districts in general, and those of Hansen in particular.

## **REALITIES OF A RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Hansen, like most rural communities, reflects the realities of a rural school district. It is geographically isolated from a large metropolitan area by a distance of several hours or more. This fact alone impacts its teaching staff, particularly its English as a second language (ESL) teachers, who are professionally isolated from their peers, lacking collegial support, and with no local access to mentorship by experienced ESL teachers to draw upon. In contrast to their urban ESL teacher counterparts, "[ESL] educators in the nation's rural areas often have to rely largely on their own wits to build ESL programs" (Zehr, 2001, p. 1).

Professional isolation in rural areas creates problems in the recruitment and retention of qualified (licensed) and experienced teachers, particularly in specific areas of expertise (Collins, 1999; Reeves, 2003). There is the propensity to utilize tutors and educational assistants rather than qualified teachers to instruct English language learners (The Education Alliance, n.d.). Meador (2005, p. 152) noted in her study on rural ELLs that rural ESL teachers "voiced their frustration with classroom teachers who made little attempt to establish relationships with Spanish-speaking students, instead relying on one or two classroom aides and one bilingual ESL teacher spread among all the classrooms to provide instruction and adult support." This situation is of special concern in districts with struggling second language learners who would benefit from direct instruction provided by experienced and professionally prepared ESL teachers, one group that can be difficult to attract to rural districts.

The NCLB mandates for finding highly qualified teachers have exacerbated this problem, disadvantaging rural systems even further in their attempt to comply with state and federal

guidelines (Jimerson, 2005a). Critics of NCLB include issues of rural schools as one of many that arise when all schools are lumped together into a "one size fits all" mandate. Going as far as labeling this NCLB policy as 'placism,' Jimerson (2005b, p. 211) states that this bias against students in rural schools "discriminates against people based on where they live." She argues that "small rural schools have excelled using successful strategies such as multi-age classrooms, interdisciplinary teaching, and performance-based assessments" (p. 218), strategies which don't align well with the high-stakes testing of NCLB.

Professional and geographic isolation are also manifested in the area of staff development. With no major universities nearby, the ability for teachers to have access to ongoing and comprehensive staff development to address the needs of their second language learners becomes more problematic. Often the sheer geographic size of many rural districts, with relatively low numbers of students, hampers comprehensive, district-initiated staff development efforts. Creative ways to offer ongoing training for these mainstream teachers becomes of paramount importance, requiring principals with vision and leadership skills who understand the importance of all staff prepared for these students (Wrigley, 2000). Generally, rural administrators tend to be inexperienced in addressing federal (Title III) requirements for serving students learning English as a second language. Even those most sincere in their efforts often do not place ELL needs very high on their school agendas (The Education Alliance, n. d.). Their district's approaches tend to be reactive rather than proactive in planning for their English language learners. Notification of the district's failure to meet federal guidelines for adequate yearly progress (AYP) or state guidelines for annual measurable achievement objectives (AMAO) for their ELL population often serves as the ultimate catalyst for some rural administrators to take initial action in addressing these students' achievement gap.

Limited funding is not a unique concern to most school districts in these days of tightened budgets but rural districts claim that it is more sharply felt by them since they cannot "derive the benefits of economies of scale" (Reeves, 2003). Thus, funding disparities as well as declining enrollment in many rural districts account for rising expenses disproportionate to revenue available. This easily results in scarce resources for mainstream and ESL teachers whose students do not have the proficiency, either linguistically or academically, to make use of the same English grade-level textbooks and other materials available to mainstream classmates. Effective and engaging reading materials, for example, that would be simpler in language and also age and content-appropriate for beginning language learners, are the types of resources that would be cut from a budget, with the argument that they benefit too few students.

The term 'low incidence schools' is one most commonly used in the ESL field to describe settings which have a small number of ELLs represented in the district and typically an itinerant ESL teacher who travels from school to school within a district to provide students with educational support. Rural low incidence schools often fall short of funding and access to grants without that 'critical mass' of ELLs needed to generate dollars to hire ESL staff and provide adequate programming (Abdelrahim & Di Cerbo, 2006). Nevertheless, districts such as these even with only "two immigrant students with a language barrier are under the same federal legal obligation to provide those students with a program to learn English as those districts that receive an influx of students" (Zehr, 2001, p. 2). At the other end of the spectrum are a few rural school districts which can be considered 'high incidence,' with ELL populations representing 25% or more of the student population (Auerbach, 2006). Within these districts in Minnesota, it is not unusual to find a meat or poultry processing plant that has attracted immigrants and refugees with enticements of steady paychecks through year-round employment, resulting in stable populations that become active members of the rural community.

A large influx of newcomers appearing within a relatively short period of time in a traditional small homogeneous town can often send its residents reeling, with culture shock felt by both sides. The arrival of these newcomers can be met with great hostility, apprehension, and resistance, especially when a community has had few 'outsiders' in many decades, if not longer (Schram, 1993). What would be considered a daily reality in urban settings across the country is transformed into a daunting and unwelcome challenge in Midwestern rural communities where diversity has historically been considered the presence of both Lutheran and Catholic churches. The lack of cultural awareness, tolerance, and acceptance of newcomers is not a new phenomenon in the United States. But in rural communities, where a stop at the local market, gas station, or bank often results in encounters with fellow residents, the hostile feelings generated on Main Street can be too easily played out in school classrooms.

Rural English language learners can suffer from marginalization in the school environment. Meador's research on the marginalized status of Mexican immigrant girls in the rural Southwest described how closely these students' identities were connected to their "participation in school social and sporting events" (2005, p. 153). Their Anglo teachers saw their lack of involvement in sports and other activities as a major reason for their lack of social as well as academic acceptance. Interestingly, Diaz' (2005) research on school attachment of rural Latino youth in Minnesota underscores the importance of a school staff's willingness and ability not only to engage these students in academic work but also to draw them into after-school extracurricular activities so that strong social bonds with their mainstream peers can be forged. His findings indicate that "students' level of school attachment is increased by the frequency of attendance at community events and by the number of extracurricular activities in which students engaged" (p. 300). A rural town that welcomes its newcomers at local events is providing its language minority youth with much needed entry into the heart of the community.

Cultural isolation in a rural community is another reality faced by the first wave of these students and their families, with few stores and services offering the types of foods and traditional supplies normally used. With less access to bilingual support and cross-cultural liaisons in a rural setting, just learning what is available to them becomes a greater challenge (Zehr, 2001). And even though public schooling is available to all immigrant and refugee children, the 'cultural script' underlying the American school experience is not. As much as rural school districts are challenged on many fronts to provide a positive and effective learning environment for their English language learners, the families of these learners are also challenged to access, understand, and participate in an educational system that is usually quite foreign to them.

## **STRENGTHS OF RURAL DISTRICTS**

Yet a case can and should be made for the strengths of rural districts for its advocates point to myriad factors that could work in favor of its newcomers, making its school setting an advantageous place for ELLs to be. Bailey (2000) from the Center of Rural Affairs cites statistics showing how much safer small schools are, noting much lower levels of violent crime and discipline problems. He also points to twenty-three research studies reflecting much higher extracurricular participation rates among small schools where "in nearly every measure, rural students [. . .] equal or exceed the participation rates of all students" (p.3). This increase in student involvement typically results in increased parental involvement and resulting community interaction, with ELL families proud to watch their children on stage, on the sports field, or wherever else activities take them. Attending a game or a concert at

school is often far less intimidating and uncomfortable for ELL families than meeting with a child's teacher in a one-on-one parent conference.

Many of our rural teachers have offered anecdotal examples of their job satisfaction working in a rural setting, reiterating what researchers have found in their studies (Gibbs, 2000; Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005). One of our Hansen team members said the following:

I love working in a small rural community with children and grandchildren of some of my family, friends and neighbors. We have a stake in what happens in our school because this is where we live and work and educate our children too. I believe one can "bloom where you are planted." Knowing a good amount of the staff for me is an advantage. We celebrate each other's life events and support and hold each other up during the bad times. I think we are a professional group, respecting the privacy issues of our students, but we know the communities and people that make up our district well enough to pick up on something that is happening in a family or something that does not feel right.

A teacher from Iowa noted how "staff members are better connected to their communities and parents, and therefore, better able to help immigrant students to become part of the community" (Zehr, 2001, p.3). This greater familiarity and geographic proximity offers teachers many more opportunities to informally interact with ESL families through daily routines at the post office, shops, churches, and other local venues. Rural teachers can also more readily tap into local community resources such as volunteer groups, fraternal organizations, libraries, and key businesses where their personal connections are invaluable.

Teachers in rural school settings have opportunities to impact decision-making and take on leadership positions that might be unattainable in large urban districts. What could be described as staffing limitations on one hand, could be seen as an opening for talented and capable teachers who want to advocate for their ELLs. Teachers willing to do the groundwork will find a fertile field. A rural Vermont ESL teacher, for example, began a cross-district consortium to apply for funding unavailable to small rural districts which resulted in monthly meetings for collegial support, cooperation, and shared knowledge (Auerbach, 2006). A southwestern Minnesota network of rural and semi-rural ESL teachers began meeting in a central location to provide themselves with a similar opportunity to connect with their peers (Edstam, 2002). Rural teachers may well have the unique ability to effect change in their schools within a system with fewer layers of bureaucracy and much more face-to-face communication between the school board, administrators, and staff. Indeed, Gibbs' (2000, p. 3) found that "rural teachers have a greater degree of autonomy and more direct influence over school policy than do urban teachers." A rural team of highly professional staff members can make a huge impact on the policies and practices of their school and district.

Whether in urban, suburban, or rural schools, it is clear that the principal plays a key role regarding the education of ELLs. Having written extensively about the challenges of educating ELLs in rural areas, Wrigley (2000) says the following:

The district can provide structure and guidance, but it is the school principal who ensures that the programs are properly implemented and maintained. It is the principal who sets the tone of acceptance, who encourages his or her staff to warmly welcome the language minority students and their families. I cannot stress enough the importance of the principal's attitude in areas such as valuing what students bring both culturally and linguistically, and initiating efforts to communicate with the families on a meaningful level. In my experience, the schools that are most effectively addressing the many needs of their ELLs are those schools that have a principal who views the new population as an enriching

rather than problematic addition to the school environment. (p. 3)

A principal capable of showing this level of leadership would represent a unique 'strength' in a rural district.

## **THE HANSEN CASE**

Hansen is a rural school district of approximately 1400 students, with a language minority population of 14%, all of whom are Spanish speakers from Mexico or parts of south Texas. The highest percentage of ELLs is 21% (107 students) at the K-5 elementary school. When the school staff began to work with the TEAM UP project in the summer of 2005, the school had one full-time licensed ESL teacher, one bilingual (Spanish) ESL teacher seeking licensure, one full-time ESL paraprofessional, one half-time paraprofessional, and one half-time family service worker. ELLs were identified by the state's Home Language Questionnaire and an informal language/reading assessment and were placed in an ELL language level based on a district constructed informal oral language survey given by the ESL teachers.

Hansen's program service model was completely pull-out in small segments of time, with as little as 15 minutes designated at some points to be followed by 30 minutes later in the day. With ELLs equally distributed per class per grade, both ESL teachers pulled ELLs from every classroom at every grade level. The ESL teachers determined reading levels at each grade and divided the ELLs into small groups accordingly and focused on reading instruction. With class schedules set around school specialist schedules (i.e., music, art, computers), ELLs were usually pulled from classes during the content (i.e., math, science, social studies) instruction time.

### **Challenges Faced by Hansen**

One of the biggest challenges identified by the team was the planning and scheduling of staff development focused on 'best practices' for ELLs. The district's staff development committee had its own list of topics, so the TEAM UP group needed to do some negotiating to put the ESL focus higher on the committee's agenda. They also had to deal with staff resistance to any 'outside of contract' time for this development, so finding pre or post class time meant shortening the school day on one end or the other to accommodate the staff time needed. Lacking funding for outside speakers, the district looked to the TEAM UP members themselves to design and present the staff development materials or find guest speakers with nominal or no fees to do so.

Getting teacher 'buy in' to even consider change is an issue at every school but particularly at Hansen where, with high numbers of veteran teachers, many are seemingly unwilling to change their instructional paradigm. Challenging experienced teacher practice is no easy task. Resistance to such change takes many forms, and the Hansen team too often heard "Show me the research!" when they suggested that change might be warranted. Unless staff can be convinced of the effectiveness of new strategies and techniques for teaching ELLs, they are resistant to making changes from their 'tried and true' methods of teaching. Though their ELL population has increased exponentially in the last decade, many of these mainstream teachers, in a stereotypic but common perspective, still look to the ESL teachers to 'fix the problem' by removing the ELLs from the classroom 'until they speak English fluently.'

Administrative support has been inconsistent, with a recent superintendent of brief tenure whose concern for ELLs was insincere at best and an elementary principal with good

intentions but torn by staff factions and union threats. The principal's main reason for participation in this grant was his concern over the rapid demographic increase of his ELL population. What was appealing about the grant was that one of its key components was the creation and implementation of a school action plan to address the needs of its English language learners specifically developed and carried out by each elementary school team. The principal recognized the potential value of this type of professional effort put forth by a team of six dedicated staff members. The team seized an opportunity to collaborate in ways that might effect changes that were so clearly needed.

Hansen was also dealing with some other realities of rural school districts. Its ESL teachers were understaffed, with only one of the two at the elementary school qualified and licensed, though very much a novice; the other was on a variance and working on her license but unfamiliar with the elementary setting. There had been a bilingual ESL teacher who left the school after a short time there, so high turnover was also a problem. Filling the teaching gap, paraprofessionals were used a great deal for one-on-one tutoring of ELLs, who, in many instances, had more direct instruction from these aides than from their classroom teachers.

With scheduling done to accommodate specialists' schedules, ELLs missed a great deal of content instruction. By pulling students from several classes at each grade level, ESL teachers were unable to connect with the large number of classroom teachers, making meaningful communication about student work and any type of collaborative efforts between teachers almost impossible. Newcomers with minimal English were not getting enough instruction at the level they needed. Overall, academic achievement for English language learners was suffering.

Many aspects of an ESL program that should have been solidly in place were loosely dealt with. Registration procedures and intake forms for entering ELLs needed attention. Appropriate questions requesting relevant information needed to be developed as the old ones were often irrelevant if not intrusive; much needed background information and academic records from the last school also needed to be included. The assessment of ELL language skills for entering ELLs had to be standardized and understood not only by ESL teachers but also by mainstream teachers. Access to a bilingual Spanish speaker to meet with families, especially during an initial registration was often limited, creating a stressful experience for all involved. Attention to ELL parental involvement, always a challenge, had not been addressed in any concerted way. And lack of translated written material and a school answering machine message only in English made communication with and notification of parents very difficult.

Hansen was also suffering financially, with declining enrollment causing major cuts in teaching staff and in dollars available for all the other needs of a school district. Some non-teaching staff positions that were cut had their responsibilities redistributed, making workloads heavier. The only bonus was more available classroom space, a rarity in most schools, which allowed the ESL teachers to have a very large and comfortable room for their pull-out classes and paraprofessional tutoring. Even common planning time by grade level, once a mainstay, was eliminated due to a reduced budget that had teaching schedules reassigned.

### **HANSEN'S SCHOOL ACTION PLAN**

One of the long-term goals for each team in the TEAM UP project was the creation of a school action plan to address each site's most pressing needs where service to ELLs is

concerned. Over a two-year period, the Hansen team identified the following four major goals:

1. To increase collaborative efforts between mainstream and ESL teachers
2. To develop and improve procedures for ESL programming
3. To increase parent involvement of ELL students
4. To provide staff development that addressed ESL issues

Each of these goals had specific objectives that helped the team approach them in small incremental steps, which, taken together, would move them towards achieving their aims.

How successful have they been with each goal? Here are the results thus far.

#### 1. To Increase Collaborative Efforts between Mainstream and ESL Teachers

Efforts to increase collaboration have been made through the process of clustering. The team considers one of their greatest successes to be the clustering of ELLs in grades 1-5 in either one or two classrooms at each grade level rather than being distributed equally across the grade. The ESL teachers have assigned themselves to specific grades, thereby further reducing the number of teachers with whom they need to connect. As one team member stated, "this has increased collaboration and professional conversation between our ESL teachers and our classroom teachers." ESL and mainstream teachers are able to discuss ways to increase ELL student achievement in a more timely and meaningful way.

In kindergarten, the ELLs are being clustered 60 minutes every morning for one of their academic blocks. During that time, an ESL teacher, an ESL paraprofessional, and a special education teacher join the kindergarten teacher in a collaborative teaching effort to work at the levels needed by these students, either at workstations or in small group settings.

With clustering in effect, the two ESL paraprofessionals have fewer classrooms to cover, allowing them to work with ELL students who can remain in their rooms and participate more actively in their classes.

#### 2. To Develop and Improve Procedures for ELL programming

Addressing the ESL program, the team worked extensively on revising their ELL registration procedures, developing new forms and channeling the paperwork in a more streamlined manner. A revised placement form was an important part of this overhaul. It included the ELLs' oral language level, their reading level, and the services being received (i.e., ESL; special education; Title I). A policy was created to share these forms with classroom teachers as another means of increasing communication with them about their newly entering ELLs.

In an effort to more smoothly schedule ESL services, the staff were informed in their August workshop as to times allocated for ELLs to receive instruction from ESL teachers. When classroom teachers began in the fall, they knew that the ESL teachers would be addressing language through content and focusing on the content areas. That information helped them plan their own instruction for their ELLs.

With the district having failed to make the state's AMAO, the team took on the enormous task of writing a plan to improve ELL achievement on a K-12 basis with Minnesota Department of Education sponsored assistance. This included a presentation to the school

board which was preceded by many months of work reviewing ELL test data such as the MN SOLOM and the TEAE test with the help of the district testing coordinator.

Recognizing the poor academic showing of their ELLs, the ESL teacher and team leader joined forces to write a grant that was funded for a migrant summer school program in the district. It was highly successful as shown by a comparison of pre and post testing results with significant gains in both reading and math for the ELLs who attended.

### 3. To Increase Parent Involvement Of ELL Students

Although ELL parents were not purposely ignored prior to TEAM UP, the team decided that a more focused effort needed to be made to increase ELL parent involvement. An ELL family night was specifically scheduled in the fall and was a major success, with far more staff participation and a high rate of parent attendance. A team member noted that during the event a feeling of "wellbeing was introduced," with great enthusiasm shown by the ELL families. With interpreters on the scene, the parent-teacher conference in the fall had an 81% attendance rate, a high point for that event.

Another change which, as one team member said, "might seem small but has made a huge difference" was the relocation of the family service worker to the elementary school office from another far corner of the school to be more readily available to translate or interpret for ELL parents when needed.

### 4. To Provide Staff Development that Addressed ESL Issues

Addressing staff development began on an incremental basis. The first year, a monthly quick five-minute 'information blast' with a suggested technique or cultural fact was shared at each faculty meeting, where TEAM UP was always on the agenda. Team members called this a "mini in-service that keeps us at the forefront of people's minds so they know that we're still out there and that we're the resource people to help them with issues they might have." The second year, a TEAM UP staff binder for each staff member was created and filled with ESL related articles on instruction, assessment, parent involvement, culture, etc., for teachers to access information. Team members continue to add to these binders throughout the year.

The team adds ESL oriented information to their school bulletin, seeing it as "simple and easy thing to do but it's a way to share staff development in an out-of-the-box way of thinking about it." They also created a bulletin board in their staff lounge to increase communication among all the staff committees within the school. "Even in a small district, there is a lot of turnover on committees and people don't even know who they can go to for information about different things."

The interim superintendent has been vocally supportive of the team's request for further staff development on ESL issues and has given them his full cooperation. This, in itself, was met with great team satisfaction as contrasted with reactions from the prior administration.

## **HANSEN - MOVING FORWARD**

The Hansen team is already planning ahead for the 2007-2008 school year, beyond their TEAM UP involvement. The team has an ongoing list of tasks to tackle in addressing the four goals outlined for itself. It needs to evaluate its collaborative model now that clustered classrooms have been put into place and determine how well these classrooms are providing opportunities for their ESL teachers to work with classroom teachers, either as team

teachers or as co-planners of parts of the curriculum. Other than the kindergarten cluster teachers, only a few classroom teachers have stepped forward to participate in collaborative efforts, pointing to time as the main factor preventing them from doing so. The team has been brainstorming creative ways to address this by identifying possible times during the week when cluster teachers at each grade level could meet with their ESL teacher.

Team members will be making another school board presentation in the next few months so they can speak directly to the board about the ways in which the district can best address the needs of their ELL population. This presentation serves to make the team's work more public, while at the same time underscoring the importance of attending to the instructional needs of this student population. They are anxious to continue their work with staff development and are developing a seven session plan to be carried out over a two-year period that addresses the following issues: ELL strategies; collaboration and team teaching; flexible reading groupings; language and content objectives; differentiated instruction; and test data evaluation.

There is a strong need to continue working on ELL parent involvement and an interest in looking at alternative parent-teacher conference formatting that would allow interested Hispanic parents to come during set blocks of time, in an "open house" fashion, rather than only at appointed times. In that way, families can attend together, supporting each other in the process of connecting with the school community. The team leader wants to investigate greater ELL parent involvement activities with other local school districts that would encourage different types of resource centers or cooperatives to meet monthly and share ideas. She would like to have a Title III networking group replicate the same type of benefits she has seen derived from a Title I networking group across several rural school districts. The team is hopeful that the yearly 'Arts Night' can have a multicultural component to it for the first time, attracting ELL families. And more cooperation will be sought from the local Chamber of Commerce, local churches, and local businesses to provide resources and/or funding for school related events and activities that would further involve ELLs and their families.

A revised district ESL program guidebook is being planned to include all of the ESL forms, procedures, and service model and will be made available to all staff as well as parents. A review of instruction time allotted for ESL levels 1 - 4 will also be under discussion to determine how and when ESL teachers work with ELLs at varying levels of English proficiency.

## **CONCLUSION**

Bernard Berube (2000; 2002), the ground-breaking author on ESL instruction in rural schools, identified three **R's** to frame his discussion: 1) **recognition** of the existence of English language learners; 2) **responsibility** on the part of all school staff to meet ELL learning needs; and 3) **respect** for each language learner as shown by respect for the ESL profession when programs are held to the highest standards. As he (2002) notes:

The three R's of LEP [limited English proficient] students and for the (ESL) profession appear particularly elusive [italics added] in the nation's rural communities, where LEP enrollments are low, where the professional staff are commonly unprepared for the changing realities of having LEP children in their midst, and where LEP newcomer children struggle to fit in to a setting where their language, their skin color, and their culture may be viewed as inferior at worst or exotic at best. (p. 1)

These three R's are not 'elusive' on the Hansen team but in fact are positively reflected in the attitude and work of its team members. These individuals are well aware of the realities of their own rural school district and can enumerate its challenges better than their critics. But they are also very proud of its strengths and have tried to build on those in developing their school action plan. They understand very well the necessity of process, that the very act of sharing their professional expertise and tackling seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the complex world of schools is an integral part of the work they do. They have become believers in incremental change and have seen the value of taking small steps leading towards a major goal. Team members have come to know each other better as friends and as colleagues, in ways that cannot help but have a positive influence on student learning and school success. Since their initial TEAM UP meetings during the summer of 2005, Hansen's ELL population has continued to increase, though overall district enrollment has dropped dramatically. As numbers continue to tell one story, the Hansen team is intent upon telling theirs.

## **AUTHORS**

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'apple pie and enchiladas' is taken from the title of a book by A. V. Millard & J. Chapa, called *Apple Pie and Enchiladas: Latino Newcomers in the Rural Midwest* published in 2004 by University of Texas Press. The authors note how much more easily ethnic food is accepted into these communities than are the newcomers themselves.