

Sheltering Students from the Deluge

Tina Zmak describes how a challenged school district is improving its results for English Learners using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol Model

Lawrence Public Schools (LPS) is an urban district in

Lawrence, Massachusetts, located approximately 30 miles north of Boston. While only 24 percent of students are considered English learners (EL), nearly 83 percent identify a language other than English spoken at home. In most homes, Spanish is the primary language.

In 2002, Massachusetts voters replaced a state law that provided for transitional bilingual education in public schools with a new law requiring that, with limited exceptions, “all public school children must be taught English by being taught all subjects in English and being placed in English language classrooms.”

While LPS had a sheltered English immersion program for ELs as required by the new law, the superintendent felt more needed to be done. “To meet students’ needs and help them achieve success, we needed to accelerate English language acquisition in content areas,” said Dr. Wilfredo T. Laboy, superintendent of LPS. “Our district is unique in that we have the highest concentration of Latino students, by size and proportion, anywhere east of Texas. We felt we needed to give all our teachers another tool in their toolbox to differentiate and improve instruction for English learners and all our students.”

In 2006, LPS implemented Enhancing Instruction for ELs with The SIOP[®] Model, a professional development program offered by Pearson Education, that helps educators teach academic content to ELs while promoting their English language development. The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model is a model for lesson planning and implementation of high quality sheltered instruction for all educators across content areas.

LPS worked with Pearson Education’s Curriculum Professional Development group to build a sheltered instruction model to address their specific needs and improve student achievement. The district employed a “train the trainer” approach, with a master cohort of 50 pre K-12 teachers and 15 central office staff receiving on-site training. The master teachers and Pearson trainers then provided face-to-face professional development to pre K-8 teachers district-wide. In 2006 and 2007, teachers received training in the eight components and 30 features of the SIOP model, with a focus on implementing four of the eight components in the first year, and adding the other four in year two. Training for high school teachers began in fall 2007.

“We know that good teaching equals good results and outcomes for students,” said Laboy. “SIOP is good instruction no matter who it’s being delivered to. The eight components and 30 features are good pedagogy. It helps teachers to meet the needs of all students.”

The features within the eight components make up the observation protocol, where educators assess the level of sheltered instruction in their classrooms. The information is used to re-evaluate sheltered instruction practices, and refine and improve lessons. This form of lesson analysis helps educators prepare an appropriate lesson plan, so as to share and expand instruction to better meet the needs of ELs in their classrooms.

“When you look at any school system in America serving linguistically diverse students, you’ll find that most people delivering instruction are not ethnically diverse. A key benefit of SIOP is that it first serves as an educational tool for adults,” said Laboy. “Often, teachers find themselves at a loss as to how to differentiate instruction to meet the needs



of linguistically diverse students. SIOP creates the kind of sensitivity and awareness teachers need to understand the students who appear before them every day. It provides concrete strategies to differentiate instruction, and it helps teachers take a deeper look and reflect on how to help all students in their classroom.”

In LPS, teachers work in collaborative teams to review, assess, and prepare sheltered lesson plans across content areas. To further enhance its implementation, LPS launched “SIOP Resident Classrooms,” an extension of the Resident Classrooms program instituted by Laboy. In Resident Classrooms, teachers can observe other teachers who demonstrate mastery on a given subject or strategy across all content areas. Teachers can then debrief with the master teacher and return to their classrooms to try what they learned. The district also employs full-time coaches who participate in the visits to Resident Classrooms and help guide teachers in their work.

“If you look at some earlier sheltered instruction models, they were geared primarily toward language development. There was a strong emphasis on language acquisition and later they brought in content,” said Laboy. “SIOP, on the other hand, has a great balance in that it provides specific language goals and content goals for students in the same lesson. So teachers are able to help students get content a lot quicker. The more content, the more academic language students develop. That’s where we want to bring the student — to content language, not just basic communication skills. That’s the power of SIOP.

“We’ve just completed our first full year of the SIOP program, and we’re already seeing the impact,” he said. “Teachers feel better about

MAP Reading – Percent of Students Scoring in Basic and Proficient Combined (Passing)

