

Chapter 2

Innovative Ideas for Tutoring and Mentoring Young English Learners

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ABSTRACT

Lagging high school graduation rates for English Learners remains a priority concern for states across the nation, and educators under pressure from federal and state accountability measures and tight local budgets are struggling to find solutions for strengthening academic achievement for English Learners and ultimately improving their chances of achieving high school graduation and moving on to postsecondary levels. Educators can look to their own communities for sustainable, low-cost tutoring and mentoring. This chapter describes a community collaboration between a high school and its feeder elementary school that facilitates high school students' volunteering as tutors and mentors to elementary English learners in a suburban school district in the Southeast. The background for the benefits of tutoring and mentoring for English Learners, a description of the program benefits for the various stakeholders, detailed steps for creating a multi-age, community tutoring and mentoring program, and resources for educators are included.

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LOOKING FOR HELP: SUPPORTING ENGLISH LEARNERS

In the early morning rush students swept in and out of the classroom, dropping book bags and calling out to me, their teacher, and their friends, before sitting down with unfinished homework assignments and pencils at the work table. The students, fifth grade English Learners (ELs) at a suburban elementary school in the southeastern United States, talked all at once listing off their needs, which were many and varied and to them quite urgent, as soon as they settled down at the table. “We’re behind on our reading of the Civil War novel for Social Studies!” said one. “Help, Mrs. Barker! Our ‘expert project’ presentations are tomorrow,” said another. “Help, I didn’t understand the math homework, and I don’t want to sit out at recess again!” snapped a third. I plunged into the seemingly endless load of assignments with the students, working around the table to help each of the seven students as they slowly progressed through their work. In a moment of quiet, one student across the table suddenly looked up from her work and loudly addressed me. “Mrs. Barker,” said Lidia, “I want to go to college, but I don’t think I am going to make it!”

Startled, I caught my breath and simply looked at Lidia, shocked that she had spoken the words out loud. She had actually spoken aloud the awful thing I wrestle with in my heart on a daily basis, the knowledge that spurs me to look for help for my students from every angle and source.

“First things first, Lidia,” I replied. “Let’s get through fifth grade,” I said with a smile before turning back to the impatient student at hand. I knew all too well that despite the efforts of her parents and her own motivation and conscientious attention to schoolwork, Lidia’s chances of attending college are slim, since statistically less than half of my state’s EL students will graduate from high school, potentially slamming the door

on any opportunity for post-secondary education, but I pushed those negative thoughts into the background, focusing instead on supporting my students’ successes within my realm of influence—the elementary school classroom.

CLIMBING THE EDUCATIONAL LADDER: A POPULATION IN NEED OF HELP

Educators who work with immigrant children in the United States understand that often these students face significant challenges throughout their journey through public schools as they climb the standards-based curriculum ladder with the additional load of English language acquisition on their backs. In addition to the steep academic ascent required to progress in U.S. schools, many ELs must maneuver with caution past loose and missing rungs of the ladder—lower levels of family literacy limiting family academic support, limited resources for supplies and technology taken for granted by other students and sometimes even educators, and pressures stemming from living at or near the poverty level. Walking across the stage to receive a diploma may not be a priority to a young man or woman who has the option of working to support his or her family, whether the family lives in the U.S. or in their home country, especially when the traditions associated with high school graduation in the U.S. are not part of a family’s history. Parents of young immigrant students may have taken great personal risks and made significant sacrifices to give their children educational opportunities in the United States, but their own experiences and the realities of life may influence or alter their vision of what is possible.

Concerned educators of young immigrant students understand the relatively short distance from elementary classroom performance to high school graduation and wonder how they can make a difference in the dismal reality of EL graduation rates in the United States. While the graduation

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