E³ Spotlight: Central Texas English Language Learner Collaborative

The Challenge

Students who speak English as a second language, or English language learners (ELLs), have unique needs in an academic environment where they *must acquire new language skills while learning rigorous academic content*. In elementary schools, there are often options for language supports or dual-language courses that allow for primary language acquisition integrated with core coursework instruction. However, by the time students reach middle school, there is little support provided in a language other than English. In many cases, the lack of support at the secondary level leads to low academic performance, and in many cases students struggle to complete high school.
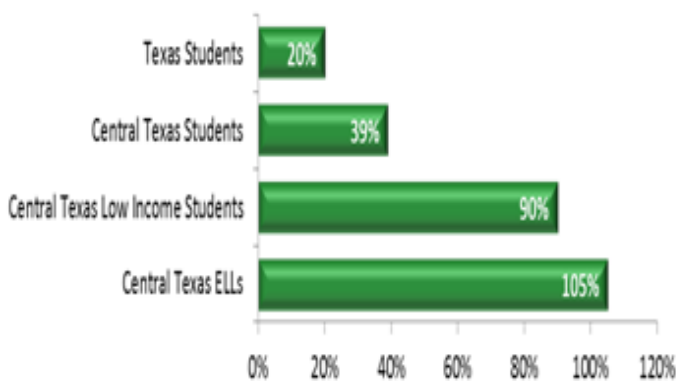
Compelling Data

One in six students in Texas are English language learners. This is the fastest growing population in Central Texas with ELL student enrollment doubling over the last decade. While over 50 languages are spoken in Central Texas schools, the great majority of our ELLs (about 90%) are Spanish speakers. Latino students have passing rates from 6 to 20 percentage points lower than their Anglo peers on 8th grade standardized tests.

Student Population Growth Rates, 2002 to 2012

Category	Growth Rate
Texas Students	20%
Central Texas Students	39%
Central Texas Low Income Students	90%
Central Texas ELLs	105%

Moreover, the achievement gap in average student performance scores on state assessments have barely moved in the last decade. By high school the performance gap has widened. Only 8% of ELL students graduating college ready, compared with 58% of all Central Texas students

Current practices for teaching and supporting ELLs are not consistent across districts or campuses, and are rarely based on evidence of success. Due to the rapidly shifting demographics and a clear need for improvement, Central Texas has the unique opportunity to act as an incubator for identifying effective practices in serving students whose first language is not English.

Common Agenda

In an effort to improve instructional practices, address mobility issues, share best practices, and build capacity within local school districts for meeting the challenge of this rapidly growing population, E3 Alliance convened the Central Texas English Language Learner Collaborative in 2009 to address the needs of this critical population and specifically address the closing of achievement gaps for ELL students. Membership in the collaborative includes Bilingual/ESL (English as a Second Language) Directors from 11 school districts, the Education Service Center Region XIII, and faculty from the higher education community responsible for Bilingual Education and Teacher Preparation Programs.

The rapid growth of students who have traditionally struggled most in our schools could be seen as a deficit for our region. Instead, we see a unique opportunity: *if we can change the system and services to build on the strength of multiple languages, and build a truly bilingual, multicultural, academically prepared student population, we can have a workforce that creates a true competitive advantage for our region in a 21st century global economy.*

Changed Practices

To date, the ELL Collaborative has: a) surveyed practices of districts across the region and found that they were highly inconsistent and lacked efficiency, b) applied the best research and available literature in the country to create a *Rubric for High Functioning ELL Campuses* for administrators that showcases aligned and research-based effective instructional practices, c) identified the need for increased input by Bilingual Directors in the creation and alignment of district curriculum, both to improve instruction and address the needs of mobile students, and d) conducted ground-breaking research, in the *Bright Spots Study for English Language Learners,* to identify promising and replicable practices to better serve ELLs based on objective growth data and qualitative research at high performing schools.

Systems Change

E3 Alliance (E3) uses objective data and focused community collaboration to align our education systems so that all students are prepared for success in their postsecondary endeavors. As part of the cradle to career approach to positive systems change in education, E3 Alliance strives to eliminate achievement gaps and create systems that allow students to follow a path of success through the entire educational continuum. Embedded in this mission is a focus on identifying and sharing best practices based on strong research and evidence-based practices for successfully teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) in the Central Texas region and beyond.

ELL Outcomes Systemic Alignment

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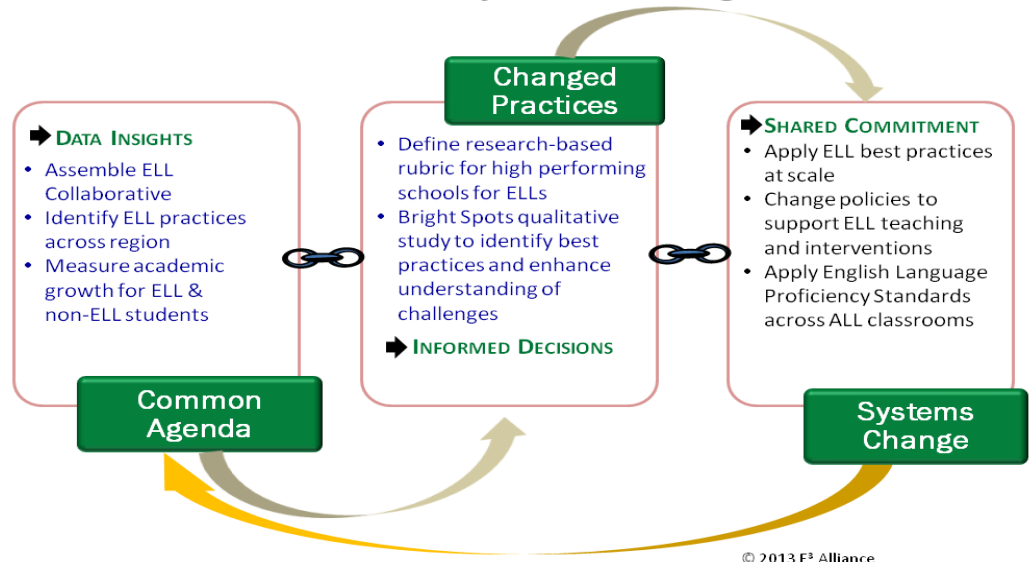
With the ELL Rubric and *Bright Spots Study* in hand, we are building a platform for ELL learner success in our region and beyond. Members of the ELL Collaborative are cooperating to develop common evidence-based tools that will have broad reach and impact across our region. The Collaborative is currently refining the ELL Rubric to incorporate the promising practices identified in the Bright Spots Study and developing a Toolkit to support continuous campus improvement. These will be piloted in the fall of 2014. Additional efforts are focused on improving bilingual teacher preparation and developing a pool of content experts who are also experts at reading and writing in the student's native language, and improving instruction for ELL students in the secondary years.