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✓ *Meet Your New President...*
Michael E. Allison - Pages 3-4

✓ *Register Today! - 2019 PA Educational*
Leadership Summit - Page 11

Plus...Safe2Say Program Update,
Assistant Principal of the Year & Legal Corner

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Challenging English Learners to Improve Academic Discourse

By Wanda J. Ramirez-Suarez and Dr. Carmen Shahadi-Rowe

About the Authors: **Wanda J. Ramirez-Suarez, M.Ed.,** is a principal at Lafayette Elementary School in the School District of Lancaster. She has worked in the education field for 24 years. During her career, she has worked in the Chicago Public Schools and in the School District of Lancaster. She has also served at the district, elementary and middle school levels in the following capacities: teacher, instructional coach, assistant principal and principal.

In addition, she has worked as an adjunct instructor at Eastern Mennonite University.

Carmen Shahadi-Rowe, Ed.D., is an English language learner (EL) instructional coach in the School District of Lancaster. She also served as the EL secondary supervisor and the EL coordinator for the School District of Lancaster. She has 20 years of experience in public education teaching Spanish and English as a Second Language, K-12. In addition, Dr. Shahadi-Rowe is an adjunct faculty member with Millersville University of Pennsylvania and Eastern Mennonite University.

Dr. Shahadi-Rowe earned her master's degree in teachers of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) from Eastern Mennonite University, and her doctorate in educational leadership from Immaculata University.

Please join us for our *Ask the Author* Zoom Webinar on Thursday, March 21 at 12 p.m. *(See page 1 for details.)*

State Context . . .

Over the past decade, the expectations of the Pennsylvania State Standards have been clearly articulated. While the expectations of the standards have been defined, teachers and administrators are still learning to align the learning goals to the standards, choose rigorous texts and create meaningful, engaging activities that are also aligned to the standards. For English learners (EL), the task of attaining proficiency in the academic standards, as well as English proficiency, presents a double challenge.

A District Perspective . . .

For several years the state's reclassification process allowed ELs who came close to reaching the overall 5.0 threshold for reclassification, or exit, from the Limited English Program (LEP) to be given a second chance to demonstrate English proficiency on a language screening tool. The EL instructional coaches in the district were charged with administering the screening tool to the borderline students. As they traveled around the district, classroom teachers expressed confidence in their students' academic knowledge and in their ability to perform well on the language screening assessment.
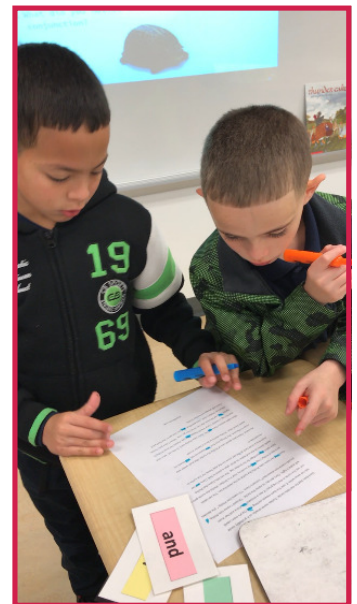
After the exam was administered, the vast majority of district students did not meet reclassification status. Why then, did these students not meet their teachers' expectations and the requirements for reclassification? A close analysis of students' test responses revealed that their receptive skills of listening and reading met the target. The results of their productive language skills, however, proved otherwise. In most cases, the language skills preventing students from reclassification were speaking and writing. Specifically, the students struggled to perform adequately on the writing section of the exam, which is weighted more heavily than speaking. Most noteworthy were students' grammar errors and inability to generate complex sentences in their writing.

Last year, at a district-wide instructional coaches meeting, the state's Language Use Inventories for Reclassification were shared. The coaches scored several ELs' writing samples, across a variety of genres, to become familiarized with the state inventories. A common refrain among the coaches was that neither native English speakers' nor ELs' had the skills to score a high rating on the writing responses.

Wong Fillmore and Fillmore (2012) noted that even mainstream English speakers are not afforded opportunities to develop mature discourse that includes sentence complexity. The authors went on to say that this type of language must be taught explicitly, along with regular instruction that includes analysis of complex text for its features.

Students in small group practice. To learn more, visit: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KRF5l3Pcw_axUlknAB3Ops65dLPpB2pr/view?usp=sharing

Data across the district showed that ELs typically stagnate in the higher levels of language proficiency. State reclassification Written Expression Language Use Inventories, even at the kindergarten level, require the use of conjunction words such as because to support their opinion (PDE, 2017). The PA Core Writing Standards, as early as fifth grade, requires students to write using sentences of varying length, as well as to expand, combine and reduce sentences for meaning, reader/listener interest and style. These high language demands on state reclassification rubrics continue into middle school and high school, where they are required to write strategically using a range of grammar and sentence structures.

The process of scoring the borderline ELs' writing in light of the PA Core Standards, conversations with our district's coaches and in depth dialogue with Principal Suarez and her English language development (ELD) teachers raised several questions: "Are we exposing our ELs to complex texts?" "Are we adequately teaching grammar and sentence complexity

> **The premise was that if students were explicitly taught about language function and structure through the use of simple, compound and complex sentence use, then the students' writing would improve."**

to our ELs?" "Is our core instruction preparing all students to be proficient speakers and writers?"

The School's Perspective...

Lafayette Elementary School is a diverse school in the School District of Lancaster. Lafayette is located in the southwest corridor of Lancaster, Pa., an area in which refugees from around the world resettle. A recent *BBC News'* story named Lancaster, Pennsylvania, "America's Refugee Capital," because Lancaster has re-settled 20 times more refugees per capita than the rest of the country since 2013. As a result, Lafayette School has seven different languages represented within the student population. The school also has an economically disadvantaged rate of 93%, and thus, has some of the same issues as many other schools that are striving to close the achievement gap. Over the last few years with accountability measures increasing, there have been many instructional conversations regarding student achievement and growth with particular attention to EL students.

Analysis...

A team of district and building level educators met to discuss and analyze the building level data. The data revealed that there was a need for EL students to be able to incorporate complex sentences into their writing; a critical component of the standards that would have a significant impact on the quality of EL students' work. More importantly, if EL students were able to incorporate complex sentences they would meet the criteria for reclassification as well as meet the standards.

This was not a matter to be addressed through intervention, nor was it an issue that impacted EL students only, this

was a core programming issue. The school needed to find a way to support all students and teachers with the classroom instructional shifts that mirrored the rigor of the standards.

The Team Intervenes by Supporting ELs in the Development of Sentence Complexity...

The team developed a deliberate and strategic plan that included explicit teaching. It was a pilot program in which EL students in grade 3-5 would be provided with direct, small-group instruction in the development of complex sentences through the use of supports. Sentence frames were aligned to those that are being used in general education classrooms to teach literacy.

The ELD team was focused on the speaking, listening and writing standards. Standards that have an impact on all students. Through much collaboration, it was established that combining sentences through the use of complex sentences in the spoken language would eventually translate into written language. The premise was that if students were explicitly taught about language function and structure through the use of simple, compound and complex sentence use, then the students' writing would improve. The development of the lessons started with the standards followed by scaffolding to meet the needs of the diverse learners. The EL students were introduced to the development of simple, compound and complex sentences through teacher modeling and small-group practice. Finally, students were given the opportunity to individually apply learned skills to a written piece. As a result, students were able to identify and articulate sentence structure components and functions. Scaffolding was deliberate and aligned to students' needs. Through much practice, the

students were able to begin to use learned skills in both oral and written formats.

Moving forward...

The implementation of mini grammar lessons on the topic of combining sentences with advanced English learners was well received. During the lesson, students identified the components of a clause and practiced combining clauses to form varying sentences. Students also identified academic vocabulary and complex sentences in an informational piece of text. Finally, students applied their newly acquired knowledge of sentence complexity to their own informational writing pieces. To scaffold students' learning, each student was given flashcards with the most basic conjunctions to serve as a resource when writing complex sentences. These flashcards were put on a ring to facilitate future learning of additional conjunctions, such as those associated with compare and contrast and cause and effect. Current anecdotal evidence shows that students are recognizing and identifying conjunctions and complex sentences in English language arts. In mathematics, students are applying these skills to both their written and oral explanations. There is still much room for student growth given that the following scaffolds are still being used: teacher modeling, prompting, repetition and sentence frames. The students, however, are slowly gaining confidence and competence with both the skills and resources. In addition, they are starting to own their learning by using precise and deliberate academic language, which is the ultimate goal.

Plans for focused and sustained professional development for all classroom teachers to receive training on

the topic of teaching sentence complexity have been made. As educators become more competent in understanding the rigor of the instructional shifts, they will then be able to plan for and deliver instruction that is aligned to the standards.

In order to ensure that the students are proficient writers, they need to be able to write for a particular audience, with a specific purpose. Educators need to be intentional about providing students with resources to develop their language skills to meet the demands of the standards. As students are equipped with the specific vocabulary associated with the unique purposes for writing, they can grow as autonomous writers who are able to use precise language to express their thoughts in more sophisticated ways, that will meet college and career demands.

For additional information, please contact Ms. Ramirez-Suarez at **wjsuarez@lancaster.k12.pa.us**. **Join us for our *Ask the Author* Zoom Webinar on Thursday, March 21 at 12 p.m.**

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Submit an Article for The Pennsylvania Administrator - Spring 2019 Theme Issue

The Pennsylvania Principals Association is seeking articles for its Spring 2019 theme issue, *"BUILDING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE."* Defining 'school climate' is daunting, particularly when it is interchanged with 'school culture.' Therefore, the following definition was selected to represent the type of articles we are looking for in this issue.

"Educational practitioners and researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of the context in which learning occurs, particularly the influence of school climate on students' academic, social and emotional outcomes. School climate is based on the subjective experiences of school life for students, staff members, school leaders, parents and the entire school community. A school's climate reflects its norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices and organizational structures. A large body of evidence connects a positive school climate to improvements in children's learning and healthy development."
Berkowitz, R., Iachini, A., Moore, H., Capp, G., Astor, R., Pitner, R. and Benbenishty, R. (February 27, 2017). School Climate. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. Ed. Retrieved Nov. 19, 2018, from http://education.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-89

We are seeking articles that expand on specific practices that **help to create a more connected school environment between and among all constituents,** along with the **evidence you have that informs effectiveness**. Articles should focus on one of the following:
♦ Programming that fosters connectiveness;
♦ Organizations that lead/support connectiveness;
♦ Training (staff, parents, students, community) for connecting to each other;
♦ Curriculum initiatives that support/foster connectiveness; or
♦ Special events that encourage, support, celebrate connectiveness.
Submit articles to sherit@paprincipals.org by March 8, 2019. For article specifications, go to:
https://www.paprincipals.org/publications/the-pennsylvania-administrator/how-to-submit-an-article