

From Divided Past to United Progress: Collaborative Leadership for English Learners

As a Multilingual English Learner (MEL) Specialist in the Tooele County School District, this past school year I had the opportunity to work with the administrators at Tooele High School in Tooele, UT on an exciting initiative aimed at improving student performance on the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs exam, a federally required assessment of English learners' academic language proficiency. Applying lessons learned from BYU's Educational Leadership M.Ed. program, especially on shaping school culture and systems for student success, we increased the number of students passing from just 3 last year to 20 this year, with significant overall growth among our approximately 147 MEL students.

Learning from Tooele's Past

In our Instructional Leadership course taught by Dr. Brian Bowles, we were encouraged to analyze our school cultures. I was fascinated as I researched the history of the Tooele Valley and the racial tensions and struggles experienced at Tooele High School over the years.

History of Immigration in the Tooele Valley

From the time of Brigham Young, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were sent to settle in the Tooele Valley. The Anaconda Copper Company built its smelter operation at the base of the Oquirrh Mountains in 1910, four miles east of Main Street Tooele (Blanthorn, 1998, p.170). The smelting company recruited workers from eastern Europe.

The immigrants who settled in Tooele were placed in housing created for mine workers on the east side of Tooele, which was referred to as the "New Town." Racial tensions between pioneer settlers and immigrants were very real, resulting in discrimination, as well as political tension that erupted in physical fights. Tooele City was divided by religious, cultural, and language differences. A school was built in New Town, but students were only enrolled until the eighth grade. If a student wished to continue his or her education, the student would need to cross to the west side of Main Street to attend Tooele High School. Many students dropped out instead of continuing their schooling. (Blanthorn, 1998).

A prominent educational leader and member of the community, Sterling Harris, used the sport of football to connect Old Town and New Town in the 1920s. A teacher and football coach, Sterling Harris recruited both Mormon youth and European immigrants to play on the team. The winning team brought the communities together as "Tooele City," proudly known as three times State Champions in high school football in 1928, 1929, and 1933. (Blanthorn, 1998, p.197). In 1992 Sterling Harris was recognized by the Utah State Legislature for his work in uniting the two halves of Tooele. ("The Legend of Sterling Harris," Tooele Transcript Bulletin, 2016).

Rising Racial Tensions and New Challenges

As a new wave of immigrants began to immigrate and settle in the Tooele Valley, racial tensions began to mount. Mexicans and Mexican Americans came to Tooele in the World War I and II eras to work on railroads and defense industry bases in the county. Later, in 1949 Mexican Americans were recruited from New Mexico to work at the Tooele Army Depot and Deseret Chemical Depot. (Blanthorn, 1988, p.176) Incidents of racial tensions erupting into violent fights between Latino and Caucasian students at THS are memories that individuals I've worked with have shared from their childhoods.

In recent years, a growing number of refugees and immigrants have moved to Tooele, primarily from Latin American countries, but also from all over the world. These students come to THS with little to no English, and varying amounts of formal schooling in their home countries. In addition to the newcomers, there are many MEL students at THS that are considered Long Term English Learners (LTEs), those who have not reached proficiency on the WIDA ACCESS assessment after 6 or more years.

In my three years at THS, I've heard students describe feeling singled out due to language and race. Many question the purpose of yearly WIDA ACCESS testing, expressing frustration about being pulled from class and being the only students required to test. They see it as a form of discrimination.

Collaborative Efforts to Improve WIDA Scores

Addressing these issues required a collaborative approach. As described in *Shaping School Culture*, effective leaders act as “healers” during times of change, who oversee transitions and heal the wounds of conflict and loss (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p.228). The need for a transition and change was ever present, and an effective change would only be possible through a collaborative school effort.

Better Conversations

We began with open conversations among MEL Facilitators, administrators, and the Federal Programs Director. When meeting with administrators and teacher leaders, the principles I learned from Dr. David Boren's courses about communication frequently come to mind, such as: seeing conversation partners as equals, conversations should be back and forth, wanting to hear what others say, invite people to speak up, and admit when you don't know.¹

As we discussed how we were going to reach and support our English Learners, a key resource we wanted to utilize was Flashlight 360 (F360), software for monitoring progress and building language skills. Licenses were limited, and we debated whether to require practice sessions. One MEL Facilitator suggested we ask the students to voluntarily participate. We agreed to honor student autonomy and present participation as optional.

¹ *Better Conversations*, Knight 2016 ; *Teams*, Duhigg 2016

Honoring Student Autonomy

Ideas from Dr. Isaac Calvert’s Philosophy/Ethical School Leadership course and readings on autonomy in an educational context from Skinner, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Frankl, echoed in my mind as I proceeded with our next steps. Over several days, I met individually with each student, explained the opportunity, reviewed their scores, and described the benefits of group practice sessions. My paraeducator and I clarified why they were classified as English learners and how targeted coaching could help. Over 100 students chose to participate—far more than expected.

Administrators supported the logistics. One MEL Facilitator’s small first-period class was merged with another, freeing her to run F360 groups. We secured enough licenses from the district and scheduled sessions. Admin informed teachers about when students would be pulled for intervention. Additional support came from a paraeducator at the junior high who picked up students from classes, helped students log in, and assisted the teacher with the F360 groups.

Coaching and Capacity Building

As group sessions were underway, I assisted with some of the grading and feedback. Seeing a need for more teacher training, I prepared a training on how to write effective prompts, how to build in leveled scaffolds to guide organization, and use of key vocabulary. We also had representatives from F360 come and observe our groups, and they provided excellent feedback and training. When I coach teachers, I keep in my personal Coaching Manifesto, developed from Elena Aguilar’s Transformational Coaching Manifesto, “What we don’t know, we can learn. What we aren’t good at now, we can improve with guided practice. We all make mistakes—what matters is what we learn and how we grow as a result.” Together, we continued to learn to utilize the resources we had to provide the best learning and growing opportunity to prepare the MEL students.

Shaping a Positive School Exam Culture

We knew that just equipping students with knowledge and developing their skills to utilize on the exam would not be enough- we also needed to address their disposition towards the exam. The previous year we had started a “WIDA lunch” where we met with students, fed them tacos and sides that was catered from a local Mexican restaurant, and reviewed with them their scores and exam taking tips. We continued that this year, and the MEL Facilitators arranged for a “WIDA breakfast” to kick off the WIDA testing season.

Over nine weeks from January to March, students took four domain-specific exams. Practice continued with WIDA practice exams, focusing especially on speaking and writing—areas of greatest struggle. The MEL Facilitator who led practice groups encouraged students before each session: “You’ve got this. Remember what we practiced. I believe in you!” The change in student confidence and effort during testing was remarkable compared to previous years.

When scores arrived in May, we celebrated 20 students passing and significant growth for all! The post-exam WIDA breakfast was filled with pride as students received their results. For those who exited, we held meetings with parents and let them know their children could now apply for the Seal of Biliteracy. The smile on students' faces as they recognized that their hard work paid off made all of our efforts worth it!

Conclusion

Reflecting on this year's success, I see how principles from the Educational Leadership and Foundations program shaped our collaborative efforts. Teaching and leading require courage, especially when healing wounds from a divided past. This experience reaffirmed that when educators work together, listening to and empowering students, we can achieve more than we imagined.