

A Tale of Two Administrators: School-based Leadership in Collaborative Teaching Models

In Mountain View School District (a pseudonym), a collaborative model for serving secondary English Learner (EL) classified Multilingual Learners (MLs) has been in place for more than 15 years. In this model, co-teaching is used to support MLs at all proficiency levels: students are enrolled in one or more content classes (ELA, math, social studies, or science) co-taught by a content teacher and an EL specialist. The district ML office provides ongoing support to schools and EL specialists in the form of professional development training for teachers, planning documents to guide co-teaching activities, district-level Teachers on Special Assignment who support individual schools and teachers, and formative assessment processes to evaluate the strengths and areas of growth for EL specialists and school-level programs. The district also provides guidelines for minimal weekly co-planning time and clustering policies to help serve MLs efficiently while avoiding segregation when creating master schedules.

Even with a long-standing model in place, Mountain View school-level administrators vary in how they implement and navigate district supports, guidelines, and policies. Below are overviews of two secondary school-level administrators in this same district, each with distinctive backgrounds, school contexts, challenges, and strategies.

Questions to Consider as You Read and Discuss:

1. What district-level, school-level, and individual factors seem to make notable impacts on administrators, the challenges they notice, and the strategies they employ?
2. What strengths do they bring that could be leveraged to support fellow school-level administrators across the district?
3. What insights can you take from this vignette to apply to your own context? Why?

Lexi Fisher is the principal of Center Middle School, a grade 6–8 school that serves over 1,000 students, about 8% of whom are EL-classified. She describes the school, which is currently experiencing a higher-than-normal enrollment of newcomers, as located in a predominantly White and wealthy area in Mountain View. Lexi, an experienced administrator and former Spanish teacher who was raised in a multilingual home, describes that when she arrived at the school, the co-teaching model “was not being implemented with fidelity.”

There are multiple challenges that Lexi describes facing at Center Middle School. First, because the EL-classified population is relatively small, they can be overlooked systemically: at times, the subpopulation is too small to appear on state-generated test score reports, and some teachers question the value of investing in ML strategies when there are so few students. A second and related challenge is Center Middle School teachers can be considered a “veteran” teaching force, with 15–20 years’ experience on average in the district and often at the school itself. As a result, some are “set in their ways” and not eager to make instructional changes.

Lexi employs a range of strategies to address these concerns and implement the co-teaching program as the district intends it. One key strategy is using school performance data to create buy-in: seeing how improving instruction for MLs could boost overall school ratings “seemed to get staffs’ attention.” Another strategy Lexi employed was to integrate attention to MLs into the overall working of the school. She did this by arranging EL specialists’ schedules in the master schedule first, before putting anything else in place. Additionally, when creating and offering school-level professional development and having data-related conversations, she works to ensure that two topics—equity and multilingual learners—are always foregrounded.

In relation to the co-teaching pairs, Lexi has utilized three key strategies. First, she ensures that teachers take part in district-provided summer PD, which she describes as very valuable. Second, she prioritizes co-planning time, making sure that the master schedule allows teachers to meet weekly to plan. When staffing was lower the previous year and this type of planning was not possible, she arranged the master schedule so that EL specialists took one day per week away from teaching to plan with all their partners. A third strategy has been to regularly rotate content staff who co-teach. “We’ve had some staff members say, um, I can’t co-teach. That isn’t an option, that’s very clear now as a staff.” She has EL specialists rotate to new content colleagues every 2–5 years to help build stronger school-wide capacity.

Thomas Edwards has been an assistant principal of Ponderosa High School for four years. His responsibilities at the school include overseeing special education, counseling, and the ML program, and creation of the master schedule. Originally a high school social studies teacher, he served as an assistant principal at another school before coming to Ponderosa High School, which serves over 2,000 students, approximately 12% of whom are EL-classified. Thomas describes the school as experiencing significant growth in this population in recent years.

Serving this increasing number of recently arrived MLs was a key challenge that Thomas noted. He described the district office as being reticent to support increased staffing for additional pull-out newcomer classes for this growing group of students, preferring to instead serve them more quickly through the co-teaching model. In contrast, Thomas felt that recently arrived students needed additional time to build language skills and to understand new educational systems and expectations. He was glad that their school was able to get the increased funding they wanted.

Other challenges related more directly to the integrated model itself. Thomas explained that “We also try, and this is harder, especially at the high school level, to give [co-teachers] common planning time.” He is not always able to do so, and teachers are often left to manage planning as best they can: “they just work that out the best way they can with each other...A lot of them are meeting before school, after school, during lunch, that kind of thing. It’s hit and miss.” Thomas also felt that district-provided professional development—which Lexi noted was very useful—was limited: he said, “it’s very remedial, very surface.” A final challenge Thomas described was that although some co-teaching teams work well together and see ML students as a shared responsibility, there are still some content teachers who feel that these students should be EL specialists’ responsibility.

Thomas describes a range of strategies used at his school to address many of these challenges. In addition to advocating for additional staffing for a newcomer class, he also mentions purposefully under-enrolling co-taught class sections at the beginning of the school year because many MLs arrive part-way through the school year, and this prevents courses from becoming too large later in the year.