



Summary of Elementary Principals' Comments on Bilingual and English as a Second Language Program Choices for School Year 2018—2019

December 2017

Background

During a December 2017 meeting for Austin Independent School District's (AISD) elementary principals, principals discussed a proposal from the district's Multilingual Education Team (MET) for how campuses would select and operate their bilingual (BE) and English as a second language (ESL) programs for the 2018-2019 school year, beginning in January 2018. The following common topics emerged from this discussion:

- overall process and program options
- student enrollment and demographics
- staffing and stipends
- resources, including transportation
- parents and community.

Program Choice Process

Most principals liked the “call it what it is” approach, so named by the MET staff, saying they appreciated the flexibility allowing campuses to make program choices to fit their students' needs. This program selection approach does not mean that campuses would be free to implement programs without any regulation or monitoring. Rather, this approach would ensure campuses are implementing programs according to the state-required rules for BE/ESL programming, would be informed by the characteristics of the schools' community, and would be a collaborative decision among the campus, associate superintendents, and MET. Principals also liked the proposed timeline, and felt the process was authentic and realistic. One principal wrote it was good to recognize that one program does not fit all schools. Another principal wrote that program choices provide respect for students' language and culture. All principals agreed that the sooner they receive guidance and information about the program choice process and allocated resources, the better prepared their campuses would be to make decisions for the coming year. Schools will have to make critical decisions based on projected student enrollment, staffing allocations, and budget allocations.

Program Options

Several principals spoke about the program options themselves. For example, some principals indicated they would keep the current BE/ESL programs they have at their schools in the coming school year. One principal favored the dual language (DL) program hub concept, where a campus provides the DL program to students in every classroom through grade 5 (consistent with program non-negotiable conditions). However, other principals indicated the DL hub concept may have negative impacts on certain

schools in east Austin where there may be under-enrolled schools or schools with fewer English learner (EL) students. Other principals wrote that offering an early exit or ESL immersion program option was not good for EL students' long-term academic success, only encouraged English instruction, and did not help students maintain their native language (e.g., Spanish). Several principals wanted assurance that they would be supported and not criticized, regardless of the BE/ESL program they implemented.

Students

Student enrollment and demographics were topics that caused principals to raise several concerns as well as offer solutions. For example, low EL enrollment in the two-way DL program was a concern mentioned since it may mean a campus would not be able to adhere to the required 50/50 combination of students from each language group. Another principal indicated that the district's high mobility rate, causing changes in a schools' student demographics, would lead to inconsistent program offerings. Several principals wanted to know if student bus transportation could be offered to bring a balance of English and Spanish speaking students to DL programming. In the case of *mixed* classrooms (where ELs in various BE/ESL programs and non-ELs not in any BE/ESL programs are in the same classroom), several principals wrote that it would be good to get rid of these and not call them DL, and that the district should provide schools with support and solutions for mixed classrooms. One principal offered a suggestion to get rid of mixed classrooms by having students from different grade levels in one classroom so that two-way DL could be offered to both English and Spanish speaking students; this idea was offered for schools that may not have enough ELs and non-ELs to offer a two-way DL program at each grade level.

A concern was raised about the program choice process being impacted by the state's accountability rating pressure for achieving high student academic performance. That is, it was suggested that relatively poor student performance could be observed at some schools trying to implement true DL programs, since students need more time while they are learning two languages simultaneously. A principal asked, given the pressure for performance and accountability, how would schools that chose DL be supported and not punished for lower performance? A principal added that the process could cause some schools to track ELs out to other schools to protect their performance and accountability rating.

Staffing

Related to student enrollment was the topic of staffing. Bilingual teachers are required for teaching ELs in a BE classroom. One principal indicated that having campuses choose BE/ESL programs that best fit their students' needs would allow for more equitable distribution of bilingual teachers across campuses. Furthermore, having clear and consistently implemented BE/ESL programs on campuses would be a benefit for newly hired teachers since it would provide realistic expectations about what type of instruction is occurring on the campus. However, several principals voiced their concern about

BE/ESL Program Options

The BE/ESL program options for Texas public schools include the following, as defined by state law: bilingual transitional early exit, bilingual transitional late exit, one-way dual language, two-way dual language, and English as a second language (content or pull-out). School staff recommend one of these educational support programs for English learner (EL) students, and parents of these students may deny or accept the program offered. The two-way dual language program also is offered to students who are not ELs who want to participate in a bilingual program.

For more information on the characteristics of each of these programs, please see the Texas Education Agency website at

<https://tea.texas.gov/bilingual/esl/education/>

recruiting and hiring enough highly qualified bilingual teachers experienced in both Spanish and English academic vocabulary, necessary to provide instruction for ELs. One principal voiced concern about the potential difficulty of recruiting bilingual teachers on campuses where low EL student enrollment or a choice of an early exit or ESL program means the bilingual stipend is only offered to a few teachers. For schools choosing DL, one principal wrote that one concern could be not having enough bilingual teachers to support DL in non-core classrooms, such as art, music, and physical education, or in special education student classrooms.

Resources

Resources and support were discussed by principals, with most principals requesting that district staff provide early notification, information and consistent support (e.g., funding, staffing formula, transportation, student transfer options) over time for them to plan and discuss BE/ESL programming with their staff and campus advisory councils (CACs) prior to selecting their programs for the 2018-2019 school year.

Parents and Community

Informing parents and community members also was frequently mentioned among principals. Principals indicated that transparency, clear expectations, and communication about the program choice process would be good for parents. Families need to have program goals and outcomes clarified prior to their decisions about choosing the best program option for their children. One principal wrote there were concerns that some EL families may not get enough information about all program options to make the best decision for their children. A principal wrote that it is possible that some parents may be concerned with the proposed program option process if it means that there may be limited options at some schools. Another concern raised by some was that a campus program choice may be seen by others as a choice by school leadership rather than a school community choice. Thus, some called for community input as well as the need to provide families with information to make informed choices.

Summary and Recommendations

The following common topics emerged from elementary principals' discussion on the 2018-2019 BE/ESL programs selection process and options:

- overall process and program options
- student enrollment and demographics
- staffing and stipends
- resources, including transportation
- parents and community.

Principals provided comments on the potential benefits and challenges they would face in making these program selections. It is recommended that district staff include principals' input and provide them with timely information as they begin the BE/ESL program choice process for the coming school year.

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