

## English Learner Vignette: Issues of Grouping EL identified students, challenges, tensions, and possibilities

As you read the following vignette, please consider the following issues:

- What tensions and considerations are at the heart of the decisions that educators at Washington High School must make? How common are these tensions? What would you do if you were in a leadership position at Washington High School, and why?
- What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of programming students classified as English learners into sheltered courses? How might these be different for students classified as newcomers (who are new to the U.S. in the last three years) or long-term English learners (who have been in the system and received language services for 6 or more years)?
- What other issues does this vignette raise?

Washington High School is located in a large urban center that has approximately 2500 students. It serves a community that has traditionally been predominantly African-American, but in recent years, the neighborhood has experienced an influx of immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala as well as a smaller number of families from Somalia and Ethiopia. As of 2022-23, about 30% of Jefferson students are multilingual and designated as English learners. Among these students, about a third are newcomers (new to the U.S. in the last three years), most of whom score at the beginning or emerging level on the state English proficiency tests. Another third are designated as long-term English learners (have been in the system and received language services for 6 or more years). The school has four English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers with training and credentials to serve English learners, two of whom are fluent in Spanish. Several content teachers also have experience working with English learners in their courses, but with relatively limited training. The majority of the staff are monolingual, and no one on the staff speaks Somali or Amharic.

In earlier years, district policy has been to teach English learners in separate “sheltered” sections (designated only for English learners) for their core content courses of science, math, and social studies. In recent years, there has been increased attention in the district to the potential harms of concentrating all of the English learners together and away from their non-EL peers and a push toward distributing English learners more equally among the various sections of each course. Amid these different concerns, the school leadership currently has

flexibility in how to schedule students into courses, so they are convening the school staff to discuss this issue.

One of the ESL teachers, Ms. Herrera, feels strongly that her English learner students can only get what they need in terms of language support by being grouped together. She partners with the content teachers in the sheltered content courses to help provide this support and believes this works well. She also points out that it will be difficult to ensure that students receive the federally and state mandated specialized language instruction they need if they are distributed among many courses. Mr. Brown, a U.S. History teacher who has often taught a sheltered section, disagrees; he argues that the students can end up getting a watered down curriculum and lose out on the chance to learn English skills from their peers. Ms. Fernandez, a Geometry teacher who has never taught a sheltered section, says she is unprepared to teach English learners. While she likes Ms. Herrera and the other ESL teachers, she can't imagine successfully co-teaching with them, in part because she doubts that they know enough Geometry to be very helpful.

As the discussion continued, some teachers suggested a more differentiated approach where newcomer students would be grouped together, while the other English learners would be more distributed. Mr. Johnson, the second ESL teacher, proposes the idea of a newcomer academy that would offer Newcomer students a school within a school where they would receive more attention from ESL teachers and reduced class sizes (which would slightly increase the size of the other sections). Mr. Johnson is more skeptical of grouping English learners together than Ms. Herrera, but thinks newcomers have particular social and academic needs that require attention. Mr. Brown (the sheltered History teacher) disagrees with this proposal, arguing that newcomers are the students who have the most to benefit from interacting with their English-proficient peers. He also worries about the social stigma and marginalization that might happen if some ELs spend all day separated from their peers.

Ms. Wu, the assistant principal who oversees English learner services, is most concerned with the school's long-term English learners (who have been classified as English learners for six or more years), because they tend to have the lowest graduation rates. Ms. Herrera (the ESL teacher) and Mr. Smith (an ELA teacher) make the case that most long-term English learners need intensive literacy intervention. They argue that it's not a matter of them needing to "learn English" from their peers, but that they need specialized support in reading and writing. However, Ms. Wu is concerned about concentrating long-term English learners together, because she has noticed some of them exhibit behavior problems (more often than other English learners) and worries that grouping them together will compound these. The teachers and administrators are meeting to weigh these various concerns and make a decision about how to group their English learners next year, including newcomers and long-term English learners.