



## Focus: Secondary Newcomer English Learners

### VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Megan Hagelis is an English Language Development (ELD) Teacher and English Learner (EL) Coordinator at [James Rutter Middle School](#) where she supports English Learners, their families, and the teachers that serve them. Driven by her father's experiences as a first generation immigrant and her volunteer work with immigrant women from China during her college years, Megan has brought the passion she discovered for working with newcomer students to numerous educational contexts and roles in northern California for over 17 years. From the inception of the pandemic in March 2020, she and her fellow educators have worked tirelessly "to meet students where they are during distance learning, driven by the joy, challenge, and complexity of the work." Affirming the diversity of languages in her district – Spanish, Hmong, Vietnamese, Punjabi, and Cantonese - Megan offers important insights on how to address the needs of one of our most vulnerable population of EL students – [newcomers](#).



### Fostering Unity to Address Inequities

Megan describes how strengthening two-way communication with families and the collective power of educators to reimagine collaboration with colleagues are both needed in order to address the "big wave of shock about the inequity that was happening" when the shift to distance learning occurred.

**Relationships with Families Matter.** Addressing multilingual communication to reach newcomer students and their families continues to be an urgent need. "The communication was occurring so fast and changing so quickly and our [newcomer] parents weren't privy to everything that was going on." Recognizing this inequity, Megan instituted more consistent and frequent collaboration with colleagues, at least 2-3 times per week. They organized to devise communication plans, to document and share information about students and families, and to identify strategies to keep connected with families – google voice, face time with students, and conferences. These locally-designed strategies are especially important given their diverse population of newcomer and EL students represent less than 15% for most languages and do not trigger the 15% translation requirement per the [California Education Code](#).

At the systems-level, Megan reflects on learnings from "crisis mode" to intentional strategies to foster communication for family engagement during distance learning. "I realize that most of what I had done was one-way communication, although in our ELAC committee we employed two-way communication." When information from the school level is sent home, parents of newcomer students often times need support to access system processes, especially when decision making structures are constantly shifting. Megan consistently leads efforts to increase [ongoing two-way communication](#) focused on supporting newcomers and their families' access to system-level supports and policies. She and her fellow educators instituted authentic communication by sending personalized bilingual post cards to students and families; these emphasized teachers' commitment to their students – who they are, what they hope for their students, and what they hope for family partnerships. "Students and parents were responsive. We watched the beauty of this flurry. It's an amazing relationship that I haven't had on such a wide scale with all parents."

**Professional Learning Communities result in innovative systems-level solutions.** Megan shares that in secondary settings grade-level conversations can typically be dominated by a focus on teaching content. Pointing to her long-standing advocacy for all teachers of English Learners to "have their feet in both worlds [content and language teaching] and not just have a singular focus," Megan describes her site's approach to foster collegial unity to address the [social-emotional, linguistic, and academic needs of EL](#) students, especially newcomers. In her role as EL coordinator she has been able to leverage funding to institute [professional learning communities](#) wherein there is a dedicated focus on "collective ownership, processes and protocols for [addressing secondary EL students](#) focused on the whole child, and analyzing what the curriculum doesn't provide and what they [English learners] need." Megan creates systems so that all teachers can be part of the process, not just her. Together, she and her colleagues have identified innovative approaches to differentiate support for newcomer EL students by focusing on cross-school efforts to increase attendance and maximize supplemental services.

The pandemic magnified the need to collaborate to address inequities regarding instructional access. Megan shares that after monitoring attendance, content-area colleagues realized that many newcomer students were attending her ELD class, but not other content classes. "I have never been contacted as much by our general education teachers as I've had this year. It's reaffirmed the need for professional learning communities and interdependence." Megan and her colleagues identified dedicated times to meet collaboratively with students and to identify supports in the designated ELD class period that can be also be provided to students during content courses (Integrated ELD).



Megan and her colleagues also worked closely with the site administrator who runs the afterschool program. They provided a list of newcomer and long term ELs who have struggled with attendance and identified strategies to support access to technology or other virtual platforms. Content and ELD teachers work in cohorts for the afterschool program. Recognizing that “there’s holes in what we’re given as practitioners in our curriculum,” Megan and her colleagues plan lessons that address these gaps, and include home visits for EL students. Their goal is to make this a [whole school approach](#), not just isolated efforts. In order to realize this, Megan shares a key set of practices for supporting newcomer students at her school.

**“Secret Master Mind Goal – Creating Reading and Writing Identities in our Newcomer Classroom”**

Megan embraces the challenge of distance teaching and learning in a newcomer classroom. She emphasizes the importance of getting to know her students through “an [appreciative inquiry approach](#) rather than a deficit approach.” In addition to incorporating [Social Emotional Learning \(SEL\)](#) strategies in her [D-ELD](#) instruction, she designs instructional experiences that promote familiarity with U.S. schooling. For example, she invites students to share their experiences with schooling and then asks them to [compare and contrast experiences](#) in their country

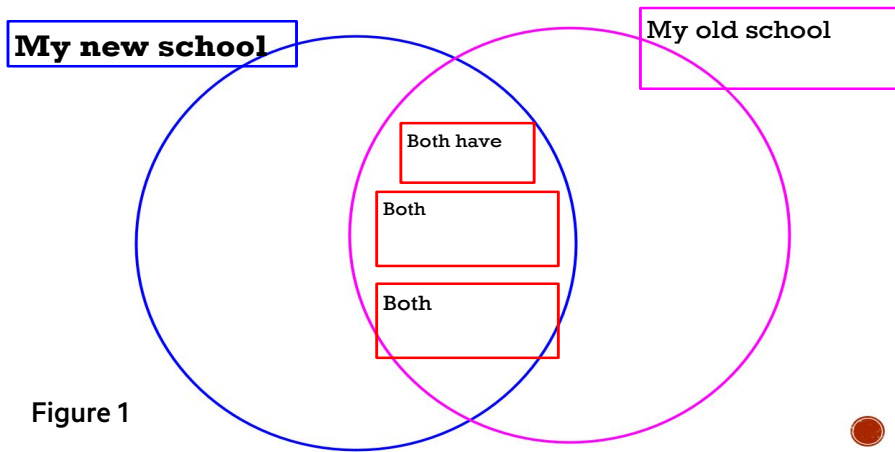


Figure 1

with U.S. schooling (see Figure 1). To emphasize differences with in-person instruction, she asks students to identify “traditional schooling in the classroom with what we’re experiencing in distance learning.” She introduces language structures and grammar in this meaningful context to scaffold student written products and oral presentations as they share within their learning community. She also keeps an inventory of student responses to celebrate and acknowledge their perspectives.

As Megan continuously builds and deepens relationships with her newcomer students, she simultaneously builds “slow and purposeful technology integration.” At the beginning of the school year, the majority of her students were not comfortable with technology and some were still developing formal literacy (reading and writing) skills. Thus, she designs her Google features and slide decks to include visuals, primary language translations, and drag and drop options. She uses this as a base to instruct students on how to keep hardcopy learning journals or notebooks which the school provides as part of their distance learning packets. These skills will be critical as students transition to hybrid or in-person instruction.

Megan’s “secret master mind goal” is to help newcomer English Learners create their individual and collective [reading and writing identities](#) to support [learning across content areas](#). This is especially urgent in a distance learning context given Megan and her colleagues’ discovery that many of her newcomers were not attending other content classes outside of her newcomer ELD course. After introducing students to different types of genres, she created a [reading survey](#) to ascertain and respond to their interest and identity as readers. Students were all surprised by the results – the majority really liked romance, many wanted to learn about non-fiction, and all were interested in real information, real people and real events. The survey results also opened the door for new partnerships and new goals, “Storytelling was a big piece for some of the students so we’ll work on creating their own stories, highlighting their own experiences of schooling here. I will partner with the Yearbook Journalism teacher to have her students interview my students and then publish in our school newspaper!” Survey results also allowed Megan to individualize [learning goals](#) for each of her newcomer students (see Figure 2).

Megan tells colleagues, “Exactly what you are doing [in the regular English classrooms] is exactly what we’re doing in the newcomer world.” Together, Megan and her colleagues continue to create a school-wide expectation for reading and equitable access to books. “Working with my colleagues, we use money to build bilingual libraries for students, purchasing books for students. We plan for mobile book days - driving to students’ homes to deliver books. Students have access to digital books, but it’s such a different experience when you’re reading a book that your teacher brought, that you’re interested in -either in English or in their home language. It’s a very different and powerful experience.”

**A Passion for Advocating for Newcomer EL Students**

As she anticipates the return to hybrid or in-person schooling, Megan highlights silver linings from distance learning. Her commitment to advocacy for students, families, and teachers of newcomer English Learner students is resolute -- whether it’s the refugee families who confide in Megan that their teenagers are sleepy at 8:00am because they can only walk in their complex from 9-11pm nightly, the EL student who states, “You are the master... you tell me what I should do”, or a colleague who is compelled to “raise the alarm” to advocate for a group of who may have been previously invisible and are now glaringly visible. For families, Megan seeks bi-directional multilingual





communication, expecting that families see the respect, hopes, and expectations she and her school prioritize for students. For colleagues, Megan continues to lead efforts in creating structures that support student leadership, advocacy and ownership by implementing [equitable practices for ELs](#). Her advice to others is to be reflective, “Make a dump list, needs you have as a teacher – hopes you have for your students. Scale it back. What are the core essentials your students—that you have in front of you – need. More than ever, put EL students at the core of everything.” Her hope for ELs is coupled with a strategic approach that includes constantly connecting with students, deepening relationships, and emboldening them to reach their goals. She reminds us that, “If you don’t have the connection with the child, the academic advice doesn’t matter because they won’t engage. They need to see their teacher as a person they can come to and is there to support. If they see that, and their families see that, they are willing to try anything!”

**Figure 2**  
Newcomer Student’s Reading Preferences Survey in  
Chinese, Arabic, Vietnamese, English, and Spanish.

1. What type of books will you read this month?

Mark only one oval.



romance stories 浪漫故事 những câu chuyện lãng mạn historias románticas قصص الرومانسية



universe and aliens stories 科幻小说 khoa học viễn tưởng ciencia ficción الخيال العلمي تخيلي



fairy tale stories 童话 câu chuyện cổ tích cuento de hadas - حكاية خيالية - سنایرریو کیمی



books about real people and events 真实的人或事件的书籍 sách về người thật hoặc các sự kiện libros acerca de personas reales o eventos دریسکتیو خلکو او یا د بیسو په هکله کتابونه کتب عن اناس حقیقین أو الأحداث

