



Keeping English Language Learners from Falling through the Cracks Federal Agreement Sets Up Multi-Tiered Safeguards

Serving some 80 language groups, including new refugees on the doorstep from faraway Somalia, Nepal, and Myanmar, the Hartford Public Schools faces serious challenges when it comes to serving children whose home language is not English. Six years after a complaint was filed with the U.S. Department of Education, a new agreement is designed to keep these Hartford English Language Learners from falling through the cracks.

Hartford, which enrolls 12 percent of the ELL students in the state, has been working since 2007 to resolve a complaint filed by the Center for Children's Advocacy with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). For an overview and summary of the newly signed agreement, see Vanessa de la Torre's excellent *Courant* article.

Here's what we found most striking about this agreement:

- **It's a Bureaucratic Labyrinth.** Since May 2007, allegations – that families were not receiving information in their native languages, disparities existed in materials and resources, and evaluation of ELLs was not timely – have run through a maze of data gathering and delay. OCR visits in 2007 and 2008 led to requests for more data, a draft agreement in 2010, further negotiations stemming from the impact of Phase I school reforms, and a follow-up OCR site visit in the 2010-2011 school year. After that, further negotiations centered on prompt and uniform identification of ELLs and extensive, school-level professional development to ensure services for these students. This is where the agreement is focused now.
- **Way Too Deliberate Speed?** An additional 11 months of negotiations took place on the draft resolution from June 2011 to May 2012, leading to a penultimate agreement, which took another nine months for OCR to approve. That brings us up to now.
- **Emphasizing Qualified and Trained Staff.** The agreement, signed by Superintendent Christina Kishimoto, specifies that ELL instruction will be geared to the District's Third-Grade Promise, with native language support provided at least by bilingual tutors, supervised by certified teachers if those teachers are unavailable. Staff recruitment will be a focus, as will professional development for principals and teachers on culturally relevant pedagogy by October 2013 and training for staff on how to assist families.
- **Critically Important Communication with Parents.** The agreement places significant weight on parent notifications, requiring the District to undertake activities that include:
 - Ensuring that all parents are notified in their native language about school choice and summer program options, access to services such as free and reduced-price lunch, and notice of suspensions or expulsions as well as special education matters;
 - Widening outreach by deploying ELL coaches on a variety of tasks, notably to include promoting awareness of ELL services at such community sites as healthcare service locations, education-related services, and refugee centers;
 - Ongoing spot checks to verify initial placement of newly registered ELL students.

The agreement also specifies the evaluations that must occur – with input from parents, community groups, and other stakeholders – and lays out a sequence of the school-by-school, summer supplemental service, and other district-wide reports that OCR is to receive at the close of 2013, 2014, and 2015. The District has come a long way since 2007, but it must integrate all of its efforts since then – and refine them – to continue to improve in ways that treat students' language experience as a strength and not a deficit.