Lessons Learned Along the Texas-México Border:
Leadership of a Dual Language District

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Abstract

Leaders of school districts along the México border are faced with the challenge of identifying and leading successful programs for English language learners. The superintendent of this academically successful border district initiated the implementation of a value-added educational program, a dual language approach that would meet the needs of both Spanish dominant students and students who speak English as their primary language. This paper focuses on a list of suggestions that the superintendent believes contributed to the successful implementation of the dual language program within his district.

The Texas-México border presents school leaders with challenging demographics. Districts within this region have high numbers of students who are recent immigrants, many students come from low-income families, and significant percentages of these students will learn to speak English as a second language during their public school experience. Cohesive and targeted educational leadership is required in order to prepare border area students to meet national and state achievement standards and to provide a focused, high quality education that also prepares the students for full participation in the emerging “trans-border” (Valenzuela, p. 270) economic, political and social environment.

The importance of focused, highly motivated educational leadership is underlined by economists who describe a clearly identifiable link between the improvement of educational attainment and an increase in individual and family income (Fullerton, 2001). Thus, superintendents and principals within the Texas-México border areas are confronted with the task of providing leadership for premium academic programs that improve school achievement, increase graduation rates, and prepare area students for technical training, university attendance or other academic pursuits beyond high school. Implicit in these goals is the need to develop proficiency in English, a second language for many Texas-México border students. In order to meet state and national standards for graduation and to be prepared for educational programs beyond high school, students must become skilled in the use of English.

Thus, the purpose of this discussion is to contribute to an understanding of how educational leaders can meet the significant educational challenges associated with location along the Texas-México Border. The paper presents the self-reported “lessons
learned” from a superintendent of a community of a successful border school district. The straightforward counsel of this district leader provides an example of how one school leader initiated and supported the development of a rigorous language program that successfully supports significant academic success for area students.

Perspectives

Current school leadership literature includes consideration of the two following principles: a) administrators who are successful in challenging environments take into account the background of their students and the needs of the community (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Valdés, 1998) and b) successful administrators adjust their decision-making to meet the achievement standards imposed by state and federal policy-makers (Lashway, 2002; Skrla & Scheurich, 2003). Each of the stated principles significantly contributes to a discussion of successful leadership practices for language border school communities with high percentages of English language learners. Thus, we will briefly discuss the following two issues: 1) the relationship of community and student context to program planning and 2) decision-making focused on effectively meeting achievement standards.

Numerous authorities on educational leadership highlight the importance of the consideration of economic, social, and other contextual factors when planning and implementing approaches and programs. For example, Reyes and Wagstaff (2003), two authors with broad experience in Texas education, emphasize the importance of considering the district and campus context. These authors state that leaders of successful school communities with diverse student bodies such as those found in the border areas of South Texas, utilize the challenges of the setting in order to “provide opportunities for student learning” (p. 28). This position is also supported by findings from a study of South Texas schools with large numbers of Spanish-speaking students (Reyes, Scribner, and Paredes-Scribner, 1999). Based on their study of successful South Texas schools, these authors stress the importance of careful consideration of the unique needs and requirements of a community for maximum student achievement. Additionally, these authors note that communities that differ in family structure, culture, ethnic background, and school experience from those communities that match historical school demographics and background will require unique applications of educational leadership that differ from traditional approaches. Thus, effective superintendents and principals craft a personal vision that corresponds with the needs and demands of the context of their local community and state.

Further insight can be gained from Leithwood and Riehl (2003) who, as a result of their review of the research and writing on educational leadership, conclude that successful school leaders “respond productively” to the challenges of diverse student groups. In a similar vein, Cuban (1998) states that superintendents faced with unique challenges must create what he calls “their own personal cause-effect models.” The requisite “effect” of such a model for successful border school administrators would be effective academic programs that incorporate successful second language learning programs.

Part of the unique challenge in “an age of accountability” (Lashway, 2002), is the requirement that all students, including those who are learning English as a second language, must meet English language proficiency standards. Lashway states that the No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) alters the role of the superintendent
by heightening the instructional leadership required for ensuring academic success. Consequently, in the current accountability environment, superintendents and principals in successful diverse school communities will demonstrate considerable instructional leadership as they contemplate and pursue programmatic alternatives that enhance the likelihood of high achievement for their English language learners.

Methods and Setting

The data included in this paper was collected as part of a case study of one superintendent’s leadership of a successful border district. The specific “lessons learned” provided in this paper surfaced during semi-structured interviews with the superintendent. The implementation of the “lessons” was corroborated via campus tours, interviews with principals and district leaders, and focus group meetings with teachers and parents.

The Texas-México border district that provides the focus of this study is located alongside the Rio Grande River. The district is typical of districts along the Texas-México border in that it serves significant numbers of migrant students, recent immigrants, and families who are part of communities on both sides of the border. Some district families participate in the life of both the Mexican and Texas communities, spending weekends and holidays with relatives in México and on weekdays living and attending school on the Texas side of the river.

In this district of approximately three thousand two hundred students, ninety-two percent of the students are identified as economically disadvantaged and fifty-four percent are classified as limited English proficient, although a much higher percent of the students continue to develop English as a second language skills. In spite of the challenges of poverty, mobility and learning English as a second language, district students have demonstrated sustained high academic achievement at all grade levels. All district campuses consistently meet high achievement standards; and, based on overall high student achievement, for several years, including the 2004-05 school year, the district has received the coveted “Recognized” award from the Texas Education Agency (2005).

The district implements a dual language program on its four elementary and one middle school campuses. The elementary dual language program is a 50/50 two-way language enrichment model in which students receive half of their instruction in Spanish and half in English. Thus, ideally students will learn language skills and content in both Spanish and English. Spanish-dominant students will learn content and skills in their first language, as well as in English; and English-dominant students will learn grade-level content and skills in both Spanish and English. The goal is to develop dual Spanish-English literacy and to provide a cross-cultural experience for all students (Howard & Sugarman, 2001). By having students study both Spanish and English, all students potentially develop communication skills and understanding across the two cultures (Christian, 1994). Additionally, numerous authors maintain that dual language programs are effective for long-term academic success (Lindholm-Leary, 2005; Collier & Thomas, 2004). These authors cite research data that supports increased academic achievement in the higher grades for those students who have studied in dual language programs during the elementary grades.
Lessons Learned

When asked for his advice for superintendents and principals in districts with high percentages of second language learners, the superintendent of this border community provided a concise list of five recommendations or “lessons learned.” The superintendent’s suggestions for successful implementation of a dual language program included recommendations for a) “setting the direction” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 3) for the program, b) initiating the implementation, and c) sustaining the focus and commitment to a successful district language program.

Though sequence is inferred by listing the steps in order, it should be understood that maintaining each activity throughout the implementation is essential for sustained success. That is, in order to preserve the integrity and success of the program, it is important that administrators continue to carry out each “lesson” throughout the life of the program.

The superintendent offered the following five recommendations for the development of a successful dual language program:

1) First, portray dual language positively. He recommends giving up a deficit perspective of bilingualism to stress a “value-added” view of fluency and literacy in both Spanish and English (Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). He emphasizes espousing a view of the students who enter as Spanish-dominant as an educational asset rather than an educational weakness requiring remedial approaches (Feinberg, 1999). As part of this recommendation, he also calls attention to the economic benefits of bi-lingual proficiency in a Spanish-English business environment and further observes that within his community, not only business, but also politics and social activities are conducted in both Spanish and English.

2) Secondly, in setting the direction, the superintendent recommends that school leaders personally dedicate themselves to gaining knowledge of the theory, data, and best practices of second language instruction. In other words, he believes that in order to make informed decisions regarding appropriate educational programs and instructional strategies educational leaders “must immerse themselves” in the study of the benefits and challenges of learning a second language. He recommends reviewing successful bilingual programs, especially dual language programs, in order to identify promising practices and make good decisions regarding choice of curricula and programs.

3) Thirdly, this superintendent emphasizes the importance of promoting the benefits of the dual language program among district staff and parents. He emphasizes that educational leaders must convince staff and parents of the advantages of the program; and superintendents and principals must “take the lead role in educating staff and parents.” He stresses that for a successful dual language program, the educational leaders of a district must convince parents and staff that being bi-literate is an excellent cognitive tool, as well critical support for the economy. He continues, “Don’t be shy or hesitant about implementing the [dual language] program.”

In his own district, the superintendent acknowledges, parents knew that students needed both languages but they [the parents] needed to overcome their own ingrained negative attitudes, since many parents (and educators) were punished for speaking Spanish
during their own school experiences. However, the district enjoys the possible advantage of having a rather steady influx of Mexican students and parents who do not bring the bad experiences that some have had growing up in the U.S. where a bad attitude was frequently exhibited toward those who spoke Spanish in school. In addition to promoting the dual language program to professional staff and parents, the border superintendent educated the district school board in the advantages of dual language for students of the community. According to the superintendent, the school board quickly grasped the advantage of educating students to be bicultural and bi-literate.

4) Fourthly, the superintendent recommends initiating the implementation of a dual language program with a whole campus approach, i.e., all students at the beginning grade level will have an opportunity to participate in the program. He prefers a “whole-school” pilot where the program is offered to all students on the campus rather than a pilot implemented in one or two classrooms. Although this approach entails considerable redesign and alteration of systems, the superintendent states, “Using the whole school gave us the opportunity to get a whole community of parents to support it [dual language program]—otherwise there are easy ways out when objections arise. [You] just move [a student] to another class.”

5) Finally, the superintendent emphasizes the importance of remaining committed to the dual language program. For example, he asserts that the dual language program which he initiated will continue to be implemented, as they continue to redefine and adjust the vision for what the program will be like in the future.

**Conclusions**

Rather than imposing instructional practices shaped to fit other communities, the border superintendent launched a language program that uniquely fit his community. Utilizing what Leithwood and Duke (1999) call “new kinds of facilitation and oversight” (p. 5), this leader envisioned, initiated, and now supports a language program that accommodates the cultural and economic needs of his community. By consciously promoting the positives of dual literacy to the entire educational community, by successfully piloting the program on one campus, and by continuing to be committed to the program, this border superintendent maintains a rigorous language program that has proven successful for the community’s students. The “lessons learned” inform the study of leadership and assist educational leaders in developing answers to the question, “What leadership practices best support the establishment of a language program that suits a diverse language community?”
References


