



OT-CO-001-013

(M)

FILED
UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DENVER COLORADO

SEP 02 1999

JAMES R. M... PEAKER
CLERK
DEP. CLERK

In the United States District Court

for the District of Colorado

Chief Judge Richard P. Matsch

Civil Action No. 95-M-2313

CONGRESS OF HISPANIC EDUCATORS

Plaintiff,

and

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Plaintiff-Intervenor

v.

SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 1, DENVER, COLORADO,

Defendant.

Monitor's Report on the Denver Public Schools'

English Acquisition Program (ELA): Report 1

Ernest R. House

Court Monitor

August 30, 1999

36

14

This is an initial report on the progress of the Denver Public Schools' implementation of the English Language Acquisition (ELA) Program, which was agreed to by the plaintiffs and DPS earlier this year. This report is an overview of the plans and preparations for the ELA program at the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year. Future reports will examine the ELA program in more detail, including inspections of individual schools.

The Denver Public Schools seem to be off to a promising start, in spite of the search for a new superintendent of schools. I was favorably impressed with the staff working on the ELA program, from the top leadership to the teacher trainers to the data system developers, all of whom I met in monitoring visits in August. The staff seems dedicated, enthusiastic, and very able. They have been open and forthright in discussing implementation problems. I also spoke with the new superintendent on his third day on the job, as he tried to sort out his new work environment.

The ELA staff have produced detailed, explicit program manuals. These manuals outline the proper procedures to be followed when registering, assessing, classifying, and exiting students in the program. Key information from these procedures is

coded into the new management information system, discussed below. Orientation information for parents has been translated into the appropriate languages. Considerable care has been taken to outline the workings of the program step-by-step.

In general, there are enough trained teachers to staff the ELA classes, though not all these teachers have full qualifications. Previously, the ELA program decided to hire only teachers who spoke the native language for those classrooms requiring instruction in the native language. Allowing teachers to learn Spanish while on the job resulted in teachers not being fully fluent in the language. Precise numbers of teachers and students in the program await completion of the district's data processing.

The majority of ELA teachers are trained by the district itself throughout the year. In visits to some of these training classes I found the instructors to be sharp, practical, lively, and on target. All come with practical experience in such classrooms, and the focus is on how to get classroom tasks accomplished. The teachers attending the classes were attentive and engaged. Written evaluations of these classes by the teachers are very positive, with responses from teachers ranging from 80% to 95% positive. The

lower scores are responses to whether the teaching is practical and “hands on” enough.

The teacher training modules are being constantly revised by the district, and DPS is investing considerable resources in the training. The training materials for the modules are well developed. Whether there are gaps in the training must await further investigation by interviewing teachers who have received the district training to find out how it has prepared them. At the moment it appears the teachers are being well trained for their tasks.

For example, in learning how to administer the Language Assessment Scales (LAS), teachers listened to the instructor’s explanations, listened to tapes of student responses, and practiced recording student responses and scoring the results. The instructor estimated that almost all the teachers in the class attained 95% reliability in administering and scoring the test. However, the teachers need more practice on returning to their schools, more practice than they can attain in the module workshop.

The LAS is critical to the ELA program. Students are identified at the school level through the use of the LAS, as well as

by other information about the student. For new students this assessment takes place within a few days of the beginning of classes. Such a decentralized system of student assessment and classification puts a burden on the schools to do the assessment quickly and correctly. Quick classification means the schools can proceed immediately with their placement and instructional tasks and that the classification is done by those closest to the student. There are advantages in such a decentralized approach, including speed, efficiency, and personalization (ideally).

The downside is that decentralization makes monitoring and control by the central office difficult since assessment processes are proceeding in a hundred schools with hundreds of different students and teachers. How good are the assessment procedures? How accurate? Consistency and accuracy in assessment (which educational measurement experts call the "reliability" and "validity" of the testing procedure) can be checked, and possibly improved, in several ways. I have asked DPS to consider ways of further ensuring the reliability of the LAS assessment.

One way is through consistent training of the assessors--part of teacher training in this case. A second way might be through

repeated checking procedures, such as administering the tests twice and comparing results, or having other assessors conduct the testing to see if they obtain the same results. A third way might be through comparing test results to other information about the students to see if the data are consistent, such as comparing the ELA test score to grades and teacher observations.

The training currently seems adequate for administering the LAS, although I want to check with teachers and others administering the tests to see how they fare. Some procedures for double checking test results are already in place, such as assessors from the ELA office checking student scores from time to time. Reliability is not likely to be as much a problem where students do not speak English at all, which is relatively easy to determine. However, when the level of student English is at issue, as in the exiting procedure, reliability may be more a problem.

It was pointed out (and evident in the student records) that significant numbers of students in the higher grades have not been exited from the program and yet are not receiving ELA services. I need to determine whether this discrepancy is a problem of the assessments not being accurate indicators of the students' English

ability, and hence the students are retained in the program, or whether the students have been lost in the system somehow. If the students are identified as being program eligible, they should be receiving services. These are not huge numbers of students but enough to worry about.

To cope with the decentralized nature of the ELA program, DPS has instituted a management information system which has potential for monitoring. According to current plans, information from the schools--test scores, parent responses to the key program qualification questions, and other student information--will be fed to the central ELA program office the day after the data are recorded in the school. The ELA office would have immediate data available on the status of each student in the program. This information would provide for monitoring the classification and placement of students in the program school by school. The information also would facilitate monitoring the program for purposes of the court order.

This information system has been purchased from a major supplier of such systems nationally and is now being customized for the ELA program. (The basic information system includes all other

students in the district as well.) Getting such a large information system up and running is no trivial feat. Having been tutored in the system by ELA staff, I consider the progress good, though the system is bound to have many bugs that need to be worked out.

It is intended that the information be readily available to the schools and used by the schools to monitor their own activities. In one school that I visited, this availability and use was not the case with the current information system. The current system is up and down, and, from my experience in evaluating instructional uses of computers, educators will not bother if the computer system is not consistently up and running. Hopefully, the new information system will be consistently operational.

In the future I need to see if the information system is operating successfully, monitor the classification and placement of students more closely, examine teachers and classes to see that they fulfill the program requirements, and inspect other aspects of the program outlined in the agreement, such as the ISA teams, the Newcomer Center, and the parent advisory groups. I will be calling on other specialists for help in these monitoring endeavors.

Visits to schools will provide a picture of how the program looks at the operational level. The schools vary considerably in how they approach and implement the program. As promising a beginning as DPS has made, there is still a long way to go for full implementation. Having an active monitoring process may help the central office emphasize to the schools the necessity of implementing the program fully, if such emphasis is needed.

There is also a more subtle aspect to implementing the English Language Acquisition program. Considerable power in the Denver schools is exercised by principals at the school level. Implementing a program is not done simply by issuing directives from the central office. Principals have many things to do other than ELA. And teachers are the ones who do the actual work with students. Unless principals and teachers embrace the ELA changes enthusiastically, implementation will be less than one might hope. Some culture change over time is necessary for all schools to accept fully that the education of these new students should receive high priority.