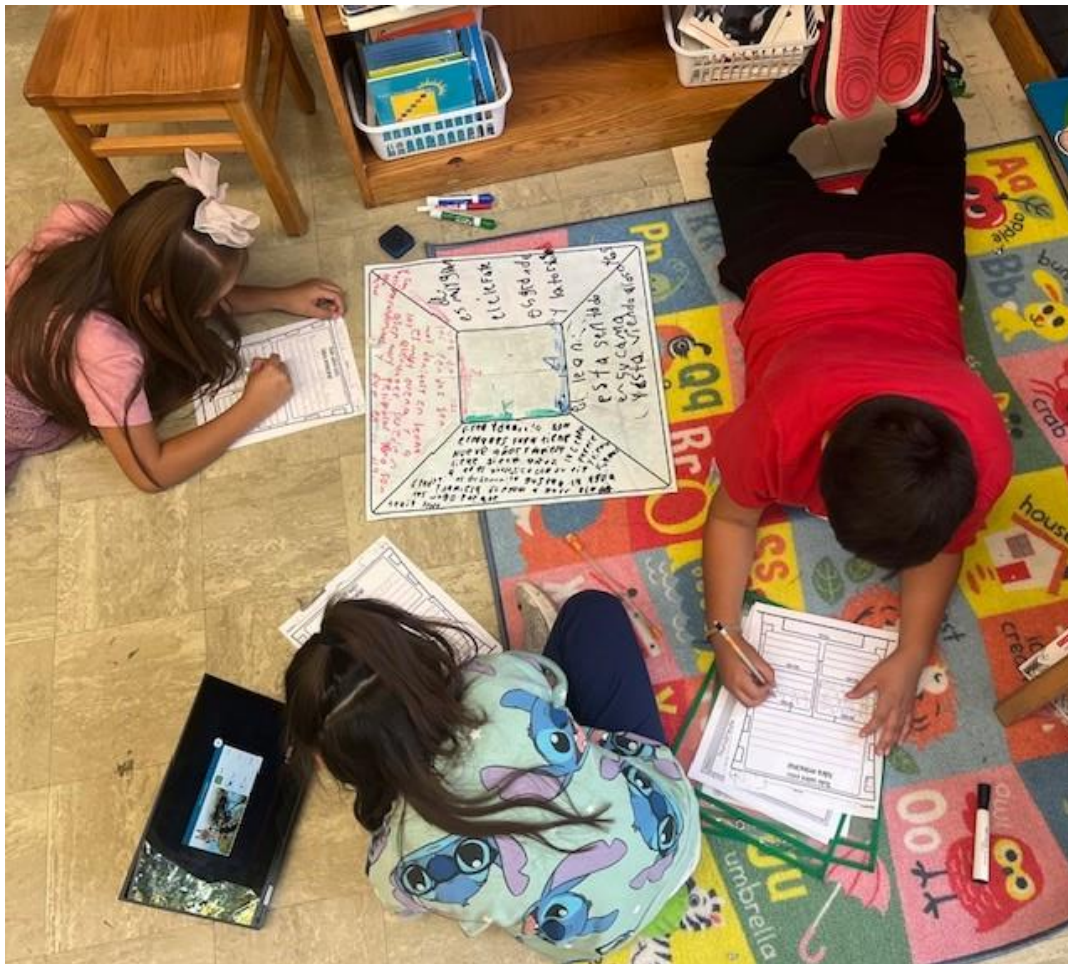


English Learners Are Capable of More—If We Make the Shift to Deeper Learning



Students at School District U-46 use resources from the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, writing in Spanish on Summarizing Mats. U-46 is one of Instructional Empowerment's partner districts and is the second largest school district in Illinois. About 40% of U-46 students are English learners.

By: Michael D. Toth and Dr. Merewyn E. Lyons, with contributions from Jessica Hessler

Topics Covered

- 1. Shifting Away from Teacher-Centered Instruction to Student-Led Team Learning**
 - The Benefits for English Learners
 - How English Learners Contribute to Deeper Learning
 - The Benefits for Teachers
- 2. How Deeper Learning Aligns to Best Practices for English Learners**
 - How the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning Implements Best Practices [Table]
- 3. Results from the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning**
 - Reduced Achievement Gaps
 - Principals Share the Impact
 - Students' Own Words
- 4. Ensuring High-Quality Learning for ALL Amid Uncertain Funding**
 - A Scalable Model for Deeper Learning
 - About the Model of Instruction for Deeper

Every year, we visit thousands of classrooms to measure rigor and deeper learning through [RigorWalks™](#). Too often, we see English learners sitting silently, hesitant to raise their hands to ask questions or contribute during whole-class discussions. During unstructured small group work, many hold back because they lack the supports needed to participate in meaningful, content-rich discussions with their peers.

Despite being capable of accessing grade-level rigor when provided with appropriate scaffolds, English learners are often given watered-down content that is several grade levels below their abilities. English learners often find themselves relegated to remedial classes without full access to the regular curriculum because of their lack of proficiency in English (Callahan, 2005; Gándara, 2015, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2022).

This isn't due to a lack of effort on the part of teachers—many are working hard to integrate English learners and differentiate for their language needs. However,

educators are operating within the legacy model of teacher-centered instruction that wasn't designed to meet the needs of all learners. Simply layering EL strategies on top of this traditional model hasn't been enough to drive authentic integration of English Learners into the learning process.

Despite being capable of accessing grade-level rigor when provided with appropriate scaffolds, English learners are often given watered-down content that is several grade levels below their abilities.

Contrast this with a classroom that has adopted the [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning](#), where teachers implement student-led team learning and design rigorous interdependent team tasks.

When we visit classrooms implementing the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, we see English learners fully immersed in the team-based learning process. They are academically and socially integrated as valued members of their teams.

In these deeper learning classrooms, English learners are valued for their multilingual skills and life experiences, contributing important insights to their teams. With clear participation structures, peer support that fosters a sense of belonging, and other scaffolds, English learners are able to confidently engage in discussions. Frequent opportunities to practice oral and written academic vocabulary accelerates English proficiency while they master rigorous content across subject areas (National Academies of Sciences, 2017; United States Department of Education, 2025).



Students at School District U-46 use a collaborative student tool from the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning. This resource gives students a clear structure for collaboration and peer support. In this example, students illustrate their thinking individually so they can then engage in a team discussion.

To truly transform the experience and achievement of English learners, we must shift to a model of instruction that empowers *all* students to engage in [deeper learning](#).

“A student who really ‘wowed’ me came into my classroom knowing no English at all. I put him in a group where I knew the facilitator was very strong, and I gave him the learning monitor role, because I knew I had lots of visuals up on the board that he could use to go through the directions.

He has not only blossomed as a team member, but also in his English. The look on his face when he gets to be working in his team, it melts my heart. Seeing that he can be successful, a student who comes in knowing no English, he can do the work just like everybody else in the group—anybody can be successful in a team.”

– Allison Berg, 1st Grade Teacher, Des Moines Public Schools

Shifting Away from Teacher-Centered Instruction to Realize the Full Potential of English Learners

Most Classrooms Are Still Teacher-Centered

Like most students, English learners usually experience traditional, teacher-centered instruction in the majority of classrooms. This legacy model of instruction is one that virtually all teachers have been taught to deliver (Cuban, 1984; Mehta & Fine, 2017).

Teacher-centered instruction is characterized by:

- The teacher's voice dominates the lesson
- Students listen quietly to the teacher
- The teacher prompts students throughout lesson activities
- Students exercise little or no voice or choice in the learning process (Patall, 2024)
- English learners are often overlooked or placed in remedial classes with other English learners (Gándara, 2015, 2017; Callahan, 2005)

This teacher-centered model was not designed to develop students into independent critical thinkers (Mehta, 2022), and it does little to support the linguistic and academic growth of English learners.

To be truly student-centered, students must have voice, choice, roles, and responsibilities for each other in their learning process. This creates a fully integrated and engaging learning experience where all students can participate in rich and rigorous discourse on the content. For [deeper learning](#) to happen, all students—including English learners—must experience student-led team learning.

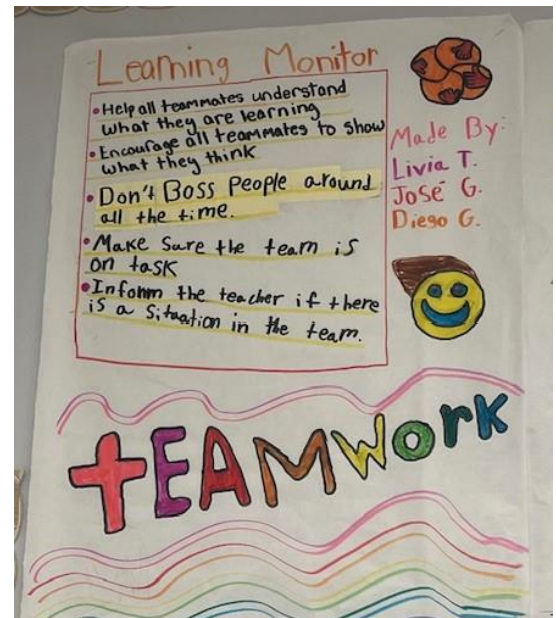
The Benefits of Student-Led Team Learning for English Learners

Student-led team learning is a model of instruction where students work in small, mixed ability teams with clear protocols to engage in standards-based work, as defined in [The Power of Student Teams](#) (Toth & Sousa, 2019).

When English learners engage in student-led team learning, they gain far more than just language skills.

The benefits that English learners experience include:

- **Accelerated language development and content mastery** – English learners develop language skills naturally by using academic vocabulary while engaging in discussions on grade-level content. Another key feature is making the learning visible using laminated thinking maps where students each write their thinking with erasable markers during the team discussions.
- **Less dependence on the teacher** – Structured team learning reduces reliance on the teacher by equipping English learners with clear roles, opportunities to actively participate in their teams, and student resources such as anchor charts, exemplars, and vocabulary walls.
- **Enhanced comprehension** – Collaborative learning allows students to process information through discussion, peer explanations, and shared problem-solving.



An example of a clear student role from the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, the Learning Monitor role. Students at School District U-46 created their own anchor chart to remind them of their responsibilities and norms when they have the Learning Monitor role in their team.

- **Opportunities to share perspectives, experiences, and background knowledge** – Students make connections between their lived experiences and new learning, strengthening comprehension and [engagement](#).
- **A stronger sense of belonging** – Clear structures and collaborative norms foster social bonds as English learners become more confident and motivated in their teams.

How English Learners Contribute to Deeper Learning and Benefit Their Peers

What Is Deeper Learning?

Instructional Empowerment defines [deeper learning](#) as *all* students developing into leaders of their own learning. They collaborate in teams, engage in rich discourse, and tackle rigorous tasks that prepare them for both academic and real-world success.

English learners bring valuable skills and experiences that enhance team-based deeper learning:

- **Cognitive Flexibility & Problem-Solving** – Multilingual students often approach problems from multiple perspectives, exercising greater flexibility and creativity in finding solutions (National Academies of Sciences, 2017).
- **Stronger Executive Functioning** – Bilingualism strengthens working memory, attention, perception, and self-regulation, helping students stay focused and plan effectively (National Academies of Sciences, 2017).
- **Resilience & Adaptability** – Many English learners develop persistence, resourcefulness, and adaptability through their life experiences (Gándara, 2015, 2017).

- **Interpersonal & Cross-Cultural Communication** – English learners excel in intercultural communication, switching languages and adjusting their communication style based on their audience (National Academies of Sciences, 2017).
- **Collaborative Mindset** – Many bring with them a wealth of experience that orients them toward teamwork, mutual support, and valuing different perspectives (Gándara, 2015, 2017).
- **Different Perspectives** – English learners’ participation enriches discussions by incorporating a greater variety of knowledge, experiences, and viewpoints (Gándara, 2015, 2017) .

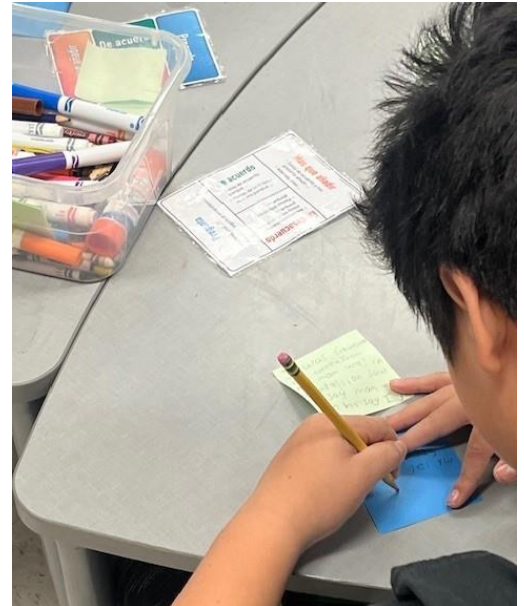
By actively engaging in [deeper learning](#), English learners not only strengthen their own academic skills—they also enrich the learning experience for their peers by contributing to the team’s efforts to make sense of the content, articulate complex ideas, and justify their thinking.

The Benefits of Student-Led Team Learning for Teachers

For teachers, shifting to student-led team learning isn’t about adding one more thing—it’s about making instruction more effective for all students.

- **Not another separate lesson plan** – English learners won’t need a different lesson plan; in teams, they can access the same rigorous content with appropriate scaffolds.
- **Less pressure and more capacity for brief on-the-spot interventions** – With structured team learning, English learners receive peer support, reducing their reliance on the teacher. The teacher can then redirect time to monitoring student learning and making adjustments in real-time. This includes providing micro interventions for individual students or a small group, then returning these students to team learning.

- **Fewer classroom management challenges** – When students are engaged in meaningful, structured collaboration, [disruptions decrease](#), and the classroom becomes more focused.
- **The joy of seeing English learners thrive** – Educators share with us that watching their English learners gain confidence, contribute to discussions, and succeed academically is deeply rewarding.
- **All students benefit** – Research shows this approach raises achievement for all reporting categories of students including English learners, students with IEPs, and students from [low socioeconomic backgrounds](#).



An English learner from School District U-46 utilizes a Spanish Agree/Disagree Card with sentence stems, from the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning. The Agree/Disagree Card is one example of a clear structure for participation that helps all students contribute to structured team discussions. Teachers often report the joy of seeing English learners thrive when they are immersed in these academic conversations.

How Deeper Learning Aligns to Best Practices for English Learners

Researchers at our [Applied Research Center](#) spent decades analyzing pedagogy in thousands of classrooms. Our findings show that student-led team learning is best achieved through a [research-based pedagogy model](#) for deeper learning. This model helps teachers and students shift from teacher-centered instruction and to team-based learning with rigorous tasks.

The [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning™](#) is designed to support ALL students. There is strong alignment between the research base of effective practices for English learners and our model. The following table shares evidence-based best practices for teaching English learners (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; United States Department of Education, 2025).

Evidence-Based Best Practices for English Learners	How the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning Implements These Practices
<p>Provide Opportunities for English Learners to Build Content Knowledge as They Develop Language Competence</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Design rigorous, grade-level tasks that help students explore academic language in context. 2. Engage students with complex texts using discipline-specific reading strategies in whole-class and small-group discussions. 3. Encourage English learners to leverage their home language to support comprehension. 	<p>The Model Provides Teacher Resources for Designing Rigorous Tasks</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Professional learning courses prepare teachers to design rigorous, grade-level tasks that help students explore academic language in context. The model includes specific courses focused on designing interdependent tasks. 2. Step-by-step guides and resources—like the 4 Steps tool—support teachers in planning standards-based lessons planning. Students are then able to engage with complex texts during team discussions. 3. Our expert coaches offer targeted guidance on how to maximize learning for English learners, including strategies for effectively grouping students who share the same home language.

<p>Leverage English Learners’ Home Language, Background Knowledge, and Experience</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Offer home language supports like bilingual dictionaries and instructional materials. 2. Use visual aids such as graphic organizers, illustrations, and multimedia. 3. Facilitate extended small-group discussions, incorporating home language when possible. 4. Encourage students to share their experiences and apply their background knowledge. 	<p>The Model Includes Resources to Incorporate English Learners’ Background Knowledge</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The model has student resources available in Spanish. Teachers can also provide other supplemental home language supports. 2. Included student resources, such as the color-coded Agree/Disagree cards, serve as a helpful visual aid for English learners. Annotated thinking guides are also provided to support students who are not yet proficient in reading. Additionally, teachers can create illustrated anchor charts that incorporate cognates to reinforce vocabulary and deepen understanding. 3. Teachers receive guidance on how to teach students to facilitate team discussions. Teachers can also encourage students to incorporate the use of home languages to enrich team discussions. 4. Team tasks are designed to help students exchange and apply background knowledge with peers. Student thinking guides offer a clear structure to support students as they share background knowledge.
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Engage English Learners in Productive Peer Interactions	The Model Is Designed to Maximize the Effectiveness of Peer Interactions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish clear norms and roles to ensure all students participate and feel valued. 2. Use peer-led discussions to build language skills and deepen content understanding. 3. Use mixed ability groups with collaboration between English-speaking and multilingual peers. 4. Ask open-ended, higher-order questions that require critical thinking. 5. Provide linguistic supports, such as sentence frames, to help students engage in complex discussions. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The model includes clearly defined student roles, such as a facilitator who initiates discussion and ensures that all team members share their ideas and questions. Another key student role is the learning monitor , who supports teammates in understanding what they are learning and encourages peers to demonstrate evidence of learning. Teachers receive professional learning on how to coach students in these and other roles and ensure all students participate and feel valued. 2. The model is built around peer-led team discussions that develop language skills and deepen content understanding. This collaborative structure is at the heart of the model, with every student and teacher resource designed to support rigorous, student-driven collaboration. The model assumes students may need support to work effectively in teams and includes intentional structures to build those skills. Resources such as readiness checks and tools to get back on track explicitly teach students how to advance their own learning and deepen content understanding.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. The model includes clear guidelines for forming mixed ability teams to that foster collaboration between English-speaking and multilingual students. It offers recommendations for grouping students based on their reading abilities, content knowledge, leadership qualities, and other special considerations. 4. Teachers receive professional learning on designing team tasks with open-ended, higher-order questions that require critical thinking. Resources such as the 4 Steps tool support teachers in creating standards-based team tasks. 5. The model's Agree/Disagree Cards include sentence stems that provide linguistic support to help students engage in complex discussions. With consistent practice, students' use of these stems leads to more fluid team discussions and the development of improved communication skills.
Provide Explicit Literacy Instruction for English Learners <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Expose students to academic language through reading, discussion, and writing. 2. Teach academic vocabulary explicitly using predictable 	The Model's Resources Support Explicit Literacy Instruction <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The model's team-based learning process exposes students to academic language through student resources, including various laminated thinking maps. Students use these tools as they

<p>routines, context clues, and word morphology (root and affixes).</p> <p>3. Use before, during, and after reading strategies to activate background knowledge, promote collaborative meaning-making, and connect learning to new contexts.</p>	<p>read the curriculum materials, writing their thinking with erasable markers, and engaging in team discussions.</p> <p>2. Students learn academic vocabulary through predictable routines using the model's thinking guides. Teachers use a 4-Step Lesson Planning guide to create standards-based team tasks. Teachers plan ways for English learners to access the content through context clues, morphology, and cognates when appropriate.</p> <p>3. The model's Connecting New Learning Mat is a student resource intentionally designed to support collaboration as students activate background knowledge and connect prior learning to new concepts. Teachers learn to plan team tasks using this and other resources aligned with before, during, and after reading strategies.</p>
<p>Support English Learners in Developing Writing Skills</p> <p>1. Build topic knowledge through rich, varied learning experiences before writing.</p> <p>2. Model and deconstruct texts to highlight structure and academic language.</p>	<p>The Model's Resources Support the Development of Writing Skills</p> <p>1. The model is designed to foster rich verbal interactions and engaging learning experiences. Resources like the collaborative structures and thinking guides help students reflect on different perspectives within their teams.</p>

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Engage students in collaborative writing. 4. Provide opportunities for independent writing with peer support for drafting and revision. 	<p>The process helps them refine their own thinking and build or deepen topic knowledge before writing.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. The model provides resources such as the 4 Steps Tool to help teachers guide students in mastering the standards, including modeling and deconstructing texts. Teachers also learn how to plan opportunities for students to process the content in teams and demonstrate their understanding. 3. The model's student resources, like the Summarizing Mat, engage students in collaborative writing. Students use the mat to think individually, write down their thoughts, and then verbally share their thinking in a team discussion. Through equal participation, the team ultimately agrees on a collective response. 4. The model includes several student resources that promote independent thinking and writing, followed by peer discussion and revision. This includes specific tools that enable students to check each other's work and coach their peers through structured feedback, which is ideal for any drafting and revision process.
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Results from English Learners Participating in the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning Can Enrich Bilingual Programs

We believe that the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning benefits all students, including English learners. However, it is not a replacement for specialized services that support linguistic development, nor do we advocate for English-only programs. Research shows that bilingual programs, which allow students to build academic knowledge in their home language while developing English proficiency, lead to greater academic growth and achievement (United States Department of Education, 2025).

Yet, with the many home languages spoken by English learners, schools often struggle to provide comprehensive bilingual services. Based on evidence from schools implementing the [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning](#), we believe this approach can transform English learners' experiences—supporting their success in rigorous, grade-level content while they continue to develop English proficiency.

Reduced Achievement Gaps

In our partner schools, English learners have closed the achievement gap with native English-speaking students. The Applied Research Center analyzed data from 2023-2025 across 4 districts (Instructional Empowerment Applied Research Center, 2025).

4. English learners closed the achievement gap by **6-47% in English Language Arts**.
5. English learners closed the achievement gap by **4-74% in Math**.

According to a 10,000-student study of our partner district Des Moines Public Schools, English learners closed the gap by **6% in Reading and 4% in Math** (Basileo, L.D., 2019). [This report](#) meets federal What Works Clearinghouse research standards.

Principals Share the Impact of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

"We have a large number of English language learners at our school. And so we're constantly trying to find ways we can help them build their language acquisition. The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning—having students teaming and owning their own learning—has been such a game changer.

We've seen such a shift in terms of students communicating academically—and socially as well. They have opened up in ways that I think have been really surprising. It's been amazing to see that students are engaging each other in conversation now in all aspects of their day."

– Cristina Smith, Principal, Warfield Elementary, Florida (2024)

"We can't say to our students, "You aren't able to do this task because your language skills are too low" ... If we think like that, then we have already decided our students' limitations, and that's not fair. Our best learning happens in a situation where we're not comfortable, where we have to do something different than we've ever done before.

As teachers, we have to be advocates for our students and not allow them to fall right into their safe zone. One of our ELL students recently said, 'I can learn so much better when a teammate tells me because I hear a different way.' If we'd pigeonholed this student in her comfort zone, I'm not sure that she would have gotten what she deserved out of her educational experiences."

– **Jill Burke**, Principal, Howe Elementary, Iowa (2019) – see [*The Power of Students Teams*](#) (Toth & Sousa, 2019, p. 84)

Students' Own Words About Learning in Teams

“We can express ourselves and when we get a wrong answer or one that we don’t understand you can ask your teammates.”

– **Amy**, 5th grade Spanish-speaking student, School District U-46

“I think that being in academic teams helps us learn faster because we have other people that help us as well as having different opinions.”

– **Oscar**, 6th grade Spanish-speaking student, School District U-46

Ensuring High-Quality Learning for English Learners—and All Students—Amid Uncertain Funding

School and district leaders face an ongoing challenge: how to provide English learners with the education they deserve while navigating unpredictable funding and resource constraints.

Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) was designed to support English learners in attaining proficiency and meeting the same high academic standards as

their peers. Yet, with the future of this funding uncertain, **schools must find sustainable, cost-effective ways to deliver a rigorous education for all students.**

Many traditional programs for English learners lack academic rigor, often based on the flawed assumption that students must master English before engaging in grade-level or advanced instruction (Callahan, 2005; Rodriguez et al., 2022).

However, research and legal precedent make it clear: English learners must have access to the same high-quality curriculum as their peers and **cannot be tracked into remedial programs that limit their potential** (Lau v. Nichols, 1974).

A Scalable Model for Deeper Learning

Rather than relying on separate, costly interventions, schools can ensure success for English learners—and all students—through redesigned Tier 1 instruction for deeper learning.

The [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning](#) provides an effective, scalable approach where all students, regardless of language background, engage in rigorous, collaborative learning.

- **All Students Thrive** – English learners develop proficiency while actively participating in grade-level content alongside peers.
- **Sustainable & Cost-Effective** – Rather than layering additional programs, this model strengthens Tier 1 instruction for every student.
- **Stronger Outcomes** – When English learners engage in robust peer discussions, they blossom—accelerating their language and content mastery simultaneously.

For district and school leaders seeking a sustainable, research-based approach that supports English learners without separate, siloed programs, the [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning](#) offers a path forward.

By investing in student-led team learning, educators can create high-impact classrooms where all students—English learners included—develop the skills to succeed.

By investing in student-led team learning, educators can create high-impact classrooms where all students—English learners included—develop the skills to succeed.

About the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

There has always been deeper learning for *some* students – but not for *all* students in every classroom, every day. Now it is possible with the research-based [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning](#)[™], which provides every teacher and all students with the professional learning, support, and resources to achieve deeper, more rigorous learning of the curriculum.

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning places students at the center of their learning, shifting from traditional teacher-directed methods to [student-led team learning](#). In this approach, students collaborate in structured, interdependent teams, guided by clear roles and responsibilities. Unlike traditional grouping, this approach ensures equal participation and accountability – fostering deeper understanding, critical thinking, and collaboration.

We guide you through the process of starting with a [well-designed pilot](#) involving volunteer principals and teachers, then scaling success with a districtwide rollout that meets the district's goals, timeline, and resources.

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About the Authors

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Michael D. Toth is founder and CEO of Instructional Empowerment (IE) and leads IE's Applied Research Center. He is also the author of the multi-award-winning book [*The Power of Student Teams*](#) with David Sousa; author of *Who Moved My Standards*; and co-author with Robert Marzano of multiple books. Most recently, he co-authored peer-reviewed research articles published in academic journals in collaboration with researchers Lindsey Devers Basileo, Merewyn Lyons, Barbara Otto, and Natalie Vannini.

Michael is a keynote speaker at conferences and coaches superintendents on creating a bold instructional vision, designing and launching a high-functioning cabinet team, transforming Tier 1 core instruction, and leading systems-based school advancement.

Learn more about Michael: <https://instructionalempowerment.com/ie-founder-michael-d-toth/>

Dr. Merewyn Lyons

Dr. Merewyn Lyons is a Senior Research Analyst with Instructional Empowerment's Applied Research Center. Her primary research interest is educational psychology, with a focus on understanding the effect of motivation on teaching, learning, and educational leadership. She is co-author of peer reviewed articles in Frontiers in Education, Quality Education for All, and Sage Open. Dr. Lyons is a member of the Center for Self-Determination Theory, the American Educational Research Association, and the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction. She is also a retired officer of the United States Navy, a retired K-12 educator, and former teacher of English learners.

Jessica Hessler

As an IE Consultant, Jessica Hessler supports schools in implementing evidence-based proven methodologies for improving student outcomes. Jessica's primary role centers around providing embedded professional development and coaching within turnaround schools.

Before joining the IE team, Jessica worked as a public school educator, instructional coach, assistant principal, and principal in schools with diverse populations. Her 23 years of experience include urban settings in both Duval and Hillsborough County, FL.

Jessica received her Bachelor's in Elementary Education from University of North Florida. Her other educational degrees include a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership and an Educational Specialist Degree in School Turnaround. Currently Jessica is completing her Doctoral Degree with her dissertation focus on sustainable leadership practices in dual language programs. She believes that through the use of data-driven decision-making, rigorous instruction and equitable educational experiences for all students, the achievement gap will be eliminated.

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