Supporting English Learners and Students With Disabilities: Strategies From Turnaround Schools in Massachusetts

Meeting the needs of English learners (ELs) and students with disabilities (SWDs) is a critical yet challenging responsibility for all schools. The task proves particularly difficult for turnaround schools engaged in wholescale efforts to improve school performance. Turnaround schools face pressure to improve outcomes for *all* students quickly and dramatically, which may hinder a school's ability to focus on the needs of ELs and SWDs specifically. Moreover, staff in turnaround schools often grapple with limitations in organizational capacity, such as staff knowledge and skills, instructional resources, and leadership structures, which may make the school staff's ability to recognize and address specialized student needs especially difficult.

In Massachusetts, where state-identified turnaround schools participate in annual state-sponsored monitoring visits, monitoring visit data have shown that many turnaround schools struggle to ensure that supports for ELs and SWDs are implemented systematically and that all ELs and SWDs in the school experience appropriate interventions. At the same time, turnaround schools in Massachusetts tend to enroll particularly high percentages of ELs and/or SWDs, underscoring the urgency behind equipping these schools with research-based lessons learned about how to better serve such students.

To shed light on potentially promising strategies that turnaround schools can use to improve teaching and learning for ELs and SWDs, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) collaborated with American Institutes for Research to explore the types of practices and systems in place in Massachusetts turnaround schools that successfully provide appropriate interventions to all of their ELs and SWDs. This brief highlights key strategies that emerged from that investigation.

Data and Methods

For this analysis, American Institutes for Research drew on data collected from Massachusetts School Monitoring Site Visits conducted in 2015–16 and 2016–17 to schools that were currently in or had recently exited from Level 4 status, meaning that the schools were among the state's most struggling schools but were not under state control. For more information about ESE's approach to accountability and assistance, see the "Policy Background" sidebar on page 4.

We identified seven exemplar schools—five elementary schools and two secondary schools—that earned the highest possible rating (*sustaining*) on state monitoring indicators specifically focused on academic interventions for ELs and for SWDs. To receive a *sustaining* rating on these monitoring indicators, schools had to (a) ensure that all ELs and SWDs experience research-based academic interventions appropriate for their specific needs and (b) ensure that these supports are implemented systematically in the school. We then examined interview and focus group data gathered during monitoring site visits to these exemplar schools to identify common promising practices for serving ELs and SWDs. Four shared strategies emerged, summarized here and presented in more detail throughout. For background information about the seven schools, including basic demographic information and the schools' overall approach to providing additional supports to ELs and SWDs, see the "Background on the Seven Exemplar Schools" box on page 3.

At a Glance: Four Strategies for Supporting ELs and SWDs in Turnaround Schools

1. *Building staff capacity to meet the needs of ELs and SWDs.* The seven exemplar schools made improving teachers' specialized knowledge and skills related to ELs and SWDs an important schoolwide priority. They leveraged state credentialing policies to staff mainstream classrooms with general education or content-area teachers who had also earned certifications or endorsements in special education or Sheltered English Immersion (SEI). In addition, they provided ongoing coaching and professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their capacity to serve these students.

2. *Continuously using data to identify student needs and monitor progress.* Staff at the exemplar schools regularly analyzed diverse forms of student data to diagnose student needs, assign interventions targeting those needs, and check whether the interventions were successful in yielding student progress. To facilitate this process, the schools adopted clear procedures and protocols for reviewing information about students.

3. *Fostering staff communication and collaboration around student support.* Supporting ELs and SWDs was a largely collaborative affair at the exemplar schools as general education, content area, English as a second language (ESL), and special education teachers continually shared expertise and insights on meeting the needs of these students. Teachers used protected, regularly scheduled staff collaboration time and repositories for storing student information to promote ongoing communication about student needs and progress.

4. *Providing differentiated support and interventions.* The exemplar schools created structures to enable teachers' use of differentiated instruction and support such as scheduled blocks of intervention and enrichment time. The specific types of interventions used to support ELs and SWDs varied across the seven schools but often included computer-based intervention programs and additional instructional time.

Strategy 1. Building staff capacity to meet the needs of ELs and SWDs

Successfully meeting the needs of ELs and SWDs hinges on a school staff's collective ability to understand and respond to those needs with appropriate supports. As such, an important strategy the seven exemplar schools used to improve interventions for ELs and SWDs involved enhancing the teaching staff's expertise in serving these students. In particular, the schools emphasized the need for teachers who serve ELs and SWDs to possess deep knowledge of the academic content they are teaching along with a nuanced understanding of how to make that content accessible to students with special academic, linguistic, and/or behavioral needs.

Teacher Credentials

One avenue for increasing teacher expertise related to ELs and SWDs involved requiring and supporting teachers' attainment of specialized certifications or endorsements. For instance, to support their EL populations, all seven schools were either working toward or had succeeded in ensuring that general education and content-area teachers who provide content instruction to ELs completed necessary coursework to earn a Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) Teacher Endorsement through the state's Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners initiative, this endorsement became a requirement for any teacher who serves one or more ELs.

Background on the Seven Exemplar Schools

Demographics. The seven schools featured in this analysis hail from five urban school districts located in geographically diverse areas of the Commonwealth. Most serve EL and SWD populations that comprise more than 10% of their total student enrollment.

School	Total Enrollment	% EL	% SWD
Elementary school A	<300	>30%	20–29%
Elementary school B	<300	20–29%	< 0%
Middle school A	<300	<10%	20–29%
Elementary school C	300–600	20–29%	10–19%
Elementary school D	300–600	10–19%	10–19%
Elementary school E	300–600	>30%	10–19%
High school A	300–600	>30%	20–29%

Approach to EL Services. All seven schools support ELs using the state's SEI model in which students learn academic content in mainstream classrooms taught in English by general education/content-area teachers who use specialized instructional strategies to make the content comprehensible for students learning English. To support ELs in developing their English skills, certified ESL teachers provide explicit and systematic ESL instruction. In accordance with state guidelines, ELs with lower levels of English proficiency receive greater amounts of ESL instruction.

Approach to SWD Services. SWDs receive instructional modifications and support in accordance with their Individualized Education Program. The seven exemplar schools predominantly serve SWDs through differentiated instruction in mainstream classrooms aided by pull-out and/or push-in support from special education teachers. Several of the schools also have self-contained special education classrooms for students with the most severe disabilities.

As an ESL teacher from one elementary school explained,

> *All of the teachers went through the SEI [endorsement] program. Some of them had to take it privately, some of them took it through a college, and some of them took it through the district. And depending on how much training you had previously, it's either a 15-hour course or a 30-hour course to get endorsed.*

General education teachers from this school credited their SEI endorsement training with giving them concrete instructional strategies that they could immediately incorporate into their classrooms, such as the use of sentence starters, visuals, and explicit vocabulary instruction. One general education teacher praised the SEI endorsement training with increasing her "sensitivity" toward ELs and the challenges they may face in the classroom. An ESL teacher from the school also perceived improvements in general education teachers' ability to support ELs following their SEI endorsement training. She noted that the training empowered general education teachers to play a larger role in modifying their own lesson plans and instruction, which in turn freed up her time to focus on areas with the greatest need.

Several of the exemplar schools also used strategic teacher hiring and assignment practices to place ELs and SWDs in classrooms led by teachers who were dually certified as general education or in their content area and as ESL or special education teachers. For example, school leaders from one secondary school highlighted how they had been "very purposeful" about the job postings and job descriptions that they released in order to hire teachers who were certified in ESL or special education in addition to a particular content area.

A teacher from one of the elementary schools noted how placing ELs in classrooms taught by a

Policy Background

In 2010, Massachusetts passed the Act Relative to the Achievement Gap, allowing the state to intervene in struggling schools. The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education subsequently adopted regulations to formalize ESE's approach to engaging with these schools to improve student performance.

Based on the regulations, all schools would henceforth be classified into Levels 1 through 5 based on several factors. Level 1 represents the highest performing schools in need of the least support, and Level 5 includes the lowest performing schools in need of the most support and placed under state control. Level 4 represents the state's most struggling schools not under state control.

Every year, each Level 4 and 5 school is monitored to determine the school's level of implementation with regard to four key turnaround practices and related indicators, which typically characterize achievement gain schools:

- Turnaround Practice 1. Leadership, Shared Responsibility, and Professional Collaboration
- Turnaround Practice 2. Intentional Practices for Improving Instruction
- Turnaround Practice 3. Student-Specific Supports and Instruction to All Students
  - ➢ Indicator 3.5: Academic Interventions for English Language Learners
  - ➢ Indicator 3.6: Academic Interventions for Students With Disabilities
- Turnaround Practice 4. School Climate and Culture

Although two indicators focus explicitly on supporting the needs of ELs and SWDs, each of the turnaround practices and indicators provide opportunities to improve the quality of teaching and learning for these students. For more information on the turnaround practices and indicators, see http://www.doe.mass.edu/turnaround/howitworks/monitor-site-visits-turnaround-indicators.pdf

dually certified general education and ESL teacher allowed that teacher to seamlessly embed explicit ESL instruction throughout the school day. The teacher explained,

Students that are at [English language proficiency] Levels 4 and 5, they need 45 minutes of ESL instruction, so when we're thinking of placing them and scheduling them and planning, the principal makes sure that these children are placed in the classroom where the teacher has an ESL license. What it is is that [the ESL instruction] is included in the reading and the writing and everything that we do.

Ongoing Professional Learning Opportunities

In addition to increasing staff expertise through specialized credentials, the exemplar schools provided formal and informal professional learning opportunities to enhance teachers' ability to support ELs and SWDs. Teachers in all seven schools had access to instructional coaches, who provided guidance and feedback on how they can improve their instruction. Teachers from several of the schools mentioned receiving coaching support specifically on issues related to ELs and/or SWDs.

At one elementary school, two instructional coaches worked with teachers and directly with students to provide specialized instruction for ELs and SWDs in general education classrooms. To support general education teachers, the coaches followed in-depth coaching cycles that involved the coach teaching a class for 2 days, coteaching for a few days along with the teacher, and then observing the teacher for several days and providing actionable feedback. One of the school's coaches is an SEI coach who works with teachers specifically on improving their ability to support ELs in a sheltered instruction setting.

At one middle school, teachers described benefiting from regularly scheduled afterschool professional development sessions where teachers identify a problem of practice, discuss plans for addressing the problem, and then share resources and suggestions with their colleagues. As an outgrowth of these sessions, teachers began providing peer-to-peer coaching. As one teacher explained,

One of the things that we started this year, as part of our afterschool professional development, is really thinking about which teachers have an expertise in an area and then can go in and help teachers who don't have this expertise develop this skill.

In particular, the school's ESL and special education teachers thoughtfully planned how they could go into classrooms to coach general education teachers on issues related to supporting ELs and SWDs. In turn, the special education and EL teachers received additional coaching from the district reading coach and the district director of speech and language. According to one such teacher, the reading coach "will come and observe us, and she'll take notes, and then she'll give us feedback once the students are away from us. She'll ask us if we have any questions or concerns, and then she's even modeled lessons. She's written lessons with us. She is all the way there."

Strategy 2: Continuously using data to identify student needs and monitor progress

All seven schools provided interventions to ELs, SWDs, and other students with specialized learning needs using a tiered system of support framework. This framework requires teachers to review student data regularly to diagnose student needs, match students with appropriate interventions, and monitor whether the interventions are enabling the student to make progress. The schools facilitated this process using clearly defined structures, procedures, and protocols.

Responding to Individual Student Needs

Both secondary schools in this analysis established protected weekly time for grade-level teachers to come together to closely review data on student needs and progress. At the high school, these sessions were known as Early Warning Indicator (EWI) meetings, and they brought together teachers and school leaders to discuss and analyze multiple sources of data for all students. According to one teacher, "Anyone who's touching your same students" participated in these meetings, including teachers from each content area, ESL teachers, and special education teachers. At the meetings, grade-level teams examined diverse types of student data such as quarterly benchmark assessments, mock Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System assessments, course-related data (e.g., performance on common assessments), attendance data, behavior data, and teachers' observational notes. They would then color-code students using stoplight colors (i.e., green, yellow, and red) based on how they are faring to provide a general sense of which students are succeeding, at risk, or struggling.

At that point, the grade-level team would follow a structured protocol to identify and prioritize students' needs systematically, devise an intervention strategy collectively for supporting those needs, and establish a plan for putting the intervention strategy in place. This planning process involved assigning a point person, determining staff roles in implementing the intervention, identifying how to measure student progress, and setting follow-up dates to assess progress during future EWI meetings. A teacher described that follow-up process as follows:

> *Once we get in the teams, we'll go over whoever we talked about in previous weeks. We'll review what the issues were, what the planned intervention was, and then we'll ask whoever the point person was, "Did these things happen?" Then, we go around the table, and we say, "Did we see the intended change that we wanted to? How is the student coming?"*

As part of those conversations, the team would assess whether the intervention worked and whether any additional adjustments or follow-up are needed.

Teachers from the five elementary schools described using similar processes to develop data-driven intervention plans for their students. For example, at one elementary school, grade-level teams used part of their common planning time to work together with the school's interventionists to analyze data and create action plans for students every six to eight weeks, depending on the frequency of the assessment. While analyzing these data, school staff would map out the status of the entire grade level and plan out flexible groupings to support academic growth. During these data cycles, school

staff were intentional about identifying students for interventions and monitoring those interventions, considering the starting level of a student, the student's current proficiency, and the next steps to continue to make progress.

Responding to Whole Classroom or Schoolwide Student Needs

Schools' structures and procedures for evaluating individual student needs also provided opportunities for teachers to look across students for patterns in student needs, such as specific learning gaps observed across multiple students. In many cases, these patterns would simply prompt teachers to reteach particular skills or content. However, in some cases, they would lead to coordinated whole class or schoolwide changes designed to better support student needs. For example, based on an analysis of ELs' academic and English proficiency data, ESL teachers at the high school discovered that several students were meeting benchmarks for ESL 1 but were not yet performing in a manner that prepared them for ESL 2. As a result, the teachers developed an "ESL 1.5" course that provided instruction more in line with students' demonstrated performance levels. On another occasion, teachers from this school devised a schoolwide strategy to address students' poor course grades in math and science. After examining data showing that students were having difficulty passing multiple terms of their science classes, the school developed a Forensics course that presented science and math content using more hands-on and exploration-based instructional strategies.

Strategy 3: Fostering staff communication and collaboration around student support

Because ELs and SWDs typically receive instruction from multiple teachers, the exemplar schools noted the importance of having staff take collective responsibility for supporting these students. They stressed how collaboration among teachers—particularly between general education/content area teachers and ESL or special education teachers—was essential to ensuring EL and SWD needs are met.

Formal Collaboration Time

Each of the seven schools incorporated common planning time into their academic schedules so that teachers could collaborate on a regular basis, and nearly all seven schools organized this time such that ESL and/or special education teachers could participate with the general education or content area teachers who taught these students.

As mentioned previously, the schools devoted some of teachers' collaboration time to identifying student needs and progress, but they also used this time to plan interventions and instruction. For instance, at one elementary school, EL and special education teachers met weekly with grade-level teachers with whom they shared students during common planning to collaborate on lesson plans and progress monitoring of students. One respondent reported that EL teachers were "very involved" in general education classroom curriculum, and EL teachers regularly discussed with grade-level teachers how they could support EL students during those lessons.

At the middle school, teachers emphasized how ESL and special education teachers participated in professional learning community meetings each Monday and Friday with general education teachers to ensure that their instructional support is aligned across grade levels. Moreover, because some ELs also received SWD interventions, EL and special education teachers would regularly collaborate on instructional practices, such as adjusting EL supports depending on student's specialized learning needs.

Structures for Sharing Information About Students

In addition to promoting collaboration through staff interactions, exemplar schools established systems that allow teachers to communicate information about student needs to their colleagues. For instance, many of the schools set up repositories such as online documents or shared data folders where teachers could post and access student information. For example, at one elementary school teachers input student data and notes about student needs into a secure, password-protected platform so that all instructional staff had access to that information, and the data facilitated informal communication about students. According to one respondent, organizing their student information on a common platform facilitated "a lot of communication between the teachers and [school leaders] about students of concern or if a teacher has a concern."

Another elementary school created a Student at a Glance form for each student, which summarizes information related to a comprehensive set of academic, social, emotional, medical, and family needs. Teachers at the school described this form as very helpful in fostering conversations with their colleagues about needs that might not be readily apparent. Similarly, a different elementary school established literacy folders for each student, which contained all sources of data related to the student's literacy skills. Teachers could pull out these folders during formal and informal collaboration sessions to access a multifaceted snapshot of the student's literacy needs and progress.

Strategy 4: Providing differentiated support and interventions

At the heart of schools' efforts to improve outcomes for ELs and SWDs were the specific interventions, instructional strategies, and supports these students receive to promote their learning. To ensure that all ELs and SWDs have access to such support, the seven schools not only adopted interventions deemed appropriate for their students' needs but also established structures and systems to facilitate their systematic implementation.

Structures to Support Intervention Use

Nearly all seven schools created a daily or weekly instructional schedule with reserved blocks of time for students to receive interventions and enrichment activities. For example, one of the secondary schools dedicated time every Monday and Friday for all students in particular grades to work independently with computer-based English language arts and math intervention programs. The computer programs tailored their instruction based on students' individual skill levels, allowing them to accommodate everyone from the school's SWDs and struggling students to its highest-performers.

At the elementary level, one school used its extra learning time added as part of the turnaround process to provide students a "second dose" of instruction. A teacher explained,

> It's a time for who in your class needs extra time because they're not…. They just need a different way of delivering. They just need another dose.

Another elementary school revised its instructional schedule to establish two separate intervention blocks at the beginning of each school day: one block for kindergarteners and first-grade students and another for students in Grades 3–5. The staggered intervention blocks allow the school's instructional coaches and interventionists to work with students in each grade band.

To further support the provision of interventions and differentiated support in mainstream classrooms, many of the schools brought in additional staff such as retired teachers and qualified paraprofessionals to help classroom teachers facilitate small-group instruction or provide one-on-one student support. Particularly in classes where students have wide-ranging ability levels and learning needs, having multiple staff members available to work with subsets of students on particular skills could promote efficient use of the intervention time. For example, one elementary school specially trained paraprofessionals to help classroom teachers implement a literacy intervention program to groups of students with varying reading levels.

Schools also minimized class sizes as another strategy to support the differentiation of instruction in mainstream classrooms. Teachers from one of the secondary schools highlighted school leaders' efforts to keep mainstream class sizes small so that aligning instruction to ELs' and SWDs' diverse learning needs remained manageable for the teacher. In addition, at one of the elementary schools, the district central office worked to reduce class sizes after an influx of new EL students caused class sizes at particular grade levels to surge, hampering teachers' ability to provide instructional support.

Specific Interventions and Supports

In this section, we highlight examples of interventions and instructional supports that one or more of the seven schools provided to ELs and SWDs to address their specialized learning needs. The examples featured here do not constitute an exhaustive list of the schools' interventions and supports, nor should they be interpreted as recommended interventions and supports. The examples presented are intended to illustrate the types of approaches taken by the seven schools.

❖ *Computer-based intervention programs.* Teachers from all seven schools described using a variety of commercially developed software programs to support ELs and SWDs (e.g., i-Ready, Imagine Learning, Lexia Reading, Accelerated Reader, Newsela, Read Naturally, Seeing Stars, Khan Academy, and Success Maker). Often, these programs could be personalized to address a student's individualized learning goals and were also adaptive, meaning they automatically adjust their content based on a student's responses. Moreover, they typically generated real-time data on students' skill levels, areas in which they are making progress, and areas for which they need additional support. This type of output could assist teachers in adjusting their classroom instruction to meet the student needs highlighted by the computer program.

❖ *Peer support.* Teachers from a number of the schools mentioned drawing on other students to provide supports for ELs or SWDs. In particular, teachers of ELs often described pairing these students with a classmate—in many cases, a classmate from the same language background with a higher level of English proficiency—to serve as a partner for practicing English speaking and listening skills in a comfortable, low-stakes environment.

❖ *Writing support center.* The high school established a writing center in a dedicated area of the school where students could go at any time for assistance with their writing assignments. The center was run by a full-time staff member provided by the district, and it was staffed with tutors who were specifically trained to work with ELs as well as other students. The tutors worked with students who visit the writing center on developing and editing their school essays. They also went into teachers' classrooms to provide support to ELs, SWDs, and other students on a variety of writing tasks.

❖ *Graphic organizers.* Teachers in many of the seven schools mentioned frequently using graphic organizers to assist ELs and SWDs with a diverse array of learning tasks. A special education teacher from one school described using graphic organizers to guide students in breaking down and planning the steps they would take to complete complex mathematics problems. A literacy teacher from another school discussed using graphic organizers to help students connect with texts in various ways. She emphasized that by using the graphic organizers consistently throughout the year, students were able to figure out they could best use them to support their learning needs. At the high school, teachers supplied all students with graphic organizers that were individually tailored to the student's specific learning needs. For example, an EL might receive a graphic organizer with an English word bank and sentence starters, whereas another student might receive a broad organizer that is simply designed to help him or her plan learning tasks.

❖ *Alternative text formats.* Another common instructional support that teachers used for both ELs and SWDs involved providing written texts in multiple formats. For example, teachers might offer students an audio or graphic novel version of the book their class is reading to help ELs or SWDs decipher key concepts. Teachers from several schools also underscored the use of ebooks, which allow students to access written texts on a variety of electronic devices. A teacher from one school that emphasized the use of ebooks noted that students learn "how to use digital annotation tools, how to highlight, [and] how to zoom in, which helps our special needs students as well as our EL students."

❖ *Afterschool programs.* Staff from most of the seven of the schools mentioned having informal opportunities for ELs and SWDs to meet with teachers after the school day to receive additional support. In addition, many of the schools created formal afterschool programs for these students. For example, one elementary school operated an afterschool intervention program for ELs that occurred three times a week for an hour and a half. The program was targeted to ELs at the lowest English proficiency levels (Levels 1 and 2) who, according to school staff, were working below grade level and could benefit from additional instructional time. Teachers explained that the program offered ELs an extra opportunity to practice

speaking English with other students, particularly by answering higher-order, open-ended questions. One of the secondary schools ran an afterschool math intervention program where students who were identified as needing extra support in math attended intervention classes after school based on a 2-week intervention cycle.

❖ *Summer enrichment programs.* One of the secondary schools developed an intensive summer school program open to ELs with lower levels of English proficiency (Levels 1–3)—many of whom came from households that did not speak English—so that they could continue learning and practicing English while school was out of session. During the 5-week program, students received an additional 2 hours of reading and writing instruction with a certified ESL instructor followed by an additional 2-hour technology literacy workshop. Teachers described the program as an opportunity for ELs to build both their social and academic language skills, and students who completed the program could receive course credit.

Conclusion

Although the seven exemplar schools employed many common strategies for supporting their ELs and SWDs, their experiences suggest there is no one-size-fits-all method for meeting the diverse learning needs of these students. Rather than prescribing blanket approaches to serving ELs and SWDs, each school focused on supporting teachers in recognizing the individualized and often complex needs these students present, devising instructional strategies to address those needs, and monitoring whether instructional strategies were implemented and produced desired learning outcomes. With an eye toward sustaining such practices, they created structures, systems, and routines for improving teachers' capacity to carry them out. These included ongoing opportunities for teachers to enhance their professional knowledge and skills, norms, and tools for teachers to collectively review and discuss data about students, and instructional schedules that provided dedicated time for teachers to implement academic interventions. Teachers from many of the schools expressed confidence that having such supports in place would allow them to maintain their practices even in the face of leadership changes or staff turnover.