Longstanding myths about how ELs learn and develop English language proficiency have negatively impacted generations of students. Below, Dr. Sonia Soltero articulates common misconceptions about ELs that are presented in her book *Schoolwide Approaches to Educating ELLs: Creating Linguistically and Culturally Responsive K-12 Schools* (2011). She counters these myths by drawing on extensive research in the field. Understanding facts can be a significant catalyst for local discussions and for crafting a shared local vision to serve ELs.

**Facts About ELs**

**Facts Regarding Second Language Acquisition**

*Acquiring a second language is not a straightforward undertaking.*

Many factors influence not only how long it takes to become proficient, but also the level of sophistication in the second language. Factors that influence second language acquisition that are internal to the learner include personality traits, age, motivation, attitude, self-esteem, learning style and level of proficiency in the native language. External factors involve structural conditions typically outside the control of the learner, such as quality of second language instruction, access to speakers of the second language, teacher expectations, education policies and instructional practice, and society's attitudes toward the learner's background.
How long does it take to master English?

Acquisition of academic second language takes between four to nine years compared with one to two years to develop social second language. Why the difference? Social language is acquired faster because it is supported by context, is less dependent on prior knowledge, has fewer complex language structures, is made up of everyday words and is driven by greater interpersonal motivation. Academic second language has less context; more complex sentences; and more abstract, low frequency and content-based vocabulary. Educators must consider that even native English speakers do not come to school with fully, or even partially, developed academic English. For ELs, the difficulty in learning academic language as their second language in addition to learning content in a language they do not fully understand is significantly amplified.

What are some common misconceptions?

Misconceptions about learning a second language perpetuate a number of myths about bilingual education and ELs. It is not true nor suggested by research that children will be confused by being raised with two languages; that the first language is a crutch and should not be used; that younger children acquire the second language more easily and quickly than older students; or that parents should not speak to their children in the first language (Soltero 2016). These “myths” have been refuted by decades of research in the United States and abroad (see Crawford’s Ten Common Fallacies about Bilingual Education 2008; Espinosa’s Challenging Common Myths about Dual Language Learners 2013; McLaughlin’ Myths and Misconceptions about Second Language Learning 1992; Soltero’s Schoolwide Approaches to Educating ELLs 2011).
General educators, school leaders and even parents are not always aware that providing specialized services for ELs is required by federal and state law, or that such services are a necessary support for ELs to develop English and achieve academically. ELs are expected to learn English and the academic content at the same pace and level as their native-English-speaking peers, who do not have the added burden of learning a second language. While their English-speaking peers are learning academic content and progressing in literacy acquisition, ELs fall behind academically if they do not receive specialized second language instruction through specially designed materials and instructional methods. In addition, students who are in classrooms where their native language is used for instruction are better served linguistically, culturally, socially and academically.

**FACTS**

ELs need specialized support.

**FACTS**

More English is not better.

*Time-on-task hypothesis* maintains that ELs must be exposed to great amounts of English to become proficient in the language and also that instruction in the native language interferes with the acquisition of English. Research evidence rejects this claim and instead suggests that ELs who receive instruction in the native language develop English more efficiently than children who are immersed in the second language (Garcia 2009; Genesee and Riches 2006). Context factors, such as development in the first language, parent support and status of each language, are much stronger determinants in the outcome of initial first or second language instruction.

**FACTS**

Immigrants want to learn English.

Contrary to popular belief, the strong need to learn English and the loss of the native language is increasing among immigrant groups, who now shift to the majority language by the second generation. A few decades ago, this didn’t happen until the third generation. The loss of the native language and culture is often seen as necessary to develop and achieve academically in English. But when ELs lose their first language, not only do they experience loss of personal identity and emotional bond with their communities, they also often experience rejection from U.S. society.
Access to adult language classes is a major problem for those who want to become proficient in English. The demand for adult ESL classes is increasing as their funding and availability decrease. In addition to the shortage of ESL instruction, other obstacles to learning English reflect the inequality that results from poverty, including extended and/or nontraditional work hours, transportation and childcare.

**FACTS**

Speaking English is not proof of English proficiency.

A pervasive misconception is that once ELs are able to speak in English they are proficient in it and are able to function in the classrooms at the same level as their native-English peers. Research again disputes this notion. Some ELs who have no accent and are able to use English for everyday social interactions on familiar topics may appear to be fully proficient but may not have yet developed the decontextualized and cognitively demanding language needed for thinking, speaking and writing about academic subjects (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency—CALP). Misconceptions about second language proficiency often lead educators to exit ELs too early into general education classes based on their English conversational skills alone (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skill—BICS). These reclassified “former” ELs no longer receive specialized academic or language support in the form of ESL or bilingual services even though they continue to struggle with the demands of academic English.

**Strategies to Consider**

These types of misconceptions about ELs are pervasive and affect decision-making regarding program implementation at the local level. Programs and services for ELs must be designed with best practices that are grounded on research evidence. It is important to start by addressing EL facts with school leaders, including school board members, teaching staff and the community at large. To address these issues, some school districts organized presentations and panel discussions, which include school leaders and educators, as well as former ELs and their parents. Other schools institute ongoing book study groups to better understand the various aspects of EL education.

It is also important to consider external and community resources available to ELs and their families. Are there social agencies and governmental centers with translated informational materials? Are there social services or clinics with bilingual staff in the community? How might the school district connect with these organizations to form networks of support for families?
Before 2012, District 98 was academically the lowest-performing school district feeding into Morton West High School. At the beginning of the 2012-13 school year, Superintendent Dr. Carmen Ayala and Assistant Superintendent Dr. Amy Zaher joined the district and immediately recognized the disconnect between curriculum and instruction, absence of cultural responsiveness and lack of community relationships. All of these factors lead to achievement gaps in reading and math.

At that time, 88 percent of the district teachers were white and monolingual. The administration decided to take a districtwide approach regarding cultural sensitivity and also adopted the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). SIOP is a trademark protocol with eight essential instructional techniques which make the language of instruction comprehensible for ELs. This training allowed the existing staff to make learning more relevant to the student population, which is largely Latino and non-English proficient. The training was offered by cohort for seven years to teachers across the district.

Another step taken was to address the needs of students through a districtwide cultural audit conducted by Bea Young and Associates. The audit found many inequities including an inadequate curriculum that lacked academic rigor and did not align with standards. Developing a culturally responsive curriculum was one of the first priorities the administration undertook. Diverse grade-level teams that included building administrators, bilingual and general education teachers and special education teachers worked on curriculum alignment and increasing academic rigor.

In the 2014-15 school year, District 98 created a Dual Language Committee composed of parents from the community, support staff, teachers and administrators. For two years, the committee researched best practices in dual language education and completed school visits to prepare staff to implement a successful program. Training for dual language was conducted through cohorts. First, all pre-K and kindergarten teachers received professional development through the district and The Center for Teaching for Biliteracy. In subsequent years, first and second grade teachers followed suit. The district posts conferences and workshops in the newsletter, sends notices via email and encourages all teachers to attend. In 2016-17, the district provided extra support and hired an EL Program Specialist to work with all EL classrooms. The EL Program Specialist provides support in instruction, planning and assessment.
What type of support and training do school leaders receive?
School leaders are eligible to attend state conferences and workshops pertaining to bilingual education. All district leaders participated in SIOP training. School leaders also participated in Dual Language training as the district prepared to launch the program. Training is comprehensive and ongoing.

How has the district addressed issues of equity?
A districtwide cultural audit was conducted, which included all staff, including secretaries, custodians and virtually anyone who touches the lives of kids. The audit involved many ways of collecting information from various groups. Surveys, focus groups and opportunities for dialog were all part of the process. This cultural-responsiveness journey incorporated ideas concerning “Inclusive Behavior Training” for all staff, which served as the foundation for the district’s change. The training included administrators, top district officials and teachers. Today:
- Cultural-responsiveness training remains a part of ongoing professional development.
- Staff focuses on cultural responsiveness in all meetings that are conducted on Wednesdays. This includes ensuring faculty meetings, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), data analysis and all district initiatives are inclusive of dual language.
- The Curriculum Department implements one standards-based curriculum for all students regardless of socioeconomic or racial/ethnic background.
- When vacancies occur, the district places an emphasis on hiring staff that more closely represent the racial and ethnic background of the student population.
- District departments no longer work in silos; goals are shared across the system.

A Culturally Responsive Curriculum
Berwyn North also developed a new, culturally responsive curriculum for all students through a teacher-driven process of deep alignment and shared assessments. Culturally responsive curriculum development means not only focusing on what is being taught, but how it is being taught to diverse learners. Berwyn North set equitable learning as its driving goal. For example, when examining “what” was being taught, the Berwyn team emphasized that the curriculum for all learners should be the same—equal rigor and equal expectation—with supports based on the needs of different student groups. Monitoring progress, the district determined its student achievement data reflects a more rapid rate of growth than the state at large.

How has student achievement changed since the district implemented these programs?
2018 PARCC Comparison Chart ELA and Math

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LOCAL CONVERSATIONS AND ACTIVITIES
- Which of the misconceptions regarding ELs are prevalent in your community?
- What strategies might your district undertake to address these misconceptions?
- How will issues of equity inform your district vision?
- How can you promote awareness of the positive impact the academic achievement of ELs has on your district?