Phoenix School District Meets New EL Requirements with Focus on Language

Isaac School District #5

From 2006 to 2019, Arizona educators had strict parameters when it came to educating the state's English Learners (ELs).

ELs in lower grades had to receive at least four hours of Structured English Immersion instruction a day, a requirement that limited ELs' exposure to other academic subjects such as social studies, science, and history. This requirement also restricted the amount of time ELs spent with their native English-speaking and/or fluent peers. However, the signing of a new Arizona law in 2019, Senate Bill 1014, meant school districts like Isaac Elementary School District in Phoenix, an urban district with approximately 1,600 ELs, suddenly had greater flexibility in their EL instruction. "Language is at the center of learning," said Lily Mesa-Lema, director of curriculum and instruction. "It's how we know what students are thinking—what they know, what they don't know, the misconceptions, and the multiple ways of understanding a problem."

The passage of Senate Bill 1014 also came with additional responsibilities. Arizona's education leaders had to determine how they would approach EL instruction going forward. Isaac used this moment to launch a student-centered EL instructional approach built around bringing nonnative English speakers into the classroom with their peers, using research-based programs, and building community.

STUDENTS
5,284

GRADES
Pre-K–8

TITLE I
86%

EL POPULATION
30%

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i-Ready | 1

What They Did

When it was time to develop an instructional model that would meet the new law's requirements, Isaac's education leaders knew they wanted to focus on building academic language (i.e., the understanding and use of language within an academic context). The new model would be grounded in research as well as rigorous and inclusive.

As part of the district's efforts to create a new EL curriculum, educators used the following:

Personalized Learning
i-Ready Assessment and Personalized Instruction help educators give all students individualized learning pathways.

Discourse-Centered Math
Isaac implemented *Ready® Mathematics*, Curriculum Associates' teacher-led math program, in 2018.

Isaac's Three Anchors
The district grounds learning in academic language, curriculum maps, and effective Tier 1 instruction.

Detailed Teacher Feedback
During remote learning, teachers recorded themselves using best practices and shared the videos with colleagues for professional development.

Language Scaffolds
The use of strategic scaffolds helps all ELs build confidence and engage in classroom activities and lessons at the same rates as their native English-speaking peers.

Family Development
The concept of math discourse can be strange to some families, so every Isaac school hosts an annual math curriculum night where teachers and instructional coaches help guardians understand the district's approach to teaching math and give them guidance so they can help students at home.

Home Languages
"We do encourage our families to read to their students in Spanish to really continue building that vocabulary because that's one of the most essential ways in which we know our students are going to be able to make that transfer [of understanding] and strengthen both languages," explained Mesa-Lema.

> *"The district has, for a number of years, been focusing on language. Because our ELs are a large population of the students that we serve,* **it's all about the language objectives."**
>
> —**Lily Mesa-Lema**, Director of Curriculum and Instruction

What They Accomplished

Isaac is already seeing the benefits of having emergent bilingual students spend more time in classrooms focusing on scaffolding academic language and giving emergent bilinguals more exposure to subjects other than English instruction.

Mesa-Lema shared a story about "the student who 'broke' *i-Ready*" as an example of how new programs and new approaches have quickly impacted student learning. This student was in Grade 7 when Isaac moved to virtual learning, but she was below grade level in math. Her teacher hypothesized that the student would be able to access the math content once she found her way around the language barrier. To test her belief, this teacher provided Spanish-language scaffolds to the academic language, giving the student access to English and math concepts. The student gained confidence and a sense of self-efficacy.

Student Growth in Mathematics with Scaffolds and *i-Ready*

Grade 9

ESPAÑOL

Below Grade Level

Introducing Spanish Scaffolds

Beginning of Year

End of Year
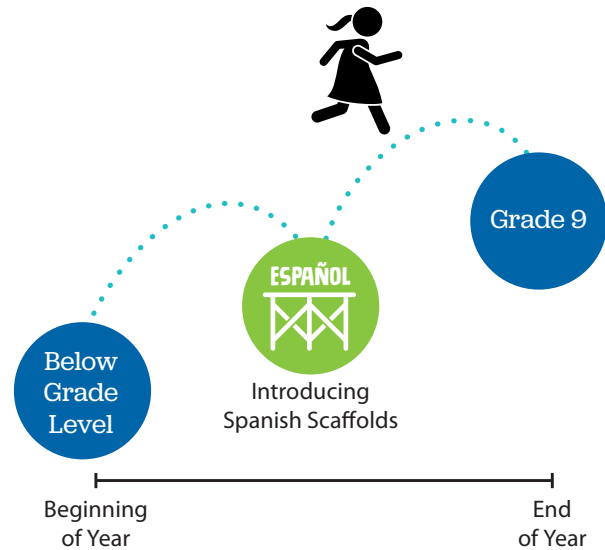
She worked hard, and by the end of the year, her i-Ready *Personalized Instruction placed her at a Grade 9 level, earning her the nickname of "the girl who broke* i-Ready."

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