



**Compassionate Curricula: Regional Public Schools are Serving More English Language Learners than Ever and Celebrating the Diversity Upturn**  
By Joy Brown

Students at Whittier Primary School in Findlay, Ohio, love Travel Tuesdays, which highlight cultures from countries where the school’s increasingly international population originated. For instance, participants have learned about Chinese New Year traditions, Diwali, and Indian sun salutations. These special days are just one way that the entire K-2 school – teachers, students, and administrators – prioritizes learning about the world by learning from each other.

Such cultural competency “builds empathy and acceptance,” said Crystal Whipkey, Ed.D. Now in her 34<sup>th</sup> year of teaching, her passion is multilingual education, particularly as it pertains to young international newcomers and helping teachers who work with them.

Commonly referred to as English as a Second Language or ESL instruction, educators are now also using the term English Language Learner (ELL) because so many newcomers are already fluent in multiple languages.

English language instructors are now more in demand thanks to immigration increases. Regional schools are being impacted and are striving to serve additional students—more than in years past—as many migrate here with their families.

For the past six years, Findlay City Schools (FCS) has annually had more non-English-speaking students enrolled. In Spring 2019, 81 were being served, according to assessment test results. Three years later, that number had increased to 127. In spring 2024, the district had 209 non-English speakers, which represents a 41% increase from the previous year and a 158% increase from six years prior. Some of those represent the same children moving through grades as they continue to learn English, but the increase also reflects a rise in new student enrollments.

For years, the district has accommodated students and their families by offering ESL instruction at Whittier Primary School, Wilson Vance Elementary School, Glenwood Middle School and Findlay High School. It buses newcomer students who don’t live in those districts to those schools.

For many years, the district employed four ESL teachers, but in recent years has increased that total to seven, said Kelly Wohlgamuth, coordinator of gifted and ESL programming.

FCS has also purchased translation tools to help staff and administrators communicate with parents about enrollment requirements, teaching standards, transportation logistics, and more. The district uses a paid website called Propio Language Services for translation, especially when communicating with caregivers, and handheld Pocketalk voice translators.

The additional staffing and services have come with additional costs, but educators here adhere to the conviction that American public schooling is a right that all residents—regardless of nationality or immigration status—should have. They also believe international students are an asset, “a gift,” as Wohlgamuth said.

“When we look at our mission statement, one of the keywords is belonging. We truly believe that everyone belongs here, and we want them to feel they have that sense of belonging,” said Wohlgamuth. “Yes, they learn from us, but we learn so much from them. It’s amazing to see how much we learn about their culture or how to solve a math problem in a new and exciting way.”

Whipkey also celebrates the increasing diversity that newcomers are bringing to the classrooms and the community at large. The differences, she points out, are opening students’ and teachers’ eyes to different ways of thinking and living. Newcomers feel welcomed and accepted when they’re invited to share aspects of their home country with others, and U.S.-born students are fascinated by and curious about how their classmates from other countries speak, dress, learn, and celebrate differently.

Whipkey remembers when the youngest migrant students would reach for the peach and blue crayons when asked to draw themselves because the idea of assimilation—of wanting to become a white-skinned, blue-eyed American—was so ingrained in their minds. Students today are encouraged to draw themselves as they truly are using Crayola's “Colors of the World,” and to be proud of their culture and heritage.

Concurrently, the goal is to teach ELLs how to become literate in English and American customs so that they can best learn and succeed in and outside of the classroom. This isn’t always easy, even with good intentions.

Many children often learn more quickly than adults, but teachers have come to realize that expecting them to simply absorb material, like sponges, passively in a classroom, isn’t the most comprehensive, efficient, or compassionate way to instruct. Therefore, Whipkey said physicality and fill-in-the-blank teaching are used to engage students. Hand gestures, facial expressions, and sketches or photos are essential learning tools, as are “sentence frames” in which teachers provide some of the primary words while encouraging students to fill in the gaps. These techniques encourage students to continuously practice speaking and writing English.

Digital translation tools are helpful but can have limitations that impede learning; for instance, some students cannot read or write in their first languages.

Along with attending regular 30-minute breakout sessions with ESL teachers to intensively work on their English skills, these students are also paired with English-speaking students to facilitate peer-to-peer learning. The pairings are optimal if the English speakers can also speak the newcomers' language. The English speaker can explain to their partner how they've gone about solving a math problem, for example, and the new student can offer their ideas and thoughts. This technique also helps to build friendships, trust, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

Feeling welcomed and safe at school can mean the world to new students, let alone those who have undergone traumatic experiences, as many migrant children have; several families who have immigrated to Findlay are asylum seekers, having fled unspeakable violence in their home countries. Wohlgamuth said the district addresses the direst issues just like it does with any given student. Conversations are had with students and caregivers to get at the crux of the problem that's impeding learning. Outside agencies are at the ready with incidences of intense behavioral issues or potential criminal activity. Teachers and staff also use facial expressions and gestures that are universally recognized as reflecting kindness.

Cultural sensitivity and differences are always considered. "For us, eye contact is important, but in some cultures, that can be seen as disrespectful. So, understanding that and not forcing those students to look you in the eye, just honoring their culture and traditions, not forcing ours upon them, and being very respectful to them, is important. They need to know that you care about them," Wohlgamuth said.

Other visual welcoming methods include displaying flags from the students' home countries, having the names of countries listed in classrooms, and, of course, hosting inclusive activities like Travel Tuesdays.

"Some of these kids are succeeding while living in homes that are less than ideal, like with multiple people living in one hotel room and situations of that nature," Wohlgamuth pointed out. "They're just amazing, hardworking kids who are so incredibly brave."

"I wish everyone had the opportunity to go somewhere where they speak a language other than the one they're proficient in and be able to truly experience to some degree, what that's like. It's such an amazing, humbling experience," said Wohlgamuth.

Language and learning breakthroughs have been known to bring teachers to tears, said Whipkey, an ESL teacher who primarily works at Whittier. The students "are so eager and so excited. I like to watch them start to use language. I like to watch them interact with their other teachers. It's just so beautiful because it's affecting a lot of people so profoundly," she explained.

## **Rural Literacy Learning**

“Our diversity is our strength!” proclaims the Hancock County Educational Service Center (ESC) on its ESL webpage. The center serves eight county school districts and offers English language instruction to those that don’t provide their own.

ESC staff say they are also seeing increases in the number of English language learners, but not as overt as Findlay City Schools, primarily because available and affordable housing is even more rare in rural areas than it is within Findlay. Most ELLs at county schools are enrolled in McComb and Van Buren, where manufacturing centers are nearby.

“The demographics in my school district have definitely shifted a lot,” said Mackenzie Leonard, who works full-time as a Van Buren Local School District ESL specialist. Years ago, most international students came to the U.S. with parents who had transferred here to pursue skilled professions at places such as Marathon Petroleum Corporation and manufacturing facilities.

“Obviously, in the past few years... a lot of families are leaving their countries due to unrest and coming here on humanitarian parole, coming here seeking asylum. So, the needs of the population are changing, and the numbers are increasing every year,” said Leonard.

Depending on the number of migrant students, each county school district recognizes and celebrates diversity differently, Leonard said. Years ago, “there was really no acknowledgment of the ESL population,” but now, “there’s no ignoring it,” she pointed out. Van Buren hosts an international night “to celebrate all families and all of their origins,” not just newcomers, she said. “It’s an exciting thing.”

County ESL instructors are also finding themselves trying to educate U.S.-born citizens, both inside and outside their schools, who are skeptical, or downright hostile toward immigrants. Knowing that such negativity often filters down to and affects the youngest among us, the teachers are striving to establish an atmosphere both inside and outside their classrooms that is fact-based and empathetic.

“I feel like I’ve spent a lot of time trying to just inform others,” said Leonard. She recently had a conversation with another educator who believed most, if not all, Haitians are here illegally. “I was explaining to her about humanitarian parole, that they have to find employment under this, and so they are contributing to our society,” Leonard said. “Afterwards, she thanked me, saying she didn’t know all of that.”

“In our area in general, it’s like it’s assumed that anyone who looks non-white is here illegally, which is not the case,” said Angelina Starkey, an ESL teacher who works with McComb students. Many Americans not only lack knowledge of the immigration and asylum process in general but also “lack compassion,” she said.

“Even the students I don’t teach, those who are not white, are heavily impacted” by misinformation, Starkey explained.

For migrants, “It’s their whole life, their culture, their country that is being put into question, and it’s not their fault,” said Leonard. “It’s heavy stuff.”

From an educational standpoint, “Honestly their (students’) documentation status is none of our business,” Leonard continued. “Our job is just to teach them.”

Teaching students’ caregivers about the U.S. public education system, and even about American culture, is also a big part of ESL teachers’ work. Many can’t help but offer additional assistance when it comes to important but complicated matters like setting up a bill payment or seeking health care, in part because they know it directly impacts their students.

“You’re kind of like a liaison, not only from the schooling aspect but for life in general,” said Starkey. “I’m often the one they come to for anything they need to go to, like an appointment. They don’t know how to do this or that. A lot of us don’t even understand health insurance and what’s involved with signing a lease. We’re on the front lines with the students and you know you can help a little bit.”

Leonard said she became interested in teaching English language at a young age, starting when she was a student at Whittier. “I saw how quickly kids learned the language. It just fascinated me. It’s very rewarding. Not very many adults love their job, but I really do,” she said.

Starkey’s love for her work, and consideration of it as a calling, is faith-based. After earning her bachelor’s degree in elementary education, she taught at a Christian school in Mexico, which prompted her to return to the U.S. and earn a master’s degree in Teaching English as a Second Language at the University of Findlay.

“As a Christian, I know that God has a special heart for people who are foreigners and that Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, so that’s what I want to do. It doesn’t matter where I come from, where they come from, what my skin color is, what their language is like. I teach to reflect that love that God has for all people,” Starkey said.

Because of housing and work situations that cause many migrants to live transient lives during their first years here, many of Starkey’s students don’t stick around for long. But there is one who stands out to her as a great success story—a girl from Guatemala whose family moved to the area when she was 10.

“She was in the fourth grade, and she was completely deaf,” said Starkey. In her home country, there was some schooling, but no special needs resources for the girl, educationally or in terms of health care. She was also being bullied because she was differently abled. Therefore, she lived an uncommunicative life. “She was a calm child. She didn’t have any behavior problems. But she lived in a silent, lonely world,” Starkey said.

The family had initially settled in Defiance, where the school system there connected her with a specialist who fitted her with hearing aids. When the family then relocated to McComb, she was

initially transported each school day to the Ohio School for the Deaf in Archbold, Ohio. Starkey said the girl is now attending one of the county school's Special Education Units through the Educational Service Center, is thriving, and is on her way to becoming fluent in four languages, including sign language.

"Hearing a story like that, how can you not feel happy for that family to be here?" asked Starkey.