

ELL students: Off the 'backburner,' now front and center



Kristina Soprano helps students in her English class at Global Learning Charter Public School. PETER PEREIRA/The Standard-Times

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September 07, 2014 12:00 AM

NEW BEDFORD — Kristina Soprano, the English Language Learner Coordinator and a teacher at Global Learning Public Charter School, is a lot busier these days.

Soprano said more teachers at the school have been telling her that they have a student who has a hard time reading, and that they know at home the family speaks Spanish.

"Just within the last year, I have already seen a shift in the culture, in the way we are teaching about the ELL kids," she said.

The ELL students, or those students who speak another language and need extra help learning English, are no longer on the "back burner," she said.

As with other city schools, the charter schools are finding ways of supporting the growing ELL population, and some are even recruiting ELLs.

Students all take a home language survey to see if they speak another language at home, and if so, are tested to see if they need additional English language support, Soprano said.

Teachers are also involved in the state's RETELL initiative (Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners,) which requires all teachers to receive state-mandated training to learn strategies to teach ELL students, over the next two years.

"It's giving teachers another set of skills, another set of lenses," on how to deal with ELL students, she said.

State statistics show that 1 percent of students at Global Learning were ELL in the 2012-13 school year. A year later, that number jumped to 5.6 percent.

Soprano attributed the increase in part to better observation and reporting by teachers. She also said students who no longer need additional support are monitored for two years, but that did not always happen. If the material becomes harder and a student cannot keep up, the student is now re-identified as ELL, she said.

ELL students are not pulled out of class for additional support, she said. Instead, classes are co-taught, with a certified English Second Language teacher. The teachers meet, and co-plan the class ahead of time, she said.

Teachers at Alma del Mar, the public charter school in the city's North End, are no stranger to ELLs. The school has almost double the statewide average of ELL students, at 13.5 percent in school year 2013-14, compared to the state average of 7.9 percent statewide.

Elizabeth Leiwant, director of academic support at the school, wrote in an email that the number is even higher for incoming kindergartners, a quarter of whom typically are ELL every year.

There's a reason for those numbers. Leiwant said school officials "actively recruit to communities that may not speak English."

"We intentionally are trying to serve that population," she said, because it is a growing segment of the city.

The school prints recruitment materials in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, hosts "English for Speakers of Other Languages," or ESOL classes for parents, and works with the New Bedford Immigrants Assistance Center to reach families.

Teachers at the school are engaged in their state-mandated training, but even before the RETELL initiative, Leiwant said the school internally trained teachers.

Identifying students in kindergarten has been "exciting," she said because students become proficient in English, "in one year or two."

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