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Improving Literacy Skills for ELs Through Targeted Professional Development

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, schools have seen an increase in the number of English learners entering their classrooms. Meeting the needs of English learners continues to be a topic for discussion. Schools and teachers across the United States are struggling to appropriately meet the unique learning needs of this demographic of students. English learners continue to be pushed through the educational system while the gap between them and their non-EL peers continues to widen. This school improvement plan was created with the intention of providing professional development that focuses on increasing teacher knowledge and providing teachers with strategies and interventions to target their English learners.

Keywords: English learners, ELL, literacy interventions, literacy strategies, professional development, peer collaboration
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Improving Literacy for ELs Through Targeted Professional Development

Over the last few decades, there has been an increase in the number of English learners (ELs) in U.S. schools. Not only that, but many schools are now seeing an increase in newcomers – students who are arriving directly from another country and have very limited to no English language skills at all. In 2023, EL made up 6.9 percent of students in Iowa public schools (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). Teachers are overwhelmed by the day-to-day demands of teaching and feel ill-prepared to meet the unique learning needs of this group of students. Meeting the needs of language learners can be a daunting task. Educators are also tasked with identifying students’ literacy skills in their first or second language. Teachers often lack the time and ability to differentiate academic content in a meaningful way. Similarly, assessing language learners can be difficult – especially when it comes to standards-based grading. Focused and ongoing professional development can help to provide teachers and additional school staff with the necessary knowledge, skills, and strategies to meet the needs of the diverse learners in their classroom.

Meeting the needs of English learners is not a new problem; however, it is a problem that is very apparent at Kinsey Elementary. English learners are being placed in classrooms in which teachers do not have the necessary educational or cultural background to help support them. The purpose of this school improvement plan is to develop a plan to help teachers at Kinsey Elementary going forward. Like many schools across the country, Kinsey Elementary has seen an overwhelming increase in the number of English learners in recent years. Staff members at Kinsey have been provided with initial training or one-and-done training that does little to help them grow as professionals or make any long-term changes to their instruction or classroom. Teachers and staff are not adequately prepared in how to meet the unique learning needs of this
group of students because professional learning is not ongoing or embedded throughout their day and/or year. Implementing targeted and ongoing professional development that is job-embedded has the potential to impact both staff and students (Cavazos et al., 2018).

The main intention behind this school improvement plan is to help create a “we” culture that involves all staff members participating in ongoing professional development geared towards learning about and implementing strategies and interventions to improve literacy for English learners. Currently, EL staff are pegged with the responsibility of meeting EL students’ needs because teachers lack adequate understanding and time to undertake this learning. This has resulted in EL staff being overwhelmed due to the sheer number of students they are helping to support and students being either sent out of classrooms for interventions or left in the classroom with little to no expectations placed on them. This is a situation that needs to be rectified. It is necessary to examine how to implement ongoing professional learning so that all staff members can be better prepared to meet the literacy needs of our English learners. Schools across the United States have seen positive benefits from implementing professional development for staff that is geared specifically towards meeting the literacy needs of EL students (Babinski et al., 2018; Cavazos et al., 2018; Li & Peters, 2020; Shelton et al., 2023). It is the author’s goal that this school improvement plan provides staff members at Kinsey Elementary with the necessary learning that helps them support the literacy needs of the English learners in their classroom using targeted strategies and interventions.

Research was conducted using journals found through the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa. All journal articles that were found were peer-reviewed and published within the last decade. Additional journal articles and input were provided to the author by colleagues and school professionals including the EL staff at Kinsey
Elementary, the school psychologist, and Northwest Area Education Agency (AEA) staff members. The author focused on reviewing articles that dealt with either professional development – both in general and geared toward EL – as well as improving literacy in elementary-aged English learners. The research allows us to take into consideration the importance of ongoing professional development and the role it plays in implementing evidence-based literacy interventions and strategies for English learners.

It is the author’s belief that providing all teachers with ongoing and targeted professional learning to help support English learners’ literacy skills will allow those same learners to show increased continual growth through intervention progress monitoring and overall growth on their English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA). Teachers cannot be expected to provide targeted support if they do not fully understand the students they are working with or how to provide them with interventions and strategies targeted towards their unique learning needs. Providing a focused and ongoing professional development plan will strengthen teachers’ ability to meet the unique needs of their English learners’ literacy development. “There is a clear need for schools to understand and adopt systems that aim to provide ELs with and without disabilities evidence-based literacy instruction and intervention, thus promoting academic success,” (Shelton et al., 2023, p. 40). Schools, including Kinsey Elementary, need to be willing to put the work in if they want to see the benefit of academic success for our English learners.

Review of the Literature

Data has shown that schools all over the United States are seeing an increase in the number of students who are considered EL with as many as five million EL students being enrolled in schools (Vaughn et al., 2022). Schools and teachers are struggling to meet the unique learning needs of this specific group of students in a way that ensures that students are receiving
what all children are entitled to – a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Many educators are noting that they feel ill prepared to teach such a diverse set of learners (Vaughn et al., 2022). Research provides professionals with a plethora of information and data ranging from how to best support ELs in the classroom setting using a variety of evidence-based strategies and interventions to the importance of professional development and potential ideas for implementing professional development.

**Perceptions Towards ELs in the Classroom**

Teachers often struggle to meet the needs of English learners. This is due somewhat in part to the perceptions they have of their students and their achievement. English learners frequently have lower expectations placed on them as soon as they are identified as EL. Umansky and Dumont (2021) state, “English learner (EL) classification is consequential for students; however, less is known about how EL classification affects student outcomes” (p. 993). Using a sample of approximately 2,155 students, Umansky and Dumont (2021) studied the effect of kindergarten EL status on teachers’ perceptions regarding students’ academic performance and achievement. Teachers utilized a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not yet proficient or far below level) to 5 (proficient or far above average). Data showed that when students were classified as EL at a young age, it often resulted in lower teacher perceptions. These negative perceptions were present across all four academic content areas – language and literacy, math, social studies, and science. Interesting to note is that the research also led to the discovery that lower teacher perceptions for EL students were not present in bilingual classrooms (Umansky and Dumont, 2021). It could be argued that this is due in part to highly qualified teachers being present in bilingual classrooms and that increasing professional development may help to combat negative teacher perceptions.
Supporting ELs in the Classroom

**Methods for Carrying Out Instruction**

Meeting the needs of ELs has been a divisive topic. Schools, administrators, and educators often disagree with how to educate English learners. Johnson (2023) lays out the different approaches that are utilized by districts across the United States:

- Some are educated in mainstream English monolingual classrooms, with or without language support.
- Some spend a large fraction of their day in designated English language development (ELD) courses with other ELs.
- Still others participate in dual language or bilingual programs, in which instruction is conducted in both their home language and in English (p. 1045).

While districts often disagree with how to best meet the needs of ELs in their schools, many schools and researchers agree that English learners often display a large gap in achievement compared to their non-EL peers. In his research, Gibson (2016) noted “that only 6% of ELLs were rated as being proficient in reading at the start of their fourth-grade year in U.S. public schools” (p. 135). This statistic is alarming and supports the need for schools and educators to shift the way things have previously been done, and instead, make way for change. The need for change is further supported when looking at graduation rates of ELs. Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016) found that “the high school graduation rate for English learner students was 61 percent in 2012-13, compared with an overall US graduation rate of 81 percent” (p. 194).

How that change happens continues to be a source of division amongst researchers. Just as Johnson (2023) addressed the differing models for instruction, Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016) found similar results in their research when it came to determining the arguments for and against bilingual education for ELs. Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016) evaluated and
reviewed numerous studies regarding bilingual education and English immersion and the potential effect that either approach could have on English learners’ academic performance and language acquisition. Through their research, they were able to come to the conclusion that utilizing a bilingual approach has the potential for greater pay off. Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016) cited two reviews, carried out by the National Literacy Panel and the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, that supported bilingual education for young students. The findings “concluded that teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English” (p. 173).

Instead of forcing students to ignore their culture and their primary language, schools can instead focus on helping students to embrace their diversity and obtain achievement in both languages. Through their review, Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016) were able to identify five practices that should be utilized when working with ELs: (1) frequent assessments in both languages to help guide and adapt instruction; (2) small-group activities that are focused on giving ELs a chance to share out and respond to questions and comments without fear of being wrong; (3) vocabulary instruction that is explicit and planned out ahead of time; (4) using academic English throughout instruction to help with acquisition of academic vocabulary; and (5) helping students grow both socially and emotionally through positive teacher and peer relationships. These five practices can be carried out by schools no matter which teaching approach is being implemented with English learners as they focus on taking ownership of student needs and concerns.

**ELs and MTSS**

One of the most difficult tasks when working with ELs is determining which students are at-risk or may require additional intervention. The research conducted by Linan-Thompson et al.
(2022) addresses how the different approaches to educating ELs “lead to variability in the design and implementation of MTSS/RTI frameworks and differing levels of success not only to prevent learning difficulties, but also appropriately identifying ELs who have learning difficulties or disabilities” (p. 484-485). There is a need for the MTSS/RTI framework to be both culturally and linguistically responsive. Meaning it must use “the cultural knowledge, experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethically diverse students” (p. 485). In the area of reading, universal screeners have typically been used to help identify these students. However, many of these screeners do not always consider the difference between ELs and non-ELs (Cummings et al., 2021) nor are they culturally responsive. In their research, Linan-Thompson et al. (2022) state that “the core components of MTSS/RTI frameworks for ELs are the same as for non-ELs; the critical difference is in the integration of culturally and linguistically responsive practices” (p. 485). Two of these components include assessment and data-based decision-making. Linan-Thompson et al. (2022) carried out qualitative research to study the implementation of MTSS frameworks at five separate elementary schools serving a large population of English learners. The two projects – one for Schools 1 and 2 and the other for Schools 3, 4, and 5 - were intended to identify culturally and linguistically responsive practices that were already taking place as well as to help schools identify and carry out additional practices. The results found that all five schools had similar assessment practices. Students’ reading ability was measured three times per year – beginning, middle, and end, and progress was also measured regularly.

Through their research, Linan-Thompson et al. (2022) also found that each school held meetings to review and analyze the data after each benchmark window. Data teams included teachers and reading specialists who then grouped students according to the intervention they felt
was needed according to the assessment data. Grade level teams reviewed regular progress monitoring as a way to identify any noticeable trends in performance. From there, staff regrouped students on an as-needed basis. The research carried out by Linan-Thompson et al. (2022) supports the need for assessments to be completed regularly and offered in both languages when necessary. It also supports the need for staff members to come together to review and analyze student data regularly so as to make data-informed decisions with ongoing data as opposed to decisions made from the results of one or two benchmark assessments.

Additional research conducted by Hoover et al. (2020) also supports the need for culturally responsive teaching within a multitiered system of support for English learners. In addition to ensuring that EL students are exposed to culturally and linguistically responsive instruction, Hoover et al. (2020) also found that the MTSS framework in schools would benefit the following: (1) multilevel instruction across three tiers; (2) research-based core literacy instruction including ESL best practices with focuses on the four domains of EL (listening, speaking, reading, and writing); (3) multiple assessment options and data sources including screeners, progress monitoring, and diagnostic assessments; and (4) ecological decision making which takes into account a variety of environmental considerations.

Once again, adjusting MTSS frameworks within schools to accommodate these practices can further support English learners in schools. Research included ELs from kindergarten to third grade in three elementary schools. Schools participated in the five-year model demonstration project with the intention of improving literacy instruction for ELs and in turn, decreasing special education referrals. After implementing the project, Hoover et al. (2020) found that 80 percent of participating teachers reported that they were continuing to see benefits after the one-year implementation mark. Schools must be intentional about developing an MTSS/RTI
framework that takes EL students into account and makes necessary adjustments to meet those needs instead of unnecessarily referring these students for special education.

**Need for Professional Development**

While research supports the implementation of various strategies or interventions, those same strategies are not effective if staff do not have the knowledge or skills to implement them. Teachers and other staff working with ELs need professional development that is ongoing to help them meet the unique learning needs of the English learners. Vaughn et al. (2022) argues a strong point that “though frequently utilized in school settings, a one-time PD delivered to a large group of teachers is unlikely to influence classroom practice” (p. 258). The research conducted by Vaughn et al. (2022) focused on studying the effectiveness of a targeted professional development program – STRIVE. Vaughn et al. (2022) noted the following about the STRIVE model:

The STRIVE approach provides teachers with an initial workshop focused on evidence and use of vocabulary and reading comprehension practices… The distributed PD, however, includes follow-up opportunities using small group teacher study team meetings examining the curriculum materials and lessons to produce high levels of confidence in teachers using the practices and fidelity to the practice (p. 259).

A total 235 educators who were teaching in 79 schools across six different districts participated in the research study. These educators worked with nearly 4,757 students – 3,594 were considered non-EL and 921 were considered EL. Through their research, Vaughn et al. (2022) found that students whose teachers participated in the STRIVE professional development program outperformed both ELs and non-ELs when compared to students whose teachers did not participate in the STRIVE program. The results from this study support the need for professional
learning for teachers that will provide them with the necessary instructional practices and opportunities to implement those practices with fidelity so as to improve academic outcomes for EL students (Vaughn et al., 2022). While the STRIVE approach is a specific professional development program, it can be assumed that similar results would come from similar professional development models.

The research conducted by Vaughn et al. (2022) was further supported by additional research that was carried out by Babinski et al. (2018). The researchers in this study also investigated the effectiveness of a specific professional development approach – Developing Collaboration and Consultation Skills (DCCS). This PD approach focuses on improving teaching practices as well as the language acquisition of EL students in elementary school. Babinski et al. (2018) note, “The teacher professional development program provides ESL and classroom teachers with a framework for collaboration, skills for implementing high-impact instructional strategies, and approaches for incorporating families’ cultural wealth into the classroom” (p. 122).

A total of 45 teachers and 118 students from 12 school elementary schools across three districts participated in the research over the span of one year. Of the 118 students, 72 of the students were in an intervention classroom and 46 were in controlled groups. Results from the study found that professional development led to an increased use of adapted strategies as well as strategies that were taught and developed through DCCS (Babinski et al., 2018). Similar to the results found in the study by Vaughn et al. (2022), students who were a part of the intervention group of teachers participating in the PD also saw positive results. The implementation of a focused PD approach saw a significant impact on story recall as well as verbal analogies (Babinski et al., 2018). Research from both Babinski et al. (2018) and Vaughn et al. (2022)
support the need for targeted professional development for teachers in order to positively impact student achievement for EL students.

Li and Peters (2020) also addressed the need for focused professional development as many K-12 teachers are not receiving adequate training in their college or other preservice programs. Their research took ten months to complete and included 48 K-12 teachers across four school districts. Through their research, Li and Peters (2020) were able to identify positive factors that occurred from teachers participating in professional development workshops. Researchers reviewed pre- and post-test data which showed an overall increase in teachers’ knowledge regarding EL theories and strategies. The cumulative score on the pretest was 428 which increased to 723 on the post-test showing a 68% increase (Li & Peters, 2020).

Additionally, the research carried out by Li and Peters (2020) supports the idea that professional development that is targeted towards ELs has the potential to positively impact student achievement. Research showed that EL students showed an overall increase (29.6%) in their language skills using the LEARNS assessment. More specifically, students showed a 37.2% increase in listening, a 28.3% increase in reading, and a 23.5% increase in writing (Li & Peters, 2020). These increases help to support the need for K-12 teachers to support students’ academic achievement through targeted professional development.

Li and Peters (2020) also found that professional development helps to increase teachers’ knowledge regarding ELs. This finding is further supported by research conducted by Cavazos et al. (2018). Their research focused on examining the effect of job-embedded professional development (JEPD) on teacher knowledge. Cavazos et al. (2018) worked closely with four first-grade teachers during a seven-month time. Data collected showed that JEPD helped to provide teachers with the appropriate content knowledge in reading for ELs as well as instructional
practices to implement with ELs. Teachers completed pretests and post-tests that assessed their content and teacher knowledge. Prior to JEPD, teachers had a mean score of 65%. This increased to 89% following the implementation of JEPD. Furthermore, data also showed that teachers’ classroom practices also showed an improvement. Through classroom observations, the researchers were able to note that modeling improved from 16% to 60%; providing corrective feedback improved from 50% to 90% and providing for individual turns improved from 33% to 85% (Cavazos et al., 2018). Research carried out by Li and Peters (2020) and Cavazos et al. (2018) both support the need for professional development for teachers supporting EL students in the K-12 setting.

**Perceptions Towards Professional Development**

As research has shown, professional development plays a vital role in meeting the needs of English learners. While professional development is beneficial for all, it can be difficult to get all staff members to buy in to its importance. Research has shown that principals are a key influence when it comes to their staff and making decisions about the role of professional development (Brown & Militello, 2016; Clark & Chrispeels, 2022). Research conducted by Brown and Militello (2016) examined the elements that principals found most important regarding professional development. A total of 34 principals and assistant principals took part in the study over an undisclosed period of time. Participants were provided with a list of common elements of professional development and then asked to rank them. Additionally, once these elements were ranked, principals were asked to elaborate on their views by sharing the reasoning behind how they ranked the elements. Results from initial research found that 16 of the 31 participants felt that professional development should be sustained over time as opposed to a one-and-done model of professional development. Eight of the participants addressed the
importance of the role of collaboration in professional development. Similarly, seven of the 31 participants addressed the importance of not only collaboration in professional development but also follow-up. Through their research, Brown and Militello (2016) were able to make the following statement: “The school principal is uniquely positioned to control the form and function of PD in schools” (p. 703).

One must take this into account when looking at professional development. Just as Brown and Militello (2016) point out, principals know their staff and the needs of their staff better than anyone else. This allows them to be able to look at the whole picture and see the needs of all. The ability to see the whole picture allows principals to tackle issues head on and develop a plan of attack. Research conducted by Clark and Chrispeels (2022) supports this statement by emphasizing the importance of principals and other administrators having a growth mindset and sharing that mindset with additional staff. Over the course of a year, two principals were interviewed and the data reviewed to determine how teachers’ perceptions of administrative leadership was affected by a principal’s practices and views. Survey questions carried out by Clark and Chrispeels (2022) found that principals held the “belief that collaborative work between principals and teachers could change a low achieving school into a high achieving school” (p. 312).

Results also found that principals with a growth mindset worked to share that same mindset with staff by providing them with not only appropriate instructional materials but also any necessary professional development. This research helps to support the importance of a growth mindset and being open to continuous improvement and ongoing learning in order to meet student needs and observe growth. Additional research from Clark and Chrispeels (2022) supports the notion that principals play a large role in meeting the needs of their students and
staff. Their research went further and included not only how principals are capable of influencing professional development but also how that influence impacts teachers’ classroom practices and thus the achievement of ELs. Not all teachers have the skills necessary to teach EL students. Clark and Chrispeels (2022) found that it is the responsibility of principals to support struggling teachers by providing them with the opportunity to strengthen their instructional skills, and thus, ensure that all students in the school are being taught by highly qualified educators. Principals must acknowledge that all staff have a responsibility to meet the needs of English learners and must then allow staff appropriate time to learn and grow with one another and from one another.

Collaboration is an important factor of professional development and professional learning. Research supports the notion of working with one another and being open to learning with colleagues through the use of collaboration (Brown & Militello, 2016; Clark & Chrispeels, 2022). Research findings from Hoover et al. (2020) further support the importance of teachers working collaboratively with one another.

A most crucial finding for the important practice of trained educators supporting new educators is that more than two thirds of the K-3 participants indicated that they continue to (a) discuss project material in professional learning community (PLC) meetings, and (b) collaborate with colleagues about… ESL and bilingual instructional best practices (p.11).

Overall, the research supports the notion that in order for professional development to be effective for both students and staff, it needs to not only be embedded in the instruction and curriculum but also sustained over time with plenty of opportunities for both peer and administrative collaboration and follow-up (Brown & Militello, 2016; Clark & Chrispeels, 2022; Stewart, 2014).
Just as principals’ perceptions regarding professional development affect its effectiveness, research also indicates that the same is true for teachers. It could be argued that educators’ perceptions towards professional learning is potentially more impactful. Educators spend more time with their students in the classroom than what principals and administrators are capable of carrying out. Teachers must not only believe that they are capable of learning and meeting the needs of their students but that they also have a responsibility to do so. Stewart (2014) supports this through the following statement: “Learning communities thrive when all participants are invested in the work they are doing” (p. 28). It can be argued that Stewart’s statement serves to remind those in education of their responsibility to learn and grow together in order to improve their instructional practices and better meet the needs of students – particularly ELs – in the academic setting.

As stated above in the study by Brown and Militello (2016) an overwhelming amount of research shows that both educators and principals find professional development is most effective when it allows for collaboration, peer support, and carried out in an ongoing manner. However, educators must be willing to put the time in to learn from those around them. It is easy for staff to rely on their own experiences which are often vastly different from the English learners in their classroom. Stewart (2014) addresses this by stating, “Teachers teach the way they were taught… When educators begin to consider feelings, interactions, proficiency levels, and what’s best for their students they become enlightened” (p. 33). Staff who are well versed in the culture of the non-native speakers or who had similar childhood experiences can provide valuable professional learning opportunities for their colleagues.

Professional learning from peers is further supported through research conducted by Alibakhshi et al. (2021). Over the course of three months, researchers examined antecedents of
EL teachers’ self-efficacy and how those variables impacted their higher sense of self-efficacy. Fifteen teachers were interviewed. While this research was conducted in Iran, results can be interpreted in a similar manner in the United States. Research found that one antecedent was related to professional development – institutional antecedents. These variables included support from both school leaders and colleagues. Findings indicated that 90% of teachers interviewed stressed the importance of support from their school leaders and 70% identified support from colleagues.

Just as other researchers have stressed the importance of collaboration and peer support (Brown & Militello, 2016; Clark & Chrispeels, 2022; Stewart, 2014), Alibakhshi et al. (2021) elaborates by stating teachers feel supported and increase their self-efficacy when they receive support and learning from colleagues “particularly when they have no experience in tackling the instructional problems, and need hints, clues and suggestions for teaching strategies, classroom management and assessment strategies” (p. 294). Professional learning was also addressed through the research conducted by Alibakhshi et al. (2021) as their findings indicated educational antecedents that increased teacher self-efficacy included in-service workshops (85%) and informal learning activities (80%). Teachers must feel confident in their ability to meet students’ unique learning needs and learning from their peers and being provided administrative support allows them to do this in a more collaborative manner.

Site Profile

Community Characteristics

Kinsey Elementary School is part of the Sioux Center Community School District located in Sioux Center, Iowa. According to data from the 2020 Decennial Census, Sioux Center has a population of 8,229 people (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Two main racial groups were identified in the U.S. Census Bureau (2022) – white (78.5%) and Hispanic (21%).
employment rate is 73.7% with the median household income being $82,050. Less than 50% of the population in Sioux Center has obtained higher education with only 41.9% having a bachelor’s degree or higher. Nearly 2.7% of the population is living in poverty with the vast majority of those individuals being 65 years of age or older.

Education is highly sought after in Sioux Center. According to the United States Census Bureau (2022), 7.1% of the population enrolled in school are enrolled in preschool, 51.7% are enrolled in kindergarten to 12th grade, 39.5% are enrolled in undergraduate programs, and 1.6% are enrolled in graduate school or professional programs. In addition to Sioux Center Community School District, Sioux Center is also home to Stepping Stones (a private preschool), Sioux Center Christian School (TK to 8th grade), and Dordt University. Various community partners team up with schools and grades to serve as guest speakers, field trip hosts, and fundraising partners.

Within the last five years, Sioux Center Community School District began working with area businesses to create Portrait of a Graduate (PoG) with an intended focus on fulfilling Sioux Center’s district mission – “Educating the Whole Student for a Whole Lifetime” (Sioux Center Community School District, 2024). School district members, students, and area business professionals collaborated to identify six different traits that graduates should possess in order to be successful members of the community: productive collaboration, skilled communication, community and cultural connections, creativity and innovation, health and wellness, and determined and empowered learning.

In summer 2023, Rising Arrows was initiated. Rising Arrows is a collaborative effort between Kinsey Elementary and New Life Church. It was created as a “response to a growing community need for childcare, adequate food and additional learning during the summer
months” (New Life Church, n.d.). Rising Arrows is a nine-week program that is held three days a week throughout the summer. In addition to being provided breakfast and lunch, students are also able to participate in optional Bible lessons, physical activities, and life skills. There is also an emphasis on providing math and reading lessons to engage students in academic content throughout the summer and further their learning. On Fridays, students are provided with field trips and other additional experiences that allow them to get into the community of Sioux Center and see more of what it has to offer (New Life Church, n.d.).

**School District Characteristics**

Sioux Center Community School District is home to five buildings – Little Warriors Preschool (3 year and 4 year), Kinsey Elementary School (TK to 3rd grade), Intermediate School (4th and 5th grade), Middle School (6th to 8th grade), and High School (9th to 12th grade). As noted above, preparing students for success outside of school is a primary focus and a part of the district mission – “Educating the Whole Student for a Whole Lifetime” (Sioux Center Community School District, 2024). Portrait of a Graduate (PoG) was created as a way to fulfill this mission by instructing students on how to be better members of the community and workforce. Throughout their time at Sioux Center, students in middle and high school create PoG portfolios that are meant to demonstrate their understanding of and implementation of the PoG traits.

At the elementary and intermediate levels, students instead focus on Habits of Mind. The Habits of Mind are 16 habits that have been identified as being “desirable attributes for learning and living productively in a complex world” (The Institute for Habits of Mind, 2022). The 16 habits are the following: (1) persisting, (2) managing impulsivity, (3) listening to others with understanding and empathy, (4) thinking flexibly, (5) thinking about our thinking, (6) striving for
accuracy, (7) questioning and posing problems, (8) applying past knowledge to new situations, (9) thinking and communicating with clarity and precision, (10) gathering data through all senses, (11) creating, imagining, and innovating, (12) responding with wonderment and awe, (13) taking responsible risks, (14) finding humor, (15) thinking interdependently, and (16) learning continuously (The Institute for Habits of Mind, 2022). Each month, there is a focus on one of the habits with specific lessons created and distributed by a team of teachers. Both Habits of Mind and Portrait of a Graduate allow for Sioux Center Schools to provide “students opportunities to develop these traits and skills throughout their entire educational experience” (Sioux Center Community School District, 2024). This emphasizes the importance of not only the academic well-being of students at Sioux Center Community Schools but also the social and emotional well-being.

**School Building Characteristics**

Kinsey Elementary School spans six grade levels ranging from Transitional Kindergarten (TK) to Third Grade. At the start of the 2021-2022 school year, Kinsey Elementary began a new Junior Kindergarten (JK) program that serves as a hybrid between TK and Kindergarten. Both TK, a half-day program, and JK, a full-day program, are intended to serve as a stepping stone for students who may require more of an intervention year; as a result, class sizes have typically been significantly smaller. At the start of the 2023-2024 school year, there were three sections of TK and two sections of JK with an average of nine to ten students per section. Kindergarten through 3rd grade are all split into six sections with no more than 20 students per section.

Kinsey Elementary has access to several support and intervention programs including Title I for both reading and math, English learner (EL) support, a high achieving learners (HAL) program, special education, and deaf education. Two certified teachers and three
paraprofessionals serve the students identified as needing Title I support. The EL department includes three full-time teachers and one paraprofessional. Both the HAL program and the Deaf Education program are run by one certified teacher each with the Deaf Education program also including a language facilitator. The special education team includes four certified teachers, one individual trained in ABA practices, and 15 full or part-time paraprofessionals. In addition to core academic subjects such as literacy, math, science, and social studies, students at Kinsey Elementary rotate through a six-day specials cycle which includes PE, music, art, STEM, counseling, and library. Demographically, 100% of the certified staff are white and 91% are female. Of the 46 certified teachers, 95.65% hold a standard license, and 4.35% hold an initial license.

According to the Iowa Department of Education (2018), enrollment for the 2022-2023 school year was at 494 students – 161 kindergarteners (TK, JK, and kindergarten), 101 first graders, 113 second graders, and 119 third graders. Demographically, 49.8% were White, 46.2% were Hispanic, 1.2% were Black/African American, 1.6% were two or more races, and less than 1% were Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Of the 494 students, 270 were male and 224 female. Additionally, 9.5% of students are identified as students with disabilities, and 36.8% are identified as EL (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). Kinsey Elementary is also considered a low-income school district as 48.2% of the student population qualifies for free and/or reduced lunch.

**Student Portfolio & Performance**

Kinsey Elementary has an overall performance score of 50.52 out of 100 which labels it as Acceptable. This is the lowest that Kinsey Elementary has scored over the last five years. The highest rating over the last five years came in 2018 with a performance score of 59.95 out of 100
which labeled it Commendable. The performance score of 50.52 places Kinsey Elementary below the state average of 54.81 out of 100. The Iowa Department of Education (2018) provides data on a school’s progress on state goals. This is calculated utilizing ISASP assessment data from third grade students at Kinsey. In 2022-2023, 73.28% of all third-grade students were considered proficient in English Language Arts. This is above both the short-term target of 59.2% and long-term goal of 67.2%.

In Mathematics, 81.74% of all third-grade students were proficient. Once again, this was above both the short-term target of 72.3% and the long-term goal of 80.3%. According to school-wide data on the MAP Mathematics Assessment, 28.31% of students were classified as High, 26.68% were High Average, 18.56% were Average, 14.85% were Low Average, and 11.6% were Low. On the MAP Reading Assessment, 20.42% of students were considered High, 21.58% were High Average, 20.42% were Average, 17.63% were Low Average, and 19.95% of students were Low. Furthermore, 58% of students benchmarked and were considered proficient on the FAST universal screener at the end of the 2022-2023 school year.

**Parental Involvement**

Parents at Kinsey Elementary have the flexibility to be as involved as they wish. Classroom teachers will ask for parent volunteers as the need arises for events such as field trips, guest speakers, classroom activities, and holiday parties. Parents are also provided opportunities for involvement through the donation of snacks, classroom materials, etc. A small group of parents head up a volunteer-based organization – Parents for Kinsey Elementary. They focus on involving parents in school-wide activities where parent volunteers may be needed. Twice a year, parents are invited to participate in Parent Teacher Conferences which occur in the fall and spring semesters. Despite increased efforts, parental involvement is more common in white
families. All communication sent home is sent in both English and Spanish. However, an additional concern revolves around the illiteracy of some of our EL parents. School staff continue to try to find additional ways to meet these unique situations and increase parental involvement.

Kinsey Elementary also encourages parents to get more involved in the school through Kinsey’s Parent Advisory Committee (K-PAC). K-PAC meets off and on throughout the school year. The main purpose of K-PAC is to keep parents informed on what is occurring at Kinsey Elementary and allow them a chance to ask questions if they need further clarification on anything. On back-to-school night, two separate parent meetings are held for new families. Parents have the opportunity to learn more about the happenings at Kinsey Elementary and ways that they can support their child’s educational experience. Both K-PAC and the new family orientation are provided in both English and Spanish.

**Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

**Curriculum**

Kinsey Elementary utilizes a variety of curriculums and resources to support student learning. Grade level teachers utilize ReadyGEN and Really Great Reading for reading and phonics. Really Great Reading is separated into specific resources based on grade level including the following: Launchpad, Countdown, Blast, and HD Word. While HD Word is available for use in both second and third grade, the curriculum is not utilized in third grade. Support staff are also provided access to these materials if they choose to utilize them for reteaching or review in their setting. Similarly, iReady is used for math. This is the first year of roll-out for this curriculum, so a significant amount of time has been spent learning how to best implement this resource with the student population.
Instruction

At Kinsey Elementary, grade level teams are in charge of their overall schedules. Lunch times, noon recesses, and specials times are set ahead of time by administration. Small group reading times are also scheduled ahead of time but have been adjusted on occasion. This is typically when students leave the general education classroom and work with any support staff such as EL, Title, special education, or HAL. This is to ensure that grade level times do not overlap or interfere with one another. While this occurs for reading, any other small group time – writing, math, or social skills/behavior – is often worked out amongst grade level teachers and support staff. Grade level teams work together to decide when each academic block occurs and how long it will take. Teachers have a lot of flexibility in how they carry out their whole group instruction. Third grade does utilize more of a true whole group instruction model while kindergarten, first grade, and second grade integrate more of the Daily 3 or Daily 5 models into their whole-group instructional routine. The integration of these models allows for greater flexibility in meeting the diverse needs of students in the general education setting.

Assessment

Students at Kinsey Elementary participate in a variety of assessments – both formative and summative. Each student is assessed according to the standards and is allowed to reassess if they were not proficient earlier in the year. Once a student has demonstrated proficiency, they are free from reassessing. Measures for Academic Progress (MAP) are utilized district-wide and are taken three times throughout the year. Students also complete the FAST reading assessment as a universal screener three times per year. With the introduction of a new math curriculum, students also complete the accompanying diagnostic assessment three times per year. Additionally, students take the STAR reading and math assessments up to five times per year.
English learners complete the English Language Proficiency Assessment until they are considered proficient in all four domain areas. Third grade students also complete the Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP). Students on IEPs who are considered to have a significant cognitive impairment are exempt from these assessments and instead are eligible to participate in Alternate Assessment – including the Alternate ELPA.

**Professional Development Practices**

Beginning in the 2021-2022 school year, Kinsey Elementary and Sioux Center Schools adopted a new professional development approach and began using what is known as Competency-based Education Innovation Configuration Map (CBE-IC Map). The CBE-IC Map uses more of a personalized learning approach. Teachers complete surveys in five separate principles – Mastery Learning, Deeper Learning, Authentic Assessment, Personalized Supports, and Anytime/Anywhere Learning. Within each principle, there are also specific components related to the overarching principle. The survey allows staff to see areas that may be needed for personal professional growth. From there, teachers identify a principle and component to focus on. At least once a month, staff are given time on Wednesday Power Hours to use the resources on the CBE-IC website or through resources they have located themselves as a way to dive deeper into their learning and apply their learning.

**Needs Assessment**

According to the Iowa Department of Education (2018), Kinsey Elementary had 46 licensed teachers during the 2022-2023 school year. Of those teachers, 95.65% were working with their standard license, while 4.35% of teachers were working under their initial license. Additionally, 6.52% were working under a provisional license. When it came to educators teaching in their field of endorsement, Kinsey Elementary had 43 out of 46 teachers teaching in their field of study while 3 out of 46 were teaching outside their field of study. This last statistic
proves most vital when considering the needs of students and staff at Kinsey Elementary. It is interesting to note that while 36.8% of the student population is considered EL, only 10.87% of teachers at Kinsey have EL certification either from preservice education or certification obtained at a later date. Research from Li and Peters (2020) found that many educators are underprepared and did not receive adequate training in their preservice programs and require professional development to improve their training. While it is not probable to require remaining staff to obtain additional certification to meet the needs of their EL students, targeted professional development coupled with on-going support related to EL literacy interventions would best support Kinsey Elementary.

Currently, the majority of teachers lack the knowledge of how to best meet the needs of ELs in their classroom. Common practice involves sending students to targeted EL intervention groups that are carried out by the EL department at Kinsey Elementary. Additionally, teachers rely on push-in support from the same EL teachers and paraprofessionals. Strategies and interventions targeted to ELs are not carried out school-wide and are inconsistent from grade to grade and teacher to teacher. Vaughn et al. (2022) found that many educators do not feel adequately prepared to teach such diverse learners and require extensive support.

While some teachers within the Sioux Center School District use the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model in their classrooms, very few teachers at Kinsey Elementary have received any sort of formal training on the SIOP Model. Email reminders of SIOP strategies are sent out periodically, but there is little to no follow-up when it comes to implementation of those components. New teachers have not received any initial formal training on SIOP or school curriculums at the start of their teaching careers at Kinsey Elementary. Instead, this is presented to them by their mentor teachers at initial meetings and not frequently
referred to again. Between the very short initial exposure for new teachers and the email reminders for the rest of the staff, teachers are frequently left feeling frustrated and not knowing where to go next. Focused professional development can help to improve teacher knowledge regarding ELs – both culturally, linguistically, and academically (Li & Peters, 2020; Cavazos et al., 2018).

The focus of this school improvement plan is to improve literacy skills for ELs by providing staff with appropriate and ongoing professional development. With such a high percentage of students who are identified as EL, and that number seemingly growing every year, it is necessary for staff to be better prepared with the necessary knowledge and skills to meet the needs of these students without relying solely on EL staff. Teachers have been provided teaching resources and curriculums that are heavily language focused but there is a lack of complete understanding when it comes to using these resources with the EL population. Staff need proper professional development on how to interpret students’ ELPA scores in each domain and identify specific strategies and/or interventions that can target students’ literacy skills. Research from Babinski et al. (2018) and Vaughn et al. (2022) both found that there is an ongoing need for professional development that is both targeted and ongoing. Ongoing support is vital to ensure that these strategies and interventions are being implemented correctly and with fidelity. It is the hope that once staff are provided with targeted professional development opportunities and ongoing support and feedback, that students’ literacy scores will improve and the gap between EL students and their non-EL peers close.

**Data Analysis**

Data plays an important role in how schools and teachers function. Data can help to support and provide evidence for what schools are doing well, but it can also be used to identify
areas of concern that need to be addressed. For example, research conducted by Gibson (2016) found “that only 6% of ELLs were rated as proficient in reading at the start of their fourth-grade year in U.S. public schools” (p. 135). Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016) found that the graduation rate for ELs was 61% while the overall graduation rate was 81% during the 2012-2013 school year. Both statistics are alarming and present the need for change to occur.

**Data Summary**

As noted above, Kinsey Elementary has an overall performance score of 50.52 out of 100 and is labeled as Acceptable. At the end of the 2022-2023 school year, 73.28% of all third-grade students were considered proficient on the English Language Arts portion of the ISASP statewide assessment. When broken down further, only 27.59% of ELs were considered proficient on the same assessment. This was just above the state’s short-term target of 19.1% and the long-term goal of 27.1%. When broken down by race, 86.15% of White students were proficient compared to 54.35% of Hispanic students (Iowa Department of Education, 2018).

English learners at Kinsey Elementary also participate in the ELPA21 assessment which assesses their proficiency in the four language domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Students must be proficient in all four domains in order to be considered proficient overall and exited from the EL program. During the 2022-2023 school year, 12.43% of EL students were considered proficient overall which was just above the state average of 10.89%. When broken down by domain, 24.86% of ELs were proficient in Reading, 15.82% were proficient in Writing, 43.5% were proficient in Listening, and 40.11% were proficient in Speaking. Proficiency levels for Reading, Writing, and Speaking were just above state averages; however, the proficiency level for Listening was under the state average of 47.36% (Iowa Department of Education, 2018).
Kinsey Elementary also places a strong emphasis on the MAP Reading Assessment that is taken three times a year – fall, winter, and spring. The MAP Reading Assessment allows for staff to observe both growth and achievement for students although more emphasis is often placed on achievement results. According to student assessment data that was collected and organized by a colleague, ELs are massively underperforming. Only 1.99% of EL students were considered High Achieving, 7.28% were High Average, 17.88% were Average, 28.48% were Low Average, and an overwhelming 44.37% were Low Achieving (Callahan Data Consulting, n.d.). Just under three-quarters of the EL population at Kinsey Elementary is underachieving with 44.37% performing in the 1st to 20th percentile and 28.48% performing in the 21st to 40th percentile.

Comparing the results of English learners against different groups yields interesting result. The results in Figure 1 (below) compare the spring achievement results for the 2022-2023 school year for the entire school population against those who are categorized as English learners. Assessment results show that 20.42% of all students were considered High Achieving, 21.58% were High Average, 20.42% were Average, 17.63% were Low Average, and 19.95% were Low Achieving (Callahan Data Consulting, n.d.). It is interesting to observe trends in the results. One can simply see by observing the data in the bar graphs that while the school-wide results are fairly even, the same cannot be said for results for EL students. When it comes to ELs, the higher the percentile rank, the fewer number of students who scored. While the school-wide results do not seem to raise any red flags, filtering the achievement results is an eye-opening experience.
As noted above, when it came to ELs, the higher the percentile rank, the fewer the students scoring. The opposite is true for non-ELs. According to the data, when it comes to non-ELs, the higher the percentile rank, the more students scoring. Figure 2 (below) compares the achievement results for ELs and non-ELs. Non-ELs had significantly more students performing in the higher percentile ranks compared to their EL peers. Student assessment results show that 31.92% of non-ELs were considered High Achieving, 28.85% were High Average, 20% were Average, 11.92% were Low Average, and 7.31% were Low Achieving. The data displayed on the bar graph is alarming. Perhaps most alarming are the two outside percentile ranks. Non-ELs had less than 10% of students performing at or below the 20th percentile while ELs had nearly 45% of students performing at the same level. On the other hand, non-ELs had nearly 32% of
students performing in 80th percentile or above while ELs did not even have two percent of students performing at the same level.

*Figure 2*

**EL Achievement Compared to Non-ELs**

Finally, it is informative to analyze data from Former-ELs and compare it against ELs. Former ELs are students who have previously received support from the EL department at Kinsey Elementary but have since exited the program. Figure 3 (below) compares the achievement results for students who were formerly EL against those who are still categorized as EL. Student assessment data shows that 10% of Former-ELs were classified as High Achieving, 35% were High Average, 45% were Average, and 10% were Low Average. Interestingly, there were not any former-ELs who were classified as Low Achieving which is a far cry from the nearly 45% of ELs who are considered Low Achieving (Callahan Data Consulting, n.d.). While the school-wide results remained consistent across the percentile ranks and non-EL results
increased as the percentile ranks increased, the same is not true for ELs and Former-ELs. Former-ELs saw a dramatic decrease in the percentage of students performing in the lower two percentile ranks; however, results showed that the greatest percentage of students scored in the Average range followed by a decrease in percentage of students for the higher two percentile ranks.

Figure 3

EL Achievement Compared to Former ELs

School Strengths

Math appears to be a relative strength at Kinsey Elementary. The Iowa Department of Education (2018) found that 81.74% of all third-grade students were proficient on the mathematics portion of the ISASP state-wide assessment. Interestingly, 58.62% of EL students were considered proficient. This was well above the state’s short-term target of 35.6% and the long-term goal of 43.6%. However, it is also interesting to know that despite this, there is an
overwhelming proficiency gap between White and Hispanic students. Nearly 92.19% of White students were proficient compared to 67.39% of Hispanic students. Data also shows that the EL program at Kinsey Elementary is finding success. Proficiency levels on the ELPA21 were at or near state averages. During the 2022-2023 school year, 22 students were exited from the EL program due to obtaining proficiency in all four domains.

Results were fairly similar on the MAP Mathematics Assessment. In the spring of the 2022-2023 school year, 28.31% of all students were High Achieving, 26.68% were High Average, 18.56% were Average, 14.85% were Low Average, and 11.6% were Low Achieving (Callahan Data Consulting, n.d.). Similar to the MAP Reading Assessment, results could also be filtered by race/ethnicity. When it came to non-ELs 42.31% were High Achieving, 31.54% were High Average, 15% were Average, 6.54% were Low Average, and 4.62% were Low Achieving. Former ELs 15% were High Achieving, 35% were High Average, 40% were Average, 5% were Low Average, and 5% were Low Achieving. Finally, when it came to ELs 5.96% were found to be High Achieving, 17.22% were High Average, 21.85% were Average, 30.46% were Low Average, and 24.5% were Low Achieving (Callahan Data Consulting, n.d.). While the results differ greatly among subgroups, the data does show stronger achievement overall. While over 50% of the EL students at Kinsey Elementary are underperforming in the area of math, this is a far lower number than the students who are underachieving in reading/literacy.

**School Challenges**

Kinsey Elementary’s school-wide and state-wide assessment data provides valuable information pertaining to the challenges that are being faced. It is clear that ELs are being vastly outperformed by the non-EL peers. While this is evident in both reading/literacy and mathematics, it can be argued that reading is a far greater issue. A staggering 67 out of 151 EL
students at Kinsey Elementary performed under the 20\(^{th}\) percentile according to achievement with an average percentile rank of 29 according to MAP Assessment norms. Kinsey Elementary ELs are considered to have low growth (median growth percentile 44\(^{th}\)) and low achievement (median achievement percentile 34\(^{th}\)). This shows that not only are EL students at Kinsey Elementary not performing as well as their non-EL peers, but they are also not growing as well, or even equal to their non-EL peers.

**Assessment Options**

Assessment results from the MAP, ISASP, and ELPA21 provided valuable data to determine strengths and challenges at Kinsey Elementary. While not necessarily required, it would be beneficial to investigate student achievement on classroom assessments and students’ progress towards proficiency on the common core state standards. Kinsey Elementary participates in standards-based grading with students achieving a score ranging from 1 (Developing) to 4 (Beyond Proficient). While time consuming, it would provide additional and valuable insight into how ELs are performing in the classroom compared to their non-EL peers.

**Action Plan**

With the increase of English learners entering U.S. schools comes the need for schools to be better prepared. Nearly five million students in U.S. schools are classified as EL (Vaughn et al., 2022) and make up nearly 6.9\% of the student population in Iowa public schools (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). Gone are the days when one or two staff members in a school are capable of meeting the needs of all the EL students in that setting. Kinsey Elementary – and Sioux Center Community School District as a whole – faces the same dilemma as many other schools across the nation. Just five years ago, Kinsey’s EL population was at 25.4\%. In just over five years, that has grown to 36.8\% (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). However, the same growth has not been seen in staff members being either certified or adequately prepared in their
preservice education to meet the needs of EL students appropriately. The lack of teachers being adequately prepared to meet the needs of ELs at Kinsey Elementary poses a problem in that students are not receiving the support they need to improve their literacy skills, and thus, the gap continues to widen between ELs and their non-EL peers.

**Proposed Improvement Plan**

Data shows that EL students at Kinsey Elementary are massively underperforming in literacy. To change student achievement, staff members need to take part in targeted and ongoing professional development with a focus on literacy strategies and interventions for English learners. While a specific professional development program similar to those utilized in research conducted by Babinski et al. (2018) and Vaughn et al. (2022) would have the potential to be most effective, the professional development plan will have more flexibility and be targeted to the needs of the staff and students at Kinsey Elementary. It is necessary for all certified staff members to participate in the professional learning no matter what subject area they teach. This must include, but is not limited to, grade level teachers, EL teachers, special education teachers, Title I teachers, and specials teachers. Additional staff – such as paraprofessionals – should also be encouraged to participate. During ongoing professional development, staff will be provided with learning focused on both SIOP teaching strategies as well as EL focused literacy interventions including explicit vocabulary instruction,

Teachers will utilize Wednesday Power Hours to participate in the initial learning and use future Power Hours to follow-up with peers using their Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Follow-up discussions will be focused on the learning that occurred at the beginning of the month or in previous months and how that learning was implemented in the classroom. Additionally, learning will be discussed during Tier 2 meetings when discussing student
concerns as a way to collaborate with team members on strategies and interventions to potentially implement with EL students and follow-up by reviewing student data to evaluate the effectiveness.

**Impact on Teaching and Learning**

The proposed school improvement plan has the potential to impact both teaching and learning. By taking part in the professional development, staff members will gain a deeper understanding of the English learners in their classroom. Staff will have more of a toolbox of strategies and interventions to choose from when working with their EL students. Staff will evaluate their own learning and teaching and have the opportunity to observe and learn from one another. Teachers cannot teach what they do not understand. Completing a professional development program that focuses on providing teachers with the knowledge and understanding needed to implement both theories and strategies will help them grow as educators (Li & Peters, 2020).

Likewise, English learners will be provided with strategies and interventions that are more targeted to English learners. Often, ELs are provided the same interventions that their non-EL peers are receiving which results in them missing key skills. Improving staff teaching through professional development has the potential to provide students with the necessary skills that they are missing and thus improve their literacy skills using research-based strategies and interventions.

**Alignment to Research**

Creating a professional development plan that is both ongoing and targeted has the greatest opportunity to positively impact student achievement in ELs and is preferable to most administrators and teachers (Brown & Militello, 2016). Adjusting professional development
away from the one-and-done approach to more of a job-embedded approach is supported in the research conducted by Cavazos et al. (2018). Through their research, they found that a job-embedded PD approach yielded positive results for both students and staff. By participating in professional learning that was ongoing and embedded within their job, teachers had a greater understanding as evidenced by scores on teacher knowledge surveys. Teachers involved were able to apply their learning which impacted students as well. After application of skills learned throughout the job-embedded PD, teachers improved their teaching to the point that they observed a decrease in the percentage of students qualifying for supplemental interventions (Cavazos et al., 2018).

Despite studying the effects of two separate professional development programs, Babinski et al. (2018) and Vaughn et al. (2022) yielded similar results in their research. Both teams found that teachers and students were positively impacted by teachers participating in a targeted PD program. Babinski et al. (2018) found teachers who completed the PD were observed utilizing the strategies that were reviewed and practiced during their learning opportunities. Students were also able to benefit from their teachers’ learning as aspects of their literacy skills also showed an increase.

**Summary**

The professional development opportunities will focus on learning about and implementing the use of SIOP strategies and language objectives in the classroom setting. Learning about these strategies and interventions provides staff with the skills and knowledge to better support their English learners. Participating in ongoing and targeted PD also allows for staff to take necessary responsibility for the ELs in their classroom as opposed to placing the sole
responsibility on the EL department. As the EL population continues to increase, it is vital that all staff members feel better prepared in meeting their students’ needs.

**Implementation of School Improvement Plan**

**Intro**

Implementing a school improvement plan geared toward professional development is a necessary step to take if educators want to see an increase in English learners’ academic achievement. The proposed plan is a timely undertaking, requires full participation from staff, and is a vital component to ensuring ELs receive the necessary supports, strategies, and interventions they are entitled to by ensuring staff understand the necessary components for teaching ELs (Hoover et al., 2020; Linan-Thompson et al., 2022). Kinsey Elementary has both individuals and teams prepared to undertake such a timely endeavor; however, the success of this project depends on the attitudes and views of the staff.

**Timeline**

The timeline of this proposed school improvement plan will take approximately a year to carry out. Sioux Center Community School District utilizes a Building Leadership Team approach to professional development. This team meets at the conclusion of each academic year with the purpose of determining roles and responsibilities for each team – the Like Team and the Mixed Team. Initial work will begin at this meeting as the leadership team will need to determine which team will carry out the majority of the workload for the coming year. Work will cease until leadership team meetings commence at the beginning of the next school year. During these meetings, the selected team will collaborate with administration, instructional coaches, and EL staff – both at the district and school level.
Once the entire staff returns, a meeting will be held with the elementary staff in its entirety. The focus will be on reviewing the previous year’s ELPA21 results. Classroom teachers and additional support staff will be provided with time to review student data and be instructed on each domain – reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A half day will be slotted to ensure that adequate time is being spent reviewing student data and understanding what their scores mean going ahead. EL staff and instructional coaches will be made available to answer questions and provide further clarification.

Figure 4

Professional Development Timeline

After the initial training on the ELPA and the domain areas is completed, further training will occur monthly thereafter. On the first Wednesday Power Hour of each month, Kinsey Elementary teachers will participate in professional development lead by EL staff members and instructional coaches. Figure 4 (above) provides a proposed timeline for what SIOP components
will be covered and when. The figure above also lists which team – like team or mixed team – will be responsible for the follow-up meeting during the third PH of each month. Kinsey Elementary will focus on implementing the SIOP Model which focuses on eight components that best address the needs of ELs: lesson preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice/application, lesson delivery, and review & assessment (Center for Applied Linguistics, n.d.).

Staff will be given time to implement skills, strategies, and interventions that were covered in each professional development training. Although not a requirement, they will be encouraged to participate in Warrior Walks with their peers to gain valuable and constructive feedback. These are encouraged to occur in the two weeks following the initial PD at the beginning of each month. On the third Power Hour of each month, teachers will meet in their teams to share out their experiences and obtain feedback from other team members. These monthly PDs will occur throughout the entire school year. Ongoing professional learning throughout the school year will help to support staff in their learning and provide more opportunities for collaboration with one another (Alibakhshi et al., 2021; Brown & Militello, 2016; Clark & Chrispeels, 2022; Stewart, 2014).

Role Clarifications and Assignments

Administration

The building principal’s first responsibility will be in collaborating with the instructional coach and leadership teams to develop a complete plan of action. While it is important to take all viewpoints into account, administration will have the final say in how the professional development is carried out. As Clark and Chrispeels (2022) note, building principals know better than most what is needed in their schools and how to motivate their staff. They will be
responsible for lining up all the necessary resources that need to be purchased for the ongoing professional development. The building principal will attend each professional development opportunity during the first Wednesday Power Hour, and will then complete walk-throughs during the third Power Hour of each month. This will allow administration insight into how the PD is being perceived and can also serve as an opportunity for them to provide staff with feedback. Hoover et al. (2020) supports the importance of administrators taking the time to collaborate with teachers and leadership teams to help support teachers’ professional growth so it is vital that administration play an active role. The principal will collaborate with the building leadership teams and EL department at the conclusion of the year to determine the program’s effectiveness.

*Instructional Coaches*

Kinsey Elementary’s instructional coach also plays a vital role in undertaking such a large endeavor. In the initial stages, the instructional coach will collaborate largely with administration and the team leaders for both the Like Team and the Mixed Team. Once trainings have been started, the instructional coach will be responsible for creating the feedback forms that team leaders will utilize during the follow-up Power Hour sessions. Results will be sent to the instructional coach. She will be tasked with organizing the data from these forms and following up with team leaders and individual teachers as the feedback warrants. The instructional coach will be tasked with completing frequent informal walk-throughs of all classroom and volunteer coaching sessions for staff wishing for further support in implementation of the components of the SIOP Model. The instructional coach will collaborate with the building leadership teams and the EL department at the conclusion of the year to determine the program’s effectiveness.

*EL Department*
The EL department at Kinsey Elementary will serve as the go-to experts in this school improvement plan. At the start of the school year, the EL department will be expected to share out on the previous year’s ELPA data including the number of students who were proficient overall and those who were proficient in specific domains. They will also be responsible for instructing staff regarding the four domains on the ELPA – reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The EL staff will also be responsible for working with administrators and the instructional coach to facilitate the initial Power Hour trainings each month. They will utilize resources that were purchased by administration from the Center for Applied Linguistics (n.d.). As the EL team is a part of their own Like Team, they will be available during the follow-up Power Hours on the occasion that a group has an immediate need for feedback or assistance. At the conclusion of the year, or whenever the current year’s ELPA results are obtained, the EL department will collaborate to review and analyze the results to determine the PD program’s effectiveness.

**Like Teams**

The Like Team is led by a grade level or subject area teacher and includes those in the same grade level or content area. Previously, their work has been focused on leading individualized professional learning for their team members through the CBE-IC Map approach the district utilizes. The Like Team will play an important role in carrying out the proposed school improvement plan. Since data review will also be a part of the Power Hours, it would be best to have Like Team leaders guide the follow-up discussions. They will pull up any necessary student data and use that to help guide the discussion during the third Power Hour of each month except January and May. The purpose behind this is to allow teachers to bounce ideas off those in similar situations as they themselves are in. Thus, the Like Team provides this opportunity.
Throughout each follow-up Power Hour, the Like Team leader will be responsible for filling out a feedback form that details questions, comments, and any other additional feedback that would be beneficial for the instructional coach to receive. At the conclusion of the year, the Like Team will provide staff with surveys to fill out and will use those results to analyze the effectiveness of the PD program.

**Mixed Teams**

When Mixed Team meetings occur during Power Hours, they are led by a team leader and typically include a classroom teacher from each grade level as well as a combination of support staff teachers and specials teachers. Work has previously been focused on the school-wide implementation of Habits of Mind. To allow for more intentional collaboration amongst grade levels and support staff, the follow-up Power Hours in January and May will be facilitated by Mixed Team leaders.

**Classroom Teachers and Staff**

All teachers will be required to attend the initial and monthly professional development opportunities. Any staff who miss a Power Hour that is focused on one of the SIOP components will be expected to meet up with administration and the instructional coach to make up what was missed. If they missed the follow-up Power Hour with either their Like Team or Mixed Team, they are responsible for providing that leader with their feedback and evidence of implementation. One Warrior Walk per semester is required. Staff will fill out a form that evaluates their colleagues’ knowledge and implementation of the SIOP Model. While not required, staff will be encouraged to participate in additional Warrior Walks between initial Power Hour trainings and follow-up Power Hours. Paraprofessionals also play a vital role in working with ELs. While their presence at Power Hours is not mandatory, paraprofessionals will
be encouraged to participate to allow for additional consistency amongst staff members who have the potential to work with ELs.

**Progress Monitoring**

Progress monitoring will take part during the third Power Hour of each month. Teachers will have opportunities to share with fellow teachers and gain feedback. During this time, staff will review observation forms from any Warrior Walks that may have occurred. Staff can either share feedback they received from another staff member observing their room or feedback they gained from observing another teacher’s classroom. If staff did not participate in any Warrior Walks, then they will provide a narrative explanation of how they implemented that month or previous months’ professional learning as well as evidence of that implementation in their lesson plans. The team leader will take notes that will be submitted via Google Forms to the instructional coaches and building administrator. Additionally, reviewing student data during these meetings or during weekly team meetings will allow for staff to observe and monitor progress and make any necessary adjustments based on student performance (Linan-Thompson et al., 2022).

**Limitations**

Perhaps the biggest limitation of this school improvement plan is that of staff members’ perceptions. Administration plays a key role in obtaining teacher buy-in when it comes to their staff’s willingness to learn and grow (Brown & Militello, 2016; Clark & Chrispeels, 2022). Many general education classroom teachers already feel overwhelmed with the workload that accompanies teaching in today’s day and age. Teachers may see this opportunity as just another phase or another to-do on their list. In order for PLCs and professional development to be successful, all participants need to be completely invested in their willingness to learn and grow
(Stewart, 2014). It is vital that administrators address the important role this PD plays regarding academic achievement for ELs.

Financial obligations could be another potential limitation. Professional development options utilizing SIOP cost money – both for the trainings and necessary materials. Currently, Sioux Center Community Schools focuses on learner-centered professional learning through Competency-based Education Innovation Configuration (CBE-IC) Maps. This is a resource the school already pays for. Adding any additional costs may be met with resistance. However, Sioux Center School District does have members on its staff who are already trained in the SIOP Model. These staff members, if willing, could help to facilitate the initial trainings and follow-up trainings that detail the components of SIOP.

**Conclusion**

The increase in English learners entering U.S. schools is not likely to stop (Iowa Department of Education, 2018; Vaughn et al., 2022). The students we are now teaching are not the same students that we were teaching a decade ago. As such, schools and educators need to adapt and be willing to make necessary changes. It is common to see ELs being unnecessarily referred for special education because they are not receiving the necessary supports and interventions that are unique to their learning needs. Shelton et al. (2023) states, “There is a clear need for schools to understand and adopt systems that aim to provide ELs with and without disabilities evidence-based literacy instruction and intervention, thus promoting academic success,” (p. 40). Previously, schools have relied solely on the intervention of their EL department when it comes to meeting the needs of their English learners; however, this practice is not sustainable and needs to end. All staff need to take an active role in the education of the English learners in their classroom.
As we know, the problem is that many educators feel underprepared and overwhelmed at the thought of carrying this out. Classroom teachers do not feel as though they have the knowledge or background to adequately teach ELs in their classroom which oftentimes result in their perceptions of ELs impacting student achievement (Umansky and Dumont, 2021). These negative perceptions are commonly leading ELs to being misrepresented or inappropriately identified for special education services (Linan-Thompson et al., 2022). Asking staff to go back to school and obtain certification is not a probable solution in many cases. As such, creating a targeted professional development program that is ongoing and allows for peer collaboration can help to alleviate this problem. Researchers agree that many educators credit learning from peers and getting a chance to have ongoing collaboration as proponents that aid in their professional learning and growth (Brown & Militello, 2016; Clark & Chrispeels, 2022; Stewart, 2014).

It is the hope of the author that by taking part in this proposed professional development program that focuses on teaching and implementing the SIOP Model, staff will feel better prepared with both the knowledge and skills needed to positively impact academic achievement of their English learners (Cavazos et al., 2018). Going forward, staff will be able to utilize the skills that they have learned and apply those skills to other curricular areas. While the focus of this school improvement plan is geared toward improving literacy for ELs, similar improvement plans could be developed to work on generalizing those literacy skills in math, science, social studies, and other curricular areas.
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