

Worcester schools expanding programs, services for English language learners

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WORCESTER – While the Worcester public schools still have a way to go to improve outcomes for English language learners, the new head of the system's ELL programs last week outlined the many fronts on which the schools are bolstering support for those students.

Specifically, the school system is gradually expanding dual language programming to more grades, increasing outreach to families of English language learners, and investing in more English as a Second Language teachers, ELL Director Carmen Melendez said in a presentation to the School Committee on Thursday.

“We've been able to accomplish a lot in the last 10 months I've been in this position,” she said.

Recent data suggests ELL students aren't yet succeeding at the level their schools and families would want, however. In her report, Ms. Melendez acknowledged that while most of the district's schools saw their students make progress on the latest ACCESS test – an assessment of English language learners' proficiency in English – nearly half failed to meet their target, while eight didn't make progress at all.

In addition, the most recent graduation and dropout data for Worcester shows the dropout rate for English language learners has increased over the last few years to 5 percent – double the rate for all students in the system.

Meanwhile, the district remains under the watch of the U.S. Justice Department, which has had an agreement with Worcester for over a decade requiring the schools to improve services for English language learners. While school officials have expressed optimism the last few years that the district was finally close to satisfying the government's conditions, a representative for the Justice Department said last month the agreement remains in place.

School Committee members and others at Thursday's meeting said they were encouraged by the progress the school system is making, even as they asked for more

evidence of the district's long-term success. In particular, they applauded the district's plan to join school systems that award the Seal of Biliteracy – an actual seal displayed on graduates' diplomas – to students who earn qualifying scores on the MCAS English language test and a second language exam.

In general, Worcester is increasing dual language programs, which enable students to learn equally in two languages. The district added a seventh-grade dual language class at Burncoat Middle School this year, and recently got approval from the state to offer classes in kindergarten and eighth grade as well, Ms. Melendez said.

“Our vision for the district is to have a K-12 dual language program,” she said, adding discussions have already begun about expanding to the high school level. “We want (students) to be bilingual. It really is an asset for the student, and we want to celebrate that.”

Other initiatives the district has undertaken in the past year include launching a parent advisory council for families of English language learners, and reaching out to local faith groups serving non-native English speaking communities to enlist their help in bringing parents into the fold as well.

The school department has also tried to create more post-graduation pathways for older English language learners, particularly students with limited or interrupted formal education, known as SLIFEs). In one initiative, students between 18 and 21 with an education gap of three or more years will be able to take a dual enrollment class – essentially a college credit course offered to high schoolers – at Quinsigamond Community College, according to Ms. Melendez.. She added that the pilot is part of a larger goal to create certificate pathways for those students so they can train for a career.

The district also continues to invest in ESL teachers, she said. The school department added five of those positions each of the last couple years, and is hiring more for next year.

Other efforts underway include expanding professional development for teachers in English language instruction and cultural competency, developing a benchmark form to monitor and identify students who need extra intervention and support, and working with local colleges to create more dual enrollment classes aimed at Spanish-speaking students.