

ESTABLISHING ENGLISH LEARNER SUCCESS

THROUGH PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Students in the Broward County School District of Fort Lauderdale, Florida speak over 180 languages. Many of these students are first-generation English Language Learners. Vicky Saldala, director of the district's Bilingual/ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) department, identified a disconnect between the resources available for ESOL students and their families' awareness of this support.

Vicky works with the district's bilingual counselor, office aides, and volunteer community members to provide robust programming for families in World Languages, Dual Languages, ESOL, and Parent Outreach.

A group of parents established the ESOL Ambassador program that now has over 60 parent liaisons to help other newly arrived families.

There are parent liaisons in Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Portuguese—the top three languages in the district—to help with interpretations, and they are expanding their team to include Arabic, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and Russian.

“[They] want to know you can relate to them and relate to their stories. Establishing a personal connection helps draw them in.”

Outreach is especially important for parents of students preparing for graduation. Vicky's team offers parents the necessary materials and support to overcome common hurdles that first-generation students often face when preparing for the next step in their education.

Every year, the ESOL department hosts The Road to College Workshop that attracts hundreds of parents from the district. The workshop is a four-hour event in which the department shares workbooks, trainings, presentations, and materials regarding:

- Admissions Tests
- Graduation Requirements
- College Planning and Applications
- Financial Aid and Scholarships

Many of the hand-outs are available in English and Spanish.

“Trying to make connections to families through their native language makes a big difference.”

To further parent outreach, the ESOL department also hosts:

- **Everything You Need to Know about the ESOL Program**—The first session of the year is held each fall, where families are made aware of the American school system and the available resources to them. Parents' questions about grades, credits, courses, parent-teacher communication, and gifted-student programs are answered.
- **ESOL Game Nights**—Schools use funding to buy educational games that are given to participants to take home at the end of the night. If families attend all four game nights, they get a free license to Rosetta Stone.
- **Four-Day Trip to the State Capitol**—Participants have the opportunity to learn about the government. A trip is also done at the local level, where students have received scholarships and internships from the visit.
- **ACT Preparedness Workshop**—The local library hosts a free four-week session through an immigration grant. An ACT® Trainer helps students prepare for the exam and provides useful materials such as practice tests and calculators.

Promotion for their programs is communicated via phone, email, flyers, the web, as well as the WhatsApp, through groups based on families' native languages. The ACT is not a test of a student's English; rather, the ACT works to remove language barriers that might hinder an ELL student's performance. She appreciates that ACT alleviates the discouragement that is common among capable, non-native English speakers.



“We promote ACT because we know it is a very effective assessment for our English Language Learners. We are very glad that they now have allowable accommodations [for students] to use.”

— Vicky Saldala

ESOL programs have had a real impact. Vicky shared the story of Monica, who came to the United States from Venezuela not knowing any English. Her two sons were ESOL students who participated in the programming, took the ACT® test, and went on to attend medical school.

Success stories like Monica's family are not uncommon within the ESOL program. Vicky and her team's commitment to these students has proven that hurdles, such as new languages or customs, do not have to be barriers to accomplishment.



“We really opened a door in collaboration with ACT.”

— Vicky Saldala, ESOL Department Director