

# Distributed Leadership in Schools with “Emergent Bilingual Leadership Teams” for Collaborative Decision Making

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## CONTEXT

The two case narratives presented in this chapter come from the City University of New York–New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals<sup>1</sup> (CUNY–NYSIEB), a project involving 66 schools across the state. Each school participating in CUNY–NYSIEB formed an “Emergent Bilingual Leadership Team” (EBLT), a school-based distributed leadership group. Distributed leadership (also referred to as collaborative leadership) is when instead of there just being one person in charge who makes all the decisions, the leadership is shared amongst several people who are all involved in decision making. EBLTs include the school principal and other key administrators, bilingual teachers, English as a new language (ENL—also known as English as a second language or ESL) teachers, general education teachers, skill and content specialists, special education teachers, parents/families of emergent bilinguals, and/or students (about five people total). The schools that applied to participate in CUNY–NYSIEB all enrolled large numbers of emergent bilinguals and wanted to better serve this population of students. As part of their participation in the project, the schools committed to the following:

(1) *A multilingual ecology for the whole school*

The language practices of all children and families are evident in the school’s visual landscape, as well as in the interactions of all members of the school community.

*(2) Bilingualism as a resource in education*

All of the languages spoken by emergent bilingual children are leveraged as a crucial instructional tool and, to the greatest extent possible, nurtured and developed. Translanguaging allows students to draw upon the full span of their language and social resources to make meaning, so translanguaging pedagogy is implemented.

The case narratives below are from the work of two CUNY–NYSIEB schools, where their EBLTs did the following:

- studied the schools’ services to emergent bilinguals;
- created a plan to improve their instruction and programming aligned to CUNY–NYSIEB’s principles;
- oversaw the implementation of the plan; and,
- developed their school’s language policy vision.

The case narratives below describe how EBLTs worked in each school and the changes they made over time to improve and transform the education of emergent bilinguals, offering examples that any school with emergent bilinguals could emulate.

### **CASE NARRATIVE 1: HILLSIDE ELEMENTARY’S EMERGENT BILINGUAL LEADERSHIP TEAM**

Susan is the principal of Hillside Elementary, a K-5 school in a suburban area of New York serving approximately 300 students. The area in which Susan’s school was located had received many families with Spanish as the home language but also families with a diverse array of other languages such as Mandarin, Russian, Arabic, French, and Hindi. Over the past five years, the percentage of emergent bilingual students increased from 8% to 30%. In the early grades (kindergarten and first), 50% of all students were emergent bilinguals. The school provided pull-out and push-in ENL<sup>2</sup> to emergent bilinguals.

Susan did not have a background in ENL or bilingual education, so she decided to participate in the CUNY–NYSIEB project to learn more about how to best meet the needs of the emergent bilinguals coming to her school. Once Susan joined the project, she convened an EBLT at Hillside Elementary that included herself, general education kindergarten and fifth-grade teachers, a reading support specialist, an ENL teacher, and the parent of an emergent bilingual student. This was the first time a group at Hillside Elementary had focused collectively on emergent bilinguals. The EBLT met

at least monthly for 45 minutes per meeting and also met twice during the summer months for at least three hours per meeting.

The EBLT started the work of reflecting on their multilingual ecology by doing a walk-through of the school, when they noticed that all the signs in the school's entryway and hallways, including samples of student work, were only in English. The messaging that students who spoke languages other than English and their families implicitly received was: *In this school, we solely speak English*. The EBLT decided to make students' home languages more visible in the school. They first created a survey to learn which home languages their students spoke, and discovered at least 15 different languages. The EBLT identified short-term goals for creating a visual representation of all of the languages spoken by students and their families in the school, and presented their plan at a meeting with the entire school staff. The EBLT worked with teachers and community members to display the languages and countries of origin of the students and their families. For instance, a first-grade teacher and her students created flags of the countries where the families are from that were placed in the school entryway and translated the school's motto into all of the languages of the school. The EBLT helped other teachers label the hallways and classrooms in the languages of their students and develop multilingual classroom libraries with texts available in students' languages. During the EBLT meetings, members discussed progress, readjusted their tasks and timelines, and identified next steps.

EBLT members also received professional development on incorporating students' home languages into instruction by CUNY-NYSIEB. The ENL, kindergarten, and fifth-grade teachers worked together to implement these practices into their classrooms and started working with other teachers in the school to share what they were learning. The kindergarten teacher started leading morning meetings with students in Spanish and Arabic (the languages of her bilingual students), with help from families who spoke those languages, which not only recognized students' home languages but provided information to guide them during the day; in this way, the home language served symbolic as well as functional purposes. The ENL and fifth-grade teachers organized a study group exploring the *CUNY-NYSIEB Translanguaging Guide* (see Teaching Activities), to learn more about how to incorporate students' home languages in their classrooms, before moving onto other resources about bilingualism and language learning. Susan and all the EBLT members, as well as those teachers who worked closely with them, noticed a shift in their understandings of the importance of students' home languages. They presented their collaborative work during full-staff professional development several times per year and also presented to the superintendent and the board of education in their district.

At the end of the first year of work, EBLT members drafted a language policy for their school based on their vision for students' language learning. Their draft policy stated that they would "provide English instruction with opportunities and encouragement for students to communicate in home languages." The EBLT shared the language policy with other staff and then worked during the second year to receive input from others who had not been involved, making revisions as needed.

Over time, Susan recognized that teacher leadership had taken root in her building, and she turned over the leadership of the EBLT to the teachers. Although she attended all EBLT meetings, participated in the work, and ensured common time was scheduled for EBLT meetings, she stopped making any decisions that would impact emergent bilinguals at Hillside Elementary without first consulting the EBLT and allowing for such decisions to be made collaboratively. She also provided time during school-wide faculty meetings to share the work and ensured that the EBLT had the resources needed for members to accomplish the goals they set annually.

In summary, this case narrative shows how working in teams on an EBLT can enhance the education of emergent bilinguals, particularly in cases where the school principal—like Susan—does not have expertise in this area.

## **CASE NARRATIVE 2: POWERLINE HIGH SCHOOL'S EMERGENT BILINGUAL LEADERSHIP TEAM**

Olivia is the principal of Powerline High School, which is located in an urban area of New York and serves about 450 students in 9th–12th grades. Approximately 60% of the school population is Latinx and 30% is Black, and 90% of the student body received free or reduced-price meals. Emergent bilingual students comprise approximately 25% of the school population and are mostly from Spanish-speaking homes. Half of the school's emergent bilinguals are newcomers, having arrived in the U.S. within the past three years, and 23% of all emergent bilinguals are considered "students with interrupted formal education." At the start of their participation in CUNY–NYSIEB, the school provided push-in ENL classes and followed a co-teaching model in certain classes, such as history and science, where the ENL teacher co-taught with a subject area teacher. In addition, they had a ninth-grade self-contained ENL class for newcomers, all of whom spoke Spanish. Olivia decided to participate in CUNY–NYSIEB because the emergent bilinguals in her building were considered "low-performing" by New York State, so she wanted support to learn how best to serve these students.

When Olivia started working with CUNY–NYSIEB, she formed an EBLT that met monthly, comprised of an ENL teacher, a Spanish teacher, a Math

teacher, a parent, and two student members. When it began, Powerline's EBLT was the school's first formal group to specifically focus on the emergent bilingual students. During the first year, the teacher leaders of the EBLT decided to concentrate on strengthening the co-teaching of ENL and content-area teachers, by including students' home languages and integrating language and literacy teaching strategies into content-area instruction. For instance, members of the EBLT recorded classes and viewed them with the co-teachers to reflect on how they used oral and written language and how students' home languages were incorporated. Student EBLT members created a survey for their classmates about how their home languages and cultures were represented in the school and what more they would like to see. Based on the survey, the students began organizing multicultural events throughout the school year where they shared music, food, and other cultural traditions. Teachers developed multilingual classroom libraries with home language materials and also displayed student work in their home languages in classrooms and hallways.

Adriana was the parent leader on the EBLT, and she decided to form a parent group within the school's parent-teacher association where parents could openly discuss issues and concerns in their home languages, with interpreters available, free childcare provided, and meetings held at different times of the day to accommodate work schedules and obligations. When Adriana heard issues and concerns raised repeatedly by families that could not easily be resolved, she brought them to the EBLT for collaborative decision making. For example, one issue raised was the need for improved parent-teacher communication, with families seeking more opportunities to speak privately with their child's teachers in their home languages at times that worked for them. This led to the organization of several parent-teacher events with translators, as well as cultural celebrations.

By the end of their first year, as EBLT members reflected on their progress and planned the next year of work, they centered their discussion on the school's vision for emergent bilinguals and drafted a language policy for their school that emphasized "bilingualism, biliteracy, and students' linguistic and cultural identities." After numerous conversations about this vision involving all EBLT members and school staff, the EBLT determined that the school would better serve its newcomers through a Spanish-English transitional bilingual education program. To open this new program, they applied for and were awarded funding from their school district, which included professional development for bilingual teachers. At the start of the new school year, the EBLT began the bilingual program in tenth grade, where most of the newcomers were, and in the following years expanded it to all grade levels. All EBLT members, including students, were involved in the hiring interviews of bilingual teachers. The school also started an

after-school multicultural club with culturally and linguistically sustaining activities and events, chosen and designed by the student members, and the school began an internship program where bilingual students earned credit by becoming bilingual teaching assistants who provided home language support to newcomers in the co-teaching classes.

At Powerline High School, the EBLT took ownership of the improvement of services for emergent bilinguals and worked closely with teachers, families, and students to do so. From its inception, the EBLT met monthly, with meetings convened by Olivia, who remained extremely involved throughout but gave more and more decision-making power to the teachers, families, and students. This case narrative shows how teacher leadership, parent/family leadership, and student leadership were cultivated through the EBLT at Powerline High School, and how decision making pertaining to emergent bilinguals was shared by all EBLT members.

## TEACHING NOTES

The EBLTs in the case narratives above are examples of what is called distributed leadership. Recent research argues the benefits of distributed leadership (also known as collaborative leadership) in schools serving emergent bilinguals (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2015; Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010; DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2017; Hunt, 2011; Menken, 2017; Scanlan & López, 2012; Tupa & McFadden, 2009). Rather than concentrating leadership in one individual, such as the school principal, distributed leadership considers leadership interactive and shared among multiple official and unofficial leaders (Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009). Teachers of emergent bilinguals, particularly those trained in bilingual education or ENL, often have the greatest expertise within their school about these students, and yet are marginalized within a school's leadership structures (Brooks et al., 2010). While school administrators still need to be knowledgeable about bilingualism and language learning, and remain engaged in all decision making for emergent bilinguals, distributed leadership brings educators with expertise in language learning, as well as students, families, and community members, into positions of leadership within a school. This way, any decisions about the education of emergent bilinguals can be made collaboratively with the necessary expertise.

Above we presented two case narratives where school leadership was distributed, as school administrators, a diverse representation of educators, families, and students worked together in Emergent Bilingual Leadership Teams. From these cases, we can see how the schools nurtured teacher leadership, family leadership, and student leadership. Specifically, the case of Hillside

Elementary, a school in a suburban area of New York with a linguistically diverse population, highlights the ability for distributed leadership to change a principal's practices. Meanwhile, the case of Powerline High School, located in an urban area of the state where the vast majority of the school's emergent bilinguals speak Spanish, points out how leadership can be distributed to students and families. We documented the efforts of each school's EBLT to improve pedagogy, practices, and programming for emergent bilinguals, grounded in a language policy they collectively envisioned. These cases show that when EBLTs focus on the education of emergent bilinguals, they can transform the education these students receive, and transform schools to be more embracing of students' home language practices, cultures, and identities.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe “distributed leadership” (or “collaborative leadership”) in your own words.
2. Why is distributed leadership important in schools serving emergent bilinguals?
3. In the cases provided, how does each school's Emergent Bilingual Leadership Team (EBLT) distribute school leadership and allow for collaborative decision making?
4. What sorts of barriers could prevent collaborative decision making within an EBLT, and how might those barriers be addressed?
5. List at least three actions taken by each school's EBLT described in the case narratives. Discuss how some of these might be implemented in your school or a school in your district/area.

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES

The two activities below are from the *CUNY--NYSIEB Emergent Bilingual Leadership Team: Planning Resource Packet*, which includes these and many more activities for EBLTs that improve education for emergent bilingual students. The *EBLT Resource Packet*, used by both Hillside and Powerline, can be accessed for free online at: <https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CUNY-NYSIEB-EBLT-Resource-Package-2015-2016-09-17-15-Final.pdf>

1. Complete “Item A: Emergent Bilingual Leadership Team (EBLT)” from the *EBLT Resource Packet* (pages 15–17). This activity helps schools form an EBLT.

2. Complete “Item B: Inventory of Language Education Resources” from the *EBLT Resource Packet* (pages 19–23). This activity offers a starting point for EBLTs to consider their school’s environment and programming for emergent bilinguals.

## NOTES

- 1 Emergent bilinguals are often referred to as “English language learners.” We prefer García’s (2009) term “emergent bilingual,” which recognizes students’ bilingualism and the ways they draw on their rich home language practices as they learn, and because the term places their bilingualism at the center of our understandings of their needs and strengths.
- 2 Pull-out ENL is when an ENL teacher removes emergent bilinguals from their general education classroom for ENL instruction, while push-in ENL is when an ENL teacher enters a general education classroom to offer ENL instruction within class.

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