

LISTENING TO THE TEACHERS:

*Six Ways to Tackle
Disrupted Learning in
English Language Learners*



OFF2CLASS[®]

INTRODUCTION



SCHOOLS may have reopened yet learning is not back to normal—particularly not for English Language Learners (ELLs). By any metric, the last few years have been marked by an unprecedented disruption to the education of students. Test scores have suffered. Teachers are exhausted. Mental health issues are on the rise. Disruption has impacted all students, but, for ELLs, that disruption has been particularly acute.

In the United States, there are roughly 5.3 million ELLs, 10% of all students. ELLs faced challenges prior to the pandemic and have experienced disproportionate learning disruption exiting the pandemic. One piece of research found that “ELLs’ learning grew almost 3 scale score points slower during the pandemic, roughly 30 per cent of a year of typical growth.” ([COVID-19 and the Educational Equity Crisis: Evidence on Learning Loss From the CORE Data Collaborative](#)).

To ensure that this disruption is not a permanent feature of the education system, districts and schools will need to learn from best practices and implement meaningful change.

As a leading provider of tools and content for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, Off2Class is uniquely positioned to help gather these lessons. Working with schools and teachers in districts across the United States (and in 100+ countries) offers a first-hand look at the challenges of ensuring a quality education for ELLs.

ELLs FACED CHALLENGES PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC AND HAVE EXPERIENCED DISPROPORTIONATE LEARNING DISRUPTION EXITING THE PANDEMIC.

ELLs (also known as Multilingual Learners, Dual Language Learners, or Emergent Bilinguals) represent nearly one in ten students, the fastest growing student population in US K12 education. This group comprises a wide range of learners including migrant students, newcomers, long-term English learners, and Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE).

These students bring a dizzying array of languages to their new schools with many districts, such as Virginia Beach Public Schools (VA), serving over 70 different languages. Teachers are essential to ensuring that quality instruction is delivered to these students. At the same time, [32 states are experiencing shortages in ESL and bilingual teachers.](#)

Off2Class exists to serve ESL teachers. Listening to educators matters. At the end of 2021, we partnered with the highly-respected US education news site [the 74](#) to conduct a survey of those teachers, to understand what their experience of the pandemic had been, and to see if any positive action could be taken.

Collected between Oct. 22-29, 2021, 669 educators provided their own perspectives on teaching and learning during the pandemic. The headlines focused on the disruption to learners ("[56% of Educators Working With English Learners Say Pandemic Significantly Disrupted Learning; Nearly 4 in 10 Say Students Should Have Repeated Grade](#)") and gave a unique insight into the lives and experiences of ESL teachers.

There was more to those insights than what was reported. This briefing document reflects lessons from that survey, insights from our 10,000+ Facebook community of teachers and the best practice emerging from our 100+ US K12 schools and district partners.

It also reflects the information gained from our inaugural ESL Career Week (March 28-April 1, 2022), hosting 1500+ teachers and 20+ districts in an ambitious attempt to bridge the teacher shortage in US K12 districts by connecting qualified teachers from Off2Class teacher network to district opportunities.

"32 STATES ARE EXPERIENCING SHORTAGES IN ESL AND BILINGUAL TEACHERS."

Daniela Torre Gibney. Bellwether Education

Capacity is not only about training and hiring new teachers; it is about helping existing educators work more efficiently and providing a support system of translators and instructors who can work directly with students, parents and the local community.

As Tim Boals of WIDA said in the original article,

"It's a big job, but there are plenty of examples of schools that are succeeding (...) We need to share those examples and ensure that educators have the resources and understanding to create and sustain those learning spaces for multilingual learners."

For districts looking to better focus on learners, six lessons stand out from our work over the last year.

Each actionable bite-sized lesson is rooted in the results from the survey and our work with US district partners.

- FOCUS ON THE RIGHT TOOLS
- PRIORITIZE NEWCOMERS
- SAVE TIME FOR STUDENTS
- EMBRACE SUPPLEMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES
- LOOK TO UPSKILL
- EXPAND THE POOL

This paper would not exist without our district partners or the tireless work of our Off2Class colleagues. A special thanks to Sarah Collings, Kris Jagasia, James Heywood, and Aliya Khan.

The lessons presented in the whitepaper are a start but a shift in imagination and practice is needed, a shift that sees the ability to support language learning as a new basic competency for all educators.

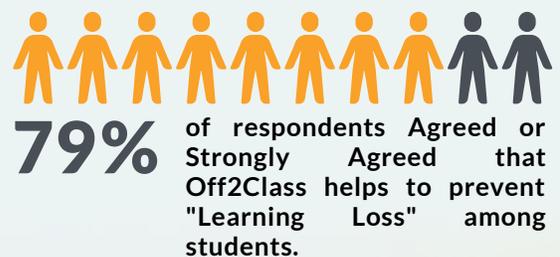
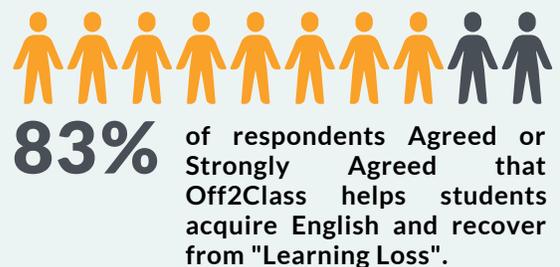
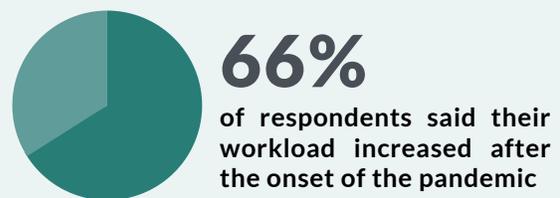
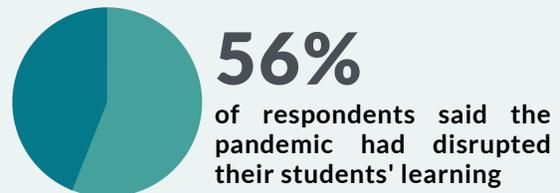
Back to school cannot simply be *back to normal*. The stakes are too high.

If you have further questions or want to learn more about any of these districts or Off2Class, drop us a line on nathan@off2class.com.

-Nathan Martin

August 2022

INSIGHTS FROM THE OFF2CLASS ESL TEACHER SURVEY



ESL Students and Teachers: Off2Class Survey (2021)



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FOCUS ON THE RIGHT TOOLS



“The average K12 student accessed 74 different education technology products, platforms or services while the average K12 teacher interacted with 86 different tools in the course of their work. The average district accessed 1,403 tools per month” ([Learn Platform, 2022](#)).

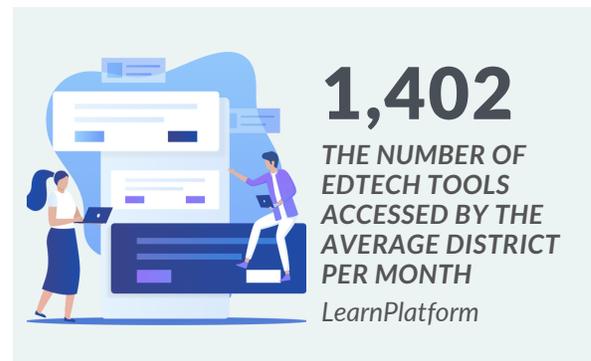
THE pandemic served as a pressure-test for edtech. Limits on in-person learning meant it was critical that any technology adopted would fit the needs of teachers and meet students in their learning. Little time remained for extensive and complicated implementations of new systems.

At the same time, educators and students continue to use a wide range of educational tools.

"YOU CAN'T JUST SIT STUDENTS ON THE COMPUTER AND EXPECT THEM TO DO WHAT THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO DO."

Tarro Funches, Canton Public Schools (MS)

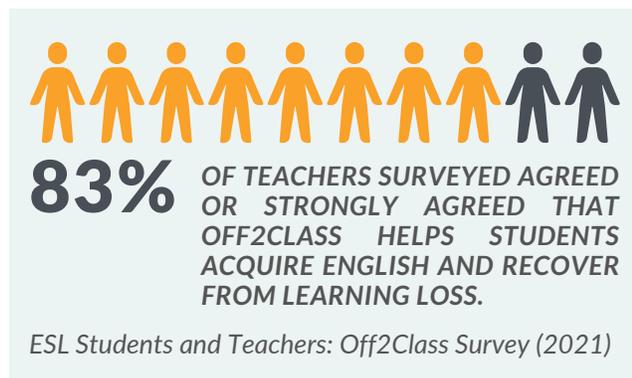
Learn Platform, a US-based edtech research organization, in an analysis of 8,000 edtech tools used by over two million K-12 students and over 225,000 teachers between August 1 and December 31, 2021, found that,



It is critical that edtech serves the needs of the educator and can truly tackle disrupted learning. We've heard from countless educators frustrated with their current solutions and looking for more effective options.

We've been honored to have a number of educators and districts choose Off2Class. In the case of Tarro Funches, English language coordinator for the [Canton Public Schools](#) (MS), there is a high bar placed on research before an edtech product is adopted and rolled out. Funches's commitment to evidence

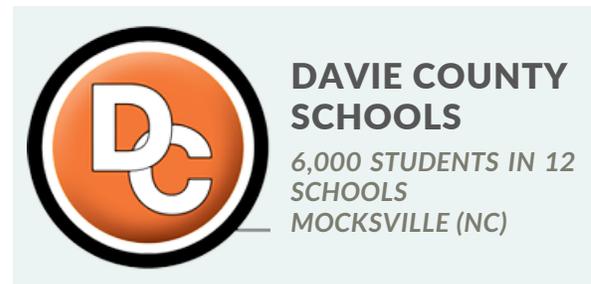
led her to establish an informal consortium of English learner coordinators from around the state, sharing research and best practices and their own edtech experiences. All those strategies increase the likelihood of a successful implementation.



“You have to work the program,” said Funches. “You can’t just sit students on the computer and expect them to do what they’re supposed to do.”

One district we’ve worked with is [Davie County Schools](#) (DCS) which serves 6,000 students across 12 schools in Mocksville (NC). The district learner demographics consist of 84% White, 5% Black, 7% Hispanic, and 1% Asian. 88% of DCS students graduate within four years. Via its ESL program, DCS offers small classes to its non-native English-speaking students in which teachers can offer individual attention.

Davie County previously used Rosetta Stone but switched to Off2Class. Luis Muñoz, EL Coordinator at Davie County Schools, noted,



“The main thing about Rosetta Stone is that it is very repetitive. The second factor was the price. Rosetta Stone is expensive. The third factor is that it was not friendly for users, too many glitches. A final factor was that you didn’t have the option to give them homework. You didn’t have a diagnostic assessment or recommendations. You had to decide what to assign them.”

HOW TO FOCUS ON THE RIGHT TOOLS

FOR DISTRICTS LOOKING TO NAVIGATE THE VARIED LANDSCAPE OF EDTECH, WE'VE LEARNED THREE TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

- **Start with the Problem:** Adopting a new tool should be linked to a problem identified by the district. At Davie County, they needed a cost-effective solution that could be rolled out rapidly to students and new teachers, a solution that improved learning and ensured that students were able to acquire the needed foundations of grammar.
- **Do the Research:** Once the problem is identified, ELL coordinators should look to existing research and evaluation sites to understand whether the claims made by the company are supported by evidence and experience. Funches stressed the importance of being frugal with federal education funds and spending wisely.
- **Build Consensus:** Purchasing edtech is only the start for a district. Successful buy-in requires teacher support. "I believe in getting input from the practitioners," said Funches. "That's why I had the ESL interventionist from the High School sit in on the presentations. We sat down to make a decision together on a product we are going to use."

PRIORITIZE NEWCOMERS



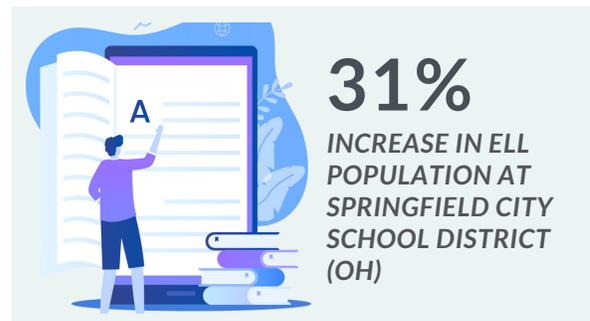
NEWCOMERS and learners who have experienced disrupted learning should be prioritized. These learners might be Newcomers, Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) or Students with Limited or Interrupted Learning (SLIFE). The exact classification might differ from state to state, but each classification represents a learner who has experienced limited education, disruption to that experience and who, in many cases, tests below their expected grade level.

"INTERRUPTIONS IN EDUCATION ARE NOT NEW TO OUR FIELD."

Dr Carol Salva

These learners have always been in particular need and attention and, as education expert Dr Carol Salva wrote, "...interruptions in education are not new to our field," ([Worried About Learning Loss, Take a Lesson from SLIFE, Off2Class](#)).

Emerging from the pandemic, we have heard from countless schools of the challenge and importance of ensuring these learners receive appropriate support to gain the needed skills and graduate on time.



Over the pandemic, we have seen an increased ELL population in local schools and Off2Class partners. One of those partners is [Springfield City School District](#), located in the heart of Ohio, a district that has seen a 31% increase in its ELL population. This district includes 10 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, and 2 high schools. With a total of 7500 students, enrollments are increasing – particularly among ELLs. Estimated figures for the studentship are 70% Hispanic, 20% Haitian-Creole, and 10% from other diverse backgrounds.

Increased ELL populations can be due to changes in the local economy, national trends and even geo-political factors. Learners from vulnerable environments are always a reality. An increasing number of schools are now looking to integrate refugees from current conflict zones such as Afghanistan and Ukraine.

THE OFF2CLASS CURRICULUM IS IDEAL FOR TEACHERS AND VOLUNTEERS WITH LESS EXPERIENCE.

Alongside traditional US K12 school districts, Off2Class works with a number of non-profit organizations such as [Immigrant Family Services Institute](#) (IFSI) an organization heavily involved in addressing the needs of refugee students and newcomers.



The [Central American Refugee Center \(CARECEN\)](#) in New York brings first-hand experience working with students who are new to the US. The organization has had to weather funding challenges and also quickly flex to respond to an increased number of students, now serving 120 students, with two teachers, and eight volunteer tutors per quarter.

The Off2Class curriculum is ideal for teachers and volunteers with less experience. It guides the teacher through each lesson, and homework activities revise the lesson content.

Melanie Creps, Community Manager for Caracen, said these resources “significantly” cut down the time teachers spend on planning.

HOW TO PRIORITIZE NEWCOMERS

THREE TIPS CHARACTERIZE SCHOOLS SUCCESSFULLY FOCUSING ON NEWCOMERS:

- **Age-Appropriate Material:** We've heard from many language teachers expressing frustration as schools struggle to teach newcomers. Materials are often seen as too "babyish" for this age group as they are designed for elementary school-aged students. This increases the likelihood that students will become disengaged and struggle to progress.
- **Consider the Academy:** Newcomer, SIFE and SLIFE learners need teachers to meet them where they might be in their life. That might be recognizing that they've come from disrupted home life, that they are adjusting to a new community, or that they are working a job to help provide for their family. We've seen a number of school districts introduce a "Newcomer Academy", providing a well-structured space for incoming ELLs to receive everything they might need to adapt to a new school and local culture. To this end, Kermit ISD (TX) [offers ESL classes to the parents of ELL students](#).
- **Grammar, Grammar, Grammar:** Students experiencing interrupted learning may have missed foundational classes offering the fundamentals of language learning. Schools prioritizing newcomers prioritize grammar.

SAVE TIME FOR STUDENTS



TEACHER time has always been in short supply. Each day, a teacher makes over 1,500 decisions. The pandemic increased that strain, adding countless complications to an already challenging workload. Research conducted by the New America Foundation, looking at English Language Learning during the pandemic, found teachers overwhelmed and exhausted.



As one teacher summed up the feeling, “...every lesson is taking me forever to plan.” ([Educating English Language Learners During the Pandemic, New America Foundation, 2022](#)).

Saving teacher time is a core part of Off2Class and its mission. It is at the heart of each part of the product offering, from the gap analysis assessments and the comprehensive lesson plans to the teacher notes and data-rich dashboards.

WITHOUT OFF2CLASS



44

minutes preparing
a typical lesson

WITH OFF2CLASS



14

minutes preparing
a typical lesson

From Lesson Preparation to Instruction, Off2Class (2021)

In 2021, Off2Class conducted a survey of teachers and found that teachers using Off2Class saved an average of 30 minutes planning one lesson, 12.5 hours per week ([From Lesson Preparation to Instruction, Off2Class, 2021](#)). By saving preparation time, teachers are able to serve more students.

HOW TO SAVE TIME FOR STUDENTS

- **Prioritize Quick Implementation:** During the pandemic, time became even scarcer. For [Hickman Mills C-1 School District](#) (Kansas City, MO) it was essential that any solution could be implemented quickly and give the teachers what they needed. The district serves 5,173 students across nine schools and represents a diverse set of learners, of which newcomers represent 8.05%. “The teachers are happy,” said Swapnam Kumar, District Lead for English Language Development. “Off2Class is easy to navigate and teachers are not struggling to find what they want”.
- **Flexible Tools for Growing Numbers of Learners:** One of these areas of growth is [Harmony Public Schools](#), an Off2Class customer. This high-performing Charter Management Organization serves 37,000 students enrolled in seven districts and 58 campuses across Texas. Over 12,000 of these students are ELLs, and this number is increasing by 1000 per year. Harmony understands the need to quickly expand to meet the needs of newcomers and a diverse population. It is critical that any new tool is rolled out to its teachers quickly and implemented without issue.
- **Plug and Play Teaching:** There have been significant disruptions to staff at schools. There is limited time to become familiar with complex software and solutions, as Davie County knows all too well. “I’ve faced the challenge of teachers quitting. I used to have eight teachers with three assistants here. Now I have five teachers including myself and only two assistants,” said Muñoz. “As a coordinator, it will be easier to keep learning going with this tool. If done right, the whole thing is done. It’s like, ‘turn on the lesson projector and your SMART Board and the lesson is done for you.’”

EMBRACE SUPPLEMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES



TACKLING disrupted learning among ELLs will require creativity and flexibility among US K12 districts. The traditional hours and routine of an in-person classroom experience will not be enough. Alongside saving time and a careful focus on newcomers, districts will embrace opportunities to supplement learning and class time.

TUTORING REPRESENTS ONE AREA WHERE MANY DISTRICTS ARE INVESTING SIGNIFICANT TIME AND FUNDING.

Oklahoma City saw a prime example of this type of support this year. Putnam City Schools offered a special “Summer Recharge” program, targeting newcomers in middle and high school who had been in the US for less than a year, with the goal of helping them improve their English proficiency, acquire computer literacy skills,

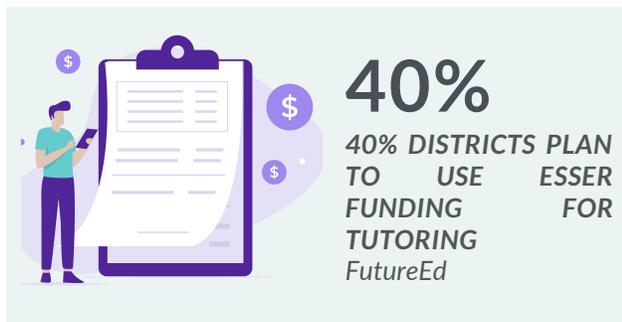
fulfill graduation requirements – including passing a state-mandated citizenship test – and obtain high school credit.



Led by Sally Diaz, secondary English language facilitator, the school-based program provided a mixture of hands-on learning and technology-enabled instruction targeting language skills in the classroom, as well as providing real-world learning opportunities, external lectures and field trips. The program saw strong results: attendance averaged 88%, 100% of students passed the citizenship test and 70% earned credit for computer literacy by demonstrating proficiency in programs such as Powerpoint and Excel. Based on observation, teachers reported improvement in participants' language skills.

Tutoring represents one area where many districts are investing significant time and funding.

Georgetown University education think tank [FutureEd](#) estimated that over 40% of districts plan to use ESSER funding for tutoring and have dedicated over \$1.7 billion in ESSER III funding to tutoring and coaching.



While this tutoring is often in-person, we have seen a rise in virtual supplementary instruction and classroom instruction. Education Week reported on the trend of districts looking to companies like Proximity Learning and Elevate K12 that can provide virtual teachers for hard-to-staff subjects. These shortages seem unlikely to be mitigated anytime soon. A [Fall 2021 survey by the EdWeek Research Center](#) found that "Teachers are quitting—or contemplating it—in staggering numbers. Almost half of district leaders and principals labeled their staff shortages as 'severe' or 'very severe'."

Off2Class has also seen districts looking to take advantage of summer breaks and other after-school time to provide additional instructional time for students.

Leveraging tools like Off2Class, districts can offer differentiated instruction and personalized learning for students.

"TEACHERS ARE QUITTING—OR CONTEMPLATING IT—IN STAGGERING NUMBERS. ALMOST HALF OF DISTRICT LEADERS AND PRINCIPALS LABELED THEIR STAFF SHORTAGES AS 'SEVERE' OR 'VERY SEVERE'."

EdWeek Research Centre (2021)

While not solely supplemental learning, Polytech High School offers adult education in Delaware for learners who are also employed in a full-time job. Tools and learning opportunities must fill in the gaps for learners, whenever they are able to learn.

Polytech delivers real results for these learners with 2,726 students participating in the program and impressive outcomes (80% job placement rate, 85% of high school students obtaining industry-recognized credentials and a 97% graduation rate).

HOW TO EMBRACE SUPPLEMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES

THREE TIPS EMERGE FROM DISTRICTS PRIORITIZING TACKLING DISRUPTED LEARNING:

- **No Break from Learning:** The best districts operate with a sense of urgency. They recognize that while breaks for holiday and summer time might be important, it is critical schools recognize that time must be made up for this disrupted period and that they continue to offer learning opportunities. Our partners in Tulsa Public Schools (OK) utilized tutors from Off2Class for its Virtual Academy, providing newcomer students with virtual and flexible learning options across the summer. The students, all refugees from Afghanistan, showed high levels of engagement with the virtual tutors, particularly any chance to practice conversational skills.
- **Mix Work and Learning:** Embedding real work experience is another way of expanding the definition of supplementary learning. Kelli Bivins is a ESL teacher in Cedar Shoals High School in Georgia and has won awards (a Fullbright teacher) for her work bringing real life learning into her classroom, particularly looking at lessons from the local hospitality industry.
- **Embrace Online:** While in-person learning is to be preferred, it is crucial that districts avail their students of every avenue and resource. This might be virtual tutors, virtual “office hours” for independent instruction or ensuring that students can easily find and access the best digital content.

LOOK TO UPSKILL

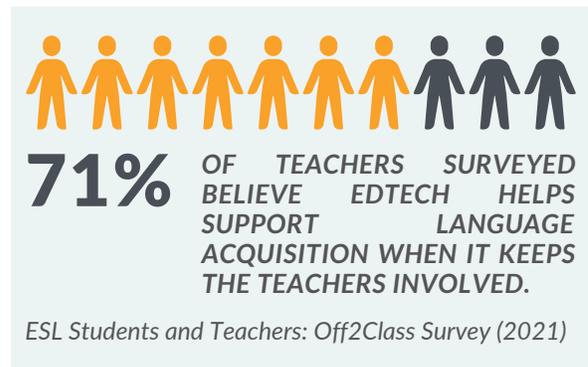


BETTER and more effective edtech alone will not be enough to tackle the challenges of disrupted learning. Teacher capacity is critical to ensuring learners get adequate support.

According to our survey of teachers, a low proportion of teachers (18%) believe edtech software that replaces teachers is effective at supporting students with English acquisition. In comparison, a majority (71%) believe edtech helps support language acquisition when it keeps the teachers involved.

Yet, there is a shortage of ESL teachers. [Education Week](#) reports that, “Between the 2008-09 and 2018-19 academic years, the number of people completing a teacher-education program dropped by nearly a third.” When it comes to world language teachers, even before COVID, research

showed that the [annual turnover rate was 20%](#).



Expanding the pool of potential ESL teachers available for US K12 districts was a primary aim of the free [ESL Career Week](#) hosted by Off2Class in March Of 2022. Over 1500 teachers and 25+ districts registered for the week of webinars, professional development and jobs board. Webinars featured districts including Tarrant County (AL), Virginia Beach County Public Schools (VA), Tulsa (OK) and Springfield (OH). We also heard from leading US districts such as Houston ISD (TX) on how teachers can tighten up their résumé and improve their chances of getting hired while education expert Daniela Torre Gibney (Bellwether Education) delivered a webinar on effective strategies for building an effective Bilingual and ESL pipeline.

HOW TO LOOK TO UPSKILL

FOR DISTRICTS LOOKING TO SUCCESSFULLY UPSKILL, THREE TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

- **Build at Home:** Districts should keep a lookout for local educators and members of the community, then encourage them to take up ESL training as a pathway. During the Off2Class ESL Career Week, Daniela Torre Gibney praised the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) in Chicago. Their impressive “Grow Your Own (GYO)” program highlights promising paraprofessionals and parents, then pairs them with teacher preparation programs and teacher education classes.
- **Provide Flexibility:** Along with the flexibility offered by Oklahoma, districts and states can look to make it easier for teachers to earn necessary certification. That might include providing multiple pathways to certification, allowing probationary certification or allowing waivers for bilingual programming or bilingual educator requirements.
- **Invest, Invest, Invest:** To reduce teacher turnover, it is essential that districts continue to invest time and energy in supporting existing teachers. Virginia Beach City Public Schools stressed the importance of providing room for teachers to grow. “We always try to support the teachers to grow professionally with allowances for advanced degrees and free professional development,” said Kathleen Cahoon-Newchok.

EXPAND THE POOL



BY 2025, 1 in 4 classroom students is projected to be an ELL. Addressing that need will require more than simply upskilling existing teachers. Districts can look to expand the pool of who they draw upon. This might mean hiring new teachers or expanding the definition of an instructional professional.

Off2Class works directly with US K12 districts and private tutors across the world. In 2021, a ban on for-profit Chinese edtech companies left many American private language tutors seeking additional work. At the same time, US K12 districts were reporting difficulty finding qualified instructors. The Off2Class ESL Career Week represented an attempt to bring those two groups together.

The week highlighted both the opportunity and the challenge of matching these skillsets. A number of districts talked about

their work looking to upskill existing teachers and bring additional teachers to the pipeline.



One example represented in the week is found in Tulsa Public Schools in Oklahoma, which serves 9,400 multilingual learners, representing 76 languages and about 37% of the entire student population.

Dr. Laura Grisso, executive director of language and cultural services, believes great language teachers can come from all parts of the school and walks of life. The district now is prioritizing professional development to build the skills of existing teachers, while a program known as Tulsa Teacher Corps (which follows what would traditionally be an emergency certification pathway), offers state-funded coaching and graduate coursework to prospective educators who already have a bachelor's degree.

HOW TO EXPAND THE POOL

HERE ARE THREE ADDITIONAL TIPS TO EXPAND THE POOL OF INSTRUCTORS:

- **Look to the Tutors:** Springfield City School District (OH) expands the pipeline of ESL instructors and teachers by hiring former students. These former students work as bilingual tutors, offering additional support at school for students and encouraging current students to consider a career in ESL teaching.
- **Embrace Blended Learning:** Leveraging qualified virtual tutors is an effective strategy to expand local teacher capacity. When implemented carefully, there is tremendous potential to tap into the vast community of virtual K12 language teachers who can be “on-demand.”
- **Every Teacher is a Language Teacher:** Daniela Torre Gibney reminded us that, due to the demographic shifts in the US, each teacher will need to double as an ESL teacher. Schools should consider how to ensure that all teachers can obtain the tools and training to serve language learners. The ability to support language learning should be considered a new basic competency.

English learners will play an important role in the future of education in America. Districts need to ensure that students have the support and training they need to thrive and succeed in the workforce and society.

CONTACT US

To find out more about Off2Class, or this research, please contact us via our website:
www.off2class.com.

