

Working Together for Dual Language Learners

Community of Peace Academy's Co-Teaching Model

In a kindergarten classroom at Community of Peace Academy (CPA) on the east side of St. Paul, Minnesota, two teachers are reading the book "Corduroy" with their students. Students are learning how to identify elements in the story like character and setting, and how to ask questions using words like "who" and "where." Earlier in the day, students spent time in small groups rotating through "literacy centers" with each of the two teachers. One group did guided reading exercises, while the other group practiced some of the vocabulary words from that afternoon's book. More than half the class speaks a language other than English at home — there's a roughly even split between Spanish-speaking and Hmong-speaking students — and most students come from low-income families. It might be hard to tell for a casual observer, but one teacher serves a specialized role, focusing on the needs of dual language learners (DLLs). This classroom is an example of how teachers carry out CPA's new co-teaching model, which is designed to support DLL students, who are mastering both English and another home language.

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In Minnesota and across the country, too many DLL students do not get the educational support they need to thrive in school. Results for DLLs in reading are consistently far behind their peers, in Minnesota and nationally. In 2017, only one in three Minnesota DLLs were reading at grade level in third grade, compared with more than half of third-graders statewide. In light of these results, education policies and media coverage often portray multilingualism as a problem. With the right supports, however, multilingualism can be a huge asset to students' learning and to the school community.

In Minnesota, where the population of DLLs has grown more than 300 percent in the last 20 years, realizing the potential of multilingual students is crucial to narrowing achievement gaps and building a competitive future workforce. Community of Peace Academy is an example of a school that has transformed teaching for DLL students through a new approach that holds lessons for other schools and education leaders.



About Supporting Minnesota Educators



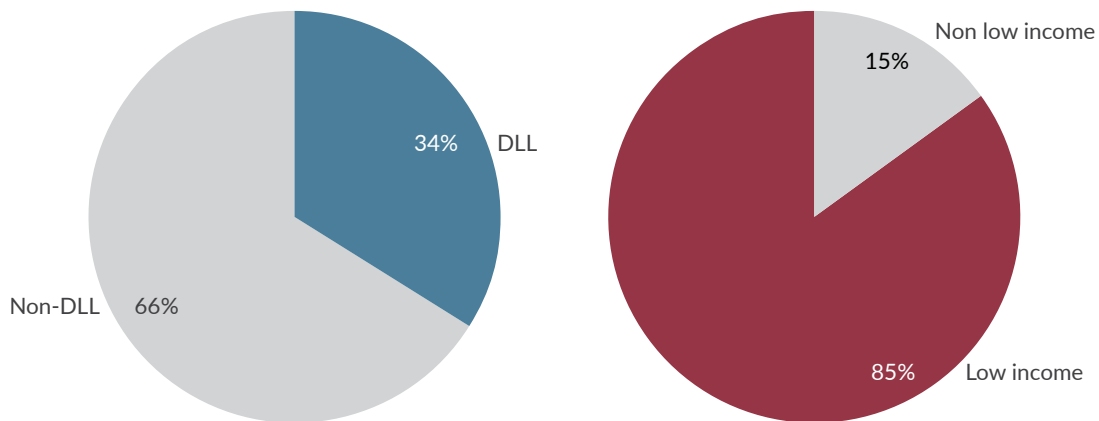
Supporting Minnesota Educators (SupportMinnEd.org) is a project of Bellwether Education Partners with support from the McKnight Foundation. Supporting Minnesota Educators looks back on McKnight's Pathway Schools Initiative to uncover and share key lessons related to teachers and leaders. McKnight began the Initiative in 2011 with the goal of improving literacy outcomes in pre-k to third grade. Seven schools in the Twin Cities area participated in the Initiative between 2011 and 2018.

Learn more at SupportMinnEd.org.

CPA is a public charter school founded in 1995 to serve low-income families in St. Paul, who have not historically had access to enough high-quality school options. CPA serves students from pre-k through high school, but its new co-teaching approach focuses on younger grades, when students' linguistic and literacy skills are in a critical period of development.

About 85 percent of CPA students in pre-k to third grade live in low-income households and one in three are DLLs. In its first two decades, the majority of CPA's students came from Hmong immigrant communities. Sixty-eight percent of students were Asian in 2005, reflecting the surrounding neighborhoods. But in the past ten years the school has become more linguistically, racially, and ethnically diverse. Forty-five percent of students are Asian, 23 percent are black, 20 percent are Hispanic, and 8 percent are white. This multilingual, multiethnic student body shapes the school's instructional approach.

PRE-K TO THIRD-GRADE STUDENTS AT COMMUNITY OF PEACE ACADEMY 2017-18, BY LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND FAMILY INCOME



CPA's mission focuses on character development and whole-child education. In 2012, when comparing their student outcomes to state and local performance, CPA's leadership team decided to dedicate more attention and resources to improving academic outcomes. According to Executive Director Cara Quinn, the school culture was strong, but the academic program (including curriculum, instruction, and assessment) needed more coherence.

Around that same time, the McKnight Foundation invited CPA to apply to the Pathway Schools Initiative, which aimed to improve third-grade reading outcomes through access to professional development and coaching supports, assessments, and opportunities to work with other schools. From 2012 to 2015, under the leadership of Quinn and elementary school Principal Bao Vang, CPA focused on improving early literacy outcomes. It introduced a new reading curriculum and assessment system, and greatly increased the feedback and coaching teachers received. Despite signs of progress in the school, however, academic results were inconsistent.

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Achievement gaps for DLL students are not unique to CPA; other schools in the Pathway Schools Initiative and across Minnesota faced similar challenges with DLL instruction in early grades. Statewide DLL proficiency in third-grade reading is 33 percentage points below the state average. But Quinn and Vang knew that DLL students' success was critical to their mission and to the success of the school as a whole. They looked closely at their instructional model and compared it to research and other examples of schools achieving DLL success.

Keeping DLL students in class could benefit DLLs as well as their classmates.

Community of Peace Academy, like many other Minnesota schools, regularly pulled DLL students out of their normal classrooms for skill-building sessions with English learner teachers. Quinn and Vang explored research indicating that DLLs may learn better when academic content and language skills are taught together and they have ample opportunities to interact with their peers. Importantly, many of the same instructional strategies that work well for DLLs – such as developing vocabulary with content-rich instruction, building foundational literacy skills like phonemic awareness, and encouraging student-led discussions in the classroom – also work well for students of any linguistic background. This means that keeping DLL students in class could benefit DLLs as well as their classmates.

Bilingual or dual language instruction, where students are taught academic content in both English and another language, is one approach to DLL instruction that is gaining popularity nationally and in some Minnesota schools. While this approach has shown great promise in some settings, because CPA has large numbers of both Spanish- and Hmong-speaking students, focusing on only one language in addition to English was not a feasible option. Teachers who speak Hmong or Spanish are also all too rare in Minnesota.

To explore other alternative instructional models, Vang and Quinn “set out to see what successful schools and schools serving DLLs were doing,” visiting Uncommon Schools – North Star in New Jersey and Partnership Academy in Richfield, Minnesota, with support from the Pathway Schools Initiative. These schools use different variations of co-teaching models, where a lead teacher and co-teacher work together to support students’ academic and language development.

Informed by these examples, CPA developed a co-teaching model for grades K-6, where DLL-focused co-teachers support two classrooms at the same grade level, working side by side with generalist teachers to provide small-group and whole-class instruction.

This approach, now in its third year, keeps DLL students learning alongside their peers. CPA’s literacy coach, Melissa Jackson, said, “The co-teaching model keeps DLL instruction connected to the curriculum,” instead of separating language skills from academic content. This approach can also benefit students who don’t speak English at home, but aren’t classified as DLLs.



Key Features of the Community of Peace Academy Co-Teaching Model

- ✓ Grades K-6
- ✓ One DLL co-teacher per two classrooms
- ✓ The co-teacher spends half the day in one classroom and half the day in the other
- ✓ Teachers and co-teachers share responsibility for whole-class progress on reading, language, and literacy
- ✓ Teachers and co-teachers use multiple co-teaching lesson styles, including one teach/one support, both teaching in small groups, and dual whole-class instruction
- ✓ English is the primary language of instruction
- ✓ Grade-level teams design their own curricula, aligned to the STEP assessments and Minnesota state standards
- ✓ Teachers share time for planning, data analysis, and coaching

When it designed this co-teaching model, CPA wanted to make sure that primary teachers and co-teachers shared responsibility for student progress and classroom management. Co-teachers are not meant to be supporting players or assistants — they are equally important leaders in the classroom. This shared leadership between the teacher and the co-teacher is important for encouraging teacher collaboration and upholding the value and importance of DLL instruction. For teachers and co-teachers, CPA expects a shared mindset that all students, no matter their linguistic or cultural background, can achieve at high levels.

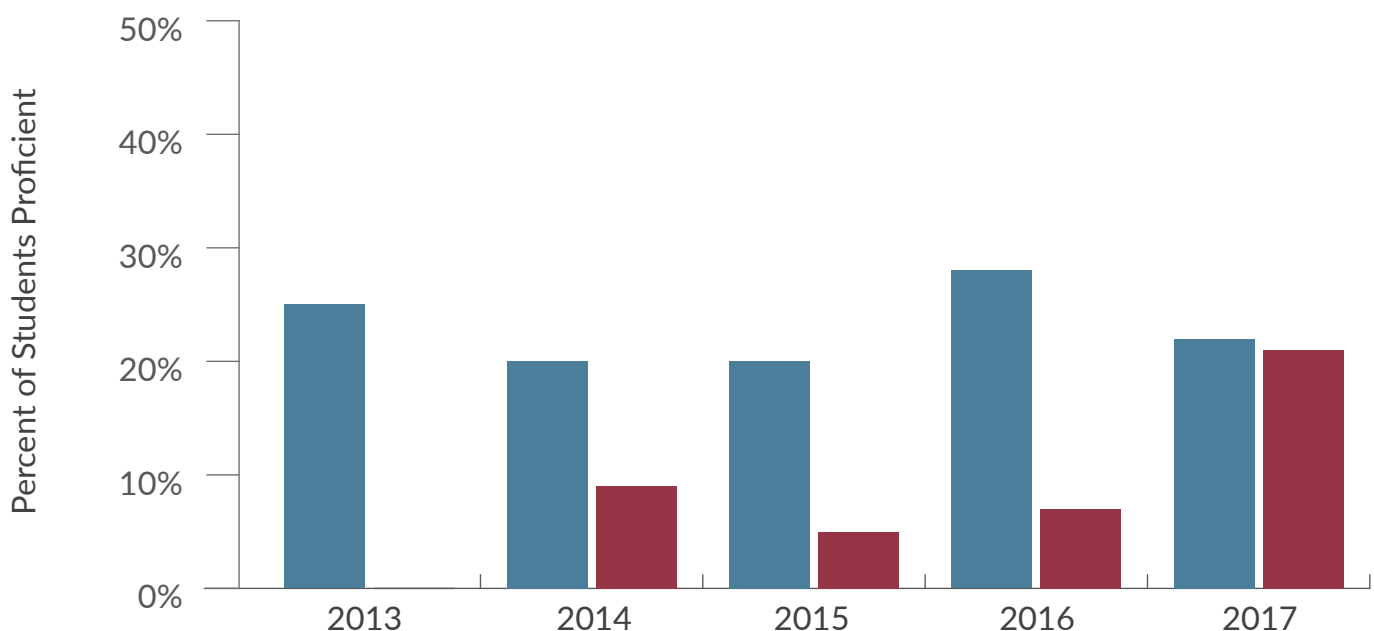
Other school leaders see cost as a big barrier to co-teaching, because it usually requires hiring more teachers overall. But Vang and Quinn put their co-teaching model into practice with very little additional support from the McKnight Foundation. This required tackling some logistical, staffing, and budgetary challenges, but they wanted to ensure that new co-teacher positions were stable and did not depend on philanthropic money. The school shifted its DLL team in the elementary grades from three ESL teachers supporting multiple grades and five paraprofessionals to seven co-teachers.

How do teachers see this change? Laura Hegrenes, a DLL specialist kindergarten co-teacher in her 12th year at the school, says, “In the big picture, it’s a wonderful model and it helps support students’ learning all day long.” Hegrenes says that the co-teaching approach, combined with new reading assessments introduced by the Pathway Schools Initiative, has made her more aware of her students’ reading progress and where they need to grow. She now works closely with classroom teachers to monitor and support progress and collaborate consistently on lesson plans, classroom management, and curriculum. “We are not afraid to give each other feedback and try new things, and they are receptive to my ideas. We listen to each other and that’s really important,” Hegrenes says.

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Early results are promising: In the most recent round of third-grade reading tests, DLL proficiency rose by over 15 percentage points, closing the gap with the school’s average. “We believe [co-teaching] is a contributing factor” to these results, said Vang. The school saw notable growth across the board for elementary school students in 2016, but uneven results across grades in 2017.

THIRD-GRADE READING PROFICIENCY, COMMUNITY OF PEACE ACADEMY, 2013-2017





One big challenge, however, is finding and retaining teachers who are adept at this model of co-teaching.

School leaders also observed that some teacher candidates trained or experienced in pull-out ESL models felt that integrating DLL instruction with the whole class was too ambitious, or asking too much of students. “They often didn’t demonstrate the mindset we needed,” said Quinn.

In response to these challenges, CPA hired several generalist teachers with DLL experience as co-teachers and provided them with on-the-job training and support. But training new teachers as DLL specialists has been a work in progress, especially after the midyear departure of the school’s DLL and co-teaching consultant in 2017. And teachers trained as generalists weren’t as familiar with effective teaching strategies for DLLs. “I didn’t have the best training in literacy instruction” before entering the classroom, says a co-teacher in her second year of teaching. She was never required to take courses specializing in DLLs, despite the growing number of DLL students in Minnesota. “I’ve grown in the role, but I’m not where I want to be.”

Given encouraging results but big challenges, what’s next for Community of Peace Academy? The ambitious shift to DLL co-teaching is still unfolding, and the school is still striving to meet its academic goals and sustain the co-teaching model. School leaders are hopeful that they can stick with co-teaching despite the difficulties of finding and retaining co-teachers. “We don’t want to give up,” said Jackson. “Because if not co-teaching, then what? We wouldn’t go back to our old way of doing DLL instruction.”

The school’s efforts would likely go further with systemic improvements to teacher preparation policy and practice in Minnesota. Minnesota has some important policies already in place, including the Learning English for Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act. This 2014 law has been recognized as one of the best in the country from the standpoint of framing multilingualism positively and calling for action across the education sector — in early childhood education programs, schools, districts, and teacher and administrator training programs.¹

¹ Conor Williams, “Pluralism on the Prairie,” *New America*, 2016, <https://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/Pluralism-on-the-Prairie-2.pdf>.

Moreover, Quinn sees co-teaching, along with the school’s other ambitious academic changes over the course of the Pathway Schools Initiative, as transforming attitudes about DLL students: “In earlier years, we weren’t always confident that our students could achieve at high levels ... we sometimes pointed to poverty and language and wondered if it was reasonable to have these high expectations. Through professional development and seeing other schools doing this work, we’ve shifted our perspective and we don’t hear that at all anymore.”

One big challenge, however, is finding and retaining teachers who are adept at this model of co-teaching. CPA found that many teachers trained and certified in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction weren’t comfortable working with larger groups of students or sharing responsibility for the whole classroom with another teacher. “We’d get people who were eager to try [co-teaching],” Jackson reports, “but then they chose not to return the next year because they didn’t feel comfortable with the model and with whole group instruction.”

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- Melissa Jackson,
Literacy Coach, CPA

Preparation programs, school districts, and the state as a whole must prioritize the needs of DLL students – and the need for teachers who are prepared to support them effectively.



But “there’s a gigantic disconnect between the legislation and implementation in the state,” says Vang. For example, state law requires teacher preparation programs to provide DLL-focused training for all, but thus far few changes are evident in programs’ practices.²

School leaders at CPA would like to see more new teachers for all instructional roles who are knowledgeable about DLL language development, familiar with DLL instructional practices and assessments, fluent in the cultural and linguistic needs of students, and excited about collaborating with their peers in the classroom. Preparation programs, school districts, and the state as a whole must prioritize the needs of DLL students – and the need for teachers who are prepared to support them effectively.

CPA’s story points to a need for teachers trained in effective, culturally and linguistically responsive ways to teach DLLs, whether in a multilingual classroom or in a small group. Moreover, teachers specializing in English as a Second Language instruction should share an ambitious mindset for their students and for what they can accomplish, and should be comfortable teaching across a variety of instructional models.

One way the state can affirm the value of multilingualism is by training, hiring, and supporting more multilingual teachers. Multilingual teachers and teachers of color are far too rare in Minnesota. Only 4 percent of Minnesota teachers are teachers of color, compared with 28 percent students of color statewide. Teachers who themselves were once DLLs or grew up in the same communities as their students are uniquely positioned to support DLL students and positively inform their colleagues’ work. Diversifying the teacher workforce at multiple points of the training, hiring, and retention pipeline has been a focus of advocacy for many local organizations in recent years, but closing the gap will be a long-term endeavor.³

Implementation of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides additional opportunities for the state to drive progress in serving DLL students. Minnesota’s ESSA plan promises to use federal funds to help schools develop better teacher retention strategies and teacher development systems.⁴ These strategies should be targeted at specific challenge areas for schools, such as recruiting and retaining teachers with skills to teach DLL students, rather than casting a broad net. The ESSA plan also promises that the state will compile a list of research-based English language instructional approaches, which could influence more schools to try new approaches to instruction.⁵ These state-level supports should respond to the unique demographic trends in Minnesota, where schools like CPA are supporting student learning in many languages simultaneously.

Community of Peace Academy, like other schools in Minnesota, is ambitiously trying new, research-based teaching and learning approaches to close persistent achievement gaps and better prepare its students for the future. Such schools deserve support from state and district policymakers and teacher preparation programs that train and shape the teacher workforce.

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2 Ibid.

3 Minnesota Education Equity Partnership, “TeachMN2020,” <https://mneep.org/teachmn2020/>; EdAllies, “Teacher Diversity” tag, <https://edalliesmn.org/blog/tag/teacher-diversity/>.

4 Minnesota Department of Education, “Minnesota State Plan: Title II,” <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/ESSA/mnstp/>.

5 Minnesota Department of Education, “Minnesota State Plan: Title III,” <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/ESSA/mnstp/>.