

EL Advocacy Case Study #1: Access to Technology During COVID-19

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Present Issues & Examples

During the unexpected pivot to distance learning models in spring 2020 and the continuation of [many students being educated via distance learning in 2020-21](#), the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated many inequities English learners (ELs) face. For example, after schools closed their physical doors in the spring, despite educators' best efforts, [many ELs fell off the radar, not attending virtual classes](#). One reason for ELs' lack of attendance last spring was their access to technology. Providing ELs access to and support with technology is the first critical step in ensuring they meaningfully take part in distance learning.

We have seen firsthand how much work educators have done to ensure that ELs are included in distance learning instruction during the current school year, even though systems have not been established to fully support their education in this new era. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have heard numerous stories of teachers who are advocating to ensure ELs' equitable access to distance learning.

This case study is the first of three that will focus on advocating for ELs during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was developed based on a compilation of responses that we received to a survey in which teachers shared their experiences of educating ELs during the crisis.

Instead of focusing on what we can't do – and we're all feeling powerless in one way or another right now - we instead will share real stories of how teachers are advocating for ELs in the hopes that you may be energized to continue advocating. We know how exhausting this all has been.

We first present authentic quotes about challenges teachers have faced so far and ways they have been advocating for ELs, citing teachers' names where they gave us permission to do so. Next, we focus on possible advocacy issues related to technology and share one case study that is representative of the ways in which teachers have been advocating for ELs. We apply a five-step EL advocacy framework as a guide for steps that you can take in your own advocacy work. Finally, we conclude with some closing thoughts.

Selected Quotes from Teachers on ELs' Access to Technology



Last spring the biggest concern was lack of computers and access to internet/WiFi. Our district provided a chrome book and hot spot to every family in need. This helped, but families with multiple children still had issues. I felt like my role of ENL teacher shifted from teacher to parent communication/engagement/ IT support. Some of my newcomer families needed help to set up an email address and help understanding how to use email. I provided multiple Google Classroom tutorial videos in the native language. For parents with limited literacy, I sent lots of texts with screenshots of the computer screen and buttons on the keyboard with simply worded instructions like, "1) Click on the dots. 2) Press the green button." It's been EXHAUSTING!!!

- *Katie Soto*



All summer I begged for training for parents and students - it did not happen. So we spent the first weeks of school teaching how to use the tech and we are letting students get comfortable with tools before introducing new tools. My school held a parent workshop to teach them how to use the tech and we will do this monthly. We have a spot in Google Classroom for the parents to practice using the same tools the kids are using.

- *(no name)*



I think for our littlest learners it has been the hardest. If a Kindergarten student is remote, they need to have an adult with them. If the adult can't read English it makes it that much harder.

- *Carissa Zuniga*



I am trying to advocate for a pay-per-minute phone interpretation service. Parents are confused about the requirements of distance learning, there is a lot of fear concerning how many cases are in our country, and a general sense of frustration and lack of information. When these parents call in desperate for answers and do not speak English, our district currently has no resources available and essentially just repeat "I'm sorry, I can't understand you," until the parent eventually hangs up. I have met with several phone interpreter companies to get quotes specific to our district and am preparing a presentation for my admin. Hopefully they will understand how effective parent communication will allow better learning for students.

- *Linnea Schroeder*



I work for a school district that has been really supportive. Our ELs have been getting iPads (pk-2) and Chromebooks (3-5). The only challenge our students are facing right now is to have access to internet connection. The school district is providing hotspots for them, but it's taking a long time for them to deliver these devices. Our kids have to visit retail shopping places and to sit outside to get free Wi-Fi in order for them to have access to internet.

- *Rodrigo Rodriguez-Tovar*



We have spoken with EL students about their understanding via Zoom and other platform written response areas. The students are responsive and let us know if they do not understand and do take initiative to ask clarifying questions. If they do have connectivity problems, most are good that they will eventually get on and attempt to do work that they can access even without the teaching in person to respond. Assignments and videos are posted on platforms for anytime access of all students. Students also have ability to find a hot spot a short distance from their homes to get consistent internet connection and or can go to school site for assistance. Our school site is open with staff to assist students with connectivity from 8am-4pm Monday-Friday.

- *Rebecca Palmer*

One person's response to "how have you advocated for ELs in response to technology?"

1. Making lots of how to videos in home language.
2. Replying to all emails no matter if workday is over.
3. Making phone calls home to assure parents' involvement in home language.
4. Sending grade reports.
5. Sending lots of positive feedback and encouragement.
6. Allowing students to turn in homework on in a variety of different platforms
7. Meeting during office hours to troubleshoot technology -Esfeidy

Focusing on One Advocacy Issue

While there are multiple areas in which you could advocate for ELs and technology right now, we recommend narrowing your focus to one area if at all possible. Some of the technology issues you may be facing include the following:

- [Access to devices](#)
- [Internet access](#)
- [Tech support and training](#) for both students and families (ideally in families' languages)

- [Protecting student privacy](#)
- [A need for better communication and partnership around technology](#) through the platforms families are using as opposed to the tools that schools are using

While we know that great strides were made this fall related to providing access to technology to students engaged in hybrid and virtual learning, we also know that delays in deliveries of devices, the sharing of devices among family members, and unstable internet connections continue to be barriers to EL learning and engagement. It is also important to note that [many educators have reported](#) that having access to devices and internet is not enough to ensure that students and families are able to use the technology effectively. Training and tech support, which often are not available in families' languages, remain significant obstacles for online learning.

In order to identify a priority area to focus on for your students, start by brainstorming a few advocacy issues using this [needs assessment tool](#), which includes a section on technology. Then try to select an area in which you are likely to be able to make a change. To learn more about steps you can take once you have identified your advocacy focus, take a look at the following case study: Technology Access for ELs at Washington Elementary School.

Case Study: Technology Access for ELs at Washington Elementary School

Washington Elementary School, which educates children from kindergarten through sixth grade, is located in a small midwestern city of approximately 100,000 people. The district is approximately 15% English learner, with Spanish being the top language spoken. Other languages commonly spoken include Arabic and Mandarin. Urdu and Thai are considered low incidence languages with only a handful of speakers. There are currently three full-time ESOL teachers at the school, with Yesenia Morales being the teacher with the most experience.

In reflecting on some of the issues around advocating for ELs' access to technology, Yesenia decided to look more in depth at the idea of providing EL families in-person support with technology access. She felt fortunate that every child in her school had been given a Chromebook or laptop this fall. In addition, her district had provided how-to videos in the district's top home languages that provided tips on using technology. However, there were still internet connectivity issues as well as questions her EL parents had about how their children could access and take part in synchronous instruction and asynchronous platforms

such as Google Classroom and Flipgrid. She determined that, because of her district's policy that allowed parents to come to school as needed, she could possibly make some inroads in this area. She decided to advocate to provide her EL families in-person support with technology so that their children could fully engage in distance learning.

Keeping her goal in mind, Yesenia used the 5-step process for EL advocacy as a framework for her advocacy efforts. First, she familiarized herself with the 5-step EL advocacy process.

5-Step Advocacy Process for ELs

The original 5-step process can be [found here](#).

Step 1: Isolate the issue

Step 2: Know students' and families' rights and relevant research

Step 3: Develop your allies

Step 4: Identify your outlets for change

Step 5: Organize and educate others

Yesenia applied the process to advocating so that ELs and their families could have in-person support with technology access when students were receiving instruction in an entirely remote environment.

Step	Ideas/Notes
1. Isolate the issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The main issue at Washington Elementary School was that some EL families still didn't feel comfortable using technology despite home language videos and having one device per child. Yesenia wanted to advocate to provide all EL families who needed it weekly opportunities for hands-on, in person support with technology access at the school. She also wanted interpreters to be on-site to facilitate effective communication. She first brainstormed several issues in writing, including securing funding for a phone interpreter. Since funding was so tight, she determined that she might be able to have success advocating around providing in-person support with technology for ELs since her school district would allow for families to meet in person with social distancing policies and masks use in place. Also, Washington ES already had access to interpreters in school, so this arrangement would not cost her district any extra money when times were tight.

Step	Ideas/Notes
<p>2. Know students' and families' rights and relevant research</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before she began advocating, she needed to first have a clear understanding of her students' and families' rights. In addition, she needed to do a search of relevant research. In this way, Yesenia was armed with information to support her advocacy issue. • In this case, she knew that ELs and their families had a right to all materials in their home language. They also had an equal right to access curricular materials. • In terms of research, Yesenia found that ELs are "experiencing reduced access to opportunities to support their English language development, academic success, and socioemotional well-being" (Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020). • She also learned that, while the effect size of distance learning is small, the effect of a student being raised in a well-resourced family has a significant impact on students' education (Hattie, 2020). However, in her district, the majority of EL families were of lower socioeconomic means. The effects of reduced access as well as socioeconomic status on student education <u>underscored the urgency to advocate</u> for EL families.
<p>3. Develop your allies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once Yesenia determined her priority issue and learned more about students' and families' rights as well as some research supporting that issue, it was time for her to give some thought to who she might be able to partner with to advance her advocacy. • She thought about all of her colleagues within and outside her school who might be able to lend their expertise. While she could have included a great number of people, she decided to first reach out to her two ESOL colleagues, community partners, her school's interpreters, her school and district technology personnel, her school's parent liaison, and her school-based personnel (e.g., social workers). By including various stakeholders in a team-based approach, she realized she was more likely to identify a solution where each party has buy-in. • One of her first tasks was to record a message in multiple languages so that if the parent called the school about a technology or learning issue, they would receive a succinct message about who to contact in a language they could understand. • She also needed signs in multiple languages to post at the school. She enlisted her allies to help out with these initial tasks.
<p>4. Identify your outlets for change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yesenia and her ESOL colleagues wrote up two paragraphs – one describing the issue and one outlining a solution of offering in person technology support office hours with interpreters for EL families. • She and her ESOL team shared this writeup with her potential allies and suggested a time to meet virtually to seek their input on advocating for ELs to ensure they and their families have access to the technology needed to engage in distance learning.

Step	Ideas/Notes
<p>4. Identify your outlets for change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yesenia and her team’s advocacy was at the school level, but she also recognized other EL families in different schools in her district might have the same access to technology issue. • She decided her outlets for change would begin at the school level in the short term, but after piloting her in-person support program at her school, she expanded the program to the district level to make it more robust. In providing this service to EL families, she and her team positively impacted their EL community. • As part of developing outlets for change, Yesenia also anticipated that she and her team might face pushback around providing EL families hands-on in person support with technology. They imagined that there were non-EL parents who might feel they were taking resources away from those non-EL parents. Yesenia and her team developed talking points (Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021) to brainstorm succinct statements that could be used to respond to pushback they received about this program.
<p>5. Organize and educate others</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The last step for Yesenia and her team was to determine how they would organize and educate others outside their initial group of allies. • After they set up the program at Washington ES, they gave it the chance to run for a couple of weeks to troubleshoot any issues that came up and adjusted accordingly. • They first ensured that the school’s EL families were aware of this service, emailing, mailing, and texting information in their home languages. • Knowing that some of their ELs’ families didn’t read their home language, they also ensured their parent liaison made phone calls to families (using interpreters for languages other than Spanish) who preferred to communicate that way. • They also created a brief video in various home languages that they shared on WhatsApp, since many of their families tended to use that app to communicate. • After they were feeling confident that they were able to more fully support EL families’ access to their children’s technology at our school, they sought to spread the word about the program to a larger audience. • They partnered with the local radio station which broadcasted in Spanish, contacted a reporter at the Arabic language newspaper, and shared information about the program at the local mosque.

Conclusion

We understand that as districts have different regulations and are using different models of instruction (e.g., all virtual, hybrid, concurrent), the advocacy efforts of Yesenia and her allies will not be applicable to every district. In this blog post, we have chosen to focus on technology as one area for advocacy, but other areas of advocacy might include ELs' access to effective instruction and/or continued opportunities for language development. Instruction in both content and language may consist of the use of [offline learning](#) strategies. We hope that whatever advocacy issue you have identified, you find the case study a helpful framework for thinking about your next steps and how you might collaborate with others through your advocacy work.

References

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Partnership

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