



**English Language Learners (ELL) Task Force Remote Meeting  
English Learner Students with Disabilities Subcommittee  
Remote Meeting**

**March 4, 2022  
3:00 pm – 4:00 pm**

**Zoom**

**Join Zoom Meeting:** <https://k12-bostonpublicschools.zoom.us/j/87003107067>

**Meeting ID:** 870 0310 7067

**OR Join by phone:** +1 301 715 8592 US (Washington DC) or +1 646 558 8656 US (New York)

**MINUTES**

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**Participants**

**ELLTF Members:** Roxanne Harvey, John Mudd, Rafaela Polanco, Maria Serpa

**Community Participants in the ELLTF's ELSWD Subcommittee (non-members):**

Susan Ou (Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN))

**Interpreters:** Randolph Dominguez (Spanish-English Interpreter), Armando Monteiro (Caboverdean Interpreter)

**BPS Staff:** Farah Assiraj (Deputy Chief Academic Officer), Ivonne Borrero (Program Director, Behavioral Health Services), Ethan D'Ablemont Burnes (Assistant Superintendent, Office of Special Education), Jen Douglas (Coordinator, ELL Task Force), Nadine Ekstrom (Senior Advisor), Faye Karp (Executive Director, Office of English Learners)

**Public:** Edith Bazile, Kathleen Boundy (Center for Law and Education (CLE)), Marielena Cruz, Charlie Kim, Sonia Medina, Maria Mejia, Maria Moura, Roger Rice (Multicultural Education, Training & Advocacy, Inc. (META)), Alan Jay Rom (META, Inc.), Claritza Rodriguez, Sughey Scannell (parent), iPhone

## Consolidated Follow-up List

- Members of the ELSWD Subcommittee to review parts of a draft plan.
- OSE and OEL to submit a joint memo to the superintendent and school leaders to re-emphasize the importance of language and linguistic diversity in hiring.
- Members of the ELSWD Subcommittee to receive answers to some of the questions posed in the detailed agenda document shared with BPS staff ahead of this meeting.

## Materials

- Agenda
- Detailed agenda

## Discussion

### 1. Welcome

The meeting began in a Zoom that did not have interpretation enabled. Everyone was asked to sign off, check their calendar invitation for an updated Zoom link, and log back on.

The meeting began again, now with intros and instructions from the interpreters.

Serpa: As we start the meeting, I would like to share with everyone a little bit of inspiration and thank you all for being here for all the work that you do. I would like to have a special word of welcome to the parents who are participating at this meeting. Then she read a poem.

Polanco: Spoke about her experience coming into the district 5 years ago as an immigrant with a son who is an English learner. She is hopeful that there will be a plan for ELSWD students. It is very hard for those who are coming into the system and crashing into a new language. "I am curious and I am anxious to help and to keep on pushing for this plan to be a functional plan for our students and our families."

Mudd: I also want to greet everyone — from BPS, the subcommittee members, and particularly the parents who are joining us for the first time. I thank BPS for being willing to help us get interpreters. We're working out the technical problems, but it's worth it so that everybody can participate. I also want to welcome Nadine Ekstrom because this is her first meeting.

Ekstrom: Thank you for the opportunity of speaking with all of you. I will say I'm very new, 3 weeks in. So, I'm getting my feet wet still. But I want to say that I have been working very closely with Farah and Ethan, at least weekly if not more often. And we've been doing a lot of having a lot of discussions and looking at a lot of work we can do together in partnership. This is a very personal and professional interest of mine in ensuring that we're looking at equitable practices for students with disabilities, specifically those who are English learners, multicultural and to see how we can support them in our schools and make sure that we're giving the message of a sense

of belonging to our children, and making them feel that they are part of the learning, environment, and that they are included in all aspects of education.

**2. Hear updates on and discuss efforts to provide native language access for English learner students with disabilities (ELSWD):**

**a. Short- and long-term plans for ELSWD students at the Office of English Learners and the Office of Special Education**

Mudd: One of our concerns, since we've been in this for many years, is where English learners, with disabilities are provided access to native language — it is a new priority policy for the School Committee, which we strongly support — but the key issue is moving from policy to practice. So, if you or whomever could give us some sense of the status of short- and long-term plans to provide native language access for ELSWD students that would be a helpful start.

Eckstrom: I am going to defer to my team, because I'm still learning about the organization. I can tell you that we are in a unified agreement of the work that we have ahead of us.

Assiraj: We share the tremendous importance of making sure that students in special education programs have native language access. **You ask some really good questions in the agenda about the data [on staff language capacity] and that's data that we don't have as good access to as we need to, yet.**

She spoke about the importance of recruitment and cultivation efforts, especially those targeting special education programs.

Mudd: Can we have language classes for our paraprofessionals?

Assiraj: I know that we have done that in the past. I don't know what the data is on how successful that is, but it's certainly something that we can look at.

**We've added some positions for the OEL side too, the English learners with disability supervisors, so we that we would have some bilingual paraprofessionals who could also support newcomers who are also students with disabilities,** as well as new positions that will focus on special populations.

We definitely need to do more of a data dive in terms of our students, and we started to also do that at least at a baseline. But I think programmatically from our strategic planning work that we've started this really falls into our recruitment efforts.

But there is also another area that we've identified that we are working towards, which is access and equity for all programs for students who are dual identified. So that would mean for students who are currently in dual language, or students who are in subseparate programs. So, we will be doing more of that data dive as part of our strategic planning and sharing that information with you.

Speaker: **The initial question was around a short- and long-term plan. How do we get to the plan?** And I've got a lot of questions on the staffing.

D'Ablemont Burnes: **We have a draft strategic plan that has been ready for [the Office of] Special Education, and that includes a portion that has an overlap with the Office of English Learners.** We want to be aligned together in that. Between Nadine, Farah, and myself, we will be able to implement that plan. We have to work with Drew [Echelson] on when that's going to be ready for public consumption.

Speaker: **There's no information that can be shared about short- and long-term growth at this point.** I have shared previous drafts with this body, SpedPAC, and others, that had goals regarding ELs with disabilities. I think that needs to be fine-tuned and edited with the Office of English Learners, then reviewed with Drew and the superintendent, so we can get it out.

Serpa: So, at this point it can't be shared. What help, what support can we give from the Task Force, from this subcommittee? We have been at this for about 5 to 6 years, we are very familiar with the system and with the field. If you'd like our support and our help in the development of the plan, we are ready to support. We understand multilingual special education. I think we can be particularly helpful in dealing with Special Ed for kids who are in the process of learning English.

Speaker: Thank you so much. I think **it would be important to get your feedback before we go public with the alignment of the strategic plans, and so maybe that's just a follow up with a subset [of the subcommittee] to be able to walk through what the planning entails.** A part of that is professional development, sort of like a symposium, a series of educative materials.

In addition to that, working with external consultants on that long-term strategy, because clearly, we have to do more. And in terms of the right now, as we build out what native access programming and supports look like for students who have disabilities and are also English Learners, we will be asking those experts to support and I think it would be really beneficial to work with some of you on the revision of that to ensure there is clear alignment and shared responsibility.

Mudd: Great! I think that that sounds like progress. We have only, in terms of plans for this [ELSWD] population, seen just a few bullets in an overall plan for special education. We are very aware that ELSWDs are like one-third of the population of special education students. It really warrants you major priority attention, and I would just throw that in your lap. We've been at this for years. And you know we're impatient, as advocates should be.

If you could give us a time frame, you know, rather than waiting for 2 months for a reconvening of this subcommittee, we'd be happy to schedule an additional meeting.

**FOLLOW-UP: Members of the ELSWD Subcommittee review parts of a draft plan.**

[Pause to resolve technical issue with interpretation.]

[Missing comment from Polanco Garcia due to problem with automated transcription.]

**b. Teacher vacancies in English Learners and Special Education programs and the efforts to hire bilingual educators for ELSWD students for school year 2022-2023**

Mudd: We should turn for a few moments into the other 2 topics: staff hiring and the budget. I want to leave enough time for the public comment at the end.

On hiring, **one of the major questions we've asked is what sort of guidance the central office is giving to the academic superintendents and the school leaders about hiring staff that have language capabilities that can match the language of the students in the school.** We have not yet seen that guidance. I just read the budget the other day and there are 1,300 special education paras and I can't imagine there isn't significant turnover. So again, it's a question of what sort of guidance is being given in terms of hiring teachers or paras with a match for the language of the student.

Speaker: Good question. I think it also speaks to another question you've asked about the student assignment overlay and language access issues — making sure that we understand where the languages are and that the staff matches up to the kids. Our data is not good enough yet to be able to do that as well as we would like.

I would say the first step is the thing that you're talking about, which is recruiting diverse candidates to begin with, and particularly with regard to language, and diversity. Certainly, the Office of Human Capital puts out their wishes and desires to recruit as many paraprofessionals and teachers with language diversity as possible, and I think we've made headway in that area. But we are not nearly where we need to be, and it is hard to even conceptualize what that overlay looks like until we have enough people who have those languages. But I think you know, through RCD — recruitment, cultivation, and I'm forgetting what the "d" is — they are working all the time really hard to increase the language diversity in our district.

Mudd: Yeah, if I could follow up. I would urge you to work not just with RCD, but with the School's Division, which supervises the school leaders. Corey Harris has said, we have been told in other environment, that they are telling school leaders that if they don't hire staff diversity, they have to justify it in a justification form, and I would suggest that something comparable on language diversity would be very important.

D'Ablemont-Burnes: As a school leader, my experience was when I got that language [about hiring], that the expectation was that diversity included language diversity.

Mudd: Great, I'm happy to hear that. We haven't seen it yet, so, but that's terrific.

D'Ablemont Burnes: I just want to quickly say that in the guidance that was developed for this year that language and linguistic diversity was mentioned. But I think what we could also do as a next step is a joint memo to the superintendent and school leaders to re-emphasize that. As the next phase of hiring, the positions will be posted soon, to ensure that we have some recommendations, and we can share that memo and communication with you.

Mudd: Great, that would be timely right now.

**FOLLOW-UP: OSE and OEL to submit a joint memo to the superintendent and school leaders to re-emphasize the importance of language and linguistic diversity in hiring.**

Speaker: Thank you very much, just one per comment I think it's very important for school leaders to know that whatever professionals they hire, if they are proficient bilinguals, they can also work in English. I think that's a really important thing for people to know in terms of the potential that this brings to the school.

D'Ablemont Burnes: I can't tell you enough how much you're looking for people who speak another language, people who are multi-certified, people who bring different perspectives because of their cultural backgrounds. You are always as a school leader looking for all those things, and the instructional expertise

Harvey: Farah, or anyone else. Are we going to get the answers as a follow up, from the questions that were posed in the agenda circulated in advance?

Assiraj: We have been working towards developing the aligned strategic plan. We actually pulled the questions to align to those categories. We can work on some responses and probably share those within the next couple of weeks some areas that we've identified we don't have data or information on, and we hope the Task Force members can support us in advocating to get some of the information that we need. We will follow up with you hopefully in the next 2 to 3 weeks.

We do need to come back to that issue around collecting the language proficiency of teachers, and I know that the Task Force, was able to really push the system. We don't have enough of that information now so I think that's something that we could also bring back to the larger EL Task Force, and obviously the Recruitment Cultivation Diversity office.

**FOLLOW-UP: Members of the ELSWD Subcommittee to receive answers to some of the questions posed in the detailed agenda document shared with BPS staff ahead of this meeting.**

Serpa: I'd like to make a comment about something that I'm very concerned about that is happening throughout some of the high schools at BPS. I hear that it is a major crisis going on with the emotional wellness of high school students in particular, in terms of the misbehavior and putting students at risk for a lot of complications in the future. would be happy to meet with you to really avert the crisis. This is not a special education issue per se. This is a schoolwide issue given the trauma that all these kids have endured during the pandemic and many other issues that really need to be addressed for teachers as well as for students.

**c. ESSER and other new funding for ELSWD programming**

Not discussed.

**d. Data gathering on existing bilingual staff, and professional development towards bilingual staffing for ELSWD students**

Not discussed.

**e. Updating the checklist/dropdown menu for developing individualized education plans (IEPs) to include access to native language**

Not discussed.

**f. Transition planning for life skills in home language settings as ELSWD students age out of Boston Public Schools**

Not discussed.

**g. Student assignment for ELSWD students**

Not discussed.

**h. Bilingual sign language**

Not discussed.

**3. Public Comment**

Rom: If I heard your earlier question correctly, you were asking whether, in the recruitment of paraprofessionals, language could be required as opposed to preferred. I know that in the past when we argued that, "You need to get paraprofessionals who speak the language of the kids in the classroom who need it." The answer always was that there's opposition.

Speaker: Well, it's always said that it's a union issue. I have asked that if it is a union issue, it should be taken up in the contract negotiations. I and we as a Task Force as I have offered support, and nobody has asked for our help. This goes back many, many, many years, many, many.

D'Ablemont Burnes: I heard it slightly differently, like in schools where there are languages that predominate. Are we being strategic about our hiring and placement of students? That's why I talked about the overlay. But it's a reasonable question about the requiring, and we can certainly look into that and get you an answer. I don't want to put a timeline on it.

Speaker: It seems like an answerable question. I wasn't even thinking about the Union issues. I was actually thinking about the legal issues around what we're able to require for different positions.

Mudd: I've been told repeatedly that it is not a requirement and a job description. That's why I was using the word "guidance." I think we do need to negotiate that with the union, but that's long term.

Bazille: I think — as one who has worked in the district for 32 years as a speech language pathologist, a special education teacher, and administrator — I see one glaring omission in this agenda that is not being addressed. Number one. Boston has nearly 22% of its students in Special Ed. That speaks to disproportionality. And there's an intersection between race. Often, when we talk about English learners, we don't talk about the intersection of race and racism. There are no supports for these students. We often talk about students who come from trauma. Trauma does not impact intellect. Students still are hardwired to learn. So, when we talk about disproportionality, we talk about underrepresentation as well as over-representation. We have both.

When it comes to students with disabilities — particularly English learners, and I'm talking about my lived experience in Boston for many decades — the other thing we don't talk about is, is special education the right service? I see that as a glaring absence here. We talk about the students who are in Special Ed who are not getting the appropriate services. But we're not talking about, what is the entry into special ed? And is it the right service? How are you ensuring that it's not a language issue versus a disability issue? It's much the same way that black students are misclassified and placed in emotional and impairment classes because of cultural differences because of behavior that's perceived to be abnormal or disability related. So, we have to look at that piece and I don't see that anywhere on this agenda. It has been an intractable problem in BPS since I can recall. Of course, special ed is not going to serve them well if they are misclassified.

Race culture cannot be separated from language. Our students, who are English learners are also black. We have a Haitian students. Don't forget, not everyone speaks Spanish. You have Cape Verde and Creole students. We have students from African countries We have students from everywhere. So, let's be inclusive about our discussion. And let's also include a discussion about race and racism in the inability to serve students well based on the LOOK Act. They're pushed into special ed and get nothing as a result, so the under-performance is not a surprise. It's never been a surprise. It's an intractable problem across decades that needs to be addressed in terms of developing the right infrastructure and the right entry point into special ed.

Kim: I'll draft it in writing and submit. I just want to be respectful of the time. I want to make sure that there would be coaches.

Speaker: That is a really important point that Edith has mentioned. We have added those areas — overrepresentation as well as dissecting into race, and really identifying the issues based on race, culture, and language. That is part of the strategic planning.

Rice: If a kid has an IEP, and if that IEP says that he or she ought to be having native language professional assistance, then what can a school advertise for, kind of generically?

We've been told by principles over the years exactly what we heard earlier: "It's a union problem." Legal problem, union problem on occasion. We have actually gone to the union and asked about that, and said, "You know we saw this kid in such and such school. The kid really would benefit from a para who speaks his or her language." We would be told, "BPS never comes to us about that." I'm not speaking you know as to the accuracy of the statement. I'm just saying, let's get the whole context of that discussion about what can be done to get more native speaking services for kids.



Mudd: I have been told more accurately by current union leadership that it's a BPS problem, not a BTU problem. We need to sort it out.

**4. Identify next steps**

Not discussed.

**5. Adjourn**