

Eric Neal:

Welcome to the State Support Team 11 podcast. I'm your host Eric Neal. Today, we are joined by Jill Kramer. Jill is the English learner coordinator at the ESC of Central Ohio. Welcome Jill, how are you?

Jill Kramer:

Hello, Eric. I'm fine. Thanks for inviting me to speak on your podcast today.

Eric Neal:

No, it's great to have you with us. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to support educators in their work with English learners, students and families?

Jill Kramer:

I grew up in New Zealand and as a young woman, I did the New Zealand version of Peace Corps. I was teaching English in a Pacific island nation called Toga and that's where I sort of caught the bug. I found my passion was teaching English. When I returned to New Zealand, I went back to teaching at a middle school. However, I took classes to get my TSOL certificate at that time. Then as many young Kiwis, New Zealanders do, I set off to see the world and spent a couple of years traveling through Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas, and ended up in of all places, Columbus, Ohio.

Jill Kramer:

Once I was here, I worked first with adult ESL learners and then K to 12. I had my teaching license from New Zealand, I added a license here, a master's in TSOL and a master's in educational leadership. I taught in a district for many years and then four years ago I decided to move to the ESC because I felt like I would have a bigger impact on ELs. In my current position, I get to work with ELs all around Central Ohio, the Cleveland area and in fact, many parts of Ohio.

Eric Neal:

I myself am a transplant to Columbus, Ohio. Lived most of my life in Orange County, California. And a lot of times people ask me that, "How did you end up in Columbus?" But speaking of Columbus, it's actually an incredibly diverse city compared to many others in the Midwest. With Ohio State University being here, many national and even international companies located here, it is to be expected but what's been surprising to me lately is that I'm hearing many immigrant communities are settling in the suburban and rural districts that I support here in the region in Central Ohio. Have you been hearing the same things?

Jill Kramer:

Yes. Yes I have. In fact, I arrived here in the 1980s and at that time, Columbus was not diverse at all. I remember being in a store that people might remember, Gold Circle, and I heard somebody speak Spanish and my head just whipped around because having traveled, I was used to hearing other languages. In fact, it was very difficult to even get an ESL job back in the 80s. But then in the 1990s, we had the Somali immigrants who arrive, refugees, and then followed by a lot of Hispanics, more Asians. And now in Central Ohio, we have an incredibly diverse population. There would be dozens of languages spoken. And in fact, a big district like Columbus City Schools, Southwest and Dublin can have 40 or 50, up to 80 different languages spoken. Yes, we are incredibly diverse right now. It's amazing to see how the community has changed, the ethnic restaurants we have. It's really made Columbus, I think, a wonderful place to live. But yes, you're right.

Jill Kramer:

As families first come, they typically live in the city of Columbus and then we've just more recently seen families moving out into the outer suburbs, rural areas, I think, possibly for housing. There are some districts that had a very small population that suddenly we're having a hundred or 200% increase from year to year. In fact, some districts that 10, 20, 30% of their students are now ELs.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, it's really interesting. A lot of the work I do at the state support team is centered around continuous improvement. We work with these districts that are in differentiated accountability. A lot of times they're focus schools, which means have large achievement gaps in one of the 10 federally recognized student groups. English language learners fall into one of those groups. And to get that calculation included on your state report card used to be a big number and then what they did is they started lowering that number to make sure that if you had even a small population of English learners, that you were going to need to put things in place to make sure that they were being served properly, which I think is the right thing to do.

Eric Neal:

But it also, like you said, in some of these areas where they may have had one or two students that were designated English learners, now if you have 20, all of a sudden this becomes not only something that's the right thing to do but something legally that you're required to address. What are some of the legal obligations that English learners districts have that they need to be worried about?

Jill Kramer:

Yeah. Being an English learner is a little bit different than some people confuse it with special ed. Being an English learner is actually a temporary condition. Almost all of our English learners are going to learn English in about five years. It's very temporary. And in fact, former ELs go on to do amazing things. I've had former ELs that are at university, have gone on to professional careers. It has been wonderful to see. But ELs as a group are a protected class of students under the Civil Rights Act and under different case law, for example, Lao versus Nichols. There are now 10 legal obligations that districts have to English learners and it's really important to follow these, of course.

Jill Kramer:

One is that we actually have to provide English language services, ESL services, EL services, there are different names. People say, "Well, at what point do you have to have an EL program?" There is no magic number. If you have one student, one EL, you have to have something for them. You have to have a program. It may not be a formal program perhaps. When you get to that 20, 25 students, you really need to be looking at having a teacher. You have to have English language assistance in some form. Then eventually you'll have to have a licensed ESOL teacher with resources. That's one thing, providing the EL services.

Jill Kramer:

Secondly, we have to make sure that our ELs have access to the curriculum. We can't say, "Well, let them learn English first and then they can come to the of classes." No, ELs have to be receiving curriculum, grade level curriculum from day one. Even a newcomer has to have access to that. In order

to do that, teachers need to scaffold and differentiate so that the students can learn those grade level concept and content.

Jill Kramer:

Then there's another requirement that's important to know, we have to communicate with parents and families in the language that they can understand. That could be a translation if the parents are literate but not all parents or not all people are literate in the language that they speak so it could also be interpretation. The districts are legally required and parents have the right to receive any information that goes to English speaking families should also go to non-English speaking families. And that's not necessarily even just EL families. There could be other families in your district whose children speak English but mom and dad don't. There are other ones, for example, students have to be placed in their age appropriate grade level. You don't want to put an eighth grade student down in second grade because he doesn't speak English. We can't do that. It did happen a long, long time ago but it doesn't happen anymore. For high school though, you do need to look at transcripts and you need to set the student up for success. But those are the most important of the legal obligations.

Eric Neal:

See a lot of overlap with how you would do just things that are considered good teaching that will help English learners. You talked about scaffolding and things like that. I'm on a statewide work group for Universal Design for Learning, many of these things are great for all students but students with disabilities, all different types of groups can benefit from some of these things that I imagine are helpful to English learners.

Jill Kramer:

Absolutely. Yes. We often just say that the strategies we use for ELs are in fact really good teaching. One of those strategies is explicit vocabulary instruction. We know that a bigger vocabulary leads to greater reading comprehension, which leads to greater academic success and our ELs have a huge vocabulary gap. We have to be very explicit in teaching vocabulary, both social language and academic language too. But if you were a teacher in a district where perhaps you don't have an EL program and you don't have a coordinator and ESL teachers, you may be looking for resources thinking, oh my gosh, what strategies should I use? I have one EL in my class. He barely speaks English. What should I use? Well, the good thing is there's a lot of resources out there now, which is really great. There are a lot of really good books out there.

Jill Kramer:

If you would want to just find an excellent professional book and I can certainly help by providing lists of those books. Online research, you can find there are websites devoted just to teaching ELs that have lists of scaffolds. There are some really great recorded webinars that you can listen to during the pandemic. A lot of organizations and companies presented these wonderful webinars. You could keep yourself busy the entire Christmas break, watching those videos. And then some districts use what is called SIOP, S-I-O-P, SIOP training. It's actually a protocol, a sheltered instruction protocol. It's not like a curriculum or anything. It's just a lot of strategies that are really helpful with ELs. But as you said, also helpful with all other students. Building background, that helps all students. The explicit vocabulary, that helps all students. Some districts train their teachers in SIOP for bigger districts.

Jill Kramer:

Then in my position here, as the ESL coordinator, I go to districts all around the area and provide some of these best practices, either the full SIOP training or partial. There are other people that do that too. Then at the ESC, we offer a series of professional development, which are available for anybody to attend for a small fee. You could always go to the ESC of Central Ohio's website to see what we have coming up.

Eric Neal:

Definitely reaching to you and accessing all of the things that the ESC have to offer are the first place I would start with if I was looking for support services for my district. Are there any other tools that districts can use when they look to strengthen their ESL programs or maybe even just diagnose the strength of their ESL programs?

Jill Kramer:

Right. There's a funding source called Title III. It is federal funds that are designated specifically for ELs. Districts that get Title III funds should do an annual evaluation of their program. And programs are always in flux. Maybe a district starts with one family comes and they're oops, now we've suddenly got one or two or three ESL students. And as the program grows, then it'll need to be changed, obviously. It's a sort of a continuum. What's in place now might work but maybe next year won't work. We're always wanting to be continuously improving the program through that annual evaluation. That is something that I can certainly help with districts. Typically I go into districts and we go through all the aspects of their EL program and create some goals. What are some things that we need to work on? Are they meeting compliance? But are they not just me in compliance but going beyond that to ensure that they're getting that rigorous standards based instruction for the student?

Jill Kramer:

Districts really should be looking at what are research and evidence based practices in teaching ELs? Are we doing that? And teaching ELs, as I mentioned, it's not just the EL teacher responsibility. I think for many, many years, it was often considered well, that's one of Jill's kids. He's an EL kid. But now we know that these EL kids are all of our kids and classroom teachers have taken on a lot of the responsibility because we can't in one period a day, teach them English. Getting all teachers on board, getting all teachers trained in SIOP or best practices so that all teachers are helping the students improve their English language.

Eric Neal:

Parent engagement is a huge thing that's going on for all students right now, how to authentically engage families, not just we had back to school night, check it off the list, we're done. But engaging families of English learners can be very challenging even with something just like trying to send the information or a newsletter or things like that home. I think about, we've talked about internally, translation services, who can we access to translate our materials and things so that we're getting our information out into the field? And some of those things are not obvious or easy to locate. Is that something else that you can guide people to if they were going to reach out to you?

Jill Kramer:

Yes. As that family engagement is absolutely crucial. And I have to say if one thing came out of the pandemic, one positive, it was that teachers were really forced to rely on families to help their children access online instruction. It also gave teachers a really good look into the family home, realizing that

there may be three or four siblings all trying to use one Chromebook. It certainly did bring a lot of the things to the forefront, which was good. But yes, with EL families, there are a lot of barriers that we can certainly help. One of course is the language barrier. Also, some EL families, the parents themselves may not have received an education so school is kind of a scary place for parents. In some cultures, teachers are held on a very high pedestal and teachers are of the experts.

Jill Kramer:

And just as you wouldn't go to your doctor and tell your doctor, "I think I have such and such and I want this medication," parents feel they can't go to the school and tell this highly educated teacher that their kid needs something. A part of it is helping the parents understand that we form a partnership here. We are working together, teacher and parent working to support the child and really helping the parents feel comfortable coming into the school. And as the pandemic hopefully is winding down, we're able to physically get more parents in because really that face to face interacting with parents is very important. Especially coming from a culture where that is sort of the way you operate is more face to face. The Zoom and other online things are not quite as good. But yes, definitely getting parents on board.

Jill Kramer:

Translation is great if the parents are literate. And just running something through Google Translate doesn't always work. Google Translate is not perfect. Some families will find it more confusing if you put something through Google Translate in Nepali, it may actually be what you're trying to communicate. But as I said, we have that legal responsibility to make sure parents understand. Whether it is through translation or whether we could use a service where you call on a phone and you say, "I need a Nepali translator," they come on the phone, they bring the family in on another line and then you can all talk together. And that also helps understand cultural differences. Educational speak, we tend to speak in a lot of words that poor parents have no idea what we're talking about. But when we do partner with the families and when we really make sure that it is a really strong relationship, it really helps.

Jill Kramer:

Luckily as an ESL teacher, I would work often with the same families for years. I'd be in a building so I would know the parents, I would work with their kids, multiple, multiple kids over the years. And that relationship was so important because the families need to know there's one teacher in that building or one staff member that they can feel that they can go to and understand. And also that I could understand their needs.

Jill Kramer:

For example, just an example, is snow days. Often they didn't realize that school was canceled. They didn't know why the bus didn't come so the children walked off to school in 15 degrees, heavy snow. Got to school, it was locked. Things like that. I was, as an ESL teacher, I would always be making sure I had that line of communication open, could text the parents, let them know, no school, no school. Just things like that. Making sure that they were really part of the school community, making sure that they were welcomed and that comes all the way from your administrators, from your principals all the way down. Those parents should feel welcomed when they walk into that school and feel that they're very much part of their child's educational team.

Eric Neal:

You hit on something there that is very important in all parent engagement but probably even more important. It's intentionally reaching out to them to let them know that they're welcome because in our minds we're like, we're welcoming people. We're educators. Of course you're welcome. But in this case, like you said, for cultural reasons, for just being in a new place, I put myself in those shoes a lot of times, if you dropped me off in a village in France somewhere and I had to fend for myself, I would be very confused and wary about just walking into places and asking for help. It really is incumbent on us to reach out and make it completely clear that we want you here. We want you involved. We want you to speak up if you do have an issue because we're here to support and help your student.

Jill Kramer:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. One thing I've noticed is many EL students are being referred for special education and identification and services and have you found that EL related issues can sometimes be confused with learning disabilities?

Jill Kramer:

Yes. Yes. This has been a really long time problem with either over identification or under identification. If we look at the Ohio numbers as a whole, the number of Ohio ELs identified as having a special ed mirrors the non-EL population. On the surface, it looks actually quite good. But if we look at individual districts, we definitely see that over identification or under identification. One issue is that there are still a lot of myths that surround this whole process. If the students have those low incidence medical issues, deafness, blindness, that's not a problem. It's the specific learning disabilities and speech and language impairment where you find that over and under identification. Because as you said, a lot of language learning difficulties or language learning in general, just mirrors a disability. If a student is having trouble with reading comprehension, hmm, is it language or is it a learning disability?

Jill Kramer:

And it's often really hard to tease that out but it's very important to tease that out because the one thing is my many years of teaching, I hated seeing my ELs being identified as a student with special needs when I knew that they were not. I knew it for sure. There are these myths that, oh, you can't identify an EL until they've been in the country for two years. That is not correct. Or, oh, speech and language. No, no, no, no. We don't deal with ELs in that because it's probably something to do with their first language. No, that's not correct. But unfortunately these myths are still quite rife and we're trying to let people know. We want to make sure that the identification is always appropriate.

Jill Kramer:

The one thing we really need to look is that really strong tier one instruction, the prevention part of it. Are the ELs getting that strong tier one? Are they getting those scaffolds? Are they getting the assistance they need in the general ed classroom to help them close that gap? Are they getting a really good, rigorous standards based EL instruction from an EL teacher? Often when we look back, we find out that some of those kids kind of just languished in the classroom and really they are smart kids. They just lacked that opportunity to learn. When a disability is suspected, a district really needs to look into all these linguistic factors, backgrounds and cultural factors because there are those things can really affect how a student is learning.

Jill Kramer:

On the Ohio Department of Education website, there are some documents that list all these factors and districts can use this as a guide to look at the student's linguistic background. How long have they been in the country? How much ESL have they had? How are they in their first language? Is the same issue happening in their first language as is happening in their second language? It's really important for somebody with knowledge of second language acquisition to be part of the team for a referral or an IEP. One thing that gets really confusing is the difference between social language and academic language. Social language, that's sort of the language of just chit chat conversation. That can develop in under three years. A student can sound great. They have no accent, they can talk about their weekend and their family and they sound great and yet they're struggling. And that is because they don't yet have academic language.

Jill Kramer:

We know that it can take anything from five to 10 years to develop academic language and that's meaning the vocabulary but also the sentence structure and the text structures of academic text. That is something that the kids may not be exposed to. A student could be misidentified because you're thinking, well, they speak English well, why are they not making progress? And that's where somebody with a language background, language acquisition background can explain that difference between the social and the academic language. Yes, it's very easily confused and it does take time and it's not an easy process. We often try to tend to be cautious because we don't want to over identify because once a student is identified as a disability, sometimes expectations go down. We don't want that to happen.

Eric Neal:

Right. It's really a challenge because it's a difficult thing I think, to put together this really, really robust EL structures and services and things in a district but that also really can only work to its full potential if your like you said, your core instruction is working well, your students with disabilities identification and services structure is working well. A lot of times, depending where you land, your district may be working through challenges with one or all of these different things, which really do add to the importance of getting the right people in place.

Eric Neal:

Which leads me to this question. I feel like, I've noticed a lot that the student preparation programs in our higher education institutions are still doing things the way they did them 20 years ago and when I was in a student preparation program and things have changed so much and there's so much more specialized information and skills that are needed for these people that are going into work in these districts, not just in the classroom, but administratively. How do you think we could partner with our higher ed institutions to make sure that these new teachers are coming in with the skills that they need to serve our EL students?

Jill Kramer:

Currently there is no requirement in Ohio that our pre-service teachers, our student teachers, receive any specific of training in ELs. Some universities do weave some of it in. Overall in Ohio and our numbers are still pretty low, so in the country as a whole 10% of our K12 population are ELs but here in Ohio, it's only 3.5%. I don't think we've kind of reached the number yet where it becomes so critical but as I mentioned, there are certain districts here that can have 10, 20, 30% of their students as ELs. Pre-service teachers really need to know how to work with ELs because if they don't have one now or when they

first start the profession, they will eventually have an EL. I would hope that eventually we could get universities to offer a class or at least weave in ELs as a special need throughout their preparation programs.

Jill Kramer:

But since that isn't happening right now, I just really encourage pre-service teachers and in service teachers to take it upon themselves right now to get that training, to find out how they can help their ELs. Look for those books, take those classes, find some extra PD, look at those webinars online, just seek out the resources because it will really help. And as we've talked about, a lot of these strategies are good teaching strategies anyway. They'll benefit you even if you don't have an EL and sometimes you have an EL and then maybe you go for years and you don't. But those strategies, once you have them in your toolbox, they're there and hopefully you'll pull them out when the next EL comes.

Eric Neal:

No, you're definitely right. If we can find a way to do that, I think it would go a long way towards helping these districts who are working through it and doing their best to try and meet those needs. If people would like to get a hold of you, what's the best way to reach out?

Jill Kramer:

You can find me through the ESC of Central Ohio's website. If you click on educator services, on English learners, I have a web page there with resources and my email but my email is Jill, J-I-L-L, .kramer, K-R-A-M-E-R @escoco.org. You can certainly contact me if you need resources, go find my page. Just contact me and I'm more than happy to point people in the right direction. That's what I do day in and day out and I really enjoy this work. Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions about any aspect of working with ELs.

Eric Neal:

Well, thank you so much. I just really appreciate you joining us today. It's been a real pleasure.

Jill Kramer:

Oh, thank you so much for inviting me. I love talking about English learners and I just appreciate the opportunity to join your podcast.

Eric Neal:

Thanks again. Well, this wraps up this episode of the State Support Team 11 podcast. If you'd like to know more about us and the work we do here at SST11, go to our website, sst11.org. Give us a call at (614) 753-4694 or hit us up on Twitter. We're @sstregion11. If you'd like to get a hold of me, I'm at E-R-I-C dot N-E-A-L @escoco.org. Until next time, I'm Eric Neal. Thanks for listening.