Understanding the ESL Guidelines and Support Programs

ESL is an acronym that is used primarily in educational settings and stands for English as a Second Language. It refers to teaching English to a person whose native language is one other than English. Other acronyms that are often used with this population are ELL (English Language Learner) and LEP (Limited English Proficient/Limited English Proficiency).

Relevance:
The NCLB requires states to establish challenging academic content standards for all students, and Title III of this act indicates that English language learners are not exempt from meeting these high expectations. It asserts that English language learners must develop English proficiency and skills for high academic achievement in English while simultaneously meeting the same challenging state standards that all students are required to meet.

Actions to Take:
- Encourage your child to read and write for pleasure in both English and your native language.
- Create a quiet place for your child and establish a regular time to do homework and study.
- Talk to your child about what is happening in school and encourage him/her to show you all school work.
- Make sure that your child gets plenty of rest because learning a new language takes a lot of energy.
- Organize a home library and/or resource corner.
- Become informed about your child’s academic performance and progress.
- Maintain regular communication with your child’s teacher and/or school personnel.
- Participate in school events such as Parent Teacher Conferences and Open Houses, and make arrangements for a translator, if needed.
- Help your child to find opportunities to use English outside of school.
- Integrate recreational activities and educational experiences.

Good Practices:
- Schools have highly qualified teachers.
- Schools understand the time required for ESL support.
- Schools assure proper testing and share the child’s level of proficiency with parents.
- Schools discuss proper placements and accommodations with parents.
- Schools provide professional development for school personnel involving intercultural communication and understanding, legal rights and the responsibilities of schools, and language-minority families.
- Schools identify and provide families with access to supplemental educational support services, including
  - Community advocates, interpreters and translators who can help bridge home and school communication,
  - Community resources for parents and families seeking adult education, literacy and English instructional programs, and
  - Website resources.
Basic Facts:
According to the 2000 Census, more than one million people (or 8.4% of the statewide population) in Pennsylvania speak a language other than English at home. According to 2006-2007 statistics from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, 45,307 students enrolled in PA public schools have Limited English Proficiency, and among them, speak at least 175 different languages.

An English as a Second Language Program (ESL) is a school district’s written plan for educating English Language Learners (ELLs) to both improve their English language proficiency and to assure that they meet the academic standards in the content areas. The program determines the curriculum for students, as well as their entry and exit criteria.

The guideline for ESL Educational Programs in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania reads as follows:

“Each school district/charter school shall provide a program for each student whose dominant language is not English for the purpose of facilitating English proficiency. Such programs may include bilingual/bicultural or English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum.”

The only requirement for registration of a student in a Pennsylvania public or charter school is an immunization record and proof of residency in the district. The proof of residency can be a copy of a rental lease or any other viable evidence of parent or guardian residency. The district may ask parents for additional information that is helpful in meeting the student’s educational needs such as background information, educational information and language assessment information. A social security number or birth certificate is not required for registration.

English Language Learners (ELLs) should be placed in a grade level which is appropriate according to his or her educational level, experience and age. An ELL student should not be automatically placed back a year because he/she does not speak English. Appropriate qualified school district personnel should assist in the development of evaluation procedures, including the selection of the instruments. Initial screening for participation in an ESL program should be performed in the student’s native language and in English. The recommended hours of daily instruction for ELLs are as follows:

- 2 to 3 hours for non-English speakers.
- 2 hours for beginners.
- 1 to 1 ½ hours for intermediate.
- 1 hour for advanced.

Learning a new language is more complicated and takes longer than many people think. It is much more than learning correct grammar and vocabulary. The length of time will depend on the student’s English proficiency level. It is usually a five-to-seven-year process in a program that meets student’s needs. ELLs should be monitored for at least one year after exiting the ESL program to ensure continued academic success. In addition, ESL services must continue for ELLs that have an IEP or special education placement. ESL instruction can be discontinued when the student meets the exit criteria described in the school’s ESL program.

Resources:
Pennsylvania Department of Education: www.pde.state.pa.us

Center for Adult English Language Acquisition: www.cal.org/caela

Dave’s ESL Café: www.eslcafe.com/quiz/

The Internet Teachers of English as a Second Language Journal: iteslj.org