For example, if the focus is on persuasion and students are given a sentence starter like, “I believe...” or “According to...” they can generally fill it in with something they think or feel.

Vela reiterated that the important point to remember is that ELLs need many opportunities to use language and to interact with native speakers of the new language if they are to build their oral English skills, acquire reading and writing skills in English, and continue to learn in many different content areas.

“Adjusting to a new language and culture is a challenging and difficult process that takes several years,” concluded Vela. “The more you know about your ELL students and their backgrounds, the more you will be able to help them.”

Running Effective Grade-Level Team Meetings: What Makes Them Tick?

Grade-level meetings are a fact of life in Reading First schools, where teamwork is a vital aspect of the school culture. But what are the attributes of an effective grade-level team meeting? And how do you know if your grade-level team meetings work?

According to Reading First consultants Linda Carnine and Jan Silverstein, successful grade-level team meetings occur when attention is paid to three big ideas that impact student achievement: (1) data-driven decisions, (2) action planning, and (3) powerful procedures.

Data-Driven Decisions Bring Students to Benchmark

“Data-driven decisions bring all students to benchmark,” said Carnine. Teachers begin this process early in the school year by taking a close look at all K-3 performance data, including the previous year’s end-of-year benchmark data, end-of-year outcome data, and content coverage and reading curriculum mastery data. Teachers then use this information to create a summary of effectiveness and to determine priorities.

“The first priority should be to reduce the number of intensive kids, or students who are reading significantly below grade level, and a second priority...
[should be] to increase the number of students at benchmark," Carnine said.

"It's important not to overlook the students at benchmark so you can make sure you keep them there," said Carnine. "Many times we are so focused on moving students from intensive to strategic and strategic to benchmark that we miss the students at benchmark."

**Action Planning Helps Teachers Think**

Action planning involves grade-level teachers regularly looking together at two important types of data for placement decisions: (1) progress monitoring data and (2) curriculum data with anecdotal notes that describe individual progress.

Grade-level teachers use these data to answer two key questions: Are the students appropriately grouped? Are better placements possible? "These questions allow teachers to put their thinking caps on and figure it out together. It's an integral part of the action planning process," Carnine said.

The questions also spark the teachers' thinking and rethinking about whether they need to improve the instructional strategies and program materials, increase the amount of instructional time, refine the grouping levels, and reassess the progress monitoring aimline.

Teachers will most likely question the aimline between December and January when student performance tends to drop due to a variety of external factors. Carnine advised teachers, "Do what you can to prevent the fall off. Plan for it to happen because it's going to happen. And squeeze out every minute of your time to plan effectively as a team."

**Powerful Procedures, Powerful Teams**

"Powerful procedures help; they make team meetings work," said Silverstein.

In particular, teachers must work together. "Students will not succeed if faced with a group of teachers whose work together is disjointed, disconnected, or, in some cases, dysfunctional," Silverstein said. "Good teachers, like good leaders, have high respect for the task at hand and the people in the room. They work together to see all students as our students rather than my students and your students."

To help grade-level teams monitor the effectiveness of meetings, Silverstein describes a simple self-assessment organized around eight key procedures: (1) purpose, (2) meeting structure, (3) group process, (4) planning, (5) communication, (6) research base, (7) professional development, and (8) motivation. Using a tool that gives grade-level teams immediate feedback on things they have in place and things they need to improve can help teams stay organized and focused.

Carnine and Silverstein have long seen the value and benefits of data-driven decisions, action planning, and powerful procedures in Reading First schools.

"You can feel it when you walk into a school," said Silverstein. "The building buzzes with the energy of eager teachers and students. The buzz is an indicator that there's a whole lot of learning going on—and a whole lot of good teaming going on, too."

"The sessions were really beneficial to a wide range of participants. They balanced the needs of new grantees and experienced grantees."

Heather Lesko
District Grants Evaluator
Fairbanks, Alaska