



## Equity for Refugee Students:

*How Perry Township Uses Teacher Leaders to Serve All Students*

**Summer 2019**

## Summary

Over the past decade, Perry Township in Indianapolis has seen significant increases in refugee students and English Learners (ELs), and now has the highest percentage of ELs in the state.

Perry Township has met this challenge head on by better supporting its educators through systems of professional learning led by teacher leaders, which has equipped educators to meet diverse student needs. Through these supports, Perry Township has achieved significant academic growth for all their students, but especially for its ELs who pass math and reading state tests at higher rates than comparable schools.

This case study looks at the impact of Perry's districtwide efforts through Mary Bryan Elementary School.

## District Context

Perry Township, an urban school district located in the south Indianapolis area, is home to 16,808 students across 17 schools. Over the past five years, Perry has been the second-fastest growing district in Indiana due in large part to an influx of refugees, many of whom are from Myanmar.

In addition, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch increased from 61% in 2013-14 to 71% in 2017-18.

Perry Township has remarkably rich cultural diversity. Perry Township has the second-highest number of ELs in Indiana, who comprise around 27% of Perry's total student population. Perry's students speak a total of 73 languages, ranging from Swahili to Burmese, and nearly two-thirds of its ELs are refugee students.

Mary Bryan Elementary is emblematic of the rapid changes taking place in schools across Perry Township. In the 2000s, Mary Bryan Elementary was a modest-sized elementary school of about 600 students and had an EL population that hovered around 10%.

Between 2012 and 2014, Mary Bryan began to see an influx of refugee students that caused its EL population to more than double to 22%. By 2017-2018, nearly one-third of Mary Bryan's students were classified as ELs. Over the previous five years, Mary Bryan saw an increase of roughly 300 students, many of whom were ELs. Students speak 16 different languages at Mary Bryan alone.



## The Challenge

During the initial waves of newly resettled ELs, schools across Perry responded the best they could by offering supports to ELs that supplemented general instruction, most commonly through pull-out instruction or additional learning opportunities like after-school tutoring.

They also began offering professional development in Sheltered Instruction for ELs and worked to implement the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) to measure teacher effectiveness with ELs.

Yet, Mary Bryan and other schools in Perry found their well-intentioned support for ELs actually limited learning opportunities for ELs and failed to raise student achievement.



The pull-out approach created unnecessary segregation in the schools and caused general education teachers to hold different academic expectations for ELs compared to English-proficient counterparts.

While professional development on how to teach ELs was offered through occasional workshops and trainings, teachers had no real support in effectively applying these strategies. Without support, many teachers believed they couldn't teach students if they didn't speak their language, which deprived ELs of learning opportunities in general classroom time, and they viewed teaching ELs as the responsibility of pull-out instructors.

To make matters worse, ELs felt culturally separated from the rest of their classmates, which slowed their acclimation to school culture and limited their confidence to engage with their teachers and classmates.

## The Approach

In 2012, Perry adopted the NIET Teaching Standards Rubric and implemented a cohesive system of professional learning led by principals and teacher leaders across most schools in the district. As Perry's experience bore out, the sum of professional learning communities, strong instructional leadership teams, and effective coaching—when built into the structure of the school day—provided the scaffolding and support to help general education teachers become effective EL instructors.



## *Investing in a System of Professional Learning*

The effort to provide equitable instruction for all students, including ELs, started with expanding the instructional leadership team. Perry elevated highly effective teachers in the building to teacher leader positions that had clear responsibilities and authority to lead instructional improvement strategies alongside the principal.

Teacher leaders were included on the school instructional leadership team, who met weekly to monitor student progress and teacher growth. At Mary Bryan, the leadership team instituted a monthly staffwide “achievement meeting” run by the principal for teachers to examine data and set individual teacher- and grade-level goals.

Leadership was also responsible for setting up trainings to help teachers develop strong foundational knowledge about effective instruction for ELs. Early in the year, teachers participated in crosswalks to understand how the Sheltered English Instruction Protocol aligned to the NIET Instructional Rubric and the school’s curricula.

With the leadership team setting the broad strategies, weekly PLCs led by teacher leaders became the key mechanism for supporting teachers. Each week, every teacher met in PLCs for an hour and a half, and they also spent additional significant time in team and individual planning sessions.

To determine students’ needs, teacher leaders would conduct frequent classroom walk-throughs to observe students at work and collect anecdotal notes and video on student engagement. These notes, in addition to the student work that teachers brought to meetings, ensured that PLCs helped teachers understand their students’ diverse strengths and needs and helped them to see what high-quality student work looked like when it was tied to standards.

## *Setting High Expectations and Providing Effective Supports for Student Communication*

In their initial classroom walk-throughs, teacher leaders at Mary Bryan noticed that EL students struggled to use academic language and full sentences when communicating in class. To address this need, teacher leaders devoted a multiweek PLC cycle to teacher expectations for student communication in class around three focus areas:

- ❖ Student body language;
- ❖ Use of academic language; and
- ❖ Confidence in asking for clarification.

Teacher leaders worked with teachers on how to set student expectations around body language and how students should ask for clarification. Teachers watched model videos of effective student body language and discussed the effect these expectations would have on how well students could communicate in class.

To facilitate student use of academic language, teacher leaders helped their peers identify what vocabulary students were generally struggling with and created sentence stems that would help facilitate using academic language at points in the lessons where teachers thought their students might struggle.

The teachers also built more speaking activities into lessons to increase the amount of opportunities students had to practice using academic language. Finally, teachers explored strategies to create a classroom environment where students felt comfortable asking for clarification when they didn't understand something.

Once given the right supports, students starting responding and demonstrating knowledge in ways that often surprised teachers. As each PLC cycle progressed, teachers would observe videos of what their students were doing at the beginning of the cycle and then watch videos of their improvement as each cycle concluded.

**Seeing the difference in student engagement, when combined with the improved quality of student work, provided teachers with small but significant wins that reinforced a schoolwide belief that all students can learn.**

As students began improving their communication skills and felt more engaged in class, the PLCs began to focus on building thinking and problem-solving skills.

Teacher leaders noticed that because students had struggled with communication, teachers assumed too much of the responsibility for modeling good thinking and problem-solving during class.

Mary Bryan devoted multiple PLC cycles to helping students become self-initiated problem-solvers. As part of these cycles, teacher leaders recommended strategies that gave students time to problem-solve before teachers offered a think-aloud model.

At first, teachers were uncomfortable with simply giving problems to students without support first, so the teacher leaders field-tested this strategy to offer a model to teachers on how this approach could be applied effectively. Having seen the strategy work with their students during the teacher leader field-testing, teachers were much more willing to try out this new approach in their class.



### *Creating an Inclusive Culture for English Learners and All Students*

To help build positive momentum and foster a sense of trust between the school leadership and classroom teachers, teacher leaders frequently recognized excellent instruction and student work. During walk-throughs, teacher leaders would note exceptional student work to bring back to PLC meetings.

Rather than telling teachers why a piece of student work was notable, the teacher leaders would ask the teacher whose student produced that work what they were doing and how it led to that piece of student learning. This provided a way to recognize teachers for their hard work while giving them more authority to lead their own instructional development.

Focusing on student work became the locus of trust-building not only between school leadership and teachers, but also between the students and teachers. As a result of the increased academic expectations and attention paid to their work, students began to sense that their teachers understood their needs and expected the best of them.

This served as the foundation for helping students of all backgrounds feel cared for and included in the school community. Teachers also began recognizing and celebrating student work, which further built student confidence.

While creating a sense of community is beneficial to all learners, it is especially so for ELs who face language challenges and cultural barriers that may keep them from feeling part of their school community.

**Commenting on this inclusivity, Mary Bryan Master Teacher Jennifer Dishman says there is so much support for everyone that “English Learners don’t recognize that they are different.”**



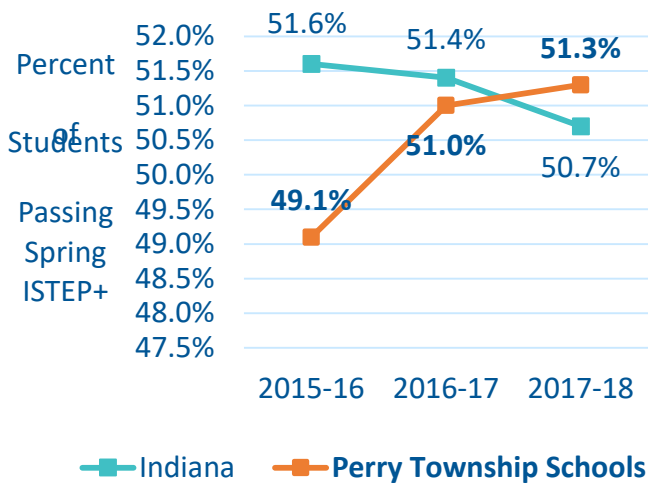
### **The Results**

By implementing strong systems of professional learning, Mary Bryan and schools across Perry Township have created inclusive communities where ELs are growing academically. Exemplifying Perry’s approach to providing equitable education for ELs, Assistant Superintendent Vickie Carpenter says, **“We do not see them as English Learners—they are just our kids.”**

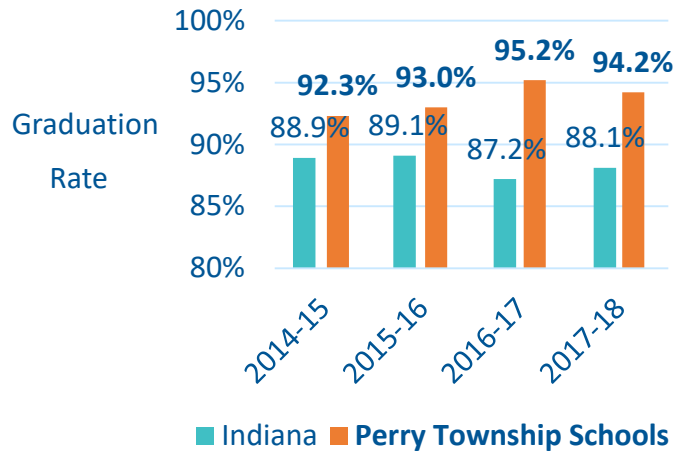
# Equity for Refugee Students

And this pursuit of equity has already paid off. According to spring 2018's World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA)—which measures multilingual readers—47% of Perry's English Learners read at a Level 5, the most proficient level. This represents a 21% increase over the previous year.

More importantly, Perry's investment in professional learning has led to academic gains for all students. Between 2015-16 and 2017-18, Perry Township students increased their passing rate on the ISTEP+ state assessment from 49.1% to 51.3%, effectively closing the gap with the state. In 2017-18, Perry's passing rate surpassed that of the state.



District graduation rates increased from 92.3% in 2014-15 to 94.2% in 2017-18, easily surpassing the 2017-18 state average of 88.1%.



These remarkable accomplishments have been achieved through school-based structures that support teacher and student growth. “NIET’s framework is a game-changer for our district,” notes Perry Township Schools Superintendent Pat Mapes.

“It confirms that success is achieved when educators are trained to adapt their teaching methods to reach children regardless of nationality, socioeconomic background, learning disabilities, and personal challenges.”

**“NIET has empowered our educators to give their very best and be a catalyst for students to do their best.”**

**- Pat Mapes, Superintendent, Perry Township Schools**