

# A Faster Path to English Proficiency

## Cherry Creek School District, Colorado



Dr. Holly Porter, Director of ELA Programs for Cherry Creek School District, never speaks about their growing population of English Language Learners in terms of problems or challenges. "I see these kids as nothing but opportunity," she says. "All of us in the district can learn from their cultures and experiences. It makes our district that much richer, and I feel lucky to be a part of it."

To help these students reach proficiency in English and content area classes, Cherry Creek has implemented Path to Proficiency district-wide.

## **MEETING THE NEEDS OF A GROWING POPULATION**

Like many districts across the country, Cherry Creek has seen its population of English Language Learners (ELL) grow in both size and diversity in recent years. Currently, the district serves 5,700 ELL students, roughly 11% of their total student body. However, their ELL enrollment is growing faster than their enrollment as a whole. Students come from all over the world, with nearly 140 languages represented in the district. Spanish is the most common language spoken at home (38%); other dominant languages include Arabic, Russian, Korean, Chinese, Somali and Nepali.

Cherry Creek uses a co-teaching model that pairs English Language Acquisition

(ELA) specialists with content area teachers for several hours each week. Outside of special, limited-time classes for newcomers, ELLs are completely immersed in the regular classroom with their English-speaking peers.

The district was already using Thinking Maps district-wide. However, English Language Learners needed extra support to speed language up acquisition and build content knowledge. Classroom teachers also needed to understand how to differentiate use of the Maps for students with different levels of English proficiency. Path to Proficiency provided a bridge to help teachers better serve their ELLs.



#### **SNAPSHOT**

Cherry Creek School District

- 67 Schools and Programs
- 54,500 Students
- 3,700 Teachers
- 92 ELA Specialists
- 29% Free/Reduced Lunch
- 5,700 ELA Students
- 140 Languages



"The kids love it because it works. They can see that they can be successful, and it gives them confidence in interacting with their grade level peers." -Meg Lucero, Program Coordinator, ELA Department

# **IMMERSING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN CONTENT**

"Since we're already a Thinking Maps district, Path to Proficiency was a natural next step for us for our ELLs," says Holly. "It builds on the Thinking Maps foundation with the same common language."

All 92 ELA specialists in Cherry Creek have been trained on Path to Proficiency. In turn, they bring the strategies they have learned into the classrooms where they co-teach. "Path to Proficiency helps students unlock language proficiency in their content-area classes, and provides an additional layer of differentiation for students needing extra language support," explains Meg Lucero, Program Coordinator, ELA Department.

Path to Proficiency builds on the use of the eight Maps that form the heart the Thinking Maps framework, of with additional differentiation and support for students at different levels of English proficiency. It is designed to both build language skills and help students access grade-level content. "Path to Proficiency helps to make language visible to students. - It allows them integrate new to concepts into their own thinking so can access and use them they independently later on," says Holly.

Because all students in the school are using Thinking Maps, the also act as a Maps bridge between English Language Learners **English-speaking** and their peers. Meg says, "Creating

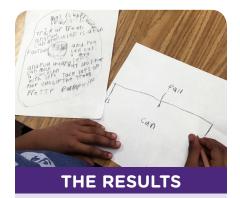
the Maps is something that all students can be successful with, regardless of their language skills. They can use pictures, individual words or short phrases. The Maps let them show what they can do and engage in meaningful classroom interactions with their peers." For example, in a fifth grade science unit on the solar system, all students were able to successfully create Thinking Maps to describe the sun, moon and planets. Creating the Maps English Language Learners helped expand vocabulary and build critical thinking skills that translate to other content areas. Because all students in the class are building their own Maps, ELLs were able to engage with their peers around the content.

#### **BETTER LEARNING, IN ANY LANGUAGE**

Both teachers and students have embraced Path to Proficiency. ELA specialists report that many content area teachers have taken the strategies they have seen the specialists use and integrated them into their regular classroom practice. A few schools with high ELL populations have even implemented school-wide Path to Proficiency training for all teachers. "It's not just for ELLs," says Meg. "Teachers are using the differentiation strategies they have learned for Special Education students and even for Gifted and Talented."

But the real proof lies in the district's

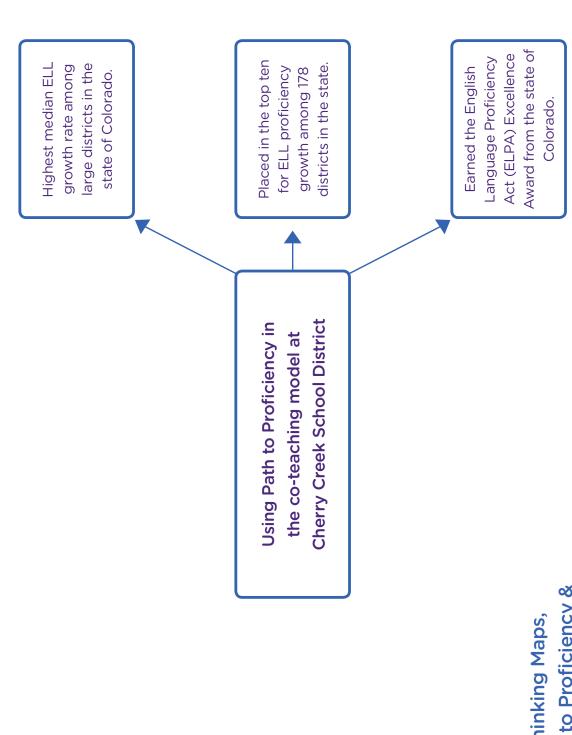
results. In 2014-2015, Cherry Creek's English Language Learners had the highest median growth rate among large districts in the state of Colorado. Cherry Creek placed in the top ten for English Language Learners proficiency growth among 178 districts in the state, earning the district an English Language Proficiency Act (ELPA) Excellence Award from the state. Holly says, "It's about our whole co-teaching model, which immerses ELLs in gradelevel classes. But Path to Proficiency gives us the common language that makes it all work so well. It's the bridge we need to support both our students and our classroom teachers."



- Highest median growth rate for large districts in Colorado
- Top ten growth rate among all Colorado districts
- Winner of Excellence Award
  for ELL proficiency growth

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Thinking Maps, Path to Proficiency & Co-Teaching Model