

## K-12 Educators' Perceived Support of English Learners' Education.

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### Abstract

The current study used a survey design to examine educators' perceptions of district and schools' support of English Learners' (ELs) education in a large midwest school district in the U.S. Participants included 16 elementary and secondary school principals and 61 staff working directly with EL students. Results revealed that participants perceived only moderate support for the education of ELs at the district level. At the building level, principals were perceived to be strongly supportive of the educational needs of EL students. However, high school educators rated principals' support lower than K-8 educators. Participants were moderately favorable towards schools' practices to involve the community in support of ELs and their families. Female educators rated schools lower on the scale of involving the community than their male counterparts. Given the upsurge of EL students in U.S. schools, there is an urgent need for districts and school leaders to prioritize research-based programs and practices that have the potential to improve teachers' pedagogical skills and the educational outcomes and experiences of ELs.

**Keywords:** English Learners, Educating ELs, School-family-community partnerships, Educator perceptions, EL Needs, Family Involvement.

### 1. Introduction

English Learners (ELs) comprise 10 percent of the student population enrolled in U.S. K-12 schools [National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2020]. This demographic shift is occasioned by the rising number of immigrants, other demographic trends, and the demands of an increasingly global economy. K-12 educational data indicates that ELs have some of the lowest academic outcomes and graduation rates among student subgroups (Jackson & McCray, 2016). There is abundant evidence that ELs struggle with reading, writing, and oral discourse in a new language. Becoming proficient in English and able to perform at grade level in core academic subjects in English takes time and occurs over several grades (Jackson & McCray, 2016; Thompson, 2015; Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Valentino & Reardon, 2014). In the absence of specific steps to address the language-related limitations and limited educational support services experienced by EL students, they are at risk of losing the educational opportunities provided to all students.

This paper is based on a larger study, *English Learners Needs Assessment Survey* (ELNA), that sought to investigate perceptions of educators regarding the education of ELs in a large midwest school district, hereafter anonymized as Midwest Public Schools (MPS) district. The paper focuses on educators' perceptions of the district's and schools' support of ELs education. The objectives of this study were to:

1. Examine educators' perceptions of MPS support of the ELs' culture, academic and family needs.
2. Examine educators' perceptions of their principals' awareness of ELs' academic performance and their provision of the necessary support to teach them.
3. Investigate educators' perceptions of MPS school district's partnership with community-based organizations to support ELs and their families.
4. Explore personal and school-related characteristics that differentiate educators' perceptions regarding the extent to which the MPS district and schools support ELs' education.

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By gathering educators' responses on their district's and schools' perceptions of supporting ELs' education, educational leaders can use the data to understand and improve school programs and practices and make ELs' educational outcomes "matter" in their schools' overall performance.

This paper is organized as follows: A review of extant literature on the education of ELs, survey design and sample selection, statistical analyses, results, discussion, conclusion and recommendations, and limitations and future research.

## 2. Literature Review

English Learners are a diverse group representing numerous languages, cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities, with Hispanic or Latinx being the majority and Spanish being the most commonly spoken language. The National Education Association (2020) states that ELs represent one of the fastest-growing student populations in K-12 in the United States and estimates that by 2025, 1 out of 4 children in classrooms will be ELs. Similar findings from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020) indicate that the percentage of public school students in the United States who are ELs was higher in fall 2017 (10.1 percent, or 5.0 million students) than in fall 2000 (8.1 percent, or 3.8 million students). While these students bring a rich cultural diversity to the schools and communities in which they live, the language barrier hinders their participation and access in the education system. Hanover Research's report on effective interventions for long-term ELs (2017) posits that, as EL students represent an increasingly prominent and important stakeholder group in U.S. public schools, districts are seeking ways to implement dedicated and specialized programs that effectively bolster their performance outcomes.

A base of research (e.g., Parker et al., 2011; Sánchez et al., 2009) suggests that a number of student-level factors are associated with the achievement of EL students, including immigration and disability status, first language, gender, country of origin, and socioeconomic status. At the school level, studies have shown academic achievement to be related to percentage of students on free or reduced lunch (Hakuta, 2011; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000), poverty, and the percentage of racial/ethnic minority students (Parker, Louie, & O'Dwyer, 2009). In his study of grade 10 Hispanic students in Massachusetts, Sanchez et al. (2009) found several school-level characteristics that were predictive of reading and math scores, including dropout rates, percentage of Hispanic students, and household income.

Support for ELs is critical to their academic achievement and social well-being. Studies show that the support a school receives influences its funding, materials, teacher training, program model, planning, and parent involvement, and thus ultimately, student achievement (Howard et al., 2007). Schools that are considered effective in promoting the language proficiency and academic achievement of English language learners are characterized by strong district and school level support, where EL programs are funded and supportive principals ensure that the EL programs are integrated with school vision and goals (Louie et al., 2019).

Other studies suggest the importance of the leadership role principals play in the education of EL students. Hill and Flynn (2004) found evidence of the importance of targeting principals for professional development (PD) programs related to EL educational needs. Likewise, Stepanek et al. (2010) encouraged "principals and other administrators to attend English language professional development sessions alongside teachers to gain a deeper understanding of effective teaching strategies for these students" (p. 37). Tung et al. (2011) found that principals in consistently high performing schools could "clearly articulate their school's policies for EL to their school staff, model behaviors and attitudes expected from their teachers, and communicate a clear vision of high expectations for learning outcomes" (p. A-1). Tung et al. further showed the importance of cultural competence by the principal, teachers, and staff, which led to better communication with parents of EL students. Other studies (e.g., McGee et al., 2014; Wrigley, 2000) underscored the importance of the principal's ability to hire, develop, and retain competent EL teachers. Overall, the attention of ELs has been translated to six priorities for school leaders: (a) learning about ELs' experiences, (b) developing relationships with ELs and their families, (c) informing ELs on the American educational system, (d) making connections to community services, (e) engaging teachers in professional development, and (f) working as change agents who actively seek to transform the school system so that ELs have access to an equitable education (Herrera et al., 2020; Louie et al., 2019; Lezama, 2014; McGee et al., 2014; Hopkins et al., 2013; Lucas, 2000).

School level practices have also been shown to have a strong influence on ELs' academic achievement. Some researchers have highlighted the importance of entrance and exit criteria for EL programs and trained personnel who can implement the criteria as envisioned (Hill & Flynn, 2004; Tung et al., 2011; Zehler et al., 2008).

Others (e.g., Lavadenz et al., 2018) examined the connection between the state accountability policy mechanisms and models used in school districts. Effective research-based instructional techniques emphasizing the development of Academic English are recommended (Hanover, 2017; Elfers & Stritikus, 2014; Gersten et al., 2007; National High School Center, 2009; Rivera et al., 2010). Teachers are encouraged to use cultural referents in both pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and classroom management (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004), while principals articulate a vision that supports the development and sustaining of culturally responsive teaching, secures culturally responsive resources and curriculum, and offers PD around culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2013; Theoharis, 2007).

The Center for Applied Linguistics recommends that school districts collect information regularly on staff needs and program strengths and weaknesses to create professional development plans that reflect issues of importance to the staff and schools (Howard et al., 2007). Given the minimal training Pre-Service teachers receive regarding teaching ELs, it is incumbent upon school districts to provide PD focusing on understanding the key principles about how EL learn and the academic challenges they face (Herrera et al., 2020; Stepanek et al., 2010).

Research on effective professional development for teachers has shown the need for on-going PD and support rather than stand-alone trainings (Louie et al., 2019; Gonzalez, 2020; Herrera, et al., 2020). The training opportunities are deemed to be effective when they include teaching techniques that can be applied in classrooms, provide in-class demonstrations with students, and include some component of personalized coaching (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011). Olson (2014) argued that teachers should receive training on how to adapt their pedagogy in different situations, specifically those that require differentiated instruction or supports for ELs. Underscoring the importance of this professional development for EL educators, one study of over 5,300 EL teachers in California revealed that teachers who received PD dedicated to instructing non-English-speaking students felt significantly more competent in teaching their students across grade levels and content areas (Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005).

Research shows that, while school districts rely heavily on federal and state laws and guidelines to educate ELs (Gonzalez, 2020), bringing together the wisdom and experiences of the district's practitioners to develop a coherent theory of EL education, in conjunction with goals for ELs, would provide the foundation for all EL policy and programming (Tung, 2010). In their summary on experiences advising school districts implementing EL programs, Stepanek et al. (2010) stated "developing and communicating a unified vision for improving instruction and services for ELs is essential. To create this vision...leaders communicate an overt and specific message about the shared responsibility for ensuring success for all students, including ELs" (p. 1).

Effective and systematic ways to engage families and community help enhance the ELs' academic achievement. Schools are accountable for *all* students' learning. Creating a school learning community that is organized around school, family, and community partnerships, with activities linked to school goals, has the potential to improve schools, strengthen families, invigorate community support, and increase EL student achievement and success (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hanover 2020). Community partnerships allow schools and districts to empower and engage a broad range of English learners and their families in culturally responsive ways to support EL families and enrich students' learning opportunities and experiences. Hanover Research (2020) conducted a nationwide study and concluded that schools should reflect on gaps in existing programs and services to identify potential organizations with which to partner to expand the supports available to EL students, families, and staff. They argue that on-going community partnerships aligned with the school's mission and integrated into the school's culture tend to offer greater benefits than temporary collaborations to support one-time events.

Epstein (2011) proposed a well-organized partnership program that uses a research-based framework of six types of involvement, including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community to focus partnerships on school improvement goals. This is in tandem with the National Education Association review of recent research on school and family collaboration, which presents 10 key strategies for creating effective family-school-community partnerships that are focused on advancing EL student learning (Henderson, 2011). They categorized these family-school-community partnerships into three types of programs, including:

1. Community and family-community programs: These are efforts to engage the community (including families, local residents, and community organizations) in advancing student learning.
2. Programs to engage parents and other family members: These are programs/efforts to engage families in children's learning and development.

3. Wraparound social and community services programs: These are programs that provide social and health services to strengthen and support children and families.

## Methods

### 3.1 Survey Design and Sample Selection

In order to meet the research objectives, a survey instrument was developed based on a review of literature on ELs, previously conducted EL survey studies (Grady & O'Dwyer, 2014), and discussions with key local persons working with refugee and other immigrant students. We collected data relating to the following areas: demographic and school characteristics, district and schools' support for ELs, beliefs about ELs, perceptions about ELs' parents and families, teaching ELs, and professional needs of educators working with ELs. This paper pertains to a section of the instrument regarding the district and schools' support for ELs, which comprised 15 items.

The ELNA survey instrument and protocols were reviewed and approved by the Missouri State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and MPS district's office of research. The questionnaire was implemented online from April 1 through April 21, 2020 using Qualtrics online survey platform. An email message containing a link to the Qualtrics survey was sent to a total of 16 elementary and high school principals whose schools were designated as EL Centers and had the highest EL enrollments in the district. The principals were requested to forward the email message to staff in their buildings who worked directly with ELs. Two weekly email follow-up reminders were sent to the principals after they received the initial survey link, in which they were asked to remind staff to complete the survey.

A total of eighty-two surveys were completed online. Five of these surveys were insufficiently completed and were dropped from analysis. The remaining 77 surveys were included in the final analyses. The survey data was imported to IBM SPSS version 26.0 (2019) for cleaning and analysis.

### 3.2 Statistical Analyses

Fifteen Likert-scaled items pertaining to the district's and schools' support for the education of English Learners were included in the questionnaire. The items were coded 1 - 4, corresponding as follows:

strongly agree → agree → disagree → strongly disagree

Responses with 'I don't know' were coded 5 and converted to missing values. Based on their common underlying educational dimension, three themes with multiple items emerged; four items did not fit the themes and were excluded from the scales (see Table 2).

To test for data reliability, we used Cronbach's alpha (Field 2018; Sijtsma, 2009) and Guttman's  $\lambda_2$ , an alternative measure of reliability, which estimates between-score correlation for parallel measures (Agresti, 2013). We further used a nonparametric rank test, Mann-Whitney  $U$  (Field, 2018; Agresti, 2013) to determine differences and similarities among groups, and the adequacy of the sample size  $n$ .  $U$  is approximately normally distributed for large samples, such that its standardized value is approximately a standard normal deviate ( $z$ ) whose significance can be ascertained from tables of the normal distribution. Considered the nonparametric alternative to the one-way ANOVA (Field 2018), the Kruskal-Wallis  $H$  extends the rank test to more than two independent samples.

To determine effect size, "an objective and (usually) standardized measure of the magnitude of the observed effect" (Field, 2013, p. 79), we used a simple estimate computed as  $r = z / \sqrt{n}$ , where  $n$  is the total number of observations. This estimate is a test statistic with one degree of freedom based on the standard normal distribution. Cohen (1988) suggested the following rules-of-thumb for interpreting values of  $r$ : .10 (small effect); .30 (medium effect); and .50 (large effect).

## 3. Results

To present the statistical results of the study, we use tables 1 (participant and school characteristics), 2 (descriptive characteristics of items and measures of scale reliability), and 3 (nonparametric rank tests of scales/items), and figures 1 and 2 (visual depiction of significant differences in scale scores by school level and respondents' gender), respectively.

Table 1 contains the frequency and percent distribution of each of the collected characteristics of the participants and their schools. Half of the participants fell in the age range of 31-50 years, nearly 80% were female, and half had a master's as their highest degree. Half were general classroom teachers, 21% were school principals, and the remainder were divided nearly equally between EL specialists (EL teacher, EL paraprofessional, behavioral intervention paraprofessional,

Reading specialist, and special education teacher) and support staff (school counselor, instructional coach, and school nurse). Thirty-six percent of respondents had been employed by MPS for less than six years, and half had been employed in their current school for less than six years. Three-fifths of respondents were affiliated with elementary (K-8) schools. One-fourth of respondents estimated that the number of ELs being served at their building was  $\leq 15$ , while 42% estimated that  $>30$  ELs were being served.

**Table 1 Characteristics of participants and their schools**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Age</i>		
21-30	18	23
31-50	40	52
>50	19	25
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	16	21
Female	61	79
<i>Highest level of education</i>		
Associate or Bachelor's	22	29
Master's	40	52
Specialist or Doctorate	15	20
<i>Primary role</i>		
General classroom teacher	40	52
EL specialist	11	14
Support staff	10	13
Principal	16	21
<i>School population served</i>		
Elementary K-8	44	58
Secondary 9-12	32	42
<i>Years employed by district</i>		
1-5	28	36
6-10	20	26
>10	29	38
<i>Years employed in current school</i>		
1-5	39	51
6-10	19	25
>10	18	24
<i>Estimated # of ELs in current school</i>		
$\leq 15$	19	25
16-30	26	34
>30	32	42
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>77</b>	

Table 2 presents the frequency, modal value, and percent of responses coded either *strongly agree* (1) or *agree* (2) for each of the 15 items following question "Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about Midwest Public School (MPS) district and schools' support for the education of English Learners."

There were two items for which <75% of respondents provided a valid answer (i.e., codes 1-4). Both items were components of the theme “School practices to involve the community in support of ELs and their families,” and they referred to schools partnering with outside organizations to assist ELs and/or their families. Values for the % agree or strongly agree range from 48 to 95 among the 15 items; for five items, the percent is >75.

A reliability analysis was conducted for each multi-item theme (see Table 2). Overall, reliability was good or better (Field, 2018; Shay 2009) for each of the three themes, as measured by either Cronbach’s alpha (range .758 to .815) or Guttman’s  $\lambda$  2 (range .759 to .823). Only one item, assigned to the theme “School practices to involve the community in support of ELs and their families,” was dropped based on a weak performance in the reliability analysis.

An equally-weighted summated scale score was computed for each of the three themes containing multiple items. Table 2 presents the frequency, modal value, and percent of responses coded either *strongly agree* (1) or *agree* (2) for the final summated scale scores. The % agree or strongly agree was 60% for the theme “Overall support of ELs by MPS district,” 91% for the theme “Administrative awareness and support of ELs’ educational needs,” and 74% for the theme “School practices to involve the community in support of ELs and their families.”

**Table 2 Descriptive characteristics of items and themes about MPS and schools’ support for the education of ELs and measures of scale reliability**

<i>“Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about Midwest Public School District and schools’ support for the education of English Language Learners.”</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>mode</i>	<i>% agree/ strongly agree</i>	<i>Reliability analysis measures</i>
<b>Overall support of ELs by MPS district summated scale</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>60</b>	<b><math>\alpha = .792</math> <math>\lambda</math>-2 = .823</b>
<i>The various cultures of EL students are celebrated within MPS.</i>	72	2	72	
<i>Services provided by MPS adequately address the academic needs of EL students.</i>	69	2	55	
<i>Services provided by MPS adequately address the needs of families of EL students.</i>	61	2	52	
<b>Administrative awareness and support of ELs’ educational needs summated scale</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>91</b>	<b><math>\alpha = .758</math> <math>\lambda</math>-2 = .759</b>
<i>School administrators are aware of the number of EL students enrolled at their sites.</i>	68	1.5	94	
<i>School administrators are aware of the academic progress of EL students enrolled at their sites.</i>	61	2	88	
<i>Administrators provide the necessary support to teach EL students.</i>	59	2	70	
<b>School practices to involve the community in support of ELs and their families summated scale</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>74</b>	<b><math>\alpha = .815</math> <math>\lambda</math>-2 = .822</b>
<i>School staff are aware of community-based organizations that can support EL families.</i>	61	2.5	48	
<i>Schools partner with community-based organizations to support parents/families of EL students.</i>	52	2	73	
<i>School site staff are aware of how to access community-based support for serving EL students and their families.</i>	63	2	62	
<i>School staff welcomes support from community-based organizations that support EL students’ families.</i>	63	2	95	<i>Dropped from final scale.</i>
<i>Schools, government agencies, and community-based organizations work together to serve EL students and families.</i>	56	2	80	
<b>The following 4 items were not included in any scale:</b>				
<b>School practices to involve EL parents/guardians</b>				
<i>My school has an effective way to communicate with parents of EL students.</i>	68	2	71	
<b>Teachers’ ability to assess EL educational needs</b>				
<i>Teachers know how to assess the educational needs of EL students.</i>	72	2	62	

**Principals’ ability to address EL educational needs**

*Principals know how to address the educational needs of EL students.* 62 2 79

**Counselors’ ability to address traumatized EL students**

*Counselors and mental health professionals within district schools are equipped to meet the needs of EL students who may have experienced trauma.* 62 2 69

*Note.* Reliability analyses are based on a subset of 68 respondents for whom at least 8 of the 15 items in this section had a valid response of 1 to 4 (i.e., excludes “don’t know” or blank responses). For this subset of respondents, if an item within the theme being analyzed was not valid, the modal value of the entire sample (n=77) was substituted.

The scale score n, mode, and % correspond to the subset of 68 respondents and are based on responses which include substituted values, as described in the *Note*. Scale scores were rounded to zero decimal places to compute the percent *agree* or *strongly agree*.

For each of the three summated scale scores and the four items not included in any scale, nonparametric rank tests were performed to examine if mean ranks differed by characteristics of either the respondents or their schools (see Table 3).

**Table 3 Results of nonparametric rank tests of scales/items by characteristics of participants and their schools**

<i>Scale/item</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Highest education</i>	<i>Primary role</i>	<i>School population served</i>	<i>Years employed by MPS</i>	<i>Years employed in current school</i>	<i>Estimated # of ELs in current school</i>
<i>Degrees of freedom</i>	2	1	2	3	1	2	2	2
<i>Overall support of ELS by MPS district summated scale</i>	H = 3.157 p = .206	U = 444.5 z = 1.047 p = .295	H = 1.267 p = .531	H = 6.028 p = .110	U = 641.0 z = 1.439 p = .150	H = 2.705 p = .259	H = 1.493 p = .474	H = 0.014 p = .993
<i>Administrative awareness &amp; support of ELS’ educational needs summated scale</i>	H = 2.453 p = .293	U = 376.5 z = .024 p = .981	H = 3.210 p = .201	H = 4.952 p = .175	U = 668.5 z = 1.803 p = .071	H = 0.527 p = .768	H = 0.703 p = .703	H = 0.776 p = .679
<i>School practices to involve the community in support of ELS &amp; their families summated scale</i>	H = 4.516 p = .105	U = 489.5 z = 1.719 p = .086	H = 0.376 p = .829	H = 4.637 p = .200	U = 592.5 z = 0.778 p = .436	H = 3.998 p = .135	H = 3.888 p = .143	H = 0.183 p = .912
<i>Scale/item</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Highest education</i>	<i>Primary role</i>	<i>School population served</i>	<i>Years employed by MPS</i>	<i>Years employed in current school</i>	<i>Estimated # of ELs in current school</i>
<i>School practices to communicate with EL parents/guardians<sup>1</sup></i>	H = 2.036 p = .361	U = 462.5 z = 1.437 p = .151	H = 1.764 p = .414	H = 4.081 p = .253	U = 589.0 z = 0.819 p = .413	H = 1.233 p = .540	H = 0.746 p = .689	H = 0.691 p = .708
<i>Teachers’ ability to</i>	H =	U =	H =	H =	U = 622.0	H = 0.963	H = 0.696	H = 2.641

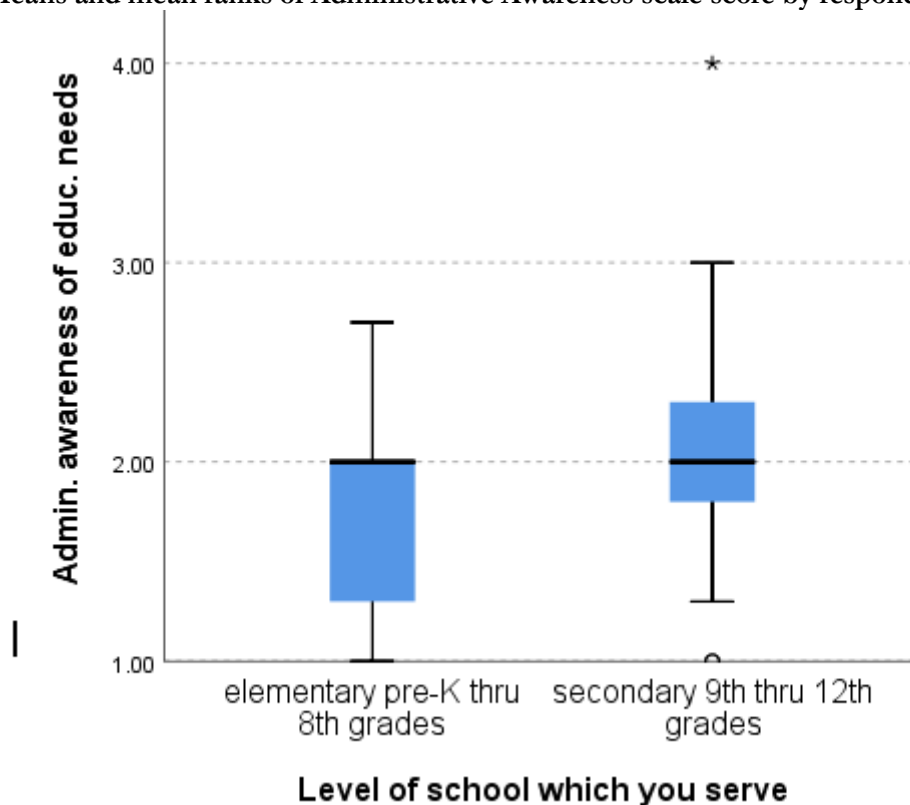
<i>assess EL educational needs<sup>1</sup></i>	1.688	400.5	0.001	2.576	$\chi = 1.273$	$p = .618$	$p = .706$	$p = .267$
	$p = .430$	$\chi = 0.379$	$p = .999$	$p = .462$	$p = .203$			
		$p = .705$						
<i>Principals' ability to address EL educational needs<sup>1</sup></i>	H = 0.161	U = 386.5	H = 3.320	H = 0.844	U = 614.0	H = 2.917	H = 2.044	H = 2.256
	$p = .923$	$\chi = .161$	$p = .190$	$p = .839$	$\chi = 1.296$	$p = .233$	$p = .360$	$p = .324$
		$p = .872$			$p = .195$			
<i>Counselors' ability to address traumatized students<sup>1</sup></i>	H = 2.030	U = 375.0	H = 3.314	H = 3.971	U = 590.0	H = 1.092	H = 1.824	H = 1.806
	$p = .362$	$\chi = 0.055$	$p = .191$	$p = .265$	$\chi = 0.889$	$p = .579$	$p = .402$	$p = .405$
		$p = .956$			$p = .374$			

Note: Classes for characteristics are as follows: age (21-30, 31-50, >50); gender (male or won't say, female); highest education (associate or bachelor's, master's, specialist or doctorate); primary role (general classroom, EL specialist, support staff, principal); school population served (elementary K-8, secondary 9-12); years employed by MPS (1-5, 6-10, >10); years employed in current school (1-5, 6-10, >10); estimated # of ELs in current school (<=15, 16-30, >30).

<sup>1</sup> Single item

Overall, the mean ranks of the three scale scores and four single items did not differ significantly by any of the characteristics evaluated. A modest difference ( $p = .071$ ) was detected in mean ranks of the scale score "Administrative awareness and support of ELs' educational needs." The mean rank is higher for respondents working in secondary schools (39.2) as compared to those working in elementary (30.7) schools, i.e., more disagreement was reported by respondents from secondary schools. The computed effect size is  $r = .22$  (small to medium). This finding is depicted graphically by the box-and-whisker plots in Figure 1.

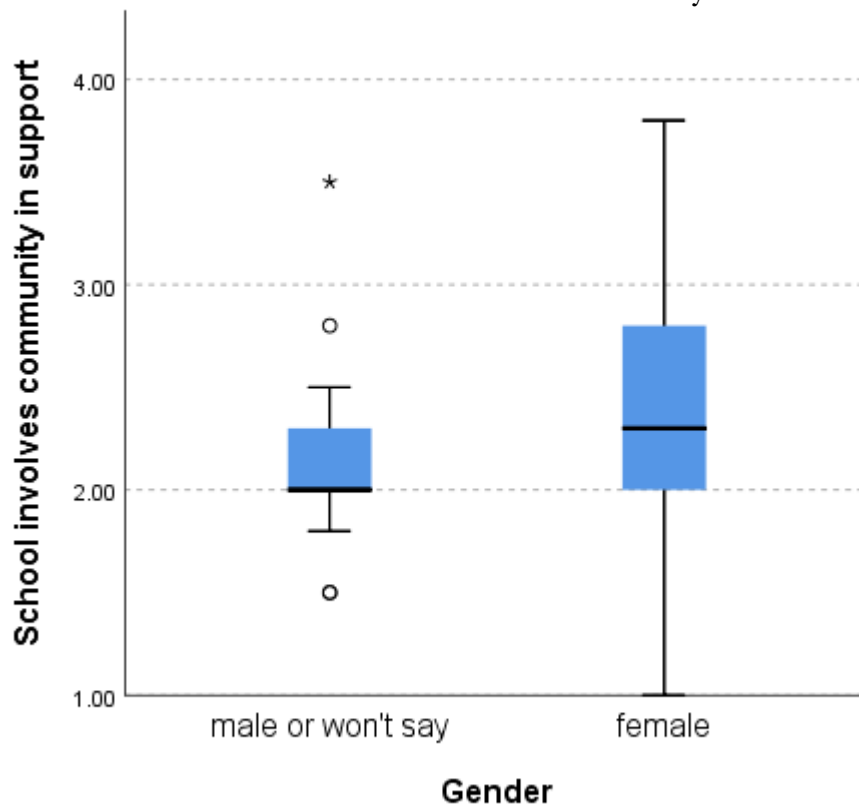
Figure 1 Means and mean ranks of Administrative Awareness scale score by respondent's school level





Also, a modest difference ( $p = .086$ ) was observed in mean ranks of the scale score “School practices to involve the community in support of ELs and their families” between males (26.5) and females (36.6), i.e., more disagreement was expressed by female educators. This effect size is also small to medium ( $r = .21$ ). Figure 2 illustrates this finding using box-and-whisker plots.

**Figure 2 Means and mean ranks of School Involves Community scale score by respondent’s gender**



#### 4. Discussion

This study sought to investigate the perceptions of educators regarding the extent to which their district and schools support the education of English Learners. Given that ELs were not equally distributed in the district, we targeted schools designated as EL Centers with a high proportion of EL enrollment, i.e., schools that enrolled an average of 25 or more EL students. It was surprising to find that one-fourth (19) of the respondents estimated  $\leq 15$  ELs attending their school. This finding suggests that there are educators in the school setting that are not fully aware of the ELs’ presence, let alone their needs. This is contrary to research-based lessons (e.g., Stepanek et al., 2010; Louie, et al., 2019) that show the necessity of creating opportunities for regular communication among all adults in the school in order to build confidence and capacity across the building to meet the needs of ELs. “Strong connections among classroom instruction, curriculum, assessment, and specialized instruction or services for ELLs are essential” (Stepanek et al., 2010, pp. 1-2).

Table 2 reveals a low response rate to items 8 (Schools partner with community-based organizations to support parents/families of EL students) and 11 (Schools, government agencies, and community-based organizations work together to serve EL students and families). This indicates that school administrators have not prioritized the education of ELs, a subgroup that is academically at risk. Herrera et al. (2020) postulated that when schools, families, and communities work together, ELs’ academic outcomes get better. This thought is amplified by Sugarman and Lazarin (2020) in their argument concerning how partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) with strong relationships with immigrant communities can benefit both families and schools. CBOs are well-positioned to enhance two-way communication by disseminating information from schools and providing educators updates on families’ needs. They can also offer supports for ELs and immigrant students, such as mental health care and after-school enrichment.

An average score of 2 (agree) was recorded for all 15 items. This could suggest potential indifference or complacency among the respondents to the support of EL students’ education at the school and district levels. According to Stepanek and Raphael (2010), it is up to principals and district leaders to inspire and sustain a comprehensive commitment to the education of EL students.

For the three summated scale scores (see Table 2), the percent agree or strongly agree ranged from a low of 60 to a high of 91. The scale measuring overall support of ELs by MPS district had the lowest agreement at 60%, compared to administrative awareness (91%) and school practices (74%) involving the community. This implies that the perceptions of the principals and other school staff working with EL students is not entirely favorable with respect to support shown at the district level for EL education. In contrast, school administration was favorably perceived as being supportive of the educational needs of EL students. It is at the district level that resources are allocated to educate ELs. Without commitment to EL education at the district level, even enthusiastic principals will be limited in their ability to implement effective EL programs in their buildings (Louie, et al., 2019; Short et al., 2012).

Respondents from high schools rated the administrative awareness of ELs' educational needs less favorably compared to the K-8 respondents. A closer examination of this association revealed that the observed difference in scale score by school level was driven by the lower ratings high school teachers specifically provided. This suggests that high school teachers perceive their principals as insufficiently involved with or supportive of EL students in their schools. This observation could be attributed to the added pressure exerted by the requirement that high schools meet state performance standards, including graduation requirements, for all student subgroups (DESE, 2018).

Compared to males, female educators gave lower ratings regarding the extent to which their schools work to involve the community to support ELs and their families (see Figure 2). This suggests that female teachers are more empathetic, caring, and sensitive to the needs of their students, including ELs, and consequently, are more likely to perceive that the schools are not taking advantage of the full range of resources in the community to support EL students and families.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Immigration trends make clear the importance of EL education in the U.S.. This study has presented educators' perceptions of district and schools' support for the education of ELs in a midwestern school district. There is need for a renewed commitment to serving ELs, who make up almost 10.4% of the U.S. student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Given that principals remain the most influential instructional leaders on student outcomes and affect the integration of policy and attitude around ELs (Louie et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2015), there is need to train them and other educators on how to overcome skills and language barriers associated with ELs and their families. Even effective teachers cannot provide ELs with educational opportunities and experiences to improve their educational outcomes without the support of districts and school leaders. Emphasis should be placed on the provision of research-based professional development programs that incorporate best practices of educating ELs. By so doing, educators will have opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills in collaborating with families and community members.

School districts ought to provide adequate resources to building administrators to prioritize and implement culturally responsive programs and practices specific to the education of ELs. Beyond the obvious language differences (Louie et al., 2019), there are substantial differences in cultural practices and discourse patterns. In this case, districts should provide funding for principals to hire, develop, and retain educators who are linguistically, culturally, and pedagogically prepared to meet the academic and sociocultural needs of ELs. This might ensure that EL and general education teachers have the opportunity to effectively collaborate to teach EL students. By so doing, there is a potential for advocacy that will increase awareness and build coalitions that support educators who work with ELs.

There is need to improve and strengthen school practices to involve parents and the community in support of ELs and their families. However, one of the challenges that is cited in the literature a lot (Grady & O'Dwyer, 2014; McGee et al., 2015; Louie, 2019) is the need for educators to understand how to engage families and communities to support ELs. Our study recognizes that different schools have different means to partner with their communities to support the education of their students. We concur with the suggestion that more intentional conversations about school-family-community partnerships in service to EL students need to be established. We posit that district leaders and school administrators need to reconceptualize parent-school-community engagement possibilities with new insight, care, and compassion. They need to view families as equal contributors for students' social and academic growth. In the forwarding remarks for Herrera et al. (2020) new book, Jong, the former president of TESOL International Association, argued that schools and teachers need to "reframe and re-imagine traditional, top-down, school-centered parent involvement and propose a new paradigm that centers family engagement as locally informed, assets-based relationship-building (radical kinship) and as a process of mutual accommodation" (n.d).

This will provide strategic ways that schools, families, and communities can work more closely to enhance student learning and increase access to non-academic supports for these students.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

We had limited access to the participants since the school district's office of research controlled and limited access. The only participants we had direct access to were principals. Given the busy schedules of principals and teachers, we contend that the length of the survey might have led to the low response rate, since it required approximately 20 minutes to complete. We believe that the principals targeted teachers and staff in their building that worked directly with ELs.

Future research should use mixed methods to focus on policy ideas and programs in districts and schools that are meant to boost the academic achievement of ELs. For instance, what does educating English Learners look like in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic?

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