

English learner effort still failing

Portland schools | The district has yet to resolve enough of its problems to rate full federal funding

By **KIMBERLY MELTON**
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The Oregon Department of Education continues to withhold a portion of federal funding from Portland Public Schools after state officials found the district still isn't meeting federal standards for serving students learning English.

In a letter to Portland last month, officials said the district had fixed only some of the problems outlined in a 2009 audit. Furthermore, the state reported new problems with the program.

Some students still don't have access to core classes such as algebra and history or are not receiving support in those courses. New findings reported that some students were exiting the English Language Learner program without evidence they had learned English.

Diana Fernandez, director of Portland's English as a Second Language department, said the district has been addressing the problems since a year ago, including going through the schedule of each ELL student and training about 130 staff on more effective teaching strategies.

But she admitted that implementing the teaching strategies and changes to students' schedules hasn't been smooth.

"Are there issues and do we need to change the way we're serving kids? Yes," Fernandez said. "But what the state found this last time wasn't something that was happening in all of our schools. It's a few schools here and there."

For Portland, however, implementation has long been a problem.

More than a year ago, the Education Department said students learning English weren't being adequately served in Portland Public Schools. Some stu-

dents weren't getting the bare minimum of 30 minutes a day of English language instruction, and some who were learning English weren't able to take core classes.

Two of the five issues reported in 2009 were also reported in a 2005 state audit.

In September, the state, which disperses the federal money, sent a letter informing the district of plans to withhold the ELL funding — about \$600,000 — until the changes were made, citing a pattern of noncompliance.

Marta Guembes, chairwoman of the district's English as a Second Language department's parent advisory council, said Portland Public Schools ought to look at redesigning the department the same way it is redesigning its high schools.

"They're just using bandages on each little thing that comes up," said Guembes, who has filed two complaints to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. "Maybe it would be a good idea to look at everything and start with a new structure and get rid of people not doing their work."

Xavier Botana, the district's new chief academic officer, said he believes the district will meet state requirements and be in compliance by March 1. But he said the department and the district have a lot of work to do to improve education for ELL students.

"We have some kids in classes that they don't understand and can't make sense of," said Botana, who was a bilingual teacher and ELL director in Chicago. "Getting in compliance, it will be a step in the right direction. But are we giving kids a meaningful opportunity to learn English? That's questionable."

In addition to working toward meeting the federal benchmarks, Botana is leading an effort to get every student learning English into a support class this spring. That means each ELL student would have a daily opportunity to get help from a trained staff person and ideally help from someone who speaks the student's native language.

At issue

Portland Public Schools has resolved three issues raised by the Oregon Department of Education. The state will continue to withhold federal money until the remaining problems are resolved.

Unresolved

- Not all students have access to required core classes.
- Not all schools use teaching strategies that would enable English Language Learner students to participate in core classes.
- The district's exit criteria aren't clear to all staff, and some students leave the program without showing English proficiency.
- In some cases, nonlicensed staff are assigned to directly instruct students.
- Some students receive traditional language arts instruction during their mandated English Language Development class time.

Resolved

- Not all students were receiving the mandated 30 minutes of English Language Development.
- The programs the district was using didn't match the paperwork submitted.
- Not all schools had information available in the native languages of students and parents.

Botana acknowledged that the proposal is ambitious and will require more investment in staffing and other resources from Portland, a district that anticipates reducing its budget by about \$17 million for 2010-11.

"If we have to cut elsewhere, we will have to figure out how to do that," Botana said. "If our fundamental job is to serve kids, we can't not do it."

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