



# Practitioner's Perspective: Newcomers and English Learners Living in Small Town America

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September 2020

Sudlersville, Maryland, is a small rural town in the far northeastern corner of Queen Anne's County on Maryland's Eastern Shore. It sits about 10 miles from the Delaware state line and 35 miles from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, surrounded by extensive corn, soybean, and wheat fields. The population is close to 600 and growing, with a large influx of immigrants primarily arriving from Central America. As you approach Sudlersville on Route 300, you will spot just one traffic light, a modest statue of the town's most famous citizen (Hall of Fame baseball player Jimmie Fox), one gas station, a small park, and the *de facto* community hubs: Sudlersville Elementary and Middle schools. These schools serve as the beating heart of the town and this rural community in the middle of nowhere.

The total number of students enrolled at Sudlersville Elementary School (SES) is 284 for the 2020-21 school year.

This number represents a small population with fast-changing demographics. The student population has recently reached close to 50% enrollment by English learners, virtually all of whom are from Latinx families and are native Spanish speakers.

Historically speaking, schools in rural communities in the United States enrolled very few students for whom English is a second language. In fact, for an extended period of time there appeared not to be a special need to formally support families of English Learners (EL) in rural community schools in most of the United States.

The United States Department of Agriculture defines a rural community as a small county town characterized by geographic isolation from other communities. Further, there is



a customary economic dependence on agriculture and frequent periods of economic distress. Under Title VI of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, a local education agency is considered rural if the total number of students in average daily attendance at all schools is fewer than 600. The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) defines a remote rural school locale as a “census-defined territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area,” and “more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.” Another characteristic of rural schools is they are more predominantly Caucasian than urban schools (The Education Alliance, 2020). This same study, however, highlighted the rapidly changing demographics and growing needs of rural communities in the United States. Consider the following:

- Only 30% of states have fewer than 5,000 EL students statewide.
- EL student enrollment growth is greater in rural than in urban schools.
- 4% of America’s EL students now live in rural communities.
- Rural schools usually hire tutors or aides instead of credentialed EL teachers.
- There are no national models for EL rural programs and policies.
- The rural teacher population often does not reflect the diversity of America.
- Rural schools lack the political power base that urban schools have.
- Teachers in rural schools tend to know little about multiculturalism or EL methodology or curriculum development, or EL student assessment.
- Administrators in rural schools do not tend to place EL policies, programs, budget, or other support mechanisms high among the school’s priorities.

## **How do newcomers and English learners survive and thrive in small-town America?**

When I first began my work in Sudlersville, I was baffled by the unexpectedly large number of Latinx families. How and why did these folks find their way to this tiny town? Were they able to access the resources they needed? Would this school understand and embrace their needs and help create a new home for their families, especially the schoolchildren? Would this integration require breaking through barriers created by a smaller, tightly-knit, and historically White community? Or, more likely, would we simply be part of the statistics cited earlier, a district in which teachers and administrators in rural schools know little about the kinds of programming needed to provide our EL families with the support they need for their children to be successful in rural American community schools?

With the financial, educational, and even emotional support of MAEC and the National Center for Families Learning, we have been able to change the momentum of this historical pattern and build a strong community of EL families in Sudlersville. We began our work in October of 2019, with an agreed mission to build a Family Learning Community to assist our entire school community with understanding the power of family engagement. This included developing intentional home-school partnerships, regardless of language barriers (many veteran teachers at Sudlersville, some with at least 15 to 20 years in the community, have watched the changing demographics but avoided embracing the partnerships because of language barriers). Our work over the past year has helped



these teachers understand that strong engagement is powerful and can actually be developed regardless of what native language is being spoken. Ultimately, families look for very similar things from their school communities: clarity that their kids are truly cared for and assisted to academically succeed.

Additionally, we were able to create a program that allowed our EL parents to spend time in their students' classrooms in order to support learning at home. EL parents were encouraged to enroll in free English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) adult education classes held at the school, to begin to improve their understanding and speaking of the English language. They also participated in Parent Time, a structured activity which was held in group meetings with English-Spanish interpreters and was designed to cover topics that would assist parents in building adult life-skills, such as goal-setting, self-care and self-advocacy, mindfulness, technology skill-enhancement, career counseling, and more. Our SES Family Learning Community developed a motto in Spanish as time progressed: *todavía no*, or "not yet." The families and teachers continued to support one another throughout the year to better understand the power of not yet, as distinguished from "No, I can't," or "No, it's not possible." They came to understand that growth is a matter of committing time and effort to achieve goals. Our families know and believe that someday, with the support of one another and the community in which they live, they will be able to accomplish personal goals as they raise their children and families in small-town America, because their education is valued and prioritized, and they are an important part of the overall school community.

The change in perspective has been equally valuable for teachers. Mrs. D. was a Pre-K teacher at Sudlersville Elementary School whose experience with the program and newly developed relationships with EL families has expanded her view about family engagement. She had been teaching Pre-K in the community for 10 years and was extremely uncertain about this new community of EL families. She wondered, how would we possibly interact with them when we don't speak any Spanish? Is it safe for them to be in our classrooms for such long periods of time? Where will we find time and money to provide them extra resources? How is this going to work? Mrs. D. began the year seeing this program as an additional burden for her and the school.

It took only a short amount of time for Mrs. D. to realize that this new community-based, school-sponsored program for our EL families would have the opposite effect. When asked to reflect on the program at the end of the year, she called the experience "truly uplifting." As a result of the program, "her families" became more confident in their ability to play an active role in their child's education. They gained a much better understanding of the importance of class attendance and how absenteeism could negatively impact their child's learning. She noticed an increased amount of in-classroom participation. Parent involvement became a priority for her. The EL students attended more field trips than previously, participated more in class, and overall their families became more engaged with the school as their educational partner.

Like most teachers, Mrs. D. was devastated by the rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Shifting from a well-structured school day at SES to at-home learning overnight created

immense worry about her students. However, she found that those families who had participated in the SES Family Learning Community continued to be highly engaged with her and the school. They were active communicators, responded conscientiously to emails (thanks to devices and hotspots provided by the program), and shared photographs of their children “doing” school at home. She shared that being part of such a community was highly motivating to families, and that her families seemed to know just what to do to help their children continue to learn and grow.

SES Family Learning Community members have praised the very substantial support they received from the school. During a time of extreme hardship and uncertainty—exaggerated by the COVID-19 pandemic—family members felt increasingly capable of continuing to move forward. They have received assistance at home with food and medical needs. The personal learning devices and hotspots have opened new technical doors, and they have embraced learning how to help their children to learn virtually. Further, they have applied self-care practices including gratitude to help them get through the toughest days. Our Latinx population has faced very difficult challenges with the pandemic, in part due to more crowded living conditions, a financial inability to stop working even temporarily, and a lack of access to basic goods in our rural community. However, the *todavía no* (not yet) mindset helped them push through these challenges. Nothing is taken for granted and they are determined to ensure that their children continue with school.

Rural communities in small-town America can feel very isolating, especially to those who do not speak English. It is hard to fit in. It is hard to ask for help. And it is hard to make a new home without leaving your old home and cultures behind. Our *Pero, todo es posible: Si, se puede* Family Learning Community at Sudlersville Elementary School has helped build a new home for our EL families. Many have become community and education advocates, as well as cultural leaders. Some, even new small business owners. Most importantly, almost all have become dear friends to each other and to the school staff and administrators. And when one thinks they cannot accomplish something, they remember it's only a matter of *todavía no...not yet!*

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## References

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