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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

For Andrew Wilson’s ELL Team, it’s all about community

NEW ORLEANS [Aug. 17] — The first day of school can be a bit daunting for any student, even more so if English is your second language. That’s why Andrew Wilson Charter School’s English Language Learners (ELL) Department is dedicated to ensuring all students and parents have the tools and information needed for educational success from the start.

“We bridge the gap between parents and teachers,” said Tricia Nance, fifth and sixth grade ELL teacher. “We don’t want our parents and students feeling a disconnect with our school.”

With the 2020-21 school year kicking off with 100 percent distance learning, InspireNOLA schools, including Wilson, held virtual orientations for parents and students prior to starting instruction.

“Not only did we ensure that we offered four different grade-level virtual orientations with translation, but we also held a specific orientation for our ELL parents and students,” said Kelly Tetreau, program coordinator and fourth grade ELL teacher. They also offered a two-hour in-person Google Classroom walkthrough for parents.

“It’s important that all our parents feel connected to Wilson and each other in addition to ensuring information is shared with all our families,” said Shelley Belgard, kindergarten and first grade ELL teacher.

The department team supports more than 175 ELL students at Wilson and serves as the model program for other ELL teams across InspireNOLA.

“They implement and pilot systems and protocols that are then shared and rolled out in our other schools,” said Keilon Johnson-Martin, InspireNOLA Instructional Support Supervisor. “I’m proud of the work this team does, which is reflected in the ELL community they’ve build at Wilson and the success of their students. They are constantly finding innovative ways to problem solve and build at deeper connection with our families and students.”

For example, they created a system of support for virtual learning across InspireNOLA Charter Schools' network by providing translation extension tools for Google Classroom and recording tutorials for parents and students in Spanish.

"They are doing everything possible to make sure all our students get the same level of instruction in virtual learning that they do in our classrooms," Johnson-Martin said. "And it extends beyond academics. The team also provides social and emotional support for our students."

For the team, they say it's all about inclusion and eliminating any disconnect.

"One of the obstacles we faced is that parents were hearing our voice, and even though we were directly translating on behalf of the teacher, parents weren't feeling like they were talking to the teacher," Nance said.

As a solution, Wilson, and all InspireNOLA schools, use Certified Languages Language Line, a service that is a three-way conference call with the teacher, a parent, and non-biased translator. The parent hears the teacher and then the translation and can respond directly to the teacher via the translator. The service also provides a transcript and recording of the call.

"This helps our parents feel more connected to their child's teacher and ensures they are getting the information they need," Nance said.

The team also realized during the last quarter of the 2019-20 school year, when schools were shut down and distance learning began, that some ELL parents were having reading comprehension issues with messages from the school.

"It was creating a vacuum where information in translated text wasn't reaching our parents," Tetreau said.

As a result, the team established chat group through WhatsApp, which allows for text and voice messages. The group now contains 134 parents.

Though originally started as another avenue to reach parents by translating messages sent from the school in both text and audio formats, it has grown into its own community where parents help parents and assistance extends beyond school communication.

Through WhatsApp, the team has helped parents with everything from filling out Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program applications to providing rental assistance resources.

"It's really become a community where it isn't just us providing information, but families are now assisting other families and answering questions," said Eduardo Gonzalez, second and third grade ELL teacher.

Gonzalez records a daily message for parents through the app, not only as a way to provide information but to help forge that school-to-family connection. He is taking their social media a step further this year by launching Wilson's ELL YouTube channel where the team intends to post video translations of weekly school newsletters, school updates, and more.

"Reading Wilson's weekly newsletter on a YouTube channel is just another way our parents can be looped in as much as possible," Tetreau said.

The support the team has for their families extends beyond classroom instruction. For example, Alba Gutierrez, seventh and eighth grade ELL teacher, creates baskets for families for Thanksgiving.

But it's not just about forging a connection between the team and the ELL families, but also creating relationships with all families and students in the school community. It's about being inclusive all-around.

"Culture and representation matters," Gonzalez said.

About one-fourth of Wilson's students are from Spanish-speaking countries. The biggest event the school hosts is Heritage Fest, during National Hispanic Heritage Month.

"Throughout the month, we celebrate what we do here all year," Gonzalez said.

Last year, the team asked if parents would be willing to contribute some food to the fest.

"Our parents were so generous that after feeding 700 kids and all the adults in the building, we still had food left," Tetreau said. "It's a testament to how much they want to share and be included. When we had nothing, they brought everything."

"And that's what contributes to this school's success," Johnson-Martin added. "The parents feel included and respected."

The efforts of this team have resulted in not only improved academics, but also in the school's culture and inclusion.

One example of this is Wilson's soccer team. Gonzalez started the team with a few ELL players and now, 65 students, both ELL and non-ELL, play.

"My kids were talking about how much they love to play and soon, other students were joining and now I could have my own league," he joked.

In the end, Tetreau said it's all about relationship building.

"Our parents have to trust the people serving their babies," she said. "We want what's best for the kids."

"We are always willing to listen and improve," Gonzalez said, with Nance adding, "We will do anything for our children."

Cutlines:

- Wilson ELL Team Photo Cutline: From left: Tricia Nance, Yecenia Lopez, Alba Gutierrez, Shelley Belgard, Eduardo Gonzalez, and Kelly Tetreau.
- Eduardo Gonzalez, an ELL teacher, works with students in second and third grade at Andrew Wilson Charter School.
- Alba Gutierrez is a seventh and eighth grade ELL teacher at Andrew Wilson Charter School

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About InspireNOLA Charter Schools

InspireNOLA Charter Schools operates a network of eight public charter schools in New Orleans, Louisiana. Founded in 2013, InspireNOLA is currently the highest performing open-admission charter management organization in New Orleans and is the only network with one A-graded school and two B-graded schools. InspireNOLA currently serves more than 5,800 students in prekindergarten through 12th grade.