

# The Newcomer Project: Mentoring and Peer Leadership at Fiske Elementary School

**Catherine Glennon Murphy**

camurphy@lexingtonma.org



**Newcomers enter our schools with rich cultural and linguistic experiences from their home countries,** but they also bring anxiety and culture shock. As

ELL teachers, we are responsible for these vulnerable students, but we also need the help of classroom teachers and other staff. At Lexington's Fiske Elementary School, we are employing staff as mentors and students as peer leaders to help our newcomers transition into our school culture.

Our newcomer program got its start four years ago, when two fourth-grade students arrived at our school from Israel with an English proficiency of WIDA Level 1. They were completely lost and unable to cope with the robust curricular demands of 4th grade. I had given them my treasured *Heinle Picture Dictionary*, and access to *Google Translate*, but these supports were not sufficient. The girls were feeling isolated, and I could see that they were very frustrated.

I therefore appealed to the math coach at our school, who readily accepted my request to set up a once-a-week lunch meeting with my students. During these lunches they played card games, shared words from their native language, and learned some academic language. The language demands were very low, and they were allowed to speak with one another in their native language, Hebrew. They looked forward to these weekly lunches and, with this extra support, they gradually became more comfortable at our school. The math coach described these lunch meetings as the most treasured part of her week, as she could see that she was truly making a difference. I could see that I had found an untapped resource and decided to set up similar relationships for every newcomer that came to our school.

I reached out to other teachers, who readily accepted the challenge to work

once a week with an assigned newcomer on a volunteer basis. In this initial year we had five mentors working regularly with our newcomers. Kari Owen, a 3rd grade teacher who was one of our first mentors, described her mentoring sessions as “a chance for the students to practice their English without being judged, without people giggling.” During this first year, the program was very informal, in that there were no logs and no training for the mentors; they simply met with their mentees once a week whenever they could find time during the school day. However, I could see that this was the beginning of something special, and I set to work to plan a more extensive mentoring program for the following year.

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Last spring, I received a grant from the Lexington Education Foundation (LEF) to set up a formal Newcomer Mentoring Project at our school. In the program’s first year, every newcomer who arrived at our doorstep was offered a staff mentor and an iPad fully loaded with apps to assist with language acquisition. Mentors received a small stipend, for which they were required to meet with their newcomers weekly and attend three community meetings. We created a mentoring committee to plan the community meetings and other events. Newcomer families, mentors, and administrators were invited to the community meetings to celebrate the work of the mentors. This was also a great opportunity to offer helpful information to our families about town resources.


Now in our second LEF-funded year, the “Newcomer Project” has grown and added an important new piece: the peer leader. Peer leaders, who are nominated by classroom teachers, are often ELLs who were once newcomers themselves. These peer leaders understand the vital need for companionship in the first few months after arrival in a new country. They provide our newcomers with friendship at a much-needed time in their lives.

As ELL teachers, we see the effects of culture shock in students who have just arrived in a new country. Our mentoring program offers each newcomer a personal ambassador in the school. This mentor, or ambassador, offers one dedicated session each week when the newcomer can play, ask questions, and

know that they are supported. Surveys of our mentors, classroom teachers, and newcomers all demonstrate that this program has been well received. At a recent community meeting, Shikma Kinsbruner, the mother of two newcomers who have now become peer leaders, spoke to a group of families and teachers who had gathered in the school gym on a snowy March morning before school. She described her experience bringing two

young children from their home in Israel when they spoke very little English. She told the newcomer families how the mentoring program had helped to ease her children's transition into American culture. "[Without the mentoring program] I'm sure they would know less English," said Kinsbruner in an interview with the local newspaper. "They're having fun learning. It's not learning, it's a different experience. It's fun." Knowing that her son is now a peer leader made her proud that he is giving back and learning important leadership skills himself. It is an inspiration to see our returning newcomers become peer leaders. These students know the value of a personal ambassador on the very first day of school in a new country.

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Our district is now in the process of analyzing the elementary mentoring programs at each of our schools and collaborating across schools to maximize the benefits for all our students. 

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Catherine Glennon Murphy** is an ELL specialist at Fiske Elementary School in Lexington, MA. She earned her B.A. at Providence College and her M.A.T. in English from Boston College and did extensive course work in Second Language Acquisition at Simmons College and B.U. She taught ESL at Framingham High School for ten years. After leaving FHS to raise her family, she taught part-time at Bunker Hill Community College and SCALE in Somerville, MA. In Lexington she taught the SEI course through the RETELL initiative for three years and continues her work in teacher training by teaching a course called "Teaching with Academic Conversations," developed by Sara Hamerla. She is participating in a district-wide study group in Lexington to promote collaboration and mentoring in the Lexington Public Schools. If you have a mentoring program in your elementary school, she would like to hear about it!