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Council gives Providence recommendations on improving education for English language learners

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PROVIDENCE — Seven years ago, the Council of Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation’s large urban systems, wrote a blistering report about how Providence was failing its English language learners.

Tuesday, it concluded that little had changed.

The council’s findings echo many of the rampant deficiencies included in a study by the Justice Department, which found that the district “set students up to struggle and too often fail.” Another report, this one released this spring by Johns Hopkins University, underscored the district’s failure to educate its fast-growing English learner population, which accounts for one-third of its total enrollment.

“Given the preeminence of English learners in Providence, the students were by and large invisible to the system in terms of the services it provided,” said Michael Casserly, the council’s executive director. “The programs aren’t there. The supports aren’t there. The attention to their lowest-performing schools isn’t there. It’s as if the system had rendered them invisible.”

Casserly did give Providence credit for inviting the council to take a deep dive into English language learners. It visited 14 schools in February, then spent months analyzing state and local data.

“In general,” he said, “the district hasn’t made much progress on the recommendations given in 2012.”

Casserly and Gabriela Uro, director of English learner policy and research, detailed the broad categories where Providence is falling far short of meeting the needs of its English learners.

- Students move from grade to grade, and school to school, without continuity of instruction. A student might get English language instruction in a bilingual classroom one year and as a “pull-out” class the following year.

-The district decides in January how many English learner seats it needs, but these families often arrive mid-year or later.

“If you’re under-counting kids, then you’re going to have teacher shortages,” Casserly said. “Kids and their families can’t figure out the path forward for learning English.”

-Teachers who are certified to teach English learners are permitted to opt out, even though the contract is silent on that issue.

The district does a poor job collecting data on whether students were making progress year-to-year.

“We were terribly frustrated in the quality of the data,” Uro said. “We found errors all the way through.”

-Many of the lowest-performing schools, which had the highest numbers of English learners, lacked a quality curriculum that could have moved the schools out of that achievement category.

The council made 100 recommendations, including building well-defined instruction, giving principals more responsibility over the programs, much more professional training for teachers and principals, and improving communications with parents.

The district says it has made a number of improvements this fall, but Casserly said, “Even if the district puts professional development in place and addresses the teacher opt-out, the instruction that kids are likely to receive is pretty weak.”

Interim Supt. Frances Gallo said the district has screened more than 1,000 students to ensure they are receiving the right services, set aside an additional \$1.1 million for personnel and programs, purchased high-quality curriculum materials and provided training for principals.

Next year, the district said it will expand the number of certified ESL teachers, make sure that parents are informed of their rights, and adopt curriculum that better meet the needs of English learners.

The report can be accessed on the Council’s web site at: <https://tinyurl.com/y48tag9p>