



A Look at Chariho's ELL Program

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72 Minutes

+ a Lifetime



ONE TEACHER'S REFLECTION:

Like shadows in the city, the toil and tedium of the day stretch behind me. I ponder the unfinished tasks that lie ahead as I leave yet another meeting for English Language Learners (ELLs). I worry, asking myself if the demands of those unfinished tasks will grow and prove too demanding.

Unsettled and unsure, I reflect on the day's conversations with colleagues, teachers from other districts and even college professors, hoping they'll have the answers. But it won't be until later, after I conduct a slow drive-through past my childhood neighborhood and settle down for a quick meal at a nearby KFC, that I relearn a simple lesson: what the mind sees, the soul unravels.

What follows in this presentation is the changing roles of ELL programs in the state and how Chariho's program meets the needs of its own students who are working diligently to master the English language.

INTRODUCTION

A painting of a rolling green landscape. The scene is dominated by vibrant green hills and fields. A winding path or road cuts through the terrain, leading the eye from the foreground into the distance. A fence, possibly made of wooden posts and wire, runs across the lower portion of the image, separating the foreground from the rest of the landscape. The sky is a pale, hazy green, suggesting a bright but slightly overcast day. The overall style is that of a traditional landscape painting, with visible brushstrokes and a rich, naturalistic color palette.

For ELL teachers in the Chariho District, the task of our program, of course, is to provide and ensure the best education possible for our English Language Learners. The demands of that task are both self-imposed and driven by federal and Rhode Island educational mandates.

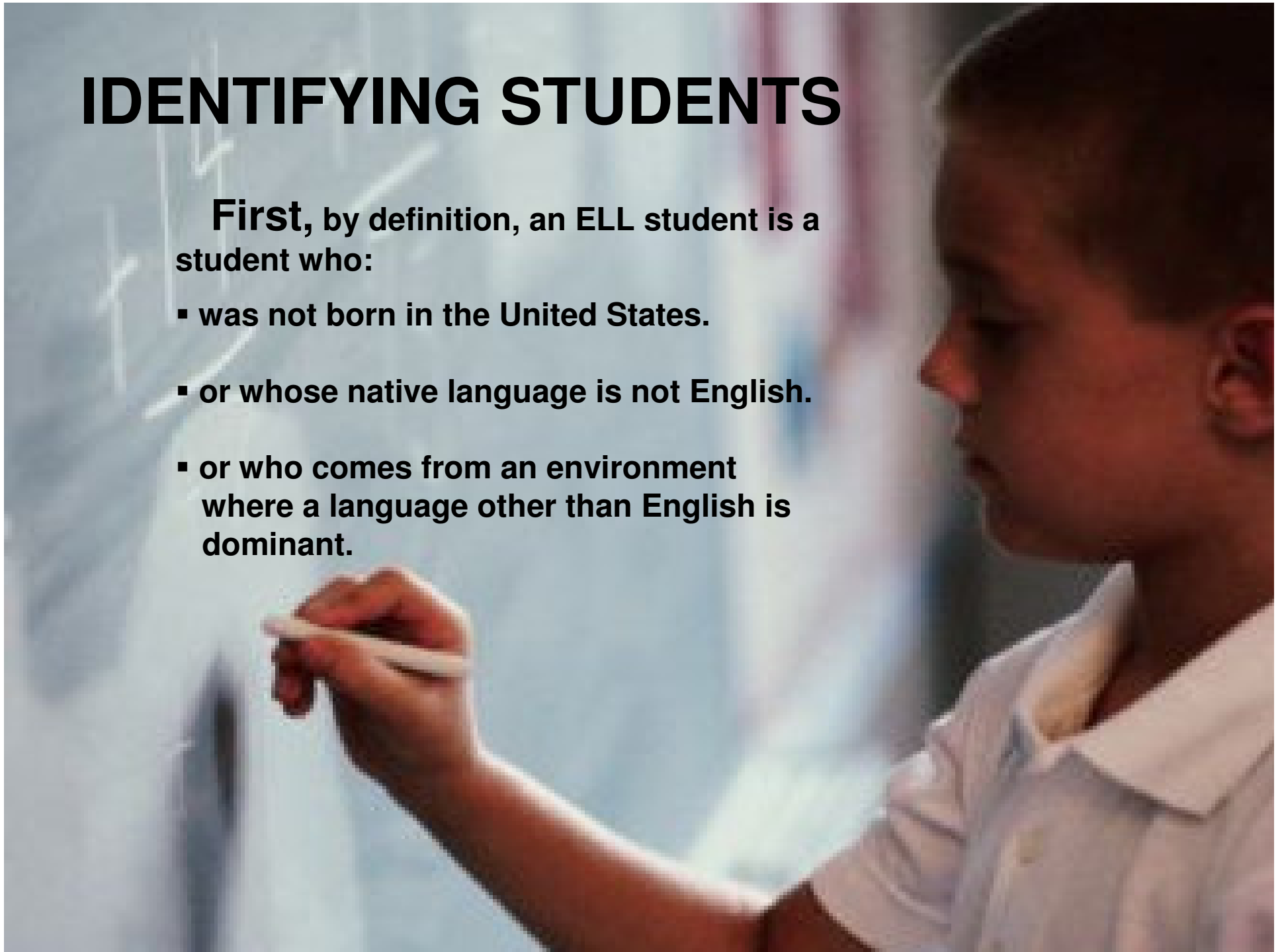
Additionally, our district is unrelenting in its goal of being home to the top-performing students in the state, at both the elementary and secondary levels.

For those unfamiliar with ELL Education, I will begin with the basics.

IDENTIFYING STUDENTS

First, by definition, an ELL student is a student who:

- was not born in the United States.
- or whose native language is not English.
- or who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant.




THE BICS

Second, it's important to distinguish that language learning occurs in two very distinct stages.

During the first stage, an ELL student acquires language that allows him or her to literally survive in the new environment and also to communicate informally with classmates and teachers. This language acquisition process takes one or, at the most, two years to complete and involves the acquisition of basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS).

In other words, a student learns to understand and to speak simple social English. The student is able to interact in a school setting, but only at an informal level.



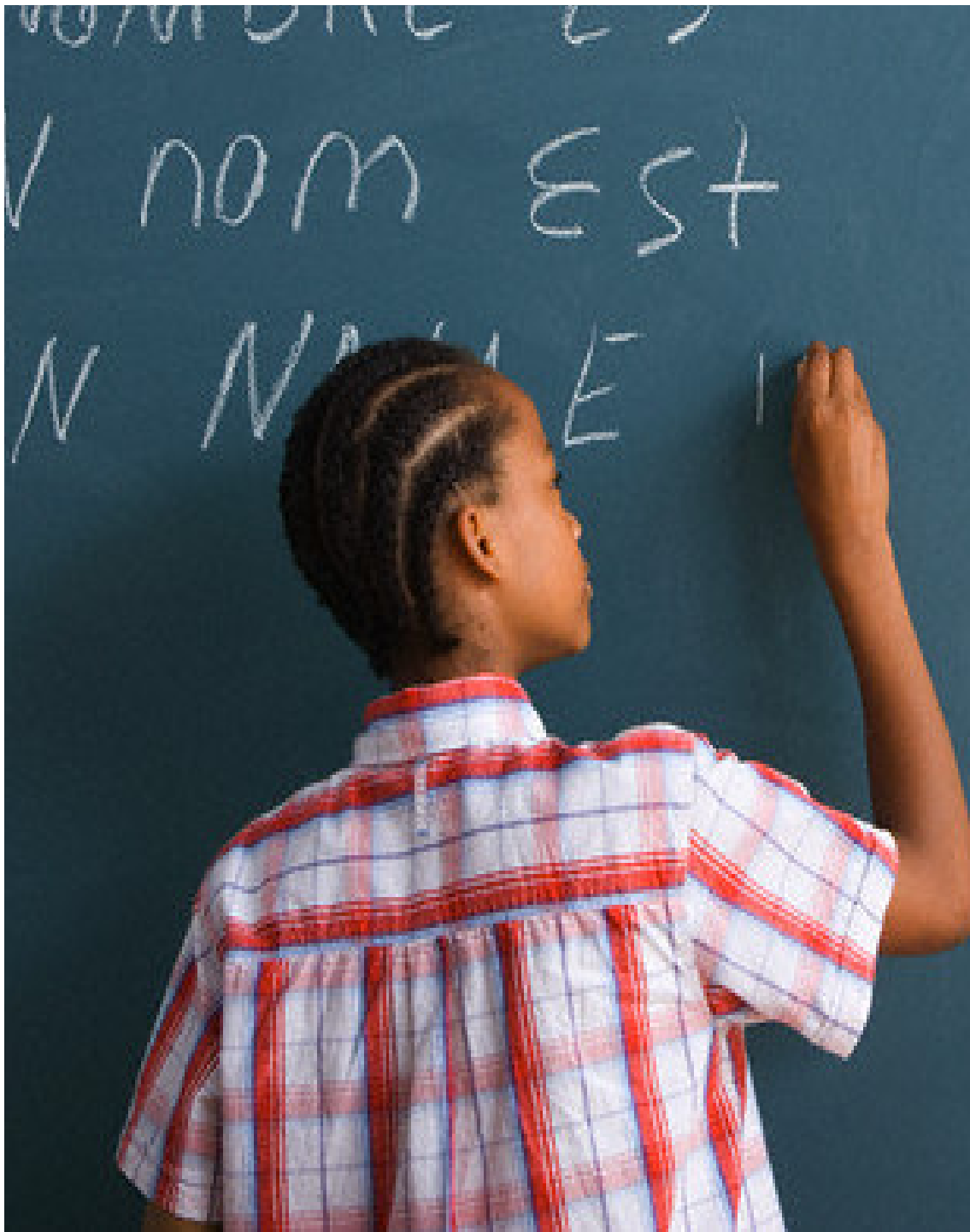


The more demanding and formal academic language, meanwhile, requires at least five years of exposure and, in some cases, may take up to seven years for ELLs to master and to catch up with their peers.

Why? Simple. Not only is academic language embedded in abstract ideas and concepts, academic language also forces students to tap into prior knowledge, which, in many cases, students may not have.

Only when an ELL student attains this cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) is he or she considered to be truly proficient in English.

THE CALP

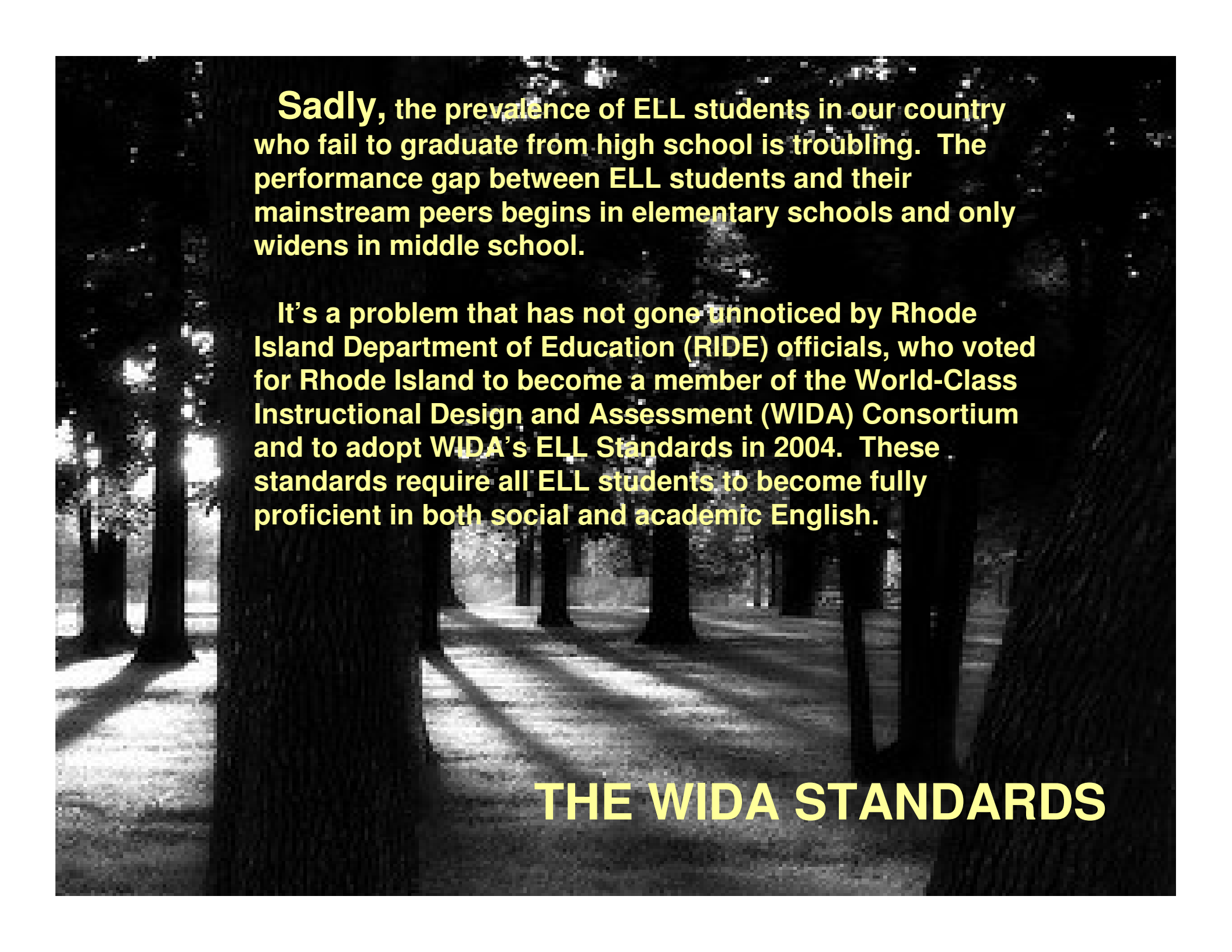


THE DILEMMA

The problem, oftentimes, comes to an impasse when an ELL student passes through the basic language acquisition stage and enters the cognitive academic language learning period.

Most teachers and administrators erroneously conclude a student is proficient in English and no longer needs ELL support.

“I don’t understand,” many mainstream classroom teachers utter. “Why aren’t they doing well in my classroom? They can speak English.”



Sadly, the prevalence of ELL students in our country who fail to graduate from high school is troubling. The performance gap between ELL students and their mainstream peers begins in elementary schools and only widens in middle school.

It's a problem that has not gone unnoticed by Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) officials, who voted for Rhode Island to become a member of the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium and to adopt WIDA's ELL Standards in 2004. These standards require all ELL students to become fully proficient in both social and academic English.

THE WIDA STANDARDS



THE FIVE STANDARDS

Standard 1: ELL students communicate for social and instructional purposes within the school setting.

Standard 2: ELL students communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Language Arts.

Standard 3: ELL students communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Mathematics.

Standard 4: ELL students communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Science.

Standard 5: ELL students communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Social Studies.

CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

The purpose of the ELL Standards is plain and direct:

- **to identify appropriate language skill-based performance goals for students in ELL and content area classes.**
- **to coexist and align with current academic standards.**
- **to provide appropriate, reliable and valid expectations of student performance.**



COEXISTING:

How does Chariho coexist alongside the state's Common Core academic standards? In answering this question, we need to begin with the BICS and the CALP :

- Entering and beginning level ELL students enrolling in the Chariho District receive ELL instruction in social language as well as Language Arts. Additionally, these students qualify and, in most cases, are placed in the district's reading intervention program.**
- Content area instruction for core academic courses is modified with input from both content and ELL teachers.**
- Entering and beginning level ELL students are not mainstreamed into content area courses for at least one academic year.**
- Student progress is measured by WIDA's *ACCESS* test, which is administered to all ELL students in the district every January.**

A person in a wetsuit is surfing on a large, curling wave. The water is a vibrant blue-green color, and the sky is a clear, deep blue. The surfer is positioned in the center-left of the frame, riding the face of the wave. The overall scene is dynamic and energetic.

COEXISTING PART TWO:

Only when a student progresses to the developing and expanding levels of language acquisition does discussion begin on fully mainstreaming the student into core academic courses. At this point, ELL instruction is offered both through inclusion and on a pull-out basis:

- Content area instruction is modified with input from both ELL and mainstream classroom teachers.**
- Academic rigor is increased, especially at the secondary school level where ELL students are expected to complete a graduation portfolio.**
- Student progress is continued to be measured on an annual basis through the WIDA *ACCESS* test.**

COEXISTING PART THREE:

In the last stage of language acquisition (the bridging period), ELL students usually are exited from the ELL program:

- In most cases, the student's progress in the mainstream classroom is monitored by the ELL teacher for two academic years.**
- Some students remain in the ELL program for an additional year receiving support during their skills or advisory blocks.**

A pair of glasses with a dark frame and clear lenses is resting on a wooden surface. The background is blurred, showing a warm, brownish tone. The text is overlaid on the image in a bright yellow color.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

72 minutes have passed since my meeting. I have driven through the Pawtucket neighborhood in which I was raised, and I find myself ordering a KFC meal from a Hispanic teenager. As my fast-food meal is keyed into the register, other workers shuffle automatically from station to station in an effort to keep all of us customers happy. I notice they, too, are all Hispanic. I'm tempted to ask them if they were ELL students, but, of course, I refrain.

I think back to my years in public school. An immigrant and recent arrival from Portugal, I was placed in a mainstream first grade classroom. Back then, there were no ELL programs; you either sank or you swam. Fortunately, I kept my head above the turbulent waters of the classroom.

I realize, though, that not everyone is as lucky as I. For rigorous academic expectations are necessary if a lifetime of learning and success is to occur. And for ELL students, that lifetime of success is possible through sound ELL and mainstream programs.