

Pablo Ortega, director of the newly established English Language Learners Program in the Des Moines Public Schools, shared statistics, stories, resources and concerns with those gathered at the Wallace House in Des Moines for the second lunch focusing on “Ethnicity in Our Community.”

Ortega’s life in Chicago as a middle school principal was interrupted last year when he attended a school job fair. A DMPS employee asked him if he had ever been to Iowa. He responded, “I have never been west of the Mississippi.” Since coming to the ELL program only nine months ago, the expressions of kindness he has experienced since coming to Des Moines have been a pleasant surprise to this native Chicagoan. But what astonished him most was the diversity within this community.

Growing up, Ortega was English as a Second Language student so he is sensitive and understanding of what it means to not comprehend what is happening in the classroom. This translates to an ELL program that considers the whole student, not just the barrier of language. Students cannot begin to learn until they feel safe and comfortable within their new environments.

Ortega pointed out that “There are more than 100 languages spoken in the households that make up Des Moines Public Schools. The district serves more than 6,000 English Language Learners with 156 committed and dedicated teachers and staff, including bilingual outreach workers at 50 different sites throughout the community.”

The mission of the ELL program is:

- To educate English Language Learners to the same rigorous curriculum standards as all students in the district while achieving English language objectives in the areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- To promote pride in students’ cultural and linguistic identities, maintain cultural heritage and prepare students to actively participate within American society.
- To ensure that the educational process is a cooperative effort between home and school; it creates opportunities to involve families, communities and DMPS staff.

The ELL program begins working with immigrant and refugee students as soon as they are registered for school. Ortega stated that, “The district’s ELL population has expanded from 11% of the students in 2003 to 20% in 2015. From June-December, 2016 DMPS averaged 55 new immigrant or refugee students per month entering the school system. Since the first immigrant ban that was ordered by the federal government in late January of this year that number has dropped to zero.

When a refugee or immigrant family comes to Des Moines, settlement services such as Iowa Department of Human Rights and Catholic Charities work with families for three months. They are given tools to navigate through day-to-day living and, most importantly, to become employed. These families want to be here and not return to the country they emigrated from so they are motivated. But it is a lot to learn in a short amount of time and often that means pressure for the family. Sometimes that extends to the children who are also learning new words, new routines, making new friends and trying to get along.

Ortega stated that if there is a 16 year-old immigrant in a room with a 16 year-old native-born student, 74% of the foreign-born students will be employed compared to 69% of the native-born. As an adult, it is more likely that the foreign-born person will average \$39,000 a year in wages while the native-born worker will earn \$47,000. That difference puts many immigrant families in poverty. Ortega was the first in his family to attend college and is currently working on his PhD. He said that the immigrant story needs to be, "What assets do they bring to us and not that the language makes them a deficit."

Ortega states that the ELL program has to always be prepared to help incoming students. The quick response approach is always related to what is happening concerning skirmishes around the world, how governments treat their citizens, and policies forming and changing politically in the United States.

During the question and answer part of the program one person asked what determines an immigrant and a refugee. Ortega explained that an immigrant makes a conscious decision to leave their native country. A refugee comes to another country based upon persecution, fear for their freedom and fear for their life. World-wide, refugees must work with the United Nations Refugee Program. That program resettles refugees by determining their status as refugees and then finding countries to which they can relocate.

Another participant wanted the Sanctuary School policy explained. "The school board wanted to make it clear that DMPS is asking that a court order be delivered to the school attorneys rather than directly to the school," said Ortega. "We also want people to know their rights."

In summarizing his presentation, Ortega made it clear that ELL students are not given breaks regarding the curriculum but given tools so that they can succeed in school. "We focus on student achievement which can only happen when students feel safe and are at a place that they can learn," said Ortega.