



## Resources



### From the Heart: Achieving success Susana Ghio — Silverton, Oregon



*In 1990, Susana Ghio came to the United States with her family to escape the turmoil in Argentina. An attorney by trade, she knew she would have difficulty practicing law in a different language. She had learned to write English in elementary school but never learned to speak it. She hadn't even passed through U.S. customs before she realized the huge difference between reading English and speaking it. "The INS agent asked me for my passport, and I think I answered, 'There is the cat. There is the door,'" she remembers now with a laugh. Sixteen years later, she vividly recalls the fear and bewilderment of being a newcomer who doesn't speak the language of the land. Now an ESL teacher who trains other ESL teachers in the Salem-Keizer School District in Salem, Oregon, Susana brings her experiences as an immigrant to bear in her work and in her community. She recently spoke with Colorín Colorado about teaching and her work with a local group that focuses on literacy skills.*

#### **In addition to teaching, you also head up a community group called "Somos Hispanas Unidas." What's the purpose of your group?**

**Susana:** It started when I got involved with a group called "Circle of Women" as a volunteer to help with Spanish-speaking women who came there for help. The organization was started by a group of nuns in Seattle to help victims of domestic violence with things like housing. The organization was slow to start here, and we eventually decided that we needed to grow a group for Hispanic women to help them understand our community and what's going on here. We started small, but we didn't give up, and — voila — now we are strong.

We renamed ourselves "Somos Hispanas Unidas," and we do things like weekly readings for children at the library, ELL classes if they need them, and computer keyboarding lessons for women. One meeting was for the women to write stories or poems for their children about their own childhoods in the countries where they grew up. Oh my goodness! They are very nice stories! We polished some of them and came up with about ten stories. They were so proud because they never did this before, but then they started reading their stories to their children and their children were just amazed. They said "We didn't know this about your life! This is very interesting!"

#### **What will you do with the stories?**

**Susana:** We have a plan to publish the stories and distribute them to elementary schools in Silverton. I want to make a packet of the stories so all

[Home page](#)

[For parents](#)

[For educators](#)

[Resources](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[In the classroom](#)

[Beyond the classroom](#)

- [The National View](#)
- [Got Questions?](#)
- [What does that mean?](#)
- [From the heart](#)
  - [May 2006](#)
  - [April 2006](#)
  - [March 2006](#)
  - [February 2006](#)
  - [January 2006](#)
  - [Archive](#)
- [Special messages](#)

[Free webcasts & video](#)

[Articles](#)

[Links](#)

[Glossary](#)

[About](#)

the children in the schools here can read them. The stories are all genuine experiences from their own countries - Chile, Argentina, Mexico. A lot of our ladies are educated with degrees from their own countries, but are working jobs here that are not connected to their education. Because of the language, they can't perform like they do in their own country, but they are still models for children.

### **What do you wish all teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs) understood about their students?**

**Susana:** We learn differently in our country, we memorize everything and don't do public speaking in school like they do here. When we learn to write, they are whole paragraphs, not pieces like the main idea and details like they are taught here. So imagine all these differences and the language, and it's just a whole different way of learning. So first we need to teach students to understand how English works.

When we first came here, my daughters were in fourth grade. Their math homework was problem-solving, which is different from the way we learned math in school. My husband and I are both lawyers and we couldn't help them with their math! We couldn't understand what they were asking us to do! It's a totally different system, so it's even hard for the parents to know how to help their children.

### **Based on the differences you're describing, what kinds of assignments or school tasks are particularly challenging for ELL students?**

**Susana:** A common thing for teachers to ask is to "describe in your own words," but these children don't have their own words in English. It's so hard for them! They don't have the extended vocabulary that they need to try and put their ideas in their own words. They think, "I know what you want but I can't find my words right now!" Teachers can help by giving them more time to find a way to get their ideas straight. Maybe let them look in books and take extra time to reflect. They know what they want to say, but they can't support their ideas with words.

### **What do you think the biggest misunderstanding is about ELL students?**

**Susana:** When you say the kid is in ESL, they think you are teaching them to be more fluent in Spanish. We do teach in Spanish first but what we do in the beginning is teach them survival skills, like how to ask for things at the store and how to read signs and how to read works like "name" and "address" on a form. Once they understand in Spanish, it's easier to transfer the knowledge to English. Just like it's easier to learn to read and write in your own language and then transfer the knowledge to English than to try to teach reading and writing and English together. I'm not saying teach in Spanish for a long time, but at least in the beginning.

### **Do you have specific suggestions for non-Spanish-speaking teachers who are seeing more and more students in their classes who aren't proficient in English?**

**Susana:** You cannot teach the ELL student like the regular student. You have to use strategies to show them how to learn differently. That's the crux of our training. Teach the student to understand and use the strategy. If I use a graphic organizer, I can see the main idea and details, not just the paragraph. Use visual cues. Use [REALIA](#), which is using a physical example. We recommend that teachers break the kids into groups so they can work together.

For secondary students, we use [SIOP](#), which stands for Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, and elementary teachers use [GLAD](#) (Guided Language Acquisition Design). Every teacher can use those shelter strategies — even in

science, math, or art — if they have ELL students who are not proficient in English.

### **In your opinion, what is the best thing that parents of ELL students can do to help their children succeed in school?**

**Susana:** First of all, they need to come to the school whenever they are invited. In our district, all the conferences and all the meetings will have translators, but if we don't have the parents come, we don't have any customers. It's hard for us to go door to door and give parents the information they need.

My goal, my ambition is to try to identify leaders in the community and have them invite us to their houses and they can invite friends to hear our talk. It's hard for parents to come to the schools, sometimes; they feel intimidated. But there are things the parents need to know!

### **What kinds of things do you want parents to know?**

**Susana:** How the school district works, what they need to do to support their students, what they need to know about homework. They need to get involved from the start so when they get to high school, the kids can't tell the parents, "An F stands for 'fabulous!'" Little things like that!

The parents need to know what to expect. They need to know they have the right to ask teachers for information about their student's progress. But they don't know that! They have the right to come to the class and observe and talk to the principal, even if they don't know the language.

Parents have rights, but they also have obligations. At home, they need to support the teachers. If you already know that the teacher is going to have assignments, but you don't ask your student about it, then you are not fulfilling your obligations. There's not just one side to the story.

### **What do you wish teachers or people in the community understood about families with ELL students**

How scary it is to not know the language. I'm giving a speech next week on how to answer the phone. It's very different when you are face to face with someone, you communicate with your hands and eyes, but when you are talking on the phone, there's nothing, just the straight words. I was almost dying every time the phone rang when we first came. My children would say, "Why are you not answering the phone?" But I couldn't! The phone is scary!

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< Back

Next >

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