

Lowell High School

- Grades 9-12
- 3,099 students
- Title 1 school
- Languages spoken: 25
- 67% students of color



Respecting Diversity at LHS



Lowell High School is unmatched in its linguistic, racial, and cultural diversity. A new wave of immigration over the past few decades has

spurred Lowell's revitalization from a struggling mill-town into an emerging gateway city. Its students bring rich lived experiences into the classroom making for a vibrant educational experience for all. Despite a social and cultural renaissance, Lowell's booming population of English Language Learners present challenges in how to best foster language acquisition.

Building College and Career Ready Listeners

Bryan Sheckman teaches US History for English Language Learners at Lowell High School. He embraces a holistic approach to teaching, using a variety of pedagogical techniques to improve language while learning history content. Listening is a key component

of this instructional vision. "Listening is a critical life and career skill," he notes. "Listening skills are important for these students for the present and the future, as many of them will take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) for college entrance, eventually," he said.

This challenge coincides with a renewed public policy focus on listening and speaking skills. Amy McLeod, Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, emphasizes the need to address the listening standards and the academic language needs of ELLs. "There's no conventional instruction about what are the components of listening and how this connects with learning."

McLeod laments the lack of high quality listening exercises that have authentic, academic language. Rob DeLossa, Social Studies Department Chair at Lowell High School, notes that "If we are serious about preparing students to become active participants in our democracy, they must be able to listen effectively."

Scaffolding the Learning

At Lowell High there is a focus on studying current events in a social studies or English course in a way that contextualizes content so that it doesn't feel abstract to students. It also exposes them to the kind of academic language that they will need to improve their literacy skills. While many native speakers hear academic language at home, this is rare for ELLs. Access to academic language channeled through engaging content is invaluable for these populations.

That's why Miriam Morgenstern, a retired social studies teacher from Lowell High School, says she uses Listenwise current events and lessons to catalyze discussions on topics including the Civil War and gun rights. The interactive transcript feature allows her ELLs to follow along and read the story as they listen. The "slowed audio" feature is also a favorite. She encourages multiple close listening exercises with different goals.

"My students are multi-level English language learners, and so they all had different entry points to the story. Students listened to the story first to identify the main idea and theme. During the second listen, students used a graphic organizer to listen for each speaker's voice and point of view. After this second listen, we quickly went over a few key vocabulary words, and then a lively debate ensued. Using prior knowledge, students related the story to the Second Amendment. More significantly, students began to speak about guns in their own lives."

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Sheckman's students also appreciate how Listenwise has exposed them to new topics and debates. "It's fascinating to see how historical events unfolded in this country," said Joseph, whose family is from Haiti. "I never studied the American Civil War so I didn't realize that the country was on the verge of collapse." Emerging cognitive research also shows that expanded background knowledge in addition to skills practice improves academic achievement and language development. Listenwise bolsters both.

Implementing Listenwise

Social studies teachers at Lowell High School began using Listenwise in the 2014-2015 school year. Director of Curriculum Amy McLeod decided to expand use to ELA teachers in 2015-16. In commenting on the use of Listenwise she noted, "its adaptability for different populations is unique and very valuable for use across a broad range of learners, subjects and settings."

Listenwise provides a toolbox of materials with questions, literacy supports and instruction ideas. In addition to the demonstrable progress in their students' listening, teachers appreciate the flexibility that Listenwise affords all learners. DeLossa notes, "A 10th grade ELL listens to the same story as an AP student in another classroom. Yet the ability to differentiate assignments allows me to target individual areas of need. This is unmatched."