

Michael Matsuda

Recognized for Leadership in English-Language-Learner Education

California Leader Puts Spotlights on Long-Term English-Learners

By Corey Mitchell February 24, 2016

- **Expertise:** English-Language-Learner Education
- **Position:** Superintendent
- **District:** Anaheim Union High School District, Calif.

Michael Matsuda often reflects on his mother's experience as a student in the [Anaheim Union High School District](#). The former Ruth Ikeda—then a 14-year-old freshman—was among the dozens of Japanese-American students forced out of Anaheim High School in the early 1940s after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Her family, including two older sisters who graduated from Anaheim High, spent two years detained in a World War II internment camp near Yuma, Ariz. The family of Michael Matsuda's father, Jack, was detained at the same camp. "It was a dark time," Michael Matsuda says. More than 70 years later, Matsuda was appointed superintendent in the same Southern California school district, keenly aware of the challenges that students can face—inside the classroom and out.

Ruth Matsuda died before his appointment as superintendent in 2014, but her stories of pain and embarrassment that the experience of internment caused are still fresh in her son's mind. Her life has inspired his work, including his efforts to bolster the prospects of long-term English-learners—those students who have stalled in their progress toward English proficiency, making it difficult for them to have full access to core courses and to graduate on time.

LESSONS FROM THE LEADER

- **Know Students' Needs:** Remember that long-term English-learners need oral-language development in the classroom every day, which teachers should encourage in Socratic seminars and other engaging oral strategies.
- **Support Biliteracy:** Develop a "seal of biliteracy" pathway so students can build on their linguistic skills to graduate with a credential affirming their academic language skills in English and another language.
- **Build Parents' Knowledge:** Support parents' capacity and knowledge by bringing them into classrooms to see and hear what critical thinking, communication, creativity, and collaboration look and sound like.

Colleagues describe Matsuda as an unassuming leader who's worked behind the scenes to make life easier for students and families who often have it the hardest. *"He focuses on our invisible students,"*

says Annemarie Randle-Trejo, the president of the school board. In his first 18 months on the job, he's prioritized the needs of homeless students and extended more resources to language-learners and their parents. *"I always tell the kids, 'I work for you, and education should work for you,'"* Matsuda says.

Earning a Diploma

In the late 1990s, Matsuda, then a middle school teacher in the district, heard about an initiative in the San Francisco schools to present diplomas to former Japanese-American students detained in internment camps. He wanted to replicate the ceremony in Anaheim for his mother and others who'd been uprooted and experienced the same ordeal. *Ruth Matsuda* resisted the idea until the district agreed to posthumously honor her former Anaheim High School principal, *Paul Demaree*. He had written letters to students in the internment camps, encouraging them to continue their education. At age 71, she and a former classmate accepted their diplomas, marching alongside hundreds of graduating seniors in the class of 1997. *"It was a proud moment,"* Matsuda says. *"My parents were English-learners. It didn't dawn on me until later when I studied what they [English-learners] are."* Amid the nation's ongoing immigration debate, Matsuda, 58, sees parallels between his mother's experience and those of refugee students, many of them English-language learners, who have come into U.S. schools in large numbers in recent years. But instead of being cast out of American schools, he believes they're seeking sanctuary inside them. The newcomer ELLs are among the 1.5 million English-learners in California's public schools, roughly 25 percent of the state's K-12 enrollment. **Matsuda's heavily Hispanic, high-poverty, 31,700 - student district has served as a laboratory for the state's efforts to improve education for ELLs.** Two-thirds of the district's students are Hispanic, and 78 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Among the district's 17 schools, only three buildings have *mobility rates* — the percentage of students who attend different schools within the same school year — of less than 10 percent.

Anaheim Union School District has more than 6,500 English-language-learner students, roughly 20 percent of the district's enrollment. **Roughly 60 percent of them are considered long-term learners of the language—those who haven't made significant progress toward English proficiency. Students long stuck in English-learner classes are less likely to graduate and attend college.** Students who are not proficient in English by the time they leave elementary school often struggle to become so later, research has shown. So, by the time an English-learner enrolls at one of Anaheim's middle or high schools, the odds could already be stacked against him or her.

To help those students, Matsuda has been instrumental in creating lesson-design-specialist programs, with teacher coaches who "infuse language and literacy into all our courses," says Cynthia Vasquez Petitt, the district's director of English-learner and multilingual services.



Photo: Christina House for Education Week

Matsuda's team tracks each ELL in the district with the goal of shoring up the student's individual academic weaknesses. He reassigned the district's top teachers, shipping them out to schools to offer their expertise to colleagues. The district looks beyond English proficiency as a goal, angling to prepare its students for college and careers.

Matsuda developed his focus on post-K-12 issues during his time as a trustee for California's North Orange County Community College District. He's also served as co-chairman of the state Partnership for 21st Century Learning.

In California and nationally, schools are embracing bilingualism, marking a significant swing from the days when the state's voters approved Proposition 227. The 1998 measure restricted the availability of bilingual education for students in favor of English-only immersion programs for English-learners. California voters will have a chance to repeal the law in November.

Matsuda's parents ran a small business, a plant nursery, out of a working-class, Spanish-speaking neighborhood in Orange County. He never learned his parent's native language of Japanese, and they never encouraged him to do so. To his chagrin, he didn't learn Spanish, either. He wants to ensure that students in his district don't lose part of their cultural heritage as he did.

Long-Term Push

Matsuda was an advocate for English-learners well before he rolled out his district's plan, including during his time as a board member for the research and advocacy group Californians Together. **In 2010, Californians Together published a study determining that many English-learners struggled with the language because schools failed to monitor their progress, adequately train teachers, or provide appropriate curriculum.** *"They're put onto a different track and not a very successful one,"* says Patricia Gándara, an education professor and a co-director of the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at the University of California, Los Angeles. **In a 2014 follow-up report, Californians Together found that nearly 75 percent of the state's English-language learners in grades 6-12 have been in schools for seven or more years and still fall short of enough fluency in English to succeed academically.**

"He understands that change has to be sustained over multiple years," says Shelly Spiegel-Coleman, the executive director of Californians Together. *"There is so much pressure on administrators that sometimes they don't see beyond the heavy load they're carrying. But he does."*
I always tell the kids, 'I work for you, and education should work for you.'

State law now requires educators to define and identify long-term ELLs and for school districts to collect and report data on such students. The state is also taking steps to encourage bilingualism for all students: Graduating seniors can earn a *"seal of biliteracy"* on their high school transcripts and diplomas, which signifies they have reached fluency in English and a second language. **Matsuda's district piloted the seal-of-biliteracy program in 2010, before Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation enacting it statewide.** About 200 Anaheim Union students earned the special recognition during the first year, 2010-11. That number swelled to more than 900 for the graduating class of 2015. Three-fourths of the district's students earning the special recognition are former English-learners. *"Matsuda is calling out these long-term English-learners that have kind of been ignored,"* Gándara says. **"We would hope that people across the state take note of that and follow that kind of model."**

Unconventional Route

In January, thousands of students from across Anaheim Union were set to spend a day off school participating in community-service projects. The effort was to mark the second annual Servathon, aimed at raising tens of thousands of dollars for campus activities and grants to pay for student-led community-improvement projects. Students solicited sponsors and collected pledges

based on the number of service hours they completed. Matsuda's board members praised the effort as another innovative undertaking by a leader who came to the superintendent's office via an unconventional route.

Education wasn't Matsuda's first career choice. He tried his hand at several jobs, including stints working as a contract negotiator for a jet-propulsion laboratory and as a diversity trainer before he broke into education as a substitute teacher in Orange County in the early 1990s. And as an educator, he bypassed several rungs on the traditional career ladder: He'd never served as a superintendent or even a principal before taking the top job in Anaheim Union School District. For most of his 20-plus years in Anaheim, he worked as a teacher and midlevel administrator running development programs for beginning teachers. Several school board members, including Brian O'Neal, were uneasy over his lack of administrative experience when he was hired in March 2014. *"He had a steep learning curve, but he rose to the occasion,"* O'Neal says. Matsuda has calmed the concerns. *"Once they saw him in the driver's seat, they realized he had everything he needed for the job,"* Randle-Trejo says. *"He was already leading well before he stepped into that position."*

Leaders To Learn From is a project of *Education Week*, the nation's foremost source for K-12 news and analysis

Produced with support from The Wallace Foundation, at www.wallacefoundation.org