

## **Immigrant Growth Felt in County Schools** *by Jane Schneider*

With the arrival of summer, many Shelby County ELL students return to homes where English isn't the primary language. To keep new skills sharp, the Shelby County Schools (SCS) runs an English as a Second Language (ESL) Summer Camp. Elementary-aged children meet a half-day for two weeks to learn about geography, share their culture, and have fun.

"The biggest challenge is meeting kids where they are," says Todd Goforth, director of SCS's ESL program. "They speak many different languages and are learning at different levels, both with their English and academically. If they are behind in reading, we must bring them up to their grade level."

And unlike the way ESL was once taught, grouping foreign-speaking children together to learn at their own pace, today's students are mainstreamed into regular classrooms, immediately immersed in both language and learning.

About half of these children start school with no English speaking skills, "and since they can't get help with homework at home, we must be able to provide that extra level of support," says Goforth. It takes one to two years for kids to become conversant in English, but three to five years to fully comprehend academic language. So classes like the summer school camp focus on strengthening academic vocabulary.

SCS serves more than 1,200 ELL students a year, and Goforth estimates 25 new students enroll each month. Most of those are Latinos. With more than 54 languages spoken by students in the county schools, it's imperative they become fluent in English in order to progress academically.

One tool Goforth has developed to meet that aim is a resource-based web site for ESL teachers. It offers exercises in English speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and "is broken into specific areas so you can focus on the individual skills with a child," notes Goforth, who is also president of Tennessee's Teachers to Speakers of Other Languages organization. He

includes teacher modification tips that explain how to assess ELL students and break down assignments. The site has become a popular one and is used by ESL instructors around the country. In addition, the district makes ESL available to adult speakers, with classes offered at three different locations year-round.

**Memphis Parent Magazine, August 2009**