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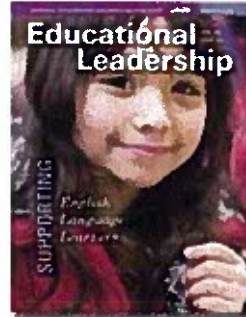
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Supporting English Language Learners

English Language Learners Make the News

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An after-school journalism program motivates English language learners to improve their English skills.



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Only minutes after the school dismissal bell rings, a group of 8- and 9-year olds dashes into a classroom and instantly become budding journalists. The classroom in which the 10 will work is divided into three centers: one for community news, a second for sports news, and a third for calendar news. The community news team reads articles from *Scholastic News*, searching for information about elected officials. The sports team is creating a list of unfamiliar words from an article on the Beijing Olympics. The calendar news team peruses a *Los Angeles Times* article about Justin Timberlake's appearance at a recent awards ceremony. The teacher directs the team to look in the article for information about what awards he won, where the event took place, and what other celebrities attended the ceremony. Near the entrance hangs a large photograph of all the students—the *Felton Falcon News* staff.

These students are working toward a long-term goal—producing a newspaper spotlighting noteworthy issues and events. The after-school program is targeted specifically for English language learners who have been in the United States for several years but who have not yet reached proficiency in English.

Why a Newsroom?

We might not be surprised to find a student newsroom in affluent or resource-rich school districts, where journalism programs tend to be popular. This newsroom, however, is at Felton Elementary in Lennox, California, 15 miles from downtown Los Angeles. The Lennox School District's student population is 95 percent Latino, and 93 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Since the mid 1990s, about 80 percent of Lennox students have been English language learners (ELLs), so implementing effective English-language programs has been a district priority. District administrators, principals, and teachers have attempted to strengthen English-language acquisition through pull-out intervention and small-group tutoring during school hours. After reviewing test results over several years, however, district administrators noticed an increasing number of ELLs who remained at the lowest levels of English proficiency. Without a change, these students were likely to enter high school with only basic English skills.

Often, ELLs have limited opportunities to practice language during the school day. Speaking time, for instance, is especially brief: ELL students spend, on average, fewer than 90 seconds per day in classroom talk.¹ Acknowledging that some of their ELLs were not receiving necessary language practice during school hours, Lennox officials viewed after-school time as an opportunity to help some of their struggling students. They established the *Felton Falcon News*, an after-school intervention program for elementary ELLs (primarily grades 3–5) who had already received several years of remedial services but who continued to score far below proficiency in language arts and mathematics. The school received funding for the program through a three-year grant from the Weingart Foundation's Urban School Districts Reform Initiative. As members of the reform initiative's research team, we established a collaborative learning community among grant recipients and evaluated the implementation of funded projects.

Where the Whole Child Is Front-Page News

One of the unique aspects of the Felton newsroom is its focus on a deep understanding of every participating student. This understanding reaches far beyond test scores. Lennox uses a student profile, a comprehensive intake tool for each student that addresses the whole child. Before the intervention program begins, the program coordinator and intervention teachers gather information for the student profile through classroom observations and from parents, teachers, and the students themselves.

The school begins by selecting potential participants for the journalism program on the basis of students' years in the United States and their need for additional English-language support. The program coordinator gathers information from classroom teachers to identify ELLs who meet the following criteria for participation:

- They have spent a minimum of four years in a U.S. school.
- They scored at the beginning or intermediate level in English proficiency on the California English Language Development Test and/or California standard tests.
- They have received multiple intervention services.

Once a group of students is enrolled in the program, the site coordinator begins an interview process to track patterns in language development and garner information to use to design an instructional approach that will meet students' needs.

The interview process begins with a 30-minute meeting with each student's parents. At the meeting, the coordinator asks parents about their child's favorite activities, special talents, and learning styles; his or her study habits at home; the subjects that the child finds frustrating; the parents' personal and academic goals for their child; and what they think they can do to support their child's education. (See the [Parent Interview Form](#) for a complete list of questions.) According to site coordinator Rosalinda Barajas, "Parents were enthusiastic about participating in the interview. All the parents voiced an interest in learning more about how to support English-language acquisition at home."

Interviews with students' present and past classroom teachers add another layer to the student profile. Classroom teachers answer questions about students' academic, behavioral, and social/personal strengths and challenges. They also offer input on students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills; and they discuss the language strategies that have been effective or ineffective with individual students and the remedial services students already have received. (See the [Teacher Interview Form](#) for details.) To paint an even more complete picture, the site coordinator observes the students in class. Using a detailed observation guide (see the [Student In-Class Observation Guide](#)), the coordinator records events that demonstrate readiness skills for fully learning English, such as the ability to follow directions, comprehend lesson content, participate in class discussions, use writing materials, and independently implement writing strategies. The site coordinator also observes the students in various instructional settings—small and large groups and independent learning—to ascertain each student's preferred learning style and environment.

Finally, the site coordinator conducts a one-on-one interview with each student. The interview begins with an icebreaker to establish rapport and to help the student feel more comfortable speaking English in complete sentences. The interviewer may ask the student what his or her favorite color is and then ask a follow-up question: Why is blue your favorite color? Then the interviewer delves into questions about learning: What do you do when you come across a word you don't know in reading? What do you do if you don't understand how to do your homework? Whom do you ask for help when you're having difficulty? Finally, the interviewer asks about students' out-of-school interests and later uses the responses to plan engaging curriculum and field trips. (See the [Student Interview Form](#) for more examples of questions.)

At the end of the interview, the coordinator fills out a checklist assessing the student's language skills. The checklist includes such indicators as whether a student used one-word responses, sentence fragments, and specific details when answering questions. The interviewer notes whether students needed assistance with vocabulary and syntax and whether the interviewer often needed to repeat questions.

Information from the interviews helps intervention teachers prepare engaging lessons that will address students' personal and academic challenges. Also, the interviews serve as an initial benchmark assessment that teachers can compare against student performance during the program. The intervention team continues collecting information from parents, students, and classroom teachers throughout the program. As the profiles are updated, the intervention team modifies instruction.

Students Get the Story

The after-school intervention program is offered for two hours each day four days each week (Monday through Thursday). Students attend two days a week, some on Mondays and Tuesdays and others on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

The program has a unique composition. There are three intervention teachers, one of whom is the coordinator, and 24 students. Each intervention teacher is a full-time teacher who has a bilingual education credential. All three intervention teachers meet on Friday afternoons to plan for the coming week.

The teachers were all hired specifically for the program, and as it turns out, two of the intervention teachers (aside from the coordinator) were already working as instructional aides during school hours. During that time, they are able to prepare materials for lessons and maintain binders of students' work.

On their first day in the program, students fill out applications, responding to questions about their interests and hobbies as well as their academic and personal challenges. Teachers collaboratively review the applications and assign students on the basis of their interests to one of the three news departments: community news, sports, or calendar.

As members of news departments, students practice skills that will help them achieve the concrete goal of producing a newspaper while they improve their English reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Performing an interview, for example, gives students an opportunity to become better speakers, listeners, and writers, while learning about the people in their communities. One program participant who had a fear of doctors felt more comfortable after interviewing a doctor for her article. Barajas noted,

The interviews have broadened many students' horizons. It's a great opportunity for children in this district whose families often do not have the resources to go on trips far beyond the neighborhood.

The article-writing process—from drafting to production—occurs in small heterogeneous groups. Each news department is composed of eight students with a range of language skills and academic abilities. The groups follow the same objectives, although content varies.

Teachers deliver content mostly through direct instruction, which enable students to ask questions and get immediate feedback. According to the intervention teachers, direct instruction also helps them closely monitor student progress. At other times, the groups are engaged in cooperative learning in which more fluent students collaborate with struggling students and teachers coach the partners in speaking and conversation skills.

The journalism unit begins with an introduction to basic sentence structure, syntax, and questioning, and then progresses to discussions of the roles of journalists and definitions of research. The students then research possible field trips that might yield important information. Next, they practice interviewing skills, which they eventually will apply during interviews on field trips. Finally, the students focus on the journalistic style of writing. Teachers guide students in writing headlines, lead sentences, paragraphs that use quotes to offer evidence, and captions that match pictures. At the end of the 11-week cycle, the students produce a newspaper.

Newsworthy Successes

The first cohort of students in the program significantly improved their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. California Standardized Test results in language arts indicate that students are quickly approaching proficiency, with the percentage of students at the basic level jumping from 13 percent before the intervention to 33 percent after the intervention. California English Language Development test results

also show a sharp increase in the number of intermediate-level students, from 59 percent to 79 percent; and a few students have achieved advanced status. Results from the Idea Proficiency Test, a formal assessment of English-language development, indicate that all participants are now in the intermediate range.

The site coordinator and teachers also have noticed that students are simply having more fun learning the English language. One student remarked, "I love working on the newspaper. It's making regular class much easier. Before I was scared to read aloud in front of the class, but now it's fun!"

Because of Felton Elementary's success with the newsroom program, the site coordinator and district administrators have expanded the model to other district schools. Now in its second year, the program is offered at two elementary schools and one middle school. Each site has the same intake process, newspaper theme, and small-group design. Meanwhile, the Felton newsroom has graduated its first group of reporters (students who reached the intermediate level of proficiency) and recruited a new crop of students and parents to participate. District leaders hope the success will spread throughout the district—and even beyond.

Endnote

- ¹ Weisburd, C. (2008). Gaining a voice after school: Why after-school programs are a powerful resource for English language learners. *Education Week*, 27(25), 28–29.

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