

Participatory leadership for **ENGLISH LEARNER SUCCESS**

This school district has successfully restructured its services to increase the number of Long Term English Learners who become reclassified as Fluent English Proficient.

Ventura Unified School District has embarked on an extensive effort to restructure the services offered to English learner students through a participatory leadership model that includes teachers, administrators and support staff and incorporates input from our students. Together, we are building pathways for student success that have already begun to produce positive results.

Although efforts are taking place at all grade spans, our starting place has been the high school level with a focus on Long Term English Learners. These are English learners who have been enrolled in U.S. schools for six years or more and still lack the English and/or academic skills for reclassification as Fluent English Proficient.

Ventura USD serves a total of 17,331 students at grades K-12, including 2,568 students currently designated as English learners. More than 90 percent of our English learners speak Spanish at home. At the secondary level we serve 949 English learners, 821 of them considered Long Term Eng-

lish Learners. A smaller group, 128 of our secondary English learners, are on pace and making expected annual progress in English and academic areas.

We also serve 904 Reclassified Fluent English Proficient Learners at the secondary level. It is important to include the RFEP students because these are the English learners who have demonstrated success in English acquisition and academic areas. They are an important part of the picture.

Our English learner students' voices

One advantage to starting our restructuring efforts at the high school level is that the students provide valuable insight regarding what would be helpful to them. The 12th-grade English learners in the level-four English Language Development (ELD) class at Ventura High were recently asked, "If a new student like you was entering this school today, what should we at the school do to help or what should we do differently?" Representative responses were:

- "Do whatever you have to in the ninth

grade year to make sure no one is credit deficient – study hall, daily advisory. It wasn't that the work was so hard, it is that I never did the outside-of-class work. The teachers are very helpful in class."

- "I didn't understand anything in the classes in the 10th and 11th grade. I am going to stay on to be a fifth-year senior because 10th grade I didn't understand and 11th grade I ditched a lot. I am missing a lot of credits. This year is the first year I am having the time with vocabulary and discussion in my classes (SDAIE classes) and Spanish Algebra is really helpful. The two-period English class is perfect for me."

- "For me, I am doing fine, but I would like to know more about what I need for college and how to apply."

- "I haven't passed the CAHSEE but all my grades and credits are good. I need to know why I am not passing it and then get help for that part."

By Jennifer Whitlock Robles

• “Geometry in Spanish would be a good idea. It is hard to understand.”

High school teachers also used surveys to find out more about how our English learners use strategies known to promote academic success. These include bringing materials to class, completing homework, participating in class discussions, reading outside of school, getting enough sleep, and getting help or tutoring when needed.

The first academic behavior surveys were given by our high school teachers to 165 English learners in 10th and 11th grade sheltered social science and ELD classes. Results were compared with 217 surveys from students in Advanced Placement U.S. history classes at the same schools.

Importance of reading outside of school

One of the most important findings from these surveys is that high school English learners report a very low frequency of reading outside of school, whereas Advanced Placement students rated it in the middle frequency range. This raised our concern because we know from our experience and literacy expert Steven Krashen’s work that students acquire critical grammar, vocabulary and text structure to comprehend the academic language of textbooks through self-selected recreational reading.

As a unified K-12 district, we were able to dig a little further on this particular item, so elementary teachers at seven schools conducted another survey of 492 students, targeting our fourth- and fifth-grade English learner students. This survey indicated that 59 percent of the students read almost every day for pleasure, 64 percent like to read and 66 percent get the books they read for pleasure at the school library. We will continue to identify ways to promote recreational reading to help English learners succeed at all levels, preschool through high school.

Leadership Matters

Our plans to increase the academic success rate for VUSD English learners were spearheaded by our superintendent, Trudy Arriaga. Her leadership made this initiative a priority for both central office and site staff. We also brought in an expert curriculum consultant who serves as a coach to adminis-

trators and teachers at two high schools. We have formed a strong leadership team that has worked together for three years.

The first step we took as a team was to attend a five-part “Secondary School Leadership Development for English Learner Success” series conducted by Laurie Olsen from Californians Together (see article on page 30). The sessions were supported by district categorical funds, ACSA and the Ventura County Office of Education. Our participatory leadership model began here. The VUSD leadership team includes our assistant superintendent of education services, director of



bilingual education programs, curriculum consultant; assistant principals, counselors, teachers and the home school liaison from Buena and Ventura High Schools.

During the course of this series we worked together to explore reasons why our English learners were not demonstrating the success we expected in our secondary schools. District data revealed that 79 percent of the secondary English learners had been enrolled in U.S. schools since kindergarten or first grade and still had not met the criteria for exit from the EL program.

A review of the master schedules and ELD courses showed these deficiencies:

- student placement was not consistently based on identified student needs;
- ELD curriculum was insufficient;
- the course sequence did not provide a pathway to success in the regular curriculum or college/university enrollment; and
- teachers lacked the training and/or resources to meet all students’ needs.

Furthermore, conversations with students revealed they were unaware of what it

means to be identified as an English learner and the expectations for achievement necessary to exit from the EL program.

To conclude the leadership series, we developed an action plan to guide our next steps. During the 2009-10 school year, some members of our leadership team participated in a professional development series on the topic of Long Term English Learners, facilitated by Laurie Olsen and Shelly Spiegel-Coleman of Californians Together. This series gave us time to share effective practices with staff in other school districts, learn from experts and refine our program design.

Our action plan becomes reality

Since the 2008-09 school-year, Buena and Ventura High Schools have offered a redesigned program for more than 400 English learner students. The primary goal of the program is to increase the number of Long Term English Learners who meet English language and academic criteria for reclassification as Fluent English Proficient.

The program includes new two-period block ELD classes for students at four proficiency levels, English courses that meet college entrance requirements, careful placement based on multiple criteria, progress monitoring assessments that provide student feedback at regular intervals, a team approach to professional development, annual motivational conversations (“pep talks”) with English learner students, innovative Spanish courses that prepare students for bilingual careers and more. Each of the components is briefly described below.

■ English Language Development classes.

Two-period block courses are offered for students from mixed grades at ELD levels I, II, III and IV. These courses are designed to move students quickly from one level to the next with transition to regular English courses following level IV. Level IV meets CSU/UC requirements for one year of English. VUSD adopted Hampton Brown’s Edge Program as our new standards-based curriculum for use in the ELD courses.

■ English courses that meet college entrance requirements. Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) courses that meet the UC/CSU requirements

are offered for English learners at each grade level. These are one-period courses designed to ensure English learner success in core curriculum.

■ **Careful placement based on multiple criteria.** The high school master schedules are based on the number of students needing the various courses available. Students are placed after a review of CELDT English proficiency levels, reading fluency, California Standards Test scores, grades, benchmark assessments and Lexile levels as determined by Scholastic Reading Inventory.

■ **Assessments to monitor student progress.** These take place in English classrooms to provide student feedback for teachers at regular intervals. The curriculum-embedded assessments provide teachers with frequent snapshots of student progress to allow for instructional adjustments, regrouping and sometimes changes in course levels.

■ **Team approach to professional development.** High school teachers joined the assistant principals, counselors, paraeducators, home-school liaisons and district support staff for a series of meetings hosted at the Education Service Center to focus on best practices for English learners and share experiences and insights. We call these TEAMSSS meetings because they include teachers of English, math, science and social science.

Participating teachers received a document camera and training to enhance their EL instruction. Categorical funds covered stipends. Chapters from “Teaching English Language Learners – A Differentiated Approach” (2007) by Rothenberg and Fisher provided guides for best practices.

The meetings were catered by students from Ventura High School’s culinary arts program and culminated with a fish-bowl exercise where English learners discussed their experiences in our high schools. Additional staff development included WRITE program training from the San Diego County Office of Education and a year-long district focus group that recommended revisions in our grading policy to reduce failure and increase student success.

■ **Annual motivational conversations.** “Pep talks” were initiated in response to

the students’ need to better understand the English learner program designed for them. Many students had taken the CELDT for years without understanding the criteria for identification as an English learner or exit from the program. A student-centered PowerPoint presentation was developed by the Ventura High assistant principal. It is presented by each school’s assistant principal during the first month of instruction in all English classes that enroll English learners. Each student also receives a “Making It Hap-



pen” brochure describing the EL program and a personalized print-out of his/her current CELDT, CST and CAHSEE results to use for setting personal goals for the year.

We have found these pep-talks to be a powerful communication tool and an excellent way for students to see teachers and administrators working together for their success. Here is a brief outline of their content:

1. The ELD program
 - 12 new courses for English learners with new Edge curriculum
 - ELD IV is accepted by the University of California for one year of English and SDAIE classes are College Prep!
 - Review of students’ progress toward VUSD English learner annual expectations
2. Reclassification criteria
3. Multilingual seal criteria
4. CELDT, CST and CAHSEE – Target scores and strategies for success
5. We are here to help you and we want you to do your best!

■ **Advanced Spanish courses.** English learners, Fluent English Proficient students and students from the VUSD middle school

two-way immersion program are able to continue their Spanish language development in native speaker courses at levels three and four. In addition, Ventura High School was awarded a CDE Vocational Education grant to develop two new courses, Spanish for Careers in the Community and Spanish for International Careers.

These level-four courses are designed around career strands similar to those described in “Best Careers for Bilingual Latinos” (1998) by Graciela Kenig. Class activities include career explorations, career-specific vocabulary development, frequent guest speakers, resume writing and mock interviews, all planned to prepare students for future careers as bilinguals.

■ **Multilingual recognition seals for graduating seniors.** VUSD validates students’ multilingual proficiencies with seals on diplomas and transcript notation. We have recognized more than 150 students with proficiency in a wide variety of world languages and are seeing a positive impact on enrollment in advanced language classes.

■ **Annual reclassification celebrations.** The criteria for reclassification as fluent-English proficient in the Ventura Unified School District are rigorous and include:

- English language proficiency demonstrated by an overall score of Early Advanced or Advanced on the CELDT with no subtest below Intermediate level.
- Academic readiness as demonstrated by a score of 340 or higher on the English language arts portion of the California Standards Test or a score of 350 or higher on the English language arts test on the California High School Exit Exam.
- Teacher recommendation demonstrated by a grade point average of 2.0 or higher and on track for graduation.
- Parent consultation.

Throughout VUSD, schools provide recognition for English learners when they are reclassified as Fluent English Proficient. The high schools work with English learner advisory committees and parent-teacher associations to host meals where students and families are spotlighted. It is a joy for families, students, teachers, administrators and other staff to share in the celebration.

Student achievement results

Student achievement results already indicate a very positive impact from our efforts. Reclassification rates indicate that both Buena and Ventura High Schools are greatly exceeding the district average rate of 9.5 percent. For both schools, this is a substantial increase over the previous year.

Impact on English Learner Reclassification Rates – Buena and Ventura High Schools

	Spring 2009	Spring 2010
Buena H.S.	11%	14.7%
Ventura H.S.	14%	20.9%
VUSD Average	9.1%	9.5%

English Learners Percent Proficient on Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs), Language Arts and Math

	2007-08		2008-09	
	Lang A.	Math	Lang A.	Math
Buena HS	8.7%	17.4%	25%	32.7%
Ventura HS	11.3%	33.3%	17.5%	33.3%

Success pathways start early

We are aware that the pathway to academic success for English learners in high school starts early. Our work at the high school level has put assistant principals in very close contact with the middle school assistant principals as they work together to assess students and decide on appropriate class placements. This articulation is essential. During the 2009-10 school year we focused more of our efforts on the middle school programs for English learners, and opened new classes for students at grades six through eight in August 2010.

In order to involve all staff in this effort, we have found it very helpful to publicize the annual expectations for English learners that were developed in our VUSD English learner master plan. These yearly goals for progress in English Language Development, language arts and math help staff at all levels to maintain high expectations and intervene early if students begin to miss annual targets.

In fact, a recent analysis of VUSD English learner achievement toward annual expectations indicates that achievement gaps initially appear at fourth and fifth grades. To

English learner results on California English Language Development Test

	2008-09		2009-10	
	AMAO 1	AMAO 2	AMAO 1	AMAO 2
	Making Progress	Achieving Proficiency	Making Progress	Achieving Proficiency
Buena HS	44.9%	22.2%	60.9%	26.8%
Ventura HS	56.7%	29.9%	62.5%	33.8%

remedy this and to reduce the incidence of Long Term English Learners, we are taking steps to strengthen our programs beginning at the preschool level.

Making a positive difference

The Ventura Unified School District's inclusive leadership model has improved our capacity to provide English learners with a program designed to meet their needs and increase success. We have found that involving leadership from preschool through adult education makes it possible to focus the staff and financial resources needed to make a

positive difference. We welcome ideas from other educators and offer our English learner master plan, PowerPoint presentations, brochures and other materials for sharing on the district website at www.venturausd.org/bilingualeducation/resources.htm. ■

Jennifer Whitlock Robles is director of Bilingual Education Programs, Ventura Unified School District. For more information about the high school programs mentioned here, contact jennifer.robles@venturausd.org.

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