

CENTRAL VALLEY FOUNDATION

Lessons Learned - Long-Term English Learners

"Long-term English Learners (LTELs) have been in our schools 6 or more years and are still not English proficient. We have not done enough in our schools to help them. The CVF LTEL Project (in partnership with Sanger Unified) stretched our staff in a supportive yet compelling way. We are more knowledgeable, better prepared, and more committed to applying what we learned through the district partnership to help our LTELs learn English and improve academically."

– Roy Mendiola, Ed.D., Assistant Superintendent, Firebaugh-Las Deltas School District

In recent years, educators and policymakers have expressed increasing concern about students who have been enrolled in U.S. schools for many years but who are still classified as English Learners. In 2012, California became the first state in the nation to pass legislation specifically defining Long-Term English Learners (LTELs) as:

- students who are in grades 6 or above who have been enrolled in U.S. schools for more than six years;
- who score far below basic or below basic on the state's English language arts (ELA) assessment; and
- who have scored at the same level on the state's English language proficiency assessment for two or more consecutive years.

It is estimated that most English Learners take an average of four to seven years to develop the language capacity to handle grade-level content demands in English. And, as students move up through the grades, the language demands of the subject matter increases considerably with each grade level. Students who remain classified as English Learners in middle and high school may have less access to rigorous, content-area courses, may have fewer opportunities to enroll in electives and may be more likely to drop-out of school.

In 2014, Sanger and Firebaugh Las-Deltas Unified School Districts partnered to launch the Long-Term English Learning Project (LTEL Project) to create large-scale systems change to improve outcomes for their middle and high school English Learners whose progress has stalled. The initial focus has been to provide intensive professional development where district leaders, principals, teachers, coaches, school counselors and data specialists participate side-by-side in trainings towards a comprehensive approach to understanding – and addressing - the learning needs of their LTEL students.

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It was especially important to establish how LTEL students differ from struggling English-speaking students. Although LTELs may *speak* English well, they may lack the vocabulary (“content language”) to access core subjects like math and science, and they are unable to use academic language to explain what they are learning. In recognition of this, a key component of the LTEL Project has been rigorous training for middle and high school teachers in strategies to integrate English language development into their subjects. As described by one administrator,

“One of the big, big eye openers was how English language development should be happening in every class across the board...it’s not just the English department’s job to help support our (EL) students. If students in science don’t understand the language, then they can’t understand the subject of science.”

District staff works hard to support teachers in translating ideas from formal trainings into meaningful shifts in their classroom practices. A variety of tools has been developed and continues to evolve. The tools and resources available on demand and include English language development lesson templates, sample language targets and language matrices. New courses at the middle and high schools were introduced that specifically support LTELs’ language development in ways that link to the language of the core content areas.

Recognizing that many such students may feel stigmatized by the LTEL label, the districts’ focus has been on empowerment. Individualized Language Plans (ILPs) have been developed which entail sitting down with each student and charting a course for her/his success -- and then providing a team to support them in achieving their goals. District and school staff members are also involved with these efforts, reinforcing the message that the districts as a whole are responsible for ensuring the success of LTEL students.

Parents play an important role in the LTEL Project and their participation is actively encouraged. A series of multi-week training programs are offered each year, and parents also participate in the ILP meetings and other school activities specifically for LTEL students.

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Because of potential lessons the LTEL Project might share with the field, it is being documented by the team of Dr. Karen Thompson, Assistant Professor, Oregon State University and co-coordinator of CVF's Data Dialogues Network, and Dr. Claudia Rodriguez-Mojica, Assistant Professor at Santa Clara University. Both Dr. Thompson and Dr. Rodriguez-Mojica have conducted extensive research on English Learners. Findings from their study of the LTEL Project will be posted on this website in the future. In the meantime, their 2015-16 interim report indicates that, ***the number of LTELs in both districts has dropped 23% over the course of this partnership.***