

LEVERAGING AFTERSCHOOL FOR ENGLISH LEARNER SUCCESS

REPORT FROM A CALIFORNIA CONVENING



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I. INTRODUCTION

PARTNERING FOR EL SUCCESS

English Learners (ELs) are the fastest-growing segment of the school age population nationwide. In 2008, more than one in ten students—a total of 5.3 million—was classified as EL. That same year across the state of California, an average of one in four students was designated as EL, with many districts seeing far greater numbers.

School systems, however, are challenged to meet the complex educational needs of the EL population, which include providing support to multilingual students and their families as cultural and economic assets for the nation. As of 2007, only 7% of EL 4th graders scored at or above proficient in reading, compared to 36% of native English speakers. Similar gaps continued through middle and high school.

Education across languages is only one element of the challenge. Problems of poverty are compounded by migration and mobility due to housing and legal issues. Language learning is complex, multifaceted, and time consuming. Students entering the English-based school system at later ages and grades are particularly disadvantaged. Parents typically are not English proficient, bilingual school staff are limited, and communication with teachers and administrators can be difficult. Political climates, public policy, immigration laws, and the economy exert particular pressures on ELs and their families. In California as elsewhere, ELs are prone to high dropout rates.

Yet, as the economy becomes increasingly global, it is ever more important for students to graduate with the linguistic and cultural skills to advance into college, careers and leadership. All adults engaged with children and youth need to join forces for EL student success in and through school.

It is unrealistic to think that classroom teachers alone can meet the educational and developmental needs of the EL population. Expanded opportunities to learn English and associated skills for school, coupled with strategic collaboration across educational as well as child and youth development sectors, offer ways to increase EL achievement and to build inter-cultural competencies. Language acquisition, literacy, and recent field research suggest that afterschool, summer programs, and other out-of-school time (OST) opportunities can be a significant resource in helping ELs develop and expand their English, and other academic skills required for success in all grades. At the same time, OST can be deliberately leveraged to foster communication and understanding among ELs and native speakers, broadening linguistic skills and showing all young people the strength of linguistic and cultural diversity.

As California leads in EL population, it is a leader, as well, in OST programming. Drawing on a mix of state, federal, and private funding, approximately 3,800 programs serve more than 1 million children and youth. The strength, effectiveness, and reach of the afterschool sector holds enormous potential for deepening support for the state's 1.3 million English Learners. The sector recognizes the critical role it plays, and groups have mobilized to expand and deepen efforts.

CONVENING FOR DIALOGUE

Building an effective interface between afterschool and school is a critical step in leveraging the potential of afterschool in helping to meet the educational needs of EL students. To help explore the issues in developing such an interface, Foundations Inc., under a grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, held two convenings of school and afterschool leaders. Northern California groups met in December, 2009; Southern California groups met in April, 2010.



Leveraging Afterschool for EL Success Convenings in California

December 2009 and April 2010

Approximately 100 participants from district and county offices of education; schools and school districts; community-based, district-run, and municipal afterschool programs; grantmaking organizations; and intermediaries, non-profits and other community groups contributed knowledge, experience, and thinking toward expanding cross-sector partnerships.

Organizations included:

After-School All-Stars
Alliance for a Better Community
ASAPconnect
Boys and Girls Clubs
California Afterschool Network
California Afterschool Regional Leads
California Department of Education
California Tomorrow
Central Valley Afterschool Foundation
Elk Grove Unified School District
Hollister Youth Alliance
LA's Best
League of California Afterschool Providers
Los Angeles Unified School District
Marcam Middle School
National School District
Oxnard Unified School District
Packard Foundation
Sacramento City Unified School District
San Diego County Office of Education
Think Together
University of California, Berkeley
Ventura Country Office of Education

With the aim of advancing a shared framework for understanding the educational opportunities, roles, and potential practices in afterschool, as well as clarifying issues, obstacles, and needs, approximately 50 leaders from diverse organizations spent the day in cross-sector dialogue. Participants recognized the distinct assets of afterschool for English language learning, for providing family and community supports, and for promoting cross-cultural exchange. They also acknowledged the need for—and challenges of—collaborative approaches, and reflected on exemplary practices from the field.

By the close of each meeting, groups had identified specific, achievable strategies for furthering afterschool as a substantial resource for ELs, and addressed obstacles, gaps, and needs for implementing the strategies at system and program levels.

This report reflects the discussions and outcomes of the meetings in addressing key questions:

- What could partnership between school and afterschool for EL success look like?
- What might be appropriate roles and strategies for afterschool, specifically, toward closing the achievement gap for ELs?
- In the context of limited resources, how can school and afterschool form lasting partnerships that support ELs?

II. SCHOOL AND AFTERSCHOOL: RESOURCES FOR COMPLEMENTARY LEARNING

Language learning and development is a highly complex social, emotional, developmental, and cognitive process. Fluent conversational English requires one to three years to develop, laying a core language base of grammar, vocabulary, syntax, sounds and pronunciation. Academic English requires and builds on this base, adding expanded and specialized vocabulary, academic syntax, and more abstract and conceptual language. English for success in school also entails learning the nuances of school-related social norms and classroom practices—and the language associated with them. Full academic proficiency in a second language is an uphill struggle that can take up to seven or more years—years that overlap with the demands of simultaneously learning subject matter content.

Research has established that conditions for learning a language include exposure to *understandable* language that also stretches abilities, consistent immersion in a variety of settings, and rich opportunities to use the language. Motivation to use this more difficult medium of expression is vital. Learners need to want to communicate in English, and need to be able to try new words and expressions without fear of ridicule or negative consequences. An environment where staff can take the time to listen, understand, and foster authentic communication; where ELs and native speakers can work together on engaging projects and tasks; and where home languages and cultures are respected, valued, and supported is ideal for expanding language learning—and helps to create such conditions.

ELS IN SCHOOL

School is the primary source of direct instruction necessary for language learning, as well as for teaching the academic knowledge and skills needed for success in later life. For ELs, as for all students, that academic knowledge includes specific standards-based content. It also includes the academic vocabulary and literacy skills needed to learn new material including the words, forms, contexts, and varied meanings that are required *before* content can become understandable.

School provides ELs with highly trained, certified, professional teachers and specialists able to identify and address a range of academic, socio-emotional, and language development needs. Systems are in place to identify ELs, assess their language proficiency levels and benchmark progress, and to target interventions and supports. School-wide strategies, such as Response to Instruction and Intervention, offer opportunities for EL students to receive additional instructional supports and a range of early interventions during and after school. While there is a shortage of bilingual teachers, California is one of the few states that requires *all* classroom teachers to receive training in English language development as part of the certification process.

Part of the challenge for schools in meeting the needs of EL students, however, is the fact that children are in school only about 25% of their waking time on an annual basis—about 30 hours per week out of 100 hours, about 180 short days out of 365 full ones. In that amount of time, teachers are charged with supporting *all* students, not just ELs, while teaching curriculum and content at a pace designed for native English speakers. Time-pressured teachers and classes are hard-pressed to provide the practice time and conditions needed for learning both language and academic content, and teachers have pointed to difficulty communicating with students and families (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005). Though time for oral practice is critical to the language acquisition process, a recent study suggests that EL students may speak for less than two minutes a day in school, outside of lunch and recess (Gándara, 2006).

In California as in most other states, these challenges are reflected in significantly lower achievement rates for ELs compared with native speakers. ELs lag far behind native speakers and are more likely to drop out of school. Only 20% of ELs scored proficient or above on the 2009 English Language Arts CST; one in ten English Learners is at grade level in English Language Arts; and only one in five is at grade level in math. Once classified as ELs, it is common for students to remain classified for six or more years (Olsen, 2010).



AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS: A CRITICAL RESOURCE

Afterschool programs can be developed as a resource that complements the instruction and support available for ELs during the school day. Programs can provide opportunities for language development that are understandably limited in most classroom settings: time to practice, time to develop speaking and listening skills, and targeted academic vocabulary development through varied activities, projects, games, and experiences. Programs can build and reinforce connections with parents, provide homework help, and offer other social-emotional benefits and supports (Weisburd, 2008). The hands-on ‘learning by doing’ approach of out-of-school time creates diverse opportunities for expanding students’ academic vocabulary orally, which contributes to a strong foundation for literacy and subject-matter learning.

“We are not a tutoring program. We offer an academic environment in a fun, engaging type of way. Once we explained this to our principals and they understood how a program like this could support ELs academically, they began to offer supports and resources at a whole new level, which in turn allowed us to identify and support our EL students.”—convening participant

A number of recent publications identify expanded learning time as a powerful resource for narrowing achievement gaps (Bhattacharya & Quiroga, 2009; Zarate, 2009; Goldenberg, 2008). In California, two studies found a positive association between afterschool activity participation and English language learning. Statistics showed increased attendance, improvement in standardized test scores, and a higher rate of reclassification among regular attendees compared to EL students not attending afterschool (Newhouse, 2008; London, Norman, & Gurantz, 2008). In Washington state, an external evaluation of a professional development model designed and implemented by School’s Out Washington indicated that training afterschool staff in

appropriate techniques for working with EL students led to sustained changes in practice for staff, and program-level changes that helped to institutionalize supports for ELs (Organizational Research Services, 2010).

The afterschool sector in California is well-positioned to expand its role as a vital resource for English Learners and learning. As attention has turned in recent years from program quantity to program quality, training, professional development, technical assistance, and networking systems are increasingly available. These resources are skilled in deepening the ability of staff and leaders at the local and program level to build quality specifically in serving the EL population. Across the state, programs are offered in schools and in communities, run or administered through the county offices of education, provided by local or regional independent organizations (such as sports, arts, or community groups), or by private providers (such as Boys and Girls Clubs or other large organizations).

Through the County Offices of Education and CDE, eleven teams of Regional Leads provide technical assistance to ensure high levels of quality. These systems are turning greater attention to ELs, leveraging the assets afterschool offers and launching strategies for aligning with the school day to increase impact. The California Afterschool Network, for example, formed an English Learner Committee to address how afterschool programs could improve conditions and outcomes for ELs, and created a section of the California After School Program Quality Self-Assessment Tool (QSA) to help program leaders examine program quality from the perspective of EL needs. Attention to English Learners in afterschool is continuing to grow through the work of non-profit organizations, through public and private grant making organizations, and through the efforts of the California Department of Education and the statewide system.

“Conducting professional development between school and afterschool staff is by no means an impossible challenge. I have seen this happen in my district. It is a matter of making priorities and sticking to them.”—convening participant

III. COLLABORATIVE ALIGNMENT: A STRATEGY FOR EL SUCCESS

Given the complexity of language learning and of ELs' educational needs, effective support—efforts that make a difference—demands complementary, mutually reinforcing work across school, afterschool, home, and community; bridging and leveraging sectors' strengths, methods, resources, and systems.

Alignment between school and afterschool is one strategy for leveraging assets and resources. *Collaborative alignment*—where school and afterschool recognize and capitalize on the distinct assets, approaches, and value of each arena—can potentially maximize the value for ELs and all students, as well as for staff, teachers, leaders, and families. Collaborative alignment begins with articulating shared goals, outcomes, and indicators, identifying strengths, resources, and complementary strategies to reach outcomes, and clearly establishing mutual responsibility and accountability.

ALIGNMENT EFFORTS UNDERWAY

During the past ten years, initiatives geared at creating more deliberate partnerships between school and afterschool have increased nationwide. In California, efforts are underway to expand knowledge, awareness, and implementation of school-afterschool alignment strategies. In several counties, afterschool staff have participated in professional development to build skills in using student data to improve supports for students. To increase capacity for cross-sector communication, technical assistance has focused on building understanding of EL concepts and terminology used by schools and districts, and on linking afterschool-style approaches explicitly to academic content standards.

Alignment efforts can be furthered by the recognition that many afterschool staff are also school day teachers, or were at one time. In addition, many afterschool coordinators manage services that cross into the school day. As these individuals share knowledge and practices across sectors and settings, they are invaluable resources for collaboration.

“School and afterschool often speak two different languages. Each sector has its own acronyms, terminology, and way of thinking. In order for collaboration to take place, each one must be willing to understand the language of the other.”—convening participant

BARRIERS TO COLLABORATIVE ALIGNMENT

Despite acknowledgement of shared goals between afterschool and school with respect to ELs, efforts toward collaborative alignment of strategies are not without challenges. Many schools and afterschool programs operate without formal or consistent working partnerships, and leaders may not prioritize deepening the connection between strategies. School leaders may see the primary role of afterschool as providing a safe place for children and youth, without seeing the additional opportunities for afterschool as a site for deliberately building ELs' language and academic skills through projects and activities, as well as community and family connections. Afterschool program leaders may feel that stronger partnerships with the school day will force a shift away from the hands-on, learner-centered and developmentally-grounded methodologies of afterschool, to replication of school curriculum and test-driven objectives.

Limited understanding of the unique and complementary opportunities that school and afterschool can provide for all students may underpin tensions that derail meaningful partnerships.

Lack of time, limited resources, and limited infrastructure also pose problems for alignment. If afterschool is to serve as a substantial support for ELs, staff need professional development and ongoing skill-building in research-based methods and materials, and leaders need professional development in program design and operations with an eye toward the particular needs of



ELs and their families. Such professional development demands resources of time and money. Data is another key area of need. Because ELs may have strong oral communication skills but struggle with reading and writing, afterschool staff need district data to identify EL students and provide proper supports. An infrastructure for data collection, data sharing across sectors, and strategic and appropriate use of data needs to be established—which in turn demands time and commitment from leaders.

PROMISING PRACTICES: STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES FOR COLLABORATIVE ALIGNMENT

While obstacles and challenges exist, so do strategies and approaches for addressing the challenges. Based on research, field practice, and input from school and afterschool leaders, administrators, teachers, staff, and technical assistance providers, recommended strategies are presented in the table.

“A commitment to looking at data from the school day and then identifying strategies to help ELs in afterschool for 15 minutes a day is very doable.”—convening participant

Recommendations are organized using a framework of five focus areas for EL supports, developed from the California Department of Education’s English Language Development Standards, the California After-school Program Quality Self-Assessment Tool, and other sources. Because feasibility is a prime factor in whether leaders and programs attempt, adopt, and sustain strategies, participants at the California convenings were asked to place strategy, suggestions on a continuum of feasibility and ease of implementation. In this way, most programs and school leaders could find a starting point, recognize some steps they might take to begin the process of collaborative alignment, and maximize the resource of afterschool. Some of the recommendations were seen as quite feasible, able to be readily implemented in most systems or programs with little need for additional resources. Other strategies were judged to be more complex, with multiple parts requiring greater time and involvement. Specific examples of what each broader recommendation might look like in practice appear in italics.

Focus Area	Readily Implemented	Intermediate-Level Step	More Complex/Multifaceted
1. Social-emotional environment	<p>Schools and afterschool programs demonstrate seeing cultural and linguistic diversity as assets.</p> <p><i>School and afterschool programs translate signs, posters, and important written communication into home languages</i></p>	<p>Strategies for building inclusive, asset-based, culturally welcoming learning environments are consistent across school and afterschool.</p> <p><i>Develop a protocol and toolkit for welcoming new EL students to be used in both schools and in afterschool programs. Include a 'buddy system.'</i></p>	<p>A coherent strategy is developed to reinforce a positive socio-emotional environment throughout the extended day.</p> <p><i>School and afterschool implement complementary activities that build students' socio-emotional skills. For example, classrooms or homerooms have a morning meeting; afterschool programs have a closing and reflection. Joint parent workshops are held.</i></p>
2. Building ELs' skills for success in school and beyond	<p>School and afterschool programs commit to actively supporting English Learner achievement, retaining broad notions of success beyond academic content areas.</p> <p><i>Afterschool is identified and stated as a key strategy in EL students' success and in closing the achievement gap.</i></p>	<p>Sectors share information about content areas covered, standards, goals and objectives, projects, and activities.</p> <p><i>Afterschool staff meet with the school academic or grade teams. Afterschool staff participate in relevant school-based professional development. Schools/districts provide OST programs with relevant EL and subject area materials, books, etc.</i></p> <p><i>OST reports to district administrators on projects, activities, and student progress.</i></p>	<p>School and afterschool programs review and develop shared goals jointly, and share responsibility for EL student reclassification rate.</p> <p><i>Teachers and afterschool program staff meet to coordinate and integrate classroom instruction with hands-on enrichment to support academic and language standards; individual student outcomes are identified, reviewed, and assessed.</i></p>
3. Developing key supportive assets: family, community, and culture	<p>Home and community involvement in children's learning and success are actively supported.</p> <p><i>Schools support strong outreach to parents for EL students' participation in afterschool.</i></p>	<p>The use of afterschool as a connection to family and community, and as a link to the school day for parents is maximized.</p> <p><i>Teachers and schools communicate important student information to afterschool programs which is regularly shared with parents. Afterschool staff participate in parent-teacher and other school meetings. Teachers participate in afterschool family events.</i></p>	<p>Programs and schools share family and community outreach initiatives.</p> <p><i>Family EL and literacy programs are developed and provided; special events for families and community members are jointly planned and implemented.</i></p>
4. Data and assessment	<p>Afterschool programs work with school staff to identify ELs, their individual levels of language acquisition, and appropriate supports.</p> <p><i>California English Language Development Test (CELDT) scores are shared with afterschool programs at the beginning of each school year.</i></p>	<p>Needs and opportunities for data sharing, analysis, and performance assessment are identified, and data check-ins are established.</p> <p><i>Identify teacher liaisons to meet regularly with afterschool staff to discuss EL student achievement.</i></p>	<p>School and afterschool staff use data and assessments to develop jointly strategies to promote EL success implemented in the classroom and in afterschool programs.</p> <p><i>Create a system for the sharing of data on a frequent basis. Schools share indicators of EL achievement such as grades and test scores with afterschool staff. Afterschool programs work with schools to share other indicators of student progress, such as culminating events or work from projects.</i></p>
5. Infrastructure, systems, operations	<p>School and afterschool leadership create time to meet regularly and provide each other with updates.</p> <p><i>Once an initial meeting has been held, a system is created to share data and other key information on an ongoing basis with teachers, paraprofessionals, and afterschool frontline staff.</i></p>	<p>Include afterschool program staff in important meetings with principals and other school administration.</p> <p><i>Encourage, incentivize, and require reciprocal observations between afterschool and school staff.</i></p> <p><i>Hold joint professional development sessions for school and afterschool staff.</i></p>	<p>Schools and districts integrate afterschool program leaders into academic planning and assessment teams</p> <p><i>Schools develop and mentor afterschool staff as future educators and leadership.</i></p> <p><i>Districts and county offices provide joint professional development, observations, and coaching to reinforce a shared responsibility for outcomes.</i></p>

Figure 1: Continuum of Collaborative Alignment Strategies



IV. MOVING FORWARD

At the beginning of the 2010 school year, over half of the students enrolled in many counties across California were classified as English Learners—a trend seen around the country. While school systems, administrators, and teachers work to ensure that ELs are equipped with the education and skills they need to succeed throughout school, into college, and as they enter the workforce, the magnitude of the task is daunting.

“More and more districts have been incorporating afterschool educators into professional learning communities. The invitation has been open and meaningful; they see the afterschool frontline staff as good candidates to invest in for the long run.”—convening participant

Afterschool, summer, and other out-of-school programs and staff can partner effectively with schools to help meet the educational needs of this rich and diverse population. It requires leveraging the unique approaches, conditions, and assets of afterschool and informal learning environments for English language development.

As research and practice in language learning and EL education grow, the role of afterschool will grow as well. Afterschool’s ability to expand and deepen vocabulary, develop oral skills, motivate extended language use, and provide extra time for practice, as well as to teach study skills, provide homework help, and connect with parents and communities will be seen as vital for students struggling with simultaneously learning a language, school systems, and academic content.

Strong examples of collaborative alignment between school and afterschool sectors in California demonstrate that such partnerships are feasible and productive. Joint professional development across sectors, the inclusion of afterschool staff in professional learning communities, assistance obtaining and interpreting student data, and support by principals and other school leadership are becoming reality in a growing number of districts across the state.

As political and financial tides turn in the state and nation, renewed, expanded, and sustained efforts are needed. Most EL students are US citizens; the great likelihood is that those who are not will be by the time they are 21. All have hopes, dreams, and potential to contribute to the quality and productivity of the nation. It is incumbent upon us to do all we can to see those potentials realized.

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