



# turning on *engaged learning*

When this school focused on quality teaching, standards-based learning and best use of academic time, growth for English language learners soared.

**T**he issue of how to increase the engagement level of English language learners is daunting, but viable solutions can be achieved if a discussion is started. In schools across California, and indeed all of America, school stakeholders are struggling to articulate ways to ensure that all of the ELLs in their schools are successful. So, let's have a conversation!

On a regular day in the life of a principal, in sunny Southern California, I walk through the halls and in and out of the classrooms of our elementary school. The ELL specialist suddenly stops me and alerts me that we have a problem: "We're stuck, and our ELL scholars are not achieving adequate academic growth!"

I ask him, "What are we going to do about it?" He says that he doesn't know, but I press the matter by saying, "Sure you do." He responds that the school is doing the best it can. I tell him that obviously the school is not, because our ELL scholars are not growing. So again I ask, "What do we need to do?"

He thinks long and hard as he stares off into space. When the solution hits, he utters a slow and sure answer, "We need to do what is right." With much passion and energy, he continues. "You're right, I can do this, but I will need your help along with every other stakeholder inside and out of the school."

The bottom line is that out of our 560 scholars, 65 percent are ELLs. These children have been stuck at CELDT levels 1 and 2 for too long. The ELL specialist told me that the teachers wanted to do more to help our students, but they needed more training and guidance.

When I became principal of the school, nearly three years ago, the scholars had achieved substantial improvements in regards to their AYP and API scores, but school improvement is an ongoing process. Two areas of needed improvement were reclassification and continuing the school-wide academic growth. Zero students had

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been reclassified the previous year, and our state test scores hit a plateau. In order to stay ahead of the curve, we needed to rapidly adjust what we were doing in regard to our ELL population.

In addition, the teachers had not received any additional ELD instructional training beyond their initial credential requirements. I realized that although I had visions for best implementation, the structure for systematic and continued success was lacking. Inconsistent growth was becoming frustrating, and I soon realized that fundamental changes needed to occur if we were to provide meaningful assistance for our ELLs.

### Students as scholars

One of the first changes I made was to my own vocabulary when referencing my students. Since it is a site goal that each child will attain high levels of proficiency in English in order to attend university, I refer to the students as scholars. I remember how much that terminology influenced my own educational path. Our school became an intellectual community and all scholars were college bound.

Next, a conversation was initiated with other stakeholders in the school. I knew that parental engagement was critical for any meaningful change to take place. Effective school involvement has to do with the extent to which parents (in particular) and communities are both supportive of and involved in a school. The three factors to effective parent participation outlined by Marzano are communication, participation and government.

One of the defining features of effective parent and community involvement appears to be good communication (Antunez, 2000) from schools to parents and community and vice versa. It is not the obligation of the parents to reach out to the school. Rather, it is the responsibility of the school to create an atmosphere where parents feel invited to participate in the communication.

When teachers make parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interaction with their children at home, feel more positive about their abilities to help their children in the

elementary grades, and rate the teachers as better teachers overall; students improve their attitudes and achievement (Becker & Epstein, 1982).

Our goal is to bring parents into the teaching and learning process. Our aim is to empower all of our parents to extend the learning day by promoting literacy in the home, in the primary or secondary language. We want parents to start turning off passive entertainment and turning on engaged learning through discussion and participation. We know that the more educated and informed the parent, the more engaged and motivated the scholar as learner.

Through conversations with school stakeholders, we realized that too many of our ELLs were at risk because of the minimal choices that they would have later in life. Too many were not accessing grade-level curriculum or receiving differentiated instruction, and they were having to take low-English-leveled ELD courses in high school because they had never been reclassified. All of our ELL students needed systematic instruction in the domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

### Content-based ELD

The teachers at my school are hard working, caring and eager to help their scholars; however, they have continuously voiced concerns about the lack of ELD training. In addition, a large percentage of our ELLs require proper SDAIE strategies be used throughout the day in all subject areas to access core content.

What was completely missing from the curriculum was content-based ELD so that low-English language learners could also access core content and build literacy. So, we engaged the teachers in a conversation about what steps needed to be taken to alleviate the situation. Overwhelmingly, they requested to be trained and coached in content-based ELD instruction for intensive vocabulary development for literacy development, and the ELD/SDAIE/universal access training – and the sooner the better!

Coaching Alongside, Inc. then came into the picture and a foundation for improvement was set. Structure and consistency were put into place. Standards align-

ment, quality program, quality teaching and learning, maximum engaged learning time, effective strategies, daily warm-ups based on intentional learning, ELD to ELA standards alignment, content connection, teacher capacity for training and coaching peers, and principal training for consistent implementation were all part of our intensive, three-year professional development roll-out.

The three areas of focus spearheaded by our professional development trainers were: quality teaching and learning, best use of



individualized academic learning time, and standards-based learning through a quality program.

This training was designed to help teachers deliver scaffold lessons that more effectively allow the students to meet the grade-level ELD to ELA standards. Lessons also integrate the core curriculum science and social studies standards.

The training began in the fall of 2009, and by October 2010, 100 percent of the teachers were trained to effectively utilize the new ELD/content-based ELD/SDAIE strategies for universal access. Three coaches were trained; one of them included our ELD specialist. Each was coached to empower the training of their colleagues to develop site and district capacity. Our conversation and paradigm focused on building trust and learning communities at the site as each teacher honed his or her craft through efficaciously training one another: “I do it for you, and we do it together, so you can do it on your own” (Antunez, 2000).

Lessons are designed to provide students

with daily ELD instruction in the four domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The teachers are trained to guide scholars through intentional instruction and daily reviews that assist students to master their grade-level ELD to ELA content standards.

The lesson components of the ELD-to-ELA instruction begin with a daily 15-minute block of teacher-led vocabulary development, in which the listening and speaking domain standards are taught. During this time, the students learn new vocabulary words by repeating words, phrases and sentences through meaningful experience and social strategies. The students continuously metacognate their learning with a partner to discuss the new concepts taught as well as reiterate former learning. The teacher uses strategies that elicit responses from all students.

Within the lesson sequence, the teacher facilitates a block that is designed to allow the students to discuss preselected vocabulary words through reading and writing,



all the while circulating to check for understanding, reteach, and meet with small groups for extended learning. At the end of a particular unit of study, the scholars publish their writing and formally showcase and reflect what they have learned.

One of the most telling aspects of the training was how much teachers learned to lower the affective filter in the classroom and increase the level of student engagement and conversation. By eliminating pacing guides and scripted lessons, the classroom

environment took on a new tone. Although the lessons were very much paced and in alignment with the published CDE Release Standards and questions, teachers used the information as guidance and owned the instruction to check in on each student's differentiated learning ability.

Students regularly utilize pair-share opportunities to learn from each other. Students are encouraged to speak in their home language to understand their thinking and metacognate the learning. In addition, through the professional development, teachers were encouraged to spend necessary time to ensure that all students master key vocabulary, concepts, and learning before moving on to a new area of study. Rather than slow down the pacing of instruction, students took ownership of the learning and responsibility for growth.

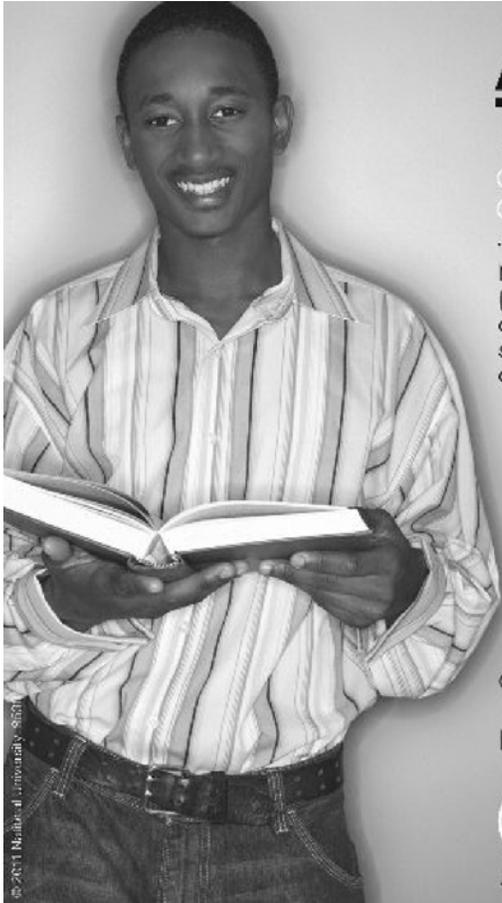
#### Using home culture as an anchor

The culture of the learner is always taken into consideration when choosing appropriate instructional materials and guiding classroom discussions. Our teachers are trained to use the home language and culture as an anchor upon which to build new learning. Appropriate literature that celebrates the traditions of the scholars is used to add interest and relevance to the lessons. Also, cultural pronunciations or grammar usage are used as learning opportunities.

Our professional development also focused on corrective recasting while students practice academic language and sentence structure. A student may describe a picture using a sentence with grammatical errors. Using positive demeanor, teachers celebrate the attempt, and then immediately use the sentence as a building block to form a slightly higher-leveled, grammatically correct sentence.

This corrective recasting helps the student feel good about the attempt and learn immediately the correct usage. "Saving face" while uttering a mistake helps students be open to trying again. Modeling appropriate usage gives them the tools to learn from their mistakes and tackle more complex utterances.

Teachers promote individual and group



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practice in listening, speaking, reading and writing new words and sentences. The goal is to promote student academic practice within the classroom context and lessen “talking at” students versus facilitating the learning for students.

**Collaborative planning for teachers**

After being trained to use the new ELD strategies, our teachers have had ample opportunities to plan collaboratively in professional learning communities. They discuss the use of standards and assessments to modify instruction to best service the needs of the pupils in their classes.

In addition, instructors are provided lesson plans that have scaffolded visual graphics and activities that enable the creation of meaningful ELD lessons. These lessons are based upon the California state standards for language arts, ELD, and the content core curriculum that is being accessed.

Since we received the professional development, our ELL subgroup has demonstrated academic proficiency by meeting its API goal with a score of 770 during the school year 2009-2010. Further evidence of proficiency is that 68 percent of the scholars in the bilingual program showed growth on the CELDT test, and 65 percent of scholars in the bilingual program scored Basic or higher on the CST.

In addition, during the 2008-2009 school year, 19 percent of the ELL scholars were reclassified, and we had a 13 percent reclassification rate for the 2009-2010 school year. This current year, 2010-2011, 21 percent of the eligible ELL scholars are either in the reclassification process or are projected to be reclassified.

**Recognition for our school**

Our school was recognized by the California Association of Bilingual Educators (CABE) as its 2011 Seal of Excellence recipient. This coveted award is given annually to the California school that best services the needs of its ELL students. Also, one of the scholars from our school received the writing award, kindergarten through second grade, as the best ELL writer in the state of California. Finally, as principal, I was given the great honor of being selected

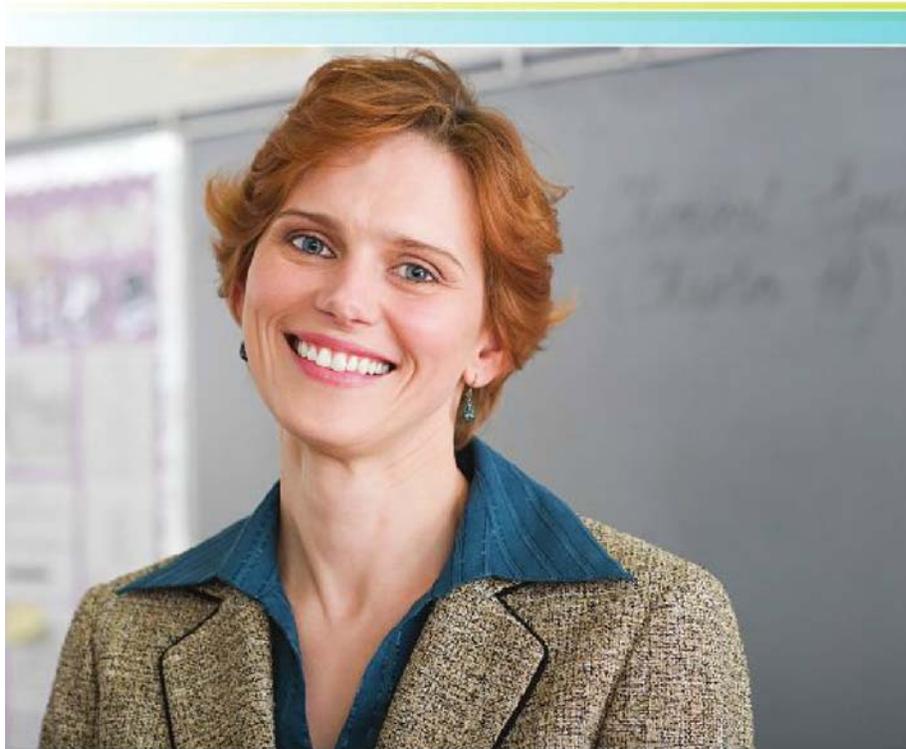
as the CABE Administrator of the Year. To think, this all started with a conversation in a hallway! ■

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