

COURT SCHOOLS

Embracing a culture of learning

Court schools have stepped up to the challenge of providing safe and secure classrooms while offering rigorous academic instruction.

It is ironic that the population of students on which we have the most surveillance, either through ubiquitous video cameras or through the vigilant presence of probation officers, have been the most invisible in many educational practices. English learners who are incarcerated youth and attend county court schools throughout California are less likely to receive instruction from teachers who are trained on research-based best practices to help EL students acquire English.

Yet recently, court school teachers and administrators throughout California have overwhelmingly accepted the challenge to improve the educational experiences of EL students in such restrictive educational environments and mitigate the factors that have historically favored incarceration over education. These are the major findings of a two-year project funded through AB 1781 and overseen by the California Department of Education to provide technical assistance to all County Court Schools in California on the most effective instructional strategies for English learners.

In October 2010, the Fresno County Office of Education received a contract to better prepare county court school teachers and administrators on the best instructional practices for English learners. The major actions of the contract included three site visitations to each court school, 20 five-day training institutes throughout state, and a series of webcasts.

The relative success of the technical assistance was found in the creative ways teachers and administrators mediated their daunting dual role to provide a safe and secure classroom environment while providing rigorous academic instruction.

Although the number of county court schools fluctuates each year, there has been a decrease in the number of incarcerated youth attending court schools between 2007 (12,085) and 2011 (9,009). About 70 percent of the total EL court school population in 2011 were concentrated in four counties

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(Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange and Fresno). English learners in county court schools have also decreased from 22.6 percent in 2007 to 17 percent in 2011, similar to the proportion of EL students in public schools throughout California. Most English learners in court schools are at Early Advanced (30 percent) or Advanced (10 percent) levels of English language proficiency. About 29 percent are at the Beginning or Early Intermediate levels.

Lessons learned

Valuable lessons were learned during the two-year technical assistance project that may be applicable to other alternative educational programs such as community and continuation schools. The quantitative and qualitative evidence that supports the findings in this report were collected from school administrator interviews during three site visits, results of an online survey, training institute evaluations and comments, and extant school-level data from state research files.

The evidence is clear that teachers and administrators in California court schools have made deliberate efforts to create a rigorous academic instructional setting, implement effective EL strategies through creative modifications, and build collaborative efforts throughout the state to support new and ongoing instructional practices.

A rigorous academic instructional setting

The purpose of juvenile court schools is to provide mandated and compulsory public education to juvenile offenders who are under the authority of the county juvenile justice system and are incarcerated in juvenile halls, camps or ranches. Juvenile court schools are operated through the county offices of education. No other factor contributes more challenges to the implementation of effective instructional strategies for EL students in these settings than the necessary nexus of creating a safe and secure facility while providing academic instruction to the students in the 82 county court schools.

Competing yet sincere interests between the county offices of education and the juvenile justice system (such as county probation) have often prevented access to a



The following comments from court school teachers suggest increased implementation of instructional

activities to engage English learner students in learning English and academic content.

■ “More focus on student grouping, more student interaction, more teacher interaction during staff collaboration meetings and outside of staff collaboration meetings.”

■ “We do more classroom interaction and have more positive interaction. One teacher has open discussions with students. One teacher is currently using narrative inquiry and invitation-to-talk to create classroom discussion. We strive to have more students talk!”

■ “The teachers are allowing the students to work in Pair-Share more. They are allowing talking between students which wasn’t allowed before.”

positive learning environment for many EL students due to probation’s priority to maintain order and provide a safe environment. But the untiring and courageous efforts by many court school teachers and administrators have brought attention to practices that have had a negative impact on learning.

Many court school teachers have established a culture of learning in their classrooms within the correctional facility. One teacher made it clear to students that once they entered his classroom, they were “his guys,” even though probation officers may have jurisdiction over the students, escorted the students to class, and even remained present in the classroom. This firmly distinguished to his students his instructional responsibilities and expectations, and the students’ role and responsibilities within the classroom.

Another teacher launched a CAHSEE tree

in her classroom and posted student names as leaves whenever they passed the reading or mathematics sections of this high stakes test. It was not uncommon for students to observe names of friends or relatives on the tree and gain inspiration to pass the test.

Strategies require creative modifications

Traditional forms of instruction in court schools have been heavily didactic and prescriptive (Gehring, 2010). In some cases, students were required to wear handcuffs in class due to their behavior. For EL students, the dual roles of court school teachers have significant implications for the opportunity to practice oral English language skills (August & Shanahan, 2006), use instructional manipulatives to support conceptual understandings and develop English language vocabulary (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007), build and activate background knowledge (Bernhardt, 2005), and implications for the homogeneous grouping of students by English language proficiency levels (California Department of Education, 2010).

For example, in one large urban court school, the linguistic grouping of students was prohibited by probation staff for safety concerns. It was unsafe to mix gang members even with the same language proficiency levels who required the same English Language Development curriculum. Limited availability of security staff prevented the escort of students to ELD classes and classroom supervision during instruction. However, with probation’s cooperation, the school eventually designed a master schedule with designated ELD courses.

Effective strategies designed for traditional classrooms must often be modified in a court school classroom. For example, “Four Corner Talk” is an activity that promotes oral language and activates background knowledge by having small groups of students discuss and write what they know about of a topic. Each small group walks to all corners of the classroom to write on poster paper their knowledge or experience with aspects of a topic.

One teacher modified the activity so students remained seated at their table, and rotated the poster papers to each small group. The essence of the activity was not

lost. Students practiced oral language skills and demonstrated their knowledge or experience with a topic.

Even when barriers existed, there was strong interest in implementing strategies that promoted student interaction and oral language skills: “The teachers still continue to fight the idea of more student interaction, they fear ‘losing control’ of the class. Much more work is needed in this area. It would be great if we could have video examples, or if best practice classrooms/schools were identified,” read one comment.

Another example of increased access to a rigorous curriculum can be found in the court schools in the Los Angeles County Office of Education. A sufficient number of students at the beginning stages of English have warranted a Newcomers Class that is conducted in Spanish. Spanish language curricula materials are available and a bilingual teacher provides instruction in the students’ primary language.

Collaborative efforts throughout the state

During the training institutes, it became obvious that the opportunity for court school staff to meet others across the state with similar challenges and instructional issues was as important as the content of the institutes. One participant summarized this experience. “It is very difficult when there is not a common purpose such as these trainings for us to get together. However, I have contacted Modoc, Trinity and Butte [counties] about specific ideas and issues.”

Many court schools have begun to establish Professional Learning Communities. However, because many court schools have small numbers of teachers, teachers who teach several content areas, or limited availability of indicators of student work, the PLCs often do not reflect what is found in comprehensive high schools. Therefore, collaborations between court schools have been discussed as a vehicle to promote PLCs on a regional basis or through the use of technology (video conferencing, webcasts, Skype, FaceTime). The genuine interest to build on the PLC concept was supported by school administrators.

During the final court school site visit, school administrators were asked to com-

plete an online survey. One question asked the extent they were able to build communications, networks or collaborations with other court schools. About 30 percent of respondents who answered this item were able to list a county court school with which they had communicated to share ideas and best practices. Here is a representative comment: “Our county is in the process of adopting

Court schools are guardians of safety as well as brokers of effective academic instruction.

English language and English learner curricula and we have been networking with other court and county schools across the state to adopt the most effective and appropriate English language curriculum for our population. First round of piloting will be this summer.”

Four recommendations

1. The project to provide technical assistance to court schools resulted in convincing evidence that court school learning environments are not impervious to change. The nexus roles of court school teachers as guardians of safety and brokers of effective academic instruction do not pose an immutable force across all court schools. There are pockets of court schools where the marriage with probation has been successful. However, if institutional factors or organizational structures are to change, a hybrid of strict discipline and rigorous instruction may be necessary.

2. The unique environment and classroom conditions make it vital for court school educators to continue to receive professional development on implementation of Common Core and Smarter Balanced Assessments.

3. The absence of a longitudinal data system prevents practitioners and researchers from determining the performance levels of incarcerated youth. State data systems contribute to misleading information about court school students by aggregating diverse educational programs within one school identifier. One large county includes com-

munity school, special education and court school students under one state-designated school code. A system to more accurately portray the progress of the unique populations of court schools is warranted.

4. The academic achievement level of EL students is often concealed by the absence of standardized test scores that are regularly available for all students in California public schools. For EL students, the consequence is significant. The unavailability of academic assessments and English language proficiency test scores has serious implications for meeting their instructional needs and achieving reclassification as fluent English proficient students.

In conclusion, court school teachers and administrators have demonstrated a determination to make English learners in court schools more discernible and conspicuous through the implementation of effective instructional practices. Efforts and structures are in place to make academic instruction a priority in California court schools. ■

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