

Gaining a Voice After School

Why After-School Programs Are a Powerful Resource for English-Language Learners

By Claudia Weisburd

At the age of 14, Miguel, a recent immigrant from Mexico, is struggling to acclimate to a new school, language, and culture while also dealing with the social and developmental challenges of adolescence. His beginner-level English leaves him lost during class discussions. He dreams of working with computers someday, but he's floundering through textbooks and tests.

Miguel's parents can't offer much support: They speak no English, and, like the families of 59 percent of adolescent English-language learners, live far below the poverty line. Friends and family members talk together in Spanish. Miguel is trying to grasp what his teachers want him to learn, but he is finding that, as a 2007 report from the Carnegie Corporation of New York put it, the task for him takes "double the work"—learning the content and the language.

If Miguel becomes part of the almost 50 percent of Latino students who drop out, he'll be ill-prepared for an English-speaking workforce. Even if he graduates, there's a good chance he won't be ready for college. In California, 8.6 percent of Latino 9th graders graduate eligible for admission to the California State University system, and only 3.5 percent for the University of California system. How will Miguel fulfill his potential—and his dreams?

Equipping English-language learners, or ELLs, with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed is a national challenge. Almost one in five school-age children now live in homes where English is not the primary language, and the population is growing rapidly well beyond the leading ELL states of California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois. As a result, teachers across the country are working with English-language learners, often in classes with a mix of native speakers and ELL students. While trying to teach the curriculum, they now need also to address the language development of students whose abilities range from complete beginner to those who speak well but lack academic-level English, to those (among the great majority) who are struggling with literacy. In a recent survey, California elementary and secondary teachers identified their top challenges in working with English-language learners; the list included lack of time to develop language skills along with content, widely differing English levels, communicating with parents and students around homework and expectations, and lack of professional development.

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After-school programs are well placed to partner with schools to address these challenges. Language acquisition is a complex and inherently social process, calling for varied learning opportunities beyond the reach of schools alone. With its informal environment, learner-centered and project-based approaches, homework time, lower student-to-staff ratios, and greater interaction with parents, after-school offers richly different language-learning opportunities that complement ELL teaching and learning during the school day. This highly communicative social setting is fertile ground for helping students expand their language skills, develop as students, and connect with schooling.

Research on language acquisition confirms what all language-learners know from experience: Practice is key. Extensive and varied opportunities to use the language are necessary for developing the skills of speaking and listening for different purposes, with different audiences, in different settings. Oral skills, in turn, underlie literacy. According to the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth, well-developed oral proficiency in English is associated with English reading comprehension and writing. The panel has called for extensive oral-English development as part of literacy instruction, but points out that this is often overlooked in schools.

During the school day, speaking time is short: ELL students average less than 90 seconds per day in classroom talk time. After-school programs can help fill the gap. With some basic professional development, after-school staff members can readily use techniques that stimulate and stretch language production, build vocabulary, model appropriate speech, and expand listening comprehension.

Good after-school programming motivates children to use their English to participate in games, activities, and projects. Supportive adult and peer relationships that develop without the pressure of grades and tests help children feel safe using their emerging English, and allow them to take risks going further with new vocabulary and constructions. This combination of motivation with safety, coupled with staff members able to add that extra bit of stretch, is just the environment language-learners need to grow.

Because after-school programs typically span ages, grades, classes, and even schools, projects and activities are designed for different learning styles and different types of participation. In this heterogeneous setting, thoughtful groupings can allow more-advanced speakers to naturally model for the less advanced. The mixed language levels that pose difficulties in school can be built upon in after-school programs for peer tutoring, homework help, buddy systems, and team projects.

After-school approaches fit well with best practices in literacy development. Effective strategies for ELL students, identified by the Alliance for Excellent Education and other researchers, are easily implemented in after-school programs. These may include integrating reading, writing, listening, and speaking; teaching language through content and themes; focusing on vocabulary development; and offering choices to spur motivation. Vocabulary building, absolutely fundamental to advancing literacy and academic success, can be built into games at all levels. Integrated skills, and reading and writing specifically, become part of after-school programming through well-designed media, technology, and inquiry projects, field trips, service-learning, and presentations. Programs also can offer free reading time with interesting materials at different levels, as well as read-alouds, buddy reading, film and book pairings, and family story or movie nights connected to themes being covered in school. Skits, drama, poetry slams, dance, and music during after-school time can all be part of literacy development for ELL students.

The strong relationships with adults that are the hallmark of effective after-school programs can, moreover, provide supports for ELL students that further their language acquisition and social development at a crucial time: the middle and high school years. Schools are particularly challenged by the need to help adolescent immigrants quickly gain academic English and the corollary study skills, work habits, and understandings of expectations they need to graduate. After-school peer tutoring, mentoring, and extended group projects offer a place for students to gain the confidence and skills to successfully navigate school and other English-language settings. After-school homework time, for example, is ideal for ELL students to work on content and language simultaneously, one-on-one with staff members, in small groups, or with peers, while also building relationships and sharing expectations about work habits, standards, and school norms.

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Programs can open pathways to greater family engagement as well. Performances, potluck dinners, and other after-school events draw families in. Parents and siblings also can be invited to homework time, and family members often can serve as resources for lessons in global education, foreign-language learning, and other areas that may showcase their talents or experiences. Parents with limited English skills often feel more comfortable in the less-formal after-school setting, which can allow communication to grow around a range of issues.

Schools can cultivate partnerships in this area by establishing strong connections with after-school programs. Active communication channels among ELL teachers, classroom teachers, and after-school staff members are fundamental to identifying specific needs and resources. Joint professional development for non-ELL classroom teachers and after-school staff members is cost-effective, and creates a base of consistent strategies across settings.

As schools and after-school programs increasingly cooperate to develop and blend the different assets they offer for English-language learning and learners, the Miguels of this country will stand a better chance of succeeding—in school and beyond.

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