

# Educating English Language Learners

GRANTMAKING STRATEGIES  
FOR CLOSING AMERICA'S  
OTHER ACHIEVEMENT GAP

APRIL 2013

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# GFE information and acknowledgments

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Grantmakers for Education builds philanthropy's knowledge, networks and effectiveness for achieving results in education. Our mission is to strengthen philanthropy's capacity to improve educational outcomes and expand opportunities for all learners by:

- Sharing successful grantmaking strategies, best practices and lessons learned that exemplify responsive and responsible grantmaking in education
- Creating venues for funders to collaborate on projects, share knowledge, develop leadership, advocate for change and debate strategies with other education grantmakers
- Interpreting data, illustrating trends and conducting research to improve the effectiveness of education grantmaking and to highlight innovative educational approaches

Our efforts are informed by eight Principles for Effective Education Grantmaking, which are designed both to guide funders in increasing their impact and to ensure that GFE's services and programs help funders accomplish their goals for change.

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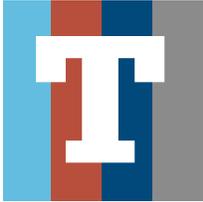
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*A Partner With Communities Where Children Come First*

# Introduction

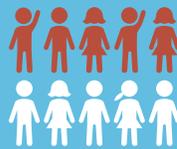


The education of English language learners (ELLs) is a matter of increasing urgency for the philanthropic community concerned about education and youth. English language learners are students who enter school without the English language skills needed to participate in and access the academic curriculum.

This population grew dramatically over the first decade of the 21st century, when the United States experienced dramatic demographic shifts in the cultural, linguistic and ethnic composition of the population. The population of K-12 English learners grew by 60 percent in the last decade compared with 7 percent growth of the general student population. As a result, the proportion of school children that are ELL has grown markedly; there are 5.3 million English learners enrolled in US K-12 schools, comprising 10.7 percent of the student population. Forty percent are between the ages of three and eight. By 2020, estimates indicate that half of all public school students will have non-English speaking backgrounds. While English learners have been present in some areas of the country for many decades, they have recently emerged in many additional states and communities. They are the most rapidly growing group of students in our nation's schools, and with a language barrier to participation and access in the education system they are also disproportionately underserved and underachieving.

The growth in ELLs has paralleled the growth of stronger accountability policies and more rigorous standards-based practices. Under No Child Left Behind, ELLs are a designated "subgroup," which has increased their visibility and focused attention on a longstanding and persistent achievement gap. As a result, schools and districts, though charged for decades with the responsibility of ensuring equal educational access for ELLs, have voiced a new sense of awareness and urgency about meeting the needs of this group of students. Now, on the eve of the implementation of new Common Core State Standards across 46 states that call for even more rigorous engagement with academic language and learning, the urgency is increasing. Education grantmakers have used multiple strategies

to address achievement gaps in our nation's schools—a goal that cannot be achieved without addressing the needs of English learners.



By 2020, estimates indicate that half of all public school students will have non-English speaking backgrounds.

## METHODOLOGY

This study draws upon two sources of data: an online survey and telephone interviews. In spring 2012, GFE selected 138 grantmaking organizations to participate in an online survey. The sample was composed primarily of GFE members who had indicated in GFE's 2010 and 2011 benchmarking surveys that they made grants to English learners or immigrants, but it was supplemented with funders identified as significant investors in English learners by Grantmakers for Children, Youth and Families and Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees. Fifty-seven grantmakers completed responses to the survey, representing diverse grantmaking entities including family foundations, private foundations, community foundations and corporate funders. Researchers supplemented the survey by conducting in-depth phone interviews with 24 survey respondents selected to represent a range of foundation sizes, organization types, geographic regions and ELL funding priorities. The study also convened an Advisory Committee comprising GFE members who are experienced funders of English learners. The advisory committee offered advice on research design, interpretation of research findings, and supplemental resources (listed in report appendix).

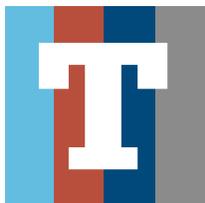
These trends have not escaped the attention of members of Grantmakers for Education (GFE), who have voiced the need to better understand the implications of demographic shifts, the needs of ELL students, and the roles grantmakers can play in strengthening outcomes for this vulnerable group of students. Indeed, GFE's Benchmarking survey has found that a growing number of funders are making grants for the education of English learners and immigrants; in 2012, 55 percent of GFE members reported that they do so, compared with 47 percent in 2008.

By analyzing grantmaking efforts to improve educational outcomes for ELLs from birth through grade 12 and highlighting lessons from experienced ELL funders, this report is designed to respond to growing interest in the field as well as the needs of the field itself. The report was also written in the hope of inspiring and supporting increased funding, awareness and capacity among grantmakers by providing a picture of what funders are currently doing to respond to the educational needs of English learners.

In 2010, GFE laid the groundwork for this study by convening grantmakers for a member briefing focused on the role of philanthropy in supporting ELL student success and issuing a report that summarized themes from the convening. The report, *Investing in our next generation: A funders guide to addressing the educational opportunities and challenges facing English Language Learners*, issued a call for more attention to the needs of ELLs, and for long-term investments and comprehensive approaches.

Together, the growing numbers of ELLs, the persistent achievement gaps and barriers to access, and an increasingly high set of stakes add up to a seminal moment for people and institutions investing in school reform and the education of English learners. Fortunately, this is an era in which a strong research and practice base offers a consistent foundation to draw upon for solutions. In addition, there is a growing group of funders who are experienced in addressing the challenges facing ELL students and the schools that serve them, and can offer the lens of their experiences, expertise and lessons learned. This report highlights themes and lessons from GFE's study and provides case studies of the investments by several foundations in English learners.

# Effective grantmaking begins with understanding English learners



The education of English learners became a universal public commitment as a result of a 1973 US Supreme Court case. In its ruling, the Court recognized this group as being denied equal educational access due to language barriers, establishing the responsibility of schools to take affirmative steps to overcome the language barrier.

## A PROFILE OF ENGLISH LEARNERS



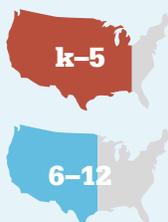
**There are currently 5.3 million English learners enrolled in US K-12 schools, comprising 10.7 percent of total student enrollment.**

They are the most rapidly growing group of students in our nation's schools.



**While the vast majority of English learners are Spanish speakers, the linguistic make-up of the total English learner population is highly diverse and varies by region.**

The US Census lists 325 languages spoken in homes across the United States. US states list a combined total of 56 different “most commonly spoken languages” among their student population. Nationally, the most commonly spoken language by ELL students is Spanish (73 percent), and Spanish is the dominant language for students with limited English proficiency in 43 states and the District of Columbia. In seven states, however, Spanish is NOT the most common first language of ELLs.



**Most English learners are not immigrants.** While some ELLs are newcomers to this nation, the majority of English learners are US-born children of immigrants. More than 75 percent of ELLs in grades K-5 are second- or third-generation Americans, and 57 percent of middle and high school

ELLs were born in the United States. This varies by region; port-of-entry communities have many newcomers, and must address a wider range of human service and integration needs as well as educational needs.



**Many English learners struggle academically, have poor educational outcomes, and never reach the levels of English proficiency needed for participation and success.**

The unique needs of ELL students, combined with the failure of most education systems to address their needs, have produced persistent poor educational outcomes for ELLs in most communities. Nearly three quarters of 4th grade ELLs scored “below basic” in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and nearly half scored below basic in math. Despite the efforts of the past forty years to build programs, there has been a substantial and continuing achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students. ELL students continue to have disproportionately high dropout rates, low graduation rates and low college completion rates. Achievement data suggest that ELLs not only lag far behind their peers, but the gaps grow as students advance through the grade levels.



**Many English learners struggle for years to become proficient in English and become “long-term English learners,” a group that is particularly vulnerable.** In the past few years, new

data has emerged identifying a large group of “long-term English learners”—students who have been in US schools for more than six years, are stalled in progress towards English proficiency without having reached a threshold of adequate English skills, and struggling academically. It is estimated that between one-quarter and one-half of all ELLs who enter US schools in primary grades become long-term English learners, and 60 percent of English learners in grades 6–12 are long-term English learners. Family income status is frequently intertwined in the educational barriers facing ELLs.



**English learners are a heterogeneous group, and needs differ from one community to another.** There is no single profile of English learners, nor

one single approach or policy that will meet educational goals and needs. They have different home language backgrounds, levels of language proficiency, socioeconomic standing, academic expectations, academic backgrounds and immigration status. Each of these factors impacts their experiences, needs and success in school.

ELLs enter US schools at varying ages and without the foundational understanding of the English language that the curriculum requires for accessing grade-level content. Their educational preparation, and particularly the strength of their language and literacy development in their home language, makes an enormous difference in how smoothly they are able to learn English and overcome academic gaps that emerge when they do not comprehend the language of academic instruction.



**Most ELL students are from low-income families.** The vast majority of ELLs are from families that are struggling economically and have parents with disproportionately low schooling levels. In every state, nearly 60 percent of ELLs live in families whose income falls below 185 percent of the federal poverty line.



**English learners are geographically dispersed.**

In the past, most English learners typically lived in six states, where policies, educational services and programs have developed and grown in response.

But since the 1990s a new pattern has emerged. While more than one in four ELL students still live in California, Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois and Arizona, the fastest *growth* has taken place in parts of the country that have had little or no prior experience of serving ELLs in their educational systems. This includes states like South Carolina (more than 800 percent growth in a decade), Indiana, Arkansas and others. Nevada had such tremendous growth in English learners over the past decade that it now has the highest ELL density of any state—more than 31 percent of its students. The needs of communities and schools that are gearing up to serve ELLs for the first time are significantly different from those with more experience. Local needs assessments are among the many crucial requirements of these educational systems.

### What do English learners need?

English learners have a language barrier—and often cultural barriers—to overcome in order to be able to participate, access the curriculum and succeed in school. Like all students, they need caring and qualified teachers, a rigorous curriculum that prepares them for college and career-readiness in the 21st century, support systems addressing the myriad conditions that get in the way of learning, and assessment and accountability mechanisms that ensure they are progressing toward their goals. However, what all this looks like and how it is delivered must be targeted and adapted to adequately address their unique needs as English learners. Awareness of specific needs is key to effective grantmaking.

First, ELLs need to learn English well enough to participate fully in an academic setting. Linguistic research suggests this normatively takes four to seven years. This is best done through intentional, dedicated curriculum in English language development and through English as a second language strategies, used across the academic curriculum, that focus on learning the English required for academic engagement, plus regular and safe opportunities to interact with and use English with native English speakers.

Second, ELLs need support to help them access the same full curriculum that their native-English speaking peers are learning. To gain this access, their teachers need to use instructional strategies that make the academic curriculum comprehensible (e.g., scaffolding, use of visuals, modified materials, preview/review, home language reference resources). Daily schedules, monitoring and district policies need to be modified to ensure that English learners have this access to the full curriculum, including college preparatory courses, science labs and electives, and that these courses are all taught in ways that support English learners.

Third, in order to achieve the dual challenge of learning English while mastering the same academic content as all other students, English learners often need additional time and support. Out-of-school programs, summer programs, extended-day options, and policies that allow for more time in school can all make a difference.

Fourth, English learners need support in bridging cultural and language worlds. As cultural and linguistic “outsiders,” they need orientation to the new culture, they need multiple structures and supports for interacting with people of different cultures and languages, they need receiving communities to be open and

welcoming, and their connection to their home language and culture must be affirmed. Whenever possible, development of the home language along with English to high levels of biliteracy provides students with powerful benefits and skills for functioning in and across multiple language and cultural communities.

# Findings: What we know about current ELL grantmaking

**The level of investment in English learners is relatively small.** Although a substantial number of GFE members indicate they make grants to ELLs, this study found that total investment in English learners is small in comparison to the magnitude of this population and the depth of educational need. Overall, it is difficult to quantify grantmaking levels in ELLs. This study sought to determine levels of ELL grantmaking using data from two sources: a Foundation Center analysis of its data set, and our survey of ELL grantmakers. The Foundation Center's taxonomy of search terms does not track investments in English learners; instead, it tracks grants to English as a second language programs and bilingual programs (which represent a subset of education investments in ELL students). In 2010, funders in that database awarded \$6.6 million in grants to ESL programs and \$3.9 million in grants to bilingual programs, making a total of 230 grants. Although this is more than double the number of grants in these categories in the previous decade, the combined total represents less than one percent of education grants listed in the Foundation Center database.

GFE's survey of ELL grantmakers asked them to identify the funding range that best describes their investments in ELLs approved in 2011. These findings suggest a range of \$30-\$65 million in total grants for ELLs across survey respondents. This is a small sample within a broader philanthropic universe, but it captures the major investors in English learner education. Most funders' annual grantmaking to English learners averages less than \$500K, with just a few major exceptions. Four foundations each grant over \$5 million annually. Nine foundations (18 percent of the respondents) give a total of less than \$50K. Many respondents found it difficult to determine the dollar amounts their institutions devote to ELLs because the money is integrated within the education portfolio and embedded within larger grants that served non-ELL students as well.

**Most funders support ELLs through their education portfolios.** Three-quarters of respondents report making ELL investments primarily through their foundation's education portfolio. A number make those grants from other portfolios, including children and families,

## STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ELL OUTCOMES

Grantmakers are supporting multiple strategies to address the educational needs of English learners:

- **Development and implementation of valid and reliable language and academic assessments** designed for English learners.
- **District-level and site-level school reform** that creates the conditions of good schooling that make attention to ELLs possible.
- **Professional development and pre-service preparation** for teachers to deliver high quality instruction—a major determinant of whether English learners access and learn the curriculum.
- Strengthening of **teacher recruitment, pipeline, training and incentives to increase the supply of educators** who are bilingual and/or have connections to English learner communities.
- **Parent education and family-school partnerships** to enable families to support ELLs' academic development and to bridge the worlds of home and school.
- **Development and expansion of early learning opportunities** to provide a solid foundation of language, cognition and healthy development for young dual language children.
- Fostering **expanded time and educational setting options** for English learners, including expanded day, summer learning, and out-of-school institutional links that enable ELLs to learn the curriculum and earn credits.
- **Advocacy, leadership development and organizing** for improved policies and increased resources for English learner students, families and communities to ensure equitable access to quality schooling.
- Development and implementation of **quality research-based English learner program models** that address the needs and challenges of various community contexts.
- **Cross-cultural relations and integration initiatives** that build an inclusive school culture for all students.
- **Support services and orientation curriculum for newcomers** to meet their transition needs.

immigrant services and youth development. Only two foundations have created a stand-alone English language learner portfolio for grantmaking.

**ELL grantmaking is primarily local.** Three quarters of the funders making grants to ELLs do so at the local or state level. Eleven percent focus at a multi-state level and 15 percent at the national level.

Among funders who reported that their ELL grantmaking is geographically targeted, California is the most common state for ELL investments. Colorado, Texas and New York were the next most frequent targets of ELL grantmaking.

**Most ELL grantmakers have a long history of ELL investments.** Two-thirds of respondents have invested in ELLs for six or more years; 41 percent have been funding English learner programs and services for over a decade. Our survey identified only four organizations that have been funding in this issue area for two years or less.

**The majority of grants considered “ELL grants” are not exclusively targeting English learners or their needs.** Grantmakers report they are funding services and programs that support English learners, but nearly all do so within a broader general education or immigrant services strategy rather than via a targeted ELL strategy. Forty percent of respondents could not estimate how much of their education grantmaking was reaching English learners, although the grants were made with the expectation that English learners would be served as part of a wider population. Even those who expressly targeted ELLs reported that their organizations did not have an explicit institutional strategy for impacting the education of English learners. GFE reviewed the grant guidelines of the foundations participating in this study and found that only two funders specifically mentioned English learners in their grant guidelines and one other funder addressed them in its strategic plan. Overwhelmingly, support for ELLs is instead embedded in more generic strategies to close the achievement gap or improve educational outcomes for low income, under-served or minority students. Several interviewees mentioned that having a more articulated and specific set of strategies for ELLs would encourage more focused and likely more effective grantmaking.

**Many ELL grants also target other demographic characteristics.** The vast majority of English learner grants target low-income and low-achieving students

in schools and communities where English learners are a known population. More than 90 percent of survey respondents consider low-income status in targeting their ELL grants. Seventy-three percent target immigrants and newcomers as a demographic factor. The third largest factor mentioned is low academic achievers (56 percent). Other framing categories include immigrants/refugees, minority education, long-term English learners, racial/ethnic minorities (predominantly Latino), and efforts to close the achievement gap.

**ELL funders invest across the education continuum.** Foundations tend to focus on a discrete band of the age and education spectrum. As with the grantmaking practices of GFE’s broader membership, ELL funders tend to focus more on K-12 education rather than early learning and postsecondary. Despite that, ELL funders appear much more inclined to support early childhood education than GFE’s wider membership; 67 percent of ELL funders support birth-5 strategies, compared with 49 percent of the respondents to GFE’s 2012 Benchmarking survey. Among ELL funders supporting K-12, there is more concentration in grades K-8 than in high school, which is also a sharp contrast with GFE’s wider membership (where 84 percent support high school versus 72 percent supporting middle school). In short, ELL funders appear to agree that it pays to start early.

The issues and activities funded differ depending on the age and grade level that is targeted. Through our interviews, we observed that funders concentrating on different age groups also tended to target different domains (see figure below). Those focusing on ages 0–8 often invest in the family domain, funding parent education and parent engagement, family support, and parent training in early literacy. Many K-12 funders support school-based reform strategies as well as supports and interventions targeting specific learners. Those who are investing more in adolescent English learners focus on college access, youth development and leadership, and academic language issues.

**ELL grantmaking is concentrated in several key fields of interest, including grade-level reading.** Foundations were asked to identify the fields of interest that are most central to their strategy (displayed below as primary investment areas) as well as any other areas of investment (secondary investment areas). The areas most commonly supported by ELL funders are:

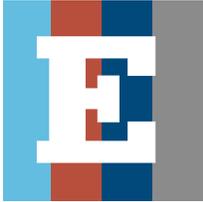
- Early literacy and/or grade level reading (all but 3 funders make grants in this area)

- Out-of-school time programs
- Parent education, training and engagement
- Teacher and leader preparation
- In-service professional development
- College readiness and/or access

**ELL grantmaking focuses primarily on funding direct services and programs.** Nine out of ten funders who support English learner grants say this is a significant element of their ELL grantmaking. The next most common funding strategy is support for developing and piloting new models or scaling up existing successful models. The strategies used less often include: public policy and advocacy, community organizing, and research and evaluation; more than half of funders report they do not invest in these strategies.

**Many ELL grantmakers are funding collaboratively.** More than half of the responding foundations fund in partnership with other funders. They reportedly do so because ELL funding is a newer area of focus and they are striving to draw upon one another's expertise. Others noted that partnering enables greater impact when their resources are not sufficient to allow them to support a more comprehensive approach to ELL supports on their own.

# Lessons for philanthropy



education grantmakers are developing a deeper understanding of how to use the tools of philanthropy to impact the education of English learners. Through the survey and interviews, a set of themes emerged relating to lessons learned, effective practices and challenges.

## Be clear about the unique needs of English learners

Funding programs and services for a broad population that includes English learners does not necessarily address the needs of the English learner community. Although English learners share many needs with other targeted populations, they are often left behind unless the particular barriers and challenges of the English learner community are addressed. Because so many grantmakers express an intention to reach and serve English learner communities but do not have a specific strategy designed to address the needs of that group, they are unable to determine the reach of their funding or its effectiveness. In order to target appropriate programs and supports, funders must understand how the needs of ELLs overlap with and differ from other school populations. As discussed above, funders must consider the following characteristics of English learners' needs:

- **The needs of English learners are not adequately addressed solely through a focus on Latino communities.** Although the majority of ELLs are Latino, the majority of Latinos are not English learners. Also, one in four ELLs is not Latino.
- **The needs of English learners are not adequately addressed through a focus on “low-performing students.”** While the majority of ELLs struggle academically and do not perform well on standardized tests in English, their educational needs differ in important ways from other low-performing students because of their lack of foundational English skills and the resulting barriers they face in accessing the academic curriculum.
- **The needs of English learners are not adequately addressed through a focus on economically disadvantaged students.** The majority of ELLs are economically disadvantaged and from homes with

low levels of parent education, sharing needs for basic supports with other low-income students. However, the issues of eligibility for services, job opportunities and family barriers to educational access differ for ELL families.

- **The needs of English learners are not adequately addressed through a focus on immigrant/refugee students.** The majority of ELLs are US-born and not immigrants, although immigrants and refugees may be the majority of English learners in the schools of some port-of-entry or refugee-resettlement communities.

The complexity of the characteristics and needs of ELLs suggests several important implications for grantmakers. First, grantmakers should use local needs assessments and data collection to understand the English learner community in their targeted grantmaking area. Second, grantmakers must be careful to ensure that the strategies they plan to support match well with the needs of the intended target group, avoiding a “one size fits all”



“There is a danger to simply saying good instruction is good instruction for all kids, because ELLs have specific needs that have to be addressed. I believe that categorical attention to

ELLs is necessary because it falls off the plate otherwise. But these issues of language are important for all students. So without losing sight of the need to keep looking at ELLs specifically, we're trying to leverage the fact that this work will help all students.”

—KENJI HAKUTA, STANFORD UNIVERSITY

approach. Third, funders should carefully vet program models and service providers prior to making grants to be sure that they demonstrate understanding of English learner needs, are designed to take into account the adaptations required to meet ELL needs, and have the staff expertise and language skills to directly address those needs. Finally, funders should require—and provide funding to enable—grantees to provide data and documentation that allows for a clear assessment of the impact of their work on English learners as a specific student subgroup.

### **Balance a specific focus on ELLs with a more holistic school improvement approach**

Many grantmakers support ELLs through broader efforts to close the achievement gap and support school improvement and reform. This recognition that a poorly functioning school or district mediates against being able to meet the needs of English learners is important. Basic conditions of strong and focused leadership, data-based planning, a culture and climate of accountability, and supports for professional learning and growth are needed to facilitate systemic responses to English learners and other low-achieving student groups. Helping school sites and districts create these conditions is a key element of addressing English learner needs. It is not, however, sufficient in itself. The ELL achievement gap will not close if school leadership—no matter how strong—does not understand their needs, or if committed professional learning communities use data that is neither valid nor reliable for ELLs.

The history of English learner education is that it has been relegated to being the responsibility of categorical, separate (and often marginalized) staff. An important shift taking place in some quarters is toward building broad ownership and accountability school- and district-wide for ELLs to thrive. For example, the S.H. Cowell Foundation and the Central Valley Foundation have supported district-level school reform in a rural California district with large numbers of English learners. The reform is a strategic restructuring of the district culture and practices to focus on student learning. Says Ken Doane of the S.H. Cowell Foundation, “We define success in part by accomplishing an institutional cultural shift that bring ELLs into central focus by districts and schools. Rather than placing the responsibility for supporting ELLs solely on specialized staff, we believe in sharing this responsibility across all teachers and offering all of them training, and across all school leaders. Everyone has to learn at least a minimum level about language acquisition and development.” (For more infor-

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—KEN DOANE, S.H. COWELL FOUNDATION



mation, read the accompanying case study of Cowell and Central Valley Foundation’s collaborative grantmaking.)

### **Start Early**

English learner communities have disproportionately little access to quality early learning programs, and students typically start school lacking the skills, language or readiness that set them up for success academically. As English learners move through school, they often amass academic deficits during the years they are learning English because they cannot adequately comprehend academic instruction in a language they haven’t yet mastered. As they progress into higher grades, the curriculum becomes more difficult to access, more conceptual and more dependent upon abstract language. For all children, a strong early foundation of language and literacy facilitates later academic success. For English learners, this is particularly true because they require a strong foundation in their home language as a foundation for English; also, the earlier they acquire English proficiency the more access they have to the increasingly abstract and rigorous grade level content encountered moving up through the grades.

With this in mind, many grantmakers focus on funding early literacy and language development for ELLs, and on supporting language-minority children and families in the formative early childhood years. They spoke in the interviews of the importance of taking a preventative approach—and of addressing the transitional, alignment and articulation issues between the early childhood/family services world and the K-12 schooling system. For example, the Minneapolis Foundation supports community-based Spanish-English immersion childcare centers, a key component of which is family participation. The W. K.

Kellogg Foundation supports a partnership between the University of Chicago and the Logan Square Neighborhood Association in Chicago to provide a pathway for parents of young children in preschools to become early childhood providers and eventually certified elementary school teachers—a grow-your-own teacher model for the community. And the Sobrato Family Foundation decided to invest in a new PreK-3 model of intensive language development for Spanish-speaking ELLs after a local and national scan. Lisa Sonsini, president of the foundation, explains: “After mapping it out from multiple directions, we decided we could make the most difference by focusing on young children (longer term impact), on early intervention and setting a strong foundation for Latino English learners as they start off on their schooling journeys.” (For more information, read the accompanying case study of the Sobrato Family Foundation grantmaking.)

### **Plan for the long haul**

Interviews with experienced ELL grantmakers highlight the need to see investments in ELL education as a long-term commitment. To some degree, this is because public schools and schooling systems change very slowly. Additionally, this reflects the four- to seven-year journey most ELLs must make to proficiency. Grantmakers spoke about the importance of educating their boards about the long time horizon required for this work. Funders are themselves still learning about the large gaps that still exist in many communities’ awareness regarding English learners and their needs, shortcomings in policy and practice, and the amount of work that is required to build systems capacity to retool. Designing and disseminating new instructional models and assessments also requires a long-term commitment. School and district leaders need support to develop their understanding of ELL needs, build the systems and culture in their schools to bring others on board, and support the professional development and coaching that enable changes in classroom practice to occur. These are evolving processes that require multiple years to take hold. Several grantmakers described making initial smaller and shorter-term grants that grew and evolved into multi-year funding to support schools in the continuing process of changing their norms and practices to meet the needs of ELLs.

### **Access the expertise of English learner experts**

Although many grantmakers and educators are still building early awareness and understanding of English



learners, a solid and consistent research base has emerged, providing direction and guidance for reformers. Some communities, schools and advocates have amassed decades of experience in how to create and sustain the educational services and systems that result in English learner success. Grantmakers interviewed for this study spoke often about the need to strengthen links between education grantmaking and the English learner research community. Many funders are not aware that there is already this strong research base to draw upon. Seeking to overcome this gap, grantmakers recommend conducting literature searches, commissioning research reviews, identifying and bringing in people with ELL expertise, and brokering grantee relationships with ELL experts. An appendix of this report includes a short list of recommended readings compiled by the Advisory Group. The accompanying case studies also describe various ways in which ELL expertise has been incorporated into grantmaking.

### **Raise ELL issues on the public agenda**

Many grantmakers spoke of the role they play as advocates for ELLs, and of the value of conducting local scans and needs assessments to buttress their advocacy. Foundations can use this information to incentivize schools to address priority ELL issues, convene educators and community leaders to learn about and discuss ELLs and their needs, and use the leverage of their leadership and relationships to garner attention. Bob Reid, of the J. F. Maddox Foundation, described such proactivity as an important role his foundation has played to support schools: “School districts are so busy dealing with remedial issues from day to day that they are not coming to us with a meaningful strategic vision about what needs to happen in education. We have a very close relationship with district leadership, and we have the time to scan the environment and identify key issues. We brought the issues of the Common Core standards to them. We said, we’re prepared to help you with a significant level of support to integrate these standards, and give them life for all your students.”

While this is a general role that foundations can play, Ruby Takanishi of the Foundation for Child Development notes that it is of particular importance with regard to English learners. “We take very seriously the fact that we are an independent private foundation and we have the opportunity to do things that other sectors like government cannot do. We feel a special responsibility to raise up issues where nobody is paying attention. Grantmaking in the area of English learner education has done that.” (For more information about the Foundation for Child Development’s role in raising the need for ELL early assessments, see the accompanying case study.)

Several funders have supported an initiative—the “Understanding Language” project led by Stanford University—that is designed to incorporate a focus on English learners into a leading policy reform: map the academic and content needs of ELLs against the Common Core State Standards. The project team is mapping the academic and content needs of ELLs against the Common Core. Funded jointly by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the effort is being led by national ELL policy expert and linguist Dr. Kenji Hakuta. Hakuta explains, “We owe all students, but especially English language learners, an instructional system that is tightly attuned to the language necessary to succeed in learning. Our current system tends to obscure the role of language. Our project will make the language that kids need to succeed academically much more visible so that it helps guide what goes on in the classroom.” (A summary of interim findings can be found online at <http://ell.stanford.edu/publication/understanding-language-conference>). Moving forward, the Understanding Language team will engage educators in developing resources around the new Standards, offer model lessons and examples of instruction, and foster online learning communities where knowledge can be shared and advanced.

Other grantmakers focus on supporting advocacy groups and community organizing efforts that can yield new programs, more accountability, or increases in public funding for educational or other services for ELLs and their families. In New York, the New York Community Trust and Deutsche Bank reported that some of their greatest successes were in supporting advocacy groups such as the New York Immigration Coalition and Advocates for Children. This work led to increased state aid in the form of a \$21 million competitive grant program for ELL pro-



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—BOB REID, J. F. MADDOX FOUNDATION

grams in New York City. The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region supports community organizing, and through Many Languages One Voice (MLOV), they worked closely with the community to help identify barriers and challenges children had with the schools and connect families with decision-makers. This series of meetings led to the recommendation by the city council and superintendent of a \$4.5 million budget allocation to ELLs.

### **Spread effective models**

Grantmakers have an important role to play in supporting the sharing of effective practices, and investing in scale-up and replication strategies for effective program models. Schools and communities in the United States are still learning how to provide meaningful educational access and support to English learners. Strong, effective programs and models are often developed in isolation, failing to reach other locales that are grappling with similar challenges. Many funders who participated in this study gave examples of their support for the development of local programs. The majority raised the importance of disseminating best practices. For some, this means investing in identifying good programs across the nation that can be brought to their region; for others, the investment in designing and piloting new and effective programs led to new grants to develop and support these strategies in going to scale. Dual language programs, biliteracy programs, international and newcomer school models, and early learning programs are examples of new research-based program models that are now being implemented across the nation as a result of foundation support. Other funders emphasize their role as conveners, bringing school leaders and program staff together to learn about what is being done elsewhere that might be relevant and useful.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, for example, has played a major role in adapting, expanding and repli-

cating AVANCE, a parent education and early learning program the foundation discovered through a search for effective programs for low-income, Latino and English Learner communities. The program was developed in San Antonio to serve Latino families; with Kellogg's support, the program has adapted its strategies to serve other cultural groups and has scaled nationally. Says Valorie Johnson, Kellogg's Program Officer in Education and Learning, "AVANCE was one of the first grants I was involved in when I came to the foundation 20 years ago, and to this day it remains one of the top three most effective investments Kellogg has made in early learning. It is a community-driven, culturally relevant, parent-empowering program for families facing multiple barriers to success which matches our mission to create the conditions under which vulnerable children and their families learn and succeed in life." (For more information, see the accompanying case study on the Kellogg Foundation's long-term commitment to AVANCE.)

### **Collaborate with other funders for greater impact**

The majority of grantmakers and grantmaking examples provided through the survey and interviews illustrate the prevalence of collaborative grantmaking for ELL education. This occurs in part because the level of demand, sense of urgency, and comprehensive/systemic nature of the need in English learner education require greater resources than a single foundation is prepared to invest. Funders need each other's dollars and partnership in order to have real impact. For example, Jennifer Curry of the Goizueta Foundation notes, "Although we don't fund public policy and advocacy, we're interested in knowing who is willing to be that muscle. It could be powerful to work closely with a policy funder on ELL issues, knowing that we'd be willing to fund the programs and services that are the results of that policy."

The drive to fund collaboratively also reflects the still-emerging state of the field. Many foundations appear unsure what to do, or are not yet prepared to pinpoint a focus within ELL education, and prefer for now to follow the lead of another foundation that has more of a track record or has invested time in shaping a strategy to impact English learners. The need for learning from and with each other about addressing ELL achievement echoed clearly through the grantmaker interviews. Those who have taken on major issues within English learner education have seen their role in part as actively engaging other grantmakers to join the effort. For example, the Carnegie Corporation saw the advent of new Common Core Standards as a major reform that

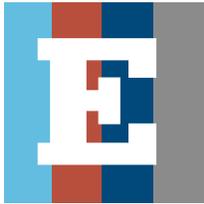


would greatly impact English learners, and helped to mobilize philanthropists as well as researchers and education leaders to work together to ensure that English learners' needs would be addressed in this major reform.

Finally, while some funders are investing in evaluations of their ELL grants, stronger mechanisms are needed for sharing the learning across the grantmaking community, and for tracking the investments in ELLs. Two grantmakers suggested it might help to put ELLs into grantmaking taxonomies to allow a clearer analysis and picture of investments in this population over time.

# Conclusion

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Education grantmakers have long shown a commitment to ensuring and expanding access to quality education. In many eras, philanthropy has played a major role in putting new reforms on the table, generating research and policy to guide educational practices, and supporting implementation of new models and new educational ideas.

There is now an urgent need to ramp up attention and resources to respond to the equity, access and opportunity gaps of the nation's growing and underserved population of English learners. There is some evidence of increasing awareness among our grantmaking community, but the investments being made are still disproportionately small in comparison to the magnitude of the need. The many indirect and generic investments being made are important, but they do not adequately address the specific barriers and challenges faced by English learners, nor do they respond fully to their needs. Many grantmakers remain unsure as to how to target and serve English learner communities in the most effective way, and they seek grantmaking models, collaborations and partnerships for moving forward with more proactive, assertive and long-term funding in this area. There is also a strong role for grantmakers in using data to inform community leaders and policy makers to advocate for ELLs in their policy, especially as the Common Core State Standards are nearing implementation. We are hopeful that this report will generate more attention to grantmaking focused on English learners and will initiate a new generation of dialogues, partnership, leadership and action within philanthropy about what we can and must do to erase longstanding achievement gaps, and make good on the promise of educational opportunity for English learners.

## The essential role of parent education, family support and early learning

The Kellogg Foundation's long-term commitment to promoting the development, expansion and adaptation of the AVANCE model



The AVANCE Parent-Child Education Program was developed as a community-based effort in San Antonio, Texas, in 1973. The model, now employed in more than 100 program sites across the

US, focuses on providing education and family support services to predominantly Latino families in low-income, at-risk communities with a strong emphasis on parent empowerment and early learning. Dedicated to promoting school readiness and supporting family engagement, AVANCE has become a national model of early childhood education for parents, teachers, researchers and the general public—with support from the Kellogg Foundation and other funders. In 2010, Kellogg made a \$12.6 million grant to AVANCE to continue its development and replication nationwide.

Twenty years ago, when Kellogg first became involved in supporting AVANCE, the foundation recognized the model as a strong match with its mission. Kellogg's primary focus is to address the cycle of poverty that limits children's access to adequate education, nutritious food, economic security and quality healthcare, by helping communities marshal their resources to ensure that all children have an equitable and promising future.

"AVANCE was one of the first grants that I was involved in when I came to the foundation 20 years ago, and to this day remains one of the top three most effective investments that Kellogg has made in early learning," says Valorie Johnson, Kellogg's program officer in education and learning. "It is a community-driven, culturally relevant, parent empowering program for families facing multiple barriers to success (poverty, language, cultural) which matches our mission to create the conditions under which vulnerable children and their families learn and succeed in life."

### The AVANCE model

AVANCE's signature Parent-Child Education Program provides low-income Latino parents with the tools to become active participants in their child's life, and children ages 0–3 with the education to become prepared and engaged students. The approach is preventative,

### GRANTMAKING STRATEGIES

- Adapting, developing, expanding, replicating an effective model
- Long-term investment

### ENGLISH LEARNER NEEDS

- Parent education and early learning for low-income, Latino ELL population
- Family literacy

community-based and focused on breaking the cycle of poverty for multiple generations.

AVANCE is designed for families struggling with poverty and multiple barriers to improving their socio-economic standing. As Valorie Johnson describes, "it reaches the most vulnerable of the vulnerable." Most AVANCE participants are not only poor and educationally disadvantaged; the program also intentionally reaches out to parents who were victims of abuse and neglect as children and/or did not have positive parental role models themselves. Many are living chaotic, socially isolated, stress-filled lives and being challenged to play an effective parental role. AVANCE strives to expose participants to a variety of information and strategies for accessing community services. AVANCE's services aim to engage parents, help them improve relationships with their children, work toward educational goals, and temper the impacts of social isolation and environmental stress.

Research shows that the first three years of a child's life are the most important developmentally. Through the motto, "Parents are the first teachers and the home is the first classroom," and AVANCE's well-rounded curriculum, parents are assisted in crafting a cognitively enriching environment in their homes which greatly benefits the intellectual development of the child. There are several components to the model:

- **Parent classes:** At the heart of the model are free, weekly, three-hour classes for parents who are expecting or who have at least one child age 0–3. Over a nine-month period, these weekly sessions involve

parenting, child development and nutrition classes; toy-making classes that teach the value of learning through play; and community speakers who help parents understand, navigate and access social services and other resources. Taught bilingually, the courses address children's developmental, health, cognitive and social needs and provide specific parenting strategies. A unique element of the program, educational toy making, promotes teaching through play and encourages personal connections among participants. This activity reduces stress, which often impedes effective parenting, while promoting self-sufficiency to parents. Toy making also allows parents the opportunity to learn how to make items the child can play with at home while developing an understanding of the importance of learning through play.

- **Adult literacy:** AVANCE sites and their community-based partners support adult literacy through GED preparation and ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. Once parents understand the value of education for their children they typically recognize the need to complete their own education. Local adult education service providers assign GED and ESL instructors to AVANCE sites while AVANCE provides the classroom space and other supportive services to allow the parents to return to school. AVANCE also facilitates the process of enrolling in college, helping parents learn how to engage in a college setting and learn the intricacies of financial aid, registration, scheduling classes, and adjusting their personal lives and family responsibilities accordingly.
- **Early childhood education:** While parents pursue their education, their children are cared for at the AVANCE Family Learning Center, where they receive developmentally appropriate early childhood education in adult-rich classrooms. Early childhood instructors and aides organize lessons emphasizing language development, basic concepts and skills, and social competence. Learning using all 5 senses is incorporated into all activities and concrete experiences are used to introduce new vocabulary, concepts, and skills. Parents are asked to volunteer at least 12 times during the year in the early learning classrooms so that they can practice the skills and concepts they are learning with children other than their own. Some AVANCE sites have incorporated Head Start programs.
- **Home visits:** The AVANCE Home Teaching component is an extension of the AVANCE parenting education provided at the AVANCE center. It provides

individual attention for families in a familiar environment and creates the opportunity to gain better insights into the family's conditions and needs. Case managers make every effort to help the family obtain essential social services, including food, clothing, shelter, counseling, and other economic assistance. Home visits are scheduled every month for each family and promote one-to-one parental instruction focusing on missing skills or areas of difficulty.

- **Other supportive services:** In order for parents to fully participate in the AVANCE services, they receive a range of supports including: transportation to and from all AVANCE services and activities; a nutritious meal served to all the children when they come to the classes with their parents; staff follow-up with daily calls to remind parents about class and to schedule transportation; referrals and support for families in accessing emergency food and income assistance, counseling, mental health needs, emergency housing and medical needs.

AVANCE recognizes the barriers that low-income, Latino populations face in accessing services and has designed the services so that they are consumer friendly and easily accessible. Services are free and are community-based, often taking place in housing projects or at schools. Staff are bilingual, culturally sensitive and come from the community being served. Services and classes are available at times convenient for families, and parents are able to move along a continuum of services as they progress from one level of advancement to another. The parenting classes are the first step and then lead to the Adult Literacy for ESL and GED classes. From there, parents can continue and enroll into college. Parents understand that their connection to AVANCE is long-lasting and that services will continue to be available over the course of many years.

#### **Demonstration of AVANCE's impact**

Working with a highly vulnerable population, AVANCE's comprehensive model has been evaluated numerous times and found to be successful. The Carnegie Corporation of New York funded a major evaluation that showed, for example, that graduates of the program consistently report and demonstrate greater school readiness, more willingness to access services, increased knowledge, and greater involvement in their children's education. Ninety-four percent of the children of AVANCE participants graduated from high school, and 64 percent of the women who obtained a GED from AVANCE went on to attend college or a technical program.

### **The importance of funder support**

Philanthropy has played a vital role in developing AVANCE from a locally effective program to a nationally replicated model. Funding has been essential to expand the program to new communities, building the infrastructure and approach to support replication, as well as the ongoing costs of delivering a comprehensive program like AVANCE. The Kellogg Foundation, having identified and established a long relationship with this model, targeted its recent \$12 million commitment for the replication of AVANCE in two distinct ways:

- 1. Expansion of the Parent Child Education Program into new states.** AVANCE is selecting four new partners a year for three years to receive grants to replicate the Parent Child Education Program in low-income, at-risk Latino communities. The grant includes money for start-up costs, training and technical assistance from the national office, as well as the entire nine-month curriculum in Spanish and English.
- 2. Replication of the Parent Child Education Program for other racial and ethnic subgroups.** AVANCE has partnered with nonprofits in three distinct cultural and racial communities (African-American, American Indian, and Latino non-Mexican) to test and study the model's effectiveness and cultural relevance within those communities. Early findings suggest that the model is very adaptable and achieving results, and the communities want to expand it.

## A preK–3 model of language learning

The Sobrato Family Foundation invests in ELL model development in response to local need



ive years ago, the Sobrato Family Foundation’s place-based commitment to improving the quality of life for children and families in Silicon Valley, California, led to the decision to fund the design and pilot of a model of early language,

literacy and academic development for the growing and underserved Latino English learner population in the region. Drawing on the most recent brain research, the emerging knowledge base regarding effective English learner practices, and with guidance from English learner experts, the Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) model was developed and implemented as a preK–3 approach in two low-performing school districts.

A comprehensive, longitudinal evaluation has shown significant impacts just three years into implementation, drawing the attention of educators throughout California and prompting the foundation to grapple with the challenges of replication and scaling up.

Traditionally, the Sobrato Family Foundation’s grantmaking approach had been responsive cash grants to support existing non-profit groups in the Silicon Valley, a region with mounting social challenges including an immense wealth gap between residents. As the family geared up to deploy a new influx of funds, they wondered how they might realize additional impact through new focus areas.

Lisa Sobrato Sonsini, a family member and president of the board, recalls, “The family was interested in making a difference for the growing numbers of Latino families in the region. We were aware of the achievement gap issues for that community, and although we had been supporting adult ESL classes and the National Hispanic University, we weren’t sure how to go about having an impact in early education or K–12. We needed a sharper sense of focus and strategy for how to work with schools and districts.”

And so began both a local needs assessment and a national scan that resulted in the foundation’s decision to prioritize addressing the English language barrier for the Latino community in the region. More than 25 percent of students entering public school in San

### GRANTMAKING STRATEGIES

- Local needs assessment and local/national scans
- Model development, piloting, evaluation

### ENGLISH LEARNER NEEDS

- PreK–3 systems alignment and curricular articulation
- Professional development and high quality language-rich instruction
- Targeting Spanish-speaking, Latino, English Learners in low-income communities

Mateo and Santa Clara counties are English learners, and the vast majority of these are Latino. These children encounter a daunting achievement gap and drop out at up to eight times the rate of non-Latino white students. Their teachers are largely unprepared, needing both training and resources to help their Spanish-speaking ELL students develop the skills they need to succeed. Sonsini explains, “After mapping it out from multiple directions, we decided we could make the most difference by focusing on young children, on early intervention and setting a strong foundation for Latino English learners as they start off on their schooling journeys. There wasn’t an existing organization in this region working on this, so we couldn’t just fund more slots or expansion. We would need to invest in model development. And for that, we would need to hire people with expertise in working with schools and specifically in English learner education.”

The Foundation identified Dr. Laurie Olsen, an expert in both school improvement reforms and English learner education, to design and lead the implementation of the SEAL model to address the needs of Spanish-speaking ELL students. Olsen worked with a national advisory group and drew upon current research; she continues to refine the model and directly support the district and classroom educators implementing SEAL.

### **The SEAL Model: A preK–3 approach**

The SEAL model is being piloted in three elementary schools and 13 feeder preschools in two California school districts (Redwood City School District and San Jose Unified School District). The preschool sites include both state-funded preschools and community-based preschools. The SEAL sites are 95 percent “minority” enrollment, 90 percent Latino, and 70 percent English learner. The schools serve higher rates of Latino children, economically disadvantaged children, and a much higher proportion of English learners than other schools in the same district or the state as a whole.

In the SEAL model, English learners start their schooling in a language-rich preschool program that prepares them in a developmentally appropriate manner for the kindergarten curriculum they will enter. The kinder program is designed to build seamlessly from this preschool experience, so that children develop the skills and language foundation needed for academic success in grades 1–3 and beyond. A SEAL classroom is designed to be “alive with language.” Children are engaged to talk about what they are learning, ask questions, predict and wonder about their world. Teachers are trained to use rich, expressive language and to create an environment where academic vocabulary comes to life. Books in multiple languages are easily accessible, and student-produced work adorns the walls. The model is built around six foundational research pillars:

- **Alignment of preschool and K-3 systems around a shared vision of early language and cognitive development provides a solid foundation for academic success.** The SEAL preK–3 model views preschool as a connected schooling experience that cuts across what has been constructed as two separate educational systems. SEAL strategies to align preK–3 include: shared professional development for preschool and kindergarten teachers on language development for young dual-language learners; an aligned language assessment designed for children ages 4–8 to give teachers a tool for instructional planning; a Summer Bridge program that enables preschool and kindergarten teachers to teach, plan and learn together; and extra support for children and families transitioning between systems.
- **The simultaneous development of both English and the home language is a powerful foundation for literacy, English proficiency and academic success overall, and adds cognitive, interpersonal and economic benefits.** Recognizing that Spanish-speaking English learners are developing in two “language

worlds,” SEAL promotes simultaneous bilingual development. It supports English learners to develop high levels of proficiency in both their home language and in English. In those SEAL classrooms where it is not feasible to teach bilingually, teachers create a climate that affirms bilingualism, provide books in both English and in children’s home languages, and support parents in ways to engage with their children in language and literacy experiences in the home language.

- **A focus on oral language development, including academic vocabulary, promotes reading comprehension, academic participation, and cognitive development.** The development of a strong command of oral language is a foundation for literacy. The amount, degree and type of vocabulary children use in the preschool years is predictive of their language skills later on. In the SEAL classroom teachers use strategies to stimulate the talk that allows language learners to explore and clarify concepts, wonder and describe.
- **Text-rich curriculum and environments that engage children with books and the printed word develop skills and love for reading and writing.** In the SEAL early-grade classrooms, books and other printed materials are prominently accessible to children in English and in the language of their families. Teachers use many strategies to engage children with text, including: free reading and access to books; front-loading vocabulary and other background knowledge prior to reading a book; shared Read-Alouds involving multiple readings and discussions of the same text; and “children as authors,” helping students to see the connection between their own words and text.
- **Language develops by learning and talking about the world—and academic language particularly develops while learning and discussing academic curriculum content.** In a SEAL classroom, language development is not confined solely to a language arts instructional block. Rather, strategies of intentional language development are present in social studies, science, literature and other academic content. With young children—including English learners—thematic teaching enhances their comprehension, exposure to and use of academic language, and making connections. A SEAL teacher identifies key vocabulary related to the curriculum theme. The teacher plans how to build background knowledge and bring the words alive for the children. Graphic organizers are used to help children categorize and build the concepts in their minds that give meaning to the vocabulary.

- **Strong partnerships between parents and teachers enhance the development of language, literacy and academic success. Supporting parents to be their child’s first teachers is core to school readiness and early academic success.** This is particularly true for young English learners, for whom the school environment often differs from their home environment. SEAL strategies include: workshops for parents on how to support language and literacy development at home; ESL classes on-site; an organized parent volunteer component that trains and places parents in the classroom to support learning; and multiple regular forums for teacher–parent communication.

### **Intensive Professional Development and Teaching Collaboration**

SEAL is not a “program.” It is an approach to instructional and curricular planning that results in an intense focus on the language development needed for English learners to attain long-term academic success. Two essential elements that lead to implementation of the SEAL model are sustained, quality professional development for educators, and a pedagogy and process for curriculum and instructional planning. Professional development and coaching for teachers—and the opportunity for collaborative on-going planning—prepares them to create active-language classroom environments and to teach with full intentionality about language. SEAL supports this process of collaborative and reflective practice, and also works with all teachers at each grade level to maximize consistency and coherence of instruction.

### **SEAL Evaluation and Future**

The Sobrato Family Foundation is funding a comprehensive evaluation of SEAL, conducted by Dr. Kathryn Lindholm-Leary, a national expert in dual-language education. The evaluation is designed to answer three questions:

- **To what degree does the performance of SEAL students improve?**
- **How does the growth of SEAL students compare to that of demographically similar students?**
- **Is there a difference between students in SEAL classrooms receiving English/SEI instruction and students in SEAL classrooms receiving bilingual instruction?**

Interim results of an evaluation that followed children from preschool through the start of second grade are very promising. Although SEAL participants begin preschool with very low levels of proficiency in both their home language and English, they showed statistically significant growth on each measure of language and literacy over the course of the preschool year, and each succeeding year. SEAL children scored far better than demographically similar Head Start children at the end of the preschool year, and SEAL children outscored the non-SEAL comparison groups at kindergarten and first grade entry on oral language assessments. SEAL children in bilingual classrooms achieved even greater growth than their SEAL peers who were instructed only in English.

The SEAL pilot and its promising outcomes have generated attention: it has drawn visitors from throughout California and it has been filmed to demonstrate good instructional practices for English learners. As a grantmaker, the Sobrato family is now grappling with new questions in order to determine the most strategic role they can play in the adaptation and replication of the model in areas beyond their own place-based focus. Says Lisa Sobrato Sonsini, “Our hope was to develop a pilot model that would be successful for the children served in the pilot schools. But beyond that, we want to see it replicated—not by taking on the costs of scale up on our own, but by showing that this actually works—and then inspiring other foundations, school districts, etc. to take on scaling up.”

Meanwhile, the SEAL effort has played a role in the evolution of the foundation. Now that it has experience in working directly with school districts, a deeper understanding of ELL issues, and new knowledge about education grantmaking, the family has decided to launch a new education fund. The fund will focus on improving academic achievement and closing the achievement gap in Silicon Valley by creating opportunities for more students—particularly low-income, underserved youth and English language learners—to receive a high quality education and the support they need from their teachers, school leaders and families. Sonsini explains, “We have seen how we can have impact by going deep in one focus area. We have become smarter grantmakers. SEAL was a huge growth experience for us.”

## School improvement through support of district-wide strategies in a community with high numbers of English learners

Collaborative funding by the S.H. Cowell Foundation and Central Valley Foundation



he Sanger Unified School District is in the heart of California’s San Joaquin Valley, where the child poverty rate is two to three times the national average. Sanger Unified serves 10,800 students. Like many Valley districts, Sanger Unified

serves high numbers of students from families with limited educational backgrounds and parents who do not speak English. Eighty percent of district students are poor, 82 percent are minority, and more than one fourth are English learners.

In the fall of 2004, Sanger Unified was notified that it would be one of the first districts in California to fall into Program Improvement status under No Child Left Behind, primarily because it failed to meet the learning needs of its ELLs. Two years later, after a superintendent-led restructuring of the district’s culture and practices focused on student learning, and with the support of grantmakers, achievement gains were dramatic enough to take the district off the Program Improvement watch list. Within five years, all seven schools moved out of Program Improvement, showing some of the highest overall achievement gains—including gains for ELLs—in the state.

Sanger’s story involves a combination of leadership commitment and involvement, long-term strategy, and the resources and support of private philanthropy. The S.H. Cowell foundation is a place-based funder, one of the few foundations focusing on California’s Central Valley and San Joaquin Valley. Cowell selects communities that demonstrate a readiness and commitment to make a lasting difference for children and families and provides a suite of related comprehensive grants in youth development, family support and education. Cowell was among the first private funders to invest in Sanger with a 2007 grant supporting the development of a literacy program in four elementary schools with high numbers of ELLs. Just one year later, already seeing positive results, Cowell made a much larger grant to support instructional components at the school level as well as a process for schools to collaborate with each other, which later became the Sanger Academic Achievement

### GRANTMAKING STRATEGIES

- Collaborative funding
- Multi-year commitment
- Grantmaker as broker

### ENGLISH LEARNER NEEDS

- District level school reform—including a focus on ELLs

Leadership Teams (SAALT). Cowell also funded a 4-year comprehensive evaluation by Stanford University that documented successful district outcomes for ELLs as well as the general student population. The foundation has continued to fund projects supporting the district’s ongoing continuous improvement journey.

Sanger Superintendent Marc Johnson describes his job as “leading the learning, not managing the program.” This leadership approach contrasts with more typical reforms centered on adopting new programs and “best practices.” Key strategies for changing the system include:

- **Sustained focus on a few initiatives.** In contrast to the “mile wide and inch deep” approach to reform, Sanger leaders picked three complementary initiatives and has stuck with them over time. The district has provided continued training and support to spread and deepen understanding of each initiative. The three initiatives, which are all geared to focus on improving student learning, are: collaboration on data use, direct instruction, and interventions. The district chose skilled trainers and adopted the DuFours’ model of teacher professional learning communities (PLCs) for teachers to work collaboratively to improve student achievement and develop a sense of collective responsibility. The phrases “Together we can” and “I can . . . we will!” represent the spirit of Sanger’s reform approach. A model of direct instruction—Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI)—was selected to help low-performing and language minority students work on grade-level standards with frequent checking for understanding. To support students struggling at grade level, district leaders designed their own version of Response to Intervention

(RTI), creating both in-class intervention and a range of intervention classes to meet the specific needs of students falling behind. To provide added help to English learners, the district expanded its emphasis on English language development.

Sanger's reforms rest on three guiding principles:

- **Develop school leadership for continuous improvement.** District administrators invest in site-based leadership as key to moving and sustaining the school reform agenda. Administrators participate in the same trainings as teachers for all major instructional initiatives, including professional learning communities and direct instruction.
- **Base decisions on data.** Educators at all levels of the system are expected to base their decisions on data, and they are held publicly accountable for doing so. Practice grounded in evidence of student learning is understood to be paramount and accompanied by systems that facilitate access to data.
- **Hold adults accountable and provide sufficient support.** Adults at all levels of the system are held accountable for continuously improving student achievement in a system of reciprocal accountability.

Sanger's reform efforts apply to all schools and all students. They are not ELL specific, but establish a high-performing set of schooling conditions, within which the needs of each student can be met. But because one in four students in Sanger is an ELL, the approach has required specific attention to their needs. Ken Doane, Program Officer at Cowell, says the Sanger effort has led him to move away from "the old either/or struggle when we think about ELLs." He characterizes this struggle as, "Either ELLs are unique and distinct and we have to be all about specific strategies and resources for them, or the things that make an effective school for all kids work for ELLs." But, he says, "Sanger is an object lesson about how it can be a *both/and*. They have created conditions for student learning and teacher learning, along with a clarity of leadership whose whole purpose is to serve each student. If a third of students are ELLs they are going to devote themselves to those solutions. Being ELLs is an important part of the profile of some students, but not the whole story."

The role of Cowell as grantmaker in Sanger has first and foremost been to provide the funding that supports the reform's continuous improvement—enabling the district to pilot new approaches when needed and estab-

lish the structures that enable collaboration to occur. But Doane explains that Cowell has also intentionally introduced other important connections and resources for Sanger. Cowell's funding of the multi-year Stanford evaluation not only provided data to feed the continuous improvement processes in the district, but also connected district staff directly to the Stanford researchers, creating valuable relationships that are not available to many.

Doane also invited key Sanger district leaders to become part of the California Collaborative on District Reform to exchange learning within this statewide network of mostly large urban district leaders. District leadership at Sanger in turn has embraced these new opportunities and relationships and strives to maximize them. As a result, this small rural district now has a seat at a number of very high-powered tables. Superintendent, Marc Johnson was named the 2011 National Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of School Administrators.

In 2008, Doane brought the Cowell Foundation's work with the district to the attention of the Central Valley Foundation (CVF), which had previously given the district a small grant for an ELL literacy program at one school. The Central Valley Foundation chose to support the district with a targeted investment focusing on ELLs and became a major supporter of the district's work with ELLs.

Because of Sanger's commitment to utilizing diagnostic student data in its continuous improvement process, the district first secured funding from CVF to support implementation of a formative English learner assessment at six elementary schools. The English Language Learner Assessment (ELLA) is now given twice a year in Sanger, and offers one of the richest available understandings of the progress of ELLs, so that teachers can modify their reading, language and literacy instruction. The grant also funds professional development that supports teachers to strengthen English learner instructional strategies. This process has ultimately helped improve results on the California English Language Development Test and the California Standards Test. Within Sanger's new culture of shared learning and communication between school leaders, word spread about the effectiveness of the ELLA, and soon all schools wanted to participate. After 18 months, Sanger requested support from CVF to take ELLA district-wide, and CVF agreed.

Since Sanger's district transformation began, they have been visited by hundreds of educators from across the nation. The issues of replication, learning from the Sanger approach, and articulating the Sanger model became

increasingly important. The Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified School District, 60 miles west across the San Joaquin Valley and possessing a similar student population, was among those that expressed interest in Sanger's work. CVF has since invested in a three-and-a-half-year partnership between Sanger and Firebaugh-Las Deltas, seeing an opportunity to not only improve education and student outcomes in Firebaugh, but to support Sanger to develop the tools, skills, mentoring and articulation of their model that may benefit even more districts down the road.

According to CVF, the Sanger and Firebaugh-Las Deltas grants are part of a broad commitment to add to the body of knowledge about ELLs, to improve their own grantmaking and to contribute to the field. The foundation invests, for example, in evaluations of its grants and strives to learn from grantees and its own grantmaking experiences. CVF has now also developed a set of questions and indicators to assess the level of commitment to ELLs from district superintendents and school board members, and it will not make grants in districts that do not demonstrate a high level of willingness to meet the needs of ELLs.

# The importance of valid and reliable language assessments for young dual-language learners

Grantmakers and Researchers Partnership



For young English learners, ages 3–8 represent a crucial period in the development of language and cognition. Early childhood educators and those focusing on the preK–3 movement are hampered by the lack of proven and

reliable assessments of oral language and preliteracy skills for English learners. Evaluations of the effectiveness of early learning programs are similarly hampered in determining the impact of services on this increasingly large group of children. Because the vast majority of English learners are Spanish speakers, the development of a good Spanish–English early childhood language assessment tool has emerged as a priority. In the past few years, grantmakers have responded to this need by creating partnerships with university researchers to create a bilingual assessment for children ages 3–8.

This effort grew out of initial development of an English-based literacy and math measure for students in grades kindergarten–3 by the University of Chicago’s Urban Education Institute (UEI). Called STEP, the K–3 tool is formative and diagnostic, designed to enable teachers to adjust instruction to the needs of individual children. Developed in Chicago, its use has now expanded to a number of urban districts across the country, as well to the networks of school reform organizations like KIPP and Achievement First. However, a comprehensive formative assessment for general preschool classroom teachers, integrating language and literacy skills, still did not exist. Several years ago, Ruby Takanishi, then Executive Director of the Foundation for Child Development (FCD) and a leader in the preK–third grade movement, approached UEI about expanding STEP to include early literacy measures for 3- and 4-year-olds, articulated with the K–3 assessments. Takanishi brought The W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation to the table to collaborate on the initial grant to fund the project.

As Takanishi notes, “STEP was a major priority for our preK–3rd initiative, because we believed that teaching and learning in classrooms is really key to any kind of reduction of the achievement gap in literacy. As far as

## GRANTMAKING STRATEGIES

- Funder as advocate and identifier of need
- Collaborative grantmaking
- Bringing in external ELL expertise

## ENGLISH LEARNER NEEDS

- Aligned language assessments designed for English learners preK–3

we knew, there was no such system like this that started at age 3 and went all the way up to age 8. Also it’s not curriculum based. We were promoting a developmental, diagnostic and continuous assessment system that could be used with any reading curriculum.”

UEI agreed, but suggested creating early math measures for 3- and 4-year olds as well, so FCD went to the McCormick Foundation and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange Group Foundation and successfully gained their support for the math effort. At the same time, the McKnight Foundation identified early literacy preK–3 as a major funding priority and selected UEI as its intermediary to provide professional development to educators in its target school districts, including Minneapolis and Brooklyn. Because of UEI’s dual role as developers of the STEP assessment and provider of professional development to early literacy efforts in the McKnight districts, there was an opportunity and push to use STEP as both a diagnostic and an evaluative tool in the initiative. The expansion of the STEP effort and the addition of school districts such as Minneapolis and Brooklyn with large numbers of English learners raised the challenge and the opportunity to adapt the assessment to dual-language learners. FCD raised this issue, and the effort to adapt STEP began.

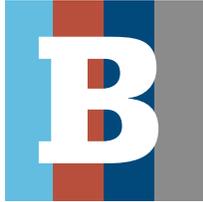
To adapt STEP to English learners required additional expertise. Dr. Linda Wing, senior advisor at UEI and a key player in STEP and the McKnight initiative, invited Linda Espinosa, Ph.D., a widely recognized thought leader and researcher on early childhood approaches with ELLs to visit McKnight selected schools. She explains, “Together we visited the McKnight schools and we looked at the data. We were

convinced that if STEP is going to be helpful here, it needs to be done in Spanish.” The collaboration of grant-makers stepped up to fund the tool’s development.

The preK measures for STEP, as well as the Spanish version from preK-3, are currently being field-tested and piloted to test their objectivity, validity and relevance for the population with which they are meant to be used. This involves an adapted rather than translated assessment, based on how the Spanish language develops and focusing on the most appropriate wording and concepts in Spanish. The designers aim to determine the set of literacy skills a bilingual child possesses in both Spanish and English. To do this well, two experts in dual language and bilingual early childhood development were added to the UEI team: Dr. Linda Espinosa and Dr. Catherine Snow.

The assessment is designed to be used in contexts where Spanish is the language of instruction—in the growing numbers of dual language/two-way immersion programs and in bilingual programs. While these are still relatively few in number, there is a critical mass of consistent research on children’s capacity to learn multiple languages, on the cognitive and social benefits of bilingualism, and on the advantage of bilingual programs for English learners in providing more immediate access to complex curriculum. The existence now of a valid, reliable bilingual language and early literacy assessment is a critical tool for making such education possible. Here a funder understood the need and the gap in assessment for this age group and intentionally sought funding partners to address the challenge.

# Resources: Key ELL Studies



Below is a list of articles and reports intended to provide a useful grounding in current ELL research, data, and evidence-based programmatic practices for funders who may be new to the field. These articles have been selected based on suggestions from Advisory Committee members and other experts in the field.

## OVERVIEW STUDIES—EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

**August, D. and T. Shanahan, eds. (2006).**

***Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth.*** New York, NY:

Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. [http://www.cal.org/projects/archive/nlpreports/Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.cal.org/projects/archive/nlpreports/Executive_Summary.pdf) *This report provides a synthesis and meta-analysis of current research on the education of language-minority children and youth with regard to literacy attainment.*

**California Department of Education. (2011).**

***Improving Education for English Learners:***

***Research-based Approach.*** Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education. <http://www.amazon.com/Improving-EdEducation-English-Learners-Research-Based/dp/080111702X> *This collection of six papers by top researchers in English learner education was commissioned and published by the California Department of Education to provide a comprehensive, user-friendly analysis of the strongest research evidence to inform instructional practices for English learners.*

**Council of the Great City Schools. (2009). *Succeeding With English Language Learners: Lessons Learned from the Great City Schools.*** Council of the Great

City Schools. [http://cgcs.schoolwires.net/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/35/Publication%20Docs/ELL\\_Report09.pdf](http://cgcs.schoolwires.net/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/35/Publication%20Docs/ELL_Report09.pdf) *This report examines the experiences of districts with differing levels of success at raising academic achievement of English language learners.*

**Council of the Great City Schools. (2012). *Today's Promise, Tomorrow's Future: The Social and Educational Factors Contributing to the Outcomes of Hispanics in Urban Schools.*** Council of the Great City Schools.

<http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/>

[domain/35/publication%20docs/HispanicStudy2011.pdf](http://www.cal.org/projects/archive/nlpreports/Executive_Summary.pdf) *This study focuses on the lives of Hispanic students in large urban schools from early childhood to adulthood, and analyzes distinctions between Hispanic and Latino English language learners.*

**Goldenberg, Claude. (2008). *Teaching English Language Learners: What the Research Does—and Does Not—Say.*** *American Educator, Summer 2008.*

[http://homepages.ucalgary.ca/~hroessin/documents/Goldenberg,\\_2008,\\_America\\_Ed\\_Summary\\_of\\_research.pdf](http://homepages.ucalgary.ca/~hroessin/documents/Goldenberg,_2008,_America_Ed_Summary_of_research.pdf) *Looks at the National Literacy Panel report as well as a second meta-analysis from CREDE, summarizes, compares and contrasts the findings, and raises questions about what areas still merit further research.*

**Gil, Libia and Sarah Bardack. (2010). *Common Assumptions vs. the Evidence: English Language Learners in the United States, A Reference Guide.***

English Language Learner Center, American Institutes for Research. [http://www.air.org/files/ELL\\_Assumptions\\_and\\_Evidence.pdf](http://www.air.org/files/ELL_Assumptions_and_Evidence.pdf) *Written in easy, bulleted format, this report takes common assumptions point by point and refutes them by summarizing and citing research and evidence.*

**Olsen, Laurie. (2006). *Ensuring Academic Success for English Learners.*** UC Linguistic Minority Research Institute, Summer 2006. <http://www.madison.k12.in.us/MCSWeb/CSSU/ELL%20Resources/Brief%20reports/Ensuring%20Academic%20Success%20for%20English%20Learners.pdf> *This report highlights nine elements of a strong program, based on three decades of research. Recommended best practices include accessible preschool programs, support for newcomers of all ages, and a focus on English language development.*

## **EARLY EDUCATION AND ELEMENTARY FOCUSED PAPERS**

**Espinosa, L. (2008). *Challenging Common Myths about Young English Language Learners.*** New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development. <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/MythsOfTeachingELLsEspinosa.pdf>  
*This report challenges six commonly held beliefs about the development of young children (ages three to eight) who are learning English as their second language and presents research evidence drawn from a variety of disciplines that can better shape education policies for all children.*

**Russakoff, D. (2011). *PreK–3rd: Raising the Educational Performance of English Language Learners (ELLs).*** New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development. <http://fcd-us.org/resources/prek-3rd-raising-educational-performance-english-language-learners-ells>  
*This policy brief spotlights major issues facing those taking up the challenge of raising academic achievement of ELLs and presents emerging policy solutions. The primary focus is on the 75 percent of ELLs who speak Spanish, and who are believed by scholars to be at high risk for school failure.*

## **SECONDARY SCHOOL FOCUSED PAPERS**

**Batalova, J and M. Fix. (2011). *Up for Grabs: the Gains and Prospects of First- and Second-Generation Young Adults.*** Migration Policy Institute. <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/youngadults-upforgrabs.pdf>  
*This study profiles first- and second-generation young adults ages 16–26, and seeks to gauge whether they are on track to complete postsecondary education and obtain jobs that pay family-sustaining wages.*

**Olsen, L. (2011) *Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Unkept Promise of Educational Opportunity for Long Term English Learners.*** Long Beach, CA: Californians Together. [www.californianstogether.org/docs/download.aspx?fileId=227](http://www.californianstogether.org/docs/download.aspx?fileId=227)  
*This study documents the large number of English learners who after six or more years in US schools are stalled in progressing towards English proficiency and are struggling academically. It describe the characteristics of Long Term English Learners and the educational factors that have contributed to their challenges, and proposes recommendations for school programs and for state policy.*

**Short, D., and S. Fitzsimmons. (2007). *Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners.*** New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York. <http://www.all4ed.org/files/DoubleWork.pdf>  
*This report highlights the need for improved strategies to address the diverse literacy needs of adolescent ELLs. The paper offers best practices for policymakers to address challenges in areas that include teaching practices, professional development training, research and educational policy.*

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