

How can schools support secondary newcomers academically, socially, and emotionally?

POLICY BRIEF

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Exploring Longitudinal Outcomes and Trajectories of English Language Learners (ELOTE)

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Statement of Issue

When adolescent immigrants arrive in the United States, they have only a few years to develop English proficiency, learn the academic curriculum of multiple disciplines, and pass the tests required to graduate from high school. These years are crucial in providing the skills and experience that immigrant newcomers will need as they enroll in higher education, enter the workforce, and become productive members of local communities and American society at large. During these high school years, schools must dedicate resources to supporting immigrant English learners (ELs) to progress academically and socially. These supports exist not only within structures such as the classroom but also include other settings, such as home and community contexts. These structures and supports must work in concert to promote graduation for immigrant ELs.

This policy brief focuses on the programs and practices that schools can enact to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of high school immigrant ELL students. The information presented is based on data gathered through the Exploring Longitudinal Outcomes and Trajectories of English Language Learners (ELOTE) Researcher-Practitioner Partnership between WestEd and the Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD). ELOTE consisted of two complementary phases. Phase One analyzed a historical cohort to identify campus programs with higher than average graduation rates for newcomers. Phase Two of ELOTE was set at two Language Center programs identified by Phase One. Data gathered during site visits to these two programs included classroom observations, teacher and student focus groups, and interviews with key administrators and staff. The purpose of this research was to identify promising programs and practices to support immigrant ELs in high school toward the goal of graduation.

The present brief outlines the promising practices identified during site visits, which are supported through data from classroom observations, focus groups, and interviews. The brief provides recommendations for staff who work at the school level, including teachers and principals. These recommendations can also guide the work of district leaders across the nation in ensuring that newcomers are fully supported academically, socially, and emotionally.

Brief Overview of Literature

The research literature emphasizes how the needs of adolescent immigrant newcomers may differ from ELs who were born and schooled in the United States. Meeting these distinct needs requires specialized supports. This research has identified four kinds of support:

- Academic and language supports,
- Social-emotional supports,
- Extra-curricular programs, and
- Parent and community engagement.

Academic and Language Supports

In order for immigrant students to access and engage with rigorous high school content, they require temporary supports that are both academic and linguistic in order to develop deep understanding of disciplinary ideas (Walqui & van Lier, 2010). This pedagogical and linguistic scaffolding is temporarily needed by students to work with grade appropriate material as they continue to deepen their understanding and build their autonomy. In the classroom, these supports may be constructed and provided by the teacher, or may be in the form of peer supports as students engage in disciplinary conversations (U. S. Department of Education, 2016).

As ELs simultaneously develop conceptual, analytic, and linguistic practices, teachers must engage in a continuous process of formative assessment to provide them with the feedback that enables ELs to improve their performances (Heritage, Walqui, & Linquanti, 2015). Teachers must plan lessons that include specific language supports for ELs as they develop disciplinary understandings and participate in disciplinary practices (Koelsch, Chu, & Bañuelos, 2014). Supports that integrate language into disciplinary understandings and practices are especially important for ELs given the challenges posed by new standards (Kibler, Walqui, & Bunch, 2015). In order to ensure ELs can fully engage with complex texts, teachers must plan supports that consider relationships between the text, the reader, the task readers are performing, and the context (Bunch, Walqui, & Pearson, 2014).

Social-Emotional Supports

Caring relationships have long been thought to be crucial in schooling for newcomers (Valenzuela, 1999). The quality of secondary immigrant students' relationships at school has been identified as an important factor in their academic engagement and achievement (Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, and Martin, 2009). Newcomers in particular need social-emotional supports provided by caring relationships that integrate their home languages (García, Woodley, Flores, & Chu, 2013). These supports can help newcomers in overcoming the stresses that accompany migration (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Extracurricular Activities

Activities beyond the classroom can also contribute to the relationships that secondary immigrant ELLs develop with peers and adults at their schools. These activities may also promote the development of English language proficiency, which is predicted by the quantity of time that ELLs speak English in informal social situations (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco, and Páez, 2008). Effective schools provide English language learners with multiple avenues for engagement and multiple ways to be successful in all of their languages (García, Flores, & Chu, 2011).

Parent and Community Engagement

Effective schools also draw upon parent and community resources to collaboratively work toward goals and address the sociocultural contexts of immigrant students' education (Walqui, 2000). Active lines of communication with parents can improve student academic achievement, while schools may also provide services such as adult ESL classes and interpretation services for meetings. Collaboration with outside non-profit organizations can also connect students with more resources to support their academic success (García, et al., 2013).

Findings from ELOTE Phase Two

In order to categorize the supports provided to EL immigrant students across the two high school sites, two intersecting categories were identified:

- formal and informal
- academic and social-emotional

These categories emerged from identifying and grouping supports common to both campuses (Schmida & Chu, 2016). Although many supports were formal in that they were officially part of the institution of school and instructional program, just as important were informal supports that exist more organically or spontaneously.

	Academic	Social-Emotional
Formal	<p>School Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on graduation • Emphasis on college access • Aligned programs <p>Classroom Pedagogy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using graphic and textual organizers • Providing opportunities to interact and collaborate • Encouraging students to speak English • Attending to disciplinary uses of language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extracurricular programs • Connecting with parents
Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High challenge, high support • Contingent instructional supports • Peer support in classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring relationships • Student trust • Diverse peers and interactions

Figure 1. Brief findings organized by category

Formal Academic Supports

At both school sites, formal structures and instructional practices supported newcomers.

Formal structures included the counseling services and planning processes that kept newcomers on track to graduation, including services such as academic tutoring, accelerated learning opportunities. Newcomers' college access was facilitated through formal programs to increase awareness, connect with college-going peers, and assistance with aspects of application such as financial aid.

“I have their graduation plan. And all students graduate Recommended. So, I’m writing down their grades and what they need; I have [a graduation plan] for every student.”

—Teacher

At the classroom level, teachers designed instruction in order to support newcomers' simultaneous learning of English and the academic disciplines. For example, in several classes, teachers provided students with graphic or textual organizers to scaffold their understanding of a difficult text or concept. These organizers support students by focusing attention on key information or details and their interconnections, and thus help to guide their reading. In some cases, students used organizers individually, and in other cases the organizers facilitated students' collaborative work. Beyond individual classrooms, both schools emphasized graduation and college access. To this end, students had access to supports such as academic tutoring, accelerated or individualized learning opportunities, and access to college guidance counselors.

Informal Academic Supports

Beyond these formal academic supports, both schools provided less official, more informal supports. For example, there were numerous instances of students supporting each other in the classroom through translation, elaboration, and explanation. In this way, students worked together to deepen each other's understanding, as well as to solidify their own understandings.

Formal Social-Emotional Supports

Formal supports also addressed students' social-emotional needs and well-being. For example, by participating in extracurricular activities and sports, newcomers not only strengthened their bonds with each other, but they also created friendships with non-ELL students in the school. These relationships create a sense of community within the school, with students identifying as members of a club or sport.

Informal Social-Emotional Supports

Although not formally planned or facilitated, at both sites a number of informal social-emotional supports were identified which promoted a sense of belonging and acceptance among students. For example, students overwhelmingly reported feeling safe, secure, and supported at their school by both peers and teachers. Students commented that they believed teachers wanted what was best for them, and wanted them to do well, in school and in life. Students also reported that there were a number of adults at school who they felt comfortable approaching with academic or social problems, before, during, and after school.

“We learn a lot! That class makes me learn a lot. [The teacher] makes us speak, read, write...all at the same time. And I learn a lot! I appreciate being at this school.”

—Student

“If you're just in this little world, and only [with other Language Center students], you're not going to know people or think this school is interesting. If you have friends, it's exciting.”

—Student

“She's terrific. She looks out for you. She's like another mother.”

—Student

The teachers tell me, “Don't give up. I think you can go up. I think you can do it.” And I feel, “Oh! I can do it!” and I just keep going.

—Student

Recommendations and Implications

What Can Schools Do?

Expand and formalize parent/community outreach. Both of the schools visited had cultivated relationships with parent and community groups. One school had a staff member with the specific responsibility of coordinating with parents. Although open houses are a good foundation, formal programs that promote year-round relationship building with communities and parents will provide newcomers with a more comprehensive array of supports.

Provide more extracurricular opportunities. Students reported extracurricular programs provided opportunities for them to interact with peers and use English with newcomers and other students. These formal programs enable students to participate in other civic and community-oriented activities. Although the support offered by extracurricular participation may be primarily social and emotional in nature, sustaining students' school engagement can improve their academic performance in the long term.

Review, assess, and plan additional supports as a school. Distinguishing formal from informal in classifying supports provides a means to recognize the work that teachers and staff do that may extend well beyond official programs. At the same time, schools can use the categories and findings as a framework for systematically reviewing what the school already does well, and what may require more work as an area of improvement. This process of review and self-assessment can work toward identifying additional supports to ensure all newcomer needs are fully met.

Engage students in identifying effective supports and unaddressed needs. In conducting the data collection and analysis for Phase Two, researchers engaged multiple groups of students in focus group discussions about effective school programs, practices, and experiences. These venues provided key corroboration of the effective supports identified by other kinds of data collected. At the same time, students were able to identify areas where additional support was necessary, such as extracurricular activities. For newcomers especially, having structured opportunities to discuss important issues with peers can be an important step toward developing greater autonomy and voice in their own education.

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