

Launching LUCHA™: Building a Binational Bridge to Biliteracy

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ABSTRACT

The integration of children whose first language is not English into public school systems is an issue that many states must confront and is particularly critical in Texas. The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) has led the way in addressing the needs of learners and schools by developing an innovative program, Language Learners at the University of Texas at Austin's Center for Hispanic Achievement (LUCHA™), under the leadership of Felipe Alanis. The following article chronicles the conception, implementation, and maintenance of the program.

THE CHALLENGE

Children immigrating to Texas from Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries face formidable obstacles when entering the Texas public school system, the most significant of which is a lack of English language skills. Patricia Kilday Hart, in her article "Why Juan Can't Read" (*Texas Monthly*, October 2006) says it well:

Two years ago, more than eight out of ten seventh- and eighth-graders with limited English skills failed the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test. Ninth- and tenth-graders did even worse. These depressing results occurred despite extensive bilingual and English as a second language (ESL)

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programs and come at a time when the number of students with limited English skills—some 15.5% of the total public school enrollment—has doubled in the past two decades.

These English Language Learners (ELLs) at the secondary level confront academic failure owing not only to language barriers but also because many schools lack resources to deliver three critical services: placing ELL students appropriately in content-area courses, diagnosing their mastery of content-area skills, or providing personnel trained to recognize and address the challenges ELL students face as they attempt to transition into Texas schools. ELL students often lose credits that they earned in Mexican schools, finding themselves placed in the wrong grade or in electives rather than core courses. It is not unusual for ELL students lacking only a few credits for graduation to be placed in freshman-level courses because they do not speak English. As a result, many students drop out of school because of feelings of frustration and discouragement. The elevated dropout rate of 56.5% for Hispanic students in a soon to be majority/minority state sends a clear warning about the economic future of Texas. Hart puts it succinctly: “This is a catastrophe in the making: the noneducation of tomorrow’s Texas workforce.”

THE RESPONSE

The University of Texas at Austin professes six core values:

- Learning—a caring community, all of us students, helping one another grow.
- Discovery—expanding knowledge and human understanding.
- Freedom—to seek the truth and express it.
- Leadership—the will to excel with integrity and the spirit that nothing is impossible.
- Individual Opportunity—many options, diverse people and ideas; one university.
- Responsibility—to serve as a catalyst for positive change in Texas and beyond.

At the time LUCHA was conceived, the president of UT Austin had set forth six strategic initiatives, including strengthening K-12 education and forging stronger ties with Latin America.

The Division of Continuing Education, established “to increase the usefulness of the University to the people of Texas,” became the institutional vehicle for responding to the need of ELLs at the secondary level,

and it found an advocate for the program in Felipe Alanis. Alanis, a former teacher and public school administrator, was the first Hispanic Texan to be named Texas Commissioner of Education. He also served as associate vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Texas System. He possesses a broad perspective on issues in higher education and public secondary education, and he enjoys a network of colleagues, a legacy of his extensive experience serving on several educational boards, consulting with public schools, and affiliations with statewide organizations for civic and educational leadership. In Alanis, the division found someone with a rich mix of skills, experiences, and contacts, and also the passion to see the program through the difficulties posed by implementation.

THE IMPLEMENTATION

The Division of Continuing Education's K-16 Education Center already existed "to help Texas students transition to and succeed in college," and was a natural fit for the new program. With funding from the division and foundation funds, LUCHA was conceived as an innovative K-16 initiative designed to assist Spanish-speaking English language learners in Texas secondary public schools make the transition to the classroom, thereby helping them achieve success in high school, college, and life. More specifically, the goal was to increase the graduation rate of Spanish-speaking English language learners by helping them in the following areas:

- transition into Texas schools without losing instructional time or course credits as they learn English;
- prepare to pass state-mandated performance examinations so they can earn a high school diploma; and
- build a foundation for completing post-secondary education.

Staff of the K-16 Education Center were on board from the start; they recognized the need for the LUCHA program through their interactions with educators throughout Texas who acknowledged that they did not have a plan or access to resources to help this growing population of students. They also realized from the outset that it was important to demonstrate that the program objectives were attainable and measurable, so they provided for assessment to validate LUCHA's impact by contracting with the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) in Houston for benchmarking and process measurement services. APQC will examine and quantify the processes that districts use to implement ELL programs, identifying procedures, collecting data, and measuring outcomes as first steps in building

a illuminating framework for understanding the impact of LUCHA within districts. APQC will conduct two main phases of analysis, following up on data collection and analysis by disaggregating, normalizing, and validating the results in order to provide customized, detailed reports. APQC will sift baseline data to address cost, productivity, efficiency, and cycle time related to the processes used in implementing the LUCHA program.

Because of the transnational nature of the program, LUCHA staff members needed the cooperation of several Mexican federal agencies—the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE), the Ministry of Public Education (SEP), and the Colegio de Bachilleres—in order to establish a methodology for aligning the curricula that students experience in Mexico with those in Texas. The contact with these agencies from the outset was important not only because it was necessary for the program’s objectives, but also because it provided a measure of credibility and trust on the part of all parties. Subsequently, the Ministry of Public Education has come to regard LUCHA as a national model and has funded LUCHA to provide services to other states.

Once the work of planning and partnering was completed, it was time to deliver on the promises of the LUCHA initiative by launching pilot programs in the Donna and Edcouch-Elsa school districts in south Texas in August 2006. In the two years since, LUCHA has provided five critical services to help schools meet the academic needs of ELL students.

THE PROGRAM

LUCHA’s services are directed toward individuals as well as institutions:

Transcript Retrieval from Mexico

LUCHA works directly with the Ministry of Public Education in Mexico and with Mexican educational institutions to locate and provide missing transcripts to Texas school districts.

Graduation Credit Analysis

Curricular specialists retrieve Mexican transcripts so they may analyze them in terms of course alignment to Texas content standards. By properly interpreting students’ educational records for Texas schools, LUCHA provides vital information for educators who must place students in the appropriate grade and courses. To ensure ELL students graduate on time by helping schools avoid placing them improperly, LUCHA specialists analyze transcripts from Mexico to help schools determine the appropriate grade

level and suitable core subjects for these students' academic trajectory. Staff members produce a Graduation Credit Analysis that provides equivalence information for awarding transfer credits and a study plan that recommends enrollment in Spanish online courses offered through LUCHA.

Diagnostic Assessments in Spanish

LUCHA offers two diagnostic assessments in Spanish that school districts can use to more accurately assess students' content area knowledge: *Algebra 1 Readiness* and *High School Readiness*. Presented online in a web-based format, each diagnostic has a maximum testing time of two hours.

Online Courses in Spanish

To help Spanish-speaking ELL students in grades 8-12 succeed in their studies while learning English without losing instructional time and credits, LUCHA offers courses in Spanish that are aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). TEKS alignment ensures that students receive a rigorous curriculum that prepares them for the next course and for success in higher education.

Onsite Training and Follow-up

LUCHA staff members provide training and on-going support for school district personnel who work with students in the LUCHA program.

THE IMPACT

University records show these numbers for the two years LUCHA has been available:

Number of students enrolled in a LUCHA course: 1,000

Number of LUCHA courses requested: 2,351

Number of Transcript Analyses requested: 688

Number of Diagnostic Assessments requested: 207

Total Number of Services Year to Date: 4,246

The numbers do not tell the whole story. Districts using LUCHA courses in Spanish have seen improvement in their students' self-esteem, because students feel that their needs are being met and that the knowledge that they have brought with them is being recognized and valued. A 17-year-old tenth-grader at Edcouch-Elsa gave this testimonial:

I'm taking *Algebra 1* and *English 1* and *English 2*. I come from Valle Hermoso, Tamaulipas. And the program is helping me to

reclaim credits that are needed here, to understand the English language, and to take algebra, which I have a hard time with.

The testimonial of another student from Edcouch-Elsa reveals that the challenge for ELL students is not necessarily the difficulty of subject matter but rather the adjustment to a different approach to teaching:

If I did not have this program available, I believe I would find the [English] courses quite difficult. This program explains everything in a simpler way. I believe that I need it [LUCHA] because courses here are very different [from Mexico]. The teachers only say, "Do it," and from time to time they explain, but for the most part they don't. The program explains in a more detailed way. So really, I would find it more difficult without these courses.

While LUCHA is the manifestation of an idealist's vision to help students, it has also delivered—as is often true with altruistic ideas—unexpected economic impact benefits. As the LUCHA program has grown, the state of Texas has realized cost savings of between \$760 to \$1,100 per student per credit.

Word has spread quickly among school superintendents, and as a result, LUCHA is now being implemented in the five major regions in Texas with the largest ELL populations: Houston, Dallas, Austin, South Texas, and El Paso. In addition, other states with significant numbers of ELL students are inquiring about replicating the LUCHA model. LUCHA program staff members are exploring ways to collaborate with other states to address shared needs.

School districts are also utilizing other resources from the UT K-16 Education Center to help LUCHA students graduate. For example, to help their LUCHA students acquire the academic language of English, school districts are placing their ELL students in the Center's independent learning courses that are in English. The districts are also validating course mastery through the Center's Credit by Exams, which expedites the obtaining of credits and keeps ELLs on the fast track for graduation. In addition, LUCHA is coordinating with the UT Migrant Student Graduation Enhancement Program to provide [immigrant migrant] students with LUCHA services. Additionally, for those ELL students who find that the traditional classroom does not meet their need, the K-16 Center works with this targeted population to graduate through the UT Austin High School Diploma Program instead of dropping out of school.

In recognition of LUCHA, the K-16 Education Center of UT Austin's Continuing Education division won the 2007 University Continuing Education Association (UCEA) South Program of Excellence award. In March 2008, LUCHA was featured as a "WOW" program at the UCEA National Conference Deans and Directors Workshop and also received Honorable Mention as a National Program of Excellence. These are significant awards for any program, but their presentation in recognition of the UT Austin program is particularly remarkable because LUCHA launched only two years ago.

THE FUTURE

Alanis was privileged to see his vision materialize when he attended the May 19, 2008 graduation ceremony at the small Donna Independent School District in South Texas, where 53 percent of the student population was identified as English language learners. At a ceremony honoring approximately 60 students who had benefited from LUCHA services were three generations of former immigrants reflecting the power of the American dream. In attendance were the mayor, the superintendent, a college professor, a high school principal, and two local newscasters—one from a major network affiliate and the other from the Spanish television network, who entered a Texas public school as a second language learner and who graduated from the UT Austin College of Communication.

Among the 60 students brimming with hope for a brighter future was LUCHA participant Sergio Barrientos, a Navy enlistee who will use a substantial scholarship to complete his college education while in the service. Judging by the statistics concerning drop-out rates for English language learners in Texas, Barrientos and his cohort are beating the odds, largely due to the collective vision and leadership of dreamers who strive to make a difference in the lives of future generations by making initiatives such as LUCHA come true.

Alanis expressed his hope for the future of the program: "I am encouraged by the success of the program, and I look forward to assisting many more English language learners to successfully transition into and graduate from Texas high schools." It is not often that one is fortunate enough to see high school students' lives being so directly and profoundly affected by an initiative of a nationally renowned research university. 🌐