

HOW ARE **English Learners** FARING UNDER



PROPOSITION
227



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How Are English Learners Faring Under Proposition 227

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> **California educates the most English learner students** in the United States, by far. In 1998, California voters passed Proposition 227, mandating that English learners entering California schools be placed in structured English immersion for a period “not normally to exceed one year,” then be transferred to mainstream classrooms taught “overwhelmingly in English.” To track the effects of Proposition 227, the California Department of Education (CDE) commissioned a five-year evaluation of the proposition’s implementation and impact. This summary of the study undertaken by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and WestEd highlights the full report’s findings and recommendations.

Educating English Learners in California and the Nation

The study for the CDE examined the educational conditions of California’s English learners as well as the effects and impact of the proposition itself. This research suggests that the protracted debate over the merits of bilingual versus immersion approaches may be diverting attention from what matters most for English learners. A new framework is needed, one that shifts away from the bilingual-immersion debate to focus on the larger array of factors that appear to make a difference for English learner (EL) achievement.

Average achievement for all students, including English learners, is up in California. More English learners than ever before are now being tested on the California Standards Tests, and their scores have improved at nearly the same rate as those of native English speakers. The question is how, exactly, to attribute this improvement. There is no short answer. We cannot simply point to Proposition 227 since many education reform initiatives were introduced over the same period — including the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, state-level accountability reforms, the state’s class-size reduction initiative and English



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Language Acquisition Program (ELAP), as well as the English Language Development (ELD) standards and the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). Moreover, since the implementation of instructional programs and services varies widely across the state, an accurate picture of what helps English learners in the classroom is necessarily complex. Overall, this study found no clear evidence to support the superiority of one EL instructional approach over another.

Proposition 227 passed by the voters in 1998

Proposition 227 was originally intended to put an end to nearly three decades of bilingual education in California, as it aimed to change the default instructional setting so that English learners would be placed in sheltered English immersion programs for one year before being mainstreamed with those who were fluent in English. The law also included a provision allowing parents of English learners to opt for bilingual instruction via waivers.

Ambiguity and selected provisions allowing flexibility in the law have led districts and schools to interpret and implement it in different ways.

Studying schools with high EL achievement also suggests that there is no single path to excellence. While these schools share many of the characteristics found in all successful schools, they also approach the education of their English learner students with a focus on several factors that seem to be more important than whether a bilingual or immersion instructional approach is used:

- ◆ A well-defined, rigorously structured plan of instruction for English learners is in place.
- ◆ Teachers are skilled in addressing the needs of English learners.
- ◆ Teachers systematically use data to assess teaching and learning.
- ◆ Teachers regularly adjust instruction based on student performance.

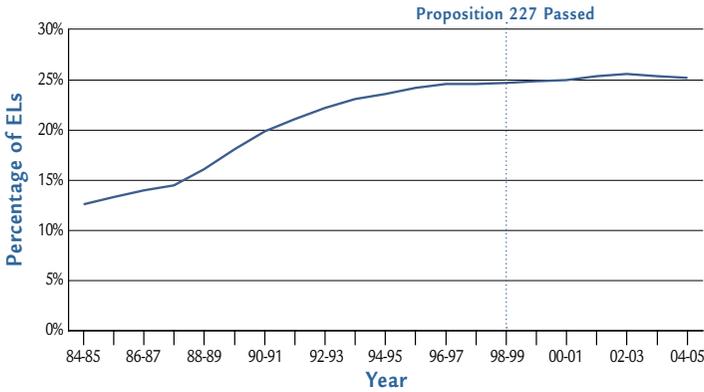
These approaches appear to contribute most to English learners' success. They are revisited later in this report.

The Urgency to Educate English Learners Effectively

Over the years, as the number of English learners has continued to grow, the issues of providing them with an effective education have become increasingly important. According to federal statistics, an estimated 5 million English learners are enrolled in U.S. public schools, an increase of more than 65 percent over the 1993-94 school year. About 1.6 million of these students live in California. As shown below, the percentage of English learners in California schools has nearly doubled over the past twenty years. Currently, one of every four California students is an English learner, and about 85 percent of these are Spanish speakers.

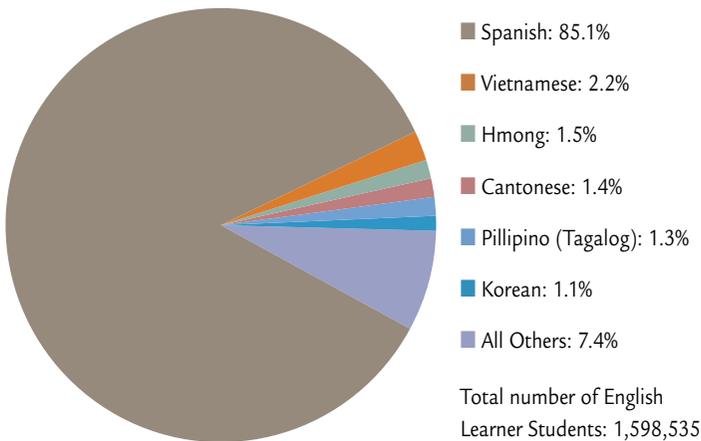


ENGLISH LEARNERS AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL CALIFORNIA ENROLLMENT OVER TIME



Even with the preponderance of California’s English learners speaking Spanish as their primary language, individual schools face diverse circumstances. Some schools serve populations where English learners speak a single primary language, while in other cases dozens of language groups are represented on a single campus. Some English learners are newly arrived, while others were born in this country and are the children or even grandchildren of immigrants. English learners also bring great variety in their levels of prior schooling and literacy in their primary language.

ENGLISH LEARNERS IN CALIFORNIA BY PRIMARY LANGUAGE, 2003-04





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English learners face the extraordinary challenge of learning academic English while also mastering the same core content standards (in English) expected of all students. A major concern of elementary school educators in this study is for the welfare of those students who do not make enough progress in English and core academics to be redesignated to fluent English proficient status by the time they enter middle school or high school. For such students, getting placed in an English learner track can mean less access to grade-level instruction in the core curriculum and difficulty attaining grade-level performance standards and mastery of academic English. At the study's middle and high schools, some EL students and their parents raised concerns that they were “stuck in the EL track” and that this track of courses was not preparing them for college.

In the face of the especially diverse attributes and instructional needs of English learners, and with no clear evidence favoring a particular instructional model, a more flexible state-wide approach may be appropriate — one that takes into account local circumstances in determining what works best for these students.

Definitions

English Learner (EL): Student whose first language is not English and who is in the process of learning English.

Bilingual Programs: Programs that use the students' primary language, in addition to English, for instruction. Students are grouped according to their primary language, and teachers are proficient in both English and the students' language.

Structured (or Sheltered) English Immersion (SEI): Programs that use English adapted to the students' level of comprehension to provide content area instruction. This approach is often used for a class of students from varied primary language backgrounds. In the law, “sheltered English immersion” and “structured English immersion” are used interchangeably.

Measuring the Impact of Proposition 227

Proposition 227 was based on the belief that instead of receiving instruction in their primary language while learning English, English learners would benefit from immediate introduction into mainstream classrooms following a one-year immersion in English language instruction. In its implementation and effects, how well did Proposition 227 succeed? To seek an answer, this study undertook a rigorous analysis of student achievement data, interviewed and surveyed California educators, and visited schools and districts across the state.

TEST SCORES AND TRENDS

This policy evaluation was not a random-assignment, experimental design study. In effect, however, Proposition 227 created a sort of “natural experiment” by forcing the movement of large numbers of students from bilingual to immersion instructional models. Thirty percent of English learners were enrolled in bilingual programs at the beginning of this transition in 1998, and, among English learners, these students were the most disadvantaged



economically and linguistically. Schools that offer bilingual instruction are far more likely than other schools to serve poor families and to enroll English learners whose initial English proficiency is very low.

In addition to these significant differences, the programs English learners were placed into were not consistent across the state. That is, the labels assigned to various instructional settings were (and still are) defined differently across districts and, in some cases, even within districts and schools. Labels such as alternative bilingual and structural English immersion actually reflect a broad range of practices, so evaluating their educational effect is difficult.

These complications, combined with limitations in statewide data, make it impossible to definitively resolve the long-standing debate underlying Proposition 227. Nevertheless, extensive analyses of the available data were conducted and very little evidence can be found that the proposition's basic premise was correct. Differences in EL achievement across instructional models – controlling for such critical factors as student demographics – were found to be minimal or nonexistent.

At the same time, federal and state accountability reform measures have resulted in a substantial increase in the percentage of English learners participating in statewide assessments, while the native English speaker test-taking population has remained fairly constant. Despite the fact that the additional EL students participating in statewide testing are likely to be those with the lowest English proficiency, English learners have improved their scores as a group at a rate largely comparable to that of native English speakers during the period since the passage of the proposition. Proposition 227 and other concurrent reforms mentioned above may have contributed to these enhanced results by focusing attention on the instructional needs of English learners and by providing supplemental resources for EL services.

While these performance trends are encouraging, other study findings are more sobering. For example, compared with native English speakers, English learners drop out of school at consistently higher rates, and they graduate from high school at consistently lower rates. Additionally, our analyses indicate that after 10 years in California schools, English learners have less than a 40 percent chance of meeting the linguistic and academic achievement criteria to be redesignated as “fluent English proficient.”

Methodology

The evaluation team used a mixed-methods approach to address the study's research questions, including case studies, phone and written surveys, statistical analyses of student performance data (statewide and from Los Angeles Unified School District), stakeholder interviews, and document reviews. For more information on the study's findings and methodology, see the Year 5 report. This culminating report, which synthesizes the findings from research performed across all five years of the study, is available at: http://www.air.org/publications/pubs_ehd_school_reform.aspx, or <http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/rs/804>.



REDESIGNATION POLICY

Given the importance to English learners of meeting the criteria to be redesignated as “fluent English proficient,” we carefully reviewed related state policies and studied districts with redesignation rates above and below the state average. We found that these districts use multiple state and local criteria, with performance standards varying across districts even on state assessments. Current state law permits such local flexibility, with the result of diluting the effectiveness of state guidelines. State guidelines are also perceived by some educators to be at odds with NCLB goals for English learners since there is an inherent contradiction between the state’s current academic achievement criterion cut-point range for redesignation — which is beginning-to-mid-Basic — and its requirement for EL subgroup academic achievement on NCLB Title I AYP — which is Proficient.

Additionally, variation in local procedures and systems to facilitate redesignation, and the degree of importance districts placed on redesignating English learners, were found to contribute to differences in redesignation rates. These factors, and other state-level factors such as redesignation-rate reporting timelines and calculation methods, call for careful rethinking of redesignation policy and practices at both state and local levels.

PERCEIVED VALUE

As measured by this study’s interviews and surveys, school and district educators generally regarded Proposition 227 positively. Favorable comments tended to emphasize the increased attention given to educating English learners rather than the proposition’s mandated change in instructional model. Overall, there has been a significant shift away from bilingual instruction, even though the proposition allows an “alternative” bilingual program for a child whose parent requests it. The shift has been toward structured English immersion (SEI) classroom settings, where instruction is nearly all in English, but the curriculum and presentation are designed for English learners. Following the proposition’s passage, the proportion of English learners receiving bilingual instruction statewide dropped from 30 percent to 8 percent. While Proposition 227 was initially controversial and highly visible, respondents in the final year of the study suggested that NCLB and the state’s Public Schools Accountability Act now have a greater impact on trends in EL education.

Implementation Barriers

Through this evaluation, a number of barriers to the implementation of the proposition were identified: the short timeline and insufficient initial guidance for implementing regulations in the law, confusion over what the law requires and allows, and the lack of clear operational definitions for the various instructional approaches to the education of



English learners. Respondents especially wanted additional guidance regarding the proposition’s waiver process to allow bilingual instruction if requested by a parent.

The majority of district EL instructional leaders responding to our 2002 survey (92 percent) reported that they had a clearly defined plan for providing instruction to EL students, as did 90 percent of school respondents. But of the districts reporting having a plan, only 37 percent indicated that teachers in their district were fully implementing this plan as intended. Of the school respondents, about half (53 percent) of those with a plan reported that teachers of English learners were fully implementing it.

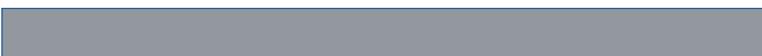
Strategies That Make a Difference

If the model of instruction does not make a significant difference on EL performance, what does? To address this, the study gathered information from 66 schools and 5 districts with high EL performance relative to others with similar demographics. Some schools in this sample offered bilingual instruction, some offered immersion, and several offered multiple options for EL instruction. Schools and districts were selected from all over the state and represented a broad range of demographic characteristics. However, we focused on schools with significant EL populations and high levels of poverty.

The findings from these schools pinpoint a few key features. As shown below, school principals and district administrators offered complementary ideas about what matters for successful instruction of English learners.

What Matters for Successful Instruction of English Learners

SCHOOL PRINCIPALS	DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS
Schoolwide focus on ELD and standards-based instruction	Shared vision and a plan for EL achievement
Staff instructional expertise and skills to address EL needs	Professional development and technical assistance related to EL education
Shared priorities and expectations in regard to educating English learners	School and classroom organized around supporting EL academic progress
Ongoing assessment coupled with data-driven decision-making	Assistance to schools in analyzing data
Curriculum and instruction targeted to English learner progress	
Resources to provide EL support, such as supplemental materials and extended-day and intersession programs	
Community outreach to increase family involvement	





To highlight the range of EL instructional programs in place at the 66 exemplar schools participating in the study, brief profiles of three schools are offered below. Additional schools are featured in the full report.

Bennett-Kew Elementary

INGLEWOOD UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Bennett-Kew is a large, suburban elementary school with a mobile school population. The school has achieved success with its predominantly Spanish-speaking EL population through constant monitoring, English immersion, and collaboration around student achievement. The school emphasizes phonics and makes a concerted effort to provide English learners equal access to the core curriculum with supplemental help from an ELD specialist. Formal and informal monitoring of English learners' progress is ongoing — teachers assess individual achievement at the beginning of the year and for every reporting period, while the principal monitors individual, grade-level, and schoolwide achievement. Although there is no difference for English learners in the pacing and exposure to the core program, a language specialist provides supplemental help to those at different English proficiency levels and provides staff development and support that ensures that teachers identify and meet individual student needs. Because assessment data are regularly shared among staff, teachers have a high level of accountability for student progress and achievement. Bennett-Kew works to involve parents, holding frequent parent meetings and providing an open house during the day to accommodate parents' work schedules. A parent-community liaison explains policies and addresses delicate issues with parents. In all of this, says Principal Lorraine Fong, "It's important to know students, to believe that they can learn, and to be able to identify the issue at hand."



Moscone Elementary

SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Moscone Elementary serves a high-poverty, highly immigrant student body. The principal credits the school's success to a vision pursued for the past 17 years that every child will reach his or her full potential. With approximately 60 percent of its students designated as English learners and 80 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, Moscone relies on an instructional plan that includes both bilingual and SEI classrooms. The "early-exit" bilingual classes are offered in Spanish and Chinese, and each grade progressively integrates more English into the curriculum so that by the fourth grade all students are mainstreamed into regular classrooms. In all classes, teachers build students' academic English in the content areas and through attention to grammar, vocabulary, and word usage. Staff are continuously engaged in fine-tuning instruction through collaboration around ongoing classroom assessments, constant monitoring of all available student performance data, and strategic brainstorming about how to respond. Often, either leadership or teachers identify an area of concern through data analysis, bring an idea to the table to address this concern, and implement it in several classrooms. The results are then evaluated and the staff makes a collective decision about whether to incorporate a strategy or intervention more broadly. As a result, the staff at Moscone are constantly refining and reflecting on their approach and innovating new strategies, while keeping what works. Building consensus around initiatives and working with the community has enabled Moscone to define and tailor the academic program to meet the needs of their student population. Leadership at Moscone, including Principal Patti Martel, attributes this success to a commitment that "Every person who comes to interact with our community must put aside all personal and political agendas."



Valley High School

ELK GROVE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Because Valley High, an urban high school in Sacramento, boasts such a diverse English learner population, they employ bilingual Spanish, Hmong, Chinese, Punjabi, and Hindi paraprofessionals to assist students with instruction in the content area. The school has a 3 percent overall dropout rate — a noteworthy accomplishment considering that 62 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 26 percent are designated as English learners. Systematic use of data and personalized attention are key to Valley High’s success. Through analysis of CELDT and CST scores, as well as feedback from teachers and feeder middle schools, each English learner is individually placed in the instructional program that best meets that student’s needs. Valley High offers a tiered “EL partnership” program with three levels of instruction: one for newcomer students, another set of “transitional” core courses for those English learners who have not yet attained the level of English fluency necessary to access college prep-level textbooks, and “SDAIE” core classes (which meet college entrance requirements). Teachers instructing classes at any of the three levels participate in a year-round professional learning program to ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills. Every incoming English learner sees a counselor and has a parent meeting to tailor the student’s schedule to meet graduation requirements and aid English acquisition. Students with relatively low English fluency trade one elective for a second hour of ELD class. Teachers are given the freedom and support to implement curricula to meet the needs of their diverse student population. Constant monitoring by the bilingual paraprofessionals, teachers, and administration ensures all students’ progress is carefully tracked. Staff view this monitoring and support for English learners as integral to the results they are achieving. “Students do not fall through the cracks,” notes EL Coordinator Linda Gonzalez.



Recommendations

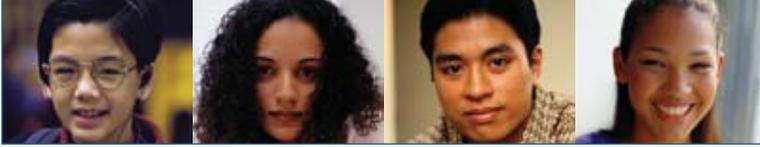
Study findings across many aspects of the implementation and effects of Proposition 227 drive our recommendations for districts and schools and for state-level policymakers and administrators.

FOR DISTRICTS AND THEIR SCHOOLS

- ◆ **Districts should articulate coherent EL policies and performance expectations across classes, grades, and schools.** The particular plan adopted for educating English learners should be consonant with students' needs, district resources, and community preferences; it should also be based on sound research, carefully thought-out, coordinated, and articulated.
- ◆ **Districts should use achievement data to guide policy and instruction.** The use of data to guide EL policy and to measure the results of instructional practices was consistently found among the successful schools and districts studied.
- ◆ **Schools and districts should limit prolonged separation of English learners from English-speaking students.** The study found instructional programs ostensibly designed to improve the English acquisition and academic achievement of English learners, but which offered them a narrower range of less challenging coursework and were often characterized by low expectations. English learners who have been functioning with reasonable fluency in mainstream classrooms in elementary school often find themselves placed in "EL tracks" upon entry to middle school, based not on their English proficiency or academic performance, but simply as a result of their EL status. While the separation of English learners for targeted support is sometimes justified, such segregation should be strategic and limited to specific instructional purposes with demonstrated success.
- ◆ **Districts should support the long-term, locally-based professional development necessary to promote the English language development and academic achievement of English learners at all levels of proficiency.**
- ◆ **Districts should deploy skilled teachers to schools where they are most needed.** California schools enrolling the largest percentages of English learners have significantly lower percentages of certificated teachers as compared to the state average (87 percent vs. 93 percent), and teachers holding special credentials for serving English learners are disproportionately distributed to schools enrolling lower percentages of these students.
- ◆ **Schools should emphasize academic English literacy across the curriculum and into the middle and high school grades.**
- ◆ **Schools should empower staff through personalized learning communities, distributed leadership, and teacher collaboration.** When teachers have a stake in shaping student learning and achievement, fewer students (or teachers) fall through the cracks.

**FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS AND ADMINISTRATORS**

- ◆ **Continue to commit substantial state support to improve teaching and learning for English learners in both ELD and core academic subjects.**
- ◆ **Continue to allow flexibility in choice of instructional model and to consider local circumstances.** Significant variation in the attributes of English learners, community priorities and values, and available resources call for varied methods.
- ◆ **Continue to identify schools and districts demonstrating high levels of success in educating English learners and increase opportunities for others to learn from them.** Develop criteria for identifying such districts and schools and mechanisms for encouraging transfer of knowledge.
- ◆ **Take steps to standardize and clarify bilingual waiver provisions of Proposition 227.** Current legal statute specifies that parents should be the primary initiators of the waiver process, with final approval left to school officials based on their assessment of the child's needs. However, it appears that parents often do not know about or understand their waiver rights, and school district decisions on waiver requests are often governed by prior practice and predisposition toward particular instructional programs.
- ◆ **Focus monitoring efforts to ensure that EL status does not impede full access to the core curriculum.** The state should hold districts responsible for ensuring that ELs not be inappropriately tracked and should encourage districts to be vigilant about preventing these practices or eliminating them when they do exist.
- ◆ **While maintaining redesignation as a locally determined milestone, specify clear performance standards for key statewide measures of EL student progress and achievement.** Because there are significant variations in local context, the state should continue to allow local districts to make their own redesignation decisions. However, the state should also set explicit, empirically based expectations for EL students' steady progress toward and attainment of statewide academic achievement performance standards required under NCLB Title I, as it has done for English learners' linguistic progress and proficiency under NCLB Title III.
- ◆ **English learners need supplemental resources.** Additional challenges, and therefore costs, are associated with teaching English to ELs while at the same time ensuring that they are learning the core curriculum expected of all students. Given these higher costs, supplemental funds (above state average spending) will be needed to bring schools educating high numbers of English learners up to an even footing with their counterparts.
- ◆ **Foster development of ELD curriculum and instructional plans aligned to the state's ELD standards for varying levels of English proficiency.** Standards-based ELD materials should be in place in every district serving English learners.



English learners are a large, growing, and vital component of California's future. Learning how to be more successful with this important population of students is clearly essential to our state and national well-being. It is imperative that we build on the progress that has been made and fully embrace this challenge.

10 Tips from Successful Principals Interviewed for This Study

- ◆ **Align instruction around consistent expectations:** I think the key to our success is consistency. Standards have to be set to reflect high expectations for all children. The support has to be there, but the standards — and the expectations — are never lowered.
- ◆ **Don't underestimate English learners:** Remember that these students are highly motivated and want to learn English. It's important to provide them with a good support group and to ensure that their first experiences help them to keep their goals high. This is critical.
- ◆ **Make English learners a whole-school priority:** All teachers must take responsibility for EL kids — it can't just be the EL department. We only have 40 kids in our ELD classes, but we have one-third of our school classified as EL. So they are sitting in regular classes and we need to get them reclassified. All teachers have to know who they are and what level they are in order to bring them up to fluent. That involves the whole staff.
- ◆ **Motivate, train, and involve teachers:** Developing highly efficient and effective teachers is the first challenge as a principal. Start by sharing research and demographics with them. Teach them how to read and analyze test scores. Teach them step-by-step all the issues with English learners: what the CELDT levels mean, what the typical life experience of an EL in the school is like. Work as a team to solve the problems. Build in time for lots of dialogue and reflection. Work collaboratively as an entire school through vertical and grade-level meetings. Include teachers in decision-making.
- ◆ **Focus on the needs of individuals:** Teachers can't look at 30+ students and say, 'I'm going to meet all of your needs every day.' It's overwhelming and you can't do it. But you must identify needs and find commonalities. Where groupings don't work, address it as an individual need. You can't approach it as "one size fits all."



- ◆ **Be an active participant in instruction:** As principals, we really need to be instructional leaders — to be in the classroom and speaking with kids. Then when you come into staff meetings or professional development, teachers take you as someone who’s credible, saying, ‘That principal came into my classroom and sat through a guided reading lesson and found the same obstacles I found.’ Then we can talk about those and how we overcome them.
- ◆ **Emphasize literacy:** In our school, everything is based on language. Schools are language places. If kids are going to do well in schools, they have to be good at language. We focus on reading and comprehension. The library here is a hoppin’ place. It is well used.
- ◆ **Encourage collaboration:** Make sure to allow opportunities for cross-dialogue among teachers within and across grade levels to make sure there is coordination and information sharing about what various teachers have been focusing on and how kids are doing.
- ◆ **Seek staff input about training needs:** Conduct an inventory of needs and provide opportunities for staff development. Ask them what they feel would help them best serve their students.”
- ◆ **Have a dedicated classroom for late-entry newcomers:** Keep the class size small. In our school, these students get ELD all morning and then are mainstreamed with native English speakers in the afternoon. I find that the students speak a lot more in this special classroom with other newcomers. Then they get role models with the English speakers in the afternoon. After one year they are transitioned out of the newcomer class [and into a regular classroom with other English learners and native English speakers]. Sometimes they can move out sooner.

