

Successful Approaches to Helping Students – Including English Learners – Succeed in Elementary School

NEARLY 1.6 MILLION PUPILS IN CALIFORNIA—

about a quarter of all students—are English learners (ELs). At the same time that they are acquiring a new language, EL students also need to learn the curriculum determined by the state’s academic content standards. These standards define what each student should know and be able to do in each academic subject at each grade level.

In order to monitor how well EL students are doing, the state created a school-level Academic Performance Index (API) that measures their results separately. Each school receives an EL-API score. The first EL-API scores were released in early 2006 based on STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting program) and other state tests that students took during spring 2005 in English, math, science, and social studies.

Education researchers found that elementary schools with similar—and fairly large—numbers of low-income and EL students performed differently on the EL-API. Teachers and principals in some of these schools participated in a spring 2005 EdSource survey that examined a large number of district, school, and classroom practices and policies. The survey also included specific questions about how English learners were taught.

The researchers used statistical techniques to compare the answers of educators in schools that had relatively high EL-API scores with those that had lower EL-API scores. Based on the results, the researchers found four strategies that were more common in the schools with higher scores:

- Using test data to improve student achievement and teaching;
- Making sure the school has well-qualified teachers, current textbooks and materials, and well-maintained and good quality school buildings, classrooms, and grounds;
- Making sure that teachers in every classroom are teaching the state’s academic content standards for their grade in an organized and understandable way, and



- Making it a high priority that every student is learning, which includes setting goals that can be measured objectively and monitored.

The study’s findings suggest some important questions parents can ask their child’s elementary school teacher or principal to see if their school is using these strategies.

How are test data used to improve instruction and monitor how well my child is learning?

Students in every elementary school in California take STAR tests each spring in English, math, science, and social studies. Each year, schools are supposed to include some test result information in School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs) that provide basic information about the school. Schools are expected to provide the SARC to parents.

Principals and teachers can also use the STAR tests and other tests—such as questions at the end of textbook chapters or tests provided by publishers—to evaluate teaching and regularly check student progress. Parents can learn more about how their child’s teacher and principal are using test results by asking:

- How do you analyze and use test data? Do you consider data analysis a high priority?
- How many different tests are used to check my child’s progress?

- Are teachers and the principal trained in how to use test data? To what extent?
- Do teachers receive test data broken down by student groups, such as English learners, and for each pupil?
- Based on test results, does the school set progress goals for my child and regularly check to see if my child is reaching those goals? Can you give me an example?
- Do the results of these tests change how the class or my child is taught? Can you provide examples?
- What do these tests say about how well my child is learning? Are there particular areas in which my child is struggling? Are there areas in which my child is doing very well?

Does my school have well-qualified teachers, up-to-date textbooks, and adequate facilities?

The SARC should also provide information about the condition of school buildings and whether there are enough textbooks for each student. In addition, it indicates whether there are classrooms without credentialed (state-certified) teachers.

Other attributes of teachers cannot be put on a SARC but are also important. Parents should note whether the teacher appears excited about teaching and seems to feel part of the school

community. Principals at schools with higher test scores tended to describe their teachers that way. At schools with higher scores, principals were also more likely to report that most of the school's teachers were state-certified and had five or more years of experience.

Parents can ask the principal:

- Is my child's teacher state-certified?
- How many years of experience teaching does he or she have?
- Are the teachers trained in the curriculum (what is supposed to be taught)?
- How long have you been a principal?

Because district support of a school is also important, parents can ask the principal:

- Does the district supply enough textbooks so that each child has an updated, standards-based book for each subject?
- Does the district support upkeep of school buildings and grounds? How?
- Does the district provide extra help for struggling students? If so, what does the school do to help students who fall behind? Does the school have in-class tutors, an after-school tutoring program, or Saturday school to prepare students for the upcoming week?

Parents can also ask the teacher: What are the academic content standards for each subject? Are you fully credentialed? How long have you been teaching?

Are the teachers in every classroom in my school teaching the state's academic content standards for their grade in an organized and understandable way?

When parents understand what is being taught in their children's classrooms, they can do a better job of helping with homework

and talking with their children about what they are learning.

Teachers in a school often rely on standards maps and pacing calendars to ensure that they are all covering the essential topics in a timely manner. Parents can ask to see these maps and calendars.

For example, a standards map shows how one chapter in a fourth-grade social studies textbook on the history of California meets social studies academic content standards and also reading and writing standards. The chapter on California's first pioneers covers the social studies standard that says fourth graders should be able to "identify the early land and sea routes to...California...noting especially the importance of mountains, deserts, ocean currents, and wind patterns." The standards map suggests that students write an information report about the first pioneers, which also meets writing standards.

A pacing calendar describes what teachers at a certain grade level are expected to teach their students at any point in time. For example, in the second week of school, one pacing calendar has all third-grade teachers reading aloud from the same book, *Roadside America*. Such an approach ensures uniformity across classrooms at each grade level in a school or district.

How is the school meeting the needs of English learner students?

Schools also use certain techniques for teaching English learners. Parents can ask:

- What kinds of learning techniques are being used with EL students? Is the school using English as a Second Language (ESL) or immersion? Is the program for English learners

a new program based on up-to-date information about how best to teach EL students?

- Are there resource teachers who work just with English learners? What is their training? Are there instructional aides in the classroom who speak the student's native language to help explain, when necessary, what is being taught? Does the teacher speak the student's native language?
- If help with English is provided in a "pull-out" program (the student leaves the class), what is the teacher doing to make sure the student does not miss out on classroom discussions in important academic subjects, such as English, math, social studies, and science?

What is the school doing to make student achievement a high priority?


The researchers found that in successful schools, the district, principal, and teachers have a shared vision that is focused on student learning and have well-defined plans to improve teaching. Parents can ask their principal:

- What academic goals do you have for the school?
- How do you plan to raise schoolwide student achievement?
- How does the school district support your efforts?
- What does the district expect from your school?
- What qualities and experience do you look for in teachers? How do you determine if they are doing a good job?

Parents can also ask teachers: What is your vision for the school, your class, and my child? What do you hope my child will achieve this year?

How can I help?

Principals at higher-scoring schools in the study report that they provide opportunities for parent involvement. One principal notes that everyone at the school works hard and is committed, including "active parents" who "take on responsibilities in an effort to improve the school."

Another good question for the principal is: "How can I get involved?" 

How can I find out more?

Similar English Learner Students, Different Results can be found at www.edsources.org/pub_abs_el07.cfm. This study was based on another study using the same survey—*Similar Students, Different Results*—which can be found at www.edsources.org/pub_abs_simstu05.cfm.

The EdSource website, www.edsources.org, also provides basic information on education issues—such as testing, standards, and accountability—and links to other organizations.



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