

# Research Brief:

## ▶ **ENGLISH LEARNERS** and **OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME PROGRAMS**

The Potential of OST Programs to Foster English Learner Success



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# Research Brief: English Learners And Out-Of-School-Time Programs

## The Potential of OST Programs to Foster English Learner Success

Out-of-School-Time (OST) programs offer the ability to expand the school day and provide English learner (EL) students with more time in educational settings that help to address the dual learning challenges they face. Research shows that this additional time can make a difference if used effectively. To that end, this brief highlights research-supported ways in which OST programs might be particularly well suited to support EL students during that extra time.

### The Need

About 1.5 million or 25 percent of California's public school students are English learners and 27 percent of the nation's ELs attend school in California—a much greater share than any other state. A large EL student population is not a problem in and of itself; the problem is the persistent gap in achievement between ELs and other youth.<sup>4</sup>

Time is important for all students<sup>6</sup> but it is especially important for EL students who have the dual educational task of learning English as well as math, science, and other academic subjects through English.<sup>15</sup> ELs need even more time to develop the *academic language* crucial for educational success<sup>40,5</sup> than to develop communicative competence<sup>3</sup> and are at risk of failing in school because of the long time that it takes to gain these advanced literacy skills.<sup>9,26</sup>

While ELs need extra time for extra learning, some argue that they actually receive less instruction overall than their English-only peers. For example, transitions associated with pull-out strategies, waiting for understandable instructions before being able to start a task, and limited course options at the secondary level—all limit the instructional time available to ELs.<sup>18,14,39</sup>

ELs' access to an effective education involves both the time for instruction and how well that time is used. The preponderance of culturally and linguistically diverse students—including ELs—in low track classes<sup>38</sup> means that these students are less likely to participate in high quality programs that foster achievement.<sup>27</sup>

### The Potential of Out of School Time (OST) for ELs

Extra time, and potential use of this time to provide effective EL strategies and activities, means that out-of-school-time programs hold particular promise for improving outcomes for EL students. Moreover, in California, which has the largest number of after school programs and spends more by far on these programs than any other state, OST programs are present in schools with larger percentages of EL students than the state average of 24 percent. Overall, the EL student population of California schools with publicly funded after school programs is 38 percent and in the state's 3,372 elementary schools with such programs, the numbers are even higher: 42 percent of students at these sites are ELs.\*

Although there are few studies and evaluations that have focused specifically on OST programs and ELs, some OST evaluation results indicate the promise of these programs for English learners. EL participants in Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Literacy (CORAL) OST programs in five California cities made literacy gains similar to their non-EL peers.<sup>1</sup> EL students who participated actively in the After School Corporation (TASC) program in New York showed greater math achievement gains than nonparticipant ELs.<sup>48</sup> Participants in LA's BEST after school programs, 50 percent of whom were ELs, showed a substantial decrease in their crime rate and a moderate increase in academic achievement among those with the best attendance and most contact with adults as compared to nonparticipants.<sup>24</sup> Low-income and immigrant youth in eight states who participated regularly in high-quality after school programs reaped academic and other benefits.<sup>47</sup> Research involving immigrant students, indicates that OST programs can help these students develop the social and cultural skills and knowledge they need to thrive in the U.S.<sup>44</sup>

**Note:** All references are listed by number at the end of this report.

\* After school program data compiled by the California After school Network, UC Davis, School of Education from the ASES and 21st CCLC database in December, 2010.

## Research-Supported Strategies: OST Programs and ELs

### Primary Language Instruction and Support in OST Programs

Five recent meta-analytic syntheses provide overwhelming evidence that teaching EL students to read in their primary language promotes higher levels of reading in English.<sup>23</sup> There is also sound evidence that instructing learners in content areas through their strongest language (or bilingually utilizing learners' first and second languages) gives them better access to content area learning and better access to valid assessment of what they know and can do in the content areas.<sup>2,32</sup> The use of their primary language in instruction ensures that ELs can access age and grade appropriate academic content while they are continuing to gain English proficiency,<sup>19</sup> an important issue given that rigor of content has been shown to be as important to EL success as the level of their English proficiency.<sup>8</sup>

Since the passage of Proposition 227 in 1998, California law strongly limits programs that are not taught wholly or mostly in English. As a result, only about 5 percent of ELs participate in programs that include primary language instruction and only 20 percent receive some degree of primary language support.<sup>7</sup> Because OST programs are not subject to all of the strictures of regular school day programs, they provide a setting in which research-supported primary language strategies can be used when these programs employ staff who are from the same cultural and linguistic background as the students they serve. For example, when OST staff and classroom teachers communicate about classroom content, OST programs can provide reinforcement in the primary language for content taught in English during the regular school day and can preview content that will

be addressed in class—strategies that have been shown to be effective with ELs in both language and content instruction.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, OST staff can check in with EL students using their primary language to see to what extent they are grasping classroom concepts, can inform teachers about areas or subjects with which ELs are struggling, and can act to address these issues by working with students on challenging subjects and assignments in their primary language.

### Opportunity for Practice, “Air Time,” and Interaction in OST Programs

To become proficient, ELs need opportunities to practice their English language skills in various ways. EL opportunities for producing language (output) and for interaction<sup>40,45,42</sup> are just as important as opportunities for input—that is, to hear and read language that they understand.<sup>11</sup> Interaction as part of this output provides learners with more input,<sup>34</sup> and improves understanding as learners construct meaning through their interaction.<sup>31</sup> This process also allows EL students to express themselves in different types of communicative situations and to draw on all of their linguistic resources to do so. Interaction has also been shown to be important to EL student motivation, which in turn, is fundamental to learning.<sup>35</sup>

Out-of-school-time programs can provide EL students with greater opportunities for English language output and interaction than they are likely to receive during their regular school day. With 25 to 35 students in a regular class, opportunities to interact with the teacher are limited as are the chances for EL students to have adequate and appropriate opportunities to produce language. In addition, children and adolescents who have come to know each other in an OST atmosphere that is less restrictive and more stress-free than the regular school day are likely to feel less self-conscious and experience less pressure regarding their “performance” in English. For adolescent ELs, in particular, embarrassment over making mistakes can be a hindrance to participation in language production activities.<sup>17,20</sup> Out-of-school-time programs also offer opportunities for a broader array of learning activities—including interactive activities—than can be easily accommodated during the regular school day. The need to meet accountability goals means that classroom teachers often must stick to a schedule and pace as determined by curricular packages designed to address the skills included on accountability measures. This pace and these prescribed activities may not always allow for the kind of interaction and extra language practice that EL students need.



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## **Understanding and Addressing EL Students' Individual Differences through OST Programs**

ELs are a heterogeneous group beyond considerations of their English language skills. They differ in myriad ways, such as in their primary language, socioeconomic status, immigrant vs. resident status, their home literacy, previous schooling experiences, and their ethnicity and culture. Research provides support for the importance of teachers' knowing their students: knowing what they know and being familiar with their background knowledge in order to build instruction on this knowledge.<sup>41,11</sup> Motivation has also been shown to be affected by how well teachers know their students and how well they can connect learning to EL students' previous learning and experience, to what students already know, what they need to know, and what excites them. Understanding EL students' level of content knowledge and designing instruction that is appropriately rigorous rather than simplified or watered down is also critical to improving their academic success. Knowing students well means that teachers can provide instruction that helps ELs apply their skills in a diversity of learning situations and formats:<sup>25</sup> EL learning is fostered when teachers use an array of activities that link visuals, manipulatives, graphic organizers, etc. to a range of oral and written activities that provide input that they can comprehend in a variety of oral and written ways.<sup>12,42</sup>

The smaller group size and more stress-free environment of OST programs offer increased opportunities for the adults in these programs to get to know individual ELs. This may have growing relevance as class sizes increase in California. OST programs often focus on hiring staff from the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds as the students who participate. These individuals have a greater understanding of the backgrounds of EL students. They can also communicate with ELs in their primary language and thus better assess students' needs. This access to bilingual staff is particularly important for EL students in the context of Proposition 227 which has led to an almost 40 percent decrease in the number of teachers earning bilingual certification during a period that saw an 8.5 percent increase in the EL population.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the desire and need to meet accountability goals can lead to a narrower set of instructional strategies as teachers adhere to the activities and pace set by state-adopted curricula and deadlines. OST programs provide a setting in which educators can call upon a wider range of activities and approaches, and thus, have a more varied tool kit for addressing the range of EL needs.

### **EL Motivation and Engagement through OST Programs**

EL students can lose motivation because they are often placed in lower tracks or provided less challenging (and often less interesting) content due to their limited English language proficiency.<sup>27</sup>



***EL students can lose motivation because they are often placed in lower tracks or provided less challenging (and often less interesting) content due to their limited English language proficiency.***

Moreover, engaging and motivating EL students is facilitated when they feel safe and accepted in the classroom environment. For many students, having a relationship of trust with a teacher or other adult at the school contributes to their success. Making connections to students' lives, including to what excites them, is also critical in stimulating student engagement and motivation.<sup>35</sup>

Program evaluations support the positive effect of OST programs on student motivation. Findings from several evaluations indicate:

- Children who attended after school programs self-reported that they were more engaged and paid greater attention in class<sup>29</sup>
- Ethnic and cultural minority youth attending San Francisco Beacons Network afterschool centers reported that supportive relationships with program tutors helped them stay on track in their academics and motivated them to participate in Beacon activities<sup>43</sup>
- Cultural and linguistic minority youth in LA's BEST after school programs reported that staff motivated them to do well in school.<sup>24</sup>

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***OST staff need skills that are designed to help them address the specific learning needs of EL students.***

The role of OST programs in supporting EL students to feel safe and accepted in the learning environment is illustrated by an after school program serving Hmong students. Staff members who created relationships of trust and a family-like atmosphere where youth could express their Hmong identities were key to the program's success.<sup>33</sup> Finally, a Harvard Family Research Project (2008) review of the literature on successful OST programs and strategies highlighted the importance of well-prepared staff who can build strong positive relationships with youth.<sup>28</sup>

OST programs lend themselves to making connections to students' lives—a key to motivation. For one, they can serve as a bridge between students' home and school, particularly when OST staff are from the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds as student participants. In addition, these programs provide a range of arts, dance, sports, and other activities that are likely to be enjoyable and thus engage and motivate students to participate in learning.

### ***Making Connections with Families of English Language Learners through OST Programs***

Connections and relationships between home and school are important factors in a student's education. Studies point to the high correlation between various kinds of parental involvement and minority students' positive academic outcomes.<sup>30,50,37</sup> Another important aspect of this connection with students' homes and families relates to teachers' and schools' ability to appreciate the culture of their students, to call on students' experiences and knowledge in that culture to promote learning, and to view students' families as a valuable asset.<sup>36,22</sup> Making connections to students' families can enhance learning and instruction: success-

ful teachers link the curriculum to the cultural resources that students bring to school.<sup>49,10</sup>

Research on schools and programs that appear to be closing the achievement gap also indicates that many of these successes benefit from partnerships among schools, community members, and institutions that reduce ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic disparities in educational outcomes.<sup>13</sup> In addition, families of EL students often do not have accurate information or a clear understanding of school norms, high school graduation requirements, or post-secondary options and how their children can qualify for these.<sup>46</sup> Thus, programs that make connections with EL students' families can provide a much-needed resource of information and understanding.

Evaluations have shown consistent results across several after school programs indicating increased parental involvement in schools on the part of parents of children who participated.<sup>29</sup> A home and community-school connection is an integral feature of many if not most OST programs. Many OST school programs are administered or sponsored to some degree or completely by community organizations and employ community members either as paid staff or volunteers. Research cited above highlights after school programs that make these cultural and community connections and their importance to students. For example programs like that studied by Lee and Hawkins<sup>33</sup> make a point of hiring staff who connect with students' culture, history and family structure and who can communicate with students in their native language. With regard to parents of ELs who often feel "at sea" when it comes to dealing with school staff,<sup>46</sup> OST programs offer an opportunity for parents to connect with their child's education in a less restrictive and less daunting atmosphere. Moreover, these programs have the opportunity to hire staff who speak the primary languages of students and their families, and often do so.

### ***Recommendation 1: Coordination Between OST and Regular School Day Staff***

Regular contact and coordination among after school and regular school day staff is necessary to make the best use of OST for EL success. There is some controversy in the OST literature about the degree to which these programs should or should not mirror school day activities. For ELs, research suggests that effective practice would employ a range of different strategies from those employed during the regular school day but that these strategies are best employed with some degree of focus on content that was taught during regular school hours—part or all of which EL students may have missed due to limited English proficiency. Moreover, such strategies can be effective in previewing and

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frontloading future lessons and topics. Regular contact and coordination among after school and regular school day staff allows OST staff to address the content and language skills that ELs most need using multiple strategies and activities that are appropriate to their English proficiency and content knowledge and that may not be available during regular classroom instruction.

### **Recommendation 2: Intention and Planning of OST Activities for ELs**

OST program staff must design well-planned activities that focus on key strategies that promote learning for EL students. Principal among these are strategies that foster interaction with peers, text, and the teacher or adult. When such interaction is intentionally planned to focus on specific objectives and to facilitate ELs' participation—it has been shown to be critical to EL success.<sup>40</sup> The extra time provided by OST programs lends itself well to interaction strategies that are often too time-consuming to fit into the parameters of the regular school day and lose out in the competition for instructional time. Moreover, the less restrictive environment of many OST programs can reduce the stress or embarrassment that can silence many EL students as they are developing their English proficiency.

### **Recommendation 3: EL Focus to OST Staff Preparation and Professional Development**

OST staff need skills that are designed to help them address the specific learning needs of EL students. Just as during the regular school day teachers are critical to student success, after school staff are the key facilitators of successful student experience in after school programs: the importance of adults to EL student success in these programs is a key evaluation finding.<sup>24,33</sup> When it comes to working with ELs, it is essential that teachers and OST staff alike have preparation and understanding of the specific needs of EL students and the best ways to meet those needs. While most of the strategies that are appropriate and successful for EL students are also effective with non-ELs, the converse is not always the case.<sup>23</sup>

### **Recommendation 4: Recruitment and Hiring of OST Staff**

Efforts should focus on actively recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining staff who share similar backgrounds to EL children and youth, and their families. Recruitment and hiring activities should be targeted to individuals living in the community where OST programs are situated in order to ensure that staff represent or have experience with the linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and

neighborhood characteristics of students participating in after school programs. Recruitment practices should be designed to attract prospective staff with professional experience and personal backgrounds that indicate skill and expertise in working with ELs.

### **Recommendation 5: Prioritization of OST Resources**

State Education Agencies (SEAs) should direct technical assistance funding (through federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers and/or state funds) toward support for programs that serve high numbers of ELs. Training and technical assistance should provide information on best practices for meeting the educational, social and emotional needs of after school participants in order to ensure a closer “fit” between program activities and the realities of participants engaging in them. The SEA should construct guidelines for programs serving ELs that include a combination of both defined and flexible options for tailoring program components to local community characteristics and needs of ELs.

Finally, while emerging evaluation research indicates the potential of OST programs to promote greater student success and youth development outcomes for ELs, this research is scant. If these programs are to have a positive impact on EL outcomes, all evaluations of OST programs need to include a focus on the effects for ELs in order to provide direction regarding how to organize and implement OST programs for maximum positive impact on these students.



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