

Afterschool Providing Key Literacy Supports to English Language Learner Students

Dollar General Afterschool
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Building the literacy proficiency of all learners is essential to equip them with the skills they will need as they navigate through the academic, professional, and personal facets of their lives. For the more than 4 million English language learner (ELL) students who attend public schools nationwide, it is more critical than ever to provide this growing population with the supports to develop their literacy skills both in and out of school. Afterschool programs from coast to coast play a central role in providing the supports—including providing a culturally sensitive atmosphere to help develop ELL students’ literacy skills and offering literacy-related activities that promote ELL students’ motivation and interest—that are essential to help ELL students thrive in school, work, and life.

The challenges facing English language learners and their schools

Learning a new language is one of many obstacles English language learners face in school.

In school, students learn new skills and concepts in a number of subject areas—from English to math to science—every day. However, for ELL students, learning new concepts and skills in a variety of subject areas is a fraction of the challenges they manage in school. ELL students—students who receive language assistance, such as bilingual education and High Intensity Language Training—are also developing fluency in a new language, understanding the new content through a language they have limited proficiency in, and oftentimes navigating a new school with an unfamiliar culture.¹ English language learners are also more likely to live in low-income families and attend schools that are under-resourced and employ teachers with the least amount of training.²

Percent of students scoring below basic in the NAEP reading achievement level, 2015

Fourth grade students

68%

27%

Eighth grade students

71%

21%

Twelfth grade students

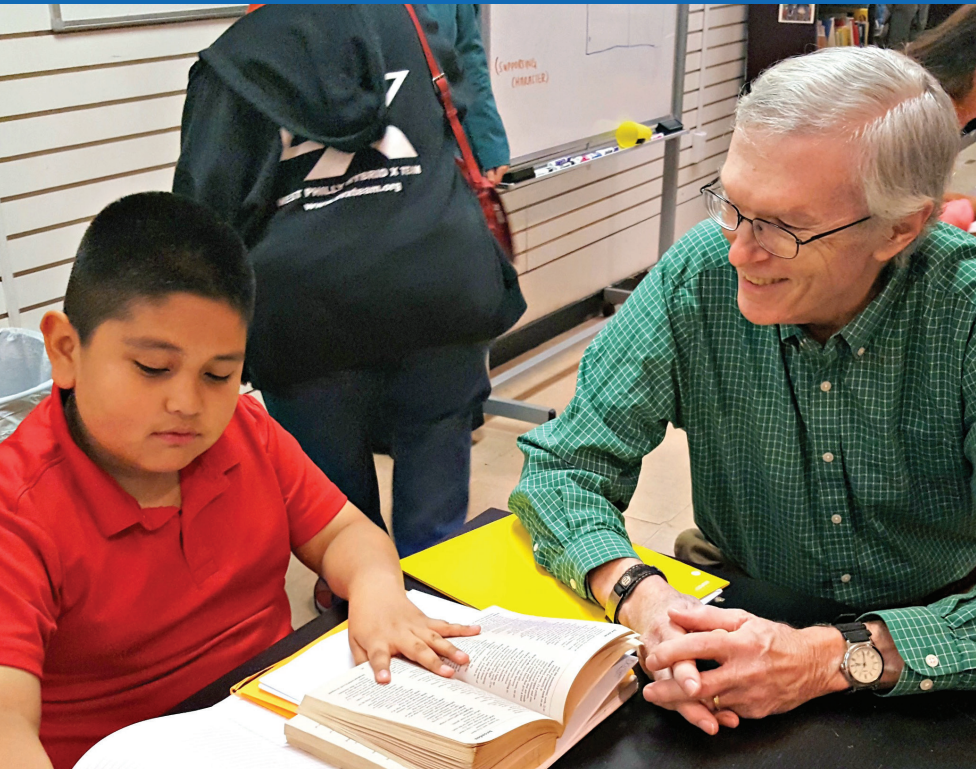
76%

26%

 ELL Students

 Non-ELL Students

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a nationally representative measure of trends in academic achievement among U.S. students.



Multiple hurdles for English language learners can have a lasting academic impact.

There are many students fluent in English who struggle in school. Confronted with many more hurdles to reach academic proficiency, it is understandable that doing well academically poses an even greater degree of difficulty for ELL students, which in turn impacts the likelihood of staying in school and graduating. ELL students in elementary, middle and high school are between 2.5 and 3.5 times more likely to score below basic in reading than their non-ELL peers.^{3,4,5} Moreover, the dropout rate for students who “spoke a language other than English at home and spoke English less than very well” is more than 3.5 times as high as the national average and the graduation rate for ELL students is almost 20 percentage points lower than the national graduation rate.⁶

English language learners are a diverse, significant, and growing portion of our public school system.

During the 2013-14 school year, it was estimated that 4.5 million ELL students attended public school.⁷ Overall, this number has steadily increased during the past decade, growing by close to a quarter of a million students and now constituting 9.3 percent of public school students.⁸ ELL students also comprise a sizable portion of public school students in some states—ELL students represent at least 6 percent of the public school population in almost half of U.S. states.⁹

English language learners are a diverse group. They comprise more than a dozen different races and ethnic populations speaking more than 30 different languages.^{10,11} Among ELL students, 3 in 4 live with families who speak Spanish at home. Other home languages include Arabic, Chinese, Hmong, Russian, and Vietnamese.¹²

Number of ELL students in public schools,

2003-04 through 2013-14

2003-04

4,217,026

8.8%

2008-09

4,439,514

9.2%

2013-14

4,460,956

9.3%

Afterschool programs are helping English language learners flourish

Afterschool programs are uniquely positioned to provide the supports English language learners need.

Given the number of difficulties facing ELL students and the steady increase in this population, schools need additional support to meet their needs and ensure that they catch up and keep up with their peers. Afterschool programs offer a host of out-of-school-time supports that help English language learners thrive while in school. Research has found that ELL students who participate in these afterschool programs see academic improvements. For example, evaluations found that ELL students participating in afterschool programs performed better on a statewide English language test and were more likely to be redesignated as English proficient than ELL students who did not participate in the program.^{13,14}

Across the county, afterschool programs provide ELL students additional time to build their literacy skills in an environment that offers individualized support, creates a sense of community, embraces students' culture, and provides integral services to care for students' and their families' overall wellbeing.

Providing a culturally sensitive atmosphere when helping develop ELL students' literacy skills.

The flexibility inherent within afterschool programs allows programs to foster ELL students' literacy skills in a culturally inclusive and sensitive manner.¹⁵ **Mighty Writers El Futuro program** (Philadelphia, PA) serves 100 percent ELL students and uses an internally developed, culturally relevant curriculum. It includes reading materials in English and Spanish on topics students care about and features a diverse set of authors. The program staffs bilingual mentors to provide support in English and Spanish, a practice that recent studies have found to benefit ELL students in comparison to English-only approaches.¹⁶ In fall 2015, no students in the program scored a proficient writing score. By the end of the school year, 62 percent of students were proficient.

Using a mix of learning approaches to build ELL students' literacy skills.

Small group activities, peer-to-peer learning, using visuals to help explain concepts, and weaving literacy into a variety of activities, are just a few of the practices **Raider's ARK (Academics Reinforcing Knowledge) After-School Program** (Arcadia, WI) uses to support its ELL students. While the program's activities are based on Common Core State Standards, a goal of the program is that its activities do not look like school. Activities integrate literacy in a number of creative ways, including art projects, games, and group sharing exercises. The program found that students in the program saw improvements in attendance, attitudes toward school, and reading scores.

Taking a comprehensive approach to support ELL students and their families.

Afterschool programs have the ability to provide a comprehensive approach to learning, recognizing that supporting students' social and emotional health plays a role in their ability to improve their literacy skills and overall academic performance.¹⁷ In addition to helping develop ELL students' literacy skills through individualized learning plans, small group instruction, read-alouds, and more, the mission of **Columbus State Community College's ESL Afterschool Communities (ESLAsC)** (Columbus, OH) is to help students develop their academic, social, and personal skills.



Encouraging students' interest in literacy-related activities keeps students engaged in school and helps develop their literacy skills.

The program weaves this mission throughout its literacy building activities, helping students to develop their leadership and teamwork skills. Approximately 8 in 10 ESLAsC students—95 percent of whom are English language learners—increased at least one grade level in reading during the 2015-16 school year.

Offering literacy-related activities that promote student motivation and interest.

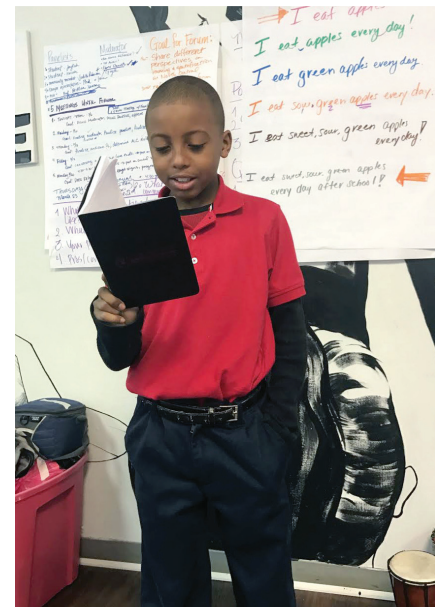
Afterschool programs have the ability to offer literacy programming that appeals to students by incorporating their interests into activities and promoting student voice and choice into programming. *La Prensa Libre de Simpson Street* (Monona, WI) takes a project-based approach to develop its students' literacy skills as a student-run newspaper. Students determine what topics to investigate, team up to collaborate on articles, and work with one another to review and revise articles. Encouraging students' interest in literacy-related activities keeps students engaged in school and helps develop their literacy skills. A Department of Education study found that close to 2 in 3 students who dropped out of school and whose first language was not English reported that they dropped out because they did not like school.¹⁸ At *La Prensa Libre de Simpson Street*, approximately 80 percent of students showed improvements in their school day attendance within one semester and 90 percent of students new to the program improved their reading comprehension within two semesters.

Engaging ELL students' families.

Family engagement is a key component to help ELL students make academic gains, including literacy-related gains.¹⁹ Afterschool programs, such as *ourBRIDGE for KIDS* (Charlotte, NC) serve as a resource for ELL students' families, offering supportive services and facilitating family involvement in their children's education. Engaging ELL students' families has been found to be difficult,²⁰ with teachers in one survey reporting that communicating and connecting with their ELL students' parents was a top challenge when working with ELL students.²¹ In *ourBRIDGE for KIDS*, family engagement is a pillar of its programming and includes home visits to meet with each new student's family, working closely with social service agencies to connect families with support services, and collaborating with community partners to offer parents workshops such as adult ESL classes. Students in the program, representing 22 different cultures, increased their reading assessment results by seven levels and 95 percent of students' teachers reported seeing improvement in students' engagement and performance in school.

Fostering community and school partnerships to ensure that ELL students receive the additional literacy supports that they need.

Bringing partners together and leveraging the resources of each is a strength of afterschool programs. *The Bridge Project afterschool program* (Denver, CO) is a unique collaboration between the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver, the Denver Housing Authority, and community representatives. In addition to its project-based curriculum that builds ELL students' reading and writing skills, the program works closely with school day staff to align its programming with students' school day lessons, connects families with social workers, offers families leadership opportunities to promote community buy-in and engagement, and is centrally located within Denver Housing Authority's public housing to encourage ELL students' program participation. The Bridge Project students saw tremendous reading gains, moving from 77 percent of students reading below grade level in fall of 2014 to just 31 percent by spring of 2015.



Conclusion

The academic struggles of English language learners highlight the essential need to provide additional supports for this growing body of students. Given the multiple hurdles facing ELL students as they move through school, it is difficult for schools alone to provide ELL students the extra supports necessary for them to succeed academically. Afterschool programs are natural partners to build ELL students' literacy skills, as well as support their social and emotional wellbeing and engage students' families in their education. As a part of the educational ecosystem, afterschool programs are helping all students, including ELL students, reach their full potential.

The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with Dollar General Literacy Foundation, is proud to present this issue brief examining the vital role afterschool programs play in building English language learners' literacy skills.

Endnotes

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