

# Principals Can Help Improve Literacy for English Learners

By Andrés Henríquez

This past October, the United States marked the arrival of its 300 millionth citizen with fanfare. Our nation is fortunate to have a young and vibrant demographic that will allow us to keep our competitive edge and compete in the global economy. But our country's potential will be lost if we don't provide our youngest citizens with the foundations they need to meet their individual potential. Many of these young people are immigrants or children of immigrants. They are helping to redefine and enrich our country. But we must take significant new steps to ensure their educational success so they can become part of our civic fabric and make our nation stronger.

Carnegie Corporation has long been committed to addressing education needs in our nation and is focused today particularly on the education of teachers and high school reform. In working for districtwide reform that offers every student the chance to succeed in and graduate from high school, we uncovered the fact that many of our young people struggle with the most basic educational requirement: literacy. Those with limited English proficiency suffer even more.

According to the 2005 National Assessment for Educational Progress, commonly known as the Nation's Report Card, eighth-grade students' reading scores are alarmingly low. Recent data suggests that close to 70% of incoming ninth-grade students are starting high school two to three grades below reading level. When researchers disaggregated the data they discovered that only 4% of eighth-grade English language learners (ELLs) and 20% of students classified as "formerly ELL" scored at the proficient or advanced levels on the reading portion of the test.

These statistics are shocking and disappointing, yet here's another jaw-dropping statistic: 57% of adolescent ELLs were born in the United States. *More than half* of those struggling to learn to read and write in English are second- or third-generation students. These large numbers suggest that many young people are not becoming literate even after many years in U.S. schools.

These statistics belie the notion that newly arrived immigrants are the cause of our low reading scores. However, it is also a fact that ELLs are not a monolithic group. These students represent diverse cultural and national backgrounds; their families have widely divergent economic, educational, and immigrant histories; and they reside in our cities, suburbs, exurbs, and rural America. This presents an enormous challenge to our nation's schools.

Four years ago, Carnegie Corporation began the Advancing Literacy program to address the national crisis in adolescent literacy. The program is dedicated to research, policies, and practices that focus on the reading and writing competence of middle and high school students. While adolescents are reading, they are not "reading to learn." Comprehending complex text is particularly challenging for students struggling with academic work in their middle level and high school years.

The needs of ELL students are especially acute. The number of ELL students is rising, and shifting demographics pose difficulties for school districts across the country. These students have a dual challenge: They must acquire a new language and become proficient in academic literacy in that language—mastering the nuances of the language in science, social studies, and math contexts.

Carnegie Corporation's response to the needs of ELL students was twofold. First, we provided funding to develop research-based instructional interventions for adolescent ELLs. Carnegie Corporation, along with the Rockefeller Foundation, supported the Center for Applied Linguistics to research the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) and provide professional development to secondary teachers in two New Jersey school districts. The model was tested in a number of schools to determine the effect on the academic performance of middle and high school ELLs under the instruction of SIOP-trained teachers. To date, the results of SIOP are quite promising.

Another research-based intervention has also shown early signs of success. Carnegie Corporation supported Johns Hopkins University in designing a program called Expediting Comprehension for English Language Learners (ExC-ELL), which addresses the needs of middle level and high school teachers in English, science, and social studies classrooms with large numbers of ELLs. The ExC-ELL evaluation took place in three states and showed that ELLs taught by teachers trained with ExC-ELL produced gains in English-language reading compared with students in matched control groups. An experimental design of this work is currently being replicated with teachers and pupils in New York City. This new study will improve the efficacy of the program by giving teachers and principals a convenient and easy-to-use handheld technological device to gather data.

Our second response to meet the need of adolescent ELLs was to support the develop-

ment of a knowledge base for practitioners and policymakers. A panel of expert researchers, practitioners, and demographers convened over an 18-month period and recently released their report, *Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learner*. The report provides much-needed advice and action steps that can be implemented for adolescent ELLs. *Double the Work* is available from the Alliance for Excellent Education ([www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org)). Other excellent reports, supported by the U.S. Department of Education, address the specific needs of new immigrants. The reports, *Research-based Recommendations for Instruction and Academic Interventions* and *Research-based Recommendations for Serving Adolescent Newcomers*, are available from the Center on Instruction's Web site ([www.centeroninstruction.org](http://www.centeroninstruction.org)).

These reports point out shifts in instructional approaches and specific interventions that effective leaders can take at the school and policy level, including:

- Identifying the specific demographics of ELLs (are they newcomers or native language speakers?)
- Teaching explicit and systematic vocabulary that includes academic terms
- Using diagnostics to identify strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, and skills and using formative assessments to provide ongoing information concerning each student's progress
- Extending time for instruction.

Of course, these recommendations can only work in schools that have fertile ground for implementing these literacy-based reforms. NASSP's *Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals* ([www.principals.org/literacy](http://www.principals.org/literacy)) outlines some concrete strategies for directing your school down this path.

Our country's motto "*E pluribus Unum*—out of many, one" continues to be an ideal we can use to build a country united in its commitment to innovation, global competitiveness, and prosperity for all. We must ensure that that our 300 millionth citizen, and every citizen thereafter, attains the literacy skills for school, work, and life. **NL**

---

*Andrés Henríquez is a program officer at the Carnegie Corporation of New York. For more information about the Advancing Literacy program, visit [www.carnegie.org/literacy](http://www.carnegie.org/literacy).*

*Reprinted with permission from the December 2006 NASSP NewsLeader. Copyright National Association of Secondary School Principals. For the complete issue, visit [www.principals.org/newsleader](http://www.principals.org/newsleader). For more information about NASSP programs and services visit [www.principals.org](http://www.principals.org).*