

Where Do We Go From Here? ¿Adónde Vamos?
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Thursday Evening, Weekly Principals Meeting,
San Francisco Unified School District

“Remember to submit your revised academic plan for meeting district benchmarks to your assistant superintendent by next Friday,” the principals were reminded as the meeting adjourned.

Mark Henderson, the principal of Sol Immersion Elementary, felt his blood pressure rise as he thought once again about getting his fourth and fifth grade English Learners to score high enough on the upcoming standards tests in English. On the way to his car, he ran into Susana Lopez, the principal of Cesar Chavez Middle School. “I have to tell you, Mark, the students you’re sending me from Sol are quite impressive,” Susan commented.

“Even our English Learners?” Mark asked.

“Especially the English Learners! I know they enter with some lower English skills than English Learners who’ve been in English Only programs, but they really catch up and start to jump ahead by the end of middle school,” Susan replied. “I’ll take your English Learners any day!”

Mark, while relieved to hear Susan’s positive feedback, worried aloud as he drove home. “I can’t believe it’s almost April. How I am going to get the academic plan finished by next week?! Maybe I should move up to middle school... Nah, too many behavior issues. I’m better off at Sol. Now if I could only keep Sol in safe harbor from state sanctions by figuring out how to help our English Learners score higher on the standardized tests in English.”

Henderson, a veteran bilingual teacher and principal, was in his second year as principal of Sol. He had directed several bilingual programs in the school district, but Sol was his first two-way immersion program. While he supported the development of bilingualism and biliteracy, he was facing increasing pressure to close Sol’s achievement gap between English Learners and their English dominant peers. His goal was to close the gap and to ensure that all students were proficient readers and writers in English by fifth grade. What kept him awake at night was wondering how the 15 new fourth and fifth graders were going to score high enough on the upcoming California standardized tests in English to meet Sol’s Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) target score as defined by California to comply with No Child Left Behind’s federal mandates. And he couldn’t forget about the Latino parents’ push for more English literacy instruction in the lower grades. Weren’t they right to demand access to more English? How was he going to respond to families the next morning in the Latino family group meeting when they brought up these issues? How could he make sure their needs were addressed in the academic plan? *Could* a 90/10 Spanish Immersion model, one in which most of the day was spent in Spanish, truly meet the needs of English Learners?

As he drove around the block looking for parking by his apartment complex, he made a mental to-do list: write up the agenda for the Latino family meeting; call Lucy, Sol’s English Language Development specialist, to make sure she’d attend; and familiarize himself with the article on the benefits of immersion education Lucy had placed in his box earlier in the week (Lindholm-Leary, 2005).

Sol Immersion School

Sol Immersion School, a Spanish-English two-way immersion elementary school, was located in the Mission district of San Francisco. The program was a 90/10 model in which kindergarten students received 90% of the instruction in Spanish and 10% in English. Each year, another 10% was added to English time, so that by fourth and fifth grades the students spent half their day in Spanish and half in English.

Students at Sol learned to read and write in Spanish. In English class, teachers in kindergarten through second grade focused on oral language development. Third grade marked the beginning of formal reading and writing instruction in English. While some students, particularly native English speakers, transitioned naturally into reading in English, many English Learners did not.

From Sol's inception in the 1980s, the school's population had been a majority of native English speakers learning Spanish as enrichment, with a minority of English Learners whose native language was Spanish. In 1995, 18% of the students were designated as English Learners; in 2000, 28%; and in 2006, 56%. The change in demographics had forced school staff to re-evaluate the program, and at the same time, questions were surfacing regarding the experience of the English Learners. More native Spanish-speaking families, a number of whom were recent arrivals to the United States, had begun to enroll their children in the school with little information about the nature of two-way immersion. Many of these families were worried their children were not learning English at the rate of their peers in other non-immersion public and private schools, and had expressed apprehension about the limited amount of time their children received instruction in English.

Both Mark and Lucy believed their concerns were valid, and felt a burning need to address them. For the previous school year, only 9% of the fifth grade English Learners reached the state benchmark level on the English Language Arts section of the California standardized test while 55% of the English dominant fifth graders did. At the same time, current research on two-way immersion programs suggested that immersion education best met the needs of English Learners over time (Collier & Thomas, 2004). Mark kept meaning to familiarize himself with the research, but he knew it wasn't going to change the fact that what Sol *didn't have* was time on its hands.

Friday Morning, Latino Family Group Meeting, Sol Immersion School

"I need your help. When I ask my son what he does during second grade English class, he tells me all he does is sing songs and play! Diego already knows how to play. What he needs to learn is how to read and write in English! What is going on?!" Esperanza Salazar, Diego's mother, spoke with a sense of urgency to Mark and Lucy.

"Esperanza, did you attend the new student orientation for families in the fall? Because Sol is a Spanish 90-10 immersion program, we don't begin reading instruction in English until third grade. Research shows that once English Learners can read in their home language, they are better equipped to read in a second. During your son's English class, his teacher focuses on oral language development, and that involves a lot of singing, poetry, and language learning games in English," Lucy answered, inwardly groaning as she added Esperanza's name to the growing list of parents of English Learners with concerns about Sol's English program.

Juan Villalobos spoke up. "You've told us that, but it doesn't mean that we don't worry about our kids when we see their test scores compared to the native English speakers at Sol.

Aurora, my daughter, should be reading much better in English this year in third grade than she is. What can you do to change this?"

"Come to the Parent Teacher Association meeting next Tuesday evening. We'll discuss the school's academic plan with a focus on our English Learners. Your comments are invaluable because your worries are shared by many parents," added Mark, stomach knotting as he thought about the unfinished academic plan hanging over his head.

Later that afternoon, Lucy and Mark met briefly, and Lucy agreed to help facilitate the Parent Teacher Association meeting. Since completing her Master's in Bilingual Education, Lucy Green had taught in two-way immersion programs for eight years, and at Sol for five. Her first experience teaching in two-way immersion had been in a 50/50 program in which K-5 students spent equal amounts of time in Spanish and English. She strongly believed that becoming bilingual and biliterate would give students access to more opportunities in life. She was also well-versed in the body of research supporting two-way immersion programs. However, she was acutely aware of the achievement gap on standardized testing in English between English Learners and their English dominant peers, and shared parent concerns about the English program at Sol. In collaboration with Mark, she had facilitated a series of staff meetings throughout the year during which teachers worked on restructuring the English program, planning for explicit instruction of academic language and vocabulary in each grade.

She thought about Esperanza and Juan's comments and the context in which they were made. Eleven months ago, Esperanza Salazar had moved to San Francisco from Michoacán, Mexico. She had decided to come to the States to provide her son, Diego, with a better education. Esperanza spoke Spanish with Diego at home, but was eager to learn English and had enrolled in an English language night course. She believed in maintaining Diego's Spanish, but not at the sacrifice of learning the language of power, English, in school. She knew he needed to read and write well in English in order to attend college in the United States. When she had filled out Diego's application for Sol, she had been unfamiliar with its program model, but had heard that it was one of the best schools in the neighborhood. Well into Diego's first year at Sol, she was beginning to question her decision to send him there as he was not yet learning to read in English.

Juan Villalobos, a restaurant owner from Nicaragua, sent both of his children to Sol. His son, Timo, had graduated from Sol and was in his second year at Sanchez Middle School. His younger daughter, Aurora, was in third grade at Sol. He loved Sol's community, its promotion of Spanish, the active parent body and the solid teacher support both his children received. But he sensed that Timo had needed, and Aurora *did* need, more English literacy instruction. He didn't buy the argument that only when they were strong readers in Spanish should they begin reading in English. What about the native English speakers? Most of them learned to read in English at home while they read in Spanish at school. Their high test scores in English reflected this. His cousin in New York sent her three children to an immersion school where students spent half the day in English and half in Spanish. Would this program model serve his children better?

Tuesday Evening, Parent Teacher Association Meeting at Sol

"Okay, let's break into groups for work on the academic site plan goals," Mark directed parents in both Spanish and English. "Make sure you have someone who can translate at each table."

Lucy sat at a table with Esperanza, and they began to look over the academic areas earmarked for discussion with the rest of the group members. "I'm worried about my second-

grader, Diego,” Esperanza remarked. “He has English for just an hour a day, and he tells me all they do is sing songs and play games. When is he going to learn to read in English? Look at these tests scores on English reading for English Learners. They are doing poorly compared to the native English speakers, even in fifth grade. English is the language of power, and the sooner my son speaks and reads it, the better!”

“Good point, Esperanza. Let’s focus our attention on how the academic site plan can address this issue,” interjected Juan Villalobos, eager to join in the discussion. “My cousin in New York sends her children to a different kind of immersion program where children have much more time in English. Could we extend our time in English at Sol, at least enough time so that kids could learn to read in English earlier?”

The small group turned its attention to brainstorming strategies for supporting English Learners. Lucy shared with the group that she had taught in a 50/50 immersion school. She also told parents about the work the staff had done over the course of the year on re-structuring the English program with a heavy focus on the transition from Spanish to English reading. She invited Esperanza to come visit her son’s English class to see the work they had been doing on developing speaking and listening skills. For the rest of the meeting she recorded parent recommendations for the academic plan, the last of which read, “Start teaching reading in English earlier.”

After the meeting ended, her thoughts turned to Diego, Esperanza’s son. Diego was one of the 25 students (not including Kindergarteners) in their first year at Sol. He was a confident reader in Spanish, and Lucy wondered how he would respond to some targeted English phonics instruction in a small group. For that matter, would this be appropriate for any of the English Learners she taught during second grade English class? Juan’s comments about the 50/50 two-way immersion model replayed in her head, and she thought back to her own experience in the 50/50 program. English Learners were certainly learning to read earlier in English compared to Sol. The benefits were obvious, but what were the costs? Whose needs had the most weight within Sol’s program?

Wednesday Morning, Second Grade English Class

The second graders were busy discussing their re-telling of animal life cycles using the transition words their second grade teachers and Lucy had taught them to say when sequencing events. “Hey, I said, ‘last,’ but I could say, ‘fourth’ or ‘finally,’” noticed Mariela after her turn to sequence the life cycle of a frog.

“Yeah, and you can say, ‘next’ or ‘after’ when you say, ‘and then,’” added Diego. “I always say ‘last’ when I say the last thing.”

Lucy ended the conversation by summarizing the work they had done together in the small group. “Diego and Mariela, you’re helping us notice and think about the different transition words we can use to sequence events, or tell them in order.”

After the period ended, she wrote notes on her laptop. “Kids are using the transition words we’ve been practicing! Discussing animal life cycles is a great activity for getting them to use the sequencing language. Also, I’m addressing many of the English Language Arts standards, especially those related to comprehension skills like sequencing. Next week, we can start working on academic language related to understanding cause and effect. It’ll fit perfectly with our study of natural resources!”

Wednesday, After School at Second Grade Team Planning Meeting

“So, let me show you what I’m seeing! In both my anecdotal records and individual assessments, I see progress in student use of the language structures we’ve been practicing. Check out my data on Diego. According to the state descriptors for beginner level students, Diego should only be able to utter simple phrases and basic descriptions. But look at this! He’s using more complex language structures in and out of the context of science, and he’s even noticing the language his classmates are using,” Lucy excitedly reported to the second grade team.

Adriana, one of the second grade teachers responded, “Yeah, it’s interesting how beginner students can use more advanced language when I give them scaffolded sentence structures. If only we had more time to plan for and teach academic language.”

Adriana, in her second year as a second grade teacher, was not comfortable with Sol’s policies on literacy instruction that required her to teach writing only during Spanish time. She wished writing instruction were part of the second grade English curriculum, as she knew the science content in English class lent itself so perfectly to writing expository paragraphs. But she felt uncomfortable about rocking the boat. Half of Sol’s teachers had taught in the school for 10 or more years. They formed the backbone of the school, having taken active roles in Sol’s development since its early history. Tom, for example, was a third grade teacher in his 18th year at Sol and a strong proponent of literacy instruction solely in Spanish until third grade. He was vocal at meetings in expressing his concerns about the implications of teaching reading and writing in English before the students developed a strong base in Spanish.

Thursday After School, Sol Staff Meeting

“It’s great that we’ve had such a focus on our English program this year, but I am still not clear about the transition into English reading. I want to make sure kids in second grade are prepared for reading third grade material,” Adriana commented at a staff meeting.

Tom cut in, “Here, here! You’ve provided all this time for us to work on English class, but we don’t actually have enough class time to get through all we’re planning! And don’t forget we haven’t fully addressed the potential dangers of teaching English reading too early.”

Lucy took notes as the conversation continued, and Mark refocused the group with a question. “We’ve made a lot of positive changes in our English program, but it looks like everyone’s asking, ‘Where do we go from here?’ I truly believe two-way immersion education is a puzzle with many possible solutions. It’s all about figuring out what’s the best fit for Sol’s community. And speaking of our community, I have a lot of feedback on our academic goals from families. Let’s go over them and get to work on finalizing the academic plan.”

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As Sol’s English Learner population steadily increased over a 10-year period, so had the demands for performance on standardized testing. While No Child Left Behind (NCLB) compelled Sol to address the achievement gap between English Learners and their English dominant peers, it also created a pressured system in which all members of the Sol community struggled to find ways to help students meet testing benchmarks in English.

Sol’s situation illustrates a growing disconnect between the reality of bilingual education and the demands of standardized testing. In the State of California, high-stakes testing in English begins in second grade when students in immersion programs have had little access to English literacy instruction. Furthermore, students not yet proficient in English according to the

California English Language Development Test are being held accountable for testing at the proficient level on standardized tests in English.

Current research indicates that two-way immersion programs best meet the needs of English Learners, but these positive results often are not evident until middle school and even high school (Collier & Thomas, 2004; Lindholm-Leary, 2005; Howard, Christian & Genesee, 2003). In addition, two-way immersion schools like Sol are being held accountable for low test scores of English Learners who have only attended a year or two of the program.

Discussion Questions

1. How can schools close the achievement gap between English Learners and English dominant students?
2. How can schools meet the needs of English Learners who are recent arrivals to the States?
3. How can teachers in two-way immersion programs be supported in planning for meeting the needs of the growing population of English Learners?
4. Are NCLB's demands on student performance realistic for English Learners, particularly for those who have only been in the States for a few years? Is it feasible for these students to reach "Proficient" level on state standardized tests in English after attending a year of school in the US?
5. How can the state and its school districts take advantage of the growing interest in two-way immersion programs from both English-speaking parents who want a public school program offering second language instruction and parents of English Learners who are recent arrivals to our public school system? And how, within the same school program can we meet the different needs of families with disparate levels of English, education, and income?
6. How can California become a national leader in promoting the benefits of bilingualism in our growing globalized society?

References

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