

**BIG
IDEAS**

CHILDREN IN THE SOUTHWEST

Using a Birth to Third Grade Framework to Promote Grade-Level Reading

Promising Practices in Improving Academic Achievement
among California's English Language Learners

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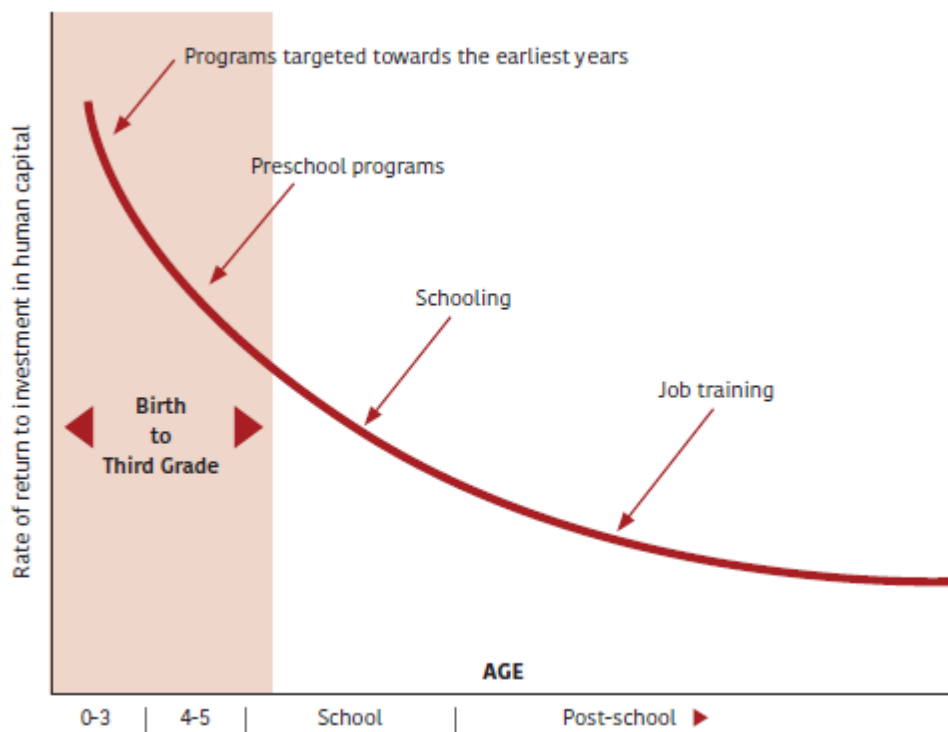


FIRST FOCUS

MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

Providing children with a solid educational foundation early in life has a profoundly positive effect on the trajectory of their lives and their earning potential. Economist and Nobel laureate James Heckman found that investing early in children’s lives yields the highest rate of return on investment (ROI) in human capital due primarily to reductions in future crime, increased future earnings, and higher tax revenues.¹ In fact, investing in high-quality early learning opportunities can yield a return of \$7-17 for every \$1 spent.²

Rates of Return to Human Capital Investment at Different Ages



Source: James Heckman, "Schools, Skills and Synapses." *Economic Inquiry*. 2008.

Additionally, investing in children’s education from birth to third grade is critically important because their success in school and beyond is heavily influenced by their mastering reading during this stage. Students who are not able to read at or above proficiency by the end of third grade quickly fall behind.³ **Approximately seventy-five percent of third graders with poor reading skills continue to struggle through high school,⁴ increasing their odds of dropping out.** As such, politicians, researchers, educators, and advocates are focusing on the transition from learning to read to reading to learn as an early benchmark of children’s academic progress.

Analyzing California’s test scores across gender, race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability, and primary language reveals that English language learners’ fourth grade reading skills are worse than all other subgroups.⁵ In 2011, an astounding 95 percent of California’s English language learners fail to read at grade-level in fourth grade.⁶ So it is not surprising that 43 percent of the state’s English language learners fail to graduate with their high school classmates.⁷

With projections suggesting that the state will have a shortage of one million college graduates to meet the state’s labor demands by 2025, California cannot afford to ignore the education and well-being of the state’s 1.8 million⁸ English language learners (28 percent of all CA K-12 students).⁹ Therefore, policy intervention

must seek to build a birth-to-third-grade system of support that reflects the strong ROI in children and supports their education and life-long success.

To increase the high school graduation rates of English language learners, we learn from and scale up promising practices that support the health, learning, and well-being of all children, with a particular emphasis on California’s youngest children. Some of the programs and strategies that are improving the educational opportunities for English language learners include:

- Home visitation programs that serve expectant mothers, infants and young children;
- High-quality infant and toddler child care;
- High-quality preschool programs;
- Transitional programs that support strong connections between preschools and kindergartens;
- Engagement strategies that emphasize the importance of attendance and curb chronic absence; and
- Summer Programs that provide enriching learning opportunities.

By providing strong support from birth through third grade, policymakers can dramatically improve how English language learners—and all children—begin, prepare for, and ultimately succeed in school and life.

Starting Early

High-quality Early Learning Opportunities Support School Readiness

“School readiness” refers to the development of physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills that are needed to learn in kindergarten. For example, a kindergartner must be able to hold a pencil, understand that a letter corresponds to a sound and know how to take turns. While the benchmarks for readiness are universal, the programs offered to ensure that all children are “ready to learn” vary widely.

Improving the school readiness of the nearly 1.6 million (57 percent)¹⁰ California children under the age of five who live in a home where a language other than English is spoken requires culturally and linguistically appropriate programs. While there is little data about California’s population of children whose primary home language is not English, it is estimated that 28 percent of children from birth to kindergarten entry have primary home languages other than English.¹¹ These young English language learners face a school readiness gap long before they enter kindergarten and therefore are less prepared than other children to meet the academic requirements of elementary school. In order to close this gap and support young English language learners, a continuum of quality early learning programs starting at or before birth up through kindergarten entry is critical to laying the strong foundation all children need to achieve grade-level reading proficiency. In doing so, such programs set the stage for children’s academic and lifelong success.

In particular, supporting children’s native languages while they learn English benefits both language and cognitive development.¹² More specifically, when children first develop strong phonemic and letter knowledge in their native language they can acquire better English skills.

Judith Tang
Attorney, Wendel Rosen Black & Dean LLP
Oakland, CA

“My family emigrated from Hong Kong to the United States (to Oakland) when I was 4 years old. My parents did not speak English and my first exposure to English was at the Yuk Yau Child Development Center, who had and continues to have a combination of English and bilingual Chinese speaking teachers. This program helped me retain my Chinese speaking, reading, and writing skills, while at the same time allowing me to become proficient at the English language. Being a bilingual attorney at Oakland's largest law firm has greatly increased the opportunities for me to serve my community and my clients.”

There are many promising programs in place in California that are improving English language learners' early education. The experience of these existing programs can be used to inform the effort to refine and expand the early education of English language learners and all children.

School Readiness at Home

Home Visitation Programs

Home visitation programs seek to improve the health and well-being of pregnant women and their children from birth to age five. These programs commonly focus on improving school readiness, assisting families in their pursuit of economic self-sufficiency, and curbing child maltreatment, crime, and domestic violence.¹³ Established evidence-based models such as the Nurse-Family Partnership have a strong track record in California of supporting first-time mothers and their young children who are dual language learners.¹⁴

HABLA (Home-based Activities Building Language Acquisition) is an example of a promising home visitation program that specifically addresses language acquisition and improves school readiness among preschoolers in Spanish speaking, low-income, low-education families in Santa Ana, CA.¹⁵ Sponsored by the University of California, Irvine, **HABLA home visitors “intensively coach parents to facilitate school readiness by providing optimal language play, shared reading, and developmentally appropriate activities.”**¹⁶ As a result, **HABLA participants have greater rhyme and phoneme awareness than non-participants.**¹⁷

Araceli Espinoza
Early Head Start Coordinator, Pediatric Therapy Network
Torrance, CA

“Many of the families we are working with in this area are dual language learners in which the population represented is English/Spanish, English/Arabic, and a mixture of Japanese and Chinese/English. Our approach is to value whichever language they are learning. The children and families in this program are multi-challenged which creates a level of barriers and risk factors. At PTN we are able to address these multiple needs because they start with us at a very young age since our point of entry is when a parent is pregnant.”

School Readiness among Infants and Toddlers

High-Quality Infant and Toddler Care

High-quality infant and toddler care minimizes cognitive and socio-emotional disparities and supports language development.¹⁸ By age three, children in more affluent families will have heard 30 million more words, on average, than children in low-income families.¹⁹ This difference is likely to contribute to future achievement gaps, as children's vocabulary development by age three has been shown to predict school achievement in third grade.²⁰

Early Head Start is a federally funded program that improves prenatal health for pregnant women, supports the cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional development of infants and toddlers and increases healthy family functioning thereby reducing children's behavioral problems.²¹ A local Early Head Start grantee, Pediatric Therapy Network (PTN), located in Torrance, California, provides resources to a diverse population of young dual language learners and their families. **In addition to offering many comprehensive programs designed for children with special needs, including providing children with physical, occupational, and speech-language therapies, PTN's innovative approach is rooted in their respect of families' home language.**

School Readiness among Preschoolers

Transitional Support

Children who participate in quality preschool are more likely to graduate with their peers and go to college than those who don't participate.²² Despite the undisputed benefits of quality preschool, children living in non-English speaking households (49 percent) and Latino children (51 percent), have the lowest non-parental ECE and center-based arrangements while White (65 percent) and African American, and Asian children (71 percent) participate at higher rates.²³

Quality preschool programs also support the transition into kindergarten and are critical to boosting early academic achievement and ensuring that children do not lose ground as they move into elementary school. Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) is one promising program that serves preschool-age children and kindergarteners in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, where nearly three in four children are designated as English language learners.²⁴ **SEAL focuses on both aligning local preschool and K-3 systems and the development of rich and complex language and spoken and written discourse skills among English language learners.**

SEAL promotes the alignment of preschool and elementary school systems by providing, such activities as, summer bridge programs for children just before they enter kindergarten, transitional activities for children and families, intentional articulation of teaching strategies and practices between the preschool and elementary schools and conducting observations, classroom visits and language proficiency assessments, and facilitating outreach from elementary schools to preschool families. In addition to providing joint professional development opportunities to preschool and kindergarten teachers, SEAL works closely with school site administrators to build their capacity to both lead and support SEAL's effective practices. To this end, administrators are integrated into the planning process and encouraged to delve into the research behind the SEAL model. Additionally, administrators are sent to key professional development conferences to stay current in the field of English Learner education and while there they participate in working dinners so that they can share what they are learning. Working collaboratively, SEAL staff and administrators jointly examine student data to discuss the language and cognitive growth of each child. Finally, SEAL staff conduct classroom walkthroughs with administrators to help them develop an understanding of and an eye for good practices.

The SEAL program focuses on assisting children with their academic language development and discourse skills in the early years of a child's schooling, closely aligning children's preschool and elementary school education. SEAL emphasizes the development of rich oral language while simultaneously developing English and a child's home language, the creation of text-rich environments, and the delivery of an enriching and fully thematic curriculum. **This approach has shown promising results for children's acquisition of English language skills. While 88 percent of SEAL participants scored Beginner or Early Intermediate on their California English Language Development Test (CELDTs) in kindergarten, only 46 percent scored Beginner or Early Intermediate by first grade in the 2010-11 school year.**²⁵

Recognizing the value of programs, like SEAL, that foster a smooth transition to kindergarten, the State of California has made significant strides to begin bridging early learning programs with transitional (TK) and traditional kindergarten (K) by developing a kindergarten readiness observation assessment. California's readiness assessment is a new tool school districts may use as a strategy to close the readiness gap and ensure all children thrive in their earliest years. It was created to provide TK and K teachers with a reliable measurement tool that will assist them in observing, documenting, and reflecting on the development, and progress of their students.

The instrument was created with four primary purposes: 1) as a psychometric measurement of children's development in key domains of school readiness (English Language Development, Self & Social Development, Self-regulation, Language and Literacy Development, and Mathematical Development); 2) to support the transition between preschool and TK, and between TK and K; 3) as a research tool; and 4) as a professional development resource for teachers. Additionally, California's readiness assessment is aligned with the Common Core Standards, the state's accountability system for elementary and secondary education, and the system that has been used for over ten years to monitor the development of children in the state's publicly funded early learning programs.

The kindergarten readiness assessment is an observation tool; it is not a "test" and was developed to be culturally sensitive and linguistically responsive to the diverse populations of students served. Teachers observe students as they participate in routine classroom activities and complete the instrument for each child within the first eight weeks of school. The readiness assessment helps teachers evaluate children's developmental progressions across multiple domains that are critical for success in school long after kindergarten.

Assessing children as they enter kindergarten is an important way to examine the effectiveness of early childhood programs, and identify the additional needs of specific children. To more effectively increase school readiness California must support a stronger connection between the early learning and K-12 worlds; promote the use of developmentally appropriate assessments of young children to improve instruction and programs; and implement a comprehensive, high-quality early learning and development system for all children, including English language learners, from birth to age five.

Promoting School Attendance

Using Family Engagement Programs to Decrease Chronic Absence

Chronic absence, defined as missing 10 percent of a school year or more, is a problem that can begin in preschool,²⁶ and if it continues into kindergarten, can be extremely detrimental to scholastic achievement as a child proceeds through school.²⁷ One study found that chronically absent students in preschool and kindergarten were more often absent in later years and more likely to be retained.²⁸ As children progress through school, the accumulation of missed classroom instruction places children further behind thus making it increasingly difficult for them to meet grade-level standards.

Hedy Chang
Director of Attendance Works
Washington, DC

“Both being ready for school and showing up to school matters... We know that kids learn when they’re in a language rich environment. When you’re not in school you’re not getting that. When attendance is problematic it can also be found that kids are disengaging. It can slow down classroom instruction. Once kids miss more than 10 percent or more of school, it begins to affect their performance... Schools and communities can make a difference. We’ve seen initiatives lower chronic absence by partnering with communities and parents, making attendance a priority, setting targets, [and] looking from the parent and child’s perspective to understand why kids are missing school. We have to begin early, ideally in pre-k.”

Research shows that an effective way to improve chronic absence rates is to improve family and community involvement in their children’s education including educating them about the importance of attendance for their children’s success.²⁹ Recognized by the Harvard Family Research Project as one of the nation’s leading innovations in family engagement, Abriendo Puertas (Opening Doors) is a comprehensive training program that bridges the cultural gaps between the systems that support children’s learning and development. Created by and for Latino parents with young children, from birth to age five, Abriendo Puertas seeks to help parents become confident in their ability to support the health, education and well-being of their children. In 2009, approximately 8,000 parents in California participated in the program, as well as 22,000 families in 31 states. In California, the program has partnered with over 200 family-serving organizations and trained 800 parent educators in 79 sites across the state, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Fresno. **The parent curriculum, taught in both English and Spanish, embraces effective practices in language development, early literacy, health, school attendance, parent leadership, and planning for family success.** The program provides engaging support for parents and families, focusing on the cultural values, strengths, and experiences of Latino families. It highlights the importance of encouraging regular attendance by providing parents with information on the link between school attendance and a student’s academic performance. The program engages parents by advising them with feasible daily habits and practices that promote regular school attendance and therefore the capacity to help their children succeed academically.

Maria Ramos
Abriendo Puertas Participant
Los Angeles, CA

“I don’t want my daughter to be one of the statistics we learned about. I’m glad I now understand what is happening in the schools, so many not graduating. I’ve made a commitment to be involved in her education and will talk to other parents about it too. As parents, what we do is of great consequences—I won’t forget that.”

While programs like Abriendo Puertas focuses on developing good attendance habits prior to entering primary education, elementary schools, like Franklin Elementary, have an important role to play in boosting students’ school attendance. In fact, research indicates that English language learners with little to no attendance risk in kindergarten through first grade have higher test scores in second and third grade.³⁰ Recognizing that attendance habits form early, Franklin Elementary in the Oakland Unified School District takes a two-generation approach to combating chronic absence and boosting student achievement. Franklin Elementary emphasizes the importance of regular attendance and education attainment beginning in

kindergarten. As a result, the school has both a chronic absence rate that is less than half the district average,³¹ and an Academic Performance Index score that is 100 points above the district average.³² Franklin Elementary's approach embraces linguistic diversity, builds a strong school community, and encourages family involvement. With two out of three (67 percent) students designated as English language learners,³³ the school offers bilingual classes for Spanish, Cantonese, and Vietnamese children, as well as English immersion classes for those students who speak other languages at home. Additionally, Franklin Elementary hires staff with the language skills needed to effectively communicate with parents by phone, at meetings, and at other school events. Additionally, the school provides parents with continuing education, including ESL (English as a Second Language) courses.

Providing Summer Enrichment Opportunities

Using Innovative Partnerships to Combat Summer Learning Loss

Summer learning loss, in which students lose academic knowledge and skills that they have gained over the course of the school year, significantly undermines academic achievement and is an important contributor to the academic achievement gap. Low-income students lose two months of reading achievement during the summer, while the reading skills of higher-income peers' improve as they participate in various enrichment activities.³⁴ These activities include trips to museums and libraries, family vacations to historical and cultural places, and a variety of summer camps and other programs.³⁵ Additionally, the impact of summer learning loss grows exponentially as children progress through school. ³⁶ Two-thirds of the reading achievement gap in ninth grade attributed to summer learning loss during the elementary school years.³⁷

A promising model in California supports collaborative summer program partnerships across districts, community-based organizations (CBOs), cities, and local funders. Combining the resources and abilities of these entities can foster positive summer learning opportunities for children. The benefits of partnerships include lower program costs, a larger variety of programming options, and varied funding sources.³⁸

Summer Matters is a statewide initiative focused on expanding and improving summer learning programs across the state. The initiative encourages local partnerships between school districts, CBOs, and cities and builds summer learning programs on top of existing after school structures to provide an engaging and integrated mix of academic and enrichment activities to children. Support for program quality is provided by local summer experts using quality assessment tools from the National Summer Learning Association. One such Summer Matters program can be found in Whittier, CA, where roughly 30 percent of students are English language learners. With funding from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and technical support provided by Los Angeles County Office of Education, the Whittier City School District JumpStart Program provides hands-on summer learning opportunities to 700 students in nine elementary schools and two middle schools. The first round of summer slots is allotted to those students who have been nominated by their principals. However, once these students have been invited to join the program, the JumpStart Program is opened up to all students at the school. Credentialed teachers provide language arts, math, and science instruction while group leaders—members of the after-school workforce—teach art, music, and dance. A strong partnership with the public library provides books to students participating in the program and encourages family participation by offering family literacy activities.

Professional development and curriculum specialists are central to Whittier's model, in which all teachers are required to participate in thirty-five hours of professional development activities throughout the school year. The training reinforces strategies to create a fun camp-like atmosphere, which emphasizes hands-on learning and individualized instruction, and discourages the labeling of students or classroom groupings based upon ability.

Jenny Hernandez
JumpStart Academic Specialist
Whittier, CA

“To make these programs successful, you need to understand your English language learner population as it changes over time. Are they first generation? Second? What is their country of origin? While this information is important in helping you think through the needs of your student population, you need to look at students as individuals, seeing beyond their label as English Language learners. With great teachers who are willing to modify their lesson plans to support all students, a supportive district, and great partnership with the local library you can create a unique, fun and enriching summer learning experience for kids who may otherwise fall behind during the summer months.”

Through thematic and hands-on learning, the program offers all students opportunities to engage with teachers and peers and develop leadership skills. These experiences are particularly beneficial to students who are designated as English language learners. **During the school year large class sizes limit student participation and interaction. In contrast summer learning programs, like Whittier’s, give English language learners additional opportunities to build their English fluency skills.** With smaller class sizes and a focus on projects and small group activities, Whittier’s program allows students to engage teachers and group leaders in a less intimidating environment, collaborate frequently with other students, and try on leadership roles. Additionally, the Whittier program gives English language learners the CELDT during the summer, eliminating the need to pull them out of class for testing during the school year, providing school year teachers with timely information that can be used to gauge the additional support each student may need. Additionally, each student is assessed at the beginning and end of the program so that teachers and staff can see if and where students made improvements.

High-quality summer programs also provide children with access to low- and no-cost meals. Due to budget cuts that have eliminated most summer school programs, participation in federally-funded summer lunch programs has declined sharply,³⁹ with an estimated 20 percent of eligible California children accessing meals during the summer.⁴⁰ Research reveals that children who experience hunger are more likely to have physical problems, such as unintended weight loss, obesity, fatigue, and impaired cognitive abilities, such as lower attentiveness, which interfere with learning.⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, children who experience food insecurity typically have lower test scores, learn less during the school year,⁴² and repeat grades more frequently than their peers.⁴³

Tying it all Together

Grade-Level Reading Starts at Birth

In order to ensure that all children, including English language learners, achieve high levels of academic achievement in public schools, policymakers must recognize that learning starts at birth and must increase access to linguistically and culturally appropriate services early in life, as children transition into school, and during the summer.

Home visitation programs are important building blocks that instill good parenting practices and nurturing environments for infants and young children, and set the foundation for successful early learning. High-quality early education programs, such as Early Head Start and the SEAL model, prepare young children, particularly English language learners, to enter kindergarten by helping them develop the skills and language they need to enter school ready to learn.

Even the best preschool programs, schools, and summer programs cannot help students who aren't in attendance. Engaging children and families to promote school attendance and eliminate chronic absence is critical to ensuring that all third graders are reading at grade-level.

Comprehensive summer programs prevent the loss of knowledge acquired during the school year. Students who participate are less likely to fall behind their peers in academic achievement. Moreover, innovative partnerships between school districts and community based organizations can reduce costs and enhance academic curricula by providing enriching learning opportunities not found during the traditional school year.

While the programs highlighted in this paper are currently fragmented, viewing them through a birth to third grade framework brings into focus the ways in which these programs build off of one another to provide children with a robust set of opportunities and supports which foster children's successful transition from learning to read to reading to learn. Taking a birth to third grade approach in establishing programs similar to the models highlighted here can help states, and the nation, ensure that all children are reaching academic milestones and setting the course to eventually become our future scientists, innovators, and community and business leaders.

Learn More About the Organizations Presented in this Paper

HABLA

HABLA's goal is to provide parent coaching and home visits to increase the school readiness of disadvantaged Latino children aged two-to-four years. Its strategy is to unite faculty and students at UCI with members of the Latino community in Orange County, the Santa Ana Unified School System, Project Access, the Corbin Family Resource Center, AmeriCorps/VISTA and the Parent Child Home Program (PCHP). www.socsci.uci.edu/habla

Pediatric Therapy Network (PTN)

Pediatric Therapy Network (PTN) was founded in 1996 by a handful of therapists, parents and volunteers who envisioned an organization that would provide the community with high quality therapy, research and education as it relates to fostering the best possible outcomes for children with special needs. PTN's mission statement is "leading the way in helping children, families and communities reach full capabilities through innovative therapy, education and research programs." www.pediatrictherapynetwork.org

Sobrato Early Academic Language, Sobrato Family Foundation

The Sobrato Family Foundation is dedicated to helping create and sustain a vibrant and healthy community, where all Silicon Valley residents have equal opportunity to live, work and be enriched. The Sobrato Early Academic Language pilot (SEAL) initiative is designed as a comprehensive and developmentally appropriate model of intensive, enriched language and literacy education designed for English language learners in public schools, starting in preschool. www.sobrato.org

Franklin Elementary

Franklin Elementary School provides a school environment where students, parents and teachers come together in the pursuit of academic achievement. Students, staff, parents and our school community are valued as we work together to provide an encouraging environment for lifelong learning. www.franklintigers.org

Summer Matters, Partnership for Children and Youth

Summer Matters is a statewide initiative to expand and improve summer-learning opportunities for low-income children across California. This work is based on a vision of quality summer learning that seeks to reduce the achievement gap by inspiring young people's learning through fun, experiential and relevant programming that includes a mix of academics and enrichment. The summer strategy builds on California's statewide system of more than 4,000 publicly-funded after-school programs. summermatters2you.net

Credits

This paper reflects the collective effort of the entire organization.

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