

What It Takes for English Learners to SUCCEED

How can schools help new English learners master the basics of English and grow in fluency?

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Tomás sits quietly in his 4th grade class hoping the teacher won't call on him. When working with his peers, he is able to understand most of the assignment but feels that he has to whisper in his native Spanish to ask a peer for help. Independent reading and writing tasks are difficult for him, and he often does not finish these assignments on time. Tomás has attended the same school for four years, but there are still times when he feels like he doesn't belong. He wants to do well and make his family proud, but he struggles to make sense of what the teacher expects of him.

Tomás is representative of a growing



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number of students in U.S. classrooms, those who have spent more than five years in U.S. schools but have not yet attained fluency in English. Students like Tomás are at great risk for becoming long-term English learners. These students account for a large portion of secondary English learners—estimates range from 30 percent to 70 percent—and most have been in U.S. schools since kindergarten (Olsen, 2010). Yet research (for example, August & Shanahan, 2010; Short, Echevarria, & Richards-Tutor, 2011) points to effective practices for preventing English learners from becoming long-term English learners. And we have found that under the right conditions, English learners can

participate fully in rigorous lessons and achieve high academic standards (Echevarria, 2012; Frey, Fisher, & Nelson, 2013). The effective practices we've seen in research and our own experience can be divided into four areas: access, climate, expectations, and language instruction.

Access

Making the core curriculum comprehensible is central to preventing new English learners from becoming long-term English learners. A growing research base provides practical information about ways teachers can facilitate access for English learners (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2013). Such efforts include differentiated

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instruction, teacher modeling, language supports, vocabulary development, collaborative conversations, and visual representations. Professional development frequently focuses on these strategies, and many teachers are skilled at providing them.

For example, 4th grade teacher Ms. Pocino uses multimedia so that English learners have visuals to help them comprehend concepts and vocabulary terms. In her lesson on the Gold Rush, she includes video clips, still images from the period, and artifacts such as the pans used to separate gold from gravel.

She also groups students for differentiated instruction. At times, students who need more support are grouped together so that Ms. Pocino can meet with them. At other times, English learners are grouped with more proficient English speakers so they can join collaborative discussions and be exposed to models of proficient English among their peers. Sentence frames (such as *According to the text, _____ and On page _____ it says _____, which supports the point that _____*) help English learners participate in oral discussions and make claims in their writing.

Although access is necessary, access alone is not sufficient. Yet the support English learners receive too often begins and ends with access strategies. Effective schools and districts must also focus on climate, expectations, and language instruction.