Fernando Maldonado-Aguiniga was typical of many of the more than 8,000 English learners in Moreno Valley Unified School District. A bright fifth grader with a shy, thoughtful demeanor and the desire to be an engineer, you would assume upon meeting him that he was destined for a good college. Yet dig into the data and you would see that despite being born in the United States and attending U.S. schools since kindergarten, Fernando had not yet managed to break free from English learner status. Unless circumstances drastically improved, he would likely lose out on the high school a-g courses that would open the doors to college and the fulfilling STEM career he so wanted. He might even join the ranks of the 23 percent of English learners who drop out of district high schools.

“My English skills weren’t all that good,” Fernando admitted.

But then an innovative program appeared on Fernando’s life path. His parents became aware of the district’s new English Learner Families For College Program and signed a contract promising that they and their son would participate in the initiative from sixth grade through the fall of 10th grade. Effort and sacrifice would be required. Family members would participate in a series of family academies; Fernando would devote his middle school elective time to English 3D, an academic language course.

Fernando and his family had joined the ranks of the English learner students who...
would soon attend the district’s six middle schools as part of the English Learner Families For College Program.

Things were about to change.

A Look at Moreno Valley USD

Moreno Valley Unified School District is located in the Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario metropolitan area and serves more than 34,000 students who are 83 percent qualified for free or reduced price lunch, 69 percent Hispanic, 17 percent African American, and 24 percent English learner. Historically, the district’s percentage of English learner students proficient in English-language arts dropped below 10 percent by sixth grade and below 5 percent by 11th grade.

In 2011, a new instructional leadership team took the helm of the district, determined to improve the educational experiences of all students. Superintendent Judy White and Martinrex Kedziora, the district’s chief academic officer, began implementing a series of reforms aimed at improving student learning, with a special focus on underperforming subgroups such as English learners.

“Our reclassification rate had not been as great as we were anticipating it to be,” said Lilia Villa, director of English Language Learner Programs for the district. “Students had already come to [middle school] as Long-Term English Learners. They should have reclassified at the elementary level; they didn’t. If we didn’t provide them with the opportunity to develop their English language abilities at the middle school, they were not going to be ready for high school, and they were not going to be ready for the a-g coursework.”

English Learner Families For College

The nonprofit California League of Schools professional development association approached the district about becoming the partner LEA for a new evidence-based program for Long-Term English Learners and Recently Reclassified Fluent English Proficient students. MVUSD accepted, and the FFC (English Learner Families For College Program) was funded by a U.S. Department of Education Investing In Innovation development grant.

Grounded in part in the findings from Laurie Olsen’s 2010 seminal report, “Repairable Harm: Filling the Unkept Promise of Educational Opportunity for California’s Long-Term English Learners,” the FFC program follows a core cohort of 325 English learners from sixth grade through the fall of 10th grade at six middle schools and four high schools.

In the fall of 2013, at the start of sixth grade, the program began providing an array of supports to develop the college-going culture and skills cohort students would need to access a-g courses, achieve, and graduate ready for college, including:

1. **English 3D** – This academic language curriculum and course was designed for Long-Term English Learners by English learner program developer and author Kate Kinsella, and is offered as a supplemental period to English-language arts. Explicit instructional routines ensure students practice academic language and associated “soft” collaborative skills while listening, speaking, reading and writing.

2. **Family academies** – The nonprofit Families In Schools provides five family academies with 22 workshops from middle school through high school in the home language of Spanish to help parents become informed, engaged advocates for their children’s education. Some parents also serve on school site Family Advisory Boards with administrators, front office personnel, English learner specialists, and cohort students to create more welcoming school environments for all families.

3. **Peer mentoring** – Starting with digital mentoring over Chromebooks in middle school and extending to in-person mentoring in high school, sixth graders are paired with a ninth-grade high-performing mentor to ease the transition to high school.

4. **Academic plans** – Each middle school year, students log their academic status (GPA, CELDT scores if applicable, prior and future API scores), enter the steps needed to either reclassify or maintain a high level of academic performance, record their plans for college and career, and make a video for their parents describing what they have learned through the plan. These learning artifacts, along with reflective journal entries, become part of each student’s digital portfolio.

**Promising results so far**

To date, the academic results are highly promising:

- 43 percent of the students who started sixth grade as English learners reclassified as Fluent English Proficient by the fall of seventh grade.
- CELDT score gains in speaking, reading and writing significantly exceeded historical gains for the district, county and state.
- Cohort students have won community essay contests and essay-based “GEAR UP”
scholarships in open competition with students whose home language is English.

The qualitative results are equally positive. English 3D teacher Rachel Quintanar said, “Most of the students entered the program with no particular experience with speaking regularly in class, and lacked the knowledge of academic language to feel confident speaking in academic settings. By the end of the first year, these students were confident and capable speakers of academic English. They were performing at levels that rival their native English-speaking peers.”

Parents have become empowered by the program as well, Quintanar said. “The family academies have also greatly benefited our parents and have helped to foster a college-going home environment. Parents have become well-informed advocates for their children. We have had so much confidence in the Transition to Middle School program that we used it with all our sixth-grade parents this past year. The parents were enthusiastic and thanked us for providing the workshops.”

“A survey by Families In Schools during the first project year revealed that:

• 92 percent of parents reported gaining confidence that they could help their child succeed in school.
• 95 percent of parents reported talking more often with their child about how they are doing in school.
• 95 percent of parents would recommend the program to other parents.

The FFC program has even begun to exert school-wide and district-wide influence. For example, at Landmark Middle School, Principal Vicky Dudek asked English 3D class teachers to provide professional development on academic language to all teachers, expanded and improved ELD and ELL classes for all levels of English learners, appointed an English learner facilitator to support all English learners and teachers with clusters of English learner students, and implemented digital portfolios and student-led conferences school-wide.

“I had no idea that a program that began with two small sections, two teachers and 60 students would evolve into something that would eventually shape the entire school’s academic focus,” she said. “But as I looked at the data and saw the impact it was having with our students, it was an easy decision to spend the time and energy necessary to go in that direction.”

The school has since been named a state and national School to Watch, in part because of academic gains and positive change associated with the FFC program.

“FFC is a perfect example of an initiative that was not top-down, but was collaborative, well-informed, well planned, and data driven. It has served as a wonderful example to me, as a newer principal, of how to make successful change happen.”

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* Source: Thomson Reuters, 2014
Since then, another academic language tool developed by Kate Kinsella, the Academic Vocabulary Toolkit, has been deployed in all middle schools to help students meet the rigors of the Common Core State Standards. Families In Schools is providing family academies for all students at two middle schools.

As for Fernando? He reclassified in his first year of the program, and in his year-end reflection at the end of the second year, he noted that he would be able to attend a four-year college of his choice instead of a community college. “If I wasn’t in this program, I wouldn’t be getting straight A’s right now – I’d probably be getting B’s because of the academic words I wasn’t using,” he said.

Fernando’s family recently moved out of the district, but he now is truly ready for his new school and a bright future.

Involving all stakeholders

Sometimes being a site administrator can be challenging when an ambitious initiative impacts your school. But as Principal Dudek said, “I have learned that the likelihood of a program’s success increases when all stakeholders are involved. [FFC] is a perfect example of an initiative that was not top-down, but was collaborative, well-informed, well planned, and data driven. It has served as a wonderful example to me, as a newer principal, of how to make successful change happen.

“My hope for all of the students involved in the Families for College program is that they continue to grow academically, that they continue to involve their family in their academic pursuits, and that they enroll in the college of their choice five years from now. I hope that families will remember our school as that special place where they were fully supported and where their dreams to attend college became a reality.”

The district has also benefited in unexpected ways as a result of the FFC program. Numerous offers to join additional grant-funded programs as a result of exposure from this first grant have resulted in the district receiving services as an LEA partner in three additional “Investing in Innovation” grants (school leadership, social and emotional learning, and math instructional strategies), three “GEAR UP” grants, an English learner/community dialect learner instructional strategies grant, a positive behavior interventions grant, and a STEM academies grant.

References

Martinrex Kedziora is assistant superintendent, Educational Services, Moreno Valley Unified School District. Kimberly Hendricks is Accountability & Assessment director for Moreno Valley USD, where Lilia Villa is director of English Language Learner Programs. Katie Sandberg is a grants consultant and CEO of Sandberg Creative.