

Gaining Ground

*Supporting English Learners Through
After-School Literacy Programming*

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Introduction

The evaluation of The James Irvine Foundation’s CORAL initiative provides important insights about what can be achieved in a comprehensive after-school program that engages children and exposes them to a quality literacy component. The great majority (84 percent) of the children participating in CORAL were reading below grade level when they entered the program, and half of the children were designated English learners. This brief focuses on the relationship between CORAL approaches and the reading gains of the English learners, and discusses the implications of these findings for policymakers and funders.

COMMUNITIES ORGANIZING RESOURCES TO ADVANCE LEARNING (CORAL)

The James Irvine Foundation launched the eight-year CORAL after-school initiative in 1999 with the goal of helping to improve the academic achievement of children in the lowest-performing schools in five California cities: Fresno, Long Beach, Pasadena, Sacramento and San Jose.

Once fully operational, this large-scale initiative served approximately 5,000 children each year—more than half of whom were designated as English learners and many of whom came from low-income families—across over 30 school- and community-based sites. Most of the youth were of elementary-school age, primarily first- to fifth-graders, with a small proportion in middle-school grades. The Foundation provided implementation support in all of the cities, with the objective of funding the initiative for five to six years in each site. In total, the Foundation committed over \$58 million to CORAL, making it the most significant and ambitious initiative undertaken by Irvine.

Following disappointing outcomes identified through a midpoint review, CORAL focused the wide breadth of programs offered at its sites on literacy activities and boosted program quality through a rigorous process of continuous improvement and staff development. These changes led to pronounced gains in achievement for a range of students.

The children involved in CORAL represented great diversity in their ethnicity and language proficiency and also, to some degree, in their performance at school. This diversity adds dimension to an examination of the role that after-school programs can play in the lives of different subgroups of youth and, in particular, English learners—a topic often missing in after-school research.

CORAL offers several key lessons to those with a stake in the success of after-school programs. Chief among the lessons are that after-school programs can, indeed, help promote student academic achievement, and that success requires targeted investment, stakeholder commitments, focused academic support, quality programming, and a process of continual improvement to attain and maintain high levels of quality.

The Policy Context

As it is in many places around the country, the landscape of after-school programs is rapidly changing in California. The recent influx of Proposition 49 funding and the resulting expansion of the After School Education and Safety Program (ASES) are supporting more after-school options for California's students. ASES/Proposition 49 programs target students in the most economically disadvantaged schools in California and by mandate must provide a comprehensive approach that blends academic and enrichment activities. These new funds nearly triple the amount spent on after-school programs in the state and bring with them both new opportunities and new questions: Can the after-school hours provide much-needed supports to increase the literacy skills of California's students, including both English learners and other students who need to strengthen their literacy skills? If so, what program strategies need to be in place to accomplish this? To help policymakers and funders begin to answer these questions, this brief highlights key findings and lessons from a just-released evaluation of a large-scale after-school initiative in California.

In California, where 25 percent of public school students are designated English learners, addressing the challenges they face — including boosting literacy — is critical.

Literacy skills are the foundation for success in all academic endeavors, and California's school children are clearly in need of support in this area. The proportion of California children in grades two through five who have achieved proficiency on the English Language Arts portion of the California Standards Test ranges from about one-third to one-half (36 percent to 51 percent), indicating that many youth could benefit from programs geared toward increasing literacy.¹

Among those in need are students who are also learning English as a second language. In California, where 25 percent of public school students are designated English learners and more than 40 percent speak a language other than English at home,² understanding and addressing the challenges for these students is critical — and boosting literacy is one of the major challenges, both during the school day and in the after-school hours.

English Learners and the CORAL Initiative

During the school years from 2004 to 2006, The James Irvine Foundation hired Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) to evaluate the Foundation's large-scale after-school initiative, Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning (CORAL), which was implemented in five California cities. The results of this evaluation demonstrate the promise of the after-school hours in supporting the development of literacy skills among elementary school-age students and, specifically, English learners.³

CORAL youth participated in a program built on established after-school practices, including providing places that offer safety, structure, supportive adults and exposure to new experiences, and using instructional strategies shown to contribute to academic success. The program included a structured literacy component that consisted of 60 to 90 minutes of targeted literacy lessons three to four afternoons a week. The literacy lessons consisted primarily of read alouds, discussions, writing, vocabulary activities and independent reading, where children individually read books of their own choosing. Other key features of CORAL included strong classroom practices (such as positive instructional strategies and group management); opportunities for adult support; and a balance between academic programming (in this case, literacy), enrichment (such as arts activities), physical activities, homework help and snacks. CORAL youth had high rates of participation in both the variety of activities that CORAL offered and in the literacy programming in particular. They attended CORAL an average of 110 days over the 2005–2006 school year (an overall average attendance rate of 73 percent of the days the program was open), which is particularly strong compared to rates found in other after-school programs.⁴

The CORAL evaluation provides important insight about what can be achieved when students participate in a comprehensive after-school program that engages them and exposes them to a quality literacy component. The findings that follow specifically suggest the potential for this programming to support the language development of English learners.

Key Findings

1 THE CHILDREN WHO PARTICIPATED IN CORAL FIT THE PROFILE OF STUDENTS THAT THE ASES/PROPOSITION 49 FUNDING WAS DESIGNED TO SUPPORT.

Proposition 49 funding targets students in the most economically disadvantaged schools in California. In the 2004–2005 school year, when P/PV's evaluation of literacy outcomes for CORAL participants began, more than 5,300 children were enrolled in the program statewide. A full 89 percent were recipients of free and reduced price lunch. Only 16 percent had achieved proficiency on the California Standards Test in English Language Arts, and half had scored below or far below basic on this test.

CORAL participants came from a variety of backgrounds: 14 percent were African American; 3 percent, Caucasian; 68 percent, Latino/a; and 10 percent, Asian (primarily Hmong and Vietnamese). While recruitment policies varied across the five cities, none of them exclusively targeted English learners. Yet more than half of the children in CORAL (53 percent) were designated as such. Children in the process of learning English as a second language were present in every CORAL classroom, varying from 38 percent to 68 percent of participants across the five cities.

2 THE CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN CORAL APPEARED TO BENEFIT FROM THE PROGRAM. IMPORTANTLY, ENGLISH LEARNERS MADE PROGRESS IN EQUAL MEASURE TO THEIR ENGLISH-PROFICIENT COUNTERPARTS.

During the course of P/PV's two-year evaluation, CORAL participants demonstrated gains in reading level, and positive changes in their attitudes toward reading and their attitudes and behaviors in school. Gains in reading level were found to be linked to the quality of literacy instruction, while positive changes in children's attitudes and behaviors were linked to their sense of belonging to the program. Over the 2004–05 school year, CORAL participants — including both English learners and English-proficient students — who were in groups exposed to higher-quality literacy programming gained .45 reading levels over the course of five months, compared to .26 reading levels for participants in groups where the literacy programming was of lower quality. Over the 2005–06 school year, when groups across the initiative had achieved this higher quality programming, the gains were .44 for all children. In addition, English learners and English-proficient students had similar positive feelings about the program: Their ratings of CORAL activities and their feelings of support, safety and belonging at CORAL were nearly identical. And regardless of English learner status, participants' sense of belonging to CORAL was related to positive changes in their attitudes about reading and school, and their behavior in school.

While not conclusive due to the lack of a comparison group, these findings show promise that after-school literacy programming can contribute to academic gains for English learners — when that programming is implemented with quality in an environment where children feel supported and engaged.⁵

3 TO HELP PARTICIPANTS FEEL SUPPORTED AND HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF BELONGING IN THE PROGRAM, CORAL WAS INTENTIONALLY STRUCTURED TO CREATE STRONG RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN INSTRUCTORS AND CHILDREN.

Instructors — called team leaders — were assigned to small groups of children and typically remained with the same group for the entire program year. For the most part, these team leaders were young adults who shared a cultural and linguistic background with the CORAL participants.⁶ They often brought that background into the classroom, creating a multicultural, multilingual learning environment. For example, more than two thirds of team leaders reported that they used a language other than English sometimes (49 percent) or always (19 percent) when they were with the CORAL participants. This classroom environment appeared to be a key factor in helping the English learners feel a strong sense of adult support.

4 TEAM LEADERS USED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES THAT ENGAGED ENGLISH LEARNERS AND HELPED THEM BECOME FULL PARTICIPANTS IN THE LITERACY ACTIVITIES.

CORAL was a fully inclusive program that grouped together children of varied literacy levels and language backgrounds. The challenge for team leaders was to use instructional strategies that would involve and motivate the English learners, as well as the other children in these diverse groups. Team leaders used a range of approaches to accomplish this. They provided students with books at the appropriate reading level — at some sites, in their native language — for independent reading; and they worked one-on-one with all students, including English learners, on a rotating basis throughout the week. To support students' active involvement and learning, team leaders encouraged children to participate in discussion in whatever way they felt comfortable — for example, through conversation, or by having the children draw pictures on the board or take part in skits — thereby providing a welcoming environment for children of all language capabilities.

In the highest-quality literacy lessons, team leaders built upon their knowledge of the students in their group and tailored the lessons to provide the children with opportunities to connect reading and books to their own experiences, family background, language and culture, and to deepen their understanding of, and connection to, cultures not their own. This strategy, which reflects best practices in serving youth of diverse backgrounds,⁷ was intended to not just improve students' literacy skills but also to develop a “culture of readers,” in which children read stories for pleasure and enjoyed discussing their latest books. For example, one group read a bilingual book about a young girl who lives in a crowded house (a situation shared by many of the students in that group), and then the children discussed both what their space at home was like and what their “dream room” would be. Another group read a story about life in New York City in the 1890s and, in an exercise that fostered students' thinking about their own family and cultural histories, wrote about how they imagined their grandparents' lives might have been.

Implications for Funders and Policymakers

English learners achieved academic gains in equal measure to other children in the program — suggesting that CORAL offers a promising approach to strengthening literacy skills in the after-school hours. Following are four key lessons for funders and policymakers who want to replicate this experience for more of California’s children.

WHEN DESIGNING AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS, CONSIDER THE BENEFITS OF SERVING CHILDREN WITH VARIED LANGUAGE AND ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS.

The progress made by the CORAL English learners took place in this context and, thus, the findings from this study do not support the idea that the initiative’s approach be directed exclusively at this group of students. It is likely that all participants in CORAL may have benefited from experiencing programming designed to engage a range of fellow students.

USE A BLEND OF ACADEMIC AND ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES AS THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMMING.

Other program sites adopting the CORAL approach would need to take similar care to ensure that the literacy programming was embedded in a broader context of high-quality enrichment programming. The enrichment programming may have contributed to the high attendance rates. It also may have been related to the children’s sense of belonging, which, in turn, was related to improved attitudes about reading. In California, ASES/Proposition 49 provides a significant opportunity for this kind of comprehensive after-school programming.

STRENGTHEN PROGRAM QUALITY BY PROVIDING ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR AFTER-SCHOOL INSTRUCTORS.

California after-school programs will likely need an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 new workers to meet this broad expansion, placing severe demands on the workforce. CORAL demonstrated that team leaders — primarily college-aged students (who comprise the majority of the after-school workforce) — were able to provide the literacy lessons at a level of quality that was related to children’s gains in reading. But it is crucial to recognize that achieving this level of quality was only possible because of the professional support team leaders received via ongoing training, program monitoring and coaching from literacy experts.⁸

INVEST THE RESOURCES NECESSARY TO PROVIDE QUALITY, COMPREHENSIVE AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMMING.

CORAL cost slightly less than \$20 per youth per day. While this is in keeping with costs of other comprehensive after-school programs, it is higher than funding available through ASES/Proposition 49 dollars alone. The CORAL cities were fortunate to have substantial support from The James Irvine Foundation for developing and providing this constellation of programming. In order to sustain it, they will need to blend public and private funds from a variety of sources. It is clear that any after-school program attempting to provide this model would need to access a variety of funding streams.

Conclusion

Finally, while CORAL offers insight into strategies for working with English learners in the after-school setting, there is more to be discovered. Although English learners benefited and made gains in their literacy skills, this program did relatively little to shrink the achievement gap because these students started so far behind their English-proficient classmates. More research is needed about what programs can and should do to close the gap.

The CORAL Series: Lessons learned from a major after-school initiative

Visit www.irvine.org or www.ppv.org to download these publications based on The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL initiative.



Launching Literacy In After-School Programs

Early Lessons from the CORAL Initiative

Presents interim findings from CORAL, with a focus on reading gains for participating youth. Offers insights for after-school funders, researchers, advocates, intermediary organizations and practitioners regarding the key components of quality in literacy programming.



Midcourse Corrections to a Major Initiative

A Report on The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL Experience

Reports circumstances and challenges related to midpoint change in the multiyear CORAL initiative. Informs grantmakers involved in major initiatives of the need to include midcourse assessment as a critical component in initiative design.



Advancing Achievement

Findings from an Independent Evaluation of a Major After-School Initiative

Presents findings from independent research on CORAL. Demonstrates the relationship between high-quality literacy programming and academic gains. Informs the after-school field of the potential role of quality programs in the ongoing drive to improve academic achievement. Includes executive summary.



What Matters, What Works

Advancing Achievement After School

Highlights findings from independent research on CORAL. Informs those who seek to fund, design, implement and otherwise advance effective after-school programs.



Supporting Success

Why and How to Improve Quality in After-School Programs

Examines strategies used to promote quality academic programming in CORAL. Makes the case for after-school funders, advocates, intermediary organizations and practitioners to support investment in continuous program improvement.



After-School Toolkit

Tips, Techniques and Templates for Improving Program Quality

Provides a practical, hands-on guide for implementing high-quality after-school literacy programming. Supplies program managers with tested tools and techniques employed in CORAL.



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Supporting English Learners Through After-School Literacy Programming

Demonstrates a relationship between key CORAL approaches and the academic progress of English learners. Makes the case for action by policymakers and funders interested in boosting the achievement of this growing student population.

Endnotes

- ¹ California Department of Education. Retrieved October 8, 2007, from <http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2007/viewreport.asp>.
- ² California Department of Education. Retrieved August 26, 2007, from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fb/yr05english.asp>.
- ³ CORAL was implemented in a total of more than 30 sites in Fresno, Long Beach, Pasadena, Sacramento and San Jose. For a full discussion of the CORAL program and its evaluation, see Amy Arbreton, Jessica Sheldon, Molly Bradshaw and Julie Goldsmith, with Linda Jucovy and Sarah Pepper. *Advancing Achievement: Findings from an Independent Evaluation of a Major After-School Initiative*. San Francisco: The James Irvine Foundation and Public/Private Ventures, 2008; and Amy Arbreton, Julie Goldsmith and Jessica Sheldon. *Launching Literacy in After-School Programs: Early Lessons from the CORAL Initiative*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 2005.
- ⁴ See, for example, U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary. *When Schools Stay Open Late: The National Evaluation of the 21st Century Learning Centers Program, First Year Findings*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2002; and J.A. Durlak and R.P. Weissberg. *The Impact of After-School Programs that Promote Personal and Social Skills*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007. Retrieved April 17, 2007, from <http://www.casel.org>.
- ⁵ As described in Arbreton et al., *Advancing Achievement*, the evaluation revealed similar promising results for students struggling with reading, irrespective of their English proficiency.
- ⁶ Team leaders were 53 percent Latino/a, 17 percent Asian, 15 percent African American, 6 percent Caucasian and 10 percent “other.”
- ⁷ For a description of the available research on, and best practices for, after-school programming regarding English learners, see Gwen McNeir, with Moses Wambalaba. “Literacy in Afterschool Programs — Focus on English Language Learners.” Portland: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2006. For a description of specific program strategies, see California Tomorrow. *Pursuing the Promise: Addressing Equity, Access, and Diversity in AfterSchool and Youth Programs*. Oakland, CA: California Tomorrow, 2003.
- ⁸ For a discussion of achieving quality, see Jessica Sheldon and Leigh Hopkins. *Supporting Success: Why and How to Improve Quality in After-School Programs*. San Francisco: The James Irvine Foundation and Public/Private Ventures, 2008.

INSIGHT GAINING GROUND

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