

## Is it time for Sonoma County to establish a newcomer program?

**E**arly in the development of the Aiming High initiative, school and community representatives worked together to identify the critical issues that were impacting Sonoma County’s ability to close the achievement gap. One key consideration raised was the growing number of new immigrant students in our county. How many such students were there and how successful were local schools at meeting their needs? Would a “newcomer program” be a more effective entry point into the school system for these students—and would it make sense to start one here?

An Aiming High subcommittee was formed to explore this issue in greater depth. In addition to clarifying the local need, they sought to obtain information about how newcomer programs were structured and what impact they had. The results of their explorations are presented in this publication.

Members of the group identified three successful newcomer programs in California—each with a different structure—and visited the districts to see the programs in action. The districts they visited included:

- **Napa Valley Unified**—Serving 17,000 students in 32 schools, Napa Valley Unified is the closest to Sonoma County both in proximity and in ethnic and language diversity. Forty-two percent of the students are Hispanic (compared to 33 percent in Sonoma County) and 24 percent are English Learners (compared to 22 percent here).
- **Livingston Union**—A K-8 district, Livingston Union is in rural Merced County, between Sacramento and Fresno. The district’s four schools serve 2,500 students from the surrounding agricultural community. Eighty percent of the students are Hispanic and 11 percent are Asian. Almost 60 percent are English Learners.
- **Irvine Unified**—Located in Orange County, Irvine Unified is a large urban/suburban district that serves 26,000 students in 32 schools. The district’s student population is 40 percent Asian and 8 percent Hispanic. Just over 12 percent of the students are English Learners.

A nuts-and-bolts summary of the team’s observations about how these districts structured, staffed, and funded their newcomer programs can be found inside. After visiting the programs and assessing their similarities and

### INSIDE

What is a newcomer program?



How many newcomers are there in Sonoma County?



Visitation report from the Aiming High team



A forum for further discussion

## WHAT IS A NEWCOMER PROGRAM?

**T**here is a small but growing presence of newcomer programs in schools across the United States. These programs respond to the needs of students who are recent immigrants to this country and have very limited English language skills. Newcomer programs promote the rapid acquisition of beginning English and foundational literacy skills. They may also teach basic “survival English” and support social/cultural adjustment. The goal is to prepare non-English-speaking students who are new to this country to participate in mainstream classrooms.

In California, newcomer programs generally serve students who have been in the United States for less than one year and who are at the Beginning and Early Intermediate levels of English proficiency as measured by the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). Programs have been developed to serve students from all grade ranges, but they are most common for grades 4 and above.

Designed as transitional programs with flexible entry and exit, newcomer programs may enroll students for different lengths of time—from one semester to two years—depending on the results of individual assessments. Most newcomer programs enroll students for about a year, then provide a transitional program to support students as they move into mainstream classrooms.

Newcomer programs can be structured in a variety of ways. Depending on the size of the population, classes may be located within the home school or at a central site that serves as a magnet for several schools or districts. Programs can be full-day or half-day, or take place after school or on Saturdays. Whatever the structure, flexible grouping practices, small class sizes, differentiation based on proficiency levels, frequent language and content assessments, and clear entry and exit criteria are the norm.

The most successful newcomer programs take each student’s educational background into consideration. Has the student’s education been interrupted? If so, where are the gaps? What literacy skills does the student have in his/her primary language? What is the student’s family background and immigrant status?

Teachers with CTET, CLAD, or BCLAD certification provide instruction to newcomers. Bilingual paraprofessionals are often present to help address individual needs and provide primary language support. Translators for parents are helpful, so an advocate or liaison position may be included.

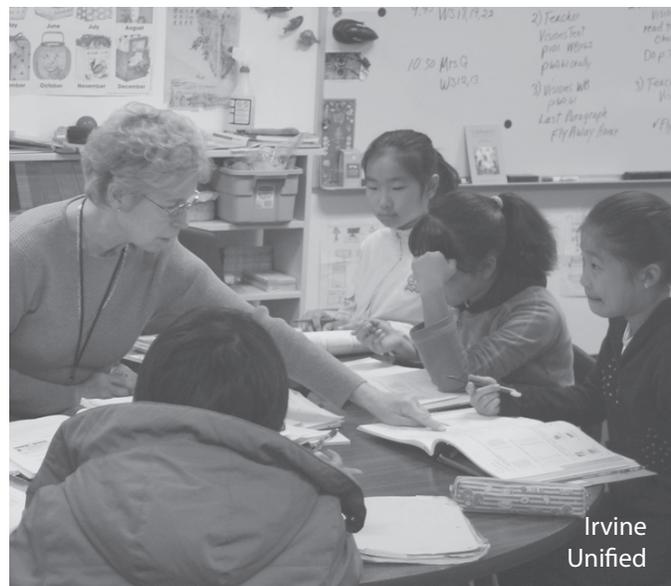
Providing intensive support services will expedite student and family access to the new school system. Services like family literacy classes, counseling, and referral to outside agencies are often incorporated in newcomer programs. ♦

differences, the visiting team considered the advantages and challenges of newcomer initiatives. These factors, described below, are ones school leaders in Sonoma County will want to consider as they look at the possibility of establishing a newcomer program to serve this region’s most recent immigrant students.

### **Students in newcomer programs achieve at higher levels**

All of the newcomer programs visited were well-established and district staff expressed the strong belief that “students do better in the mainstream after attending these programs.” One district evaluated its program’s academic impact by tracking the achievement of immigrant students who enrolled in the program compared to those who did not. Their findings revealed that the students who completed the newcomer program and transitioned into mainstream classes achieved at a higher level and advanced more quickly than immigrant students who went directly into mainstream classes.

As a group, the students in newcomer programs were happy to be there and felt welcomed and supported by their school. Staff reported very few, if any, discipline problems in these programs. The students seemed to understand the challenges they were facing and saw the newcomer program as an opportunity to succeed. As one district EL



coordinator said, “High school newcomers come to school wanting to learn English and become professional soccer players. They have the same aspirations and dreams as other students.”

**Newcomer programs build staff expertise**

Staff in all of the visited programs were passionate and committed to the work they were doing. They *wanted* to work with language learners and had developed specialized skills providing English Language Development (ELD) and content instruction to students at the lowest end of the language proficiency scale.

Professional development was an integral part of their success. Districts actively supported the professional growth of the newcomer staff. In one district, teachers participated in newcomer-specific trainings at least four times per year.

The expertise and commitment of the program staff had a districtwide benefit as teachers shared effective instructional strategies with colleagues and conveyed their strong belief in the future of their students. This “ripple effect” made other teachers more cognizant of the needs of the English learners in their classrooms and more

knowledgeable about how they could help these students succeed.

**Language development is the primary focus**

Each newcomer program visited had clear entry criteria and admitted only those students who were new to the United States and at the lowest levels of English language proficiency. All students entering the programs scored at the Beginning or Early Intermediate level on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). Students at these levels of language proficiency need intensive ELD instruction if they are to succeed in our schools—and this was the primary focus of each newcomer class. ELD was incorporated into every learning activity, across all content areas. Frequent and ongoing assessment of students’ language skills allowed teachers to pinpoint instruction, which was delivered in small, leveled groupings.

**Students are transitioned to mainstream classes**

Newcomer programs are short-term, transitional programs that are designed to give students the language and literacy skills they need to participate in mainstream

**HOW MANY NEWCOMERS ARE THERE IN SONOMA COUNTY?**

**T**here’s no precise data on the number of newcomers in Sonoma County, but there are some statistics that point to the size of this population. On the most recent CELDT summary, the county had 847 students at the Beginning level of English language proficiency—638 in elementary grades and 209 in grades 7-12. In addition, there were over 1,600 students at the Early Intermediate level, which could include some newcomers.

On the STAR report, English Learners are divided into two groups based on the length of

time they have been in California public schools—more than 12 months or less than 12 months. Last year, Sonoma County schools enrolled 665 students in grades 2-11 who had been in the country for less than a year.

Countywide, the number of newcomers is less than 10 percent of the total English Learner population, which now stands at 15,675 students. But because of their very low level of English language proficiency, these students run the greatest risk of failure in our schools. ♦

|   | K  | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5  | 6  | 7  | 8  | 9  | 10 | 11 | 12 | Total        |
|---|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|--------------|
| <b>CELDT:</b> Beginning                   | 20 | 63  | 159 | 170 | 83  | 67 | 76 | 38 | 39 | 50 | 35 | 32 | 15 | <b>847</b>   |
| Early Intermediate                        | 27 | 195 | 330 | 379 | 175 | 88 | 81 | 52 | 62 | 63 | 55 | 53 | 52 | <b>1,612</b> |
| <b>STAR:</b> Enrolled less than 12 months | –  | –   | 77  | 72  | 66  | 75 | 62 | 53 | 62 | 91 | 68 | 39 | –  | <b>665</b>   |

classrooms. Students rarely stay in the programs for more than a year. Once their skills progress to a level where they can join mainstream classes, they are transitioned out of the newcomer program.

All of the programs had criteria to determine when students would transition into mainstream classes—Immediate or above language proficiency on the CELDT along with specific levels of performance on selected assessments. Staff supported students as they transitioned and students continued to receive newcomer services before or after school, in summer school, or through other transitional structures. ELD instruction continued and students participated in intervention programs in their mainstream classes.

### **Greatest need is among students in grades 4-12**

Although the visiting team observed one K-3 program, newcomer initiatives had the most impact with students at grade 4 and above. The districts that did not include the early primary grades in their programs felt that the focus of instruction in grades K-3 was already on language and literacy and that K-3 immigrant students could succeed in mainstream classes with intensive intervention.

### **No special funding is required**

None of the programs visited had any special funding for their newcomer programs. They all reprioritized existing dollars, using a combination of ADA, Title I and Title III, Migrant Education, After School, EIA-LEP, ELAP, and Transportation funds to support their programs.

“My observation after visiting these programs is that developing a newcomer initiative is a definite possibility for Sonoma County, especially for students in the upper grades,” says SCOE assistant superintendent Don Russell. “The programs we saw had nothing ‘magical’ about them. These districts simply made a commitment to support their immigrant population, then made it work. Any district could establish a newcomer program if it had the will—and the willingness to look at using resources in a new way.”

Russell points out a few challenges that Sonoma County would face in developing this initiative. “With a large number of small districts and an English Learner population spread throughout the region, magnet programs operated on a regional basis might make



the most sense for us. With this kind of regional structure, issues related to student transportation and collaborative funding would come to the forefront, but these are logistical details that could be worked out if our schools are committed to the idea of improving services for newcomers.”

To that end, SCOE will host a meeting on May 24 to bring district leaders, school principals, EL coordinators, and other interested staff together with the members of the Aiming High newcomer team. The goal is to discuss the team’s findings, gauge interest in pursuing the idea, and provide a forum for further discussion. ♦

## **JOIN THE DISCUSSION**

Join us as we explore the possibility of creating a newcomer program in Sonoma County

**Wednesday, May 24, 2007**  
**1:00 P.M. at SCOE**

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# VISITATION REPORT FROM THE AIMING HIGH TEAM

**T**his is a summary of the key characteristics the Aiming High team observed when they visited the newcomer programs in Napa Valley Unified, Livingston Union, and Irvine Unified school districts.

**Populations served:** The programs in Livingston and Napa Valley serve their districts' growing number of Spanish-speaking immigrant students with limited educational backgrounds. In contrast, Irvine's students represented a wide range of international languages and cultures, with a majority from Asian countries. These students tended to have strong educational backgrounds in their primary language and above-average socioeconomic status.

**Program structure:** The visited programs varied from a "school within a school" to a magnet center. In communities with large populations of newcomers, students were served at their home school. Districts with smaller populations developed magnet programs and enrolled students from more than one school. In this scenario, transportation was sometimes an issue.

The visitation team observed programs designed for elementary, middle, and high school students, although not all districts served the K-12 spectrum. At the lower elementary grades, class size was around 18 students. Thirty to 35 students were enrolled in the middle and high school newcomer classes. All classes served students in grade-level clusters.

The K-6 programs were full-day. Grade 6-12 programs were generally half-day (3 to 4 periods), with additional SDAIE courses in math, history-social science, and science. Some programs had summer school and before/after school components. The language of instruction was varied—one program was English only, one was English with primary language support, and one district used dual language or English immersion depending on the placement.

English Language Development (ELD) instruction was the primary focus of each program—throughout the entire day and in every content area. In some of the secondary programs, ELD was provided in the mainstream classroom, then students were regrouped for additional ELD and literacy development at their targeted levels. Programs also

included acculturation activities to help students adjust socially and culturally to their new school and community. For grade 6-12 students, civics and history-social science instruction provide the vehicle for acculturation. PE was also part of every program.

Group work was strongly emphasized.

Instructional materials were varied, but mostly included the supplemental resources that accompanied the district's adopted materials. Livingston Union used GLAD (Guided Language Acquisition Design) in support of Houghton-Mifflin Reading. Other programs included High Point, Read 180, Accelerated Reading, Access History, ALEKS Math, and ESL Reading Smart.

Clear entry and exit criteria were present in each program, and students could enter or exit at any time of the year. Most students stayed in the program for 12 months, although participation varied based on assessment results. Assessment was frequent and ongoing. Students typically exited the program when they reached the Intermediate level of English proficiency and attained specific benchmarks in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Each program provided transition support to help students move successfully into mainstream classrooms.

**Staffing:** All of the newcomer programs visited were supported by a district-level EL coordinator. All teachers were fully credentialed, with CTEL, CLAD, or BCLAD certification, and they had strong literacy development backgrounds—even at the high school level. Teachers participated in extensive professional development related to curriculum, assessment, and instructional strategies specifically for newcomers. Some teachers spoke the primary language of their students; others did not. Even where teachers were bilingual, English-only was used during the designated language arts portion of the day or week.

Paraprofessionals were present for at least a portion of the day and many of them were bilingual. Some programs also had bilingual liaisons for parent and community outreach and some provided students with counseling and other types of support services.

**Funding:** None of the districts visited had special funding for their newcomer program. They used existing funding—ADA, Title III, Migrant Education, EIP-LEP—to meet this priority need. ♦

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