



## Focus: Leadership for English Learners

### VOICES FROM THE FIELD

#### *Equity-focused Leadership to Support English Learners during Distance Learning*

As Director of English Learner Services and Categorical Programs in the [Azusa Unified School District](#), Norma Camacho remains steadfast in her dedication to English Learners. She leads with the initiative to meet the needs of their teachers and parents to ensure student success.

Faced with changing from in-person to remote learning, Norma's first thought was how to connect with the 70 newcomer students, mainly from Guatemala who spoke Q'eqchi', a dialect no one in the District spoke. Norma quickly discovered that although many families of English Learners immediately contacted the District to pick up Chromebooks and hotspots, the families of recent immigrant students were less likely to reach out. Lacking internet access and even sometimes cell phones, contact with these families was challenging, and news that schools had closed was interpreted to mean instruction had ceased. Understanding that many families resided in nontraditional dwellings, Norma noted, "...we had to really go out and find where those families were." Norma took initiative and involved teachers, community liaisons and principals to reach out to families, even contacting neighbors to find them. The established trusting relations between the families of newcomer students and school personnel proved essential. Norma commented, "... those are the families who fear being tracked or found for whatever reason...it was really making sure that they were comfortable, feeling safe." Since these families did not have internet access, Norma partnered directly with the Instructional Technology department in the district to secure iPads with embedded internet connectivity. With Norma's initiative and outreach, all newcomer students were eventually able to participate in distance learning.



Creating a district strategy for purposeful outreach to families of ELs across the grade spans, Norma also reached out to parents of English Learners who had access to technology and had also received print materials and workbooks in both English and Spanish. Norma met with parents and noted, "I really wanted to circle back and find out from that group what recommendations they had in terms of distance learning." Parents of English Learners in [Dual Immersion](#) noted how effectively they were able to support their children. In contrast, parents of students in classes instructed primarily in English with English Language Development (ELD) indicated that support was insufficient, particularly for two groups of English Learners. For the youngest EL students, [dual language learners](#) in preschool, transitional kindergarten and kindergarten, parents shared the difficulty "for families to support that learning at home when they don't read or speak English." Parents of high school students, commented "it was difficult to navigate that content, particularly in math, even with the Spanish print materials, just because of the rigorous content." Additionally, although parents shared that they were eager to support their children and expressed their concern that they had never seen a Google classroom and were not able to support their children's use of technology asking, "How might I be able to learn this so that I can help my child at home?"

As Norma noted, reflecting on parents' comments led to some important changes to distance learning for Fall 2020. These changes included dedicated time built into the daily schedule at the elementary level for small group [Designated English Language Development \(DELD\)](#) instruction and tutoring at the secondary level to [preview \(or frontload\)](#) language and content needed to access the curriculum. To continue to support families, videos on technology use for parents and parent-led training on technology were developed.

**Ensuring access to language and content instruction.** With devices and internet access available, the focus quickly shifted to instruction. For Norma, the essential question became, "...how do we maintain that focus on language development in distance learning?" During the last four years, the district emphasized integration of [academic language](#) throughout the curriculum with teaching strategies to engage students in [collaborative conversations](#) on complex topics. These partner and small group conversations for understanding and analyzing content proved challenging to implement during distance learning. Facing this challenge, Norma collaborated with teachers to co-plan lessons that intentionally identified the linguistic features and the technology use that would support [Integrated English Language Development \(IELD\)](#), language development in the content areas. Norma and a social studies teacher co-planned lessons on the Great Depression to support language development among English Learners. Lesson planning included determining "...what the academic language focus was and the function of language they were going to focus on in this particular lesson..." Together, Norma and this particular teacher worked on "building language frames into a Google slide presentation so that the kids would have access, and then [use the] embedded links to record their oral rehearsal." Teachers' lessons augmented the basic textbook and on-line presentation to include the specific linguistic components needed by English Learners to remain engaged and continue their linguistic progress.

Teachers also shared their challenge of meeting students' language needs without assessment data from the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). From Norma's point of view, this is both a challenge and a wonderful opportunity to help teachers develop a deeper understanding of the [California English Language Development \(ELD\) Standards](#) and the progression from [emerging to expanding and to the bridging proficiency levels](#). For the new school year, coaching and training on ELD will have a deeper emphasis on being able to analyze the language they hear and see students using in speech and writing and learning how to support progress in language development. For Norma, working with teachers to dig deeply into the meaning of the standards, the advice in the new [English Learner Roadmap Teacher Toolkits](#), and their ability to enrich language development is an exciting time. While no one wished for a pandemic, and the shift to distance learning has been challenging, Norma's equity-focused leadership has strengthened teaching, learning, and parent engagement in meaningful and responsive ways.