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INSIGHTS FROM CO-DESIGNED ENGLISH LEARNER IMPROVEMENT NETWORKS

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A NEW SENSE OF URGENCY

Low expectations and performance among English Learners¹ are often interpreted as an inevitable outcome for students still learning English. Yet the participating local educational agencies (LEAs) in this case study were committed to addressing inequities that existed pre-pandemic and were exacerbated because of it. The LEAs engaged in the work and innovated to respond to the heightened sense of urgency to implement promising practices that improve English Learners' education, language acquisition, and achievement.

This research brief presents a case study of an English Learner Improvement Network (ELIN), a group of educators focused on a shared problem of practice in EL education and supported through collaboration between researchers and practitioners in English Learner education and Improvement

Science. The case study involves an urban school district and a charter organization with between approximately 50% to 80% of students who have ever been English Learners².

Although each success story is unique, they share a remarkable sense of urgency and commitment and demonstrate the value of English Learner Improvement Networks.

Why EL Improvement Networks?

Preparing English Learners (ELs) with the 21st-century skills needed for competitiveness in a global world challenges educational organizations large and small. Bryk et al. (2010) argue that solving educational problems

takes a networked approach in which scholars and educators with a diverse mix of skills are brought together in the pursuit of a science of improvement. Yet, despite widespread improvement networks, few focus on support for ELs. Two recent studies of improvement networks focused on ELs support the role of horizontal partnerships between teachers and coaches (Thompson et al., 2018) and between university teacher educators and program developers to increase teacher expertise (Heineke et al., 2020).

charter organization serving large numbers or percentages of ELs. Emerging from CCF’s Consortium for English Learner Success Initiative, ELIN grantees were required to define current needs and capacities, the improvement science approach, and EL goals.

This ELIN is unique in the extensive collaboration between CEEL and IC from initial design through implementation of network meetings, participant coaching, and technical assistance over three years. (See Figure 1. Project Overview and Timeline.) Our analysis of interviews conducted with ELIN leads, the two grantees and their artifacts yielded five key themes.

The Urban School District serves 84,000 Expanded TK – 12 students, approximately 50% ever English Learners. The District applied for this grant with the goal of doubling its dual language programs from 5 schools to 10. The Urban School District was under the leadership of an Improvement Science champion who introduced the theoretical foundation and initial use of Improvement Science, although not with an EL focus.

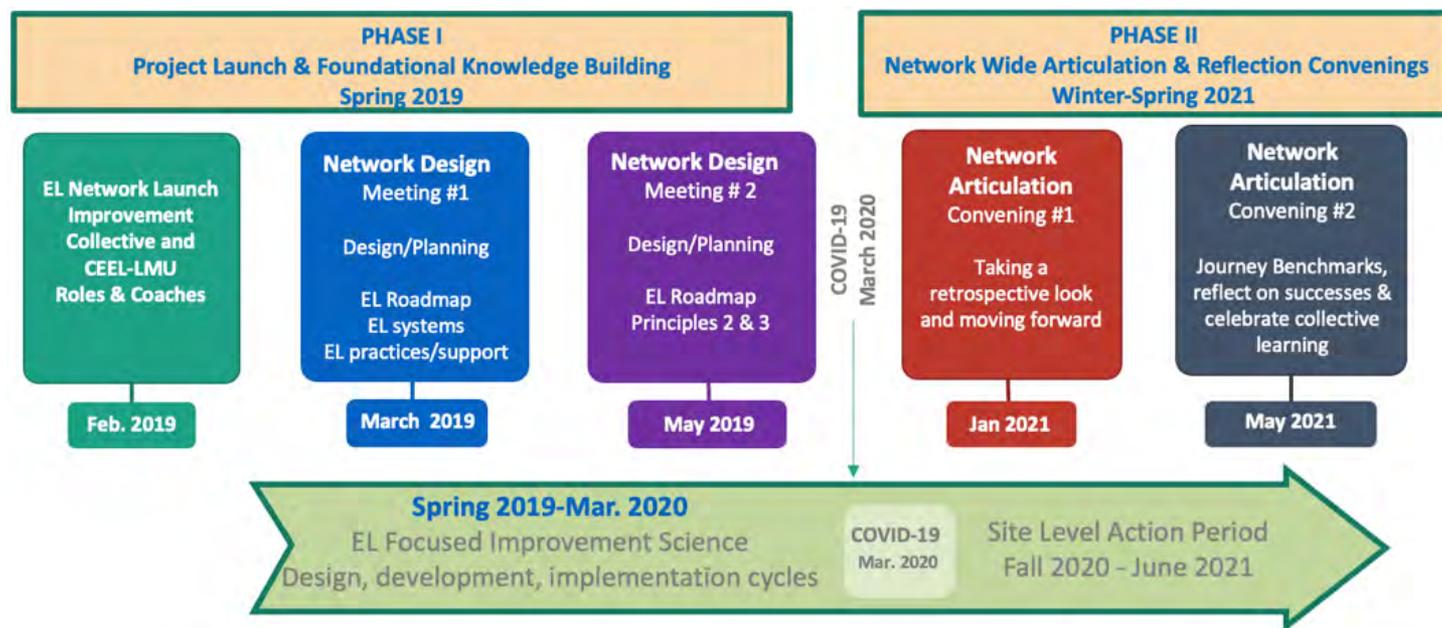
Theme 1 Expert Partnerships Support Improvement

The collaborative leadership between experts from CEEL and the IC provided an essential value-added contribution to the ELIN. The partnership began with CCF’s program officer “arranging” a partnership between CEEL and the IC. The partners discussed “how we can merge an EL focus with improvement science processes” in designing the ELIN learning and coaching sessions to expand knowledge and ability to implement effective education for ELs using Improvement Science. The partnership between CEEL and the IC extended to the collaborative “design of each of the sessions, the delivery of the sessions, [and] the design of the materials that were used, particularly around the EL Roadmap.” As noted by the lead partners, the purpose of the merger of an EL focus and Improvement

Co-Designing an ELIN

In 2018–19 the California Community Foundation (CCF) funded the Loyola Marymount University Center for Equity for English Learners (CEEL) and the Improvement Collective (IC) to co-lead and facilitate an English Learner Improvement Network in an urban school district and a

Figure 1. Project Overview and Timeline – CCF English Learner Improvement Network



Science was to avoid knowledge silos and to present “improvement around a particular focus area in a more integrated fashion” to “accelerate some of the outcomes that these networks participate in.”

Theme 2 **Context Impacts Improvement**

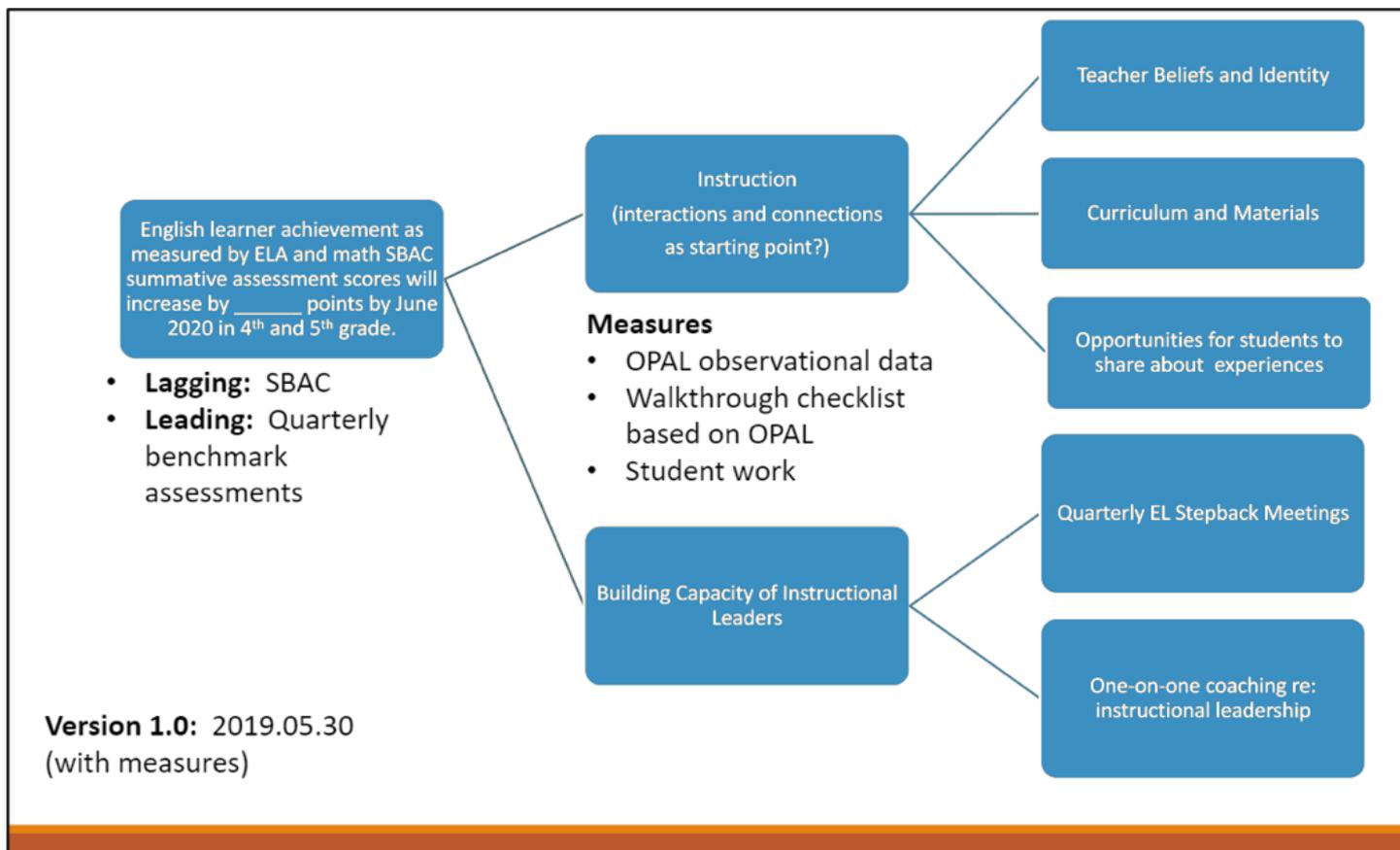
Grantees were well-positioned to succeed in the ELIN based on prior knowledge and experience in either EL education or Improvement Science. As a lead IC partner noted, “What was helpful is that they [charter organization] already had an existing relationship with CEEL, and we were able to leverage that.” The charter organization was familiar with Observation Protocol for Academic Literacies© (Lavadenz & Armas, 2012) and incorporated it to document needs and to drive improvement. (See Figure 2. Design Drivers - Charter Organization.) The urban district team had implemented Improvement Science and recognized the need to engage teachers with broad, open-ended questions such as “Let’s talk about English Learners.” The IC lead recognized the importance of this background knowledge,

noting “It is really hard if you’re trying to learn the content and the improvement [simultaneously]; the cognitive load can be really overwhelming.”

Leadership context also impacted the participants. Each relied on their organizational leaders’ support (Santos & Hopkins, 2020) to join the ELIN, while later facing challenges due to leadership changes. An IC lead observed the impact of change at the project level “It’s just hard any time you have turnover like that to get momentum,” and also, “Anytime there’s a change in senior leadership, there’s often a change in priorities.”

COVID and shift to distance and hybrid learning impacted all participants. A CEEL lead explained, “Together with the funder, we conceptualized how we could be responsive and what we could do to affirm the great work that each one of them was able to carry on in spite of the pandemic.” Another CEEL lead observed, “One thing I would consider a success is that they shared how they maintained the EL focus throughout the pandemic.” And as schools reopened, “The work that they restarted was very centered on ELs.”

Figure 2. Design Drivers – Charter Organization



**Theme
3**

**Smaller Steps Lead To
Larger Changes**

Both the urban district and the charter organization began with major goals to redesign or expand their EL program and services but quickly altered the goals into smaller, actionable steps (See Figure 3. Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycles – Urban District.) with the collaborative guidance of CEEL and the IC. As a CEEL lead noted, “We met consistently with the Improvement Collective to be able to chart out a course to identify the PDSA cycles that the networks would participate in with that English Learner focus.” An Improvement Collective lead observed, “What’s always challenging is identifying that starting point and understanding how to scope down.” Participants agreed; “I think the ability for teachers to think small and make small changes consistently is powerful because sometimes we get really overwhelmed when we think ‘I need to make big changes in my classroom.’” From the IC perspective, “Teachers were really surprised by how looking with more specificity...made a difference in how they thought about their practice.” Their success with smaller changes supported later expansions of biliteracy for ELs to other grades and content areas.

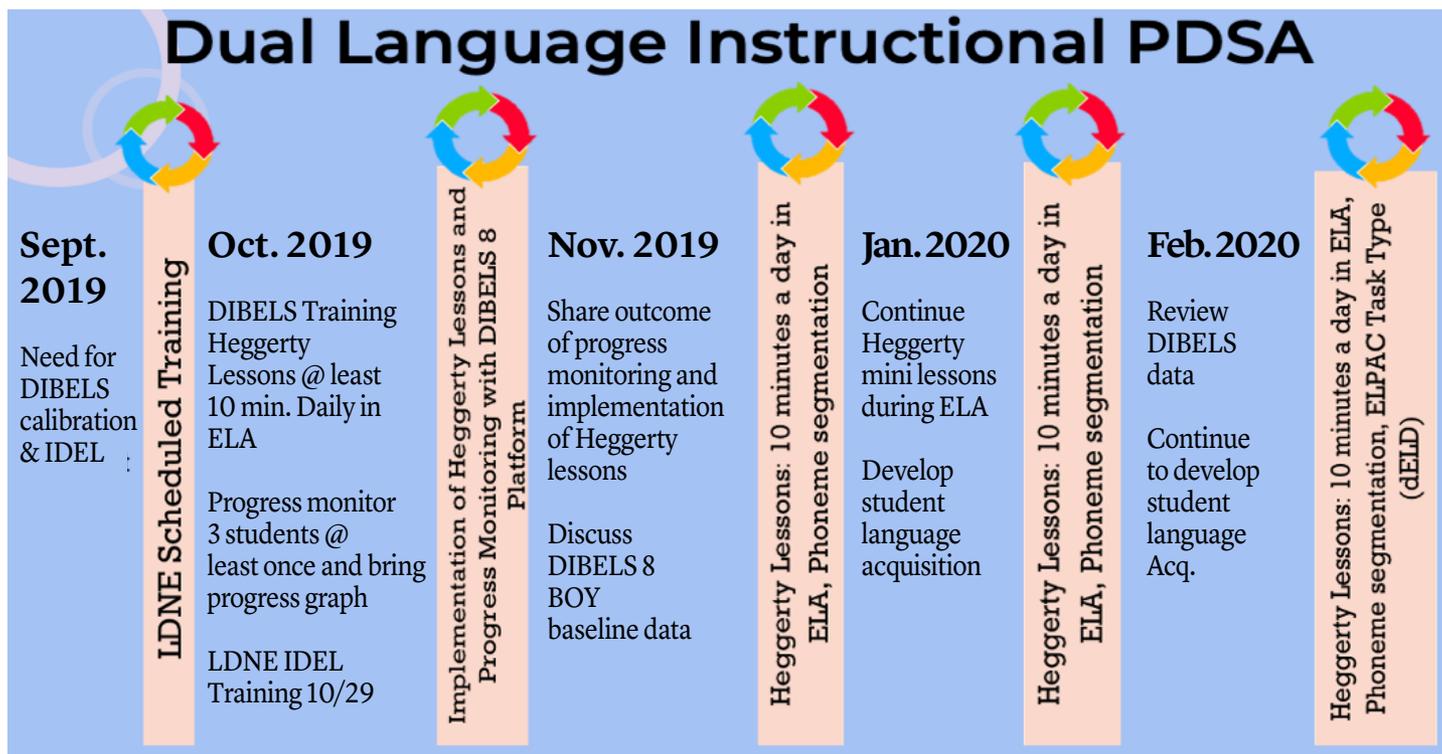
The Charter Organization had been active members of The Consortium for English Learners Success prior to becoming one of the LEAs in this case study. They had consulted with CEEL for technical assistance in biliteracy program design for over 10 years. The entire charter consists of six schools serving approximately 3,400 TK–12 students; five of the six schools participated in this project. They applied with the intent to uncover the root cause(s) of low academic outcomes for ELs. In 2018-19, when they became an ELIN, they were composed of 79% ELs.

**Theme
4**

**Collaborative
Coaching Counts**

CEEL and the IC recognized the importance of collaborative coaching, identified consistent members from their teams who would coach each participant group, and then met before and after coaching sessions. A CEEL lead

Figure 3. Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycles – Urban District



commented, “That was important because we wanted...to have consistency in and more knowledge of the collaboration, so we were constantly talking about the advice that was given from the Improvement Science perspective and...from the EL perspectives.” A charter organization member noted, “The combination of EL research and pedagogical knowledge integrated with Improvement Science coaching is something that made this project really unique and impactful for improving our work.”

Theme 5

Teacher Leaders Support Implementation

Both the urban district and the charter organization learned to rely on teacher leaders. After one year, the charter organization implemented a teacher leader model to provide direct access to teachers to meet their goal of changing classroom practice for ELs. For the urban district, “Those teachers that participated were validated by the work...they were then empowered to support teachers.” As one urban district leader noted, “We currently have three [teacher] coaches strategically placed in schools with high [numbers or percentages of] ELs that engage in this work at their school site...in these cycles of learning.” Teacher leaders were so valuable that a CEEL lead opined, “The [site] team needs to be comprised of minimally someone with the expertise.

Conclusion

Our ELIN case study contributes to knowledge of networks’ ability to support education for English Learners and clarifies the factors that contribute to success. It demonstrates the benefit of intense collaboration between experts in EL education and experts in Improvement Science. Their collaboration from initiation to implementation formed a solid foundation and ongoing support for participants. Similarly, the collaboration between administrators and teacher leaders strengthened shared understanding and support for classroom teachers. In essence, this ELIN serves as a model of a systemic and coherent approach to improving education by engaging content and process experts and educators across organizational levels in a targeted focus on improving education for ELs using Improvement Science.

Recommendations

Emerging themes in this case study are in line with findings from previous research on Improvement Science focused on English Learners (Bugler, 2021; Heineke et al., 2020; Santos & Hopkins, 2020; Thompson et al., 2018). These findings suggest the following recommendations:

1. Acknowledge the necessity of deep content and process knowledge and expertise to implement effective change. The CEEL and IC collaborative partnership, from inception to implementation, was essential for implementing key EL program changes through Improvement Science.

3. Expect the unexpected (and adapt to stay the course). Prior experiences, local politics, leadership changes, and the pandemic all impacted the pace and focus of the participants' change efforts. These unexpected changes required flexibility, support, and adaptability.

2. Ensure that coaching from the content and process experts as well as site teacher leaders is frequent and on-going. Learning and implementation cycles include multiple unanticipated aspects that required the support from those with greater expertise and experience.

4. Time and funding are essential. Learning and applying new approaches demanded long-term investments. ELIN participants had the opportunity to learn from experts, coaches, and each other, yet they still felt they needed more time to facilitate their ability to share their learning at their sites.

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ENDNOTES

¹ English Learners are K-12 students who speak a language other than English at home and are still developing the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in English needed for success in a school's regular instructional programs. (See "Glossary of Terms for English Learner Reports," California Department of Education, <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/longtermel/Glossary.aspx>). English Learners are increasingly referred to as "emergent bilingual" students in recognition of both languages they are learning, rather than just progress towards English proficiency. (See "Improving Education for Multilingual and English Learner Students," California Department of Education, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/documents/mleleducation.pdf>).

² Ever-EL students are a combination of current English Learners and students who were previously designated as EL and were later reclassified upon developing full English proficiency. Understanding this group holistically provides a more complete picture of how well schools are serving EL students across their educational trajectory, from entering school not yet fully proficient in English to achieving full English proficiency and beyond.

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