

California to help students not fluent in English

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.06.15

Word Count **791**



Letisia Huertado (left) helps Destiny Valle (center) and Ashley Vargas construct sentences in their first-grade class at Parkview Elementary School, Dec. 10, 2014, in El Monte, California. Photo: Gary Friedman/ Los Angeles Times/TNS

LOS ANGELES — After more than 11 years in Los Angeles public schools, Dasha Cifuentes still isn't speaking or writing English at grade level. The U.S. native, whose parents are Mexican immigrants, was raised in a Spanish-speaking household.

Dasha acknowledges that the two languages get confused in her mind.

"I should be more confident in English because I was born here, but I'm embarrassed that I haven't improved myself," said Dasha, a junior at Fairfax High.

Now, however, she and other students like her are receiving more attention under a new state law and programs by Los Angeles Unified and other school districts. The law requires the state to define and identify a "long-term English learner," the first attempt in the nation to do so.

Hiding In Plain Sight, Needing Help

The state released its first information about the efforts this week. It has identified nearly 350,000 students in grades six through 12 who have attended California schools for seven years or more and are still not fluent in English. They make up three-fourths of all middle and high school students still learning English.

Among them, nearly 90,000 are classified as long-term English learners. It means that they also have failed to progress on the state's English proficiency exam for two years in a row and score below grade level in English standardized tests.

"These kids need to be visible," said Shelly Spiegel-Coleman of Californians Together, a Long Beach-based nonprofit group that promoted the legislation and released the state report. "In many instances, these students are sitting in mainstream classes and are not getting any specialized help."

A 2010 study by the organization found that many students struggled because schools failed to monitor their progress, provide appropriate courses or train teachers. Last year, the American Civil Liberties Union sued the state. The ACLU said the state did not provide services for students learning English that were required by law.

In addition, Fairfax High Principal Carmina Nacorda said more than 70 percent of her 125 long-term English learners have educational disabilities.

A New Student Focus

Meanwhile, many educators say that students who achieve fluency in their first language more easily learn English. However, they say that a 1998 law passed by voters severely restricted the teaching of both Spanish and English in the same class.

The new focus on such students comes amid a shift in California's long-running language wars. Since the 1998 law, called Proposition 227, a counter-movement has grown. It promoted the teaching of two languages at one time, called bilingual education. Californians will vote on a ballot measure in November 2016 to repeal the proposition or keep it.

In Los Angeles Unified, about one-third of the 600,000 students are learning English and more than 35,000 of them are still not at grade level after five years. The district has overhauled its services for such students after a 2011 agreement with the U.S. Education Department, which found they had been seriously shortchanged.

Among other things, Los Angeles Unified has developed two new classes aimed at strengthening language skills for students such as Dasha and beefed up teacher training. In addition, the district requires all teachers to try to develop relationships with the parents as well as their students to keep them informed about progress.

Slower Pace Works Better

At Fairfax, Dasha said the new efforts have helped. On a recent morning, she and her classmates watched a “60 Minutes” TV documentary on Los Angeles Lakers point guard Jeremy Lin. Her teacher, Serafin Alvarez, then peppered the students with questions about it to check their understanding. What inspired Lin to play basketball? How many colleges offered him scholarships? What helped him to succeed?

Few of the 10 students answered the questions correctly, but it was unclear whether they didn’t understand the documentary or did not care to pay attention. Alvarez said student disinterest is one of his biggest challenges in teaching the more advanced language skills needed for college and careers. A recent vocabulary list included “mandated,” “effective,” “interact” and “discipline,” words few of the students hear at home, he said.

Dasha said she ignored her problem for years, failing to follow the advice of her teachers and parents to read books and use the dictionary. She said she was ashamed of her limited skills and too scared to ask for help.

“Now, I’m regretting my life not developing myself into a better person, and that hurts me the most,” she said.

But she said the pace of the Fairfax classes are slower and the teachers more patient. In addition, a Fairfax program linking each student to a mentor teacher has helped her talk about her problems, she said.

“I’m more motivated, like a turtle coming out of its shell,” she said.

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "Slower Pace Works Better" that explains some of the advantages of programs for "long-term English learners."
- 2 Which sentence from the article gives the BEST evidence that current programs are often ineffective?
- (A) It has identified nearly 350,000 students in grades six through 12 who have attended California schools for seven years or more and are still not fluent in English.
 - (B) "In many instances, these students are sitting in mainstream classes and are not getting any specialized help."
 - (C) "I should be more confident in English because I was born here, but I'm embarrassed that I haven't improved myself," said Dasha, a junior at Fairfax High.
 - (D) In addition, Fairfax High Principal Carmina Nacorda said more than 70 percent of her 125 long-term English learners have educational disabilities.
- 3 Read the sentence from the section "A New Student Focus."

Californians will vote on a ballot measure in November 2016 to repeal the proposition or keep it.

Which word can replace "repeal" without changing the meaning of the sentence above?

- (A) void
- (B) visit
- (C) recruit
- (D) replace

4 Read the sentence from the article.

The new focus on such students comes amid a shift in California's long-running language wars.

Which word can replace "amid" without changing the meaning of the sentence above?

- (A) with
- (B) during
- (C) outside
- (D) above

Answer Key

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Paragraph 17:

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