English learners are students whose native language is a language other than English and who, therefore, have difficulty reading, writing, speaking, or understanding the English language. English learners are entitled to supports in public schools to ensure they can fully participate in educational programs. English learners are more likely to be low-income, unhoused, and lack access to high-speed internet than their non-English learner peers. English learners account for 14.3% of students enrolled in public charter schools (compared to 11.9% in traditional public schools). English learners struggled greatly during the pandemic and continue to have difficulties advancing academically in its aftermath. When schools closed in spring 2020 and shifted to remote instruction in the 2020-21 school year in many parts of the country, English learners struggled to engage in learning, due in part to difficulty accessing devices and broadband.

The lack of access was compounded in many cases by the lack of family support. Many families of English learners did not have the digital and technology literacy needed to support remote learning. School districts did not consistently provide technology support in the families’ home languages so that families could help their students. Despite these challenges, when offered the option for in-person learning, many English learners opted to continue instruction online over health and safety concerns.

English learners faced additional challenges in receiving instruction. For some, family members may have been classified as essential workers, leaving English learners responsible for providing child care for siblings. For others, English learners may have begun working to help support their households, since COVID-19 had a severe impact on employment for immigrant workers. In part due to these additional family responsibilities, English learner chronic absenteeism rose during the pandemic. In schools that only offered remote learning, attendance was typically lower for middle and high school English learner students than for their peers. Chronic absenteeism is problematic because it often leads to extremely poor academic performance and a significantly higher likelihood of dropping out of school without graduating.

These challenges likely explain why English learner academic performance has recently declined in math and reading, according to state assessments. Although public charter school English learners have historically outperformed their traditional public school peers in growth in math and reading, English learners continue to lag behind their English-speaking classmates.
On tests assessing how well English learners are mastering the English language, writing and speaking proficiency was lower in 2022 compared with pre-pandemic proficiency, potentially because these skills are harder to teach remotely. Of greater concern is the lack of English language growth from the 2019-20 school year to the 2021-22 school year, meaning that English learners are not making up for the lost instructional time.

Like traditional public schools, where 12% of students are English learners, approximately 14% of public charter school students are English learners. In this case study, we ask the question: How might we better support English learners?

**Methodology**

From January through June 2023, we visited 10 schools to learn more about their efforts in the aftermath of the pandemic. In selecting site visit locations, we purposely selected a few schools that had higher proportions of English learner students to better understand how they are serving English learners, who are a growing percentage of the total school population. For example, at Burnham Wood in Texas, 54% of students participate in the bilingual/ESL education program. At HIVE Preparatory in Florida, 22% are current English language learners, and 65% of students in Rocketship Mosaic in California are English learners.

We also conducted interviews with charter associations and authorizers as well as members of the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition. In addition, we surveyed nearly 150 public charter school leaders and 100 public charter school teachers and support staff across the country.

Through these efforts, we identified a variety of initiatives or strategies to better serve English learners.

**Strategies**

The schools we visited were serving larger numbers of English learners before COVID. In response to COVID, many continued to implement strategies used pre-pandemic and, in some cases, adopted new strategies — such as expanding access to devices and software.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adding staff in core instruction to support English learners</td>
<td>Schools provide individual support for EL students.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Schools hire teacher aides to support large numbers of EL students in core courses.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Schools hire a substantial number of multilingual staff.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating intentional coordination with classroom teachers</td>
<td>Schools assign social workers for students, and the social workers also coordinate with students’ teachers to ensure that students have all the resources and support they need to fully access instruction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using language acquisition strategies</td>
<td>Schools train teachers using programs that include various strategies such as hand gestures, which help increase comprehension by connecting an action with a word, and anchor charts, which are visual representations of learning that students can refer back to later.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offering 1:1 devices</td>
<td>Schools provide students with devices such as laptops or Chromebooks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holding celebration activities</td>
<td>Schoolwide celebrations of students passing their English proficiency assessments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offering casual, informal, student-run language clubs</td>
<td>In an effort to ensure that students feel affirmed in speaking in their native languages, schools have adopted after-school language clubs where students can gather and speak in their native language while working on English acquisition, in a more relaxed, informal setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing support for parents</td>
<td>Schools offer services to help families address basic needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schools offer formal programs committed to outreach to families in crisis.</td>
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</table>

**Staffing strategies to support English learners**

This case study focuses on one of the strategies that we saw in the site visit schools — staffing in core instruction to support English learners.

While all public schools are required to provide support for English learner students, the way schools staff their classrooms for core instruction has the potential to greatly impact the experience of English learners. English learners have the dual challenge of learning English while also learning academic vocabulary and content.

The schools we visited accelerate English learner exposure to academic English by adapting the school’s staffing models to best serve the needs of their English learners.
Individualized instruction in their native language while transitioning to English academic vocabulary

One strategy we saw was individualized instruction in a student’s native language. Schools with relatively small numbers of English learner students assign teachers to work directly with these students, instructing them in academic content initially in their native language and transitioning to English academic content.

For example, at HIVE Prep, the school’s traditional English learner program is built for younger English learners in kindergarten. Typically, the school enrolls 100-150 kindergartners each year, and 60-70% of those kindergartners do not speak English at the start of the school year.

However, during the pandemic, two older students who did not speak any English transferred into the school, prompting the school to quickly adapt to meet those students’ needs. For every core subject, the two students had a teacher assigned to work only with them. The teacher would teach the lesson in their native language until staff felt confident the students could start receiving instruction in English. One of the students moved after the school year, but the other student returned to school the following year and speaks English. The student still receives some support in class but no longer needs more individualized attention.

Group instruction staffed with teachers providing language supports

Another strategy is group instruction with staff providing language supports. Schools with larger proportions of English learners have built in language supports within the classroom.

Rocketship Mosaic offers several dual language classes. In these classes, certified English learner teachers work to provide appropriate language support to English learner students who learn from and alongside their English-dominant peers.

Instead of dedicated dual language classes, Burnham Wood uses classroom aides to provide language support. Depending on the number of English learners in a class, one to three aides are staffed in core classes such as English, math, science, and social studies. The aides help both the students and the teacher. For instance, an aide may translate for the students and support them in their learning. To help the aides prepare for the class, the classroom teacher will share their lesson plans. The aides are part of the school’s tutoring program, and many are education majors in college looking for additional classroom experience in anticipation of one day becoming a classroom teacher.
Hiring multilingual staff

Hiring multilingual staff can be a great asset to support English learners. The schools with large proportions of multilingual staff were located in areas with large Spanish-speaking populations, which helped to increase the recruiting pool.

HIVE Preparatory is located in Miami, and most of the staff are Spanish speaking. Because of the bilingual staff, they can make adjustments while teaching in Spanish. The staff transition little by little, speaking less Spanish as students become more confident in English.

Similarly, Burnham Wood is located in El Paso, Texas, across the border from Mexico. Many of the staff are Spanish speaking and were immigrants. Staff noted that because they had to overcome similar challenges, they are able to serve as role models for students to show that they can be successful in learning English and doing well academically.

Conclusion

The flexibility afforded to charters allows them to innovate when it comes to serving English learner students. Charter schools use their independence and autonomy to staff classes and create programs and initiatives that work best for their student populations. This flexibility has helped charter schools respond nimbly to the changing needs of their students and accelerate learning for those who were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

Other schools looking to help English learner students can use the example set by these schools as a potential road map. The systems the schools put in place demonstrate how to create customized programs that expand learning opportunities for English learner students and maximize their potential.

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1 See 20 U.S.C. § 7801(25)
2 U.S. Department of Education “Ensuring English Learner Students Can Participate Meaningfully and Equally in Educational Programs.” https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-factsheet-el-students-201501.pdf


6 Ibid.


13 Lazarín, “English Learner Testing During the Pandemic: An Early Readout and Look Ahead.”

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT ENGLISH LEARNER STUDENTS

16 Ibid.