

**The San Diego Small High School Knowledge Capture Project:  
*Promises and Challenges***

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# **Approaches to Promoting College Readiness for English Learners**

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## Background

Under the direction of Libia Gil, two researchers at American Institutes for Research (Catherine Bitter and Laura Golden) conducted a series of interviews at five small schools in San Diego with the aim of capturing practices that foster college readiness for students, particularly practices that address the specific needs of English learners (ELs).<sup>1</sup> The sample of schools was selected to ensure a range of features across schools, such as the size of the English learner population at the school, diversity of backgrounds and language levels of English learners, gains in proficiency, types of programs, and location. Wherever possible, the researchers interviewed the principal, two teachers, and two students at each school. Interview questions included a range of topics, such as what college readiness means to staff at the school, practices in place at the school that foster college readiness for English learners, how teachers are prepared to meet the expectations of the small school, the role of parents and community, students' experiences in attending the school, and lessons learned along the way at all levels.

Following is a draft of some key issues and highlights that emerged from an analysis of the interview data (final revision as of April 2010).<sup>2</sup>

## Academic Content and Support

With regard to instruction and support, one school, the School of International Business (SIB), stood out as unique from the other schools, offering a comprehensive and school-wide approach toward meeting the needs of English learners. At other schools, particular strategies, such as project-based learning and internships, school-wide AVID programs, and college trips were highlighted.

### *Targeted efforts for English learners school wide (School of International Business)*

The School of International Business is a case of a school that has taken a proactive and comprehensive approach to addressing the unique needs of their large EL population (many of whom are at the beginning stages of learning English). This school has a deliberate and systematic approach to meeting the needs of their ELL students that is embedded in the practices throughout the school.

The principal indicated that the school starts with a good understanding of their student population by looking at and discussing data, which has been “vital in addressing students’ needs.” The principal noted that she and the teachers share the belief that ELs need more support and that the resources should be targeted toward the students who need them most. “It begins with a different philosophy – that students who need it the most get the best teachers.” As a

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<sup>1</sup> The genesis for this probe grew out of the fifth meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform held in Sacramento, California, which focused on college readiness for EL students.

<sup>2</sup> This study was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

result, the principal is very purposeful in the way she assigns teachers to classes. Whereas historically the ESL or sheltered classes have been given to the least experienced teachers (and even teachers still being documented), at SIB teachers who are “the most qualified and the best at their craft” are assigned to those classes. In addition, the principal ensures that those classrooms get the resources they need, such as technology and document cameras.

Each student is hand-scheduled and placed based on his or her needs. For students at the lowest language levels (i.e., newcomers), there is a dedicated ESL program with a strong teacher who has many years of ESL experience and is supportive of students. Students indicated that teachers in all subject areas help them to learn English and go out of their way to explain things to them. In the content areas, ELs are grouped together for some classes. For those classes with large numbers of ELs, peer tutors are included to provide support. Peer tutors get credit for assisting in class and get training for their role as tutor via a resource teacher on site and the AVID teacher. Depending on the nature of the class, in other cases, SIB is purposeful about placing students in heterogeneous classes. In those cases, no more than 30% of the class is made up of ELs so that other students can support them and serve as English models.

As an additional support, the principal was able to use some of the EL funding to hire a counselor who is dedicated to following the progress of ELs. The principal noted that this is the type of support you would traditionally offer to higher-achieving students. But again, in its commitment to allocate resources to the students most in need, the school has targeted ELs. The counselor speaks Spanish, and “has really helped with communication to parents and students since he is truly there to support their needs.” The principal further noted, “We’re pleased with the results we’re getting... It has made a big difference – like night and day.”

Some of the school-wide practices available to all students at SIB (as well as at many other small schools in San Diego) that were mentioned as beneficial for ELs include:

- **Striving Readers program.** Students in ninth and tenth grade who are reading at three or more levels below grade level are placed in a Striving Readers class – which is an additional English class geared toward accessing literacy across the content areas. The class focuses on academic language that is relevant for their classes. For example, they learn how to decipher information in a math book or how to read a history book. Although the program is not specifically designed for ELs, it is beneficial for them, and many ELs are included in those classes.
- **AVID program.** The AVID program at SIB targets students who are traditionally underrepresented at the college level, including ELs. The AVID teacher communicates with other teachers regularly, supports each of the content areas, and talks about common strategies to use across classes, such as teaching units of study that create connections across classes. In addition to learning study skills, such as note-taking and organization, AVID students also learn about college culture and learn valuable information about scholarships, college options, and the college application process. Students in the AVID classes have also taken college trips to SDSU and UCSD, which has been very helpful to them in understanding the environment of the colleges. Conversely, students who do not

have the opportunity to take AVID can have significant gaps in their understanding of college options and the application process.

- **Partnership with Mesa College.** The “fast track” program is open to all students on the Kearny campus, and SIB staff commented that more and more of the EL students at their school are taking advantage of it. In fact, both students we spoke with were ELs in their senior year and taking a full a full load of Mesa College classes. One student explained that he had to take an English exam to determine his placement in Mesa College classes. By 12<sup>th</sup> grade, he scored well enough that he did not have to take ESL classes. He qualified for college-level reading for the first semester, and next semester he will be able to take English 101, which will be transferable to any university. The principal noted, “particularly with ELs, we’ve changed their perception of going on to college.” The school counselor helps students think about what classes would be appropriate to take at Mesa College and helps them complete the paperwork to do so. School staffs have also made specific efforts to help students who are not legal residents with the necessary paperwork for enrolling in college.
- **Tutoring.** After-school tutoring is available school wide every day for math and English, and ELs take advantage of it. The principal remarked, “We tell every parent of an EL that it’s available and necessary that they come.” Students indicated that their teachers at SIB are very accessible to them and will offer help in any subject. Teachers offer help to students even when they are not in their classes anymore. For example, students who are taking college classes often go back to their SIB teachers for help.
- **Internships.** The advisory board (composed of community members) is active in providing students with opportunities for internships, job shadows, and guest speakers. There is someone on staff who is in charge of getting guest speakers and is able to respond to specific requests from teachers. In one example, a recent guest speaker was a Spanish-speaking graduate of SD High who had gone on to Purdue University, providing a role model for students. The school also has a strong relationship with Marriott Hotels. Marriott staff come to the school and talk to students about the hotel industry – what skills are needed, e.g., speaking English. In another example, an immigration lawyer was invited to speak at an intermediate ESL class. Students gathered ideas on what they knew and wanted to know about the topic of immigration. “She was invited to share her story, tell the kids about the route she took to earn her law degree, and answer their questions about immigration. Afterwards, we spoke about what it takes to graduate from law school.”
- **College-going culture.** Teachers often talk to students about what will be required of them at the college level. School assemblies give students information about the kinds of colleges, which helps them to decide which college they may want to go to.

The professional learning at the school is primarily site-based and focuses heavily on strategies that support language learning. The principal and literacy resource teacher do some modeling and co-teaching of lessons with teachers. Teachers videotape one another and observe each other’s classrooms. In some cases, they have individual meetings with the principal. Some

professional development sessions are done as a whole staff and some in small groups. In addition, teachers indicated that they are a strong support for one another. One teacher noted, “We’re a small school and my support is just down the hall or just an email away.” Another teacher mentioned that he had been working closely with the Striving Readers teacher to improve his teaching of academic language and to build his understanding of how to apply the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) strategies.

The principal noted that she always pushes for students to communicate in the classroom and that ELs are active participants. Students are expected to be talking and feel comfortable doing so. As a result, there is rapid improvement in language acquisition.

Some of the strategies that teachers mentioned using in their classrooms include:

- **Heterogeneous grouping.** One teacher noted, “I give them a chance to talk with people who are more fluent so they learn from others... Students come with a great diversity of previous knowledge so I focus on balancing my groups so some are strong on academic skills and some are strong on English.” The principal also indicated that she and the literacy resource teacher had been working with teachers on how to manage group work.
- **Role model.** One teacher noted that he comes from a similar background as many of his students and as a result is able to serve as a role model for them—showing them that it is possible to achieve: “I share my story.” And because he was an EL himself, he is able to empathize with his students’ learning process and know what would be helpful to them.
- **Academic language.** School wide, teachers focus on academic language learning, using strategies such as word walls. The math teacher noted that he works with students on the roots of words such as “polynomial.” He also uses “visual vocabulary” that helps students remember the meaning of the word.
- **Writing.** One teacher noted that she was moving students away from writing summaries to writing analytically, which will get them ready for college-level writing. She does a lot of modeling on writing clear sentences and topic sentences. For higher level ELs, she gives them the opportunity to revise for clarity.
- **Translation.** One teacher mentioned that he translates key vocabulary into Spanish as needed. He also encourages speakers of other languages to write translations of definitions into their own languages.
- **Socratic seminar.** The ESL teacher said that she uses Socratic seminars to get students to think about and talk about a topic in depth.

In addition, the small school setting itself seems to provide an important benefit for ELs. Students have daily interactions with school staff. And all students, including ELs, receive a high level of support, individual attention, and encouragement from their teachers. Teachers communicate with one another about student progress and know the strengths and weaknesses of their students. They are willing to offer help to all students, even those who are not in their

classes. The principal noted a change in students over the four years of the school's growth. "I see more confident students. I see students who think the college system is for them and that it's an understood expectation that it's available for them. Mostly because of the small school setting and we know our students well... In a large school, the neediest population gets overlooked. I'm so pleased this year to see students who started with us and could not speak English and are now in college. It's been the first year I felt we've done something life changing."

### ***Project-based learning (Construction Tech Academy)***

Another approach to designing an academic program that addresses the needs of EL students (as well as many others) is to incorporate project-based learning into the curriculum. Construction Tech Academy (CTA) provides a unique example of leveraging community support to provide hands-on opportunities for students to engage in project-based learning and internships. CTA was started by representatives from industry who recognized the need for greater diversity in the construction and engineering fields. It followed the development of a construction engineering program at San Diego State University. CTA aims to prepare all students for the university with a rigorous path that prepares them for college.

CTA's advisory program is primarily focused on project-based learning. During the advisory period, teachers conduct integrated projects with students by grade level that are focused on engineering, architecture, and construction. For example, a recent project required students to design a Starbucks that would fit into the architecture of Balboa Park. Students went to the park, photographed the architecture, interviewed people at the park, designed a building, made a scale model of the building, and presented it to adults from the school and industry. Each project takes approximately six weeks on average, and students work in groups of 4-10 students with assigned leadership positions, such as the "foreman" or "superintendent." Teachers develop the projects over the summer and begin a new one with the students each quarter. Guests from industry often participate in the advisories by providing guidance on the projects or sharing their experiences in school and industry.

The project-based learning extends beyond the advisory class as well. As one teacher explained, if the students complete a project to design an amusement park during advisory, the physics teacher will teach about the physics of the rides, the geometry teacher will discuss the shapes of the various rides, and the English teacher may have them write a persuasive brochure to convince people to attend the park.

The principal of CTA sees this learning technique as preparing students well for the types of work and thinking required in college, teaching them how to "problem solve and work collaboratively in groups." In addition, he noted that the projects encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning: "Students are given parameters and timelines. We teach them to manage their own time and resources without having direct teacher guidance all of the time."

The principal and teachers cited the advantages the project-based learning program has for English learners. Teachers are expected to set up project groups with a range of language skills.

English learners can then practice speaking English in a peer setting. According to the principal, “In the project environment you see English learners interacting more, speaking more. It allows them to use other strengths they have.” A teacher echoed this opinion, saying, “In the traditional class [ELs] are stuck behind the language. But in a team setting they can communicate in different ways... it gives them communication skills. It also gives them the confidence to tackle projects and be successful.”

In addition to supporting the implementation of project-based learning by consulting on or sponsoring projects, the community is engaged with CTA in several other ways. A community outreach staff member at CTA helps to facilitate a variety of community-based activities. For example, representatives from industry visit the school to provide guest lectures or to teach units. Industry members also provide job shadows and field trips for students. The job shadows provide students with the opportunity to meet professionals in a career area they are interested in, to ask questions about the work they do, and to see firsthand what the work is like. Other representatives from industry mentor students after school. For example, there is an after-school mentorship program for girls. Industry sponsors also provide paid internships to students, many of whom are English learners, over the summer. Finally, industry members have donated a significant amount of funding to the school and have set up scholarships for students. Any student who qualifies and is accepted to San Diego State’s Construction and Engineering program will receive a full scholarship from the Association of General Contractors.

As one student noted, “It’s more about learning real world experiences and preparing for the real world.”

### ***School-wide AVID (School of Community Health and Medical Practices)***

While AVID is a program that has proven useful to many traditionally under-served students, it provides a particularly promising set of strategies for encouraging and supporting EL students to succeed academically. At the School of Community Health and Medical Practices (CHAMPS), all students participate in a school-wide Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. All teachers at CHAMPS are trained in AVID strategies, and, according to the CHAMPS principal, “Any teacher coming here has to buy in” to the strategies. Many students choose to attend CHAMPS because of this program.

The core AVID curriculum is taught as part of the advisory period at CHAMPS and aims to develop students’ skills relevant to the challenges they will face in college. Across all four years, students are expected to keep planners and binders and use Cornell note-taking techniques. To prepare for the types of higher-level thinking skills that will be required in college, part of the AVID curriculum focuses on how to develop and respond to various levels of questions, including questions that require reasoning, analyzing, comparing/contrasting, and predicting/hypothesizing. Finally, CHAMPS has incorporated AVID’s WICR (writing, inquiry, collaboration, and reading) method across all classes in the school.

The focus of the core AVID period varies depending on students’ grade level. In the freshman and sophomore years, according to one teacher, the advisory is a “support system for [students’] core academic classes.” Earning good grades is the primary focus of the AVID advisory period.

All students are expected to fulfill the A-G requirements, and advisory teachers check in on students' transcripts and grades to make sure they are on track. According to the lower house AVID lead teacher, "The AVID teacher is like a second parent, keeping the students on track for their grades, sharing information from one teacher to another... we know if there is a paper or test in another class...It sends a message that...we're not willing to sit by and watch you fail, we will support you to succeed."

In the upper grades, students are taught about the college preparation and application process. All students are required to fill out the FAFSA and take the PSAT and SAT. Advisory teachers continue to check students' notes, organization, and binders for their content area classes. Students also work collaboratively in groups to discuss and write a response to a higher-level question that they have created around their coursework. By having small group discussions and projects, CHAMPS is trying to foster the use of study groups as a strategy to use in college. Finally, a subset of students does a two-year research project in order to receive college-level AVID credit. According to one teacher, the focus in the upper grades on college preparation is particularly important for English learners who may not be familiar with the college admission process in the U.S. or may have parents who are unfamiliar with the education system in the U.S.

According to the principal, the "AVID culture" extends across all aspects of the school. For example, as part of their "Roll Call" assembly time, guest speakers teach students about strategies to prepare for college and motivate students to apply to college. In addition, each grade level has a budget for college visits, in which students visit a school and write about the visit afterwards. According to the principal, the college trips "have been tremendous in changing the minds of students who have not been able to go to college before and help to get them excited about that." CHAMPS has also started a 2-day summer camping retreat (funded by SDCS), where they discuss expectations for behavior and college preparation. Every teacher and nearly every student at all grade levels attends. As part of the retreat, motivational speakers talk about how to be successful in college and about the characteristics of a successful student. According to the principal, "It was something we did to get our students excited about school, learning, and college."

Finally, CHAMPS has incorporated an AVID tutoring program in all content areas. Approximately 20 tutors have been hired to assist struggling students. These tutors, who are primarily local university students, work with students during an extra period at the end of the day. Students who fall below a C in a particular class are expected to attend this tutoring period. Tutors also assist during the school day with content area and elective classes. Both CHAMPS teachers highlighted the importance of this tutoring program for addressing the needs of English learners. According to one math teacher, "Whenever I have that extra set of eyes and body in the room that can help if a student has an individual need, that is very helpful for ELs. They really want to succeed and they are not afraid to ask for help." According to a second teacher, "We have a strong tutoring program, so we try to teach [students] to seek out resources, especially our ELs who may have trouble with reading and writing...Having the ability to advocate for themselves – we encourage that."

While all students, regardless of their language ability, participate in the AVID program at CHAMPS, aspects of the program are particularly targeted toward students who are learning



English. Specifically, tied into AVID’s writing focus, CHAMPS has incorporated a school-wide writing focus into their academic program across all content areas. While each teacher addresses certain aspects of writing relevant to his or her content area, there is also a common focus across the school on several writing characteristics, including capitalization, order, punctuation, and spelling. According to the principal, the focus on “order” encourages students to organize their thoughts well and think about how to incorporate the various details that make up their writing. They are now also examining student work and having conversations about the next steps to boost students’ writing skills.

### ***College trips (CIMA)***

The principal at CIMA (School of Communication) indicated that the school is working to establish a college-going culture for their student population, which is largely composed of ELs, and that the “teachers work hard to make sure students understand that college is a possibility in their lives.” The annual college trip at CIMA provides students with a hands-on opportunity to learn about the college environment and college options firsthand, in addition to providing them with experiences outside their neighborhood community.

Approximately 40 students go on the trip each year. They are selected on the basis of their GPA, citizenship grade, and an application and essay. Preference is given to 11<sup>th</sup> graders. During the 5-day trip, students visit approximately 8-10 universities across the state (public and private). This year they will visit: Cal State LA, UCLA, SC, CSU Bakersfield, Fresno State, San Jose State, UC Merced, Stanford, and SFSU. Before the trip, students are required to research the schools they will be visiting and prepare questions. While they’re in the bus in transition from school to school, groups of students give presentations on the schools they have visited.

The principal noted that some of the students who go on the trip have never been farther than Los Angeles, or even as far as Los Angeles, so the trip itself is an eye-opening experience. They have the opportunity to travel on the bus and stay in hotels and see some points of interest along the way, such as Hearst Castle and San Francisco’s Fisherman’s Wharf, Ghirardelli Square, and Chinatown.

The college trip costs approximately \$12,000 to \$15,000. In the past, the trip has been covered by donations. This year it will be primarily funded by the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools Grant. The principal requires students to contribute \$100 to ensure their commitment. For families who are unable to afford the \$100, he makes alternate arrangements, such as volunteering time in the library.

Students who go on the college trips have the opportunity to experience the college environment firsthand, to learn about the different academic programs that are offered, and to “think outside of San Diego.” The principal noted that the students who go on the trip bring back a lot of information to share with other students, and that “it really permeates throughout the whole school about the possibilities of going to college.”

In addition to the state-wide trip, CIMA also arranges short trips for groups of students to visit local universities, such as San Diego State, USD, and UCSD, and local community colleges.

One student mentioned that she had the opportunity to follow a college student for the day and sit in on her classes. Furthermore, all 12<sup>th</sup> graders at CIMA are required to take a senior advisory class that focuses on helping students understand college options, fill out college applications and essays, research and apply for scholarships, and complete the senior exhibitions. Lower level ELs are grouped into advisories with a Spanish-speaking teacher.

Finally, CIMA has been able to take advantage of opportunities available through the Student Center that give all students an opportunity to learn about college options, such as college workshops, college nights, college fairs, and career day. The Center has also arranged for guest speakers to do presentations in CIMA classes on colleges and careers. One CIMA student mentioned that she participated in a senior advisory at the Student Center (in addition to her senior advisory at CIMA) – where she was able to get individual attention on college prep issues, such as applications, financial aid, etc.

The principal indicated that these practices have increased students' knowledge about college options and what is needed to get there. "When I compare the kids that went on the first college trip four years ago to the kids that are going this year – it's a different type of kid....more savvy, college oriented, and more academic."

## Personalization

When asked about the benefits of small schools for ELs, respondents at all schools and across all levels – principal, teachers, and students – mentioned the personalization that takes place in the small school environment. School staff noted that students don't "fall through the cracks" in a setting where teachers know each student personally and check on them regularly to address individual needs. One principal noted, "There is at least one adult in this office who knows every student." Another principal pointed out that before, in the large comprehensive high school, "there was really only one track of students that were pushed into college," and that now, with break up into four small schools, all students "have advocates for them saying, 'you can do that'." A teacher at another school commented, "Students get more support at a small school. I know almost all the students and what they are taking, who are their teachers. We can identify their strengths and weaknesses. We get to know them better and then they get more support. Here they have more communication with the teachers, counselors, and principal." When asked what they liked best about their school, several students expressed appreciation for the extra support that they receive at their small schools. One student commented that he gets "more one-on-one with teachers" and that "teachers are more willing to stay and help students." Another student commented, "I like the support most. Teachers really support us... They are always there for you... They give tutoring out of their time... I like the flexibility and confidence teachers give us. It's like we're in a second home. They really care about the students, not just money or their job. They make you feel comfortable speaking to them. I like that most."

The personalization is a benefit for all students, although it can be particularly beneficial for ELs, who have unique needs that can easily be overlooked in a large school. One principal pointed out, "In a large school the neediest population gets overlooked, especially because parents do not or cannot advocate for the students. The teachers and I know students so well, so their needs are more transparent, hard to miss." Another principal noted, "I have 500 students, two counselors,

and one principal who knows the whole population... It especially helps ELs because they don't know or don't advocate for themselves what they need." One EL student said that the personal attention he had received at his small school had helped him tremendously. "I was short a few credits. My counselor helped me get into night school to get back on track. My principal is always complimenting me, and it motivates me more to do better. It's always nice to hear those compliments. Especially the ladies in the office. They make sure I'm on time, and at class. I owe a lot to them."

School staff at some schools specifically mentioned small class size and looping as aspects of small schools that allow them to get to know students individually and follow their progress over time. "I teach better because I know them," noted one teacher. "I think the looping is important in social studies because we know exactly what we worked on last year with the group. So, we can focus on the next step. And I think it makes a big difference," noted another teacher, giving the example of one EL who had attended 21 different schools and benefited from the continuity of the looping, turning into one of their best students. "There are some things she's really good at because she did them over and over again. And other things she's lacking in because she never got them." Another teacher commented, "[Students] are with teachers for more than one year, so we really know their strengths their weaknesses and can help them work on those. When we used to teach in the comprehensive high school, I would invest all this time and energy into my kids and then they would go off to their next English teacher and I would never see them again."

One principal pointed out that the small school environment also benefited ELs because of the exposure to English language models. "In a lot of larger schools, ELD students really are segregated and only put in ELD classes. Here they interact with native English speakers so they hear English spoken in its natural form, so I think that is one of the advantages." Another principal pointed out that the small school environment allowed them the flexibility to offer courses that benefit their particular EL population and "not just throw them all into one basket just because they speak the same language at home." Furthermore, the small school format allows schools the flexibility to change things that are not working. Staff know students, including ELs, and their needs, and are able to make adjustments along the way. One student mentioned that he was able to get in to see a counselor and make changes to classes with much more ease than his friends at larger high schools.

One teacher pointed out that "the sharing of information among teachers goes a long way" in the small school setting. The principal at the same school pointed out that "the natural collaboration" that occurs among staff benefits students at small schools. "When you have the English teacher next to your math teacher, the conversations among staff are so beneficial for EL kids and students in general."

Several school staff noted that the benefits of personalization extend to parents as well. In the small school setting, school staffs are able to reach out to parents, particularly EL parents, in a way that would be more difficult in a large school. They are able to reach out to parents individually, and "parents are more comfortable coming in and asking questions" in the small school setting. Many schools reported that they provide translators during school events, and some hold separate meetings for parents in Spanish and in English. In addition, some have hired

counselors and parent liaisons who speak Spanish to further facilitate communication with parents. One teacher commented, “We have really good attendance at our open houses. This is something very new to me. The difference between when SD High complex versus SD small schools is unbelievable. I get way more parents now than I ever did before.” Another teacher commented, “The personalization piece is huge for ELs because going back to the parents not understanding the whole educational system and so we serve as surrogate parents in that aspect and our students have so many needs – a product of being inner city as well as ELL – they have a lot of needs. It would be very easy for them to slip through the cracks or fly under the radar in a big comprehensive high school.”

One principal commented, “Students coming to us at lower levels, but we are doing more with them” because of the personalization.

## Parent Engagement

Engaging parents in the college preparation process was cited as a major challenge across schools. In particular, many respondents cited the need to better engage parents of English learners, who may not be familiar with the education system or the college preparation process. In addition, several respondents noted that some parents do not necessarily share the same expectations for their children’s enrollment in college that the school may have. For example, according to one student, “[My father] did not agree with the idea to send me to school because most girls don’t go to school in my country. They say they have to learn how to be at home, how to cook, to do all those things at home...” Two schools, School of Community Health and Medical Practices (CHAMPS) and School of International Business (SIB), have put in place some unique strategies that have started to attract more parents to the school campus to learn about and become involved in their children’s college preparation.

According to the principal of CHAMPS, the school has started to use a “personal touch” for parent outreach that has helped them (according to one teacher) “turn the corner” in engaging parents. This outreach process has been spearheaded by a new Dean of Students. The outreach effort consists of dinners for parents to meet with the principal or faculty to learn about the school and their children’s academic progress. To attract parents to the events, parents are contacted by students’ AVID teachers and office staff. Since the office staff speak a variety of languages, they are particularly helpful in contacting parents who do not speak English as their primary language. CHAMPS has also installed an automatic dialer that will contact all parents and leave messages about upcoming events. Thus, parents have started to hear from the school almost daily prior to an event.

The events have been structured in a way to attract parents and to make it easy for parents to attend. Parents are encouraged to bring their children so that they do not have to worry about child care. During the most recent event the parents were grouped at tables with their child’s AVID teacher, which allowed them to speak directly to someone who knows their child well. CHAMPS has also tried to keep presentation time to a minimum to make it a much more personalized experience. The students translated directly for the parents and teacher within the small groups when necessary. The dinners were also framed as big and important events and resulted in the district superintendent, board members, and even the press attending the event.

According to the principal, these efforts have increased parent attendance approximately ten-fold recently: “We have seen a lack of parent participation, but it has changed recently. When I started it was common to have only have a handful or 20 parents show up for open houses and parent events; we’ve increased that number to 200 now in our school.”

SIB has also employed several strategies to get parents more involved:

- **Grade night.** Instead of the traditional open house, parents are invited to come to the school twice a year for “grade night.” It is a family event that includes performances, snacks, and child care, but most importantly, provides the opportunity for parents to talk individually with school staff about their child’s progress and needs. Translation is provided in three different languages. One Farsi-speaking student indicated that his sister was able to translate for his parents. The last grade night was attended by 400 parents.
- **Parent meetings.** Periodically, the school holds meetings with parents. Since the principal and other school staffs speak Spanish, they are able to hold separate meetings in Spanish and in English. The principal explains to parents what students need to do to go to college and what classes are needed.
- **Calling home.** For languages that are not spoken by school staff, students at the school who speak the language will be asked to call homes to explain messages to parents.

In addition, some schools mentioned having hired a parent liaison and/or bilingual counselors in an effort to improve parent engagement. CIMA (School of Communication) has recently acquired a grant to begin conducting home visits.

## Concluding Comments

Across the five schools that were interviewed for this paper, ELLs seemed to benefit from the small school setting itself and the personalization it allows. School staffs tend to know each student individually, offering the opportunity to address the unique needs of ELLs, which are easily overlooked in a larger school setting. Furthermore, these schools made efforts to draw parents of ELLs into the school and encourage their participation. Each of the schools had approaches in place that promote college readiness for all their students, including ELLs, such as project-based learning (Construction Tech Academy), a school-wide AVID program (School of Community Health and Medical Practices), and college trips (CIMA).

One school stood out as unique in taking a comprehensive and proactive approach to meeting the needs of their ELL students. The School of International Business has a large number of ELLs, particularly at the beginning levels, and at that school, decisions about staffing, programming, instructional strategies, course placement and resource allocation are all made with the specific needs of ELLs in mind. The “constellation” of programs and practices in place at SIB, deliberately designed and integrated to support ELLs, ensures that meeting the needs of ELLs is embedded in the culture and everyday operation of the school.