

TOOLS FOR SCHOOLS

Postsecondary Access for Latino Middle-Grades Students

CASE STUDY

Learning English Among
Friends (LEAF)



A publication of the PALMS Project

The PALMS Project seeks to improve the life chances of Latino youth by opening doors to postsecondary education. We communicate information about how to equip and support students and their families in the pursuit of education beyond high school. We aim to impact the work of secondary schools, college access programs, and community-based organizations that are committed to providing Latinos with an education of the highest quality.

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About the PALMS Case Studies

The PALMS case studies offer in-depth descriptions of initiatives that seek to increase the educational attainment of Latino students. Though the programs' activities are oriented towards students' futures, they also pay close attention to how students are faring in their current educational settings. As such, they partner with schools to improve the quality of students' academic and social experiences in the secondary grades (6-12).

As part of the PALMS Tools for Schools collection, the case studies illustrate a variety of approaches that educational institutions can use to strengthen their outreach to the Latino families in their midst. We encourage our readers to use the case studies as discussion starters. To that end, each case includes a set of questions that facilitate analysis and application. It is our intent that these materials stimulate rich and productive conversations that will benefit both Latino students and the schools that serve them.

Suggested Format for Discussion of This Case Study

- Find a time and place where you and three to five colleagues can meet to discuss the case study. We recommend a 50- to 75-minute, uninterrupted segment.
- Agree to do the reading ahead of time and to jot down answers to the questions on page 3. Encourage everyone to mark up their copy of the case study. We provide wide margins so that readers can make notes.
- Before starting the meeting, decide on some ground rules for conducting the discussion (e.g., no side conversations, no one monopolizes the floor, all opinions are received with respect). It may help to have someone take on the role of facilitator.
- Begin the discussion by stating that the purpose of this time is to **explore ways in which your school or program can apply the lessons offered by this case study.**
- Make sure that someone is taking notes about the main points of your discussion.
- To conclude your discussion, try to agree on concrete action steps. For example, you may want to present your observations to a wider group of colleagues. Or you may be ready to begin implementing some of the ideas generated by your group.

We wish you the best in your efforts to promote postsecondary access among Latino students. Be sure to check the PALMS website regularly for new tools and materials to help you in your work.

Discussion Questions for Learning English Among Friends

Please review the following questions prior to reading the case study:

1. How did LEAF leaders learn about the needs and characteristics of the Hispanic population in South Waco? In what ways is this an ongoing process?
2. How do the LEAF partners (Baylor University, Waco Independent School District, community agencies) experience win-win outcomes as a result of their participation in the program?
3. In addition to teaching English to adults, what other strategies does LEAF employ to bridge the distance between Hispanic families and educational institutions?
4. How does LEAF help parents learn about the U.S. educational system?
5. How is LEAF trying to make itself sustainable?
6. What strategies from LEAF could be adapted to your local context?

Learning English Among Friends (LEAF)

In 2001, a university professor in Waco, Texas began to discern a connection between the low academic performance of some middle school students and their parents' limited or non-existent proficiency in English. As he shared his observations with other educators, they agreed to begin a program that focused on improving the parents' English skills, so that they could better support their children's education. And so was born LEAF, a program determined to keep student success from getting lost in translation.

Responding to the Need

What began as an enterprise to empower Hispanic parents to become involved in their children's education has reached far beyond the school walls, says Randy Wood, professor of curriculum and instruction at Baylor University's School of Education. Wood, along with Rob Rogers, associate professor in Baylor's School of Social Work, and several student volunteers, launched the LEAF program in 2003 as an outreach to South Waco's predominantly Hispanic community. Wood recalls learning that, within the 40-block area surrounding César Chávez Middle School, close to 500 people were not able to speak, read, or write in English. Put a different way, an estimated 70 percent of the parents at César Chávez do not speak English. "We began to see a connection between the academic struggles of some students and the fact that their parents could not communicate with school staff," he says.

Communication with school staff was not the only issue. Parents told Wood they wanted to learn English to improve their employment

prospects and to participate more fully in the life of their community.

One parent said, “If you don’t speak English, it’s like people don’t really see you.” Wood and Rogers then saw the potential of English classes not only to transform the school experiences of individual students, but also to revitalize a run-down community. “We believe the program has been successful because it’s come from the community. It’s not something we’ve been trying to impose upon them. It’s been something they want to better support their families. Our job was to figure out how to work together to remove the language barrier,” says Wood.

Wood and Rogers approached the school’s Campus Decision-Making Committee about starting an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) program at the school for interested parents. With an enthusiastic endorsement from the committee, and especially Alfredo Loredó, the school principal, LEAF’s first class was offered in September 2003 and attracted 30 participants. A supporter from the beginning, Loredó was instrumental in publicizing the program, issuing personal invitations for parents to attend classes. The program also advertised itself through Spanish-language radio stations. Once in the school, Loredó and his staff took additional steps to create a welcoming environment. Loredó comes to LEAF once a month and speaks to parents in Spanish, and several faculty members also stay late once or twice a month so they can personally greet the parents when they walk through the front doors.

A World of Partners

A typical LEAF night kicks off at 5:30 p.m. with groups of four or five adults sitting around a table and engaging in English-literacy activities with help from Baylor University pre-service teachers who receive 16 hours of training in ESL instruction. Each participant uses a workbook published by Oxford University Press that contains illustrated units on real-life topics such as visiting a doctor, shopping, and parenting. The books were purchased with funds from GEAR UP Waco (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), a LEAF partner since its inception. “The focus of GEAR UP Waco is preparing students to succeed in high school and college, so it made a lot of sense for us to support something that helps parents become more involved in their children’s education during the middle school years,” explains Matt Williams, executive director of the program until April 2006.

Funds from GEAR UP Waco also pay for the evening meal that parents, volunteers, and children share after an hour of ESL lessons. After the meal, parents can attend GED or computer classes, which are offered through a partnership with McLennan Community College and GEAR UP Waco. Williams notes that local university and college personnel will occasionally offer presentations about college admissions and financial aid to LEAF participants. “It’s kind of a back door for us to give them information about continuing their or their children’s education,” he says. While adults attend classes or presentations, AVANCE Waco, a

community agency that serves low-income families with young children, provides child care for infants and toddlers. Baylor volunteers offer crafts, tutoring, and other activities for children ages 4 and older.

According to Truell Hyde, vice provost for research at Baylor, LEAF's success can be attributed to the partnerships that the program leaders have cultivated. Funders also see the value of the partnerships, as evidenced by several grants that LEAF has received at the local and federal levels. This past summer, GEAR UP Waco was awarded a six-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education, which included \$1.2 million for continuing and expanding LEAF activities. "The GEAR UP program prioritizes partnerships, and we have plenty of evidence regarding the benefits that community partnerships make not only for student achievement, but for overall family well-being," says Williams.

A Responsive and Flexible Approach

One of LEAF's guiding principles is described well by the part of its name that says "among friends." The program has always worked to establish a relaxed and family-friendly atmosphere, in which tutors could get to know the adults in their group, and through which parents, neighbors, and children could spend more time together. The Baylor pre-service teachers pay close attention to the learning styles of their adult students and tailor the weekly lessons accordingly. The high level of comfort that learners experience with program staff and volunteers has led to changes in the program itself. "Once the students began feeling

more comfortable with English, they requested that we also offer GED and computer classes, so they could improve their employment prospects,” recalls Wood. LEAF leaders took the request seriously, and these classes were soon added to the program.

Other changes in the program have been initiated by the Baylor student volunteers. In 2005, senior Elizabeth Terry developed “LEAF Kids,” a literacy program for children in preschool through fourth grade who have parents in the LEAF program. Parents take home a pre-primer reader that they are required to read to their children at home two or three times a week. Terry notes that reading to their children is a big motivator for many parents to continue practicing their English skills at home. LEAF volunteers go over the book while the parents are in class, so that they will know what the story is about and can feel comfortable reading it with their children.

Ripple Effect

As parents learn English and become comfortable in the César Chávez building, they begin to come back for school-related events. Principal Loredó has noted a distinct link between participation in LEAF and participation in school events, such as open houses. In a November 20, 2006 article in the *Waco Tribune*, he notes, “We really believe, and the research shows, that a student whose parents are well versed in [English] and the school system will have more success.” According to Loredó, the costs of keeping the school building open are nothing compared to the

benefits experienced by students, families, and school personnel. In addition to feeling more comfortable in their children's schools, parents also feel empowered to carry out tasks many people take for granted, such as shopping at large grocery stores. During the sharing time at the beginning of each lesson, parents have told about getting promotions as a result of their improved language skills.

The impact extends beyond home and school. Wood speaks enthusiastically of South Waco as a community that's redefining itself, inwardly and outwardly. "You can see houses are being painted, flower beds are being dug, yards are being mowed. This used to be a real scary neighborhood, but it is not anymore," he explains. In 2005, LEAF leaders, volunteers, and parents were invited to Austin to meet with 10 Hispanic legislators from across the state and discuss their experiences with the program. According to Wood, parents were most struck by the fact that political officials were coming to them to ask their opinion about education. The results at César Chávez have been so encouraging that all but one of the seven middle schools in Waco Independent School District will host a LEAF program by January 2007. Financial backing from MCYC, a youth services agency, enabled Waco High School to add the program in fall 2006. LEAF will also operate on the Baylor University campus itself, working with 48 members of the university's housekeeping staff.

Looking Ahead

As LEAF expands into several new venues, its leaders are grap-

pling with preserving the integrity of the original design and defining the non-negotiable elements of the LEAF approach. Among these non-negotiables is the relaxed, friendly atmosphere that has characterized the program from the outset. According to Wood, the small group atmosphere is what keeps participants coming back. Also key will be the ability for each “branch” to remain responsive and open to the needs of the communities in which they operate.

To assist other communities in launching and building their own LEAF programs, Wood, Rogers, and their colleagues hope to develop a toolkit with appropriate materials and resources. Their success thus far has been well documented internally and by the media, making it very feasible for others to learn from their experiences. Wood says, “When we began this program at César Chávez, I told Mr. Loredó that I’m not here to just do a little research project and leave. I’m here for the long haul, whatever it takes for us to see something significant develop.” Three years later, it is clear that something significant *has* developed, and that much more is yet to come.

NOTES:

*The PALMS Project is a partnership between
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