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Boys and Girls Club Participation and English Language Development Among English Learner Students

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Summary

Using the Youth Data Archive—through which we match individual-level data from the Redwood City School District to that of the Boys & Girls Club of the Peninsula—we follow English Learner students over three academic years to study the link between their after school program participation and English language development. The Boys & Girls Club programming is not specifically focused on English learning, but does incorporate academic success elements into its activities. Our results indicate that Boys & Girls Club attendance is associated with gains in English proficiency from one academic year to the next, particularly in students' listening and speaking skills.

Data for this study come from the **Youth Data Archive (YDA)**, maintained by the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University and its partner agency The SPHERE Institute. The YDA is comprised of individual-level data for young people living in several San Francisco Bay Area communities from a variety of public and private agencies, including school districts, county human services agencies, county health services agencies, city parks and recreation departments, and local or regional non-profit youth-serving agencies. The data are linked individually across sources and over time to create a longitudinal record of youth's schooling, program participation, and service receipt within their communities.

Why Study English Learners and After School Participation?

In the past quarter century, the nation's K-12 public schools have experienced a large influx of students who speak languages other than English. Across California, one-quarter of the public school population is comprised of students who are not considered fluent in English (Williams et al., 2007), but in many districts this percentage is even higher. English learner (EL) students require additional in-school supports to learn English and importantly to meet the accountability standards set forth in the federal No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB). NCLB requires that schools show annual progress in student achievement overall and also for specific subgroups of students. English learner students are a designated NCLB subgroup and schools are required to show both increasingly higher rates of academic success as well as English language proficiency for these students each year. With these high stakes, many in the field of education are grappling with the best ways to help students

whose first language is not English gain needed language skills so that students succeed in learning and their schools succeed within the NCLB accountability system.

Research has shown that many factors affect how EL students acquire English language skills, including their preparation prior to entry in U.S. schools, educational practices, and out-of-school environments (Genesee et al., 2006; Ready and Tindal, 2006; Saunders and O'Brien, 2006; Valdés, 1998). Our study focuses specifically on out-of-school contexts, looking at the effects of after school program participation on English language development. The vast literature on after school program participation concludes that high quality programs do improve students' academic outcomes, especially for the most disadvantaged or at-risk students (see Lauer et al. (2006) for a recent meta-analysis of after school program evaluations). Researchers studying after school program effects have not fully explored English language acquisition as an academic outcome for non-native speakers.

The Setting: Boys & Girls Club of the Peninsula

The Boys & Girls Club of the Peninsula (BGCP) has several centers across San Mateo County. Nearly all (97%) Redwood City School District (RCSD) attendance at the Boys & Girls Clubs occurs at the Mervin G. Morris clubhouse, located on the grounds of Hoover Magnet School, a K-8 school in the district. This site serves primarily as an after school provider, though the program is also open for activities on weekends, and hosts organizations during the school day. Once students arrive after school they are separated by grade level and work for an hour with staff and volunteers on homework (often aided by a computer), extra work-sheets, independent reading, and occasionally arts projects. At the end of the homework hour, students move on to other activities, with programs that students or their parents sign up for in advance. Open gym time, arts and crafts, and enrichment programs are all part of the program

offerings. There is also a game room where students congregate.

The Outcomes: English Language Milestones

The California English Language Development Test (CELDT)—which is administered in the fall of each academic year—assesses a student's English proficiency in four different areas, which correspond to four separate subtests: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing.¹ A student receives a proficiency level of Beginner, Early Intermediate, Intermediate, Early Advanced or Advanced in each skill area, with an overall proficiency level derived by equally weighting the four subtests. Students are considered English Proficient when they earn an overall score of Early Advanced or Advanced, with a score of Intermediate or higher on each subtest.

Title III of NCLB requires that students who are new to a district and identify speaking a language other than English at home must take the CELDT test within 30 calendar days. From this test, students are then designated as Initially Fluent English Proficient (IFEP) or English Learner (EL), the latter of whom retake the CELDT annually until they are reclassified as Fluent English Proficient (RFEP). We consider three language milestones. Two of these milestones, which are set out in NCLB, are the Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAO) that school districts must meet:

- **AMAO 1** measures the annual progress of EL students. It requires students whose overall scores are Beginning, Early Intermediate, or Intermediate to improve one level by the following year. Those who score Early Advanced or Advanced must attain or maintain English Proficient status.
- **AMAO 2** measures the percentage of EL students in a defined cohort who have achieved English

¹ Students in Kindergarten and first grade are only assessed on Listening and Speaking. Prior to the 2006-07 school year, Listening and Speaking were tested together, but since that time have been tested in separate test components.

Proficient status. This cohort contains students who could reasonably be expected to have reached English Proficient status.

The final milestone is redesignation:

- **RFEP** status is achieved when a student: (1) attains English Proficiency on the CELDT; (2) achieves a minimum score on the California English-Language Arts Standards Test (CST ELA), which is administered in English; and (3) is evaluated by both the teacher and parents as ready for reclassification. Similar to AMAO 2, we consider redesignation among a cohort of students who could reasonably be expected to redesignate in the year.

Who Attends Boys & Girls Club?

As shown in Exhibit 1, RCSD students who attend BGCP are more likely than those who do not attend BGCP to be EL students (65% compared to 43%). Those who attend BGCP are also more likely than those who do not to receive Free or Reduced Lunch (86% compared to 57%); to have parents without a high school diploma (49% compared to 31%); and to be Latino (90% compared to 63%). Many of these factors, especially those connected to socio-economic status, are related. We control for these multiple influences in the findings presented in this brief.

RCSD Students who attend BGCP do so fairly regularly. On average, students attend 52 days during the school year, with little difference by English language group. For the analyses we present next, we also look at the extent of participation, with the thought that students who attend with higher frequency might experience more pronounced effects on their English acquisition. Overall, nearly a quarter (23%) attend the program 90 or more days during the school year. This is the equivalent of 18 consecutive weeks of after school participation, which is almost half (43%) of the school year. This rate of very high participation is similar across all four language groups.

Exhibit 1: Characteristics of RCSD Students Attending and Not Attending BGCP, Grades 1-7, 2004-05 to 2006-07

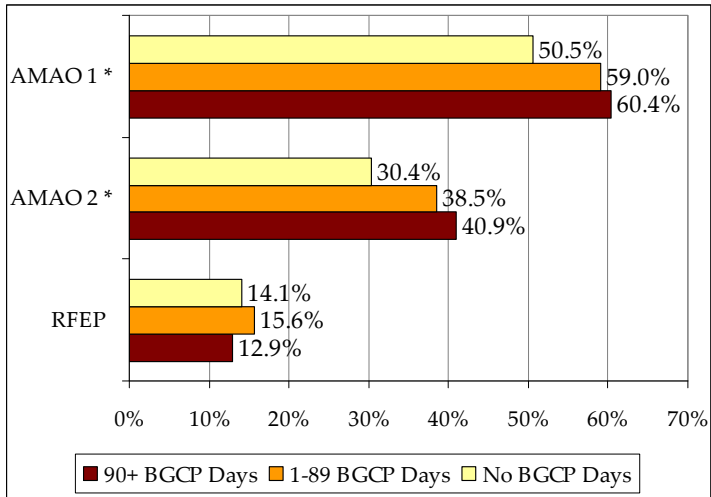
	BGCP Participant	No BGCP Participation
Language Proficiency		
English Learner	64.8%	43.4%
Redesignated Fluent English Proficient	13.5%	10.4%
Initial Fluent English Proficient	7.3%	7.1%
English Only	14.4%	39.1%
Gender		
Female	41.7%	49.8%
Male	58.3%	50.2%
Ethnicity		
African American	4.1%	27.4%
Asian	2.6%	2.4%
Latino	90.1%	63.1%
White	3.0%	6.8%
Native American	0.2%	0.3%
Average grade level	3.9	4.0
Free or Reduced Lunch	86.2%	56.8%
Special education	10.8%	10.8%
Parents' education less than HS	49.0%	31.3%
Enter U.S. schools after age six	12.3%	11.3%
Total Number of Observations	1,054	17,278

Linking Boys & Girls Club Attendance with English Language Proficiency Outcomes

The goal of this article is to understand how after school programming is associated with English language development amongst non-native English speakers. Exhibit 2 graphically shows the link between BGCP attendance at different levels and achievement of the three English language milestones discussed previously: AMAO 1, AMAO 2, and RFEP (redesignation). The graph is based on logistic regression models that control for a host of factors that affect both BGCP participation and language outcomes. The top set of bars shows that for an average 1st to 7th grade EL student at RCSD, the regression-adjusted percent who achieve AMAO 1 is 51%. Fifty-nine percent of the same average EL students who attend BGCP for 1-89 days during the school year achieve AMAO 1. Attending 90 or more

days is also associated with a higher rate of achieving AMAO 1 at 60%. The relationship between BGCP attendance and improved AMAO 1 outcomes is statistically significant for both of these groups. A similar pattern of outcomes holds for AMAO 2. About 30% of students who do not attend BGCP achieve AMAO 2. Those who attend 1-89 days or 90 or more days are more likely to achieve AMAO 2, 39% and 41% respectively (also statistically significant). Attending BGCP does not affect students' redesignation rates.

Exhibit 2: Links between BGCP Participation and English Language Milestones, Grades 1-7 in 2004-05 - 2006-07



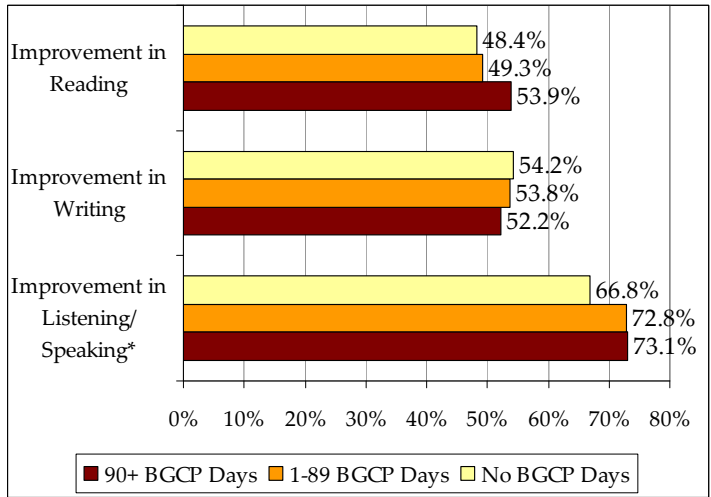
Notes: (1) All tabulations are regression adjusted for factors including grade level, sex, ethnicity, school attended, Free/Reduced Lunch status, parents' education level, special education, and timing of the entry to U.S. schools; (2) statistically significant effects (p <.05) are marked with an asterisk.

Linking Boys & Girls Club Attendance to Specific Aspects of Language Development

Through fieldwork we conducted at BGCP, we know that BGCP programming is not specifically focused on English language attainment. Why then would we see an improved chance of attaining AMAO 1 and AMAO 2 associated with attendance, especially at very high levels of attendance? We propose that it may be that youth who attend the club are gaining skills in the more non-academic aspects of language—in speaking and listening rather than in reading and writing. For instance, although BGCP staff are all bilingual, adult volunteers are mostly mono-lingual English speakers,

putting students who attend the club in situations that require them to speak or follow instructions in English. It is also possible that students who have characteristics that make them more likely to attend BGCP also are more likely to achieve English language milestones (selection bias). We have controlled for factors such as family economic and educational background, but we are unable to observe important factors such as student motivation or family drive for educational success.

Exhibit 3: Links between BGCP Participation and CELDT Sub-test Milestones, Grades 1-7 in 2004-05 - 2006-07



Notes: (1) All tabulations are regression adjusted for factors including grade level, sex, ethnicity, school attended, Free/Reduced Lunch status, parents' education level, special education, and timing of the entry to U.S. schools; (2) statistically significant effects (p <.05) are marked with an asterisk.

Reading, writing, listening and speaking are all considered in AMAOs 1 and 2, but can be examined separately with the underlying CELDT data. Exhibit 3 presents graphs similar to those in Exhibit 2, but for the reading, writing, and listening/speaking portions of the CELDT separately. We find no statistically significant effect of BGCP participation on improvements in students' English language reading and writing. Rather, the gains in English language proficiency come mainly from statistically significant improvements in students' listening and speaking portions of the CELDT. Students who attend BGCP are 6 percentage points more likely to improve their listening and speaking portions of the CELDT

compared to those who do not attend (73% compared to 67%).

Why Do We Find a Link Between Boys & Girls Club Attendance and Language Development?

We explore two paths to understanding why the link between BGCP attendance and improvement in listening and speaking might exist: (1) We conducted qualitative research at two of the BGCP sites, including the one located on Hoover campus; (2) we explore the possibility that students who attend BGCP are somehow more likely to do well on the CELDT regardless of their BGCP participation.

Through in-person observation, interviews, and focus groups, we learned that although the BGCP is not specifically focused in its programming on helping students to learn English, students are exposed to English. Mono-lingual English-speaking volunteers interact with students regularly and many activities require that participants speak or listen to English. Indeed, one Spanish-speaking parent we interviewed said he sends his child to BGCP specifically because he wanted him to learn English.

We also conduct investigations into whether there might be reasons other than BGCP participation that this particular group of students improved their language development at higher rates than other non-participating students. Specifically, we seek to understand whether there is selection bias in our results—that students who attend BGCP are somehow different from students who do not and those differences might be driving the findings in this brief. We examine students' math and English Language Arts CST (California Standardized Test) scores in the year prior to BGCP enrollment to see if there are differences. Focusing on EL students, we find that there are no differences in ELA test scores between those who do and do not enroll. Students who enroll have slightly higher math CST scores, which could indicate that students who are succeeding in other subjects are more likely to attend. However, the difference in scores is quite small and

we therefore conclude that even if there is selection bias that overstates the magnitude of our findings, the general conclusions from this analysis remain valid.

In addition, because the BGCP site that most students attend is located on a school campus, and also because BGCP is a relatively low-cost program, there are few barriers in place for students who want to attend the program.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

There are several policy-relevant conclusions related to this work. First, although after school programming has been linked to a host of positive academic outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged youth, this link to language development among English learner students is a new area that merits further exploration. It may be that EL students in a heavily Latino community, like Redwood City and the neighboring North Fair Oaks, do not have sufficient opportunities to speak English outside of school except in places like after school programs. Low-income English learners may be especially limited in opportunities, which makes the low cost of BGCP attractive.

A second implication of this research is that English language learning policy discussions need to concentrate on learning both inside and outside of school walls. To the extent that after school programming offers a safe venue for testing newly learned English listening and speaking skills, after school programs serving high concentrations of EL students should be intentional in creating these opportunities for youth. More research into this area is needed to fully understand the ways that non-school environments, and especially after school programming, can foster English learning in meaningful ways.

The research described in this brief also provides implications for the after school and out-of-school time programs and literatures. Specifically, more

research is needed to understand whether and how gaining English proficiency is linked to the host of positive youth development outcomes that can be attributed to high quality programming.

Finally, there are implications in many areas of policy for the value of linking disparate sources of data in ways that allow for new cross-agency analyses. The Youth Data Archive model of tracking individual youth across the various institutions that serve them throughout the community can be applied to a variety of policy areas to answer a host of questions about how we are and should be serving youth in and out of school settings. Cross-agency data sharing with the goal of supporting youth in communities offers tremendous potential for documenting the mechanisms that create positive youth outcomes.

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- This brief is based on an article by London, Norman, and Gurantz (2008).*
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- For a summary of this report and more information about the Youth Data Archive, please visit the John W. Gardner Center website at:*
http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/current_initiatives/youth_archive.html.