

Founded by the Center for Investigative Reporting

## State has one of nation's highest gaps in Hispanic-white reading proficiency

October 23, 2011 | Sarah Garland



*Students practice reading skills with an intervention teacher at an elementary school in Soledad, a small Salinas Valley town. (Sarah Garland/California Watch)*

**SOLEDAD** – On a cool winter morning Nicole Miller circulated through her fourth-grade classroom in this small town in the Salinas Valley, quizzing students on material they'd likely see on state tests in the spring.

“How do you know ‘hit the lights’ is an idiom?” she asked a student.

“ ‘Hit the lights’ is an idiom because if you hit the lights, they break,” the student replied.

Miller smiled. “Good answer!” she said.

The majority of students in Miller's class began their schooling speaking no English, and idioms often are the last frontier for anyone learning a foreign language.

Many of these students have just mastered the ability to read. But because idioms are heavily represented on California's fourth-grade test, these 9-year-olds need to learn that “tickled pink” doesn't mean turning colors and that someone who is “all thumbs” is clumsy.

Helping students reach this more sophisticated understanding of English is a difficult but increasingly urgent task. A decade ago, only 10 percent of Soledad fourth-graders demonstrated proficiency on state reading tests. The vast majority of the students are low-income Hispanics, many of them English-language learners.

By 2010, the percentage had leapt to 43 percent. The district plastered a new slogan on bulletin boards across the district: “We’re cooking!”

The improvement is impressive, but a large gap in proficiency still exists between Soledad’s fourth-graders and the statewide average. Soledad lags behind the rest of the state by 20 percentage points. At the current rate, it will take Soledad’s students at least another decade to catch up.

In many ways, Soledad’s struggles mirror those of the state as a whole, which has one of the nation’s biggest gaps in reading performance between Hispanics and whites.

By its own measure, the California Standards Test, the state has made some progress in closing that gap. In 2010, about half of Hispanic students were proficient on the fourth-grade English language arts test, up from just a quarter in 2003. The proficiency gap between Hispanics and whites shrank by 7 points.

California’s performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the Nation’s Report Card, reveals a bleaker picture.

Only 12 percent of Hispanic fourth-graders in California were proficient in reading on that test in 2009, which places them behind every state in the nation except for Utah and Minnesota. On this test, the proficiency gap between Hispanic and white students actually grew slightly over the past decade.

These figures suggest that huge numbers of California’s Hispanic students, the majority of whom are English-language learners, are missing a key benchmark that could affect the state’s long-term future: the ability to read fluently by third grade.

Research has shown [PDF] that students who miss this goal are at a much higher risk of dropping out of high school. That means California is on track to see millions of students drop out in the coming years.

The trend could spell economic disaster for a state that’s already deep in financial crisis, at a time when California is about a million college graduates short of meeting workforce needs, according to the Public Policy Institute of California.

“What we’re doing in California is a travesty,” said Patricia Gandara, co-director of The Civil Rights Project at UCLA and an expert on the Latino achievement gap. “There has been very little done to improve the situation for these kids, and it’s dire.”

### **Budget cuts hit reading programs**

Many experts argue that the Golden State has taken the wrong approach to teaching English-language learners, who are largely Hispanic and make up a quarter of the state’s 6.2 million students.

At the same time, California has a history of underfunding its schools compared with other states, experts say. Most recently, the fiscal crisis has hit schools and districts with large Hispanic populations particularly hard. Budget cuts are reducing programs intended to narrow the Hispanic reading gap, which hasn't gotten as much notice as it deserves, educators say.

"There's been so much attention to black-white gaps. We need more focus on what works for narrowing Hispanic-white gaps," said Sean Reardon, a Stanford University sociologist.

In the Soledad Unified School District, Superintendent Deneen Newman recognizes that the district is "not there yet," though officials are trying numerous innovations to make a difference.

"Our attitude is if we're not cutting it, we'll do whatever it takes," said Newman, a 23-year veteran of the public schools who started as an elementary school teacher in South Central Los Angeles. "The challenge is how quickly you can do it."

### **Hispanic student enrollment grows**

Soledad, a small dot on the map along Highway 101 in the center of the state, is nestled among vineyards, prisons, and fields of broccoli and strawberries. Its small middle class is made up mainly of prison guards. Most other residents pick crops. Half of the town's adults are high school dropouts.

Like the rest of California, Soledad has seen a boom in the number of Hispanic children enrolled in its schools, a growing number of whom don't speak English as a first language. Since 1999, the district's enrollment has more than doubled, to nearly 4,500.

Ninety-two percent are Hispanic, half are English-language learners, and the vast majority live near the poverty line. In California as a whole, a quarter of the students are English-language learners. Most of those students are Hispanic, and more than half of them are low-income.

Before 1998 and the passage of Proposition 227, many of Soledad's students learned mostly in Spanish up until sixth grade under the district's bilingual education program. After 1998, Soledad maintained a dual-language program funded by a grant; students spent half of the day learning in English and the other half in Spanish. But gradually, the program has shrunk to only two grade levels and eventually will close.

"The parents more and more opted for English," Newman said. "They are saying to get a job these days, you have to have English skills, and you have to pass that high school exit exam." Besides less parent interest, the district had difficulty attracting qualified teachers to teach in two languages, and district officials say the data on student achievement didn't support keeping it.

Now, nearly all of the district's classes are taught in English, with extra help for limited-English students who are still learning the language.

## **Trying out new methods**

Newman is studying other parts of the state and trying to bring back lessons to her district. District administrators visited Chula Vista, an elementary school district in San Diego County, and the Sanger Unified School District, outside of Fresno; both districts have seen improvement in achievement, particularly among Hispanic students.

Newman and her principals have introduced new teaching methods, begun an intensive effort to track student data and hired teacher coaches. They are trying new intervention techniques for students who fall behind and launching an effort to improve parental engagement.

“No one thing is the panacea,” she said. “It’s all these things layered together.”

Newman attributes the district’s gains to a combination of initiatives mainly focused on training teachers and providing more feedback.

Newman hired additional teachers who focus on English learners, pulling them out in small groups and helping their regular teachers better meet their needs.

This year, the district also hired full-time coaches who circle through the district observing classrooms, giving feedback to teachers and helping them master new teaching techniques. Soledad also has paid for substitutes so that teachers can watch consultants teach model lessons and discuss them afterward with their colleagues.

Soledad also is focusing on helping weak teachers and, in some cases, getting rid of them. Four years ago, the district started a program in which principals identify struggling teachers for retraining. So far, three teachers have participated. (There are about 190 teachers in the district.) One resigned, one was fired at the end of the process, and one successfully completed the program and is still in the classroom.

One of the district’s lower-cost approaches was to set up what is essentially a district-wide book club. Each year, Newman assigns one book about good instructional practices. Every instructional employee in the district is required to read it. They then discuss the book’s ideas and try to implement them.

This year, the district is studying a teaching method called explicit direct instruction, in which students are encouraged to talk in pairs during lessons, both to improve their language skills and keep them engaged, and teachers poll students throughout a class to make sure they’re understanding each concept.

## **Funding struggles could deepen**

Newman also has exhorted all of her principals to spend more time in classrooms observing teachers, instead of in the office dealing with discipline and paperwork.

Miller, a 14-year-veteran, has mixed views on Soledad's reforms. She likes explicit direct instruction, which she says has helped her students, and appreciates the extensive feedback she gets from administrators and fellow teachers.

But she believes the district needs more consistency to make sure the achievement gains stick. "It seems to have a cycle of change every year or two," she said. "If you want to see something working, you want to stick with it one or two years."

Even as Newman tries to implement other ideas, a cloud hangs over Soledad. Last year, its budget dropped nearly 10 percent, to \$35 million, the same amount the district received in 2007.

For the last two years, the federal stimulus allowed the district to hire the additional coaches and teachers. That money is now gone, and Newman wonders how all of the reforms she is trying will fare as the fiscal crisis bears down on her schools.

She's already cut librarians, computer technicians, counselors and assistant principals. She can't afford to hire additional teachers, so she is expecting class sizes to increase.

Cuts to special state programs intended to help disadvantaged students have exacerbated these losses. During the time the district was making steady gains on its test scores, so-called "economic impact aid" was rising in the district. The aid is part of a state program for districts with high concentrations of poor and disadvantaged students.

The state also was sending Soledad about \$100,000 a year for its English Language Acquisition Program, which is directed at low-income English-language learners.

Last year, both funding streams were reduced, even though the numbers of English-language learners and poor students rose in Soledad.

"Those programs were extremely important for us," Newman said. "With the cutback of those funds, it means we have less staff to support those students and fewer materials to help us in our work."

The funding reductions mirror what is happening statewide. On average, per-pupil funding last year fell below the 2007 level, while economic impact aid declined by 5 percent and funds for the English Language Acquisition Program declined by 20 percent.

Money is tight for California school districts partly because the state has been relatively stingy when it comes to funding public education.

California ranks 43rd in the nation in per-pupil spending (adjusted for California's high cost of living): \$8,853 in 2007, compared with a national average of \$10,297.

Newman feels lucky to have good teachers who put in extra hours trying to close the achievement gap, even though their salaries are about \$7,000 below the statewide average of \$67,000. But she is aware that her luck – and that of her students – could run out.

“I am very fearful that if we don’t turn things around and start investing in our children again, especially in California, then what we’re going to find is more and more students who aren’t able to graduate because they can’t meet the requirements,” Newman said. “They will not have the opportunities we want them to have.”

*This story was produced as part of a collaboration between California Watch, part of the independent, nonprofit Center for Investigative Reporting, and The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education-news outlet affiliated with Teachers College, Columbia University.*