Implementation Effectiveness of K-5 Spanish Pathways: Recommendations to Improve English Learner Success

Rhina Torres| Client: Multilingual Pathways Department, San Francisco Unified School District

According to their "Vision 2025" public education plan, San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) made a commitment to expand Dual-Language Immersion (DLI) and Biliteracy (BL) language pathway programs to better serve English Learners' (EL) needs. However, before the district fully expands the availability of language pathways, it should continually assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the existing models. Consequently, SFUSD can strengthen the performance of ELs, specifically students enrolled in the Spanish pathway models, and provide robust supports and guidance to other schools in the district. Currently, about half of the existing Spanish pathways models are performing at or below the district average according to an acceleration model report of student performance on the 2017 Smarter Balance Assessment English Language Arts exam. This project focused on investigating this outcome. In particular, I aimed to answer the following questions:

1. *What elements of the pathways design drive success?*
2. *How do the pathways differ in implementation?*
3. *How do higher performing pathways differ from underperforming pathways*

METHODS

- **Literature Review:** I conducted a literature review of existing research on effective practices for ELs and a pathway implementation study done for SFUSD by Stanford University.
- **Data Analysis:** I analyzed district-wide student enrollment data, school site level, EL reclassification data, and teacher tenure data to summarize the current state of program implementation.
- **Case Study:** I took a deeper look at the program implementation at a school performing near the district average and a school performing below the district average in DLI and BL pathways. I compared the classroom composition of students, EL reclassification data, teacher tenure, and teacher practice.
- **Teacher Survey Analysis:** I reviewed two self-reported online surveys administered to SFUSD Spanish bilingual teachers to gain insight of the distribution of language in their program, pedagogical practices, curricula, and experience. The first survey was administered to 29 SFUSD Spanish bilingual teachers across 15 schools and experience and the second survey was to Spanish bilingual teachers in case study schools.

FINDINGS

- **Misalignment of Program Expectations Between District and School Sites:**
  When teachers were asked to name challenges they face as a Spanish bilingual teacher, 79% cited "lack of materials/resources," while 48% cited "lack of clarity of instructional expectations."

- **Language Allocation of Instruction Varies Across and Within Schools:** According to surveys administered to 29 Spanish bilingual teachers in the district, 15 reported a distribution of language in their instruction that did not meet the research guidelines for their grade. Additionally, some teachers reported that 50% instruction occurs in English, but reported only 90 minutes of instruction in Spanish. It was even more surprising to find that this variation also existed within schools. For example, three out of four teachers at School B did not meet fidelity to the BL pathway language allocation.

- **Composition of Classrooms:**
  At the district level, Spanish BL individual 90% of classrooms adhere to district guidelines on the composition of its students. Similarly, 80% of DLI schools meet fidelity to this criterion. However, this reporting is limited due to inconsistencies in the data reported.

- **Case Study:**
  The case study between two comparable BL and DLI programs revealed that their implementation does not differ significantly. According to the teachers at School F and School J that completed the surveys, only three out of 11 reported allocating language of instruction in accordance to the model. On the other hand, three out of the six teachers that completed the surveys at School D and School N reported true fidelity to the language allocation of the BL model. However, this data is limited in that it is self- reported and presents bias.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Align the District's Guidelines for Language Pathways Schools**
  As schools continue to expand their language pathways, district leaders should ensure that there is a shared vision between school administrators, staff, and teachers for the implementation of Biliteracy and Dual-Language Immersion models. This shared vision should establish clear expectations for each program model such as language allocation policies, pedagogical practices, curricula expectations, common terminology, and student enrollment procedures. In order to rectify the mismatch between district and school sites, district leaders should lead an implementation training to familiarize administrators with the latest research on bilingual programming and expectations for each program model. Additionally, all bilingual teachers should participate in professional development to familiarize them with latest research on designing coherent instruction for their pathway model.

- **Establish a Coherent Language Allocation Policy for Each Site**
  School leaders should work with their teachers establish a clear language of instruction distribution to meet the guidelines set forth by the district. Consequently, teachers can design coherent and effective instruction that integrates English Language Development and linguistic transfer skills across all content areas while maintaining fidelity to the distribution of language. The language allocation policy should also account for instruction that occurs outside of the students' classroom, such as, Physical Education, Art, Music etc.

- **Common Metric for Comparison**
  As schools vary in implementation of pathways to meet their students' needs, district leaders should decide on a common metric to compare the performance of students enrolled in the language pathways. Although BL and DLI have similar outcomes, they are designed differently and may serve different populations. Therefore, the district should decide to either monitor the performance of these programs by the growth English Learners achieve through the English language proficiency exam, or the performance of all students enrolled assessed by a metric that is applicable to EL and target language learners, for example, the SBA Math. Furthermore, district leaders should also streamline data collection practices across the district so that student progress can be accurately tracked.