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## Easing Transitions: DCYF Programs for Newcomer and English Learner Youth

*“Anna” is a recent immigrant from Honduras, who said that her family came to the United States “because the violence is increasing way too much” in her home country.<sup>1</sup> She became involved in Latinas Unidas, a program at San Francisco’s International High School funded by San Francisco’s Department for Children, Youth and Their Families (DCYF). The program provides Anna and other young women from Mexico and Central America with homework help and literacy support while also developing their self-esteem and leadership. As a bilingual and bicultural program, Latinas Unidas is a safe space where Anna can meet with other newcomer youth and find support in navigating her transition to the United States.*

The program that Anna attends is part of the Department for Children, Youth and Their Families’ (DCYF) English Learner Leadership (ELL) strategy within DCYF’s larger portfolio of Teen programs. The goal of this funding strategy is to support extended out-of-school time for students to practice and learn English while also promoting acculturation, social development, self-empowerment, and strong relationships with adults and peers. Nearly half of the youth served by English Language Leadership programs are “not fluent” in English, and most of the remaining youth are “somewhat” fluent. In 2013-2014, less than 10 percent were fluent in English.

This research brief, prepared by Social Policy Research Associates (SPR), summarizes key themes surfaced by interviews with program staff and focus groups with youth at two English Learner Leadership programs and one Youth Empowerment Fund (YEF) program that serves English learners.<sup>2</sup> A total of 22 youth participated in the focus group interviews, two of which were held in Spanish and one of which was held in Cantonese. Youth respondents came from China, Mexico, France, and different countries in Central America, such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The range of time for participants living in the U.S. generally ranged from six months to two years. The purpose of this brief is to highlight the strategies that programs are using to serve the English learner (EL) population, as well as surface areas that EL populations could use additional support.

*“[At this program], we do healing circles and talk about our experiences...we have people who listen to us, which is most important. They support and understand us and don’t look down on us like the majority of people do. Instead of putting us down, they pull us up.”*

<sup>1</sup> Anna is a pseudonym.

<sup>2</sup> The English Language Leadership programs are Newcomer Club and Latinas Unidas. 67 Suenos, a YEF program, also hosted a Spanish-language focus group.

# CONTEXT

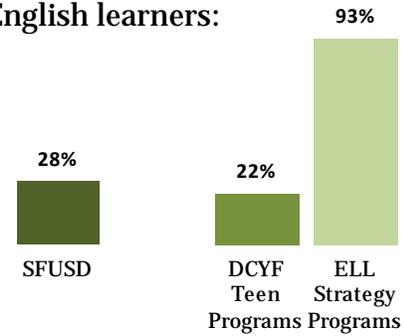
Youth respondents said that their families came to the U.S. seeking a better life for their children, including opportunities for schooling and freedom from violence. San Francisco has long served as a “sanctuary” or haven for immigrant families, particularly after the city council passed a “city and county of refuge” ordinance in 1989. The board of supervisors underscored this commitment as recently as July 2014, with its pledge to provide humanitarian relief to immigrant children and families fleeing violence in Central America. In keeping with its reputation as an immigrant friendly city, San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) has made bilingual education and services to English learners a priority, establishing newcomer programs at 11 schools and multiple programs designed to support bilingualism, including dual language and bi-literacy programs of study.

English learner and newcomer families, however, still face significant challenges in San Francisco. Housing was the most common challenge raised in our interviews. For instance, one youth described how he lived with his parents and brother in “a single room, not even an apartment” and went on to say, “It was beyond my imagination that the room we are staying in is even smaller than the room in China.” A program leader said that newcomer families can often only afford to live in “the most dangerous neighborhoods with the worst facilities.” Respondents also spoke about challenges that English learners, particularly those that are undocumented, face in finding job opportunities and in understanding their legal rights in the U.S.

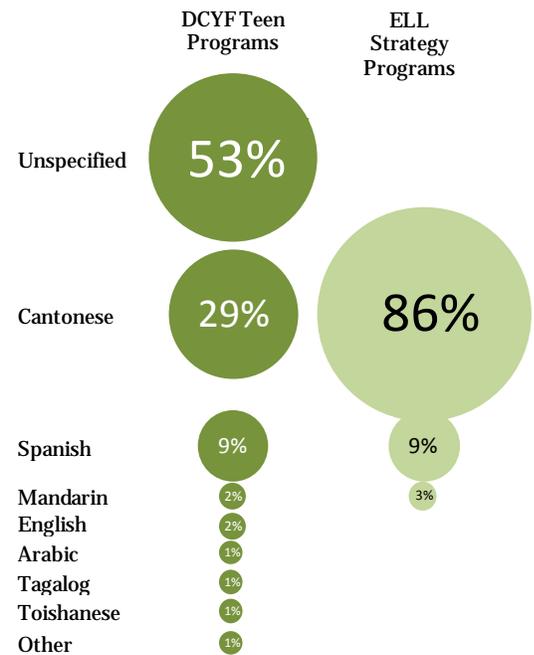
Newcomer youth also face a host of other social and emotional challenges. Language access and isolation are common challenges, as are family tensions caused by the reliance of parents on their children to help navigate U.S. culture and services. One focus group respondent said, “Parents have high expectations of you and rely on you a lot. You are the only one that has the opportunity to learn English... you turn into the center of the family and they expect a lot from you.” Communication between parents and children can become a challenge due to their varied experiences and differing rates of acculturation, contributing to a sense of isolation. One focus group respondent said, “Sometimes...you can’t tell your parents that [something] is happening...At home you don’t feel you have the confidence to speak what you want or what you are thinking.”

## By the Numbers:

### English learners:

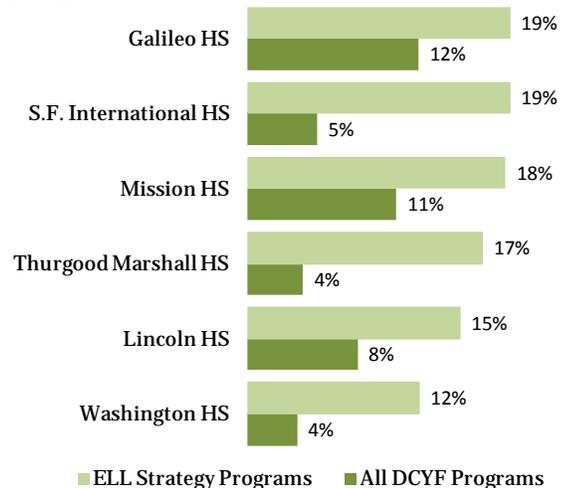


### Languages spoken by English learners:



Less than 1%: Vietnamese, Japanese, American Sign Language, Korean, Khmer/Cambodian, Russian, and Samoan

### Schools of participants in ELL strategy programs:



# PROGRAM DESIGN

The three programs highlighted in this brief (Latinas Unidas, Newcomer Club, and 67 Suenos)<sup>3</sup> shared a focus on helping immigrant youth to address these challenges through a focus on building skills to meet the expectations of a new culture, providing homework support so that youth can stay in school, and creating a space where they can talk and ask questions about issues of acculturation. Programs emphasized the importance of creating a space for the participants to have honest conversations about their experiences and providing them with educational and social support.

In 2013-2014, 44 percent of the youth served by the programs funded under the English Language Leadership strategy were “not fluent” in English and 46 percent were “somewhat fluent”. As is true for the overall immigrant population in San Francisco, Cantonese and Spanish are the most common languages spoken by participants, though at least twelve other languages were spoken by Teen participants in 2013-2014.<sup>4</sup> Although 21 percent of youth served by all Teen programs were less than fully fluent in English, they were much more likely to be categorized as “somewhat fluent” than are those served by English Language Leadership programs.

All three programs operate from International High School, an SFUSD school that is designated for newcomer students. The Community Youth Center of San Francisco (CYC) Newcomer Club also operates newcomer programs at Mission High School, Galileo High School, Washington High School, Thurgood Marshall High School, and Lincoln High School, all of which are among the high schools with the largest English learner populations.<sup>5</sup> Because the programs are co-located at schools, youth are generally referred to the program by school staff, counselors, or teachers, and the programs operate at lunch and afterschool.

Although each program is unique, they have several key characteristics in common, all of which are designed to help integrate newcomer and English learners into San Francisco.



**Bilingual and bicultural staff.** The staff was strongly praised by all of the young people who participated in the focus groups, primarily for creating a safe space and for being resources when youth had cultural questions or needed information. A respondent from the CYC focus group said, “If we have problems we can ask CYC staff to help. Like if family members don’t know English or have a cultural question, we can ask the staff to help.”



**Cultural events.** All three programs hold regular cultural events. For example, CYC hosts a workshop to examine cultural identity every year, a party for Chinese New Year, and classes to teach cultural practices like drumming and the dragon dance. Latinas Unidas and 67 Suenos celebrate indigenous and Native American culture from Mexico and Central America through their décor, games and activities.



**Field trips.** At least two of the programs take youth on field trips so that they can get a better sense for the extended bay area community. 67 Suenos went to Half Moon Bay and San Diego to meet the family of Anastacio Rojas, a Mexican immigrant who was beaten to death by border patrol agents. CYC takes participants on field trips to Daly City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.



**Homework help.** Programs provide computer access and homework support, which is vital because students often cannot get academic support at home. Providing homework help can be challenging, however, because students range in age and also vary dramatically in their level of academic preparation. Latinas Unidas does not have the staffing to provide tutoring. Instead, they rely on older students to help younger students and have a partnership with San Francisco State so that college students can serve as tutors.

<sup>3</sup> In 2013-2014, 46 Teen programs served EL youth. EL youth made up over a third of participants at nine programs.

<sup>4</sup> Because DCYF Teen programs did not specify a home language for 53 percent of English learners, it is not possible to estimate how representative DCYF English learners are of the general San Francisco population.

<sup>5</sup> Based on 2013-2014 EL enrollment data from the California Department of Education’s DataQuest.



**Orientation and preparation for college.** Participants at 67 Suenos and CYC indicated that the programs helped them with their college applications, financial aid, and understanding A-G requirements. One 67 Suenos student said, “They tell us [that] if we need help with college applications, we can come and stay late working on them.” Although the programs do the best that they can with this piece, CYC said it would be helpful to have more resources to take students on college tours.

## KEY SUPPORTS FOR ENGLISH LEARNER STUDENTS

Focus group respondents focused on the role of DCYF-funded programs in promoting safety and a sense of community, bilingualism, and biculturalism.

### ***Safety and Community***

Youth in all of the focus groups emphasized the value of confidentiality and having a safe space where they could share their experiences with peers. One youth, for instance, speaks about the most important aspect of the program: “Everything we say here is confidential and stays here. We’re able to share our stories with everyone. That’s what I like best.” Safety is so essential because youth often feel vulnerable and isolated in their new communities. In these settings, youth can exchange ideas about the immigrant experience and discuss the cultural tensions that sometimes exist between students’ home and school worlds. Safety is promoted through the following practices:

“Newly arrived people are scared. We go outside and don’t know what others are saying. We worry about getting lost and don’t know how to get to places. We also worry about being bullied and being taken advantage of. After participating in CYC, we have more confidence.”



**Group agreements.** Organizations established guidelines for interaction, such as making sure that one person speaks at a time, the importance of listening and respecting opinions that are different from your own. “We make agreements, which are rules that we all need to follow. The most important thing is respect.”



**Group check-ins, circles, and storytelling.** Several students talked about the value of group check-ins and storytelling. “There is a circle for you to tell your story and explain who you are and what you have in common. That’s where you begin to connect.”



**Use of art to deepen storytelling.** 67 Suenos engages youth in the creation of murals, which tell the stories of immigrants and their journey to the United States. Through art, the youth were able to express their emotions. A student described, “The murals say what people are not able to say with words because they are afraid. People only say the superficial but through murals people gain courage and strength to tell their stories at a deeper level.”

### ***English Language Skills and Value for Bilingualism***

Language access is the primary barrier for students, and participants were really appreciative of the opportunity to communicate in their native language. A CYC participant said that having a program where participants and staff speak Cantonese provides “a better sense of belonging.” Similarly, youth at Latinas Unidas said that being able to speak Spanish is “important because there are other programs where you can’t express yourself because you [can’t] speak [your own] language.”

Beyond providing participants with opportunities to express themselves in their native language, programs helped them to find their “voice” by building their confidence to express themselves in their native language and in English. CYC, for instance, encourages participants to take risks and speak in front of others. A participant said, “We have presentations in our lunch group and we constantly have to prepare. Through these presentations, we build confidence in our ability to speak.” The program director of 67 Suenos said that the program begins by providing a space for youth to tell their stories until they are “ready to transform their stories into a source of power” and then encourages them to

“speak not only about their narrative but broader patterns and broader issues.... specifically around migrant justice issues. They become experts and advocates in terms of their community and the undocumented community at large.”

Finally, program staff emphasized the value of bilingualism for youth in such a diverse society so that participants start to see their developing linguistic skills as an asset. The director of 67 Suenos said, “Many times the youth apologize for their developing language skills, but we tell them ‘You speak two languages, our President speaks one.’”

### ***Value for Biculturalism and Respect for Diversity***

Participants at 67 Suenos said that one of their biggest challenges in the U.S. is learning to deal with diversity and to communicate with peers who speak other languages. One participant said, “Participating with others who don’t speak the same language is difficult because [at school] we always work in groups, and it’s hard to share and communicate ideas.” One function of the programs is to help students adjust to diversity and help promote intercultural understanding.

“I don’t know how to speak English, just a bit, but I speak to Chinese people and try to learn the language... Since joining this group, I’ve learned that it is fun to share with other Latino people whose cultures you don’t know about until you share and we make more friends.”

A youth from Latinas Unidas said, “Coming to this group showed me that discriminating [against] people from other countries isn’t good because we are all alike and together.” Jesus Yanez, the director of Latinas Unidas, said that a large focus of the program is to “help young people understand that, in order to be successful, they’re going to have to get comfortable with other forms of diversity like sexuality, [being] around other races, and [being] within the Latino diaspora.”

Beyond promoting understanding of youth from other cultural groups, programs help students to embrace their bicultural immigrant identities by encouraging them tell their unique stories, embrace their home cultures, and learn skills needed to navigate in the US and advocate on behalf of their community. One participant said, “We learn about our own culture, which we didn’t know before coming here... They remind us to not forget where we come from.”

## **RESOURCES FOR EL AND NEWCOMER YOUTH IN SAN FRANCISCO**

During our interviews, we asked respondents, both youth participants and program leaders, to highlight ways that San Francisco could better support the English learner population. Notwithstanding large scale issues that cannot be addressed by DCYF, such as limited housing, respondents raised the following issues:

- **Additional slots for youth within EL programs that allow for more long-term participation.** For at least two of the programs, youth can only access supports within their first two years of immigration. Participants of Latinas Unidas, for instance, repeatedly talked about their disappointment that they would not be allowed to enroll in the program the following year.

“Newcomer Club targets immigrants that have been in the U.S. for less than two years.... Because of the type of service we offer and the limited resources we have, there might be over 200 students who want to join but we have a limit of 120 students during the school year and 50 or more additional during the summer.”

—Annie Tong, CYC Newcomer Club

- **All of the programs provide some level of homework help, but it is sometimes challenging to provide support due to very different academic levels among students.** Programs would benefit from formal curriculum as to how to teach newcomers about key aspects of American culture, support them in school, and teach them how to access resources. Programs could also benefit from partnerships with tutoring agencies and colleges that can help provide a range of academic support.
- **It would be useful to have EL-specific work opportunities, particularly over the summer.** Difficulty finding work is a theme that arose in two focus groups. For instance, one youth said, “Most of us can’t work because we are undocumented and some of us are underage. We would like to help our families but can’t because of those reasons.” Programs could benefit from partnerships with youth-focused workforce programs in order to link young people to jobs.

“I would expand the employment and internship opportunities and some of the workforce development opportunities... How can we create opportunities for them to not only gain transferrable skills in school but in workforce readiness programs?”

– Jesus Yanez, Latinas Unidas Program Director

Additional resources for newcomer and EL youth include:

- **[San Francisco Unified School District \(SFUSD\)'s Multilingual Pathways Department:](#)** Provides English Learners with a culturally and linguistically relevant education and engages educators in quality professional development to better meet the educational needs of English Learner students. Available resources include: multilingual EL program guides; up-to-date information on the Lau Action Plan as well as federal and state laws covering the rights of ELs; the new California English-language Development (ELD) standards; and reclassification criteria by grade-level.
- **[California Department of Education \(CDE\)'s English-Language Development Standards:](#)** Comprehensive information on the implementation of the English-language development standards and alignment with the Common Core State Standards. Provides overview of what students should know and be able to do at each grade level.
- **[California Tomorrow's Learning English & Beyond:](#)** Description of a holistic approach to supporting English learners in after school programs. Describes background context, articulates challenges, and presents strategies to help ELs with English language development.
- **[Edutopia's Do's & Don't For Teaching English Learners:](#)** Blog post from English and Social Studies teacher in Sacramento that describes best and “worst” practices for working with English learners in the classroom.

## CONCLUSION

As the key funder of youth programming in San Francisco, DCYF plays a central role in supporting programs for English learners in the city. Although the separate English Language Leadership funding stream is new, DCYF has a long track-record of funding and supporting programs for newcomer and immigrant youth. The three programs highlighted in this paper represent only some of the DCYF-funded programs serving English Learners in San Francisco. For instance, over 90 percent of those served by Charity Cultural’s Families in Transition and Tel-Hi’s Teen Learner’s Pathway program are English learners. Yet, program leaders say that demand for services within this population outpaces availability. The new funding stream is an opportunity to more strategically meet the needs of new immigrants and in doing so help fulfill San Francisco’s goal of providing sanctuary for this population.



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