

BY MAGGIE DOWNS

IMAGINE

a program that helps very young English-language learners become fluent, creating a solid foundation for academic and career success and helping to close the opportunity gap for children in marginalized communities.



Project Moving Forward's positive outcomes caught the attention of José Viana, assistant deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Education and director of the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), who visited several elementary schools in the Moreno Valley Unified and Alvorad Unified school districts earlier this year to see the program firsthand. Viana met with administrators, teachers, and parents to obtain feedback on the program, and to inquire about their ideas to improve language acquisition strategies. He will use the information to build a toolkit for families on how to navigate and support their children while they are learning English.

"I'm impressed, I'm inspired, and I'm heading back to Washington with many great ideas to share," Viana told UCR Today, a publication from the University of California, Riverside, during his visit. "It is important to replicate best practices and keep the momentum going." The 30-minute, daily program was developed following 12 years of research by Navarrette. It involves a systematic vocabulary and language development technique she calls the Rule of 3, which stands for the Rehearsal, Analysis and Production of words (or RAP). "Most programs compartmentalize language and literacy skills, the Rule of 3 focuses on the brain research that indicates that children learn better through a multi-sensory, integrated approach. Students learn words, phonics, reading and writing component through a thinking process where the onus of learning is put on the child," Navarrette said. "I think that's a big difference."



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This program exists. And it recently expanded to include two schools in the Coachella Valley. The brainchild of Linda Navarrette, a researcher for the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Riverside, Project Moving Forward was created in 2012 and is currently offered at schools throughout the country.

Inspired by Navarrette's assignment training teachers in Giyani, South Africa, to develop students' thinking skills, this innovative project began with a simple question — what if students were accelerated from the start, so they would never need remediation?

This question started Navarrette's quest to establish a program that would integrate several elements essential to academic success: Teaching students the critical thinking skills necessary to arrive at their own conclusions, rather than relying on rote memorization; using an innovative system for English learners to acquire language and literacy skills at a very young age before remediation programs are ever needed; and combining vocabulary development, phonics, reading, and writing simultaneously.

"I've always been an innovative type, but that's not always welcome in education, because you're changing the system. That's a hard thing to do," she said. "But I've always been the kind of person who knew there were five ways to do something. I think outside the box."

Entitled Project Moving Forward, this innovative program was originally backed by a \$1.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education. It launched in Moreno Valley Unified School District and quickly expanded to several other California districts.

Since the project's implementation, Navarrette has received two multi-million dollar grants and a prestigious Golden Bell Award from the California School Boards Association. Nationwide, the program is now used in more than 100 schools in seven states. The program expanded to include the Coachella Valley this year, now offered at two schools within the Coachella Valley Unified School District — Las Palmitas and Mecca elementary schools.

The approach also flips the classroom script.

"It's highly student-centered instead of teacher-centered," Navarrette said. "In a traditional program, the teacher who is teaching language does all the talking. Here the emphasis is on the student making those connections." In 2017, Navarrette led a preliminary study to quantify reading results from Project Moving Forward students, compared to English-language learners not in the program. The study found that non-participating children gained 0.6 points, while the average gain for program participants was 130.1 points.

Navarrette said the ultimate goal of Project Moving Forward goes beyond English learners' acquisition of language and literacy skills. The goal is to establish educational equity through giving English learners access to advanced learning opportunities including higher education in the future. It also gives them opportunities to become competitive in the job market.

"As a teacher, bilingual school psychologist, and school administrator, I saw lower socio-economic students and English learners constantly being labeled and targeted for remediation starting in kindergarten.

The emphasis was always on the problems," Navarrette said. "But I strongly believe that dwelling on problems does little to solve them. It is much better to come up with solutions."

Dr. Navarrette will be discussing her program with the public during a special program at the UCR Palm Desert Center on February 26, 2019.