

Bridging the vocabulary gap

30 November 2016, by Sarah Nightingale



Children learn vocabulary through Project Moving Forward, a program created by UCR's Linda Navarrette. Credit: University of California - Riverside

Marci Carver's kindergartners know a lot about the word "package." They know it contains three vowels, but one of them "doesn't talk," and the letter "g" sounds like a "j." When asked about the meaning, they know a package not only comes in the mail, but is also a bundle of items that are grouped together. They have no problem packaging these thoughts into sentences.

Carver, a 27-year veteran of the Moreno Valley Unified School District (MVUSD), has never seen her students learn words and phrases so naturally. She credits their success to Project Moving Forward, a vocabulary development program created by Linda Navarrette, who directs the initiative from the University of California, Riverside's Graduate School of Education.

Backed by a \$1.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Project Moving Forward was launched in MVUSD and six other California districts in 2012 to help English [language learners](#) and other students with limited English proficiency. In Moreno Valley, the program has grown from two schools to 17, with all kindergartners now

participating and four of the schools offering it through fifth grade. Nationwide, the program is now used in more than 100 schools in seven states.

According to data from MVUSD, more than 90 percent of English language learners in the program met or exceeded their annual progress goals last year, far greater than the state's target of 62 percent. Data from 2013 showed Project Moving Forward helped close the gap in API scores between children from low income families and their peers from 12.2 percentage points to 1.9 points.

The results have been well received by Judy White, superintendent of schools in Moreno Valley.

"The research on vocabulary development in young children is very clear about the need for learning through repeated exposure to words. In Project Moving Forward, none of this is left to chance. Every child feels like they have something to offer and every child leaves better than when they came in," White said.

Project Moving Forward is based on 12 years of school-based research by Navarrette, a former teacher, psychologist, and administrator with a passion for closing the education gap between English-learners and non-English-learners, and advantaged and disadvantaged students.



Project Moving Forward is fast-paced, interactive and puts the onus for learning on the child. Credit: University of California - Riverside

Navarrette's approach involves a systematic vocabulary development technique called the Rule of Three or RAP, which stands for the Rehearsal, Analysis and Production of words. It is fast-paced, interactive and puts the onus for learning on the child.

While there are variations in exactly how the material is delivered, the approximately 30-minute daily program starts when a teacher puts a word on a screen or board. The class sounds out the word together before analyzing it using a poster chart that is central to the lesson. The chart helps students identify structural components in a word, including vowels, silent letters and sounds like "ch" and "ing." For children using the RAP approach, each word becomes a puzzle that can be solved, with teachers encouraging students as they challenge themselves to dissect new words.

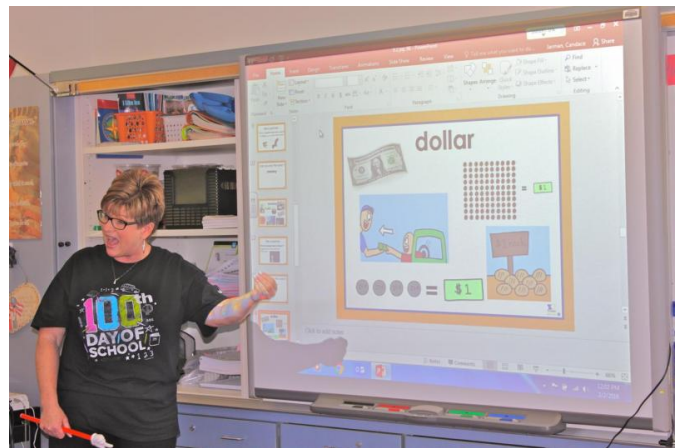
Using a second image-based slide, students then identify the context of each word, considering if it has more than one meaning and discussing whether it's a verb, (can you do it?) or a noun (a person, a place or a thing). Guided by a third slide, children work in pairs to practice using the word in sentences. The group time, which includes five to eight words per session, is supported by a workbook for reading and writing practice.

Candace Jarman, a special education teacher at Moreno Valley's Ramona Elementary School, said she "gets goosebumps" thinking about what Project Moving Forward has done for her students, half of whom she expects to join mainstream classes in record time.

"I've been teaching for 25 years and this is the program I've been looking for. The kids I teach are not only English language learners but are also in special education classes, so to see them being able to express themselves in complete sentences is phenomenal," she said.

Carver, a kindergarten teacher at Box Springs Elementary School and an early adopter of Project Moving Forward, now helps train other teachers to use the program.

"As a teacher, I like that the students get several chances to grasp a concept and I can see their strengths and weaknesses, so I know where I need to do more work. I have kindergarten kids who are now learning on a first- or second-grade level and the process is happening very naturally," she said.



Candace Jarman, a special education teacher at Moreno Valley's Ramona Elementary School, teaches a lesson using Project Moving Forward. Credit: University of California - Riverside

Teachers say the program not only supports the development of vocabulary, but also critical thinking skills students will need to meet Common Core academic standards as they advance through the school system. By introducing them to concepts that are more likely to be experienced firsthand by middle- and upper-class children, the program can also help level the playing field for disadvantaged kids.

For example, all the kindergartners in Morelia Arroyo's class at Serrano Elementary School knew that a book is something you read, but none of them understood the concept of 'booking' a plane ticket—until they learned it through Project Moving Forward.

"Project Moving Forward gets children thinking beyond what they know. My kids love this program and so do I," Arroyo said.

An important indicator of Project Moving Forward's success is data from the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), the state's English language proficiency test that is given to all students whose home language is not English. Students' performance on the CELDT is measured on five proficiency levels: beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, early advanced and advanced, with students meeting their annual targets by gaining one performance level per year until they are proficient.

More than 90 percent of students in MVUSD's Project Moving Forward program improved by one level or more last year, exceeding the California Board of Education's target of 62 percent for schools that support English language learners. At Hendrick Ranch Elementary School, one of the first schools to implement the program, 100 percent of students improved by one CELDT level, with 74 percent gaining two or more levels.

Thomas Smith, dean of UCR's Graduate School of Education, said the results have been tangible in local schools.

"When you visit a class implementing Project Moving Forward, whether one with a large number of English Learners or one with students who have been classified as having learning disabilities, you become excited about the high level of engagement and learning that is occurring in front of you," he said.



More than 90 percent of English language learners in the program met or exceeded their annual progress goals last year, far greater than the state's target of 62 percent. Credit: University of California - Riverside

"Having this program at UCR creates opportunities for research and training that can have a large impact on the literacy development of students in the Inland Empire."

With more than 80 percent of MVUSD students eligible for free and reduced-priced lunches, 90 percent non-white, and a quarter English language learners, the student population in Moreno Valley reflects the diversity in California's school districts and the need to empower all children through language learning and development, Navarrette said.

"A lack of vocabulary development is the key barrier to academic success for economically disadvantaged students and English Language learners, making it vital to provide early support to children, particularly in preschool and kindergarten," she said.

U.S. Department of Education data shows low-income [students](#) start school up to 14 months behind their more affluent peers, and President Obama's Fiscal Year 2017 Budget supports increasing access to high-quality early learning to improve educational outcomes in kindergarten and beyond. Navarrette aims to make Project Moving Forward part of that expansion.

"The earlier we can level the playing field for these children, the better chances they will have for success in all areas of their lives," she said.

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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