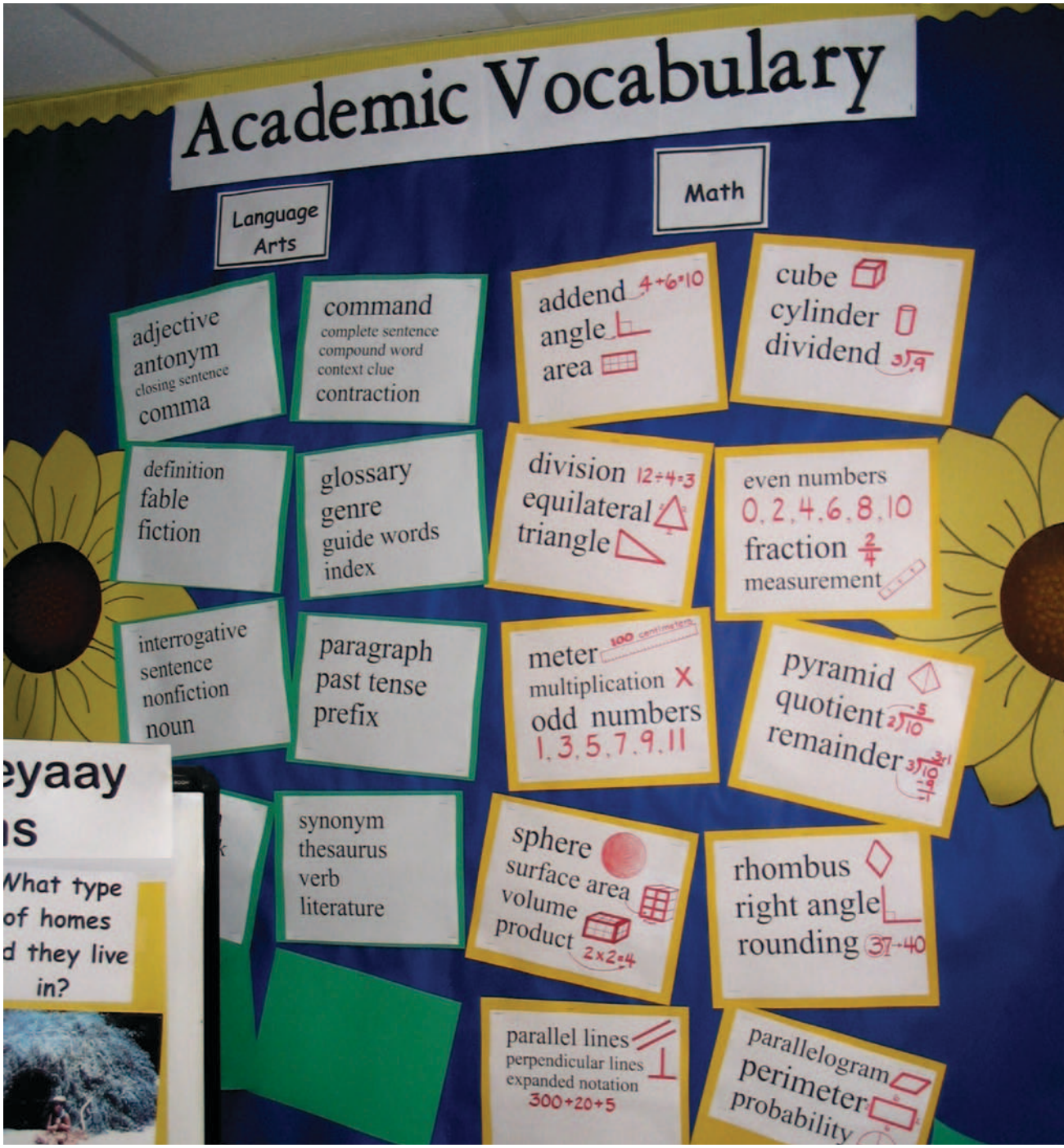
Todo tiene que ver con lo que se habla
It's all about the talk

A district focuses on the how of teaching to propel student achievement against the odds.



Rebecca Geiss

By Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and John Nelson

A teacher guides students through complex text. Guided instruction releases some cognitive responsibility to learners as they try to apply new learning under the watchful eye of the teacher. When they stall, their understanding is scaffolded using questions, prompts, and cues.

The numbers are grim. Nearly 18% of Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States were high school dropouts, far more than the percentage of black and white students (Aud & Haines, 2012). Hispanic students made achievement gains in mathematics and reading from 1992 to 2009, but the gap between Hispanics and whites has remained the same (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). The gaps continue even though most of these students today are born in this country: The Pew Hispanic Center reports that 90% of Hispanic children under the age of 18 are native born (Passel, Cohn, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2012). Countless resources, human and fiscal, have been devoted to the intractable problem of closing the white/Hispanic achievement gap and raising the graduation rate.

Good news: The largest elementary school district in California is succeeding at changing these outcomes. Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD) consists of 45 schools and 28,000 students in a community less than 20 miles from the Mexican border. The city reflects this close connection, with 68% of its students identifying as Hispanic or Latino. Achievement concerns moved district leadership to adopt a new approach to serving all of its students, including the 35% who are identified as English learners. The change in outcomes has been rapid: In 2005, only 33% of Hispanic/Latino students were academically proficient or advanced as reported on the California Standards Tests. By 2011, this had grown to 60%. (The statewide average for all students in 2012 was 47%)

The improved academic achievement of Hispanic/Latino students in Chula Vista can be traced to the focused, collective efforts of administrators and teachers to increase the rigor of academic language used across disciplines and grade levels. Academic language is a broad term that refers to the registers of the classroom, especially the vocabulary, function, and forms that are unique to the school environment. Our use of language is foundational to learning. James Britton put it more elegantly: "Reading and writing float on a sea of talk" (1983, p. 11). Importantly, this effort has hinged on the talk of educators as well and was made possible by the district's commitment to collaborative professional development. As one administrator noted, "Todo tiene que ver con lo que se habla" ["It's all about the talk."]

Outline of the effort

CVESD has invested in collaborative professional development for a decade. Each school has an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) consisting of the principal, grade-level representatives, and instructional coaches. A cohort of ILTs from six or seven schools meet for a full day each month to examine a topic in depth. Each cohort has been assembled according to geographic proximity and demographic similarities. At these meetings, the ILTs work through content in the morning, then meet with a facilitator in the afternoon to determine how to take the morning's ideas back to their schools. Over the years, CVESD has used the ILT structure to advance various district initiatives such as Reading First. From 1999 to 2004, the district experienced initial growth in achievement followed by a period of stagnation. Concerned with these stalled results, John Nelson, a senior district administrator, initiated a professional partnership with Nancy

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Frey and Douglas Fisher, two professors from San Diego State University. The resulting discussions and subsequent support of the superintendent and school board led to a new initiative: raising the rigor of academic language throughout the city's schools.

An instructional framework

The district initially focused on a common instructional framework that would leverage the collective efforts of its educators. Like many other districts, CVESD had traditionally allowed teachers to determine their own methods for instruction. But increasing attention to accountability measures drove the district to try scripted programs to bring about consistency. The scripted programs may have introduced consistency, but they had the disadvantage of focusing teachers on completing lessons rather than developing students' cognitive and metacognitive thinking. As Amy Noelle Parks and Sarah Bridges-Rhoads noted (2012), teachers discovered that this narrowing spilled over into other instruction, even into areas that did not use a scripted program. In hindsight, it is not surprising that achievement gains stalled.

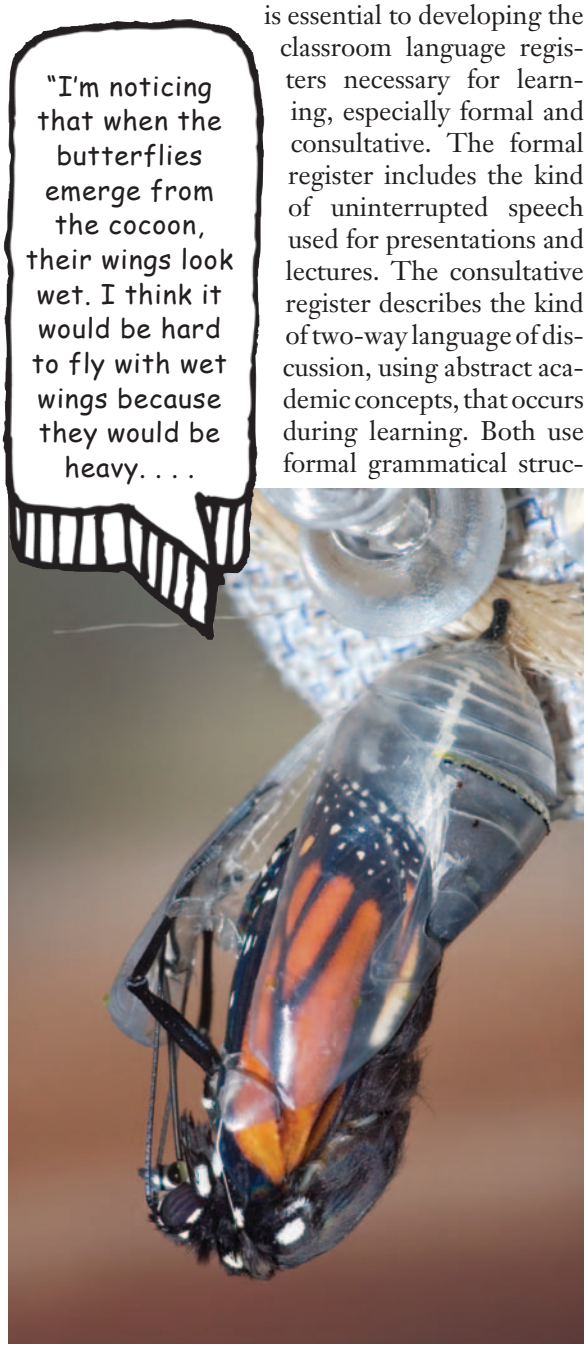
The district leadership team agreed that adopting a common instructional framework would be an important first step for a shared professional vocabulary about instruction. In 2006, the group introduced the new framework that gave teachers more latitude in developing and delivering lessons. This framework highlights the necessary steps in a learning cycle:

- *Focus lessons* introduce new concepts and ideas to learners. Focus lessons establish content and language objectives and feature teacher modeling and think-alouds to expose the thinking of an expert to novice learners.
- *Guided instruction* releases some cognitive responsibility to learners as they try to apply new learning under the watchful eye of the teacher. When they stall, their understanding is scaffolded using questions, prompts, and cues.
- *Productive group work* further increases student responsibility within a small group format. In the company of peers, students clarify their understanding, resolve problems, reach consensus, or identify solutions.
- *Independent learning* occurs as students approach mastery of concepts or skills. This includes both in-class and out-of-class (homework) opportunities for independent application and extension.

Fisher and Frey meet regularly (usually six times per year) with the ILTs to discuss an aspect of the instructional framework; Nelson hosts each event and oversees work with the teams to apply the information at their school sites. This foundational work has grounded discussions and decisions about other policies and practices, such as homework, formative assessment, and development of quality indicators for use in coaching and learning walks.

Elevating teacher talk

An early emphasis focused on improving the quality of teacher talk in the classroom. This is vital to enabling students to use academic language, and early observations by the three authors and building administrators found that students and teachers didn't spend much time talking about their thinking, a process known as metacognitive language. This is essential to developing the classroom language registers necessary for learning, especially formal and consultative. The formal register includes the kind of uninterrupted speech used for presentations and lectures. The consultative register describes the kind of two-way language of discussion, using abstract academic concepts, that occurs during learning. Both use formal grammatical struc-



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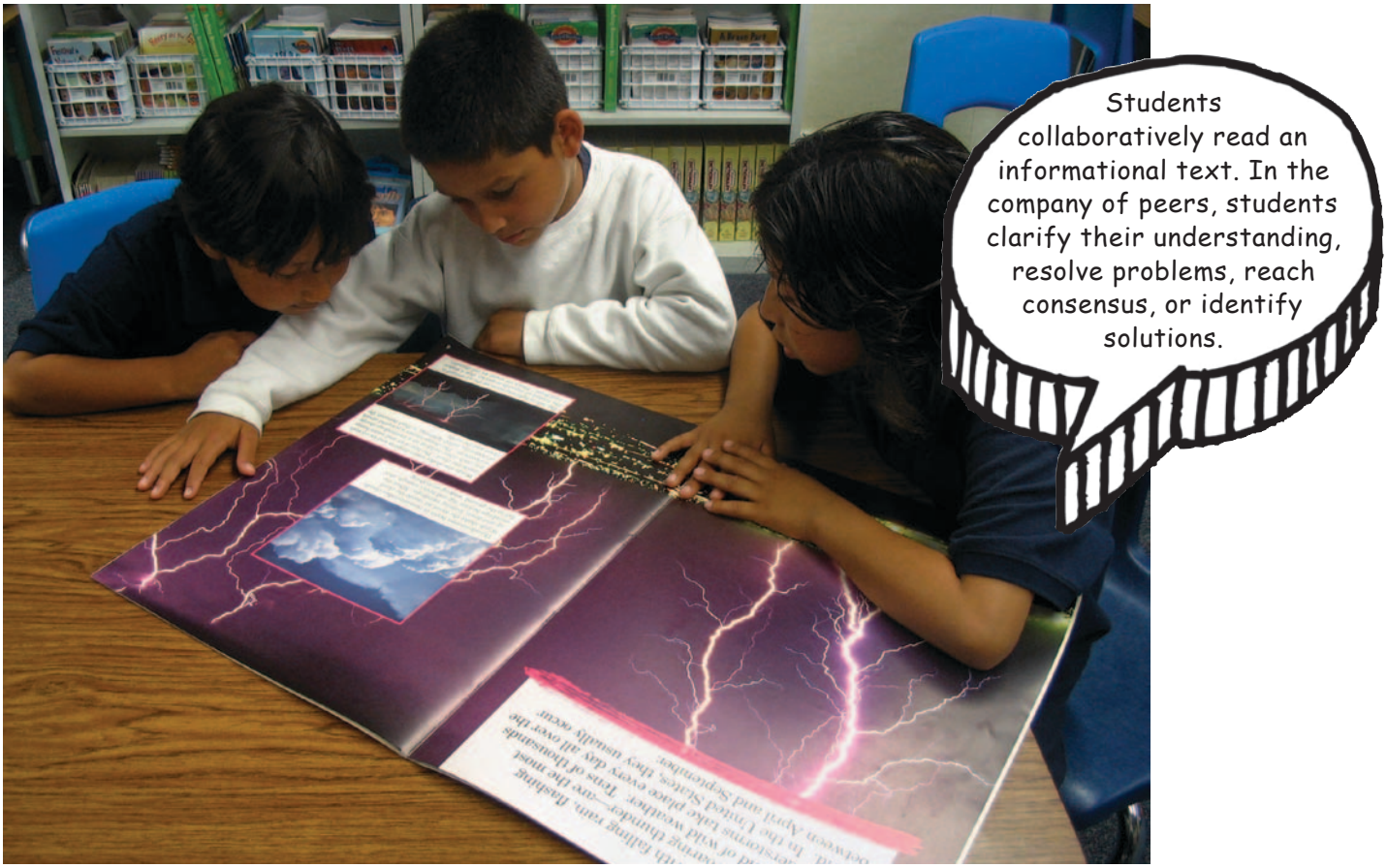

tures and diction, and adept use of these registers signals advanced language skills. Many children have had little exposure to these registers before attending school and, without explicit instruction, are likely to quickly fall behind academically.

In order to build students' capacity to comprehend and participate in formal and consultative registers, teachers focused on modeling and thinking aloud (Davey, 1983). Teachers model and demonstrate, rather than merely explain, and make their internal thinking apparent. For example, a kindergarten science teacher observes butterflies emerging from their cocoons in the class garden and says:

> "I'm noticing that when the butterflies emerge from the cocoon, their wings look wet. I think it would be hard to fly with wet wings because they would be heavy. But I also see that they don't fly right away. This one [points] has been sitting on the branch for awhile. He is fanning his wings. I can see that he is drying them, and they are getting bigger. Now, I remember we read that he is pumping the blood into his wings. One question I have is how long will it take before he flies?"

By doing so, the teacher immerses her young learners in the metacognitive aspects of language development, especially in her use of academic language (cocoon, emerge, fanning, pumping). In addition, she models inquiry as part of learning. Importantly, teacher think-alouds lay the foundation for students to think aloud as well, which is essential in the consultative register.

Creating opportunities for talk

Teacher talk alone can't elevate student language. Students must use and apply academic language. The next phase of professional development focused on creating mechanisms for increasing the amount and quality of student talk. The ILTs examined the features of productive group work, especially how to listen for indicators of advanced language use. Students were taught how to ask questions of one another, build on each other's ideas, offer evidence and examples to support their statements, and how to disagree without being disagreeable. Many students, including those who are English learners, need further scaffolding. Language frames alleviate some of the linguistic load by providing some, but not all, of the words needed to query, explain, or analyze. These are posted on the board or on table tents. For instance, in 4th-grade mathematics, a commonly used language frame for examining an extended word problem is:

"The keywords _____ helped me to solve the problem using _____."

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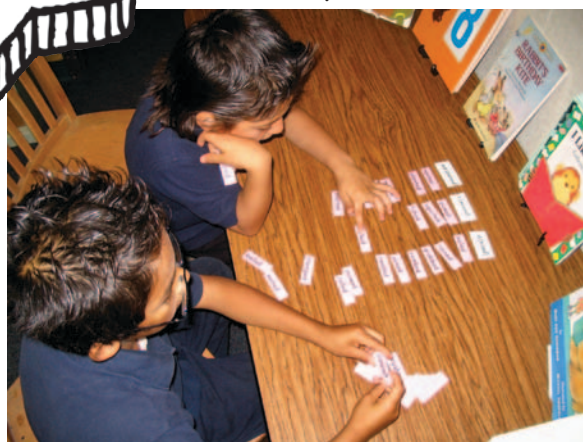
Students sort words into categories as an aid to remembering them.

As the group discusses how to solve the problem, they can turn to these and other language frames to move the discussion forward. The ILTs collectively developed hundreds of language frames for each grade level and content area and posted them on the district's server for use by all the schools.



Extending the talk

More recently, CVESD is preparing for the Common Core State Standards, adopted by California, 44 other states, and the District of Columbia. CVESD's work on the instructional framework and on academic language development has proven to be foundational in this new phase. Beginning in 2011, teachers have focused on text complexity in reading. The ILTs have assessed texts and developed text-based questions to use during close reading. They recognize that student interaction with the teacher, the text, and other students is vital to enabling students to comprehend complex texts. As one principal noted in a session, "We can't just hand out hard books and expect them to read them. We know a lot more about scaffolding. Now, we'll be doing it with more advanced readings in mind." Toward that end, the ILTs compiled text-based questions for many books used in district classrooms. The questions scaffold student understanding from literal to inferential levels and move from smaller segments of text (word and sentence levels) to those that cause students to take the entire text in mind (Fisher & Frey, in press). For example, 3rd-grade teachers on the ILTs developed these questions for the book *So You Want To Be President?* (St. George, 2000).

- *General understanding questions* ask about the overall view of the text, such as the sequence of information or the story arc. *Why would someone want to be president?*
- *Key detail questions* focus on supporting details to main claims in the text. *What are some of the characteristics or qualities of the presidents?*
- *Vocabulary and text-structure questions* bridge literal and inferential meanings of text. *How does the author organize the text to show similarities and differences? What does the author mean by "swelled heads"?*
- *Author's purpose questions* require students to examine the genre and point of view of the author and narrator, and draw on elements of critical literacy. *What is the author's point of view about the presidential office? Who are the groups of people who have not held presidential office?*
- *Inferential questions* encourage students to examine how arguments in a persuasive text, ideas in an informational text, or key elements in a literary text build to a whole. *What clues help you understand the importance of honesty in a president?*
- *Opinions and intertextual questions* invite students to leverage information from the text to formulate opinions or to make connections to other texts. *In your opinion, what are three characteristics of a great president? How does this book compare to* If I Were President (Stier, 1999)?

In developing these questions together, teachers have established a format for continuing this work at their sites. They're also using modeling, think-alouds, and productive group work to further support comprehension during close reading. Given their understanding of academic language development, they recognize that a close reading lesson dominated by teacher talk or one that moves students too quickly to independent learning will leave a significant number of students behind. "The way to get these complex texts is through lots of interaction," said the principal. "We know our students need the [academic] language development. These questions help us to remember they need interaction with the text, too."

Talk outside of professional development

The ILTs represent less than 20% of all the teachers and administrators in the district so professional development sessions alone would not change teaching effectiveness districtwide. These teams continue to function outside of these sessions, especially as they work with their school sites and across their cohorts. At the school level, ILT members design, deliver, and assess professional development. Importantly, the ILT structure is not a train-the-trainer model. Rather, a school-based inquiry model of professional development is used to consolidate district initiatives with site-specific needs and strengths. Each year, the principal leads his or her school through a

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systematic evaluation of hard and soft data in order to develop questions that will determine the content of the sessions. These are further aligned with their stated achievement goals for the year. The ILTs are responsible for integrating the district content in a meaningful way into the site inquiry process. For example, many schools focus their inquiry on raising achievement for targeted groups of students. With such a large Hispanic/Latino population, as well as a significant number of English learners, these groups' needs are often given deliberate attention. One elementary school examined its students' abilities to use academic language to explain the purpose of their learning. ILT members collected student examples and nonexamples on video and analyzed them together as a faculty. They noticed that the quality of the student responses often varied widely within the same class. "We came to the realization that, without intending to, we were structuring inequality within our classes," said a member of the school's ILT. "We knew we had to get better at making sure they all knew what their learning targets were."

In order to address this more thoroughly, the school revisited a rubric developed by the authors and the ILTs to delineate quality indicators for setting purpose. These included:

- The established purpose focuses on student learning, rather than an activity, assignment, or task.
- The established purpose contains both content and language components.
- Students understand the relevance of the established purpose.
- Students can explain the established purpose in their own words.
- The teacher designs meaningful experiences and outcomes aligned with the established purpose.
- The teacher has a plan for determining when the established purpose has been met (Fisher & Frey, 2011, pp. 20-21).

Teachers and administrators at the school conducted learning walks throughout the year in order to measure the effectiveness of their work on this topic. In addition, they used the resources within their cohort by inviting members of other ILTs to join these learning walks and subsequent discussions. In the span of one year, the Academic Proficiency Index — a state measure of student achievement across standardized tests — had risen 27 points for Hispanic students at this school. "As a school, we were performing pretty well, but there's been a gap between some of our significant subgroups," said the principal. "For us, focusing our efforts on being more conscientious about establishing purpose with these students has really paid off. It's helping them to develop the academic language they need when they read, write, compute, discuss, analyze . . . you name it. It's all about the talk."

Conclusion

Creating and implementing an instructional framework has provided more students with better learning environments. The achievement of Hispanic students has nearly doubled even as poverty rates and the percentage of English learners have increased. Although there is still room for progress, much has been accomplished as Chula Vista has focused efforts to ensure that all students develop academic language.

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