

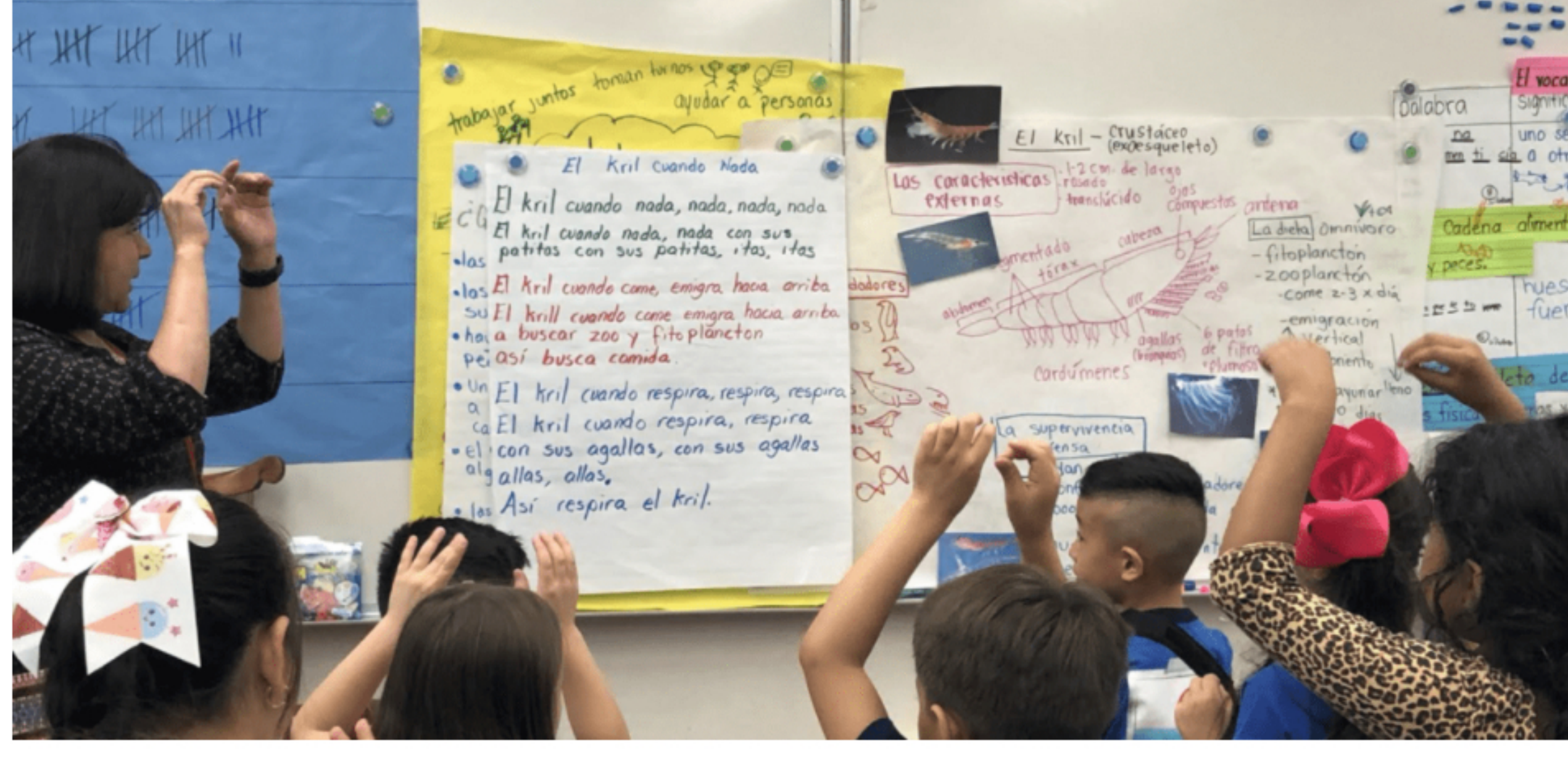
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COLUMNS

Funk: Literacy program at Oak Grove making difference for English learners

by Chris Funk

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English learners take part in a lesson. Photo courtesy of East Side Union High School District.

In education, we preach the seven keys to college readiness. They include advanced reading in grades K-2, advanced reading in grades 3-8, advanced math in grade 5, Algebra 1 by grade 8 with a C or higher, Algebra 2 by grade 11 with a C or higher, 3 on Advance Placement (AP) exam or a 4 on International Baccalaureate (IB) exam and 1650 SAT or 24 ACT.

Educators also believe it is critical to focus on social emotional intelligence, and the Four C's: critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity skills. All these characteristics are important for students to develop as they progress through our educational system and increase the chance of graduating from high school and being college-ready.

I am going to focus on literacy in this column and come back to some of the other keys to success in future articles.

We know that if students are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade, they will be in catch mode moving forward. Fourth grade is when there is significant change in the level of material. Up until the end of third grade, students are learning to read. By fourth grade, they are reading to learn and using their skills to gain more information in subjects, such as math and science, to solve problems, to think critically about what they are learning and to act upon and that knowledge in the world around them.

We also know there is an opportunity gap between more affluent communities and less affluent communities. Households where there are limited books, where children are not read to, where children sit in front of the television all day or play video games tend to enter school behind their peers.

The ability to read creates confidence in students and provides the opportunity to take chances. But some students feel like failures because they do not comprehend the material that is required to learn. In many cases, they simply cannot access the material because their reading level is too low. One can only imagine the despair a student who has a fifth- or sixth-grade reading level must feel navigating high school academic material.

I want to highlight a literacy program in the Oak Grove School District (OGSD) in conjunction with the Sobrato Foundation. Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) is a comprehensive model of enriched language and literacy education for both English-only and English learner (EL) students. It was designed by Dr. Laurie Olsen, a national expert in English language learner education.

Currently, the SEAL program is implemented in 12 schools in OGSD, both in Structured English Immersion (SEI) classrooms and dual language classrooms. The goal of SEI is acquisition of English language skills so that an EL student can succeed in an English-only mainstream classroom.

All instruction in an immersion strategy program is in English. Teachers have specialized training in meeting the needs of EL students, possessing either a bilingual education or ESL teaching credential and/or training, and strong receptive skills in the students' primary language.

The goal of the Dual Language Immersion, a bilingual program also known as two-way or developmental, is for students to develop language proficiency in two languages by receiving instruction in English and another language in a classroom that is usually comprised of half native English speakers and half native speakers of the other language.

The SEAL model produces powerful language skills and rich academic vocabulary development through hands-on science and social studies-based thematic units addressing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). SEAL also supports parents to develop language and literacy practices with their children at home and in the classroom that results in authentic family engagement and a home-to-school connection.

The model provides intensive professional development to teachers and administrators, coaching, and collaborative planning and reflection. For young ELs, the model creates learning conditions that build language and literacy skills necessary to succeed in the academic world and the world at large.

For all students, the SEAL classroom brings to life the rigor, relevance and learner engagement called for by the CCSS, the English Language Arts (ELA)/English Language Development (ELD) Framework, and the new CAELD standards.

SEAL is anchored by six research-based foundational components that permeate all aspects of teaching and learning throughout the school day: Alignment of TK-3 programming around a shared vision of powerful language development, simultaneous academic language and literacy instruction (including bilingual options), language-rich environments and instruction emphasizing expressive and complex oral language, text-rich curriculum and environments that engage children with books and the printed word, language development through academic units based on science and social studies standards, and bringing teachers and families together to support language and literacy development.

About 23% of students in Santa Clara County are classified as English Language Learners. Yet, only 56% of third graders score proficient in reading on the State of California English Language Arts exam. We must do better. Forty-four percent of our students are playing catch up and will continue to lag and enter middle school and high school discouraged and disillusioned.

SEAL is one research-based program that has demonstrated growth in the Oak Grove School District. By their third year of implementing SEAL, 65.4% of Oak Grove's ELs demonstrated growth of a minimum of one language level in the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). This represents an increase of 15.5% in comparison to achievement prior to implementation.

Oak Grove expects to see similar data as they receive the second year of the new English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) data. Additionally, the reclassified English Learners remain the student group with the highest percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards on the state SBAC English Language Arts Assessment at 79% in Oak Grove.

It is these types of programs that all of our students, especially our English Learners, need at an early age to help them meet the first two keys to being college ready when graduating from high school. Literacy is the building block to all other skills that need to be developed for students to excel in their education journey.

San José Spotlight columnist Chris Funk is the superintendent of the East Side Union High School District. His columns appear every third Monday of the month. Contact Chris at funkct@esuhsd.org or follow @chrisfunsupt on Twitter.

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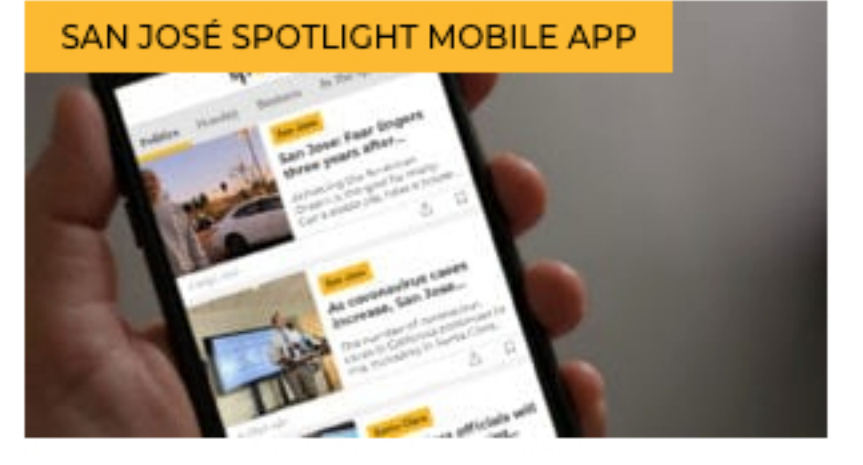
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