



# Wolves That Learn and Grow with the Pack

The impact of overcoming language barriers **BY COLIN HEFFINGER**

NOT ALL WOLVES are the same. A rising population of pups, often English Language Learners (ELLs), may struggle to express their ideas in English while concurrently learning the written, verbal, and audio aspects of the language. This continuous battle to express their thoughts and ideas in English, combined with teachers' lack of preparation in teaching ELLs, can create a language barrier that is often difficult to surmount. ELLs are as capable as every other student to think at cognitive levels about complex texts through scaffolded instruction to ensure comprehension.

Due to the growing ELL population, Las Américas ASPIRA Academy

(LAAA) designed and implemented the W.O.L.V.E.S. Reading Program in 2017, which addresses the problem of limited teacher instruction and student engagement in grade-level, complex texts with language acquisition scaffolds. LAAA is a K-8 charter school utilizing a bilingual programmatic focus called dual language education in which instruction is given in both English and Spanish. The W.O.L.V.E.S. Reading Program builds from this structure by directly engaging students through complex reading immersion in Spanish and English language literature, which expands via written and verbal learning instruction within groups.

# Superstars in Education

“The purpose of the W.O.L.V.E.S. Reading Program is to enhance the balanced literacy framework at LAAA by embedding language acquisition scaffolds so that all students, English Language Learners (ELLs) included, would improve their literacy achievement and ultimately close the reading achievement gap,” reflects Emily Edmonds-Eveland, Director of Curriculum and Instruction for Las Americas ASPIRA Academy. “Students are excited when its W.O.L.V.E.S. reading time because it provides complex reading tasks in English and Spanish that students can read and understand.”

LAAA partnered with the University of Delaware and Dual Language Education of New Mexico to receive professional development on a variety of biliteracy instructional strategies including Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, Thinking Maps, and Literacy Squared. Teachers used this knowledge to create over 300 lessons in English and Spanish with embedded language and literacy acquisition scaffolds with accompanying trade books which are incorporated during small group (K-2) and shared reading (3-5) instruction.

Since its inception in 2017, the W.O.L.V.E.S. Reading Program has made huge strides for the future. It has been actively presented at the La Cosecha Dual Language 2018 and 2019 New Mexico Conferences, as well as at the ISTE 2019 Philadelphia conference, where the program was given back to communities. Over 300 lessons created through the W.O.L.V.E.S. Reading Program are available online, providing the opportunity for other schools across the nation to build from the program.

Emily elaborates further on opportunities for other schools to utilize the

W.O.L.V.E.S. Reading Program in their teaching curriculum. “The English Language Arts Common Core State Standards requires teachers to teach with more challenging texts and for students to be able to read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently; therefore, it is important for both teachers and students to be supported in this process,” Emily continues. “Teachers need to be encouraged because there are so many scaffolds and strategies out there. It’s about finding the ones that students need, being creative and adjusting the program to fit their students. For teachers working with ELLs, the W.O.L.V.E.S. Reading Program can be helpful to them as well.” ■

In the face of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the W.O.L.V.E.S. Reading Program has quickly adapted by using blended learning models to effectively teach students that are unable to attend classes in person. Teachers are actively making flipped lessons, shared reading approaches for grades 3 through 5, and Zoom video conferences to provide students with the opportunity to continue reading and engage in discussion about the text with their teachers and classmates. By bringing the classroom lessons online, teachers can keep their students involved from the safety and comfort of their homes.

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