

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS



Mighty Writers El Futuro

Philadelphia, PA

500 Average number of students served during the school year

100% ELL students

100% Students from low-income families

Main funding sources:

- ▶ Businesses
- ▶ Foundations
- ▶ Individual donations

Providing a culturally sensitive atmosphere to help English language learners develop literacy skills.

More than 4 million English language learners (ELL)—students who receive language assistance, such as bilingual education and High Intensity Language Training—attend public schools nationwide. This growing and diverse population faces myriad challenges and needs a coordinated system of support to help them build literacy skills and thrive. Afterschool programs are uniquely positioned to serve both ELL students and their families.

Overview

Mighty Writers El Futuro program, an afterschool program serving 100 percent ELL students, centers its approach on providing a culturally responsive environment to its students and families. To build students' literary skills and celebrate their cultural identities, the program hosts cultural activities and uses an internally-developed, culturally-relevant curriculum and bilingual mentors.

A typical day for students

Students start their afternoon with a snack and homework assistance, receiving support from staff in English and Spanish. Homework time is followed by physical activity, and then writing projects. Mighty Writers coaches students to think critically about their project topics. Students read examples of work on their topics before beginning the writing process, which includes multiple revisions and an intensive review process. At pickup time, parents and staff discuss students' progress and upcoming events, like program-hosted potlucks.

Outcomes

The program tracks student progress by collecting essays multiple times a year and leveraging MY Access, a tool that scores writing proficiency. In fall 2015, no students in the program scored a proficient writing score on MY Access. By spring 2016, 62 percent of students were proficient.

During the 2015-16 school year, 75 percent of parents said that they were confident that the program improved their child's grades and 81 percent saw either a "great deal" or "steady" improvement in their child's writing.

Challenges

ELL students face many hurdles in school. ELL students must develop fluency in a new language, understand new content through a language they have limited proficiency in, and navigate a new school with an unfamiliar culture. ELL students are also more likely to live in low-income families and attend under-resourced schools.

ELL students are struggling academically. ELL students are between 2.5 and 3.5 times more likely to score below basic in reading than their English-fluent peers. The dropout rate for students who “spoke a language other than English at home and spoke English less than very well” is more than 3.5 times as high as the national average and ELL students’ graduation rate is almost 20 percentage points lower than the national average.

ELL students are a growing and diverse population. During the 2013-14 school year, approximately 4.5 million ELL students attended public school, an increase of almost a quarter of a million students over the past decade. ELL students comprise a diverse group of more than a dozen racial and ethnic populations speaking more than 30 languages.

Read [Afterschool Providing Key Literacy Supports to English Language Learner Students](#) to learn more.



Program characteristics

Mighty Writers El Futuro program fosters ELL students’ literacy skills in a culturally inclusive and sensitive manner. Directed by bilingual mentors and local professional writers serving as volunteers, Mighty Writers’ in-house curriculum is in English and Spanish and incorporates the work of Latino authors, including novels, poems, song lyrics, and articles.

Topics are wide-ranging and geared to promote student interest and engagement in literacy, especially among students who are reluctant readers and writers. During “Comic Book Madness,” local comic book writers and illustrators teach students to tell their story in comic book format. The program reviews and revises its curricula every summer to ensure that it remains relevant and appealing to students.

Celebrating students’ cultural identities is also a central attribute of the program. Mighty Writers hosts various cultural activities with food, music, and dancing.

Program history

Mighty Writers opened its doors in 2009 in South Philadelphia to address the city’s literacy crisis—more than half of Philadelphia’s adults did not possess adequate literacy skills. The program began as one site with two staffers, serving 150 students ages 7 to 17. By 2017, the program had expanded to four of Philadelphia’s most high-need neighborhoods, employing 12 full-time employees and a volunteer force of 400. The Mighty Writers bilingual site, El Futuro, opened in 2014.

Recommendations

for serving ELL students and their families

- ▶ Reading works by authors in whom students can see themselves improves literacy and engagement.
- ▶ Honor each student’s culture and honor each student individually.
- ▶ Focus on students’ ideas and story first and where the commas go later. Emphasize that writing is about communicating and sharing ideas, and try not to get caught up correcting grammar.



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