

## PROGRAMS SHOWING SUCCESS IN CLOSING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP

*Promising approaches to closing the opportunity gap are found in almost every community. Two recent examples illustrate these approaches:*

As students at **El Verano Elementary School** learn science, they also improve their English-language skills. Their instruction is part of a federally-funded joint project between the 4,600-student Sonoma, California district and the Exploratorium, a science museum in San Francisco. In Sonoma Valley, many students are from low-income families; 59 percent qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Fifty-one percent of students in the district are learning English as a second language. Teachers say their students naturally learn English in Sonoma's science lessons, since they must use it when they see and touch the natural world through in-class experiments. The school provides good support for its students learning English, but the interplay of language and science is subtle – students are often unaware that they are actually learning.

In 2008, 37 percent of El Verano's 5<sup>th</sup> graders tested "proficient" in science on state standardized tests; by 2011, that number had risen to 49 percent. Performance on the state's English-language-proficiency tests also improved significantly.

Since the start of the Sonoma Valley project at El Verano Elementary, Principal Maite Iturri said parents have told her, "I didn't know my child talked so much" or "My child is suddenly asking a lot of 'why' questions."

(Fleming, Nora. "Partnership Blends Science and English Proficiency." *Education Week*. 26 March 2013.)

**Union City, New Jersey** is an unlikely candidate for successful education reform. "It is a poor community with an unemployment rate 60 percent higher than the national average. Three-quarters of students live in homes where only Spanish is spoken, and a quarter are thought to be undocumented" and at risk of deportation. Its schools were once so bad that state officials almost seized control of them.

Fear of state takeover compelled the city to adopt a long-term strategy for pre-school to high school. Union City's pre-K programs now enroll almost every 3- and 4-year-old. All students in the district are encouraged to become "thinkers, not just test-takers." Kids who come to school speaking only Spanish become bilingual. Parents are treated as partners. Teachers collaborate with each other. Principals are educational leaders, not just disciplinarians.

Teachers have high expectations for their students and emphasize that education can help them escape poverty. Schools focus on pride and respect, which resonates with the community's culture.

"My goal is to do for these kids what I do with my own children," says teacher Susana Rojas. "It's all about exposure to concepts — wide, narrow, long, short ... I don't ask them to memorize 1, 2, 3 — I could teach a monkey to count."

This kind of learning has paid off. "In 2011, Union City boasted a high school graduation rate of 89.5 percent — roughly 10 percentage points higher than the national average. Last year, 75 percent of Union City graduates enrolled in college, with top students winning scholarships to Ivy League schools." Out of 22,000 American high schools, U.S. News & World Report ranked Union City High in the top 22 percent.

(Kirp, David. "The Secret to Fixing Bad Schools." *New York Times*. 9 February 2013.)