

DESIGNING FOR IMPACT: HOW CENTRAL FALLS, RI USED RESEARCH TO SUPPORT MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

Written by:

Amber Humm Patnode | Proving Ground, CEPR Kriti Chopra | Proving Ground, CEPR Christina Claiborne | The Annenberg Institute at Brown University Thought partnership and analytic support:

Central Falls School District Mathematica





Central Falls, Rhode Island, is a small, densely populated, and linguistically diverse city where 51% of public school students are multilingual learners (MLLs). Like many districts across the country, Central Falls struggled with stagnant language acquisition rates and wide achievement gaps for MLL students. Over 65% of MLLs in their first three years of service were scoring at Levels 1 to 2.9 (out of 6) on the state's language proficiency assessment. In English Language Arts, just 1.9% of MLLs met proficiency compared to 7.6% of non-MLLs. These academic disparities were compounded by trauma experienced by many newcomer students and limited systemic support for identity

Central Falls set out to tackle this challenge through support from the Rhode Island Department of Education and Proving Ground at Harvard University, resulting in the creation of an extended day program called "See the 3."

development, SEL, and family engagement.

Central Falls, RI



Program at a Glance

Central Falls School District (CFSD) employed a structured, evidence-based approach to design and implement See the 3, an extended day program aimed at enhancing language proficiency (achieve a score of 3+ on the state's language proficiency assessment) and fostering a sense of belonging among multilingual learners (MLLs). This initiative was grounded in implementation science principles, emphasizing stakeholder engagement, iterative development, and contextual adaptation.

Key Features of Year 1 of Programming:

- Target Population: Students in grades K-12 scoring Level 1 to 2.9 on the WIDA ACCESS state assessment.
- Program Structure: Two-hour after-school sessions, 3–4 days per week, focusing on all four language domains with an emphasis on speaking and writing.
- Additional Supports: Provision of snacks, meals, and a 30-minute recreation period during each session.
- Community Engagement: Monthly field trips designed to enhance social connections and real-world language application.
- Summer Programming: Five-week sessions, four hours per day, four days per week.
- Participation: Out of 610 eligible students, 243 consistently participated, supported by 25 teachers across the district.



Planning and Administration: A Structured, Collaborative Process

In fall 2021, Central Falls joined seven other districts in a two-year initiative led by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) and Proving Ground, a project housed within the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University. The goal: to improve student outcomes through continuous improvement and data-driven decision-making. RIDE provided matching funds for districts that committed resources to this work.

Year 1: Identifying the Problem and Designing a Solution

Each district formed a leadership team—including superintendents, directors, principals, and specialists—that participated in six virtual sessions focused on:

1. Identifying a problem of practice using local data

Evidence-Based Practice:

Clearly defining a specific problem based on local data increases the relevance and focus of the solution (<u>Carnegie Foundation</u>).

Evidence-Based Practice in Action:

The team conducted a data diagnostic, which revealed that 65% of multilingual learners (MLLs) in their first three years of service were scoring at Levels 1 to 2.9 on the WIDA ACCESS language proficiency assessment.

2. Conducting root cause analysis

Evidence-Based Practice:

Understanding root causes ensures interventions target the right problems at the right level (University of Washington).

Evidence-Based Practice in Action:

Using a modified "5 Whys" protocol and logic tree mapping, the team explored barriers across four domains—Instruction, Curriculum, Environment, and Learner—and identified critical root causes, and chose to prioritize six among the many identified:

- The intensive MLL classes were overcrowded.
- They were unable to monitor student progress without interim assessment data (data other than ACCESS scores).
- There was no comprehensive MLL framework in place, including programs, services, strategies, materials, resources, benchmarks, and assessments.
- There were limited opportunities for belonging and identity development.
- The students had trauma unrelated to direct classroom/school involvement.
- There was no high-quality professional development to support MLL instruction (ongoing, data-driven, student-based, evidence of change).
- They were unable to attract or recruit bilingual teaching candidates.
- The systems of support were not designed to support MLLs (reading specialist, math intervention, after-school programming).



3. Brainstorming and selecting a solution

Through structured brainstorming, each team member proposed and voted on possible solutions to address the root causes. The team narrowed down to six promising ideas and evaluated them based on potential impact and feasibility.

4. Designing a pilot for implementation and evaluation with user-centered principles Evidence-Based Practices:

- Designing with input from end-users ensures that interventions are feasible, acceptable, and aligned with needs (<u>Carnegie Foundation</u>).
- Clearly defined core components allow for training, observation, and fidelity monitoring (<u>National Implementation Research Network</u>).

Evidence-Based Practice in Action:

The extended day program—eventually named *See the 3*—was selected for piloting. It aimed to integrate language instruction, identity development, and belonging-building for MLLs.

With support from Proving Ground, the district used journey mapping to visualize what students and families would experience in the new program. These visuals were shared in home languages for feedback, which helped shape the design. A practice profile was then developed to define the program's core components and implementation expectations. These components included:

- Intentional Relationship Development
- Language Development (aligned to WIDA and grade-level standards)
- SEL Skill Development (based on CASEL's five competencies)
- Whole Child Affirmation
- Family Engagement (in families' home languages)
- Celebration of Language and Identity

As Central Falls designed *See the 3*, district leaders consulted EdResearch for Action briefs focused on supporting <u>multilingual learners</u> and <u>immigrant-origin students</u> to ensure their approach was grounded in evidence-based practices. These briefs informed the program's emphasis on language development, social-emotional learning, and culturally responsive practices, helping the district align its design with research on what supports academic success and belonging for multilingual learners.

Year 2: Implementing and Evaluating

In year two, Central Falls piloted *See the 3*, which focused on language development, identity, and belonging. The district monitored implementation and met at least monthly with RIDE, Proving Ground, and other districts to reflect, troubleshoot, and plan future improvements.



Implementation and Program Details: Evidence-Based Design Principles in Action

1. Curriculum Built for Multilingual Learners

Evidence-Based Practices:

- <u>Instructional resources and technology</u> designed to integrate language development and grade-level content learning have demonstrated effectiveness.
- <u>Differentiated language development services</u> are necessary to meet the needs of ML-ELs with varying language proficiency levels and educational backgrounds.

Evidence-Based Practice in Action:

Central Falls designed a program specifically tailored to multilingual learners. A team of teacher leaders and district staff selected culturally responsive resources, including the Cengage National Geographic curriculum ("Reach Higher" and "Lift") and Lexia English for K-6 students. These were supplemented by teacher-created lessons aligned with the science of reading and the district's core curriculum. All materials were chosen to build both academic and communicative language skills.

While the original design included trauma-informed SEL instruction delivered by mental health professionals, staffing shortages required an adaptive approach. Instead, staff began training in the RULER framework, allowing classroom teachers to incorporate SEL practices more broadly—an example of flexible, responsive program design.

2. Real-World Enrichment to Reinforce Language Learning

Evidence-Based Practices:

- Emphasizing pedagogy that <u>values students</u> backgrounds and providing extended learning opportunities can positively influence the engagement, achievement, and sense of belonging of ML-EL students
- Formal programs and <u>after-school supports</u> have been shown to improve academic performance for immigrant youth.

Evidence-Based Practices in Action:

Daily enrichment and recreation periods allowed students to develop social and academic language through play and relationship-building. Monthly field trips to places like aquariums and climbing gyms gave students the opportunity to use language in authentic, community-based contexts. These experiences boosted students' confidence, supported social-emotional development, and encouraged language transfer across settings. Many trips also welcomed family participation to deepen community connection.



3. Family Engagement Centered in Culture and Language

Evidence-Based Practices:

- Programs that <u>communicate with families in their home languages</u> and involve them in learning increase both student attendance and parental engagement.
- Programs designed to <u>engage immigrant-origin families</u> can foster collaboration, cultural understanding, and educational success within the school community.

Evidence-Based Practices in Action:

Site coordinators organized family events in the primary languages spoken at home. These gatherings included sessions to explain student assessment data, share program updates, and build community among families and staff. Participation was strongest at the elementary level but grew over time across all grades. Events reflected the core values of affirmation, belonging, and cultural celebration, key to sustaining trust and engagement.

4. Staffing Structures that Prioritize Sustainability and Quality

Evidence-Based Practices:

- <u>Strong teacher-student relationships</u> can contribute to students' school persistence, sense of belonging, and educational aspirations.
- Effective implementation requires manageable class sizes, supportive staffing, and strong instructional leadership.

Evidence-Based Practices in Action:

Each site was staffed with two coordinators—one for instruction, one for operations—to ensure smooth daily management and high-quality teaching. Class sizes were kept small (typically 12 students), with a teaching assistant or support staff member assigned to each classroom. Site principals oversaw school-level logistics, while a district-level MLL director coordinated efforts across schools. These staffing structures ensured consistency, built leadership capacity, and reduced burnout among educators.

5. Intentional Program Design and Targeted Outreach

Evidence-Based Practice:

<u>Accessible communications in multiple languages</u> and formats can bolster home-school connections and improve student engagement.

Evidence-Based Practice in Action:

The program launched in fall 2022 and ran for 2 hours after school, 3–4 days per week, with a 4-week summer session. Recruitment targeted 1st–12th graders scoring at Level 1 to 2.9 on the WIDA ACCESS assessment. School staff personally contacted eligible families through calls and home visits to explain the program and invite participation. While middle and high school attendance was initially inconsistent, participation improved significantly in year two—demonstrating the value of sustained, trust-based outreach.



Program Iteration: Strengthening and Scaling What Works

In its third year (2024–25), See the 3 entered a new phase of iteration and refinement. Building on implementation insights and evaluation data from the first two years, Central Falls focused on improving quality, deepening family engagement, strengthening instructional design, and expanding reach to more multilingual learners (MLLs).

Expanded Student Reach and Differentiation

- The program continued to serve students in grades K-12, now operating 2-3 days per week across sites.
- One school piloted a classroom specifically for students with English Language Proficiency
 (ELP) levels 3.0–4.7, expanding services beyond the original target group of Level 1–2.9 learners.
- This pilot set the stage for a rebranded summer session, *MLL Enrichment*, with a new goal of helping students reach an ELP of 4.8 or higher to exit MLL services.

Summer 2025: MLL Enrichment Program Highlights

- Target Group: Students in grades K-5 with ELP levels 1.0–4.7.
- Schedule: 4 days/week, 4 hours/day, for 5 weeks.
- Curriculum and Materials:
 - Lexia English: Direct Instruction and Writing Lessons.
 - Phonics for Reading, Magnetics, and National Geographic Reach.
 - SEL integration through RULER and Morning Meetings.
 - Online station rotation platforms, including Lexia English and i-Ready.
- **Enrichment:** On-site assemblies, physical education twice a week, and art classes twice a week.
- Data Use:
 - Weekly data chats with students and Lexia certificate celebrations.
 - Progress notes sent to families at the end of the program.

Professional Development and Staff Support

- **Before the Year:** Teachers engaged in a two-week preparation period, including PD on Lexia English and planning for the year.
- During the Year:
 - A January PD break offered time for reflection and recalibration.
 - Monthly staff meetings provided *See the 3* teachers and TAs with regular support from program coordinators.
 - Teachers piloting English 3D, a new ELD curriculum, contributed feedback to inform its school-day adoption in 2025–26.
 - TAs received dedicated training with the district's MLL Director.



Family and Community Engagement

- TELL progress monitoring was administered four times during the year to track language growth.
- One school hosted a TELL data night, inviting families to review student progress and celebrate learning.
- New family nights—including events like "paint night" and a themed "sleepover"—offered joyful, culturally affirming ways to strengthen school-community relationships.
- Walking field trips to local destinations (e.g., parks, libraries, basketball games) provided low-cost, high-impact opportunities to connect classroom learning with the broader community.

Implementation Infrastructure

- Coordinator Support: Monthly meetings and one-on-one check-ins with the district's MLL Director ensured that each site coordinator received tailored implementation support.
- Instructional and Operational Leadership remained a cornerstone of each site, sustaining small class sizes and enabling consistent, high-quality programming.

Evaluation and Learnings

Quantitative Findings:

To measure the impact of See the 3, Central Falls Public Schools used a matched comparison design across three consecutive years (2023, 2024, and 2025). This quasi-experimental method compared outcomes for participating students with those of their peers in the same grade level who had similar baseline assessment scores who were eligible but did not participate, controlling for key covariates such as attendance and home language.

Evaluation Design 2022-2023

- Sample: Of 610 eligible multilingual learners in grades 1–12, 243 consistently participated in the program.
- Matching Criteria: All analyses matched students on grade level and controlled for prior ACCESS scores, attendance during the evaluation year, and language spoken at home (primarily Spanish, limiting subgroup disaggregation).
- Thresholds for Meaningful Impact:
 - A 2.0-point scaled score increase in ACCESS scores was defined as the minimum meaningful effect for general proficiency.

Key Findings

• Preliminary analyses showed a 70% probability that participation in *See the 3* led to gains of at least 2.0 points.



Evaluation Design 2023-2025

- Sample: 175 students were included in the analyses for the 2023-2024 and 2024-25 analyses. Due to limited data, students in grades 8–12 were excluded from the 2025 analysis, and students in grade 12 were excluded from the 2024 analysis.
- Matching Criteria: In both years, analyses matched students on grade level and controlled for prior ACCESS scores, attendance during the evaluation year, and language spoken at home (primarily Spanish, limiting subgroup disaggregation).

Thresholds for Meaningful Impact:

- A 2.0-point scaled score increase in ACCESS scores was defined as the minimum meaningful effect for general proficiency.
- An 8.5-point scaled score increase was evaluated to test for more substantial growth.

Key Findings

• 2023-2024 Results:

On average, students who participated in *See the 3* during the 2024–25 school year improved by 6.41 points on the ACCESS language proficiency assessment. The analysis showed there was an 88% probability that students gained at least 2.0 points. There was a 30% likelihood of an 8.5 scaled score point gain. The overall pattern suggests that *See the 3* is helping multilingual learners make consistent and measurable progress in language development.

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Implications for Continuous Improvement

These findings provide evidence that *See the 3* contributes positively to language development for multilingual learners. While the program did not meet the more ambitious 8.5-point benchmark, the consistent improvements above the 2-point threshold reinforce the value of continued investment, refinement, and ongoing evaluation.

Family and Educator Feedback: Confidence, Belonging, and Community

Central Falls also collected extensive qualitative data from focus groups with families and staff to better understand how the program was experienced on the ground.

Key strengths identified by staff based on family & staff surveys and focus groups:

- Strong relationships between students, teachers, and families, especially fostered through small-group instruction and bilingual staff.
- Safe and inclusive learning environments where students could take academic risks without fear of judgment.
- Real-world enrichment through field trips that built language fluency and community connections.



- Effective communication between staff and families, with multilingual support.
- Built-in planning time was praised by teachers as essential for delivering high-quality instruction.

Areas for improvement identified by staff based on family & staff surveys and focus groups:

- Curriculum differentiation: Teachers often had to modify materials themselves to meet diverse student needs.
- Staffing consistency and readiness: Some sites lacked stable staffing, and materials were delayed during early implementation.
- Testing and assessment stress: Students, particularly younger ones, expressed anxiety around assessments like TELL, especially the speaking portions.
- Technology limitations and secondary student needs: Teachers noted the need for more devices and flexibility for high school students with competing priorities.
- Teacher burnout: While planning time helped, full teaching loads during the day and program responsibilities in the afternoon created fatigue.

Conclusion

The implementation of *See the 3* in Central Falls exemplifies how school systems can use research to drive meaningful, equity-centered innovation. By grounding their program design in evidence-based practices, sourced in part from EdResearch for Action briefs on multilingual learners and immigrant-origin students, the district ensured that every aspect of the initiative, from curriculum to staffing to family engagement, was informed by what works. Just as important, Central Falls brought this research to life through a thoughtful, inclusive design process that elevated student and family voices and remained flexible to real-world constraints. This case offers a compelling model for how districts can use research not only to inform policy but also to develop programs that reflect the lived realities of the students and communities they serve.

This EdResearch for Action brief is a collaboration among:









