

# Project SOL

## Newsletter III

### *A Note from the Project Directors*

*Dear Participants and Friends of Project SOL:*




*It has been over four years since we began Project SOL and we can now share some results with you. We begin with a reminder of the project goals and accomplishments, then we describe our findings for each of these goals. We hope you enjoy this overview of our project results. We believe the information we have gathered will be helpful to all of us who are interested in giving students from other lands the best possible opportunity for success.*

*We also want to take this opportunity to say thank you again to the many students, parents, teachers, principals and school staff members who have participated in this important project. If you would like to keep up with our more detailed professional reports about the project, please visit our website: [www.fiu.edu/~sol](http://www.fiu.edu/~sol). If you have any questions, or just want to chat about the project, don't hesitate to call us. Our number is 305-919-5953 and we are always happy to hear from you!*

*Best Wishes to Each and Every One of You,  
Dr. Mary Levitt, Dr. Jerry Levitt, & the SOL Staff*



### *Project Goals*

-  **To learn what it is like for students from other lands to go to school in the U. S.**
-  **To learn how moving to a new country might affect students' social networks, their feelings about themselves, and how well they do in school.**
-  **To learn what schools can do to help students from other lands achieve success.**

### *Accomplishments*

#### **What We Have Done**

In the first year of the project, our staff interviewed 638 students in grades 3-4, 6-7, and 9 who had recently arrived in the United States from Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, Bahamas, Cayman Islands, Dominica, or Trinidad & Tobago. Students were asked about their social networks and how they are adjusting to school in the United States. Parents also participated by completing a survey about their children's educational experiences and their family's adjustment. We also gathered information about school achievement and behavior from participating teachers and from school system records. After removing any information that would identify individual participants, all information gathered was entered into our computers. We repeated these interviews and surveys in the following year and again in the third and final year of interviewing for the project. The information that we have gathered gives us a general picture of what it is like for students from other lands to adjust to their new situations.

#### **What We Have Learned**

In general, our findings indicate that adjusting to a new school in a new country is a challenge for most students and it seems that the first year is the hardest. The biggest hurdle for students (those who do not already speak English) seems to be learning the English language. As students learn more English, they do better in school.

We have also learned more each year about how social relationships, school experiences, and community conditions contribute to students' ability to meet the challenges they face. Our results regarding each of the project goals are described next.

**Project Goal 1: To learn what it is like for students from other lands to go to school in the U. S.**

#### *School Performance*

In each year, we asked students how they are doing in school compared to the year before. In the first year, most students said they were doing the same (49%) or worse (16%) than they did in their country of origin, and only 35% said they were doing better. By the second year, most students (70%) said they were doing better and about the same number said they were doing better in the third year. Students' classroom grades and test scores (from their school records) also improved over this time. The major reason students gave for better performance in the first year was that the work was easier than it had been in their country. The most frequent reasons students gave for better performance in the second and third years were that they were learning more English, learning more in general, or working harder.

#### *Things That Were Hard for Students*

Each year, we asked students whether a number of things had been hard for them over the past year. In the first year, almost all of the students (80-90%) said that leaving friends and family members had been hard for them. Many students (45-55%) also said that teachers and others not understanding their speech or their ways of doing things was hard, along with trying to learn English. Also, students (40-50%) often said that making new friends, not having friends or relatives nearby, being in a class with more advanced students, and students from different countries fighting with each other were things that were hard for them. Some students (20-36%) also said being in a class with less advanced students,

experiencing unfair treatment or prejudice, family difficulties, or neighborhood or housing conditions were hard for them. Students were clearly adjusting to their new situations by the second and third year interviews, as fewer students reported difficulties each year. However, even in the third year, over half (58%) of the students said leaving friends was still hard for them and most (82%) said leaving family members was still hard for them.

**Project Goal 2: To learn how moving to a new country affects students' social networks, feelings about themselves, and how well they do in school.**

We found that, on average, almost half (43%) of the students' social networks (people important to them) remained in the country of origin when we did our first interviews. This included many family members and most of the students' friends. By the third year, most students had more local friends. Students often reported receiving support from both family members and friends, and they reported increases in support after their first year in the U.S. On average, students also reported more positive feelings about themselves over time. Overall, students who had less stress in their lives and more support from the people in their social networks felt better about themselves and they performed better in school. However, learning English seemed to be the most important key to school success for students who were not English speakers when they arrived in the U.S.

**Project Goal 3: To learn what schools can do to help students from other lands achieve success.**

In the last year of our project we asked students and parents what schools could do to make things easier for new students. Many students (43%) and parents (32%) gave recommendations related to language issues, such as the need for more bilingual staff or translators, more ESOL classes, or more classes and materials in their native language. Some students (23%) and parents (24%) also said school personnel should provide more support and understanding for students, but other students (15%) and parents (12%) said schools were fine and should do nothing more. Some students (10%)

thought schools should create more clubs and activities for new students, should help them to make friends with other students, or should help new students understand the new system and rules.

We also asked students what they thought about school and teachers. The majority of students (54%) said school was good, great, and important for them and for their future. Many students further reported that school was very important to their parents. In addition, several students said school was a fun, cool, and interesting place to learn (27%). However, some students (10%) said school was boring, hard or difficult, and demanding. A substantial majority of students (71%) thought teachers were good or great as a result of either their teaching style or their personal traits, but some students (9%) thought teachers were mean, rude, disrespectful, boring, or too strict.

Overall, these responses suggest that schools should address issues such as language and translation problems, along with the support and understanding provided to new students. However, students seem to be generally satisfied with the schools and teachers they encounter when they arrive in the US.

***What's Next?***

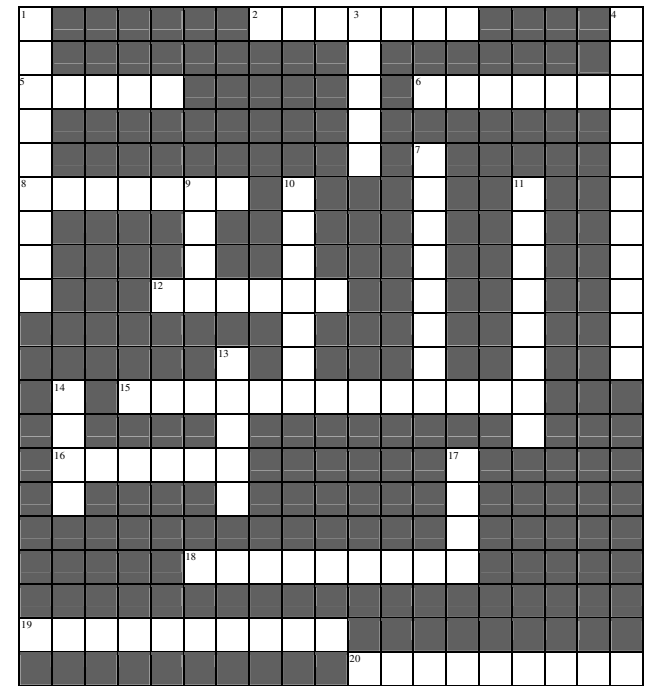
As you might guess, because we have a *lot* of information from the project, we still have a lot of work to do to understand all of it. We will continue to post new findings on our project web site as they emerge.

**Project SOL Web Site:** [www.fiu.edu/~sol](http://www.fiu.edu/~sol)

***Game Zone***

We have put together a crossword puzzle for you to complete. Please read the clues and search for the answers throughout the newsletter!!!

ANSWERS: Across: 2. hardest, 5. adapt, 6. support, 8. English, 12. better, 15. understanding, 16. native, 18. bilingual, 19. activities, 20. satisfied. Down: 1. challenge, 3. doing, 4. interesting, 7. advanced, 9. some, 10. friends, 11. language, 13. fewer, 14. fine, 17. ESOL.



**ACROSS**

- 2. The first year seems to be the \_\_\_\_.
- 5. Our project seeks to understand how new students \_\_\_\_ to new situations.
- 6. Some students would like school personnel to provide more \_\_\_\_.
- 8. The biggest difficulty for students seems to be learning \_\_\_\_.
- 12. Learning more English was the main reason for \_\_\_\_ performance in school.
- 15. People not \_\_\_\_ their speech or ways of doing things was hard for students.
- 16. Several students wanted classes in their \_\_\_\_ language.
- 18. Some students thought schools should have more \_\_\_\_ staff.
- 19. Students think school should create more clubs and \_\_\_\_.
- 20. Most students are \_\_\_\_ with school and teachers.

**DOWN**

- 1. It is a \_\_\_\_ for new students to adapt to a new school and country.
- 3. We asked students how they were \_\_\_\_ in school.
- 4. Several students feel school is an \_\_\_\_ place to learn.
- 7. Students found it difficult to be in a class with more \_\_\_\_ students.
- 9. In the first year, most students were doing about the \_\_\_\_ in school as in their country of origin.
- 10. Leaving \_\_\_\_ and family behind had been hard for most students.
- 11. Many students made suggestions about \_\_\_\_ issues.
- 13. By the second and third year, students reported \_\_\_\_ difficulties.
- 14. About 14% of students think school is \_\_\_\_.
- 17. Many students like the \_\_\_\_ classes offered in school to learn English.