

# Building a Better Future for English Language Learners:

How Hartford Public Schools and Middlebury Interactive Languages are partnering to close the ELL achievement gap



**S**ome students in Hartford, Connecticut, had a unique camp experience last summer. Rather than playing soccer or practicing the tuba, these students had a more fundamental goal in their vacation pursuits: learning English.

Like many urban districts, Hartford has a significant number of students for whom English is a second language. In fact, district officials report that more than 86 languages are spoken in the homes of its students.

To meet the growing ELL challenge, Hartford partnered with Middlebury Interactive Languages, the leader in K-12 language academic instruction, to develop these English language academies as part of an innovative, comprehensive new program that meets the learning needs of all its students. The other key building blocks of this program are the integration of new digital curriculum modules in the classrooms and extensive professional development training for teachers.

Hartford's comprehensive program will transform the way the district supports its English Language Learners (ELL) and help more students prepare for academic and career success. It could also be a national model for educating ELLs, which at nearly five million students is both the largest and fastest growing population in U.S. schools. The program is not just designed for students who are native Spanish speakers, but also students of all language and cultural backgrounds.

"We are taking a new approach to ELL education that embraces blended learning and academic language instruction," said Hartford Public Schools Superintendent Beth Schiavino-Narvaez. "The early response to the program from students and teachers has been encouraging, and the students have been energized to learn English and develop academic discourse, which is critical to language learning."

The month-long ELL academy is modeled after

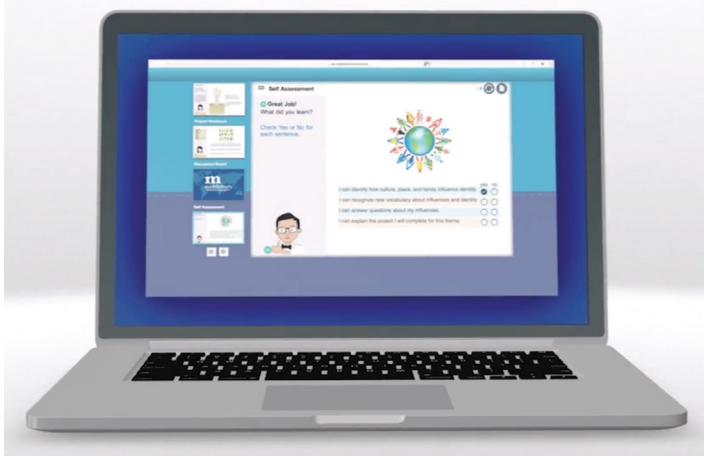
Middlebury Interactive Languages' immersive world language summer academies and has been tailored for non-native English students. Similar academies developed by Middlebury Interactive had already delivered strong results in three urban districts in Massachusetts, including improvements in students' language skills as determined by post-academy assessments. Middlebury Interactive's rigorous academic approach employs proven language learning principles to accelerate English language learning and help students use language in real-world situations.

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—Beth Schiavino-Narvaez, Hartford Public Schools Superintendent



While these ELL students were enmeshed in the activities of the academy, Hartford teachers and staff were simultaneously working with Middlebury Interactive's academic team to develop a broader program for the academic year.



to support non-native speakers on the path to learning academic English.

Middlebury Interactive will also provide ongoing program evaluation and technical support to Hartford. The participating ELL students have embraced the digital and project-based learning, according to Monica Quiñones, the district's Director of ELL Services. Students have even offered suggestions to improve the student experience, feedback that Middlebury Interactive and Hartford are working to address.

“This is a very forward-thinking solution Hartford is developing to address one of the biggest fiscal, social and educational challenges facing our nation’s public schools,” said Middlebury Interactive Languages CEO Jane Swift. “The traditional ELL models really haven’t worked, and this partnership puts new digital learning tools in the hands of teachers and employs research-based approach to English instruction that has already proven successful in learning a world language.”

Swift noted that one of the key factors of the new program is that the digital materials allow for enhanced flexibility and scalability, which is critical to address large and unanticipated swells in ELL enrollment, including those experienced by districts across the country with the recent influx of unaccompanied minors.

She also noted that another core learning principle in the Hartford program is the focus on culture, not just the local Connecticut culture, but also the native culture of the learners. Research show that allowing the students to stay connected to their native cultures—while adapting to a new one—is critical to learning English.

In order to assist with the ongoing enhancement and expansion of the program, Middlebury Interactive has contracted with Johns Hopkins University to conduct a third-party assessment of the ELL program. The results of the study, expected in late spring 2015, will help fine-tune the program going forward and provide a road map for other school districts to create their own blended learning ELL programs for non-native English speakers.

The program was developed by Middlebury Interactive’s in-house academic team of linguists, ELL specialists, language Ph.D.s and digital education experts, led by Chief Learning Officer Dr. Aline Germain-Rutherford, Surdna Professor of Linguistics at Middlebury College. In addition, Dr. Jim Cummins, one of North America’s foremost experts on ELL instruction and the author of some of the most influential academic studies on the topic, consulted on the design of the digital ELL curriculum.

One key result of this collaborative effort was the design and development of blended learning curriculum modules for implementation during the school year. Like the academies, the curriculum is designed specifically to meet the needs of ELL students at their own grade levels and improve learning outcomes.

The program currently reaches approximately 300 ELL students in grades four through eight at eight different schools: The Latino Studies Academy at Burns Elementary School, the Maria C. Sanchez Elementary School, M.D. Fox Elementary School, L.W. Batchelder Elementary School, Burr Elementary School, James H. Naylor Elementary School, the Expeditionary Learning Academy at Moylan School and the McDonough Expeditionary Learning School. The program will expand to reach more students in the 2015-2016 school year.

Through this new partnership, Middlebury Interactive also provides teacher professional development on the use of new technologies and language learning practices, starting with 15 Hartford teachers trained this year. District coaches, in partnership with Middlebury Interactive, created professional development resources specifically for ELL teachers to implement this innovative blended learning curriculum

