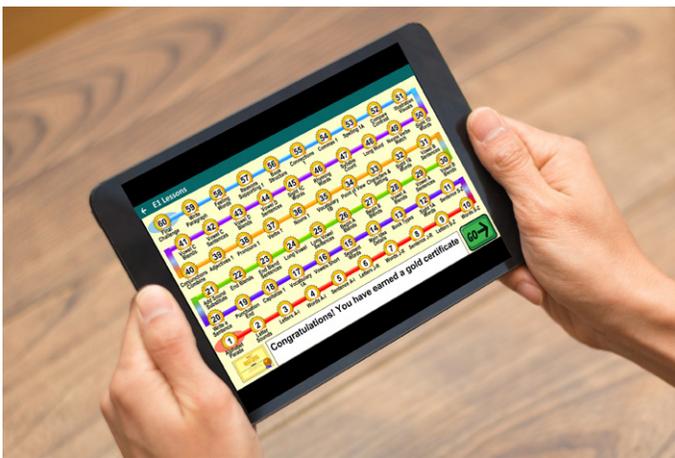




Sweetwater Union’s Adult Ed Program Sees ELL Engagement Soar With Learning Upgrade

One of the largest adult ed programs in California turns to an engaging (and mobile) literacy curriculum to motivate students both in class and on the go

Sweetwater Union High School District’s massive adult education program is the second largest adult school in the state of California—and it’s still growing. At four campuses and 20 off-site locations (including one Tyson Chicken plant) in the coastal and inland cities south of San Diego, more than 25,000 adult learners of all ages come to study everything from culinary arts to welding to GED or high school diploma prep. Typically, students come to a campus or off-site location for classes, which are often held in the evenings, although a growing distance education program serves learners remotely through online curricula, learning management platforms, and teacher-student check-ins over Skype.



While the technical and vocational classes are certainly a draw, by far the largest population of adult learners at Sweetwater are English language learners (ELLs) looking to sharpen their oral and literacy skills. Unlike other higher-ed programs serving adults, Sweetwater offers learners a low-cost option for continuing their learning when it’s convenient for them, but that low price point presents its share of challenges as well.

Sweetwater Adult Education Breakdown

4 Campuses

20 Off-Site Locations
(including one Tyson Chicken plant)

More than **25,000** Adult Learners

Largest population of adult learners at Sweetwater are **English Language Learners (ELLs)**

High Usage At Home Accelerates Learning

Average time to earn a course certificate (60 lessons): **24 hours**

Two students completed all 5 courses (300 lessons) within **4 months!**

Average time/week using mobile app: **4 hours**

Average CASAS Gain 10 Weeks*: **+7.8 points**

Highest CASAS Gain 10 Weeks: **+16 points**

**Learners pre-tested at or below 210 points*

“Adult ed is voluntary, and our students very much vote with their feet if they don’t like what’s going on in the classroom—they just stop coming to school,” explains Mary Murphy, a former teacher trainer who now heads up the ESL program at Sweetwater’s Division of Adult Ed. “We offer an open-entry/open-exit, so teachers can have new students entering into their classrooms weekly, or into our distance learning programs up until the last week of the semester. And at the same time, we have students leaving on a weekly basis.” Work schedules, arranging childcare, or simply discouragement at the pace of learning can all hamper attendance and hinder course completion, meaning teachers must be extra vigilant—and flexible—when it comes to planning their lessons.



“My students give such positive feedback and their confidence is increasing. I just see remarkable growth.”
—Lisa Wilson-Scharmann, Sweetwater ELL Teacher

A Teacher’s Journey Through Engagement

Teachers at Sweetwater’s adult education program use Learning Upgrade’s engaging music, video, and lessons to teach new concepts and reinforce learned ones. Here’s what Sweetwater ELL teacher Lisa Wilson-Scharmann is seeing as she uses the program with her students.

Warming Up

A typical day begins with a warm-up reviewing the previous day’s lesson. If a student has a Learning Upgrade lesson that they feel supports a lesson previously taught in class or they had difficulty with it, I will share it with the class. Next, I like to do an activity in partners or teams to get the students conversing in English. I will do a whole-group lesson and then the class will break into their textbook groups. Last, I end with a quick check before students leave class.

From the Top

All of my students love the challenge of starting on English Upgrade 1 and work up to the next level. The lessons are very clear and provide immediate feedback. Students must repeat low scoring lessons until mastery is achieved.

Independent Workers

My students are definitely hooked on Learning Upgrade. I see their excitement and progress. They enjoy the ease of the app and can use it anywhere and at any time. They work independently while having fun. The app is friendly and does not intimidate them. My students are building confidence and are practicing English outside of the classroom.

Going Mobile

The mobile app (which most of my students use) allows for learning all day long, and I’m able to monitor their progress as often as I like. The lessons are musical, engaging, and fun to play. The students don’t even realize they are learning because they are enjoying the music and games so much.

Remarkable Growth

I find that this is an amazing way to get students to continue their learning outside of the classroom. The lessons are short, and you can quickly show part or all of the lesson to support classroom learning—or students can work on something while, say, waiting for an appointment.



“It’s a very difficult dance but our teachers do it well,” Murphy says. “It’s tough to have a continuation because you could have a completely different set of students from one day to the next.” To keep students invested, Sweetwater’s ELLs use literacy programs such as Learning Upgrade both in class and on their own time, a tactic that gives students a level of comfort between classes or teacher check-ins. Learning Upgrade, a literacy and math curriculum designed specifically for ELLs, uses a variety of songs, games, and videos to teach and reinforce concepts in an engaging way. There’s no set way for teachers to use it across the range of beginning and intermediate language classes offered at Sweetwater, but many teachers use the program’s engagement factor and built-in rewards system to draw students into lessons and capitalize on the infectious enthusiasm.

“One of our teachers begins class every day with a lesson from Learning Upgrade to get students excited—that’s her warmup.”

—Mary Murphy, Head of the ESL program at Sweetwater’s Division of Adult Ed

“The new students always ask: ‘How do I get that, too?’ Other instructors run lessons with students in the computer labs, using data from automatically generated reports to gauge how well the class understands a given lesson.” “Those teachers often go back if they see a certain lesson where many students have struggled and conduct a class lesson on their projector or interactive whiteboard,” Murphy explains. And still other instructors assign lessons as practice or homework, letting students complete assignments at home, on the bus, or wherever they can squeeze it in.

With the varied enrollment at Sweetwater, engaging students during class time is a formidable enough challenge; ensuring that they’re keeping up with their learning outside of class can be an even greater one. In response, teachers have set up Edmodo and Facebook groups for their classes where students can keep on top of coursework—provided they have reliable internet access, which isn’t always the case. When they do, Murphy says, as often as not it’s mobile access through devices such as smartphones. But rather than let that fact hold learning back, educators at Sweetwater have flipped it into an advantage.

Learning Upgrade’s new mobile app, which works with both Android and iOS, is a prime example. “Teachers have been embracing the mobile app and showing the students how to use it whenever they can,” Murphy says, adding that being able to access their coursework content anywhere and anytime has been a boom to both students and teachers alike.





“There’s some very small chunks in Learning Upgrade. You can work on it for 10 minutes and put it away and come back to it and pick it up where you left off.”

—Mary Murphy

Though every ELL student at Sweetwater gets initial access to use Learning Upgrade at home or through a mobile device, they have to use it or risk losing their individual license. Since the Sweetwater adult ed program works on a tight budget, administrators decided that it only made sense to offer Learning Upgrade licenses to those students who were actively using it. “We’ve had great success using it in our beginning literacy programs up to the intermediate level,” Murphy says. “When students don’t use the program, it isn’t a question of them not liking the program. It’s because of time.”

Although they believe strongly in the program, Sweetwater doesn’t make the at-home use of Learning Upgrade a requirement, Murphy says. “But students are told that their

use of it will be monitored. When students know the license is going to expire, that often encourages them, as with all of us, to think twice about losing it.”

In many cases, engagement isn’t only tied to any one program or teaching method, but rather permeates the entire culture of the district. At Sweetwater, Murphy attributes Learning Upgrade users’ recent gains on CASAS tests—whose administration is a requirement of their federal grant—to a combination of motivated teachers and students who see a value and results from continuing their education. “We make sure our teachers closely monitor the work being done,” Murphy says. Teachers make a special effort to highlight to the class when a student receives a gold or silver award in Learning Upgrade, showing lesson completion or mastery.

“Teachers always comment, ‘Wow, I saw you spent 10 hours last week working on this, good job.’ It means a lot to anyone when someone is aware of the good work you’re doing.”

—Mary Murphy

The app is available as a free download from:

