

'It's the right thing to do'

Austin, district's retiring EL director, speaks on 39-year career helping language learners

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Teaching and leading an English learner program is so much more than just knowing the language, said Laura Austin of the Carson City School District. That's primarily



Dr. Laura Austin

because no matter what, people won't always agree no matter how they communicate, whether it's English, Spanish, Chinese or whichever language the conversation might take place

in for the individuals or group.

Austin retired Monday after spending 39 years in education, spending a career and most of her lifetime in Douglas County. She might have started out in Oxnard, Calif., developing her passion for teaching there, but her husband's ties to Nevada brought the couple to Douglas County and she secured a job as an English as a Second Language teacher, working in high school for nine years and coming to CCSD in 2002.

With Carson City, she started as a half-time ESL coordinator and half-time vice principal for Mark Twain Elementary School, then becoming Eagle Valley Middle School's assistance principal for

three years. This gave her the tools to become Mark Twain's principal for the next seven years prior to becoming the district's full-time ESL director while pursuing her doctorate.

"I've loved being an educator and stayed ahead of the curve with best practices and trends," she said. "Part of the joy of being a principal is establishing the relationship with the teachers and the children, but also the parents. I really got to know the community as a principal. ... I was also raising three children. It's an educational leadership opportunity, and it's been serving me well. ... I've been surrounded by great people."

In her most recent role, Austin helped enact Title 3 law in the district, which ensures English learners achieve state academic standards and acquire English language proficiency. As director, Austin has overseen about 18 EL teachers among 10 of the district's schools who are maintaining compliance with federal law and 23 paraprofessionals providing native language support. Austin said she admires all of the district's EL staff members. They oversee students' educational instruction and support in the classroom, parental outreach and communication and accessibility to school district staff or curriculum, including the Gifted and Talented and Education or

Advanced Placement programs.

They also make sure the district maintains federal standards and that language is not a barrier to any of these issues, a significant portion of the EL program for families.

This also includes writing grants for various implementation specialist and instructional coach positions, especially in the past three years to teach content to English learners, she said.

"How do you teach math to students who are still learning the language?" she said.

Austin cited the Every Student Succeeds Act, signed into law by former President Barack Obama in December 2015, which gave English language learners a strong advantage and improved certain accountabilities and increased funding provisions. It also sent the message that these learners were to be considered a priority. It also helped clear any confusion that "English as a Second Language," which refers to an actual class students take, and "English learner," denoting students themselves, were separate terms, along with others, although Austin said there's still a long way to go in helping the public to understand why it's so important to serve EL families.

"That's the mission of the job," she said as director. "When you explain it to families, it's simply because it's the right thing to do."

Community outreach was one of the most important tasks she had for helping others to understand that EL programs aren't just about students learning a new language, but focusing on academic English and how to use it in the classroom and in other situations, she said. Most students coming into Carson City School District as a new citizen or not are not even learning their primary or secondary language for the first time.

"The ESL kids don't just take an ESL course," she said. "Some students say, 'This is my third language.' That's why they stopped calling it 'ESL.' Some people think we're only teaching in another language, and it's not English and it's not rigorous enough. That couldn't be further from the truth."

Austin said her ability to speak Spanish was a true asset to getting the opportunity to getting her roles in Douglas and Carson City, but "that's not always the answer."

"It's about people, not about the language," she said. "It's always reaching through and communicating with people. You don't always agree. So much discussion was with parents and administrators above me and what we should be doing with the kids. It has always been the Latino community usually that has been the most supportive."

Austin is proud of Carson City's results when it comes to its EL

current student population and its potential, with about 95 percent of its program students graduating this past June. Total enrollment as of the start of this 2020-21 school year, including kindergarteners so far, was about 800, but nothing was final yet, she said. Changes still had been occurring with families making decisions to change to homeschooling or other options due to COVID-19.

They've also helped to meet needs with Internet access, hotspots and remote acquisition programming, she said, with the district's Innovation and Technology department responding to families' needs as necessary.

"The other areas (we're challenged in) is the special education nexus because they're struggling with language or they have disabilities, and they continue to be a challenge," she said.

Austin said she plans to stay in Douglas and continue to advocate for education and continue the conversation about EL.

"It has been my honor to serve the English learner community and the community as a whole," she said. "I just so admire the individuals I've met and the children and the young adults that I've had the pleasure to work with. I love public education. To me, it is the best part of our great country. I leave the district in great hands."

