For decades, sociolinguists have called upon researchers to use our knowledge of language variation to help the communities we study (c.f. Labov 1995, Wolfram 2009, etc). Linguists and educators across the country have had success in achieving educational goals by providing educators with a more nuanced knowledge of language variation. This knowledge can have an impact on how students are taught and assessed (Charity Hudley and Mallinson 2011). It has also been shown that when teachers have more training in linguistics, they adopt more pluralistic attitudes (Sweetland 2011). Other collaborations have involved undergraduate and graduate students in service learning endeavors (Bucholtz 2011).

This paper presents a description and early results of a program we are developing in conjunction with a Houston charter school. The program contains four phases: in the first phase, we assess students’ use of and attitudes about “non-standard” linguistic features. In the second phase, we provide teachers with materials and training to use in the classroom, offered through a series of workshops, which are then implemented in the third phase. The fourth phase centers on an end-of-the-year reassessment of the students and an evaluation their progress.

One variable feature that we focus on, after Fought (2003), is variable usage of prepositions found in Chicano English, perhaps directly tied to Spanish. When students use these non-standard features in their writing, teachers are often capable of "marking the error" without being able to provide an explanation. To combat this situation, we provide teachers with the knowledge to recognize the "error" as a varietal feature, and give them a grammar variation guide that they can refer to in teaching standardized writing. For instance, we have found that we can draw on findings from cognitive linguistics, for example, examining the differences in meaning between on/in, and of/from, that teachers can use in the classroom.

Based on the needs of this particular school, we have thus far focused on Chicano English and African American English. As the program expands, we anticipate providing guidance on LEP (Limited English Proficient) assessment, which many schools are struggling with in response to the No Child Left Behind act.