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Effective Curriculum for English Learner Success:
**English Learner Responsive
Curriculum and Teaching: The
Right Materials in the Right Hands**



**EL Curriculum
Brief Series**

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is the second in a four-part series “Effective Curriculum for English Learner Success,” written for foundations supporting schools in which English learners (ELs) have meaningful access to an intellectually rich, culturally responsive, and linguistically supportive education. Curriculum development and curricular reform present an opportunity to advance the goals of educational equity and an EL responsive education. This second brief explores the relationship between curriculum materials and the teachers who deliver the curriculum, which has implications for the kind of investments in curriculum and professional learning that can make a difference in strengthening education for ELs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Investing in curriculum is a strategy for influencing classroom instruction. The tendency in curriculum development is to create “teacher-proof” standardized materials with detailed scripts, lesson plans, pacing guides, etc. Having one curriculum that works in the same way for all students across the system, regardless of the teacher, is more cost-effective and easier to implement, monitor, and assess. But standardization as a goal conflicts with the need for responsiveness to diverse needs. This tension is central to designing curriculum for ELs.

Curriculum for ELs requires adaptation, scaffolding, and responsiveness. Therefore, funders should invest in curriculum designed to anticipate, bolster, and support teachers’ capacity to flexibly and selectively adapt the curriculum and materials to their EL students.

In California, the state has adopted visionary and research-based EL policies in the past decade. For these policies to be successful, teachers need high-quality curriculum and the support to enact the robust instructional vision that is standards-focused, differentiated and responsive, and that centralizes the needs of ELs. Teachers cannot realize this vision without a curriculum designed for these purposes.

Introduction

The hope of high-quality curriculum is that it will lead to a coherent learning experience for students that covers essential standards, is intellectually engaging, and results in student achievement and mastery. For ELs, curriculum must also support language development, scaffold and build comprehension, and be culturally and linguistically responsive. Curriculum does not stand alone, however. It is a tool in the hands of teachers whose job is to deliver it. Investing in curriculum materials is one of the oldest strategies for influencing classroom instruction—to shape what teachers teach, how they instruct, and therefore what students learn. Unlike standards, frameworks, objectives, assessments, and other mechanisms that seek to impact instruction and guide teaching, instructional materials and curriculum packages shape directly what teachers and students actually do in the classroom. They have an intimate connection to teaching and learning.

Ideally, teachers know how to use curriculum, are knowledgeable and focused with intentionality on the content and standards, and are sufficiently adept at determining their students' needs to adapt and differentiate materials to address those needs. Because this is unfortunately not always the case, particularly with respect to understanding the needs of ELs, curriculum developers design and write curriculum that supports teachers in the endeavor of teaching content to their students. The beliefs and assumptions curriculum writers hold—about the role of teachers, teaching in relation to materials, and the capacity of teachers to deliver curriculum—deeply influences the materials they create.



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Differing perspectives on the relationship between curriculum, teachers, and teaching

Almost always at the heart of curricular reform are assumptions and beliefs about teachers and teaching that inform the prescriptiveness of the curriculum and the forms of support and guardrails built into the teacher guidance and professional development that accompanies the curriculum. Curriculum developers write and design curriculum based on their analysis of teacher capacity and their understanding of the role of the teacher.

There are two different paradigms for the relationship between the curriculum and teachers, each with serious implications for ELs. Curriculum designed to be used with high fidelity assume teachers do not have the knowledge or skills (or should not be given the flexibility) to make curricular decisions. In contrast, curriculum can be designed for teachers’ flexible and selective use adapted to their students based on their professional judgment.

Two perspectives on the curriculum-teacher relationship and implications for ELs

Paradigm	Implications for curriculum design	Local education agency (LEA) role	Implications for teachers
TEACHER-INDEPENDENT OR TEACHER PROOF	<p>Curriculum delivers the content and the teacher is largely irrelevant.</p> <p>Teachers’ lack of capacity and bias can result in inequities, inefficiency, and inadequate coverage of content. Therefore, curriculum is detailed, specific, and implemented with fidelity. The emphasis is on content experts as the designers of curriculum, which offers content coherence.</p> <p>Teacher supports are primarily focused on the delivery of lessons via a detailed, standards-based scope and sequence; scripted lesson plans and detailed pacing guides; and embedded standard assessments of skills and key concepts. Designated materials and texts include assessments to level instruction.</p>	<p>LEAs offer training on delivering the curriculum with fidelity and monitor implementation.</p>	<p>Teachers deliver the curriculum with fidelity.</p> <p>All materials are provided.</p> <p>One-size pacing creates challenges for students with unique needs and interests, like ELs.</p> <p>Teacher creativity and professional instructional decision-making are constrained.</p>

Paradigm	Implications for curriculum design	Local education agency (LEA) role	Implications for teachers
TEACHER AS THE CRAFTER AND ADAPTER OF CURRICULUM	<p>Curriculum provides an overarching standards-based scope and sequence, a wide range of high-quality core and supplemental materials to choose from, and a variety of possible pathways and learning activities.</p> <p>Curriculum embeds resources and guidance related to differentiating based on English proficiency levels, and in response to cultural and community inclusion.</p> <p>Curriculum crosswalks English Language Development (ELD) standards and content standards to support teachers in addressing the linguistic demands of the content.</p>	<p>LEAs offer professional development in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standards-based backwards design and curriculum planning. Mechanisms for knowing EL students and communities. Planning standards-based Designated and Integrated ELD. <p>LEAs also provide teacher collaboration and planning time, along with supports, including coaching.</p> <p>LEAs need to invest in a wide range of supplementary materials.</p>	<p>Teachers craft or adapt curriculum according to backwards design and in response to student needs and interests.</p>

We explore these paradigms and their implications below.

PARADIGM #1: THE TEACHER-INDEPENDENT OR TEACHER-PROOF CURRICULUM

In the world of curriculum, particularly curriculum deriving from standards movements or developed by experts in specific content disciplines, there often exists an implicit linking of curriculum to subject matter instead of to classroom practice in ways that largely ignore teachers and teacher practices. This kind of curriculum assumes the most direct way to influence student learning outcomes is through the curriculum itself—a well-constructed sequence of content and skills. The authors, content specialists, and professional curriculum writers construct the curriculum to be largely teacher-independent or teacher-proof. They do not necessarily think of the teacher as a variable or of diverse student needs that might require adapting the approach; instead, they focus on the coherence and strength of the content itself. A well-constructed curriculum is trusted to deliver the content.¹

¹ Beginning in the 1960s and early 1970s, and taking full force in the 1990s and throughout the No Child Left Behind era, the notion of a “teacher-proof curriculum” became a central component of education reform to improve outcomes, create more equity, and foster standardization across the system to address the gaps in teacher capacity and bias. The aim was to minimize the teacher’s control by creating a tightly-constructed curriculum with a firm relationship between standards, content, texts, assessment tools, scope and sequence, lesson plans, and learning activities. According to this notion, teachers could not stand in the way of a direct transaction between the student and the curriculum. While there was some push-back charging that it was “de-skilling” the profession of teaching, the approach fit a generalized perception that students were being left behind because teachers did not know how to teach or (through an equity perspective) teacher biases translated into lower expectations for children of color and ELs, resulting in watered down and less rigorous teaching.

This curriculum lays out a clear specific scope and sequence, detailed lesson plans and activities, and rigid pacing guidelines. It is often scripted as well, requiring little teacher expertise to deliver. All a teacher is expected to do is read the Teachers' Manual and deliver it with fidelity. Key components include detailed manuals, a training infrastructure for delivering the curriculum with fidelity, and district monitoring systems to ensure it is being done.

Teacher-proof curriculum may try to anticipate various student needs with descriptions of what to do to deliver the curriculum to some standard student types, but cannot anticipate the range of student needs in a classroom. Typically, it is a one-size-fits-all approach. Student needs that fall outside the generic—requiring more time, differentiation, attention to language development, etc.—are relegated to interventions beyond the standard curriculum block. The curriculum is inadequate for the embedded differentiation required to address EL needs. Because the teacher-proof curriculum is designed to make sure that teachers do not make changes—even to accommodate student diversity—ELs are often left behind.

Presented with such curriculum, teachers either simply accept it and deliver it as is, regardless of relevance or responsiveness to students; or, behind closed doors, teachers make their own independent decisions based on their best understanding of the standards and materials (however weak or strong), their beliefs about what is important, and their ideas about their students. The teacher is left on their own to try to scaffold comprehension and participation for ELs, add relevance and additional background knowledge that may be



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essential for mastering the content, and infuse language development into the content lessons. Or, they may ignore those needs, deferring to the curriculum they are expected to deliver.

PARADIGM #2: THE TEACHER AS CURRICULUM ADAPTER AND THE CURRICULUM AS A TEACHER-EMPOWERING RESOURCE

Besides family income and parent education, the number one determination of student success is the quality of the teacher and the relationship between the teacher and students. Fundamentally, a teacher's role should be focused on taking students where they are; on understanding the assets, challenges, interests, and concerns of students; and on shaping learning activities and supports in ways that best engage and facilitate their learning of standards. The highest-quality classrooms and schools in the most privileged communities tend to reflect this paradigm. The curriculum's role is to provide the "substance" teachers use when crafting the curriculum and learning experiences that respond to student needs. They use their knowledge of standards to draw upon, combine, and adapt relevant and appropriate materials.

Creating curriculum to be crafted and delivered by teachers in ways that are responsive to students is different from creating teacher-independent and teacher-proof curriculum. This paradigm of curriculum development views teachers as professional evaluators, adapters, and even creators and designers of curriculum as appropriate for their own classroom of students. For teachers to do this requires skills, knowledge, and capacity. Teachers need to know their students. They need clarity about the standards and their learning objectives—what lessons and units are trying to accomplish and the body of knowledge and skills to be developed. They need the skills to assess the existing curriculum and the array of supplementary materials critically and flexibly. They also need the ability to make professional instructional decisions, including about the curriculum and materials, that are effective and appropriate for students.

The equity challenge: Teacher capacity to adapt, differentiate, and deliver responsive curriculum for ELs

The teacher-proof paradigm makes it far more difficult to shape teaching and learning responsively to the needs of the actual diverse students in any one classroom, and more challenging to differentiate instruction for ELs.

To meet the needs of ELs, teachers need to understand effective language supports and be able to adapt materials, select and pair supplementary materials, modify pacing, use assessments designed for ELs, and build in more language development for ELs than a teacher-proof curriculum designed for "average" native English speakers is likely to accommodate.

There are other challenges in a teacher-proof or a teacher-independent approach to curriculum. The relationship between students and teachers is a major factor in student learning and student success. The degree to which teachers are able—have permission, skills, capacity, and the materials—to adapt curriculum and instruction around student needs, assets, and interests impacts learning. The engagement of students and teachers is crucial to teaching and learning. This can be challenging with teacher-independent or teacher-proof curriculum.



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But to be the solution for ELs, the second paradigm—teacher as adapter of curriculum—requires a level of skills and understanding about standards, curriculum design, and ELs that too few teachers have. Clearly, there is an essential role for institutions of higher education in delivering preservice teacher education and for districts in providing the professional development that enables teachers to adapt curriculum.

URGENCY GIVEN THE SHORTAGE OF TEACHERS PREPARED TO TEACH ELs

In California and nationwide, there is a capacity gap to deliver quality instruction to ELs. There is also a marked shortage of teachers with the understanding of ELs and the skills to create and adapt curriculum on their own for ELs in both English-instructed settings and in bilingual or dual language education programs. This is occurring in the context of a national general teacher shortage.

Nationally, the supply of teachers prepared to teach ELs has lagged behind the need for a long time. This school year, the U.S. Department of Education reported that at least 35 states, including California, have a shortage of teachers who are prepared to work with the growing number of ELs. The pandemic has only exacerbated this situation as layoffs have predominantly impacted low-income schools, where ELs are often concentrated.

But even prior to the pandemic, many schools and districts struggled to meet their legal obligation to ELs by providing them with teachers who have the proper certification, relevant training, and experience. Data from California shows that low-income students of color and ELs are disproportionately placed in classrooms with teachers who are least prepared, have not completed a credential program, and/or are teaching out of their field (e.g., history majors teaching math). Under-resourced schools in under-resourced communities have long seen a revolving door of inexperienced teachers and persistently low academic outcomes for ELs.

The capacity gap is real. Whatever curriculum is offered in California and around the country must face the reality that many teachers simply may not yet have the preparation or understanding of their ELs or of curriculum design to adapt materials on their own. Any thoughtful investments in curriculum must take this into account.

This capacity gap makes the first paradigm—teacher-independent or teacher-proof curriculum—particularly attractive to state policymakers and district leadership. Having one curriculum that works in the same way for all students across the system, regardless of the teacher, is more cost effective and easier to implement, standardize, monitor, and assess. Equity advocates often support these approaches because they mediate the imbalances in teacher quality and bias as a factor across classrooms and schools, and they make clear and transparent what students are receiving in the classroom. These approaches support the standardization sought by those concerned about students of color and ELs who are left behind due to less-experienced or biased teachers, inferior materials, and lowered expectations. But standardization as a goal can conflict with the need for responsiveness to diverse needs. This tension is central in designing curriculum approaches for ELs.

Curriculum for ELs requires adaptation, scaffolding, and responsiveness. It cannot be fully dictated or scripted. Teachers have to use their observational and assessment skills along with tiered levels of scaffolding to support their ELs in comprehending and participating in content curriculum; to integrate language development into content instruction; and to leverage the linguistic resources of cross-language connections and their students' home language. Teachers must also use supplemental materials to incorporate the cultures, languages, and experiences of the diverse EL communities.

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What does this mean for curriculum development, and for the role that textbooks, packaged curriculum, and materials can play in an effective approach to EL education?

- The curriculum itself should be designed to anticipate, bolster, and support teachers' capacity to flexibly and selectively adapt the curriculum and materials to their students. Curriculum developers cannot just assume teachers are able to adjust instruction, adapt materials, appropriately modify curriculum pacing, and design lessons and activities to better meet the needs of students.

- Curriculum developers should embed explicit language development and scaffolding for EL access to content into all of the curriculum. They should also provide the supports for teachers to adapt pacing, materials, and activities to the needs of their students. There continues to be a persistent lack of capacity in the teaching force related to understanding the needs of ELs and the implications for instruction.
- Curriculum developers should offer greater supporting materials that facilitate teacher adaptations of instruction for ELs at differing proficiency levels. They should also provide curriculum-embedded assessments that are appropriate for and sensitive to second language learners.

Curriculum can be developed in ways that support a mix of specificity and support for instructing ELs, and that inform, facilitate, and empower teachers as they learn to adapt, augment, and even create materials that may be needed for their ELs.

Curriculum developers need to step into this challenge and plan for teachers playing this role. They should assemble an array of core and supplementary materials, frame an overall scope and sequence based on standards, suggest a variety of pathways for moving students through that scope and sequence, put forth alternative learning experiences to choose from, offer resources for differentiation and adaptation, explicitly link ELD standards to content standards, and provide links to support extended student and class inquiries.

There is great need for quality packaged curriculum for teachers of ELs. But investment in this type of curriculum is not sufficient. Professional learning and an infrastructure of support for this kind of teaching is also needed. Professional learning linked to this type of curriculum engages teachers in understanding and exploring the disciplinary concepts, content, and backwards design and engage in curriculum planning responsive to student needs and interests. While some preservice teacher preparation programs address the curriculum-making aspect of the teacher role, most do not. This teacher role has to be cultivated and developed in districts through facilitated grade-level team planning, teacher mentors and teacher leaders, stipends and resources for curriculum planning, and professional learning for teacher practitioners as well as school and district leaders who support teachers in curriculum and instruction. Professional development, structures of collaboration and planning, and systems for teachers to know their students are the necessary partners to EL responsive curriculum.



The opportunity for EL responsive curriculum in California

Now is the time and California is the place to develop such carefully-constructed curriculum materials that embrace ELs and bolster the capacity of teachers. The large numbers of ELs who currently lack meaningful access to the curriculum and of teachers who lack capacity to serve ELs are evidence of the urgent need for investment.

California can lead the nation in the creation of EL responsive curriculum. The state has a sufficiently large EL population to be a viable market for curriculum developers.

Publishers develop curriculum when they believe there is a

market for their materials and when buyers are more informed and mobilized to demand such materials.

California is home to more ELs, by number (1.1 million) and proportion (21%), than any other state. It enrolls 30% of the nation's ELs. In total, 38% of California's students enter school as ELs. These statistics underscore that California matters to the creation of curriculum for ELs. Materials developed for the California market have the opportunity to influence what becomes available for the rest of the nation.



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Today, the curriculum situation in California is far from what it needs to be for our ELs. For years, ELD and reading intervention materials (for struggling readers) were positioned as one and the same, treating ELs who have language development needs as if they were native English-speaking students struggling to read. Equally problematic, the curriculum provided to ELs was a one-size-fits-all approach that is actually designed around the needs of native English speakers. These patterns remain the norm throughout the state, and there still is widespread confusion about the distinction and hallmarks of quality ELD curriculum. As a result, ELD is persistently at the top of the list of areas "out of compliance" with education law. There is confusion within existing curriculum about the difference between Designated ELD on the one hand and strategies for pre-teaching or re-teaching general academic content on the other hand. **Existing packaged curriculums generally are written for the "average," "normative" student: they do not easily accommodate responsiveness to the different needs of ELs nor do they easily accommodate the integration of language and content.**

Yet, **California has recently undergone significant and visionary policy shifts, which demand that teachers develop new ways of instructing their ELs to be more assets-based, responsive, and integrated across the curriculum. These shifts require investment in curriculum development and professional learning.** Teachers skilled in delivering curriculum that responds to ELs needs and integrates language development with content have become especially critical. In 2010, California adopted the Common Core State Standards. In 2014, the state issued the English Language Arts (ELA)/ELD Framework with a central focus on content and language integration. In 2017, the State Board of Education adopted the EL Roadmap State Policy, calling for assets-based and needs responsive approaches that address the diversity within the EL population and leverage their assets in intellectually-rich and scaffolded curriculum

and instruction. All teachers are now expected to utilize the ELD standards in planning to deliver Integrated ELD across the entire curriculum. All teachers are also expected to differentiate, scaffold, and adapt instruction in response to the linguistic needs of ELs. **Qualified teachers of ELD for ELs, general education teachers, and subject-area teachers need the skills to integrate the ELD standards within core subjects. But they cannot do this without a curriculum designed for these purposes and that supports them to do so.**

The California vision, guidelines, and policies present a big lift for a teaching force that had been positioned and monitored to deliver rigid teacher-proof curriculum during the No Child Left Behind era. The vision is not standardization, but rather standards-focused, differentiated, and responsive teaching and curriculum. California's research-based policies can only be realized if teachers have EL responsive curriculum along with support to enact the instructional vision. The policy shifts over the past decade have also opened the door to expanding dual language and bilingual programs. However, the state suffers from a drastic shortage of bilingual teachers and a shortage of curriculum designed for bilingual programs.



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Youth Leadership
Institute and SEAL*

Philanthropy needs to invest in the kind of curriculum that matches the needs of the multilingual and diverse California student population, that supports teachers in developing their capacity to teach ELs, and that addresses the goals of our state.



Conclusion

California could and should be the place to incentivize curriculum writers and developers to create materials that are responsive, assets oriented, and steeped in an understanding of ELs; align to the ELD standards in addition to other content standards; incorporate Integrated ELD strategies and language development; and provide specific curriculum for high-quality Designated ELD addressing the varying levels of English proficiency and the linguistic demands of the academic content ELs need to master. This curriculum must reject the tendencies to overprescribe instruction in teacher-proof curriculum, focusing instead on the supports and scaffolding inadequately-prepared teachers need to make essential instructional decisions for ELs. The curriculum has to be specific and clear about its use with ELs. It must provide sufficient guidance and resources for teachers so they can adapt and deliver it flexibly in response to the cultural and linguistic needs of the students in their classes.

Even the EL responsive and teacher supportive curriculum described in this brief is not sufficient. Equally necessary are investments in professional development, collaborative curriculum planning, and LEA infrastructure for implementation. Leaders must work with teachers to understand their ELs, provide supplementary materials teachers can draw upon for cultural and linguistic inclusiveness, and ensure the conditions and supports that will enable teachers to use those materials effectively. Coaching can support teachers in making decisions about instructional practices and modifications such that ELs are consistently progressing toward meeting or exceeding the content standards. To ensure that new teachers are being prepared adequately to fulfill their role as curriculum adapters and responsive teachers of ELs, preservice teacher education programs should incorporate a stronger focus on building teacher competencies in curriculum design and adaptation for ELs. Foundations seeking to deploy curriculum to improve schooling for ELs should consider all levels in a comprehensive agenda.

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