

Implementation of California's Learning Standards in English Language Arts and Math: Insights, Innovations, and Challenges in Six Districts

The Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (**C-SAIL**), funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, examines how college- and career-readiness (CCR) standards are implemented, if they improve student learning, and what instructional tools measure and support their implementation. This brief presents findings from C-SAIL's **Implementation Study**, which uses interview data to explore how district administrators, principals, and teachers are understanding, experiencing, and implementing California's learning standards in English language arts (ELA) and math. We examine how and what kinds of supports are provided to teachers of all students, including students with disabilities (SWDs) and English learners (ELs) who take the general state assessment.

C-SAIL researchers interviewed 10 state officials and 13 district officials in six California districts. We selected the six case study districts by identifying two urban, two suburban, and two rural districts with relatively high percentages of SWDs and ELs. We also examined other district characteristics—percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, student achievement or growth rates, and geographic location within the state—to ensure that our districts represented a range of contextual factors.

Below we share insights from the six case study districts, emphasizing California's innovative practices and notable challenges.

Curriculum

The emergence of California’s learning standards simultaneously required the development of new standards-aligned curricular materials and lessened educators’ dependence on them, as they can look to the standards themselves as a core source of subject matter.

Insights

District leaders across the state encourage their teachers to exercise their judgment in making curricular decisions, reasoning that no curriculum will perfectly match each particular classroom context.

- » One district noted that when the Common Core first came out in 2010, plenty of textbooks boasted a “Common Core-aligned” sticker but weren’t actually aligned to the standards. The district instead had its teachers develop units of study, which allowed them to dig into the standards in a way they wouldn’t have had they purchased a curriculum. This also created opportunities for the district to address misconceptions, such as the belief that some standards are “need-to-know” and some are “nice-to-know.”
- » Two districts mentioned believing their teachers feel less tied to their curricula because they can look to the standards for guidance and then choose curricular materials that suit their students’ needs.
- » Even the districts that purchased curricula emphasize teachers’ flexibility and innovation when implementing these curricula.

Innovations

- » One district created an ELA “cheat sheet” binder to help teachers more clearly see how the district curriculum and the standards are aligned. The binder contains one page for each ELA state standard, with information about where to find that standard in the curriculum, questions students should be able to answer once they’ve mastered the standard, and the version of that standard from the previous grade level and in the next grade level.
- » One district’s high school opted to adopt a locally developed project-based, standards-aligned curriculum rather than purchase the high school version of the state-approved curriculum the elementary and middle schools in the district use.

Challenges

- » One district said that in trying to be open to teacher curricular preference, it has encountered logistical challenges. For example, the district allows math teachers to choose between two different purchased curricula or developing their own units of study, but when teachers change their mind about which they want to use, they sometimes flood the curriculum companies with one-off requests for materials.

Professional Development (PD)

California districts continue to use professional development time to support their teachers in understanding the instructional shifts that standards-based learning necessitates, though a lack of funding sometimes makes this difficult.

Insights

Most districts noted that their teachers were not yet fully on board with or fully versed in the state standards. Some districts said this was a result of not providing enough training in the early days of the standards.

- » In particular, two districts said they were now focusing PD on teachers who were struggling to move from scripted, direct instruction strategies to the more student-centered, skills-focused spirit of the Common Core. They emphasized that many teachers want to make this change but need support to do so, especially in terms of differentiating instruction.
- » Two districts focus math PD on shifting teachers from an emphasis on the recitation of memorized figures and formulas to a more conceptual understanding of number sense.

Innovations

- » In one district, every teacher visits every other teacher's classroom over the course of each school year to observe instruction. This form of professional development elicits high levels of buy-in among teachers in the district, as they wanted to be able to learn from each other and were already accustomed to frequent visitors.
- » In one district, social emotional coaches work with teachers to develop behavior plans for struggling students after observing them in class. The student, teacher, and coach then meet weekly for a check in.
- » In the same district, a traveling physical education teacher allows grade-level teams to meet for weekly, hour-long professional learning communities.
- » One large district is leveraging technology to design e-learning modules for teachers and partnering with outside "micro-credentialing" companies through which teachers can take online courses and earn topical credentials. These approaches help the district battle the challenge of fragmented PD delivery in large districts.

**Challenges**

- » One district noted that the release of the Common Core standards in 2010 was coordinated with extra funds for training teachers, particularly in struggling schools, but that money ran out before they had the time to fully build staff capacity around the instructional shifts.
- » One district was successful in implementing weekly collaborating time for elementary school grade-level teams but said that scheduling makes this difficult at the high-school level.

Assessments

California districts generally agree that the state test is an appropriate measure of student achievement, but many are still in the midst of shifting instruction to better align it to the assessment.

Insights

Every district believed the Smarter Balanced Assessment was aligned to the standards, appropriate for students, a useful tool, and likely to remain stable well into the future. However, districts disagreed about particular challenges of the assessment.

- » One district felt that since students now take the test on the computer, it unintentionally assesses their typing skills in addition to content. This is particularly a challenge in younger grades, when students are still becoming accustomed to using computers. However, two other districts noted being particularly excited about the test moving to the computer, one because it keeps up with the way kids are learning today and is more relevant to 21st century students, and the other simply because students found it more engaging than paper and pencil.
- » Two districts emphasized appreciating the state's switch to a focus on growth as a measure of accountability rather than comparing districts to each other, but one still felt the test is too closely tied to accountability.
- » One district believed the ELA assessment would remain in place longer than the math assessment because of resistance from teachers and parents to standards-based learning's conceptualization of learning math.

Innovations

- » One district lists students' progress toward individual standards on their report cards.
- » Two districts utilize online programs that allow teachers to build their own assessments using test questions aligned to particular standards; one of these districts noted that the program they use even allows teachers to build standards-aligned writing rubrics. Another district expressed interest in such a program but could not afford it.
- » One district is in the process of creating a document for teachers that provides examples of questions that test clusters of standards, rather than just one, as this is how Smarter Balance Assessment items are designed.
- » The same district has a district-wide, mid-year writing benchmark modeled after the Smarter Balanced Assessment questions that every student takes each year. Teachers grade these benchmarks together and use them as jumping off points to plan writing instruction for the rest of the year.



Challenges

- » Two districts believed that teachers had not been given enough time to adjust to the Common Core and California’s state standards before states began assessing students on the material and new way of learning.
- » One district struggled to push teachers to assess their students to the rigor that the state assessment does, as evidenced by their tendency to choose easier tasks for their students when provided the option between lower- and higher-rigor common assessments.

Students with Disabilities (SWDs)

California districts disagreed about the appropriateness of California’s learning standards for SWDs, but several innovations for aligning instruction for SWDs to the standards were apparent.

Insights

Districts varied in their opinion of the appropriateness of the state standards and accompanying Smarter Balanced Assessment for SWDs.

- » One district said the standards and assessment were appropriate for all SWDs, and that they helped keep rigor high in the classroom; however, they said a gap still existed between the content general-education students received and the content SWDs received.
- » Two districts said they were appropriate for all SWDs except for those in Kindergarten and first grade.
- » One district believed the standards and assessment were simply out of touch with the needs of SWDs.
- » Two districts thought new **testing accommodations** offered to SWDs were an improvement over the old state test in California.

Innovations

- » One district has an online bank of standard-aligned individualized education program (IEP) goals that special education teachers can access when designing IEPs.
- » The same district offers a year-long fellowship for special education teachers in reading instruction. The cohort meets on eight Saturdays throughout the year, receiving professional development in targeted and specialized reading instruction before implementing in their classroom, videotaping themselves, and submitting for feedback. The cohort then comes back together to debrief these experiences.
- » Another district offers a summer literacy camp for struggling students in grades K–3 as a form of early intervention, with screenings for disabilities conducted throughout.

Challenges

- » One district noted the challenge unions pose to moving teachers of SWDs into new roles when their current one is not a good fit.
- » Another district reported that getting both special-education and general-education teachers to share the needs of all students with each other was the “biggest roadblock” to providing SWDs with a great education. This played out in the high level of variability among schools regarding whether or not teachers of SWDs felt comfortable attending their general-education team’s PLCs.

English Learners (ELs)

Opinions on the appropriateness of California’s learning standards for ELs was mixed, with only two districts deeming them completely appropriate.

Insights

Similar to the way district leaders viewed the appropriateness of standards and assessments for SWDs, opinions on their appropriateness for ELs was divided.

- » Two districts said they believed the standards were appropriate for ELs as they help maintain a high level of rigor in the classroom.
- » One district thought the standards lacked cultural relevance and are out of touch with the needs of ELs.
- » One district wished ELs had a two-year grace period from the state assessment instead of the current one-year period, as the data from the state assessment for ELs in their second year tends to conflate language ability with content proficiency. The same district thought the standards were not developmentally appropriate for very young ELs.
- » One district noted that of their ELs who take both the general state assessment and the EL assessment, approximately 20 percent are scoring in the highest percentiles on the EL assessment but not even reaching proficiency on the general assessment. They believed this indicated something was out of sync with the general assessment.
- » Two districts thought the state’s new testing accommodations, such as glossaries in students’ native languages, were appropriate and helpful.

Innovations

- » One district offers a K–12 bilingual immersion program in which ELs initially take all of their classes in Spanish and continue to take two classes in Spanish from grade 6 through their senior year, generally a language arts and a social studies class. The program uses a lottery system in kindergarten through fifth grade, after which students can no longer apply.
- » One district has a full-time teacher dedicated to providing one-on-one writing tutoring to ELs on a drop-in basis. The district established this after realizing that many ELs were failing classes solely based on their writing ability.



Challenges

- » Three districts mentioned liking that the state chose to combine the ELA and English Language Development standards designed for ELs into one set of standards, as it pushes teachers to take on shared responsibility for ELs. However, two of the districts noted that training teachers to teach in this way has been challenging, particularly because general-education and EL teachers lack collaboration time and because curricular materials have not yet caught up with this change.
- » One district has struggled with the overidentification of ELs as SWDs and is working to disentangle language acquisition challenges from learning challenges.