

What California Educators Are Saying about their Professional Learning and Materials Needs

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For several years, WestEd's Measure to Learn and Improve (MLI) project team has kept state policy leaders informed about statewide implementation of the California Academic Standards in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, by summarizing and disseminating survey results from the RAND Corporation's annual American Educator Panel (AEP) surveys of teachers and principals.¹ This brief summarizes recent results related to educators' reported needs for high-quality instructional materials and professional learning.

In surveys in May 2017 and May 2018, California educators were asked to select the top five things they most need in order to effectively support implementation of the state academic standards at their school. In both years, the most commonly identified need among California teachers was higher quality textbooks, curricula, and/or instructional materials that align with the standards, although a lower proportion of teacher respondents cited this as a top need in 2018 (50 percent) compared to the 64 percent who had identified it as the top need in 2017. California teachers' other reported needs also shifted over time. In 2018, the second most cited need among California teachers was more time to observe other teachers teaching (reported by 47 percent),² followed by more effective

strategies for teaching students with special needs (43 percent) and English learner students (42 percent), while in 2017 teacher respondents had put these same needs in fifth (41 percent) and sixth (36 percent) place, respectively. In 2017, the second and third most cited needs among teachers had been digital tools (reported by 52 percent) and more opportunities for collaboration with other teachers (45 percent). (Table 1, on page 2, shows the standards-implementation needs by ranking and shows the percentage of teachers or principals who ranked them as such.)

Responding California principals saw these issues a bit differently than teachers. For example, principals ranked higher quality standards-aligned materials as only the eighth most important need in 2018 (compared to it being the highest need reported by California teachers), and the sixth most important need in 2017.³ In both years, California principals indicated that more time to observe teachers teaching was their top need (cited by approximately two in three respondents each year). And in both May 2017 and May 2018, just under 50 percent of responding principals also sought more opportunities for teachers to collaborate. However, having more effective strategies for teaching special needs students was the second most commonly identified need among principals in 2018 — cited by 55 percent, up from 42 percent in 2017. Perhaps relatedly, the 2017/18 school year was the first year in which the test performance of special needs students was a required indicator in California's new dashboard accountability system.⁴

Table 1. Rankings of standards-implementation needs cited by California teachers and principals in 2018 and 2017 and percentages of those who ranked them as such

Implementation need	2018 Teachers ranking by percentage (<i>n</i> = 492)	2018 Principals ranking by percentage (<i>n</i> = 300)	2017 Teachers ranking by percentage (<i>n</i> = 477)	2017 Principals ranking by percentage (<i>n</i> = 386)
Higher-quality textbooks, curricula, and/or instructional materials that align with the California standards	(1) 50	(8) 24	(1) 64	(6) 40
More time to observe teachers teaching	(2) 47	(1) 68	(5) 44	(1) 65
More effective strategies for teaching special needs students	(3) 43	(2) 55	(4) 45	(5) 42
More effective strategies for teaching English learners	(4) 42	(4) 46	(6) 36	(4) 43
Digital tools	(5) 41	(11) 16	(2) 52	(7) 32
More opportunities for teacher collaboration	(6) 36	(3) 48	(3) 45	(2) 49

Instructional materials

Selecting materials. In the May 2018 surveys, teachers were asked to rank the factors that are important to them in determining which curricula, programs, and/or instructional tools they use in their classrooms. Among the 492 responding California teachers, the two top considerations, mirroring responses from the survey's national teacher sample (*n* = 15,719), were "alignment to state academic standards" and "how engaging materials are for my students."⁵

Certain materials considerations were more important to different subgroups of California teachers. Higher proportions of California elementary teachers than secondary teachers cited alignment to standards (+13 percentage points) and local district requirements (+18 percentage points) as one of their top two materials considerations, while higher proportions of California secondary teachers than elementary teachers ranked student engagement (+14 percentage

points) and alignment with the statewide assessment (+8 percentage points) as the top two.

A higher proportion of California teachers with 10 or more years of teaching experience identified standards alignment as one of their top two considerations (+20 percentage points), while California teachers with less than 10 years of experience more often rated materials' usability or ease of implementation as one of their top two considerations (+14 percentage points).⁶

Frequency of materials-focused professional learning. On average, compared to the California teacher respondents, teachers in the survey's national sample reported participating more frequently in professional learning that was focused on adapting their instructional materials to student needs. Specifically, 41 percent of the national teacher sample reported participating in professional learning focused on adapting materials "at least every few months" in the past year, compared to 29 percent of California teacher respondents.

On the flip side, another 21 percent of the national teacher sample reported having not participated in any such professional learning in the past 12 months, compared to 27 percent of California teacher respondents.

Materials-focused professional learning was reportedly more frequent among California elementary teachers than among California secondary teachers in 2017/18. Comparing the survey responses of elementary school teachers to those of secondary-level teachers, approximately 10 percent more California elementary school teachers reported receiving professional learning to implement or adapt instructional materials in 2017/18, and a higher percentage of the elementary school teachers reported more frequently collaborating around implementing and adapting instructional materials.

These results may be due, in part, to the varying timing of recent materials adoptions in many California districts. The state standards and frameworks have rolled out at different periods, and many California districts are gradually moving away from teacher-created materials (CFTL, 2018). Across the state, curriculum decisions are generally (at least initially) made at two levels: the state makes recommendations and district leaders then make choices from among those recommendations. But recent research suggests that even districts that have adopted the same curriculum materials can take broadly different approaches to implementation and to “filling the gaps” they have identified in the materials, and “there are few formal structures for districts across the state to share information about what works and doesn’t with their peers” (Perry, Marple, & Reade, 2017, p. iii).

Professional learning

Common professional learning activities in California. The most commonly reported professional learning activities among California teachers were meeting with other teachers to discuss standards, instruction, and/or student learning

(reported by 93 percent); working with other teachers to develop materials and/or class activities (93 percent); reviewing student assessment data with other teachers (85 percent);⁷ and participating in professional learning communities (PLCs) (81 percent). However, while about two in three California teachers indicated that the former two activities helped them improve, lower proportions reported that PLCs (51 percent) and reviewing assessment data (50 percent) were helpful to them.

The May 2018 survey results also indicated that peer observation (or viewing of classroom videos) and coaching/mentoring were less common among California teachers. For example, 60 percent of California teachers reported that in the past 12 months they almost never or never “observed another teacher’s classroom in my school to get ideas for my instruction or to offer feedback or was observed by another teacher from my school.” At the same time, among the less-experienced teachers (i.e., those with less than 10 years of experience) within that same sample, peer observation and coaching/mentoring were more commonly reported (by +10–20 percentage points).⁸

Positive perceptions of recent professional learning. The May 2018 survey responses from California math teachers generally indicated that they felt that their professional learning experiences in math over the prior 12 months, both formal and informal, had had a positive impact on their students. Approximately two in three reported (on separate questions) that their recent professional learning had enabled them to better help their students develop their conceptual understanding of mathematics (72 percent agreed); develop fluency with math skills and procedures (67 percent); and apply math to solve problems in real-world contexts (68 percent).

California ELA teachers were similarly positive about the impact of their recent ELA professional learning experiences. Over 60 percent agreed (on separate questions) that their ELA professional learning in the prior year had made them better able to help all of their students use textual

evidence to make inferences or support conclusions drawn from texts (70 percent agreed); analyze the structure of texts, including how sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of text relate to each other and the whole (64 percent); and write arguments to support claims in analysis of substantive topics (64 percent).⁹

These perceptions align with other recent research, which has cited returns from California school districts' investments in internal, customized professional learning systems and structures — often including district-level curriculum and instruction specialists or coaches who establish and support tailored site-level professional learning — as a complement to more traditional district professional learning offered via the central office (Finkelstein et al., 2018; Reade, Perry, & Heredia, 2018).

Conclusion

The implementation of California's academic standards has taken place at the same time as concerted efforts to substantially modify the state's funding model, a shift toward local control, and implementation of new accountability and data reporting. With such significant changes underway on various fronts in recent years, systematic knowledge-sharing about progress is vital. In the coming months, the state's county offices of education are likely to play a key role on this front, by fostering a climate of collaboration, candor, and evidence-based decisionmaking across California's varied district contexts. To that end, a key aspect of WestEd's MLI project in 2019 involves an online network of geographically diverse California county officials working together to share knowledge and promote better local data analysis and use.

References

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Endnotes

1 The RAND Corporation's American Educator Panel (AEP) surveys were originally launched in 2014, and are administered several times a year in more than 20 states. To create the panels, RAND first sampled 2,300 public schools, stratifying for balance by grade span (primary, middle, high, and combined), school size, poverty status, population density, and geographic region. Educators in California and several other states are over-sampled to afford state-level representativeness. Educators who change schools remain on the panel, and new members are added periodically so the panel remains representative over time. For the May 2018 administration of the RAND Foundation's American Educator Panel (AEP) surveys, 492 of 879 California teachers (56 percent) and 300 of 1,056 California principals (28 percent) responded. The average margins of error in turn generally range from ± 5 –8 percentage points. Subgroup analyses/cross-tabulations were carried out using the raw/unweighted counts of respondents, who were grouped by grade span (elementary/secondary), by years of experience (less than 10 years versus 10-plus years' teaching, and less than 5 years versus 5-plus years as an administrator), by subject area (ELA/math teachers), and by the proportion of English learners (ELs) they teach or oversee at their site. Only statistically significant subgroup differences are presented in this brief.

2 In the May 2018 AEP surveys, more time to observe other teachers teaching was actually the most-cited need among two subgroups of California teachers: elementary teachers (56 percent) and teachers with less than 10 years of experience (60 percent).

3 Moreover, in the May 2018 surveys, California principals were also asked to consider the sufficiency of the resources

they had allocated to their teachers during the 2017/18 school year to support teachers' implementation of the state standards; 82 percent reported that their teachers had "mostly sufficient" or "completely sufficient" access to resources (e.g., standards-aligned textbooks and instructional materials and access to online resources) both in ELA and in math. Research suggests that California teachers "may be supplementing with non-commercially published materials more than administrators are aware... Across [California's 10 Math in Common] districts, 79 percent of teachers reported that they used materials to supplement their teaching in 'some' to 'most' of their lessons each week (and) almost half of teachers reported asking their peers for support to determine whether instructional materials are aligned to the standards" (Perry, Marple, & Reade, 2017, pp. iii–iv).

4 California principals leading schools in which English learner (EL) students accounted for more than 25 percent of enrollment were more likely than principals in schools with a smaller proportion of EL enrollment to cite a need for more time to observe teachers teaching in their classroom (by +7 percentage points) and more effective strategies for teaching special needs students (by +10 percentage points) and for teaching EL students (by +14 percentage points).

5 Thirty-seven percent of California teachers ranked "alignment to state academic standards" as their top consideration in determining which classroom curricula/tools to use, and 17 percent ranked it second; while 27 percent of California teachers rated "how engaging materials are for students" as their top consideration, and 28 percent ranked it second.

6 No differences were evident between California ELA and math teachers on this materials selection question.

7 Seventy percent of responding California elementary teachers (versus 39 percent of California secondary teachers) reported reviewing student assessment data and/or assignments with other teachers at their school to make instructional decisions at least monthly, and more California elementary teachers than secondary teachers reported that this type of professional learning helped them improve (61 percent elementary versus 41 percent secondary).

8 This result aligns with recent findings from California's 10 Math in Common (MiC) districts, where 50 percent or more of experienced teachers (those with more than 10 years' teaching) reported that they did not engage in professional learning that involved peer observation or one-on-one coaching/mentoring. According to one report from the MiC evaluation, "It is unclear from these data whether experienced teachers are not pursuing these types of [professional learning] experiences with colleagues because they are opting out, or because their participation is considered 'less necessary' because of their greater experience level" (Reade, Perry, & Heredia, 2018, p. 14).

9 Approximately 10–15 percent more California secondary ELA teachers than elementary ELA teachers agreed with each of these statements about their recent ELA professional learning.

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