

Meeting the Moment:

Lessons on Instructional Materials for Multilingual Learners in California Middle Grades

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Executive Summary



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On nearly every academic success metric, California’s multilingual learners (MLLs) lag far behind their English-only peers. Although California sought to remedy this situation with sweeping policy changes over the last ten years, including the adoptions of English Language Arts/English Language Development standards in 2012, a tiered list of standards-aligned curricula in 2015, and a first-of-its-kind comprehensive framework for aligning and bolstering instruction for MLLs, achievement gaps between these students and their English-only peers have persisted. Early analyses document that the COVID-19 pandemic’s onset and subsequent transitions between distance and in-person learning have widened these gaps. Research shows that the quality of instructional materials, including the integration of language supports and the relevance of content to students’ lives, influence this disparity, but few investigations have so far explored educators’ uses of, challenges with, and benefits from instructional materials during this period. Such learnings can inform curriculum publishers’ future iteration of materials and state policymakers’ recommended lists of curricula to strengthen support for these prioritized students.

Accordingly, we answer in this report:

- How did middle-grades teachers and education leaders utilize instructional materials throughout shifting learning contexts to meet MLLs’ needs?
- Based on conclusions to the previous question, how can publishers of instructional materials and statewide policymakers better support middle-grades educators to ensure MLLs’ access to high-quality instructional materials?

To answer these questions, we leverage qualitative data collected from semistructured interviews and focus groups with thirty-nine middle-grades English language arts (ELA), English language development (ELD), and mathematics teachers and key site and central office leaders in three public school networks. We find that:

- Whether used during distance or in-person learning, the sequencing and scope of comprehensive instructional materials can paradoxically exacerbate constraints on teachers’ time. Even though many educators cherish their materials, when compounded with compacted site schedules their pacing can especially overwhelm ELD teachers’ planning and instruction.
- Without robust training on using instructional materials to engage MLLs in independent learning, teachers often personally translate – and long for accurate translations of – core and supplemental instructional materials that can serve students at all levels of English language proficiency.
- Both ELA and math teachers highlight MLLs’ pressing challenges with academic language. Combined practices and techniques like sentence frames and other scaffolds can especially, but

not exclusively, support MLLs' literacy and English language development.

- Teachers familiarized themselves and their students with beneficial products during distance learning. Upon returning to the classroom, providers limited their access to some of it.
- Educators want instructional materials that are culturally relevant and age- and grade-appropriate for their MLLs.

Information from on-the-ground practitioners gains other educators, publishers of instructional materials, state policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders a better understanding of how the implementation of instructional materials for MLLs looked during this tumultuous time. Our conversations helped uncover supports and concerns using instructional materials previously unaddressed in early pandemic literature.

Based on these findings, we recommend several action items for publishers and policymakers to consider for future materials and policies intended to support middle-grades MLLs.

We encourage **publishers of instructional materials** to:

- Include tips about how to scope and sequence the work for diverse schooling schedules;
- Preload materials with high-quality translations and translanguaging opportunities in students' non-English languages;
- Incorporate resources for English language vocabulary development;
- Sustain students' and teachers' access to virtual supports and products, and regularly update the content they access through it;
- Deliver ongoing, role-differentiated training that encourages educators to use language development resources and other techniques that reach MLLs at all levels of English proficiency; and
- Center cultural relevance, age and grade appropriateness, and language development.

Related, **state policymakers** must:

- Set clear, high expectations for rigorous integrated ELD instruction;
- Urgently adopt revised curriculum frameworks and subsequent state-adopted lists of instructional materials that include language supports and guidance for culturally responsive and relevant teaching;
- Regularly update the frameworks and lists in the spirit of statutorily-recommended timelines; and
- Make available MLL-focused review criteria to inform instructional materials' adoption processes.