

## **IMPLEMENTING POLICY: NAVIGATING THE ENGLISH LEARNER ROADMAP FOR EQUITY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This essay explores a variety of ways California's English Learner (EL) Roadmap can be used as a tool to make significant and transformative changes to provide meaningful learning opportunities for students classified as English Learners. The EL Roadmap contains 4 principles: (1) Asset-oriented and needs-responsive schools; (2) Intellectual Quality of Instruction and Meaningful Access; (3) System Conditions that Support Effectiveness; and (4) Alignment and Articulation Within and Across Systems. We explore each of the Roadmap's four principles and provide suggestions for ways to capitalize on the policy to improve educational opportunities for English Learners, including a focus on English *and* other languages, using research-based principles to guide local planning and continuous improvement for EL instruction and assessment, aligning resources and systems to accelerate ELs' learning, and valuing and building upon the linguistic and cultural assets students bring to school.

**Keywords:** english learners, multilingual students, leadership, english learner roadmap

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### **Implementing Policy: Navigating the English Learner<sup>1</sup> Roadmap for Equity**

California has a long and complex history of educating students classified as English Learners (ELs). With over 18 percent of students identified as ELs and 81% of ELs speaking Spanish

(California Department of Education, 2019), the racialized nature of language policies cannot be ignored (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Although most ELs are U.S. citizens, the U.S. Latinx population feels significant discrimination regardless of citizenship (Almeida et al., 2016).

California's educators face the complex task of interpreting and enacting language related policies to implement best practices for ELs. This article is an urgent call to action for education faculty to enable our graduates to capitalize on the English Learner Roadmap to make significant, systemic, transformative changes for ELs. We explore how the Roadmap's four principles can be enacted to promote educational equity and multilingualism.

### **The EL Roadmap**

As with any policy, implementation will determine whether or not the EL Roadmap achieves its stated mission: "California schools affirm, welcome, and respond to a diverse range of EL strengths, needs, and identities" (California Department of Education, 2017). As such, it is critical that educators at all levels are knowledgeable about how the Roadmap can be a tool to make and defend decisions that improve schooling for California's ELs, their families, and the educators who serve them. The Roadmap includes the [policy](#) itself and practical [online resources](#) to support implementation, including the [research](#) employed, and several [examples](#) from the field for each principle. The EL Roadmap also aligns with many of the key goals of California's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) priorities related to teaching, learning, and parent involvement. A [crosswalk](#) of this alignment shows the overlap of EL Roadmap principles and LCAP priorities. The Roadmap consists of four principles; within each principle various "elements" clarify the principle's intent. In March of 2020 the California Department of Education showed its continued support of the policy by awarding ten million dollars in implementation grants (CDE, 2020). The EL Roadmap delineates expected outcomes but gives freedom to individual schools and districts regarding how they choose to implement the policy. Below we address research-based ways each principle can support equity for ELs.

#### **Principle One: Assets-oriented and Needs-responsive Schools**

Building on Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth and Moll's (1992) funds of knowledge models, Principle One explicitly states that ELs' languages and cultures are assets, contradicting the traditional deficit perspective regarding ELs that pervades schools (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006). It notes the positive effects of bilingualism and the wide diversity among the EL population. Savvy educators can refer to Principle One as policy that requires schools to acknowledge and build on the linguistic and cultural wealth students bring to school.

Element 1.B's statement that "no single program or instructional approach works for all EL students" can be used to resist boxed curricula or literacy practices that are intended to be used with fidelity but without attention students' strengths and needs. Instead, we can educate teachers to differentiate and be responsive to students' needs. Culturally responsive curricula and instruction are required in Element 1.A, which is an opportunity for administrators to encourage the use of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP, Paris & Alim, 2017) and multilingual teaching

practices such as *translanguaging* (García & Li, 2014). Supporting teachers to collaborate with diverse families and communities will also be critical, as educators are typically underprepared to achieve these partnerships effectively (García, 2004). Increasing multilingualism can also assist in the development of safe and inclusive school environments and partnerships with families and communities. Key questions education faculty can ask themselves include:

Does our program prepare graduates to...

- a. Develop multilingual schools that are dedicated to sustaining students' cultures?
- b. Ensure that programs, curricula, and instruction are culturally responsive and tailored toward individuals rather than groups?
- c. Create school climates that are culturally sustaining, safe and inviting for all students and families?

These questions may help a program consider how to move toward a deeper equity-orientation at the program level and rely less on individual faculty members' initiatives.

### **Principle Two: Intellectual Quality of Instruction and Meaningful Access**

Principle Two of the EL Roadmap provides specificity regarding expectations for instruction for ELs, with an emphasis on intellectual quality of instruction and meaningful access. Intellectual quality involves instruction, curriculum, and materials that are rigorous, standards-based, and integrated with content (Element 2.F). Meaningful access to the curriculum (Element 2.D) refers to students having the opportunity to engage with content through supports such as integrated and designated ELD (Element 2.A), scaffolds (Element 2.F), home language support (Element 2.E) and choice of instructional programs (Element 2.G). In essence, Principle Two enables administrators to defend decisions that support trauma-informed pedagogy, home language instruction, translanguaging, and bilingual programs. Educators who want to provide a culturally and linguistically responsive education for their students now have the policy backing to do so.

Principle Two also suggests that to ensure meaningful access, schools should carefully consider and analyze their programmatic and placement policies in light of current research as well as their school's data and student outcomes. For example, when discussing new bilingual programs, administrators can point to research suggesting that middle grade EL students in two-way language programs are reclassified as English proficient at higher rates than EL students who are in English only programs (Umansky & Reardon, 2014). Key questions education faculty can ask themselves include:

*Does our program prepare graduates to...*

- a. Understand what meaningful instruction for ELs looks like?
- b. Provide equitable learning opportunities for ELs and all students?
- c. Examine and reflect on implications of school programmatic and placement policies for student outcomes?

In summary, Principle Two provides administrators with a legal backing for culturally and linguistically relevant instruction that provides equitable learning opportunities for ELs.

### **Principle Three: System Conditions that Support Effectiveness**

Principle Three speaks to systems that need to be in place for effective teaching and meaningful learning for ELs to occur. It provides the reasoning for leadership to consider how resource allocation, professional development, and goal setting can be utilized to support ELs and their needs. It also provides explicit guidance toward directing “adequate resources” to serve ELs (Element 3.B), enabling leaders to go beyond Titles I and III funds. Ensuring that EL families’ voices are heard in the school budgeting process, as is required in the LCAP, can help determine the best use of funds. This is particularly important in California, where the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) provides differentiated funding to schools based on student populations served, their achievement, and needs.

Principle Three suggests that systems utilize culturally and linguistically valid and reliable assessments to understand ELs as individuals and to evaluate how well the schools are meeting ELs’ needs (Element 3.C). Although there is a dearth of assessments that are adequate for measuring the strengths of ELs in every context, educators may begin with existing assessments and complement them with continuous formative assessment (Bailey & Carroll, 2015).

Element 3.D suggests that systems are responsible for the capacity building of educators, including professional development, leadership development, and collaboration time for in-service teachers, as well as efforts to create a pipeline of qualified teachers, including bilingual teachers. This element opens opportunities for professional development that specifically addresses ELs’ needs, such as trauma-informed (Morgan et al., 2015), culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017), holistic bilingual (Escamilla et al., 2014), and translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014) pedagogies. Finally, school and district leaders should develop system-wide capacity for understanding and using data about ELs to inform programmatic and instructional choices. Key questions education faculty can ask themselves include:

*Does our program prepare graduates to...*

- a. Create clear goals, systems, and structures for EL access, language development and academic achievement?
- b. Invest sufficient resources appropriately to support EL learning?
- c. Support teacher capacity to provide meaningful, relevant instruction and build staff capacity to understand data about EL learning outcomes and address EL learning needs?
- d. Appropriately utilize culturally and linguistically valid and reliable assessments to guide programmatic and instructional decisions?

These questions, along with the other three principles, should be considered within the context of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and LCAP.

### **Principle Four: Alignment and Articulation Within and Across Systems**

Principle Four emphasizes the need for better alignment across educational segments to create a more cohesive, articulated schooling experience for ELs. Currently, early education programs are distinct entities from the elementary and middle schools that students attend, and high schools may

be in a different district entirely, although [recent efforts](#) seek to align early childhood and early elementary. Community colleges and universities are additional systems. Communication among schools, both within and between systems, is typically weak or even non-existent, allowing students to fall through the cracks. This can result in loss of achievement, lower self-esteem, and higher drop-out rates (Alspaugh, 1998). For migrant and highly mobile students, the disjuncture they experience between schools can be particularly problematic (Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009). Different requirements, data systems, and general bureaucracy can impede transfer of academic records, delaying reclassification and other academic services. In addition, other community-based programs that provide key services to students often have little interaction with teachers and schools. Creating coherency across educational systems (Element 4.C) is central to Principle Four.

Principle Four also charges schools with providing college-readiness pathways for ELs. When students are tracked into English as a Second Language courses, they can receive limited access to rigorous content and often lack the ‘a through g’ courses required for college (Callahan et al., 2010). Moreover, students who matriculate in community colleges or universities often require non-credit remedial coursework, as expectations between high school and higher education are nebulous (Kanno & Cromley, 2013).

Principle 4 asks administrators to reallocate funds to support ELs and their teachers (Element 4.B). For example, funds could be applied toward professional development for research-based language development practices, such as the Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) program (Manship et al., 2016), Guided Language Acquisition Design (Deussen et al., 2014), or Paired Literacy (Escamilla et al., 2014). Funds could be reallocated to address creative scheduling, coursework that better integrates language with rigorous content, and increased alignment between schooling systems. Partnerships and communication with after school organizations that enrich, rather than remediate, could also provide ELs with the extra academic supports that would advance their language and academic skills. Key questions education faculty can ask themselves include:

*Does our program prepare graduates to...*

- a. Design approaches and programs for continuity, alignment and articulation across systems that specifically address ELs’ strengths and challenges?
- b. Implement schedules and resources to build partnerships with afterschool and community entities to provide additional support and time for ELs?
- c. Design EL approaches and programs to be coherent across schools, districts, initiatives, and across the state?

Principle Four provides administrators with opportunities to create structures that ensure ELs’ success both within individual schools and across educational settings.

### **Conclusion**

The actions suggested in this article will require brave, out-of-the-box thinking and creative resource allocation. If implemented well, the EL Roadmap could foster a student-centered, asset-based approach that elevates EL students’ heritage, recognizes their contribution to a multilingual society, and shifts schooling toward a dignity frame, which would, “Enable the cultivation of one’s

full personhood and thus preclude overly narrow reforms that reduce students’ rich humanity to their English proficiency” (Poza, 2021, p. 484). Intended to replace a pervasive deficit-orientation (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006), the Roadmap acknowledges the wide diversity of ELs and moves away from a monolithic, monolingual orientation toward the need for instructional solutions that are responsive to individual students’ needs. The Roadmap is not a silver bullet. Instead, it is an opportunity for educators to transform education for ELs. Table One summarizes some of the important policy shifts represented by the Roadmap. The prior policy column includes examples of both the general characteristics as well as specific legislation. Note that some of these policies remain in existence and as such, this shift should be considered along a continuum as policies are revised rather than a specific timeline.

**Table 1**  
*Important Policy Shifts in the EL Roadmap*

Prior policies	EL Roadmap
Prescriptive, mandate-driven compliance (e.g., NCLB)	Setting a vision and mission for California schools with research-based principles to guide local planning and continuous improvement
K-12 focus (e.g., NCLB, California Common Core State Standards and ELD Standards, ELA/ELD Framework)	Explicit recognition of early childhood education and community colleges and universities as crucial parts of the education system; need for alignment across educational settings
Focus on English proficiency (e.g., NCLB, ESSA assessment requirements)	Focus on English plus other languages
One-size fits all approaches (e.g., NCLB, Prop 227)	Responsive to the needs of diverse EL students
Deficit-orientation (e.g., NCLB, Proposition 227)	Assets-orientation; value and build upon the linguistic and cultural assets students bring
Limited focus on providing the professional learning and support teachers need to respond to needs of ELs (e.g., NCLB, Proposition 227)	LEAs required to provide teachers with the learning opportunities and resources needed to ensure ELs have equitable access to the full curriculum
Literacy and English taught for the sake of English literacy (e.g., NCLB, Proposition 227)	Literacy, English and other languages taught to provide voice to EL students and prepare all students for civic participation in a global community

Research will be critically important to support ongoing implementation of the types of educational changes addressed above. Studies that explore replicable, equitable family

participation structures would help ensure that minoritized voices are heard. Also needed are studies that identify efficient, productive resource allocation strategies that are truly responsive to EL students' needs. Since Dual Language schools are increasing in popularity and there is a current dearth of bilingual educators across the state and country (Sutcher et al., 2016), studies that identify ways to effectively recruit and train bilinguals to become educators is needed. A critical piece of the puzzle will be the development of more valid, reliable measures that are culturally and linguistically relevant. Large scale, longitudinal research is needed to understand how assessment and placement policies influence EL learning opportunities. Studies that document and replicate alignment across school systems and productive, inclusive school-family and school-community partnerships would be particularly helpful. In short, research on any aspect of the implementation of the EL Roadmap would be a significant contribution to the field.

After two decades of Proposition 227 repressing bilingual education, the trifecta of Proposition 58, Global California 2030, and the EL Roadmap represent possibilities in moving toward greater equity within California if educators are willing to make brave, and possibly unpopular, decisions. However, we must not forget history; it is important to make systematic changes that do not ebb and flow with the tide. Despite significant gains for ELs in California, national anti-immigrant sentiment continues to threaten progress. Future educators should be prepared to support the development of equitable, multilingual schools and simultaneously combat linguistic and cultural hegemony during both supportive and contrarian political environments.

Note: The first author participated in the EL Roadmap working group.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Although we resist the deficit orientation of the term English Learner, we use it in this paper because it is the legal term in the EL Roadmap and other California education policies.



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