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

## Abstract

This brief presents findings from C-SAIL's Implementation Study, which uses interview and survey data to explore how district administrators, principals, and teachers are understanding, experiencing, and implementing the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) state 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.

## Keywords

college and career-ready standards, implementation, curriculum, professional development, assessment, students with disabilities, english learners

## Disciplines

Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research

## Comments

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# Implementation of Texas'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 and survey data to explore how district administrators, principals, and teachers are understanding, experiencing, and implementing the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) state 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.

Since our research began in 2015, C-SAIL researchers have conducted a state-representative survey of 42 district officials, 154 principals, and 591 teachers in Texas. In addition, we have interviewed 12 state officials and 20 district officials in six Texas districts. We will interview teachers in the Fall of 2018. 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 highlight our key survey findings on teacher perceptions on curriculum, professional development, assessments, SWDs, ELs, and outreach/communication. We share detailed insights from district officials in the six case study districts, emphasizing Texas's innovative practices and notable challenges.

## Curriculum

**A majority of teachers (75%) felt that the curriculum selected or developed by their district was aligned to the standards.**

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### Insights

Districts are investing considerable time in creating curricular materials (e.g., scope and sequence, yearly plans, instructional focus documents) to support teachers in implementing the standards in more specific ways with concrete examples.

### Innovations

Curriculum is being used as a strategic tool for ensuring alignment, though districts take different approaches.

- » Teachers participated in curriculum reviews with district personnel at regularly scheduled intervals, which facilitated curricular standardization in large, sprawling districts.
- » One district adopted a focused strategy of developing a small set of curricular goals, rather than a complete curriculum redesign.
- » In several districts, curricular reform focused on an instructional document that provided an overview of what each unit entailed, what students should know prior to the unit, what they were going to learn, and what they should be able to do. When bundled with performance assessments, this document helped teachers understand what was required and what each standard meant in context.
- » Two districts used vetting committees of principals and teachers to decide upon and evaluate curriculum.

### Challenges

Districts continue to struggle to incentivize teachers to abandon traditional units and practices (such as phonics instruction) in favor of more standards-aligned instruction. Several expressed concerns that the standards covered too many topics.

- » According to administrators, teachers are still grappling to understand the standards at a deep level. They reported that teachers felt overwhelmed with having to cover a range of content while simultaneously discontinuing prior practices.

## Professional Development (PD)

**A majority (68%) of teachers across both subjects reported receiving PD on the content of the standards. However, fewer than half of teachers received PD on instructional strategies for SWDs (44%) and ELs (48%).**

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- Insights** Coaching was the most common form of professional development, enabled by a robust array of resources that were not consistent or available in smaller districts.
- Innovations** Large districts with high capacity were able to offer monthly professional learning communities (PLCs) with an instructional coach in every school.
- » Two districts offered “trade days” for teachers to pick-and-choose days when they would attend PD, reducing the need to conduct large, unwieldy, district-wide trainings.
  - » In one district, coaches offered PD three to four times a month for teachers on language development, literacy, standards, and language acquisition so that small groups of teachers could choose what fit their schedules best.
  - » Some districts sent participants to the state’s literacy academies, where teachers learned instructional techniques for teaching the ELA standards and changes to the standards over time.
- Challenges** Some district administrators felt that principals lacked important instructional knowledge across the content areas that they supervised. Coaches filled this deficit in many schools, but there was high turnover among coaches in some districts.
- » Coaches are mobile and in high demand, using their expertise in one instance to obtain higher-paying jobs in other districts.
  - » Cuts to specific technology funds hindered virtual coaching in some districts.

## Assessments

**A majority (63%) of teachers believed that district summative assessments, formative assessments, and school-based assessments were aligned to the standards.**

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**Insights** Districts focused on common formative and other benchmark assessments as a means of collecting more data throughout the school year, moving beyond a heavy emphasis on end-of-year tests.

**Innovations** Alignment work between the assessments and local curricula occurred internally in most districts, supplemented by benchmark assessments.

- » Only one district contracted an outside for-profit partner to develop aligned benchmark assessments.
- » Two districts hoped for more benchmark assessments, while one district raised concerns about the administrative burden of additional assessments.
- » In another district, officials highlighted that the district-developed assessment was created to be harder than the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) in order to better prepare their students.

**Challenges** Frequent changes in state assessment systems led to what district administrators believed was incorrect data, and delays in receiving results. Districts reported that teachers questioned whether the assessments were developmentally appropriate.

- » One district wondered about the relationship between insufficient funding and negative assessment results, echoing a broader concern about a lack of funding increases for several years across the districts studied.
- » Several districts felt that the assessments were not appropriate for SWDs and ELs students.

## Students with Disabilities (SWDs)

Teachers reported that they spent significantly less time on standards-emphasized instruction across grades and subjects for students with disabilities than students without disabilities. General educators believed that the standards were somewhat inappropriate for SWD, and teachers of SWDs reported significantly less buy-in to the standards than general educators.

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### Insights

Districts focused on more fully integrating teachers of SWDs into PD with general education staff, particularly in PLCs. Some participants felt that the standards were not appropriate for SWDs but that they raised the level of instruction for SWDs.

### Innovations

Instructional technologies have allowed teachers to achieve the goal of more differentiated, standards-based instruction. However, these are expensive and infrequently funded, leaving districts to rely on adaptations of more traditional PD.

- » Some districts are placing SWD teachers in general education PD, ensuring that they receive similar professional learning content with common PLCs and planning time.
- » One district developed a traveling Individualized Education Plan (IEP)-compliance roadshow, where district administrators attended faculty meetings to show general educators how to understand IEP goals.

### Challenges

Rural districts had difficulty finding and retaining SWD teachers because many used their districts as stepping stones to jobs in better-paying districts. All districts struggled to hire bilingual SWD teachers.

- » In one district, training for SWD teachers did not adequately prepare them to be both reading and math interventionists.
- » District officials reported that general education teachers felt underprepared to teach SWD from their teacher preparation programs and wanted PD on behavior management, mental health, and disabilities.

## English Learners (ELs)

**Teachers reported that they spent similar time on standards-emphasized instruction across grades and subjects for English learners compared to native English speakers. Compared to general education teachers, teachers of English learners were similarly likely to believe the standards were appropriate for their students.**

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**Insights** With a long history of educating ELs, Texas districts have integrated ELs into their thinking around standards-based instruction instead of viewing them as a novel or difficult-to-serve subgroup.

**Innovations** All six districts have moved towards dual language instruction, even though the state did not mandate dual language programs.

- » Language Acquisition Specialists, Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) training, and iStation software for virtually all schools and teachers improved standards-based, grade-level instructional practices for teaching ELs.
- » Some districts also gave tuition reimbursement to general education teachers who obtained EL certification.

**Challenges** Districts reported concerns about the quality of the state’s Spanish Language Arts (SLA) standards, especially at the foundational level, as well as the rigor of Spanish instruction and buy-in from general educators around bilingual education.

- » The SLA standards are essentially a direct translation of the ELA standards, which is inappropriate considering the differences between the two languages.
- » Some district officials pointed to political rhetoric challenging the legitimacy of bilingual education programs, as well as resistance from general educators.
- » The state does not differentiate accountability goals for schools whose students are almost 100% ELs, leading to a lack of alignment between dual language curricula and assessment.



## Outreach and Communication

**A small majority (57%) of Texas teachers felt that a lack of support from parents was a moderate or major challenge.**

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- Insights** Several district officials discussed parent, community, and external partnership outreach efforts around the standards in order to decrease opposition to the standards and increase their relevance to students' future careers.
- Innovations** Districts are experimenting with different partnership models to “rethink what schools look like” from innovation schools, which integrate technology in every classroom, to partnerships with industry, which create apprenticeship structures for students.
- Challenges** Two suburban Texas districts experienced pushback to the standards as parents confused the TEKS with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Similarly, two districts described pushback to bilingual education programs.
- » Parents concerned about CCSS were unable to articulate specific standards that they felt were inappropriate. In one instance, however, an official described parent frustration at being unable to help with conceptual math homework in elementary grades.
  - » In one district, school board members pushed back against funding for bilingual education. District administrators had to communicate and emphasize the requirements of federal and Texas state law.