

Common Core Implementation: Units of Study in Sacramento City

MARCH 2014

Author

Joel Knudson
American Institutes for Research

About the California Collaborative on District Reform

The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of the American Institutes for Research, was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

The Common Core State Standards introduce a new set of opportunities and challenges to the K–12 education landscape. The new standards call for deeper levels of student engagement and understanding, a demand that may be at odds with the scripted curriculum available through many existing textbooks. Moreover, the standards come without a clear road map for how districts might engage teachers in the implementation process. Consequently, many district leaders are searching for the best means of introducing the Common Core into classrooms while building teacher capacity to lead students to deeper levels of understanding. Fortunately, many California districts are leading the way as early implementers of the new standards. The ideas and lessons emerging from their work can help other educators maximize the effectiveness of their own implementation efforts.

This brief shares one district's approach to engaging teachers in curriculum development.¹ Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) is developing units of study as one component of a comprehensive approach to implementing the new standards. The SCUSD story includes the motivation behind the district's approach, the steps it has taken so far, and the early lessons learned. By telling the story, we attempt to leverage the potential of the Common Core by helping school systems learn from one another and accelerate their growth by recognizing and responding to the early successes and stumbles of their peers. The goal of the brief is not to suggest that other districts should mimic the SCUSD approach, but rather, to present one district's experience from which others may identify and adapt ideas to meet their own students' learning needs.

The information presented here emerged from a November 2013 meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform, which used the SCUSD experience as a foundation to explore issues of Common Core implementation facing all California districts. The brief draws on

the perspectives of SCUSD central office leaders as well as a panel of principals and teachers who have been engaged in developing the district's units of study. It also reflects the feedback of other leaders in educational practice, policy, and research who are members of the California Collaborative and who bring their own experiences and expertise to bear on the most pressing issues facing California's K–12 public school systems.

Setting the Sacramento Context

SCUSD serves roughly 43,000 students in and around the state's capital. Almost three quarters of the district's students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and nearly 22 percent are English learners (ELs). The district reflects the region's racial and ethnic diversity, with a student body that is 37 percent Hispanic, 19 percent white, 18 percent African American, 17 percent Asian, and the remainder representing other or multiple racial/ethnic groups.

New senior leadership arrived in SCUSD in 2009 with the goal of building a stronger learning organization that could better support student success. District leaders encountered what they described as trends of flat student performance in English–language arts (ELA), substantial variation in instructional quality, and minimal collaboration among teachers. In response, these leaders sought to develop a more collaborative and reflective culture that would engage in continuous improvement in the service of students.

California's adoption of the Common Core in summer 2010 represented perfect timing for SCUSD. The district's strategic plan—informed by stakeholder input and released in January 2010—features three pillars, one of which is college and career readiness. The new standards provided

a means for the district to prepare students for postsecondary success because the standards were already aligned to what leaders wanted to accomplish in classrooms. As one district representative explained, the standards “gave us momentum to start the work.” In the first school year after Common Core adoption, therefore, the district began the process of aligning curriculum, assessment, teaching, and learning to the demands of the new standards. District leaders clarify, however, that the standards have not driven SCUSD's work; the overriding goal motivating the district's activities is to become a learning organization that continually improves in the service of student learning. The standards have simply served as a vehicle for this work. As multiple district leaders explain when describing their implementation efforts, “We believe that the work is the learning and the learning is the work.”

Using Units of Study for Common Core Leverage

Effective Common Core implementation requires a broad range of interconnected efforts. Among these is the alignment of curriculum and instructional materials with the learning goals and progressions of the new standards. Existing textbooks and pacing plans, aligned to the previous California standards, are generally not adequate for this task. In the absence of new texts and curriculum frameworks, districts have been developing their own approaches to incorporating curriculum and instructional materials that are consistent with the Common Core. (See the box on page 4 for information about state-developed curriculum frameworks and instructional materials.) As one component of its implementation efforts, SCUSD began creating units of study both as a tool for guiding curriculum and for facilitating adults' professional learning.



What Is a Unit of Study?

In SCUSD, a unit of study refers to a cluster of standards, united by a broader area of focus, that is addressed through a series of lessons over several weeks. For example, a unit of study in ELA might focus on reading and writing informational texts. The units identify the topics teachers will cover, the standards they will address, the assessments through which students will demonstrate their understanding, and a sequence of lessons designed to lead students toward the identified learning goals. The units in SCUSD also identify sample texts for teachers to use in teaching the unit and a rubric for evaluating the culminating assessment. This brief uses the terms *unit of study* and *instructional unit* interchangeably.

enable students to demonstrate mastery of that standard. By June 2011, the group had examined three standards in depth.

Through the process, SCUSD educators realized that addressing standards in isolation from one another was a suboptimal approach because the standards are designed as an interconnected set of knowledge and skills. Building on both their own experience and the advice of Phil Daro,² district leaders determined that a full instructional unit was a more appropriate grain size for approaching the work of implementing the standards. (See the box on page 3 for a description of an instructional unit.) They also realized that working with a single teacher from each school would not be sufficient to take the approach to scale.

SCUSD’s Process of Developing Units of Study

2010–11: Designing Tasks and Lessons in ELA

SCUSD leaders convened a stakeholder group shortly after the state adopted the Common Core to determine how best to introduce the standards in the district and began implementation in January 2011. From the beginning, district leaders focused on the instructional core (the interaction among students, teachers, and content), with particular attention to learning tasks that are directly relevant to the standards and that call for students to demonstrate deep levels of understanding. For their earliest efforts, district leaders invited principals to send one teacher from their school to meet with peers in the central office and learn about the standards. This group of teachers moved from standard to standard in ELA, asking what each standard required of teachers and students and designing tasks and instructional plans that would

2011–12: Developing Units of Study With the End in Mind

In 2011–12, district leaders revised their approach. The original team of teachers (Cohort A) continued to work on Common Core implementation but shifted their focus to issues of assessment. At the same time, district leaders selected 19 “early implementation sites” representing kindergarten through 12th grade (Cohort B) to develop tasks and lessons in teams of teachers as a means of understanding the standards and incorporating them into classroom instruction; this work transitioned to focus on whole units of study by the end of the year. The approach to unit design follows a model of backward design in which educators begin by identifying the goals for student performance by the end of each unit and designing assessments that will produce evidence of whether students have achieved those goals. The group then specifies what needs to happen during an instructional unit—including elements like essential questions, instructional materials, and formative

State Curriculum Frameworks Aligned to the Common Core

Since SCUSD began working on their units of study, the California State Board of Education (SBE) has adopted a new state curriculum framework for mathematics³ aligned to the Common Core (November 2013) and is scheduled to act on a recommendation to adopt a new ELA/ELD curriculum framework⁴—also aligned to the Common Core—in summer or fall 2014. The frameworks are tools to help districts develop the scope and sequence, progression, and weighting of instruction to lead all students to academic proficiency. As tools, the frameworks offer design guidance for instructional materials—including locally developed units of study like those in Sacramento—and professional development.

To support the curriculum frameworks, state-adopted advisory lists of instructional materials identify textbooks, technology-based materials, tests, and other educational materials that teachers and students can use as learning resources for mastering the Common Core.⁵ In January 2014, the SBE adopted a set of instructional materials for mathematics in kindergarten through Grade 8;⁶ a legislative suspension on the state adoption of additional instructional materials ends in July 2015 (although exceptions to this suspension have been provided through legislative action).

assessment tools and practices—to enable students to reach those goals. The result of these efforts is a set of draft units to be refined and eventually used districtwide. The process also can serve as a model for teacher teams to continue developing site-specific units within their schools.

2012–13: Supporting English Learners and Expanding to Mathematics

In 2012–13, the district's work expanded and deepened. Cohort B (the early implementation sites) continued to develop units in ELA, and teachers from these sites were joined by teams of teachers from every school in the district. The focus for all teachers involved in the unit development sharpened on ELs and student access to complex texts, an effort for which the district drew on the support of Lily Wong Fillmore.⁷ District leaders asked teachers to be explicit about identifying the language demands within a unit and the instructional strategies needed to meet those demands. An effort also emerged to embed the state's new English Language Development (ELD) Standards⁸ into the units.

In addition to the changes in the ELA units of study, SCUSD educators began developing units of study in mathematics for Grades 3–8. This effort included a new set of teacher teams representing each school in the district serving those grade levels.

2013–14: Expanding Efforts to Every School and Beginning the Process of Integration

In 2013–14, SCUSD has shifted the responsibility for developing districtwide units to a team of training specialists in ELA, mathematics, and ELD. District leaders originally planned for every teacher in the district to use a newly developed unit from the district for ELA and mathematics during the school year. Feedback from teachers, however, has suggested that limited time to administer and respond to the assessments embedded in each unit—many of which include performance tasks with open-ended responses that take substantial time to score—pose challenges for integrating the units with teachers' instructional practice. District leaders continue to look for opportunities to provide



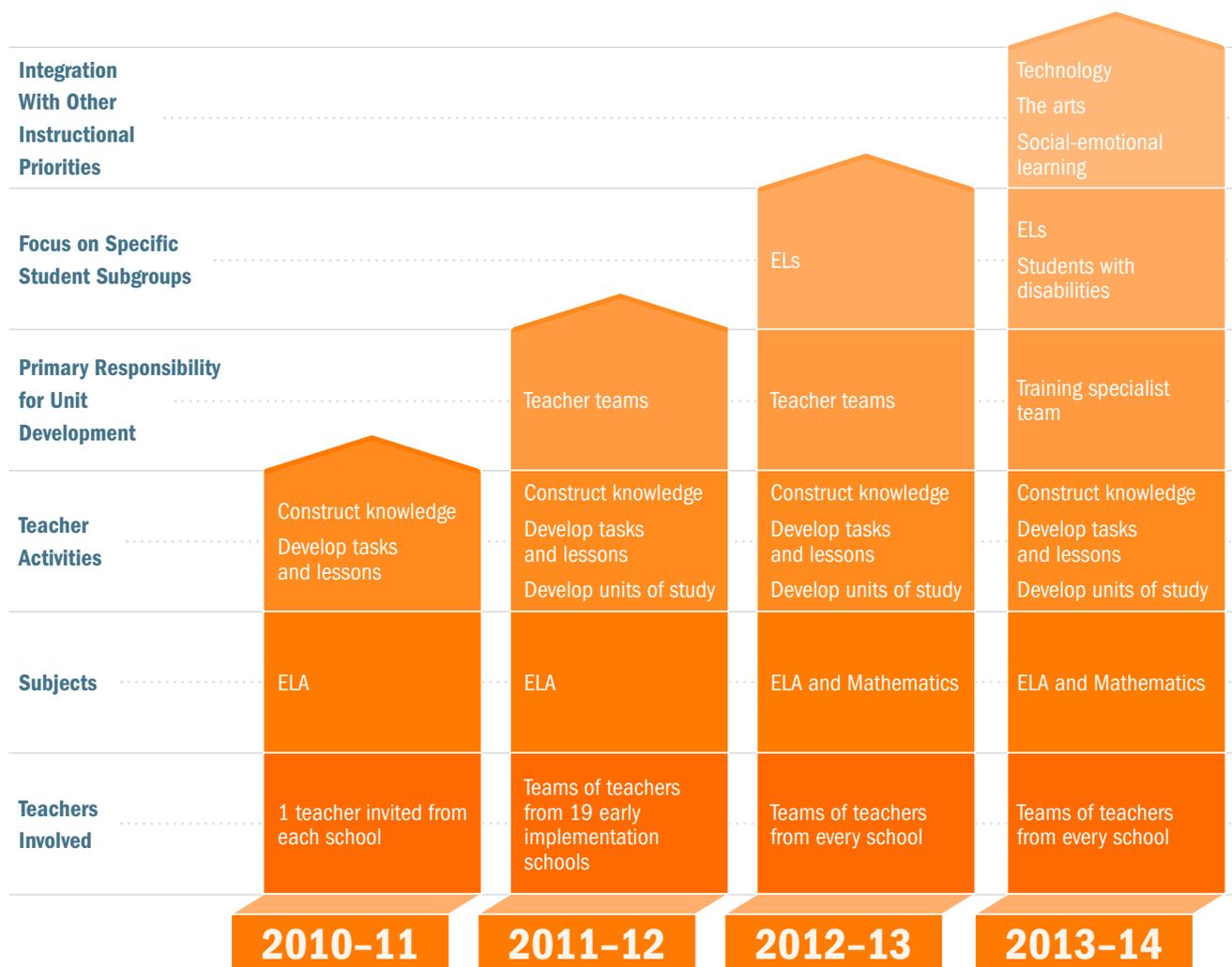
appropriate supports for teachers while encouraging the extended use of the units of study districtwide.

To supplement the growing set of districtwide units, the central office is encouraging teachers to develop units in school sites with the support of the training specialist team. As part of this effort, district leaders have asked teams of teachers in every school and in every grade K–12 to develop or implement at least one unit for use at their school site.

At the same time, district leaders are working to connect Common Core implementation to other district initiatives. These efforts include integration

with the arts, attention to universal design for learning for students with disabilities, and a districtwide emphasis on social-emotional learning. The process of integration also enables the district to build upon its strengths. For example, the Linked Learning pathways⁹ already developed in many of the district’s high schools provide lessons for districts about developing and using integrated units of study; a process of integrating the Common Core into these existing units is currently emerging.

Figure 1. The Evolution of Units of Study in SCUSD



Moving Forward: Connecting Units to Curriculum Maps and Supporting School Sites

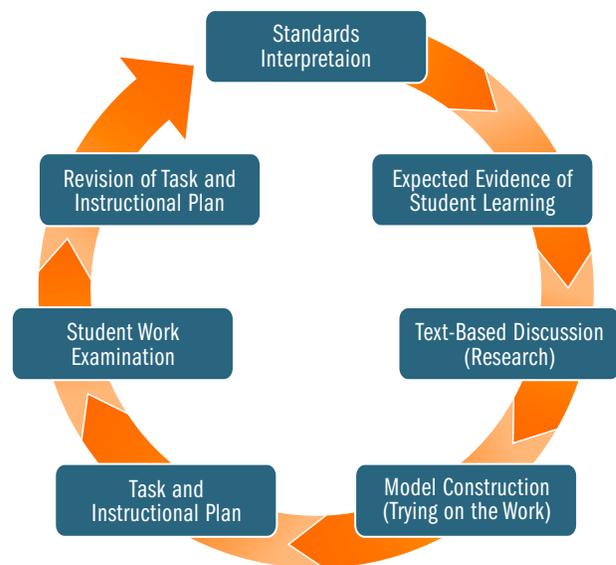
As the unit development process continues to unfold, the SCSUD focus is shifting both to refinement of the district-level units of study and to teacher support at the site level. District leaders are creating curriculum maps that will guide what teachers teach at various points in the school year; the plan is to embed the district-adopted units of study within the curriculum maps. The training specialist team will continue to lead the revision of the units of study developed by teachers in 2011–12 and 2012–13. This team also has taken on the responsibility of developing the remaining units of study to cover the academic year; the teacher role has in turn shifted to providing feedback on these district-level units.

At the same time, district leaders want to encourage teachers to continue developing units at the site level to supplement or take the place of districtwide units. Members of the training specialist team work with teachers at school sites to provide guidance and support in creating units of study that align with their own needs. As long as teachers use the same unit across a grade level, and as long as that unit meets the content, skills, and level of rigor identified in the curriculum maps, schools can choose to use their own locally developed units in place of the units provided by the district. Through this approach, district leaders aim to ensure an appropriate level of quality while honoring creativity and innovation at school sites.

SCUSD's Use of Units of Study to Facilitate Professional Learning

The units serve two purposes. First, they help SCUSD address the need for curriculum and instructional materials that are aligned with the Common Core. Second, they are a powerful vehicle for building teacher and leader capacity. Figure 2 outlines the district's evidence- and inquiry-based cycle of continuous improvement through which teachers develop units while building their own capacity to understand and facilitate student mastery of the standards.

Figure 2. The SCUSD Cycle of Professional Learning



Standards Interpretation: Teachers begin with the end in mind by examining the standards and determining what the standards expect students to know and be able to do.

Expected Evidence of Student Learning: Next, teachers identify assessments that will provide evidence of whether a student has achieved mastery of that standard (or set of standards).



Text-Based Discussion (Research): Having established the final goal for a unit and the evidence of whether students meet that goal, teachers turn to research to deepen their content understanding and repertoire of instructional strategies. They also ground their thinking with a text-based discussion—where “text” takes on an expanded definition that could include video, student work, or online or print-based text—that asks whether the evidence they seek is available in the text at hand.

Model Construction (Trying on the Work): From that point, teachers engage with the work as students and actually try to complete what they will ask students to do, refining as appropriate.

Task and Instructional Plan: Once teachers have developed a solid plan for instructional materials and delivery, they return to their own classrooms to introduce the new lessons and tasks to their students.

Student Work Examination: Having delivered the lesson and guided students through the completion of a task, teachers collect student work as evidence of effectiveness.

Revision of Task and Instructional Plan: From the evidence of student learning that they collect, teachers reconvene and modify the units to better guide classroom instruction to desired student learning goals.

District leaders believe this approach to professional learning offers several benefits. First, it enables teachers to engage with the standards and develop a deeper understanding of what the standards require of students. Second, incorporating evidence of student learning drives the refinement process; all lesson planning and instructional decisions derive directly from what the evidence indicates that students know and are able to do. Third, viewing

implementation as a developmental process supports an orientation toward continuous improvement that district leaders hope will frame teachers’ view of their professional role overall. The district’s decision to label all units as “draft”—where each unit is always open to refinement—and to explicitly incorporate unit revision into the process are manifestations of this perspective.

Lessons Learned From the SCUSD Units of Study Experience

District leaders in SCUSD describe the units of study as an approach that has helped introduce the Common Core into classrooms while building the capacity of teachers in the system. The process, however, is one of ongoing refinement. The challenges encountered and lessons learned in SCUSD—some of which come from district leaders and some of which emerged from California Collaborative members during the group’s November 2013 meeting—are just as instructive as the details of the approach itself.

Lessons About the Design of the Units Themselves

Achieving the Appropriate Level of Specificity

Teachers must consider many specific elements of classroom instruction when implementing a unit of study. Providing access points for ELs and students with disabilities, incorporating prior student knowledge, and addressing other aspects of classroom instruction can help provide guidance

to teachers on how best to facilitate student learning within a unit, especially when taking into account concerns about equity and access. As teachers begin to use units of study developed or vetted within the central office—units that they did not actively design themselves—these elements of instruction may be particularly important. At the same time, excessive articulation of expected teacher behavior can create an overwhelming document of 30–40 pages and stifle the creativity of teachers who may feel constrained by the overspecification of the unit details. California Collaborative members emphasized that districts must pair units like those being developed in SCUSD with strong professional development so that teachers are equipped to deliver effective instruction within the parameters that a unit provides.

Balancing Teacher Empowerment With Quality Control

Developing units of study can help teachers understand the standards in deeper and more meaningful ways than traditional approaches, but the model also calls on teachers to act as curriculum developers, a role that is new for many. High standards of quality need to accompany unit development, and district leaders need to find a balance between empowering and trusting teachers to exercise their professional judgment with ensuring quality control.

Lessons About Engaging Teachers in the Implementation Process

Leveraging Teachers' Experiences and Perspectives

The units of study fundamentally rely on teachers' professional judgment to drive Common Core implementation efforts. A leader from another California district identified this as a fundamental strength of SCUSD's efforts to date, saying, "If you really want to understand the work and how you can support it and make it get better, ask the people doing it.... Seeing teachers as the solution, not as the problem, is really, really important." Efforts to develop units of study and similar approaches can enable district leaders to collect the advice and feedback of teachers and use them to enhance implementation effectiveness. As district leaders explore uncharted territory in supporting instruction and student learning, teacher feedback is essential for the continuous improvement process.

Building Trust to Facilitate Teacher Growth

SCUSD's implementation efforts seek to empower teachers. At the same time, change introduces the possibility of failure; the instructional shifts implied by the Common Core and the responsibilities of developing units of study can introduce fear and uncertainty for teachers. For these efforts to be successful, district and site leaders need to create trusting environments where teachers feel





comfortable taking risks. Describing her principal's approach to creating a safe space to experiment and grow, one SCUSD teacher explained, "That was a great gift for us, because we knew we could try things out and he wasn't going to come in with his check marks and say, 'Okay, you're fired.' ...It helps us be comfortable with the chances you're taking." California Collaborative members suggested that district and school leaders might enhance their effectiveness by moving beyond *allowing* risk taking to *modeling* risk taking. Demonstrating comfort with change and a willingness to make mistakes, evaluate, and refine one's practice as a leader can send a powerful message to teachers that the same kind of reflective practice is encouraged for them.

Providing Enough Time and Support

Finding time for teachers to learn and engage in the unit development process is an ongoing struggle and has limited the speed with which SCUSD can expand its efforts districtwide. Likewise, district leaders indicated that providing on-site guidance and feedback to teachers strengthens the quality of efforts at the school level, but available resources limit the extent to which the district can provide this support. In addition, districts have traditionally relied on the state's textbook adoption process to provide some criteria for instructional materials. An approach to developing units of study that calls for teachers to identify the most appropriate resources for a lesson is an opportunity to empower teachers, but it also introduces a new burden for educators already stretched too thin. Providing teachers with appropriate time, training, and support to manage this responsibility will present an ongoing challenge for school systems.

Balancing Teacher Engagement With the Need to Go to Scale

SCUSD district leaders found teachers' involvement in unit development valuable in building understanding about what the standards require and fostering commitment to the Common Core effort. Describing the process in his school, a SCUSD principal observed that "Teachers struggle together. They are invested and they care how it turns out. There is buy-in.... They have a bond now that is way deeper than passing someone in the hall." Of course, resource limitations make it difficult to provide this same opportunity to all teachers in a school system. Other teachers may benefit from using the units developed by their colleagues or by central office leaders to guide the use of curriculum and instructional materials. At the same time, teachers who were not involved in the development process will not have experienced the same level of thinking and planning that led to the end product. These teachers will need substantial support to understand new tools, embrace them, and integrate them into their classroom practice. Without a deep understanding of the standards themselves and the ways in which lessons and assessments within a unit of study are designed to lead students toward mastery, educators who did not develop the unit might simply resort to the kinds of scripted curricula that emerged under No Child Left Behind.

Conclusion

The Common Core presents a powerful opportunity for educators and school systems to learn from their peers and accelerate their own learning and development. In that spirit, this brief aims to articulate the SCUSD approach to developing units of study as one possible avenue to teacher engagement and curriculum development to meet the new standards. The units of study represent only one component of what should be a comprehensive approach to Common Core implementation, and the degree to which they align with other strategies will vary from district to district. Nevertheless, the lessons learned in SCUSD can inform the efforts in other school systems. By adapting good ideas, avoiding early missteps, and addressing challenges early in the implementation process, districts can prepare themselves to capitalize on the opportunities presented by the Common Core.

NOTES

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the educators in SCUSD whose experiences are reflected in this brief for their willingness to share their work. In particular, I thank Iris Taylor and Olivine Roberts for their instrumental contributions to planning the California Collaborative's November 2013 meeting and to chronicling the district's story.
2. Phil Daro is a lead author of the Common Core State Standards in mathematics and has consulted with SCUSD district leaders on implementation of the standards.
3. The adopted curriculum framework for mathematics is available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ma/cf/draft2mathfwchapters.asp>.
4. The first draft of the ELA and ELD curriculum framework, produced by the state's Instructional Quality Commission, is available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/rl/cf/elaeldfrmwrk2014pubrev.asp>.

Additional Resources on Common Core Implementation in SCUSD

SCUSD Common Core Website:
<http://www.scusd.edu/common-core>

California Collaborative Meeting Materials:
<http://www.cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting23>

Getting to the Core: How Early Implementers Are Approaching the Common Core in California:
<http://www.edpolicyinca.org/publications/getting-core-how-early-implementers-are-approaching-common-core-california-0>





5. A recent commentary in *EdSource Today* from Instructional Quality Commission Chair Bill Honig addresses the relationship between standards and curriculum in California in more detail: <http://edsources.org/2014/coherent-and-sequenced-curriculum-key-to-impl>.

6. The adopted list of instructional materials in mathematics is available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ma/im/>. This list is advisory; a 2013 addition to the California Education Code allows districts to use instructional materials that have not been adopted by the SBE, provided that they are aligned with the state's academic content standards.

7. Lily Wong Fillmore is a professor of education at the University of California at Berkeley whose work focuses on issues of language access for second language learners in school settings.

8. The California State Board of Education adopted a new set of ELD standards in November 2012; these standards also are being integrated into the new curriculum framework for ELA.

9. Linked Learning is a high school improvement approach that operates through pathways of courses, internships, and student supports that provide a unifying theme to students' high school experience and connect students to real-world learning opportunities related to that theme.



The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of American Institutes for Research, was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

The development of this brief was supported through generous contributions from the California Education Policy Fund, the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation, the Dirk and Charlene Kabcenell Foundation, the S. D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation, the S. H. Cowell Foundation, the Silver Giving Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation. The views, findings, conclusions, and recommendations here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the viewpoint of these organizations.

For more information about the Collaborative and its work, visit www.cacollaborative.org.