

COMMENTARY

How California can transform math education for English learners



CRYSTAL GONZALES



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Credit: Allison Shelley for American Education

In California and across the country, English learners are too frequently an afterthought.

Though they are one of the largest student groups — California has more than 1 million students who are learning English as a second language, and that number is growing — their academic performance has barely budged over the last two decades. According to the [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#), only 4% of English learners are proficient in eighth grade math, compared with 29% of non-English learners. Furthermore, [NAEP reading scores](#) revealed that only 10% of fourth grade English learners are proficient in reading, compared to 37% of non-English learners in the same grade.

There are many reasons for this. But one of the most important is also one of the most fundamental: The textbooks and other instructional materials used in classrooms every day are typically not written with English learners in mind. While these textbooks may be rigorous and aligned with state standards, they lack the cultural relevance and language support necessary for students who are learning English. Teachers know this to be true. [A survey](#) found that 82% of teachers believe their current materials either somewhat or not at all reflect the needed academic rigor for English learners.

Fortunately, California has an opportunity to start making this right. Next year, our State Board of Education will release [its first math adoption list](#) of state-approved curricula since 2014 — recommending math instructional materials that state education leaders believe align with California's revised math framework. While some California districts have already started or completed their selection process, many districts in the state will soon choose a new math curriculum from that list.

There is a common misconception that mathematical concepts transcend linguistic differences, so the needs of English learners shouldn't be a concern. However, the reality is that language is critical for math instruction — and so math instruction materials that incorporate language support can help all learners. If the state recommends materials that center on the needs of English learners — and districts ultimately purchase and adopt them — we can make significant progress toward making our math curriculum more accessible for all students.

Curriculum adoption may feel technical and esoteric, but it is essential to promote equity — especially for English learners. [High-quality](#) instructional materials serve as a “floor” for instruction, providing teachers with the materials they need to connect with every student in their classroom.

Unfortunately, our classrooms — especially those serving English learners — too often fail to reach that floor. A recent report from the [Center for Education Market Dynamics](#) revealed that California districts with greater percentages of English learners are the least likely to have adopted a new math curriculum. Many of those districts are waiting for the state adoption list before moving forward. This means that the adoption — and the curricula ultimately selected by districts — will have a dramatic effect on the academic experience of English learners, in particular.

How can we get this process right? While California provides a list of state-approved curricula, it does not review instructional materials for specific populations, including English learners. This means districts and counties must figure out which math curriculum is most supportive of English learners. State leaders should provide guidance and resources to county offices of education so that districts are well positioned to run their own adoption processes. To

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