

## EdWeek Market Brief

Analyst's View

Sept. 28, 2023

# Districts Are Ramping Up Standards for ELL Materials. Here's How to Meet Rising Expectations

*Companies Need Materials That Weave Content With Language Learning, Says an Advocate for Major School Systems*

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Staff Writer



As the rate of English-learning students in U.S. classrooms rises — and is set to grow at a faster rate in the years ahead — education companies are facing pressure to adapt their materials to meet both the heightened demand and districts' increasingly rigorous standards.

In 2010, 4.5 million students were classified as English learners, or roughly 9.2 percent of all public school students in the country, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. By 2020, that number climbed to 5 million, or 10.3 percent of public school students.

By at least one prediction, that number could grow to 15 percent by 2032.

To address the existing and future needs of English learners, districts are asking more from providers across the board, from core curriculum in subjects like English and math, to supplemental materials focused on language development, said Gabriela Uro.

As director for English language learner policy and research for the Council of the Great City Schools, a nonprofit organization representing 78 urban districts in the U.S., Uro hears directly from district leaders about the ways providers have, and haven't been, helping meet the needs of their English learning students.

These needs have long existed, she said, but districts are just now increasing their push to address them more rigorously, and at scale.

"Finally, we've have enough of us out there talking about this, and districts learning about what they really need in materials," she said, "that we're now starting to see districts put things in their RFPs that actually convey what they really need in terms of access to grade-level content for English learners."

The biggest trend she sees, especially in general adoptions of core curriculum materials, is tougher standards.

## About the Analyst

**Gabriela Uro** is the director for English language learner policy and research for the Council of the Great City Schools, where she is responsible for all matters pertaining to English language learners. Uro has led or co-authored a number of publications and studies focused on English



language learners. Prior to joining the council, Uro served as the policy adviser to the assistant secretary of elementary and secondary education, and the director of the office of bilingual education in the U.S. Department of Education under former President Clinton.

"Districts are much better at articulating both in the RFP and also in the selection committee's reviews that they're looking for more rigor and higher expectations," she said.

Uro spoke with *EdWeek Market Brief* about what those expectations look like, and how providers can position themselves to meet them.

### **What are districts asking for when it comes to English language learner materials that they haven't before?**

The districts are asking for better focus on attention and on language development. It's not a separate thing that happens somewhere else — it happens while you're learning content. And that goes together with better integration, so that the materials are integrated and connected in coherent ways so that it's not, "Okay here, you're learning the content, and now let me pivot, and here are the words to learn to go with the content." No. That should happen a little bit more seamlessly.

When it comes to language, the focus is more on academic language. Educators know that they need to focus on the academic English because that's the register, or the type of language, that English learners will need so they can successfully engage when they're in their math classes, biology, and any other content classes.

### **Are there any specific needs districts are asking publishers for help addressing?**

We're also seeing districts try to ask for materials that address the needs of particular subgroups of students. For example, there's been a lot of talk about newcomers, whether they're refugees or asylees, and [districts] asked publishers to have materials attend to those populations.

It's such a small population that to be honest, I think publishers have a hard time responding to such a small market. Some might have it. Some might have it as a supplemental. Some might have it in a little text box in materials, but it's not a very robust response to the ask.



Don't have kids learning English on topics that are not even connected to what the other kids are learning in the classroom, or what that same child will be learning when they go to their math class.

**What role do supplemental materials play in addressing English learners' needs, and what trends are you seeing there?**

A lot of times English learners might be getting the general materials, but they might not engage with it as successfully because there might not be sufficient support for them. But there are usually also supplemental materials that are very much focused on English learners.

What districts are asking for those is that if you're going to have the supplementary materials, make sure that they're connected to grade level.

**How do you accomplish that?**

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[Districts] are really asking [publishers,] "We get it, sometimes you're not going to change your entire core instructional materials, but can you update your supplemental to have that be tied to content? And [make] it have higher expectations for language?"

**What else are districts asking for in terms of research or evidence for materials?**

What districts are wanting and asking for is the evidence base, what's the alignment of the materials to the research? It's science of reading for English-speaking kids, but if you have a dual-language program that has Spanish as a partner language, or French, then what is the research base to develop those literacies?

Some districts are asking for materials to come in Spanish and English because they might have a lot Spanish speakers in that state, sometimes it's a consent decree, but other times, it's just because of the growth of dual-language programs. Those programs tend not to have materials, so they have to cobble things together. What they're hoping is a publisher can say "Look, I'm going to give you a whole set of materials that has a parallel flow, and content mix that's coherent for both your English side as well as your Spanish or French."

**What kind of teacher resources do educators ask for when it comes to materials for English learners?**

A lot of the time teacher-facing material comes with a whole host of digital resources. Sometimes they're overwhelming, and the teacher has a hard time curating all that.

Teachers want easy, searchable access to evidence bases ... teachers don't have the time to go through all this to find that kernel, and they [may think] it sounds like fun and like it might be good for my kids, but is it based on research?

**Where are education companies falling short in providing products and services to English learners? How could they be improved?**

There are two big things. One is the rigor I was mentioning. The districts have upped their game. They're asking for the right things, they are forming their selection committees to be experts so they can look for these things. Well, the publishers are maybe "upping their game" in sort of the way it happened with Common Core. They slap a sticker on it that says, "This is new for ELLs, new and improved!" and it has maybe two [new] pages.

Publishers' change isn't as evolved as districts are hoping. They're not providing a robust access to academic language or even content. We find sometimes, when we're

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reviewing materials — and we did a review for materials just in July with our new framework on foundational literacy — and found that sometimes, when they do the scaffolds for ELLs, it affects the content.

### **Is there a good example of how materials fall short that you can point to?**

We did a whole review of math materials with [Los Angeles Unified School District]. It was part of a procurement process, and what we would often find is they would say, “For ELLs, how you want to scaffold is ...” and it was a cookie-cutter, “if they’re beginning, do this. If they’re intermediate, do that.” And that’s not going to cut it.

Instead of focusing the task on the content of math, they would turn it into a vocabulary issue. What is the term for fractions? For the number that goes on the bottom of fractions? That’s not helping them understand the concept of fractions. You’re just asking them if they can tell you what those things are called.

This is where we’re still struggling. We work with publishers, there’s other folks that help publishers understand this because it’s tricky. You think that you’re helping with language, but you have to think — did we take away the content? We have to figure out how you do language without taking the content away.

### **Are there any other ways providers can better help teachers of English learners?**

There’s the question of coherence. If you have supplemental materials, and they’re doing a good job with [English language development], but they’re not designed in a way that helps connect back to what the student is learning with the gen-ed teacher. Now the student didn’t learn the type of language that is going to help in the class, and is still stuck.

Teachers get frustrated because for them, they now have to do a lot more planning to figure out, “Okay, this is unit two, but for you it’s unit 12. So bring your language of unit 12 into my unit two.” It makes it harder on the humans that are trying to attend to the need and the content.

### **How do you help classroom educators overcome that hurdle?**

Maybe this is where technology can come in. If your supplementary material is not going to be a one-to-one alignment, they have it be more dynamic and nimble so you can do a search [for example.] If it's about reasoning ... what are the sentence frames that I would use to express my reason? If you teach me those now, [as a student] I'm hitting both math, because we're dealing with reasoning in math class, and then I'm dealing with argumentation in English. So now you've equipped me as an English learner to be able to handle the academic language demands of both of those content areas.

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