

High-Quality Teaching Materials for ELLs Is Goal of New Initiative

By Corey Mitchell on February 20, 2019 12:10 PM

The Council of the Great City Schools and Los Angeles Unified School District have launched the first phase of a nationwide initiative to improve the quality of instructional materials for English-language learners—and the training for teachers who work with them.

The first products of the partnership are middle school math materials, designed with the goal of preparing more English-learners to take Algebra I by 9th grade.

The council, which represents more than 70 of the nation's large urban school districts, began a purchasing consortium under the premise that the combined buying power of districts that serve millions of ELL students would compel publishers to improve the quality of materials they produce for those students.

"This was really born of frustration on the part of public school systems all across the country that they could not find the materials that they needed specifically for English-learners," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools.

"Rather than being in a place where the materials were dictated by the people selling them, we basically decided what we'd be better off doing is telling the publishers what it is we needed."

The consortium allows any school district in the nation to join and purchase the materials. More than a dozen districts have already expressed interest, Casserly said.

Education Week has written about the struggles [challenges teachers face with English-learner materials](#) that often fail to strike the right balance.

Many publishers don't include support and strategies that help teachers support their students' understanding of texts and unfamiliar concepts. And the companies that do often err on the side of oversimplification, failing to engage or challenge the English-learners, educators argue.

Research backs those claims.

A 2015 study out of the University of California, Los Angeles, found that policies and programs for children of immigrants and English-learners tend to focus on their [need for remediation and basic skills](#), rather than ways to expose them to higher-order thinking skills.

Los Angeles Unified leaders think the new materials will help the district narrow a long-standing math-learning gap between its native English-speaking students and those who are still learning English.

Overall, about 30 percent of middle school students in the district meet state math standards. Among former ELLs reclassified as English proficient, about 28 percent meet the standards.

For English-learners, there's a precipitous drop—only two percent reach that level, said Hilda Maldonado, senior executive director of diversity, learning, and instruction for the district.

"Obviously we're not happy with those results and we think we can do better," Maldonado said.

Three publishers—Curriculum Associates, Imagine Learning Inc., and Open Up Resource—worked with Los Angeles Unified and the Council of the Great City schools for more than a year to create the classroom materials and professional development for teachers. Their goal was to help teachers simultaneously strengthen students' math and language skills.

"We put a lot on our educators and we expect them ... to close achievement gaps, get students at proficiency and we don't always provide them the support they need,"

Maldonado said. "We basically targeted how we could get better materials in front of teachers so that they could in turn benefit the students."