



POLICY BRIEF

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IMPLEMENTING CALIFORNIA'S LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

by Allan Odden and Nancy Kotowski

This policy brief is based on a USC study directed by Allan Odden, David Marsh, and Nancy Kotowski. The findings are reported in Nancy Kotowski's doctoral dissertation, Implementation of the California English-Language Arts Curriculum Framework, University of Southern California. The following California school administrators and former USC doctoral students conducted the district and school case studies: Rod Buchignani, Ellen Curtin, Cecilia Fernandez, Constance Fish, Barbara Forcier, Judith Fogel, Ruben Hernandez, Denise Hexom, Mary McCullough, Carol Leighty, Laurie Love, Steve Lowder, Shirley Peterson and Jack Stokes.

A corner stone of California's education reform strategy is the creation of a series of high quality curriculum frameworks designed to upgrade K-12 education in the state. The frameworks raise expectations of students' knowledge and understanding of language arts, mathematics, science, and history/social science. They focus on learning for understanding, and thinking, problem solving, and using knowledge in practical, real-life situations. More specifically, the goals of the frameworks are to introduce a curriculum which can be used for all students and produce students who:

- Know how to learn
- Can use knowledge to analyze issues and solve problems, and
- Can apply that knowledge to actual problems of the economy and society.

PACE is a non-partisan university-based education research center, directed by James W. Guthrie, UC Berkeley; Michael W. Kirst, Stanford University; and Allan R. Odden, USC. Julia E. Koppich, UC Berkeley, is the Deputy Director.

English-Language Arts Curriculum Framework

California's English-Language Arts Curriculum Framework emphasizes the use of literature, rather than textbooks, to expose students to language arts. Its basic premise is that students can best learn to read and write through experience - by actually reading and writing. It proposes that students read real literature - books, stories, and poems - rather than traditional reading books. Its tenets are that language arts should:

- Be literature based,
- Emphasize writing and language developments skills, and
- Integrate reading, writing, listening and speaking, and integrate language arts with other subjects.

Implementing the frameworks requires fundamental changes in classroom practice. From the standard practice of presenting curriculum as fragmented and isolated bits of knowledge, teachers must instead make students draw upon and advance their understandings of both content and skills. Valid solutions are not unique and can vary widely. To engage in this fundamentally different classroom discourse, most teachers need deeper understandings of the content areas, a wide range of new pedagogical strategies, and more complex strategies for organizing classrooms and schools.

In 1991, USC conducted a study of 14 California school districts and elementary schools to assess the extent to which teachers were implementing the language arts curriculum framework, and to determine what factors the

teachers believe are impeding or facilitating its implementation. The study examined teachers' understudying of the frameworks, the degree of implementation, and factors affecting the implementation process.

Teachers' Understanding of the Frameworks

Teacher perceptions of the language arts curriculum framework showed that they had a good understanding of the frameworks' purpose and approach. Teachers perceived that the language arts framework is an *experiential program* which suggests a fundamental change from the traditional roles in the teaching-learning process. Within the framework, the teacher seeks to evoke students' interest in reading and writing and connects them with it personally. Students are provided with opportunities to respond to what is read. Open-ended questions are used to connect students with the text and to bring them beyond it, and students are given opportunities to construct their own meanings from the text.

Teachers also recognized that the language arts framework is a *core program for all with skills taught in meaningful contexts*. In other words, every child, regardless of ability or conditions, is provided the same core language arts program which is literature-based, meaning-centered, challenging, and draws on students' experiences.

The framework also involved *thematic integration*: teachers emphasize language arts skills in all content areas, and use thematic units to integrate reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Teachers also characterized the framework as developing a *comprehensive, coherent language arts program* which links language arts curriculum standards with new, high quality instructional materials, new forms of assessment linked closely to those standards, and active involvement of parents with regard to language use and reading at home.

Teachers also felt that the framework involved *phonics* which is taught in meaningful

contexts in the early grades and focus on the most important letter-to-sound relationships.

Degree of Implementation

Despite teachers' thorough understanding of the frameworks, in the districts and schools studied, the English-Language Arts frameworks were not fully implemented at the classroom level. The first three of the five components described above were implemented to a moderate degree, with mixed results for the other two.

Experiential language arts instruction. Teachers wanted to offer students a rich, experiential language arts program, but implemented this only moderately in their classrooms. Teachers provided students with daily opportunities to read on their own and to hear good literature read to them. Teachers believed that they evoked students' interest in reading materials and connected students personally with the materials. But while 84 percent of teachers believed they used open-ended questioning techniques to a high degree, only 67 percent said that such approaches were the center of communicative interaction in their classrooms.

Core program for all students with skills taught in meaningful contexts. Most teachers believed they were offering all their students the same core, literature-based, meaning-centered language arts program to a moderately high degree. Then probed regarding specific aspects of teaching skills in context, however, only 26 percent were implementing this approach at a moderate level.

Thematic integration. Most teachers wanted to use integrative language arts processes in all subject areas. However, only two-thirds indicated they used these processes to a high degree. Although most teachers felt they were implementing the "basics" of the integrated instructional approach to a high degree, the overall results suggest that the scope of possibilities of thematic integration have not yet been tapped.

Mixed results were found regarding two dimensions of the framework - the comprehensiveness and coherence of the

language arts program being implemented, and the issue of phonics instruction.

Comprehensive, coherent language arts program. The language arts frameworks require that students have access to literature. However, mixed results were found regarding the supply of literary works needed to teach the program to all students, especially limited-English-proficient students. Some teachers and students had sufficient, new materials while other did not. Regarding assessment, 72 percent of teachers indicated that they used alternative forms of testing student, including written and oral work, to a high degree, while others did not. Seventy-Two percent of teachers indicated that they used alternative forms of testing student, including written and oral work, to a high degree, while 22 percent indicated moderate degree, and six percent indicated a low degree of use. Sixty-five percent of teachers believed they were currently covering the full range of the goals of the language arts program and aligning assessment with what students were expected to learn. Twenty-three percent indicated a moderate degree and nine percent a low degree of alignment at the present time. Thus, teachers wanted to link assessment strategies more to new forms of instruction, but full implementation of this objective was just beginning.

Phonics. About half of the teachers indicated that they implemented the frameworks' approach to phonics to a high degree and 24 percent to a moderate degree. However, 18-23 percent of the teachers indicated a low degree of implementation, which means they were using a phonics, not a literature-based, approach to teach language arts. This finding conflicts with the finding that most teachers said they were teaching skills in meaningful contexts, not the typical phonics approach. It suggests that teacher probably were grafting the new skills-in-context approach onto the traditional phonics approach, this providing at best only partial implementation of the framework. This mixed pattern has been found on other studies of California's curriculum reform as well (Cohen, 1991).

Factors Affecting Implementation

As California initiated its nation-leading curriculum reform efforts in the mid-1980s, consensus began to emerge about the key elements of the local curriculum change process. The following factors found to be significantly related to effective curriculum change:

1. Creation of ambitious, credible and sound visions of educational change such as those embodied in the California curriculum frameworks.
2. An ambitious antecedent implementation phase in which key individuals learn more about the new curriculum vision and become competent in using small curriculum units to implement that vision.
3. District and site administrator knowledge and commitment to the curriculum change effort throughout the entire implementation process from initiation through full implementation.
4. Ambitious training and technical assistance during adoption, but particularly throughout the entire implementation process, which includes specific assistance in individual teachers' classrooms
5. Use of teachers as knowledgeable leaders throughout the implementation process.
6. Long-run commitment to full and complete implementation, i.e., staying power.
7. Teacher mastery of the required content material and pedagogical practices.
8. Emergence of teacher commitment to the new curriculum program, which often occurred after more than one year of actively working to change practices in the teacher's own classroom.

The USC study identified 12 factors which affect the implementation-change process for the schools and districts studied, several of which are included in the factors listed above. Overall, teachers who perceived a higher degree of implementation also experienced a higher level of

support for their English-Language Arts framework implementation efforts from:

School site leadership. Teachers in this study perceived the implementation progress had been maintained at their sites through school leadership that kept language arts reform a high priority. Teachers gave very high marks to their school leaders for having the knowledge and expertise needed to support program implementation efforts.

District leaders' knowledge and Expertise. Although not as high as school leaders, teachers also gave district leaders high marks for implementation. Teachers believed that knowledgeable and expert leaders at both the school and district are key to the curriculum change process.

Fidelity to full implementation. Overall, teachers felt pressure to fully implement and not "down-size" the program. The findings suggest that fidelity to full implementation was the message.

Mastery of new practice, student outcomes, and teacher effort. As the literature suggests, teachers' perceptions of student outcomes are linked to the amount of effort the teachers are expending to implement the new frameworks. Teacher confidence in their professional practice and student achievement are also very highly correlated (Rosenhotz, 1985). Seventy-three percent of teachers reported that their language arts instructional knowledge, skills, and practices were significantly improved; 90 percent had observed positive outcomes for students. As a result, nearly three-fourths were willing to exert the effort to get the program fully implemented.

Pressure to fully implement the program. Ongoing assistance and pressure to continue implementation is critical for effective implementation (Huberman & Miles, 1984). After adoption, 69 percent of teachers perceived there had been continued district pressure for full implementation to a high degree. Eighty-six percent believe their district has kept attention focused on the new program as a high priority.

District-school liaison. A strong district-school connection was generally evident in the districts and schools studied, including open communication between school and district staff on implementation issues, teacher influence over implementation activities, and continuous district support for language arts implementation activities.

Teachers rated other factors that support implementation only moderately strong or weak in the schools studied.

Encouragement and recognition. Firestone (1989) found that providing incentives, such as encouragement and recognition, helped the implementation process by compensating for the personal costs involved in acquiring new knowledge, skills, and practices. The findings indicated a low degree of district encouragement and mixed results at the school level.

Time and training opportunities. Training, ongoing assistance and collaboration are the sine qua non of effective curriculum change (Huberman & Miles, 1984; Fullan, 1991; McLaughlin, 1991; Odden, 1991). Only half the teachers felt training opportunities provided by the school were well targeted to help them acquire the knowledge, skills, and practices needed to fully implement the new language arts program. After receiving inservice training, only 34 percent of teachers indicated follow-up assistance was highly helpful; 42 percent felt it was not. Only 41 percent of the teachers in this study believed they had sufficient time for ongoing training. Further, only 21 percent of teachers believed they had sufficient time to collaborate with colleagues regarding the program, share ideas, and plan. Marsh and Odden's (1991) earlier study of implementation of the California mathematics and science frameworks found that integration and coordination of program issues, problems, and activities occurred through collegial interaction, especially among the teacher experts. Schoolwide consultation was the norm. In contrast, these factors were not found to be operating among the teachers in this study.

Administrative monitoring. Previous research found that monitoring of the

implementation process supported full curriculum reform: needs and problems are anticipated, and the new program is buffered from outside interference. In this study, district leaders received a moderately low rating regarding their effectiveness in remedying implementation needs and problems that arose. Only 20 percent of teachers rated district leaders' handling of implementation needs and problems as high. School leaders scored higher, but monitoring and effective response was not rated a strong feature of the implementation processes studied.

Teacher workload and program commitment.

Local capacity and motivation to embrace policy objectives is essential to generate the effort and energy needed for implementing and sustaining a successful project (McLaughlin, 1991). Firestone (1989) found that one leadership function supporting effective implementation was avoiding work overload for teachers and maintaining an even flow in the implementation process. Low marks were given to school and district leaders for recognizing and effectively addressing teachers' work overload. But despite the workload, more than half of the teachers felt a high degree of ownership of the new program, suggesting teachers are working hard for what they believe is good instructional practice.

Instructional materials and facilities.

Adequate materials is one factor enabling changes in teaching practice; providing a sufficient literary works and library books, key to the new language arts approach, were in insufficient supply in the majority of districts and schools.

Consistency and congruence at the school level. The findings suggest that there was strong communication among school staff, and there was a moderate to high degree of congruence of the new program with teachers' preferred teaching goals. However, lower marks were given for schools' effective handling of implementation needs and problems that arise.

The USC study found substantial movement toward changing language arts content and instruction, but also that further change was needed for complete implementation. These findings fit with other studies of the

implementation of the new California curriculum frameworks. Additional research shows that a variety of teacher networks are perhaps the most powerful strategies for developing teacher capacity for fully implementing these visions of elementary and secondary school curriculum (Adams, 1992, Liberman & McLaughlin, 1992). Robust networks however, are costly. Unless more resources are devoted to professional capacity development, activities now feeling the brunt of the budget cutting knife, California's hopes embodied in the curriculum frameworks are less likely to be realized.

Policy Implication and Recommendations

The findings from this and other related studies on curriculum reform suggest the following policy implications:

1. California should continue to support its new curriculum frameworks. They are viewed locally as professional visions of what the elementary and secondary curriculum program should be. Teachers are willing to work hard to have them become the program in all schools.
2. More resources need to be provided to support opportunities for teachers to develop the professional expertise needed to implement the frameworks fully. Teachers are more than willing to participate in such activities but they are in short supply. The California subject matter projects need to be fully funded and expended. Additional resources also need to be invested in books, other literary materials and fully equipped libraries.
3. The state should continue as a high yield investment in many capacity building programs, such as School Improvement, Mentor Teachers, Staff Development, and 1274 Program.
4. Additional resources also need to be invested in books and other literary materials and fully equipped libraries.
5. District and school leaders must become both knowledgeable about the substance of the new curriculum frameworks and provide consistent, long-term support for activities designed to get them completely implemented in

classrooms. The state could consider including such knowledge and expertise in administrative credentialing standards.

6. Finally, the implementation problem is not the one conventionally supposed -- that implementation will not happen because the frameworks are "top-down" entities and meet teacher resistance at the local level. On the contrary, teachers strongly embrace the new California curriculum frameworks and believe they represent professional understanding of content area curriculum standards. Further, most teachers want to fully implement these frameworks in their classrooms.

The implementation problem is a learning problem. The issue is how to structure a set of activities or strategies that can engage teachers in the process of constructing a new set of professional practices that are required by these frameworks. Traditional staff development is insufficient for this task (Adams, 1992; Cohen, 1992; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Little, et al., 1987). What is needed is a strategy that allows teachers to work together collegially across schools to develop, try out, and perfect the classroom instructional strategies that will engage students' in the process of constructing content-based knowledge envisioned in these frameworks. The California subject matter projects are a step in the direction of these strategies; they probably need to be more ambitious, more numerous, and a supported more generously.

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