

Serving English Learners During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting changes in schooling have been particularly difficult for students learning the English language. Recent research indicates that nearly 40 percent of English learners (ELs) nationwide were not receiving the services and support they needed to successfully engage with academic content during distance learning and that ELs experienced greater lags in learning than their peers. As the types and quality of instructional supports provided to ELs at school are vital to their educational outcomes, it is critical to understand how these students were supported during a nontraditional school year. This report highlights the ways in which public K–12 school districts planned to support ELs during the first full academic year of the pandemic. Drawing on a multiphase, mixed methods research approach, findings reveal that within their LCPs, districts across California:

- **attended to the unique needs of ELs** in their plans, with nearly every district outlining how ELs and families would be supported during 2020–21;
- **prioritized the needs of ELs** in both access to technological resources and potential returns to in-person instruction, with a significant difference emerging between districts serving greater proportions of ELs and those serving fewer;
- **identified specific assessments** to evaluate lags in learning and facilitate individualized interventions for ELs;
- **grounded services in English language development (ELD) strategies**;
- **planned to offer supplemental services and programs specifically for ELs**, including tutoring, office hours, and summer credit recovery programs;
- **intended to provide professional development sessions tailored to support the instruction of ELs**, including for specific ELD curricula as well as the technological resources that teachers would use during distance education; and
- **offered translation services for parents** to support student learning, although evidence indicates that these services were typically asynchronous and one-way.

Results collectively indicate that districts communicated their intentions to assess student learning and progress, planned to provide both designated and integrated ELD services, and offered supplemental educational services to mitigate lags in student learning. However, in general LCPs included too little detail to determine the extent to which plans for 2020–21 differed from educational programming prior to the pandemic or the sufficiency of districts' plans to ensure student progress in language development and academic learning. Moreover, the legislation mandating the plans did not include measures for adherence to plans or for monitoring student outcomes as a result of plans. Therefore, lingering questions remain about the strategies actually implemented by districts, the educational experiences of ELs during the pandemic, and how those experiences shaped students' academic development.

Introduction

In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced school closures and limited in-person instruction across the U.S., ushering in an unprecedented crisis for K–12 schools and the students they serve. Almost immediately, education leaders, teachers, and parents voiced grave concerns about the negative impacts of these changes on students’ engagement and learning, especially for members of historically marginalized student populations. Scholars predicted school closures would be particularly harmful for low-income students, students in earlier grades, students with disabilities, and students learning English (Santibañez & Guarino, 2020), potentially compounding existing achievement gaps both nationwide and within California (Reardon et al., 2018). These predictions were validated by the responsive research that followed initial school closures, as surveys of teachers and parents indicated multiple disparities in student learning based on family income, including inequalities in how instruction was delivered (Hamilton et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2021), the material that was covered (Hamilton et al., 2020), and students’ overall engagement (Kamenetz, 2020; Kraft & Simon, 2020; Kurtz, 2020). More recently, a report examining students’ academic progress found that, on average, students tested in fall 2020 and winter 2021 performed at lower levels compared to previous cohorts and predictions based on prepandemic data, suggesting that student progress has slowed since schooling disruptions due to COVID-19 (West & Lake, 2021).

The pandemic and resulting changes in schooling have been particularly difficult for the subgroup of students learning the English language. Parent surveys conducted in California early in the pandemic (April 2020) revealed the difficulty that non-English-speaking families faced in understanding communications about changes to school operations, support services, and directions for navigating distance learning (Education Trust-West, n.d.; Parent Institute for Quality Education, n.d.). Moreover, surveys of both parents and teachers indicated that nearly 40 percent of English learners (ELs) able to participate in remote instruction were not receiving the designated services and support to successfully engage with academic content during distance learning (Parent Institute for Quality Education, n.d.; Vizcarra, 2020). As the pandemic stretched on, these challenges accumulated, and academic performance lagged. Recent evidence from the CORE Data Collaborative in California suggests that English learners experienced greater lags in learning (compared to expected progress) in both English language arts (ELA) and math, on average, than their counterparts (Pier et al., 2021).

These emergent trends, in addition to unsettling early research results, prompted rapid response from both policymakers and educators. At the state level, legislators addressed student engagement and equity concerns, in part, through the adoption of Senate Bill 98 (SB-98), which required local educational agencies (LEAs)¹ to complete Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (LCPs) detailing their strategies to (a) ensure continuity of learning, including

¹ In California, LEAs include public school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools.

in-person and remote instruction as well as access to technological resources; (b) evaluate and support students' academic progress and overall well-being (that is, physical, mental, and social-emotional health); (c) monitor attendance and engagement; and (d) outline targeted supports for students with disabilities and English learners. Yet prior research suggests that planning mandates and templates for LEAs may not lead to the development of plans that sufficiently address the needs of English learners in California (Lavadenz et al., 2018). LCPs may reflect similar limitations in outlining asset-based approaches to support English learners. Moreover, there is no infrastructure in place for comprehensive monitoring of the implementation of LCPs and, more broadly, the educational approaches taken by the state's nearly 1,000 LEAs in response to the pandemic.

Together, the early evidence that English learners lacked adequate access to services during the onset of COVID-19 and ensuing school closures, prior research suggesting that planning mandates are not sufficient to address the needs of English learners, and the fact that more than 40 percent of the state's 6 million K–12 students speak a language other than English at home and 20 percent are eligible to receive supplemental instruction services as English learners (Education Data Partnership, 2021) indicate that it is critical to understand how LEAs planned to support these students—who were already facing complex challenges—during a nontraditional school year. Knowing the investments that districts intended to make, in terms of services and resources, is necessary context for both policy and practice, extending beyond educational outcomes (that is, academic progress) to examine more closely their potential inputs in support of broader recovery efforts.

Part of a larger review of local plans in California within the context of COVID-19,² this report leverages LCPs to examine how public school districts planned to support English learners during an academic year characterized by uncertainties. Findings reveal that districts communicated their intentions to assess student learning and progress, planned to provide both designated and integrated English language development (ELD) services, and offered supplemental educational services to mitigate learning loss. However, in general LCPs included too little detail to determine the extent to which plans for the 2020–21 school year differed from educational programming prior to the pandemic or the sufficiency of districts' plans to ensure student progress in language development and academic progress during distance and hybrid learning.

² For the full review, see Hurtt, A., Reed, S., Dykeman, K., & Luu, J. (2022). *Policy and planning in the midst of crisis: Supporting student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic* [Working paper]. Policy Analysis for California. edpolicyinca.org/publications/serving-english-learners-during-covid-19-pandemic

English Learners During the Pandemic

Challenges to equity across K–12 public education existed long before the pandemic disrupted learning. Evidence indicates that students classified as English learners in U.S. schools have historically lagged behind their peers with respect to academic achievement, advanced course taking, and degree attainment (Callahan et al., 2010; Fry, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This is particularly true in California, where achievement and high school graduation gaps between these groups are especially wide (Sugarman & Geary, 2018). Research suggests that this is partially driven by lower average levels of family socioeconomic status (Grissom, 2004) in addition to the negative stigma and reduced expectations associated with the “English learner” label (Umansky, 2016). Above and beyond these factors, however, the type and quality of instructional supports provided to English learners at school as well as the criteria required for reclassification as “fluent English proficient” remain important predictors of the outcomes of English-learning students (Hill et al., 2014; Umansky & Reardon, 2014). Moreover, school-based supports, such as assignment to specially trained ELD teachers and classes as well as access to modified course content, provide important scaffolding for English learners’ academic development and entry into the education mainstream. However, school closures during the pandemic threatened to disrupt the delivery of these critical educational resources, thereby further increasing achievement disparities between English learners and non-English-learning students and extending English learners’ time to reclassification.

Research on decreased student attendance during the pandemic (Advocates for Children of New York, 2021) and inequalities in students’ access to digital resources and other at-home learning supports (Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020) presaged many of the challenges English learners were likely to face during an extended period of distance learning. Indeed, in a 2020 survey of parents of English learners in California, 45 percent reported that their child was not receiving the support needed to participate actively in distance learning (Parent Institute for Quality Education, 2020). A survey of teachers and administrators similarly indicated a lack of such support services, finding that only 39 percent of English-learning students interacted at least weekly with ELD teachers and less than one third received integrated ELD services during instruction (Vizcarra, 2020). Researchers and educators working with Californians Together suggest that the variation in the availability and accessibility of support services in spring 2020 may have been exacerbated by a lack of planning, as their review of the COVID-19 Operations Written Reports from 79 school districts found that fewer than half of the reports cited detailed plans for delivering ELD services to English learners in a remote-learning environment (Williams, 2020).

As findings from a recent analysis of California students’ standardized assessments indicate, these challenges have led to a disproportionately negative impact of the pandemic on English learners’ academic progress. Researchers found that English learners experienced, on average, 3.8 months of learning lag (that is, a decrease in achievement growth from fall 2019 through winter 2020–21 relative to prepandemic growth rates) in ELA and 3.1 months of learning

lag in math, compared to average lags of 2.3–2.4 months among non-English-learning students (Pier et al., 2021). Additionally, the authors found that these declines were greater than those experienced by any other student subgroup, including lower income students, students experiencing homelessness, and students with disabilities. While Pier and colleagues (2021) do not speculate about the reasons for the disparate declines, they acknowledge that these results may conceal the individual- and school-level differences that contribute to students' test scores, including but not limited to assessment administration and mode of instruction. Our analysis intends to illuminate some of the district-level factors that may add to the more pronounced learning lags of ELs by investigating the actions and services public school districts intended to implement during this time.

Senate Bill 98 and Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans

Following the unsettling evidence from spring 2020, the California State Legislature adopted SB-98 in June 2020 to address, in part, equity concerns as well as to increase engagement and support for students (and families) during the 2020–21 academic year. As the disruption to schooling the prior spring was potentially compounded by limited preparation to shift school operations completely to a remote environment, SB-98 mandated LEAs to complete LCPs exhibiting their extensive preparation for the upcoming school year. These plans were required to outline the strategies LEAs intended to take to ensure learning continuity (in both remote and traditional classroom environments) and to provide students with access to academic and well-being supports. All public school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools across the state were required to submit LCPs to local school boards for adoption by September 30, 2020, and post these plans to district or county websites,³ making LCPs publicly available for data collection and analysis.

Similar state-directed local planning requirements were in place in California before SB-98. Traditionally, LEAs are required to adopt and annually update Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs),⁴ which include short- and long-term goals outlining the actions, services, and expenditures LEAs plan for supporting student outcomes. These plans must consider input from important stakeholders in the community (that is, parents and students). However, with shifting health guidelines due to the pandemic, LCAP updates were suspended for the 2020–21 academic year and replaced by LCPs. The LCPs closely mirror LCAPs in several key ways, including LEA requirements to engage with community stakeholders and publicly post plans as well as the use of a planning template. SB-98 required the State Board of Education to design an LCP template⁵ for LEAs to use to record their plans aligned with the state's education policy priorities.

³ For more information about LCPs, see the California Department of Education website: cde.ca.gov/re/lc/learningcontattendplan.asp

⁴ For more information about LCAPs, see the California Department of Education website: cde.ca.gov/re/lc

⁵ A copy of the LCP planning template can be downloaded from the California Department of Education website at cde.ca.gov/re/lc/documents/lrngcntntyatndncpln-template.docx

These priorities included English learners, as SB-98 directed LEAs to provide both designated and integrated ELD instruction during distance learning [EDC 43503(b)(5)]⁶ that addressed how language proficiency would be conducted and support would be provided for students to access curricula. ELD was also one of three instructional focus areas noted in SB-98 (along with mathematics and English) within which potential gaps in student learning needed to be assessed [EDC 43509(f)(1)(C)(i)], with LEAs mandated to describe the differentiated strategies and actions they intended to take to “accelerate learning progress” [EDC 43509(f)(1)(C)(ii)]. LEAs were also directed to involve the families of English learners in creating LCPs, noting that parent advisory groups needed to be established to review the plans [EDC 43509(b)(3)], reflecting the stakeholder input also required for LCAPs. Language-inclusive outreach efforts were also a requirement for reengagement strategies in the event of student absence [EDC 43509(f)(1)(F)].

Clearly, English learners and their families were a core focus of SB-98; however, the details of these plans have yet to be explored statewide, as research to date has focused on a limited number of LCPs (Gao et al., 2021; Romero, 2021; Williams & Buenrostro, 2021). Therefore, little is known about the emergent trends within districts’ plans, the broad variation in approaches, and the potential impacts to student learning and engagement, particularly for English learners. This report attends to these questions, providing a holistic view of the services that public school districts across the state planned to provide for English-learning students in a pandemic context. Although LCPs do not convey how these actions and strategies were implemented, they offer a unique snapshot of school district intentions at the time, including how these intentions were communicated to local stakeholders.

Research Methods

To understand districts’ plans to serve English learners during the 2020–21 academic school year, we employed a multiphase, mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the LCPs of public school districts.⁷ For the 969 public school districts operating in California during 2020–21, 958 LCPs were located and downloaded—952 of which used the LCP template⁸ and 889 of which were readable by computers.⁹ In the first phase of analysis, we leveraged open-coding methods to unearth key themes in districts’ plans. A team of three undergraduate researchers, guided by the principal investigator and a graduate student researcher, reviewed LCPs from a purposive sample of 19 unified school districts,

⁶ For this and subsequent references, see the cited section of the California Education Code (EDC) at leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codesTOCSelected.xhtml?tocCode=EDC&tocTitle=+Education+Code+-+EDC

⁷ Public school districts in this analysis refer to elementary school, high school, and unified school districts.

⁸ SB-98 noted that while LEAs were not required to use the template, LCPs needed to include “all of the information [it] specified” [EDC 43509(e)].

⁹ At the time of primary data collection, which occurred in October 2020, LCPs were posted across LEA websites. Most LCPs are now linked at the California Department of Education’s website: cde.ca.gov/re/lc/calclinks2021.asp

selected due to their large proportion of English learners and representation of the diversity in geographic location and enrollment size of districts across the state. Researchers compared coding notes in weekly meetings, looking for points of agreement and dissimilarity.

Drawing from these key themes, the second phase of analysis investigated the depth of districts' plans through close coding of the LCPs from unified districts, which operate both elementary and secondary schools. Given that unified districts in California serve nearly 70 percent of the state's K–12 students, analysis centered on the LCPs from these districts to capture the instructional and operational plans from the most populous K–12 districts in the state. A data collection tool was then developed to support the systematic review of districts' plans, which allowed a team of five undergraduate researchers to translate information from LCPs into categorical variables—for example, “offered online tutoring (yes/no)” or “parental technology support (yes/no)” —that specifically targeted plans to serve English learners. Each LCP was coded by two researchers, with coding compared throughout data collection to ensure accuracy. Where discrepancies in coding were observed, researchers verified answers and debated interpretations of districts' plans to arrive at a consensus. In parallel research, three other research teams coded LCPs across additional domains—instruction, assessment, professional development (PD), attendance and engagement, and provision of meals and technology—using similar data collection tools. A total of 346 LCPs were coded, capturing all unified school districts in the state.

In the third phase, the breadth of districts' plans was captured through automated counts of key words and phrases across LCPs from all districts ($N = 889$), inclusive of unified, elementary, and high school districts. The frequency of these terms was used to determine the extent to which a concept was addressed by districts across the state.

This report thus leverages statewide data to determine the differences that emerged in local plans to support the varying proportions of English learners across districts, responding to research at the onset of the pandemic that revealed the challenges non-English-speaking families were facing in education, including accessibility of remote instruction and availability of ELD services (Education Trust-West, n.d.; Parent Institute for Quality Education, 2020; Vizcarra, 2020). Specifically, we compared districts serving both higher and lower proportions of English learners using the median proportion of English-learning students (13.21 percent) as a cutoff between these groups, and we conducted two-tailed t -tests to determine whether observed differences were statistically significant. In all of the tables that follow, we report unadjusted statistics that simply describe what is observed in LCPs and the differences across districts. It is important to note that many factors may contribute to these differences (for example, socioeconomic status of students, school board policies, teacher quality and training, technology infrastructure in the community, and so forth), which we do not account for in this analysis. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the sample of districts included in each phase of analysis.

Table 1. Characteristics of Analytical Samples Across Phases of Analysis

	Statewide	Full LCP sample (Phase 3)	Unified districts (Phase 2)	Qualitative sample (Phase 1)
Total number of school districts	1,025	889	346	19
Total enrollment	5,992,567	5,683,086	4,118,819	862,184
Race/ethnicity (percentage)				
Asian American/Pacific Islander	12.4	12.6	12.9	6.7
Black	5.2	5.1	5.7	7.6
Native American	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.2
Latinx	55.3	55.3	55.5	70.4
White	21.7	21.5	20.6	11.8
Multiple races	4.1	4.1	4.1	2.7
Race identification missing	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.6
Special population (percentage)				
English learners	17.7	17.8	17.4	21.4
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	58.9	59.1	60.1	76.6
Geographic locale (percentage)				
Urban	16.0	15.4	17.1	31.6
Suburban	30.0	31.4	39.0	10.5
Town	16.7	16.8	21.1	21.1
Rural	34.3	33.6	22.8	36.8

Note. LCP = Learning Continuity and Attendance Plan. Data points calculated based on publicly available data sets from the California Department of Education (cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/downloadabledata.asp) and the National Center for Education Statistics (nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/SchoolLocations).

Findings: Districts Prioritized the Needs of English Learners

Overall, districts appeared to respond to SB-98’s mandates to attend to the unique needs of English learners in their LCPs, with nearly every district in California (more than 99 percent) referencing English learners and outlining how students and families would be supported during 2020–21. In fact, many unified districts prioritized the needs of English learners in their planning across two areas: technological resources and potential returns to in-person instruction (see Table 2). We define “prioritization” as a district’s intent to provide a student group with preliminary or preferential access to resources. In this case, English learners were more likely to have been prioritized by districts to receive a computer and internet connectivity support, with about half of all unified districts prioritizing English learners in their distribution. While only about one third (36 percent) of all unified districts included English learners as a prioritized subgroup for in-person instruction during hybrid learning or limited return to campus models, there is a significant

difference between districts serving greater proportions of English learners and those serving fewer. There is a similar difference regarding staffing changes, where districts serving a larger proportion of English learners were nearly 30 percentage points more likely to hire additional staff to support students than districts serving fewer English learners.

Table 2. Prioritization of English Learners in District LCPs (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide	Unified districts			
		All	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
English learners	99.2				
Priority during hybrid learning		35.7	21.3	47.2	26.0***
Priority for computer distribution		49.3	51.3	48.5	3.2
Priority for internet connectivity support		50.4	50.0	51.5	1.1
Additional staff hired to support ELs		29.0	13.3	41.5	28.5***
	<i>N</i>	889	346	150	194

Note. EL = English learner. Low EL districts serve student populations where fewer than 13.21 percent of students are ELs. This cutoff is based on the median proportion of students who are ELs in our sample districts. Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, see the working paper (edpolicyinca.org/publications/policy-plans) associated with this report. Differences represent unadjusted calculations between groups.

*** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$.

While LCPs described plans for learning across multiple dimensions, the intended availability of some instructional and supplemental support services was often limited for or not accessible to all English learners. In the following sections we further unpack the details of districts' plans to serve English learners in five key areas: assessment, instruction, supplemental services, professional development, and communication and familial engagement.

Assessment

One way districts acknowledged the unique needs of English learners was in their plans to assess student learning and progress. Table 3 presents the assessment strategies outlined in LCPs to support English-learning students. Eighty-two percent of unified districts cited the use of specific assessments¹⁰ for English learners to evaluate learning loss and facilitate individualized interventions and targeted supports. Commonly listed assessments included Renaissance Star, i-Ready, Benchmark from StudySync, and Imagine Learning. Many districts also noted that assessment data would serve multiple roles: to measure both language development and academic learning. For example, one Central Valley district described the use of Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) to "provide a Lexile score for students which can be used for language

¹⁰ This measure does not include the state-mandated English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC), which is intended to measure language proficiency. Only half of all school districts stated that ELPAC assessments would continue during the pandemic.

reclassification purposes and to determine reading proficiency.” Similarly, some districts reported plans to use more than one assessment tool, as illustrated in this excerpt from another Central Valley school district serving a population where 41 percent of students are English learners:

To measure ELD, we will use **Renaissance Star ELA** in the beginning of the year and desegregate data by EL students. However, our goal is to implement our **revised ELD benchmarks by the 2nd quarter**. The Benchmarks measure all 4 domains of ELD and will be given about every 6 weeks. ... Our **long-term ELs and ELs that have scored a 3 on the previous ELPAC** ... will be assessed 3 times a year with the **Reading Inventory** as a way to monitor progress. [emphasis added]

Table 3. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Assessment (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide	Unified districts			
		All	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Assessment administration					
Assessments mandated by the district		97.1	95.3	98.5	3.5**
ELPAC	51.9				
Plan outlined		87.9	87.3	88.1	1.7
Assessment calendar referenced	19.0	30.9	29.3	32.0	2.5
Specific assessments listed for all students		93.9	90.7	96.4	4.6**
By grade level		51.4	48.0	54.6	3.9
For English learners		81.8	74.0	88.7	13.0***
For students with disabilities		53.2	51.3	54.1	2.8
Types of assessment described for all students					
Diagnostic	64.0				
Formative	87.0				
Summative	46.0				
<i>N</i>	889	346	150	194	

Note. ELPAC = English Language Proficiency Assessments for California; EL = English learner. Low EL districts serve student populations where fewer than 13.21 percent of students are ELs. This cutoff is based on the median proportion of students who are ELs in our sample districts. Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, see the working paper (edpolicyinca.org/publications/policy-plans) associated with this report. Differences represent unadjusted calculations between groups. The findings for EL-specific assessments exclude the state-mandated ELPAC.

*** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$.

LCPs most often included district intentions to leverage general assessments to support the specific needs of English learners, drawing on a range of strategies to assess the academic performance and progress of students. Fewer than half planned for district-level summative

assessments,¹¹ though many districts intended to use formative assessments (87 percent) and diagnostic tests (64 percent). In terms of evaluations more specific to the needs of English-learning students, districts described plans to use embedded assessments from the curricula of major publishers, such as Wonders (McGraw-Hill) and English 3D (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), student writing samples, and tools to assess oral language skills (for example, the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix).

Despite the identification of assessments and clear language around intended implementation, specific plans for how and when to administer assessments for English learners in a distance learning environment were less explicit. We noted similar trends around this lack of specificity in the more general assessment plans articulated in LCPs as well, although some unified districts (30 percent) noted assessment calendars or detailed plans about the timing and frequency of assessments.¹² These unknowns made it challenging to determine both the extent to which districts' assessment plans for 2020–21 differed from plans during the years prior to the pandemic and how these plans may have been altered for remote administration. Limited detail in LCPs may reflect districts' constrained capacity to adapt assessments for a distance learning environment. Alternatively, optimism about a return to in-person instruction may have led districts to focus less on logistical details at the time of planning, under the assumption that the shift to distance learning would be temporary.

Although collectively, this evidence suggests that districts acknowledged the importance of assessing student learning, particularly the need to identify assessments for the express purpose of monitoring language development and the academic progress of English learners, what testing may have looked like from a student standpoint is still largely concealed by the LCP data.

Instruction

One of the primary aims of SB-98 was to provide districts with the flexibility required to operate during the pandemic while maintaining a focus on students' instructional needs through an access- and equity-minded lens. Our research revealed that districts frequently included descriptions of how instruction would specifically support English learners, including the integration of ELD strategies into general classes and small-group instruction as well as the incorporation of supplemental resources. However, many of the instructional plans appeared to depend on the transition from distance learning back to in-person instruction, similar to assessment and a recurring theme across LCPs.

¹¹ In spring 2020, standardized testing (such as the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress), primarily measuring students' academic progress in math and ELA in Grades 3–8 and 11, was suspended in California. In spring 2021, districts were given the option to forego administering standardized tests if a similar substitute was available and administered uniformly across a grade, school, or district, with 18 of the state's 25 largest school districts opting to offer alternative tests (Johnson, 2021).

¹² Districts may have also included information, such as assessment calendars, in attachments or hyperlinks to district websites. In those cases, this supplemental material fell outside the scope of this work, as data collection was bounded by the strategies and actions explicitly noted within the LCP template.

Implementation of phased instruction. For most districts, plans for serving English learners were organized around three phases: remote instruction, hybrid instruction, and full in-person instruction. Table 4 presents results for the instructional strategies outlined by unified districts. While the details of plans for serving English-learning students during remote instruction were limited, 95 percent of unified districts did reference English learners specifically in their plans for distance learning. Moreover, nearly 72 percent of districts named the curricula that would be used to support the academic progress of English learners, with more than two thirds indicating that curricula would be adapted for distance learning. In 40 percent of unified districts, in-person services, which typically included in-person assessment or supplemental instruction in cases of severe learning loss, were planned for English learners during remote instruction.

Relatedly, about one third of districts prioritized in-person services for English learners when implementing hybrid schooling schedules, often describing plans for small-group instruction focused on designated ELD, or, in a few cases, learning pods. Districts in which a large percentage of the students are English learners noted specialized plans for in-person services during distance learning and hybrid schooling more frequently than their counterparts, likely the result of both greater need and more resources. In one large urban district, ELD learning hubs were organized specifically to support newcomer students, a considerably specialized plan not frequently found in LCPs.

Notably, our analysis also revealed that some districts completely omitted plans for distance learning or described plans that relied exclusively on in-person instruction. The scope of this project does not allow us to determine the reasons motivating such omissions, which may be a result of optimism about the return of in-person instruction. On the other hand, districts could have also truly returned to the classroom early in the 2020–21 academic year based on county health and safety guidelines. As it stands, these unknowns mask the potential learning context for English learners—and students more generally—in these districts, particularly if distance learning needed to be leveraged at a later time due to the shifting nature of the pandemic.

English language development. Whether in the distance learning environment or in person, districts' plans for serving English learners were grounded in ELD strategies—both integrated and designated—with all but one LCP in California referencing ELD (see Table 5). Additionally, nearly 70 percent of all districts described the inclusion of integrated and designated ELD strategies in synchronous learning activities; however, only 20 percent of districts described integrated ELD as part of asynchronous learning, which could occur through supplemental online learning tools (such as Imagine Learning) or, in some cases, through closed captioning included in recorded lectures.

Table 4. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Instructional Method (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide	Unified districts			
		All	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Distance learning plans for all students	98.0	98.8	98.7	99.0	0.7
Synchronous learning		99.4	100.0	99.0	0.5
Schedule		3.2	0.0	5.7	6.0***
Named curricula		71.9	62.7	78.8	14.6***
Curricula adapted for distance learning		66.4	61.3	69.9	9.0*
Translation services provided		38.6	24.0	50.3	27.2***
Asynchronous learning		95.4	93.3	96.9	4.1*
Instructional minutes by day of the week		27.5	29.3	26.3	4.2
Specific plan for at least one student group		96.2	99.3	93.8	5.0***
For English learners		94.8	97.3	93.8	3.0
For students with disabilities		90.5	91.3	89.7	1.2
In-person instruction offered to ELs		39.7	25.3	51.3	25.8***
Hybrid learning plans for all students	79.0	87.0	87.3	86.6	1.0
Structure schedule		52.3	56.7	49.5	7.4
Half-day schedule		6.6	11.3	3.1	9.6***
2–3-day alternating schedule		6.6	7.3	6.2	1.6
2–3-day grouped schedule		21.1	20.0	22.2	2.1
Priority for in-person/hybrid instruction		52.3	49.3	54.1	5.4
By grade level		11.6	8.0	13.4	5.5
For English learners		34.4	34.7	34.5	0.0
For students with disabilities		38.2	37.3	39.2	2.0
<i>N</i>	889	346	150	194	

Note. EL = English learner. Low EL districts serve student populations where fewer than 13.21 percent of students are ELs. This cutoff is based on the median proportion of students who are ELs in our sample districts. Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, see the working paper (edpolicyinca.org/publications/policy-plans) associated with this report. Differences represent unadjusted calculations between groups. In a half-day schedule, one cohort of students is on campus in the morning while the other attends in the afternoon. In an alternating schedule, specified cohorts of students attend class in person on alternating days of the week (for example, Monday/Wednesday). In a grouped schedule, specified cohorts of students are on campus on grouped days of the week (for example, Monday/Tuesday).

*** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$.

Table 5. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to English Language Development (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide	Unified districts			
		All	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
English language development	99.6				
<i>Designated ELD</i>		87.8	82.7	92.7	9.2***
Number of minutes per week reported		8.7	5.3	11.4	7.0**
Synchronous instruction		69.3	64.0	74.1	10.6**
Asynchronous instruction		35.4	27.3	42.0	13.8***
Small-group instruction		41.2	30.7	49.7	18.6***
<i>Integrated ELD</i>		80.3	68.0	90.7	23.2***
Number of minutes per week reported		1.7	0.7	2.6	1.9
Synchronous instruction		67.5	53.3	79.3	25.4***
Asynchronous instruction		20.0	8.7	29.0	20.7***
Small-group instruction		20.3	12.0	26.9	15.5***
N	889	346	150	194	

Note. ELD = English language development; EL = English learner. Low EL districts serve student populations where fewer than 13.21 percent of students are ELs. This cutoff is based on the median proportion of students who are ELs in our sample districts. Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, see the working paper (edpolicyinca.org/publications/policy-plans) associated with this report. Differences represent unadjusted calculations between groups. *** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$.

In the case of designated ELD instruction, one strategy commonly included in districts’ plans was small-group instruction, although fewer than 10 percent of districts explicitly outlined a schedule or detailed how many instructional minutes would be allocated for these activities. However, many districts described setting aside time for small-group ELD instruction with a classroom teacher or bilingual teacher’s aide during regularly scheduled synchronous learning time in elementary schools. For secondary schools, districts scheduled separate synchronous classes taught by an ELD instructor. It was less common for districts to describe how ELD instruction would be incorporated into asynchronous instruction, as only about one third of LCPs suggested designated ELD strategies would be included in these activities, often citing supplemental online learning tools such as Rosetta Stone.

Curricula. As mentioned before, most districts noted the use of commercially available curricula to meet the needs of English learners. Imagine Learning and Lexia Learning were those most frequently mentioned in LCPs, often enfolded within plans for supplemental learning opportunities. For example, a large Sacramento area district stated: “All English learners in K–12 have access to Imagine Learning and Literacy, an adaptive learning solution that accelerates reading and language proficiency for students during asynchronous instructional time.”

However, as with assessment plans, it was often unclear whether these curricular programs were in use prior to the pandemic and the shift to distance learning or if they were adopted (or adapted) as a result of altered learning environments. In fact, very few LCPs included explicit language about adapting curricula. One notable exception was an urban district in Southern California that described partnering “with EL Achieve to adapt and create in-person ELD curriculum and lessons into online PowerPoints that continue the acquisition of the English language.”

Specialized subgroups. In addition to the general descriptions of instructional supports for English learners in many LCPs, some districts outlined instructional plans and specific curricula for key subgroups of English learners (see Table 6), most commonly for newcomer students¹³ and long-term English learners.¹⁴ For example, a few large urban school districts designated additional ELD class time for newcomer students, with one district providing 40–60 minutes per week of additional ELD for elementary newcomers and designated classes for those in secondary schools. In addition, some districts cited curricula for specific subgroups of English-learning students. For example, one large urban district planned to use English 3D with long-term English learners and Rosetta Stone with newcomers. Moreover, dual-language immersion programs, which support concurrent learning of English and another language, appeared in 10 percent of all LCPs as a curricular model, reflecting reports that the growth of these programs may have slowed during the pandemic (Stavely & Rosales, 2021).

Table 6. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Student Subgroups (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide	Unified districts			
		All	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Services for specific subgroups					
Newcomer students	26.4	28.7	18.0	37.3	19.8***
Migrant students	16.9	11.3	2.7	18.1	15.5***
Long-term English learners		15.9	7.3	22.8	15.8***
Dual-language immersion program	10.4	18.8	6.7	28.5	23.9***
N	889	346	150	194	

Note. EL = English learner. Low EL districts serve student populations where fewer than 13.21 percent of students are ELs. This cutoff is based on the median proportion of students who are ELs in our sample districts. Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, see the working paper (edpolicyinca.org/publications/policy-plans) associated with this report. Differences represent unadjusted calculations between groups.

*** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$.

¹³ A student participating in a newcomer program is defined by California Education Code 51225.2.a as “a pupil who is participating in a program designed to meet the academic and transitional needs of newly arrived immigrant pupils that has as a primary objective the development of English language proficiency.”

¹⁴ California Education Code 313.1.a defines a long-term English learner as “an English learner who is enrolled in any of grades 6 to 12, inclusive, has been enrolled in schools in the United States for more than six years, [and] has remained at the same English language proficiency level for two or more consecutive years.”

Our review of LCPs indicates that unified districts across California had instructional plans and curricula in place to serve English learners during the first full academic year of the pandemic, often prioritizing them in their strategies to support student learning. However, similar to prior findings, the descriptions included in LCPs do not provide enough detail to determine the extent to which curricula and instruction were adapted to support online learning or if districts were relying on a return to in-person schooling to serve English-learning students fully. Moreover, how much time was truly dedicated to ELD in distance or hybrid learning instruction or if ELD was integrated into online instructional time more broadly is unknown. Critical aspects defining the learning environment of English learners during 2020–21 are difficult to determine from LCPs, which only provide us with districts’ plans and do not report how these plans were later implemented.

Integration of Assessment and Instruction

The integration of assessment and instruction is also critical for student learning, as evidenced by language included in SB-98, which directed districts to note specifically how they intended to accelerate learning progress based on students’ assessment information. Results indicate that most districts described the use of assessments to inform instruction as well as intervention, revealing that 64 percent of unified districts planned to use diagnostic assessments (to determine students’ current knowledge and skills), while 87 percent of LCPs noted that formative assessments (to monitor student learning as it occurs) would be used to evaluate student progress (see Table 3). The integration of assessment and instruction was especially evident in plans to serve English learners, as many districts described how assessment would be embedded in instructional programming or noted that student interactions with teachers and online tools would also serve as formative assessments. Some LCPs detailed how assessments would inform instruction, with one Sacramento-area district describing the use of Ellevation, a web-based software platform to support data analysis for English learners in the creation of individualized learning plans.

Supplemental Services

In addition to integrated and designated ELD instruction in the articulated curricula, many districts planned to offer supplemental services and programs to meet the specific needs of English learners during the pandemic. Table 7 presents the strategies outlined by unified districts. Not surprisingly, districts serving larger populations of English learners described more supplemental support than their counterparts. Although these services varied across LCPs, the most common included tutoring, office hours, and summer credit recovery programs.

Table 7. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Supplemental Services (Percentage Reporting)

	Unified districts			
	All	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Supplemental services				
Office hours	54.8	46.7	61.1	13.8**
Tutoring services specific to ELs	38.8	29.3	46.6	17.3***
<i>N</i>	346	150	194	

Note. EL = English learner. Low EL districts serve student populations where fewer than 13.21 percent of students are ELs. This cutoff is based on the median proportion of students who are ELs in our sample districts. Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, see the working paper (edpolicyinca.org/publications/policy-plans) associated with this report. Differences represent unadjusted calculations between groups.

*** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$.

Tutoring. In their efforts to support English learners' academic development, nearly 40 percent of unified districts planned to offer tutoring services specifically for students learning English. Tutoring services were often described as occurring through synchronous instruction for an individual student or group and provided by a bilingual paraprofessional, tutor, or volunteer. Some districts worked with nearby colleges to recruit tutors, while others relied on tutorial services embedded in online curricula or offered through third parties. For example, several districts indicated that tutoring services for English learners would be available through the APEX Learning program, while others reported using Paper, which provides 24-7 access to tutoring services in four languages (English, Spanish, French, and Mandarin). In most cases, tutoring was intended to occur synchronously during the school week, although it was often scheduled outside of regular school hours. For instance, some districts offered Saturday school as a learning intervention, with the LCP from one small unified district in the Central Valley noting that "school sites will offer online Saturday school intervention for students with significant learning loss" during which "teachers will focus on math, ELA, and ELD, with priority given to unduplicated students."¹⁵

Office hours. Office hours were another common supplemental service noted in LCPs, with 55 percent of unified districts planning to use this time to support the individual needs of all students, including English learners. In some cases, office hours could be considered an extension of small-group or individualized instruction, as a teacher or paraprofessional may be working with a small group of students on a specific skill or learning objective during this time. Moreover, office hours may also be held for families, as one urban district described organizing weekly office hours for "families to call in and share any comments, questions, or concerns" in three languages—English, Spanish, and Arabic.

¹⁵ As defined in California Education Code 2574(b)(2) and 42238.02(b)(1), unduplicated students refer to an unduplicated count of pupils who are (a) English learners, (b) eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program, or (c) youth in foster care.

Summer school. In many LCPs, districts also highlighted their experiences and efforts to serve English-learning students with ELD instruction in summer 2020, during which schools implemented programs to address the learning loss resulting from unexpected school closures during the prior spring. Programs offered during this time typically involved credit recovery, intervention, or accelerated ELD. One district in the Central Valley reported implementing three separate programs over the summer: one for credit recovery, one to help at-risk students with the transition between middle school and high school, and a two-week academy for English learners to accelerate their English acquisition. Some districts made it clear that these programs were very successful in assisting English learners, with one Central Valley district reporting that 98 percent of their English-learning students advanced at least one level in written and oral proficiency.

Broadly, the reports on the implementation and success of districts' summer school programs in 2020 demonstrate districts' overall attentiveness to the larger concerns of learning loss, especially for students with specialized needs. Districts also described intentions to continue to offer supplemental schooling the following summer. For example, the LCP from one district in the Central Valley noted that "Summer School (K–8) will be offered to students that are showing learning gaps according to the **Star Assessment** [and] priority enrollment [will be] given to English learners" [emphasis added]. Similarly, a Los Angeles area district planned to offer summer school, or "extended summer distance learning," for students with demonstrated need based on assessment results.

While it was unclear whether districts' summer programs were designed in response to the pandemic and the potential learning loss experienced by students due to disruptions in schooling or were preexisting strategies to support English learners, SB-98 specifically allocated funding for "activities that directly support pupil academic achievement and mitigate learning loss related to COVID-19 school closures" [SB-98 § 110(d)], such as extending the instructional school year or offering additional academic or integrated support services. This suggests that, regardless of whether these programs were previously offered, districts potentially had access to the monetary resources required to support their implementation during the 2020–21 school year. This is particularly important given the potential of such strategies to affect students' educational trajectories more broadly, as articulated by one Central Valley district: "Credit recovery classes allow students to make up failed classes. ... [T]hese actions support graduation rates and college and career readiness and have been instrumental in meeting the needs of unduplicated students."

The inclusion of supplemental services in LCPs indicates that districts aimed to meet—and often prioritized—the needs of English learners by providing additional instructional services both during and outside of regular school hours. While the quality of these services or the extent to which they were accessed by English learners is presently unknown, evidence from LCPs suggests that districts considered English-learning students at the forefront of their instructional plans.

Professional Development

PD and staff preparation were important elements in districts’ distance learning plans, as nearly all LCPs noted PD opportunities for teachers as well as others in instructional roles (such as paraeducators) from in-house and third-party vendors to support instruction for English-learning students (see Table 8). In fact, 77 percent of unified districts noted that PD would be provided to teachers to support the instruction of English learners, with LCPs spotlighting PD sessions primarily focused on specific ELD curricula (for example, English 3D). Some districts also noted the planned implementation of a professional learning series to guide EL instruction, such as English Learner Roadmap Implementation for Systemic Excellence! (EL RISE!). Many of these trainings were guided by ELD specialists or coaches hired to ensure that English learners received targeted language support, instruction, and intervention unique to the distance learning environment. For example, one rural district described training that would be provided on targeted support strategies for English learners by an educational technology coach.

Table 8. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Professional Development (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide	Unified districts			
		All	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Professional development	96.0				
Teach in a remote-learning environment		99.7	99.3	100.0	0.0
Teach ELs during remote instruction		77.2	70.0	83.5	13.5***
	<i>N</i>	889	346	150	194

Note. PD = professional development; EL = English learner. Low EL districts serve student populations where fewer than 13.21 percent of students are ELs. This cutoff is based on the median proportion of students who are ELs in our sample districts. Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, see the working paper (edpolicyinca.org/publications/policy-plans) associated with this report. Differences represent unadjusted calculations between groups. ****p* < 0.01. ***p* < 0.05. **p* < 0.1.

Relatedly, PD opportunities often spotlighted the technological resources teachers would use during distance education, including devices and apps as well as assessment and instructional tools and online platforms, among others. Some districts employed online instructional tools that could be leveraged to develop the listening and speaking skills of English learners, even though these often were not specifically intended for English-learning students. For example, in one Kern County district, training would be provided in Flipgrid (a website that supports the facilitation of video discussion).

Although many LCPs noted that PD training would include sessions to support the instruction of English learners, specific strategies were often unclear, as districts provided limited details about planned training sessions or programs. For example, one Bay Area district noted: “Teachers have additional opportunities to further strengthen their skills and knowledge by participating in virtual conference-style staff development days that include offerings/sessions, such as ... English Language Learner Tools and Supports.” Similarly, a Los Angeles County district described offering “targeted PD on ELD strategies in distance learning.” Despite teachers and staff largely having access to PD opportunities targeting English learners, this lack of detail makes it difficult to establish a comprehensive picture of district planning for distance education PD.

Communication and Familial Engagement

The physical closure of schools and the transition to distance learning and hybrid instruction models placed a tremendous responsibility on families for supporting and monitoring their children’s schooling. As previously mentioned, many non-English-speaking families faced difficulty understanding communications about school operations, distance learning, and support services (Education Trust-West, n.d.; Parent Institute for Quality Education, 2020). Recognizing these challenges, many districts outlined strategies to engage and support the parents of English learners and ensure clear communication for the upcoming school year.

Translation services. Table 9 presents the translation services outlined by districts in their LCPs. More than 80 percent of unified districts reported providing translation services for parents. At minimum, most districts described sending translated letters and emails to families, often as part of a tiered reengagement plan. Additionally, several districts, and the families they serve, benefitted from the fact that Aeries, a K–12 platform, facilitates communication between districts/schools and students and parents in a user’s preferred language. Other districts planned to use ParentSquare, a portal that automatically translates emails and text messages. Relatedly, a report recently published by Californians Together noted that while many districts ensured there were translation services for multilingual families, LCPs often failed to describe two-way communication strategies for non-English-speaking families (Williams & Buenrostro, 2021). Although our work affirms that translation services were almost all asynchronous and one-way, some districts took great strides to ensure smooth two-way communication between families and school personnel. For example, several districts described hosting virtual family meetings for parents to learn about school operations and services as well as to ask questions. In one instance, a Southern California district shifted its regular “Cafecitos” to a virtual format. Moreover, a few districts reported hiring professionals to mediate conversations between families and schools.

Table 9. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Translation Services (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide	Unified districts			
		All	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Linguistic/translation services	30.2				
Translation services for parents		81.2	78.0	84.5	8.2*
Translation services for students		54.5	40.0	66.3	27.8***
<i>N</i>	889	346	150	194	

Note. EL = English learner. Low EL districts serve student populations where fewer than 13.21 percent of students are ELs. This cutoff is based on the median proportion of students who are ELs in our sample districts. Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, see the working paper (edpolicyinca.org/publications/policy-plans) associated with this report. Differences represent unadjusted calculations between groups.

*** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$.

Technology support. During remote instruction, the availability of technological devices and a stable internet connection were essential for instructional access. However, for many non-English-speaking families, this access was not readily available; in fact, prior to the pandemic, of the 1.4 million students who did not have access to either a computer or high-speed internet, 57 percent spoke a language other than English at home (Saucedo, 2021). SB-98 also mandated that districts describe how device and connectivity access would be provided to support distance learning for students [EDC 43509(f)(1)(B)(ii)], reflecting a focus on bridging a long-standing digital divide. Table 10 presents the strategies outlined in LCPs related to technological resources. Nearly all unified districts planned to provide devices (99.4 percent) like laptops or Chromebooks as well as assistance with internet connectivity (98.3 percent) through partnerships with providers or by offering hotspots to families. Importantly, about half of all unified districts prioritized English learners in the distribution of these supports.

Table 10. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Technological Resources (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide	Unified districts			
		All	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Technological devices	93.0				
Support or subsidy offered in general		99.4	100.0	99.0	0.0
Any student can receive a device		96.0	96.7	95.4	0.2
Priority given in distribution		68.0	70.0	67.0	3.4
By grade level		3.5	2.0	4.6	2.7
For English learners		49.3	51.3	48.5	3.2
For students with disabilities		6.9	6.0	7.7	1.7
Internet connectivity	92.0				
Support or subsidy offered in general		98.3	99.3	97.4	1.0
Priority given in distribution		73.8	77.3	71.6	6.0
By grade level		0.9	1.3	0.5	0.8
For English learners		50.4	50.0	51.5	1.1
For students with disabilities		6.3	5.3	7.2	1.8
	<i>N</i>	889	346	150	194

Note. EL = English learner. Low EL districts serve student populations where fewer than 13.21 percent of students are ELs. This cutoff is based on the median proportion of students who are ELs in our sample districts. Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, see the working paper (edpolicyinca.org/publications/policy-plans) associated with this report. Differences represent unadjusted calculations between groups.

Beyond increases in availability of devices and broadband services, navigating technology setups and online learning resources may have continued to challenge non-English-speaking families. To support this, many districts provided technology support in parents' primary languages, which could take multiple forms, including asynchronous tutorials, multilingual webinars, and support hubs in multiple languages. For example, one Bay Area district hosted a "Student and Family Distance Learning Hub," which provided access to bilingual support staff in addition to tutorials and resources in English and Spanish. Similarly, a few districts created multilingual tech hotlines and websites to support families.

As SB-98 required districts to engage with the families of English learners through language-inclusive outreach efforts, districts endeavored to communicate with families by providing information in multiple languages as well as offering opportunities for two-way communication. Moreover, the technological support districts planned to offer reasserts the idea that efforts were made to improve both access and equity. Yet, as suggested by Williams and Buenrostro (2021), occasions for shared communication between school personnel and families in students' home languages may have been too few, and access to these services varied greatly across unified districts.

Implications and Questions

The LCPs mandated by SB-98 document the policies and practices to support English learners that emerged in local planning during a nontraditional school year. Findings reveal that districts communicated intentions to ensure access to instruction, evaluate student progress, provide ELD services, offer supplemental educational services to mitigate learning loss, and engage with families. However, the limited detail provided in most districts' plans made it difficult to determine the extent to which LCPs led to greater access to instruction and resources, engaged students and families appropriately and effectively, and improved (or at least stabilized) student learning. Further, the findings from this research point only to what was planned, not what was later implemented nor what could and should have been done.

Although this report serves as an essential record of how California school districts planned to respond to the tremendous challenges associated with nearly universal school closures and the prolonged suspension of in-person instruction, lingering questions remain. Education leaders must continue to wrestle with these questions to realize the intentions of SB-98 fully and secure equitable access to quality learning opportunities for all students in the state, particularly English learners. Careful consideration of these questions is crucial for district and school leaders as they plan and implement educational programs, policymakers as they look to induce action and accountability on the part of educators, and researchers as they work to understand the impacts of policies and educational programs.

Implications for School Leaders

Despite the intentions to adapt instruction and services during distance learning conveyed in their plans, districts' LCPs lacked detail and specificity. This echoes the results from an earlier analysis of district LCAPs, which found that few districts had outlined promising practices or asset-based approaches to English learner education even prior to the pandemic (Lavadenz et al., 2018). There was little evidence that plans for the 2020–21 school year differed from educational programming in previous years. Moreover, some districts completely omitted plans for distance learning or described plans that relied exclusively on in-person instruction. This limited detail effectively conceals many of the critical elements that make up the learning context provided for English learners and raises questions about the extent to which districts used the LCP process—and the pandemic context more broadly—to evaluate prior educational strategies and test new approaches to engage and serve English learners and their families.

As the LCP development process closely paralleled that of the LCAP—which districts have completed since 2014 and returned to in 2021–22—LEAs must continue to consider their practices (or lack thereof) critically and guard against replicating ineffective approaches in subsequent plans and actions. Therefore, as schools reopen and educators are faced with the scars of the pandemic, both on themselves and the students they serve, opportunities abound to reimagine the schooling experience for English learners. Schools need to develop strategies

for engaging in authentic and meaningful two-way communication with students and families. Educators need to find ways to provide remote instruction that is synchronous and teacher led, not relying solely on online services from outside vendors who do not intimately know the students they are serving. We need to continue to assess students in virtual settings and through online mediums. We must also use those assessment results to evaluate student progress in language development and academic learning and build instruction specifically tailored to students' individual needs. Finally, we need to ensure that our best intentions translate to implementation fidelity and improved student experiences and outcomes.

Policy Considerations

Although districts were directed by state policy to consider English learners and incorporate ELD in their LCPs, SB-98 offered limited specification for how this should be done or what exactly these plans should include. This open-ended policy language may have been intentional, providing districts with the opportunity to determine what works best for their students and their community; however, as circumstances continued to change, clearer guidance may have better supported district and school leaders during the planning process. Future policy could thus consider outlining specific strategies and services for English learners that would ensure their availability and access across the state. It is important to identify the particular supports and resources English learners need, how these can best be provided during distance learning, and the potential challenges that may arise in implementation. Such policy considerations are critical as we move towards recovery from a global pandemic so that LEAs are better prepared to ensure learning continuity in the event of another crisis.

Further, as SB-98 was intended to hold schools accountable for meeting the needs of the most underserved students during the pandemic, it is difficult to ascertain whether the legislative requirements around planning actually induced and encouraged the actions needed on the ground. This may reflect the planning tools (that is, the template) associated with district LCPs. District plans that used the LCP template directly aligned with the priorities outlined in SB-98; however, using a structured document for planning may have also affected the shape and form of the plans themselves. Moreover, presently no mechanism exists within the state to examine critically the implementation of LCPs (or districts' standard planning document, the LCAP), limiting awareness of the specific strategies enacted at the local level to support student learning from year to year. Given that plans garner meaning in relation to their application, this prompts the need for a system in which districts reflect on their actions and investments in contrast with those they intended to put into practice to understand (a) why plans may have changed and (b) how future policy could better support districts in securing and supporting their needs. While the system has previously contended with disconnects between legislative requirements, district plans, and actual execution, as we move towards recovery, we must also grapple with how best to make planning meaningful for those implementing the plans. We must also reconsider the existing mechanisms through which education policy is made and with which schools are held accountable and identify ways to measure the outcomes we seek rather than the inputs we can mandate.

Directions for Future Research

Despite the fact that having districts create LCPs provided a means with which to evaluate the depth of districts' plans for distance learning and understand how the needs of English learners in particular would be met, the effectiveness of these strategies in providing quality services to English learners cannot be measured through LCPs. To resolve key questions about the efficacy and equity of policies for English learner education specified in districts' plans, future research will need to compare English learner outcomes across districts that articulated varying plans for meeting these students' needs during the pandemic. Quantitative researchers should work to link student-level administrative data to the district-level policy data we summarize in this report¹⁶ to investigate the short- and long-term outcomes associated with the learning supports English learners were provided during the 2020–21 school year. Such work will be necessary to identify the policies and practices that were most and least effective in supporting these students during a period of prolonged remote instruction. At the same time, we currently lack detailed information regarding LCP policy diffusion and implementation by educators in California school districts. Therefore, future qualitative researchers should examine whether, how, and to what extent K–12 administrators and teachers were aware of their districts' LCP policies and were prepared to put them into practice during pandemic-induced school closures. Results from this line of research will be critical to future efforts aimed at improving policy creation, communication, and implementation.

Reflections

Although the challenges of meeting the unique needs of English learners and their families are not new, the pandemic exposed the depth of these challenges and the cascading inequities present in both our school systems and society at large. This analysis distills the organizational and instructional strategies and services included in the plans from nearly 900 public school districts. We aim to inform education leaders as they continue to adapt policy and practice to ensure that English-learning students are able to access quality instruction as we enter a postpandemic recovery. Limited detail in districts' plans, however, introduce additional unknowns about the educational experience English learners contended with during the 2020–21 school year and how this has shaped their academic and personal development. As we face yet another school year marred by the uncertainties of an evolving pandemic context and new challenges with in-person schooling, education stands upon a precipice of opportunity to not only reimagine its embedded systems but rebuild them on a more equitable foundation.

¹⁶ Data collected from district LCPs summarized in this report are available to download at edpolicyinca.org/publications/policy-plans.

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