

## Helping English learners succeed should be a top priority for schools amid the pandemic

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**T**he California Legislature and Gov. Gavin Newsom have come to an agreement on a state [budget](#) that looks better than expected for education, but there are lots of decisions still to be made about spending.

As we think about how to redesign education for the pandemic and reopen schools, legislators and local leaders must prioritize English learners and teacher professional development. Education can only adapt to the new normal if teachers have the training and time for planning and collaboration to do so. And that training must focus on the specific educational needs of the students.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed deep disparities in the country. Los Angeles [Mayor Eric Garcetti](#) challenged California and the nation to do better, asking “Is normal really what we want to come back to?” It’s critical that we also ask this question of public education.

Many are already [thinking](#) about how to redesign education for a new era. But a crucial piece is missing in those conversations: adequately building teacher capacity to support the diverse needs of their students.

By better supporting teachers, we have an unparalleled opportunity to tackle long-standing educational equity problems, particularly the [opportunity gaps for English learners](#), who make up [a large number of students entering public schools in California](#), and an even [higher proportion of children ages 0-5](#).

English learners and their families have been [hit hard](#) by COVID-19. With school closures, these students are falling even farther behind. As a principal told me recently, the opportunity gap “is becoming a chasm.”

While teachers in California receive basic information on how to teach English learners, it falls far short. And unlike [in other countries](#), here there is little time built into calendars and schedules for teachers to get the needed training and planning time to successfully support students. Teacher contracts are not designed to support ongoing professional learning and collaboration.

As state funds shrink and distance learning takes root, we will face difficult choices. But one thing we know for certain: [investing early in education for vulnerable children can make a huge difference](#). Doing so helps children gain invaluable skills, strengthens the future workforce, grows the economy, and reduces social spending. Investing in teachers now is a smart bet.

The first step is for state and district leaders to prioritize investments in teacher development so teachers have the instructional strategies they need to support English learners, as well as all students. Organizations like [Early Edge CA](#) and [Californians Together](#) continue to advocate for these kinds of investments. Locally, districts would be wise to put professional learning focused on English Learners front and center within their budgets because they represent a significant number of students both within and coming into their school systems.

Professional development, curriculum, and policies should also emphasize [research-based approaches](#) that best support English learners, such as integrated language and content. This research shows that children learn best when teachers acknowledge and build from the linguistic and cultural assets children bring to schools, and when learning is designed to support their specific needs.

Hybrid models of professional development are one option. In these models, teachers get paid to do the work on their own time, for example in the summer or on weekends. Finally, time for collaboration and planning to enact research-based practices should be built into union contracts and school calendars.

Teachers are hungry to learn right now. Recently, my organization, [SEAL](#), had more than 300 educators participate in a free webinar to support young English learners within the distance learning context.

This was only one of many learning opportunities being offered to educators where large numbers of teachers are logging on, desperate to learn and be inspired as they grapple with this complicated and unprecedented time. But webinars alone will not address this learning curve. Deep, enduring and relevant professional learning happens when it is intentionally designed and sustained over time. It is critical that we leverage the motivation and hunger felt by those serving California's students — and not go back to the old normal.

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