

# Case Study of SEAL Implementation: Oak Grove School District

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Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) is a research-based, comprehensive instructional model that provides professional development and technical assistance to teachers and education leaders, equipping them to deliver high-quality education to Dual Language Learners (DLLs) and English Learners (ELs)<sup>i</sup> in preschools and elementary schools. The model was launched in 2008, when the Sobrato Family Foundation<sup>ii</sup> partnered with Laurie Olsen to design and pilot test a comprehensive approach to support language and content learning in the early grades. The SEAL model is now being implemented in over 130 preschool classrooms and over 110 elementary schools across the state of California.

In 2020, SEAL engaged Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) to develop a series of three in-depth case studies on district implementation of the SEAL model during its replication phase (2013-2018) in order to better understand how the districts operationalized the model to meet the needs of ELs/DLLs and adapted it to meet their specific contexts. This case study focuses on the Oak Grove School District, which was one of the first districts that went through SEAL model replication efforts across its schools. It describes how the district embraced the SEAL model and adapted it to its particular needs, the outcomes of SEAL implementation for the profiled schools and their students, and lessons learned for districts and policymakers seeking to more effectively engage and support ELs.

### About SEAL

The SEAL model is designed to build the capacity of preschools and elementary schools to develop the language and literacy skills of ELs and DLLs. The model delivers language-rich, joyful, and rigorous education for all children. Originally the model focused exclusively on grades PK-3, however, it now encompasses the upper-level elementary grades as well.

## District Context

Situated on the southeastern side of San Jose, the Oak Grove School District serves approximately 9,896 students in transitional kindergarten (TK) through eighth grade across its 14 elementary schools and three intermediate schools.<sup>iii</sup> Of its students, 39% qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch (FRPL)<sup>iv</sup> and 29% are ELs.<sup>v</sup> Hispanic/Latinx students comprise approximately 48% of the student body.<sup>vi</sup> The vast majority of ELs in the district speak Spanish, though a small number of students speak Vietnamese, Filipino, Mandarin, or Punjabi.<sup>vii</sup>

Prior to 2013, the district had been educating ELs through designated English Language Development (ELD) Centers that separated these students from the whole classroom environment. Students who were newcomers or those with low scores on the California English Language Development Test were sent to one of a handful of schools that had ELD Centers. The coordinator of the Educational Services Department (ESD) explained that the thinking at the time was to build students' language skills prior to giving them access to academic content. In these pull-out centers, students worked on English acquisition and then went back to attending classes at their original schools. Upon deeper reflection, analysis of student data and experiences, and conversations across the district, leaders agreed that the ELD Centers were limiting EL students' participation in core instruction and project-based collaborative activities.

According to Superintendent José L. Manzo as well as district leaders and one Oak Grove principal, the district was at an inflection point with the ELD Centers as educators realized they were not achieving their intended purpose of improving English-language acquisition. For the superintendent, one interaction with a student stood out as a critical moment when he realized the ELD Centers were not effectively serving the needs of EL students:

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I was talking to an older student who was having a hard time with English. And [I] asked him when he had moved to the district. He said that he had always gone to schools here, and that’s when it hit me—whatever we’re doing isn’t working. We need something new.

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Other district staff echoed Manzo’s sentiments, asserting that the strategy was not demonstrating long-lasting results. The ESD coordinator shared that they were seeing students in their fifth, sixth, and seventh year in district schools who were still at a “Level 1” in terms of English acquisition. Counter to their original purpose of supporting English acquisition for newcomer students, these pull-out ELD Centers were holding students back from being exposed to English-speaking peers and grade-level content. Moreover, according to the district’s ESD coordinator, the ELD Centers were inhibiting mainstream classroom teachers from developing the necessary skills to address the needs of ELs in a whole-classroom setting.

Emergent research related to ELs, coupled with the realization that many students either were already long-term English learners or on the path to that designation, made it clear to district leaders that their belief in and approach to teaching ELs English prior to and separate from content instruction needed to be disrupted. As put by the ESD coordinator, “I remember thinking, ‘Oh my word, I just spent how many years training people in this paradigm? And now I’ve got to eat my words.’” At that time, in 2012, 29% of Oak Grove’s elementary school students were classified as ELs, and roughly 11% of ELs were reclassified to Fluent English Proficient during the 2011–2012 school year.<sup>viii</sup>

In addition to recognition that the ELD Centers were not producing the long-term results that ELs needed, the district was emerging from the broader policy context of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and transitioning to implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Under NCLB, district and school staff had become used to a more rote “teach to the test” environment where—according to one of the district’s SEAL coaches—educators and students alike were not finding joy in teaching or learning.

## District Adoption of SEAL

Oak Grove adopted the SEAL model in 2013 after broader education policy shifts and district leaders’ reflections on their own EL policies necessitated a new approach to educating these students. Earlier visits to SEAL demonstration sites were a critical factor in garnering the initial commitment to the model. The district’s ESD coordinator and a handful of district staff, principals, and teachers from Oak Grove’s four Title I schools were invited to see the SEAL model in action at an elementary school in a neighboring district.

After spending time with Olsen, SEAL’s founder, and observing how deeply immersed in language the SEAL classrooms were, Oak Grove staff debriefed about the model and were excited about its potential for systemically changing the way they taught ELs. A current coach at one of the district’s elementary schools, Christopher Elementary School, explained that the high level of student engagement and advanced academic vocabulary were two things that sold her on adopting SEAL:

“

We were in the [demonstration site] classrooms and we saw with our own eyes these rich classrooms with learning, and we heard the students speaking. Just the level of engagement...I had never seen anything like that. Then, when we started implementing the strategies in our own classrooms, we were teaching [students] high-level vocabulary and they were meeting us. We had really high standards, and I feel like the level of rigor shot up really quick, and I [first] saw that when we visited [the demonstration site].

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After seeing the way students were engaged and learning about the components necessary to get to that point, another SEAL coach said the decision “was unanimous. We all decided that this was something we needed to pursue. It was a moral imperative at that point. Like, ‘We have to do this.’”

Manzo recognized that SEAL could also be an effective vehicle for launching Common Core instruction, since at the time there was no clear instructional guidance or curriculum for implementing it, particularly with ELs in mind. Under the SEAL approach, the curriculum and instructional practices were to be designed in collaboration with teachers across lessons and subject areas. This integration of ELD instruction into academic content areas across grade levels aligned well with the goals of the Common Core.

Educators in the district came to view SEAL as something reinvigorating that made learning more joyful. A teacher at Edendale Elementary School described what SEAL did for teachers:

“

SEAL gives teachers back the profession that got taken away from us with No Child Left Behind. For a more tenured teacher, being able to create again and get to know your standards well, and to be the artist as well as a scientist, is just a gift. And having time to collaborate in the unit development days is tremendous, because you are talking across your district with grade-level peers...And we lost all of that with NCLB.

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Subsequently, Manzo made the decision to initially target the district’s Title I schools to ensure that the SEAL model would reach the sites with the highest proportions of ELs.

## District Approach to and Support for SEAL Implementation

As a precondition to implementation, Oak Grove’s assistant superintendent at the time made extensive efforts to ensure buy-in from all school leaders and teachers at prospective SEAL sites. To do so, she asked principals to invite their educators and school staff to visit demonstration sites and asked each group to make a collective decision about adopting SEAL. This gave staff a greater sense of agency and is one of the conditions that district leaders believed led to high rates of implementation.

Each prospective elementary school site started by bringing Kindergarten and first-grade staff to a demonstration site, followed by staff from second grade and third grade. (When SEAL began offering training for fourth through sixth grade teachers, district leadership extended the demonstration site visits to teachers from these grade levels, too.) Even if a school would not be implementing SEAL until a few years into the future, teachers from those schools were brought on the site visits to understand what the model entailed and to help them decide whether to invest their time and energy into adopting the model. SEAL also provided handbooks, videos, and other materials to prospective school sites to help teachers who were unable to attend the demonstration site visits in person build an understanding of the model. (See “SEAL Model Timeline for Teacher Professional Development” text box to learn more about SEAL’s typical implementation timeline and process.)

An Oak Grove SEAL coach described this process as feeling “almost grassroots,” in that school administrators and teachers alike had to agree with the model and its associated professional development before adoption. The principal at Christopher Elementary School explained how full buy-in laid the groundwork for successful implementation by describing how some reforms had been presented in the past: “When it’s presented to staff, you don’t have a choice. ‘You’re doing it this way,’ then of course there’s a wall, and then you didn’t have the buy-in.”

### Scaling Up SEAL Implementation

SEAL was implemented in the Oak Grove School District in successive waves or cohorts of schools, beginning in 2013 with four elementary schools with the highest Title I populations – Christopher, Edenvale, George Miner, and Samuel E. Stipe.<sup>ix</sup> Implementing at a small number of schools first was helpful in identifying best practices and areas for improvement along the way. (See “SEAL Model Teacher Professional Development Series” text box for an overview of the training series provided to teachers and SEAL coaches.) This laid the groundwork for scaling the SEAL model to upper grade levels in the schools that were already implementing it and to eight non-Title I schools. There are currently 12 sites implementing SEAL from TK through third grade, with five schools expanding implementation to fourth through sixth grade.

Manzo wanted to implement SEAL at these eight non-Title I schools to serve the collectively large presence of ELs across these sites. He was also aware that the entire student body could benefit from the SEAL model’s approach to building language acquisition. However, according to a SEAL coach, the model was a harder sell for teachers at non-Title I schools who were not eager to try a new approach that called for additional work to craft the rigorous lessons that the model required. This resistance slowed implementation efforts

#### SEAL Model Timeline for Teacher Professional Development

In Year 1, which begins in late summer or early fall, teachers participate in the SEAL Launch and the first three training modules. In Year 2, they participate in the final three modules. Teachers can also choose to participate in a Summer Bridge program between their first and second years of training. Typically, SEAL staggers the 2-year teacher training cycle over a 3-year period, with teachers in PreK/Transitional Kindergarten through Grade 1 training together in Years 1 and 2, and teachers in Grades 2–3 participating in the training cycle in Years 2 and 3.

#### SEAL Model Teacher Professional Development Series

Teachers and instructional coaches, called SEAL coaches, are the primary audience for the 2-year professional development series consisting of a “Launch,” six module trainings, and a Summer Bridge program. The purpose of the Launch is to establish a shared understanding of the SEAL model. The module trainings are where teachers learn background research and learn instructional strategies to support ELs, and how to create standards-based thematic units and foster family partnerships. SEAL coaches also receive additional training (e.g., SEAL Coach Convenings) to support their role in helping teachers implement SEAL in their classrooms. The participation of district and school leaders in module trainings is optional; however, they are strongly encouraged to participate in the Launch.

at these sites. While some teachers at these sites are still hesitant to adopt the SEAL model, a handful of non-Title I teachers see the value and are implementing it in their classrooms.

To further scale the SEAL model in the district, in 2015-2016, Oak Grove and SEAL identified two schools to serve as the district's first SEAL demonstration sites – Christopher and Miner Elementary School. (See “SEAL Demonstration Sites” text box for additional information on this component.) Christopher was chosen as a demonstration site because of the previous principal's full commitment to implement the SEAL model, which has been sustained by the current principal. Notably, Miner closed due to consolidation in 2018 (see SEAL Implementation Challenges for additional information); in response, the district made Edenvale Elementary School a new demonstration site because the school staff implemented the SEAL model effectively, which contributed to positive academic student outcomes. As discussed later in the case study, the district's current demonstration sites—Christopher and Edenvale—are two exemplar models of SEAL implementation.

### SEAL Demonstration Sites

To showcase SEAL in action, and demonstrate what high quality education can and should look like for English Learners and Dual Language Learners, SEAL offers demonstration site visits at a few of our partner school districts and early education centers. Demonstration site visits provide participants with an overview of the SEAL model before leading small groups through classroom observations. Everyone then reconvenes to discuss what they observed with SEAL and host school staff, creating a rich conversation about the implementation process.

## Funding

According to the district's ESD director, Oak Grove first signed a memorandum of understanding with SEAL to establish their partnership. Once SEAL was adopted, the district used federal and state supplemental funding to pay for the expenses of SEAL implementation. Currently, according to the district's 2021–2022 Local Control Accountability Plan,<sup>x</sup> all school sites are provided with the necessary funds to implement SEAL, primarily through Local Control Funding Formula funding. This includes funding for the district's SEAL coaches. (This group and their role are described in greater detail later in this case study.) Furthermore, Oak Grove receives additional funding from SEAL to cover the expenses associated with the district's demonstration sites.

## Role of District and Site Leaders

As part of garnering buy-in from school leaders and teachers, district leaders in Oak Grove had explicit conversations with principals about the time commitment and the nature of the professional development associated with SEAL adoption and implementation. According to one Edenvale teacher, the cadence of professional development trainings for administrators, coaches, and teachers was communicated clearly by SEAL trainers and district leadership, as was the role of each group in supporting SEAL. Understanding the time commitment and expectations up front made it easier for teachers to collaborate with SEAL coaches around instruction, curriculum, and troubleshooting of different issues related to layering SEAL into the classroom. As the ESD director explained:

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**The assistant superintendent and the principal on special assignment did a really good job of letting principals know what they are going to be in for. Implementation is so robust that they didn't want anybody to go in with their eyes closed about it...We knew that it's not going to be a 'one and done' training; it's going to mean X, Y, and Z for several years.**

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This communication helped establish expectations for what SEAL would require and what to expect in terms of support and interactions around the model. Further, the explicit support from district administrators played a central role in successful SEAL implementation by setting the tone that SEAL was a priority and the district would provide resources to back it. For example, Edenvale’s principal shared that the assistant superintendent helped with all his hiring around SEAL to ensure that new staff would embrace the model: “There was never a doubt that the district wasn’t 100% behind SEAL, ever.” This created the conditions for teachers to invest in SEAL without the fear that it would be another reform or curriculum that they would abandon in lieu of a new one down the road.

Similarly, an Edenvale teacher shared that SEAL felt more permanent because of how research-based it was. This grounding helped the teacher feel like SEAL was going to be an embedded part of the district’s work. This is important because, as she noted, “we are constantly getting told to do this—‘This will save the children!’ Then two years later, we scrap it and get asked to do something else.” Additionally, according to the Edenvale principal, the research-based component of SEAL and the organized nature of professional development and communications with SEAL staff helped the district see the SEAL model and staff “as trustworthy...Like they present an air of ‘We’ve got this, we know what we’re doing.’”

## SEAL Coaches

To support SEAL implementation efforts, Oak Grove’s district leaders called upon existing English Learner teaching partners (ELTPs, i.e., teachers on special assignment dedicated to supporting the instructional needs of ELs) and literacy coaches embedded throughout the schools to become SEAL coaches. (See “SEAL Coach Role and Responsibilities” text box for additional information on a coach’s typical role and responsibilities as part of the SEAL model.) These groups of coaches were already engaged in determining and supporting English language arts (ELA) standards and implementation, so district staff believed them to be important individuals who could support SEAL’s implementation.

During the first five years of SEAL implementation, the district had a literacy coach at each of its Title I schools and an ELTP at each of its 12 SEAL school sites. This meant that the Title I schools implementing SEAL in the first few years had two SEAL coaches, although the ELTPs split their time between supporting SEAL and providing administrative support for the district (determining ELA standards, setting and reviewing curriculum, etc.).

In addition to spearheading the organizing, material preparation, curriculum, and strategy creation for SEAL teachers, SEAL coaches are responsible for facilitating “unit development days” (UDDs). UDDs are designated staff time when SEAL teachers and coaches collaborate on curriculum development and instructional strategies. In Oak Grove, the UDDs were a space to share information, establish expectations, and use that information as a basis to inform curriculum creation among similar grade-level teachers across multiple school sites. Although the coaches described the UDDs as “fun” and “helpful” experiences, this was the result of considerable advance preparation and

### SEAL Coach Role and Responsibilities

- Work with teachers to maximize consistency and coherence of instruction and to encourage collaborative and reflective practice.
- Lead professional development modules and special topic institutes that bring together district staff, administrators, and teachers across SEAL sites, building a shared understanding of the framework and research behind the SEAL model while creating a robust community of SEAL practitioners.
- Support the Summer Bridge program, an intensive professional development opportunity for teachers as well as enriched language development for children.
- Lead classroom demonstrations and modeling to help individual teachers implement SEAL strategies.
- Plan instructional and curriculum sessions to review curriculum standards, plan thematic units, and analyze the core program to determine where intensive language development strategies can be employed.



coordination done by the coaches to make these days as productive and enjoyable as possible. Typically, the SEAL coaches convened prior to the UDDs to share their observations about teacher practice, identify areas that needed work, and come to consensus about what the upcoming UDDs should focus on. In many cases, they also conducted background research on the agreed upon topics.

SEAL and district staff overcame their hesitation about the challenges that could arise from coordinating with so many coaches at a time by building a network to support coaching across the district. Through SEAL's Convenings, the district established a system-level understanding of the model and called upon school principals to support coaches across sites. (See "SEAL Convenings" text box for more details about this component.) Establishing this network was an essential asset that contributed to the successful adoption of the model. The principal at Christopher Elementary was appreciative of SEAL coaches and recognized the important role they served toward implementation:

### SEAL Convenings

A series of regional and state-wide Convenings engage district leaders, principals, SEAL coaches, and bilingual educators in building their understanding of the needs of ELs, deepening their knowledge of the SEAL model and their role in the implementation process. These gatherings provide structured opportunities for peer dialogue about the challenges inherent in supporting teachers through instructional and curriculum change, and for building a toolkit of skills related to being an instructional leader and sustaining SEAL implementation. New state policies and broader educational trends are also outlined with the aim of building coherence and cultivating a shared vision and commitment across the SEAL network.

“

**I couldn't [implement SEAL] without coaches because they helped make it manageable for [teachers] in the classroom, to make it real. They help them by not just modeling or doing it but showing it. When we all work together, you can see the impact that you can make with it.**

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### Oak Grove Families

The district was intentional about informing as many of its families as possible about the benefits of the SEAL model for all students. More specifically, it was attentive and responsive to the ways in which parents of non-EL students reacted to the resources and time being invested into a model that, at first glance, did not benefit their children. The district worked with its SEAL school sites to disseminate information about the model and held sessions with parents to further introduce them to it. The district was able to generate buy-in from parents, including parents of non-EL students, by highlighting how the SEAL model promoted language development for all. It was also helpful that non-EL families saw positive results and growth in their own children's language acquisition. Oak Grove's ESD director recalled an exchange with a non-EL parent who was a member of a district parent committee:

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**I remember one of my parents at one meeting saying her son was coming home talking about the roles of democracy and [using] some of the vocabulary they're using, and they're just blown away. And this is an English-only student. So we just really tried to reiterate, and to the teachers too, that this is not just for [ELs]. Of course we do it with wanting to champion the achievement of the [ELs], but no student is going to be hurt by going through these strategies.**

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Having provided this overview of Oak Grove’s implementation of SEAL, we now dive more deeply into how implementation unfolded at Christopher Elementary School and Edenvale Elementary School. These are two of the district’s first SEAL implementation sites and they now function as SEAL demonstration sites.

## Edenvale and Christopher Elementary Schools: Exemplars of SEAL Implementation

In order to examine SEAL’s influence on classrooms and instruction, it is useful to look at how the model was implemented in Edenvale Elementary School and Christopher Elementary School. In addition to being SEAL demonstration sites, both schools offer a bilingual program.

Edenvale is a TK through sixth grade school in south San Jose that serves approximately 480 students.<sup>xi</sup> The school’s English learners are primarily a mix of Spanish and Vietnamese speakers.<sup>xii</sup> Edenvale was identified as one of the early Oak Grove elementary schools to implement SEAL because of its Title I status and its high percentage of ELs and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. SEAL implementation initially focused on TK through third grade and then gradually expanded to more grade levels as Edenvale started seeing success with the lower grades. Sixth-grade teachers started SEAL training in 2020 and were able to attend the first two SEAL modules before the school was closed due to COVID-19. Currently, all classrooms at Edenvale are implementing SEAL.

Christopher Elementary School is a TK through eighth grade school in San Jose that serves approximately 380 students.<sup>xiii</sup> The school’s ELs are primarily a mix of Spanish and Vietnamese speakers.<sup>xiv</sup> Christopher currently implements the SEAL model in TK through sixth grade.

Like Edenvale, Christopher is also a Title I school. As such, district staff were eager to implement SEAL within Christopher’s classrooms to support academic growth. According to district leaders, the principal at the time had already been exposed to the SEAL model and was fully supportive of its implementation at the site. The current principal, who was an instructional coach at the school when SEAL was first implemented, described Christopher’s staff as “data driven” and “used to people coming in and visiting their classrooms to support them.” This environment allowed the school and its staff to be open-minded to SEAL’s approach to supporting Title I students.

### Edenvale Elementary School Demographics<sup>x</sup>

- 79% of students qualify for FRPL.
- 63% of students are ELs.
- 86% of students are Hispanic/Latinx.

### Christopher Elementary School Demographics<sup>xi</sup>

- 70% of students qualify for FRPL.
- 43% of students are ELs.
- 82% of students are Hispanic/Latinx.

## SEAL Implementation

Importantly, the implementation of SEAL at Edenvale built on—rather than replaced—prior programs. For example, the school already had a bilingual program for K through third grade students, and this was extended in 2017. SEAL was not seen as competing with the bilingual program but as a complement to it, since it reinforced the simultaneous development of each student’s primary language and English. Likewise, project-based learning (PBL) was a preexisting model for fourth through sixth grade that SEAL

built on. According to an Edenvale teacher, PBL was similar to SEAL in that it required teachers to develop units and performance tasks; it did not, however, allow students to go deep enough into the content and “learn the background information, practice it, and use the language to really think deeply about the content before asking them to build something or make something or create something.” SEAL provided a set of strategies to strengthen PBL and incorporate more academic language and literacy development in the process.

This process of building SEAL into preexisting programming was not always smooth, however. The principal described initial tensions with SEAL staff related to respecting preexisting programming. For example, PBL units had already been developed, so Edenvale’s principal suggested using those units and “SEAL-ifying” them to honor the work that teachers had already done. After some negotiation, Edenvale’s principal and SEAL staff came to an agreement concerning how to build out SEAL while respecting that prior work. Overall, school and district staff described the main value of SEAL as its flexibility and adaptability while adhering to its robust, comprehensive research base and pedagogy; however, Edenvale’s principal characterized initial conversations as “not respectful enough of what we had already invested [in for] several years.” Edenvale’s principal said that he had direct conversations with SEAL leaders and they were responsive and amenable to his ideas of how to best integrate SEAL into other programming intended to bring in the Common Core.

Like Edenvale, Christopher expanded SEAL into fourth through sixth grade. However, unlike Edenvale, Christopher also serves seventh and eighth grade, and staff have been attempting to expand SEAL on their own into these grade levels. As a result, they have spent much of their energy on ensuring consistency and scaffolding across grade levels. Christopher’s principal explained that she and the SEAL coaches are now facilitating a school-wide SEAL approach by “working with my seventh- and eighth-grade teachers, who aren’t in [SEAL], and doing some of those strategies in there.” The goal of this work is to intentionally incorporate SEAL’s strategies across academic areas to sustain and reinforce this type of learning–integrated language development throughout the content areas–in the school’s upper grades.

Christopher and Edenvale each have one ELTP coach and one literacy coach; all of these individuals are also trained SEAL coaches. At each school site, they work together to support SEAL implementation, typically by dividing their SEAL responsibilities. At each school, one coach works with TK through third grade and the other works with fourth through sixth grade. Despite the division of labor, the coaches see no difference in their roles or responsibilities supporting SEAL.

The ELTP and literacy coaches at both school sites meet weekly with their respective principals, which allows them to maintain open communication regarding SEAL implementation, progress, and needs. Both principals defer to the coaches as the experts on working with teachers and instruction. Edenvale’s principal similarly described his interaction with coaches as one of deference, where they serve as “co-anchors of the program” because of their leadership in facilitating SEAL activities, particularly UDDs.

While literacy coaches work primarily at one school site, Title I schools implementing SEAL in the early years, like Edenvale, also had access to an ELTP coach. However, ELTPs also had district responsibilities beyond supporting SEAL, which could cause challenges. As described by Edenvale’s principal, the ELTP SEAL coaching role is sometimes problematic for school administrators and coaches alike because they “are kind of freelancers” and not site-based, making accountability more difficult and their scope less clear. Thus, while it is easy to coordinate with the literacy coach because the position is site-based and funded by the school, it has been harder to coordinate meetings and align with the district-funded ELTP coach, who splits their time between district meetings or work at other school sites. Although both the ELTP coach and Edenvale principal described a positive relationship, they both acknowledged the limitations of what could be focused on or accomplished with the ELTP coach being split across sites.

## Teacher Buy-in and Agency

Unlike other education initiatives that are more prescriptive, SEAL implementation and professional development involves actively seeking teacher feedback about what is working well and what is not. Amplifying teacher voices during implementation has supported the success of SEAL in Oak Grove and the feeling that teachers are actively shaping what it looks like rather than passively receiving or adhering to it. This in turn has contributed to teachers' sense of instructional agency and increased their buy-in to the model. Edenvale's principal, for example, did not move forward with making the school a demonstration site until after speaking with teachers and making sure they felt ready:

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**It took us a year to become a demo site after they offered it to us because our teachers requested an extra year....A few more teachers needed training, and a lot of my teachers were still earning their tenure or getting their full credential. They needed to get through some [of these] phases to feel ready to be observed.**

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Interviewees asserted that teacher buy-in was essential for SEAL to be implemented in earnest. Factors that influenced teacher buy-in were time and resources set aside by school administrators to collaborate on SEAL and teachers' site visits to SEAL demonstration sites in nearby districts. Some teachers and coaches described teacher buy-in as difficult at first because of all the upfront work to learn the model and collaborate on curriculum and instruction. Hearing about the successes of teachers who had already implemented the model and seeing it in action mitigated this skepticism. For example, one veteran Christopher teacher shared that a new teacher to her school quickly bought into SEAL after seeing her model it in a way that effectively engaged students:

### SEAL Bilingual Offerings

For bilingual educators, SEAL provides both Bilingual Convenings and Bilingual Instructional Rounds. SEAL teachers, coaches and administrators are invited to Bilingual Convenings, where they are provided professional development designed to strengthen bilingual instruction and bilingual programming in their respective sites. Bilingual Instructional Rounds bring SEAL coaches and principals together to observe SEAL bilingual classrooms in other SEAL districts, sharpen their lens of what bilingual instruction should look like in a SEAL classroom, and to collaborate on how to strengthen SEAL instruction and implementation in their respective bilingual programs.

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**I modeled...the Draw and Label...the Categorical Matrix... [and other SEAL strategies], and she was amazed to see how the students were paying attention and participating. She told me, 'That doesn't happen when I teach.' So I told her, 'It's because of SEAL. You have to have that experience. You have to learn, take notes, and then let's talk about this. Then, you can start doing.' And she started, and she was highly motivated because she saw the students' engagement improve in her classroom.**

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As bilingual school sites, Christopher and Edenvale intentionally included bilingual teachers in SEAL's adoption and implementation efforts. For example, its SEAL coaches invited bilingual educators to UDDs, since they could leverage their experience teaching in dual language settings and contribute to the lesson planning development process. Additionally, SEAL offered Convenings for bilingual educators to

acknowledge their specific classroom experiences and challenges, which also created a space for them to collectively generate strategies to overcome such challenges. (See “SEAL Bilingual Offerings” text box above for more details.) The inclusion of bilingual educators strengthened SEAL implementation as well as the bilingual program at each school sites. As described by one of SEAL’s staff members:

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**What was unique and special in Oak Grove was the fact that bilingual teachers, who often were extremely isolated and had no one to plan with, were absolutely included in part of that planning... Everyone was planning together as a unit and so the notion of true teacher collaboration being valued and honored and understood as this key sacred element in order to implement really strong, effective teaching creates a tremendous amount of buy-in.**

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## Role of School Leaders

It became clear through our interviews that strong school leadership that sends clear messaging about SEAL helped Edenvale navigate high turnover and reduction in SEAL coaches. (See SEAL Implementation Challenges for more detail about these issues.) SEAL is incorporated into Edenvale’s theory of action as a key element to support instructional practice through which the school can meet its goals in ELA, arts, science, and social studies. One teacher shared that the “principal adores and believes in SEAL and also believes in the bilingual program.” This allowed the principal to set the tone by creating a “safe space to take risks” with SEAL, where teachers are allowed to be “lifelong learners” who try out and refine the strategies as they go. At Edenvale, setting this tone has helped establish a more collaborative and open culture of learning among teachers, who want to share what is working in their use of SEAL practices as well as what they need help with.

Christopher’s previous principal believed strongly in SEAL, which led him to spearhead efforts to implement the model at the school site. The new principal has continued this momentum and support for SEAL, all while capitalizing on her own lived experiences with SEAL and extensive tenure as an educator to build on the model. She first heard about SEAL during her time as a fourth through eighth grade teacher at Christopher; she went through her first SEAL training during her first year as Christopher’s instructional coach with teachers from upper grades. Her on-the-ground experience as a teacher within the school she now leads, coupled with her SEAL knowledge and training, gives her a unique vantage point that allows her to support the SEAL model not just in the classroom but also across grade levels, thus strengthening implementation and impact.

## Classroom Level Implementation

According to the Edenvale SEAL coach, the school did not implement a well-articulated curriculum before SEAL, with teachers working in silos and rarely collaborating. A clear value that SEAL added was that it not only introduced more collaboration around curriculum and instruction but it also created a cohesiveness across grade levels that had been missing; this had benefits for students and teachers alike.

Christopher and Edenvale teachers worked together to purposefully create units and lesson plans that carried over across grade levels and were modified according to student academic level. By having similar

content and instructional topics embedded throughout grades as students progressed within each school, teachers created engaging learning environments that were rich in oral language, graphics, and student-led work.

This continuity in content and instructional topics within the classroom helped students recognize and feel familiar with the content being taught, which bolstered their engagement. According to Edenvale’s principal, SEAL coach, and teachers, students could draw on their knowledge of a content area that they had covered in prior years in order to dive deeper. One teacher described how students felt motivated to invest more in learning activities that they were first exposed to in younger grades:

“

**And when they go on to other grades, my next-door neighbor in my classroom, she teaches fourth grade, and she’ll mention like, ‘Oh, we’re in our Earth’s Processes unit. And the students were talking about what you guys did two years ago in second grade in your Earth’s Processes unit.’**

”

Edenvale’s principal elaborated on how this consistency made a significant difference for ELs:

“

**The lack of coherency is not as consequential for kids whose parents have a lot of language skills and abilities, but for English-language learners, it has more impact when you do not have that level of coherence....When you have school programs with more instructional coherence, you get better results.**

”

Meanwhile, the coherence in instructional strategies has also supported teachers’ instruction, as SEAL strategies—such as “Draw and Labels”—were commonly employed across grades and gave teachers a shared understanding or common language around ELD functions and practices. Moreover, the coherence across same-grade-level classrooms had positive implications for teachers because in many cases they could inherit SEAL units and materials that had already been developed by their predecessors.

One of the major appeals of SEAL for school administrators and teachers is the flexibility built into the model. Since SEAL is not meant to be a specific curriculum, but rather is an approach layered onto a curriculum that is integrated into the classroom, teachers have appreciated the flexibility and agency it provides and have felt empowered to integrate it in ways that make sense to them. A teacher from Christopher shared:

“

**We weren’t teaching from a curriculum, we were pulling all of these resources from credible places, but we were creating our own curriculum. And so when you’re invested in something, you’re going to do it right. I would be remiss to say that we were [not] tired, but in a different way. It was hard work; it wasn’t a walk in the park.**

”

The level of collaboration and co-design with building thematic curriculum fostered a sense of shared ownership that has motivated teachers to put in hard work during SEAL UDDs and to be intentional about instructional planning periods. Moreover, according to the Edenvale principal, support from district leadership has allowed teachers to exercise creativity with how to adapt the model to their classrooms. A SEAL coach at Edenvale said that SEAL created “a safe place to act and to try....Then the belief [in the model] came once teachers saw what their students could do.” Additionally, the understanding that SEAL was meant to be a continuous approach extending into the upper grades made implementation more appealing to teachers because they knew there would be some continuity of the model to make it worth the investment.

All of the interviewed teachers and coaches addressed how SEAL looked distinct from a normal classroom, emphasizing that seeing the model in action was a major selling point. When it came to student engagement, they saw that students became more confident and spoke more often, and that the classrooms came alive with talking and laughter. Another difference was that the model was woven into curriculum and instruction across subjects, grades, and classrooms. This opened up more room for collaboration across grades; one Edenvale teacher noted that this meant materials, activities, and strategies could be shared more easily amongst teachers.

## Rigor

School personnel at both Christopher and Edenvale were pleased with the level of rigor that SEAL brought into their classrooms. They first witnessed it through site visits, where they noticed that students were capable of engaging and learning at a high level. This prompted Oak Grove’s teachers to aim for and expect the same for their own students.

After going through SEAL training, teachers felt comfortable sustaining a high level of rigor and expectations for their students. They did this by intentionally incorporating strategies and academic vocabulary across lessons, which was further supported by the instructional alignment across grade levels at both schools. This consistency during the school year and across multiple grades reinforced student learning and maintained rigor across students’ academic trajectories. An Edenvale teacher explained:

“

**We have a different language function for each unit—whether that be cause and effect, compare and contrast, sequencing—and we try to keep that consistent. If we’re doing sequencing for our language function in writer’s workshop, we might be doing an informational thing. And I do see the kids be like, ‘Oh yeah, from our language function’ and bringing those transition words, like afterward, finally, into their writing. So I do feel like that language has transferred, whether it’s the content language or English-language development. I do think that being intentional about having those strategies woven into different areas is what helps them use those words in that [academic] language more organically. So it takes intentionality, but I do see the transfer happen.**

”

Teachers have scaffolded this rigor across grade levels in a way that challenges students and remains mindful of which approaches may be more applicable based on grade level and age. While lower-grade teachers might use dramatic play or research centers with objects and materials to support their

teaching, those in higher grade levels adapt their strategies to be appropriate for their students' age group. Edenvale's literacy coach explained:

“

**They do a Draw and Label, and then lecturing, and then all that high-level vocabulary is leveraged throughout the unit. In a primary classroom, you'll see a lot of center work going on...So if I'm studying about what it means to be a community helper, I can dress up and role play being a community helper, so that I can use that language. In an upper-grade classroom, instead of having centers, they have research rotations where students are learning how to read and decipher statistics, maps, art, and synthesizing that information and saying things like, 'Oh, remember when we looked at that map over there? I wonder if that's connected to the piece of reading I'm doing right now.'**

”

Despite variation across grade levels, teachers have consistently incorporated creative and fun activities that keep students engaged in rigorous, standards-based content. Teachers have used SEAL strategies to incorporate movement, song, and student collaboration in their activities, keeping students engaged and helping them learn. When describing current classroom environments that have been shaped by the SEAL model, Christopher's SEAL coach said:

“

**It's definitely how it used to be before NCLB, in terms of bringing back dramatic play, bringing back the talking, bringing back the love of school, but without dumbing down the vocabulary. When we were first planning TK way back in the beginning, we were talking about the vocabulary that students would use during transportation. The supervisor was like, 'Why can't you just say car or truck?' We had to tell her, 'No, vehicle is the academic term. They should know that and they can use it in a sentence and they'll understand what it is when you explain it to them, and constantly see it in print and books and everything.' That's changed the mindset of a lot of people, too.**

”

By believing in students, holding high expectations, incorporating strategies that support student learning and growth, and making it fun, teachers have brought to life the level of rigor that SEAL demands while simultaneously supporting ELs' language development and strengthening student engagement in their learning.

## Student Collaboration

Christopher and Edenvale's teachers have created a collaborative environment for students to work with and learn from one another. Teachers at both schools have intentionally created spaces for students to brainstorm and discuss questions. They have found that providing opportunities for students to talk with one another has sparked opportunities for them to collectively tackle the same problem, which has prepared them to comfortably approach independent thinking and reflection after generating initial ideas



with their peers. At the same time, teachers have learned to use additional SEAL strategies to ensure that all students are participating and to check for engagement and comprehension. When asked about student collaboration, one of Edenvale’s teachers described the following approach:

“

I have tables of four to five. [Each] is their own team, and the team names are related to the unit. So the beginning of each new unit is like, ‘Oh, we have a new team. You get to pick a name together, you get to decorate the name together.’

So when we’re doing Earth’s Processes, I’ve got “The Geologists,” “The Seismologists.” And then they do work in those teams a lot. We do cooperative strip paragraphs where each team writes one sentence and then we come together as a class and rework the paragraph together. But the teams, each kid gets a marker and they have a different color marker. So I’m making sure that, ‘Oh, I don’t see any green. Is your other friend having a chance to write too?’ So just giving them a lot of opportunity to work in groups.

”

Like teachers at Edenvale, Christopher teachers provide students with opportunities to create together throughout their units and lessons. Classrooms have been transformed into physical learning spaces that display the work students create with one another and with their teachers. One Christopher teacher recalled the powerful collaborative learning she’s been able to facilitate and observe in her classroom:

“

So with key vocabulary words, we would do a vocabulary-in-context strategy where we’d create a poster of things. We’d ask the kids, ‘How many of you have ever heard this word?’ and tally how many kids heard and how many haven’t heard it before. It would [then] be used in a sentence and, even if they didn’t know it before, we can use this as an opportunity to read for context clues. ‘Share with your partner what you think that word means, based on how it’s used in the sentence. Let’s spell the word. Let’s clap out the word. How many syllables does this word have?’ And then we create meaning together. We decide on a shared definition. When we hear this word, this is how we’re defining it. Then we create a picture for it. Then we’d extend that definition by doing synonym work, or something to that effect. It’s just one of the ways that we could extend our learning beyond definition and picture. And then it became our signal word. So instead of saying, like, ‘When I say chips, you say salsa.’ I would say, ‘Say immigration.’ And they would say, ‘immigra...’—they would repeat the word. They would say the definition that we all agreed upon together and do the hand motions that go with it. And that was so, so powerful. I still have chills when I talk about it, because it was very effective in teaching those really key vocabulary terms. And it’s something that really stuck with them.

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## Cultural Relevance

Teachers at both school sites have built on these strategies by incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into lessons and activities. They are intentional about including individuals and stories that not only reflect students' own backgrounds but also other cultures and traditions. Teachers do their part to make sure students and families are reflected in the curriculum and content.

One of the most common ways that second-grade teachers at both Christopher and Edenvale felt they were able to establish these types of connections was through the immigration and ancestry unit, where students were given an opportunity to learn about their names and to create cultural dolls that represent their families and the traditions and customs from their homelands. Within this same unit, teachers asked students to create family trees, which prompted students to interview family members to learn about their history and relatives. Combining these lessons with SEAL strategies has supported students' learning about their own family origins. Teachers use the "Draw and Label" strategy to support students with capturing information, introducing vocabulary, and having supporting sketches and pictures; this grounds students in their work and can be revisited to reinforce their learning throughout the unit. As described by a SEAL teacher:

“

**They can refer back to [their Draw and Label for the ancestry unit] so that they're able to make connections between different groups of people, immigrants. Their stories might be different, but each of the groups had hardships. Each of the groups traveled here in a certain way. Each of the groups came for different reasons.**

”

Teachers have also incorporated students' home languages into classroom settings in ways that continue to engage family members. For example, an Edenvale teacher used a SEAL strategy to engage fourth and fifth graders in an activity that involved translating a chant into another language of each student's choice. Meanwhile, a Christopher teacher shared the following approach:

“

**In my classroom, in the pre-COVID days, we would have a morning meeting greeting. We would say hello and good morning to each other in the different languages that were represented in our classroom. We would establish the classroom as a very safe space and we would build upon practicing that so that they're familiar with the different languages. It made for a very rich place to come to, very inviting. One year I had nine different world languages represented in class. It was great because the kids felt validated, and they chose to share. And they said, 'Oh, my family's from Laos.' And then I said, 'Oh, that's so awesome. Do you know how to say good morning?' [The student responded,], 'Oh, I don't know.' I said, 'Well, I'm going to ask you to go home and ask and see if you can find out. And then when you're ready, we'll spend a week practicing.'**

”

According to Christopher's literacy coach, centering students' experiences, cultural backgrounds, and languages has allowed Oak Grove to become one of the first districts in the state to pass resolutions for

ethnic studies and diversity, equity, and inclusion. In fact, the cultural relevance embedded in the SEAL model has helped teachers bring equity and inclusion back into their classrooms. The adoption of SEAL has supported teachers' defense of the use of culturally relevant practices in their classrooms. Christopher's literacy coach explained:

“

**Our district did [previously] do work around equity, but then it disappeared, and it was like, ‘Oh, we don’t talk about that anymore.’ And then when SEAL came and everything is based on equity, especially Module 4 with ‘Windows and Mirrors’ and ‘World in the Classroom,’ some of us were just so overcome with emotion that we were like, ‘Oh my God, thank you.’ And we were like, ‘Well, SEAL says we need to be doing this.’ So it just really validated for us what we’ve known all along were best practices with inclusion and students. So I would say that they were the catalyst for that.**

”

## Family Partnership

Another major emphasis of the SEAL model is the cultivation of school-family partnerships, which are fostered in part by a SEAL strategy called Gallery Walks. Oak Grove's schools have benefited from the SEAL model's Gallery Walks, described as “end-of-unit celebrations” that invite parents to their children's classroom to see visual displays of learning that students describe to their families. Teachers at both Christopher and Edenvale described the positive ways these Gallery Walks have shifted their thoughts and approaches to family partnerships, all while strengthening parents' connections to their children's education. Gallery Walks have helped teachers feel more comfortable interacting with families because they anchor these interactions to students' learning and development. One of Edenvale's teachers described it this way:

“

**[During] my first year teaching, when I didn't do SEAL, I didn't know what I would [do to get] families into [the classrooms]. That idea was really nerve-wracking. But with SEAL, there's the idea of a Gallery Walk at the end of each unit where the whole purpose is to invite in our families and other classes to have the students really show off what they learned. And those Gallery Walks have become a big deal. I let the students create the invitation, invite someone special. And I've started doing two Gallery Walks, a morning one and an afternoon one, so that grown-ups who can't come in the afternoon can come in the morning. Because it is a big deal to a lot of students.**

”

In addition, Christopher Elementary School added 30-minute parent workshops prior to Gallery Walks as a means to strengthen relationships and communication with families. Christopher staff adopted this strategy from Miner Elementary, a former demonstration site that recently closed. Initially the workshops were meant to inform parents of updates or sessions that the school thought were important for families. They have since evolved to give parents opportunities to voice topics of interest, and school staff have

been able to tailor the workshops accordingly. For example, Christopher staff recently addressed parents' interest in social emotional learning. The school's literacy teacher described the evolution of the workshops:

“

We learned to have a workshop a half an hour before the Gallery Walk, because the parents would be coming to the school anyway. At first they started out as topics, such as how to do a Read-Aloud with your child, that can keep them engaged. And then we would do the five-exchange conversation. SEAL is very good about giving you these ideas and topics. And then they would even give us the slide deck. And then we would make them our own. As the years went on, we surveyed our parents, [and] they really wanted [sessions on] 'how to make sure my child turns in their homework.' The topics shifted. And we even did workshops around positive parenting. But that's because we created that culture of trust with the parents.

”

This approach has not only given families another opportunity to connect with the school, it has also created an initial channel of communication between parents and school administrators and an opportunity for school staff to show they are receptive to the needs of community members.

Using SEAL strategies and lessons, Christopher and Edenvale teachers are able to prompt families to be an integral part of their children's learning processes. Students engage and discuss what they are learning in the classroom with their families, and this provides them with an opportunity to transfer it into the home. It also keeps parents informed about what their child is learning. Christopher's SEAL coach explained:

“

I've had parents contact me as a coach like, 'How can I help support teachers in this implementation? My kindergartener is constantly talking about [activities] that they've done for the Civil Rights Movement unit, and they love it.' The family home-school bridge connections, the way it's changed homework, has really brought families and students together to talk more about what they're learning and involving the family more. And especially when they do those projects [at home] and they bring them to school, then during the Gallery Walks and they're sharing all of that, it's fun.

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## SEAL Outcomes

SEAL has had widespread impact in the Oak Grove School District, both on students and on the school culture at Edenvale and Christopher Elementary Schools.

## Student Level

The SEAL model has helped students across Edenvale and Christopher feel a sense of connection with and excitement about learning. They are eager to engage with their teachers and with the content that is being discussed. This creates an inclusive and welcoming learning environment that allows everyone to thrive. The district's ESD coordinator described this effect:

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**At the classroom level, there is really a sense of joy from the kids and the teachers...When I [heard] the students say, 'At our next Gallery Walk, my friend's parents are going to come, and they don't speak English, they speak Thai. We should have information on our walls in Thai.' And that came from the students. When they were doing projects around the census, the students said, 'Yeah, we have all of the gender banners and flags and LGBTQ flags because they need to be included.' So that sense of belonging, that 'Windows and Mirrors' module of training really brought that to the forefront. And where it was embraced and implemented deeply, it makes a world of difference.**

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In addition to reigniting a sense of joy around learning, district and school staff noted that students are more confident in their academic abilities. Much of this is due to the way that classrooms transform into learning hubs that constantly reinforce the content and vocabulary being taught in the current unit. One of Christopher's teachers spoke about the impact that SEAL had on one of her fourth-grade students:

“

**I have a student that is my example. When we started this school year, she was reading in Spanish. She was reading at second-grade level, and now she's reading at Level 4...I was like, 'Oh, my gosh.' I celebrate those things every day...In math, she's another person. In the beginning, she didn't talk. She was very shy. She didn't want to share anything. Now she's there. She shares. She speaks up. She's another person. Those [are the] kids that really boost your passion for teaching.**

”

The scaffolding and support is an integral part of the SEAL model that teachers have implemented in the classroom, and this has increased student reclassification rates and engagement at both school sites. Notably, these results are seen and celebrated by school staff and parents who recognize the value-add of SEAL. A teacher from Christopher recalled her experience as a first-year SEAL teacher supporting her second-grade class:

“

**I honestly think—because the scaffolds that we have in place, and because they have access to information everywhere they look around the room—that they could talk about it and they could write about it...It was addressing their academic needs so that they had the support there to do what I was asking of them, like to break words apart, to put them back together. And then being able to transfer some of those skills at a very high level.**

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Many of these student-level outcomes would not have been achieved without the school-level impact that SEAL had at both Christopher and Edenvale.

## School Level

The principals at Christopher and Edenvale both noted that becoming demonstration sites held them to a higher standard in terms of SEAL implementation. With the knowledge that other sites would be looking to them for how to best implement the model, they felt accountable for elevating the pedagogy and instruction of teachers. As such, the public and visible nature of being demonstration sites built in additional expectations around embracing SEAL.

Both schools saw an increase in reclassification rates among their students—an outcome that matched district-level data throughout the Oak Grove School District’s SEAL sites. Edenvale’s principal elaborated on the positive impacts that SEAL had throughout the district:

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**My school has improved every year on the [California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress] test, and in terms of designating more students fluent English proficient. We’ve seen a lot of academic shifts in the positive. We have built up our bilingual team from a TK to third [grade], to a TK to sixth [grade team]. We have stabilized the staff. People want to transfer to Edenvale. We’re a school that’s sort of a destination site, not just because we’re a demo site for SEAL, although that has certainly added to the draw of Edenvale. But I think the work that the teachers have done over the years has built a reputation that this is one of the best Title I schools in California...So I think it’s changed our reputation. It’s changed the trajectory of our academic results and outcomes for students. I think it’s built a lot of pride in both [sic] the teachers, families, [and] students.**

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Beyond reclassification rates, both schools’ principals described the impact that SEAL has had on teacher preparation and growth. According to Christopher’s principal, teachers learned how to support language development and vocabulary through implementation of a rigorous curriculum. Edenvale’s principal had a similar reflection and described how teachers were able to develop curricula using their own expertise and ideas, with the support of SEAL trainers and coaches; this allowed for a more organic implementation effort across the school’s classrooms:

“

**We really have a learners’ culture, where we as a staff are willing to try things out. And when things work, the teachers are adept at spreading and doing the teaching for one another, and it catches on like wildfire because it’s not something that’s coming down from the principal.**

”

## SEAL Implementation and Challenges

Implementation in Oak Grove has not been without its trials. Some of the most challenging circumstances that district and school staff have had to respond to were the need to reduce the number of coaches due to budget reductions, school closures, and competing initiatives.

### Reductions in Coaches

In 2018, as a result of budget constraints, the district cut half of the ELTP coaches tasked with SEAL implementation, reducing the number from 14 to six. In this new configuration, every coach was responsible for two or more schools and have additional duties beyond their role as SEAL coaches. Although Olsen originally envisioned SEAL coaches could cover two schools, the reduction in this support posed a challenge, as not all of the unit development, material preparation, and organization had been completed. While the number of SEAL coaches is less critical in later stages of implementation, the reduction has contributed to a reduced capacity and greater workload among the coaches. One coach shared that the remaining coaches were split in various ways—supervising student groups, supporting English Language Proficiency Assessments for California testers and school administrators, and often serving as substitute teachers.

This reduction, coupled with Edenvale’s high turnover rate, has also meant that new teachers starting the two-year SEAL training period have less coaching support than those who began during the first five years of SEAL implementation. It has also influenced new teachers’ ability to fully buy into the SEAL model, as they often said they have felt like they were “going in blind” to SEAL training. One staff member at Edenvale described how SEAL trainers and coaches oriented them to what their training would look like over the next few years, though delays in training and a prolonged rollout of modules as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have caused some new teachers to feel frustrated. School staff shared that one thing these challenges have demonstrated is the importance of establishing a strong school culture that embraces SEAL so that all teachers, including new ones, can rely on one another for additional support.

### School Closures

School closures were a second challenge to SEAL implementation in the district. As a result of declining enrollment, two elementary schools—Miner (a former SEAL demonstration site) and Glider—were closed in 2018. Several teachers from these two schools were transferred to other school sites that were not officially implementing SEAL. Since educators from the two closed schools had already been trained in SEAL and embraced the model in their classrooms, they continued implementing it at their new schools, despite the lack of continuity across and within grade levels. According to the ESD director, these schools began “seeing some organic kind of spreading...maybe not throughout the whole school at these sites, but at least in the grade levels of where those teachers came in.” She further explained how the collaborative and integrative nature of SEAL has trickled into other classrooms:

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**What we are seeing is those teachers who were teaching at Glider and moved to Taylor once the school was consolidated—which was not implementing SEAL. As they’re going to Taylor and doing the lessons and units, some of their colleagues were like, ‘That looks really interesting. What is that? Can we learn more about that?’ So we’re starting to see some of those individual teachers organically grow implementation at their grade level.**

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This organic spreading of SEAL speaks to the strength and lasting impact of SEAL professional learning, which targets not only teachers, but also coaches and administrators at the school site and district level. An important part of the model is collaboration across sites and cohorts, so that teachers work with others in their grade across schools. Several district and school interviewees shared that the strong partnership between SEAL and the district, coupled with the professional development offered to district and school staff, fostered a strong understanding of the importance of the model and established multiple prongs of support. The SEAL staff assigned to the district, who are in constant communication with district staff, have helped embed the model into professional development structures and interactions. According to one coach, it felt like “I’m part of SEAL and [they’re] part of the district.” Other teachers and school staff believed the professional development component of SEAL was well thought out and delivered.

## Competing Initiatives

In addition to school closures, several district and school staff noted that when the district adopted SEAL there were already other district and school initiatives in place. According to the ESD director, this created ambiguity around what should be prioritized and how to integrate the various initiatives so they would all be implemented with fidelity. For example, schools began implementing the Engage New York curriculum but did not always understand how to incorporate SEAL:

“

**A lot of times teachers would tell us, ‘We’re supposed to implement these foundational skills, but it’s running into my SEAL time.’ We’ve been trying to show [teachers] how things can get incorporated throughout [the curriculum] and not [just during] SEAL time. SEAL [can occur] throughout your day.**

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Key to mitigating these concerns was strong and clear guidance from school administrators about priorities coupled with an explicit statement that the school should be integrating SEAL into all aspects of instruction and curriculum. Clarity from administrators has helped school staff and teachers navigate priorities. While SEAL training is clearly seen as a priority, one coach believed that district leadership could have been more explicit about telling teachers that once they are trained they should prioritize SEAL implementation in their instruction.



# Facilitators and Lessons Learned

In this section, we highlight lessons learned, including factors that facilitated SEAL implementation in the Oak Grove School District and implications for other districts seeking to implement the model. District and school staff identified several conditions that have supported their ability to successfully adopt and implement SEAL. These include strong support from district leaders, a robust initial cohort of SEAL coaches, ongoing professional development, and teacher involvement in school decisions.

- **Strong support at the district level was key to adoption and successful implementation of SEAL.** Two of Oak Grove’s district leaders were critical in bringing SEAL to the district. They advocated for and fully believed in the model, which created a ripple effect to other district staff and school personnel who were exposed to it. Having leaders who believe in and defend the SEAL model at the district level has been crucial to ensuring that schools are provided with the necessary funding and structures and that educators are provided with the resources and support to successfully learn about SEAL and implement it in their classrooms.

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**Having a champion at the district office was critical to SEAL success. [The district staff member’s] ability to loop in and bring on board the right people, including district administrators, the superintendent, the board, as well as site administrators. She did a lot to keep SEAL front and center. She ran the principal meetings every month, she brought together all those coaches once a week, and had really intentional meetings that were primarily focused on SEAL.**

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- **Identifying SEAL champions at the school level can further promote SEAL among colleagues.** In addition to district-level staff, Oak Grove was able to create buy-in and support from teachers across its school sites, particularly through its visits to SEAL demonstration sites. This generated interest and excitement among teachers, who came back to their home schools and shared information with their colleagues about the model. In the words of a SEAL staff member:

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**They would bring lead teachers and teachers who were influential in some way or another amongst their staff, and that created good momentum and good buy-in.**

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- **District leaders included school staff from the beginning of SEAL adoption and centered their voices during implementation, which strengthened the belief in and sustainability of the model.** School staff were included and consulted prior to moving forward with decisions that would directly impact their work. For example, Edenvale became a demonstration site only after its teachers felt they were ready to fully focus on growth and implementation of the model—a decision that the principal also supported.
- **Including bilingual teachers in planning and implementation strengthened curriculum development and collaboration.** One of Oak Grove’s biggest advantages was tapping into the expertise and knowledge of its bilingual educators. Given their primary focus on students in bilingual programs, these staff can often feel excluded from larger school-based decisions.

Bilingual teachers understand the importance of language acquisition and are well versed in strategies and approaches that are grounded in the same research as SEAL. Thus, these educators could support school sites like Christopher and Edenvale that were interested in establishing continuity in curriculum and content across grade levels. They participated in collaborative creation sessions with teachers from other grades and schools, which arguably established a stronger curriculum alignment and peer network.

- **Having a full-time, onsite SEAL coach promoted successful implementation and sustainability of the SEAL model across multiple school sites.** Oak Grove initially had a literacy coach at each of its Title I schools and an ELTP coach at each of its SEAL sites, all of whom also served as SEAL coaches. The district had a larger number of coaches compared to other districts that also adopted SEAL, which allowed staff to build trust and rapport with leaders and staff at their respective school sites while reducing the overall workload that coaches must manage. Christopher and Edenvale leaders found that it was most helpful to have an onsite coach who was a part of their school staff because this individual could be attentive to the school’s needs. Since the district was forced to reduce the number of SEAL coaches due to budget cuts, school leaders and staff have found that some elements of SEAL—particularly those that fall under the coaches’ responsibilities, like ordering or preparing materials for lessons—have been impacted.
- **Offering additional professional development opportunities for teachers improved their confidence and classroom instruction.** Oak Grove leaders were aware of the advantages that teachers felt from being in collaborative workspaces with opportunities to design SEAL curriculum and lessons. Giving teachers time to work together and prepare their unit lessons has supported SEAL success. In recognition of this, and in response to teachers’ requests to have additional time to practice and prepare, Oak Grove offered teachers an additional year to participate in the SEAL Summer Bridge program even after their two years of training were complete. This gave them an opportunity to further practice their strategies during the summer and boosted their confidence and skills, which they transferred into their classrooms during the school year. A member of SEAL’s staff explained the benefits of this approach:

“

In Oak Grove, they offered [teachers] multiple years [of Summer Bridge], even when they were past their formal years of training, which we know is a huge benefit to a teacher’s competence with SEAL and usually a greater indication that they’ll continue to use those strategies and implement SEAL in their classroom because they practice them in that [summer] environment.

”

- **Adopting the SEAL model across all grade levels at a given school sustains and promotes students’ learning while aligning a school’s curriculum.** The Oak Grove School District worked with SEAL and the district’s schools to train and grow the model across grade levels. SEAL’s training has helped Christopher and Edenvale adopt the model up to the sixth grade, and Christopher’s principal and coaches are attempting to expand the model into seventh and eighth grade on their own, which means that students are being exposed to similar strategies and learning environments across multiple years. As a result of the collaboration and communication that stems from aligning curriculum across grades, teachers are aware of what units and vocabulary the students have worked on and what levels they are at. This allows teachers to more effectively build on students’ existing knowledge.

# Conclusion

The Oak Grove School District engaged principals and educators from the beginning of its exploration and learning of the SEAL model, which generated early buy-in from staff and supported a smoother adoption of the model. With the support of SEAL's trainers, Oak Grove built a strong coaching network, comprised of literacy and ELTP coaches, which maximized the support that teachers had during the initial planning and continuous implementation of the model across school sites. Further, the district gave teachers flexibility and empowerment around curriculum development, included them in school decisions, and increased their professional development opportunities to hone in on and build their confidence around SEAL strategies. Oak Grove successfully integrated the SEAL model into its work because of its district leaders who had a clear vision and strong belief in the approach, its network of SEAL coaches who supported implementation across sites, and its teachers who felt valued and heard throughout the development of the model. This also contributed to the expansion of the SEAL model to other grade levels and non-Title I schools, which increased the number of students ultimately served by SEAL's approach. Oak Grove fully invested in the adoption of SEAL in a way that has facilitated its integration into institutional policies and practices throughout the district. District and school staff are seeing the impacts of these investments directly on their students who are more engaged with their peers and school, and are more eager to learn.

## End Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> Because the SEAL model includes preschools, SEAL uses both terms (Dual Language Learners [DLLs] and English Learners [ELs]) as well as the combined acronym (DLLs/ELs) to refer to the primary population the model was designed to serve. The EL term is statutorily defined and refers to K–12 students who meet state and federal criteria and are learning English while simultaneously learning academic content in school. The DLL term is less consistently defined. In this case, it refers to preschool-aged children who come from homes where a language other than English is spoken.
- <sup>ii</sup> The Sobrato Family Foundation is now called Sobrato Philanthropies.
- <sup>iii</sup> Oak Grove School District. (n.d.). *About us*. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from <https://www.ogsd.net/our-district/about-us>
- <sup>iv</sup> California Department of Education. (n.d.). *District profile: Oak Grove elementary*. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sdprofile/details.aspx?cde=43696250000000>
- <sup>v</sup> Oak Grove School District. (n.d.). *About us*. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from <https://www.ogsd.net/our-district/about-us>
- <sup>vi</sup> California Department of Education. (n.d.). *2019–20 enrollment by ethnicity: Oak Grove elementary (Report no. 43-69625)*. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/enrethlevels.aspx?agglevel=District&year=2019-20&cde=4369625>
- <sup>vii</sup> California Department of Education. (n.d.). *2019–20 English learner students by language by grade: Oak Grove elementary (Report no. 43-69625)*. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/SpringData/StudentsByLanguage.aspx?Level=District&TheYear=2019-20&SubGroup=All&ShortYear=1920&GenderGroup=B&RecordType=EL&CDSCode=43696250000000>
- <sup>viii</sup> California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Selected district-level data (4369625): Oak Grove elementary for the year 2011–12*. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/cbeds3.asp?cYear=2011-12&Enroll=on&PctEL=on&PctFEP=on&PctRe=on&cSelect=4369625—Oak%5Egrove%5EElementary&cChoice=DstProf1>
- <sup>ix</sup> Center for Equity for English Learners, Loyola Marymount University, & Wexford Institute. (2020). *Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) model: Final report of findings from a four-year study*. <https://doi.org/10.15365/ceel.seal2020>
- <sup>x</sup> Oak Grove School District. (2021, June 23). *Local Control Accountability Plan*. <https://www.ogsd.net/our-district/lcap>
- <sup>xi</sup> California Department of Education. (n.d.). *School profile: Edenvale Elementary*. Retrieved November 22, 2021, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sdprofile/details.aspx?cde=43696256048128>; California Department of Education. (2021, January 8). *Edenvale Elementary 2019–2020 School Accountability Report Card*. <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1630360595/ogsdnet/o5tfzy3fb6plebpi63e0/EdenvaleSARC19-20.pdf>
- <sup>xii</sup> California Department of Education. (n.d.). *English learner students by language by grade: Edenvale Elementary (4369625-6048128), 2019–20*. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from

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<https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/SpringData/StudentsByLanguage.aspx?Level=School&TheYear=2019-20&SubGroup=All&ShortYear=1920&GenderGroup=B&RecordType=EL&CDSCode=43696256048128>

- <sup>xiii</sup> California Department of Education. (n.d.). *School profile: Christopher Elementary*. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sdprofile/details.aspx?cde=43696256048102>; California Department of Education. (2021, January 8). *Christopher Elementary 2019–2020 School Accountability Report Card*. <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1630360594/ogsdnet/pyqewllxpoizsuoqeyld/ChristopherSARC19-20.pdf>
- <sup>xiv</sup> California Department of Education. (n.d.). *English learner students by language by grade: Christopher Elementary (4369625-6048102), 2019–20*. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/SpringData/StudentsByLanguage.aspx?Level=School&TheYear=2019-20&SubGroup=All&ShortYear=1920&GenderGroup=B&RecordType=EL&CDSCode=43696256048102>