

Overview: The SEAL Model and Its Implementation Across Three Exemplar Districts

By Enrique Romero and Heather Lewis-Charp



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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 educational leaders, equipping them to deliver high-quality education to Dual Language Learners (DLLs) and English Learners (ELs)ⁱ in preschool and elementary school. The model was launched in 2008, when the Sobrato Family Foundation (SFF)ⁱⁱ 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 to develop in-depth case studies of Redwood City School District, Oak Grove School District, and Mountain View School District, three exemplar districts that adapted SEAL to fit their unique contexts and, in doing so, addressed implementation challenges. These case studies provide detailed examples of how districts supported implementation during SEAL’s replication phase (2013–2018) and describe the districts’ approaches to getting teacher and school leader buy-in, funding the initiative, and providing ongoing professional development. They also profile implementation at select district schools as examples of SEAL instructional practices and outcomes.

By providing detailed information on district- and school-level implementation of SEAL, these case studies complement a recent multi-year evaluation, conducted by Loyola Marymount University’s Center for Equity for English Learners and Wexford Institute, which found that SEAL positively influenced instructional practices, student engagement, and academic outcomes.ⁱⁱⁱ Combined, this research provides a picture of what education systems change looks like when an assets-based and research-based approach to learning for ELs/DLLs is applied.

As a companion piece to the case studies, this overview describes the SEAL model, including its origin story, its central design principles, the staffing and professional development structure, and highlights from its pilot and expansion efforts. It also provides a glimpse of SEAL implementation after the replication phase, before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all aspects of our society and had profound impacts on schools across the country. The overview concludes with a discussion of key learnings from the implementation experiences of the three case study districts and the implications for school districts and policymakers seeking to implement SEAL.

Founding Story and the Pilot Phase

A catalyzing force behind the development of the SEAL model was better addressing the educational needs of ELs/DLLs (ELs’ preschool-aged counterparts) in California, particularly in light of increased evidence of educational inequity experienced by long-term EL students and the state’s political challenges concerning bilingual education. California’s Hispanic/Latinx population has been growing steadily and, since 1996, Hispanic/Latinx students have been the largest racial/ethnic group in the state’s education system, comprising approximately 50% of the student body.^{iv} Meanwhile, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have consistently comprised approximately 11% of the student population.

The changing demographics within California’s schools resulted in a substantial number of ELs in classrooms. In the 2006–2007 school year, before SEAL was launched, about 25% of the state’s students

were considered ELs—a percentage that has remained relatively constant across the years, based on state data.^v At the time, the primary language for 85% of ELs was Spanish, followed by Vietnamese, Filipino, Cantonese, Hmong, and Korean. There was a corresponding increase in the number of DLLs (children up to age 5 who speak a language other than English at home), many of whom performed lower than monolingual English-speaking students on Kindergarten readiness and scored lower on reading and math assessments.^{vi} Persistently low achievement outcomes among California students who had ever been classified as ELs compared to their monolingual English-speaking peers demonstrated a pressing need to provide these students with a learning environment that focused on English-language development using more targeted practices and a rigorous curriculum.^{vii}

Politically, the changing demographics across the state and within California’s classrooms gave rise to Proposition 227,^{viii} which shifted the vast majority of classrooms to English-only instruction. Though it was thought that placing ELs—then referred to as Limited English Proficient students—in English-only classrooms would improve their English-language proficiency, research has shown that English-only classrooms were not producing the academic results desired and in fact were harmful to students’ academic growth. Compared to their non-Hispanic White peers, Hispanic/Latinx students had substantially lower graduation rates (84% vs. 68%, respectively) and their dropout rate was almost twice as high (11% vs. 21%).^{ix} Olsen, SEAL’s founder and an expert in EL education, shared the following reflection of the context the state was in:

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There were multiple contributions to how and why [the SEAL model] started, all of them historically situated in that particular moment where California was deep in an English-only era, English-only policy for English Learners. The research was just increasingly clear that what was going on in California schools was flying in the face of what research suggested and what we knew were the right things to do.

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SFF became interested in addressing the inequity in educational opportunity that Hispanic/Latinx students in Silicon Valley, particularly those learning English in school, were facing. SFF consulted with Olsen to gauge how she would approach this problem. Through this collaboration, Olsen saw a need and an opportunity to create a model rooted in research-based evidence that could meet the academic needs of ELs. As she explained:

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There was definitely a need to figure out, how can we provide the field with some kind of model of what education should look like, that's really research-based for English Learners, and to do it in a way that was not just about, 'Let's try this out and research it, but let's offer people a look at what it is.' So the intention of both creating a model and then creating a model that had some visibility that could impact a field was always really important.

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The partnership between SFF and Olsen led to the creation of the SEAL model, designed to develop the language and literacy skills of Pre-Kindergarten (PK) through third grade DLLs/ELs.

Piloting the SEAL Model

SFF and Olsen began looking for districts with a high population of DLLs/ELs that were willing to pilot the SEAL model. It was particularly challenging to recruit school districts to serve as pilot sites, as SEAL’s approach contradicted forms of teaching that educators were accustomed to using throughout their years of English-only classroom instruction and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era. Olsen recalled this experience:

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I had to find districts that were willing to let us do something that was really counter to policy and common practice. The task in starting SEAL was to articulate the research in a way that people could hear and understand it at a time where all of the noise in the field was counter to what we were talking about. So, when I said that [SEAL’s] bilingualism was going to be a big piece of what I would do, [the districts] were very taken aback. When I went to districts and [mentioned] that what we would want would be thematic curriculum with language [development] embedded in and throughout it, and they were deeply invested in purchased state adopted curriculum...it was a very hard sell and hard to find the districts.

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Despite these initial challenges, in 2008 Olsen was able to recruit two California school districts—Redwood City and San Jose—to serve as SEAL pilot sites. These districts agreed to pilot the model because they had a significant need to better support their EL students and district staff were advocating for improved education for ELs.

SFF and Olsen were committed to providing the pilot districts with the necessary support and resources to test out elements of the model and create the type of supportive learning environment that research showed was most impactful for ELs. This included starting early, with DLLs in preschool, aligning and strengthening instructional practices across the PK through third grade continuum for both DLLs/ELs. District leaders, school staff, Olsen, and a consultant, Jennifer Diehl (who later became SEAL’s Director of Innovation and Strategic Design), were involved in determining the right research-based elements and resources to include as part of the SEAL model to create enriching classrooms that would support ELs’ development. As such, the process was supplemented by many supports that were funded by SFF. Olsen described working on the pilot as a very hands-on endeavor:

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The original pilot was very hands-on because we were figuring out the model. We were in the classrooms all the time. We were working with the teachers in a [high] level of intensity. We also provided a lot of stuff to the schools—a lot of materials, a lot of enrichment. Some of that was because it was our notion of what curriculum should be, [a] really rich environment [with] rich materials. Teachers were excited by having that support. Teachers were excited about being able to do field trips. Teachers were excited about being able to do this.

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Promising Early Outcomes

Over the course of its pilot from 2008 to 2014, the SEAL model demonstrated initial success and promising results for DLLs as well as on ELs’ language acquisition and academic performance.^x Even after its first pilot year, school staff began to notice differences in how PK students from SEAL classrooms transitioned to Kindergarten. As Olsen recalled:

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We were able to show growth even in the preschool year, and then those kids entering Kindergarten [was] sort of the buzz in the district about how prepared they were and how impressive they were, [which] began to filter out. We didn't really have results from the evaluation that we released in any kind of way until those kids were in first grade. But by that time the growth was pretty impressive and it was sufficient to convince people that it was a worthwhile model to try.

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The pilot evaluation, conducted by Kathryn Lindholm-Leary, revealed promising results for students, teachers, and families. For one, students in SEAL classrooms demonstrated significant growth in their language, literacy, mathematics, and cognitive and social development in both English and Spanish based on various testing instruments. Additionally, third- and fourth-grade SEAL students obtained similar or higher test results on California’s English Language Development Test and its Standards Test compared to students receiving English-only instruction. Most teachers implemented SEAL at a relatively high level once they had two years of experience with the model. Finally, the evaluation found that SEAL impacted how often parents engaged in literacy-related activities at home, increasing parent partnership in student learning.

These outcomes affirmed the model’s credibility and that of the research upon which it was based. As other districts heard about these promising outcomes, they became interested in learning more about

and implementing the model. This led SFF and Olsen to shift their attention toward replication of the SEAL model.

The Replication Phase

As a result of the promising outcomes from the evaluation of the SEAL model pilot, SFF and Olsen decided to replicate and evaluate the model in more sites across the state. In the end, the replication effort and evaluation encompassed 67 schools across 12 districts that began implementation between 2013 and 2015.

The replication of the SEAL model was based on the learnings that emerged from the on-the-ground implementation and overall evaluation of the pilot program. For example, in order to have the most impact on students' growth, the growing SEAL team changed how they selected school districts, focusing not just on those with need but also on those with a desire and commitment to support the model. In the words of Olsen:

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We learned something about choosing our districts [from the pilot]—that what was really important if we wanted to impact a field was to find places where the model could be supported, and could thrive, and could live with some fidelity to what we were trying to do. So, our criteria for looking for districts became different for the next period of time. And we knew that part of the job then was not just [to] implement in those places, but to document, to do videos, to bring visitors too.

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The SEAL model's approach to teacher training during replication was also influenced by the learning that came from the pilot evaluation. Because teachers had a fairly high level of implementation after two years of experience with SEAL, the model included two-year professional development cycles for PK through third-grade teachers. Additionally, the model was continuously refined during the pilot phase—and to a lesser extent during replication—as districts took ownership of key elements and shifted aspects of the model to meet their own local conditions and needs.

One key factor that facilitated effective SEAL replication was the shift away from NCLB to the Common Core. Under NCLB, schools and teachers had become accustomed to creating classroom environments focused on test taking. The Common Core contributed to the shift away from a myopic focus on standardized testing toward building critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills. This national shift in education created an opportunity for the SEAL model to support schools with the creation of a curriculum that addressed the main components of the Common Core in ways that also centered and supported EL development. Olsen explained:

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Luckily, two things happened very quickly as we began working with these districts. One was the switch from NCLB to the Common Core, and just an overall exhaustion with NCLB... And with the adoption of the Common Core and new frameworks, et cetera, there wasn't yet curriculum being sold. So there was this little window that enabled us to answer the curriculum dilemma for districts by saying, 'We'll work with your teachers to create curriculum that is standards-based to the Common Core.'

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The SEAL model and those supporting its implementation in the early years came to be viewed as a resource that helped school staff understand the Common Core. According to Olsen, the SEAL model was seen as “an interpreter and disseminator” of research and information. The model played an important role in helping various school staff interpret and understand the standards of the Common Core by “putting it in practitioner terms,” which gave it a positive reputation among the districts that used it. SEAL implementation became more feasible for districts after the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)^{xi} came into effect. LCFF allowed districts to distribute and target funding towards students who needed the most support, including ELs. As such, the SEAL model was primed for effective replication because of its promising outcomes, ease of alignment with Common Core, and available funding for implementation through LCFF.

The SEAL team was also intentional about its framing of issues around literacy and language in order to avoid negative reactions to bilingualism that were (and still are) part of the political landscape. Olsen discussed how she and other SEAL leaders described the model in ways that could appeal to as many individuals as possible without getting lost or intertwined within the English-only versus bilingual education debate:

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We needed to have a different way to talk about language and literacy, rather than fall into the old battles over it. And so talking about rich, powerful, expressive, academic language was a way to sweep in the notion that we're talking about language for the purposes of an integrated academic learning. The [use of] 'rich, powerful, expressive' was because in another time we might've talked about the importance of language as voice, language for purposes of personal expression. But by weaving that together with academic language, we felt [it] could be heard. [And it] took it out of the bailiwick of what was then the real entrenched battles in the field [over bilingual education].

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To support SEAL replication, Olsen began growing the SEAL team, first as consultants and later as staff.^{xii} During the pilot phase, a group of three to five individuals worked on the model. This grew to a staff of 25—primarily trainers who supported replication efforts. Jennifer Diehl, who had worked closely with Olsen in the pilot, began collaborating to develop the formal training modules. Moreover, the pilot phase helped illuminate the need for systemic changes and supports at the school and district levels to help teachers embrace and implement the kinds of instructional changes the SEAL model expected. Thus, other key staff roles were added to the SEAL team to ensure strong partnerships with districts and to strengthen the role of district and school leaders throughout SEAL implementation. Patty Delaney, SEAL’s Director of Program and Partnerships, explained:

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Building the site and district leadership piece was essential to our replication efforts to ensure they understood the model and their role within implementation and sustainability. To do this, we knew we needed additional staff specifically dedicated to working with district and site leaders. We realized this was critical to replicating the model in multiple different contexts. This really set SEAL apart from other programs, since oftentimes we work with teachers and leaders separately.

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Key Findings from the Replication Evaluation

In partnership with Loyola Marymount University’s Center for Equity for English Learners and Wexford Institute, SEAL completed an external evaluation of its replication model. The four-year study, conducted between 2015 and 2019, found that SEAL implementation had a favorable impact on instructional practices and student learning. SEAL teachers significantly increased their use of research-based classroom practices and reported an overall positive impact on their knowledge and skills to instruct ELs. Moreover, more than 90% of district and school leaders agreed that the model’s approach led to instructional improvements and increased engagement among ELs. These practices created more interactive classrooms for students and a more rigorous and relevant curriculum, which promoted students’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Notably, the evaluation also found higher levels of implementation among SEAL teachers in bilingual classrooms.

In addition to instructional practices, the evaluation reported improvements in student outcomes. For example, second- through fourth-grade EL students in SEAL classrooms showed similar or greater English proficiency development when compared to same-grade ELs who were not in SEAL classrooms. Additionally, third- and fourth-grade ELs in SEAL classrooms scored at the two highest levels of proficiency on the annual EL assessment or were reclassified as fluent English proficient. This was a notable pattern of growth considering that the majority of these students scored at the two lowest levels of proficiency in Kindergarten. Finally, PK and Transitional Kindergarten students in SEAL classrooms showed significant

improvement in their language fluency in both English and Spanish across pre- and post-assessments focused on oral language fluency and pre-literacy.

Overall, the evaluation of SEAL’s replication showed positive changes in instructional practices that better equipped schools and teachers to support DLLs/ELs with their language and academic development and to provide a more joyful and engaging educational experience for these students. The evaluation findings alluded to the changes in district and school systems that took place throughout replication and implementation to obtain these results. The case studies further explore these changes to better illustrate how the SEAL model can support districts in systems change that centers ELs/DLLs.

The next section describes key elements of the SEAL model during the replication phase, including the roles of key staff on the SEAL team and within SEAL sites in supporting implementation.

SEAL Model: Design, Components, and Staffing

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SEAL is about changing education for English Learners. It's about the conversation it's able to engender in the field, and in policy. It's about the picture of what education could be...and to show that it's possible for this to be.

–Laurie Olsen, SEAL’s Founder

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The SEAL model is designed to build the capacity of preschools and elementary schools to develop the language and literacy skills of DLLs/ELs and to deliver language-rich, joyful, and rigorous education for all children. The model’s approach is based on three research foundations: preventing long-term ELs; enacting effective practices for serving linguistically diverse students and their families; and addressing the demands of 21st-century academic standards. These foundations undergird the four pillars of the model: focusing on academic language; creating enriching learning environments; articulating across grades and aligning within school systems; and fostering strong family–educator partnerships. These four pillars are upheld through 11 pedagogical practices that educators use to implement the SEAL model in their classrooms.^{xiii}

The SEAL model’s approach to implementation includes a strong infrastructure of professional development and support for district leaders, school principals and other site leaders, and teachers. In addition to a two-year teacher training cycle, SEAL provides professional development and technical assistance via its Summer Bridge Program, Convenings, Instructional Rounds, and informal check-ins with instructional and administrative school personnel at SEAL sites. Key to this work are SEAL staff with deep expertise in EL/DLL education (including trainers, a Coach-Facilitator, and District Relations Administrators [DRAs]) who provide this professional development and technical assistance. District-based SEAL coaches are also integral to the success of SEAL implementation at their respective sites. Lastly, demonstration site visits offer prospective SEAL partners and other interested parties a glimpse of what SEAL looks like in the classroom. These visits, along with Instructional Rounds, also reinforce and deepen SEAL

implementation among SEAL partners. Each element plays an integral role in creating the systems needed to support SEAL implementation at the classroom, school, and district levels.

SEAL Model Components and Staffing

SEAL’s trainers, Coach-Facilitator, and DRAs are experts on the SEAL model who work directly with district and school staff to support them with implementation. Trainers lead professional development “training modules” for teachers and coaches during which they share research and unpack the instructional model, and participants see instructional strategies and lessons modeled within classrooms. SEAL’s Coach-Facilitator leads Coach Convenings to prepare district-based SEAL coaches to model SEAL teaching strategies and to lead unit development days with teachers.

The Summer Bridge Program is an optional and highly recommended intensive professional development opportunity for teachers that offers enriched language development for children. With the support of SEAL staff and district-based SEAL coaches, teachers deepen their SEAL teaching expertise by co-teaching with grade-adjacent peers (e.g., a Kindergarten teacher is paired with a first-grade teacher). They observe and support one another in practicing new strategies that they can then carry over to improve SEAL implementation during the school year. (See “SEAL Model Teacher Professional Development Series” text box for more details about the teacher training cycle and its relationship to Coach Convenings and the Summer Bridge Program.) Additionally, SEAL trainers work in pairs and typically complete classroom walkthroughs annually with DRAs and the district’s SEAL coaches to provide teachers with feedback on what is being implemented well and how to improve their strategies. Doing so strengthens their confidence and their ability to implement the SEAL model.

SEAL’s DRAs work closely with district and site leaders to help them understand their role within the implementation process and to contextualize the model for their schools and communities. One way in which this work is addressed is via SEAL Convenings, which may be organized and led by DRAs, trainers, and/or the Coach-Facilitator. (See the “SEAL Convenings” text box for more details about this

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 coach-facilitators 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.

component.) In addition to SEAL Convenings, SEAL coaches and principals attend Instructional Rounds where they observe SEAL classrooms in other districts. The purpose of these gatherings is to sharpen their understanding of what SEAL instruction should look like and to collaborate on how to strengthen SEAL instruction and implementation in their respective schools. Some of the SEAL Convenings and Instructional Rounds are focused on bilingual educators in order to support their specific needs. (See the “SEAL Bilingual Offerings” text box for more details about these gatherings.)

SEAL Coaches

District and site leaders select staff from within district or preschool sites to become SEAL coaches. SEAL coaches are district or school staff who promote SEAL strategies and directly assist teachers with SEAL implementation in the classroom. SEAL coaches are trained to model SEAL lessons and strategies through live instruction, provide opportunities to practice strategies, and offer feedback to teachers. They facilitate unit development days, which bring teachers together to structure and design upcoming units using SEAL strategies that contribute to curriculum standards.

Coaches also greatly contribute to SEAL’s Summer Bridge Program, where they support teachers in co-teaching units, practicing strategies, and developing resources and materials for the lessons. In some districts they may also deliver SEAL’s professional development modules, particularly to new teachers who join the district after their grade-level peers have completed their SEAL module trainings.

When districts and schools needed to pivot to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, SEAL coaches played a major role in helping teachers adapt the model to the distance learning environment. (See “Implementing SEAL in a Virtual Context” in the Appendix for more details about the pandemic’s effect on implementation and how the three case study districts adapted SEAL to the distance learning context.)

The way SEAL coaches are assigned to school sites is up to the district’s discretion; it is typically based on a structure that best supports SEAL implementation and that is responsive to the district’s instructional infrastructure and funding considerations. In some districts, coaches are based at a specific school, while

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.

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 collaborate on how to strengthen SEAL instruction and implementation in their respective bilingual programs.

in others they are located centrally in the district and tasked with supporting various schools. The SEAL grade levels they support vary by district depending on which grade levels are implementing the model at each site.

SEAL Demonstration Sites

SEAL demonstration sites are specific school sites that serve as live examples of the model in action. They were established to capture the high-quality instruction and enriched environment offered to DLLs/ELs. In the words of Olsen:

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We knew that part of the job was not just [to] implement but to document, to do videos, to bring visitors. We wanted people to see it. And...to change people's perceptions about what young English Learner, brown-skinned children were able to do; to see the kids engaged and talking. We were fighting racism, we were fighting the English-only movement. Through the use of video and visitors, people began to see that the kids could work in two languages, could work with high-level intellectual content and vocabulary.

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SEAL staff provide demonstration site participants with an overview of the SEAL model before leading small groups through classroom observations. Visitors then reconvene with SEAL staff and staff from the host school to discuss what they observed and inquire about the implementation process. Demonstration site visits are often instrumental in helping district leaders and school staff decide whether to replicate the SEAL model. Each of the case study districts is an exemplar district; it is therefore not surprising that they all have schools that serve as SEAL demonstration sites.

Each of the SEAL model's key components is designed to promote successful implementation across districts and school sites. Over the years, districts such as Redwood City, Oak Grove, and Mountain View have worked to integrate the model as a consistent approach that uses rigorous instructional practices that center the needs of linguistically diverse students. These districts' commitment and understanding of the model, which has been greatly supported by SEAL staff, has generated a change in school and district structures and systems that is supported by leaders, teachers, and families alike. Ultimately, it is the students—both EL/DLL and English-only—who benefit from the model when it is successfully implemented consistently, as seen through their improved language acquisition and academic performance.

In the next section we highlight key aspects of SEAL implementation in each case study district and discuss common implementation challenges.

SEAL Implementation Highlights and Common Challenges Across the Case Studies

Exhibit 1 provides an overview of SEAL implementation in each of the districts, with a focus on timing of SEAL adoption, aspects of implementation at each district that are unique or strong, and key facilitators and supports. The case studies provide much more detail about each of these dimensions, including in-depth examples of instructional strategies and student outcomes.

Exhibit 1: Case Study Districts



Redwood City School District

Began SEAL implementation in SY 2008–2009 (Pilot Site) and is currently implementing in 8 of 14 elementary schools.

Strong example of:

- Integration between PK and Kindergarten.
- Centralized approach to managing coaches and curriculum development.

Key facilitators:

- District and school champions.
- Long-term commitment to bilingual education.
- District support for teacher professional development materials.
- Prioritization of SEAL with other change initiatives.
- Schools carried some costs, demonstrating commitment to the model.
- Collaboration between teachers and coaches on creation of materials.



Oak Grove School District

Began SEAL implementation in SY 2013–2014 and is currently implementing in 12 of 14 elementary schools.

Strong example of:

- Taking time to get buy-in from teachers and school staff via joint planning.
- Expansion of model into upper grades to strengthen alignment, instructional approaches, and SEAL sustainability across elementary schools.

Key facilitators:

- District and school champions.
- Full-time, on-site SEAL coach at Title I schools, with additional coaches during implementation.
- Additional professional development to increase teachers' confidence.
- Incorporation of model into existing bilingual program and leveraged bilingual teachers' expertise.



Mountain View School District

Began SEAL implementation in SY 2014–2015 and is currently implementing in 8 of 10 elementary schools.

Strong example of:

- Productive collaboration with the teachers' union to launch and expand SEAL implementation.
- Navigation of teacher push-back.

Key facilitators:

- District and school champions.
- Trainings and site visits that provided valuable modeling.
- District-wide trainings and professional development that provided ongoing learning for teachers.
- Family partners who advocated for the model.
- Localized coaches at the district office.
- Trusted teachers selected as SEAL coaches.
- Leveraging of teachers' training from previous initiatives.

As described in the exhibit, although each district was unique, we observed many similarities, particularly in the conditions or supports that were needed to facilitate successful implementation.

Common Implementation Challenges

Each of the three SEAL case study districts faced implementation challenges that they navigated in their own unique ways. Although every district has its own history and context, it was challenging for all of the districts to balance SEAL implementation with other initiatives and priorities while making sure that schools and teachers felt ownership of and investment in the model. Their most common challenges are as follows:

- **Pushing against entrenched beliefs and educational practices.** By implementing SEAL, the districts were asking for schools and teachers to push aside educational approaches for teaching ELs that had been in place for decades. Even with many champions, it took considerable effort for districts to raise collective expectations for the types of content students should be learning, particularly around the development of higher-order academic language.
- **Gaining teacher and principal buy-in.** The SEAL model asks a lot of teachers. As a result, to varying degrees, districts needed to navigate push-back from teachers and principals who were reluctant to put in the time needed to learn and implement the model.
- **Setting aside enough planning and professional development time for teachers.** The model requires that a considerable amount of time be set aside for training and collaboration, which means that district leaders needed to secure substitutes to cover teachers' classes.
- **Negotiating the role of the district in implementing the model.** The three case study districts differ in the degree to which they have centralized aspects of SEAL implementation (such as preparation of materials, funding, direction of coaches, etc.). Finding the right balance between the role of districts and schools was an important aspect of implementation because it was integrally related to providing the right balance between support and autonomy.
- **Sustaining commitment to the model.** The SEAL model takes years to really become embedded in a school's culture. Meanwhile, turnover in principals, teachers, and coaches leads to the continual loss of expertise, institutional memory, and relationships. Thus, it is challenging for districts to provide sufficient training for new staff in order to maintain the level of expertise needed to support the model over the long term.

Unfortunately, many of these challenges were deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because these case studies focus on SEAL implementation during the pre-pandemic replication phase, those challenges won't be discussed here. However, please see the Appendix for additional information about how districts, schools, and teachers tried to stay true to the SEAL model as they pivoted to distance learning. In the next section we discuss the collective implications of the case studies for those interested in replicating SEAL in their communities.

Implications for Replicating SEAL

Based on the data SPR collected about SEAL implementation during the replication phase across all three exemplar districts, we identified three key areas as instrumental to successful SEAL implementation: the role of district and school leaders, professional development supports, and conditions that support systemic educational change for DLLs/ELs. We describe each in turn below and discuss their respective implications for educators, policymakers, and funders seeking to replicate the SEAL model.

Role of District and School Leaders

The importance of district- and school-level champions was a recurrent theme across the case study districts. Almost all of the individuals interviewed expressed a deep appreciation for the advocacy and support that their leaders had dedicated to SEAL. Key implications of this finding are as follows:

- **Because SEAL is an intensive model that seeks to influence broad-scale change, it requires a deep level of commitment from district and school leaders.** Strong district and school leader support is essential for addressing and removing barriers that limit school staff's capacity to implement the SEAL model. School and district staff, including SEAL coaches, stressed how important it is for leaders to listen and respond to staff's needs in order to sufficiently equip educators with the resources they need to successfully implement SEAL. Part of this means that leaders must be thoughtful and strategic regarding how and when to begin and expand SEAL implementation across school sites, so as to increase the likelihood of successful implementation. One way that districts began establishing commitment and support for the model was by onboarding more influential, well-respected, and experienced teachers onto the initial team that first learned about SEAL; this helped build credibility for the model and generate conversation with other teachers across the district about its impact. In addition, when school-level leaders could not provide needed resources, the ability to lean on the resources and expertise of the SEAL team and the district was key to quality implementation. SEAL supported this commitment by providing technical assistance to staff at all levels—teachers, coaches, principals, and district leaders—helping each “actor” understand the model and their role.
- **District leaders can be creative in how they approach funding SEAL implementation.** The three districts recognized SEAL's value and committed to providing the resources for staffing, professional development time (including resources for substitutes), and materials. Districts acquired funding from external sources, such as foundations, and also redirected funding in order to prioritize the needs of ELs and because they believed that SEAL benefits all students. District leaders felt it was important for the schools to set aside some of their budgets to support SEAL implementation, as this increased their commitment to the model. SEAL supported district leaders by consulting around strategies for funding and sustaining SEAL implementation.
- **Implementing SEAL is an iterative process, so it is essential to provide the time, grace, and support required to fully embed the program.** One of the most frequently recurring themes

across the three districts was the importance of time for planning and learning. Moreover, the teachers who embraced SEAL were passionate, committed to education, and willing to make mistakes as they experimented with new strategies and approaches. Accordingly, in addition to giving themselves time to learn, they were willing to ask for help from coaches, peers, or other individuals to resolve any questions related to the SEAL model. District and school leaders, in turn, gave teachers the time, grace, and support they needed to embrace the program. The following quote by a teacher is illustrative:

“

It's going to take time to learn, so you definitely need to be good to yourself and know that it's going to take time to learn all the strategies. It's not something that you can do quickly. It takes time....But I guarantee you that the end result is going to be worth it....Be good to yourself in learning everything. You can't learn everything in one year. We're still learning after seven years and still want things demoed and shared....It's a learning process. And I don't think the learning will ever stop with SEAL.

”

Professional Development Supports

SEAL is a professional development model that empowers teachers to deliver high-quality instruction that is rigorous, joyful, and engaging. Because it is not a set curriculum, it is not a one-size-fits-all approach; it requires that districts make a long-term investment in learning, co-creation, and collaboration. The experiences of the case study districts imply that the following professional development supports are particularly important to successfully implementing SEAL:

- **Validating teacher expertise is an important first step to overcoming resistance to new initiatives or “initiative fatigue.”** An important component of SEAL implementation is teacher validation. Teachers may resist a new model or initiative and can feel threatened by the presence of another individual in the classroom. Furthermore, many teachers are wary of the sense of whiplash associated with short-term initiatives that are not properly funded and do not lead to sustained change. To reduce teacher resistance, a district leader suggested the following:

“

Validate teachers as the experts in the classroom. They have been teaching for many years and they know their students well and their heart is in the right place. Validate what they know and invite them to make small changes over the course of time. And before you know it, you're thriving, you have a happy teacher, and you have successful students and families.

”

- **Teachers implementing SEAL need time and space to collaborate and create with one another in ways that tap into individuals' strengths and provide opportunities for growth.** Although they noted how challenging it was to find the time to do so, teachers and coaches spoke of the ways that SEAL created space for them to break out of their silos and collaborate with other teachers in new ways. The model provides opportunities for teachers to coordinate within and across grade levels, which can be particularly powerful for PK and Kindergarten teachers who often do not have regular opportunities to interact with one another. Case study schools sent teachers to SEAL Convenings and the Summer Bridge Program and also provided teachers with regular opportunities to engage in joint planning.

Conditions that Support Systemic Educational Change for DLLs/ELs

Finally, the case studies point to some overarching implications for policymakers and other educational partners to consider as they seek to support systemic educational change and create rewarding and engaging learning environments for DLLs/ELs, as well as all children in early learning and elementary school settings.

- **More educators and parents need to believe that all students benefit from rich academic language and interactive, research-based instructional strategies.** A core theme that emerged from the case studies is that the SEAL approach is beneficial for all students, including native English speakers, because it fosters a “language-rich” context of academic learning. As such, it promotes the development of advanced academic vocabulary. It is this belief that drove the Oak Grove district to expand SEAL to non-Title 1 schools with fewer EL students. Although those who have seen SEAL in action believe that it benefits all children, there is still work to be done to convince all teachers and parents.
- **Instructional strategies need to be grounded in the idea that learning is fundamentally joyful, creative, and collaborative.** One of the strongest themes of the case studies is how liberating SEAL was for teachers after the NCLB-era focus on testing. SEAL invited teachers to use their creativity by welcoming art, music, and student discussion back into the classroom. Respondents repeatedly spoke of how SEAL classrooms are joyful because students are engaged in conversation, their work is exhibited all over the room, and their families are welcomed into the space.
- **Instructional quality improves when teachers are treated as professionals and encouraged to innovate.** The SEAL model asks a lot of teachers, while also empowering them by having them take the lead with content creation, providing them time to collaborate with peers, pairing them with coaches whom they can rely on for support, and challenging them to hold all of their students to high standards. Ultimately, when teachers are treated as professionals, it results in higher-quality instruction. For example, the case study districts saw that bringing bilingual educators into collaborative workspaces with their colleagues allowed them to share their

expertise in teaching in dual-language settings and support their peers in developing a curriculum focused on language development. It is important to note, however, how challenging it can be for districts to carve out enough time for teacher collaboration, given limited capacity and other demands on the school day.

- **Bilingual education must be grounded in research-based instructional practices that promote language development and expose students to a rigorous curriculum.** The history of bilingual education in California shows the long-lasting, negative impacts on academic performance and life outcomes when ELs/DLLs do not have the learning environment and resources they need. The favorable outcomes and impacts of the SEAL model across district sites prove that these student groups can thrive when given appropriate instruction and resources. State representatives and district leaders may wish to consult the philosophy and research of the SEAL model to further enhance the state’s approach to bilingual education.
- **Approaches to reform should be flexible enough that districts and schools can adapt them to their unique contexts.** While recognizing how much time it takes to implement SEAL well, staff in all of the case study districts remarked on its flexibility, noting that it is a set of instructional approaches and strategies rather than a curriculum. The flexibility of the SEAL model allows districts to implement it along with other programs and interventions.
- **Cross-grade alignment and collaboration is a key facet of broader systems change.** Staff in each district talked about how SEAL promotes cross-grade-level alignment and coordination: While the model is focused on PK through third-grade alignment, each of the case study districts had sought to expand SEAL strategies to fourth and fifth grade as well. This meant students could rely on similar instructional practices and strategies from each of their grade-level teachers throughout their elementary school experience. This familiarity benefited all students but was particularly helpful for ELs.

Conclusion

Since 2008, the SEAL model has positively influenced instructional practices, student engagement, and academic outcomes, as demonstrated by external evaluations of the SEAL pilot and replication effort, and as illustrated in the three case studies of SEAL implementation. The Redwood City, Oak Grove, and Mountain View School Districts modified the SEAL model to fit their unique contexts and conditions, which improved the quality of instruction for their ELs and DLLs and promoted a positive professional learning environment for their teachers. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these three districts invested fully in the adoption of SEAL in a way that facilitated its integration into instruction and institutional policies and practices throughout their schools.

As we emerge from the pandemic, there are many challenges facing districts and schools, such as reduced enrollment and staffing turnover, and this makes it difficult to sustain an intensive model like SEAL. At the same time, the value of such a model—one that promotes effective instruction, high

expectations for all students, and interactive and joyful classrooms—has been accentuated by the pandemic. The SEAL model has the potential to better serve EL and DLL students across different schools and districts, which is especially important for a state like California, whose population diversity continues to increase. All children can benefit from the SEAL model, because it recognizes and values linguistic diversity and sets strong foundations for academic success.

Appendix

Implementing SEAL in a Virtual Context

Over the 2020–2021 school year, the three case study districts provided distance learning to students in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, SEAL staff, district leaders, SEAL coaches, and teachers significantly modified their strategies to implement SEAL in a virtual context:

- **SEAL coaches and teachers transitioned SEAL lesson plans from in-person to distance learning activities.** For example, Redwood City incorporated more technology into its curriculum and SEAL strategies; Mountain View recorded material to explain online platforms—such as Flipgrid, Pear Deck, and Seesaw—to students and families.
- **Teachers created digital walls in an effort to replicate their physical classroom walls,** which reflected SEAL strategies and lessons that students could refer to in order to reinforce their learning. Unfortunately, these digital walls did not have the same impact as the physical walls.
- **Distance learning limited the participatory aspect of SEAL classrooms.** Though teachers tried using the chants and songs that kept students engaged and taught them vocabulary during in-person instruction, students often sang with their microphones off and could not respond as immediately or frequently as if they were in person. As such, classrooms were not as interactive or collaborative.
- **Teachers were forced to prioritize specific content, often at the expense of SEAL strategies.** During in-person classes, teachers could scaffold and repeat information or strategies. However, distance learning limited their live instructional time with students. This reduced key opportunities for reinforcement that help students learn and process information.

One of the bright spots that arose from distance learning was the fact that teachers sustained the collaborative workspace and frequently shared resources and best practices with one another to support their teaching. Despite this, SEAL classrooms were significantly impacted by the pandemic. Staff at all three districts expressed their eagerness to return to in-person instruction to support their students' learning more effectively.

End Notes

- ⁱ 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.
- ⁱⁱ Sobrato Family Foundation is now called Sobrato Philanthropies.
- ⁱⁱⁱ 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>
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- ^v Edwards, B., Leighty, J., & Wilson, K. (2008, March). *English Learners in California: What the numbers say*. EdSource. <https://edsources.org/wp-content/publications/ELStats0308.pdf>
- ^{vi} Espinosa, L., & Crandell, J. (2020). Early learning and care for multilingual and dual language learners ages zero to five. In California Department of Education (Ed.), *Improving education for multilingual and English Learner students: Research to practice* (pp. 189–249). California Department of Education. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/documents/mleeducationch4.pdf>
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- ^{viii} California Legislative Analyst’s Office. (1998, June). *Proposition 227: English language in public schools*. https://lao.ca.gov/ballot/1998/227_06_1998.htm
- ^{ix} California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Cohort outcome data for the class of 2009–2010*. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/cohortrates/GradRates.aspx?cds=00000000000000&TheYear=2009-10&Agg=T&Topic=Coh&RC=State&SubGroup=Ethnic/Racial>

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- ^x Lindholm-Leary, K. (2015). *Sobrato Family Foundation Early Academic & Literacy Project after five full years of implementation*. Sobrato Family Foundation. <https://sobrato.app.box.com/s/cg20x3q26ccdfm9dsgl3mdon8epl40oe>
- ^{xi} California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Local Control Funding Formula*. Retrieved March 11, 2022, from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/>
- ^{xii} In 2019, Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) became its own independent organization.
- ^{xiii} Sobrato Family Foundation. (2018, June). *Sobrato Early Academic Language PreK–3 model*. <https://seal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Prek-3rd.pdf>