

Case Study of SEAL Implementation: Redwood City School District

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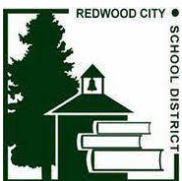


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Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) is a research-based, comprehensive instructional model that provides professional development and technical assistance to teachers and educational leaders, equipping them to deliver high-quality education to Dual Language Learners (DLLs) and English Learners (ELs)ⁱ in preschool and elementary school. The model was launched in 2008, when the Sobrato Family Foundationⁱⁱ 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 Redwood City School District (RCSD), which has been a SEAL partner since the pilot was launched in 2008. Prior to the pandemic, the district served as a SEAL demonstration site and periodically hosted visitors who were interested in learning more about the SEAL model and seeing what it looked like in practice. These visitors included representatives from other districts or preschool centers that were considering partnering with SEAL, as well as researchers, policy leaders, and other educational partners. This case study highlights RCSD’s SEAL origin story and approach to SEAL implementation prior to onset of the pandemic, provides in-depth school-level examples, and highlights program outcomes and lessons learned for districts and policymakers seeking to more effectively engage and support ELs/DLLs.

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 in the heart of Silicon Valley, RCSD served an estimated 6,700 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten (PK) through eighth grade across 12 schools in the 2020–2021 school year. Its PK program operates at seven of its elementary school campuses. Though the vast majority (97%) of ELs speak Spanish, RCSD also serves EL students who speak Arabic, Mandarin, Filipino (Pilipino or Tagalog), Russian, Samoan, and Vietnamese, making it a very diverse student body. About one third of the students are ELs. The majority of students in the district identify as Hispanic/Latinx (68%), followed by White (22%), Asian/Pacific Islander (6%), and African-American (1%).^{iiiiv}

In 2018, RCSD closed four schools (Fair Oaks, Adelante, Hawes, and Orion) due to declining enrollment and subsequent budget cuts, reducing the number of schools in the district from 16 to 12. As part of the closures, Adelante’s Spanish-immersion program merged with Selby Lane, which also had a dual-language program and was a SEAL demonstration site. The combined school was renamed Adelante Selby Spanish Immersion School. Students from Fair Oaks elementary school were moved to Taft Community School (another SEAL site). The closure of Fair Oaks also resulted in the closure of the PK program that operated at that site.

RCSD was one of the few districts in California that maintained bilingual programs throughout the Proposition 227 era, when districts were essentially prohibited from offering bilingual programs to the state’s ELs. Despite an “English-only” policy, RCSD developed and continued to implement bilingual education models in some of its elementary and early childhood sites to meet the needs of students with home languages other than English, although these programs tended to be “early-exit” models that ended before third grade. One school in particular, Hoover Community School, had a large community of bilingual families and veteran staff with a very strong commitment to bilingualism.

District Adoption of SEAL

From 2008 to 2013, RCSD served as one of two districts in the initial pilot of the SEAL model; it piloted SEAL at Hoover Community School and in its early childhood education program. RCSD was a strong candidate for the SEAL pilot because it (1) provided access to several PK sites, and PK–3 alignment is a key component of the SEAL model; (2) served large numbers of EL students; and (3) had extensive experience with and a long-term commitment to bilingual education and dual-language instruction. At the time that RCSD adopted SEAL, a disproportionate share of Hoover Community School’s students were struggling academically and the district was actively seeking instructional support for teachers in bilingual and structured-English-immersion classes so they could better serve EL students. Olsen, SEAL’s founder, said that Hoover was an ideal pilot site for SEAL because the school was ready to “try something” and had a staff of “veteran bilingual teachers that were not going to be moved off their commitment to bilingualism.”

RCSD’s expansion of SEAL was facilitated by Assistant Superintendent Linda Montes and the principal of the district’s Child Development Centers (CDCs), Edna Carmona. Around the same time that Montes took her position as director of English Learner Services, Carmona asked RCSD’s superintendent if she could expand the program to all of the CDCs. She explained that the CDC within Hoover was “already doing it for some years when I came on board. But I said, ‘This is something that all preschool staff should be trained in.’”

Montes, who is a bilingual advocate and former bilingual teacher and school principal in the district, knew the value of and need for professional development for bilingual teachers and was eager and willing to manage the SEAL partnership at the district level. When she assumed the role of director of English Learner Services, SEAL had expanded to the district’s other CDC sites and to three elementary schools besides Hoover (Garfield, Taft, Selby Lane). She toured the CDC sites and saw immediately the value of expanding the program across the district. Reflecting on that experience, she commented:

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It was so profound that when I went to the district office, my superintendent and I toured what was happening at the preschool programs at SEAL in our district, and I just started crying, because I’m like, ‘This is what gifted programs should be for all our students.’ It was just amazing. This is what all our students need. It became our mission to make sure all of our students were exposed [to SEAL].

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Shortly thereafter, Montes started making progress toward implementing SEAL across the district with a centralized approach, eventually expanding it to all of RCSD’s EL-serving elementary schools (eight out of its nine elementary schools). The broad-scale adoption of SEAL at the CDCs and expansion at the elementary schools provided an opportunity for the integration of SEAL from PK to third grade at schools across the district.

District Approach to and Support for SEAL Implementation

Hoover Community School was one of the original pilot sites where the SEAL model was developed, beginning in 2008. Teacher training expanded to other RCSD schools when the SEAL pilot ended and expansion of SEAL implementation began in 2013. As more sites signed on to implement the SEAL model, the cohort of teachers-in-training grew. This prompted district leaders to adopt a centralized approach to SEAL implementation in order to facilitate teacher collaboration and training across the district, thus establishing a network of SEAL teachers who could serve as resources for each other. (See the “SEAL Model Teacher Professional Development Series” text box for an overview of the training series provided to teachers and SEAL coaches.)

This section provides more detail on the district’s centralized approach to SEAL implementation and funding, the district’s role as a SEAL demonstration site, and the role of coaches within the district.

Centralized and Prioritized District Initiative

RCSD used a centralized approach to the SEAL model, which meant that district leaders managed SEAL coaches, the purchasing of SEAL materials for all sites, and the training of school leaders in the SEAL model. Because SEAL was a districtwide initiative, RCSD was able to prioritize and make time for trainings in the professional development calendar and create aligned thematic units by grade level across the district. Given that CDCs were part of the district, districtwide expansion also supported systemic and coordinated support from PK through the third grade.

Because SEAL was district-led, the district leaders were able to prioritize it over other initiatives when necessary—for example, when California began requiring teachers to participate in trainings for its newly adopted English language arts (ELA) and math standards. This meant that teachers might be simultaneously trained in the new standards and in SEAL, which opened the possibility that they would experience two very different approaches and messages. To rectify this problem, RCSD designated the eight elementary schools that had adopted SEAL as “SEAL-only” schools and waived the requirement that teachers receive the other ELA standards training. Furthermore, SEAL began incorporating the new ELA standards into the trainings to ensure the new standards were integrated into the model and unit development.

SEAL’s Model Teacher Professional Development Series

Teachers and instructional coaches, called SEAL coach-facilitators, 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, instructional strategies to support ELs, and how to create standards-based thematic units and foster family partnerships. (See “Summer Bridge Program” for a description of this component.) 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.

One of the most impactful aspects of RCSD taking a centralized approach was that the district was able to create units of study that were shared and common across the district. Montes described this benefit:

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Through the district, all preschool classrooms, even though they are at different sites, all are aligned with the same unit of study. It is the same for TK, Kindergarten, [and] all through third grade. Then we ended up, because we liked that model, developing units of study for fourth and fifth grade.

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The units also aligned across grade levels around key topic areas: All grade levels concurrently alternated between a social science and a science unit with a shared theme. For instance, at the time of SPR’s interviews, all grade levels were engaged in a science unit focused on some version of survival. A SEAL coach described how “third grade is studying habitats, second grade is studying biodiversity and reproduction of plants, first grade is studying physical characteristics of animals in certain habitats and Kindergarten is....focusing on the components of an ecosystem.”

The benefits of aligned units of study across the district were multifold. This approach helped align teachers around the vocabulary they are using, clarify the intentions around specific units of study, and provide consistency around the use of chants and other SEAL strategies. Coaches, who were assigned to at least two different schools, could more effectively support teachers as they moved between classrooms, grade levels, and schools. Finally, when the district updated a unit of study, this alignment meant it could purchase SEAL materials for multiple sites at once.

Though beneficial overall, there were challenges associated with taking a districtwide approach. Training educators in SEAL throughout the year and in Summer Bridge took a lot of coordination and was a big investment of time and energy. (See the “SEAL Model Timeline for Teacher Professional Development” and “SEAL Summer Bridge Program” text boxes for more details about the sequence and content of these elements.) The widespread implementation of SEAL in the district made it challenging for leaders to find enough substitutes to cover classrooms on training days. This was particularly challenging at the CDC sites, which have more requirements than the elementary schools for the timing of classroom activities and for

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 PK/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 Summer Bridge Program

Summer Bridge is an optional program for teachers that allows for intensive professional development as well as enriched language development for children. Teachers build a shared understanding of SEAL’s approach and deepen their SEAL teaching expertise by co-teaching with a grade-adjacent peer (e.g., a Kindergarten teacher is paired with a first-grade teacher), observing and supporting each other try out new strategies and deepen implementation.

child-to-teacher ratios. As Carmona explained, “Teachers had to be out of the classroom for more than 10 days for the in-depth learning of the strategies, which they all needed. To find a sub was a challenge.”

RCSD addressed this challenge by providing multiple trainings for smaller groups of teachers, finding additional funds to support mass substitute hires, and promoting half-day trainings. The CDCs applied for grant funding to pay for substitute time and materials. Montes said she felt that RCSD’s investment in SEAL training was more than worth it.

Funding

In addition to investing its own resources, RCSD drew on grants to support SEAL training and implementation. In 2008, RCSD received a five-year grant from the Sobrato Family Foundation to pilot SEAL. When the pilot ended, RCSD continued to receive funding from SEAL to offset the costs associated with being a demonstration site. Throughout this period, the district “pulled on some federal funding, state funding, and local funding” and invested its own resources to support teacher collaboration to develop SEAL units of study, provide trainings, purchase materials, and hire district staff as SEAL coaches. Over the years, RCSD invested most heavily in hiring and training SEAL coaches in order to support a centralized approach to implementation.

The CDCs also received additional funding from The Big Lift, an initiative in San Mateo County focused on supporting high-quality preschool and summer learning with the goal of reducing absenteeism and increasing family partnership. The Big Lift provided small grants to the CDCs that supported adoption of curricula for the thematic learning units promoted by SEAL and also helped the CDCs pay for a portion of the SEAL coaches’ time. The district was also able to draw on state preschool funding to support professional development, though this funding was inconsistent.

As RCSD’s engagement with SEAL evolved, the district realized it needed schools to take on some of the costs in order to ensure buy-in at the school and classroom levels. As Montes said, “At the beginning, if a principal wasn’t invested financially, it was easy for them to say, ‘Well, I can’t send my teacher.’ But if they’re paying for a sub...then that’s on them. That’s the collaboration and that needs to happen.” Thus, RCSD leaders asked schools to contribute to the SEAL model with their own funding and to build the costs into their budgets. Principals were asked to set aside funding to release teachers for planning days, to pay for planning time after school, and to engage in training days. These investments ensured that schools were committed to the model as a long-term approach.

Hosting a Demonstration Site

Prior to the pandemic, RCSD had the additional distinction and responsibility of being a demonstration site for SEAL. As a SEAL pilot site, Hoover Community School began to see success at the staff and student levels, bringing accolades and attention to the district for academic gains and enriched learning environments. In later years, when Hoover became a SEAL demonstration site, people would travel from other districts or states to see the program implemented, and staff at nearby elementary schools within the district could see SEAL’s promise. Thus, Hoover’s success and proximity as a SEAL demonstration site laid the groundwork for SEAL replication across the district’s elementary schools. As Olsen explained:

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Having really seen the success of Hoover and being able to visit and see it happening in the classroom definitely helped in terms of creating buy-in. I think when teachers see that as successful, then they're more likely to want to try it and bring it to life in their own classrooms.

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At Hoover, the CDC's role in modeling PK integration of SEAL was particularly powerful for many who visited because it helped dispel skepticism about the ability of preschool-age students to engage with academic concepts and language in developmentally appropriate ways. A SEAL coach described implementation across the CDC sites, including the SEAL demonstration site: “We have some amazing preschool classrooms in Redwood City that just took their SEAL training and went with it....The classrooms were phenomenal.”

One benefit of RCSD serving as a pilot and demonstration site was that the district has helped to inform the development of the model, as SEAL used information and lessons from RCSD to refine the approach in an iterative way over time. For instance, SEAL shifted its PK curriculum in response to CDC teacher feedback, making it more hands-on and visual. Carmona explained that “SEAL staff create the [training] modules, but they are informed by our feedback to them about what works and does not work.” SEAL also customized training for preschool teachers, having recently collaborated with RCSD to experiment on self-paced preschool units. Similarly, as it became clear over time that school leaders needed to be engaged more intentionally, SEAL developed specific trainings for school and district leaders. SEAL was a partner to RCSD every step of the way, adapting as necessary to fit the district's needs.

RCSD had to navigate the additional responsibilities that come from hosting numerous guest visits. Although coaches and school administrators provided teachers at demonstration sites with extra coaching and lesson-preparation time, teachers still felt the stress of being observed by visitors who came expecting to see high levels of SEAL implementation in their classrooms. An RCSD coach described this feeling:

“

Teachers put a ton of pressure on themselves because we're a demonstration site. They feel like everything has to be perfect and they spend hours and hours and hours before the tour, sometimes over the weekend, getting their room tip-top....It doesn't matter how many times I say that 'it's okay to be messy, it's okay to make mistakes.'

”

In an effort to alleviate the pressure on Hoover staff, SEAL and district leaders switched demonstration sites to the CDC at Garfield Elementary and the elementary grades at Selby Lane (which is now Adelante Selby). This allowed for guest visits to be spread out across two school sites and provided an opportunity to showcase the work of more teachers.

RCSD staff who oversaw SEAL implementation viewed being a demonstration site as helpful for deepening implementation among teachers and as an opportunity to impact a broader set of young people. The principal at Adelante Selby explained that it “pushes [teachers and coaches] so that they have to up their game. You feel a little bit more...traction [with the model].” He described that having visitors observe classes and provide feedback deepened the level of collaboration and reflection among teachers

about their implementation of the model. Furthermore, through their modeling of SEAL practices, RCSD educators had a unique opportunity to influence teachers and students from across the state, making the work even more impactful and meaningful.

Role of SEAL Coaches

At RCSD, all SEAL coaches were hired and managed at the district level and reported to Montes in her role as assistant superintendent. Each SEAL coach typically supported two schools within the district by leading trainings and planning sessions; conducting classroom visits; leading SEAL strategy assessments; providing informal and collaborative support to school staff; managing the ordering and delivery of SEAL materials to classroom teachers; and providing specific supports for demonstration sites. When the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, their duties expanded to include adapting SEAL to distance learning. (See “SEAL Coach Role & Responsibilities” for more information on the role of coaches in the SEAL model.)

SEAL coaches at RCSD served as collaborative partners whose primary role was to support teachers with SEAL implementation. Each coach supported implementation and also often served as a liaison between school administrators, district leaders, and site teachers, helping teachers to solve problems as they arise. One SEAL coach explained that she was often in the role of “advocating for something the teachers are wanting some support with.” SEAL coaches were also the frontline support for access to materials related to their thematic units, such as books, props, and other instructional artifacts.

Although coaches offset some of the prep work for teachers so that they could focus on planning and teaching SEAL strategies, RCSD found that it was important that they not prepare all the materials for teachers. Montes explained:

“

What we found was that if we only had the coaches do all the preparation of materials, and let’s say the coach went from a full-time to a half-time position, then the teachers felt like they couldn’t implement, because they didn’t have somebody to create all the materials for them. We realized that this was not a good model and that it had to be a collaborative effort where the teacher was also invested in creating the materials.

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SEAL Coach Role & Responsibilities

- Work with teachers to maximize the 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, which provides intensive professional development 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.

Because SEAL units of study in RCSD were aligned within and across grade levels districtwide, coaches were able to smoothly work across multiple schools, assisting with curriculum development, preparation of materials, and support for teachers. This proved especially useful when it came time to move to virtual schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic, as having consistent online units made it easy for district teachers to access and share class materials and resources.

Exemplars of SEAL Implementation: Adelante Selby and Community Development Centers

To examine SEAL’s impact at the classroom and school level, this case study draws on examples from two sites that implemented SEAL within RCSD. Adelante Selby Spanish Immersion (ASSI) School is a combination of two distinguished dual-language schools (Selby Lane and Adelante Immersion) that merged in the 2019–2020 school year. The second site is the state preschool program within the CDCs. The CDCs operate at seven elementary school sites under the supervision of Carmona. In this section, we provide some background on these sites before delving into details about how they adopted and implemented SEAL.

The Adelante Selby campus (formerly the Selby Lane campus) is located in the predominantly White and affluent community of Atherton. The year prior to the school merger, it enrolled 730 students, although few students from the local community attended Selby Lane. It served a predominantly Latinx (90%) and socioeconomically disadvantaged (83%) student body, including a concentration of ELs (46%) who lived in neighborhoods across town. Selby Lane was a demonstration site for SEAL before it merged with Adelante and was well known for its engaged and supportive parent community. The school had an English strand that served ELs through structured English immersion (SEI) and a relatively new two-way bilingual immersion program.

Teachers in both SEI and bilingual classes had adopted and integrated SEAL approaches. As a former teacher noted:

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You could literally walk into one class, it was an English class, and you could walk into the Spanish class, and they were doing the same strategy....There was a lot of collaboration among both programs. It was very powerful to see. Teachers were supportive, open, and flexible.

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Selby Lane began its bilingual program 2013-2014, the same year it began SEAL implementation, and SEAL served to ensure alignment and coherence as this program developed and expanded into additional grades.

Adelante Spanish Immersion School was a Kindergarten through fifth grade elementary school in a highly affluent neighborhood; it enrolled 470 students in the 2018–2019 school year. It was a very popular school of choice and often had a waitlist of over 100 families. It too served a large Latinx student population (73%) but it also served a much higher percentage of White students than did Selby Lane (23% versus 6%), a smaller percentage of ELs (26%), and a less socioeconomically disadvantaged group (46%).^v

According to district staff, the parent community also differed considerably from that of Selby Lane, as it included a higher percentage of well-educated, English-only parents. It also had a very active parent–teacher association that was able to bring additional resources into the school through its fundraising efforts. When Adelante merged with Selby Lane, its families and teachers had to shift campuses, and this led to some tension and a period of adjustment. The principal said it felt a little like “an arranged marriage” at first, and it took some time for staff to adjust to the transition.

The newly merged ASSI School serves over 700 students, 78% of whom are Latinx and 18% of whom are White; almost 50% of students are ELs. ASSI has a whole-school, two-way bilingual immersion program that uses a 90/10 model, with 90% of time in Kindergarten spent in Spanish and 10% in English. The ratio of Spanish to English becomes more balanced over time, eventually reaching 50/50 by the fourth grade. One ASSI teacher described that the school has a philosophy that “being bilingual is a superpower,” and the goal is for students to be fluent in both Spanish and English. The school prides itself on being bicultural and on embracing and reflecting the values of its Spanish- and English-speaking families.

The seven CDCs in RCSD serve toddlers and preschool-aged students who are primarily from low-income families within the district. They function as separate sites, with their own staff and administration.^{vi} Some sites use a bilingual approach while others use English exclusively in instruction. The CDCs’ curriculum serves infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in the first five years of life and aligns to the California State Department of Education’s Standards for Kindergarten Readiness. Although the CDCs fall under the purview of the school district and are located at school sites, they have historically operated very independently from the elementary schools. SEAL has played a significant role in tightening alignment and coordination between PK and Kindergarten teachers, which has contributed to the CDCs becoming a model for other preschools across the state.

The remainder of this section highlights SEAL implementation in RCSD’s preschool and elementary classrooms. It explores the roles of the teachers and school leaders in implementing the model and provides examples of rigor and family partnership.

SEAL Implementation in the Classroom

SEAL classrooms at ASSI and in CDC sites (PK–3) alternated thematic units every four to six weeks as they worked across various subjects, switching between a focus on social studies and science. This allowed students and teachers to dive deeply into a topic, thus supporting academic language development and helping to prepare students to be successful in higher-level science and social science classes that they take in middle and high school. One former teacher at Selby Lane said that after years of focusing exclusively on reading and math during the No Child Left Behind era, the focus on social science and science content “was really exciting as a teacher, because you finally got to dive into something that was more than just, ‘I need you to perform well on this test.’ It turned back into, ‘There’s stuff to explore in this world that is really exciting. Let’s dive into it and explore it together.’”

One prominent aspect of how SEAL showed up at ASSI and in the CDCs was that it supported the vibrant use of academic language in a way that engaged students and brought the classroom alive. Teachers said their use of SEAL strategies like call and response, Read-Alouds, Think-Pair-Shares, and chants, as well as their encouragement of student talking, led to rich student conversations. A CDC teacher said that “the most important part is that [the children]...start talking, and they are learning different...words that they haven’t heard before.” Another CDC teacher said that the SEAL model encouraged students to “ask each other questions when they share, or talk to each other about what they think an idea might be.” ASSI and CDC teachers both said that one of SEAL’s most powerful elements is the way it supports student talk about concepts and ideas, and that through student talk teachers can understand the cognitive connections that students are making.

Finally, in SEAL classrooms at ASSI and in CDCs, students produced a lot of art and writing that was displayed prominently in classrooms and in hallways, alongside materials highlighting vocabulary. A CDC teacher described:

“

SEAL [is] all over our classroom. You can walk in and you can tell what unit was taught this week...You walk in and you could tell, ‘Ooh, this classroom is teaching insects,’ or ‘This classroom is teaching transportation.’

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Similarly, an ASSI teacher said that she would describe a SEAL classroom “as colorful with high academic language all around in the materials, the posters, the books, [and the] manipulatives.” The visual displays of vocabulary and student work made both ASSI and CDCs immediately recognizable as SEAL sites and they positively impact students. A CDC teacher said that posting student art helped students feel validated and seen, reminding them of what they have learned.

Role of SEAL Teachers

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SEAL represents best practices in education. The strategies we’re learning here can be applicable to students of all ages, even for college students. Good teaching is good teaching is good teaching. SEAL is good teaching.

– Edna Carmona, CDC Principal

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SEAL raises expectations for what teachers should be teaching in the classroom. In order to reach these expectations, teachers at both ASSI and CDCs spent extensive time in SEAL training, working with their coaches, collaboratively planning lessons with teachers in other grade levels, and setting up and taking down SEAL unit materials. The work required to execute SEAL was described as much more intensive than the level of work required by other models. An ASSI teacher explained, “I really enjoy [SEAL], but it is a lot of hard work....There is a lot of prepping...before you teach a new unit.” Similarly, a SEAL coach explained that “the level of planning and coordination and work that teachers are doing with this program are not easy.”

Because of the diversity of teaching strategies used in the SEAL model, teachers collaborated often out of necessity—across grade levels at their own sites (including PK and K teachers who rarely interacted prior to SEAL) and with teachers at other elementary schools within the district. Doing so allowed them to share resources and materials and to align on teaching. RCSD planning days, weekly planning time, and Summer Bridge served as designated times that teachers had to collaborate, create lessons or units together, learn from one another, and capitalize on each other’s strengths. The ASSI principal described being “creative to provide release time for [teachers] during the school day so they could plan for their next unit. That’s important because it takes a lot of time to get it all together and align their practice. And they divide up the work.”

In the following quote, an ASSI teacher provides an in-depth example of how she approached and planned for a typical lesson and the benefits she derived from seeing her unit design in practice:

“

I feel that [SEAL’s] a great way to teach. For example, when we were doing our unit on ‘[Now and] Long Ago,’...[which focuses on] the past and present, my students participated in their own museum. We had a museum in the classroom going on, and they got to try everything in there, all the props. We had a washboard...and we made butter. All these things. It really makes it come alive. I really enjoy that about SEAL units, all the props that you get to use. And I think it really supports the students in learning. But I do want to say it is a lot of work, especially being in a new grade....I’m still building some of those units, making them a little bit meatier.

”

Role of School Leaders

Principals in RCSD played a key role as champions who found ways to support staff with receiving and implementing SEAL training. One of their most essential roles was securing enough substitute teachers to release teachers for training or to collaboratively develop their thematic units. School leaders at ASSI and within CDCs found funding for early-release time for teachers during the school day to allow for unit planning and alignment in half-day increments as well as financial stipends for weekend trainings. School principals also partnered with the SEAL coaches on formal classroom visits each month in order to conduct observations of student engagement, classroom set-ups, and instructor strategies.

At ASSI, the principal supported paid time for his teachers to devote to SEAL implementation outside of the classroom. Similarly, Carmona, who is the CDC principal but is also referred to as the CDC director, personally attended SEAL planning days and trainings. She also paid teachers to attend Saturday trainings. As one CDC teacher noted:



Our director made sure that everyone was on board with SEAL. She would bring us all together on a Saturday and have people show us the strategies, how to do them, what to do, and names of strategies. It’s constantly our director making sure that we are being refresh[ed] with all those SEAL strategies and [that we know how] to apply them.



Leading a SEAL demonstration site, in particular, required school leaders to take on additional coordination and encouraged them to be proactive in budget planning and teacher-release time so that teachers could implement the model consistently. ASSI’s principal understood the time it takes for teachers to plan and that it was best done when they work together. Because each thematic unit was typically six weeks long, he knew teachers needed about a day and a half paid days to prepare it. Thus, he prioritized a budget for teacher Professional Learning Communities, providing a minimum of one day for grade-level collaborations each month. He also believes it is essential for teachers implementing SEAL to have coaching support and to attend other trainings if they would like.

ASSI expanded the use of some SEAL strategies schoolwide, to include fourth and fifth grade, including: Gallery Walks, which are family events during which students present their work to family or community members; a Focus Wall, where the unit goals and vocabulary are visible to all inside the classroom; and a Culminating Task at the end of each unit, such as an oral presentation, a poster, a skit that the students do, or a piece of writing, depending on the content. The principal explained that he required these components as a way to support schoolwide teacher accountability and curriculum alignment, and because he saw the benefits of these strategies for literacy practices in earlier grades.

The ASSI principal also prioritized and strengthened schoolwide SEAL implementation and sustainability in other important ways. To support the alignment of goals for “implementation and budgets” and to avoid having SEAL be an “add on,” he incorporated the model into the school’s Site Plan.^{vii} In addition, he attended SEAL’s Bilingual Convenings and Bilingual Instructional Rounds about two times a year to learn about policy updates and promising practices. (See the text boxes on “SEAL Bilingual Offerings” and “SEAL Instructional Rounds” for more details about these components.) The principal explained:

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 at their respective sites. See “SEAL Instructional Rounds” text box for details about the purpose of these sessions.

SEAL Instructional Rounds

In addition to SEAL Convenings, SEAL invites SEAL coaches and principals to 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. In the case of Bilingual Instructional Rounds, the focus is on bilingual educators and strengthening their vision and implementation of bilingual instruction in SEAL classrooms.

“

Going to the [SEAL] Convening keeps it fresh. It gives me new things to learn and bring back to the staff. I also like the [Instructional Rounds], where you can go see other schools or even within the school, with a focus around some strategy.

”

Rigor in Practice

Teachers described the SEAL model as bringing a high level of academic rigor because of the complexity and variety of vocabulary in each thematic unit. In particular, SEAL lesson planning requires teachers to build strategic blueprints for increasing students’ vocabulary over time. One teacher at ASSI explained that when she approached a SEAL lesson plan she looked ahead at the vocabulary she was going to use and broke the words into three tiers; her goal was to get to the vocabulary words in the third tier by the end of the unit. Similarly, a CDC teacher explained that the exposure to academic language in SEAL is rigorous in part because there isn’t just an expectation of recall, but of understanding:

“

‘We’re going to tell you this thing, but as we’re telling you it, I want you to make connections and try to fill in the word or fill in the meaning.’ We don’t just give the answer. And, by the end of the week, repeating things so often that the kids will often give it back to you...Usually the words that they use or the words that they learned will be in context or tied to concepts, like, ‘Oh, I noticed that when the potato grew, it had roots.’ We’re expecting that kind of language in a full sentence.

”

Another ASSI teacher reported that SEAL lessons were rigorous in part because they were targeted to the “multiple intelligences” of students. Teachers had to make conscious choices about what activities, such as writing, art, music, poetry, or chants, to include for each lesson in order for it to “land” with students:

“

It includes many things or touching things, and that’s how [students] learn it and memorize it. For me, that’s what makes a rigorous lesson. They produce language, they produce writing, they produce art and drawing and building. I think it motivates them to think, and sometimes think out of the box, which in past years was very, very difficult.

”

The SEAL model asks teachers to observe what strategies are working and to record what students are retaining so that they can adjust as needed to meet students’ needs. Some methods for monitoring student learning include observation charts, where students document what they are observing; journals, where students record their learnings for each unit for the teacher to review; and “Turn and Talks,” where students speak aloud to each other about their learning while the teacher observes. These

mechanisms helped SEAL teachers at ASSI and CDC observe student learning and the impact of a SEAL strategy on any given day. In addition, formal and informal meetings with the SEAL coach helped solidify strategies or steer course corrections when gaps were identified.

Finally, several individuals we interviewed spoke about how rigor at ASSI and in the CDCs was reinforced by the additional time that teachers took to prepare lessons, monitor student learning, and adjust their strategies in an iterative way to meet student needs. Carmona noted that as principal she has observed that “the major impact really has been in the skill of the teachers—to teach in a research-based, more rigorous, and more intentional way.”

Family Partnership

ASSI and the CDCs had strong strategies for family partnership within their schools prior to their implementation of SEAL, but the SEAL model helped further strengthen the tie between home and school. Certain SEAL activities like family projects, Gallery Walks, and reading/sharing times inside the classroom created natural openings for family members to engage with their children about academic topics and to deepen their ability to partner with schools in their children’s learning.

SEAL’s family partnership strategies also created a vehicle to incorporate students’ cultural backgrounds into the curriculum and increase the relevance of what students are learning. For instance, second graders at ASSI had an ancestor unit in which they were asked to interview their parents and grandparents about where their family is from. The unit was designed to help them learn about family traditions and about how school was different when their older relatives were growing up. Family members were also regularly invited to participate in and showcase their expertise in their children’s classrooms, often demonstrating cultural practices and art forms. For example, an ASSI teacher talked about how a parent demonstrated cheese making in her class and then let students sample the cheese with tortillas made by hand.

Students also got to share their knowledge with family members in Gallery Walks, another cornerstone of the SEAL model. They are similar to open houses and take place every four to six weeks as the culminating activity for a thematic unit. One teacher explained:

“

It’s a really big event. The families come out and they get to see all their projects, and the students are talking, they’re leading their parents around the classroom, showing them what they’ve learned.

”

The CDCs in particular, serving the youngest students, already had structured family time embedded in their classroom schedules prior to SEAL. For instance, Wednesdays were “Family Days,” when parents were welcomed inside the classroom to read a book or share a personal story. However, SEAL lessons incorporated a new level of family partnership, such as inviting children to bring items from their home life into the classroom. One CDC teacher explained that parents also participated in home projects, such as helping their child build a 3D model and presenting the project to the class with their child:

“

Parents will come with the children, and they're very proud, holding their project. And then they both talk about it in front of the other children—what they did, what they used. So it's a very good [experience] for the parents to get involved with their education and their activities.

”

SEAL Outcomes

As a result of participation in SEAL, RCSD has seen a variety of positive outcomes at the student, school, and district levels.

Student Level Outcomes

Given SEAL's emphasis on high-quality instruction for ELs and the training SEAL provides on how to strengthen instruction, it is not surprising that the most reported outcome for students is high fluency in English and Spanish. School administrators and teachers at ASSI reported that SEAL led to an expansion of their students' vocabulary. One teacher explained:

“

Students learn a high academic language in Spanish. That's powerful, and that's going to help them in the transition to English. In first grade, I still don't see reclassification that much, but I could tell that if the [student develops] a strong Spanish vocabulary, the transition to English will be much better.

”

Another teacher explained that English-only parents were also surprised when their children began showing signs of Spanish fluency at home. Similarly, the ASSI principal said that SEAL supports students in their use of a higher-level vocabulary and that teachers “feel good” about that, which in turn leads to increased teacher morale.

SEAL students at RCSD also showed signs of deeper learning of academic content that appears to be influenced by SEAL's thematic units and instructional strategies, which emphasize the integration of language development with rigorous content. Teachers and the principal at ASSI talked about how the thematic units helped students to develop deeper subject-matter expertise. One teacher explained that some SEAL strategies involve a lot of reprocessing, such that students have to recall what they have learned to create an aggregate summary. This may take the form, for instance, of a “categorical matrix,” which is a way for teachers to gauge a student's comprehension of the lesson. She elaborated:

“

I think that’s the beauty of SEAL—that [students] become more knowledgeable as they’re learning. And because it is theme based...they’re working on [it] for many weeks, [and]...they become experts on it. It becomes like a real-life application of what they’re learning. I can tell right away when it really clicks, because then it becomes part of their writing.

”

School Level Outcomes

At the school-level, teachers at ASSI and in the CDCs shared stories of how SEAL adoption had increased parent participation and visits to the classroom. One shared how parent partnership had become second nature in her classroom through the incorporation of parent involvement in thematic unit lessons:

“

Every time we have activities, and we have our Gallery Walks, we invite the families to come... And also we invite parents at the start of the unit. We send a letter home highlighting if any parent has a particular, like, something that they maybe do—a job, or the career involves something that we’re learning, or they have experience on that topic and they want to come out and do a presentation.

”

In addition to more visible family partnerships, staff from ASSI and the CDCs reported that their adoption of SEAL led to richer curricula and instruction. Teachers, school leaders, and district leadership agreed that the SEAL model and trainings created “strong teachers.” One teacher noted that it was particularly valuable to have quick access to quality bilingual resources, such as materials, books, and a SEAL coach for guidance. Another reported that, as a result of SEAL, she has used more diverse teaching techniques, including embedding more cultural appreciation and family partnership.

Overall, teachers collaborated a lot under SEAL—within their grade levels, across grade levels, and districtwide. Teachers at the same grade level within the same school collaborated most often, but SEAL teachers reported collaborating with other teachers across the district, particularly if they had been trained in the same teacher cohort. One teacher, for instance, reported that SEAL provided a mechanism for her to collaborate with staff frequently and to share the lesson planning in a way that created stronger units and more connected teacher relationships.

Finally, SEAL teachers, particularly veteran teachers, were seen as experts in language development at the school level. Working at a demonstration site emphasized this because educators, policymakers, and others interested in the SEAL model from across the state came to watch them teach. Teachers with unique skills and talents, such as music and art, were able to shine and take the lead on preparing materials for other teachers. For instance, during the first year of the pandemic, one ASSI teacher’s SEAL chant was featured in EdSource, a California-based education news source. The principal said this resulted in a new sense of morale and pride for the teachers and school.

District Level Outcomes

The biggest success at the district level was the benefit of having SEAL units aligned from PK to third grade across the district. Showcasing the strength of RCSD's centralized approach, coaches were able to build out units for fourth and fifth grade, beyond the original SEAL model of PK–3. Having alignment across the district allowed teachers to leverage resources and materials across schools. Moreover, the district was consistent in its offerings: A student transferring from one school to another within the district saw the same learning environment, and SEAL coaches could easily observe and provide feedback on the same units. This streamlined their tasks and strengthened opportunities across the district for instructional collaboration, reflection, and improvement.

Facilitators and Lessons Learned

In this section, we highlight lessons learned about key factors that have facilitated SEAL implementation in Redwood City and describe implications for other districts seeking to implement the model.

- **RCSD schools made a long-term commitment to meeting the needs of ELs in asset-based ways.** Some schools within RCSD prioritized meeting the needs of their EL students at a time when deficit-based and anti-bilingual education policies (like Proposition 227) were in effect in California. This allowed a commitment to bilingualism among families and teachers to persist. When SEAL became available, the district recognized it as a potential solution to the community's needs. Hosting a SEAL pilot site led to becoming a demonstration site, which in turn led to districtwide implementation and the development of a network of SEAL teachers and schools.
- **District, CDC, and school leaders served as champions for SEAL.** Overall, parties at all levels within RCSD expressed the importance of having district leadership that “believes in the work” to support and advocate for the SEAL model. In RCSD, a key champion was Montes, who saw its potential because of her previous experience as a school principal, a special education teacher, a bilingual education specialist, and a university professor. Carmona was also instrumental in SEAL expansion across the preschool programs. In addition, district and site leaders played important roles in identifying sufficient federal, state, and local funding for SEAL coaches and teachers to attend trainings and to hire enough substitutes so that teachers could participate in trainings, unit development, and lesson planning.
- **Peer modeling and sharing of successful practices across schools were important drivers of expansion.** The availability of teachers who had mastered SEAL practices within the district, particularly among early childhood educators, was key to driving the expansion of the program. Teachers were motivated and encouraged to try new things and to take risks because they were able to observe the work of peer educators who had mastered SEAL strategies.
- **District leaders prioritized SEAL over competing initiatives.** Since RCSD began implementing SEAL, there have been competing initiatives and policies. By prioritizing SEAL training and implementation, RCSD leadership gave teachers permission and the time needed to focus on the

SEAL model. District leaders shared that this dedication to SEAL made teachers more “willing” and “open” to doing the work required to successfully implement the model.

- **The district was able to create efficiencies by using a centralized approach to manage SEAL coaches and curriculum development.** RCSD managed the districtwide expansion of SEAL, hiring all SEAL coaches to support training and unit development and providing a unified approach to implementation across multiple sites over many years. This unified approach nourished relationship-building across the district and school administrations as well as between schools. In addition, centralization allowed coaches to visit classrooms and support teachers at any site, if needed.
- **RCSD required schools to carry some of the costs of implementing SEAL in order to increase their commitment to the model.** The district learned early on that schools needed to help fund the SEAL model in order to fully buy in and commit to long-term implementation. Schools took over costs for teacher planning days and trainings, substitute coverage, schoolwide events, and meetings by incorporating these items into their budgets and annual Site Plans. Meanwhile, the district covered costs for classroom materials, props, trainings, and portions of the SEAL coaches’ salaries.
- **Having teachers create at least some of their own materials was an important sustainability strategy.** Coaches hired at the district level provided a lot of start-up support to new teachers. While useful and necessary, this led to an overreliance on their assistance and meant that teachers could use a lack of coaching support as a reason not to implement SEAL. Thus, district leaders came to believe that the best approach was for teachers and coaches to collaboratively develop materials.
- **District and site leaders valued teachers’ time and professionalism by ensuring funding for materials and teacher planning.** Teacher implementation takes investment, resources, and plenty of time. Whether at the school level to leverage skills and talents or across district collaborations to share materials and tips, educators were respected and valued for their expertise and trusted with requests. District leaders created processes to fund and deliver teacher requests promptly.

Conclusion

This case study focused on RCSD’s SEAL origin story and the approach to SEAL implementation across the district. It also highlighted examples and outcomes from one RCSD elementary school and the district’s early childhood program. The value of having bilingual instructors and champions at every level of the district cannot be understated: It was critical to adoption and the success of SEAL implementation in this district. The commitment to bilingualism and to ELs led RCSD’s educators to improve the quality of their units and to reflect on their teaching practice. Finally, RCSD’s centralized approach to SEAL implementation led to strong alignment across schools and grade levels, which in turn helped to create more consistently rigorous learning environments for its students.

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 The Sobrato Family Foundation is now called Sobrato Philanthropies.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Redwood City School District (n.d.) *Home*. Retrieved March 30, 2022 from <https://www.rcsdk8.net>
- ^{iv} Dataquest (n.d.) Retrieved March 30, 2022, from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/dataquest.asp>
- ^v Dataquest (n.d.) Retrieved March 30, 2022, from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/dataquest.asp>
- ^{vi} Redwood City Child Development Program (2019, October 3). *Curriculum*. Retrieved March 30, 2022, from <https://rccdp.org/curriculum-by-levels/>
- ^{vii} A Site Plan is a plan of action to raise the academic performance of students and improve the school’s educational program.