



# Language-Rich and Joyful Learning:

## Supporting Pandemic Recovery for English Learners and Dual Language Learners

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## SEAL's research-based strategies can inspire engagement and ignite learning among young English Learners

English Learners (ELs), children from immigrant families, and children living in low-income households are among those who have been hardest hit by the health and economic consequences of the pandemic (Breiseth, 2020). They are also among the students most likely to have missed out on learning due to remote learning challenges and other school and family disruptions.

Yet despite the educational challenges encountered by ELs and Dual Language Learners (DLLs) during the last 18 months of distance learning and quarantines, there have also been at least two silver linings. Both illustrate that students' and families' languages and backgrounds are assets, not barriers, to success.

- First, although many ELs and DLLs have experienced limited exposure to English during the pandemic, they have also had additional time to be immersed in their home language. Research shows that home language support effectively promotes English language development (National Academies, 2017). Thus, while English language development may have slowed for some ELs and DLLs, the additional time with their home languages, if leveraged properly, may ultimately foster stronger bilingualism and biliteracy in the long term.
- Second, the pandemic impelled educators and caregivers to work more closely together. Schools that communicated with their families in a culturally and linguistically responsive way fostered stronger home—school relationships, productive student learning at home, and smoother transitions to in-person schooling.

### KEY TERMS

**English Learners:** K-12 students who meet state and federal criteria and are learning English while simultaneously learning academic content in school.

**Dual Language Learners:** Preschool-aged or younger children who are learning two (or more) languages at the same time or who are learning a second language while continuing to develop their first (or home) language.

**Dual Language Programs:** Programs in which students are taught academic content in two languages.



As communities continue to respond to the challenges of COVID-19, educators need to build from students' and families' assets and employ research-based strategies to re-engage students and support their learning. As part of this, educators must establish and foster relationships, address traumas and other social and emotional needs, and make teaching and learning relevant, affirming, fun, and engaging for students. Schools must also attend to the wellbeing of teachers, many of whom have experienced stress and burnout over the past year and a half.

**SEAL can help schools accomplish these things.** A rigorous external evaluation of SEAL, conducted between 2015 and 2019, found that teachers and leaders in SEAL schools employ teaching strategies that effectively engage students (Center for Equity for English Learners & Wexford, 2020). Evaluators found that students in SEAL schools—who are largely ELs and socioeconomically disadvantaged—were confident and joyful learners who experienced positive developments in language, literacy, and academic achievement. The evaluation also found that teachers in SEAL schools were more collaborative, enthusiastic about teaching, and confident in their knowledge and skills after receiving in-depth training on how to implement the SEAL model.

This brief explains how SEAL contributes to improved teaching, learning, and engagement for DLLs and ELs. **It describes how SEAL strategies and tools can support pandemic recovery, offering specific resources that can assist educators in meeting students' social and emotional needs, strengthening school–family partnerships, and addressing unfinished learning.** Finally, it suggests ways districts can leverage state and federal stimulus funds to support implementing and scaling those practices.



## 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. Its model delivers language-rich, joyful, and rigorous education for all children. SEAL provides professional development, curriculum support, and technical assistance to school systems—which bolsters learning for all children but is especially critical for ELs.

# SEAL Contributes to Improved Teaching and Learning

As part of a comprehensive systems-change approach, teachers and staff in SEAL schools and districts engage in two to three years of professional learning. Independent evaluators studied the implementation of this training in 67 schools across 12 districts. They found that after the SEAL training, teachers significantly increased their use of research-based best practices for teaching ELs and increased their confidence and sense of efficacy as educators (Center for Equity for English Learners & Wexford, 2020).

## Teaching and learning improved in the following ways:

- Teaching became **more interactive**;
- Teachers and principals observed increased **student engagement**;
- Principals observed more **joyful and confident** students;
- Teachers increasingly helped students make **connections** to previous learning and felt more confident making **home-to-school connections**;
- Students had greater **access to materials**, technology, and other resources for learning;
- Teachers used more **scaffolding strategies** to enhance comprehension;
- Teachers used more **flexible groupings** to meet student and group learning needs; and
- Teachers said they were more **enthusiastic** about teaching.



# Critical Elements of the SEAL Model

The research-based SEAL model is built around four pillars:



## A focus on rich, powerful, expressive, and academic language throughout the curriculum

SEAL weaves **language and literacy** into all aspects of the school day to support engagement and learning for ELs, DLLs, and native English speakers alike. It supports students' home languages and encourages bilingualism and biliteracy.

SEAL **builds upon existing standards and curriculum**. SEAL emphasizes language development through integrated standards-based thematic units and curriculum by building upon the Preschool Learning Foundations, incorporating the Common Core English Language Arts standards, California's Revised English Language Development Standards, the Next Generation Science Standards, and state social studies standards.



## Creation of an affirming and enriched environment

In SEAL classrooms, teachers recognize that the way children relate to each other is a primary point of social learning and development. Therefore, SEAL teachers help students' **build positive self-identities** and develop skills for social interaction, teach and acknowledge social behaviors, emphasize the **value of bilingualism**, and encourage peer interaction and collaboration.



## Articulation across grades and alignment of the preschool and elementary systems

SEAL is a **whole-school initiative**. Effectively implementing SEAL requires school and district leaders to set goals, establish policies, and align sufficient resources to support SEAL implementation over time. School leaders and preschool-through-third-grade educators must ensure consistency and cohesion across classrooms and throughout the school. These actions and commitments ensure that the model is supported systemically.



## Strong partnerships between families and schools

Staff in SEAL schools **engage families** in schoolwide and classroom experiences to further develop home-school partnerships to support student learning.

These pillars are realized through deep and sustained **professional learning**. For two years, teachers participate in intensive professional development, coaching, and collaborative planning within their grade level. Moreover, SEAL's approach to professional learning also involves instructional coaches, principals, district leaders, and families in the learning process; all the adults who support students learn and embrace research-based strategies for supporting language-rich, rigorous, joyful, and deep learning for young children.

# SEAL Strategies and Tools Can Support Pandemic Recovery

SEAL strategies are particularly relevant during this time of pandemic recovery. Throughout the pandemic, SEAL has been working closely with our educator colleagues in the field to understand their challenges and successes. We have also been following national and state data as it emerges in order to understand the unique challenges facing ELs and DLLs as well as low-income and immigrant communities. In doing so, we have identified three major priorities that SEAL strategies can help address:

**#1 COVID-19 has intensified students' social and emotional needs.**

**#2 COVID-19 has underscored the importance of family—school partnerships.**

**#3 COVID-19 has led to unfinished learning for ELs and DLLs.**

We discuss each of these priorities below and offer specific tools and resources to support educators and administrators as they continue to weather this public health crisis and address stubborn and sometimes widening educational opportunity gaps. Additional tools can be found on the SEAL website and through the Multilingual Learning Toolkit, hosted by Early Edge California.



## #1 COVID-19 has intensified students' social and emotional needs.

During the pandemic, many students have been socially isolated and disconnected from peers and school staff. Many children and young people have experienced social and emotional challenges, including anxiety, depression, and trauma (YouthTruth, 2021; Jones, 2020).

SEAL prioritizes relationships and learning environments that are socially and emotionally affirming. SEAL educators learn concrete strategies for creating welcoming, inclusive classrooms that embrace students' and families' cultural and linguistic assets. SEAL encourages educators to critically examine their teaching practices to ensure they are culturally and linguistically affirming, as well as healing-centered (Ginwright, 2018). Another central theme in SEAL's work with schools is the importance of fostering joy in learning—with educators supported in designing and offering engaging, participatory, hands-on learning experiences. SEAL teachers are also prompted to reflect on the extent to which they are creating opportunities for student voice and agency during instruction.

### TOOLS AND RESOURCES

#### To help children feel safe, supported, and affirmed

##### [Affirming Language, Culture & Identity](#) (SEAL Video, 2019)

This video shares asset-based strategies for teachers to engage with families, develop young children's social-emotional health, and set up a classroom environment to support multilingual learners.

##### [SEAL Strategy Write-Up: My Name](#) (SEAL Strategy, 2020)

This resource provides two examples of how teachers can use children's names to support positive identity development.

##### [SEAL Bibliography: Literature of Mirrors & Windows](#) (SEAL Resource, 2020)

This is a bibliography of diverse books that affirm and reflect different aspects of children's identities.

##### [Social and Emotional Learning for English Learner and Immigrant Students](#) (Educator Resources, March 2020)

This curated set of research and resources by the Center for Equity for English Learners is designed to support EL and immigrant students' social and emotional health during and in the aftermath of the pandemic

## #2 COVID-19 has underscored the importance of family—school partnerships.

School—family partnerships have always been essential to student learning and school improvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Now, more than ever, those relationships are critical in ensuring that students, especially ELs and DLLs, have the support they need to succeed.

SEAL emphasizes the importance of leveraging family partnerships to create inclusive, linguistically and culturally affirming classroom communities. Teachers learn how to conduct family empathy interviews to help uncover each family’s “funds of knowledge” in order to design a culturally responsive and sustaining approach to instruction. SEAL also trains staff on working with families to develop strategies for supporting strong home language and literacy development at home, creating expanded learning opportunities at home for students and families, and strengthening communication with families.

### TOOLS AND RESOURCES

#### To support educators in forming strong family—school partnerships

##### [Engaging Families in Distance Learning](#) (SEAL Webinar, May 2020)

While sheltering in place, the connection between home and school was of the utmost importance. This webinar invites teachers, coaches, and other support staff to learn about strategies, tools, and resources to help families as students return to in-person learning.

##### [Home-School Connection and Projects](#) (SEAL Video, n.d.)

Opportunities for curriculum-based learning at home help build relationships with families and support language development for ELs and DLLs. This video showcases an example of a home—school project presentation in a preschool classroom where educators provide a high-quality extended talk in multiple languages and provide hands-on, inquiry-based experiences. This resource is part of the Multilingual Learning Toolkit.

##### [Family Conversations, Home—School Connections, & Projects](#) (SEAL Strategy, n.d.)

This resource describes how to engage families in their children’s learning by facilitating family conversations, home—school connections, and projects. This resource includes guidance on how to partner with families and connect the curriculum to learning at home. This resource is part of the Multilingual Learning Toolkit.

##### [SEAL Strategy Write-Up: Family-Centered Goal-Setting](#) (SEAL Strategy, 2020)

This resource provides the rationale and tips for involving families in student goal-setting.

##### [Supporting Young English Learners at Home](#) (Educator Resources, n.d.)

These family and caregiver activities produced by WestEd provide simple, fun activities families and caregivers can use with young EL children at home to strengthen language development in the home language or English.

##### [The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family—School Partnerships](#) (Report, 2013)

This resource is a publication of Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education. Based on existing research and best practices, this resource is designed to support the development of family engagement strategies, policies, and programs.

### #3 COVID-19 has led to unfinished learning for DLLs and ELs.

Most students covered less content in 2020–2021 than in a typical year, and many have missed additional instructional time because of the technological, economic, health, and mental health challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic.

As a result, many students, especially ELs and economically disadvantaged students, have “unfinished learning” (Education Trust, 2021) that will require additional instructional support and acceleration (TNTP, 2020).

Further, many students from non-English speaking homes have had fewer opportunities to hear and practice English than they typically would have. This “linguistic isolation” (Siegel, Martin & Bruno, 2007) may be part of the reason that achievement for ELs during COVID-19 has significantly lagged their pre-pandemic levels (Pier et al., 2021) and may have contributed to stalled English language development. Yet, at the same time, these students have had more time to hear and practice their home language. Schools that leverage these linguistic resources can help ELs accelerate their English and academic learning.



SEAL builds English language skills while also developing and honoring the home language. SEAL uses research-based, language-rich teaching strategies to deepen and accelerate language and literacy development in order to support biliteracy. SEAL coach–facilitators work with teachers to develop strategies for pairing linguistic development with academic rigor so that ELs and DLLs develop language skills as they learn and engage in content-rich instruction across the disciplines.

#### **TOOLS AND RESOURCES**

### **To increase language-rich learning**

#### **6 Key Considerations for Supporting English Learners with Distance Learning**

(SEAL Blog, March 2020)

This blog post describes research-based strategies and considerations for teaching ELs during distance learning (and beyond).

#### **Promoting Oral Language in Distance Learning** (SEAL Webinar, May 2020)

In this webinar, participants are exposed to strategies and technologies that promote oral language and increase engagement.

#### **Integrated and Designated English Language Development** (SEAL Videos, 2018)

In these videos, teachers demonstrate specific strategies for developing academic English language skills from kindergarten to fourth grade.

#### **Five-Exchange Conversation** (SEAL Strategy, 2020)

This tool introduces teachers to the five-exchange conversation, a teaching strategy for engaging children in informal conversations, modeling language, and amplifying student vocabulary.

#### **SEAL Strategy Write-Up: Ensuring the Presence of Each Child’s Language** (SEAL Strategy, 2020)

This write-up speaks to a variety of ways in which educators can value, affirm, and partner with families to incorporate children’s home languages into the learning environment.



# Opportunities With State and Federal Funding

Schools and districts across the nation can adopt or deepen strategies and practices aligned with SEAL that support literacy and language development for ELs and DLLs, from preschool and through the elementary-school years. These strategies can support learning recovery and re-engagement.

To support this work, school districts have unprecedented access to a major infusion of federal funds (Jordan, 2021) intended to support pandemic recovery. Some states, like California, have also invested considerable state dollars toward school districts' pandemic recovery efforts (Fensterwald, 2021). The federal funds, available now through to at least 2024, are in addition to ongoing state and local funding streams. In consultation with local stakeholders, school districts should tap into these one-time sources to jump-start whole-school planning, professional learning, and family engagement in order to support EL and DLL success. Following this jump-start period, these programs and strategies should be sustained through ongoing funding sources.

Excellent uses of one-time funds might include the following practices and strategies:

- ✔ Partner with external professional learning experts to offer teachers ongoing training on English and home language development and literacy strategies. Set aside additional professional learning time on the schedule for that training to happen.
- ✔ Hire coaches and facilitators to work with teachers on an ongoing basis to deepen instructional strategies and skills related to early childhood development, language, and literacy (including in the home language), student engagement, and culturally and linguistically relevant practices.
- ✔ Invest in training and paid staff collaboration time to create integrated, thematic curricula that address ELs' specific language development needs and grade-level academic content.
- ✔ Develop plans to create dual language programs or expand existing programs to additional classrooms, grade levels, and school sites.
- ✔ Develop a districtwide or schoolwide plan and strategy for moving to a community school model (Maier, Daniel, and Oakes, 2017). A community school approach is ideal for scaling and deepening social, emotional, and academic support for ELs and DLLs while fostering language-rich, joyful learning. Through such a model, a school could offer individualized whole-child supports while expanding learning time, relationship-centered learning, and wrap-around supports for students and the entire family.
- ✔ Expand learning time and opportunities during school, after school, and in the summer for ELs and DLLs, especially programs that combine language-rich instruction with enrichment and play as well as programs that provide opportunities for home language development.



- ✔ Pay multilingual and multiethnic family leaders to liaise between the school and families and support strengthened and ongoing school–family partnerships.
- ✔ Expand programs aimed at strengthening family involvement and family literacy, including those in support of home language development.
- ✔ Train school staff to effectively engage families, including multicultural and multilingual families; this may include training on two-way communication strategies and strategies for creating a welcoming school environment.
- ✔ Provide multilingual families with training on how to access and use technology that aids instruction and communication.
- ✔ Provide families with multilingual information and resources on how to access housing services, internet connectivity, food services, childcare, health care, immigration services, adult education, and other supports to address their basic needs.

## Conclusion

As educators, families, and students begin to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and districts have the opportunity to rebuild and reimagine education (Policy Analysis for California Education, et al., 2021), dramatically strengthening social, emotional, and academic supports for all children. This transformational work is especially critical for ELs and DLLs, who have faced unprecedented barriers to learning during the pandemic, despite bringing incredible assets to their schools. The SEAL strategies and tools summarized here can be leveraged to support ELs and DLLs in classrooms, schools, and districts across the country, leading to language-rich, joyful learning for all children while celebrating each child’s unique cultural and linguistic assets.



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