



National Research & Development Center to Improve
EDUCATION FOR SECONDARY ENGLISH LEARNERS

WestEd 

SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT ENGLISH LEARNERS IN DISTANCE LEARNING

What Can School and District Leaders Do?

HAIWEN CHU

Focused on the role of school and district leaders, this brief is part of a series from the National Research and Development Center to Improve Education for Secondary English Learners that articulates concrete actions that teachers, leaders, parents, and policymakers can undertake to ensure that adolescent English Learners develop substantive and generative knowledge and skills in distance learning environments. This brief builds on literature on distance learning in general and on distance learning with English Learners in particular. It draws on empirical studies on distance or online learning in secondary schools carried out before the pandemic, mostly in credit-recovery settings (Heppen et al., 2017; Heinrich & Darling-Aduana, 2019); evidence-based practices from in-person instruction with English Learners (Baker et al., 2014; Walqui & Bunch, 2019); well-reasoned scholarship; guidance

documents posted by a variety of state and national organizations, including the Council of Great City Schools (Uro et al., 2020), English Learner Success Forum (2020), Learning Policy Institute (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020), and Policy Analysis for California Education (Myung et al., 2020); and proposals, experiences, and opinions of students and teachers engaged in distal learning (Community Design Partners, August 2020).

School and district leaders operate in a multi-layered, nested, ecological system in which all aspects and layers of the system interact and affect each other. Because school and district leaders' actions influence all of the other layers of the system, the brief first presents important aspects of this nested system, outlining district responsibilities and school roles that relate to what school and district leaders can do to

better serve English Learners (Table 1). The brief then explores how to support the development of teacher expertise in designing and implementing distance learning for English Learners.

Table 1. Roles and Responsibilities at Nested Levels of the System

District Responsibilities	School Roles	What School and District Leaders Can Do
Engage in reciprocal communication with families of English Learners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer communications in the home languages of families and through their preferred channels. Serve as a hub for resources to meet families' social, emotional, and nutritional needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure adequate staffing and language capacity to communicate with families. Listen carefully to families' needs and seek solutions and referrals.
Ensure equitable access for English Learners to instruction and technology.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer devices that enable English Learners to access instruction effectively. Expand access to broadband so that English Learners can participate in synchronous instruction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leverage local community resources to expand access to devices and broadband. Ensure clear channels of communication and referrals when needs are identified.
Provide accelerated options for the subject-specific learning and language development of English Learners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that English Learners are assigned to appropriate grade-level courses. Offer accelerated options for English Learners to explore and connect the most important ideas within a discipline. Ensure that students' English language proficiency levels do not serve as barriers to participation in classes or in advanced course enrollment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide adequate staffing for scheduling support. Monitor the enrollment of students in the most challenging (and well-supported) classes possible. Offer choices for accelerated learning, including after-school or supplemental programs. Offer courses in languages other than English that students speak, including Advanced Placement courses in language and literature.

District Responsibilities	School Roles	What School and District Leaders Can Do
Offer high-quality models, platforms, and tools for ambitious and well-supported distance learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Select and adopt high-quality instructional materials and digital platforms that enable English Learners to access and interact with multimodal texts for disciplinary learning. ▪ Ensure that online learning blends synchronous and asynchronous interaction to support powerful learning experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Solicit and follow feedback from teachers about effective elements and platforms. ▪ Circulate and encourage the sharing of materials, such as lesson plans that are successful, with a focus on features that can be transposed.
Provide professional learning opportunities that expand educator expertise and are coherent, relevant, job-embedded, and responsive to their needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Engage educators in content-focused professional learning that demonstrates best practices in using the same digital platforms they will use with students. ▪ Create sustained opportunities for educators to learn from each other as they share common problems of practice and develop, test, and refine shared solutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Offer time and structures for teachers to collaborate in communities with colleagues to identify problems of practice and develop shared solutions. ▪ Promote and reward distal collaboration among teachers in the district. ▪ Invest strategically in developing educator proficiency with a few digital platforms that will promote oral interaction.

The following section elaborates on the last row of this table, offering suggestions for how school and district leaders can support educators' professional learning, as improvements in

professional learning can contribute considerably to improving learning experiences for English Learners.

Support the Development of Shared Educator Expertise in Designing and Implementing Instruction for English Learners

Prior to the pandemic, Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2017) synthesized 35 studies employing experimental or quasi-experimental designs that identify design features of face-to-face professional development that have been causally connected to improved student achievement outcomes, expanding on previous

seminal studies (e.g., Garet et al., 2001, Desimone, 2009). Table 2 offers ideas for how each of these design features can inform the professional learning experiences offered to teachers who are having to carry out instruction in distance learning environments.

Table 2. Ways to Support the Design Features of Effective Professional Development

Design Feature	School and District Leader Actions
1. Is content-focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustain a focus on disciplinary learning and resources available online to support rigorous, grade-level learning. • Ensure that professional learning is about the design of distance instruction and effective use of digital platforms to expand students' access to content rather than measure their compliance.
2. Incorporates active learning , using adult learning theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create virtual professional learning experiences in which teachers experience, analyze, and apply the kinds of quality learning experiences that they will create for their English Learners. • Have teachers actively reflect on similarities and differences between distance learning and face-to-face formats.
3. Supports collaboration , typically in job-embedded contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide time for teachers to plan and collaborate. • Organize teams of teachers in subject-specific clusters so they can collaboratively create lessons based upon a shared format, theme, and activities. • Support teachers in crafting, critiquing, implementing, observing, and refining one another's lessons. • Center collaboration at the nexus of reflection, practice, and the creation of shared instructional products for online learning.

Design Feature	School and District Leader Actions
4. Uses models and modeling of effective practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Help create school libraries of distance learning lessons, perhaps with commentaries from teachers of their implementation. ▪ Annotate model lessons with a focus on what could be readily adapted to work in face-to-face or hybrid classrooms when schools more fully reopen.
5. Provides coaching and expert support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Offer cycles of individual or collaborative coaching focused on quality opportunities to learn. ▪ Include technical aspects of online instruction at first but with the broader aim of offering quality learning experiences for students.
6. Offers opportunities for feedback and reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Join teachers online during the implementation of a lesson to observe how it goes; offer teachers honest appreciation, and support them in refining the lesson, contributing to it with specific ideas. ▪ Focus on successes that can be built upon and expanded. ▪ Engage teachers in processes of self-reflection and peer-reflection.
7. Is of sustained duration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use breaks in the school schedule to offer intensive professional learning about instructional design and distance learning. ▪ Maximize teacher planning and collaboration time with ongoing supports throughout the year. ▪ Reassess at regular intervals and adjust intensity of offerings to focus on meeting teacher needs.

Given the unprecedented nature of the challenges created by COVID-19, ideal solutions do not yet exist and will need to be created by educators who are actively engaged in teaching

English Learners. For these reasons, it will be especially important for school and district leaders to offer educators the time, resources, and spaces to find solutions collaboratively.

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