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School Reform for Students of Color and English Learners: Leaving Pedagogy Behind

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Context and importance of the problem

California's students of color comprise 73% of its entire student population, with Latinos making up the majority of the state's students – more than 3.2 million (Ramanathan, 2010). In light of these numbers, public school improvement efforts and instructional policies that do not explicitly address the educational experiences of students of color and English Learners risk neglecting one of the most pressing areas of focus for the state's system of public education.

Public school reformers have responded to these demographic patterns through a variety of school improvement efforts intended to boost the performance of students of color and English Learners. In fact, an entire school improvement industry (Rowan, 2002) has sprung up alongside the public school system, part of which is intended to meet the unique needs of these historically underserved groups. This industry is composed of organizations outside of conventional public schools and includes non-profit school reform organizations, universities, for-profit educational providers, and management organizations. Its purpose is to affect the structure and function of public schooling by shoring up assistance to struggling schools with training, information, materials, and programs that are not readily available within the traditional public school system.

In California, this industry is flourishing, and non-profit school reform organizations have proliferated in recent years. Still, we know relatively little about the pedagogical practices that take place in schools served by reform organizations. This policy brief contributes to this knowledge gap by reporting on the types of instruction that took place

in six schools that partnered with one prominent California school reform organization. I found that the while school reform efforts were consistently associated with the provision of standards-based curricular *content*, high-quality *pedagogical techniques* were rarely in place. Patterns like this underscore the need for researchers to study how California's reformers can influence not just *what* curricula teachers cover, but *how* teachers deliver this curriculum, particularly when working with students of color and English Learners.

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Critique of policy options

For the past decade, the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has required states to hold public schools accountable for progress toward standardized test targets. The law mandates that states institute corrective actions for schools and districts that are unable to consistently meet targets, and consequences range from changing the curriculum, restructuring, to dissolving entire districts. California policymakers have crafted instructional policies that reinforce this federal system; its state-sanctioned textbooks and standardized assessment are aligned with state curriculum standards, and monetary grants for low-

performing schools and districts incentivize schools to assume high fidelity to the state’s curriculum.

Under this structure, schools that serve mainly students of color and English Learners – populations that historically perform lower on standardized tests – often struggle to meet testing targets and are, consequently, under heightened pressure to boost scores to ward off corrective actions. In response, many of these schools partner with school reform organizations for help meeting test targets.

Implicit in these instructional policies is the assumption that standards alignment improves the quality of teaching and learning, particularly for students of color and English Learners. Yet our findings provided little evidence that standards-aligned instruction was associated with the kinds of high-quality pedagogical practices that research shows are characteristic of schools that meet the needs of students of color and English Learners, such as techniques to manage orderly, learning-centered classrooms; strategies to support English

Learners; culturally relevant instruction; or the delivery of coherent (i.e., logically sequenced) lessons.

I found that the most common types of training, information, and materials that the organization provided schools centered on strategies for aligning instruction with the state’s curriculum standards, rather than on resources for improving pedagogy or learning new instructional techniques. This focus on standards-alignment was reflected in the schools’ classrooms. As Figure 1 shows, our researchers rarely observed standards-aligned curricular tasks co-occurring with other forms of quality pedagogy. In only 5% of cases was standards-based content observed alongside all of the other forms of quality pedagogy that we looked for. In fact, in a quarter of the cases (26%), standards-aligned content was observed without any of these other practices in place. Put another way, standards-aligned content was rarely linked with high-quality pedagogy in these schools

Figure 1. Occurrence of Standards-aligned Tasks with Other Pedagogical Practices

Standards-aligned curricular content	Learning-centered classroom management	English Learner strategies	Culturally relevant instruction	Coherent lesson delivery	Co-occurrence of standards-aligned content with other pedagogical practices (% of cases)
✓					26
✓	✓				16
✓	✓	✓			12
✓		✓			9
✓	✓	✓	✓		7
✓	✓			✓	7
✓				✓	5
✓	✓	✓		✓	5
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5
✓	✓		✓		4
✓		✓		✓	2
✓		✓	✓	✓	2

✓=practice was observed

N=57 instructional observations

Policy recommendations

While these findings suggest that California’s school reformers may be effectively helping schools align the content of instruction with the state’s standards, they also point to the next steps in school reform for California’s students of color and English Learners. Now schools are poised to focus

on deeper elements of instructional quality that reach beyond the technicalities of curricular alignment and that aim to strengthen teachers’ pedagogical skills.

State-supported programs and low-performing schools grants that encourage public schools,

districts, and school reform organizations to create ongoing, cumulative professional learning opportunities for teachers are the next step.

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Continuous teacher professional development that focuses on questions of pedagogy would shift schools' focus away from teacher training in how to implement standards-aligned materials or programs to teacher professional development in how to gauge the unique learning needs of diverse student

populations and how to develop instructional strategies that are responsive to their needs.

Potential focus areas for this professional development include:

- Developing instructional techniques that are tailored to students of color or English Learners;
- Cultivating rigorous, learning-centered classroom environments; and
- Delivering coherent lessons that are grounded in principles of learning theory.

This shift would set educators' sights on deeper issues of pedagogical quality, look past superficial questions about content coverage, and redirect school improvement efforts to center on explicit questions about students of color and English Learners – the most equitable focus of school reform for California's students.

References

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