

Defining the California Literacy Landscape

By Morgan Garvey, Ed.M., May 2026



Introduction

California has outlined ambitious goals for improving reading proficiency through legislation and budget decisions, all of which have implications at the local level. When having discussions about English language arts (ELA) instruction, curriculum selection, and the science of reading, it is important for governance team members to be aware of key terms in the field of literacy, as well as current legislation guiding ELA instruction and material adoption. This fact sheet provides governance teams with operational definitions of terms and recent legislation that are frequently referenced regarding language and literacy instruction in California.

English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework

The [ELA/English Language Development \(ELD\) Framework](#), adopted in 2014 and published in 2015, is a comprehensive guidance document for educators, administrators, curriculum developers, university faculty, and community members. It provides an overview of how ELA and ELD standards relate to each other and how they can be implemented in all content areas across grades K-12. ELA standards relate to the knowledge and skills students are generally expected to acquire for reading, writing, and speaking the English language, whereas ELD standards are specific to English learners. The framework intertwines these standards purposely. The ELA and ELD standards are meant to be taught in tandem so that all students may gain ELA skills and English learner students concurrently learn social, cultural, and academic uses of the English language. The framework discusses language and literacy instruction in five central themes: meaning making, language development, effective expression, content knowledge, and foundational skills. The document provides an overview of ELA/ELD standards, a description

of what constitutes effective professional development, guidance for administering formative assessments, and practical instructional guidance for each grade level.

Key terms

Term	Definition
Meaning making	Literal understanding of text and language; also includes inferences, as well as critical writing, reading, and listening skills.
Effective expression	Students learn to assess an author's purpose and use of language and imagery to convey information. Students also learn how to convey their own message and tone appropriate for the task.
Foundational skills	Knowledge of print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics, word recognition, and fluency, which work together for a student to decode and comprehend written language.
Phonics	The ability to connect letters to sounds.
Phonemic awareness	The ability to identify distinct units of sound.
Fluency	The ability to read words and sentences with automaticity.

Source: California Department of Education (2015). [ELA/ELD Framework for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve](#).

Instructional standards

Content standards define what knowledge, skills, and concepts students should master at each grade level. In ELA, the standards relate to reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The standards emphasize students' ability to form and articulate evidence-based arguments, derive meaning from informational texts as well as literature, and engage with academic language. California's ELA standards are available in an [online searchable database](#). They were approved by the State Board of Education (SBE) in 2010 and modified in 2013, per the recommendation of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. A related set of [ELD standards](#) were developed for English learners in 2012.

Instructional materials

Instructional materials are textbooks and other resources used to support student learning, including workbooks, software, videos, presentations, objects, and visual aids such as charts. Manipulatives such as flashcards, alphabet magnets, and grammar charts can be used to support language and literacy acquisition in early grades. In 2025, Assembly Bill 121 directed the development of new guidance by experts in evidence-based literacy instruction to be used by the SBE to support the follow-up adoption of ELA/ELD instructional materials. The process is expected to conclude in November 2026. Prior to this, the last adoption of ELA/ELD instructional materials was completed in 2015, per Senate Bill 201. To support governance teams through the instructional materials adoption process, CSBA's Research and Education Policy Development Department has published fact sheets, briefs, and hosted several webinars on [adopting instructional materials](#).

The Golden State Literacy Plan

The [Golden State Literacy Plan](#) was published by Gov. Gavin Newsom in June 2025. The nine-page plan outlines a multi-year strategy

for improving reading outcomes, including a timeline of ongoing initiatives and proposed future investments. Highlights of the plan include screening for reading difficulties in early grades, providing evidence-based professional development for educators, ensuring that instructional materials are evidence-based, and hiring literacy coaches.

Screening

Starting in the 2025–26 school year, students in grades K-2 will be screened annually for reading difficulties, including dyslexia, as mandated by [SB 114 \(2023\)](#). The law also mandates timely parental notification and results reporting, and appropriate staff training for implementation. Screening results must be used solely for early identification and support, not for high-stakes decisions such as special education eligibility, grading, or teacher evaluation.

Screening is conducted in early grades so that students can be identified for additional support early in their education. Research has found that students who are identified for intervention in grade 1 tend to end the year with significantly higher scores than peers who do not receive interventions following screening (Al Otaiba et al., 2014). The state-funded Multitudes screener is available in both English and Spanish and at no cost to schools. While the screening tools are free to local educational agencies (LEAs), the LEA will need to allocate staff and staff time to implement the screening. It is important to note that screeners, while useful in identifying students that may need additional instructional support, cannot be used to formally diagnose a learning difficulty. Additionally, screeners cannot be used to determine a student's eligibility for an individualized education program (IEP) or Section 504 plan. Screeners are best thought of as a piece of information to be considered among other factors when making decisions about a student's learning needs. For more information about implementation of screening for reading difficulties, the California Department of Education has a [Screening for Risk of Reading Difficulties](#) webpage and a [Literacy Screenings Professional Development FAQs](#) webpage.



Assembly Bill 1454

[AB 1454](#), passed unanimously and signed by Gov. Newsom in October 2025, seeks to address gaps in literacy achievement by bolstering key components of ELA instruction: administrator preparation and instructional materials. The bill aims to enhance administrator preparation programs by updating standards for administrative services and reading specialist preparation programs to include training on effective means to teach literacy. This change aims to ensure that teachers, administrators, and reading specialists are prepared to implement literacy instruction methods that reflect the California ELA/ELD Framework. The bill also calls for improvements to instructional materials, including state-level adoption of new evidence-based textbooks and materials, and inclusion of materials that reflect varied home languages that students may speak.

The bill also emphasizes leveraging children's home languages as an asset. The SBE must finalize their recommendations for the follow-up adoption by Jan. 31, 2027. Following the adoption, LEAs must adhere to these guidelines when selecting new curricula and materials. Per AB 1454, LEAs must choose materials from SBE's list or certify that their own choice is aligned with SBE's criteria.

Senate Bill 488

[SB 488](#), adopted in 2021, aims for all teachers in California to be prepared to provide evidence-based literacy instruction suitable for all students, including multilingual learners, English learners, and students with disabilities. The bill required the Commission on Teacher Credentialing to update their reading and literacy standards, as well as Teacher Performance Expectations (TPEs). The bill called for updates to all teacher preparation programs and the development of a new literacy performance assessment to replace the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA). The new literacy program standards and TPEs took effect in July 2024. The new Literacy Performance Assessment replaced RICA effective July 1, 2025.

Assembly Bill 121

[AB 121](#), passed in 2025, amended the role of the state superintendent of public instruction (SSPI) and made several funding appropriations to establish or expand crucial education services in the state. With the passage of this bill, the SSPI will take a more proactive role in fiscal oversight by examining the budget of a county office of education (COE), conditionally approve or disapprove a budget that does not provide adequate assurance that the COE will meet its current and future obligations and resolve any problems, and notify the president of the SBE, if the SSPI determines that a county office of education is in financial distress.

Among many fiscal provisions, the bill required the SBE to establish criteria and guidance for selecting or creating effective literacy professional development programs in grades TK-5. The SBE is required to publish this list of programs no later than Sept. 30, 2026. The bill also approves funds for LEAs to use in the 2026–27 fiscal year for training certificated and classified staff who provide literacy instruction.

Literacy coaches

Literacy coaches support effective instruction by training teachers on evidence-based practices, modeling instruction, and providing one-on-one support as teachers encounter challenges. Literacy coaches can also help with planning lessons, guiding data interpretation and decision-making, and providing feedback on observed lessons. Though the terms are similar, a literacy coach is different from a reading specialist. Literacy coaches work with teachers, whereas reading specialists typically work with students. Per the Golden State Literacy Plan, "the State has invested a total of \$500 million for Literacy Coaches in the 2022 and 2023 Budget Acts. As of the current 2024–25 school year, 818 of the state's highest needs schools have been funded to hire and train literacy coaches and reading specialists."

Conclusion

It is important for governance teams to stay abreast of legislative updates and understand how those changes impact the LEA. Governance teams can review their board policies and administrative regulations regularly, ask for more information on legislative updates regarding curriculum and instruction, and dedicate time to learning and understanding what changes are imminent. For guidance and resources CSBA's Policy and Governance Technology Services updates board policies and administrative regulations quarterly, [provides webinars](#) on policy updates to policies, and [offers trainings](#) to support governance.

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