Getting Down to FACTS

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Curriculum Policy for California Schools

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Introduction

Curriculum policy shapes what students learn, how teachers teach, and which academic opportunities remain open or closed as students move through school. Its effects are not always visible at the point decisions are made. During the Common Core transition, for example, California districts reduced access to eighth-grade algebra, with enrollment falling from roughly 60 percent of students to under 20 percent. The immediate rationale was equity, reflecting concerns that many students were being placed in courses for which they were not prepared. Over time, however, this shift was associated with a decline in advanced mathematics course-taking in high school, particularly in calculus and precalculus, without corresponding improvements in achievement. Students who did not enter the accelerated pathway had lower rates of access to A-G courses linked to four-year college enrollment, with especially large differences for low-income students.

This example illustrates how curriculum policy can reshape students' academic trajectories over time. California is now at another such moment, with new literacy requirements, a recently completed mathematics materials adoption, and ongoing decisions about course access, supplementation, and implementation support. These decisions are likely to influence students' opportunities and outcomes over the coming years, often in ways that may only become apparent over time.

This brief draws on Getting Down to Facts III technical reports on curriculum adoption and use, early literacy, secondary mathematics, early childhood education, high school policy, and multilingual learner access to examine how California's curriculum policies are functioning in practice. It uses "curriculum" broadly: not only to mean textbooks and subject-matter content, but also to include the design of learning experiences, the supports teachers receive to enact them, and the extent to which instruction reflects what is known about how students learn and develop.

Across the studies, six patterns emerge: districts often make consequential curriculum decisions with limited state guidance; teachers often receive limited district guidance; many teachers view current materials as inadequate and supplement extensively; the state lacks usable data on key aspects of curriculum use; curriculum reforms are most effective when paired with coherent professional learning and implementation support; and curriculum policies can shape students' later opportunities in important, if sometimes indirect, ways. These findings raise questions about how curriculum decisions are made, supported, and evaluated over time.

Findings

1 **California districts often lack clear, specific guidance from the state about curriculum quality and implementation**

In areas such as mathematics, early literacy, and early childhood education, the state does not always provide districts with sufficiently clear or differentiated guidance about which curriculum materials and supports are highest quality. As a result, districts are often left to sort through too many options with too little help, which increases local burden and contributes to uneven implementation, especially in smaller and mid-sized systems.

2 Teachers often lack clear district guidance about curriculum use and supplementation.

Districts vary widely in the expectations they set for how teachers should use adopted materials. Even with expectations, districts commonly give teachers substantial autonomy without corresponding guidance about supplementation. This pattern leaves important decisions about curriculum coherence, consistency, and quality to individual teachers or schools rather than embedding them in a clearer district strategy. This lack of guidance places responsibility on teachers to curate supplemental materials and results in materials whose quality is not systematically known being widely used in California classrooms.

3 **Many California teachers view their curriculum materials as inadequate and supplement them extensively.**

Teacher survey data and district leader reports suggest that many California teachers see their core materials as insufficient, especially for engaging students and meeting diverse learning needs. These perceptions help explain the high rates of supplementation and teacher-created materials, raising concerns about consistency, instructional quality, and the degree to which current materials support strong teaching.

4 **California lacks usable statewide data on key curriculum issues.**

Although schools and districts report a large amount of information through tools such as SARCs and LCAPs, these data are often not standardized or accessible in ways that support monitoring, research, or improvement. Important gaps remain in understanding curriculum adoption, supplementation, high school course-taking, and multilingual learner access to programs and opportunities.

5 **Curriculum reforms are more effective when they are paired with professional learning and**

coherent implementation supports.

Evidence from California's literacy reforms suggests that curriculum policy can improve student learning when it is coupled with strong professional development, local planning, implementation support, and follow-through. These findings indicate that curriculum reforms are most likely to succeed when they are embedded in a broader system of support rather than treated as stand-alone policy changes.

6 Curriculum policies can have important indirect effects on students' later opportunities.

Curriculum-related reforms do not only affect instruction in the short term. They can also reshape course-taking patterns and students' access to later academic opportunities. In California mathematics, for example, course-taking reforms were associated with reduced access to advanced math, showing that curriculum policy can have significant downstream effects even when achievement effects are limited.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

California districts often lack clear, specific guidance from the state about curriculum quality and implementation

Curriculum guidance in California is not always clear or specific. Multiple state-level documents and policies, including content standards and curriculum frameworks, shape expectations, but Gallagher et al. report that district leaders describe uneven attention to and use of these policies and frameworks.

The state has processes in place to evaluate curriculum materials and make adoptions, though these adoptions are advisory. New mathematics materials were adopted in 2025, 11 years after the prior adoption. Polikoff and Haderlein, as well as Gallagher et al., report that district leaders expressed frustration with the long delay between adoptions, noting that existing materials were out of date and poorly aligned with the state's mathematics framework, adopted in 2023. When the state did complete the 2025 adoption, it approved 64 materials across 29 product families. Although this breadth was not a focus of the interviews, a list of this size places a substantial burden on districts to evaluate options and make informed selections.

Similar challenges extend to other grades and subjects. Stipek and Meloy report that the state does not conduct rigorous review of transitional kindergarten or preschool curricula, again shifting responsibility

for evaluation to districts and schools. As a result, districts may struggle to identify and implement high-quality, aligned curricula that support early learning.

Recent policies, including AB 1454 and AB 121 related to the science of reading, require the state to evaluate literacy curricula and professional development providers, creating the potential for a more focused set of approved materials and supports. Across both literacy and mathematics, the evidence suggests that clearer state guidance, particularly around implementation, would help districts navigate curriculum selection and use more effectively.

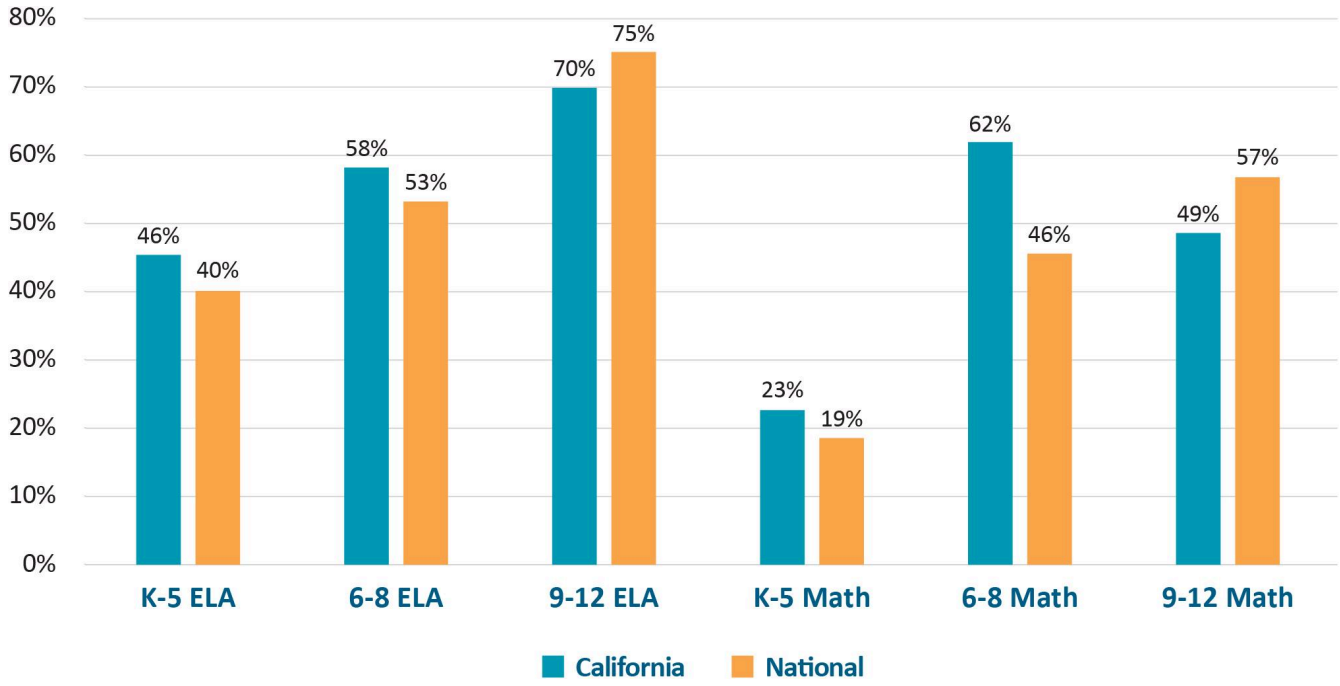
Teachers often lack clear district guidance about curriculum use and supplementation

The lack of strong curriculum guidance also operates at the district level. Polikoff and Haderlein examine interview data from district leaders and find substantial variation in district expectations for teacher curriculum use. As shown in Table 1, 61 percent of district leaders reported that teachers had at least some autonomy in curriculum implementation: 27 percent said teachers mostly had autonomy, and 34 percent described a mix of teacher autonomy and expectations for implementation. Some district leaders specifically noted that teachers were granted greater autonomy in part because adopted materials were perceived as outdated or of poor quality.

Table 1: Proportion of Districts Reporting Various Expectations for Teacher Curriculum Use, By District Size

District size	Teacher Autonomy	Curriculum Use Expected	Both Autonomy and Expectations	n
Small	36.8%	31.6%	31.6%	19
Medium	23.5%	37.3%	39.2%	51
Large	27.8%	50.0%	22.2%	18
Total	27.3%	38.6%	34.1%	88

Figure 1. Percent of Teachers in California and Nationally Who Report Using "Curriculum Materials I Create Myself" at Least Weekly



Polikoff and Haderlein also analyze survey data from California teachers and find that many teachers, including a majority in some subjects and grade spans, report using curriculum materials they create themselves at least weekly. As shown in Figure 1, California teachers are often more likely than teachers nationally to report this kind of teacher-created curriculum use. More broadly, California teachers report extensive curriculum supplementation, again at levels above national averages. Teachers draw on a wide range of sources and use supplements for a wide range of purposes.

Despite this high level of supplementation, district leaders generally do not indicate that districts provide specific guidance about how supplemental materials should be selected or used. At the same time, School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs) do not provide sufficient detail about district-adopted supplemental materials to make it possible to understand what districts are using or how supplementation is being structured.

Many California teachers view their curriculum materials as inadequate and supplement them extensively

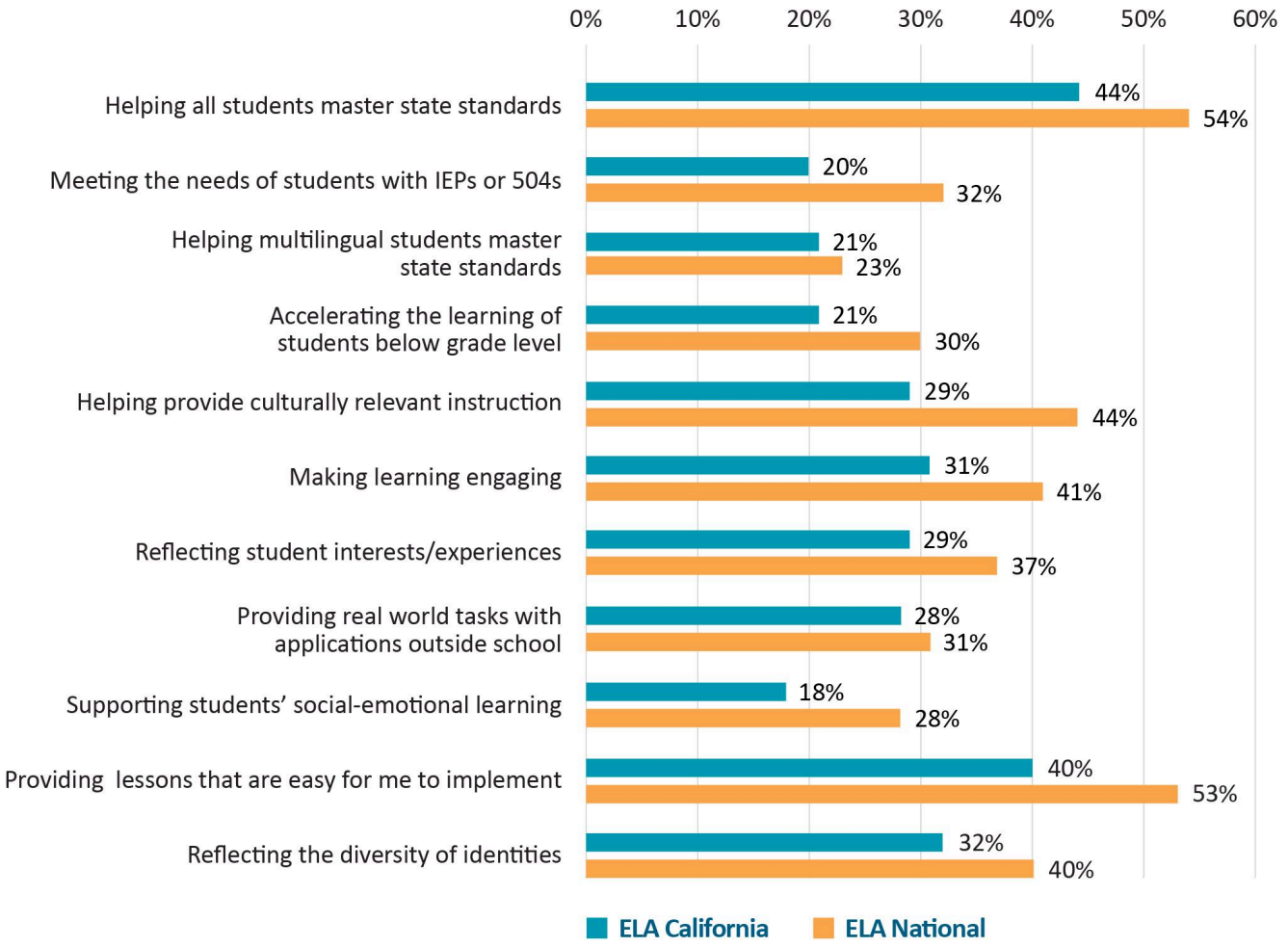
Polikoff and Haderlein, along with Gallagher et al., report that district leaders often perceive teachers as finding adopted curriculum materials inadequate and in need of supplementation. Teacher survey data analyzed by Polikoff and Haderlein confirm this pattern and show that California teachers hold more negative views of their curriculum materials than teachers nationally. As shown in **Figure 2**,

California teachers report lower levels of adequacy than national averages on every item they were asked about. Their concerns are especially pronounced when it comes to whether materials meet the needs of diverse learners, including students with disabilities, English learners, and students performing below grade level.

This concern about curriculum adequacy may be especially important in secondary schools. Immordino-Yang and Darling-Hammond identify substantial misalignment between many features of California high schools and what is known about adolescent development, arguing that this misalignment contributes to student disengagement. Their review highlights the importance of curriculum and instructional approaches that connect academic learning to real-world issues, support social-emotional development, and allow students to demonstrate deep understanding in authentic ways. It also emphasizes the value of community connections and civic engagement that make learning more relevant, socially meaningful, and connected to students' sense of agency and purpose.

Although California has seen large-scale efforts to redesign secondary education along these lines, the evidence suggests that more work is needed to evaluate these models, support continuous improvement, and reduce policy barriers that make this kind of curriculum and school design difficult to sustain.

Figure 2. Teacher Reports of the Adequacy of Their Recommended or Required Instructional Materials in ELA



California lacks usable statewide data on key curriculum issues

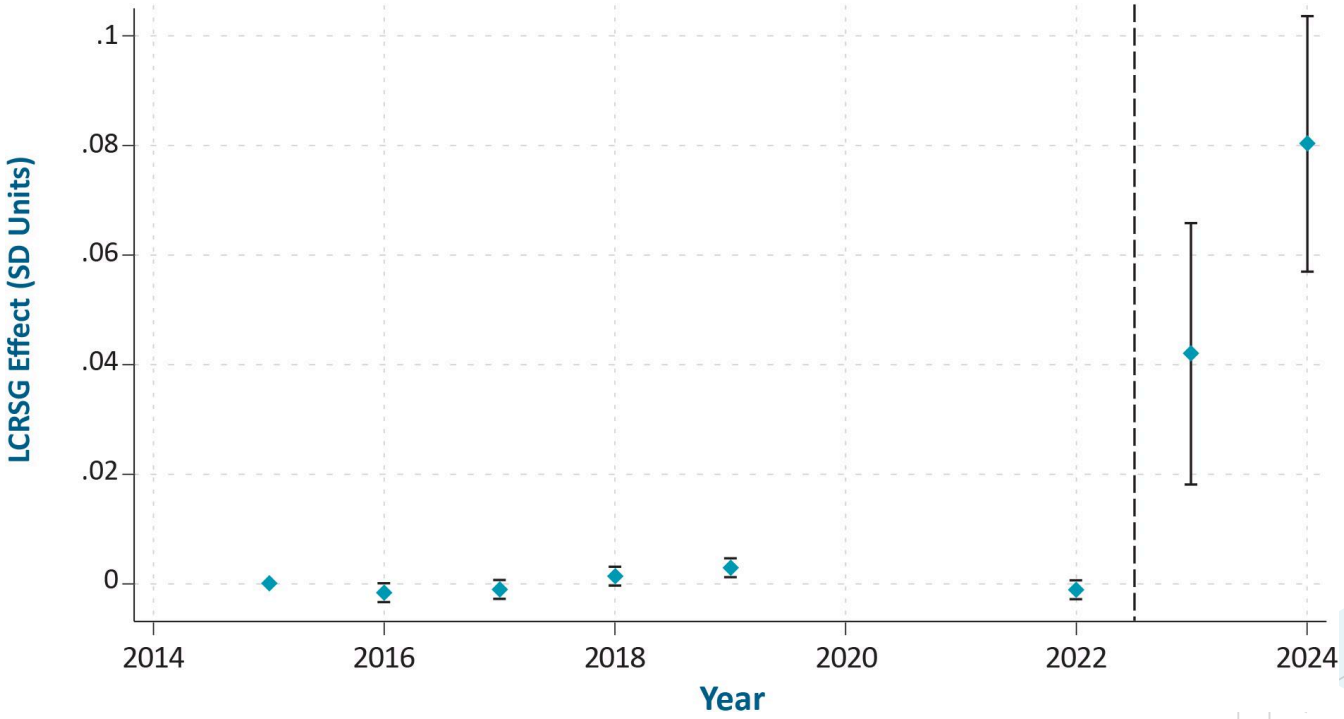
Despite extensive reporting requirements through SARCs and Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), California still lacks usable statewide data on several basic curriculum-related issues. Polikoff and Haderlein show that although SARCs require schools to report on curriculum material adequacy, the lack of standardized formats makes these data extremely difficult to use for understanding students' access to quality curriculum. Hibel similarly describes the substantial labor required to extract usable information from LCAPs. Huffaker's analysis of high school course-taking was limited by the age of available data, which have not been updated since 2018. Umansky and Khurana, as well as Burns and Price, also identify important ways in which data limitations constrain analysis of English learner access to programs and opportunities.

These examples point to a broader problem: California collects large amounts of information, but not always in forms that support monitoring, research, or improvement. More standardized and routinized reporting across tools such as SARCs and LCAPs would make it easier to understand students' opportunities to learn and to identify which instructional supports and policies are most effective.

Curriculum reforms are more effective when they are paired with professional learning and coherent implementation supports

Novicoff evaluates California's Early Literacy Support Block Grant (ELSBG) and Literacy Coaches and Reading Specialists Grant (LCRSG) and finds that both programs led to improvements in student achievement. The design of these programs provides insight into how curriculum-focused reforms can be structured to support instructional improvement. Both initiatives relied heavily on professional development aligned with evidence-based reading practices, delivered by experienced providers offering differentiated support for teachers and administrators. They also provided funding to schools with some flexibility to support local implementation alongside professional learning. In addition, both programs incorporated planning processes to ensure that resources were aligned with instructional goals, with planning requirements mandated in ELSBG and optional in LCRSG.

Figure 3. Impact of LCRSG on Third Grade Reading Achievement



As shown in **Figure 3**, LCRSG produced immediate gains in student achievement that grew in the following year. The effects were even larger for ELSBG, by roughly 40 percent. These positive impacts

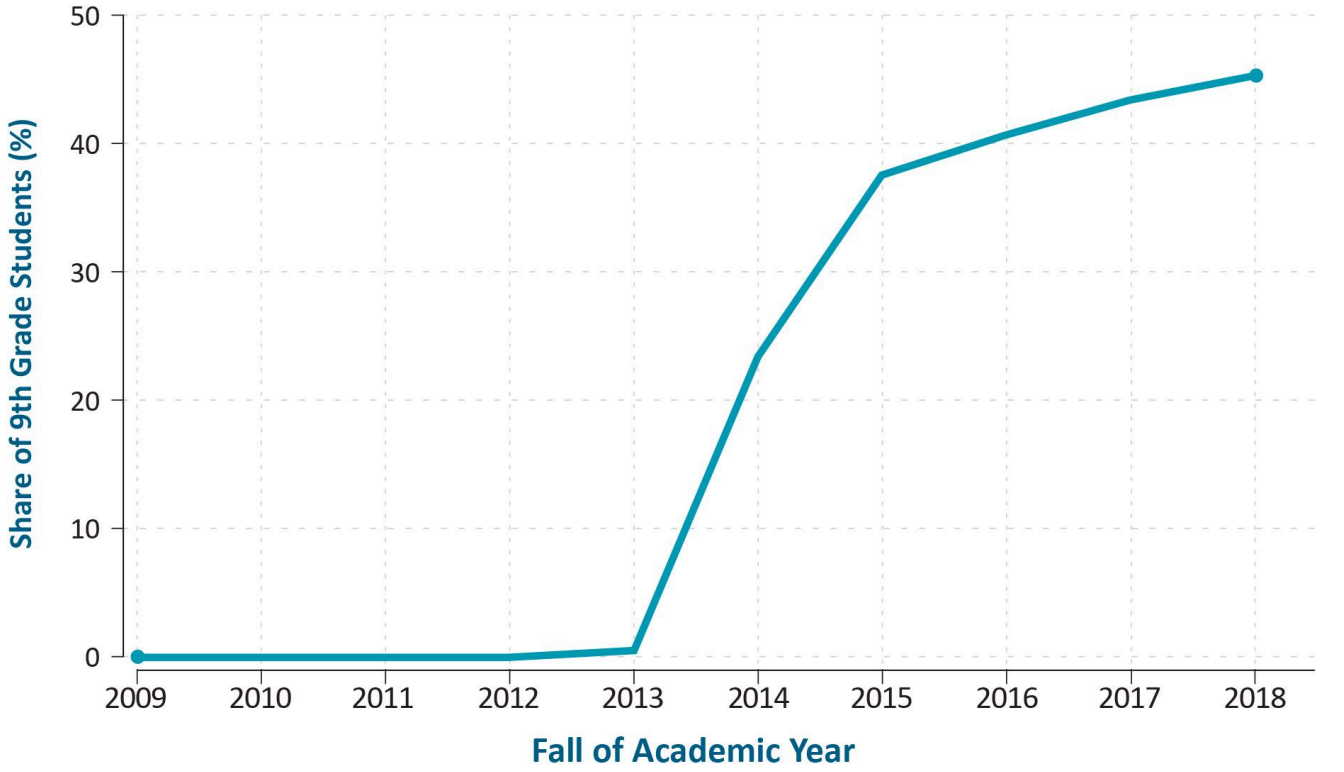
were observed across a range of school contexts, including those serving large proportions of English learners. Taken together, the evidence indicates that curriculum reforms are more likely to improve student outcomes when they are paired with sustained professional learning, local planning, and structures that support implementation and accountability.

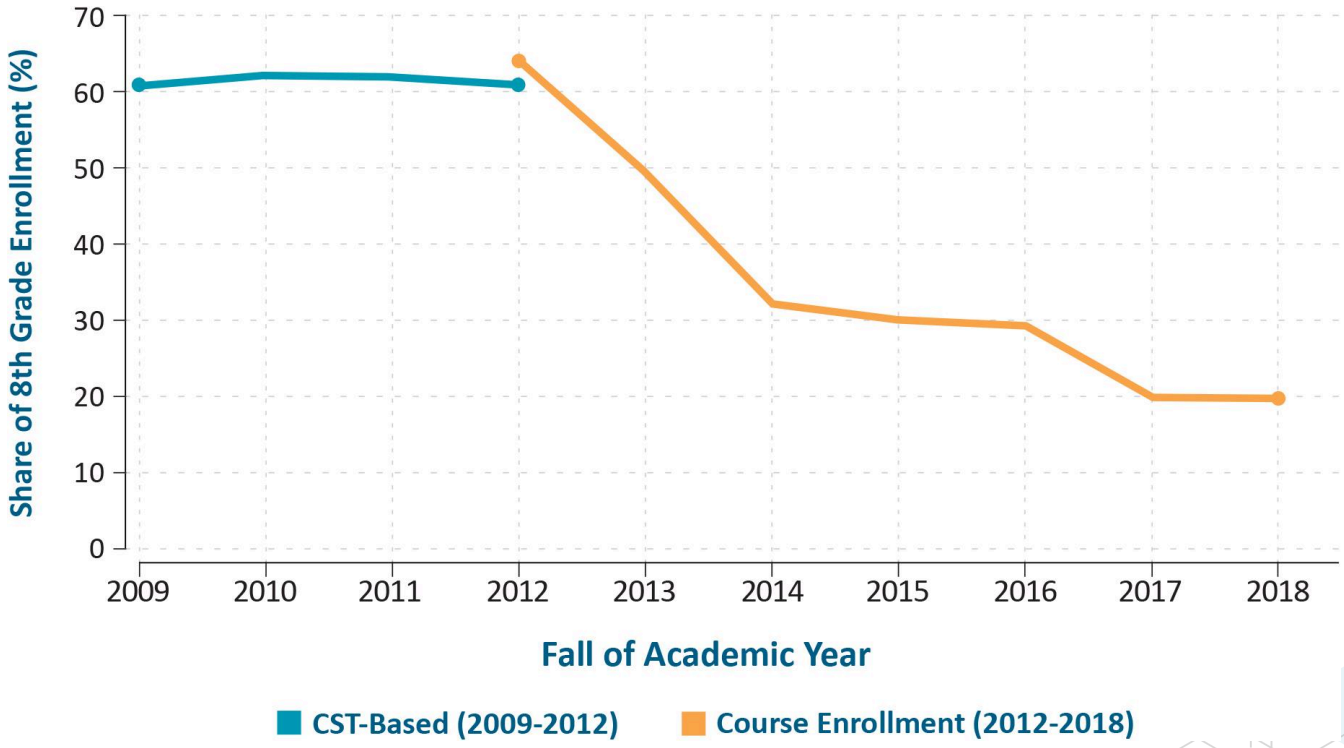
Curriculum policies can have important indirect effects on students' later opportunities

Huffaker examines the effects of Common Core–era mathematics reforms on eighth-grade and high school course-taking. The analysis finds sharp, immediate, and persistent effects on students' access to Algebra I in eighth grade, with enrollment dropping from about 60 percent to 20 percent, alongside a corresponding increase in enrollment in integrated mathematics courses. Access to advanced mathematics courses in later years also declined by an estimated 3 percentage points.

These reforms had little effect on achievement overall, though Huffaker finds a small positive effect in the preferred model. Their broader significance lies in how strongly course-taking policy can shape students' later academic opportunities. In this case, the reforms reduced access to advanced mathematics while also narrowing access gaps, largely by lowering advanced course-taking overall. The findings illustrate that curriculum-related policy changes can have important downstream effects even when their immediate achievement effects are limited.

Figure 4. Changes in Mathematics Course Enrollment After Common Core Adoption





Note: CST Spring data tagged to fall of academic year.

Implications for California

The research points to four areas where the evidence has direct bearing on current policy decisions.

Clearer state guidance about curriculum quality

The evidence suggests that districts often receive state guidance on curriculum materials and aligned supports that is too delayed or too general to reduce local search costs. In areas such as mathematics, districts are often left to evaluate large numbers of materials with limited help distinguishing among them, which increases local burden and contributes to uneven implementation. Given variation in local capacity based on district size and resources, this could contribute to inequities. This suggests the value of a state role that reduces search costs and provides clearer signals about quality without eliminating local discretion.

Clearer district guidance about curriculum use and supplementation

The evidence also suggests that many districts lack a coherent strategy for how teachers should use adopted materials and how supplementation should occur. Teachers are often given substantial autonomy, in part because adopted materials are seen as outdated or inadequate, but this can lead to uneven quality of practice across classrooms. These findings point to the importance of clearer district expectations about curriculum use and, where supplementation is common, more intentional approaches to selecting and supporting supplemental materials.

Curriculum reforms paired with professional learning and implementation support

California's literacy reforms suggest that curriculum policy is more likely to improve student outcomes when it is paired with high-quality professional learning, local planning, and implementation supports. The broader lesson is that curriculum reform is not only a matter of adopting standards or materials. It also depends on whether districts and schools receive the guidance, resources, and accountability needed to implement those reforms well over time.

Stronger curriculum data infrastructure

The evidence points to major limitations in California's current curriculum data infrastructure. Important information about curriculum materials, course-taking, and student access exists in some form, but it is often difficult to use for monitoring, research, or improvement. More standardized and usable data systems would make it easier to understand students' opportunities to learn, while recognizing that curriculum data alone cannot fully capture implementation quality.

Conclusion

Curriculum policy plays a central role in shaping students' opportunities to learn, but California's current approach leaves districts and teachers with too little guidance, too little support for implementation, and too little usable data. The evidence suggests that curriculum reforms are most effective when they are paired with professional learning, planning, accountability, and clear implementation structures. It also shows that curriculum policy can have important indirect effects, especially through course-taking changes that shape students' later opportunities.

These studies provide evidence that curriculum policy is shaped not only by what materials or frameworks the state adopts, but also by how clearly it signals quality, how implementation is supported, and what data are available for learning and improvement.

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