

reading writing Ready!

This English course focuses on college and workforce readiness while engaging students in meaningful activities.

“Far too many students are not adequately prepared for college. Too many of our high school students are not being adequately prepared for careers in the workforce today, and too many students, regrettably, are not being prepared to become effective citizens in our participatory democracy.”
— Jack O’Connell (as quoted in EdSource, 2005).

Program improvement in California, like in all other states, has to follow No Child Left Behind guidelines, but there is room to tailor and define a program that meets local and state needs. In California, the Essential Program Components have been endorsed by the State Board of Education as California’s response to the Program Improvement requirements.

The plan includes nine components, which are all essential for success. None of the nine components stand alone as a silver bullet, but working in tandem, the nine

components offer schools and districts a blueprint for successful improvement that can make a significant difference in the way that education is approached in the state.

Implemented and overseen by the CDE, the nine components are:

1. Instructional program: standards-aligned English-language arts and mathematics textbooks and SBE-adopted pre-Algebra and Algebra 1 textbooks;
2. Student access to high school standards-aligned core courses (master schedule and pacing schedule);
3. Principals’ instructional leadership training;
4. Teachers’ professional development opportunities;
5. A student achievement monitoring system;
6. Ongoing instructional assistance and support;
7. Teacher/department and subject-matter collaboration;
8. Intervention programs for students

performing below grade-level standards; and

9. Fiscal support.

As the nine components are implemented in schools and districts around the state, there is an expectation that schools and districts will increase college and workforce readiness as students are given the opportunity to acquire basic skills and meet the rigorous California State Standards.

An integrated system of standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment and supports provides a critical foundation for student success, leading to greater opportunities for all students. Setting clear guidelines supports a successful transition into postsecondary education and the workforce.

Efforts to transform high schools into personalized and engaging learning communities for all students should be the cor-

*By Zulmara Cline, Kim Flachmann and
Chris Street*

nerstone of all Program Improvement sites. Establishing clear and rigorous standards aligned with entrance requirements for post-secondary education and the workforce will help high schools to not only meet their Program Improvement goals, but also help students become workforce ready.

The Expository Reading and Writing Course

In response to the need to help students get ready for college and the workforce, the California State University system, in collaboration with K-12 partners, has developed an Expository Reading and Writing Course aligned with the 11th and 12th grade English-language arts standards.

The course has an online component for professional development and community-building, and offers teachers a variety of best practices for teaching academic literacy strategies. The ERWC offers an opportunity for students to refine their reading and writing skills in the area of expository text by incorporating the tenets of rhetoric.

This curriculum, although not designed

specifically for Program Improvement schools, meets most of the nine conditions for Program Improvement and shows great promise for helping students master the skills and standards needed to be workforce and college ready (Hafner & Joseph 2007).

Additionally, the curriculum is based on best practices for adolescent literacy, which goes beyond reading comprehension and decoding to include critical thinking, analyzing, synthesizing and questioning. As defined by Meltzer and Hammon (2004), adolescent literacy development “stresses the interdependence and synergy of reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking in the construction of knowledge.”

The ERWC, with its emphasis on academic literacy, includes the ability to critically analyze text in a deep and thoughtful way, enabling the reader to grasp the concepts being expressed, the ideas being espoused and the rhetorical devices being employed. As students learn to be critical consumers of text, they need to know how to determine if a text is worth reading, cit-

ing and believing (ICAS, 2002). As readers, students need to find the emotional, logical and ethical dilemmas in society, in text, and in their own worlds. Academic literacy leads to the ability to evaluate information from a number of sources and to analyze problems from a number of perspectives. Successful students, both in college and in high school, need to have the ability to synthesize information from a variety of sources, ensuring that they understand diverse perspectives and opinions.

Addressing the standards

By focusing on the reading and writing skills that are essential for success at the collegiate level, the 14 modules that make up the ERWC allow teachers and students to begin addressing an array of standards. The course is standards-based, contains student and instructor materials, and includes research-based professional development with opportunities for expansion, follow-up and more in-depth study.

The online community component allows teachers who have been a part of the supplementary professional development program to participate in conversations regarding the modules, to share materials and to discuss their successes and challenges. This ongoing support allows for teachers to become an integral part of the growing and learning process as they begin to implement these strategies in their classrooms.

Additionally, the master template for all the lessons, based on best practices, allows teachers to spend more or less time on a topic, depending on student needs and mastery levels, thus encouraging both flexibility and rigor. The recurring strategies within the modules allow students to apply and use them until they have mastered recommended strategies.

For learning to occur, students must be academically engaged in co-constructing learning experiences with the teacher and their peers. Also vital to the learning process is the necessity for curriculum and instruction to value and connect learning to students’ cultural and linguistic contexts — particularly for students who are most at risk for disengagement and dropping out.

In Program Improvement schools, the



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ERWC has been particularly effective in helping teachers define a standards-based curriculum that is adaptable to many classroom situations, implement a rigorous writing curriculum with students of different ability levels, and engage students in meaningful reading and writing activities. This is particularly effective since the goal of PI is for schools to make adequate yearly progress with all subgroups for two years in a row.

For example, Orange High School, a Program Improvement school in southern California, represents one case of a school making consistent improvements in the numbers of students who are classified as proficient in English.

According to Kami Kenyon, an English teacher at the school, the students' marked improvements are "due to a combined effort of teachers, administration and student commitment." Since Kenyon introduced the ERWC to her colleagues in 2003, the steady climb in student scores suggests that the school's emphasis on "expository text has created classrooms where student focus and interaction are highlighted."

In fact, Kenyon said, "As an EL team, [we have] made a commitment to utilizing real-life materials to teach the language portion of the curriculum. Many of our EL teachers are utilizing modules and all are utilizing strategies from the program. Current events are a centerpiece of most of our ELD as well as SDAIE content areas."

The teachers who are committed to using the ERWC curriculum at Orange High do so because they see the results. Since 2003, when the ERWC was first introduced at Orange High School, the percentage of students proficient in English has increased from 36 percent to 60 percent in 2006.

The ERWC is not yet a formally accepted course in the Orange Unified School District, so the teachers at Orange High have "taken the template idea and utilized it to intermingle core literature pieces and expository texts." Kenyon said this application of the template "is a great part of our increased CAHSEE pass rates."

In Kern County, where the ERWC has been implemented in all the high schools for a number of years, one teacher at a PI school noted that the emphasis of understanding

the expectations for college is very helpful: "I can say that [the modules] are very helpful in helping teachers see what kind of reading and writing our students are expected to do in college. These modules have allowed us to address the need for more non-fiction literature in the curriculum."

Another teacher noted the aspects of reading and writing skills being addressed: "[The modules] have assisted the students in furthering the development of their critical thinking and writing skills."

Research shows increase in test scores

An independent evaluation of the implementation of the ERWC has found that when there is a critical mass of teachers who have participated in the professional development, California Standards Test scores increase at three to five times the rate when looking at individual school gains (Hafner & Joseph, 2007).

The researchers concluded, "The improvement in percent proficient in English (from 2003 to 2006) in high intensity ERWC schools was more than five times the rate of all California high schools (11 percent vs. 2.2 percent) and three times the rate of control schools (11 percent vs. 3.6 percent)."

In the same study, Hafner and Joseph report that many of the responding teachers stated a positive impact from the ERWC professional development on their classroom practice. They referred to impacts such as increased ability to prepare students for college, implementation of new instructional strategies, improved student skills in reading and writing and improved student scores on a number of measures.

Teachers also described many benefits of using the course modules and strategies, which included increased use of nonfiction texts, assessments that drive instruction and integration of reading and writing. The overall benefits of using research-based best practices with expository texts cannot be overstated, especially in schools struggling with meeting AYP and API targets.

Leadership for achievement

The goals of Program Improvement require that schools engage in a systemic process of aligning curriculum, assessments,

standards and professional development and providing leadership in a manner that helps all students achieve at high levels.

In a state with a sizable high school population of very diverse students, including large numbers of English learners and special needs students, there need to be many opportunities to access the core curriculum using the best practices from adolescent literacy research. The ERWC provides an opportunity for high schools to adopt a standards-based curriculum that is research-based and focuses on student engagement and participation, teacher professional development within a supportive learning community and shared leadership within the school population. ■

For more information about the ERWC, visit www.calstate.edu/eap/support_hs_teachers.shtml

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Zulmara Cline is associate director, Teacher Education and Public School Programs, CSU Chancellor's Office. Kim Flachmann is a professor at Cal State San Bernardino. Chris Street is an associate professor at Cal State Fullerton.