

Curriculum Overlays to Close Educational Opportunity Gaps

A Formative Evaluation of Project Momentum

Background

In 2024, the Southeast Cooperative's Project Momentum staff received a Closing Educational Opportunity Gaps grant from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). With this support, Project Momentum worked to develop (K-12) English Learner Development (ELD) curriculum overlay resources.

ELD curriculum overlays, referred to in this report as curriculum overlay(s), are intended for use in both ELD and general education settings. Curriculum overlays are planning tools designed to help educators identify the language demands of a unit, select strategies that support EL/ML outcomes, and integrate language development consistently across content instruction.

A formative evaluation to understand curriculum overlay

As part of its commitment to continuous improvement, Project Momentum contracted with Wilder Research to conduct a formative evaluation of these new curriculum overlay resources. Through a collaborative discussion approach, Wilder Research learned that Project Momentum wanted feedback from qualified professionals in a range of education-related roles. The evaluation focused on three questions: 1) the quality of the resources for supporting EL/ML education; 2) the extent to which districts and educators could adopt and use them; and, 3) what Project Momentum should consider for helping the resources reach educators and districts to enhance their ability to provide high-quality EL/ML instruction.

Mixed methods study design

In collaboration with Project Momentum staff, Wilder Research created a mixed-methods study design using both quantitative questionnaires and a qualitative focus group. This approach included sampling and recruitment of professionals with relevant educational experience qualified to review Project Momentum's curriculum overlay resources for content quality. Participants were also asked to assess the prospective usefulness of these curriculum overlays for different types of instruction supporting ML/EL student learning in different settings.

Sample

Eligible professionals for the study included:

- Professional curriculum developers contracted by Project Momentum staff to help with the development of an effective curriculum design.
- Teachers, coordinators, or other school/district administrators who directly or indirectly support EL/ML education and outcomes.

Response rate and participation

Ten professionals (referred to as reviewers moving forward) responded to the initial inquiry which was distributed via email, indicating their interest in reviewing a curriculum overlay, completing the questionnaire, and participating in a focus group. While only 8 out of 10 reviewers completed the questionnaire, all 10 participated in the focus group discussion.

Questionnaire

Reviewers were given instructions and provided with a three-item questionnaire to help ensure a consistent approach to reviewing the curriculum overlay resources. All reviewers were encouraged to review the questionnaire before assessing their selected curriculum overlay resource. More specifically, this questionnaire asked reviewers to:

1. Identify their selected curriculum overlay by subject area and grade level;
2. Indicate their own education-related background including current role/title and years of education-related experience, and;
3. Provide an assessment of the curriculum overlay resource that they reviewed for its ability to meet their expectations related to content quality, ease of use, and prospective effective supporting EL/ML students and other student populations.

To establish a baseline understanding of reviewers' general perceptions about the curriculum overlay resources, the evaluation team reviewed the responses from the questionnaire one week prior to the focus group.

Focus group

A focus group consisting of 10 reviewers representing educators, administrators, and curriculum developers was conducted by Wilder Research on March 18, 2026. The focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and explored reviewers' in-depth thoughts about curriculum overlays potential usefulness to support EL/ML and general education goals and outcomes. In appreciation for their time and feedback, participants were given a \$50 stipend.

Study considerations

Due to the small sample size, the findings presented in this summary should not be considered generalizable. Reviewers' assessments should be viewed as exploratory and intended to inform ongoing refinement efforts of curriculum overlay resources and future EL/ML support.

Reviewing the curriculum overlay

The following summary first presents a high-level overview of reviewers' close-ended question feedback by curriculum overlay, grade level, and subject area. It then summarizes reviewers' qualitative feedback on the resources' strengths and opportunities for improvement. Finally, the summary concludes with the reviewers' recommendations for next steps.

Pre-focus group questionnaire data

Eight of the 10 reviewers completed the pre-focus group questionnaire. At the time of the study, curriculum overlays were available for grades K–5, and each grade level was represented by at least one reviewer.

When completing the questionnaire, reviewers could choose from 12 curriculum overlays (Figure 1). Reviewers selected one overlay to assess. Among the 10 reviewers, three reviewed Language Arts curriculum overlays, two reviewed science curriculum overlays, two reviewed social studies curriculum overlays, and one reviewed a math curriculum overlay. Each resource follows the same nomenclature (or section naming convention) and general organizational structure regardless of subject area or grade level. For a more detailed outline of each curriculum overlay and its structure visit [Project Momentum's ELD Curriculum Overlays](#).

1. Curriculum overlay outline by section

Section number and name	Curriculum overlay focus
1. Spotlight on Language	Language, functions, setting up clear objectives, and designing scaffolds.
2. "Getting Started"	Strategies for connecting new learning to students lived experience and cultures.
3. "Instructional Strategies"	Helping students to practice and bridge language and content.
4. "Making Connections"	Cross-curricular and community connections.
5. "Materials and Resources"	Providing examples of instructional tools including visuals and other texts.
6. "Evidence of Learning"	Strategies for monitoring progress and allowing students to reflect on their development.

Are the curriculum overlays easy to understand and are they useful?

All reviewers agreed with the following statements: "curriculum overlay are easy to understand," "curriculum overlay provide useful guidance for EL/ML support," "I plan to use curriculum overlay to support student learning."

Do curriculum overlays meet reviewers' expectations?

Eight reviewers provided a total of 48 section-level ratings (Figure 2). Ratings were positive, with reviewers saying that most overlay sections exceeded expectations—4, (n=28), or met all expectations—3" (n=19). One reviewer said a section met most expectations—2 (n=1), and none said, "meets some—1" or "does not meet—0" (Figure 2).

Reviewers gave the highest ratings to the sections "Spotlight on Language", "Instructional Strategies," "Material and Resources," and "Evidence of Learning" (sections 1, 3, 5, and 6) with an average rating of 3.63 (Figure 2). The lowest-rated section, receiving mostly "meets all expectations" with an average rating of 3.38 was "Getting Started" (i.e., Section 2).

2. Curriculum overlay and section ratings

Please indicate each section's ability to meet your expectations, (N=8)	Section 1: "Spotlight on Language"	Section 2: "Getting Started"	Section 3: "Instructional Strategies"	Section 4: "Making Connections"	Section 5: "Materials and Resources"	Section 6: "Evidence of Learning"	Average rating by overlay
Grades K/1 – Language Arts	4	4	4	4	4	4	4.00
Grades K/1 – social studies	4	4	4	4	4	4	4.00
Grades K/1 – science	3	3	3	4	3	3	3.17
Grades 2-3 – science	4	4	4	4	4	4	4.00
Grades 4-5 – Language Arts	3	3	3	3	3	3	3.00
Grades 4-5 – Language Arts	4	3	4	2	4	4	3.50
Grades 4-5 – social studies	3	3	3	3	3	3	3.00
Grades 4-5 – math	4	3	4	4	4	4	3.83
Average rating by section	3.63	3.38	3.63	3.50	3.63	3.63	3.56

Focus group feedback

An additional two reviewers who did not complete the pre-focus group questionnaire participated in the focus group discussion, bringing the total number of reviewers in the study to 10 (N=10). Overall, reviewers expressed positive perceptions of Project Momentum's curriculum overlay approach and the individual curriculum overlay resources across grade levels and subject areas.

The following themes emerged from reviewers' discussions about how they would describe the curriculum overlays to educators, school leaders, and district administrators who may be unfamiliar with the resources:

- Curriculum overlays are beneficial, WIDA-aligned and MDE-compliant,
- Curriculum overlays use a high-quality, inclusive, and intentional design,
- Curriculum overlays provide potential benefits for educators and students.

These themes are intended to summarize common ideas expressed across reviewers but should not be interpreted as exhaustive or mutually exclusive.

Curriculum overlays as WIDA-aligned and MDE-compliant

Reviewers consistently described the curriculum overlays as high-quality, standards-aligned resources that support both general education classroom instruction and EL/ML programming. Reviewers emphasized that the overlays align with WIDA standards and state expectations while addressing a perceived need for practical, high-quality instructional resources that support learners across grade levels. Several reviewers also noted that the overlays may be especially valuable for educators who have limited familiarity or confidence in applying WIDA standards within their instructional planning.

I'm constantly surprised at how unfamiliar with the standards teachers are, both with [district and] state standards, even for their grade level. And then the WIDA standards, I think we've all been struggling with it... We [recently] started diving in for the first time to the new 2020 standards, just this year and it's a lot of learning. And so [it's better] having those things pre-selected [content and standards] and there [within the curriculum overlay] and they're aligned. And I don't have to wonder if they're identifying the correct standard.

I used to create curriculum at my old school, and I used to do all this by hand. So, I'm like, this is amazing, just to have it for every grade and the different subject areas. I just see it as like a really great tool to bring teachers together, and to help [for example in] co-teaching situations where people just don't even know where to start. [Curriculum overlay] brings a sense of, like legitimacy to people that might question what you're doing. It's like, 'No, this is aligned.'

Design is high-quality, inclusive, and intentional

In addition to standards alignment, reviewers identified several other design features that contributed to their perceptions of the curriculum overlays as high-quality instructional resources. These included an inclusive approach that supports English Learners (ELs), Multilingual

Learners (MLs), and students in general education settings; scaffolded supports tailored to students' grade levels and language proficiency; and the intentional integration of language development throughout instructional materials and content areas as opposed to treating language as an add-on.

So often in our curriculums that we get in our schools, you have your content and then you have your turn to this page for multilingual learners. You know, what's more helpful is if it's embedded. And it is within the [curriculum overlay] instruction, it's all intertwined. I think of it as a ribbon running through the day, and that ribbon is language.

I like the instructional tools and scaffolds...It has everything and it's inclusive. [For example] There is this pie chart template that everybody can use, no matter if they're a native English speaker or not. We can all be doing the same activity. And you can use it with so many activities, not just probability. Then there are the argument sentence stems, all those argument paragraph frames. You can use that all year, and then as the year progresses, like you know—hopefully even take away some of that scaffolding.

Like instructors of newcomers, there's very, very little that is age respectful and grade appropriate, and [the curriculum overlay is] really giving them transfer skills that they need to be successful in the classroom.

Reviewers perceive benefits for educator application and student learning

Reviewers described several ways the curriculum overlays have the potential to benefit both educators and students. In addition to reducing planning time, reviewers expressed a sense of relief associated with having access to high quality, standards-aligned resources. Several implied that this would increase their and other educators' confidence because they could be assured that they are providing high-quality and evidence-based instruction, rather than spending time searching for, or creating materials that may not be reliable. Additionally, reviewers described the curriculum overlays as a practical tool that could additionally help to strengthen collaboration between general education teachers and EL/ML specialists.

So, this is a really helpful tool for teachers instead of just like Teachers Pay Teachers [website], or printing random worksheets, or doing a really cute project about alligators that has nothing to do with the grade level content that [students are] supposed to be familiar with in order to be successful in their general education space. This is a really good starting point.

About half of our population are English learners, and our teachers really struggle with over translating. They tend to copy and paste large bodies of text, the whole textbook, everything, and they want to hand it to the kids. And a lot of our students don't have that first language proficiency [for this to be helpful]. And I really appreciate that [curriculum overlay offers] strategies and skills in English that teachers can implement instead of copying and pasting and translating.

A lot of what I've been doing this year, it's been like people are just translating [or wanting me to translate] huge bodies of [text]. I'm like, this is not my job, you know. So, this is a great tool, I think, to bring teachers together and to help—for me in particular—with co-teaching situations where people just don't even know where to start.

Reviewers' recommendations for next steps

Although reviewers did not identify substantive concerns with the curriculum overlay approach or the individual curriculum overlay resources, they offered several recommendations to support successful rollout and implementation. Rather than suggesting changes to the resources themselves, reviewers focused on strategies for increasing awareness, strengthening educator support, and promoting intentional adoption across schools and districts.

Engage educators and other school and district leaders early

- Intentionally involve EL/ML educators, general education educators, school principals, and district administrators early on to be effectively positioned to support educators throughout the initial learning and implementation phases.
- When possible, offer professional learning opportunities (e.g., trainings, webinars, or learning communities) that help educators develop confidence in selecting and applying the curriculum overlays to meet the needs of their students.
- Avoid providing overly prescriptive templates or fully developed lessons that could encourage over reliance on curriculum overlays rather than their intended use.

Ensure that the messaging reflects its intended audience

- Help educators understand that the curriculum overlays are designed to enhance—not replace—their existing curriculum or professional expertise.
- Emphasize the overlays as flexible planning tools that support informed instructional decision-making and language integration within existing instruction.
- For administrators, emphasize that the curriculum overlay approach is a solid investment—free, WIDA-aligned, designed with EL/ML learners but helpful to all.

Consider options for support beyond access only

- Help educators and administrators understand that making the curriculum overlays available is an important first step but also underscore the value of ongoing professional support for implementation.

Continue engaging educators, school leaders, and districts to help them identify their learning and implementation needs. This summary presents highlights of A FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF PROJECT MOMENTUM'S CURRICULUM OVERLAYS.

For more information about this report, contact Piere E. Washington at Wilder Research, 651-280-2655 or piere.washington@wilder.org.

Author: Piere E. Washington

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