Effective Practices for English Learners

BRIEF 2

Assessment and Data-Based Decision-Making
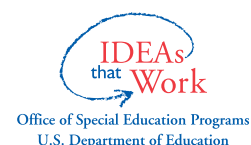
Support

Preferred Citation

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We wish to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Professor Janette K. Klingner (1953–2014), University of Colorado Boulder, to the work of the MDCC-5 Model Demonstration Projects on behalf of English learners with or at risk of having literacy-related disabilities.

Multitiered Instructional Frameworks

Response to intervention (RTI) describes models that use data to inform decisions regarding delivery of instruction. Many RTI models closely align with three-tier models of instructional delivery, where Tier 1 refers to core curriculum that all students receive, Tier 2 refers to supplemental support that some students receive, Tier 3 offers an even more intensive level of instruction for students who do not demonstrate adequate improvement, given Tier 2 support. In practice, RTI and three tiers have become synonymous for many. Accordingly, this report uses "multitiered models" to describe the broad group of instructional approaches that depend on students' response to instruction as a primary indicator for planning ongoing levels of instructional intensity. This distinction acknowledges that the number of tiers in the model is not the critical feature. The important features in multitiered models are the use of appropriate, research-based reading instruction and intervention; assessment, screening, and progress monitoring of students in need of support; and culturally responsive teaching strategies and principles. These features can be implemented in any number of tiers, depending on the resources and needs that characterize a school, district, or state.

Assessment and Data-Based Decision-Making

This document is the second in a series of briefs for school leaders, educators, and policymakers charged with implementing or supporting multitiered instruction that accommodates English learners (ELs). In this brief, three model demonstration projects (Cohort 5 of the Model Demonstration Coordination Center—see sidebar) share their framework for assessment and data-based decision-making to improve literacy instruction for ELs. This brief also addresses issues that school and district personnel frequently encounter when designing and implementing tiered instruction in schools that implement bilingual programs or that serve ELs in English as a second language programs.

Audience

This brief is designed to support practitioners, instructional coaches, and policymakers in designing and implementing procedures for choosing literacy assessments, analyzing data, setting criteria, and making decisions based on student data when implementing multitiered systems of support.

Practitioners: Classroom teachers and EL interventionists will find this brief helpful for selecting measures, making group and individual decisions, and monitoring student progress across languages.

Instructional coaches and school leaders: The guiding principles discussed in this brief can help instructional coaches and school leaders make decisions about student placement in tiered instruction and about the language(s) of instruction and assessment.

Policymakers: This brief also informs district and school policymakers of methods to select the most appropriate literacy measures for ELs and lends guidance for setting policy regarding entry and exit criteria for tiered intervention.

Introduction

When implemented well, a multitiered system of support provides educators with the data to identify students who need early intervention and those who may have a learning disability. A **culturally and linguistically responsive** multitiered model ensures that no group of students is overrepresented or underrepresented in supplemental or intensive interventions (i.e., Tier 2 or Tier 3) and that ELs are properly instructed in each tier. Culturally responsive models take into account the many factors, such as lack of English language proficiency, that can affect student scores on screening and progress-monitoring measures.

Cohort 5 Model Demonstration Projects

The three research projects that authored this report were funded in September 2011 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. These projects make up what is known as Cohort 5 of the Model Demonstration Coordination Center (MDCC). Each of the research projects works with school districts that serve large populations of ELs.

Cohort 5 works to improve the outcomes of ELs in the primary grades by implementing tiered approaches that incorporate the following instructional features:

- Appropriate, research-based reading instruction and interventions for ELs
- Culturally responsive teaching strategies and principles
- Progress monitoring and data-based decision-making
- Professional development and strategic coaching for teachers

For more information, visit **www.mdcc.sri.com**

The language and literacy developmental trajectories of students who are instructed in two languages are still not well understood. One reason is the great variability in students' abilities and proficiency in their first and second languages. A second reason is the variability in the programs in which ELs are enrolled, particularly in the amount of time dedicated to literacy instruction in each language and the amount and quality of support for English language development. In discussing the assessment of ELs, Abedi wrote that ELs "face a dual challenge: developing English and learning the academic content of the curriculum in English."[1] Therefore, assessing students in a linguistically responsible manner requires procedures that (a) assess the strengths and needs of individual ELs and groups of ELs, (b) identify ELs at risk of reading failure, (c) provide native-language and/or English literacy instruction and intervention based on identified needs and continuous progress-monitoring data, and (d) incorporate multiple sources and data points.

Principles in Practice: Project ESTRE²LLA, Texas

Central to the Project ESTRE²LLA multitiered model is the importance of using assessments that are valid and reliable for ELs to obtain current data on levels of language proficiency and literacy skills in both languages. In addition to assessing students in both languages, the use of multiple types of assessments is especially important in second and third grades. Project ESTRE²LLA is implemented in three schools across two school districts. Both districts have multitiered models and benchmark reading criteria for English and Spanish. Students are assessed three times a year in the language of instruction.

Prior to their involvement in Project ESTRE²LLA, all three schools had established data meetings held by grade level after the beginning-of-the-year and middle-of-the-year benchmark testing. Literacy specialists and administrators also attended the meetings. Two decisions were made at these meetings. First, students were grouped for literacy instruction in their dominant language according to their scores. Students who were below level were assigned to a code-based intervention, a comprehension intervention, or both. In addition, students in second and third grades who were on or above grade level in Spanish were grouped for English reading instruction. Students received Spanish instruction three times a week and English instruction twice a week. Student progress was monitored weekly, and teachers met every 3 weeks to discuss student progress and to adjust groups and instruction as needed. Once students began English instruction, the language of the progress-monitoring measures was alternated biweekly to provide teachers information on student progress in each language without increasing the amount of time allocated for assessment.

The first year of implementation, first-grade teachers in School A collected data on several measures each week. At data meetings, they expressed that some of the data were not useful and, at times, provided conflicting information about student progress. Project staff members met with the teachers to review the measures and modify data collection to focus on measures that not only provided information on student progress, but also more closely aligned with their instruction.

At the end of Year 2, project staff members reviewed data with teachers and administrators at each of the three schools. These discussions focused on patterns of performance of ELs in kindergarten to grade 3 within and across grade levels, revealing opportunities to improve data-based decision-making at two of the schools in one of the districts. The principals of these two schools recognized the value of choosing an alternate measure to be used at all grade levels to facilitate a more accurate understanding of student performance and growth over time and to inform instructional decisions.

Over time, school personnel also began to appreciate the importance of using multiple types of assessments to better monitor student language development, especially in second and third grades. Writing samples and content area assessments provided additional information about students' academic knowledge and language. With multiple data sources, developing a comprehensive assessment plan with clearly articulated criteria, within and across languages across grades, is essential.

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1   Abedi, 2011, p. 49

Appropriate assessment measures and associated procedures improve precision in identifying ELs who have learning difficulties and reduce inappropriate referrals to remedial and special education programs. Assessment procedures for ELs are similar to those already in use in typical multitiered models, but critical differences are addressed in this brief. These differences include attending to bias, reducing the misconception that behaviors typical of second-language acquisition are disability indicators, and appropriately interpreting assessment results when making instructional decisions.[2]

Universal Screening

Universal screening is used to determine students' acquisition of key reading skills—phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. The assessment and administration schedule for ELs does not differ from that for other students, but in a linguistically responsive process within a multitiered instructional framework, measures, whether in English or another language, are valid and reliable for ELs and demonstrate diagnostic accuracy for predicting learning problems.

One-point-in-time assessments may not accurately reflect the language and literacy skills of ELs enrolled in bilingual education or English as a second language programs. Unlike their monolingual English-speaking peers, ELs are in the process of becoming bilingual and/or achieving English proficiency and may be transitioning from literacy instruction in the native language (L1) to instruction in English (L2). Their language and literacy skills vary in each language and change over time. This fact highlights the importance of multiple levels of assessment and data collection from a variety sources to determine students' current performance, their ability to learn, and the rate at which they are able to learn.[3]

Examples of Measures Used for Universal Literacy Screening

The Center on Response to Intervention provides further information about universal screening, including a Screening Tools Chart you may consult when choosing specific assessment measures. For more information, visit www.rti4success.org/essential-components-rti/universal-screening

Two practices can help to make these determinations: (1) use data in the students' L1 and/or calculate their rate of growth in L2 by using data from previous years; and (2) conduct dynamic assessments. Dynamic assessment consists of a short test-teach-test cycle in which students are first assessed to determine their current performance in relation to target skills, followed by the teaching of the skill(s), such as how to read words with a long-*e* vowel sound. Students are then immediately assessed to determine whether they acquired the skill. This process requires more time, so it should be used only when students' below-level scores cannot be explained. Dynamic assessment is most useful with students who are acquiring initial literacy in their first or second language because it provides teachers with information on students' ability to respond to focused instruction. Given its conceptual similarity with multitiered models, dynamic assessment is a natural ancillary within a culturally and linguistically responsive multitiered instructional framework, contributing to a more comprehensive assessment process.[4]

2   Hoover & Klingner, 2011
3   Klingner & Harry, 2006
4   Grigorenko, 2008

Progress Monitoring

In a multitiered model, progress-monitoring measures document changes in student learning and establish students' learning trajectory. Adequate response within a given tier of support is typically determined in one of three ways: (1) students may achieve or exceed an expected level of performance, according to normative criteria (status); (2) students may demonstrate adequate improvement or progress during the course of intervention (slope); or (3) students may demonstrate a combination of adequate degree of improvement and level of achievement following instruction. Progress monitoring also informs the effectiveness of instruction specific to interventions used in the classroom.[5] The use of these measures can help distinguish between ELs who have learning difficulties and those who have not had adequate instruction or opportunity to learn. Like other students with learning difficulties, ELs with learning difficulties tend to have a slower rate of learning that becomes evident with the systematic use of progress-monitoring measures that assess literacy skills. On the other hand, ELs who lack opportunities to learn often make rapid and consistent gains once they are provided systematic and explicit instruction in Tier 1 and Tier 2.[6]

When students receive literacy instruction in two languages, assessing their progress in both languages is essential. However, many educators feel that dual-language testing infringes on instructional time. Alternating the language of the assessment by testing period can diminish testing burdens. If progress-monitoring data are collected every 2 weeks, the teacher would have one English and one Spanish score each month. This information would provide teachers valuable information about student progress in each language and also allow them to identify differences in growth between languages.[7] Not to do so underestimates students' skills and ability.

Many factors must be considered in making decisions about student placement and instruction, such as the quantity and quality of language and literacy instruction they have received, their skills in English and Spanish, and the appropriateness of their original placement.

Progress Monitoring: Determining Adequate Response to Instruction

Final status: Normative framework—student scores above the 25th percentile (standard score of 90) or a benchmark or criterion associated with future success on a defined outcome.

Slope of improvement: Weekly rate of improvement based on a progress-monitoring measure administered weekly or biweekly and a normative cut point that tells us what an adequate rate of improvement is on that measure (indicates learning but not whether final status is adequate).

Combination of status and slope: An adequate slope and strong performance on the average of the last two progress-monitoring scores with cut points set normatively. If either is met, response is considered adequate.

From the Center on Response to Intervention: www.rti4success.org

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Considerations in Choosing Measures

Implementing multitiered instructional frameworks with ELs is as complex as learning to read in two languages. An effective multitiered model requires data collection that is consistent, within and across

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5   Hoover & Klingner, 2011; Linan-Thompson & Ortiz, 2009
6   Linan-Thompson & Hickman-Davis, 2002
7   Ortiz & Yates, 2002

languages, to document student progress in both languages, as appropriate. For students in one-way and two-way bilingual education programs, use grade-appropriate measures that match the language of literacy instruction. For those in transitional bilingual education programs, use grade-appropriate measures that match the language of reading instruction, often L1, initially; assess in both the native language and English during the transition process; and assess in English when students no longer receive reading instruction in L1 and/or are ready to exit the program. For students in English immersion programs or English as a second language programs, use grade-appropriate measures in English to document the development of English language and literacy skills.

In addition to validity and reliability, other factors should be considered in choosing measures for universal screening and progress monitoring, such as the language in which measures are available and/or the types of adaptations and accommodations that may be required in conducting assessments with ELs. Resources available for assessment are important considerations, including availability of personnel with EL expertise, cost, and time required for administrations. The Center on Response to Intervention (www.rti4success.org) provides tool charts that include information on measures that have been normed with ELs and other diverse populations.

The following table provides an example of challenges that arise when measures or criteria are inconsistent across grades. These challenges include variation in the percentage of students identified for supplemental instruction and difficulty ascertaining student growth. In this particular example, a school used the Tejas LEE (Lectura en Español) to assess reading skills in kindergarten to grade 2. However, Tejas LEE was the only measure used in kindergarten, was one of the measures that could be used in first grade, and was one of the measures that had to be used in second grade. In first grade, teachers had the option of using either the Tejas LEE or the Evaluación de la lectura to identify students for supplemental instruction. The percentage of first-graders identified as needing supplemental instruction was either 20% or 30%, depending on the measure used. As students moved from second grade to third grade, understanding reading trajectories was further complicated by the addition of two more measures, the Developmental Reading Assessment and the AIMSweb. Recognizing this ineffective means for tracking student progress across grades, the school now uses AIMSweb across all four grades.

Example School: Differences in Measures Used and Percentages of Students Identified for Supplemental Instruction

Grade	Measures	Students identified for supplemental instruction
Kindergarten	Tejas LEE	8%
First	Tejas LEE or EDL	20% 30%
Second	Tejas LEE and EDL	41%
Third	EDL/DRA and AIMSweb	42%

Tejas LEE provides information on a variety of Spanish reading and language skills at specific grade levels and at different points in time.

EDL = Evaluación de la lectura (measures Spanish reading fluency and accuracy at different reading levels)

DRA = Developmental Reading Assessment (measures English reading fluency and accuracy at different reading levels)

AIMSweb is a web-based system for measuring and tracking Spanish and English grade-appropriate reading skills.

Principles in Practice: Project ELITE, Texas

As part of a districtwide effort to improve the efficiency in which students were provided services within a multitiered instructional framework, Project ELITE collaborated with district leaders, teachers, and specialists to implement a system for structured data meetings in kindergarten to grade 3. The main objectives of the data meetings were to (a) review student literacy performance data against established benchmarks, (b) collaboratively identify and discuss students' language and literacy needs, (c) group students according to need (including students in need of Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction), and (d) select and implement evidence-based instructional practices to meet identified needs in all tiers of instruction. Grade-level teachers met monthly to discuss core instruction. Multitiered model specialists, intervention providers, grade-level teachers, and instructional administrators gathered three times per year (beginning, middle, and end of year) to review benchmark data and discuss instruction in Tier 2 and Tier 3.

As part of the protocol implemented at each campus, administrators and instructional staff members were guided in optimizing the instructional process for ELs. Meeting agendas included items that asked teachers to review students' language-proficiency levels and consider that data alongside literacy data, particularly when setting student goals and planning instruction. When identifying and selecting instructional practices, teachers considered specific ways that practices supported language and literacy development for ELs, and they were guided in examining resources that support English language development in addition to the acquisition of basic early literacy skills in English, Spanish, or both languages.

During Year 1 of implementation, classroom teachers reported a notable shift in their practice due to the collaborative component of the data review process and the focus on ELs. Successes of implementation included a sense of "ownership" for all students' learning and development across the grade levels, along with opportunities to draw on the diverse knowledge and expertise of their colleagues through regular grade-level teamwork. Challenges to implementation included limited instructional resources for supplemental (Tier 2 and Tier 3) instruction in Spanish, as well as inadequate time and methods for ongoing communication between intervention providers and classroom teachers so that instructional alignment occurred. Suggestions for addressing these challenges included allotting time within the data meeting process for stronger collaboration between classroom teachers and intervention providers and guiding staff in locating research-based instructional materials in Spanish.

Data-Based Decision-Making

Educators use screening and progress-monitoring data to make decisions about students' movement within and across tiered instruction and to determine eligibility for referral to remedial and special education programs. These data are also used to determine the effectiveness of core instruction and interventions.

Documenting routines and procedures for decision-making is an essential step within a culturally responsive multitiered instructional framework. To ensure consistency, school personnel should identify and document whether they consider additional factors when making decisions about student placement in intervention. For example, in which grades is student progress assessed in the native language and in English? At what point is the language of the benchmark assessment shifted to English? Is the decision based on a set process (e.g., individual performance) or is it a point in time (e.g., at the end of third grade)? Are exceptions made, and if so, what is the basis for these exceptions? Having established and clearly articulated procedures facilitates decision-making at the school, grade, student, and group levels. Grade- and school-level data team meetings should focus on data analysis to identify the needs of individual and groups of ELs and determine whether problems might be attributed to lack of fidelity in the implementation of the curriculum or delivery of instruction. Although data review meetings are usu-

ally conducted by grade level, schoolwide meetings at least once a year may be helpful for setting targets as a school and for determining whether subgroups of students benefit equally.

Data Reviews

Data reviews should be conducted at logical, predetermined intervals (e.g., before instruction and then aligned with grading periods). It is helpful to review ELs' data more often at the beginning of the year to determine whether placements were accurate, especially for ELs in the process of transitioning to English or with initial literacy instruction in their second language. During these review meetings, teachers can provide information beyond screening and progress-monitoring scores, such as information on language proficiency, past educational placement, or grades, to describe ELs' learning patterns.

In addition to assessing literacy skills, teachers should monitor language development in the native language and in English with the goal of ensuring that students understand and use academic language, which is necessary to learn from texts and teacher talk, engage in academic discussions across the content areas, and discern precise meaning from oral and written language.[8] Language proficiency is currently not assessed regularly in most multitiered models. However, a focus on reading skills alone may cause teachers to overestimate ELs' literacy skills. Even when ELs are able decoders and fluent readers, the lack of adequate vocabulary and unfamiliarity with English syntax may affect the speed with which ELs process text, and that, in turn, may interfere with their ability to comprehend text.[9] Kung found that third-grade ELs who could read grade-level text at 130 correct words per minute were less likely to pass the state accountability test, a measure of reading comprehension, than native English speakers who read at the same rate.

Uses of Systematic Data Review

- Assessing and progress monitoring students
- Identifying school- and grade-level trends or issues
- Gauging effectiveness of school- and grade-level curricula and instructional delivery
- Identifying areas of need
- Setting criteria for movement within a tiered instruction system
- Identifying students who may need additional instruction or assessment
- Identifying disabilities

For students in dual-language programs, teachers make important decisions about when and how to introduce literacy instruction in English. Some of these decisions are programmatic, based on the particular program model (e.g., dual-language, transitional, or English as a second language program) or literacy model (e.g., simultaneous or sequential literacy development). In other instances, decisions are made at the school, grade, or individual student level, based on student progress.

Assessment of ELs in English as a second language programs is complex. For these students, assessing English proficiency is crucial to plan necessary scaffolds for literacy instruction because students are asked to learn to read in a language they have not yet mastered. When a student lacks sufficient English language skills, but receives systematic and explicit core reading instruction and makes good progress, additional instructional time may be better used to provide robust English language instruction in the context of literacy activities, instruction that enriches language development and reading skills, rather than remediating reading skills.

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8   Gersten et al., 2007
9   Kung, 2007

Providing a blanket intervention to all students regardless of their individual needs is not culturally responsive and is contrary to the premise of multitiered instructional frameworks that promote the use of instruction that responds to student needs.

Criteria and Decision Rules: Identifying Students At Risk

The success of multitiered instructional frameworks depends on accurate identification of students at risk of reading failure. Tools that have been developed for monolingual populations are likely to overidentify ELs even when they are assessed in their first language because those assessments do not take into account ELs' language and literacy development. Learning and, as a result, literacy are not compartmentalized by language, and even though some abilities transfer, what is known in each language is not equal. Parallel measures are useful but may not provide a complete picture of ELs' ability because their language and literacy skills are fluid when becoming bilingual.

It is important to consider ELs' educational history when interpreting screening scores. For example, a second-grade student who recently transitioned to English instruction may not meet the established benchmark because although he can accurately decode words, he does not have sufficient fluency to comprehend text. He does not need Tier 2 instruction; he needs more practice. Contrast that with an EL who has been receiving English instruction since kindergarten in an English as a second language program and does not meet a benchmark in second grade. This student is more likely to need Tier 2 instruction. In both cases, progress-monitoring data are useful in determining whether the students benefit from instruction and in pinpointing specific difficulties.[10]

When using assessment tools that have not been normed with ELs, the appropriateness of the cut scores has to be considered on an individual basis. For example, for a student initiating reading instruction in English in second grade, failure to meet the second-grade cut score on an oral reading fluency test is likely an indication of a lack of educational opportunity, not a lack of ability. This understanding is important even when assessing students in their L1 because some students do not have L1 skills comparable to that of monolingual speakers of that language. To ensure that students are not underserved, decision rules should clearly articulate how students will be supported to ensure language and literacy success.

Principles in Practice: Project REME, Colorado

The REME multitiered model incorporates multiple levels of assessment and data sources, including classroom, school, and district data, to acquire a more complete understanding of EL progress relative to true peers over time. Incorporating multiple data sources emphasizes the need to avoid using only one score to make fundamental instructional adjustments. Multiple data sources can include a variety of assessment practices and measures, such as performance-based measures, curriculum-based measures, both oral and silent reading skills, and the mandated measures such as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills or state standards-based achievement tests. The REME project staff also stresses the importance of completing reading and writing assessment when possible in the schools. In regard to data interpretation, REME incorporates a variety of ecological considerations in grade- and school-level team data-based decision-making prior to making tiered placements and needed instructional adjustments. Sustainability of multiple assessment levels and data sources includes efforts to develop and document practices for ensuring that proper assessment of ELs at the classroom, school, and district levels occurs beyond project completion. Development and implementation of a revised districtwide EL referral and assessment process occurred to provide a more culturally and linguistically responsive set of procedures to reduce bias and ensure proper special education referrals and placements.

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10   Linan-Thompson, 2010

For schools and districts with fairly stable student populations, it may be useful to set cut scores based on the past performance of students at the school or in the district. Using class means to identify students who are significantly below their peers is another viable approach. These approaches presume a student population that is consistent from year to year in terms of students' linguistic and educational backgrounds and range and distribution of language and literacy skills.
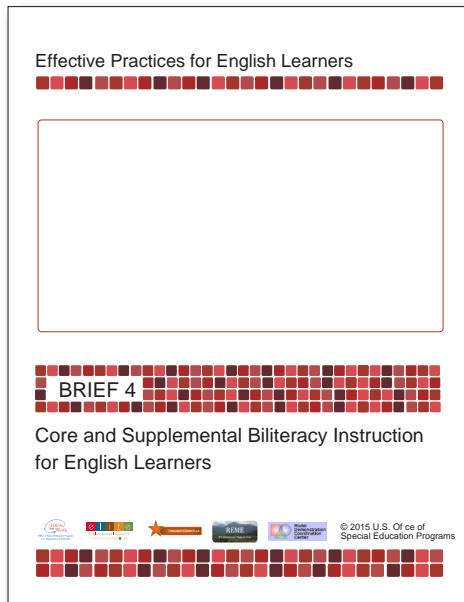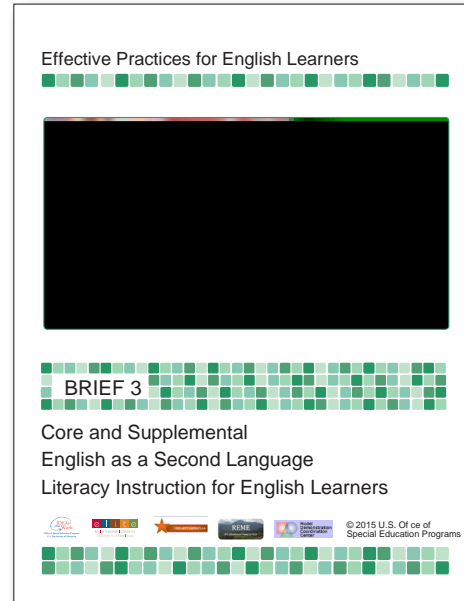
A key component of multitiered instructional frameworks is assessment of students' level of performance and learning rate over time to make educational decisions. The promise of culturally responsive multitiered models is the reduction of inaccurate referrals to remedial and special education programs. To ensure that this promise is realized, the approach should respond to the unique learning needs of ELs.

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For Further Guidance

This brief is part of the **Effective Practices for English Learners** series. The goal of this series is to assist administrators, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in implementing or refining a campus-wide model for improving the academic achievement of ELs in the primary grades. Other briefs in this series address key issues in implementing multitiered systems of support for ELs and can be consulted for further guidance.

Effective Practices for English Learners

BRIEF 1

Meeting the Needs of English Learners
Through a Multitiered Instructional Framework

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Effective Practices for English Learners

BRIEF 3

Core and Supplemental
English as a Second Language
Literacy Instruction for English Learners

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BRIEF 4

Core and Supplemental Biliteracy Instruction
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BRIEF 5

Professional Development to Support
a Multitiered Instructional Framework

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