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Why Instructional Materials Matter for Maryland Students

The students of Maryland are a vibrant community of diverse learners, including a growing number of multilingual students and students from various racial and cultural backgrounds.¹ Instructional materials designed to best serve these students must facilitate enriching, culturally responsive, and language affirming environments for all students.

Students deserve the opportunity to engage with rigorous content that builds a strong foundation for their educational journey and empowers them with essential learning skills. High-quality literacy instructional materials offer students engagement with worthy and complex texts, tasks, and learning experiences which foster critical thinking abilities, language development, and amplify student voice and agency. Additionally, these materials prioritize the affirmation of students' cultural and linguistic identities, attending to inclusive learning communities that connect education to their real world experiences, and provide the support and skill to ensure students with diverse learning needs to thrive.

By aligning with College and Career Readiness standards and research-based approaches, high-quality instructional materials unlock and support knowledge-building that encourages active learning and leads to dynamic demonstrations of knowledge from students. Furthermore, these materials offer support for educators, equipping them with the necessary tools, content knowledge, pedagogical expertise, and research-based practices to effectively engage students and adapt to diverse community and school contexts. With this comprehensive approach, instructional materials in Maryland have the potential to create transformative learning environments that prepare students from kindergarten through graduation for a future of choice and opportunity.

¹ In 2022, Maryland's student population included 33% Black, 33% White, 22% Latinx and 7% Asian students, as well as 12% English learners, 12% students with disabilities, and an increasing proportion who face economic challenges ([Maryland Department of Education](#)).

Document Introduction

This framework serves as a valuable resource for educators and stakeholders across the education sector to identify key criteria in truly high-quality instructional materials. It outlines the essential elements of outstanding curricula and offers clear guidelines on the necessary instructional shifts and educator supports needed to foster meaningful learning experiences for students. To deliver the world-class education that the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future envisions, educators and leaders can rely on this framework in service of identifying research-based, high-quality materials that are necessary to provide students with rigorous instruction, nurture spaces that affirm their cultural and linguistic identities, and ensure students’ continued progress and success each year.

This framework is grounded in extensive research aimed at defining the content, instructional practice, and instructional design present in high-quality instructional materials. These research-based elements are central to the criteria within this framework and critical to support the kinds of learning experiences that Maryland students deserve.

Despite its strengths as a resource for identifying high-quality instructional materials, there are limitations for how this framework can be used. While the document presents crucial guidelines, it is NOT intended to be exhaustive in addressing all elements of instructional materials and practices needed to create an equitable experience for students. Additionally, this document is NOT a rubric, meaning it does not provide a checklist or a scoring system for evaluation of instructional materials. Instead, it offers guidance on the essential components of high-quality materials, encouraging educators to exercise professional judgment and adapt to their specific educational context. From this framework, a complimentary ELA/literacy rubric has been designed to make these criteria measurable in service of evaluating the quality of instructional materials.

It is also important for educators and leaders to recognize any and all humanizing considerations beyond the framework that may be necessary based on the unique students, contexts of classrooms, and school/district conditions in their review and selection of high-quality materials using this framework. Overall, this framework serves as a roadmap, empowering educators to select and utilize the instructional materials that foster inclusivity, rigor, and relevance, ultimately resulting in enhanced student learning outcomes for all students.

DOCUMENT ORGANIZATION

This document, intended for use when considering K-12 ELA/literacy core instructional materials, is organized into four categories (Designed to Affirm Students; Grade-Level and Standards-Aligned; Instructional Design; and Educator Supports), with domains that highlight Key Criteria within each subsection.

While specific categories have been included for Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Pedagogy and Language Affirming Instruction, related considerations for affirming students are woven throughout the framework. Similarly, considerations for diverse learning needs and Universal Design for Learning have been embedded throughout to reflect the way that these practices must be interlaced in thinking about content, instructional practice and support for educators.

A collection of research and scholarship used to inform this framework is included as an Appendix.

Key Criteria for High-Quality Instructional Materials

DESIGNED TO AFFIRM STUDENTS

Affirming students creates opportunities for cultural and linguistic backgrounds to be an asset and a source of validation in the learning experience. In addition to a foundation of grade-level content, high-quality instructional materials must prioritize instructional practices that affirm students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and support students with a range of diverse learning needs. This includes developing culturally responsive-sustaining learning communities that center who students are, use literacy as a tool for civic engagement, and connect learning to the world outside the schoolhouse walls. Social Studies instruction must also intentionally affirm students' languages and language practices through a focus on building upon students' multilingualism, ensuring texts support language development, and designing language objectives that work in concert with content and literacy learning. Through these instructional choices, materials have the potential to cultivate a sense of belonging and recognize who students are and will grow to be.

Key Criteria for Culturally Responsive Instruction

- **Affirm & Center Students:** Instructional materials affirm, engage, and center past and current knowledge of Black/African, Indigenous, Brown, and non-Western perspectives and highlight multilingualism. Instructional materials are designed to encourage students to anchor their individual experiences, backgrounds, and cultural knowledge to support and further literacy work. This includes (all of the following):
 - a. regular opportunities for students to share about who they are and what they know, bringing their unique funds of knowledge² to their literacy experiences;
 - b. reflection and conversation within the context of the text or topic under study that affirm students' identities and experiences.
 - c. tasks that support students to express (orally, in writing, in media, and other formats) how text and topics under study do or do not impact their understanding of the world; and
 - d. tasks that require students to integrate what they have read and/or learned from others with their own knowledge, and synthesize ideas across texts.
- **Social Studies as a Tool for Civic Engagement:** Instructional materials consistently use texts and tasks that prompt students to apply the knowledge of disciplinary concepts and tools to develop their civic engagement skills, examine current events, build authentic inquiries, and take informed action. This includes (all of the following):
 - a. opportunities for students to read, write, listen, and speak in an effort to think critically about the content/perspective of the text or resources;
 - b. opportunities for students to apply disciplinary knowledge, skills, and perspectives to inquire about problems involved with public issues
 - c. attention to historical and social contexts in texts; and

² Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141

- d. opportunities for critically examining texts for influence, bias, and diversity of perspectives, and considering whose voice is elevated, and whose is absent.
- **Real World Connections:** Instructional materials consistently connect with students' lives, future goals, communities, and world. This includes (all of the following):
 - a. use historical sources and disciplinary tasks to connect to current events;
 - b. engage in collaborative tasks and/or projects that involve real-world problem-solving through meaningful interactions with peers and their local communities; and
 - c. connect developing literacy skills and knowledge relevant to students' academic and personal goals.

Key Criteria for Language Affirming Instruction

- **Multilingualism in Social Studies:** Instructional materials are deliberately designed to support multilingualism with a specific focus on building disciplinary specific thinking skills (corroboration, sourcing, contextualization) while encouraging students to leverage their linguistic repertoire to communicate with one another via reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This includes (all of the following):
 - a. sustained oral and written communication, including explicit encouragement to utilize a range of language practices and register, and to use their full language repertoire through so all students express themselves in a language they are comfortable with while working to learn literacy content and meet language objectives in the target language.
 - b. building vocabulary and understanding of new concepts in English and home language(s), including use of social and academic vocabulary; and
 - c. making translanguaging³ connections, such as by making connections between students'
 - d. home language(s) or register and the language or register of instruction (e.g., cognates or academic language registers).

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³ García, O., Johnson, S. I., & Seltzer, K. (2017). *The Translanguaging Classroom: Leveraging Student Bilingualism for Learning*. Caslon. For more see *Translanguaging Strategies*, English Learner Success Forum

GRADE-LEVEL AND STANDARDS ALIGNED

Grade-level, standards-aligned content serves as a necessary foundation for equitable student experiences in the classroom. Engaging with this rigorous content from kindergarten through graduation sets students on a path to empowered lives, and instructional materials must be designed so that all students have access to this essential literacy work. The ideas, concepts, skills, and understandings gained in the social studies disciplines prepare young people to be more effective citizens and provide students with the tools to understand, interpret, and effectively meet the challenges of the 21st Century world. In social studies, learners should be engaged in skill-based inquiry arcs (focused on evaluating evidence, questioning, and communicating conclusions), and academic concepts and approaches that help to organize and make sense of disciplinary content and knowledge. This includes ensuring all students engage with worthy texts and resources; tackle high-quality questions and tasks; develop their oral language and vocabulary; and pursue a volume of writing to express their learning and ideas to become independent readers and learners.

Key Criteria for Alignment with the Maryland Social Studies Standards (MSSS)

- **Inquiry as Core Tenet:** Instructional materials reflect the idea that inquiry is the core tenet of effective social studies instruction. Further, materials focus on the interrelated enduring understandings, concepts, and skills from the core social studies disciplines (civics, economics, geography, and history). The instructional materials also contain clear opportunities to practice asking questions, investigating essential questions, and gathering relevant evidence to develop claims. As such, the instructional materials will include:
 - a. The instructional materials reflect and incorporate the content of the Maryland Social Studies Frameworks & Standards (MSSFS).
 - b. Instructional materials focus on the investigation of compelling and supporting questions in a structured way.
 - c. Contain units that build toward taking informed action and providing students with an opportunity to apply their learning to real world challenges
 - d. Explicit instruction designed in ways that are clear and authentic.
 - e. Explicit opportunities for teachers and students to develop and plan inquiry arcs.
 - f. Provides lesson objectives aligned to grade-appropriate K-12 College-And-Career Ready Literacy Standards
- **Disciplinary Content Fluency:** Instructional materials contain accurate, detailed content with a variety of culturally responsive sources and abundant, well-designed practice opportunities along with supporting resources that align with the sequence of the MSSFS. This includes (all of the following):
 - a. Lessons and units that build disciplinary knowledge and skills through the evaluation of sources and evidence and reflect the practice of social scientists
 - b. Materials that provide authentic opportunities to build content knowledge and disciplinary skills across units in History, Civics, Geography, and Economics

- **Evaluating Sources and Leveraging Evidence:** Opportunity for source evaluation and the use of evidence to support claims is a particular focus of the instructional materials. Materials contain systematic and supportive practice opportunities for students to investigate how the reliability of a document can be affected by the circumstances under which it was created. Further, instructional materials provide systematic opportunities for learners to gather relevant information from multiple sources while developing claims and counterclaims.

Key Criteria for Text & Resource Selection

- **Grade-Level Texts:** Instructional materials ensure that all students have extensive opportunities to actively engage with grade-level texts. These core texts for instruction are appropriately complex for the grade (based on quantitative and qualitative features¹) to build students' ability to read closely. This includes opportunities to engage with longer primary, secondary, and historiographical works across all elementary and secondary levels. In early elementary grades, these texts are used for reading aloud.
- **Supportive Texts and Resources:** Instructional materials incorporate supportive texts and resources that include (all of the following):
 - a. texts at a variety of complexity levels from students' home language that are sequenced around knowledge-building topics/themes in order to support of students' access to grade-level texts
 - b. a range of knowledge-focused topically-connected multimedia and art resources (e.g., videos, visual art, music, or virtual museums or galleries)
 - c. materials utilize authentic texts that have opportunities for rich vocabulary and syntax to support language development.

Key Criteria for Compelling Questions and Tasks

- **Text-Based & Aligned to Standards and MSSFS:** Instructional materials include text-specific questions, discussion prompts, essential questions, and tasks to support students' access to primary and secondary sources. This includes:
 - a. align to the essential questions embedded within the MSSFS
 - b. attend to each text's particular qualitative complexities (i.e., meaning/purpose, structure, language, knowledge demands); and
 - c. spur the analytical thinking required by college-and career-ready standards at each grade level (i.e., attention to key ideas, details, craft, and structure)
 - d. Use the origin, authority, structure, context, and collaborative value of the sources to guide the selection of evidence from multiple sources
- **Intentional Sequencing:** Instructional materials sequence essential questions, text-based questions, discussion prompts, and tasks to support students in building enduring understandings targeted in the MSSFS. This includes (all of the following):

- a. build from students funds of knowledge⁴
- b. attend to the words, phrases, and sentences (including syntax) in texts;
- c. Embed checks for understanding (e.g., questions, tasks) of the text, topic, or literacy skill under study to elicit evidence of student learning;
- d. engage in close reading of especially complex or historically significant sections of text;
- e. build mental models of texts as student read; and
- f. integrate understandings across multiple sources.

Key Criteria for Speaking, Listening, and Oral Language Development

- **Integrated Oral Language Development:** Instructional materials regularly integrate discipline-specific oral language, writing, reading, and discussion about grade-level texts, social studies topics². This includes:
 - a. attend to meaning and oral language development within disciplinary instruction;
 - b. writing activities that engage students in discussion as part of the writing process³; and
 - c. use expressive language (speaking and writing) with increasingly complex language and syntax, demonstrating growing proficiency in the language of instruction.
 - d. Activity organizers that are aligned to the text structure of primary and secondary sources
 - e. Glossaries that, when possible, include student home languages
 - f. Explicit connections between language and content objectives.
- **Prominent, Authentic Discourse Opportunities:** Instructional materials include frequent discourse opportunities for students to discuss texts and topics under study. This academic discourse simultaneously builds knowledge, vocabulary, and language skills to express ideas and comprehension. These discourse opportunities will include prompts that are explicitly connected to various historical sources (primary and/or secondary documents: text, speech, visual arts, music).
- **Building vocabulary:** Instructional materials include explicit teaching of discipline specific and text-based vocabulary, including special attention to academic and content-based vocabulary. This includes (all of the following):
 - a. practice of newly taught words in a variety of modes (orally, in writing) such as through multiple relevant examples that support students making connections with words;
 - b. student-friendly definitions;
 - c. visual representations; and
 - d. encouraging the use, review, and assessment of targeted words throughout the unit.

⁴ Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141

Key Criteria for Volume, Quality, and Range of Writing

- **Prominent, Authentic Writing Opportunities:** Instructional materials provide frequent opportunities for students to write, connected to taught skills, texts, and topics under study. This includes:
 - a. short, focused research projects; and
 - b. crafting prose, sentences, paragraphs, and texts that allow students to communicate information and their ideas through multiple means of expression.
 - c. Constructing explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples, and details with relevant information and data while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanations
 - d. Refining claims and counterclaims attending to precision, significance, and knowledge conveyed through the claim
 - e. Identifying evidence that draws information directly and substantially from multiple sources to detect inconsistencies in evidence in order to revise and strengthen claims
- **Explicit Instruction:** Instructional materials include attending to the discrete disciplinary aligned skills of social studies aligned writing. This includes (all of the following):
 - a. explicit instruction on paragraph and text structure (e.g., via structure-focused mnemonic devices, graphic organizers, etc.)
 - b. the use of relevant tools needed for access to effective construction and composition of writing; and
 - c. grammar/usage instruction in and out of context.
 - d. attention to the writing process and language development alongside development of writing skills⁵.
- **Varied Writing Experiences:** Instructional materials address different types of writing (i.e., on demand, process, and research) and meet college- and career ready expectations for writing across genres⁴. This includes a focus on argumentative, informative, and blended forms of writing.

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⁵ [ELA Benchmarks of Quality](#), Benchmark 1, English Learner Success Forum

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

Instructional materials must support meaningful engagement for all students in order to be deemed high-quality. It is through this intentional design that these resources contribute to learning communities where students unlock knowledge; are authentically engaged as readers, writers, and thinkers; have the support they need; and regularly demonstrate their learning in dynamic ways.

Key Criteria for Building Knowledge & Skills

- **Knowledge-Building Focus:** Instructional materials center on building knowledge through engaging inquiry-based investigations about civics, people of the nations and world, geography, economics, and history. Units feature regular interaction with, but not limited to: knowledge-rich texts, data sets, and simulations. Literacy skills and strategies are primarily taught and used in service of building disciplinary knowledge through reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This includes instructional materials that includes (all of the following):
 - a. material scaffold the degree of difficulty or complexity within activities;
 - b. materials support opportunities to generalize learning to new situations;
 - c. materials support prior knowledge and key ideas.
- **Inclusive Content:** Instructional materials for key areas of the MSSS are expansive and representative of diverse identities, including content from a variety of community, cultural, and language backgrounds within and across school years. This includes texts and resources at each grade level that (all of the following):
 - a. elevate multiple perspectives;
 - b. provide counternarratives that challenge dominant narratives;
 - c. inspire reflection, motivation, or social action in response to ideas and content presented; and

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- **Historical Thinking Skills:** Instructional materials include the synthesis of historical thinking skills throughout, including opportunities for critical historical inquiry. These skills should include regular opportunities for:
 - a. contextualization: locate a document in time and place and to understand how these factors shape its content;
 - b. corroboration: consider details across multiple sources to determine points of agreement and disagreement;
 - c. sourcing: consider who wrote a document as well as the circumstances of its creation;
 - d. chronological thinking: consider how events in history unfold over time;
 - e. claim development: analyze claims, interrogate the credibility of evidence and develop counter claims.

Key Criteria for Student Agency

- **Metacognitive Processes:** Instructional materials develop students' metacognition by directly teaching and supporting students to monitor understanding during reading and self-regulate during writing. This includes: setting goals; self-monitoring growth; and reflecting on the impact of students' choices and ongoing development as readers, writers, and communicators. For multilingual learners, materials provide guidance on developing students' meta-awareness around language use and choices⁶. Instructional materials will include all of the following:
 - a. setting goals & self-monitoring growth;
 - b. reflecting on the impact of students' choices;
 - c. modeling and developing strategies that support students in making their thinking visible through speaking or writing as they develop their understanding; and
 - d. guidance for building metacognition for students with diverse learning need
- **Choice & Voice:** Instructional materials include a balance of student choice and teacher-defined tasks. Students are provided regular opportunities to make choices about how to spend time, who to spend it with, and what materials are used (texts, topics, and tasks). This includes (all of the following):
 - a. choosing methods for expressing their understanding that best reflect their strengths as learners and their understanding of the content;
 - b. self-selecting texts or resources (e.g., selections that represent their interests, identities, or abilities);
 - c. tasks that invite students to identify and pursue their own inquiry arcs; and
 - d. regular student feedback about literacy experiences and instruction;
 - e. provide texts learners can identify themselves within.
- **Collaborative Learning:** Instructional materials engage all students in collaborative learning through a variety of routines, structures, and tasks that allow for whole group, small group, and independent thinking. Materials explicitly plan for students to demonstrate their curiosity and share their tentative thinking; ask questions; and adjust their understanding by building on one another's ideas through speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Key Criteria for Progress Monitoring and Supporting Students

- **Supports & Scaffolds⁷:** Instructional materials are designed to support a variety of student strengths and needs in ways that do not interfere with their ability to engage with grade-level content. This includes (all of the following):
 - a. text and/or content-specific guidance on potential individual students needs so that supports, scaffolds, and extensions can be effectively differentiated;
 - b. supporting resources that provide reteaching opportunities for students not yet proficient in reading, writing, and language grade-level skills; and
 - c. supports and scaffolds that are designed to shift responsibility to students over time.

- **Simultaneous Literacy & Language Development:** Instructional materials provide appropriate supports for multilingual learners by including (all of the following):
 - a. explicit instruction in writing, text structure, syntax (sentence structure), and cohesive devices (words that connect ideas in a text such as although, however);
 - b. sentence or discussion frames; and
 - c. strategic grouping to allow for students to converse in home languages.
- **Progress Monitoring:** Instructional materials embed frequent opportunities to monitor and develop students' progress of disciplinary literacy skills, the application of those skills, the development of language, and the growth of content knowledge. This includes (all of the following):
 - a. embedded and consistent formative assessment practices for content, literacy, and language learning;
 - b. varied and multiple means of demonstrating integrated content, historical thinking skills, literacy, and language learning (e.g., podcast, mock interview, blogpost);
 - c. regular monitoring of grade-level reading proficiency; and
 - d. regular monitoring of oral language development.
- **Meaningful Feedback:** Instructional materials provide frequent opportunities for feedback to advance content understanding and disciplinary literacy skills, as appropriate to the type of literacy instruction. This includes (all of the following):
 - a. peer and teacher cycles of feedback, including communicating progress;
 - b. normalizing mistake making and affirming effort and growth; and
 - c. providing guidance for explicit, timely, informative, and accessible formative feedback to address partial understandings about tasks, texts, and topics in ways that allow learners to monitor their own progress effectively and to use that information to guide their own effort and practice; and adequate, supportive, and;
 - d. guidance on how and when to collect data, as well as how to respond to specific student strengths and needs.

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EDUCATOR SUPPORTS

To promote facilitation of meaningful learning experiences for all students, instructional materials ensure effective supports for educators. Throughout the instructional materials, explicit tools and resources focus on enhancing educators' depth of social studies specific knowledge for teaching and utilizing pedagogical content knowledge in planning for instruction and practicing inquiry-based teaching to build on or extend students' critical thinking, fostering reflective practice, including the examination of their own identities, and employ research-based inquiry teaching practices. In addition, resources are thoughtfully designed for ease of use and fit to community context.

Key Criteria for Educator Knowledge

- **Examine Self:** Instructional materials support teachers in examining their own identities, biases, and belief systems to help them understand how these factors might influence instructional choices. This may include reflection prompts, examples of educator thinking, or embedded professional learning.

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- **Inquiry-Based Teaching Practices:** Instructional materials support teachers in engaging with students in the inquiry process and inquiry based pedagogical practices (question formulation, research, Inquiry reflection, evaluation, and synthesis)

Key Criteria for Educator Knowledge

- **Text, Topic Knowledge:** Instructional materials support educators to engage students with rich texts and topics by providing (all of the following):
 - a. text analysis for anchor texts, including quantitative and qualitative complexity;
 - b. considerations for engaging a diverse group of students in anchor text/unit content in inclusive ways (e.g., guidance, explanatory content, or teacher notes); and
 - c. explanations, examples of concepts, and/or additional resources to support teachers' in building their own knowledge of the content and topics under study.
- **Students' Linguistic and Cultural Assets:** Instructional materials support educators to leverage students' linguistic and cultural assets. This includes prompting educators to learn about and integrate the knowledge, strengths, and resources of students, families, and the community - especially those who have been historically marginalized.
- **Supporting Language Development for ALL Learners:** Instructional materials build educators' understanding of research-based practices to support language development for all learners, and especially for multilingual learners, including (all of the following):
 - a. use of home language, translanguaging, and developing cross-linguistic connections in order to deepen understanding of the linguistic features across languages and registers; and
 - b. the development of oracy skills.

- **Supporting Literacy Development:** Instructional materials build educators' understanding of research-based practices to support literacy development through social studies instruction including (all of the following):
 - a. building knowledge of students' language development, including oracy, and language development standards;
 - b. use of home language, translanguaging, and developing cross-linguistic connections in order to deepen understanding of the linguistic features across languages and registers;
 - c. the simultaneous development of language, content, and literacy skills; and
 - d. providing examples of student language with varying levels of language proficiency within the lesson context.

Key Criteria for Usability

- **Design and Functionality:** Instructional materials are designed to support ease of student and teacher use. This includes (all of the following):
 - a. a visually appealing design with an organized and logical format;
 - b. materials that are appropriately paced;
 - c. clear and concise educator-facing guidance; and
 - d. a variety of ways to engage with the content, including leveraging current technology
- **Adaptability for Context:** Instructional materials contain materials and/or meaningful suggestions for how to adapt for district, school, and/or classroom context. This may include varied selections for topics under study; flexibility to modify tasks to connect to local resources, organizations, or issues; or varied pacing suggestions based on number of school days or minutes of instruction.
- **Program Coherence:** Core instructional materials work in concert with (or have the potential to work in concert with) additional supplemental Social Studies materials (e.g., interventional materials). This includes, aligned and research-based content and instructional approaches across materials.

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Research & Scholarship Supporting the Framework

Note: Our team is still working to refine this list of research and scholarship that underpins this framework, but will be heavily leveraging Student Achievement Partners' new [e² \(Essential X Equitable\) Instructional Practice Framework: Toward a Vision for High-Quality Instruction](#).

A robust research and scholarship base underpins this framework. For more information about research-supported practice, see Student Achievement Partners' [Essential X Equitable Instructional Practice Framework™](#).

GRADE-LEVEL AND STANDARD ALIGNED

Culturally Responsive-Sustaining

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