

April 2025

Curricular Mapping for ESL Programs

Insights from the Translating
Opportunity Texas Initiative



Texas Success Center

*Prepared by Student-Ready Strategies
with support from WestEd*

Background and Context

“Translating Opportunity Texas: A Strategy of Talent Strong Texas Pathways” aims to support all community colleges in Texas in establishing effective English as a Second Language (ESL) pathways from adult education to credentials of value, including industry-based certifications, certificates, and degrees leading to careers with living wages. In partnership with WestEd, Student-Ready Strategies, and the Center for Community College Engagement, along with generous support from Ascendium Education Group, the Texas Success Center (TSC) has engaged a cohort of four Texas community colleges in this effort: Amarillo College, Brazosport College, El Paso Community College, and Houston Community College. The products and learning from this initiative will contribute to the scaling of best practices across the state.

Student-Ready Strategies (SRS) serves as the technical assistance provider for this project, working with participating colleges in refining processes and tools to redesign and accelerate ESL pathways to lead to student completion and career success. Specifically, SRS is facilitating several activities with the participating colleges from Fall 2024 to Fall 2025 to explore each institution’s ESL curricular pathways, as well as their student communications, student support services, and institutional policies. The insights from these activities will provide a foundation for each college to develop and implement an action plan to better serve students who are Multilingual Learners of English (MLEs).

To that end, SRS engaged the colleges in an exercise to map their ESL curriculum in Fall 2024. This report summarizes the findings from this process and offers recommendations for institutions to consider in strengthening their ESL curricular pathways.

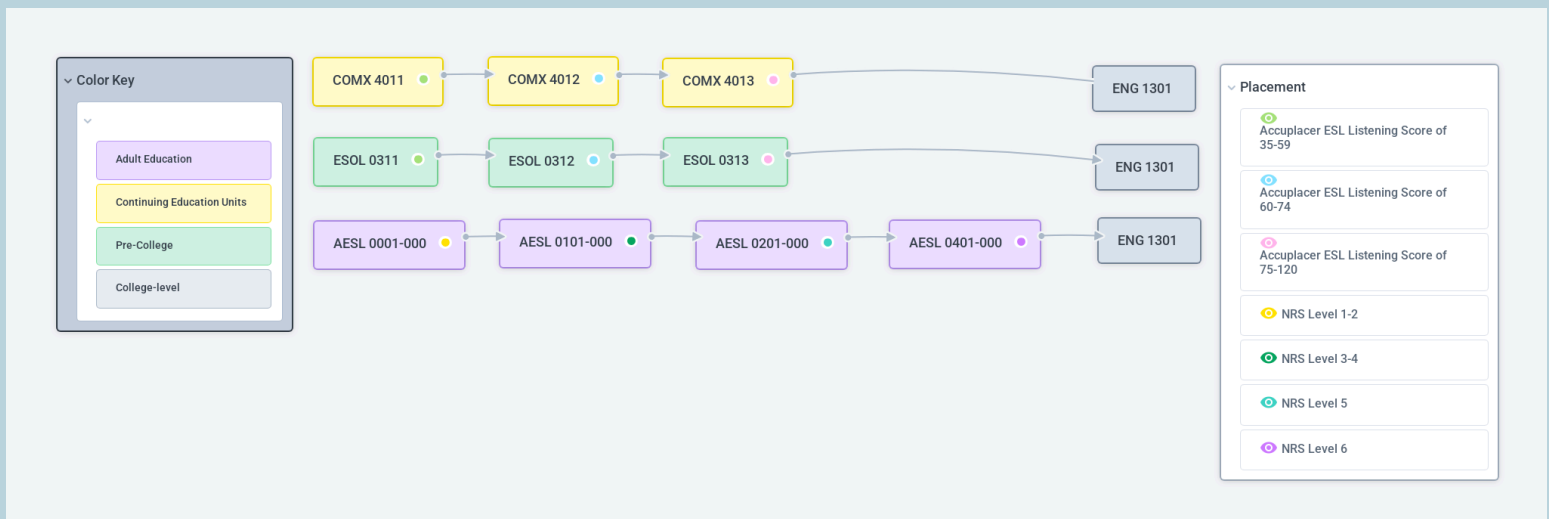
Curricular Mapping

A curricular map is a tool rooted in “systems thinking” that converts course lists, placement criteria, and course data into an image that clearly demonstrates the curricular system a student must navigate at the institution. These maps break down the distinct parts and subparts of a curricular system—the courses, sequences, prerequisite requirements, and placement criteria—in a visual manner that highlights the relationships among those parts.

Each course on a circular map is represented with a color-coded box to denote the course type. Course sequences and prerequisite requirements are represented with arrows between the boxes, and placement requirements are shown with color-coded symbols that correlate to a placement “key.”

An example of what a basic ESL map can look like is shown below.

Basic ESL Map Example



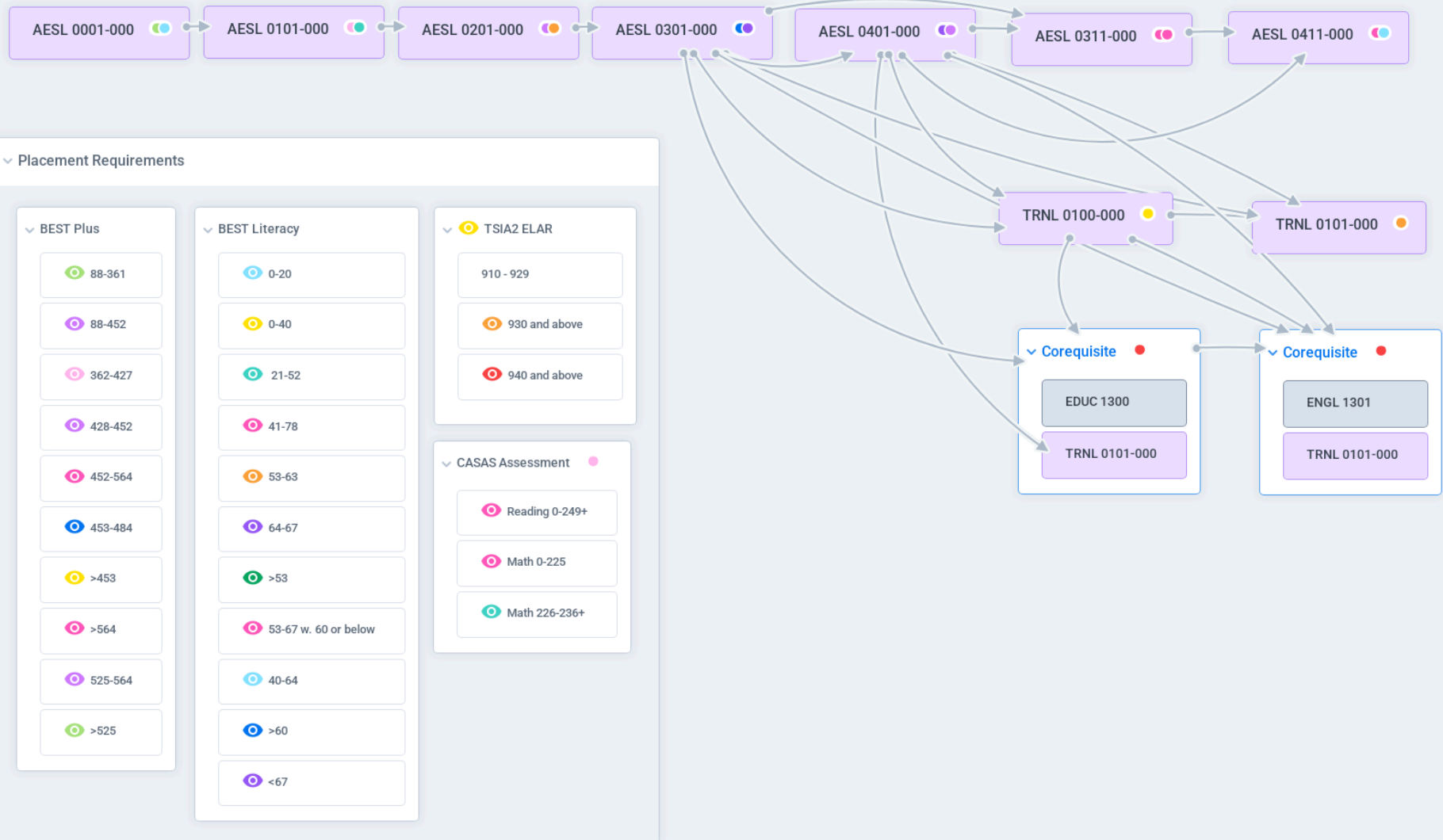
**This map is shown for demonstration purposes and is not reflective of any specific institution's curricular pathway.*

While the map above displays streamlined pathways from ESL programs to college-level coursework, these pathways are often more complicated in reality, like the example shown on the following page.

By presenting complex systems in this visual format, curricular maps provide a mechanism for institutions to identify systemic issues in their curricular pathways, such as lengthy course sequences or convoluted placement requirements. For this project, each participating college was tasked with creating a curricular map for their ESL pathway(s), including any adult education, continuing education, pre-college/developmental, and college-level programs.

Complicated ESL Map Example

College A Adult Education ESL Map

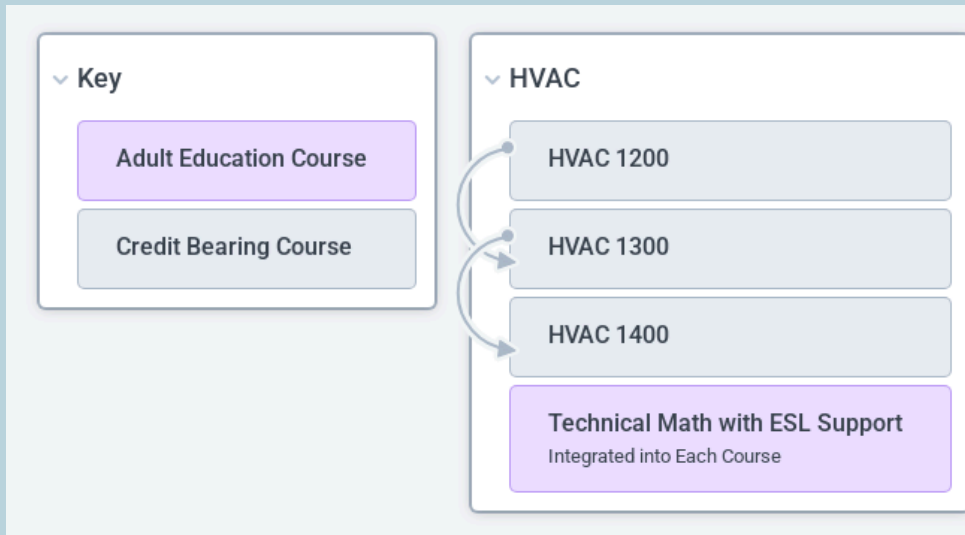


*This map is shown for demonstration purposes and is not reflective of any specific institution's curricular pathway.

Participating College Curricular Maps

The four participating institutions' curricular maps demonstrate the thoughtful design of ESL pathways. By offering an impressive variety of ESL programs both across and within institutions, the cohort's ESL pathways indicate a collective commitment to meeting the diverse personal and professional needs of MLE students. Key features from the cohort's curricular pathways are summarized in this section.

Embedded ESL Map Example



**This map is shown for demonstration purposes and is not reflective of any specific institution's curricular pathway.*

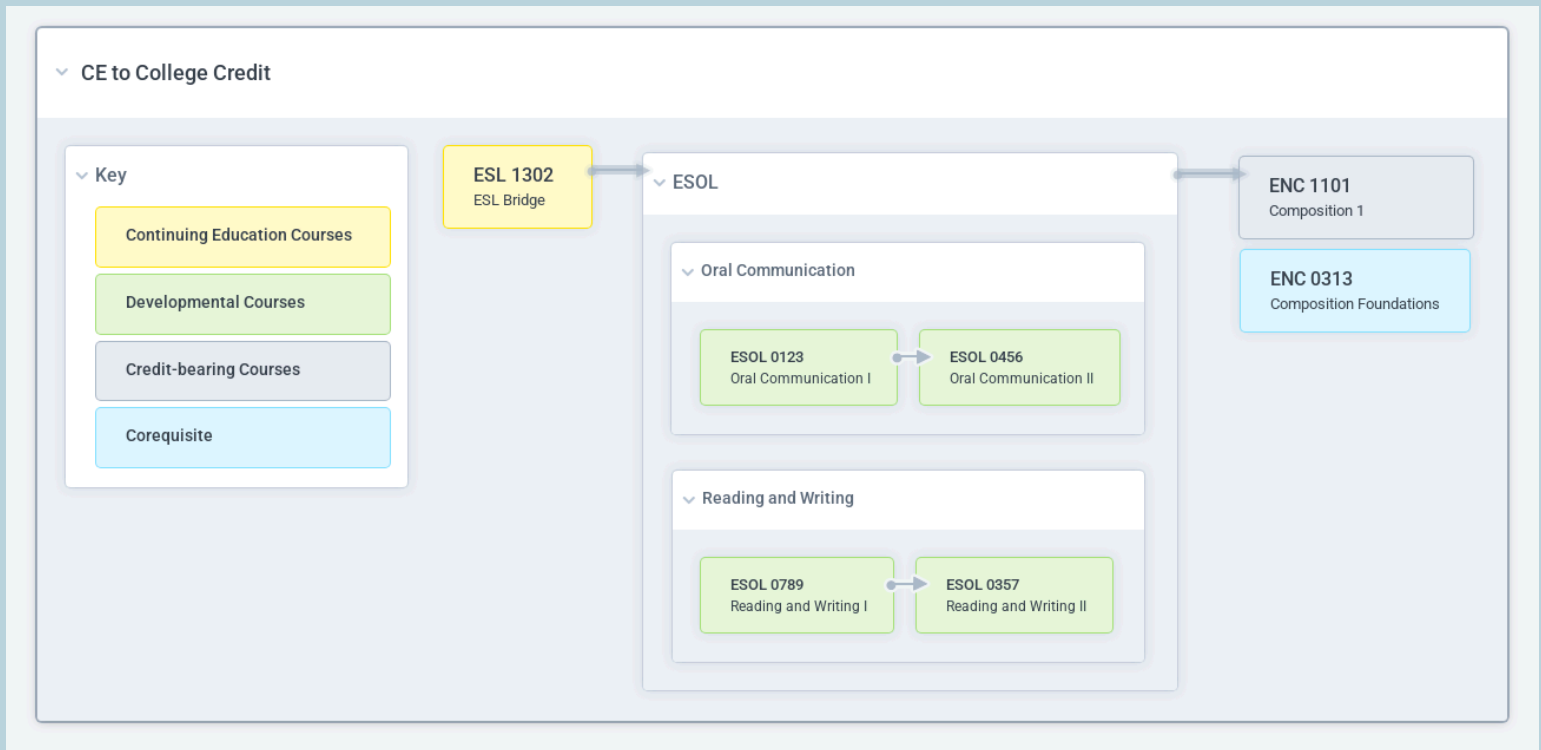
Three of the colleges offer ESL programs/courses through Adult Education and Literacy (AEL). These programs vary in length and structure, with course sequences ranging from four courses to six courses. One of these institutions has embedded credit-bearing workforce training in its AEL ESL program. An example of this structure is shown above.



Two of the colleges offer multiple ESL programs through Continuing Education (CE) to meet various student needs, such as conversational English courses, accelerated English courses, and ESL courses for professionals. The cohort's curricular maps demonstrated extensive variation across CE programs, with stand-alone CE ESL course sequences ranging from two courses to six pairs of courses to 12 sequential courses.

Both institutions that offer CE ESL pathways have also delineated a pathway from CE ESL to college-level coursework. That pathway at each institution includes pre-college/developmental ESL courses that culminate in a corequisite course taken alongside a college-level communications course. An example of this type of structure is shown on the following page.

Embedded ESL Map Example



**This map is shown for demonstration purposes and is not reflective of any specific institution's curricular pathway.*

Key Insights & Recommendations

As noted above, the participating institutions offer an array of ESL programs and pathways that provide opportunities for students to brush up on their English skills, prepare for career advancement, and/or enter college-level coursework. However, these offerings are structured differently across institutions, leading to variations in program length, placement requirements, incorporation of workforce training, and mechanisms to bridge ESL pathways with college-level programs.

To streamline and strengthen ESL curricular pathways to credentials of value at participating institutions, SRS, with input from WestEd, offered considerations and recommendations to the cohort colleges, like those shown on the following page. These recommendations were tailored to each college's programs, but those outlined on the following page are more general to apply for any institution looking to enhance its ESL pathways.

For more information about the research base behind these recommendations, see the "Translating Opportunity: Improving Postsecondary Pathways for Multilingual Learners of English" report.

- **Reexamine the ESL course sequence for opportunities to streamline and reduce the time required to complete the pathway.** Consider if the placement bands could be collapsed and/or if the number of required courses could be reduced without negatively impacting student outcomes. As demonstrated in developmental education research, requiring long sequences of non-credit preparatory courses before a student can access gateway coursework is associated with poor student outcomes (Community College Research Center, n.d.). Conversely, shortening ESL course sequences supports improved ESL student outcomes (The RP Group, 2020); this accelerates student progress toward achieving academic and career goals.
- **Explore opportunities to incorporate short-term training/certificates along the ESL pathway.** Short-term training and certificates support student momentum in the ESL program by allowing them to demonstrate accomplishments outside of English proficiency. These training/certificate opportunities can also contribute to career advancement, encourage further academic engagement, and offer opportunities to earn income that can support their daily needs and educational pursuits.
- **Provide opportunities for earlier engagement in academic and/or career and technical course content.** Consider options like contextualized ESL instruction that can be tailored to meet the academic and career development needs of MLE students (Beam et al., 2019). Additionally, opportunities to co-enroll or earn credit before exiting the ESL program support the student's identity as a college student. For example, students enrolled in an ESL pathway could benefit from enrolling in credit-bearing courses aligned to their professions.
- **Clarify and strengthen the on-ramp from ESL programs to other college coursework and programs.** Create intentional bridges from any short-term programs or training to longer academic pathways by utilizing mechanisms like bridge courses or the corequisite model.
- **Review course titles and descriptions for deficit language.** Identify and revise any deficit terms—like *low-level*, *basic*, *elementary*, and *fundamental*—that “convey needs, are externally- and problem-focused, and communicate what a student is missing” (Keadle, 2020). Consider terms that are encouraging, reflect a positive view of students, and are easy to understand for students who are MLEs.
- **Use a curricular map to initiate conversations about the above recommendations at your campus.** Engage faculty and instructors in curricular conversations. Connect with other departments to strengthen the bridge between the ESL programs and other academic and career pathways. Additionally, the map can be used to help student-facing staff, like advisors, understand the ESL pathways, placement requirements, and connection points to other college programs.

Next Steps

The curricular mapping exercise serves as the first of several technical assistance activities that SRS will facilitate with the Translating Opportunity Texas cohort over the upcoming year. Additional activities will include a review of student-facing communications and student support services available to MLE students at participating colleges, as well as a review of institutional policies. SRS and the TSC will publish summary reports for these activities and, ultimately, will develop an implementation guide to support institutions across Texas and the nation in this work.



References

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Keadle, V. (2020). *Deficit language in course descriptions*. Strong Start to Finish. <https://strongstart.org/resource/deficit-language-in-course-descriptions/>

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