

Ed Partners

Building District Capacity for Student Success

This series explains how California Education Partners (Ed Partners) helps districts learn how to strengthen their systems for instructional improvement and student outcomes. The first brief explains Ed Partners' current approach to collaborations: networks of districts working to address a specific practice area. The accompanying cases describe two districts' experiences working with Ed Partners from 2021 through 2024 in Preschool through third grade Coherence Collaborations (P3CCs) focused on improving the systems that support math and literacy.

Taking Reform to Scale: Learning from Ed Partners' Collaborations

Ed Partners offers 3-year "collaborations"—networks of districts working on the same focal area—that support participating districts in changing their systems to improve student outcomes. Each district's work is led by a cross-functional team that includes district and school administrators as well as teachers in relevant grades or subjects. Ed Partners convenes this team approximately three times a year over the duration of the collaboration. Ed Partners also provides teams with a program manager (PM)—Ed Partners' term for a coach that meets monthly with the team.

Ed Partners provides four types of information to the districts in each collaboration:

- research- and evidence-based ideas for changes that would improve student outcomes;
- an approach to systems change centered around data and logic, not tools;
- a framework for understanding system components that need to work together to improve teaching and learning, including clear expectations for student learning, common effective practices, monitoring of progress, and capacity building for teachers and administrators; and
- a strategy for scaling instructional improvement across the district.

The Ed Partners model has four key features:

- Ed Partners provides research-based ideas with instruction on system improvement.
- Teams test and adapt ideas and learn how to scale ideas in their local contexts, which builds local ownership and commitment to reform.
- The 3-year timeline allows time for districts to gain traction in the work but is short enough to create a sense of urgency around districts building local ownership.
- The PM's thought partnership helps districts strategize about how to apply the research-based ideas in the local context of each district.

Districts vary in the extent to which they improve their systems and student outcomes. Districts that lack a deep commitment to the work or that start with large gaps in system capacity generally make less progress. Districts that realize greater improvements have multilevel leadership—teacher leaders, principals, and senior district leadership—coordinated around success. Even with such a commitment, 3 years is a short time for districtwide improvement, especially for larger districts.

Lake Tahoe Unified School District: P3CC Mathematics

Driven by stagnant math performance districtwide, Lake Tahoe Unified School District's initiative aimed to develop a system to improve math instructional capacity at a pilot site, Sierra House Elementary School. The P3CC team developed and refined pacing guides, essential standards, and collaborative practices to enhance math instruction. Despite initial challenges, Sierra House successfully piloted a collaborative approach that led to measurable gains in student achievement over time. The initiative underscores the role of strong instructional leadership and resource allocation in scaling effective practices within decentralized districts. Although a full districtwide system has yet to be established, the district now has a foundational blueprint to expand this model and guide other schools in adopting similar capacity-building strategies, as captured in four takeaways:

- Monthly all-staff math collaboration days built conversations about instruction into the school schedule and continue to serve as the primary vehicle for building adult capacity at the pilot site.
- The alignment of instructional leadership efforts at the district and school levels is a critical component of district systems that improve instruction.
- The district provided resources at two important junctures: (a) to initiate Sierra House's pilot of an adult capacity-building system and (b) to spread the learning from the pilot to other sites.
- Further district resources will be needed to develop a coherent districtwide system for adult capacity building going forward.

Grass Valley School District: P3CC Literacy

In 2020 Grass Valley School District hired a new superintendent. There was ongoing turnover in district and school administration, resulting in low trust between teachers and administrators and little instructional oversight. The superintendent mandated i-Ready in K–8, which revealed underdeveloped phonics skills in students; he empowered the teacher leaders on the P3CC team to improve literacy instruction. The team adapted a phonics assessment, tested and scaled a phonemic awareness and phonics curriculum, and gathered data showing improved student outcomes. The team is leveraging their results to scale the existing changes, and they plan to continue deepening their improvements in literacy. We have five takeaways from their experience:

- The superintendent's decision to let teacher leaders drive the work built a team with strong ownership of reform and internal accountability for improved student outcomes.
- Ed Partners helped the team connect research-based ideas to the existing system and provided a PM to keep the team on track, which were critical to both making the work impactful and moving beyond the superficial improvement efforts that had occurred in the past.
- Ed Partners built the team's understanding of how to scale changes and the team has internalized the process and is now ready to use it to improve outcomes in other areas.
- The work of the team has improved the district's culture and has started to develop the district's system for increasing instructional capacity.
- Nonetheless, the district still needs to strengthen its systems for adult capacity building to make improvements in other areas without risking burning out its teacher leaders.

