

Building Momentum One Step at a Time

Grass Valley School District's Progress Towards P–3 Coherence in Literacy

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In 2020, Grass Valley School District (GVSD) engaged in the Preschool through third grade Coherence Collaboration (P3CC) with California Education Partners, focusing on improving literacy instruction. Over 3 years, the GVSD P3CC team implemented new literacy assessments and instructional practices, particularly in phonics instruction. The collaboration's approach emphasized teacher leadership, internal accountability, and the strategic use of data, which shifted the district's culture towards one more conducive to continuous improvement. By the end of the 3-year collaboration, GVSD had successfully spread its literacy initiatives districtwide and improved student outcomes. GVSD needs to further develop its system for instructional improvement despite these gains, particularly in building adult capacity and ensuring sustainable leadership and collaboration structures.



Districts in California (and across the country) work hard to improve instruction and student outcomes. Many attempts at new reforms fail to achieve their desired outcomes, however, and are rapidly replaced by new initiatives. California Education Partners has been developing an approach that supports districts in building systems that help break the cycle of endless waves of short-lived change, positioning districts to scale solutions beyond the end of a traditional technical assistance partnership. This three-part series of briefs describes Ed Partners' approach and how it helped two districts identify areas to strengthen their systems for teaching and learning, implement pilot strategies to address those areas, and begin scaling improvements districtwide.

Introduction

In fall 2020, a new superintendent came to Grass Valley School District (GVSD). He found a close-knit community with a stable teacher workforce. However, the district was in Differentiated Assistance because of students' poor performance on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP). One of the superintendent's approaches to improving student outcomes was to join a California Education Partners (Ed Partners) collaboration: the Preschool through third grade Coherence Collaboration (P3CC). The collaboration provided research-based information about comprehensive literacy instruction along with support for piloting approaches and then scaling them in the district. Central to Ed Partners' approach is that districts select an improvement team representing multiple roles in the district. Amid ongoing administrative turnover at the district office and in the principalship starting in 2021–22, to lead the P3CC work, the new superintendent tapped veteran teachers from most of the P–3 grades with strong standing in the district, using their knowledge, commitment to their community, and influence with their peers to drive the reform.

Characteristics of Grass Valley School District

1,067

noncharter students

535

charter students

69%

unduplicated pupils

19%

special education

5%

English learners

2 elementary schools

(TK through fourth grade), one traditional and one dual immersion program

1 middle school

(fifth through eighth grades)

1 charter school

(TK through eighth grade)

1 preschool center

Source: Small School Districts' Association

This case traces the work in GVSD from initiation through the 3 years of the collaboration, based on the following data collected during that time:

- 13 interviews with district employees in GVSD (nine teachers, six district administrators, and two principals);
- four interviews with their Ed Partners program manager;
- notes from observing Ed Partners' P3CC convenings; and
- artifacts (e.g., documents tracking GVSD plans and status in P3CC, School Board presentation and conference slide decks sharing progress, student outcomes data shared by the district).

The Grass Valley P3CC Literacy Journey

This section provides a chronological description of the work of the P3CC team in GVSD. It describes the evolution of the work, including challenges, key strategies, and turning points.

When GVSD first started working with Ed Partners, the district did not have formal systems or norms to support coherent instruction, and teachers had become accustomed to a revolving door of new initiatives.


Often, when we learn about districts that have moved steadily towards improvement, we hear about conditions that are atypical for California districts, such as stable leadership, trust between teachers and administrators, and a culture where teachers regularly share their professional practice. At the start of its collaboration, GVSD did not have any of these conditions in place. One team member explained:

One of the things about our district that I think a lot of people love is it's not micromanaged. ... We have a district that gives us a little more professional leeway to make those decisions about what's best for students. However, I think that that can go a little too far. Then you have people that feel like they can make the decisions about the academic information that needs to be taught ... [and what they do] not want to teach. ... In our district, we've [also] gone through a variety of principals in the last 5 years. I think with that, there's a little bit of a distrust with the admin title.

As this quotation indicates, GVSD's culture of teacher autonomy had slipped beyond the optimal bounds of teacher professionalism to a place where it impeded coherent instruction and meeting students' needs. Additionally, GVSD was characteristic of many districts where new initiatives were introduced and teachers had learned through experience that if they were not interested in participating, they could just opt out and wait for the change to pass.

The Ed Partners approach had features that could address these challenges and build on the district's strengths. Two features of the Ed Partners model were particularly important. First, Ed Partners teams are composed of multiple roles. GVSD's team was made up of district leaders (including the preschool director) and teachers from most grades, from preschool through third grade. Initially, the teacher representatives all came from one of the district's traditional elementary schools, which created a concentration of engaged teachers in that school. The collaboration was also set up to last 3 years. A team member explained:

For us, that is a big thing. Because like many districts, there's something that ... [is] the fad for the year, and then it goes away. Then it's the next fad of the year, and it goes away [too]. ... We're going to commit to something for 3 years. That's a big chunk of time. ... We can do this.



P3CC's cross-functional team structure created space to build trust between teachers and administrators; the 3-year commitment signaled to teachers that the work would stick around long enough to be worth their time.

Work started slowly in the first year as teachers felt overwhelmed, but over time the team landed on an idea to customize an assessment of phonics instruction.

One of the superintendent's first major decisions after joining the district was to require teachers to administer the i-Ready assessment as a way of measuring summative student progress in English language arts (ELA) and math across the district. Teachers were initially opposed, believing that the online assessment did not accurately measure student knowledge, especially in the younger grades. The superintendent acknowledged that no assessment system would be perfect, but he also realized the need to track student progress to understand if student outcomes were improving.

Initial i-Ready results revealed gaps in students' phonics skills. Additionally, because of the high levels of teacher autonomy, the district did not have a centralized way of getting teachers in all grades to teach phonics even though California Common Core State Standards include phonics skills through fifth grade. As a result, the P3CC team decided that their work needed to focus on phonics.

Even though the team had a focus, it took them a while to figure out how to move forward. During this time, one team member described a general feeling of "overwhelm" on the team resulting from the pressures of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, the new implementation of i-Ready, and challenges getting substitutes to cover their classes for P3CC meetings. As a result, it was not until the spring of the first year that the team landed on their first big step. They decided to revise the Basic Phonics Skills Test (BPST), an assessment that some were using as a diagnostic in their own classrooms, to get a richer picture of students' phonics skills than they could with i-Ready. One teacher explained their rationale for adding a more nuanced assessment as a starting place for making instruction more consistent:

If I can show that ... with the teaching of phonics, I can show a growth above and beyond those classrooms that are not explicitly teaching phonics, then maybe I can get [other teachers] to see that ... [phonics instruction] is something that they should be looking more into.

Team members decided to align the skills tested on the BSPT to their adopted curriculum by grade level and add items to get a more fine-grained assessment of students' mastery of the skills. They used summer school to develop what they called the Grass Valley Basic Phonics Skills Test (GVBPSST) and pilot it in one classroom, and they had a draft ready to pilot more broadly during the second year of the collaboration.



On multiple fronts, Year 2 work focused on creating supports to help a broader set of teachers try the new assessment and specific supplementary instructional materials.

The second year of the collaboration focused on expanding the coalition of the willing in several ways. First, the team added a team member at the second, smaller elementary school, giving them a foot in the door for spreading the work to both schools. But the bigger push was getting teachers who were not on the improvement team to try out the resources that the team had created and identified.

Coming out of a successful summer school pilot, the team made the GVBSPT more broadly available. Their end goal was to get all teachers to use the assessment to support instruction so that the superintendent could include it as part of the district's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). To entice more teachers to participate, the team kept revising the assessment and considering how to make it easier to implement, including providing support for teachers if they had any issues with administering it. The team also piloted and soon expanded two supplemental instruction programs for phonemic awareness and phonics, which supported teachers in TK through fourth grade with teaching these skills.

Near the end of the second year, the team began piloting a tool to help teachers diagnose whether their literacy instruction was giving students the opportunity to learn the range of skills that research suggested students needed to build fluency. A consultant who worked with Ed Partners, Dr. Nancy Akhavan, had created a trademarked framework she called the "Lit Six," a simple way of reminding educators of the six approaches necessary to build students' literacy skills. These six approaches that are part of daily comprehensive literacy instruction in the elementary grades are read alouds; shared reading; small-group instruction and independent reading; phonemic awareness, phonics, and word work; language; and writing. One teacher explained, "I think after [many] years, sometimes you're on autopilot. And so reminding yourself that you really need to take a moment and draw in these different types of [literacy instruction is helpful]." Near the end of the second year, the team piloted a very basic checklist based on that framework, which asked teachers to chart their instruction every day across the Lit Six elements to see if their instruction over- or underemphasized different components of literacy.

By the end of the second year, the work had spread on multiple dimensions:

- the district had teachers in both schools on the team;
- teachers both on the team and beyond were piloting the GVBPSST;
- teachers both on the team and beyond were piloting supplemental curricular materials to improve students' phonics skills; and
- all teachers in the district (K–8) administered the i-Ready.



The team began thinking about how to leverage data showing positive student outcomes to change practices and the broader culture in the district.

As the team started looking at their data, they began to see a positive pattern in terms of student performance in phonics. One team member explained why those data points were so crucial given the culture in the district:


So I think we still have a huge culture of just leave me alone ... and "I'm not interested. ... You can't tell me what's best for my kids." So we're trying very hard to change the culture. ... We're not telling you to do this because we want to ... control you. ... It's that we're all in this job for what's best for kids.

With data from both the i-Ready and the GVBSPT showing that students whose teachers were doing phonemic awareness and phonics instruction were improving, the team realized that they had a warrant to push their more reluctant colleagues to use the GVBSPT and the supplemental phonemic awareness and phonics materials.

In Year 3, the team continued to spread and deepen their work on literacy instruction, making some aspects of their work a districtwide "tight," increasing the rigor, and getting ready to expand into another element of comprehensive literacy instruction.

One of the problems with typical attempts by districts to implement reform is that as new approaches spread beyond initial adopters, the work becomes more superficial. GVSD countered that pattern of diffusion by supporting teachers to implement the GVBSPT and use it to improve their instruction. One of the main ways that GVSD worked to link their phonics assessment to instruction was to require teachers to administer it to their own students. To support teachers' administering a one-to-one assessment, the schools provided the teachers with coverage so that giving the assessment added relatively little additional burden. One team member explained why the district required teachers to administer the assessment to their own students:

The teacher has to give the phonics assessment, not a classroom aide, not a parent volunteer. Because knowing firsthand the deficits [in a student's skills] because you gave the phonics assessment is different than reading the results on a piece of paper. ... So we supported our teachers by giving them some time and giving them support to give the phonics assessment.



The administration made universal teacher administration feasible by having the teacher normally assigned to the computer lab cover teachers' classes in the fall, freeing teachers to call students one at a time for the assessment. By providing supports for everyone to do the assessment and requiring it to be done a specific way, it became a districtwide "tight" (a reference to literature on scaling innovation where some elements of an innovation are allowed to vary according to local context—a "loose"—and others are required to be consistently implemented everywhere—a "tight").

Once administration of the GVB PST was occurring consistently across both traditional elementary schools, the test's use had spread far enough that new issues were emerging; in some cases team members took immediate action and in others they have plans to do so in future.

- The team examined the GVB PST results and saw that students were vastly exceeding expectations for "grade-level" work because of how the team had aligned the GVB PST to the curriculum. Digging deeper, team members discovered that their curriculum did not match the rigor of state standards, which led to work on realigning the GVB PST to the California standards.
- The team recognized the need to develop an approach to phonics assessment that was appropriate for the dual immersion classrooms in the second elementary school.
- The team discovered that it needed to provide teachers with support for using the test results effectively. Team members provided peer coaching on how to interpret the data and how to provide instruction that was responsive to the results (e.g., small-group, differentiated).
- The team began to explore how students' stronger phonemic awareness and phonics skills influenced their writing and pinpointed an opportunity to push deeper into writing instruction. The team connected the P3CC work to another district initiative on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) with a pilot on building students' writing endurance for longer periods of time.
- The team started planning to spread the Lit Six checklist by offering professional development on how to use the tool. Team members intend for the results to help make decisions in 2024–25 about the district's professional learning needs.

This set of challenges and responses corresponds to Ed Partners' framework of the Fundamentals for System Coherence and Impact (hereafter Fundamentals) for system change. The district is setting clear expectations for explicit phonics instruction, monitoring student progress, examining results relative to expectations for student learning, identifying needed supports for building adult capacity, and coming to agreement on shared teaching practices with an eye towards gaps between current and desired practices. The multidimensional approach is evidence of the depth and spread of the work: The initiative is deep enough to engage multiple prongs of the instructional system. GVSD's experience also exemplifies how the Fundamentals form an interconnected "system" as opposed to being isolated levers to pull in an improvement process.

Over this time, student outcomes improved, which the team attributes to the work with Ed Partners.

School boards have the responsibility to sign off on the superintendent’s vision and monitor progress. As a result, the GVSD superintendent regularly reports on progress towards student achievement goals, using both CAASPP and i-Ready data. GVSD’s CAASPP scores showed improvement in both traditional elementary schools in ELA, after an initial drop during the pandemic (Table 1). In fact, GVSD has exited Differentiated Assistance.

Table 1. CAASPP Scores for GVSD Traditional Elementary Schools by Grade Level, 2018–19 to 2023–24

	Percentage of students meeting or exceeding CAASPP standard				
	2018–19	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
Grade 3	48.86	26.67	33.88	42.10	57.30
Grade 4	58.69	37.68	37.97	29.60	39.13
Grade 5	43.14	32.63	41.67	31.37	33.62

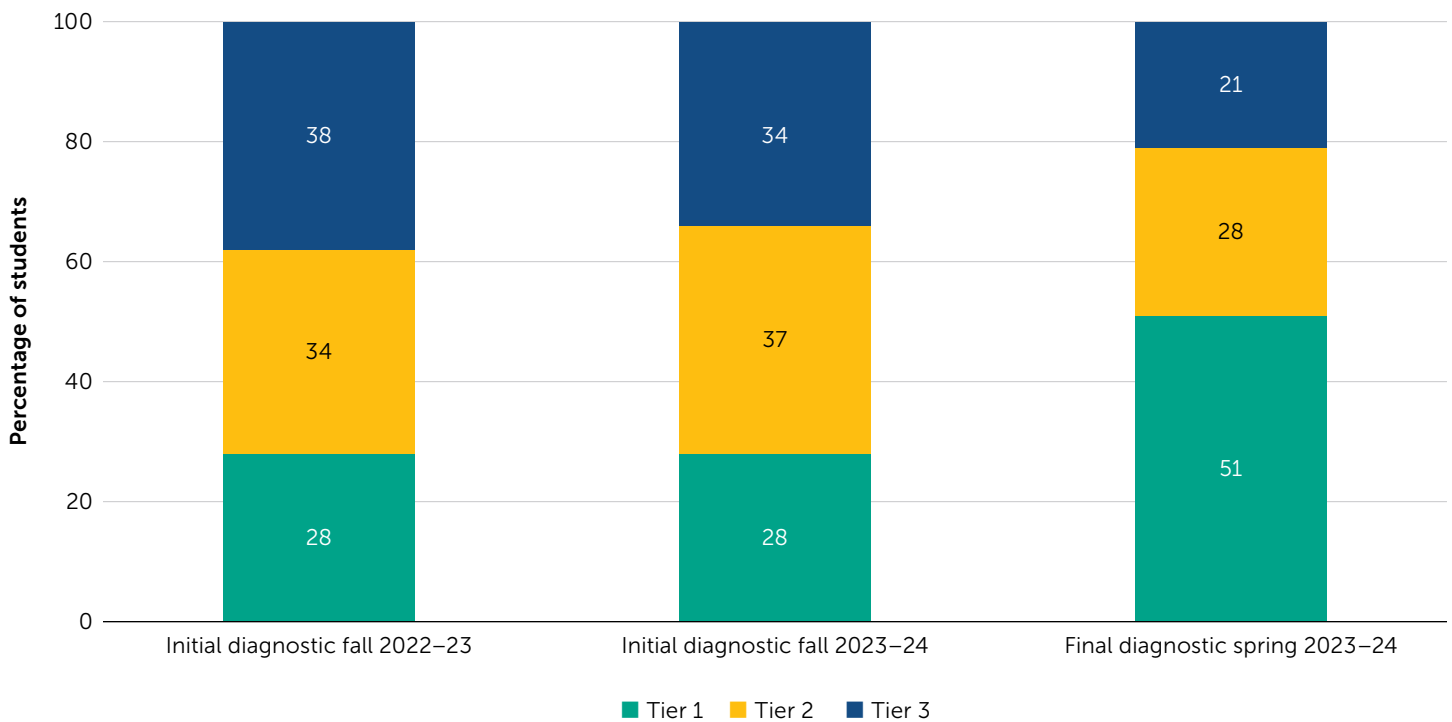
Note. There is no data for 2019-20 due to COVID-19.

The shaded cells indicate cohorts where any students would have had their phonics skills assessed using the GVB PST and then received explicit phonics instruction in prekindergarten through fourth grade due to GVSD’s P3CC work. The number of students affected by that work increased every year, from only pilot teachers in 2021–22 (hence the lighter shading of that cohort), to most of one school in 2022–23, to almost all of both schools in 2023–24. These data look promising, especially because students who received targeted phonemic awareness instruction in preK, TK, and kindergarten still have not reached the age when they will take the CAASPP.

These data also need to be interpreted cautiously. First, student achievement data tend to vary from year to year because of cohort differences and measurement error. Second, factors other than P3CC might lead to improvements or declines in instructional quality and student learning. These can be seen looking at the Grade 5 data, where scores increased and decreased about 8 percentage points across all of the years when none of the tested students had plausibly been affected by P3CC; the drop in scores from 2018–19 to 2020–21 is a reminder that the impact of COVID-19 and its aftermath is another factor affecting student learning that is still working its way through school districts.

We start to have more confidence that there is a positive trend (but again, no evidence that P3CC “caused” any improvements) when we see promising trends in other data as well. Because GVSD’s superintendent required administration of i-Ready for all students starting in first grade, we can turn there for information on how some of the younger students in the district are performing (Figure 1).

Figure 1. i-Ready Diagnostic Data for English Language Arts, Grades 1–8



Note. Tier 1 indicates on or above level; Tier 2, one level below; Tier 3, two or more levels below.

As these data for Grades 1–8 show, there were modest improvements in i-Ready ELA diagnostic scores between fall 2022–23, when a few teachers were piloting the GVBSP and new phonemic-awareness and phonics instructional programs, and fall 2023–24. During 2023–24, when use of those materials spread to most teachers in the elementary schools, there was a substantial increase from fall to spring in the proportion of students who were on track to achieve standards on the CAASPP. These data do not offer causal evidence that P3CC led to improvements, especially because they include Grades 5–8, which did not participate in P3CC at all. But they do include Grades 1–3 and bolster the picture of positive performance trends from CAASPP data.

Teachers and administrators in GVSD have greater confidence that P3CC is an important part of their journey than these aggregate data alone show. Additional school-level i-Ready data demonstrate that the school most active in the Ed Partners work—which also serves the highest proportion of unduplicated students of the district’s elementary schools—closed the performance gap with other schools in the district during the years of work with Ed Partners. Other data from teachers who are active in P3CC work show that their students’ performance trends exceed broader trends at their grade level. Combined, these data provide enough evidence of improved student outcomes to support the decision to expand the work and sustain the changes that teachers have made.

Takeaways

Looking across the 3 years of the collaboration, we see a substantial change in GVSD in terms of the district's ability to implement a system improvement, the relationship between teachers and administrators, and student outcomes. This section focuses on how those changes came about.

The change began with the superintendent's decision to have teachers drive the P3CC work.

Ed Partners always works to elevate the voice of teachers on improvement teams in recognition of the fact that teachers bring the deepest expertise in the district's instructional program, including both assets and barriers to improvement. With the superintendent's explicit support, GVSD's work was led by teachers, even prior to the launch. The superintendent reported early on that he would have chosen to prioritize improving mathematics performance by joining Ed Partners' Mathematics collaborations, but he believed it was more important to start the work in the area that teachers felt was more important, so they joined the Literacy collaboration. As we observed the team over 3 years, we saw a progression from work during convenings being directed by district administrators to teachers leading the conversations.

Over time, the team increasingly described a group identity that had deep roots in their long-term relationships in the district:


We've all worked together very closely for a ... substantial amount of years, and we've just created this safe space for each other that's welcoming. We've never been selective as to who's a part of that—if anybody wants to join and be a part of it. I will say we are the teachers that will take risks. ... When [the attempts] don't work, we'll go back to the drawing board. ... We've built that community among each other.

Empowered by supportive leaders, the team developed a culture that has a high tolerance for temporary failure in the service of learning.

Ed Partners provided a level of ongoing support that exceeds what the district was accustomed to, helping it learn about and test new ideas and then scale them.

When we heard in the team's interviews the confidence that its members had developed over time, it was almost hard for us to remember where they had started. In 2022–23, one team member reflected with us on their journey from the start of P3CC through their second year:

I felt like we were really struggling last year. ... We were so overwhelmed with trying to get organized as a team and ... just being overwhelmed with coming out of COVID. I think [our Ed Partners program manager] sat and just watched a lot of us cry and express frustration for a while. ... I think that the team that I'm on has a huge willingness to put




in the hard work ... and we always want to move things forward, but we didn't know really how. And I think that joining up with California Ed Partners ... they gave us the structures, they gave us the routines, they gave us the ways to kind of bounce ideas off of things and ... decide whether or not that was something that needed to stick, whether it was effective, [and] whether it was a sustainable idea.

The Ed Partners program manager built strong relational trust with the improvement team by listening to them describe what was challenging and then providing suggestions they might try to move the work forward in their local context. Once the COVID-19 restrictions ended, the Ed Partners program manager attended almost all of the team's all-day monthly meetings in person. The ideas that Ed Partners shared were not necessarily fancy, but in a district that had run on relationships and teacher autonomy, these ideas helped the district create additional building blocks in a system that might be capable of gaining traction with a reform. For example, Ed Partners had all districts make a calendar of their assessments—i-Ready, GVBSPT, and CAASPP—along with other important events, such as professional development days. Once they were all laid out on a page, the district had what one team member described as “an eagle-eyed view” of the year. With this perspective, the district was able to schedule assessments in ways that were more optimal—for example, moving their final administration of i-Ready to before the CAASPP so that they could use it to understand how students were likely to perform on the state's assessment.

The team appreciated that their program manager helped keep them focused through the early stages of the work, before they started to see improved student outcomes. As one team member explained, “I feel like she was key to really keeping us on track in the beginning ... [b]ut we knew at some point in time, that we were going to be able to take this path on our own too.” The mix of relational trust and tactical project management approaches enabled the team to leverage their existing strengths—relationships, hard work, risk taking, and knowledge from many years of teaching—to try new ideas and build a system that could start to spread them.

Ed Partners' approach to continuous improvement, which differed from team members' prior experiences with improvement efforts, built internal accountability on the team.

Like all California districts, GVSD has previously engaged external providers, such as the County Office of Education or other organizations, for such things as supporting plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles as part of the LCAP or sending a few teachers to a training on new approaches to mathematics so that they could then share what they had learned. Typical approaches to continuous improvement that interviewees described centered activities like root-cause analysis and tools like fishbone diagrams. We asked teachers to reflect on what was different in their Ed Partners work. They described their work with Ed Partners as a cycle of piloting new ideas and looking at data, which built their buy-in and created internal accountability around changing student outcomes.



Ed Partners presented a straightforward logic of continuous improvement that started with building local understanding of the problem and committing to solving it. As teachers developed and piloted approaches, refined them, and examined the data as a team, their sense of ownership grew. One teacher, in contrasting this work with prior continuous improvement efforts, noted:

But I think the difference [with Ed Partners] is that we are on the other side pushing each other. So ... we're not going to allow it just to be superficial. ... And when we started to dig deeper, and actually push each other and challenge each other to ... tackle the hard thing ... I think it made us realize that all of the superficial things we've been doing were ... pointless. ... I think about what a PDSA cycle is. ... [All our prior work with PDSAs] was not anything that we were [actually] trying to make any changes with. It was just to show that "Yep, we did it [a PDSA]. Look and see. See what we did." And then you go back to your old practices again.

This team member contrasted their Ed Partners experience with other continuous improvement efforts they had been involved with, like those required by the state's LCAP process, which focused on using specific tools to complete a process and where completing the process itself was externally valued, supported, and monitored. In the case of P3CC, team members began to build internal accountability not for just doing a process but for testing, monitoring, learning from, and spreading changes that would lead to improved student outcomes.


Ed Partners helped GVSD build knowledge of how to do a staged rollout of new practices.

In interviews, team members consistently reported that, like many districts, they historically have a pattern of implementing something new districtwide, having it fail, and then abandoning it. Ed Partners helped them break that pattern—even in a district that had teachers who resisted change both based on their identity as autonomous professionals and because they had experienced prior cycles of superficial implementation. Ed Partners helped the team understand the role that pilots could play in refining implementation and gathering evidence that a practice was worth trying. As one team member explained:

We know that ... for other people to jump on board, we have to make it doable and reasonable, and we can't ... ask them to do the failing. We have to have done the failing [forward] first.

The team recognized that it was easier to spread ideas once they had refined their approach to reduce barriers to good implementation.

In GVSD, once the team had piloted changes, they started to spread their work by talking with their closest colleagues and getting some of them to try the new assessment and instructional resources. At the same time, they began building awareness across the entire staff, first at one elementary school



and then in both traditional elementary schools. One administrator described how the teachers on the team shared in staff meetings and district professional development days:

They would share the work that they're doing, what they have learned about their students through this process and what they've learned about their teaching and how they have changed and grown and adapted. And sometimes it was little changes. And sometimes it was big changes. ... And it always, always, always went back to the growth they're seeing in their students and how they're able to help their students through the information [from] giving the phonics assessment.

When they shared their experiences and data, with the backing of administration, the team also began communicating the idea that the entire district would be moving towards adopting these practices. They gave their colleagues time and space to ask questions, observe their classrooms as they tried new things, try out the tools and approaches the team had already piloted, and give feedback on what supports they would need to bring these practices into their own classrooms.


The teachers on the team, who acknowledge that part of why they were selected was because they tended to be risk takers, sometimes found the process of a staged spread of the work "slow." Yet they came to recognize the importance of building in time for others to take on new approaches. One team member explained:

[We] have to slow down sometimes for some of the people on our campus. ... You've got to ... let them come to it on their own, as hard as it is because ... they ... have to wrap their own head around it.

The team found success spreading GVBSPT to most teachers in both elementary schools through this process of sharing information, encouraging others to try the test, and making clear that because of the improvements in student outcomes, these practices were going to "stick" in the district and all teachers would be required to do them. As the superintendent explained, "Once we know this is the Grass Valley Way, and we've codified that, it's not going to be a choice." Notably, mandates came at the end of a multiyear process that gathered evidence of local effectiveness, built enthusiasm from some teachers, and offered all teachers time and support to learn.

Through the P3CC work, the district built on its preexisting sense of community to foster a culture that is conducive to ongoing improvement and internalize an improvement process that was not applied to other problems of practice.

One of the markers of achieving true depth of change, according to Coburn,¹ is that in addition to shifts in practice, there are shifts in culture that support reform. Prior to the P3CC work, team members had friendships, but there were not good relationships between administrators and teachers. The P3CC work changed that, in a very positive way. As a teacher on the improvement team explained,



I feel like the biggest part of it is just ... the process that you go through ... coming up with a problem with practice, and ... looking at how we can make those changes ... and see how it works. And if it fails, go back to the drawing board. ... And I think that we were not ... unaware of that process. ... But I think that we've never had the support to continue to keep trying and failing and trying and failing and then succeeding. ... And I think that ... our superintendent has been very supportive of that.


Another team member echoed this sentiment, stating, "It just feels like it's changed the culture of our district a little bit, which is huge."

Team members consistently mentioned that administrators voiced their tolerance and appreciation for risk-taking even when it brought results that were not positive in the short term. The district also created time through releasing the teachers on the P3CC team for one day each month to meet with their program manager, look at data from their recent tests of new approaches, and plan how to spread the work more broadly. The teachers on the team believe this time was critical to enabling the team to make the amount of progress they did over 3 years. Finally, administrators gave the team access to districtwide professional development time to spread the work. The district's multifaceted support not only made the work possible but also built the trust that was the foundation of a new district culture that is conducive to continuous improvement. The district has subsequently started applying a similar process to addressing some of the increase in challenging student behaviors since students returned from remote school in 2020–21.

Although GVSD experienced success with P3CC, the district needs to continue to build its system for instructional improvement to sustain these gains and pursue other improvements.

GVSD has made notable improvements in district systems and culture around instructional improvement and has shifted literacy assessment and instructional practices, with some evidence that these efforts have improved student outcomes. However, 3 years is not a reasonable timeline for a district to develop a system that is fully capable of continuous instructional improvement. We identified three areas in our data where GVSD needs to continue to build its system: principals' instructional leadership, structures and processes for building adult capacity, and practices and culture around using data.

At the start of the collaboration, GVSD was experiencing substantial turmoil: a new superintendent was hired the year the district joined the collaboration, two new principals were hired during the collaboration, and other senior leaders were changing roles or leaving the district. Teacher autonomy and teachers' distrust of administration, including distrust generated by the superintendent's decision to mandate i-Ready, meant that teacher leadership was the most viable path forward at the time. Even while this fit the district's context, interviews showed a veritable consensus that the system needs to evolve further. The district currently has three teachers who, in addition to full-time teaching positions and roles on various committees, are trying to find ways to build instructional capacity by coaching their colleagues (if their colleagues ask). In contrast, principals do not currently play much of an instructional



leadership role. Once the relatively new principals have built strong relationships with their staff, they will need to expand their roles while continuing to empower teacher leadership to avoid burnout among their teacher leaders and ensure long-term sustainability.

The district is planning to continue work in literacy—likely moving into writing instruction—and to start work in elementary mathematics. Improving writing and mathematics instruction will likely be more complex than improving phonics instruction, partially because of how easily teachers' changes were supported with the new assessment and instructional materials. Ed Partners played the role of helping the district select promising change ideas and brought them research-based knowledge through Dr. Akhavan. The district will need to develop a more robust system for building adult capacity going forward. One opportunity is that the teacher contract provides for an early release day once a week. While some of this time is reserved for teacher-determined, grade-level coordination, other time could be used for instructional improvement structures like professional learning communities. If that time were structured around a focus on inquiry into instructional practices and student learning, with teachers holding one another accountable for progress, it could provide the opportunities for teacher collaboration and feedback that are necessary to support improved instruction. The district will likely also need to refine its approach to instructional coaching as three teachers cannot sustainably coach their peers while teaching full-time.

In addition to building a more robust approach to supporting professional learning, the district needs to expand the number of people who have adopted a culture of data use. When the collaboration began, members of the improvement team shared their colleagues' concerns about the superintendent's mandate to administer i-Ready. Over time, they came to see it as one among several measures that could help them assess needs and monitor progress. They also came to value more deeply the way more nuanced assessments could provide them with classroom-based knowledge to inform instructional decisions. To move forward, GVSD will need to support teachers' use of a range of data both for instruction and as part of improvement efforts. Ideally, a more robust approach to examining data would be paired with a more structured approach to teacher-collaboration time to leverage the strength of combining those approaches into greater gains.

Finally, the district needs to guard against initiative overload. All teachers in the district are currently engaged with a committee focused on one of three strands of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) work: academic, behavioral, or social-emotional learning. A set of teachers (including some on the P3CC team) work on the district's UDL team, and teachers on the P3CC and UDL teams plan to weave together those lines of work to start improving writing instruction. The district also intends to improve mathematics instruction using many of the approaches learned during the P3CC literacy work. Finally, the work on phonics needs to be expanded and sustained, which includes helping more teachers use the data they now have and supporting the consistent use of instructional practices like small-group instruction to provide in-class intervention for students who require it. This is a lot of work for a small district, and a set of dynamic teacher leaders are tapped on multiple parts of it. This is both normal and a pressure point to be managed carefully.



Conclusion

GVSD is a case of a district that truly took a reform to scale. Teachers deeply owned the work and held one another accountable for making progress. The work had enough depth to change the instruction that students received as well as some aspects of the culture. Over time, the work spread from a small pilot to a districtwide “tight,” and it is being sustained because it has become incorporated into the norms, processes, and structures of the district. Importantly, the district is seeing positive impacts on student outcomes from this work and applying the processes they learned through P3CC to other areas of need.

No district fully transforms in 3 years, but GVSD has made strong improvements to its system for instructional improvement by building a deeper shared understanding of expectations for students, instructional practices that help students meet those expectations, and ways to use data at multiple levels of the system to monitor student progress and support better instruction. GVSD has more work to do to develop a system for supporting adult capacity building because its current approach overrelies on a few individuals and does not fully leverage the existing resource of teacher-collaboration time. This case nonetheless offers an example of how a district that is facing the types of challenges that many districts across California contend with can take strong steps to improve teaching and learning.

Endnote

¹ Coburn, C. E. (2003). Rethinking scale: Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change. *Educational Researcher*, 32(6), 3–12. doi.org/10.3102/0013189X032006003

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