

Taking Reform to Scale

Learning from California Education Partners' Collaborations

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This brief comes out of a 4-year partnership between Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) and California Education Partners (Ed Partners) aimed at improving school district outcomes. Ed Partners' efforts focus on two key areas: prekindergarten and transitional kindergarten through third grade coherence and increasing the number of students on track for high school graduation. The brief describes how Ed Partners' multistage approach—building district capacity for improvement, piloting reforms to scale, and focusing on sustainable, systemwide changes—helps address persistent barriers to district improvement. The findings highlight both successes and challenges, underscoring the importance of multilevel leadership and offering valuable insights for districts seeking context-driven, systemic, sustainable change. The brief is accompanied by two practice briefs providing further insights into two districts' experiences with Ed Partners: [Lake Tahoe Unified School District](#) and [Grass Valley School District](#).



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


Since February 2020, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) and California Education Partners (Ed Partners) have been engaged in an ongoing research-practice partnership to learn about, document, and implement practices to support district improvement. The focus of that work has been on Ed Partners' "collaborations," which we will describe in this brief. During the 4 years of Ed Partners' collaborations that we have studied, 48 districts have sent 65 teams to join a collaboration with the goal of improving student outcomes in the focal area: either the Preschool through third grade Coherence Collaboration (P3CC) or the collaboration to increase the proportion of students who are "on track" to graduate high school having met California's A–G requirements (known as 8/9 On-Track). Through our partnership, both organizations are learning about common barriers to improvement, how some districts take measurable steps towards improved outcomes, and how Ed Partners can more consistently support districts to make systems change that leads to improved student outcomes.

PACE's Data Collection and Role as a Thought Partner

PACE collects data from Ed Partners and participating districts so that Ed Partners' learning can be informed by independent evidence.

- PACE sends one or two researchers to most of Ed Partners' in-person and virtual events. Over the course of the 4 years, this has totaled more than 300 hundred hours of observation.
- PACE conducted 288 interviews over the 3 years (we did not conduct interviews in the first year because the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted our data collection plans). Leaders (i.e., district administrators, principals, early learning coordinators, and formal teacher leaders like Teachers on Special Assignment [TOSAs]) made up the majority of our interviews (65 percent); 20 percent of our interviews were with teachers participating on their district's improvement teams; and 15 percent were with Ed Partners staff.
- PACE analyzes the data and brings those analyses into meetings with Ed Partners where they are used, alongside the thoughts and experiences of Ed Partners staff who are doing the work, to support reflection and decisions about how Ed Partners can improve its model and approach to best meet the needs of the districts.

PACE attends Ed Partners' internal debrief and professional learning meetings three times each year; PACE also meets with Ed Partners leadership roughly twice a month. In these spaces, we discuss preliminary analyses, share broader research that might be relevant for Ed Partners' thinking and work, listen to the perspectives of the Ed Partners staff who are doing the work, and engage with the Ed Partners team about the implications of what we are learning together.



This is the first of three briefs that share our collective learning about how to support district improvement and the steps districts can take to build a system that develops their capacity to improve student outcomes. In this brief, we describe our work with Ed Partners, the basic structures and foundational ideas in Ed Partners' collaborations, and what we have learned about district conditions and Ed Partners' approaches that facilitate district improvement. The companion pieces lay out two cases of districts' journeys through the P3CC collaborations to build school and district systems for improving instruction and student outcomes. While each case has features unique to the local context, both offer broader lessons about multiple levels of leadership and common approaches that can support districts to improve their systems and student outcomes.


Context and Goals of Ed Partners' Collaborations

In 2013, California passed landmark legislation, known as the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), that had several important features, a few of which are central to Ed Partners' current work. This legislation did the following:

- increased funding for K–12 education and distributed funding more equitably across districts;
- gave local educational agencies more control over how they spent their education dollars;
- created a planning process, the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), that was designed to engage community voices in the district's planning process;
- named "continuous improvement" as the approach districts should use in areas where performance did not match expectations;
- created tiers of state assistance for districts that needed to improve performance; and
- charged County Offices of Education (COEs) with supporting districts in their LCAP development and implementation and with providing tiered assistance where necessary through Differentiated Assistance and, in more extreme cases, Direct Technical Assistance.¹

While student performance, especially in the highest poverty districts, improved somewhat under LCFF prior to the pandemic,² student performance slid during the pandemic and has recovered only marginally since.³ Most districts in the state are identified as needing some level of assistance on one or more areas of performance on the California School Dashboard, but few districts receive the type of support they need to make meaningful and sustained improvements in student outcomes.

Ed Partners has been running district improvement networks since it launched its work with Math in Common in 2013. That and subsequent networks had some promising results. Specifically, there is evidence that a sample of districts participating in a P3CC collaboration made substantial changes to district systems around mathematics instruction, which supported improved instructional capacity for math in a subset of those districts,⁴ and there are examples of specific districts enhancing their systems for supporting ongoing instructional improvement in ways that the district attributed to improved student outcomes.⁵ But Ed Partners continues to refine its approach to achieve its goals more consistently:



(a) it helps the districts improve their system functions and student outcomes in a focal area of practice, and (b) it articulates an approach to system improvement that can be replicated across districts and focal areas of improvement. This brief is a snapshot in time that lays out the fundamental features of Ed Partners' overall approach as of the end of the 2023–24 school year (recognizing that any individual district or collaboration may deviate from the typical approach) and shares lessons that PACE has learned from studying Ed Partners' collaborations.

The Ed Partners Approach: Key Structures and Central Ideas

A collaboration typically starts with Ed Partners recruiting seven to eight small to mid-sized districts that serve between 2,000 and 20,000 students and include a high population of typically underserved student groups. Ed Partners targets districts of this size because they make up 50 percent of the student enrollment in California as well as 40 percent of the total districts, and they generally have access to fewer technical assistance providers because of their size or location. With the support of Ed Partners, each district engages in a capacity review to build a shared understanding of a district's context, to understand ongoing reform efforts and the system's current capacity for improvement, and to give the district an opportunity to reflect on its aspirations and students' current performance. As part of the capacity review, the district identifies stakeholders and existing change agents (e.g., early adopters, thought leaders) in the focal grades and subjects. This reflection supports the district to identify a cross-functional "improvement team" composed of one to two district leaders, at least one or two principals, and teachers representing the range of grades and subjects that are the focus of the collaboration. P3CC teams often have preschool administrators as well, while 8/9 On-Track collaborations often have counselors. Finally, the district selects a team lead (usually a district or school administrator) and commits to ensuring time for the improvement team to meet monthly and to attend collaboration events. As of the 2023–24 school year, teams were required to have representatives across two school sites to provide opportunities to learn from each other and to prepare the teams to catalyze change across an entire district, not just a single school.

Ed Partners assigns each district a program manager, who is ideally the district's coach for all 3 years of the collaboration. Program managers come from a variety of backgrounds, but most are former school or district administrators. Regardless of their specific prior experiences, all bring approaches for building strong relationships with district teams, strategies for helping teams develop a culture of and processes for improvement, and a commitment to improving equity and student outcomes. Program managers have three main roles in supporting their district teams: (a) attend monthly, in-person team meetings; (b) work with the team lead to plan the team meetings and create an improvement culture on the team; and (c) connect the team with resources to support them with testing ideas and managing the process of scaling system improvement. Through the program managers' support for district teams, Ed Partners aspires to develop the districts' capacity to continue the work independently at the end of the 3-year collaboration.

The program managers in each collaboration also work with the Ed Partners leadership team to develop an overall scope and sequence for the collaboration and design and to lead approximately three 1.5-day events aligned to the Ed Partners scope and sequence over the course of each year. As needed, the program managers create additional shared learning opportunities (SLOs), which are virtual afternoon workshops on a specific topic relevant to the collaboration. Across the convenings and SLOs, Ed Partners provides the opportunity for teams to engage in a carefully sequenced set of topics and tools to support them with improving their systems and student outcomes in their focal area. Teams also share with each other what they are trying and any evidence that these approaches are improving system outcomes.

Ed Partners has revised the scope and sequence over the past few years. The sidebar describes the main topics that are common across both P3CC and 8/9 On-Track as well as the content that is unique to each as of fall 2024.

Topics Covered in Ed Partners' Collaborations

Common across Ed Partners' collaborations


- Approaches to improvement
- Scale of best practices
- Fundamentals for System Coherence and Impact (see Figure 2):
 1. clear expectations for students,
 2. common effective practices that are collaboration specific (see right),
 3. a system to build teacher and administrator capacity, and
 4. a system to monitor student progress to guide decision-making.

Specific to P3CC mathematics and literacy

- A shared vision for mathematics instruction and clear expectations for student learning in preK through third grade, aligned with the California Common Core State Standards
- Common effective practices for:
 - aligned data and assessment to monitor student progress and
 - high-leverage, research-based instructional strategies in elementary mathematics and literacy (e.g., the Standards for Mathematical Practices)

Specific to 8/9 On-Track

- Clear expectations for equitable course placement and A–G completion
- Common effective practices for:
 - on-track monitoring and placement and
 - grading, intervention, and instruction



Ed Partners provides common support across all its collaborations as it pertains to approaches to improvement, processes for scale, and the Fundamentals for System Coherence and Impact (hereafter Fundamentals) while individualizing the support for setting clear expectations and effective practices for the P3CC and 8/9 On-Track collaborations. The rest of this brief will focus specifically on those supports unique to the P3CC collaboration. We focus on P3CC because the two attached case studies examine districts from each of the P3CC math- and literacy-focused collaborations. Additionally, the support and content expertise provided by Ed Partners in the P3CC collaboration have remained relatively consistent across the 4 years of data collection, whereas those in the 8/9 On-Track have evolved to narrow the scope of support provided by Ed Partners, align with research, and best meet district needs. What follows is a brief description of the shared topics.

An Approach to Improvement


During the years that we've studied Ed Partners (through 2023–24), Ed Partners has anchored its collaborations in the Ed Partners Promise:

At the conclusion of collaborative, continuous improvement work with California Education Partners, districts and their schools will have the skills and knowledge to further develop, execute, and spread a sustainable improvement approach that is contextually driven and that quantifiably improves student outcomes.

The Ed Partners Promise reiterates the collaborations' North Star: sustainable system improvement that leads to improved student outcomes. While many professional development activities have historically focused on creating meaningful learning opportunities for participating adults, the Ed Partners Promise sets the tone that the success of districts and the collaboration as a whole will be measured based on outcomes that the district is expected to sustain at the end of its collaboration with Ed Partners.

Ed Partners' approach to continuous improvement is relatively straightforward and has five main components:

- identify stakeholders within the system at the classroom, school, and district levels who are needed to scale improvement;
- create a culture where it is safe to try new things, even if they fail, in the service of learning and improvement;
- use data to understand gaps in performance, monitor progress, and provide instruction that meets students' needs;
- pilot test promising ideas and gather evidence of effectiveness and educator support through the pilot process; and
- scale effective practices by expanding the pool of educators trying the piloted approach and leveraging system structures, processes, and leaders' authority to spread the change so that all students who can benefit receive that approach.



Notably, this approach does not rely on a series of tools or a particular methodology to scaffold educators' continuous improvement work. Instead, it relies on culture, data, straightforward logic, and managing the rollout of changes that are found to be effective. While the first four of these are found in high-quality approaches to continuous improvement, we discuss the last in greater detail because its emphasis is a distinguishing feature of Ed Partners' work.

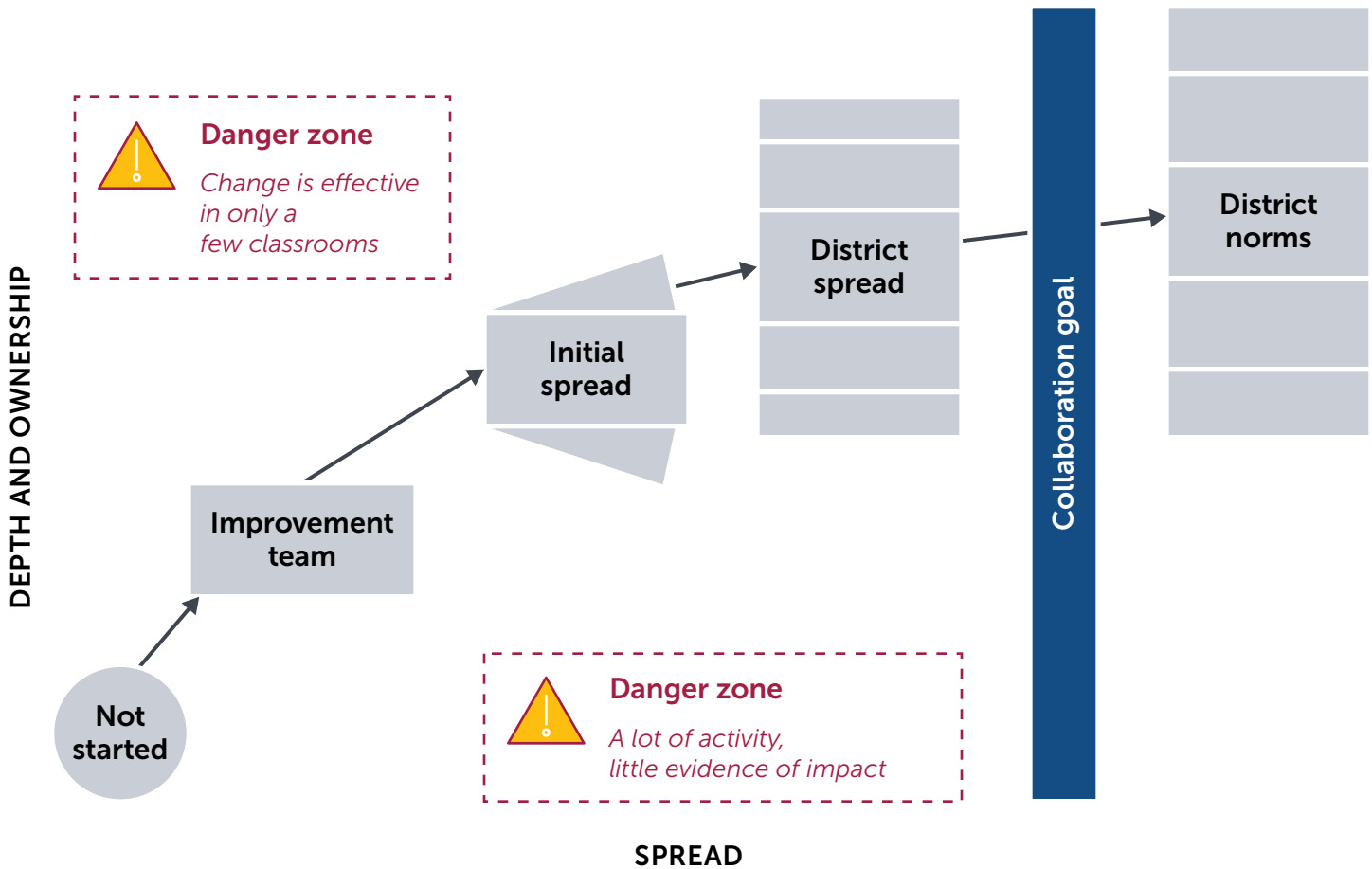
Scale

There are two related ideas, rooted in research, that Ed Partners has elevated in its work in recent years: *scaling* effective practices by leveraging *systems*. The first is the expanded definition of *scale* as defined by Coburn's research on literacy reforms that improved student outcomes over the long term.⁶ Coburn pushed back on the simplistic understanding of scale—that is, how many people have been touched by an initiative. Instead, she named four dimensions of scale necessary for reform to have a long-lasting impact.

- **Depth:** A high-quality implementation that shifts beliefs, norms, and the underlying pedagogical principles of instruction has depth.
- **Ownership:** While reforms are often initiated, required, and/or supported by external mandates, over time the authority and capacity to support the change and the understanding of how to enact the change must shift to be held within the organizations (i.e., districts, schools, and teachers).
- **Spread:** Principles central to the reform are taken up by increasing numbers of people across a system and are embedded in formal policies and organizational culture.
- **Sustainability:** Adopted reforms are only significant if they persist over time, so they need to become embedded in the structures, processes, and norms of the district.


Notably, many education reform efforts fail in one of two ways: (a) the reform never spreads past a small set of early adopters (lack of spread), or (b) the reform is implemented widely but so superficially that it does not meaningfully change practices or outcomes (lack of depth).⁷ Ed Partners joins this framework for scale with a presentation of continuous improvement focused on systematizing research-based, high-leverage practices across an entire district. In doing so, Ed Partners seeks to move beyond tools and processes (e.g., plan-do-study-act [PDSA] cycles) to support teams in building ownership of a change and then in strategizing about systems-level impact by attending to the four dimensions of scale (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Taking a Reform to Scale in a District Through an Ed Partners Collaboration



Ed Partners teaches districts a staged approach to scale from small-scale pilot tests to districtwide implementation:

1. Team members pilot a new practice, gain evidence about how it is working, and adopt, adapt, or abandon it.
2. Once the team members have figured out how the approach can be implemented in their system, they start expanding testing by recruiting willing colleagues outside the improvement team in participating schools and grades (P–3 or 8–9). This may lead to further adaptation of the approach; it is also intended to create support for broader implementation among teachers not on the improvement team.
3. The initial spread more systematically includes teachers in participating schools and focal grades by engaging system structures and processes to support scale as the work moves beyond early adopters. For example, the work might be to spread to relevant grade levels at schools with members on the improvement team.

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4. Next, the work spreads farther in the district across traditional organizational silos, such as grade levels, departments, or schools, becoming embedded in norms, structures, and processes. Crucially, district-level engagement becomes critical for supporting implementation in multiple schools. School and some district processes support sustained focus on implementation of the work with fidelity (e.g., observation tools, professional learning communities, cross-site collaboration). The work may even start to spread beyond the two schools whose staff are members of the improvement team.
 5. Finally, the changes are spread districtwide and become the new norms. The district office's role is to monitor and make adjustments as needed to sustain high-quality implementation across all sites. This stage is unlikely to happen during the 3 years of the collaboration but is the desired result of Ed Partners' focus on supporting sustainable systems and habits.

Ed Partners' approach to continuous improvement and scale intentionally slows initial implementation and spread, interrupting the iterative cycles of superficial change that are the norm in many. Instead, this approach encourages sustained focus on specific high-leverage practices with a deliberate rollout. As Ed Partners clearly states, districts will not be able to move through all five stages within the 3 years of the collaboration, but they will ideally both make progress and learn how to pilot and subsequently scale interventions in their systems.

In addition to providing a framework for districts to think about scale, Ed Partners helps districts strategize about some of the nuts and bolts required to scale reform, including finding ways to embed the work within the existing district systems. For example, Ed Partners prompts teams to project-manage change and engage the structures and processes needed to facilitate systems change in their local context. Examples of this type of support include the following:

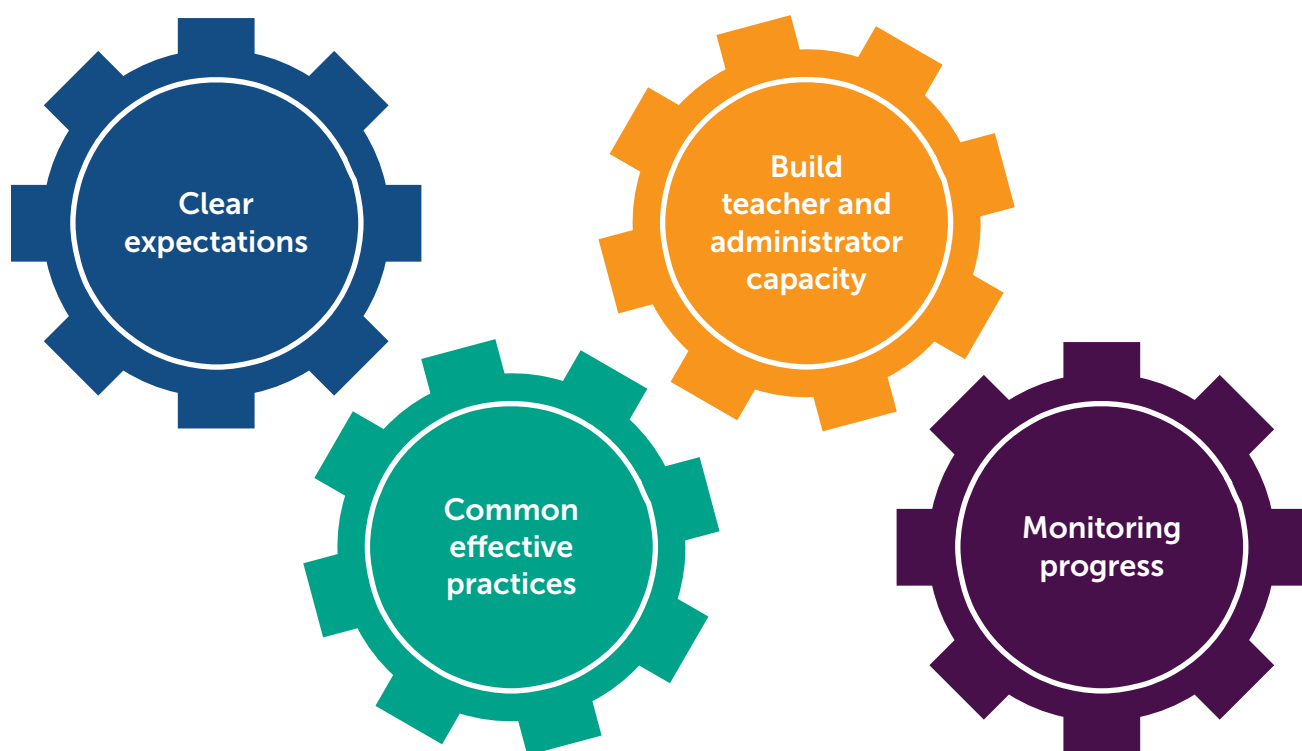
- identifying existing teacher professional development dates and collaboration time that could be used to support the work;
- identifying existing assessments, as well as who uses them and for what purpose, to figure out if there are existing gaps or redundancies in assessments;
- planning timelines in advance to ensure that they consider other important events and conflicting demands on educators' time; and
- monitoring the quantity and quality (depth and ownership) of implementation by the improvement team and those to whom the work is spread.

Ed Partners also provides direct instruction and support for districts in how to think about the system components they need to engage to scale reform.


The Four Fundamentals of Systemic Instructional Improvement

The second framework that Ed Partners has been elevating is based on research from Development and Research in Early Mathematics Education (DREME) at Stanford University, which has a project focused on preK–3 alignment. In 2022–23, Ed Partners began to develop new, shared language about what it means to be an education “system” capable of improving student outcomes in preK through third grade. Ed Partners has expanded that initial framework to be inclusive of its 8/9 On-Track work and systems for instructional improvement more broadly. Ed Partners’ Fundamentals name four critical components of a district system that all need to function in a coordinated way to improve teaching and learning (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Ed Partners’ Fundamentals for System Coherence and Impact



As Ed Partners districts engage in the work, they typically start by focusing on one of these Fundamentals, such as clear expectations for student learning (typically rooted in state standards and expectations of rigor) or high-leverage instructional practices (to help students meet and demonstrate their progress towards meeting the expectations). As teams delve into one or more research-based common effective practices, they encounter the need to revisit state standards more deeply to build a shared understanding and expectation of rigor and to grasp how their instructional materials do and do not support standards-aligned instruction. Because teachers are testing new practices, they need measures of student learning and teacher implementation to understand whether those practices are benefitting students,



which in turn requires thoughtful consideration of their assessment system and its strengths and weaknesses in supporting instruction and monitoring progress. When the teams scale new practices, they grapple with the importance of a system to build teacher and administrator capacity so that staff throughout the district develop the ownership and depth of understanding necessary to implement the common effective practices well. Collaborations may choose to start with any of the Fundamentals (though they have typically started with common vision and grade-level expectations or high-leverage pedagogical practices), but because these Fundamentals are interconnected in a high-functioning district, teams inevitably need to address all of them, and in the process they improve their district systems.

Districts entering collaborations typically vary in the extent to which one or more of these system components are underdeveloped. Ed Partners names the system components and, based on research and reflections about what has helped similar districts develop these capacities in the past, Ed Partners designs an approach to support districts in engaging in the Fundamentals in an integrated way. Ed Partners focuses the work on a specific problem of practice, which itself helps build district habits around narrowing the number of active initiatives to build system coherence and consistency. The two cases associated with this brief illustrate well how system efforts to improve student outcomes may start with a focus on one component but ultimately need to engage all four to improve the system of instruction and student outcomes. Ed Partners also believes that naming the Fundamentals and helping districts see how they are linked will make it easier for districts to internalize and replicate the approach to address other aspects where they want to improve outcomes.

As indicated earlier, there is some variation in the content included in each Fundamental across the two collaboration types—P3CC and 8/9 On-Track. For example, within the Fundamental focused on common effective practices, the P3CC collaboration focuses on effective mathematics teaching practices promoted by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics,⁸ while 8/9 On-Track centers discipline-neutral practices like equitable grading practices, feedback, and multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate learning. The “build teacher and administrator capacity” Fundamental contains largely the same content across both P3CC and 8/9 On-Track. The other two Fundamentals—clear expectations and monitoring progress—have some similarities but also have differences related to the focus of the collaboration (e.g., 8/9 collaborations monitor course placement in secondary schools and student grades, while P–3 collaborations monitor student progress in ways appropriate to those grades).

Ed Partners continues to refine how it presents these Fundamentals with the goal of greater alignment across its collaborations while also considering the differences that exist when serving students at two different points in their academic journey. This is especially important because of Ed Partners’ goal of supporting reform of district systems. With several districts sending teams to both P3CC and 8/9 On-Track collaborations, if their teams learn similar approaches to strengthening the Fundamentals, that could facilitate coherent shifts in the district from preschool through secondary school.



Lessons Learned

Ed Partners' collaborations aim to help districts identify and build on their systems' strengths to overcome their challenges. But this is not easy. While Ed Partners-led district networks have always been based on ideas around continuous improvement and have been well received by participating districts, districts have inconsistently made the types of gains that Ed Partners wants them to achieve. Looking across the 4 years of data that PACE has collected, we can draw lessons about Ed Partners' evolving approach from the results it has achieved in terms of improvements in district systems, teacher practices, and student outcomes. The first four lessons are about Ed Partners' approach and the factors that seem most important to promoting district success in its collaborations. The last three are about how district engagement either supports or hinders district progress in Ed Partners' collaborations.

The Ed Partners Approach

One root cause of the relatively stagnant student learning outcomes in California is that many districts face challenges in changing teacher practices systematically. Leadership turnover at both the district and the school level is high, leading to a constant churn of people and ideas. Often, minimal time is set aside in the contract for basic teacher professional learning. Additionally, opportunities for educators to collaborate vary, and some teacher contracts limit how schools or districts can oversee that collaboration. Moreover, teachers can be wary of administrators' new initiatives, sometimes for good reason, as administrators often promote more initiatives than can be effectively managed. In such situations, it makes sense for teachers to stick to what they are familiar with and believe works while waiting for the latest initiatives to pass. Without a way to introduce new knowledge and effective instructional strategies—and with little time for teachers to practice, reflect, and receive feedback on new approaches they try—it becomes difficult for districts to drive meaningful change. Over time, districts can become entrenched in the status quo, lacking the systems and processes to move forward. However, every system has strong educators and resources that can be mobilized for change.

According to many educators we interview, though, experiences with COEs and other technical assistance providers that their districts have hired in the past often fail to address their need for systems improvement. As educators describe their districts' typical practices, we hear a range of ineffective ways of engaging in professional development and technical assistance: (a) districts use short-term engagements with consultants who provide exposure to knowledge without support for implementation or integration into existing systems and processes; (b) districts send a few teachers to an outside training and hope they will spread what they learn; (c) there is a lack of coherence across related initiatives; and (d) districts engage external supports for superficial planning processes that are a compliance exercise rather than a means to genuine improvement. These types of experiences typically lead to superficial change or deeper change only for the few educators who engaged most intensely with the external support, or essentially no change at all. Ed Partners' approach is different in terms of both what it presents and how it works with districts to transfer what it teaches into practice.



The content that Ed Partners offers districts in its collaborations pairs (a) a small set of research-based ideas with (b) instruction on how districts can enhance their existing systems to scale reform.

When PACE first began studying Ed Partners' collaborations, Ed Partners offered districts substantial flexibility in what to work on and how to work on it. At the extreme, one team that was interested in improving eighth-grade on-track rates in a 3-year collaboration focused its efforts on third grade—even though those third graders would only be in sixth grade when the collaboration was scheduled to end. At that time, Ed Partners showed strong deference towards teams' beliefs about what they wanted to work on and how to accomplish collaboration goals. Over time, Ed Partners has come to provide much more guidance about which "change ideas" to work on—and which to avoid—typically presenting a small handful of options within a shared framework and a recommended sequence for testing those changes. While Ed Partners still greatly values districts' local context, it has come to believe that districts join the collaborations partially for Ed Partners' recommendations for how to improve. Ed Partners also finds that collaboration across districts can be more easily made productive when districts are working on similar changes.

Ed Partners now provides direct instruction on the Four Fundamentals and scale, along with activities that help teams examine how the Fundamentals currently exist in their systems, how the change ideas engage the Fundamentals, and how teams may need to expand or deepen district capacity around one or more of the Fundamentals to scale the change ideas in their systems. The combination of direct instruction on the Fundamentals and scale, along with the opportunities to investigate and engage in those ideas in their districts, provide the teams with a mix of theoretical and hands-on learning experiences in system improvement. The goal is to leave districts with both discrete knowledge and experiences engaging district systems to improve student outcomes so that they can apply lessons about systems for instructional improvement to other initiatives down the line.

Something Ed Partners no longer does may be one of the biggest departures from much of the technical assistance offered to districts in California. Ed Partners does not provide general instruction in common tools of continuous improvement, such as PDSA cycles or root cause analysis. While these ideas are common as part of approaches to continuous improvement, Ed Partners has come to believe that a focus on these tools can lead districts to prioritize continuous improvement tools over the experiential learning of testing and refining high-leverage practices within a district's particular context. Instead, Ed Partners articulates the straightforward logic of improvement described earlier in this brief, which builds the capacity of teachers and administrators to implement high-leverage practices while also developing the skills to modify or create district systems that support these practices at scale. Ed Partners supports district teams to build a culture conducive to learning from tests—including those that fail—and works with teams to use data to support improvement.



Ed Partners works with districts in a way that supports districts to fit new ideas into their existing systems, which builds local ownership of the reform.

Ed Partners often states that it does not have a “cookie-cutter approach.” Ed Partners provides districts with information and a set of ideas that have evidence from research and practice but does not tell districts where they need to start or exactly how they should implement ideas. Instead, Ed Partners provides opportunities for teams to engage the ideas in a structured way and supports teams to make decisions about what is most likely to work well in their own context.


The required cross-functional team is key to this process because it brings together staff representing the major groups required to implement the key changes to the table. Teachers, coaches, and school-site staff are needed to pilot high-leverage practices and adapt them to district context, while district and school administrators are needed to facilitate the creation of the policies, processes, and structures necessary to support implementation of these practices at scale. Within cross-functional teams, administrators get to hear teachers’ experiences as they test new approaches. Instructional staff get to tell administrators what support will be needed to make the changes effective for students and sustainable while gaining a clearer understanding of the district systems that are available to effect change.

As the process moves from team members’ pilot testing into structures and processes that administrators oversee, Ed Partners supports districts to scale strategically using two mechanisms: (a) bottom-up, by leveraging teachers’ peer-to-peer support and informal influence and (b) top-down, by tapping into school and district structures and processes to achieve consistent implementation. Ed Partners seeks to include key teacher leaders who have influence and those who have developed ownership over the piloted practices as well as administrators who have the positional authority to champion the initiative in each team so that when the team is ready to spread changes, it is well positioned to do so.

By requiring districts to choose their own path to scale improvement, Ed Partners interrupts the typical pattern of top-down initiatives that have low teacher buy-in and reduces the barriers for bottom-up improvement by creating a collaborative dialogue between actors from the classroom and the district cabinet. While teams describe Ed Partners’ collaborations as being distinct from more typical district experiences with sources of technical assistance or professional development, not all districts achieve the same results from their engagement with Ed Partners.

The 3-year timeline of collaborations balances urgency and stability.

Ed Partners’ collaborations have typically evolved into a 3-year set of work. This multiyear timeline is important for several reasons. One is the symbolism of the 3-year commitment, which makes clear that Ed Partners’ work will not be just the flavor of the year. Some districts do not get off to a very good start and need time to muddle through the team’s understanding of the work and address some basic challenges before they can move forward. (This was true of both districts profiled in the accompanying cases.) However, 3 years is not long enough to reach districtwide scale in most instances, which



creates a sense of urgency for teams to act quickly and experience progress towards scale before their partnership with Ed Partners ends. Three years is also necessary for districts to own the work of testing a few powerful ideas and to start engaging their systems to scale them.

Program managers provide thought partnership that helps teams transfer knowledge gained in convenings to their local context.

The program manager role is key to ensuring that the content provided by Ed Partners at convenings is adapted in a sustainable way to the existing district ecosystem rather than stacked as a new strand of improvement work. The role is designed to change over time: The program manager initially provides heavy support for team leads, designing and sometimes even facilitating team meetings, but gradually releases major responsibilities to the team lead. Because of their unique role as people who know a given district well and yet sit outside of it, program managers are positioned to help teams think outside their district's typical ways of doing things as they test and then scale new ideas. Program managers strategize with team leads about how to reach milestones, overcome challenges, maintain focus on specific high-leverage strategies, and use existing features of their system or culture to scale the work in their districts. Building a strong relationship and trust—with the team lead and the team as a whole—is consistently named by program managers as a key component of their role, so that they can engage teams in transparent conversations about what needs to be improved in their districts and candidly discuss progress or lack thereof throughout the 3-year partnership. Program managers can also provide insight from the work of other districts, can strategically connect districts with one another, and can help districts prioritize how to spread and to whom within the system. Sometimes, these inquiries suggest new opportunities that might need to be created within systems to support high-quality implementation of new instructional approaches.

District Progress

In 2024–25, Ed Partners is launching a new internal system to track district progress better and further refine its understanding of how it can best support districts. Until that system is operational, neither PACE nor Ed Partners will be able to concretely quantify tiers of progress and how many districts fall into each tier. Regardless, it is readily apparent that there is variation in what districts accomplish. The two companion briefs describe districts that made concrete changes to their systems and have at least local evidence of improved student outcomes. At the opposite end of the spectrum, some districts make minimal progress, including some that Ed Partners asks to pause participation until they are ready to recommit to the work. While this brief has largely focused on what Ed Partners can do to achieve its goals, our data make clear that because the work is driven by the districts themselves, the districts play a determining role in the extent of improvement they achieve. The final three takeaways focus on what districts accomplish.

Some districts make minimal progress towards scaling improvement during their 3-year collaboration.


We have seen examples of superintendents who recognize that their districts have a performance problem, sign their districts up for a collaboration, delegate leadership to a leader within the district, and then believe that Ed Partners will make their performance problem disappear. We have never seen such a district make meaningful progress because leaders cannot outsource improvement. There are many times that the work is led successfully by a senior district leader who is not the superintendent—a deputy superintendent, for example. But a superintendent demonstrating clear commitment to the success of the work is vital for signaling to district and school leaders and to teachers that the work is valued, ensuring the work has sufficient resources, and communicating that the work will last long enough to make it worthwhile for educators to change their practices. We have seen superintendents convey their commitment to the work in multiple ways, including by regularly checking in on it when they meet with the team lead, ensuring that the team has the resources (especially time) to do the work, sometimes coming to improvement team events, and giving the improvement team the opportunity to present on its progress to the School Board.

We have also seen Ed Partners engage with some districts that are currently facing more challenges than can be overcome in 3 years with the level of support that Ed Partners provides. Systems work to improve instruction involves getting the four fundamental components of instructional systems working coherently across multiple levels in a system: the district, its schools, and its teachers. If districts do not have sufficient coherence at the start of a collaboration or it is interrupted (e.g., there is significant leadership turnover), that lack of coherence will likely create barriers in norms and culture that inhibit improvement. Establishing the culture and norms to enable improvement takes time and limits the initial scope of impact a team can have as it builds buy-in and trust with peers across the system. This does not mean that such systems cannot improve, but the larger and more complex they are, the longer it will take. Three years of work with Ed Partners is not sufficient for some districts that have fewer initial system strengths to build on to scale an impactful set of changes, and in some instances, districts pause before rejoining Ed Partners when they can more meaningfully engage in the work.

Multilevel leadership and commitment at the classroom, school, and district levels are key to taking advantage of what Ed Partners offers.

Most districts that join a collaboration have engaged senior leaders and have system and cultural assets that give them the potential to make good progress in the 3 years of an Ed Partners collaboration. But achieving that end goal is not guaranteed. From the variation among those districts, we can learn more about how multiple levels of a district's hierarchy need to be engaged to scale improvement.

- Teacher leadership is a critical component of Ed Partners' approach. Teachers need to pilot changes, collect data, adapt the changes to their context, and recruit willing colleagues to try as well. But teachers cannot make system changes. They cannot authorize resource allocation to support the work (e.g., time to present their work at a staff meeting, changes in the use of




professional development or teacher collaborative time, purchase of instructional materials) or make the types of decisions necessary to hard wire changes into a system (e.g., deciding that a new approach is going to be mandatory).

- Principals need to be instructional leaders to make their schools conducive for instructional improvement. They run the system of a building. Our data show that, in districts that make the most progress, principals typically play a key role in ensuring that teacher collaboration time—staff meetings, professional development days, and shared planning time—is used to support instruction. Principals can also create some of the conditions to support teachers to share their practices with one another. And principals sometimes need to step in and have difficult conversations with teachers who are against change. But principals cannot make things improve beyond their own school sites—for that, district leadership needs to be engaged.
- Districts need to put a sustained focus on a given problem of practice to enable meaningful change. Substantial improvement requires sufficient time and resources. District leaders need to signal a long-term commitment early to create the informal incentive for teachers and school leaders to change their practice. Additionally, the resources and authority necessary to spread practice beyond one school require district engagement. For example, districts play a key role in setting the conditions that build adult capacity, such as identifying individuals with expertise (from within or outside), ensuring opportunities for teacher practice and feedback, and creating a culture where purposeful experimentation is safe and there are expectations for consistent adoption of district-tested effective practices. Districts may also need to adopt new instructional materials or assessments to support implementation as well as provide professional development for school leaders to build their capacity.

Teams that are successful in making system changes that improve student outcomes in an Ed Partners collaboration typically need leaders at all three levels working coherently to support progress and overcome challenges along the way.

Three years is not enough time to transform systems, especially in larger districts.

Ed Partners has chosen to have 3-year collaborations in recognition of the fact that 3 years is a long time for many districts, because that timeline creates a productive sense of urgency for teams, and because Ed Partners' goal is to build districts' capacity to improve, not to create a long-term dependency on Ed Partners' supports. In 3 years, Ed Partners aims to give districts new knowledge about evidence-based practices, a strong start in scaling them, and experience with sustainable approaches for system improvement. In a handful of districts, we have seen evidence of system change and positive trends in student outcomes, and the districts report that they have processes for applying what they have learned about system improvement to other areas of their systems. Several districts have joined multiple Ed Partners collaborations, providing their systems with a way to engage with Ed Partners over a longer period. In some cases, districts have progressed in one area (e.g., P3CC) and want support to kick-start improvement in another area (e.g., 8/9 On-Track). Some larger districts have engaged more than one



team in 8/9 On-Track work to try to improve two or more feeder patterns, with the goal of reaching a tipping point where their districts can spread progress independently. Regardless of why districts are pursuing a multiple-collaboration strategy, this is evidence of how valuable the districts find Ed Partners' supports to be as well as how challenging it is for California districts to sustain improvement given their current system capacity. As Ed Partners' approach evolves, it will be interesting to see if it is able to support districts in reaching a point where they can sustain their own improvement more quickly.

Conclusion

Ed Partners is engaged in the critical work of supporting California districts that have “local control” but insufficiently developed local capacity to improve. The ongoing research-practice collaboration between PACE and Ed Partners has been examining Ed Partners' approach and how districts engage in their collaborations. The work has shown that Ed Partners' approach to district collaboration—providing opportunities for districts to own their improvement work while Ed Partners provides scaffolding in the form of frameworks for understanding how to scale system reform, research-based ideas to push through a district system, and supports for districts to scale changes—has promise for building system capacity and improving student outcomes. But the success of these initiatives depends heavily on the engagement and commitment of district leadership at all levels, from the classroom to the school to the district office. Districts that achieve the most progress are those that not only embrace teachers' expertise and learning but also ensure that principals and district leaders work in unison to create the necessary system conditions for scaling improvement. However, the path to systemic change is complex, particularly for districts with significant initial challenges, and the timeline for seeing impactful results can extend beyond the 3-year collaboration period.

PACE has produced two accompanying case studies, which illustrate the different paths taken by two districts engaged in Ed Partners collaborations. Together, these cases provide rich examples of how districts have engaged in the work, illustrating both shared themes around promising aspects of the Ed Partners model and productive ways that districts can engage with it. The cases also highlight the variation in districts' approaches and reaffirm Ed Partners' belief that there is not a cookie-cutter approach to system improvement.

Endnotes

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