Improving the Instructional Core at Scale

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Executive Summary

This case study examines how one school district in California scaled a structured, data-driven approach to teacher collaboration to improve instruction and student outcomes districtwide. Over the last 8 years, Chino Valley Unified School District (CVUSD) has implemented the Professional Learning Community (PLC) at Work model across all schools in the district, strengthening teacher leadership, deepening teachers' use of student data to inform instruction, and fostering sustained collaboration among educators—all of which have contributed to notable gains in student achievement. The district's ability to scale the model was anchored by district leadership and their partnership with the teachers' union, which helped launch and sustain the district's focus on improving teaching and learning, despite disruptions due to COVID closures and contentious local school board politics. CVUSD applied Richard Elmore's framework for scaling good educational practice, which identifies four key district-level strategies for systemwide instructional improvement: (a) establishing a coherent framework of effective practice, (b) launching with an explicit scaling strategy, (c) strengthening organizational focus on improving teaching and learning, and (d) building opportunities and incentives for continuous improvement.

The district:

1. Articulated a shared vision of effective practice anchored in the three key norms for effective PLCs at Work: (a) a focus on student learning, (b) a culture of collaboration, and (c) a results-oriented approach. Educators routinely met in collaborative teams to establish goals for student learning, design assessments, analyze data, and adjust instruction.
2. Designed systems to scale improvements in student learning districtwide, focusing on creating coherent infrastructure. Providing scheduled time for collaboration, sustained coaching, and consistent leadership enabled reliable scaling of effective practices across the district's 37 schools, which serve more than 25,000 students.
3. Created the conditions to build capacity and motivate improvement, establishing structures, processes, and resources—such as institutes, guiding coalitions, and rubrics for collaboration—to foster peer learning and problem-solving districtwide. CVUSD invested in shared professional development and peer accountability to bring all educators into the work of continuous improvement.
4. Finally, CVUSD institutionalized processes for continuous systemwide learning and adaptation. Through feedback loops and shared data use, the district cultivated a culture of reflection and processes to reexamine its own priorities and strategies. New staff are onboarded with training in the PLC model, and ongoing professional learning is available to support distributed leadership across the system.

As California continues to prioritize learning recovery and equity, CVUSD's experience illustrates how districts can build coherent systems that strengthen teacher collaboration, enabling educators to work collectively to advance student learning.

Introduction

The *instructional core* is the dynamic and interdependent relationship between three essential classroom components: the teacher, the student, and the content (City et al., 2009). Meaningful improvements in learning occur only when changes are made to at least one of these components while simultaneously affecting the others. For example, teaching and learning improve when teachers adjust their instructional practices to engage students actively with rigorous content. In a single classroom, these targeted improvements can lead to meaningful gains in student outcomes. However, such progress remains isolated in pockets of excellence unless scaled systematically across multiple classrooms and schools.

In California, school districts are the primary drivers for scaling instructional practices to support the success of all students. The levers for change in a California district—the district's mission, strategic goals, resource prioritization, curricula, instructional materials, assessment practices, and professional development—are defined and approved at the local level. Districts play an essential role in empowering the instructional core by establishing the structures necessary to support instructional improvement while encouraging contextual adaptations within clear, well-defined boundaries.

This report presents a research-based framework for scaling improvements to the instructional core that impact student achievement. We use one school district's approach as a lens for examining how to adapt models focused on improving teaching and learning within individual schools to support instructional reform on a broader scale.

Framework for Getting to Scale With Good Practice

To expand advancements in instructional practice from isolated pockets of excellence to widespread improvements, districts must realign their systems to support instructional change. In "Getting to Scale With Good Educational Practice," Elmore (1996) states that while instructional reforms are common, lasting improvements are rare because efforts to implement ambitious school reforms tend to rely on the intrinsic motivation of a small subset of highly committed teachers while alienating the majority who find such changes daunting:

> [Reform strategies] rely on the intrinsic motivation of individuals with particular values and competencies—and a particular orientation toward the outside world—to develop and implement reforms in schools. ... The problem of incentives is that these individuals are typically a small proportion of the total population of teachers. The demands required by this kind of ambitious, challenging, and time-consuming work seems at best formidable, and at worst hopelessly demanding. (p. 16)

Elmore's examination of the history of education reform highlights a recurring failure to account for how educators will develop the knowledge and skills to implement reforms as well as a failure to account for educators' incentives to engage in the difficult work of learning a new approach to their work. This disconnect, according to Elmore, leads to indifference or resistance among most teachers in the absence of aligned supports and conditions that enable deep instructional change.

Elmore also noted two related problems in how districts approach reform that impede change. First, education-reform efforts often focus on *implementation*—the process of putting a predesigned program or policy into practice—and assume that educators and institutions have the requisite knowledge and ability to execute the reforms effectively. As Elmore (2016) points out, "'implementation' is something you do when you already know what to do. 'Learning' is something you do when you don't yet know what to do." Without learning, even well-intentioned reforms risk being applied in a mechanical manner, losing their transformative potential. Too often, well-intentioned educators take on many initiatives but don't know why or how those practices will address the gaps in teaching and learning.

Structural limitations of school and district systems further exacerbate this issue. Current system structures often isolate educators from one another, limiting opportunities for collaboration and shared learning. Pockets of excellence rarely expand or sustain impact systemwide because the broader system is not designed to facilitate such spread. Furthermore, district professional learning frequently fails to incentivize iterative learning and improvement but rather opts for one-and-done training, expecting teachers to implement strategies in isolation. To scale instructional improvements, reforms must both foster conditions where the broader teaching force can engage in sustained, collective learning and address systemic barriers to scale. Without restructuring the system to promote collaboration, alignment, and shared ownership of reform goals, efforts are likely to perpetuate cycles of failure to scale.

Elmore (1996)—based on his analysis of large-scale reform attempts of the past—identified four strategies to address barriers and achieve instructional improvement at scale. This report will apply Elmore's strategies as a lens to analyze an instructional reform that has achieved scale in one school district in California.

The following is a summary of Elmore's four strategies:

- **Establish a coherent framework of effective teaching and learning practices.**
  "Strong external normative structures for practice" are critical to institutionalize the idea that good practice is defined by shared conceptions of good practice across the entire district, not just by individual teachers', grade levels', or schools' inward values and competencies. It is often beneficial for districts to center efforts on normative frameworks as defined in research or already proven in other educational settings and then support practitioners in adapting those practices to their individual contexts.

These frameworks allow a district to articulate the expectations of what is being taught and delineate what high-quality instruction looks like. Examples of normative structures for practice that should be aligned to a district's coherent framework could include formalized districtwide standards for instruction, vertically aligned content standards, high-quality instructional materials, professional development practices, accountability mechanisms, and district operations.

- **Have an explicit scaling strategy from the start.** According to Elmore, "one of the major lessons from past large-scale reforms is their astounding naiveté about how to get their successes to move from one setting to another." Rather than assuming that changes in practice will spread across the district by diffusion based on the enthusiasm of a superintendent and a few exemplar teachers, districts should design and execute deliberate, structured processes to replicate and expand successful teaching and learning practices, taking into account the practical and institutional complexities that changes in practice must overcome. It is the role of the district to create intentional systems that reproduce success across the schools they serve.

- **Develop systems that intensify and focus motivation to engage in improving practice.** Organizational structures, processes, and policies should be intentionally designed to focus and intensify motivation for improving teaching and learning, ensuring that all staff—regardless of their level of confidence or beliefs—are meaningfully engaged in the process. These systems must create collaborative spaces, such as grade-level professional learning communities, instructional leadership meetings, and principal trainings, that promote the examination of teaching practices and their impact on student outcomes. To avoid isolating "true believers" from the skeptical or hesitant, these groups should be organized around common problems of practice, emphasize face-to-face interactions, and ensure that all members can influence and support one another's instructional improvement. Leaders must further support these efforts by providing the necessary resources—protected time, structured agendas, relevant research, and appropriate data—that make collaboration consistent, effective, and centered on building shared trust, alignment, and collective responsibility for improving the instructional core. Furthermore, these systems must be aligned to ensure sustained focus on the instructional core, allowing practitioners to focus deeply on fewer goals rather than having to change priorities frequently.

- **Promote opportunities and incentives for continuous improvement systemwide.** District systems should be designed to support educators' learning and collaboration as well as system-level learning around the district's established framework for effective teaching and learning. By providing resources, aligning incentives, and incorporating feedback loops, districts can foster continuous improvement and ensure alignment between classroom practices and district goals. These structures should include processes for initiating educators who are new to the district and should create a culture of innovation. They should align incentive systems to support shared learning and the spread of improvement ideas, driving effective teaching and learning at

all levels of the districts. By integrating feedback loops, these systems incentivize practitioners to contribute valuable insights directly to system leaders, strengthening alignment between classroom practice and district or school priorities. This orientation positions the district as a dynamic learning organization that is itself capable of responding, learning, and evolving.

CVUSD's Journey to Scaling Instructional Improvement

This brief will apply Elmore's strategy for scaling reforms to examining the path that Chino Valley Unified School District (CVUSD) took to implement an instructional reform at scale across its 37 school sites that serve more than 25,000 students. Elmore's framework emphasizes the importance of aligning organizational structures, professional expectations, collaborative teams, and systems for continuous improvement to foster widespread adoption of new practices. Even though CVUSD did not explicitly apply Elmore's scaling strategies to its reforms, this report will analyze how the district's approach to reform reflected each of these strategies in practice. Using CVUSD as a case study, the report will explore how the district leveraged structural changes to achieve coherence and consistency in instructional improvements. This analysis aims to provide practical insights for other districts seeking to scale—effectively and equitably—instructional reforms with evidence of impact across diverse school settings.

CVUSD adopted the Professional Learning Community (PLC) at Work model as its districtwide strategy for improving teaching and learning. This model focuses on collaborative educator teams working interdependently to improve student learning. By establishing structures within which educators routinely engage in cycles of setting goals for student learning, data-driven decision-making, and continuous reflection and adjustments to practice, the model fosters collective responsibility for student success and ongoing professional growth.

CVUSD's sustained focus over 8 years on building the infrastructure necessary for continuous improvement of teaching and learning via PLC at Work has resulted in measurable improvements in teaching and learning—even during the COVID-19 closures—and designation as a PLC at Work model district (Solution Tree, 2024).[1] The district's first attempt to implement the PLC at Work model in 2007 "failed"—in the district's own words—to make the systemic changes required for success. A strategic relaunch in 2017–18, in partnership with the leadership of the teachers' union, enabled CVUSD to plan and develop the coherent systems needed to support districtwide instructional improvements, which have led to sustained academic growth that persisted even throughout the COVID-19 closures.

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[1] The only other district to receive this recognition in California was Sanger Unified School District in 2012.

Methods

The data in this report build on the findings of the Year 1 report on the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) Intensive Assistance Model pilot (Cottingham et al., 2023) with the aim of better understanding the district's role in accelerating the improvement of teaching and learning in California. The findings in this report are informed by:

- 12 interviews with five district office staff (one staff member was interviewed twice) and six school site administrators in CVUSD;
- one day at the district office observing principals-only training;
- one day each at an elementary and a high school site observing two guiding-coalition meetings, two grade-level PLCs, and 12 classrooms; and
- six interviews with Solution Tree associates and three CCEE coaches.

All data collection occurred from March through August of 2024.

Since the relaunch of effective PLCs during the 2017–18 school year, CVUSD's overall outcomes for students in English language arts (ELA) and math have outpaced growth in the state overall and in San Bernardino County, where the district is located. Over the 8 years of implementation, student performance in CVUSD increased by 3.87 percent in ELA and 3.62 percent in math while performance at the state and county levels fell during the same period (California Department of Education, 2024). CVUSD was able to maintain proficiency in ELA and math during the COVID-19 pandemic, in contrast to the drops in many districts across the state (Domingue et al., 2021; Hough & Chavez, 2024; Pier et al., 2021), and the district resumed its growth trajectory once students returned to in-person schooling.

CVUSD serves a student population (Table 1) that is more affluent and has fewer English learners than California or San Bernardino County overall, but the district has been able to reduce the gap in academic performance between its socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) and non-SED students.

Table 1. CVUSD Demographic Data Compared to California and San Bernardino County[2]

		Percentage of students		
		California [a]	San Bernardino County [b]	Chino Valley Unified School District [c]
Student group	English learners	18.4	15.7	10.2
	Socioeconomically disadvantaged	62.7	72.5	51.2
	Students with disabilities	13.7	14.0	12.4
Race/ethnicity	Asian	9.9	4.3	21.1
	Black	4.9	7.6	4.4
	Filipino	2.2	1.3	4.8
	Latino	56.1	68.6	54.9
	White	20.3	13.8	11.0

Sources. [a] Data from *State of California: State performance overview,* California Department of Education, 2023–24, caschooldashboard.org/reports/00000000000000/2024; [b] data from *County summary: San Bernardino County*, Education Data Partnership, 2023–24, ed-data.org/county/san-bernardino; [c] data from *District summary: Chino Valley Unified,* Education Data Partnership, 2023–24, ed-data.org/district/San-Bernardino/Chino-Valley-Unified

These increases can be seen across most subgroups and classifications (See the table in the Appendix for further data). CVUSD's instructional systems have helped SED students improve in ELA and math at a faster rate than their non-SED peers—5.96 percent and 4.47 percent respectively over the 8 years—and they have outpaced state and county improvement rates (Table 2).

[2] This table presents race/ethnicity data for student groups that make up more than 4 percent of CVUSD's total enrollment, which doesn't include Native American students (0.1 percent), Pacific Islander students (0.3 percent), and students of two or more races/ethnicities (3.2 percent).

Table 2. ELA and Math Scores on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), 2016–17 and 2023–24

		ELA scores			Math scores		
		2016–17	**2023–24**	**Change**	**2016–17**	**2023–24**	**Change**
All students	California	48.56	47.03	−1.53	37.56	35.54	−2.02
	SBC	41.70	40.46	−1.24	28.55	27.20	−1.35
	CVUSD	56.77	60.64	**3.87**	45.02	48.64	**3.62**
Non-SED students	California	68.41	66.13	−2.28	57.35	55.24	−2.11
	SBC	61.34	57.68	−3.66	46.31	44.06	−2.25
	CVUSD	71.39	73.33	**1.94**	60.14	63.14	**3.00**
SED students	California	35.52	36.81	1.29	24.57	24.98	0.41
	SBC	34.43	34.32	−0.11	21.63	21.16	−0.47
	CVUSD	43.38	49.34	**5.96**	31.15	35.62	**4.47**

Note. CVUSD = Chino Valley Unified School District; SBC = San Bernardino County; SED = socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Source. Test results at a glance: State of California, CAASPP and English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC), California Department of Education, 2024, caaspp-elpac.ets.org/caaspp/CompareReportSB?ps=true&lstTestYear=2024&lstTestType= B&lstGrade=13&lstGroup=1&lstSchoolType=A&lstCds1=00000000000000&lstCds2=36000000000000&lstCds3= 36676780000000&lstNav=srch&lstFocus=a

Delving into the data on SED students more deeply reveals that most student ethnic groups have improved their scores across both ELA and math, with the exceptions being the Asian SED population (a decline of 0.46 in ELA, which sits at 76 percent proficiency, well above the rates for the state and San Bernardino County as a whole) and the Black SED population (which declined over this time compared to their peers at the district, county, and state levels). Performance of students with disabilities and English learners have also improved in the district in both ELA and math. The growth has been gradual yet consistent, showing incremental improvement for each year of the implementation.

In the following sections, we examine the systems behind CVUSD's success through Elmore's research-based lens on how education reforms are effectively scaled; this provides actionable insights for other districts aiming to scale proven models for improving teaching and learning. By detailing the specific actions that the district took under each strategy, we will demonstrate how CVUSD created the necessary structural shifts to spur and sustain widespread instructional improvement.

Establish a Coherent Framework of Effective Teaching and Learning Practices

A foundational component for scaling instructional improvement is a coherent framework of norms that establish effective teaching and learning practices across the district. As Elmore (1996) states, education systems must "develop strong external normative structures for practice" so that expectations for high-quality teaching and learning practice do not depend on subjective opinion and are based on "formal statements of good practice." This means that to scale instructional improvement across a school district successfully, there needs to be a clear and shared understanding of what effective practice looks like.

For CVUSD, this meant establishing shared expectations for good practice to which all the district's instructional goals, resources, and practices across all school sites were aligned. In CVUSD, *good practice* is defined as a set collaborative and reflective processes in which educators, working together, use evidence of student learning to continually improve their instruction. This commitment to ongoing reflection and refinement is embedded in the district's structures and professional learning communities, enabling educators to learn from data and from one another to advance the quality of instruction together. Specifically, the PLC at Work model provided the foundational set of norms around which CVUSD built structures to focus improvement.

The three key norms for effective PLCs at Work are (a) a focus on student learning, (b) a culture of collaboration, and (c) a results-oriented approach (DuFour et al., 2024). These three norms are enacted in a school via two groupings of educators.

- **Professional learning communities:** structured groups of educators who collaborate regularly to analyze student data, share best practices, and align their teaching strategies to improve student outcomes and enhance instructional effectiveness.
- **Guiding coalition:** a group of school-site staff (e.g., school leadership, departments, and/or grade-level teams) who come together regularly to identify key standards, develop unit plans and common formative assessments, examine student outcomes, share instructional strategies, and identify students in need of intervention.

The work of these two groups enables schools to build the structures and processes needed to improve results for students. Central to this work is a shared framework that guides collaboration and decision-making. The focus of each meeting of the PLCs and the guiding coalition is on answering four questions that examine the systems a school has for improving teaching and learning:

- What do we want students to learn?
- How will we know if they have learned it?
- How will we respond if learning has not occurred?
- How will we respond if learning has already occurred?

These four guiding questions serve as the foundational anchor for every meeting, ensuring that collaboration remains focused, intentional, and rooted in student learning. By consistently returning to these questions, teams establish a shared, normative process that guides their collective work and improvement efforts. This structured approach ensures that collaboration remains focused on student learning and supports continuous, meaningful instructional improvement.[3]

To move from isolated school-level practices to systemwide improvement, however, district-level support is essential. As Elmore (2016) identified, scaling norms coherently across the district requires intentional leadership and infrastructure to establish these practices across schools. The district centered its work to improve teaching and learning on the norms for adult collaboration as defined by the PLC at Work model, which were then codified into the district's memorandum of understanding (MOU). This established clear expectations for implementation that supported alignment across traditionally siloed district departments. The district established and has protected the norms over many years, helping teachers and site leaders focus on a small number of high-leverage priorities.

Crucially, this systemwide coherence was not driven by the district alone. It was catalyzed by a powerful partnership with the teachers' union. The district office worked closely with the union to identify and codify the normative practices that would guide the work of the district going forward. The union leadership initially recognized and raised the need for more structured, collaborative practices, such as PLCs, as essential for improving teaching and learning in CVUSD. Their proactive stance sparked a partnership of mutual interest between the union and district leadership and was a critical first step for the district's efforts to improve the instructional core across the district. Without the initial support from the union, it would have been difficult for the district to enact the PLC framework consistently; uptake of these structures would likely have remained isolated in individual schools as it was during the first iteration. The combination of union and district leadership supporting the work helped the framework to be adopted consistently across schools. See Table 3 for an example of specific district office actions that created the framework for teaching and learning that was then shared with schools.

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[3] This report focuses on the PLC at Work model because the district and union leadership in CVUSD selected this model as the set of normative structures around which they structured their improvement efforts. However, the actions that CVUSD took to build a coherent framework for teaching and learning illustrate an approach that districts can apply to other normative structures for practice (e.g., the National Council of Teacher of Mathematics standards, California Standards for the Teaching Profession, or PLC at Work collaborative team actions). In this section, we highlight the actions taken by CVUSD to enable districtwide engagement with this model. For more information about what the PLC at Work structures look like in California districts, see Cottingham et al., 2023.

Table 3. District Office Actions to Establish a Framework for Teaching and Learning

To establish a coherent framework of effective teaching and learning practices …	
District office actions enabled →	**Schools to:**

1. **Develop aligned expectations with input from district and union leadership, site administrators, and teachers**
    a. How: side-by-side trainings (PLC at Work conference) and leveraging the existing Teaching and Learning Task Force to define aligned expectations with teachers
    b. Which produced: district priorities and expectations for adult collaborative actions to support the PLC at Work model that were codified into the district's MOU
	1. **Understand clear expectations of what high-quality teaching and learning looks like in the district**

There were four main steps in CVUSD's initial work to establish a coherent framework for teaching and learning districtwide.

The union and district leadership identified the inconsistent use of PLC time as a shared pain point. The district's initial attempt to implement the PLC at Work model in 2007 revealed significant challenges that prevented the model from achieving its intended impact. While schools were provided with weekly time for teacher collaboration, responsibilities and expectations for implementing the model were unclear and poorly understood, and they varied widely across sites. The inconsistent implementation of the PLC model created confusion and frustration among teachers since expectations differed depending on the school. A district leader recalled:

> *Teachers were frustrated. One principal at this school was doing PLC work, and this principal over here was like, "Oh, no, that's just a district thing, we don't do that here." … So teachers were complaining, "Hold it, how come that school doesn't have to do anything, but over here, I have to do this PLC? I want that free time!" That's really what it came down to.*

This inconsistency led to friction among both schools and administrators, teachers, and the district office, culminating in a call from the teachers' union to establish clear, districtwide expectations for professional learning time. The district office also recognized its own organizational shortcomings, particularly the passive stance it took in the first attempt that failed to foster the coherence and alignment needed to improve teaching and learning across all schools. The push from the teachers' union coupled with a more active district role addressing the problem of inconsistent PLC time set the stage for the successful reboot, as the current superintendent shared:

> *The union was saying, "Hey, we need to have consistency, because our members are complaining to us about why is it different in every school?" And so we took that … as an opportunity, let's use that to reboot this. That's when we said*

… we can't do what we did last time. The district has to take ownership of this process, and so that's why we ended up taking the ownership, because I don't necessarily know if we would have gotten there if [the union] didn't come to us.

In response, district and union leadership collaborated to address the undesirable variation that staff were experiencing from site to site. Together, they began a process to establish a shared vision for how the PLC at Work model could be adopted into the district's priorities while respecting site-specific contexts. Adjusting course the second time around, district and union leadership took a year to prepare before relaunching the model with all district staff in 2018–19.

Leaders in district administration and the teachers' union both saw value in the PLC at Work model for supporting much-needed alignment across schools in the district. The union valued the model for empowering teachers to make instructional decisions that best supported their students while preserving professional autonomy. One labor leader described the value that the union saw in advocating for aligned implementation of the model:

We have value in moving this process forward because again, at the end of the day, it's making your profession better. … Even if we don't agree with the district, our job is still to be educating these students and doing what's best for them, right? And there's value in that PLC process as an educator, right? … To be honest … after the initial grunt work, you've got some of your CFAs [common formative assessments] … you've done your success criteria … you built these interventions, and you've built these enrichments, and you know now you're tweaking [a] little bit here [and] there, but the heavy lifting … that's in the beginning—once you get past that, it should be making things a little bit easier as an educator. So there's value in that, even if we're not agreeing with the district on other things.

Reflecting a similar sentiment, the superintendent emphasized his deep belief in the PLC model as a driver of equity and high-quality instruction for all students and his commitment to supporting all teachers to engage in the PLC model to ensure student success:

I'm here to support good learning for kids because that's what we go into education for—it's for our kids. And we want all of them to be successful. … I truly believe this is the right work to do. This does impact kids. It's the equalizer for me. You know, if all of our teachers would do this and do it at high levels, all kids would learn at high levels.

Labor's and management's shared belief in the PLC at Work model to improve student learning created a strong foundation for meaningful collaboration between them. A group of district cabinet and union leadership traveled to a PLC at Work conference in another state to align their expectations with one another before planning the relaunch. The team attended

all the same sessions and debriefed the conference each day over dinner, building a working relationship for how to put the model into practice. The convening clarified that the leadership group wanted to pursue the model in CVUSD more broadly across the district, and they determined that they needed to secure additional resources to take on the work effectively. The challenge for the district and union leadership was how to take a model that was designed for individual schools and adapt it to align teaching and learning practices across an entire district.

The leadership group determined that the existing Teaching and Learning Task Force (hereafter the Task Force) would be charged with setting shared expectations for the improvement of teaching and learning in the district. The district's Task Force was a preexisting group composed predominantly of teachers who worked closely with the superintendent to set and evaluate the instructional direction of the district. The Task Force comprised teacher leaders and one administrator from each school level (elementary, middle, and high school), including members of the leadership group who had attended the PLC at Work conference. With representation from teachers, admin, and district leadership, the Task Force was an ideal space to initiate planning for the rollout of the PLC at Work model.

Initially, the Task Force struggled to identify a manageable plan for improving teaching and learning. It slowly whittled the options down to three overarching district priorities that would guide all district actions: (a) implementing the PLC at Work model, (b) teaching to district essential standards, and (c) fostering student engagement with learning. The Task Force then worked to codify a set of expectations that would define what high-quality adult collaborative spaces, or PLCs, would look like. The expectations for high-quality PLCs were refined from existing literature of the PLC at Work model to serve as the external normative standards to which the district would adapt teaching and learning practices.

Leveraging the Task Force to set the direction of the PLC work was a critical step towards improving teaching and learning at scale in two ways. First, because the Task Force was made up predominantly of teachers, it elevated teachers' voices and expertise to a decision-making role, not just a classroom-level one. Aligning the voices of teacher, site, district, and union leaders gave credibility to the expectations that had been set with their respective groups across the district. Second, the Task Force drew from research on effective PLCs to refine its expectations for high-quality adult collaborative time and established these expectations as standards to help schools and PLCs assess and strengthen their collaborative and instructional practices.

The district and union codified a set of ten expectations in the MOU for adult collaborative time that would apply to district-, school-, grade-, and subject-level PLC meetings. Through the Task Force, the district established the collaborative team actions expected in all PLCs, colloquially referred to as the "yellow sheet" (see Figure 1). The yellow sheet defines ten agreements for PLCs in CVUSD.

Figure 1. CVUSD's Collaborative Team Actions in a PLC at Work District

Collaborative Team Actions SIMPLIFIED in a PLC at Work A.K.A. "Yellow Sheet" Tight School Year Areas in Bold (2024-2025)	PLC #1 What do we want all students to learn?	PLC #2 How do we know if the students are learning it?	PLC #3 What will we do if the students are not learning it?	PLC #4 What will we do when the students learn it?
Develop team norms that are beyond general professional courtesies				
Write a SMART goal and routinely monitor progress toward meeting it				
Deconstruct the 10-12 essential standards into learning targets				
BEFORE INSTRUCTION OF THE UNIT				
1. Identify and calibrate the team's understanding of the essential standards that correspond with the upcoming unit • What students must know and be able to do to be proficient with the essential standards (success criteria) • The student friendly, "I can" statements for the essential standards	X			
2. Determine which essential standard(s)/learning targets require a common formative assessment (CFA) during the unit for student and team feedback. Create CFA(s) [2 versions] with administration and scoring agreements	X	X		
3. Create end of unit assessment		X		
4. Tentatively plan for the number of days allocated for teaching the unit	X			
DURING INSTRUCTION OF THE UNIT				
5. Clarify for students the essential standards; have students reflect on their learning	X	X		
6. Analyze CFA data using a data protocol, by student and learning target		X		
7. Identify a team plan to address the results of the CFA			X	X
8. Collectively respond with intervention and extension for the learning target(s) with Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction			X	X
AFTER THE INSTRUCTION				
9. Analyze end of unit assessment and determine next steps for Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction		X	X	X
10. Have students reflect and set continued learning goals	X	X		

The adult collaborative actions are also mapped to indicate which of the PLC at Work questions they help answer, integrating the district's specific expectations with the framework it had chosen to center its practices on for improving teaching and learning. Cocreating the shared expectations for teaching and learning enabled the district and union to "buffer" best practices for instruction from other disputes as they arose. One union leader articulated this:

It's having a clear understanding of what that PLC process is … to say, "Hey, how does this align with this yellow sheet?" How does it align with the four questions that we want to focus on? … The other stuff is … noise. Let's focus on that. And if you're focusing on that, you're good.

These codified adult actions and responsibilities defined the sandbox in which school staff would work to improve the instructional core and clarified expectations for schools. Next, the district needed to provide the resources—time, funding, external expertise, and adult capacity-building opportunities for schools to fulfill these expectations.

Have an Explicit Scaling Strategy From the Start

Building on the foundation established through the PLC at Work model, the district recognized that sustaining and spreading effective practices required more than isolated implementation; it demanded a coherent, intentional approach to systemwide scale. This section explores how CVUSD's deliberate scaling strategy enabled the district to overcome systemic and practical challenges, ensuring that effective instructional practices could be successfully adapted and expanded throughout the district.

Scaling instructional reforms districtwide requires more than enthusiasm or even pockets of demonstrated success in individual schools—it demands a deliberate and well-designed strategy from the outset. CVUSD learned this lesson firsthand, pivoting from an initial uneven implementation of the PLC at Work model to a strategic, coordinated relaunch that prioritized alignment across all 37 school sites. By taking the time to establish clear expectations, forge a mutually beneficial partnership with the teachers' union, secure necessary resources, and prepare educators and leaders, CVUSD laid the groundwork for sustainable improvement. See Table 4 for examples of the district office's actions that positioned it to drive and support scaling of the model across the district more effectively.

Table 4. District Office Actions to Drive and Support Scaling

To start with an explicit scaling strategy …	
District office actions enabled →	**Schools to:**

1. Plan initial exposure to all district staff
  a. How: trained all 1,700 staff with Solution Tree in a district-specific convening
  b. Which produced: initial exposure for all instructional and school staff
2. Secure resources to support the work—time, money, staff, and capacity
  a. How: reorganized the district office to support the work that schools and staff would be taking on under one decision maker so that district decision-making could better respond to overall needs by streamlining spending, identifying the time needed to support the work, and identifying and mobilizing the staff needed
  b. Which produced: established time for district support of the work, aligned spending, and coordinated capacity-building efforts with a clear district vision
	1. Participate in initial training and exposure to the selected improvement model
	2. Establish school guiding coalitions
	3. Establish mission, vision, values, and norms aligned to those set for the overall district

Union and district leadership took three actions to develop the initial strategy for scaling their selected framework for teaching and learning.

The union agreed to formalize shared expectations for PLCs only if all 1,700 instructional staff had the opportunity to learn the model in a convening format before it was implemented at each school site. Union leadership supported the PLC at Work model because they saw it as a model that advanced the "professionalization" of teachers and honored their expertise and knowledge of how to best support student learning. The model created structures that promoted learning new practices and provided an avenue for consistent experiences for teachers and students across schools. It also created systems that supported all instructors in improving their craft and clearly defined what high-quality instruction looked like. However, the union noted that an issue with the initial rollout of the high-quality PLC focus 10 years earlier was that training and engagement with the model were left up to willing adopters. Some principals took advantage of district resources to train large portions of their staff while other sites focused on other instructional supports, leading to a mixed bag of implementation quality and teacher experience across the district. The union made clear that if the district was going to restart, then all 1,700 teachers would need to be trained together. Initially, the district office tried to settle on smaller trainings, but the union emphasized the need for everyone to hear the same message, which resonated with district leadership.

The district office worked with its technical assistance provider to shape the message that all staff would hear and aligned that message with established district expectations. The district partnered with Solution Tree associates for the initial training and limited the number of presenters to reduce variation in the presentations that staff experienced. This was done to ensure that the trainers emphasized the same key takeaways from the model and tightly aligned it to the district's vision. This initial exposure to high-quality PLCs demonstrated several tenets of how the district engaged with technical assistance partners in later years. First, all staff had to be exposed to experts and research-based knowledge if they were expected to put the shared expectations into practice. (Currently, all new staff receive a similar introduction to PLC training before beginning work in CVUSD that is then followed by a sequence of trainings during their first year, deepening their understanding of the process.) Second, the district—not the technical assistance provider—defines the goal of the training and the key takeaways that the external partner is helping them to achieve. Technical assistance providers have expertise in their support areas, but district input is needed to frame those supports around the established vision, priorities, and context. CVUSD's role is to integrate resources that support the vision and priorities established by the Task Force, which includes district, teacher, admin, and union voices. Finally, the district office has a plan for how to internalize the capacities being shared by the technical assistance provider so that it can create intentional processes to reproduce success and sustain improvements once the technical assistance provider leaves. Throughout this case study, the district office engaged with all external partners in this way and structured its own capacity-building activities to ensure the same tightly framed transfer of knowledge and skills to staff in each school.

The district office reconfigured its departmental organization so that it could more nimbly mobilize the resources necessary to initiate and scale the work. Many districts operate in a departmental structure that has the advantage of allowing specialization (e.g., business, curricular, and technological expertise), but this structure can also create silos, making it challenging to align efforts across departments. To ensure that the PLC model took root and endured, the district needed to invest in a systems-level role or team charged with coordinating district resources strategically, ensuring that resources were deployed effectively to respond to emerging needs and supporting the PLC model from launch through full implementation and long-term sustainability. From the first attempt at implementing this work, the district had identified several disconnects across departmental functions that hindered coherence and alignment. Dr. Norm Enfield—the current superintendent, who at the time of the relaunch was the director of human resources—suggested an organizational shift to bring formerly independent departments into alignment under his title of deputy superintendent:

> And I said, if you can make me deputy superintendent, and I'm in charge of business, I'm in charge of maintenance and operations. I'm in charge of curriculum, and I'm in charge of HR. I said that would really help me out, because I don't have the time to convince the assistant superintendent of business I need money. I need to say, "I need money" … I don't have the time to say to the assistant superintendent of facilities, "Can you provide me with this facility?" I need to be able to direct them to provide the resources to make things happen within the system to support student learning. I need to be in charge and be able to just make it happen, because we got a lot of work to do, and so that helped me as a deputy superintendent.

To enact the shared vision and expectations that district leadership created with the teachers' union and Task Force, the then superintendent elevated Dr. Enfield to deputy superintendent, charging him with department alignment. In this role, Dr. Enfield oversaw the curriculum and instruction, business, human resources, facilities, operations, and maintenance departments under a single leadership structure. When he later became superintendent, he elevated Grace Park to role of deputy superintendent; she has since been a key force in leading and sustaining PLCs across CVUSD.

This meant that all resources were aligned and readily available for use to meet the needs of the expectations set forth and codified in the MOU, and the new deputy superintendent did not need to get the approval of multiple associate superintendents to mobilize necessary resources to support the work established by the Task Force. For example, if the Task Force determined that a new set of meetings was needed to support principals in implementation, the deputy superintendent could immediately secure facilities for training through the facilities director, funds to conduct the training through the business department, and coaches to facilitate the training through curriculum and instruction because they all reported directly to him. It also meant that all calendars were aligned across departments that may have traditionally operated in
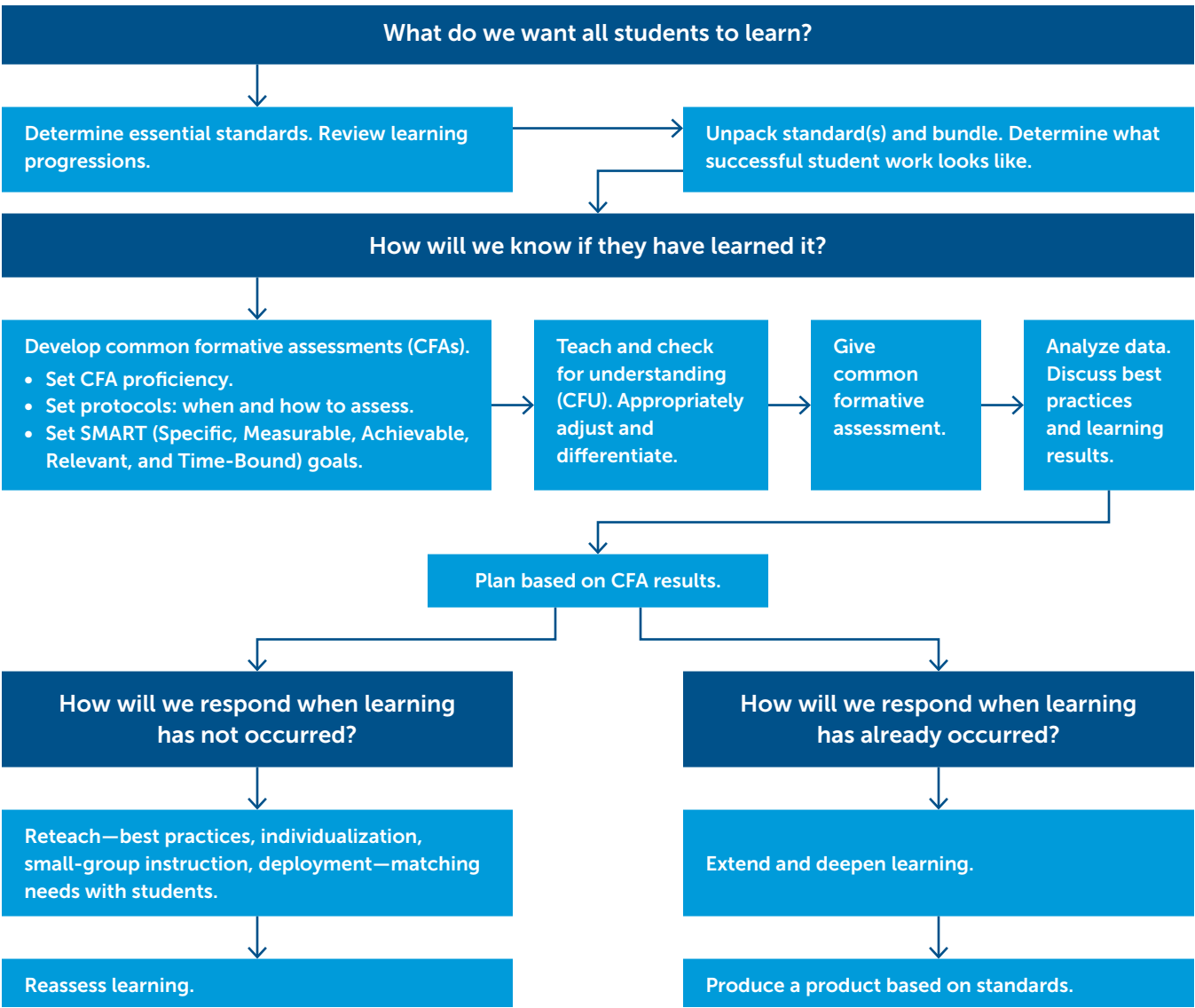
isolation from one another. For example, once data were available from assessments, they were already accessible to those leading professional development who knew when and where the professional development could take place—facilities—and substitutes could be secured for all staff who needed to attend. This coherence across departmental operations enabled the district to act quickly to respond to school needs and align resources with the district vision as opposed to the tedious process of securing district approval from multiple independent departments. The reorganization also signaled that the work of all these departments was intended to be aligned around the district priorities of highly functioning PLCs to improve teaching and learning.

Having established shared expectations for the PLC at Work process and the teacher-led Task Force guiding instructional improvement and having reorganized the district office to support these improvement efforts, the district was ready for the next step of engaging schools in the work.

Develop Systems That Intensify and Focus Motivation to Engage in Improving Practice

For schools to sustain meaningful improvements in teaching and learning, it is not enough for the district simply to introduce new ideas or communicate expectations around the PLC at Work process. The district office has to take deliberate action to establish the structures, processes, and resources that help schools maintain focus, build collective capacity, and integrate this work into everyday practice. In the case of CVUSD, this improvement was viewed through the lens of the ten agreements for PLCs codified in the district's yellow sheet that were based on the norms from the PLC at Work model. CVUSD recognized that it lacked key pieces of infrastructure necessary to establish a reliable system to support implementation of the agreements. In response, the district developed instructional resources to fill critical gaps identified in the PLC at Work model, with the aim of strengthening coherence and capacity across the system (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. PLC at Work Road Map

What do we want all students to learn?

Determine essential standards. Review learning progressions.	Unpack standard(s) and bundle. Determine what successful student work looks like.

How will we know if they have learned it?

Develop common formative assessments (CFAs). • Set CFA proficiency. • Set protocols: when and how to assess. • Set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) goals.	Teach and check for understanding (CFU). Appropriately adjust and differentiate.	Give common formative assessment.	Analyze data. Discuss best practices and learning results.

Plan based on CFA results.

How will we respond when learning has not occurred?	How will we respond when learning has already occurred?
Reteach—best practices, individualization, small-group instruction, deployment—matching needs with students.	Extend and deepen learning.
Reassess learning.	Produce a product based on standards.

Source. Adapted from *How to Launch PLCS in Your District,* by R. W. Smith, 2015, Solution Tree Press, p.16.

To support coherent implementation of the ten agreements across schools, the district identified the need for three key instructional resources that were each necessary for addressing one of the core PLC learning questions: (a) essential standards and pacing guides to help teams answer "What do we want students to learn?"; (b) benchmark assessments to help teams answer "How will we know if they have learned it?"; and (c) expectations for high-quality interventions and extensions to help teams answer "How will we respond when learning has or has not occurred?" Rather than having each school site develop these resources itself, the district developed them centrally in collaboration with site leaders and teacher teams. These resources—districtwide essential standards and pacing guides, benchmark assessments, and expectations for high-quality

interventions and extensions, for every grade and subject—formed the foundational district-level support that schools needed to answer the four PLC at Work questions and aligned the work of schools and the district office around sustained improvement of teaching and learning.

CVUSD also developed a consistent process to develop, roll out, and monitor the impact of each instructional resource, led by the district's instructional leadership groups—site administrators, PLC guiding coalitions, and district coaches. By consistently applying the same collaborative process and distributed leadership approach to develop, roll out, and monitor the three instructional resources, the district not only ensured high-quality outcomes but also fostered broad-based buy-in along the way. In Table 5, we present the systems that CVUSD created to develop, implement, and monitor the three sets of districtwide instructional resources needed to scale the PLC at Work model, highlighting the common practices that the district used for each.

Table 5. Systems to Develop and Implement Instructional Resources

To develop systems that intensify and focus motivation to engage in improving practice ...	
District office actions enabled →	**Schools to:**
1. **Consolidate the first draft of instructional resources with facilitated feedback from teachers** a. How: Each school and department shared initial lists of essential standards. The curriculum and instruction (CI) department and coaches worked with teacher leaders to consolidate these lists into a districtwide set of instructional resources. These same groups support the ongoing refinement of the resources based on teacher input. b. Which produced: common district essential standards, pacing guides, CFAs, intervention, and extension resources 2. **Provide regular trainings on district-developed instructional supports with four instructional leadership groups (site admins, PLC leadership teams, coaches, and the CI department) to prepare instructional leaders to drive implementation at sites** a. How: three times per year with instructional leadership groups. The only input from external technical assistance is the PLC leadership teams. The district runs site admin, coaching, and CI department trainings. District leadership is present at *every* training. b. Which produced: a deeper understanding of how the work should look in practice and multiple opportunities to align thinking across instructional leadership groups and sites 3. **Develop systems for monitoring implementation of the instructional supports at sites and provide feedback and support as needed** a. How: led by the CI department with the instructional leadership groups serving as extensions b. Which produced: regular data collection and analysis supported with adapted reports and data protocols aligned to district expectations for each (e.g., three times per year in most cases) to inform subsequent trainings for instructional leadership groups and scaffolded supports to specific sites and PLCs	1. **Determine what they wanted all students to learn aligned to essential standards for the district overall** (PLC question 1) 2. **Determine how they would know if students learned what they wanted them to** (PLC question 2) 3. **Develop a structure for intervention if students did not learn what they expected them to** (PLC question 3) 4. **Develop a structure for extending learning if students had learned the material** (PLC question 4) See Figure 2 for more information.

The district consolidated first drafts of instructional resources from all schools to create aligned district resources that were then refined with facilitated feedback from teachers. CVUSD took a measured, iterative approach to designing districtwide instructional resources that supported the PLC at Work model. Rather than mandating rigid, top-down materials, the district office developed initial drafts of each instructional resource that were consolidations of those produced by each school in the district. These consolidated district resources defined the parameters for what high-quality implementation of each resource looked like. Schools were then given the flexibility to determine how to implement these resources in alignment with the district's expectations.

Assembling the initial draft was only the starting point. Recognizing that meaningful implementation requires ongoing collaboration and improvement, the district established a regular cadence, usually three times a year, to elicit feedback from teacher leaders (grade-level and department chairs) and refine resources to better meet teacher needs and overarching district needs. This dialogue both ensured districtwide coherence and maintained school-level adaptability.

The district first formed a committee of teachers from across the district to develop essential standards and pacing guides to codify shared expectations for what students should learn in 130 instructional days each year. The committee used the essential standards and pacing guides from all schools to develop the overarching district resource, and the drafts were shared with teams at each site for feedback. Teachers played a critical role in refining these resources, ensuring that they reflected the district's identified areas of instructional need while also being practical for classroom use. This collaborative process deepened teacher ownership, reinforced best practices, and resulted in a set of essential standards that balanced district priorities with site-specific flexibility.

During the second year, the district applied this same approach to monitoring student learning, introducing benchmarks and accompanying data-analysis protocols. The benchmarks, administered three times a year, tracked progress on the essential standards and informed professional learning supports. The district provided sample data protocols and reports as models, with the expectation that teams would adapt these tools to fit their own site needs and PLC structures.

By the third year, the district had extended this process to intervention and extension, defining expectations for high-quality support systems rooted in research-based frameworks such as response to intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). While the district established broad parameters—such as ensuring accessibility and equity—schools retained autonomy in structuring their intervention models (e.g., pull-out programs, reteaching strategies, or classroom rotations) to best support their students.

The district's iterative process for resource design and refinement centered on teacher input facilitated by district staff. The district created a system where schools were not just consumers of resources but active participants in shaping and sustaining instructional improvement. Schools were encouraged to adapt resources, and the district elicited feedback that was then used to refine those resources further. This approach balanced the need for district coherence and alignment with site-level autonomy to address specific needs. CVUSD did not stop at providing well-intentioned resources—an all-too-common pitfall in many districts where thoughtful materials go unused. Instead, the district paired resource development with a structured system of ongoing training and leadership development to ensure that the implementation of these resources was both effective and aligned across all schools.

The district office invested in developing the capacity of select leaders across the system to understand the instructional resources and effectively guide their implementation. The district office identified four critical groupings of staff needed to lead the implementation of resources tied to the PLC at Work questions across all schools: site administrators, PLC leadership teams, district coaches, and CI department directors. These instructional leaders serve as an extension of the district office and are responsible for training school staff to implement the collaborative actions on the yellow sheet and to refine the use of district resources to meet the unique needs of their school contexts. The district office leads these groups through a structured cadence of regular training sessions to build and refresh the skills necessary to implement resources with fidelity and to support the development of other school-site staff.

Table 6. Key Instructional Leadership Groups in CVUSD

Key instructional leadership groups	Responsibilities
Site administrators	Lead the PLC leadership team at each site and coordinate work across school feeder patterns (elementary → middle → high school)
PLC leadership teams (guiding coalitions)	Consisting of principal(s), grade- and subject-level PLC team leads, and union representatives, lead and train staff in each grade- or subject-level PLC
District coaches	Provide support to PLCs at two school sites as requested and/or as identified in district essential standards assessment (ESA) data
CI department directors	District directors underneath the deputy superintendent lead the rollout of the PLC at Work model to improve teaching and learning districtwide

CVUSD's leader trainings play a crucial role in ensuring that the district speaks with one voice and signals its priorities clearly. All trainings are led by district staff or partners who have been carefully aligned with the district's messaging. Presenters rehearse together to ensure consistency, maintaining coherence in how priorities and expectations are communicated and ensuring that instructional leaders across the district "speak with a single voice." To reinforce alignment,

the instructional leadership groups receiving the training are given opportunities to practice their messaging with peers and how they will lead training with their own staff—for example, within feeder patterns where principals from elementary, middle, and high schools work collaboratively to ensure that consistent messaging reaches teachers and, ultimately, the experience students have as they transition between sites. This intentional approach ensures that priorities are not only communicated but also consistently reinforced across all levels of the district.

To manage resources effectively, the district made the strategic decision to train instructional leaders rather than all staff directly for ongoing professional development, as had been done during the model's initiation. This approach requires the district to intentionally internalize the capacity necessary to lead implementation, reducing significant expenditures on external partners in the long run. However, it still requires a significant investment of district resources to support the uptake and mobilization of external knowledge. For example, the district had to reallocate time for directors within the CI department to spend more time at schools (generally 3 days a week) so that they could support principals, teachers, and guiding coalitions in the work rather than completing tasks in the district office. In this instance, the district chose to reallocate existing resources to focus on functions that affected teaching and learning through the PLC at Work model—one of the district's three priorities—narrowing the scope of their roles but deepening their capacity to lead that work with schools across the district. As a result, district staff now lead most of the training for staff around district instructional resources while external providers are used strategically to refresh the instructional leadership groups. This model of training the trainers has enabled the district to continue building instructional leadership capacity that can then be leveraged to fill vacancies or support other struggling school sites across the district. The instructional leaders ensure coherence across the district and are expected to monitor the quality of the adult collaborative spaces, provide support to teams when necessary, and share feedback on implementation with the district office.

Structures and processes for monitoring and providing feedback on the implementation of collaborative team actions were developed alongside the creation of district instructional resources. CVUSD has built a system of accountability, support, and feedback to ensure that PLCs are implemented consistently and with quality. Responsibility for monitoring the shared expectations outlined in the district's yellow sheet rests primarily with the CI department, whose directors oversee the development, refinement, training, and implementation of the resources to answer each question. The instructional leadership groups, trained extensively by the district, serve as extensions of this department by providing regular feedback with the department through scheduled check-ins, such as principal one-on-ones and districtwide coach meetings. Because these instructional leaders are positioned as the trainers for school-site staff, they can easily observe the capacity of PLCs to implement the district's shared expectations.

Additionally, the instructional leadership groups regularly monitor the resources being produced by PLCs at each site for alignment with district expectations. For example, site administrators are responsible for examining PLCs' CFAs and subsequent student performance on those CFAs. This monitoring lets school leadership anticipate outcomes on the district benchmarks and adjust how they support teams and bring in additional resources, such as district coaches, if needed to support a team. The district also provides tiered support for principals whose school sites face challenges in implementing PLC practices as evidenced in student outcomes and observations of PLC spaces.

The district office strategically participates in each school's guiding coalition meeting. After several years of implementing the PLC at Work model, the district office recognized discrepancies between the feedback from instructional leadership groups and actual student learning outcomes on ESAs and end-of-year tests. District leadership made a strategic shift to ensure that they were attending the guiding coalition meetings at each site and more frequently attending individual PLC meetings. This increased presence allowed the district office to gain firsthand insight into the alignment between stated priorities and observed implementation, fostering stronger connections between district expectations and classroom practices. The district's presence in these spaces also allowed district staff—who generally led the training of the instructional leaders—to monitor the dissemination of district priorities by instructional leaders. District staff could clarify any misunderstandings with the guiding coalition and provide feedback to the principals after each meeting. This is yet another way to ensure that the district "speaks with a single voice" rather than trusting a game of telephone between the district office and the classroom.

Promote Opportunities and Incentives for Continuous Improvement Systemwide

This section explores how CVUSD's structured approach to monitoring, reexamining priorities, and building capacity allowed the district to maintain a coherent focus on improving the instructional core that incentivizes continuous improvement at multiple levels. As CVUSD advanced its implementation of the PLC at Work model, it recognized the importance of sustaining momentum and refining its practices over time. The district established processes to monitor the implementation of key collaborative actions, ensuring consistency and alignment with its priorities. Gathering data and feedback from school sites helps the district continuously reexamine its goals, update resources, and strengthen its training programs to support both new and experienced staff. As a result, schools receive support through regular processes and structures from district and school administrators, the PLC guiding coalition, and coaches who have rich experience in operationalizing the district's expectations.

Since the relaunch in 2017, annual district priorities and training have focused on only the ten collaborative team actions for high-quality PLCs, incentivizing staff to go deeper rather than diffusing attention to other spaces. Staff input from each site is used to develop initial

resources, and teachers can see that their feedback is incorporated annually into the resources produced by the district. These resources in turn support teachers' improved instruction, further incentivizing their active engagement with the work. See Table 7 for examples of district actions that incentivized continuous improvement of its systems for teaching and learning.

Table 7. District Office Actions to Incentivize Continuous Improvement

To promote opportunities and incentives for continuous improvement systemwide ...	
District office actions enabled →	**Schools to:**

1. **Continue monitoring implementation of PLC questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 at sites and provide feedback as needed**
  a. How: Sustain the monitoring and feedback strategies established for each of the district's ten collaborative actions codified in the MOU.
  b. Which produces: information that indicates the quality of implementation of the ten actions and informs (a) reexamination of district priority areas and (b) accompanying resources to support schools with implementing and maintaining district coherence (e.g., modifications to essential standards, ESAs, intervention strategies, unit plans)
2. **Reexamine district priority areas and implementation of collaborative team actions (yellow sheet agreements) each year**
  a. How: The Task Force gathers feedback from instructional leadership groups who have in turn gathered feedback from school-site teams.
  b. Which produces: revised district goals and focal areas
3. **Train new staff in the PLC at Work model when they enter the district**
  a. How: Conduct a new-staff institute based on Solution Tree conferences followed by a progression of trainings focused on answering each PLC at Work question during a staff member's first year, all led by CVUSD staff.
  b. Which produces: shared understanding and opportunities for new teachers to incorporate thinking while being a part of a functioning PLC
4. **Refresh PLC at Work model with all instructional leaders**
  a. How: All instructional leaders experience refresher support guided by the same Solution Tree associate each year.
  b. Which produces: a sustained focus and external support around priority areas, which are used to build capacity of new instructional leaders that cycle into PLC guiding coalitions, site admin roles, and district coach roles
	1. **Refine and adjust the systems developed in #3** [see Table 5] **to improve practice and student learning**

Here, we highlight two actions the district has taken to incentivize continuous improvement around its framework to improve teaching and learning.

The district maintains the monitoring and feedback processes around the implementation of the adult collaborative actions that drive PLCs to (a) inform the Task Force as they establish district priorities for the next year and (b) refine the resources provided by the district to support school implementation of the collaborative team actions. CVUSD sustains and refines its continuous improvement efforts through ongoing monitoring of the implementation of the adult collaborative actions at school sites, as informed by the instructional leadership groups and the district's curriculum and instruction department. This information first

informs the Task Force's annual reexamination of district priorities around collaborative team actions, as outlined in the yellow sheet agreements; second, it guides the refinement of resources provided to schools to support their work while ensuring coherence across the district.

The Task Force selects up to two areas to focus on in the upcoming year. Over time, the Task Force may cycle back to the same item on the yellow sheet multiple times. For example, the Task Force identified a need to improve intervention systems at schools for the 2024–25 school year through feedback provided by instructional leaders and examination of ESA and end-of-year test data. These priorities are selected in the fall of the prior year so that the district can begin developing a scope and sequence of support for instructional leaders and secure assistance (e.g., external expertise) or refine resources (e.g., essential standards, ESAs, unit plans, etc.) that are necessary to drive that capacity building. The Task Force does not identify areas that are outside the areas articulated on the yellow sheet as priorities for the district's goal of fostering highly effective PLCs. As the deputy superintendent shared, this helps school-site staff strengthen their understanding of how to participate in and lead highly effective PLCs:

> We're all focusing on the same thing; I think it helps because then you're not having to relearn a new priority. … It's about what you say is important. … If this is a priority, you've got to make the time, and we've been able to stay on the same things, which then again, builds the confidence of our principal leaders. … They're … really getting better at just a few things. … Our main thing is professional learning communities. … That's the vehicle to drive everything that we do.

The established agreements for effective collaboration and PLCs ensure a sustained focus on a limited number of priorities so that staff across CVUSD can continue to deepen their understanding of effective PLCs rather than shifting focus to a new model each year. At this point in CVUSD's journey, the district is refining implementation of the PLC at Work model and the resources that support it in most subject and grade levels instead of creating additional structures and processes.

The district invests in training to build the capacity of new staff around the adult collaborative actions and to refresh the knowledge of all instructional leaders. New staff entering the district participate in a structured progression of training, beginning with an institute modeled on Solution Tree conferences and followed by sessions throughout their first year. These trainings, led by CVUSD staff, guide new teachers through answering each of the four PLC questions and foster a shared understanding of the model's principles. This process allows new staff to incorporate PLC thinking into their practices while contributing effectively to existing PLC teams.

All instructional leadership groups receive refresher trainings facilitated by the district three times per year to consistently reproduce high-quality PLCs across the district. These sessions focus on sustaining attention to the district's priority areas and building capacity among leaders

who transition into new roles within PLC guiding coalitions or instructional leadership positions (e.g., new department or grade-level PLC leads). These touchpoints are also where external expertise is brought in when necessary, such as additional support from PLC support providers or experts in designing and analyzing assessment and subsequent outcome data. The district's curriculum and instruction department leads the design and rehearses and cofacilitates these sessions, ensuring that the capacity to support what is being taught is internalized within the district office. This model builds the district office's capacity to support schools and sustain a model that it initially needed external support to launch. The deputy superintendent explains:

> It helps to have Solution Tree here; we don't need them here. … During COVID, they weren't in, and we led [the training]. We built the modules, we led the modules, it was our curriculum team … and we were doing our own training. … We just have a relationship with [Solution Tree associates], that they have just a different voice. But at any time, [we could say] we don't want to, we don't need to, we don't have the money, we're where we can sustain ourselves. … We're choosing to partner with Solution Tree because we have the funding right now. And for [CVUSD staff] to hear it another time … another way of what we say we're going to be working on from another speaker. But definitely … we don't need Solution Tree to be able to drive this work, because they come and go. We're the ones that are going to stay. So we need to make sure that we have the systems in place. And we absolutely can do any of them. Any of my directors can easily come in and help share this work because we know it well. We know it deeply.

It can be difficult to be "a prophet in your own land," and external partnerships can help provide another voice to reinforce the central ideas of the model to improve teaching and learning that the district has focused on. However, internalizing this knowledge is essential if the district office wants to be able to support its own staff with implementation coherently across schools, departments, and grade levels. This dual approach ensures that both new and experienced staff remain aligned with the district's goals, reinforcing coherence and continuous improvement across all levels of the system.

The training schedule for instructional leadership groups also follows administration and analysis of the ESAs, which are conducted three times annually, ensuring that they are both proactive and responsive. Proactively, the arc of training is designed around district goals for specific components of the yellow sheet that are set by the Task Force at least a year in advance. This forward planning ensures that training sessions build on one another, revisiting and reinforcing key concepts outlined in the district's shared-expectations document. At the same time, trainings are responsive to emerging needs identified through ESA data or other student-performance metrics. This sequencing ensures that trainings not only align with long-term district priorities but also adapt to meet immediate needs, fostering continuous improvement across schools.

Takeaways

CVUSD provides an example of what it takes to improve the instructional core at scale: sustained leadership, coherent systems, and disciplined focus. The district's progress was not driven by a single initiative or external provider but by a comprehensive, integrated approach to building internal capacity, strengthening adult collaboration, and aligning supports around student learning. The following takeaways highlight the structures and practices that enabled CVUSD to prioritize teaching and learning over time—even amid leadership transitions, political pressures, and evolving state demands. Together, these lessons illustrate how coherent district systems can empower educators, buffer instructional improvement from disruption, and ensure that all students benefit from consistent, high-quality teaching.

Improving the instructional core starts with the superintendent and cabinet. The superintendent and cabinet must lead the communication that prioritizes creating a system to improve instruction—this leadership cannot be delegated. This includes participation in developing, monitoring, and refining the systems that ensure consistent focus across the district. One example of this prioritization in CVUSD is that the superintendent attends all trainings related to the district's framework for effective teaching and learning practices—even if he has attended them before. Dr. Enfield shared:

> I attend pretty much all of the professional development that we do … for PLCs here at the district. … We'll hold … 10 or 20 of them. I go to all of those. … I do that because I'm sending the message, "This is important to the superintendent." … If it's important to me, it's important to my principals, it's important to my cabinet, it's important to everybody down the line, and I think that's a critical one that needs to happen.

Signaling that the work is a priority often occurs at the start of a new initiative, but to build the necessary structures and processes to improve the instructional core, district leadership must continue to be actively involved in sustaining focus on improvement.

District leadership sets the direction, schools test it, and together they refine it. In CVUSD, district leadership sets the direction for instructional improvement with the support of the teachers' union, which is represented on the Task Force. Together, leadership from both groups empower schools to test, refine, and implement solutions aligned to shared priorities. Schools are often left to operate independently from one another, which can unintentionally foster reactive rather than proactive district support. While site-level ownership of student needs is important, district leadership must ensure coherence by defining clear priorities, establishing measurable targets, and maintaining consistent expectations for collaborative work and progress monitoring.

CVUSD exemplifies how districts can balance direction setting with site-level autonomy. The district—with input from schools—sets goals, creates ways to measure progress, and develops districtwide resources, such as pacing guides, essential standards, and expectations for collaboration. Schools, in turn, align their site-level goals, instructional approaches, and intervention systems with these district priorities. Schools are responsible for providing feedback on district resources and processes, fostering a cycle of continuous improvement that refines the work without changing overall district priorities. This approach allows schools to engage in productive struggle around how to best help students learn while the district maintains ownership of what students need to learn. The district ensures coherence across sites that frees up vital resources to focus on high-quality teaching and learning rather than expending energy to support a wide range of isolated solutions.

District systems to improve the instructional core empower all teachers and support the professionalization of teaching. District systems designed to improve the instructional core play a central role in the professionalization of teaching by helping teachers and administrators prioritize developing high-quality instruction and by aligning the necessary structures and supports to do so. District systems are designed to incentivize teachers to provide feedback on the resources and support they receive from the district. All staff—not just the willing—are expected to be active participants in improvement work, and district structures are designed to help all staff engage in the process. In CVUSD, this professionalization is sustained through a strong partnership between district and union leadership, which ensures alignment on shared expectations for teaching and learning while empowering teachers to make decisions based on their expertise and the unique needs of their students. The commitment to high-quality PLCs began by securing time within the school day for teachers to collaborate and then intentionally building supports (e.g., instructional leadership groups, essential standards, pacing guides, ESAs) that facilitated effective use of that time. Teacher agency is the driving force of these spaces, and the district role is to protect it and provide resources—including the time and energy of district experts—that ensure high-quality use of that time.

Alignment of district and union leadership is critical to drive the work and helps shield the critical systems that affect teaching and learning from external pressures. District and union leadership prioritize the preservation of collaborative processes and best practices because both parties agree on their value in improving student outcomes. This protects these systems from disruption, even during contentious negotiations or political upheaval. For example, combative board politics in Chino Valley have made state and national news. However, broader community discussions or board-level political turmoil have not disrupted the progress being made in instruction and student learning in schools across the district. Both district and union leadership see their role as buffering administrators and teachers from noise generated by the board that could distract from the ongoing improvement work. The strength of this partnership between district and union leadership has enabled the district to weather political turbulence and remain focused on improving outcomes for students.

CVUSD's leadership demonstrates how districts and unions can align around a high-quality instructional core to support progress being made by teachers and students. Through weekly meetings, district leadership provides updates and solicits union feedback on next steps before public announcements, fostering trust and transparency. District leadership further amplifies this alignment by publicly acknowledging union support, whether through community stakeholder outreach, staff trainings, or board presentations. Leaders on both sides have demonstrated that protecting what is best for teaching and learning requires ongoing, vigilant attention. As a result, CVUSD's processes for adult collaboration have been sustained and continually refined rather than abandoned in response to crises, shifting initiatives, negotiations, or contentious board dynamics.

Building internal capacity requires initial investment with external partners and intentional planning to internalize external expertise. Not all districts in California have the capacity to build systems for instructional improvement on their own. Initial capacity building—often requiring external support—should be viewed as an investment rather than a permanent solution. While external partners can play a vital role in supporting early stages of the work, to sustain progress districts must intentionally plan for internalizing this capacity over time. Without a clear strategy for transferring expertise and building internal systems, districts risk wasting resources on external solutions that cannot be maintained once the external support is gone.

Scaling improvements to the instructional core is difficult and resource intensive, yet it remains the only way to sustain improvements in teaching and learning. While the commitment is essential, districts face numerous systemic barriers: the current California School Dashboard broadens the number of issue areas to consider; sudden infusions of funding often distract from addressing core instructional challenges; and external partners are not incentivized to help districts internalize the necessary capacity to sustain improvements. Despite these challenges, CVUSD demonstrates that sustained improvements are possible when districts commit to building internal capacity intentionally. After first leveraging external expertise to address immediate needs, the district created a plan to internalize that capacity, enabling staff to repeat and scale the work independently. This intentional approach ensures that investments in capacity building lead to lasting improvements in teaching, learning, and district systems.

District leadership must streamline support and speak with one voice. District leadership has a responsibility to prepare concise, digestible, and actionable training for instructional leaders and the teams they support. These instructional leaders are deeply engaged in the day-to-day work of supporting teachers and students; they rarely have the time or bandwidth to create the systems needed to support effective adult collaboration from scratch and refine their own practices for supporting other staff. It falls to the district office to curate the limited time and space with these instructional leadership groups in order to make effective shared meaning and practice that will facilitate the capacity building they are expected to lead at school sites.

A critical factor in CVUSD's success in streamlining support for instructional leaders has been the district's commitment to speaking with one voice. In many cases, this means that the same individuals deliver messaging to multiple stakeholder groups to ensure absolute consistency. Every training is carefully rehearsed, with district leadership—up to and including the superintendent—attending sessions alongside school leaders to align understanding and reinforce shared priorities. In turn, the instructional leaders being trained are given the opportunity to practice the instruction they will lead with staff. This consistency extends to union representation, who are integrated at multiple levels: weekly conversations occur between union leaders, the superintendent, and the deputy superintendent to shape priorities, and union representatives participate in site-level guiding coalitions. By embedding union leadership and the Teaching and Learning Task Force into the training and decision-making processes, CVUSD ensures that implementation of the PLC model is not only aligned but also co-owned and communicated by all instructional staff.

Shifting the instructional core is hard and requires multiple reinforcing structures to succeed. Shifting instructional practice is a complex and challenging endeavor, requiring sustained focus and a cohesive system of supports to succeed. CVUSD addressed this challenge by developing and maintaining multiple reinforcing structures that aligned efforts across the district. These structures are positioned so that they can grow, support, and sustain improvements to the instructional core and provide differentiated support across the district as needed. This began with comprehensive initial training around the PLC at Work model, equipping staff with a shared understanding of the framework. The district then created foundational resources, including essential standards, assessments, and monitoring and feedback tools, which schools were empowered to refine to meet their unique needs. To sustain progress, the district established instructional leadership groups that provided ongoing coaching and support to school leaders around the district's priority areas. These groups ensured that focus on improving the instructional core remained central to the district's efforts while fostering collaboration and capacity building at every level. By layering these supports and emphasizing alignment across all structures, CVUSD was able to navigate the inherent challenges of shifting instructional practice and maintain progress towards improved teaching and learning outcomes.

Consistent focus maximizes long-term impact. Sustaining improvements in teaching and learning requires more than starting new initiatives; it demands consistency and a focused approach over time. In CVUSD, the district demonstrated that limiting the number of priorities each year was key to driving meaningful progress. By concentrating efforts on improving the instructional core through ten specific practices for adult collaboration, the district avoided the common pitfall of spreading energy and resources too thin across multiple competing initiatives. This disciplined focus allowed the district to channel its resources and attention into high-impact actions aligned to the overall district vision. Had the district taken on additional efforts, it would have risked diluting the impact of the work and undermining its ability to address its greatest needs. Instead, by maintaining a narrow and intentional scope—which at times meant declining opportunities for additional state and county resources—CVUSD was able to make sustained progress towards improving teaching and learning districtwide.

Conclusion

Scaling instructional improvement across an entire district requires a deep commitment and a willingness to restructure systems and align resources to support instructional improvement. CVUSD serves as a compelling example of how to achieve this. The district recognized that asking teachers to make significant shifts in instructional and collaborative practices demanded an equally robust investment in capacity development. The changes that CVUSD implemented reflect Elmore's principle of reciprocity of accountability for capacity: "For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation" (Elmore, 2002, p. 5). The transition to the PLC at Work model required significant changes to teacher and principal capacity, and CVUSD met this challenge by reorganizing district structures, codifying shared expectations, aligning resources, and partnering with the teachers' union to ensure coherence and shared ownership of the work of capacity development.

By centering its efforts around the PLC at Work model, CVUSD not only built a coherent framework for teaching and learning but also developed systems to sustain and scale these improvements over time. CVUSD's ability to align districtwide structures, cultivate collaborative ownership, invest in professional development, and foster continuous improvement demonstrates that meaningful instructional reform is possible when systemic change is supported by intentional planning and steadfast commitment. CVUSD's journey underscores a critical lesson for other districts: The depth of transformation in the instructional core must be matched by the depth of systemic support provided to educators.

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Appendix

Table A1 highlights progress in student achievement across various student subgroups in CVUSD in 2016–17 and 2023–24. While overall average performance declined across California and in San Bernardino County (SBC) during this period, CVUSD saw sustained gains in both English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics. Notably, socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) students in CVUSD improved at a faster rate than their non-SED peers. CVUSD's targeted instructional strategies were associated with performance growth for key subgroups—including English learners (EL), students with disabilities (SWD), and Latino students—that exceeded growth state- and county-wide growth patterns. These results underscore the district's success in building equitable systems that support academic growth for all learners.

Table A1. Steady Learning Gains Across Subgroups in CVUSD, Surpassing State and County Trends

		ELA scores			Math scores		
		2016–17	2023–24	Change	2016–17	2023–24	Change
All students	California	48.56	47.03	−1.53	37.56	35.54	−2.02
	SBC	41.70	40.46	−1.24	28.55	27.20	−1.35
	CVUSD	56.77	60.64	**3.87**	45.02	48.64	**3.62**
Non-SED	California	68.41	66.13	−2.28	57.35	55.24	−2.11
	SBC	61.34	57.68	−3.66	46.31	44.06	−2.25
	CVUSD	71.39	73.33	**1.94**	60.14	63.14	**3.00**
SED	California	35.52	36.81	1.29	24.57	24.98	0.41
	SBC	34.43	34.32	−0.11	21.63	21.16	−0.47
	CVUSD	43.38	49.34	**5.96**	31.15	35.62	**4.47**
Asian SED	California	59.88	61.5	1.62	54.71	54.65	−0.06
	SBC	68.33	67.97	−0.36	60.16	63.11	2.95
	CVUSD	76.39	75.93	**−0.46**	74.49	74.98	**0.49**
Black SED	California	25.09	25.53	0.44	14.47	14.07	−0.40
	SBC	24.27	20.80	−3.47	12.35	11.66	−0.69
	CVUSD	39.69	32.36	**−7.33**	24.31	18.34	**−5.97**

		ELA scores			Math scores		
		2016–17	2023–24	Change	2016–17	2023–24	Change
Filipino SED	California	59.88	63.53	3.65	45.57	48.89	3.32
	SBC	68.10	67.79	−0.31	51.09	54.00	2.91
	CVUSD	72.92	75.51	**2.59**	59.72	64.38	**4.66**
Latino SED	California	32.87	32.96	0.09	21.65	20.48	−1.17
	SBC	33.48	33.14	−0.34	20.44	19.40	−1.04
	CVUSD	38.12	42.61	**4.49**	25.00	26.21	**1.21**
White SED	California	43.67	45.87	2.20	31.58	34.74	3.16
	SBC	40.89	39.70	−1.19	27.50	27.47	−0.03
	CVUSD	50.07	58.57	**8.50**	35.41	37.40	**1.99**
SWD	California	13.86	15.83	1.97	11.10	12.54	1.44
	SBC	10.92	12.40	1.48	8.06	8.72	0.66
	CVUSD	17.40	19.29	**1.89**	13.60	14.80	**1.2**
EL	California	12.09	10.29	−1.80	12.32	10.25	−2.07
	SBC	10.96	10.18	−0.78	9.53	8.85	−0.68
	CVUSD	15.72	17.58	**1.86**	21.52	25.61	**4.09**

Note. ELA = English language arts; SBC = San Bernardino County; CVUSD = Chino Valley Unified School District; SED = socioeconomically disadvantaged; SWD = students with disabilities; EL = English learner.

Source. Test results at a glance: State of California, CAASPP and ELPAC, California Department of Education, 2024, caaspp-elpac.ets.org/caaspp/CompareReportSB?ps=true&lstTestYear=2024&lstTestType=B&lstGrade=13&lstGroup=1&lstSchoolType=A&lstCds1=000000000000000&lstCds2=36000000000000&lstCds3=36676780000000&lstNav=srch&lstFocus=a

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