

School District Collaboration: Lessons From Districts Participating in California Education Partners' California Language & Learning Initiative (CALLI)

Daniel Bugler

Improving student performance, especially that of those learners who experience poverty, disabilities, language barriers, or some combination of these factors, is an ongoing challenge for many, if not all, school districts. It can be particularly so for smaller or more geographically isolated districts that, compared to their larger urban counterparts, are likely to have fewer resources at hand, including content specialization.

California Education Partners (Ed Partners), a nonprofit organization that identifies itself as an education reform organization, recognized this issue when it began working with small California districts at its inception in 2011. By 2015, it had come to see this resource gap as a critical issue for small- to medium-sized districts whose schools were struggling to improve instruction. In response, it launched a cross-district collaboration called the California Language & Learning Initiative (CALLI). Ed Partners intended CALLI to support such California districts both directly — on-site and at regular convenings — and indirectly by creating a structure through which participating districts could collaborate on their improvement efforts.

Twenty-five districts signed on to start working with Ed Partners for three years starting in school year 2016/17 in one of three content areas: early literacy (13 districts), academic language (6 districts), and high school mathematics (6 districts). Participants comprised elementary, high school, and unified districts, ranging from 4 to 30 schools and from 1,122 to slightly more than 21,000 students. At the end of the first three years, districts were invited to continue for another two years in a modified approach called CALLI 201. Eighteen districts chose to do so. (For more information about CALLI's approach, see Appendix A: About CALLI; for more

About this Brief

In spring 2017, WestEd was engaged to conduct a formative evaluation of the California Language & Learning Initiative — a cross-district collaboration developed and supported by California Education Partners (Ed Partners). Over the next four years, WestEd staff conducted a series of interviews to advise Ed Partners on participants' perceptions of the initiative and their recommendations for improvement. During that period, WestEd conducted focus groups with district improvement team members (35 participants in five focus groups) and with team leads (49 participants in seven focus groups) as well as individual interviews with 25 improvement team members, 12 team leads, and 14 superintendents from CALLI districts.

This brief draws on the results of those interviews to present key learning about the initiative and what districts need to do to make the most of such collaborative opportunities. Note that WestEd's evaluation was not a summative assessment of the effectiveness of Ed Partners' approach to continuous improvement.

about participating districts, see Appendix B: Participating CALLI Districts).

This brief draws from interviews with participating districts' team members about what they and their districts gained and learned from the CALLI experience.

What is CALLI's value for districts?

Members of district improvement teams engaged in CALLI identified a wide range of elements in the collaboration that created value for themselves and their districts, including direct support they received from Ed Partners, an opportunity to learn with and from peers, and support from content experts. They also praised the structure, accountability, and team time established by CALLI that helped them to develop and, as needed, refine a district improvement plan and to stay focused on the core work outlined in that plan. They reported seeing increased personal and team capacity to use continuous improvement processes. And they noted the development of an "improvement mindset" within their team, a mentality that values the iterative improvement cycles of planning, doing, and learning.

Team members credited CALLI participation with helping them develop a better understanding of their district's challenges and with developing greater trust and better communication among improvement team members and between team members and district leaders. They also highly valued becoming part of a content-specific CALLI community of learners with other districts. Each of the three content-specific communities was convened separately three times a year. Between convenings, community members were encouraged to reach out to one another for help. Interacting with the same participants over many convenings helped generate mutual understanding

and trust, which, in turn, helped them more freely give and receive critiques of one another's plans and processes, including suggested improvements.

"If you care about student learning and student achievement and you want the freshness of ideas, you should [become] part of [a] collaborative. It's worth the investment of time. It will pay itself back with student results and staff growth."

—District Superintendent

Many participating districts were rural, and their team members noted that CALLI provided opportunities for professional growth and access to experts that would not otherwise have been possible. As one improvement team lead observed, "Without this, there is no way we would have the big-name [experts] — leading people in the discipline — [or the] technical support. There are just so many things that we would not have the money for."

CALLI participants noted advancement in several specific areas related to their district's continuous improvement efforts. Some reported better district practices supporting continuous improvement cycles, such as routine discussions in school, district, and cabinet meetings of initiative evidence and its implications. Others reported developing new approaches for building broader buy-in for the district improvement plan. For example, members of one district team reported adopting an initial improvement strategy that had low stakes for teachers; the intent was to help teachers acclimate to the process and become more trusting of the plan before asking them to implement strategies with higher stakes.

Were there positive impacts on instruction and student achievement?

In the early years of CALLI, districts used state test scores to find evidence of student progress. Some found it. One improvement team member recalled that after a departmentwide intervention in their district, student test scores “jumped so dramatically the state thought they had to re-evaluate the numbers and double-check that there wasn’t an error.” Most district teams, however, found that it takes time to develop improvement strategies, test and refine them, and implement them at the scale needed to generate widespread gains.

With the onset of the COVID pandemic and limited statewide testing in California for the last two years of CALLI, districts could not easily track annual progress. Instead, team members relied on interim assessments and classroom assessment strategies, such as exit tickets (i.e., a short student response to a prompt about the lesson), to see if students showed improvement. They also relied to varying degrees on informal indicators to help them see if the classroom instructional changes they sought were happening. Several districts relied on teacher reports and anecdotal evidence of changed classroom practices and improved student learning. While team members reported that their data were positive, they acknowledged the need to improve the quality of the evidence they use to assess progress.

Some districts found early evidence of changed practice in classroom observations. Many CALLI districts with high numbers of English Learners had identified academic language as their content focus for continuous improvement. Their improvement teams developed new instructional tools and techniques to increase students’ use of rigorous academic language. One district wanted to see a more engaged classroom. Its primary strategy encouraged teachers to pull students

into discussions around mathematics even if it meant the classroom would be “a little messy or a little loud.” Over time, as teachers became more comfortable in urging students to “add a second sentence or to justify their thinking,” classrooms did indeed become louder. “It was good to have a noisy classroom,” the team member concluded, “because it meant kids were talking about math.”

In another district, all teachers were trained to implement new strategies to engage students in vocabulary-rich academic discourse. They used empathy interviews to see what students thought of the new classroom practices. One improvement team member said, “Students crave these conversations. I have a student who typically does not initiate conversations. In an empathy interview, she told me she is willing to participate in our structured conversations because she knows the roles, and she looks forward to having these conversations.”

What do districts think of Ed Partners’ approach?

One theme articulated by CALLI participants over four years of formative interviews was a strong appreciation for Ed Partners’ overall approach to the work. Members of district improvement teams reported appreciating their relationship with the Ed Partners staff member assigned to work with their district. Many team members referred to their Ed Partners contact as an integral and vital part of their team. Some noted that their contact’s strong facilitation skills and broad perspective on California districts contributed to better team discussions and decisions. In addition to WestEd’s formative assessment of CALLI, Ed Partners regularly polled participants to see what they thought was or was not working in the initiative. Participants valued the opportunity to provide feedback. As one noted, “They’re always working to improve their processes as well.... And they are always learning, too. I appreciate that.”

“I would tell a fellow superintendent, ‘You can’t do this alone, and you shouldn’t do this alone. If so, you’re doing it the hard way.’”

—District Superintendent

Perhaps because finding time to meet as a team is a constant challenge in the day-to-day frenzy of district work, many team members also said they valued the time for teamwork built into the schedule of the three annual convenings.

Finally, teams praised the content-specific support they receive directly from Ed Partners and content experts brokered by Ed Partners. One team member said, “Ed Partners is not afraid to say, ‘It sounds like you’re struggling...let’s give you some resources or bring in a [content expert].’”

How did districts use their CALLI training to address COVID?

When COVID-19 forced the shutdown of California schools, districts encountered challenges they had not envisioned when initially developing their improvement plan. “Everything we’ve been working on is halted because we’re no longer in front of students,” noted one participant. Districts were forced to quickly identify their most pressing COVID-related issues and develop a plan to address them. In interviews, participants said they relied on their improvement team and the protocols they had learned from Ed Partners (e.g., one district used empathy interviews to see why students were not logging into class) to create a new plan of action. “To deal with the COVID crisis,” said one interviewee, “we fell back on ... the way we collaborate [as a team], which had improved so much over the course of the year... We’re able to make great strides because...we already had in place our understanding of how our collaboration should work.”

In one district, teachers struggled to teach remotely and engage students. The CALLI team realized they needed a simple solution to keep students reading complex texts. One teacher said, “With COVID, we thought, ‘what could we push while kids are distance learning?’ And one of those things was the volume of text that they are reading. We knew we had to plan something manageable. And we knew we had to plan something where it would be easy for us to get the data.” They decided to ask third graders to independently read two articles per week using the district’s online system that tailors texts to students’ reading levels. These students demonstrated greater growth in reading compared to a control group with whom this strategy was not used.

In another district, by fall 2020, the improvement team saw an increase in the number of students receiving Ds and Fs on assignments. The team used empathy interviews and surveys to understand why students think they are earning poor grades. They learned that students wanted more interactive and engaging activities. Based on student responses, the team developed a learning cycle around activities that require students to interact and connect with peers through content-focused student-to-student conversation.

What did districts learn about collaboration?

Assemble the right team

Many districts that decided to continue in CALLI 201 rethought their improvement team based on their own experience and guidance from Ed Partners. For example, teams that had not included district-level leadership had struggled to gain broad support in the district. Similarly, teams without principals had struggled to gain support in schools, and those without teachers had struggled to get teacher buy-in. Teams found they needed representation from all three levels to develop a plan they could implement with broad

buy-in. “One reason our team was strong,” said one member, “is that we had teachers, principals, and district-level staff. If you don’t have that mix, you’ve got blind spots, and [for] any plans you put in place, you’re going to miss a whole component.”

Focus on culture

Many team members who believed their team was having success attributed it to team members being willing to try solutions and potentially fail and to learn from failure. “We made a pledge to come in open-minded — to challenge ourselves to think differently about professional development and to develop something that would be sustainable.... We had no idea what [would be sustainable], but that was the mindset we wanted,” reported one superintendent.

Many teams found it equally important to eliminate hierarchy within their CALLI team. Participants who engaged with other district teams at CALLI convenings noted that it was readily apparent when a team did not equally value all members’ voices. Such teams, they said, struggled to gain trust among their members and, thus, struggled to gain momentum.

Across the board, district teams underscored the need to involve teachers in developing and refining their district’s improvement plan because implementation was inevitably more difficult without teacher buy-in. At an early convening, teams learned to use empathy interviews with teachers and other stakeholders to examine issues from different points of view. For some districts, this technique transformed their staff’s approach to understanding any problem. “Before, we had never even heard of empathy interviews,” said one team member. “Now, empathy interviews are always something that comes up as a potential way to gather data.”

Choose the right-sized problem

For many districts, using Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles to improve processes and practices was new. “We used to plan and plan and plan because we did not want to launch something and have it fail,” one team member recalled. “Now we launch lots of little trials and see what works and what doesn’t and learn from that.”

CALLI participants appreciated the concept of what one interviewee called being “in the learning zone.” That meant exploring a problem with the intent of deeply understanding it and remaining open to potential solutions. Being in the learning zone helped teams develop a studied response to a problem rather than rush to judgment. For many teams, reminders that they were in the learning zone made it easier to seek and receive advice from thought partners, other districts, or stakeholders.

Successful teams found they spent a lot of time in the learning zone before defining the problem they wanted to solve and the strategy they wanted to implement to address that problem. They also learned to narrowly define the first problem they wanted to solve. For example, one district wanted to raise test scores for 3rd graders but realized the problem they first needed to address was helping teachers develop better strategies to increase student conversation using academic language. Once the right-sized problem was identified, the team developed hypotheses and strategies for addressing the problem; implemented and tested each strategy; and, based on data from that test, decided whether to abandon it, refine it, or scale it as is. One participant noted the importance of not trying to do everything at once: “Let’s try one thing. Start small, then scale. That was the biggest learning for me.”

Identify the evidence needed to assess the work

During their CALLI experience, teams increasingly focused on evidence: Did they have evidence about what was working? Could they measure the impact of improvement efforts for students and teachers? For many, the effort to find better evidence was a constant struggle. To begin with, they needed to learn what constitutes rigorous evidence. Many districts found that their evidence was not as rigorous and reliable as it needed to be. The collaboration helped teams develop better evidence through consultation with content experts, other district teams, and Ed Partners staff.

Embrace problems and obstacles

Participants reported that while their implementation efforts often failed, they had come to recognize failure as a learning opportunity rather than as the end of an improvement effort. Reflecting on the necessity of being “in the learning zone,” one participant said, “We are more reflective about failure. We analyze what went wrong and rethink how to execute based on that failure.” They also felt freer talking openly with other teams about what had not worked, thus allowing teams to learn from one another’s experiences.

Think about sustainability

Overall, CALLI teams identified participation in the collaboration as one of the best staff development activities they had ever undertaken. Team members could articulate what they had learned through the process and how it had changed their practices. Several team members reported that they had recently been promoted in their school or district to take on new roles in coaching, curricular leadership, and administration. One participant became a first-time superintendent. They said the professional growth they experienced through CALLI contributed to them being promoted. For some, that added responsibility meant that they could take the ideas they learned through CALLI and apply them to other content areas or grade levels. Others reported recognizing in their fellow team members qualities and strengths they had not known their colleagues have.

When team members talked about how they could sustain the improvement work, those who saw that their team had representation from the classroom, school administration, and district leadership believed that effective practices would continue. One district leader said, “Our principals are the future leaders of the district. If we get them [to buy in] and be involved, these practices will continue.”

Appendix A: About CALLI

CALLI districts were asked to make a three-year commitment. During that time, each six-to-eight-member district improvement team worked through CALLI to develop and refine a plan to improve classroom instruction in its identified content area. Teams analyzed data to identify problem areas, reflected on root causes, hypothesized potential solutions, and captured that work in an evolving improvement plan augmented by implementation and monitoring plans. Ed Partners asked teams to identify key enablers of and barriers to progress, assess what they wanted to change or keep, and adjust their plan accordingly. Sometimes the data they collected prompted teams to change the problem they wanted to address or the strategies they wanted to use.

District teams with the same content focus were brought together in a learning community and convened three times a year for two days of professional learning and face-to-face collaboration (carried out virtually during the pandemic). During each two-day meeting, teams learned from content experts, engaged with new processes and tools, and worked within and across teams on issues related to their respective plans.

A key Ed Partners goal for these gatherings was to develop a sense of mutual trust and support between participants that would extend not only between convenings but eventually beyond CALLI itself. To that end, Ed Partners had participants work collaboratively in interdistrict discussions to provide feedback on one another's improvement plans, discuss shared and unique challenges, and develop ideas for potential solutions. Ed Partners encouraged teams to reflect individually and with other teams from their community of learners to diagnose what was working, what was not, and what might need to change in their plan. This collaborative inquiry was at the heart of the improvement process, allowing

teams to learn from one another and to adopt or adapt practices and tools that had been successfully used in other districts.

Finally, each district was assigned a dedicated Ed Partners professional to support the leader of its improvement team, serving as a thought partner and advisor between convenings. These individuals also brought in content area experts as needed. They often pointed to other districts facing similar challenges and encouraged team members to contact their counterparts in those districts.

The emergence of CALLI 201

During CALLI's first three years, Ed Partners routinely assessed it using participant surveys, formative evaluation reports, and staff reflections. Based on the results of those assessments, Ed Partners made changes intended to strengthen the initiative and invited the original CALLI districts to extend their commitment by another two years (2019/20 and 2020/21) by signing on for the revamped program called CALLI 201. Eighteen of the original 25 districts accepted the invitation. Two of the 18 districts decided to participate in two content areas. (See Appendix B for more about participating districts.)

CALLI 201 reflected three significant changes. Ed Partners brought on new staff who had more school and district experience than their predecessors and could thus offer better guidance to district teams. It also developed a two-year plan with a tighter focus on continuous improvement, using rapid cycles of testing and learning. Finally, it asked districts to (a) rethink the composition of their improvement team to ensure that the team appropriately represented the range of stakeholders needed for success and (b) establish a district leadership team to support and elevate the work of the improvement team.

In CALLI 201's first year, Ed Partners introduced its continuous improvement framework. Teams used a series of guiding questions to define a

challenge area they wanted to tackle and set a district goal for results the team wanted to change. The teams then engaged in a series of activities to analyze past efforts, current data, and the system that produced the results the team wanted to change. Some teams opted to continue working on the same challenge they had addressed in the first three years of CALLI. Others decided they needed to address a new challenge. These teams then developed a new improvement plan, with hypotheses linking team actions to desired outcomes and identifying the evidence they needed to monitor results. Finally, they developed an implementation plan specifying who was responsible, key activities, and a timetable.

Teams committed to conducting a series of tests using a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) protocol to test their hypotheses, monitor results, and learn what worked and what did not. Ed Partners encouraged them to undertake rapid PDSA cycles

to test small changes in practice and assess their effects on desired outcomes before expanding the solution. District teams identified stakeholders whose buy-in would be critical for success and developed strategies to increase their support for the improvement plan. They also defined the data and evidence they would monitor to understand the effectiveness of their work.

Again, this was an iterative process, with teams conducting small tests; gathering evidence from stakeholders about the strategy being implemented; and, based on that data, deciding whether to refine, abandon, or scale the strategy. Between convenings, each district team continued implementation of its improvement plan and assessed its progress. During these periods between convenings, districts continued to receive expert support from their assigned Ed Partners staff member and, as needed, from outside content experts.

Appendix B: Participating CALLI Districts

District	No. of Schools	Enrollment	Free or Reduced-Price Meals (%)	English Learners (%)	CALLI 201 Districts
Azusa Unified	19	9,277	87.4	33.0	x
Corning Union Elementary	6	2,043	83.1	34.4	
Cutler-Orosi Joint Unified	8	4,083	95.5	48.5	x
Dinuba Unified	10	6,580	79.5	32.1	x
Fairfield-Suisun Unified	30	21,366	59.4	15.3	x
Fowler Unified	9	2,477	75.8	22.6	
Galt Joint Union Elementary	8	3,693	67.2	21.0	x
Galt Joint Union High	4	4,526	28.7	3.3	x
Golden Plains Unified	6	1,831	91.2	62.0	x
Kings Canyon Joint Unified	21	9,775	80.3	33.4	
Lawndale Elementary	10	6,300	78.2	32.8	
Mendota Unified	7	3,146	95.0	68.7	x
Novato Unified	17	8,029	35.4	18.0	x
Pixley Union Elementary	2	1,122	94.7	71.8	
Placer Union High	7	4,137	27.3	1.7	x
Red Bluff Union Elementary	7	2,163	71.8	14.3	
Robla Elementary	6	2,231	90.6	42.3	x
San Rafael City Elementary	10	4,635	62.1	43.4	
San Rafael City High	4	2,365	42.5	14.5	x
Sanger Unified	20	11,204	75.3	20.2	x
Santa Paula Unified	10	5,459	84.1	41.5	x

District	No. of Schools	Enrollment	Free or Reduced-Price Meals (%)	English Learners (%)	CALLI 201 Districts
Selma Unified	12	6,447	78.6	29.0	x
Tahoe-Truckee Unified	12	3,978	44.2	22.2	x
Ukiah Unified	15	6,349	72.2	26.1	x
Washington Unified	23	7,978	63.9	20.1	x

Source: California Department of Education 2014/15.

©2021 WestEd. All rights reserved.