

What Does It Take to Accelerate the Learning of Every Child?

Early Insights from a CCEE
School-Improvement Pilot

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Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

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Executive Summary

Student achievement in California has not rebounded after the precipitous declines of the COVID-19 pandemic, with English language arts (ELA) and math scores remaining well below prepandemic levels. Student attendance has declined dramatically, and trauma and time away from school have led to mental health challenges, delays in social development, and behavioral issues among students. All too often, teachers work in isolation to create lesson plans and deliver instruction, with little instructional support, limited opportunities for collaboration, and unclear expectations. Under these conditions, even basic instruction is not easy, much less accelerating learning.

It is in this context that the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) has launched the Intensive Assistance Model (IAM) pilot school-improvement project, which is designed to build new approaches for teacher collaboration and student support. The IAM pilot's goal is to support schools in implementing the Professional Learning Community (PLC) at Work model, which uses an intensive support and coaching process to empower teachers as instructional leaders through developing processes, structures, and culture that support collaborative planning, data analysis, and targeted interventions. Teachers work in grade-level teams to define essential standards, create assessments, and tailor instruction based on student data.

The PLC at Work model has led to measurable impacts in student achievement. This pilot has shown promise for creating schools that can quickly diagnose and collectively respond to students' needs. Five of the eight participating schools shared evidence of improved academic outcomes after the first year of implementation, along with increases in teacher satisfaction, but to sustain and expand these positive gains, substantial school district support and leadership are required.

Realizing the model's potential requires the active engagement of district offices to align resources, remove barriers, and support effective teaching and learning systems. Barriers include lack of collaboration time, insufficient school-site staff, incoherence between district- and school-based work, and the cost of intensive coaching. These can be overcome with a focus on strengthening and aligning systems at the school, district, county, and state levels to center student learning and educator support.

The PLC at Work model is tightly aligned with the tenets of continuous improvement and local control that undergird California's current policy approach and can be successfully employed alongside any curriculum or materials, across various contexts. Critically, this model puts teachers in the driver's seat, empowering them to make instructional decisions as a collaborative team. Early returns suggest the model has great potential to improve teaching and learning throughout California's schools.

Introduction

Across the state of California, student achievement continues to lag prepandemic levels. The most recent state (Myung & Hough, 2023) and national (Lewis & Kuhfield, 2023; Mervosh, 2023) assessment data show that the percentage of students meeting or exceeding English language arts (ELA) and math standards has declined significantly for every grade since before the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, on California’s Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) tests in 2023, only 46.7 percent of students met or exceeded standards in ELA and only 34.6 percent in math, both scores lagging 5 percentage points behind 2019 levels. The performance of English learners, low-income students, and students of color is particularly concerning; because their scores were already much lower than the scores of other groups, their declines are much more dramatic. For example, in 2023 only 16.9 percent of Black students met or exceeded state standards in math, a decline of 4.62 percentage points from 2019, and only 29.9 percent met or exceeded standards in ELA, a decline of 3.26 percentage points (Fensterwald & Willis, 2023). Similarly, scores for English learners continued to lag 2019 scores by 2.65 points in math and 1.94 points in ELA (California Department of Education, 2023b).

These results are extremely troubling but not surprising. From the start of the pandemic, researchers have been concerned about its effects on learning (Hough et al., 2021)—particularly the inequitable impact since the health and economic effects of the pandemic and related school closures disproportionately affected students who were already marginalized (Fortuna et al., 2020; Tai et al., 2021). Researchers have also highlighted the evidence-based practices that are necessary to accelerate student learning and help students recover. For example, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), along with Californians for Justice and the Education Trust—West, released a framework in early 2021 for how to reimagine and rebuild California’s schools (PACE, 2021). In addition to comprehensive supports that help students feel safe and supported in school, the report called for school teams to concentrate on key actions to advance teaching and learning: focus on priority standards and lessons to accelerate learning; regularly assess student learning data; create an individualized action plan to meet every child’s needs; and provide students with intensive supports and interventions to support teaching and learning.

Despite widespread consensus on this vision, it has been hard to execute as California’s schools are not typically well organized to provide these kinds of supports for learning. Research consistently shows that schools with coherent systems for collaborative planning and reflection time for teachers as well as structures for instructional support and student intervention can greatly improve teaching and learning (Cobb et al., 2018; DuFour et al., 2016; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Glaze, 2013; Levin et al., 2008). Yet all too often in the typical California school, teachers work in isolation to create lesson plans and deliver instruction, and they often have very little instructional support (Children Now, 2019) as well as limited opportunities for collaboration with unclear expectations for how to best utilize that time (Saenz-Armstrong, 2021). In the wake of the pandemic, as student attendance has declined precipitously (Myung & Hough, 2023), and

student trauma and time away from school have led to mental health challenges, delays in social development, and behavioral issues among students (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022; Mustala & Cha, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), it has become extremely challenging for teachers to deliver basic instruction, much less to accelerate learning.

It is in this context that the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) has launched the Intensive Assistance Model (IAM) pilot school-improvement project, which is designed to build new approaches in California schools for teacher collaboration and student support. Starting in 2022–23, CCEE began working in eight schools across five districts to establish teacher and staff teams in each school. These teams regularly collaborate to determine essential standards, develop common assessments, analyze student data, and tailor instruction and support to improve students' academic outcomes. Throughout the 3-year pilot, schools will receive 40–50 days of intensive on-site coaching from Solution Tree, a national professional development service provider working with CCEE that focuses on the creation and implementation of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) at Work model. The IAM pilot is intended to build new knowledge about how to transform schools to improve student learning and, in turn, to inform new structures for how districts, county offices of education (COEs), and the state itself can support educational improvement that affects teaching and learning. It is still extremely early in the pilot, but the work at these school sites reveals the critical need for district offices to build structures from the start that support the scale and spread of school-based improvements. The school- and district-level actions described in this brief can transform the systems that support teaching and learning within California's schools, both for this model and for other state and local policy initiatives designed to improve classroom instruction.

Methods

Throughout Year 1 of the IAM pilot (2022–23), PACE collected data on the progress of implementation of the PLC at Work model in the pilot schools and districts through 39 interviews with school, district, COE, CCEE, and Solution Tree leaders as well as with leadership in the Arkansas Department of Education, which is in Year 7 of a similar project. The findings and recommendations in this brief are also informed by 8 hours of observations of Solution Tree coaching with participating districts, attending a PLC at Work conference in Sacramento, and 4 days in Arkansas where the team observed PLC at Work model schools and met with district and state leaders advancing the work. Finally, PACE's analysis and recommendations are informed by examination of extant literature around effective scaling of education reform, piloting new interventions, and continuous improvement.

PLC at Work: A Model of School-Based Continuous Improvement

The idea of continuous improvement has been central to California’s education strategy over the past decade. The California Department of Education used the term “continuous improvement” 23 times in the January 2018 version of the state’s Every Student Succeeds Act plan (California Department of Education, 2023c) and has since enacted a series of policies and investments designed to support continuous improvement across the state (Furger et al., 2019). These include a publicly accessible California School Dashboard providing statewide data, investments in COEs as support providers for school districts through a Statewide System of Support, and revisions to the state funding formula to give school districts more flexibility in how they invest resources to meet locally defined goals. To date, this policy framework has lacked a vision of what continuous improvement looks like at the school level. Perhaps as a result, there is a growing sentiment that the state-level investments in continuous improvement in California have not been successful in permeating to the school level (Fensterwald, 2023), especially in the critical areas of teaching and learning and in the state’s lowest performing schools (Hough et al., 2017).

The IAM pilot was explicitly designed to respond to the emerging need for more intensive support for some schools and districts (California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, 2022). Indeed, the districts in this pilot are some of the places where improving teaching and learning has been most difficult: all but one district is under Direct Technical Assistance with CCEE, meaning they are receiving support directly from CCEE for failing to exit differentiated assistance (DA) and are referred by their COE or the Superintendent of Public Instruction, are in fiscal receivership, or have contracted directly with CCEE for DA, and they serve a very high proportion of low-income students of color.¹ The goal is to put in place a schoolwide approach to improve teaching and learning that establishes a learning orientation (for both teachers and students), a collaborative culture, and a shared focus on results. To create this schoolwide culture, staff collectively define their school’s mission, vision, and commitments, which guide all of their subsequent implementation efforts. Once these expectations are set, teams work together to answer the four guiding questions of the PLC at Work model:

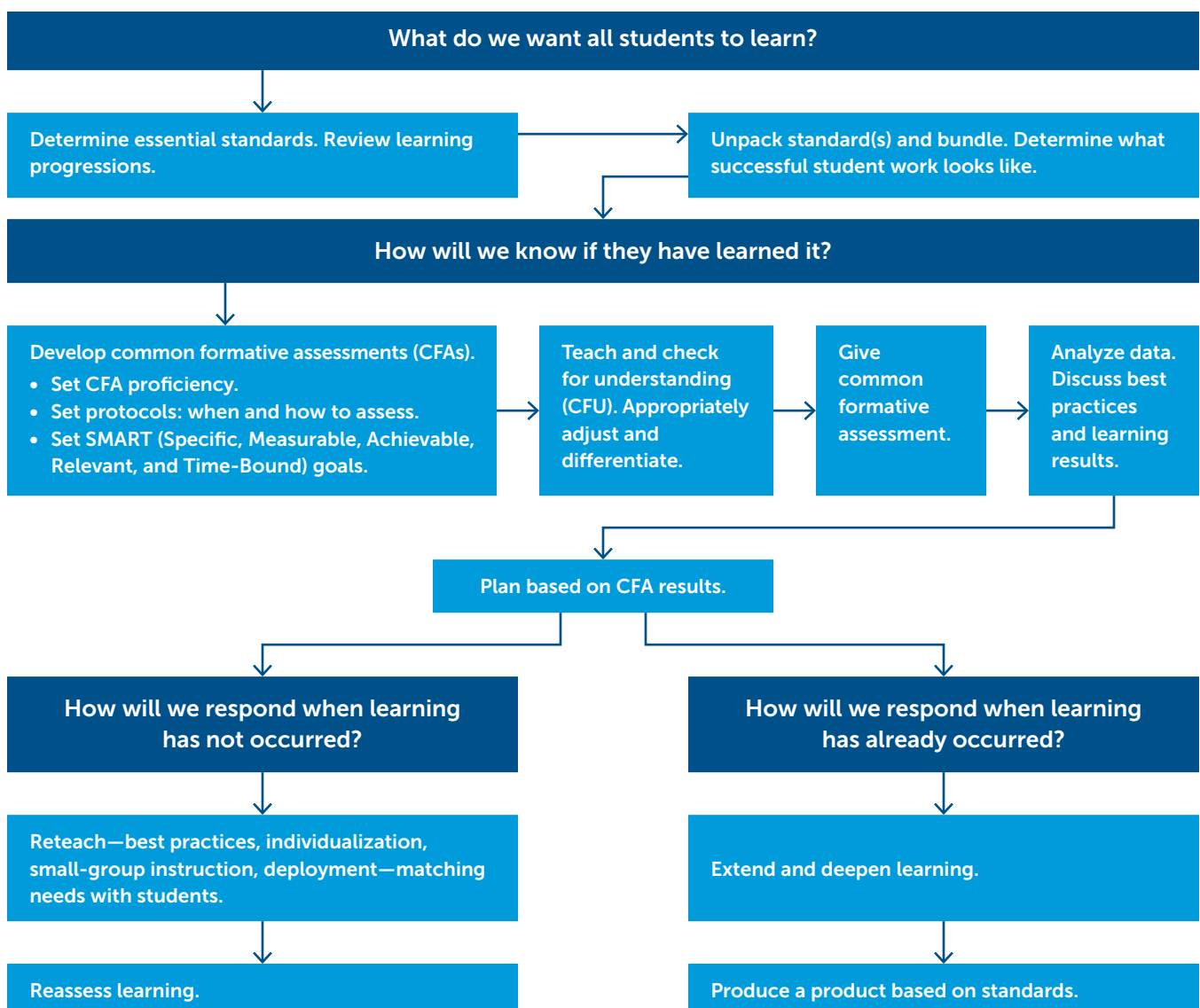
- What do we want students to learn?
- How will we know if they have learned it?
- How will we respond when learning has not occurred?
- How will we respond when learning has already occurred?

Teachers collaborate within and across grade-level teams to develop common, standards-based unit plans and assessments, to analyze evidence of student learning, and to determine student learning assets and needs. Each team then determines the best way to intervene with

¹ All but one of the participating districts were given the opportunity to join the pilot first because they were under Direct Technical Assistance; the additional district was selected to join the pilot through an open application process. All the districts split the cost of the contracting with Solution Tree with CCEE (50/50 over 3 years). Districts then selected which school(s) would participate in the project through various means; seven are elementary schools, and one is a middle school.

students and to share a collective responsibility for all students, not just those in their individual classes. Staff at pilot schools receive intensive coaching from a team of five Solution Tree coaches to develop the structures and processes needed to answer the four questions. Coaches support schools in the processes of school transformation that enable continuous improvement of teaching and learning through the model previously described. The steps taken to develop these processes are led by two critical groupings of school staff: (a) the “guiding coalition,” which includes all site leadership and representation from each grade level, and (b) the grade-level teams, which 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 specific teaching and learning process is further elaborated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. PLC at Work Model Road Map



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

Analysis of the first year of the IAM pilot, a review of literature on effective scaling of best practices, extant literature on the PLC at Work model, and interviews with staff in each of the participating districts and schools as well as with Solution Tree coaches indicate eight elements that must be present in schools for the PLC at Work or other models designed to affect student teaching and learning to succeed.

- 1. A site leadership team (guiding coalition) that represents all grades and subjects:** This team effectively leads the PLC at Work model development, regularly analyzes student learning data across the school, and helps to ensure that grade-level teams conduct high-quality meetings. The team critically engages the school community to establish a schoolwide mission, vision, and collective commitments. Members of the team develop a deep understanding of the model and can help train their peers, including onboarding new teachers into the work.
- 2. A minimum of 1 hour of collaboration time for teacher teams per week within the school day and an established culture and norms for the use of that time:** At a bare minimum, teachers must have time to collaborate with their peers during the workday as a grade-level PLC; otherwise, it is neither feasible nor sustainable for teachers to analyze students' work together and refine their instruction and interventions. Most important, however, the expectations for how this collaborative time is used must be clear: Collaborative time should focus *only* on answering the four essential questions of the PLC at Work model. This is a significant cultural shift for many schools and teachers away from using planning time for individual planning or grading. Administrators and teachers will have to hold one another accountable and on task throughout the cultural shift.
- 3. A principal who sees teacher collaboration as part of the school improvement plan and holds teachers accountable for using the collaboration time appropriately and for achieving improvement:** Principals in this model must serve as the instructional leaders of the school and prioritize their role of ensuring high-quality implementation of the PLC at Work model. In many instances, this requires principals to delegate operational tasks to other staff members so that they can participate regularly in grade-level meetings.
- 4. Common standards and curriculum:** The current California standards cover more material than can be taught deeply in an academic year. For this reason, during the first year of PLC at Work implementation, schools are required to identify "priority standards," or the content that teachers agree must be mastered by all students, and to align those standards vertically across grade levels. Narrowing the focus to agreed-upon priority standards enables the guiding coalition to establish a vertical sequence of standards across the school site and sets the stage for grade-level teams to build clear unit plans and common assessments.

5. **Common assessments:** Once priority standards are identified, grade-level teams begin constructing aligned common formative assessments (CFAs) to monitor student progress and the impact of the teaching methods. Schools can choose to modify existing assessments or develop their own aligned to priority standards, through training either with an assistance provider or with district staff.
6. **Common digital data that track progress by student, subgroup, and class/subject:** Data collection systems must be accessible by all school-site and district staff. It is the expectation in PLC at Work schools that all staff are collectively responsible for every student, which requires transparent sharing of information on student progress and the teaching methods used. These information systems should include student achievement data on CFAs in addition to common planning materials and curricular and intervention resources. At a minimum, student data is shared and discussed in regular grade-level PLC meetings and systematically aggregated schoolwide.
7. **Systematic, immediate, and personalized interventions shared across all teachers and staff for students who do not reach learning targets:** These supports will be developed primarily in Years 2 and 3 of the pilot and require that schools have in place systems for Tier 2 interventions (instructional support for students outside of core instructional time, often in small groups) and Tier 3 interventions (more intensive support for students with significant or chronic learning needs, often individualized support with trained specialists) as determined from student outcomes on CFAs and district benchmarks.
8. **Intensive support from content-level experts and coaches for teachers and leadership teams:** Implementation of the PLC at Work model requires a deep understanding of how school systems need to be structured to support the continuous improvement of teaching and learning. This includes expertise in how to lead PLCs, analyze student data, and provide high-quality instruction. Because the PLC at Work model is quite different from how schools are normally organized, schools can rarely make these transitions on their own; intensity of coaching is key to building the capacity to sustain this work, and that coaching must be reinforced by school leadership and the guiding coalition.

Many local educational agencies across California would say that they have PLCs in place, but the effective implementation of the PLC at Work model is structurally different from how schools are typically organized. This model shifts schools from the traditional system of largely independent instructors to a community with collective responsibility for all students and their achievement. One coach explained:

Teachers have been taught that the work is done individually. Every movie out there about the greatest teacher on the planet is an individual. You never see a team. The "hero teacher" is just this person that dedicates their entire life and just does everything for the kids in their classroom that year. This [model] is saying teachers

can be empowered to work together to create student learning, and the more that you work together, the higher student learning that you will see, and the easier the pathway to success is. But at no point in time do I believe any teacher out there is doing a poor job on purpose. It is simply [that] they are thrown a lot of different things, and there's no strategic plan for how to implement student success.

These shifts in culture and practice are not easy to make, and the support provided to educators in each school is intensive and is aligned with what research indicates are best practices in professional development (see the textbox on page 10). Grade-level team meetings in model PLC at Work schools are highly structured and are focused on teaching and learning. In each meeting, teachers discuss what standards will be taught and what data will help them know whether students have learned the content. They then review student work and assessments, discuss what teaching practices were most effective, and determine the next steps for student intervention. Within the pilot, these meetings are supported by a Solution Tree coach, and school administrators are expected to attend regularly to learn the process alongside teachers. In this model, teachers share a collective responsibility for all students, and all staff are expected to support interventions across the school, whether a student is rostered in their class or not. The grade-level team examines student data together to identify the additional supports that students need, including resources that need to be tapped across the school (e.g., leveraging existing structures such as Multi-Tiered System of Supports or Response to Intervention models), and determines who is responsible for making sure that the appropriate adults are informed of a student's need for a specific intervention. In this way, all the available resources and capacities for intervening with students are systematically leveraged in a school, as opposed to a teacher being responsible for all the potentially needed interventions for the students in a single classroom. Teachers develop new knowledge together, in ways that are deeply embedded in their day-to-day work.

Throughout PACE's interviews with participants, we consistently heard that the model refines their systems focused on "how" the adults in the school collaborate around teaching and learning to best serve students, leaving the "what" of curriculum and instructional decisions up to the teachers working directly with students. The model empowers teachers as instructional experts to decide how to best deliver content and engage students. The structures and processes of the model require reflection on the effectiveness of those strategies, as evidenced by student outcomes and a collective response to intervene as needed, which ultimately drives the improvement of teaching and learning.

How Teachers Learn: What We Know About Professional Development

A review of professional development research indicates that effective professional development incorporates most of the following elements: (a) it is content focused; (b) it incorporates active learning; (c) it supports collaboration; (d) it uses models of effective practice; (e) it provides coaching and expert support; (f) it offers feedback and reflection; and (g) it is of sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

In contrast to the “one shot” model of professional development, in which a teacher attends a 1-day workshop, embedded professional development that results in changes in practice reflects an ongoing cycle that includes the following:

- introducing and learning, where educators build knowledge about the new approach and see examples of others demonstrating specific aspects of it;
- heavily scaffolding practice, where educators have opportunities to explore key ideas in simulations and practice discrete skills before combining them into an overall approach;
- practicing in context, where educators get to try out the new ideas in their own teaching; and
- analyzing practice and consolidating learning, where feedback and reflection support teachers in recognizing aspects of practice they are enacting well and how they could further improve (Gallagher & Cottingham, 2019).

Most professional development lacks sufficient opportunities for iterative cycles of practice in context and for analyzing practice to consolidate learning. As a result, much of teacher professional development is ineffective at improving teacher practice (Timperley et al., 2007; TNTP, 2015). Stand-alone professional workshops are contained and convenient to schedule; however, these opportunities do not provide the time, structure, and support that result in robust, sustained professional learning (Wei et al., 2009, p. 36). Teachers need time to reflect on and learn from their practices, to co-plan instructional activities, and to collect and analyze data. Collaboration can lead to improvements in teacher practice and student learning when it is highly structured and focused around how changes in teacher practices will improve students’ experiences and outcomes (Cordingley, 2015).

Evidence of Success From Pilot Sites and the Field

The PLC at Work model for school-level improvement has led to measurable impacts on student achievement in schools across California and the country (California Department of Education, 2023a). Here in California, the impact of the PLC at Work model in Sanger Unified School District has been lauded and was highlighted by the Department of Education as an exemplary practice for other districts to model their own work after. As of 2022–23, 30 California schools are designated as “model PLC at Work schools,” meaning they have increased percentages of students meeting or exceeding grade-level readiness on a district, state, or federal assessment and have maintained those gains for at least 3 years (Solution Tree, 2023). In one state, Arkansas, the Department of Education has gone a step further and has actively used the PLC at Work model to improve schools across the state, with the effect of documented improvement of (a) student academic outcomes and overall engagement, (b) teacher understanding of instructional expectations and high-quality intervention practices, and (c) school culture and establishment of a sense of shared responsibility for all students to succeed (Education Northwest, 2021).

It is early in the process for the IAM pilot; however, the schools are already showing evidence of transformation. In Year 1, schools are expected to define their mission, build capacity around fundamental collaborative processes and improvement, identify schoolwide essential standards, and begin developing unit plans and CFAs around those standards, which all eight participating schools accomplished. In Year 2, the schools will structure and carry out interventions for students. Year 3 serves as a time to refine the resources, structures, and processes created in Years 1 and 2 while the schools still have access to intensive coaching support. It is anticipated that the greatest growth in student achievement will occur in Years 2 and 3 as teachers and students become more familiar with the improvement systems.

During the first year, the work has been difficult for participants and requires a massive investment of practitioners’ time and energy. One teacher described the challenge of shifting adult behaviors and mindsets to realize the PLC at Work model:

I’m not going to lie and say it was easy, it was very hard. ... Sometimes there is pushback from teammates. ... There is a lot of collaboration. And sometimes a lot of teachers do want their time just to be able to grade some papers that they don’t want to take home at the end of the day.

But across all schools, we are seeing evidence of the cultural and structural shifts needed for successful implementation. One district leader described their assessment of the impact of Year 1 of the pilot:

Even though they're only in Year 1, I continue to see the power of the work that's happening in [the school] at this point, through the excitement and the ownership that I see on the part of the principal and the teachers, and just the energy that they have for the work, their belief system about "if we just stay at it, and look, student by student, we're going to be able to move everyone to proficient."

The school leaders and coaches we interviewed reported that teachers were feeling more supported and empowered to improve student learning and had made positive changes in their own teaching practices based on collaboration with their peers. Five of the eight participating schools shared evidence of improved student academic outcomes across various assessments—including i-Ready, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), and grade-level CFAs—because of implementation of the PLC at Work model. At this stage, these positive gains were inconsistent and generally confined to a few grade-level teams. All participants acknowledged they had a long way to go to become model schools and show consistent student gains across the board. To realize the potential of the model, there is a need for the district office to align resources, remove barriers, and buffer school sites from other policy initiatives so that school sites can maintain their focus on improving their systems for effective teaching and learning.

The Role of Districts: Active Participation That Facilitates Scaling

Districts have a critical role to play if schools in the IAM pilot are to positively transform teaching and learning; the school-based work cannot succeed without strong district leadership and support. Districts generally play an essential role in determining the direction of schools in their jurisdiction and establishing the foundational conditions that can enable or unintentionally impede school improvement (Myung et al., 2020). The challenge for districts is in ensuring quality of implementation at the school site and ultimately supporting scaling of best practices districtwide. The district office must collaborate with schools to establish a shared purpose and a culture of trust as well as to reinforce professional learning and collaborative structures in the same way teachers are being asked to collaborate with peers within the school-based improvement model. This includes protecting the work that schools are taking on, tightening the focus on teaching and learning, and not introducing additional or competing initiatives. In the case of this (or any) pilot, districts have a responsibility to collect data on the efficacy of the pilot and build plans to expand and sustain the work if the pilot is successful (Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia at SRI International, 2021).

Districts in the CCEE pilot have already started taking some of these actions towards scale. After the first year of the pilot, each district is expanding its engagement with the work in some capacity, either through additional training or by adding school sites in Year 2. As we think about further scale within and across California districts, PACE has compiled the specific actions that

districts can take to support the development of the depth, ownership, spread, and sustainability necessary for effective scaling of the essential school practices that support improved systems for teaching and learning, first within the pilot school and ultimately throughout the district (see Table 1).²

Table 1. District Actions in Support of Scaling the PLC at Work Model

Essential school element	District actions supporting scale
(1) A site leadership team (guiding coalition) that represents all grades/ subjects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A district leadership team (district guiding coalition) models the processes expected of the school guiding coalition. It has representatives from each school site as well as district staff and administration. This team regularly and collaboratively analyzes student learning data and develops districtwide goals and focal areas accordingly. • The district guiding coalition sets and communicates expectations for conducting site-level guiding coalitions, and monitors and gives feedback on guiding coalition meetings. “Leaders can’t be afraid of powerful verbs such as expect, require, and support” (Eaker et al., 2021, p. 17).
(2) A minimum of 1 hour of collaboration time for teacher teams per week within the school day and established culture and norms for the use of that time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District leaders adjust master schedules to give teams time to collaborate, ensuring that students receive effective interventions as needed. • District leaders collaborate with the union early in the process to negotiate for planning time with the clear expectation that time is for examining student data, co-planning, and determining interventions for students. • District staff attend site-level guiding coalition and grade-level meetings to monitor progress and give feedback on PLC implementation, including providing additional resources and protecting the time from infringement.
(3) A principal who sees teacher collaboration as part of the school improvement plan and holds teachers accountable for using the collaboration time appropriately and for achieving improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district provides training for principals to understand the core PLC concepts (e.g., through developing principal teams for shared learning about PLC processes and practices) and clearly communicates that principals are expected to enhance the performance of each team within their school—the goal is to create a cadre of experts at the principal level. • The district anticipates needs of site administrators and prepares principals to communicate with and train their site-level teams about the PLC processes and district responses to student outcomes. • The district embeds the processes/outcomes of the school-level PLC processes into annual evaluations with the expectation that the principal is responsible for the ultimate effectiveness of each team. • The district limits new initiatives, allowing site-level teams to focus on high-quality implementation of the PLC at Work model.
(4) Common standards and curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district ensures that a guaranteed and viable curriculum is in place at every grade level and course (Tier 1 core content). • If the district has already identified essential standards, the district provides opportunities for school staff to iterate on existing standards materials. • If the district has not already identified essential standards, the district facilitates districtwide conversation across schools to identify these standards and vertically sequence them across all grade levels.

² PACE’s lessons here come from our review of extant literature around scale, piloting of reforms, interviews with district leaders that have scaled the model, and Solution Tree’s literature around districtwide PLC at Work practices, specifically Eaker et al., 2021.

Essential school element	District actions supporting scale
(5) Common assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district provides training for sites to develop CFAs and gives feedback on them in grade-level and/or site-level guiding coalition meetings. • The district expects principals to share CFA data in district leadership meetings to help determine overall district trends. • The district works with school sites to align district assessments with CFAs at school sites and around the essential standards previously identified. • The district establishes a calendar for district assessments aligned to progressions of essential standards.
(6) Common digital data that track progress by student, by subgroup, and by class/subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district manages a data system that can consistently provide reports on student outcomes after any districtwide assessment to inform resource allocation and capacity-building initiatives. • The district ensures that schools are creating an online repository of student-outcome data on CFAs that is available for district staff as well as other school sites in the district. • The district clearly and regularly communicates learnings from district data with stakeholders (teachers, administrators, school board members, unions, parents, etc.) and prepares site leaders with next steps to address needs identified in the data analysis. • The district models and provides ongoing feedback around research-based and data-driven decision-making. • The district regularly monitors and publicly celebrates improvement.
(7) Systematic, immediate, and personalized interventions shared across all teachers and staff for students who do not reach learning targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district ensures that there is adequate staffing to provide immediate, personalized support for students who need it. • The district sets expectations, monitors impact, and provides feedback and training on how to implement a system to give immediate, personalized support for students. • The district-level team identifies overall district trends in student data and provides support for sites to address those student needs (e.g., additional resources, support staff, professional development).
(8) Intensive support from content-level experts and coaches for teachers and leadership teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district develops the capacity of content-level experts within the district who can deploy district-level instructional support (e.g., coaches, teachers on special assignment, other technical assistance providers) to high-need schools or teams. • District staff who support site teams undergo PLC at Work training around the creation and facilitation of a high-quality PLC and actively participate in Solution Tree coaching with site-level teams. District staff have ideally been part of a school transformation to a model PLC at Work school.

The ramifications of not taking proactive steps to leverage school-based learning for districtwide scale are that systems improvement fails to materialize and the few bright spots that emerge quickly fade. Chino Valley Unified School District (USD) experienced this fade-out when it first implemented the PLC at Work model 17 years ago, but the district was able to restart the work successfully because of a district plan for scale and sustainability that has positively affected student outcomes. The actions that this district took helped schools to focus on the work of teaching and learning and ensured that their district system supports scaling of high-quality practices across sites (see textbox on page 15).

The Chino Valley Story: Supporting the Improvement of Teaching and Learning at a District Scale

District leadership in Chino Valley USD credited the PLC at Work model for the district's improved overall ELA and math scores coming out of the pandemic.³ Initial implementation 17 years ago began without a plan for scale, and as a result, the vision of learning for all quickly fizzled, leaving pockets of teams on their own to identify and respond collectively to student learning needs. However, 6 years ago, the model was revived by new district leaders who were present in the district as part of the first iteration. One of those individuals, Dr. Grace Park, is currently associate superintendent. She articulates the major shifts that the district made around the PLC at Work model, which helped this work effectively scale across the district in its second iteration:

[For this work] to be effectively implemented at the school site, PLC needs to be a priority by top district leadership. If this is not a communicated priority, your schools will know because there are always competing initiatives that will get in the way, and the work will fold very quickly, like it did in our district about 17 years ago. When top leadership consistently communicates PLC as a priority, helps monitor the work that we value, and provides feedback for elevating the work, we can shape the conditions for elevating student learning.

When the first attempt failed, district leaders learned that they must take a much more proactive role in supporting implementation at schools. To this end, the district now communicates clear expectations for staff and ensures that they receive regular feedback around the quality of implementation as evidenced by student outcomes (Gallagher et al., 2017; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008; Van Veen et al., 2012). Here we highlight several of those practices.

³ From pre-pandemic testing in 2019 to when testing resumed in 2023, Chino Valley USD achieved minor gains in ELA and math achievement on the California SBAC while the state as a whole and the county of San Bernardino both saw declines. Between 2019 and 2023, Chino Valley gained 2.3 percentage points in ELA, compared to a decline of 4.4 and 5.3 percentage points for the state and San Bernardino County, respectively. In math, Chino Valley's scores increased by 0.1 percentage point, compared to a decline of 5.1 and 5.4 percentage points for the state and San Bernardino County, respectively. In the district, Asian American, Filipino, Latinx, and White students as well as students experiencing homelessness and socioeconomically disadvantaged students have outpaced students in the same subgroups state- and countywide in both ELA and math, although the performance of the district's English learners is behind the county, and the achievement of Black students and students with disabilities declined relative to the same subgroups at the state and county levels over this time (California Department of Education, n.d.).

Communication of clear expectations:

- Include district leadership, union representation, district coaches, and school administrators alongside teachers in training around the model so there is a coherent understanding of what high-quality implementation looks like and to establish common expectations.
- Provide training on the model to all new hires and provide ongoing coaching to guiding coalition teams, including the district and each school-site team, to ensure that best practices are sustained.
- Emphasize, in school board meetings, the importance of the PLC at Work model and highlight student achievement across the district.
- Codify district expectations for PLCs into a one-pager that is shared with all staff and that guides walk-through observations and coaching.

Systematic monitoring of quality as evidenced in student outcomes:

- Have district staff regularly attend meetings at each site, including guiding coalition and school-site leadership team meetings.
- Align district assessments to revised district essential standards that were established by school-site staff with district support.
- Ensure principals bring team plans, products of PLC implementation, and CFA data to district guiding coalition meetings to describe the status of teaching and learning at the site.

Multiple opportunities for feedback and support to improve implementation:

- District coaches spend a significant amount of their time on campuses supporting and coaching in PLC meetings and doing walk-throughs at schools.
- Content-area coaches are deployed to support teams as determined by CFA and district interim data on student outcomes.
- Principals are expected to serve as the leaders of teaching and learning at each site and regularly attend department-level PLCs, which often requires principals to delegate operational day-to-day needs to other staff.

The process of building capacity around teaching and learning never ends, so district offices must continually reinforce their practices, first to enable effective practices to scale to other sites and, ultimately, to sustain the PLC structures that are shown to have a positive effect on student learning.

Barriers to Implementation and Districtwide Scale

PACE observed several barriers to scale across the eight schools in the five districts participating in the IAM pilot project. If unaddressed, these barriers can prevent successful adoption of models designed to affect teaching and learning and can lessen the likelihood of positively affecting student achievement or scaling beyond the pilot schools.

Lack of Access to Collaboration Time

In districts without at least 1 hour of dedicated time for PLC planning per week, facilitating the improvement work at a school site was extremely difficult and sometimes impossible, despite positive feelings about the work. Master schedules must be adjusted to give teams time to collaborate and provide effective interventions to students as needed. The level of implementation of schools with dedicated collaborative time in the school day (e.g., specials such as art, music, and physical education) was markedly farther along compared to sites where such time was absent. Ideally, collaborative time should occur during the school day because the time and monetary costs of keeping teachers after school lower the likelihood of sustaining the work.

Insufficient Staff to Support Improvement Efforts

The lack of staff to provide coverage for teachers while they were either receiving training or collaboratively planning also negatively affected implementation. Staffing shortages are well documented in California (California Department of Education, 2023d; Carver-Thomas et al., 2022), and several districts said that they were unable to secure enough substitutes so that teachers could attend training and collaboration sessions. One of the Solution Tree coaches noted how the lack of staff in California stands in stark contrast to other states:

I've talked to all the principals I work with in California, and it's very difficult with their staffing to make room for additional instructional people for support, like interventionists. ... There seems to be a high shortage of people to hire. Even if there is money and it is posted, [the open position] sits there for a while.

A lack of specialists and interventionists means teachers in California are generally also responsible for Tier 2 and 3 interventions for students on top of first instruction and do not have protected time for collaboration with peers during the school day, both of which threaten the overall sustainability of the model.

Incoherence Between Districts, Support Providers, and School-Based Work

Project participants in the CCEE pilot shared that a lack of understanding on the part of district staff and incoherent support from multiple technical assistance providers were significant barriers to implementation. District leadership must be made aware of the significant resource requirements for implementation of the PLC at Work model—or other models with iterative feedback for teachers—and give pilot schools the flexibility to prioritize implementation of the PLC at Work model over other initiatives. In at least two of the participating districts, multiple technical assistance providers and district support staff—19 different coaches across multiple initiatives in one district—were pushing simultaneously into school sites, causing confusion and frustration for school staff. To prevent confusion and avoid the risk of undermining multiple initiatives, districts can support schools by clearly articulating to assistance providers, including district and county coaches, the “loose” aspects of the PLC at Work model they can modify and the “tights” that are a nonnegotiable part of how the schools and district operate.

Cost of Intensive Coaching

The intensive intervention is prohibitively costly for some districts, and paying for multiple schools to have the same level of high-touch support is not feasible for scale in all districts. The cost of each school participating in this pilot totals \$939,950 over 3 years for 40–50 days of on-site coaching, with CCEE covering 50 percent of the costs for these pilot sites (California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, n.d.). The funds for the model project come predominantly from rollover COVID-19 response dollars that will not be available in future years. Implementing this model at a lower cost or with district coaches may increase the feasibility of scaling to other districts but reduces access to the Solution Tree coaches and their expertise in successfully leading school transformations.

Challenge in Scaling to Schools With Less Ideal Conditions

In most districts, the pilot sites are some of the most highly stable schools in the district, with an existing collaborative culture and committed teachers and leadership. There is a concern that selecting the invested schools from low-performing districts, including districts that are in fiscal receivership, does not serve as a helpful “model” from which to scale since most of the schools in underperforming districts are also underperforming. There appear to be some foundational conditions that need to be met for a school to engage productively in the coaching for the PLC at Work model, and those conditions should ideally match the conditions at sites where the work is expected to scale next. Understanding if these selected schools can serve as models for their peers will be monitored in Years 2 and 3 of the IAM pilot.

Next Steps for Scale

The PLC at Work model is tightly aligned with the tenets of continuous improvement and local control that undergird California’s current policy approach. This model can be successfully employed alongside any curriculum or materials, and the specific structures are designed to fit within local contexts. Furthermore, this model firmly places teachers in the driver’s seat, shifting school systems to empower them to make instructional decisions as a collaborative team examining, and accelerating, student outcomes. For this reason, the model has great potential to improve teaching and learning throughout California schools and districts.

The kinds of shifts inherent to this model require significant capacity within districts and schools to do things differently. The work of the first year of the IAM pilot highlights how district offices must support teaching and learning initiatives within schools—whether for this model or others—if policies are to be successfully implemented, scaled, and sustained. The lessons learned in Year 1 can benefit schools and districts now in the process of transforming their systems for teaching and learning and are aligned with what research shows are best practices for scaling educational initiatives. Our students need help catching up from the pandemic, and the strategies outlined in this brief can help districts improve systems for teaching and learning and accelerate that process now.

In the two remaining years of the pilot, PACE will continue to monitor the implementation of this instructional improvement work at the school and district levels but will also begin looking at how the state as a whole can support such initiatives at scale. Ultimately, we must strengthen and align our systems at the school, district, county, and state levels to center student learning, build educators’ and administrators’ capacity, and use feedback loops with students, families, educators, and community members to improve policies and structures at all levels of the education system. This integration and coherence are necessary to achieve the kind of improvements in student outcomes that we need at this critical juncture.

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