

Early Indicators of Systemic Improvement

A Case Study of Two High-Poverty School Districts

Benjamin W. Cottingham
Kiley O'Meara
H. Alix Gallagher



March 2022

Early Indicators of Systemic Improvement

A Case Study of Two High-Poverty School Districts

Benjamin W. Cottingham, Kiley O'Meara, and H. Alix Gallagher

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express appreciation to Azusa Unified School District, Dinuba Unified School District, and California Education Partners for sharing their work. This report, like all PACE publications, has been thoroughly reviewed for factual accuracy and research integrity. The authors assume full responsibility for the accuracy of the report contents.

Suggested Citation

Cottingham, B. W., O'Meara, K., and Gallagher, H. A. (March 2022). *Early indicators of systemic improvement: A case study of two high-poverty school districts* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/early-indicators-systemic-improvement

Executive Summary

This report examines two districts—Azusa Unified and Dinuba Unified—that have begun to shift district structures, policies, and culture to have a measurable effect on student outcomes. Both districts have committed to reducing the D/F rate for students (eighth graders in Dinuba and ninth graders in Azusa) as part of a learning community led by California Education Partners (Ed Partners). The districts have collaborated with Ed Partners for multiple years to refine their continuous improvement approach and build capacity for sustained improvement. Although neither district has realized its improvement goals, student academic outcomes in the districts have begun trending in a positive direction. The improvement teams have started to spread proven practices with the support of system leaders throughout each district. PACE’s data show that staff in each district—including those who have never worked directly with Ed Partners—have begun to internalize continuous improvement structures and processes and are now scaling these processes to address other problems of practice, even those beyond instruction.

The goal of this report is to examine the leading indicators for how improvement efforts can support organizational coherence, improve instruction, and positively affect student outcomes. PACE’s analysis of interviews and observations in Azusa and Dinuba revealed three key lessons that districts can take to lead impactful improvement efforts:

- anchor work in outcome measures to motivate educators, support learning, and maintain focus;
- invest in an aligned system of instructional learning to support teachers in improving instruction and ensure the depth of understanding, ownership, and spread necessary for scale; and
- use cross-role and cross-site structures to help spread promising practices and increase sustainability.

Structuring the improvement efforts around these key lessons with the support of Ed Partners has contributed to positive trends for student achievement across multiple subject areas and demographic groups. Additionally, both districts have used improvement structures and processes to empower practitioners, building their capacity to lead improvement efforts across each system. This report describes how districts can build their internal capacity for improvement with support from an external partner and highlights key lessons that other districts can apply to improve student outcomes and their systems overall.

Introduction

This report is one step towards bridging the gap between believing that continuous improvement *could* shift educational outcomes and learning what it looks like when districts actually *do* improve outcomes with help from external support providers. In recent decades, the concept of “continuous improvement” has gained momentum in education. Continuous improvement is based on the idea that *systems* (not individuals) are the largest forces driving outcomes. Leaders engaged in improvement form an understanding of how a system is creating undesirable outcomes, select and test changes that are likely to improve the system, measure whether improvements occur, and use evidence to determine what practices to retain, modify, or abandon (Grunow et al., 2018). California’s local education agencies are expected to practice continuous improvement under state law, so it is critical to understand how to improve support of districts’ improvement efforts. Examples of successes exist (Bryk, 2021), but there is not yet widespread understanding about how to apply continuous improvement consistently to improve educational outcomes.

To address this gap, we selected two school districts—Azusa Unified and Dinuba Unified—where there are *leading indicators* of positive outcomes because studying these districts can reveal the early and middle stages (respectively) of districts leading promising continuous improvement work. Neither the districts nor California Education Partners (Ed Partners) would claim that they have fully achieved their improvement goals. However, the field currently has a dearth of “in process” descriptions of systemic improvement and is overly reliant on retrospective accounts. Both districts have collaborated within improvement learning networks led by Ed Partners for multiple years to refine their approach to continuous improvement, resulting in positive student outcome trends, and they have begun to spread and scale organizational shifts in culture and processes that are critical for long-term success.

We rely on two types of leading indicators in this brief: positive trends in student outcome data attributed to intentional organizational changes and evidence aligned with Coburn’s (2003) framework for *scale*. Coburn identified four features of reform that are consistently related to substantive and long-lasting instructional improvement:

- **Depth:** Consequential reforms shift educational system beliefs, norms, and pedagogy.
- **Sustainability:** Adopted reforms are only significant if they persist over time.
- **Spread:** Principles central to the reforms are taken up by increasing numbers of people across a system *and* are embedded in formal policies and organizational culture.
- **Ownership:** Reforms are often required and/or supported by external mandates or organizations, but districts, schools, and teachers must own the reforms for them to stick.

We examined the work in Azusa and Dinuba through the lens of Coburn’s elements of scale using data from interviews (with school and district staff in Azusa and Dinuba and Ed Partners staff), artifact review, and analysis of California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) data. Interviewees included eight district and three school administrators, four district coaches, seven teachers, and eight members of Ed Partners’ staff. Although the work of these districts is unfinished, early evidence shows that teachers are invested in and own the work, student outcomes are improving, and best practices are spreading throughout the districts.

Dinuba Unified and Azusa Unified are high-poverty California K–12 school districts located outside the two major urban centers of Fresno and Los Angeles, respectively. Table 1 lists some of the relevant district characteristics.

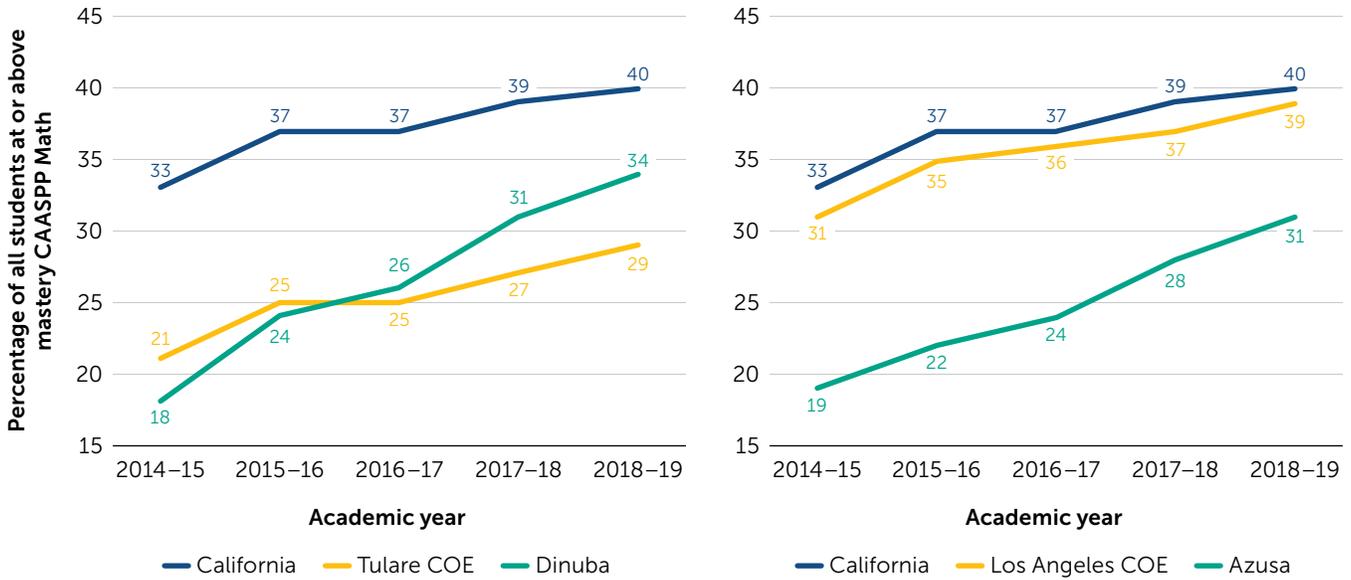
Table 1. Characteristics of Azusa and Dinuba School Districts

District characteristics	Azusa	Dinuba
Number of schools	16	10
Enrollment (2020–21)	7,729	6,670
Percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students	86	83
Percentage of Latinx students	67	84
Percentage of English learners	24	33

Dinuba first partnered with Ed Partners in 2013 with a focus on improving math outcomes, and Azusa began in 2016 with a focus on academic language development in all subjects for Latinx students. Each district has expanded its work with Ed Partners to new learning networks, including those focused on student readiness for the transition from eighth to ninth grade, college and career readiness, and curriculum coherence from preK through third grade. Adding new teams to each of these networks has increased the number of staff in each district who have practical experience with leading improvement efforts and has built on prior improvement efforts, leading to gradual student growth and system change.

Both districts had relatively low student outcomes relative to their counties and the state when they began working with Ed Partners. Figure 1 compares the percentage of students scoring at or above mastery on the CAASPP math test in Dinuba and Azusa (green), respectively, to their county percentage (yellow) and the state percentage overall (blue) for each school year from 2014–15 to 2018–19. Both districts have improved student outcomes at a faster rate than the county and state.

Figure 1. Improved Student Outcomes in Dinuba (left) and Azusa (right) School Districts Compared With County and State Outcomes



Source: California Department of Education CAASPP Database.

Dinuba’s overall passing rate in math increased by 16 points over five years compared with increases of 8 points at the county level and 7 points at the state level, closing the gap with the state by 60 percent. Dinuba now has a higher passing rate than the county and has cut the gap with the state in half. Azusa has similarly improved math passing rates for students overall: a 12-point increase compared with increases of 8 points and 7 points at the county and state levels, respectively, closing the gap with the state by one third. We also saw similar trends in ELA and for Latinx students, who make up most English learners in these two districts and were a focus of the California Language and Learning Innovation (CALLI) collaborative. District staff referenced early signs of positive ELA growth according to multiple interim district measures, such as MAP Growth, Achieve3000, and STAR Reading.

Staff in each district also cited qualitative evidence of improved student learning opportunities from classroom observations, or “walkthroughs,” and videos of teacher practice and student engagement. One teacher explained: “We are seeing huge gains in our students’ language development, especially with our English learners ... systematically and intentionally using specific language frames and teaching them conversation skills.” These data suggest that improvement efforts have accelerated the growth of student outcomes and are now driving the spread of improvement capacities in each district.

The Role of California Education Partners

Ed Partners is an external support provider that leads 3- to 5-year learning networks, or *collaborations*, of districts focused on problems of practice such as improving the number of students on track for college to increasing coherence from preK to third grade. Collaborations share many common structures with broader ideas about networked improvement communities (Bryk et al., 2015); each Ed Partners collaboration has a shared outcome focus, and districts test strategies and learn from one another's efforts to meet the goal.

Key Features of an Ed Partners Collaboration

As the "hub" of the collaboration, Ed Partners

- convenes districts three times each year;
- provides each district with a program manager (PM) who differentiates support for district needs (e.g., scaffolded coaching for team leads, facilitation of team meetings, co-design of improvement cycles with measurable goals, and data analysis);
- connects teams with expert thought partners through shared learning opportunities (SLOs) to help identify, test, and analyze research-supported change ideas; and
- offers ongoing improvement training, data support, and tools and frameworks to scaffold improvement work to meet districts where they have need.

Participating districts form an *improvement team* composed of leaders from multiple levels of the system (e.g., classroom, school, and district). Each team has a specified lead who works closely with the Ed Partners PM to organize and drive the improvement work forward. Teams are expected to meet between convenings to test change ideas for their practice and examine data on the effectiveness of their implementations and effects on student outcomes.

The structures described in the text box are like those seen in many improvement networks, but Ed Partners' application and use of those structures are what distinguish its approach from others. Our analyses suggest that there are five key principles of the Ed Partners approach:¹

¹ We describe these and other strategies that support districts and schools taking up continuous improvement in a spring 2022 PACE report.

- **Focusing on student outcomes oriented towards a shared collaborative aim:** Teams are expected to connect any tested change idea to its intended impact on student outcomes. Changes in distinct structures, processes, and adult behaviors are critical for system reform but are not ends in and of themselves. An Ed Partners leader explained: “That [student outcomes] aim is central because it implies you’ve got to keep going back and have something to measure that you can actually put your finger on and say you did it or you didn’t. As opposed to ... trying to measure adult capacities. But what changed for the kids?” A shared focus on student outcomes serves as an anchor for assessing whether changes are implemented well enough to make a difference for students and provides a common aim for districts to work from and learn from one another.
- **Emphasizing the development of a logical plan to meet the aim, including measures of implementation and interim outcomes to assess progress:** Ed Partners supports districts to build on existing knowledge rather than innovating idiosyncratically. Districts pilot ideas with small sets of educators so that they can be tested and adapted to context. If outcomes do not change, the idea is adapted or abandoned; but if it does improve student outcomes, the system has gained knowledge about the conditions (e.g., teacher professional learning) necessary to ensure high-quality implementation that improves student outcomes. Ed Partners encourages districts to use existing information streams first (e.g., data from curriculum-embedded assessments) when possible, prior to developing new data streams that can cause confusion and be a barrier to sustaining practice.
- **Helping districts select research-based change ideas so they avoid wasting effort “reinventing the wheel”:** Although there are constant calls for districts to select “evidence-based” approaches, in practice it is difficult for educators to sift through the vast array of existing evidence to choose ideas that are most likely to work in their context. Ed Partners gives districts opportunities to learn from vetted experts in the field through SLOs, in which experts present and discuss with larger groups, and through individualized site-based coaching. These supports ensure that Ed Partners collaborations are rooted in both deep knowledge of instruction and continuous improvement processes. Once districts select research-based ideas, those ideas are tested through the continuous improvement process, and implementation is refined until they either improve performance or are purposely abandoned.
- **Scaffolding districts to apply continuous improvement through more differentiated supports and fewer tools and frameworks:** Continuous improvement requires a departure from the norm, so success rests on people’s ability to learn and adopt new skills, practices, and mindsets. Ed Partners facilitates these changes via their coaches, who differentiate for each team, meeting them where they are. Continuous improvement tools are shared in a simple, practical manner, emphasizing common sense instead of overwhelming educators with complexity and technical terminology.

- **Prioritizing sustainability from the start:** Ed Partners' goal is to not be needed in the long term, so a clear plan for transferring full ownership of change management to the district must be in place from the start. Ed Partners puts "their shoulder to the district's wheel," helping districts weave improvement approaches into their existing priorities instead of presenting their work as a new initiative. Ed Partners understands that while teachers possess the greatest expertise on daily instruction, early and continued leadership support is critical to remove barriers, communicate to stakeholders, and align resources and priorities for systemic coherence. Finally, Ed Partners focuses on the practical rather than the perfect by helping districts prioritize: "You can do anything, but you can't do everything." Ed Partners realizes that if the amount of work required to implement or test a change is too great, it's not a viable option for sustainable change.

Districts Emphasize Coherence Around Improving Student Outcomes

In this section, we identify three lessons evidenced in the ongoing work across Azusa Unified and Dinuba Unified School Districts, supported by Ed Partners, for maintaining coherent alignment across improvement efforts to have a positive effect on student achievement outcomes:

- anchor work in outcome measures to motivate educators, support learning, and maintain focus;
- invest in an aligned system of instructional learning to support teachers in improving instruction and ensure the depth of understanding, ownership, and spread necessary for scale; and
- use cross-role and cross-site structures to help spread promising practices and increase sustainability.

The ideas undergirding the work that these districts are engaging in are not novel, nor have either of these districts discovered a "silver bullet" or secret quick fix. What is different from other improvement efforts is the districts' purposeful focus on aligning all work with student achievement instead of getting sidetracked by policy shifts or system disruptions. They have steadily employed research-supported methods to do the difficult work of changing classroom practice instead of focusing on more accessible tweaks around the edges. These districts have broken down traditional silos of roles and hierarchies, lifting teacher leadership to drive the process of change continuously, instead of relying on top-down mandates to drive change. Their work is incomplete, but their learnings offer a path towards impactful continuous improvement.

Lesson 1: Anchor Work in Outcome Measures to Motivate Educators, Support Learning, and Maintain Focus

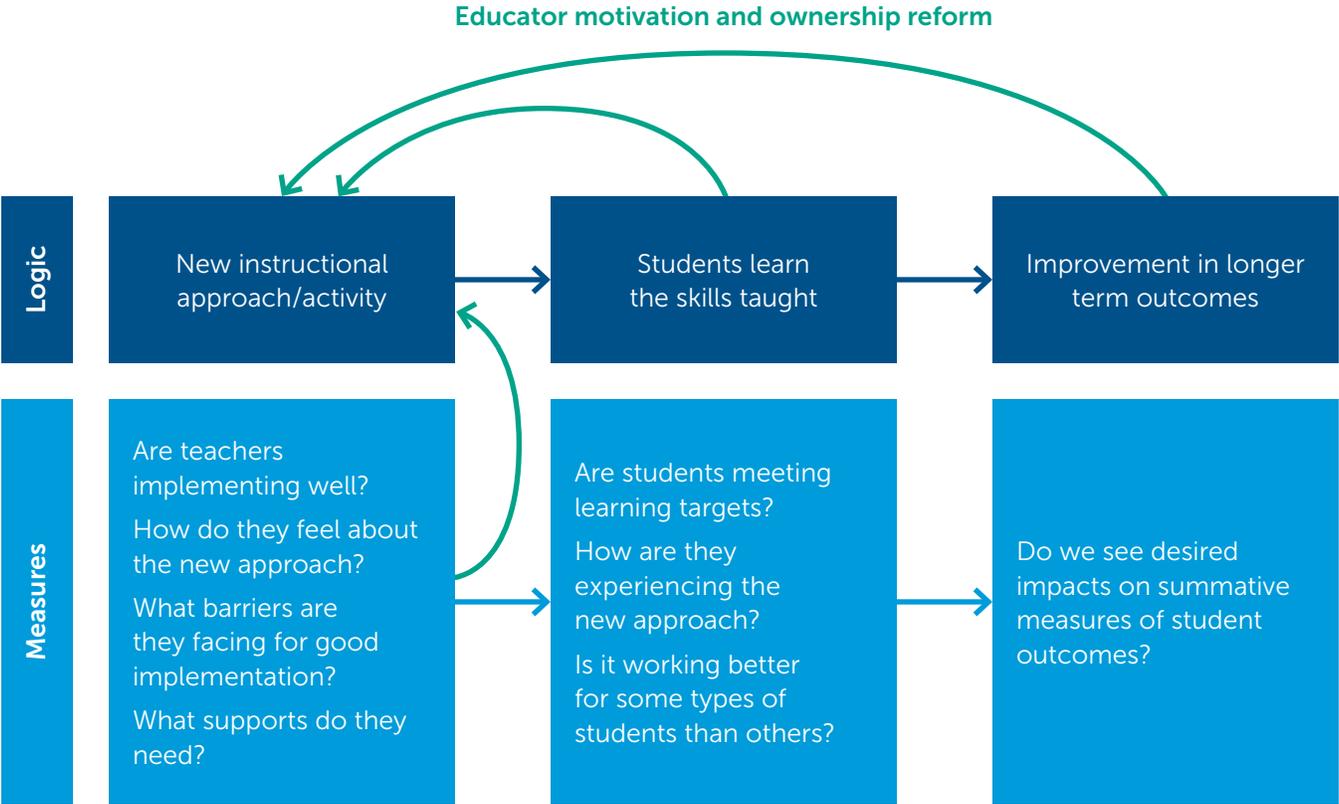
Azusa and Dinuba use a wider variety of measures across their systems than are traditionally used, and they align data collection and analysis with the changes they are testing. When measurements are aligned with an explicit theory of action, they help promote coherence and transparency across the system. While this may sound like common sense, it's much easier for districts to function in "reaction" mode, moving from crisis to crisis and continually shifting priorities. In education, measurement often increases that frenzy because the most used measures (e.g., standardized test scores) lag too far behind instruction to inform improvement and are affected by a broad array of factors outside of educators' control. These districts have conducted systemic audits and added or aligned measurements such that they continually inform both instruction and structural decisions.

Districts leverage student outcomes rather than participation requirements to build enthusiastic participation. A traditional challenge of instructional reform is that teachers believe reform efforts will come and go and thus do not engage fully in attempting to change their practice or have insufficient support to make substantive changes in practice (Spillane et al., 2002). In these two districts, teachers lead the testing of new ideas and the dissemination of findings, investing in them as key stakeholders in the improvement process. Azusa and Dinuba avoided the common churn of reform by examining and sharing student outcomes as evidence of the effectiveness of selected change ideas to sway skeptics and reveal gaps in implementation that highlight if support is insufficient for success. Transparently sharing what does and does not work has built a willingness to participate in the work, empowering teachers to test changes that would improve their own instruction and then share those changes with their colleagues. The result is a sense of co-ownership between teachers and district leaders for leading systemwide improvement and an increasing number of teachers willing to shift their own practices and test new ideas.

Administrators in Azusa and Dinuba have let student outcomes drive teacher appetite, convincing resistant staff to implement new strategies through colleagues' endorsements and improved outcomes rather than mandates (Reeves, 2021). Teachers were not told that they had to implement any specific approaches, but once they learned instructional changes were leading to better results, they generally wanted to participate. The improvement team began with interested teachers—"pilots"—who acted as early adopters to test, adapt, and model new research-supported shifts in instruction or practice to address a specific issue area. Changes in practice that showed positive results convinced more teachers to join in the improvement effort. As one Azusa staff member put it, positive outcomes help to build a "coalition of the willing." District offices were able to spotlight these successes and provide opportunities for principals and teachers to learn what is working and put it into practice in their own sites or classrooms. Ed Partners PMs played a role in prompting leaders to share successes, communicating progress to build momentum intentionally.

Each team uses a wide variety of metrics and methods to understand the impact of improvement efforts on student achievement. Effective data use is one aspect of improvement that many districts find challenging, especially those without established data systems (Hough et al., 2017). Annual test-score data provide minimal information to inform current instruction (students typically take tests in the spring, and results become available in the fall) but have often been used to point out educators’ failings; using data for improvement requires a different approach, one tied closely to the logic of the change being tested (see Figure 2; Grunow et al., 2018; Hough et al., 2018). For members of systems to learn from their improvement processes, they need to understand quickly the impact of the changes being made. The district teams in Azusa and Dinuba collect data around three components of the change idea being tested: (a) the implementation of the change idea, or impact on adult behavior; (b) the experienced change idea in practice, or impact on student behavior; and (c) the outcomes of the change idea, or impact on student outcomes. Gathering this information throughout the testing process ensures that change ideas are applied as intended and can be more carefully modified in specific contexts to meet the needs of each classroom as well as specific student groups.

Figure 2. An Aligned System of Multiple Measures Supports Continuous Improvement



Administrators and teachers involved in the improvement work have an expansive view of data that helps them develop a clear picture of both outcomes and implementation. One administrator explained: “We talk ... in our district about the three-legged stool of data, that we want the classroom observation data, we want the interview or teacher survey data, and then we want achievement data.” Observation data yield information on instructional quality, while teacher interview or survey data help the improvement team understand implementation successes and challenges; collecting these data from teachers also helps teachers recognize how their perspectives have a direct impact on decisions about the reform, which in turn increases their ownership. Finally, student data—including curriculum-embedded, formative, and interim assessment data and grades—provide regular evidence of whether new practices improve student outcomes. By including a range of measures of student outcomes, the districts get a clear signal if the attempts at reform remain superficial—as many attempts at education reform do (Cuban, 2013; Labaree, 2010; Tyack & Cuban, 1995)—as opposed to making true and lasting instructional shifts that have the desired effects on student outcomes.

Lesson 2: Invest in an Aligned System of Instructional Learning to Support Teachers in Improving Instruction and Ensure the Depth of Understanding, Ownership, and Spread Necessary for Scale

Systemic changes that affect student outcomes inevitably must support teachers’ learning as instructional shifts are made. In two multiyear studies examining districts that were able to reform mathematics instruction successfully, Cobb et al. (2018) share their main finding:

[A] range of improvement strategies for supporting teachers’ learning, including pull-out professional development, regular time for collaboration, and content-focused coaching, can each make important contributions. However, the effectiveness of each of these strategies in supporting teachers’ learning increases when they are coordinated and become facets of a teacher learning system. (p. 3)

The work in Azusa and Dinuba provides corroborating examples of the central thesis of Cobb et al.’s study. Building on the preceding section, this section describes some of the ways that the districts engage teachers as leaders of reform. Having teacher leaders clearly engaged as champions of the change helps avoid the typical dynamic of “top-down” instructional reform. Teacher ownership is complemented by district structures and processes that provide support to teachers for developing depth of understanding of new instructional strategies.

Districts provide a variety of ongoing supports for teacher learning. Azusa and Dinuba ensured that teachers had access to a range of complementary learning opportunities, including whole-group professional development, individual coaching, collaboration time in professional learning communities (PLCs), and book studies. Instructional coaches offered professional development to site administrators, leadership teams, and teachers as well as classroom-based

one-on-one coaching to support implementation of new strategies. Ed Partners also provided professional development, both via staff and content experts engaged to further district learning on focal areas. Both districts have created structures and time to foster teacher collaboration, including nested PLCs that meet frequently to discuss strategies and include school and district leaders. These opportunities give teachers multiple access points, differentiated learning opportunities, and time, all of which support the true adoption and ownership of new instructional strategies.

Teachers lead and are the owners of professional development across the district.

Both districts give teachers leadership responsibility in the design and delivery of professional development. Azusa has begun to use teachers, working alongside a school administrator, to train their peers once they have successfully incorporated a new instructional strategy into their classrooms. The improvement team and district staff lead the introduction of new change ideas with “pilot” teachers who test strategies, bring feedback, and refine implementation in their own classrooms, referred to as “test kitchens.” In the second year, pilot teachers become instructors, leading small groups of two to five other teachers with the support of a school or district administrator, further testing, implementing, and refining change ideas (See Figure 3 in Lesson 3 for further description). This strategy ensures that teachers become leaders and owners of the change instead of reform being “done to” teachers.

Both districts have opened classrooms, establishing a culture of instructional transparency. Both districts use a classroom walkthrough process for collecting formative data around instruction, building transparency around teacher learning of new practices. Walkthroughs include district staff, school administrators, and teachers, who then provide feedback to teachers with an eye towards a specific change in practice that is the focus of their improvement effort. One teacher reflected on walkthroughs and her district’s system of teacher support, saying:

We have done lots of cross-site sharing and collaborating, which is very, very important. We have had walkthroughs of other principals and other school districts just come through our classrooms to see what we have been doing so that they can take back ideas to other districts and other schools. The same as our principal goes and does walkthroughs as well. ... We have had professional learning communities, PLC huddles, we’ve had huddles in which we all get together as our district. And our district will bring coaches from the district, and we learn from them. ... It’s been awesome to see the different types of collaboration, the different types of learning that we can get from other sites and implement some of those ideas to our sites and within our district.

Improvement team members in each district stressed the importance of framing these observations as formative and helping to inform the broader school community of emergent learning practices—to see where bright spots are emerging and where the district can provide teachers with additional support. It is worth noting that establishing walkthroughs as a beneficial process was not easy. Dinuba collaborated with the Labor Management Institute to move from historically adversarial relations with labor leaders to a more collaborative partnership to both address grievances and plan for the future (Koppich, 2020).

Principals are engaged as instructional leaders. Both districts developed approaches for ensuring that their principals could be effective instructional leaders. For example, Azusa’s monthly principal meetings dedicate a portion of time to instructional leadership wherein principals participate in the same instructional training, led by district coaches and teachers, that they are then expected to provide to their own staff. Administrators in the district approach any new initiative by investigating barriers to implementation, or as one put it: “Keep the heart of the classroom teacher in mind. What would make it hard for me to do this?” Administrators in both Dinuba and Azusa continue to support implementation by protecting the resources that support the professional learning structures described previously.

Lesson 3: Use Cross-Role and Cross-Site Structures to Help Spread Promising Practices and Increase Sustainability

While many districts operate in silos with a top-down flow of information and accountability, a multidirectional flow of information is oil for a district’s improvement engine (Cottingham et al., 2019). The types of structures Azusa and Dinuba have to facilitate the flow of information across district hierarchies are common in many districts (e.g., PLCs, department or grade-level meetings) but are not often used to share learning from and information for improvement processes. These structures protect time for work on instructional reform and engage a diverse group of staff so that ultimately the reform is more likely to be sustained through changes in leadership, support provisioning, or context.

Structures promoting teacher leadership, centered on co-creation of knowledge, elevate classroom-level feedback so that teachers continually inform system-level supports. Both districts have created teams and structures that support the transfer of information and teacher insights into district-level decision-making. The districts center teachers as the key source of wisdom, intentionally connecting district administrators, school leaders, and teachers to co-create knowledge. Teachers have multiple opportunities to inform decision-making so that administrators can dedicate resources to areas of greatest need. One district administrator explained:

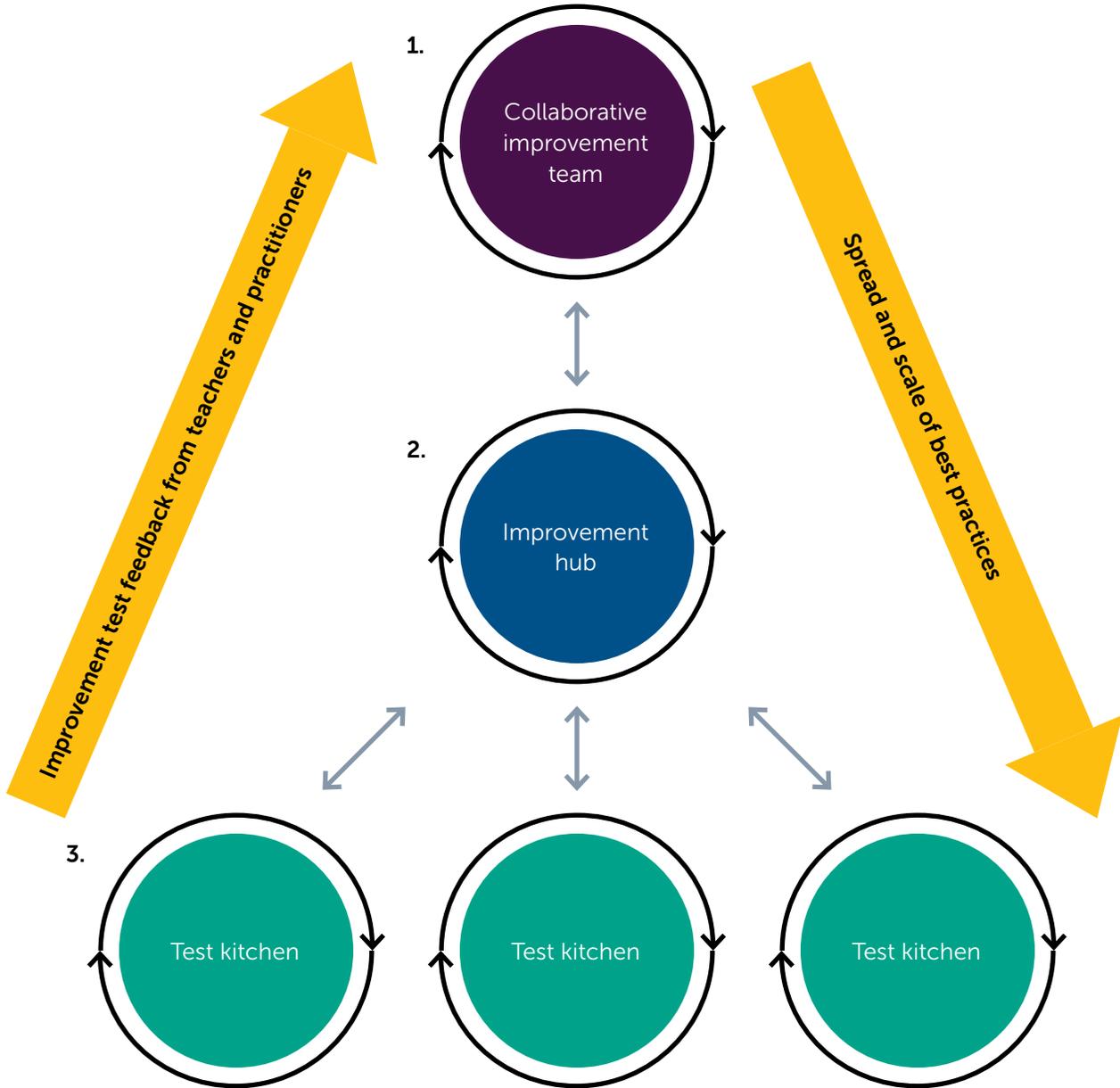
We have certain structures within the system that allow us to hear and respond in real time. ... We really have tried to build that sense of collective efficacy at the teacher team level at their sites, and individual teacher efficacy where there's a mindset about growth and improvement, and that it's okay to take risks, and that they're not afraid to tell us when something's not quite working.

District and school leaders recognize that teachers understand best what is working in the classroom, and they ensure that the culture for carefully testing and adapting changes exists at all levels of their system. By explicitly soliciting feedback from teachers and adapting in response, the districts have built a cadre of teacher champions for reform, solidifying the improvements across the districts.

Integrated structures and processes facilitate regular communication and feedback across roles traditionally separated by hierarchy, job description, or content area. Both districts, with Ed Partners' guidance and support, have created three types of structures and processes that intentionally connect across and attempt to break down district and school hierarchies (see Figure 3). In the previous sections, we described how these structures build depth of knowledge and teacher ownership, but they also contribute to spread and sustainability:

1. The "collaborative improvement team," which includes district office, school, administration, and instructional staff, leads the work and meets directly with Ed Partners.
2. Each district has an internal "improvement hub" that collects feedback and data from tests of change and connects them to the improvement team leading the work at the district level. In each district, the hub consists of teacher leaders who support a group of their colleagues in testing and implementation and are supported by district/county coaches or Teachers on Special Assignment. This group ensures that critical cross-role/cross-functional information is synthesized and shared.
3. Professional learning in each district is structured around small groups conducting teacher-led tests of change, or "test kitchens." Test kitchens consist of two to five teachers who test a common change idea; these teachers are generally volunteer "prototypers," while Dinuba also uses PLCs to test new ideas. Feedback is provided to these teachers through classroom walkthroughs and examination of student-outcome data, making instruction transparent both to other teachers and to administrators.

Figure 3: Structures That Support Spread and Sustainability in Azusa and Dinuba



Teacher leaders can share their deep instructional knowledge with both administrators and other teachers through these structures and identify high-quality change ideas through test kitchens. Proven best practices can then be shared throughout the system with contextual evidence that they positively affect instruction and student outcomes in a district’s specific context. When teachers and administrators jointly drive reform, teachers can spread ideas to their peers while administrators champion the work and ensure that it has sufficient resources. Together, they create a coalition that can spread and sustain reform over time.

Conclusion

The Azusa Unified and Dinuba Unified School Districts offer lessons for continuous improvement that support instructional shifts using teams and structures to promote teacher leadership and encourage cross-role and cross-site collaboration. These shifts have contributed to positive trends for student achievement across subject areas and demographic groups. Although neither district has realized its improvement goals, they have both begun to internalize the work they began with Ed Partners to establish continuous improvement structures and processes that they can now scale to address problems of practice, even those beyond instruction.

Both districts joined an Ed Partners collaborative with the goal of improving a specific outcome over a few years. In addition, both districts want to develop their capacity to improve on other dimensions without external assistance. These districts are purposely using the outside assistance from Ed Partners across multiple collaborations to build improvement capacity throughout their system. An administrator in Azusa explained:

They have given us a gift, and that gift is how to navigate in a real authentic manner change that sticks ... exposing the district and us who are in the district to say, "Hey, this is how you can go about things to make things better, make it more inclusive, make it more engaging, make it more collaborative." And at the end of the day, your outcomes are more genuine, more authentic, and will stick longer, because [Ed Partners] are not trying to ramp things—we build this together.

In addition to improving the focal student outcomes, both districts see Ed Partners' support as a way to build their schools' and district's internal capacity over time to identify areas where improvement is needed and independently apply strategies they have learned to sustainably improve outcomes. Highlighting how districts are able to build capacity for improvement and can inform what supports and resources may be necessary to help others progress similarly across California.

References

- Bryk, A. S. (2021). *Improvement in action: Advancing quality in America's schools*. Harvard Education Press.
- Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.
- Cobb, P., Jackson, K., Henrick, E. C., & Smith, T. M. (2018). *Systems for instructional improvement creating coherence from the classroom to the District Office*. Harvard Education Press.
- Coburn, C. E. (2003). Rethinking scale: Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change. *Educational Researcher*, 32(6), 3–12.
- Cottingham, B. W., Gong, A., & Gallagher, H. A. (2019, October). *A student-centered culture of improvement: The case of Garden Grove Unified School District* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/student-centered-culture-improvement-case-garden-grove-unified-school-district>
- Cuban, Larry. (2013). *Inside the black box of classroom practice: Change without reform in American education*. Harvard Education Press.
- Grunow, A., Hough, H. J., Park, S., Willis, J., & Krausen, K. (2018, September). *Getting down to facts II: Towards a common vision of continuous improvement for California* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/towards-common-vision-continuous-improvement-california>
- Hough, H. J., Byun, E., & Steen Mulfinger, L. (2018, September). *Using data for improvement: Learning from the CORE data collaborative* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/using-data-improvement-collaborative>
- Hough, H. J., Willis, J., Grunow, A., Krausen, K., Kwon, S., Steen Mulfinger, L., & Park, S. (2017, November). *Continuous improvement in practice* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/continuous-improvement-practice>
- Koppich, J. E. (2020). Dinuba's journey: From conflict to collaboration. *California Labor Management Initiative Spotlight*, Issue 1.
- Labaree, D. F. (2010). *Someone has to fail: The zero-sum game of public schooling*. Harvard University Press.
- Reeves, D. B. (2021). *Deep change leadership: A model for renewing and strengthening schools and districts*. Solution Tree Press.
- Spillane, J. P., Reiser, B. J., & Reimer, T. (2002). Policy implementation and cognition: Reframing and refocusing implementation research. *Review of educational research*, 72(3), 387–431.
- Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: Reflections on a century of public-school reform*. Harvard University Press.

Author Biographies

Benjamin W. Cottingham is the associate director of strategic partnerships at PACE. His work focuses on how research practice partnerships can support the equitable improvement of student outcomes across California's education system.

Kiley O'Meara is a senior researcher at PACE. She specializes in investigating the improvement process, from the practices, tools, and levers that support change to the contexts that inspire innovation to the habits, mindsets, and behaviors that promote growth.

H. Alix Gallagher is the director of strategic partnerships at PACE. Her work investigates approaches to improving instructional quality and supports partners in their efforts to improve equity and student outcomes.

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Improving education policy and practice and advancing equity through evidence

PACE is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. Founded in 1983, PACE bridges the gap between research, policy, and practice, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local decision makers to achieve improvement in performance and more equitable outcomes at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. We do this through:

- 1 bringing evidence to bear on the most critical issues facing our state;
- 2 making research evidence accessible; and
- 3 leveraging partnership and collaboration to drive system improvement.



Stanford Graduate School of Education
520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: (650) 724-2832 • Fax: (650) 723-9931

edpolicyinca.org