

Meeting 51 Summary
Implementing an Instructional Framework:
Defining and Fostering Excellence in Elk Grove

October 31–November 1, 2023

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***Note:** This meeting summary was developed as a resource for members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. We are making this document publicly available in an effort to share the work of the Collaborative more broadly and to inform the dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. This summary does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for the general public. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit www.cacollaborative.org.*

In October 2023, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened in Elk Grove, California, for the first meeting of the 2023–24 academic year. Meeting participants continued attending to issues of coherence discussed in previous meetings, this time sharpening the focus on teaching and learning as the anchors for school improvement efforts. Using the lens of an instructional framework in Elk Grove Unified School District (EGUSD), the group explored approaches to defining and developing a common language related to instruction, cultivating educator commitment, and improving teaching practice.

Designing a Framework for High-Quality Instruction

EGUSD, located in southern Sacramento County, is the fifth largest school district in California. Encompassing 320 square miles, the district operates 68 schools. With increasing enrollment, the district is slated to build an additional 68 schools during the next several years. Currently, the district serves more than 62,000 students. Roughly 6 in 10 students are socioeconomically disadvantaged, 13% have disabilities, and nearly 1 in 5 are English learners.

District leaders in EGUSD recognized the critical importance of providing all their students from various backgrounds access to excellent classroom instruction, so 6 years ago, they began the journey to create a framework for high-quality instruction. As one district leader shared, the journey began with a conversation about one question: “If there was one thing you could focus on as a school district to move the needle on student learning, what would it be?” After digging into the research, district administrators decided to focus on the

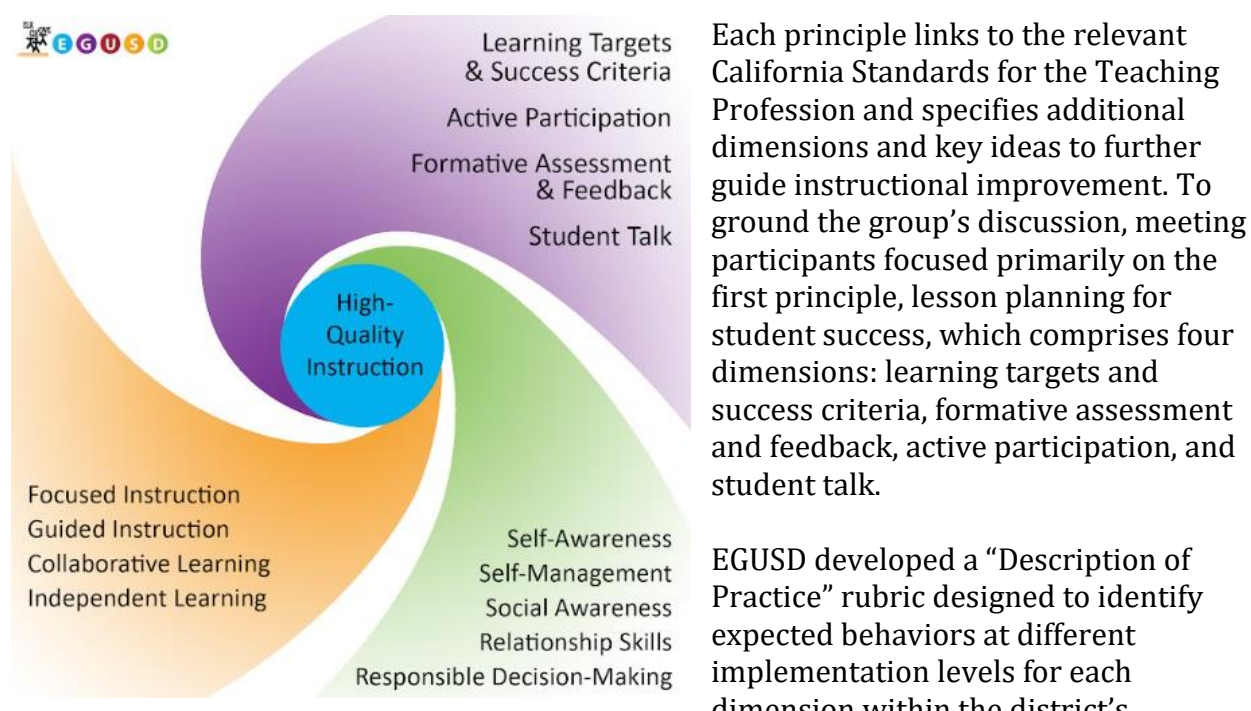
¹ Thanks to Marina Castro, Mary Louise Baez, Emily Agopian, and Crystal Aguilera for taking careful notes to make this summary possible.

quality of teaching. They realized that even though the district employed 3,500 trained and credentialed teachers, teachers and leaders did not have a shared understanding of what high-quality instruction looked and sounded like in the classroom. District leaders recognized the importance of having a common language about instruction to set expectations and build educator capacity through training, feedback, and support. Efforts therefore began with defining high-quality instruction.

Defining High-Quality Instruction

District leaders started by conducting a review of the literature; then they collaborated with multiple departments within the district to discuss the evidence from research before defining high-quality instruction as a comprehensive approach that incorporates three key principles: (1) lesson planning for student success, (2) phases of instruction, and (3) social-emotional learning competencies.

Exhibit 1. EGUSD Instructional Framework Graphic



instructional framework. (See Exhibit 1 for a screenshot of the rubric within the learning target dimension.) Meeting participants broke into small groups to share insights about the framework overall and the expectations articulated for specific dimensions.

Exhibit 2. Description of Practice for Learning Targets in EGUSD

Learning Target (LT) <i>Learning targets are brief statements that explicitly describe what students should know and understand as a result of the learning and teaching</i> CSTP 1.3, 2.7, 3.1, 4.2, 4.3				
	Practicing		Honing	
	1	2	3	4
Relevant	<input type="checkbox"/> Minimal or inconsistent alignment to grade-level/content-area standards ¹ .	<input type="checkbox"/> Alignment to grade-level/content-area standards exists but may be too broad.	<input type="checkbox"/> Alignment to grade-level/content-area standards is appropriately narrow in scope.	<input type="checkbox"/> Daily alignment to grade-level/content-area standards is consistent and driven by understanding of the learning progression within individual standards.
Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> LT explains what the students will do (e.g., page number, topic, agenda, chapter) instead of what they will learn. <input type="checkbox"/> <25% of students can accurately identify the learning	<input type="checkbox"/> Content standard(s) are used as verbatim learning targets or LT language is not accessible by students. <input type="checkbox"/> 25-50% of students can accurately identify the learning	<input type="checkbox"/> Key concepts from the content standards are identified in the language of the learning target, often written in student-friendly language. <input type="checkbox"/> 50-80% of students can accurately identify the learning	<input type="checkbox"/> Key concepts from the content standards are identified, and the learning target is consistently written in student-friendly language. <input type="checkbox"/> 80-100% of students can accurately identify the learning
Explicit	<input type="checkbox"/> LT is not posted or shared with students.	<input type="checkbox"/> LT is identified (e.g., handouts, written on the board) but is not discussed with students.	<input type="checkbox"/> Communication of LT occurs effectively once in the lesson, and students actively engage with the LT.	<input type="checkbox"/> Communication consistently names the learning and is referenced multiple times throughout the lesson, and students engage with and reflect on the LT. ²

Learning Targets and Success Criteria

The framework defines learning targets as brief statements that explicitly describe what students should know as a result of the learning and teaching. Success criteria articulate, in specific terms and in language meaningful to students, what successful attainment of the learning targets looks like. Teachers can measure student attainment of the success criteria by identifying what students can do and say to demonstrate learning. These criteria help students understand what to look for while learning so that they know whether they are meeting the success criteria.

Meeting participants who discussed the learning targets and success criteria dimension in small groups acknowledged the clarity and consistency this dimension allows in classrooms districtwide. However, they also raised the concern that focusing on learning targets can lead to compliance-oriented behaviors without deep learning, particularly if teachers engage in activities designed to satisfy the criteria of the rubric without a deep understanding of how they connect to improved student learning. One meeting participant shared as follows:

There is some stuff that is easy to look at and check off, such as whether or not the learning target is written on the wall. However, the complex nuances about learning targets and whether or not students are meeting success criteria and learning in meaningful ways requires more judgment and expertise.

Other meeting participants agreed with this sentiment and added that the opportunities for adults in the EGUSD system to learn from one another and develop as professionals are where the real power of the instructional framework lies.

Formative Assessment and Feedback

Teachers engage in classroom activities to generate ongoing information about what students are learning that can inform how teachers react instructionally. These formative

assessment practices should occur in the natural course of teaching and learning. EGUSD leaders have connected the dots among the dimensions of the instructional framework to specify that educators should strategically plan formative assessment activities to measure student proficiency toward success criteria.

According to district leaders, one of the biggest challenges with this dimension is the frequent response from teachers, “Oh, we already do this.” However, similar to the reflections about learning targets and success criteria, meeting participants who discussed this dimension in small groups cautioned about teachers administering formative assessments for the sake of compliance. Guidance and support for educators should instead emphasize the rationale behind the quality implementation of approaches that enable teachers to diagnose and address student learning needs using a variety of formative assessment practices.

Active Participation

Students demonstrate engagement with their learning by doing something in response to instruction. Reflecting an emphasis on equity, the framework specifies that this expectation should apply to all students.

Student Talk

The purpose of student talk in the classroom is to develop students' conversational skills as an avenue for fostering self-expression, academic language development, and thinking in a discipline. Teachers can maximize the quality of student participation in classroom conversations through careful planning about the content to be discussed, the process through which dialogue takes place, and the reason for conversations among students.

Meeting participants asked that the distinction between active participation and student talk be clarified because the two dimensions seem similar. District administrators highlighted that they deliberately added student talk as an area of focus beyond the dimension of active participation. To address the confusion that can sometimes result from this dual focus, district administrators emphasized that students can actively participate without talking in class, and with a large population of English learners who benefit from practicing speaking, the intentional focus on oral language is critical for addressing the full range of student learning needs. Meeting participants who discussed the student talk dimension in small groups appreciated the inclusion of student talk as an indicator of student success because conversation can help students process their learning. The participants also underscored the difference between learning and regurgitating the material and advised that teachers thoughtfully plan opportunities that encourage student engagement in ways that foster academic growth. To do this, they emphasized the importance of creating a safe space for students to feel that they can take the risk to speak up in class, particularly English learners or students with special needs.

Teacher Engagement in the Development Process

Throughout the meeting, participants discussed the level of teacher involvement in developing the instructional framework. District leaders shared that although a small team of central office leaders took primary responsibility for developing the instructional framework, they worked collaboratively with site-level administrators, teacher leaders, and teacher labor groups to get feedback about rolling out and implementing the framework to ensure the development of a shared understanding and the commitment needed for long-term sustainability. Meeting participants argued that EGUSD was able to take this approach because they have carefully cultivated high levels of trust with their teachers to the point that they can initiate instructional initiatives from within the central office without creating the perception of mandating top-down improvement efforts or robbing teachers of their professional judgment. In districts without a similar history of trust and collaboration, the approach may need to be different, as underscored by one meeting participant who stated "the things that outlive us are co-governed. It will only survive if all the actors jointly believe in it."

Building Educator Capacity to Implement the Framework

Having developed an instructional framework that anchors EGUSD's approach to instruction, district leaders have carefully designed trainings and supports to foster a shared understanding of quality and improved instructional practices. These capacity-building efforts began with principals and have recently expanded to include teachers districtwide.

Developing and Supporting Principals to Implement the Framework

Principals play a vital role as instructional leaders supporting teachers and promoting excellence in teaching. The meeting in Elk Grove built on multiple discussions in recent Collaborative meetings about the role of principals in instructional improvement. The role of principals is to emphasize the importance of coherence, prioritize teaching and learning, keep a balance between administrative and instructional leadership, value student input in framing conversations about instruction, and meet the challenges associated with burnout and turnover.

EGUSD has pursued a thoughtful long-term approach to developing principals as instructional leaders and developing a shared understanding across site leaders about what that entails. When EGUSD district leaders began working with school site administrators to provide professional development about the various components of the instructional framework, they quickly realized that despite the shared definition of high-quality instruction articulated in the instructional framework, educators did not yet have a shared understanding about what that looked like in the classroom. The district refined an existing tool designed for use in English learner classrooms and created the district's Framework Observation and Note-Taking Toolkit (FONT), which aligns to the instructional framework. The group would go on to discuss the FONT in greater detail on the second day of the meeting.

A panel of five EGUSD principals shared their experiences with district approaches to building principal capacity in leading instructional improvement efforts, as well as some of the emerging challenges to sustaining the work. Reference to the FONT in their comments reflects the degree to which they have embraced the tool in their approaches to monitoring instruction and supporting teachers.

Developing Consistent Language and Understanding Through Professional Development

Principal panelists emphasized the importance of having a common language when talking to one another and when providing feedback to teachers. As a first step toward building a common language, both principals and teachers have received and will continue to receive training on the FONT. One principal stated, "We have been getting training since 2022, and honing our skills on how to score the different dimensions and how to align with one another." For example, principals have been meeting with principal support groups to analyze classroom instruction videos using the FONT tool to practice and calibrate with one another. Teachers began receiving similar training at the start of the 2023–24 school year to help build a shared understanding of the district's expectations for quality and the language needed to describe it. Principals noted that having this common language makes it easier to provide targeted feedback to teachers and for teachers to respond to that feedback.

Addressing Learning Gaps by Using Technology

Principals expressed appreciation for the opportunities created through the technology behind FONT. From a convenience standpoint, principals' ability to access the tool on handheld devices enables them to easily use it when observing classrooms without the

distractions of cumbersome devices or the inconvenience of paper-and-pencil information gathering. Furthermore, the tool provides vital information about each class and the students it serves. A demographic breakdown of the students in each classroom, including breakdowns by race, family socioeconomic background, disability status, and English language proficiency, provides principals with the information needed to ask teachers targeted questions about instructional strategies based on the composition of a class. One principal stated, “It [the FONT tool] has helped us focus on a variety of subgroups. We’re a diverse school. That feature has helped us shape our feedback to the teachers and helps us view the classrooms through an equity lens.”

Providing Additional Supports and Time for Administrators and Teachers

Principals shared that as much as the framework aligns with their beliefs about high-quality instruction, they still need time—both to feel fully comfortable with a deep and nuanced framework and to get into each classroom. One panelist shared, “Principal guilt of not being in every classroom I set out to be in on a certain day because I am dealing with 37 other problems is a real thing.”

The principals emphasized that teachers, too, need time to get to know the framework and implement it effectively with fidelity in their classrooms. Several administrators noted that pushing into teachers’ classrooms and using the FONT tool is asking teachers to be vulnerable, which also requires time to develop trust and comfort. One administrator shared as follows:

Teaching is so personal. When you give or get feedback, it feels personal. It is so important for me as a principal to show that I don’t know everything, and they don’t have to know everything either. I’m there to help them unpack their thinking and help them through the learning process.

Meeting participants also echoed the importance of building relationships and trust. Investing the time and energy to develop a learner-stance culture for the implementation of the framework to thrive is essential. As one participant stated, “I think you start with empathy with the conditions teachers have to work under and then be transparent and ask how best school leadership can support teachers.”

Developing and Supporting Teachers to Implement the Framework

Educator understanding of the EGUSD framework is another prerequisite to implementing its principles effectively, which is why EGUSD also is working to develop the capacity of their teachers. Initial training efforts are designed to familiarize teachers with the framework and prepare them to integrate it with their classroom practice. District administrators shared their approach to developing and supporting their teachers.

Strategic Rollout and Engagement

The district emphasized the importance of an intentional and strategic approach to rolling out the framework to gain maximum engagement from their teachers. Central office leaders deliberately designed trainings to take place in person to allow for immediate application of the principles and standards in classrooms. Teachers on Special Assignment

played an instrumental role in delivering site-based training, and, as discussed previously, the involvement and support of principals as instructional leaders also was critical.

Training and Support for New Teachers

District administrators acknowledged that although training and support for teachers is important, one area of challenge is how to provide that training and support for new hires to the system, especially in a context when there is a shortage of substitute teachers to free up teacher time. To navigate this challenge, the district is experimenting with an innovative approach to onboarding new teachers, which involves creating video resources to provide flexibility and targeted support to address the varying needs of teachers.

Long-Term Sustainability and Collaboration

Finally, district leaders emphasized that the development of the framework and the capacity of its site leaders and classroom teachers is part of its long-term sustainability plan meant to withstand any changes in leadership at the district level. To build this framework and ensure its relevance across time, meeting participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a focus on instruction and evaluation systems that can adapt with changing educational landscapes. They also noted the role of trust and collaboration in building and sustaining these systems. According to district leaders, teachers are willing to embrace the district's approach to instruction because they trust district leaders and believe the developments in recent years are consistent with their own views about teaching and learning. Not all district contexts and educational environments have the deep history of trust that exists in EGUSD, and educators in other communities could resist approaches that they believe are misguided or avoid change they had learned to expect will be short lived. The strategies for any district to embrace instructional improvement must therefore respond directly to the assets and challenges of the context in which they are applied.

Supporting the Growth and Development of High-Quality Teaching Through Data Systems

The focus of the second day of the meeting shifted to questions about how educators know if the instructional practices they support are actually happening in the classroom. The morning began with an exploration of the FONT tool and gave participants the opportunity to practice using the tool while watching classroom observation videos of EGUSD teachers.

The tool creates space to provide qualitative information in the form of narrative notes as well as quantitative rankings on a scale of 1–4 for each dimension of the instructional framework. Although principals have the ability to rate each dimension within the instructional framework when conducting an observation, they can choose to narrow their attention to select only the elements that are the focus of their classroom visit. EGUSD leaders emphasized that although principals can rate teachers on a scale of 1–4 on the rubric, the FONT is not an evaluative tool. Rather, the FONT tool is designed to foster reflection and dialogue for teachers and administrators about where they are, where they want their students to be, and the opportunities to improve instructional practice to help achieve those goals.

Although the tool also offers possibilities for providing immediate feedback to teachers via email, multiple principals from the panel on Day 1 shared their preference for in-person, one-on-one meetings as the best way to provide feedback to teachers. However, some principals ask teachers for their preferences about the mode(s) through which they would like to receive feedback. Because the tool offers the option of emailing the results of the observation without having a one-on-one conversation first, meeting participants cautioned that the convenience of existing options for the tool could unintentionally encourage suboptimal feedback procedures.

Usage reports available to central office leaders reflect the increased uptake of the tool across the district. During the 2022–23 school year, principals recorded 3,000 observations. Through October 2023 of the 2023–24 school year, principals had already recorded 1,400 observations. An “Observations by Site” provides an overview of observations for individual schools, including data on the percentage of teachers observed more than once, and teachers whom principals need to follow up with, enabling principals and central office staff to monitor and improve the frequency of their observational practices.

Meeting participants had the chance to watch video clips of EGUSD teachers instructing students and then practiced using the FONT tool to score various elements of the observations. Small groups offered a forum to discuss some of the strengths of the tool, challenges in implementing the tool, and potential areas of refinement.

Strengths of the FONT Tool

Participants noted the great potential for professional learning with the FONT because of its emphasis on formative learning rather than evaluation. One meeting participant exclaimed, “Focused time for teachers to spend on instruction, learning to align to the standards, and having the opportunity to reflect on their practice is exciting.” Another shared, “This is an excellent structure for humanizing educators because it really allows for growth and improvement.”

Meeting participants pointed out that one great strength of the tool is that its technology can be easily replicated in other school systems. Participants further expressed appreciation for aspects of the FONT design that prepared principals and teachers to use it effectively. Because the tool’s interface makes the tool easy to navigate, along with the demographic data available about each classroom, and the interactive features that facilitate feedback conversations, the FONT serves as a resource to support their work rather than a distraction from it. These features may be especially useful for new principals who have much to learn but can get into classrooms quickly and embrace the instructional monitoring components of their role.

Challenges and Cautions of the FONT Tool

Meeting participants also noted several cautions and potential areas of challenge concerning a classroom observation tool like the FONT. First, although the technical features lend themselves to easy replication or adaptation in other districts, several participants warned that adequate knowledge about what various dimensions and principles entail, plus a culture of professional learning and trust, are preconditions for

success. As one participant shared, “There’s a lot of underlying work and trust that must be built. You can’t do this work without that strong foundation.”

Second, although the opportunities to collect robust data about instruction are a strength, too much information can overwhelm educators. One meeting participant recommended that school and district leaders prioritize specific areas of attention to enable prioritization and avoid confusion: “Be explicit about what you want to work on as an area of focus. Use it as a reinforcement of what the school has already been doing.”

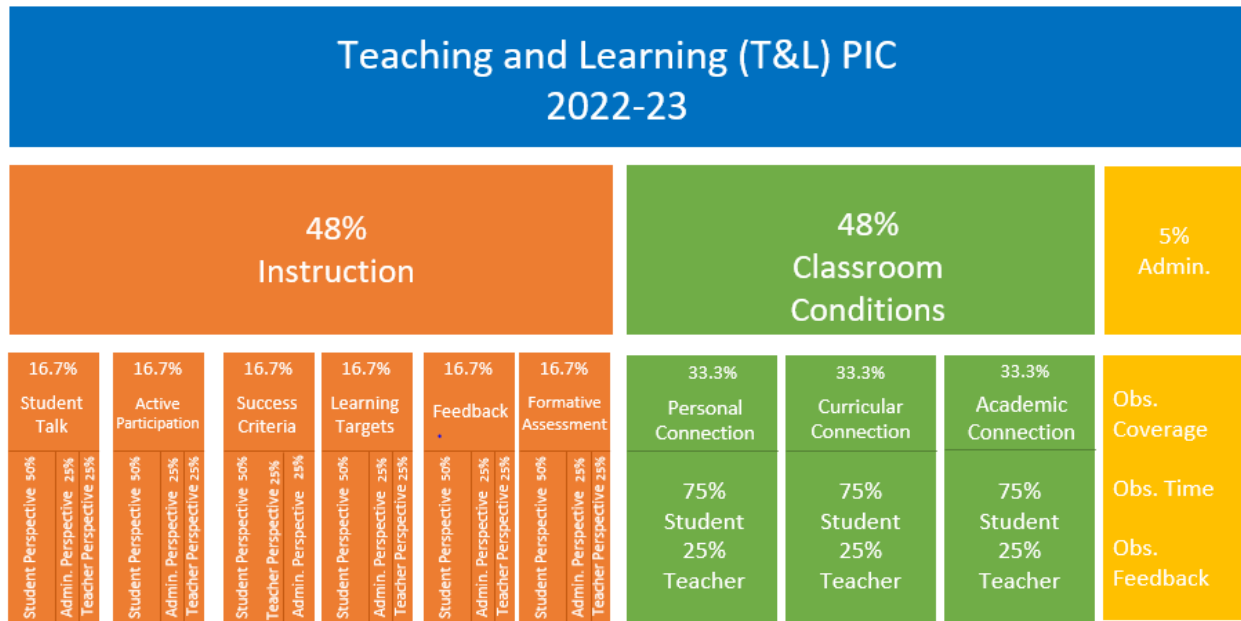
Finally, several meeting participants identified the likely challenges in using the tool for principals who had not been an instructional coach prior to becoming a principal. They would need a lot of modeling, support, and instruction to grow in learning how to provide effective feedback. This consideration for building capacity is particularly important given the context of EGUSD. The district continues to have growing enrollments and is slated to build 68 more schools in the next several years. Although the district has done the hard work of defining high-quality instruction, determining expectations, and investing in calibration to build the capacity of the educators in the system, strategies to hire new staff and build their capacity will be essential to sustain the focus on high-quality instruction.

The Program Implementation Continuum Tool

The FONT sits within a broader approach to data collection and reflection that EGUSD approaches through its Program Implementation Continuum (PIC) tool. The PIC is an approach designed to foster continuous improvement. The tool features a set of output measures that combine together to provide data about the fidelity of implementation for a wide range of district initiatives.

The district collects multiple measures from across all their school sites, aggregates them to determine a PIC score for implementation ranging from 0% to 100%, and provides the results of the analysis to each school site leader. Exhibit 2 illustrates the measures that comprise the PIC in the area of teaching and learning, including the components, subcomponents, and weighting for that are of focus.

Exhibit 3. EGUSD Teaching and Learning PIC Components



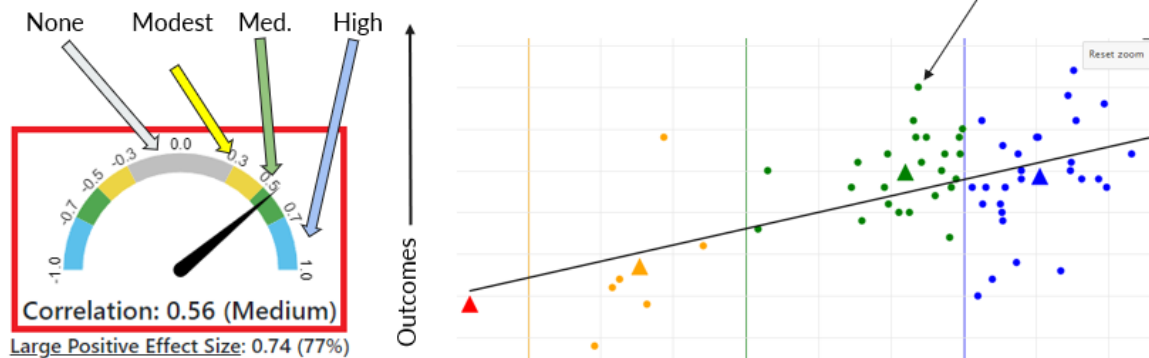
The “instruction” component (orange) aims to capture the extent to which teachers are implementing high-quality instructional practices. Each dimension within this component (e.g., student talk, active participation) aligns directly to the dimensions in the instructional framework. The “classroom conditions” component (green) measures how teachers are maintaining classroom conditions that are conducive to learning: how they connect with students, foster engaging and rigorous instruction, and approach classroom management. The “administrative” component (yellow) is a new component the district added in the 2023–24 school year related to administrator practices in monitoring and providing feedback about instruction. This component includes measures of how often administrators record FONT observations, how much time they spend on observations, and how often they provide feedback through the FONT to teachers.

In addition to providing information about program implementation for the district overall and individual school sites, the PIC enables district leaders to examine the relationship between program implementation and favorable outcomes. Exhibit 3 shows a scatterplot of teaching and learning data for schools across the district. In this chart, the x-axis represents school-level PIC scores for the overall teaching and learning metric. The y-axis represents desired outcomes. As teachers incorporate the principles of the instructional framework more deeply into their teaching, district leaders expect to see improved test scores and other student outcomes. The district runs a correlation analysis between school implementation and student academic and nonacademic outcomes at all district schools and provides analytic reports to district and school leaders. The correlation between the two measures in Exhibit 3 is 0.56, which reflects an effect size of 0.74, which district data analysts characterize as large.

Exhibit 4. Correlation Between School-Level PIC Scores for Teaching and Learning and Student Outcomes

How strongly associated are implementation and outcomes?

PICout 101: Correlation



Connecting the Dots

Throughout the meeting, participants emphasized that the mutually reinforcing and interconnected strategies employed in EGUSD help ensure consistency in the district’s approach to instruction. When messaging from leaders at the school sites and the central office delivers the same message about quality instruction, and when expectations and supports reinforce those expectations, educators can better understand and trust the resources designed to help them improve. By sustaining these messages across time, the district enables teachers and leaders to embrace positive practices without having to navigate mixed messages or unexpected changes in direction. Superintendent Chris Hoffman closed the meeting with a reflection on how the multiple pieces of the district’s approach—including the instructional framework, training and professional development, the FONT tool, and the PIC—fit together to improve outcomes for students. He stated,

It comes down to that monitoring piece and really ensuring that the quality of what we expect in the classroom is happening in the classroom and that our site leaders can give the right kind of feedback after observations to help teachers continue to improve that practice. We must make sure we provide the right support and knowledge, so they have the skills to be able to do that. You can put people through training, you can put tools in place, but the part that keeps me up is ensuring what’s happening in each of the classrooms across a very large district. And I’m seeing it happening on a regular basis.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The Collaborative will meet next in February 2024 in Oakland, California, to dive into early literacy, with a particular focus on the needs of multilingual learners. In the meantime, Collaborative staff will continue to share key lessons and takeaways from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators as we did in 2023 through briefs, commentaries, webinars, and legislative briefings. Resources from this meeting, as well as resources from previous meetings and updates regarding Collaborative members, are available at www.cacollaborative.org.