

STRENGTHENING IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH CROSS-DISTRICT COLLABORATION

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MARCH, 2024

INTRODUCTION

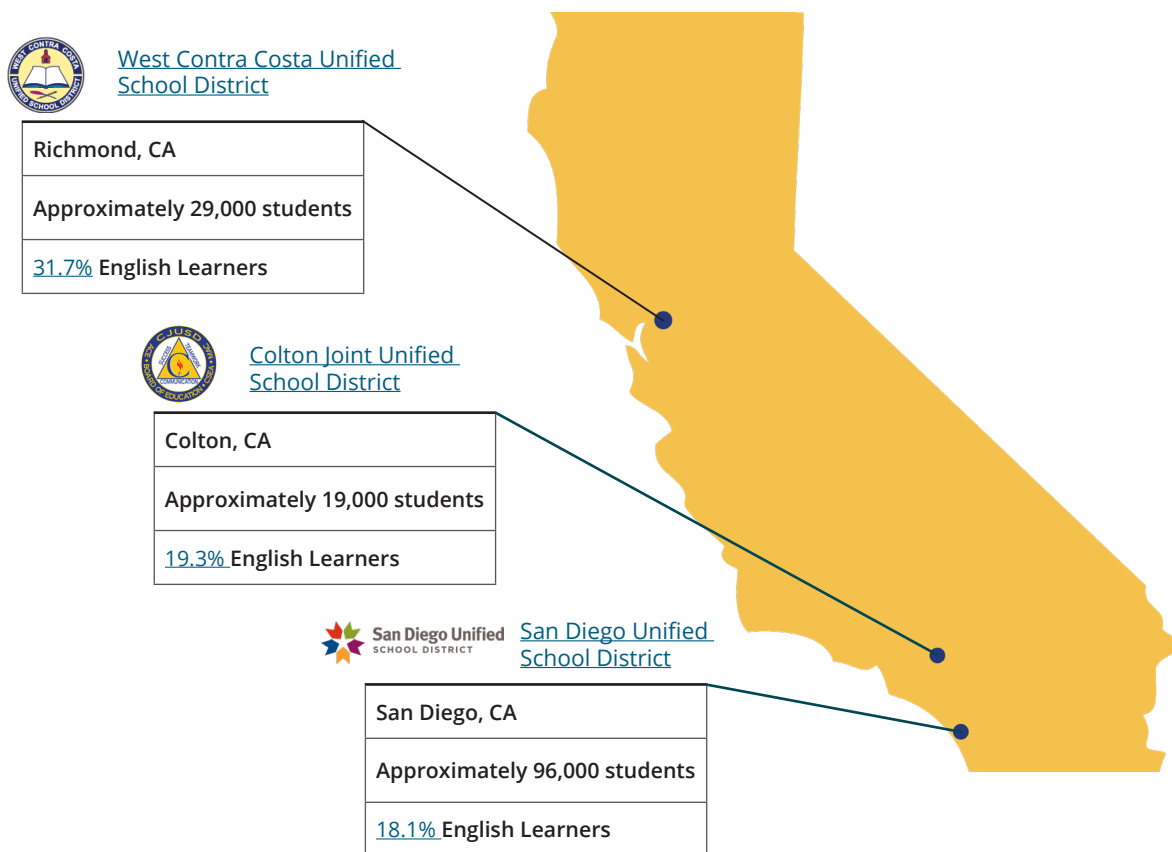
Collaboration is one of the most powerful strategies for implementing change in public education, yet one of the most difficult to do well. While it is common for teachers within a school to collaborate, long-term, meaningful collaboration among site-based and central-office staff is unusual. Insufficient time or funding for collaboration activities, administrative and logistical hurdles, and lack of communication are just a few of the barriers that make this kind of collaboration rare. When the aim is to support cross-district collaboration, those challenges are amplified and can include geographic and/or cultural differences. The [benefits](#), however, are clear: bringing cross-district professionals together fosters shared learning, contributes to continuous improvement, and creates pathways for ongoing support that are boons to effective and sustainable implementation.



[ConnectED](#) has worked with San Diego Unified School District (since 2019), Colton Joint Unified School District (since 2021), and West Contra Costa Unified School District (since 2021) to systematize the adoption and implementation of various versions of the Illustrative Mathematics (IM) curriculum in middle schools. ConnectED's foundational frameworks support collaboration across contexts and, as such, helped identify a need and opportunity to build meaningful connections among the three California districts that ConnectED supports in the [Effective Implementation Cohort \(EIC\)](#) work.

As district staff in Colton, San Diego, and West Contra Costa independently worked to implement a high-quality mathematics curriculum, they engaged in traditional capacity-building activities within their respective districts (i.e., curriculum-based workshops and professional learning, classroom visits, unit planning support, and coaching). From ConnectED's vantage point as a learning partner to all three districts, staff members Kiera Brodsky-Chase, Vinci Daro, and Tamyra Walker recognized mutual opportunities for the districts to connect and reflect on each other's strengths and challenges. ConnectED leveraged its role to facilitate observation, learning, and reflection activities as a way for the three districts to benefit and grow from each other's implementation journeys.

THE DISTRICTS



COMMON IMPLEMENTATION FOCUS

Illustrative Mathematics (IM) is a problem-based curriculum designed to facilitate a student-centered learning environment that fuels student problem solving and discourse. A common thread throughout the different implementation efforts in each district has been a focus on using the embedded Instructional and Math Language Routines. These instructional routines are designed to support students' development of core mathematical concepts through structured peer interactions and opportunities for students to revise their thinking orally and in writing. The Math Language Routines, specifically, create innovative ways for students to engage in mathematical meaning-making using various language-rich structures for interaction, reflection, and revision.

In service of cross-district learning, ConnectED engaged Colton Joint Unified, San Diego Unified, and West Contra Costa Unified in an iterative process to design and pilot tools to support the implementation and integration of the Math Language Routines. ConnectED began with the premise that "People need to do work that is authentic - that meets a need - that is of immediate importance to their role at that moment" (Vinci Daro), and this common through line is synergistic with authentic engagement for district implementation teams. This approach "created learning opportunities that mirror the discourse-based learning that students experience in their classrooms" (Kiera Brodsky-Chase) and, as such, district leaders begin to experience the shifts that students experience in a problem-based learning environment.

CROSS-DISTRICT COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES

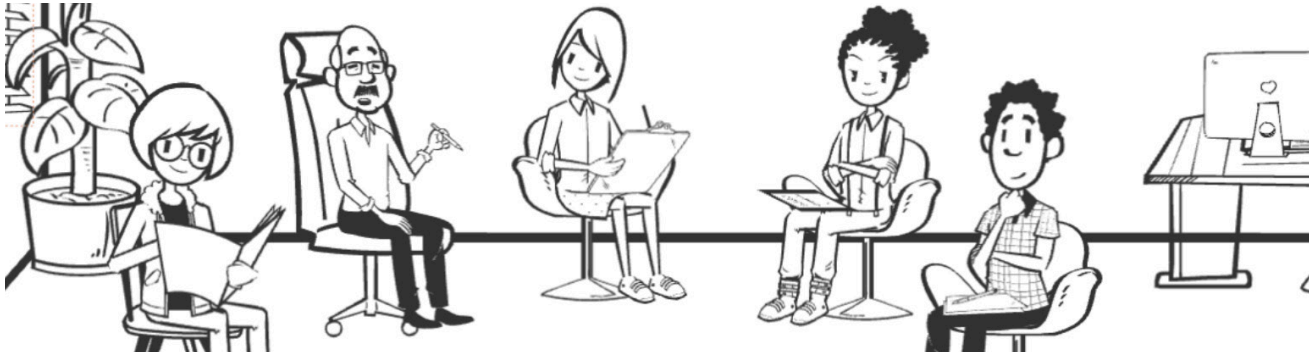
Classroom Visits

One of the most impactful collaboration activities consisted of multi-day onsite classroom visits coordinated by ConnectED and attended by a variety of staff from the three districts. ConnectED worked with each district implementation team to determine classroom implementation of the Math Language Routines as the shared focus and purpose for the visits. As such, the foundation of each visit was to build central office personnels' knowledge of how the Math Language Routines looked when implemented as part of the curriculum, how teachers and students engaged with each other, and how students' uses of language are integrated with mathematical content learning.

The district teams designed and used a [common walkthrough tool](#) to guide their classroom visits as they observed teachers across the three districts. Visits to multiple schools and classrooms were scheduled in each hosting district over several days, during which attendees were invited to observe lessons, complete the tool, and engage with each other to discuss and calibrate their observations. The observational approach was low-inference, non-evaluative, and focused on strengths in order to build leaders' capacity to:

- engage in a learning process that is not driven solely by a pre-defined outcome
- learn how to see a wide variety of student approaches to solving problems
- understand the pedagogical complexity that the Math Language Routines demands of teachers
- establish trusting relationships with teachers and site-leaders

Classroom visits in a given district consisted of observing multiple classrooms within at least one - and sometimes several - school(s) per day. At the beginning of the day and/or at each new school visited, the group would first meet in a dedicated space on the school's campus to plan the day. This was a chance for the district coordinator, coach, and sometimes teacher(s) to provide important context about each classroom, the school culture, and implementation efforts of the math curriculum. This also served as a time to reground in the common observation tool and share supporting documents or tools before heading into classrooms. The group would often split between two classrooms to not overwhelm the space and spend half a class period with each other before switching. Alternatively, the group would spend an entire period in one classroom if space allowed.



Each day of walkthroughs concluded with a debrief conversation facilitated by ConnectED. These conversations created space for group reflections and additional context-setting about the observed classrooms. In most instances, the teacher or co-teacher from an observed classroom joined the debrief to share their lesson-planning journey and contribute to the discussion. Debrief conversations focused first on what students were **doing, saying, and feeling** during the lesson and then on how to establish and sustain systems to support teachers' ongoing learning and professional growth related to pedagogical shifts that center student thinking and voice.

Having people in different roles – teachers, coaches, school/district leadership, and providers – present in the room naturally allowed for a wide range of perspectives and feedback to be shared, often leading to deep conversations about instructional practices, walkthrough structures, and the tool itself. Jeremiah Lack, Colton's Curriculum Program Specialist (ELD), shared that these conversations helped him connect with the other districts, especially when it came to common barriers:

“Sharing where we are – pacing-wise and fidelity-wise – it was nice to know we’re not alone with those challenges.”

JEREMIAH LACK,

Colton's Curriculum Program Specialist (ELD)

Conducting classroom walkthroughs, however, was not without its challenges. Doing so took significant coordination on the part of the ConnectED team and each District Implementation Team. Kiera Brodsky-Chase, Vinci Daro, and Tamyra Walker worked closely with the district coordinators to identify and address these barriers along the way. Logistical hurdles included arranging for substitutes to cover for the teachers traveling to the other sites and ensuring that coaches and coordinators had the appropriate approval to travel. The District Implementation Team coordinators leveraged their role to help clear these hurdles for the schools so that teachers could participate. The ConnectED team planned and coordinated all hotel, transportation, and food needs for the visits. Together with the district teams, they arranged the schedules for each multi-day visit and ensured the necessary time and physical space for any non-classroom-based collaboration, such as post-visit debriefs and shared tool development. ConnectED also supported the district coordinators in easing teacher discomfort with being observed during classroom visits by building relationships and trust. Math department leads and coaches played an important role in building a culture of safety and learning at schools so that teachers could feel comfortable when other adults observed their classroom. This included the slow and vital work of coaching teachers into a growth mindset, where continuous learning and openness to improve is the norm. These values were reinforced in both the observations themselves and the debrief conversations, which were non-evaluative and centered on the strengths of the teachers and students. Teachers expressed that being part of classroom visits was a great learning experience and that they came to look forward to future visits.

Additional Collaboration Activities

The following served as two additional collaborative touchpoints where district staff could continue to build their connections and work together.

Virtual Coach Meetings

ConnectED hosted weekly virtual meetings for instructional coaches from Colton Joint Unified, San Diego Unified, and West Contra Costa Unified to meet in a 'community-of-practice' format to work through coaching barriers and drivers. Additionally, this coaching collective focused on building a deeper understanding of the Math Language Routines so that coaches were more equipped to support teachers.

Conference and Convening Attendance

In 2022, ConnectED coordinated the districts' attendance at a national math conference and the EIC Convening. These shared learning opportunities provided extended collaboration and dedicated time away from campuses to reflect and plan. Heading into these events, ConnectED and the districts established the agendas, with a focus on time for collective sharing about learnings and calibration on priorities and challenges when doing classroom walk-throughs. These in-person discussions allowed for insights to be contextualized for each district and for the district staff to continue building relationships with one another.

IN THEIR WORDS: BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

“This cross-district collaboration reminds me that we all have similar challenges and successes, even with different situations, capacities, and resources. I appreciate feedback and reflections from inter-district colleagues and I don't feel completely alone on this journey.”



MARK LOBACO

Mathematics Coordinator, Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Department, West Contra Costa USD



Classroom Visits, San Diego Unified School District, November 2022

“The collaboration with other California districts has been a great learning experience since we are all implementing a new curriculum. We are having similar experiences and challenges so I appreciate the time we can learn from each other.”



San Diego Unified
SCHOOL DISTRICT

JESSICA WALSH

Program Manager-Mathematics, San Diego USD

“Partnership with the other districts has given us a wider spectrum of tools and resources and gets us the knowledge and information way more quickly. We can ask better questions because of it - we've heard about and seen the pitfalls.”



DENISE TSCHIDA

Curriculum Program Specialist in Mathematics, Colton Joint USD

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, professional learning providers and school districts looking to engage in meaningful cross-district collaboration can benefit from considering the following.



Understanding Context

Each district is distinct and has unique characteristics that shape it. [Understanding the contexts](#) of each district helps inform successful identification of, and planning for, appropriate collaboration activities.



Trust and Relationships

The best collaboration happens when people feel connected and comfortable with one another. [Building relationships](#) is a key element to successful partnerships and collaboration.



Common Goals

Creating common goals for collaboration gets everybody on the same page. For any collaborative activities:

Agree on a relevant cross-district **implementation theme**.

Collectively articulate a shared goal for this theme that is **ref active of each district's own implementation goals**.

Work together to define a **shared learning agenda** wherein each district can articulate what they would like to learn about the theme.



Clear Communication

Having a clear [communication feedback loop](#) with all critical perspectives involved and following through on any feedback is essential for sustaining collaboration.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The ConnectED team would be happy to answer any questions you may have and provide support for you and your team on your journey of cross-district collaboration. Please contact Kiera Brodsky-Chase: Kchase@connectednational.org