

Separate Paths, Common Goals: Cross-District Collaboration on Mathematics and English Learner Instruction

California Collaborative on District Reform

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About this series

This brief is the third in a series exploring the promise and challenge of the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership. This project is funded by grants from the Stuart Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Introduction

Across the country, resource-strapped school districts are looking for opportunities to work strategically with other districts to increase efficiencies and learn from each other's experiences. The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership, established in 2008, serves as a useful example of such collaboration (see description of the Partnership in text box below).

The overarching goal of the Partnership is to graduate students prepared for success in higher education or for a career with significant growth potential. With this goal in mind, the third and fourth largest districts in California identified three major areas of focus for their joint endeavors: enhancing mathematics instruction, improving outcomes for English learners (ELs), and developing strong leaders at the school and district levels. In 2011, they added a fourth focus—college and career readiness¹—to leverage additional strategies underway within each district. Exhibit 1 provides demographic information on the two districts.

In our first two briefs describing the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership, we used Etienne Wenger's (1998) communities of practice² framework to describe the initial stages of the Partnership and its role in developing district-level leadership. Here, we look more deeply at two specific areas of focus for the Partnership—mathematics and ELs. Both of these areas provide insights for other jurisdictions considering similar cross-system efforts.

Organized within the broader contexts of the Partnership and of each district, these two strands of work illustrate how multiple, intersecting communities of practice can enrich the learning within and across each community. Close examination of these two areas of work also illustrates that communities of practice are not static; they evolve over time as relationships develop and as those involved identify strategic areas for joint work. Our documentation points to the importance of acknowledging the ebbs and flows of such collaborations and the crucial role that knowledge brokers play in bringing what they learn from the shared community of practice to their home districts. The role of these brokers is essential if districts are to implement the lessons they learn as a result of their collaborative work.

According to Wenger, traditional boundaries—such as those between individual classrooms, schools, and districts—create fertile ground for learning by creating opportunities for outsiders to question some of the often unarticulated assumptions upon which practice is built. Built on a foundation of trust, identification of shared work, common goals and the use of common tools to accomplish those goals, the Partnership facilitates cross-district learning by engaging in the shared examination of practice and outcomes. In addition, the Partnership has generated opportunities for participants in the community to act as brokers who capitalize on their learning to spread new practices within their home districts.

According to Etienne Wenger and his colleagues, communities of practice evolve in organic ways through mutual engagement in shared practice and incorporate three core elements:

- **A domain:** A shared area of interest (e.g., improving achievement of ELs to which members are committed and in which they have a shared competence.
- **A community:** In pursuing the domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. This social dimension is a hallmark of true communities of practice, and the development of trust within these communities is essential.
- **Shared practice:** As a result of pursuing the domain together, members develop a repertoire of resources—experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems—that define the practices within their area of shared interest. It is through the use of these tools that shared practice occurs.

According to Wenger, “brokers are able to make new connections across communities of practice, enable coordination, and...open new possibilities for meaning” (p.109).

Drawing on interviews with district leaders as well as focus groups with coaches, specialists and principals, this brief describes the Partnership’s work in two of the four areas that the districts selected as key leverage points for district action. One of these areas focuses on a particular part of the schools’ curriculum—mathematics. Both

Exhibit 1. District Demographics, 2010–11

	Fresno Unified School District	Long Beach Unified School District
Total enrollment	74,831	84,816
Free or reduced-price lunch	82%	70%
Latino	62%	53%
African American	10%	16%
White	13%	15%
Asian	12%	8%
Filipino	0%	4%
Pacific Islander	0%	2%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	0%	0%
English learners	24%	23%

Source: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

districts’ analysis of student achievement data confirmed that many students were not succeeding in Algebra I, a gate-keeping course for higher-level mathematics as well as for other college preparatory courses. Working together to improve preparation for and success in algebra made immediate sense. Additionally, both districts struggled to move large numbers of ELs out of English language development (ELD) courses and into academic classes that would prepare them for a broader range of postsecondary options. For this reason, improving outcomes for the approximately 25 percent of students designated as ELs in each district was also a high priority and potential source of mutual learning and progress. While the Partnership targets work in both mathematics and EL instruction, the purpose and

About the Partnership

The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership is a collaboration between Fresno and Long Beach Unified School Districts, the third and fourth largest districts in California. The Partnership is designed to accelerate achievement for all students and to close achievement gaps by capitalizing on shared, systemic capacity-building across the two districts. The districts identified four strands that focus their work: enhancing mathematics instruction, improving outcomes for English learners, developing leadership at the school and district level, and college and career readiness. As a growing number of districts consider cross-system collaboration, it is more important than ever to learn how partnerships like this one operate and how the work becomes embedded in the policies, structures, and daily work of each district.

For a description of the early stages of this Partnership, see: Duffy, Brown and O’Day, 2009 (http://www.cacollaborative.org/Portals/0/cafiles/CA_Collaborative_Fresno_LB_Brief1.pdf).

For a description of the Partnership as a leadership strategy, see: Duffy, Brown, O’Day and Hannan, 2010 (http://www.cacollaborative.org/Portals/0/cafiles/CA_Collaborative_Fresno_LB_Brief2.pdf).

nature of that work differs considerably across the two priorities. From the outset, the districts' collaboration in mathematics was clearly defined—both in terms of its goals and in terms of its focus on specific instructional practices. This clarity allowed the districts to leverage lessons from one another right away, contributing to steady growth in elementary mathematics scores.

In contrast, while the districts were committed to improving achievement for ELs, the specifics of the joint work to accomplish this goal were less obvious. This meant that district staff charged with leading the EL strand needed to spend time learning about each other's context and looking for concrete opportunities for developing joint activities or tools.

Reforming Mathematics Instruction

The Partnership's work in mathematics incorporates an approach to instruction first developed in the elementary grades in Long Beach and then taken up to varying degrees by several other districts in the state. Based on Singapore math,³ the Math Achievement Program and Professional Development (MAP²D) in Long Beach is an instructional approach to mathematics that includes daily instruction for 30 minutes focused on basic computational and procedural skills (using *It's All About the Facts*, a district-developed teacher guide), in addition to 60 minutes of more conceptual instruction (called *Math Lesson Design*). This 60-minute instructional period uses the state-adopted text and incorporates demonstration, individual and group problem-solving practice, and formal and informal assessment of student learning based on the Singapore model. Implementation also includes a district-developed MAP²D pacing plan use of ongoing, district-developed assessments to guide instruction, and professional development facilitated by MAP²D coaches to model and support the use of specific instructional strategies.

MAP²D differs significantly from the way mathematics has traditionally been taught in the United States. Rather than concentrating on the memorization of rules for solving mathematical problems, this approach develops students' mastery of mathematics fundamentals (e.g., automaticity in mathematical calculations) as well as their conceptual understanding. In addition, MAP²D focuses on deeper mastery of fewer standards than is common in most mathematics programs in the state.

Although Long Beach and Fresno were at different stages in their mathematics work and implemented the instructional approach in different ways, both recognized the need for significant professional development and support to ensure that instructional changes took hold in classrooms throughout the districts. Below, we describe the two districts' efforts to improve mathematics achievement and the kind of cross-

district learning the Partnership has facilitated in this area.

Mathematics in Long Beach

MAP²D began with a single teacher's approach to mathematics instruction. Si Swun, who was himself an English learner who struggled with mathematics when he was a student, was able to draw from his own experiences and his knowledge of Singapore Math to develop this innovative approach to mathematics instruction in his classroom. Based on his success, the district recruited him to help pilot the approach in 2004–05 in 5th grade classes in five elementary schools. In the spring of 2005, when it appeared that the approach was improving student outcomes on benchmark assessments, district staff developed a plan to implement the approach more widely in the district. The following year, in 2005–06, 15 schools adopted the program in 4th and 5th grades with the support of three district mathematics coaches.⁴ Each day, the three coaches (including Si Swun) visited a school's 5th grade math teachers (and some 4th grade math teachers) to model and observe lessons. Then they sat in on grade-level meetings to provide professional development. Principals also provided release days, during which substitutes were hired for all 5th grade math teachers for half the day to allow time for additional training on site. In 2006–07, five full-time coaches supported implementation of the program in 40 schools in 2nd through 5th grade. Rather than providing half-day trainings on site, teachers from those schools met together at the district professional development center, followed by on-site modeling and coaching.

As implementation progressed and the district fiscal context became more constrained, deployment of coaching resources varied. Initially, schools were selected for program implementation and coaching support based upon student achievement scores on the mathematics California Standards Test (CST) and their agreement to participate in the pilot. During those

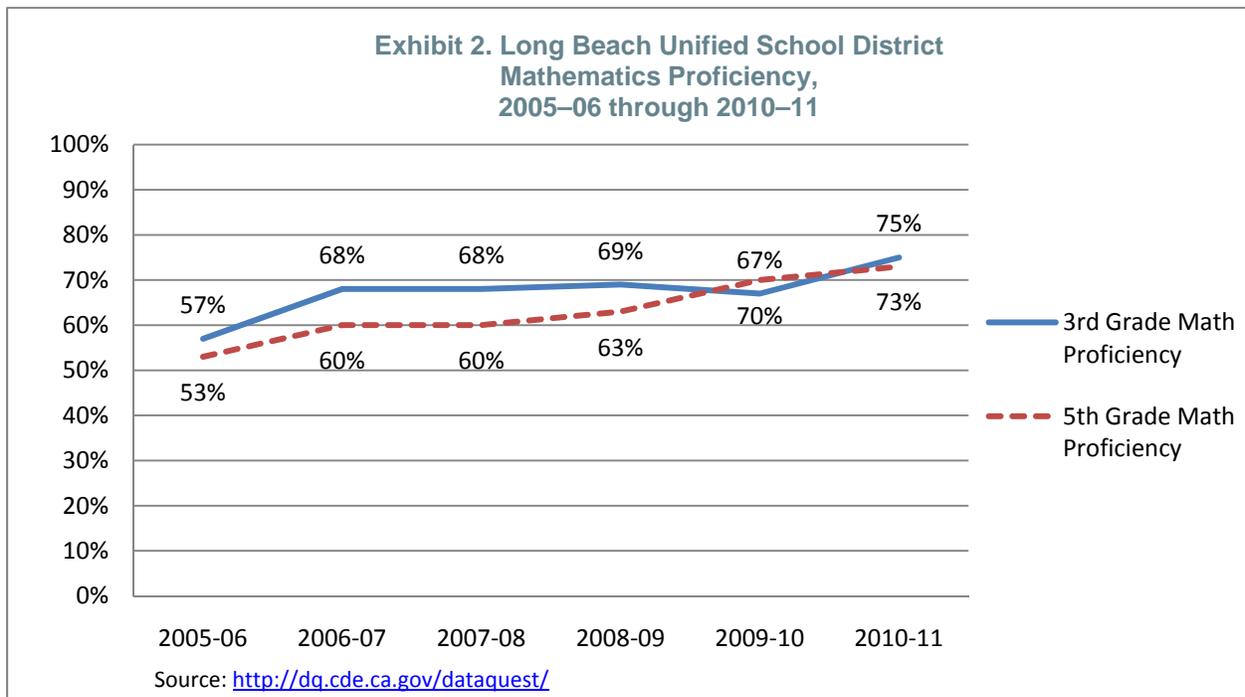
first two years, principals were required to sign a contract indicating their willingness to adjust school schedules to allow for on-site coaching and professional development. Initially, schools with the lowest achievement results were targeted for the most intensive implementation support. In 2008, when the district adopted a new textbook, it expanded the program district-wide. MAP²D is currently implemented in all elementary schools in the district, though with varying degrees of coaching support and fidelity. In 2010–11, the district employed four mathematics coaches who focused on particular grade levels. Coaching resources were distributed based on a pyramid of tiered support. At the top were schools that needed the most support, based on a combination of factors that included student achievement on CSTs, administrator training, and staff turnover.

For schools that received the most intensive support, coaches engaged in two four-day cycles—once in the first trimester and once in the third trimester. On Monday, one coach examined data together with the principal to determine what grades to focus on and then performed walkthroughs with the principal.⁵ This collaborative process helped support principals as they learned to supervise teacher implementation of the instructional approach and provided information for coaches about specific instructional support that might be necessary.⁶ On Tuesday and Wednesday, all four coaches visited that school to give demonstration lessons, or as one coach called it, “math on wheels.” On Thursday, coaches

conducted a “celebration walk” together with two teachers (usually one K-3 and one 4-5 teacher) and the principal. Together, they observed a lesson at each grade level. At the end of the day, the teachers who participated in the celebration walk reported their observations and highlights to the rest of the faculty. On Friday, coaches met together at the district for a variety of activities, including planning for the next week, developing assessments, and collecting and analyzing student assessment data as well as feedback from principals and teachers.

According to coaches, classroom walkthroughs provide opportunities for principals to learn about the instructional approach as well. Attention to the important role principals play in supporting rigorous instruction is something the districts share. Both devote significant resources to ensuring that principals are part of the ongoing implementation. In both districts, the ongoing coaching model includes regular examination of student assessment data and coaches who conduct targeted walkthroughs with principals. Those debriefing conversations serve not only to identify areas of strength and need, but also as professional development opportunities for the principals themselves.

Since implementing this instructional approach more widely in 2005-06, Long Beach has seen steady gains in mathematics achievement (see Exhibit 2 for a summary of those results). Coaches who had been with the district prior to



implementation of MAP²D indicated that the program has resulted in significant changes to curriculum, instruction, and instructional support district-wide. As one coach said, “I’m going to be honest... [before MAP²D] we had no math coaches and we didn’t have all this professional development that we have now. Pretty much we had an adopted text and you followed the pacing of the textbook. Now we have our own pacing and the textbook is something that we definitely use, but we’ve rewritten the pacing in a way that we think is a better sequence. We build from the foundation of number sense forward.” Moreover, a principal indicated that MAP²D has provided more consistency across schools: “We have a lot of kids that transition from school to school. It has helped us align the practice and implementation.”

Mathematics in Fresno

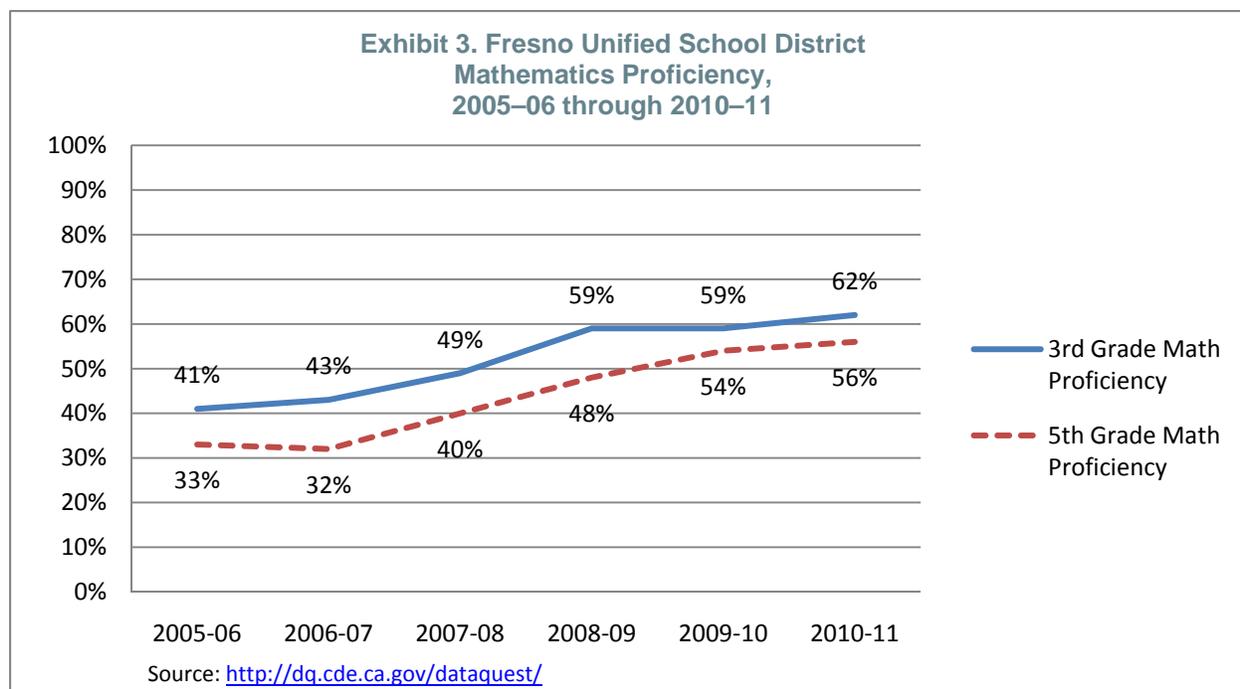
Leaders in Fresno learned about Long Beach’s success using MAP²D through the superintendents’ participation in the California Collaborative on District Reform.⁷ Some cross-district collaboration focusing on mathematics preceded the Partnership; however, the formalization of the Partnership focused both districts’ attention and resources on this work. In 2007–08, Fresno piloted an approach to mathematics instruction that is modeled on the Long Beach program. That first year, six math coaches each worked with one school to begin implementing the reform. They learned about the approach to basic math facts (which develops automaticity in mathematical calculations) and the more conceptual approach to mathematics directly from Si Swun, who designed Long Beach’s instructional approach. For coaches in Fresno, the opportunity to learn from the program’s designer was invaluable. That first year focused exclusively on the 30-minute instructional block that addressed math facts, which Fresno called *Beyond the Basic Facts*.

Reflecting its commitment to implementing these instructional reforms, the district devoted substantial resources to monitoring and supporting success including providing six full-time math coaches, targeted professional development on the program and the coaching process for those coaches, and the creation of aligned, district-wide quarterly assessments. In order to deepen their understanding of *Math Lesson Design*—the 60-minute instructional approach implemented in

Long Beach—Fresno’s coaches were invited to observe lessons in Long Beach in the spring of 2008. In order to implement the instructional approach district-wide, Fresno coaches observed and then practiced the instructional approach together with coaches in Long Beach classrooms. Long Beach coaches provided feedback for Fresno coaches and discussed their approach to coaching during these visits. Doing so helped build the Fresno coaches’ capacity to model instruction in their own district. Then in 2008–09, coaches in Fresno worked in cohorts of three to implement the instructional approach with all elementary schools in the district, focusing attention on both *Beyond the Basic Facts* and *Math Lesson Design*.

For Fresno, this approach to instruction and the way the district was supporting instructional change represented a major shift in practice. The coaches indicated that although some teachers might have previously included some aspects of the approach in their classes, *Beyond the Basic Facts* and *Math Lesson Design* had now become a district-wide expectation. As one coach said, “My first year as a coach, it didn’t seem like there was a real focus on mathematics... We would meet once a month and discuss vocabulary and how to increase knowledge of academic vocabulary in math, but there wasn’t a specific, consistent focus.”

Coaches pointed to three major areas where the change in culture was most visible: in a shift away from curriculum driven by the textbook toward standards-based instruction grounded in mathematical concepts; in daily accountability and monitoring of student learning; and in teachers’ willingness to open their classrooms to coaches. According to one coach, teachers had become accustomed to monitoring visits from district staff. Recognizing the need for coaches and teachers to learn new ways of conducting professional conversations, coaches in Fresno received training in cognitive coaching techniques.⁸ According to Fresno’s math coaches, these kinds of meaningful discussions that focus on instructional support, not evaluation, were a challenge for everyone in the initial stages of implementation. All coaches agreed that as a result of widespread, focused attention on mathematics instruction, the district has seen significant gains in mathematics scores (see Exhibit 3 for a summary of those results).



Two-Way Learning

Fresno was clearly able to learn from Long Beach’s implementation of MAP²D. The conversations across districts allowed Fresno to accelerate its implementation of the instructional approach—going district-wide much more quickly than Long Beach had. However, both districts benefited from the process; Long Beach staff are quick to point out that it is only through sharing ideas like MAP²D with outsiders that leaders, coaches, and teachers were able to articulate the thinking behind their practice. Long Beach leaders believe that this has resulted in deeper learning for Long Beach teachers, coaches, and principals.

Another example of lessons Long Beach has taken from Fresno concerns the mathematics placement practices that Fresno piloted as part of its Equity and Access initiative which has focused attention on student access to rigorous academic courses. Work began in 2008–09 with Project 980/340—so named for the 980 high school and 340 middle school students performing at “proficient” or “advanced” levels on the CST but who had a GPA below 2.0. The district identified these students so that school leaders could target appropriate resources to re-engage them in school.

As the district developed its data dashboards, district staff also noticed a trend in Algebra 1 participation rates: although the proficiency rates

had continued to climb between 2004–05 and 2008–09, participation in Algebra 1 in 8th grade had dropped. When district staff conducted more detailed transcript analyses, they found large numbers of students who were not enrolled in A–G⁹ courses, including Algebra 1, which are required for entrance to the University of California and the California State University systems. As a result, the district began to re-examine course placement practices that keep certain students out of these courses.

District leaders then identified a pool of students who had scored between 325 and 350 on the CST in 7th grade mathematics¹⁰ and placed those students in Algebra 1 in 8th grade, along with the intention of designing an additional mathematics support class. After their first year of implementation (2009–10), Fresno leaders were pleased with outcomes from the new placement policy: enrollment in 8th grade Algebra 1 increased by 13 percent, with only an 8 percent drop in the proficiency rate of those students at the end of the year.

As part of their ongoing commitment to and conversations about equity and access, Fresno shared these results during one of the Partnership meetings. Seeing Fresno’s results, Long Beach adopted the placement practice in 2010–11. Long Beach also designed and enrolled students in an additional mathematics support class.

A summary of achievement results appears in Exhibits 4a, 4b, 5a, and 5b. Prior to implementing the new policy, Fresno saw a decline between 2005–06 and 2006–07 in the number of students enrolled in Algebra 1 in 8th grade. At the same time, there was a decline in the number of students who scored proficient in Algebra 1 in 8th grade, despite the fact that the percent proficient increased. The number of students enrolled and proficient in Algebra 1 in 8th grade jumped dramatically in 2009–10 in Fresno with their new placement policy. Long Beach also reported success in the first year of implementation. While Long Beach had been seeing a relatively steady increase in enrollment and proficiency, the placement policy and support classes seem to have accelerated their efforts to improve Algebra 1 outcomes for more students. Both districts define success not only in terms of increasing the number of 8th graders enrolled in Algebra 1, but also in terms of higher proficiency rates. In Long Beach, the number of students enrolled in Algebra 1 increased 10%

between 2009-2010 and 2010-2011, while the percent proficient in Long Beach fell 5%. However, the numbers of students enrolled and scoring proficient actually increased.

Long Beach credits its success in 2010–11 not only to the student placement practices the district learned from Fresno, but also to the new support classes it offered to students. In particular, Long Beach experienced some of its biggest jumps in persistently underperforming middle schools, where the district has devoted significant attention and support. In their second year of implementation, Fresno experienced mixed results. While the actual number of students enrolled in Algebra 1 in 8th grade continued to increase in 2010–11, the number of proficient students decreased. According to Fresno superintendent Mike Hanson, the first year of using the new process for placing students in Algebra 1 was done quickly in August, just before schools opened. While Fresno leaders knew that for sustained success,

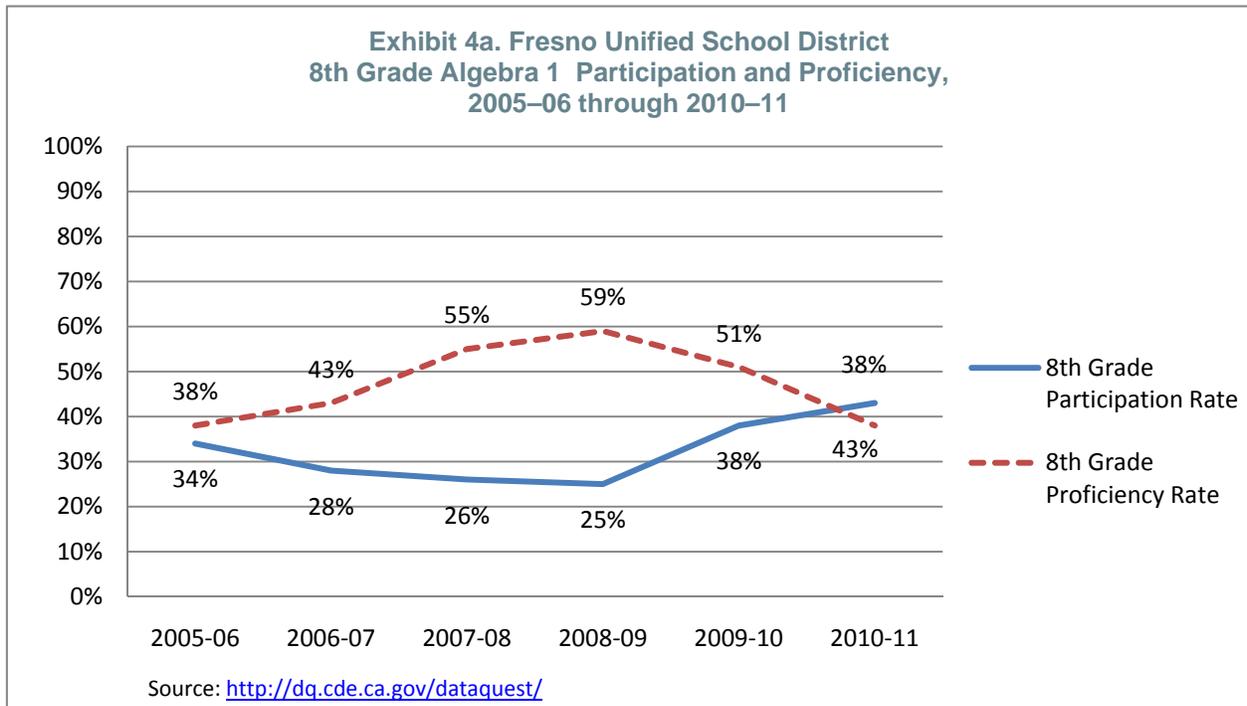


Exhibit 4b. Fresno Unified School District 8th Grade Algebra 1 Participation and Proficiency, 2005–06 through 2010–11

	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11
Number of 8th grade students tested	2,032	1,637	1,479	1,398	2,055	2,274
Number of 8th grade students proficient	772	704	813	825	1,048	864

Source: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

it was important to provide support systems for some of those students enrolling in Algebra 1, these supports did not materialize. Consequently, although the district increased the participation rate with only a relatively small dip in proficiency in the first year of implementation, they saw a significant drop in proficiency in the second year. According to

Hanson, “We didn’t execute this as intended. We own this.” The benefits of any collaboration depend upon successfully applying the lessons in one’s home district. As Hanson observed, “We’re lucky, very lucky, to have this Partnership, but no partnership is going to help execute in your own district. There are things that a partnership can’t do.”

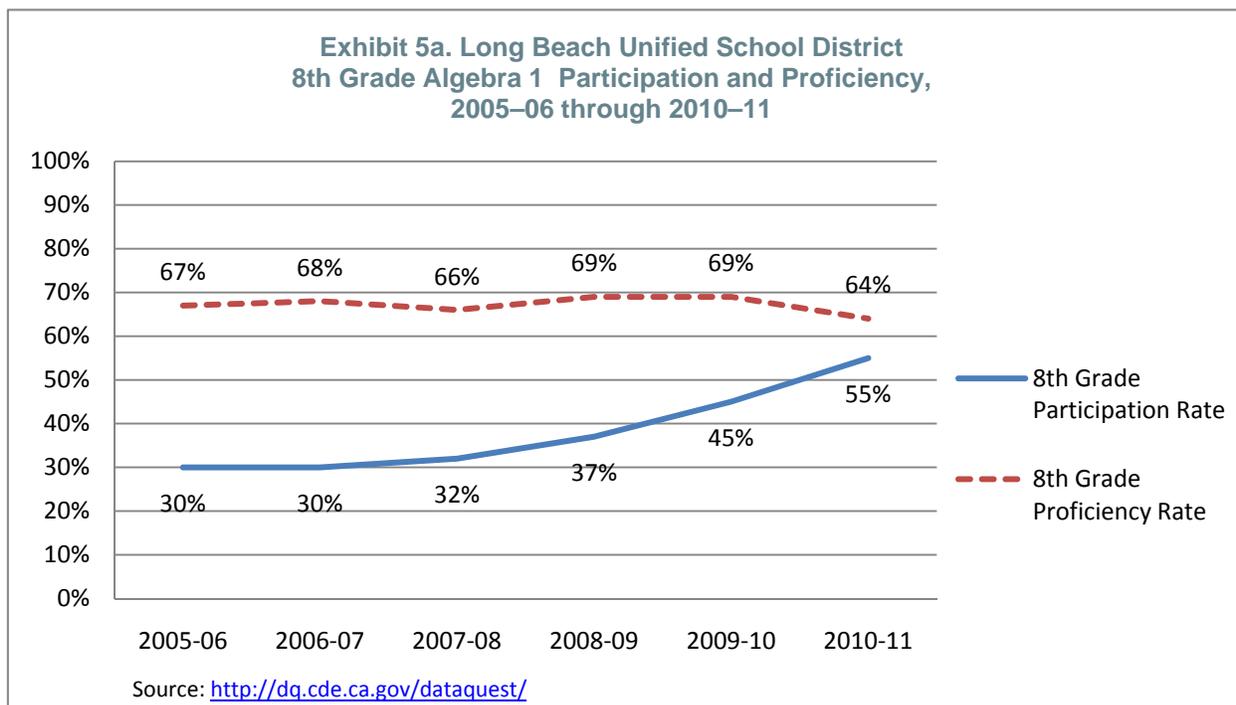


Exhibit 5b. Long Beach Unified School District 8th Grade Algebra 1 Participation and Proficiency, 2005–06 through 2010–11

	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11
Number of 8th grade students tested	2,193	2,225	2,235	2,574	2,990	3,613
Number of 8th grade students proficient	1,469	1,513	1,475	1,776	2,063	2,312

Source: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

The example in Fresno points to the important role that brokers play in any community of practice. For Fresno to benefit from the learning that results from the Partnership, they must rely on leaders who can align new learning and new practices to existing contexts. Fresno’s district-level mathematics leaders and coaches effectively applied the lessons from Long Beach’s experience with MAP²D—which allowed the district to accelerate its implementation of instructional reforms in elementary mathematics. However, Superintendent Hanson acknowledged that they did not quickly apply the lessons from Long Beach and other districts when it came to the supports necessary for 8th grade Algebra 1 success.

Benefits of the Partnership

The cross-district collaboration in mathematics illustrates how districts can benefit from a community of practice organized around a concretely defined practice. The shared area of interest in this case was improved student achievement in mathematics, and the Partnership provided the forum for district leaders, coaches, and principals to engage in discussions that focused on that shared area of interest. In addition, the curriculum itself and the professional development and coaching practices that support its implementation provided the joint work around which the districts addressed common challenges.

Providing Opportunities for Cross-District Observations and Ongoing Conversations:

The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership continues to offer both districts opportunities to participate in cross-district conversations and in ongoing conversations among district leaders. According to district staff and coaches, these opportunities have provided several lessons they have applied to their own districts, and have let them see the instructional program in practice and hear from those implementing it in order to ensure that sufficient resources are in place to support implementation.

Seeing the Instructional Program in Action:

The Partnership provided opportunities not only for Fresno to learn about implementation directly from the creator of MAP²D, but allowed the district's coaches and principals to see the program in practice with similar students. According to one coach in Fresno, it "was very helpful to have that time to observe what was going on in their schools and then to have a chance to pick the coaches' and teachers' brain." Another Fresno coach added that "we heard it from the source. It was like having a map before you get there." Once the coaches visited Long Beach, she shared that "it brought about a consistency on how to go about raising student achievement in mathematics." Seeing the program and talking with those who were implementing it allowed coaches in Fresno to anticipate possible challenges and proactive supports that help avoid those challenges.

Ensuring Sufficient Resources Are in Place:

Although each district needed to provide sufficient resources for implementation, ongoing conversations among district leaders within the Partnership informed their decisions about the necessary supports for implementation. The capacity for Fresno to leverage lessons from Long Beach's implementation experience is reflected in the districts' different approaches to implementation. Long Beach piloted the approach and had to assess its impact as it was implemented more widely in the district. Fresno was able to learn from Long Beach's pilot and from candid conversations with teachers, principals, and coaches in Long Beach, which allowed them to accelerate their own implementation. Those observations and conversations allowed Fresno to move district-wide much more quickly, with the necessary supports firmly in place.

Another lesson Fresno took from Long Beach's implementation experience was the essential

role principals play as instructional leaders who must support and guide implementation at their school sites. As a result, Fresno leaders worked with their Long Beach counterparts to organize a site visit for Fresno principals to Long Beach schools to observe MAP²D in action. These visits required an investment of time on the part of both districts. However, according to district staff who coordinated these activities, by doing this, the Partnership sent the signal that making such visits happen is a priority.

Implications for the Partnership: Maintaining Connections

As we have noted in an earlier brief, the Partnership provides a forum for the districts to share their data and assess their progress; these conversations require a level of trust that allows for candid and sometimes difficult conversations to occur. Those from the district offices who are charged with leading the mathematics work meet quarterly across the districts to share their practices. They examine data together, noting patterns that are different and similar in student achievement across both districts. Doing so results in more nuanced discussions of those patterns. Maintaining those connections was essential to the success of Fresno's implementation of instructional reform in mathematics. We also saw that building a culture of embedding the use of student achievement data into how schools do business was more easily accomplished in Long Beach, where there is a longer tradition of continuous improvement district-wide. However, the Partnership—in mathematics in particular—has provided traction in Fresno to accelerate the process of implementing common instructional approaches modeled on MAP²D and shifting to a culture of continuous improvement. In addition, because these conversations are ongoing, district leaders can dig deeper in their analysis with each pass through their data.

What the districts learn from each other goes beyond sharing best practices; they also help one another truly understand their successes and their struggles in implementation. Those candid conversations help the districts apply and sometimes adapt new practices in their unique contexts with the knowledge they have gained. This is precisely what Wenger refers to when he discusses brokering. People—in this case the leaders who participate in the Partnership—examine each other's practices together and generate new understandings that they bring back to inform the work in their own districts.

District English Learner Initiatives

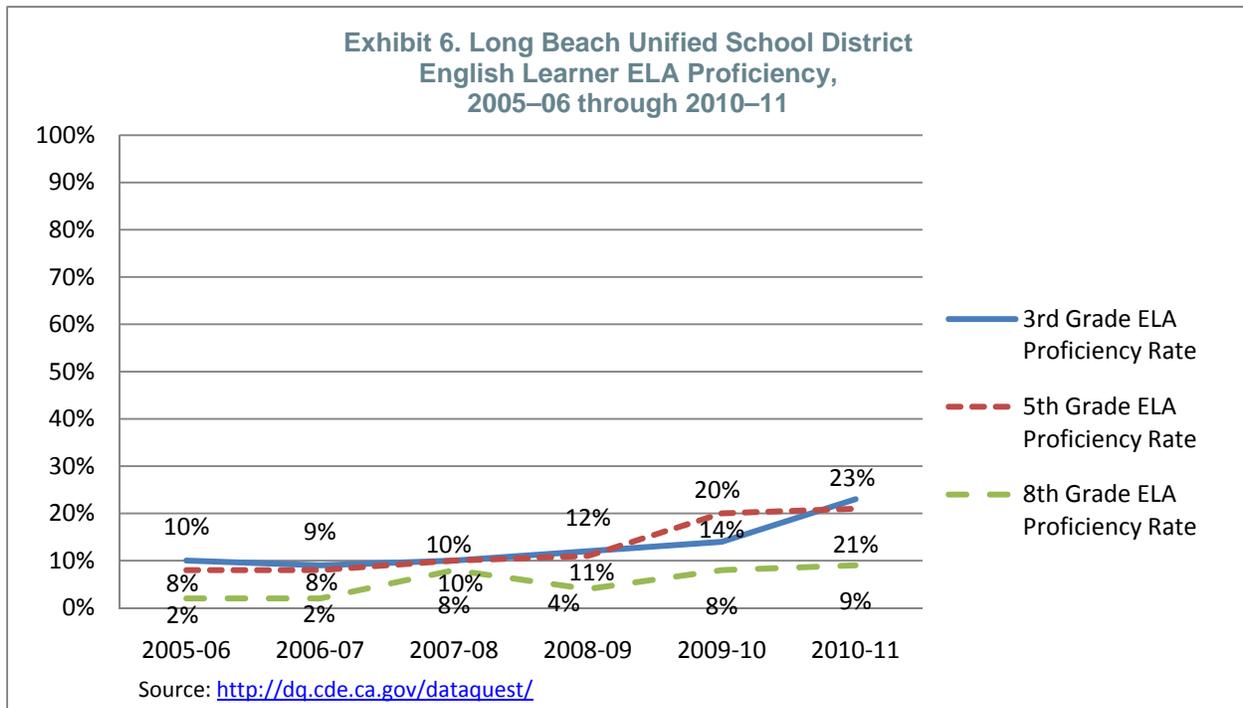
While the mathematics work seemed very clearly defined from the beginning, the EL-focused work in the Partnership was less so. Each district had (and has) its own approach to supporting EL achievement, and the basis for joint work had to be built over time. Learning about each other's systems accounted for much of the Partnership's initial work together. For example, Fresno conducted district-wide training for elementary teachers in "frontloading,"¹¹ and implemented Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol¹² (SIOP) training for Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) teachers at the secondary level. The district will provide SIOP training to all mathematics and English language arts teachers at the secondary level in 2011–12. Long Beach focused primarily on SDAIE strategies but did not take the same district-wide approach. Instead, training in Long Beach was voluntary. In addition, whereas Fresno had an ELD curriculum for ELs in elementary grades, Long Beach did not. More importantly, Fresno and Long Beach adopted different strategies for the supports they provide both for EL students and for teachers of ELs. Fresno provides coaching to teachers throughout the district using a train-the-trainer approach, whereas Long Beach has adopted a targeted pull-out approach for students, along with some coaching of teachers in specific grades. Despite these differences—and to some extent because of them—the districts have learned from one another. Below, we describe each district's approach to fostering EL student achievement in greater detail and explore the role the Partnership has played in supporting shared learning.

Like the mathematics initiative, the Partnership's EL-focused efforts are grounded in ongoing analysis of data. One type of data that the district leaders examine is EL scores on the state English language arts (ELA) test. As depicted in Exhibits 6 and 7, these data give but a very rough picture of EL performance over time. One shortcoming of such cross-sectional analyses is that the make-up of the EL subgroup is constantly shifting in predictable ways. As students acquire English, they are exited from EL status; at the same time, new EL students with lower levels of proficiency are constantly entering the subgroup. This means that the performance of ELs who have been served by the district is systematically underestimated at

any given time. In addition, Exhibits 6 and 7 do not capture important details about the students such as prior educational experience, or whether students are new to the U.S. or have been enrolled in the district for years. Leaders from Fresno and Long Beach actually take a much more nuanced approach to their analysis of EL achievement, often looking at individual student growth. Despite their shortcomings, however, the exhibits included here can provide readers a very broad context for the Partnership's EL efforts. In our next brief, we will examine more thoroughly the districts' use of various kinds of data to ground the work of the Partnership.

Support for English Learner Achievement in Long Beach

In Long Beach, the Long Beach Unified School District *English Learner Master Plan*, adopted in 2002 and revised in 2006, guides programs and supports for English learners. The Master Plan was developed in collaboration with parents, staff, and community members and is supported by board policy and administrative regulations for ELs. District-wide practices include pulling out students for targeted instruction and providing school-wide professional development for implementation of instructional strategies such as the development of academic vocabulary and SDAIE. Based on its assessment of district-wide achievement patterns, in 2010–11 Long Beach assigned 35 ELD specialists to schools to provide instruction for small groups of students in fourth and fifth grade. Those grade levels became the focus of an effort to get as many students as possible reclassified¹³ and scoring proficient on the CST before entering middle school. Specialists worked in a single school and pulled out specifically identified students for three hours of targeted instruction in the morning. In the afternoon, specialists modeled instruction for teachers, supported EL students in core instructional contexts, and sometimes provided school-wide staff development on instructional techniques that support ELs. At the end of 2010–11, Long Beach was considering expanding that approach to include K–3 in 2011–2012. Coaches in Long Beach believe that targeting specific students and providing them with guided practice using academic vocabulary has had a positive impact on student achievement (see Exhibit 6).

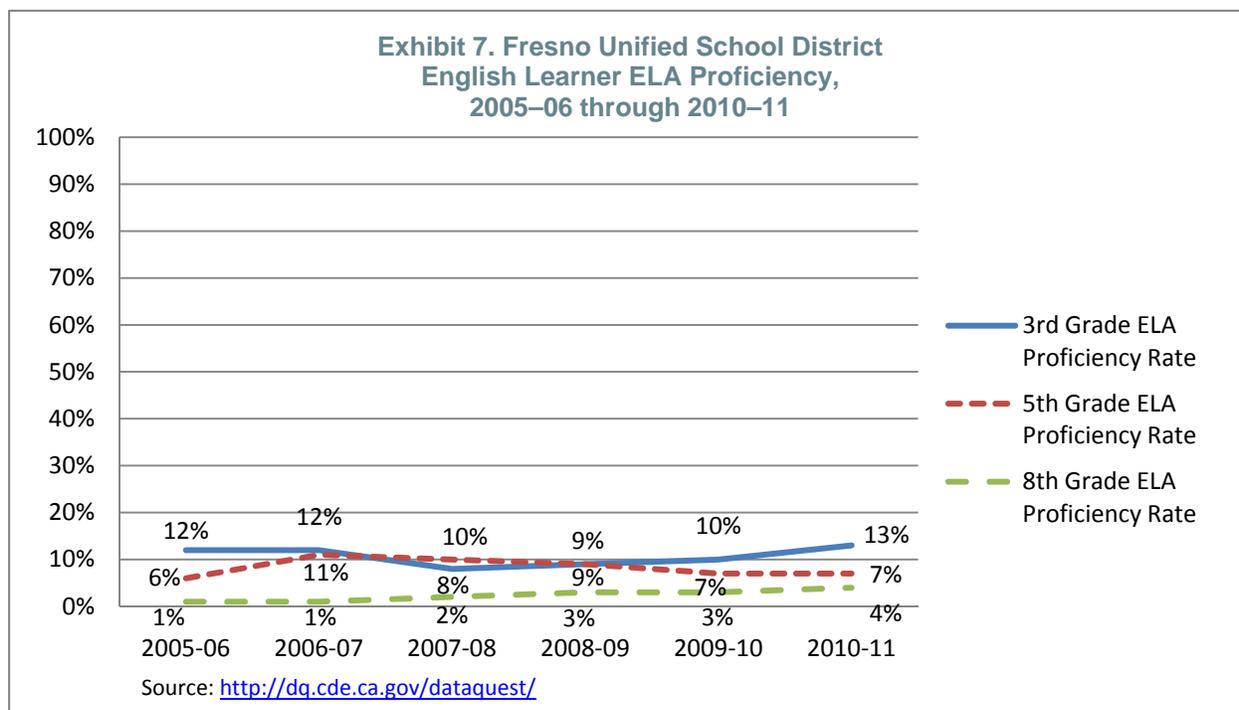


Support for English Learner Achievement in Fresno

Fresno’s district-wide approach to supporting ELs is guided by its *English Learners Master Plan*, last revised in 2005, which was developed in collaboration with parents, staff, and community members. The *Master Plan* is supported by board policy administrative regulations and is the foundational document that delineates all aspects of Fresno’s practices for English learners. In addition, the district’s current practices are guided by the *English Learners Task Force Report* (2009). It serves as an addendum that details current actions, but does not contradict any of the practices in the Master Plan. The report made recommendations in seven key areas, including effective teaching practices, professional learning, student placement and monitoring, structured English immersion, additional programs that support ongoing language development and community, and parent involvement. Since the publication of the *Task Force Report*, the district has redoubled its efforts to accelerate the academic achievement of ELs and has devoted substantial coaching resources to ensuring that the task force recommendations are implemented district-wide. Coaches from Fresno said that the

report also helped the district’s transition from a focus on compliance to a focus on instructional supports.

The district has struggled to improve achievement for long-term ELs who plateau at levels just below proficient. District leaders adopted a train-the-trainer model for elementary schools; 12 coaches received training in frontloading, which they then shared with staff at all elementary schools through explicit training, modeling, and coaching. SIOP training was provided for all EL instructional coaches, as well as secondary sheltered instruction teachers, site administrators, and other instructional coaches. At the same time, EL coaches also received training in cognitive coaching techniques (with mathematics and special education coaches). Coaches and principals were very positive about the support they received from the district. One coach said, “This is the first time that it has been systematized where all schools are implementing frontloading. I see that message coming down from our direct supervisor. That is supporting our work.” A principal also shared positive feedback, noting: “Every time we call EL Services, they make time for us. I know I can call anytime and get an answer.”



Learning Facilitated by the Partnership

As we have described in earlier briefs, one of the primary venues for the Partnership to facilitate cross-district collaboration is the quarterly meetings. The Partnership provides opportunities for cross-district learning not only through ongoing conversations with job-alike partners, but through ongoing conversations across the four focal areas and with others who regularly attend quarterly meetings. One foundation for work in both districts is their mutual commitment to equity and access. Learning about Fresno’s practices led Long Beach to develop a specific sheltered English class for long-term EL high school students that would earn students A–G credit. According to Long Beach leaders, it was Fresno’s work in equity and access that stimulated “new ways of looking at something that we wouldn’t have had if we didn’t have the Partnership.” The capacity to apply that learning to a specific area that Long Beach had not yet addressed points again to the role that brokers play in bringing that learning back to their districts: “We [Long Beach leaders] then had to say, ‘Okay, how does this work for Long Beach and what can we do with it?’” Leaders of the EL work from each district reiterated the importance of having a thought partner. The EL-focused Partnership work illustrates that it is not necessary for districts to adopt the same practices in order to learn from one another. As in mathematics, the Partnership

provides a forum for the districts to leverage lessons from one another, adds weight to the work, and sustains a focus on the goals for their work through their ongoing connections across the two districts. But there are differences in the character of the learning opportunities that the districts have provided because of the way their shared practice has evolved over time.

Applying Lessons in their Home Districts:

Despite their different instructional contexts, staff charged with leading the EL work acknowledged the importance of hearing what their partners were doing to support ELs. For example, prior to implementing frontloading district-wide in Fresno, district leaders discussed the way Long Beach had incorporated the practice in the past. Essentially, Long Beach had made the training available to sites on a voluntary basis, rather than making it a required part of professional development and coaching. As a result, the approach had not taken hold district-wide. Fresno’s goal was for all teachers to adopt the practice, so they rolled it out more systematically, training teachers and principals, and providing follow-up coaching and support to all elementary schools over a two-year period. Because the leaders had been engaged in ongoing conversations, they recognized these differences and were able to strategically adapt their implementation process. One factor that explains the different approaches to

implementation is something we also allude to in our discussion of the work in mathematics: Fresno and Long Beach differ in the degree to which they have established district-wide instructional coherence, and those differences have an impact on the ways in which each district manages instructional change. Long Beach utilized specialists for their EL work whereas Fresno employed coaches, coupled with a district-wide instructional training program, to drive instructional improvement for all students.

Leaders in Long Beach also credit their Partnership conversations for the pull-out approach they have implemented in 4th and 5th grade classes. In examining achievement patterns, staff who led the EL work agreed that 4th and 5th graders and those scoring at the intermediate level on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) were struggling. In an earlier brief, we described the important role that cross-district data-based discussions play during Partnership meetings. In that brief, we explained that in their analysis of achievement data in both districts, Long Beach noticed that the dip in 6th grade on the CSTs was steep but not as dramatic in Fresno. Long Beach created self-contained classes for 6th grade to smooth the transition from elementary to middle school.

Examination of those data also led district leaders to compare notes about what they do to target resources to 4th and 5th grade students—particularly those who score at the intermediate level on the CELDT. As one leader from Long Beach described it, “They [Fresno] have a discrete program for ELD. We do not. We use Open Court and then we do differentiation and we have some district-designed resources that support that. So I was looking at what we could do that would bridge the difference between a discrete program that’s purchased and used specifically for ELD and our idea of differentiation.” This led to Long Beach’s current targeted approach to supporting ELs in 4th and 5th grade, which uses 35 specialists who pull students out for ELD instruction each morning. According to the Long Beach district EL leader, the perspective that Fresno provided initiated the thinking, and “that is the most valuable part of the Partnership.”

Maintaining Focus:

Even though coaches, specialists, and principals were unable to point to specific instances where they have benefited from the Partnership in

relation to their EL work, district staff believe the Partnership has had system-wide benefits in the area of supports for ELs. First, the Partnership keeps both systems focused on the achievement of ELs. Through the Partnership, conversations about ELs, which could easily become a marginalized conversation about the achievement patterns of a specific subgroup, are instead embedded in broader analysis of district practices related to mathematics, leadership, and, now, college and career readiness. Leaders suggested that capitalizing on the features of their work provides opportunities to create aligned and integrated instructional systems that address the needs of all students. It is the nested, intersecting communities that make up the larger Partnership that have prevented the marginalization of those conversations and at the same time have kept attention and resources focused on EL achievement in both districts.

Implications for the Partnership: Maintaining Connections

As in mathematics, those leading the EL-focused work meet quarterly to discuss practices related to EL support in each district. Initially, the quarterly meetings provided an opportunity for the EL leaders in each district to gain a clearer understanding of how the other district approaches EL instructional support. As in mathematics, the EL conversations have consistently been embedded in their ongoing examination of data. While leaders acknowledged the benefit of having a thought partner for candid discussions of challenges and potential solutions, both leaders also wanted to find more concrete work to do together. This desire points to the importance of shared work for partnerships such as this, as for other types of practice communities. One leader said, “Basically, you need something to do” in order for a partnership like this to have relevance for district leaders and become embedded within the system. Most recently, the EL leaders and other EL team members have begun to jointly create an ELD progress monitoring tool for each grade level, along with plans to monitor and support EL students after they transition into mainstream settings. While in its initial stages, having something concrete to work on—even though each district may use the tool differently—seems to have reenergized their participation in the larger Partnership. The ongoing conversations during Partnership meetings allowed the leaders to discover that they share a need for such a tool.

Multiple Models for Learning

Taken together, these two strands of work demonstrate the differing levels and forms of engagement that are part of the Partnership and that help to give it its strength. Wenger argues that communities of practice thrive when there are opportunities for multiple levels of participation. In the case of the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership, the mathematics strand initially included activities that involved district personnel throughout both systems. Multiple participants, including district-level leaders, coaches, principals, and teachers benefited differently, depending on their proximity to the core work of the mathematics instructional reforms. On the other hand, the EL strand initially involved only the district-level staff charged with leading the work, which limited opportunities for broader learning across the two systems. Interestingly, over time the EL work has begun to include multiple layers of participation while the mathematics work has moved toward involving fewer people. This reflects the dynamism of this and similar partnerships. These two focal areas also illustrate an ebb and flow of activity within the Partnership that is born of variations in membership and evolving relationships in the community and the degree to which partners are engaged in joint work.

While the Partnership as a whole has resulted in district learning and the adoption and adaptation of each other's practices, the mathematics and EL strands of work also demonstrate that different kinds of learning can occur based on the degree to which the work is shared in each district. Those differences help demonstrate that there is not just one model for this sort of Partnership; instead, the different kinds of learning across the priority areas are part of the dynamic and organic nature of this work and help sustain the Partnership over time.

The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership also illustrates that even when districts adopt similar practices—as with the 8th grade Algebra 1 placement policy—the districts must apply the lessons within their own contexts. Each district must assume responsibility for executing the learning it takes away from the joint work. Context is important, and ultimately, each district must own the strategies and actions necessary to implement change successfully.

The quarterly meetings provided different kinds of learning opportunities for the leaders of the mathematics and EL strands. While the domain, community, and shared practice were clearly defined in mathematics, the development of shared practice took longer to emerge in the EL-focused work. And because of that, the learning that has emerged across the districts has also been less concrete.

If we look again at the work of the Partnership through the lens of Wenger's framework, we see that the mathematics and EL strands defined a shared area of interest early on and both have regular communication through quarterly meetings, teleconferences, and email that has helped build trust, allowing candid conversations to occur. Wenger suggests that this social dimension of the work is essential to a community of practice, and suggests that shared practice is also an essential component. In the case of mathematics, the joint work focused on the implementation of a specific instructional approach and progress could be measured using the same metrics along the way. For the EL strand, it has taken time for the joint work to emerge. Initially, the shared practice was embedded in ongoing conversations to learn about approaches being adopted in each system, careful examination of achievement patterns in each district, and a thought partnership that, in the words of one district leader, would “stimulate your thinking about your work.” This thought partnership, coupled with a deep commitment to improving achievement of ELs, continued to animate the work in this arena until a more concrete focus for collaboration emerged. As one of the leaders commented, “Initially, it made me a more reflective person. That was very beneficial. Now we have moved towards having a very concrete product.”

Examining the Partnership's work in mathematics and ELs demonstrates that there are multiple models for districts to learn from one another. With shrinking resources, it is essential to identify successful ways to effectively leverage resources and share learning to improve district performance. The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership demonstrates that collaboration across districts is one way to do this and offers promise to other districts seeking to improve their work.

Endnotes

¹ This fourth area of focus for the Partnership is also called Linked Learning, which is an approach to high school improvement that combines rigorous academics, career and technical education, and real-world experiences. Students select an industry-themed pathway and design a course sequence that will prepare them for postsecondary options.

² The concept of communities of practice is very similar to that of professional learning communities, a term used more frequently in education settings. We use communities of practice because of its broad application in many kinds of organizations and sectors and because of the emphasis on shared practice as the community's foundation. See Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ What has come to be known in the U.S. as “Singapore math” is a teaching method that draws upon textbooks and syllabi from the Singapore national curriculum that emphasizes problem-solving and model-making with a focus on in-depth understanding of mathematical concepts.

⁴ For an evaluation of the 2005–06 pilot, see Gulek, J.C., Dawson, D., Anderson, E.M., & Naranjo, S. (2007). *MAP²D elementary mathematics program 2005–06 evaluation report*. Long Beach, CA: Long Beach Unified School District Office of Research, Planning, and Evaluation.

⁵ Classroom walkthroughs enable participants to gain a better understanding of particular instructional practices. Typically, a protocol or list of questions guides short classroom visits, which can be conducted in particular grades, subject areas or school-wide, depending on needs and goals.

⁶ On Monday, while one coach works with the principal to examine data, walk classrooms, and establish instructional priorities, the other three coaches visit other schools by principal or teacher request.

⁷ The California Collaborative on District reform joins researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue and collaborative activity to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems. For more information on the Collaborative, see <http://www.cacollaborative.org/>.

⁸ Cognitive coaching helps make a clear distinction between coaching and evaluation through building trust and rapport between coaches and teachers, co-development of questions and areas of focus, and learning how to respond in ways that promote teachers' continued growth and ongoing reflection.

⁹ The University of California specifies which courses fulfill these requirements. The A–G requirements specify a course-taking pattern that is designed to ensure that students can participate fully in their first year at the university. Following the A–G sequence of courses fulfills the minimum eligibility requirements for admission to the University of California and the California State University systems.

¹⁰ The performance levels for each grade and subject area on the CST are based on scale scores that range between 150 and 600. The score dividing the “basic” scores from “below basic” is 300 for every grade and subject area. Thus, a score of 325 places a student in the middle of the “basic” band. The score dividing “basic” scores from “proficient” scores is 350 for every grade and subject area. Selecting students with scores between 325 and 350 means they are enrolling students in the top half of the “basic” band.

¹¹ Frontloading is an approach to instruction that includes previewing vocabulary, skills, and concepts students will learn later.

¹² The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is an instructional approach that combines eight interrelated elements that help teachers address the particular linguistic and academic needs of ELs including: lesson planning that addresses both content and language objectives, incorporates the development of background knowledge, comprehensible input, targeted strategy development, interaction, practice/application, lesson delivery, and assessment.

¹³ In California, each district determines what specific criteria will be used to determine whether a student has sufficient English proficiency to be classified as a fluent English speaker.

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California Collaborative on District Reform

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For more information about the Collaborative and its work, visit www.cacollaborative.org.