

## **Meeting 52 Summary**

### **Developing Language and Literacy in the Early Grades: Toward Instructional Quality and Consistency in Oakland**

February 27–28, 2024

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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](http://www.cacollaborative.org).*

In February 2024, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened in Oakland, California, for their second meeting of the 2023–24 academic year.<sup>2</sup> Meeting participants continued attending to issues of coherence discussed in previous meetings, this time sharpening the focus on instruction using the lens of a literacy and language framework developed in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). Because OUSD recognizes the importance of supporting students in acquiring language skills while concurrently developing their literacy skills, the discussions throughout the meeting emphasized the interconnected and mutually supportive strategies required to support both language and literacy.

### **Understanding the Historical and Local Contexts**

OUSD, located in Alameda County, serves about 34,600 students in the seventh most ethnically diverse city in the country. Half of the families served in OUSD speak another language in their homes. One third of OUSD’s students are classified as English learners, and newcomers represent more than one quarter of the English learners in the district.

The district is in the process of strengthening its approach to early literacy instruction and student learning, with particular attention to the needs of multilingual learners. However, in addition to the large percentage of English learners and the rapidly growing population of newcomer students, the district confronts major challenges in the area of educator

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capacity. Among these challenges, OUSD is combating a 19% teacher turnover rate each year. According to one district administrator, “We have high rates of teachers who are not credentialed and are not skilled at serving our diverse learners.” Given this context, district leaders believe that consistent instructional approaches and surrounding supports are essential to ensuring quality despite a continually shifting educator workforce. The district is therefore navigating a shift from one of relative autonomy for school sites to a more coordinated approach across schools to ensure more coherence in professional development (PD) around an aligned curriculum.

In addition to this local context, OUSD’s work around language acquisition and literacy development sits within a broader historical context. To help foster an understanding of the advancements around language equity and the progress still to be made, district leaders led meeting participants through a gallery walk highlighting landmark events in the past 100 years around language, equity, and civil rights. Examples included the 1947 *Mendez v. Westminster* decision, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* decision, and the 1996 OUSD Ebonics Resolution.<sup>3</sup> Several meeting participants recognized that one main advancement is the shift from viewing bilingualism as a deficit to honoring bilingualism as an asset. Others noted that despite legal victories over the years, the path from the courtroom to the classroom is “a very thin trail” and argued for continued progress to push these reforms into the student learning experiences in practical and effective ways. One meeting participant built on this perspective by emphasizing the importance of efforts in Oakland in continuing the journey toward equitable student learning: “There is no more critical racial justice issue than literacy and language development. It has to happen here if it is going to happen around the rest of the nation.”

## **The OUSD Language and Literacy Framework**

OUSD has articulated a vision that “all students will graduate with the language and literacy skills they need to become lifelong readers, critical thinkers, and effective communicators.” To move toward achieving that vision, district staff collaborated during the pandemic to create the OUSD Language and Literacy Framework (Exhibit 1) and committed to creating a system that addresses language proficiency and literacy development as interconnected elements in a student's success.

The district refers to this equity-centered framework as their North Star. It comprises several key elements:

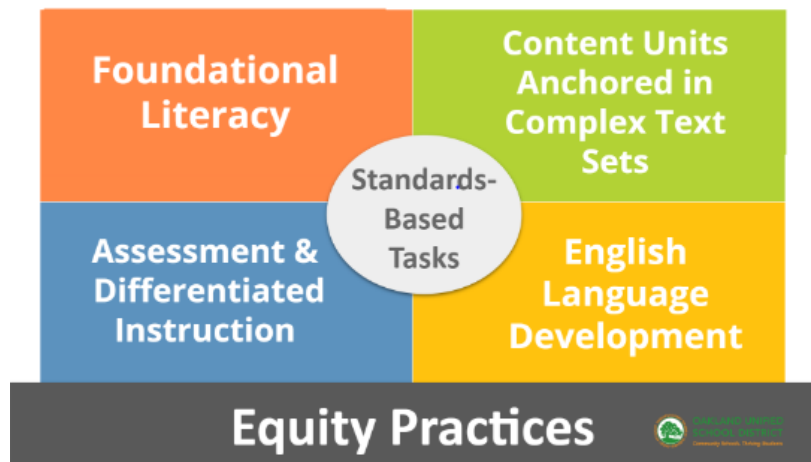
- The framework defines *equity practices* as the necessary conditions for learning that undergird all other components of the framework; these should celebrate students’ diversity in the service of powerful learning, cultural competence, and belonging. The

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<sup>3</sup> *Mendez v. Westminster* was a 1947 class action lawsuit that ended school segregation in California and supported civil rights efforts to end segregation nationwide with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. In 1974, the Supreme Court ruling in *Lau v. Nichols* affirmed the right of English learners to participate in public school programs and helped establish a mandate for schools to meet the language needs of their students. In 1996, Oakland Unified School District became the first district in the country to declare Ebonics a second language and recognize it in its bilingual student programs.

district aims to do this by disrupting deficit thinking, leveraging cultural and linguistic assets, and nurturing empowering narratives.

**Exhibit 1. OUSD Language and Literacy Framework**



- *Standards-based-tasks* are at the core of the framework because these everyday learning activities are the best predictors of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students will develop over time.
- *Systemic instruction in foundational literacy* is critical for students to learn necessary foundational literacy skills—from phonemic awareness and concepts of print to decoding of connected text.
- Students pursue inquiry in a topic anchored in *complex text sets* to ground knowledge building and inquiry in rich and culturally relevant materials.
- *English language development (ELD)* takes the forms of both *integrated ELD*, which aims to explicitly teach academic language while providing access to the core curriculum, and *designated ELD*, which uses protected time to focus language development for students at a similar English proficiency level.
- *Assessment and differentiated instruction* calls upon teachers to use data and tailor instruction to meet students’ individual needs.

To illustrate the constant language and content demands teachers need to navigate in their classrooms, participants viewed a video of a first-year Grade 4 classroom teacher presenting a lesson about the Revolutionary War during designated ELD time. Throughout this three-part lesson, the teacher employed multiple ELD strategies to help students unpack the meaning of a section of text: “There were about 500,000 Loyalists when the American Revolution started in 1775, which was about 16 percent of the total population.” The teacher guided students by deconstructing the sentence into “chunks” to determine what each sentence chunk meant and then reconstructing the sentence to make meaning of the text. The teacher also gave students opportunities to practice speaking by giving them the opportunity to “turn and talk” with classmates and providing them with specific prompts to use in their conversations with their classmates. Students also had a chance to apply their language skills by submitting written responses as exit tickets, which the teacher used to gauge student understanding.

At the end of the video, this teacher shared her opinion of the strength of tying ELD into English language arts lessons, stating, “I hear a lot of different ideas and thoughts from different students. I emphasize a lot of conversation cues, which extends their reasoning instincts and gives them opportunities to practice.” Additionally, one district administrator

emphasized that in the absence of high quality ELD materials, OUSD had to create their own. What they wanted to illustrate to meeting participants through the video is that when high-quality instructional materials that reflect the spirit of the ELA/ELD framework *are* in place, powerful language learning is possible, even with first-year teachers. It is a call to action to ensure that the district, and more broadly the state, invest in language-centered curriculum for multilingual learners.

Meeting participants reflected that the amount of scaffolding and resources teachers need in order to deliver a lesson that focuses not only on content but also on language development requires a great deal of training and support. Subsequent meeting discussion was broken up into groups and covered educator capacity-building efforts in more detail (see Consultancies Address Key Capacity-Building Challenge section).

## **Cultivating Teacher Knowledge and Skills to Foster Early Language and Literacy**

Efforts in OUSD to improve early literacy recognize that high-quality curriculum is essential but insufficient to support academic progress. District leaders characterized the capacity-building challenge as learning not only curriculum and pedagogical approaches but fundamentally understanding core literacy, foundational literacy, and the process of language development. They further noted that this full range of knowledge and skills is too often absent from preservice training or typical approaches to PD. Therefore, there is a concerted effort in the district to provide training and support to teachers through their Language and Learning Institute.

The district offers ongoing PD—curriculum specific and curriculum agnostic, both optional and required—to teachers, tutors, literacy coaches, and principals to help develop capacity across the system to deliver literacy and ELD instruction. This PD covers a wide range of topics that collectively speak to the full range of dimensions from the Language and Literacy Framework, including district vision, equity, designated and integrated ELD, and assessments. Because many of these opportunities are optional, district administrators and meeting participants acknowledged the limits of this approach in addressing systemwide capacity needs.

### ***OUSD Teachers Highlight Benefits and Challenges of Professional Learning Experiences***

To help illuminate educator experiences with professional learning and spark deeper discussion among meeting participants, a panel of early elementary teachers shared their insights about receiving training and support to implement the principles of OUSD’s Language and Literacy Framework.

#### ***The Power of PD Opportunities***

One teacher described the devastation they felt when they first saw the district data showing the gap between where the students were and where they needed to be by the end of the school year, because it seemed insurmountable. Since then, as one teacher explained, “I have been going to all the training because I never want to be in that place again.” The teachers described multiple opportunities to receive training on a range of topics that

included robust phonological awareness, foundational literacy, professional learning communities, peer observations, and modeling. Given the substantial commitment required to engage in learning opportunities—one panelist described their participation as “a heavy lift.” Importantly, teachers described their participation as worthwhile, if not essential, in order to learn about strategies to improve their practice.

### *The Value of Collaboration and Support Structures*

Several teacher panelists highlighted the value of collaborative planning, peer observations, and coaching as essential for teacher growth and student success. One panelist said that on a recent walk-through of classrooms, observers noticed that some of the teachers were not implementing some of the recommended strategies and the curriculum with fidelity. When asked why, the teachers responded that they weren’t sure what to do when they got stuck, so they just stopped applying the recommended behaviors and skills. However, after the teachers saw their peers model those strategies, observers noticed a huge growth in teachers putting them into practice during the next walk-through. As another teacher stated, “Our best form of professional learning is pairing up and learning skills from fellow teachers.”

Other teachers mentioned that because of high teacher turnover rate in the district, some teachers have not been exposed to the same professional learning opportunities as their more experienced peers. Peer observation represents a great way for teachers to learn from one other even when they have not had access to the same trainings. At the same time however, panelists noted that there are not enough of these opportunities available in the district. Teachers pointed out the need for systemic support structures that allow for the sharing of best practices and collaborative problem solving.

### *Inequities in Access to Learning Opportunities*

Several teachers mentioned that as powerful and essential to their practice as the district-provided professional learning opportunities are, not every teacher in the district is in the same position to opt into the various opportunities. One teacher explained, “Teachers are in different places as far as the amount of time they have to give to professional learning. Some can’t do summer PD because they would have to pay for summer child care to do so but can’t afford that. Others have to rush home because they have families to take care of.” These observations suggested that if the district hopes to create growth opportunities for the full teaching force, creative approaches to expand access may be important.

### *Lack of Time for Professional Learning*

One common pain point for district leaders and other educators is the lack of time for professional learning. In OUSD, district administrators drew particular attention to the limited contractual time reserved for it. The hours required to learn about the processes of literacy development and language acquisition, master curricular materials, and embrace effective pedagogical strategies are substantial—especially when starting from scratch with a new group of teachers every year—the time protected in the contract is simply not sufficient to meet the full range of capacity needs for all teachers. Even beyond formal professional learning opportunities themselves, constrained planning time complicates teachers’ efforts to implement what they have learned.

### ***Consultancies Address Key Capacity-Building Challenges***

After the teacher panel, meeting participants broke into small-group consultancies to discuss challenges associated with building a system of professional learning to support early language and literacy.

#### *Keeping ELD Centered in Efforts to Build Teacher Capacity*

District administrators shared data showing that students in the district are not learning the language skills identified as necessary for their grade level in the state standards. Third-grade assessment data for English-only and EL students indicate that students in both groups are demonstrating progress in learning phonics and high-frequency words. However, eighth-grade assessment data reveal a massive disparity between English-only and EL students in vocabulary and reading comprehension. District administrators emphasized the importance of intentionally prioritizing ELD to ensure that the work doesn't get left behind and sought input from meeting participants on ways to center language development in early literacy efforts.

Meeting participants noted that there is likely huge variability in the teachers, students, and schools represented in the data. To get a better understanding of the issue, the district needs to account for the variability across subgroups when analyzing the data and tailor interventions appropriately to address identified needs.

#### *Navigating Variation in Implementation Across Sites*

District leaders described variability in implementation across some of the sites due to multiple factors. For example, some opposition to the new Language and Literacy Framework comes from teachers who learned to teach using the whole-language and balanced literacy approaches. In addition, there is some resistance against the centralized push from the district in a district that is accustomed to school site autonomy.

Meeting participants acknowledged the strong foundation on which OUSD is building by noting that the vision for success is coherent and grounded in research and equity. They further encouraged the district to lean on the community to bolster the district's efforts, suggesting that partnerships can enhance the implementation and sustainability of these language and literacy efforts through resource sharing and the exchange of expertise and knowledge. Meeting participants also emphasized the critical role of site leaders and principals to help drive change.

#### *Differentiating Supports for Educators*

It was noted that in a district with varying levels of experience and high rates of teacher turnover, district leaders must tailor PD to meet the diverse needs of educators. This differentiation is critical for ensuring that the learning opportunities are relevant, engaging, and effective for teachers at different stages of their careers.

Meeting participants encouraged district administrators to listen to the feedback during the panel discussion from the teachers who expressed a desire for PD opportunities that allow educators to observe and learn in real classroom settings by observing their peers as

they apply best practices. Meeting participants stated that not only would this be engaging, but it would also allow educators to become active learners in their PD journey.

Meeting participants also encouraged district administrators to consider different approaches to credentialing teachers in the district to gain some control over teacher training and build a well-trained pool of new teachers, although the effort required to do so would be a heavy lift.

## **Building a System of Professional Learning to Support Early Language and Literacy**

The capacity needed for fostering language and literacy extends beyond classroom teachers. In OUSD, literacy coaches, principals, and tutors all play instrumental roles in fostering success for teachers and students. To be maximally effective, PD support for these roles must be aligned, mutually supportive, and sequenced in a way that appropriately addresses adult learning needs. A panel of principals, literacy coaches, and tutors joined the meeting participants to discuss the various professional learning supports they have received from the district.

### ***Forms of Professional Learning***

Professional learning in OUSD takes multiple forms.

#### *Cohort Sessions and Site Rotations*

As part of the district's coaching collaborative, small cohorts rotate among school sites and feature learning walks—an approach in which educators visit classrooms to observe, gather insights, and reflect on teaching practices and student learning in a collaborative and nonevaluative manner.

#### *Focus on Leadership and Content for Coaches*

Literacy coaches in OUSD provide both content support to guide teachers in curriculum implementation and coaching on instructional strategies. Acknowledging this dual focus, PD for literacy coaches addresses both elements. The PD includes OUSD's Coaching Collaborative, a monthly 3-hour session providing a dedicated space for developing coaching skills as well as opportunities to understand the curriculum deeply through calibration exercises.

#### *Specialized Cohorts for Dual Language Educators*

OUSD provides education in two languages in their dual language (DL) schools and classrooms throughout the district. The goal is to develop students' academic proficiency and make them bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate as well. Given the unique challenges of DL instruction combined with the district's focus on providing leadership and content-focused PD to its coaches, the district brings its DL educators—coaches, principals, and teachers—together into a specialized professional learning cohort, addressing the need to provide them differentiated support.

### *Network-Based Learning for Principals*

Recognizing the difficulty of building community among dispersed schools, the district organizes PD for principals based on their network affiliations. This approach seeks to foster closer ties and more relevant learning experiences within specific contexts.

### ***Feedback Mechanisms***

Meeting participants inquired about feedback mechanisms between site-based teachers and leaders and the central office to discuss the impact of various instructional strategies at school sites. Panelists shared that there are informal mechanisms depending on the levels of relational trust that exist between educators and individuals at the central office. However, panelists and meeting participants acknowledged that relying on relational trust for feedback when that level of trust is not yet widespread is not equitable. The district also relies on formal survey data and other indicators such as attendance at professional learning events. One district administrator shared, “Attendance is a big sign we track. If we have only 30%–60% attendance, that tells us something isn’t working, and we need to change the structures.”

### ***The Balance Between Tight and Loose Expectations***

Panelists also talked about the importance of tight strategies and loose strategies—that is, the expectations that are consistent and clearly defined across the entire district and those that educators can adapt to the individual needs of their school sites. Clarity about these distinctions is especially important in OUSD given the variability across schools and classrooms in EL student populations, newcomer student populations, and teacher turnover rates. One principal talked about how SIPPS, a research-based foundational skills program used in OUSD, is a tight strategy but that “every principal needs to understand as they walk through the classrooms that different individuals need different supports, and that’s a loose [strategy].” Another panelist shared that guarding professional learning time and coaching time should be a tight strategy, but given staffing shortages, sometimes this component unintentionally becomes a loose one because of competing priorities for time.

### ***Consultancies Address Key Capacity-Building Challenges***

District administrators and meeting participants broke into small groups to further explore ways in which educators in multiple roles can reinforce one another as part of a larger system of building capacity around early literacy and language development.

### *Vision and Leadership*

A clear vision from district leadership, along with coherent and consistent messaging and support, is crucial for aligning efforts across all roles. Challenges of insufficient time and teacher turnover as well as disagreements over appropriate levels of autonomy pose significant challenges for ensuring consistency in aligning supports. Nevertheless, meeting participants and panelists agreed that the vision and leadership in OUSD is strong. Building on this foundation, district leaders continue to invest in PD and are working to overcome cultural and systemic obstacles in collaborative ways. Despite the progress that has been made to coordinate and align across the system, more time and intentional attention are needed to fully align these efforts. OUSD Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell closed out



the conversation by stating, “We are taking on the struggle of how to get tighter as a system. In OUSD, we love autonomy; that is the culture in Oakland, so we are working to build coherence across the system.”

### *Collaboration and Relationship Building*

Another key area for attention is the importance of strong relationships among principals, coaches, and tutors. Collaboration within and across roles, all focused on shared language and priorities, is essential to building stability in the system and aligning the system of supports. In a time of widespread educator shortages, substitute teaching often needs to divert educators’ time and attention away from the core responsibilities of capacity building. Districts must therefore find ways to protect time for collaboration to achieve the optimal level of instructional integrity and effectiveness.

### **Change Management and Moving Toward Consistency**

The early literacy work under way in OUSD represents a shift away from work that has historically been more decentralized. Within the central office, district leaders have moved to strengthen the connections across different lines of work—for example, by tying the early literacy work to the district’s strategic plan and Local Control Accountability Plan. In their work with educators, district leaders are seeking to foster greater consistency in instructional practices in a system that has featured high levels of autonomy and teacher turnover. Shifts in vision, curriculum, and professional learning supports are essential to OUSD’s language and literacy efforts, but just as important to the conversation is the cultural shift that needs to take place to achieve coherence across the system.

Meeting participants broke into small-group consultancies to discuss ways in which the district can strike the appropriate balance between autonomy and centralization to achieve coherence in literacy instruction and language acquisition.

### ***Building Clarity Through Effective Communication***

The importance of clear, cohesive, and frequent communication with all stakeholders emerged as a critical factor. Effective communication strategies are necessary to convey the reasons behind shifts toward centralization, articulate the expectations for both school sites and educators, and celebrate successes. Meeting participants also highlighted the need to engage community members, parents, and external partners in this journey to increase buy-in and ownership, as well as to build collaborative relationships and partnerships that can last beyond a single project. This strategy goes hand in hand with the notion of building trust among the various actors involved.

### ***Addressing Structural and Budgetary Constraints***

Discussions about the move toward a more managed system also touched on the need to navigate financial constraints and structural challenges. Strategic allocation of resources and the prioritization of both financial and human resources directly impact literacy and language development; however, school site principals who have local control over the allocation of resources at a site may not choose to prioritize the literacy and language goals of the district in their decision-making processes. More guidance from the district to

centralize these efforts may be needed as the district identifies schools that may require additional support.

### ***Leveraging Success and Learning From History***

Leadership instability and high levels of teacher turnover in OUSD have presented ongoing challenges. Despite this turbulence, one program that has remained and thrived in the district is Linked Learning. Meeting participants encouraged the district to learn from that history to leverage the success of that program when managing current changes. Doing so could help build momentum, understanding, and buy-in.

### ***Strategic Planning and Implementation***

Meeting participants suggested that because effective change management requires a strategic approach, it is essential for the central office to set clear goals, outline a road map for achieving these goals, and establish benchmarks to monitor progress towards realizing them.

### **Implications for State Policy**

The conversation around efforts to improve literacy and language culminated in a discussion about implications for state policy in this area. California's commitment to local control empowers districts to make decisions about instructional approaches, curriculum, and professional learning. However, Assembly Bill 2222 could shift this dynamic by following a national trend in which states are creating tighter expectations for reading instruction.<sup>4</sup> Meeting participants discussed the degree to which actions at the state level may or may not support local efforts to improve early language and literacy instruction and the complexities involved in legislating educational reform.

The main concern that emerged from the discussion was around narrow definitions of literacy. Meeting participants worried that the bill might narrow the definition of literacy in ways that could exclude the needs of multilingual learners. Too often, members of the education community approach teaching and learning around literacy without recognizing that issues of language acquisition are fundamentally intertwined with it. Attention to literacy without equal and integrated attention to language acquisition threatens to overlook the needs of multilingual learners and harm their opportunities for academic growth. Participants therefore advocated that an emphasis on the "science of reading" must not only incorporate the full body of research on early learning and literacy, but also the evidence about supporting language development.

Another concern raised by meeting participants had to do with time for the implementation of policy-driven programs and the financial challenges they may present. One pain point that is consistently raised across Collaborative meetings is the lack of time available to implement programs and policies that are good for kids. As an example, AB 2222 proposes PD requirements without addressing the practicalities of time allocation for

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<sup>4</sup> See more information about Assembly Bill 2222 in this summary:  
[https://drive.google.com/file/d/12KJe15\\_z701\\_wqpiQGj3gBgBe8vrpkOS/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/12KJe15_z701_wqpiQGj3gBgBe8vrpkOS/view)

educators. OUSD is one of many districts in which collective bargaining agreements cap the number of hours available for PD. Moreover, professional learning around literacy is only one of many demands on educators' time, all of which need to fall within a constrained number of hours. In addition, the potential added costs and resource demands of adopting new literacy approaches or materials as mandated by the bill are significant and do not consider the budget constraints districts are struggling with.

Meeting participants generally acknowledged that the intentions of AB 2222 are positive but advocated for an approach to achieving the goals laid out in the bill that is more nuanced and inclusive. One meeting participant stated, "Agreeing on the big principles is easy, but the devil is in the details. As a field, we need to get sharper about educating the legislature and creating tables around various sector advocates to lift up the substance."

The meeting closed with a reflection from a meeting participant, who tied the importance of continuing the push around language and literacy to the fundamental purposes and goals of public education: "Our biggest safeguards against slipping into fascism is a vibrant and intellectual culture, and literacy is the baseline for inoculating people from mis- and disinformation. This is our important safeguard against dangers staring us down for the years to come. We shouldn't lose the relationship between language, literacy, and culture."

### **Next Steps for the Collaborative**

The Collaborative will meet next in May 2024 in Sanger, California, to dive into equitable approaches to grading at the secondary level. 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](http://www.cacollaborative.org).