

Meeting 56 Summary

Data for Improvement: Cultivating a Culture of Reflection and Collaboration in Napa Valley

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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.*

Napa Valley Unified School District (NVUSD) hosted the 56th California Collaborative on District Reform in October 2025 to explore how districts can build a culture of data use to understand and improve student outcomes. Using NVUSD's context to inform the group's conversation, meeting participants engaged in two days of conversation about the conditions, resources, and communication needed to foster a district-wide commitment to examining evidence of student learning and closing achievement gaps.

Building Upon NVUSD's Foundations

In the past, relying on data has helped NVUSD navigate complex and sometimes difficult choices that ultimately strengthened the district and better positioned it for future success. NVUSD used data to inform its financial stability, approach to governance, and strategic plan development. With these foundational pieces in place, NVUSD wants to apply the same evidence-driven approach to improve student outcomes and close long-standing achievement gaps.

District leaders began the meeting by walking participants through background information about the students NVUSD serves and examples of ways the district has historically used data to inform its path forward.

Understanding NVUSD's Student Population and Needs

To introduce meeting participants to the NVUSD context, district leaders explained that they often have to correct misconceptions about their students: "People hear Napa Valley and think about the wine industry; they think that we are inundated with wealth. And there is wealth in this valley, but we educate the backbone of the community which works to keep [it] going." Nearly 70% of NVUSD's 16,000 students qualify as high need under California's funding formula (i.e., unduplicated

¹ Thanks to Emily Agopian, Crystal Aguilera, and Linda Choi for taking careful notes to make this summary possible.

count of low income students, English learners, and/or foster youth). Unlike several nearby community-funded districts that spend between \$24,000 to \$37,000 per student, NVUSD relies on the state's Local Control Funding Formula as its primary revenue source. Even with supplemental and concentration grants, the district receives less than \$15,000 per student.

District leaders described a long history of educators, leaders, board trustees, and community members who, until recently, had insufficiently acknowledged and addressed the divide between rich and poor in the community and in their schools. The most recent California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress results are consistent with longstanding trends: fewer than half of students have met state standards in English language arts (ELA), and only about a third have done so in math. Disaggregated results reveal deep and persistent disparities between White and Asian students and their Hispanic and Black peers, as well as between economically disadvantaged and more affluent students.

Using Data to Inform Enrollment and Finances

To illustrate how data-driven decision-making has played out in practice, NVUSD district leaders shared examples of difficult decisions they and the school board made to address the district's troubled finances. When current superintendent Dr. Rosanna Mucetti began her tenure in 2018, the district faced tremendous fiscal challenges. NVUSD enrollment numbers were declining and projected to continue dropping. Its reserves had fallen to approximately 3%, the state required reserve for a district of its size. Despite these realities, the district had increased staffing levels and planned to build a new middle school. Once district leaders and school board members got a handle on this sobering data, NVUSD's financial circumstances left district leaders and the school board with few choices. Between fall 2019 and spring of 2021, the NVUSD school board voted to close three schools and reduce their workforce.

District leaders described this time as extremely difficult. According to one district representative, "We never want to go back to that reality. We have trauma, it was hard." Since then, NVUSD has made several moves to stabilize the district's finances, including negotiating out of the agreement to build a new school, increasing inter-district transfers to increase enrollment levels and the funding levels that come with them, and building its reserves to 25%.

Using Data to Inform Governance Practices

NVUSD's second example of how data has guided their decisions was equipping school board trustees with transparent, accurate data and reforming the board's norms and practices. Superintendent Mucetti shared her perspective that if the district is asking the board to make difficult choices, such as closing schools or laying off teachers, trustees should be equipped with information to articulate the rationale for those choices to parents, teachers, and the broader NVUSD community.

In anticipation of and during the aftermath of the school closures, the NVUSD school board faced intense public backlash. Board meetings drew standing-room-only crowds, trustees endured threats to their safety, and election cycles saw candidates running with promises to reopen eliminated programs and remove the superintendent. Through the crisis, the board remained committed to a robust governance framework built on training, shared norms, and clearly defined roles. NVUSD's governance model reflects that commitment. Their practices are anchored by a comprehensive handbook that the team updates regularly, annual priorities and self-evaluation aligned with district goals, and rigorous trustee onboarding. While some members of the NVUSD community still disagree with the decisions the board made, trustees and district leadership

recognize that these were the right decisions to make based on the detailed data they had. The board's practices and commitments ensure trustees remain focused on student-centered, data-driven decision-making as they advocate for all students.²

Using Data to Address Historic Inequities in Student Achievement

Turning to data to guide decisions during difficult times has proven effective in NVUSD, so district leaders are taking the same approach for improving learning opportunities for all students. In one district leader's words, "We have had a lot of practice in the last few years in using data to make financial changes, and now we want to use that to increase achievement." Building on the stability achieved through financial and governance reforms, NVUSD is now focused on instructional improvement, particularly on closing persistent achievement gaps between historically underserved students and their more advantaged peers.

Two primary mechanisms for launching this work—data dialogues for site leaders and a pilot program for teachers to co-develop the district's instructional framework—would be the foci of further exploration as meeting participants considered the roles of principals and teachers in a culture of data use.

Leveraging Principals in Collaborative Data Conversations

Principals are pivotal in driving instructional improvement. They serve as models and enablers of the time, structures, and safe environments needed for educators to use data as part of the improvement process. To better understand how districts can support site leaders for success, meeting participants examined an emerging practice of data dialogues in NVUSD and the supports principals need to lead their schools in collecting and using data for improvement.

The Data Dialogue Process

NVUSD's data dialogues bring principals together with their peers and central office leaders for structured, evidence-based conversations about student learning. Principals take turns sharing how they have analyzed their students' outcomes, reflections on why those outcomes occurred, and planned actions to address what they see. The conversations are designed to turn data use into a collaborative practice, where principals and district leaders learn and problem-solve together. Recent site-level gains on summative assessments in the first year that the district introduced the data dialogues suggest that this approach is helping participating principals translate data into action and be better instructional leaders in their schools.

Meeting participants observed two principals participating in an abbreviated data dialogue. In the first dialogue, an elementary principal reflected on why their school exceeded its goals in ELA and math performance. The principal attributed the school's results to the work teachers have done over the last 12 months to revisit instructional pacing to ensure that they covered all priority standards prior to testing. The principal also highlighted the value of cross-school collaboration and common interim assessments for helping teachers have a shared understanding of student learning expectations. The second data dialogue featured a high school principal reflecting on their school not meeting its student achievement goals. The principal shared disaggregated student performance data to highlight persistent gaps in student performance and expressed the belief that strengthening professional learning communities (PLCs) and ensuring consistent grading practices

² To learn more about the NVUSD governing team, we encourage you to read the Collaborative's 2024 report, [*Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing: Lessons about Effective School Board Governance from Napa Valley and San José Unified School Districts*](#).

across subject-area teams could better position teachers to address gaps in students' learning. Both conversations candidly addressed successes and challenges and modeled how structured dialogue about data can strengthen the partnership between site and district leaders.

Principals' Perspectives on Using Data

Following the data dialogue demonstration, a panel of four school principals shared more about their experiences bringing stronger data-driven practices to their sites and what regularly examining student data enables them to do.

Using Data to Monitor Progress and Build Buy-In

The principal panelists emphasized that regularly examining indicators of student learning helped keep attention on instructional priorities and, in turn, strengthened teachers' engagement in reviewing student data. Regular monitoring of interim and formative assessment performance can enable educators to spot gaps in students' learning early and adjust instruction as needed. One principal recalled a time when they noticed stagnation in math performance midyear, realized a need for renewed focus and resource allocation, and subsequently worked with math teachers to address the issue. Panelists also shared their belief that greater and more frequent visibility of student data also helps teachers self-identify gaps in their own instruction. One principal explained that, as teachers became familiar with their students' data, their natural, next question became, "Now what?", prompting changes in instructional practice. These observations suggest that turning to student data frequently can facilitate collective responsibility for results and adjustments to instruction as needed.

Using Data to Strengthen Alignment and Coherence

Principals noted that regular engagement with data also reinforces alignment between school-level practices and district priorities. When educators understand how their efforts connect to broader goals, it reduces the sense that new practices are "adding to their plate" and instead frames examination of student data as part of a coherent strategy. One principal explained, "We have a better understanding through our whole organization of what our goals are." Another principal shared that NVUSD's shared planning tools and protocols further support this alignment by helping teachers engage in the work in a standardized way while honoring their professional expertise. As one principal reflected, "We are all collaborating about the same data. But you can still have creativity in how you use that data to address your instruction in the classroom."

Using Data to Foster Partnerships and Shared Ownership

Panelists stressed that data-driven improvement is most effective when it is a collective effort. Structures such as the PLCs already in place across all NVUSD schools create opportunities for teachers to collaborate and build a sense of shared responsibility for student outcomes. Two principals described bringing their sites together in grade-level teams so teachers could brainstorm and problem-solve with colleagues from a different school. That experience prompted teachers to try new instructional practices they had not considered previously and develop a sense of partnership that extended beyond their school-level PLCs. One principal expanded on this approach by saying, "My staff don't work in isolation. Nobody on my staff would say they work alone." This principal went on to advise that celebrating success in one classroom with all teachers reinforces that any win is a shared win. Another principal agreed. When scores improved for a struggling math teacher in the principal's school, "everyone got excited with her." Another panelist believed that educators should also emphasize shared ownership when student performance does not meet expectations. The principal shared a story about a teacher who, after reflecting on why her students were not making the desired growth, brought her insights to her colleagues. Together, the team

analyzed the situation and collaboratively mapped out a plan to better support student learning. Rather than isolating educators, data conversations can foster partnership and collective celebration, reinforcing that improving outcomes is a shared responsibility.

Conditions and Supports Site Leaders Need to Bring Stronger Data Practices to Their Schools

Small group conversations further explored how districts can support principals and teachers to use data more effectively.

Train Educators in How to Interpret and Use Student Data

Meeting participants emphasized that effective data use begins with equipping educators to access, interpret, and apply what they see in student data in meaningful ways. Several groups raised concerns that, while educators may receive data reports, they might not have the time or experience in translating those numbers into actionable insights. One participant noted that the data dialogue demonstration and principal panel helped them understand how educators are using data in NVUSD, but neither covered “what kind of training [NVUSD educators are] getting” to engage in those practices. A principal panelist echoed this point, sharing that they would like to see more opportunities to take teachers to external, high-quality trainings about data-driven instruction. In addition to helping teachers make sense of their data, this principal believed that a shared training experience can boost teacher investment: “When teachers have, not just tools, but common tools and common language, when your brain hurts and you have [spent the training] critically thinking, you are excited ... [and] you excite them about teaching kids.”

One group extended the conversation by urging districts to evaluate the impact of their training efforts, not just the outcomes they hope to achieve. A meeting participant shared, “We need to measure what we put in. Take a step back and ask if we are doing the right work and doing so with fidelity.” Monitoring both quality and effectiveness of professional learning to inform refinements, adaptations, and changes can help districts build stronger cultures of data-driven teaching and learning.

Balance Efficiency and Engagement in Data Use

Participants discussed how to balance making data accessible to educators with engaging them in the interpretation of those data. Participants recognized that teaching is complex and time-consuming work. The more districts can prepare reports and dashboards that make data easily accessible to site-based teachers and administrators, the more time educators have to analyze them and plan next steps. As one participant observed, “A lot of time is spent asking for data or getting it ready to be used the right way. There should be more tools for that process so principals can use it right away.” This need is amplified by the growing complexity of data systems. While districts have access to more data than ever, the process of finding and organizing it has become more cumbersome. One meeting participant reported, “My system had better reports back in the day. ... The simplicity of tools from past is not the same now. ... There’s 10 places to pull from instead of just one.”

But access to data does not guarantee improvement; participants emphasized that professional judgment is essential for turning data into action. When educators engage deeply with their students’ data, they bring important context to its interpretation and expertise in what the data means for their instruction. Educators’ engagement in data analysis can also reinforce a culture where data is a tool for learning rather than compliance. As one participant cautioned, when districts “just give” data to educators without an opportunity for dialogue, “You lose the trust and

choice in the collaborative process and making sure you are intentional when you are doing it.” The challenge, then, is that districts must ease the burden of time and effort required for educators to access information while preserving opportunities for professional judgment and collaborative inquiry. Providing efficient tools and clear reports, while ensuring educators use their expertise to interpret and act on the data, is essential for making data use sustainable.

Prioritize Trust and Support, Especially When Examining Data Feels Vulnerable

Administrators hoping to foster a culture of data use need to acknowledge potential sources of resistance and create conditions for teachers to engage in honest conversations with one another. Educators can feel exposed when examining their students’ performance data—especially those who remember approaches to accountability in the No Child Left Behind era that could trigger sanctions, public labeling, or even school closures. Despite success stories of schools that experienced positive results after an increased focus on data, honesty about setbacks and lack of progress can put educators in vulnerable positions. One participant reflected, “I know at the school I am at, the teachers are paranoid. ... You’re afraid it’s going to be used against you.” Another person contrasted the U.S. education with systems in other countries, where early-career teachers have more opportunities for healthy failure in trusting spaces: “We haven’t done that and we leave teachers to do that on their own.”

Resistance to data use can also stem from the intensely demanding conditions in which educators work and the emotional toll of public scrutiny. One participant candidly shared, “I think in 2025, their jobs as principals [are] much harder than when I was a principal. ... Teachers and principals are ... overwhelmed.” Another participant connected potential discomfort with data to broader, public perceptions of educators that are not conducive to cultivating vulnerability: “[Educators] show up because they want to do a good job. So it can be demoralizing to be told [by the data] that they’re not doing a good job, and nothing changes. Then the workforce gets exhausted.”

To address this challenge, participants emphasized the importance of creating working conditions that enable educators to share their data comfortably and honestly. One participant suggested that districts frame their ask of teachers in a way that emphasizes everyone in the system is going to be using data and responsible for student outcomes: “There’s that idea of mutual accountability—coming to a collective understanding of what we’re going to try.” Others stressed that support must accompany expectations. According to another individual, “When you ask someone to do something, there has to be a support alongside it. The teachers are doing the bulk of the work. How do they feel supported and not like we are telling them they have to do something blind?” Another member added, “We have to offer scaffolded resources in order to succeed. ... I think people are seeking direction and clarity.” More than technical tools, having a culture of data use requires trust, mutual accountability, and conditions that make collaboration possible.

Co-constructing a Culture of Data Use With Teachers

Including teachers in decisions about how data is interpreted and applied is essential, because they are closest to the instructional core. When teachers help shape the processes and expectations for data use, it can help ensure data conversations lead to instructional decisions that benefit students. Meeting participants therefore explored strategies for engaging teachers in data-informed planning and the challenges that can arise from balancing collaboration with system-wide consistency.

Leveraging Labor Partnerships

A district’s relationship with its teachers union plays a critical role in shaping the district’s culture of data use. Expectations around examining student evidence of learning not only influence

instructional practices, but also how teachers allocate their time and identify their priorities. If central office and union leaders are not aligned on these expectations, efforts to promote data use risk being perceived as additional demands, rather than strategies that are part of a larger, systemic plan for improvement. The alignment around these expectations (or lack thereof) will shape the degree to which data use efforts lead to collaboration or resistance.

NVUSD leaders described their longstanding, positive relationship with the Napa Valley Educators Association (NVEA) as a critical asset for grounding educators in evidence of student progress to close the achievement gap. Their partnership is rooted in interest-based problem solving (IBPS), a collaborative approach that emphasizes shared intentions over positional bargaining. Over the years, IBPS has guided how NVUSD and NVEA have navigated a variety of challenges together, enabling the leaders in the two organizations to build trust and a strong foundation for joint decision-making. Now, as the district turns its attention more intently to instructional quality, both NVUSD and NVEA are leaning on their well-established relationship to chart a path forward.

But candid discussions about student data and heightened attention to performance results can introduce new dynamics that may put positive relations between NVUSD and NVEA at risk. In a small town like Napa, one NVUSD leader shared, “relationships are such a key factor at play here.” District leaders characterized the community as one where it can be more important to get along than to uncomfortably address challenges head-on. Despite a longstanding commitment to collaboration and IBPS, disparities in outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged peers have persisted across that same time period, suggesting that strong labor relationships alone are not sufficient for addressing opportunity gaps. The leader continued that when they looked at decades of student performance data disaggregated by race and class, “The data was telling truth that could threaten the relationships we have cultivated.” The current challenge is how to leverage the strength of those relationships while acknowledging their history and embracing a collective responsibility for improving outcomes for all NVUSD students.

Designing an Instructional Framework

With trust and IBPS as the foundation, NVUSD invited teachers to co-develop a shared instructional framework, grounded in evidence of student learning, so daily practice reflects the district’s goals. Leaders from the central office launched High Impact Instructional Team (HIIT) in spring 2024 in which they began collaborating with a group of nearly 100 teachers to co-develop the instructional framework. HIIT participants span multiple sites, grade levels, and subject areas. They meet regularly to engage in practice-based learning grounded in gradual release of responsibilities strategies, implement the instructional strategies with students two to three times per week for four to six weeks, and report back to each other their reflections on student engagement and review evidence of student learning. A panel of HIIT teachers described how these routines have prepared them to review and discuss evidence of student learning and apply it to their instruction.

Alignment Around a Shared Instructional Vision

Panelists reported that HIIT enables them to teach more consistently with their peers towards a shared vision of high-quality instruction. Moreover, greater coherence among colleagues has helped clarify goals both for their own practice and their students’ learning. One panelist shared that the process of designing an instructional framework with her colleagues has increased “calibration and alignment across sites and across the district. To see what other teachers at my level are doing and how they understand a standard—having that collaboration is so valuable.” She continued by saying that as she learns more from her colleagues about different ways to teach a standard, she finds that her students’ understanding of the standard also increases: “The clarity we have brings

clarity to students.” Another colleague on the panel agreed and added that participating in HIIT has brought them a greater understanding of where students are struggling: “You think you have a picture of what’s happening in your classroom and sometimes what’s great about data is it helps you see inconsistencies. ... Did students really know their learning goal? Are we playing a really fun game with dots and dice or are we learning addition and subtraction?” Having opportunities to collaborate with colleagues on a shared vision for instruction can facilitate district-wide coherence and help teachers translate evidence into stronger instructional practices.

Benefits of Peer-to-Peer Learning

One of the most valuable components of HIIT to the panelists was the opportunity to give and receive feedback with peers. A central feature of the program involves practicing teaching strategies on one another, where one colleague teaches and others act as students. These practice-based learning opportunities allowed educators to learn from one another in real time, strengthening their confidence to adapt existing approaches and try new practices. As one teacher explained, “You sit down and learn from each other. ... You’re refining as you’re receiving feedback. And that allows us to plan a little better.” Another panelist echoed this sentiment by saying, “Doing the work and the practice and trying the strategies [on each other] and reflecting on our teaching ... and being vulnerable with my own teaching practice” is the centerpiece of the program.

As positive as their experiences in HIIT have been, panelists cautioned that this kind of collaboration may only continue if it extends beyond HIIT and makes its way into PLCs in their schools. Their comments suggested that the district’s growing emphasis on PLC presents the ideal channel for this work to take place. One teacher believed that, although she is participating in this district-wide HIIT team, her PLC at her school is the real “unit of change, because it will be where teachers will be using common language and looking at data to discuss all our students.” Others agreed that this work will only be sustainable if it is done in collaboration with their PLCs. A teacher shared an example of how the work in HIIT could be effective if brought to their school-based PLCs: “We were asked to bring data about how we were using the first set of ‘I do’ strategies. Everybody came in with their evidence, and we were able to showcase it. That’s energizing, when your peers and you are all bringing your work ... because you’re all doing your part.” Opportunities for peer-to-peer feedback are essential to embedding data-driven practices into the classroom and ensuring educators are doing so in collaboration, not isolation.

Time as a Prerequisite for Meaningful Reflection

Panelists agreed that time is a necessary condition to reflect on data and their practice meaningfully. HIIT provided what one teacher called “the gift of time,” explaining that “being able to take a step back and reflect on your teaching is a huge gift.” Another panelist emphasized that time is essential for collaboration: “It’s important to create spaces and time for teachers to come together and work with grade levels as partners.” Another teacher expanded on this idea, saying that the time they have to work together in HIIT has “given us permission to look at teaching practices and whether they are really in line with what students need.” These reflections underscore the importance of time for teachers to engage deeply with data and instructional improvement.

Superintendent Perspectives on Collaboration and Barriers to Change

Relationships between district and union leaders can have a strong influence on the degree to which teachers have protected time, shared data routines, and other important conditions for instructional improvement. By sharing insights from the early stages of its HIIT journey, NVUSD offered one example in which those relationships enable the district to move toward more

systematic data use. Yet, as participants acknowledged, positive relationships alone do not guarantee transformative student learning. Superintendents from multiple districts participated in a fishbowl conversation about their experiences leveraging labor relations for improvement. The superintendents reflected on what strong labor partnerships allow them to accomplish and where their systems still fall short of achieving goals.

Working Together With Teachers to Accomplish More Than They Could Alone

Superintendents shared examples of work that was improved or made possible because of their collaboration with their teachers union. As one superintendent explained, “When we have been most aligned [with the teachers union], we have done pretty remarkable things.” This superintendent shared that their redesigned teacher evaluation system and adoption of new district-wide assessments might not have been possible had district leaders chosen a top-down approach over a collaborative one. Another superintendent described a council of teachers in their district that manages a repository of high-quality instructional materials for teachers to use and share. The superintendent recognized that the district could not have developed or managed the repository without the help and expertise of its teachers.

Superintendents also considered the relative benefits and tradeoffs between quick, executive decision-making, and slower, collaborative decision-making. Understandably, certain situations—such as crises or urgent operational needs—require decisive, top-down leadership. In these moments, swift action can be necessary to ensure stability and safety, even if it means temporarily setting aside typically collaborative processes. However, this superintendent cautioned that while top-down approaches may yield quick results, they are rarely sustainable over the long term. “You can do top-down and that can work for a short time. People say ‘go slow to go fast.’ But I think it should be ‘go slow to make it last.’” This superintendent went on to explain that their role also involves frequent reiteration of key messages to educators and taking the extra time to listen to educators’ perspectives.

Clarifying and Communicating “Tight” and “Loose”

Superintendents emphasized the importance of distinguishing between practices that should be “tight” (standardized and required across the district) and those that should be “loose” (flexible and adaptable to the context of individual schools and classrooms). One superintendent explained that challenges often arise not because educators want complete autonomy, but because they do not know which expectations are non-negotiable and which allow for discretion. Effective messaging about these boundaries, the superintendent noted, helps resolve this tension within a district. Problems can also occur when educators do not have *any* opportunities to exercise their professional judgement, underscoring the need for balance. Another meeting participant summarized the group’s conversation by saying, “Being clear is kind.” In other words, clear communication about what is tight and loose sets expectations that enable staff to understand their roles and responsibilities within the larger system.

The superintendents shared examples of where and why they are tight in their systems. One superintendent described their district as “tight” on all schools having PLCs (so much so that they are written into the teachers’ contract), but “loose” on which instructional strategies are most effective. Another superintendent described how their district has tightened the role of teacher coaches by centralizing their training to promote consistency in approach across sites. Instead of having many different coaching models, the district now has one unified approach, with coaches regularly collaborating and learning together, helping to maintain high standards while still allowing for site-level adaptation.

Building Formal Policies and Structures That Foster Collaboration

Several superintendents described formal structures within their districts that serve as opportunities for regular communication and collaboration with their labor groups. One superintendent reported that they meet with union leadership every two weeks. They continued, “It feels slow [and] it’s a huge time investment” but that it is worth it to have “consistency over time” and for “the union [to] see that we are not undermining” them. This superintendent also shared that they strengthened the relationship between the union and the board of education. For example, the superintendent reported that their union leadership is likely the only in the state that regularly attends the annual California School Board Association conference with the board and senior district team. Although this arrangement is atypical, this superintendent believes that “cultivating the connection between school board and union leadership has been advantageous for us.”

A second superintendent shared that the presidents of all their unions are members of the superintendent’s cabinet. When the idea was first introduced over 15 years ago, they explained, “there was a lot of nervousness.” But ultimately, district leaders believed that having the unions’ perspectives early and often gives them more opportunities to contribute to effective decisions and highlight unanticipated consequences of district decisions, helping to strengthen both ideas as they are being developed in cabinet and the relationship overall. This superintendent similarly shared that they spend two hours every week in meetings with the teachers union leadership. Echoing the sentiment “go slow to make it last” shared earlier, this superintendent believed that addressing issues early on with union leadership prevents issues from worsening and thus reduces time spent on what would have been a bigger problem down the road.

Addressing Superintendents’ Biggest Challenges

Even in high-trust environments, systemic factors at play can make student performance difficult to improve. The fishbowl concluded with a frank discussion of what superintendents considered to be some of the biggest barriers in their work. Superintendents responded that time spent with trusted colleagues is invaluable for thinking through dilemmas and organizing collective action. However, that time is often hard to find. One superintendent reflected on the value of professional networks, sharing that their connections to groups like the Collaborative were essential to their success and well-being as a superintendent. But the lack of support in all education roles—from classroom teacher to superintendent—can make the job isolating, raising concerns about educator shortages and waning interest from prospective, future educators.

One fishbowl participant believed that if superintendents had more time to organize together, they could have a powerful influence on state policy, but the time-consuming nature of their job makes this difficult. Another superintendent agreed and felt that most of their challenges with state policy are in situations when policies are designed for the “lowest common denominator,” and that poorly written legislation exists because policymakers are not deeply familiar with the needs and work of school districts. Some Collaborative members discussed the challenges of advocacy and representation at the state level and acknowledged the profound challenge for any statewide organization to effectively represent the experiences and interests of over 1,000 districts serving very different communities. Fishbowl participants agreed that collective action and stronger organization among superintendents could help address these challenges but acknowledged that the demands of their roles often limit their capacity to advocate effectively.

Tackling Barriers to Teacher Engagement With Data

Developing and sustaining a culture of data use demands that teachers know how to use data as a tool for improving instruction. This work hinges on building capacity, creating time and structures for collaboration, and fostering trust so educators feel safe engaging in candid conversations about student performance. Collaborative members engaged in small group consultancies that explored three different challenges that prevent teachers from embracing data use as part of their daily practice.

Balancing Warm Relationships With Rigor of Data Use

NVUSD's central problem of practice returned to a concern that the district's moves towards stronger data use and holding educators accountable for improving student outcomes could erode the warm, positive working relationships the district has with its educators. While district leaders consider their collaborative relationships a valuable asset, they expressed uncertainty about whether these relationships will remain collaborative as the district holds educators to a higher standard in closing achievement gaps. The presenting district leader explained, "We want to learn how to balance the relationships with having the drive to close these opportunity gaps. And discomfort will emerge, [so] how do we move through that?"

The group conversation first turned to the risks of pushing change too quickly, particularly at the teacher level. Participants reflected that if NVUSD is asking its educators to regularly examine and then be held accountable for students' outcomes, the school and district culture need to foster a safe environment for teachers to learn how to collect and analyze evidence of student learning and try new instructional approaches in response. Further, vulnerability needs to be modeled and shared across all levels of the system. According to one participant, "We can't ask people below us to do things we don't do." As part of this conversation, a NVUSD representative shared hopes of strengthening their teacher evaluation system but sees it as being separate from the focus of the problem of practice. One participant warned that if teachers perceive new expectations to use data as being a component of their evaluation in any way, it could threaten their buy-in and the trust needed to have honest conversations about student learning. Even if district leaders intend for the evaluation system to be separate from the current focus on data use, teachers will likely see the two as connected.

The consultancy group also discussed the importance of clarifying the purpose of data use to educators and potentially elevating student voice as a motivator for that purpose. District leaders are clear-eyed about how rigorous data practices can address disparities between underserved students and their more advantaged peers, but teachers and principals may not yet fully understand or embrace this connection. If educators are not equally clear on the purpose behind these efforts, it creates a risk that they are being asked to do more just because "the district made me do it." Small group members advised district leaders to articulate and reinforce that message regularly. The group also explored how to center student voice as a motivation to support educators' data use. NVUSD district leaders highlighted the strategic planning process as a model for deep student engagement and a way for the district community to heal from years of tension. Collaborative members highlighted the opportunity to engage students in a similar way to promote data-centered conversations about instruction and student learning. If students are the ones who take ownership of identifying inequitable outcomes and where they want to see their learning shift, then that may help encourage a sense that "we're all in this together."

In reflecting on the consultancy, a presenting district leader shared that the conversation changed the lens with which they view this challenge. Their central problem of practice was being fearful of

how the district's relationship with its teachers could deteriorate. But leaders must resist leading from fear of what could go wrong and instead lean into what is needed to help educators succeed. The leader believed that shifting from risk avoidance to proactive support would be critical for sustaining trust while advancing rigorous, equity-focused data practices.

Addressing High School Literacy Through Data and Curriculum Reform

Another school district's consultancy sought to address low high school literacy rates that were recently revealed by newly collected reading assessment data at the secondary level. According to the presenting district leader, one barrier to addressing this challenge is that many high school teachers believe that their primary responsibility is to teach content, not foundational skills like reading. Additionally, because most high school students in this district are organized in career pathways, there is limited instructional time available for intervention and support. These circumstances have led to resistance in integrating literacy support into subject-area instruction. While the district explores structural solutions that include expanding from a six- to eight-period day to create more time for targeted interventions, it has deployed additional instructional staff in the form of teachers on special assignment (TOSA) to address student learning needs through tutoring services. While the TOSAs have brought greater district-wide coherence, some teachers perceive these efforts to be "top-down," creating greater fear among teachers and principals who worry their autonomy is being taken away. The district's already high teacher turnover rates, especially in high schools, further complicate efforts to sustain these initiatives and maintain consistent curriculum support.

To move forward, the group articulated three ideas for the district to consider. First, the district might begin a schedule redesign with pilot high schools that are receptive to the idea and the opportunities for integrating literacy supports into a new schedule. By focusing on these early adopters, district leaders can use their data and success stories to build momentum for broader change. Second, the group advised that, rather than imposing reforms from the central office, there may be opportunities to include teachers in co-developing ideas across sites and in partnership with district leaders. Third, the group highlighted that professional development for secondary teachers on literacy instruction will be a key lever for building confidence and integrating reading support across multiple content areas beyond ELA.

In addition to instructional strategies, the group emphasized the importance of engaging parents, community members, and industry partners to reinforce the urgency of addressing literacy gaps, especially as students prepare to enter the workforce. Leveraging the reading assessment data to tell a story about critical but underdeveloped skills among high school students could be a powerful motivator for those in and out of the school system to prioritize this need. Finally, in schools where career pathways have a strong culture, the district should consider ways to integrate literacy goals into the pathways (instead of being a threat to take the pathways away), creating a more holistic approach to student success.

Sustaining Improvement Amid Fiscal Constraints

The final consultancy centered on a third district's challenge to sustain data-informed improvement efforts amid shrinking budgets and looming staff layoffs. The presenting district leader noted that although the district has made progress in reviewing data and using it to guide instruction, impending cuts and the resulting burden on remaining staff could derail these practices. "We can no longer fund the staff footprint we have had in the district, and [this] will have a significant impact on working conditions," the leader explained. The district, a relatively affluent small suburban/rural system with strong labor relationships and supportive families, faces declining

enrollment and state funding formulas that leave it 20–30% below the average revenue of similar nearby districts. Despite optimizing class sizes, reconfiguring schools, and tightening personnel requests, layoffs appear inevitable. This reality raises concerns about maintaining essential services for students and sustaining time for collaborative data work.

The group considered potential solutions such as creative scheduling, leveraging extended learning opportunities, and partnering with neighboring districts or community organizations to share resources and support. Participants also suggested engaging community volunteers to fill gaps in programming. Beyond logistics, participants stressed the importance of transparent communication and clearly articulating non-negotiable priorities for supporting students, especially those with the greatest needs. Involving teachers and labor groups in problem-solving was seen as critical for sustaining morale and working relationships during difficult transitions.

Finally, the conversation turned to broader advocacy and the role of state policy in shaping district realities. Participants highlighted the unintended consequences of funding formulas that assume continuous enrollment growth, the importance of sharing districts' unique challenges with policymakers, and the need for ongoing engagement with local officials and community groups. While financial constraints are daunting, the group concluded that adaptation, collaboration, and proactive engagement at the local and state level are essential to preserve progress for students and emerging data-driven practices.

Communicating to the Public About the Work of Schools and School Districts

Building a culture of data use extends beyond educators; the broader district community relies on evidence as well. Families need information about their students' progress, the supports their students may need, and how to meet students' goals for the future. Residents and local policymakers regularly look for signals of school quality and the degree to which educators are addressing issues in student outcomes. At the same time, heightened scrutiny and political polarization shape public perceptions of schools and complicate engagement. In the closing session, participants examined key challenges and promising practices for bringing community members into a district's culture of data use to communicate transparently, invite input, and connect evidence to action.

Engaging and Communicating With Constituents via the School Board

School board members serve as a vital bridge between the central office and members of the broader community. They hear directly from families about their experiences and priorities, and many trustees earn their seats by successfully articulating and committing to address those priorities during elections. Trustees offer valuable insight into what matters most to constituents and the beliefs community members have about what and how the district is doing. A panel of three NVUSD trustees discussed what priorities they hear most from their constituents, what information families turn to when they have questions about the district, and what the implications of those priorities and sources of information are for how the district creates community-wide, data-informed understanding and decision-making.

Balancing Individual Priorities and District-Wide Stewardship

Trustees shared that the most common question they hear from parents is about, in the words of one panelist, "what we're doing for one specific student." While this perspective is understandable, board members must make decisions that serve all students in the entire district. Panelists

acknowledged that explaining this empathetically can be difficult: “We have to [be the] board for the whole district, and that disconnect can come across hard. They think of me as disconnected.” Another trustee added, “We can say over and over we have 16,000 students, but people are concerned about their student. ... Single issues are what gets people.” The challenge, they noted, is helping families see how personal concerns fit within district-wide priorities. While this is an ongoing tension, trustees highlighted times the board communicated this idea successfully. For example, a bond measure to modernize several school sites recently passed, despite bond measures rarely gaining support in the Napa area. One trustee believed that the bond’s passage was evidence that the board is improving at articulating the intersection between individual students and district-wide responsibility: “I think we slowly succeeded in that. Otherwise, we would not have passed the school bond.”

Aligning Urgency With System Timelines

Trustees acknowledged a common tension between parents’ expectations for quick action and the reality that meaningful system-level change takes time. While families want solutions that address their child’s needs immediately, the process of raising an issue, drafting and finalizing policy, securing board approval, and implementing changes often spans months or even years. As one trustee explained, “There’s a time factor. They want to know what can be done now. ... Their emails are urgent. We have the luxury of time, but they don’t.” Panelists believed that this gap in timelines can create frustration, especially when improvements are not immediately visible. One trustee reflected again on the district’s school closures: “We had to reimagine what middle school is like. That first year, kids won’t feel what we’ve done. Now, [four years later], they see that, but they didn’t see it immediately. That is the struggle, the pace.” Trustees emphasized the importance of acknowledging families’ urgency while communicating clearly that progress is underway, even if changes take time to materialize.

Using Data to Cultivate Shared Understanding

Trustees emphasized the critical importance of having accurate, timely information when making and defending difficult decisions. In the lead-up to voting on school closures, panelists relied on data to form and defend their positions as they cast their votes. They expressed gratitude for transparency from central office leadership, noting that regular updates from the superintendent continue to keep them knowledgeable: “We are extremely well informed thanks to our superintendent. ... I have never had a parent come up and say something that completely surprised me.” One trustee recalled a recent conversation with parents still bitter about school closures: “It’s hard not to get into defensive mode. [I wanted to say,] ‘I didn’t see you at the eight Zoom town halls we had.’” In these moments, data becomes essential, not only for guiding decisions but for explaining and substantiating them. As one trustee put it, “It’s so critical for us to have data to back” why certain choices were made, especially when facing organized opposition or alternative perspectives. Consistent access to comprehensive district data makes their very public (and often contentious) role easier, equipping them to act in the best interests of students even when decisions are unpopular.

Communicating Proactively

In a conversation about what trustees need to better communicate with their constituents, several key strategies emerged.

Earlier discussion highlighted how trustees often find themselves using data defensively, relying on evidence when challenged on their decisions. But panelists also argued that proactive sharing can enable transparency before controversy arises. One trustee explained, “My community loves it

when I share proactively. Because our district gives us enrollment data, I share that on social media ... and once they see that information ... that becomes more useful” for the trustee’s communication to their constituents. By anticipating questions and making data visible early, trustees position themselves as effective and trustworthy communicators.

Another panelist recommended celebrating student successes identified in data to provide a fuller picture of district performance. This trustee recalled contacting a local newspaper several years ago to cover a prestigious scholarship earned by two NVUSD students, only to find little interest. Reflecting on how perceptions have shifted since then, the trustee noted, “I think we are doing a better job now. I don’t think we can emphasize too often the excellent students we have.” Districts should make efforts to communicate success stories beyond their usual audience, not to erase legitimate concerns, but so that narratives reflect both challenges and achievements.

Trustees also discussed the value of engaging other civic leaders in using data to support the work of the school district. In Napa specifically, this can be challenging because the city’s reputation of being predominantly wealthy often obscures the realities of most NVUSD families, who are not wealthy. One trustee explained, “[Other Napa] elected officials are finally [be]coming clear on the fact that, 50% of the homes here are weekend homes. My neighbors are millionaires but they’re not contributing [to the public school system] because they don’t really live here. We are full of service workers who make that lifestyle possible.” Another trustee believed that demonstrating to local officials NVUSD’s successes, challenges, and current priorities can help them become advocates of the district’s initiatives: “If we arm them with data, then they can help us.”

Finally, trustees underscored the importance of demonstrating that their decisions reflect public input. To develop their strategic plan, NVUSD engaged in a yearlong community engagement effort, gathering perspectives from educators, students, families, and community members. The resulting strategic plan articulates NVUSD’s most important priorities, which helps trustees stay focused. One trustee explained that, because the strategic plan reflects a wide range of voices that were systematically collected through a rigorous process, it “gives us as trustees the belief in what the community told us. ‘We listened to you; this is what you said you want our schools to be.’” By grounding their actions and priorities in the district’s shared vision, trustees can reinforce transparency and trust.

Providing Simplicity, Clarity, and Opportunities for Interaction With a Data Dashboard

Districts across the state are grappling with how to communicate evidence of progress transparently, especially in the face of multiple, sometimes unreliable, sources of information. Grounding the discussion in NVUSD’s experience, members explored strategies for communicating with the broader community about both achievements and ongoing challenges. One widely used tool in California school districts is a public-facing dashboard. NVUSD’s recently developed dashboard served as a basis for two small group discussions: one on how school systems can effectively and broadly share their progress, and a second on how districts can support their leaders in navigating both the intended and unintended consequences of publicly shared information.

Across both discussions, several themes emerged. First, participants agreed that dashboards should frame data within accessible narratives rather than simply display numbers. Further, those narratives may be different depending on the audience. For example, parents may need language that connects data to student experiences, while staff and board members are looking for alignment with district strategies and measurable goals. Participants also emphasized that transparency alone does not build trust. Consistent, personal engagement is essential to help stakeholders interpret

information and feel invested in the district's progress. One participant reiterated this idea by saying, "You can put out the dashboard and the beautiful deliverables, but that alone would not have done it. [The real communication takes place] through human interaction and consistency." This approach positions the dashboard as a starting point for conversation rather than an end in and of itself.

Second, the conversations highlighted the importance of simplicity and focus in the information being shared. Dashboards overloaded with indicators risk confusing users and diluting key messages. Focusing an audience's attention on a few priority metrics each year can help foster clarity and consensus. Additionally, pairing quantitative data with qualitative stories and visuals can help bring a numerical data point to life in a more meaningful way. Qualitative data may also be more effective than quantitative data in shifting the perceptions of those with concerns about aspects of the district's work or the outcomes it has produced. Districts can communicate about progress most effectively by striking a balance between numbers that spotlight important trends and stories that connect those numbers to human experiences and resonate emotionally with their intended audience.

Finally, leaders reflected on how public-facing dashboards introduce an internal layer of accountability. At NVUSD, each specific goal in the strategic plan has an "executive sponsor" who takes responsibility for progress toward stated outcomes. While this structure strengthens ownership, it can feel daunting for staff who are new to the level of visibility that dashboards bring. One leader voiced their concern by asking, "Do my director and strategy lead understand the data? And how are we communicating that so when counselors ask them about data deadlines, they understand why it's important" for that data to be included in the dashboard? Participants suggested providing support for staff that could include cultivating a safe environment that allows for discussing and navigating failure, tools to address missteps, and attention to the potential emotional impact of public scrutiny. These measures can help leaders respond confidently to questions and avoid defensive reactions from themselves or others.

These insights suggest that NVUSD's dashboard and others like it can be most effective when they operate as one part of a larger strategy for engagement. By combining clear messaging, strong evidence, and opportunities for human-to-human interactions, districts can transform data from static information into opportunities for trust and accountability.

Looking Ahead: Public Narratives and the Future of Education

The next Collaborative meeting will focus on the common public narratives shaping the perceptions of K-12 education and how members of the California education community can and should shape those narratives to better serve students. Our meeting concluded with a forward-looking discussion about what the focus areas of that meeting might be.

Participants acknowledged that public education has always faced several competing and critical narratives. While public support of education historically reflects a belief in schooling as both a public benefit and a collective investment, members felt that in recent years, messaging has shifted to increasingly frame public education in terms of individual advantage. Other predominant narratives put the onus of societal change onto schools, even though, in reality, schools have very little influence on larger issues like poverty, immigration reform, and artificial intelligence that dramatically shape the context in which schools operate and students' prospects for academic success. As one of the few public institutions broadly available to all, education systems carry unrealistic expectations to solve societal challenges. Members also surfaced concerns about

declining trust, persistent critiques of teacher unions, and the perception that schools are slow to adapt to the present times.

At the same time, participants highlighted opportunities to reframe the narrative by focusing on innovation, equity, and the essential human dimensions of learning. They stressed the need to prepare students for an uncertain future marked by technological disruption, economic volatility, and shifting workforce demands. Some participants expressed a desire to be on the leading edge of anticipating workforce needs and signaling that public school systems are ready to address those needs. But others believed that education has historically struggled to deliver on such promises and should prioritize what is immediately within reach. Addressing this tension in our next meeting will be critical.

Underlying these discussions was a call for coherence and shared responsibility among leaders in California K–12 public education, including members of the Collaborative. Participants emphasized that schools cannot meet tomorrow’s challenges without partnerships across sectors. They also agreed that any effort to influence public narratives must embrace complexity, anticipate change, and position education as foundational to democracy and community well-being. This framing sets the stage for the Collaborative’s next meeting, focused on strategies to strengthen public education’s value-add in a rapidly evolving world.