

GUIDE

A recipe for results: A district leader's guide to curriculum-based professional learning



In “[The power of connectedness: A case for a coherent instruction system for reading and science improvement.](#)” we described how one school’s success was supported by a set of integrated, system-wide conditions, including curriculum-based professional learning (CBPL). This guide highlights four features of CBPL that stood out in this school and shows how leaders used them to help teachers internalize curriculum, respond to student needs, and enact strong instruction.

What CBPL looked like in the school

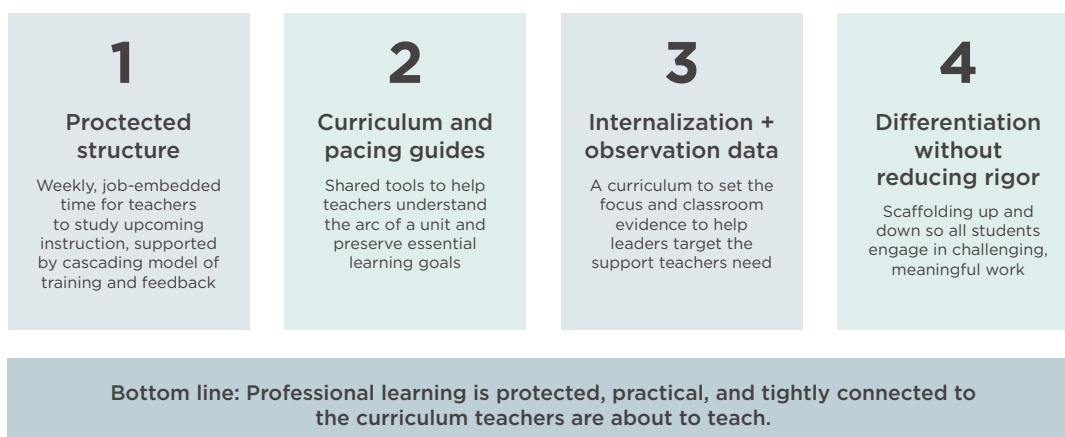
In the school, CBPL did not happen simply because teachers had time to meet. It depended on a coherent structure, shared tools, and a clear connection between professional learning and classroom instruction. Four ingredients, active in the school and enabled by the district, helped make CBPL a practical mechanism for strengthening teaching and learning:

1. A protected structure for ongoing, job-embedded professional learning supported by a cascading training model
2. Curriculum and pacing guides that helped teachers understand the arc of instruction
3. A focus on curriculum internalization, informed by classroom observation data
4. Dedicated time to plan for differentiation by identifying and embedding both scaffold-up and scaffold-down strategies

Together, these four features made CBPL a coherent bridge between curriculum, professional learning, and classroom practice.

Effective CBPL = Coherence + Classroom connection

Four ingredients help make CBPL a practical mechanism
for strengthening teaching and learning

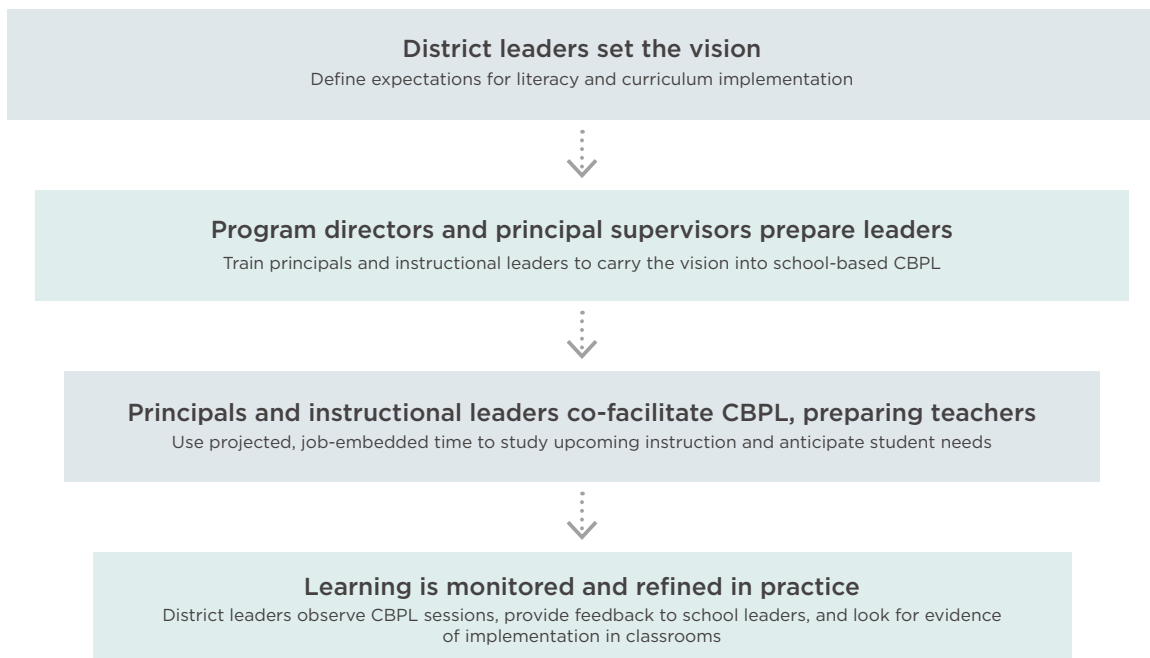


1. Establish a protected structure for ongoing, job-embedded professional learning

A central feature of the district’s curriculum-based professional learning model is protected, recurring time for teachers to study and prepare for instruction. Their model uses 90-minute CBPL sessions each week that focus on upcoming lessons and units, modeling high-leverage instructional practices, and anticipating student needs.

“CBPL is the biggest way that we are able to train our teachers and build capacity.”

To make CBPL truly protected and job embedded, leaders across the system needed a shared understanding of the instructional priorities and how to support them. A cascading model of training and feedback helped create that alignment from district leadership to classroom practice.



Protected weekly CBPL time, reinforced by a cascading model of leader training and feedback, gave teachers a consistent setting for the next part of the work: using shared curriculum and pacing tools to understand the arc of instruction and prepare upcoming lessons.

2. Develop curriculum and pacing guides

Curriculum and pacing guides are a necessary foundation for effective CBPL because they help teachers understand both the structure of individual lessons and the broader arc of a unit. In CBPL, leaders and teachers use these guides to unpack upcoming instruction, identify the most essential content, and make careful decisions about pacing when instructional time is limited. This support is especially important for newer teachers, who may still be developing the skill of internalizing lessons, unpacking units, and deciding which instructional moves matter most.

“We know that it’s supposed to take 120 minutes. You only have 90. How do we figure out what’s important?”

As one participant explained, much of the work is helping teachers navigate the gap between the curriculum’s intended timing and classroom realities. Leaders use their understanding of “the whole arc of the unit” to support those decisions.

But shared curriculum guidance alone was not enough; leaders also needed evidence from classrooms to see where teachers were struggling to enact that vision and where CBPL should focus next.

3. Focus on curriculum internalization and classroom observation data

Effective CBPL helps teachers move beyond knowing what lesson comes next to understanding the purpose of the lesson and how to enact it well. While the district provides a clear instructional calendar identifying what teachers should teach each day, school leaders use CBPL to ensure that teachers are internalizing the lesson, understanding the intended learning, and preparing to make the curriculum come alive in classrooms.

“It is our job to make sure that the teachers are internalizing the lesson and understand what they are doing.”

At the same time, CBPL is not driven by the curriculum alone. Leaders also use classroom observation data to identify patterns across teachers and determine where professional learning should focus. As one participant noted, “What we are observing in class is what we’re doing for that PD.” Another described the process as identifying a trend “across the campus” and then providing professional development in response. In this way, CBPL creates a feedback loop: the curriculum sets the instructional focus, while observation data helps leaders target the specific supports teachers need to strengthen implementation.

4. Use CBPL to plan differentiation without reducing rigor

CBPL provides protected time for teachers to plan differentiation in advance while maintaining the instructional challenge of the curriculum. Rather than lowering expectations, teachers use this time to anticipate where students may need support and where they may need additional challenge.

A key part of this work is identifying both scaffold down and scaffold up strategies within the planning process.

“I posed this question. I didn’t get a response. So how am I scaffolding down to better support the students so they can respond?”

CBPL creates space for teachers to learn from one another by sharing materials, approaches, accommodations, and instructional strategies. Through this professional collaboration, teachers prepare to support access without watering down the task, ensuring that all students remain engaged in rigorous learning experiences.

The bottom line

Teachers benefit when professional learning is protected, practical, and tightly connected to the curriculum they are about to teach. In this school, CBPL helped teachers move from covering lessons to understanding the purpose of instruction, anticipating where students would need support, and planning how to maintain rigor while increasing access. This work was also coherent across the “vertical spine” of the system; district leaders, principal supervisors, school leaders, instructional coaches, and teachers shared responsibility for understanding and enacting the CBPL model. Leaders created recurring structures, provided curriculum and pacing guidance, used classroom observation data to target areas of need, and built time for teachers to plan scaffolds, share strategies, and strengthen implementation together. Together, these routines connected district expectations, professional learning, and classroom practice into a continuous improvement cycle.



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