



A Snapshot of Oakland Unified School District's Comprehensive Professional Learning to Implement Illustrative Mathematics



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Introduction

This brief presents a snapshot of the conditions and processes in place in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD)—a medium-size urban public school district that was an early adopter of Illustrative Mathematics (IM)—as a comprehensive set of instructional materials that are aligned with a broader vision of quality mathematics learning and teaching. Although these efforts span grades K–12, the focus of this snapshot is on what is in place for the middle grades (6–8). This snapshot of OUSD's structure for professional learning addresses this question:

What district conditions enable powerful professional learning while implementing a common and ambitious curriculum, Illustrative Mathematics?

Beyond mathematics, the district offers opportunities in STEM learning, including robust programs in data science and computer science. The Academic Language and Literacy Acceleration for Secondary (ALLAS) institute is an intensive, multiday professional learning opportunity conducted by the district's English Language Learner and Multilingual Achievement (ELLMA) office. This institute is focused on instructional design and implementation that specifically addresses how to increase the quality of learning opportunities for Multilingual Learners across disciplines.



Key District-Level Conditions

Shared, Ambitious Vision

The 2025–26 school year's shared math vision centered on scaffolding for rigor, which built on ideas that were the focus of the previous 2 years: student–student talk and checking for understanding. The idea of scaffolding is grounded in notions of balancing high challenge with high support coupled with a three-part architecture (before, during, after) to think through planning for lessons.¹ The goal of this approach is to provide every student with access to grade-level instruction that is aligned with academic standards.

One key vehicle for this work is the district's content and communication rubric, which is a living artifact used to communicate how content and communication are interrelated in the district's vision. The rubric offers a coherent framework and descriptors of different levels of work, and it guides all the work described in this brief.

District-Level Staff Capacity

With sustained, philanthropic support from local foundations, the district has been able to sustain math coaches at the middle school level, with each coach serving one or two campuses. In addition, two middle schools have site-funded math coaches. These math coaches are seasoned educators who have extensive experience in the district. And a secondary mathematics coordinator for middle school is also a certified IM facilitator of professional learning.

Coaching Model and Community

Coaches have well-defined roles that support building teacher expertise so that all students are served in learning ambitious mathematics through the implementation of IM. Coaches facilitate regular professional learning community meetings at campuses with math departments, engaging in implementation-focused improvement cycles that are focused on using evidence of student work. They also conduct districtwide communities of practice with

¹ Gibbons, P. (2009). *English Learners, academic literacy, and thinking: Learning in the challenge zone*. Heinemann.

affinity groups of teachers who meet about once a month. Coaches are also key participants in facilitating instructional rounds that enable real-time monitoring of patterns of instruction, trends and variations, and the identification of districtwide priorities or emphases regarding professional learning.

Structure and Content of Professional Learning

Districtwide Professional Learning Days

District staff held a mini-conference in which they engaged educators in free-choice workshops on a variety of topics related to districtwide initiatives. This conference was built into the annual professional learning calendar for educators and included topics such as

- leveraging curricula for Multilingual Learners,
- leveraging language routines to scaffold for rigor, and
- making student thinking visible with Building Thinking Classrooms.

Districtwide Grade-Level Communities of Practices

On the second Wednesday of each month, during minimum-day released time, the district invites math teachers from all schools to district-facilitated, highly interactive 90-minute meetings. These meetings are organized around a common “deep dive” topic that offers teachers experience and reflection. Participating teachers experience a common idea together, make connections to the district’s initiatives collectively, and then focus on reflection and application. Standing groups are organized into six strands based on grade level and theme, and the topics included in the strands may address groups of students such as Multilingual Learners. The standing groups meet across the school year to pursue an agenda of collective learning that is closely tied to the classroom practice in iterative cycles.

Sample agenda topics across a school year include

- modifying lesson plans for Multilingual Learners,
- planning for language on multiple levels,
- responding to student thinking,
- scaffolding for student thinking and language,
- engaging in lesson internalization from IM, and
- analyzing student writing.

Campus-Based Professional Learning Communities

Coaches work with one or two campuses and all the mathematics teachers. Twice a month, during minimum-day released time on Wednesday afternoons, coaches facilitate planning and implementation cycles in which teachers plan for ambitious instruction that uses IM, collect evidence of student work and learning, and analyze student work by using rubrics to inform instruction almost in real time.

Examples of Professional Learning and Reflection

Conceptual Understanding

In one whole-group session, the middle school facilitator led a session with a [unit-culminating activity](#) taken directly from the 7th grade IM curriculum. The activity was a rich problem that offered four different student perspectives about the comparative advantages of applying a percentage discount (20% off) versus an amount off (\$30 off). As participants worked in groups, they surfaced different ideas that cut across representations including equations, tables, and graphs, and they anticipated student thinking and ways to facilitate the activity in the classroom. Discussion also addressed how to adjust expectations for 7th grade students versus 8th grade students, who may have more tools based upon their greater experience with writing equations.

Student-Centered Practice

In a different session, the facilitator offered the whole group a Number Talks activity as a student-centered way to participate in collective mathematical sensemaking. After facilitators gauged how familiar teachers were with the activity, they led teachers in experiencing an example of comparing two fractions to determine which was closer to zero. In the debriefing of the fresh experience, participating teachers identified many different benefits for Number Talks as student-centered practice:

- valuing student voice;
- positioning students as competent;
- valuing different strategies;
- building the skills of students to listen to one another;
- offering teachers a way to check for understanding; and
- valuing creative, nonalgorithmic mathematics.



Language Development

One session focused on districtwide grade-level interim assessments and the question “What do rigorous math explanations and reasoning look like?” After working through an assessment, participants made connections between it and the districtwide math content and communication rubric. One grade-level group discussed the role of verbal explanations, the use of representations such as tables and graphs, and issues of distinguishing between rubric levels to assess complex multipart questions. The discussion of the role of language focused on several key insights.

- Although responses should connect with the specific context, it is important for students to be able to talk about the more generally important mathematical ideas and representations (e.g., tables, graphs, and equations).
- Offering students pieces of language to connect ideas may need to be tailored to the specific question they are answering.

- Having students respond to the question “Could you explain this to someone who isn’t here?” draws attention to the purposes of using language more broadly, including offering key context and background information.
- Rigorous explanations weave together both conceptual understanding and logical thinking.

Reflection and Application

This brief described and connected several components of district structures and content that support professional learning regarding implementing IM.

Table 1. Reflection and Application Questions for Practitioners to Ask

Conditions and structures	Reflection	Application
District-level conditions • Shared, ambitious vision • District-level staff capacity • Coaching community and model Structure and content of professional learning • Districtwide professional learning days • Districtwide grade-level communities of practice • Campus-based professional learning communities	To what extent are these conditions and structures in place in your district or campus?	• What are some short-term actions that can foster the types of rich professional learning described in this brief? • What long-term investments are necessary for creating the conditions for deep professional learning?

Appendix. Data and Sources

- **Documents:** agendas for after-school meetings across the 2026–27 school year
- **Focus groups** with the instructional support team
- **Observation of communities of practice:** three after-school sessions, each about 90 minutes in length