



# BETTER TOGETHER

Teachers Lead

Lessons in Professional Learning From the  
Better Together: California Teachers Initiative





## Supporting Teachers in This Moment and Into the Future

In the wake of COVID-19 challenges and our collective refocusing on deep-rooted racism in reaction to the brutal murders of George Floyd and too many other Black people, many fellow educators are looking for resources and support. If there is a silver lining amidst all the tragedy that surrounds us, it is that we are spurred to action. Educators see a renewed commitment to creating just environments where all students can live and learn without fear of racism, discrimination, harassment and violence. It's time to provide more support for teachers as they navigate these important times.

This moment has brought into sharp focus the inequities in support for teachers and students that were already pervasive in our schools, as well as the need to help teachers through this time and beyond.

**Today's pressing demands to teach differently to reach all students further elevate the ongoing importance of facilitating opportunities for:**



Peer-to-peer teacher professional learning, collaboration and connection.



Inspiring, recognizing and supporting classroom teachers as leaders in their schools and districts.



Elevating and honoring teachers' voices in their own professional learning.

As schools prepare for what is next this fall, it is important that policymakers, professional learning providers and teachers themselves embrace this moment as an opportunity to consider new approaches to professional learning for teachers.

The urgency of this moment also offers an opportunity to revisit the findings from the [Better Together: California Teachers Initiative](#), an effort that supported teachers across California for five years from 2015 to 2019. This learning brief shares lessons learned about a bold new approach to supporting teachers drawn from [retrospective research conducted by the Center for Research on Educational Access and Leadership \(C-REAL\) at CSU Fullerton](#). The study included a survey of 179 Better Together participants and teachers who played leadership roles in the Initiative, as well as 17 follow-up interviews with participants to examine the short and long-term outcomes as well as best practices for teacher professional learning and leadership development.

While the Better Together Initiative in its original form has sunset, organizers are eager to highlight the impact of an approach that is needed now more than ever.

## Better Together: California Teachers Initiative

In 2015, leaders from the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities (AICCU), the California State University System (CSU) and New Teacher Center came together to launch the Better Together: California Teachers Initiative. This quickly grew from a handful of connections between teachers into a thriving community of thousands of teachers that offered educators a space to reconnect with their passions for teaching and provided a platform that helped them make an even bigger difference in the lives of their students. This effort connected more than 37,000 teachers from



across the state for peer-to-peer learning, culminating in a statewide day of learning led by teachers, for teachers. The Initiative consisted of two parts. First, the Summit: Better Together's statewide day of learning offered a unique opportunity for California's Pre-K-12 teachers, teacher candidates, school administrators and other educators to come together on college and university campuses to collaborate, re-energize ahead of the new school year, and become part of an ongoing teacher network. The Summit enabled teachers to share the latest strategies and resources with colleagues across their region to improve teaching and learning in their classrooms. All Better Together activities were open to all educators in the state and free of charge.

The Summit grew into the Better Together Network that provided activities, resources and an ongoing venue for dialogue. The Network supported teacher growth and collaboration through social media community engagement, online events, an online database of resources, local events and programs, and direct collaboration with statewide educational partners.

Recognizing the inequities in support for teachers and students across our schools, the Initiative never charged a fee and promoted free resources only. All activities were open to educators of all levels and subjects and brought together teachers from across districts, as well as from public, private, and parochial schools.

Each year, every participant left the Summit with our annual [resource guide](#) – a one-of-a-kind index of free, teacher-vetted resources that were already working in classrooms across the state.

### Network organizers aimed to address three challenges:

- 1 Teachers reported feeling disconnected and consistently requested more time for collaboration to share best practices. Teachers expressed frustration with the overload from required "sit and get" professional learning opportunities.
- 2 Teachers needed access to teacher-vetted quality resources and support to effectively implement California's new standards and address student needs.
- 3 Teacher shortages across California amplified the need to recruit and retain more than 100,000 new teachers over the next decade and create the infrastructure to support them.

When envisioning a statewide professional learning model, organizers were driven to create an environment where teachers would actively engage in and lead learning opportunities to meet their needs and the needs of their students. Organizers brought participating teachers back to their college campuses to emphasize the concept of lifelong learning.





**In reviewing research analyzing the impact of this approach over time, organizers identified the following beneficial aspects of the Better Together approach:**



Facilitating peer-to-peer learning, collaboration and connection among teachers across schools and districts.



Inspiring, recognizing and supporting classroom teachers as leaders in their schools and districts.



Elevating and honoring teacher's voices in their own professional learning.

After delving further into these aspects of the Better Together approach, organizers offer below recommendations to policymakers, those who provide teacher professional development and teachers themselves on how to embrace opportunities for these vital supports.

### **Facilitating Peer-to-Peer Learning, Collaboration and Connection Among Teachers Across Schools and Districts**

The Better Together Summit featured TED-style EdTalks on challenges and successes presented by local teachers and breakout discussions in an [Edcamp](#) format, a participant-driven approach that allows educators to collaboratively determine session topics the day of the event.

The Edcamp format encouraged peer-to-peer dialogue and empowered teachers to lean into their own learning by enabling them to suggest session topics and step up to lead or share during the discussions. It provided an opportunity for teachers to identify the resources they need to grow and take their teaching to the next level.

Teachers reported that they felt the freedom to engage in conversation about the relevant challenges associated with teaching without fear of judgment or harsh criticism at the Better Together Summit. One teacher said,

**“It was great to be able to network, to be able to listen to other teachers, to be vulnerable and not be judged.”**

As participants in peer conversations, it was acceptable to be vulnerable and to admit that aspects of teaching, learning and assessment are often difficult to perform. As a result, they expressed their concerns, listened to responses from other teachers and collaborated to develop viable solutions to each challenge presented during the Edcamp model sessions. Better Together participants treated each other as professionals, reassuring one another that their experiences in the classroom were not unique, but a shared experience.

Better Together fostered a culture of collegiality, where teachers were inspired to share their pedagogical practices with colleagues. One teacher shared that, "The reality that instructional practices and experiences in education are 'pretty ubiquitous' created a shared space for participants to develop a sense of solidarity and openness to learn from one another." Another reflected on coming to the realization that:

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**"There are opportunities for us to build and grow collectively as teacher educators."**

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Another participant commented on the power of peer connection, reflecting:

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**I feel like Better Together has given me a little self-confidence in the sense that I can be more equipped to be able to handle those struggles, and I know that other people are going through the same types of issues as well.**

**//**

With Better Together gathering teachers from across the region, teachers commented on the opportunity to hear and engage with other teachers about so many different ideas and approaches to teaching and learning. One teacher reflected, "The diversity of ideas helped me see things differently."

One math teacher reported that she struggled to teach the subject matter with her middle school students because of language barriers. Through Better Together, she found strategies that guided her to more effective teaching by incorporating writing into her instruction. She found techniques for grouping and pedagogical strategies that brought her classroom alive with students engaging and helping each other to succeed. She described a classroom transformation where no "student leaves the others behind. They care about each other and their success."

Teachers brought Better Together back to their schools. Educators implemented Edcamp-like models into their schools' professional development because they believed its collaborative model would be more effective than traditional professional learning. Participants continued the collaborative culture by sharing the skills, methods and techniques they learned at Better Together with their colleagues who did not attend. After these changes were enacted, teachers noticed student academic growth and an improvement in school climate. The C-REAL survey of Better Together participants showed a strong impact on students, peers, districts and schools.





One of the most often reported outcomes from Better Together was fostering opportunities for networking. Participants described the excitement of being part of a statewide community of teachers organizing on behalf of the profession and those they serve. Almost all participants at some point mentioned networking opportunities as a motivator for participating in and returning to Better Together Summits. For almost all participants, networking led to an expansion of their worlds. Teachers reported no longer feeling isolated or like they were working in silos. Additionally, the impact of Better Together events grew exponentially as a result of expanded professional networks. When teachers returned to their school sites, many invited their peers to participate in the Better Together community.

Teachers across the state recognized the power and value of networking both in person and using social media platforms. Teachers said social media created a platform to share instructional resources such as lesson plans and discussion boards. It was also a source of ongoing communication between Better Together participants throughout California. As their networks expanded, they recognized the statewide and national influence to improve the teacher-workforce through a continuous exchange of information. Teachers living in rural communities found the networking opportunities profoundly helpful. They felt a stronger sense of community and professional connections. These teachers shared how limited professional learning opportunities were in small communities and schools.

Better Together filled a void in professional learning opportunities for attendees. For many participants, they were able to develop and sustain meaningful relationships with other educators. In doing so, their lesson plans and instructional practices have changed to include more technology, innovation, and student-centered learning opportunities. Further, participants interacted with a diverse array of teachers – some who had minimal resources to support their students, while others had enough to engage their students effectively. Collectively, they resolved to do more with less, ultimately developing greater solidarity and professional learning networks beyond the scope of Better Together.

## Inspiring, Recognizing and Supporting Classroom Teachers as Leaders in Their Schools and Districts

Through the peer learning opportunities, Better Together inspired teachers to lead. Further, their confidence increased as they engaged and learned more about the concept of being a leader. One teacher reflected that attending the Better Together Summit helped him participate more actively in creating a college-going culture at his school. He described how peer conversation sparked changes in his thinking:

**“After participating in some of the sessions, it was interesting to me how people wanted to hear about what I was doing in my classroom. They would reflect on my ideas and then give me ideas. It got me thinking differently about what I can take back to my high school. How I can be that leader on my campus. Before I was more focused on what the administration wanted us to do, but this was about what teachers could discover within ourselves.”**

Several teachers shared that Better Together was their first time speaking in front of large audiences, while other attendees perceived themselves as leaders for the first time. Both experiences led to a greater resolve to support,

and in some instances advocate for, students at the school site and district level. One teacher said,

“  
A lot of the things  
that I have gained  
from conferences  
like Better Together  
have helped me to  
build my leadership  
and not be afraid  
to be who I am and  
to express myself.  
”

Many teachers shared that the peer learning and networking opportunities through Better Together led them to embrace the concept of “leading where you are,” which acknowledges the impact and influence classroom teacher leaders can have in their schools, communities and districts. Several teachers said that Better Together inspired them to remain in the classroom to serve as

Since Better Together, Have You Assumed  
Any Leadership Roles?



Percentage of survey respondents to the C-REAL study (n=172) who reported assuming leadership roles after Better Together.

support to their colleagues and fostered the belief that classroom instruction equates to leadership. As teacher leaders, they also impacted student learning and success by creating college-going cultures at their school sites, leading professional learning programs and presenting innovative approaches to student teaching and assessment through their districts and social media platforms. These examples diverge from the traditional view of leadership as limited to administrators or school district offices. The majority of survey respondents reported assuming leadership roles since engaging with the network.

When asked whether they have assumed any leadership roles, 69 percent said yes. One participant, who began teaching at the age of 32, immediately understood the impact teacher leaders have:

“Being involved in Better Together helped me realize that ... you can lead where you are, and be a teacher leader, while still having a positive impact on schools and on what we offer students.”

Another teacher said, “Before Better Together, I did not see myself as a teacher leader. I didn’t know I had the skill set and disposition. Now, I am capable, and there is a purpose for those spaces. Purposeful for self and for students.” Teachers increasingly saw themselves as leaders and recognized the need to advocate for students.

Educators also demonstrated teacher leadership by implementing Edcamp-like models at their school sites. A teacher shared how they used their experiences from Better Together to build collaborative structures around professional learning, stating, “I was able to learn how to facilitate dialogues around teacher professional development with veteran teachers.”

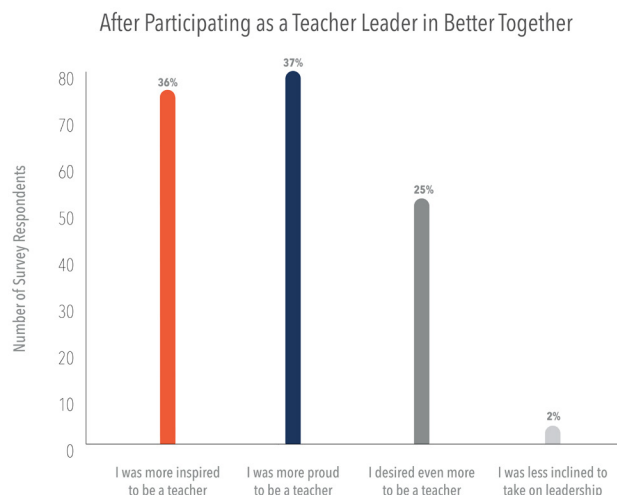
Once educators better understood their role as teacher leaders, they utilized their agency to work as collective advocates for students. One teacher reflected that Better Together “reminded me of my role as students’ advocate.”

## Elevating and Honoring Teachers' Voices in Their Own Professional Learning

After experiencing Better Together, teachers reported feeling more empowered. Teachers shared how Better Together provided a safe access space for multiple voices to speak, learn and support teacher leadership. Two components impacted Better Together presenters: voice and validation. Many of the respondents expressed that they rarely, if ever, had a chance to speak in front of a broad audience or to engage in meaningful discussions with small groups beyond their school site. The opportunity to share their expertise results in empowerment for both the presenters and the audience.

Teachers also elevated the importance of directing their own professional learning. As one teacher shared, "Better Together provided a new lens to my district of how professional learning can be designed by teachers and for teachers." Another reflected, "It's not about telling teachers how to do our jobs. It's about teachers supporting teachers and sharing strategies. Teachers can choose what they want to learn and what they want to share with others."

After participating as a teacher leader in Better Together, survey respondents reported feeling more inspired to be a teacher, more proud to be a teacher, and a stronger desire to be a teacher.



Percentage of survey respondents to the C-REAL study (n=172) who reported being more inspired to be a teacher, more proud to be a teacher, desired even more to be a teacher and less inclined to take on leadership.

Teachers also highlighted Better Together's focus on honoring teachers as true professionals and experts in their craft, which renewed their motivation at the start of a new school year. One teacher reflected, "Overall, I remember the whole event being geared toward reminding us as professionals in education why we do what we do. So I went back with a new passion and a renewed desire to do what's best for kids." Another stated

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It's nice to have something that unifies you, that keeps teachers motivated and creates a sense of connection beyond just your site and your school.  
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## Implications for Teacher Professional Learning

Overall, Better Together embodied many best practices for teacher leadership, professional learning and networking. The effort demonstrates that a **comprehensive, multipronged approach to serving and supporting teachers in these areas is critical**. In a state like California with a diverse teacher workforce and students and families coming from a variety of settings and locations, there is no one way to provide effective teacher learning and growth. It requires a host of stakeholders

working collaboratively to meet the multiple needs of the communities that collectively contribute to this state. As a result, we encourage policymakers and those who provide professional development to support a model similar to Better Together to serve all. **The essential components of this model include teachers facilitating learning based on their needs, and responding to local, regional and statewide needs using online and face-to-face gatherings. Altogether, this model helps address educational challenges and shares solutions in support of teachers as leaders in professional learning.**

To ensure opportunities for teachers to share across districts and the state, **it is also important that this professional learning is open, free and accessible to all teachers.**

At this moment of upheaval with COVID-19 and our collective refocusing on deep-rooted racism, we see more clearly than ever the need for a cohesive way to support, connect and empower teachers across the state. We must learn from this moment and build professional learning support for teachers to create more equitable learning environments for teachers and their students.





Below are recommendations for policymakers, teacher professional development providers and teachers themselves who – now more than ever – need to embrace opportunities for these vital supports.

## Recommendations for Teachers:



### Peer-to-Peer Learning, Collaboration and Connection

- Ask for, seek out and participate in as many opportunities to collaborate with teaching peers as possible, including in-person, online through forums like Twitter, and at conferences.
- If you cannot find any pre-existing opportunities in your area, think about how you might organize time for collaboration and discussion with peers at your school site or district.
- Remember that there are teachers across the state facing similar challenges. When you are feeling discouraged or need inspiration, reach out to your teaching community for support.
- Do not underestimate the power of networking online. For those in rural communities especially, connect with teachers on Twitter for constant inspiration.



### Inspiring Leadership

- Remember that you are a leader in your community, for your students and for your peers. Find ways to lead from where you are.
- Seek out and create opportunities to share what is working in your classroom with others in your network.



### Elevating and Honoring Teacher Voices

- Elevate and honor the voices of your teaching peers by sharing with your community.
- Remember and take pride in the power of your voice as a teacher.

## Recommendations for Professional Learning Providers:



### Peer-to-Peer Learning, Collaboration and Connection

- Ensure the professional learning you provide gives ample opportunity for teachers to connect, network and collaborate, including with teachers across districts. Teachers will appreciate having the time to discuss how to implement new strategies and tools with their peers.
- Steward opportunities, formal and informal, for teachers to learn and grow together.
- Recognize the value of teacher networking by building professional communities of support.



### Inspiring Leadership

- Create opportunities for teachers to lead from the classroom.
- Create opportunities for teachers to grow presentation, facilitation, public speaking and leadership skills. Encourage them to join conferences and other forums for teachers to share what works.
- Help create opportunities for teachers to lead within professional learning opportunities you host, giving them the chance to share what they know and how they implement skills and tools.



## Elevating and Honoring Teacher Voices

- Elevate and authentically honor teacher voices consistently over time and in multiple venues. Call on teachers to share their insights on challenges and successes.
- Find ways to uplift teacher voices in your community by inviting classroom teachers to write blog posts, lead professional learning and networking events, and more. Pay them for their time and expertise.

## Recommendations for Policymakers:



## Peer-to-Peer Learning, Collaboration and Connection

- Prioritize and fund consistent teacher collaboration opportunities to ensure they have time to share best practices and learn from and with one another.
- Recognize the value of teacher networking by building professional communities of support.



## Inspiring Leadership

- Encourage schools and districts to create opportunities for teachers to lead from the classroom by highlighting examples of where this is happening.
- Prioritize and fund opportunities for teachers to develop their leadership skills to enable them to better share their knowledge and expertise.



## Elevating and Honoring Teacher Voices

- Call on teachers to share about their challenges and successes when considering policies that impact them.





# THANK YOU!

This publication is based on research funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and The State Farm Companies Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of either the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation or The State Farm Companies Foundation.

A project of this magnitude would not have happened without the innovative and collaborative spirit of three large and different statewide organizations. We would also like to thank the many supporters of the Better Together: California Teachers Initiative who have been with us since 2015, including our partnering college and university host sites, outreach partners, teacher advisory committee, and sponsors.

**With questions about this report or the Better Together California Teachers Initiative, please email [teacherslead@cateacherssummit.com](mailto:teacherslead@cateacherssummit.com)**

Published June 2020