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Impact in Action

Beech Avenue Elementary

Fontana Unified School District, California



Highlights

Beech Avenue Elementary has been engaged in the Teaching for Effective Learning (TEL) program since 2021, gradually transforming their professional learning system by adapting school structures, practices, and culture.

TEL has impacted Beech Avenue Elementary in the following ways:

- ✓ **Collegiality**—Teachers experienced greater reach and depth in their professional connections including more trust and confidence within their grade level teams, across subjects within the school, and with their principal.
- ✓ **Collaboration**—Teachers collaborated on deeper levels including content and teaching practices while aligning their collaboration so that the whole school was moving toward a shared goal.
- ✓ **Shared Leadership**—The implementation process strengthened skills of the principal and leadership team and also helped cultivate leadership qualities in each teacher to lead their own inquiries, share their practice, make decisions, and become active members of their teams and school.
- ✓ **Ownership**—Teachers adopted TEL and made it a systematic part of their practice, both pedagogically and structurally, by ingraining it in their school calendars and using the experience as a means to establish and institutionalize cycles of continuous development and improvement.



Beech Avenue Elementary

Beech Avenue Elementary School is in the Fontana Unified School District (FUSD) in Fontana, California, just east of Los Angeles. According to the California Department of Education, there are 630 students at Beech Avenue Elementary.¹ The school is composed almost entirely of students who identify as Hispanic (96.7%).² 238 students (37.8%), are English Learners, most of whom are Spanish speaking.³ Additionally, 87.3% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.⁴

While the California School Dashboard⁵ places Beech Avenue Elementary performing under the standard, compared to both the average student and state level, students are growing/improving at significant rates.⁶ In 2023, Beech Avenue Elementary students had a **significant increase** in math performance from the prior year. Students from low-income backgrounds and students with disabilities saw the **same significant growth rates**. Students also increased English Language Arts (ELA) scores from the previous year. While they may still be scoring below the state average, teachers and learners are making great strides to bridge learning gaps. Even with widespread learning loss that occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Beech Avenue Elementary student outcomes are rapidly improving.

¹ [School Profile: Beech Avenue Elementary \(CA Dept of Education\)](#)

² [National Center on Education Statistics, Beech Avenue Elementary](#)

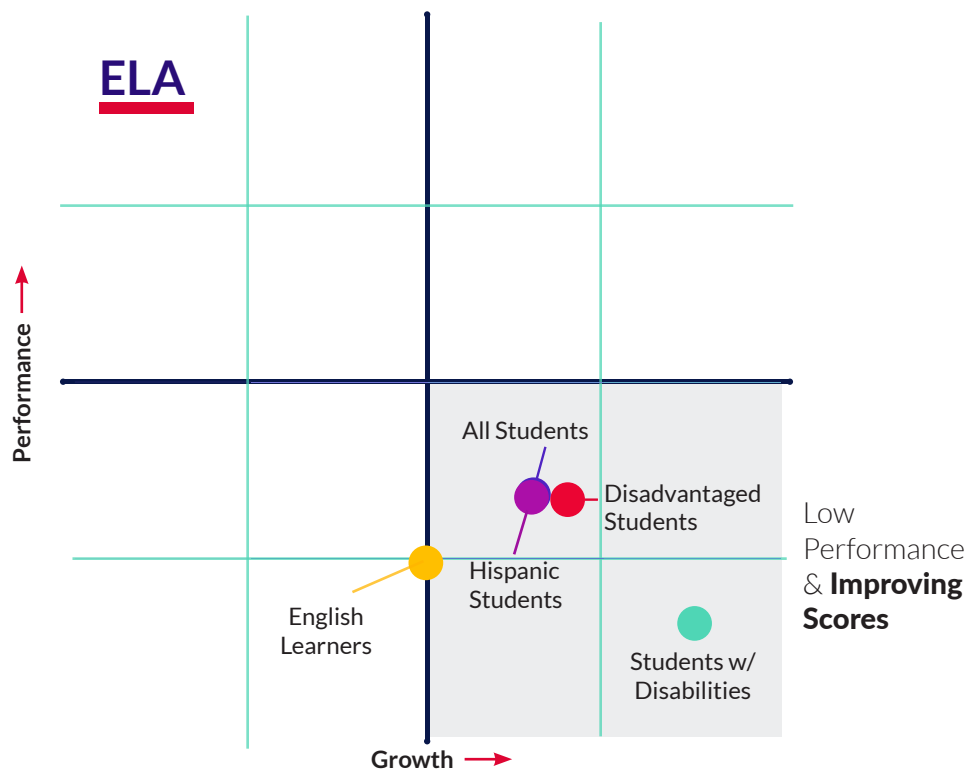
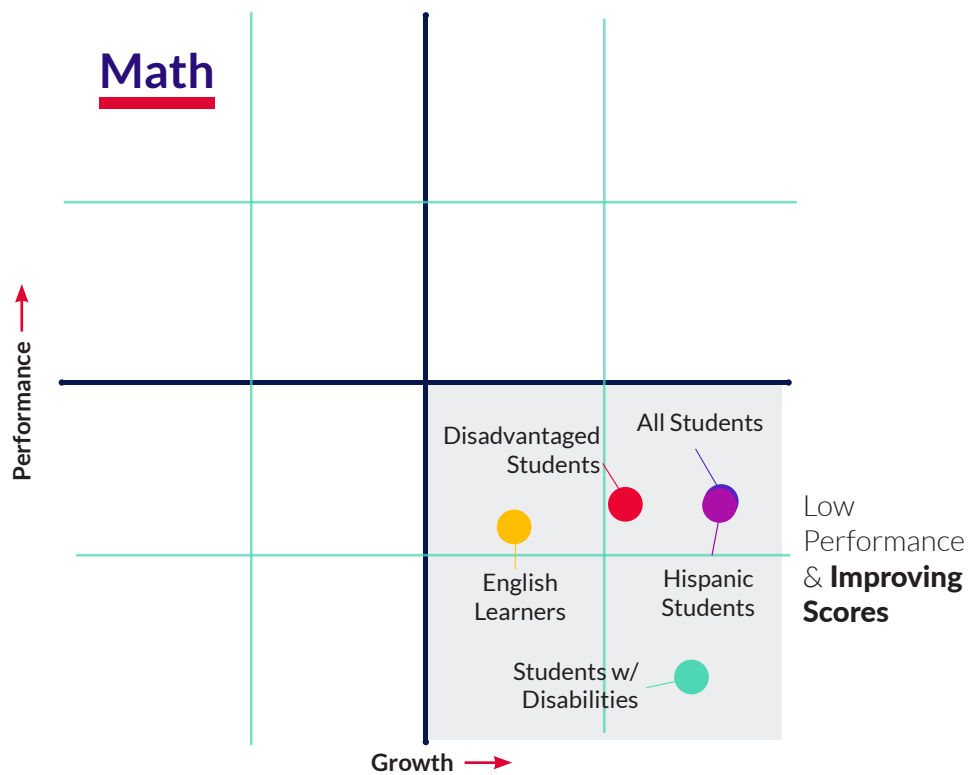
³ [School Profile: Beech Avenue Elementary](#)

⁴ [National Center on Education Statistics, Beech Avenue Elementary](#)

⁵ [California School Dashboard: Beech Avenue Elementary](#)

⁶ [California Department of Education School Dashboard Additional Reports and Data](#)

Student Performance and Growth Since Last Year





What is TEL?

Teaching for Effective Learning (TEL) is an experience focused on growing a culture of professional learning built on the critical research of how people learn and action-based improvement methodologies. Through partnering with NCEE facilitators and school leadership, teachers engage in a process of professional development grounded in a theory of learning that challenges their practices and aims to build a research-based perspective on teaching that will continue throughout their careers. This not only benefits the individual, but also the whole culture of the school as it cultivates a collaborative, rigorous, and continual professional learning environment.

In the midst of the pandemic and online learning, Beech teachers engaged in TEL and conducted their own research to study their teaching practice. At the time of this writing, Beech is completing their third year of designing and integrating systems to improve teaching and learning with teachers continuing to build their capacity as experts of their craft.

Methodology

This brief profiles Beech Avenue Elementary as a model of growing and sustaining TEL. We interviewed the principal, Michele Mower, and the NCEE facilitator, Edna Thomas, to understand the process of implementing TEL. Questions for Michele delved into her relationships with staff, her perspective and beliefs on professional development, and the role she played during TEL to support its success. Questions for Edna revolved around facilitating the content and maintaining progress, building relationships with teachers, and sustaining engagement. Additionally, interviews were conducted with five teachers ranging from second to fifth grade. Questions for teachers sought to bring understanding of the culture at Beech before TEL, how teachers responded to and embraced TEL, and the changes it set into motion for their professional practice and students.



Bringing TEL to Beech Avenue Elementary

To understand Beech Avenue Elementary's experience with TEL, the story begins with **Principal Michele Mower**, who has been the school leader since it opened in 2007. Prior to the opening of Beech Avenue Elementary, Principal Mower had already been working in FUSD for several years in a variety of roles including elementary teacher, literacy coach, coordinator for elementary education, and assistant principal.

Before the pandemic, Michele participated in NCEE's National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) program—a 12-unit executive development program for school leaders. NISL's focus on high-performing and effective school systems resonated with Principal Mower. It inspired her to “do better by kids” and use the lessons in NISL to improve her school. She internalized the ways in which a professional learning system can be an asset to her school as it can support teachers to make sustained improvements in a coordinated way. Her zeal and urgency for her students and teachers in the wake of pandemic-related learning loss and challenges pushed her to bring TEL (directly aligned to the NISL learning and building off the research therein) into her school. She wanted to remediate loss and gaps and felt like it was time to get ahead of issues instead of consistently resolving problems.

First Year Hesitations

When Michele introduced TEL in 2021, teachers already felt comfortable with professional development (PD). Teachers shared that they understood the importance and impact of it; however, the reality was that PD was often underdeveloped and unsupported. A **third grade teacher** stated:

“A lot of teachers, I felt, were very cynical toward the idea of bringing in TEL... another bunch of things that people are going to come and tell us we're supposed to do, and we'll probably do for a year, and then kind of toss out...”

Sentiments about the burden and short life of previous experiences is an indication of the lack of integration and surface-level nature of PD before TEL.

In conversation, teachers were never opposed to learning more about how to improve practice; it was simply that the practicality of professional development was difficult for teachers who were constantly meeting other important demands. A **fifth grade teacher** spoke about their perspective on PD when TEL was first being introduced:

"I see the benefits of professional development in an ideal world, but at the same time, we don't have that time. So I think that's always the concern, where do I find the time to do this? Because when you get with your team and you talk about things, they see other things that you may not see, but the reality is, okay, when do we find this time, when do we find the time to really sit down and talk?"

It is understandable that teachers starting the 2021–22 school year, after dealing with multiple challenges of the pandemic, were hesitant to embrace a brand new professional development approach. In the first year, 2021–22, teachers were put into common interest pairs and asked to design an open-ended inquiry project. A **third grade teacher** remarked, after the first meeting about TEL:

"I think people didn't understand what exactly it was that we were going to be doing."

A **fifth grade teacher** said, when TEL was first introduced:

"I didn't mind the program itself, I just didn't like the set up that we had because it was after school hours and some of us have commitments after school... that was a concern for me. I have things to do after school and now you're asking me to stay after school. Yes, we were getting compensated but still it was the fact of the matter of, I have other things to do."

A **second grade teacher** sympathized with their colleagues' hesitations of the after-school model:

"I have colleagues that live about an hour away, and that was a lot for them. They weren't going to stay after school to meet for an hour, because that [traffic] was going to back up. It would make it a three hour drive home."

Despite being compensated for the work done after school, the concern was that the model took teachers away from their families and necessary obligations. Michele knew that even as teachers pushed back, she would continue to lead them through the process. TEL wasn't going away because she knew the benefits it would bring to her staff and students. This persistence and depth of knowledge are some of the qualities teachers appreciate most in her. Teachers know Michele does her homework, and every decision she makes comes from a place of care for her staff and students. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2019)⁷ explain that successful leaders engage with leadership practices including building relationships and building their people, setting directions, and redesigning the organization to support designed practices. Michele actively practiced all of these domains while being responsive to the situational context.

There was a trial and error process in the first year that was at times challenging, frustrating, and confusing. What Beech Avenue Elementary, Principal Mower, and its teachers demonstrated was that the key to successful TEL implementation was patience and perseverance. **One teacher** expressed:

"It was presented as not another item on our plate that we had to handle, but this would be good in the long run. And to be honest, it took almost the first year before I was on board."

A **third grade teacher** also said:

"Maybe that first year might have been partly our fault too. Like we didn't quite know what we wanted to implement. Well, like that freedom of being able to implement anything, and we kind of came up with something, and I don't know that it was necessarily the best focus that first year."

⁷ Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris and David Hopkins, "Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited," in *School Leadership & Management* 40, 1 (2019): 5–22, DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077

The NCEE facilitator didn't come into Beech and direct change, but instead ingrained a personal and collective responsibility for change into the school. Once teachers realized they were responsible for their inquiry projects and those projects led to positive student outcomes, teachers jumped onboard. A **third grade teacher** shared:

"We realized it's not a new curriculum, it's not a different way to teach. It's just actually refocusing on our own practices and understanding where we're headed, where we want the kids to go, that brought clarity for us."

A **fourth grade teacher** said:

"We're trying to bring these kids back. We're trying to cover all the bases, catch them up. And it felt like one more thing. But then when you saw the results at the end of the first year, there was actually an increase in their knowledge. So it showed that it was helpful, and if we could figure out a way to make it not one more thing, then that would benefit us the best."

Michele continued to share and elevate a vision of a new system of professional learning with teachers engaging in iterative cycles of inquiry. Edna, the NCEE facilitator, provided consistent support along the way. A **third grade teacher** praised Edna for sticking with this group:

"It's a credit to her that she was extremely patient through the whole process, and encouraging and kind of kept reminding us that this may not show in the first year. It may take a little while, but stick with this process because it's good and you're going to see its fruits in the long run, right?"

Leadership for Sustainability

Their principal took into account the challenges that the first year of TEL brought. In the 2022–23 school year, Principal Mower embedded TEL into the school day and most teachers agreed it was the better model. The willingness to respond to teachers' needs and change schedules is an example of Michele's resource allocation skills and is a reflection of how teacher learning is supported in high-performing schools and systems. When TEL is embedded in the school day, it is more closely linked to professional practice and to the daily choices teachers make in classrooms. The new model relieved teachers of any conflicts after school and therefore increased attendance and engagement. Teachers remarked that their colleagues were participating in TEL with a focus, a common vision, and a stronger bond than when they met after school. They had built-in support during the school day and teachers knew they could lean on their learning community. In the embedded model, teachers were given one, two-hour block every other week for six weeks at a time for both semesters.

Another new addition in the 2022–23 school year was a school-wide writing focus. As a school, teachers saw large gaps in students' ability to write, including prose, handwriting, and grammar. They decided to turn TEL into an opportunity to align all inquiry projects toward a school-wide writing related goal. The writing focus is unique to Beech but demonstrates the customizability and flexibility of TEL. Through the customization, teachers found that grade level groups and school-wide goals, as opposed to paired and unrelated inquiry teams, were the most effective method for Beech. They were able to talk about their writing goals within their grade-level teams, teach the lesson they developed and refined, and watch their peers teach before bringing the practice into their own classroom. The deep level collaboration that goes beyond content and into the functions and skills of teaching is a core tenet of a successful TEL implementation. Collegiality permeated not only horizontally within grade levels but also vertically. A **third grade teacher** shared:

"I love working with my colleagues. ...I got to work really closely with other grade levels, because like I said, we didn't often get to do that."

The ability to share and collaborate under the umbrella of their writing inquiry gave teachers a better understanding of the standards at each grade level. It turned fractionated teacher teams into ones that collaborated with each other to close gaps. The writing inquiry is another example of Beech Avenue Elementary systematically adopting TEL in a way that uses its structure to serve contextual needs.

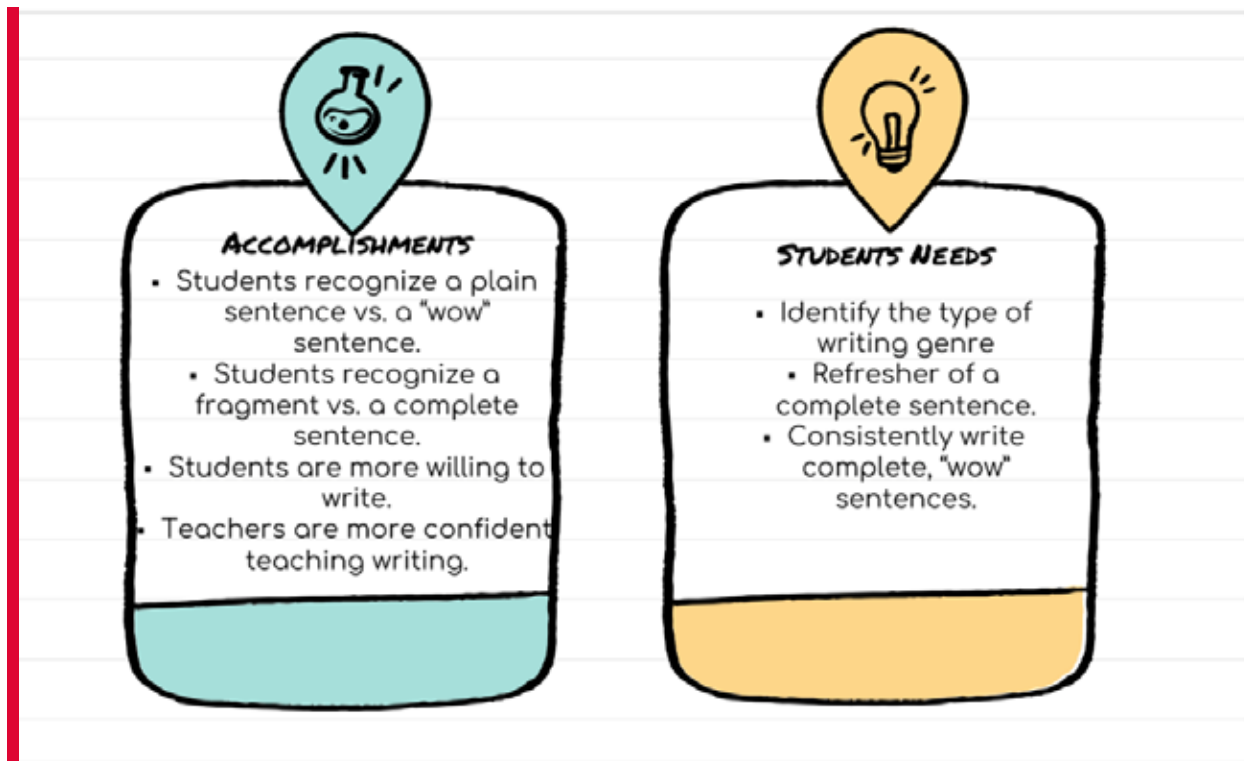


Figure 1. Second grade team's end-of-year presentations about their writing focused inquiry

Adaptive Implementation

Designing and integrating new systems to improve teaching and learning is challenging work and there are many details to organize. While teachers were in their professional learning meetings, their classrooms were staffed with substitute teachers. However, there weren't enough subs for all teachers, so in the first semester, half of the staff received subs while the other half had school staff that took their kids outside for physical education (PE). Then, in the second semester, those groups switched and staff with PE got subs and vice versa. This model allowed teachers to fully step away from their students and classrooms to give their attention to their research projects. A **third grade teacher** stated:

"The time that we were given by our principal to be able to be pulled out, even though I'm out of the classroom, it's still so crucial because we were able to plan and implement these great lessons and then talk about what happened in each other's classrooms and to really take all of that feedback and then rework it again."

However, each strategy was not without its challenges. Subs meant teachers had to make plans for the two hours they were away from their classroom. Both elements—making plans and being away from students—was an adjustment for teachers. A **second grade teacher** said:

“So I know that most of us felt the same way, like it wasn’t a problem, but when it was a sub, it made it more difficult, because we had to create lesson plans, and then it was frustrating when you created something and if the sub did not show up.”

A **fourth grade teacher** commented:

“I had mixed emotions personally about the help during the school day, because when the teacher is out of the classroom and there’s a sub in there, it kind of is detrimental to the kids if it happens repeatedly. But what Michele was able to do is get us people that would do like PE for us, and so they took the kids for PE, so there was no learning loss time there and then, if we had any questions or any resources that we needed, she would do whatever she could to get them for us and answer our questions.”

Michele was consistently in the TEL process helping, supporting, and reassuring teachers that their time outside the classroom focusing on their own practice would be a worthwhile endeavor. She executed a systems thinking mindset and aligned with a set of internal NCEE indicators for sustainability that partners can use to self assess. She addressed competing commitments and weighed choices to be in line with TEL. While the two hours away from students every other week for six weeks did create challenges, she understood the more significant issues of the after-school model.

A **fifth grade teacher** understood the trade offs and said:

“It [sub plans] was a little bit burdensome, but again, once you’re in it, you start realizing, like, I’m not going to stress over the plans. I’m going to leave something that’s more accessible because again, it’s only two hours... At least in my case, that’s what I started to do. I would kind of leave something that I knew was not going to be too overwhelming for the guest teacher and the kids because again, it was just for a few hours.”

Teachers also understood that they tried an after-school model that was unpopular and incongruent with teacher needs so the sacrifices required for the in-school model had to be weighed against the alternative option.

Another resource teachers had during the implementation process was a teacher-on-assignment (TOA). Teachers-on-assignment are common across school districts in California and fill district needs, for example curriculum development or student support. At Beech Avenue Elementary, the TOA served as a supporting role for TEL by engaging with teachers’ inquiries, being a thought partner, helping find resources, and more.

A **fifth grade teacher** explained:

“She would sit in those meetings and she would be guiding us so that we wouldn’t go in a completely different direction. So that way we were aligned with what Michele really wanted us to do... when we got stuck she was able to tell us, well, why don’t you guys try this or have you guys given a thought about this. So those were some really good conversations... So then it wasn’t just kind of me saying something, it was more like collectively. So then it comes different than he’s telling me what I have to do, you know.”

A **third grade teacher** said:

“And she did the same thing with TEL where she was really trying to accommodate what we wanted, but at the same time, offer a lot of ideas, and then do a lot of the heavy lifting. Where, like when we finally decided this is what we want to do, she would put together all the plan and all the heavy lifting part of it, and gather whatever resources we needed for it, or copied or whatever, and put it in one place, so that by the time you modeled it, there was a lot of pressure off in that way, right? And she also offered to model herself, you know, do things, or come in, or she gave really good feedback afterwards. And so it was a good experience with her. It was very helpful having her as part of it.”

The use of the TOA to support teachers’ TEL efforts exemplified a shift in culture and conditions to make TEL an internal priority, a structure to make TEL sustainable and ongoing, and a way to further spread TEL practices. To use a TOA in this particular setting is a choice that Michele made to ensure the TEL practices were not something forced onto her staff but were gradually ingrained into how the school functioned. The TOA also spread TEL across and through the staff as not just an offering for classroom teachers but all staff and therefore all students. The TOA was able to do “the heavy lifting” and make resources aligned with TEL accessible for the context, from specials all the way to fifth grade.

Edna explained:

“The TOA was very active in supporting the process. She acted as a guide for teachers and worked to answer questions. She was an integral part of the classroom walkthroughs for checking the criteria for success and implementation. She also was instrumental for the collection of data as implementation and instructional practices were observed.”

When Michele or Edna were not available as a resource, the TOA was a sounding board and partner to help teachers succeed. Michele called her “integral to our success.”





Teacher Impact

Despite the growing pains that Michele and her teachers experienced, Beech Avenue Elementary has built a professional learning system where teachers grow and advance their professional expertise, individually and collectively, year after year. They have embraced the ebbs and flows of implementation, reaping the rewards of a professional learning system where teachers continue to build their capacity in ways that position them as experts of their craft. Through this process, teachers shared three main areas where they have seen the biggest impact and improvements: themselves, in their students, and with their colleagues.

Teachers emphasized that TEL is not based on new or revolutionary concepts. This is not to say that going through the process will not be a change, but the basis of TEL is familiar. Teachers recognized the objectives and purposes of the core learning and understood that TEL is a systematized way to ground teaching in the learning sciences. Teachers saw how the inquiry cycles were a way to deeply focus on their practice. As mentioned, teachers didn't often have the time to engage with extra professional development but they saw TEL as an embedded support system without layering on lots of "new stuff."

A **third grade teacher** shared:

"This allowed me to be very focused and I think that was one of the biggest things. As teachers, planning time is always lacking. So for us not to reinvent the wheel, but to really look at what we were doing and to have a clear cut focus of what we wanted the outcome to be so that we knew where we were going, and the kids also knew where they were expected to go, I think that made a big difference."

In this process, teachers learned how to be more self reflective and begin a cycle of improvement within themselves. The structure and implementation of TEL in Beech Avenue Elementary provided a strong foundation for a continuous improvement culture where the inquiry questions they undertook were not for completion or participation but to ground teaching in the science of learning, and to systematically study their practice in order to understand what was working and what was not.

A **fifth grade teacher** remarked:

"If I want my kids to improve on this, they need to take ownership. And I think those pieces that are embedded within TEL are really the key to the success. Because anybody can have a PLC. But again, what's the focus of the PLC? Well, I'm just doing it because my boss is asking me. Now it becomes, okay, no, I'm doing this because my kids need the help. Now, I know that in order to have success, I need to have these things within it, right? Did I activate their prior knowledge? Right? If not, what did I do to build some of that knowledge so that when I start teaching, they're not just staring at me like, what is he talking about? You know? So I think those are the important parts of this program."

A **fifth grade teacher** remembers what Edna taught them in the first few days of TEL:

"Okay, when I teach and when I plan, I have to make sure that in my lesson there's some kind of, you know, I'm letting kids learn from each other and monitor their learning. Right? So, like, the idea of them being able to. Okay, this is where I am. This is where I want to be. These are the steps I'm going to take to get there."

Teachers we interviewed have been thrilled with the student response and improvements over the last few years that have been tied to improvements driven through the inquiries.

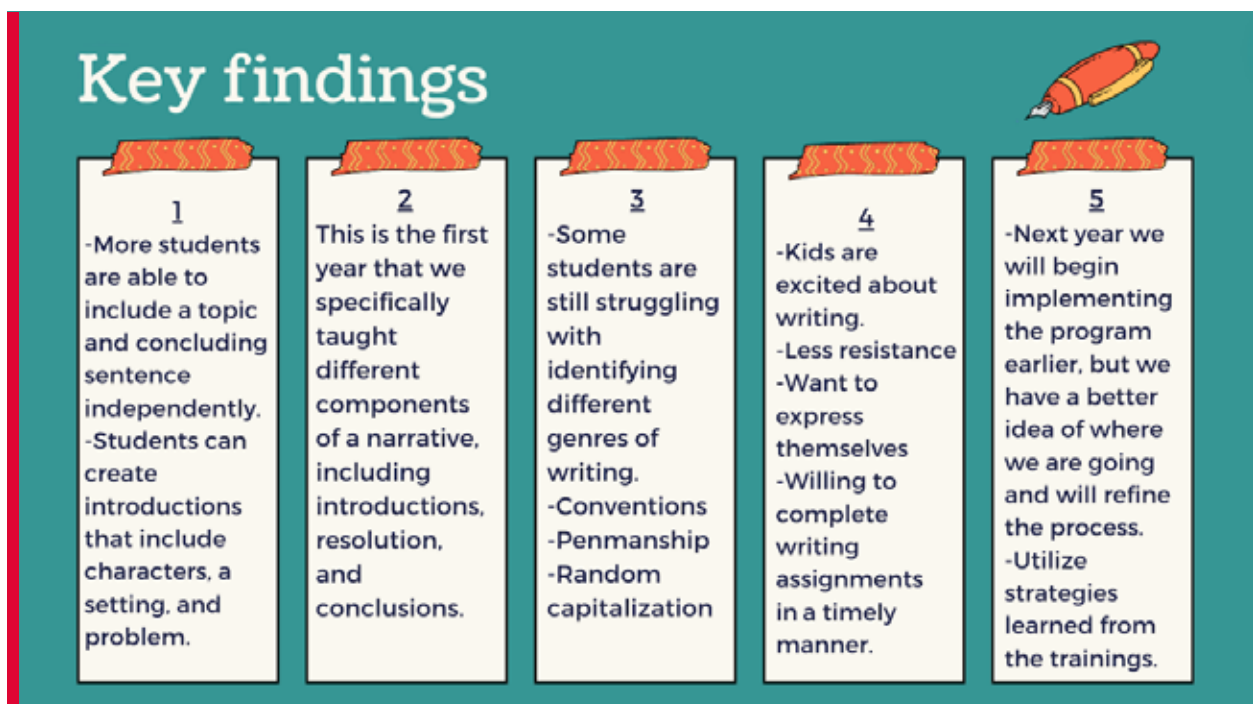


Figure 2. Third grade team's end-of-year presentations about their findings from the writing focused inquiry

Lastly, the learning and inquiry practices embedded in TEL have had a significant impact on the Beech staff. TEL united people around a common goal and improved collaboration, camaraderie, and confidence. As previously mentioned, teachers observed each other live in the classroom and they spent extensive time developing materials and content together for the inquiry focused on student writing. Another benefit, in addition to those already mentioned as a result of mutual observation, was an increased feeling of teamwork. Teachers continually praised their teams and the collaboration. Engaging in inquiry in small teams has strengthened their professional learning communities overall.

A **second grade teacher** shared:

"I think we're just more comfortable sharing ideas, and we're not worried so much about hurting someone's feelings, but like making sure, you know, because sometimes it can get uncomfortable, like, if we don't agree with something, but I think we've all worked together for so many years now there hasn't been a lot of change with the staff."

Donohoo, Hattie, and Eells (2018)⁸ posit that when school leaders have a hand in setting the narrative of their school, it fosters safe and social professional learning while diffusing possible tensions that may arise. Leadership goes beyond structural support to include emotional support that allows teachers to collaborate in a critical yet productive manner. Through sharing the role of advisor with the NCEE facilitator and, eventually, taking the lead in advising, the school leader has positioned herself intentionally as a leader of teaching and learning (a responsibility often set aside while managerial tasks take center stage). In this process, a sense of collective efficacy is also built because teachers can see improved student outcomes to validate their work.

Multiple teachers commented on the increased comfort with their peers and colleagues. A **third grade teacher** was amazed by her peers who were previously not outspoken, but who now came to the table with great contributions. The teacher said:

"Throughout TEL, I think that it gave other people, other teachers who are not necessarily a part of leadership, [a chance] to really shine and share some of these great practices that we don't get to see. Because one, they're not in our grade level, or they're just kind of that quiet person, and maybe they only share it with one other person."

A key component of TEL is having teachers share their inquiry projects and findings. Besides adjusting to TEL, this was a big fear for many teachers. Whether it be public speaking or putting in the effort to share school-wide, teachers had hesitations. Despite the initial fear, the experience of sharing and taking on the role of expert allowed teachers to learn from each other, and celebrate their students and all the amazing things they've accomplished. Like the confidence and partnership developed by small groups, the presentations opened the door for everyone, despite their position or power, to put their successes on display and become a part of the larger conversation.

⁸ Jenni Donohoo, John Hattie, and Rachel Eells, "The power of collective efficacy," *Educational Leadership*. 75, 6 (2018): 40-44.



Looking to the Future

Before the 2024–25 school year even began, Michele and her team of teachers were gathering during the summer to discuss plans for their next inquiry cycle. In the next school year, Michele will still receive coaching and support from a facilitator as needed and then, in turn, will advise teachers. Teachers and leadership at Beech Avenue Elementary have fully adopted TEL for themselves and are on their way to running it independently. In this transition period, the principal and teachers will remain on their continuous improvement journey to elevate and institutionalize TEL and its principles. In conversation, teachers wanted to impart lessons and best practices that have made TEL successful. Teachers emphasized the importance of having a strong leader to drive TEL because leadership is foundational to organizing and sustaining the experience including getting teachers on board, setting goals, and establishing systems. Principals play a key role in distilling complex information and making the purpose and process of TEL accessible. Teachers also shared that when burdens—such as after school time and sub plans—were lifted, they had an increased ability to participate fully in their learning and study of their practice through iterative cycles of inquiry. The time, without distraction or caveats, is crucial to the success of TEL. Utilizing PE or other specials, as opposed to substitutes, is an optimal solution.

Lastly, being receptive to what TEL can bring to your school or practice and being clear as a team about the “why” is the best way to ensure optimal outcomes. Another key factor is to acknowledge up front that transformational change takes time: both the intentional design of how time is used and length of time. True transformation that involves reimagining the system at the classroom and school level does not happen quickly. The teachers, principal, and students at Beech Avenue Elementary demonstrated the complexities and challenges of implementing a continuously improving professional learning system but with determination and a systems thinking approach; the benefits of building this culture have greatly improved the whole school.