



Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #17 - Todd Collins (Palo Alto Unified School District)

- Todd Collins: Lots of times in education, you say, "Well, we'd be able to do better if they had more resources. Schools are so underfunded, dah, dah, dah." Well, here's a school district that's as well funded as any you're going to find, and we're utterly failing this group of students. We simply can't call ourselves a great school district unless we get great results for our least resourced and most challenged students.
- Speaker 2: The results, they've been immediate. And we had one of the biggest shifts in the state.
- Speaker 3: It's almost magical when it all comes together. And I think to myself, this is what education is about.
- Speaker 4: There were inequities everywhere. My students in South Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.

Speaker 5: Over 40% of our students were leaving third grade with less than proficient reading skills, and that was just something we had to stop.

Speaker 6: The bottom line is that we can prevent reading failure. We can change the trajectory of these students' lives. And I just want to shout from the rooftops, "It can be done."

Speaker 7: From Glean Education, This is Ed Leaders In Literacy, a podcast series that features educators and administrators who have made hard decisions about instruction, curriculum, intervention and school systems to close the achievement gap and build equity by improving literacy. First, a word from our sponsors.

Speaker 8: Go ahead and state your name and title and what you enjoy about working here.

Kemi: So my name is Kemi and I am the learning and engagement specialist here at Hergetty. I love working here because I am surrounded by colleagues who are passionate about the science of reading, passionate about seeing kids learn how to read and get all the skills that they need.



Speaker 7: Hergetty's daily phonemic awareness curriculum is used by over 450 school districts nationwide. Learn how you can get started at hegerty.org. That's H-E-G-G-E-R-T-Y-O-R-G.

Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education. And today we are talking with Todd Collins. He's a member of the Palo Alto Unified School District board of education. After a long career in technology and investing, his primary focus is on supporting and improving California public education. Todd and his wife live in Palo Alto where they've raised three adult children, all products of public schools. Hi Todd Collins, thank you for joining us today.

Todd Collins: Thanks for having me.

Jessica Hamman: So I'm so excited to connect with you and share your work with our listeners. This is the first time that we've interviewed a board member on this Ed Leaders In Literacy podcast, and I'm super excited because being a board member, you play an enormous role in the final decisions that get made within a school district, but it's often done behind the scenes. So can you share with us a little bit about how you got involved with becoming a school board member? And what interested you in the mission of improving literacy in your community, and in fact, throughout the state?

Todd Collins: Sure. When I first got involved with our school board, I had no ideas about literacy, it wasn't even on my radar. In fact, student



achievement wasn't especially on my radar. My parents were both teachers and so I grew up in a house where teaching and learning was the most important thing. In fact, until I went to college, I never really had any idea that people did anything else. I knew theoretically that they did, but everybody I knew was a teacher, and so that was the family business. And I got involved in business several years later and stuck with that through my career. I had kids in the schools. I'm a civically oriented person, so I got involved as a volunteer first of my schools, and then on a couple of district related committees.

Todd Collins: And what I found is there's no other way to put it, my district was not well run. And not from make trains run on time, not hey, we're not spending our taxpayer dollars efficiently way. It's just that we weren't focused on any particular goal, we just showed up and did the work. I have my career in business and investing and one of the things that is part of the DNA there is that the reason we do things is we have an objective in mind. If you're in the private sector, you want to make your company more successful. If you're an investor, you want to make money. If you are starting a company, you want that company to grow. So we have specific intentions about what it is we're trying to do and we know whether we've done a good job or not.

Todd Collins: What I found in my school district is we had no idea. We thought we were spectacular, but we had actually no idea whether we were doing a good job or not. And we spent a lot of time on things that clearly made no difference in whether we were going to do a good job or not. In fact, the vast majority of the time at the board was spent on things that really didn't even affect children in classrooms.



I sometimes say that I never thought of becoming a board member until my kids aged out of youth sports. I spent most of my time when they were young coaching their teams, and eventually they got good enough and old enough that I wasn't even allowed to coach their teams anymore.

Todd Collins: And so I found I had 10 or 15 hours a week and I started volunteering more at the district and then eventually decided I should not complain about school board, I should actually try to join it. And so I did, and I was elected about six years ago. And what happened was when I got there, I started asking really anybody starting with the superintendent, "We say we're a really good school district, I hear us say that over and over again. On the front page of the website of my school district, it says, 'We're the number one school district in California.' How do we know?" Quick answer is, well, look at our standardized test score. It didn't take much reflection to realize that my kids would do fine anywhere.

Todd Collins: I didn't move to Palo Alto and sent my kids to school here because I thought the schools are going to change my kids who would otherwise be very mediocre into some superstars. My kids were good kids. They were going to work hard and do their best, and if they went to one school district or another, I'm sure they were going to do fine. I personally went to absolutely undistinguished schools in Syracuse, New York. I turned out fine. All my friends turned out fine. And so it didn't seem to me that the school were going to take something that wasn't very good and make it into something wonderful. So that wasn't a good explanation. And it turns out there wasn't any other explanation.



Todd Collins: No one had any real idea about what it meant to be good and how do we know if we did better last year than we did this year? Nobody knew. So I spent the first two years of my time on the board trying to figure out what did it mean to actually be a good school district? And I read a lot. I talked to a lot of people and I did what I always do when I am confused and don't understand, I got every set of numbers I could find and tried to analyze them. I'm a person who really likes to try to understand the world through numbers. And if I can't see it in the numbers, then it's hard for me to know that it's real. So my poor wife, when we were young, we used to travel and do things together. Now, all I do every night and weekend is pull databases off of the CDE website and try to analyze them.

Todd Collins: And so I spent a couple years working at that project as well as talking to people all over the country, all over the state, trying to understand what it meant to be a good school district. And I came up with something, and there's analysis that goes with this, but I'm holding up a prop. Can you read that? Is it mirrored?

Jessica Hamman: Yes.

Todd Collins: It says, "We simply can't call ourselves a great school district unless we get great results for our least resourced and most challenged students." And I wrote that down. I made this poster, I carry another one around in my briefcase, not only because it's true because I think it is true. And that sounds an ethical statement, a



moral statement. It's oh, these kids are really important, so we should make sure we spend resources on them. That's absolutely true, but it's also true just on a practical, real world basis. And let me explain what I mean. So in a district like mine, we're an affluent community with Stanford universities in my school district, we have a lot of people with high educational attainment.

Todd Collins: The kids in my district are getting a lot of educational inputs from the moment they're born, even before they're born, that many kids don't get. In the event that the schools don't give those kids something they need, then the parents are A, going to realize it and B, make sure that they get it. They're not going to let the school fail their child, they're not going to let their child fail. As a result, not surprisingly, for the vast majority of the kids like that in my school district, they don't fail. They don't fail. So what I realized is I can't tell anything about my school district by looking at the results of those kids, they literally can't fail. If I looked at kids who don't have those inputs, my most challenged and least resourced students, I will be able to find something.

Todd Collins: What I ended up doing is I ended up focusing on low income Latinx students. There are really two reasons for that. The first reason is that is by far the largest subgroup of students in California, that's 43% of California's 6 million students. Not only is that important because there are so many of them, it's also useful because in the thousand school districts in California, every one of them has a lot of those kids, which means every one of them reports results for that group every year for every grade. So I've got a lot of points of comparison between the kids in my district and all these



other kids in other districts to see how my kids are doing. When I first did this analysis, I was almost certain it was wrong.

Todd Collins: When you do a lot of analysis, you make a lot of mistakes, and I have made my share of analytical mistakes. And so usually when I find something that's interesting, my first reflex is, must have done it wrong, and I go to look and see what my mistake was. This one turned out to be right. And what I had done is I had ranked all the districts in California by third grade, ELA, English language arts scores, based on how many kids were at or above grade level, just for low income Latinx students. And what I found is my school district in Palo Alto, the number one school district in California by some measures, was in the bottom 5% of all school district in California.

Todd Collins: There are over a thousand school districts in California. I limited my analysis to those with a hundred students or more SED Latinx students in third grade so the numbers would be more reliable and consistent. And so out of those 295 districts, we were number 281. Now, to tell you something about my district, we're an affluent district, we have lots of high performing families and students. We have very ample funding where it's called a basic aid district, which means our local property taxes are higher than what the state guarantee is under Prop 98, so we get to keep that overage. And so while most districts have say 12, \$13,000 per student, my district has about 22. So we have substantially more funding per student.

Todd Collins: As a result, we have small classes, we have highly paid teachers, we give them lots of training. We have literacy specialists in every



elementary school. Every advantage that we could think to give ourselves, give our students, we have. Lots of times in education, you say, "Well, we'd be able to do better if they had more resources. Schools are so underfunded, dah, dah, dah." Well, here's a school district that's as well funded as any you're going to find, and we're utterly failing this group of students. So couldn't be that, right? And so to me, that was really both a realization and a puzzle, because if we're doing such a bad job, there had to be a reason. It couldn't just be chance, there had to be something that we were doing because you don't just wind up in the bottom 5% by chance.

Jessica Hamman: Did you share your findings with any of the leadership or the rest of the board? And if so, what was their reaction and impression?

Todd Collins: I did. It came out in stages. First, I shared it with the superintendent. I think the superintendent was appropriately skeptical of over the transom analysis. It's funny, in my job, I sat on a lot of boards. When I was a young investor, I was on a board of a company and I used to send a lot of suggestions to the CEO. And later that company turned out to be a big success and the CEO turned out to be a really great CEO. And he told a story at a dinner once where he said, "Yeah, I used to get a lot of emails from Todd with a lot of suggestions. And I set up a rule in my email, if the sender is Todd and it contains the words 'good idea,' route directly to trash."

Todd Collins: Which I thought was a really smart policy because if you think about it, educator are trained professionals, superintendents are



trained professionals. Board members are volunteers, almost none of whom have educational training. So the idea that board members are going to have great ideas that school districts go implement, actually doesn't happen very often. I know in my private sector work, it doesn't happen either. I don't have great ideas that my CEOs didn't already have. As I tell them, you've probably forgotten more about your industry than I'm ever going to know.

Jessica Hamman: I think that's a humble place to come to, but I think there's also an element that many school leaders will admit that they were not trained as business people, and they rise from an educator through the ranks of leadership. And you bring to the table business savvy and data forward thinking that they may not have been exposed to or understand in depth before. So there is something else that's brought to the team that's-

Todd Collins: Oh, I couldn't agree more. I mean, that's been our focus on our board, is setting priorities, talking about measurements, saying, "What are we trying to do, and how are we going to be held accountable for the things that we try?" And instantiating those in policies and procedures that'll stick. That's why I think a board member can really effectively move the needle on performance, but it's usually not by saying, "Hey, I got a great idea about curriculum," or, "You know what? You should go work on third grade reading. That's really where the action is." That's not usually where a board member can add value. So my superintendent was appropriately skeptical, Not because he didn't like the answer, but because he was just appropriately skeptical.



Todd Collins: But then he looked into it just the way I looked into it and came to the conclusion that I did, that in fact, this was a pretty serious problem. My fellow board members, I think we have a capable and well aligned board. We spend a lot of time getting it to be that way. And my board members, I think in general, all accepted that this in fact was a genuine problem and didn't look to me to say what the solutions are, though I have some thoughts about what good actions are. But really looked to our superintendent and our district staff appropriately, because those are the people who are charged with coming up with the proposals and solutions. Our district has really started to embrace this.

Todd Collins: We approved the spring initiative that we call Every Student Reads that is focused specifically on improving reading performance by third grade. There's both a set of very specific metrics that we're looking at, that we're measuring over the next three years to make sure we actually move the needle on student achievement, and a set of actions that includes sending all K through two teachers to Orton-Gillingham training. We started two years ago, screening every K through two student for dyslexia, which as you know, the state mandate for universal training just is failed in the legislature this year. We're doing it anyway. And we found 25% of our students were at risk for dyslexia the first year we screened, and we immediately took action.

Todd Collins: So when I see universal screening failing, it horrifies me because this is a very powerful tool that we've implemented and we see the power. So people were appropriately skeptical, but ultimately were



persuaded by the data and have now started to take action, to try to do something, to really move the needle on this result.

Jessica Hamman: And I love that the data motivated change because that's one of the most powerful parts of data, is not just collecting it and gazing at it, but to use it to further something, maybe to use it to guide instruction or use it to guide change across the school district. And it sounds like there were two areas of change that you've discussed were already being implemented. So there's in depth training with a really good high quality research based program like Orton-Gillingham, and then there's screening universal screening, which is so important. One element that you didn't mention that is often mentioned in coordination with literacy progress is curriculum. So can you tell us a little bit about the curriculum piece and where you guys are on that?

Todd Collins: I would love to. So when I did this analysis and did this finding, I said, "I've got to get smarter about how people teach reading." I knew nothing about it. I mean, literally nothing. And what happened is I ran into a guy at a conference, somebody associated with core and I told him about this analysis and how I was really disturbed by how poorly my district was doing. And he said, "What curriculum do you use?" And I said, and I really didn't know much about it, but I knew the name of it. I said, "We use this Lucy Calkins thing, which I think a lot of people use." And he looked at me whether I was being sarcastic or, and I think he realized I was just sincere. He said, "Well, a lot of people think that's a really bad curriculum for low income students."



Todd Collins: And I said, "Really? Because I thought a lot of low income districts use it." He said, "They do." But the people who are knowledgeable about this realized that this potentially is going to fail low income students. Like I said, I'm not trained as an educator, so I usually don't try to dive into curriculum instruction issues because that's really outside my expertise, but this was an area that I had to find out more about. So I went and looked around the country at what people were saying and doing, looked at a lot of that critique of the Lucy Calkins curriculum, tried to understand what was going on with the science of reading and what people who were advocating for that?

Todd Collins: What was going on with the dyslexia community and how their approaches for structured literacy and foundational skills related to tier one general ed instruction. And ultimately came to the belief that, hey, this is probably a meaningful part of the problem, that we are a district that almost by the textbook description of where Calkins fails, that's exactly where we see it failing. It's actually working well in some respects for our kids who already know how to read and our teachers, by the way, really like it. In part because most of the students, they teach already know how to read. But for the kids who didn't know how to read and keep in mind, this is before two years ago. At the point that we adopted it and up to two years ago, there was no foundational skills component to Calkins at all.

Todd Collins: And we were following it. So our kids were not getting any phonics, any phonemic awareness, any core foundational skills at all. And so when you looked at it, it wasn't a surprise that we succeeded, it was



a surprise that more kids didn't fail. And I think it showed the power of the inputs that our kids get outside of school, that so many of them did well, despite the fact that we were not giving them any foundational skills at all. This is actually a big issue. The teachers in our district have been enthusiastic supporters of this curriculum. We work closely with Columbia's Teachers College, we've sent a lot of our teachers to Columbia to study with the Teachers College people. It's a popular curriculum.

Todd Collins: That said, we realized that this is a problem. We have discontinued using the phonics curriculum and we're going to substitute OG based methods for the phonics curriculum starting next year. And we agreed as part of our initiative that we are going to do a curriculum review next year and potentially, I mean, there's no certainty because they might decide to recommend the curriculum we already have, but we're going to review alternative curriculums. And my hope is that we adopt a curriculum that is a different curriculum.

Jessica Hamman: And does the school district have a plan in place for tracking data to show progress through these elements of change that are occurring?

Todd Collins: That's such an important thing, and the answer is basically no. I read a study last year about how to align early education systems with the K-12 system, how unaligned they were and what it took to align them. And one of the things that the study pointed out is that while in grades three through 11, courtesy of ESSA and the federal requirements, we have very good data, and everybody focuses on



accountability grade three and 11. Before grade three, we know nothing. And I realized when I read that, I'm sure I had a sharp gasp because I realized that I as an analytically minded school board member, knew literally nothing about what happened to our schools before third grade.

Jessica Hamman: That is an incredible point that I'd just like to pause on for a minute because there's some things we take for granted. A lot of education is this gigantic cruise ship in the middle of the ocean, it goes in the same direction, it's very hard to turn. And there's some things we just take for granted. And the fact that assessments are done third through 12th grade and we look at that data is something that we're used to. And even me, who supports school districts with understanding their data starting at third grade, I haven't really integrated the fact that... And we ask teachers to do their progress monitoring themselves, but I haven't really connected the fact that, well, they're not actually asked to be accountable for K through second. So that's really interesting.

Todd Collins: Yeah. So I'll tell you the slightly longer story of what it said in this report. It looked at the grades three through 11, and there's a guy, do you know who Sean [inaudible 00:24:28] is? He's a professor at Stanford, he's done a big study of student growth, consolidating different data sources and normalizing them. So he can tell you the growth rate by subgroup of every district in the country. And one of the things that shows for California and for many other places is that between grade three and grade 11, the growth is roughly one academic year per one calendar year. Which is, another way of saying that is a certain number of kids are behind in third grade and approximately the same number of kids are behind in 11th grade.



Todd Collins: Therefore, by definition they progressed roughly at one grade level per year. One way to look at that, I mean, we usually look at it with a deficit model and say, "Oh look at all those kids who are behind." Another way to look at it is those guys in grades three through 11 are doing their job. If their job is to get one year academic growth out of one calendar year, they're by and large doing their job. The problem is before third grade, we're delivering a huge percentage of the kids below grade level, and in my particular case, 80% of my low income Latino students were behind in third grade, but the process by which they arrived there was invisible. Invisible. There was no data, there were no metrics, forget it.

Todd Collins: I mean, accountability, not in terms of holding people accountability, but just even visibility.

Jessica Hamman: The time between kindergarten and second grade is a data dead zone basically.

Todd Collins: It is. That's a great way to describe it.

Jessica Hamman: And interestingly, you said progress is steady which is accurate, but the problem is that students who are behind stay behind and students who are on grade level, stay on grade level.



Todd Collins: Exactly.

Jessica Hamman: And another issue is that we know from the research that, that K through second time period, cognitively is a time where early intervention can soar. However, if we don't have statewide data on how students are doing, then we can't possibly support them through systematic intervention. It's really amazing.

Todd Collins: It is. So we are, for the first time in my district, consolidating literally the only assessment we have, which is the Fountas & Pinnell BAS Assessment which we can talk about in a second, but it's literally the only assessment data that we have on reading. And we're consolidating that into a spreadsheet for the first time so we can actually track how kids are doing on our beginning of year, middle of year, end in year F & P BAS to at least give us a number to look at. Now, I'm not an expert on an assessment, but I've learned something about assessments and I've looked at the BAS Assessment specifically. It does not strike me as a very effective or detailed oriented assessment. It's basically a tool for assigning leveled readers to students.

Todd Collins: Leveled readers are its own category of problem and we won't get into that, but even if leveled readers were great, why are we using a tool that's designed to assign kids to leveled readers to try to track and diagnose their developmental reading ability? Margaret Goldberg has said, "Administrators really like BAS because it



generates a number that they can put on a spreadsheet. And it doesn't happen to be a particularly instructive number, but it's a number."

Jessica Hamman: I think that is actually very poignant, because it points out how many times data is looked at as a box to check. It's looked at like something they have to do throughout the year, but it's not often looked at in the way that you look at data, where it is prescriptive and it gives you an idea of where you are and where you want to be. So I think that that speaks to that issue. And then the other thing that occurred to me is that having all these part work in tandem is really critical. So it sounds like you've had mindset shift and awareness that has been broadened after bringing this incredible data to your school district, and they've made steps to ensure that they have the research based approaches that are going to support the gaps.

Jessica Hamman: Specifically, with regards to let's say Orton-Gillingham which is a structured literacy approach. And yet it seems like the assessments aren't yet caught up because those are not aligned with a structured literacy approach. So in this gap where you're putting all the puzzle pieces together, I imagine that there are going to be things that are mismatched, and maybe they'll see that down the line and then it will help to bring in assessment that's aligned with the instruction. Because then the assessment can actually guide the instruction.

Todd Collins: You're absolutely spot on, and I think also true of the curriculum. I think part of my hope is that we're sending a hundred teachers to



OG training, those teachers are going to come back with a different understanding of what foundational literary skills look like and how kids learn to read. That, I hope will inform not only their classroom practice, but also the way they then look at the other pieces of the puzzle, that they look at hey, why am I using BAS? I mean, that doesn't really tell me the things I need to know, maybe I should be looking at different assessments. Why am I using this Lucy Calkins thing? There are things I really like about it, but now that I look at it I see there are things that are really missing.

Todd Collins: Are there other curriculum that are going to serve me better than this because this one seems to have some problems? And so once you've opened everybody's eyes, then you have the opportunity to have a discussion, to look at it with fresh eyes. That's our hope.

Jessica Hamman: I absolutely love how you're sharing this in the midst of your journey. I think a lot of the times that we've interviewed people on this Ed Leaders In Literacy Podcast it's at the end of their journey, or they've hit some major milestone like they have achieved grade level reading at third grade, but in this case you have the bravery and the wisdom to share this work in progress. And I think a major takeaway is that there is no shame in starting on this road. We may not all have the perfect curriculum that's aligned with our exact needs that the data is showing, and have the teachers perfectly trained in everything we need them to be, but if we have a vision of what the pieces need to be, and we use data to support our methods of getting there.



Jessica Hamman: This is a powerful journey that you're taking as a school district, as a community to get that bar moving. And I really thank you for sharing this midway, because I think it's not often something that people do in the middle of a progress. I fully appreciate it.

Todd Collins: Well, thank you for saying that. Human organizations are not perfect, and it's unreasonable to expect perfection from them. I hear from parents, I talk to kids, I see things with my own eyes and it's, oh wow, that's not very good. But a piece of business wisdom that I heard once that I really took to heart is that the measure of an organization isn't whether you have problems, because everybody's got problems, everyone always has problems. The question is whether you have the same problems this year that you had last year. If the problems are the same, then you probably should go look at yourself in the mirror and figure out why you're not doing something to change the problems.

Todd Collins: But if you're working, if you're doing your job right, you're going to be solving the problems that you've had and then encountering new ones that you'll then have a chance to build on the foundation that you've laid. And so hey, when we finish with reading, we can then go talk about math. I mean, our math results are nothing to write home about either, but one of the reasons I think that I really focused on reading is I've come to believe that it is the most foundational skill. I mean, I don't get any pushback when I tell people, "Hey, if we're failing to teach a kid in reading, then we've really ultimately failed." This is non-negotiable, this is not something that anybody can disagree on that it's not important.



Todd Collins: And no one does. What I've found surprising, and even in myself is that we came to accept that this low level of performance in reading in California is acceptable. And it's, well, it's too bad that 70% of low income black kids and 65% of low income Hispanic kids are below grade level. Yeah, that's really too bad, we should do better. We should fund the schools more, or we should do that, or we should do this. It's, no, we should narrowly focus in on that problem and figure out exactly what we need to fix it. So let me talk a little bit more about some of the work I've done outside of my district.

Todd Collins: And I did this analysis originally to inform myself about my own district and it played that role, but it also opened my eyes to understanding what was going on in other places around the state. For instance on my list of 2,995 while I'm at the bottom, other people are at the top. So one of the things I decided to do is I reached out to districts both at the top and the bottom to try to understand what they were doing, and to try to figure out what lessons there were to learn. The number one district on my rankings is Bonita Unified. If you drive out the 210 from Los Angeles toward Nevada, you'll go by it. You won't notice, but you'll go by it. And Bonita Unified while I'm at 20% low income Latino students that are above grade level, they're at 63.

Todd Collins: This is a suburban school district, they have about \$12,000 per pupil per year, about 45% of those pupils are low income Hispanic students, a mixed suburban district. Very typical. ChrisAnn



Horsley runs literacy instruction for their district office. When I called up ChrisAnn and told her you're the number one district on my list, she was pleased, but I would say not the least bit surprised because ChrisAnn has been working on this problem for 15 years. She started as a principal in the district and realized that she wasn't getting the reading results that you want and so she focused in on what it took to teach kids reading successfully. And then eventually seeing her success, the district promoted her to the district office, and now she plays that role for her district as a whole.

Todd Collins: While she's a hero in my book, she's not superwoman. She doesn't fly around with a cape or an S on her chest, she just does great implementation of tools anybody else could use. They use Benchmark Advance, one of the most popular curricula in California. One thing she says though, is, "I use Benchmark, but I absolutely don't use the foundational skills units, I use SIPPS." And they train people very aggressively on SIPPS, so they do SIPPS with high fidelity. As you probably know many of your listeners know, some people bring SIPPS in, but they don't really train hard on it. And if you don't do it well, it doesn't deliver nearly the impact. If you do it with fidelity, it delivers huge impact.

Jessica Hamman: And for those of our listeners that don't know what SIPPS is, can you explain it a bit?

Todd Collins: Yeah, you can probably explain it better than me.



Jessica Hamman: So SIPPS is a structured systematic approach created by John Shefelbine who is a professor in California as well at one of the UC schools I believe. And it's based on the Orton-Gillingham approach as well, really easy to implement, it's scripted and used as a phonemic awareness, phonics and spelling supplement.

Todd Collins: Thank you. And I didn't know Shefelbine was the original author so thank you, I learned something. Yeah, and distributed by a collaborative classroom up in Marin County. And I think the collaborative classroom told me about 300 districts in California purchase SIPPS. Now, how many actually use it after purchasing it, and how many use it with fidelity is a different question. But anyway, ChrisAnn had her way of teaching reading, and her district has a way of teaching reading that's exceptionally useful. And one thing I've subsequently found with my list is not only is Bonita is number one, Covina-Valley next door is number eight, the district Bassett which is next door to Covina-Valley, is number 13.

Todd Collins: And so what's clear is that these practices have spread the way things do spread in districts, and it's like people talk to the district next door. There's another cluster of districts I found in the same report, there are five districts, Whittier, Whittier City, Lawndale, and at the other end of the anchor is ABC Unified all in Los Angeles County. All within a 20 mile diameter, from one end of the circle to the other 20 miles, six of the top 25 districts in California for teaching reading. And so it's clear that what these people are doing is it's not that they have more money or have different kids or.



Todd Collins: They're not doing anything that any of us can't do, but they've figured out practices to make it effective and shared those practices within their organization so that now they and their neighboring organizations can do it. So that's great. From my point of view, this is what passes for profound in my world. It's, they figured out a great way to do it, and what they figured out is transferrable because their neighbors caught it from them.

Jessica Hamman: I think that is so key, because when change needs to be made and change is hard, especially through an organization that's big like a school district and has so many moving parts, it's really easy to say, "Well, it would work for them, but it won't work for us because..."

Todd Collins: Right.

Jessica Hamman: But you make the amazing point that is not the case, that it could work for you and it can work for them. I oftentimes, in these conversations with Ed leaders in talking about literacy success, the idea of a recipe for success just keeps coming back to me over and over again. We are always touching on the same concepts, the concepts of teacher training, the concepts of curriculum, the concepts of school systems and intervention, of tracking data. There's a recipe for literacy success, and the school districts like Bonita know the recipe. And so we can publish that recipe, and we can support other school districts for coming on board.



Jessica Hamman: It's not easy, it sure isn't easy, and your journey with your school district currently shows that it takes a lot of time, and good will, and effort but sure is worth it for every kid that's affected and gets to be a little more proficient in literacy because their school district took the time to understand these components of the recipe.

Todd Collins: This effort has launched for me as I focus on my district and these are the 12,000 kids that I'm responsible for, but that's a very small drop in the ocean of six million kids in California. And what I realized in my research and my analysis is that hey, just exactly what you said, the same problem plays out in a thousand times in California across a thousand school districts, and a lot of the same solutions will be effective in those places. The question is, okay, how do you identify those practices, and how do you support people in spreading them? And so one of the things that I've worked hard on is creating what's called the California Reading Coalition, which is bringing together people who are working on this problem all over the state.

Todd Collins: And what I found, when I first started on this effort, I only knew a couple of them. I mean, there's a hotbed in Oakland, I'm sure you've talked to some of the people in Oakland who are working hard on exactly this set of problems. There's people in the Los Angeles County Office that I'm sure that are working hard on this problem, but what I found is that most of these people were working in relative isolation, they didn't even know who each other were. And much less if you were a school district in Kern County, and you decided you heard an Emily Hanford podcast and you decided I want to do better at reading and it's, who in California is



working on this? It's, how would I even know? How would I even find out?

Todd Collins: I might go to a conference and ask, but chances are the person I asked never heard of it either. We wanted to create this coalition to both network the people who are doing this work so they can support each other, and to amplify their voices so that other people around the state can hear about what's going on. And understand that both there's a crisis in reading in California, and there are people who are effectively working to solve the crisis and they can join those efforts. And so the California Reading Coalition is just getting going, we're working on two things really to promote this issue. One is that we're going to create an outlier report out of this analysis that we've been talking about and do case studies of some of the districts, both who have been successful and who have been unsuccessful to talk about what the differences are.

Todd Collins: And then we're going to try to have an in-person gathering in the fall, date's not scheduled yet, but probably late September or early October to try to get people together who are focused on this issue in California, and try to build a community of practice of people who will give ongoing support to this effort across the state.

Jessica Hamman: I love it, Todd. So you're doing work not only at the community level, but also at the state level and it's so important. So thank you for all that you're doing for teachers, administrators, and kids.



Todd Collins: And you or your listeners you can go to our website, which actually just went up last week, but is called caraeds.org, californiareads.org. And it has resources about what's going on in California, it has news reports about reading initiatives across the country and especially in California, and it has ways to sign up to get monthly updates of what's going on in California so you can be aware of some of these things as they happen.

Jessica Hamman: That's perfect. And for those listeners who may be outside of California, they can still look at California's Reading Coalition here with an eye to what might be done in their own state.

Todd Collins: This is a monumental effort that needs to happen all over the country. It's funny because I don't tend to be a hyperbolic person, I can't think of anything that's more fundamental in education than this. And I know this is the work that you do professionally, I'm just an amateur, I try to help, but I really admire the people who do this because this is fundamental work. If we don't teach kids to read, not only is a lot of our other work going to be wasted, we have fundamentally capped the potential of these human beings in life and in our society, and we can't afford as a society to have that happen. Not only is it bad for those kids, it's bad for everybody else, we need to focus on this.

Todd Collins: It's not going to solve all our problems, but as we've said before the trick isn't not having problems, the trick is not having the same problems next year that you have now. So this is a problem we know how to solve, we know how to teach kids to read, it's just a matter of



focusing on it and making sure we do it. So let's focus on this problem and make progress, and I know you and Glean do fantastic work in that.

Jessica Hamman: Thanks so much, Todd, and thanks for sharing your story. To learn more about Todd and the work he's doing in collaboration with Palo Alto Unified School district and CA Reads, please visit the school district at www.pausd.org or caraeds.org. Thank you, Todd.

Todd Collins: Thank you. I was great talking to you, Jessica.

Jessica Hamman: Thank you for listening to our Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast. To find links to the articles and resources mentioned in this podcast, go to gleaneducation.com/edleaderspodcast and access them in the show notes. Bye for now.

Jessica Hamman: This episode was edited and produced by Nita Cherise.

