

Grasslands Elementary faculty build unity and shared knowledge at a PLC at Work event.

Grasslands Elementary

LOS BANOS, CALIFORNIA

Grasslands Elementary adopted the PLC at Work® process, establishing collaborative systems that transformed the culture, empowered teachers, and enhanced student achievement.

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► DEMOGRAPHICS

- **892** students
- **78.1%** free or reduced lunch
- **35%** English learners
- **7%** students with special needs

► RACIAL/ETHNIC PERCENTAGES

- **86.8%** Hispanic
- **8%** White
- **1.8%** Asian
- **1.3%** Multiracial
- **1.2%** Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- **0.6%** Black
- **0.2%** American Indian or Alaska Native

Serving kindergarten through sixth-grade students, Grasslands Elementary, located in California's Central Valley, is a diverse community with many English learners and socioeconomically disadvantaged families. The school is dedicated to equity, growth, and collaboration. According to its website, "The mission of Grasslands Elementary School is to empower teachers and partner with families and community members to educate children by promoting academic achievement and problem-solving skills, and ensuring high levels of academic and social-emotional learning for all students."

LosBanosUSD.org/O/GE

Please note that all data and people mentioned in this story represent solely the time frame in which Solution Tree actively worked with the school or district and the time frame in which the school or district committed to implementing processes and practices set forth by Solution Tree. Building and district leaders and staff featured in Evidence of Excellence stories may have changed since the stories were published.

► CHALLENGE

Grasslands Elementary first opened its doors during the 2020 Covid pandemic, which set the stage for a uniquely difficult start. Their first year in operation was fully remote, followed by a hybrid model with limited instructional continuity. This challenging beginning created foundational issues as the school also navigated administrative turnover. The degree of understanding of the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) at Work® process varied among teachers, and any time designated for true collaboration among teams was often misused for meetings or staff development not aligned with PLC goals.

Without agreed-upon essential standards, instruction lacked clarity, and few teams knew how to use data or common formative assessments to guide instruction. Chronic absenteeism and behavior challenges further impacted learning, especially for students with academic gaps due to disrupted early education. The Grasslands team saw an urgent need to rebuild their school culture and improve student achievement. Their goal in partnering with Solution Tree was to create a sustainable, collaborative system focused on student learning and long-term academic growth.

► IMPLEMENTATION

In the summer of 2022, before officially taking on the role of principal at Grasslands Elementary, Margarita Ordunez brought nine teachers to the PLC at Work® Institute in Las Vegas. This group formed the foundation of the school's initial guiding coalition.

Then, as the 2022–2023 school year began, with the support of their assigned Solution Tree associate Stephanie Discher, the Grasslands team focused on developing a shared understanding of PLC practices. They began their first book study on *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work®* by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas W. Many, and Mike Mattos. Through the study, they established collaborative team norms, began identifying essential standards, and explored the purpose and structure of common formative assessments (CFAs) and Tier 2 interventions.

Ahead of the 2023–2024 school year, a second group of 10 Grasslands staff members attended the PLC at Work® Institute in San Antonio, Texas. With one year of implementation behind them,

“For every educator at Grasslands, working with all of the students in their grade level is key, rather than just ‘my students’ in a silo. That has been a major shift in the culture in our school, where we’re helping all students learn.”

—Margarita Ordunez / Principal, Grasslands Elementary School

► IMPLEMENTATION (CONTINUED)

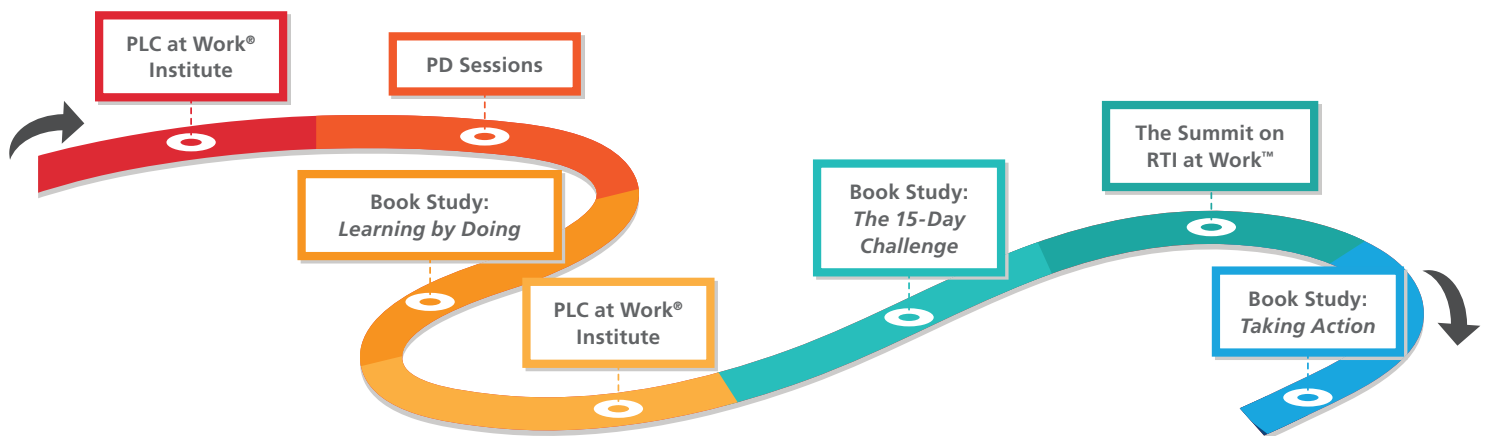
the team had more context and returned excited to refine instruction and intervention. After this event, they started the book study for *The 15-Day Challenge: Simplify and Energize Your PLC at Work® Process* by Maria Nielsen. The book helped their teams strengthen their CFAs, analyze data, and respond more effectively to student needs.

In preparation for the 2024–2025 school year, the Grasslands team attended The Summit on RTI at Work™ in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Inspired by Mike Mattos’ sessions, Principal Ordunez wanted this year’s focus to be on response to intervention and developing consistent, schoolwide systems for student support. “There was still that misconception, so we had to clarify that Tier 2 is for

essential standards. We can’t intervene in everything that we teach,” she emphasized.

Using the resource *Taking Action: A Handbook for RTI at Work™* by Mike Mattos, Austin Buffum, and Janet Malone, staff received clear expectations around protected core instruction, targeted reteaching based on CFAs, and differentiated support through specialists.

To support this work, the Grasslands team developed a master schedule to ensure Tier 1 instruction remained sacred—no pull-outs for speech therapy, individualized education programs, or reading intervention. Tier 2 interventions became strategically structured *What I Need* time, while Tier 3 interventions were reframed as a third layer of support, delivered only after Tier 1 and Tier 2.



► RESULTS

Over three years of implementing the PLC at Work process, Grasslands Elementary has achieved significant academic gains and a profound cultural transformation. Their collaborative efforts have led to stronger student outcomes on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) and a more unified learning environment.

Here’s a snapshot of their progress:

- Schoolwide CAASPP math scores increased from 20% to 38%, making it an 18 percentage point increase in students who scored a level 3 or 4.
- Schoolwide CAASPP ELA scores increased from 31% to 46%, making it a 15 percentage point increase of students who scored a level 3 or 4 from 21–22 to 24–25.



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