



# Collective Educator Agency: How Olive Elementary School Transformed Teaching and Learning



## Discover How Olive Elementary Aligned School Staff Around Common Goals to Improve Teaching and Learning

Olive Elementary partnered with AVID to foster Collective Educator Agency, resulting in positive change for students, teachers, and the entire campus. With AVID's support, Olive Elementary staff worked together to assess their needs and moved forward with a unified vision and actions, using a common instructional language and strategies. These efforts resulted in more efficient teaching, students gaining new strategies to support their learning, and a campus-wide culture of support for every student and educator.

### The Challenge: A Need for Collaboration and Cohesion

**Olive Elementary, located in Orange, California and is comprised of 354 K–6 students — 53% of whom are from socioeconomically disadvantaged households, and 24% are English Language learners.<sup>1</sup>**

Olive Elementary School wanted to see their students succeed, and though their staff were aligned in *what* they wanted for their students, *how* they were going to get there was unclear. It was something each teacher felt they needed to determine on their own.

Teachers knew they needed a unified approach with common language and strategies to enhance consistency for students, which would ultimately support their learning.

After witnessing the impact of AVID in secondary schools in their district, Orange Unified—Olive Elementary's district—started to select elementary schools at which they would begin implementing AVID. Olive Elementary was one of the schools selected, and they were to begin AVID implementation in the upcoming year.

To prepare Olive educators for AVID implementation, staff attended an AVID Summer Institute professional learning and training event in 2016.

After attending Summer Institute, a group of Olive Elementary teachers were inspired by the tools and strategies they learned and how they enhanced collaboration between them.

They realized AVID was *how* they were going to get their students where they wanted them to be.

This group of teachers was committed to implementing AVID so every teacher on their campus could utilize AVID strategies to support their students. With the principal seat open at their school, they lobbied to bring a principal on board that would help them actualize this goal.



*“We were all struggling; each teacher was separate in their own little classroom—in their own little atmosphere,” shared 4th grade teacher, Lisa Leon.*



<sup>1</sup> <https://sarconline.org/public/summary/30666216029870/2021%E2%80%932022>

## The Solution: Utilizing AVID to Create Cohesion

### Determining Needs and Creating a Plan

AVID provides a comprehensive college and career readiness system, supporting schools as they make positive changes in the areas of **Systems, Instruction, Leadership, and Culture** on their campus. AVID's College and Career Readiness System provides a wealth of resources to support these areas.

**One example is AVID's WICOR® (Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organization, and Reading) strategies to support instruction.** To help students build skills essential for college and career, teachers include elements of WICOR® in their lesson plans, or within their classroom operations.

As the Olive Elementary team embarked on their AVID journey, they realized that it was not a feasible goal to implement all facets of AVID in every classroom at once. Instead, they chose to focus on Instruction, and identify a few specific strategies to start with.



*Reflecting on Olive's implementation journey..*

*"Let your teachers lead, ask them where they think you should be starting. Look for strengths and build on those strengths."*

*– Principal Heather Darrow*

**Organization is a part of WICOR® instructional strategies, and staff had access to a multitude of resources to support in this area.** Because school staff were already focused on organization, as they had implemented binder use for students, this was one of the areas they started with.

Olive staff later utilized data they were already collecting to determine additional areas of need. For example, Olive Elementary staff were already reviewing reading inventory scores of English language learners, as this was a key element in students reclassifying from "English Learner" to "Fluent English Proficient."

Reviewing this data led them to focus on common instructional language and strategies for reading and vocabulary to support students' needs across the campus.

## Moving from Individual to Collective Efforts

Each teacher at Olive Elementary was passionate about equipping their students with the skills and tools needed to prepare them as they progressed in school and life. They understood that equipping their students with the skills and tools necessary for success was not a goal unique to themselves, but rather a common objective and passion shared by all the teachers at Olive Elementary.

With Heather Darrow joining the Olive Elementary team as principal in 2016, the school set out on a journey to achieve their goal of implementing AVID to ensure all teachers were moving forward with the same goals and mindset.

In recognizing their shared beliefs, they began to take action based on those beliefs—collective educator agency—to enhance success for students, and themselves as educators.

**Collective Educator Agency**—where educators on a campus take intentional actions based on shared beliefs and trust that, together, they can increase opportunity and measurable success for all students and each other.

## Utilizing Common Instructional Language and Strategies

After aligning their thinking around what they wanted to achieve, Olive Elementary educators began to utilize common instructional language and strategies across all grade levels. Olive educators began using one strategy: Philosophical Chairs, an inquiry-based strategy built on a prompt and to which contradictory positions exist. Participants address these positions through deep, academic discourse in a structured, formal process. “We would start teaching [Philosophical Chairs] in Kindergarten,” shared Ellen Schwartz, Kindergarten/1st grade teacher, “and then each year, each of those concepts would be built upon as they get through each of the grades.” Though some may doubt a kindergarten or 1st grader can engage in the elements of a philosophical discussion, Mrs. Schwartz has seen her students take on these challenges and thrive.



“

*A lot of times, people think that five- and six-year-olds are not capable of taking notes. Five- and six-year-olds aren't capable of organizing themselves and their materials. Five- and six-year-olds can't ... debate with a classmate over an opinion in class. And I would say, “Yes they can—and they can do it well.”*

*– Ellen Schwartz, Kindergarten/1st grade*

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## Leading the Way with Professional Development

One driving factor that supported Olive Elementary staff in implementing common instructional language and strategies was professional development—both AVID-facilitated and school or district-facilitated.

In 2016, Olive Elementary began sending staff to AVID Summer Institute, where educators participated in the AVID Elementary: Foundations Implementation (Grades 3–6) Community of Practice, a training course for implementing AVID in elementary school. In this Community of Practice, they learned WICOR® instructional strategies to utilize in their classroom and engaged in planning for the upcoming year around implementing these strategies.

This collaboration time served as a launching point for bringing these strategies to their campus. In the following summers, Principal Darrow continued to send additional staff to Summer Institute—and attend Summer Institute herself—demonstrating the expectation that AVID strategies were to be embedded in the classroom and culture at Olive Elementary.

Principal Darrow further showed her support of the work and the teachers on campus through her actions around their continued professional development. She was intentional about providing collaboration time for teachers through professional learning communities and grade level collaboration time.

Professional development was not limited to AVID-facilitated events; Olive Elementary also engaged its staff in in-house professional development around the AVID strategies they learned at Summer Institute. Principal Darrow recognized the importance of peer learning and asked staff experienced in certain AVID strategies to lead professional development around that topic. This action led to more teachers becoming familiar with the strategies and provided leadership opportunities for educators.

## Collaborating for Success

In addition to professional development, intentional collaboration played a key role at Olive Elementary. AVID provided a structure for regular collaboration through AVID Site Team meetings, where educators and leaders came together to discuss AVID implementation and planning. In addition, Principal Darrow ensured all Olive Elementary staff had intentional collaboration time to ensure they were on the same page regarding the use of AVID strategies and shared their experiences and recommendations.

### Examples of collaboration time included:

- A portion of staff meetings devoted to collaboration
- Grade-level collaboration meetings
- Cross grade-level collaboration meetings
- Professional Learning community time
- A portion of professional development time devoted to collaboration

## The Impact: Positive Outcomes for Educators and Students

In using common instructional language and AVID strategies across all grade levels, Olive Elementary underwent positive shifts in how educators taught, collaborated, and thought about teaching, resulting in positive impacts on educators, students, and the school's community.





## Teaching Efficiency Was Enhanced

Implementing AVID strategies resulted in a schoolwide culture of transparency and trust, with teachers knowing that students would enter their classrooms at the beginning of each year with strategies and tools needed to process the content they would be learning. Teachers didn't have to re-teach these strategies each year, and in turn, they had more time for content instruction.

## Students Were Equipped with Strategies to Support Their Learning

Because there was continuity in using the same strategies to process information from year to year, students were able to refine these skills. After becoming skilled in the strategy through learning and practice, students were able to use it as a tool to aid in their learning. With this new skill in hand, they advanced to the next grade level, well-prepared to face new challenges. Their new teacher was able to build upon students' existing knowledge and introduce more advanced concepts with greater rigor.

*You don't have to go back to square one of explaining the whole thing to them...they can turn around and teach it to some of the other students as well.*

*—Chip Kavanaugh,  
3rd/4th Combination Class Teacher*

*“When I’m going to 7th grade, I might feel a little less weight [on] my shoulders since I know how to organize when I’m writing...”*

*—Damien, 6th grader*

These strategies didn't stop at supporting students in the next grade level at Olive, and students continued to utilize them as they moved on in their educational and career journeys.

“Olive’s responsibility, organization, how to be able to communicate ... how to express yourself, really helped me going into high school...,” shared Destiny, a 10th grader and Olive Elementary Alumnus. “With the lessons learned from here, I was able to use those in my work and just presenting myself [on] a daily basis.”

## A Culture of Support was Created Across the Campus

In activating collective educator agency at Olive Elementary, school staff were enveloped in a culture of support, rather than feeling they needed to solve challenges on their own. “When you have a common goal, it really brings people together,” shared 4th grade teacher Lisa Leon, “The atmosphere here is different than a lot of other schools. We all seem to be striving to do better, and we work together really well, and I think it’s because we have this common ground and foundation...” This culture of support prompted teachers to reach out to their colleagues to offer support, knowing their efforts would ultimately impact the school as a whole.

When Brooke Glasky, a Kindergarten teacher at Olive, initially returned from an AVID training, she was embraced by support from upper grade level teachers: “They helped us process [the training content] and bring it down to a level where it could be successful in kindergarten, and it’s just these constant conversations of ‘What are you doing,’ ‘How does it look,’ ‘Can I see your template?’ ...It’s amazing to have that collaboration.”

## School Became a Community

This supportive culture helped Olive become a community. The focus shifted from educators taking action to help their students succeed to helping our students succeed. Students felt a similar impact, as Kindergarten/1st grade teacher Ellen Schwartz shared: “Not only does it help your staff to be able to have a common language and common goals, but it also has that for the students. There’s not the, ‘Oh, I was in so-and-so’s class, and I got to do this or this.’ But it was, ‘I got to be at an AVID school site where this is what we did.’ There’s that whole community that builds together and has that common language.”







## Conclusion

Olive Elementary staff knew they needed a unified approach with common language and strategies to create consistency for students.



**When they began implementing AVID, they set out to enhance skills and outcomes for their students. They not only achieved this goal, but saw additional positive outcomes as a result, specifically in how teachers taught and worked together.**

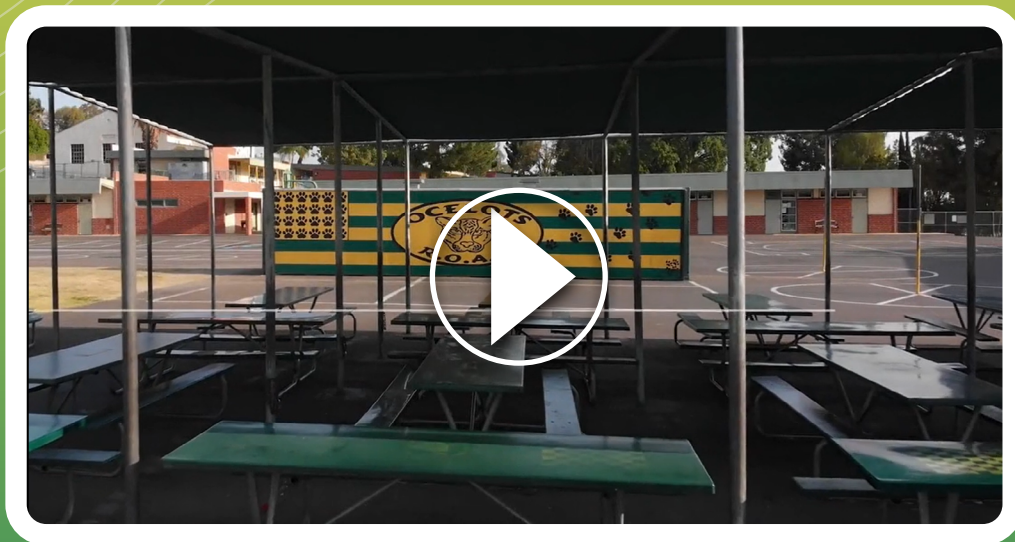


By establishing a common vision, aligning mindsets and strategies, collaborating, and engaging in continued professional development, Olive Elementary staff created an environment where students and educators thrive.



**Their ongoing investment in implementing AVID strategies will continue to help them grow and expand this positive impact for years to come.**

Ready to **activate**  
**a culture of success**  
at your school or district?



Watch Olive Elementary's story  
and connect with AVID today!



[AVID.org](https://www.avid.org)