



Annenberg Institute
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Outcomes Based Contracting for Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Pilot Cohort

Year 1 Findings

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Executive Summary

This research brief presents emerging findings from the first year of a pilot cohort of school districts and professional learning (PL) provider pairs implementing outcomes based contracting (OBC) for curriculum-based professional learning (CBPL). The brief describes emerging findings from interviews with participants implementing OBC and a document analysis, focused on three partnerships participating in the COBC's first pilot cohort for CBPL. Participants viewed some elements of the OBC process as supporting stronger contracting and implementation of CBPL services, and identified some tensions of implementing OBC for the first time in a new field.

Summary of Findings

Participants report the following elements of the OBC process as supportive in their work:

- The OBC process resulted in contracts that were more detailed and included a theory of action tying a specified scope of CBPL services to measurable outcomes.
- District interviewees consistently reported that the contracting process resulted in contracts that were more aligned with their districts' needs.
- Having continuous improvement check-ins in the agreed upon scope of work supported the ability of the district and PL provider staff to work together to strengthen implementation of the CBPL services.
- District and PL provider staff shared how adding mutual accountability to the OBC contract shaped their approach to the work, and district staff shared how they appreciated tying their organization's investment to specific outcomes.

Participants report the following tensions that are arising as they implement the OBC process:

- Across all partnerships, interviewees agreed that the OBC process for developing contracts requires more investment of staff time and operational infrastructure from both districts and providers when compared to non-OBC contracting.
- PL provider staff raised tensions in balancing the specificity of the contracts with the flexibility perceived to be needed in providing CBPL services.
- Given the complexity of providing CBPL services amidst dynamic education environments, PL provider staff expressed needing to balance their perceptions of concerns about financial risk while also wanting to provide positive, measurable results from contracted PL services.
- A lack of consensus in the field on the 'right' way to measure the timely impacts of professional learning on teachers created challenges in identifying the appropriate measures to include in the contract.

Outcomes Based Contracting for Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Pilot Cohort: Year 1 Findings

Professional learning (PL) is an important lever to support teachers' instructional practice, which in turn can support student learning and address persistent inequities in educational opportunities.¹ While PL can be an important support for educators, not all PL is equally effective, with a growing attention towards identifying the specific formats and design features of effective PL, and in turn, less effective PL.² Within the broader PL field, there is increased attention towards ensuring educators have access to curriculum based professional learning (CBPL). CBPL is defined as high-quality professional learning that supports the implementation and sustained use of high quality instructional materials to ensure that teachers can effectively use these materials in their classrooms.³ CBPL is a promising PL model that has growing evidence behind its efficacy.⁴

There are other factors outside the features and format of PL that influence how PL relates to teacher and student outcomes. First, the extent to which PL services are coherent with other school district interventions matters. Second, capacity and funding within school districts can impact the ability of school districts to support sustained, evidence-based PL services. Third, there are challenges in measuring the impact of PL services in order to identify the highest-leverage type of PL services.⁵

Amidst these challenges, the policy and fiscal environment is pushing towards increased accountability for education spending. With uneven evidence on the impact of contracted education services and potentially less funding support for education services broadly, there is increased attention from policymakers and district leaders towards ensuring education spending translates into meaningful outcomes.⁶ This may have important implications for the procurement of PL services, as school districts spend an average of \$8,300 per teacher on instructional staff support per year.³

Within the context of these challenges and the focus on increased accountability, there is an opportunity to think through whether there are ways to strengthen contracting and implementing PL services to address some of the challenges districts face. One model that is currently being piloted by a cohort of school districts and PL providers, with the support of the Center for Outcomes Based Contracting (COBC) is outcomes based contracting (OBC).

Outcomes Based Contracting for Curriculum-Based Professional Learning

OBC is a process by which school districts and service providers develop a contract in which a substantial portion of payment is contingent upon meeting agreed upon outcomes. The OBC model is designed to improve education service procurement practices and strengthen implementation quality, with the ultimate goal of achieving meaningful student outcomes (for more information on OBC broadly, see [here](#)).

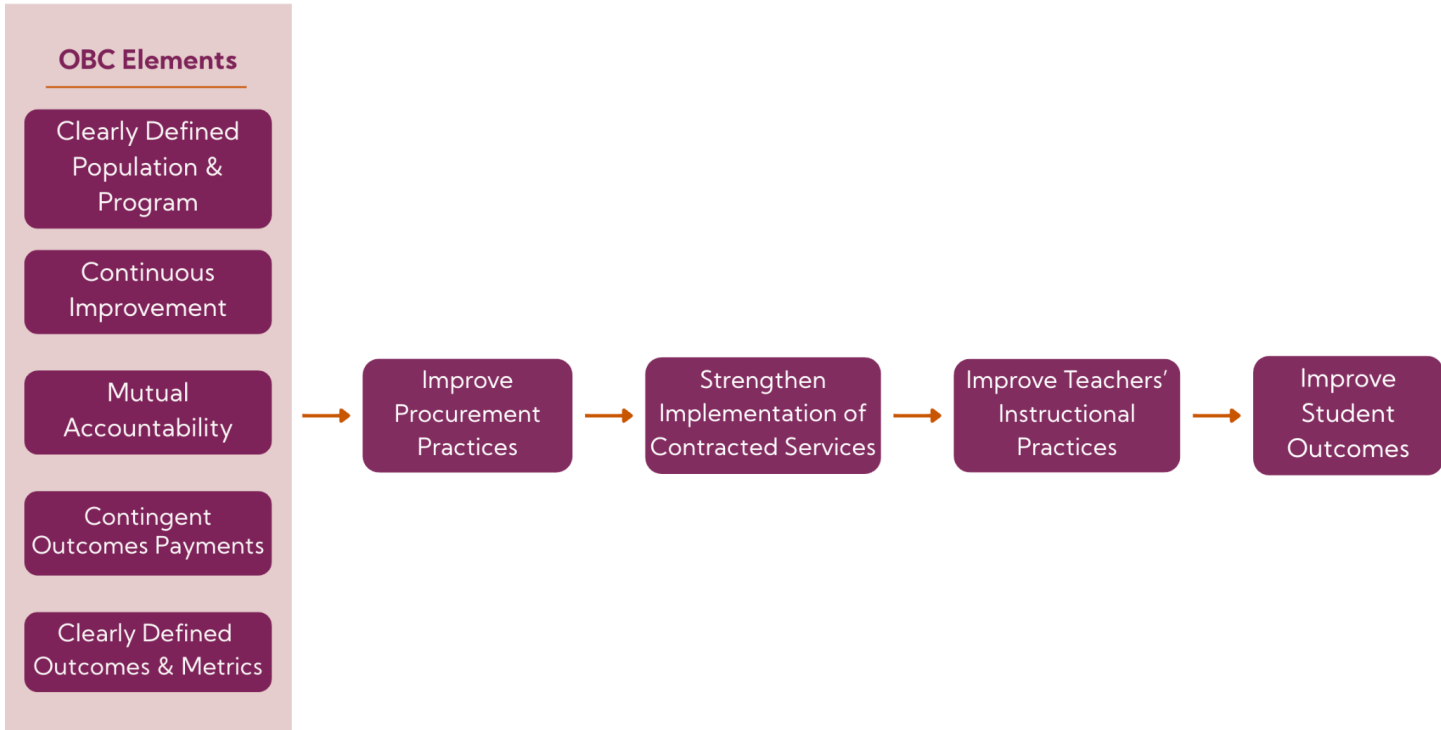
The COBC is supporting a pilot cohort of school district and PL provider pairs to engage in OBC for a specific type of PL services, CBPL, with the goal of understanding the extent to which the OBC model can be implemented in the context of CBPL services. CBPL is an important education service area for this study, given the above-described challenges the PL field faces, including variability in impacts by PL design features,

a lack of coherence with other interventions, capacity and funding to support sustained, evidence-based PL services, and challenges in measuring the impact of PL services in order to identify the highest-leverage type of PL services.⁸

How OBC Might Support CBPL Procurement and Implementation

Figure 1 outlines the elements that the COBC theorizes support successful use of OBC within the procurement of CBPL services. These elements include: having a clearly defined population and program, continuous improvement structures, mutual accountability, contingent outcomes payments, and clearly defined outcomes and metrics. The theoretical framework underlying this work is that these elements lead to improvements in procurement practices, strengthen the implementation of contracted CBPL services, and ultimately improve teacher practice and student outcomes.

Figure 1. OBC Implementation Framework



Given the challenges identified above in contracting effective PL, a key element of how OBC may improve CBPL procurement and implementation is mutual accountability. In the OBC framework, districts and PL providers agree upon actions both organizations will complete, information that will be collected and monitored aligned with these actions, and outcomes that are tied to payment. This mutual accountability, when tied to clearly defined outcomes and contingent outcomes payments, may lead to clearer information about what is feasible and aligned with PL providers' and districts' capacity and locus of control, as well as clearer information about expected implementation impacts. Drawing on principal-agent theory,⁹ this integration of mutual accountability and payment-contingent outcomes addresses a challenge in CBPL procurement and implementation by creating stronger incentives for the PL provider to act in the interest of improving student outcomes. Mutual

accountability may also push school districts to be more intentional about ensuring educators have the capacity to engage with the contracted services and are clear about the ways in which they can support the services' implementation, as well as encourage more coherence with school- or district-wide initiatives in order to ensure educators have the systems-level support they need to access and benefit from the services.

Additionally, inclusion of continuous improvement structures¹⁰ alongside mutual accountability creates a framework for district and PL providers to engage in improvement science, using the information collected to refine services in order to strengthen implementation and impact in response to the context and the needs of educators. This, too, can address the challenge of coherence, as school district staff and PL providers are encouraged to continuously refine the scope of services in response to the dynamism of the school context, in order to ensure the services can have the agreed upon outcomes.

Potential Challenges OBC Might Encounter in CBPL Procurement and Implementation

There are also potential challenges that the OBC for CBPL pilot cohort may face when implementing the model for the first time in the context of CBPL. One way in which extending OBC into CBPL for the pilot cohort may be challenging is related to capacity. As noted above, school districts often face capacity challenges that can inhibit the implementation of strong PL services. The OBC model may require more work during the contracting phase to co-develop the scope, and may also require more work due to the continuous improvement structures. This may be challenging for school districts to implement with integrity.

Another potential challenge is identifying and measuring feasible, appropriate contingent payment outcomes. Measuring PL impact effectively across school districts can be strengthened through standardized measurement frameworks and shared metrics across organizations.¹¹ Within the field of PL measurement, Guskey's¹² Five Critical Levels of Professional Development Evaluation framework is often used to outline the different levels of impact that PL services can have on schools and educators. The framework is built upon the premise that educators' professional growth progresses across levels. These levels include participants' reactions and perceptions (Level 1), participants' learning (Level 2), organization support and change (Level 3), participants' use of new knowledge and skills (Level 4), and student learning outcomes (Level 5). This framework aligns with research on PL evaluation, which finds that measuring impact requires evidence of changes in teacher knowledge and practice before inferences can be drawn about student achievement outcomes.¹³ While this framework helps to organize ways of thinking about PL impacts, operationalizing these levels into measures requires additional attention towards understanding what are valid and reliable measures of the constructs across all five levels.

A central focus in evaluating PL is measuring changes in instructional quality—an important mechanism through which PL translates into improved student learning. To establish valid, objective indicators of teaching quality, research emphasizes observation models and standardized rubrics that assess specific, observable instructional practices.¹⁴ Of course, having standardized observation tools can be challenging when there must be alignment between the focus of the PL and the observation tool dimensions of interest, in order for the measure to be valid and reliable. Beyond using a standardized tool, for OBC, there also needs to be an understanding of what are appropriate baseline thresholds and thresholds for the contingent payment outcomes, ideally informed by evidence from the PL research field on typical effect sizes or growth intervals

for the dimension and measure type of interest. Meta-analytic evidence on the impacts of PL on teacher practice can support aligned thinking around feasible impact effect sizes or growth intervals.¹⁵

In sum, tying PL providers' payment outcomes to PL impact outcomes is complex. It requires confidence in a set of tools to measure impacts of PL services on potentially different dimensions of teacher and student outcomes, within a field that is characterized by a diversity of tools. It also requires insight into the correct thresholds to set for payment, which need to be both feasible and meaningful. Finally, observation models are cited as potentially the strongest measurement tool, and conducting observations and walkthroughs can be time-intensive.

The Current Study

OBC for CBPL creates a framework to respond to the increased political and fiscal pressures described above, as well as potentially address some of the challenges the CBPL field faces through a focus on mutual accountability, continuous improvement, a focus on feasible and appropriate measurement of PL impacts, and strong partnership structures.

The Research Partnership for Professional Learning (RPPL) research team is examining how the OBC process shapes both the contracting process and the implementation decisions of PL providers and districts for the pilot CBPL cohort. The overarching questions guiding the research are: **Is OBC working in the way it is intended to work? What elements of the OBC process are supporting PL providers and school districts to engage in a partnership where the procurement practices and the implementation services have been strengthened? Where are tensions arising as the model is being implemented with this pilot cohort?**

The pilot cohort and this research study are ongoing. This research brief summarizes emerging insights from the first year of the OBC for CBPL cohort. These insights are preliminary and are focused on understanding the extent to which OBC is being implemented in line with the theoretical framework for how OBC can strengthen CBPL educational services.

Notably, all three partnerships in the cohort entered the OBC process with well-established relationships between district and PL provider staff members and received dedicated coaching support from COBC throughout. These conditions should be considered when assessing whether these findings would hold for new partnerships or for districts and providers engaging in OBC without prior working relationships.

Data and Analysis

We conducted interviews with 13 interest holders from the three district-provider pairs participating in the pilot OBC for CBPL cohort. The interviewed interest holders included two COBC coaches, seven PL provider staff members, and four school district staff members. To contextualize these interviews, we also reviewed cohort documents, including meeting notes and documents completed as part of the contracting process. We reviewed all transcripts from interviews and generated analytic summaries of each, with takeaways focused on the following:

- How did the OBC process shape the contracting process between PL providers and districts?
- How did the contract terms (as well as any additional OBC support) influence the implementation decisions of PL providers and districts?
- To what extent did district clients and PL providers feel satisfied with the process and to what extent did they meet the terms of the contract?
- Which aspects of the OBC process and contracts (e.g. supports, selected metrics) were most and least successful at shaping action and supporting positive outcomes?

We also reviewed, for each pair, their OBC contract. Given that each provider had worked with their partner school district previously, we also reviewed their previous contract that was procured through a non-OBC process. We analyzed the contracts, focusing on the extent to which the contracts contained information aligned with the five OBC elements identified in Figure 1. We then integrated the analytic summaries from the interviews with the results from the contract analysis to identify emerging findings from the first year of the cohort. For more details on the data and analysis, see the Technical Appendix.

Partnerships Overview

The Center for OBC is supporting a pilot cohort of three school district and PL provider pairs to engage in OBC for CBPL for two years. All three partnerships entered the cohort voluntarily and with strong pre-existing relationships between districts and PL providers. As part of this pilot cohort, school districts and professional learning service providers engage with a COBC coach to develop a contract that includes the OBC partnership elements and mutually agreed upon middle of year and end of year outcomes, then implement the CBPL services in line with the contract contents. Table 1 outlines the CBPL services that were contracted. Table 1 also outlines the middle- and end-of-year contingent payment outcomes that the partnerships agreed upon, aligned with Guskey’s framework for evaluating PL impacts in schools.¹⁰

Table 1. Overview of Year 1 CBPL Services and Continent Payment Outcomes for OBC for CBPL Pilot Cohort Participants

	Partnership 1	Partnership 2	Partnership 3
District Context	Type: PreK–8 charter network Locale: City Enrollment: ~1,500 students	Type: PreK–12 school district Locale: City Enrollment: ~72,300 students	Type: Prek-12 school district Locale: Rural Enrollment: ~1,800 students
CBPL Service Description	Year-long support for 60 K-8 math teachers who serve students scoring below proficiency. The services focus on building teachers’ skill in facilitating the synthesis portion of problem-based lessons via delivery of	Approximately 34 weeks of support for 30 teachers teaching literacy or math in grades 3-5, serving students who attend schools identified as needing improvement.	24 weeks of support for five teachers co-teaching inclusion classrooms in grades 3-5, serving both general education students and students with disabilities. The program focuses on literacy instruction and includes up to eight hybrid coaching cycles and three

	Partnership 1	Partnership 2	Partnership 3
	in-person workshops, virtual professional learning communities, classroom coaching, and additional support.		communities of practice, along with additional support for school and district leaders centered on monitoring and implementation.
Middle of Year (MOY) PL Provider Contingent Payment Outcomes			
MOY Teacher Reactions and Perception	None	None	60% of teachers agree/strongly agree that they teach more inclusively and equitably as a result of the PL Provider support. Status: Met
MOY Teacher Learning	80% of teachers who score at least "Proficient" on a lesson plan synthesis rubric right after their initial workshop. Status: Met	None	None
MOY Organizational Support and Change	None	None	None
MOY Teacher Use of Knowledge and Skill	60% of classrooms observed show evidence of teachers facilitating an effective lesson synthesis. Status: Met	None	2 out of 3 teacher teams either level up (by 0.5+) or hit a Level 3+ on the inclusive teaching rubric for effective adult collaboration. Status: Met 60% of teachers report that they "often" or "every day" leverage all adults in their classroom to maximize student learning. Status: Met
MOY Student Learning	None	None	None
Summary of MOY outcomes	2/2 met	None	3/3 Met
End of Year (EOY) PL Provider Contingent Payment Outcomes			

	Partnership 1	Partnership 2	Partnership 3
EOY Teacher Reactions and Perceptions	None	70% of teachers agree or strongly agree with the statement: “[PL Provider] coaching and support have been effective in improving my classroom instruction.” Status: Met	80% of teachers agree or strongly agree with the survey question “I teach more inclusively and equitably as a result of [PL Provider] support.” Status: Met
EOY Teacher Learning	70% of teachers respond Very or Extremely Confident on a survey question: “How confident are you in planning and facilitating a synthesis discussion that includes a student strategy, or verbal or written explanation, or discussion of the strategies or ideas?” (waived*)	None	None
EOY Organizational Support and Change	None	None	None
EOY Teacher Use of Knowledge and Skill	70% of classrooms observed show evidence of teachers facilitating an effective lesson synthesis. Status: Not Met	0.75 average score increase on observation walkthrough tool for literacy or math from baseline to final observation Status: Met 50% of teachers coached by [PL Provider] using district curriculum for math or literacy receive a 2 (mostly) or 3 (yes) on the walkthrough tool question: Does instruction align to the intentions of the adopted materials? Status: Partially Met 15% increase in % of teachers coached by [PL Provider] using district curriculum for math or literacy from baseline to final observation receive a 2 (mostly) or 3 (yes) on the walkthrough tool question: Does instruction align to the intentions of the adopted materials? Status: Met	2 out of 3 teams of teachers either move 1+ levels or are at level 3+ based on the [PL Provider] inclusive teaching observation rubric, Effective Adult Collaboration domain Status: Met 80% of teachers respond “Every day” or “Often” to survey question, “I (or my team and I) leverage all adults in my classroom to maximize student learning” Status: Met

	Partnership 1	Partnership 2	Partnership 3
EOY Student Learning	None	10% increase in % of students in grades 3-5 at participating schools are projected to meet or master on math standardized assessment from BOY to EOY MAP assessment Status: Partially Met 10% increase in % of students in grades 3-5 at participating schools are projected to meet or master on reading standardized assessment based on BOY to EOY MAP assessment Status: Partially Met 25% of students in grades 3-5 at participating schools are projected to meet or master on math standardized assessment based on EOY MAP assessment Status: Partially Met 33% of students in grades 3-5 at participating schools are projected to meet or master on reading standardized assessment based on EOY MAP assessment Status: Partially Met	None
Summary of EOY outcomes	1 waived, 1 not met	3/8 Fully Met, 5/8 Partially Met	3/3 Met

Note: *Waived due to missed administration.

Summary of Partnership CBPL Services and Outcomes

Across the scope of CBPL services agreed upon, all included instructional coaching, but the specifics with regard to duration, number of educators, and the focal subject, varied.

There was variation in the duration of the CBPL services, ranging from 24 weeks to a full year of CBPL services. Further, the population of teachers and students was clearly defined within each contract, but varied. For example, Partnership 3 outlined services for just five teachers, while Partnership 1 outlined services for 60 teachers. Partnership 2 focused on both math and literacy, while Partnership 1 focused on math and Partnership 3 on literacy.

All three partnerships included contingent payment outcomes focused on teachers' use of the knowledge and skills they acquired through the CBPL services, although measurement tools and thresholds varied.

The RPPL team categorized the contingent payment outcomes in line with the five levels of Guskey's framework. Two of the three partnerships included survey items to measure teachers' reactions and perceptions of the CBPL services (Level 1), both focused on the perceptions of the CBPL services as effective. Only one partnership included an outcome related to teacher learning (Level 2). None of the partnerships included metrics for organizational support and change (Level 3), which Guskey identifies as a prerequisite for translating teacher learning into sustained classroom practice. All three partnerships included outcomes related to teachers' use of the knowledge and skills they acquired through the CBPL services (Level 4), although all three partnerships used different observation tools to measure this type of outcome, while Partnership 3 also included a survey item asking teachers about their practice. Only one partnership included student learning outcomes (Level 5).

Looking across these Year 1 contingent payment outcomes, we see there is a lack of attention towards holding PL providers accountable for organizational support and change. This may be because the mutual accountability structure of the OBC process has organizational support and change as the responsibility of the district, rather than the PL provider. While districts do agree to uphold certain organizational structures in order to facilitate educators' access to the CBPL services, it is not tied to payment in the same way as PL provider outcomes. For example, in the Year 1 contracts, districts agreed to be accountable for ensuring a certain percentage of teachers attended the PL services and completed required activities, as well as ensuring a certain percentage of instructional leaders completed their required activities (e.g., coaching logs). They also agreed to be accountable for data collection, continuous improvement participation, and supporting the logistics of scheduling and implementation. However, these agreed-upon actions may have been less clear in how they were measured and enforced without a parallel to contingent payment outcomes. The Year 1 contracts hold PL providers accountable for teacher-level outcomes through the contingent payment outcomes, without, in the same way, holding districts accountable for the conditions research identifies as prerequisites for sustained practice change.

The different organizational levels at which the end-of-year PL provider outcomes are focused, as well as the variation in the tools used to measure them, highlights the lack of consensus in the CBPL field as to the 'right' way to measure CBPL impacts. While some degree of variation is expected in response to the different scopes of services, the lack of a standardized observation protocol or set of survey items highlights a gap in the field of CBPL measurement to move towards evidence-informed tools and thresholds that can support cross-district expectations for PL impacts.

All middle-of-year contingent payment outcomes were met, while there was variation in the end-of-year outcomes across partnerships.

The PL providers in Partnerships 1 and 3 met all of their middle-of-year contingent payment outcomes. For the end-of-year contingent payment outcomes, the PL provider in Partnership 1 did not meet the outcome related to teachers' use of knowledge and skill, and the outcome related to teacher learning was waived because the school district partner was not able to administer the survey. The PL provider in Partnership 3

met all three contingent payment outcomes, one focused on teacher reactions and perceptions, and two focused on teacher use of knowledge and skill. Partnership 2 was unable to share the data for their outcomes at the time of publication.

This summary of the scope of services co-developed by the three partnerships participating in the pilot OBC for CBPL cohort, and the contingent payment outcomes they decided upon, highlights that there was a common focus on instructional coaching and on measuring the impacts on teacher practice. However, there was variability in how these elements were operationalized. The partnerships that had contingent payment middle-of-year outcomes met them all. Of the two partnerships we have data for on their end-of-year contingent payment outcomes, one partnership met all three defined outcomes, while the other had less success administering the necessary survey, and meeting the target threshold for the observation-based measure of teachers' instructional practice. This next section explores the elements of the OBC process that participants reported to be supportive in their work, as well as the elements that they found challenging in this first year.

Emerging Findings: What Elements of the OBC Process are Participants Reporting to be Supportive in Their Work?

Here, we summarize emerging findings about the elements of the OBC process that cohort participants have identified as strengthening their work.

The OBC process resulted in contracts that were more detailed and included a theory of action tying a specified scope of CBPL services to measurable outcomes.

Interviewees described how the OBC contracting process was more extensive than the non-OBC contracting process, with more time spent aligning on a theory of action for the services to be contracted, connecting a more detailed scope of work to specific outcomes. Table 2 summarizes how non-OBC contracts for two of the three partnerships compare to the contracts developed through the OBC process (Partnership 2 was unable to share their previous, non-OBC contract). The second column summarizes our analysis of the OBC contracts for each partnership, while the subsequent columns summarize our analysis of each partnership's non-OBC contract for CBPL services in the prior year with the partner. As seen in Table 2, the contracts developed through the OBC process between the districts and PL providers were more detailed than their previous year contracts developed through a non-OBC process. In addition to adding in specific outcomes for the work, this detail more explicitly outlined the scope of work, including detailed activities, goals, and measurable targets.

Table 2. Comparing OBC vs. Non-OBC Contracts Within Partnerships

Contract Element	OBC Contracts Model (High-Level Summary Across All Three Partnerships)	Non-OBC Contracts (Previous contract by Partnership)	
		Partnership 1	Partnership 3
Scope of work and target population	Extensive Detail: Outlines timing, exact range of PL activities, goals, and precise targets (grade/subject, student/teacher counts).	Minimal Detail: Lists only the PL activities to be completed.	Moderate Detail: Includes a list of PL activities, timing, and a high-level description of targets.
Contingent payment outcomes	Metric-Driven & Time-Bound Outcomes: Explicitly defines the metrics, evaluation rubrics, and specific timeframes used to assess and verify agreed-upon outcomes.*	Not Specified	Not Specified
Payment Structure	Performance-Driven Payment Structure: 40% of contract value is contingent on outcomes; uses an outcome rate card that breaks down the percentage of payment to specific outcomes and target metrics.	Upfront Payment Structure: 100% paid to the PL organization at the beginning.	Milestone-Based Payment Structure: 50% paid mid-service; 50% paid upon completion of full scope.
Roles and Responsibilities	Extensive Detail: Outlines individual personnel roles for contract development, implementation, and reporting.	Not Specified	Not Specified
Mutual accountability	Shared & Specific Duties Across School District and PL Providers: Establishes mutual responsibilities including consistent communication and data-sharing protocols alongside distinct obligations (e.g., district manages attendance/rosters; provider owns PL execution and data security).	Not Specified	Provider-Heavy Duties: Identifies more operational commitments on the provider (e.g., strict rescheduling limits, data point persons).
Continuous improvement	Iterative & Data-driven Continuous Improvement Structures: Establishes frequent (weekly/bi-weekly) data reviews and inter-team progress meetings to collaboratively evaluate implementation goals, monitor performance metrics, and drive ongoing decision-making.	Not Specified	Low-frequency & Fixed Alignment Continuous Improvement Structures: Includes up to four scheduled cross-team and internal scoping sessions across the program lifespan with no mention of

Contract Element	OBC Contracts Model (High-Level Summary Across All Three Partnerships)	Non-OBC Contracts (Previous contract by Partnership)	
		Partnership 1	Partnership 3
			ongoing data monitoring.

Note: *While the outcomes based framework remains consistent, specific metrics differ by partner: Partnership 1 measures teacher learning and application and Partnership 3 evaluates teacher self-reported perception/satisfaction, self-reported learning, and application (see Table 1 for full details).

District interviewees consistently reported that the contracting process resulted in contracts that were more aligned with their districts' needs.

All district staff members felt that contracts developed through OBC were more aligned with district needs. They emphasized that the process shifted the contracting process, and resulting contract, from a more generic agreement to a product of a discussion that helped align PL services to district needs through an explicit theory of action, and created a more useful document to guide the work.

Hearing from District Staff Members:

"I expected one kind of level of conversation, and it went deeper and... that was nice...it [OBC contracting] really was a process that I think pushed people on both sides to get more specific about what you could expect and what was reasonable." — Development Director (District)

"The fact that we're continuing to meet with our partners... is forcing our staff to continue focusing on what we said matters to us... with other vendors, we have a contract, but we never really touch it later in the year." — Accountability Director (District), District Staff Member

When asked if the contracts developed through OBC were more aligned with district needs, PL provider staff members had varying perceptions. While some did agree that they were more aligned with district needs, others shared that they didn't feel the additional detail was a significant departure from what they would have done. One PL provider staff member shared, "Transparently, it didn't change the way we operated... we would have functioned very similarly," and another shared, "I'm not sure that this led to any kind of significant change in scope that wouldn't have otherwise happened." These responses suggest that, for some PL provider members, the OBC process formalized practices already present in well-established partnerships rather than generating new approaches to service design. These responses suggest that some of the benefits participants attributed to OBC may reflect the value of collaborative, structured contracting practices, a finding with implications for how the field understands which specific OBC elements are contributing to stronger contracts.

Having continuous improvement check-ins in the agreed upon scope of work supported the ability of the district and PL provider staff members to work together to strengthen implementation of the CBPL services.

District and PL provider staff members shared that they met more frequently for structured check-ins focused on continuous improvement than they typically would have under non-OBC contracts. These continuous improvement structures allowed for what interviewees described as stronger partnership building, more frequent data reviews, more frequent opportunities to celebrate what was working well, and more opportunities to address challenges or refocus services in order to strengthen impact.

Case Study 1: How Continuous Improvement Check-Ins Shifted the Work

During a continuous improvement check-in, district and PL provider staff members co-reviewed the survey data that were being collected. The data showed them that teachers were not able to engage in aspects of the PL services because of conflicts with IEP meetings. A district staff member addressed the reason for the conflict within the district so that it was not an issue and the teachers could engage as designed.

Participants shared how adding mutual accountability to the OBC contract shaped their approach to the work, and district staff members shared how they appreciated tying their organization's investment to specific outcomes.

As part of the OBCs, districts and PL providers are each accountable for specific actions or roles. PL provider staff members noted that this structure provided a helpful framework for addressing instances where district actions were impacting educators' access to agreed-upon services. One PL provider staff member reflected, *"The mutual accountability portion was more detailed... it successfully protected the provider by formalizing district responsibilities, such as teacher attendance."* As a specific example of how mutual accountability shared their partnership, a PL provider staff member shared, *"...it drove change...when the district did pull kids into test prep out of tier one instruction, it gave us...a leg to stand on to say, 'don't do that for all kinds of reasons,' but, particularly because of our contract and our ability to meet the outcomes."* As evidenced through Case Study 2, the mutual accountability piece was cited by district staff members as a mechanism for encouraging their organization to protect teachers' time to engage with the PL. In Case Study 2, from a PL provider perspective, the mutual accountability shifted their action more towards adding in progress monitoring structures.

Case Study 2: Reflections on how Mutual Accountability Shifted the Work

When asked what, if anything, was different in the steps their organization took to implement the OBC contract, both district and PL provider staff members within one partnership discussed how their organizations shifted their action in response to the mutual accountability framework. These shifts, while described positively by participants in this section, also introduced tensions for PL providers that are explored in the next section.

District	PL Provider
A district staff member shared that the mutual accountability element changed how their district engaged with the PL, saying, <i>"We felt it was necessary to support and protect the time that we worked with [the PL Provider]. So, as a district, we created time into the school schedule to set</i>	A PL provider staff member overseeing the implementation of the services shared how the additional accountability led them to add in more progress monitoring structures. <i>"...I want to have more checkpoints along the way. Like, what's happening in between when I'm not there? ...I didn't think about that as much before."</i> They also

out a time to meet with [the PL Provider] for professional learning, [and] a time for the teachers to meet with each other to co-plan and do inclusive practices. So, normally we wouldn't do that..but because of [OBC], we made sure we protected that time that the teachers had to learn and to work with each other."	described how they also increased their attention towards ensuring school leaders could support teachers in applying the work, saying, "[Now] I need to...give support for what leaders are doing in between my visits because, if teachers aren't confident and I'm no longer there on site, and I'm not meeting with those groups virtually, what else is happening to ensure that we're still continuing the work?"
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In addition to discussions of how mutual accountability shaped some actions and decisions, all school district staff members interviewed felt OBC helped to assure that the district would see the outcomes they needed from the investment they were making. For example, one school district staff member shared, *"I think so often...schools are bombarded...with so many different vendors and partners that are out there and the costs can be astronomical. When...budgets are so squeezed...you've got to know what you're doing and it has to be purposeful. I think outcomes based contracting assures that both parties have a vested interest in making that partnership successful and getting the outcomes that you're after. I just think it's telling that when you have an opportunity to foster these relationships between a vendor and a school, **the students benefit because everybody's working together in a much more purposeful way than it being just a contractual exchange of money.**"* Another school district staff member shared, *"I like to make sure we get what we pay for. I tell students all the time, it's your parents' money that we're using. So I want to make sure we get the most out of it."*

What Do These Emerging Findings Mean For The Field?

- Co-designing detailed procurement contracts can serve as a useful tool for aligning district needs with provider service delivery:** By establishing more detailed scopes of work and theories of action *together*, districts got more clarity on the outcomes they need to see in their schools, and providers were able to ensure their services match district goals; resulting in stronger partnerships. While PL provider staff members may have felt that they already develop those details as part of their scope of work, district staff members found value in this collaborative practice. This process aligns with theory suggesting that additional information surfaced during the OBC process may support stronger implementation.
- Continuous improvement structures and mutual accountability may help address systems-challenges in PL implementation:** In Year 1 of the OBC for CBPL pilot cohort, continuous improvement check-ins created opportunities for districts and providers to identify and address barriers to PL engagement in real time (e.g., scheduling conflicts with IEP meetings). Mutual accountability language gave providers standing to address district-side implementation challenges, such as competing instructional priorities that pulled teachers out of PL sessions.⁵

What Do These Emerging Findings Mean For Year 2 of Research?

- **Focus on Student Outcomes:** Year 2 research will build an understanding of how the more widespread inclusion of student outcomes in OBCs may shift perceptions of how the OBC elements, and in particular, the mutual accountability and contingent payment outcomes, are working within these partnerships.
- **Tracking Sustained Implementation Integrity;** Year 2 research will continue to explore the extent to which the OBC process is being implemented with integrity as the partnerships continue, and see whether the elements cited as supportive (e.g., mutual accountability, continuous improvement structures) are still adhered to at the same level as the partnership enters into a second year.

Emerging Findings: What Tensions are Arising When Implementing OBC for CBPL?

Here, we summarize emerging findings about tensions that cohort participants have identified as arising of the OBC process.

Across all partnerships, interviewees agreed that the OBC process for developing contracts requires more investment of staff time and operational infrastructure from both districts and providers when compared to non-OBC contracting.

The OBC contracting process included more staff members and more time from both PL providers and from districts than typical contracting. This meant an increased time demand was experienced across more staff members. For school districts, the additional staff included instructional staff and staff involved in data and measurement. For PL providers, both programmatic and business development staff were included at a higher level, in part because this was a new procurement method and the PL provider staff members acknowledged they did not have all the necessary infrastructure developed for the OBC procurement and contracting process. School district staff members from two different partnerships shared how this more extensive contract development process created time-related challenges for their organization, with one staff member sharing, in response to a question about challenges, “*Time. Time. Time. Oh my goodness, [it] was so hard.*” This reflection was focused on the additional meetings to learn about OBC and co-develop the contracts.

While PL provider staff tended to describe the capacity challenges as being more acute for their district partners, one PL provider staff member shared, “*I think there's some risk here in this contracting process taking so long and being so intense. And it's also, frankly, unpaid time.*” A PL provider staff member from another partnership shared a similar sentiment, saying “*...when we do all this planning during the contracting phase... that's actually a phase of work we would typically get paid for...*” The way in which OBC procurement is designed asks providers to invest significant staff time, develop measurement infrastructure, and contribute to scope design, all before a contract is executed. This may impact their approach to cost structures, and lead to

important assessments about how to navigate that unpaid time in light of the likelihood of the contract being agreed upon. Interviewees emphasized that navigating this extended process was something they felt was less risky in this cohort, specifically, because they were working within pre-existing, well-established relationships across the districts and PL providers. This insight highlights a potential barrier to entry for PL providers entering into this space—a foundation of pre-existing trust in the district partner. If mutual accountability is a key part of the OBC model during service delivery, extending that principle into the contracting phase itself may strengthen the model and address this barrier to provider participation. For example, compensating providers for co-design labor, or structuring the contracting phase with shared commitments from districts (not just shared meetings), could help to address PL provider concerns about the up-front risk. This may be particularly salient for smaller PL organizations for whom the up-front, unpaid investment may be more difficult to absorb.

In addition to the contracting process taking more time, operational infrastructure needed to be developed which required more staff members to contribute during contract development. This included conceptualizing and developing measurement infrastructure to support the ability to measure the outcomes included in the contract. It also included outlining specific roles and responsibilities for the year, and setting up the process for continuous improvement check-ins.

While the additional capacity needed to implement OBC as part of the pilot cohort was cited as a challenge, these efforts may represent districts developing infrastructure that supports not just the implementation of the contracted CBPL services, but also their broader infrastructure beyond these specific services for implementing and measuring PL services and instructional practices. As an example of this, the data manager from one school district shared that the changes they made to how they collected and analyzed math data for the OBC-contracted CBPL services led to the district making similar changes to their ELA data collection system, because they saw it as a benefit for their internal data systems.

PL provider staff raised tensions with balancing the specificity of the contracts with the flexibility perceived to be needed in providing CBPL services.

Some PL provider staff members shared that they had concerns about balancing the flexibility needed in the implementation of CBPL with the perceived rigidity of OBC contracts. PL provider staff members from two different partnerships expressed concerns that any changes in how they were delivering services would impact their ability to meet contract outcomes or disrupt their cost structures. This tension points to a design challenge within the OBC model. The continuous improvement elements encourage adaptive, responsive implementation. The contingent payment structure may discourage it, because service adjustments could affect whether outcomes are met. Clarifying how OBC contracts can accommodate responsive adjustments without triggering renegotiation of outcomes or payment terms would strengthen the model.

Hearing from a PL Provider Staff Member:

"I will say, the trickiest part of it, though...is – In general, our usual professional learning contracts are pretty flexible. So, let's say they've bought 24 onsite hours and 40 virtual hours, but later say they need more onsite and less virtual. That's very easy for us to say, 'okay, this many virtual equates to this many in-person'...But that's been harder to do with the OBC contract because we agreed up front on, 'this is what we're going to do and these are the outcomes'. So, anytime we were to change things—although we didn't re-go back through the contracting process—we did have to think about the implications. If we change that service for them, does that change what we think we can achieve outcome-wise? And then if it does change, are we comfortable with that change? So it did make the human part of professional learning—which is being really responsive to what you're seeing happen—a little more challenging to work around." — Academic Director, (PL Provider)

Given the complexity of providing CBPL services amidst dynamic education environments, PL provider staff members expressed concerns about financial risk while also wanting to provide positive, measurable results from contracted PL services.

While district and PL provider staff members agreed that PL services should lead to improvements in teacher practice and student outcomes, PL provider staff members shared that OBC can feel like a financial risk that their organization is taking on, especially given the complex contexts within which PL services are provided. PL provider staff members pointed to how quickly things can change in a school that impact the ability to see impacts from CBPL services, citing everything from instructional priorities changing to hurricanes impacting the ability of the PL provider to influence teacher practice, and to then measure those impacts in real time. This could create a situation where they feel like they delivered the services in the ways as intended, yet because of the complex educational environment they work in, do not see the outcomes met on the timeline they expected, and in turn, are not fully compensated. One provider shared: **"...we can do all of those things [PL services] with fidelity—following our coaching framework with continuously refined inputs—but so many of the indicators are lagging indicators. It feels like we can do everything right, with commitment to the outcomes we're working to achieve, and still not achieve them. Because of that, it doesn't feel like we have that much control."** Looking ahead in their end-of-year notes, a PL provider shared how it felt like this tension was potentially magnified as they moved into the second year and included student-level outcomes in their OBC, saying: "it feels like there are so many variables between PL and student outcomes." This concern reflects a structural feature of PL implementation. The relationship between PL inputs and measurable outcomes is mediated by school and district conditions that are often outside the provider's direct control, which has implications for how contingent payment thresholds are set and evaluated, and PL providers consider risk in the OBC model.

In addition to this discussion of OBC as a potential financial risk, however, multiple PL provider staff members expressed how OBC is a financial opportunity for their organization, because they see OBC as a potential way to differentiate their services from other providers.

A lack of consensus in the field on the ‘right’ way to measure timely impacts of professional learning on teachers created challenges in identifying the appropriate measures to include in the contract.

Interviewees raised the issue that, field-wide, there is not a single, well-validated measure of teacher practice that is used commonly across PL interventions. This is distinctive from services such as tutoring, in which the field might agree on student formative or summative assessments as outcome measures. Instead, the field has multiple different instruments, many of which are provider-specific (e.g., surveys, walk-through tools). This variability in instruments is reflected in this PL providers’ statement, *“I know there's not a lot of us doing OBC with PL right now, so it'll be really interesting down the line to have different examples of what an outcome could look like for teacher outcomes and student outcomes. And then...how do we align data to something like that? We have rubrics, surveys, and walkthrough tools. It's a lot of different things to compare.”* This reflects a broader gap in the PL field: unlike student-facing services where districts have access to standardized student achievement metrics, measures of teachers’ instructional practices are less standardized.

In addition to there being less consensus on the ‘right’ measures of PL impacts, interviewees raised how, other than teacher perceptions, they felt that some outcomes may be lagged in how they show up in teacher practice and student outcomes, with one provider saying, *“...the outcomes could be two years down the line when we're no longer measuring. And that feels pretty risky for us.”*

These measurement challenges reflect a broader challenge in the field of PL implementation and research. This challenge may also be an opportunity to bring more alignment towards identifying the universe of potential measures districts and PL providers are interested in, and creating aligned, validated, and adaptable instruments that can be drawn upon for OBCs.

What Do These Emerging Findings Mean For The Field?

- **Infrastructure Support for OBC Contracting and Implementation:** While the OBC contracting process resulted in contracts that districts felt were more aligned with their organizations’ needs, the process came with capacity challenges across district and PL provider staff members. This may be an opportunity to create infrastructure to support OBC engagement, both for districts and PL providers new to OBC, and to those building from initial work in this space. This infrastructure could include tools for identifying and aligning on evidence-based outcome measures, templates for continuous improvement check-ins, and OBC-specific resources for onboarding staff to the process.
- **Clarifying the Flexibility of the OBC Model:** PL provider staff members experienced tensions between the need for flexible CBPL implementation and the perceived rigidity of OBC contracts, expressing concerns that service adjustments could impact their ability to meet contract outcomes or disrupt cost structures. This highlights an opportunity to clarify the extent to which OBCs are intended to shape or impact PL provider and district flexibility, especially in light of the data-driven, continuous improvement nature of the model.

- **Building Aligned Measurement Tools and Buy-In for Standardized Tools:** Districts and PL providers noted the absence of a standardized, widely accepted tool for measuring CBPL service impacts on teachers. This gap points to a critical opportunity to establish aligned measurement infrastructure in CBPL. Districts need tools to measure a range of outcome types, including teacher perceptions, learning, and instructional practice, as well as organizational structures and student outcomes. There also needs to be support across organizations to buy into using more standardized tools to support field-level infrastructure and norms. This signals a need for evidence-informed tools to measure and monitor CBPL implementation and impacts. [RPPL's Shared Measures Toolkit](#) provides an example of field-level infrastructure, with adaptable tools designed to measure CBPL implementation across provider and district contexts.
- **Addressing Provider Risk and Contract Structures:** As currently designed, OBC shifts financial and operation risk from districts to providers. This is by design, and in line with theoretical ways to improve PL procurement and implementation. Emerging tensions around time investment and capacity challenges, perceived contractual rigidity, and financial risk were largely experienced by PL provider staff members, while school district staff report greater alignment with their organizations' needs. This suggests that there are opportunities to reflect on how OBC structures can address PL providers' perceptions of the risk that may come with OBC for CBPL, with potential implications for pricing and contract structures. The degree to which PL providers perceive this risk as manageable will potentially shape the extent to which OBC extends into the CBPL field, especially for smaller PL providers or for new partnerships without pre-existing trust.
- **Grounding Contingent Payment Outcomes in Evidence on PL Features and Impact:** PL provider interviewees expressed concern about whether the contingent payment outcomes in their OBCs were feasible, particularly given the time horizon of the contracts and the lagging nature of many PL outcomes. Setting feasible thresholds for contingent payment requires two things the field does not yet have in sufficient supply: (1) stronger evidence on how specific PL features (e.g., delivery model, dosage, coaching frequency) relate to the magnitude and timing of impacts on teacher practice and student outcomes, and (2) aligned, validated measures that capture those impacts at appropriate intervals. Research finds significant variation in the relationship between PL features and impact on teachers and students.⁹ Building norms around what constitutes realistic expected outcomes for OBC contracts, grounded in that evidence base, would support both districts and providers in setting contingent payment thresholds that reflect what CBPL services can reasonably achieve within a given time frame.

What Does This Mean For Year 2 of Research?

- **Focus on Evolving Capacity Demands:** Year 2 research will explore whether concerns about capacity and time demands decrease as districts and PL providers move into their second year of the OBC partnership.
- **Focus on Student Outcomes and PL Provider Perceptions of Risk:** Year 2 research will continue to explore how perceptions of risk change when student outcomes are included

in partnership contracts, and explore participant perceptions of how Year 1 and Year 2 outcomes were aligned and feasible for the duration of the CBPL services provided.

- **Focus on Perceived Rigidity:** Year 2 research will focus on identifying concrete examples of PL providers or district staff members needing more flexibility than outlined in contracts, and how that was navigated.

Conclusion

Across the three partnerships, common themes emerged around the ways in which the OBC process provided structures and supports for stronger CBPL contracting and implementation. In particular, school district and PL provider staff found value in the continuous improvement and mutual accountability structures. They identified these elements as helpful for creating strong partnerships and systems to ensure the work was being prioritized within districts and is implemented in response to the district and educator needs. Districts found value in co-developed, more detailed contracts that brought clarity and structure to their work. These findings align with the theoretical framework for using OBC for CBPL, with emerging evidence that increased information in the contracting phase can support districts' procurement practices, and that both the district and the PL provider found value in being mutually accountable for specific actions that enabled the services to be delivered. It also aligns with research on the positive ways continuous improvement can support refined professional learning services.

There are also tensions emerging, almost exclusively for PL providers, although capacity constraints were reported across roles. PL providers navigated unpaid upfront co-design labor while being held accountable to intermediate metrics that they felt may be distal, lagged, or sensitive to district-side implementation variables outside their direct control. Some of these tensions reflect the challenges of the field, including a lack of consensus on how to measure the multiple types of PL impacts that are expected (e.g., from teacher perceptions to student outcomes), and capacity and financial constraints across partners.

When contextualized within the broader research base on professional learning evaluation, the measurement challenges, and the associated risk, encountered by the cohort align with calls for more standardized measurement infrastructure.¹⁴ There is a lack of consensus on validated, standardized measures for intermediate outcome measures that are key to understanding PL impacts—particularly measures of instructional quality. Unlike student-facing services like tutoring, where standardized assessment metrics are widely accepted, capturing real-time changes in instructional quality are measured by a variety of tools (e.g., walk-through rubrics, surveys, exit tickets) that vary by provider and context. Because teacher practice survey measures are often subject to social desirability bias or require resource-intensive classroom observation models, the different levels at which PL is theorized to impact teacher and student outcomes into valid, reliable, and feasible performance metrics created challenges in the first year of the OBC for CBPL cohort.

These emerging perceptions are valuable for assessing the extent to which OBC is operating as intended for both PL providers and school districts. The findings suggest that OBC operates as intended in shifting some financial risk from districts to PL providers. In traditional contracting, districts bear the cost of services regardless of outcomes, with the risk that teachers and students may not benefit from the services. In OBC, providers take on financial risk tied to results. Providers report that this risk shift, combined with unpaid contracting labor and lagging outcome timelines, creates challenges.

The research team will continue to examine this balance in perceptions of the benefits and tradeoffs for PL providers and district staff as the cohort continues into year two. Understanding how specific procurement and implementation structures shape contracting, partnership dynamics, and outcomes is a critical question for the PL field. Year 1 findings suggest that the process elements of OBC, particularly collaborative contracting, mutual accountability, and continuous improvement, show early promise. The contingent payment mechanism introduces tensions, primarily for providers, that warrant continued examination and design attention as the cohort enters Year 2.

About RPPL

The [Research Partnership for Professional Learning](#) (RPPL) is a collective that brings the teacher professional learning field together to study which practices support teacher learning and increase equitable student outcomes.

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Technical Appendix

Data and Methods

The RPPL team conducted interviews with participants from the pilot OBC for CBPL cohort. This study included three partnerships within this cohort, each involving collaboration among a COBC coach who facilitated the onboarding, contracting, and monitoring processes, a professional learning provider team that delivers the PL services, and a school district team that receives those services. We recruited interviewees through collaboration with COBC staff members, who initially reached out to key personnel involved in contracting and implementing OBC within the cohort. RPPL researchers then followed up with additional study information including an overview of interview questions and consent materials, as well as scheduling. In some cases, we used snowball sampling by asking interviewees to recommend other relevant participants.

In total, we have interviewed 13 participants thus far: two COBC coaches, seven PL provider staff members, and four school district staff members. Interviews were conducted via Zoom between mid-November 2025 and mid-February 2026 and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were de-identified prior to analysis.

Appendix Table 1. Interviewee Roles and Sample Size

Interviewee Role	Number of Interviewees			
	Partnership 1	Partnership 2	Partnership 3	Total
PL Staff Member	3	2	2	7
School District Staff Member	2	1	1	4
COBC Coach	1*		1	2
Total	6	3	4	13

Note: *One COBC coach oversaw two partnerships. This coach is reflected in the “Total” for Partnership 1 as the majority of the interview content was focused on Partnership 1.

We also had access to all relevant contract documents—including contracts, rate cards, and cohort materials outlining roles, responsibilities, and onboarding processes—shared by COBC staff members. In one partnership, we were additionally able to obtain a non-OBC contract that had been executed in the previous year for the partnership, which allowed us to examine differences in structure, roles, and accountability mechanisms between the OBC and non-OBC contracts the PL provider and district had developed.

The emerging findings in this memo draw on our team's review of interview notes and transcripts from the 13 participants reflecting on their experiences implementing OBC within the PL cohort. While we have not yet done a formal qualitative coding analysis, we have synthesized our notes alongside a review of individual transcripts into these emerging findings. We then reviewed the contract and cohort documents to supplement and contextualize the interview data during analysis.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the interview sample was limited to participants who responded to our outreach and were available during the data collection window, as detailed in Appendix A. Consequently, the perspectives captured may not fully represent all stakeholders involved in these partnerships, as those who were unavailable might have had different experiences or insights. Additionally, all three partnerships entered the cohort with well-established relationships and received dedicated COBC coaching support. These enabling conditions should be considered when assessing whether these findings would hold for new partnerships or broader OBC implementation.

Additionally, we interviewed one OBC coach who oversaw two distinct partnerships. Because one of those partnerships was progressing more rapidly at the time, the coach focused almost exclusively on that single case during the interview. As a result, our current findings do not capture this coach's perspective on the second, less active partnership (at the time).

To address these limitations, we plan to conduct a follow-up round of interviews with participants. This next phase of data collection will allow us to capture a more balanced view of both partnerships and achieve a comprehensive, longitudinal understanding of how these contracts and relationships evolve over time.

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