

District Spotlight: Laura Mendes of Springfield Public Schools, on Their Partnership with Collaborative Classroom

By Peter Brunn | Categories: Interviews, Events, Thought Leadership

Collaborative Classroom's annual Summer Institute is the biggest professional learning event of our year, bringing together hundreds of educators from across the country to deepen their teaching practice and strengthen their implementations of Collaborative Classroom curricula.

This year we're delighted to have four official "partner districts" who are serving as thought partners to help us shape the 2021 Virtual Summer Institute: Burnsville Eagan Savage School District 191 in Minnesota, Corvallis School District in Oregon, Huntsville City Schools in Alabama, and Springfield Public Schools in Massachusetts.

In this interview, we spotlight our distinguished partners at Springfield Public Schools in a conversation with Laura Mendes, Director of Literacy, Elementary and Early Childhood Education.



Laura Mendes

To provide some background for our readers, could you say a few words about your district and the Collaborative Classroom curricula that you are implementing?

Springfield Public Schools serves approximately 26,000 students across 60 schools, 34 of which are elementary sites with Prek-5 or K-5 populations. Depending on the year, we are either the second- or third-largest school district in New England. (Boston Public Schools is the first.) We employ over 4,500 individuals. We are an urban district with a high rate of poverty. Despite the challenges that face urban districts such as Springfield, we are committed to ensuring that all our students see their full potential starting with early childhood and early literacy.

Collaborative Classroom's Collaborative Literacy suite, comprised of *Being a Writer*, *Making Meaning*, and *Being a Reader*, along with *SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words)*, is helping us to achieve our literacy goals and expectations for our students. We believe all students can learn to read and become literate and informed adults.

When you reflect on your experiences engaging in professional learning with Collaborative Classroom, what comes to mind?

We have a fairly long history with Collaborative Classroom. The first thing that comes to mind when I think of our professional relationship is the word "relationship."

Although we don't use Collaborative Classroom's Caring School Community curriculum, the crux of that program is an evident thread in the Collaborative Classroom curricula we do use, as well as in the character of all who work for the organization. We have more than a professional relationship; it feels personal because it is.

The organization's approach and stance with us has always been responsive and about keeping our students at the center of all we do and all the decisions we make. Collaborative Classroom is not an ordinary curriculum "vendor." They are our partners in making sure our students and educators get what they need to be successful.

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What are your hopes/goals for the 2021 Virtual Summer Institute? What are you most excited about?

I am looking forward to participating in this Institute. I am especially excited to hear from the keynotes and to learn from other districts using Collaborative Classroom curricula. We have so much to learn from one another. We can't do this work in isolation.

I'm also excited to share the work that [Collaborative Classroom professional learning consultant] Stacey Abeyta and I partnered on to explore how to build independent learners, and for members of our coaching team to share their work. I think others will learn from our work.

Springfield has been implementing Collaborative Classroom curricula since 2014, when your educators started using the *Being a Writer* program. What thoughts or guidance might you share with a district that is just launching its implementation?

As districts begin to implement any of the components of instruction from Collaborative Classroom, I would advise making sure educators know why this curriculum was chosen and *the why* behind the what it is and how to use it. If districts have internal coaches available, make sure they are equipped to lead the adult learning.

One of the biggest draws for us with any of the Collaborative Classroom curricula were the educative features of the resources within the manuals and in the Learning Portal (previously the Learning Hub). As we learned early on, really unpacking the unit by the overall goals, and then unpacking more closely by week and then by day can really keep teachers focused on the lessons' purposes.