








CURRICULUM CONSULTING | SUCCESS STORY

With the right *Tools* available, “why” becomes “how” in Simi Valley

About the Simi Valley Unified School District

-  28 schools 
-  750 teachers 
-  Serves suburban communities north of Los Angeles 

“That’s the piece that people want: how to easily get the strategies into the classroom.”

— Cheryl Abla, McREL implementation advisor

“Anyone can collect data. It’s what you do with it to improve instruction that matters.”

— Dr. Hani Youssef, assistant superintendent, Simi Valley USD

Recipe for Success: McREL Services Provided

- ❖ **Power Walkthrough®** classroom observation app and training, to help collect data on instructional practices and empower better conversations about PD and supports.
- ❖ **Classroom Instruction That Works® (CITW)** strategies and facilitator training, to broaden use of research-based instructional practices and build capacity among district staff to sustain the focus.
- ❖ Coaching and training inspired by *Tools for CITW*, giving teachers and school leaders practical classroom learning activities to employ, and the professional freedom to choose which to use, and when.
- ❖ **Technical assistance and training** in project-based learning.

Teachers dig deeper into Classroom Instruction That Works after *Tools* book adds classroom-ready tactics

The Challenge

“Why” was a great starter. But the Simi Valley Unified School District really began tasting success when it added a generous dollop of “how” to its professional development recipe.

The 2015–16 school year was a time of turnover in the Southern California district—new board, new superintendent, lots of new faces in admin—and Dr. Hani Youssef, assistant superintendent of educational services, wanted to be sure instructional capacity kept moving forward in the district’s 28 schools.

He has two deputies, and both of them had the same advice based on separate interactions with McREL International earlier in their careers: Let’s get trained in the Classroom Instruction That Works (CITW) framework, and also start using Power Walkthrough, which will reveal to principals and teachers if CITW’s nine best categories of instructional strategies are actually getting used in classrooms.

Strategic Solution

McREL consultant Cheryl Abila made three visits to Simi Valley between 2016 and 2018 to coach and train educators on CITW concepts and strategies. (In a fourth trip, Abila helped to start up a new, project-based learning elementary school in the district.) If these visits were graph points, they’d illustrate a rapid rise in instructional knowledge among hundreds of educators.

Visit 1, in January of 2016, was to teach several dozen administrators the basics of Power Walkthrough, a classroom observation app that can help gather data on instructional practices such as: Are teachers pausing after questions, are students letting each other speak in collaborative groups, are there opportunities to revise notes, and so on.

According to Dr. Youssef, that introduction to the CITW instructional strategies was alluring, because they perfectly mirrored what he wanted to see happen in schools, but also a little frustrating, because his teachers and school leaders were now so curious about the strategies that they wanted to learn more than a walkthrough could accommodate. A deeper dive into the book and PD that Power Walkthrough is based on, *Classroom Instruction That Works*, was in order.

So visit 2, in the summer of 2016, was a four-day train-the-trainers symposium that resulted in more than 220 teachers (out of a teaching corps of about 750) and school leaders becoming authorized to deliver CITW training and coaching themselves. Youssef said any concern he may have had that teachers would show up just for the \$110 summer workshop payment vanished when he saw them crowding Abila after her formal presentations, asking to keep the conversation going: “Long after we dismissed, those classrooms were still full.”

In business as usual, Simi Valley and McREL might have parted friends at that point, but then in 2018 Abila and several coauthors came out with a sequel of sorts, *Tools for Classroom Instruction That Works*. That’s the moment “why” became “how,” and Youssef brought Abila back yet again.

“Before the *Tools* book we would just say, ‘You need to be personalizing student learning, you need to have goal setting, you should be creating graphs where students can be tracking their efforts’—all these things they had to create—but we didn’t give them the *how*. The *how* really helped, and that’s why we use that book the most now, because that’s the piece that people want: how to easily get the strategies into the classroom,” Abila said.

Echoed Youssef: “The very initial piece in CITW is establishing a positive classroom environment and establishing positive relationships with your students. That was our theme as well. We talked about building these relationships, but very rarely did we discuss the tools to create those environments. Now you can go to a training on day one and walk out and apply it in your classroom.”

Results

In keeping with McREL’s philosophy of sparking curiosity and “inside out” school improvement, further implementation of CITW was left in the capable hands of the now-trained school leaders and teachers themselves. “We didn’t as a district dictate, for example, that our first area would be setting objectives. We relied on the trainers and their principals and APs for how they’re going to roll this out. Each school decided what was best for them,” Youssef said.

The results, he admits, are difficult to measure, because Simi Valley is compelled to use a state assessment that simply doesn’t address teaching and learning the way he wishes it would. Creating a district assessment is high on the to-do list.

But there’s no question the Simi Valley school district is a changed place. Said Youssef: “Anyone can collect data. It’s what you do with it to improve instruction that matters.”

Next Steps

CITW and the tools that support it are now finding their way into Simi Valley’s new emphasis on cooperative learning groups, and likely will influence the district’s entire approach to assessment.

“When you want to know if students are learning, the very first question you have to ask is, ‘What is it you want students to learn?’ Our next step is, we need to work our way toward some common assessment. Whether it be departmental, schoolwide, or districtwide, we need some tool other than the state test to measure learning,” Youssef said.