



# **Evaluation of the California Subject Matter Project**

History-Social Science Project  
Case Study

Teresa McCaffrey and Nancy Kamprath Bier  
SRI International  
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# The California History-Social Science Project: The UC Berkeley History-Social Science Project and the Mt. Diablo Unified School District

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## Introduction

Despite pressures for quick one-size-fits-all fixes to providing teachers with professional development, the California History-Social Science Project (CHSSP) has maintained a focus on providing long-term, subject-specific professional development. The CHSSP has sought opportunities to partner with districts, schools, and teachers so as to help build teachers' content knowledge, academic literacy skills, and professional communities. By doing so, the CHSSP strives to enable teachers to base their instruction on primary sources and historical analysis and argumentation. At the same time, districts across California have been seeking ways to help their teachers gain the skills necessary to deliver rich learning experiences that offer students opportunities to develop advanced skills through a variety of approaches to learning.

This case study describes the development of a partnership between one of the CHSSP sites, the University of California, Berkeley History-Social Science Project (UCB HSSP; Exhibit 1), and the Mount Diablo Unified School District (MDUSD; Exhibit 2). This partnership began in the mid-1990s and continues today. We begin by describing the work done in this partnership, starting with the initial collaborative efforts that began the partnership. Next, we illustrate how the CHSSP and MDUSD built on multiple opportunities to expand the partnership and achieved many of its goals. After explaining the evolution of the partnership, we discuss key teacher-reported outcomes as well as the challenges the partnership faced. The work we portray exemplifies some of the work going on among the CHSSP sites, work that is constantly evolving as the CHSSP seeks ways to move forward in an increasingly challenging context.

## The Beginning of a Partnership

The partnership between the UCB CHSSP and MDUSD stemmed from a common desire to support teachers and improve student outcomes. With that goal, they began working to provide professional development for grade-level groups of teachers. This joint work resulted in strong relationships that would later lead to larger scale efforts.

One of the long-term goals of the CHSSP was to build relationships that could provide opportunities for high-quality professional development for teachers. The CHSSP sites sought to expand both the depth and breadth of their work by reaching more teachers,

### **Exhibit 1 The California History-Social Science Project**

The CHSSP is an organization of teachers, historians, and associated scholars that provides training, teacher development, and leadership opportunities. The CHSSP network is dedicated to increasing student achievement through a research-based approach that addresses standards-aligned content, academic literacy, and the disciplinary skills of history and the social sciences. In addition to the UC Berkeley location, CHSSP sites can be found at California State Universities at Fresno, Long Beach, and Dominguez Hills and at UCLA, UC Irvine, and UC Davis, which also houses the CHSSP's statewide office.

schools, and districts, as well as by strengthening and expanding the content of their professional development offerings. In fostering a partnership with the MDUSD, the UCB HSSP site hoped to set an expectation that history-focused professional development should be a regular occurrence for all teachers instead of an occasional experience for those teachers personally interested in history.

Before the work with the UCB HSSP began, the district personnel were aware they needed to develop multiple ways of supporting teachers in order to improve student outcomes. When the partnership began in the mid-1990s, MDUSD had few professional development offerings, and none were targeted to history teachers. The resources available for professional development were

primarily for reading and math, the areas of greatest accountability. Aware that they could not provide all the support teachers needed, MDUSD staff members sought outside assistance to increase teachers' knowledge and skills and improve student learning. Because of the UCB HSSP's reputation for building teachers' content knowledge and professional community, the MDUSD curriculum coordinator contacted the UCB HSSP's director. Thus, the partnership began.

In the first 5 years of the partnership, the UCB HSSP provided professional development directed to one grade level at a time. The main purpose of this early work was to build teachers' content knowledge, improve their academic literacy skills, and give them strategies to better support student learning. Each year, the UCB HSSP worked with about 10 teachers from one grade level for 3 days spread out over the spring semester. The work started with sixth-grade teachers and then expanded to seventh, eighth, 10th-, and 11th-grade teachers in subsequent years. Teachers in each grade level came away with a binder full of resources including curriculum, tools, and strategies to apply in classroom teaching. For example, one of the strategies involved backward planning where teachers looked at end-of-year expectations for their students and created the supports necessary to help them achieve their learning goals.

One of the outcomes of this early collaborative work was that district staff members, teachers, and UCB HSSP leaders formed strong professional relationships and created structures for ongoing professional development. This facilitated UCB HSSP's and MDUSD's work with teachers and enabled them to be more responsive because they were familiar with the needs of both the schools and the MDUSD staff members. In addition, establishing relationships and collaborative structures enabled the UCB HSSP and MDUSD to position themselves to take advantage of funding opportunities as they emerged. Thus, developing relationships, creating support structures, and laying the groundwork for additional work were all important elements of the early partnership work.

**Exhibit 2**  
**The Mount Diablo USD**

The MDUSD is a large suburban district in the East San Francisco Bay Area. Its racial and language demographics, as well as its test scores, mirror those of the state as a whole. MDUSD includes both low- and high-income schools as well as some schools with a high percentage of English language learners. Having a wide range of student needs within one large district magnifies the challenges district staff members face daily as they seek to support teachers and improve student outcomes.

## Building on Opportunities to Expand the Partnership

During the initial years of the partnership, personnel from both the MDUSD and the UCB HSSP reported they were able to see that the professional development was beginning to change teacher practice. Seeing changes take hold in teachers' classrooms inspired them to continue to move the work forward and look for ways to deepen and expand the professional development opportunities within the partnership.

For 3 years, the MDUSD and the UCB HSSP collaborated on developing a proposal for the Teaching American History (TAH) grant program as a way to continue and expand their work (Exhibit 3). Through participating in the TAH grant program they hoped to build a community in which teachers could increase their historical knowledge and improve their ability to teach literacy skills within a historical context. The partners worked collaboratively to outline a professional development experience that would extend teachers' content knowledge and develop their literacy strategies in a professional community. The process of developing the grant proposal strengthened the ongoing partnership work and eventually resulted in the receipt of a 3-year TAH grant (with one carry-forward year) to work with fifth-, eighth-, and 11th-grade teachers.

## The Professional Development

By winning the TAH grant, the UCB HSSP and MDUSD gained the opportunity to provide long-term, in depth professional development for MDUSD history teachers. The plan they created was intended to develop teachers' content and pedagogical content knowledge, improve their academic literacy skills, and enhance their professional development. The professional development they designed to reach these goals was based on a year-round model where teachers participated in summer institutes and were supported through colloquia and classroom observations and demonstrations throughout the year.

### Content

The professional development the UCB CHSSP provided for MDUSD sought to increase teachers' content knowledge and academic literacy skills by working with them to create and implement an innovative curriculum for a specific discipline. Professional development providers hoped this would move teachers and students away from textbook-directed instruction and toward using primary documents to engage in historical analysis and argumentation. The goal was to do this by increasing teachers' content knowledge and critical thinking skills and developing their professional community.

### *Building content and pedagogical content knowledge*

According to the UCB HSSP staff, one of the critical goals of TAH professional development was enhancing teachers' content knowledge so that they could offer

### Exhibit 3 Teaching American History Grants

The purpose of the Teaching American History grants is "to raise student achievement by improving teachers' knowledge and understanding of and appreciation for traditional U.S. history." The grants are designed for local education agencies to pair with groups with deep content knowledge to create and disseminate new and cohesive models of professional development. In this way, the grant program is designed to promote the teaching of U.S. history as a separate academic subject, improve practice, and increase student achievement.

students richer learning experiences. From the UCB CHSSP's perspective, history requires an understanding of the complex relationships between different events. There is always more than one way to understand historical events and the evidence that supports a historical argument. Basing work on this premise meant that teachers had to understand the complexity of history, that events have multiple interpretations, and the need for evidence to support a historical argument. According to partnership members, a key aspect of this approach was helping teachers understand that the way they frame and pose questions to their students affects how the students perceive and investigate a particular topic. For example, the co-director of the UCB HSSP commented

If you want kids to really do rigorous history, you have to help them understand how complex it is. You can't just tell it as this done story.... Because that's not rigorous history, that's just memorization...so I guess that when I think about rigorous history it's not "What was the Civil War?" but "How did the role of slavery affect the onset of the Civil War?" It's issue based and it's arguable. You want to teach your history in a way that kids have more than one way to answer it.

In creating the structure of the TAH grant proposal, the partnership designed the professional development events not only to build teachers' content knowledge, but also to help teachers learn how to frame questions that exposed students to the complexities of the historical content being examined. For example, during both the summer institutes and colloquia, university professors gave lectures on a variety of topics (e.g., causes of the Civil War, triangular trade, and Hispanics and the United States). These presentations were followed by a grade-level discussion led by a graduate student from the University of California, Berkeley. During the discussions, the groups talked about the main points of the lecture, how the information could be used in teaching, and how to use various tools and strategies (e.g., focus questions) to help students represent the varying historical points of view.

#### *Enabling the teaching of academic literacy*

A second goal of the collaboration was to improve the teaching of academic literacy in the district. The reason for this was twofold. First, UCB HSSP believed that teachers must scaffold student learning to promote the students' comprehension and analysis of historical texts. Scaffolding, according to UCB HSSP, provides the foundation on which students will then be able to make sound historical arguments. Second, the UCB HSSP believes that writing is a critical element in the learning process. One UCB HSSP staff member stated, "Writing has a huge role in student thinking. They don't really know it until they can write about it." Through improved academic literacy skills, students could gain a greater understanding of the nuances of historical events. Thus, by scaffolding students' literacy teachers could help them think and write historically. Teachers needed both academic literacy skills and teaching strategies to pass those skills on to their students.

The academic literacy strategies presented by the UCB HSSP varied in content but were all designed to help students understand both the language and the ideas behind the language in historical texts. For example, the passive voice is often used in traditional textbooks when the authors do not want to assign responsibility. The goal was for the teachers to have tools and strategies to help students identify and interpret the type of

language used so they could understand the historical context behind the text and not just accept the textbook’s interpretation. To assist teachers in this task, the CHSSP developed many graphic organizer tools. These tools covered a range of topics and provided guided structures that students could use to analyze textbooks or primary source documents in order to, for example, identify the underlying context for historical writings or varying points of view for historical events.

*Building community to support teacher learning*

The UCB HSSP believed that by working together, teachers and professional developers could push each other’s thinking and invigorate teachers’ practice. Giving teachers new content knowledge and strategies for teaching academic literacy was important but not sufficient to institute meaningful changes in teacher practice. According to the UCB HSSP model, building a professional community was also necessary so that teachers could discuss new ideas and concepts with other history

professionals. The third element in the TAH grant thus was the development of a professional community to foster and support the work throughout the district.

Teachers worked together formally and informally throughout the grant period. Formal structures were in place for teachers to reflect together on their practice as they looked at student work or got feedback on observations. One of the ways the grant sought to build community was to have teachers examine student work during professional development events (Exhibit 4). As part of this process, teachers volunteered to try out the TAH curriculum units and bring the student work back to the group for discussion and reflection. As one teacher described, looking at student work provided teachers with an opportunity to analyze what students had learned and reflect on how well the students could “argue a point and select good evidence instead of just writing random facts on the paper.” To facilitate discussion and keep the focus on the student work and improving the lesson (rather than on the teacher), the TAH grant used a strict protocol in which participants had well-defined roles and a limited amount of time to spend on each segment. Teachers also worked together informally as they discussed new content and strategies and developed and revised units. Each of these structures, whether formal or informal, helped teachers to become part of a professional community that could, ideally, support them beyond the life of the grant.

**Exhibit 4**  
**A Lesson on the Interstate Highway System and Understanding Points of View**

A group of 11th-grade teachers gathered to discuss a TAH grant lesson on the development of the U.S. interstate highway system. In the process, they exemplified how looking at student work can push teachers’ thinking about how and when to present a lesson. The lesson asked students to read two short passages from two different textbooks and then use a graphic organizer to analyze the authors’ points of view. During the group discussion, teachers touched on a number of salient points. They talked about using the lesson as a warm-up rather than as a complete lesson or, conversely, of supporting longer discussion with another graphic organizer. They discussed the quality of the question asked of the students and wondered whether the students’ answers were similar because they really understood the lesson or because the question was vague. Deep discussion of topics, looking at questioning techniques, and reflecting on the biases of authors are all pedagogical strategies the TAH grant professional development stresses.

## **Format**

The TAH grant consisted of a professional development program structured around six key elements:

- Lectures by professors on new historical information and perspectives
- Presentation of new literacy strategies to scaffold students' learning as they begin to look at history in more complex ways
- Curriculum development through collaborative lesson and unit design with the support of teacher leaders and graduate students
- Classroom implementation of these lessons and analysis of student work to discern what students learned from the lesson
- Demonstration lessons and observations to support classroom implementation
- Reflection on lesson implementation followed by revision of the lessons and units.

The UCB CHSSP delivered the professional development through a summer institute followed up by colloquia during the school year. The summer institute and the colloquia work incorporated these six key elements. In the summer institute, for instance, teachers might hear a lecture by a professor on the causes of the Civil War, learn new strategies for supporting academic literacy, and work with a group of same-grade-level teachers to develop a lesson plan. Then, in the fall the teacher might try out the lesson while a grade-level coach observed, provided feedback, and supported reflection. Finally, the teacher might revise the lesson according to what she learned through this process.

The first two summer institutes consisted of 80 hours of professional development over 2 weeks, followed by four colloquia. However, in response to feedback from both the leadership team and the participants, as well because of funding pressures, in the final year of the grant the leaders shortened the summer institute to 1 week so that additional time could be spent mentoring teachers in the classroom.

## **Examining the Outcomes of the Partnership**

The partnership between the MDUSD and the UCB HSSP succeeded in developing key supports for teaching history, changing teacher practice, and improving student outcomes. Participants created curriculum units focused on students learning about history as “historians” who seek a deeper understanding rather than as simple consumers of history facts as presented in traditional textbooks. UCB HSSP staff supported teachers as leaders and as members of a professional community, enabling their growth as professionals. Finally, there are signs that this work led to improved student outcomes in the classrooms of participating teachers.

### **Facilitated the Creation and Implementation of Innovative Curriculum**

One of the key outcomes of the partnership was that, through ongoing collaboration, teachers and professional developers created numerous lessons for teachers to implement, resulting in a set of curriculum units, all of which were tested and revised by the teachers



themselves. Teachers reported that their teaching practice improved as a result of the tools and structures they gained through the professional development. Furthermore, they reported that the changes in their practice worked to develop students' critical thinking skills, improve students' academic literacy, and keep the lesson focused on salient concepts.

Teachers reported that the lessons they developed as part of the ongoing collaboration in the partnership were designed to build students' awareness that history is a complex subject and to develop critical thinking skills. As one teacher participant noted, the lessons enabled teachers to bring in more analysis, more discussion, and more interaction with primary sources. Another teacher described learning different ways to help students understand cause and effect, chronology, and compare and contrast. These understandings could work to build a more nuanced understanding of history for students.

The work of the grant also helped teachers keep their lessons on salient points and concepts. According to the participants, having structured discussions with colleagues played a key role in helping them focus their instruction. For example, one teacher reported that through the work of the grant she learned to concentrate more on her ultimate goals rather than on teaching students history facts. Discussion with colleagues helped her focus on

“What is your goal in teaching them [that]?” That’s really helped me so that I don’t feel like I have to tell them every story of history, but I do need to tell them a few stories of history really well and I really need them to understand that story from beginning to end...I’m really going to look at it from an end perspective first. So I’m talking about the Civil War, what do I want them to get out of the Civil War? OK, so what facts do I need to put in that story to get that end result?

As a result of collaborative opportunities within the partnership, teachers were able to both create their own lessons and implement lessons designed by other teacher participants. Developing their own lessons gave teachers the chance to put into action the new ways of thinking about history and literacy that they were exposed to in the partnership's professional development events. Furthermore, teachers reported that using these lessons inspired them to add to other parts of the curriculum, thereby going beyond the text throughout their teaching, not just in the lessons developed within the work of the grant.

In addition to these teacher reports of improvement in their practice, an outside evaluator also documented improvements in the curriculum of participating teachers. As part of a WestEd evaluation for the U.S. Department of Education Grant Performance Report,<sup>1</sup> lessons were scored for six components: (1) historical content knowledge, (2) historical focus question, (3) academic literacy strategies, (4) primary sources, (5) assessment, and (6) lesson plan organization. The lessons teachers created before participation in the grant were mostly rated as beginning or developing. Those developed after participation in the professional development were rated as advanced or proficient to advanced on the same components.

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<sup>1</sup> *U.S. Department of Education Grant Performance Report (ED 524B)*, WestEd, August 31, 2009.

**Exhibit 5**  
**Mean Scores for the Pre-lesson and Post-lesson Plans**

Rubric Component	Pre-lesson Plans	Post-lesson Plans
Historical content knowledge	2.42	3.86
Historical focus question	1.75	4.00
Academic literacy strategies	1.58	4.00
Primary sources	1.50	3.43
Assessment	2.42	4.00
Lesson plan organization	2.58	4.00

Scale items: 1 = Not at all, 2 = Very little, 3 = Somewhat, 4 = To a good extent, and 5 = To a great extent.

**Developed Teacher Leadership Skills**

The partnership provided multiple ways for teachers to grow both in their own practice and in supporting other teachers. Some of these opportunities occurred within the work of the grant. For instance, teachers had the chance to act as mentor teachers. Mentor teachers helped develop and lead the professional development and also worked with the participating teachers in their classrooms by giving demonstration lessons and conducting observations. Other opportunities occurred outside the work of the TAH grant. For example, participating teachers were given the opportunity to present at district professional development days and at a variety of history and social studies conferences.

**Enabled the Development of a Community to Support Teachers' Learning**

At all levels of participation, teachers, administrators, and professional developers consistently reported that one of the greatest outcomes for teachers was the development of a professional community. The community provided teachers with a place to support each other and to push each other's thinking. This opportunity was especially important because teaching can be such an isolating profession. A district administrator reported, "The last couple of years I watched teachers grow into learning how to work together and collaborate around lessons. Because teachers, especially at high school, tend to be very isolated. They're almost working in silos." Teachers echoed this in their comments. One teacher stated, "It rejuvenates you, it makes you enjoy your job, enjoy your subject matter, like your colleagues, want to support your colleagues. And the reading and writing is really helping my kids." Thus, she saw benefits for both herself and her students from her participation in this community of teachers.

**Impacted Student Learning**

Finally, there are hopeful signs that the work of the grant affected student outcomes. In one evaluation of the UCB HSSP/MDUSD TAH grant, students in participating teachers' classes did significantly better on standardized tests than students from teachers' classes

who did not participate in the TAH grant.<sup>2</sup> According to WestEd’s evaluation report, both 8th- and 11th-grade students who had TAH teachers scored higher on the History California Standards Test (CST) than students who had non-TAH teachers. Although this is only one evaluation and teachers self-selected into the professional development, it provides a corroboration of participants’ informal reports of the positive effects they saw on their students throughout the course of their participation in the TAH grant work.

## **Overcoming Challenges**

For more than 10 years, the UCB HSSP has been offering sustained research-based professional development to participating teachers in the MDUSD. This professional development has led to enhanced curriculum, the development of teacher leaders, the creation of a teacher professional community, and improved student outcomes. Whereas members of the partnership described accomplishments, they also acknowledged that they had to confront some challenges over the years. These included trying to cover all the material for the CSTs while also going in depth in ways that helped students become historical thinkers, communicating effectively in the context of a large leadership team, recruiting teachers, and instability in collaborative opportunities because of budget constraints.

### **Depth Versus Breadth**

In this era of high-stakes testing, teachers can find it frightening to make the trade-off for depth instead of breadth. Participants reported that teaching the TAH units enriched the curriculum in their classes and increased student interest. They also acknowledged, however, that it slowed down the pace of the class. One teacher reported that using the curriculum and tools from the grant had the following impact in her classroom:

It’s slowed my curriculum down...because it takes time. It takes time to teach writing...and we talk about...what’s a real in-depth story besides your paragraph in your history text. You get all that enrichment that adds to the story...that’s what grabs you, that’s what interests you, that’s what makes you want to analyze...but it has slowed down my curriculum. You know we’re a survey course and I can’t go that much in depth on every little topic because then I’m behind by the time we get to the CSTs and the end of the year.

### **Leadership Team Communication**

The UCB HSSP and MDUSD used a relatively large leadership team to carry out the work of the TAH grant. This team comprised staff from the UCB CHSSP and the MDUSD. The UCB CHSSP group consisted of a director, a grant coordinator, graduate students, and teacher coaches for each of the grade levels (grades 5, 8, and 11). Teacher-leaders and administrators represented the MDUSD. Together, they planned the professional development. Although this approach provided many people with opportunities for input and could enrich the work of the grant, partnership members acknowledged that it was at times difficult to communicate effectively across such a large leadership team.

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<sup>2</sup> *U.S. Department of Education Grant Performance Report (ED 524B)*, WestEd, August 31, 2009.

## **Teacher Recruitment**

Organizers struggled to recruit teachers to participate in the grant. The number of total participants was approximately 30 each year of the grant. For instance, at the elementary level, even though all teachers were responsible for teaching history, only a limited number of teachers had a passion for history and sought out professional development opportunities in history. Moreover, there were competing demands on teachers' time. In the MDUSD as well as across the state, social studies is currently deemphasized in favor of reading and math. One way the grant organizers addressed recruitment difficulties was by building support among principals so that they in turn could recruit teachers at their schools. The grant coordinator made a point of going to principal meetings and to school sites to spread the word and to recruit new participants. Another recruitment strategy was to have teacher participants work to enlist fellow teachers, communicating the benefits they had received as a result of being part of a collaborative community.

## **Budgetary Challenges**

The economic downturn during the last few years of the grant created difficult circumstances in MDUSD. Teachers were losing their jobs, were being asked to teach different grade levels, and were generally disheartened by their labor conditions. In fact, the MDUSD gave a pink slip to the TAH grant coordinator. The grant leaders tried to work with teachers to support their continued participation as they went through these tumultuous times. For instance, one young teacher was moved from fifth grade to kindergarten. In theory, this disqualified her from participating in the grant. She was enthusiastic and making changes in her practice, however, so the grant leaders hired her to serve as a fifth-grade teacher coach to enable her continued participation.

## **Sustaining the Work of the Partnership**

Through their partnership, the MDUSD and the UCB site of the CHSSP worked to build teachers' content and pedagogical content knowledge in order to improve students' historical knowledge, critical thinking, and literacy skills. They did this by maintaining a focus on the CHSSP belief that good professional development should consist of creating a supportive professional community where new content knowledge and pedagogical strategies could be explored, implemented, and reviewed. Through their work on the grant, the partners enhanced teachers' understanding of history as a complex discipline, enabled teachers' professional growth, helped create a history curriculum directed to building students' critical thinking skills and improved student outcomes.

In fact, the work was perceived as being so successful that the partners applied for and received a second TAH grant to continue their work. The focus continued to be on building teachers' content knowledge and academic literacy skills within a professional community. This time, however, the partners were excited that they would be able to start with an even stronger base as they worked with teachers and administrators well versed in the key concepts and processes of their TAH professional development structure. They also felt that they would be able to build off the framework of the first grant, as well as the curriculum and teaching tools already developed, to continue to deliver high-quality professional development for MDUSD teachers. It was the partners' hope that with this foundation, the work of the partnership would have every opportunity to continue to

flourish. Regardless of the TAH grant program's future, the CHSSP is committed to working in partnership with local schools across the state to improve teacher practice, student learning, and literacy.