

Is It Working? How Fresno Unified Redesigned an Existing EdTech Contract Around Student Results

THE CHALLENGE

Fewer than 1 in 3 third graders reading on grade level

DESIGNING FOR SUCCESS

Building accountability into every contract

THE JOURNEY

From 345 programs to one clear line of sight to results

THE IMPACT

Reading gains, contract accountability, and a district transformed

LESSONS LEARNED

Start with the goal, let the data lead the way

THE CHALLENGE

When Fresno Unified School District took stock of its own progress, the picture was clear: fewer than half of the district's first graders were reading proficiently, and by the time students reached third grade, only 1 in 3 were reading on grade level. Their goal was as simple as it was ambitious: every child reading by Grade 1.

However, a closer look at the district's initiatives revealed 345 programs in operation, and only 14% had a clear objective, aligned success measures, and results available. The district had been investing heavily without a clear line of sight to outcomes.

That finding catalyzed the Academic Return on Investment (AROI) framework, requiring every district initiative to identify expected outcomes and build in a plan to measure results. Outcomes based contracting (OBC) offered a mechanism to do that at the contract level.

A long-standing contract with Curriculum Associates for i-Ready, valued at over \$1.5 million, came into focus through this process. The tool was available across K-8 schools, but the district had yet to establish the consistent implementation expectations needed to connect usage to student results. The district was paying for access. Could they start paying for results?

A district audit of 345 active initiatives revealed a striking accountability gap

14%

of initiatives had a clear objective, aligned success measures and results available.

The remaining 86% were operating without measurable outcomes – millions of dollars invested without a clear line of sight to impact.

DESIGNING FOR SUCCESS

From the start, Fresno's team was deliberate about scope. Rather than converting the i-Ready contract to OBC in year 1, the district restructured the existing contract to carve out a separate outcomes based agreement focused on the students most in need. Starting small was intentional — to strengthen implementation before scaling, and to ensure that accountability felt like a recognition of success rather than a penalty for schools that hadn't yet had the conditions or support to fully deliver.

What made Fresno's approach distinctive was the intentionality behind every design decision, one that reflected the core principles of OBC: clearly defining the student population, selecting outcomes that were meaningful and measurable, structuring payment tied directly to individual student results, establishing mutual accountability between district and provider from the start, and building continuous improvement into the contract. The result was a \$78,750 contract focused on approximately 1,750 first grade students reading below grade level on baseline assessments, with half of that value contingent on end-of-year reading growth and proficiency targets.

TWO SEPARATE CONTRACTS - CURRICULUM ASSOCIATES SY 2024-25

TRADITIONAL CONTRACT

~ **\$1.5 M**

Total Contract Value

- Kindergarten + Grades 2-8
- All Students
- Payment on Delivery

PAYMENT OUTCOMES

- PRICE BASED ON COST
- PAYMENTS TIED TO INPUTS

OUTCOMES BASED CONTRACT

\$78,750

50% Contingent on Outcomes

- 1st grade - ~1,750 Students
- Reading Below Grade Level
- Payment Tied To Results

PAYMENT OUTCOMES

- EOY READING PROFICIENCY
- TYPICAL GROWTH
- HIGH GROWTH

The OBC wasn't designed as a standalone pilot: it was embedded within Fresno's broader "Level Up" literacy initiative and the district's "Every Child is a Reader" campaign, woven into the work teachers and principals were already doing. That integration gave the contract traction at the school level that a siloed initiative rarely achieves.

THE JOURNEY

Implementation required thoughtful coordination. Fresno Unified's seven regions operate with significant autonomy, and like many large California districts, site-level buy-in was built through engagement rather than mandated from the top down.

Participation in initial training varied across regions, and the district worked intentionally to build shared understanding across schools with different starting points and priorities.

The student roster was finalized in the opening weeks of implementation as beginning-of-year diagnostic data became available. Beyond the contract itself, Fresno invested in the systems and structures needed to make the work real in schools. This included clear governance, coordinated training, and shared tools that supported implementation across levels of the system.

Working collaboratively with Curriculum Associates, Fresno operationalized this approach through a multi-tiered governance structure: a Core Team meeting weekly, a Principal Advisory Team with one principal per region meeting monthly, and a Teacher Advisory Team providing on-the-ground feedback. Together, these teams created a continuous feedback loop that kept district leadership, school principals, and teachers aligned around the same goals throughout the year.

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Fresno's experience reflects key findings from [Digital Promise's research](#) on OBC's impact on edtech procurement (March 2026) and the core principles of the Center's [Standards of Excellence for Outcomes Based Contracting™](#).

Increased edtech usage rates

Districts engaging in OBC saw higher usage relative to national rates - with 69% of students meeting the recommended dosage, almost 14 times the 5% industry baseline - driven in part by stronger implementation support from providers. Fresno's bi-weekly data cycles and the custom monitoring reports CA developed to support district-level implementation illustrate this implementation support.

Professional learning was systematic and layered, spanning teachers, coaches, principals, and paraprofessionals, with materials aligned to foundational reading skills. Learning walks, conducted twice monthly, were supported by jointly developed observation rubrics and clear look-fors to reinforce instructional consistency. As implementation progressed, the district strengthened its data and communication systems.

Curriculum Associates developed custom usage and monitoring reports at weekly, monthly, and quarterly intervals, while co-branded communication materials helped educators understand expectations, track progress, and identify next steps in language aligned to the district's broader literacy work.

With these structures in place, 50% of participating students met the recommended dosage threshold. While this was lower than the district's target, it still represents ten times the 5% industry baseline.

Clearly-defined roles and partnership for continuous improvement

OBC's clearly-defined roles and shared responsibilities across district, school, and provider teams drove a systematic shift toward real-time course correction and continuous improvement. CA's active participation in learning walks and Fresno's multi-tiered governance structure kept educational partners aligned and engaged at every level of the organization.

Instructional coherence

The OBC model enabled districts to better align edtech implementation with broader instructional goals. Fresno embedded their OBC within the "Level Up" literacy initiative and "Every Child is a Reader" campaign, making accountability feel native to the work already underway.

Provider learning and effective implementation

Providers gained new knowledge about effective implementation that extended beyond the single contract. For Curriculum Associates, whose dosage research had focused on 3rd grade students, the data from Fresno's OBC generated new insights into what effective implementation looks like for younger learners.

THE IMPACT

For the Fresno USD AROI team the shift in how the district used data to ensure tools were making a difference for students was transformative:



“The AROI framework pushed us to ask a harder question: not whether i-Ready was being used, but whether it was actually moving outcomes. Grounding our partnership in shared data and clearly defined results shifted the entire conversation: from monitoring implementation to understanding impact. That's what accountable contracting looks like in practice.

—FUSD Cross-Departmental AROI Team”

Each of Fresno's 1,750 first grade students had the opportunity to meet multiple growth and proficiency targets, adding up to 3,850 possible outcomes across the contract. Nearly 2,000 outcomes were achieved, each one representing a student reaching a reading or growth milestone.

The results reflected meaningful progress, particularly in growth:



1,000+

TYPICAL GROWTH
OR HIGHER



600+

STRETCH GROWTH



320

REACHED GRADE-LEVEL
READING PROFICIENCY

The numbers seen in Fresno are far more than just statistics. They represent real students and reflect measurable and meaningful gains in student literacy outcomes.

The partnership also generated impact beyond the contract itself, particularly in how data was used to support implementation. As Ken Tam of Curriculum Associates explained:



“The report that we generate... we've now generated that same report for other districts across the country because getting to that level of granularity of how schools are doing on a regular basis allows for two things to happen: regular celebrations of the places that are meeting the goals as intended, and also putting the right attention to the places that may not be implementing with great intentionality.

—Ken Tam

The district continued with another OBC in 2025-26, and district trustees are being trained in outcomes based governance, a signal that the accountability principles embedded in this contract are taking root at the highest levels of district leadership. Driven by the AROI framework, that commitment now reaches across the district, embedded in contract tools, aligned to district and school planning cycles, and supported by governance structures built to ensure every investment is clearly connected to measurable outcomes and improved student results. When Fresno started this work, they asked a simple question: could they start paying for results? The answer is yes.



[READ MORE ABOUT OUR IMPACT](#)

LESSONS LEARNED

Fresno's partnership produced results and a clear set of conditions that made them possible.

WHAT WORKED WELL



MANAGEABLE SCOPE

Carving out a focused OBC from a larger contract made accountability feel achievable rather than punitive

INITIATIVE ALIGNMENT

Embedding the OBC within “Level Up” and “Every Child is a Reader”, with senior leadership sponsorship, created natural buy-in at every level of the district



TRUE PARTNERSHIP WITH CURRICULUM ASSOCIATES

Joint learning walks, custom reporting, and co-developed materials meant both parties were invested in the same outcomes

MULTI-TIERED GOVERNANCE

A structured meeting cadence spanning district, providers, and schools levels kept all parties aligned and created the conditions for real-time course corrections throughout the year



For districts considering OBC, particularly those already purchasing edtech at scale, Fresno's story offers a practical model: you don't have to overhaul everything at once. Start with a focused contract, get the design right, and let the data tell you where to go next.