

Emma Eccles Jones Foundation Donates Nearly \$1M to Create USU Collaboratory for Innovation in Teaching and Leadership for Early-Career Teachers Statewide



Laura Reina, Ph.D., assistant principal at Edith Bowen Laboratory School, guides elementary school teachers through a class mapping activity at the 2024 LEARNS Conference.

The Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, with the generous support of the Emma Eccles Jones Foundation, announces the Utah State University (USU) Collaboratory for Innovation in Teaching and Leadership led by Nate Justis, Ph.D., principal of the Edith Bowen Laboratory School, a public charter school located on the USU Logan campus. The USU Collaboratory, inspired by the Academy of Singapore Teachers, targets early-career teachers, master teachers, and school leaders by providing support and leadership opportunities.

Justis received a Fulbright Scholarship to study Singapore's teacher-led learning teams. "I have come to realize in my 10 plus years as an administrator that when teachers thrive, students benefit. Happy, healthy teachers contribute to happy, healthy students. During my time in Singapore, I witnessed the success of small teacher learning groups."

Following his Fulbright experience, Justis proposed creating a conference every June for early-career educators in Northern Utah where teachers could learn from peers and mentors. The proposal received a three-

year, \$50,000 innovation grant from the Utah State Charter School Board to help fund the conference and a two-year, \$50,000 teacher leadership grant from the Utah State Board of Education to expand the network.

The Utah LEARNS (Learning for Educators and Researchers Through Network Systems) Conference debuted in June 2024 on the USU Logan campus. The first year drew about 60 educators; the second year saw attendance grow to more than 100.

"We seek to create an inspiring and safe space where teachers connect and learn together," Justis said. "The Utah LEARNS network provides in-person and online opportunities to collaborate. We facilitate an annual conference, classroom observation days, and statewide learning systems."



Nate Justis, Ph.D., principal of Edith Bowen Laboratory School

The conference connects elementary educators across Utah to share expertise and access research to improve professional practice. Sondra Knudsen, a kindergarten teacher in Logan City District School, shared her thoughts about the conference. "Attending the Utah LEARNS conference was truly inspiring for me. I connected with other educators from around the state who are passionate about making a difference. The experience reignited my enthusiasm for teaching. I came away with a toolkit of ideas and strategies that will enhance my students' learning experiences and help me grow as an educator."

Nearly 75% of surveyed attendees reported interest in continuing collaboration during the school year through professional learning teams and classroom observation days in model schools. "We are enthusiastic about

expanding this professional network beyond the annual conference,” Justis said.

Following the 2024 LEARNS Conference, Justis met with Emma Eccles Jones Endowed Dean Al Smith of the College of Education and Human Services to discuss creating a statewide network of teacher resources and mentors—a collaboratory. Smith had already been exploring ways to better support early-career teachers through Utah’s strong network of senior-level educators.

“The Collaboratory will promote teacher well-being by offering critical supports to early-career educators, enabling them to develop professional networks and access resources that will help retain them in the teaching profession. This kind of support is essential to stemming the significant rate of early-career attrition from the profession,” said Smith.

The Emma Eccles Jones (EEJ) Foundation, which funds numerous educational outreach initiatives for USU students, shared this vision. Emma Eccles Jones, a beloved Cache Valley elementary educator in the early 1930s, left a legacy that has supported a top-ranked USU education program for more than 25 years.



Ellen Rossi, board member of the Emma Eccles Jones Foundations with The Very Reverend Frederick Q. Lawson, board member of the Emma Eccles Jones Foundation

Ellen Rossi, board chair of the EEJ Foundation and the great-niece of Emma Eccles Jones, said, “We wanted to understand the pressures today’s teachers face. The foundation is deeply committed to supporting educators, and we want to ensure teachers have a future beyond their training at USU. The burnout and turnover rates are alarming, which created concern for us and for the future of the college. How are we going to recruit the next generation of teachers?”

It was recently reported that 43% of Utah teachers leave the profession within their first five years (Report to the Utah Legislature, Number 2021-13). This statistic is particularly concerning given the investment of time

and resources that university students are putting into earning teaching degrees. Another major concern of early-career teachers leaving the classroom is the impact left on students.

Justis and Smith met with Rossi to present a three-year pilot plan aimed at supporting early-career teachers and improving retention. The USU Collaboratory team shared survey data from the first annual LEARNS Conference showing that early-career teachers would benefit from mentorship by experienced educators. Increased teacher retention ultimately benefits students by providing classrooms with supported, well-resourced teachers.

The EEJ Foundation approved the proposal and committed to support the program with necessary funding. The USU Collaboratory will begin in January 2026. The project is composed of four initiatives including support for early-career teachers, networking opportunities for school leaders, statewide learning teams, and access to professional learning hubs based in schools throughout Utah.

Participants in the pilot program will receive incentives such as opportunities for graduate school scholarships, paid mentor teachers, classroom observation days with Utah State Board of Education credit, opportunities to collaborate with teachers from across the state, access to an online space for teacher collaboration, and admission at the annual LEARNS Conference.

Initially, two model school sites will receive direct support. Participating educators will track feedback and observations as they implement the USU Collaboratory’s principles. “The vision of the Collaboratory is to have statewide impact, strengthening the teaching workforce in all Utah communities,” shared Smith.

In years two and three, the USU Collaboratory plans to grow up to four additional model school sites, launch Statewide Learning Teams, expand the Early Career Teachers Academy by 25% and provide up to 14 graduate student scholarships.

“Ultimately, our vision is to leverage USU’s status as a land-grant university to better support teachers and leaders throughout the state by providing professional learning that is collaborative, relevant and personalized,” Justis said. “We want to build a thriving community of well-connected teachers and leaders who love their work and know they have a safe place to learn and grow at the USU Collaboratory for Innovation in Teaching and Leadership.”

For more information, visit the USU Collaboratory [website](#).