

Teachers Across Utah Empowered at Third Annual Utah LEARNS Conference at USU

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A deep math learning session led by EBLS teacher Joseph Kozlowski gives teachers hands-on guidance to implement an innovative Problem of the Week model.

In early June, the Utah Learning for Educators and Researchers through Networked Systems (LEARNS) held its third annual conference at Edith Bowen Laboratory School (EBLS), a K-6 charter school housed within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences on the USU Logan campus.

Utah LEARNS is a teacher learning conference and the brainchild of Nate Justis, principal of EBLS, who modeled the event from teacher collaborations he witnessed first-hand as a Fulbright Scholar to Singapore in 2022. Justis applied to the Utah State Charter School Board for a grant and was awarded a \$50,000 three-year innovation grant in 2024 to create the conference.

Further funding for the conference is provided by the recently announced USU Collaboratory for Innovation in Teaching and Leadership, which is a program developed in 2026 with the support of the Emma Eccles Jones Foundation. The Collaboratory is a progressive resource led by Justis for early-career teachers, master teachers, and school leaders to provide new resources and leadership opportunities for Utah's teachers. It is composed of four initiatives: support for early-career teachers, networking opportunities for school leaders, statewide learning teams, and access to professional learning hubs based in schools throughout Utah, which aligns with the Utah LEARNS conference.



Nate Justis, principal of EBLS

The mission of Utah LEARNS is to connect elementary educators throughout Utah in ways that enable them to share their expertise and engage with research to improve their professional practice and empower student learning.

"Education is becoming increasingly complex and our response to that is to help educators become increasingly connected and collaborative," said Justis.

Justis addressed the crowd of almost 200 teachers from school districts in Northern Utah in a keynote address focused on the importance of keeping teachers connected and giving them a platform to share their expertise with one another. "When it comes to facing the complex challenges of education, collaboration always wins," Justis said in his address.

Attendees were enthusiastic about the conference. "I love the excitement that I feel from all the educators here, not just the presenters," said attendee Peri Green, a first-grade teacher for Box Elder School District. "We're excited to improve our careers and help the students we teach. It's empowering. I signed up for a couple different math sessions, and I love what I've learned so far. I'm excited to try some of it with my students."

Hallie Jensen, former teacher at Monticello Academy, a charter school in West Point and new first grade teacher at the Family Lyceum in Clearfield, added, "What I love about the LEARNS conference is how applicable everything is. We know the theory, but sometimes teachers just need the application. I feel like that's what these workshops do. They bring that application, and you get it from master teachers who you know you can trust."

Teachers specifically noted ready-to-implement ideas they can take back to their classrooms, such as ways to help students become passionate about reading, tips to building a classroom library, creative ideas to use manipulatives to help students think more abstractly about numbers, and practical tips on better connecting with parents at parent-teacher conferences.

Mady Treasure, third-grade teacher in Cache County School District, attended the LEARNS conference for the first time this year. "There are so many options. I had the choice to pick what I wanted to do and what areas I wanted to focus on," she said. "It is catered to my needs. The presenters have been very helpful. They have given me tools and ideas I can walk away with and immediately apply in my classroom."

From its inception, Justis's vision has been to fill the state with similar conferences that bring teachers together so they can create connections and learn from one another.

One week prior to the annual LEARNS conference, the Southeast Education Services Center (SESC), which encompasses schools in Carbon, Emery, Grand, and San Juan school districts as well as Pinnacle Canyon Charter School in Price, hosted a Best Practices Forum at Green River High School and a Leadership Summit at Grand County High School. The two events brought together more than 130 teachers and leaders and were held in collaboration with the Utah LEARNS Network and USU Collaboratory for Innovation in Teaching and Leadership. Joseph Kozlowski, a second-grade teacher at EBLS and a top five finalist for Utah's Teacher of the Year in 2025, was the keynote speaker at the Best Practices Forum.

"Teaming up with the Utah LEARNS Network and the USU Collaboratory allowed us to bring together top-tier professional development provided by our own educators from the Southeast region," said John Hughes, executive director of the SESC. "In rural districts, it's easy for teachers to feel isolated, but these events gave our folks a genuine space to connect, talk shop, and feel supported. We are incredibly grateful for this partnership and the shared belief that every teacher in Utah deserves this kind of community, no matter where they live."

Justis recognizes that his vision for impacting teachers statewide is coming to fruition. "This conference is not just an event, but a convening of a growing network of dedicated professionals seeking to improve teaching and learning across our state," he said. "Through the inspiring work being shared at our Utah LEARNS conference and through the USU Collaboratory for Innovation in Teaching and Leadership, we see a bright future for Utah educators and their students."