# CALIFORNIA**COLLABORATIVE**
## on District Reform

# Meeting 28 Summary
# Assessment and Teacher Leadership
# in the Transition to the Common Core

June 18–19, 2015
Whittier, California

Prepared by Joel Knudson, American Institutes for Research[1]

*Note: This meeting summary was developed as a resource for members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. We are making this document publicly available in an effort to share the work of the Collaborative more broadly in order to inform dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. It does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for public consumption. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit www.cacollaborative.org.*

The California Collaborative on District Reform convened for the 28th time in Whittier Union High School District (WUHSD). The substance of the meeting picked up on multiple threads from previous convenings—building teachers' professional capital, developing productive formative assessment practice, and pursuing high-quality mathematics instruction—while deepening the group's ongoing focus on the Common Core State Standards. In this meeting, the Collaborative visited a high school district for the first time, using that context as a jumping off point to explore district-developed common assessments and teacher leadership as vehicles for implementing the Common Core and improving student learning opportunities. Participants also examined the integration of these efforts with broader state policy developments, including the first administration of the Smarter Balanced summative assessment and the ongoing evolution of districts' Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs).

## Setting the Whittier Context

The meeting began with an introduction from WUHSD leaders in which Superintendent Sandy Thorstenson and her colleagues characterized the district as an environment with stability and consistency and supported by a deep bench of quality staff. These aspects of its context reflect the district's current point along an improvement trajectory that has

---

taken many years. Key student outcomes reflect some of the successes and ongoing improvement that have taken place.

### *Student Outcomes Provide Evidence of District Success*

WUHSD has demonstrated success in a range of student outcomes, despite 12 years of changing demographics that have increased the percentage of traditionally underserved students. The percentage of Hispanic students has grown from 73 percent to 88 percent in that time. Moreover, the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price meals expanded from 28 percent in 2001–02 to 67 percent in 2013–14.

Among the results that WUHSD leaders shared were strong measures of student engagement. The district's attendance rate was 96 percent in 2014–15 and exceeded 95 percent in all five of its comprehensive high schools. The dropout rate was only 4.5 percent districtwide, which compares favorably to Los Angeles County and statewide data (12.6 and 11.6 percent, respectively). The dropout rate was also low for student groups that traditionally struggle with engagement in high school. For example, the WUHSD dropout rate for English learners (ELs) was 7.0 percent, far below the county rate of 22.8 percent and the state rate of 20.9 percent.

Students' academic performance also reveals trends of ongoing success. The district's Academic Performance Index (API) provides one indicator of progress: the 2003 API growth score was 623; in 2013 the district achieved a mark of 790. Scores on the California High School Exit Exam in 2014–15 were 88 percent for English language arts (ELA) and 92 percent for mathematics for WUHSD's 10th-grade students; 12th-grade passage rates have exceeded 99 percent for at least the last eight years. Increasing numbers of students are also participating in Advanced Placement courses: the district's participation rate grew from 16 percent in 2010 to 23 percent in 2014. The state has also recognized the district's strong performance: all five comprehensive high schools earned the California Gold Ribbon Award in 2015.

### *District Leaders Attribute Success to Key Elements of District Culture*

District leaders described the positive student outcomes in WUHSD as an extension of relationships among stakeholders who are collectively focused on student success. Interactions with employee associations are student-centered, professional, and collaborative. As one central office employee explained, "We're like a family. It's not like everything is perfect…but when we have issues, we sit down and we assume good intentions and we love each other." A teacher who has held leadership positions voiced a similar sentiment by saying, "We go to meetings [in other districts] and come back and say, 'Thank God we work where we work.'" He also emphasized the effort that goes into sustaining a feeling of partnership: "It is a lot of work to build the relationship that we have and the trust that we have." Likewise, district leaders described the board of education as sophisticated and student-centered. These leaders described the relationships among stakeholders as productive because they focus on serving students. As one individual attested, "Kids are the direct beneficiary of a culture of trust and collaboration."

District leaders have also developed partnerships with other organizations in the community. Five elementary districts feed students into the high school district. WUHSD pays substitute costs for teachers from the feeder districts to visit high school teachers to build connections between what students experience in one district and what they will encounter in high school. In addition, Thorstenson meets monthly with each of the elementary district superintendents. Beyond the K–12 school system, the district also seeks to leverage local nonprofits, churches, and community service groups to support its work.

Through its years of improvement, three shared values in WUHSD have emerged that help to shape the district's culture:

1. *Collaboration:* The district's focus on teaching and learning operates primarily through structured opportunities for teacher collaboration. WUHSD anchored its focus on shared work among teachers in learning opportunities. This has included three visits to Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, which began in 2004 with the principal and two influential teacher leaders from each campus, and continued with assistant principals and other teacher leaders from each campus on two subsequent trips. Presentations from Richard DuFour and shared readings and discussions previewed the lessons from those visits. Today, course-alike teams on each campus plan lessons and review data, and additional activities such as best practice days and summer collaboration opportunities create more space for teachers to work together. Each site develops its own bell schedule to include time set aside for weekly teacher collaboration and for student intervention and tutoring. District leaders report that as a result of these various opportunities, staff surveys reveal positive morale across the district that has strengthened over time.

2. *Common assessments:* Common subject-area assessments have grounded the collaborative work of teachers in WUHSD. A more extensive exploration of this work follows later in this summary.

3. *Directed intervention:* WUHSD has deliberately embedded student interventions within the normal bell schedule, responding to the realization that, especially at the high school level, participation rates for tutoring drop when activities happen before or after the school day. Teachers build time in to work with all students and, if appropriate, release the small number of students who do not require additional attention.

## Developing Common Course Assessments

The WUHSD shared values directly support a district theory of action that revolves around teachers. One district leader explained the theory in this way: "If we have teachers deeply collaborating and making decisions about teaching and learning, then the district will experience increased student academic success." To facilitate this kind of discussion and decision making, the WUHSD has spent more than a decade developing and leveraging common subject-area assessments to improve student learning.

### *History of Common Course Assessments in WUHSD*

Leaders from WUHSD shared the district's history of developing common assessments, emphasizing their evolution over time as an anchor for instructional improvement. As one administrator explained, "The process has been the most important thing for us, not necessarily the product."

The district's work with common assessments dates back to 2000, when central office leaders first advocated systemwide assessments as a means of leveraging instructional improvement. This initial entrée was short-lived, however, as ideas for a district-guided process produced pushback from some teachers. In response, WUHSD leaders decided to let the idea incubate before moving forward more systematically. The district provided training in the essential elements of common assessments. District leaders then encouraged—but did not mandate—schools to develop common assessments individually at their sites rather than start with a collective districtwide development process. The work grew organically over time.

In 2002 movement around common assessments gained traction at the site level. Although all schools had become involved to a limited degree, the work was spotty, inconsistent, and did not become authentic until the efforts of the mathematics department at Whittier High School (WHS) to develop its own assessments across a subject area began to prove successful.

Teachers of a common course would administer the assessments, share their data with one another, and use that information to discuss three issues: (1) how well students were doing overall, including if, how, and/or what to reteach; (2) what teachers were doing whose scores were higher, and (3) which students needed immediate intervention. The assessments consisted only of 10 to 15 multiple-choice questions, but district leaders reflected that the approach worked better than the original district-led idea for a few reasons. First, collecting and sharing data at the site level felt safer because the teachers already knew and trusted one another. Second, because the teachers had developed the assessments themselves, they had ownership over the process, which gave it legitimacy for them. Finally, the tests consisted of only a few items, meaning they did not add undue burden to the participating teachers to create or score them.

In 2003 the work started to grow. WHS expanded its positive efforts in mathematics to other subject areas within the school and established parameters for how teachers would develop and use the common assessments. These parameters derived from an explicit recognition of teacher collaboration as the priority for the effort. As one WUHSD leader reflected, "The collaboration piece was the most essential part of those common assessments." This collaboration was multifaceted. Teachers had to agree on the test content and administration date, which helped to make the curriculum more consistent across classrooms. They also had to share their data by name, which exposed teachers to their peers in a way that made many uncomfortable at the outset but also enabled frank conversations about classroom teaching. A district leader who worked at WHS at the time recalled, "Of all the things we did, I think that may have been the most difficult to get

through." Finally, teachers had to analyze the assessment results and their implications collectively.

The emphasis on collaboration led school staff to introduce another parameter that has become a cornerstone of the work: teachers and leaders agreed that teachers would not share the results with school or district administrators. The belief was that introducing an element of judgment or accountability from outside the course-alike teams might undermine the process.

Over time, the practice that began in WHS has spread across subject areas and schools. The site-based assessments still continue. The effort has also expanded, however, to include districtwide subject area assessments developed collaboratively by teacher leaders from each school and administered regularly during the school year—first once per semester, and now on a quarterly basis. As the work has grown, WUHSD has codified the approach in its guide to instructional direction. The district released the original document in 2004 and revised it in 2007 and 2010. A new revision that is underway, led by teacher leaders, will reflect the district's continued evolution in the context of new state standards.

WUHSD leaders report that the common assessment work has been instrumental in their transition to new standards. Developing assessments has helped teachers understand the changes they need to make in their instruction. It has also smoothed the transition to an unfamiliar set of student and teacher expectations by providing a vehicle to talk about instruction and student learning. As one district leader shared, "It has alleviated a great deal of anxiety for me…Because we have the system, I know that even if the results aren't what we hope them to be, I know that we have a process to identify where our students are struggling, and teachers will be able to work on changing how they teach to address that."

### *Reactions to the Common Assessments in WUHSD*

To better understand what the WUHSD common assessments entail and how they can inform instruction, meeting participants split into small groups to examine two of the district's common assessments. The first was a ninth-grade algebra unit test on linear equations consisting of 22 multiple-choice questions, seven short response items, and a performance task. The second was a performance assessment for government class that asked students first to review seven primary sources related to gun control—including legislative language, editorials, a political cartoon, and an infographic—and then to write a letter to a congressperson in which they "develop a position, supported by evidence, arguing whether or not our gun control laws are justified or should be reconsidered."

In small-group conversations and in the subsequent full-group discussion, meeting participants shared reactions to the assessments and several issues for district leaders to consider if the assessments are to inform instructional improvement and student intervention. Among these were an appreciation of the purpose of assessment in WUHSD, as well as the need to ensure accessibility, capture student thinking, build teacher capacity, and manage time and resources to maximize the value of the assessment practice.

*Purpose:* Overall, participants were very positive about WUHSD's approach to assessment "of and for learning." Several noted that assessment in the district is not driving learning. Rather, learning is driving assessment, and assessment has become one element in a broader process of improving instruction and student learning. This orientation appropriately places assessment as one critical component of improving classroom practice.

*Accessibility*: If assessments are to fairly and accurately capture student knowledge and skills, they need to provide access to students with disabilities and ELs who might struggle with test forms, language demands, or other elements of the assessment process that create barriers for them. In WUHSD, English language development (ELD) support teachers and special education support teams contribute to the assessment development to ensure that teacher teams take all student needs into consideration. Setting up assessment development in this way can better position teachers to address the learning needs of all students in their classrooms.

*Student thinking*: In addition, if assessments are to inform teacher dialogue and classroom practice, they should provide insights into students' reasoning and help teachers to identify and address student misconceptions. For mathematics, this may mean more (or even all) open-ended items. For performance assessments such as the one from the WUHSD government class, it may mean additional steps to track not only how students *cite* evidence, but also how they *weigh* evidence. Asking students to argue two sides of an issue, or to present and defend their work in front of peers, can help an assessment more effectively capture critical elements of student learning. Both the task itself and the rubric that teachers create to assess the task should give teachers a sufficient window into student thinking to diagnose their understanding and possible misconceptions.

*Teacher capacity*: Teachers also need the knowledge and skills to effectively use the information that comes from assessments. For example, do teachers understand the meaning of the distractors in a set of multiple-choice questions? If students consistently select the same incorrect responses, are teachers positioned to address the flaws in reasoning that those responses represent? Similarly, do rubrics give teachers a sufficient window into student thinking to diagnose misconceptions? Many teachers will require coaching on how to design an effective test item, how to develop a useful rubric, and how to use assessment results.

*Time and resources*: Although districts play an important role in ensuring that teachers use assessments appropriately, providing sufficient resources to accomplish this goal can be challenging. Enabling teachers to give feedback to one another can help teachers understand the assessments better and leverage them for improved classroom practice. Additional team-based activities—including teachers grading one another's assessments or having multiple teachers grade an assessment—can help with inter-rater reliability. These activities, however, take extra time that teachers and districts may not have.

### *Reflections on Validity and Reliability*

Locally developed assessments like those in WUHSD can bring teachers together and anchor conversations about instruction, but it might also sacrifice the quality that comes from tools created by assessment experts. The group therefore addressed issues of validity and reliability and how they play out at the local level.

Meeting participants with strong assessment backgrounds suggested that efforts to achieve validity and reliability need not require perfection. Rather, local assessment is a developmental process, and efforts that fit into a broader cycle of continuous improvement take time. One WUHSD leader reflected that educators in the district may not have the tools to evaluate whether a common assessment is of "high quality," but they can tell that each assessment gets better every year. Another participant with assessment expertise affirmed the importance of this perspective and observed that the district's work is "reciprocal and generative learning. It's continuous improvement around the work that's being done. It is a huge shift in paradigm, not only in the way one assesses but the way one instructs—and you need time to get there."

Meeting participants also noted that some processes to ensure validity and reliability are in place. Transparency through peer review—which takes place through the original development of the assessment and through annual teacher revisions—is one way of constructing a validity argument. Discussions about assessment results (and the ways in which they inform subsequent changes to a test) are another part of this process. Noting that the stakes are different for local assessments designed to inform instruction than state or federal tests with accountability implications, individuals framed this discussion as taking steps to ensure that local assessments are "valid and reliable enough."

Conversation during the meeting also highlighted ways in which district leaders can strengthen the validity and reliability of their assessments. For example, district leaders can create "social moderation processes" to see if everyone is evaluating a test in a similar way and arriving at the same evaluation of a candidate. Comparing student performance on local assessments to other performance measures—like the Scholastic Aptitude Test or the Smarter Balanced summative assessments—can also help educators judge the quality of locally developed tools for capturing progress in student learning.

### *Calibration of Local Assessments to State Summative Assessments*

For many years, WUHSD teachers used results from the California Standards Test (CST) to help calibrate their locally developed common assessments. Common assessment results that triangulated with CST scores provided an indication that the local assessments were capturing the right kinds of information; assessments that did not pointed to areas for revision. CST results also enabled WUHSD educators to compare performance with students around the state. With California's transition from the CST to the new Smarter Balanced assessments in ELA and mathematics, the amount of information that WUHSD receives has diminished substantially. Although the Smarter Balanced assessments will produce data on 11th-grade ELA performance and some mathematics courses, no state

assessments currently exist for other subjects and grade levels. Against this backdrop, WUHSD leaders posed the following question to meeting participants:

> How can teachers at all grade levels and in all subject areas know how well the students' performance on the common assessments reflects knowledge of the new California standards? In particular, how do teachers effectively assess progress in the untested grades and subjects?

In response to the WUHSD problem of practice, meeting participants identified several approaches to validating local assessments in the absence of a state test. Peers can score assessments, helping to introduce elements of objectivity and inter-reliability into producing and using assessment results. Districts can also seek ways to ensure quality at the front end of the assessment design process by developing item specifications (including leveraging the specifications that Smarter Balanced has produced and released) that can guide the work of teacher teams.

Districts can turn to other outside resources for calibration and quality control as well. One district, for example, hired an external research organization to validate its local assessments. This strategy offers an alternative to using state results, but participants also noted that external organizations are not the same as Smarter Balanced and may not be completely attuned to its approach to assessment design. As another approach, districts might leverage the state's subject matter projects to help address the quality of locally developed assessments. Teacher teams might also build from assessment tools crafted by other organizations—participants mentioned modules from the Literacy Design Collaborative and performance exams from the Silicon Valley Mathematics Initiative as two examples. In addition, Stanford University's Kenji Hakuta and Ray Pecheone are creating a set of massive open online courses (MOOCs) looking at quality in performance tasks. District leaders and teacher teams might use these as resources to improve the quality of their local efforts.

## Creating Opportunities for Teacher Leadership

Because WUHSD fundamentally orients its common assessment work toward facilitating teacher collaboration, it also helps to develop and guide the work of teacher leaders. Meeting conversation turned to ways in which WUHSD and other districts create opportunities for teacher leadership.

### *Teacher Leadership Opportunities in WUHSD*

The district's theory of action relies on teachers "deeply collaborating and making decisions about teaching and learning." To facilitate these opportunities, part of WUHSD's evolution over time has involved developing new ways for teachers to take on leadership responsibilities. This year, 46 percent of the 500 teachers in the district have a leadership role, including 66 department chairs and 163 positions that receive a stipend of some kind. Among these roles, two positions that are critical to the development and analysis of common assessments are course leads and coaches.

_WUHSD Teacher Leader Positions_

Course leads are annual positions, filled by individual school sites, to lead course-alike teams within a high school. WUHSD identified 44 course leads when it created the position in 2003; there are now 113 course leads districtwide. Although the roles began with primarily logistical responsibilities, the instructional focus has deepened over time and these individuals are instrumental in guiding collaborative efforts among teachers. The course leads facilitate the course-alike team (e.g., Algebra 1 or government)—including the development and analysis of site-based common assessments—and engage in additional activities at the district level. Best practices meetings bring course leads (plus one additional teacher of their choosing) from all high schools to the central office to analyze assessment data and share instructional practices and resources. They then use the information generated to inform work within their site-based teams. The district uses Title II funding to provide $2,000 in compensation for each course lead each year.

To help facilitate the work of course leads and course-alike teams, the district also employs six curriculum and assessment coaches who hold two-year terms. These coaches come from classroom positions at each school and play support roles, both to run best practices meetings at the district level and to support course leads on-site. District leaders noted that the primary responsibility of the coaches is to facilitate strong collaboration, which has not always come naturally to people entering the coaching role. As one WUHSD representative explained, "The hardest thing for us to learn was that we're not trying to _do_ anything. We're trying to make collaborative learning teams stronger. That's our agenda." To that end, part of the district's learning process has been teaching the coaches how to coach their peers.

In addition to these roles, teachers have summer learning opportunities during which they can exercise leadership. The teams that participate in the best practices meetings during the academic year also convene for one week during the summer; each teacher receives $200 per day. In addition, any district teacher can come to the central office for open collaboration time. The district provides a room to meet, lunch, and child care for teachers who choose to get together over the summer. WUHSD leaders report that approximately 150 people show up each day.

WUHSD leaders described the district's teacher leadership roles as opportunities to energize teachers and advance their careers. The teacher leadership positions often provide an important testing ground; teachers often transition later into school and district administration positions. Teacher leadership is not merely a pathway out of the classroom, however. One district leader articulated a vision of returning coaches to the classroom feeling invigorated and empowered. As he explained, "I want good teachers to stay teaching."

_Evolution Over Time_

WUHSD leaders characterized the central office's orientation to teacher leadership as a gradual release of responsibility over time. According to district leaders, the central office has become less directive as teachers have built greater capacity to lead the work. At the

same time, responsibilities for teacher leaders have become more substantive. For example, the course lead position began with a heavy emphasis on scanning and printing documents for course-alike meetings, and has shifted to focus primarily on fostering effective collaboration among teachers. Teacher-led activities have also become more valued and deeply embedded in the district's work, in large part in response to teacher feedback. For example, best practices meetings that began as a two-hour block of time has stretched to a full day, and teams routinely convene past the end of the day when they meet during the summer.

*Observations From WUHSD Teacher Leaders*

To help advance the group's understanding of how teacher leadership operates in WUHSD, a panel of teacher leaders—who have served as course leads, coaches, and even as president of the teachers association—shared their experiences. Throughout their discussion, these representatives reiterated elements of the district culture that district leaders introduced in their overview presentation at the beginning of the meeting. Among these were a strong focus on relationships and a commitment to continuous improvement. As one teacher leader attested, "The culture here is of growing. We want our teachers always to be learning."

Teacher leaders also emphasized the importance of meeting teachers where they are. Building comfort for teachers to share their ideas with colleagues is a challenge and can take time. "You have to meet the group where they're at," one individual explained. "We're not here to push; we're just here to support your needs." In order to do this, the teacher leaders talked about building trust, especially when it comes to sharing information that teachers identify with personally, such as student performance and grading practice. Panelists also articulated a philosophy that everyone has strengths, and that coaches play a critical role in identifying and creating space for those strengths to emerge. According to one teacher leader, "I haven't met a middle-of-the-road teacher that doesn't have a great idea. It's getting people to share those ideas that's important."

The panelists also addressed the balance between top-down and bottom-up leadership for instructional improvement. Although central office leaders can establish priorities and expectations, several people expressed the idea that nothing can carry a message to other teachers like a teacher can. The message has more validity when it comes from a peer. Moreover, a pack mentality can put healthy pressure on people to change. Describing a teacher who was initially reluctant to contribute to his course-alike team, one teacher leader observed, "The more he's with that team, the better he will be." The result of a more bottom-up orientation toward collaboration is that teachers own the work. They work productively together not because they are following orders, but because they believe it makes them better. The result is a focus on professional growth rather than compliance to expectations and regulations. One teacher leader recalled a conversation she had with a group of her peers, telling them, "It's not the district. Those [teachers] at the table: *we* are the district."

WUHSD district and teacher leaders described the relationship with the teachers union as an extension of the district's trust and connection with teachers. District leaders described a high degree of overlap between teacher leaders and union representatives; those individuals guiding instructional improvement efforts are also those most active with the union. District leaders also described their interactions with the teachers association as collaborative and cooperative. The superintendent sits directly at the negotiating table. Neither the district's attorney nor a representative from the California Teachers Association participate. Conversations from both sides focus on instruction and student learning, and they help the central office and its teachers move forward in a productive, not adversarial, way.

### *Teacher Leadership Opportunities in Other District Contexts*

The WUHSD story represents one model for empowering teachers to lead the work of instructional improvement. To expand the conversation, a panel of leaders from three other districts shared their approaches to teacher leadership.

#### *Sacramento City Unified School District*

Like WUHSD, Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) has developed a theory of action around collaboration and capacity building. In SCUSD, this includes an emphasis on side-by-side learning. Among the strategies the district employs, teacher leaders from each elementary school gather four times per year to participate in collaborative learning with a focus on ELA and mathematics, and then return to their sites to cultivate the learning of their peers. In between these meetings, 20 "training specialists" with expertise in ELA literacy, mathematics, or ELD visit schools to facilitate teachers' engagement through the stages of SCUSD's coaching cycle: (1) goal setting, (2) planning, (3) acting/teaching, and (4) reflecting/revising. In addition, the district has established a set of "lab classrooms" in which teachers demonstrate lessons for their peers using a modified lesson study design.

#### *Garden Grove Unified School District*

Garden Grove USD builds on a climate of trust and two-way communication that takes place in formal and informal ways, which, like WUHSD, extends to its union relationships. The district features a variety of teacher leadership roles, which range from positions with safe entry points and minimal commitment to more comprehensive roles. Teachers On Special Assignment (TOSAs) work in full-time support roles designing professional learning opportunities and working with teachers in schools. Department- and grade-level chairs and demonstration teacher positions also enable teachers in the district to lead and model promising classroom practice for their peers. In addition to these ongoing roles, Garden Grove USD creates structured opportunities for sustainable and scalable involvement in decision making and programmatic improvement through what it calls a "consult" process. For example, a consult of district teachers guides the district decision-making process for textbook adoption.

_San Jose Unified School District_

Like the other districts, San Jose USD features many traditional teacher leadership roles, which include stipends for teachers who take on additional responsibilities. Some recent developments have also expanded opportunities for teachers to exercise more leadership for improvement. For example, the district's new teacher evaluation system features 25 consulting teachers, which are teachers who conduct peer evaluations. The district is also in the process of developing pathway for both model and master teachers. Under this model, high-quality teachers rotate into this position for a three-year term, and then return to the classroom. Similar to the philosophy articulated by WUHSD leaders, the hope is that the system will send teachers back to their classrooms feeling empowered and invigorated.

### Reflections on Teacher Leadership and Collaboration

Several observations emerged in response to the various district approaches to teacher leadership and collaboration.

_Designing Teacher Leadership Positions for Success_
Several comments highlighted important considerations for designing leadership positions. These included the importance of establishing a central office service mentality in which district administrators orient their roles toward helping teachers improve instruction. As one individual argued, "We shouldn't be asking teacher leaders to do things that are the jobs of administrators." Meeting participants also advocated for carefully selecting the right teachers to serve in leadership roles in order to maximize their effectiveness. Responding to the conditions that have facilitated success in multiple districts, conversation also highlighted the idea that strong union relationships can shape the nature and quality of teacher leadership. When union leaders are also instructional leaders, and when the central office works collaboratively with labor, it can help the entire system move more efficiently and effectively to improve instruction.

_Identifying the Appropriate Level of Autonomy_

Conversation about the central office also identified potential tensions between ensuring quality and granting ownership and responsibility to teacher leaders and teacher teams. District leaders may struggle to accommodate the developmental process of building strong teams and improving teacher capacity while simultaneously underscoring the urgency of rapid progress for students. They may also need to navigate the balance of providing appropriate guidance and direction with providing space for teachers to lead and feel a sense of ownership. Decisions about viewing student performance data also require careful judgment. Although district leaders may wish to monitor site-based student assessment results to evaluate progress and develop supports for teachers, teachers may have more authentic conversations with one another if they do not perceive pressure from administrators who have access to the completed tests. The WUHSD experience suggests that in navigating the appropriate level of teacher ownership, improved student results can justify teachers having more latitude. As one WUHSD leader explained, "It's because the kids are doing really, really well that we've been able to pull back."

*Creating Sustainable Collaborative Practices*

Strong relationships among teachers can help them feel good about collaboration, but positive perceptions are not sufficient to justify or sustain practice. If promising practices are to last, it is important to demonstrate that teacher leadership and collaboration are leading to positive changes in instruction. Participants also recognized the persistence of WUHSD's efforts over a long period of time and noted the importance of consistency and follow-though in helping the district to maintain and improve its strategies.

*Retaining Good Teachers*

Teacher leadership opportunities can also support other important goals—notably, teacher retention—but such opportunities may not be sufficient to hold onto great teachers. Multiple district examples highlighted the importance of building a strong culture as a factor in teacher retention. Some of the districts represented in the meeting have also prioritized efforts to compensate teachers fairly; although teachers' primary motivation may often be the quality of their work environment, competitive salaries and additional rewards can help teachers make the choice to remain in a professionally rewarding environment.

## Examining the Interaction of Local Efforts with State-Level Policies and Practices of Assessment and Accountability

Assessment plays an instrumental role in informing student interventions, instructional decisions, support strategies, program design, and resource allocation. It does this not only at the classroom, school, and district levels, but also at higher levels of the system. Having explored the ways in which local assessments can anchor instructional improvement efforts at the district level, the meeting conversation turned to the role of state policies and practices in summative assessment and accountability (particularly the LCAP) in facilitating or impeding continuous improvement.

### *Updates on the State Assessment System*

Ilene Straus, vice president of the State Board of Education (SBE), joined the group to provide an update on the state's summative assessment system. At the time of the meeting, the first statewide administration of the Smarter Balanced assessments in ELA and mathematics were wrapping up. As of June 12, 1,814 local education agencies (LEAs) had administered assessments; 3.2 million tests had been started; and 2.7 million ELA and 2.8 million mathematics tests had been completed. Districts were scheduled to receive secure online results within four weeks after their last school completed testing, parents were to receive individual student results eight weeks after the last school completed testing, and public reports are to be available through DataQuest in August or September 2015.

Assessment plans in other subject areas are still unfolding. Assembly Bill 484 calls for the California Department of Education (CDE) to issue a recommendation to the SBE for what the state's new assessment system should be. Indications of what that recommendation is

likely to include have not come through, but Straus described the desire from various stakeholders to have an accountability system that includes multiple measures.

Straus also pointed out that the broader state context influences the assessment picture and emphasized that many moving pieces are progressing at once. A draft of the framework for the Next Generation Science Standards should be available in six to 12 months. The transition to new systems of assessment and accountability, plus the Common Core, are all rapidly evolving. At the same time, heavy turnover within CDE has affected morale within the organization. All of these simultaneously evolving factors play into the state-level policy picture.

### *Reactions to the First Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment Administration*

District leaders shared their reactions to the first administration of the Smarter Balanced summative assessments. By and large, the process was technologically smooth. Multiple district leaders reported that the 2014 field test had prepared them well for the live test in 2015.

#### *Accessibility of the Assessment So Students Can Demonstrate Knowledge and Skills*

District leaders also reflected on the demands of the assessments. The mathematics test, which featured different item types than the exclusively multiple-choice CST that preceded it, was engaging for many students. The assessments were long, however, and required stamina. Meeting participants also identified issues related to equity and access. For example, the language demands of the new assessments are substantial, especially in mathematics. Although Smarter Balanced was proactive in trying to fairly capture student knowledge by directly addressing the use of construct-relevant and construct-irrelevant language, this was the first full trial of the items. An item-level analysis would help assessment designers determine how these issues played out in practice and the degree to which revisions to items and the assessment design process are necessary. Participants also raised challenges of the digital divide. Nearly all students are familiar with how to use cell phones, but not all have had access to computers. Computer-administered assessments run the risk of capturing student comfort with computers (which is likely to be higher for more advantaged students) rather than their knowledge and skills. A module on computer access and familiarity from the National Assessment of Educational Progress could provide a model for Smarter Balanced to replicate and analyze the degree to which this influences student performance.

#### *Utility of Summative Assessment Results for Informing Improvement*

Some of the most extensive conversations about the Smarter Balanced assessments revealed frustration with the reporting function and the degree to which test results can help districts reflect on and improve progress. One comment was representative of the consistent feedback from district leaders: "So far the reporting that we've seen is not sufficiently detailed to inform instruction." Participants recalled that the information

available from the CST was much more detailed and, as a result, more actionable. Many expressed an interest in seeing information at the strand level for ELA[2] and the domain level in mathematics[3] to enable them to better target areas for improvement. Reporting at the standard level, if possible, would be even better.

## *Usability of Interim Assessments for Measuring Progress*

Participants also reflected on the use of other aspects of the Smarter Balanced system for improvement. Although the Smarter Balanced system includes interim assessments designed to monitor progress throughout the year, district leaders complained that the assessments were cumbersome and required extra time to score. In addition, although the scope and sequence of instruction will vary from district to district, administrators and teachers are unable to manipulate the sequence of the Smarter Balanced interim assessment or to select a subset of items, so they match it to the local instructional program. Finally, some participants observed that interim assessment data are available at the teacher level but not the system level, making it difficult to analyze district progress midyear.

## *Availability of Digital Library Information for Supporting Teachers*

Likewise, components of the Digital Library—the Smarter Balanced system's formative resources—made it difficult for districts and other organizations to facilitate systemic improvement efforts. CDE and Smarter Balanced control access to the online system, so district leaders cannot monitor the level of use within their system, nor can they help teachers with any part of the library. The challenges are more pronounced outside of K–12 districts. For example, higher education systems have no access to the Digital Library, and therefore have no ability to use the tools to help prepare and support preservice teaching candidates.

## **District Messaging Around New Assessments**

Given districts' early experiences with the Smarter Balanced system—including the administration process and student scores from the summative assessments—meeting participants discussed how best to talk about the assessments with parents and community members. Because of the challenges with the first summative test and uncertainty about next steps, many district leaders were reluctant to publicly embrace the system wholeheartedly. To reflect their first experiences, some described an approach that focused on growth of the system. One district leader shared, "Patience has been our message…What we have today…is not what's going to be in the future." Another district carried a similar message, reminding stakeholders that this system is new, everyone is going to learn a lot, and the district wants parents and community members to learn with them. Other district

---

[2] The Common Core in ELA consists of four strands: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
[3] The Common Core in mathematics is organized by grade level and then by domains, which the California Common Core State Standards document describes as "clusters of standards that address 'big ideas' and support connections of topics across grades." Examples of domains include "Number and Operations in Base 10" and "Measurement and Data."

leaders indicated that their messaging deemphasizes the weight of the Smarter Balanced results. One district leader stressed that the assessments are just one of many measures the district uses to monitor student progress. Another district leader described efforts to affirm the connection between previous practice and current directions, emphasizing the strengths of prior approaches while simultaneously describing the ways in which the new standards and the assessment system that comes with them are part of the district's continuing effort to improve.

To help districts and the state overall with Common Core and Smarter Balanced messaging, Children Now is coordinating an effort to educate the general public. This campaign has included direct parent engagement at more than 10,000 schools, social and print media messages through channels that include the CDE Common Core listserv and California Charter Schools Association newsletter, and coordinated rapid responses that address negative media mentions about the Common Core and reinforce positive messaging. Children Now has worked with a few districts on this "rapid response" campaign, but would love to engage with others.

## Reflecting on the Second Round of LCAP Development

Meeting participants also had an opportunity to share their experiences with completing the LCAP for the second year. Multiple district leaders spoke highly of their ongoing efforts to strengthen community engagement and praised the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and the LCAP process for facilitating these efforts.

Most reactions, however, highlighted concerns about the revised LCAP template. Despite claims that the LCAP process is intended to support continuous improvement, multiple district leaders reflected that the plan itself has become a compliance document. First, the document has become longer and more cumbersome: the completed LCAP grew from 20 to 104 pages in one district and exceeded 400 pages in another. Moreover, district leaders observed that the document does not inform or support the learning and improvement process. Some also noted the lack of coherence with other statewide efforts. For example, there is no connection between the LCAP and the LEA plan.

One meeting participant reflected that the LCAP tries to serve many purposes (for example, comprehensively capturing district plans while also informing communities) and, as a consequence, fails at all of them. Some districts were able to communicate with their communities by appending an executive summary or guide to the completed LCAP, but they did this by going above and beyond the LCAP requirements. One individual suggested that an online system might be a more appropriate means of collecting district plans. That system would be easier to navigate than the cumbersome Word document currently in place. It could also then automatically output the kinds of information that are most relevant to different audiences.

Through this discussion of LCAP challenges, meeting participants also recognized the importance of effectively communicating their experiences and concerns to state policymakers. A narrow window exists before Governor Brown leaves office and a new

governor steps in to fulfill a whole range of campaign promises. If the education community expresses strong levels of dissatisfaction with the LCFF process, the new governor might swiftly dismantle key elements of the funding system. The district voices most prominent in Sacramento right now, however, may be reinforcing a perception that districts simply want to be left to their own devices without onerous state oversight. As one participant argued, it is important to communicate a different perspective: "We want the oversight, and the state clearly has a role in making sure this gets done right." In other words, districts need not only to find a way to acknowledge the role the state plays in ensuring commitment to quality and equity, but also to help find ways to do that in support of districts' own efforts to reflect and plan at the local level. The voices of districts within the Collaborative might be particularly important in communicating this message to leaders in Sacramento to ensure that the LCAP meets district needs as the refinement process continues.

## Identifying Overarching Themes

Across the entire meeting, a few key themes emerged.

### *Relationships Are Key*

The WUSHD story fundamentally revolves around its work with and for teachers. One key lesson from the district and from the broader conversations about other contexts across the state is the importance of relationships. Collaborative culture thrives on the personal connections among teachers. Leadership opportunities, compensation, and collaboration with unions all underscore the value of the teacher voice for the central office. The relationships engendered through the strategies discussed in the meeting are not a goal in and of themselves, however. They are a means to an end. Strong collaboration and motivated teachers help produce better instruction. Teacher empowerment and morale also helps with retention. As one meeting participant observed of the work being done in WUHSD, the quality of educator relationships creates a bond and commitment: "This kind of work makes your teachers want to stay because it's exciting...It's the *adults* they don't want to leave."

### *Assessment and Improvement Are Developmental Processes*

Comments throughout the meeting also emphasized the importance of viewing assessment and improvement as a developmental process. Assessment practice is a journey, and each district and each educator is at a different place on the path. The WUHSD approach to local assessments ("They may not yet be great, but they're better than last year") reflects this orientation. Likewise, the appreciation of the Smarter Balanced system as the initial step in an ongoing process of refinement helped to frame district leaders' reactions to their experiences. The state's approach to assessment is a learning process, and feedback from the field will help identify ways to improve based on those initial experiences.

### *Collect Feedback to Inform Improvement*

Finally, conversations throughout the meeting highlighted the importance of feedback in the improvement process. Assessment practices are one way of collecting this feedback:

data on student performance informs teacher conversations about improving classroom instruction. Additional avenues for communication are also important, however. Teacher surveys and other feedback mechanisms can help district leaders reflect on and refine their approaches to collaboration and supporting teacher leadership. Student reflections about assessment practices can help teachers and administrators identify the supports they need to provide. And feedback from district leaders to state policymakers can help refine the state policies and practices to best support instruction and student learning at the local level.

## Next Steps for the Collaborative

The date and location for the next Collaborative meeting have yet to be determined. This summer, however, the Collaborative staff will assemble feedback about the Smarter Balanced assessments to share with representatives from the SBE and CDE. In addition, the Collaborative staff will continue to generate publications that share key lessons from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators. As always, resources from this and previous meetings, updates about Collaborative members, and information about upcoming events are available on our website at [www.cacollaborative.org](http://www.cacollaborative.org).