

THE CALIFORNIA COLLABORATIVE ON DISTRICT REFORM

May 22, 2008

Dear Collaborative members and guests,

We are looking forward to seeing you all at our seventh convening of the California Collaborative on District Reform, to be held on June 2-3 at the WestEd offices in Oakland. My goal in this letter is to provide you with both the general focus for the meeting and an overview of the Oakland context in which our deliberations will take place.

The focal problem posed by Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) for this meeting is:

Given the complexity of providing comprehensive programs that serve EL students, and the variety of structures that exist within OUSD, how can the district be cohesive in its efforts to support schools to foster EL student success? How can the district support improved student learning in all schools in a way that respects each school's unique structures and challenges?

Our exploration of this focal problem will build on previous Collaborative deliberations in a number of ways. First, it will tap into a theme that has recurred consistently since we first got together in Hayward two years ago; that is: ***How to successfully navigate the tension between district direction and site-based decisions.*** In this case the specific focus will be on supporting ELs at the secondary (middle and high school) levels in the context of OUSD's recently adopted EL Master Plan. By zeroing in on a particular set of issues within this broader question, we will be able both to concretize the discussion and to go more deeply into its ramifications and implications at various levels of the system. Moreover, we will be having this conversation at a point when we may be able to help OUSD make timely adjustments in their approach.

In addition, the large number of ***small secondary schools*** in OUSD will give us the opportunity to consider particular issues with respect to instruction for ELs in the context of small schools, a topic that emerged from our meeting in Sacramento last November. For example, despite the many advantages of small schools, they generally lack the economies of scale present in larger schools, a situation that can make the allocation of resources (human and material) to particular populations of students more difficult. We will have the opportunity to look at several models for addressing these and other issues relevant to EL students in small secondary schools.

Finally, given the active participation of parent and community members in the design and governance of the small schools, we will be able to extend the discussion ***parent and community engagement*** begun in our sixth meeting in Redwood City, but from a different, more grassroots perspective.

The OUSD context: In Oakland the tension between coherence and flexibility arises from the district's desire to be cohesive in the direction, goals, and programs for serving ELs while respecting differences across schools and decisions from school administrators, staffs, and community partners. This is especially important given the ***substantial differences among the schools in culture and approach*** and the fact that a large number of small schools have been developed in partnership with the local communities, whose voice in school-based decisions and approaches is integral. Overall, OUSD aims for cohesion in the goals, not uniformity of specific strategies.

In addition to the diversity of OUSD's portfolio of secondary schools, a second important aspect of OUSD's context is the relative ***newness of the district's EL Master Plan***, designed to guide programming



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and instruction for EL students throughout the district. Implementation of the Master Plan is in the very early stages. This means that many of the issues related to the focal question (coherence-flexibility) are just being worked out. From Oakland's perspective, the topic of this meeting is thus very timely. The Collaborative visit provides an authentic opportunity to contemplate how the Mater Plan will evolve over the next few years.

OUSD also faces some particular challenges with regard to its master plan in the small schools, particularly with respect to serving newcomer students and to addressing the needs for teacher development in the context of relatively high teacher turnover.

Challenge of serving newcomer students in small schools. This is a particular issue for Oakland, given the nature of its EL population (especially in recent years) and the small size of many of the secondary schools and their newcomer groups. That is, each school may have less than 5-10 newcomers and limited resources (particularly teacher knowledge) to address EL needs. The small schools have a larger proportion of EL students than the average across the district, but most of these students are long term ELs and so have different learning needs from newcomers. Also, there is a wide variety of EL subgroups across schools. From the school perspective, it can be difficult to configure classes to meet the language needs of each of the various EL subgroups. From a district perspective, it is challenging to provide comprehensive support across district, given the diversity in populations and needs. Furthermore, in some cases district administrators report that the design/approaches of the small school do not necessarily meet the needs of the student populations at the school.

Challenge of developing teachers to work with newcomers and other ELs. Teachers must contend with addressing the unique design features of their small school while also learning to meet the varying needs of a diverse student population. This can be difficult to do all at once, particularly for new teachers. In addition, ELD teachers often feel isolated in small schools because there may be only one per school (or even one shared across schools). The task of teacher development and professional community is made more difficult by the substantial teacher turnover in the schools, often among newer teachers. While turnover complicates teacher development plans in general, it can pose particular problems for small schools, where losing a few teachers can have a big impact of the school and on its capacity to serve particular populations of students, such as ELs.

Challenge of resources, both human and material. A third contextual issue forming the backdrop for our consideration of the focal question in OUSD concerns issues of resources, both human and material. First, there is the tension between limited number of staff at the district level with relevant expertise and the magnitude of the support needs in the schools. The task of providing adequate support to a large and diverse number of small schools serving different EL groups and of tailoring this support to the unique context of each school is substantial, and there are only a handful of district staff available to carry it out. In addition, there is the question of how to allocate limited fiscal resources. Both questions have implications for deciding what gets done centrally and what is left to the discretion of the individual schools.

Given these challenges, we will consider implication of our focal question concerning coherence and flexibility in three specific policy arenas: resource allocation strategies, programming and instructional resources for EL students, and teacher development strategies. Following this letter, we have included some specific questions to think about with respect to these three policy arenas.



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Schedule for the meeting:

On Monday, June 2, we will have the opportunity to explore the coherence/flexibility tension both from the district perspective and from the perspectives of stakeholders in a range of OUSD small schools. We will begin with a short DVD providing a little historical background on the small schools initiative in Oakland, particularly with respect to the role of community and parents in this effort. Then, district leadership and staff will introduce our focal question and provide an overview of the OUSD context, with special attention to the three identified policy arenas (resource allocation, EL programming, and teacher development). In the afternoon, we will break into small teams to visit six of the small middle and high schools serving EL students in OUSD. In the school visits, team members will have the opportunity to gain deeper understanding of school contexts, needs, and evidence of and perspectives on district support. Monday evening, we will gather for a pleasant group dinner at Café Verbena, around the corner from our hotel.

On Tuesday, June 3, participants will identify emerging themes across the schools visited and discuss implications for policy and practice in OUSD. We will pay particular attention to implications of what we heard and observed for the three identified policy arenas. In doing so, we will take the focal problem of coherence and flexibility as central not only with respect to supporting the schools but also with respect to learning from the diversity in approaches and results across the secondary schools in the system. On Tuesday afternoon, we will consider the broader implications of a small-schools/portfolio-of-schools approach to improving instruction and outcomes for English learners. The discussion will move beyond the Oakland context toward implications for other districts and for policy and research, particularly with regard to carrying out this work in the context of state and federal accountability demands.

Our meeting will adjourn at 3 p.m. on Tuesday, June 3. If you have any additional questions regarding the meeting logistics, please don't hesitate to contact Suzanne Claussen and the California Collaborative staff at 650.843.8192.

Again, thank you for joining us. We are looking forward to a lively and fruitful meeting.

Sincerely,

Jennifer O'Day, Collaborative Chair
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