**Back to School in the Era of COVID-19:
Uncertainties, Complexities, and Emerging Plans**

Meeting 41 Executive Summary

By prompting school closures and transitions to distance learning in schools across the state in spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed almost overnight the environments in which students learn. By June, districts were in the process of planning for fall transitions back to school despite continued uncertainty about the conditions under which reentry might take place. The 41st meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform brought together members and invited guests to consider ways to best meet student needs during this time of unprecedented disruption. By convening Collaborative members virtually for the first time in the group's history, the meeting presented an opportunity to illuminate some of the key challenges and priorities that districts must navigate as they prepare for the 2020-21 school year, as well as to explore opportunities for innovation and strategies for success.

Two Pillars for Reentry

The meeting began with an exploration of two pillars that create the foundation for district transitions back to school: providing for the physical health and safety of students, educators, and families in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; and pursuing equity and racial justice at a time of increased awareness of institutional racism and greater threats to the academic success of our most vulnerable students.

From a health standpoint, experts have signaled that waves and hotspots of the virus are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Policies to ensure hygiene and safety—from social distancing practices to promoting habits of hand washing and sanitizing; wearing masks; and cleaning furniture, objects, and equipment—are advised in all in-person learning settings. Despite improved awareness of and access to hygienic practices and tools, old habits are likely to persist, especially for young children. Constant vigilance will help ensure that students and adults alike engage in safe and responsible behaviors.

The meeting also took place during a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and heightened attention to matters of racial justice. Participants emphasized that these conditions profoundly shape the ways in which students, parents, teachers, and community members will engage with issues related to reentry. As one individual stated, "It's really important that we sit with and acknowledge what parents, students, and families are sitting with right now—walking through the deep pain, anger, and frustration that they are feeling." Throughout the meeting, participants framed the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to address persistent barriers to equity and racial justice through actions at the state, school, and classroom levels.

Addressing the Complexity of Reentry

Having established the two pillars of health and equity for the meeting, participants turned to a session that sought to unpack the complexity of factors that districts face in planning for the transition back to school. At the time of the meeting, districts were responding to multifaceted pressures that some characterized as a three-pronged crisis: (a) the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for community health and safety; (b) the economic distress felt by families struggling with sudden unemployment, by workers forced to report to jobs in unsafe conditions, and by school systems facing consequential reductions in resources; and (c) social unrest that has drawn increased attention to the practices and impacts of systemic racism.

Despite the complications that the pandemic has introduced, participants argued that COVID-19 has created an opening to make important changes in K-12 education. According to one individual, "We should never go back to where we were in January. It wasn't enough. It wasn't working for everybody then, and this is an opportunity to create something going forward." Creating space for change may be especially important regarding issues of equity and racial justice, as circumstances have added urgency—and in some cases granted permission—for long-overdue conversations.

Creating Equitable and Effective Instruction in Remote or Hybrid Settings

Educators acted heroically in spring 2020 to meet student and family needs within a narrow window of time. Nevertheless, the resulting learning environment featured wide variation among classrooms, schools, and districts and significant gaps in quality between distance learning opportunities and typical in-person classroom settings.

Participants explored some key areas of attention to ensure a quality teaching and learning environment. Districts need to understand what their students are currently experiencing and the needs that require attention—not just academically, but socially and emotionally as well. In addition, participants explored strategies to create a coherent and rigorous instructional program in fall 2020 that exhibits the principles of high-quality teaching and learning. Finally, participants explored matters of instructional quality through the lens of working with teachers to craft and implement promising approaches. Improving quality in fall 2020 will require careful attention to addressing teachers needs, building their capacity through effective supports, and thinking creatively to leverage the potential of partnerships and virtual learning environments.

Ensuring Social and Emotional Well-Being as a Foundation for Learning

Throughout the meeting, participants emphasized that social and emotional health might be schools' first priority for reentry. One person reflected, "In order for any type of learning to occur, we have to meet those students' needs social-emotionally first. Otherwise, they're not going to have the space or capacity to engage in any learning, no matter how well thought-out it is."

In a fishbowl conversation among a subset of Collaborative members who work in districts, participants described the negative effects of isolation that they have observed in their children and students—challenges that more severely impact vulnerable students due to

health, economic, and racial injustice pressures. These kinds of pressures have eroded trust that people feel in the people around them and their overall environment, introducing toxic levels of stress for many students and adults.

Nevertheless, lessons from developmental and learning science tell an optimistic story about the brain's ability to change based on experience, and to develop 21st century learning skills like resilience. Participants explored "The New Three R's" that can help focus support for whole-person well-being and learning. *Relationships* help to build a sense of stability, belonging, and trust that enable students to manage and overcome stress. *Routines* help to establish the order and calmness that enable the brain to focus, concentrate, and function at optimal levels. *Resilience* equips students to navigate the challenges that emerge from the COVID-19 context and the other obstacles present in their school and home experiences. Participants discussed strategies for working with students, supporting adults, and leveraging partnerships to facilitate whole-person wellness in the face of multiple crises.

Leading Through Crisis: Lessons, Challenges, and Tools

Just as the health pandemic has created unprecedented settings for teaching and learning, it also has introduced new demands for leaders. The fourth and final meeting session explored the skills, dispositions, and supports needed for leaders to effectively lead their organizations through times of crisis.

Leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to draw on other bodies of knowledge about leadership in crisis. For example, the principles of high-reliability organizations can help to guide the work of leaders and characterize the work of districts who successfully navigate situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. Reducing variation in performance, involving people at every level in decisions that affect them, communicating frequently and comprehensively, and using any instance of failure as an opportunity to improve are all characteristics shared by such organizations. Processes like the U.S. Army's After-Action Review tool can help guide processes of reflection through which organizations use failures as learning experiences. The meeting discussion emphasized building culture during normal times to enable systems to handle crises when they emerge.

Discussions in role-alike small groups explored the implications for leadership in different contexts. The notion that leaders should exhibit "deliberate calm and bounded optimism" in the face of crisis resonated across these groups. So too did calls for introspection and action to advance racial justice. For district leaders in particular, communication strategies may be especially important to promote engagement, relieve anxiety, and build more productive organizations. At the same time, participants called for clearer state guidance in areas like health, safety, and instructional minutes to ensure equitable learning opportunities for students in fall 2020.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic requires that the Collaborative remain flexible in adapting to the evolving conditions of California schools and the needs identified by Collaborative members. We expect to meet virtually again in fall 2020 to continue addressing these issues, especially as they relate to equity and racial justice.

Meeting 41 Detailed Summary
Back to School in the Era of COVID-19:
Uncertainties, Complexities, and Emerging Plans

June 15-16, 2020

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 to inform the dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. This summary does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for the general public. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit www.cacollaborative.org.*

The 41st meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform took place during a time of unprecedented disruption to American schooling. The COVID-19 pandemic had forced the suspension of in-person learning in schools across the state, dramatically changing almost overnight the environments in which students learn. By June 2020, districts were planning for fall transitions back to school despite continued uncertainty about the conditions under which reentry might take place. By convening Collaborative members virtually for the first time in the group's history, the meeting presented an opportunity to illuminate some of the key challenges and priorities that districts must navigate as they prepare for the 2020-21 school year, as well as to explore opportunities for innovation and strategies for success.

Two Pillars for Reentry

The meeting began with an exploration of two pillars that create the foundation for district transitions back to school: providing for the physical health and safety of students, educators, and families in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; and pursuing equity and racial justice at a time of increased awareness of institutional racism and greater threats to the academic success of our most vulnerable students.

Safety in Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic

Don Goldmann, chief scientific officer, emeritus, at the Institute for Healthcare Improvement and Professor of Immunology and Infectious Diseases, and Epidemiology, at the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health, began by summarizing and fielding questions about what scientists had learned about COVID-19 by the time of the meeting. First and

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foremost, he emphasized that the virus would not go away anytime soon, and that waves and hotspots are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Moreover, the influenza season beginning this fall is likely to complicate matters by increasing demands on the health care system. Although vaccine developments are under way, it is still unclear how protective a vaccine will be and for how long, how widely available it might be, and who would agree to be vaccinated. On the positive side, early evidence suggests that children may be less susceptible to the disease, less likely to become seriously ill, and—especially in the case of younger children—less likely to disseminate the virus in high concentrations, which could shape the ways that district leaders consider risk as they transition back to in-person schooling.

Goldmann also addressed priorities for approaches to hygiene and safety. Among the promising strategies for minimizing student contact are social distancing within classrooms and on buses—an approach made more effective if the same group of students can stay together with the same teacher or classroom—and staggering start and stop times so that smaller groups of students enter and leave the campus at any given time. In addition to parameters for interpersonal interaction, masks on children old enough to wear them can reduce droplet transmission dramatically. Increasing the size of the space in which people congregate and maximizing ventilation are critical to minimizing airborne transmission. Encouraging access to and regular habits of handwashing and sanitizing with an alcohol-based hand rub, as well as environmental disinfection emphasizing high-touch surfaces, are also important.

Despite improved awareness of and access to hygienic practices and tools, Goldmann reminded Collaborative members that old habits will persist, especially for young children. Constant vigilance will help ensure that students and adults alike engage in safe and responsible behaviors. Adults will play an important role in modeling these practices.

Finally, Goldmann offered some thoughts about approaches to COVID-19 testing. At the time of the meeting, the PCR test—collected through the nasopharynx—represented the gold standard in detecting the virus. Goldmann acknowledged that testing in a school environment, which may call for rapid and repeated testing on a large scale, may lead administrators to consider other approaches. Self-administered tests, including those based on saliva and for coronavirus antigens rather than nucleic acid may be more practical, but can be less sensitive than the nasopharynx versions. Rapid turnaround is critical for contract tracing and quarantining infected children and staff.

Equity and Racial Justice

The meeting took place shortly after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and subsequent protests worldwide, and only three days after Rayshard Brooks died at the hands of police in Atlanta. In the framing of the meeting and in comments throughout, participants emphasized that these conditions profoundly shape the ways in which students, parents, teachers, and community members will engage with issues related to reentry. As one individual stated, "It's really important that we sit with and acknowledge what parents, students, and families are sitting with right now—walking through the deep pain, anger, and frustration that they are feeling."

Elisha Smith Arrillaga, who as executive director of The Education Trust–West has actively engaged with matters of equity during the pandemic, offered opening remarks that identified three concrete actions Californians can take to address matters of racial justice. First, at the state level, Assembly Constitutional Amendment (ACA) 5 would reinstate affirmative action in California.[2] In an environment where race-conscious practices regularly shape student experiences, support for race-conscious decisions might open doors for addressing policies and behaviors that constrain student success. At the school level, engaging in antiracist teaching practices can help transform classroom experiences in which many students suffer from patterns of conscious and unconscious bias. Finally, at the individual level, Smith Arrillaga called on all Californians to act courageously and call out racism when it emerges in the actions of individuals and systems.

Throughout the meeting, participants framed the response to the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to address persistent barriers to equity and racial justice. One person argued, "We really have an opportunity, even with everything that is going on, to do something different and to do it better." Another participant echoed this sentiment, but further urged that attention to racial justice requires specificity in language and intentionality in action. She explained, "We so quickly devolve to, 'Well, I want to support all kids.' And I think that our data say that we need to be able to call out what happens to African American students, what happens to American Indian students. We need to be intentional." Another individual called on *all* Collaborative members to persistently attend to issues of racial justice throughout the meeting's conversation. "I would hope that we'd have a fervent conversation about how to put equity in the center of this discussion, and hopefully not just put that on the backs of the members of color here."

Addressing the Complexity of Reentry

Having established the two pillars of health and equity for the meeting, participants turned to a session that sought to unpack the complexity of district plans for transitioning back to school.

COVID-19 Creates Overwhelming Levels of Complexity

Discussion among participants emphasized that reentry plans are incredibly complex. At the time of the meeting, districts were responding to multifaceted pressures that some characterized as a three-pronged crisis: (a) the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for community health and safety; (b) the economic distress felt by families struggling with sudden unemployment, by workers forced to report to jobs in unsafe conditions, and by school systems facing consequential reductions in resources; and (c) social unrest that has drawn increased attention to the practices and impacts of systemic racism.

In the face of these challenges, districts also have limited capacity to respond appropriately. Evolving conditions and uncertainty about the path ahead require contingency planning

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[2] At the time of the meeting, the California State Assembly had recently passed ACA 5; the California State Senate would approve the measure June 24. ACA 5 will appear as Proposition 16 on California's November 2020 general election ballot.

and constant adaptation. Meanwhile, planning creates tremendous demands on adult leaders in the system who are exhausted from their work within districts and from the broader developments in their communities and across the country. Labor relationships also shape possibilities for progress—opening doors to new solutions when those relationships are strong, but frequently constraining them when effective working partnerships have not yet been established. Districts navigating these challenges are doing so with limited guidance from the state, which participants suggested could contribute to inefficiency, variation, and inequity. As one person reflected, "I think local control is important and I think we should maintain that, but it does make me question…is this the moment to let a thousand flowers bloom?"

In addition, community pressures can complicate decisions about the most appropriate course of action. Motivated by a desire for clarity and solutions to the most pressing matters in their individual circumstances, community members often advocate for simple solutions when they do not understand the depth of district challenges and the implications of a given action for a range of stakeholders. Moreover, district leaders reported that they often absorb the most pressure from parents who already have options and feel empowered to advocate for their interests, especially when neighboring districts make different choices than they do. This dynamic can make it difficult to develop policies with equity at the center. As one district leader explained, "We are going to make a lot of people unhappy if we do what's right, right now."

COVID-19 Also Presents Opportunities for Productive Change

Despite the complications that the pandemic has introduced, participants argued that COVID-19 has created an opening to make important changes in K-12 education. According to one individual, "We should never go back to where we were in January. It wasn't enough. It wasn't working for everybody then, and this is an opportunity to create something going forward."

Creating space for change may be especially important regarding issues of equity and racial justice, as circumstances have added urgency—and in some cases granted permission—for long overdue conversations. "For school districts that may not have had the courage to address it head on," one person argued, "this has really given us the unexpected opportunity…to have the deliberate steps to take to become antiracist." In this vein, another participant spoke of promising shifts in central office conversations during the pandemic: "Through the closure, we've had some opportunity to practice asking the question, not just, 'Who is this hurting?' but 'Who is this privileging?'" Yet another participant pointed to changes that are happening among students that will push educators to be more responsive to matters of equity as they unfold in school settings, saying, "If you've seen the protests, many of [our students] have been out in the streets. They're not going to be the same students who we had [before] coming to our school [in the fall]. How are [district leaders] thinking about bringing that into the classroom, as you may have a different voice than the students that you saw before?"

These opportunities for advancing equity need to acknowledge and address the elevated challenges that the most vulnerable students face. Students in low-income families may have child care responsibilities, more limited access to devices and internet access, and

increased health risks—especially if they live with essential workers or in multifamily homes. Problems of physical and emotional safety are also more pronounced for historically underserved students. As one individual asserted, "The student populations that have been most damaged or held back during the period of distance learning are those that were also getting the least before we went into distance learning, so you've essentially doubled down on the equity issues." At the same time, empowered families already have options to provide their children with child care and additional learning supports, or to select among in-person or distance learning opportunities because their employment and financial situations grant them flexibility to do so. As districts create choices for students and families, participants called for attention to ways in which districts can address concerns for students who do not have the luxury of choosing among various learning formats and activities.

Promising Practices to Build on for Fall 2020

In the face of crises that frequently feel overwhelming, participants also identified some promising approaches that can help with reentry planning and implementation. Some of these observations related directly to matters of instruction or social and emotional well-being; this summary covers those ideas in the more detailed discussion of those topics later in this document.

Resources and Supports for Students

Despite interruptions to instruction in spring 2020 and shortcomings in their approaches, district actions during the school closures have created a foundation for productive practices in fall 2020. Districts in many communities dramatically expanded technological access to students by providing devices and hotspots to help address longstanding digital divides. Districts also reported engaging in new forms of outreach and more frequent communication that helped enhance community understanding and engagement. New forms of data collection—from monitoring virtual attendance and engagement to collecting student, teacher, and parent perspectives through surveys—also enabled districts to access and act on evidence about the effectiveness of their approaches. District leaders also described efforts to foster virtual teacher–student interactions or to provide social and emotional supports to students and parents. Creative deployment of staff like counselors and bilingual staff to make these individual connections through direct outreach enabled districts to understand and address student needs in new ways. These rapid responses born of crisis conditions can serve as the basis for fostering productive relationships and learning environments when school resumes in the fall.

Approaches to Planning

Meeting participants also shared approaches to reentry planning that might foster greater efficiency and effectiveness. Advisory and planning committees in several districts have helped to make the work more manageable. As one participant explained, "Frankly, the work is so overwhelming to the system that when we think of the entirety of it, it was destabilizing people and putting people in a frozen place." By focusing on discrete phases of

reentry or considering the unique needs of elementary, middle, and high schools, these districts found ways to organize their challenges so that teams could make progress with planning. These planning committees also offered opportunities to build relationships and strengthen plans by incorporating teacher, student, and community voices into the process of understanding and addressing problems.

Partnership and Collaboration

In addition, examples from the meeting highlighted ways in which coordination and collaboration might help districts with planning efforts. In spring 2020, these examples sometimes took the form of partnership with other local authorities, including regular communication with public health officials or neighboring superintendents. Moving forward, the opportunity created by this moment in time to strengthen stakeholders' voices and engagement might be just as important. "If there was ever a time for us to get family engagement right," one participant asserted, "I think now is that time." Surveys are one common method through which districts are soliciting student, teacher, and family input, but participants also recommended connecting with individual groups rather than assume that teachers or parents are monolithic groups with uniform priorities. Districts also should be careful that their outreach efforts do not merely amplify the voices of those who are already most empowered. As one person reflected, "The folks that are filling my email box have just come back to normal. Those are the people that the system worked for. Why wouldn't we take this opportunity to break down systems and practices that didn't allow each of our kids to be successful?"

Use of Space

Finally, participants suggested that creative use of space and time can maximize possibilities for in-person learning when it resumes. For districts experiencing declining enrollment, otherwise unused physical space can expand options for socially distanced classroom instruction. Similarly, libraries and gymnasiums are possible meeting spaces. In the spirit of collaboration, community partners also can offer space for both instruction and child care by leveraging buildings like museums and community centers.

Creating Equitable and Effective Instruction in Remote or Hybrid Settings

Many educators acted heroically in spring 2020 to meet student and family needs within a narrow window of time. Nevertheless, the resulting learning environment featured wide variation among classrooms, schools, and districts and significant gaps in quality between distance learning opportunities and typical in-person classroom settings. Through a combination of opening reflections from selected Collaborative members and subsequent small group conversations, the second session of the meeting focused on priorities, strategies, and challenges for providing high-quality and equitable instruction in fall 2020.

Understanding Student Needs

Participants discussed the importance of districts understanding what their students are currently experiencing and the needs that require attention.

Assessment of Academic Need

Students will return to school for the 2020-21 academic year having experienced spring and summer learning loss, which are likely to be more pronounced for the most vulnerable students. Comments during the meeting suggested that some form of assessment and evidence gathering is critical to understanding students' academic needs so that educational opportunities can address gaps in learning and position students to navigate appropriate academic content. As one participant remarked, "Now more than ever, I think that it is imperative that we know our kids by name and need, and we need to take some time to identify the array of needs that we're going to have to assess." Common assessments could play useful role in identifying needs, but districts' abilities to administer such assessments are shaped by a combination of state guidance, agreements with local bargaining units, and considerations of students' social and emotional response to the current crises. Some participants suggested that the state could play a useful role by sponsoring a statewide assessment; existing screeners could be used for this purpose.

Assessment of a Broader Set of Needs and Actions

In addition to academics, participants underscored the importance of students' social and emotional well-being if they are to re-enter school—whether virtually or in person—ready to learn. Thus, districts should consider sources of evidence that can help target these needs. Teachers also have experienced profound disruptions professionally and personally, and their social and emotional needs also require attention; some monitoring of teacher engagement may be useful for identifying areas for adult support. Other kinds of measures also might be useful, especially when students are not present on school campuses. For example, tracking instances of student outreach and contact from various members of the school community can inform work to engage and support students.

Sources of Evidence

To help build a stronger understanding of student and adult needs, participants considered various sources of useful evidence. Surveys of students, teachers, and parents can be powerful, especially when the items have equity as a focus. Participants especially focused on the importance of student voice, both to help the district understand how its approaches are actually experienced and to help foster student engagement. Articulating a view expressed by many small group members, one person suggested, "If there's ever a time to engage student voice, it's now. In terms of everything we're doing, we need to hear from them." Another participant referenced recent protests for racial justice to similarly advocate for giving students a voice in the solutions that districts develop, "knowing that they are having the opportunity to exercise that voice in the world right now and in their communities in a way that maybe many of them have not had [before]. If they come back into schools and they don't have that voice in helping solve some of these problems, I think we'll lose a lot of students."

Conversations about assessment also acknowledged tensions that might emerge depending on the methods and purposes of those efforts. For example, the kinds of evidence required to identify broad patterns across classrooms, schools, or school systems may be different from those that are meaningful and actionable for classroom teachers. At a time when all members of the school community feel overwhelmed, districts will need to prioritize the most important data collection and analysis activities with attention to the burden that they place on students and teachers. Participants also emphasized that appropriate use of assessment results is critical. Most data are likely to tell educators that the students who were already behind are now further behind. How can teachers and administrators translate that knowledge into action? In that vein, several people argued that the response to inevitable gaps among students needs to be on high-quality standards-based instruction, not simply remediation.

Creating a Coherent and Rigorous Instructional Program

Participants also explored strategies to create a coherent and rigorous instructional program in fall 2020 that exhibits the principles of high-quality teaching and learning.

Consistency Across Classrooms and Schools

In reflections about distance learning experiences in spring 2020, participants highlighted inconsistency as one of the most glaring shortcomings. Challenges related both to variation in the teacher–student interactions in learning settings and to insufficient technological access for some students, especially those from low-income families. Listing just some of the obstacles that these students faced, one person drew attention to "folks with limited to no connectivity, doing instruction while sitting in parking lots to get free Wi-Fi from businesses, typing papers on their phone and submitting, lack of privacy, [and] child care and elder care responsibilities."

Small group discussions noted that the high levels of variability and inequity during districts' initial foray into distance learning underscore the need for instructional coherence and consistency when school begins again in the fall. Referencing district efforts to create a strong instructional program during normal times, one person noted, "I think the same work that you do for coherence and consistency throughout the school year has to be done through distance." To that end, the summer might offer an important opportunity for reflection and improvement. As one participant reflected, "How can we ensure that content, curriculum, [and] pedagogy are being delivered and standardized? It's looking at each system and what we learned from what happened in spring."

Anticipating a return to school in fall 2020 that could feature the continuation of distance learning or a hybrid learning environment, participants noted that successfully navigating multiple—and potentially changing—teaching and learning models requires a set of consistent expectations that also allow for differentiation to meet individual learning needs. Districts will need to dedicate attention to both content and pedagogy that can ensure common expectations and student experiences across learning formats. Some participants suggested that using a single platform (for example, Google Classroom) in all schools can help create the conditions for consistency across a district.

To ensure consistency, participants emphasized that communication is critical. Building parent and student understanding of a district's instructional approach can help it calibrate expectations and navigate the learning environment even as it shifts between distance and in-person settings. It also may be important to emphasize the differences between a district's approach in spring 2020 and its plans for 2020-21. Many students and parents perceived the initial transition to distance learning as a temporary aberration that did not count toward meaningful education goals or milestones. In contrast, district leaders will need to clarify that whatever the instructional delivery model is in fall 2020, it *is* the learning that students will experience and need to master.

Key Areas of Attention for Instructional Quality

The second area of challenge most frequently identified in participants' reflections about spring 2020 was the lack of rigor and quality teacher–student interactions. As one person observed, "Very little attention has been given to the rigor of instruction over the course of this pandemic, and nearly no thought given to virtual work-based experiences for students needing support as they transition from the system to the world of work." A second participant succinctly articulated a similar point about levels of quality overall: "In too many cases, what I have seen is we really did not put the *learning* in the distance." The result was variation in student experiences across classrooms, schools, and districts that often contributed to student frustration, stress, and disengagement.

Recognizing that the summer offers an opportunity to reimagine approaches to learning with attention to rigor, participants explored considerations for maximizing the quality of teaching and learning in distance and hybrid settings. A publication from Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), released in July 2020, lays out some key areas of attention for ensuring quality instruction in the COVID-19 context.[3] One of the brief's authors joined the meeting to provide an introduction to the instructional framework then under development.

The PACE framework draws on expertise from both research and practice to focus educators on some key components of the instructional environment. At the time of the meeting, the framework called attention to dimensions like pedagogical approaches, synchronicity, technological access and tools, and the proportion of instruction that takes place in person. For example, in a blended environment where student experiences feature a combination of distance and in-person learning opportunities, educators can look for ways to maximize the potential of different pedagogical approaches. Expository learning might be best suited for asynchronous approaches that leverage text, video, or other applications for delivering content to students. In contrast, interactive opportunities like discussions, labs, and hands-on learning experiences are those for which in-person or synchronous distance instruction is a high priority. Building on these observations, other

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[3] See Myung, J., Gallagher, H.A., Cottingham, B., Gong, A., Kimmer, H., Witte, J., Gee, K., & Hough, H.J. (2020). *Supporting learning in the COVID-19 context: Research to guide distance and blended instruction.* Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education. Retrieved from https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/supporting-learning-covid-19-context

participants added their perspectives that project- and work-based learning might be approaches that can improve student engagement when learning at a distance.[4]

Promising Instructional Strategies

Participant perspectives shared during this session and in other parts of the meeting highlighted promising approaches for improving instructional quality. Recognizing that the overall number of instructional minutes and opportunities for teacher–student interaction have been reduced from traditional in-school experiences, some participants advocated for the identification of "essential standards" or "power standards" that can help enable focus and depth.

The novel learning environment created when students participate in school remotely also creates space for innovation. Indeed, some participants expressed appreciation for the pockets of creativity in lesson design that they observed during spring 2020, including instances of effectively combining synchronous and asynchronous instruction, flipped learning experiences, and team teaching. These promising strategies can provide a foundation for further growth in 2020-21. Some districts shared plans to develop "distance academies" that provide permanent distance learning for students who can benefit most from that learning format. One district described efforts to identify its strongest teachers in core subject areas, then provide synchronous learning opportunities for students from a range of schools so that attendance zones did not interrupt access to high-quality teaching; other teachers can also observe these lessons to help inform their own practice.

Discussions during the meeting also highlighted strategies for attending to diverse learning needs. Some of these approaches involved additional instructional time. For example, in hybrid learning models where students split their time between virtual and in-person learning, English learners or students with disabilities might receive smaller group on-site support during times when they would otherwise be learning virtually. Districts also might deploy instructional staff like teachers on special assignment to provide supplemental instruction to students with elevated needs. Extended school days or weekend learning also can enable districts to supplement the support that struggling students receive. In describing these approaches, participants also emphasized the importance of building and strengthening teacher–student connections. Targeted online appointments, for example, can help provide additional social and emotional support to students who need it.

Supporting Teachers to Craft and Implement Effective Solutions

The third lens the participants used to explore matters of instructional quality was the importance of working with teachers to craft and implement promising approaches.

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[4] After the meeting, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) also released guidance for school systems to plan for high-quality teaching and learning in 2020-21. The CCSSO resources offer a useful supplement to the PACE brief and the meeting conversation. See Council of Chief State School Officers. (2020). *Restart & recovery: Considerations for teaching & learning overview.* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from https://ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/CCSSO_RR_Consider_Teach-v3.pdf

The Complexity of Working With and Supporting Teachers

Opening remarks from one Collaborative member and subsequent small group discussion underscored again the complexity of the school reentry challenge. One person used the analogy of a three-dimensional puzzle to describe the prospects of preparing and supporting teachers in delivering excellent instruction: "If you imagine the cube, you can see each of the external pieces, but as you pull each piece out, you realize that it is attached to multiple pieces inside that you didn't realize."

Several obstacles complicate the prospects of putting teachers in the best position to succeed. For example, reentry requires attention to technological and pedagogical preparation for teaching in ways that can diverge widely from traditional classroom practice. Compounding that challenge is the need to track and provide emotional support to students. As one participant observed, "There's a whole set of things that…largely got layered onto teachers in this mad rush while they're also trying to redo their classrooms." At the same time, districts need to attend to the health and safety needs of the teaching force, as well as child care obligations that have emerged for some teachers as their own children have been sent home to learn. These dynamics could lead to fewer teachers feeling safe or comfortable reporting to school sites for in-person learning; by reducing the number of adults on site, their absence exacerbates the challenges of physical distancing for students. Collectively, these pressures for teachers and for school systems mean districts and families are asking more from teachers precisely at the time when they have least to give.

More Expansive Views of Who Comprises Instructional Staff

Given limited system capacity and increased demands on teachers, participants recommended that districts think more expansively about who can meet the range of responsibilities now required of instructional staff. As one person reflected, "What I've learned through this process is that we have to take advantage of every person who's willing to help." A range of school personnel, from classroom teachers to principals to instructional aides and counselors, might play important roles in forging connections and ensuring quality learning experiences for students. Parents have been forced into more active roles in supporting their children's learning from home; although the pressures on them are substantial, they too are a resource. Districts also might turn to partner organizations for support with both instruction and child care that can help to create the conditions for high-quality teaching and learning to take place. Youth organizations, community colleges, and teacher preparation programs are examples of possible partners for districts moving forward.

Strategies for Building and Leveraging Teacher Capacity

Participants discussed a variety of strategies that can help to build and leverage teacher capacity in service of high-quality teaching and learning.

Some district strategies call for reimagining teacher roles. Traditional approaches to K-12 education adopt a fairly uniform understanding of what a classroom teacher does. In an environment of distance and hybrid learning, districts have an opportunity to differentiate teacher roles to capitalize on individual strengths and availabilities. As one participant

observed, "Some teachers are going to be rock stars that are engaging in online learning and others aren't." Another person added, "Are we thinking about how we find teachers that we know to be effective and put them in front of more students than they would normally do just in their classroom?" The example described earlier of enabling students to sign up for live lessons with a high-quality teacher, even if they are not assigned to that teacher's class or school, is one such innovative approach; other teachers also can attend these classes to get ideas for their own instruction. Similarly, another district offered a stipend to a subset of teachers to record three lessons per week for use in fall 2020. Other teachers can use these lessons for content delivery, freeing them to focus more of their time and energy on differentiation and individualized instruction.

Participants also discussed approaches to building teacher knowledge and skills. Most districts already feature summer professional development opportunities for students; tailoring these toward teaching in a hybrid environment can help prepare teachers for success when they return to school. By videotaping synchronous lessons of teachers who thrive in a virtual environment, districts also can create exemplars of high-quality teaching practices that their peers can access asynchronously. Participants also advocated for districts to create opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration and learning to help teachers navigate unfamiliar teaching and learning environments.

Labor–Management Collaboration

Participants also recognized that effective collaboration between districts and their labor partners can help facilitate problem-solving around instructional and staffing issues. "The only way we're going to get through all of this and come out better on the other side," one person asserted, "is if we do it together." As an example, representatives from one district shared examples of side letters they had created that would allow teacher to opt into distance learning assignments and create flexibility for involuntary transfers. Other participants, in contrast, described ways in which communication voids in the face of contract language intended for a different context made it difficult to find common ground for new approaches. Multiple participants noted that districts with strong working relationships in place before the pandemic were better equipped to navigate the process of generating creative solutions.

As districts and unions navigate the conditions under which teaching and learning take place, efforts to support and protect teachers may be in tension with efforts to ensure equitable access for students. Policies to ensure quality teaching and learning experiences for the most vulnerable youth in K-12 school systems could mean, for example, providing equitable access to teachers most skilled at working in a virtual environment. At the same time, ensuring the safety of the teaching force might mean providing choice to medically compromised employees regarding the environments in which they work. For example, older or medically at-risk teachers could receive priority for teaching virtually to address these health concerns rather than their relative expertise in distance learning. District leaders will need to make difficult decisions in confronting these potentially conflicting priorities.

Given the wide range of labor–management relationships across the state, participants also noted that leaving key decisions to be negotiated with local bargaining units contributes to

wide variation across districts. The state might play an important role in advancing equity and consistency by establishing parameters for teaching and learning in critical areas.

Ensuring Social and Emotional Well-Being as a Foundation for Learning

Throughout the meeting, participants emphasized that social and emotional health might be schools' first priority for reentry. One person reflected, "In order for any type of learning to occur, we have to meet those students' needs social-emotionally first. Otherwise, they're not going to have the space or capacity to engage in any learning, no matter how well thought-out it is." Another individual added, "This is an opportunity for us to put relationships at the center of the education enterprise." The third session of the meeting turned explicit attention to matters of social and emotional well-being in transitions back to school.

Troubling Effects of Isolation

In a fishbowl conversation among a subset of Collaborative members who work in districts, participants described the negative effects of isolation that they have observed in their children and students. Some of these challenges, like the loss of peer relationships, occur broadly. According to one individual, "It's never been harder to be a kid, period…and then you put a pandemic on top of that and you isolate people—young people who thrive on being connected—and I think this added dramatically to the challenges that kids are dealing with." Eager to resume these connections, students and families crave a return to normalcy.

Fishbowl participants further highlighted the elevated challenges experienced by vulnerable students due to health, economic, and racial injustice pressures. From a health perspective, many parents are forced to work in unsafe conditions, and in some families, students need to work as well. Students often live in homes with multiple families, increasing their potential exposure to COVID-19 and limiting opportunities for isolation to focus on schoolwork. Moreover, students with undocumented parents navigate any health challenges without insurance to cover medical needs. Adding additional economic pressure, still other families feature parents who have lost their jobs. Older students often have caretaking responsibilities for younger siblings, putting additional pressure on their shoulders. Participants reported higher incidents of domestic violence during the pandemic that disproportionately affect low-income families. Matters of racial injustice elevated in the wake of George Floyd's killing often compound these challenges, especially for students who historically have not felt listened to or understood.

Remarks From Pamela Cantor, M.D. About Lessons From Developmental and Learning Science

Child psychiatrist and Turnaround for Children founder Pamela Cantor, M.D. joined the group to share lessons and perspectives from the field of neuroscience that can inform approaches to reentry.

Human Reactions to Crises

Cantor began by echoing some key challenges that have been introduced and exacerbated by COVID-19. In particular, many students feel unsafe and are experiencing a lack of trust as they navigate school closures, racial justice, and other pressures from the pandemic.

Developmental and learning science offer important lessons about humans' reactions to crises. First is the malleability of the human brain, a living structure more adaptable to experience than any other tissue in the body. This makes the brain susceptible to negative influences, but also makes it capable of growing in positive ways under the right conditions. In addition, the brain's growth is actually experience dependent. Fewer than 10 percent of the 10,000 genes in our genomes get expressed in our lifetimes. It is our environments, experiences, and relationships that determine which genes get expressed— and therefore who we are and who we become. Given these factors, context is critical in shaping how the brain develops and operates. According to Cantor, there is no separation between nature and nurture; our lives are not predetermined by a genetic program. Therefore we, as adults, have an important role in shaping the context—the environments, experiences, and relationships—in all settings in which students grow and learn.

Stress plays a critical role in how children's brains develop and learn. Stress produces cortisol, which, at mild or tolerable levels, is adaptive. That is, it can enable focus and elevate performance in the right circumstances. When cortisol levels are persistency high, however, and not buffered by the presence of a calm adult, they can produce a condition called toxic stress and can lock children into a fight-or-flight reaction to their environment. Cantor explained that the result affects children on a biological level: "Adversity doesn't just happen *to* children, it happens inside their brains and bodies through the biologic mechanism of stress."

Despite the threat that stress introduces to physical and emotional well-being, another hormonal system—oxytocin—plays an equally critical role in the body's response to stress. Relationships that are strong and positive cause the release of oxytocin within the brain. Oxytocin hits the same structures in the brain as cortisol and therefore can literally protect children from the damaging effects of cortisol at a cellular level. Cantor emphasized that human relationships are critical to producing oxytocin and therefore protecting students from stress, helping them engage with learning, and helping them to build resilience.

Applications of Developmental and Learning Science to Child Development

Cantor described findings from research that connect some of the lessons from science to the experiences of children inside and outside of school settings. Research conducted in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York City found that the most startling effects on children were not in Ground Zero schools, but rather in the communities of children in deepest poverty. In other words, those children already exposed to stress and without the supportive structures that would help them to produce oxytocin were more vulnerable to the effects of a disruptive and threatening event.

As another example, a famous study of young children—the "marshmallow experiment"— presented children with a choice of eating a single marshmallow immediately or waiting 15 minutes and receiving a second marshmallow. The initial study found correlations between

children who were able to exert self-control—delaying gratification—and key learning and life outcomes. In 2012, however, another researcher redid the study under different conditions: Prior to initiating the marshmallow tests, children received a box of broken crayons and a promise that the researcher would return with a new box. For half of the children, the representative brought new crayons as promised. For the other half, the researcher returned to apologize that they were not able to provide new crayons after all. Then the researcher repeated the marshmallow test. The group for whom the promise was kept had no trouble waiting for the second marshmallow. In contrast, the group for whom the promise was broken gobbled up the first marshmallow right away. The ability to delay gratification and exert self-control, it turns out, has much to do with whether a child trusts the person providing them with a marshmallow. In other words, this updated research demonstrated that the malleable skill of self-control was not just in the child, it was in the child in an environment that was designed to reveal this skill—through the experience of a trustful relationship. The connection between context and the development of skills and talents has enormous implications for how we design environments to optimize learning and development.

Implications for the Context of COVID-19

Cantor argued that this body of knowledge helps to illustrate some of the challenges that all people—adults and children alike—face during the time of COVID-19. The combination of the health pandemic, economic hardship, and racial injustice have escalated the inequities of today and uncertainty about the future. These circumstances have eroded trust that young people feel in the adults around them who are supposed to protect them. When trust is broken, our bodies are seized by stress. COVID-19 therefore presents a paradox: In order to remain physically safe, we need to be physically distant from one another, which disrupts the very kinds of human connections we need to feel emotionally safe.

Science helps to illuminate the challenges we face, but it also lights a pathway for helping young people to thrive. Emotions can engage our cognitive learning skills, or they can shut us down. The charge for educators is therefore to design environments that enable the cognitive, social, and emotional skills and talents of all students to be revealed. If the adults in students' lives can build the relationships, environments, and experiences to support whole child development, this will not only enable our young people to cope with stress, but it will also support engagement in learning and the ability to thrive. To that end, five elements can help to foster effective learning environments using whole child design: (a) positive relationships; (b) settings filled with safety and belonging; (c) integrated comprehensive supports; (d) intentional development of skills, mindsets, and habits of all successful learners; and (e) rich, meaningful instructional experiences in which students discover what they are capable of.

Cantor concluded by identifying what she called "The New Three Rs" that can help focus support for whole-person well-being and learning. *Relationships* help to build a sense of stability, belonging, and trust that enable students to manage and overcome stress. *Routines* help to establish the order and calm that that enables the brain to focus, concentrate, and function at optimal levels. *Resilience* equips students to navigate the challenges that emerge from the COVID-19 context and the other obstacles present in their

school and home experiences. According to Cantor, "Building relationships and resilience is likely the most important task we have for ourselves and our kids today." This will enhance regulation skills and the ability to manage stress for adults as well as for children.

In her closing remarks, Cantor cautioned participants about using the word "trauma." Although it can be a well-intentioned acknowledgement of the sources of stress that students experience, it also can introduce stigma and shame for those students because it sets up a relationship between student and adult that is deficit-oriented from the beginning. Instead, Cantor argued that we should view trauma as a disturbance in our lives—a disruption to health, mood, behavior, and skill development. This is something that can happen to any of us, and fortunately, the consequences are reversible. Rather than use trauma as a label, she recommended using it as a lens to support all students so that they can understand and overcome its effects.

Approaches for Addressing the Needs of the Whole Person

Participants considered strategies through which districts can help support the whole-person needs of both students and adults.[5]

Monitoring Student Needs

Several approaches can be useful in helping educators understand and address a range of student needs. Surveys are one strategy already employed by many districts this spring to collect evidence of student perspectives on a broad scale; parent input may be critical for understanding the experiences of younger students. Some participants also described mentoring relationships between district leaders and students that not only create a support structure for students, but also give district leaders a more personal window into student experiences. In the classroom, prompts from teachers to students when they take attendance can be another form through which students can share what they are thinking or feeling. At least one participant cautioned, though, that district leaders need to be open to the feedback they receive when they turn to students for their opinions: "We have to be willing to listen and hear the hard things that they may have to say to us. It is there that you begin to build relationships."

Developing Relationships With Students

Further exploring one of the "New Three Rs" from Cantor's presentation, participants discussed the importance of developing relationships with students. "In a time when things are fractured," one person observed, "you have to double down on building these kinds of relationships." Another individual added, "The relationship piece is at the heart of engaging our students and building trust." Nevertheless, establishing relationships with students in the absence of in-person contact in fall 2020 presents daunting challenges. According to one participant, "Our teachers had relationships with their students when we

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[5] As a resource that can supplement observations that emerged from the meeting conversation, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) released a roadmap for addressing social and emotional learning in the transition back to school for 2020-21. See Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2020). *Reunite, renew, and thrive: Social and emotional learning (SEL) roadmap for reopening school.* Chicago, IL: Author. Retrieved from https://casel.org/reopening-with-sel/.

shut down on March 13, and we still had challenges connecting with students. So what does it look like when you're starting a school year and that relationship isn't there?" Another person voiced a similar concern by saying, "The challenge is going to be the teachers getting to know the kids, because coming back with physical distancing, facial coverings…and not being able to see their children every day…That's one of the concerns our teachers have."

Despite the obstacles that distance learning creates, participants also explored some strategies for developing strong student relationships. Continuing an earlier idea of leveraging staffing in more creative ways, districts might assign adults to make a personal connection with a specific set of students, potentially bringing in a range of staff (e.g., instructional aides) to make the workload manageable and maximize the quality of student connection. A concierge program in one district gives families a resource to call, talk to a human being, and be connected directly to the services they need. Home visits are a way to make connections to student and families when in-school connections are not possible, especially for students who have not engaged in virtual learning. There are also several tools that other organizations have created to help build relationships. The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, for example, has developed webinars to give teachers language to talk with their students about racial justice. Turnaround for Children also shared tools with participants that classroom teachers can use to develop relationships with their students even in a virtual learning environment.

Creating Routines With Students

Participants also discussed strategies for developing routines for students to establish order and create the conditions for a calm brain. Routines may be especially important in the transition back to school in fall 2020, where great uncertainty remains and learning formats may change rapidly with the ebb and flow of COVID-19 spread. From a system level, consistency across classroom and schools—discussed earlier as a component of high-quality instruction—will also be important for emotional health but will require extensive collaboration and communication to achieve. At school and classroom levels, routines for opening the day, for opening a class session, or for school drop-off are possible areas for attention. A routines planner from Turnaround for Children is one tool that might help student manage their own time. Starting meetings among adults with check-ins can also be part of a routine and can help build relationships at the same time.

Building Resilience in Students

Participants also briefly reflected on strategies for building resilience. In recognition of the neuroscience demonstrating that resilience is a malleable skill, some participants also reflected that the zone of proximal development that shapes educators' approaches to academic learning can also apply to developing resilience. By recognizing where students are without support, then scaffolding the development of skills that students can exhibit with guidance and encouragement, educators can help those students develop their ability to respond to adversity.

Attending to Both Adult and Student Needs

Conversations about social and emotional support frequently explored implications for work with students, but participants also emphasized understanding and supporting adults—both teachers and parents. One person acknowledged the increased demands on teachers during the pandemic and observed, "Now you have to be an expert in everything, and that's pretty hard to do in such a short period of time…We need to find some sort of way to let our teachers know they're not alone and to have platforms and opportunities for them to reach out because I know their anxiety is pretty high as well." Another participant echoed this point, emphasizing that caring for adult needs also will equip them to better support students: "We are more likely to help the adults in service to kids form relationships if we're also making sure that we're checking in on them as human beings and making sure that they're okay too."

Identifying and Responding to Pressures and Challenges That Can Complicate Whole-Person Supports

Participants also raised some of the challenges that can get in the way of providing supports that enable social and emotional well-being. Working with upper grade levels, for example, may require educators to think of their roles in new ways. Teachers who work with dozens of students rather than a single class and who identify primarily with their content area may not think about providing social and emotional supports as part of their job. Teens themselves can make it difficult for adults to make connections in this way, but this does not diminish the need. According to one individual, "It's just what high school kids need the most and crave the most—and are hard-wired in their brain to rebel against. And so adults can often give up on them, thinking they don't want that, but in fact they crave that connection just as much."

Districts also need to consider the demands placed on teachers to address the full range of student needs. Pressures to stay on top of a district-established scope and sequence lead many teachers to feel that they cannot afford to step away from academic content to spend their time on social and emotional matters. They need permission and support from their supervisors to engage with students around their nonacademic needs. Expectations for support may also require collaboration between districts and bargaining units. Districts will need to provide guidance and secure buy-in that positions these kinds of priorities as important.

Leveraging Partnerships to Ensure Social and Emotional Well-Being

In recognition of the limited bandwidth that schools have to promote social and emotional health, participants suggested looking beyond K-12 schools for support. Even before COVID-19, California had some of the nation's lowest numbers of nurses, counselors, teachers, and assistant principals. Now, with the demands for these roles increasing without any concomitant influx of resources, school systems may be ill-equipped to address student needs. As one participant reflected, "The bandwidth of the school doesn't match up with a whole child [approach], and just educators talking to each other isn't going to get us to that vision." Districts might consider county agencies, YMCAs, boys & girls

clubs, and other community partners to provide important resources and supports so that teachers have the capacity to facilitate academic learning.

Leading Through Crisis: Lessons, Challenges, and Tools

Participant discussion through the first three sessions of the meeting focused primarily on student needs and the ways in which school systems can foster supportive and productive learning environments among teachers and students. Just as the health pandemic has created an unprecedented circumstance in which teaching and learning takes place, however, it also has introduced new demands for leaders. The fourth and final meeting session explored the skills, dispositions, and supports needed for leaders to effectively lead their organizations through times of crisis.

Perspectives From a Veteran Superintendent

The session began with remarks from veteran superintendent Dale Marsden, who drew on his experiences in district leadership and the military to share insights about the current environment. These remarks suggested that leadership during the pandemic is an opportunity to draw on other bodies of knowledge about leadership in crisis. Such circumstances are volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous, and threatening. Because of the complexities of the situation and the role, Marsden shared, "I liken the job of being superintendent to living on an aircraft carrier during war." The charge for a leader in this context, he argued, is not to solve the problems we face, but to manage the complexities of those problems. The leader's role is to establish, communicate, and model the values that will help the organization move forward. "Who we are as leaders is simply magnified during times of crisis," he reflected. "A crisis is an opportunity to live out their espoused values." To that end, leaders play an important role in modeling the kinds of behaviors they want to see throughout the system.

Principles for Effective Leadership

The principles of high-reliability organizations can help to guide the work of leaders and characterize the work of districts that successfully navigate situations like the COVID-19 pandemic.[6] Reducing variation is one characteristic of such an organization. Crisis situations will tax leaders physically and emotionally. Ensuring consistency and excellence of practice and safety of delivery is essential, as is avoiding human error born of physical or mental fatigue. As one strategy for reducing variation, San Bernardino City Unified School District (SBCUSD), under Marsden's leadership, developed a safety checklist with more than 40 critical items that would help leaders to achieve consistency in their actions during turbulent times. Also fundamental to organizational success is a healthy approach to failure. In an environment where people need to make rapid decisions with little precedent

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[6] In his remarks, Marsden referenced the work of Greg Jacobson, whose 2018 blog post was included as one of the premeeting readings for participants: Jacobson, G. (2018, March 18). *5 principles of a high reliability organization (HRO)* [blog post]. Retrieved from https://blog.kainexus.com/improvement-disciplines/hro/5-principles.

to guide them, leaders need to eliminate fear so that people feel comfortable failing and learning from failure.

In the spirit of learning from failure, meeting participants reviewed the After-Action Review tool originally developed by the U.S. Army and used frequently during Marsden's time in SBCUSD. The tool guides organizations through a reflection process that can take from 30 minutes to a couple of hours to complete by addressing three questions:

1. *What did we just experience?* This part of the process draws on input from multiple stakeholders to illustrate the perspectives of all players, resulting in a composite perspective that paints a more accurate picture of what actually happened.

2. *What did we learn from what we experienced?* The leader's job here is to resolve the space between the organization's espoused values and its values in action.

3. *What will we do next time?* Input from a range of people about productive action moving forward will help to make an organization's system, practice, and policies better.

To make the After-Action Review effective, it is critical to understand the central principle that the approach is nonjudgmental. The goal is not to assign blame, but rather to strengthen the organization's capacity to navigate the next challenge that emerges.

Additional principles also can maximize the effectiveness of leaders in crisis situations. One of these is to involve people at every level in decisions that affect them. The impulse in the face of immense system pressure may be to centralize decision-making to maximize efficiency. However, Marsden explained, "High reliability organizations shift from control to involvement." For this kind of engagement, communication is essential. He added, "Information is like oxygen. Without it, people hallucinate." One of the more positive outcomes of spring 2020 school closures was reports from several participants that districts had increased the frequency and quality of communication; building on this foundation may help districts to continue engaging stakeholders as they approach the 2020-21 school year.

Building culture during normal times will enable systems to handle crises when they emerge. Building relationships early, for example, enables leaders to draw on them when necessary. Marsden explained, "I did a lot of listening, and as I listened, it built the relationships that were necessary [so] when those crises came, I could depend on those leaders to walk me through that and learn." Similarly, equipping other leaders with resources and capacity to make decisions in normal times enables them to do so when crisis situations demand that they act. He continued, "When times of crisis came, people felt empowered and needed to be empowered."

Finally, crisis situations require that leaders honor and prioritize self-care. A crisis, especially a prolonged crisis, can create mental, human, and system fatigue. The effects of stress examined during the meeting's third session can be just as powerful for system leaders as for students and teachers. Taking time and seeking support for social and emotional well-being will enable leaders to play the role that their organization requires of them. And again, modeling self-care sends an important message to others to do the same.

Implications for Leaders in Different Roles

Following remarks about leadership in crisis, meeting participants broke into role-alike groups to discuss the implications for leadership in their own contexts. Across the groups, comments suggested that calls for "deliberate calm and bounded optimism" in the face of crisis resonated.

District Strategies to Facilitate Calmness

Within the small groups of superintendents and other district leaders, participants discussed mechanisms for facilitating calmness within their organizations. Communications strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic may be especially important for these purposes. Collecting information from a range of stakeholders can encourage participatory decision making and help members of the school community feel heard. Similarly, providing information can help to answer questions, provide assurances, and relieve anxiety among community members.

Actions to Advance Racial Justice

Comments about leadership and racial justice emerged across multiple small groups. These times have revealed troubling examples of hate speech and racist behavior, but also create an important opportunity to revisit policies and procedures. Working with community partners can help to engage a range of voices in problem solving and craft more responsive and productive solutions. Participants named organizations such as Orange County Human Relations and California Conference for Equality and Justice as examples of potential partners in this role.

For organizations that provide direct support to districts, internal reflection and change can better equip district partners to recognize and address underrepresentation and marginalization. Leaders can examine staffing and board membership to ensure that important perspectives are reflected in the organization's work. Contracting with Black-owned businesses can help build the capacity and visibility of historically underrepresented voices while also enhancing the quality of work overall. Participants suggested that White leaders in particular should share the responsibility of moving conversations about racial justice forward so that it does not fall exclusively on the shoulders of staff of color.

The small group of funders also considered the implications for leadership within philanthropy. Many foundations already have recognized the importance of funding equity-oriented organizations, and should continue to do so. However, the small group also argued that leaders need to monitor, understand, and change areas in which funding decisions have actually exacerbated racism—for example, by providing support to organizations supporting underserved populations by not empowering those communities to be drivers of the work. To that end, participants also discussed ways to bring voices from the communities being served into their decision-making processes.

Calls for Stronger State Guidance

In the role-alike small group conversations and in other discussions during the meeting, participants suggested that state guidance is critical both for ensuring equity and for mitigating the burden falling on district leaders' shoulders. A state commitment to local control—introduced with the Local Control Funding Formula to equip districts to better understand and address the needs of their local communities—has translated during the pandemic into a reluctance to establish any statewide expectations for districts. One person described the way in which this commitment is harming vulnerable students by arguing, "I think we are exploiting the most disempowered populations we serve by acting as if the local context is the reason why we are not providing directives and [instead] we are only providing guidance." Leaving issues like expectations for teacher engagement and instructional hours to be collectively bargained, for example, ensures inequitable variation in student experiences across the state. Participants suggested that clearer parameters for issues like health, safety, and instructional minutes are needed to ensure equitable learning opportunities for students in fall 2020.[7]

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic requires that the Collaborative remain flexible in adapting to the evolving conditions of California schools and the needs identified by Collaborative members. Nevertheless, feedback from the June meeting suggests that meeting virtually was an effective way to bring voices together from a variety of perspectives to understand and address the most pressing concerns that districts face as they navigate the transition back to school. We expect to meet virtually again in fall 2020 to continue addressing these issues, especially as they relate to equity and racial justice, and plan to finalize the meeting dates by the end of the summer. In the meantime, the Collaborative staff will continue to pursue publications and activities that share key lessons from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators. As always, resources from this and previous meetings, updates regarding Collaborative members, and information concerning upcoming events are available on our website at www.cacollaborative.org.

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[7] In the weeks following the meeting, the California legislature adopted expectations for minimum instructional minutes by grade level for the 2020-21 school year. However, that language still leaves the details of what constitutes an instructional minute to the discretion of local districts. A PACE brief coauthored by multiple Collaborative members and released in July 2020 offers several recommendations for state action in this and other domains in response to COVID-19. See Hough, H., O'Day, J., Hahnel, C., Ramanathan, A., Edley, Jr., C., & Echaveste, M. (2020). *Lead with equity: What California's leaders must do next to advance student learning during COVID-19.* Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education. Retrieved from https://www.edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/pb_hough_jul20.pdf