

Series Overview

A New Trend – Districts Learning Together

In the last two decades, district leaders have faced unprecedented demands to improve educational outcomes for students—demands made even more challenging in California by a recent fiscal crisis of historic proportions. At the heart of these demands is a growing recognition of the pivotal role that district offices can play in catalyzing and leading efforts to raise achievement for all students while closing the gaps between privileged and underserved groups.¹

During this same time, the field has learned much about the ways that educators actually come to change their practice—whether through an emphasis on generating, interpreting, and using data to assess the effectiveness of current practices, or through models of new and innovative alternatives to the status quo. One lesson from both research and practice is the value of professionals learning from each other around common problems and in the service of common goals. Referred to as professional learning communities (or communities of practice), these social learning arrangements have generally emerged in the context of classroom- and school-level collaboration.

Recently, however, the demand for district improvement has converged with the emphasis on communities of practice to produce cross-system learning communities. In these collaborations, district staff work and learn together to drastically transform outcomes for students. Such learning from other practitioners presents an alternative to the more traditional reliance on external support providers, especially for schools or districts identified for improvement under state or federal accountability programs.

The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership

It is in this context that the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership emerged. In 2008, the leaders of two of California's largest urban school districts—Fresno and Long Beach Unified School Districts— entered into a formal learning partnership, with the goal of preparing all students for success in higher education or for a career with significant growth potential. Though initially designed to secure greater categorical funding flexibility from the state, the Partnership emerged as a strategy to direct the attention of both systems to important levers for improvement. Focused on mathematics instruction, improving outcomes for English learners, leadership development, and college and career readiness, the Partnership is designed to accelerate achievement for all students and to close achievement gaps by capitalizing on shared, systemic capacity-building across the two districts.

As resource-strapped states and districts across the country begin to implement the Common Core State Standards, it is useful to examine lessons from collaborations such as the one between these two districts. This Special Series on the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership examines the evolution of this unique partnership, which began over four years ago with informal conversations between two superintendents. Those conversations revealed many commonalities, including a shared belief that district leaders and practitioners have much to learn from their own practice and from one another. It was this belief, along with the goals and values the two leaders shared, that ultimately led them to formalize their Partnership.

About the Series

With the generous support of the William and Flora Hewlett and Stuart Foundations, the California Collaborative on District Reform has documented the evolution of the Partnership from its initial stages in 2008 through 2012. Our work resulted in the publication of four briefs highlighting different aspects of their collaboration:

- [*Special Series on the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership: Perspectives of District Leaders*](#). The first brief in the series describes the initial stages of the Partnership and provides recommendations to those who might consider adopting partnerships as a support mechanism for district improvement.
- [*Building Capacity for Accelerated Reform: The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership as a Leadership Strategy*](#). The second brief explores the Partnership's capacity to strengthen leadership practices, including modeling a commitment to student learning, creating high-quality professional learning opportunities for district leadership team members, leveraging resources, and using data to support continuous improvement.
- [*Separate Paths, Common Goals: Cross-District Collaboration on Mathematics and English Learner Instruction*](#). The third brief describes two foci of the districts' work together: enhancing mathematics instruction and improving outcomes for English learners. Close examination of these two areas illustrates that there is not just one model for shared learning in the Partnership; instead, the different approaches are part of the dynamic nature of this work, and help sustain the work over time.
- [*Building District Capacity for Data-Informed Leadership*](#). The final brief focuses on the Partnership's role in building capacity for data-informed leadership. It explores the ways in which the Partnership has deepened the culture of data use within and across the districts, helped both districts address infrastructure challenges, and provided support for data use for local and state policy.

All four briefs are available on the California Collaborative website at <http://www.cacollaborative.org/publications/publications-briefs/>

Key Lessons from the Partnership

The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership has lessons for district leaders, policymakers, funders, and researchers alike. Those lessons and their implications for all stakeholders include the following:

Identifying common goals and metrics: Building on a series of informal shared learning opportunities, the superintendents developed a Memorandum of Understanding that spelled out the Partnership's goals, strategies, and indicators of success. Every formal meeting of the Partnership addresses these indicators and the immediate and long-term actions necessary for them to continue to improve. As both districts examine their progress together, their accountability systems guide the learning of teachers and administrators in the districts as well. Both superintendents hold themselves accountable for results and have incorporated the work of the Partnership into their own evaluations.

Building a Partnership team: Early on, the superintendent of each district appointed one member of his senior leadership team to guide the development of Partnership activities. Both of these senior leaders had participated in the Broad Residency in Urban Education, an experience that gave them a common framework to guide their efforts. In addition, the superintendents realized that the success of their collaboration would depend upon the degree to which they could institutionalize the Partnership. While all staff are expected to achieve the goals of the Partnership, the superintendents directly involved central office staff, who are charged with leading the specific joint priorities. Identifying central office leaders who

would benefit from this collaboration also helped ensure that the Partnership became embedded in the day-to-day activities of district staff.

Developing relationships and trust: In the literature defining and describing communities of practice, Wenger² and others describe the importance of taking time to develop relationships among community members. Taking that time allows trust to develop so that conversations can be candid. The same is true within this Partnership. Throughout our documentation, district leaders pointed to the level of trust that allows them to ask some of the more thorny questions about their work. Both superintendents are willing to engage in difficult conversations about progress toward district goals, and have created a culture for adult learning and accountability throughout their systems that relies on honest examinations of their successes and their challenges.

Acknowledging multiple models for learning: Looking more deeply at the particular strands of work within the Partnership demonstrates that differing levels and forms of engagement not only help give it its strength, but lead to different sorts of learning. These different types of learning across the priority areas are part of the dynamic, organic nature of the work and help to sustain the Partnership over time. The ebb and flow of activity within the Partnership is born of variations in membership, of evolving relationships in the community, and of the perceived need and urgency of the joint work. And the types of learning that result reflect differences in the perceptions of those involved. For example, one strand of work resulted in Fresno accelerating the pace of instructional reforms in mathematics. Another resulted in the joint development of tools that will help both districts monitor language development for English learners.

Deepening the culture of evidence-based practice: Over time, the Partnership leveraged a variety of data to measure progress, accelerate growth, and increase capacity for data use in both systems. While the Partnership is grounded in the development of common metrics, it also provided opportunities to ask deeper questions about performance and make sense of evidence produced in response to those queries. Both districts had begun the work of building the culture and infrastructure for data-informed leadership; the Partnership accelerated that process by providing a wider context for examining metrics and learning from each other's practices. As they engaged in collective inquiry, their questions deepened, creating a need for more robust portraits of student achievement. Building a culture of data-informed leadership has helped leaders accurately assess the root causes for achievement patterns and make appropriate adjustments or stay the course when warranted.

Implications

For districts, policymakers, funders, and researchers, the Partnership points to the promise of working across traditional district boundaries and demonstrates that districts need not depend solely upon outside agencies to accelerate the pace of improvement. Working with other districts can be cost effective, can expand the use of promising practices, and can increase ownership of local initiatives.

- **Districts:** Although partnerships such as this may hold promise for district and school improvement, districts looking to engage in this kind of collaboration must understand and embrace specific conditions for success. Taken together with what we know about communities of practice more broadly, the lessons of Fresno and Long Beach underscore the importance of identifying common goals and measures to monitor progress, as well as aligning progress towards those goals to district strategic plans. This Partnership also illustrates the challenges involved in bringing together two complex systems. There is not always one-to-one alignment across districts for job-alike pairing. In addition, the time to develop relationships and trust among team leaders is critical to producing joint work and engaging in candid examinations of practice. As one district leader suggested, it is essential for each partner to “have skin in the game.” While

the two districts developed common goals and measures to monitor progress, the day-to-day work of the Partnership was, initially, somewhat ambiguous. While that ambiguity presented initial challenges, many came to see it as a strength. By not scripting their work, the Partnership creates a learning opportunity for adults in the system “because they have to fight through the ambiguity to find the clarity themselves.”

- **Policymakers:** Although partnerships present a promising alternative to reliance on external support providers, not all districts are prepared to take up the challenges and supports that a partnership might offer, and not all districts would work equally well as partners. Collaborations such as this are not easily replicated. However, policymakers can play an important role in removing barriers (such as one-size-fits-all requirements to use prescribed external providers as part of accountability programs) or in developing incentives for collaboration (in cases where districts have identified a district partner and are willing to hold themselves publicly accountable for their work together). In addition, as the work of the Partnership unfolded, discussions about resource allocation extended well beyond categorical flexibility. Policymakers might consider ways that allow districts to support common professional development activities, purchase technology to accelerate collaboration, and share human capital.
- **Funders:** Continuing to invest in efforts that offer innovative practices to address complex challenges that schools and districts face is essential to promoting the sorts of promising practices that will drive improvements forward. Systemwide improvement and capacity building may not show short-term, direct impact on student outcomes, but it has the potential of reaching greater numbers of students in deeper and more lasting ways. It is also important for philanthropic organizations to continue to invest in the documentation of promising practices that can serve to build a network of innovation. While the practitioners engaged in these sorts of innovations need to be held accountable for outcomes, funders also need to acknowledge that demonstrating impact through such complex institutional learning takes time and may not necessarily result in one district simply adopting the practices of another district.
- **Researchers:** While we have reiterated the importance of trust among district leaders in the Partnership, the same can be said for our relationship with the districts as documenters of their work. It took time for trust to develop, and we wish to thank the district leaders, coaches, and principals who took time from their busy schedules to speak candidly with us about their successes and challenges. Their deep commitment to serving students has been inspiring throughout the documentation process. We hope our conversations and the resulting briefs not only inform the field about the promises and challenges of such work, but also provide an opportunity for leaders from both districts to reflect upon, and learn how others are making sense of, their work.

¹ See Sykes, G., O'Day, J. and Ford, T.G. (2009). The district role in instructional improvement. In G. Sykes, B. Schneider, and D. Plank (Eds.), *Handbook of education policy research* (pp. 767-784). New York: Routledge.

² Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.