

June 4, 2015

Dear Collaborative Members and Guests,

We look forward to seeing you in Whittier on June 18-19 for our upcoming meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform. Many thanks to Sandy Thorstenson and her team in the Whittier Union High School District (WUHSD) for offering to host the meeting and for their willingness to share their work as we explore strategies for developing and using common assessments and leveraging teacher leadership in the transition to new California state standards. We are particularly excited about the opportunity to visit WUHSD, both because it will be our first gathering in a high (rather than a unified) school district and because WUHSD has demonstrated such marked success where many other districts in the state have struggled—that is, with secondary school students and teachers.

In Whittier, we continue our ongoing exploration of Common Core implementation, picking up on the themes of continuous improvement, data use, instructional shifts, and professional capital that have dominated our last few meetings. A central purpose at this meeting will be to examine the roles that assessment plays in promoting teacher understanding of the standards and informing instruction, as well as in monitoring student progress. Whittier's use of teacher-developed common assessments will also give us an opportunity to explore the ways in which districts can leverage teacher knowledge and leadership in the development of tools and strategies for improvement—and the kinds of supports that teachers need to take on these leadership roles effectively.

Meeting Overview

Day 1: The meeting will begin Thursday morning with a discussion of common assessments and the ways in which they can frame conversations about instruction and student learning. In Whittier, district-wide teacher-developed assessments have provided an anchor for teacher collaboration and a natural entry point for transitioning to new standards. After an orientation to WUHSD's work, participants will break into small groups to examine some of the common assessments created by the district's teachers. Through these conversations, we will discuss some of the important considerations for capturing information about student knowledge and skills, as well as the supports that teachers need as they develop and use these kinds of tools.

Having introduced the role that WUHSD teachers play in creating assessments, we will transition to a broader conversation about teacher leadership. As districts embrace new standards and work to improve instructional quality overall, what role do teachers play in guiding the improvement process? The course teams that develop WUHSD's common assessments are a key vehicle for teachers to take responsibility for growth in instruction and student learning. The afternoon session will begin with an overview and then move quickly into a panel of the district's teacher leaders, who will share their experiences and insights about leading teacher teams around assessment and instruction efforts. Of course, the WUHSD model is only one of many possible approaches to empowering teachers. Following the panel discussion, representatives from other districts will describe their strategies for fostering and supporting teacher leadership, followed by a full-group discussion about cross-cutting issues and important considerations in building teacher capacity and supporting their work.

As usual, we will end the day with an opportunity for networking and collective relaxation over dinner at Datillo Ristorante in Whittier.

Day 2: On Friday morning, we will address the larger state context in which a comprehensive system of assessment resides. Districts have just finished the first administration of California's new summative assessments in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. We will begin the morning by giving district leaders an opportunity to share their experiences with the new assessments and the ways in which they plan to use the results. Keric Ashley of the California Department of Education will then share a general update about the current plans and timeline for state-level assessment tools, both those offered through the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and those that have yet to be finalized.

Following this general discussion of the state's assessment system, we will turn to a problem of practice posed by the WUHSD team that affects all districts in the state. Since the sunset of California's Standardized Testing and Reporting program after the 2012-13 school year, districts have lacked the annual reports on student progress for subjects and grade levels not covered by the SBAC assessments. This presents a particular challenge at the high school level, where even the ELA (which is administered only in Grade 11) and mathematics tests address only a small percentage of students in any given year. The group will engage in discussion about the kinds of indicators and tools needed to accurately assess student progress and inform district-level decisions in the absence of statewide assessments in the non-SBAC subjects and grades.

Readings

As usual, all readings and reference materials for the sessions are available in multiple formats. If you requested a hard copy of the binder, all of the readings are included inside; the cover sheet within each tab identifies a subset of the readings as priority readings. **On Friday, June 5, you will also receive an email with a subset of preparatory readings attached. We strongly encourage you to read these materials prior to the meeting**, as they have been incorporated into our group activities and provide important background information on the topics we will discuss. Please pay particular attention to the WUHSD common assessments, as we will explore these in small groups on the morning of Day 1.

For your convenience, all of the meeting materials are also available on the Collaborative website at <http://www.cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting28> and via DropBox at a link you will receive via email.

If you have any questions regarding the meeting logistics, please don't hesitate to contact Dawn Smith at 650.843.8239 or dcsmith@air.org. If have any other questions, please email me (joday@air.org) or give me a call at 202.262.4987. I look forward to seeing you all later this month!

Sincerely,



Jennifer O'Day
Chair, California Collaborative on District Reform, and
Institute Fellow, American Institutes for Research