

**Meeting 21 Summary**  
**Creating a Quality Community Schools District:  
Each Child College, Career, and Community Ready**

April 11–12, 2013  
Oakland, California

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***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 dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. However, it does not contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for the purpose of public consumption. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit [www.cacollaborative.org](http://www.cacollaborative.org).*

The 21st meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform built on several ongoing threads of discussion in the Collaborative’s work related to quality, equity, and preparation for postsecondary success. The meeting extended a recent focus on 21st century learning by emphasizing the hard and soft skills that students must develop not only for academic success but to interact with their environment as contributing members of the workforce and their community. It also deepened the group’s attention to opportunity gaps by highlighting approaches to recognize and address barriers to access and success. Finally, dialogue built on preliminary conversations about Senate Bill 1458 to consider the sources of evidence that exist for capturing and promoting school quality. Meeting participants used the context of Oakland Unified School District (USD) to address these three areas while more broadly considering ways in which school districts can comprehensively address the needs of students and their communities.

### **Exploring the Oakland Approach to District Improvement**

Oakland USD’s approach to school improvement is deeply connected to its history and local context. The meeting therefore included several opportunities to learn about and discuss the district role both as a vehicle for student growth and as an integral member of the broader overall community.

#### ***The Genesis of a Community Schools District***

The goal of Oakland USD is to adequately prepare all students for success in college, career, and their community. District leaders believe that this goal demands academic excellence,

but also requires attention to student needs that extend beyond that domain. As one Oakland representative explained, “Our goal is not organized around the change of test scores but around the whole child.” In order to do this, the district recognizes the fundamental importance of each student’s daily classroom experience. According to one district leader, “The most important thing a district does is support the relationship between a student and a teacher in the classroom.”

In order to prepare students for a positive teacher-student relationship, however, districts must respond to their local context. In Oakland, this means confronting the profound trauma inflicted by a long history and continuing reality of institutional racism, poverty, and violence. The struggles that students confront on a daily basis leave many of them unprepared to enter the classroom and engage in the kind of interpersonal interaction they need for academic success. District leaders described children in Oakland classrooms who know 40–50 people who have been murdered or taken away from them. Students live in “food deserts” that lack grocery stores or access to fresh food. The life expectancy in West Oakland is 15 years lower than it is in neighborhoods a couple of miles away; students in the West Oakland community are also seven times more likely to live in poverty. As a result, the district has embraced the imperative to address not only the academic but the physical, social, and emotional needs of its students. If they wish to position students for academic success, adults in Oakland USD must meet students where they are. To do this, one district leader explained, “We have had to find a way to handle how deeply sorrow carves into Oakland.”

Oakland USD’s emphasis on the whole person extends to the adults in the system as well. Poor fiscal management led to state takeover in 2003 and deficits from which the district has only just emerged. Combined with many years of strained labor relationships, the district’s history has bred a culture of mistrust that stands in the way of collaboration and collective action. In addition, individuals in the community are often the products of a school system that failed to meet their needs as children. Even beyond the school district, the community itself has been distressed in terms of the way people engage in partnerships. Thus, as the district seeks opportunities for productive adult-child relationships, it also embraces a responsibility to identify and address the needs of adults.

### *The Oakland Model for Community Schools*

To meet its community’s needs, Oakland USD defines itself as a full-service community district whose charge is to create a full-service community school in every neighborhood. In Oakland, such a school “serves the whole child; invites the community in and extends its boundaries into the community in order to accelerate academic achievement; and shares responsibility for student, family, and community success.” Oakland has a long history of community schools, but these schools have not always featured an emphasis on equity or quality. Therefore, Oakland USD has also committed to being a full-service community school *district* that “provides and implements the infrastructure and systems to support full-service communities including policies, practices, and funding.”

To respond to the Oakland community's needs and build a system of quality community schools, the district operates according to the strategic plan adopted in 2011. The plan emerged from a communitywide effort that involved 5,000 people in 14 different task forces and led to a set of school-quality standards that aim to drive everything from charter reviews to employee awards. The plan also reflects several key principles. Quality in Oakland USD schools is the responsibility of everyone in the community. The district does not assign blame for the trauma that exists in Oakland but instead accepts a responsibility to address it in partnership with the entire city. In addition, just as the Oakland USD approach to school quality is a response to the needs of the community it serves, the strategic plan positions schools to address their own specific context. The district seeks not to develop a blueprint but rather a philosophy that guides school efforts to meet student needs.

Oakland USD leaders described the strategic plan as requiring an enormous cultural shift for the district. The imperative to improve academic opportunities and outcomes for students, accompanied by the supports necessary to put students in situations where they can experience success, has implications for educators at all levels. The district has not always featured an emphasis on quality, and the plan demands persistently high expectations as schools look to operate most effectively to meet the full range of student needs. The focus on collaboration in the service of kids, both within the district and with external partners, also represents a major transition for a system in which schools and individuals have traditionally operated in isolation. Finally, district leaders emphasized the related evolution from a traditional focus on "my kids" and "my school" to a shared responsibility for student success across the district in which all adults embrace the need to serve "our kids."

### *Coordination Across the District*

The school system is critical for driving and supporting the cultural shifts that district leaders seek, and the central office must connect and reinforce the efforts taking place across departments and offices. A panel of district leaders demonstrated the ways in which various offices within the district have oriented their work in service of Oakland USD goals. Oakland's commitment to the whole child requires district leaders to simultaneously work with the Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards while also addressing the physical, social, and emotional needs of students; leaders acknowledge that they cannot support students' academic success without addressing these other needs. Multiple panelists also emphasized the centrality of people and relationships in the district's work, including a concentrated effort to celebrate the assets of the district's African American males—again, as a necessary precondition to achieving academic success—and an aspiration of the human resources department to create a system where employees are personally and professionally valued and supported.

The panel also revealed some of the ways in which coordinated district efforts recognize the broad set of supports needed to have students ready to learn in schools. The neighborhood influence on students' prospects for success is profound and evident not only in drop-out rates, but in poverty levels and life expectancy that vary widely across the

city of Oakland. School facilities become an important means of creating a safe space and positive learning environment for children. As one individual explained, “If I’m subjected to poverty every day, then I need to come to a school environment that offsets the impact of that poverty.” The district has leveraged community support in the form of bonds toward a capital improvement program that makes schools a beautiful and protected space for children and their families.

A second example of Oakland USD responding directly to the needs of students from particular communities comes from the Department of Nutrition Services. District leaders recognize that students must have their basic needs met if they hope to achieve academic success. However, the West Oakland area where many of the district’s children live and attend school is a food desert with no available grocery stores. Instead, children get their food from liquor stores and corner stores, and many arrive at school in the morning without having eaten breakfast. To ensure that students receive the nourishment they need to be ready for school, the district has organized produce markets at schools with high rates of free or reduced-price lunch eligibility (above 70 percent) and no grocery stores nearby. In an effort to provide healthier food and support the local community, the food sold at these markets is grown and stored within 250 miles of Oakland. The district is also building a new facility that will not only expand its ability to prepare fresher food but will provide students with internship opportunities for Linked Learning<sup>1</sup> pathways.

### ***A Restorative Approach to Relationships***

Within the context of Oakland USD’s efforts to strengthen both student and adult relationships, the meeting provided a brief opportunity to learn about the district’s engagement in restorative justice practices. The restorative philosophy drives all of the district’s efforts and recognizes that students must enter schools ready to learn and build healthy connections with their teachers and peers in order to facilitate their learning. Oakland USD follows traditional restorative justice approaches that move away from zero tolerance policies and toward repairing harm, but the district seeks to expand beyond disciplinary issues to embrace a restorative approach to all relationships. As one Oakland USD leader explained, “Restorative justice is about what we are trying to become.... This is not something on the side. This is a fundamental core principle of being that guides all the other policy work.”

A long history of disproportionality motivated Oakland USD’s emphasis on restorative justice. African American males in particular have been suspended at much higher rates than their peers, and observations from those students suggest that cultural misunderstandings often drive teacher interactions with their students. An Oakland district leader shared an observation from one boy who said, “There is something about me showing up as who I am that is a problem for the teacher.” The leader went on to remark,

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<sup>1</sup> Linked Learning is a high school improvement approach that operates through pathways that provide a unifying theme to students’ high school experience and connect students to real-world learning opportunities related to that theme. For more information, please refer to resources from the Collaborative’s November 2011 meeting in Long Beach: <http://www.cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting17>.

“For those students, those schools are not experienced as quality schools.” Moreover, the exclusionary practices that result from zero-tolerance disciplinary policies take students out of the learning environment, putting them further behind and making it that much more difficult to catch up and succeed when they return. Therefore, while restorative practice has traditionally been applied primarily to repair harm, the goal in Oakland USD is to use it to build healthier relationships and stop harm from happening in the first place.

Oakland USD has identified three tiers of restorative practice. The first is prevention, which seeks to build stronger relationships among students and between students and teachers. It operates primarily through regular classroom community-building circles<sup>2</sup> in which participants follow specific norms (for example, the use of a “talking piece” that allows only one person to speak at a time) to share their thoughts and feelings with the group in a safe and respectful setting. The goal of the circle is to humanize each individual, including the teacher. By knowing and understanding one another better, students are less likely to inflict harm on one another, and teachers are more likely to respond to the behaviors of individuals that they know well rather than to stereotypes. Restorative justice interventions get progressively more intense, continuing with a second tier that uses community conferencing as a non-punitive response when harm occurs. This process engages the offender, the victim(s), and members of the school community to address the root causes of harm, support accountability for the offender, and promote healing for the victim(s), the offender, and the school community. Finally, when an exclusionary response to harm is necessary in the form of suspensions or referrals, circles of support and accountability guide supported reentry. In all tiers, the district focuses on children *and* adults and builds on the recognition that adults have also been disserved by the system and are critical contributors to a healthier school environment.

Restorative justice in Oakland USD currently operates through an expanding pilot program. Each pilot site features a restorative justice coordinator funded as a half-time or full-time position. The district’s experience to this point suggests that this dedicated position is necessary so that someone can be available when an incident occurs; a teacher who takes on the responsibility in addition to their teaching role simply cannot provide the responsiveness the process demands. In addition to working with students, the coordinator also leads professional development within the school to build teacher and administrator capacity to engage in restorative practice. Ultimately, the aspiration is for assistant principals to hold the capacity of the coordinator role and for the entire school community to be sufficiently proficient in the use of restorative behaviors to address the school’s needs. In addition to having a coordinator in place at the school level, the district has found that having an administrator dedicated to restorative practice is essential to its success. Without this committed individual, people practice in isolation and fail to capitalize on the promise of restorative practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Participants viewed a video during the meeting that demonstrated the community-building circle process in one Oakland USD school. That video is available at <http://www.ousd.k12.ca.us/restorativejustice>.

Oakland district leaders shared some early signals of success, as well as next steps. One school that has implemented community-building circles has seen a cohort graduation rate of 84.6 percent, suggesting that the stronger relationships may be contributing to higher levels of persistence and resiliency. The district also reports that 273 students have stayed in high school into a fifth year rather than drop out when they did not graduate on time. The district continues to deepen and try to learn from its efforts district-wide. In the meantime, Oakland USD will develop social-emotional standards for adults and children in the system by the end of the year; these standards will be aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

Despite these successes, challenges remain. Although the pilot program has drawn on funding from the city of Oakland, from the California Endowment, and from school sites, the central office continues to navigate resource and human capital barriers to implementing restorative justice at scale across the district. In addition, district leaders continue to look for ways to improve success at the third tier of the restorative approach, reentry for students who have faced exclusionary consequences. Finally, the cultural shifts required for a transition to a restorative approach are substantial. Overcoming biases and traditional beliefs about discipline is difficult, and the district faces criticism that it has gone soft on kids. The process of culture change and capacity building represent key issues to address as the district moves forward.

## **The School Quality Review (SQR) Process**

The overall framing of the Oakland context helped to establish the district's definition of a quality school and a quality school system, including the reasons why those definitions are appropriate for Oakland USD. The meeting then turned to questions of how a district might capture evidence of that quality and then use it to inform the school community and its efforts to improve. Participants engaged in a deep dive into the SQR, a process the district has adopted as a key mechanism for defining, capturing, and improving quality. Sessions enabled meeting participants to explore one school's completed SQR report, to hear from individuals in schools that had gone through the SQR process, and to engage in dialogue about the opportunities and challenges they saw in the district's work.

### ***Overview of the SQR***

The Oakland USD strategic plan lays out expected outcomes, along with a set of specific standards across six indicators that identify the conditions under which a school meets district expectations for quality. The definition of quality that emerges from these standards directly reflects community input into the strategic planning process. According to Oakland USD leaders, because the definition of quality is locally defined, the district's standards and processes support greater buy-in. The standards have in turn driven the district's SQR process, which it sees as a critical lever for driving school improvement.

The SQR process itself is a comprehensive school review designed to assess schools according to Oakland's standards of quality. It began in 2011–12 with a pilot of 15 elementary and middle schools, and expanded to a new set of schools in 2012–13. The

process has evolved as it has grown, but the fundamental pieces have remained the same. An SQR team composed of a lead reviewer from the central office and other educators from around the district collects various pieces of data to provide feedback about a school's progress for each of the school quality standards. The goal is to triangulate a school's self-reflection, interviews and observations conducted during a three-day site visit, documents, and relevant data to provide an assessment of the school's strengths and areas for growth. The process takes 18 months from start to finish, and schools will participate once every three years.

From the central office perspective, the SQR serves several purposes:

- The SQR builds a window to see what is happening in schools. Through the process, the district builds a stronger understanding of the strengths and challenges across schools and can use that information to adapt its interventions and supports.
- The SQR provides a mirror for schools to see what they are doing. Through both the self-reflection component of the SQR and reactions to the overall report, principals and teachers have an opportunity to articulate and address their needs.
- The process seeks to provide a database of effective practices. In the spirit of collaboration that Oakland USD is working to build, the growing set of information available through the completed SQRs provides a valuable resource for schools to identify peers who share their struggles as well as exemplars who can serve as resources for improvement.

### *Learning From the Experiences of SQR Participants*

One meeting session featured a fishbowl conversation among principals and members of the school community from three sites who participated in the SQR process during the 2011–12 school year. Among the positive experiences they shared, the SQR validated what many in the school knew but had never been able to articulate. According to these individuals, the SQR provided a common language and gave a common frame of reference for administrators and teachers to acknowledge areas of struggle and to come together to address them. Fishbowl participants also described the SQR as a call to action. Because it clearly identified areas of struggle, it compelled administrators and teachers to find ways to improve. One individual suggested that the SQR can provide leverage to leaders who want their colleagues to act but may have otherwise struggled to get everyone on board. Members of the fishbowl also described ways in which the SQR can motivate community engagement by clearly articulating challenges and the concrete ways in which the school plans to address them. As one person shared, “When you have a great plan, even if you don’t have all the resources yet, people want to be a part of that plan.”

These site representatives also shared some of the challenges they experienced through the SQR process. While the SQR report clearly identified areas of need, the action steps were often unclear, and schools struggled to develop plans for moving forward. Individuals also raised challenges of alignment and timing with other planning and reporting requirements of the district. For example, first-year pilot participants were not able to tie their school site plan to their SQR responses due to non-overlapping content and deadlines. Finally, fishbowl participants mentioned the shortage of capacity to manage the next steps after

receiving the SQR report—deficits of available strategies, individual skill level, and time to engage in planning all presented obstacles at the school level.

### ***Themes From Dialogue***

The SQR represented one district’s approach to conducting a comprehensive assessment of school quality. Extensive dialogue among meeting participants included reactions to the Oakland USD SQR, as well as reflections from other Collaborative members who have researched or developed similar review processes in other context. This conversation unearthed several themes that apply to any effort to develop a similar tool.

### ***Using a Review for Multiple Purposes***

Measures of quality, whether they rely on traditional sources of data like test scores or embrace a more comprehensive set of measures, offer an opportunity to use the information for multiple purposes. These might range from self-reflection and improvement to high-stakes accountability that drives decisions about compensation, job security, and school governance.

Meeting participants identified the tension that exists in using a process for these multiple purposes. Comments from early participants in Oakland’s SQR process suggest that it has in fact promoted self-reflection and led school staff to engage deeply in developing and implementing improvement plans. These principals, teachers, and community leaders have ownership over the process and buy into the results because they have emerged from within. Applying high stakes to the process introduces the risk of a compliance-oriented response that seeks to avoid blame and consequences rather than engage in authentic reflection and collective problem solving. At the same time, perceptions of the district as a thought partner or resource potentially shift to those of a judge and adversary. Meeting participants cautioned that use of a tool like the SQR for these multiple purposes must be introduced carefully to ensure that success in one domain does endanger the prospects for success of another.

### ***Ensuring Validity and Reliability of School Measures***

A comprehensive school review has the potential to serve as a much more powerful indicator of quality than traditional approaches that rely on multiple choice tests in a limited subset of academic domains. As districts adopt a more comprehensive set of evidence, however, they must be vigilant about the quality of the measures they adopt. For example, meeting participants observed that the review process should reflect the *quality* of an indicator they observe in schools, not its mere presence. Professional learning communities represent one case in which the nature and quality of collaboration among teachers can vary wildly; a useful assessment of collaboration in a school needs to reflect not just whether the collaboration takes place, but where it thrives and struggles. District leaders should also consider whether particular measures accurately reflect the reality of a given school site. For example, parent survey results may reveal high levels of satisfaction, but if only 10 percent of parents complete the survey, those results may not be representative of the population from which they are collected. Meeting participants also



cautioned about the challenges that can emerge when participants in the review process hold different conceptions about what a particular indicator represents. Careful attention to communication and the development of shared understanding can help ensure that the review provides a common ground for productive discussion, rather than creating a forum for ideological battles.

Meeting participants also raised the importance of addressing the connections among various data sources. Examining the correlation between ratings in a review and other outcomes of interest can help district leaders understand the degree to which those ratings serve as valid measures. Mismatches between data sources can both inform understanding of the quality of those sources and guide intervention efforts. Low levels of alignment between a school's self-reflection and an external assessment, for example, can serve as a valuable data point for working with the school team to address their results.

Just as district and school approaches to improvement must *address* the local context, a review process designed to capture school quality must *reflect* a particular school's context. Schools, like districts, must be understood in relation to where they have been and where they are heading. The point-in-time snapshot that a school review provides risks being perceived as a litany of failures, especially for a school early in the improvement process. This may be particularly harmful if the review is used for accountability purposes. Meeting participants suggested that reports emerging from a school review should provide a thorough understanding of the school context that reflects growth over time without sacrificing high expectations across the spectrum of school quality standards.

### *Making Reviews Actionable*

Discussion about school quality reviews raised questions about the degree to which they provide sufficiently detailed guidance about how to make school improvements. Broadly speaking, meeting participants articulated a tension between providing a comprehensive set of findings and an easily digestible report that informs people without overwhelming them. Some participants also raised questions facing district leaders as they design the feedback they provide to schools. Do schools have adequate guidance to respond to the findings, and do they have the capacity to do so in an effective way? Does the feedback schools receive help schools prioritize areas for improvement? How should schools navigate the expected balance between immediate actionable goals and long-term planning for growth?

Speaking about the Oakland USD SQR, district representatives who went through the process in 2011–12 acknowledged a frustration with the lack of direction the final report provided for next steps. However, they also asserted that the absence of concrete directives forced school sites to develop their own plans and resources in a way that gave them more ownership and deeper understanding of the strategies they employed. These individuals cautioned that a more prescriptive approach might engender a compliance-oriented response that would not have moved the school-level teams as powerfully.

To balance the desire for guidance with the opportunity to use school reviews as a springboard for site-level action, some meeting participants advocated for supplementing the reports that emerge with ideas for accessing best practice. When used across an entire district, the final reports can provide a rich collection of data about schools that struggle and those that thrive in a particular area. When schools struggle with a particular indicator, a report that exposes them to other schools with strengths in that area can help the school team learn about and adopt approaches that might be effective.

### *Building Capacity to Build Capacity*

Comments from meeting participants suggest that the school review process can serve as a mechanism for building the capacity of teachers and leaders in schools. In Oakland USD, the frustrations with the district's lack of directives for responding to SQR results were accompanied by an appreciation for the opportunity to learn about and develop approaches within their site teams. Even as the process enables individuals to build capacity, however, meeting participants questioned whether teachers and leaders have the knowledge and skills to respond to school review findings. Moreover, meeting participants noted the implications for districts regarding reciprocal accountability, the notion that the district bears responsibility for giving sites the tools they need to meet the district's expectations. If the central office expects schools to use a review process to drive improvement, does the district have the capacity to provide the support that school sites need for improvement?

Meeting participants also raised the possibility of differentiating the school review process to respond to differing levels of school capacity. In part as a response to concerns about the comprehensiveness of the review being overwhelming, some participants suggested that high-performing schools with a strong track record might receive a smaller report targeted on very specific areas for improvement. Likewise, schools with low capacity that are at the beginning stages of an improvement trajectory might target a limited set of high-leverage activities to focus their energy and improve their prospects for success.

As an additional component of addressing capacity, meeting participants discussed the tension of building review teams that balance the need for high levels of calibration while also encouraging broad participation. As a means of embracing shared responsibility for quality, districts can create opportunities for active participation across stakeholder groups, leverage the expertise of those groups, and encourage buy-in to the process and its results. At the same time, district leaders need to ensure consistency in understanding and application of the quality indicators through the review process. An approach that develops a core review team within the central office and brings in a broader set of reviewers for each school is one way to try and strike this balance.

### *Changing Culture and Building Relationships*

Because it operates on a three-year cycle, the Oakland USD SQR process requires a periodic deep exploration of a school's success and challenges. However, district leaders see it as a more powerful lever that can help develop habits of reflection and feed the culture of

continuous improvement they aim to create. Meeting participants therefore considered the question of how the SQR can continue to encourage self-reflection on an ongoing basis.

Oakland USD leaders also acknowledged that culture change depends on the central office's ability to change the nature of the relationships among adults in the system. As the SQR process unfolds, they continue to look for opportunities to create structures that intentionally and deliberately build trust. The SQR represents an opportunity to reinforce new perceptions of the central office, provided that schools see the district role as one that adds value to their work. As one participant observed, "The efficacy of the process is integral to building trust." Here again, observations about the tension between self-reflection and accountability apply. Perceptions of a school review process as a "gotcha" exercise for a district to single out poor performance can undermine a system of continuous improvement supported by the central office. Meeting conversation suggested that communication about the purpose of the review needs to be clear and well understood. One individual commented, "If you want to influence culture, the message has to be about children and what they deserve."

Observations about messaging and its role in supporting stronger relationships extend to the review results themselves. Participants emphasized the importance of relaying two messages to schools. On one hand, communication about school reviews needs to celebrate growth, especially for schools that might be performing at low levels and would otherwise be dispirited by findings that overemphasize their weaknesses. On the other hand, districts and schools must maintain high expectations that call on all schools to meet the highest levels of a district's school quality standards. Meeting participants identified the important role that the central office can play in supporting principals as they present results to teachers and the community.

#### *Leveraging Technology to Maximize the Effectiveness of a Review*

As conversation during the meeting identified tensions associated with comprehensive school quality reviews, some individuals identified opportunities to use technology to enhance its effectiveness. As one example, an online tool might help a district navigate the tension between comprehensiveness and manageability. The tool could contain all of the information available in a full school report but focus that information and how it gets used and accessed by different audiences. In this way, users can see the results they need without becoming distracted or overwhelmed by entire set of results. Technology might also help schools use the review to drive ongoing improvement. Instead of a static report issued on a periodic basis, an online system could enable schools to track progress and identify new goals and strategies as their needs continue to evolve.

### **Extending Dialogue to Questions of State Policy**

Following the deep exploration of Oakland USD's efforts to develop a quality community schools district, conversation turned to two policy discussions that have involved many members of the Collaborative in recent months, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)

and the California Office to Reform Education’s (CORE) request for a waiver from the sanctions associated with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

### ***LCFF***

Collaborative district leaders have continued to engage in efforts to support Governor Brown’s proposal for the LCFF, which aims to more equitably distribute state funds according to student need while providing local districts with the flexibility to allocate those funds in ways that best serve their community. Most prominent among these has been a series of meetings between Collaborative district leaders and several advocacy groups around accountability provisions in the LCFF. The meetings have enabled these individuals to move beyond the typical talking points to better understand their respective concerns and priorities, and the group has successfully identified some common ground around the mutual desire to pursue goals of equity. The Collaborative will continue to monitor policy developments to see whether an appropriate opportunity exists for this group to directly inform the policy process.

Beyond this update, meeting participants emphasized the importance of continuing to support the LCFF in the face of emerging criticism. In particular, the ineffectiveness of the current system must remain a central piece of policy discussions, especially as some groups seek to adopt school finance reform measures that retain many of the fundamental flaws of the existing system. As one participant argued, “The argument of winners and losers is a huge opportunity for folks in positions of power to keep the status quo.” The conversation took on particular relevance in the context of Oakland USD, where efforts to work with outside partners as part of a community schools district become much more difficult in a system of categorical programs governed by traditional conceptions of how districts should operate and spend their money.

### ***CORE Waiver***

The Oakland meeting also provided Collaborative members with an opportunity to learn about CORE’s recently submitted ESEA accountability waiver request. The waiver itself features three components: (1) college- and career-ready expectations for all students; (2) a system of differentiated recognition, accountability, and support; and (3) supports for effective instruction and leadership. Conversation focused primarily on the accountability piece, which—like the Oakland USD SQR—proposes standards of quality that encompass multiple domains and incorporate multiple measures. It also introduces an innovative model of intervention in which participating districts respond to low performance by providing support, including coaching teams from the system’s highest performing schools.

A brief discussion among meeting participants produced several observations about the waiver. First, just as with the measures a district selects for a comprehensive school review, CORE districts need to ensure the validity and reliability of the multiple measures they propose. CORE expects for the measures to be somewhat fluid as districts put them into practice and learn about which yield the most valuable information about school success. At the same time, meeting participants brought up the importance of balancing continuous learning with stability. While systems can and should engage in practices of

reflection and ongoing improvement, some participants referenced research in other settings that cautions against the confusion that can emerge in schools when teachers and leaders feel as if expectations are a constantly moving target.

In addition, meeting participants raised questions about CORE's open invitation to other California local education agencies that wish to join the waiver. General agreement with the principles laid out in the waiver request may not be sufficient, as the other districts will not have gone through the learning process that led to the approach in the proposal. CORE representatives acknowledged that because they are breaking new ground with many of their ideas, details around expansion have not yet been resolved. Nevertheless, CORE believes that charting these unknown waters is essential to making progress. As one individual asserted, "The future of education actually lies in the establishment of collaborative networks like CORE."

CORE is currently awaiting a response from the U.S. Department of Education about the waiver request and anticipates a period of negotiation before it receives a final verdict about the proposal. In the meantime, a possible waiver request from the state of California and eventual ESEA reauthorization could impact whether or not the CORE waiver request becomes and remains the official mechanism for school accountability. Regardless, the CORE districts believe that the waiver represents the direction that accountability needs to go, and district leaders assert that regardless of the federal and state responses, this is what their work will look like.

## **Themes of Meeting Discussion**

Dialogue throughout the meeting raised several themes about district reform efforts.

### ***Embracing Districts as a Facilitator of School Improvement***

The community schools movement has a long history in the United States, but Oakland USD is unique in its effort to develop and support such schools on a system-wide basis. Meeting participants raised several benefits of driving improvement from a district level. First, a system-wide approach enables educators to promote equity. While decentralized efforts can produce excellence in pockets, they often favor communities that already have the fiscal and human capital to foster innovation and growth. The district's role in establishing high expectations, providing supports, and facilitating system learning can help produce success for all children. Second, districts can foster collaboration by identifying strong practices and creating opportunities for schools and individuals to learn from the success of their peers. As one participant commented, "What is the belief system that undergirds a system? It takes a village to raise a child, and the collective is better than the individual." Districts also play an important role in building capacity and developing systems of reciprocal accountability where schools are held to high expectations and receive the resources they need to meet those expectations. Meeting participants emphasized that these strengths derive not from the central office telling schools what to do but by providing opportunities and scaffolding their inquiry process so that principals and teachers can apply their skills and expertise to meet their local needs.

For Oakland USD in particular, the effort to build a system of quality community schools emerges from a context of long-standing distrust of the central office. Even today, improvement efforts stand against a backdrop of stagnant teacher salaries and growing class sizes. In such an environment, how does a district recognize the importance of teachers while also remaining solvent and ensuring that the central office is actually helping schools? Oakland district leaders acknowledged the challenge and emphasized the importance of building relationships and credibility with adults across the system. As one representative explained, “You have to have enough new history that people aren’t ascribing old history to new problems.”

### ***Responding to Local Context***

Oakland USD’s efforts are a response to its community needs and history; the commitment to develop a system of high-quality community schools is a direct response to the gap in preparation—academic, physical, social, and emotional—for many of the students who enter its schools. It is also an approach designed to address the trauma that has deeply impacted the community. Many of the districts represented in the Collaborative face similar challenges of racism, poverty, and violence. However, their specific approaches to working with schools and communities will look different, as they should—as a result, tools like the SQR will also look different across districts. Just as districts respond to their own local needs, so too must schools. Meeting participants emphasized the important role that districts can play in equipping adults in schools to adapt their approaches as appropriate to best serve their students.

### ***Building a Culture of Continuous Improvement***

Underlying all the specific strategies being employed in Oakland is a movement toward a culture of continuous improvement. District leaders seek to build a philosophy in schools, in the central office, and in the community in which adults constantly evaluate their successes and challenges and adapt to meet the evolving needs of the people they serve. To make this culture shift, meeting participants emphasized the need to embrace and model learning at all levels. This culture shift also requires management of expectations. Some strategies do not work, and deep cultural change may take longer than the five years spelled out in a district’s strategic plan. Districts must therefore embrace and help their communities understand a process through which improvement should be constant, but never complete.

Within a culture of continuous improvement, meeting dialogue addressed the important role of failure. Participants emphasized that failure is the expected byproduct of innovation and is critically important to learning but also advised that individuals and systems need to “fail forward.” As one individual explained, “It’s only a failure if you don’t learn from the experience.” Nevertheless, meeting participants also described the pressure that exists from outside groups who will not tolerate failure. Districts themselves can be complicit in this with their expectations for schools. Central office leaders must therefore give permission for and model failure while simultaneously maintaining high expectations and

must build relationships with partners who will stand with them as they go through the same process at the district level.

### ***Educating and Collaborating With the School Board to Secure Continued Support***

The need for patience with improvement efforts has direct implications for a central office's relationship with the local school board. Observations about Oakland USD indicate that the Board's involvement in the development of the strategic plan has been essential to the district's ability to sustain a consistent approach to improvement. One individual explained that the Board sees the plan as *their* plan and, as a result, has committed to faithful implementation of the plan even through upcoming leadership transitions. Meeting participants also emphasized the importance of managing board expectations. One early outcome of Oakland USD's engagement efforts with students is a higher retention rate; students who would otherwise have dropped out are now continuing in school. These students are also taking state tests that they would not have taken in the past, and the result may be an apparent drop in overall district achievement. Work with the Board to understand that this outcome is a reflection of district progress, and not a failure that requires urgent corrective action, has been essential to securing ongoing support for Oakland USD's work.

### ***Building Administrator and Teacher Capacity***

A culture of continuous improvement calls on teachers and leaders to engage in ongoing reflection and learning to enhance their ability to meet student needs. Within the Oakland context, this includes requirements not only to develop content knowledge and pedagogical expertise but the ability to engage in restorative practices, to develop strong partnerships, and to address concerns raised through the SQR process. This point echoes one of the themes from the discussion of school reviews: educators at the district and school levels need the knowledge, skills, and resources to address the areas of weakness that emerge from a review process. As district leaders think about the comprehensive set of supports they provide to students, they must also embrace the responsibility to build the capacity of the adults to provide these supports.

### ***Achieving Coherence***

The work of a community schools district is a comprehensive effort to support the whole child in the context of the community in which they live. The result is that many departments and organizations are working toward the same goals from different perspectives. With many strategies unfolding at once, districts face the challenge of ensuring alignment across the efforts and achieving efficiency across the system. One concrete example of this challenge in Oakland USD is in the area of special education, which district leaders indicated currently sits outside the core of the district's work; central office leaders are currently developing recommendations to take to the school board in June that can help integrate special education into the district's approach. The collaborative spirit the district seeks must apply in the central office as well as schools to ensure that attention to coherence and alignment is ongoing.

### ***Developing Community Partnerships***

A community schools approach necessarily depends heavily on relationships with individuals and organizations in the broader community. While the meeting focused primarily on K–12 school systems and not these external partnerships, some examples of and observations about partnerships emerged over the two-day conversation. Oakland USD has actively pursued partnerships with community organizations to better inform and support its work with children. The nutrition services work with local producers seeks to meet students’ physical needs while also contributing to the health of the local economy. A data sharing agreement with the housing authority gives Oakland officials a more comprehensive understanding about its students’ needs, which in turn enables officials to better respond to those needs. District leaders also report that the Alameda County Health Department has restructured its services in support of full-service community schools.

Despite these promising developments, meeting participants acknowledged that the work is hard. Turf wars and bureaucratic obstacles are difficult to navigate. Tension exists between the collaborative spirit required for effective partnership and the political context in which people operate, where the ability to claim credit for success is often a powerful motivator. A movement toward expanded and deepening partnerships also requires a willingness to engage within the central office; this often demands internal efforts to make sure a district is better prepared to partner as well.

### ***Finding Resources to Support the Work***

The scope of Oakland USD’s efforts is substantial, as are the resources required to support them. Some opportunities exist from working across agencies and leveraging the resources they have to address student and community needs. The district has also engaged in substantial fundraising efforts, and its facility improvements draw on community support in the form of bonds. However, the district has had to be fiscally responsible and careful to prioritize its efforts. It has had to protect the SQR process with research and development money. The work has also taken place at the same time that Oakland USD has eliminated a \$40 million structural deficit. The challenges of funding a wide range of work that seek to expand the district’s role beyond the classroom doors have major implications for the prospects of replicating or taking these efforts to scale. While the meeting did not address these issues in detail, they represent an area in which other districts could learn from the successes and challenges that Oakland USD has faced.

### **Next Steps for the Collaborative**

The next Collaborative meeting will take place in San Francisco USD and focus on special education within an equity-centered and restorative approach. In the meantime, the Collaborative will continue to engage district leaders in dialogue around the LCFF to ensure that policy discussions incorporate the district voice and reflect commitments to equity and local flexibility. For ongoing information about the Collaborative, resources from this and previous meetings, updates about Collaborative members, and information on upcoming events, please visit our website at [www.cacollaborative.org](http://www.cacollaborative.org).