

Meeting 27 Summary Accountability and Support in a Coherent System of Continuous Improvement

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

After spending three of the past four meetings focused on issues specifically related to implementation of the Common Core State Standards, the California Collaborative on District Reform convened for the 27th time in Fresno Unified School District (USD) to examine the broader context in which instruction and student learning take place. The district provided a valuable lens through which to explore some basic elements of a system of continuous improvement: Fresno's approach to developing coherent goals and a system for measuring progress toward those goals, zeroing in on specific problems, and uncovering their root causes features innovative practices from which districts around the state might learn. At the same time, the district's efforts to create strategies for supporting learning to address those problems and promote growth offered an opportunity to draw on lessons from other contexts and advance the learning of all meeting participants.

Establishing Coherence: Aligning Goals, Accountability Systems, and Budgets in Fresno

Clearly articulated goals can anchor a system of continuous improvement by specifying desired outcomes against which to measure success and identify areas for growth. The meeting began with an introduction to Fresno USD's approach to establishing goals and aligning them with the district's systems of accountability and budgeting.

Fresno USD Goals for Students

The Fresno USD school board has established four goals for the district's students:

1. All students will excel in reading, writing, and mathematics.

2. All students will engage in arts, activities, and athletics.
3. All students will demonstrate the character and competencies for workplace success.
4. All students will stay on track to graduate.

These goals have guided the district's work for several years. They appear on the district website; in framed pictures in the Fresno USD board room; and in various district documents distributed to parents, teachers, and students. The four goals also coalesce around a single guiding principle for the district's work as it relates to issues of equity and access:

Fresno USD Guiding Principle: To provide all students with the opportunity to graduate with the greatest number of postsecondary choices from the widest array of options.

This guiding principle framed much of the two-day conversation and anchored discussions about data systems and strategies for improvement.

Alignment of Goals With Other Systems for Ensuring Progress

In addition to their own internally developed goals, districts respond to external pressure and expectations for addressing student needs and meeting performance targets. In California, examples of these include the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP)—which requires districts to report expenditures and measures of progress toward eight state priority areas—and the single plan for student achievement (SPSA)—a state-mandated document through which school site councils are to organize, articulate, and allocate resources toward a school's improvement process. Fresno USD also has received a waiver from the accountability provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act through its work with the California Office to Reform Education (CORE), which adds another set of expectations for the district's work.

Such numerous reporting requirements and externally driven priorities often can disrupt a district's focus and create confusion about its targets for success. District leaders responsible for compliance with federal requirements, for example, may struggle to connect their work to the key strategies that a district has developed to meet its own internal goals. To avoid this issue and to ensure greater coherence in its work, Fresno USD leaders have deliberately connected the district's goals with the LCAP, the SPSA, and the CORE waiver.

A presentation from Fresno USD leaders demonstrated the connections between internally developed goals and external planning requirements by using the example of the CORE waiver. Through the waiver, the CORE districts have developed the School Quality Improvement Index (SQII) to measure school and district performance. The SQII consists of five elements, each of which contributes to 20 percent of the overall index score: (1) academic performance, (2) academic growth, (3) culture and climate factors, (4), social-emotional factors, and (5) completion and retention rates. To pursue coherence and

consistency in expectations and communication, the district has directly mapped its four goals to the components of the SQII. This approach includes expectations and measures of progress toward Goal 1 (excelling in reading, writing, and mathematics) in the academic performance and academic growth dimensions of the SQII. Culture and climate factors in the SQII reflect progress toward Goal 2 (engaging in arts, activities, and athletics). Social-emotional factors incorporate outcomes related to Goal 3 (characters and competencies for workforce success). Finally, Fresno’s work in relation to Goal 4 (staying on track to graduate) contributes to the SQII’s completion and retention rates.

Tensions in Aligning Goals and Pursuing the Fresno USD Guiding Principle

In efforts to orient the district’s work in service of its guiding principle, Fresno USD leaders identified three key considerations that can sometimes produce tension.

The first is that actions to improve student outcomes must focus not solely on improving graduation rates, but in preparing students to graduate *with* choices *from* a variety of options. A narrow focus on graduation rates might enable students to earn their high school diploma, but without adequate preparation for workforce options or postsecondary degree completion. Although community college represents an important pathway to success for some students, it poses particular challenges in Fresno, where many students fail to earn a degree within six years and where outcomes are especially troubling for Latino and African-American students. The district has therefore focused on raising the expectations within the K–12 system—emphasizing not just graduation, but the satisfaction of the state’s A-G requirements for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems. These requirements are not necessary to graduate from Fresno USD and may not necessarily prepare students for a wide range of careers; nevertheless, they open the range of postsecondary options to students so that they can better pursue the path that best meets their needs.

Fresno USD described the second tension as “changing student conditions in the present when conditions are ever changing.” Data on student outcomes can provide important information to teachers, counselors, principals, and district leaders about where and how to intervene and provide support moving forward, but it often comes too late to address the immediate needs of individual students. Moreover, because conditions constantly change, data may not sufficiently inform district action if the information is not immediately available. The district has therefore turned its attention to collecting actionable information on students that enables it to act in the service of students struggling in the present.

The third tension emerges through a perspective voiced by Fresno district leaders: “It’s always about everything, but not always with equal focus and intensity.” The demands on school and district leaders are multifaceted, complex, and sometimes overwhelming. Yet they are all part of a leader’s job, and they all require attention; thus, “It’s always about everything.” The message district leaders have tried to communicate at the same time, with mixed success—and perceived tension and pressure on the part of school administrators—is the part of the statement that comes after the comma: “but not always with equal focus

and intensity.” In the face of competing priorities, effective leaders focus their attention on the most pressing challenges and opportunities. To do so requires sound judgment, strategic thinking, and productive action.

These three considerations framed Fresno USD’s work in developing a district data system—and in advancing its work overall—and would reemerge throughout the rest of the meeting.

Leveraging Data: Providing Actionable Information About Student Needs and Progress Toward Goals

As part of its effort to engage in a process of continuous improvement, Fresno USD has spent several years developing an extensive set of indicators and a data system that educators throughout the district can use to reflect on progress toward their goals and to directly inform their decisions at the district, school, and individual student levels.

History of the Fresno USD Data System

The story of Fresno USD’s data system begins with a grading scandal that took place at Edison High School in 2008 in which a teacher was alleged to have inappropriately raised the grade of a star student athlete. A district investigation into the issue addressed the specific circumstances of the grading change, but also produced a broader finding that the district lacked tools to ensure equity in grading practices across schools and a recommendation that the district develop a system to better track adult and student behavior and performance. In response, Fresno USD created a cabinet-level position for an associate superintendent of equity and access. Jorge Aguilar, associate vice chancellor with the University of California at Merced, has filled this role since its inception (facilitated through an agreement that enables him to work closely with Fresno USD) and brings his connections and deep understanding of higher education to inform his work. Aguilar described his work as operating like a nonprofit organization, where the title and resources associated with the position provide authority, but he and his team have the freedom from other bureaucratic constraints and reporting structures that enables them to act efficiently in students’ best interests.

Although one tangible product of the district’s equity and access work is its data system, district leaders emphasized that the data system is merely a tool to advance the district’s work in giving all students opportunities to thrive. Ultimately, the district’s work is about enabling individual students to succeed. Data may reveal some broad trends among students who share similar characteristics, but each student is an individual shaped by his or her own personal traits and circumstances. Fresno district leaders therefore argued that in order for it to be successful, work around equity and access—including the data system—needs to inform and guide the supports that individual educators, schools, and the district overall provide for individual students.

Functionalities of the Fresno USD Data System

The equity and access team has carefully cultivated the district's data system to address Fresno USD's needs; clarity around the scope of these needs has come into sharper focus as the work has progressed. The system now boasts more than 3,000 indicators that shed light on issues Fresno educators have identified as important. To address the danger that the magnitude of these indicators could become overwhelming, the district has developed customized views for different users that help keep the information manageable.

Although district leaders have designed the system to meet the particular needs identified within Fresno, they also have done so according to a philosophy of "public dollar, public good" that says any dollar spent on public education should be spent only once. Thus, the software designers have deliberately created the system to be transplanted without cost and adapted for use in other district contexts.

Providing Students With the Opportunity to Graduate...

Aguilar guided meeting participants through various components of the system to demonstrate the progressively detailed and actionable information the system provides. He began with a key component of Fresno USD's guiding principle, providing all students with the opportunity to graduate. First and foremost, the system provides information about Fresno USD's overall graduation rate—information it can accurately estimate over the summer, months before final numbers come from the state. This number is a critical measure of the district's ability to successfully move students through K–12 by positioning them to leave with their high school diploma.

Although this number provides a useful measure of success, it does so after the fact, too late in many cases to intervene with students who are not on track for graduation. To enable proactive supports for students, the system also identifies the number and percentage of 12th-grade students on track to graduate. For school counselors, the system also enables the identification of individual students who are not on track by looking at the credits those students have completed an indicating whether they have sufficient time to complete the remaining credits required for graduation by the end of 12th grade. A finer grained analysis further allows school personnel to identify the next steps to work with students: The system identifies the number and percentage of 12th-grade students at risk for not graduating *and* not enrolled in a credit-recovery course. Yet another level of detail reveals the number and percentage of 12th-grade students at risk for not graduating, not enrolled in a credit-recovery course, and not enrolled in the district's Expanded Learning Summer Program. Through this progressive level of detail, the system enables counselors to deal with one of Fresno's primary tensions by changing conditions in the present. By identifying the students who need credit recovery or summer school, counselors have the information they need to guide students toward concrete actions that can position them to graduate from high school.

...With the Greatest Number of Postsecondary Choices From the Widest Array of Options

The examples of high school graduation indicators addresses only half of Fresno USD's guiding principle. The district seeks to ensure graduation "with the greatest number of postsecondary choices from the widest array of options." The equity and access team has therefore designed metrics that allow the district to embrace an expanded understanding of this guiding principle. The system identifies not just the number and percentage of students on track for graduation, but also those on track for A-G completion. In this way, district leaders and school personnel can examine the degree to which students have the opportunity not only to earn a high school diploma or move on to *some* postsecondary education, but also to choose among options that include community college, CSU, and UC.

Again, Aguilar gave an example of one way in which the data provide counselors and other personnel with actionable information. Fresno USD offers a credit-bearing mathematics course called Algebra/Geometry. The course enrolls students who passed both Algebra I and Geometry, but with low grades that suggest the students would struggle in Algebra II. The course's goal is to enable students to strengthen their content understanding in both subject areas while fulfilling the district's requirements to earn three years of mathematics credit to receive their high school diploma. The problem is that while the Algebra/Geometry course does qualify for graduation, it does not meet A-G requirements, meaning that students who pass the course may remain on track to graduate from high school but will be ineligible for CSU or UC without a subsequent qualifying mathematics course. To prevent this from happening, users of the data system can find the number and percentage of 12th-grade students (and, as with all metrics, see the individual students who meet this criterion) who passed Fresno's Algebra/Geometry class with a D or better but are not enrolled in Algebra II. Counselors can work with these students to enroll them in Algebra II and put them back on track to meet A-G requirements, once again changing conditions in the present to meet student needs.

Data-sharing agreements with local institutions of higher education—including the State Center Community College District (SCCCD), CSU Fresno, and UC Merced—allow for further analysis of the degree to which students are positioned to select from an array of postsecondary educational options. First, users can look at the number and percentage of 12th-grade students on track for A-G completion who have applied to at least one institution of higher education. They also can look at the number and percentage of 12th-grade students who have applied to UC, or to UC and CSU. Counselors can then work with students to apply to the full range of colleges for which they are eligible and keep the greatest number of options open.

Even for students who are not on track for A-G completion, the data system provides information to help ensure that students take the necessary steps to successfully matriculate in a postsecondary education program following high school graduation. The data system identifies the number and percentage of students who have applied to SCCC. Users also can see the number and percentage of students who are *only* eligible for community college and have completed their placement assessments but have not completed the required advising session. (Similarly, the system identifies the number and

percentage of 12th-grade students admitted to CSU who have not taken the English and mathematics placement exams.) Counselors can then work directly with students to ensure that they navigate *all* the steps needed to successfully enroll in college the following fall. Once again, the equity and access team has designed each metric to provide actionable information to change conditions in the present—applying to more schools, taking placement exams, completing advising sessions—to help individual students fulfill the promise of the district’s guiding principle.

Aguilar also highlighted a college-readiness dashboard within the system available for each 12th-grade student. In a single page available for each student, a user can see that student’s eligibility for and progress toward matriculation at SCCC, CSU, and UC. With this lens, counselors can view a student’s current progress and easily identify the immediate next step a student needs to take in order to keep the widest array of postsecondary options open.

Monitoring Postsecondary Success

As an additional window into the functionalities of the system, Aguilar discussed ways in which the Fresno USD system provides data about students after they graduate from the district. A set of metrics provides the number and percentage of students placed in college courses below the levels for which they are eligible. These placement decisions happen for multiple reasons—a student may perform poorly on a placement examination, or representatives from the college may pressure students to enroll in a lower level course because they anticipate that seats will be available to accommodate a larger number of students—but they result in students delaying (and often undermining) their progress toward degree attainment because those students spend time and money on courses that do not contribute toward graduation requirements. Moreover, the inappropriate placement decisions tend to disproportionately impact students of color, posing a threat to the notion of equity that underlies Fresno’s work. As with the other metrics, the information from the data system informs direct action from the district, both in helping counselors encourage students to advocate for themselves and in guiding discussions between district and college personnel in which the district can tell the institution of higher education how many seats to plan for in various courses based on those students’ high school performance.

Creating Views for a Variety of Users and Purposes

The data system began with the goal of tracking A-G completion rates, and the complexity of that task has deepened in the ways that Aguilar demonstrated. Through this process, however, the district saw value in applying the tools in the system for other purposes. The equity and access team has therefore created different “views” and provided different levels of access to indicators depending on a user’s role. The team began by leveraging the data system to create the district’s board-adopted data dashboard, a set of indicators that the board of education has identified as key metrics for districtwide success. Other dashboards have followed: District leaders next applied the tools to a cabinet leadership data dashboard, then a district department-level dashboard, and then a dashboard for each of the district’s programs. Different users also leverage the system for different purposes. Counselors, for example, can access much of the information Aguilar described to work

with individual students in preparing them for college eligibility, application, and matriculation. Principals, in contrast, see an expanded set of information designed to directly inform the planning process for their school site.

Revisiting the Three Tensions

Aguilar’s orientation to the data system illustrated how the district has attempted to navigate the three tensions identified at the beginning of the meeting. First, the expansive set of indicators helps educators monitor students’ preparation not only to graduate from high school, but to do so with a robust set of postsecondary options. Some of these indicators, such as those related to Algebra/Geometry enrollment, specifically focus on practices that might help students graduate at the expense of keeping their options open. Second, regarding the need to change conditions in the present while conditions are ever changing, all the indicators Aguilar shared are designed to provide actionable information. This often means pointing to a specific next step (for example, enrolling a student not on track to graduate in a credit-recovery course). Finally, the system features more than 3,000 indicators, perhaps emphasizing the daunting nature of the statement in the third tension that “it’s all about everything.” However, the equity and access team has designed the system with different views, so that individuals in different roles can access the information most directly relevant to them. Moreover, the system highlights those areas demanding the most pressing attention: helping principals, counselors, and others use their professional judgment when issues require varying levels of intensity and focus.

Identifying Areas for Further Exploration

Reactions during the group conversation also revealed aspects of the Fresno data system that merit further attention. Although the system plays a critical role in shining a light on key problems related to equity and access, meeting participants also suggested that there needs to be more careful consideration for how special education fits into the picture. While acknowledging that Aguilar only had time to demonstrate a limited number of indicators, group reactions also emphasized that many indicators of on/off-track student performance are available before 12th grade and require intervention earlier in a student’s academic career. In addition, participants also asked about school-determined measures. Although the collection of more than 3,000 indicators is an effort to be comprehensive, these are measures identified as important by the central office. If school personnel believe that other metrics are important to track progress toward their own site goals, is there a way to incorporate those into the system? Finally, some individuals asked about how the data system—and the way in which people use it—can or should incorporate and value qualitative data that are important to understanding various aspects of school and classroom activity and progress.

Integration of Data Systems Into a School-Level Cycle of Continuous Improvement

Because the data system in Fresno serves as a tool to inform improvement efforts, the district’s areas of focus and progress toward using the data continue to evolve as it learns more. Fresno USD’s next area of focus is on the school—with the principal as a primary target user—and drawing on key metrics within the system to tie together school-level

budgets and goals as articulated in the SPSA. The goal is to empower site leaders to make decisions and provide justification for those decisions in the site plan based on patterns they observe in the school's data. District leaders describe the shift in focus from the previous system, which held principals accountable for achieving a set of universal externally defined targets, to a new paradigm in which site leaders exercise (and explain and defend) their own professional judgment to identify and address areas of attention for their own school. As one individual described, "I think it's a lot more flashlight than hammer. The hammer now around accountability is being able to describe what you're doing and why."

To inform this site-level decision making, the district's data system presents a view to principals that highlights key indicators within each of the five domains of the SQII. For those categories in which a school lags dramatically behind its peers, a flashing red light appears. The expectation for principals, then, is to examine these indicators, identify the root causes behind the data, determine the school's top priorities, and design strategies to address them, which they articulate in the SPSA. In other words, district leaders hope to engender a cycle of continuous improvement at the school level, with the data system acting as a tool for informing the process. District leaders are in the process of navigating the level of oversight they should provide for this process by striking a balance between providing sufficient direction and empowering site leaders to act.

Themes and Considerations From Meeting Discussion

Group conversation in response to the demonstration from Fresno USD district leaders identified several themes and considerations regarding district efforts to design and leverage a system such as the one in Fresno.

Attention to Equity and Meeting the Needs of All Students

Meeting participants observed that Fresno USD has designed indicators with a fundamental attention to issues of equity. The indicators themselves may appear neutral, but because they highlight disparities among students, they also reveal critical gaps that require systemic attention. For example, the students most frequently "down-drafted"—those students placed below their ability level in postsecondary coursework—tend to be black and brown, low income, and English learners. These issues of equity merit particular attention in Fresno, where nearly every student in the district falls within one more of these traditionally underserved student groups. The system therefore plays a key role in exposing key threats to equity, access, and student progress. As one Fresno leader explained, "We have to be able to show data views that trigger a moral call to action." In addition to overall reports of student progress, data views showing individual student data also include a picture of the student to drive home the point that the data tell the story of individual people. The metrics are merely a tool to inform efforts to help students succeed.

Mandated Processes and the Danger of a Compliance Mentality

Fresno USD's recent attention on data use for planning at the school level generated reactions about the approach to promoting thoughtfulness through required processes.

Several people cautioned districts to recognize and address the tendency of educators to view new developments through a compliance lens. Although district leaders see the SPSA as a vehicle for principals to articulate their deep thinking and planning, site leaders may not have the same impression. As one individual noted, “Having seen a number of reforms and policies mandated that were meant to really foster thoughtfulness, when we mandated them, it subverted the thoughtfulness of practice.” Working through the SPSA helps the district pursue coherence by aligning strategic thinking with a required process, but it also operates through a mechanism traditionally viewed as a compliance-oriented document. Some meeting participants suggested that rebranding the effort as something different from “SPSA” might help.

Capacity to Use Data

Meeting participants observed that the individuals within the district who will access and act upon the data need to develop the capacity to do so. Counselors, who play a critical role in interpreting and acting on some of the information Aguilar displayed to the group about being on track for graduation and matriculation, need to understand the data in order to advocate for their students. Gaining that understanding may require training, reflection, and practice. In addition, principals need to build the decisional capital to make informed decisions. This capital includes understanding the data well enough to identify the right priorities, including a level of analysis that can uncover the root causes behind problems. It also involves developing appropriate responses to those priorities. District leaders, then, face the challenge of building the knowledge and skills of educators throughout the district to use data in a way that contributes to continuous improvement.

Importance of Communication and Framing

As the district seeks to expand the use of data to inform sound, site-level decisions among principals, meeting participants also drew attention to the importance of communication and perceptions of the shifts for principals and other school personnel. Principals need to understand the purpose of the process and the pieces for which the district will hold them accountable. Although the overall frame of continuous improvement is appropriate, they also need to understand the bottom line. As one meeting participant put it, “What gets you fired?” Comments also suggested that principals might be quicker to embrace the data-informed planning process when the data system provides the information they already want to know. This can help advance the view of the system as a tool to support improvement rather than a mechanism for compliance. The capability of incorporating school-specific measures mentioned earlier may help with this effort.

Communication needs extend beyond school staff to include the broader community. State requirements describe the SPSA as the product of planning efforts within the school site council. Even beyond the parent members charged with contributing to the SPSA, however, districts and schools face the challenge of developing messages to parents and other community members. Meeting participants discussed the balance of sharing the deep importance of work around equity with the need for simplicity and the danger of politicizing the process. The work around Fresno USD’s data system is nuanced and complex, but school boards and other community members may be more responsive to

bottom-line indicators of progress. As one educator reflected, “We find that folks really don’t care about how we do our work. They just care that there are results for kids down the road.” Meeting participants also addressed the tensions that emerge when community members perceive that districts are acting on behalf of some students at the expense of others. One individual explained, “It can become very politicized, and we need to be careful about protecting that body of work [focused on equity and access].”

Although Fresno USD’s data system has fundamentally grown from an emphasis on equity, access, and attention to underserved students, comments from some meeting participants suggested that messaging may be safer when it focuses on meeting the needs of *all* students. At the same time, others argued that data might provide a powerful tool for highlighting disparities among students and motivating a call to action. Navigating this balance to act in the best interest of kids calls for careful judgment and strategic planning within the central office.

Trade-Offs in Skipping Over Process

Fresno USD leaders deliberately designed their data system so that other districts can transplant and adapt it to their own contexts. This design feature enables other districts to make more rapid progress without having to “reinvent the wheel” and repeat all of the growing pains that Fresno experienced. However, the careful thought and attention that has gone into selecting measures has been a fundamental component of Fresno’s efforts to align strategies with goals and to identify the root causes of its most pressing challenges.

Moreover, the conversations with higher education have been critical in this process—not only for sharing data, but also for beginning collaborative efforts to ensure that students position themselves to have the greatest opportunities to earn a postsecondary degree. This process can be time consuming and politically challenging, but is critically important. The relationships are therefore critical to *understanding* issues of equity and access by establishing data agreements to populate key indicators of progress. However, the data that these metrics produce also can play a valuable role in motivating and informing conversations with higher education to *address* issues of equity and access.

Overall, meeting participants emphasized the importance of spending the time and energy to effectively build out a data system that meets a given district’s needs. One individual observed, “[The process is] not efficient, and I don’t think we should expect it to be.” The development work, as demanding as it is, is part of the process of self-reflection critical to the system of continuous improvement that Fresno USD and others seek to achieve.

Scale and adaptation also pose additional challenges. Fresno USD has the benefit of working within a limited and clearly defined pipeline of local higher education institutions, including one primary UC, one primary CSU, and one community college district. Other districts may face more complexity and variability; for example, one district leader described the challenges of navigating seven cities, four community college districts, and nine community colleges. In addition, incorporating additional school systems—including private schools, as well as other UC and CSU campuses—adds to the demands of

relationship building and outreach required. Some meeting participants suggested that any effort to create a system such as the one in Fresno for all districts calls for a robust statewide data system that would provide universal indicators across all K–12 and higher education institutions in the state. Such a movement would require a set of conversations among institution leaders that have never before happened in a meaningful way; it may or may not make sense for this to happen at the state level.

Designing Supports for Improvement

Having addressed the importance of alignment in creating district goals, then creating metrics and systems that help educators monitor progress toward those goals, the meeting discussion turned to the role districts play in supporting improvement when the data reveal areas for growth.

A panel discussion among leaders from four California districts provided an entry point into issues of system supports. San Bernardino USD has taken steps to create supports for all levels of the system through coaching, mentoring, and strategies specifically designed to support high-quality classroom instruction. Oakland USD, drawing on many of the strategies employed in Denver Public Schools, has sought to clarify, define, and support the leadership capacities embedded in all roles throughout the district. Long Beach USD is building on years of district culture to maximize human capital through both relationships and training opportunities, supported by an ongoing effort to break down walls across departments. San Jose USD is looking to leverage increased districtwide clarity around vision to focus on personnel and capacity-building through refining its model of school oversight while empowering and building the capacity of its leaders to act.

The panel discussion and additional conversation throughout the meeting touched on strategies for support, but focused much more on a *culture* of continuous improvement in which educators can develop supports in an ongoing way. The following themes emerged as part of the broader district conversation, as well as in direct response to some of the activities underway in Fresno USD.

Modeling the Practice of Reflection and Improvement

Leaders can help create the conditions for reflection and growth by modeling a mindset of improvement at all levels. One district leader described a practice of undergoing a 360-degree review for principals and district leaders. These individuals not only received feedback about their performance, but also shared their data with the people they supervised and the ways in which they planned to improve, thereby exposing their challenges and an orientation toward acknowledging and addressing them. That district also provides coaching and mentoring at all levels of the system, including at the superintendent level; this practice not only provides an avenue for feedback and support, but also communicates that assistance and growth are part of everyone's job description. When teachers and principals see that all leaders in the system perceive their individual role as one of an ongoing learner, it helps create the expectation and space for everyone to do the same.

Creating the Space for Experimentation and Risk-Taking

In addition to modeling improvement, district leaders play an important role in creating the conditions for growth to happen. Mistakes are part of the learning process, and risk-taking and innovation will lead to more mistakes than business as usual. Moving from a federal and state policy context built on compliance and sanctioned, this transition may take time and support. As one meeting participant advised, “We must demonstrate that taking risks will be rewarded even if there are momentary declines in student outcomes.” Meeting participants also cautioned that district leaders need to exercise patience to see things through rather than succumb to the frequent education reform practice of jumping to the next big thing. If district leaders empower and trust site leaders to make decisions based on their data, those leaders need sufficient time to implement and adjust the strategies they develop in response.

Blurring the Lines of Leadership

The principal role received substantial attention throughout the meeting, but meeting participants also suggested that blurring the lines of leadership can help engage and empower other personnel to grow. Spreading responsibility to teacher leaders and even parents helps make the work more manageable for principals and can help sustain the work through any criticism that emerges. It also can promote engagement and buy-in from those within the school charged with realizing the school’s goals. In the context of Fresno USD’s focus on the SPSA, this could mean opening the planning conversation to a broader set of school leaders.

Adopting a Central Office Service Mentality

District leaders also create the conditions for ongoing improvement through the ways in which they structure and orient the central office. Departments and programs traditionally operate in silos, making it difficult to coordinate and align efforts and frustrating school personnel seeking assistance. One panelist argued for careful attention to structures that best meet site-level needs by reminding the group about the essential purpose of a school district: “We exist for one reason in the central office: to support the needs of the school.”

Balancing Clear Expectations With Empowering Site Leaders

As districts look to empower school sites to make decisions on behalf of students, meeting participants also recognized that leaders in the central office need to strike a balance between tight (setting clear expectations and parameters for behavior) and loose (allowing sufficient flexibility and autonomy at the school site). Some meeting participants advanced the philosophy that the better schools do at understanding their data and using it to guide school improvement, the more autonomy they receive. At the same time, if the work is about empowerment, meeting participants recognized that district leaders cannot sit in judgment of every site-level decision. As long as school leaders are using a sound process of data analysis and program design, they need the space to see their plans through, adjust as they find appropriate, and learn from the process.

Exploring the State Role in Accountability

The state of California is in transition as it moves to a new funding model, a new system of state summative assessments, and new school- and district-level measures of success. Meeting participants discussed the implications of their exploration of district-level accountability, data, and continuous improvement for the role of the state.

Anticipated State-Level Changes

Conversations and developments among various state policymakers lead us to anticipate several changes for the state's evolving accountability system. First, multiple measures of progress will replace the current approach under the Academic Performance Index—what one individual described as “combining multiple measures into a single reductive index.” Discussions are also underway about a system that would supplement valid and reliable state measures (which the system has always featured) with variable local measures that reflect local priorities and a process for incorporating new measures over time. In the meantime, scores from the new Smarter Balanced assessment will report performance at the pupil, school, district, and state levels. The turnaround time for these results are anticipated much more quickly than they were for the California Standards Test; data should be available to districts within two to four weeks after testing for the entire district has finished, and reports to parents should go out within eight weeks of the end of testing. Testing plans for other subjects are still under development and will be resolved in 2016, but features such as matrix sampling will be considered in those discussions.

Tensions and Considerations for the State Role

Meeting participants highlighted some areas for attention as the state navigates its role and its new accountability system. First, tension exists between allowing a district to act as it needs to—to move forward in developing its goals, metrics, and processes for improvement—while still maintaining high expectations for districts that may not have the disposition or capacity to act in the same way. Referencing the statewide trend to direct more autonomy to the district level, one participant observed that “decentralizing is inherently unequalizing.” Some districts will thrive without constraints while others will struggle without clear guidelines. Just as effective educators differentiate their supports for students in classrooms and for principals in schools, meeting participants suggested that a similar model of differentiation is important to design at the state level.

Consistent with the direction in which Fresno USD is attempting to move, meeting participants expressed high levels of interest in developing a system driven by support and technical assistance rather than punitive measures when districts and schools struggle. The deep flaws with that system point to the unanticipated consequences of well-intentioned state and federal policy. Comments highlighted the need to be wary of negative pressure and perverse responses that are likely to emerge from any new state-level accountability system. “If we can predict what’s going to happen,” one individual argued, “we can prevent it from going south.”

Reflecting on Issues of Common Core Implementation

A brief conversation on the second day of the meeting enabled meeting participants to reflect on progress with Common Core implementation and make connections to previous Collaborative meetings. First, the idea of a Yelp-style site for Common Core resources introduced during the past two meetings emerged again. District leaders, principals, and teachers struggle to navigate the overwhelming set of instructional materials freely available to guide classroom instruction. A user-reviewed system that enables educators to filter the sea of materials and evaluate them according to the experiences of their peers could help with this effort.

Meeting participants also reemphasized the need for coherence in conversations about other district improvement efforts. Activities and discussions related to both the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and state accountability often take place in silos completely divorced from conversations about the Common Core. By aligning these efforts, districts can promote coherence and make each more powerful. For example, an opportunity exists to leverage the infrastructures created for community engagement around LCFF to talk about the Common Core and work with parents and other community members on the whole range of school improvement efforts.

Finally, meeting participants acknowledged the uncharted waters that shared standards have created. Because they have always operated according to their own systems of standards and assessments, states have not had a reason to work together on issues of educational improvement in any meaningful way. With shared standards and assessments, an opportunity exists to leverage best practices and problem-solve collectively across state lines. The experiences within the Collaborative could provide a model for how state education agencies could operate in the Common Core world.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The Collaborative will reconvene in Whittier Union High School District in June 2015 to examine issues of formative assessment in the context of implementing the Common Core. In the meantime, the Collaborative staff will continue to generate publications that share key lessons from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators. As always, resources from this and previous meetings, updates about Collaborative members, and information about upcoming events are available on our website at www.cacollaborative.org.