

# **How District Partnerships Can Help Build Learning Organizations**

Final report on the Sanger-Firebaugh District Partnership Project

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## How District Partnerships Can Help Build Learning Organizations

### 1. Why a district partnership?

California school districts are under growing pressure to provide more rigorous instruction and better learning outcomes for all students. The introduction of California Common Core Standards, and soon a new testing system, increases learning demands not only on students but also on teachers, principals, and district administrators and leaders. These demands are especially intense for districts with high proportions of students in poverty and English learners.

Increasingly, policymakers and educators recognize the limits of improving one school at a time. Evidence is mounting that school districts can either support or stymie school improvement efforts. The crux of support is a focus on learning—of adults as well as students—for without adult learning, student learning is unlikely to improve.

Transforming districts into learning organizations is not business as usual. It doesn't happen through a training program for leaders or a staff development program for teachers. It takes ongoing opportunities for all professionals to learn and to interact with others on the same path. Such opportunities depend in turn on sustained district leadership and commitment.

The big question is *how* a district develops the capacity for continuous learning and improvement. The Central Valley Foundation (CVF), committed to improving education for English Learners in California's Central Valley, identified the Sanger Unified School District in Fresno County as a district with a track record of continuous improvement from which others could learn.<sup>1</sup> But how other districts could learn from Sanger was an open question.

To test the idea, CVF funded a proposal from Sanger Unified to support a partnership between Sanger and Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified, a smaller district an hour away with an expressed interest in learning from Sanger's success in transforming its district culture. For the past three-and-a-half years the District Partnership Project (DPP) has offered an example of districts learning from one another, with a particular focus on English learners who are the majority of students in most Central Valley school districts.

The DPP aimed to create opportunities for Firebaugh to learn from Sanger's successes and for both partners to learn from each other in their quest to create and sustain a culture of continuous improvement and accelerate success of their English learners. With hundreds of small isolated districts in the Central Valley and beyond, the

Foundation viewed this partnership as a “demonstration site” to test and refine this strategy for improving outcomes for students in the two districts.

Since January 2011 when the DPP began, Sanger and Firebaugh have joined several other networks of districts, including one launched by Sanger, suggesting the need for and appeal of district-to-district relationships. Their experiences in these networks provide additional clues about cross-district learning. In addition, CVF has extended the Sanger-Firebaugh partnership for three years with a specific focus on long-term English learners in the secondary grades. This agenda was inspired by data analyses and discussions generated in the Stanford ELL Network to which both districts belong.

As part of the DPP grant, we documented the Partnership over its first 3.5 years.<sup>2</sup> Documentation of the Partnership’s work and outcomes was built into the project in order to draw lessons useful to other districts, funders, and policymakers. In this report, we describe the ideas underlying the Partnership, how the districts worked together and benefited, and implications for supporting districts seeking to learn from each other.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. A common vision to ground the Partnership

Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified and Sanger Unified leaders began their partnership with agreement on the vision they were pursuing. They shared the goal of improving outcomes for all students, with a special focus on English learners, and a path for reaching that goal. They had a clear direction: to build the capacity of professionals at all levels of the district to use evidence from their work to continuously improve. In 2011 when the partnership launched, Firebaugh was already pursuing strategies that had been key to Sanger's steady improvement since 2004 – teacher collaboration in grade-level and subject teams and diagnosing student learning needs against state standards. The districts agreed that they were on the same track.

The partners' shared conception of building professional capacity evolved over the three years as did their understandings of differences between their local contexts. This evolution encompassed both *what* needs to change and *how* to bring about changes that lead to continuous improvement. Beginning in 2004 Sanger began to tackle shifts in district culture essential for success which, retrospectively, we identified as:<sup>4</sup>

- From teaching the textbook to diagnosing student learning needs
- From principals as managers to principals as leaders of adult learning
- From professional isolation to collaboration and shared responsibility
- From top-down mandates and compliance to reciprocal accountability

The CVF grant provided funds to support specific strategies and activities designed to accelerate these shifts in Firebaugh and sustain them in Sanger, as detailed in the next section.

How to lead and sustain these major shifts in culture, however, is less amenable to specific strategies and organized partnership activities. Early on, Sanger leaders realized that they needed reasonable expectations for how quickly change could occur. They also saw that evidence can focus and motivate change and that investment in building relationships is central to progress. Initially implicit, and now explicit, three core principles guide Sanger and Firebaugh's work:

- Take a developmental approach.
- Ground all decisions in evidence.
- Build shared commitments and relationships to sustain change.

These principles took on shared meaning between the districts' leaders as they talked through problems and issues arising from their work. Similarly, their

understanding in the abstract that strategies and designs that worked well in Sanger would not transfer directly to Firebaugh took on concrete meaning as Firebaugh leaders began to try out and subsequently adapt successful Sanger approaches. Not only is Firebaugh much smaller, serving 2,300 students in five schools (K-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-12, and a continuation high school) compared to Sanger's 11,000 students in 20 schools, but larger portions of its student population are poor and English learners. Also, Firebaugh's greater distance from Fresno and nearby cities make teacher recruitment and retention more difficult.

“[The Partnership] has been extremely beneficial. If I had to do it all over again I would. I think it has been a great benefit to everyone.”  
*Sanger administrator.*



### 3. How the Partnership pursued Its vision

With agreements on a shared vision, relationships between the two districts' leaders and specific partnering activities began on a strong footing and evolved over the course of the partnership. Throughout, Sanger managed the District Partnership Project budget for both districts' activities, convened monthly Leadership Team (LT) meetings of leaders from both districts and project documenters, scheduled periodic cross-school visits, and served as liaison with CVF staff.

The partners initially focused on three interrelated initiatives designed to strengthen instruction, following Sanger's approach. Improvement strategies and activities were designed to: 1) strengthen teacher professional learning communities or PLCs, 2) bolster instruction through principles of effective instruction (modeled after Explicit Direct Instruction or EDI), and 3) develop interventions for struggling students (Response to Intervention or RTI, based on the special education model). Sanger had moved far on each initiative and Firebaugh had a foothold on PLCs and EDI. Over time, both made adaptations as needed, especially with the advent of Common Core's emphasis on rigorous instruction for all students.

Collaboration and ongoing diagnosis of student progress were integral to these initiatives and central to Partnership activities. Activities ranged from joint attendance at conferences on professional learning communities (PLCs) led by the DuFours<sup>5</sup> to Firebaugh educators' observations of Sanger schools. Partnering also focused on preparing principals to be leaders of learning and developing a culture of reciprocal accountability. Activities included Sanger participation in Firebaugh's Alternative Governance Boards for struggling schools and Firebaugh's adaptation of Sanger's model for principal summits.

As the DPP matured, the districts intensified their focus and activities on diagnosing and addressing needs of English learners (ELs), and long-term ELs (LTELs) in particular. Sanger took the lead in developing and piloting an Individualized Language Plan (ILP) tool (similar to the Special Education IEP), and both partners committed to taking on the challenge of improving outcomes for secondary LTELs through their second three-year grant from the Central Valley Foundation.

*“We are all learning . . . I see [the new grant] as much more of a two-way equal relationship . . . Our systems are better in some cases but they [Firebaugh] have fewer horses.” Sanger administrator*

Throughout the three-and-a-half years, both districts experienced changes in leadership. In Firebaugh, two of the four schools had changes in principals, with the middle school experiencing three changes. In Sanger, the superintendent and deputy superintendent who had launched the Partnership retired. In spite of this significant

turnover in key players, the commitment to the Partnership remained solid—testimony to perceived benefits for both districts.

To give a flavor of partnering activities, we give examples below, grouped by the major shifts in culture described in the previous section, along with evidence of benefits and challenges. The section ends with illustrations of how the work of the Partnership itself embodied the three principles for leading change that guided the work in each district.

*Creating and sustaining collaboration.* Teacher PLCs are the vehicle for teacher collaboration in both districts. Sanger launched its PLC initiative after district leaders attended a DuFour conference in 2004 and began sending groups of teachers and principals each year. Firebaugh leaders embraced this approach, first attending a DuFour conference with Sanger leaders which forged relationships between leaders, laying the groundwork for multi-level collaboration between the districts. Each year both districts sent teams of teachers and principals to DuFour conferences where they sat together discussing PLC issues and building new cross-district relationships. By 2014 most teachers in each district had attended at least one conference and gave it top ratings among all their professional learning opportunities.

Although Firebaugh had PLCs, many were in name only. This situation changed quickly after their DuFour experiences, beginning with principals' dedicating time for PLC meetings and the expectation that PLC time was to be protected. Firebaugh teachers also observed PLCs in Sanger, which gave them a concrete sense of productive use of PLC time. They reported being amazed at how efficient the teams were in using data to decide next steps.

*“Sanger’s bringing DuFour training into the Valley had a big impact on the Partnership and networks. All types of collaboration resulted.”  
Firebaugh administrator*

By 2014, nearly all teachers in both districts agreed with the statement “PLCs are critical to our schools success” (88 percent in Firebaugh and 94 percent in Sanger). Firebaugh teacher data show significant progress on PLC collaboration, including sharing strategies and testing out new ideas for instruction.

Firebaugh’s small size poses challenges to PLC operations not faced by Sanger. For example, at the secondary level most courses are taught by only one teacher, which limits collaboration around specific standards, assessments, and lessons. In both districts, PLC routines were disrupted by the shift to Common Core standards and suspension of the CST. Teacher teams could no longer rely on tests aligned to the old standards or on multiple choice tests. Teacher teams in both districts shifted their focus to understanding the new standards and began to gear new lessons to them.

*Supporting teachers to diagnose student learning needs.* With a commitment to direct instruction (EDI) in both districts, teachers were trained to check for student understanding frequently and diagnose specific learning gaps as a basis for additional teaching. The partners also focused on developing interventions for struggling students (RTI), strengthening English language development (ELD), and scheduling time for both during the school day. In addition, Firebaugh adopted Sanger’s DPAs (district progress assessments)—quarterly assessments modeled after the state test. Because Sanger was further along, Sanger district leaders provided professional development for Firebaugh teachers.

Following Sanger’s trainer-of-trainer model, Firebaugh teachers were selected from grade level teams in elementary schools and subject teams in secondary schools for EDI and RTI trainings led by Sanger district leaders. In addition, Firebaugh teachers observed instruction and interventions in Sanger schools with demographics similar to theirs. Further, to advance both districts’ capacity to diagnose ELs’ learning needs, the Partnership grant supported their use of a new more frequent and timely assessment for tracking the progress of English learners—the English Language Learner Assessment (ELLA) aligned with the CELDT.

Benefits from Firebaugh teacher visits to Sanger during the first year were striking. Teachers described being ‘blown away’ by the behavior of students who looked just like their students—how poised they were in greeting visitors and how well they interacted with the teacher and peers in the classroom. Benefits of the one-way visits tapered off as Firebaugh teachers shifted their focus to changing their own practices. In 2011 they rated classroom observations in partner district higher than observing in their own (76 versus 68 percent). In 2014 the direction reversed, with ratings of peer classroom observations higher than those in other districts (84 percent versus 77 percent).

*“The networking is just amazing – the people we have met, the things we have been able to share. Firebaugh administrator.”*

Firebaugh teachers rated Sanger-led training highly, however the trainer-of-trainer model was less effective because it relied on strong PLCs for sharing and implementing learning. Yet training all teachers is impossible because Firebaugh has a limited pool of substitute teachers to draw on and was challenged to staff the classrooms of even the small number of teachers who participated.

Progress on interventions through the Partnership was substantial. Teachers initially resisted sending their students to another teacher for intensive instruction. But they moved steadily toward sharing responsibility for all students in a grade level or subject and now have routines for interventions in place. Firebaugh leaders facilitated this shift by hiring several certificated substitute teachers who were essentially full-time

staff members able to free the strongest classroom teachers to work with the students most in need.

Midway through the Partnership, the shift to Common Core standards disrupted the districts' trajectories for instructional improvement and challenged district leaders to create a smooth transition. Sanger moved into intensive training for teachers in math supported by a major foundation grant and in English through support from Tulare County. They created four new central office positions to lead the transition in K-6 and 7-12 math and English. Firebaugh, with many fewer staff and grant resources, relied on professional development from Fresno County. Both districts began tackling the implications of Common Core for their ELs and together participated in Ventura County professional development focused on the particular challenges of LTELs at the secondary level, supporting this direction for future collaboration.

*"In the absence of the Partnership we would still be wondering if we were on the right track." Firebaugh administrator*

*Preparing principals to lead adult learning.* The partnership provided opportunities for Firebaugh to learn about several strategies that Sanger has used to prepare principals to lead improvement efforts in their schools. These include:

- Involve school leaders in all teacher professional development, both to develop their knowledge of why and what teachers are being asked to do and to signal their commitment to implementing the practices.
- Engage all principals in annual Summits designed to build deeper knowledge about their students and focus promising next steps for increasing learning (described in next section on reciprocal accountability)
- Conduct classroom walk-throughs and feedback sessions with a mixed group of school and district leaders to develop shared understandings of good instruction and how to use classroom visits to support administrator-teacher conversations about teaching and learning.
- Deepen school leaders' understanding of leading culture change through sessions conducted by an organization management consultant for all staff and for struggling schools in each district.

District partners used all these strategies for developing principals' leadership, from attending teacher professional development sessions to introducing classroom walk-throughs with progress rubrics on iPads. Leaders in both districts learned quickly that use of technology in walk-throughs can backfire without first building trust that the goal is not "gotcha" but rather an opportunity for conversations about needed supports

for teachers. The rubrics are now under revision to reflect the shift from EDI to Common Core and deeper knowledge about the instructional needs of English learners.

Although the Partnership supported Firebaugh principal learning through these strategies, there was limited dialogue between principals across the two districts. Principal turnover in Firebaugh's intermediate and middle schools during the three years (a different principal each year in both schools) contributed to the lack of partnering at this level. Also, centralized scheduling of school visits did not encourage principal-to-principal communication about the timing and focus of visits. And the transition to Common Core complicated the development of a common instructional vision and language to support cross-school collaboration. This is likely to change in the future with the partners' focus on LTELs at the secondary level, and with growing and more stable school leadership in Firebaugh.

The transition to Common Core is also a likely explanation for teacher survey responses suggesting a decline in principal support for PLCs in both districts. The PLCs have been following the DuFour model, which relies on student performance data as the basis for teacher collaboration and learning. Teachers have not yet developed classroom assessments based on the new standards. Instead, during the past year teacher PLCs have focused on learning the new standards and designing lessons to support student success. So their PLC routines have been disrupted. While eager to support teacher learning, principals and district leaders are in the process of creating a vision of how to support the transition in PLC collaboration.

*Developing reciprocal accountability.* Over time Sanger worked to balance accountability for results with provision of support needed to be successful. Primary vehicles for supporting this shift in district culture were Sanger's lauded Principal Summits and its model for Alternative Governance Boards (AGB) in struggling schools, along with an array of professional development opportunities and support for teachers and principals. Summits were designed for principals to present their school's data on student achievement trends and for district administrators to ask probing questions and help focus specific improvement efforts for the year. In Sanger this had become an important arena for dialogue and developing shared accountability between schools and the district. Sessions with three or four principals at the elementary or secondary level also built collaboration and shared improvement agenda across schools.

One Partnership expectation was that Firebaugh would create Principal Summits adapted to their context. With only one school at each level in Firebaugh and a less well-developed data infrastructure than in Sanger, Firebaugh leaders had to make significant adjustments in Sanger's Summit structure. Nonetheless, each year, Firebaugh leaders tried different organizational arrangements for the Summits in which each principal presents their data. For next year, Firebaugh leaders are planning a district-wide retreat for school Summits that would focus on challenges for both individual schools and for articulation across the schools.

“We got wind that they [Sanger] were changing [the Principals’ Summit] and borrowed their template and changed ours too.”  
*Firebaugh administrator*

With an AGB already in place in the Firebaugh middle school and anticipated to be formed at the high school, the Partnership provided the opportunity for Sanger leaders to participate in Firebaugh’s AGBs. The AGB structure allowed Sanger leaders to contribute their experience in working with principals on data use, constructive walkthroughs, and productive conversations with teachers. It also gave Sanger participants a deeper understanding of the schools’ leadership challenges to bring to their dialogue with Firebaugh district leaders.

Teacher survey responses suggest that Firebaugh is moving toward a district culture of mutual accountability and support. Teachers give higher ratings for the district “getting and paying attention to teachers’ feedback” and “balancing direction and school flexibility” than they did three years ago. Sanger teacher data also show improvement on these fronts, with stronger positive ratings over the three years on these measures of district leadership. They also rate the district higher in “promoting an understanding of system change”, suggesting that there’s a deepening sense among Sanger teachers of shared mission and accountability between schools and the district.

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The three *principles for leading change* that undergirded Sanger’s transformation – taking a developmental approach, grounding decisions in evidence, and building relationships for change – are evident in the functioning of the Partnership as well as in the two districts. As this report documents, the Partnership has been developmental in its very nature. It began with an idea and resources from CVF. Early steps focused on building commitments and relationships between the leaders in Firebaugh and Sanger. It evolved through trying out strategies, looking at results, and discussing together what made sense as next steps. Evidence played a role every step of the way. What worked in Sanger didn’t necessary work in Firebaugh and vice versa. The process has been learning by doing and discussing across two different district contexts.

These principles are evident too in how the data analyst supported by the Partnership grant created and carried out his role. He defined a new way of doing business, made possible by his physical location in Sanger’s curriculum and instruction unit. By sitting in on district leaders’ frequent meetings and conversations, he became immersed in issues of English learners and derived empirical questions that he could pursue with data at hand. Through this process he analyzed data and presented results that informed district decisions about ‘next steps’. After honing in on key empirical questions about EL student progress and engineering Firebaugh’s transition to the data

system he introduced to Sanger, the data analyst began to generate data that helped Firebaugh leaders see trends and define problems.

Particularly useful for both districts have been the analyst's innovative data displays showing the intersection of EL students' CELDT scores for English proficiency with CST scores for ELA and math proficiency – created in a format that allows principals and teachers to dig down to the classroom and individual student in each cell. This data analyst role is built into the partners' new CVF grant and has become a model for several new networks. A significant benefit of the Sanger-Firebaugh partnership is developing this vision for what a data analyst can do to support evidence-based decision making in a school district.

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#### 4. Partnering as a strategy to transform district culture: What does it take?

Partnering in pairs, or in larger networks, as a vehicle for transforming district culture does not flow naturally from the norms and practices of most school districts. Fundamentally, developing a productive district partnership requires a shift from business as usual in district interactions. Political pressures, feared comparisons, and scarce resources make many district leaders leery of revealing problems, sharing resources, and joining forces with other districts. In order for a partnership to work, districts must shift toward norms of transparency and collaboration to meet common challenges.

##### Shifts in District Norms for Successful Partnering

FROM	TO
Protection, problem hiding	Transparency, problem sharing
Competition for scarce resources (e.g., staff)	Resource and knowledge sharing
Focus on unique local conditions: “It won’t work here”	Focus on common challenges and local adaptations

These shifts in norms don’t happen overnight or uniformly at all levels of the system. The Sanger-Firebaugh Partnership began with some key advantages: leaders committed to the idea of partnering and buy-in to the principles and agendas that undergirded Sanger’s success, as well as a history of relationship among a few of the top district leaders. Other conditions were built over time as relationships expanded and grew stronger.

Several conditions seem key to building norms essential to partnering and ultimately to realizing the shared vision of districts as learning organizations. They can be achieved in various ways over time depending on internal and external resources—both funding and expertise. Conversely, their absence can slow and even undermine long-term goals of transforming district systems.

(1) *Commitment to partnership goals and norms.* Top district administrators in each district believe that partnering can further their district’s goals and help shift district

norms to improve the learning of all students. Without committing to a shared image of a district learning organization dedicated to student success, partnering is unlikely to result in changes beyond a new program or strategy here and there. Commitments begin as abstractions but develop as cross-district relationships grow, some of which may predate the partnership and provide a springboard for working together. Without top leaders' endorsement of partnering and setting the tone of collaboration, daily pressures inside districts can sidetrack their attention to partnering.

(2) *Agreement on a broad agenda.* The Sanger-Firebaugh Partnership embraced three major initiatives: collaboration (particularly PLCs), principles of good instruction (initially direct instruction), and interventions for struggling students using special education's RTI model. Both districts supported these initiatives which have evolved over time with the shift to Common Core and deeper understanding of the needs of English learners.

The initiatives served as a broad agenda that structured much of the work across the two districts, with attention to English learners embodied in each. In addition to providing a common language, a shared agenda helps guide partnering plans, such as deciding which activities are most amenable to partnering and setting a rough roadmap for scheduling events.

*"We had the same initiatives but we had no picture of what they could look like before DuFour and Sanger." Firebaugh administrator*

(3) *Structures that support building relationships and sustained conversation.* Across district lines at each level of the system—teacher to teacher, principal to principal, and district office to district office—partners need mechanisms to facilitate their communication and sharing. In the Sanger-Firebaugh partnership, scheduling was handled by a designated district administrator in each district. Yet they often struggled to coordinate events from school visits to shared professional development across districts. Each district has its own internal scheduling and communication demands, and Sanger and Firebaugh learned early on that advance scheduling was essential as each district's calendar begins filling up before the school year even starts.

Their experience suggests that school-to-school visits work best when they are negotiated between principals within parameters set by each district. Sharing schedules of events and school calendars is a starting point. Simple protocols that elicit purpose of school visit and key people to be involved, plus communicating directly with the host school principal, are important in laying groundwork for a visit. Once visits have happened, principals and teachers can establish their own communication links when mutually desired.

District leaders came to share the phrase "working below the green line" to signal the importance of building relationships among individuals, beyond setting up structures and procedures, to bring about change. Originating in Sanger's work with an

organizational management consultant, ‘below the green line’ became common parlance among Sanger leaders over the years and guides their actions when introducing new practices.<sup>6</sup>

At the district level, a monthly team meeting has been a key structure for keeping the District Partnership Project (DPP) on track and deepening relationships between all top district administrators in both districts. It has been a vehicle for catching up, exchanging information, expressing needs, discussing challenges, and hearing feedback from each other and the project documenters. This touchstone each month has been essential for developing open communication, a sense of progress, and awareness of how differences in district context influence shared agendas.

“What every partnership has to get to is working below the green line. When partnerships are not working, they go through the motions because money is tied to it. True partnerships are when you go way beyond that and have conversations at a different level.” *Sanger administrator.*

(4) *Access to external resources including financial support and expertise.* Partnering exacts costs of time and additional services. Districts cannot take on new time-consuming professional relationship-building and communication, scheduling, and shared activities without extra resources to support some of the time and costs dedicated to the work. Needed resources include substitute teachers to free classroom teachers to visit schools, professional development, just-in-time data analysis, and communication structures to maintain ongoing contact, focus the work, and build trust.

Opportunities for partnering districts to access rich sources of new knowledge — both together and individually—have proved invaluable. For example, both Sanger and Firebaugh participate in the Stanford ELL Network which provided up-to-the-minute information on evolving state policies re English Learners and the new ELD standards, as well as analyses of each districts data on long-term ELs. Network resources support not only improvement efforts in each district but also their joint work on Long-Term English Learners (LTELs) because they are participating together.

(5) *Internal and external feedback loops.* The monthly Leadership Team (LT) meetings served as a regular feedback mechanism for the leadership of each district, as well as a structure for building relationships. These conversations elicited multiple viewpoints and allowed the partners to question one another. Discussions surfaced instances of miscommunication and/or differing understandings and perspectives on a topic, and engaged the partners in brainstorming solutions to whatever issues came up.

“The main thing is the willingness and transparency of sharing what is working and what is not and that is where we can get a lot of leverage [in the Partnership] because we have broken down those walls.” *Sanger administrator*

District leaders got internal feedback on a regular basis from the Partnership’s data analyst, who kept his ear to the ground and provided a constant flow of usable data in response to questions that arose during LT discussions. As documenters, we participated regularly in the meetings, contributing an external feedback loop as well. For example, if our interviews and observations on the ground suggested a pattern that seemed important, or if we noticed issues not mentioned, we would put them on the table, as well as respond to questions from district leaders. We also brought a broader perspective, having a multi-decade history of studying districts across the country.

More formal documentation briefings that took place twice a year were occasions for the LT to reflect on and discuss our findings and observations. Typically the first was mid-year with a focus on both benefits and struggles we observed through interviews with teachers, principals, and district administrators in both districts. The second was typically a presentation of data from teacher surveys, conducted three times in each district, with a focus on trends for measures of teacher learning and classroom instruction, PLC development, and school and district norms. These sessions provoked questions and discussion among the districts’ leaders who welcomed the data and took action when needed.

“The Partnership has been a value. Having [top administrators from both districts] talk—a PLC with another district—has been helpful and Firebaugh has taken on some things we have done and made them better.” *Sanger administrator*

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These conditions for successful partnering are neither exhaustive nor conclusive. Intensive district partnerships such as this one will have different contexts and will begin with district strengths and challenges that differ from those Sanger and Firebaugh brought to the DPP. What’s universally true, however, is that any district partnership will evolve over time. Relationships build, districts weather staff turnover, new relationships develop, and partners adapt the agenda to what they are learning and in response to external demands, such as the new Common Core standards and assessments.

## 5. Looking ahead

The Sanger-Firebaugh partnership is unique in its design for intensive networking and commitment to the goal of building a district culture for continuous improvement with a focus on English learners. Such a partnership provides opportunities for frequent and extensive engagement across the districts. It encourages connections between teachers, principals, and district leaders. Unlike larger networks which typically have a designated convener and meeting structure, district partners create and adapt structures to suit their particular needs.

The funding for this partnership was inspired by Sanger’s success in achieving continuous improvement over a decade for all its students, including English learners. The choice and structure of many partnership activities were designed to give Firebaugh teachers and administrators opportunity to learn from Sanger’s strengths and successes. For Sanger, the partnership demonstrated that such a “teaching” role did not hold them back from making further progress. Moreover, Sanger folks felt validated and gained new ideas and a fresh perspective on their own work.

The Partnership is beginning a new three-year effort building on the relationships established during the DPP. The Central Valley Foundation is funding this extension with a specific focus on secondary students who are long-term English learners and therefore at risk of missing out on courses required for entrance to college. This moves the partnership into a new arena where they will collaborate on solving a thorny problem faced by both districts.

As close observers of both Sanger and Firebaugh over the last several years, and casual observers of several networks to which one or both belong, we raise the four following questions about how districts can best learn from one another. They assume a long-term goal of increasing access for districts, particularly small geographically isolated districts, to new knowledge and collaborative relationships than can support their quest to continuously improve.

### *What might be learned from the next three years of the Sanger-Firebaugh Partnership?*

The Partnership’s new phase moves both districts into uncharted territory in two significant ways. First, they are tackling a widespread and difficult problem—secondary long-term English learners (LTELs)—which ensures a statewide audience for the progress they make. Second, they are shifting the nature of the partnership from one tilted towards one district mentoring another to joint work. The districts will work together to gain insights and solutions adapted to the needs and resources of each of their contexts.

Their experiences over the next three years will be a rich source of information about how partnering activities and relationships change when the districts focus on a specific problem and improvement effort within their shared agenda. What are the substantive and logistical challenges in working together on the same problem? How much will the districts collaborate on joint development or work independently in tandem and compare notes? Whatever partnering strategies the districts pursue, their experience promises important insights both on partnering and what works for English learners in two different contexts. Lessons about effective interventions for long-term English learners at the secondary level will come from both districts, strengthening their evidence base.

### *Can networks of more than two districts take on the depth of work possible with two?*

Most district leaders are familiar with networks, often belonging to several. But their experiences are often limited to each district sharing self-identified ‘best practices’ in a show-and-tell format, sometimes coupled with observations of classrooms. Although interesting and often useful on a small scale, this approach rarely leads to taking on the larger challenge of changing district norms to foster continuous improvement.

Larger networks inevitably trade off depth for breadth, yet they can provide a valuable knowledge-sharing forum for districts, especially those geographically isolated with similar demographics. At the same time the contact between districts involved in larger networks is significantly less than that of the two-district partnership we describe, both in intensity and in numbers of teachers and administrators involved. Contact in networks typically is limited to a small team attending each of a few meetings per year, with cross-site visits often a component but still limited to one team. With strong planning and facilitation, meetings can provide valuable new knowledge and opportunities for within- and cross- district engagement.

But can such a network influence the norms of member districts and tackle challenges of changing district culture? If not, is it feasible to garner the resources needed for two-district partnerships? The next two questions probe these issues.

### *Can synergy be gained by multiple networks with overlapping memberships?*

Although a large network is limited in its reach of participants and impact, it can significantly enrich a district partnership. The DPP has benefited from both districts’ participation in the Stanford ELL Leadership Network of seven districts funded by the S. H. Cowell Foundation. The ELL Network is notable for bringing in experts in language learning and keeping members abreast of emerging state policies for English learners. Further, the network provided each district with analyses of their own data for English learners, highlighting the numbers and challenges facing long-term English learners.

These experiences spawned considerable activity in Sanger and subsequently Firebaugh and helped define the partners' agenda for the future: improving outcomes for secondary long-term English learners. The network's ideas and data catalyzed a focus for joint work within the partnership.

Whether or not ideas from a broad network get incorporated into the way a district or partnership operates is an open question. Sanger and increasingly Firebaugh can enact new ideas quickly because they have built a culture of trust and desire to improve. Ideas introduced into a collaborative, evidence-based district culture are far more likely to take root than in a traditional top-down culture. Sanger was able to act immediately on new evidence about LTELs, e.g., revising their Principal Summits and creating Individual Learning Plans for LTELs, because their norms and structures—coupled with resources—assume rapid integration of new ideas. Likewise, the Sanger-Firebaugh partnership had matured sufficiently through the DPP to be able to act on ideas and evidence from the ELL Network.

Partnerships can also benefit a larger network. Sanger and Firebaugh participate in a new regional network, SCALE Up, initially conceived by Sanger as a way of engaging districts in Sanger's practices that led to their culture of continuous improvement. A collaboration of six districts funded by California Education Partners, this network is intended to build district leadership capacity with an initial two-year focus on early literacy (K-2). Its main strategy is strengthening K-2 grade-level PLCs' uses of network-developed formative and summative literacy assessments. This network benefits from the DPP in several ways. Having developed strong trusting relationships, the partner districts can model transparency in sharing weaknesses, helping to set the norm for network meetings. Also, they have learned from the DPP what does and doesn't transfer well from Sanger to smaller districts, and this knowledge can be shared and leveraged in SCALE-UP.

In addition, Sanger and Firebaugh's joint participation in the ELL Network and new partnering work on LTELs brings resources to the other Central Valley districts to support their efforts in addressing the needs of English learners. Their experience and enthusiasm over learning from the data provided by the DPP data analyst and by the ELL Network data consultant prompted SCALE-Up to adopt this model for district data support. The Central Valley Foundation also leveraged the success of the DPP data analyst role by adapting the model for their newly formed CVF Data Network. This Network, made up of eight district recipients of their English Language Learner grants, also includes Sanger and Firebaugh.

*Can other successful districts be identified and supported to play the same role as Sanger with a set of neighboring districts?*

Both the first grant for the Sanger-Firebaugh Partnership and the design of the SCALE-Up Network began with the goal of leveraging Sanger’s success to help other districts improve. Because of Sanger’s track record of continuous improvement, other districts in the region and across the state were eager to learn from them and it made sense to design networks in which Sanger would help others understand how they created a culture that sustains improvement. Yet, this approach raises questions about Sanger’s capacity to take on this new work. Can Sanger’s impact be magnified through collaboration with other districts without undo strain on its own resources, particularly the time of key central office leaders? What is a reasonable scope and intensity of network involvement for an exemplary district like Sanger?

A handful of districts not as well-publicized as Sanger have achieved comparable outcomes, though not all with the same demographics and with little documentation of how their outcomes were achieved, particularly for English learners. Could such districts be identified and documented so that they could become beacons in their own geographic areas? Of course, districts with strong track records, including Sanger, have succeeded under outcome measures which no longer exist. In time, those districts that excel under the new Common Core regime could become the hub of a close partnership and one or more networks. Will funding sources and technical support—private and public—be available? The DPP, ELL Network and SCALE UP have received substantial foundation grants for their work.<sup>7</sup>

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The District Partnership Project demonstrates how partnering between two districts can benefit both partners, in this case much flowing from the already successful district to the becoming-successful district. It points to challenges of practical matters like scheduling, communication, and logistics. At the same time, it demonstrates that Firebaugh made significant progress in becoming a learning organization, with norms and mechanisms for continuous improvement taking hold. The two districts internalized the principles for leading change—taking a developmental approach, using evidence, and building collaborative relationships – both inside their districts and in the Partnership to build an effective partnering culture.

With the shift to Common Core, we see two districts that are more likely than most to resist business as usual. By this we mean the common practice of expecting change to come from adopting new textbooks “aligned” to new standards, turning to clearinghouses of instructional resources for teachers and handbooks for administrators, and taking on a vast array of professional development. These resources



all have their place, but the districts most likely to benefit are those that have their own compass—a vision of how they can move toward continuous improvement through building a culture of collaboration, diagnosing student needs, principals as leaders of learning, and reciprocal accountability.

In California and beyond, these tumultuous times demand so much more of our school systems. California school districts now face a new funding system, a new set of standards, and an emerging set of new assessments that depend upon a solid technology infrastructure. In this complex changing environment, partnerships and networks are likely to become increasingly important for district leaders as well as teachers and principals. Networks brokered by districts have the potential to break down old barriers to their interaction and establish new relationships of mutual support and collaboration to improve student success.

To the extent that such networks succeed in breaking down old barriers and building new cross-district relationships, educators inside schools and central offices can help each other adapt to a changing environment and make judgments about what in other districts applies to their own. Some districts have always had this opportunity—typically those who are part of special projects or grants—and benefit from creating and owning the solutions to be implemented. But most valuable is the development of relationships between districts that serve similar populations and share similar challenges.

Across the Central Valley and throughout the state are hundreds of small districts, many long distances from neighboring districts. Support for partnering and networks—for taking the fundamental idea of teacher collaboration in professional learning communities and ratcheting it up to the district level—seems essential during these times. Business as usual can provide some immediate resources, but the deeper, lasting answers to continuous improvement for students and educators will likely lie in the pooled knowledge of practitioners grounded in local evidence.



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Our work in Sanger from 2008 to 2013 documented how the district transformed itself into a learning organization. See David, Jane L. and Joan E. Talbert (2013). *Turning Around a High-Poverty District: Learning from Sanger*. San Francisco, CA: S. H. Cowell Foundation. Available in hard copy at no cost by request from the S.H. Cowell Foundation or digitally at: <http://www.shcowell.org/docs/LearningFromSanger.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> For a description of the documentation design, see About the study, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> We tracked California state test scores but do not report them as outcomes of the District Partnership study for two reasons. First, we do not have a data point for the final year 2014 because state testing was suspended. Second, the introduction of Common Core during the 2012-13 school year caused major disruptions in the path both districts were following, including a mismatch between their District Progress Assessments and the new directions indicated by Common Core. We append California's API results for each district for 2010, the year before the DPP began and 2013, the last year in which it was given, on p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> David & Talbert, *op cit*. See Endnote 1 above.

<sup>5</sup> Through their national organization, *Solution Tree*, Richard and Becky DuFour conduct one- and two-day conferences for educators on the benefits and practices of grade-level and subject/course teams of teachers working in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to ensure that all students meet learning standards.

<sup>6</sup> Organization management consultant, Steve Zuieback, introduced the "Below the Green Line" model in Sanger during the early years of their reform. The concept refers to a diagram of the features of organizational change with three circles above a line (which happened to be green) and three circles below. Above the line are structures, operations, and strategies—often the exclusive focus of reforms. Below the line are relationships, communication, and identity—the less tangible dynamics of change which support or hinder "above the green line" work. District leaders came to see the concept as so pivotal that they continued to contract with Zuieback for refresher training and problem-solving sessions and built them into the DPP grant for both districts.

<sup>7</sup> Five districts, along with Sanger and Firebaugh, make up the Stanford ELL Leadership Network: Corning Union Elementary, Fairfield – Suisan USD, Napa Valley USD, Tahoe Truckee USD, and Ukiah USD. In addition to Sanger and Firebaugh, SCALE-Up includes: Fowler USD, Earlimart SD, Mendota USD, Kingsburg Elementary Charter. Average costs for the DPP, the ELL Network, and SCALE-Up range from approximately \$290,000 to \$495,000 per year.

## Abbreviations

AGB	Alternative Governance Board
API	Academic Performance Index
CCSS	Common Core State Standards
CELDT	California English Language Development Test
CFA	Common Formative Assessment
CST	California Standards Test
CVF	Central Valley Foundation
DPA	District Progress Assessment
DPP	District Partnership Project
EDI	Explicit Direct Instruction
EL and ELL	English learners and English Language learners. Interchangeable terms.
ELA	English Language Arts
ELD	English Language Development
ELLA	English Language Learner Assessment
IEP	Individualized Education Plan (Special Education)
ILP	Individualized Language Plan
LT	Leadership Team
LTEL	Long-term English Learner
PLC	Professional Learning Communities
RTI	Response to Intervention

## About the study

Documentation research was built into the DPP to capture the districts' experiences and draw lessons for districts, funders, and policymakers about this unusual approach to improving English learners' achievement in the Central Valley. Documentation built upon our prior three-year study of Sanger's successful approaches to continuously improving student outcomes and how district leaders brought them about (See Endnote 1). From this research, we brought an analytic framework and measures to document the partner districts' progress in developing and sustaining key organizational conditions for improvement. Throughout the DPP, we tracked:

- the districts' partnering relationships and activities;
- Firebaugh's implementation of Sanger's successful reform strategies and leadership principles, as well as Sanger's success in sustaining and deepening them; and
- student outcomes in both districts, with particular attention to English learners.

Our research used multiple methods including interviews, observations, surveys, and document review. We also participated in monthly DPP meetings and provided feedback along the way.

To document DPP relationships and activities we observed a sample of all planned activities and informal interactions among district leaders and interviewed participants at the district and school levels to probe their experiences and reactions. We focused on cross-district dialogue, school visits and walk-throughs, and professional development involving the two districts' leaders and classroom teachers. We also reviewed a broad range of documents from both districts, including test score reports, various protocol for assessing and supporting English learners, and teacher ratings of professional development activities.

To document the districts' progress on improvement strategies we used repeated teacher survey measures, multiple interviews with district and school administrators and staff, and informal observations in classrooms and PLC meetings in elementary and secondary schools. Survey questions were designed to measure core features of Sanger's culture – collaboration, data use to diagnose student learning needs, principal leadership of teacher learning, and district leadership and shared accountability for results. To assess trends on the survey indicators, we obtained three data points for each district. For Sanger we used baseline data from our 2009 teacher survey, with follow-ups in 2011 and 2014; for Firebaugh we conducted surveys in 2011, 2013, and 2014. Response rates were uniformly high across years for each district, ranging from 70 to 94 percent. Teacher survey responses provided formative feedback to each district, as well as serving to document DPP outcomes.

Finally, we tracked each district's trends on annual student achievement data for all students and all subgroups from 2010 to 2013 on the California Standards Test, the state's Academic Performance Index (API), and metrics designed to meet federal requirements for school progress under No Child Left Behind legislation. Because the state suspended testing in 2013-14 and results of the Smarter Balanced pilot assessments are not available, we cannot add evidence from standardized tests for the final year of the partnership.

## California Academic Performance Index (API) Scores\*

	<b>2010**</b>	<b>2013***</b>
<b>Sanger All</b>	806	833
<b>Firebaugh All</b>	756	774
<b>State All</b>	768	790
<b>Sanger ELs</b>	761	792
<b>Firebaugh ELs</b>	717	738
<b>State ELs</b>	692	717

\* See Endnote 3 for description of challenges in interpreting these data.

\*\* The District Partnership Project (DPP) began in January 2011 and continued through the 2013-14 school year. The table shows baseline API scores for the year preceding the DPP and ending a year early due to the suspension of state testing during the transition to new state assessments.

\*\*\* The percent of tested students who are English Learners are: Sanger 36%, Firebaugh 61%, and Statewide 34%.

## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the many folks in Sanger and Firebaugh who supported our research on this pioneering partnership between two districts. The trust and candor of all those we interviewed was essential to our understanding of the Partnership. Our work was enriched by the warm welcome we received in both districts, from top district administrators to office staff in the central office and the schools.

We single out district leaders and staff who went out of their way to make our work go smoothly. Firebaugh Superintendent Russell Frietas and Sanger Superintendent Matt Navo (and Marc Johnson until June 2011) not only spoke with us several times a year when we visited the district, but they made sure that district and school administrators and staff understood the purpose of our documentation and supported it. Assistant Superintendent Roy Mendiola in Firebaugh, and Steve Carlson, Sanger's Grants Administrator, were our liaisons who several times each year created schedules for our requested interviews and observations spanning several days and multiple schools. Each of them was proactive in this role, suggesting additions to our requests and also providing us with a trove of district data.

Special thanks also go to Firebaugh and Sanger district administrators and staff who met with us multiple times a year for interviews and invited us to sit in on sessions they led with principals and/or teachers. They include Stacey Robb, Firebaugh Director of Educational Services; Jon Yost, Sanger Associate Superintendent; Sanger Area Administrators Tim Lopez, Adela Jones, and Karl Kesterke; and Susan Fitzgerald, Director of Projects. Jose Silva, the Partnership data analyst housed in Sanger, provided us with valuable data on challenges and progress of English Learners. The experiences and insights of these key leaders in the Partnership were fundamental to our ability to capture its challenges and benefits.

We are grateful to each and every Firebaugh and Sanger school principal, assistant principal, teacher, and other support staff who devoted precious time to our interviews – some of whom talked with us more than once a year. By interviewing them and observing their schools, teacher PLCs, and classrooms, we learned about similarities and differences across the two districts, as well as how partnering mattered on the ground for teaching and learning. We thank you all for sharing your practice and helping us to see how you are working to improve students' success.

We thank the Central Valley Foundation for building documentation into the project. Lauren Wolkov, Executive Director, and Annette Leifer, Associate Director, were strong supporters of our role in capturing the story – both challenges and benefits – to inform the Foundation's future investments as well as share lessons with the field.

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*Joan E. Talbert*