# Local Control in Action: Learning from the CORE Districts' Focus on Measurement, Capacity Building, and Shared Accountability

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## Summary and Policy Implications

- California and the nation are at the crossroads of a major shift in school accountability policy. At the state level, California's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) encourages the use of multiple measures of school performance used locally to support continuous improvement and strategic resource allocation. Similarly, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reinforces this local control, requiring more comprehensive assessment of school performance and a less prescriptive, local approach to school support. These changes represent a major cultural shift for California schools and districts.

- As California supports districts statewide to embark on this improvement journey, there are important lessons to be learned from the CORE districts, six of which developed an innovative accountability system under a waiver from No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The CORE districts are early adopters of the new accountability paradigm: local leaders using multiple measures of school performance and working together to figure out collectively what works best for struggling schools.

- This study examines how the CORE districts understood, implemented, and responded to the new accountability system implemented under the waiver. Our research indicates that a shift to greater flexibility and locally-determined capacity building efforts brings its own set of challenges, but substantial benefits as well. The CORE districts present an opportunity to learn how to effectively utilize multiple measures of school quality, develop shared accountability, and build capacity for schools and districts to improve.

- In summary, we find that: 1) district and school administrators greatly appreciated the shift toward a more holistic approach to measurement and an emphasis on support over sanctions; 2) most waiver districts adapted CORE's accountability system to their local needs, revealing a tension between shared accountability and local variation; and 3) CORE's measurement system and district-level collaboration hold promise for improving local systems, while efforts to improve schools through collaboration and capacity building remain a work in progress.

## Introduction

California is in the midst of a dramatic transformation in how we educate our children. In 2013, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) marked an historic change in the way California funds its schools and makes education decisions. Shifting to local actors major decision-making authority over how to allocate resources to meet students' needs, California's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) process encourages the use of multiple measures of school performance used locally to support continuous improvement. The passage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 reinforces this local control, requiring a more comprehensive approach to assessing school performance that includes both academic and non-academic measures and placing the responsibility for intervening in low-performing schools primarily with districts. Underlying both of these major policy shifts is the idea that local leaders are in the best position to drive real educational improvement. However, their ability to do so hinges on their capacity to use data for improvement and to enact change at the district office and in schools systemwide. Given that the past decade under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act focused on compliance to a different federal approach to accountability, building this capacity is no small feat.

Luckily for California, there is much to be learned from the CORE districts about how local leaders can work together to improve student outcomes. The CORE districts are perhaps best known for the "waiver" they received from the U.S. Department of Education that freed them from some of their federal obligations under NCLB. Under the terms of the waiver, six of the CORE districts (Fresno, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, and Santa Ana) developed an innovative accountability system that focuses on providing comprehensive data on performance and emphasizes the importance of school improvement. Key features of this accountability system are 1) school performance indicators that focus on academic outcomes alongside non-academic measures of student success, 2) peer-to-peer school improvement interventions, and 3) district-level capacity building.

The CORE districts are early adopters of the new accountability paradigm: local leaders using multiple measures of school performance and working together to figure out collectively what works best for struggling schools. This system improvement work in the CORE waiver districts is challenging; these are mid-sized and large urban districts serving over one million students, three quarters of which are students from low-income backgrounds. As California supports districts statewide to embark on similar improvement journeys, there are important lessons to be learned from these districts.

Our study examined how the six CORE waiver districts understood, implemented, and responded to the new accountability system in the 2015-16 school year.[1] In this policy brief, we organize our findings around three aspects of implementation: educator attitudes and beliefs,

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[1] Full report can be found at: https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/at-the-forefront

implementation of CORE interventions across districts, and early outcomes. In each section we address the implementation of the measurement system, school-level improvement efforts, and district collaboration. Our findings suggest lessons about what it means to be "data-driven" in a multiple-measures accountability era and raise questions about how to facilitate school improvement. While efforts to motivate change via sanctions and prescribed interventions in prior accountability eras may not have yielded all of the expected positive results, our research in the CORE districts indicates that a shift to greater flexibility and locally-determined capacity building efforts brings its own set of challenges, but substantial benefits as well.

### CORE's Measurement of School Quality and Support for Struggling Schools

CORE's work under the waiver was broadly to 1) collect measures of school performance that reflect the goals of educating the "whole child"; 2) implement school improvement efforts using locally-driven solutions and peer support; and 3) improve district capacity to better support schools and the educators and students within them.

CORE's measurement system reports academic outcomes (academic performance, academic growth, graduation rates, high school readiness) alongside non-academic measures of student success (chronic absenteeism, suspension/expulsion, English Learner (EL) redesignation, students' social-emotional skills, and school climate and culture). CORE's measurement system is in line with new requirements for measurement under both ESSA and LCFF. Each indicator in the measurement system is weighted, with those weights being aggregated into a single number (which was a federal requirement under the waiver for the identification of schools for intervention). In the full measurement system (intended to roll-out in 2016-17), the academic domain accounts for 60 percent of the final score, and measures in the non-academic domain account for 40 percent. For most metrics (except EL re-designation), points are divided between the "all students" group and the four subgroup categories (lowest-performing racial ethnic group, English learners, students with disabilities, and disadvantaged students) measured using a subgroup "n size" of 20. For each metric and each subgroup, schools are given an index level score which compares them across all CORE schools. These metric cut points (1-10) are established for each indicator based on an initial year of data and then maintained over several years. In 2015-16, all aspects of this measurement system were collected and reported, but the social-emotional learning (SEL) and culture-climate (CC) survey results and the academic growth data were not yet used for accountability.

Under the NCLB waiver, the CORE districts designed a system of intervention they believed would better meet the needs of their low-performing schools. CORE's philosophy is that barriers to school improvement and appropriate interventions are necessarily contextually driven and local in nature. Further, CORE leaders believe that practitioners already possess the knowledge and skills to improve, or can develop them, and schools can improve most quickly when allowed autonomy and provided the support to share successful practice and engage in structured inquiry to guide improvement efforts. In this spirit of improvement, 178 schools were

identified across the CORE waiver districts to engage in two tiers of improvement activities. Schools falling in the lowest 5 percent of all schools in the CORE waiver districts were paired with high-performing schools or those demonstrating growth with similar student populations. Other schools with low-performing subgroups or students were grouped into communities of practice (COPs). With facilitation, paired schools identified 2-3 problems of practice, developed an improvement plan based on the U.S. Department of Education's (ESEA) seven turnaround principles, created a structure for collaborative interaction, met quarterly, and were expected to show evidence of "learning and progress." COP schools (2-4 schools in each group) also received facilitation to identify problems of practice, come together around shared problems, meet quarterly, and run quarterly PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) cycles.

The districts' measurement and school intervention work is supported by cross-district collaboration as a means to build capacity for central office improvement. To this end, staff in the CORE districts attended quarterly meetings, met regularly virtually, and engaged in an annual peer review process, in which the districts evaluated one another's progress toward stated goals using detailed rubrics.

To understand the CORE waiver districts' implementation of this accountability system, we gathered data on educators' experiences implementing CORE's accountability and intervention system at school and district levels in the 2015-16 school year. In each of the six CORE waiver districts, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with central office administrators responsible for CORE-related work, including superintendents, cabinet-level administrators, district staff responsible for data, accountability, school support, curriculum, and human resources, and a sample of school principals and facilitators engaged in the CORE-related intervention work (a total of 54 interviews). We supplemented these interviews with observations of CORE meetings and training sessions (42 hours) and analysis of extant documents. It is important to note that not all aspects of the waiver system were fully operational at the time of our study, and that the system itself was in flux due to ESEA reauthorization in December 2015. However, the waiver was in full effect while we were conducting our field work.

### Attitudes and Beliefs about CORE'S Accountability System

*District and school administrators greatly appreciated a more holistic approach to measurement.* Most administrators valued the measurement system and the use of a comprehensive set of academic and non-academic measures to assess school performance. As one superintendent explained, "the social-emotional side …needs to play against the academic piece. If you have one without the other you're probably missing something." While many interviewees did not perceive the measurement system to be new in its entirety, as many were using some to many similar measures prior to CORE, they generally acknowledged the value of having all of these measures accessible in one place and formally including them as expectations in the accountability system. By including a comprehensive set of measures, the goal was that

schools would be held accountable, and recognized, for essential aspects of child development that, in prior years, were invisible in accountability systems. One district administrator reported that this measurement change in turn changed who in the system feels responsible for school improvement: "Now that we've got an accountability index that has multiple domains and a more holistic set of measures with actionable targets, more departments that support schools are feeling that they have the agency to be able to take action to contribute to student success." Although most interviewees endorsed the inclusion of academic and non-academic measures, some expressed concerns about particular indicators (e.g., validity of SEL and CC survey-based measures and high-school readiness indicators).

*Academic growth was preferred over status.* Administrators consistently praised the measurement system for including measures of growth in student achievement rather than just status. One central office leader underscored the fairness of such a system, "The growth measure … is the only fair way really to measure because, again, you've got a school on this side of town and this side of town you can only look to see how much they have grown, not compare one to the other where they're at." Not surprisingly, principals from lower-performing schools particularly valued the emphasis on growth, since a growth measure better reflects a school's contribution to student achievement.

*Tensions surfaced over how measures are reported.* In the CORE measurement system, each indicator is reported with schools across all CORE districts ranked on individual measures using a 1-10 level scale system, and a single score was produced for each school. Some administrators endorsed this index score system, while others raised questions about the value of multiple versus single, aggregate measures of performance. One principal believed the rankings allowed her to identify schools she could contact for support in areas in which her school rated relatively weak. Others expressed more neutral positions of acceptance. One district leader said, "I think people in public education are so used to that kind of ranking system, that this is just another sort of 'you're red, you're orange.'" Yet others were quite critical of the ranking system. One principal argued that these rankings wrongly promoted competition over collaboration. Leaders in another district intentionally de-emphasized the index ranking, noting its conflict with an accountability model intended to provide a multi-dimensional picture of schools.

*Support favored over sanctions.* District and school leaders supported CORE's focus on support over sanctions. Most district and school staff believed that the intervention model was better suited for school improvement than NCLB sanctions. Echoing the message from CORE leaders and documents, district and school leaders consistently noted and appreciated that accountability was intended to be used as a "flashlight not a hammer." One central office leader described the system as "not about putting the red scarlet letter, it's about providing supports." A leader in another district concurred that the CORE intervention work "wasn't viewed as a punitive thing. It was more you've been identified, but here are resources to help you. We're going to pair you with other schools. We're going to create communities of practice … but I think just the philosophy behind it was much more positive than a negative thing."

*Administrators endorsed cross-school and -district collaboration.* Administrators embraced the CORE vision of peer collaboration at school and district levels. District and school leaders reported three intertwined purposes of collaboration: mutual learning, building capacity to engage in continuous improvement, and networking. In most districts, the theme of mutual learning was most salient. Interviewees in these districts believed the purpose of CORE interventions was to encourage the sharing of ideas and successful practices at the school and district levels. Others believed that a key purpose of the CORE interventions is to build capacity to engage in continuous improvement activities. In the words of one superintendent, "I don't want you to help them, I want you to help them get better." That is, these interventions were perceived as helping districts and schools learn how to solve their problems rather than just selecting solutions.

### Lessons from the CORE Accountability System Implementation

*Local adaptation was common across districts.* All districts adapted the CORE Accountability System to their local contexts. In most districts, CORE's measurement system was part of a broader data system that includes additional indicators based on a district's definition of student success and continuous improvement goals. Similarly, districts adapted school pairing and COP work to fit local contexts. This resulted in variation in the scope of their interventions—that is, whether they utilized CORE interventions in all schools or just CORE-identified COP and paired schools. This adaptation was important for integration with existing district programs and cultures.

*Achieving reciprocity in collaborative work proved to be challenging.* In the school pairings, for example, although the initial intent was coaching of low-performing schools by a high-performing partner, over time the goal changed to one of promoting two-way learning across both schools. Nevertheless, leaders in schools raised questions about the potential for mutual learning. The matching process and concerns about "fit" contributed to this challenge in both pairings and COPs. Paired schools were primarily matched based on having similar demographics. As a result, interviewees expressed concerns that matched schools had different contexts, despite seemingly similar demographics. On the whole, principals in both COPs and pairings believed that cross-school collaboration functioned best when schools shared not only similar students, but also similar challenges and successes. Administrators in several districts similarly reported that it was hard to learn from other districts who had different challenges, student populations, and strategic plans.

*Formal activities facilitated informal collaboration.* The work of the CORE waiver districts is supported by a nonprofit organization with approximately nine staff members— several of whom were employed by partner districts prior to joining CORE—who support and advance the work of the member districts. One important role staff play is to facilitate cross-district collaboration, through regular in-person and virtual meetings, as a means to build capacity to meaningfully engage with the measurement system and to improve schools. Although

district leaders and administrators regularly participated in these formal activities, they tended to value the informal activities—such as contacting other CORE District "role alike" administrators between meetings as issues arose. Nearly all of the Superintendents reported that they routinely called and texted each other to consult on emerging issues. Similarly, district administrators leading CORE work reported reaching out to the CORE community when they work through local implementation challenges. As one district administrator shared, "There's a cross sharing that's really been…a widening and a bigger circle of collaboration than we ever had before." Formal collaboration activities necessarily facilitated the creation of this network, while providing the time, space, and climate to promote relationship building among people with similar roles across districts.

*Limited capacity created obstacles to implement CORE activities.* Districts varied widely in their ability to manage, interpret, and use the measurement system data to engage in improvement activities. Even for those districts whose administrators had a great deal of facility with academic and traditional non-academic data, the use of SEL and CC measures was very new. In fact, few administrators articulated a clear understanding of specific SEL constructs and their measurement. Some administrators believed the lack of familiarity with and capacity to interpret the new non-academic measures contributed to lower levels of use. Capacity constraints also affected school intervention work. In addition to the ubiquitous lack of time and inadequate funding, administrators spoke about inconsistency in the motivation, skills, and availability of facilitators. The role of the facilitator also appeared to be unclear and inconsistent across districts. Centralized training was not provided to facilitators in all districts and, in most districts, existing principal supervisors took on facilitation in addition to their existing duties. In some cases, this meant facilitators were not fully committed to the intervention work, rarely attended meetings, and did not properly review school plans. Overall, facilitation was not as substantive as many hoped and may not have optimally promoted learning among schools.

*Misalignments also constrained implementation.* Some interviewees expressed concerns about misalignment between the CORE measurement system and measures included in other data and accountability systems. Interviewees in two districts reported that several indicators vary slightly from metrics included in the state's current accountability system, including suspension and ELL re-designation rates, making them difficult to interpret at the school level. A leader in another district shared similar questions about calculation differences: "I think that's one of the biggest questions we always get from schools. Why is my re-class [EL re-designation] rate different here than what the state says?" The misalignment was particularly vexing for some. For example, we were told about a school that had received district recognition for their work around improving EL re-designation rates, but scored low on the CORE re-designation metric.

### Early Outcomes of CORE's Accountability System

*New system useful in informing local decisionmaking.* Under the CORE vision, district and school educators were expected to regularly use the measurement system results to

illuminate potential problems and generate collective inquiry and action for improvement. At the district and school levels, we heard of widespread engagement with the measurement system results, particularly to guide: 1) resource allocation, 2) stakeholder communication, and 3) improvement planning. In all but two districts, administrators reported using the measurement system to identify resource needs, use, and effectiveness. In one district, for example, central office leaders regularly asked principals to reflect on the measurement system results and how they were guiding school improvement plans: "When you say you want $50,000 for something, which indicator are you using to make that argument?" District administrators also collaborated with their peers to develop common language and strategies for communicating the measurement system with parents and faculty, while some school administrators reported referring to the measurement system reports during their school site leadership meetings. Other administrators used the measurement system data for improvement planning. Leaders in one district used the holistic data reports to re-evaluate their schools' performance. In two other districts, school leaders utilized the measurement system to guide work with leadership teams, including using data to lead cycles of inquiry and embedding the measurement system into their school goals. While many educators reported ongoing use of academic data to guide their practice, not surprisingly, there was much greater variation in the depth of reported engagement with newer non-academic measures (recall, SEL and CC survey data were not yet included in the index).

*School intervention work may not be intensive enough to produce dramatic change.* Interviewees expressed a range of perspectives on the effects of CORE interventions at the school level. Some administrators reported powerful learning, while others gleaned little from these collaborative interventions. In particular, some individuals questioned the appropriateness of relatively "light touch" interventions to solve chronic performance problems in schools. As one district administrator stated, "The pairing work, we gave them guidelines that we expected them to meet a minimum of three times. I don't know if that's enough for anything to matter in the long run." Another district administrator expressed concern over the perceived intractability of performance problems at some troubled schools, saying, "[In a very low performing school in the district], we've had a really hard time finding a…leader who really wants to embrace it because of all the challenges there." Given some of the serious challenges facing the low-performing schools in these districts, some leaders questioned whether these capacity building activities were the right approach for school improvement.

*Deeper learning in peer-to-peer collaboration is a work in progress.* Administrators shared several examples of learning achieved through the CORE school-level interventions. For example, involved schools picked up "best practices" from other schools to facilitate their implementation of existing programs. One higher-preforming paired principal reported learning several logistical processes from their low-performing partner to "make our special education program more compliant." This kind of learning involved error correction: recognizing that Individualized Educational Plans were not being submitted in a timely manner, this school learned from the lower-performing school how to better manage their flow of paperwork. While these superficial learnings and changes were common and, at times, quite useful, interviewees

provided fewer examples of deeper inquiry directed towards continuous improvement. Similarly, district-level collaboration activities appeared to result in useful technical problem-solving, but we heard fewer reports of deep learning. Nevertheless, district administrators largely felt that they had gained valuable strategies from others and benefited from cross-district collaboration. As one district administrator said, "the opportunity to be in a constant community collaborative space with folks from these other cities in California is really invaluable."

*Districts struggled to develop authentic professional accountability*. Part of the CORE theory of action rests upon the assumptions that member districts will hold one another accountable for implementing the accountability system and helping one another improve. A primary way that they did this was through a formal peer review process, where the districts reviewed and rated each other's reports of implementation. In most districts, interviewees remarked that the peer review process played out as a compliance activity, described by one interviewee as "check, check, check." Another interviewee described the peer review process as "basically grading someone's paper" with "very, very minimal" conversation, and shared that the peer review process was "frustrating" and "cumbersome" and did not promote reflection. This tendency to focus on compliance is not surprising, but was dissatisfying to some district leaders, who then pushed to go deeper with the collaboration to "dig into to some nitty gritty problems of practice at a district level." To this end, the CORE districts are now strengthening their commitment to one another by focusing on a specific, measurable goal for cross-district school improvement and harnessing collective resources to do so as a Networked Improvement Community. In the spirit of continuous improvement, the districts learned from their successes and challenges in waiver implementation and are organizing with more rigor in this next phase.

## Implications for the New Accountability Era

Ahead of the curve, the CORE districts have implemented an innovative accountability measurement system and supports for school and district improvement that are in line with the new requirements of both ESSA and LCFF. Moving from a top-down approach of school improvement to a bottom-up model that builds local educators' capacity will be a challenge for systems across the country. It takes time and effort for systems to change, and CORE's work shows that these efforts hold great potential. The experiences of the CORE districts may be useful in informing the design and implementation of accountability systems currently under development in California and nationwide.

### Integrating Multiple Measures of School Performance

If the experience of the CORE waiver districts is generalizable, educators will be receptive to the inclusion of a more diverse set of indicators as required under state and federal law. Educators in our study indicated that tending to the "whole child" has always been a central part of their work, and that the extended measurement better aligned the accountability system with their existing views and approaches. The inclusion of multiple measures in this way serves

to identify the strengths and weaknesses of schools on many dimensions, which the CORE districts appreciated. The work in these districts suggests several lessons for other districts and states when introducing new school accountability systems.

*Build buy-in across the system.* If educators and leaders are going to take the time to review and reflect on data, they need to perceive measures to be meaningful and valid. District efforts to adapt measurement systems to reflect local values and needs may be important for building local buy-in, but these adaptations also come with challenges. If multiple measurement systems are perceived to be misaligned, it can undermine local support. In fact, achieving wide scale buy-in may be difficult: even among CORE waiver districts, where leaders created the system and selected the indicators, there was considerable variation in buy-in within and across districts. Involving educators in the development of the systems is important, but likely not sufficient. Efforts to demonstrate the validity and value of new measures may also be needed.

*Focus on building capacity to understand and respond to data.* To use the data in a new multiple-metric system to drive practice and improvement, educators and leaders also need to understand the measures and know how to respond to them. As scholars and practitioners have long observed, "data [alone] don't drive" and do not immediately lead to action without the capacity to interpret and act.[2] While many educators have the capacity to interpret and respond to academic data (e.g., state, benchmark, interim, and diagnostic assessment results), additional capacity needs to be built around the newer academic and non-academic measures. There are also added challenges of acting within the context of a multiple-metric system. Educators and leaders need to learn how to interpret and respond to data that may show positive results on some indicators and negative results on others.[3] With new measures, educators will also be looking for solutions designed to move specific indicators. While some may be inclined to create readily-available solutions and a menu of "what works," capacity to respond may require more. Educators need to understand the data and what might be the underlying reasons for lower-than-expected results. They may also need support in accessing new knowledge about possible actions to take. Such efforts might require networking with experts, support from peers and coaches, and access to research. The complexity of new data sysems also requires greater communication strategies and ways of helping all stakeholders understand what it means for a school to be rated high on some measures and not on others, and then what to do about it.

*Develop a local culture around data use.* To respond in meaningful ways to data, educators need the support of colleagues and a culture that supports reflection over compliance. While we cannot expect a shared commitment to new data systems to appear overnight, there

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[2] See Dowd, 2005; Marsh, 2012; Marsh, Bertrand, Huguet, 2015.

[3] Recent analyses indicate that in fact the majority of schools are high on some measures and low on others, indicating that multiple measures show different dimensions of school performance (Hough, Penner, & Witte, 2016).

may be opportunities to build shared understandings about the new measures over time via preparation programs, supervisory supports, and in-service programs.

*Be wary of unintended consequences.* Our interviews with CORE waiver district administrators indicate the need to maintain a careful eye on the possibility of distortive responses to these new accountability systems. Under NCLB, research demonstrated ways in which educators narrowed instruction, focused on "bubble kids," and emphasized test-taking strategies to assist schools in meeting accountability targets.[4] The new accountability systems introduce a host of measures with the potential for similar "gaming" strategies. Even without the "high stakes" of sanctions possible under NCLB, pressures to "look good" for the public and to attract and retain students in contexts of declining enrollment and school choice could create incentives for educators to improve the numbers but not the practices in schools. To ensure productive responses to these new measures (and the ultimate validity of the results), administrators should carefully monitor schools and ensure consistent messages about the purposes of and proper responses to data. Further investment in capacity building, particularly around changing the culture of data use and accountability in schools, may facilitate this shift.

## Supporting Schools to Improve

Under ESSA, districts will now be primarily responsible for school improvement. Given the backlash against NCLB's approach to improvement, it is highly likely that many districts will pursue more flexible, locally informed capacity building activities in the same spirit as the CORE school intervention work. Districts electing to implement collaborative approaches similar to the peer-to-peer interventions used in the CORE districts can learn from the following lessons.

*To maximize learning, consider the "fit" of collaborative partners.* To ensure authentic, mutual learning, schools need to be matched in ways that guarantee all parties have something to learn from one another. Pairing schools based on demographics and performance alone may not always lead to meaningful exchanges, as some administrators in CORE waiver districts and schools shared with us. Instead, matching should also consider the local context, as well as geographic proximity. The content of improvement efforts is also an important consideration: a school that wishes to develop new practices to address low English Language Learner (ELL) performance may be best paired with a similar school that has had success in improving their ELL program. Leaders may also consider allowing schools greater autonomy in selecting their collaborative partners, while brokering connections with similar schools that may best assist with specific improvement issues.

*Ensure consistent, high-quality facilitation.* Successful collaboration also rests on the availability of well-trained, committed facilitators. Districts should consider allocating resources

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[4] See Booher-Jennings, 2005; Jennings & Bearak, 2014; Hamilton et al., 2007; Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006

to support staff time and training for facilitation positions, as well as investing in tools to promote facilitators' work with schools (e.g., protocols for leading meetings around processes such as Plan-Do-Study-Act, materials to guide coaching).

*Attend to structural challenges in schools that may undermine improvement efforts.* Without basic building blocks—such as stable teachers and leaders, sufficient funding, safety—improvement efforts may be misdirected or short-lived. The experiences of the CORE districts indicate that the people inside schools matter greatly, as does the environment in which they work. Regardless of what approach to capacity building is taken, states and districts should consider other policy levers to ensure that all schools, particularly the lowest performing, have adequate resources and are staffed with effective and committed teachers and leaders who can take on improvement efforts and promote a culture that supports educators to reflect on data, to try out new strategies, and monitor progress. In addition, given the considerable challenges often facing low-performing schools—such as a high student mobility and staff turnover, safety concerns, low morale, a lack of trust or professional culture—one must ask if a peer-to-peer intervention model goes far enough to address these difficult conditions and to promote deep learning and improvement. While ESSA and LCFF clearly seek to move away from NCLB-era interventions that were perceived by many to be "draconian," we should not rule out the possibility that for some schools, true improvement may require dramatic organizational changes.

## District-Level Capacity Building

Under ESSA and LCFF, districts will be responsible for facilitating data use and improvement in schools. Cross-district collaboration is one approach for building district capacity to serve in this role. Once again, we can learn a lot from the CORE districts about district capacity building generally, and networked approaches more specifically.

*Focus on relationships.* It takes time to build relationships, but once established, districts can communicate directly about problem solving. Building these relationships requires dedicated time and, ideally, shared projects to build trust and shared language. Our research suggests that formal collaboration opportunities were necessary but not sufficient: administrators highly valued frequent opportunities for informal interactions with individuals serving in similar positions.

*Get the right people to the table.* As leaders in the CORE districts shared with us, if attendees at collaborative events do not have the authority to make needed changes in their respective districts in response to the ideas generated in meetings, progress will be slow if not stalled. Moreover, frequent turnover and rotating attendees were seen as an obstacle to building momentum (as well as trust). Leaders seeking to build cross-district collaboration should consider ways to promote continuity among those participating in these efforts (e.g., expectations, incentives) and ensuring that individuals with agency attend.

*Select meaningful, shared priorities for improvement work.* Participating districts must feel that they have something to learn from one another. This raises questions about whether districts differing in size and local context are best suited for collaborative work and indicates the need for purposeful matching. Collaborative relationships should also attend to the alignment of policies and goals between districts. That is, do the goals of collaborative work fit with districts' local priorities? Are there common problems that are central to multiple districts and not viewed as add-on work that draws administrators away from what they care about most? If expanded, policymakers should consider both the context (e.g., district size, demographics, policies, and location) as well as the content (e.g., addressing teacher retention issues, managing data) of district improvement needs to properly facilitate relationship/network building across districts. The CORE districts' work shows that with careful attention, collaborative work can be a force for improvement.

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