

# Special Series on the Fresno Long Beach Learning Partnership: Perspectives of District Leaders

California Collaborative on District Reform

December 2009

## Introduction: The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership

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### About this series

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This brief is the first in a series that will explore the promise and challenge of the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership. This project is funded by grants from the Stuart Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation.

Preparing all students for success in higher education or a career is the goal of many reform efforts in school districts today. At first glance, the goal seems straightforward. And yet one California district leader recently described the process of actually moving complex education systems toward that goal as “bone crushing and deeply emotional.”

Building capacity for that challenging work is what the Fresno Unified-Long Beach Unified Learning Partnership is all about. The Partnership is a joint effort of the third- and fourth-largest districts in California to pursue common goals, measure student outcomes, share professional knowledge, learn from each other, and support each other's progress. It differs from other networks or professional associations in the level of joint commitment across the two systems, the deep engagement in common activity, and the strong agreement about the leadership practices that are most likely to make a difference for student achievement. It also differs from other strategies to assist low-performing districts or schools because it involves *shared learning* between districts rather than external technical assistance to fuel improvement. As a learning initiative, the Partnership is an experiment that holds promise not just for these two districts but also for other urban systems and for the state as a whole.

The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership is a collaboration that aims to improve student outcomes, accelerate achievement for all students, and close achievement gaps by capitalizing on shared systemic capacity-building across two high-need districts. The districts agreed that their common goal should be to “prepare all

students to be ready for success in higher education or a career with significant economic growth potential.” Prompted by a concern about dropout rates and the

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inadequate preparation students were receiving for higher education and meaningful career opportunities, leaders from the two districts began to identify key strategies to improve student performance. These strategies initially focused on English learners, mathematics instruction, and leadership development.

### Learning at the center of the Partnership

The work of the Partnership revolves around learning – student learning, adult learning, and systems learning. The Partnership has established goals related to student learning that drive the districts' joint work. Guiding the Partnership is an implicit theory of action: as leaders collaborate and learn more about what they must do to improve student achievement, student learning will improve. Both districts in the Partnership track the extent to which their various strategies that focus on mathematics, English language learners, leadership development, continuous improvement, and systems alignment are proving effective by using the data dashboards that have been tailored to

reflect their improvement goals. Indicators reflect annual goals, but also measure interim student progress. District leaders examine data across the two districts, followed by discussions of what they can do to accelerate progress. The frequency of this data analysis allows district staff to take action immediately. After noting a flattening of math scores on benchmark tests, one superintendent wondered, “Why would we wait until next year to act on what we have learned early on this year?”

The Partnership is more than just effective use of data. It is also a mechanism for systems learning that suggests a potential alternative (or complement) to current approaches to intervening in districts identified for improvement under

federal or state policy. Existing state approaches rely on external technical assistance providers to bring in knowledge and strategies for improvement. But external providers may not be able to support the embedded, ongoing learning that characterizes the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership. Moreover, as the number of districts and schools in Program Improvement<sup>1</sup> continues to grow and as state resources remain constrained, innovative alternatives to existing intervention processes are essential. In addition to being an innovative approach through which the districts have defined their shared goals, the Partnership offers an alternative to the us/them dynamic – whether intentional or not – that often characterizes district work with external providers.

### District Key Facts, 2008-2009

	Fresno Unified	Long Beach Unified
Total Enrollment	76,621	87,509
Annual Budget <sup>1</sup>	\$673 million	\$747 million
Free and Reduced Price Lunch	80.4%	68.3%
FTE Teachers	3917.2	4016.6
Fully Credentialed Teachers	98.5%	97.6%
Length of Superintendent Service	4 years	7 years
Other information	Broad Prize for Urban Education winner in 2003 and five-time finalist for the award	
<b>Demographics</b>		
Latino	60.1%	51.6%
African American	10.7%	17.1%
White	13.9%	16.1%
Asian	13.4%	8.1%
Filipino	0.4%	3.7%
Pacific Islander	0.4%	1.9%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.7%	0.2%
English Learners	26.0%	23.7%

Source: DataQuest, California Department of Education

<sup>1</sup> Budget figures reflect total expenditures (excluding special revenue, capital project, debt service, and permanent funds) reported on Ed-Data for 2008-2009. These figures can be accessed at: <http://www.Ed-Data.k12.ca.us>. These numbers reflect an update to the initial version of this brief.

This brief, the first in a series to document this unique cross-district collaboration, describes the initiation and early stages of the Partnership, and suggests that the processes for organizational learning the Partnership has created may lead to sustained district improvement over time. The Partnership might thus serve as a model for leaders in other districts who are similarly committed to achieving common goals and who

are willing to identify and share the leadership practices most likely to foster student achievement.

This brief is based upon interviews we conducted with leaders from both districts who have been directly involved in the Partnership. We interviewed district superintendents, leaders tasked with management of the Partnership itself,

and district administrators leading each of the three strands of work. Each was interviewed twice – once in the winter and then again in late spring. In addition, we attended one of the joint Partnership meetings. All of the district leaders with whom we spoke noted the differences between the Partnership and other professional networks. Discussions with their partners, they said, were more candid and allowed them to dig more deeply into their challenges and

collaboratively solve problems. The benefits cited by those with whom we spoke certainly point to the promise of this Partnership as an alternative to traditional strategies for district support. And yet, because their progress appears to depend upon the relationships they establish, partnerships such as this may not necessarily transfer to other settings, and require the hard work and commitment of all involved.

## Genesis of the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership

### Forming the Partnership

In large part, the initiative is the result of a collegial relationship between Superintendents Mike Hanson (Fresno) and Chris Steinhauser (Long Beach) that developed through their involvement in the California Collaborative on District Reform, the Urban Education Dialogue, and other professional networks. The superintendents found many commonalities in their approaches to improvement, including a shared belief that district leaders and practitioners have much to learn from their own practice and from one another, that commitment to continuous improvement is critical if meaningful progress is to be made, and that greater flexibility in the use of state and federal funds can enable more effective targeting of resources to specific improvement strategies. These leaders believed that solutions to the challenges they face would more likely come from their own efforts than through compliance with requirements from external agencies. They also realized that each had something to offer the other.

The Partnership began informally as district staff shared their work, particularly in elementary mathematics. Initially, Long Beach shared its success in elementary mathematics instruction (through the MAP2D program).<sup>2</sup> Fresno district-level staff visited schools and classrooms in Long Beach to see the program in action. Together staff from both districts discussed the ways in which MAP2D was implemented in Long Beach and what the successes and barriers to implementation had been. Learning from those candid conversations, Fresno adapted the program to fit their local context and needs, and had experts from Long Beach provide professional development to the coaches and principals in Fresno.

Building on these informal shared learning opportunities, the superintendents developed a

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that spelled out the Partnership's goals, strategies and indicators of success. Once the formal partnership had been established and the three focal areas identified, there were other opportunities for collaboration that emerged as well, such as technology, where Fresno was

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making more progress than Long Beach. A Hewlett Foundation grant played an essential role in supporting the first phase of inter-district visits.

Another opportunity for shared practices has been district efforts to ensure equity and access. As an operating principle that applies across all grades, equity and access is related to such issues as promotion/ retention, English learner placement, and Algebra 1 participation. The Partnership has focused attention initially on A-G<sup>3</sup> requirements and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. For example, Fresno has recently created a division to increase student access to courses that fulfill the A-G course pattern. Long Beach has also had a long history of addressing issues related to equity and access and has had great success in increasing its AP participation and passing rates. While learning from each other on these multiple fronts, the Partnership has evolved. A little more than a year after the districts formalized their Partnership, they are now poised to jointly tackle middle and high school mathematics and instruction for English Learners and the implications of these areas of focus for leadership development.

### Committing to success

One important characteristic of the Partnership is the commitment to student success. Although many districts strive to improve student achievement, what makes the commitment striking in this Partnership is the fact that it permeates everything the districts do together, and keeps them tightly focused on their goals. This commitment is evidenced by the strong results-based accountability systems in place to track students' progress. As both districts regularly examine their progress together, these accountability systems guide the learning of teachers and administrators in the district as well. The superintendents hold themselves and other professionals in the system accountable for results and use data to track progress toward benchmarks that have been set for each of their goals. Both superintendents have incorporated the work of the Partnership into their own evaluations and hold themselves accountable through the use of data dashboards that build targets into different levels of the system.

In Long Beach, Superintendent Steinhauer ties his evaluation to the measures of the Academic Success initiative. In Fresno, Mike Hanson ties his evaluation to the district data dashboard. Fresno's data dashboards include specific annual targets for achievement in mathematics and English language arts, social/emotional indicators, indicators of whether students are on track for college and career preparation, and indicators related to leadership development, facilities, safety, and community engagement. Long Beach uses many of the same metrics that are then rolled up into a summary document to inform the community about progress on key district-wide initiatives.

The districts use these measures to obtain greater flexibility in their use of state resources. Such flexibility would enable the districts to align their resources more closely with the goals and strategies of their Partnership. The district leaders realized that if they were granted greater flexibility for resource allocation, however, there would have to be clear evidence to indicate whether particular strategies were having the desired impact on student outcomes. Thus, the Partnership metrics focus primarily on academic measures. Every formal meeting of the Partnership addresses these measurements and the immediate and long-term actions necessary to make sure the districts continue to move in the right direction.

### Building a Partnership team

The superintendents in both districts realized that the success of their efforts would depend on developing and institutionalizing systems, structures, and processes that could support the ongoing work of the Partnership even if a change in leadership were to occur. While all staff are expected to achieve the goals of the Partnership, the Superintendents involved several central office staff from each district to focus district attention specifically on the strategies of the Partnership. Building on previous communications between district mathematics leaders as well as their own deepening professional relationship, the two superintendents identified key personnel in mathematics, English language learner instruction, and leadership development to join the Partnership team. In addition, they named Robert Tagorda, Assistant to the Superintendent, in Long Beach and Vincent Harris, Executive Officer, District Accountability, in Fresno as the district

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As one leader said, "We no longer think in terms of our kids and their kids...they're all our kids."

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leaders responsible for the overall coordination of the team and its activities. Both report directly to their superintendent and both participated in the Broad Residency in Urban Education, an experience that has given them a common framework to guide the Partnership's reform efforts.

### Developing relationships and trust

In this first year of the Partnership, district leaders have learned to trust that their joint commitment to a common vision and mission will drive their discussions of accountability and the development of common tools. Developing relationships across the districts has taken time, but these relationships have allowed the conversations to be candid and honest. In addition, meeting together has helped the team identify differences across the two districts and opportunities for common work. This commitment to success in both districts motivates district leaders to seek opportunities to share resources that they believe will accelerate the pace of improvement.

## Working Within a Shared Learning Community

The work of the partners has emerged over time and continues to evolve. Thus the initiative's development suggests that there is an organic reform process in place that is complex but that may have an important advantage over existing intervention processes. Leaders from both districts described the central role their early discussions about sustainable and effective improvement strategies played in the development of the Partnership.

### Quarterly meetings

The quarterly meetings of district partners alternate between the Fresno and Long Beach district offices, and include both superintendents, leaders of the partnership work, and key staff responsible for the three areas: mathematics, English learners, and leadership development. Early meetings helped develop relationships across the districts and identify overlaps where they could collaborate. As the meetings have continued, district staff have been able to deepen their focus on substantive challenges both districts face.

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Part of what makes this Partnership unique and complex is the fact that the districts essentially worked their way to common ground.

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Typically, Partnership meetings have opened with a presentation by the superintendents about the ways the Partnership integrates with the work of each district more broadly, followed by reports about progress on specific Partnership projects. The next item on the agenda is usually a presentation, typically about an aspect of practice relevant to both districts. For example, one meeting featured a presentation on a framework for systems thinking. Another shared a beta design of initial features from Fresno's equity and access database. The remainder of the day-long meeting is devoted to team discussions, which provide opportunities for job-alike district staff to define common challenges and solutions. Partnership members, particularly the leaders of each of the three strands in each district, identified these conversations as the most powerful aspect of their learning together. The conversations allow district staff to delve deeply into the reasons behind a reform's success or failure. So, for

example, one leader in Fresno discussed the importance of understanding why MAP2D improved mathematics achievement in Long Beach. "Too many people see sharing best practices as though it is really easy to fix...I'm convinced if we didn't take the time to think about why it worked in Long Beach, for Long Beach, we wouldn't have been able to understand how to modify it here." And a member of the Long Beach team discussed the importance of being able to articulate their lessons to outsiders as an important aspect of their own learning.

### Joint work

Research on organizational learning suggests that one cornerstone of successful communities of practice is the development of joint work. Because both districts serve large numbers of English learners and poor students, the districts share similar challenges. Initially Fresno built upon Long Beach's success in elementary mathematics to raise its own proficiency levels in mathematics. While the early collaboration focused on Long Beach's successes, the Partnership has since identified a common work. Thus, although one could argue that Fresno was initially the beneficiary of Long Beach's experience, the Partnership has since evolved and is now concentrating its attention on middle schools – not only middle school mathematics achievement but the intersections between mathematics, leadership, and English learners in middle school. In between the quarterly meetings, district leaders meet. For example, partners focused on the mathematics strand conducted middle school "walk-throughs" together in both districts. Later, using new virtual meeting technology (Cisco's Telepresence), they met to collaboratively develop lessons and common assessments to address gaps in mathematics instructional units. They have also discussed ways to improve programs designed to prepare aspiring and present school and district administrators for new leadership assignments. As one district leader put it, there is a "shared ownership of the math classrooms in both districts."

### Use of common tools

Members of the Partnership are developing and using tools to facilitate their collective work. One example is the extensive use of the data dashboards mentioned earlier. We witnessed the use of these dashboards during a meeting when district staff examined data trends for students in

mathematics. District partners noted that while 53% of fifth-grade students scored proficient in mathematics one year, three years later, only 38% of that same cohort scored proficient. This observation prompted discussion about what happens in sixth- and seventh-grade mathematics that might lead to such a dip.

Another example of common tools is the work to develop common student assessments designed to improve student achievement in middle school mathematics. Joint development of items for assessments has led to deeper conversations among district leaders than they might have had otherwise. In one meeting, district mathematics experts were explicitly identifying the concepts they intended to measure and which assessment items might be the best measures of those concepts. And once both districts have administered those assessments to students, the conversation will continue to dig into the successes and challenges of instructional implementation.

A third example of the districts' joint work is the effort to ensure equity and access. Unlike the other three focal areas, this has only recently emerged as an important strategy to accelerate the pace of improvement. Fresno is developing a system that will help monitor student access and enrollment in courses that meet entrance requirements for the University of California and California State University. Fresno has shared that system with Long Beach, which has inspired conversations across both systems about students' systematic access to courses that will prepare all students to be ready for success in higher education or a career with significant economic growth potential.

### Sharing resources

In the early days of the Partnership, both districts focused considerable attention on obtaining greater flexibility over use of state and federal resources. District leaders believed that the restrictions on these funds hindered their ability to develop the most effective and efficient strategies for achieving their core goals. To this end, the partners sought and received waivers from the State Board of Education for some categorical program requirements. For example, the districts received a state waiver that allowed them to use funds from a professional development block grant district-wide rather than using funds to target schools in deciles 1-5. According to one district leader, the waivers initially gave the Partnership some urgency. The waiver process produced

some positive results, but the districts found the application process labor-intensive for the incremental flexibility the waivers granted. Because of California's fiscal crisis, the state recently granted temporary flexibility by suspending monitoring for all districts. However, the superintendents continue to advocate for legislative action to gain wide flexibility (paired with careful attention to accountability).

As the work of the Partnership has unfolded, discussions about resource allocation have expanded beyond the need for fiscal flexibility. District leaders discuss specific ways to allocate more funds toward achievement of academic growth targets and partnership goals and strategies. As a result, they have begun to share funds to support common professional development activities and purchase technology to accelerate progress toward their goals. Fresno, for example, used some of its special grant funds to purchase virtual communication tools for both districts.

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In addition to sharing certain financial resources to support joint work in both districts, they also share human capital, and leverage their expertise to continue to build Partnership coherence across both systems. For example, Chris Steinhauser co-presented with Mike Hanson at the Fresno Consolidated ACSA half-day mini-conference in February, 2009. And Fresno's Associate Superintendent of Equity and Access delivered a Board workshop on equity and access principles in November 2009.

### Leadership

For the two districts to achieve their goals, effective leadership at all levels of the system is essential. The leadership practices that have come to characterize the Partnership not only improve the quality of individual work, but also affect systems throughout both districts. The initial stage of the Partnership has required that leaders push beyond familiar territory, participate actively, respect and learn from different perspectives, and tenaciously focus on results. The Partnership has

been successful, in part, because of the willingness of leaders to exhibit humility, intellectual curiosity, patience and openness in their relationships. And because the Partnership does not rely on just one leader at the top of the system, but on a team of leaders, it may prove to be more sustainable than other models for improvement. Research suggests that distributed leadership can create conditions for sustainable change to take hold (Spillane, 2006). Although it is still early in the life of the Partnership, this idea of distributing responsibility across a system is one

of its promising features. As one district member put it, “they set up infrastructures for team leaders to collaborate with leaders in like positions... There isn’t a lot of micromanaging of the work which is key to open communication, but there are mechanisms for people to report what they’re learning, so there’s that sense of accountability built in.” Another leader suggested that initially the Partnership was dependent on the two superintendents, but “now, it is becoming part of the culture.”

## Partnerships as an Alternative Intervention Strategy

According to provisions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, schools (and now school districts) receiving federal Title 1 funding must make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Schools and districts that fail to meet AYP for two or more years in a row are identified for improvement and subject to consequences and assistance.

Holding districts accountable for school achievement benchmarks is an acknowledgment of the key role districts play in mediating

improvement. Typically when schools or districts have fallen short of their achievement targets, they receive additional funding to work with external providers that have expertise in supporting reform. Underlying that model for technical assistance is the assumption that schools or districts lack sufficient capacity to make the requisite changes and that external providers can leverage lessons from other sites that save district resources and effort, which will accelerate the pace of improvement.

In California, the main district intervention process is the District Assessment and Intervention Team (DAIT) program. The DAIT program provides targeted technical assistance to districts in Corrective Action by examining the effectiveness of current practices, prioritizing and developing plans to address areas of particular need, and ultimately helping the district exit program improvement. Even though Fresno and Long Beach did not enter into their Learning Partnership as an alternative to the DAIT process, a new way of thinking about the intervention process has emerged from the Partnership’s initial work on goal setting, identification of key reform strategies, and development and regular use of data dashboards to measure progress and guide future improvement efforts. Fresno in particular has built its Partnership with Long Beach into its state-required LEA plan for improvement. Both districts are committed to supporting each other, making the partnership itself the vehicle for providing external support.

The Fresno-Long Beach Partnership is a promising alternative to models that rely primarily on external technical assistance. Rather than assuming that expertise for reform resides outside of the system, the Partnership model assumes

that organizational learning will occur through shared practices and ongoing dialogue across systems that are experiencing a common set of challenges. By concentrating attention and resources on a clearly defined goal, the

Partnership creates coherence in each system and increases the likelihood that various parts of the system will operate together. As partners learn to work more efficiently, they begin to reduce organizational barriers that inhibit organizational improvement and, in doing so, make themselves even more attractive for external partners. For example, both districts will benefit from different aspects of the College Board effort to increase the numbers of underrepresented students who enroll in AP classes and pass AP tests. Fresno hosted an institute for AP English and world history that Long Beach staff attended, and Long Beach hosted a series of counseling modules that Fresno staff attended. Doing so allowed each district to determine which aspects of the institutes need to be modified the following year. According to district leaders, support providers like the College Board may find such economies of scale attractive as they roll out their services.

Most district improvement processes emphasize the importance of organizational alignment around student learning outcomes. Often, they stress the

critical role that governance and leadership play in organizational improvement. From its inception the Partnership has been clear about its focus on accelerating improvement in student learning, which provides coherence for the core improvement strategies.

When districts are identified for improvement, they typically work with an external partner to develop a plan for improvement. The Partnership differs from the usual processes that involve external providers because the formation of the Partnership *preceded* any discussion of how the Partnership could be used as a strategy to help deal with Program Improvement issues. Both superintendents envisioned a future in which the dropout rate was significantly reduced and all graduates were well prepared for success in higher education or a career with meaningful growth potential. This vision and the strategies continue to drive the Partnership and create an important foundation upon which the Partnership can continue to grow.

## Promising Outcomes

California districts thinking about using Partnerships as an alternative to DAIT (see box on p. 7) should be aware that a successful Partnership involves work well beyond the preparation and adoption of a Local Education Agency (LEA) plan and MOU's. Both Tagorda and Harris, the district administrators who guide Partnership activities, mentioned the high level of commitment required to sustain and nurture the Partnership, particularly in its early stages. The Fresno-Long Beach Partnership illustrates a commitment to ongoing system learning and the importance of holding all adults in the system accountable for that learning.

The good news is that the Partnership may also be effective in making lasting gains in student achievement. As the data in tables 1 and 2 indicate, the focus on elementary mathematics in the early stages of the Partnership seems to be paying off. The districts are beginning to see increased student achievement for third and fifth grade mathematics. Data in Fresno, for example, indicate that the district has experienced significant gains in third and fifth grade mathematics achievement for the second year in a row, and Long Beach continues its steady growth in mathematics as well. However, though the early focus of district mathematics teams was

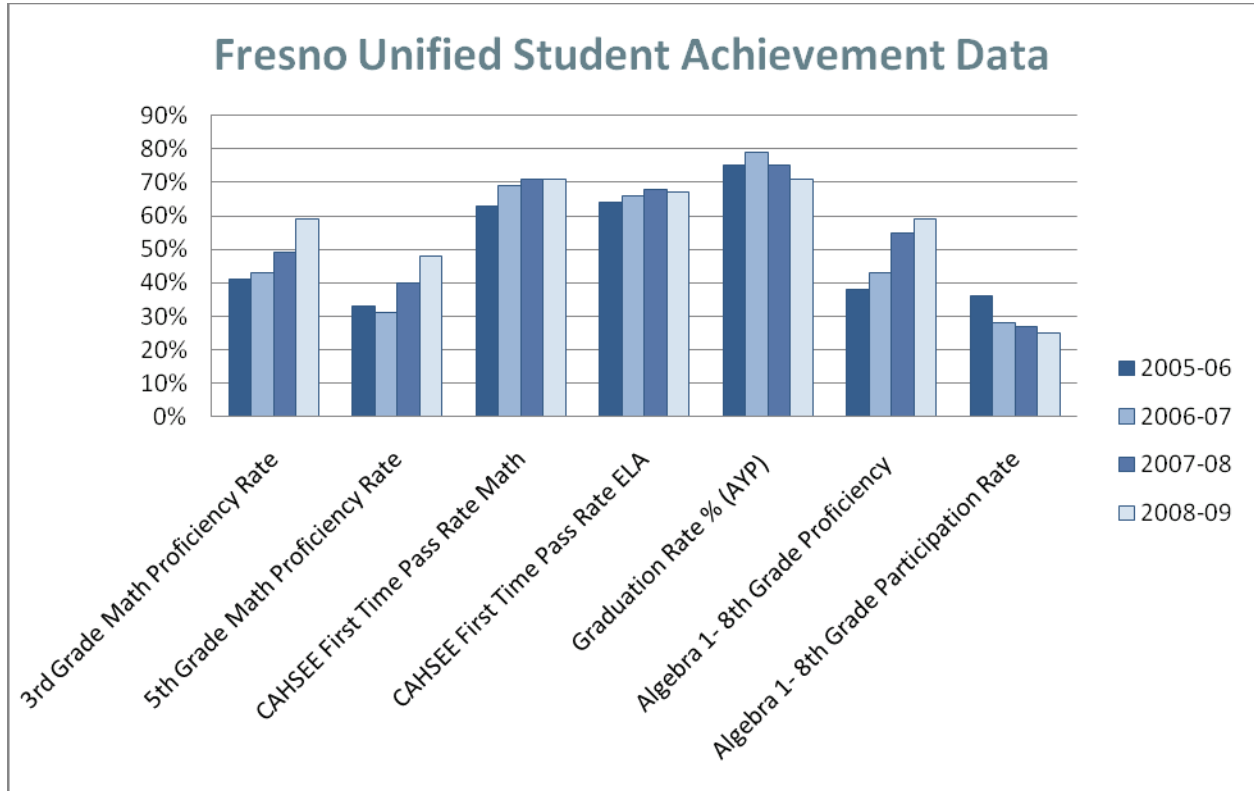
elementary mathematics achievement, as we indicated earlier, that focus has begun to shift as districts examine trends that show dips in student achievement between fifth and eighth grade. While eighth grade algebra participation rates have fallen in Fresno, the number of students enrolled in eighth grade algebra who score proficient has gone up, indicating that the district may be improving its ability to identify students prepared for eighth grade algebra. And yet neither district is satisfied with the participation or proficiency rates for eighth grade algebra, which has fueled considerable conversation among district teams. And neither district is satisfied with its graduation rate. By looking at these results together, the district leaders can discuss which strategies seem to be most effective in increasing student achievement. The capacity of the Partnership teams to remain focused on achievement data and yet flexible in their responses to those data contribute to the organic growth of additional opportunities for the Partnership.

Although sharing learning is certainly at the heart of the Partnership, sharing resources is another benefit of their collaboration. The Partnership has increased the capacity of both districts to leverage resources in a number of areas, which is critical,



particularly in this economic climate. The Partnership has led to some unintended collaborations. These include work together with the College Board to pilot professional development modules, work together on the Early Commitment to College initiative and Connect Ed,

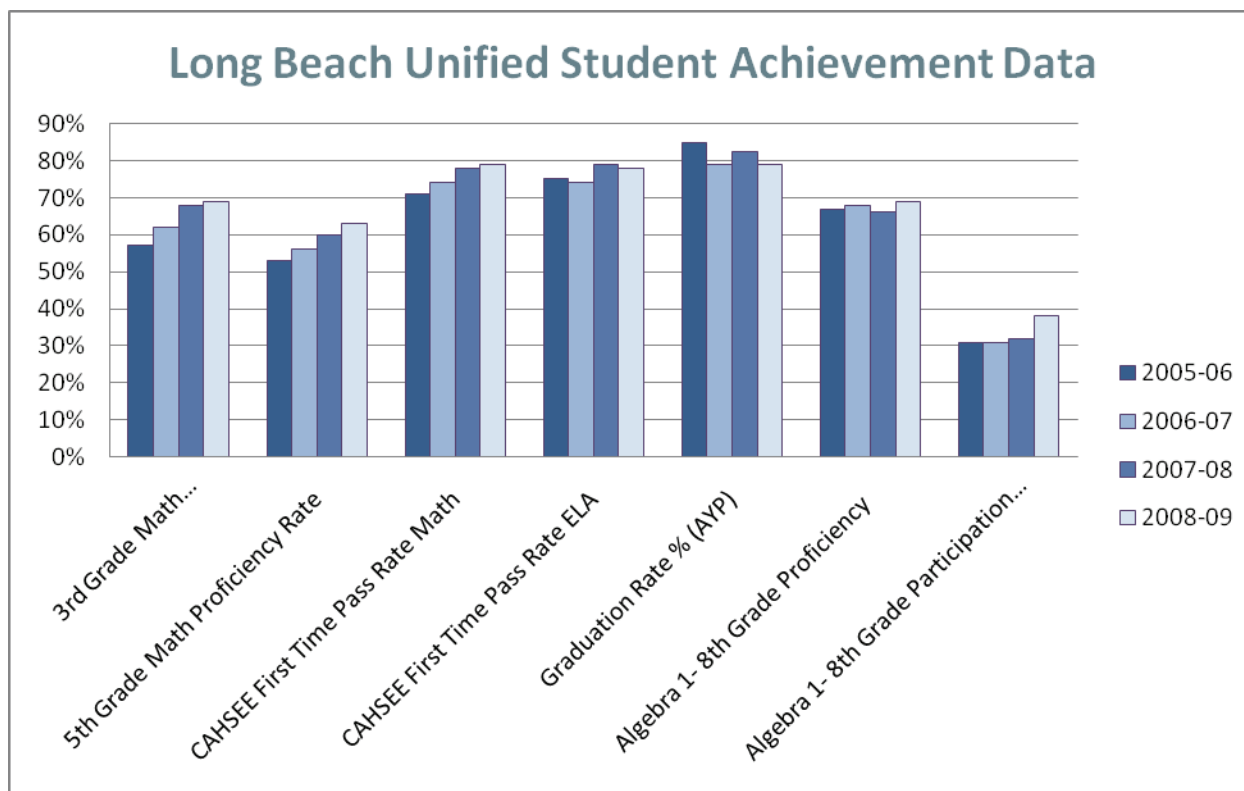
sharing strategies to increase the number of families completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and strategies that address equity and access, collaboration on federal programs such as Investing in Innovation grants (i3), and Broad Prize knowledge sharing.



Fresno Unified Achievement Data, 2005-06 through 2008-09

	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Math Proficiency	41%	43%	49%	59%
5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math Proficiency	33%	31%	40%	48%
1 <sup>st</sup> Time Passing Rate Math CAHSEE	63%	69%	71%	71%
Graduation Rate (AYP)	75.5%	79%	75.5%	71.1%
Algebra 1: 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Participation Rate	36%	28%	27%	25%
Algebra 1: 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Proficiency <sup>5</sup>	38%	43%	55%	59%

Source: DataQuest, California Department of Education  
Table 1



Long Beach Unified Achievement Data, 2005-06 through 2008-09

	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Math Proficiency	57%	62%	68%	69%
5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math Proficiency	53%	56%	60%	63%
1 <sup>st</sup> Time Passing Rate Math CAHSEE	71%	74%	78%	79%
Graduation Rate (AYP)	84.7%	79%	82.4%	79%
Algebra 1: 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Participation Rate	31%	31%	32%	38%
Algebra 1: 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Proficiency	67%	68%	66%	69%

Source: DataQuest, California Department of Education  
Table 2

## Lessons from the Partnership: Challenges and Opportunities

While early indications of the Partnership’s impact on student achievement are promising, leaders from Fresno and Long Beach caution that partnerships may not be the best strategy for all districts. Not all districts are ready to take up the challenges and supports offered by such a partnership and not all districts would necessarily work equally well as partners. In addition, if partnerships were adopted statewide, the question of matching districts as partners would be complex. In this instance, a number of factors

contributed to the capacity of these districts to work together effectively. Both superintendents are leaders who are willing to engage in difficult, candid conversations about progress toward district goals and who are willing to hold themselves accountable for results. As a result, they have created a culture for adult learning and accountability throughout their systems. Both superintendents are publicly accountable for the success of the Partnership as a core reform strategy for improving student achievement in

their districts – a practice that permeates both districts. In fact, the Partnership represents part of the DAIT strategy in Fresno and is written into the Fresno LEA plan. And by modeling their own willingness to engage in candid assessments of their progress at the very top, district leaders encouraged others to do the same. Leaders with whom we spoke said that although it took time to build the foundation that would support success, they trust now that their Partnership conversations aren't "some dog and pony show," but rather a sustained effort to do the work required to support increased student achievement.

In addition, both superintendents identified leaders who were willing not only to engage in those tough conversations but to work through the initial ambiguity of the Partnership. There was no checklist or set of protocols to define their early work together. Though that ambiguity presented challenges in the early stages, the leaders we spoke to indicated that, in hindsight, it was a strength that allowed the work to emerge and evolve in real time as needs and demands shifted. In addition, they noted that district team members initially required a certain degree of confidentiality during quarterly meetings to provide a foundation for their collaborative relationships to grow.

There are several lessons from the Partnership can be instructive for other districts considering similar collaborations.

### **Developing a common framework**

Leaders in both districts pointed to the importance of establishing a framework to guide Partnership activities instead of starting with a list of pre-defined tasks that district leaders would complete. By creating a shared vision and adopting common goals, strategies, and metrics, the Partnership established a foundation upon which future actions would be based. District leaders saw the lack of defined tasks as both a strength and a source of some confusion, especially early in the Partnership.

According to one leader, by not scripting the actual work, the Partnership "really creates the opportunity to build because they have to fight through the ambiguity to find the clarity themselves." In that sense, what seems to have been essential for the success of this partnership was being clear from the beginning about the framework that would guide actions, so that the ongoing work is more than a list of projects but rather a coherent, coordinated reform effort. The common vision, strategies, and measures of the Fresno-Long Beach Partnership have provided

the coherence necessary to sustain the collaboration over time for leaders who juggle multiple responsibilities. The framework also provides continuity even when there are changes in key personnel. Also important is the belief in and commitment to leadership practices that contribute to the Partnership's success and that support innovation. The framework and leadership practices must be more than an agreement created on paper; they must be real and they must evolve over time in a culture of mutual trust, respect, and openness. Having some degree of confidentiality was one important aspect of developing that level of trust as strong leaders at different levels of the system openly share their challenges and learn the best ways to support each other's progress. The districts addressed this issue quite explicitly by establishing clear ground rules for their quarterly cross-district meetings. Focusing on those interactions early on demonstrates the importance of creating a context that allows for the development of strong relationships grounded in candid assessments of progress and challenges.

### **Embed Partnership in the core work of the district**

Another challenge that districts face in setting up partnerships such as this is not creating additional layers of work, but instead using the Partnership as a means of supporting and improving existing work. District leaders are busy and are often pulled in a number of different directions. For that reason, leaders said that partnerships should become embedded in the regular work of the organization, rather than an additional set of activities. As several leaders from both Fresno and Long Beach noted, calling or meeting with their counterparts has just become "part of the work that we do" to help students succeed. There was also a balance between ensuring there were concrete Partnership projects and maintaining a level of flexibility that would allow the Partnership to evolve to meet shifting needs. Involvement in meaningful projects from the beginning was important. Having a concrete project can create a sense of urgency and help leaders define work that has the potential of making an immediate impact. At the same time, leaders acknowledged that the Partnership is dynamic. While the Partnership is embedded in the ongoing activities of both districts, it also requires time and attention to develop work together and share best practices as common needs emerge.

### Identifying common areas of work

Because districts structure their organizations in different ways, one perceived challenge to partnerships such as this is the identification of job-alike district leaders who can collaborate as partners. For example, the structure of the leadership pipeline – and thus of leadership development – differs across the two districts. In Fresno, leadership development includes the entire leadership pipeline because of administrative structures in place in schools. Fresno has assistant principals in nearly every school, which provides a built-in pipeline for leaders. However, Long Beach has very few assistant principals, so their efforts have focused on creating a pipeline for aspiring principals using a grant from the Broad Foundation. In Long Beach, the person charged with the leadership development strand of the Partnership concentrates on selection and induction. Because Long Beach has a surplus of credentialed administrators and fewer administrative openings each year, the selection process is different than it is in Fresno. In Fresno, finding people to fill the leadership positions is a bigger challenge than it is in Long Beach. Fresno's focus is on developing pathways for leadership opportunities for staff in the district, ensuring that those interested in it have access to the training required for administrative credentials. These structural differences impact the day-to-day work of the partners. Finding common ground across their differences was, according to district staff, an important aspect of their early meetings together. Discussing their practices and the reasons behind them has created both challenges to identifying common ground on which to collaborate and

opportunities to reexamine those practices more deeply. This has made the Partnership more dynamic.

### Building relationships

Developing a common framework is essential in shaping a partnership. However, just as important is allowing time for relationships to develop and common work to emerge. This is particularly challenging for districts that are under intense pressure to improve student achievement. However, taking the time to collaborate across different structures and learning to trust one another can accelerate the pace of improvement in the long run. Although leaders in Fresno and Long Beach did not consider distance a barrier, they also pointed to the importance of face-to-face meetings, especially in the early stages of the Partnership. Also important to the Partnership were opportunities to observe classrooms together and share observations. Those conversations about shared observations deepened the level of trust among leaders. Once relationships were established and common areas of work defined, much of the activity was then done using technology to facilitate communication.

Our early observations indicate that the Fresno-Long Beach Partnership may provide a promising strategy for districts and schools to share resources and build environments where improvement efforts are deepened and sustained. Thus, the Partnership may have implications for state policymakers who are charged with finding strategies to accelerate the pace of improvement in a climate of diminishing resources.

### Conclusion

This Partnership and others like it may provide a viable alternative or complement to existing district support strategies; learning communities, resource alignment, stronger accountability systems, and continuous improvement are at the core of its work.

Although our initial conversations indicate that the Learning Partnership is producing some positive outcomes, we want to be clear that this brief describes the early stages of this learning partnership. District work collaboration appears to have built the commitments and systems that provide the foundation for ongoing adult learning to sustain their improvement efforts. Further, this

brief is based upon conversations with a limited number of district staff who are directly involved in Partnership activities. These conversations have provided valuable perspectives on the challenges of building such a Partnership.

Our conversations have also led to a number of questions. For example, what role are third party providers playing in the Partnership? What challenges do districts face in sustaining partnerships such as this? What are the links between the work of the Partnership and other collaborative strategies? And how might other districts build internal capacity to benefit from partnerships such as this? We will also track the

impact of the Partnership on schools, classrooms, and overall student achievement. Our ongoing exploration of the Partnership will focus on these

and related questions to help districts and policymakers understand the potential and the challenges of this unique approach.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires states to implement accountability systems that measure school and district progress toward student proficiency in reading and mathematics using annual assessments. Scores from those assessments are disaggregated by socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency to ensure that no group is left behind. Schools and local education agencies (LEAs) that repeatedly fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) on annual proficiency goals in any of those subgroups are subject to corrective action. In California, Program Improvement (PI) is the designation for Title I-funded schools and districts that fail to make AYP for two consecutive years.

<sup>2</sup> The Mathematics Achievement Program and Professional Development (MAP2D) is a district-wide approach to mathematics instruction designed to include an integrated set of curricular, pedagogical, and professional development components. Designed initially by a teacher in the district, the program is intended to accelerate the progress of lower achieving students so that they achieve at proficient or advanced levels on the California Standards test. The district provides trimester workshops and coaching for all teachers. Instruction includes 30 minutes of daily instruction in basic math facts followed by a 60-minute lesson that follows a specific structure.

<sup>3</sup> A-G requirements are the courses students need to successfully complete to become University of California and California State University-eligible.

<sup>4</sup> Both superintendents recently published an op-ed piece advocating for such legislation as part of California's Race to the Top efforts.

<sup>5</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> grade algebra proficiency rates represent a percentage of students enrolled in algebra in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

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# California Collaborative on District Reform

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The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of the American Institutes for Research, was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

The documentation of the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership is supported through generous contributions from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Stuart Foundation. The views, findings, conclusions, and recommendations here are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the viewpoint of the foundations.

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