Lessons Learned in Systemic District Reform

A Cross-District Analysis from the Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System (CAIS) Benchmarking Study
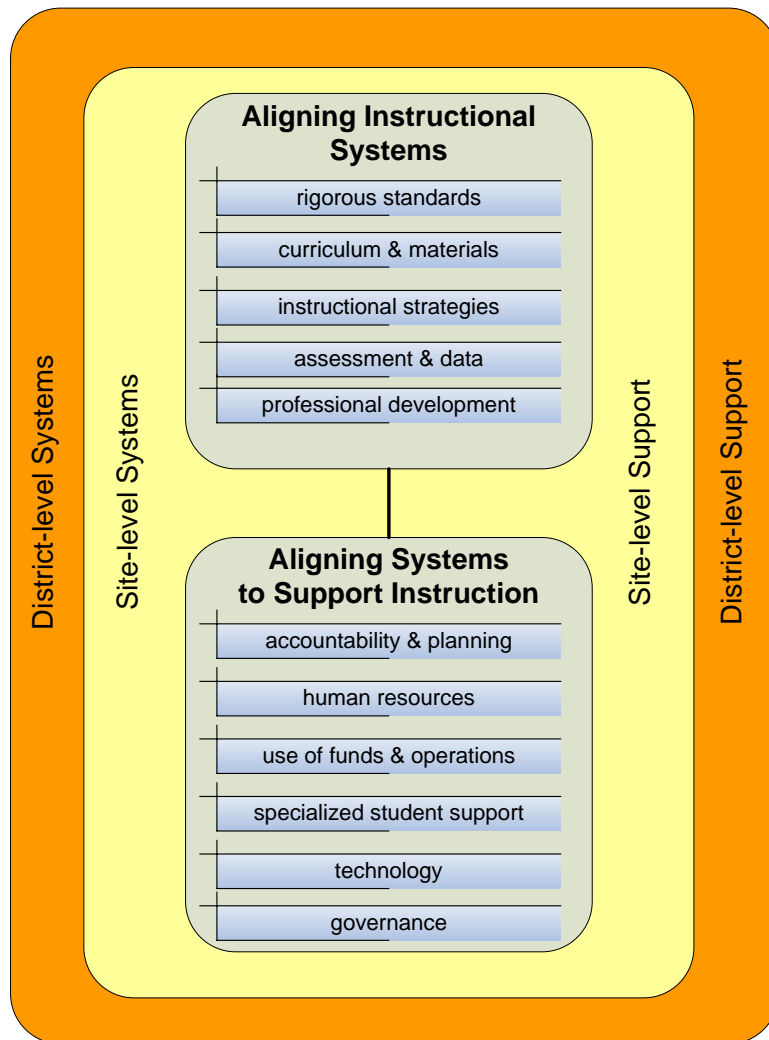
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I. Overview

Urban district reform has been hampered by the challenge of understanding and supporting the tremendous complexity of district change. Improving this understanding through actionable, practice-based research is the purpose of this study.

We began the study with the hypothesis that achieving districts both align their instructional systems (standards, curriculum, instructional strategies, professional development, and assessment and data) and their systems to support instruction (accountability and planning, human resources, specialized student supports, use of funds, technology and governance) around a powerful equity goal and a clear vision of teaching and learning. This basic framework is laid out in *Defining a Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System (CAIS)* by Louise Bay Waters (2007).

A Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System

Aligning Instructional Systems

- rigorous standards
- curriculum & materials
- instructional strategies
- assessment & data
- professional development

Aligning Systems to Support Instruction

- accountability & planning
- human resources
- use of funds & operations
- specialized student support
- technology
- governance

District-level Systems · Site-level Systems · Site-level Support · District-level Support

Stupski Foundation   Springboard Schools   BILL & MELINDA GATES foundation

The purpose of the CAIS Benchmarking Study was to delve deeply into exactly how districts accomplish this alignment. Over the two years of the study, we have found that, indeed, the CAIS Study districts did focus on structural alignment, but that they also placed considerable emphasis on the development of organizational cultures that enabled them to **address issues of equity and instructional quality in ways that many districts can't. These** cultures were critical in sustaining the change process long enough for reforms to move from the cabinet to the classroom or to scale from a pilot to the district as a whole.

As we moved beyond a high-level understanding of the alignment of district structures and cultures to a more detailed look at the precise levers of district change, the role of district leaders in managing this change became clearer. What emerged was a picture of change as more of a dance than a march. Like good dancers, CAIS Study superintendents possessed a repertoire of moves, and they used these to respond to their changing and district-specific contexts. While these moves had many commonalities, their sequence and form varied. The most proficient of the superintendents not only had a range of moves, but were very intentional in their use and reflective in their application, thereby enlarging their repertoire over time.

How Districts Advance Equity-Based Systems Reform
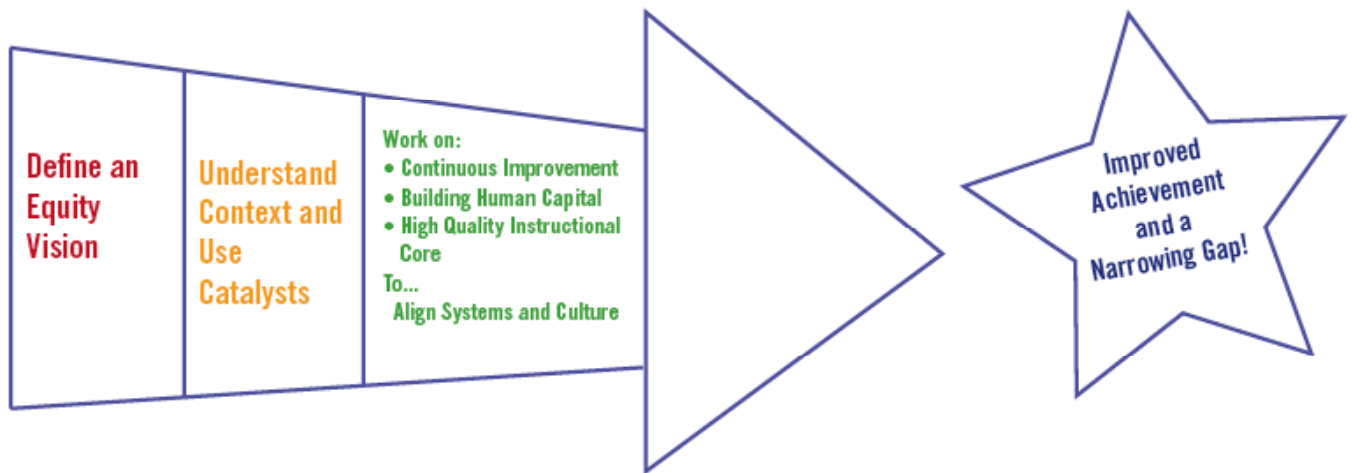
Out of these lessons emerged a more complex theory of equity-based district reform. On the basis of this study, we posit that high-performing districts that sustain and improve academic achievement for low-performing students and students of poverty and color:

- **Focus on an Equity Vision.** They have leaders at the top of the system who keep the focus on a core strategy or set of strategies related to improving the achievement of under-performing students.

- **Create Catalysts and Leverage Context.** These leaders intentionally leverage opportunities and evidence to help build stakeholder understanding, mobilize renewed efforts, adjust strategy and clarify their goal.

- **Align Cultures and Systems.** They have people at multiple levels who implement both strategy and tactics in ways that, over time, serve to align both structures and culture with the district's goals for students.

- **Commit to a Sustained Strategy for Change.** While there are many levers for change, there are three that seem to be of particular significance: building human capital, building the discipline of continuous improvement and defining a high-quality instructional core.

The hallmark of these districts' journeys is that they develop and are sustained over a period of years as a result of leaders' ability to manage the politics of reform including various destabilizing internal and external forces.

II.   CAIS Benchmark District Selection and Research Methodology

While urban reform has been hampered by the challenge of the complexity of district change, studying district-level change has been equally hampered by the challenge of studying complex systems over time. A primary and critical constraint is the lack of comparable data across states. A second research challenge involves the methodological difficulty of making causal connections between multi-faceted, district-level change and student-level achievement, especially in the dynamic, politically-charged contexts in which **classic "experimental design" approaches are imp**ossible. In addition to these hurdles, research is hampered by the lack of clear exemplars: while a variety of researchers have found that districts do matter for student achievement, no large urban district with significant numbers of students of poverty and color and significant size has yet shown across-the-board exemplary levels of sustained student achievement.

The focus on the school district as an important source and locus of change is relatively new. The combination of methodological constraints, lack of comparable data sets and dearth of clear exemplars have thus far limited our understanding of exactly how districts that are intentionally building systems of achievement have made their progress. The default has often been to limit studies to the examination of variables that can be measured (i.e., class size, teacher credentials) even though these are well understood to be at best proxies for the primary levers for change. The research that has examined district reform from a broader systems perspective has often yielded high-level findings which are useful but which fail to provide the level of implementation detail, context or description of district development over time that is needed by district leaders faced with the practical challenge of leading change.

Selection
Given these constraints and these needs, the CAIS Benchmarking Study intentionally did **not undertake to define "the one best path to district reform."** Instead we sought to deepen **the discussion around the "how to" of reform by** selecting districts for close observation that:

- Had over 25,000 students with at least 35% of these African American and Latino and over 20% students of poverty.

- Were among the highest performers in that demographic within their state and resided in states with strong correlations between state tests and NAEP results.

- Had been recognized for exemplary district systems in more than one area and an intentional focus on systems alignment.

- Had a strong equity focus.

- Had leaders willing to engage in a new kind of collaborative research project.

Within these parameters, the CAIS Study selected three districts to examine in detail: Montgomery County, Maryland; U-46, Illinois; and Elk Grove, California. Each of these districts has had success in raising the achievement of underperforming students and has been recognized for the development of systems to support this effort. Bellevue, Washington, which does not meet our demographic profile, has received wide recognition for closing the advanced placement gap and for developing strong district systems. Their accomplishments and openness to partnering in the development of the methodology for this study resulted in their inclusion as a pilot CAIS district.

Methodology

The CAIS Benchmarking Study was built around the work of interview teams that met with individuals and focus groups at the board, district, site and classroom levels. At the district level, this included key members from all segments of the district from operations and technology to curriculum, special education and student services. During this time, other team members visited at least one elementary, one middle and one high school that represented high implementation, and another set that represented low implementation of the district's key reform strategies (a total of at least six schools). From this initial multi-day district visit and the review of collected documents, the interview team and project leadership developed a draft timeline and map of the key events, catalysts and strategies in the district's reform journey. They also postulated a list of potential cultural attributes, or guiding principles, that they felt represented both the tacit and explicit culture of that district.

With this initial framework in place, researchers returned and met with the district leadership team for a structured critique of the analysis. The result informed a more detailed sifting of the data. The final set of events, catalysts and strategies, as well as detailed descriptions of each, were arrived at collaboratively. Because of the complexity of the data collected and the analysis needed, the necessity of building a knowledge management tool to support this work became clear early in the project. The resulting tool, which we named CAISWorks, combines a relational database with a visual interface that together allowed the data to be tagged, sorted and displayed in a variety of ways. Each event in the database is tied to one or more of the 11 CAIS structural components (such as curriculum or governance) and one or more of the guiding principles (such as transparency or shared responsibility). Each event also has attached to it annotations explaining the identified systemic links as well as related artifacts (board memos, newspaper articles, assessment rubrics). To aid in analysis, both data points and annotations are searchable. More importantly, a graphical user interface allows researchers to view the data represented visually. These visual representations include depiction of the overall reform timeline as well as depictions of the evolution of various elements in relation to each other (e.g., use of data vs. professional development). Once the data was entered and the preliminary analysis complete, the team returned to the district again to use the tool with key district personnel to identify missing elements and unearth linkages not yet found by the team.

Facilitated by the power of CAISWorks, the CAIS Benchmarking Study was able to put in place a methodology that allowed researchers to collaboratively analyze the multi-dimensional process of district reform in partnership with the participating districts. The ability to view multiple layers of data and visually search for patterns has made possible the co-construction of knowledge between practitioners and researchers as well as across the four district research teams. The tool and the embedded artifacts and research summaries provide rich case studies on individual district reform. The Cross-District Analysis then takes these individual learnings and looks across the districts for patterns that can be gleaned.

The Cross-District Analysis

This cross-district analysis assembles a series of the lessons from the three CAIS benchmark districts and the Bellevue pilot that cast new light on how diverse, achieving districts with an equity focus have intentionally aligned their systems to focus on delivering high quality teaching and learning for traditionally underperforming students. Given the limitations of the study, these findings must be seen as descriptive of a hypothesis about promising practices rather than a prescriptive recipe for reform. Taken together, though, the identified practices point in directions that have important implications for leaders both within and outside school systems whose focus is on district reform. Though causal connections cannot be drawn between specific elements of the reform efforts in each district and specific results, the goal of the study was to explore how these specific elements can work together to support change for students. The identification of specific elements is also an important step toward identifying those variables that merit the development of a

consistent set of measurement metrics that may one day allow the field to take on the analytic challenge of understanding exactly which piece of the puzzle made a difference to which outcome. In the meantime, a more holistic portrait of promising practices has the potential to help the district leaders whose job it is to assemble the pieces of a reform effort that can bring closer to reality the goal of providing life changing options for students of color and poverty.

III. Levers for Improving Access to Quality of Instruction:
The "What" of District Reform

Committing to a Sustained Strategy

In public education today, leaders are looking for a strategy for improving teaching and learning. Thus Harvard, in its Public Education Leadership Program (PELP), talks about strategy as a key ingredient in leading change in public education. According to Stacey Childress, PELP co-founder, **"strategy is the set of actions an organization chooses to pursue in order to achieve its objectives."**

But a set of loosely connected actions don't add up to a strategy. Strategy is a set of "deliberate" actions that are "puzzle pieces that fit together to create a clear picture of how the people, activities and resources of an organization can work effectively to accomplish a **collective purpose." Strategy is not only a road** map, it is also a tool for coherence. Strategy is something that evolves over the course of many years. While it takes into account new information and innovations, it adopts only what advances the strategic thrust of the organization. In contrast, in districts where there is no coherent strategy, yo**u see a "flavor of the month" approach to reform. As such, as Childress goes on to say, "strategy is about** choosing — choosing what to do, and just as importantl**y, choosing what not to do." *(PELP Coherence Framework, October 2006)***

Based on our research, achieving districts are very intentional about their choice of a key strategy or sequence of strategies. They are equally clear on their theory of action, i.e., how this strategy leads to improved teaching and learning and the access to that instruction for previously underserved students. They build cultures and communication to support the strategy and align their systems around it. In the CAIS Benchmarking Study, we have found three major strategic levers for this type of change — three foci for reform:
- Building human capital
- Building the discipline of continuous improvement
- Defining a high-quality instructional core

While attending to all, the three benchmarking and one pilot district each sequenced their overall strategy differently, beginning with the **lever that was to remain the district's central** priority. In Montgomery County, where commissions had highlighted the lack of accountability for student achievement, the initial lever was building the discipline of continuous improvement. Elk Grove, with its rapid growth, gave greatest focus to building human capital, which was sustained over three superintendents. In both Bellevue and U-46, new superintendents entered districts with strong cultures of site-based decision making and no central curriculum or assessment. While implementing in very different ways, both initially undertook to define a high-quality instructional core. Although each of the four districts sustained commitment to one preeminent strategy, all developed intentionality in each of the three areas over time. The lessons learned about using these levers to align systemic change, detailed below, therefore draw from all the districts.

IV. Innovative Approaches in Systems Alignment

All four CAIS Study districts have intentionally focused on systems building in three key areas: capacity building, continuous improvement and the instructional core. Going one step further, they have also focused on systems alignment between structures, culture and vision as a strategy for moving student achievement and equity. Beyond this overall systemic approach, they have also developed innovative tactics that embody and enhance coherence. These tactics represent specific "lessons learned" with potential applicability in other districts seeking to accelerate systemic reform. The innovations fall into three categories: redefining organizational boundaries, reframing traditional relationships and leveraging technology.

Redefining Organizational Boundaries

Loaned Leaders: U-46. When Superintendent Connie Neale was confronted by the combined fiscal and achievement crises at the beginning of her term, she also faced holes in her administrative team. Needing to jump-start reform and wanting time to both grow and assess potential leaders, she turned outside to fill her immediate needs. With support from the Stupski Foundation, she hired a retired deputy state superintendent to lead her instructional reform, supporting her with external literacy experts and an internal project team of teacher leaders. An external data expert, also Stupski-funded, was hired as a consultant to head up data and assessment with an initial focus on English Language Learners and low-performing schools. By bringing in people with known expertise who were unconnected to the internal turmoil and closely aligned to her vision, she was able to accelerate systems building. The subsequent year, Neale created the position of Chief Academic Officer and elevated a principal who had been involved with the project team. The team continued rolling out the Curriculum Roadmap and the loaned deputy remained as a part-time coach and thought partner for the CAO and team for the next four years. That second year, she also brought the data consultant inside as Director of Data and Assessment, having now established him with teachers and principals. The year of loaned leadership provided Superintendent Neale the space to stabilize the system and begin her reforms. Ironically, funding district positions is frequently seen as an inappropriate role for educational foundations, a premise this research calls into question.

Teacher Education Institute (TEI): Elk Grove. Faced with burgeoning enrollment and a slow pipeline from nearby teacher-credentialing institutions, Elk Grove sought a partnership with San Francisco State University in the early 1990s **to create the district's own 11**-month teacher preparation program. To date, the program has produced over 700 teachers who have gone on to work for the district. TEI has allowed Elk Grove to put in place rigorous quality screens and tailor preparation to their curriculum and culture. It has also supported their efforts to recruit non-traditional candidates, particularly candidates of color, outside of the local area, bringing them in as interns. Building on the success of TEI, Elk Grove later instituted an administrative credential program with Sacramento State University to allow them to train their own administrators. A testament to the success of TEI has been its strong support through three superintendents, the initiator, Bob Trigg, and subsequently Dave Gordon and Steve Ladd.

Reframing Traditional Relationships

Bringing Unions into Management: Montgomery County. Jerry Weast's initial description of MCPS as a school system divided into two separate and unequal districts — a Red Zone of poverty, color and low achievement and a Green Zone of affluence and high achievement — led directly into **"Our Call to Action,"** which was designed to mobilize both

the district and the community to embrace all students and ensure that achievement would not be predictable by race. This same call to move across boundaries and develop shared responsibility for all students went out to the three employee unions. Beginning as collaboration and building on the district's earlier move to interest-based bargaining, it resulted in a restructured governance process. The three unions were invited to participate in the district's capital and budget planning process. To ensure all voices were heard, the superintendent also invited administrators to form a fourth union to participate on equal footing with the others. Once the initial planning processes were completed, the heads of the teachers' and administrators' unions became permanent members of the district's leadership team. The resulting decision-making structure has allowed MCPS to cross vertical and horizontal boundaries within the organization, speak with a consistent voice and model a culture of shared responsibility.

"Neverstreaming": Elk Grove. By the late 1980s, as the population of Elk Grove both mushroomed and changed, record numbers of students were being referred for special education. In some cases, this included almost a third of the students at a single school. Superintendent Dave Gordon, who was closely connected to California's state educational leadership in nearby Sacramento, decided to use his insider's knowledge to broker a new approach to special education. The agreement he negotiated through state waivers allowed Elk Grove to receive funding for a special education population of 10% without testing for program eligibility. The funds could then be used in prevention, particularly at the pre-school and early elementary levels, and mainstream classroom support — something Elk Grove calls "Neverstreaming." "Neverstreaming" has allowed Elk Grove to proactively serve special education students while significantly reducing identification. More importantly, it has established the value of early intervention and the norm of collective responsibility for a traditionally marginalized group of students. The district carefully tracks school-level identification data. When identifications seem disproportionately high, it intervenes to examine the core program not just the special education services.

Leveraging Technology

The Curriculum Web: Bellevue. Bellevue used the creation of a common curriculum as the vehicle to meet its goal of providing all students an education preparing them for college success. The Curriculum Web emerged as a pivotal structure for developing and supporting the common curriculum across subject areas. Essentially, the Web provides an electronic portal to the curriculum. It includes a vast array of resources such as lesson plans, pacing guides, curriculum materials and even video clips that scaffold the instruction of challenging concepts or supply on-demand professional development. At the same time, the Web provides an electronic forum for teachers to discuss, share, create and refine curriculum as a professional community. In some subject areas, this is highly mediated. In others, it has more of a "wiki" tone. The electronic nature of the curriculum also makes it highly transportable and enables review and contribution by external curriculum experts. Finally, the Web links to the District Data Analyzer that provides access to assessment results, transparent to all teachers and administrators. The Curriculum Web both built on and reinforced a district culture that valued collaborative innovation, deep understanding of subject matter, and transparency of practice and results. By incorporating teachers in content refinement the process, it served to diffuse union and teacher resistance to a highly mandated curriculum. In other words, it enabled Superintendent Mike Riley to implement a "both/and" approach to district reform — one that was both top-down and bottom-up.

Instructional Quality Management System (IQMS): Montgomery County.
Montgomery County's IQMS was envisioned as a comprehensive system linking curriculum resources, student performance data, professional development management and systems accountability measures. In the reverse of Bellevue, MCPS began with the data and accountability functions of a component of the IQMS — the Instructional Management System (IMS). The IMS was designed to enable educators to monitor student progress, access state and MCPS standards, analyze assessment data by standard for instructional planning, and perform longitudinal analysis of district, school, grade, class, sub-group and individual data for program planning. As it grew in sophistication, it included graphic profiles showing student performance against targets, similar schools, leading indicators and other accountability measures. These measures were in turn linked to accountability processes such as the M-STAT, which uses the military model of after-action reviews to facilitate school-based data reflection. A later module incorporating curriculum resources was added to the larger Instructional Quality Management System along with one focusing on professional development. The staff development module integrated course registration, management and payroll functions into the system that now enables concurrent analysis of student outcomes along with professional development input. While providing significant structural supports for the Montgomery County reform process, the IQMS has been equally central to building a culture of data use and accountability for student achievement.

V. Conclusion

High performing classrooms and schools, while still not common, can be found across the nation. However, these beacons of hope are extremely fragile — difficult to sustain and scale beyond heroic teachers and principals. Scale and sustainability, and the equity imperative they entail, are dependent on districts. Unfortunately, there are no urban districts that have achieved consistently high levels of student performance across demographic groups, grade levels and schools over time. For this reason, a focus on systems reform remains imperative.

Given the criticality of this quest, we cannot wait for a comprehensive model to emerge but must draw lessons from districts positively moving in this direction. To this end, the Stupski Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation undertook the Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System Benchmarking Study, in partnership with Springboard Schools, to identify common practices in three achieving urban districts that could illuminate promising directions to be built upon by other districts seeking to accelerate reform.

In order to both identify and make these lesson as accessible as possible, it was necessary for the CAIS Study to examine district change in three dimensions: across the system — the alignment of both district structures and culture; through the system from vision to classroom impact; and over time with the dynamics of change. Each dimension involved an **examination of both "what" they did and "how" they did it. The complexity of the task and** the desire to make the findings accessible to the wider reform community led to the creation of a knowledge management tool, CAISWorks, and to the need for the identification of a pilot district, Bellevue, Washington, to partner with in the development of both the process and the tools for the larger research project.

The research sought, and **found, ways that leaders managed both the "how" and the "what"** of equity-based reform in contexts that were often less than ideal. What we have discovered is that there is no prescription for change but rather dimensions and processes of systems reform that can be intentionally managed. Understanding these dynamics positions leaders to accelerate and sustain the development of districts that provide powerful life options for students of poverty and color.

It is our hope that these findings will add to the growing knowledge needed in transforming urban education in the United States. It is the belief of our organizations that we in the field **of educational research and reform must model the types of "collaborative innovation" and "transparency" we seek in the districts we support. Though the one best "answer" may** continue to elude us, we are confident that through our collective work we will build the capacity for finding answers to the intransigent challenges of educational equity.