CALIFORNIA **COLLABORATIVE**
on District Reform

You'll Never Be Better Than Your Teachers

The Garden Grove Approach to Human Capital Development

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Contents

Executive Summary

In recent years, education stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels have increasingly turned to human resources policies on teacher tenure, compensation, and evaluation as leverage points for improving teaching quality in classrooms. Although these efforts appropriately aim to improve the quality of the teaching force, they too often seek silver-bullet solutions applied in isolation from other improvement strategies. Moreover, many proposed strategies treat quality as a largely static characteristic to be better distributed rather than an area for ongoing development and do little to address the performance of teachers who occupy the vast middle ground between excellence and harmfulness. Emerging attention to entire systems of human capital management, however, appropriately recognizes the need for a comprehensive approach to improving teaching quality. Garden Grove Unified School District, a large urban district in California, provides a compelling example of what such a system looks like in practice.

Introducing Garden Grove

Garden Grove has demonstrated success in improving student performance for more than a decade. Its measures of college preparedness and academic proficiency rank among the best of similar districts, indicators of success the district has achieved while serving a high proportion of low-income students, English learners, and students of color. This track record has earned Garden Grove the 2004 Broad Prize as the nation's best urban school system and the esteem of peer district leaders throughout California. With the goal of articulating and sharing the best practices of a high-performing urban school district, this report describes the ways in which Garden Grove seeks to attract and maximize teaching talent through a comprehensive system of human capital development.

Garden Grove district leaders see teachers and teaching as the fundamental drivers of student success. As outgoing superintendent Laura Schwalm explains, "You're never going to be a better district than the teachers in your classrooms." To that end, the central office sees two paths to improving instructional quality: (1) getting the best teachers and (2) building the capacity of the teachers it has.

Getting the Best Teachers

Essential strategies for getting the best teachers include the following:

- Approaches to **recruitment and student teaching** that give district leaders extensive opportunities to prepare, observe, and assess the quality and potential of teaching candidates
- A **hiring and placement** process that emphasizes skills *and* dispositions that will enable teachers to work collaboratively, constantly improve their craft, and contribute successfully to student learning in the district
- An **induction** program that prepares new teachers for the district's expectations for instruction and professional culture, including multiple opportunities to receive feedback

- An affirmative approach to **granting tenure** that actively selects quality teachers to remain in the district after their second year, rather than retain by default the teachers who simply continue teaching
- A **compensation** system that attracts quality candidates by offering competitive salaries and rewarding teachers for contributions to improved instruction in the district

Building the Capacity of Teachers You Have

Likewise, key strategies for building teacher capacity include these:

- A comprehensive approach to **professional learning** that provides opportunities for training and collaboration at the district, school, and individual level, with an emphasis on what takes place in the classroom
- A model of **instructional supervision** that emphasizes the importance of ongoing feedback in enhancing teacher performance
- An **evaluation** system that strategically connects with the district's efforts to monitor and improve teaching quality
- An approach to **working with struggling teachers** that provides extensive opportunities to improve and, in the cases where these efforts are unsuccessful, a commitment to removing teachers from the classroom who are actively harming student learning opportunities
- Opportunities for **teacher leadership** through which the district can leverage the human capital of its teachers while nurturing their professional growth

Building a Culture and Approach to Improvement That Enable Strategies to Succeed

These strategies for human capital development are essential components of the way the district pursues improvement. The story of Garden Grove is less about *what* it does, however, than *how* it approaches its work. Underlying all district efforts is a strong culture, driven fundamentally by the needs of students and the work of teachers, that prioritizes personal relationships, that reflects a philosophy of service from the central office to the schools, that trusts and empowers teachers to drive the work of student learning, and that features a commitment to continuous improvement. It is from this culture that effective practices of human capital development emerge, and it is within this culture that the practices can achieve success.

In addition to the district culture, Garden Grove seamlessly integrates human capital strategies into an overall approach to district improvement. Human capital is not an end in itself; it is only in relation to the district's goal of maximizing outcomes for students that the human capital system takes on true meaning. The district's problem-based approach to initiating and managing change produces and supports the strategies of human capital development described in this report. At the same time, sound fiscal management, a collaborative relationship with the teacher union, and stable superintendent leadership have helped create the conditions for sustained growth.

Applying Lessons to Other Districts

What can we learn from the Garden Grove story? With regard to human capital development, Garden Grove provides compelling evidence that a comprehensive approach can help facilitate high-quality instruction and student learning. Educators and policymakers need not be swayed by the false promise of a silver-bullet approach to school improvement. Furthermore, the Garden Grove story provides concrete examples that other district leaders might consider in advancing their own approaches to human capital development—provided that they appropriately evaluate and adapt these strategies to meet the needs of their local context. At the same time, the most powerful lessons from Garden Grove may not emerge from the strategies themselves but from the processes through which they are created—a collaborative process that puts people at the center.

Perhaps the strongest lessons from Garden Grove, however, are about district improvement overall and developing ways to maintain discipline and focus on the right goal, student learning. District efforts may be most likely to succeed when leaders set clear expectations, communicate extensively about them, and establish strong support mechanisms. The Garden Grove story is one of discipline to avoid the allure of every good idea, and thus protect the system from what district leaders label "the constant swirling of reform." Finally, the Garden Grove story is one of consistent improvement through the ongoing pursuit of promising practice and the relentless refining of those things that are most effective at attaining the desired results. The results attained by placing a primacy on students and teachers within Garden Grove suggest that valuing people and the interactions among them may be particularly important in driving the coherence and stability needed to achieve the student outcomes district leaders seek.

Introduction

Teachers matter. For more than a decade, research has consistently demonstrated the importance of classroom teachers in improving outcomes for students during their formal education and beyond.[1] Increasingly, policymakers have responded to these findings by pursuing tenure reform, new models for teacher compensation, and revamped teacher evaluation systems as mechanisms for improving teaching quality in classrooms.

Although these policies appropriately identify teaching quality as a critical lever for school improvement, they too often seek silver-bullet solutions applied in isolation from other improvement strategies. Moreover, many proposed strategies treat quality as a largely static characteristic to be better distributed rather than a matter of ongoing development. They also do little to address the performance of teachers who occupy the vast middle ground between excellence and harmfulness. The most promising evaluation models, which use evaluation results to inform teachers' professional growth, may represent an exception to this trend, but even in these cases, tension often arises when district leaders wish to encourage honest self-reflection to improve practice but simultaneously apply the high stakes of teacher salaries and job security to performance ratings. In a context where narrow pathways to change can dominate the conversation, emerging attention to entire systems of human capital management appropriately recognizes the need for a comprehensive approach to improving teaching quality.[2] Garden Grove Unified School District (USD), a large urban district in California, provides a compelling example of what such a system looks like in practice.

Garden Grove has consistently demonstrated an ability to improve student outcomes while serving a disadvantaged student population, an accomplishment that earned it the 2004 Broad Prize for Urban Education.[3] Since that time, Garden Grove has continued to demonstrate consistent growth as a district overall and for its minority and low-income students in particular. Perhaps more important, it has made substantial progress in eliminating certain pockets of overwhelming underperformance. On the fourth-grade California Standards Test (CST) in mathematics, for example, only 15 of the district's 3,448 fourth-graders scored far below basic in the 2011–12 school year.[4] Despite this success, much work remains. Pockets of inadequate performance still exist in the district's schools, and academic results for its Latino, English learner, and low-income students continue to lag behind their more advantaged counterparts. Nevertheless, the district has made undeniable progress toward meeting all students' academic needs.

Perhaps equally impressive is the district's reputation among other California district leaders. Peer superintendents, particularly those who participate with Garden Grove as members of the California Collaborative on District Reform, have long recognized the district for its ability to leverage quality leadership and sustained focus on student needs to achieve ongoing improvements in student performance. Indeed, this report comes specifically at the request of one of these district superintendents, who observed that these attributes are fundamentally connected to a system of human capital development[5] and saw value in articulating exactly what this system entails.

Garden Grove is currently in a time of transition. Laura Schwalm, the district superintendent for more than 14 years, retired in June 2013 and Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education Gabriela

Mafi has stepped into the superintendent role. For district leaders, this transition provides an opportunity to reflect on and articulate those elements that have been most essential to its continual growth. It is also an ideal time for an outside audience to reflect on what human capital development looks like in Garden Grove and what other districts might learn from its example.[6]

In Garden Grove, every action in the district is oriented toward improving the ability of adults to meet student needs in the classroom. A simple statement from Schwalm captures the entire district philosophy: "You're never going to be a better district than the teachers in your classrooms." To that end, the central office sees two complementary paths to improving instructional quality: (1) getting the best teachers and (2) building the capacity of the teachers it has. In the face of piecemeal and often polarizing approaches to achieving higher quality classroom instruction, Garden Grove provides an alternative driven by a culture of respect, continuous improvement, and unwavering attention to student results.

> "You're never going to be a better district than the teachers in your classrooms."

This report aims to articulate the system of human capital development in Garden Grove and the broader district context that enables it to thrive. The story unfolds in three chapters. The first chapter makes the case for why educators might pay attention to Garden Grove in the first place. A long history of academic growth in both standardized test performance and college preparation sets the district apart from most of its large urban district peers. Just as important, an underlying culture focused on people and on continuous improvement defines the district and enables it to guide students toward academic success.

The second chapter explores specific human capital policies and strategies in Garden Grove. I first examine the practices for attracting and retaining good teachers—including recruitment and student teaching, hiring and placement, induction, tenure, and compensation. I then describe the practices for building the capacity of teachers once they are in the system—including professional learning opportunities, instructional supervision, evaluation, interventions for struggling teachers, and pathways for teacher leadership. The focus of chapter 2, and of the report overall, is primarily on the district's work with teachers. Recognizing, however, that human capital development involves instructional and noninstructional personnel throughout the district, the chapter also briefly addresses the role of school administrators in the human capital development process.

Although the specific strategies of human capital development are essential components of the way the district pursues excellence, the story of Garden Grove is less about what it does than how it approaches its work. Therefore, the third chapter describes the ways in which Garden Grove seamlessly integrates human capital strategies into an overall approach to district improvement. This includes the district's problem-based approach to initiating and managing change that produces and supports the strategies of human capital development described in this report. At the same time, sound fiscal management, a collaborative relationship with the teacher union, and stable superintendent leadership have helped create the conditions for sustained improvement.

The report concludes with observations about what other districts might take away from the Garden Grove story.

NOTES

1. Examples of studies connecting teachers to student achievement gains include Hanushek (2002); Rockoff (2004); and Sanders & Rivers (1996). Examples of studies connecting teacher quality to desirable adult outcomes include Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff (2011) and Hanushek (2011).

2. See Curtis & Wurtzel (2010); Laine, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Lasagna (2011); and Odden (2011) for early examples of human capital frameworks in the field of education. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education's Teacher Incentive Fund has expanded its scope to acknowledge a more holistic approach to improving teacher quality than through compensation alone.

3. From the Broad Prize website: "The $1 million Broad Prize, established in 2002, is the largest education award in the country given to school districts. The Broad Prize is awarded each year to honor urban school districts that demonstrate the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among low-income and minority students." (http://www.broadprize.org/about/overview.html)

4. This translates to 0.4 percent of Garden Grove fourth-graders scoring far below basic. As a point of comparison, 2 percent of fourth-graders statewide scored far below basic on the CST.

5. This report uses a definition of human capital supplied by Milanowski and Kimball (2010): "the productive skills and technical knowledge of workers. It includes individuals' knowledge, skills, and abilities and the values and motivation they have to apply their skills to the organization's goals" (p. 70).

6. This report draws on district leader, school administrator, and union leadership interviews; teacher focus groups; document review; and meeting observations that took place primarily during the 2012–13 school year. In addition, the bulk of this report was written during that school year. Therefore, references to district practices and individuals' titles reflect the strategies employed and the positions held during the data collection period. Several of the individuals interviewed for this report have since taken on new roles, including Gabriela Mafi (superintendent), Kelly McAmis (assistant superintendent of secondary education), and Laura Schwalm (retired).

Chapter 1. Making the Case: Why Garden Grove?

Literature on school reform frequently addresses the role that districts play in school improvement, and the education press often has highlighted the nation's largest urban school systems to identify and follow key trends in education reform. Indeed, many of these stories relate directly to issues of teaching quality and offer important lessons to district leaders and other education stakeholders.[1] In this sea of stories about district reform, why should Garden Grove merit our attention? This chapter shares Garden Grove's long history of growth in achieving key student outcomes and then turns to critical elements of the district culture that set it apart from many of its peers and lay the foundation for its human capital approach.

Garden Grove District Profile

Garden Grove Unified School District serves nearly 50,000 students in Orange County, California. As Table 1 demonstrates, the district serves a student population that is predominantly low-income, with roughly four in 10 students identified as English learners (ELs). A majority of Garden Grove students are Latino or Asian; most of the district's Asian students are Vietnamese, followed by a small percentage of Korean students. The district includes 46 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, and seven high schools, as well as two special education schools and two continuation schools.

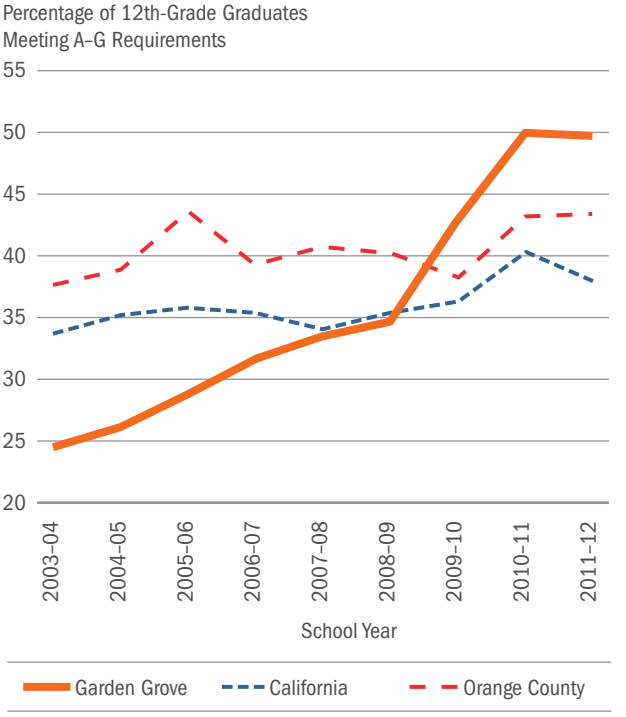
Table 1. Garden Grove USD Demographic Profile, 2012–13

	Garden Grove USD	California
Total Enrollment	47,599	6,226,989
Hispanic or Latino	53.5%	52.7%
America or Alaska Native	0.2%	0.6%
Asian	32.9%	8.6%
Pacific Islander	0.7%	0.5%
Filipino	1.2%	2.5%
African American	0.8%	6.3%
White	9.9%	25.5%
Two or more races	0.2%	2.4%
Not reported	0.5%	0.7%
English learners	39.5%	21.6%
Special education	10.7%	11.2%
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	71.5%	55.8%[2]

Source: dq.cde.ca.gov

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 as a result of rounding. Percentages in the last three rows overlap other categories and each other.

Figure 1. State, County, and District A–G Completion Rates, 2004–2012



Source: Garden Grove USD

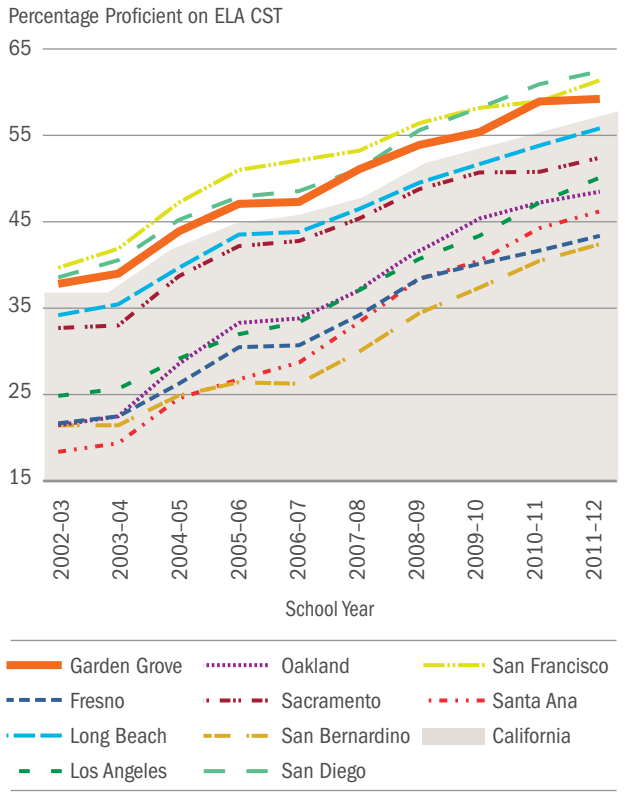
A History of Achievement Growth

Student performance trends during the last decade demonstrate the ongoing improvement taking place within Garden Grove. The district's ultimate goal is to effectively prepare students for postsecondary success. Completion rates for the state's A–G requirements, a set of high school courses that students must complete for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems, currently provide the best and most easily understood measure of student college preparation. A–G course completion rates during the past decade demonstrate consistent growth in Garden Grove that far eclipses the trends for the state overall and for the county in which the district sits. (See Figure 1.)

Proficiency rates on the CST provide further evidence of growth in student performance over time. These measures are limited in their utility: They represent a single point in time within each school year, fail to capture the range of student performance below and above the proficiency cutoff, and serve merely as a proxy for the knowledge and skills necessary for postsecondary success. Nevertheless, these data are a publicly available means of comparing Garden Grove to other large urban California districts.[3] Figure 2 shows that Garden Grove proficiency rates in English language arts (ELA) have climbed consistently in the past 10 years. This trajectory is in line with the statewide trend, despite the fact that the district serves a higher percentage of ELs and low-income students—students who traditionally perform at lower levels on California's state assessments—than the state as a whole, and the trajectory falls within the top tier of comparable districts in terms of overall performance.[4]

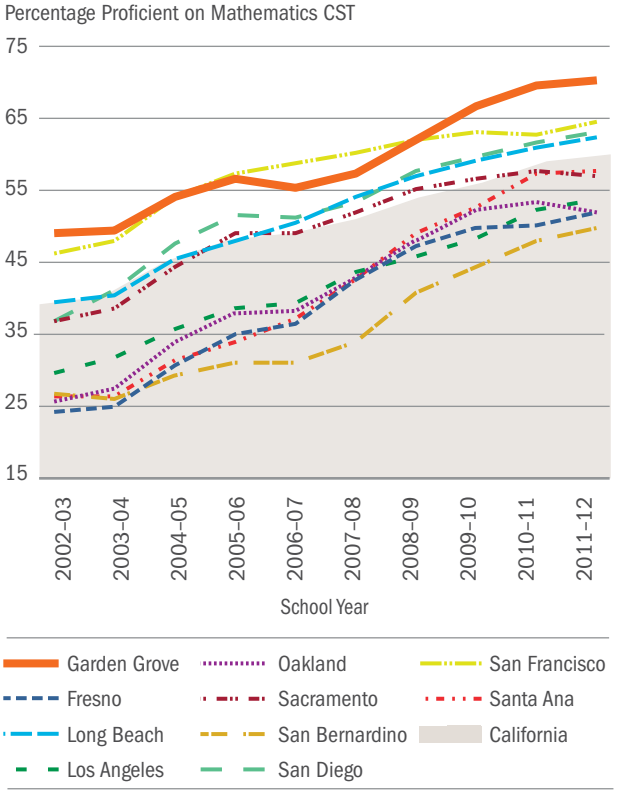
Mathematics performance (see Figure 3) is even more impressive. Garden Grove is one of the top

Figure 2. California District ELA Proficiency Rates, 2003–2012



Source: data1.cde.ca.gov

Figure 3. California District Mathematics Proficiency Rates, 2003–2012



Source: data1.cde.ca.gov

large urban performers in the state: Both overall achievement levels and growth in the past 10 years place it above the state average and distinguish it even from its highest performing urban peers.

At the same time that overall proficiency rates have increased, achievement gaps between various subgroups of students have narrowed modestly during the last 10 years. For example, the gap between socioeconomically disadvantaged students and the district average overall has decreased from eight points to six points in ELA and from seven points to four points in mathematics.[5] Likewise, the gap between white and Latino students has decreased from 27 points to 26 points in ELA and from 24 points to 16 points in mathematics. The difference in proficiency rates between Asian and Latino students has decreased from 39 points to 31 points in mathematics (but has grown from 31 points to 35 points in ELA).

These performance trends provide some evidence of Garden Grove's success at improving student performance in the past decade. At the same time, they underscore the ongoing need to make dramatic improvements in student academic opportunities. Despite growth in A–G completion rates that far exceed the overall state and county trends, only half of Garden Grove's high school graduates have completed the requisite courses for UC and CSU admission. Proficiency rates on the CST continue to climb, yet a substantial portion of the district's students fail to demonstrate mastery of the state's content standards. Finally, disparate performance levels continue to exist among subgroups of the district's students. Although these data validate the work Garden Grove has accomplished in the last decade, they also underscore the urgency of continual attention to instruction and student learning, with a particular focus on equity to ensure that the district meets the needs of all students.

District Culture: Educational Excellence the Garden Grove Way

The student performance data just presented provide some numerical justification for a focus on Garden Grove. To understand where the numbers come from, however, one must first understand the culture that drives the district. Administrators and teachers alike describe the district culture as "the Garden Grove Way"—the name itself an implicit acknowledgment that what happens in the Garden Grove cannot be captured with typical characterizations of district policies or specific practices. Nevertheless, several components permeate and drive the district's culture, which in turn shape central office decision-making processes and specific strategies for positive change. Among these are a high level of coherence driven by a focus on students and teachers, primacy of relationships, a philosophy of central office support, principles of trust and empowerment, and an orientation toward continuous improvement.

The Centrality of Students and Teachers

Garden Grove's orientation is intentionally simple: Everything the district does must contribute to accomplishing the best possible outcomes for its students. The district's ultimate goal is for all students to leave high school prepared for postsecondary success. Whether a student chooses to continue on to college, technical education, or a skilled career, district leaders believe that all students should have the preparation to give them a full range of options. It is for this reason that A–G completion represents such a key indicator of success for the district. As a measure of progress toward that goal, Garden Grove district leaders believe that each student should make one year of academic progress for each year they spend in the

district. This focus has been instantiated through two intermediate goals that serve as the district's primary indicators of progress, which the district refers to as Goal 1 (overall proficiency growth for all students) and Goal 2 (growth in English language development for the district's ELs).

Garden Grove district leaders acknowledge the criticism that emerges from a perceived overemphasis on the results of standardized tests. Nevertheless, their descriptions of district efforts make clear that the shared vision of quality instruction, not the tests, drive the central office's work. CSTs and locally developed benchmark assessments simply provide evidence about the success of their efforts. As Director of Secondary Instruction Kelly McAmis explained, "At the core, we believe that your student achievement data, your state data, [and] your interim assessments will all take care of themselves if you focus on that good teaching in the classroom."

The district goals for ongoing growth are clear. To meet them, Garden Grove sees teachers as the lynchpins of success. As Superintendent Schwalm explained, "The only thing that really will make a difference to a child is a teacher. That's it. [As superintendent,] I don't make any difference to kids other than my influence on getting them the best teachers and helping them continue to be the best teachers. It's the teacher that makes the difference to the kids." Former Garden Grove Education Association (GGEA) president Chris Francis[6] echoed this perspective, explaining that "The district office as a whole sees the teachers as the ones in the trenches. They're the ones getting the work done." This recognition of the essential role that teachers play in producing student learning has made the maximization of teaching talent the district's lever for success. In turn, in a system that sees students as its most important clients and teachers as its most valuable assets, everything the district does revolves around people.

> "I don't make any difference to kids other than my influence on getting them the best teachers and helping them continue to be the best teachers. It's the teacher that makes the difference to the kids."

Coherence

An intense focus on student needs through high-quality teaching, combined with a deep belief in equity, has driven Garden Grove leaders to design the district's work with a high degree of coherence across the system. Fundamentally, central office leaders believe that although pockets of excellence can be effective for incubating new ideas, they best serve students by extending the best of those ideas across the district. As one principal described the approach, "We found if it's a good model, it's good for all kids and all teachers." Garden Grove's experience suggests that uniting its best people around a singular focus has enhanced the quality of the work it produces, particularly in the face of systemic challenges. As Schwalm explained, "If you want to move something that's difficult to move, everyone needs to be pushing in the same direction." Raising one of the dangers of a more decentralized system, she cautioned, "Very good people can build very effective silos."

Garden Grove's orientation toward centralization facilitates a high degree of alignment across all district activities. District leaders may introduce new initiatives from the top down, but they explicitly design them from the bottom up to build on work already taking place in schools and

classrooms. By situating new efforts as extensions of existing approaches, central office leaders facilitate communication and understanding throughout the district. In addition, by staying the course and reinforcing the same strategies over time, the district enables teachers to enhance their command of specific instructional strategies because teachers have an opportunity to learn, use, and refine these strategies as they grow. At the same time, this approach buys credibility among teachers, who have come to trust the central office's judgment and its ability to support and improve classroom practice rather than developing reform fatigue and a "this too shall pass" mentality as new ideas emerge. Even as central office leaders adapt district practice to meet evolving student needs, the conscious efforts to achieve consistency and alignment lay a foundation for all strategies that emerge to succeed.

Emphasis on Relationships

The most striking feature of any conversation with Garden Grove's central office administrators is their attention to personal relationships. Director of Elementary Instruction Monica Ibarra-Acosta explained that this emphasis begins when new employees enter the district. "Garden Grove is a very unique place. It definitely is. Immediately people are brought on board and made to feel as valuable contributing members of the culture here. The building of relationships comes through loud and clear." Individuals who describe their introduction to the district routinely tell stories of personal outreach that made them feel welcome and valued. Several principals described friendly phone calls and e-mails, offers for rides, and ongoing support from their colleagues to help them in their new roles. One principal told the story of receiving a tip from her custodian for good local fish tacos, which he then picked up for lunch as a welcoming gesture during her first week.

> "I wasn't a number. I immediately felt recognized as an individual, as part of this huge community."

Teachers communicate similar experiences. One current teacher on special assignment (TOSA) described her transition from another district to teach in Garden Grove by saying, "I wasn't a number. I immediately felt recognized as an individual, as part of this huge community." She continued, "Here, the first thing that struck me was that they made an effort to know your name.... You feel valued." The assistant superintendents of elementary and secondary education know all their teachers by name, and leaders across the central office describe efforts to know and value employees as people.

The primacy of relationships extends to interactions with parents and the larger community. Garden Grove is a customer service–oriented organization, and this mentality extends to educators and community members alike. It also applies to the relationship between the central office and the teacher union, GGEA, a collaborative partnership that sits at the heart of the district's work with teachers. As leaders discuss their roles, it becomes clear that the priority on relationships is not an added area of focus that accompanies their work, but a central feature that drives it.

Central Office Service Mentality

The Garden Grove Way also involves a philosophy of support from the central office to schools and teachers. Because the district sees the best means of improving student learning as maximizing the quality of teaching, the implication for the central

office is a responsibility to build capacity, remove obstacles, and provide support. As Schwalm explained, "If we as leaders are not helping everyone around us become smarter and better, we're not doing our job."

District leaders embrace not only a responsibility to support schools, but to model the expectations they have for administrators leading teachers and for teachers leading students or peers. Just as the central office expects teachers to guide students to a year of improvement for every year they spend in the district, district leaders embrace a responsibility to do the same for its teachers and leaders. Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education Sara Wescott described this philosophy by saying, "I think we try to model that our goal is to serve schools. We feel like we are the role models for how everyone should be treated in the district." For the district's leaders, this means modeling not only the role of service, but that of vulnerability and the willingness to reflect on one's practice and continually look for opportunities to improve.

> If we as leaders are not helping everyone around us become smarter and better, we're not doing our job.

> I think we try to model that our goal is to serve schools. We feel like we are the role models for how everyone should be treated in the district.

Trust and Empowerment

The relationship among the central office, school administrators, and teachers revolves heavily around trust and empowerment. Garden Grove relies on teachers to lead and carry out its most transformative work—the facilitation of student learning in classrooms—and expends most of its resources on supporting teachers in this mission. In fact, the central office has increasingly turned to teachers to develop new district strategies and to build the capacity of their peers. The mutual trust that district leaders have tried to build between the central office and teachers—trust from teachers that the district will help teachers to do better work, and trust from the central office that teachers will apply their professional judgment to improve the practice of their colleagues and learning of their students—drives a productive set of relationships that enable the district to operate most effectively.

Orientation Toward Continuous Improvement

A fundamental component of the district's approach to growth is a practice of evidence-based decision making in which the central office relies on information about instructional practice and student learning to guide its decisions. The expectation is that the same behavior must take place at the school level. Principals' school goals must draw on the performance of students and teachers in classrooms, and teachers' work with students requires a thoughtful response to individual students' demonstrated performance. The district's work is perpetually unfinished; educators in all positions and with all levels of experience must constantly look for opportunities to grow and refine their work in the service of students. In a district that values ongoing improvement, district leaders place a premium on collecting and understanding the evidence of where improvement has already taken place and where challenges remain.

Connecting District Culture to Strategies of Human Capital Development

In many ways, the story of Garden Grove starts and finishes with the Garden Grove Way. A more thorough explanation of the district's human capital development strategies, however, demonstrates the ways in which its culture has developed a comprehensive system of talent recruitment and development that encourages the ongoing growth of instructional quality. At this point, an important distinction is in order. The strategies described in the following section are not what have *produced* the district as it exists today.[7] Rather, these policies are *reflections* of the district as it exists today; the specific strategies described in the following chapter are the ways in which the district has instantiated its overall approach to meeting goals for students the Garden Grove Way.

NOTES

1. As one example, the press and research communities have focused substantial attention on the Denver Public Schools Professional Compensation System for Teachers ("ProComp") as an early model of compensation reform (see Goldhaber & Walch, 2012, and Wiley, Spindler, & Subert, 2010). More recently, a high-profile and controversial series in the *Los Angeles Times* on teacher effectiveness in Los Angeles USD drew public attention to the use of value-added analysis as a measure of teacher quality (http://www.latimes.com/news/local/teachers-investigation/).

2. The percentage of students statewide who are socioeconomically disadvantaged is reported from the 2011–12 school year and was retrieved from www.ed-data.k12.ca.us.

3. California districts listed for comparison purposes are those with student enrollments above 45,000, more than 50 percent of students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals, and more than 20 percent of students classified as ELs. Note that even with these restrictions, Garden Grove is one of only two districts with an EL population that exceeds 30 percent; nearly 40 percent of Garden Grove students and 51 percent of Santa Ana students are ELs.

4. Note that the numbers in these graphs represent raw percentages and do not control for the demographics of the population that each district serves.

5. A more appropriate comparison here would be between students who qualify for free and reduced-price meals (a statistic that represents socioeconomic disadvantage) and those who do not qualify. Unfortunately, these data are not publicly available. Therefore, the data here are likely to understate the achievement gap that exists for socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

6. After completing his term as GGEA president, Francis became an assistant principal at a Garden Grove intermediate school.

7. It is beyond the scope of this brief to closely examine the history of Garden Grove that led it to this point. However, the "Change Over Time" text box on page 33 addresses some of the key shifts that have occurred during the district's journey.

Chapter 2. Identifying the Strategies for Attracting and Developing Effective Teachers

If teachers are the most important levers for improving student outcomes, the responsibility of the central office is to ensure that each student has access to the best possible teachers. For Garden Grove district leaders, the theory of action is simple. Schwalm explained: "How do you improve a school? Well, you get better teachers or you help the teachers you have get better." A shared conception of high-quality instructional delivery drives the Garden Grove strategies to attract and improve its teaching force, which should in turn lead to improvement in instruction and student learning. (See *Effective Instruction: A Districtwide Expectation of Quality* on this page.)

Together with a clear picture of high-quality instruction, a shared conception within the central office of what makes for a great teacher lays the foundation for the district's human capital efforts. Content knowledge, basic pedagogical skills, familiarity with state standards, and overall intelligence are prerequisite for teaching in Garden Grove, but district leaders place a premium on the personality and disposition that individuals bring to the table. First among these is a passion for students, a belief that all students can learn, and the accompanying belief that a teacher can make a difference for every child. Beyond the teacher–student relationship, district leaders also deeply value professional behavior, a willingness to be coached and accept feedback, and a commitment to

Effective Instruction: A Districtwide Expectation of Quality

Early efforts to improve instruction in Garden Grove produced frustration for teachers and administrators alike. In the elementary grades, teachers learned two different models of instructional delivery, one for ELA and one for mathematics. In the secondary grades, teachers were closely tied to a set of practices within their own content area, leading to what Mafi described as a "Tower of Babel" in conversations about instruction across content areas. In order to develop a common language and set of expectations for quality that applied to all teachers, district leaders developed the Garden Grove Effective Instruction framework in 2006–07 to define expectations for instructional delivery in K–12 classrooms throughout the district. The framework builds on models developed by Doug Fisher, Nancy Frey, Madeline Hunter, and others, but it has been adapted and formalized internally by the Office of Instruction, drawing in part on the input of Garden Grove's teachers.

The framework itself articulates a gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to his or her students. The process includes a lesson opening/orientation, presentation ("I do it"), structured/guided practice ("We do it together"), group collaboration ("You all do it together"), independent practice ("You all do it alone"), and lesson closure. For each of these steps, the framework explicitly identifies characteristics of teacher behavior, student behavior, and content incorporation that should be present in a high-quality lesson. District leaders clarify that not every lesson will feature all these stages (although they do expect every lesson to have a solid opening and closing), but they believe that every piece of a lesson should fit within the framework.

The Effective Instruction framework creates the foundation for Garden Grove's instructional work. The district has developed templates for teachers to use in individual lesson planning and in coplanning/coteaching opportunities that directly map onto the framework. Formal and informal feedback from administrators to teachers about their instruction also directly reflects the Effective Instruction framework. Finally, the district designs its teacher development activities—from teacher induction to individual support to grade-level collaboration—to specifically address or fit into the Effective Instruction framework.

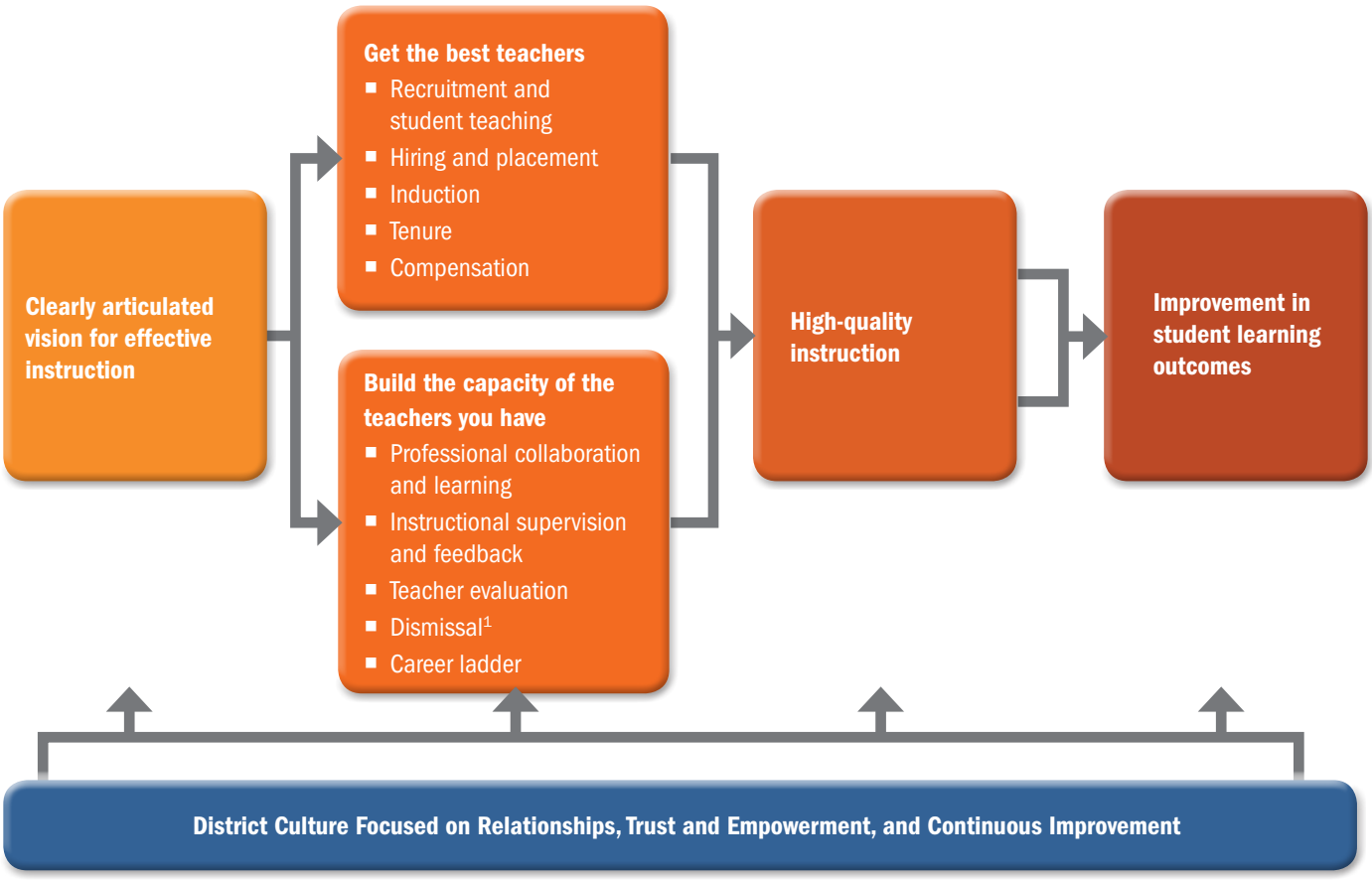
collaboration as an essential tool for improvement.

This chapter outlines some of the specific ways in which Garden Grove attracts and develops these effective teachers, captured in the following diagram (Figure 4) that describes the district's use of human capital strategies to improve student outcomes. Guided by a vision for effective instruction, the district pursues a comprehensive set of actions designed to attract and retain the best available teachers. These include recruitment and student teaching, hiring and placement, induction, affirmative offers of tenure, and compensation. Garden Grove then invests most of its resources in building the capacity of teachers in the system through an integrated system of professional learning, instructional supervision and feedback, an integrated approach to evaluation, and opportunities for teacher leadership. In addition, the district's work with struggling teachers seeks to ensure that they receive the support they need while taking active steps to protect students from those teachers who might cause them harm or impede their opportunities to learn.

> "How do you improve a school? Well, you get better teachers or you help the teachers you have get better."

The strategies that follow are a snapshot in time. They represent the district's responses to its current needs and build on the Garden Grove's unique history. The strategies will intentionally continue to

Figure 4. The Garden Grove System of Human Capital Development



evolve along with the district as it moves forward through its process of continuous improvement.

Getting the Best Teachers

The first approach to school improvement in Garden Grove is to attract, place, and retain the best possible teachers. Because this is the area in which the district has the greatest control over the composition of its teaching force, district leaders pay careful attention to identifying and placing teachers who reflect the Garden Grove culture and can best meet its students' needs.

Student Teaching: Recruiting and Auditioning New Talent

Garden Grove's reputation and track record of success enable the district to recruit in a targeted way. Turnover within the district is low, and in recent years, district leaders have had the luxury of selecting teaching candidates to fill a small number of openings. (This also is due in part to the California fiscal crisis, which has led the district to eliminate many of the teaching positions left vacant by retirements or other departures.) In a district of roughly 2,000 certificated teachers, Garden Grove hired 60 new teachers for 2012–13.

Whenever possible, district leaders seek opportunities to comprehensively determine whether a teaching candidate is a good fit for Garden Grove. The student teaching program is therefore a deliberate element of the hiring process. District leaders pass student teaching candidates through a rigorous interview process to ensure that any student teacher is a viable possibility for full-time hiring after the student graduates and earns a teaching credential. In addition, the district (and not the preservice institution) selects the master teachers to work with teaching candidates. By taking ownership over this process, district leaders make assignments that best prepare prospective teachers to meet student needs, not for the convenience of higher education programs that may wish to consolidate their student teachers in a small cluster of schools.

The student teaching experience itself essentially serves as an apprenticeship and an audition. If candidates pass muster, they have demonstrated their skills and potential for growth in a more comprehensive way than a traditional interview could measure. In the process, they also have received extensive training in the Garden Grove system. As a result, these candidates often receive contract offers.

Comments from beginning teachers suggest that long-term substitute positions often operate in the same way. When some promising candidates fail to receive a full-time offer for one of a small number of teaching vacancies, an offer to work as a long-term substitute gives them an opportunity to demonstrate their teaching potential to district leaders and can lead to subsequent full-time hiring when positions open up.

Increasingly, district leaders have sought to capitalize on partnerships with local institutions of higher education to strengthen the district's teaching pipeline. The vast majority of Garden Grove teachers graduate from three institutions: California State University–Long Beach (CSULB); California State University–Fullerton; and the University of California–Irvine. When the district identifies a specific teaching need—for example, a high school physics teacher or a Vietnamese language teacher to meet the language interests of a particular school community—the Office of Personnel contacts the teacher training programs at these schools to see whether any potential candidates are emerging. District leaders then can target individual outreach to specific teaching candidates with the skillsets needed in Garden Grove schools.

Recently, the district has engaged in a deeper partnership with CSULB to better assess teaching candidates and prepare them for full-time employment in Garden Grove. In 2011–12, the two partners ran a pilot program that included a full year of student teaching using a model of coplanning and coteaching to better prepare and assess teaching candidates. District leaders described the pilot as an overwhelmingly positive experience as a result of the quality of the candidates, the Garden Grove teachers willing to participate, and the student teaching experience itself, as well as the number of full-time hires the process produced; the central office plans to expand the program as their primary approach to selecting and working with student teachers.

In the future, however, the district will face the challenge of being able to pursue this more involved student teaching program with all candidates while filling an expanded number of teaching positions. Upcoming retirements will produce substantial hiring needs beginning in 2015, and Garden Grove will not have the luxury of attracting candidates exclusively from the CSULB program. Assistant Superintendent of Personnel Joli Armitage acknowledged that a year-long experience might not be possible for all student teachers—especially if other local preservice institutions are not able to support a full year of student teaching—but maintained that at least one semester is necessary to assess individuals' potential. In addition, some hard-to-staff positions will require district leaders to look for outside candidates to meet students' needs. If the district is able to move forward and expand its new model for student teaching, Armitage estimated that about 80 percent of its new hires would come through the student teaching program, while 20 percent would be outside hires.

> "What I'm looking for is a moral imperative. They have to believe they are the doorway to opportunity.… If you don't believe teachers can make a difference, we should give the paycheck to the parents."

Hiring and Placement: Assessing Candidates for Will, Skill, and Fit

Student teaching and long-term substitute positions help the central office make hiring decisions with as much information at their disposal as possible. Teaching candidates also come from other preservice training programs, however, and from other districts, and district leaders must identify strong matches from these sources without the benefit of a six-month or year-long audition. The central office has therefore developed a hiring process designed to ensure that teachers have the skills *and* beliefs it believes are essential to fostering student success.

The teacher hiring process in Garden Grove begins with screening of candidates by central office staff. Through a writing sample and interviews with central office and school representatives, district leaders assess a prospective teacher's skills and compatibility with the overall district culture. Armitage described her priorities in identifying candidates by saying, "What I'm looking for is a moral imperative. They have to believe they are the doorway to opportunity.… If you don't believe teachers can make a difference, we should give the paycheck to the parents." A comment from a second-year teacher comparing her interview in Garden Grove to the hiring experience in other districts speaks to this emphasis beyond raw skills and

content knowledge: "Yes, they were trying to ask about me as a teacher, but I felt that they were also reading me as a person. It was just a different vibe."

Fundamentally, district leaders believe that if an individual demonstrates a belief that all students can learn, a willingness to be reflective and collaborative about his or her practice, and a commitment to constantly improving their instruction, the district can build the skill level of that individual to teach effectively. As Wescott explained, "Once in a while you see those superstars, but it's a learned thing. We know we can teach them the technical parts of the job. That's really a philosophy of ours in all roles. If you have the heart for it and the willingness and the passion and the attitude, we'll teach you the rest." Because of this, evidence of will *and* skill are critical components of the hiring process.

Garden Grove operates under the understanding that teachers and administrators work for the *district* and not for a particular school. Therefore, it is the central office that identifies individuals through the screening process as good fits for the district. At that point, principals have the opportunity to meet with candidates from this prescreened pool and select the strongest match(es) for their site.

The strategies employed by Garden Grove to recruit and hire (and to retain) high-quality teachers all operate on a philosophy of selectivity. The district views high-quality teachers as the most important tool in improving outcomes for the student it serves, and it applies high standards in order to ensure that this happens. Currently, Garden Grove has the benefit of a strong reputation and a pool of prospective teachers that exceeds the available teaching space in the district; some observers might contend that the district therefore has the luxury of selectivity that other district might not share. District leaders acknowledge this advantage yet argue for the importance of high standards in all districts, regardless of situation. In the end, by appealing to a sense of pride in the teaching force and establishing an aura of exclusivity, making the process more competitive can help a district attract the best candidates.

Induction: Transforming New Hires Into Garden Grove Teachers

Having hired teachers into the district, administrators and teacher leaders work closely to orient them to the district's culture and expectations for instruction. California's Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) system is a state-mandated induction program that enables teachers to earn a clear credential at the end of their second year of teaching.[2] Garden Grove works within the state system, adapting it where possible to prepare new teachers to succeed. The district's TOSAs deliver the BTSA training; each new teacher works with an individual TOSA as their support provider.

Although the BTSA program serves a practical purpose of enabling novice teachers to clear their credential, it also is a critical mechanism for providing training and support in teachers' efforts to meet the district's profile of high-quality instruction. As Armitage explained, "The development is aligned already with what *all* of our teachers do" and therefore includes careful attention to the elements of the Effective Instruction framework, as well as strategies like instructional supervision, coplanning, coteaching, and watching and delivering demonstration lessons.

BTSA also provides a structure for the district to introduce new teachers to the district's culture of self-reflection and continuous improvement by building in systematic classroom observation accompanied by honest and sometimes critical conversations about teaching practice. By folding

these conversations into the induction process, the district helps define expectations for how teachers talk about their work. The observations also contribute to the formal evaluation process required each year for new teachers and inform critical decisions about tenure.

Tenure: Avoiding the 30-Year Mistake

Having selected teachers, oriented them to the district's expectations, and observed their early growth, the central office faces a critical decision about whether to keep new teachers in the system. The regulations governing tenure decisions in Garden Grove are similar to those throughout California and much of the rest of the country: new teachers achieve permanency on the first day of their third year in the district. District leaders see tenure as a high-stakes decision that will directly affect the quality of teaching in the district for decades to come; one individual referred to a misjudgment about tenure as a "30-year mistake." In recognition of this importance, the central office approaches permanency decisions as an active affirmative selection, and not as the default result for new teachers. In other words, a new teacher who makes it to their third year does so not because he or she has avoided a catastrophic mistake, but because he or she has demonstrated the skills and dispositions that district leaders believe are essential for leading students to academic success.

> "We want to see a certain level of skills, we want to see a positive attitude, and we want to see growth over time throughout the year and based on multiple measures."

In addition to the close support provided by the TOSA as part of the BTSA process, the principal—as well as the assistant superintendent of personnel, the assistant superintendent of elementary or secondary education, and the director of elementary or secondary instruction—regularly observe and discuss the performance of each new teacher. The parties do classroom walks together to observe instruction—with expectations tied directly to the district's Effective Instruction framework—and calibrate their understanding of each teacher's performance and potential. Perfection is not the expectation. Rather, Mafi explained the goals in this way: "We want to see a certain level of skills, we want to see a positive attitude, and we want to see growth over time throughout the year and based on multiple measures."

Consensus among the principal, Office of Personnel, and Office of Instruction drives final permanency decisions. In the majority of cases, all three parties agree on the final decision to retain the teacher; in cases where they disagree, they return and observe the classroom again. Although final hiring decisions rest with the assistant superintendent of personnel, a no vote from any of them will almost always lead to the decision not to retain. District leaders emphasize that the decisions are based on the individual—there is no target number or percentage that they seek to retain or let go. Nevertheless, they estimate that 10 to 20 percent of new teachers in a given year do not receive an offer to return. Describing the process from the union perspective, Francis reflected, "If they're not doing well, at least I know it wasn't based on one person's decision. It was a group feeling. For the most part, that person was given a fair shot and a fair chance to meet the expectations and given the support to try and bring it up."

Compensation: Attracting Quality by Rewarding Commitment

As is consistent with a philosophy of orienting its resources toward excellent instruction, Garden Grove deliberately compensates its teachers well for their work. Documentation from the California Department of Education indicates that the district's beginning and average salaries are highly competitive with those of its neighboring districts and with districts across the county, and they exceed those of its peers by as much as $10,000 in some cases.[3] The base salary tells only part of the story, however; the district commits substantial funding to support teachers' efforts to improve their craft by providing released time for learning opportunities and by compensating teachers for trainings and other events that take place outside school hours. In part, compensation decisions help the district attract and retain teaching talent. Perhaps more important, they are a byproduct of a resource allocation strategy oriented entirely to producing high-quality classroom instruction. (For more information on the district's resource allocation practices, see *Practicing Sound Fiscal Management to Ensure Stability* on page 39 and *Trade-Offs* on page 43.)

Building the Capacity of Teachers You Have

The second approach to school improvement in Garden Grove is to maximize the effectiveness of the teachers already in the system. The district revolves around improving the quality of teacher–student interactions in the classroom. Therefore, the bulk of its work is oriented toward developing mechanisms that create a culture of reflection, collaboration, and continuous improvement. These efforts build on the Effective Instruction framework and rely heavily on the strong relationships and philosophies of support, trust, and empowerment that drive all the district's actions.

Professional Learning: The Cornerstone of Human Capital Development

In Garden Grove, the term "professional development" applies to the whole suite of supports and practices intended to improve the craft of teaching. These include district initiatives, schoolwide areas of focus, and work with individual teachers—all with attention to the *how* of teaching (including both pedagogy and practices of collaboration and preparation) as much as the *what* of teaching (the content of instruction).

Just as with the strategies for attracting a quality teaching force, this description of professional development in Garden Grove represents a point in time. These are the practices in which the district is engaged to address its current needs. Evolution over time has led to a philosophy in which district leaders seek to equip teachers to exercise their own professional judgment to facilitate student learning. Approaches to instruction include some nonnegotiables—for example, the use of the Effective Instruction framework to structure lessons—and administrators and teacher leaders design many learning opportunities to build teacher skill in using that framework. District leaders and teachers alike, however, describe much of their professional development as the accumulation of tools for their "teaching toolbox," to be accessed as appropriate to address the specific needs of students in their classrooms.

From a teacher's perspective, the professional learning opportunities may be the aspect of working in Garden Grove that separates it the most from teaching in other districts. The word *support* emerges constantly in conversations with teachers as they describe what it means to work in the district; these teachers speak at great length about the extensive opportunities they have to collaborate with and learn from others as they seek to improve their practice. Professional learning occurs through a variety of

approaches—both formal and informal—that emerge from the central office, the school, or the individual level as the need dictates. (The professional learning opportunities available to teachers also are the result of conscious decisions about how/where to invest time and resources. See the sections *Practicing Sound Fiscal Management to Ensure Stability* on page 39 and *Trade-Offs* on page 43 for some of the motivations for and implications of these decisions.)

District Initiatives

Professional development opportunities that emerge from the central office represent solutions to specific challenges of student learning that emerge across the district. Regular meetings of the superintendent, assistant superintendents, directors of instruction, director of evaluation and research, and director of K–12 education services enable the central office to continually review districtwide trends in instruction and student performance to identify and address gaps in instructional quality. One goal of these meetings is to evaluate proposed strategies for their quality and fit with Garden Grove teaching staff. Equally important, however, are conversations across departments to ensure that improvement efforts meet the needs of all students (especially ELs and special education students) and can be sustained with available district resources. In all cases, the nature of the problem dictates whether solutions are most appropriate at the district, school, or classroom level.

Who Builds Teacher Capacity?

Efforts to build teacher capacity involve administrators and teachers from both the central office and school sites. The following list identifies some of the key actors in these activities.

- *Office of Instruction:* The assistant superintendents and directors of elementary and secondary instruction are the formal supervisors of the principals and TOSAs, respectively. They guide high-level district decisions and work with individual sites to ensure that professional learning opportunities meet teacher needs and lead to instructional improvement.
- *Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSAs):* Organized into teams of 23 elementary TOSAs and 22 secondary TOSAs, these central office instructional leaders provide much of the individual support to teachers, both through BTSA and as-needed work with tenured teachers. The TOSAs dedicate specific days each week to working at school sites and spend the remainder of their time working with one another to research and design interventions. TOSAs do not require an administrative credential, and their work with and feedback to teachers is nonevaluative by design.
- *School administrators:* Site principals and assistant principals play critical roles as instructional leaders within schools. Administrators visit the classrooms of every teacher in the school multiple times per week and provide feedback on what they see. They also work with central office staff to design and implement trainings or other supports to improve instruction at their site.
- *Instructional leadership teams:* One teacher from each grade level meets as part of a school team; this team receives training and leads colleagues in site-level instructional improvement efforts.
- *Demonstration teachers:* Specially designated classroom teachers open their classroom for observation by grade-level teams from other schools and lead prelesson and postlesson discussions with the observing teams about the lesson content and teaching strategies. These teachers often receive training on new strategies first and work to implement them in their own classrooms before opening their doors to colleagues.
- *Classroom teachers:* Much of the learning that takes place in Garden Grove happens among classroom teachers. Through informal interactions, formal collaboration time, and coplanning/coteaching opportunities, teachers frequently rely on one another to build their teaching skills.

Professional development efforts originating within the central office deliberately aim to avoid the silos that are sometimes byproducts of specialization. Garden Grove expects its teachers to meet the academic needs of all students. For that reason, the Office of Instruction develops and provides supports for all students—in close collaboration with other departments—including all subject areas, ELs, and students identified for special education services. On a philosophical level, this approach reflects the district's commitment to equity by integrating all student needs into its teacher development efforts. On a practical level, filtering all supports through the Office of Instruction enables the district's commitment to coherence in its professional learning opportunities and instructional practices.

Strategy Academy. At the district level, administrators use evidence of student learning to identify a new focus for each school year to build on existing efforts to improve instruction.[4] As Wescott explained, "We try to build on what we've been doing so there's a natural progression and refinement of instruction that occurs." To emphasize this focus, the district employs what it calls Strategy Academy, an approach that—like most of the district's efforts—builds primarily on internal expertise rather than external consultants. The central office begins by identifying the specific problem of practice and then providing training to a set of demonstration teachers across the district. Garden Grove then provides release time for every teacher in the district—usually at the same time for grade-level teams within a school—to observe a demonstration teacher's lesson in the particular area of focus, complete with a briefing before and after the lesson. To follow up on and support this effort, teachers will usually plan a lesson with a TOSA at their own sites. The district also expects principals to plan and lead similar work with teachers. Through ongoing efforts throughout the school year, the district seeks to deepen teachers' understanding and ability to successfully implement these new ideas in their classrooms.

> "We try to build on what we've been doing so there's a natural progression and refinement of instruction that occurs."

Consults. New strategies also emerge from teachers themselves. In cases where the central office identifies an area of persistent challenge or a decision that will affect instruction across the district, teachers also directly inform the development of new strategies through a process the Garden Grove calls "consults." District leaders work with the union to select teachers to actively explore a particular area of persistent challenge and work to identify potential solutions; they essentially act as pilots for incubating new ideas. District and union leaders alike spoke about the importance of selecting individuals who can push the district's thinking forward. According to Francis, "We don't want passive members. They're there to represent the teachers and give their input [but] we also don't want an obstructionist teacher who's just going to go there and put up a wall. We're really there for problem solving, being productive, and working together." (See *Elevating Teacher Voice in District Policy...* on page 36 for an example of the consult process. For more information on the relationship between the central office and the union, see *Collaborating With the Teacher Union as a Partner in Service of Improvements in Instruction* on page 40.)

Through the consults, district leaders draw on the expertise of teacher leaders to navigate complex

problems without simple answers, problems that might otherwise be addressed by a small number of central office administrators. At the same time, the consults facilitate buy-in and faithful implementation, as the educators who will be tasked with carrying out new ideas are directly involved in developing solutions and can communicate about those solutions to their colleagues. Indeed, they represent a prime mechanism through which district leaders pilot new ideas before scaling them districtwide as part of an overall change management process. (See *The Garden Grove Cycle of Continuous Improvement* on page 34.) In the end, the model represents an example not only of professional learning through leadership, but of teacher empowerment that drives major district decisions.

Super Week. The district also hosts Super Week, which takes place the week before classes begin in the fall and gives teachers an opportunity to choose among a wide variety of workshops. The central office selects topics for these trainings on the basis of teacher surveys that identify what teachers want and where they feel like they need more support, as well as the central office's ongoing analysis of student performance trends. Topics at Super Week in summer 2013 included areas like technology use, developing literacy across content areas, and building close reading skills—almost all of which were explicitly linked to implementation of the Common Core State Standards—as well as sessions that provided an introduction to the standards themselves. The sessions are all optional, but the district pays teachers their hourly rate for any session they choose to attend.

Additional training opportunities also are available after school hours throughout the school year, for which teachers also receive release time or additional compensation.

School-Level Foci

In addition to districtwide initiatives, each school selects a particular area of focus based on review of the school's data and consultation among the principal, the assistant superintendent of elementary or secondary instruction, and the director of elementary or secondary instruction. (Some principals also draw on surveys of their staff about professional learning needs.) Typically, TOSAs and district administrators identify trends on the basis of a review of hard data, which they supplement through classroom observations and conversations with school leaders to more accurately pinpoint areas of need. The TOSA role is then to support the principal's vision; these teacher leaders will frequently develop training and coaching sessions at a school to help address a specific need. Through the process, TOSAs work closely with demonstration teachers and members of a school's instructional leadership team to roll out new ideas and provide support to teachers.

School-level learning opportunities rely heavily on teacher collaboration. Some teachers described specifically identified days during the school year (called "open house" or "strategy showcase") when teachers have an opportunity to observe their peers and learn about the classroom strategies they are using. In addition, all schools have collaboration time built into their week to facilitate peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Grade-level and subject-area teams often serve as the mechanism through which administrators and TOSAs introduce new ideas to teachers. Teachers also described using their collaborative teams to do lesson studies, develop common assessments, and even align materials and assignments across subject areas and grade levels. Although the central office continues to work on pockets of teachers who resist collaboration, several teacher comments suggest that work with their peers has become a highly valued support for

personal improvement. As one middle school teacher explained, "I think that colleagues in other districts tend to envy our collaboration.... I can't imagine teaching without it."

Individual Supports

The majority of the opportunities that teachers have to improve their craft occur close to the classroom, often through a coaching model. At this individual level, teachers have opportunities to seek supports that match their own personal needs. In many cases, this occurs through Super Week or other district-sponsored events. Teachers also have direct access to their principal and TOSA to request support for particular areas of focus. These requests often result in coplanning and coteaching opportunities with the school's TOSA, but they also can lead to suggestions for professional reading or collaboration with a peer whose strengths might help address a teacher's area of need. Finally, the same principle of collaboration that drives much of the school-level professional development becomes a valuable support for teachers to improve individually. By turning to their colleagues through formal collaboration time and more informal interactions, teachers gain leverage from the expertise of their peers to address their professional challenges.

> "I think that colleagues in other districts tend to envy our collaboration.... I can't imagine teaching without it."

Although the system is responsive to the teachers who are proactive in seeking opportunities for growth, it can be more difficult to work with teachers who do not pursue—and sometimes deliberately avoid—these activities. District leaders acknowledge that the Garden Grove approach to instruction requires a degree of vulnerability and collaboration that may be at odds with traditionally insular views about classroom teaching. One TOSA described her efforts to pursue activities like lesson studies, in which an entire grade-level team visits a colleague's classroom to observe and discuss a lesson, as a strategy to bring more reticent teachers into the improvement process without exposing them in uncomfortable ways. The hope is that over time, these teachers will begin to embrace increasing levels of collaboration and seek support on their own.

The strong relationships that drive the district's work are essential for these individual professional learning efforts, both for administrators to understand teachers' strengths and to build the trust needed to engage in improvement efforts. Although the greatest amount of work takes place through principals and TOSAs at the site level, the assistant superintendents and directors of instruction make a point of knowing every teacher in every school in order to build positive relationships, maintain a connection with the instruction taking place in the classroom, and actively influence the quality of classroom practice. The expectation in the district is for constant discussion, reflection, and collaboration on teacher practice. As one principal explained, "It's not just an administrator that's supporting a teacher in the classroom. It's the TOSAs. It's their peers. It's release time for them to observe other teachers. It's all of us working collaboratively together to improve instruction."

Instructional Supervision: Providing Ongoing Feedback for Continuous Improvement

National education reform dialogue often focuses on the perceived need for more robust teacher evaluation systems, in part under the logic that formal evaluation is critical for providing teachers with the feedback they need to improve their practice. In contrast, Garden Grove leaders believe that ongoing feedback should be an integral part of the teaching process well before a formal evaluation takes place. Therefore, the district makes an explicit distinction between the feedback teachers receive through the ongoing practice of instructional supervision and the more formal contractually mandated evaluation process. This report attempts to reflect that distinction by addressing the activities separately.

> "It's not just an administrator that's supporting a teacher in the classroom. It's the TOSAs. It's their peers. It's release time for them to observe other teachers. It's all of us working collaboratively together to improve instruction."

District leaders see instructional supervision as the ongoing feedback essential to teacher learning and improvement. One district leader described the process by using the analogy of teaching children. Instructional supervision is like the process of teaching: The goal is to improve the students' learning, to monitor their performance and address weaknesses so they can improve their level of mastery. Evaluation is like a course grade: It takes place after the fact and provides a summative judgment of whether the learner reached a goal. Just as district leaders expect to improve the performance of its students by at least one level every year, they expect principals to help teachers keep getting better each year. Ultimately, instructional supervision is a tool to facilitate this improvement.

Instructional supervision is an area of increased attention for the district. Central office leaders have actively engaged principals by facilitating conversation, asking all to read Robert Marzano's *Effective Supervision: Supporting the Art and Science of Teaching* and conducting a series of trainings through the 2011–12 school year to develop consistent expectations across sites. The district has subsequently facilitated principals' communication with their sites by preparing slide presentations for them that outline the rationale and key components; these presentations seek to achieve consistency in messaging across schools and down through site administrators and teachers. In turn, principals have asked their staffs not only to share the details of the process, but to solicit teacher input on how best to employ the model in their school—for example, on how they prefer to receive feedback. In addition, the district incorporates attention to instructional supervision into its training for new teachers, which union leaders also are invited to attend so that they can hear firsthand the messages and expectations delivered by central office leaders.

Instructional supervision in Garden Grove includes three components:

1. *Set expectations*: If teachers are to meet the standards for teaching and learning in Garden Grove (and be held accountable for doing so), they must understand what those standards are. The district's Effective Instruction framework

establishes the gradual release of responsibility expected in classrooms by outlining the various stages of a lesson and identifying appropriate teacher behavior, student behavior, and content for each stage. However, the expectations also include pupil progress, the actions and relationships that contribute to a productive learning environment, and the professionalism and collegiality that district leaders consider to be core job responsibilities.

2. *Monitor expectations*: Regular classroom observations combine with individual conversations and data review to provide a deep and balanced picture of each teacher's classroom performance. District leaders expect principals (or other administrators) to visit every classroom at least weekly.
3. *Provide feedback*: Setting and monitoring of expectations must drive communication back to teachers that can help them improve their practice. Each principal determines the nature of feedback that works best for their site—in terms of both format and frequency—in consultation with their teachers. However, district leaders charge principals with considering five important elements when delivering feedback: *communication mode, content* (which could include descriptors, praise, questions, and/or suggestions), *focus* (often related to school expectations or individual areas of attention), *frequency*, and *flexibility* (or differentiation to accommodate individual teacher circumstances).

Instructional supervision is inextricably linked to the improvement in instructional practice. Principals' observations directly inform their work with teachers, as well as the supports provided by TOSAs and school colleagues. They also inform a principal's overall assessment of school needs and drive grade-level and whole-school strategies to improve teaching.

The 2012–13 school year was the second year of the district's increased attention to instructional supervision. Central office leaders acknowledged that despite the clear distinction they see between supervision and evaluation, some teachers nevertheless perceive the feedback they receive as being evaluative. District leaders have therefore increased their attention not only on *what* principals need to do, but *how* they need to interact with and lead teachers at the school site. In the meantime, relationships with TOSAs and other teachers can enable these teachers to expose their weaknesses and concerns to peers in nonevaluative roles. Through consistency over time and careful attention to cultivating trusting relationships, district leaders believe instructional supervision will become an integral component of teachers' self-reflection.

Teacher Evaluation: One of Many Integrated Approaches to Improving Instruction

Instructional supervision is the core mechanism through which the district provides feedback to teachers, and evaluation represents merely one component of this process. Although Garden Grove does not see evaluation as the key lever for improvement, formal evaluation does play an important role in ensuring high-quality teaching and learning, and district leaders take it seriously.

The Garden Grove teacher contract stipulates that each temporary (first-year) and probationary (second-year) teacher go through the evaluation process annually; tenured teachers go through the process more infrequently, typically on a five-year cycle. Despite the wave of evaluation reform sweeping many districts, Garden Grove district leaders prefer to operate as effectively as possible within existing parameters over engaging in the lengthy, often distracting, and sometimes divisive

process of crafting new systems. Therefore, the district's contract language on evaluation has remained unchanged for many years, and in fact derives directly from longstanding elements of the California Education Code. For tenured teachers, the process requires two unscheduled or one scheduled observation, for which principals use the district's Effective Instruction framework as a guide. The process concludes with an evaluation conference, a written summary of that conference, and (if necessary) a Recommended Improvements form. The final result of the evaluation is a holistic rating of satisfactory, needs improvement, or unsatisfactory.

District leaders emphasize that the purpose of the evaluation process is not to "ding" teachers, but to provide support. Indeed, the formal evaluation constitutes just one of the many interactions that principals have with teachers about their classroom performance; the evaluation simply provides an opportunity to document the results of an ongoing process of observation and feedback. As one principal explains, "Ultimately, none of us would want to give any teacher an unsatisfactory evaluation without multiple layers of support and conversations before you get to that particular point in the evaluative process."

> "Ultimately, none of us would want to give any teacher an unsatisfactory evaluation without multiple layers of support and conversations."

Struggling Teachers: Holding Adults Accountable for Meeting Student Needs

Garden Grove embraces and expects continuous improvement for anyone who works in the district. To enable this practice to take place, district leaders invest substantial resources in ensuring that the right individuals enter the district, and that the district supports them in every way possible to maximize their potential. Inevitably, however, some teachers are unable to meet the district's expectations. In these cases, the district offers intensive support, and when that support does not yield sufficient growth, the central office actively pursues dismissal.

Peer Assistance and Review

Teachers who receive an unsatisfactory final evaluation enter the peer assistance and review (PAR) process.[5] Through PAR, a teacher receives formalized support through a consultant teacher specifically trained to coplan and coteach with the identified teacher. The consulting teacher meets with the struggling teacher at least once every two weeks and communicates with that teacher weekly. The consulting teacher also meets with the PAR panel—composed of three district administrators and four union-selected teachers—and produces quarterly reports about the assisted teacher's performance. According to Francis, "There's lots of support in place so that as association president I can honestly say [if] even after all this they're still not succeeding, they shouldn't be in the classroom."

Dismissal

In addition to supports, the PAR process includes intensive documentation. District leaders ensure that teachers undergo extensive classroom visits from the principal, Office of Instruction, and Office of Personnel and they document every step of the process to make sure their reasoning is sound and that it meets the legal requirements of the teacher contract. In some cases, teachers demonstrate

sufficient progress to exit the PAR process and continue teaching. Others fail to demonstrate the necessary improvement to remain in their positions. District leaders report that in most cases, in the face of the evidence, teachers have instead elected to retire or resign. Although the central office is adamant about removing these teachers from classrooms, it aims to treat teachers with dignity through the process and to help people come to their own realization that Garden Grove is not the right place for them.

Union leaders actively participate in the dismissal process by connecting teachers to legal representation and ensuring that teachers receive the full protection afforded by their contract. They also play an active role in selecting PAR panel members and the district's consulting teachers. In the end, however, union leaders seek the same goals as everyone else in the process: ensuring that Garden Grove students have access to high-quality teachers. According to Francis, "As association president, I'm not here to protect poor teachers. I'm here to protect the process.... Ultimately, if they're a poor teacher, they're not good for students, schools, or teaching as a career."

> "There's lots of support in place.... [If], even after all this, they're still not succeeding, they shouldn't be in the classroom."

In the end, the dismissal process reflects the district's philosophies of faithful implementation and accountability. District leaders adhere closely to contract guidelines to ensure an efficient process, and what is more important, one that removes ineffective teachers from classrooms. Also, although Schwalm empowers her senior leadership team to make effective hiring decisions, she demands that they address the poor decisions as well. According to Schwalm, "My expectation is if anybody that doesn't belong here gets in, they're accountable for it and they help get them out." Armitage echoes this philosophy, explaining, "If I blow it and I let someone go through the ranks and get tenure, I have to fire them. And I do it. It's painful, but I do it."

Career Ladder: Providing Opportunities for Growth and Leadership

Many opportunities exist for teachers to take on leadership roles and embrace higher levels of responsibility. As in any school district, some teachers transition to school administration as principals and assistant principals; district leaders indicate that most of the district's current principals were Garden Grove teachers prior to moving out of the classroom. The 45 TOSA positions also represent a formal position change through which teachers can assume broader responsibility for instructional improvement. Garden Grove also offers multiple ways for classroom teachers to step out and lead as teachers. Department chairmanships at the secondary level, instructional leadership teams, consults, and demonstration teacher positions all give teachers an opportunity to take on higher levels of responsibility and ownership for instructional quality.

District leaders are careful to identify those they consider to be the right individuals to fill these leadership roles. Teachers often volunteer for these positions, but just as often principals nominate teachers because of their demonstrated performance and capacity to lead. As one TOSA described, "One of the things this district does really well is they look for a good fit. They are constantly looking at who the different leaders are on the

campus,…knowing that one of the things they are willing to do is cultivate people over time. If they see something that looks promising, they will begin to mentor that person and look for opportunities to get them involved at the school or district level." Ibarra-Acosta echoed this point by sharing advice she gives to teachers who want to be identified as leaders: "I think probably one of the best ways is just be really good at what you're doing.… If you're a great teacher and you love what you do, you get noticed."

Despite the formal leadership roles that exist, district leaders emphasize that the most important work in the district happens in classrooms, and that the majority of its educators will always need to be teachers. As Schwalm explained, "Frankly, most of our people are going to need to be in classrooms, and that's one of the challenges of this profession. Not everyone can leave [the classroom]. We don't need 2,000 administrators. That would be a horrible place. We need 2,000 highly effective teachers." The question confronting the district, then, is how to let people stay in the classroom and feel like they're advancing. District leaders acknowledge that the question is one that they have not fully answered, but the general approach has been to empower teachers to lead the work while compensating them for their time.

> "One of the things this district does really well is they look for a good fit. … If they see something that looks promising, they will begin to mentor that person and look for opportunities to get them involved at the school or district level."

The most important principle guiding the match of individuals to school and district leadership positions is meeting student needs. Leadership positions are an opportunity for teacher empowerment, but they exist because the district sees them as essential for improving classroom practice. In that vein, the district views advancement not as a means of rewarding high performance, but as a way to leverage talent to best meet student needs. As Wescott reflected, "People who are simply ambitious don't necessarily get ahead in the district. It's more service and responsibility."

Selecting and Developing Administrators

As instructional leaders with the most direct connection to classroom teachers, site-based leaders play a critical role in achieving instructional excellence. In many ways, the district's expectations for school administrators mirror those of teachers. Indeed, the entire system of human capital development that exists in Garden Grove explicitly incorporates school leaders as essential contributors to quality instruction and student learning.

District leaders demand quality execution of best practice, performed through collaboration and in the spirit of continuous improvement, to produce instructional excellence in the service of student learning. Just as the Effective Instruction framework defines expectations for teachers, a Garden Grove framework of effective leadership identifies specific characteristics and behaviors that district leaders expect of site leaders. These attributes reflect not only the district's emphasis on instructional excellence and evidence-based decision making, but the

prioritization of relationships and school environment that define what the district is and enable it to operate most effectively. The leadership framework includes the following five dimensions, which provide the foundation for the district's work with its school administrators:

- Personal leadership characteristics
- School culture and climate
- Instructional supervision
- Use of data
- School–community relationships

Principal selection and placement rests on the philosophy that administrators work for the *district*, not for a particular *school*; district leaders will reassign administrators to align individual strengths with site needs. The selection process itself begins with an open announcement, followed by a screening process in which principals watch and critique two lessons—one by an experienced teacher and one by a novice teacher—and explain how they would follow up with the teacher. In addition, a panel that includes central office staff, a representative from GGEA, and (for high schools) a parent representative interviews the candidate, followed by additional meetings with the assistant superintendent of personnel and the assistant superintendent of elementary or secondary instruction. As with teacher screening, central office staff pay close attention not only to a candidate's knowledge and skills, but to the candidate's personality. As Wescott explained, "We look for servant leadership qualities. People with big egos won't do that well here." After the screening process, district leaders make a recommendation to the superintendent, who in turn meets with the candidate, then presents his or her name to the board of education for approval.

> "We look for servant leadership qualities. People with big egos won't do that well here."

As it does with teachers, the central office seeks opportunities for administrators to regularly improve their leadership practice through training and collaboration with peers. New principals go through a two-year induction process called Rookie Wrap that seeks to build their leadership skills and networks of support. The year begins with introductory meetings and a visit from the assistant superintendent of elementary or secondary instruction to briefly observe each teacher's classroom and talk about what they see. Each principal gets assigned to a mentor who contacts them at least weekly. The assistant superintendent of elementary or secondary instruction also meets with the new principals as a group six times throughout the year in addition to regular principals' meetings and informal contacts. Comments from some principals suggest that the process seems to be effective at introducing new administrators to and preparing them for work in the district. As one former principal reflected, "Within my first three months, because I had frequent interactions with other principals and mentors, I was able to frame and have an understanding about why we do things here in Garden Grove."

Ongoing supports also exist for established administrators. Each summer features a two-day administrators' conference that focuses both on specific leadership practices and on social interaction to build trusting relationships among principals and between central office leaders and school administrators. Principals' meetings take place twice monthly. And ongoing communication with the Office of Instruction seeks to ensure that

principals are effectively identifying and addressing the needs of their sites.

Administrators participate in an annual evaluation process with the assistant superintendent of elementary or secondary instruction. The evaluation builds directly on Garden Grove's components of effective leadership and operates through a fall goal-setting meeting, midyear discussion, and end-of-year reflection. Each step in the process requires evidence of progress toward the goals, reflections on successes and challenges, and identification of action steps for moving forward. As with its approach to teachers, however, district leaders see the formal evaluation as merely one component of an ongoing cycle of communication designed to improve opportunities for students at the school site.

Site leadership is an area of close district attention because Garden Grove seeks to balance the need for strong instructional leadership with school cultures in which teachers feel comfortable sharing and improving their practice. At its best, the district features relationships that cultivate continuous improvement. A survey by GGEA leadership at the end of the 2011–12 school year, however, revealed concerns about stress and lack of communication that existed among some teachers in response to a high-stakes accountability environment. In response, district and union leadership have worked closely to design trainings throughout the 2012–13 school year for principals and union representatives at each site that address not only *what* site leaders need to focus on and communicate to their teachers, but *how* they can best communicate in healthy and productive ways.

Garden Grove hires new principals from outside the district when appropriate. Central office personnel, however, almost always come from within the district. As the district strengthens its TOSA program and its training at the secondary level, current leaders anticipate that more leaders may rise from within the district. Incoming superintendent Mafi observes that "Our APs [assistant principals] now are very proficient, for the most part, at having conversations around the work and instruction because many of them have come through our TOSA ranks." This increase in emphasis on building internal capacity reflects a parallel close attention to succession planning at all levels. District leaders carefully monitor the performance of educators in all positions and seek to provide them with leadership opportunities so that they can (a) build and demonstrate their potential and (b) be prepared to assume new levels of responsibility when new positions open in schools and within the central office.

Human Capital Strategies in Context

Garden Grove district leaders believe that the strategies just described have been essential for attracting talent, building teacher capacity, and improving student learning in the district. They also emphasize, however, that these strategies have emerged within a broader context of continuous improvement and represent approaches within a specific local context to address their own district needs. The following chapter describes the ways in which the district identifies the need for change, develops strategies for change, and manages the change process to produce and sustain these kinds of human capital strategies.

NOTES

1. The role of dismissal in building teacher capacity is not necessarily in building the capacity of teachers who are dismissed, but in improving the overall quality of the teaching force.

2. California uses a two-tier teacher credentialing system. Teaching candidates earn a preliminary credential, good for five years, through completion of their preservice teacher training program. Preliminary credential holders must then earn a clear credential through an approved induction program that typically takes place through the school district.

3. California Department of Education (2012).

4. For example, Garden Grove focused on strategies to improve reading comprehension during the 2012–13 school year.

5. Any teacher who disagrees with their evaluation rating can respond in writing using a formal response form. Additionally, the teacher can request a different evaluator and/or ask for another observation.

Chapter 3. Situating Human Capital Development in the Broader Context of District Change Management

Together, the strategies and policies outlined in chapter 2 form a coherent system of human capital development, but adult human capital is not an end in itself in Garden Grove. It is only in relation to the district's goal of continually improving *outcomes for students* that the human capital system takes on true meaning. In this regard, the human capital strategies outlined in this report are at once the result of the district's approach to change and change management and a set of mechanisms that can foster productive growth in all areas of the district's work related to teaching and learning. This chapter thus examines the intersection between human capital development strategies in Garden Grove and the district's overall approach to improvement and system change.

District Culture

The Garden Grove approach to human capital development, and to district improvement overall, is a direct extension of the culture described in chapter 1. The centrality of teachers and students, emphasis and relationships, philosophy of service from the central office, commitment to trusting and empowering teachers, and orientation toward continuous improvement establish the foundation from which effective strategies emerge and create an

Change Over Time

Garden Grove's culture includes a commitment to continuous improvement. Although it is beyond the scope of this report to revisit the district's entire process of evolution, it may be instructive to briefly describe some of the areas in which the district has revisited its strengths and weaknesses to change course in response to its evolving needs. Interviews with educators in Garden Grove suggest that the district has built on longstanding strengths of collegiality and strong fiscal management. Garden Grove always has been a good place to work; the evolution over time has been toward a more intense focus on the quality of classroom instruction.

The district continues to modify its approaches to building teacher capacity as that capacity changes. Schwalm reflected, "In the beginning, we found the best practices we could and we pretty much said everybody's going to do it." As the district has progressed, however, teacher capacity has grown and persistent obstacles to student learning have come into sharper focus. Central office leaders believe that the initial, more prescriptive, approach to working with teachers has taken the district as far as it can go. For the future, the district leaders recognize a need to let go and rely more heavily on teachers to drive the work of improvement. An observation from a secondary teacher with many years of experience in the district reflects this point: "We've gone away from a forced approach. Now they trust us to use the appropriate tools in the appropriate setting." District leaders use the analogy of climbing a mountain to describe their progress. Certain tools and techniques are required at different parts of the climb, and they need to apply constant vigilance to ensure that their approach is appropriate to the challenge in front of them.

Evolution also is evident in the district's approach to school leadership. Over time, the central office has increasingly called upon principals to be instructional leaders. The district's current efforts to improve administrator capacity in instructional supervision reflect a transition in the role of a site leader and the importance of ongoing feedback in improving one's instructional craft. At the same time, the collaboration between the central office and GGEA in matters of communication between principals and union representatives aims to facilitate improvement without introducing fear or stress. These and other strategies are merely examples of a district that constantly revisits and revises its approach to working with teachers to ensure that those teachers are best equipped to meet their students' needs.

environment in which those strategies can lead to success. Specifically with regard to human capital, these components of culture create a teaching force that is receptive to change and well positioned to embrace efforts to improve their professional contributions as teachers.

The Garden Grove Cycle of Continuous Improvement

The evolving strategies for human capital development in Garden Grove emerged from a process of ongoing self-reflection in which district leaders identified the most pressing barriers to improving teaching quality and leveraged the people within the district to develop solutions. This problem-based process of improvement consistently identifies approaches with the greatest likelihood for success, introduces them in a way that facilitates refinement and buy-in, and pursues them relentlessly to ensure faithful implementation.

The central office decision-making process drives the development of effective strategies that the district can bring to scale and sustainably support. Central office leaders talk regularly through formal cabinet meetings, meetings of the central office's instructional team, weekly meetings between each member of the cabinet and the superintendent, collaborative activities related to the specific demands of their work, shared professional reading, and other informal interactions. These regular built-in opportunities to collaborate create an environment in which individuals know one another's work and working styles well and are well positioned to approach decisions as a team.

Identifying the Root Causes of the District's Most Pressing Problems

Formal meetings routinely include a careful ongoing review of data, both hard and soft, to assess the district's strengths and weaknesses. When problems emerge, the conversations seek to identify not only the mere symptoms of troubling student outcomes but also the root causes that lead to those problems, especially those that reveal inequities among schools or student subgroups. For example, the district's focus on grading practices (discussed in *Elevating Teacher Voice in District Policy...* on page 36) began with an examination of A–G completion rates but came into focus through a comparison of course grades and CST scores that revealed teachers' grading practices that poorly reflected student content mastery, especially for specific subgroups of students. By focusing on the causes of particular outcomes, the leaders seek remedies that have the greatest potential to change the outcomes in question.

Developing Improvement Strategies

Having deeply explored a problem, district leaders strategically identify opportunities to address the root causes they have identified. Possible solutions draw on shared reading, research, and the practices of peers in other California districts, as well as extensive discussion among central office leaders. Because they relate to challenges of human capital, the solutions often involve professional learning opportunities and work with teachers to address student needs. Comments from teachers reflect a strong district orientation in these approaches toward innovation and research-based strategies.

District leaders then raise key questions about the appropriateness of a given strategy. They might include whether a particular course of action would make sense to schools, how it would apply to the district's ELs and special education students, and whether it is consistent with efforts already underway in the district. It is here that the district commitment to alignment and coherence becomes particularly important. Just as important, the central office team

takes into account the timing and resources that are aligned to support a given course of action. The burden on teachers and schools, as well the current levels of capacity and/or willingness to implement new ideas, may lead the district to hold back on new approaches until it can better position them for success. Similarly, the district investigates whether the resources exist to take an idea to scale. If district leaders do not believe they can (a) provide a service to every school that needs it and (b) provide it for as long as schools need it, they will not begin the service in the first place.

Starting Small and Bringing New Ideas to Scale

District leaders also carefully consider the ways in which they introduce new strategies to teachers and schools. In most cases, the central office prefers to begin efforts on a small scale, usually in the form of a pilot. (The emerging student teaching partnership between Garden Grove and CSULB described in chapter 1 and the example of the grading consult in secondary schools presented in this chapter are two examples of approaching new ideas in this way.) In taking this approach, the central office consciously avoids branding or advertising what it does; district leaders explain that publicizing efforts frequently invites closer scrutiny but rarely facilitates an improvement in the effectiveness of a given approach. This is particularly true in cases where district leaders feel that further refinement is necessary to finalize an appropriate solution.

Starting small affords several benefits. First, it enables the district to work through imperfection before taking a more comprehensively developed new idea to scale. Rather than having to fight through resistance at the outset of new initiatives, district leaders work with administrators and teachers who will try new things and provide honest feedback about their successes and failures, enabling district leaders to expend their energy on refinement rather than persuasion.

Second, starting small enables the district to use early feedback to more effectively craft a particular solution. Rather than start from an assumption that the central office has the answers to the district's most pressing challenges, district leaders often draw on the expertise of administrators and teachers to develop the best ideas. Indeed, many strategies to *improve* human capital in Garden Grove deliberately leverage the human capital *already present* in the district. This philosophy requires some humility and comfort with ambiguity among central office leaders, but as a result, teachers and administrators contribute as partners, buy in more completely, and indeed improve the ideas that district leaders originally designed. Moreover, the approach reinforces the relationships among adults in the district by giving teachers agency and validating their contributions to the organization's progress.

Third, the district's approach aids in efforts to bring ideas to scale. As teachers and administrators experience success with new efforts, they share their stories with peers, who in turn begin requesting similar opportunities in their own classrooms and schools. District leaders report that the result is an increased demand for new ideas that educators believe will help them do their jobs more effectively, rather than a top–down push from the central office demanding compliance with a new set of requirements.

Although the district prefers to start small and move slowly, central office leaders explain that some situations require immediate top–down action. These are (a) cases of urgency in which current practices are doing damage to students and (b) situations in which the solutions are fairly simple and obvious to all. Central office leaders also emphasize, however, that they are able to trade

on the credibility they have developed over time to make these decisions.

Implementing New Ideas With Fidelity

Central office leaders recognize that new ideas are unlikely to be effective unless implemented faithfully and consistently over time. Success in Garden Grove therefore rests not only in identifying effective strategies, but in implementing them well across the district. The central office expends a significant amount of energy ensuring that site-level educators deeply understand and appropriately apply any approaches to improve student learning. District leaders believe that this requires not only effective rollout, but persistent attention to quality in the months and years that follow. As Mafi explained, "You have to put it out in the public eye again and again and again until it permeates the fabric of what people are doing and it's just assumed to be done." A comment from an elementary teacher about the central office reflects a similar perspective: "They don't change to something new all the time. They stick with something and then they fine-tune it and fine-tune it.… It's unending waves of refinement."

Connections to Existing Practice

To enforce the notion of faithful implementation, the district consistently seeks to ensure that any new

Elevating Teacher Voice in District Policy Through the Garden Grove Consult Process: Secondary Grading Practice

Garden Grove district leaders have embraced a process they call a "consult" to address particularly complex challenges. The term originates in language from the California Education Code—which identifies various district-level decisions as "negotiable" or "consultable." Rather than a contractually mandated compliance structure, the process has become a key mechanism for district leaders and teachers to collectively understand the root causes of key challenges and navigate the solutions to those challenges. One such consult began in response to troubling trends in student performance data in 2008–09. Low grades can present a significant obstacle to college eligibility, as students meet the A–G requirements for admission to the UC and CSU systems only when they receive a C or better in a qualifying course. District leaders found that 30 percent of ninth-graders received a D or F in English, threatening their ability to meet A–G requirements from the very beginning of high school.

A thorough review of district grading practices further identified substantial variation and inconsistency between measures of student performance. A comparison between grades and CST results revealed that students were failing high school classes despite demonstrating content mastery on the state test: 65 percent of ninth-grade students who received a D or an F in ninth-grade English scored basic or above on the CST. The misalignment was more pronounced among particular student subgroups. For example, 10 percent of Asian students who scored at or above proficient on the Algebra 1 CST received a D or an F in the class; the same was true for 32 percent of Latino students. At the same time, certain students received high ratings in their classes despite a questionable command of the skills they needed for postsecondary success.

The review of grading practices revealed that Garden Grove secondary teachers were typically not grading students on content mastery. Grades often drew heavily on compliance rather than learning, with substantial weight given to homework completion. Calculation of final grades often penalized students for early failures, meaning students could receive a poor grade despite mastering content by the end of a class. Grades also often were subject to the "power of zero," in which a missed assignment that resulted in a grade of zero severely dropped a student's average score across assignments. If the district's goal is for students to achieve common standards, and if achieving those standards reflects students' level of college preparation, these traditional approaches to grading may not be appropriate.

Despite the clear threats to student opportunity associated with existing grading practices, the details of moving to a standards-based grading system were not clear. Furthermore, district leaders found that teachers' professional identity at the

approach it embraces deepens and extends the work already taking place in the district. Too often, districts pitch reform efforts as splashy new ideas that undo or ignore existing district practice. Over time, teachers develop reform fatigue, ducking yet another wave of new ideas, and in the process lose trust in the central office. Some teacher comments suggest that this was a previous problem within the district, and is one of the greatest areas of improvement during the past decade. Today, Garden Grove district leaders actively seek to combat this danger by introducing new ideas within the framework of existing district approaches and following up over time to ensure that the ideas stick. One TOSA described the district's current state by saying that "I think one of the strengths in Garden Grove is always keeping in mind what's been done and building off it."

> "They don't change to something new all the time. They stick with something and then they fine-tune it and fine-tune it.… It's unending waves of refinement."

secondary level often was closely tied to their grading practices, creating an emotional attachment that can make it difficult to change practices. Because of this, Garden Grove district leaders believed it was especially important for teachers to see the problems themselves and to help create the solutions. As one district leader explained, "The idea and pressure had to come from the top, but the work had to come from our teachers, from the bottom up."

The process for revisiting grading practices began in 2008–09 with the Task Force on Grading. District leaders began by carefully structuring conversations and showing teachers the same data that they were wrestling with to help create a shared understanding of the problems with the traditional approach. At the same time, the district solicited help from teachers in developing solutions by subtly introducing the possibility of unilateral district action. State policy gives teachers discretion over individual grading decisions, but districts have the authority to create grading guidelines. District leaders made it clear that the central office had the discretion to identify a new direction alone yet simultaneously acknowledged the complexity of the challenge and the need for informed opinions. By inviting teachers to tackle the challenge of grading practice with them, district leaders embarked on what they called the most collaborative work they've done with teachers. As one leader explained, "Sometimes you have to get trust by giving trust." The district, in conjunction with teachers, has now developed grading guidelines that define letter grades by mastery of standards and specify a breakdown of the way in which homework, formative assessments, and summative assessments should contribute to a student's grade. The guidelines also address the purpose of homework and assessments and make suggestions for best practice on mastery of standards and for addressing the severe impact of assigning a zero to a piece of student work.

As with many district initiatives, grading efforts began small, giving teachers and leaders an opportunity to revisit and adapt new approaches before taking them to scale. The initial grading guidelines were implemented through pilots in several schools and featured two-way feedback between the pilot sites and district leaders about how to refine the guidelines themselves and the way they were communicated and implemented. District leaders also looked for opportunities to inform the process by introducing relevant research and creating opportunities to visit other schools and districts that had embraced new approaches to grading. In the meantime, participation in the consult expanded to several hundred teachers, who became instrumental in introducing the new grading guidelines to school sites as the approach expanded districtwide. The anticipated backlash against a new approach never materialized, a victory that district leaders attribute to the quality of the guidelines—a direct result of teacher input—and to the role teachers played in communicating about them to their colleagues.

Communication

Communication plays a critical role in implementation fidelity. Messages change shape as they filter from the central office to site administrators to teachers, and so district leaders make a concerted effort to ensure consistent messaging. This includes a commitment to simplicity and crafting messages that are easily understood and remembered. Sometimes, as in the case of the district's work on instructional supervision, the district goes so far as to design slide presentations for principals to share with their school sites to ensure that all teachers across the district receive the same guidance. Interview responses suggest that this focus on communication has led to clearly understood expectations across the district. As one secondary teacher reflected, "[A]gree or disagree, the communication is very clear.... Everyone knows what is expected."

> If we can explain the "why" behind things, we get a lot more buy-in.... We move at a quicker pace if all the teachers see the big picture and the "why."

In addition to supporting consistent practice across the district, communication plays an instrumental role in developing trust among educators in Garden Grove. Transparency in central office decision making, accompanied by clear rationale for why certain decisions take place, provide an essential foundation for teachers to trust the guidance and expectations issued by district leaders. As one TOSA explained, "If we can explain the 'why' behind things, we get a lot more buy-in. Then the pushback becomes the minority.... We move at a quicker pace if all the teachers see the big picture and the 'why.'" For Schwalm, the connection is crystal clear: "That's the solution to everything: communication—which means relationships and trust." Warning against the temptation to treat communication as an afterthought, or to farm it out to others, Schwalm observed, "99 times out of 100, if there's a problem, it can be traced back to communication or lack thereof."

Reflecting and Refining Decisions

Finally, the central office constantly revisits previous decisions to make sure that they are still the right fit for Garden Grove, its teachers, and its students. This process involves the same careful data review (again, using hard and soft data) through which district leaders identify problems in the first place. As one example, Garden Grove's Goal 1 and Goal 2—which seek one level of improvement in academic and English language proficiency for every year a student spends in the district—focus district efforts and serve as its primary measures of success. Nevertheless, district leaders annually examine Goal 1 and Goal 2 to ensure that they still reflect the goals and priorities of the district; comments from Mafi in summer 2013 suggest that a more explicit focus on students' social-emotional well-being may be necessary to reflect Garden Grove's emphasis on the whole child. By continuing to revisit decisions over time, district leaders aim to align systems to meet the district's evolving needs.

Creating Stability to Sustain Improvement

As a foundation for the decision-making process itself, the Garden Grove central office has established several conditions that can sustain improvement efforts over time and through major periods of transitions. These include a lean central

office, sound fiscal management, a collaborative relationship with the teacher union, and stable superintendent leadership. Together, these facilitating factors create the stability that enables the district to maintain and deepen its efforts over time.

Designing the Central Office to Achieve Coherence

Because of the Garden Grove emphasis on consistency across the district, central office leaders have carefully aligned district leadership positions and processes to embrace collective decision making and knowledge sharing. For example, the Offices of Personnel and Instruction are inextricably linked and work together on all major decisions. Explaining her relationship with Mafi and Wescott, Armitage said, "We have this synergy. We just trust each other. In a way, they're HR too." The Offices of Personnel and Instruction represent one important nexus of collaboration, but the same mentality extends across the entire central office.

In service of this approach to decision making, the district has consciously designed the central office as a small and flat team. District leaders embrace greater workloads and responsibilities as important trade-offs in exchange for providing consistent messaging to schools with clear lines of authority and keeping resources within school sites. For example, all 47 elementary principals report directly to Wescott. District leaders have revisited this decision multiple times, but they consistently arrive at the conclusion that the approach is required to achieve the degree of alignment it needs. According to Wescott, "It's a challenge, but I don't see within our structure how else you could get the coherence." Schwalm echoed this opinion and connected the idea of potentially minimizing central office workloads to meeting student needs: "I know it's going to help you [in your central office role], but tell me how it's going to help schools and teachers do a better job for kids."

The strains became particularly acute in response to the California fiscal crisis, during which the district elected to preserve teaching positions above all other priorities. Despite the challenges this introduced, central office staff embraced the increase in workload as fair and necessary. Ibarra-Acosta explained, "I don't think my workload is any heavier than a principal's. I think our principals work incredibly hard. So when I think about what we do here, I think we shouldn't be working any less than they do."

The lean central office reflects the district's priorities for coherence and resource allocation, but it also helps reinforce the district's approach to building teacher leadership and distributing responsibility. District leaders see value in empowering teachers through consults and other teacher leadership opportunities as a means of generating new ideas and building buy-in, but these structures also give the district the capacity to manage the workload. By giving teachers responsibility for developing strategies and training their colleagues, the district simultaneously relieves some of the demand that would otherwise fall on central office administrators.

Practicing Sound Fiscal Management to Ensure Stability

Human capital initiatives cost money: Teacher salaries, professional learning opportunities, and responses to financial crisis demand resources from the central office. In the face of competing demands for a limited pool of funds, district leaders in Garden Grove take steps to strategically and proactively allocate resources to support the work they believe is most important.

Garden Grove has a long history of sound financial management that has enabled it to support and sustain its human capital work. Some of this derives from the strategic planning on the programmatic side: District leaders pursue a new initiative only when they can provide support to every school that needs it, for as long as the support is needed. As a result of this kind of foresight, the district avoids unsustainable financial commitments that can constrict its available resources and undermine its efforts at consistency. District leaders also carefully examine the regulations on any funding stream to find ways of using resources that are compliant with the legal parameters that surround them but support the district's programmatic needs. This effort is meticulous. According to Schwalm, "Around here, there's no detail too small to attend to." Finally, the centralized nature of decision making within the central office is intended to allocate dollars with the greatest level of efficiency, all oriented toward the district's student performance goals. Through this approach, the district seeks to avoid the departmental battles that can unfold when individuals become territorial about the dollars they control. Schwalm explained, "It's this simple: It's the kids' money."

These decisions rest on a foundation of conservative budgeting; the Office of Business Services makes a point of overestimating projected expenses and underestimating anticipated income, never committing to expenses it cannot confidently cover. In addition, the district funds and runs its own insurance for medical, dental, vision, and worker compensation. Self-insurance allows the district to manage its own costs by avoiding the marketing and overhead expenses required for an outside provider. Although this approach has been effective for Garden Grove, district leaders identify some challenges for other districts that might pursue a similar strategy: Districts need enough money to start their own insurance program, they need to operate on a scale that makes the risk manageable,[1] and they need to run it as an independent business such that the dollars in the insurance fund remain untouchable by other district programs even in response to crisis or demands for more money.

Despite substantial budget cuts during California's fiscal crisis, the district made a conscious decision not to lay off a single teacher throughout the crisis. The teaching force decreased in size in this period, but solely from retirements and attrition. Likewise, Garden Grove continued to commit resources to professional development at all levels of the system, including the training sessions and release time teachers use to improve their craft. Once again, the district's bottom line is to maximize the quality of learning opportunities for students. After the many resources it has invested in attracting and building the capacity of its teaching staff, district leaders view any movement that removes effective teachers from the classroom as counterproductive.

Of course, this decision had its trade-offs. Class sizes increased substantially; upkeep of facilities, technology, and materials lapsed; and noninstructional programs and staff suffered cuts. Severe financial constraints have forced district leaders to make difficult decisions about their priorities, and they have consistently chosen classroom instructional quality as the most important asset to protect.

Collaborating With the Teacher Union as a Partner in Service of Improvements in Instruction

Because the national dialogue on school improvement so frequently revolves around the relationship between districts and teacher unions, that dynamic in Garden Grove merits special attention. The district sees teachers as the individuals most essential to the success of the Garden Grove students. As a result, the central

office *needs* to work with the teacher organization. This relationship in Garden Grove is a further reflection of the district's culture and facilitates the district's effectiveness. Whereas relationships between district management and labor unions often become adversarial in other districts, the relationship in Garden Grove might best be described as collaborative. A reflection from Armitage captures perspectives shared from both sides: "Our union is our partner and I see them as an advocate, not an adversary. We're all teachers; they're just teacher leaders."

The qualities that describe the district culture overall also characterize the interactions between the central office and union leadership. Both sides communicate extensively. The superintendent meets regularly with the union president, and the assistant superintendent of personnel meets with the union's president and executive director once a week. Recently, union leaders also have begun regular meetings with district leaders in the Offices of Instruction and Special Education. The goal of these meetings is to maintain open lines of communication so that the two sides can collectively solve problems before they balloon and become unmanageable. Describing her approach to these meetings, Armitage explained, "I front-load, front-load, front-load. I try never to surprise-attack them. I want them to get a call from me before the teachers [get a call from me]." The proactive communication between the district and the union does not eliminate disagreements, but it does create a healthy relationship built on common ground that enables the two sides to move forward productively. As current GGEA President Tina Gurney explained, "Even though we fell down here and there along the way, our goal was always the same: what's best for kids." Recently, the central office and union have joined together to articulate the norms guiding their interactions to ensure that the nature of this relationship remains healthy and productive even as the district experiences transitions in individual leadership positions.

> "Our union is our partner and I see them as an advocate, not an adversary. We're all teachers; they're just teacher leaders."

GGEA also plays an active role in district improvement opportunities. The contract mandates the union's involvement in PAR and dismissal decisions and outlines specific responsibilities for selecting PAR consulting teachers and providing legal representation. The union also is prominently involved in district efforts to improve teaching capacity: GGEA selects representatives for the district's consults and attends many of the district's trainings. In other words, the union's role is not relegated to contract negotiations and disputes but contributes to the broad array of strategies to improve the quality of and support for Garden Grove teachers.

The collaborative nature of this relationship makes union leaders susceptible to accusations of being "in bed with" the district. District and union leaders alike largely dismiss this charge. Gurney and GGEA executive director Jim Rogers explained that such accusations can usually be dispelled by an explanation of the decision-making process and an assurance that union leaders considered and protected the rights of their teachers. In the end, central office leaders estimate that 90 percent of the district's teachers are comfortable with the relationship, and union leaders argue that the partnership between them best serves the teachers' needs. According to Francis, "I can say as a whole,

the district strongly supports teachers and is fair to them. They're truly valued for the work they're doing in the classroom." He continues, "The more unions and district administrators take that adversarial stance, it's going to hurt us as an educational community in the end. I think it's important to foster that collaborative relationship."

The temptation exists to attribute the success of this relationship to the cooperative disposition of GGEA—if only other unions would similarly orient their work toward collaboration and the best interests of children, the argument goes, their districts would be in a much better position. A clear understanding of the Garden Grove relationship must recognize, however, that collaboration like this exists because the district respects, trusts, and empowers its teachers. Both sides believe that the other is acting in the best interest of students. Equally important, both sides acknowledge, welcome, and support the other's role in achieving instructional improvement. This mutual trust and respect is perhaps one of the best manifestations of the Garden Grove Way and what positions the district to be successful.

> "The more unions and district administrators take that adversarial stance, it's going to hurt us as an educational community in the end."

Maintaining Focus Through Stable Superintendent Leadership

Stable senior district leadership has been instrumental to the consistency and sustainability of the district's work over time. In summer 2013, Schwalm retired after more than 14 years as superintendent, having been only the third superintendent to lead Garden Grove in the last 39 years. This stability has enabled and fostered the coherence in the district's approach to achieving instructional excellence, for the district has been able to sustain attention to its improvement efforts over time without having to adjust to the new vision or direction of a newcomer.

The importance of Schwalm's district leadership extends beyond her mere longevity. Administrators and teachers respect the credibility she brought to the position after more than 40 years in the district, during which she held nearly every professional role the district offers. Even as superintendent, she made a conscious effort to teach lessons in classrooms every year. Schwalm described these as important opportunities to ground herself and understand more deeply what the central office is asking teachers to do, and to remind her how hard the job of a teacher really is. Her actions sent teachers an equally powerful message of empathy and respect.

Individuals at all levels of the district also described the ways in which Schwalm modeled the culture and expectations the district holds for all its employees. Her intense focus on and respect for people extended from elevator conversations to teacher meetings to her weekly check-ins with members of the central office team. Assistant Superintendent of Special Education and Student Services Lorraine Rae explained, "She just sits here making you feel she really cares about you, as if she doesn't have a care in the world and she doesn't have anything she has to do. It just amazes me the she takes such time to get to know you." Her recognition of individuals by name and care to ask them about their personal lives reinforced this perception.

In addition to the ways that Schwalm modeled the district's approach to relationships, interviews suggest that her personality and leadership style were essential guiding forces behind the district's strategic planning process. Wescott explained, "She has a way of looking at problems and identifying the most creative finesse-filled way of solving them and making everybody feel like they won." Several central office leaders also described Schwalm's ability to recognize skills they did not know they had and to build their capacity in leadership positions they had never previously envisioned filling. Individuals also talked about Schwalm's talent for giving feedback in a way that made expectations clear without making people feel threatened or undermined. As Ibarra-Acosta explained, "Laura gives us a lot of feedback, but she does it in a way that you don't know that she just gave you feedback.… She may come in and give feedback about something, and I never leave thinking that Laura just told me I didn't do that right."

In spring 2013, the Garden Grove Board of Education selected Mafi to replace Schwalm as the district's superintendent. This decision reflects the board's own commitment to a policy on leadership succession that it was instrumental in developing in 2011. Moreover, the selection of Mafi validates the work of the existing central office team and reflects a commitment to its continued leadership. Indeed, Schwalm and Mafi worked closely together throughout the transition period—including regular evening meetings to address the logistical, political, and general leadership dynamics connected to the superintendent role—to ensure a seamless connection for school leaders and teachers in the district.

Comments from Mafi in summer 2013 suggest that with new central office leadership, an important opportunity exists to become more explicit and transparent about what the organization believes in and how it approaches the work of teaching and learning. Indeed, the board has asked district leaders to craft a vision statement, mission statement, and strategic plan that articulate the district's approach to improvement. Nevertheless, consistency in the ways individuals at all levels of the district describe their work suggests that the culture and expectations in Garden Grove are deeply enough embedded that the district will continue to grow through this leadership transition. As Mafi explained, "There's no intention to change anything, but to deal positively with the changes at the same time we continue to grow in the direction we've been moving: toward really focusing on the whole child and focusing on how we address some of the inequities inherent within our system."

Despite signs of stability, leadership transitions always are a test for an organization, and the same is true of Garden Grove. The degree to which the district maintains the most central elements of its identity while continuing to improve opportunities and outcomes for students will be important to follow.

Trade-Offs

Finally, it is worth acknowledging again the trade-offs the district has made in choosing to operate as it does. Garden Grove district leaders see a small, streamlined central office as essential for creating consistent messaging to schools with clear lines of authority. The efficiency created by this approach also enables the district to keep more resources within school sites directly supporting instruction. These choices have costs. The workload within the central office is demanding, and it only increased during the recent financial crisis.

Similarly, the district's philosophy of applying best practices to all the district's schools reflects a fundamental orientation toward equity and the belief that a fruitful practice should be available to

all its students. A unified approach to curriculum and instruction, on the other hand, limits autonomy for principals and teachers. This is not to say that the district discourages innovation. In fact, Garden Grove's districtwide approach to elementary mathematics instruction grew from the success of a program in nearby Long Beach USD that was brought to the district's attention by an individual who had worked with it there. Similarly, districtwide use of thinking maps in K–12 classrooms originated with a group of teachers who learned the strategy from an external presentation and saw it as an effective tool to enhance their own instruction. Nevertheless, if district leaders feel that an individual's approach is inconsistent with its conception of quality instruction, or cannot be scaled in a way that benefits all children, the district does not support the kind of autonomy that would allow teachers to move out of step with their peers.

The demands on teachers represent another trade-off. Teachers who adopt a traditional approach to classroom instruction, in which individuals have the freedom to operate as independent experts behind a closed classroom door, are likely to struggle in an environment that demands collaboration and expects teachers to expose their practice in the service of improvement. Even for teachers who embrace the Garden Grove culture, the district rides a fine line between providing comprehensive supports that enable teachers to improve and overwhelming them with out-of-classroom activities. Compensating teachers for their time is one way in which the central office acknowledges these demands, and the union plays an important role in setting limits for expectations, but the call for continuous improvement and associated high expectations have implications for the work of Garden Grove teachers.

Finally, the district has made conscious decisions to dedicate resources to school sites. During the fiscal crisis, it doubled down on this philosophy, electing to continue its professional development activities while refusing to lay off any full-time teacher. An increase in class size has been one of the biggest impacts: By not replacing teachers who retire or leave the district, district leaders report that classrooms have reached their maximum capacity. The district also has sacrificed administrators, bus drivers, gardeners, and counselors in its middle schools. It has instituted furlough days and cut sports with low enrollment. Garden Grove, like all districts, has faced difficult decisions, and the central office's prioritization of classroom instruction has resulted in the loss of other important people and programs.

NOTE

1. One central office leader estimated that a district would need at least 1,000 employees to accommodate this level of risk.

Conclusion

The story of Garden Grove is that of a district that has oriented its work around maximizing the quality of classroom instruction. The central office sees teachers as the individuals most essential for improving student learning. District leaders have therefore dedicated most of their efforts to (a) getting the best teachers to teach in Garden Grove and (b) building the capacity of the teachers who already work in the district. The result is more than a decade of improvement in student performance and an environment in which teachers are respected, trusted, and empowered to drive the work of student learning.

What do we make of a case like Garden Grove? If decades of education reform have taught us anything, the wholesale transplantation of an approach successful in one context is unlikely to produce dramatic improvement in another setting. Yet at the same time, writing off the Garden Grove story as a byproduct of facilitating factors that could never be present in *my* district misses an opportunity to learn and improve.

First, Garden Grove presents compelling evidence that a comprehensive approach to human capital development can enable sustained growth in instruction and student learning. Educators and policymakers need not be tempted by the allure of a silver bullet, or swayed by the promise that a single high-level policy decision will produce a noticeable change in teaching quality. Instead, policymakers, district leaders, and other key stakeholders should turn their attention to the entire suite of human capital supports and strategies that can collectively improve classroom instruction and enable a school system to engage in the practice of continuous improvement.

Second, some of the specific strategies described here may provide ideas for district leaders to incorporate or adapt into their own systems. These strategies may be specific to the areas of human capital or they may draw from the central office's overall approach to running a large urban district. An important caveat is in order, however. The strategies used in Garden Grove emerge from a particular local context and have been explicitly designed to serve the needs of that context. The success of any idea will depend heavily on the degree to which it is appropriate to and adapted for its own environment. Thus, the most powerful lessons from Garden Grove may not emerge from the strategies themselves but the processes through which they are created—a collaborative process that puts people at the center.

The last takeaway relates to district improvement overall. The story of Garden Grove is not intended as a roadmap for replicating the *Garden Grove* Way. Rather, it is about developing *a* way to maintain discipline and focus on the right goal, student learning. In Garden Grove, district leaders would argue that this way is about supporting the ongoing work of every teacher to best meet student needs. Regardless of the focus, however, district efforts may be most likely to succeed when leaders set clear expectations, communicate extensively about them, and establish strong support mechanisms. The Garden Grove story is one of discipline to avoid the allure of every good idea, and rather maintain a sharp, laserlike focus on what matters most. Finally, the Garden Grove story is one of constant improvement through the ongoing pursuit of promising practice and the relentless refining of those things that are most effective at attaining the desired results. District leaders who are able to pursue positive change within a similar context of coherence and stability may be the most likely to achieve similar levels of success.

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