CALIFORNIA**COLLABORATIVE**
on District Reform

Meeting 33 Summary
An Agenda for the Future: Mapping the Terrain of California Education

June 22–23, 2017
McClellan Park, California

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Note: *This meeting summary was developed as a resource for members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. We are making this document publicly available in an effort to share the work of the Collaborative more broadly to inform dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. It does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for the general public. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit www.cacollaborative.org.*

Changes at the federal level and an upcoming California election are shaping the social, economic, and political context in which K–12 districts operate. The 33rd meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform provided an opportunity to step back, reflect, and take stock of the road ahead. It also created a forum to identify priorities and next steps for the group. The Collaborative's mission is to improve instruction for all kids and narrow opportunity gaps for traditionally underserved youth through a focus on specific problems of practice, a systems approach to addressing issues, and a process of collective inquiry that brings multiple perspectives to the table. Keeping in mind this overall orientation, participants considered topics and activities that might help the Collaborative and its members navigate the state's most pressing challenges in the months and years to come.

Throughout the meeting, participants emphasized the need to prioritize issues of equity and access. The disparate opportunities available to students around the state and ongoing economic trends make it imperative for public schools to help all students achieve success in academics and in life. One individual characterized these trends as a movement toward "educational and economic apartheid," saying, "We have a system where essentially the young folks of color in our state are relegated to live in higher poverty areas and have lower educational opportunities and a system deprived of higher paying jobs." The text that follows summarizes the conversation during the 2-day meeting, including presentations that helped to frame the broader California context, working groups that identified key areas of focus for the state, and a deeper dive into the pursuit of continuous improvement. Through all of these specific topics, participants highlighted equity as a priority that needs

* Thanks to Jarah Blum, Marina Castro, Suzette Chavez, Linda Choi, and Sudie Whalen for taking careful notes during the meeting, which made this summary possible.

to ground any conversation and action moving forward. As another participant observed, "The only way we can fight concentrated poverty is [through] concentrated education."

Setting the Context: Where Is California Headed?

To examine where the Collaborative and the broader community of California educators should focus their attention, it is important to understand the world that K–12 districts are preparing their students to enter as well as the opportunities and constraints that will shape district decisions. The meeting began with three research-based presentations to help illustrate what schools are preparing students for, who those students are, what their challenges will be, and how much money school systems are likely to have to address those challenges and ensure student success.

Misalignment Between Education and the Job Market: The Need for College Graduates

Hans Johnson of the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) led the meeting by sharing findings from his research on the alignment between education and the job market in the state.

The Importance of College Degrees

Research consistently has demonstrated that economic returns on a college degree exist in all areas and continue to grow. Readings distributed prior to the meeting reveal that an increasing percentage of jobs require postsecondary education and training, and that the college wage premium—the percentage difference in pay between college graduates and high school graduates—has increased over time. Johnson's presentation emphasized that California reflects these broader nationwide trends. The wage premium for college graduates relative to high school graduates grew from 62% and 61% in 2005 (for men and women, respectively) to 72% and 70% in 2015. Johnson illustrated that the premium is stronger in some fields than in others. The lifetime wage difference between college and high school graduates in the field of engineering, for example, is $1.15 million. The difference in education is $240,000.

Job Market Projections

PPIC projections found that by 2030, two of five California jobs will require a bachelor's degree, but only one in three Californians will have a bachelor's degree—a shortfall of 1.1 million workers. This gap results in part from increased demand: Occupations that require college degrees are growing, and the need for highly educated workers within occupations is increasing. PPIC also attributes the gap to a decreasing supply of qualified workers: The highly educated baby boomer population is retiring, and relatively low 4-year college completion rates mean that the next generation is failing to fill the baby-boomers' shoes.

Barriers to College Completion

Problems with California's higher education system pose significant obstacles to addressing the gap that Johnson described. Some of these relate to college entry. Even if K–12 education systems are effective at preparing students for college, there may not be enough seats to accommodate those students. Completion rates for California's A-G

requirements[1] are increasing at a much faster rate than seat availability, making community colleges the only viable option for many students. Moreover, California State University (CSU) raises admission and transfer standards as the number of applicants increases. Beyond college entry, degree completion poses additional challenges. Remedial coursework is the place where most college students fall off track. Limited seats at 4-year institutions means that more students enter the community college system, where 80% of students go into remedial courses. This pattern keeps students away from credit-bearing classes and the path toward transfer or degree completion. There are some efforts to improve these outcomes—a new graduation initiative in the CSU system aims to move from 57% to 70% of students graduating within 6 years, with no gaps among racial/ethnic groups—but the challenge is daunting.

Income Inequality: An Economically Bifurcated State

Kfir Mordechay of the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles added data and reflections about issues of economic opportunity that extend beyond the education system. California is experiencing increasing polarization and bifurcation not only along lines of race and ethnicity, but also across income and geography. Since the Great Recession, incomes at the 80th and 90th percentiles have risen as the 10th and 20th percentiles have fallen, thus widening the gaps between the haves and have-nots in the state. Child poverty rates have also increased; the gaps have increased at higher rates for Black and Latino children.

Concentration of poverty is also on the rise. Middle-income neighborhoods across the state are shrinking; some regions were hit harder than others. Forty-eight percent of the Census tracks in Fresno, for example, are at least 40% poor, a growth of 10% in the number of Census tracks in only 4 years. The result is that students live in increasingly segregated neighborhoods and attend increasingly segregated schools. The typical poor student in 1993–94 attended a school that was 40% poor; that number now approaches 60%. The housing and job markets only exacerbate these changes. Poverty tends to be intergenerational, yet the housing market has recovered faster in coastal metropolitan areas, and high-paying jobs in technology tend to be clustered in those geographies. Thus, individuals and families in inland areas have struggled more to recover and have fewer options for upward mobility. Mordechay warned that these changes are increasing the economic inequalities he described.

California Budget: Uncertainty Built Into the System

Mac Taylor of the Legislative Analyst's Office concluded the presentations with remarks about the California budget and its implications for K–12 schools.

Challenges in Predicting State Revenues

The nature of the California budget makes revenues difficult to predict. Seventy percent of state revenues come from personal income tax, and the state's tax structure means that

[1] California has identified 15 courses that students must pass with a grade of C or better in order to gain eligibility for the University of California and California State University systems. These requirements are known as the A-G requirements; A-G coursework refers to classes that qualify toward these requirements.

160,000 people in a state of 40 million pay almost half of these personal income taxes. For the majority of California residents, personal income is fairly stable. For these wealthy citizens, however, capital gains comprise a more significant piece of their annual income. As a consequence, personal income tax is highly volatile because it is subject to changes in financial markets, making the overall state budget similarly unpredictable. Taylor advised that in a state like California, it is particularly important to have healthy reserves to weather the unpredictable fluctuations in revenue.

Constraints From Upcoming Financial Obligations

Specific to K–12 education, funding has improved in recent years, but financial obligations will significantly constrain district options. In 2016–17 dollars, the state has finally caught up to and exceeded 2006–07 spending levels that preceded the Great Recession. So far, funding growth through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) has exceeded the rising contributions that districts must make to state pension plans. However, the mandated rates for the California State Teachers' Retirement System (CalSTRS) and the California Public Employees' Retirement System (CalPERS) will essentially double between 2015–16 and 2020–21; these rates could be even higher if current projections are off base.

Implications for K–12 Districts

Taylor closed by highlighting some of the implications of California's budget picture for K–12 school districts. He first emphasized the importance of long-range contingency planning by saying, "You should be very careful about making long-term contract commitments. You should have very high reserves, because you have to prepare for these downturns—you don't know when it's going to come or the magnitude." He also acknowledged the difficult negotiations this may require with labor partners, who could resist the impulse to be conservative with salaries against the backdrop of rising state revenues. Increasing pensions costs also create tension with LCFF expectations. As districts aim to appropriately direct supplemental and concentration funding in service of targeted student groups, they do so in the face of dramatic increases in spending obligations for CalSTRS and CalPERS that can make the isolation of targeted funding almost impossible.

Additional Education Context: Instruction and Politics

Following the set of presentations that primarily addressed economic issues, a panel of Collaborative members and subsequent full-group conversation elaborated on critical elements of the state's education context.

Pursuing Instructional Improvement

Respondents to the presentations highlighted several areas of attention for instructional improvement. Attracting, recruiting, and retaining highly effective teachers is a perpetual challenge for school districts, but limited school funding and escalated cost of living make it even more pronounced. Meanwhile, positive changes—including transitions to the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards—have advanced the work of teaching and learning, but they are a demanding shift for teachers, they require a lot of training, and as a result of the increased expectations and burden, they have

impacted morale. A statewide teacher shortage that creates a limited supply of willing and talented teaching candidates only compounds these issues.

Preserving a United Political Coalition

Referencing recent policy successes and looming challenges, some participants suggested that that the preservation of a united political coalition will be critical to continued forward progress. One panelist noted that the Brown Administration coincided with what he described as three vector forces coming together: a rising tide of revenue, big ideas (like the Common Core and LCFF), and a united political coalition. As policy implementation continues, more specific interests geared around refining the details could fragment this coalition. This dynamic is particularly dangerous around LCFF, where a strong alliance came together to pass the policy, but groups joined for different reasons. For some, flexibility was the rallying cry. For others, equity drove the effort. Some advocates and other members of the California education community have expressed concerns that the policy apparatus has chosen to prize flexibility, but has given equity short shrift.

These political dynamics are the backdrop for gubernatorial, legislative, and other statewide races in 2018. These elections will introduce at least some candidates who will run as change agents and seek to undo whatever has come before. In the absence of a coalition to stand in defense of the positive progress made in recent years, key policy wins could be in jeopardy.

Mapping the Terrain: Identifying Challenges and Opportunities for Educational Improvement

From a discussion of the broader state context, meeting participants broke into cross-role working groups to discuss the most pressing challenges in three domains: (1) the instructional core (the interaction of teachers and students around content); (2) external factors that influence students' abilities to engage in academic learning during their K–12 experience and to thrive after high school graduation; and (3) financial constraints and opportunities related to revenues, obligations, and investment priorities. The text that follows identifies some of the key areas for leveraging improvement that emerged from the working groups and the full-group discussion that followed.

Human Capital: Work With People

Progress in all three domains calls for great people—individuals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to do difficult work, and (in many cases) to do it in new ways. However, meeting participants highlighted the shortage of effective professionals currently occupying key roles. Students desperately need phenomenal teachers, yet a teacher shortage compounds the ongoing challenge for districts to recruit, retain, and develop them. Transformative cultures of caring needed to address external influences on the learning environment demand a skill set from school and district leaders that is not readily found. The experiences and mind-sets needed for strategic budgeting also call for an approach that has not been necessary in a traditional approach to district resource

allocation. People matter a great deal, and moving forward calls for marked improvements in capacity.

The instructional core working group in particular focused on the need to build a human capital pipeline and pathways for career growth and advancement. The state's teacher shortage amplifies an existing challenge for ensuring high-quality instruction in every classroom. A path forward therefore includes expanding the supply of new teachers coming through preservice programs, as well as strategic attention to growing and developing talented educators throughout their careers so that they stay and thrive in the profession. Group members advocated for paying attention not just to issues of career pathways and promotion, but to cultivating the self-efficacy that drives many teachers to the profession in the first place.

Other areas of attention related to human capital include professional learning for teachers and leaders alike, as well as the knowledge and skills that great leaders need to develop to move the work of teaching and learning

Continuous Improvement

To make progress with the challenges ahead, meeting participants throughout the afternoon emphasized the need to create cultures of ongoing reflection and improvement. Although Common Core implementation has been underway for several years, the demand for teachers to improve their practice in a manner consistent with the standards remains a heavy lift. Strategic planning and budgeting calls for a skill set that district leaders did not need under the previous school financial system. Building these skill sets is not merely a matter of training. As one individual explained, "The goal is to continually get better at getting better." Another participant described a need to focus "on systems change and how [a] district can be self-reliant on its own knowledge and its own ability to learn. It's the only way we can make large-scale changes across the state, because they can't wait for someone else to come and show them." If districts are to make progress with improving practice in a variety of domains, meeting participants argued for the importance of building learning systems.

An orientation toward continuous improvement involves a change in mind-set. In a state that has relied for years on a compliance mentality, the shift to continuous improvement is notable and challenging. This mind-set calls for an evolution from standardizing approaches to focusing on the local context and tailoring approaches to its strengths and needs. It means a shift from short-term to long-term thinking, especially amidst political pressure to move fast. It requires a different perspective on failure and understanding its role in the process of innovation and improvement.

Conversation on Day 2 of the meeting examined continuous improvement in greater detail; that discussion begins on page 8 of this summary.

Culture of Care

Poverty and its associated trauma profoundly impact student learning needs. Students struggle to thrive outside of school when their physical and emotional well-being is under attack. Just as importantly, those scars come with students into the school walls. As one individual explained, "Once kids step inside the doors of the school, the out-of-school factors become in-school factors." Schools must address these issues to prepare students for academic and life success.

The working group who explored external factors emphasized the importance fostering a positive transformational culture of care. Several participants cited research and professional experience about the importance of students having a strong connection with a caring adult within their school. Efforts to advance social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies can be a critical component of the work. The challenge for districts is to develop a systemic approach that creates these connections for every student. This effort requires integration with other elements of a district's work. For example, SEL efforts are most effective when embedded into the work of classroom instruction rather than treated as an add-on. Adults are best positioned to help students make important emotional connections when they learn to build strong relationships with one another and with students.

The group's conversation suggests that a continued focus on district efforts to develop SEL among students and adults is appropriate for navigating the challenges ahead.

Finances

Any effort to improve calls into question how districts will pay for what they do. The morning presentations and working group conversation emphasized the need for districts to effectively manage finances to navigate the constraints and opportunities that shape districts' abilities to meet their students' needs. LCFF has created a space for districts to align their resource allocation decisions with strategies that will advance local priorities and goals. Early implementation experiences have revealed, however, that many districts are not yet well positioned to do this effectively. A theory of action about the relationship among goals, strategies, and budgets is often poorly articulated or missing entirely. Systems often struggle to understand whom they serve, what they need, and how to identify their predictable failures. Pressure inside and outside of a system often pushes districts to adopt a short-term focus that could conflict with progress toward long-term impacts. A disconnect also exists between the eight state priorities required at the state level and the more focused and locally tailored attention favored by many researchers and district leaders. Moreover, current data availability is insufficient to connect postsecondary outcomes with K–12 measures. Collectively, these challenges make it difficult for districts to align resources with their priorities and activities.

Thus, areas for attention moving forward include building district capacity for strategic planning, as well as creating opportunities for districts to share innovative ideas with one another as they manage their respective financial situations. This focus all takes place against the backdrop of LCFF and refining the imperfections of the system while maintaining support for the focus on equity and local control that drove its creation.

Shared Ownership

The obstacles students and their communities face extend far beyond the walls of the K–12 school system, but the supports and opportunities available to make a difference do as well. An important area of focus for school systems, then, is partnering with individuals and organizations within and beyond school walls to pursue community needs and goals. Group members emphasized that districts should not simply embrace partnership for the sake of collaboration; shared work needs to be goal oriented and related to kids' needs. Group members also advocated for partnerships to be responsive to their local context. The approach to shared ownership in a rural district without a network of government resources and community-based organizations will take a much different form than in an urban district with existing initiatives and relationships. Finally, group members highlighted the importance of compelling data to mobilize action among a set of partners in service of collective goals. The Collaborative's March 2017 meeting on collective impact provides a useful foundation and model for continuing to explore cross-sector partnerships.

Shared ownership requires stronger communication efforts to build understanding between districts and their communities. Community members are not just potential partners; they are potential political allies, yet multiple participants noted that the narrative about education in California does not reflect the reality that districts face or focus on the big picture about the direction forward. From a funding perspective, for example, the general public does not understand districts' financial constraints. To the contrary, LCFF has left some with the perception that schools are flush with cash. A proactive and strategic communication effort can help bridge the gap in understanding about the circumstances facing K–12 educators. It can help parents, community members, and partners invest in (and contribute to) district plans moving forward. And it can help build and maintain the constituency of support needed to move K–12 policy and practice in the right direction.

Building Capacity for Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement emerged as one of the more prominent areas of focus from the Day 1 conversation. It also aligned closely with one of the pre-reading pieces, a keynote address from Tony Bryk to the Carnegie Summit on Improvement in Education that outlined the key principles of improvement science. As the meeting moved to its second day, meeting participants explored how to go about engaging in continuous improvement and to develop a deeper understanding of what it means.

Exploring Continuous Improvement at the Local Level

To anchor conversations in the realities of district practice, presentations about the CORE Districts and Fresno Unified School District (USD) described two concrete approaches to pursuing continuous improvement at the local level. Principles of improvement science guided both efforts, and for an emerging approach that is still being tested in the field of education, their experiences helped to identify some important lessons learned.

CORE Districts

Rick Miller of the CORE Districts began with an explanation of how a set of districts have aimed to leverage the strength of a network to pursue continuous improvement. Since the CORE Districts began their work in 2010, they have continued to refine their strategies as leaders have learned from their successes and challenges. For example, after early efforts to pair high- and low-performing schools in a mentoring relationship met with limited success, their approach evolved to leverage communities of practice that follow established structures for working together. Now, as the network moves into what its leaders describe as CORE 3.0, it has adopted the networked improvement community model developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. After extensive reflection and discussion, the CORE Districts collectively identified a shared focus for their work, to "improve math proficiency of African American and Hispanic/Latino students, especially Grades 4–8."

CORE Districts leaders began their efforts by acting as "system detectives," interviewing high- and low-performing teachers and students to better understand the shortcomings and barriers that exist in current mathematics practice. Through that process, leaders identified primary and secondary drivers for the goals they wanted to achieve in math proficiency and the narrowing of achievement gaps.[2] For example, a draft product of these conversations focused on teacher knowledge, training, and mind-set as one primary driver of desired student outcomes in mathematics. The hypothesized secondary drivers that might influence teacher knowledge, training, and mind-set included mathematical content knowledge, teacher mind-set toward mathematics, new teacher induction, new teacher coaching, and mathematics professional development. The team then developed some change ideas that could help address those drivers. In this case, an early draft named a new teacher pre-institute induction experience and a new teacher coaching protocol as potential change ideas. To move forward, CORE District leaders then outlined their roles to support local action teams in running plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles built around the change ideas.

Fresno Unified School District

Jorge Aguilar described Fresno USD's efforts to engage deeply with data to address issues of undermatching high school graduates to postsecondary opportunities. District leaders examined 8 years of National Student Clearinghouse data on student enrollment in the University of California (UC) and CSU systems, then backward mapped that information to see enrollee's academic profiles when they were still Fresno USD students. This process revealed troubling trends of students not pursuing their best higher education options; students frequently enrolled at colleges with a lower level of rigor than their academic preparation and achievement would have enabled them to access. In one slice of the data, district leaders found that 104 students were eligible for the most selective CSUs, including 57 low-income students. However, only 51 students overall applied to these schools, and only 22 low-income students applied. Moreover, of the 104 eligible students, 25 applied to

[2] Note that at the time of the meeting, this set of primary drivers, secondary drivers, and change ideas was still undergoing a process of refinement.

only one CSU, effectively limiting their options after admission decisions were made. Overall, only 382 of 1,775 students eligible for UC or CSU even applied.

District leaders then performed a root-cause analysis to identify the reasons behind the problem and directed their attention to the causes that they could control. A web-based tool enabled staff to develop and upload a fishbone diagram that articulated the root causes and contributing factors for their problems. Following a similar model to the one described for the CORE Districts, Fresno USD identified change ideas to address the problems, then assigned an action owner to design and implement PDSA cycles around each component of the change ideas. For example, the district sent a customized letter advising students to consider applying to particular institutions for which they were academically prepared. As a result, the number of applicants increased from 382 students in 2015–16 to 578 in 2016–17.

Reflections on Engaging in Continuous Improvement

Reflections from Miller, Aguilar, and other participants around the room highlighted some of the lessons learned from the CORE Districts and Fresno USD work that apply to continuous improvement efforts at multiple levels of the system.

Problem-Based Action

Initial reactions to the presentations highlighted the value of a problem-centered approach to improvement. By deeply examining troubling outcomes and working to understand the contributing factors that underlie them, district leaders can focus their attention on issues within their control that are most likely to move the needle on student results.

A problem-based approach contrasts with local, state, and federal policy that has spawned a compliance orientation to meeting externally identified actions and priorities. Participants discussed the use of checklists as one way of illustrating this distinction. Fresno USD's data system and associated outreach to students often took the form of checklists for guidance counselors and others to complete. For example, a work process developed within the district guides counselors through a series of steps to follow for each student who applied to at least one CSU or UC campus. The steps include activities like "Based on campuses applied to, counselor discusses college 'fit' using the 'Which college fits YOU?' handout" and "Counselor collects parental level of support *and* IHE rankings from student and documents on student's IHE Dashboard."[3]

The list raised questions about whether such an effort reinforced a longstanding compliance mentality within the district. One participant argued that a distinction between a checklist and a compliance mind-set is the use of the checklist to see whether an intervention has an impact, and a willingness to shift practice in response. Another participant articulated a similar distinction about the motivation and use of a checklist, noting that danger arises when the details of the checklist displace the end goal for its users. He suggested that "if, in contrast, the goal is around some essential practice—and the

[3] IHE is an abbreviation for institution of higher education.

traditional practice is some substantial distance from that—if compliance then becomes a tool for moving toward that essential practice, then that can be a helpful thing."

Motivations and Mind-sets

Even with a problem-based focus, leaders in districts and other organizations still need to work with people's existing orientation, as motivations and mind-sets can impact the speed and effectiveness of forward progress. The CORE Districts have realized that the compliance mentality within central offices is strong. Even though LCFF has theoretically freed districts to operate with more flexibility, the approach to school improvement ingrained through decades of compliance has a tight hold on many individuals and organizations. Moving in a new direction of reflection and change requires persistent efforts to transform the mind-sets and behaviors within systems. In addition, participants recognized that political dynamics are at play in an improvement process, and different actors have motivations beyond simply getting better. For example, with regard to a college access and completion agenda, there are incentives for longstanding practices of remediation in higher education, and the CSU system operates with significant constraints around admitting and graduating students. Individuals and organizations might focus on a particular problem, but other problems might supersede their efforts over which they have no control. Data systems like the one in Fresno USD could help to prompt honest conversation by placing all the facts on the table to motivate discussion and action.

The Right Grain Size for Action

An additional tension inherent in the work is selecting the appropriate grain size for productive and meaningful growth. The goal for the CORE Districts is to motivate what Miller characterized as "massive systemic change," yet the networked improvement community approach operates through small pieces that can be controlled and run through rapid cycles. Achieving change at scale can seem remote when operating on very specific problems—in the case of CORE, these were problems around which teams aim to work through PDSA cycles each week. Miller argued, however, that "The idea of being rapid is that it changes a mind-set," and that the mind-set might be what helps to transform entire systems. He similarly added, "We have to be audacious in our goals, but we also have to be realistic about what we can accomplish."

The Importance of Context

Meeting participants emphasized how local context should shape an approach to continuous improvement. For several years, federal policy and parts of the research community prized the lessons available from randomized control trials, which focused on standardized interventions and moved the field away from localized application of knowledge. PDSA cycles and the overall context of continuous improvement are a departure from that mentality in that they focus on the ongoing refinement of interventions shaped by the expertise of local actors in response to specific local conditions. Because improvement science is relatively new to education, participants advocated for learning how it applies in different conditions. Continuous improvement will likely look different in a small rural district than in a large urban environment, for example.

Sustained Commitment

Additional comments suggested that continuous improvement is a long-term effort that requires a sustained commitment—and it raises questions about viability of cultures and practices given the all-to-often high turnover of key systems leaders. Miller raised an issue that echoed Day 1 observations about rising above short-term thinking and planning by saying, "It's a journey, and it takes time, and you have to be willing to take the time." The work in the CORE Districts is just getting underway; the set of primary drivers, secondary drivers, and change ideas was still in the process of revision during the meeting, and details will continue to evolve over time. Fresno USD's strategies to address undermatching are also relatively recent, but they build on the strength of a data system that the district has been developing for several years. During the 2016–17 school year, two instrumental senior leaders who have championed the work have departed, however, and questions remain about how the district will sustain the effort.

Appropriate Expectations for Progress

Tied closely to the importance of sustained commitment is managing the expectations for results. Stakeholders within and outside systems need to understand that the work takes time. One participant told the story of a children's hospital transitioning to a new data dashboard; the leader of that transition reported that it took 6 years for people throughout the hospital to really own the new system. Conversation therefore emphasized a balance of urgency for improvement with a realistic understanding of the change process. As one individual suggested, "We shouldn't beat ourselves up, but we should be ever impatient about trying to get there."

The Role of Failure

In an environment of compliance and accountability, many educators have learned to fear failure as a label that invites judgment and sanctions. Improvement science preaches, in contrast, that failure is part of the process of innovation. As one participant declared, "If you're not willing to accept failure, you're not going to change." A movement toward embracing failure—as part of ongoing forward progress—requires appropriate messaging about what failure means, the role it plays, and how systems respond when it happens. As part of this communication effort, participants emphasized the need to contextualize failure. Many parents and other stakeholders resist the notion of schools "experimenting with our kids," often preferring the known current state to an untested new approach. In response to these concerns, it is important to help parents understand that, as one individual stated, "Failure is the current state." Innovation—and the inevitable short-term failures that accompany it—is not a luxury undertaken at the whim of curious administrators, but it is a necessity to move systems of instruction and student learning forward.

Developing a State System of Support for Continuous Improvement

Based on the discussion about continuous improvement at the local level, conversation turned to the statewide system of support needed to facilitate ongoing reflection and improvement. The group began its conversation about the most recent proposal for the

statewide system of support; much of that discussion took up the lens of continuous improvement from the prior session.

Current Proposals for the State Accountability and Intervention System

A memorandum developed for the July 2017 State Board of Education meeting describes a proposal for California's integrated statewide system of support. The document articulates an overall goal for the system, "to help LEAs and their schools meet the needs of each student they serve, with a focus on building local capacity to sustain improvement and to effectively address disparities in opportunities and outcomes." To build capacity at the local level, the system identifies three levels of support: help provided to all districts and schools (Level 1), differentiated assistance geared to address specific performance issues (Level 2), and intensive interventions for districts or schools with persistent performance issues (Level 3). The memorandum identifies a set of supports available for each level and names the California Department of Education, county offices of education (COEs), and California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) as agencies with responsibilities for coordinating those supports. One of the key CCEE roles is as a referral agency, a broker of resources for local educators.

Reactions to the Preliminary State Plan

Meeting participants first raised reservations about the identification process for districts and schools in need of intervention. Part of the challenge relates to grain size. Tension exists between the federal system—which focuses exclusively on schools—and the state law—which acknowledges the district role in school improvement and therefore requires the identification of districts in need of intervention. Confusion might easily emerge from these different approaches about which districts or schools meet criteria for intervention and who is responsible for improvement.

Comments also related to defining, characterizing, and responding to failure. Some participants worried about the multiple criteria that could trigger intervention. State law identifies eight state priority areas and 13 student subgroups, creating a vast number of opportunities to fall short of expectations. Because of this, and due largely to the special education subgroup, one participant estimated that between 65% and 80% of schools will trigger intervention. Acknowledging this likelihood, another individual warned that a system that cannot meaningfully identify districts and schools in greatest need of support cannot be effective: "If there are too many opportunities for failure, then everybody fails, and if everybody fails, then nobody fails."

Remarks about the proposed state plan also explored its support for continuous improvement. Following the session about continuous improvement at the local level, some participants observed that there was little evidence of the priorities from that discussion about capacity in the state plans. The document does not include a problem focus, it has no mention of a root cause analysis, and it makes no reference to a process through which districts and schools might address specific challenges that stand in the way of student learning. In the sparse details of the state plan, some participants saw an opportunity to build shared agreement across the state about practices and processes that have a chance

of supporting improvement, to move "from a stance of expertise to a stance of facilitated inquiry." Although the state plan includes language that could be interpreted through this lens—for example, "the principles at the heart of LCFF require that state and regional agencies providing assistance *work with* local educators and stakeholders…rather than developing a strategy or interventions to be *done to* the LEA or school"—meeting participants expressed concerns that players who have provided support in the past will still be involved but may gravitate toward traditional approaches to providing support. These organizations may not have the mind-set or capacity to be facilitative in the way that continuous improvement calls for.

Extending a theme voiced throughout the meeting, participants emphasized that communication is critical in any statewide effort. Conversations about failure require a different framing and response than the punitive approach of the No Child Left Behind Act and other federal and state policies. Participants also warned against the danger of using jargon without embracing the underlying principles. Terms like "continuous improvement" have become widespread in the California education community. Unless state and local practices truly embrace and facilitate processes of ongoing reflective inquiry and refinement of approaches, such terms may merely apply a new label to a well-practiced and deeply flawed approach to school improvement.

Setting an Agenda for the Collaborative

The meeting closed with an opportunity to reflect on the major themes of the meeting and the implications for how the Collaborative should organize its work in the months and years ahead.

Commonality Around Problems of Practice

Conversation on Day 2 reinforced the big ideas that emerged from the working groups on Day 1 (see pages 5-8) and spelled out several potential areas of attention for upcoming Collaborative meetings and activities. These areas for future discussion include the following:

1. An emphasis on **people** to develop an education community with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to do the work, and to do it in new ways
2. Attention to **continuous improvement**, that is, understanding what it is and building individual and organizational capacity to embrace and engage it as a way of approaching educational improvement
3. Advancing social and emotional learning to build a **culture of care** that recognizes and addresses the needs of all adults and students in our education system
4. Effectively managing **finances** to navigate the constraints and opportunities that shape districts' abilities to meet their students' needs
5. Building **shared ownership** for education between schools and their communities to make stronger connections and leverage the strengths of partners all around the system to advance school and community goals

The Collaborative will look to identify problems of practice within these domains in our identification of meeting topics, development of written products, and pursuit of additional activities, to help Collaborative members and the state overall address the challenges ahead.

Commonality Around Areas for Attention

In addition to the problems on which the Collaborative might focus, participants highlighted two issues that merit attention through all of the Collaborative's work. First and foremost among these is a focus on equity. Poverty profoundly impacts students' life experiences and ability to succeed in school, and the resources available to schools and their communities often mirror the circumstances of students and their families. Attention to traditionally underserved students and addressing opportunity gaps has grounded the Collaborative's work since its inception, and it has provided a through-line for its 11 years of meetings, publications, and other activities. Participant feedback affirmed that equity needs to be an explicit anchor for the work as the group moves forward.

A secondary area of attention is communication. Participants frequently observed that the general public—and often policymakers as well—have a view of public schools that is not aligned with the experiences of the people in the room. In the absence of clear messaging about the strengths and needs of the system, the state risks moving in the wrong direction—especially as upcoming elections bring candidates advocating for change. As one person warned, "If we don't craft a common message, others will, and we may not like what they're saying." These observations suggest that as the Collaborative moves forward, it should approach any meeting topic with an eye toward building understanding within and beyond the walls of the school district through effective outreach.

Ideas for Next Steps

Meeting participants identified potential next steps for the Collaborative. Many of these ideas centered on possible locations and topics for upcoming member meetings. For example, in recognition of the prominent role that COEs play in implementing LCFF and are likely to play in a statewide system of support, the Collaborative might consider visiting a county office to examine how best to leverage this role. If innovation is to be an area of focus, then perhaps a charter management organization—part of a movement founded on the promise of innovation—could be instructive to the work of traditional districts. In recognition of the nascent work of improvement science in the field of education, the Collaborative could consider a visit to another industry in which PDSA cycles in service of continuous improvement have taken hold.

The Collaborative staff will continue to revisit notes from this meeting and engage in conversation with members to help refine a plan for moving forward. Immediately, it will work to finalize the date, topic, and location for the next meeting. In the meantime, the Collaborative staff will continue to pursue publications and activities that share key lessons from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators. As always, resources from this and previous meetings, updates regarding Collaborative members, and information concerning upcoming events are available on our website at www.cacollaborative.org.