

District-to-District Partnerships

A Research Brief

December 2015



This work was supported by the Center on School Turnaround (PR/Award Number S283B120015) and the California Comprehensive Center (PR/Award Number S283B120012) through funding from the U.S. Department of Education. It does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

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Introduction

This brief provides findings from interviews with stakeholders engaged in four district-to-district partnerships to better enable the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) and others to offer technical assistance to California districts.

California is in the midst of major changes in education: shifting to a new Local Control Funding Formula, transitioning instructional practices to meet new state standards, and adopting an enhanced accountability system. Districts will be required to change how they approach planning and program implementation to meet these complex challenges. In this new context, county offices of education, school districts, and individual schools will need to engage with stakeholders to create and monitor locally meaningful plans.

Across the country and within California, examples of peer partnerships have emerged as an approach to creating an assistance model around shared values and objectives. The use of local education agency partnerships, including professional learning communities (PLCs), has the potential to play a significant role in supporting regional meaning-making of education reforms and building district capacity. Such partnerships in California could help with the shift to local decision-making, deepen practices for collaborating with stakeholders, and build confidence in planning and allocating resources.

Methods

Based on background research and staff recommendations, the California Comprehensive Center and the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd (Center) identified and studied four district-to-district partnerships from throughout the United States.¹ Center staff began by researching each partnership's website (if available) and then interviewing key personnel, who included partnership facilitators (those responsible for maintaining the partnership) and district staff directly involved in the partnership.

During interviews, facilitators and/or district staff were asked about the partnership's background, rationale, facilitation, outcomes, and challenges. WestEd staff recorded, transcribed, and analyzed the interviews to capture emerging lessons.

¹ As an additional source of information, the research team reviewed available documents from a state project in New York that linked high-performing districts with low-performing districts. However, the majority of state personnel associated with this project had left the department before interviews could be arranged. See Appendix 2 for more information.

Background

The use of PLCs to promote collaboration between teachers has been embraced as an effective strategy to improve teaching for more than a decade (Schmoker, 2005; Hunt & Carroll, 2003; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). The use of PLCs in education settings beyond the classroom, however, is less well documented or practiced. Fullan (2005 & 2015) suggests that a total system focus on PLCs at the school/community level, the district/regional level, and the state or province policy level could have a lasting and profound impact on student outcomes. In California, the shift to local control provides a rich opportunity to use district or regional PLCs to support plan development and effective program implementation.

Previous studies of district and regional partnerships have identified three areas of consideration. First, regional differences may impact the effectiveness of a collaborative planning model, and therefore, it is important to consider different governance and participation structures so that various stakeholders' input can be included in the partnership. Second, when developing a collaborative network, it is important to intentionally build relationships within and across the partnership to ensure that participants have common expectations for the partnership's outcome and a safe space to share accomplishments and challenges. Third, use of an outside facilitator to create a structured, equitable, and constructive collaborative space for participants is essential to build trust, maintain focus, and facilitate communication.

Please see Appendix 1 of this brief for a more comprehensive literature review.

Partnership Profiles

The following profiles give a brief introduction to each partnership that Center staff studied, along with an outcome highlight cited by interviewees.

California Office to Reform Education (CORE)

Formed in 2011, CORE districts include Clovis, Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco, Santa Ana, and Sanger. Collectively, these districts include over a million California students. CORE's mission is for the districts to work together to innovate, implement, and scale new strategies and tools that help students succeed. Specifically, the ten districts work on three main areas of collaboration: standards, assessment, and instruction; professional capital; and a school quality-improvement system.

CORE's governing board is composed of the partner districts' superintendents, and CORE is largely supported through foundation funding.

Outcome Highlight: Interviewees described their School Quality Improvement Index as a major partnership accomplishment. One stakeholder pointed out, “As we finish our School Quality Improvement Index and start to really use our data system to drive our shared interventions, I think that’s how we’re really going to make significant gains.” Another stakeholder explained that this new system would lead to a “massive impact,” as schools would no longer be judged by the narrow lens of standardized test scores; future decision-making would be based on a much more holistic perspective.

Five District Partnership (5DP)

Formed in 2012, the 5DP is a collaborative partnership between five districts in Massachusetts – Chelsea, Everett, Malden, Revere, and Winthrop. The high mobility of students between the five districts, combined with the implementation of Common Core State Standards, led to the creation of the 5DP. The 5DP’s mission is to close the achievement gap and maximize resources by aligning curriculum, performance standards, assessments, instruction, and professional development across the five districts.

The five district superintendents govern the 5DP, and it is supported through a combination of grant funding and contributions from the five districts.

Outcome Highlight: Participants explained that they have increased education consistency across the five districts. One district participant noted, “It [the partnership] has allowed us to have capacity to fully align our curriculum, and each district now has a standards-based curriculum using the *Understanding by Design Framework*.” She elaborated that this alignment ensures there are no “gaps or redundancies” for students that move between districts.

Ohio Appalachian Collaborative (OAC)

Established in 2010, the OAC is currently a partnership between 24 rural Appalachian school districts. The districts formed the partnership to implement education innovations, share and generate resources, influence policy, and build community.

The OAC began as a partnership of 21 districts that received a Race to the Top grant. In 2013, the OAC received a Straight A grant, and 17 of the current 24 districts were part of the original OAC. Throughout its existence, the OAC has been governed by Battelle for Kids, which manages the grant and facilitates collaboration across the districts.

Outcome Highlight: Participants cited their progress in offering many dual enrollment options for their students (high school classes that count for college credits in Ohio). To accomplish this, the 24 districts had to work together to certify as many of their teachers as possible to offer an increasing number of dual enrollment courses. According to one interviewee, this option has saved local families over \$3 million dollars in college tuition.

Schools Collaboration and Leadership Expansion Project (SCALE Up)

Formed in 2013, the SCALE Up collaborative is composed of six small, rural school districts in California's Central Valley (Sanger Unified, Firebaugh-Las Delta Unified, Fowler Unified, Mendota Unified, Earlimart, and Kingsburg Elementary Charter). The mission of SCALE Up is to improve member districts' capacity through cross-district leadership, development, and training. The districts are currently focused on an Early Literacy Project to measure and improve literacy and language development for their transitional kindergarten through second grade students.

An executive team composed of the six district superintendents governs SCALE Up. California Education Partners operates and facilitates the partnership.

Outcome Highlight: Interviewees pointed out that an early commitment included sharing and learning from each other's data. However, not all districts were using the same data system. The districts made a group decision and collectively switched their data systems to the same platform – a real test of commitment. Although it is too early to analyze the effect on student outcomes, one stakeholder pointed out that this transition now allows the group to speak the same language when working together on early literacy and to share information more effectively.

Emerging Lessons

Although these partnerships were formed for differing reasons in diverse regions, some crosscutting lessons emerged that are largely in line with the background literature. Interview participants felt strongly that anyone attempting to initiate district-to-district partnerships take these five lessons into account.

- Organize partnerships in response to a common need and ensure that ongoing activities and goals focus on issues that continue to resonate.
- Ensure that superintendents are actively involved in shaping the focus and progression of the partnership and strengthening accountability.
- Engage multiple levels of district stakeholders – from school staff to superintendents – to distribute leadership.
- Employ the services of a dedicated third-party facilitator who can build or has existing relationships with participants.
- Take time to build relationships and trust among participating districts.

Evidence and Examples

The following information describes the evidence and synthesis that informed the emerging lessons, including specific examples of each finding.

The partnerships were organized in response to a common need, and ongoing activities focused on issues that continued to resonate with all districts.

Participants from each partnership stressed the importance of their partnerships being founded on a common need that generated interest and commitment. In some instances, the need was a specific issue that the districts wanted to work on together (e.g., early childhood literacy). Others came together to address regional concerns, such as student mobility, and yet others collaborated out of a perceived necessity to pool resources.

Interviewees from the SCALE Up partnership explained that they originally attempted to build a partnership around the notion that Sanger would be a training district for other local districts to learn from. This idea failed to capture the interest of the surrounding districts. In one participant's words, "The districts didn't like the idea that another district was going to show them how to do it right." Sanger then shifted the focus to this question: "Would you be willing to come together as a group of districts focused on one particular problem of practice where we learn from each other?" This approach generated a substantial level of interest and began the SCALE Up partnership, with a focus on the mutually identified common need of early childhood literacy.

Similarly, the 5DP was born out of local research on the impact of student mobility in urban districts. The five urban districts in the 5DP are in close proximity to each other – so close that student mobility between districts created a need for consistency of education across the districts. As one district participant pointed out, ". . . the research was showing that we could mitigate the achievement gap on these [mobile] students if we were to have a more consistent educational experience [across districts]." The districts started working together in 2012 with the explicit purpose of aligning curriculum, assessments, and teaching practice across the five districts.

The districts' superintendents were actively involved and shaped the focus and progression of the partnership while also strengthening accountability.

Interviewees from each of the four partnerships indicated that district superintendents played an important role in ongoing partnership activities. Facilitators and participants often credited the superintendents' high level of involvement as critical success factors. The frequency of superintendent involvement varied slightly across partnerships, but all involvement entailed regular meetings (e.g., quarterly, monthly), and the superintendents acted as a steering committee for the partnership's activities.

For example, the superintendents of CORE meet quarterly and drive CORE's progression through facilitated meetings. One district interviewee explained that the superintendents' involvement has been one of the biggest factors in making the partnership work: "...the superintendents and boards of the school districts must be 100 percent committed to

doing this. If you don't have that, and you're not giving your staff the direction, it's not going to work.”

The SCALE Up partnership has superintendents meet at SCALE Up summits twice a year. The first meeting is to listen to team members discuss common needs and outline the work for the year ahead. The second meeting brings the superintendents back together with team members to discuss the work and alter it as necessary. As one interviewee stated, “...[district staff] began to own the work and the superintendents began to own the pushing and influencing [of the partnership].”

By contrast, superintendents within the 5DP meet monthly (either in person or on the phone). The connection points keep the partnership on track, talking about goals and planning future work. A district leader pointed out that this setup allows the superintendents to be actively involved and “help drive from the top.” Another 5DP interviewee pointed out that the superintendents' active involvement sets a certain tone that helps ensure forward movement and “...holds us accountable to each other.”

The partnerships engaged multiple levels of district stakeholders – from school staff to superintendents – to distribute leadership.

While each partnership relied on active superintendent involvement, the partnerships' structures allowed the involvement of many district personnel. Two of the partnerships took this involvement even further – to the school level. Interviewees pointed out that the involvement of district personnel helped lead to concrete outcomes and also ensured that the partnerships could endure turnover at both the superintendent and staff levels.

The CORE district partnership's structure includes quarterly superintendent meetings and more frequent meetings of district staff organized into groups to address particular goals. Each district within CORE selects the personnel who are best suited to represent them in a particular group. One interviewee pointed out that this approach to engaging district staff was intentional from the start: “We were not going to be just a collection of superintendents, but we were going to be vertically aligned as well. We've found a way for the district staff at the cabinet level and below to be intimately involved in CORE's work.”

In another example, the SCALE Up partnership is led by the superintendent summits and complemented by monthly leadership team meetings. The leadership teams for each district focus on the partnership's goals and are comprised of the chief academic officer, principals, and teacher leads. While these teams formally meet monthly, they touch base at other times between meetings. One district participant pointed out how critical this wide involvement has been and contrasted it with experiences in other less successful partnerships where the superintendent was the sole district representative: “Well, that dissolves it. The superintendent may not be available every time they want to hold a meeting.”

The partnerships employed a dedicated third-party facilitator who built or had existing relationships with the participants.

Each of the four active partnerships is facilitated by a neutral third party who manages the day-to-day activities to support the partnership. Interviewees reported that these activities included coordinating with district superintendents, interfacing with the district staff and teachers implementing the initiatives, and ensuring that the partnership remained aligned with its mission and vision. Facilitators also helped to ensure buy-in across the districts and problem-solve issues as they arose.

The facilitator of the 5DP, for example, spent the first weeks in her role meeting one-on-one with superintendents and district staff to listen to their hopes and concerns for the partnership. She pointed out that taking time to understand the context of each of the districts has allowed her to act as the central point of contact for superintendents as well as district staff. She focuses a lot of her time on building connections across districts to ensure alignment and to promote a sharing of ideas. One district leader noted that the facilitator “plays the perfect liaison between the superintendents and the rest of the 5DP. . . . It’s a key role, and I don’t think we would have much success, if we didn’t have it.”

The OAC was initiated by a former rural superintendent who used his past experiences and relationships to gain buy-in from other rural superintendents to participate in the partnership. Once the OAC was established, Battelle for Kids hired a dedicated staff person who interfaces with district teams. As one district leader shared, this facilitator “...keeps things going...keeps thinking, keeps communicating, and keeps bringing people back together for conversations.” Another district leader agreed, stating that without the facilitator’s guidance and regular reminders, they simply would not keep commitments.

The facilitators of CORE provide a range of support to districts, including holding one-on-one meetings with district teams, offering professional development from experts in the field, providing targeted support for district content specialists, and sharing districts’ exemplary practices with each other. One district participant in CORE noted, “I think that the facilitating role that the CORE folks play is really critical. They do a really good job of ensuring that everyone is able to speak their minds freely.”

The partnerships took time to build relationships and trust among participating districts.

The facilitators we interviewed in all four partnerships discussed their intentional efforts to get to know district superintendents and staff and to create a space where people felt comfortable being vulnerable. The superintendents, for their part, modeled being open and collaborative for their district teams, which led to deeper cooperation across the partnership. While this level of transparency was initially challenging, participants saw

that engaging in a PLC led to deeper and more regular collaboration (even on topics the partnership did not cover).

For example, early in the partnership, CORE intentionally began focusing on building relationships among the district participants and facilitating opportunities for district teams to share their strengths and challenges. As one facilitator noted, “...early on in the partnership, we thought that [if] we could bring a bunch of districts together, they would somewhat facilitate themselves. They could share what they knew, or they didn’t know. What we quickly realized is that the relationship-building component is really important...an outside facilitator can help design and structure that.” Another interviewee at CORE agreed, saying, “A lot of the work is taking the time to get to know each other and building relationships . . . making mistakes and then building structures that work for you independently. It’s not a cookie cutter-type thing.”

While the facilitators of these partnerships have created a space for transparency and sharing, the superintendents have intentionally opened themselves to collaboration. A leader in the 5DP shared that for a district partnership to be successful, teams must “come to the table without an ego and let go of territorialism. That’s hard, but it is doable, especially if you keep focusing on the greater imperative, which is student achievement.” Similarly, a superintendent in the OAC shared that upon joining the group, “Four or five superintendents [in the OAC] reached out to me and got me up to speed on what’s been going on with the collaborative...That power of coming to a new district and then having this wrap-around support, which I didn’t even have in my previous district that was triple the size of this one, was pretty dynamic.” Finally, a district participant in CORE noted, “The power of this [is]...the empowerment of...people who are brilliant and sharing their brilliance and opening up to being criticized. I think that’s really important, that you just have to leave your egos aside and go for it.”

Challenges

While there were many positive outcomes from the partnerships, there were also some common challenges.

Some of the partnerships struggled to maintain district autonomy while also promoting uniformity across partnership goals.

District leaders and facilitators alike noted that ensuring sufficient alignment across districts, while also allowing districts to maintain their individuality, can be difficult. Partnership facilitators shared that they are constantly evaluating the appropriate number of partnership initiatives and the level of alignment required for implementation. For example, in the 5DP, while all of the districts share a common scope and sequence to

instruction in English language arts, districts individualize this scope by determining what books they use at each grade level.

Additionally, two of the partnerships have been impacted by varied levels of district skill, both in terms of the level of investment in the partnerships' goals and in their ability to carry out the work. Interviewees expressed that this dynamic can lead the more prepared districts to feel held back, while the districts less capable of implementing the initiatives feel pushed too fast. Facilitators pointed out that differentiated support has been important to meet individual district needs. One facilitator noted, "Trying to plan meetings, make sure everybody's on task, and create activities that are meaningful for everybody when they're all in different places – that's a challenge."

For each initiative the partnerships did take on, superintendents had to analyze how to align their districts' systems and staff, which can mean letting go of autonomy, speeding up or slowing down the pace of the work to keep in step with partner districts, and navigating the challenges of implementing change at home. One interviewee noted, "I think probably, collaboration is just really, really hard. You have a group of folks who have run their own organizations...[To collaborate, you must] give your autonomy away a little bit. I think that has been the hardest part." Another interviewee agreed, "You have to be adaptable to [releasing full autonomy]...because if you're not, I don't think you can get the work done. All these districts have put aside some of their lasting traditions to be able to get into this to work with other school districts."

The distance between participating districts was often a challenge.

Another challenge participants encountered has been geographic distance, both from one another and from the facilitators. One district participant noted, "It's really difficult for us to have some sustained work together when we're [trying to meet up with staff from a district that is far away]. Geography has an impact on that." To address this challenge, facilitators balance the number of in-person meetings with virtual ones and travel to districts for some one-on-one meetings. Participants have been exploring different ways to collaborate, including by webinar and videoconferencing.

The turnover of leadership and key staff created challenges in each partnership.

Finally, each partnership has encountered turnover, both at the superintendent and staff levels. While the change in district leadership has impacted group dynamics, each partnership has maintained momentum by ensuring that the staff implementing the work understand and value it. As one facilitator noted, "We've found a way for the district staff at cabinet-level and below [to be] intimately involved in the [work]. By embedding it in the work of the district, when a leader leaves, there's still an institutional knowledge of the organization and of the collaboration that keeps people engaged and working on it."

Implications for the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence

The CCEE is well positioned to play an important role in both cultivating future partnerships and further researching best practices within existing partnerships. The following are options the CCEE could pursue.

Establish an infrastructure for districts to volunteer to be in a partnership.

The CCEE could develop an online system for volunteer districts to sign up to be in a district partnership. The system could identify needs and goals to allow CCEE staff to make appropriate linkages between districts with common needs that are geographically close to one another.

Create a network of facilitators by region and make contextually sensitive assignments.

The same system could include a database of willing facilitators to support the district partnerships. The CCEE, working in conjunction with the volunteer districts, could assign facilitators to each partnership. Facilitator assignments could be made based on a number of contextual considerations (e.g., geography and pre-existing relationships).

Work with new partnerships to help them build partnership blueprints.

The CCEE could work with the new partnerships to help each develop a research-informed framework for conducting the partnership. Topics could include meeting frequency, meeting structure, tools for distance meetings, agreements, and other foundational matters. Starting with a small number of new partnerships, the CCEE could learn valuable lessons and apply them to future partnerships.

Conduct ongoing research into existing and future partnerships to refine the approach.

The CCEE would be well positioned to study new and ongoing partnerships to refine best practices and provide continuous improvement assistance.

Conclusion

The shifting California education landscape calls for more meaningful collaboration and coordination of practices and resources across organizations. The emerging lessons here, although preliminary, promise a strong possibility that district-to-district partnerships can help educators address the complex challenges of local control, new standards, and new accountability. Policymakers and practitioners can play a crucial role in helping to actualize these lessons in technical assistance throughout the state. While promising, formation of district-to-district partnerships will require careful consideration of local

contexts and dedicated staff, who are able to coordinate with district teams, to ensure that the partnerships are relevant and supportive to participants.

Appendix 1: Literature Review

Research has found that when "teachers engage regularly in authentic 'joint work' focused on explicit, common learning goals, their collaboration pays off richly in the form of higher quality solutions to instructional problems, increased teacher confidence, and . . . remarkable gains in achievement" (Schmoker, 2005, p. xiii). This "joint work," commonly called professional learning communities (PLCs), supports teachers to work together to share experiences and challenges, develop common lessons, and review student achievement data. Fullan (2005) asserts that PLCs improve the professional capacity of teachers through "working together, [which cannot be learned] from a workshop or course. You need to learn it by doing it and getting better at it on purpose" (p. 19).

While *learning by doing* has been embraced as an effective strategy to improve teaching, the use of PLCs in education settings beyond the classroom is less well documented or practiced. Fullan (2005), however, suggests that a total system focus on PLCs at the school/community level, the district/regional level, and the state or province policy level could have a lasting and profound impact on student outcomes. DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) agree, stating, "The benefits of organizing schools and districts into professional learning communities in which educators work collaboratively with and learn from one another is one idea upon which educators can find common ground" (p. 9).

As PLCs are considered more broadly, there are some examples of districts and regions working collaboratively. Cases from the literature tend to fall within four general partnership configurations: (1) district-to-district; (2) foundation-to-district; (3) community organization-to-district; and (4) college/university-to-district. Reasons for collaborating generally fall within three categories: (1) to leverage power, voice, and resources for a common cause; (2) to address an emerging need or opportunity that is locally significant; or (3) as part of accessing funding or support for a particular program. This paper focuses on partnerships between districts or regions for the purpose of leveraging power and resources for a common cause or to address an emerging need or opportunity – areas that most closely align to the kind of collaboration that California's recent shifts call for.

In one example of an extensive regional partnership study, Finnegan et al. (2015) looked at three regional collaborations of school districts that partnered to address issues of racial segregation in Rochester, New York; Omaha, Nebraska; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. All partnerships in this study were focused on a specific goal – regulating inter-district transfer programs to produce more balanced student demographics in regions experiencing segregated enrollment. The research focus was on how each partnership's

core program features, including governance structures and resource distribution, impacted implementation and opportunities for students (Finnegan et al., 2015).

While the study's focus was on regional cooperation to address enrollment, Finnegan et al. offered findings that can be applied to partnership efforts more broadly. First, a prior history of collaboration among jurisdictions has a strong impact on the success of subsequent regional equity efforts. Second, understanding the local political context for stakeholder engagement shapes support for, and implementation of, the program. Third, more comprehensive programs require more policy advocacy, state-level inducement, and regional control of resources (Finnegan et al., 2015). Therefore, as partnerships are considered to promote and improve local decision-making in California, it will be important to understand how regional differences may impact a collaborative planning model's effectiveness. It will also be important to consider different governance and participation structures so that various stakeholders' input can be included in the partnership.

In another example of a detailed partnership study, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) looked at the Fresno Unified School District and Long Beach Unified School District collaboration. Called the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership, these districts entered into a formal learning arrangement to prepare all students for college and career (California Collaborative on District Reform, 2008). This partnership formed through conversations between the district superintendents, who found they shared a similar belief that district leaders and practitioners would benefit from studying their own practice and by learning from one another.

AIR documented the evolution of the Learning Partnership over its first four years and identified some key lessons that can be applied to other district-to-district partnerships:

- Identify and formalize common goals for the partnership, measures of success, and ways that districts will be held accountable for results.
- Build a partnership team and identify a district lead to guide the development of the partnership externally and internally.
- Develop relationships and trust so that participants are able to discuss challenges and engage in difficult conversations.
- Allow for an individual district to work at its own pace and provide space for teams within the partnership to engage differently.
- Deepen the culture of evidence-based practices to leverage a variety of data to measure progress and accelerate growth (California Collaborative on District Reform, 2008).

When developing a collaborative network, therefore, it is important not only to understand regional and state politics, but also to intentionally build relationships within

and across the partnership to ensure that participants have common expectations for the partnership's outcome and have a safe space to share accomplishments and challenges.

Other researchers have spent time studying school partnerships – with broad lessons that are likely applicable to district and regional partnerships. Muijs, Ainscow, and Chapman (2011) studied one federation (collaborative network) of rural schools in England to see if collaboration would have an impact on equity and a role in school improvement. The authors found that collaboration "can be a useful strategy for rural schools faced with issues such as scarce resources, limited capacity in terms of broadening curricular provision and remoteness from [local] decision-making centres" (p. 72). The article did note some challenges, however, including leaders perceiving inequities of voice and competition between schools, both of which made establishing trusting relationships across leaders of individual schools more challenging.

In the second example, AIR, as a part of the California Comprehensive Center, studied whether school visitations between lower- and higher-performing schools in California had an impact on knowledge sharing and development of effective school practices (Huberman et al., 2011). AIR found sufficient success in this model that it recommended that the California Department of Education consider "making the school visitation process, and/or other approaches to developing cross-school and cross-district communities, a part of its overall school- and district-improvement plan" (Huberman et al., 2011, p. 25). AIR did note, however, that facilitation would be required at the county and district levels. These studies reinforce the potential positive impact of partnerships noted above and also raise the importance of a third-party facilitator to create a structured, equitable, and constructive collaborative space for participants.

Appendix 2: New York Partnerships: Dissemination Grants

The research team also studied two recent grant opportunities in New York that promote partnerships across schools and/or districts. The first grant program in 2012, called the Commissioner's Schools Dissemination Grants, identified five of the highest-performing or high-progress schools and awarded grants for the associated districts to share effective practices with up to four partner districts. This program no longer exists, and the research team was unable to interview staff related to the project. However, the team did review written materials and staff analysis of the project's effectiveness.

The second grant program, the New York Charter School Dissemination Grants, is a program similar to the Commissioner's Schools Dissemination Grants, with the goal of sharing effective practices from New York's charter schools with New York's district schools. The first round of the New York Charter School Dissemination Grants began in 2013, with a second round of applications currently being reviewed for the next grant period. The research team interviewed the program's facilitator.

The Commissioner's Schools Dissemination Grants' status updates indicated a number of positive outcomes for partnered districts. Some of the reported outcomes in the lower-performing districts were concrete (e.g., implementation of new instructional models), while many others were more structural (e.g., increased data-driven focus, increased student involvement, and inclusion of technology). District representatives from the higher-performing districts were quoted as saying that they also benefitted from their participation in the partnership through the process of reflection. As one leader pointed out in a status update, "We have learned as much from our partner schools as they have learned from us."

During the initial phase of the partnership for the New York Charter School Dissemination Grants, the partner schools would meet to create a formal agreement about the work they would engage in. The interviewee said, "The partner schools together determined exactly what they wanted to accomplish and what their goals were and then again how they would increase student academic achievement with their partnership." By formalizing the outcomes at the outset of the partnership, the schools shared expectations that the facilitator was able to reinforce through ongoing check-ins and grant monitoring. The district superintendent and charter school board president signed off on each partnership. This step added legitimacy to the work that the schools were engaged in, enabling most of the partnerships to continue even if a site leader changed.

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