

District Reform as Teaching and Learning:
How the System “Learns” to Improve Instruction

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“I believe we can’t do this alone. We don’t have the expertise to get all of our kids to reading, writing, and math at grade level, get all of our kids graduating on time and ready for college and career. We cannot do this alone. And so the partnership piece is going to be the way we will get there from here until eternity. We will never not have partners.”

12/04 Assistant Superintendent of Highline School District

The education policy environment, in its recent attempts to hold educators accountable for what students learn, presents unprecedented challenges for school districts across the United States. Especially in urban and rural areas where leadership shortages, teacher turnover, and achievement gaps persist, schools and districts face increasing urgency to link the daily work of educators more clearly and directly to learning outcomes for students. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has made it difficult for districts to hide disparities in outcomes across groups of students, thus increasing the pressure to build capacity among all professionals (Honig, forthcoming). Attempts to address these complex concerns engage districts in a variety of activities aimed at building a stronger internal system of supports for instructional improvement.

The Superintendent quoted above notes a need for districts to partner with external organizations in their efforts to address issues of instructional improvement. This paper presents interim findings from a pilot study that focuses on how districts, as systems, *learn* to lead and implement content-focused instructional improvement, when they are guided in their efforts by an external support organization.¹ We argue that there is still much to learn about how external organizations teach districts with varying needs and capacities to lead improvement efforts. The goal of our study is to understand how school districts learn from external support as well as how the support provider negotiates its teaching relationship with the districts. The study informs efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning nationwide, by external support organizations (reform networks, university-based centers or consortia, foundations, non-profit groups, etc.), as well as school districts themselves.

We present the paper in four sections. The first outlines the study’s focus and specific research questions, reviews related research and offers a conceptual framework that undergirds the study. We then describe the research design and methods. Finally, we present selected

¹ We use the terms *external support organization* or *external support provider* interchangeably. Corcoran & Lawrence (2003) describe these entities as “reform support organizations” that typically reside outside school districts but focus on providing external resources and knowledge to stimulate these systems to educate all children to high standards.

interim findings from data collected in one school district. Our discussion considers the connections between learning that occurs among professionals within the district and the ways the district comes to learn as an organization.

The Role of School Districts in Instructional Improvement

Despite their often-turbulent conditions, a growing body of research establishes that school districts do *matter* in terms of achieving system-wide instructional improvement and it begins to identify the characteristics of improving school districts (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). For example, a number of reports describe political and organizational stability and consensus among leaders regarding core reform strategies as critical to successful district improvement efforts (e. g., Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). A recent study from RAND concludes that district success may be tied to the capacity of central office staff to lead instructional reform, coherence among initiatives across the district, and the use of accountability measures to provide incentives for meaningful change in classroom practice (Marsh, Kerr, Ikemoto, Darikek, Suttorp, Zimmer, & Barney, 2005). Across the current research, identified characteristics of “successful” or reforming school districts include: a systemic approach to reform, a coherent focus on instructional improvement, consistent and proven strategies for the professional development of principals and teachers, alignment across district policies and reform strategies, and a data-driven approach to school and teacher accountability (Rosenholtz, 1989; Massell & Goertz, 1999; Massell, 2000; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Fullan, 2000; David & Shields, 2001; Corcoran & Christman, 2002; Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin 2002; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Some studies get closer to activities undertaken by district-level actors that are likely to make an *instructional* difference, among them, the series of studies about New York City Community District 2 and San Diego. There is promising evidence from these studies and others that when districts focus single-mindedly on instructional improvement and the professional development of leaders and teachers they build professional community and can make a difference in student outcomes (Rosenholtz, 1989; Elmore & Burney, 1997, 1999; Massell & Goertz, 1999). Regarding improvement at the classroom level, David & Shields (2001) report that the alignment of standards, assessments, and accountability systems were not enough in the

districts that they studied; teachers needed clear expectations and ongoing assistance to make the critical pedagogical changes. Consistent with the David & Shields (2001) findings, other researchers note that reform efforts in urban school systems improved their prospects for instructional improvement when they focused on specific, concrete, and powerful instructional strategies that were consistent and coherent throughout the school district (Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Corcoran & Christman, 2002; Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002; Resnick & Hall, 1998). Reports suggest that decisions about intervention at both the district and school levels should be based upon analysis of student data, a process that is often referred to as data-driven—or evidence-based—decision-making (Smylie & Wenzel, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; BASRC, 2002; Bloom, Rock, Ham, Melton, & O’Brien, 2001). Finally, Bloom et al. (2001) note that when curriculum and instruction are the focus of attention early in intervention efforts and when powerful learning strategies are made concrete—and thus easier to implement—for teachers, the likelihood of instructional improvement increases.

Taken together, these studies also make it clear how difficult a task it may be to bring about the kinds of instructional improvement that many stakeholders (and the current policy environment) are calling for. The intensification of state and federal accountability systems has motivated districts to proactively support the renewal of instruction, but the demands for improvement often appear to ask too much in too short a time. Both the difficulty of maintaining and sustaining instructional improvement efforts, and the intensifying demand for such results, beg questions about exactly how districts become proficient at this task. Two kinds of answers emerge from related bodies of literature, the first concerning the effects of external organizations to which many districts have turned to support their reform efforts, and the second concerning the mechanisms and dynamics of how a district, as a system, might “learn” to improve teaching and learning in classrooms—that is, learn better forms of instructional improvement practice.²

External Support for School and District Instructional Reform

The literature on third-party support for district instructional reform confirms that these providers can be a source of assistance, a knowledge resource, and a potential guide for teaching and learning about instructional improvement. Such groups, variously referred to as

² We use the term “instructional improvement practice” to refer to leadership and instructional work that is intended to improve teaching practice with the goal of improving student learning outcomes.

“intermediaries” (e. g., Burch, 2002; Honig, 2004; Corcoran, 2003), “reform support organizations” (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2003), and “external change agents” (e.g., Huberman & Miles, 1984), have been major players in district instructional reform in recent years. Some, operating from a philanthropic base, such as the Panasonic Foundation’s systemic change efforts (e.g., Mitchell, 1990) or the Annenberg Challenge initiatives (e.g., Christman, 2001; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003), bring resources and a well-developed reform agenda to schools and school districts, along with varying degrees of technical assistance. Others, which reside in universities or regional educational assistance organizations, are more likely to offer fee-based assistance aimed at capacity-building and professional development (for example, the Institute for Learning (IFL), a part of the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh). Still others are non-profit entities providing districts comprehensive support for reform on a fee-for-service basis, among them, First Things First and the Busara Group (Kronley & Handley, 2003). Corporate groups like the Merck Institute for Science Education (Corcoran, 2003) provide yet another form of external support organization.

While highly varied, these external efforts are all focused on the systemic improvement of schooling, often with a particular focus on the quality of teaching and student learning. As such, they have properly recognized that the districts they work with need extensive help creating and maintaining systems of support for instructional improvement. External organizations accomplish this by—

- *Offering the district access to ideas about reform*, and often specific knowledge resources (including materials).
- *Creating a relationship with the district over time*, through which the knowledge resources are delivered, generally through expert staff or consultants.
- *Operating from a stated or implied theory of action* that sometimes rests on a vision of good instruction and the means to reach it in a complex system.
- *Intervening in—even disrupting—the “status quo” affairs of the district*, and by doing so creating occasions, at least temporarily, for change.
- *Providing legitimacy and a stable reference point for reform ideas*, which might otherwise get lost in the turbulent affairs of a complex school district.

In recognition of the demanding nature of the systemic changes districts are attempting (Annenburg Institute for Reform, 2003), these external groups generally offer long-term support, often for up to five years, and sometimes significantly longer.

Yet, for all their apparent promise, the track record of such arrangements, to the extent that it has been documented in the literature, is mixed. The long-term relationship between the Merck Institute and four partner districts, for example, shows evidence of change in district culture and instructional practice, within the domain of science and mathematics teaching (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003). The Chicago Annenberg Challenge, on the other hand, was unable to demonstrate that schools and districts, guided by the Annenberg theory of action, consistently improved learning outcomes (e.g., Smylie & Wenzel, 2003). Other studies of philanthropic investments in district reform, such as the Pew Charitable Trust's network of districts pursuing standards-based reform, report similarly inconclusive findings (David & Shields, 2001).

Research to date sheds some light on the broad contours of more and less successful external support relationships. Trust building and establishing credibility are an essential part of the process (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2003), as is championing the reform with relevant stakeholders and political bodies (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003; Marsh et al., 2005). Furthermore, the emerging literature charts the ways in which external groups offer leadership for reform, at the same time they help to build leadership capacity in the organization (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2003; Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003). A recent study of the Institute for Learning's relations with three school districts, however, cautions that support from top-level district leadership, the relative capacity of the intermediary organization, and its alignment with district needs and other district initiatives can impact the outcomes of external support for instructional improvement (Marsh, et al., 2005).

While research has begun to demonstrate many of the forces, conditions, and dynamics that may be responsible for the success or failure of district instructional improvement, either externally supported or not, scholars have spent relatively little time trying to understand the nature of what is referred to across this literature as *capacity for instructional improvement* and how districts, as systems, "learn" to build and sustain that capacity as a system-wide condition. The problem of building this capacity across district systems—a form of scaling-up—may actually mean building leadership and instructional expertise more deeply across the wide array of actors (central office leaders, coaches, building principals, and teachers) that make up the district system. A close examination of how learning occurs for individual actors as well as the processes involved in creating and supporting a collective sense of capacity overtime is

missing from these studies. An examination of the existing research on district systems as learners of reform begins to address these concerns. To date, however, this literature does not cohere around a well-integrated set of ideas about the relationship between professional capacity building and system learning.

District Systems as “Learners”

The research regarding school district systems as “learners” is limited; most attempts to understand how districts “learn” have studied a ‘slice of the pie’ such as the relations between central office leaders and schools or teachers (Burch & Spillane, 2004) or how leaders and teachers make “sense” of new instructional policies (Coburn, 2001; Burch, 2002). While these studies are helpful in signaling potentially important dynamics of change, there is much to learn about how changes at the individual level relate to collective learning among and by organizational actors, and beyond that how their learning is reflected in structures, policies, and practices that define the system as a whole. We draw here on earlier definitions of “system learning” as both the process of coming to understand the district as a whole organism (and its performance in relation to instructional improvement) and the structures, policies, and practices created on the basis of that understanding (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003). In concert with much of the work on organizational learning (e.g., Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1998), we thus see system learning as transcending the learning of individuals, although potentially guided by individuals, especially those in leadership positions.

Here, the much cited work on District 2 and San Diego instructional reforms is especially helpful. Though these lines of work did not use the term “system learning,” studies of the instructional improvement process conducted in New York Community District 2 (see for example, Elmore & Burney, 1997; Stein & D’Amico, 2002) and San Diego City Schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Hightower, 2002; Stein, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2004) suggest that “theory-based reforms” such as those implemented in District 2 and in San Diego, require organizational, cultural, and political conditions that are conducive to adult learning.³ Drawing on sociocultural theories of learning, these researchers have begun to describe the supports necessary to foster systemic change, such as creating coherence and shared language around curriculum and instruction, leveraging variation to bring adult talents and learning needs

³ Resnick & Glennan (2002) refer to “theory-based reforms” as those reforms that draw upon decades of cognitive research on teaching and learning.

together, and developing system capacity to scaffold adult learning (Stein & D’Amico, 2002; Stein, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2004). This work gets closer to helping us understand the problem of how district systems “learn” about instructional improvement. However, there is still much to discover about *what* is learned *by whom* in such instances; how this learning is appropriated within the system; and how these actors’ *participation* in events, activities, or relationships continue to create learning environments that support the system’s learning.

Our research questions relate specifically to the ideas and concepts that sociocultural theories of learning suggest are important components of a *reform-as-learning* process, although we add that it is critical to understand the relationship between professional capacity building and *system learning* in the context of instructional improvement work (Stein, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2004). Our questions are framed in sociocultural terms to get at what the literature has yet to explicate about district’s instructional reform-as-learning:

1. How does the *relationship with an external support provider* shape or guide the district in teaching and learning related to instructional improvement practice?
2. What are the critical characteristics and dimensions of the *settings* that support their learning and how are they constructed?
3. What are district educators learning about instructional improvement practice (what ideas are they appropriating and how is their work changing as a result?)
4. In what ways does individual and collective learning among district personnel contribute to what the district as a system “learns”?

These questions rest in a theoretical frame, explicated below, that offers a useful lens for unpacking what is going on as districts develop their instructional improvement practice.

Sociocultural Learning Theory and Organizational Learning

We build our theoretical framework by marrying ideas from sociocultural learning theory and organizational learning literatures. First, we treat “system learning”—here, what the district as an organizational system learns about instructional improvement—as residing in the collective daily *practice* of individuals, a central tenet of sociocultural learning theories (Brown & Duguid,

1991; Wenger, 1998).⁴ This view of system learning has four principal dimensions that capture change in:

- (1) *Collective capacity for instructional leadership practice*—that is, the collective knowledge, skills, and commitments of all members of the instructional leadership cadre (e.g., central office leaders, school principals, coaches and teacher leaders).
- (2) *Enacted instructional leadership practice* throughout the organization, and especially in “boundary crossing” settings (Stein & Coburn, 2005)—that is, the use of sophisticated instructional strategies and tools in the interaction between external “teachers” (e.g., CEL consultants) and learners (e.g., leaders, teachers).
- (3) *Organizational structures and routines* that support instructional leadership practice.
- (4) *Instructional practice within classrooms*, in response to teachers’ engagement with instructional leaders in settings in which that leadership is exercised.

These definitions help to focus our attention on what educators—in an external support organization and in the districts with which it works—are doing as they work on instructional improvement. Brown & Duguid (1991) suggest that it is in the everyday practices of individuals such as system leaders, classroom teachers, or intermediaries (e. g., instructional coaches) that the success or failure of organizational change in such a setting is determined. District instructional reform, then, implies a relationship between collective change and the way that individuals across organizational levels engage in their work. Therefore, we view changes in leadership practices and instructional practices across the district system as appropriate units of analysis for revealing systemic learning about instructional improvement.

There is the potential for organizational teaching *and* learning to occur in district settings (formal workshops, one-on-one encounters, informal advice giving, etc.) that are intended to impart the knowledge, skills, and commitments of instructional leadership and to embed the practice of instructional leadership in the organization’s structure and routines. In such settings, teaching and learning may become “organizational” to the extent that they are taken up in the practices of individuals and transferred across individuals and organizational contexts to eventually become institutionalized.

Studying how individuals participate in these improvement efforts can reveal much about the way an organization reforms itself as a system—indeed, how the district, as an organizational system, learns. To date theories about organizational learning have tended to draw primarily

⁴ We use the term *practice* throughout to describe the ways that people do their work on a daily basis (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998). We note that “practice” and “capacity for practice”, while analytically useful to distinguish, are mutually constituted within everyday practice settings.

from behavioral perspectives (e.g., Cyert & March, 1963; Cohen & March, 1974) that treat change in organizations in terms of what people or the organization as a whole do, or cognitively-oriented perspectives (e.g., Argyris & Schon, 1974; Argyris & Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1998) that link organizational change with notions of how people make sense of, and reconstrue, their organizational environments. Though in the past these notions have not been well integrated with one another, our framework links the two *and* at the same time connects the organizational, collective level of learning with what takes place among individual professionals. Sociocultural theories of learning are especially helpful in forging these connections. In sociocultural approaches, learning is conceived of as a process occurring within activity settings or events that are mediated by the broader current and historical contexts that surround them (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Lave, 1996; Wertsch, 1991).⁵ This shifts our attention from considering cognition as existing in the heads of individuals (as thoughts, schemas, memories, scripts, and plans) to a view of cognition as an active process of solving mental problems (e.g., by thinking, organizing, planning, etc.) *in the service of action* (Rogoff, 1993). This leads us to consider what connects individual learning to how the collective system acquires more knowledge, understanding, or skill or a different climate or culture (Salomon & Perkins, 1998).

Pilot Study Research Design

In the fall of 2004, we initiated a qualitative research study into what, and how, an external support provider—the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Washington—was engaging districts in collaborative teaching and learning partnerships about instructional improvement. This report summarizes interim findings from a pilot investigation of CEL’s work in one school district during the 2004-2005 academic year.

We began our investigation using a case study design intended to seek answers and raise increasingly focused questions for future research. To develop an understanding of the nature of the partnership between CEL and the school district, to describe what was being taught, and to assess what was learned among district actors, we collected and analyzed 35 interviews and

⁵ We treat “activity setting” here as the socioculturally defined context in which human functioning occurs. “Among the activities mentioned by Vygotskian psychologists are play, instruction or formal education, and work” (Wertsch, Minick, & Arns, 1984). We are using the term here to define the specific activities that are facilitated by an external support provider for the specific purpose of instructional improvement reform within a school district (such as leadership seminars, walkthroughs, coaching cycles, etc.).

multiple informal conversations, field notes from observations of over 45 district and school events, as well as artifacts from district, school, and classroom sources. Data collection focused on the work of district instructional leaders, district-level events, and instructional visits to several schools. We also conducted research activities in a limited sample of two schools—an elementary school and a high school—in order to study partnership activities at that level of the system.

Settings and Participants

Highline School District was the first district to join in partnership with CEL, beginning the work in 2003. We selected five district instructional leaders who interacted regularly with CEL consultants regarding their leadership practices, 2-3 other district leaders, and 4 district content area coaches to participate in the study. We also selected two schools—Clover Valley High School and Oak Park Elementary—that were recommended by CEL and district informants as engaged in the partnership work (see section on Highline School District for extended descriptions of the district and the schools). Within the schools, we sampled the building leaders, the literacy coaches, and 2-3 teachers, selecting informants who were described as having key roles in the instructional improvement work that was central to the district partnership with CEL.

Data Collection Procedures

Classroom teachers, building literacy coaches, principals, central office personnel, and CEL staff and consultants participated in individual, semi-structured, audio-taped interviews during the data collection period, generating a total of 35 interview transcripts. Most interviews were about an hour in length. We asked informants to describe the kinds of activities that they were engaged in related to the Highline/CEL partnership and to talk about the kinds of things that they had learned from that work.

In addition, we observed approximately 45 different events related to the Highline/CEL partnership work, for example, district and building level planning meetings, district level leadership seminars, coaching cycles, and building level “walkthroughs” (classroom visits with administrative staff). Multiple artifacts, such as evaluation tools and documents from planning and administrative meetings, as well as from classrooms, were collected throughout the data collection period.

Data Analysis

After the first round of data collection, the research team read the entire data corpus. The subsequent 8-9 months included ongoing team meetings, during which we identified key categories and themes within the data that each member of the team was reading and coding. We identified four main categories that described the data including (1) the nature of the partnership; (2) what CEL was “teaching”; (3) evidence of learning, and (4) tensions and challenges related to the instructional improvement work.

Based on the four categories and several sub-themes, an analytic guide was developed and each member of the research team wrote a summary of a portion of the data (e.g., central office interviews and observations, building-level, CEL). We further analyzed these materials by triangulating data across the various data sources and by developing hypotheses which were then tested through iterative reviews of the data. From the analytic summaries, the team identified overall themes that were supported by consistent evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To minimize bias and maximize data quality, we checked assertions with local scholars and informants from CEL and the school district during the latter writing stages.

The Center for Educational Leadership

The Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) is an independently funded organization affiliated with the College of Education at the University of Washington. CEL develops professional development and support services for educational leaders. Drawing on both the academic resources of the University and the professional services of a variety of external consultants, CEL offers continuing education programs for principals, superintendents, and other central office leaders from area school districts. CEL also works directly with school districts on a fee-for-service basis—currently, CEL has partnerships with seven school districts in three states. It is the “partnership” work that is the focus of this research report.

Theory of Action

CEL’s mission is to “eliminate the achievement gap that divides students along the lines of race, class, and language.” CEL asserts that the achievement gap will be eliminated only when the quality of instruction improves, and that instruction will only improve at scale when leaders better understand what powerful instruction looks like—so they can lead and guide professional

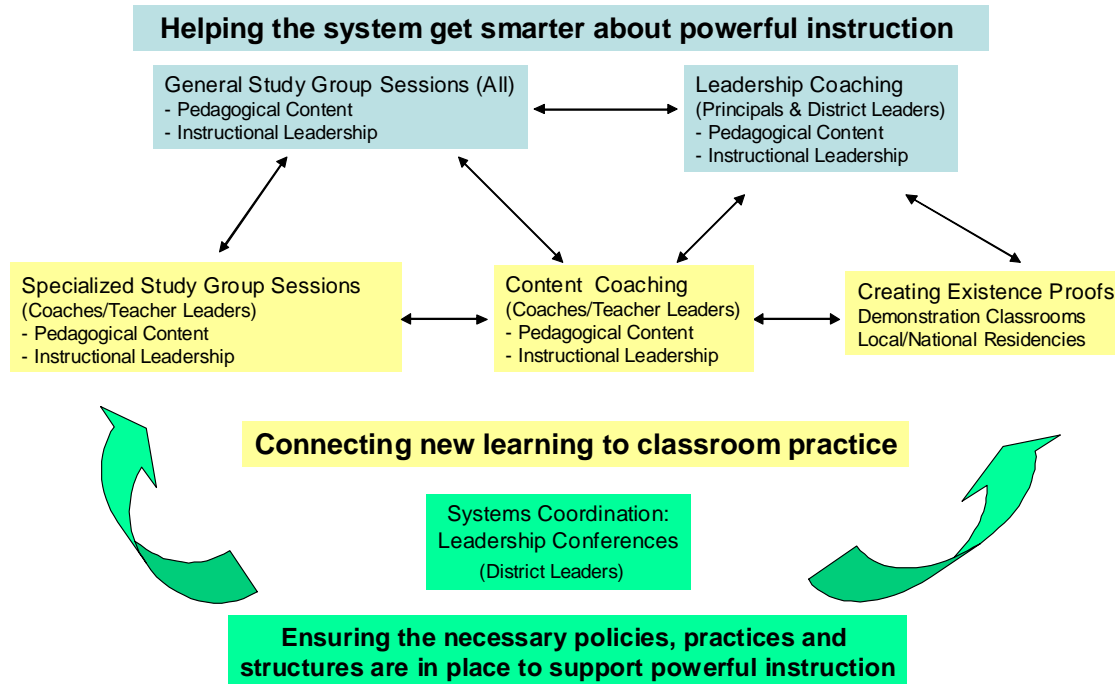
development, target and align resources around instructional improvement, engage in on-going problem solving and long-range capacity building.

The Theory of Action rests on three “basic footings”:

1. Helping the district system to “get smarter” about powerful instruction—a term used to describe learning environments that enable all students to be taught and, with effort, to master cognitively demanding curriculum (Brandt, 1998)—through monthly, all-day general study group sessions for district and building leaders and coaches; and leadership coaching (see Figure 1 below).
2. Working directly with content coaches and teacher leaders at school sites with the aim of connecting new learning to classroom practice. The theory of action aims to accomplish this through (a) specialized study group sessions for coaches and teachers leaders (these usually occur monthly on the day after the general study group sessions); (b) instructional coaching—each district partner negotiates the specifics of this coaching; and (c) creating existence proofs (such as demonstration or lab classroom settings).
3. The third footing of the theory of action ensures that the necessary policies, practices, and structures are in place to support powerful instruction (system-wide). Here CEL proposes two vehicles: leadership conferences (district planning meetings) and project management to accomplish the goal. In each district partnership, there is a Project Director who oversees the work and coordinates the efforts of various external consultants that CEL brings into the district context.

Figure 1. The Center for Educational Leadership Theory of Action

**Improving Instruction through Content-Focused Leadership
A theory of action**



External Consultants

CEL contracts with a number of external consultants. The consultants coach and provide professional development for leaders and teachers within the district sites, although the specifics of these arrangements are negotiated individually with each district. The consultants are carefully selected for their expertise as well as their “match” with district needs. They all have previous educational experience in districts such as New York City’s (former) District #2, San Diego Unified School District, and Chicago Public Schools. A total of seventeen consultants work in various CEL partner school districts.

Highline School District

Highline School District (HSD) is a mid-sized, diverse district located in the first ring of Seattle’s south-end suburbs. The district serves a student population of approximately 17,700 students. Over 50% of these students participate in the federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program. Although White students currently make up 43% of the student population, this

majority group has decreased in size dramatically over the last twenty years. The majority of the student population in Highline is composed of the following ethnic groups: 21% Asian students, 20% Latino students, and 14% Black students. The demographic numbers hint at the diversity of the district however they do not completely describe it; when clustered in one large group, Highline students represent 81 different nationalities and speak 70 different languages.

Academically, Highline has made steady gains over the past several years, but continues to struggle in many areas. The district's relatively new central office leaders send clear signals regarding a district-wide commitment to instructional improvement and the school board set a goal that 9 out of 10 students in the district will meet standards, graduate on time, and be prepared for college or career by 2010. The percentage of tenth graders passing the state's standardized test (required for graduation) in 2005 was 66.6% in reading, 38.2% in math, 57% in writing, and 28.4% in science. Nonetheless, the district made steady improvement in state student assessment scores over the last three years (retrieved October 2, 2005 from <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/?schoolId=104&reportLevel=District&orgLinkId=104&yrs=>). The district was in the first year of "district improvement" (a Washington State accountability designation) in the content area of mathematics during 2004-2005.

During the 2004-2005 academic year, the district was in its second year of partnership with the Center for Educational Leadership. The contract with the CEL for that year—funded primarily through district, state, and federal Title II professional development monies—provided Highline with over 150 days of leadership coaching and roughly 55 days of instructional coaching for teachers in reading instruction.

School Sites

During 2004-2005, the research team selected two schools in Highline School District in order to study the impact of the partnership work at that level of the district system. Those sites included one high school (Clover Valley) and one elementary school (Oak Park).⁶

District officials considered Clover Valley High School to be making progress toward instructional improvement and to have a strong leadership team. As one of five high schools located within the district, Clover Valley served approximately 1200 students taught by 60 teachers (October 2004 count). Student outcomes mirrored district averages; tenth grade student

⁶ Although, with permission, we name Highline School District, all other identifiers such as school names or individual names are pseudonyms.

scores on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) were low, but improving steadily. With over 40 languages spoken by the students—many of whom were new immigrants to this country—Clover Valley was among the most diverse schools in the district.

Oak Park Elementary, our other research site, had a student population of approximately 640 students. The student body was divided among four primary ethnic groups: 27% Latino, 25% each Asian and White, and 20% Black students. Student performance on the WASL was improving in reading and stabilizing in math and writing scores.

Table 1 shows student outcome data on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) for Clover Valley High School and Oak Park Elementary over the past three years.

Percentage of Students at or above Standard (Clover Valley High School)			
Year	Reading	Writing	Math
Spring, 2005	56.5	54.0	21.5
Spring, 2004	46.8	48.3	23.0
Spring, 2003	44.2	36.2	21.4
Percentage of Students at or above Standard (Oak Park Elementary)			
Year	Reading	Writing	Math
Spring, 2005	60	38	34
Spring, 2004	57	38	33
Spring, 2003	44	36	34

CEL’s Relationship with Highline School District

A CEL Project Director worked with central office leaders to shape the instructional improvement work in the Highline context. She and six to seven CEL consultants interacted with school district personnel across multiple levels of the district system. Their work ranged from teaching at district-wide seminars to direct coaching of building leaders, district and building content coaches, and classroom teachers. Consultants shadowed central office instructional leaders—coaching and guiding them regarding the instructional leadership work with principals, especially during the first two years of the partnership. As well, CEL consultants offered advice at debriefing sessions that followed district-level leadership seminars and maintained email contact with district actors between their visits. Each building principal had four full days per year of on-site coaching with a CEL consultant (2004-2005). Some schools contracted individually with CEL for additional services; this was the case in both of the schools that we studied. At the high school, a CEL consultant was hired to coach six 9th grade

literacy teachers for 25 days during the 2004-2005 school year and, at the elementary school, the principal hired a CEL consultant to plan with his leadership team and work strategically to align categorical programs with overall building goals.

CEL collaborated with Highline personnel regarding instructional leadership and the improvement of teaching and learning in a number of specific settings, including for example: professional development seminars, district-level planning meetings, external visits to other districts, demonstration sites (“lab” classrooms, summer school sessions), and school-level planning meetings. Below are brief descriptions of some of the most common of these activities; the first three of these (leadership seminars, instructional leadership council, and coaching) were considered *non-negotiable* components of the CEL/district partnership—in other words, CEL required that these structures be in place in some form as part of their contract with districts.

- *Leadership Seminars*

These monthly, all-day teaching sessions for building principals and coaches were CEL’s foundation activity for teaching literacy content and instructional leadership. District leaders took an active role with CEL staff and consultants in the planning and the execution of the sessions. Sessions typically involved participants in observations of content-focused demonstration lessons with Highline students as well as teaching and learning activities related to reading instruction.

- *Instructional Leadership Council*

Although in theory these monthly meetings were intended to help district leaders think strategically about their policies, practices, and structures; in Highline they focused on “*troubleshooting and communicating about upcoming plans*” for the partnership activities. Participants at these meetings typically included a representative team of district players: central office instructional leaders and the Superintendent, representatives of the Union, elementary, middle, and high school principals, and the CEL Project Director. The meetings took place monthly during the first two years of the CEL/Highline partnership.

- *Coaching*

CEL’s pedagogy rested on a coaching model that includes description of ‘best’ practices, demonstrations of those practices, attempts by learners to approximate, and the provision of feedback. CEL staff and consultants modeled instructional and leadership practices across a variety of school and classroom settings including at the Leadership Seminars, on instructional visits in schools, and in work with literacy coaches and teachers. A CEL informant noted:

We believe that if people just come and have their ‘sit and git,’ no matter how good the sit and git is, it’s not real until you are side-by-side with somebody who can help you think through the skills and processes in your own site with your own teachers. And, so, we’ve told the districts, you can’t just have the content sessions [Leadership Seminars]

without the coaching, nor can you have the coaching without the content because what are you coaching for? What are you getting smarter about?

- *External Site Visits*
CEL encouraged and facilitated site visits to New York, (former) Community School District #2 and San Diego Unified School District. One CEL Project Director referred to HSD as “*really studying the work*” through their visits to San Diego. Various school staffs and district leaders from Highline visited both districts.
- *Summer School*
Clover Valley High School contracted with CEL for a consultant to work with some of their 9th grade literacy teachers during HSD’s 2004 summer school session. Summer school was considered an expanded site for teacher learning, “*but with an angle toward teaching the content to the kids as well as to the teachers. Having those Clover Valley teachers really learn about how to work with adults*”.

A Negotiated Partnership

CEL had a general theory of action about how to achieve change and brought specific ideas about leadership and instruction—many of these strikingly similar to actions in use in New York City’s District #2 and San Diego schools over the last decade—but CEL did not bring specific scripts or strategic plans. Much of what was accomplished in Highline was a matter of step-by-step negotiation. The CEL Director commented that it was this aspect of the relationship that made it a partnership.

And people have their own context and their own set of ideas. It’s how you work with a set of ideas; it’s about teaching someone something, but at the same time it’s about being taught by what and where they are. It’s a constant negotiation about what we mean by partnership.

The role of the CEL Project Director in Highline was to orchestrate the work of multiple consultants in partnership with district instructional leaders. She met, emailed, and telephoned regularly with district leadership to strategize and plan for future events and to coordinate the work of the six to seven consultants who were present at any given time in the district. She also worked in individual schools participating in building walkthroughs, doing demonstration lessons in classrooms, and responding to requests for guidance from principals. In essence, she was reading the reform as it progressed: advising and guiding the district and building leaders in their improvement efforts. She described her role as thinking “*across the system, where is it that*

there's the gap, where is it in terms of getting to how you make this happen." She said she had an "insider/outsider" status in the district.

And I think it's really the key that there is a certain amount of insider/outsider status. I'm inside enough that they know that I know where they've been and what the work is. And I've got some trust developed. But, I'm outside enough in that I'm from CEL and there's sort of that element of credibility. So, I can say, 'we're going to sit down and roll up our sleeves and figure this out together.'

The partnership between Highline and CEL seemed organic to us. The Project Director described the work as "*relational*." This relationship was in constant negotiation and re-negotiation in the day-to-day work. There was a delicate balance to be achieved between an external partner *pushing in* to the district with a strong, clear vision of instructional leadership and instructional practice and *pulling out* in order to support the district's growth. Working within that tension was a challenge for both parties in the partnership.

We also saw the relationship between CEL and Highline School District as a pedagogical relationship, one which involved teaching and learning for many of the participants (especially CEL consultants and district leaders (including principals and coaches). Our interest here is in the characteristics of the learning activities that were co-created by CEL and the school district and in how professionals in Highline School District appropriated and took into their own work CEL's reform messages.⁷

Characteristics of the Learning Environments

CEL directors and CEL consultants espouse a particular vision of what they described as "powerful" instruction. Reading was referred to as a "vehicle" for teaching "*what underlies all really good teaching*." So, while CEL taught generic components of good instruction (modeled after Cambourne, 2001), the vehicle for learning was a specific content area. In Highline, for years one and two of the partnership, that was reading instruction.⁸

CEL directors and consultants send a clear message linking leadership with content-focused instruction: an effective leader understands what good instruction looks like and how to grow good teachers—all of which sits on a solid foundation of content expertise. One of CEL's mantras was "*you can't lead what you don't know*" meaning that leaders need to know enough

⁷ Appropriation is a term we use throughout this paper to refer to the process of taking up new ideas or skills and transforming them to one's own through talk or action (Herrenkohl & Wertsch, 1999).

⁸ During Year Three of the partnership with Highline, services were expanded to mathematics.

about pedagogy in key content areas (such as reading, writing, or mathematics) in order to lead instructional improvement. In Highline, CEL was teaching reading content knowledge, effective instructional leadership skills *and*, across all of their work, our data suggest that CEL was teaching about “opening” teaching and learning to more public and less isolated practices. We provide the following examples of the kinds of learning environments that CEL was co-creating with Highline around instructional improvement practice.

“Opening” Educational Practice

In Highline in 2004-2005, school and district leaders engaged in instructional improvement practice by spending time in classrooms nearly every day (barring major catastrophes). Instructional visits and weekly instructional letters were examples of ongoing activities in Highline intended to expose colleagues to the work of peers. We saw this “opening up of practice” occurring in two ways: (1) through the scrutiny of current forms of practice, and (2) through the observation of external images of excellent practice.

Scrutinizing one’s own practice. Given the intense partnership focus on improving the quality and outcomes of instruction, we observed a great deal of “scrutiny” in and around classrooms in Highline. District leaders joined CEL consultants and building administrators on regular visits to classrooms—called “walkthroughs” by many, but officially termed “instructional visits”—intended to understand and assess classroom teaching and learning and the professional development needs of teachers. Instructional visits could take up to a full day and, in some cases especially early in the reform effort, were packed with roughly twenty-minute observations and followed by debriefs regarding multiple classrooms. By fueling conversations about classroom practice, instructional visits often resulted in improvement-oriented next professional development steps for a teacher or a building leader.

A district leader reflected on his role during instructional visits.

So the philosophy is that the school leaders are on ground every day and should be working with teachers daily and we’re helping to support and grow their capacity to work with the teachers. So I end up being another set of eyes on the instruction and I try to ask some of the hard questions.

At one school, he had an opportunity to do just that.

...we went to a Language Arts class, divvied up in groups. And it was great... [students] would read the article and process it as a group and then [the teacher] would call on a student. And one of the ones that she called on gave an answer and she asked for evidence in the text and he tried to read it and couldn't. And it was just blatant. And so I said to the principal, 'tell me, how do you read aloud for a kid who can't read?' And, to his credit, he has talked about that experience as being really valuable.

Instructional visits such as this were not focused solely on teachers' practice; school and district leaders were likewise considering what the classroom environment implied for their leadership. They were opening their own leadership practice to the scrutiny of their district peers and outside consultants and using those experiences to analyze and plan future learning events for their staff.

Since teachers were most often the objects of instructional visits and debriefs, they were sometimes left wondering what their principals and invited guests saw in their classrooms. The opportunity for teacher learning in these cases may have truncated had teachers not pushed back—as was the case in this example:

And, I mean, if they're going to walk into the room—which I really believe that our door should be open—they should provide us with some feedback. And that doesn't always happen. Now my principal knows that if he comes in my room I like that. Some push back, you know, if you're going to come in here, and I know you have opinions because you're smart people, tell me what you see, tell me what's working well, tell me where I can improve. And use that time and that resource of the CEL consultant...use that resource to make us better and not just for your own learning, but for all of our learning.

CEL directors and consultants also had colleagues nationwide who could provide images of good practice for Highline district employees. School and district leaders—as well as some teachers—relied on CEL to showcase best practices. CEL-initiated demonstration lessons, co-teaching opportunities, and offsite visits presented possibilities that existed just outside of Highline's current expertise. Thus, at times, CEL also provided a *window* to outside examples of instructional excellence.

Observing images of best practice. CEL also coordinated the observation of examples of powerful instruction and effective instructional leadership for district and building leaders, coaches, and some teachers. Often this involved visiting another classroom, either within the district or in highly touted districts such as San Diego or New York. In May, 2005, several Highline leaders, a building coach, and an exemplary teacher took a trip to New York to observe a “residency model” for conducting professional development. One of Highline's district

leaders described the power of going to New York in order to *see* the practice instead of just hearing or reading about it.

I saw good instruction, but I don't know if the instruction itself was what made it different.... It was watching the modeling and then trying to put a structure to it. We did a lot of processing, of how can we take this idea back? What are the crucial parts? What do we have in place? Who are the players? We talked about what's the role of the principal and the visiting teacher. What's the role of the coach? How do we make a one-week stint stick? What's needed to make it stick? So the instruction itself was good, but it was just the power of the idea...and it could have happened, here in Highline, but it was just seeing the idea and playing with it.... And, there's something about seeing that depth of that culture[in NY] and about—and seeing the security guard and the street, and there's no playgrounds and no anything and those classrooms have thirty-four and they're doing it, that just takes away all the barriers.

As noted above, CEL's work was on-the-ground and involved side-by-side modeling and demonstrations of best instructional practices, all images of the possible. The coaching philosophy aimed for the gradual release of responsibility—first teach *to*, then teach *with*, and finally release responsibility to the learner, but still stand *by* to help out (this process was referred to as “to, with, and by” by several informants). Our data indicated that personnel across Highline School District were learning, to varying degrees, a great deal about the work of instructional improvement.

Evidence of Learning across Highline School District

One central office leader provided a ‘laundry list’ of her learning related to the district’s partnership with CEL. Her comments offered insight into the ways in which various actors in Highline were learning from their involvement with CEL. It illustrated the ways that she was appropriating the ideas about powerful instruction and the leadership necessary to bring about instructional renewal.

What am I learning? I think I'm learning about best practice in general, about the elements of balanced literacy or a comprehensive literacy approach—not only the structure, but the instruction that needs to go behind it. And probably, and most important, the planning that goes with it, and the rationale for each of the components. I'm also learning different staff development strategies and methods, ways of working with different groups of people, how to identify achievement that is at the level I want it to be versus not, the use of data, the use of the GLEs in forming

the instruction. And, not that this was a void in my life prior—but certainly to a much higher level and more intentionally, and I’m also just learning more about how to analyze text and how to choose text at a much higher, or deeper level than I did in the past.

Her description of learning at a higher or deeper level was characteristic of how others talked about what they were learning from CEL. Highline School District was not a ‘blank slate’ before CEL came along, but our data suggested that CEL helped focus the attention of district leaders on the specifics of instructional leadership. For example, although central office leaders engaged in a type of building walkthrough before the official partnership with CEL was established, the nature and purpose of their instructional visits had shifted as a result of new understandings. The same district leader elaborated on this issue as she talked about the district’s knowledge of literacy:

We all have varying degrees of knowledge and ability, but there’s no one on the Highline staff that has the depth of knowledge of [several CEL consultants]. If we had an internal person I would think that it might be little easier. I think that [CEL consultants] are learning sources that we’re using to support the work at least long enough for us to build the capacity we need to sustain it.

This district leader’s remarks suggest that CEL was “bringing capacity” to build capacity. As noted earlier, the partnership was designed to help the district build internal capacity in both leadership and instruction. In the following sections, we limit our discussion to examples of change that we observed across district and building leaders. We note that, although they are in varying stages in their learning—we saw evidence that leaders had taken up new ideas from their interactions with CEL and, in several cases, we documented obvious changes or shifts in their daily work. The relatively few examples provided here are illustrative of the kinds of phenomena that we labeled as evidence of “learning” among the participants in the study.

Learning Among Central Office Leaders

We documented several specific changes in the ways that central office leaders were engaging in their work. The following illustrates two of these: (1) developing leadership voice, and (2) spending time in schools.

Developing leadership “voice.” The CEL Executive Director described his perception that central office leaders and principals were learning “*what good instruction looks like*” and

that this year “*they should be more articulate about explaining what they think is good instruction and why they think it’s good instruction and what they think is not good instruction and why they think it is not good instruction.*” As evidence of growth in leadership, he described the openings and closings that the district leaders were doing at the Leadership Seminars as evidence of learning.

When I go to the study sessions and I see [district leaders] actually do the opening or see them do a closing, I’m thinking, ‘wow’, they couldn’t have done this last year. I know they were heavily coached, but this is pretty cool. To me that’s evidence of individual learning of key players in the organization.

In January, one of the district’s instructional leaders began the Leadership Seminar with an opening talk. She began by urging building leaders to “*take stock of where your major initiatives are, both those initiated by the district and those unique to your school.*” She continued, “*Use your leadership voice to help those around you to feel this urgency*” and “*we need to make every day count. It will be easier if teachers understand the urgency and are given truly professional opportunities to grow.*” Reflecting what she felt “they” had learned from their work with CEL, she said,

I want you to remember how many of us thought that read aloud would be an easy implementation because we related it to ‘read to.’ When we learned more we realized that there were many aspects and layers to read aloud...At the secondary level, the same analogies apply to shared reading. It is more than putting text on the overhead and reading it together.

Near the end of the opening, the district leader described for principals the components of leadership voice—and the district’s expectations for building leaders (she used overhead transparencies as she spoke).

In addition to being able to assess teacher practice, we also need a strong leadership voice in order to lead this work of improving student learning. Having a strong leadership voice includes being able to articulate the:

- *Rationale for the work—i.e., when significant numbers of students aren’t successful, it’s the right thing to do.*
- *Urgency of the work—i.e., our students can’t wait.*
- *Purpose of the work*
- *Use of data to inform teaching decisions and professional development as a result of classroom observations*
- *Clear and explicit expectations*

Our leadership voice needs to be heard in all that we do including:

- *Verbally—openings + closings for staff meetings, grade level meetings, in-service sessions*
- *In writing to communicate with staff in letters, feedback, memos, and bulletins*

The opening talk provides evidence that this central office leader had learned from observing CEL consultants. They coached her as she began to transform these kinds of messages and then perform them in the public domain. Her public demonstration of this skill created an opportunity for building leaders to appropriate the technique for use in their building contexts—it became a learning environment for principals.

District leaders were spending their time in schools. In the past, central office leaders in Highline SD had not spent significant amounts of time in school buildings. This changed with their exposure to CEL's teaching.

I mean up until this year, [one central office leader] was just doing all their evaluations. He was the evaluator for 22 elementary principals and four middle school principals. How often can you be in a school and do meaningful work when you have that much on your plate. So, this year, as a direct result of conversations that came out of the Instructional Leadership Seminar and related to the fact that they need to be in buildings at least—and they are setting up a schedule—every other week. Building principals can expect them to be there every other week spending two hours with them—every other week consistently, whether or not they have one of their CEL consultants with them. So what they are doing with their own jobs has shifted.

Consistent with CEL's theory of action, Highline's district leaders set expectations for themselves to be in schools on a regular basis, not only to supervise and evaluate principals, but also to support their professional development. A district instructional leader described how the role of the external consultants changed over time suggesting a very similar set of changes and learning on the part of the central office staff.

The walkthrough used to be I and an outside consultant and the principal go through the classrooms and look for trend data and talk about where the strengths and needs of your building are and what possible staff development is. We still see that to some extent, but what we've tried to infuse in them is to make those consulting days just that, more of consulting days where it's more ongoing staff development, for primarily the principal and the coach, but also for teacher-leaders. So a typical day might look like, part of the day we're there to talk to the principal, we talk about

data—the principal shares what they’re working on...what he hopes is the next step. We might do some trend analysis or visit in some classrooms and see what practice looks like. But we’re also going to pull in a grade level. We might plan a lesson with them. And then one of the teachers teaches and then we debrief afterwards. It’s more hands-on staff development than: ‘I’m here to check you out.’ We’re going to learn together.

The district leaders saw this model of instructional visit as a productive setting for learning among building principals.

We would do planning together, then a teacher would try on the lesson and we’d come back and debrief, then we’d try it on again. So a lot like a lesson study. And our teachers were walking away excited and enthused. And our principals, I think, got more understanding about good instruction through that than they did through walking through their classrooms. So we really changed that this year.

Spending their time in schools and classrooms served two purposes for the central office instructional leaders. First, it provided an opportunity for them to assess learning outcomes related the district’s instructional improvement work and second, it provided a learning opportunity for building leaders (supported by CEL consultants) regarding the assessment of building professional learning needs.

Principals as Instructional Leaders

One principal we spoke with talked about his learning from the monthly Leadership Seminars (attended by all building leaders and coaches). He commented that he felt like he was getting “a Ph.D.” in instructional leadership.

That’s the monthly literacy training. What’s been very helpful to me is I’ve learned more about literacy through that. I feel like I am getting a PhD in leading for instruction and part of that has to be knowledge of good instruction.

Another principal in Highline described his new ideas about his role as the building leader. “The principal needs to set the vision and the tone for instructional improvement. The coach and the principal have to be closely in tune with the objective and goal.” He suggested that his ideas were connected to his contact with CEL. “I think one of the things I’ve learned is that it is more valuable to go deeper than broad (with the work).” He further commented on the need to connect his personal building goals with the overall vision of the partnership between his district

and CEL. “Until May 2004, I kind of assessed my own strengths and weaknesses relative to the unique needs of this building. A main priority of mine now is to have consistency around the district-level coach from CEL.” He spoke of his increased understanding about how to evaluate teacher practice.

If you’d asked me that question three years ago, I would have said, well, we have people who have trouble with management and trouble with instruction. Now I would be very specific. When they do a read-aloud, do they have an opening, do they have a closing that’s prepared, have they given thoughtful questions, time to develop some questions? I’d be much more concrete.

While the above data suggests that principals had taken up new ideas about their work from their interactions with CEL, we also documented changes in principals’ work. In a manner that seemed to mimic the learning of district leaders, building leaders talked about being strategic in their leadership work especially around teacher learning, conducting building walkthroughs, and developing leadership voice. Several principals connected their learning directly to their relationship with CEL.

Being Strategic and Leading for Instructional Improvement. Principals in Highline were responding to clear messages coming from their central office about what was expected of building leaders—including spending a minimum of two hours per day in classrooms getting to know the professional development needs of their teachers. One central office leader commented about these messages.

I think most people know what we’re looking for so that it’s not, ‘we don’t know what we’re going to be judged by, or we don’t know what you expect of us.’ I think principals should be classrooms two hours a day at a minimum. You have to do that to lead the work. Do principals have conferring notes on their teachers, just like we will want teachers to have when they start independent reading for their kids. We want Principals to really know their staff. And so, in some of the conversations recently that we’ve had with principals, we say talk to us about your staff. You can either go down the roster one at a time, or you can group people as you see naturally and say, OK, these are people that are just wading into the work and the evidence that I have of that is it looks like this when I go in. And here’s the next group. And the evidence I have, it looks like this. And here are the people that, you know, are kind of my front learners and for each of those groups, what would be the next step in their professional development? How are you going to move them forward? Is it one-on-one coaching with your coach? Is it sending them to the next door neighbor’s school to visit a teacher that is just one step ahead of them in the practice? Is it reading a book or a chapter from a book that would be just in-time

learning? You know, what is it that's going to move that person to their next step?

One of the principals described a change from “*rhetoric to action*” that had occurred among the leaders at his high school. He noted that they were learning to be strategic in their planning for instructional improvement.

But, we're very focused on improving instruction to get equitable outcomes. I write about that every week to our staff. That's what we do our professional development around, how to improve the instruction and how it's working for all kids. So I'm in my fifth year in this building and I would say the rhetoric might be similar to rhetoric that we've had in the past, but the work is much more specific around that rhetoric. We're much more strategic in how we operationalize to improve instruction. And so, I think, we're going beyond rhetoric into real action. And the other thing that's much different now is we do a ton of adult learning around these issues. We spend all of our time either talking about instruction or equity or small schools. And even when we're talking about small schools, we're talking about instruction in small schools...and equitable outcomes in small schools. So it's—I think if you were to do a time study of our time together, ninety plus percent of it is on that. So I think that's the difference, the rhetoric's probably the same, but we are operationalizing around it...much more strategically.

The principal of Oak Park Elementary similarly commented on the kinds of things that he has learned about instruction from his work with CEL and how those shaped his leadership work with teachers.

I've certainly learned read-aloud and how to do the text preview or overview. I've learned to strategically ask questions that are going to get at the instructional purpose and how to close a read-aloud. I've learned how to do that myself and how to observe that in other teachers and provide feedback to teachers about that. I can provide specific, meaningful, and timely feedback to teachers in a way unlike I've ever been able to do before.

Conducting Walkthroughs. A big change in principals' practice in Highline involved the amount of time they were spending in classrooms each day. This was part of the district's changing expectations for their building leaders. This quote typifies comments made by district leaders about their principals.

Well, they're in classrooms two hours a day. They are giving teachers feedback. Up until now, it was like a message of formal evaluation and unless you can get better—you're in dire straits. I don't even talk to you about instruction. That's changed—the principals are more and more partners with their building coach in planning

professional development with their staff, instead of just ‘waiting for somebody downtown to come out and train my people.’

The principal at Clover Valley High School, for example, often asked for specific feedback on individual teachers during instructional visits. At one such visit, he asked of the CEL consultant, “*It might be interesting to get your feedback on [a teacher] (even though she won’t be here next year) because she infuses literacy strategies in her teaching, does project-based learning, gets students jobs and internships for learning. It would be good to see everyone on this list, for better or for worse.*” And following a visit to one classroom, the principal asked the consultant, “*Is this the right level of work?*” He commented (below) about how he had transformed what he had learned at the CEL Leadership Seminars into classroom-level work with teachers.

A couple of sessions ago we were taught how to script...It’s like, you know, of course we all script. But we really worked on how you script with a specific focus so we can hear a focus in our [teachers’] questioning strategies. And so I really learned that day that I should only be scripting the questions—or focusing in on the questions and student responses so I can have a very focused conversation with the teacher...and not scripting everything. It sounds like such a little thing, but it was really profound to think about how I could get more out of my time in classrooms.

Leadership voice. Principals in Highline were required to write weekly “instructional letters” to their staff (a strategy that was recommended by CEL). These letters represented clear evidence of a change in leadership practice. Oak Park’s CEL consultant commented that the letters written by that principal “*were extraordinary.*” She described them as “*revealing about his thinking and wondering and goal setting.*” The high school principal noted that “*it’s because of the CEL consultant that I write a weekly letter,*” although the letters were a district expectation.

Typically, the instructional letters contained both inspirational stories and specific comments about expectations for classroom practice in the building. Following are a few examples from principals’ instructional letters that are representative of the content of these letters.

I hope that some of you noticed that I did not mention planning, purpose, and questioning strategies in my last letter. While I did not mention them in my letter, I still spent my time in classrooms last week looking for planning, purpose, and

questioning strategies that support intellectual rigor for all students. Here is what I saw:

9th grade literacy classrooms (this is a composite description of what I saw in three rooms, all of which are inclusive)—

Purpose—Students will look closely at a piece of text in order to understand or hypothesize about the choices made.

Thinking Questions for Independent Reading:

- 1. How would the text change if a different character told the story?*
- 2. Why did the author choose the narrator that he/she did? What was his/her intent?*
- 3. How reliable is the narrator in being able to convey information to the reader?*

In another letter, an elementary principal directly spoke of the work of Brian Cambourne—a direct connection to the teaching of CEL.

Being asked if one believes that all children can learn has become as common as being asked if one wants fries with a fast food order. Of course, I believe all kids can learn. But I have something as scarce as a hen's tooth, a rationale for how all children can learn. This understanding of how children learn to read and write is rooted in the research and theory of Brian Cambourne. At the end of this letter is a schematic of how Cambourne's conditions for learning, when present in classroom settings, results in the acquisition of literacy for the large majority of children. We will return to Cambourne's model during the August trainings and throughout the year.

Evidence of Organizational Change

CEL's theory of action hinged on a differentiated approach that began with the strategic allocation of resources to district and building leaders. Another "tier" of support was aimed at building coaches and to a relatively few "goer" teachers and schools (some of whom contracted individually for additional CEL resources).⁹ The theory of action promoted by CEL and adopted by Highline took advantage of the will of these "goers" to build their capacity as future teaching sites.

CEL's approach was strategic—infuse knowledge among key leaders, build deep capacity among those willing and able, provide as much on-the-ground coaching in 'goer' sites as possible—and was definitely a shift in business as usual for Highline School District. The strategy did not spread equal resources to every school or, within schools, to every classroom. It

⁹ The amount of coaching resources directed to the building and classroom level increased significantly during 2005-2006.

was differentiated and started at the top levels of the organization on the theory that leadership was essential to achieving systemic change. In the following sections, we analyze this theory as it played out in Highline School District.

Differentiated Support of Learners

In effect, CEL leveraged the hierarchical structure of the school district by providing a wide range of professional learning opportunities for five central office leaders, three of whom were newly titled as Elementary Directors (2) and Executive Director of Secondary Education (1). This group, their immediate supervisor (Chief Academic Officer) and a secondary curriculum specialist were targeted by Highline as “instructional leaders” for the improvement work in literacy. The phrase used by CEL, “*you can’t lead what you don’t know*” illustrated the learning task for this group—and the adoption by Highline of the notion that leaders must have knowledge of content in order to appropriately lead instructional improvement, essentially *teaching* their principals to lead the work in schools. Although the plan for allocating consulting resources included four days of coaching for each building leader, their supervisors were with the consultants approximately 44 full days during the 2004-2005 school year across all their visits to schools. That meant central office leaders had ten times more time with consultants than principals. One of the district leaders reflected on her concern regarding the lopsided opportunity to learn.

I look at my own position and I have had the advantage of having—well, for this year—44 full days with a consultant talking in my ear...in addition to my own reading and study groups, in addition to the leadership days and the planning for the leadership days. That’s been all professional development for me. I feel very lucky to have that much time. Our principals only get a fraction of that. And yet, I know how much I’m learning and how much more I need to learn to lead this work. And so my worry is, are we getting the principals enough support, and I think we’re trying to pace it—some people think we’re going way too fast, others think we’re going too slow...but I think we’re trying to pace it so we do give them the support. I think our principals need to have the support to be able to lead this work. I see them as pivotal in making this all work.

In addition to strategically sinking resources into leaders in the district, CEL also used a “best fit” approach for placing consultants with particular schools. This included putting consultants who had leadership skills in particular schools and those with deeper

content knowledge in others—and teaching the central office leaders to make the strategic decisions themselves. The CEL Project Director explained,

But, what they're understanding now is how much about the content has got to go deeper and how it's really now about getting good PD for teachers. Because when one consultant is on the ground, she will do PD with teachers. Now, another one can't do that. Her expertise is leadership.

She went on to describe the way that one of the Highline leaders had come “full circle” to realizing a need in some schools for more content expertise, “*because what those schools need are really content people...and they get that. It's just so much of having the right chess pieces on the board to begin with, having the vision about that, but then, let's be strategic about where there's a good fit and where there isn't.*”

District leaders learned to support principals differentially, based on their unique learning needs. As one district leader explained,

It just depends on what that school needs at that particular moment to move them forward. And we talk about that together ahead of time, so we don't show up with some key agenda that we've figured that we're going to impose upon the school. We [principal, coach, elementary director & sometimes guest coach] figured this out together.

It's important to note that all principals, building coaches, and some teacher leaders from each building attended monthly partnership-directed Leadership Seminars where specific content and pedagogy in literacy and leadership were modeled and discussed. Building coaches worked with a CEL consultant for second day following the Leadership Seminars on content specific to coaching classroom teachers. Theoretically, the learning that was occurring at these sessions was taken up in buildings around the district. However, the CEL Project Director and the Highline central office leaders actively looked for and supported schools and teachers who were considered “ready” for deeper learning.

“Going with the Goers”

A term that captures the idea of differentiated support that we heard often in Highline was “go with the goers.” The term referred to the strategy of investing resources in people who

are willing to embrace change and take on new learning. The CEL Project Director described the philosophy.

It's short-term actions for long-term goals. You only have so many resources. And, yes, you pay attention to everybody at a certain level, but then, where can you get the most traction so that you can see propelling your own work forward. Because if you're just waiting for everybody to come along and be at this level, I mean, you're always going to have to think about differentiation.

A Case in Point. At Clover Valley High School, a group of six 9th grade literacy teachers worked with a CEL consultant for a total of 25 days over the 2004-2005 school year. This followed an intensive summer school session at which the same teachers taught side-by-side with the CEL consultant for 6 days over 4 weeks. A permanent schedule adjustment was made that gave these teachers, working in a 9th grade 'house,' daily time together for collaboration.

Given limited resources, Clover Valley administrators opted to spend them on this group of teachers who were motivated to improve their teaching. The goal was to see how this investment would affect the six teachers' practice, and examine the extent to which the investment generated a sense of enthusiastic urgency about instructional improvement among other staff members. As a district administrator explained below, "*you can't support everybody at once.*" The following excerpt revealed the rationale—as well as the frustration—associated with sinking resources into a small number of people.

I would explicitly ask to see the non-house teachers and so we've had two or three walks that have been really devastating to the principal—I think he would accept that word—in that there's kind of an out-of-sight, out-of-mind about it. One of the real challenges of high school is you can't support everybody at once. I think you have to do what Clover Valley has done and focus on language arts with your literacy work. And yet that leaves you not helping others.

The Clover Valley principal described the fact that coaching resources were primarily allocated to his "goers" teachers.

And I think it's hard to say this on a tape recorder, but one thing we've agreed to is that right now we're not supporting struggling teachers...that is part of the theory of action—I don't know if it's a CEL theory of action or a SanDiego theory of action--this notion of having lab classrooms. So the notion is that we're "going with our goers."

This way of doing business carried with it a critical tension for Clover Valley’s leadership team and for the central office leaders in Highline. The possibility that the strategy of “going with the goers” as a short-term means to build long-term capacity meant leaving many teachers—and potentially students—behind worried some district personnel. Designed to build capacity among willing and able principals and teachers, the strategy was intended to build “evidence proofs” used to demonstrate good practice to others across the district. District leaders referred to this as an “*equity versus equality*” approach—a strategy that was a difficult switch from business as usual.

Indeed, for Highline the investment in capacity building as a strategy for change carried with it a concern regarding the time it took for principals and teachers to learn instructional improvement strategies and achieve results for students—especially given the accountability pressures. Highline leaders were keenly aware of the need to make significant improvements in a short time frame. This sense of urgency was articulated in the district’s goal of “9 out of 10” student graduated and college-ready by 2010. Highline School District was designated by Washington State as a “district in improvement” in mathematics, during the 2004-2005 school year. Six of their 32 schools were in some level of school improvement. One of the district’s academic leaders described this as “*a tension point*”, adding that “*it’s probably due to the accountability, that without showing results in terms of what the state and the public look for very soon, we’re not going to be able to keep up the effort—without tying those together more.*” Recognizing that the “*deep*” work takes time, this leader noted that everyone needs to recognize “*the need to show results for kids at the same time we build capacity that we know will make a difference in the long term.*” The struggle to build long-term capacity came into direct competition with the very present pressure of the state and federal accountability systems.

Changes in structures and processes. Many structures and processes changed in the Highline central office over the two years that they had partnered with CEL, some prompted directly by CEL. One critical change, cited by numerous Highline leaders and CEL staff, was a central office redesign related to the supervision of building leaders. Before the 2004-2005 school year, one central office person supervised all 21 elementary schools and four middle schools. In addition to yearly principal evaluations, this individual dealt with wide variety of issues that were not directly connected to instruction, such as parent complaints and building maintenance issues. Beginning in fall 2004, new procedures were established to align principal

supervision and leadership for instructional improvement. For example, classified staff was hired to screen parent calls and direct inquirers to resources instead of sending all issues to the directors responsible for schools. In addition, two elementary directors divided the supervision of the 21 schools, and middle school supervision responsibilities were moved to the secondary director. These structural changes set the stage for changes in the relationship between the central office and schools.

The process for evaluating principals changed in Highline. There was a new focus on assessing principals in relation to their role as instructional leader. The elementary directors described a matrix protocol they used during instructional visits as a way to provide specific feedback to principals, as well as the fact that the district had developed a new evaluation tool for building leaders.

[The principal evaluation tool] was actually developed by a committee last year, and then they piloted it with two principals last spring. It's new this year for the whole principal group. We took that tool, though, and created a matrix—so it has elements of the principal evaluation, but it's really our communication tool. We use it to guide our visits, what are we going to focus on? And in that we talk about what the current status is and what we see as the next step. And then, after every single visit, we send a copy of that back to the principal. So they know what we have—you know, we do it together when we're there, we have our little laptops out and do all our typing right then...But we talk about, what did we decide together were going to be next steps that you were going to work on in the next few weeks? So they know exactly what we have in our notes, and we have a copy of those notes.

Another structural change that took place in Highline was the assignment of literacy coaches to each building—a decision made the year prior to the district partnership with CEL. During the first year of the partnership, the district leaders decided that they had left the principals with too much discretion regarding the hiring of the building literacy coaches. As they began to see this error, the district leaders rewrote the job description for building coaches. One of the district leaders described the coaches' role from her perspective during the following school year (2004-2005).

Well, we see them as in-building, bringing specific staff development to the needs of the building to work alongside of and with the principal in one fashion, but not as an equal partner with the leadership. I mean, the leadership still has to be done by the building principal, but the coaches are to support with the staff development. So they might do some staff development at the staff meetings, they might do some book group facilitation, and then a majority of their position is really coaching cycles, working one-on-one with the

teacher. The teacher establishes what their need is, the coach is there to support them and to do a “to, with, and by” model so that the coach is modeling how to do a practice, doing it with the teacher and then giving feedback on it to the teacher.

The focus in Highline during 2004-2005 was on instructional improvement, professional learning, and the systemic shifts necessary to accomplish change across the organization. Our study of CEL’s partnership with Highline is ongoing; during the current school year we have concentrated our data collection efforts on connecting the central office story with schools, literacy coaching, and classroom level change.

Conclusions

In this report, we have described the unique characteristics of Highline’s partnership with an external support provider—the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington. We saw the partnership as a process of ongoing negotiation through which CEL engaged dynamic and context-specific strategies. Although CEL articulated a clear theory of powerful instruction and a process for achieving systemic change, the partnership work was specific to the district’s needs and to particular school contexts. Further, CEL and district informants agreed that the partnership depended on personal relationships that evolved overtime in terms of trust and give-and-take.

CEL’s pedagogical agenda concerned instructional leadership and content-specific instructional improvement. Nearly all informants discussed leadership and instruction (here, reading instruction) in relation to the professional development activities led by CEL and their consultants. Perhaps most interesting was the way that CEL urged the ‘opening up’ of practice—both leadership practice and instructional practice—to public scrutiny. CEL staff and consultants coached district and building leaders in practices such as school walkthroughs and demonstration lessons and they facilitated a number of inter-district observations and visits to school districts such as New York City’s (former) District #2 and San Diego Unified School District.

In this paper, we focused on the learning of some district and buildings leaders, however, to varying degrees in the two schools that we studied, we also documented learning among coaches and teachers. CEL’s work in Highline went beyond impact on individual or professional learning—some of CEL’s influence resulted in district system changes. Here, CEL’s differential

approach to the allocation of professional development resources, a strategy referred to as “going with the goers” was notable. In alignment with CEL’s theory of action, Highline made choices that placed resources in schools and with teachers that were willing and able to invest deeply in professional learning. The strategy did not promote *equal* distribution of resources to every school, or within schools, to every classroom teacher. The theory held that building strategic models of good practice would serve as powerful teaching sites for future learners.

Although the changes that we documented during the first year of the study suggest significant learning and change across multiple levels of this district system, our interest lies in the relationship between the individual learning that we saw among professionals and improvement and growth across the district as a collective system. Put another way, how is the learning that is constructed at the level of practice (whether of leaders, instructional coaches, or teachers) connected to the district as a collective learning system (Brown & Duguid, 1991)?

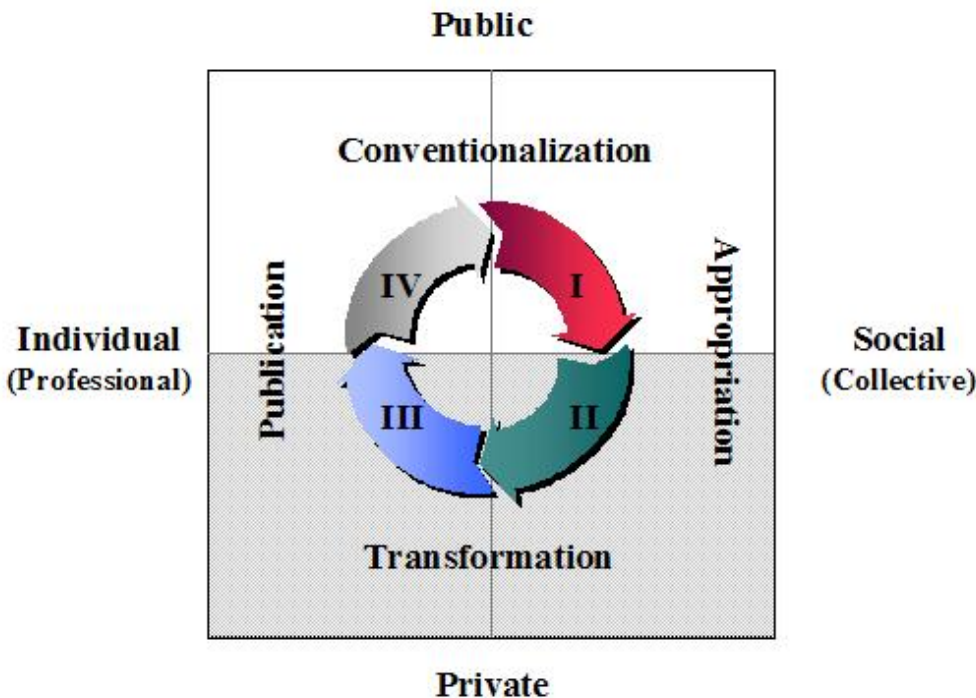
Sociocultural theorists argue that learning arises in the interactions between individuals and their environment (Vygotsky, 1978). The Vygotsky Space (see Figure 3), adapted from Harre (1984) by Gavelek and Raphael (1996), provides a visual image of the ways that the individual (here we use the term professional) and the social (we might say the “collective” or the district system) interact as knowledge is constructed, appropriated by individuals, and then re-produced as public or conventionalized practice (McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2005). The Vygotsky Space, as described by McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, contains four quadrants that are formed along two dimensions: (1) the public/private dimension and (2) the individual/social dimension. The four “spaces” describe the process through which individual learning connects with ongoing collective learning to become institutionalized practice. The iterative stages of this process include:

- Individual appropriation of particular ways of thinking through interaction with others (Q1 to Q2)
- Individual transformation and ownership of that thinking in the context of one’s own work (Q2-Q3)
- Public display of new learning through talk or action (Q3-Q4); ¹⁰
- The process whereby those public acts becomes conventionalized in the practice of that individual and/or the work of others (Q4-Q1).

¹⁰ Some would call this process “mastery” (see Herrenkohl & Wertsch, XXXX)

This representation of Vygotsky's general law of cultural development is a potentially useful tool for understanding the relationship between individual and collective learning.

Figure 3
The Vygotsky Space (McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2005)



For example, we described the Clover Valley High School contract with CEL for extended coaching for their 9th grade literacy teachers. Over the school year, the CEL consultant (coach) met monthly with a group of six teachers for a three part coaching cycle. The first day involved a planning meeting for all the teachers usually focused on aligning state grade level expectations (GLEs) with classroom text choices and mini-lessons (Q1). The session also included individual coaching of one teacher in the public setting with other teachers observing, contributing ideas of their own, and making connections to their own classroom settings (Q1-Q2). That evening, the individual teacher worked out a lesson plan for the next day in her classroom, appropriating ideas presented during the pre-planning session (Q2-Q3). All the teachers in the group observed the teacher demonstrate her lesson back in the public domain with the CEL coach at her side (Q3-Q4). Finally, the group reconvened at the end of the cycle to discuss the lesson (Q4), setting the occasion for the observing teachers to take new ideas

back to their classrooms, transform the ideas for their own settings, and develop lessons with those ideas in mind (Q2-Q3). The external coach designed the next coaching cycle with the teachers based on their joint sense of “next steps” for their professional learning.

District and building leaders observed the teachers’ work during instructional visits to the classrooms or observations of the coaching work (Q4-Q1). District leaders designed learning opportunities for professionals from other schools (coaches, teachers, and building leaders) based on what they learned from observing the coaching cycles (Q2-Q3). They made their learning public at events, such as school visits where new coaching was taking place or at principals’ professional development activities, (Q3-Q4). Here, principals or other coaches had opportunities to repeat the learning cycle (Q4-Q1).

The process through which individuals hear new ideas or observe new practices, transform those ideas for their own work and make them public through talk or action—creating the opportunity for the practices become conventionalized in the work of others—is iterative. It doesn’t happen once, but is a continuous cycle (McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2005). The Vygotsky Space is a helpful tool for understanding the ways in which learning spans private and public; individual and collective spaces. It is not as helpful at foregrounding the levels of support and scaffolding necessary for new learning to take place (the primary process through which CEL is “teaching” school districts around instructional improvement work). We think, however, that the model is a promising one for clarifying how the process of reform—viewed here as a learning process—occurs. We expect that by focusing our data collection and analysis efforts on the cyclical and social nature of learning process, we can document the ways that powerful instructional practices become conventionalized (or institutionalized) in the work of professionals across a school district. Indeed, this model may help us to understand how the process of learning itself becomes conventionalized instructional improvement practice within a district.

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