

**The Pedagogy of Third-Party Support for Instructional Improvement:
A Partnership between CEL and Highline School District**

**Interim Findings Report
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This document lays out a series of preliminary findings from a study that is currently in progress regarding the school district partnership work of the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Washington. The data presented here are the results of a year one study of CEL's work in one local school district, therefore the descriptive patterns are limited in scope.

“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

Because we’re working literally side-by-side in a partnership, I can begin to see where they’re growing as well as where the holes are... This is where we start our theory of action around building content knowledge, building leadership skills through the content sessions, but also the ongoing coaching on site, and looking for ways to get to practice—a way to develop places to engage in the practice.

3/05 CEL Project Director

The above quotes foreground the reality that public school districts face in the current high-pressure accountability environment. Especially in urban and rural areas where leadership shortages, teacher turnover, and achievement gaps persist, school districts face increasing urgency to link the daily work of educators more clearly and directly with learning outcomes for students. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has made it increasingly 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.

Recent years have seen an explosion of activity by third-party groups supporting school districts in their efforts to address issues of instructional improvement. Some of these relationships are largely externally driven through philanthropic activity focused on the improvement of schools and school systems (for example, the Panasonic Foundation’s systemic change efforts, the Gates Foundation’s small school initiatives, or the Annenberg Challenge grants). In other cases, district leaders are the primary designers and instigators of change efforts that intentionally draw in external partners for research, capacity building, and professional development support (for example, the University of Pittsburgh’s Learning Research and Development Center’s (LDRC) work with New York District #2).

Research into district change efforts supported by “intermediaries” have offered some insight into the work of assisting leaders in developing the capacity to lead improvements in teaching and learning (Togneri, 2003; Resnick & Hall, 1998; Corcoran & Christman, 2002; Honig, 2004). Scholars have yet to take a close look, however, at what is going on in districts and third-party arrangements especially when the external support providers are explicit about their intentions to develop district capacity for instructional improvement. There, a form of

teaching and learning is taking place. There is a need to know much more than we currently do about the way these third-party arrangements stimulate the district’s own “system learning” at the same time that they offer concrete guidance for the everyday practice of teachers and administrators.

In the fall of 2004, we initiated a qualitative research study into what, and how, a third-party support provider—the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Washington—engages districts in a collaborative teaching and learning partnership about instructional improvement. This report summarizes the results of a one-year pilot investigation of CEL’s work in Highline School District.

A key problem for research regarding school district and third-party arrangements rests in understanding how the *pedagogy* of the external provider matters in helping to grow leaders’ and practitioners’ capacity to reshape and improve teaching and learning. Gaining this understanding means looking closely at the way professionals at all levels of district systems learn by engaging in new practices and learning about new possibilities for their work. At the core of this phenomenon are fundamental, unanswered questions about the nature of the relationship between districts and third-parties, the “pedagogy” of third-party engagement, and the dynamics of “system learning” (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003).

Three central questions about the pedagogy of third-party support providers guided our pilot study of the partnership between CEL and Highline School District.

- 1) What is the nature of the partnership between the third-party support provider and the school district?
- 2) What (and how) does the relationship with a third-party support provider *teach* about the practice of leadership for instructional improvement?
- 3) What do district actors *learn* from their partnership with a third-party?

The Pilot Study Design

We investigated these questions using a one-year 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, to describe what was taught, and to assess what was learned among district actors, we collected and analyzed 35 interviews and 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 district instructional leaders, district-level events, and instructional visits to several schools. We conducted research activities in a limited sample of two schools—an elementary school and a high school—in order to study partnership events at that level of the system.¹

The Center for Educational Leadership

¹ See Appendix A for a more fully developed outline of the methods used for this one-year pilot study of CEL’s work in Highline School District.

The Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) is an independently funded organization affiliated with the College of Education at the University of Washington. CEL develops and designs professional development and support services for educational leaders. Drawing on both the academic resources of the University and the professional consulting services of a variety of external consultants, CEL offers a variety of services including continuing education programs for principals, superintendents, and other central office leaders from area school districts. These courses link to other programs in the College of Education such as the principal credential program and doctoral level studies in leadership forming a continuum of leadership preparation programs.

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. CEL approaches its district partnerships with a flexible structure that enables it to conform to the needs of individual districts and leaders. A CEL Project Director coordinates each district partnership.

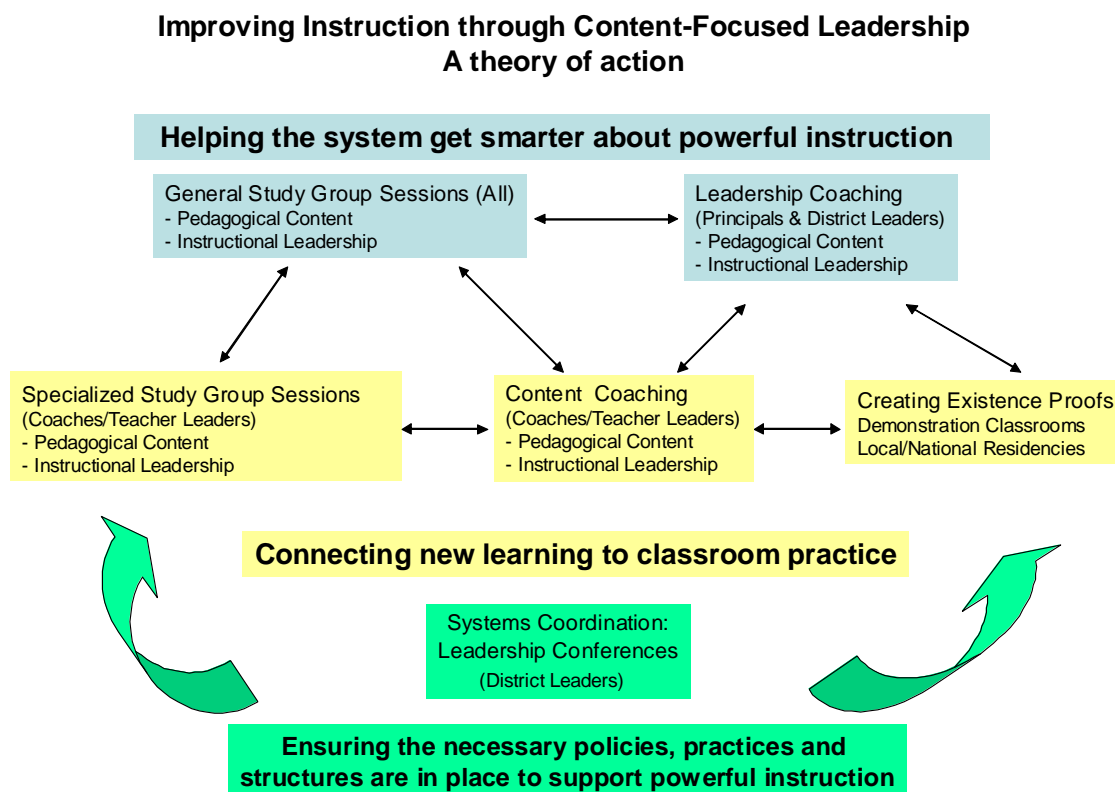
Theory of Action

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 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



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 suburbs. Sitting atop a ridge that separates the Duwamish, White, and Green River

valleys from the Puget Sound, the “High Line” ridge area developed over time into five suburban cities. 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 and one elementary school.

District officials considered Clover Valley High School to be making progress toward instructional improvement and to have a strong leadership team. Deemed as a “mover and shaker,” Clover Valley High School contracted with CEL for additional coaching resources aimed at the classroom level during 2004-2005 (approximately 30 extra days). 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 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% 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

The Nature of the CEL/Highline Partnership

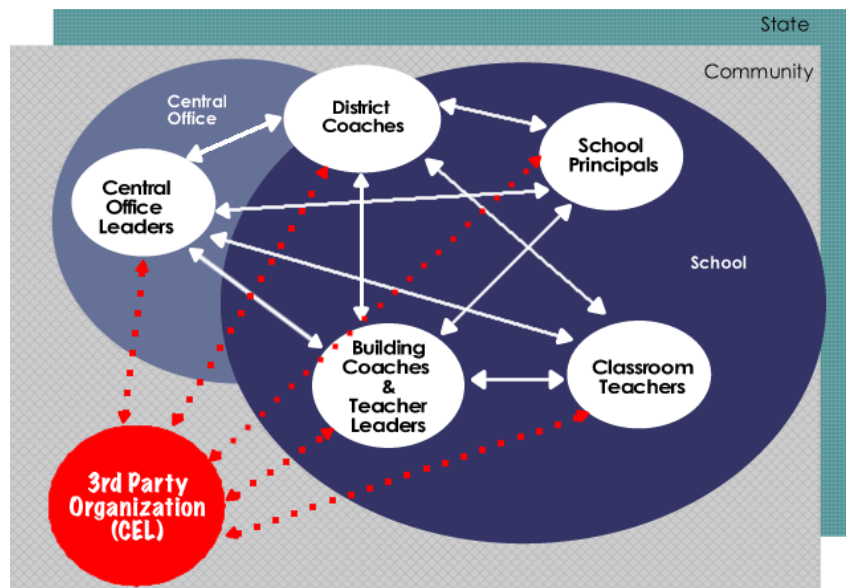
CEL’s contract with the Highline School District focused on building leadership and instructional capacity among district professionals. Informants across both Highline and CEL referred to the district’s arrangement with CEL as a *partnership*. As exemplified in the quote that began this report, the current Superintendent in Highline believed that school districts such as Highline “*cannot do this alone*”—that is, achieve their goal of bringing students in the diverse district to standard-level work by 2010. During the first two years of CEL’s partnership with Highline, the district was also (1) working with the Panasonic Foundation on systems alignment and (2) supporting a high school redesign initiative that led to a \$5.6 million district grant from the Gates Foundation for the 2005-2006 school year. This section of the report describes our findings regarding the characteristics of the partnership between the Center for Educational Leadership and Highline School District.

The CEL Project Director worked with central office leaders to shape the instructional improvement work in the Highline context. She met regularly with district leadership to strategize and plan for future events and to coordinate the work of the six-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.

CEL consultants interacted 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. 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.

Figure 1 illustrates the numerous contacts that the CEL Project Director and consultants had across multiple layers of the district context.



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. School staffs and district leaders from Highline visited both districts. In the context of talking about an upcoming trip to New York, the CEL Project Director commented about the multiple purposes that these trips serve.

We’re going to do a little mini-pilot-residency with a middle school in NYC...the method to my madness is threefold. One is that we bring our partners in to see what it [best teaching practice] could look like. But down the road, what I want to have is a place where we can do residencies one or two times a year, ideally three times a year for people who are further along. Who, if they spent a few days in some great classrooms (like 3-5 days) and saw how all the reading and writing fit together across three days ...it would propel their work.

- 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 provided expertise to the district regarding instructional leadership and pedagogical content knowledge, but the partnership involved an ongoing process of negotiation with district and building leaders. 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 CEL 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 partnership was full of give and take that extended beyond contractual obligations. The district was not a blank slate when CEL arrived; it had existing programs and reform initiatives in place. Even in their earliest interactions with Highline, CEL was negotiating the “terms” of the partnership such as the decision to focus improvement efforts in the content area of literacy. Highline’s reading adoption was Open Court; CEL promoted a ‘balanced’ literacy approach to reading instruction. The Project Director commented that the decision to focus the improvement work on literacy “*was purely negotiated. Including this time last year, sitting down with [an assistant superintendent] and him saying, ‘we want to work on balanced literacy. And the vehicle is going to be Open Court.’*”²

The negotiative nature of the CEL/Highline partnership extended to schools, some of which had individual contracts with CEL. Oak Park Elementary, for example, negotiated a separate contract for an additional external consultant. Generally, the schools that had individual contracts with CEL were early responders to the CEL theory of action.

Clover Valley High School also had an independent relationship with CEL that preceded the district partnership. The principal described the evolution.

I have a dual relationship with CEL personally and I think our school has a dual relationship with CEL that is unique... we had them [CEL staff] come down to talk about strategic planning around equity and social justice...they did a lot of work with our administrative team and then facilitated some courageous conversations with our staff. At that point they said, wow, you need [CEL Project Director], because now you’re ready to

² The CEL Project Director was aware when this decision was made that there were potential tensions between the Open Court adoption and the approach to balanced literacy and powerful instruction that CEL promoted. See section on Competing Initiatives.

talk about instruction with your staff and simultaneously, Highline was working with CEL on the partnership for the district.

The individual school contracts at Clover Valley High School and Oak Park Elementary were the exception rather than the norm across the district. It was typical for building leaders and coaches to come in contact with CEL at the monthly leadership seminars and follow-up coaches' seminars or when a CEL consultant—nearly always accompanied by a district instructional leader—spent a day in their building (that occurred four times during the school year or about once every two months). During the building visits, teachers might see the CEL consultant during an “instructional visit” or walkthrough of their classroom. So, although the overall approach to system improvement was focused on district and building leaders in the first two years of the partnership, CEL staff and consultants spent considerable time on-the-ground (e.g., in classrooms) in Highline School District.

The Work Takes Place “On-the-Ground”

The role of the CEL Project Director in Highline was to orchestrate the work of multiple consultants in partnership with district instructional leaders. In practice, while the Project Director for the Highline partnership spent an immense amount of time in phone or email conversations and planning meetings with central office leaders, she also worked in schools and classrooms as requested. She noted that her work with Highline extended beyond contracted professional development sessions and planning meetings. She talked to us about her early work with Highline.

I felt like I could have lived down there and it wasn't enough time. I felt like it was really important to be at the major planning meetings and I coached a couple of elementary schools myself so that I knew the work on-the-ground ...when principals would call me and say could you come out, I would. And, most principals didn't take me up on that, but a few did. And I would go out and either they would watch me give feedback or they would just want to pick my brain about particular practices.

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 described herself as having 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 work of CEL consultants was also on the ground. The consultants spent their time in schools, usually with district instructional leaders at their side (note that because building leaders were responsible for 10-11 schools, they were with CEL consultants 44 days during the 2004-2005 academic year). The consultants also worked with building leaders and coaches—at district seminars and in buildings—teaching and guiding them regarding leadership and

instructional improvement. One CEL consultant contracted individually with Oak Park Elementary said,

You know my role, when I'm there, I'd say I spend 75% to 80% of my time with the principal and his reading coach. I've had a couple of conversations alone with him and a couple of sessions and work with her alone. But, much more of it has been the three of us together at a table doing the planning.

Other CEL consultants described their time in Highline as a) working side-by-side or along-side of district and building leaders, b) analyzing professional development needs together, c) planning together for walkthroughs and demonstration lessons, and d) working directly with classroom teachers. Following are some representative quotes from CEL consultants describing their work.

How does my work play out? I think the first year looks very different than this year (year 2). The first year, I spent a lot of time doing much more modeling than I had expected to do. I think that has to do with not only they needed to hear what was happening, but also they needed to see it, they needed to put words to a picture, so to speak. This year I find the work is different because it is now side-by-side, really side-by-side with the principal and the coach digging into how they can move this work in a bigger way.

My work is with professional development, working with central office to help plan that and help make sure it fits into the big picture of where they're going. And then, the rest of the time, I actually go out into schools with the [district leaders]. So, it started off primarily to work with a central office person to teach them what an instructional leader is, what they do and how they operate, because they are also the evaluator of principals as well as the coach for principals. So that was my primary role, but now it's really looking at instruction throughout the building. It's focused on classrooms. We analyze together, we talk about what is going on with that particular teacher, whether that teacher is having trouble or is really a bit high end and what kind of support that teacher would need to keep moving, and based on what the kids are doing, we then decide what that teacher needs.

The consultant who worked at Clover Valley High School worked directly with classroom teachers, but this model was unusual in the district.

And I spend most of my time with the teachers in their classrooms. We have planning sessions in the afternoon. Either I'm modeling or we're co-teaching or they're teaching and I'm observing. A lot of our work this year has been planning...and so a lot of our work has been restructuring the curriculum in a reading workshop friendly way, getting independent reading going. I've only spent twenty days there so most of it's been with the teachers.

CEL staff and consultants collaborated with HSD staff to plan for the monthly leadership seminars. A common example of this type of collaborative planning occurred during the debrief sessions after the seminars. Present at this meeting were two CEL Project Directors and the CEL consultant who teaches at the leadership seminars.

District Leader: *Do we do read aloud or shared reading?*

CEL Consultant: *I could be prepared for both. Do you want fiction or non-fiction? How is the coaching work looking? Are coaches more comfortable with fiction or non-fiction?*

District Leader: *They are working with the teachers.*

CEL Consultant: *If you want to do chunking, information text is easier.*

CEL Project Director: *But if you think about what they are doing.*

District Leader: *They are still asking literal questions.*

CEL Project Director: *Think about what will benefit your principals and coaches.*

District Assistant Superintendent: *If we use our data, then informational text may warrant more attention.*

CEL Consultant: *One other wrench – your GLEs – between and among texts. It may be hard to replicate what the GLEs are after.³*

District Leader: *That means we need to plan carefully.*

District Leader: *It might be interesting to do a 6th grade lesson.*

CEL Consultant: *Leadership team – what are you thinking?*

District Assistant Superintendent: *Tie it back to [another district leader’s] comment on data – shared reading...*

District Leader: *My vote – I’m going to say fiction. They [teachers & coaches] are doing so many new things. Do something they know a bit about but do it better.*

We observed this type of planning and give and take among leaders across a variety of settings including meetings of central office leaders, debrief sessions after leadership seminars, and at the building level among principals, district supervisors, and coaches. It was less common during the second year of the partnership to observe this type of interaction at the classroom level of the system.

At Clover Valley High School, however, the partnership made the largest inroads to daily practice of teachers. These teachers, unlike most teachers in the district, received direct coaching and support from the CEL Project Director and a CEL consultant. In this context, CEL worked with teachers in a local context addressing problems of practice co-identified by the teachers and CEL. One of the teachers explained this “on-the-ground” professional development.

...we started out where I was teaching and she was watching me, and then she would give me feedback. And then we went to her modeling and me watching and observing. And then we co-taught once. And now she watches me again. So it’s kind of like the coaching cycle.

I think that a coach—having a coach come in on a consistent basis like she does, she meets with us a couple of times a month, is the answer to good teaching, to taking teachers who really want to be good teachers and who want to put in the effort and the time and who maybe have some raw skills, I think that just works wonders.

I think, as far as our learning together, she definitely gives us freedom to say what we’re working on and what we need to improve. And she fully asks us to guide where we go

³ GLEs refer to the Washington State Grade Level Expectations that are coordinated with the state content standards—Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs).

together. And we send her our ideas of our lesson plans before she comes so she knows where we are. And that's why I think it works well. She meets us where we are, like she's asking us to do with our kids.

At the elementary level, principals at multiple locations noted how consultants and CEL personnel were out in their buildings addressing problems of leadership for instructional improvement. At Oak Park, for example, the principal valued having a CEL consultant who knew his style and goals. He resisted a district decision to assign him a new consultant during the second year of the partnership. He talked with the CEL Project Director and “*after that she [the consultant] was re-assigned. It saved an enormous amount of time because knowing her from last year we were already able to have good conversations with her.*” Another elementary principal described the CEL consultant’s work as evolving from walkthroughs and debriefing to “*talking with grade level teams on a specific topic.*”

The Partnership is Context-Specific

CEL’s relationship with Highline was dynamic over the year that we observed it. Because the work evolved on-the-ground, it was also tailored to the specific needs of the district. CEL consultants corroborated our observation that the partnership in Highline was individualized. For example, the consultant who led the monthly leadership sessions, noted that while her professional development work was similar across three CEL partnerships, the content of the each session was based on district needs.

It's the same in that each month I teach something to the principal group and then we do some work the next day with the coaches. But districts feel they have different needs. In one district, it's been what does powerful instruction look like? In Highline, it's been more what does it look like within these approaches, because they had already distinguished for themselves that they wanted read-aloud and independent reading in elementary schools and accountable talk and shared reading in secondary. So, that was already determined by them.

Another consultant, when asked specifically about the way the work differs across school contexts within the district said,

I think a lot of it has to do with the personality of the principal and the principal's team, what I hear them say about their beliefs and values...I think I can be more honest and direct with one school and they want that. And, at another school, I may be more recommending, suggesting, questioning.

In the example following, CEL consultants and district leaders discussed their plans for the instructional improvement for the upcoming school year. This scenario highlighted CEL’s strategic, yet non-scripted influence on the district. The group is referring to a recent trip that several central office leaders took with CEL to New York City and to the “residency” model that they planned to implement during the 2005-2006 school year.

District Leader #1: *How do we build capacity in our district? One of the things I initially thought is that Jean [a pseudonym] might travel to a different classroom each time and after talking with [CEL Project Director], no we need to see the growth over time in one classroom and really go deep. These are just initial thoughts about what we might do starting in August for identifying the teachers in September, and then inviting them to start some of the professional development in September and October. And then the other sheet is based on a conversation we had in NY about how do we bring back those residency ideas to Highline? Again, it's picking the people who are not only willing, but have the skills enough to attach to the meaning and to have them do it starting next year. And there are things in this section such as doing it maybe 3 times a year, so we respect and honor those classrooms that we are disrupting and that we release both the visiting teacher and the host teacher to have half-day planning.*

Assistant Superintendent: *In NY, do the residency teachers, not the ones going, but the ones doing it, get additional support, like a stipend?*

District Leader #1: *Well, that's what we're suggesting. I didn't actually write it in here, but we talked about that. I think it's essential for the level of work we are asking them to do, that there would be some type of recognition. The bigger difference between what we've done in the past is we've done inter-classroom visitations where they just go for a period. This is 2-5 days, selected targets, really deep planning, half day release to really get deep and plan, And, the coach would be part of that and the building principal has to be part of at least some of it so that there's follow up after the fact.*

District Leader #2: *The coach comes with the visiting teacher.*

CEL Consultant: *If you're going to do it 3 times a year, why would you not want the principal to be there the whole time? It's 3-5 days?*

District Leader #1: *Because it's 3-5 days. So could we ask principals to be out of their building for a week at a time with a classroom teacher? Or could we ask them to identify coaches to be there? Push back. ...I mean I think personally they might go crazy if we ask them to be there the whole time.*

District Leader #2: *They don't get a sub.*

District Leader #1: *You know, I think with the consultant residency, or how we use our consultants, I think that's a must, the principal is there because it's PD for the principal, but I didn't see the in-district residency, at least initially, being at the same level. That was my thinking.*

CEL Consultant: *What do you mean not at the same level?*

District Leader #1: *Well, I've never seen this teacher, and I trust my colleagues to know that she's got great practice. But is it the practice that is worth a week of a principal's time, or would I rather say I want the principals to be there to bring back and support the classroom teacher who is the visiting teacher. Or would I rather have that principal's time watching the CEL consultants, and go deeper with her.*

CEL Project Director: *And they've done professional development with adults longer than the teacher has.*

District Leader #1: *Right, I didn't want to put principals' staff development on the teacher's shoulders. Again, it was what I was thinking. I want principals to be participating so they can do the follow through, provide support for those visiting teachers back in the building. But I didn't see it as professional development for the principals. I saw the consultants as principal professional development.*

Although Highline’s leaders developed their own design—the seeds for the residency plan were planted during a trip to New York with their CEL Project Director. As they worked through the details of the plan, the district leaders welcomed, even solicited CEL’s advice.

The partnership was also tailored to individual school settings. In the following example, a district administrator commented that the instructional visit was meaningful to her because it included lesson planning with teachers and a demonstration with students who attended the school—it was context-specific.

Today I was at school when the morning began—we had primary teachers that were released, we planned a read-aloud together with the CEL consultant. We went into the classroom and the CEL consultant and the school coach co-taught what we had planned together to a group of second graders. We all watched. Then we came back out of the classroom and debriefed what we saw. And then the teachers, in groups, planned their own read-alouds. There’s the power in doing it together with...with lots of structure and modeling, trying it on in front of kids where you can see it for real, then debriefing...and then, trying it on your own.

After attending the morning session of a monthly leadership seminar, we observed a group including a central office instructional leader, a CEL consultant, and four middle school principals as they walked through a middle school. The conversation after the walkthrough exemplified the individualized nature of this partnership. The group did not suggest the same professional development for all staff at the school. They identified the specific needs of each teacher and planned accordingly. The following was recorded during an observation of the debrief session.

Central Office Leader: *You opened up your lab [he is referring to the classrooms] to let us muck around. My main focus is to talk about the role of the principal and how to move practice. This is a way to all see the same thing.*

Host Principal: *I know the teachers, where they’ve been and where they are headed. I was pleasantly surprised to see M. (a teacher) not talking... The assistant principal and coach have spent time with him. S. (another teacher) has this down—M. will go and talk with her. They are doing more learning from each other...*

CEL Consultant: *I’d love to encourage him to take notes about what students are saying. It gives him a focus—what are the patterns.*

Host Principal: *M’s challenge is that he plans in his head—shooting from the hip. He’s being pushed in many different areas.*

Central Office Leader: *Any other areas of need?*

Host Principal: *The last teacher. When she asked for responses, she was tallying responses. It’s all direct instruction. You can see where the tables are pushed back. Next steps – relaxing a bit.*

CEL Consultant: *She would benefit from seeing teacher #2 who has routines down, no wasted time. How calling out students’ behavior takes away time.*

CEL's coaching in this situation was driven by the specific context of a middle school walkthrough. Although the general focus was on principals' practice, the consultant used the shared experience as the starting place for instruction. The consultant was also modeling for the district leader how to interact with principals around issues of instructional leadership.

The Partnership is Relational and Evolving Over Time

Our informants characterized the interactions between CEL and the district as growing in honesty and trust. The nature of the reform effort required ongoing, often critical, feedback that was difficult to give and perhaps more difficult to receive. But, by the time we conducted our study (the second year of the partnership), we heard from a variety of sources that the conversations consisted of increasingly straight talk. As with any set of relations, however, the interactions were not without tensions. Some informants told us that CEL had multiple voices—sometimes those were viewed as a resource and sometimes as a source of misinterpretation.

CEL consultants talked about the ways that they “pushed back,” providing critical feedback to district leaders. In the example below, the consultant talked about the district's efforts to implement a reading strategy before she thought they were ready.

I know that they have an agenda for this work. And, I've really pushed up against that agenda because as much as I like doing this work, one of the hardest things is when somebody wants me to do something I know doesn't work or I don't believe in. I think in the past I would have just done it, because I felt, well I need to do it; they hired me to do that. But, now I'm realizing I need a stronger voice. So, for example, in January they wanted to roll out independent reading and I just can't. Now, they trusted enough to say, well, why can't you and hear the reasons.

In some situations, when we observed district leaders and CEL staff strategizing about the use of CEL consultants in the district, we interpreted the exchanges as honest give and take. Here, the district leaders expressed a sense of trust in the Project Director's opinion.

District Leader #2: *Thinking about working with Carol [a pseudonym], being in that partnership and knowing them so well, you can read each other's minds. When it's somebody new, for several visits, there's that dance.*

CEL Project Director: *You are thinking about that one person. You also know that some of her style is a bit rough on folks. I want you to think about pussyfooting around for 3 visits.*

District Leader #1: *Are you recommending Nancy [a pseudonym]? Are we fools?*

CEL Project Director: *You know your principals and you know Carol. I think you'd....*

Assistant Superintendent: *I'm thinking back to what we just said.*

District Leader #2 to CEL Project Director: *You know these folks and you know us. You have a great track record.*

In a subsequent interview, one of the district leaders present at that planning meeting reflected on the decision to take the Project Director's advice.

The new consultant is new [to us]. She's from New Zealand and then was in San Diego. And we feel really fortunate. Her specialty is K-6. And that's something we haven't had. We've had all these middle school people. We haven't had anybody who can really help us with that early learning. So that's exciting. So...you know, there's a little bit of trust right now. We are trusting our Project Director that this is all going to work out. But it sounds exciting.

CEL hired consultants who were of like mind and who supported their theory of action and general approach to instructional leadership and content-based instructional improvement. A district instructional leader discussed the benefits of having consultants with different sets of skills.

We went and spent four days shadowing her [CEL staff member] in her job in San Diego. And that's when we just absolutely fell in love with the woman. She just was so brilliant in her decisions that she made in how she worked with people even though she has this kind of quiet demeanor. So we really pushed to have her involved with us. And so—because our Project Director brings one set of skills, but she brings another. And they don't necessarily have each other's skills. So it's so important to have that person who's been in our shoes help us with this. We're going to continue to push for more time with her...we call her, "Aunt."

At other times, and in some places, the voice of CEL was interpreted as presenting a mixed message across consultants. One principal said,

I know our consultant has struggled a little bit because she is not attending those trainings so she's not there. She can watch the videos, but that's kind of past the fact. So, she doesn't know what we're hearing first hand. She has her own viewpoints, and ideas, and knowledge base. Sometimes it conflicts a little bit.

She continued, describing how having a central-office administrator present with the consultant helped add coherence—at least to this set of ears.

I think it is helpful having our administrator there who is hearing the CEL presentations but is also working with our consultant closely. She helps us stay on the same track. But it's been a little bit different just because with the consultant not having that same language that we're hearing on those Mondays and not having that same message. Sometimes it can be conflicting. But for the most part our consultant's been good about going with the flow and trying to add whatever she can to what we've been learning.

The partnership consisted of variable, but often trusting, relationships—between the CEL Project Director, the CEL consultants, the central office leaders, and certainly some building leaders and coaches. However, there was evidence of some tensions in the partnership between the external organization and the school district regarding ownership over the renewal work. One of the building principals identified this as a healthy tension.

There's always a tension—I use tension as a healthy word—between the district and CEL over whose work it is and CEL's very respectful of that. The district needs to own it. And sometimes I think the district might rely on CEL too much for help. But I'm not sure of that—I'm not in all those meetings. But you can sense sometimes that there's a healthy tension over who decides what to do next, and how is it done and so there's times when we get mixed messages from CEL people and from district people.

At another school, the principal took ownership of the work in his building by saying, “*We are doing independent reading, not the IR that our consultant had in mind, but I don't want to hold teachers and my coach accountable if they don't yet know the expectation.*”

It wasn't that CEL didn't understand, even support, this tension. At times, the Project Director sounded like she was pushing the district to take ownership of the work. She recently told one of the Assistant Superintendents: “*And I trust you to know what's best for your schools and principals at this point.*” She reported that, “*I might have pushed back more last year, and I did. But now, it's like let's think about this stuff together. What are your needs?*”

At the end of the pilot study year, an Assistant Superintendent told us that the district planned to take the reins.

Well, I think one thing is that we're starting to be in this what I would call a healthy place—being able to define how CEL can help us best rather than taking only their lead in how they can help us. And I think that's healthy. It may feel awkward when we want to go in a direction that may not be exactly what CEL folks would recommend. But, it's where we feel we need to go. And so I think, in the last few months, we've been in a transition spot about that piece.

She continued, describing the ways that Highline was developing variable reform strategies for their elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools.

And, even if that's not always matching what's the best theory, how do we start centrally exerting that leadership in a way that CEL folks work with us and truly feel comfortable pushing back, but we end up developing our own theory of action and taking those lumps or those off-roads and on-roads as we learn them.

The partnership between Highline and CEL seemed organic to us. The CEL 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.

In the next sections of this report, we unpack in further detail the CEL theory of action as it was put in use in the Highline partnership. We saw the relationship between CEL and Highline School District as a pedagogical relationship, one of continual teaching and learning for

all the participants. We begin by describing what CEL staff and consultants perceived themselves to be *teaching* in Highline.

What was Being Taught?

The sheer number of “experts” floating around Highline School District made it essential for CEL to project a theory of action that was understood by both their consultants and their clientele. CEL created and maintained the organization’s vision, articulated below by CEL’s Executive Director, Steve Fink.

One of the underpinnings is that, as a provider, we need to work with the whole [district] system because while there is all kinds of evidence regarding good schools, my belief is that in the absence of the system conditions that are created to sustain those schools, as soon as the principal changes or teachers come and go, the schools regress back toward their starting point...And, the other conceptual underpinning that we share, is that until people get smart about what good instruction looks like, it’s really difficult to think about what do we need to do as system leaders to create the conditions to support that.

Another CEL Project Director elaborated.

CEL believes that strong leadership through the principal is one of the major factors in improving classroom instruction, therefore improving student achievement. And we believe you can’t lead what you don’t know. We believe that principals truly need to be instructional leaders...and we would like to see the Assistant Superintendents lead the work for the principals. So it has to start with the Superintendent supporting the work and then the Assistant Superintendents becoming the instructional leaders.

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 Brian Cambourne’s Conditions for Learning), the vehicle for learning about the conditions for learning was a specific content area. In Highline, for years one and two of the partnership, that was reading instruction.⁴

We asked CEL consultants to describe their visions of good instruction. The most common components of those visions included 1) knowing students well (assessing their prior learning; assessing their learning needs); 2) supporting students to become independent learners; 3) delivering rigorous, explicit instruction; and 4) designing a supportive and appropriate classroom environment. Following are representative quotes from CEL consultants regarding their vision of good instruction.

... to understand how students learn, for teachers to really understand how their individual students learn.... scaffolding and teaching kids how to do something, not just what to do...how to become independent in doing that....

⁴ Plans for Year Three of the partnership included an expansion to mathematics.

...when a teacher has really deep knowledge of what students already know... moves students from where they are to where they need to go, but also makes them strive for more than they thought possible...highly engaging...constructivist with a clear, deliberate focus...repetitive...no-nonsense...high level of expectation.

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 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.

Literacy Content Knowledge

Although the partnership targeted reading as its content focus, Highline leaders had considered literacy as an avenue for instructional improvement work in the years before their relationship with CEL began. District leaders had visited San Diego and New York schools and had conceptualized the idea of a school walkthrough. One of these leaders described what they encountered as they began to gather data about the status of literacy instruction in Highline classrooms. “*What we saw in those buildings was pretty sobering... we saw round robin reading, or popcorn reading. (We saw) lots of what we would term low engagement.*”

The most explicit teaching around reading content knowledge and powerful instruction was delivered at the monthly leadership seminars attended by all Highline principals and building coaches. It was at this venue that the “message” about what it takes to set up a classroom, assess and engage students, and to teach reading (using the components of balanced literacy) was demonstrated for all participants to see and hear. In the following example taken from our field notes, the CEL consultant was teaching about independent reading—a component of literacy instruction that Highline was set as goal for elementary classrooms.

Our goal for students is independence. What do teachers need to know? What [your district leader] said – the less you know, the simpler it looks. Independent reading – how hard is it? It’s crucial – what makes text more challenging? When I taught 4/5th grades, I thought challenging text was longer, smaller print and harder words. That was before a lot of professional study...My principal would say, “I know you are cleaning during independent reading because your room is too clean at the end of the day.” It is the time during the day when I could work one-on-one.... It is a time when instruction is happening, practice is happening, kids are in “just right” books. It is not DEAR, SSR, Teacher Time, not a time for teachers to model reading. Where else in the day can we give one-on-one attention to kids? It is not a time to “hang out with books”. In independent reading, students are practicing what teachers taught.

At other points, she broadened her message about reading instruction to include the culture of teaching and learning in classrooms.

Kids mimic what they've been taught – we need to change their thinking about being students. They can't just sit and listen. Isn't the teacher just going to fill me with knowledge? What do students believe their role is? Sit & listen, talk to teacher, be quiet, find correct answer, short phrases for answers, giggle when a classmate gets called on? Part of the work is combating learned behavior and it doesn't take long to do. Lay the list alongside my lesson planning and target these behaviors. There is a resilience a teacher must have to insist that students do the work.

For one district administrator, however, “the work” was about instructional leadership.

The work that we've been doing with CEL is definitely around balanced literacy, and we're using the vehicles of balanced literacy. But what we're really doing is improving instruction and improving leadership. We're focusing on read-aloud or shared reading or independent reading just to get there.

Her assessment that the partnership work was about leadership was aligned with another aspect of what CEL's theory of action.

Instructional leadership

The CEL Project Director for Highline described the centrality of leadership in CEL's approach to system-wide instructional improvement efforts.

The nexus for our work lies in leadership. And through leadership development and we mean at all levels of the system—so the district level, building level (meaning principals and teacher leaders—how the development of that leadership can help to improve instruction and instructional practice...that's, in a nutshell, 'the work.'

Learning how to be an instructional leader, however, was viewed as a complex process. As the Project Director explained it,

One of the big issues in this work is, how do you help people lead work that they don't really understand and help them acquire a vision for the work that is far more robust than they may realize at the moment?

Another of the CEL Project Directors defined instructional leadership this way:

[Principals] have to know enough about instruction to be able to go in a classroom, analyze practice, have conversations with teachers about next steps, be able to look across their school and identify patterns to plan staff development...

School walkthroughs (called instructional visits in Highline) were opportunities for CEL leadership consultants to guide district leaders in issues regarding instructional leadership (for more description of instructional visits in Highline, see following section). One consultant told

us that she and the leaders (district and building leaders) looked at instruction during these visits, using their observations to plan for professional development. She said, “*We do that together. We look for an across-the-board pattern. So, we looked at 8 classrooms and what is the pattern for these 8 as far as strength, because they are working on what is the next step [for professional development] across-the-board.*”

Another component of instructional leadership that was emphasized by CEL concerns the development of “leadership voice.” Principals were supported in writing “instructional letters” to their staffs and in opening and closing professional development meetings. Likewise, district leaders were guided in writing letters to principals, opening and closing district-wide leadership seminars, and other professional development activities. A CEL consultant described the importance of “voice” in leadership work.

Ideally, as the leader, the principal, the instructional leader, you’re going to be involved in all of it, certainly in the planning so you know what’s going to be taught. But you may not do the specific content work directly yourself. But, you certainly want to be the opener and closer in most instances. And so, what does that look like in terms of using a leadership voice to communicate to staff your beliefs about the work, why we’re doing it, the rationale, the purpose, what do we want to accomplish, how, through what we know from research and from good practice what we expect as outcomes for students, a clear expectation of what I want you to do with this, not next year, but tomorrow, and how I will be supporting the work and then what I expect to happen next. So that would be encompassed in an opening which we wanted to be powerful, to be laced with real examples or stories, to be engaging. And then, as the closing, to review what we’ve learned, to assess, to talk about what we’ve learned, to again give rationale and expectations, and to be kind of that efficient leader that we know we can do this and we know it’s hard, but—in all of that communicating—that we’re all going to be learners, and I’m learning, I’m a risk taker, and in my work with you today, I’ve demonstrated that I’m a risk taker—and that’s not so much said as modeled.

She also described a similar set of ideas about the building leader as the “key learner” and the “key teacher” in the building.

It really is the role of the principal to be the key learner in the school, to be the key teacher in the school, to be responsible for what teachers are doing on a daily basis, and to require that teachers are learning, that they’re improving, that there is a plan for helping them do that through PD.

Instructional leadership was not just “taught” by CEL; central office leaders in Highline also took on a role as *teacher* in terms of helping principals come to understand and practice how to be an instructional leaders within schools. One of the Highline leaders reflected on her role in supporting principals’ learning about instructional leadership. It’s interesting to note that she also described herself as a *learner*.

When I’m there by myself, I’ve done actually very similar things and it’s because of the strategies—the skills that the outside consultants have given me over the last year

and a half. We're going to talk about data, we're going to talk about what's happening in the building, we're going to see some classrooms. I've also gone, though, and said, OK, on this visit with you and your coach and your teacher-leader, we're going to do some planning. And we actually plan lessons together because it was my observation that they really didn't have a deep enough knowledge base in how to do it.... So we're asking principals to keep conferring notes or notes on teacher strengths and needs—let's walk through them, let's talk about them, then together we kind of say, you know, we see a trend here, or we might do some staff development. I might focus on the community issue with a particular teacher or principal—what have you been doing with your community? What are your needs? How can I support you?

This comment not only illustrated leadership practices that connect to instruction (e.g., classroom visitation, planning instruction, keeping conferring notes about teachers), but also showed how the district leader had learned to practice instructional leadership. When working with principals, this quote suggests that her focus was on instructional issues rather than facility or budget issues (although those issues may have surfaced in her visits to schools).

“Opening” Educational Practice

Generally speaking, most school and district leaders are so removed from the daily activities of the classroom that they have indirect effects at best on the actual interactions between teachers, students and content. In Highline in 2004-2005, however, school and district leaders engaged in *instructional improvement practice* by spending time in classrooms nearly every day (barring major catastrophes).⁵ Instructional visits and weekly instructional letters were examples of ongoing activities in Highline intended to expose colleagues to the work of peers. This opening up of practice occurred in two ways: by (1) encouraging the scrutiny of one's own practice, and through (2) observing external images of excellent practice.

Scrutinizing one's own practice. Given the intense partnership focus on improving the quality and outcomes of instruction, a great deal of scrutiny was occurring 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, were packed with roughly twenty-minute observations and debriefs of multiple classrooms. By fueling conversations about classroom practice, instructional visits often resulted in improvement-oriented next professional development steps for a teacher or 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

⁵ We use the term “instructional improvement practice” to refer to work that leaders, coaches, and teachers do that is intended to improve instructional practice with the goal of improving student learning outcomes.

with the teachers. So a lot of what we do is, 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.

The CEL consultant working with Clover Valley High School's leaders pushed them to make difficult judgments about the quality of teaching in their building. This deep scrutiny of practice did not come easily, especially given the norms of typical high schools. An assistant principal explained to a CEL consultant what she saw after a classroom observation: a teacher-centered class with very little student talk. She then said, "Well, she is a good teacher," meaning she's not our worst teacher. The consultant replied, "No, she is not teaching. That is not teaching." The debate over the definition of teaching continued between Clover Valley leaders over about five minutes, after which they discussed the appropriate "next steps" regarding professional development for this teacher. 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.

Scrutinizing practice in Highline was rarely easy. Opening up practice might be a starting point for instructional improvement, but it required people to voluntarily leave their comfort zones and enter vulnerable, and sometimes humbling, positions. Making one's work public was becoming increasingly common practice in Highline, yet as might be expected, there was "a fear [among building leaders] of having interaction with teachers because it'll be perceived as evaluation." One principal also noted the potentially evaluative role of his CEL consultant, who was always accompanied to Clover Valley by district superiors (not evidently aware that the consultant was likely coaching the district administrator as well as the principal in these situations).

You know, it's a lot. It's a little bit confused right now—does she work for the district, or does she work for [the principal] she coaches? So, sometimes you get to feeling, oh, she's coming with the district to check in on us...so, she has that awkward role of—she's not truly a coach because she's only here four times a year—and every time she's here, the district folks are here too. So that's a little bizarre because they haven't figured out yet—they sort of go back and forth—the district, are they checking up on us, or are they here to help us, or is it a little bit of both...? And so that's a little bit confusing.

Since teachers are not part of the group's instructional visits and debriefs, they were sometimes left wondering what their principals and invited guests saw in their classrooms.

There's a disconnect in [walkthroughs] though. And I'm really open with our administration... They really have to work on—and my principal has been better about this with me, but they really have to work on giving the teachers that feedback in a concrete way. 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.

Other teachers such as the one quoted below experienced the classroom visits with extreme trepidation. A range of readiness among teachers regarding instructional visits was to be expected—and, the following teacher's angst poignantly captured one end of the developmental spectrum regarding the potentially overwhelming experience of opening educational practice to public scrutiny.

I was more concerned—and all of us—we had so many people coming through this building, we couldn't think about kids. We were thinking about adults because you don't want to look like you don't know what you're talking about and if a group of peers are walking through and observing you...I think this is just human nature—we were more concerned like, OK, are we looking good to them—is this the way they want me to do it? We weren't concerned that the kids were getting it. I've done read-alouds. I know how to ask questions. You know, I didn't know what they wanted. But, I mean, like, OK, they want me to do turn and talk and do a chart. I can do a chart. So I did. So then they do a debriefing. Well, (laughs) well here's—and I'll have to tell you that this might not bother other people, but this bothers me. When I went in the first thing that was said was—I guess I was just taught as a teacher and as an evaluator, you know, you tell somebody three or four positives before you talk about what they need to work on—you know, and you kind of get everybody on a better frame of mind. No one said a word about this is good, your room looked good, you had good control of your kids—whatever. That's all I wanted to hear. Nobody said a word. And this really—they need to hear this message. Because I felt this was terrible happening with another teacher here. They said, like, how do you think you did? Now, when they say that to me, I'm thinking, I did terrible. I'm embarrassed. I don't like this. I'm defensive.

This teachers' sense of the instructional visit experience highlighted the tension involved in opening practice to public scrutiny. It also suggested that there was a range in terms of both learning about leadership and learning to improve instruction across the district. It would take time before holding a mirror to one's work became normalized practice.

CEL directors and consultants also have colleagues nationwide who could act as images of good practice for Highline district employees. School and district leaders—as well as some teachers—relied on CEL to showcase best practices and work with them on their professional learning steps. 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. We referred to this process as “observing images of the possible.”

Observing images of best practice. A key component of CEL’s teaching involved offering personal experiences with powerful instruction and effective instructional leadership. 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. To me one of the big takeaways was that whole thing that I talked about—the meta-cognition. We asked her to do it. And she goes, oh! well that’s what Teachers College does. Sure, I’ll try it on. And she did it. And we actually got to see the Teachers College professional developer on Friday do her stint in that building. And she was just brilliant in being able to teach and then say, teachers I did this because, and then I changed my mind because, and she would kind of give us—but it would only be three sentences and then back to teaching. And she would do it off and on throughout the whole lesson. It was just very powerful rather than waiting till the end of the lesson like we usually do and then you can’t get that level of depth that way. So watching the modeling and then trying to just 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? You know, 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.... But there’s something about seeing that depth and that culture 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.

CEL also provided Highline teachers and leaders with models of powerful instruction closer to home. The CEL consultant, who was contracted by Highline to lead the monthly “content” seminars—in this case focused on reading instruction—described her philosophy behind her teaching and coaching work. She insisted that demonstrating the teaching skills with local students was the most effective way to teach.

In order to help people achieve that and see what I’m seeing, I need to help them see something different from what they’ve seen before. Because I do believe that the majority of teachers teach the best way they know how. And they get, through practice and experience, some known sense of what it means to be a 5th grader or a 4th grader. And it’s how we present them with opportunities to bump up against those beliefs that they might change their practice...it’s not fair to say, now go do it. It’s, I’m going to be standing here by your side because it’s a hard thing to accomplish. So, as a coach, we can give people

opportunities to see what they haven't seen and then actually teach them the skills that they need to achieve that goal.

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 an overview of the ways in which various actors in Highline are learning from their involvement with CEL. It illustrated her sensemaking about the components of 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 their learning. 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, you know, there's no one on the Highline staff that has the depth of knowledge of [several CEL consultants]. I think 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 is "bringing capacity" to build capacity. As noted earlier, the partnership is designed to help the district build internal capacity in both leadership and instruction. In the following sections, we provide examples from our data of the learning that we found across various district actors. We note that, although they are in varying stages in their learning—we saw evidence of new thinking among many individuals in the district and, in several cases, we documented obvious changes or shifts in their daily work.

Learning Among Central Office Leaders

Several of the CEL Project Directors and consultants described central office and building leaders in Highline as being at a *conceptual* stage in their learning, not yet able to fully implement things that they had been exposed to, but showing evidence of new 'thinking' in their language and interactions. For example, one consultant said of building leaders that she had worked with: *"They're still at the conceptual, more theory and knowledge base [stage] and so, for example, how can they bring more of the application of using it [differentiated instruction] in the classroom into their work with the teachers?"*

Central office leaders were described by CEL informants as beginning to think in "smart" ways about their leadership and as pushing back on CEL in "smart" ways, even though they were still learners. CEL staff talked about this phenomenon of learning over time, describing decisions made by district leaders that, with increased knowledge about 'the work'—changed over time. For example, early in their partnership with CEL, district leaders pushed setting up lab, or demonstration, classrooms in each building. The CEL Project Director noted the change in their thinking about this decision.

But I think the main reason they pushed it [setting up lab classrooms] was because they didn't understand the complexity of the teaching involved. And they just thought the teachers go to training and they come back and they do it...and then by March [1st year, 2003-2004], they got it. They were able to see what the problem was, having a lab classroom where a literacy coach is going to work side-by-side with a computer teacher in a high school. They began to see how some of the principal's choices for lab teachers were really not the place for people to get smart about their work together.

In another example, she described how the central office leaders had matched CEL consultants with principals early on *"based on little knowledge about the schools or the principals."* Later, she explained, the conversation was around matching the principals' needs with specific consultants. *"The question is what do they know about each of their principals as learners and what their needs are? And what do I know about who our consultants are and what they can bring?"*

Another CEL consultant talked about learning among district leaders as the development of their instructional voice, suggesting that this change occurred because of their increased understanding about "the work."

When I was here last year, most of the conversation and the facilitating were in my hands. And I think what's happened is you can see a shift so that I can sit back often and I can

listen and they very often are the facilitators with me pushing into their facilitating. I guess what I see happening is that 'voice' has happened to them. And voice has happened because they have come to a much, much greater understanding about this work. What the work is. I think the other piece is that it's not just the work, the pedagogical-instructional work that takes place that's important but I think they're also learning their own leadership style through watching others. I think what they've done is they've learned the content as well as the leadership.

Other examples of changes in how leaders were thinking about their practice were evident in their own comments about the role of school principals. Two district leaders described how things “used to be” and how their thinking has changed; one commented on a change in thinking about the traditional role of building leaders and the other noted that, as district leaders, they need to “teach” building principals about their new expectations.

Well, I kind of go back, you know, ten/fifteen years as a classroom teacher and that direction was never felt by the classroom teacher. When I was a building administrator it started to become part of the issue. Data was starting to be there. But it was still about having a well-run school and not having parents complain—those management things. I think the last two—starting three years ago, but the last two years are much more focused—it's really been about student achievement and what we can do to support those kids.

Before, we hired principals because of their managerial skills and personnel skills, but not necessarily because they were instructional leaders. And so we're really having to, with this new expectation, ramp up their skills at the same time. And we're having to teach them, how you become a good partner with your coach so that between the two of you...you're doing the mom and the dad thing and you're getting it to all your folks and getting that done. So that—that would be, raising the level there, and then raising the level of instructional practice of our teachers through those key people [principal & coach] at each school.

The nature of effective professional development for adults throughout the system was another area of learning. For example, one leader shared what she's learned about leadership and supporting adult learning through her work with CEL.

I've learned that you have to be right there with the people. You can't lead from afar. You can't. And if it's the principal—that's why they have to be in the classrooms. They can't lead from the office. If it's the central office, like me, I can't lead principals from the central office. I have to be out there with them, shoulder to shoulder, walking through classrooms—you know, struggling with their struggles, dealing with their problems alongside of them. You can't do it from afar.

She also commented on her learning about the structures that are needed to support adult learning.

I think that the structures have to be in place to make all of this happen, there has to be direct alignment. And by that I mean, we're supervising the principals and we're the ones that are leading the literacy work. We can't have somebody lead the literacy work and then a different person supervises the principals. Besides that, it doesn't work. It has to be a supportive environment—it has to feel like support. You can't mandate stuff to happen. It's just like, if we said, "OK, all you need to do is implement read aloud", we're saying it from afar, but we're not in there rolling up our sleeves helping them do it and making it feel like it's supportive.

We documented several specific changes in the ways that district leaders were engaging in their work. The following examples summarize the most obvious of these including (1) taking over the work (from CEL), (2) developing leadership voice, and (3) spending time in schools.

Taking over the work. Highline leaders referred to themselves as “babies” or novices in terms of their early understanding of “the work.” For example, during a leadership seminar for all principals and school literacy coaches, an elementary director shared how her own understanding of certain instructional practices in reading had changed from the previous year.

We have learned that the less you know the more simple things seem, and the more you know, the more complex things are. I want you to think back to how many of us thought implementing independent reading would be easy because we related it to sustained silent reading. I was one of them. We all know better now. Shared reading is more than just slapping something on the overhead. Last year it was our best thinking at the time.

Another central office leader described how she and her colleague were planning to take over some of the roles formerly assumed by CEL consultants in the upcoming school year (2005-2006).

I think that our use of the guest coaches [consultants] has now morphed into something a little bit different. Whereas last year and at the beginning of this year often times they [instructional visits] were almost like instructional audits or looking for trends and then figuring out what the next step would be from there. And we have still continued to do that periodically, but we think that we can take that part on. So the outside guest coaches would really be involved more in professional development—on-the-ground professional development at a particular school site.... I think the work that we did last year and the very beginning of this year was kind of plowing the soil, you know, getting us to take a look at the practice. And before we could really look at it deeply we had to have some level of understanding. So that had to be built at the same time. And so I see—that's how I work, you know, it's just changing.

The CEL Project Director described how a district leader made her own decision about the use of one of the CEL consultants after some encouragement.

...she's gotten so smart and I said, look, you know your principals, you know what their needs and strengths are and their personality quirks. I trust completely that you can tell

me, this is where she [CEL consultant] is working out, this is where we need to cut our losses...And, then, I got an email from her just yesterday saying, we cancelled her over at one school and moved her to another school because the principal over there loves her. But, she just made the decision to just cut the losses. That's fine.... I feel like the leadership works. Everybody in Highline has been working on this...has gotten so smart about the leadership aspect.

Another example of this change involved the kinds of services that Highline negotiated with CEL for the coming year. The CEL Project Director suggested that the district instructional leaders not bring in consultants as “*outside coaches to coach your principals. You can do that. You know that.*” In the past, each principal received four days of coaching from CEL consultants, but in 2005-2006, central office leaders planned to use the CEL consultants in a different way—including hiring different consultants. The new plan focused on strategic and differential use of resources based on building needs and CEL consultants developing “studio”—or demonstration—classroom sites; HSD central office administrators would provide the leadership for building leaders that was previously provided by CEL consultants. One of the district leaders described their decision-making process and the shifts in the way they were doing the work.

We had twenty-two elementary schools, each with four days apiece. So we had eighty-eight total for our elementary cadre. Now we're moving from eighty-eight to thirty-eight. So we're decreasing greatly. And we're moving from having three different consultants. We're keeping one of them and then adding one [for elementary]. So we're going to have just two different consultants. And no one will have assigned days. In the past we had four days assigned to every school regardless of need and regardless of size. So now we want to make it more equitable rather than equal. So some of our schools may get four days specifically for them plus some group PD. Other schools might not get specific days for them. They'll just be invited to groups. So depending on the need and also the readiness.

Developing leadership “voice.” The CEL 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, Steve said that he considered 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 kind of going 'wow', they couldn't have done this last year. And 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.

Other CEL consultants corroborated his view including one who described similar evidence of growth in the district's instructional leaders.

I go to those content sessions and I'm glad to see and witness the development of their leadership. I mean, there has been a remarkable growth from—when I think about their role in the early content sessions and their ability to sort of share what they know—to where they are now. I think that's been a very important venue for district leaders to be instructional leaders.

In January, one of the district's instructional leaders gave the opening. 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 everyday 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.

The opening covered (1) where we are now, (2) what we've learned, and (3) where we are going and next steps. 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.

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*

District instructional leaders also learned through their experiences with CEL to write “instructional letters” to their building principals. One of our CEL informants saw evidence of learning in the first letter of the year to principals from the district leaders (during the summer of 2004) as they set expectations for building leaders.

In their opening memo to staff that they are currently working on, they are laying out what they're expecting principals to do and what they're going to be talking to principals about

with each school visit. So, for example, their goal is for each of their principals to have conferring notes on each teacher. They want them to be able to say for each of their staff members, these are their strengths around literacy instruction and these are their needs and this is my plan of growth for each teacher.

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 Conference 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. The Superintendent connected these changes with CEL's influence.

In that partnership, CEL has brought a team together to interface with our team and do a lot of planning. They put in place a set of activities for teaching building instructional leadership skills to principals and administrators and for making sure that this is a central office that does provide leadership about teaching and learning. That's not necessarily something central offices are known for... that we're more concerned about dialogue than just giving direction.

Another district instructional leader described how the role of consultants during a walkthrough 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 more 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,

what's truly more hands-on staff development rather 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.

Related to the time they spent in schools, two of the district leaders developed a computerized model that they used for keeping track of the leadership goals that they set with their elementary building principals. The system was based on the district's new evaluation tool for principals, but served as a practical way to keep track of each principal's progress. They developed an Excel spreadsheet that tracked their school visits (see Appendix B); the spreadsheet was linked to a Word document that allowed the district leaders to keep track of progress on several indicators of the principal's leadership related to literacy content (later, indicators for mathematics were added). The indicators were related to the new district principal evaluation tool. For an abbreviated example of these forms, refer to Appendix B. [For a description of the new principal evaluation tool, see *New Structures, Procedures, and Policies*.]

Principals as Instructional Leaders

Our informants reported changes in the conceptions that building principals had about their role. One CEL consultant said, however, that many of the building principals were at an early stage in their learning.

It's a normal bell curve. It really is. There are people who bought into this almost from the very start that are further along. And, that's an obvious, isn't it? Those are the people that are succeeding in a greater way. So there are some of the principals who get it and have it at this point. They have a clearer picture of what the literacy work looks like. And then there are those who are just a little slower at picking it up. Either they don't have the strength in this particular arena, but as I said, I can honestly say of all the principals I'm working with [about 9-10], there's only one principal who is not engaged at all.

One principal we spoke with talked about his learning from the monthly Leadership Seminars that all building leaders and coaches attended. 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 almost said 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 changes in his thinking 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.

However, as noted by the CEL consultant quote above, there was a range of response from building leaders to the teaching of CEL. We interviewed two other principals regarding the HSD/CEL partnership. One principal expressed reluctance to the idea that CEL’s teaching represented new information for her staff. *“I feel like even with the shared reading training and the independent reading training, we’ll be able to balance it because my staff has a pretty good foundation. It’s not so much new that they really need to be just totally integrated in the concept of literacy all around and everything to do with staff development.”* She seemed to interpret the renewal work as a “literacy initiative” rather than a fundamental shift in thinking about instructional leadership and the imperative to build capacity.

They’ve helped us focus on a balanced literacy program. And that, for me, seems to be the message I’ve received. These are the components that need to be in a classroom. These are what will help move your students to be proficient and up to grade-level standards. You’re never really done. You just need to start where you can and then constantly keep working to improve it little by little. That’s kind of the message that I’m hearing.

While the above data suggests that principals were motivated by their interaction with CEL to “think” about their work in new ways, we also documented changes in principals’ work. In a manner that seemed to mimic the learning of district leaders, building leaders were learning to be strategic in their leadership work especially around teacher learning, to conduct building walkthroughs, and to develop 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.

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 you know 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 shape 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.

One of the consultants who worked at Oak Park with the leadership team and with classroom teachers commented on the way that this principal made himself available to demonstrating what he had learned through his work with CEL. *“You know, read-alouds, putting himself in the middle of a fishbowl kind of exercise. I mean, he has very much, I think, shown his willingness to put himself in the middle of this.”* The principal at Oak Park also put resources toward developing his relationship with CEL outside of the district’s contract in order to further his own learning and that of his staff. *“I received some additional grant money and what I’m trying to do is just develop my own contract with that money with CEL.”*

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. The following 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.’

As discussed earlier, walkthroughs in Highline changed overtime from a sweep of the building to focused demonstration lessons or planned observations of specific lessons conducted by either a coach or a CEL consultant and observed by a few other building staff. During these visits and subsequent planning meetings, CEL consultants often made specific suggestions and “coached” everyone from teachers to building coaches to the principal.

In our observations, 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 translated 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.

Another principal told us the following about his work on the days he spent with the CEL consultant.

I pick her up at the hotel and have a little conversation on the way in, then at school we have a pre-conference, usually with the reading coach and myself and my [district] supervisor. [We talk about] what the ‘look-fors’ are going to be for the day. We try to be very specific about what they’re going to see and usually that’s going back to her prior visit—what our assignment was for various people or for the building. Usually there’s a pretty rigorous debriefing. Maybe our coach debriefs with the teacher, while the CEL consultant and others remain quiet. Then the teacher leaves. Next there is a debrief with me and the building coach. So the “coach coaching the teacher and the principal coaching the coach” and then, with my building coach staying in the room, I’ll sometimes get feedback about my coaching of her from the CEL consultant.

Principals were developing leadership voice. One Highline principal described an aspect of his development having a stronger “leadership voice” on his part.

And I had to learn how to have a leadership voice that doesn’t say we’re the problem, but to say that we’re the answer. So, I’d say, for the most part the staff really believes that if they improve teaching, kids will learn more. So, our number one focus is, you know, we’re informed with this belief, that instruction matters. And that instruction is a tangible input that can change the results that we get from our kids. So our number one focus is improving our teaching.

He specifically related the development of leadership voice to his CEL coaching.

How do you get a leadership voice around the work...it’s because of the CEL consultant that I write a weekly letter to the staff and I send them to her and she sends me feedback all the time. So the relationship with her has been great—to have somebody from a system that was focused on instruction, come in and help us.

Later, in our interview, he said of his work with the CEL consultant.

I think I just came to understanding this morning that my greatest learning has come from my consultant in terms of the CEL/district work. But, in terms of the official Highline School District work, having a coach whose experience in leading for instruction...not even leading for literacy, but leading for good instruction, has been tremendous. So what have been some of the specifics that she’s helped us do—she’s been really helpful in creating a strategic plan that truly is strategic to the point of who gets helped and who doesn’t. Give this much resource, this much time, this much expertise—how do you leverage all that to see gains in the classrooms, realizing you’re not going to see gains in all classrooms? She’s helped us with our time management as instructional leaders in terms of having a bit more time in the classroom and then strategically, which classrooms.

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.

Changing Practice among Building Coaches and Teachers

Teachers—especially the teachers at Clover Valley who worked with a CEL consultant—characterized the kind of professional development that CEL delivered as “hip-to-hip”; CEL consultants literally worked beside them to co-plan, co-teach, and critique their instruction. This style allowed these teachers to focus on problems of their own practice and receive help with

immediate issues. It also encouraged increased collaboration among the teachers themselves and among teachers and building coaches. Here one teacher from Clover Valley High School explains what the work with the CEL consultant has meant to her as a professional.

She's amazing. And we were just talking today in our collaboration meeting with the language arts teachers that if her personality were different, or if she didn't have the skill she has, I don't know if it would work with us. But, she's so gifted in the way that she deals with us and the way she deals with kids, and she's brilliant and she knows the material...so working with her has been such a gift.

The literacy coach at Clover Valley also commented on the way that teachers in the rest of the Literacy Department (non-9th grade house) were working together to improve their practice.⁶

...my administrator I work with this year likes to use the days that we have substitutes in the building (when the CEL consultant is here) to pull the Literacy Department together and do pieces of that staff development that we got from the CEL days [monthly Leadership Seminars] and do something similar with our people. And at the same time, these people are involved in coaching cycles.

Although we did not focus on building coaches in the pilot study, the coaches at both Clover Valley and Oak Park suggested in their interviews that they had learned from their work with the CEL consultants and from the Leadership Seminars. They talked about learning coaching skills, learning specific pedagogical moves, and learning about curriculum content. Following are representative samples of comments regarding each of these areas of practice.

Coaches were learning to “coach” teachers in their buildings. One of the CEL external consultants commented about the building coaches in Highline.

No, they absolutely did not know how to do that a year ago [coaching cycles]. And I think that a part of that work has come from the demonstrations that CEL consultant has done, even in the Monday content sessions, and then, specifically in working with the coaches on those Tuesdays. Some of that work has come because the district coach comes to observe and give feedback on the coaching cycle. She has done coaching cycles with the building coach. The building coach does the coaching cycle with folks in the leadership team. The principal and I have given her feedback on her coaching work...I think the Title I teacher's understanding of coaching came from watching the building coach. So, all new learning, absolutely.

Coaches were learning about specific pedagogical and curricular practices. One of the building coaches we interviewed talked about the work the district coaches did with a CEL consultant once a month.

⁶ At Clover Valley High School, the literacy department combined the former language arts department, English Language Learner department, and a portion of the special education department (serving primarily students with learning disabilities). At Clover Valley, all 9th grade students were organized into a 9th grade “house” and the 9th grade literacy teachers worked with an external consultant contracted through CEL.

Mondays have been nice to have a big group and then we have the chance for smaller coaches groups on Tuesday afternoons. That's been a chance to practice the content that is being introduced to or referred to on Mondays...the chance to for some conversations with other coaches to start that processing of it, to share experiences in different schools, and to put some of that content into practice.

Coaches talked about the specific kinds of pedagogical practices that they were learning from watching the CEL consultant work with teachers in their buildings or from working with the CEL consultant as a group. The following quotes are from two building coaches that we interviewed.

I've been on her [CEL consultant's] hip when she's been here and I've sat in those conferences and I have been scripting furiously from day one. I mean, I've got a five-page document with just sentence stems that she uses in various circumstances. Sentence stems that she uses in mini-lessons, sentence stems that she uses in conferring, sentence stems that she uses in coaching.

For example, this last week we [group of building coaches with CEL consultant] really got levels—we got stacks of books and worked on text difficulty and really understanding what makes a text a certain level. It's starting that processing piece with the content that is introduced on Mondays.

Likewise, our data (while limited in this area) suggest that some teachers were learning—especially teachers at Clover Valley High School where a CEL consultant worked with a small group of literacy teachers in a 9th grade house. Lead teachers at Oak Park also spoke about their learning and connected it to the monthly Leadership Seminars. Following is a summary of the kinds of things that teachers we interviewed said they were learning.

Teachers were trying on and learning about the Readers/Writers Workshop model (Calkins, 2001). At the high school, teachers talked about the workshop model and the use of mini-lessons as examples of changed practice. In the following quotes, two teachers we observed at Clover Valley reflect on what they had learned from their work with the CEL consultant.

Well, because I'm brand new to the Reading Workshop model, it was great to actually watch her model with a student conference. I've watched her do about, I think at least ten. So, it's given me a lot more ideas, a lot more confidence in what I can learn and accomplish. And there have been a few times when she observed me and gave me feedback. So, that's one really concrete way that she's helped. And I saw her teach two mini-lessons, because I wasn't too familiar with the concept of a mini-lesson. She gave me the structure for a mini-lesson and then when she knows what I'm working on, she would offer me sources and give me ideas about what I could [work] on.

We started out with workshop being a bit rigid. Like, this is the mini-lesson, this is independent work time, here's the share [shared reading], students read different books;

and now we're trying to mix it up a little bit. In my classes the students need that and they're ready for that.

We also collected field notes in these classrooms. The following example illustrates teachers using the workshop model and “trying on” practices such as conferring with individual students via student writing.

In their journals, students construct two columns: notes from the text; my ideas about the text. One student's journal has a teacher's comment: “Guadalupe, continue unleashing (let out) the brilliant, deep ideas you have inside of you. These are the types of entries I am looking for! (Please write back)”

And, in another classroom at a later date, a teacher tried the strategy of “turn and talk.” In this example, however, the teacher didn't offer the students specific ideas to “talk” about and left them wondering “about what.”

Roughly 25 students, mini lesson on non-fiction (article titled Growing Pains)

T to students: “What do we notice about the text features in this article?” (students talk about parentheses, quotes in boxes, etc.)

*T: “You have to activate your prior knowledge.” “Notice the headings and subheading.”
Butcher paper guide – “Our first steps with non-fiction”*

T reads aloud the 1st 2 paragraphs of the article.

T: “Turn and talk.”

S: “About what?”

T: “About the ideas in your head.” “Do you agree? Disagree? And Why?”

[Topic is the relationship between physical health (obesity) and academic success. Author writes they are closely intertwined.]

S1 (girl): Do you agree?

S2 (boy): Course I agree.

S1: “Well I'm big and I'm doin' okay.

S2: (inaudible)

S1: “But you're not big.” (Keeps repeating this to S2's responses)

T: Acknowledges these conversations are hard, and the topic is meant to push you, to make you feel a little uncomfortable.

S's transition to independent work because group discussion is not as strong as she had hoped. Says something to students about how they need to develop their skills become aware of their comfort zone.

The CEL consultant working with these teachers commented on their growth in relation to the work they were doing with Readers/Writers Workshop.

And when I'm looking at the kids' notebooks, there is so much more they're commenting on. Well, I think the author might have used their personal point of view because they wanted me to really have this experience—I mean, this is at a higher level. And I thought, well, darned if that unit didn't have some traction for them and get them going.

CEL was assisting teachers' learning of both pedagogy and content. The CEL Project Director for Highline talked about the learning that she observed as teachers watched demonstration lessons, coaching, and debriefs. She described a classroom in which she had conducted a demonstration lesson, followed by a debrief session of her teaching with some local teachers and CEL consultants. She described the learning that took place for the teachers in that building.

Okay, so that was in March. I went back in May and I was quite frankly blown away by the movement in the classroom. And we had worked on Read Aloud and so we went back to the classroom that we had first seen. This first grade classroom where the kids were at their desks playing with Cheese-Its as she's reading this Read Aloud. Everybody is just zoned out. It was like dead time. And I modeled in there and coming back was like, wow, you could identify what she was teaching those kids. The kids were talking...you could identify next steps and everything in between.

Another CEL consultant commented similarly about changes that she was seeing over time in classrooms around the district.

So what is cool is that we're using my visits as almost a kind of benchmarking. So, I was here, say, a month or two ago. For example, in this one school, it's so amazing at the intermediate level especially. Last time I was here, the coach was modeling a Read-Aloud and the upper-grade teachers were literally sitting there with their arms folded. That's where we were then. This time, it's such a great change to see that they had received more coaching. They'd actually gone to another school to see [another coach] teach a sixth-grade class doing a Read-Aloud and they came back, did some planning and a couple of the upper-grade teachers really took off. And the change today was pretty amazing. You know, from this (with arms folded), to teach me more and set up a classroom library, have a meeting area, take the junk out of their room or organize it. Proceeding differently to let's try on some things with the Read-Aloud.

At Oak Park Elementary, teachers discussed the implementation of the reading pedagogy introduced by CEL. These teachers had not received the same dose of intensive professional development as the teachers at Clover Valley; however, they did attend the monthly Leadership Seminars with their building principal and coach.

I'll have to say the two things we've instituted in the last two years, as major changes here, have been read-aloud and independent reading. Well, we always kind of did, in our minds, read-aloud and independent reading. And so when they say we're starting to do this—which the district could have handled it a little bit better the way they told us. It was almost like we're doing this brand new thing but it wasn't brand new. But it was a

variation of what we'd always done and a better version. What I did with my read-aloud which I've always done (is to) try to ask deep questions and involve the kids. I've added the 'turn and talk' which you do during read-aloud.

Responding to the question, "Is that a similar lesson to what you might have done last year or the year before?" another teacher at Oak Park responded,

No. Well, yes and no. I wouldn't have focused as much on different genres. And that's kind of what I've learned this year from the coaching meetings and from CEL consultant. I'm getting to know more about what third graders, where they are developmentally and what they need to know. I used to focus on just really easy questions and I'm now trying to, you know, get them to think harder.

The building coach at Oak Park noted that the staff had an increasingly clear focus on aligning their practice to the state grade level expectations (GLEs). "Right now we're really realizing that we have a lot of work to do with the GLEs. And that's kind of what we're basing everything from right now. For every lesson that we're doing we're trying to be conscious about thinking about the GLEs and how we're focusing on them." She elaborated about how on the building's focus.

Ok, so first of all what does this particular GLE really mean? And second of all what does it look like in my classroom? What are some evidence? How do I gather evidence that my kids are mastering that? That's kind of where we're anchoring everything in and attempting to anchor everything in. The professional development is happening at the individual level all the way up to the full staff.

Teachers were learning a variety of strategies for engaging students in their own learning as well as how to set individual student learning goals. They are learning to know their students well. A teacher at Clover Valley High School described the shift in the way that her practice has developed over the past year of work with the CEL consultant.

Last year I was teaching one novel to all kids, both in my ninth grade and eleventh grade classes because that's what we had for resources and that's what I was taught in my Masters program. And then from there I had to scaffold it for the different levels that we had in our classes. But, still, I mean, you're reading ninth grade text to students who have second grade reading levels. And so the classroom environment was much different because of that. And with that comes a lot of frustration for kids, which makes complete sense. So you would have seen more discipline problems happening because students—anyone feels frustrated if they don't know how to access information. But this year it's different because of the resources that we've been provided and the training. And so, when you walked into my room you probably saw students working on individual education plans. And some working together, some working alone, many students talking, many students reading quietly, many students writing, based on whatever their personal plan is that we've established together.

The CEL consultant who worked with the teachers suggested that they had learned to engage students with text in new ways.

The teachers have really learned how to help the students move from students who read the book as a detached reader who just reads and summarizes—to a reader who has an opinion about what’s happening in that book, to a reader who can look at the author’s style and comment on whether it’s effective or not. And I’d say that gets two-thirds of their students. A big success for them was when they were able to get their students over the hump of looking at books like they dropped from heaven without a writer. You know, someone wrote it. Someone wanted you to have an experience with it. Does it match up to what you think they wanted? And, some of that work is really coming through in the kids’ talking and their writing.

And, one of the teachers talked about the ways that she involved students in their own learning. In this quote, she began by talking about how her practice had changed over the past year.

I mean, I think that—there are so many different things that have shaped me throughout the year. You know, and my classroom looks like this because of things that she has modeled, and questions I’ve asked her. And, I mean, I can say right now what I’m working on based on what things we talked about this week. We are working on giving more student ownership in the curriculum.

So, asking for—negotiating feedback with them, asking for their input about what they want to study and where we should go. And me still having an agenda as a teacher, but maybe I want to call them in to help with the “how” we get there a little bit more. And she [CEL consultant] modeled that for me a little bit yesterday. But, we’re at the point where we’re—where I’m teaching—we started out where I was teaching and she was watching me, and then she would give me feedback. And then we went to her modeling and me watching and observing. And then we co-taught once. And now she watches me again. So it’s kind of like the coaching cycle. So she’s not doing as much modeling with me, but just giving me feedback and input in kind of small tweaks. So the learning curve is not as steep at this point, but it’s still making a lot of progress, I think.

We have documented evidence of learning across district leaders, building leaders, coaches, and some classroom teachers. We also saw evidence in our data that the partnership between CEL and Highline had impact on the district as a system. In the following sections, we describe these changes.

Impacts of the Partnership on the District as a System

Our pilot study in Highline suggested that 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). 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. In terms of

psychological ‘bang for the buck’ (in other words, grabbing educators’ attention regarding instructional renewal), CEL’s on-the-ground coaching of teachers at Clover Valley High School was gaining recognition across the district as a promising approach to professional development.

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 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.⁷ 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.

Supporting our principals to have the skills and strategies that they need to do this work. I mean, 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. Because, without that—I mean 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

⁷ See next section, “Changes in Policies and Structures” for a description of the responsibilities of the elementary and secondary directors—who we refer to throughout this document as instructional leaders or central office leaders.

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 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. As described earlier, 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 alongside 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. 9th graders at Clover Valley attended classes in a separate building (which happened to be on top of a hill) less than 100 yards from the rest of the school. The remaining 45 teachers at Clover Valley, “down below,” engaged in regular professional development activities tied to relevant problems of practice. In a typical month, teachers met four times, both in their departments and in small school planning groups to discuss milestones and standards for student learning (see page 56 for discussion of the Highline small schools redesign initiative). Despite these hearty efforts at improving instruction, fewer resources were spent on “non-house” teachers, compared to those “on the hill.” The notion of “going with the goers” created some tensions between teachers at Clover Valley. The following teacher explained his perception of house/non-house differences in the following comment.

...every time they—the literacy department allows us to observe them, I see that there just seems to be a lot more collaboration. And there seems to be more uniformity from class to class. Where here we’re kind of—at least I feel like I’m kind of struggling with this whole brand new concept, whole brand new model, besides the multi-literacy....

Given limited resources, Clover Valley administrators opted to spend them on a small number 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 excerpts 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, however, carried with it a critical tension for Clover Valley’s leadership team and for the central office leaders in Highline. The following comment by the Clover Valley principal is representative of what we heard in numerous district leadership meetings. 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. Especially in a climate of accountability, and given the district’s status as a “district in improvement” in mathematics, this approach was potentially problematic.

And so, we’ve flip-flopped twice this year. We went from helping the goers to look what’s going on in other classrooms! I started lesson planning with teachers, and then our goers sort of fell off because they weren’t getting any support—they were way out on the ledge and all of a sudden they weren’t getting the support they needed. So that’s what we sort of fell upon, we have a very strategic list of teachers and how much coaching they get...and who gets an “x” amount of coaching...and who is only going to get support from their department time and the CFGs. And all of our department time is instructionally-based. So I meet with department heads once a month and we do lesson plans together about what they’re going to do during their instructional time in their departments.

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. We could hear their struggle in the things that the system leaders told us.

I think we originally thought of more for schools who were struggling, less for schools that were there. But I think it’s going to be different than that. I think the equity is going to be different, not always less. I also think our supervisors will be spending more time with the schools whose leaders need more skills in content knowledge to push their skills.

Well, let’s go with the goers! ...and we’ve got plenty of them who are willing to try it on, willing to really give it a shot... And because we’ve got—you know, a lot of teachers have got a long way to go—going with the goers can work for us and keep us moving forward. And I think we’ll build a good relationship and we’ll find the healthy way. But it does take time. And that’s the down side, until we get to a higher level, we still are losing kids, and, so then another strategy would be to be much more aggressive, and say, you can’t meet these marks and we can’t spend any more time helping you get there. You need to go. And that is another theory of action you see people take. And we’ve not been as aggressive...

The process of turning focused attention to problems of instructional improvement led the school district to redesign or make changes in several of their policies and procedures in order to accommodate the work. Following are examples of the kinds of systems changes that we documented in Highline during the 2004-2005 school year.

Changes in Structures, Policies, and Procedures

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. One of the elementary directors reflected on these changes by comparing her own experience as a principal in Highline.

Well, I can tell you what I experienced as a building principal. I saw my supervisor twice a year in a kind of one-on-one situation. One was a goal setting and one was my evaluation. And there were many times where I felt gosh, I wonder how he knows that about me, you know, because I never had that experience to really share with him. The difference now is I'm in the buildings, I have far fewer buildings than he did...he had twenty-six, I have eleven. That's a big difference. I'm able to be in my buildings twice a month for at least two hours and four times a year—it's an entire day or it might be a half day where I'm really talking with the principal, I'm rolling up my sleeves and looking at data with the principal and doing some, you know, generating ideas and brainstorming together, walking through classrooms, talking about instruction together. It's December and I feel I really know my schools. That's far more than I felt that my supervisor knew me in three years.

A CEL Project Director noted that “*they have rearranged centrally.*” Previously, she said, “*Two of the central leaders were not even evaluating principals.*” She said that they “*came down and spent probably a week with me [in San Diego] shadowing and trying to figure out—because they knew that they were going to start evaluating principals. So, you know, they really wanted to figure out what their role would look like and how they could support their principals.*”

The process for evaluating principals changed in Highline. There was a new focus on assessing principals in relation to their role as instructional leader. One of the elementary directors described the 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. [See example of matrix in Appendix B]

District Leader: *It's brand new, there are seven different areas...*

Interviewer: *Is that the new evaluation tool?*

District Leader: *No. That was actually developed by a committee with 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. The CEL Project Director commented on this policy change.

And then in the spring [2004], when it came to pass that they realized they made a mistake, they wanted to spend time beating themselves up about it. You know, 'you told us.' Fine, water under the bridge. What are we going to do now to have people bow out gracefully? And, let's think about what we can do to improve the situation next year. So, the district actually wrote a job description for their literacy coaches. And re-invited coaches to apply or not apply, or re-up or not re-up based on this job description that said explicitly you will be in classrooms at least 50% of the time.

One of the district leaders described the model 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.

Given the intensity of the focus on instructional improvement, the professional learning challenges, and the systemic shifts that occurred in Highline (in part) as a result of their partnership with the Center for Educational Leadership, there seemed to be some inevitable tensions in the work. Early in our data collection process, we noted these challenges in the statements made by informants during interviews and observations.

Tensions and Challenges for the Partnership

Our informants identified several tensions that existed in moving the work forward. Nearly everyone we spoke to talked about these issues and most informants saw them as part and parcel of doing business in a diverse urban school district. While many various comments surfaced, the challenges mentioned most often included the following.

Urgency for Results versus Time to Build Capacity

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 current accountability environment in education. 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 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.

The sense of urgency was present across much of our data. One of the instructional leaders opened the December leadership seminar with a discussion of “*9 out of 10*,” [graduating and college-ready] framing the session with a story about a welfare mother’s wish for her son, a student in Highline and sharing that overall, the district was only at “*6 out of 10*.” He then stated, “*I feel good that we have these goals. We are working hard and it’s good to have these intentions, but until we have the capacity, we won’t get there.*”

District leaders (and principals) often shared their sense of urgency through the instructional letters sent to principals and teachers. The following excerpt was taken from a letter from a central office leader to secondary principals.

The first semester ends in three short days. Then there will be 90 days left.

I urge you to take stock of where your major initiatives are, both those initiated by the district and those unique to your school. How close are you to accomplishing your mission for the year? Is instruction improved? Is it improved by enough to get to 9 out of 10 by 2010? Use your leadership voice to help those around you to feel this urgency. And you don’t have to bear responsibility yourself, nor should you. We need to continue to generate enthusiasm for the work in our teachers. One thing that is working is rather than just doing walkthroughs, releasing a small group of

teachers to plan together, have someone teach the lesson with the others looking on, and then debriefing.

We need to make every day count. It will be easier if teachers understand the urgency and are given truly professional opportunities to grow.

District officials talked about the steps they were taking to address their sense of urgency: hiring school leaders with instructional backgrounds rather than management expertise; motivating principals and teachers to engage in ‘the work;’ and balancing the pressure for change with recognition of people’s efforts. The following quotes from interviews and meeting notes are representative of the comments that we heard from central office instructional leaders.

It’s going to take time to really start changing the hiring practice so we truly are hiring instructional people that can help lead this work.

First of all, how to convince folks that they need to change, you know, the urgency there and then give them the support and the help in building that knowledge— basically, you have to build the whole foundational knowledge.

While the sense of urgency was apparent in conversation and written documents, there was also a sense of frustration about how to achieve goals quickly, and the realization that long-term capacity building takes time. During the debrief conversation after a leadership seminar in December 2004, central office leaders talked with CEL consultants about the need to implement the components of a comprehensive approach to reading (Highline’s term for balanced literacy). At the end of this conversation, one of the HSD district leaders commented (in regard to the practice of Sustain Silent Reading or SSR), “*look at the stats—we don’t have time for SSR. We need to know where kids are,*” indicating the urgency she felt for teachers to learn to assess student needs through individual conferences with independent reading.

Competing Initiatives

As mentioned earlier in this report, Highline School District was not a blank slate when CEL entered the picture. CEL was not the only organization that the district partnered with nor was CEL’s approach to reading instruction the only approach available for teachers in the district. Both other curricular adoptions and other partnerships competed for the attention of district personnel.

Elementary Literacy Programs. From our earliest interviews with CEL staff and consultants nearly everyone mentioned the difficulties of dealing with competing initiatives within Highline School District. When CEL began working with the district during the 2003-2004 school year, there were several existing literacy programs in place. First, eight of the 22 elementary schools in Highline were Reading First schools—and the district could not turn down those federal and state resources. In addition, the district had adopted Open Court as its primary reading program and many of its elementary schools had implemented the Accelerated Reader program. A district leader described the district’s “side by side” approach to integrating reading programs that already existed in the district with CEL’s approach.

You have to understand where we were. We had taken a staggered approach to adopting Open Court. We spent a lot of money and time. With Reading First schools, they have to use Open Court. That’s why we chose side-by-side. We have eight of 21 schools that are Reading First. We weren’t going to turn down \$125,000/year to say no thanks, we don’t need help. For us, that would be foolhardy.

The CEL Project Director noted that the decision to begin in Highline with literacy was a negotiated decision, given the state context and the number of Reading First schools in the district. *“But if I were to have my druthers, I wouldn’t have started with reading. What a can of worms in this state context!”* Together the district and CEL worked to find the common ground between CEL’s balanced literacy approach to teaching reading and what was in place in Highline. A district leader thought that the approaches could be *“married.”*

I think what’s been powerful, though, is the Reading First in place with what we’re learning through CEL and our literacy initiative on top, because that’s when I think we’re really getting the power. So, even though a building might be Reading First and is mandated to use Open Court for ninety minutes, it doesn’t mean they can’t use better instructional strategies in implementing Open Court... than just reading from the text...In some buildings, it’s taking a piece of Open Court and really marrying it with what we’re learning...

Similarly, we observed the Accelerated Reader program in all of the elementary schools that we observed on instructional visits (4-5 different elementary schools). During one of these school visits, the district leader said of the program—in response to a comment by the CEL consultant: *“We are hoping through our own learning we can make it [AR] into independent reading.”* During an informal walkthrough at one building, we observed two different stances being taken by the building coach and the classroom teacher. As the teacher walked around her classroom she asked several of her students prior to the start of independent reading, *“Do you have an AR book?”* The coach was also walking around the room and at the same time was asking students if they had a *“just right”* book. Both the teacher and the coach were inquiring about students’ book selection. While on the surface these approaches to text selection seemed similar, the underlying rationales were quite different. In the Accelerated Reading program, students’ book selection was predetermined based on AR book leveling—and a computerized assessment of student ability. Regarding the differences in the approaches, a CEL consultant explained her views in response to a question by a district leader.

District Leader: *How do we move from AR/SSR toward Independent Reading?*
CEL Consultant: *One way to start changing is to focus on information “checking in vs. conferring”. How do I actually confer? Research what students can do. The information I need to ask human to human. A computer is one kind of assessment but I believe I can find out information that a computer can’t. I want to say publicly – they [Fountas & Pinnell] figured out their text levels with real kids interacting with real texts. They looked at all things a computer can do [reference to AR] plus how kids interact with themes. Fountas & Pinnell look at theme and how chapters connect to each other. Computers have a hard time analyzing flash back and flash-forward.*

The Open Court curriculum was a challenge in terms of implementing the components of a balanced literacy program. The following quotes are typical of what we heard in elementary schools.

This work we’re taking on takes more planning than ever before. Open Court, a teacher could read from the book. The questions were there. There was no creative planning. It’s that Catch 22. People [teachers] try to come in and make deals not to be observed.

It takes some doing. It takes some time to help teachers figure out how to combine it and where to fit it in with the balanced literacy program. But definitely you can’t use that alone and do what we’re trying to do with all the CEL trainings and the balanced literacy approach. It can be one element of that, but you definitely need to supplement with other materials in order to make it work as a balanced literacy program.

CEL consultants downplayed the differences and worked to find common ground among these various programs. Two of them reflected on their concerns. Their comments are typical of what we heard from all of the CEL staff and consultants that we spoke with.

While I don’t deny the tension, I think it’s able to exist, but not be damaging. I think that as teachers begin to recognize the cultural changes, the community changes that happen in their classrooms with balanced literacy work and they see their opportunities to infuse skill work in with the love of reading. I think that in years to come, maybe it’s that the tip of the scale is going to tip to balanced literacy as opposed to Open Court. Maybe in some schools, because of leadership...decisions will be made to maintain a fuller Open Court life, but I certainly can see that there are other schools that have it only as a small piece of...[their program].

I think in some way they’re trying their best to make it work. In some places it may mean that they’re sloughing off using Open Court. In some places it may be that they’ve learned how to integrate the thinking of Open Court into the thinking of balanced literacy. And in some places they’re still using Open Court in a very big way. And, they’re paying lip service to this work.

Small Schools Initiative. During the time of this study, Highline School District was engaged in major initiatives around instructional improvement and high school redesign. The

district's high school redesign work was supported during 2003-2005 by U. S. Department of Education planning and implementation grants. During that time period, Clover Valley High School was also working actively with the Coalition of Essential Schools. [The school was the recipient of a CES grant to support their conversion process .] For 2005-2006, Highline was awarded \$5.6 million district grant from the Gates Foundation and variations of small school plans were well underway across the district's high schools. All of the district leaders and the principal at Clover Valley talked about the necessity of maintaining a focus on instructional improvement, even given the initiative to restructure high schools. An Assistant Superintendent (now Superintendent) felt *both* initiatives were critical.

We're always going to have the improvement of instruction at the core ...But, for example, at the high school level, we won't get to where we need to get by just improving instruction and other people can disagree and I certainly welcome that. But I'll stand up anywhere and say that we have some structural things that will always get in the way. High schools were never designed to get nine out of ten kids prepared for college. And so for our work around conversions and, the small high schools, I'd love to get all that structural stuff done, sooner than later, so that we can start taking advantage of those structures and keep driving instruction...but, we're going to have to do some structural stuff too, there's just no way around it.

Clover Valley High School—one of the district's most diverse comprehensive high schools—accomplished the conversion to three fully autonomous schools of approximately 400 students in one academic year. The principal of Clover Valley hired three new principals for the 2005-2006 school year; he is now serving a one-year stint as the “conversion principal” before he leaves the building. Clover Valley's goal was to accomplish the structural change and to maintain a strong focus on instructional improvement. He explained this to us in December of 2004.

So, our number one focus is, you know, moving forward with this belief that instruction matters. And that instruction is a tangible input that can change the results that we get from our kids. So our number one focus is improving our teaching. And even what's going on with our small schools—still our number one thing is improving our practice every day....

The planning for the conversion took place over the second semester of the 2004-2005 school year. The (new) Superintendent was aware that proceeding with both initiatives at once was potentially an overwhelming task.

We've tried to be thoughtful—I don't know how well it's going to work yet—about the pacing of both at the high school level... We don't want to burn everybody out and we're pushing some of the structural stuff pretty hard... at the high school level. There's only so much time in the day, you know, and there's only so much people can give after, before, during the summer. And we're filling all those slots with needs and expectations. So we've got to really be thoughtful about how deep we can go with instruction at the same time expecting people to really think through how high school can look different... and those structural changes.

The principal at Clover Valley noted in May 2004 that the pace of instructional improvement had slowed with the focus on conversion. *“So, what we’ve done since December or January is to say we’re going to solely focus on the structural change, but only until June.”* While the conversion work was accomplished at record pace—*“instructionally, we’re really struggling.”* He continued,

Either we want our teachers really focused on improving their instruction or on fixing the structure. And it’s a shame that it falls on teachers to do both.

Our teachers working with CEL are making tremendous growth. It’s slowed down a little bit the last couple of months...but those teachers have made great growth.

There were some tensions at Clover Valley around “breaking up” the ninth-grade house teachers, who had worked so successfully with the CEL consultant. A central office leader commented,

So we’ve had this group clicking, and they’re together. And I think a huge part of the experience is that they’re all in it together and learning together. And now we’re going to split them up into three schools.

One of the literacy teachers from the ninth grade house said that she was worried about her students as they were dispersed among the small schools.

I think they [the students] would be angry if they went into a classroom where they were all reading the same book and not doing the kinds of things that we’ve been doing. And I want them to continue their learning because they are becoming serious and excited about literacy.

She also worried about whether Readers’ Workshop would be adopted by all the small schools and whether schools, with autonomy over their budgets, would decide to hire the CEL consultant to continue working with teachers. The consultant also noticed that the conversion to small schools placed stress on teachers’ time and competed with the instructional improvement work. She gave the example of her own past experience in an ‘already’ small school in NYC, where she said, *“the only meetings you were asked to attend were ones that you brought student notebooks to.”* At Clover Valley, she understood that teachers were on 4-5 committees given the conversion work and were stretched to find the time to devote to the literacy work.

CEL consultants and staff were clear that a structural change to small schools would not in and of itself result in improved student learning—that there must be simultaneous focus on instruction.

...unfortunately, unless they really are focusing on instruction, improving instruction, the change to the structure of small schools isn’t going to make any difference for kids.

The difficult part that I find with small schools this year is that I want them to hurry up and include instruction right from the beginning. Because I don’t believe that if you make a

smaller school, things will be better for kids. I think if we make a smaller school with teachers doing no more powerful teaching, we'll let something go.

The tension between the two initiatives played itself out in the CEL/Highline partnership around how to deliver consistent messages across the K-12 spectrum—and in coming to terms with the challenge of achieving instructional improvement system-wide while simultaneously engaging in a high school redesign process. CEL consultants told us that there are few models that suggest the “best” way to accomplish instructional improvement at the high school level.

Among the central office leadership in Highline, the conversation about high schools was ongoing and leaders were developing a separate strategy for “the work” at the high school level. One of our informants said they were working on *“how to weave together the K-12 approach knowing that the approach may be different depending on the level.”* She commented that this tension had lead Highline to develop its own theory of action regarding their high schools. She noted that Highline’s approach was a “different way for [some CEL consultants] to think” about the work and the way that it might be combined with the high school redesign initiative.

Conclusions

The findings reported here summarize a one-year pilot study of CEL’s partnership work in one school district and are therefore limited. Highline School District graciously allowed us to watch their instructional improvement activities during the 2004-2005 academic year. Given limited resources, we chose to observe a slice of what the district and CEL were doing—we limited our informant pool to about ten central office leaders and district coaches, two principals, and a few teachers and building coaches. Nonetheless, we documented considerable learning among a number of district professionals and several significant systems changes that appeared to be related to the district partnership with CEL.

In this report, we 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.

Perhaps obvious (given their theory of action), 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.

We documented learning across district and building leaders and, to varying degrees in the schools that we studied, among coaches and teachers. When resources were concentrated (as they were on district leaders, building leaders, coaches, and some teachers), we saw evidence of learning—where there were fewer resources, predictably there was less response to the partnership work. Of note were the ways that district and building leaders were developing skills related to the assessment and guidance of professional development activities. As well, leaders were developing something referred to as “leadership voice” or the ability to lead through presence at professional development activities and speak about instructional improvement goals through opening and closing these activities and through writing instructionally specific letters to staff.

CEL's work in Highline went beyond impact on 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.

Highline also made several policy changes that appear related to their partnership work with CEL. These included, for example, a structural redesign of central office roles so that leaders of curriculum and instruction had responsibility for principal evaluation as well as for their professional growth. The district developed a new principal evaluation tool that was aligned with their instructional improvement goals and divided responsibilities for buildings across three instructional leaders who spent the majority of their time in schools. These, and other changes, were evidence of significant systemic changes in Highline. They supported the district's effort to focus on a small number of initiatives all with the goal of raising student achievement and preparing 9 out of 10 students to graduate from high school college or career ready by 2010.

The instructional improvement activity was not without tensions. CEL's theory of action, adopted in several significant ways by the district, was a capacity-building strategy and required substantial investments of time. For Highline, the investment carried with it a concern regarding the time it would take for professional learning to take hold. This sense of urgency was real—the struggle to build long-term capacity came into direct competition with the very present pressure of state and federal accountability systems. It raised concerns regarding the sustainability of the improvement efforts and a question about how issues related to time and urgency would be resolved over the long term.

A developing challenge to the instructional improvement work was coordination of the district's multiple external partnerships, which included a \$5.6 million district grant awarded by the Gates Foundation in 2005. All of the district's high schools were working on some form of

high school redesign, which was a high priority district improvement goal.⁸ Our data suggested that there were signs of stress and tension involved in accomplishing these simultaneous improvement goals; however, it is important to note that the high school redesign process was in early stages during the time of the pilot study. The question raised by this tension, however, was one for CEL: How, as an external support provider, does an organization such as the Center for Educational Leadership work with school districts to negotiate competing agendas and multiple partnerships with external support providers? It seemed likely that such competitions will be part of school district landscapes in years to come given the pressure on diverse urban districts to achieve enormous improvements on many fronts related to outcomes for students.

Likewise, there were hints in our data that “opening up practice” was an important although potentially hierarchical process. If the rationale for opening up practice was to create new opportunities for learning as new information about practice became available to communities of teachers, of coaches, and of leaders—or, across these communities—then the question arose, who’s practice was opening up? Although district leaders certainly may have felt open to scrutiny by other district personnel (principals and coaches, for example) when they “opened” district-wide professional development activities such as the monthly Leadership Seminars, it seemed clear that the focus regarding opening practice was on schools and the practice of principals and teachers. Here, a caution could be raised. In what ways, does the system, or the theory of action, allow for reciprocal feedback from teachers regarding the process of instructional improvement? The same might be said for principals. In the absence of such feedback processes, it seemed possible that resistance rather than learning might result. Those feedback loops might be present, but we did not see them in the limited data that we collected at the school level.

In sum, the pilot study data suggested that the Highline/CEL partnership has had significant impact in the district. This study will continue in Highline during the 2005-2006 school year and will expand to include two other CEL/district partnerships. As we learn more about CEL’s work and their theory of action, our research questions focus on the roles, activities, and settings that are associated with potential changes in professional practices and in the districts as systems. We note that the connections between the learning environments, such as the general study groups, and the practices of leaders, coaches, and teachers and potential changes in policies and procedures at the system level—are critical to understanding how and what professionals learn, as well as what districts, as systems, learn. The most recent iterations of our research questions as we move forward with this research agenda include:

1. How does the participation of district personnel in roles and activities related to instructional improvement practice (that is, the work of leading and improving instruction) change over time?
2. What are the critical characteristics and dimensions of the settings that support their learning and how are they constructed?

⁸ It’s important to note that the high school redesign process in Highline was supported between 2003 and 2005 by U.S. Department of Education planning and implementation grants. Clover Valley High School competed for and was awarded a Coalition of Essential Schools grant during the same period.

3. How do interactions with an external support provider shape or guide the district in teaching and learning related to instructional improvement practice?
4. In what ways does individual and collective learning among district personnel contribute to what the district as a system “learns,” as evidenced by changes in practice, new policies, and the development of tools that support and sustain the instructional improvement work?

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Appendix A: Pilot Study Methods

Given that the research questions for this study call for “naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings”—a major feature of qualitative data—we designed the study as a descriptive case study and relied on human interactions, key events, and the informants’ interpretations of these events to help us draw conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). Here we provide an explanation of our sampling decisions, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

Settings and Participants

Highline School District was the first district to join in partnership with CEL, beginning the work in 2003. Since we initiated our inquiry by looking for a partnership with established relationships between CEL and district personnel, particularly one that appeared to productively impact instructional and leadership practices, Highline School District emerged as an optimal site for our pilot study. Within Highline, we sampled five district instructional leaders who interacted regularly with CEL consultants on their leadership practices, 2-3 other district leaders, as well as 4 district content area coaches. In order to study the Highline/CEL partnership work at the school and classroom levels of the system, we also selected two schools—Clover Valley High School and Oak Park Elementary—schools that were recommended by CEL and district informants as engaged in the partnership work. Given our limited resources during the pilot study year and given that our research questions were focused on the pedagogical relationship between CEL and their partner district, we felt we could learn more about the relationship in schools that were highly involved in the instructional improvement work. Within the schools, we sampled the building leaders, the literacy coaches, and 2 teachers—again these were informants who had taken 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 from a variety of system actors. 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. We observed a variety of events including, 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 the classroom, were collected during interviews and observations throughout the data collection period.

Data Analysis

After the first round of data collection, we read the entire data corpus and started to reduce the mass of information by creating data summary sheets for each interview. The summarizing exercise was guided by our three research questions (namely, the nature of the partnership, teaching, and learning). The subsequent 8-9 months included ongoing data analysis meetings within the research team, in order to check on earlier understandings and thematic analyses of data. Checking in regularly as a team, 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 and rechecked assertions with local scholars on teaching and leadership development and some informants from the field during the latter writing stages.

Appendix B: Instructional Visits

SCHOOL	EVALUATIONS	Visit #1	Visit #2	Visit #3	Visit #4	Visit #5	Visit #6
School A	School A\Evaluation Principal.doc	9/23	10/4	10/15	11/1	11/22	12/3
School B	School B\Evaluation Principal.doc	9/27	10/13	10/27	11/15	12/1	12/14
School C	School C\Evaluation Principal.doc	9/15	9/29	10/14	11/3	11/23	12/15
School D	School D\Evaluation Principal.doc	9/27	10/6	10/20	11/10	11/23	12/15
School E	School E\Evaluation Principal.doc	9/14	9/28	10/21	10/29	11/18	12/8
School F	School F\Evaluation Principal.doc	9/21	9/30	10/26	11/15	12/7	12/21
School G	School G\Evaluation Principal.doc	9/16	9/30	10/7	11/2	11/24	12/16
School H	School H\Evaluation Principal.doc	9/29	10/6	10/19	11/1	11/9	11/29
School I	School I\Evaluation Principal.doc	9/17	10/4	10/25	11/5	11/17	12/2
School J	School J\Evaluation Principal.doc	9/14	10/12	10/26	11/17	11/30	12/20
School K	School K\Evaluation Principal.doc	9/23	10/14	10/28	11/4	12/9	12/21
4 Guest Coach visits							
Coach #1							
Coach #2							
Coach #3							
Reading First Visits							
conferences							

Appendix B: STATE OF LITERACY AT YOUR SCHOOL *

Indicators	Where are we now?	Next Steps
<p>Coaching cycles are used as regular “on-the-job” professional development.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Understand the needs and strengths of the staff in the school</i> ○ <i>Promote and model life-long learning and continuous growth</i> 		
<p>Principals in classrooms a minimum of 2 hours daily and <u>provide instructional coaching</u>. (Meeting with teacher and asking reflective questions to push the practice forward)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Understand the needs and strengths of the staff in the school</i> 		
<p>Staff assigned to maximize learning - -staff with the most skill assigned to the most struggling readers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Understand the needs and strengths of the staff in the school</i> ○ <i>To assign and reassign staff within school to facilitate delivery of instruction</i> 		
<p>Reading coach has a strong knowledge of literacy + strong people skills.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Knowledge of best practices of instruction and assessment</i> ○ <i>To assign and reassign staff within school to facilitate delivery of instruction</i> 		
<p>Principals use every opportunity to use their leadership voice to move the literacy work forward.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Articulate a shared belief vision for continuous improvement and life-long learning</i> ○ <i>Promote and model life-long learning and continuous growth</i> ○ <i>Clearly communicate effective instructional and assessment practice</i> 		

* The italicized bullets correspond to the district’s principal evaluation tool.

<p>Conferring notes and classroom visit logs are in place and capture the support plans for teachers and to help the leadership team analyze trends and create professional development to address needs of the building.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Use authentic assessment data, including self-appraisal, to measure improvement and inform action of individuals, groups, and the school system</i> ○ <i>Recognize and celebrate efforts and achievements</i> ○ <i>Engage instructional staff in frequent conversations/reflection about classroom practice</i> ○ <i>Assist staff in self evaluation leading to effective practice</i> 		
<p>Read Aloud has been presented as the focus and teachers are implementing with integrity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Require teachers to teach essential learnings and grade-level expectations as defined by state and local curriculum.</i> ○ <i>Assist staff in adjusting to and accepting school reform changes, especially in the areas of teaching, learning and assessment</i> 		

* The italicized bullets correspond to the district’s principal evaluation tool.