Research for Cross-District Collaboration and Learning: Three Intersecting Models
Invited Session for Fall 2012 SREE Conference on Effective Partnerships: Linking Practice and Research

Session Abstract

The purpose of this panel session is to explore the promise and the challenges of varying approaches to incorporating research into cross-district collaborations designed to foster improvement in teaching and learning for all students.

Over the past decade, not only has there been increased recognition of the role that districts can play in catalyzing and supporting instructional improvement (Sykes, O'Day, & Ford, 2009), but there has also been a growing trend toward districts working across system boundaries to examine data, share promising practices, and engage in joint work or problem solving. While organizations like the Council of Great City Schools have had a long history of bringing district leaders together for periodic sharing, other collaborations are emerging on a regional or state basis, often spurred by policy demands for demonstrating ever greater increases in student achievement. These collaborations take varying forms, depending on their genesis and focus.

This panel brings together participants in three intersecting district collaborations in California to discuss the role of research in their work as well as the challenges and lessons they face in bringing research to bear on practice – and practice to bear on research. The three collaborations and their approaches to research are described below.

A. The California Collaborative on District Reform

The first of these collaborations, which laid the foundation for the other two, is the California Collaborative on District Reform. Initiated and staffed by the American Institutes for Research, the Collaborative brings together district leaders, researchers, state policy actors, and funders in ongoing dialogue and collective action to improve teaching and learning for all students in the state’s most challenged districts. Built on a solid research base, the Collaborative incorporates research into all aspects of the work. The goal is not only to expand the intellectual capital on effective district strategies to support student academic growth but also to create social capital among districts and between practitioners and researchers to foster the integration of research into district improvement efforts. A core underlying premise is that by bringing multiple perspectives to the table, we can both expand our knowledge base and build a foundation for collective evidence-based action, bridging the cultural and political gulfs between research, policy, and practice.

Members of the Collaborative include the superintendents of ten of the largest and most influential districts in the state, along with respected researchers on system change and instructional improvement, state policy actors including the President of the State Board of Education, and philanthropic funders who support district-level improvement efforts.

Research base: The general approach of the Collaborative rests on several research-based premises:
• **Districts are a viable intervention point in the development and implementation of effective policy** (Datnow & Park, 2009; Sykes, O’Day, & Ford, 2009; Supovitz, 2006). Cross-district analyses of student achievement results confirm that districts differ substantially in their effects on student achievement results (O’Day & Bitter, 2002; EdSource, 2005). Decades of implementation research confirms that local contexts matter; federal and state policies are mediated through district structures, capacities, and interpretations of policy intent and regulation (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977; McLaughlin, 1987; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002). Moreover, more recent implementation research departs from traditional top-down conceptions of policymakers as distinct from implementers by suggesting that all levels contribute to the policymaking process through interaction among agents and actors within and between levels of the system (Datnow & Park, 2009).

• **Collaboration across differing perspectives and contexts can foster systemic learning and sharing of promising practices.** Decades of research on individual and organizational learning have demonstrated that organizational actors are influenced by the contexts in which they work. These actors develop cognitive frames (beliefs, expectations, and reference points that are often shared by those engaged in similar work), through which they interpret new information (Huber, 1991; Brown & Duguid, 2001). Differences in the experiences, knowledge, and cognitive frames of stakeholders can impede individual and organizational learning that could improve system performance (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Spillane et al., 2002). Exposure to alternative perspectives and information from differing contexts or levels of the system not only adds new data into the learning/improvement process (“single-loop learning,” Argyris & Schon, 1978) but also can challenge restrictive cognitive frames, allowing for the reinterpretation of evidence and revision of previously held beliefs (“double-loop learning,” Argyris & Schon, 1978). The Collaborative’s cross-role dialogue and collective problem-solving fosters both of these types of organizational learning.

• **Effective collaboration requires trust and openness, which in turn require consistency of participation over time and a focus on concrete, shared problems of practice.** This premise is supported by the large and growing body of research on professional learning communities (referred to as communities of practice in other sectors). This research finds that effective communities of practice develop over time as individuals interact around common goals and problem-solving, develop common language and tools, and build the social trust essential for risk-taking and collective learning (Wenger 2000; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Over six years, Collaborative members have developed the trust that allows them to engage in frank and open examination of their practice and assumptions. Moreover, recent research on the spread of innovations suggests that for research to substantially influence practice, it must first be understood through the lens of practice (Brown & Duguid, 2001; Brown 1991). Nesting Collaborative meetings in the concrete problems and contexts of individual districts—and engaging members in joint work on special projects and working groups—allows participants to bridge the gap between research and practice, fostering greater understanding and application of research findings.

• **Effective improvement strategies require close examination and continuous use of multiple forms of data across multiple levels of the system.** The critical role of data use has been well established in both district case studies and cross-district quantitative analyses (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007; Supovitz & Weathers, 2004; O’Day 2002; EdSource, 2005). The research emphasizes the need for data
not only on student outcomes but also on inputs and processes that may have contributed to those outcomes. In addition, the ways in which educational actors examine and interpret available evidence can make the difference between more and less effective data use (Coburn & Talbert, 2006). For this reason, data from Collaborative districts and the state (often displayed and examined in new ways) are a key, consistent component of the Collaborative’s work.

**Role of Research in the Collaborative:** Key to the Collaborative’s work has thus been the integration of researchers with practitioners and policy makers as full partners in efforts to tackle the most pressing problems of district practice. The relationships established through this work have led to further partnerships between researchers in the group and the member districts, sometimes in the form of formative evaluations of member districts’ reform efforts and other times in the form of district participation in broader research studies. In addition, relevant research reports and findings are an integral component of all Collaborative endeavors. Collaborative staff review research pertinent to the topics of meetings or working groups, cull the most relevant and accessible pieces, and collect them into extensive briefing binders that serve both as preparation for members before the meetings and as resources afterwards. External researchers whose work pertains to the topics at hand may also present their findings at Collaborative meetings.

The combination of research, concrete district data, and knowledge from practice provides the grist for expanding the collective understanding of the problems most relevant to improving learning outcomes for the state’s most challenged students. But it is the relationships and trust built over time that have paved the way for a deeper and more sustained insinuation of research into the design, evaluation and refinement of district strategies.

**B. Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership**

Four years ago, based on the relationships built through the California Collaborative on District Reform, the Fresno and Long Beach Unified School Districts embarked on a formal learning partnership with the goal of preparing all students for success in higher education or for a career with significant growth potential. Though initially designed to secure greater categorical funding flexibility from the state, the Partnership emerged as a strategy to direct the attention of both systems to important levers for improvement. Focused on mathematics instruction, improving outcomes for English learners, leadership development, and college and career readiness, the Partnership is designed to accelerate achievement for all students, and to close achievement gaps by capitalizing on shared, systemic capacity-building across the two districts. The districts have worked together to define common metrics for leading and trailing indicators, which have been incorporated into the strategic plans adopted by their local school boards. The impact of the Partnership can be seen in the instructional program (Fresno has adopted and adapted the mathematics program developed by teachers in Long Beach), in shared placement policies and support structures, and in tools and data structures that have enriched both districts’ capacity to monitor and improve educational equity and performance.
Role of Research in the Fresno-Long Beach Partnership:

The superintendents from these two districts continue to benefit from the involvement of researchers as members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. In addition, based on the strength of their relationships with those researchers, they asked the Collaborative research staff to document the work of the Partnership both for their own learning and that of other interested stakeholders in the state. This form of documentation research represents another model of researchers and practitioners working together to increase knowledge and improve practice. The documentation has produced internal memos for the district partners and external briefs and presentations for the broader education community.

C. California Office to Reform Education (CORE)

The final cross-district collaboration included in this panel also grew out of relationships built in the California Collaborative on District Reform and the subsequent work of the participating districts to write and submit California’s application for the second round of Race to the Top state grants. Although unsuccessful in the bid for the federal grant, the seven (now eight) districts decided to continue working together to implement key elements of their jointly produced plan. The work of this partnership is concentrated in two arenas: 1) implementation of the Common Core State Standards, and 2) strategies for more effective talent management in the districts. Teams from the eight districts meet regularly to pursue joint work in each of these arenas.

Role of Research in CORE

CORE represents a third model of integrating research and practice. Though the members of CORE are all district practitioners, they have brought in researchers as presenters and advisors for the district teams. Surveys of district participants have revealed that exposure to these researchers and other experts has been one of the most valued aspects of the Partnership’s work to date. In addition, as in the case of the Fresno-Long Beach Partnership, the work of CORE is being documented by an outside researcher, whose goal is both to help the participating districts and to draw out lessons on cross-district learning that can inform other such partnerships in the future.

The Panel

The Panel will bring together the chair of the California Collaborative on District Reform, the documenter of the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership, and the Executive Director of CORE. Moderated by Joan Talbert (Stanford University), who has spent much of the past decade researching district-level reforms in systems across the country, the panel will explore the roles that researchers and research play in these three collaborations, the challenges of building meaningful partnerships between research and practice, the key lessons learned in the process, and the impact of the research on the reform practice itself. After the discussion among the panelists, the session will be opened up to interactive dialogue with the audience.
References


