



None of Us Are As Good As All of Us: Early Lessons From the CORE Districts

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Introduction

“None of us are as good as all of us.” This refrain is common among educators within the CORE Districts.¹ Now in its fifth year, this collection of 10 California districts came together to address jointly some of the key challenges they face as they try to improve instruction and student learning. Rather than operate in silos, district leaders in CORE have created an avenue to adapt promising ideas from colleagues in other districts to meet their own local needs. They seek to avoid the pitfalls that have slowed progress in other systems. They even work together on shared products intended to enrich the learning and accelerate the progress of all participants in the service of student achievement. In the process, CORE has attracted a great deal of attention. As interest in cross-district collaboration grows, CORE can provide a useful example from which the field of K–12 educators can learn.

Cross-District Collaboration As an Approach to Improvement

Networking opportunities for district leaders have existed for years. Conferences and professional associations have created avenues for superintendents and other leaders to meet one another, learn about various district strategies, and even engage in political advocacy. The relationships developed in these settings, however, build on infrequent interactions and tend to focus on superficial commonalities among individuals and districts. Presentations that share progress typically shine a spotlight on successes without acknowledging areas of continuing struggle. Political engagement efforts, because they often seek compromise in order to reflect the diverse priorities and needs of a wide range of contributors, tend to produce a watered-down point of view that insufficiently addresses the challenges of many districts.

Recently, the field of education has turned to collaboration on shared work as a vehicle for improving student learning. The literature on organizational learning has long recognized the power of communities of practice for stewarding knowledge. These social structures bring members together around a sense of joint enterprise, facilitate regular interactions that enhance members’ abilities to do their jobs better, and produce a shared repertoire of communal resources through their joint work (e.g., Wenger 2000; Wenger, 1998). Wenger (2000) notes that communities of practice “are nothing new,” and in fact “communities of practice are everywhere” (p. 207), but suggests that they may be underutilized as mechanisms for learning and improvement.

School systems have attempted to build and leverage communities of practice as a means of building teacher knowledge and skills to improve instruction, most notably through the creation of “professional learning communities” (PLCs) (DuFour, 2004). PLCs composed of teacher teams, for example, often jointly create assessments, review student work, and design lessons to meet student needs more effectively. They can observe one another’s classrooms and exchange feedback with peers about their teaching practices. In the process, these teachers learn from their peers’ best practices. They bring a range of experiences and perspectives together to address their most persistent challenges. In places where these learning communities operate effectively, they have helped schools and districts transform their approaches to teaching and learning.

¹ The name “CORE” began as an acronym for “California Office to Reform Education,” a name that emerged through the writing process of California’s Race to the Top Phase II application. The organization has since renamed itself the CORE Districts. Throughout this report, we refer to the group as CORE.

From this context, a new model of cross-district collaboration has emerged. Groups of districts are increasingly coming together to share successes and challenges. District leaders who have traditionally operated in isolation from their peers are creating venues for cross-system learning. Educators are applying the principles of professional learning communities to the challenge of district-level reform. Responding to and guiding this trend, nonprofit organizations, the philanthropic community, and even California’s political system have evolved from relying heavily on external sources of support to embracing cross-district collaboration as a vehicle for school improvement.

Cross-district collaboration offers particular promise for district leaders seeking to address long-standing trends of inequity. Achievement differences among subgroups of students reflect opportunity gaps between students who are Latino, African-American, low-income, and English learners (ELs) and their more advantaged counterparts. At the same time, the percentage of traditionally underserved students in our schools, especially ELs, continues to grow. Educators in many districts and schools have demonstrated a commitment to addressing the fundamental barriers to student learning, yet the solutions to these persistent challenges are not always clear. For those district leaders dedicated to issues of equity and access, the opportunities that collaboration offers to accelerate system learning and better meet the needs of all students may be especially important.

CORE As an Example of Cross-District Collaboration

Perhaps no emerging cross-district partnership has received as much attention as CORE. The CORE districts attracted a nationwide spotlight when the U.S. Department of Education (ED) approved a set of waivers from the accountability provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in August 2013—the only such waivers awarded at the district level.² Although many know of CORE solely because of the waivers, CORE actually operated as a cross-district learning community well before the waiver decision. Irrespective of the waivers, the districts’ collaborative efforts highlight several important elements of cross-district learning.

First, the CORE districts set out to engage in joint work. The nature of the collaboration rested not only on a platform of sharing ideas, but on actually developing systems and processes together. The waiver—and the new accountability system it created—would become the most tangible example of this platform, but even CORE’s earliest efforts to implement the Common Core State Standards featured the collective development of assessment tasks as a vehicle for accelerating the standards transition process. This approach set CORE apart from some other emerging models of collaboration because it leveraged the resources and collective expertise of multiple school systems in service of a shared product.

Second, the CORE districts deliberately sought to include voices throughout the central office and beyond in their work together. Cross-district collaborations often bring together role-alike groups to create a support network and opportunity to share improvement strategies. CORE extended this

² Eight of the 10 districts in CORE applied for and received a waiver. Clovis and Garden Grove Unified School Districts remained a part of CORE, but chose not to pursue the waiver. Note that although the participating districts jointly developed the waiver, ED accepted and approved the applications from each of the eight districts individually.

approach to building connections across districts by convening teams throughout the system to more thoroughly embed collaboration into the way entire districts do business.

Finally, the scale of CORE distinguishes it from many other cross-district collaboration efforts. The participating districts—Clovis, Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento City, San Francisco, Sanger, and Santa Ana Unified School Districts (USDs)—collectively serve 1.1 million California students; roughly one in six of the state’s K–12 student population; and more than 37 other entire states (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Table 1 and Figure 1 provide a summary of the CORE districts’ student demographics. The potential to transform student learning opportunities is tremendous. At the same time, with the attention garnered through the ESEA waiver, CORE has attracted an audience for its work that does not exist for many other cross-district partnerships. CORE is therefore well positioned to serve not only as a vehicle for helping its own students, but as a beacon for learning in other settings as well.

Table 1. CORE District Demographics, 2014-15

District	Enrollment	FRPM ^a	ELs	Special Education ^b	African-American	Asian	Latino	White
Clovis USD	41,169	36%	6%	8%	3%	13%	35%	43%
Fresno USD	73,543	87%	25%	10%	9%	11%	67%	11%
Garden Grove USD	46,177	75%	42%	11%	<1%	33%	54%	9%
Long Beach USD	79,709	66%	23%	11%	14%	7%	55%	14%
Los Angeles USD	646,683	76%	25%	13%	9%	4%	74%	10%
Oakland USD	48,077	75%	32%	11%	27%	13%	44%	10%
Sacramento City USD	46,868	64%	22%	13%	17%	17%	38%	18%
San Francisco USD	58,414	62%	28%	12%	10%	35%	29%	13%
Sanger USD	11,204	76%	20%	6%	2%	10%	70%	15%
Santa Ana USD	56,815	86%	46%	11%	<1%	3%	93%	3%
California State	6,236,672	59%	22%	11%	6%	9%	54%	25%

^aFree and reduced-price meals

^bSpecial Education data are calculated based on 2013-14 enrollment

Source: DataQuest

Documentation of Lessons From CORE

This report tells the beginning of the CORE story. It draws on two primary data sources. The first source is a set of 44 interviews conducted between February and May 2015. The study team interviewed every superintendent who led a CORE district between 2010 and 2012, additional central office employees from each participating district, CORE staff members, policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders who were involved with CORE’s work at the time.

The reader should note a few important points about this set of interview data. The district leaders who participated in interviews were typically those most prominently involved in CORE’s early activities. As a result, these interviews may reflect the perspectives of individuals

who saw the most value in their CORE experience (and therefore chose to continue participating) and underrepresent the perspectives of those with less positive experiences (who consequently

disengaged before developing a deeper familiarity with the group). The interviews also asked individuals to reflect on activities that took place as many as five years ago. Respondents are therefore likely to have constructed a story line about the past that fits current perspectives and conditions. Some of the twists and turns that characterized CORE's early work may not appear in this reconstruction of history.

The second data source is a document review that featured hundreds of written records, including grant applications, media accounts, research reports, meeting agendas, presentations, internal communication, and other files that described the activities and products associated with the CORE districts. These documents provided historical accounts of the group's inception, examples of ways CORE positioned itself to outside audiences, and the priorities and discussion topics that drove internal conversations among CORE leaders.

Using these data sources, the authors have written this report to achieve two goals. The first goal is to document CORE's early history, beginning with its inception and continuing until the districts' decision to apply for the ESEA waiver in early 2013. CORE emerged from a particular set of circumstances that shaped its design and goals in important ways. The report offers a record of the process and an accounting of the key decisions that shaped CORE in its early years. It deliberately focuses on the development of CORE as a learning community, including the motivation for and vehicles through which the districts designed their collaborative efforts. It therefore does not discuss the ESEA waiver, which later added new dynamics to the districts' shared endeavors and shaped their work in new ways. Future phases of this project will track the districts' decision to apply for a waiver and CORE's subsequent evolution.

Figure 1. CORE District Geographical Representation



The second goal is to identify lessons learned from CORE's early efforts. CORE continues to evolve at the same time that additional cross-district partnerships are emerging throughout California—and perhaps beyond. It is important to identify the successes, challenges, and tensions that exist in the work if these models of collaboration are to fulfill the promise that working together offers. Readers should view the documentation of CORE in this context. Other districts are unlikely to replicate the conditions that produced this particular instance of cross-district learning. Examining the development of a partnership that has operated for nearly five years, however, can accelerate learning not only for CORE, but for other similar efforts, and provide useful considerations for embracing the work of cross-district collaboration.

A Seed Is Planted: District Leaders and Policymakers Set the Stage for CORE to Emerge

Predating CORE’s official beginning, the participating districts began working together in new ways in response to a particular set of circumstances and opportunities. CORE was an extension of existing relationships among participating superintendents and early efforts among those superintendents to work together on a set of shared challenges. At the same time, the California political setting created an opportunity to translate those relationships and approaches to collective work into a new model of collaboration.

Relationships Develop: District Leaders Break Ground in Cross-System Learning

By the time CORE officially began in fall 2010, two established venues had helped build relationships among participating district leaders through which they communicated regularly about their work. The first venue was the Urban Education Dialogue (UED), a forum of large urban district superintendents designed to foster dialogue about the challenges and opportunities associated with running K–12 school systems in California.³ Six of the superintendents who eventually brought their districts into CORE regularly attended the semiannual UED meetings. Through these interactions, those leaders developed an understanding of one another’s situations and general approaches to district leadership. They also built a set of personal relationships with peers who faced similar challenges and had similar priorities.

In addition to UED, the California Collaborative on District Reform (California Collaborative) had created a venue for district leaders and other education leaders—including policymakers, researchers, reform support providers, and funders—to explore problems of practice together since it formed in 2006.⁴ The California Collaborative met three times per year, each meeting hosted by a member district leader, and focused on a concrete challenge facing that district. Like UED, the California Collaborative forged relationships among superintendents who would eventually form CORE; eight CORE districts had central office leaders who regularly attended meetings. The California Collaborative took these relationships a step further, however, by exploring the day-to-day strategies that participating districts employed and struggles these districts encountered—especially strategies and struggles related to issues of equity and access. The opportunities to observe and reflect on the improvement strategies employed throughout California allowed district leaders to learn from and provide feedback on their colleagues’ work.

Comments from district leaders suggest that these learning opportunities sparked an appreciation of the potential for cross-district collaboration. As Fresno Superintendent Michael Hanson reflected, “We would show up in these conversations together, and learn, and grow, and get better.” Jonathan Raymond, superintendent of Sacramento City USD at the time CORE began, echoed this sentiment: “There was a sense that practitioners share a kinship and a camaraderie and I think just a sense of the work that is often really missing in this field of education, and that

³ For more information on UED, visit <http://pricephilanthropies.org/tag/urban-education-dialogue/>

⁴ For more information on the California Collaborative, visit www.cacollaborative.org. Note that one of the report authors serves as the deputy director for the California Collaborative.

because we have had experiences, there was this underlying curiosity as to ‘What might this look like on a broader scale?’” Because of these experiences, the superintendents later approached their interaction through CORE with a preexisting belief in the power of collaboration as a vehicle for improving instruction and student learning.

UED and the California Collaborative also forged important connections between district leaders and stakeholders from other parts of the K–12 education community. Rick Miller, who was then a deputy superintendent with the California Department of Education (CDE), participated regularly in both groups and developed personal and professional relationships with many of the superintendents, as well as a deeper understanding and appreciation of the work taking place at the district level. These ties proved instrumental later when the districts later established a leadership structure for their work in CORE.

Building on the foundation of networking and learning established through UED and the California Collaborative, two districts created another approach to cross-district collaboration by forming the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership. At a California Collaborative dinner in June 2007, Superintendent Hanson and Long Beach Superintendent Chris Steinhauser decided to form what they called a “formal learning partnership” between the two districts. Although the partnership began as an undefined idea generally based on shared priorities and challenges, it evolved to focus on four key areas: mathematics instruction, improving outcomes for ELs, leadership development, and college and career readiness. The superintendents viewed each of these areas as avenues for improving outcomes for all students while closing achievement gaps between traditionally underserved students and their more advantaged peers.

The partnership also featured a different set of participants: In addition to the superintendents, it brought together leaders from other central office roles to work together across district lines, thus more thoroughly integrating cross-district interaction into the ways the organizations worked. The new collaboration was more than a collection of individual members, as the UED and California Collaborative had been; it was a connection between *systems*. District leaders from both systems reported benefits from the partnership, including a deepening of evidence-based leadership and an expanded capacity for developing advanced metrics and best practices (California Collaborative on District Reform, 2012).

In addition to providing these benefits, the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership also raised the profile of the two districts in state policy circles. Long Beach USD had already earned a reputation for excellence: The district received the second ever Broad Prize in 2003 as the nation’s best urban school system. In 2010, McKinsey & Company also identified it as one of the world’s 20 most improved school systems. The partnership, however, turned the spotlight on both districts as leaders and visionaries in the field of K–12 education. The state board of education invited Hanson and Steinhauser to speak and California Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell’s 2008 State of Education address recognized the districts’ work as “a model pilot that we can soon extend to districts throughout this state” (O’Connell, 2008). The two districts were forging new ground not only in the way they learned together, but in the way policymakers and others viewed them as models for innovation in the field.

Opportunity Knocks: The Political Context Creates the Conditions for Innovation

At the same time that districts were coming together in new ways, the California policy setting had created a thirst for new ideas and resources. A series of studies collectively known as *Getting Down to Facts*,⁵ released in 2007, had identified some fundamental problems in the way the state education system handled issues of finance and governance. Discussion among superintendents in the aftermath of these studies—including a set of policy briefs that working groups of California Collaborative members created⁶—helped clarify some of their own ideas about how the state might improve. These potential improvements included a break from what many described as the compliance mentality that seemed to govern the CDE and a desire for more local flexibility to improve conditions for students.

Shortly after the *Getting Down to Facts* studies came out, however, California endured a debilitating fiscal crisis. Per-pupil expenditures, already among the lowest in the nation, plummeted from \$8,952 to \$7,452 between the 2006–07 and 2010–11 school years (California Budget Project, 2010). Without sufficient resources to cover their expenses, districts responded with drastic layoffs and program cuts. At the same time, the financial situation made a productive state response to the finance and governance issues almost impossible, adding fuel to the already developing fire of frustration among many district leaders.

Into this situation of fiscal scarcity, ED introduced a new competitive grant program called Race to the Top. States could submit applications that demonstrated a commitment to four federal priority areas—standards and assessments, data systems to support instruction, great teachers and leaders, and turnaround of the lowest-achieving schools—and earn up to 500 points based on their commitments to improvement. The highest-scoring states would then receive grants to support the reform efforts described in the application. The \$350–\$700 million for which California was eligible could provide a lifeline to districts struggling to preserve jobs and programs as revenues continued to decline.

Along with 39 other states and the District of Columbia, California submitted an application for Phase I of the grant program after completing a writing process driven by the governor’s office (guided by Undersecretary of Education Kathy Gaither) and CDE (guided by Deputy Superintendent Rick Miller). The state finished in 27th place, more than 100 points behind the winning states Delaware and Tennessee. Although ED announced a second application phase, California policymakers concluded that replicating their initial approach to requesting funding would not produce a competitive application. Gaither later reflected that the extensive compromises required to satisfy the governor’s office, CDE, and the Department of Finance undermined the application’s effectiveness: “We drafted every word ourselves, and that was a painstaking series of negotiations. You could say that the end result, by being a document that was agreeable to all three of those entities, was probably watered down.”

⁵ For more about the *Getting Down to Facts* studies, see <https://cepa.stanford.edu/gdtf/overview>

⁶ These briefs are available at <http://www.cacollaborative.org/publication/policy-briefs-california-education-finance-and-governance>

The governor's office decided to apply for Race to the Top again, but with a dramatically different strategy for developing the second application. Secretary of Education Bonnie Reiss described the approach in this way:

“The strategy in the second round, rather than top-down, we considered it bottom-up, meaning that instead of the governor's office and the state department of education coming up with a very general plan and then asking LEAs [local education agencies] to sign on to it....Who are the ones actually on the front lines, in the trenches day in and day out, that are actually responsible for delivering education? Well, it's our school districts. It's the superintendents of these school districts. It's the school principals. It's the teachers in each of the school districts.”

In March 2010, Hanson and Steinhauser received an unexpected request to meet with Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in his private Santa Monica office. Flanked by the jet from *True Lies* and swords from the *Conan* films in which Schwarzenegger had achieved movie fame, the governor, the secretary, and the superintendents explored a writing process in which local superintendents would guide the application on behalf of the state. District leaders, not state policymakers, would design a proposal that could speak to the federal government's priorities while also reflecting and addressing the realities of district and school improvement.

The group, with subsequent input from Los Angeles USD Superintendent Ramon Cortines, went on to select a set of seven districts to write the application together. Schwarzenegger and Reiss insisted on including Los Angeles USD—a condition that Hanson and Steinhauser readily endorsed. A viable statewide application would need the strength of the state's largest district behind it. Beyond that, the writing team needed geographic diversity and a range of district sizes and types.

To flesh out the group, Cortines, Hanson, and Steinhauser turned to the colleagues with whom they had already been working for several years. San Francisco Superintendent Carlos Garcia had served previously as superintendent in Fresno and Sanger and Cortines had hired him into his first principalship years before in San Francisco. Through San Francisco, the application team also featured representation from the Bay Area. Sacramento City Superintendent Raymond had developed relationships with the others through his involvement with UED and the California Collaborative, and his district added a Northern Californian perspective. Sanger Superintendent Marc Johnson had also come to know the others well through his work with the California Collaborative. With Sanger, he brought the weight of a district that had achieved accolades for dramatic districtwide turnaround⁷ and the perspective of a small, rural district. Clovis was somewhat of an outlier in that Superintendent Dave Cash had not participated in some of the same networking channels as the others. Nevertheless, he had a strong relationship with Hanson, built in part on his district's close proximity to Fresno. Inviting Clovis to contribute to the application also enabled the group to incorporate the perspective of a suburban California district.

The resulting set of seven districts spent roughly two months engaged in an intense process of producing California's new Race to the Top application. Superintendents and other leaders from

⁷ For details on the Sanger USD story, see David & Talbert (2013). Johnson also received recognition in 2011 as the American Association of School Administrators National Superintendent of the Year.

their districts met regularly with the governor’s office and representatives from CDE and divided into writing teams for each of the four federal priority areas. Through in-person meetings in Sacramento, videoconferences, e-mails, and telephone calls, the teams worked long hours to draft the state’s proposal. They sought to produce a competitive application while incorporating the priorities and responding to the concerns of the participating districts.

The strategy consulting firm The Parthenon Group helped facilitate the process. In Phase I of the Race to the Top competition, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation had funded Parthenon and other consulting organizations to help a select group of states craft their proposals. California was not one of these states. When California decided to pursue the funding in Phase II, Reiss worked with some philanthropic organizations—including, notably, the Stuart Foundation—to secure funding for similar support for its application and hire Parthenon as a consultant. Parthenon helped coordinate the writing effort and push the state in a more strategic direction. By analyzing other states’ applications and scores from Phase I, providing guidance on which elements of the application might be most important in improving California’s score, and helping organize the work, the Parthenon team informed the perspectives of the writing team as it developed a more competitive Phase II proposal.

The application itself stretched to roughly 200 pages, plus nearly 900 pages of appendices. ED responded favorably to the proposal, naming California a finalist and inviting a representative team to Washington, D.C. to defend the application. Even at this phase, participants in the process recognized that something special had taken place. The application had generated strategies for how the districts might approach their work together and they were eager to see some of those ideas through. Matt Hill, a senior administrator from Los Angeles and a member of the writing team, described the general sentiment within the group: “There was a small contingent of us that went to D.C. to do the presentation...and the conversations at that point were saying that this work is critical. It’s important. I think everyone agreed that it needed to continue whether or not we got Race to the Top funding.” Lupita Cortez Alcalá, Deputy Superintendent for Government Affairs and Charter Development Branch at CDE, recalled a similar epiphany: “Whatever happens, whether we win or lose, we can’t let this momentum go...This has been incredibly fruitful, just this experience, and we’ve learned so much from each other, and there’s a lot going on that we can really learn from and grow from, and that we need to continue this.”

In the end, California once again finished out of the money. Ten states received grants and California, in 16th place, was 17 points shy of a score that would have placed it among the winning states. District leaders responded to the decision with a mixture of disappointment, relief to be free of some of the more daunting commitments they had made in the application, and a strong desire to continue the work they had begun together. As Fresno’s Kim Mecum explained, “You couldn’t stop it once it started, right? I mean, the ball started to roll. From there, I think all of us—not just the superintendents, but myself included—you clearly see the value of networking and sharing and reaching out to each other.” Sanger’s Johnson described a similar realization: “There’s a lot of power to coming together and having these kinds of conversations. I think that was when we just said, ‘You know, maybe we need to keep this going.’” The steps that followed helped transform what began as grant-writing team into a new district partnership.

The Seed Sprouts: CORE Designs Its Work Together

Having set the stage for powerful cross-district work to continue, the Race to the Top district leaders went on to establish themselves as a formal learning community united by a commitment to meet the learning needs of all students. In the process, CORE transitioned from an initial group of districts that worked together to pursue a political opportunity to a formal structure of cross-system collaboration focused on the innovation, implementation, and scaling of new strategies in service of student learning.

District Leaders Develop Structures for Continued Work Together

The momentum that began with the Race to the Top application transformed into action when two key sources of support emerged. With a stable foundation of shared commitment and resources to guide them, the seven districts fleshed out a governance structure and areas of focus that helped shape their continued collaboration.

Funding Opportunities Introduce Resources for Ongoing Collaboration

Stuart Foundation President Christy Pichel had come to believe in the potential of cross-district collaboration through her experiences supporting the California Collaborative and the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership. As an observer during the Race to the Top application process—having helped to fund The Parthenon Group’s coordination of the work—Pichel saw the value that this particular set of districts discovered in working together. In her view, an opportunity existed for the districts to continue their collaboration and to innovate in a way that would resonate with her board:

“We were enthusiastic about the potential of the districts working collaboratively together. The districts’ collaboration fit well with the foundation’s strategy of supporting the development of the capacity of all educators and leaders throughout a district without what we felt were counterproductive elements of the federal government’s compliance requirements.”

When the Race to the Top funding fell through, Pichel looked for ways to capitalize on the districts’ continued interest in working together. She began by commissioning The Parthenon Group to evaluate the feasibility of the districts moving forward. Parthenon reviewed the Race to the Top application and interviewed key contributors to the writing process to identify priorities and opportunities for the districts. When all seven districts expressed interest in continuing their work together, the Stuart Foundation also approved grants (\$700,000 for Year 1 and \$800,000 for Year 2) to help support the new partnership.

Meanwhile, inspired by the potential of cross-district collaboration, Miller (who had left CDE in spring 2010), Phil Halperin, and Natasha Hoehn were founding a new organization called California Education Partners (Ed Partners). The goal of this organization was to provide opportunities for school districts to address common systemic issues cooperatively. Because of the collaboration emerging through the Race to the Top competition, the seven districts provided an opportune entry point to pursue this mission. Ed Partners offered the districts counsel as a strategic partner and three years of in-kind support to administer and operate the collaborative

work, including hiring staff members to facilitate the group’s work. Miller, Halperin, and Hoehn’s history of advocating for the district voice—Miller through his role in CDE and as a member of both UED and the California Collaborative, and Halperin and Hoehn through many years of work in San Francisco and California overall—may have helped with their credibility. By offering the structure of an existing organization, Ed Partners enabled CORE to design its efforts without having to worry about operational details such as fundraising, finance, legal incorporation, or structures for hiring and payroll. As Halperin said, “From our perspective, it also enabled them to focus on the work of CORE as opposed to establishing the organization of CORE.”

Subsequent fundraising efforts strengthened the financial foundation for the districts to continue collaborating. In addition to financial contributions from the Stuart Foundation and in-kind support from Ed Partners, the group secured grants from the California Endowment, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Dirk and Charlene Kabcenell Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and The James Irvine Foundation.

CORE Creates a Governance Structure to Organize Its Work

At this point, the districts knew they wanted to continue working together and had the financial means to do so. The next step was to organize the work.

An Oversight Panel from the Race to the Top Application Becomes CORE’s Governing Body

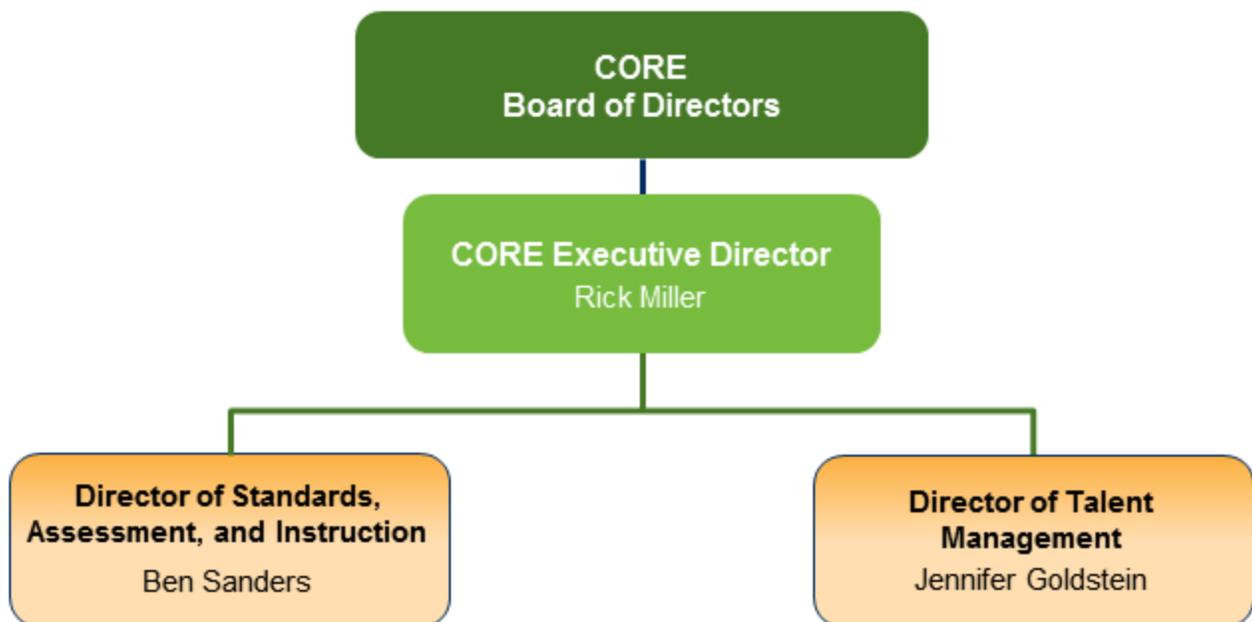
In the Race to the Top application, the districts had to identify a fiscal agent to oversee the distribution of federal money and execution of the reform plans. The writing team had been reluctant to let CDE oversee the work because district leaders thought that CDE’s size and bureaucracy would prevent the group from being what Reiss described as “a more nimble, collaborative entity.” District leaders also had concerns that CDE did not have the capacity to evaluate and assist the districts to help them meet their goals. Indeed, frustrations with CDE had provided some impetus for the districts to work together in the first place. As an alternative to CDE oversight, the application called for the creation of an Implementation Board of Directors. The board would include representatives from several groups: superintendents (seven); charter schools (one); institutions of higher education (three); state representatives (two); and foundations or nonprofits (four). As part of the application process, the legal entity had already been created and named the California Office to Reform Education, or CORE.

When the superintendents came together to craft their work without Race to the Top funding, they decided to leverage the board they had already conceived for the proposal and adopt its name, CORE.⁸ Because the scope of this board’s work would not be as expansive as the plans in the federal application, however, this board would not need the full range of organizations described in the application. Instead, the district leaders created a board consisting of the seven superintendents; the superintendent of public instruction (at that time, Jack O’Connell); and the secretary of education. O’Connell declined his invitation, however, and Reiss resigned from her position after a short period of time. The governing board for CORE has therefore comprised the

⁸ Although the seven districts crafted the Race to the Top application, the state invited all California districts to commit. Had the state’s application been successful, the board would have overseen the grant administration statewide. Absent the Race to the Top funding, the board’s scope related only to the work of the CORE districts.

member superintendents ever since. CORE hired Miller—who had come to know many of the superintendents well during his time at CDE and was now a senior partner at Ed Partners—to serve as the group’s full-time executive director. CORE established itself in 2010 as a limited liability company subsidiary of California Education Partners, which is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Figure 2 provides the 2010 organization chart for CORE.

Figure 2. CORE Organization Chart, 2010



CORE Officially Begins

After the districts lost the Race to the Top competition, Gaither announced in an August 2010 e-mail to the districts and other stakeholders involved with the application that CORE was being formed despite the loss. A press release officially announced the establishment of CORE on October 8, 2010, and named Cortines (Los Angeles); Steinhauser (Long Beach); Hanson (Fresno); Cash (Clovis); Johnson (Sanger); Raymond (Sacramento); and Garcia (San Francisco) as participating superintendents.⁹

Quotes in the press release highlighted some of the key motivations for the CORE districts to work together. Cortines spoke of the value of this cross-district collaboration to his district in the press release, saying, “We strongly believe there is benefit and efficiency to the seven school districts continuing to work together. Together our districts represent well over a million students; students who deserve our best effort to help them succeed” (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2010). Steinhauser echoed this sentiment and emphasized the importance of the Common Core as an anchor for the districts’ work together: “We are committed to refining California’s rigorous state standards by adopting internationally benchmarked common core

⁹ For a full timeline of key CORE events, please see page 33.

standards and aligned assessments that better prepare students for success in college and the workplace” (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2010).

The Districts Build on Their Race to the Top Experience to Create a Focus for Their Work

Having officially created CORE as an entity through which to collaborate, the districts turned to identifying areas of focus and principles for their work together.

Mission

The seven superintendents fundamentally viewed the new collaboration not as an end in and of itself, but as a means for achieving shared goals for system effectiveness and student outcomes. The CORE mission statement reflects the higher purpose for which the group came together: “As a collaboration of districts, we work together to innovate, implement, and scale new strategies and tools that help our students succeed, so that our districts are improved to meet the challenges of the 21st century.” Underlying this mission was a commitment to equity and meeting the needs of all students, a shared moral purpose that had united many of the superintendents since their early days in UED and the California Collaborative.

Areas of Focus

The Parthenon Group interviewed district leaders, funders, and other members of the California education community to get their thoughts about the four federal priority areas that shaped the Race to the Top application and the viability of those areas as focal points for collaboration. The group shared findings from its work with the superintendents in December 2010, including priority areas identified by various interview respondents, costs associated with different activities, and a proposed governance structure to manage the work.

Armed with Parthenon’s input, district leaders identified two areas to anchor their work: standards and assessments (which CORE initially called Standards, Assessment, and Data) and great teachers and leaders (branded as Talent Management). Through the Standards, Assessment, and Data line of work, CORE developed and piloted new instructional materials and formative assessments aligned with the Common Core. Talent Management focused on issues of teacher quality. According to an internally developed concept paper, CORE espoused a belief that “empowering and supporting teachers and leaders is one of the best levers to improve outcomes for students” (California Office to Reform Education, 2011, p. 5). The concept paper states that CORE also looked to facilitate the sharing of tools, strategies, and best practices that would help serve this goal, with a particular focus on teacher and principal evaluation and professional development.

Principles of Collaboration

Early conversations among CORE leaders identified not only shared areas of focus, but also principles for working together. Many district leaders’ descriptions of CORE’s initial goals highlighted the importance of collaboration itself; most endorsed a gestalt philosophy that Raymond described by explaining, “true collaboration is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” District work also was too often isolated and burdensome; collaboration helped to diffuse the risk and reward. Exposure to new approaches can help introduce districts to new

ideas. As Garcia observed, “You get so focused when you’re dealing in a district with just your own issues that sometimes you realize that somebody else might be doing something that might be better than what you’re doing or might complement what you’re doing.” Oakland’s Nicole Knight reflected on the added benefits of working together on challenges for which districts have not yet developed solutions:

“It is just so important that we’re not doing this work in isolation. The changes [and] the shifts are too big, are too significant, and are too high stakes to just figure out on our own....Wouldn’t it be nice if we could share resources, if we could learn from each other, and in doing so each carry a little bit lighter of a burden?”

Staff members and district leaders’ reflections on CORE’s work also revealed some key details about the nature of the collaboration. A clear distinction existed between shared learning and implementation. CORE provided a forum for sharing and learning with one another, but adapting ideas to local settings and translating them into structures, policies, and practices was left to individual districts. Districts also had the freedom to draw on the joint CORE work in ways that were appropriate to their own context. Members would commit their time and energy to their peers, but had no obligation to make any specific changes when they returned to their districts. This flexibility enabled the full complement of seven districts to participate without reservation. As Miller later recalled, “We want them to be a part of this and we want to work to get them to buy into this....Any barrier we put up will be a reason for them not to be a part of it.”

Early internally-focused documents articulate the following set of partnership design principles that guided CORE’s initial work:

- Upholding an unwavering **belief in equity and access for all students**
- Maintaining an **instructional focus** and **practice orientation**
- Committing infrastructure to be **data-driven**
- Fostering flexibility and independence with mutual accountability that is **outcomes-focused**
- Incorporating local leadership from local communities to be **educator-driven**
- Upholding **clear and accessible** language for optimal collaboration, communication, and implementation of new strategies

A nearly identical set of design principles persist today and appear on the section of CORE’s website describing its purpose (<http://coredistricts.org/why-is-core-needed/>).

Theory of Action

The areas of focus and principles of collaboration informed a theory of action for how CORE’s work might lead to system improvement. Although this causal chain was not described explicitly in most participant interviews or official CORE documents, it did appear in a March 2011 grant application to The James Irvine Foundation:

CORE’s theory of change is as follows:

- *If* member districts work together to address a common set of high-priority challenges

- *And* CORE staff coordinates these collaborations, bringing in outside experts, fundraising to support the joint work, leveraging technology to facilitate the collaboration, and ensuring ongoing communication between, among, and about the districts to advance the work
- *Then* California’s school districts will benefit from new, more efficient, sustainable, easily leveraged strategies for implementing effective reforms, and teaching and learning will improve at a more rapid, sustainable, and scaled pace (California Education Partners, 2011)

With the goals and structures in place, CORE set out to design its work in Standards, Assessment, and Instruction (SAI) as well as Talent Management.

Standards, Assessment, and Instruction

The Common Core is a set of academic standards that defines the knowledge and skills that will prepare students for success in college and careers. The Race to the Top application had provided district leaders with an opportunity to flesh out plans for what a transition to the new standards might look like. Parthenon’s interviews with district leaders in fall 2010 cemented an interest in continuing this work together—with particular attention focused on an idea from the federal proposal, the development of a shared Common Core-aligned item bank. SAI therefore became the first and longest-lasting area of mutual focus among the CORE districts.

The details that follow reflect participants’ recollections of the early stages of the SAI work. Note that because of the retrospective nature of the interview data, the story may not fully capture some of the details—including missteps and challenges that participants later addressed—that characterized early stages of the work.

Determining an Area of Focus for SAI

When California adopted the Common Core in August 2010, each of the CORE districts committed independently to transitioning to the new standards as a move in the best interest of their teachers and students. Because the standards had been finalized only months before CORE began, however, each district was essentially at the same starting line in trying to navigate the implementation process. As Noah Bookman, who first became involved with CORE as a Los Angeles district leader, explained, “Everybody’s starting Common Core, so this was a moment in time where [we were] all kind of at the same place trying to figure out how to adopt and adapt these new standards.” CORE leaders envisioned that focused collaboration could help them identify and develop strategies to transition to the Common Core.

Establishing the SAI Team

As one of CORE’s first personnel moves, Ed Partners hired Ben Sanders in March 2011 as director of standards, assessment, and data (later SAI) to facilitate CORE’s Common Core efforts. Prior to this position, Sanders’ professional experience included time in the classroom as a high school teacher and roles in designing and delivering professional development for teachers and leaders.

To collaborate on Common Core-related issues, the superintendents of the participating districts identified an initial SAI team of about seven senior instructional leaders; the team later grew to include close to 50 leaders from across the CORE districts. The number of leaders from each district who participated depended on the size of the district; larger districts included between five and seven participants and small districts typically included between one and three. The selection criteria for these leaders depended on the district—as San Francisco’s Shannon Fierro explained, “The district participants varied, and this was always a bit of a push-pull with CORE. Who do you send from your district? Every district is organized differently.” Interviews suggested, however, that leaders across the districts had backgrounds in curriculum and instruction with expertise in mathematics or English language arts.

Midway through the SAI team’s development, Ed Partners hired Michelle Steagall as CORE’s chief academic officer in January 2012. Steagall came to CORE from Clovis, where she had participated in the group’s collaborative activities as part of her central office role. Because she brought district experience to the CORE staff, Steagall helped bridge the gap between the staff’s facilitation role and the on-the-ground needs and priorities of the SAI team.

Designing the SAI Work

With the SAI team in place, Sanders worked with its members to identify their priorities. The team moved forward with the mutual goal of developing strategies to implement the Common Core in CORE districts. It took time to solidify the form that work would take. Through several team meetings and learning opportunities, however, the focus of the SAI work gradually emerged.

Building on the strategy from the Race to the Top application of developing a shared item bank for district-level interim and formative assessments, the SAI team envisioned a shared statewide set of assessment items for districts to collect information on student progress. These assessment items could inform teachers’ classroom decisions and help the central office make strategic decisions to better meet identified student learning needs. The design, development, and piloting of new assessment modules became an early anchor for the districts’ work together. This work, however, was a gradual and iterative process that engaged each district in different ways at different time periods in these initial years.

SAI Team Meetings

The SAI team met on a nearly monthly basis beginning in April 2011. Although team members frequently met in person at an easily accessible location (often in Southern California), the group also began working occasionally through videoconference to improve convenience. The focus of these meetings was to develop and vet guiding principles for a Common Core implementation plan. Through these meetings, team members found opportunities to establish trust; build informal and formal connections among district leaders; participate in professional learning opportunities; and jointly focus on planning processes, strategies, and progress for the Common Core implementation in each district.

From these initial meetings, the team eventually determined that it was crucial to address its own professional learning needs on the Common Core. Team members brought content expertise and

experience in curriculum and instruction—and each district had begun their own professional learning activities on the new standards—but team members were nevertheless new to the Common Core. District leaders required more in-depth knowledge to understand the standards and more effectively organize the new assessment modules that would later anchor the districts’ early work.

CORE leveraged the size and influence of its members to organize training sessions for the SAI team on the new standards. Phil Daro, for example, one of the authors of the Common Core in mathematics, led the group through an in-depth discussion of the mathematics standards in November 2011. This session addressed the founding logic, rationale, goals, and organization of the standards, as well as implications for practice. In January 2012, additional standards authors and experts in the field—including David Coleman, Jason Zimba, Pam Grossman, and Stanley Rabinowitz—trained this group on English language arts and mathematics standards and assessment issues. Participants’ recollections indicate that these professional learning opportunities were an efficient and effective approach for establishing a shared understanding of the Common Core among superintendents and district leaders.

Through their own professional learning, SAI team members also achieved clarity on an area of focus that could leverage the collective contributions of seven districts to inform and support local implementation efforts. Fresno’s Dave Calhoun emphasized the importance of creating a resource that could serve this purpose:

“There were many, many resources available both within and supportive of school districts in California that could be leveraged in this collaboration to really accelerate our work. We really worked together to figure out, ‘What would be the type of resource that would actually be of value and useful for teachers as we move into the new (at that time) world of Common Core State Standards?’”

The original item bank idea evolved to be not just a resource that districts could access to develop their own assessments, but a vehicle to help teachers and leaders understand the Common Core. By looking at ways in which students could demonstrate the knowledge and skills required by the new standards—through assessment tasks—educators could develop a stronger understanding of what the standards demanded of students. Assessment therefore offered promise as a tool for monitoring student progress and building educator capacity.

Near the end of 2011, a subteam formed to design a set of Common Core-aligned online modules—complete with instructional guides, curricular resources, and formative assessment and analysis tools—for targeted grade levels. This approach built on the idea of an assessment bank first articulated in the Race to the Top application, but evolved to reflect what district leaders were learning through their early SAI professional learning opportunities. During these meetings, the team determined that it was necessary to introduce the modules to select school-based implementation teams during summer 2012 that later helped develop additional modules.

2012 CORE Summer Design Institute

The task of developing assessment tools among participating districts focused on what CORE called its Summer Design Institute. Building from the shared professional learning opportunities in 2011, the SAI team engaged with teacher teams from each participating district to introduce

them to (a) a conceptual and practical understanding of the Common Core; (b) the role of formative assessment in implementing the Common Core (and improving instruction generally); and (c) the process of developing Common Core-aligned formative assessment tasks.

As a product of the districts' work together, teacher teams developed formative assessment tasks for use across the participating districts. The development process unfolded in three phases: (a) conducting training prior to the Summer Design Institute; (b) designing assessment tasks during and following the Summer Design Institute; and (c) piloting new assessment tasks in classrooms during the following school year. Notably, the SAI team designed the work to focus on both *product* (assessment tasks) and *process* (developing the tasks). The concrete product that emerged was a set of assessment tasks that teachers could use in their classroom practice. Perhaps equally important, the process of developing the tasks provided a valuable professional learning opportunity for teachers to more deeply understand the Common Core itself and the ways in which their instruction would need to change to help students succeed with the new standards.

CORE district leaders invited a group of teacher leaders from each of the eight districts participating in CORE at the time¹⁰ to contribute to the process. These teachers represented a specific content area (English language arts or mathematics) and a range of grade levels. According to interviews and e-mail updates to the CORE board, desired participant characteristics included teachers who were in good standing with the district, previous knowledge about Common Core standards, extensive classroom experience, content (mathematics or English language arts) knowledge, demonstrated initiative and completion of work, and willingness to collaborate. As with members of the SAI team, however, the actual selection process varied by district.

Pre-Institute Training

Before the Summer Design Institute, the CORE districts invited a set of recruited teacher leaders to register and participate in a series of pre-Institute webinars the SAI team hosted. These one-hour webinars and supplemental readings were designed to maximize the productivity of the institute by providing a primer on the Common Core, the purpose of CORE, the focus on formative assessment, and the goal and process of the Summer Design Institute. Rochell Herring—a program officer in education leadership at the Wallace Foundation with expertise in school design, leadership development, and standards-based instruction—provided the first webinar in May 2012 on the English language arts standards. The second webinar, in June 2012, featured Daro and focused on the mathematics standards. Margaret Heritage led the third webinar in June 2012 on formative assessment.

Summer Design Institute Assessment Development

The Summer Design Institute was a two-and-a-half day training opportunity held in Berkeley in June 2012. The institute featured 125 teachers, about 30 members of the SAI team, and several content experts to guide the work. The teacher teams broke into seven pairs from each of the eight CORE districts, with each pair representing a specific content area (mathematics or English

¹⁰ Oakland USD had joined the original seven districts as an eighth CORE member by the time the Summer Design Institute took place.

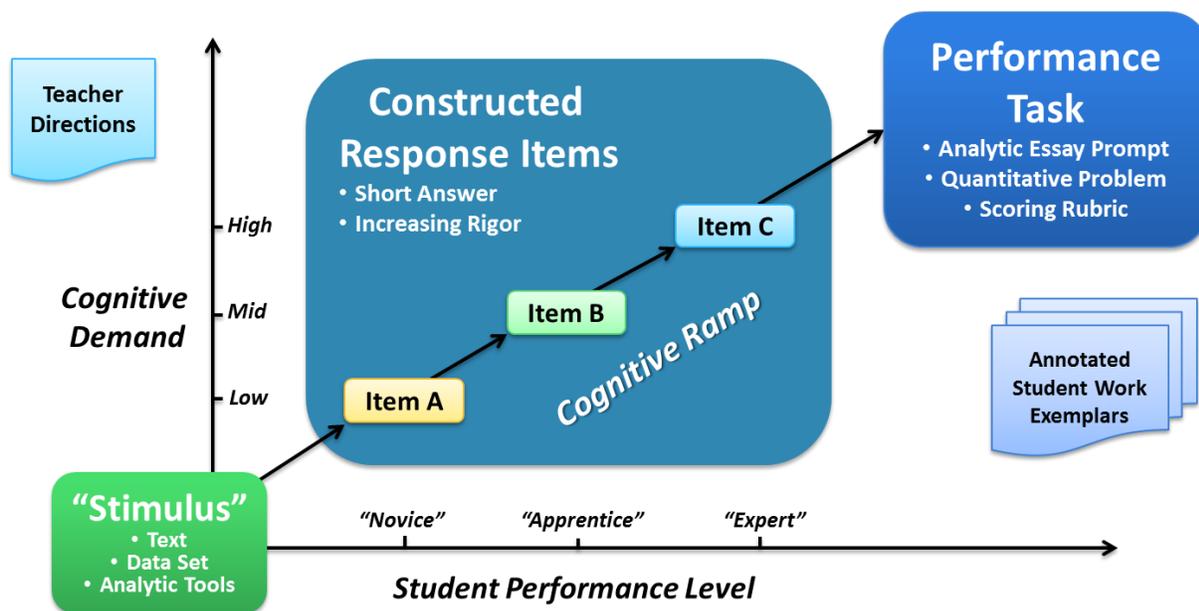
language arts) and grade level (Grades 3, 4, and 7 for mathematics and Grades 1, 4, 7, and 9 for English language arts). Through the workshop, the SAI team sought to build the capacity of teachers to employ formative assessment, analysis, and continuous improvement processes aligned with the Common Core.

To help develop assessment tasks, CORE outlined a model in spring 2012 for what it called *assessment modules* (see Figure 3). The model built on the content specifications from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, which was in the process of creating California’s new Common Core-aligned statewide assessment system. The model also focused on a multistep process of asking students to demonstrate their understanding in a series of progressively more demanding steps. According to the CORE website,

The modules incorporate a “stimulus” (in ELA, an excerpt of complex text; in math, a set of variables), a series of “constructed response” questions arrayed along a cognitive ramp of increasing complexity, and a culminating performance task (an evidence-based writing prompt in ELA; a complex problem to solve and write about in math. (CORE, n.d.)

The modules included *formative (performance) assessment tasks* designed to measure students’ ability to apply knowledge and skills in response to complex questions or problems; *scoring rubrics* to guide and calibrate teachers’ analyses of student work; *teacher directions* for administering the tasks along with a profile of the tasks; *student work exemplars* that sampled student work and teacher feedback; and *optional elements*, such as academic content discussion, instructional guides, and teaching resources.

Figure 3. CORE Formative Assessment Module: Key Components



Note: Adapted from CORE’s 2012 Summer Design Experience, <http://coredistricts.org/our-work/standards-and-data-assessments/>

Institute leaders tasked each teacher team with developing one performance task during the June event and another two before the end of summer 2012; the teams designed three sets of 28

modules during three phases (June, July, and August) for a total of 84 initial assessment modules ready for trial when teachers started school in fall 2012.

Post-Institute Pilot

After teacher teams completed the assessment modules and had them reviewed for quality and alignment, the CORE districts selected a cohort of teachers to participate in piloting the performance assessment tasks during the 2012–2013 school year. According to an SRI International policy report,¹¹ each of these districts also selected the performance modules to pilot, prepared teachers and students for the pilot, scored the tasks, and debriefed teachers about their experiences with the task (Tiffany-Morales, Astudillo, Black, Comstock, & McCaffrey, 2013). Teachers collected student work associated with the assessment modules and provided feedback about potential revisions to the modules. CORE regarded this third phase of the assessment development process as invaluable both to inform revisions to the assessment modules and help teachers transition to the standards.

The pilot provided an opportunity for teachers to observe how students responded to the new expectations of the performance assessment tasks. Teachers also reported that their instructional practices shifted to align with the performance assessment tasks in the pilot (Tiffany-Morales et al., 2013). In these ways, the assessment module efforts helped CORE’s collaborative work influence classroom practice in participating districts. As Sanders described, “The nice thing about those folks is that they were closer to the ground, if you will. They were closer to the work itself.” The pilot also enabled CORE’s collective work on the Common Core implementation to reach the classroom level and helped identify lessons learned that would later inform districts’ local implementation efforts.

Participant-Reported Outcomes of the Early SAI Work

CORE participants spoke about ways in which the SAI team, and in particular the assessment module development process, influenced their districts and their work as individuals.

Developing Tools to Support Assessment Practice

The early SAI work produced CORE’s earliest tangible product, a set of 64 assessment modules available for use within and beyond the CORE districts.¹² The participating districts entered their new partnership eager to adopt the Common Core, but with an awareness that the transition would be a daunting and uncharted process. The opportunities to collaboratively plan, learn, and develop an initial way of implementing the Common Core were an invaluable experience for CORE as an organization. The monthly meetings and Summer Design Institute made the standards more concrete and helped build a common understanding about what high-quality classroom assessment tasks look like. In some districts, the assessment module development

¹¹ SRI International interviewed teachers and administrators in three of the participating districts about their experiences with the pilot of the performance assessment tasks following the Summer Design Institute.

¹² The final assessment modules for English language arts are publicly available at <http://cep01.managed.contegix.com/display/SAI/CORE+ELA+Performance+Assessment++Modules/>. The final assessment modules for mathematics are publicly available at <http://cep01.managed.contegix.com/display/SAI/CORE+Math+Performance+Assessment+Modules/>.

directly influenced subsequent approaches to assessment development and use. Steinhauser, for example, reported that curriculum leaders in Long Beach leveraged the learning from the Summer Design Institute to write new end-of-unit districtwide performance assessment tasks. Sanger also went on to use one of the modules as a benchmark assessment in all its ninth-grade English language arts classrooms (Tiffany-Morales et al., 2013).

Creating Access Points for Standards Implementation

Evidence suggests that the Summer Design Institute and its associated activities provided an access point for teachers and administrators to understand the Common Core. Through a survey administered by Ed Partners, participants reported an increase in their knowledge of the Common Core from 5.3 before the Summer Design Institute to 7.6 afterwards on a ten-point scale, where one represents “basic knowledge” and 10 represents “highly knowledgeable.” In addition, 84 percent of survey respondents agreed that they “gained a better understanding of the instructional shifts” associated with the Common Core through their participation, and 91 percent agreed that the information they learned about the Common Core “is directly applicable to my work” (Sanders, 2013).

Interview responses also indicated that the process of developing modules made the standards more concrete than more abstract conceptions that might have characterized their early exposure to the Common Core. Santa Ana’s Michelle Rodriguez highlighted the inherent value and outcome of SAI’s initial approach with the Institute:

“The great part was our teachers were excited about what they were doing and our students were learning at a higher level because they were able to do learning around all the work that we had taught within the Common Core around big ideas, essential questions, [and] really learning through project-based elements as well.”

Calhoun shared a similar sentiment about the organizational outcomes associated with SAI as an orienting experience for teachers: “I think it really helps both the system and teachers to really recognize where the target had moved to as we stepped into the world of Common Core.”

Demonstrating the Value of Collaboration

The superintendents who created CORE had already embraced the value of collaboration through previous opportunities to work with and learn from one another. Several CORE members suggested that during the initial years of forming and planning, the SAI team developed a similar appreciation for working together. One observer noted that the range of activities “gave an opportunity for the SAI team to work together with a mutual focus—the processes of working together was a learning experience in and of itself.” Learning as a group about the Common Core helped participants gather insights about the standards. Long Beach’s Ruth Ashley affirmed this by saying, “I think it’s helped me to look at the system...with more appreciation in learning from my colleagues from other districts.” Sacramento City’s Iris Taylor reinforced this point: “I feel like there are people that I can connect with and talk to about what’s working or not working and who can answer questions that I may have. I have a network of people that I can reach out to. Then there’s the professional learning, the opportunity to learn at the feet of the experts in the field has just been invaluable.”

Recognizing Differences Among Individuals and Districts

Although accounts of the SAI work from interview respondents were generally positive, participating individuals and districts reacted in different ways. Whereas Sanger integrated a performance assessment module into a districtwide assessment, for example, not all districts told stories of incorporating the SAI team’s work products into their own practice. In fact, some comments suggested that translating CORE learning opportunities into daily district practice was difficult because no established structures or procedures existed to do so. Likewise, not all individuals and districts shared the same perceptions of the work’s value.

One example of this diversity in responses comes from Oakland. Although Oakland district leaders and teachers participated in the Summer Design Institute, they came to the workshop having joined CORE only three months prior. Working on their own Common Core transition plans independent of the other districts, Oakland district leaders had identified their own priorities and strategies for the standards transition. As Knight recalled, “We were on our own path in Oakland. When I came in, we did participate in that formative assessment pilot, but it didn’t resonate in the same way for Oakland as it did for San Francisco and L.A.” Because Oakland had already made progress in developing Common Core-aligned curricula that included assessment tasks, Phil Tucher explained, “We thought maybe we were a year or two ahead on that part of the work....The performance task development pilot was a little bit redundant at that point, at least for math.”

Both district leaders also shared positive impressions of CORE’s work, but their experiences speak to the differences that exist in a group with membership as diverse as the districts in CORE, as well as to potential challenges of introducing new members to collaborative efforts. Even for a topic like the Common Core, for which the similar starting point among all districts created substantial common ground, slight differences in individual district timelines and priorities affected the degree to which collaboration added value.

Evolving Areas of SAI Attention

The SAI team continued to search for areas of common interest on which to focus their work. Even as the piloting efforts continued on the assessment modules, SAI team members identified and designed approaches to address other areas of interest. Internal CORE communication indicates that a three-day Arts Integration Institute in November 2012 followed the 2012 Summer Design Institute as the next major SAI activity. (Neither CORE documentation nor participant interviews revealed much detail about this event.) By the time the districts decided to pursue the ESEA waiver in early 2013, plans were underway for the 2013 Summer Symposium, which emphasized the importance of academic language and literacy development—especially for ELs—in Common Core implementation.

Reflections on the Early SAI Work

SAI participants generally shared favorable impressions of their opportunities to work together. Their interview responses suggest that some key features facilitated the group’s early success.

Shared Starting Points

When CORE’s work began, district leaders were still trying to work through details of new standards that had been released only months before—standards that would shape new state assessments, instructional materials, and other expectations related to teaching and learning. All participants were at the same starting point in trying to craft an implementation plan for their own district. This helped create a willingness to learn among the participants because they had not figured out solutions to their shared challenge. It also opened the space for districts to mutually develop a product. Because the districts did not have fully developed instructional tools at their disposal, they had an opportunity to operate more efficiently by creating something that each district could apply to its own context without having to reinvent the wheel.

Willingness to Learn

The CORE district leaders’ willingness to learn accompanied tolerance for an undefined mechanism for collaboration. It took time for participants to define what their work would look like; the initial SAI team met for nearly a year before planning began for the Summer Design Institute. But team members embraced and worked through a period of ambiguity to reach a point of concrete next steps—perhaps in part because they knew they had to implement the Common Core anyway. From Rick Miller’s perspective, approaching this work with an open mind made these experiences useful and meaningful:

“I will say what made it really, really manageable, and gratifying, and successful, I think, to some degree, was a collective willingness on the part of a lot of the folks to just accept the reality of the fact that we didn’t know exactly what we were doing, and that was okay. People had a natural sense that [CORE] was a useful thing.”

Connections to the Classroom

CORE’s efforts to develop assessment modules also connected its work directly to some classrooms. Many cross-district networks feature conversations among senior leaders, but do not extend their efforts to the day-to-day work of teachers and leaders in schools. The Summer Design Institute and its associated activities directly engaged teacher leaders from each of the participating districts. The subsequent pilot put new assessment tools in the hands of some teachers and on the desks of their students. If collaboration is to ultimately create differences in student performance, it needs to enhance student learning opportunities. The assessment modules were an attempt to make this connection. Module development and the subsequent pilot, however, happened with only a select group of teachers. Future documentation efforts may help illuminate the degree to which ongoing SAI activities have helped improve instruction at scale.

Talent Management

Like implementing new standards, developing great teachers and leaders had been a focus of the districts’ Race to the Top application. When Parthenon interviewed district leaders in the aftermath of the Phase II funding decision, it confirmed an interest in sustaining efforts around teacher quality. Paired with the SAI efforts, Talent Management became the short-lived second focal point around which CORE designed its early work together.

Like SAI, the Talent Management story relies primarily on retrospective interview data. In contrast to the SAI work, however, CORE suspended its Talent Management efforts after a short period of time. As a consequence, interview responses may place more emphasis on the struggles encountered in Talent Management—which shaped the final and lasting impressions of that line of work—than those experienced in SAI, whose longer history of shared work may obscure the memory of some early challenges.

Determining an Area of Focus for Talent Management

Under the broader umbrella of great teachers and leaders, the participating districts decided to focus their attention on teacher evaluation. Teacher evaluation had been a key component of the Race to the Top application: states could earn up to 58 points for their plans to improve teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance. The final California application committed to a new principal and teacher evaluation system based on multiple measures, at least 30 percent of which would derive from student achievement growth. The writing process for the teacher evaluation portion of the application had required a careful balance of faithfulness to the districts' beliefs about teacher quality—including different perspectives on the role that student achievement data should play—and the need to field a competitive application. As Parthenon's Dave Hoverman recalled,

“I think at the time there was a level of discomfort that the superintendents actually had about some of the commitments; they were trying to do something that was authentically committing to some of the requirements to get this money that they also felt were the right things to do in their communities and for their kids.”

Despite the challenges of crafting an application about a teacher evaluation policy, Parthenon's report suggested that it remained an area of common interest for the districts to address together.

Establishing the Talent Management Team

To help guide the work, Ed Partners hired Jennifer Goldstein to serve as director of talent development (later renamed Talent Management) in April 2011. Goldstein came to CORE on loan from a faculty position at City University of New York, where she conducted research on teacher evaluation and distributed leadership and taught an inquiry team-based leadership preparation program. She described “a strong belief that...meaningful talent management reform...involved a partnership between district management and labor—the teacher union—that places that were really redesigning what teacher evaluation looked like had both of those players at the table.” Because she had professional commitments that extended into the summer, Goldstein actually began her work with CORE in by doing part-time work in summer 2011 before coming on board full-time that fall. A needs assessment that Goldstein conducted as her first activity in the new role confirmed that teacher evaluation was the top area of interest for the CORE districts.

As with the SAI team, each superintendent identified a team from their district to contribute to the Talent Management work. This team had only one or two people per district, which was smaller than what the SAI team later became. Interview responses also indicated that substantial variation existed in the types of district leaders that participated—some had cabinet-level

positions while others did not, and some had responsibilities for labor negotiations while others did not—which may have contributed to later challenges in finding common ground.

Union Involvement

Notably, the work did not involve the teacher unions from any of the districts. A meeting organized in the aftermath of the Race to the Top application (but predating CORE) in July 2010 had included five of the districts (Fresno, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Sacramento City, and San Francisco), plus union leaders from Fresno and Los Angeles. The goal had been to find some common ground on issues of teacher quality. Although the meeting produced some useful discussion, it did not lead to any concrete next steps. At the same time, tensions about teacher evaluation stretched back to the Race to the Top application and unions were reluctant to agree to an evaluation system that incorporated student achievement. Among the seven original CORE districts, only United Educators of San Francisco officially supported the federal application.

Beyond the history of central office and labor relationships, Miller suggested that active collaboration with the teacher unions was outside the scope of what CORE was trying to accomplish:

“[Part] of the ongoing ethos of CORE is that we’re not a singular implementer; we’re not trying to become one large district. We talk about what works with each other, and we learn from each other, but then we go back and implement based on what works for our local context. I would argue that negotiations fall squarely into that. How the union was involved in our work really was a local decision.”

For Goldstein, however, the lack of union involvement was a red flag because it conflicted with her view of how education systems best address issues of teacher evaluation.

Designing the Talent Management Work

CORE had established a shared focus on teacher evaluation and assembled a team to explore the issue, but the work itself was largely undefined at the outset. As Goldstein explained, “My first task on being hired was to define what the Talent Management work would be.” E-mail updates to the CORE board indicate that meetings of the Talent Management team took place monthly beginning in September 2011, alternating between in-person meetings and videoconferences per agreement by the team members.

In addition to general conversations within the Talent Management team about goals and strategies, the group’s work together featured some shared learning opportunities. CORE commissioned an analysis of the contract language in the districts’ collective bargaining agreements in an attempt to inform efforts to improve teacher evaluation policies. Representatives from the Value-Added Research Center joined the group to provide an orientation to their work and lay the foundation for a potential partnership with some of the participating districts. Neither of these activities translated, however, into ongoing areas of focus or shared work.

Accounts from participants suggest that three district leaders in particular—Mecum, Drew Furedi of Los Angeles, and Nancy Waymack of San Francisco—made strong connections and

continued to consult with one another on teacher evaluation issues. Overall, however, the Talent Management team never coalesced around a concrete set of work. Attendance dwindled. Steagall recalled, “The team was small. . . . It was small by nature and then it got even smaller when some districts said, ‘This doesn’t create value to us.’” Finally, an e-mail update from Miller to the CORE board in April 2012 announced that Goldstein was going to transition to a new role on the faculty at California State University at Fullerton. Talent Management lay dormant until it reemerged under a broader frame of *professional capital* within the context of the CORE ESEA waiver.

Participant-Reported Outcomes of the Early Talent Management Work

Echoing the experiences of the SAI team, the limited set of district leaders who participated in and spoke about the Talent Management team spoke highly of the opportunity to develop and strengthen relationships among their peers from other districts. Two individuals also described how conversations with colleagues from other districts strengthened the work they were already doing within their own system. There do not appear to have been any concrete changes, however, that resulted from the early Talent Management work.

Reflections on the Early Talent Management Work

Two fundamental challenges plagued the Talent Management working group: lack of common ground among districts and poor role alignment.

Lack of Common Ground

First and foremost, the districts simply never found sufficient common ground to guide their work together. The Race to the Top application had established some joint commitments related to parameters of a teacher evaluation system, one of which was the incorporation of student achievement data into evaluation ratings. Absent a mandate to do this, however, district leaders had very different priorities and strategies.

Both the starting places and the end goals varied widely. Long Beach and Sanger had strong relationships with their unions and did not see a need to change course in major ways. Reflecting on the push to incorporate student achievement data into teacher evaluations for Race to the Top, Long Beach’s Ashley said, “That’s not our culture, and it’s still not our culture to do that. We have, as a district, always embedded those conversations with our administrators and teachers together in data, so it was always about the hard data and the soft data as well.” The incorporation of student achievement as 30 percent of a teacher’s rating was a nonstarter in Long Beach. Los Angeles, in contrast, wanted to build on the progress made in the Race to the Top application as part of its movement toward a new evaluation system that incorporated student achievement data into teacher ratings. Clovis represented yet another lens. The district had just developed a new teacher evaluation system in summer 2010, and as the only CORE district without a teacher union, represented a completely different world when it came to talks about contract language.

Conversations about teacher evaluation also get highly charged in a way that the SAI discussions never were. Evaluation involves judgments about individuals’ performance and affects hiring and firing decisions. Evaluation had also become a hot-button issue politically in California and

across the country. As Miller reflected, “That was really hard work. We were naïve in how hard that work was. I’m talking about politically hard work to deliver that. It was in the middle of this tempest.”

The result was a struggle to find areas of commonality in which the districts could work together. San Francisco’s Waymack recalled, “I think we were a little floundering in finding the common task that we were all doing that would benefit from our joint work on it.” Hanson echoed this sentiment by contrasting the Talent Management work with the efforts of the SAI team: “When you’re at the same starting point on Common Core and you have different strategies, but you’re going down the same road, you can still stay together...It’s harder when you have different strategies, different purposes, different orientations, and you’re already at different starting spots.”

In the end, the Talent Management experience helped identify one of CORE’s most important early lessons, the need to develop a shared priority and concrete body of work. Phil Halperin, senior partner at Ed Partners, summarized this perspective by explaining, “Having a common practice, having a common need that all the participants share and are bound together on, is critical. Otherwise, it’s just a tea party, a camping trip.” Miller added his takeaway: “When you don’t share the end goal and you don’t share the starting place, I think it’s almost impossible to collaborate. As I do this work moving forward, it’s a place I will always look and say, ‘Where are we starting?’ to see whether or not this makes sense for us to do this work together.”

Poor Role Alignment

Comments from a variety of individuals involved with the Talent Management work, including from Goldstein herself, also point to a poor match between the director and the role that CORE wanted her to play. Goldstein’s vision for what the work should entail did not match the districts’ goals. She wanted to find ways to address the bigger picture of teacher evaluation, including the role that partnerships and labor play in that development process, as well as the connections between issues of teacher evaluation and the emerging work of the SAI team. The Talent Management team, however, wanted to begin collaborating together on a more focused scope of work. This created challenges for figuring out how best to lead and facilitate the partnership.

At the same time, Goldstein’s background did not fit the mold of what district leaders came to believe was effective. In particular, central office experience was important to establish credibility with the group and to understand and address their concerns. Despite her extensive research background and history of working in and with school districts, Goldstein had not spent time as a central office employee. CORE staff members concluded that a background in a school district was important for being successful as a facilitator of this work; the decision to bring Steagall from Clovis to CORE as the chief academic officer was a direct reflection of this new philosophy.

The CORE Board

The two explicitly identified strands for CORE in its early years were SAI and Talent Management, but CORE’s story during this time period also includes the critical role of the board itself. The CORE board played a functional role beyond setting the agenda for the second-

line leaders who drove the SAI and Talent Management work. Perhaps equally important, CORE played a role for the superintendents themselves to deepen relationships, fuel their ongoing commitments to one another, and extend their influence in the state.

In addition to its work within districts, CORE emerged as an avenue for communication and engagement among superintendents on state policy issues. Regular e-mail updates from Miller to the CORE board reflect conversations about bills coming through the California legislature, measures promoted by the governor, and other education-related initiatives as well as member discussions about the implications of potential policies and how they should respond.¹³ CORE board members often encouraged one another to support these issues through telephone calls, letters, personal meetings, and public statements. In addition to individual actions, CORE itself sometimes issued formal statements, as in a memo on federal flexibility delivered to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in February 2011. In addition to CORE initiating its own advocacy work, stakeholders also turned to CORE to ask for its support for policy initiatives or legislative action. This political engagement role helped the board monitor developments related to ESEA flexibility and eventually paved the way for CORE districts to apply for a waiver in 2013.

Beyond this externally focused role, interview responses also indicated that the CORE board created a critical support system for the participating superintendents. The nature of this interaction was different from other superintendent networks. Former Santa Ana Superintendent Thelma Melendez de Santa Ana described the group as individuals who were “forward thinking, that wanted reform in their districts, and wanted to collaborate, because usually it’s a very lonely position. You’re sort of on your own, and everybody’s super competitive. This was a completely opposite way of looking at the work.” The result for many superintendents was a community that supported one another on multiple levels. San Francisco Superintendent Carranza described the value of the group by explaining, “It’s almost kind of my own personal–professional support group with people that I trust to be able to talk about the unvarnished work we’re trying to do...It also is a really important space where I get to recharge my batteries as a leader in the company of other leaders.” Former Los Angeles Superintendent Deasy voiced a similar sentiment, saying, “The superintendents I would count on as my closest supporters...I would do anything for them personally and professionally, and they helped me grow. They were there for my professional development and they were there for my personal support.”

Even more than the opportunity to engage in shared work across school systems, therefore, the CORE board itself played an important role in shaping and providing value for the superintendents’ work together.

CORE Persists and Grows

CORE leaders established their work based on a philosophy of collaboration, but with no clear idea of how collective efforts across districts might play out. As a result, its long-term viability was very much in question. In the first two years of work together, however, CORE not only

¹³ Miller’s previous role at CDE—and his ongoing policy connections through personal relationships and a role as a principal at the political strategy consulting firm Capitol Impact—positioned him well to coordinate this policy engagement.

continued to exist, but expanded to include three additional districts while surviving turnover in superintendent leadership.

Incorporation of New Districts

After beginning as the seven districts who wrote the Race to the Top application, CORE expanded to include three additional districts. Like the Race to the Top district selection process, these new additions emerged from existing relationships among superintendents.

Oakland USD was the first new district to join CORE's ranks. An e-mail update from Miller to the CORE board in March 2012 announced the decision, but the incorporation of Oakland Superintendent Tony Smith into the group was a natural extension of the relationships already in place. Smith was a regular participant in UED and the California Collaborative and developed strong connections with his peers through these and other channels. As Miller explained, "When Tony was part of these groups and we'd have dinner together or do our thing, it just became so obvious that what he was thinking was the same thing we were thinking, and vice versa.... It made enormous sense for us to include Oakland as well." For his part, Smith saw value in the opportunity for collaborating and learning from one another. He also saw value in the shared priorities on issues of equity and access as well as the work of Common Core implementation. The decision to join seemed obvious. As Smith recalled, "I think the choice that...we, Oakland, would be involved in CORE was not a district choice. I just said we are, and I just kept showing up."

Santa Ana and Garden Grove formed the second wave of new CORE membership when they joined in July 2012 and January 2013, respectively. Garden Grove had always been closely connected to the CORE efforts; other superintendents and CORE staff members often referred to Superintendent Laura Schwalm as the "silent partner" in the group. Schwalm had strong relationships with many members, particularly with Hanson and Steinhauser, and was content to connect with them informally without the publicity and commitments that would come through a formal CORE membership. When Schwalm decided to retire in 2013, however, she saw an important opportunity for her successor Gabriela Mafi. As Schwalm explained, "I finally joined CORE as I was transitioning out of Garden Grove because of the desire to stay connected and to allow Garden Grove an immediate support network." Mafi, who previously had not had much involvement with the group's work, joined CORE as a board member and continued Garden Grove's involvement when she stepped into the superintendent role.

Santa Ana, on the other hand, introduced a new district perspective to CORE. Superintendent Thelma Melendez had assumed her position in 2011 after serving as ED assistant secretary. Having returned to California, she already had established relationships with many of the participating superintendents: She had participated in a superintendent training program with eventual Superintendents Deasy (Los Angeles) and Raymond (Sacramento City), had contributed as a member of UED during her time as superintendent of Pomona USD, and came to know the districts' work better during her time in Washington, D.C. As she explained, "While I was assistant secretary, I became a bigger fan of Long Beach and Fresno and their initial work there. I knew coming back that I wanted Santa Ana to be a part of it. I talked to Mike [Hanson] and Chris [Steinhauser] and they let us." Miller echoed this account: "We were all friends with her

when she was in D.C. When she came back, it made sense....It was a combination of folks knowing them and them wanting to be a part of it.”

CORE’s expansion in many ways mirrored the process of district selection for the Race to the Top application. Superintendents built on existing relationships and shared priorities to establish new ways of working together—and in the process, expanded the set of districts involved and the number of California students they reached.

Continued Participation Through Superintendent Turnover

Since CORE began in fall 2010, a superintendent transition has taken place in eight of the 10 districts. For three of the districts, this transition took place in the time period before the ESEA waiver decision. In all three cases, the new superintendents stepped into their role from within the central office. Los Angeles’ Deasy knew of CORE from his role as deputy superintendent. He recalled that the district’s continuation in CORE when he became superintendent in early 2011 was an easy decision, saying, “I reached out to these superintendents right away and then really began to become very involved in it.” Carranza was even more connected with CORE, having helped write the Race to the Top application and continued working with colleagues in other districts after CORE began. To him, maintaining San Francisco’s involvement when he assumed the superintendency in summer 2012 was also a no-brainer: “It was in my mind a *fait accompli* that we would continue to be part of CORE....We had built institutional muscle around the collaboration.”

The transition in Clovis was not as seamless as those in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Like Carranza and Deasy, Janet Young had held a senior leadership position in her district as the associate superintendent for human resources. Like Carranza, she served as part of the Race to the Top writing team. She had not been involved with CORE, however, prior to becoming superintendent in summer 2011. At that time, she recalled, “I got the feedback that they wanted us to continue as a partner and so, because I did not have all the knowledge and the experience the former superintendent had, it was difficult to base the decision on whether to stay in or exit CORE until we got into it.” CORE leaders told Young that the district could choose which elements of CORE in which it would participate. Comfortable with the nature of that commitment, Young elected to continue as a CORE member. Accounts from many CORE participants, however, indicate that Clovis’ involvement with the group has been extremely limited, and some ambiguity exists as to whether Clovis is still a member. For her part, Young spoke very highly of CORE’s work, but acknowledged that—particularly in light of her district’s decision not to apply for the ESEA waiver—the district is “an outlier” when it comes to active participation.

Since the decision to apply for an ESEA waiver, superintendent transitions have happened in five other districts. As in the aforementioned districts, Garden Grove’s Mafi and Sanger’s Matt Navo became superintendents after a long history of working within the central office in their districts, and after having been groomed for their roles as part of a succession process. Oakland, Sacramento City, and Santa Ana, in contrast, brought in new superintendents from other districts; in Sacramento City and Santa Ana, the transition took place after a period of leadership by an interim superintendent. All five districts have continued their involvement with CORE. Future

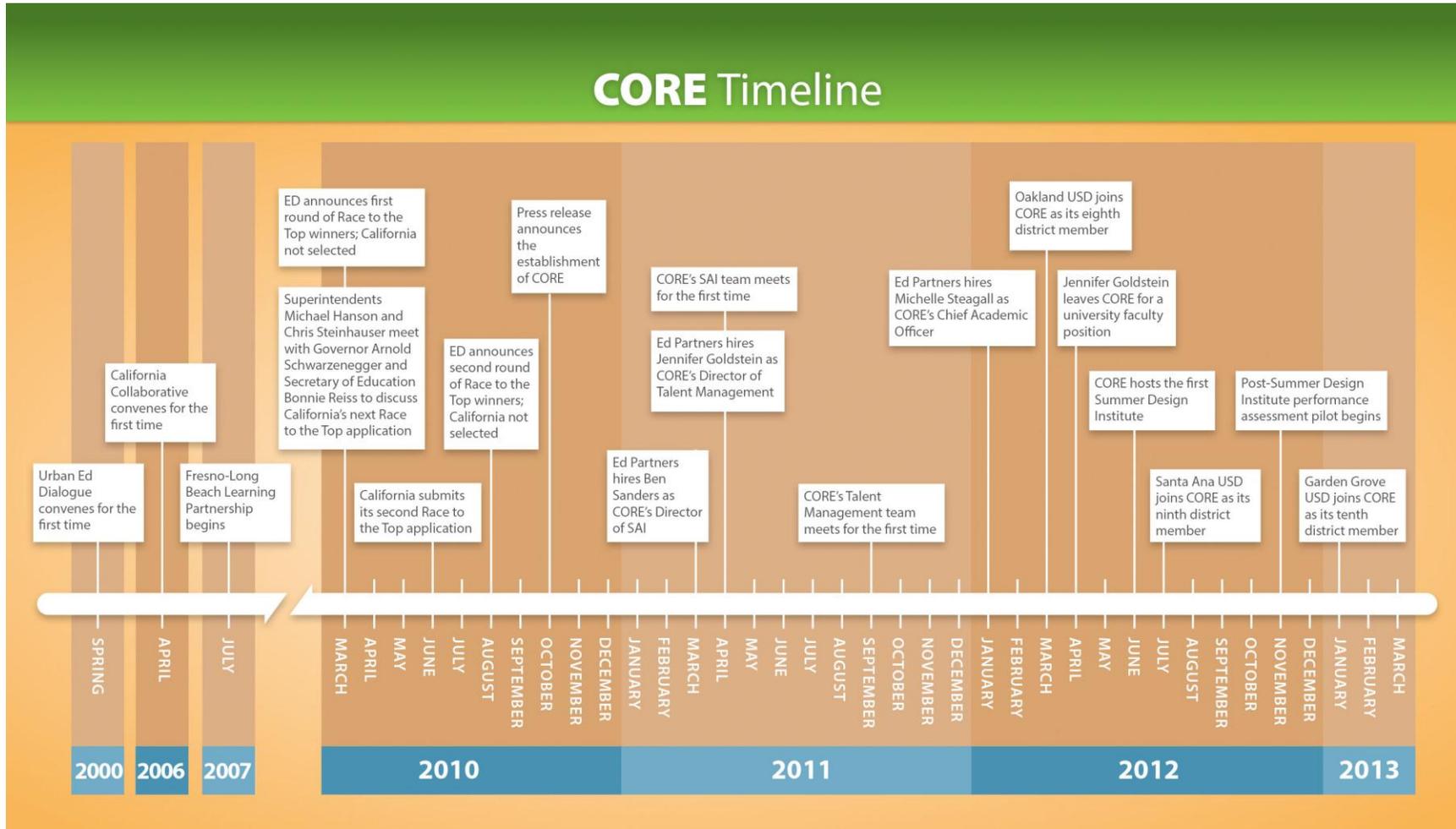
documentation work can examine these transitions to provide greater insight into how CORE has maintained district involvement even when new district leaders lack prior exposure to the group.

Evolution Through the CORE Waiver

Perhaps the most influential transition that CORE experienced took place when the districts applied for and received an ESEA waiver. This changed the parameters of collaboration in several important ways. Rather than existing as a community of choice, where districts could opt in to whatever elements of CORE's work that they chose, the eight waiver districts committed to a set of shared activities and deliverables for which they were accountable to one another and the federal government. At the same time, not all districts participated in the waiver. Clovis and Garden Grove elected not to submit an application, and Sacramento City and Sanger have subsequently decided not to renew their waiver applications. Questions therefore emerge about what it means to be a CORE district when the commitments among members differ.

It is beyond the scope of this report to examine these questions and the others that emerge through the waiver process. Future work will explore these issues in further detail.

Figure 4. CORE Timeline



Reflections on CORE’s Early Work

Having chronicled the early CORE story, an important question emerges: So what? What do we make of CORE’s existence and the work in which districts have engaged together? This report provides a historical record of how CORE came to be and how the districts designed their work. It also can shape our understanding of what participants perceive to have been successful, what can improve, and what others might learn if they wish to explore a similar model of networking and collaboration. To that end, this section addresses two questions. First, what do CORE staff members and district leaders believe they have accomplished? We examine participant perceptions of what CORE has to show for its collective efforts. Second, what are the lessons learned? We identify some of the crucial issues that CORE and other district partnerships might consider in shaping their work together. Some key decision points and the balancing of sometimes competing priorities can affect collaborative work in important ways. We discuss some of these issues and how they played out in CORE’s initial years.

What Did CORE Accomplish in Its Early Years?

An obvious question arises when educators try something innovative in education: Does it work? For CORE, no universal outcomes indicate whether the early cross-district collaboration was a success. What CORE accomplished also varies by district and individual. Participants have engaged with CORE to different degrees, and the ways in which their work has changed as a result may look very different from system to system and person to person.

Tracking the outcomes of collaborative work also presents challenges of attribution. Collaboration may shape district behavior in important ways, but rare is the direct causal link between working together and a concrete change in practice or performance. As former Oakland Superintendent Tony Smith explained:

“If a district that’s in CORE says they did all that stuff without being part of CORE, I don’t think that’s true. If CORE says this district is doing this because they’re in CORE, I don’t think that’s true either. I think that it’s the kinds of things that people are gravitating to and...played out and got strengthened by sitting at the table together.”

What is true is that nearly every district interviewee responded that they were personally better off and their district was better off because of their involvement with CORE. A representative quote from Steinhäuser reflects this perspective: “I personally believe this: We would not be experiencing the positive outcomes that we are today if it was not for our involvement in CORE.” Several indicators support the notion that CORE’s members found value in their early work together.

Expanded Relationships

The most frequently addressed effects of the CORE experience were the deepened and expanded relationships that district leaders developed with their peers. CORE itself was an outgrowth of existing relationships among superintendents. Accounts from these individuals about their CORE experience suggest that they strengthened these bonds through their work together.

Perhaps more powerfully, however, CORE engendered relationships among other second-line district leaders who would not otherwise have known or had a chance to work with one another. Several central office leaders told stories about calling their colleagues in other districts when they ran into questions or wanted advice. As Oakland's Knight attested, "One of the greatest benefits—if not the greatest benefit—of the CORE collaboration is the informal collegial relationships that are formed and are long lasting. . . . That has been really invaluable and continues to inform our work." Fresno's Mecum described the relationships as expanding into her everyday work: "Now that we have those relationships. . . we're reaching out all the time. . . . I mean, it's just fluid—it's not like we stop and meet now. It's just something, the minute we're doing something, we reach out." These relationships created the foundation for the productive collaboration and outcomes that would follow.

District leaders' accounts of relationships suggest that when partnership is effective, one result of the districts' work together is not simply the activities *within* CORE. Part of the power of cross-district collaboration may be that it changes the way educators approach their work. The relationships free educators from the silos that traditionally characterize district work and create an environment with more support and information than they previously could access.

Capacity and Feelings of Empowerment

Participants also reported improved capacity. Leaders within the SAI team, for example, often described a deeper understanding of the state's new standards as a result of their learning opportunities with peers and Common Core experts. Speaking of her time in Clovis, Steagall explained, "I was better positioned to lead in my district with the knowledge that I brought back from my engagement with CORE—from both the experts as well as my peers from other school districts."

Interview respondents also described a sense of empowerment. After years of operating within the confines of what many perceived as an ineffective state system of education, CORE provided an opportunity to operate outside those boundaries and give voice to the district perspective where it had previously not existed at the state level.

Continued Participation Demonstrates Value

An indicator of how much participants valued their CORE work and the relationships it fostered was their continued participation. All 10 districts continued to identify themselves as CORE members (although the level of engagement among districts varied). District leaders also continued to attend and contribute to CORE meetings and activities through the CORE board and SAI team. People voted with their feet. CORE attendance records indicate that all eight districts participated in SAI meetings between January 2012 and March 2013; only Clovis and Oakland missed more than two meetings, and four of the districts had perfect attendance. In contrast, participation waned in the Talent Management group—an indication that district leaders did not see the same value in that line of work.

Tangible Work Products

Beyond the gross metric of participation, CORE also created some tangible products through its early work. The most obvious example is the assessment modules that emerged from the 2012

Summer Design Institute. Educators within the CORE districts and beyond now have access to a set of instructional resources that can help guide teachers and students through the expectations of student learning that come with the Common Core. At least one district has embedded this work formally by incorporating one of the modules into a districtwide assessment. Little information exists, however, about the degree to which other districts have accessed these modules or perceptions of their quality.

Leveraged Knowledge of Other Systems

District leaders also described leveraging their connections with and knowledge of other districts to effect change in their own systems. District leaders in Oakland, for example, recalled encountering transition challenges with principals in their attempts to employ new Common Core-aligned assessments in their districts. These site leaders were reluctant to transition to new tests while still being held accountable to performance on the California Standards Test, which measured progress toward the previous state standards. A few went so far as to tell their teachers to ignore the district’s new curriculum and assessments and prepare their students for this test. Messaging from central office leaders was inconsistent. Principals were caught in the middle, and the confusion interrupted important standards implementation work and undermined the transition to the Common Core. The next year, because of interactions through CORE, Oakland leaders learned that Los Angeles was making a similar transition to Common Core-aligned assessments. Los Angeles had decided to forgo what had been a comprehensive assessment the prior year and focus instead on a couple of performance tasks from the Mathematics Assessment Resource Service as their sole centrally administered assessment for the year. Armed with this information, Oakland central office leaders were able to use the example of their influential peer to help motivate their own transition—as Tucher explained, “with way more confidence that we’re not fighting an entire system alone.”

Subsequent Collaborative Efforts

Finally, interview responses indicate that CORE spawned subsequent collaborative efforts among participants. San Francisco and Oakland, for example, both recently adopted new district policies for honors courses and mathematics course sequencing at the secondary level that are designed to create more equitable learning opportunities for students. District leaders crafted a white paper and policy language together, and then testified in front of one another’s boards to demonstrate commitment to the joint effort. It is difficult to attribute collective action like this directly to CORE. The relationships among central office leaders that made this kind of effort possible, however, are unlikely to have developed without that networking vehicle. Moreover, district leaders reported that subsequent collaboration through CORE deepened as a result of partnering more intensively on that specific project.

What Are the Lessons Learned?

CORE emerged from a unique set of circumstances to which other districts are unlikely to have access. Cross-district collaboration continues to grow, however, as an avenue toward system and school improvement. As an example of the ways in which districts can work together, CORE offers lessons not only for its own continued growth and evolution, but for other educators who

might consider similar approaches to collaboration. This section outlines some key considerations that have emerged from CORE’s work.

Select the Right Districts

The CORE experience suggests that the success of a cross-district collaborative effort depends heavily on the districts that comprise the partnership. Several characteristics of the 10 districts that comprise CORE contributed to the effectiveness of the group’s work together.

Participation by Choice

Superintendents did not join CORE as the result of a mandate or external matching exercise; they selected their peers and elected to join the partnership. As a result, the participants focused their work on what they believed to be best for kids and what they believed they could achieve progress on together—not on areas of focus defined by someone else. They also had the freedom to engage with the work to the degree that it added value for them.

Common Priorities

Interview responses also suggest that common interests and priorities helped the districts ground their collective efforts. Despite the many important differences among the participating districts, all featured a traditionally underserved student population. The percentage of African-American or Latino, EL, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students—all of whom have struggled in California’s K–12 education system—matched or exceeded state averages in almost every district. Just as important, the superintendents in the districts expressed a deep commitment to addressing issues of equity and access as well as ensuring that all students had opportunities to succeed. Deasy described this connection by observing, “The size made no difference. We all have language learners. We all have youth in poverty. We all struggled with physical resources. We all had unions.¹⁴ I mean, there was a common thread in our mission that was the captive issue.” These shared principles helped the participating districts find common ground as they designed their work.

On a big picture level, these common priorities united all participating districts. Other differences, however, sometimes made collaboration difficult. One example is discrepancies among districts in the realm of teacher evaluation—especially the incorporation of student achievement data—which made it difficult for districts to work together.

Diversity Among Districts

Just as similarities in priorities and student populations influenced districts’ ability to collaborate, so, too, did their differences. The CORE districts represented a wide range of sizes (ranging from nearly 650,000 students in Los Angeles to only 11,000 in Sanger); locations (ranging from Northern California to the Bay Area to the Central Valley to Southern California); and philosophies about issues such as centralization of district decision making. Interview responses suggest that these differences enhanced the work by giving participants different lenses and strategies for understanding issues. Rodriguez, for example, reflected, “It is nice to have both

¹⁴ Clovis USD does not have a teacher union.

bigger and smaller districts around so that you can see, ‘Oh, so how are they tackling this? How would that then apply to our setting?’” Similarly, Carranza observed, “I think the willingness of the large urbans to engage in understanding the reality of the smaller school districts, and the smaller school districts [willingness] to engage in the complexities of the large urbans and be [open] to understanding that has been really powerful.”

The differences among districts also created obstacles. Travel presents a barrier to working together. Although technology helps the process through videoconferencing and other communication and information-sharing tools, much of CORE’s work happened face-to-face. Long days of driving and flying created an added burden for those who had to travel.

District size also can influence the ability to engage. Whereas the larger districts had the luxury of spreading CORE responsibilities among individuals within the central office, Sanger’s smaller student population also meant a much leaner district staff. Consequently, the same core set of leaders had to devote a substantial portion of its time to keep the district involved. Johnson explained, “When it’s the same six people in the room every time trying to figure out, ‘Okay, now who’s doing this also?’ that can become really problematic, and it limits your ability to really engage deeply in some of those things.” CORE was able to help with this process by providing funding for an additional district staff person, but Sanger leaders described a level of effort that simply exceeded their capacity. In partial response to these demands, especially as they increased in the context of the ESEA waiver, Sanger ultimately elected to disengage from some key elements of CORE’s work. Subsequent documentation efforts will track this evolution in the district’s participation in more detail.

Mindset of District Leaders

CORE participants also described an orientation toward learning and a growth mindset as critical components of their work together. Even though many of the participating districts had earned stellar reputations in the K–12 education community, all believed they had much to learn in order to fulfill their responsibilities to their students. Sanders reflected, “Almost to a person, they seem to demonstrate a lack of satisfaction with the progress that they had made. They just didn’t feel like they had gotten to where they want to be.” Consistent with this attitude, CORE staff members and district leaders indicated that their interactions were most effective when participants sought the commonalities that created opportunities to learn rather than focusing on the differences that could shut down those opportunities.

As part of this orientation toward learning, the CORE superintendents committed themselves and their districts to acknowledging their own weaknesses. Traditional venues for district networking such as conferences and professional associations often feature presentations about successes or frustrations about the *external* conditions that make work difficult. For CORE to be successful, the superintendents believed they needed to expose their flaws and struggles. As Johnson described, “One of our norms, one of our commitments to each other, was we’re going to be brutally honest about the things that aren’t working well because that’s how we get things working better.”

Mutual respect was another component of the culture that contributed to CORE’s effectiveness. Conversations were most productive when everyone around the table believed that the others had

something to offer. As Steagall explained, “It didn’t matter what district you came from or what your position was, or is. Everyone had the same value when they walked in the door. We’re all learning together. We all had something to share, but not everything.” This norm of respect did not mean that everyone had to agree. Indeed, major differences in philosophy and approach existed among districts and individuals. CORE participants maintained an air of respect during these disagreements, however, through what Los Angeles Superintendent Cortines called the ability to “compromise with integrity.”

Cultivate Relationships

An extension of culture and mindset, strong relationships were a fundamental aspect of the districts’ work together. Relationships, however, were not merely a CORE outcome. They also were an important precondition for learning, and CORE staff members took concrete steps to build connections and trust among the participants. To create the conditions for the kind of unfiltered sharing that characterized CORE’s work at its best, participants cultivated relationships to the point that they trusted one another and felt safe sharing honestly with their counterparts from other systems.

Creating Time and Space for Relationships to Develop

In the early stages of the districts’ work together, participants had opportunities to get to know one another in both personal and professional settings. Fierro recalled, “There were opportunities for us to hang out, to get to know each other. We spent the night at a hotel and had dinner all together and became friends. I think that that is actually fundamental to the design and success of the model.” With time at a premium and the pressure to move as efficiently as possible, other collaborating districts beginning their work together may feel tempted to focus solely on shared work. CORE deliberately set aside time for individuals to get to know one another—a step that may have contributed to the deep relationships that can help a partnership thrive.

Participating Consistently

Interviewees also spoke to the importance of consistency in participation. When teams featured the sustained engagement of the same group of people, district leaders could build on a trusting environment and a foundation of working together to make further progress each time they met. CORE’s work was less successful, however, when the same team of people did not commit to participating. Reflecting on the Talent Management work, Furedi recalled, “There was so much churn in a lot of the other districts that it was really starting over many times.” If collaboration is more powerful when built on strong relationships, as many respondents suggested, the regular interaction required to develop these relationships becomes an important consideration in creating the conditions for learning.

Be Clear About Expectations

Interview respondents emphasized the need for clarity among participants about the reasons they pursue collaboration and what their commitments will entail.

Identifying Shared Goals and Problems of Practice

A wide range of goals—from developing shared products to engaging in legal or political advocacy to pursuing funding to simply expanding a network of peers—might unite a set of districts. When district leaders come together, a critical first decision is what they are trying to accomplish and what will happen to help achieve this goal. As Carranza advised, “First and foremost, you have to collaborate around *something*. The something can’t be just because you all want to get together. There has to be something that brings you together to collaborate because the collaboration will be challenging at times.” Schwalm echoed the point by emphasizing that collaboration is a means to an end: “Collaboration is a tool. Collaboration isn’t the goal. [Work together requires] being very clear about what your goal is and why you’re collaborating, then getting very focused on that.”

Tied closely to identifying common outcomes, districts might collaborate most effectively when they work together on shared problems of practice. By identifying a challenge that exists in similar forms across districts and addressing that challenge as a team, districts can anchor their efforts in something concrete. The work that the SAI team guided to develop assessment modules is one example of the ways in which CORE focused not only on a shared problem of practice (how to facilitate implementation of the Common Core by building teacher capacity and monitoring student growth) but a shared product (Common Core-aligned assessment modules).

Some of CORE’s successes and challenges CORE experienced related directly to its effectiveness at establishing clarity about expectations. When the SAI team coalesced around issues of Common Core implementation, it created a shared purpose that grounded their work together. Conversely, the Talent Management team was unable to articulate a common goal. Although team members shared an interest in teacher evaluation as a topic, no target outcome united their efforts. Without that glue to hold the group together, the work fizzled after a short period of time.

Making Commitments to One Another

Tied to clarity about purpose, the early CORE experience suggests that effective collaboration also should begin with honesty about the commitments each person is making. As they originally came together, the CORE districts freely chose to participate, and no district had to meet any specific requirements to continue its involvement. Although this flexibility gave districts the freedom to associate with CORE to the degree that it made the most sense to them, it also led to a variation in commitment levels. Interview responses suggest that the sanctioning and support of the superintendents has been important in framing CORE as a priority for participating districts; participation and perceptions of usefulness have waned when this commitment was not strong. Likewise, participants indicated that collaborative efforts were strongest when groups participated consistently. Agreeing at the outset of joint work about what participation entails may help achieve the consistency that enables a partnership to thrive.

The clarity described here applies not only among superintendents, but among all the individuals contributing to the work. If collaborative work is to permeate the system beyond the superintendent level, communication of purpose, priorities, and parameters needs to extend to all

participants. Messaging therefore becomes an important consideration for the leaders that bring their colleagues into a collaborative environment.

Design Collaborative Work

Interview responses also revealed some important considerations for organizing the work itself.

Creating an Infrastructure to Facilitate Collaboration

In CORE, a set of facilitators has been important for moving the districts' joint work forward. Collaboration takes time. The process of planning and organizing activities requires careful thought, preparation, and execution, all of which pose critical challenges for district leaders already overloaded with their day jobs. By hiring a staff of facilitators to guide the work—what some refer to as a “hub organization”—Ed Partners removed what would have been an unmanageable burden on the districts themselves. This staff has continued to grow, but in the initial period of CORE's existence, Executive Director Miller; Director of Standards, Assessment, and Instruction Sanders; Director of Talent Management Goldstein; and Chief Academic Officer Steagall played critical roles.

The CORE experience points to some characteristics of an effective facilitator. Content expertise helps not only in understanding the issues at hand, but in connecting district leaders with key pieces of research and experts in the field who can inform their work together. Beyond the content, CORE leaders also concluded that central office experience matters. Not all of the CORE staff members had this background—including, notably, Miller himself—but they came to see it as an important feature of the staff team. The practical knowledge of navigating day-to-day district challenges, along with the credibility that background buys with other district leaders, may help a facilitator respond more effectively to district leaders' needs.

In addition to the knowledge and experience that a facilitator brings to the table, dispositions and interpersonal skills also may represent important considerations. What one interview respondent called “an entrepreneurial spirit” can help partnerships navigate a context of ambiguity. Cross-district collaboration is uncharted territory for many school systems, and part of the facilitator role is to help everyone involved figure it out. That individual needs to help a group find direction by translating the priorities of district leaders into actionable next steps, and then constantly revisiting their approach to meet district needs. At the same time, district priorities and expertise need to drive the work forward. Identifying what she saw as a success of CORE's early efforts, San Francisco's Waymack noted that although the CORE staff members “participated and did act in facilitating roles, they let the districts be the experts. They let the superintendents be the experts.”

Finally, the work also involves navigating the group dynamics and personalities, especially among superintendents who may be accustomed to making the final decisions within their own organizations. Reflections from participants indicated that Miller has played an important role in managing the internal and external politics that surround CORE. Sanger's Jon Yost observed, “You've got some pretty big personalities in that room. . . . Rick's been really good at working behind the scenes, keeping CORE focused on the right work.”

Leveraging Resources

Collaboration creates an opportunity to engage in activities not possible on the small scale of an individual district. This was perhaps most clearly evident in CORE's access to content experts as they addressed the transition to the Common Core. District leaders described the contributions of individuals such as Daro and Heritage as instrumental in deepening their understanding of the new standards. In a state with more than 1,000 school districts, the vast majority could never have created the same opportunity on their own. By bringing districts together at a scale that could be compelling to leaders in the field—helped in no small part by the 10 districts serving a collection of more than 1 million students—CORE created unique and powerful learning experiences.

Other district collaborations might explore similar ways of expanding the set of options at their disposal to improve instruction and student learning. That may mean, as in CORE's case, working with experts who might not engage with individual districts. It could mean pooling financial resources to create learning opportunities that are not feasible at the individual district level. It also could mean leveraging the influence of a collection of school systems to effect change in other organizations—for example, to negotiate with textbook companies that might not otherwise cater to the individual needs of a single district.

Providing Flexibility

CORE district leaders deliberately designed their interactions to enable participants to adapt what the group learned and produced together to their own context. This orientation of the work was a departure from a policy setting in which compliance with state and federal mandates often drives central office efforts. The freedom from these constraints helped create the conditions for more authentic learning among districts.

In addition, CORE acknowledged that each district's situation is different: student demographics, district size, union relationships, local politics, reform history, and countless other factors shape the approaches that district leaders take to best meet student needs. Each CORE superintendent recognized from the outset that the solution in one environment might not apply to another environment and designed their work accordingly. Interviews from other district leaders indicate that this decision was important for creating the conditions to work effectively together. Santa Ana's Rodriguez, for example, described her appreciation that "they also recognize that we're not going to all look the exact same.... I appreciate the ability for there to be individualization and personalization of the efforts by school districts." Sacramento City's Olivine Roberts voiced a similar ethos, saying:

"A primary...philosophy of CORE is that each district is different and each must take into account its unique culture and context. Hence, CORE does not prescribe what each district must do; instead, we have the autonomy to customize the utilization of shared resources and apply the knowledge gleaned from the various professional learning opportunities to inform our local work."

But flexibility also can introduce tension. When districts have the freedom to participate in a partnership on their own terms, it may be difficult to secure commitments from all participants to

contribute. Clarity about expectations can help districts navigate this balance between autonomy and mutual accountability.

The dynamic of flexibility changed when ED awarded ESEA waivers to eight of the districts in summer 2013. For the first time, participating districts had to commit to concrete deliverables and agree to consequences for their performance. Further documentation of CORE's efforts will seek to unpack this evolution and the implications for the districts' ongoing collaboration.

Foster Commitment and Sustainability

Conscious efforts to foster commitment and sustainability can help cross-district collaboration thrive. The initial superintendent buy-in when CORE began helped provide a critical initial push for the districts to embrace the learning opportunity. In urban school districts, however, turnover is a fact of life. Indeed, eight of the 10 superintendents who originally committed their districts to participate in CORE have transitioned out of their roles.¹⁵ Directly integrating second-line leadership into the work can help partnerships continue. When other central office leaders develop their own relationships and make their own investments, their participation can shift from responding to their boss' mandate to actively participating because their work is better as a result. As districts embed collaboration deeper within their organizations, it can become part of the way they do their work and more easily survive the transition of a single individual.

The CORE experience also suggests that direct outreach to new superintendents can help the collaboration survive leadership transitions. In most cases, this happened through contact from Miller and fellow superintendents.¹⁶ Comments from Clovis' Young indicated, in contrast, that she stepped into her role without a deep understanding of the district's involvement in CORE. This may explain, at least in part, why many respondents have described Clovis as the least engaged of the 10 districts. If direct outreach is a viable strategy for recruiting new superintendents to contribute to CORE, perhaps a similar approach might yield results when transitions take place in other central office roles as well.

Allow Room for Growth While Providing Immediate Value

Descriptions of CORE's evolution from participating district leaders indicate that it took time for the work to come into focus. Even when working teams identified a shared priority, extended conversations unfolded until team members crafted a plan for their work together. The relationships that many described as a positive outcome of the work also took time to develop. Through continued interactions, some participants developed a level of trust that deepened the professional connections among them. At the same time, the demands on district administrators' time are substantial. Taking a day each month to step away from the office and meet with peers from other districts is a luxury. If participants do not perceive an appropriate return on their investment of time and energy, they are unlikely to continue with high levels of engagement.

¹⁵ Cortines, who transitioned out of the superintendency after serving in the role from 2009–2011, returned to the position in 2014 after the departure of his successor, Deasy.

¹⁶ As the earlier description of superintendent turnover addresses, leaders who were already part of the districts became the new superintendents during 2010–2012 in the three districts in which the superintendents had left. IN subsequent documentation efforts, the process of recruiting new leaders to CORE may reveal new lessons in the cases of Oakland, Sacramento City, and Santa Ana, all of which brought in superintendents from outside the district.

The challenge facing districts that enter into a collaborative relationship, then, is to provide immediate value while also allowing time for the work and relationships to take shape. That tension may be easier to navigate when the superintendent is already deeply committed to working together, as was the case with CORE. Designing the work to produce some early wins—in CORE’s case, these included valuable learning opportunities with experts in the field and the production of tangible assessment tools through the Summer Design Institute—may also help sustain interest and commitment until deeper and more lasting connections develop.

Conclusion

CORE represents one manifestation of a growing trend in which districts are working together to accelerate their improvement while diffusing the burden of innovation. CORE's strategy of involving leaders from throughout the central office and its effort to develop shared products are among the features of its collaborative effort that may hold promise for other similar partnerships. Its high profile—due in large part to the ESEA waiver—also positions it well to inform the broader field of educators about its successes and challenges in pursuing formal collaboration. As new examples of cross-district collaboration emerge, an exciting opportunity exists to learn from the CORE experience.

CORE emerged from a unique set of preexisting relationships and political conditions that set the stage for a particular model of collaboration to develop. District leaders leveraged connections they already had with peers and built on a foundation of collective action that took place through the development of California's Race to the Top Phase II application. These conditions are important for understanding the design decisions that CORE leaders made. They also represent a context that other district leaders are unlikely to replicate. To that end, educators looking to follow this model of collaboration will need to explore the CORE story critically with an eye toward how any lessons learned might apply to their own situation.

The accounts of CORE district leaders, staff members, and other stakeholders suggest that some considerations might be particularly important for effective cross-district collaboration to occur. The selection of districts matters: the right people need to be at the table, and they need to be there for the same reasons. Once a partnership begins, participants need to attend both to the nature of the work itself and to the culture and relationships that will allow for meaningful discussions. Clear expectations from the outset about shared goals and commitments also can help ensure that everyone is on the same page to move forward together. Conscious attention to these issues might help other districts maximize the effectiveness of their own collaborative efforts.

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