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Considerations for Cross-District Collaboration

Early Lessons From the CORE Districts

Telling the CORE Story

This brief summarizes early lessons from a broader project seeking to document the history of and lessons learned from the CORE Districts. For the complete story of CORE's formation and more details about the lessons learned, please refer to the full American Institutes for Research (AIR) report, *None of Us Are As Good As All of Us: Early Lessons From the CORE Districts*. Future phases of the documentation project will track CORE's work through the development and implementation of the districts' ESEA waiver.

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Introduction

"None of us are as good as all of us." The refrain is common from educators who are turning to cross-district collaboration as a vehicle for improving schooling. A growing body of research recognizes the important role that school districts play in creating the conditions for school success. District leaders also have increasingly recognized the value of working with their peers in other districts to tackle their most pressing challenges. Rather than operate in silos, districts can adapt promising ideas from other contexts to meet their own local needs. They can identify and avoid the pitfalls that have slowed progress in other systems. In some cases, they can even work together on shared products that enrich their learning and accelerate their growth in the service of student success.

For all the promise that cross-district collaboration offers, U.S. education is brimming with innovative ideas that fail to ignite widespread change. The professional learning communities that transform how subject-matter teams view their roles as teachers and learners in one high school may become little more than a glorified department meeting in another, where teachers primarily trade stories about behavioral problems in their classrooms. The balanced literacy program that produces dramatic student learning growth in one elementary school may amount to mere surface-level compliance to posting word walls in its sister school across town. Without careful attention to the factors that help cross-district learning occur, education leaders looking to achieve systemwide change may fail to capitalize on the potential of working together across district lines.

Enter the CORE districts.[1] CORE began in fall 2010 as a network of seven California school districts that came together to focus on the shared challenges of implementing new academic standards and improving teacher quality. It now includes 10 districts that collectively serve more

[1] The name "CORE" began as an acronym for "California Office to Reform Education," which 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 brief, we refer to the group as CORE.

than 1 million California students. (Refer to Exhibit 1 for the geographical distribution of the CORE districts.) The districts—Clovis, Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento City, San Francisco, Sanger, and Santa Ana Unified School Districts (USDs)—have attracted increased attention and scrutiny after eight of the participating districts received a federal waiver from the accountability provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in summer 2013.[2] Yet, well before it pursued the ESEA waiver, CORE existed as a learning community focused on issues of teacher quality and classroom instruction.

Exhibit 1. CORE Districts

As it enters its fifth year, CORE can offer important lessons from its experiences as a mature and evolving district partnership. By focusing on the period before the ESEA waiver, the purpose of this brief is to identify some of those lessons and, in the process, to accelerate the learning and progress for educators pursuing cross-district collaboration.

How Did CORE Come Into Existence?

CORE emerged from the convergence of two influences: It was both an extension of preexisting relationships among district leaders and a response to political opportunity. Predating CORE's official beginning, several participating leaders had already begun networking and learning together across district lines. Through groups like the Urban Education Dialogue (UED)[3] and the California Collaborative on District Reform (California Collaborative),[4] district leaders came together to focus on the challenges and opportunities associated with running K–12 school systems in California, with persistent attention to issues of equity and access. These opportunities helped the participants build relationships and learn from one another's approaches to leadership and system improvement. In fact, a groundbreaking partnership between Fresno and Long Beach was a direct outcome of relationships and ideas that began in UED and the California Collaborative and set the stage for many of the ways in which the CORE districts would eventually work together.

In spring 2010, the California political environment created the conditions for district leaders to work together in a more powerful way. Having failed to win funding in the first round of the U.S. Department of Education's (ED's) Race to the Top program, California policymakers turned to seven districts to produce the state's second round application. Those districts—Clovis, Fresno, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Sacramento City, San Francisco, and Sanger USDs—worked long hours over a two-month period to craft a new state proposal. Although ED again passed over California when it awarded Race to the Top grants in summer 2010, the application had generated strategies for how the districts might approach their work together; district leaders were eager to see some of those

[2] Two participating districts, Clovis and Garden Grove, elected not to apply for the waiver. Two additional districts, Sacramento City and Sanger, initially received a waiver in summer 2013 but have since elected not to apply for a waiver renewal—Sacramento City in spring 2014 and Sanger in spring 2015.
[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.

ideas through. As now-retired Sanger Superintendent Marc Johnson recalled, “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.’”

Data Sources

A study team from AIR developed this brief and the accompanying full report using 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 second data source is a document review of hundreds of written records, including grant applications, media accounts, research reports, meeting agendas, presentations, internal communication, and other files that describe 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.

An October 2010 press release announced the official formation of CORE. The new group brought together the same seven districts[5] that had contributed to the Race to the Top application. The district superintendents would make up the CORE board, and CORE would be led by its new Executive Director Rick Miller, who had come to know the district leaders through a prior role in the California Department of Education as deputy superintendent and through participation in UED and the California Collaborative. CORE would design its work around two topics—Standards, Assessment, and Instruction (SAI) and Talent Management—and hire a director for both areas to guide the districts’ work.[6]

This early SAI work centered on one of the shared challenges across the seven CORE districts: implementing the Common Core State Standards. To guide CORE’s collaborative efforts, each superintendent identified a team from their district to contribute to the SAI efforts. After an initial period spent getting to know one another and trying to identify a focus for the work, the cross-district team engaged in its own professional learning to build familiarity with the standards before coalescing around the creation of CORE’s earliest tangible product, a set of 64 assessment modules. Through a set of activities tied to what CORE called its 2012 Summer Design Institute, teacher teams developed and piloted this set of assessment tasks that helped introduce the Common Core into classroom instruction. This early effort brought the districts together around a shared challenge, focused on a concrete activity around which they could collaborate, and sought to influence the quality of classroom instruction directly.

Talent Management was the second focal point of CORE’s early work together. Under a broader umbrella of great teachers and leaders that had its roots in the Race to the Top application, the participating districts decided to focus their attention on teacher evaluation. As with the SAI team, each superintendent identified a team from their district to contribute to Talent Management. However, the districts never found sufficient common ground to guide this work. 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

[5] CORE would eventually expand to 10 districts when Oakland (March 2012), Santa Ana (July 2012), and Garden Grove (January 2013) joined the group.
[6] The nonprofit organization California Education Partners managed fundraising, finance, legal incorporation, and human resources issues for CORE in its early years. As part of this role, it hired the CORE staff that facilitated the partnership activities.

had very different priorities and strategies and never found areas of commonality on which to focus their partnership. As Fresno Superintendent Michael Hanson reflected, "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." The Talent Management work shortly lost steam; it would lay dormant until it reemerged under a broader frame of *professional capital* within the context of the CORE ESEA waiver.

What Did CORE Accomplish in Its Early Years?

Nearly every district interviewee responded that they personally and their districts were better off because of their involvement with CORE. A representative quote from Long Beach Superintendent Chris Steinhauser 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." What was behind the perceived value of the CORE experience?

Expanded Relationships

The most frequently addressed effects of the CORE experience were the deepened and expanded relationships that district leaders developed with their peers in other districts. Accounts from the participating superintendents—most of whom had preexisting relationships—suggest that they strengthened these bonds through their work together. Perhaps more powerfully, CORE engendered relationships among other second-line district leaders who would not otherwise have known or had a chance to work with one another. As Oakland's Nicole 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 Kim 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 jobs. The relationships can free educators from the silos that traditionally isolate districts from one another and create access to more support and information than they previously could access, thus enabling leaders to act more efficiently and effectively.

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. Former Clovis district leader Michelle 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 that 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

The CORE districts' ESEA waiver—through which the districts designed an entirely new accountability system—is perhaps the most prominent concrete outcome of their partnership, but even CORE's earliest work created some tangible products. The assessment modules that emerged from the 2012 Summer Design Institute, for example, are 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.

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 school 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 because of partnering more intensively on that specific project.

What Are the Lessons Learned From the Early CORE Experience?

CORE emerged from a unique set of circumstances. Even without these, cross-district collaboration continues to grow as a vehicle for system and school improvement. As an example of the ways in which districts can work together, CORE offers lessons from both its successes and challenges for educators who might consider similar approaches to collaboration.

Select the Right Districts

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

Participation by Choice. Superintendents were not required to join CORE; each chose 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 others. Common interests and priorities also helped the districts ground their collective efforts. Despite the many important differences among the participating districts, all had traditionally underserved student populations; 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.

Diversity Among Districts. Just as similarities in priorities and student populations influenced districts' ability to collaborate, so, too, did their differences. The CORE districts differ in size (ranging from nearly 650,000 students in Los Angeles to 11,000 in Sanger); location (representing Northern California, the Bay Area, the Central Valley, and Southern California); and philosophy about issues like centralization of district decision making. Interview responses suggest that these differences enhanced the work by giving participants different lenses and strategies for understanding their challenges.

Although the differences among districts represented a CORE strength, they also created obstacles. Technology helps the process through videoconferencing and other communication and information-sharing tools, but much of CORE's work happened face to face. Long days of driving and flying created an additional 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. Because the same core set of leaders had to devote a substantial portion of its time to keep the district involved, Sanger leaders described a level of effort that simply exceeded their capacity.

Mindset of District Leaders. CORE participants also described an orientation toward learning and a growth mindset among district leaders as critical components of their work together. Even though many of the participating districts had earned stellar reputations, all believed they had much to learn in order to fulfill their responsibilities to their students. CORE's original Director of SAI Ben 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." As part of this orientation toward learning, the CORE superintendents committed themselves and their districts to acknowledging their own weaknesses. Johnson described this perspective by saying, "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."

Cultivate Relationships

Relationships 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.

Creating Time and Space for Relationships to Develop. In CORE's earliest stages, participants had opportunities to get to know one another in both personal and professional settings. With time at a premium and pressure to move as efficiently as possible, collaborating districts just 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. 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

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 San Francisco Superintendent Richard 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." Retired Garden Grove Superintendent Laura 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." 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.

Making Commitments to One Another. The early CORE experience also suggests that effective collaboration begins with honesty about the commitments each person makes, something that was not characteristic of CORE's earliest work. When 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 made the most sense to them, it also led to varied levels of commitment. 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.

Design Collaborative Work

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

Creating an Infrastructure to Facilitate Collaboration. 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"—CORE removed what would have been an unmanageable burden on the districts themselves. The CORE experience points to some characteristics of an effective facilitator. Content expertise is important, but CORE leaders also concluded that central office experience matters. Dispositions and interpersonal skills are also important considerations to coordinating and guiding the work of multiple individuals and organizations.

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 Phil Daro (a lead author of the Common Core in mathematics) and Margaret Heritage (an expert in formative assessment) as instrumental in deepening their understanding of the new standards. By bringing districts together at a scale that could be

compelling to leaders in the field—helped in no small part by serving a collection of more than 1 million students—CORE created unique and powerful learning experiences.

Providing Flexibility. CORE district leaders deliberately designed their interactions to enable participants to adapt to their own contexts what the group learned and produced together. 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. CORE superintendents recognized from the outset that the solution in one environment might not apply to another and designed their work accordingly.

Foster Sustainability

Conscious efforts to foster district 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; eight of the 10 superintendents who originally committed their districts to participate in CORE later transitioned out of their roles. 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, collaboration can more easily survive the transition of a single individual.

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. Yet the demands on district administrators' time are substantial—members of the SAI team often left their offices for day-long in-person meetings each month. If participants do not perceive an appropriate return on their investment of time and energy, they are unlikely to continue with high level of engagement. 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. 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 and diffuse the burden of innovation. CORE emerged from a unique set of preexisting relationships and political conditions that set the stage for a particular model of collaboration to develop—conditions that other district leaders are unlikely to replicate. Nevertheless, as additional cross-district partnerships enter the scene, the CORE experience offers critical opportunities for other district leaders to learn from a more mature model of systems working together. By capitalizing on some of CORE's successes and avoiding the same early missteps, these educators can accelerate their learning and take full advantage of the promise that collaboration offers.