

Meeting 25 Summary
Professional Capital in a Time of Transition:
Moving to the Common Core in Garden Grove

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Prepared by Joel Knudson, American Institutes for Research

***Note:** This meeting summary was developed as a resource for members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. We are making this document publicly available in an effort to share the work of the Collaborative more broadly in order to inform dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. It does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for public consumption. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit www.cacollaborative.org.*

The Common Core State Standards have been a consistent thread running through all of the California Collaborative on District Reform’s work over the last four years. Since the standards were finalized in summer 2010, the Collaborative’s activities to support their effective implementation in California classrooms have included member meetings focused specifically on understanding the content of the standards in June 2010, an examination of assessment practices associated with the new standards in June 2011, and an exploration in November 2013 of units of study as one approach to building connections between standards and curriculum while building teacher engagement. They have also included convenings of district and county teams to delve into particular implementation issues and strategies. And, in the past year, they have incorporated the building of a statewide consortium of stakeholders to support Common Core implementation. The 25th meeting of the Collaborative continued the group’s engagement with the standards by looking at implementation through the lens of professional capital, focusing on the particular challenges emerging in Garden Grove Unified School District. Conversation throughout the meeting emphasized that an effective transition to the new standards requires districts to do more than build relevant teacher knowledge and skills; districts must also address issues of teacher motivation and develop the social capital and professional judgment that will best position educators to support student learning.

Introducing and Applying the Professional Capital Framework

This meeting initiated a planned longer term focus on capacity building in the context of the Common Core. To provide a common foundation for exploring capacity issues, the

meeting began with an overview of Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan's 2012 book *Professional Capital*, which has been used widely in Collaborative member districts.

The professional capital framework consists of three interrelated components: **human capital**, **social capital**, and **decisional capital**. Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills that teachers acquire and employ as part of their classroom practice. Social capital exists in the relationships among teachers; social capital both helps to build teachers' human capital and provides networks of resources and supports. Decisional capital represents the experience that teachers develop over time to make sound judgments based on their own professional expertise.

Reflections on Professional Capital and the Common Core

Feedback from meeting participants about the framework indicated that it provided an effective lens through which to frame their own work related to Common Core implementation. Among the three types of capital, participants suggested that decisional capital is probably lacking in most districts. Although many standards implementation efforts have focused on helping teachers understand the content of the standards (building human capital), they have not always been accompanied by efforts to help teachers exercise their professional judgment in adapting to a new set of standards and student expectations. Complicating the issue, some participants suggested, is the tension between the urgent need to deliver Common Core-caliber instruction and the Hargreaves and Fullan's claim that decisional capital takes about eight years to develop.

Meeting conversation also emphasized that all three elements of professional capital are intertwined; in particular, several participants emphasized that decisional capital can be developed and accelerated through social capital. As one individual observed, "In a team of teachers, you get the decisional capital from the group collaboration." In other words, teachers and other educators can build on the ideas and expertise of their peers to aid and help develop their professional judgment. Environments already characterized by strong collaborative cultures may thus find themselves in a better position for standards implementation.

Participants also identified some challenges and limitations of the framework. For example, districts may struggle to find the time to adequately develop all three kinds of capital as part of their Common Core transition efforts. Some observers also suggested that the framework may not fully address all components of needed capacity. Both cultural and political capital are necessary elements of capacity for a successful transition to the Common Core; these will also need attention during the transition process.

Recognizing Professional Capital Needs in Garden Grove

Having established a foundation for understanding capacity needs in relation to the Common Core, the group turned to some of the specific issues facing Garden Grove.

Garden Grove's History of Success

Garden Grove has a history of sustained growth and success in student performance while serving students who traditionally struggle academically. The district's students are primarily low income (73 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch) and minority (59 percent of students are Latino and 27 percent are Vietnamese), and the majority come from immigrant families. Seventy-three percent of the students are linguistic minorities, who came to Garden Grove as English learners (ELs) and speak a language other than English as their first language. Forty-one percent are currently designated ELs. Nevertheless, Garden Grove has consistently outperformed its peers on common measures of academic progress. Seventy-one percent of its schools exceed the statewide target of 800 on the state's Academic Performance Index (API), compared with 49 percent of schools statewide, and its district API of 820 is the highest among all of California's large urban districts. Fifty-eight percent of students scored proficient or above on state tests in English-language arts (ELA), compared with 57 percent statewide, and 69 percent did so in mathematics, compared with 60 percent statewide. Student success extends beyond meeting grade level expectations to include preparedness for postsecondary education. Nearly 52 percent of the district's graduates met the state's a–g requirements for admission into the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems. This is higher than for the state as a whole (39 percent) and for the more-affluent Orange County (47 percent) in which the district is located.

District leaders attribute their success in large part to a focused attention on high-quality instruction that has deepened over the past decade. The district's Effective Instruction framework draws both on research about quality teaching and on the expertise within the district, and establishes expectations for what lessons should look like in the district. At the same time, it provides a common language for teachers across grade levels and content areas to talk about their work. The framework also provides a foundation for the structures and supports across the district that facilitate consistency in instructional practice. As a result of their common understanding of quality instruction and their laudable student results, teachers in Garden Grove rightfully take great pride in their work as education professionals.

Change Comes to Garden Grove

Against this backdrop of instructional and achievement success comes a wave of changes in the district. Garden Grove faces the same transition to new standards and assessments as its peers around the state. At the same time, the central office features new faces in major leadership roles—most notably, Gabriela Mafi transitioned into the superintendent role at the beginning of the 2013–14 school year after her predecessor had held the position for the previous 14 years. In addition, Proposition 30 and the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) are introducing new money into the school district after years of fiscal crisis. Accompanying these changes is a year-long strategic planning process that does not necessarily change the district's goals, but seeks to articulate and draw attention to them in ways that Garden Grove has not done before.

These changes are opportunities for improvement, but they also introduce tensions into the district. As Mafi explained, “Your greatest strengths are also your greatest weaknesses.” For example, Garden Grove has an established practice of fiscal conservatism, an approach that the community deeply appreciated in times of fiscal scarcity, when the district was able to avoid laying off a single teacher. Now that resources are re-entering the school system, however, central office leaders face the perception among some stakeholders that the district is sitting on piles of money. The district has also built a long tradition of developing internal approaches to improvement that leverage the strengths and ideas of educators within the system. As a consequence, the central office is not well practiced in introducing externally developed initiatives like the Common Core and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) state tests. Finally, the district takes a centralized approach to instruction and student learning; this has helped it achieve coherence and consistency, which position the district to better meet its equity goals. Comments throughout the meeting suggested that decisional capital is particularly important for teachers in leading students to mastery of the Common Core. In a system where educators have come to rely on guidance from the central office, however, are they equipped to use professional judgment—to exercise decisional capital—in the way the standards demand?

The remainder of the meeting focused on the challenges that the Common Core is introducing and the ways in which these play out in Garden Grove and other districts.

Highlighting the Importance of Teacher Motivation

The problem facing district leaders in Garden Grove is building and sustaining teacher motivation in a transition from a system in which teachers have experienced success to a set of standards that introduce uncertainty and a potentially steep learning curve. Mafi framed the question for the group this way: “In a time of change, how does the district maintain motivation when teachers do not experience the level of success to which they’ve become accustomed? And as teachers try new things, how much risk is okay?”

To address this problem, meeting dialogue emphasized the critical role that teacher motivation plays in transitioning to the Common Core. Discussions about standards implementation tend to focus on teacher knowledge, skills, and ability; capacity building in many school systems equates to teaching people the new standards and how to integrate them into classroom instruction. At the same time, educators are increasingly turning attention to *student* motivation and finding ways to better engage and inspire students. Meeting participants highlighted the need to connect these often separate lines of focus and address teacher motivation in a time of change.

To ground its discussion of motivation, the group reflected on the work of two authors that identify teacher will as an essential component of performance. First, in a 1996 book chapter called “Standards as Incentives for Instructional Reform”, Brian Rowan argues that performance is a factor of ability, motivation, and situation, and the interaction among the three. The group also considered a discussion of teacher will from Robyn Jackson’s 2013 book *Never Underestimate Your Teachers*. The book identifies four drivers of teacher will (and, by extension, will of any adult working within a school district)—autonomy, mastery,

purpose, and belonging—and suggests that one of these impacts each teacher’s willingness to embrace change. Any effort to engage a teacher’s will, Jackson argues, relies on a personal relationship that allows a principal to identify that teacher’s driver(s) and on actions that enable the teacher to fulfill his or her need for autonomy, mastery, purpose, or belonging in the transition to a new way of doing things.

Reacting to Frameworks on Teacher Motivation

Meeting participants agreed that Jackson’s focus on will, and on the drivers of will, is an important component of the Common Core transition. They also reacted positively to Jackson’s call to personalize approaches with teachers to meet their individual needs. Some individuals further clarified that personalization often requires understanding the root cause behind stated problems. Knowledge of the individual and a willingness to probe on issues that arise can help principals and other leaders get to the heart of a challenge and address the underlying barriers to a teacher’s engagement and success.

Reactions to Jackson’s framework also included the observation, however, that individuals’ motivations rarely divide so neatly into a single box, as the author’s writing seems to suggest. There are multiple intersecting issues and drivers for each person, and efforts at personalization need to understand and address them all. Tying in Rowan’s attention to ability, motivation, *and* setting, participants also noted that motivation is not just a personal issue. It is influenced by the school context and by colleagues, and a small number of teachers can often impact the will of an entire teaching staff. Finally, some meeting participants refuted Jackson’s assertion that “you cannot solve a will problem with a skill solution.” Belief that one has the capacity to perform a particular task or role can impact motivation, and teachers who build their own capacity—perhaps especially those for whom mastery is a primary driver—may become more engaged in improvement efforts. As one individual pointed out, “You feel good about yourself when you’re a high performer.”

Connecting Teacher Motivation and the Common Core

Applying the ideas from Rowan, Jackson, and leaders from Garden Grove to Common Core implementation, some meeting participants suggested that a powerful opportunity exists to build teacher motivation regarding the new standards because of the wide base of support that exists among California educators. Whereas other externally mandated changes have often generated substantial debate over whether new directions were appropriate for schools, teachers, and students in the state, reactions among California educators to the Common Core have been consistently positive. One individual observed, “[No Child Left Behind] felt like a hostile wave, and this feels totally different, because the anxiety I hear is, ‘Can I do it well?’ and not ‘Should I be doing it at all?’” Motivation may be easier to build in an environment when the people involved believe in the change taking place.

To help build teacher motivation regarding the Common Core, meeting participants emphasized the need for school and district leaders to build trust and strong relationships. These relationships can not only help leaders diagnose and address misgivings among teachers, but can help build support among teachers to embrace the priorities that district and school leaders establish. District leaders can help engender good will by identifying,

respecting, and incorporating the perspectives of teachers throughout the process. For example, teachers in one district expressed concern during the 2013–14 school year that the district’s existing standards-based student report cards did not appropriately address the knowledge and skills students needed to demonstrate under the Common Core and might send mixed messages to parents and students. In response, the district suspended report cards for the entire school year while it developed new Common Core–aligned report cards. Seeking and applying teacher feedback in ways like this can help teachers feel that their expertise matters and can encourage buy-in as the district moves forward. As one participant put it, “Empathy can lead to the trust we need for system change.”

Districts can also play an important role in creating the conditions for risk taking. As they transition to the Common Core, teachers need to feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes—and to understand the power of mistakes as part of the learning process. A growth mindset is important for all people within the district to embrace. At the same time, meeting participants recognized the need to recognize teachers’ success when they do take risks. According to one individual, “All these things we don’t have time for—checking in, celebrating achievements, saying ‘good job’—is the exact thing that will buy you loads of motivation.”

To help facilitate a risk-taking culture, leaders play an important role in modeling the behaviors they expect to see in teachers and students. This includes the growth mindset and behaviors of resiliency that teachers encourage in their own students. As one person explained, “We have to model for our teachers what we will be expecting of our kids.” In addition, vulnerability on the part of the principal or other leaders—the willingness to admit and expose that which they do not yet know and have not yet mastered—can help teachers feel comfortable taking risks. As one meeting participant said to a group of Garden Grove leaders who have just left the principalship to join the central office, “The professional vulnerability is such a gift to the ones you will lead.”

Social capital can also play an instrumental role in facilitating motivation during the Common Core transition. A network of peer support can help teachers build their skills while addressing shortcomings and areas of discomfort or uncertainty. One recent Garden Grove principal also highlighted ways in which peer pressure can influence teacher will: She described a grade-level team in which teachers met to plan lessons together. When the group returned to debrief a lesson they had designed as a team, it became clear that one teacher had completely ignored the group’s work and delivered a different lesson to her students. This teacher’s peers made clear that their team worked together to establish common expectations and instructional approaches to meet the needs of the school’s students, and that disrespecting that process and the contributions of one’s peers was not acceptable in the school. The principal reported that the teacher subsequently became a contributing member of the team, engaged in the school’s approach to instruction and collaboration. Without intervention from the principal or the central office, teachers were able to influence a teacher’s buy-in to improvement processes in the school. As several participants advocated throughout the meeting, it is possible to “use the group to move the group.”

Addressing Different District Contexts

Teacher will is an essential piece of the Common Core transition, but it occurs within the broader district context in which teachers and leaders operate. For example, Garden Grove leaders expressed confidence in their systems to develop teacher skills but noted that they face a challenge in building the will to change among the teachers who have traditionally been their biggest cheerleaders (and most successful educators). In some other Collaborative districts, however, a majority of teachers have already bought in to the Common Core but lack the knowledge and skills to enact the new standards. In those environments, district leaders may need to focus their energy on finding ways to develop teachers' human capital.

Garden Grove has also benefitted from stable central office leadership, positive labor relationships, and a supportive board of education, which together have enabled it to sustain and deepen improvement efforts over time while building trust among teachers in the system. Not all districts currently enjoy this kind of stability, which may impact what they are able to achieve within the central office, with bargaining units, and with stakeholders within the district. Meeting participants recognized that these contextual issues will invariably impact a district's approach, but they also emphasized the need for leaders to take advantage of their own circumstances and lead within their own context.

Leveraging the Principal Role to Build Professional Capital

Because principals play a critical role in the movement toward the Common Core, district attention must also turn to developing and supporting site-level administrators. As instructional leaders, principals must exercise their own professional capital to help teachers both embrace and master the new standards. Some of the principal's role will involve helping teachers to develop the knowledge and skills (human capital) required to integrate the new standards into classroom instruction. Some of it will involve creating opportunities for teachers to work with and learn from one another (social capital). And some of it will be closely tied to fostering motivation. Principals need to develop and nurture relationships that will enable them to diagnose and address areas of discomfort and resistance. Attention to both human and social capital will help to create a trusting environment in which teachers feel comfortable taking risks.

One area that might merit particular attention, according to the Garden Grove leaders and other meeting participants, is principals' decisional capital. As principals seek to address teachers' individual needs, they need to exercise professional judgment in determining what fundamental issues are at play and how best to work with each individual to resolve them. In some cases, this may require pushing people to improve, a more forceful style of leadership designed to move things forward. In others, it may involve pulling, drawing people into the excitement of a new idea. And in others, it may include nudging, a gentler touch that slightly redirects positive, well-intended actions in a more effective way. Many principals may be naturally strong in one of these approaches, but to be successful, they need to use each to their work with an individual teacher as the situation requires. Districts

will play an important role in developing and supporting principals to exercise this kind of decisional capital to lead their schools effectively.

Communicating to Facilitate the Change Process

Professional capital in the context of the Common Core means not only meeting high expectations for effective teacher practice, but doing so in a time of change. If district leaders hope for principals and teachers to develop the professional capital they need to adapt to the Common Core, they must find ways to communicate about that change.

Revisit Past Practice and Adapt to a Time of Change

In Garden Grove, self-reflection among central office leaders has revealed problems with current and past communication practices. The district has traditionally kept a low profile, ignoring media requests and deliberately avoiding actions that might attract attention—positive or negative—that could distract from the district’s focus on teaching and learning. District leaders have recently discovered, however, that this low profile has some negative consequences. For example, Garden Grove sometimes loses students to transfers to neighboring districts, and district and school leaders have done little to dissuade families from making a move. District leaders suggested that students are not necessarily moving to better schools, but moving to environments that parents perceive to be better because they are not sufficiently aware of school successes in Garden Grove. In addition, district leaders have also realized that communication efforts developed during a time of stability and sustained success may not be appropriate in a time of change, when uncertainty creates a desire for more information.

The current nature of communication in Garden Grove may also create barriers to shared understanding about developments within the district. Communication to schools about expectations and district developments takes place primarily on paper, happens from the top down, and comes in such high volumes that principals and teachers can suffer from information overload. In addition, though district leaders are comfortable communicating about change that results from the ideas and activities of people within the district, they are less experienced with introducing new approaches that come from the outside, like the Common Core.

To help address its communication challenges, leaders in Garden Grove recently commissioned a communications audit from the Center on Risk Communication. Although results of this audit have not yet been shared publicly, they confirm the reality that Garden Grove leaders identified: The communication strategies that worked for the district in the past are no longer adequate to communicate with principals, teachers, classified staff, and the community. Meeting dialogue therefore turned to approaches to communication that can help Garden Grove and other districts navigate change, especially as it relates to the Common Core.

To supplement the background information she provided about Garden Grove, Mafi shared some lessons about change communication that she and other district leaders have learned

through a series of leadership development workshops led by Bain & Company over the past year and a half. First, district leaders need to work on creating a positive perception of the change. People's emotional response to change typically experiences a dip as they become aware of exactly what the change will entail. In cases where the reaction to change is positive, the emotional response begins as supportive, uninformed optimism and transitions to a more resistant informed pessimism before rebounding through stages of hopeful realism and hopeful optimism. However, Bain's work suggests that individuals with a negative initial perception of the change go through two separate dips and that their final reaction is one of acceptance rather than informed optimism. Garden Grove is thus trying to approach communication efforts in a way that will encourage a positive reaction to the Common Core.

A related second lesson is that even the district's biggest cheerleaders are likely to go through an emotional dip. Those most excited about the Common Core may experience misgivings when they realize the nature and magnitude of the change it will require for their classroom practice. Bain calls this dip informed pessimism, and it is at the root of the motivation challenge that many Garden Grove teachers are experiencing. District leaders have realized that they need to provide supports that prevent teachers from checking out during this stage, and instead guide them through a period of informed realism to the informed optimism necessary to make an effective Common Core transition.

Craft the Right Messages

Having addressed the importance of communication, meeting participants turned to components of the message(s) that district leaders might send about the Common Core. First, conversation highlighted the need to establish the rationale behind the standards, as audiences do not respond nearly as effectively to *what* you do as to *why* you do it. Several commenters noted the importance of identifying a "north star"—the needs of students in the K-12 education system—that can ground all discussions about the Common Core and district decisions overall.

Meeting participants also emphasized the need to tailor messages to the interests and priorities of a particular audience. For some audiences, the rationale behind the Common Core might be about preparedness for college and career. For some, it might be about California students measuring up to peers in other states. For some—especially in an environment like Garden Grove that has already engendered trust and positive impressions about the district's work—the message might be about continuing in the direction the district has already been traveling but doing so in ways that will support teachers and students better. District leaders need to understand their audiences well enough to craft their messages appropriately.

Conversation also addressed communication about externally driven changes. Part of the challenge in dealing with new ideas that come from the state, federal government, or elsewhere is that districts may not know all the details about expectations or timelines. District and school leaders may be uncomfortable asking teachers for buy-in or supporting them through a transition when they have unanswered questions themselves. One

participant advised, “It’s okay to say, ‘We don’t know.’ That kind of vulnerability can be powerful, as long as it’s followed by, ‘And when we find out, we’ll tell you.’”

Other observations about Common Core communication emerged as well. For example, the elevated expectations that come with the new standards may prompt an instinct among adults to protect students from a level of rigor that could discourage or disengage them. Meeting participants emphasized that caring for kids involves maintaining high expectations that will enable them to succeed in school and beyond, then providing the supports they need to meet those expectations. Relationships and rigor need not be at odds with one another, and messaging from district and school leaders needs to emphasize the importance of both.

Finally, meeting participants stressed that the Common Core transition will be difficult. District leaders need to acknowledge the challenge and pledge to help everyone through the process. As one person noted, “All of us are going to get dirty.”

Identify and Use the Right Messengers

In addition to the messages themselves, meeting participants recognized that selecting the right messengers will be critical to successful communication. Messages need to come from multiple levels, and they need to come from individuals the audience trusts. Just as the message might take different forms depending on the audience, different messengers might be appropriate to reach the range of stakeholders within and outside the district. Meeting participants also connected the conversation about messaging to issues of teacher will. The same individuals and groups that can hold sway over teacher motivation can also play an important role in communication efforts. District leaders might find that it helps to identify and target these people as they seek to communicate about the Common Core in schools.

Address Communication Processes

Beyond messages and messengers, communication requires a set of systems and processes that can enable districts to effectively reach their target audience. This means using media that those audiences are comfortable with and predisposed to accessing—including social media platforms. It also requires a proactive approach to communication. Rather than merely respond to controversy and unrest, districts need to take the initiative to craft the narrative around important issues like the Common Core and provide information to stakeholders before misinformation can distort the picture.

In addition, meeting participants talked about the need to see communication as a shared and coordinated effort. Districts often locate communication efforts within a single office or individual. A more expansive view is needed, one participant argued: “Communication is everyone’s responsibility and it’s a journey. You just need someone at the helm to guide the journey.” In addition to expanding the pool of people charged with communicating, district leaders might also look for opportunities to increase direct communication. Central office staff often work through principals to send messages to teachers within school sites, a practice that fits well within the district hierarchy but relies on principals with diverse levels of understanding and buy-in to deliver consistent signals from the central office.

Finding ways to communicate directly with teachers can help ensure that messages are not distorted.

Exploring a Statewide Effort to Implement the Common Core

From conversations about the district role in managing the Common Core transition, the group turned to ways in which a range of stakeholders can facilitate statewide success.

The State of the State

Although the Collaborative indirectly touches many California students—Collaborative district leaders collectively serve more than 1 million students, and the group’s members touch many parts of the state’s education community—the scale at which improvement efforts need to take place across the state is incredible. The state serves more than 6.2 million students and has more than 315,000 teachers in almost 11,000 schools. Moreover, some participant comments suggest that the focus of education-related conversations at the state level in recent years have veered away from issues of student learning. One individual asserted, “In most cases, we’ve gotten away from the notion of the superintendent as an instructional leader.”

California educators have embraced the Common Core without the political divisiveness emerging in many other states, but comments also identified some of the promises of the standards that have not been realized. Despite expanded legislative freedom for districts to adopt instructional materials of their choice, many are not buying instructional materials. As one participant observed, “We opened the cell door and they’re not coming out of the cell.” Similarly, districts are not leveraging materials that are available outside of the traditional textbook market, like those developed for New York State, that are solid, have been vetted, and are freely available. One participant lamented the failure of districts to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by a set of standards shared across many states: “The irony is that we are not using the power of the *Common Core*.” Missed opportunities exist not only with content, but with mechanisms for accessing training and materials; participants further noted the limited extent to which technology has been leveraged for professional development at reduced cost and across state lines.

Given the challenges and obstacles that remain for the state’s implementation process, meeting participants discussed the ways in which statewide efforts can help facilitate growth and success at the local level. Although conversations about the state role tend to focus on the roles and responsibilities of the California Department of Education, meeting dialogue explored other channels and opportunities through which the state can accelerate and elevate its improvement efforts.

California Consortium for Implementation of the Common Core

For more than a year, a group of stakeholders representing a variety of organizations has been meeting to coordinate plans and supports for districts to manage the Common Core transition. The California Consortium for Implementation of the Common Core operates on the fundamental understanding that if the Common Core is going to work, the process will

not just take a long time; it will take a lot of different stakeholders working together. Several Collaborative members have played an active role in coordinating the group's activities and maintaining attention to the range of ways in which the state can collectively move forward.

Among the products of the Consortium's work is a set of tools designed to help inform and facilitate district progress, including a survey of districts conducted in fall 2013, a leadership planning guide designed to identify key considerations for district-level implementers, and a web-based tool to help districts navigate technology issues related to the standards and their associated assessments. The Consortium has also played a role in convening and connecting stakeholders—including a recent meeting that brought representatives from higher education into the Common Core conversation—and mobilizing support, both political and financial. Representatives from the Consortium indicated that as relationships within the group continue to strengthen, its work is likely to expand and deepen.

California Collaborative on Educational Excellence

As part of the Local Control Funding Formula regulations, the state legislature called for a new body, the California Collaborative on Educational Excellence (CCEE), to support the process of district improvement; statute states that the purpose of the group is “to advise and assist.” Sandy Thorstenson, superintendent of Whittier Union High School District and the recently named superintendent board member of the CCEE, joined the meeting to provide a general progress update and solicit input on the direction of this new organization. At the time of the meeting, four of five board members had been named. Once the complete board has been named, it will meet to select an executive director and engage in the goal- and vision-setting process that will establish its scope of work and course of action.

Meeting participants offered some reflections on how the CCEE might operate most effectively. One approach is to shine a light on best practices from which others can learn. This role might apply not only to the work of California districts, but to the broader field of advising and assistance. Although the absence of state tests will make it difficult to identify which districts need assistance in the near future, the CCEE can take advantage of this window of opportunity to learn about the successes and failures in this field and develop an approach for California that is consistent with best practice.

Participants also provided advice on how best to support struggling districts. Against the backdrop of No Child Left Behind, which mandated specific interventions in response to repeated failure, participants advocated for the CCEE to be proactive, rather than reactive, in providing assistance. The group also cautioned against replicating models of assistance from the past simply because people in the state are familiar with them, noting that those approaches were not particularly effective and are unlikely to facilitate the kind of improvement struggling districts need. Finally, meeting participants argued that the CCEE needs to create opportunities to differentiate supports to meet diverse student needs.

Conversation also suggested that the CCEE will need to balance the creation of new systems and alignment with existing structures. The \$10 million set aside to fund the CCEE’s work is not enough money to create an entirely new system of supports within the state. The county offices of education may play an important role as an intermediary in improvement efforts. For them to perform effectively in this role, however, the CCEE needs to address the wide variation that exists among county offices in quality and capacity. In recognition of the limited budget available and in response to lessons learned through the California Office to Reform Education and other district learning networks, some participants also recommended that the CCEE tap into the expertise that already exists within districts rather than assuming that an outside provider model is best. As one individual said, “I think there’s more credibility there and more capacity there.”

State Level Communications

Many of the lessons that emerged from the conversation about district communication reemerged in the context of the state role in Common Core implementation.

Craft the Right Messages

Just as at the district level, messaging and planning regarding the Common Core is important statewide. There is a danger of selling the Common Core as simply yet another initiative—a danger reinforced by the decision to identify the standards as only one of eight priorities with the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) template. Instead, meeting participants suggested that the Common Core should act as the umbrella that ties together efforts in service of English learners, students with disabilities, early childhood education, high school pathways, and other educational priorities. At the same time, the Common Core can serve as a catalyst for coherence and effective practice, providing a common language across service providers and a vehicle for collaboration at all levels of the K–12 system.

Meeting participants also cautioned against the temptation to complicate the message. The Common Core is a response to the most controversial elements of the previous system of standards and assessments. Its approach to establishing fewer standards and going deeper with them is a response to the “mile-wide, inch-deep” set of expectations that frustrated educators with the previous California standards. The SBAC assessments, with varied item types designed to capture students’ conceptual understanding, stand in contrast to exclusively multiple choice tests that sometimes encouraged and rewarded misguided approaches to curriculum and instruction. Framing the Common Core at the state level as a response to people’s frustrations with the past will be an important part of the message.

Identify and Use the Right Messengers

Just like at the local level, state-level communication should leverage messengers whose opinions and expertise the general public trusts. Parents trust UC, CSU, and community college systems, and representatives from these systems can talk about the Common Core with regard to college preparation and alignment with the new Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). The REAL (Regional Economic Association Leaders of California) Coalition might also be an effective messenger; its existing work to align regional economic development

agencies and chambers of commerce can provide a platform to connect the Common Core to the needs of California businesses. The state chamber of commerce might also be influential. Although it has not engaged in education issues for some time, successful efforts to work with chambers of commerce at the local level could spark an interest at the state level.

Create a Communications Process

Meeting participants also emphasized the need to develop a statewide communication strategy about the Common Core. Although the CDE Foundation is partially addressing this need, participants suggested that the foundation's communication efforts may not happen within the timeline or at the scale the state needs to accompany local implementation efforts. Meeting participants also observed that the kind of infrastructure that existed to support LCFF—where respected local leaders engaged in advocacy efforts through letters, op-eds, and direct contact with constituents—is not present for the Common Core. When critiques of the Common Core do emerge, one individual argued, “Locally, if we see something, we need to make sure that people are responding.” This will be particularly important when the anticipated push-back on the new assessments happens in spring 2015.

Additional Areas for State Attention

Meeting participants identified additional issues that merit attention at the state level.

Provide Feedback on Capacity and Progress

District leaders within the Collaborative benefit from a strong base of capacity and existing networks of support among their peers, but participants felt that many other districts—especially the state's rural districts—do not have these same advantages. There needs to be a mechanism through which the state can receive feedback on how things are going so that the state (whether through the CCEE or other avenues) can design appropriate supports. Meeting participants indicated that a map of the state that identified the capacity and implementation progress at the county and district levels might be especially useful.

The state might also benefit from some means of measuring progress through the Common Core transition. One of the tools typically used for this purpose, state test scores, cannot provide any information about the 2013–14 school year, and will not provide data with a useful point of comparison until the new SBAC tests have been administered multiple times. Developing, identifying, and sharing tools and data that track implementation progress can help provide actionable information to help districts along their journey. In the meantime, district LCAPs and dissertations from a network of CSU doctoral students on Common Core implementation can provide some windows into plans and progress across the state.

Develop and Strengthen Resources for Districts

One consequence of the state's lifting of restrictions on instructional materials and of influx of locally and commercially developed resources is that district leaders face information

overload when selecting materials for school use. Meeting participants posed the idea of a Yelp-like site in which users can rate and provide feedback on these materials. Such a tool would enable district leaders to manage the otherwise overwhelming set of resources while using the judgment of their peers to help make informed decisions.

The state's new frameworks in ELA and mathematics also provide tools to help district leaders bridge the gap between standards and curriculum, pacing, and instruction. The frameworks also make connections between the standards and English language development (ELD), supporting district leaders in providing access to the Common Core for all learners. These connections may be more explicit in the ELA framework (in part because that framework is labeled as an integrated guide for both ELA and ELD); comments from one participant suggested that modifying the mathematics framework to make them explicit in the same way can help communicate the importance of integrating ELD into all subject areas, not just reading and writing.

An additional opportunity for improvement may exist through providers of after-school programs. These programs can expose students to Common Core-aligned learning opportunities outside the school day, helping to mitigate the time limitations that all districts face. At the same time, they can leverage a flow of resources that exists completely independently of district funding streams. The providers of these programs seek training to incorporate their work into the Common Core, and collaborative opportunities may exist to improve student learning.

Align Other Statewide Systems

Meeting participants also highlighted the need for alignment with other elements of the K-12 education system. First, the Next Generation Science Standards introduce shifts for teachers and leaders that are similar to those of the Common Core; educators cannot forget this other set of new standards as they design and implement the Common Core transition. Second, if the state really intends for the K-12 system to prepare students for postsecondary success, the California High School Exit Exam and high school graduation requirements need to be reexamined—neither is connected to the expectations of the Common Core. Meeting participants acknowledged that the timing may not be right for these moves, but noted that they must remain on the radar.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

Discussions in Garden Grove raised many potential areas for further exploration in future Collaborative meetings, all examining opportunities for building capacity as districts deepen their engagement with the Common Core. We expect to identify the exact date, location, and topic of the next meeting in early fall 2014. In the meantime, the Collaborative staff will continue to produce a series of short policy briefs that highlight themes from our April 2014 meeting in Los Angeles; these briefs can communicate important perspectives to the broader field of educators engaged in LCFF implementation. As always, resources from this and previous meetings, updates about Collaborative members, and information about upcoming events are available on our website at www.cacollaborative.org.