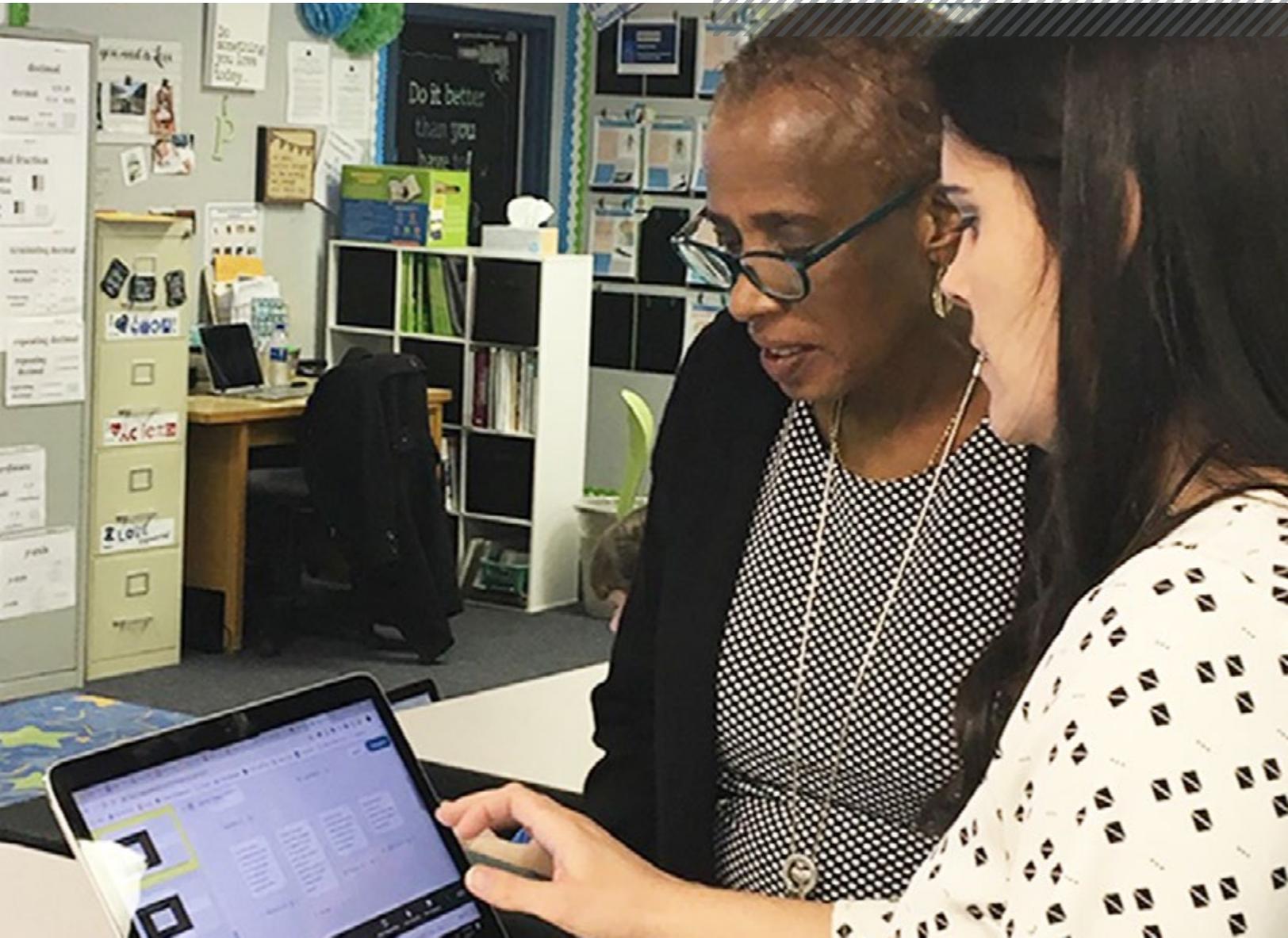




DEEPER LEADERSHIP FOR EDUCATORS,
DEEPER LEARNING FOR EVERY STUDENT:

ENABLING CONDITIONS, BUILDING CAPACITY, AND MAXIMIZING EQUITY



ENABLING CONDITIONS, BUILDING CAPACITY, AND MAXIMIZING EQUITY

Deeper learning for every student requires creating conditions that structure supports to sustain and scale, building capacity among every educator to lead, and maximizing equity goals explicitly as part of the agenda. (See [Deeper leadership for educators, deeper learning for every student: A look at three district approaches.](#))

Transforming schools to provide deeper learning is an ambitious proposal that far outstrips traditional approaches to how teachers teach and administrators lead. In fact, to do so for every student requires rethinking nearly every aspect of school, from engaging all school staff members in the work of leading change to reallocating resources responsively.

What strategies and evidence should inform how we think about doing this transformational work? Looking across the three districts described in an earlier [publication](#) from CTQ, this paper responds to two key questions:

- What patterns or formulas for success suggest scalable, sustainable approaches to building the capacity, conditions, and equity needed to root deeper learning in public school districts?
- To what extent are those patterns influenced by district context? In other words, is there *one* pattern based on urbanicity, student population, community context, or other factors?



Overview of the three districts

	CLARENDON SCHOOL DISTRICT 3 (SOUTH CAROLINA)	POMONA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (PUSD) (CALIFORNIA)	JEFFERSON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS (JCPS) (KENTUCKY)
Setting conditions	Educators created a learning community to pursue micro-credentials to assess and adjust how time was being allocated to meet individualized student needs.	Co-teaching and teacher-led learning were implemented as strategies for creating time and opportunity for effective teachers to scale instructional expertise.	Teachers have access to substantial professional learning resources (coaches, coverings and digital/print). One school has repurposed Title II funds for teachers to lead their own learning.
Building capacity	Collective leadership was implemented to increase instructional and leadership capacity as well as to actively engage all educators owning student outcomes.	Educators piloted micro-credentials to help determine their utility for personalizing professional learning for building instructional and leadership capacity.	Through <u>JCPSForward</u> , teachers have informal opportunities to learn from one another via virtual communities.
Maximizing equity	Time was structured and instructional and leadership capacities were deployed to provide targeted supports for students who needed them the most.	In response to the <u>Significant Disproportionality</u> designation, PUSD implemented Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to focus on the social-emotional needs of its vulnerable students to ensure that they were prepared for rigorous academic instruction.	Ever since a court order forced the district to integrate its schools in the 1970s, the city has <u>tried to maintain diverse schools</u> although it is located in a southern state that is segregated along racial and economic lines.
Context	Small rural	Midsized urban	Large urban
Schools	2 (50% <u>Title 1</u>)	41 (75% <u>Title 1</u>)	169 (60% <u>Title 1</u>)
Students	1,256 (27 foster youth)	23,185 (255 foster youth)	98,361 (1,000 foster youth)
Teachers	76 (67% with advanced degrees)	1,953 (percentage with advanced degrees unavailable)	6,738 (85% with advanced degrees)
Free and Reduced Lunch %	70%	86%	62%
English Language Learner %	<5%	29%	10%
Ethnicity	67% White 25% Black 6% Hispanic	87% Hispanic 4% Black 3% Asian 3% White	42% White 37% Black 12% Hispanic

Below we take a closer look at how each district addressed issues of creating enabling conditions, building capacity, and maximizing conditions and capacity for more equitable learning.



Creating enabling conditions for teacher-led learning

Deeper learning demands radically different approaches in how educators deliver and think about their work to support students. Individual educators can and should commit to building relevant knowledge and skills, a capacity-building question we'll turn to later. And schools, districts, and states seeking to spark and sustain deeper learning approaches are wise to think *systemically and early* about ways to support and structure these shifts in mindset and practice for educators and students alike. For that reason, we first consider the systems conditions that successful deeper learning environments put in place.

In conjunction with experts on organizational change in schools, CTQ conducted meta-analyses of robust research literature about factors that made some

schools and systems more successful at making and sustaining change than others. We created a research framework consisting of seven conditions that set the stage for teachers and other leaders to collectively design, implement, sustain, and scale complex instructional and organizational changes of the kind that deeper learning demands (see visual below).

These conditions enable and create the capacity of educators in many roles to accomplish complex change leadership work, such as what's needed for deeper learning approaches, within and across schools. The first four constructs are typically necessary for supporting the final three constructs. When one of these constructs is missing, the resulting challenge is relatively predictable.

	<p>Collective vision and strategy that offer a well-articulated theory of action communicating the why, what, and how of the actions to be taken</p>
	<p>Supportive administration that enables development and exercise of every educator's capacity as a leader of student-centered improvement</p>
	<p>Capacity and resources that include funding, time, capacity-building resources, and personnel that are allocated in ways aligned to the strategy</p>
	<p>Enabling work structures that emphasize leadership and learning as shared work rather than the provenance of particular roles in a school or district</p>
	<p>Relationships and social norms that promote a results-oriented culture of collaboration and relational trust as a means to support transparent feedback and continuous improvement</p>
	<p>Shared influence that expects teachers and administrators to not only share work but also responsibility for problem-solving and leadership across positions and organizational charts</p>
	<p>Orientation to improve that supports a stance of inquiry and risk-taking as well as innovation by educators as keys to achieving equitable, student-centered learning experiences and environments</p>



We used this framework to better understand the progress in the three districts we studied. None yet has all of the elements needed to establish the complex and transformational leadership work required of deeper learning opportunities for every student. However, each of the districts have schools or specific district-level strengths that, if strategically combined, could amplify and sustain existing work to make deeper learning a scaled and sustainable practice system-wide.



Collective vision and strategy

Each of the three districts is on the path to creating a system of deeper learning.

All three have developed strong visions for more equitable and deeper learning though they vary substantially in how formally and specifically that vision is expressed.

At one end of the continuum, Clarendon 3 has formally adopted a stance of collective leadership in which teachers and administrators share responsibility for professional and student learning, practice improvements, and address the root causes of the challenges students face. The specific ways in which they enact that commitment, however, are left open to the individual school and school-based teams. While informal, this approach has rooted deeper learning approaches in shared assumptions about strategy and the nature of their mission as a district and fits with the close-knit ethos throughout the district. Formal plans, while useful for preserving commitments, would be perceived as too rigid in this district’s culture.

As a far larger district, JCPS needed to develop a clear and explicit vision more formally through approval by its school board and leadership. This was important due to the size and complexity of the district and its relatively high staff turnover rates. Despite that formal approach, the vision did not reach all schools because it hadn’t been fully socialized among all staff; the documentation was left to stand alone, and we learned from a number of educators that there was not an effective strategy in place yet to actualize the vision.

Ultimately, a *balance* of formal and informal expressions and modes of sharing the vision are critical. District culture and community context as well as factors like staff turnover matter when

considering the most successful way to strike that balance.



Supportive administration

In all three districts, principals were key catalysts for the teacher-led learning and leadership.

At Watson Lane in JCPS, the principal did not rush to solutions. As teachers began to take control of their learning, the principal was careful to ensure professional development was tied to student needs and school priorities. And he did point out how his area superintendent supported him in turn, “allow[ing] him to do these things.”

Similarly, at Walker-Gamble Elementary (WGE) in Clarendon 3, then first year principal Allen Kirby started his tenure by involving the entire school in the Collective Leadership Initiative (CLI) through the South Carolina Department of Education in partnership with CTQ. Through this initiative, WGE educators share leadership responsibilities around being responsive to student needs.

“I have learned that the catalyst for changing the landscape of education is found in our building. Our teachers’ expertise and leadership can impact the culture, students, and community in an immeasurable way. – Allen Kirby”

He later told us how the superintendent gives him considerable autonomy and professional trust, and their close working relationship translates readily into the way he works *with* teachers.

For Cynthia Sanchez, a starting point at Armstrong in PUSD was treating teachers the way the students need to be treated. She noted:

“We expect to take care of the kids and their social-emotional needs so they can learn. We work on social-emotional learning (SEL) and not just the test scores. As principal I make it clear that teachers first work on their social-emotional needs [so they can learn and teach], and I do the same thing for them.”

Sanchez offers individualized support to address teachers’ needs in order to meet school-wide instructional goals. She also regularly networks informally with a few other principals, and together they encourage teachers across their schools to



learn from one another — using both after school meet-ups and social media to spread good ideas and practices. One of those principals told us:

“It all begins when people begin to learn from each other and there is peer pressure.... But I can say that today I see my staff at the cusp of what we really can do. A big part of it has been those opportunities for teacher leaders to be pulled out of the classroom, working with their colleagues which again, without being a Title I school (and the additional resources available), we would've never had the opportunity to do.”

However, teachers typically do not report that they work with principals like the ones at WGE, Watson Lane, and Armstrong. They are the exception, not the norm. If principals do not embrace those who teach in their schools as leaders, then teacher leadership for deeper learning cannot be fully realized.



Capacity and resources (and the problem of turnover and staff instability)

In JCPS, teacher and principal turnover is much more problematic than in the other districts where staff stability allows easier continuity once deeper learning work begins with less drag on budgets and capacity-building work. However, it's important to note that deeper learning is often seen by these districts not as “what we do after we stabilize staffing,” but as a powerful means of *stemming* turnover and attrition within their schools.

A JCPS priority school administrator said, “I think teachers stay because we put a premium on making this a place where they can innovate, and they are not going to get slammed for trying things and failing at them.” Clarendon 3 and PUSD did not have issues like those we found in high-needs schools in JCPS. As a result, even in their high-needs schools, teachers have a chance to develop relationships with students and parents demanded by pedagogical reforms that focus equally on academic *and* social and emotional learning.



Relationships and social norms

In PUSD, the Office of Equity and Professional Learning (OEPL) began redesigning professional learning to better reflect the types of classroom environments teachers need to create for students. These redesigned learning environments integrate

collaboration and social-emotional learning for the participating adults so that they can experience deeper learning for themselves. District administrators in the OEPL were clear that was the only way that teachers create that type of learning environment for students.

Perhaps the most striking example of strong relationships that support powerful collaboration can be found in the co-teaching classroom of Jamie Santana and Paula Richards in PUSD. While these two teachers are at different points in their careers, they have created a teaching practice and classroom environment built on mutual respect and reciprocal mentoring to engage themselves and their students in deeper learning. Learn more about Jamie and Paula in the video and case study linked below.

At WGE in Clarendon 3, relationships and cultural norms were so important that became the focus of their Problem of Practice that administrators and teachers focused on during their year of collective leadership implementation. They understood that relationships and social norms are key factors in teachers being willing to share their practice, to engage in the instructional risk-taking needed for deeper learning reforms, and to systematically spread teaching expertise to every classroom and child in the building. The cultural shifts allowed for teachers *to see and experiment with* new practices that led to deeper learning for their students. At Watson Lane, the strong relationships that teachers developed around their practice allowed a co-teaching model to emerge for some teacher pairs, developing shared and transparent practice around deeper learning teaching strategies.



Shared influence

At all three schools, we observed powerful instances of shared influence not only between teachers but among teachers and administrators. There was no doubt that the principals of WGE, Watson Lane, and Armstrong led their schools. In each case they were viewed by teachers as “in charge”; however, they were also seen as *first among equals*. In each of the schools, teachers felt comfortable in taking risks because principals did as well, and they worked together in doing so. Some teachers held formal leadership roles, such as at WGE where



several hybrid roles were created so more time could be allocated for both teaching and leading. But the power of their leadership was more informal as the culture of shared responsibility and the opening up of classroom practice became the norm in their respective buildings.

Building the capacity of teachers and administrators

Time for teachers to learn and lead is essential to deeper learning strategies, which represent a real departure from how most teachers were prepared or experienced P-20 learning themselves. As a result, investments in capacity-building — at both individual and systems levels — are a nonnegotiable priority. When we think of capacity building, we typically think about building knowledge and skills that are missing among certain individuals. That type of personalized professional development is often necessary and desirable, especially in schools and systems with high rates of turnover, underprepared teachers, and/or educators who are working out of field.

As other researchers have found, however, the success, scalability, and sustainability of that type of capacity-building is bound by the extent to which *teams and groups* of individuals take up new knowledge and apply it. That process is as much or more about the adaptive changes— shifts in mindset and behavior — than about technical pedagogical skills. How do teachers and administrators think differently about the work of leading? How do they build a culture of professional learning that builds capacity for them to solve problems and address the needs of students? In considering these questions, the district’s experiences surfaced three issues:

1. Reconsidering leadership as work, not individuals;
2. Developing content and leadership expertise; and
3. Identifying expertise and systematically spreading it.

Leadership is about the work, not about the individual

Effective teacher leadership emerges when those who teach and administer come together and mobilize human, cultural, and technological resources in ways that improve their school communities for

the common good. It is about the work — and much less about the individuals, personalities, or roles. (e.g., Spillane’s concept of distributed leadership shifts the study of leading from an individual into the realm of understanding the actions or tasks that leaders engage in to accomplish their work¹).

Communicating the concept of collective leadership was less challenging in a small school district like Clarendon 3, but it still took time for teachers to understand and embrace, as they had been conditioned by years of high-stakes accountability tied to standardized tests to follow curriculum scripts and implement packaged programs. The key in each case was the principal who modeled what s/he hoped to see in teaching and learning. When we asked the three principals about how they developed their collective leadership skills as well as the mindset for it, they had little to say. Typically, Kirby, Russell, and Sanchez would talk about how informal interactions with other educators helped them cultivate their expertise in collegial ways.

Let go to add on

In each of the districts we studied, teachers, administrators, and district leaders all reported enormous implementation burdens due to state mandates and locally adopted programs. In Clarendon 3 and other CLI districts in SC, schools reported having as many as 15 programs underway at once. These programs sometimes had overlapping goals but were siloed from one another, with separate implementation plans, metrics, data tracking, and other processes. One educator described it as a “layer cake: where we just keep adding and adding until the whole thing slides apart” with little clear marginal benefit from the addition of new programs.

One key strategy was finding the “no” in innovation by systematically discarding programs that were not working in order to allow a focused emphasis on student-centered and deeper learning to take hold. In some instances, this process was more about refining programs so that mutually reinforcing work was better connected. For instance, the district’s micro-credentialing pilot was leveraged to personalize professional learning around content and leadership development. Here, the process and evidence were used as part of their Professional Learning

¹ Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



Communities (PLCs) and learning walks, including the opening up of classrooms so teachers could engage in reciprocal observations with colleagues several times each nine weeks. Teaching schedules were changed so common planning periods for each grade level guaranteed that colleagues could work together an hour daily, an effort which also freed up larger blocks of time to meet state Read to Succeed and other requirements for students.

Leverage teacher expertise to scale capacity-building

In PUSD, teachers leading professional learning were central to their strategy to address issues of equity related to the Significant Disproportionality designation. Unfortunately, teacher voice and choice were not always present in some of the district's schools or in other divisions that offered professional development. Several district schools have begun to rethink their PLCs, particularly those where the co-teaching model was a driver of professional learning because that strategy is showing great promise. However, many teachers pointed to the fact that their PLCs did not always support the development of the kinds of deeper learning teaching strategies they sought to implement.

At Watson Lane in JCPS, teachers talked about how much they appreciated the choice they had in learning what they needed and with whom. One of the most compelling examples of teacher-led learning was when two teachers of fourth grade told us how much they learned about deeper learning when they “switched a few kids” they were teaching (across the hall from each other) — and then compared notes on what they each experienced and learned about deeper learning practices in action.

We found numerous examples of teachers improving their teaching when they had access to “more authentic collaboration” in their schools, in clusters of them, or in the case of JCPS, in virtual communities of practice. One PUSD teacher, who has been greatly influenced by the expertise of the district's co-teaching teams and coaches, told us:

“I think the collaboration part is the biggest for me in improving my practice. When you learn from other teachers, and you hear their ideas, and you get to

share with one another, I think that's the best way to learn. I'm not just taking in information from an outside expert; I'm getting ideas that teachers are actually using in their classrooms.”

In PUSD, three teachers from the co-teaching classrooms influenced 487 teachers (311 via professional development, 63 through job embedded support, and 113 by way of social media). However, there is no way to formally measure their leadership impact so others can learn from how they get the results that they achieve.

Of the three districts, JCPS has the most formal and compelling approach to deeper learning. While participation in deeper *professional* learning is still opt-in, JCPSForward networks teachers with identified expertise in key deeper learning competencies and deploys them to support peers. This strategy allows expertise not only to enrich a single school but also to begin spreading across schools so that initial capacity begins to tip over to scale.

The district's union, the Jefferson County Teachers' Association (JCTA), has attempted to advance teacher leadership through its collective bargaining agreement but has had to spend most of its organizational energy fighting state takeover of its local schools. In fact, JCTA has led efforts for the district in the performance assessment micro-credential pilot — and keeps pushing for teachers to be recognized formally and paid as leaders in the contract. In PUSD, the teachers' union was also instrumental in getting the micro-credential pilot off the ground and reported that they too were interested in using micro-credentials to codify deeper learning among teachers in its collective bargaining agreement. However, in both cases the district administration had yet to take full advantage of the union and its leadership in and for professional learning.

In fact, JCPS teachers seemed to be especially concerned about the mismatch between the nature of their PLCs and the kind of professional learning they needed to experience to implement deeper learning reforms. In one focus group, JCPS teachers pointed out that most PLCs were data driven, and



what they really need is for them to be inquiry-driven — prompting us to capture their sentiments (see below).

Data PLC



Inquiry PLC



Focused on data and/or provided materials/goals



Focused on a meaningful purpose or problem of practice identified by participants



Strives for unity, but often lacks trust among individuals



Fosters authentic community through skilled facilitation



Often lacks opportunity for building leadership skills and capacity



Addresses explicit outcome to build individual and collective leadership



Limited by focus on short-term goals and outcomes



Driven by passion and inquiry creating transformational problem-solving

Identify the expertise systematically before spreading it

Each of the three districts has used some form of competency-based professional learning — typically micro-credentials — to verify educator expertise before asking them to support peers formally and informally. This seems like an obvious first step. But traditionally, educators in many districts have been selected as coaches, peer reviewers, or instructional specialists based on their tenure and test scores, which may or may not reflect mastery of deeper learning approaches.

Translating powerful informal knowledge into a more formal version seemed to be a challenge. For example, each of the three principals could readily articulate how *they* identified teaching expertise and utilized their teacher leaders. However, most of their knowledge of the *who and how* was in their heads and clearly not codified for other administrators and teachers to use. They know, as Allen Kirby has pointed out, teachers’ expertise and leadership have a positive impact on the culture, students, and community but often in an “immeasurable way.”

Principals such as Kirby, Russell, and Sanchez have developed their own system for identifying expertise and how to utilize teacher leaders in spreading it. However, most of what they know how to do was developed informally and outside of the formal training they received as administrators. Sanchez told us how the spread of expertise began at Armstrong:

“So we thought we were doing great until we realized you can’t get a four on relevance until you go outside of the classroom walls. And so we’re doing walkthroughs ... to work with the other teachers that are not within your four walls.”

With micro-credentials, administrators and teachers have an opportunity to document expertise and use emerging technologies to leverage even more of the talent they have. A PUSD administrator talked about the potential of virtual learning communities:

“We have coaching to help teachers and administrators develop the skills. We have time on those student-free days where they get together and are able to share. It is not enough. At best teachers can learn with colleagues at their grade level and occasionally with those above or below. One thing we don’t do well enough is technology for the adults. We’re scratching the surface of what we can do with it. Where you can actually put teachers in front of their ViewSonic. They have their big screens in their classrooms. They literally could connect with their colleagues in other school sites down the street and be together virtually.”

In each district micro-credentialing has emerged as a strategy to support the identification of teaching expertise. Taking full advantage of teacher-led learning has been a challenge. For example, more than half of the 25 JCPs teacher leaders who participated in CTQ’s Cultivating Communities for Impact virtual learning training indicated they were interested in leading a micro-credential virtual community of practice. Yet, only six virtual community organizers were tapped to lead their peers. Opportunities for teacher leaders to use expertise is a key strategy for spreading it. District leaders have talked about the prospect of doing so for years.



Maximizing deeper learning conditions for equity

We know that students need more time to engage in the more complex tasks of deeper learning, and their teachers need more time to develop, refine, and assess the lessons of learning more deeply. We also know that our most vulnerable students are frequently not afforded access to this type of enriching learning opportunity.

The dictionary definition of equity speaks to “freedom from bias or favoritism” — and in education often means fairness and access. Much has been made of the difference between *equity and equality*. Equality in education is treating every young person in the schools the same; equity is about making certain everyone has the support s/he needs to be successful. In terms of deeper learning, we need to do better on both fronts. Our most vulnerable students need to have equal access to deeper learning opportunities; they also need to have the necessary support to ensure equitable opportunities to engage in deeper learning.

In each of the three communities, we observed a variety of efforts to address inequities in teaching and learning. The Jefferson County Board of Education has established a clear definition of and vision for more multicultural education and has established a division for diversity, equity, and poverty to address the needs of its 100,000 students. As a result, the JCPS central office has developed child enrichment programs, established the collection and reporting of community health data, and created awareness programs for educators as well as a volunteer talent center and school-based decision-making councils to include parents. In all three districts, teachers and principals were being trained, through an increasing array of programs, to help students feel safer, get along with peers, and be better prepared for life while also meeting higher academic standards.

At Armstrong in PUSD, we began to see more clearly how equity can be integrated and harnessed in advancing deeper learning outcomes. For a segment of its 1,900 educators, the district has begun to move professional development away from workshops and

trainings to teacher collaboration and peer coaching as ways to accelerate innovations in teaching that incorporate social and emotional learning supports for students. In the co-teaching classrooms, the achievement gap between low-income students of color and white students has been closing on measures such as sixth-grade mathematics and English Language Arts, and in the pilot schools implementing a schoolwide PBIS strategy to improve school climate, the number of discipline referrals decreased by 48 percent and suspensions by 61 percent.

Our work in these three districts uncovered at least four additional issues that are essential for maximizing deeper learning conditions for equity.

Cultivating school readiness for teacher leadership

Building trust and sound relationships among teachers and administrators is key in developing a system of teacher leadership (rather than individual teachers as leaders). At WGE, Watson Lane, and Armstrong, the three principals are clearly quite effective getting their schools ready for teacher-led learning leadership. At Watson Lane, Russell used a working conditions survey to pinpoint broad issues to address, albeit the instrument does not get at the nuances of teacher leader development for deeper learning reforms. At WGE, Kirby used a CTQ survey of collective leadership to assess readiness and measure progress in shifting the culture. Sanchez used her experience and informal mentors. We wonder how other schools will learn to do what three have done. More work needs to be done for more schools, and the teachers and administrators, to collectively assess their readiness for teacher leadership for deeper learning.

Learning to think about people and time differently

At WGE, two-thirds of the educators engaged in CTQ's assessing how time is currently used micro-credential to anchor their collective understanding of what they are doing and how they can better use their most vital commodity — people — for deeper learning. They began by repurposing Title I funding and existing personnel allocations allowing them to create two hybrid teacher leader roles, which combine direct instruction in classrooms and a Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics



(STEAM) lab with time to serve on the instructional leadership team and support colleagues. The media specialist now also supports Gifted and Talented students, and they have eliminated typical fully released coaches and specialist positions, consolidating traditional stand-alone positions to make space for flexible FTEs so more teachers could teach and lead beyond their classrooms.

At Watson Lane, the principal was able to redesign the school schedule, also using Title I and II funds, so teachers have at least five hours of PLC time each week. When we asked how he learned to develop this kind of schedule, it was clearly an organic process for him, cobbling together a variety of experiences he had as a teacher and assistant principal. Teachers told us they have been making the instructional shifts they needed to make because they are “putting in lots of time after school” to learn from one another. When asked directly, a focus group of about 10 teachers noted that on average they work between 60-70 hours a week. This is not sustainable.

Building capacity in the central office for teacher leadership

In PUSD over the last several years, the Office of Equity and Professional Learning has supported an array of efforts to spur teacher-led learning and leadership, both formally and informally. The shift in strategy began when top-level leadership made the commitment to an organic approach to teacher leader development – and not the usual implementation of a rigidly organized career ladder or master teacher program. These efforts appear to be paying off – albeit there is much more work to be done to build the capacity of central offices for the next stages of the work. For example, in PUSD and JCPS, teachers from some schools do not experience voice and choice in their professional learning – and neither central office has a vision and strategy in place and agreed upon for how to create a system of teacher leadership for the entire district.

This does not mean central office administrators do not see the need to rethink their roles and the redesign of professional learning for deeper learning outcomes. For example, in JCPS, over the last two years, the teachers’ union and a group of central office administrators spent time outlining what such a system can look like. As one JCPS educator, who

has been in the district for decades, told us: “They are sincere about wanting more equitable approaches to deeper learning, but they get bogged down.”

Getting beyond the tests and accountability

The modern era of school reform, perhaps beginning with the *A Nation at Risk* (1983), has placed increasing emphasis on improving academic outcomes without limiting opportunity for anyone to achieve. Since No Child Left Behind (2001) and its successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2016), policy reformers have used high-stakes testing to identify which groups of students are achieving (or not) and have meted out an array of incentives or sanctions. Much has been written and debated about how best to respond to low performance of students and the inequitable results between white students and students of color. One view calls for a moratorium on high-stakes testing, pointing to how they often push teachers toward teaching narrow, basic skills as opposed to deeper ones; another one claims assessments are necessary to push back against the “protectors of the education status quo.”



Clarendon 3 educators share strategies for building teacher leadership capacity.

The educators, particularly teachers and principals with whom we worked, were not caught up in these debates. And we saw, as teachers engaged in more of their own learning, they gravitated toward innovative approaches to assessment that encouraged observing, collecting, and interpreting evidence of deeper learning (such as represented by the Assessment for Learning Project led by the Center for Innovation in Education (CIE) with Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC)).

In fact, we saw evidence in each of the three schools of how educators used and embraced student data to improve teaching and opportunities for deeper learning outcomes. At Walker-Gamble, educators





Students in JCPS engage in deeper learning strategies.

were learning together how to use summative assessments in their planning throughout the year. At Armstrong, teachers examined both standards-based portfolios of their own making as well as varied SEL data associated with Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). At Watson Lane we observed classrooms with students engaged in peer-to-peer learning, using online assessments to review one another's work.

However, the number of assessments and checklists that educators must attend to seemed to be weighing them down. At Watson Lane teachers talked of teaching too many duplicative standards and “needing more than a checklist to determine who is ready to move to the next grade level.” And

Applying the insights

In this paper, we've explored considerations for how three very different — but nationally representative — districts have built conditions, capacity, and equity to support deeper learning for students and staff alike. They've done this work despite substantial challenges: Clarendon 3 appears to have very little capacity as a two-school rural district, Pomona straddles two very different urban contexts despite its suburban size and locale, and JCPS struggles with ongoing political and other complexities as an urban flagship. (More information about their context and work is described in an earlier paper [Deeper leadership for educators, deeper learning for every student: A look at three district approaches.](#))

What's important, and inspiring, is that each of these districts has found their challenges to be reasons to pursue deeper learning as a solution rather than an excuse to avoid extending the right kinds of learning opportunities to the students they serve. We've drawn out a number of common themes as well as contrasting approaches that respond to their unique context. A follow-up paper [Deeper leadership for educators, deeper learning for every student: Tools to advance your work](#) helps us analyze key takeaways for other districts and then consider how best to apply them in varied contexts. We hope you will explore that work.

¹⁰Jensen, B., Sonnemann, J., Roberts-Hull, K. & Hunter, A. (2016). *Beyond PD: Teacher professional learning in high-performing systems*. Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy.

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