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The Promise of Partnership for Promoting Reform

"Over the years of reform efforts, the bottom-up/top-down controversy for educational reform has been resolved; it has become clear that a strategy which blends the two approaches promises the best results. One widely shared reform principle is the necessarily collaborative nature of school reform work."

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Abstract

The age-old aphorism that 'two heads are better than one' or the similar 'what we can do together is far greater than we could do alone' is clearly borne out in the school reform work of the partnerships described in this article. What is also clear from our analysis is that one of the most powerful aspects of the partnership configuration is the opportunity for learning it provides the participants. Learning, however, is not a foregone conclusion of partnership work. In fact, we have come to believe that one of the barriers to reform is the obstacle to learning that typically exists when people come together across institutional and ideological boundaries without support for the exchange of ideas, perspectives, and beliefs. Since it would be impossible to change institutions (schools, universities, teacher preparation, district administration, and so forth) without active participation of the persons whose work is located there, supporting the learning together across those boundaries seems to be essential to the methodology of reform.

Our role as outside change agents, therefore, has been to support the work of reform by supporting opportunities for learning for the reformers. To accomplish that, we employed a series of strategies to help the partnerships learn together about the work of schools, teaching, and reform. We found considerable evidence in our data that learning became a centerpiece in the work of the partnerships in both a collective and personal way. We also found that the exchange of ideas, theories, and problems across individuals, schools, partnerships, and the region offered participants a forum not only for their own learning, but also valuable practice for stimulating similar conversations back at their home sites.

For many of the participants, these conversations about the inner workings and challenges of schooling that confront us in modern American life were the first they had ever had with colleagues – a sad indictment, indeed. At the same time, it is important to hear the value of the work as many participants explained how this work gave them an opportunity 'to talk about the hard, deep issues [they] have wanted to talk about all of their professional lives, but didn't know how.' After practising in the safe setting, they reported feeling prepared to 'go back to [their] schools and do the same work' – dialoguing with the rest of the school community about issues that matter for children.

In these ways, the data we have collected thus far point to the potential of partnering not only as a sustained learning experience for partnerships, but one whose effects will ripple within the institutions involved, and, one hopes, outside those institutions and across the system.

The past decade of school reform in this nation has yielded numerous and often conflicting ideas about how the work of reform ought to be conducted. We are told by some that reform needs to be a 'bottom-up' enterprise, that is, that the initial effort needs to begin at the reform site with local initiative. We are coached that a grassroots beginning will help ensure 'buy-in' of those for whom the reform has most immediate consequence. At the same time, we are cautioned by others not to rely on bottom-up initiatives, that bottom-up strategies fade as the reform work becomes more complex. For this reason, we are coached that 'top-down' strategies are most important at the beginning to ensure adequate coordination and sustained support. Of course, over the years of reform efforts, the bottom-up/top-down controversy has been resolved; it is clear to most of us doing this work that a strategy that blends the two approaches promises the best results (Fullan, 1993; Schlectly, 1990).

While there are many conflicting notions about how school reform ought to proceed, the school reform community across the nation has generated a number of reform principles that are widely shared. One of those principles is the necessarily collaborative nature of school reform work. We all seem to agree that the work of reform is so complex and multifaceted that it cannot be done alone. Rather, it must be done in a collective manner that is often structured into partnership arrangements of one kind or another. These partnerships typically cross institutional boundaries and bring together such entities as schools and universities, or state reform initiative organisations with businesses and school districts. The actual arrangements of these partnerships take different forms as well and include a variety of participant

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stakeholders – teachers, parents, school administrators, local community members, students, university faculty, district personnel, and so forth.

However, while it is commonly agreed that partnerships provide a necessary structure for reform and that broad representation from and within the constituent groups is necessary for successful change work, how to accomplish this goal is less well understood. Simply gathering people at one place for a shared purpose is difficult enough. Beyond that, we are uncertain how to create an inclusive process within which the many different voices of those affected by reform can actually be heard. Nor are we clear on how to work across the differences that these constituencies bring to the work. For instance, we all recognise that parents of immigrant children hold important knowledge about their children and their culture that is vital for teachers and schools. But how to overcome the barriers of custom, language, and time that keep many parents away from school is unknown, in spite of how valuable their knowledge could be to the successful running of those institutions.

Similarly difficult are the conversations that need to be facilitated among school and reform constituencies who view both the reform process and intended outcomes differently – district personnel and union leaders, for example, or sceptical parent groups and enthusiastic proreform teachers. While it is unclear how to bring these groups to the table, into the process, and into partnership with one another, it is clear that coming together is vital for an informed reform process. The importance of partnership to the reform process, along with the challenges of creating and sustaining partnerships, is the focus of this chapter.

In our Bay Area School Reform Collaborative's School-University Partnership (SUP) project, partnership itself – the act of partnering across institutional and ideological boundaries – is central to our work. Our role as outside change agents focuses on supporting school-university partnerships, which we have organised into a network called the School-University Partnership Learning Community. Given our focus on partnering for reform, this chapter presents what we have learned about partnership work and how to support it for the purpose of school change. We draw on our experience over the past 2 years to examine partnership both as an ideological construct and as a programmatic structure designed to bring about and sustain reform in schools.

We will begin by addressing the idea of partnership as a structure for change and discuss how we have conceptualised partnering as a vehicle for learning that leads to reform. Following this, we will describe the partnership structures of our collaborative work, both the partnership arrangements themselves and the web of partnerships that sustain the work. In the third section, we will discuss the effect of partnering on our efforts at reform, drawing on various data sources to examine the experience of partnering as described to us by the participants in our project. We will also include our initial impressions of the effect of those experiences on the participants' growing capabilities to initiate and support change at their home sites. Our data sources include field notes from partnership meetings and events, interview and questionnaire data from partnership members, and partnership documents created as part of the work. Given our early findings about the relationship between partnering, adult learning, and reform, we will conclude by reflecting on the support role for partnerships that we have assumed as the centerpiece of our change agentry work.

Partnership, learning and promotion of reform

In our view, learning is at the heart of school reform. We believe that in order for reform to occur learning must be going on in all aspects and at all levels of the school community. As school people learn, their practice changes, and the institutions that house those practices change in turn. For example, as teachers learn new things about their students, they can construct new ways of teaching them. As administrators learn from teachers the new demands of practice, they can construct new ways to manage schools and support both teacher and student learning. As parents watch their children grow and engage in the world in new ways, they learn how to support them as well. As the adults in organisations learn, the organisation itself has the capacity to change and grow, and so, in a way, an organisation can learn as well (Senge, 1990). Even in higher education, there can be this kind of transformation: University faculty can learn from watching their student teachers learn to teach. Student teachers can learn from a reflective examination of their work and from the university faculty and other adults who assist them in learning how to reflect well.

An important goal of our school reform work is to turn our schools into learning organisations that promote and support the learning of children and adults. If a school (including a school of higher education) is a learning organisation, it will have the

capacity to change to meet the changing needs and demands of its constituents. Embedded in this idea of learning lies our hope for changing American education to teach our nation's youth more equitably and powerfully. Thus, for the purposes of our work in creating schools as learning contexts, we needed to ask ourselves: What contextual conditions are necessary for promoting the powerful learning needed to bring about changes in schools?

The social construction of knowledge

An important aspect of learning is that it occurs in collaboration as people work together to make sense of their world and their experience. According to current ideas of constructivist learning theory, learning occurs when people encounter new ideas and experiences and have an opportunity to reflect on them for the purpose of enhancing their understanding by drawing on their existing knowledge and beliefs. In the process, the learners construct new knowledge. Furthermore, given the complexity of the world that school people encounter and its highly social and political nature, the learning that goes on in the schools is best accomplished not by individuals working in isolation from one another but rather by people working together. Thus knowledge not only is constructed, it is socially constructed (Airasian & Walsh 1997; O'Laughlin 1992; Prawat 1992).

For example, when teachers talk about why certain children are slow to understand the concept of negative numbers in mathematics and those same teachers have an opportunity to share their ideas and experiences with colleagues or parents, they are engaged in professional learning. In the process they collectively construct new knowledge about how children learn math. In the best of all worlds, that knowledge will guide their future teaching practice.
As school principals come together to discuss the impact of a new state initiative regarding bilingual education, they bring to bear what they know and have experienced in the past to grapple with the circumstances and happenings of the present. In this process, they, too, construct new knowledge.
In this instance, the new knowledge the principals construct may be broad in scope and far-reaching in potential effect; it could include such things as bilingual education itself, the politics of state initiative for school reform, the technicalities of managing legislative change, and so forth.

Partnership: Its value in the process

Where, then, does partnering fit in? The value of partnering in learning becomes increasingly evident as we consider (1) the complexity of the processes of both schooling and school reform, (2) the complexity of the processes of knowledge construction itself (Airasian & Walsh, 1997), and (3) the reality of cognitive limits adult learners bring to the processes of trying to make sense of the social circumstances of their lives (Shulman & Carey, 1984; Wineburg & Grossman, 1998). New understandings of school life and practice can be more powerfully developed by partnerships of school people (teachers, school administrators, parents, university faculty, students, and others) who come together to collaborate in an examination of things as they are and a construction of images and plans for what they might become.

Learning and the value of multiple perspectives

The challenge we faced at the outset of our project was this: How do we create and support partnerships that bring together multiple voices and promote thoughtful deliberation of school practice that leads to the construction of new knowledge and eventually the reform of schools?
The School-University Partnership Initiative was designed to answer this question and to address the challenges outlined above. Since its inception, the Initiative provided an operating structure of nested partnerships designed to promote adult (professional) learning that would lead to changed practice and eventually both school and university reform. We based this model of change on the idea that reform could be initiated and sustained by partnerships of representative stakeholders convening for the purpose of learning about their work from one another through a problem-centered process of inquiry. The fundamental structure we employed was partnership; our role as change agents was to support those partnerships in their work.

The change agent challenges

Given our notion that learning is at the heart of meaningful change in schools, we established a set of procedures to keep learning at the center of the partnership work and to support the partnerships as they moved from learning to action.
The challenges to accomplishing those coupled goals of learning and action are many. Several emerge directly from the structure of partnering across institutional lines: how to capitalise on multiple perspectives for learning rather than fracture because of them; how to invest

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representatives of different stakeholder groups in the common work which they may consider to be outside their immediate institutional agendas; how to build equity in the partnership group so that no particular participant (for example, university participants) had greater power than the others in the partnership conversations. Beyond these process challenges are the pedagogical challenges of creating learning opportunities for the partnership members once they actually convene: how to facilitate productive learning conversations; how to structure new ways to reflect that lead to the possibility of new understandings; how to provide opportunities for people to practice moving from understanding to action in a safe and supported way; how to continually refresh the partnership work with new things to think about and new partners to think with.

To address these challenges we designed and implemented a number of strategies that focus our work as outside support providers. In the following paragraphs we will highlight four of the strategies that we consider most central to our efforts, based on our experience of working in this initiative to promote professional learning that leads to reform in schools. The selection also reflects the results of a formative evaluation of our work, which has provided direction for ongoing adjustments over time.

Strategy 1: Common principles to guide the change process

The first strategy of our approach was to establish a set of common guidelines. The need for common guidelines was sparked by one of the initial challenges we faced as outside support change agents: how to prompt the creation of partnerships that in their form would maximise investment, learning, and incorporation of multiple perspectives on the part of the very different institutions and individuals who would be involved.

We determined this first challenge to be one of structure or design. Our initial design question was how to facilitate partnership work that was more than just a 'coming together,' and work that was seen not as a mechanism to 'fix schools,' but instead as one that directed the work toward the development of all participants and their home institutions, including both schools and universities. Additionally, we wanted to provide opportunities for learning through multiple parallel conversations about the work.

The guidelines were developed by a group of school, university, and business leaders knowledgeable about school reform. In addition to pooling their collective knowledge and wisdom about change in universities and schools, they reviewed the literature on school-university partnerships with a special focus on professional learning and reform. From the work of this group we culled a set of guidelines for the Initiative.

The guidelines formed the basis for partnership development and selection. They require partnerships to demonstrate the following:

- A shared vision of teaching and learning
- A focus on the continuum of professional development that entails placing professional learning at the center of reform
- A plan that builds on the strengths and weaknesses of schools and universities to renew both institutions
- A focus on inquiry
- A set of governance and financial structures to support the partnership.

We intended that the guidelines would help equalise the partnership relationships by undoing traditional hierarchies and promoting shared responsibility for the work. Additionally, the guidelines helped the partnerships focus on the coupled goals of professional development and institutional renewal. These goals directed the partnership constituencies to improve all facets of teacher education as a method for school reform, and by focusing the work on renewing both institutions, they led everyone to think of their home institutions as places of change. Because partnerships were asked to build on the strengths and weaknesses of the institutions involved, partnerships had to consider ways to flatten existing hierarchies between and within institutions and to capitalise on different perspectives, talents, and expertise. The guidelines also encouraged partnerships to utilise a common process of inquiry and develop a shared vision of teaching and learning, thus moving the agenda toward common goals rather than competing outcomes.

Following the establishment of the guidelines, our challenge was to assist partnerships in designing plans for change that were both responsive to them and innovative and reflective of the unique institutions in their partnership groups. Our aim was to draw on the guidelines in a manner that would benefit the agendas of each organisation and, at the same time, facilitate investment in the joint work. The common goals helped establish a shared set of commitments and lay the groundwork for collaborative learning. Eventually, they also provided a foundation for the larger learning community, which was made up of eight different partnership teams. Since the partnerships shared both goals and processes in common, they had

compelling reasons for working and learning together. For example, all of the partnerships were committed to developing plans for supporting the entire continuum of professional development. Similarly, they were focused on developing the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions for assuming an inquiry stance toward their work. Our efforts to support the partnership reform work assumed new dimensions as it fanned out from individual partnership support to assist the partnerships in their efforts to support one another as the collective work of the larger community progressed.

Strategy 2: Nested partnerships for learning

The collective work of the larger learning community raises the second strategy we employed in this reform initiative: establishing multiple opportunities for new collaboration and growth. An early concern of ours was that as the partnerships developed, they could fall prey to the very traps that plagued the institutions involved: They might either gravitate uncritically toward a shared perspective or, on the other hand, be stymied by competing opinions. Either way, we anticipated that the partnerships would benefit from new perspectives on their work and new opportunities to construct knowledge in collaboration. Consequently, we designed three levels of partnerships with three different configurations of people at each level:

- the school-university individual or working partnership, which includes one or more schools or districts and one university partner (eight total);
- the critical colleagues partnership ('critical colleagueship'), which pairs two of the partnerships at the first level (four total); and
- the partnership of partnerships, which brings together all of the partnerships into a large Learning Community.

Our change agentry involves planning and support for the partnership-learning work on all three levels.

The broadest of these levels is that of the SUP Learning Community, which meets 4 times a year to work together across all the partnerships on the project of professional development and institutional change. We designed all facets of the SUP Learning Community to maximise professional development for its participants based on principles of learning through inquiry such as reflection, multiple perspectives, and collaborative problem solving. The SUP Learning Community reinforces a sense of 'commonness,' in that it is built on the common guidelines and goals, shared accountability, and common content. In our framing of this larger Learning Community we intentionally included the many educational institutions of the Bay Area irrespective of whether they had membership partnerships. In this way, we invited to our conversation unaffiliated members of the larger local education community such as scholars from universities of the region whose work is relevant to our reform effort. Several of these scholars attended our meetings and spoke about their research. These presentations generated considerable discussion and resulted in an enhanced knowledge base for the work of reform. They also provided the community with an expanded sense of whose work it is to reform schools.

The critical colleagueship layer of partnering – the structure that partners two partnership teams – was added to the plan near the close of the first year of the Learning Community's work when we hypothesised that a focused sharing of experiences would help each partnership progress towards its own goals. Our intention was to create new opportunities for cross-partnership conversations that were both consistent and predictable. We also wanted to provide more opportunities for dialogue than was possible in our large group discussions. As the partnership colleagues began to know one another's work better over time, they developed the capacity to enhance the learning potential of their partners in extraordinary ways. (We discuss this finding about our work in the last section of this report). This aspect of the partnering structure has resulted in the partnerships receiving intensive, personalised assistance with their own particular work and approach.

Strategy 3: Common content

A third strategy involved establishing a point of common focus for our work at both the partnership and Learning Community levels. The need for a focus that transcended professional development and institutional reform came from the two-part question: Toward what are we directing our change efforts? Change for what? After much discussion about this question among the steering committee and others, we decided to establish equity in our schools as a common goal. Thus our collective answer to the question was 'toward change that will

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result in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students.' This common focus, and the change agent work to establish and sustain it, has proven to be some of the most important work that we have done together so far.

This commitment came about as we set out to plan the Learning Community activities and looked for common ground within the partnership work. Although the partnerships had the common framework of the guiding principles, they were taking quite different approaches to change. In order to understand those approaches, we had to become clear about the goals toward which those approaches were directed. Interestingly, in exploring those coupled questions of goals and approaches, we discovered that though the approaches were different, the goals of the partnerships seemed to have much in common. For example, several of the partnerships were focused on literacy with the goal of helping all children learn to read, write, and talk in powerful ways; others had embraced efficacy with literacy as the vehicle for helping all children learn. All eight partnerships were focused in some way on creating schools that would produce equitable and excellent outcomes for all children.

We began to frame the overarching goal of equity as we considered the collective goals of literacy and efficacy that motivated and organised the partnership work. In one way or another each partnership developed a professional development plan designed to build new understandings, changed practices, and changed institutional structures that would support equitable and excellent outcomes for all students. Establishing equity as an overarching goal brought the Learning Community together and established the need for working collectively to understand better what equity means and how our work can move us toward it. An important strategy of our work, therefore, was to conduct the inquiry that led to the common focus and to broaden and deepen it at the same time.

While our equity-based efforts occur in many different places within the Initiative, the most visible occur at the larger Learning Community level where speakers have presented research about historically underserved student populations and issues around closing the achievement gap. Reflection and dialogue about equity have expanded the learning at all levels – from the whole-group conversations of the Learning Community, to critical colleagueships, and partnership interactions themselves. This focus was intended not only to provide a sense of common purpose, but also to encourage cross-partnership dialogue centering around students and results, rather than strategies and institutional change as ends in themselves.

■ Strategy 4: Shared accountability

Our accountability strategy, which we see as a fourth dimension of our change agent work, also reflects the guiding idea of learning as the centerpiece of the partnership processes. We asked each partnership to create an accountability and documentation plan as part of its membership in the learning community. They were to organise their plan around three domains: student learning, adult learning, and institutional learning. We directed partnerships to collect and analyse data as a means of assessing the impact of their partnership work in each of these three areas.

Embedded in this work was the idea that learning is central to reform: As important as is the impact (or lack of it) to our collective work, learning about why the work was successful or not is equally important. A significant part of our accountability is examining what we learn from our data-based inquiry that sustains the reform effort and enhances the equity agenda in schools.

In addition to placing shared learning at the heart of our accountability strategy, we established several norms for actions that we hoped would result in increased capacity for conducting inquiry that leads to the construction of meaningful local knowledge, which would, in turn, be used to guide improved practice. Establishing norms is critical to this accountability approach. In this instance these norms included the following:

- The partnerships would decide themselves what they need to know to advance their work most powerfully;
- they would establish means for answering the questions they raise in a systematic manner that involves the collection and analysis of relevant data; and
- they would prepare their findings to be presented to an audience of their peers (ie the Learning Community itself). Our strategy was to move the accountability processes away from traditional methods of collecting findings focused on successes, which are then reported to an outside unknown audience, and toward collecting and analyzing data that lead to authentic learning about the work. The findings of this inquiry are reported to an inside, well-known audience, in this case, members of the Learning Community itself and the communities of students and parents the partnership work was ultimately designed to serve.

We incorporated accountability into the Learning Community activities for several reasons. First, it was intended to facilitate cross-partnership interactions that were learning occasions centered on results rather than sharing occasions focused on activities. Structuring cross-partnership discussion about data would augment the more casual encounters within critical colleagueships. Second, the accountability process meant that partnerships could make sense together of puzzling results and strengthen new plans for action by bringing multiple perspectives to bear on the issues. Because we launched the critical colleagueships long before dialogues around accountability, critical colleagues served as a more informed and committed audience for the inquiry work. The accountability work was intended to reinforce the guidelines in a way that was embedded in the work of the partnerships and to strengthen it in ways that an add-on, such as a series of workshops, could not. Each partnership is engaged in data-based inquiry at the partnership level and is examining its work with regard to the guiding principles. Third, the accountability process meant that the partnerships had one additional common experience to facilitate their learning together. Because the partnerships are engaged in and examining different approaches to the work of reform, the accountability process provides an additional means to share results through a common framework.

Our role in this process was to establish and enact norms and processes to support the partnerships in their inquiry efforts. The goal was to create the conditions whereby the accountability processes were owned and valued by the partnership groups. We believe that only with those matters in place does the accountability work become part of the learning context it was designed to create.

What we've learned about partnering, learning and reform

In this section we summarise our findings about the value of partnering for learning that triggers and supports the development of a deeper commitment to change. The data we have gathered about partnering in different configurations – individual partnerships, critical colleagueships, and so forth – suggest that participants have begun to recognise the importance of certain precursors to learning within a partnership structure. Before seeing the value of coming together across institutional lines (and often conflicting points of view), participants report that they learned the importance of developing relationships with others with whom they felt they had little in common. For example, one partnership leader explained that one of the most difficult transitions in his partnership group was moving from a 'defensive stance about one's own institutional programs' to an 'explanatory stance about how the program works, including its goals, accomplishments, and lessons learned.' He explained how partnering involved working to dislodge preconceptions about the efforts of others, preconceptions which many times included the tendency to blame others for the shortcomings of the schooling system: 'Over time the process involved becoming open to better understanding the work and intentions of others,' he explained.

Working together on challenging issues has been important to establishing these relationships and to understanding one another. Participants report that as they have partnered in addressing such issues, they have seen how much they have in common with one another – clearly, something they had not realised before the partnership work began. In fact, as they have grown to understand one another, they have developed new shared understandings. As one participant described it, 'The more we grow together as a team, the more our philosophies merge together.' The data suggest that this understanding flows from genuine connections that are made as people let their preconceived judgments fall away. Participants report that these new nonjudgmental relationships leave them more open to considering new ideas and alternative ways of doing the work of school and school reform. They report being more open to speaking honestly with one another and to taking risks. As we know from learning theory, both honesty and risk taking are essential for learning and therefore an important outcome of the partnering strategies employed in this work.

Partnership and possibility

Despite the early difficulties in establishing these new patterns of relating in open and honest ways across institutional lines, our data show that over time participants have come to value partnering as a way of doing their work and as essential to institutional change. Early in the process they recognised the limits of isolation. They report coming to view their partners as allies in the work of reforming schools. For instance, one principal explained how 'involvement with [his] university partners gave [him] insight, knowledge, and collegial support to focus on student learning and effective teaching.' He credits the partnership with helping him

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focus on specific goals and objectives for students that are based on inquiry and assessment.

While the partnership structure provides the opportunity for new relationships and a greater appreciation for the common ground partners share, it also provides the chance to appreciate and value important differences. The various configurations of partnership that the Initiative provides puts people in contact with one another in numerous ways, thus exposing them to many new ideas and multiple opportunities to practice the skill of conversation and learning across different points of view.
As challenging as this work is (and as demanding as are the requirements for guidance and support), the benefits are not lost on the participants who comment frequently about what they learn from these experiences, not only about others, but also about themselves.
Our data show unquestionably that the process of being exposed to and consideration of multiple points of view has provoked participants to reflect deeply about their personal practice and beliefs. One participant explained, 'Exposure to different points of view has led to changes and modification of my opinions and ideas.' Many teachers regularly report that involvement with the partnership has made them reflect more on their teaching; one remarked,

I am not taking anything for granted any more, including my "tried and true" practices. I am more willing to read up on current issues and research and, more important, make some effective changes in my instructional methods. Having the university staff on our campus has challenged me to look at what's going on, reflect on what I see, and attempt to make appropriate changes.

Another remarked that through interaction with others and testing her own beliefs and practices, she has deepened her understanding of the 'reasons why' she is involved in education and what she needs to do 'to be a better educator.' Similarly, after discussions with members of other partnerships, a university participant stated the need to revisit her strategies and change how she worked with teacher candidates. Still other participants remarked that cross-partnership groupings resulted in new definitions for terms and ideas they thought they already understood.
For instance one teacher reported expanding her conception of equity from 'just being equal' to 'a state of mind and a relationship between adults, students, community.'

Networks and new ideas

Participants in the Initiative consistently report a new awareness of the value of networking and problem solving with partnerships doing similar work. The data reveal participants becoming increasingly aware of the need to look beyond their own ranks for both ideas and feedback. They explain that although their individual partnerships already cross institutional lines, partners still tend to accommodate one another within their new groupings, which may cause their thinking to become 'circular' or otherwise limited rather than visionary. Stepping outside one's familiar ways of doing the work is both enlightening and renewing; they report that examining the work with 'outsiders' creates opportunities for the generation of new ideas and enriched thinking on the part of individuals and partnerships alike.
One partnership member described how having another partnership group to talk to helped him and his group clarify and articulate both what they were doing and why. Others report that the interactions have helped them develop a better understanding of how their activities are, and are not, addressing issues of equity.

Cross-partnership conversations offer fresh alternatives for practical day-to-day difficulties as well as exposure to new strategies. Partnership members explain that such exchanges give their teams new ideas that they discuss within their own partnerships, then embellish to create new knowledge for themselves about their work – student teacher/cooperating teacher seminars, in one instance, and a set of strategies to improve school image, in another. 'Even if we don't use their ideas, we begin to think of alternatives,' one explained.

Each time we get together I learn more about our work, what we need to do next, and how to sustain the partnership.
For example, we learned today that there are even more ways to assess student learning than we have envisioned, thanks to our critical colleagues.

Participants indicate that listening to the advice and experience of others has shaped and focused their work, and that they anticipate that this will continue through ongoing collaboration and discussions with other teams.

Dialogue and the challenge of change

We are learning from our data that this kind of insight is the product of dialogue among diverse practitioners. In the process of working in various partnership configurations, participants have had multiple opportunities to test and challenge their personal beliefs. These configurations and resulting dialogue are stimulating

reflection and learning, but the resulting learning challenges are many. As one participant explained,

The partnerships expand the resources, enlarge the learning community of the institutions involved, and in essence create a larger think tank. On the downside, there are challenges to what 'I knew' and some struggle with a loss of control.

This temporary "loss of control," while indicative of the important disequilibrating stage of learning, is uncomfortable for all learners. It requires attention on the part of those in charge – the work needs to be supported consistently by the change-agent partner leaders. Providing support during this time of disequilibrium is especially important when learners come together from different places and do not have the safety of their home institutions to back them up.

Part of this disequilibrium or loss of control comes when participants encounter predictable conflicts as multiple points of view are expressed in learning conversations. Our data point to a growing realisation on the part of participants that conflict is a natural part of this exchange and the learning that comes from it. Participants report a new awareness that working through the conflict leads to both compromise and new ways of thinking. They report learning that these changes, ultimately, result in more people sharing a stake in the work at hand. As one participant explained, the partnering experiences have really confirmed that we do need a level of provocation and argument to move forward. I've learned to not get threatened by stressful situations that arise within the partnership but rather to see them as part of the process of working together and that it is okay.

Differences as opportunities for change

Comments such as these reveal the shift we have observed from a view that differences in institutional perspective are a hindrance to change to one that appreciates difference as a fundamental condition for learning and growth. Similarly, such comments suggest that the partnerships have begun to find ways to surface multiple perspectives and incorporate them into decisions and activities. Some partnerships report beginning to realise how much can be gained from soliciting more voices in the process of reform. They have discussed mechanisms to put this in place at their home sites. For example, one participant commented,

I've learned a lot about equity from many different perspectives. I'll work on building structures that give voice to all staff. I'll try to take small steps to integrate conflicting thoughts.

Another participant explained that her group is working on a structure for increased voice among the faculty. In both cases, it is clear that participants have learned that inclusion and voice in the process itself is absolutely essential to successful (albeit challenging) efforts at reform.

An additional aspect of what brings about a sense of renewal comes in participants' seeing themselves reflected in the work of others. Many report feeling a sense of inspiration that comes from sharing ideas with people whose experiences are at once both similar and different. The partners commonly express feeling encouraged through the validation from other partners concerning the difficult choices they have made in their work, the systems they have established, the activities and goals that represent their best attempts. They explain that even seeing similarities in their struggles has been a boost; one participant remarked that "meeting with other people who have grappled with the same issues and won has been very inspiring."

Working with other partnerships as critical colleagues or in the larger Learning Community provided a glimpse of the light at the end of the tunnel, when certain groups of colleagues had accomplished what others were working toward. Seeing others succeed gives hope that success is possible. It is clear from our data that sharing experiences across all kinds of institutional boundaries renews motivation for participants immersed in the hard early work of reforming schools. As one participant explained, sharing common experiences, successes, and challenges 'enlivened and deepened our partnership work.'

Perceptions of self and changed roles in practice

As partners, and teachers in particular, work across institutional lines, they seem to inherit a different sense of their role in the workings of school. We are finding evidence, for example, that a number of teachers in the Learning Community have adjusted their view of themselves within a system that often seems unchangeable. Several remarked that they feel teachers need to be more 'proactive' in creating and facilitating change within the system. One reflected further on how the typical response of teachers – and one that needs to change – includes 'behaving as victims regarding state policy.' The teacher who made this comment explained further,

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The Promise of Partnership for Promoting Reform

If I don't want to be a victim, I must assume my power in a responsible, sensitive way: to continue to speak up and question the status quo, to help reactivate an important committee, to be compassionate with my students but be tough academically and maintain high standards.

This determination by teachers to expand their leadership roles at their home sites is corroborated by several administrators who report a changing role for teachers as a result of their involvement with the partnership and Learning Community. Similarly, university participants report realising their responsibility to take on a stronger advocate and, perhaps, leadership role, both with their partnerships and their home institutions, around equity issues including the diversity of candidates in teacher education programs and equitable support for all beginning teachers.

Not only have teachers begun to situate themselves differently within the system once they've interacted with partnerships, they perceive that they are more valued as they join partnerships and learn alongside university partners. At the same time, university partners report becoming clearer on the special expertise of their teacher colleagues. This is evidenced powerfully in one partnership, for example, where participants report that more value is being placed on the insights of cooperating teachers in the development of effective pre-service education.

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