





How Do California School Districts Get Ready for Multiple Pathways?

A Synthesis of Planning Challenges

School Redesign Network at Stanford University

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The School Redesign Network at Stanford University is a national research and professional development organization fostering equitable and innovative school systems.

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"Much reform in U.S. schools has been an add-on enterprise. Although many change initiatives begin with a focus on how schools should change, few have considered how central-office operations, district resource allocations, and management structures must also change to support a major redesign of educational work."

— Linda Darling-Hammond and others, Instructional Leadership for Systemic Change

Purpose of this Report

s districts and secondary schools across California attempt to re-construct educational offerings at the secondary level, they face a myriad of challenges. These challenges are compounded by the tendency in reform efforts to focus on the school alone, as described above by Linda Darling-Hammond, Founding Director of the School Redesign Network at Stanford University (SRN). This brief report focuses on a more comprehensive reform effort taking place in ten school districts in California that are planning a comprehensive system of multiple pathways in high schools. This report captures the main challenges and opportunities experienced by the ten districts receiving planning grants through Connect-Ed's District Initiative for Expanding Pathways, supported by The James Irvine Foundation from January through June, 2009.

The report reflects the ongoing commitment of SRN to support ConnectEd's demonstration network of California school districts creating systems of multiple pathways to prepare all students for both college and career.

Prior to their initial selection for planning grants, these districts met certain ConnectEd eligibility criteria, which included:

- district-wide high school enrollment equal to or exceeding 5,000 students
- students eligible for free or reduced lunch equaling or exceeding 30 percent of total enrollment
- evidence of some capacity to develop a larger system of multiple pathways

The James Irvine Foundation, in consultation with ConnectEd, awarded each of the ten districts a seven-month planning grant in November 2008. At the end of the planning period, six of the districts were supported to begin implementation of at least four pathways at the high school level.

Elements of the Planning Process

IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES

The planning period provided a tableau for SRN to conduct an informal qualitative inquiry into the challenges emerging during the planning phase. The questions addressed were the following:

- 1. What possible challenges (in planning for the district implementation of multiple pathways) have researchers identified that might be present in these ten districts?
- 2. Does there appear to be a set of common challenges across the districts? Do the common challenges follow any categorical patterns?
- 3. What implications for professional development and support for the districts emerge from the common challenges?
- 4. How can SRN and ConnectEd effectively apply the learning about the common challenges to the design of the district leadership series during the implementation phase of the grant?

DEVELOPING DISTRICT PROFILES

SRN conducted a series of 30- to 60-minute telephone interviews with ConnectEd personnel and with a cross-section of district leadership in the ten districts between February and March of 2009. Six ConnectEd personnel were interviewed who were acting as leadership coaches during the planning phase with the ten districts. Some coaches were assigned to more than one district.

Twenty-five people from the participating districts also agreed to be interviewed. These included superintendents, school board members, district pathway directors, curriculum and CTE directors, principals, other administrators, postsecondary partners, industry partners, and other intermediaries. Each participating district had at least one completed interview.

District Initiative for Expanding Pathways: District Participants

Antioch Unified

Los Angeles Unified Local District 4

Long Beach Unified

Montebello Unified

Pasadena Unified

Porterville Unified

Sacramento City Unified

San Diego Unified

Stockton Unified

West Contra Costa Unified

Applying Existing Knowledge: Possible District Challenges

he difficulties in major school reform have been extensively chronicled in the last two decades. Jeannie Oakes' research from 1992 on tracking asserts that educational reform altogether presents challenges that have *normative*, *political*, and *operational* dimensions.

A normative dimension, as the name suggests, refers to widespread and deeply held beliefs that people hold. Oakes defines it as, "a web of cultural assumptions about what is true, what is "normal" — and cultural values about what constitutes appropriate action given particular truths" (1992). Political dimensions are closely linked to normative ones. Oakes claims they are, "public labels, status differences, expectations and consequences for academic and occupational attainment." They often touch on controversial issues such as race and class. In the context of this report, we more explicitly link leadership as a core component of this political dimension. In order to negotiate the political will of key stakeholders, district leadership and community leadership have emerged as key factors. The technical (or operational) dimension deals with "the division of knowledge and teaching strategies into programs or courses that stipulate the knowledge and learning experiences appropriate for different ability levels" (Oakes). Oakes asserts that programs and classes are narrowly defined and students are tracked into them according to perceived ability levels. This report exposes how these same factors are surfacing for districts as they confront curriculum and instruction, planning time, and overall program development.

A review of current writing particular to the initiation of multiple pathways in districts indicates that among the existing barriers to implementation is that this reform requires "fundamental changes to core beliefs and practices" (Oakes & Saunders, 2008). Multiple pathways can interrupt deeply held norms in education. Grubb (2008) adds that multiple pathways should be conceptualized as more than just restructuring comprehensive high schools — it requires new ways of thinking about the delivery of education, including new types of relationships between students and teachers, and the broader preparation of students for life after high school.

There are arguments both for and against the impact of multiple pathways on sub-groups. Gándara (2008) speaks of the potential for multiple pathways to open doors for immigrants and English learners. She asserts that there are more benefits than liabilities to such an approach. In contrast, Shireman (2004) in *Education Week* claims that multiple pathways cannot address the needs of what he calls vulnerable students. He contends that it is a smokescreen that conceals the real issue that needs to be confronted — how the current models of high school reform should change the actual day-by-day instructional processes.

A pool of literature evaluates the merit of integrating Career and Technology Education (CTE) with academic core classes. Hoachlander (2006) disputes the conventional wisdom

that CTE is "for the non-college bound, that it does not attract high-achieving students, that it deters students from pursuing rigorous academics, and that it produces only modest, short-term improvements in earnings, are not supported by the evidence." In fact, he asserts that the evidence stands in utter contrast to this.

The planning for multiple pathways in a school district calls for fundamental change to deeply held high school structures. Using Oakes' framework, there are identifiable normative, political, and operational considerations underlying the opportunities and challenges associated with multiple pathways reform that have been highlighted by recent research.

Identifying Common Challenges and Patterns in the Multiple Pathways Districts

RN's interviews of California ConnectEd planning grant districts yielded three areas of key challenges related to planning for district-level multiple pathways implementation. As the three areas correlate well with researchers' conceptions of larger school reform challenge, those categories of normative, political, and operational challenges will be used here.

NORMATIVE CHALLENGES OF SYSTEMATIZING PATHWAYS AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL

Two broad normative challenges specific to our ten districts in the planning process emerged from our interviews:

- 1. Anxiety and concern over the future trajectories and opportunities for students enrolled in pathways.
- 2. Ambiguity over what elements (e.g., curricular, work-based learning, and instructional experiences) constitute a pathway.

Anxiety and concern over the future trajectories and opportunities for students enrolled in pathways

District leaders repeatedly described their concern over the common perception that pathways are focused more on career training than college preparation. They suggested that the failure to distinguish pathways from more vocationally-oriented programs reduced their broad appeal among families and educators and conformed to the traditional split between academic and technical education. A central office administrator identified parent trepidation about the district's pathway programs. "There have been occasions," the administrator said, "when parents feel like we are trying to program their kids into something that is 'less than.'" According to one board member interviewed:

Once we take the time to explain, [parents] get it. They get very excited, but then they ask, 'but does that mean that they won't be ready for college? You're preparing them for a trade? To go into the workforce?'

Respondents said that common misperceptions about the purpose of pathways and their implications for students are not limited only to parents. In one district, teachers' uncertainty about pathways' impact on their professional lives was reflected in their diverse reactions to news that the district had received a sizeable implementation award from The James Irvine Foundation. "CTE teachers are doing cartwheels because they feel validated," the district's multiple pathways director said." Simultaneously, he said "AP teachers are really nervous because they're wondering 'what does this mean for me?" He also referred to deeper anxieties expressed by some teachers in thinking about shifting away from a traditional curriculum paradigm. He said a common response is along the lines of, "You can't possibly be preparing for one while you're preparing for the other.... It's the old vocational ed mindset [that pathways are] for the kids who can't do the college prep work."

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While most of the normative resistance to pathway programs was framed around anxiety or uncertainty about sufficient college-preparation, some district respondents also mentioned the opposite sentiment — that pathways would not provide students with sufficient vocational preparation. District administrators described their attempts to present pathways as a positive alternative to traditional vocational education, with increased opportunities to develop a broader industry-based skill set that would be more durable, open-ended, and potentially remunerative.

Ambiguity over what elements (e.g., curricular, work-based learning, and instructional experiences) constitute a pathway.

Interviewees suggested that the term "pathway" means many things to many people, and gets layered onto a diverse array of existing programs and labels that are used to describe them.

In one large urban planning-grant district, a district coach identified an array of existing programs that were often referred to as pathways, including academies, smaller learning communities, semi-autonomous "pilot" schools, and other specialized school programs. The challenge, according to the coach, was to avoid adding another term. "We don't want to try and change the terminology and confuse people," the coach said, "or have them think that [pathways] is completely new [and that] they got it wrong all these years."

The challenge of defining pathways was a common theme among the district leaders who were interviewed. One administrator in Southern California described "huge misunderstandings" of pathways among central office administrators in her district. While some administrators framed pathways as a vehicle for making all CTE courses A-G eligible, others described pathways as a strategy for exposing more students to rigorous academic and technical experiences but not necessarily designing them to be A-G eligible. In a Northern California district, the discussion for pathways was less on A-G eligibility than distinguishing them from more traditional programs such as ROP. A district administrator suggested an "understanding gap" about pathways, and said:

It's not where we'd like it to be. We're getting there. People are in different places of understanding. There is still the widespread notion of this being like ROP. I don't think people really understand the changes [that have been taking place in] CTE either.

Regardless of existing pathways infrastructure, administrative leaders noted the importance of bringing together diverse stakeholders to help guide how pathways are conceptualized and communicated. For planning-grant districts, planning councils most often serve this role. One district leader summed up the value of these councils by saying that the group "really helped us figure out how to do the communication about multiple pathways."

POLITICAL CHALLENGES OF ESTABLISHING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Arguably the single most prominent theme that emerged from district respondents was the critical role that leadership plays in supporting systems approaches to pathways development. Leadership was not framed as a unitary construct embodied in a single person, but as being multi-dimensional and residing at multiple levels within the district and across the community. With respect to the political challenge of district leadership, stakeholders identified three major areas of need.

- 1. Need for an executive champion to promote pathways around a clear vision
- 2. Use of distributed leadership to build organizational commitment and sustainability
- 3. Establishing broader community buy-in and input

Need for an executive champion to promote pathways around a clear vision

There was shared agreement among most district and community leaders about the importance of having an executive "champion" or "sponsor" leading the charge to develop systems supports for pathways. While district superintendents were most often identified as being key executive sponsors, other senior (cabinet-level) leaders were also seen to play the champion role with the superintendent's charge and continued support. "You can't expect a superintendent to spend so much time doing this, but you can expect the superintendent to deputize someone," one community leader told us. While many district leaders suggested that the executive mantle could be shared, they also noted that the superintendent needed to "stand up and speak" out for pathways at key junctures to demonstrate a personal commitment to supporting pathways.

District stakeholders suggested that having an executive champion is necessary but not sufficient to leverage systems support for pathways. One district leader summed up this insufficiency by saying "It's not enough to lead, you have to lead with vision." Vision, according to one ConnectEd coach, entails changing the lens through which district leaders understand pathways in relation to the larger school system. Rather than frame pathways as a new program or grant opportunity, district respondents suggested the

importance of executive leaders championing pathways as an essential element of district functioning — a central component rather than an addon.

In contrast, when vision was lacking in districts' executive champions, interview respondents were less optimistic about achieving systems change. One ConnectEd district coach shared his observation about a district:

It's a project that they're doing, but it's not clear how it will alter the district in any fundamental way. The vision for the work seems to be lacking.

Active presence by executive champions was a more powerful sign of the legitimacy of and commitment to the work than his or her words alone. This included attending planning meetings and conveying to the community that this initiative was a priority for the district. For example, during the planning grant phase one superintendent made several public/media ap-

pearances to express his commitment saying, "This is the direction we're moving in. This is what we all have committed to." According to a high level administrator in the district, by being out front with very specific roles and responsibilities to advance the work, the superintendent quelled opposition in the district by saying, "This is what we're going to do in our district. You have to believe that this is really where our train is going, and you have to want to be on that train."

Yet, this was not always the case. One central office administrator reflected on the planning process in the district and said, "I'm concerned. My superintendent has been invited to all the meetings but hasn't shown up to any of them."

Use of distributed leadership to build organizational commitment and sustainability

Given leadership mobility, particularly among superintendents, district respondents argued that systems support for pathways could not be achieved if the initiative was located in one particular office and if responsibility for it rested with one person. Rejecting the notion that any one person could effectively lead systems change, one district administrator said:

If we want this to be systemic, it has to be sustainable. If the initiatives are going to be board-driven, than we need a collaboration of the different departments in order to make it sustainable.

One ConnectEd district coach said:

They can't fight over domain. They have to enable others, working collaboratively with them. They need to break down the walls of the central office and become more connected to the community and the school.

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Another central office administrator emphasized a similar point — that reform cannot come from a single direction. Utilizing the top down vs. bottom up metaphor of reform, the administrator said:

Top down is not going to last. Top down is going to be resented. Bottom up is not sustainable. When personalities leave, it goes with them. How do we meet in the middle and change the system?

In order to "meet in the middle," several district respondents advocated establishing transparency and open communication about the work. For example, they suggested creating agendas for their district initiative meetings and documenting progress toward and revisions to their implementation plans so that these documents could be shared broadly via web-based communication.

The importance of distributing leadership for pathways into schools and classrooms was also frequently noted. District stakeholders suggested the need for a strategic balancing act to avoid heavy-handed implementation — described by one stakeholder as ramming reform down teachers' throats — while also avoiding too light a touch that may be marginalized by teachers as optional and/or ephemeral.

Establishing broader community buy-in and input

District respondents insisted that the need for building stronger coalitions and opportunities for community ownership and voice in this initiative was also paramount — focusing on political forces, community advocates, parents and students, and industry partners to provide support and stability to the initiative.

One district leader said that his plan was not only to "rock the boat" in his district, but to create new anchor points for the ship in many harbors because he realized the fleeting nature of educational reform. As one ConnectEd coach said: "You have to look at a way that the community has a role to sustain [multiple pathways] over time. You need a sustainable coalition."

Business engagement, political engagement, and industry advisory councils around particular industries were seen as ways of ensuring the success of this type of reform. For local businesses, this could mean showing them how (free) student workers in a difficult economy could benefit them. For politicians, it might mean presenting multiple pathways to the local mayor or a congressperson by framing it as future economic development and more productive citizenry.

Coalition building appeared to be more critical in larger districts than smaller ones because of the greater number of competing priorities, according to interview respondents. One set of district leaders described how industry was the real driver for multiple pathways reform in their district because their community didn't have an adequately skilled workforce. The district respondents also suggested that getting students to share

their interest in and excitement for pathways was vital to leveraging buy-in among teachers, parents, and the broader school community.

Several district respondents acknowledged that while offering valuable perspectives, external voices could also present major challenges. One district leader warned, "There's a lot of people that want to serve an advisory function, but the work is not really going to fall on their shoulders." This leader indicated that while the district was certainly soliciting a broad community perspective in the planning process, they put more emphasis on the "insider" perspective at school sites and in the district to create the implementation plan.

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TECHNICAL/OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES OF PATHWAY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVEMENT

The third large category of challenges that emerged from interview respondents was around the operational and structural decisions associated with creating a coherent, aligned system of pathways. This included:

- 1. The challenges of time
- 2. Prioritizing and aligning essential elements of professional development
- 3. The difficulties of work-based learning

The challenges of time

It seems that the short time frame of the planning phase limited two important processes for change. One was getting people to think about how existing pathways are functioning in relation to the multiple pathways vision, and the second was to consider how to bring new pathways into the fold. Respondents noted that systemic change is a process, and as such, a few months was not enough time to establish a plan to overcome their well-entrenched structures. They felt it had to be done in stages over a period of time using communication, cooperation, and collaboration.

Similarly district respondents acknowledged challenges they anticipated emerging during the implementation stage. This included trying to find sufficient planning time for teachers as well as their community coalition, addressing the complex mechanics of master schedule, and locating time for district personnel to collaborate with site leadership.

Prioritizing and aligning essential elements of professional development

Interview respondents recognized that there would need to be significant teacher professional development in order to implement multiple pathways to scale. The issue of how to schedule professional development for teachers and how to do it so that all people are aligned was a challenge often mentioned. One ConnectEd district coach referred to an increasing awareness of some of the key structures and systems that need to be put in

place to support a substantive shift in classroom instruction. He referenced a set of "big rocks" that need to be addressed in order for this reform to work. "It's around flexible scheduling, common planning time, teacher engagement and buy-in, and professional development."

Another ConnectEd district coach also referred to the challenge of applying professional development in the classroom. "You don't magically just create projects and they just happen one day; that takes a lot of thought and planning. [Teachers] can't be that strong if they're not really having common planning time."

The difficulties of work-based learning

The difficulties of arranging work-based learning (WBL) for students, particularly in geographically large districts was another theme that surfaced. Transportation to and from WBL was difficult in districts where students didn't have cars. Another district leader recounted how they had to go outside of their district to locate a hospital that would give their students internships because the local hospital was not interested in taking on students. Liability insurance reasons, along with worker's compensation, were often-cited operational problems.

One ConnectEd coach mentioned that he was worried about the number of WBL learning opportunities that districts will need to have. Would businesses open up their doors to all these students?

Identifying Implications for District Leadership Professional Development

he undertaking of a system of multiple pathways presents both opportunities and challenges to school districts, particularly in the planning phase. In general, the ten ConnectEd planning districts were perceived as taking this planning phase very seriously. Most appeared to be using the ConnectEd guiding principles and core components of multiple pathways as cornerstones for development. From the categories and subcategories of normative, political, and operational challenges identified by the respondents in the SRN interviews, three areas for SRN/ConnectEd support emerged strongly.

Professional development about clear systems of regular communication and messaging

The issues brought up repeatedly by interviewees in the normative challenges seem to cluster around communication — who believes what, who knows what, who speaks for the work, etc. Misunderstandings of definitions, of vision and responsibilities, and of agreed-upon courses of action can abound when the communication and messaging systems are not thought-out and implemented carefully. Skepticism can proliferate when it is not countered by consistent and multiple messaging.

Opportunities to observe/interact with working models of distributed leadership and capacity building

The interviewees were candid in recognizing that multiple pathways require a dramatic change in the classroom, and therefore a proportional dramatic change in the behaviors and political will of central office and service departments. The messaging referred to the first implication needs to come, consistently, from multiple aspects of the district. Because this type of distributed responsibility and ownership may not be common practice in districts now, the districts involved in the ConnectEd network need to have opportunities to see it in place, to talk about it, to try it out with others.

Demonstrations of the integrated nature of academic and career learning in multiple pathways instruction

The interviewees' reports of the traditional dichotomy of academic and career training can be mitigated by examples and demonstrations of effective integrated pathways — examples in operation that break the mold. Participating districts need to learn about, but also see and try out, instructional practices in multiple pathways classrooms that dispel the dichotomous thinking.

Applying Major Lessons to the Design of the District Leadership Series

he challenges surfaced through the SRN interviews provide a challenge of their own to SRN and to ConnectEd — to responsibly listen to what the district respondents had to say, and to what the ConnectEd coaches reported as their observations — and then to incorporate those resulting needs into the professional development opportunities of the two-year implementation phase of the Irvine grant. This brief section highlights how the District Leadership series for 2009-11, co-constructed by SRN and ConnectEd, was designed to directly address the needs identified by the interview participants. The following are examples of how major "deliverables" from SRN/ConnectEd in the District Leadership Series would address the challenges posed by the districts themselves.

The District Leadership Institute at Stanford in July 2009 featured presentations by Stanford Graduate School of Business professors on communication and messaging. Following the presentation by Rao, participating districts constructed their own 100-day communication plans on multiple pathways, taking advantage of the extended team work time to do this. These 100-Day Plan conversations were facilitated by ConnectEd district coaches and SRN staff.

The residency opportunities in 2009-11 hosted by participating districts will allow district teams from each of the districts to focus on a particular area of identified need. For example, the residency in November 2009 in Long Beach provided concrete examples of distributed leadership, in the way that the district has conceptualized it for multiple path-

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ways. Participants were able to talk with role-alike members of the Long Beach team in order to see their processes and perspectives on distributed leadership. Each residency also includes time in pathway classrooms that demonstrate emerging practices according to the ConnectEd Pathway Certification tool. People cannot change what they cannot see and feel.

Four upcoming practitioner-responsive knowledge briefs will focus on high leverage content areas that will increase shared understanding and communication. For example, the first in the series of briefs for 2009-10 will address current thinking on distributed leadership, plus examples from within the six implementation districts themselves.

This series of interviews and subsequent analysis process have highlighted a consistent set of challenges facing the ten districts that are part of this initiative. Though there are deep normative, political, and technical challenges, there are also numerous opportunities for change. With the support of district coaches and partner organizations, these districts and communities have the potential of truly challenging the status quo and implementing a new high school model that can support *all* students for success in college and careers.

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