A Systems Approach to Creating an Ecology of Equity in a High-Poverty School District

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About This Series

This series of field-facing memos describes promising assessment for learning practices. The series examines the various ways in which Assessment for Learning Project grantees are using, adapting, and creating assessment practices oriented to learning. To see the full series, please visit *https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/library/publications/Assessment_for_Learning_Project*

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The Assessment for Learning Project (ALP) is a multi-year grant program and field-building initiative designed to fundamentally rethink the roles that assessment can and should play to advance student learning and improve K–12 education in the United States. If assessment is to become a lever for improving individual students' opportunities and capacities to learn, then assessment must also become a lever for achieving more equitable education outcomes. Led by the Center for Innovation in Education (CIE) at the University of Kentucky in partnership with Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC), the ALP project aims to develop the field's professional capacity to design and assess learning experiences in ways that simultaneously promote meaningful and equitable student learning. This memo highlights the ongoing work of the Sunnyside Unified School District (SUSD) to create an ecology of equity by developing a school system that fosters a belief in each person's capacity to learn and increases students' opportunities for success by helping students take responsibility for their own learning through the use of evidence.

The Sunnyside Unified School District (SUSD) in Tucson, Arizona is changing the conditions under which students learn by creating multilevel professional learning opportunities for adults in the district. Located in a culturally and linguistically rich community, SUSD is surrounded by two First Nations and shares a border with Mexico. Most students in Sunnyside (84%) identify as Hispanic/Latinx, are of Mexican heritage, and are low income.[1] Leaders in SUSD are committed to ensuring that its students will graduate high school being college, career, and community ready. The district's mission is "to develop students who have a strong sense of identity, purpose, and agency so that students leave SUSD as effective learners who act with purpose to achieve the conditions they desire in their own and others' lives."[2] To realize this goal, the superintendent, Steve Holmes, works closely and collaboratively with the chief academic officer (CAO) who oversees curriculum and instruction and the chief school officer (CSO) who oversees principals and the operation of its 21 schools. Together, these district administrators work closely to support, develop, and strengthen the leadership of principals, a cadre of instructional coaches, and a growing number of teacher leaders in schools.

SUSD believes that the quality of leadership in each school is a critical condition for creating an ecology of equity in Sunnyside. An earlier memo in this series told the story of how one school in SUSD, Summit View Elementary School, was led by a learning-oriented and equity-minded principal who was developing a school culture where adults regularly give feedback to each other in order to cultivate higher expectations for student and teacher learning. That principal was supported by a team of central office administrators. This memo describes that team and tells their story—how, over the past several years, to better educate their 16,000 students, they have introduced formative assessment knowledge and practice to teachers and school administrators through the creation of system-wide professional learning structures that introduce, strengthen, and spread pedagogical shifts in all 21 of their schools.[3]

Why Assessment for (Rather Than of) Learning is Needed

Most educators recognize that standardized tests are inadequate for knowing how to improve student performance and teaching practice. Many would also agree with researcher David Conley (2015) who observed, "Over the past ten years, educators have learned the distinction between summative and formative assessments" (p. 27). Yet, Linda Darling-Hammond, Gene Wilhoit, Linda Pittenger (2014), David Conley (2015), and others have argued that educators still need to deepen their assessment knowledge and use a broader range of assessments in order to prepare students adequately for college, career, and life. They point to recent research that has identified "a much more comprehensive, multi-faceted, and rich portrait

Big Ideas and Insights from This Memo

- Creating the conditions for a coherent, system-wide culture of learning—such as developing systemwide structures that generate knowledge for practice and strengthen the quality of relationships among people that promote learning—is central to developing an ecology of equity.
- Changing the system of schooling in high-poverty communities requires leaders at every level of the system who are committed to equity and to learning how to grow students' opportunities for success.
- Leaders at all levels of the system must engage deeply in learning the work in order to be able to affect teacher beliefs and practices.
- District systems need to find ways to notice students' strengths and listen to students' interests and needs, give students agency in their learning, and engage students in using evidence of their learning to guide their education, thereby repositioning students in district efforts to change educational practices.

of what constitutes a college-ready student," and argue that we now know adequate preparation for college, career, and life will require "much more than content knowledge and foundational skills in reading and mathematics" (Conley, 2015, p. 12). Thus, they describe the increasing importance for students to know how to handle assignments or tasks that do not have one right answer, to raise pertinent questions, to gather additional information, to reason with evidence, and, ultimately, to make judgments in complex and dynamic situations.

Developing such abilities in youth will help students engage in what they are learning and have ample opportunity to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to engage successfully with complexity. Standardized assessments neither teach nor measure such skills. Therefore, to help students be well prepared to succeed in college, career, and life, a broad range of assessments and instructional practices are needed that develop students' abilities to think deeply, to reason with evidence, to make connections across subjects, and to formulate meaningful questions. Providing access to assessments that measure ambitious learning and supporting teachers to use these assessment approaches to help students learn are also important levers for equity.

ALP Grantees are Developing Assessment for Learning Practices

Given the significant need for the development and use of assessments that promote and measure more complex student-learning outcomes, ALP has awarded grants to a group of organizations—including individual schools, charter school organizations, a state department of education, public school districts, and intermediary organizations—that are developing assessments and assessment practices that foreground learning. In its unique approach to grantmaking, ALP actively supports its grantees and the organizations they serve to continue to learn in and from their individual and collective assessment for learning work. The grantees featured in this and other memos in this series were selected with ALP's assistance and represent the full range of grantee types in the project. The aim is to identify and observe promising assessment for learning practices in use by grantees, learn about the development and implementation of these practices, and consider to what extent these practices advance ALP's learning agenda.

Growing an Ecology of Equity in a District

Over the past number of years, SUSD has reimagined the student's fundamental relationship to learning and school. Leaders have focused educators' attention on formative assessment practices, reallocated resources, and introduced professional learning structures that bring more attention to and support for the instructional shifts that are needed in classrooms to help students develop the skills and dispositions to become purposeful and self-directed learners. This systemic approach to district-wide learning has helped teachers make these necessary shifts in their teaching and helped administrators to make complementary shifts to leading learning in schools.

Developing purposeful learners who have a strong sense of identity and agency is the educational mission of Sunnyside. Superintendent Holmes, who attended kindergarten through twelfth grade in Sunnyside where his grandmother still lives, returned to the district as superintendent in 2014 to "advance [teaching and learning] in deeper ways for our students." He brought a deep commitment to make teaching and learning in the district a means for achieving equity. He also brought a proclivity for developing strong, caring relationships with students and adults:

> Part of my thinking [about formative assessment]…has always rested on this whole construct of agency for students. What I've learned…is that what we value in high-poverty schools is a very *compliant* student who can do things that are being asked of them in ways that comply with a certain norm or standard….[I] have always felt like the student's voice…has never really mattered [the way it should]…. More importantly, [I] have seen multiple generations of students leaving systems like ours without a lot of skills to have a really great post-secondary experience…. Agency has always been at the center of how I think about a theory of action that actually produces students who have the skills to take charge of their own learning in their own lives.

For Holmes, helping students develop the skills to take charge of their own learning in their own lives is at the center of establishing an equitable education system in Sunnyside.

Equity and Agency Beliefs

Holmes's tenacious commitment to achieving an equitable and excellent education for each Sunnyside student undergirds SUSD's approach. High-poverty communities are complex environments in which to develop cultures of equity and excellence. High-poverty districts are more likely to use prescriptive curriculum programs that narrow students' opportunities to think creatively and analytically, write in a variety of genres, conduct research, make oral arguments, and reason with evidence (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Schools and school systems often fail students in low-socioeconomic communities. This happens in numerous ways: by "subtracting students' culture and language" (Valenzuela, 2018), by neglecting to teach culturally-relevant curricula (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2000; Duncan-Andrade, 2007), by having low expectations for student performance (Delpit, 2012), and by maintaining structural and cultural systems that protect privilege and create barriers that impede efforts to improve the achievement of minority students (Noguera, 2001). Until recently, the mediocrity in Sunnyside's school had been acceptable. Not anymore.

Holmes leads Sunnyside with an expectation for excellence and a belief in students' capacity for success. He is also aware of the particular challenges that exist in low-socioeconomic districts. Teacher turnover is also more prevalent than in higher-income districts. Holmes said, "Every school in SUSD struggles to find "high-quality teachers who are here for the right reasons." Also, teaching low-achieving, low-socioeconomic status students is hard. The salary in these districts is often lower and the workplace conditions tend to be less supportive than in more affluent school districts (Bryk, 2010). For all these reasons, growing an ecology of equity and excellence in high-poverty school districts like Sunnyside requires identifying the many complicated and entangled obstacles to equity—and then doing something about them.

Improving Instruction at Scale

In SUSD, the leaders are focused on instructional improvement through the use of formative assessment—with the goal that principals, teachers, and students use evidence to advance learning while it is underway. Holmes works closely and collaboratively with both the CAO and CSO who have codeveloped a multi-tiered leadership team that meets weekly. Their weekly meetings focus on learning together in order to support others (e.g., principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders) to be able to provide the leadership know-how to create schools in which every student becomes more self-directed, knowledgeable, and engaged in his or her

learning. Their systems approach to creating an ecology of equity is characterized by five tenets: (1) there is no hierarchy in learning; (2) learning occurs by doing the work; (3) the focal work is creating learning experiences for everyone that are learner-centered and purposeful; (4) knowledge resources, including assessments, must be selected strategically with the aim of influencing the instructional core; and (5) multilevel social learning structures strengthen relationships and support the purposeful use of knowledge while developing local capacity for using knowledge resources. Knowing how to support each teacher to make necessary shifts in his/her instruction in order to provide students with more equitable and meaningful opportunities to learn requires a systemic approach to district-wide learning.

Strategic Selection of Knowledge Resources

SUSD has partnered with researchers Nancy Gerzon and Bob Montgomery at WestEd, an ALP grantee, to participate in a series of blended online courses designed to help teachers integrate formative assessment practice into daily instruction. Formative assessment practices are the processes by which teachers and students gather and interpret evidence of student learning and plan next steps for learning. The online courses are intended to help schools move away from a heavy reliance on teacher-directed instruction. The idea is that, as teachers incorporate formative assessment practices into their instruction, they create classroom cultures with supportive norms and structures where students are taught to monitor and direct their own learning. In such a learning environment where students are simultaneously supported and challenged, they become more self-directed and purposeful learners.

In 2017, seven schools in Sunnyside had groups of teachers participating in WestEd's digital learning modules on formative assessment, Student Agency in Learning (SAIL). Summit View Elementary School was one of them. Simultaneously, the district was also "dabbling" with using its own form of Instructional Rounds, which are described by Elizabeth City, Richard Elmore, Sarah Fiarman, and Lee Teitel (2009) as an improvement practice that "cuts across the boundaries of individual classrooms and schools…[and supports the] creation of strong lateral relationships within and between schools" focused on developing a coherent instructional culture (p. 37). The district called their Instructional Rounds "Cadre Walks" which they used to observe formative assessment processes during instruction and students' evidence of learning. The quality of instruction and the sorts of learning opportunities provided to students were on the minds of central office administrators. Test scores in the district were low, and administrators recognized that "students need access to higher level learning opportunities." As Sunnyside administrators visited schools, they noticed improved student-centered instructional approaches occurred in classrooms where teachers were participating in the SAIL course.

Because administrators were thinking deeply about how to improve teachers' instruction in all schools, Holmes said, "it became clear" that SAIL "was something that we could launch [and it]…actually matched a lot of what we were already trying to do." He valued how the SAIL course engaged teachers in the principles of providing feedback to students and saw an opportunity to use this blended, online learning course to develop educators' capacity in SUSD to create greater levels of student agency in the classroom. Driven by "a strong belief in the work," Holmes worked with the CAO and CSO to plan strategic ways to introduce cohorts of teachers, instructional coaches, and school leaders to the principles of formative assessment, student agency, and giving (and receiving) meaningful, constructive feedback.

Making Formative Assessment Knowledge Accessible

SUSD decided to enroll the entire Curriculum and Instruction team in the SAIL course. These administrators, along with the CAO and her directors, meet weekly to discuss course concepts and determine how best to support school leaders in this formative assessment work. Guided by their strong beliefs that everyone needs to learn and that learning occurs by doing the work, district administrators also enrolled all principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches in SAIL. The district's vision for providing students with more equitable and meaningful opportunities to learn involved creating system-wide social learning structures to support everyone at all levels of the district to engage in learning through doing the work.

In addition to providing access to formative assessment knowledge for administrators, coaches, and groups of teachers in a few schools, SUSD wanted to encourage entire schools to participate in the SAIL course. By 2019, 16 of SUSD's 21 schools were fully implementing SAIL. District administrators established a teacher leader program to involve some teachers from every school in SAIL. Teacher leaders are selected by their school site and receive a stipend for completing the course and supporting the facilitation of formative assessment work across the site. These teachers then become the Lead Learners in their schools. One rationale for the Lead Learner program, according to Holmes, was the desire to develop "a critical mass [of teachers] who have actually engaged in the course." As of 2019, every school has designated Lead Learners who are taking one of the SAIL courses. Their learning experiences (shared with the CAO in reflection journals) provide useful information to the district about how, and with what support, teachers in SUSD learn these new practices. Lead Learners' knowledge of how to use formative assessment in their classrooms makes them knowledgeable colleagues who can help their peer teachers implement and deepen formative assessment practice through collaboration and modeling. Lead Learners may also increase other teachers' interest in engaging in these practices. Eventually, Lead Learners will also host "lab" classrooms to support their peers' learning.

Creating Connected, Multilevel Social Learning Structures

As SUSD invested in opportunities for educators in different roles to take the online formative assessment courses, the leaders also created structures where educators could collaboratively engage in the work and learn together while seeking to use their formative assessment knowledge in their classrooms and in their schools. A key strategy for changing instruction at scale in SUSD was the investment in ongoing opportunities for site administrators to gain practice in the use of the formative assessment knowledge that is provided in the SAIL course. The primary way site administrators practice using—and, in so doing, further developing—their knowledge of formative assessment practices is during their monthly Cadre Walks.

The Multilevel Structure of Cadre Walks

Cohorts of principals, instructional coaches, and district administrators gather each month at a different school to participate in a Cadre Walk. They visit classrooms together to observe learning, discuss what they have noticed, and to make connections to formative assessment concepts. Cadre Walks are jointly led by the district CAO and the CSO who explain that classrooms are used as labs to deepen everyone's learning. Classrooms are selected randomly, sometimes by drawing teachers' names out of a hat.

When Cadre Walks first began several years ago, principals' inclinations were to select

their very best teachers to observe. Principals also tended to "explain away and defend" the particular observed instructional practices. Principals made excuses for teachers based on uncontrollable variables like class size. These human tendencies, however, prevented meaningful discussion from occurring about how to improve instruction and principals' practices.

The CAO and CSO knew that, in order for the Cadre Walks to become sites where meaningful conversation about how to use formative assessment to support more purposeful and engaged student learning could occur, they would need to create the conditions where principals and assistant principals were comfortable talking about the instructional practices that needed to change. They would also need to create enough psychological safety among the group for leaders to talk about their own missteps in leading and their own learning needs (Edmondson, Bomer, and Pisono 2001). To create conditions that were more conducive to learning and risk-taking, the CAO said they reminded principals that the purpose of Cadre Walks is to learn. "We just flat out said, [one of our norms is] not defending practice. Everyone is in this together. Everybody is learning together." The CAO recounted their words to principals after listening to their classroom debriefs:

> We noticed that we felt this need to explain away and defend what we're really looking at, and there's no place for it. We are not going to learn as long as our mindset is that way.

By reiterating that the purpose of their work was "to learn together," principals began to develop a set of individual and collective behaviors that could genuinely support learning. These behaviors included honest, vulnerable reflections; acknowledging their own learning needs; connecting what they noticed in their classroom to content in the online SAIL course; and brainstorming meaningful feedback to teachers. Developing ways of learning together is also difficult for teachers, which means principals need to create the conditions at their school sites that are conducive to teachers developing learning behaviors with each other.

Learning Conversations Form the Center of the Cadre Walks

During a Cadre Walk in November 2019, principals practiced gathering evidence of teachers' use of formative assessment. This Cadre Walk was conducted after principals completed the SAIL module focused on teachers' processes of gathering students' evidence of learning during a lesson. In classrooms, principals looked for teachers' use of evidence-gathering strategies with their students. They were learning to notice what these strategies look like during instruction and how to give feedback to teachers to advance and strengthen their use of formative assessment strategies. Prior to entering the classrooms, principals were asked, "What are you paying attention to when you walk into a classroom?" Asking principals to give forethought to what they would pay attention to when they observed instruction reinforced the module's goals to develop noticing, which is a critical formative assessment skill.

When principals stepped out of a classroom, they huddled together in a circle to discuss what specific practices they had noticed. For example, after observing a research lesson in a seventh-grade classroom, one principal said, "Students appeared clear about *what* they were supposed to be doing but only some seemed to understand *why*." Other colleagues agreed. The CSO connected these observations to formative assessment practice when she said, "I'm wondering if the teacher is collecting evidence [of what students are learning]. There were lots of opportunities for the students who were finished to

give feedback to their peers." Adding to this observation, another principal said, "There was a lot of waiting around for the teacher to come around [to each group of students]." After several more observations, the facilitators asked, "What is the entry point to giving feedback to this particular teacher?" They discussed possible entry points openly. No excuses were made on behalf of the teacher; no reassurances or criticisms were given to that teacher's principal. Quickly, they agreed that providing this teacher with evidence of her own practice might help her move forward in her efforts to gather evidence of student learning during a lesson. One suggested helping this teacher begin to use peer feedback loops with students. Thinking about how to constructively convey information to this teacher, another principal said, "It is important to validate the work that the teacher is doing and then give the teacher a push." This practice continued throughout the Cadre Walk, with part of their conversation following each classroom observation including ways to provide feedback to that particular teacher. Attention was given to constructing feedback in a manner in which the teacher could hear, understand, and then be able to use the feedback to make adjustments to his or her teaching.

The principals visited four different classrooms and their conversations followed a similar pattern. After spending ten minutes in a math class, the principals were quick to share what they noticed: "The students were in groups but working in isolation." They also noticed that the learning goal was unclear. One principal noticed a discrepancy between the learning goal and the teacher's feedback to students. He said, "If the learning goal was about understanding the math concept, the teacher's feedback was about completion of the task." The principals were in agreement. Then, they discussed how to give feedback to this teacher, who the instructional coach and school principal characterized as a proud teacher who is often unaware of how her in-the-moment instructional decisions affect students' opportunities to learn.

Using a Conversation Routine to Collect Evidence of Principals' Learning

After visits to all four classrooms were complete, the principals were asked what they learned from their visits that day. One principal said "intentionality" stood out to him as really mattering in his efforts to lead this learning work back at his school. Another principal elaborated on that idea and said, "intentionality around the learning instead of task completion." A third principal said that what stood out to him was the need to "undo ego-centered feedback" at his school where he thought feedback often either praises or criticizes an individual. He said this undoing of ego-centric feedback was a necessary "re-wiring" in order to help his teachers focus on the formative assessment practices that they need to develop. A fourth principal commented on the central tendency for teachers to stay in control of the learning agenda: "Teachers still create the learning targets; we don't involve the kids." The facilitators of the session listened.

This routine of principals articulating their individual learning from the morning's observation experience provided an informal opportunity for the facilitators to gather evidence about where the principals were in their own understanding of how to lead this instructional improvement work with teachers at their sites. Being able to see these formative assessment principles in the midst of instruction that the cadre of principals recounted is surprisingly difficult to do. After listening, one of the facilitators offered this thought: "You have to know your teachers. School site leadership walkthroughs are important to do. And, just as you need to know where your teachers are

in their learning trajectory, we need to know where you are so that we know how to support you." Her co-facilitator said, "I struggled today to stay on formative assessment." With this acknowledgment, she modeled that she, too, is learning in and from these Cadre Walks. She also said, "We *need* to stay focused and grounded in the core of our formative assessment work." Her statement was a call to everyone in the group to help maintain this focus.

The CAO reiterated to the principals the collective need to understand the formative assessment work more deeply. She prodded the principals to go beyond seeing just the mechanics of formative assessment on display in classrooms and encouraged them to instead look for evidence of student agency and learning.

During their Cadre Walks, the cohorts of principals, assistant principals and coaches remains the same all year. This consistency of membership, along with conducting Cadre Walks in everyone's school, helps to develop a level of honesty and safety in the group, which makes it more possible for the leaders to learn together and in front of each other. The leadership of this public learning is provided by the CAO and CSO who model learning behaviors in the group, such as asking questions and reflecting on their need to continue learning. By making their learning transparent to others, they demonstrate the adage that there is no hierarchy in learning. They also support others' learning by asking questions. In these ways, the Cadre Walks fulfill their learning purpose, which one principal described this way: "We are working to align our formative assessment practices across the district and [to be] diligent about the feedback we give."

Related Challenges Worth Considering

A central feature of an ecology of equity is that learning must take place at every level of the system. To create an ecology of equity in a school district (especially a high-poverty district) fundamentally means repositioning the students to be at the center of the learning work—and usually students are quite far removed from the center of learning in schools. In order to place students at the center of their own learning, the relationship between teacher, student, content, and assessment must change. For instance, students and their learning strengths, interests, and needs must guide the selection of and engagement with content. Furthermore, supporting a different relationship among students, teacher, and content requires creating school conditions that support both teachers and students to navigate the development of such a changed relationship. Thus, creating these school-based conditions requires creating analogous conditions in the district so that principals are supported to learn new ways of thinking about and conducting their work as site leaders. The Cadre Walks are designed to help principals and other leaders learn new skills and ways of doing their job.

A Lead Learner at a high school described the importance of principals understanding the significant challenges of learning how to change the relationship among students, content, and the teacher in the classroom. She said, "It's a difficult shift for students as much as it is for teachers because [students] are very acclimated to having information handed to them, and they don't really have to strive to obtain it." This Lead Learner said her involvement with the SAIL course had led her to give her high school students the autonomy to decide how they would like to approach learning content in her class. She explained how now she tells students what the learning goal is for the day—such as understanding how an author organizes an argument—and then lets the students, who are organized into small learning groups, determine how they will approach developing their understanding of that goal. Students, with

the teacher's input, also determine the success criteria for that day's learning goals. This teacher explained, "If students can't learn in the way that best suits them, then they're not going to learn as richly or as deeply as possible.…They're way more capable of making choices that are better suited for their needs than I am."

This teacher has altered her own instruction quite significantly to reposition the student in a decision-making role about his/her learning. In her role as Lead Learner in the formative assessment work at her high school, she is tasked with helping her teacher colleagues engage in developing a less teacher-centric approach to instruction. She works closely with a group of teachers who are learning to use formative assessment practices in their teaching and organizes opportunities for these teachers "to talk to each other and work on [using formative assessment] together." She said, "We have some people who are really excited about [formative assessment], and we have a lot of people who aren't.…" She identified several reasons why teachers at her school don't want to engage in this work. First, she said teachers consider formative assessment "another initiative that we're going to do for a year and then it's never going to happen again." The teachers' developmental process may reveal the deleterious effects of many years of initiative churn, which is especially common in low-socioeconomic districts. Teachers can learn to wait out the latest reform effort because, before too long, it will be replaced by something else. Lead Learners reported discovering that support from the site administrators is "much more valuable than you might assume." Their discovery validates the district's approach of emphasizing the importance of principals learning formative assessment practices. Principals who understand formative assessment practices signal to teachers that these practices are not going away. They also can support teachers' ongoing learning of how to incorporate these practices into their daily instruction in ways that contribute to achieving the district's goal for students to become purposeful learners with a strong sense of identity and agency.

A second obstacle to engaging in the formative assessment work she observed is that many past reforms in SUSD had "a lot of accountability pieces…that made teachers feel an additional burden." When leaders like Holmes arrive in a district, they inherit the history of previous change efforts, which can make their efforts toward improvement more difficult. Oftentimes, teachers are held accountable for changes without receiving adequate support for the learning they need to do to enact those changes (Elmore, 2018). Even though, in Sunnyside, administrators have invested heavily in opportunities for learning and have framed Sunnyside's formative assessment endeavor as a collective learning initiative, teachers, like many people, find change unpleasant because learning something new requires effort, uncertainty, and unlearning practices that are comfortable.

These challenges to creating an ecology of equity are learning challenges. Making system-wide change is complex because it involves learning simultaneously and continuously at different levels of the system. Writing about how to make instructional improvement at scale, Richard Elmore (2018) said:

> The fundamental problem is how to construct relatively orderly ways for people to engage in activities that have as their consequence the learning of new ways to think about and do their jobs, and how to put these activities in the context of reward structures that stimulate them to do more of what leads to large-scale improvement and less of what reinforces old pathologies of the existing structure (p. 87).

The challenge, then, in SUSD is to continue to support principals, instructional coaches, and Lead Learners as they design learning activities for others, especially those who find learning how to use formative assessment practices in their work difficult. Leaders in SUSD have developed an array of structured activities that, at their core, engage people in new ways of gathering and using evidence of learning to support instructional shifts. Even though they are making significant progress, systematically changing instruction in any district so that learning experiences are equitable and purposeful for students is long-term, steady work that requires perseverance and fortitude. The hard-won successes, however, will change lives.

Reflection Questions

The reflection questions are intended to spark consideration about how to approach instructional improvement at scale in order to achieve an equitable education for each student.

- In Sunnyside, the primary district-wide learning focus is to cultivate deep expertise in the use of formative assessment practices in order to develop students who have a strong sense of identity and agency. What is the primary learning focus in your district? And, what has your district done to create the conditions for a coherent, system-wide culture of learning about that focus?
- Sunnyside's systemic approach to learning involved creating multilevel structures in which educators in different roles engaged in learning-by-doing formative assessment. They were engaging in the process of formative assessment—observing, reflecting on progress, and using evidence to guide feedback and next steps. In your district, what (if any) opportunities are there for educators in different roles to learn-by-doing together? How are those opportunities organized? How often do teachers and administrators "walk the talk," using the practices they want students to experience?
- The district administrators highlighted in this memo sought to establish an environment where there was "no hierarchy in learning" and where the learning experiences were designed to be learner-centered and purposeful. What sorts of adult learning experiences exist in your district? Who leads these experiences? How are the learners' needs determined? Then, how are these needs used to inform the design and facilitation of the learning experience?
- In early rounds of Cadre Walks, the district administrative leadership team noticed that a mindset of defensiveness prevented deeper, authentic learning from occurring among participants. The CAO described naming those defensive behaviors when they occurred, reiterating the learning purpose of the Cadre Walks, and enumerating specific learning behaviors. Have you developed routines and practices that make the work of teaching and learning public and more visible? What norms, routines, and practices have you established to cultivate a culture of learning where people are vulnerable with one another? Have you observed defensive behaviors? And, if so, how have you responded?
- The superintendent in SUSD contends that the student's voice "…[needs to be] at the center" of how we think about a theory of action in school systems—especially systems that serve low-income, minority students—if we want to develop "students who have the skills to take charge of their own learning in their own lives." How does your district include the students' voices in the design and delivery of their education?

Endnotes

[1] During the 2018–19 school year, 80% of students in SUSD qualified to receive free or reduce-priced lunch and approximately 142 students (0.9%) were identified as homeless, according to the district website (https://stories.susd12.org/district). All schools in the district are Title 1 schools.

[2] See SUSD website, https://stories.susd12.org/district.

[3] Learning is viewed as a fundamentally social phenomenon by social learning theorists. For example, see Etienne Wenger, https://wenger-trayner.com/all/what-is-social-learning/.

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