

**Center for Research on the Context of Teaching
Stanford University**

CRC

**The Learning Partnership
Documentation**

**Final Report
*Summary***

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Overview

In 2002 the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation launched a national initiative to improve education for urban youth through a strategy of district system reform. *The Learning Partnership (TLP)* pursued a mission to develop district learning organizations through a collaborative partnership between the Foundation's national intermediary organizations and selected district partners. Its focus on district system reform, its conception of a high-performing district, and its principles for partnering with districts to achieve system change were grounded in a growing body of evidence concerning effective strategies for educational improvement.

The initiative involved three organizations as national intermediaries: the Center for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) of University of Pennsylvania and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) of Brown University served successively as *TLP* "capacity builders;" Stanford University's Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC) was "documenter." A national advisory group provided both technical support and guidance.

TLP intended to partner with 3-4 mid-sized urban districts over a course of 8-10 years in order to support each district's reform efforts and to test and refine a theory of systemic educational change through these local efforts. The time frame envisioned for district partnerships was based on evidence that education reform takes 3-5 years to take hold and result in improved student outcomes and the assumption that additional time is needed to ensure sustainability of organizational and instructional improvements. With counsel from its advisors during fall 2002, the MacArthur Foundation selected Baltimore Public Schools (BPS) and Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) as first partners. Conditions in these districts suggested that they were ready to benefit from the partnership model, and the districts' contrasting contexts were potentially fruitful for drawing early lessons from the reform work. The districts would benefit from partnering work with *TLP*'s capacity-building organizations and would receive approximately \$2 million annually in support of the co-designed system reform work.

The partnership with Baltimore was put on hold when its superintendent left the district during the planning year. The partnership in Minneapolis was active as designed for nearly three years through the spring of 2005 and for an additional two years without support from an external intermediary organization. Sustained funding to Minneapolis enabled the district to continue its development of high quality professional development in literacy and mathematics that was launched through the TLP initiative.

The Minneapolis partnership made headway on several important outcomes sought by the initiative:

- The district's professional development system was redesigned to offer higher-quality learning opportunities in mathematics and literacy instruction for teachers;

- Teacher leadership for instructional improvement in these areas developed within the central office and in schools through the partnership and the expert consultants it brokered;
- Instructional coherence in math and literacy increased in the district as teachers and principals developed a common knowledge base and focus for their improvement efforts.

The partnership struggled because of conditions that were unanticipated and uncontrollable and because of the weak knowledge base for building the sort of partnership that *TLP* envisioned:

- Leadership turnover on both sides challenged the partnership to continually build trust, shared understandings, and commitment to a reform agenda;
- *TLP*'s theory of action, which specified key elements of an effective district learning system, was developed by the external partner and was never communicated fully or owned by district administrators and leaders;
- *TLP* lacked policy and tools for negotiating partners' roles and responsibilities and guiding this new form of partnering practice;
- The partners did not develop a system for evaluating their co-designed work and so lacked a vehicle for learning from and improving their efforts;
- Lacking a knowledge base to ground a *theory of changing districts through a partnership*, *TLP* was charting new territory and all parties in the initiative struggled over issues of strategic entry points, developmental process, and the external partners' role.

In spite of and because of these struggles, *TLP* contributes lessons and hypotheses for practice and research regarding challenges and potentials for developing a district learning system through a foundation-funded partnership:

- Collaborative leadership and professional networks between system levels is key to instructional improvement; the "middle system" is a lynchpin for system-wide change;
- Unequal school capacity to benefit from district instructional improvement resources calls for differentiated supports that allocate intensive resources to low-capacity schools;
- Diverse external expertise is needed to build instructional reform capacity in a district, and roles shift as internal capacity develops;
- A partnership to lead district reform must establish normative agreements about authority relationships and continually navigate power dynamics entailed in a serious system reform effort;
- Documentation to inform district reform work must be grounded in system leaders' commitments to tracking change on indicators of their progress.

This report elaborates the conceptual groundings for *The Learning Partnership*, the intended role of Documentation and our enactment of it; implementation experiences in Minneapolis, and lessons to be drawn from this short-lived experiment

The Learning Partnership's Conception

The Learning Partnership (TLP)'s theory of action for district system reform centered on a set of Elements that together describe district conditions for continually improving student achievement and closing achievement gaps. The theory also included a "co-design" principle for partnering between a district and an external organization to develop strategies and designs for system reform work. *TLP* set a timeframe of 8-10 years for the partnerships to ensure that significant and sustainable changes in district system conditions could be made. Documentation of the reform work and of its anticipated and unanticipated outcomes was integral to the initiative's learning agenda.

TLP's Elements. The set of Elements that formed *TLP*'s "theory of action" focused on three district conditions held to be essential for continuous improvement:

- collaborative leadership
- professional learning communities
- evidence-based practice at all levels of the system.

Other *TLP* Elements referred to district policies and conditions that leverage and support district change toward these practices:

- targeted professional development,
- incentives for learning and collaboration,
- reallocation of resources to support system learning,
- district focus and coherence around instructional improvement, and
- public engagement.

TLP's theory argued that district-wide improvement of student achievement occurs when professional communities of practice use evidence to make decisions about how to improve their practice and that system change to support this vision is implemented through collaborative leadership and public support. In this view, conditions at multiple levels of a district system work together to achieve ongoing system change and improved student outcomes.

TLP's co-design principle. *TLP* invested in a new conception for district reform partnerships that was grounded in evidence that district change is limited when an external organization brings in a model to be implemented or when it serves as technical assistant to a district's reform agenda. The co-design approach to district partnering was intended to build district ownership and accountability for system reform work, to create dialogue between knowledge from research and from reform practice, and to result in plans and change strategies that would be more effective since they were grounded in distributed expertise.

Documentation

The initiative invested in documentation as a vehicle for testing *TLP*'s theory of action and developing knowledge about district reform, as well as providing ongoing feedback to local partners. Since the initiative's conception was tested in just one district,

judgments about its wisdom and viability depend heavily upon the documentation and interpretation of implementation experiences in Minneapolis.

Data for *TLP's* experience in Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) come from observations of the partnership and its outcomes from Fall 2002 through Spring 2005. *Implementation and outcomes for TLP Elements* were documented at the central office level through observations and interviews focused on all facets of work co-designed by the partners and at the school level through two-year case studies of ten district schools that represented all grade levels and differed in baseline capacity. *Co-design processes* were documented through observations of planning work and repeated interviews with *TLP* capacity builders and district administrators, staff, and consultants involved in the reform work.

In developing this account of the initiative, the Documentation team was mindful of potential biases that could come from its inside role in *TLP's* organizational infrastructure and in district partnering relationships. Identification with the initiative might result in an overly-positive view of its merits and accomplishments; on the other hand, up close experience with struggles of partnering with districts could result in exaggerated attention to disappointments on both sides. Documenters used several strategies to ensure balance in the observations and lessons drawn from *TLP's* experience, including: use of qualitative and quantitative research standards for developing descriptive data, triangulating data to develop findings, and seeking review and interpretation of findings from district administrators and staff and from *TLP's* capacity builders over the course of the initiative. In addition, Advisory Board members provided quality control through individual reviews and a full-day meeting to discuss a draft of this report. This account represents the Documentation team's best efforts to achieve a thorough and balanced report on *The Learning Partnership*.

TLP Implementation and Outcomes in Minneapolis

The Minneapolis partnership launched its district reform work with a focus on targeted professional development (one of *TLP's* Elements). The partners co-designed a new professional development system that targeted math and literacy instruction, involved a cadre of teacher leaders from schools in designing and conducting summer institutes, engaged teacher teams from all district schools in a week-long institute, and included follow-up sessions and on-site work that was designed to build communities of practice working to improve instruction.

The initiative fell short of its goals for the Minneapolis partnership in that the system reform work was circumscribed and, although successful in many ways for its targeted goals, failed to significantly redirect the district toward *TLP's* vision of an effective district system. With a single district partner, it is possible only to focus on conditions in that particular district that mattered for the partnership's success and to draw lessons from what went well and not so well. Therefore it is important to be clear about the special context conditions of *TLP's* partnership with MPS.

District context challenges. Several context conditions limited the partners' ability to co-design additional system reform efforts and presented significant challenges for reform. For one, leadership instability in the district and in *TLP* undermined trust and collaboration between the partners. Over the course, there were three different superintendents, which created uncertainty over decision authority in the central office. Further, the third superintendent lacked commitment to the partnering work, demoted or moved administrators and staff who had been involved in the professional development institutes, and undermined district morale. The Minneapolis partnership also suffered from a change in *TLP*'s capacity building organizations during the second year; partnering relationships, shared understandings, and trust had to be developed anew.

Other conditions that constrained progress toward *TLP*'s vision were facets of district structure and culture that proved highly resistant to change. A strong tradition of school autonomy made it difficult for the district to implement centralized instructional policies. The district's system of special school programs, choice policy, and school partnerships with local business and philanthropic organizations posed special challenges to system coherence. The diversity of educational programs in the district systematically undermined instructional coherence and limited potential for system reform through central district policy and professional development. At the central office level, the organization was fragmented into the functional silos typical of large urban districts, but divisions among them were reinforced by philosophical disagreements about curriculum, instruction, and assessment; this made collaborative decision-making and action especially challenging.

The lack of a local intermediary organization to work with the district in implementing work co-designed with *TLP* partners turned out to be a significant liability and perhaps a fatal flaw in the partnership. This context condition placed enormous pressure on the national capacity building organization to provide technical support, and efforts to substitute other organizations from across the country was problematic when the partnership couldn't be nurtured on a regular basis. The intensity of partnering work that seemed to be required in Minneapolis was one factor that caused the Foundation to back off from its plan to add other partners to the initiative.

Despite all these challenges, *TLP* helped to develop the district's capacity for instructional improvement in math and literacy. Footprints of the partnership include *TLP* Elements beyond targeted professional development – especially growth in collaborative leadership between system levels and professional learning communities in schools.

District outcomes. *TLP* partners' work on MPS professional development reform developed district professionals' appetite and leadership for instructional improvement efforts; at the same time it had some unanticipated negative consequences that contribute lessons to the field. First, the co-designed summer institutes fostered an appetite for high quality learning opportunities among district teachers and administrators. After experiencing sustained, content-focused professional development with school grade-level teams, teachers came to expect this kind of district support for their learning. Institute participation nearly doubled in two years, with half of the teachers returning for a second year.

Second, district leadership at the middle level of the system developed through the institutes in ways that appeared to increase coherence between the central office and schools around content instruction. Teachers who were facilitators in the institutes became liaisons between their school community and the district's curriculum and instruction staff during the school year. This enhanced vertical communication in the system helped to establish accountability and support for implementing district designs for instruction and teacher learning.

Third, instructional coherence in mathematics and literacy increased through the institutes, particularly in mathematics where teachers and principals developed stronger commitment and ability to implement the district's elementary and middle school math programs. In literacy, the summer institutes spread ideas about student learning and strategies for reading instruction across district schools, building a common knowledge base that grounded the subsequent development of a district literacy framework.

An unanticipated consequence of the professional development reform was that some schools lacked the leadership and professional capacity needed to benefit from the institutes and its follow-up work. District schools that had weak principal leadership, poor coaching, and novice teacher communities were not able to take advantage of the rich learning opportunities that *TLP* afforded. Ironically, the reform may have deepened student achievement gaps in the district. The case of a "turnaround" school that we documented offers evidence of the kind and intensity of district support needed for qualitative changes in a school, including selection of a site administrator with strong interpersonal skills and connections to community resources, district administrator presence and support for change, fiscal resources to bring change agents into the school, and district validation of successful moves that create momentum for improvement. These kinds of system investments and incentives were essential to developing a weak school's capacity to benefit from a reformed professional development system.

Despite the partners' intention to lead system change on most *TLP* Elements through MPS professional development reform, other Elements were not systematically engaged through co-designed work and changes may not be sustainable. In effect, the partnership with Minneapolis did not provide a fair test of the initiative's theory of action. Nevertheless, the case is useful in suggesting principles to guide similarly ambitious system reform initiatives in education.

Lessons for the Field: Implementing an ambitious district reform vision

TLP's Elements put forth an evidence-based vision of effective district reform and defined critical foci for system reform. However, the Elements were not an effective organizing force for the district, nor did they constitute a theory of action for *how* a district can move effectively to achieve the vision. Lessons from the Minneapolis experience center on the question of how research-based knowledge of effective district practice might have driven the partners' reform work. They offer rudimentary principles for a theory of district change.

The initiative needs to communicate its reform vision across the system.
Minneapolis district partners had limited access to the knowledge that grounded the

initiative's Elements, and confusions over the focus and rationale for partnering work persisted at all system levels.

TLP should have worked more systematically to develop shared understandings with district leaders of the initiative's vision of a high-performing district. Documents and other tools could have been used to ensure that *TLP*'s theory of action – the eight Elements and evidence about how they operate together to continually improve teaching and learning – was featured as the initiative's vision for district reform. Regular conversations among core district staff and *TLP* capacity builders were needed to advance shared understandings and accountability for the ongoing district reform work.

System reform should focus on developing capacity across Elements. The MPS partnership focused on professional development to the neglect of other *TLP* Elements on which the district was particularly weak, such as coherence of instructional improvement efforts and public engagement. Success of the focused intervention depended upon prior capacity at all system levels: the central office units with least experience struggled most; schools weakest in leadership and professional community benefited least.

Closing student achievement gaps in this and similar districts requires systematic attention to inequalities in organizational capacity across the system. Improved student outcomes depend upon coherent, intensive, and sustained efforts focused on all of the conditions represented by *TLP* Elements.

Developing collaborative leadership between system levels is key to district reform. Literature on systemic reform initially focused on the alignment of curriculum and assessments at the top of the system as the primary lever for change. *TLP*'s theory of action saw the problem of change additionally as developing collaboration and coherent action among multiple levels of the system and between the system and communities. System reform in this view involves not just aligning policies and tools for coherent direction to schools, but also changing relationships between the district office and schools to develop coherent system reform action.

Experience in MPS provides evidence that capacity at the “middle” of the system is essential to changing relationships between the central office and schools. Teacher learning and change were greatest where there were strong interstitial units to carry messages, resources, and evidence between the district office and schools. The math team's greater readiness to lead professional development came from the infrastructure of informal teacher leadership that had developed through prior NSF grants.

System reform calls for customized support to individual schools. The experience in Minneapolis revealed that district capacity building efforts can exacerbate school differences in capacity to improve instruction if the change strategy treats all schools equally. In this case, all district schools were required to send teachers to the summer institutes; follow-up expectations were embedded in the professional development. Schools relatively strong on *TLP* Elements at the beginning of the reform work were able to take advantage of all facets of the district's new professional development

opportunities, while the weakest schools lacked a minimal level of leadership support and community strength to engage and sustain the work.

Explicit attention to between-school inequalities is essential to a district system reform. A theory of action to address between-school inequalities in capacity will go more deeply into instruction and more broadly into politics than *TLP*'s Elements signaled and that its national capacity builders could address.

Lessons for the Field: Co-design partnership as a change strategy

Although research on education reform points to the importance of forging a partnership between external and internal system actors, evidence from practice or research on how to do this is slim. *TLP*'s experiences in co-designing work with Minneapolis revealed challenges entailed in this partnering approach and suggest principles to guide future partnering practice in a district reform initiative.

A co-design partnership needs guidelines for partnering practice. Because a co-design approach to district reform departs from typical forms of partnership, it was not readily understood by district leaders nor easily enacted by initiative capacity builders. Clear definitions of authority domains for each party and operating guidelines were lacking at the start of the initiative, and questions about the appropriate and effective role of the national intermediary organization became a major concern of *TLP* leaders and issue for MPS administrators and staff over time.¹

Contractual agreements and guidelines are needed to scaffold the innovative co-design partnering relationships. Tools to support this understanding might include illustrations of how this model contrasts with the more conventional models and prompts for questions that the partners might ask of themselves and one another to avoid falling into the more familiar roles.

A viable partnership depends upon shared understandings of the reform vision. Minneapolis district partners had limited access to the knowledge base that grounded *TLP*'s vision, and the partnership provided few resources to advance shared understandings.

Such an initiative depends upon the development of shared understandings between external partners and district leaders about the vision and nature of their collaboration. Such understandings can be developed through documents and tools focused on particular elements, forums of teachers, administrators and staff, and community leaders that used media to convey the theory and its evidence base, and the co-design of an indicator system for tracking the system's change toward each Element. Regular conversations among core district staff and external partners are needed to advance shared understandings and accountability for the ongoing district reform work.

¹ A paper in progress by Cynthia Coburn provides an in-depth analysis of lessons learned from *TLP*'s co-construction approach to partnering between a district and external organizations.

Co-design system reform entails leading with district initiative to engage core problems. The MPS partnership focused on content areas for instructional improvement that were defined by consensus as important, but attended little to conditions in the central office that constrained progress across district schools or to school conditions that would inevitably limit their progress.

External partners need a theory of action for engaging all parts of the system in change and a design for how to help the district implement it. The evidence base from *TLP* and related district reform initiatives is not adequate to ground such a theory. Nevertheless, learning theory provides a general principle that dovetails with case observations from this initiative: development can be scaffolded by an agent who models and supports a shift in practice over time. Tailoring collaboration on system reform to district contexts entails detailed attention to local culture, between-school inequalities, and particular schools' needs. State and federal accountability policies drive a focus on low-performing schools, and external partners can help to design targeted efforts and to guide the change process in those schools.

District and external partners should continually assess and improve their practice. The theory of co-construction assumes that this arrangement will bring the best evidence to bear on problems of district change. The district brings local and practical knowledge to bear on design decisions, and external partners bring knowledge from research and expertise from external networks. However, this assumption was not always met in Minneapolis: sometimes neither partner was highly knowledgeable in a subject domain, and decision rules for judging the partnership's readiness to reach a particular design decision and seeking outside counsel were lacking.

District reform partners would benefit from having expectations and tools that prompt them to assess their individual and joint expertise for work in a particular area of district reform and to seek additional partners as needed.

Reform is a problem of political, cultural, and social change. Lack of attention to race and class during the Minneapolis reform work revealed how difficult it was for district leaders to name and address issues that pervaded the central office, schools, and community. This was notable especially since race was salient in district-community politics during the course of *TLP's* partnership. Silence around race politics seemed to paralyze district reform.

District reform is not just about technical change in the classroom or organizational redesign in the central office. It is also about race and class dynamics in urban school systems and the politics of district change. An external initiative might be an effective catalyst for addressing systemic inequalities, but only if its authority to engage all facets of the district is established at the start.

Lessons for the Field: national capacity for a district reform initiative

The MacArthur Foundation's decision to pursue an ambitious vision for system change that lacked a pre-specified design for implementation set the stage for all of *TLP*'s challenges and for the lessons it now offers the field. Among them are those that pertain to a foundation's decisions and investments. These lessons are distilled from *TLP* advisors' and Foundation officers' reflections on the initiative's experience and Documentation evidence from Minneapolis.

Getting started on significant, sustainable system change takes time and resilience.

District reform is messy work. It engages all levels of the system, an organizational culture that has developed over time in particular state and local contexts, layers of education reform history that shape leaders' thinking about external partnerships and effective practice, professional union leadership and politics, community leadership and politics, and relationships with local intermediary organizations and foundations. In order for an outside organization to engage effectively in a district partnership, it needs to develop knowledge and relationships that make it possible for them to build upon the strengths and address the weaknesses of the system.

A foundation's capacity to improve education at the district level includes its willingness to invest in developing intermediary organizations' knowledge and relationships with districts over several years, its taste for learning from the struggles that are inevitable during the early phases of a reform partnership, and its resilience in the face of setbacks. A district reform funding structure would invest in time for grantees to develop local knowledge and relationships essential to collaborative work, with a developmental view of partnering and system change.

National capacities should be evaluated in terms of initiative demands. The selection of national intermediaries for a district reform initiative should focus on the fit between leadership demands of the initiative and an organization's capacities. Because judgments are entailed in developing site-specific strategies and designs, the initiative's intermediary organizations require a strong knowledge base from practical experience and familiarity with research to effectively guide the work. They should be equipped to scaffold the district partners' understandings of system change by knowing the right questions to ask and having a repertoire of tools designed to support changes in thinking and practice.

Selection criteria for district partners should consider constraints on change. A district's readiness for reform partnering was a primary criterion for selecting *TLP* partners. In the selection of Minneapolis, emphasis was placed on superintendent leadership and local philanthropy; yet neither proved to be robust – the superintendent left the district, and local foundations were never seriously engaged in system reform. Conversely, some criteria on which Minneapolis had been rated as weak may have significantly inhibited change: lack of a local intermediary organization to support the partners' designs, a state with weak support for district improvement, and a strong local tradition of school autonomy.

A district reform initiative needs a strategy for managing superintendent turnover. *TLP's* heavy reliance on MPS's initial superintendent for making and authorizing decisions about district reform work limited the development of collaborative leadership intended by the initiative's vision for system reform. A local design group was formed in Fall 2002 but was never reconvened. The loss of Superintendent Johnson at the end of the partnership's first year was a blow to the partnership, since she both owned the district's vision for reform and managed all of the functional units that should have come together in the reform effort.

CEO turnover is endemic to large urban districts and inevitable during a sustained partnership of the duration *TLP* intended, yet top leadership is critical to the success and stability of a system reform initiative. Research-based knowledge concerning strategies for sustaining reform through leader succession is needed in education, since incentives seem to work in favor of new superintendents bringing in new ideas and initiatives and derailing existing ones. Evidence that civic capacity plays an important role in educational improvement suggests that actively engaging the school board and civic leaders in a system reform initiative is key to a sustainable district partnership.

Developing local and national knowledge for system reform requires a theory of action. *TLP* had an ambitious knowledge-development agenda and invested in a national documentation function that would both inform local reform practice and capture lessons across multiple sites. Experience in MPS revealed challenges of engaging district leaders in learning from evidence provided by the national documentation team. District administrators had not been engaged in developing the outcomes, indicators, and interpretations of data relevant to *TLP's* Elements and so lacked ownership of the evidence that might have informed their reform decisions.

A theory of action for knowledge development through a district reform initiative would provide a useful guide for documenters and district partners. Such a theory would include strategies through which external and district partners can develop shared conceptions of useful evidence and mechanisms for establishing timely feedback loops. A local documentation partner would be needed to support the ongoing use of evidence at all system levels.

The theory also would inform the initiative's design for knowledge development across district sites. It would consider trade-offs between breadth and depth of research on district reform to guide decisions about numbers of district partners and the nature of contrasts useful for comparative analysis. And it would consider the nature of cross-site evidence needed to support the development of strategies, tools, and practices for taking a system reform design to scale.

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The Learning Partnership underestimated the organizational and knowledge capacities needed to manage the implementation of its ambitious vision for district reform

and co-design approach to change. As an extended professional learning community, all of the *TLP* agents—the district, support organizations, documenters, advisory board members – felt challenged by the demands of the initiative. They also felt that the experience of doing, documenting, and advising on the partnership with Minneapolis significantly enhanced their capacity to support district system reform in the future. Hopefully, this account of the initiative’s work will extend its learning opportunities beyond those involved in the initiative