

# Lessons for Developing School and District Capacity to Transform Literacy Instruction: The Canterbury Learning Collaborative

## About this Brief

This retrospective study chronicles the progression of the Canterbury Learning Collaborative (CLC) which consisted of a small group of educators, mostly principals and teachers. With sustained support from outside funders, a network of schools came together regularly over a period of 10 years (2006–16) to learn with and from one another about how to strengthen their school leadership and teaching practices in order to improve student literacy. Over time, the central office learned from the CLC and developed district structures that supported changes to literacy instruction and school leadership across the district.

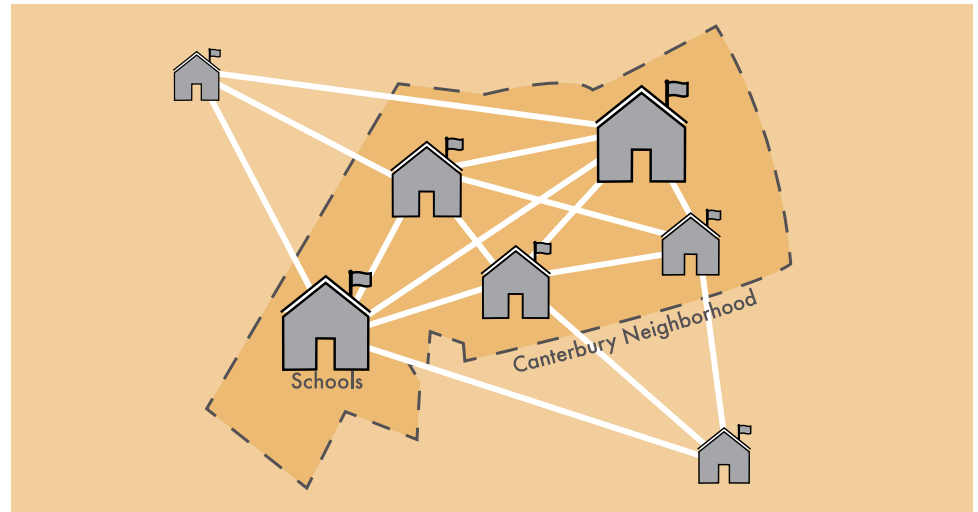
This project was funded by the S.H. Cowell Foundation. For more information and to read the papers, please visit the SCOPE web site.



Stanford Center for Opportunity  
Policy in Education  
505 Lasuen Mall  
Stanford, CA 94305

<http://edpolicy.stanford.edu>  
[scope@stanford.edu](mailto:scope@stanford.edu)  
650.725.8600

By Ann Jaquith, Stanford University



**T**his retrospective study chronicles the progression of the Canterbury Learning Collaborative (CLC), first within the Collaborative and then later within the district in which the CLC resided, and shows how its development has supported instructional change. The story of the CLC provides lessons about how to develop the needed capacity to lead instructional change. There are lessons for central office administrators, school principals, and coaches—as well as for funders interested in supporting school instructional change efforts.

The CLC consisted of a small group of educators, mostly principals and teachers, from a cluster of schools located in the Canterbury neighborhood of the Woodgrove Unified School District (WUSD).<sup>1</sup> The WUSD is a medium-sized, urban school district with approximately 50,000 students. Within the WUSD, Canterbury is a poor, working-class neighborhood with large numbers of immigrant families. Students attending schools in this neighborhood typically perform below the district average.

With sustained support from an outside funder, the Goodwork Foundation, educators from schools in the Canterbury neighborhood came together regularly over a period of 10 years (2006–16) to learn with and from one another about how to strengthen their school leadership and teaching

<sup>1</sup> With the exception of technical assistance providers, all organizations referred to in this report have been anonymized. Interview subjects are not named and locations are given pseudonyms to preserve the privacy of the participants and their organizations.

practices in order to improve their students' literacy. This network became known as the CLC. Three key groups of actors are particularly important to this story: the principals who formed the CLC during the period from 2006 to 2012, the foundation that supported the principals to do so, and the central office administrators who oversaw the schools, curriculum, and instruction.

### **The Progression of the CLC**

This brief describes the 10-year progression of the CLC in four phases: (1) Principals forge relationships, (2) Members lead learning, (3) District learns from the CLC, and (4) District leads learning. (See Figure 1., pages 4-5) It also summarizes the findings described in the full report, as well as some of the key lessons learned about leading instructional change at scale and the particular organizational levers that can support the development of instructional capacity in a district system. More detailed information about the study and how needed capacity for changing literacy instruction was developed during the four phases of the Canterbury Learning Collaborative are available in the full report at <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/ScalingInstructionalImprovement>.

**Principals Forge Relationships** The first phase of the CLC's evolution, which began in 2006 and lasted until 2009, centered on *principals forging relationships*—with one another, with the Goodwork Foundation program officer, and with teachers. These relationships were centered on learning together. First, CLC member schools learned how to develop school-based systems of performance assessment. During the No Child Left Behind era of mandated curriculum and tests, this type of performance orientation to assessment, especially in schools that were historically low-performing and that served low-income students, was unusual. As part of the CLC's work, supported with a grant from the Goodwork Foundation, educators in these schools developed ways to learn with and from each other.

When the original grant concluded, the focus of the CLC shifted. The new focus became developing an alternative approach to literacy

instruction—one that was student-centered, involved reading authentic texts that appealed to students, and offered additional literacy strategies beyond the relatively narrow phonics emphasis of the federally supported Reading First curriculum.

When the inquiry focus of the CLC shifted, participating schools in the Collaborative reshuffled; three of the original CLC schools, however, remained. Their involvement was important to the CLC's culture because the original principals and teachers involved had learned how to learn together. They learned to refine their instructional practices through their collaborative work, which involved participating in school visitations and engaging in joint-inquiry about the relationship between teaching and learning. In this way, the routines and practices that these schools developed together became integral to the CLC's next phase of work.

**Members Lead Learning** The second phase, in which *members led learning*, began in 2010 when principals from the Canterbury schools, along with principals from several nearby elementary schools in the district, began to meet together regularly to pursue learning about student-centered approaches to teaching literacy. With external support, they established routines and practices that helped them figure out how to introduce and implement these unfamiliar—and at the time unconventional in the district—literacy instructional practices in their schools. Three conditions enabled the CLC to form, endure, and become a generative source for strengthening literacy instruction in their schools:

- The agency of school leaders who took action to seek out alternative approaches to teaching literacy in their schools.
- The depth and durability of the learning relationships that its members formed with one another. These relationships were formed and sustained by members' willingness and routine practice of looking together at the work they were doing.
- The Goodwork Foundation's steady support and strategic grant-making.

All the principals involved in the CLC wanted to strengthen the quality of literacy instruction and learning in their schools. The CLC principals took the initiative to learn about alternative literacy models, which they did by conducting their own research and by visiting a school on the other side of the district that had begun to implement Lucy Calkins' model of literacy instruction.<sup>2</sup> The CLC principals say they "didn't just sit around waiting for things," and their visit to the other school inspired them to figure out how to bring that approach to literacy instruction to their own, more diverse schools. They asked questions of themselves and each other, such as: "How do you get readers and writers workshop up and running in your school? What does it look like? What's the role of the site leader?"

To implement Calkins' model, they worked together to raise money from foundations in addition to the Goodwork Foundation. They applied for grants to send teachers from their schools to attend Columbia University's Teachers College Readers and Writing Project (TCRWP) institutes and to pay for TCRWP experts to provide several days of instructional coaching at their schools each year. They also used these funds to hire teacher leaders at their own sites to become literacy coaches who supported other teachers in this new literacy instructional approach. And, perhaps most important during this time of mandated, scripted curriculum and high-stakes testing in the WUSD, these principals gave their teachers permission to teach differently. One teacher said, "Getting permission [to teach differently] was exciting. Kids were suffering under a one-size-fits-all approach" to literacy instruction.

The CLC principals sought out colleagues with shared beliefs about literacy instruction, and they realized that they needed to learn how to significantly transform literacy instruction in their schools and then lead the change. One principal recalled, "We were all struggling with . . . getting buy-in from staff, getting enough money to make [classroom] libraries, making our learning

meaningful." Recognizing a shared need for learning, they began to intentionally engage in activities to support their learning.

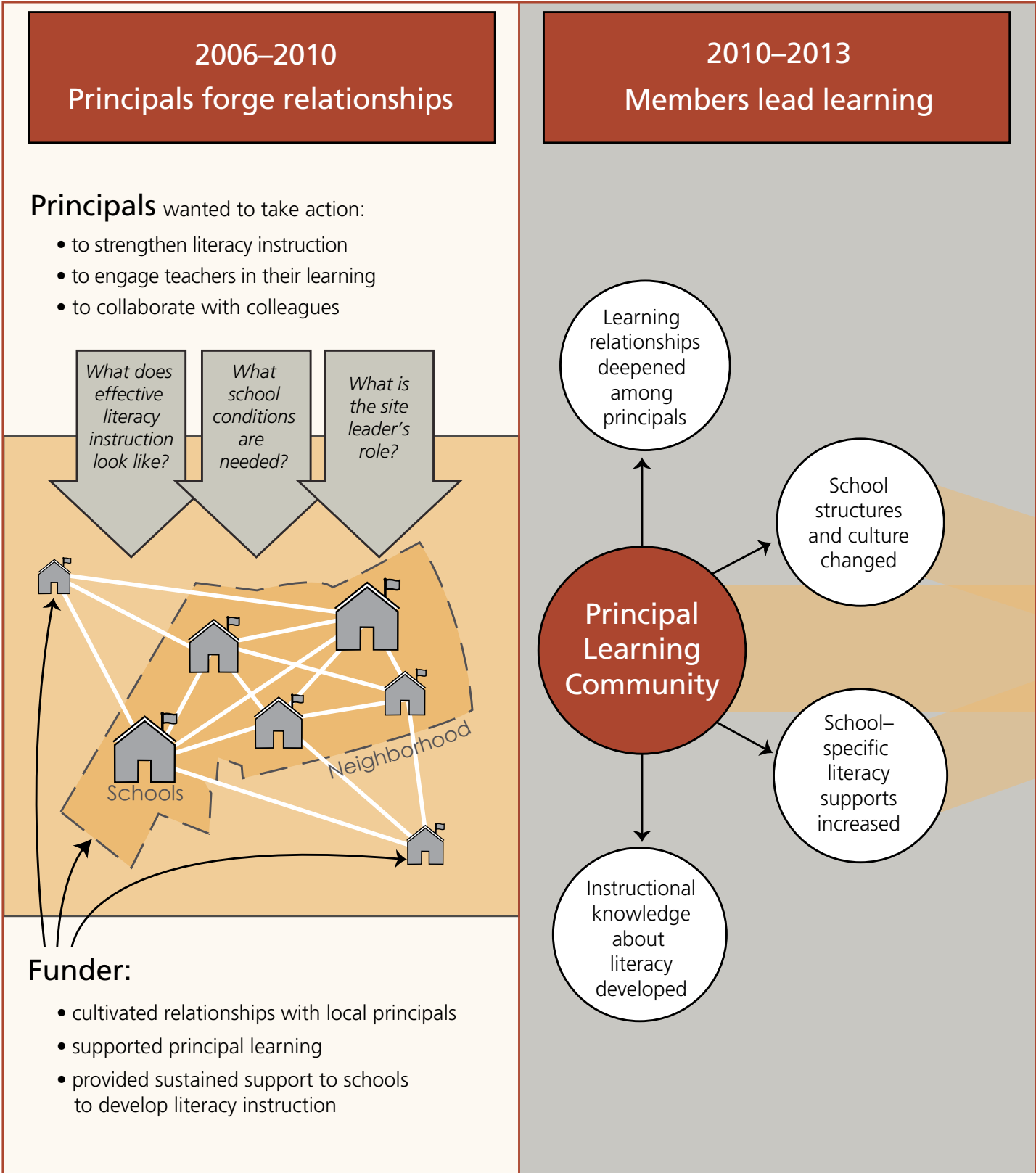
The CLC principals met regularly to talk about how to lead teachers to change their approaches to literacy instruction, and they visited literacy classrooms in each others' schools. With funds from the Goodwork Foundation, they hired a facilitator to keep their CLC meetings focused on their own learning. The facilitator helped them create the conditions for deeper learning among themselves. Before the facilitator, one principal said, "We were not pushing ourselves the way we felt an outside observer could." The facilitator helped them "to be more open and honest in our discussions." The principals talked about how much they learned about themselves as leaders and from one another during this period of time. They learned about "structures that [their] colleagues had put into place" in their schools as well as "different observation [tools]" and "how they rolled out professional development to their teachers. . . ." They also learned a great deal by participating in TCRWP professional development with their teachers. One principal said, "We were just participants there with them." Another said, "We were all learning." The prevailing attitude among the CLC principals, as well as the cultures they sought to establish in their schools, was, according to one principal, "Let's all be vulnerable and mess it up!" This principal said, this intentional approach to learning "was the piece that I think moved practice a lot."

**District Learns from the CLC** The third phase of the CLC, in which the *district learned from the CLC*, occurred in 2013 when the central office became involved in leading and overseeing the CLC, marking an important turning point in the progression of the Collaborative. During the preceding four years, the culture and teaching practices in the CLC schools had changed considerably. Other schools in the district became aware of the influx of professional development that teachers in the CLC schools had. One district

<sup>2</sup> Columbia University Teachers College Reading & Writing Project. (2014.) Retrieved from <http://readingandwritingproject.org/about>

Figure 1

The Progression of the Cante



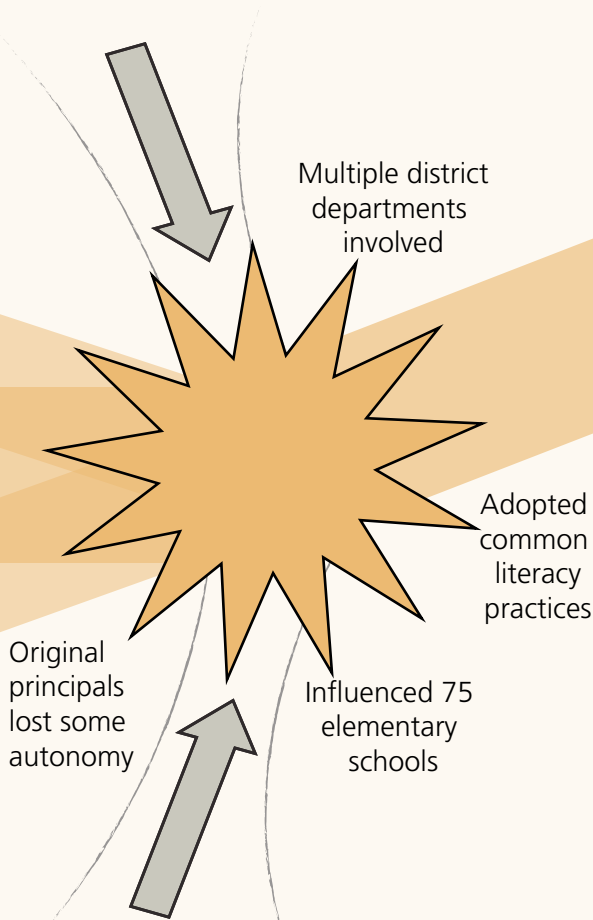
rbury Learning Collaborative

2013

District learns

District:

*How can all schools and students benefit?*

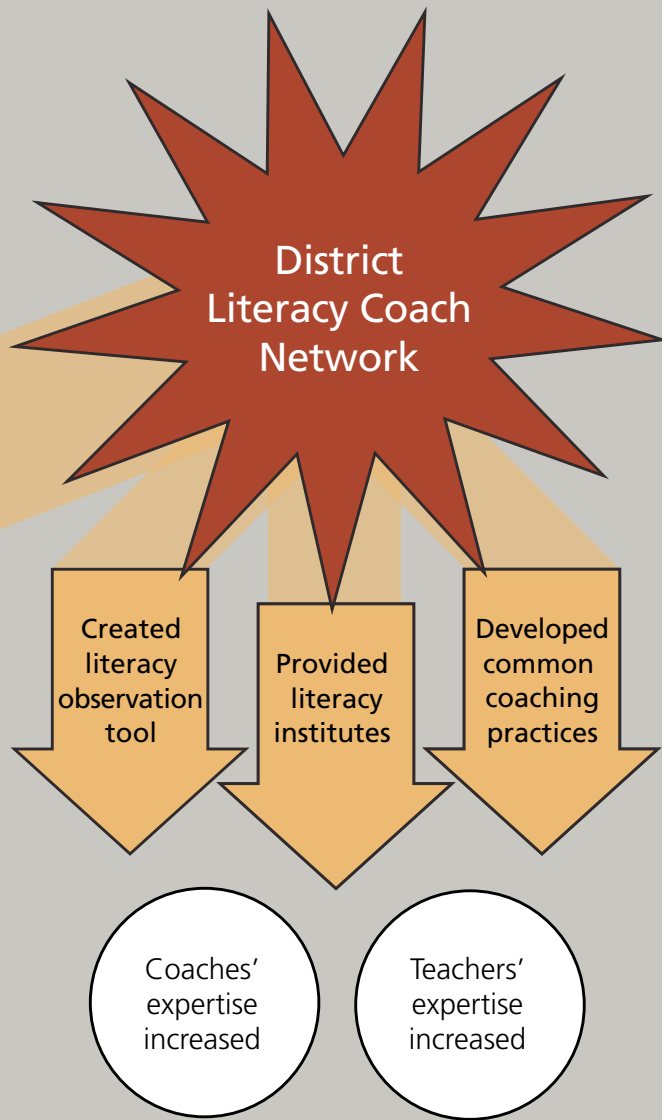


Funder:

*What district conditions are needed to sustain this work?*

2014–2016

District leads learning



administrator recalled the CLC schools had created a “black market” for literacy professional development in the district. District administrators also saw the effects in CLC schools on school climate, culture, and instructional practice. Thus, when a central office administrator was approached by the Goodwork Foundation and asked to get involved in the Canterbury Learning Collaborative, he was interested.

This administrator recognized that the Foundation was concerned with the “scalability” and “longevity” of the CLC. Although at the time this administrator was only “vaguely” aware of the work going on in the CLC, he wanted “to think about how the district could take on and effectively lead” this work. As a former principal, this administrator recognized challenges inherent in the central office assuming this role but expressed a deep commitment to the potential of supporting cross-school, collaborative learning. He said, “It felt really important to be responsive to the principals’ needs.” Although original CLC principals referred to this change in governance as the “district takeover,” they acknowledged that many important changes in the way central office administrators worked with principals and sought to support schools coincided with this change—and, many educators in the district believe, the district-wide changes were influenced by routines and practices that central office administrators learned from the CLC.

**District Leads Learning** From 2013 to 2016, the central office of the district began to *lead learning* as it absorbed practices used by CLC schools to use as approaches for developing principals as instructional leaders and for supporting a new district-wide approach to literacy instruction. By 2014, central office administrators restructured the district’s existing Literacy Coach Network (LCN) and placed two literacy coaches, previously key literacy leaders in the CLC schools, at its helm. This restructured Literacy Coach Network strengthened the quality of literacy coaching in the district and developed a more coherent system of literacy professional learning supports. For the first time, literacy coaches in the CLC schools were explicitly connected both to the district department that

oversaw the district’s literacy core curriculum and simultaneously to the central office administrators who oversaw elementary schools. School literacy coaches were also provided with their own robust opportunities for learning to coach literacy instruction more effectively.

In the LCN, literacy coaches experienced four intertwined strands of learning: They developed their literacy content knowledge, practiced teaching and coaching in schools with actual students, received help developing customized school coaching plans, and received regular feedback on their coaching from an expert coach. In part because of their exposure to rich professional development as educators in CLC schools, the two LCN lead coaches possessed a great depth of literacy expertise and productive relationships with school principals, central office school supervisors, and curriculum and instruction administrators. Based upon 28 interviews conducted for this study, they seemed respected by all for their literacy knowledge and coaching prowess. Consequently, the two LCN lead coaches played important knowledge and relational brokering roles in the district—and the LCN became a hub for developing common, effective, and flexible coaching and teaching strategies for literacy instruction.

**Key Lessons Learned** Changing instructional practice district-wide is complicated and challenging work. It is a multidimensional undertaking that requires paying attention to the depth of the desired change, not merely increasing the number of schools or teachers involved. The CLC demonstrated that leading instructional change in schools and within a district involves coordination of departments, a shared vision, and a willingness to work together across multiple levels of the educational system. The CLC offers many lessons about leading the process of instructional change at scale. Two important lessons are:

- The need to establish a district-wide shared vision for the desired change.
- The need to focus schools’ attention and efforts on a specific instructional change.

The CLC also offers important lessons about particular organizational levers that can help develop a district's capacity for transforming literacy instruction. These lessons for bringing coherent supports to schools include:

- Coordinate central office departmental supports to schools. Coordinating district supports to schools can be accomplished by creating a district structure (for example, the reorganized Literacy Coach Network) that can function as a knowledge broker, resource carrier, and capacity builder that operates as an intermediary, joining schools and central office departments.
- Develop organizational structures and routines within the central office to coordinate, or possibly integrate, work across departments. Compartmentalized and disconnected work within the central office creates “craziness” at the school level and undermines each department's improvement efforts.
- Make sure structures and routines are in place to support principals' learning. Principals need a voice in determining the focus of their learning.
- Provide access to expert knowledge and opportunities to practice using that knowledge with informed feedback; teachers, principals, and coaches all need opportunities to practice with feedback.

Finally, the CLC also offers lessons for funders that want to support district instructional change efforts. These lessons include:

- Provide steady, sustained investment over a long period of time to a particular change effort rather than making a larger, one-time investment.
- Remain alert for opportunities to promote communication and coordination across school-system boundaries, such as between schools and the central office or between principals and teachers.

- Play the role of critical friend to a project if the funder is able to establish learning relationships with grantees, as the Goodwork Foundation program officer was able to do.

Additional lessons for the development of system capacity that improves instruction are described in the full report. Nuanced suggestions are offered about how actors—those located outside the district as well as those located within the system at various levels—can develop capacity for instructional change. Indeed, it might be that achieving instructional change at scale becomes possible only when a sufficient number of differently located actors apply pressure on the system for a particular instructional change over a long enough period of time.