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## High Performing School Systems to Close Achievement Gaps in NEA Foundation–Funded Communities

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Building and Sustaining Collaborative Culture  
in Columbus and Seattle

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The NEA Foundation Issue Brief



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## ABOUT THE NEA FOUNDATION

The NEA Foundation is a public charity supported by contributions from educators' dues, corporate sponsors, and others who support public education initiatives. We partner with education unions, districts, and communities to create powerful, sustainable improvements in teaching and learning. Visit [neafoundation.org](http://neafoundation.org) for more information.

## ABOUT THE NEA FOUNDATION REPORTS AND ISSUE BRIEFS

Occasional reports issued by the NEA Foundation provide in-depth coverage and analysis of innovations designed to increase teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Selected innovations are drawn mainly from the NEA Foundation program sites.

Issue Briefs provide an engaging snapshot of impactful features of NEA Foundation's local union, district and community collaborative partnerships.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We also are very grateful for the many contributions of Rodolfo Careaga, The NEA Foundation Vice President of Programs and Liz Dunning, The NEA Foundation Senior Vice President of Programs.



Dear Colleagues:

Today, several prescriptions exist for enabling schools and districts to effectively fulfill their missions to systemically improve outcomes for students. Virtually all of them are predicated on organizational dynamics associated with “systems thinking” and “learning organizations,”<sup>1</sup> and “continuous improvement.”<sup>2</sup> These approaches provide a useful way to think about work that must respond to complex and variable environmental factors (for example, mobility of students, home circumstances, or neighborhood contexts) and to school-internal factors (for example, success or failure of specific programs, adequacy of instructional materials, and individual students’ abilities and characteristics). Systems thinking helps organizations identify the inter-relationship of the factors that impinge most directly on success and failure, and learning organization structures and processes help organizations to adapt in the face of evolving influences or exigencies through:

- ongoing reflection about why a problem exists;
- generation of “shared vision” or about what change will ultimately look like;
- examination of the processes, structures, and relationships by which goals and solutions are generated, implemented, and regularly assessed; and
- examination of the ways in which accountability for reaching these is distributed—at the level of individual, and across individuals. (adapted<sup>3</sup>)

Continuous improvement stresses use of evidence of student learning for decision-making and problem-solving, and on the collaborative culture that brings “all concerned interests together to look at results, formulate a shared theory or understanding, consider potential responses, identify needs for new resources and capabilities, and move into action in response.”<sup>4</sup>

This Issue Brief highlights several of these processes in two NEA Foundation-funded sites—Columbus, OH and Seattle, WA.

Sincerely,



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## Building and Sustaining Collaborative in Columbus and Seattle

Experiences in the NEA Foundation funded sites suggest that reform efforts led by collaborative leadership bodies reflective of all levels and groups of the district’s organization are useful in building vertical and horizontal buy-in through inclusive and shared decision-making. The **district-union collective bargaining agreement** can sustain collaboration by formally binding parties to new and mutually held expectations regardless of personnel or structural changes that may occur. This is especially important given turnover of school and district leadership, and the traditional exclusion of the community from educational decision-making. (See also NEA Foundation *Issue Brief Unions, Districts and Communities to the Table* for more information on community engagement as a strategy for reform.)

In Columbus, collaboration between the Columbus Education Association (CEA) and Columbus City Schools (CCS) around substantive issues of teaching and learning is codified in the **collective bargaining agreement**. The agreement provides for a “Reform Panel,” a team co-chaired by the CEA president, or designee, and the Superintendent, or designee, and is made up of an equal number of union representatives and administrators. It facilitates the implementation of initiatives “directed at the improvement of teaching and learning conditions in the District” and of requests “for variances to the agreement that may be submitted by school-based, shared decision-making cabinets.” The Panel also deliberates instructional and curricular recommendations that may be made by committees created by the Panel and school-level leadership teams.<sup>5</sup>

In May of 2009, with support from the NEA Foundation, collaboration was deepened in a focused way through 100% Project schools, funded in part by the NEA Foundation. The Reform Panel was expanded to become the District Leadership Team (DLT) with the addition of community, business, parent and higher education members. The addition of these partners was designed to ensure broad representation from the Columbus community at large, and deepen the shared commitment to the district’s mission.

In Seattle, as part of the Seattle Education Association (SEA) and Seattle Public Schools (SPS) efforts to transform conventional contract negotiations into an opportunity to reform education for students in high-poverty schools, SEA and SPS collaborated on an NEA Foundation-funded pilot effort within two feeder patterns (*Flight Schools*) to improve student achievement overall, and to reduce achievement gaps among diverse subgroups of the student population.



In the preamble to the current collective bargaining agreement, the philosophical stance undergirding this collaboration is made explicit:

**We believe there is a correlation between the education of our students and the empowerment of the staff entrusted with the responsibility for their learning. Therefore, this Agreement commits both parties to building a collaborative partnership based on mutual respect and trust that is deeper than the leadership and which will continue beyond the tenure of those currently in leadership positions in our respective organizations.<sup>6</sup>**

Operationalizing this commitment are various committees, of which the Partnership Committee (consisting of five appointees from SPS and five appointees from the SEA) addresses most directly issues of teaching and learning. The purpose of the committee is to address the achievement gap, driven by the urgent and shared acknowledgement that “there is not the luxury of time – each day that passes without every effort being made to ensure that all students can reach the standards set by the SPS for every student to be able to know and do upon graduation is a breach of our collective responsibility to provide a quality education.”<sup>7</sup>

**The charge of the Partnership Committee clearly supports a shared vision for improved teaching and learning as the substance of collaboration, and includes, but is not limited to, the following:**

- **Researching best practices in other districts nationwide and identify resources, human and financial, that could support school-level initiatives focused on closing the achievement gap;**
- **Addressing challenges to improvement and innovation;**
- **Seeking financial and professional support for these efforts from external sources, given that the effort to eliminate the achievement gap is substantial; and**
- **Developing a process that monitors progress, evaluates the use of resources, intervenes where necessary, and adjusts plans, resources and timelines.<sup>8</sup>**

Noteworthy in the contractual language are specific provisions for joint monitoring by SEA and SPS of the stability of staff in the lowest-performing (“Level 1”) schools and Flight Schools, those schools funded in part by the NEA Foundation.

Reinforced through the Columbus and Seattle agreements and committee structures are several critical learning organization and continuous improvement dynamics, among them: building formal supports for a collaborative culture to be sustained; facilitating a shared understanding of the problem to be solved and possible approaches to solving them; and distributing leadership and accountability at all levels of the union, district and community.



## Teacher Learning and Improved Student Achievement at the Core of Collaboration

But change in organizational structure is not sufficient<sup>9</sup>; high quality teaching and learning, with the data to gauge—and supports to bolster—its ongoing development, must be infused at all levels, from the superintendent’s office to the classroom. Richard Elmore stresses this dynamic when he states:

The single most persistent problem of educational reform in the United States is the failure of reforms to alter the fundamental conditions of teaching and learning for students and teachers in schools in anything other than a small-scale and idiosyncratic way...[R]eforms wash over schools in successive waves, creating the illusion of change on the rolling surface of policy, but deep under this churning surface, the fundamental conditions of teaching and learning remain largely unchanged in all but a small proportion of classrooms and schools...<sup>10</sup>

Elmore suggests that the reason for this state of affairs is that “structural change allows teachers, principals, and community stakeholders to work together in new ways, but it does not, by itself, change the knowledge that these actors bring to bear on the problem of instruction.”<sup>11</sup>

This last point is pivotal to the NEA Foundation theory of action. This theory seeks to build the knowledge, skills and dispositions undergirding highly effective teaching at the level of the individual teacher and across communities of teachers.



## Professional Rounds in Columbus City Schools

Columbus insists that its collaboration remain squarely focused on instructional effectiveness. Beyond its efforts to support new teachers (see NEA Foundation Issue Brief *Peer Assistance and Review: All Teachers on the Road to Instructional Leadership in Columbus, OH “100% Project Schools”*), Columbus has sought to shift the collective culture surrounding ongoing professional learning of all teachers by increasing ways in which teachers regularly contribute to district- and school-wide improvement through “professional rounds.”

Based on a medical model of professional development, rounds have been described by researchers and practitioners alike as “one of the most valuable tools that a school or district can use to enhance teachers’ pedagogical skills and develop a culture of collaboration.”<sup>12</sup> Pursued as a collaborative project of CEA and CCS, Columbus began implementing rounds in 2007, with a visit occurring monthly, on average, to each classroom in a school within each of two 100% Project feeder patterns.

The process involves:

- Formation of a group of principals, teachers and district staff from a single feeder pattern, and selection of a school for a visit by the group;
- Review by the entire group of instructional issues (or “problems of practice”) identified in the school’s improvement plan; and
- Division of the larger group into sub-teams of five or six members, with each team conducting four classroom visits of 25 minutes each.

A debrief by sub-teams of the group at the conclusion of the class visits focuses on evidence related to teacher and student behaviors associated only with the particular problem of practice.

The full observation team reconvenes and generates a set of guiding questions that will be used by the school as a whole (and by individual teachers or groups of teachers, if these teachers so choose) to reflect on school policies and teacher practices that help or hinder their ability to successfully address the problem of practice.



The benefits to the school that has been visited are matched by the benefits to teachers on the visiting team. Dorothy Wilson, 100% Project manager relates:

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On their first round, many teachers report how their approach to looking at their own instruction is transformed—they ask, ‘what might that teacher have done differently?’ They develop the ability to step back from their own practice, and ask themselves daily—what might I be doing differently to get all of my kids where they need to be?

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Noteworthy is the DLT’s decision to modify the usual model; in other Ohio districts that have adopted rounds, principals and administrators comprise the visiting observation team. Columbus felt very early on that the teams should include teachers. Support for substitute teachers, agreed upon by both the union and district, allows teachers to participate in the rounds, providing them with time during the day to participate in observation visits and discuss what they have seen during the debriefing. Rhonda Johnson, CEA president, observes: “Feedback from peers participating in the instructional rounds has been invaluable; in debriefing sessions—which are not evaluative—they help teachers and the school focus and reflect on very specific challenges.”

A memorandum of understanding between the district and CEA ensures that the rounds remain focused on teachers’ professional learning, resulting in a shared understanding of rigorous and effective instruction. The memorandum specifies that:

- Observations made as part of a non-evaluative teacher observation, such as professional rounds, shall not be used as part of any teacher’s evaluation;
- Written observation documents remain property of the observer and cannot reference specific teachers or classrooms; and
- No documents generated as part of the rounds process may become part of a teacher’s personnel file or evaluation.<sup>13</sup>



## Professional Learning Communities in Seattle Flight Schools

A core goal of the Flight Schools initiative was adoption of “professional learning communities” (PLCs) as an approach to instructional improvement.

One definition of a PLC states that it is “a collegial group of administrators and school staff who are united in their commitment to student learning. They share a vision, work and learn collaboratively, visit and review other classrooms, and participate in decision making.”<sup>14</sup> In a summary of research, the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, warns, however, that a PLC is difficult to define because “it is not a prescription, a new program, a model, or an innovation to be implemented. Rather, a PLC is an infrastructure or a way of working together that results in continuous school improvement.”<sup>15</sup> The Center points out that, unlike other administrative committees or meetings held by teachers, PLCs are high-performing collaborative teams that “shift the focus of school reform from restructuring to reculturing” and “establish a schoolwide culture that is based on a fundamental belief in building teacher leadership in school improvement efforts.”<sup>16</sup>

How is this reculturing achieved? In its summary, the Center cites several characteristics that define the PLC as a distinct organizational process, if not structure (adapted)<sup>17</sup>:

- **Shared values and vision:** Teachers and administrators share a vision focused on student learning and a commitment to improvement; the vision is used as a context for decision making about instructional practice and collaborative learning efforts.

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- **Collaborative culture:** PLCs are based on the premise that through collaboration, professionals achieve more than they could alone; teachers benefit from the resources that each brings to the PLC.

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- **Focus on examining outcomes to improve student learning:** The focus of a PLC goes beyond a team getting together to look at data. In PLCs, teachers respond to data that require mutual accountability and changing classroom practices.

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- **Supportive and shared leadership:** Administrators are committed to sharing decision-making with teachers and providing opportunities for them to serve as leaders; leadership is shared and distributed among formal and informal leaders.

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- **Shared personal practice:** A major focus of PLCs is on professional learning in which teachers work and learn together as they continually evaluate the effectiveness of their practices and the needs, interests, and skills of their students; teachers share experiences, observe each other, and discuss teaching.

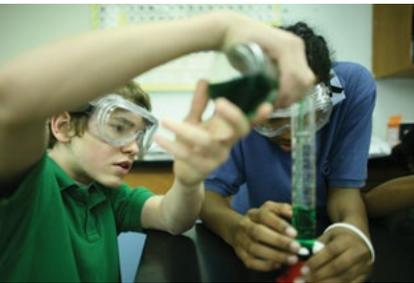
True to the notion of a PLC as a process and as an attempt to shift organizational culture, PLCs can be developed through a variety of formats, and, in Seattle, have been structured as vertical or grade level teams, content area teams, professional rounds and book studies. Their areas of focus have also varied, and include data review, curriculum and assessments, cultural competence, leadership development and family engagement.<sup>17</sup>

Pat Sander, *Flight Schools* project director, drives home the importance of PLCs as a new way of working and facilitating high-quality learning among teachers resulting in improved student outcomes:

**“PLCs drive changes to structures, for example, how and when time is allotted for teachers to meet...they also change processes, for example, what teachers meet about; and who sets the PLC agenda focusing on student learning. What PLCs are achieving in Seattle amounts to a change in outcomes—PLCs redistribute leadership and accountability for teacher learning and corresponding results for student engagement and achievement as a shared endeavor of administrators and teachers, of central office and of schools.”**

PLCs are now codified in the Seattle teachers’ collective bargaining agreement. The agreement stipulates: “Participation in faculty, instructional council, departmental, team/grade level, safety, and technology meetings, will not exceed one hour outside the defined workday unless mutually agreed upon by the participants... Other meetings will be used for teacher-directed collaboration time or for Professional Learning Communities (PLC).”





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## Moving Forward

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The Columbus and Seattle school districts exemplify many of the dynamics associated with high-functioning, learning organizations. Michael Fullan succinctly describes learning organizations as “continually acquiring new knowledge, skills, and understanding to improve one’s actions and results.”<sup>18</sup> These districts are engaging in the difficult work of inclusive, transparent and ongoing reflection on and adjustment of their improvement strategies, work that is facilitated at the highest levels of leadership through formal contract agreements and regular and structured dialogue. At the frontlines, it transpires in structured groupings of teachers and administrators through, for example, professional learning communities, professional rounds and school-based leadership teams.

The distributed leadership and shared decision-making, and vertical and horizontal flow of information, learning and knowledge—all focused on high-quality teaching and learning as the core enterprise—can accomplish the important goals of:

- **Increasing the specificity of proposed innovations—that is, one size does not fit all. In one feeder pattern in Columbus, for example, project-based learning might more aptly constitute the content of embedded professional development. In another, it may be classroom management.**
- **Increasing the likelihood that change will not be merely symbolic—but owned and operationalized at all levels. By empowering all groups and individuals to voice and resolve competing interests or ideas through formal channels, resistance to change characteristic in large bureaucracies stands to diminish. In a classroom in a school in Seattle, for example, the district-facilitated training in cultural competencies may emerge as a set of global-learning activities; in another, it may take the shape of an anti-racist or anti-sexist learning unit.**

As “learning organizations,” both feeder patterns and both classrooms will continuously examine their progress with hard data, holding themselves equally accountable for showing measurable improvement in student achievement and performance according to agreed-upon standards. The sets of structures and processes instituted in the two communities are meaningful only insofar as they remain focused on student learning, and on the improvement in the capacity of those most intimately responsible—teacher or teacher aide, principal or district administrator—to facilitate that learning.

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## Selected Resources

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- Schools That Learn (for information on application of Peter Senge’s thought to school improvement) at: <http://schoolsthatlearn.com>
- The National Education Association—KEYS 2.0 (for information on continuous school improvement) at: <http://keysonline.org>
- “Instructional Rounds in Education A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning” at: <http://hepg.org/hepg/book/99/InstructionalRoundsInEducation>
- Learning Forward (for information on Professional Learning Communities) at: <http://www.learningforward.org/index.cfm>

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## Endnotes

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- 1 See: Senge, P., Cambron-McCabe, N. Lucas, T., Smith, B., Dutton, J. & Kleiner, A. (2000). Schools that learn. A Fifth Discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education. New York: Doubleday/Currency; Fullan, M. (1995). The school as a learning organization: Distant dreams. *Theory into Practice* (34, 4), 230-235; Fullan, M. (2007). Educational reform as continuous improvement. In Willis D. Hawley & Don Rollie, (Eds.). *Keys to Effective Schools: Second Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- 2 Hawley, W. D. & Sykes, G. (2007). Continuous school improvement. In Willis D. Hawley & Don Rollie, (Eds.). *Keys to Effective Schools: Second Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- 3 Adapted from Smith, M. (2001). Peter Senge and the learning organization. Retrieved from <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.htm>; See also:
- 4 Hawley & Sykes, op. cit. (p. 159 and p. 161)
- 5 See Columbus collective bargaining agreement at: <http://www.ceaohio.org/GD/Templates/Pages/cea/ceaPrimary.aspx?page=2&TopicRelationID=50>
- 6 See Seattle collective bargaining agreement at: <http://seattlewea.org/index.php/collective-bargaining-mainmenu-14>
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 *ibid.*

- 9 Newmann, F. M. & Wehlage, G. G. (1995). Successful school restructuring:  
A report to the public and educators. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research
- 10 Elmore, R. E. (2007). Local school districts and instructional improvement. In Willis D. Hawley & Don Rollie, (Eds.). Keys to Effective Schools: Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Marzano, R. J. (2011). Making the most of instructional rounds. Retrieved from:  
<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb11/vol68/num05/Making-the-Most-of-Instructional-Rounds.aspx>
- 13 Columbus Education Association flyer “Professional Rounds”
- 14 See NCREL at: <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/currclum/cu3lk22.htm>
- 15 See Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement at: <http://www.centerforcsri.org/plc/>
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 Baker, D. B., Batchler, S., Gratama, C. A. & Peterson, K. M. (2011). Seattle Public Schools: Flight School Initiative Year 5 Evaluation Report. Seattle, WA: The BERG Group
- 18 Fullan (2007), *op.cit.*





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