CALIFORNIA’S GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

District Case Studies of Professional Capital

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Twin Rivers Unified School District
—one of five case studies of school districts—

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November 2016
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Introduction

In 2013, the Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD) was in bad shape. Years of political turmoil and system dysfunction had created a toxic culture of favoritism, bullying in the workplace, school neglect, and disengagement system. Three years later, the district has gone through a series of important organizational changes that have turned around the entire system: creating a new improvement-focused culture of collaboration, systems thinking and organizational learning, and enhancing the morale of district and school staff. This case study seeks to capture the approach and strategies through which TRUSD has revamped its organizational culture and set the foundations to enhance the teaching profession and continuously improve student learning across the district.

The three concepts underpinning our analysis are professional capital, system coherence, and student success. Professional capital—comprised of human, social, and decisional capital—is the key asset that has to be invested, accumulated, and circulated to yield continuous growth and strong return in student and adult learning in an education system. System coherence is about the clarity of the key priorities and strategies in the minds, hearts, and hands of educators, staff or faculty at all levels of the system. Coherence is the development of shared mindsets across the system. Increasingly, we see student success, especially around deep learning and closing achievement gaps, as part and parcel of professional capital and coherence. They should be seen as a mutual feed that promotes deep learning on the part of adults and students in the system.

This short report begins with an overview of TRUSD, identifying some of the key strategies used to turn around the organizational culture in a relatively short period of time. It shares the findings from data collected from two site visits in March 2015 and May 2016, including a review of over 80 documents and videos; interviews and focus groups with staff members from across all levels of the system (i.e., district office to schools to classrooms); observation data collected from school site visits (2 elementary, 1 middle and 1 high school), a principals’ meeting held at the district headquarters, from systems thinking training sessions for classified staff and school leadership teams, and in an induction meeting for new hires for the district. It concludes with a series of key lessons from Twin Rivers and focused recommendations to further the development and circulation of professional capital in a district at the initial stages of its improvement journey.

The Twin Rivers Unified School District in a Nutshell

The TRUSD was created through the amalgamation in 2007 of three elementary districts (Rio Linda Union, North Sacramento and Del Paso Heights) and the Grant Union High School District. It serves approximately 28,000 students through 29 elementary schools, 5 middle schools, 4 comprehensive high schools, and 20 pre-school sites. With a staff of approximately 2,800 employees, it has a diverse student population of 43% Hispanic, 24% White, 15% African American, and 9% Asian students, coming from homes where 46 languages are spoken. In Twin Rivers, one in every four students is an English Language Learner, and 83% live in a low income household.

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The merger of four smaller districts into the Twin Rivers Unified School District in 2007, initially received with hope and enthusiasm by many leaders, staff, and communities, quickly turned into a harsh competition for institutional power in the new unified district, fueling a toxic culture of favoritism, balkanization, and bullying. The economic crisis in 2008 only intensified internal tensions and political turmoil. Half of the custodians and many classified staff were laid off and several highly qualified staff members were moved into lower status positions. Budgets were cut in some departments but not others, with no adequate explanation. Appointments and lay-offs based on district leaders’ existing relationships rather than merit became regular practice. Hostility, campaigns of discredit, and internal fights took precedence over the regular operations of the district, resulting in neglect of operations, community relationships, and schools. This was the district that Steve Martinez, the new superintendent appointed in July 2013, inherited. Three years later, TRUSD is an entirely different organization.

Having worked for the Fresno Unified School District and Clovis Unified School District, Martinez was the first superintendent since 2007 who did not come from one of the smaller districts that merged into TRUSD. Dr. Martinez and his small executive team have brought the entire district into much better shape; the organizational revamp has begun to show its impact on student outcomes, especially on measures of student engagement. Between 2013 and 2015, high school graduation rates have gone up from 75% to 82%, drop-out rates have dropped from 16.4% to 9.2%, and 8 TRUSD schools received the California Gold Ribbon Schools Award in 2016. These are impressive accomplishments in less than three years.

**System Coherence at Twin Rivers**

*Redesigning the district’s organizational structure.* Shortly after taking office, Martinez reorganized the district office with the intention of better engaging staff in owning the district’s mandate to serve and support students. With support from the Board, he recruited and appointed new administrators for every critical role in district leadership, signaling a new beginning for the district. A new Professional Development department was created to promote high-quality teaching and learning with a focus on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and student engagement. A Human Resources department was created to deal with employee issues to proactively seek, attract, and retain talent. Administrative Services put procedures in place to ensure effective response to working orders; school facilities and gardens began to look consistently clean. A previously under-resourced and reactive department of police services was revamped as a campus-centric organization that centered its decision making on students and on establishing positive partnerships with parents and the larger community. Within a year, the picture of a functioning district started to emerge.

By the time of our second visit in 2016, we saw signs of greater focus across the system and the emergence of a culture of learning and collaboration in schools, as well as examples of individual elementary schools that had dramatically shifted instructional practice in classrooms. Yet, we did not find evidence of substantial improvements to instructional practice in classrooms across the entire system. The focus of the district’s energy over the first 3 years of Martinez’s tenure was on putting basic organizational structures in place, re-establishing trust, setting a common vision, and establishing the foundations of a highly functioning organization where professional capital could thrive with the
explicit intention of better serving and building the capacity of schools to improve student learning and engagement.

Re-establishing trust. Building trust in a district with a six-year history of broken promises, abuse of authority, alienation and negligence was a crucial first step to bring TRUSD back on its feet. Martinez and his executive cabinet firmly embraced this core principle: “If there’s anything we commit to, we’ll do it.” He began meeting with individual trustees weekly, and arranged regular meeting times with the Board president. He took important steps to engage union leaders as active partners in the work of the district (e.g., class size reduction, hiring new faculty and administrators, and implementing teacher prep time), which have begun to relieve the system of some of the tension and mistrust between the union and TRUSD.

California’s new funding structure, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), allowed the district to make significant investments in school infrastructure and personnel such as those listed above. Because its implementation mechanism, the Local Control Accountability Plan, required community participation in the development of the district budget, it served as an opportunity to reengage the community in the discussion and participation in key decisions concerning the district.

Martinez re-engaged community members and other stakeholders through ongoing meetings with district partners, faith-based communities, neighborhood association groups, alumni associations, and civic organizations. He spent a lot of time visiting school sites, attending community meetings, making himself available to everyone in the district, to hear and discuss issues all the way from parking problems to test scores. He also took time to sit in classrooms, to get a feel of the experiences of students at TRUSD. His constant engagement with the field gave him a good sense of the pulse of the district, and offered first-hand information to identify key issues and lay out possible solutions. In part, as a result of all these deliberate efforts to reestablish trust, attendance at community meetings started to increase. The district started to get inquiries from people interested in working at TRUSD. The image of TRUSD in the media and among community stakeholders began to become more positive.

Focus on students. Coherence (and later professional capital) is explicitly anchored in the third component of our framework—student success. One of the things you will hear consistently from people working at TRUSD today, regardless of their formal role in the district is that the focus has come back to students. Some protocols have been established to ensure the attention is brought back to students: These include moving the ‘student recognition’ section to the beginning of every Board meeting, rather than at the end. Before signing their contracts, new hires, all the way from operations to school staff are asked to articulate how their work will make things better for students. Staff members across the entire district have been receiving high quality training on systems thinking, helping them to simultaneously focus on students and clarify the links between their everyday work and the improving of educational opportunities for students. Bringing the focus back on students has also required that Martinez and district leaders stay alert to and deal with the multiple distractors that continuously threaten to derail attention.

Two recent developments have brought a sharper focus and a greater sense of shared purpose at Twin Rivers. First, a strategic framework was developed to channel the actions of all educators, staff or faculty across the system toward three focus areas: Unparalleled Student Achievement, Engagement and Outreach, and Organizational Efficiency and Effectiveness. Every district department and every school are now required to establish two or three SMART goals connected to one or more of the three focus areas. Each department and school in the system is being encouraged to engage in cycles of
continuous inquiry to identify key challenges and leverages for action, design and try out solutions, assess results, and refine the strategy over time. In quarterly meetings, district departments meet on system-wide summits where they present to small groups of staff in other departments their goals, strategies, and progress. A similar practice is being introduced in Professional Learning Communities for principals.

Second, the district has established a new “40/40” target, which makes reference to an expectation recently articulated by Superintendent Martinez that 40% of students in the district should meet or exceed the new California standards in ELA and Math in 2016. Under the new 40/40 expectation, each individual school is expected to either get 40% of their students to meet or exceed the standards in ELA and Mathematics or to increase their current figures by 10%. One thing to stay vigilant about with regards to 40/40 is the possible spread of unintended school practices strictly focused on raising the percentages by whatever means.

Communication, systems thinking, and organizational learning. TRUSD’s communication strategy has shifted from surface to strategic, with the central office carefully crafting and disseminating consistent messages about TRUSD’s mission, vision, strategies, and achievements. The district’s website has been revamped so that people within and outside the district can keep abreast of what’s going on. Intentional and frequent opportunities for staff from different departments and principals from different schools to collaborate with each other encourages ongoing lateral communication, and enables the development of shared language and understandings across the district. Expectations and consequences for not fulfilling them are also constantly communicated through professional training sessions and in the constant interactions between leaders and their staff. Dr. Martinez hosts monthly meetings with principals and regular meetings with the district’s management staff to share relevant updates, to make his thinking visible to district and school leaders, and to listen and respond to questions and feedback, ensuring constant vertical communication between the district and schools and lateral communication at the district level. As a result, a common identity is being forged in Twin Rivers, embodied in their new motto, “We are TR!”

Twin Rivers’ deliberate design as a learning organization, constantly shaping and re-shaping its’ strategy through ongoing learning from implementation, is fundamental to developing system coherence. The research team witnessed and heard about multiple instances of organizational learning, including the constant refinement of the district’s school support strategy (changed twice within a year), the evolving shape of the quarterly district-wide summits (reportedly getting better each time), the creation of Instructional Leadership Teams in schools, and the constant prototyping of strategies to turn these into effective vehicles of school improvement. The constant reshaping of the district strategy is not about shifting to a totally new thing each time something doesn’t work. It is rather a form of responsive change that tweaks and constantly refines existing programs to make them more effective.

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2 In 2015, the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) was introduced as the new state-wide measure of student performance. Designed as a response to the introduction of the Common Core Standards and aimed at measuring college and career readiness, CAASPP replaces API as the statewide measure of student achievement in the State. The new exams are based on more challenging academic standards, and the 2015 results are being used state wide to provide a baseline to track progress in student learning over time.
Martinez and his team have also intentionally created an atmosphere that encourages continuous learning on the job. In the eyes of many district leaders and staff, they have led the creation of a learning organization through their own example, modeling openness, transparency, trust and integrity in their everyday interactions with people in and outside the district. Consistently district leaders, staff, and school principals report Martinez asks them to “take risks, make mistakes, but fall forward.” In a district where failure and innovation had historically been punished and discouraged, the leadership’s new attitude has created an institutional environment where learning together (with its necessary mistakes) is the work of everyone in the system.

TRUSD has adopted the Waters Foundation’s Systems Thinking in Education as its systematic approach to organizational learning and has invested heavily to bringing this training to staff across the system at multiple levels. In Systems Thinking sessions, staff and leaders from different departments get together and look at existing performance measures (for example, low Advanced Placement enrollment rates), ask themselves why they don’t have the impact they want, identify the systems that maintain those results, examine the underlying beliefs that created such systems, and craft new strategies to break cycles of poor performance, grounded in new beliefs such as high expectations, trust in student capacity, equity, and so on. Almost every group we talked to mentioned the impact of Systems Thinking on their everyday work. Systems thinking was clearly disruptive in this district that previously operated in siloes, where vertical authority was the only legitimate vehicle for action and where mistrust prevailed.

**Professional Capital at TRUSD**

We have used the term wrong drivers to qualify policies and strategies that have characterized many education reform efforts over the past several decades and yet do not produce their intended results (e.g., punitive accountability, human capital or individualistic solutions, and technology). Their counterparts (e.g., capacity building, social capital solutions, and pedagogy) are right drivers in the sense that they foster school and system improvement. Highly successful systems lead by developing social and decisional capital, with human capital strategies strengthening and supporting the larger improvement agenda. The core strategies used at TRUSD to turn a previously dysfunctional system into a highly functioning one are grounded on principles that are consistent with this concept of professional capital.

**Cultivating Social Capital**

Systems thinking and the deliberate encouragement and development of collaborative practice within and between departments and schools have been the core approaches to strengthening social capital across the district. TRUSD leaders and capacity builders from the Waters Foundation intentionally assign projects for central office departments to work together, and professional learning communities have become central activities for developing social capital among principals and school faculty. Numerous voices from across all levels of the system spoke about improved communication within the district and increased engagement of staff and faculty in improving education quality within Twin

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3 Michael Fullan (2011). Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform. Seminar Series 204. Victoria, Australia: Centre for Strategic Education.
Rivers. Increased collaboration within and between the central office, elementary and secondary schools continues to build a collective sense of responsibility for student achievement that extends beyond teaching faculty and administrators to cafeteria workers, bus drivers, purchasing personnel, and so on. Everyone is implicated in the success of TRUSD’s students. During our visits, people continuously spoke of the high levels of motivation incurred by this new culture and the evolving circles of support that help them carry out their daily work in service of the TRUSD’s mission.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) serve as a structure to collaborate around core system initiatives. Principals organized into their own PLCs report that they found collaboration with their peers in PLCs valuable, helping mitigate any anxiety around the introduction of new initiatives, developing shared understandings of the core strategies to move the district forward, and enhancing collective capacity to lead improvement in schools. Gradually, the district has used PLCs to challenge the assumptions of principals about teaching and learning, to reinforce that teaching and learning are the focus of school leadership. Principals’ PLCs are seen as an initial step to develop effective collaboration in schools aimed at improving instructional practice. By getting better at collaborating themselves, so the thinking goes, principals will be better positioned to lead and create conditions for effective collaboration in their schools.

PLCs had existed in schools since the time of the merger, but their activities varied widely from school to school, and most were simply used to share information with and among staff or to complete paperwork. On our first visit, we heard from principals that teacher PLCs were not effective vehicles of teacher collaboration for instructional improvement, but one year later, the same principals reported important changes in their schools’ PLC work, including a sharper focus enabled by the district’s strategic framework, the adoption of continuous cycles of inquiry as the mechanism for teacher collaboration, the beginnings of the use of data to identify and address problems of practice.

The recent creation of Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) in schools and Instructional TOSAs, with their increasingly clear and more focused role, have played an important part in the development of more effective PLCs in schools, and their role will become more important in the years to come. A deliberate focus and strategy to examine and improve pedagogical practice in classrooms is the necessary next step to maximize the impact of teacher collaboration on student learning. There is an important lesson here to be learned here: PLCs are not a program. They must be steeped in comprehensive relationship building and collaboration within schools, across the district and vertically between schools and central office.

**Developing Decisional Capital**

In principle, teaching practice at TRUSD is governed by the principle of subsidiarity—that is, centrally defining standards of performance and practice as well as carefully selected resources and professional development while giving teachers freedom to create their own lessons, maintain their preferred teaching style, and interpret data. However, there is shared agreement that this vision has yet to trickle down to school sites after the first couple years of Martinez’s leadership.

The Common Core State Standards are being used as the point of reference to identify key instructional initiatives to be supported district-wide. They were used to develop a new report card and are currently informing the design of benchmark assessments for the district. That said, it should be kept in mind that the CCSS were released three years prior to Martinez’s arrival, so even though one the key priority actions of his first days in office was to complete a district plan and timeline for
CCSS implementation and launch an aggressive CCSS professional development plan for teachers and principals, these plans inevitably had a late start in comparison with many other districts and were a source of stress for schools. However, our general impression of the system was that there is a shared sense of excitement, hope, and confidence, that the district is moving in the right direction, and that solutions to challenges found in the way will be figured out.

District benchmark assessments are currently being developed by staff in the department of Assessment and Accountability in coordination with curriculum TOSAs for use district-wide to track progress and inform school and classroom improvement. Unlike the rest of the district personnel we talked to, staff in charge of designing the benchmark assessments expressed feeling out of the district’s communication loop and left to their own devices to develop the benchmark assessments. Many educators, staff or faculty in the system, including the staff charged with developing the assessments themselves, have reasonable doubts about the reliability and validity of the benchmark assessments. For example, it seems like performance in current benchmark assessments has little relationship with the school’s performance on the new statewide assessments. The development and constant refinement of benchmark assessments is one of the few areas where more deliberate attention on the part of TRUSD leaders may be necessary. A focused effort to ensure the validity and reliability of the new benchmark assessments, fully connecting the team developing the assessments with other units to encourage constant and focused collaboration, and bringing them into the communication loop so that they’re kept abreast of the overall improvement strategy at Twin Rivers are crucial next steps in the district’s improvement journey.

Professional development opportunities are designed with the following key aspects in mind: link to site implementation, ‘learning by design’ mode, data-driven, and research-based. Professional development is offered in summer sessions, release days, Wednesday mornings, and ongoing PD meetings. A PD committee that includes all levels of support and service departments meets on a quarterly basis to review data and make recommendations and advise yearly PD plans for the district. The Superintendent’s role is to ensure the ongoing evaluation of effectiveness and relevance of the PD offered at TRUSD.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are seen as the basic vehicle to enhance the collective decisional capital within TRUSD. As mentioned earlier, school PLCs are evolving into vehicles of school improvement in Twin Rivers, but are yet to substantially improve classroom pedagogy in all schools. The increasingly coordinated work of principals, ILTs, and instructional TOSAs is gradually sharpening the focus of PLCs and creating a culture continuous learning and collaboration in schools.

Identifying and spreading effective instructional practice is an important next step toward focusing PLC work on pedagogy and a special committee, led by the Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, Jacqueline Pérez, has been created to define and identify visible examples of effective instructional practice. From this preliminary work, the committee plans to define 5 or 6 key observable features of effective instruction that all teachers will be expected to display in their everyday practice, select teachers identified as personifying effective classroom practice for other teachers to visit, observe, and learn from, and create materials (e.g., videos, vignettes, etc.) to make effective pedagogy visible across the district and incorporate it in PD sessions and PLC work.

Mentoring and support from central office is forging a strong link of support and constant communication and coordination with school principals. Executive Directors of elementary and secondary education constantly visit schools and make themselves available to principals over the
phone. A key role these Executive Directors are playing in schools is encouraging principals to make decisions and choices most likely to enhance student learning opportunities.

Instructional leadership teams and instructional TOSAs are also key resources in building professional capital. While at the time of our first visit most TOSAs were in a stage of developing trust with their principals and teachers and trying to figure out the most effective ways to have and maximize impact, one year later the TOSAs felt that their role was clearer with a sharper focus and that schools were more open to and actively requesting their support. The TOSAs are working with ILTs which have been established at each school over the past year. ILTs include teacher leaders from each grade and coordinate with their principal to advance the improvement work of their school. TOSAs are often asked to support the work of the ILTs, which have increased the bandwidth for building capacity for continuous improvement in schools and promise to become an important vehicle to enhance student performance.

Lastly, a data system to inform instruction is being created and delivered through a platform called Illuminate in order to support evidence-informed decision making at all levels of the system. While high school teachers view Illuminate as more user-friendly than their elementary school colleagues, teachers and principals are at the beginning stages of use and seeing its value. Also, the district is building a central data warehouse and the IT department was in the process of figuring out effective processes to deliver critical data in the form of customized reports/dashboards for faculty and staff across the district.

**Attracting and Developing Human Capital**

In less than two years, TRUSD moved from no structure or effective procedures for Human Resources (HR) to having a focused and clear strategy to attract, retain and develop talent. New procedures have ensured that issues brought to the department are addressed in a timely manner, either directly by HR or by the appropriate department. The new HR department established mechanisms of accountability, enacting probation periods and dismissals when necessary. These initial steps set a good foundation for the development of a healthier organizational environment where it was more pleasant to work.

For the first time, the HR department started to take a proactive stance to recruitment, ensuring TRUSD’s presence in recruitment fairs, establishing communication channels with community colleges, expanding the search radius outside of California, overall widening the pool of potential candidates. The district increased teachers’ salary and established bonuses for harder-to-fill positions (e.g., STEM). Twin Rivers currently offers the highest salaries in the region for certified teachers, helping to increase the attractiveness of TRUSD to talented candidates. Formal hiring procedures are now in place to ensure that the best candidates are selected with each potential new teacher interviewed by the Superintendent and each new classified hire meeting with the Deputy Superintendent. Twin Rivers has high standards and is committed to bringing the best available talent to work in the district.

TRUSD’s human capital strategy also involved letting go of district staff and school principals who were not willing or able to do the work required by the new district improvement agenda. By next year half of the school principals in Twin Rivers will be principals hired under Martinez’s administration. Two things are worth pointing out here: 1) the district didn’t have much trouble finding talented people to fill in the vacated positions; and, 2) there was little, if any, protest from administrators or community members following decisions to let go of administrators. This is best explained as the result of a district
agenda seen positively among the majority of people in the district and the larger community, and the reestablishment of trust within the district and with the larger community.

Capacity building with existing staff is another aspect of TRUSD’s human capital strategy, including systems-thinking training and a range of other PD opportunities centered on the CCSS. The district taps into and extends the influence of talent within the system by appointing TOSAs, for example, deploying them across the district and creating a talent pipeline within the district. Professional learning communities offer a vehicle for principals and teachers to collaborate with their peers, simultaneously benefiting their schools and expanding their influence to other schools. The executive cabinet is always looking for points of high leverage for district improvement and has placed committed staff in new roles that are sometimes clear departures from their prior responsibilities and expertise. This approach to talent management reflects high trust in people and a commitment to their learning.

**Key Lessons and Strategic Recommendations**

TRUSD has achieved remarkable progress in less than three years. Leaders and staff across departments now share a common vision: improving educational opportunities for students within an organizational culture that values and supports every staff member.

Despite significant district improvements, leaders across the system share a healthy sense of dissatisfaction with where the district is at right now and a sense of urgency for moving it forward. The next phase for TRUSD is to continue deepening trust and building strong relationships, and especially to focus on instructional improvement linked to learning outcomes for all students. Although remarkable, their accomplishments are also fragile. We believe that current challenges including LCAP planning and new assessment outcome criteria are opportunities to pursue the ’right driver agenda’ and diving deeply into instruction and outcomes is the best way to anchor the next phase of development. It is crucial that TRUSD maintains current efforts to learn from and refine the work of instructional TOSAs, principals, Instructional Leadership Teams, and PLCs, and to accelerate the work currently underway to define, operationalize, and make effective instructional practice visible across the district.

Ensuring the validity and reliability of benchmark assessments is also critical. A data system with relevant data on student performance in an easy-to-use and transparent fashion can serve as a powerful means to enhance collaboration for instructional improvement. Continuing to deliberately and relentlessly develop system coherence is crucial as TRUSD moves into their next phase of improvement. The next big push is to get that clarity in the system, to create coherence so that, at the teacher level, “it’s really clear how it all fits together.”

Twin Rivers is a case to learn from in the current quest to move the over 1000 districts that make up the California education system forward. At the same time, TRUSD would benefit from trying to make clear its own journey, sources of success and unfinished business. It is timely for Twin Rivers to ‘go outside to improve inside’ as part of California on the move.

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Note

This is one of five district case studies of Professional Capital under the title of California’s Golden Opportunity.

The five case studies are:

1. Corona Norco Unified School District
2. Fresno Unified School District
3. Long Beach Unified School District
4. Twin Rivers Unified School District
5. Whittier Unified School District

In addition, there are three supporting documents:

1. California’s Golden Opportunity: A Status Note
   Michael Fullan & Team
   November 2014

   Michael Fullan & Team and California Forward
   January 2015

   Michael Fullan & Team
   July 2015

This material is published by Michael Fullan and Team (see www.michaelfullan.ca), and supported by the Stuart Foundation.
*Endnote*

Our deep thanks to the Stuart Foundation for supporting our work in California.

Our Professional Capital group who contributed to the case studies consists of: Andy Hargreaves, Santiago Rincón-Gallardo, Joelle Rodway, Nancy Watson, Claudia Cuttress, Eleanor Adam, Mary Jean Gallagher, and Joanne Quinn.

**Glossary**

ACSA: Association of California School Administrators

API: Academic Performance Index (former California student assessment program)

CaEdpartners: California Education Partners

CCEE: California Collaborative for Educational Excellence

CCSEA: California County Superintendents Educational Services Association

CDE: California Department of Education

COE: County Office of Education

CORE: California Office to Reform Education

CSBA: California School Boards Association

CSEA: California School Employees Association

CTA: California Teachers Association

CFT: California Federation of Teachers

LASSO: Local Agency System Support Office

LCFF/LCAP: Local Control Funding Formula/Local Control and Accountability Plan

SBE: State Board of Education